QUEERING THE BODY:
CROSS-DRESSING PERFORMANCE AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN
CANTONESE OPERA OF POST-1950S HONG KONG

BY
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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic study of women’s cross-dressing performance in Cantonese opera (yueju) productions in Hong Kong since the 1950s. Stemming from ethnographic research conducted from 2012 to 2016, my study concerns issues of women’s history, fandom, and social identity (gender, cultural, and national). Taking a musicological, ethnographic, and historical approach, I examine gender performativity as it pertains to those women performers who play the leading male role-type (the wenwusheng) in Cantonese opera—performers who also attract mostly female fans. I interpret their performances within a broader framework concerning the colonial history of Hong Kong. By focusing on the performance of female masculinity in traditional Chinese expressive culture, I study how gender authenticity and cultural authenticity, as discursive formations, carry political meaning. Under British rule in the twentieth century, Cantonese opera in Hong Kong did not shrink but thrived and later became a local cultural icon. I argue that, by examining how practitioners and fans perceive the authenticity and legitimacy of local performance practices and styles, sentiments of cultural inferiority and national belonging internalized by this former colony’s residents are confronted. The queer body of the female wenwusheng, perceived by both local and mainland practitioners and fans as inauthentic in its staged representation of masculinity, takes on new significance in the context of Hong Kong’s contemporary political climate, where these perceptions of inauthenticity also belie an ambivalence displayed by Hongkongers toward the cultural, national, and political identities they embody.

While hangdang (role-type) and wenwusheng have been defined in historical scholarship on Cantonese opera, my ethnographic study of recent practices challenges the conventional
understanding of both concepts within the context of Hong Kong. By examining repertoires, vocal timbres, and stage performances, I investigate how gendered identities, sexuality, political power, and social legitimacy are enacted in female wenwusheng performance. While some people presume that orthodox masculinity is embodied in male bodies, the analysis of gender performativity in singing and acting illustrates how relationships between both voice and vocal gender, and the performing body and gendered role-types, can be denaturalized.

The phenomenon of female fans pursuing female wenwusheng is a notable characteristic of Hong Kong’s Cantonese opera scene. This ethnography challenges stereotypes of these fans, who have been viewed as ignorant “groupies.” I study the gendered dynamics between fandom and stardom by bridging the literature on traditional patronage in Chinese opera with that of fan studies in Japanese pop culture. Beyond the exchange of social, cultural, and economic capital, my observation of and interaction with fans during their events and opera performances provide insight into the interplay between actresses’ public, onstage performances and their informal, offstage engagement with fans. The blurred boundary between actresses’ onstage and offstage personas demonstrates that it is commodified homoerotic emotional intimacy that ties female wenwusheng and their fans together.

This homoerotic emotional intimacy is also manifest in media (re)presentations of an iconic female wenwusheng, Yam Kim-fai (1913–1989). By examining her appearance on different “public stages”—opera performances, films, and in the entertainment press—I focus on how the actress’s star image is asexualized and resexualized. My intertextual reading, contextualized in reference to recent studies of sexual minorities in Hong Kong, illustrates that Yam’s female masculinity not only carries queer overtones, but also serves as an enabling space for new identity possibilities.
These possibilities are not limited to gender and sexuality, but also hold cultural and political implications. Given that traditional Chinese cultural practices are considered better preserved in mainland China and/or Taiwan, and that the female wenwusheng tradition in Guangdong was basically discontinued in the 1950s, the artistic value and authenticity of women’s cross-dressing practices in Hong Kong are frequently questioned. While some local practitioners have recognized the threat to female wenwusheng caused by the new wave of recently migrated male wenwusheng from China, what these “real men” embody is not only a different performing style and aesthetic; in the eyes of many practitioners and fans in Hong Kong, they also symbolize a more orthodox masculinity and a “purer” form of Chinese performing arts. An investigation of female masculinity discourse and the “impure” form of Chineseness embodied by female wenwusheng provides a performative perspective for understanding the complexity of Hongkonger cultural and political identity, especially given the increasing tension between Hong Kong and China since 1997. This dissertation on women’s cross-dressing performance therefore not only enhances our understanding of gender politics in and the cultural history of contemporary Chinese societies, but also enriches scholarship on Chineseness, cultural hegemony, and geopolitics in the Sinophone world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND ROMANIZATION

Unless otherwise stated, all the English translations of interview quotes and Chinese sources are mine. I italicize all non-English terms and do not use plural form (e.g. wenwusheng instead of wenwushengs) in this dissertation. For most Chinese terms, I romanize in the pinyin system. For Hong Kong actors’ names, I follow the conventional spellings (according to the Cantonese pronunciations), among which some appear in the Hong Kong Film Archive online catalogue (http://ipac.hkfa.lcsd.gov.hk/ipac/cclib/ipac.jsp?cs=iso-8859-1). For most of the Chinese names (except Chinese scholars who write in English), I put their family names before their given names. Given names are usually indicated by hyphens. For instance, for the name Leung Sum-yee, Leung is my interlocutor’s family name and Sum-yee is her given name.

I have romanized the vernacular Cantonese dialogues, terms, and idioms based on the system of Cantonese romanization system developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK), which can be accessed online via http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/lexi-can/. “Ca.” is added after terms to indicate Cantonese romanization. For place names in Hong Kong, I follow the official English spellings used in Hong Kong instead of the pinyin system and American English (e.g., “Yau Ma Tei Theatre” instead of “You Ma Di Theater”).

There is no gendered pronoun in spoken Cantonese. Although “kui 佢” in Cantonese does not imply gender, in my interview transcriptions, I follow standard English conventions and translate it as “he” or “she” based on the biological sex of the people to whom my interlocutors referred.
### ABBREVIATIONS

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<td>Ca.:</td>
<td>Cantonese</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCP:</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKAPA:</td>
<td>Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKSAR:</td>
<td>Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>PRC:</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>RHK:</td>
<td>Radio Hong Kong</td>
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<td>RTHK</td>
<td>Radio and Television Hong Kong</td>
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<td>ROC:</td>
<td>Republic of China</td>
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It was a weekday evening in September 2012, around 7 p.m. After getting off the subway at the Yau Ma Tei station, I followed the sign and headed to the Yau Ma Tei Theatre. Located by the famous Yau Ma Tei Wholesale Fruit Market in an old residential and business area of Hong Kong’s Kowloon Peninsula, this recently renovated theatre was formerly a shabby cinema known for its pornographic movies (Fig. 1.1). No wonder that when my friends heard that I was going to this theatre, their first reaction was laughter, until I explained that I was attending a Cantonese opera performance. It seemed that many people knew where and what the theatre was in the past, but nobody was aware of its renovation and its new role as a cradle for training young Cantonese opera actors.

Passing the busy street with a newspaper stall, a few restaurants, a convenience store, and a shop for herbal tea, I arrived at the entrance of the theatre five minutes later. The bustling lobby was packed with middle-aged and older women. Dressed casually, most of them came with friends. They were chatting, looking at flyers advertising upcoming performances, and sharing snacks. I overheard many talking about the recent shows and actors they had watched. Others were pointing to their flyers and introducing new actors to their friends. A middle-aged woman was trying to help an elderly lady, who was either illiterate or had difficulty in reading the small font on the flyers, figure out the title of the performance for that evening. The lobby was small but no one attempted to keep their voice down. So even though there were only dozens of people in the lobby, the noise was unbearable. Around 7:15 p.m., I entered the theater and found my seat. It was a small
theater, housing 300 people. Audience members did not stop talking until the lead percussionist (zhangban) hit a wooden block twice very quickly to signal everyone to be ready at 7:30 p.m. After a short instrumental prelude, the curtain was raised and a supporting actress who acted the role of a servant opened the scene. . . .

Some audience members arrived late but were still allowed to be seated. As they tried to squeeze into their assigned seats they blocked others’ views, but nobody complained. Around 7:45 p.m., the theater was basically full and there were no more latecomers. Meanwhile, a young actor cast as the male lead entered the stage. He wore white oil-based makeup with a pink gradient around the eye and cheek areas, and had light red lips, thick black eyebrows, and almond-shaped eyes—the outer tips forming a 45-degree angle with the inner corner—outlined by black eyeliner. His costume—a light ocean blue-color haiqing (a long robe for scholar-type male role-types) and simple headdress, and black and white embroidered wensheng xie (shoes for scholar-type male role-types) with thickened soles—indicated that the character was a refined young scholar in his (early) twenties. Some audience members in the front rows were excited and clapped. Soon after he did the stylized liangxiang (literally, showing face) pose with his long water-sleeves, accompanied by the percussion, he sang a short excerpt to introduce his character.

After the singing stopped and other supporting actors came onstage, I occasionally overheard audience members say, “Who’s that? Pretty handsome.” “The voice is good. It sounds like so-and-so.” And, “This character was played by so-and-so before. I
watched this play many times when I was young.” They did not whisper. But their comments were mostly short sentences and they usually stopped after a sentence or two. Other people did not seem to be distracted or irritated.

Very soon in the first scene, the character of a young female beauty, played by the female lead in falsetto voice, encountered the young scholar (played by the male lead). They fell in love immediately and expressed their affection with singing. When signature songs were sung, the audience was quiet and seemed very focused. Some people also sang along.

The performance concluded about 10:30 p.m. with a happy ending: the young scholar married the beauty after the misunderstanding was resolved. Some audience members in the front rows went closer to the stage to take photos during the curtain call. A few middle-aged women waved their hands and shouted, “Good job! You are awesome!” The male lead came to the edge of the stage and received red pocket money from these women. He bowed with a gesture of pressing the palms of both hands together. When he looked up and smiled, an audience member at the back remarked, “Oh, it’s a girl!” The person next to her responded, “She somehow looks like Yam Kim-fai [an iconic figure of cross-dressing actress in Cantonese opera]!”

The account above describes one of the typical evenings that I experienced at Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong, where I conducted field research for my doctoral dissertation between September 2012 and August 2013. My dissertation is an ethnographic study of women’s
cross-dressing performance in Cantonese opera, the dominant local Chinese opera genre in Hong Kong, from the 1950s to the present. It concerns female masculinity that is both enacted by and embodied in the cross-dressing body, which in this case attracts mostly female fans.

Hong Kong is a former British colony whose majority population comprises Han Cantonese speakers.¹ It is one of the three Cantonese opera centers, along with Guangzhou (also known as Canton) in mainland China, and Macau, the former Portuguese colony, in the twentieth century. This traditional Chinese expressive idiom was not suppressed by the colonial powers but thrived under British rule. It has also served as a local cultural ambassador for important historical or political events. Even though Cantonese opera has become a subculture since the late twentieth century and is considered either outmoded or a pastime for middle-aged and older women, most Hongkongers are still able to name at least one famous operatic actor or title, or to sing a representative phrase or two from a favorite work.

The tradition of women’s cross-dressing performance—in which actresses play the role-type that comprises the male lead, or wenwusheng—has been a signature feature of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong since the late twentieth century. The importance of women’s cross-dressing performance to Hong Kong culture is perhaps best exemplified by Yam Kim-fai (1913–1989), a cross-dressing actress who was active in both Cantonese opera and Cantonese cinema—playing the wenwusheng in the former and being cast as mostly male characters in the latter (Fig. 1.2). Not only known for her renditions of romantic young men in both mediums, she was also famous for her zealous female fans, ambiguous gender identity, and rumored same-sex relationships. Despite her retirement from the entertainment industry in the late 1960s, the phenomenon of female cross-dressing stars surrounded by mostly female fans still continues in today’s Hong

¹ According to the 2016 by-census data, 92% of the population is ethnic Chinese and 88.9% uses Cantonese as their usual language (2016 Population By-Census, Census Department and Statistics Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017).
Kong. Nonetheless, some people view cross-dressing actresses as second-class *wenwusheng* because they do not embody the orthodox masculinity associated with male *wenwusheng*, and their fans as ignorant “groupies.”

As the perception of masculinity is also tied to patriarchal constructions of the nation, attitudes toward female *wenwusheng* interweave with a sense of cultural inferiority internalized by Hongkongers, as observed by many scholars, since colonial times. This cultural inferiority stems from the common perception that legitimate Chinese culture is preserved in mainland China and/or Taiwan, making Hong Kong of secondary importance (Abbas 1997: 6). Given that China has trained only male *wenwusheng* since the 1950s, the female *wenwusheng*’s body is doubly marginalized: it is seen as presenting both a weaker masculinity and “impure” Chineseness. To interrogate the perceived gender and cultural authenticity embodied in this performing body, this dissertation employs the concept of queerness, but not just to describe female masculinity and homoerotic subtexts. Rather, going beyond “queer” as an adjective to describe the perspective, aesthetic, or quality of a phenomenon or practice, I employ the term as a verb. In this way, I focus on the active capacity of “queer” not only to accommodate the in-betweeness, the uncategorized, or the uncertain, but also to create new meanings and possibilities. Thus I approach the female *wenwusheng* body as an enabling space that not only challenges the “norm” and the orthodox—the more legitimate masculinity embodied in the male *wenwusheng* body from mainland China—but also to accommodate ambivalent cultural, national, and political identities, and to negotiate as well as create new possibilities of a sense of belonging.
Fig. 1.1 Map of Hong Kong.

Fig. 1.2 Google Doodle (Hong Kong) presented a painting of Yam Kim-fai to celebrate her 103rd birthday anniversary on February 4, 2016. Screenshot by the author on February 4, 2016.
Cantonese Opera and Hong Kong

Cantonese opera, also known as “yueju,” “daxi,” and “guangdong daxi,” is one of the three hundred traditional Chinese opera genres and has been popular in Hong Kong since the late nineteenth century. To understand cross-dressing performance in Cantonese opera and its cultural-political context, it is necessary to know something about the cultural background of Hong Kong and fundamental principles of Chinese opera.

Cantonese Opera and Cantonese Language in Hong Kong

Given that the majority population in Hong Kong represents the descendants of Cantonese people from Guangdong Province, Cantonese has been one of the two official languages (along with English) since the British colonial period (1841–1997). The pronunciation and some grammatical rules of Cantonese are different from those of standard Mandarin,2 the lingua franca in mainland China since the Republican era in the 1910s, and later, in Taiwan since the late 1940s. Schools in Hong Kong teach the modern Chinese language with Mandarin grammar (script) and Cantonese pronunciation (sound). Therefore, in Hong Kong the written form of Chinese slightly differs from the spoken mother tongue. While the connection between sound and script is usually taken for granted in “linguistic nativity” (Tsu 2010: 3–8), learning Chinese, for Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, always involves a process of translation—from spoken Cantonese to the standard modern Mandarin grammar (Chow 2014: 108–11). Written Chinese is a quasi-foreign language for Hongkongers. Given that the script represents a more authoritative form of the language, the vernacular Cantonese (even when it is written) is considered less formal and less sophisticated. After 156 years of British colonization, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was handed over to the People’s Republic of China and the territory became the “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.”

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2 Also known as guoyu (national language) and putonghua (common language).
Even though Mandarin has been added as an official language, the Cantonese vernacular still remains the major language that is used in everyday life, schools, and government.

The stylistic characteristics that most prominently typify Cantonese opera today originated from the shenggang city centers—meaning Guangzhou (sheng) and Hong Kong (gang)—in the 1920s and 1930s (Chan 1999: 16). One of the remarkable changes in Cantonese opera made by the 1920s shenggang troupes was to move from the Mandarin-like “stage-vernacular” (wutai guanhua) to Guangzhou-accented Cantonese (guangfu hua), which also signified a rise of local consciousness in the genre as Cantonese was the predominate language that was spoken in these cities. The frequently performed plays usually feature love stories between a young, refined, and romantic male scholar (played by the wenwusheng) and a young, faithful female beauty (played by the principal huadan, the female lead).

The Cantonese people (guangdongren) are not limited to the Lingnan region of South China (huanan)—the Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan Provinces, and the two former colonies of Hong Kong and Macau—but have also spread to North America, Southeast Asia, Australia, and the United Kingdom. They share the language along with other Cantonese traditions such as music, diet, ritual, and beliefs across borders. Likewise, Cantonese opera can also be found in these Cantonese communities around the world.

**Chinese Opera**

Lost in Translation

In Chinese language, *xiqu* (literally, “drama-song”) is the term for Chinese opera. Although “Chinese opera” and “Chinese (traditional) theater” are more common in the English-speaking scholarship, many find these English translations to be insufficiently accurate (Li 2010: 1; Stock 2003: 4–7; The House News Channel, YouTube 2013). What is lost in translation is that
Chinese opera features four major skills (*sigong*)—singing (*chang*), speaking (*nian*), acting/gesturing (*zuo*), and acrobatics (*da*). Those who oppose the term “Chinese opera” argue that the way of delivering plots in *xiqu* is beyond singing and music, which are the major media of Italian opera. While there is no doubt that singing is an essential skill in *xiqu*, the other three skills—speaking, acting, and acrobatics—occupy an equally important place in delivering narratives.

An emphasis on visual components also distinguishes Chinese opera from Italian opera (Mackerras 1975: 12; Yung 1989: 11–12). *Zuogong* (acting skill) and *wu* or *wuda* (acrobatic skill) are two major skills that contribute to the visual components of a production. It is important to note that the *zuogong* in Chinese opera is not equivalent to acting in modern drama or films. A core skill actors need to acquire in their training, *zuogong* highlights the stylized choreographed movements that conventionally represent different objects and actions on the operatic stage with minimal stage sets (Wichmann 1991: 2–6). For instance, an actor would enact the following sequence to indicate the movement of unlocking and opening a double door without the actual object on the stage: by placing hands outward front and center of the chest with fingers slightly curved, twisting the right hand, then straightening the right arm and moving it from the center to right; the left hand and arm follow the same steps in the opposing direction.

The Role-type System

Another major difference between Chinese opera and Italian opera is the unique role-type system (*hangdang*) in the former. The role-type system is similar to the concept of stock characters. Each role-type is characterized by a set of signifiers—“physical and vocal conventions and patterns of stylization”—that delineate the characters according to gender, age, social status, marital status, occupation, personality, and disposition (Wichmann 1991: 7). Every
Chinese opera actor chooses a role-type in his/her early stage of training. As a role-type consists of performed signifiers, in traditional practice an actor may choose any role-type without being concerned whether his/her biological sex and age match those of the role-type.

In this dissertation, I refer to dramatic characters as the specific persons that are created by playwrights in plays. Role-types comprise the enactment of constellations of conventions that actors acquire through long-term training. The gender of a role-type always matches that of a character. But the performer’s sex can differ from that of the role-type as well as that of the character. For instance, a scholar-type male dramatic character should cast a sheng (a generic term for male role-types) performer; and the performer can be either a man or a woman.

**Theater for the Masses**

Another difference between Cantonese opera and Italian opera is the association with social or cultural capital. While Italian opera tends to be a class-specific art form, Cantonese opera is consumed by all socioeconomic classes in Hong Kong. Although being a Cantonese opera regular is not affordable for everyone, the tickets are generally cheaper than those for European classical music and opera. In addition, the half-price tickets for people over sixty at urban commercial theaters and free ritual operas (shengongxi) in rural areas also make the genre more accessible to everyone. Even though many ritual theaters nowadays are not free, tickets for both commercial and ritual performances are relatively affordable for all classes.

**Female Wenwusheng**

**Contemporary Casting System**

The wenwusheng, literally meaning “civil-martial male role-type,” was a new role-type that emerged in the 1920s and is the male lead of the “six pillar system” (liu zhu zhi). Arose with the burgeoning of urban commercial theaters, the “six pillar system” is a casting system that
features only six major role-types. These are the two main leads—wenwusheng and zhengyin huadan (principal young female role-type)—and the four supporting role-types—xiaosheng, wusheng (middle-aged or older martial male role-type), chousheng (male clown role-type), and erbang huadan (supporting female role-type).

Meanwhile, playwrights also started to write new plays to fit the system and these therefore feature only six role-types (Chen 2007: 163–64). Contemporary plays that are still performed today usually share a plot formula in which a young gentleman (played by the wenwusheng) and a beautiful young woman (played by the zhengyin huadan) fall in love with each other. Their path is full of obstacles such as misunderstandings, wars, suspicious betrayals, and family interventions, in which the other four supporting role-types take part. Yet, contemporary plays usually have happy endings, in which all the problems are resolved and the male and female leads reunite or marry.

**The Wenwusheng Role-type**

The wenwusheng is a combination of two older role-types: xiaosheng (young courteous male role-type) and xiaowu (young martial male role-type). The former emphasizes singing technique and features young, handsome, gentle, intellectual, and romantic scholar-types of dramatic characters. The latter stresses acrobatic skill and portrays mostly macho, brave, gallant, loyal, and righteous military general types of characters. Marrying these two role-types, actors who play wenwusheng are expected to have excellent skills in both singing and acrobatics. Characters portrayed by the wenwusheng role-type usually contain the qualities of both xiaosheng and xiaowu while emphasizing one or the other in particular plays. Within the “six-pillar system,” the wenwusheng role-type gradually replaced the star role-types from the old casting system—xiaowu and wusheng—to become a central locus of stardom since the 1930s.
The Emergence of Female *Wenwusheng*

The *wenwusheng* role-type has been played by both men and women since its inception in the 1920s. Due to the late Qing law and social taboo, women performers were banned on public stages in the late nineteenth century. Despite this, increasing contacts with foreign modern ideologies in cities such as Hong Kong and Guangzhou in the early twentieth century resulted in the emergence of female entertainers in public spaces such as theaters, tea houses, and singing halls. As a marketing gimmick in an increasingly open society, these women also embodied a sense of modernity and social progressiveness. However, the prohibition of coed troupes remained in effect until 1933 in Hong Kong and 1936 in Guangzhou. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Cantonese opera scenes in these two cities were still occupied by the preexisting all-male troupes and a few rising all-female troupes. Cross-dressing actors of both sexes resulted from the ban on coed troupes. After coed troupes became legal, many male cross-dressers lost their popularity and retreated to teaching or left the Cantonese opera circle. By the mid twentieth century, male cross-dressers became virtually extinct onstage.

In contrast, the female cross-dressing tradition from the all-female troupe era continued to flourish in Hong Kong, but not in Guangdong. After the coed troupes became the norm in the late 1930s in Hong Kong, while some female cross-dressers changed their male role-type to female, others navigated their careers to the silver screen. Despite that, the female *wenwusheng* tradition was continued by a few iconic figures, such as Yam Kim-fai, and did not fade out. In today’s Hong Kong, the performance of *wenwusheng* is almost equally shared by both female and male performers. In China, even though some female cross-dressers remained active after 1936, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the soon resumed Chinese Civil War (1927–1950) drove many actors and actresses to Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asia. After
the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party attempted to impose state cultural policy on the performing arts and began to criticize and discourage cross-dressing practices (especially by men) in Chinese opera (see, for example, Li 2003: 192–97). In today’s Guangdong, even though professionally trained female pinghou (non-falsetto voice for male role-types in Cantonese opera) singers sometimes still appear onstage, female wenwusheng performers are rare.

**Professional and Amateur Actors**

Another concept requiring clarification is the professionalism-amateurism binary as relevant to the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong. As a consequence of Confucian influence, in Chinese society the professional entertainer is an unrespectable occupation. People who perform for a living are generally considered to be of lower or even an underprivileged class (Goldstein 2007: 19–26). The stigmatization of professional actors is particularly strong. Even though many music and Chinese opera aficionados are knowledgeable and have excellent techniques and musicality, they would rather retain their status as amateurs and only perform for leisure with a small group of friends (Lee 2009: 88–95). While this preference for amateurism can still be found in the Peking opera piaoyou culture (Goldstein 2007: 31–32) and Jiangnan sizhu ensemble clubs (Witzleben 1995) in today’s China, the modern institutionalization of performing arts after the 1950s and advocation on behalf of proletarian and folk artists have played an important role in destigmatizing professional performers.

The professional-amateur (zhuanye-yeyu or zhiye-yeyu) binary, or, more accurately, the dichotomy between full-time (quanzhi or zhiye) and part-time actors (jianzhi or banzhi), is rather

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3 The Communist Party actually has put more pressure on male cross-dressing than female cross-dressing performances in Chinese opera. Today’s Zhejiang yueju opera is still an (almost) all-female Chinese theater practiced in mainland China.

4 Frequently heard proverbs, such as “prostitutes are not faithful, actors are cold-blooded” (piaozi wuqing xizi wuyi), are biased statements that degrade actors’ dignity.
complex in the study of Cantonese opera, especially in the context of Hong Kong. This simplistic dichotomy was not always useful during my fieldwork because not all my interlocutors identified themselves or refer to other actors in this way. Many started as aficionados and then became amateur or “community” (shetuan) singers or actors while working full-time jobs to support this interest. Some amateur actors later decided to quit their full-time jobs to devote themselves to their performance careers. “Professional actors” can be understood in various respects: those who rely on performance as the major source of income; full-time actors who do not work any job besides performing, which may or may not provide enough earnings to live on; and those who quit school or their jobs to become full-time actors, among whom some are trained in modern institutions such as the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. As some devoted aficionados decide to keep their full-time jobs but still devote significant time and energy to practicing, the quality of their (infrequent) performances is on par with that of some full-time actors (Cheung 2009). The difference between “professional” and “amateur” actors is not necessarily based on their artistic capabilities.

Actors in Hong Kong are basically freelancers with unstable workloads and incomes. Over the past four decades, amateurs have occupied a relatively large portion of the practitioners in the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong. For instance, the so-called “guixiu changjia” (female singers from respectful families) is a group of amateur women singers who devote substantial money and time to their hobby. Their devotion also helps many musicians and teachers guarantee a relatively stable income.

While the guixiu changjia represents a clear example of aficionado-singers, the line between part-time and full-time actors in many cases is not easy to draw. Many actors who

5 “Guixiu” refers to respectful women from well-off families or who have married into wealthy families. “Changjia” means singers. “Guixiu changjia” is a term that draws a distinction between upper-class (married) women and those female entertainers in the traditional sense who perform for a living (Chen 2007: 41–42).
perform a few times a year, playing some leading roles, actually have part-time or full-time jobs which are related or unrelated to Cantonese opera. Jobs that are related to Cantonese opera include Cantonese opera teacher, headdress maker, makeup artist for Cantonese opera beginners, and Chinese opera radio show host.

Traditionally speaking, the wenwusheng performer is also in charge of crucial decision-making for the troupe and is the highest-paid actor (Lum 2004: 52). However, my ethnographic data demonstrate that this is not always the case for the rising wenwusheng over the past decade. Some rising wenwusheng who are also the producers of their own performances pay experienced actors a relatively high amount of money to be members of their supporting casts. It is not uncommon to see supporting casts that are more famous than the young wenwusheng actors. In many cases, making a profit is not a major purpose of the producer-wenwusheng. The reality is that they may even lose money in order to gain publicity.

In this dissertation, the use of “amateur actors” refers to people who have not undergone a long period of formal training, and those who consider performing Cantonese opera as a hobby rather than a career. I term professional or full-time actors as those who perform regularly and may hold one or more Cantonese opera-related part-time jobs. In short, my uses of “professional” and “amateur” are mostly based on the performers’ orientations rather than their skills or sources of incomes.

Rediscovering Identities

Being “Chinese”

My interest in identity politics and Cantonese opera grew out of the uneasiness and confusion that I have experienced over the past two decades in Hong Kong, China, and the
United States. The following three anecdotes summarize my relationship to and positioning within this topic as my dissertation focus.

I

Born in British Hong Kong and raised there in the 1980s and 1990s, I left to attend school in Beijing in late 1998. Ten years later, when I was studying in Champaign, IL, I saw a television program online that featured Hongkongers’ responses to the upcoming 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. I do not remember the details of the program but for a youngster’s tear-stained face, as she talked about her feelings toward China (the wording is approximate): “I am so proud of being a Chinese national (zhongguoren),” she said. “I am so proud of our ancestral land (zuguo), China. We made it.” I was very shocked because during the almost two decades that I lived in Hong Kong, I never heard people say that they were proud of China. My generation would only laugh at the national anthem of the PRC when we heard it during movies or on TV (such as broadcasts of the Olympic Games). I wondered whether the patriotic propaganda had successfully infiltrated into the educational system only a decade after 1997. Although I was not sure whether the interviewee belonged to the mainstream voice or if she was just an exception, her response represented one of the many rapid cultural and political changes in post-1997 Hong Kong that made me feel like I am a stranger in my own home.

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Actually, my interest in studying local Hong Kong culture and identities began earlier, when I was living in Beijing in 1998 and was continuously experiencing unexpected cultural shocks. This was one year after the British hand over of Hong Kong to the PRC, and I had moved there to pursue my study of yangqin (the Chinese hammered dulcimer) performance. My

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decision was simple and absolutely apolitical. I only wanted to fulfill my dream of studying with yangqin masters at prestigious music conservatories and to become a professional yangqin player. Yet, while the politics or identity was never my concern, my everyday encounter with both Chinese mainlanders and other ethnic-Chinese international students gradually fostered my Hong Kong identity, as various cultural confrontations kept urging me to ask myself why I was different from them. Here is my second story.

II

In my first month in Beijing, I was told by a Chinese-Singaporean acquaintance in Mandarin, “Your Chinese is not good (nide zhongwen buhao).” Very soon I found out that his meaning of “Chinese” only narrowly referred to “spoken Mandarin.” Although I did not consider it to be a personal offense, his comment challenged my understanding of the word “Chinese” as a language (zhongwen). While growing up in Hong Kong, when we said someone’s Chinese is good, it meant s/he was an excellent writer, with the ability to write in a poetic and/or creative way rich in vocabulary, expressions, and idioms. Therefore, while most people in everyday life in Hong Kong communicated with each other in spoken Cantonese, “good Chinese” to me never narrowly meant fluently speaking a Chinese language, whether Mandarin or Cantonese, but rather was reflected in writing.

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While my generation learned how to write in traditional Chinese characters at school in Hong Kong, I was surrounded by only simplified Chinese during my stay in Beijing. Simplified Chinese characters are the official, standardized form of script used in the PRC since the 1950s for the sake of improving literacy. They were later adopted by Chinese diasporas, such as those in Singapore and Malaysia. Yet, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau still maintain the use of
traditional Chinese characters as official script. Those who have basic knowledge of the Chinese language know that adapting from traditional to simplified characters is easy, but not vice versa. As I had had minimal troubles in everyday communication in Beijing since my first day there, my friend’s comment urged me to ask myself: how could a Chinese-Singaporean who wrote in simplified Chinese and spoke Mandarin with a strong accent tell me my Chinese was not good? Which or whose Chinese was he talking about? Does Chinese exist? Or is one form of the Chinese language more superior or legitimate than others? If so, how can the Chinese I know—which is more traditional and complex—be less legitimate than spoken Mandarin and the simplified characters?

III

In the first week of my college life in Beijing, all academic classes were replaced by “patriotic education” (aiguo jiaoyu) activities. As an international student, I was exempted from attending. But I decided to join the class’s one-day trip to the Marco Polo Bridge Incident Hall. As the Marco Polo Bridge Incident marked the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, the Hall was built to commemorate the dead. The walls of the Hall were inscribed with the names of the sacrificed Chinese soldiers. While walking around the Hall, I felt some intense emotions from my classmates: some quietly sighed; others swore angrily. When the classmate next to me observed that I was very calm and did not say a word, he asked me, “Hey, do you know about this history? Did they teach you this in Hong Kong? Japanese are so evil!” I said, “Yes, I learned about this in my Chinese history class.” He looked more confused and said, “Damn it! You don’t think Japanese are evil?” My immediate response was, “Our textbooks use fewer adjectives.”

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7 Both Cantonese and Mandarin are tonal languages. It is commonly agreed that it is more difficult to learn Cantonese than Mandarin. One of the difficulties is manifested in the complexity of the Cantonese pronunciation system. While Mandarin has four tones, Cantonese has nine.
After some time living in Beijing, I noticed that, from the perspective of many mainlanders, an anti-Japanese sentiment is “inherited in all ethnic Chinese blood.” In the eyes of my classmate, for instance, my indifference when encountering the bitter Chinese history with Japan resulted from my colonial education, which was perceived as not only “anti-China” (fanzhong), but also “anti-ethnic Chinese” (fanhua). During my study, my “Chinese identity” was questioned every time that others found I was not as enthusiastic as they were in defending or supporting China, or when I criticized the CCP government, such as in regard to censorship. Moreover, I was very often expected to behave and think like other Chinese mainlanders. One reason for this is that I am an ethnic Chinese who grew up in a Chinese-populated society. Another reason is that Hong Kong had “reunited” with its “ancestral land” (chongtou zuguo de huaibao) and others now saw me as a Chinese national (zhongguoren) like them.

However, most of them had little knowledge about what my generation of Hongkongers experienced when growing up in the late British colonial period. Most of us generally had little sense of how to belong to a nation or state—especially how to belong to the communist-run PRC—at least at an emotional level. When I was growing up, people and the mass media surrounding me often made fun of the PRC, their people, culture, vocabulary, and even lingua franca (Mandarin Chinese). Every time we heard the opening phrase of the PRC national anthem, we laughed. Instead of national pride, we felt distanced and irreverent. At schools, I did not meet anyone who knew how to sing the entire anthem. Or, to be more accurate, nobody wanted or needed to learn it.  

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8 After the summer of the transfer of sovereignty from the UK to the PRC in 1997, I spent my last year in middle school. A teacher taught my class to sing the PRC national anthem because we needed to sing it at school assemblies and other events. Again, most of my classmates found it funny and were reluctant to learn it. During assemblies, only a few “good” students sang along with the broadcast recording.
In Beijing, even though I communicated in Mandarin and used simplified Chinese in everyday life, I also noticed many subtle differences in both language and worldview in comparison with my peers. This experience suggested to me that Hongkongers are different from Chinese nationals (zhongguoren), and that Hong Kong could not possibly become a Chinese city (like Shanghai and Guangzhou) immediately after July 1, 1997. While my friends in Hong Kong thought I would become more “Chinese” and more politically inclined to the PRC after living in Beijing, my experiences suggested otherwise. It was my Beijing experiences that fostered my consciousness of being a Hongkonger (xianggangren). I discovered my Hongkonger identity when living in China.

It is crucial to distinguish the subtle conceptual differences that exist within the English word “Chinese.” While in English the same term is used to refer to ethnicity, citizenship, culture, language, and geopolitical area, the terminology in the Chinese language is more specific. For example, huaren means ethnic Chinese (for example, American-born Chinese), zhongguoren means citizens of China (now the PRC), zhonghua wenhua or huaxia wenhua means Chinese culture, and zhongwen or huayu means Chinese language. Without specifying it, in many instances of everyday conversation, the English word “Chinese” implies that everything emanates from or is of China proper—the PRC. It contains a hegemonic PRC-centric implication (Rey 1998; Shih 2013: 6–11).

This PRC-centrism is also ubiquitous in daily Chinese-language conversations in Hong Kong. Despite the more accurate distinguishing of different types of identities in the Chinese language, many people in Hong Kong, intentionally or not, still confuse the use of huaren (ethnic Chinese) and zhongguoren (Chinese nationals, meaning citizens of the PRC), especially when trying to reinforce a sense of belonging to China. The term zhongguoren is usually mistranslated
as “the Chinese” in English (Shih 2013: 6). The prevalent logic is this: given that you are ethnically and culturally Chinese—i.e., you are a Chinese descendant and you speak the Chinese language—you should identify yourself as a zhongguoren. This is especially the case among those who practice and love traditional Chinese culture in Hong Kong, for instance, practitioners and audience members of Cantonese opera.

Last but not least, I do not mean that Chinese and Hongkonger identities are entirely antagonistic to or exclusive of each other. By emphasizing the Hongkonger identity, I intend to illustrate that the colonial experience has contributed to the understanding of the complexity of Hongkongers’ relations to China and Chinese culture, such as Cantonese opera.

**Why Cantonese Opera?**

My subjectivity as an ethnic Chinese in a former British colony is not merely a personal matter, but has directly influenced my academic pursuits. In the eyes of many music scholars in China, Cantonese opera is not considered “Chinese opera” and is excluded from the canonical information taught at institutions of higher education, despite the fact that the frequency of performances of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong surpasses many genres performed in China or Taiwan. When I was studying at a music conservatory in Beijing, I audited the class “Introduction to Chinese opera” offered by the musicology department. I was exposed to a wide range of genres, their canonical repertoires, and representative actors. One day, our teacher, who was a/n (ethno)musicologist, asked the class which genre they would like to learn next. One of the students suggested Cantonese opera. This teacher’s immediate response was, “Cantonese operatic songs are just like pop music (liuxingqu).” I did not agree with her but I understood
where her bias came from. Cantonese opera has been considered an “urban entertainment” since the 1920s and 1930s, part of cosmopolitan life in the port cities of Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Western musical instruments and tunes were adopted by Cantonese opera musicians. Later in the mid twentieth century, the opera actors were also active in the Cantonese cinema. The early Cantonese pop songs (in the 1960s and 1970s) were also heavily influenced by Cantonese opera in terms of tunes, vocal projection, and style of accompanying music. This cross-pollination between Cantonese opera and other popular media genres made it an “impure” form of Chinese opera.

These factors may account for the bias of my teacher. However, in the early stage of my PhD studies, I was told by a mentor, who is herself a native Cantonese and ethnomusicologist, to change my topic from Cantonese opera to kunqu, which is a more traditional genre in Jiangsu and perceived as more “sophisticated.” She added that, “As a native Hongkonger, if you study your own culture (Cantonese opera), you won’t be taken seriously.” Her advice might have been well intended but did not dissuade me from asking: How about Cantonese opera? Is Cantonese opera taken seriously (enough)? The amount and depth of both Chinese and English scholarly publications on Cantonese opera do not proportionally reflect the extent of its practitioners around the world. The fact that the Cantonese language is relatively difficult to manage and live performances of Cantonese opera involve a high degree of flexibility and improvisation may become obstacles for non-native researchers.

Even in Hong Kong, the value of Cantonese opera has been underestimated. I have been told by many (including my friends and interlocutors) that Cantonese opera is a pastime for

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9 The Chinese opera research in China was—and still is—relatively northern China oriented (with focuses on Peking opera, Dongbei pingju, Hebei bangzi, and Anhui huangmeixi) with a few exceptions from the coastal area near Shanghai (for instance, kunju and Shaoxing yueju).

10 Also, I was not interested in studying a genre only because it does not belong to “my culture” and it fits into the canon.
middle-aged and older women, who come to the theater to see good-looking actors in their fancy costumes, and do not care about the quality of the performances. The attitude toward female wenwusheng is even worse. I even heard a remark that, “The female wenwusheng tradition still continues in Hong Kong just because there are not sufficient talented male actors.”

My determination to research female wenwusheng in Cantonese opera primarily stemmed from my curiosity about why many Hongkongers and Cantonese themselves tend to neglect this genre and these cross-dressing actresses, despite their popularity. Their attitude also reminded me of another statement that I heard growing up: “Hong Kong is a cultural desert.” In spite of the popularity and great international success, local cultures of Hong Kong—including Cantonese opera, Hong Kong cinema, and Cantopop—were not considered “culture” (wenhua), but commercial products until the late 1980s. Ackbar Abbas (1997) describes this as a “reverse hallucination,” meaning the habit or desire of “not seeing” what exists. He further explains that, due to the cultural inferiority deeply ingrained in the society, Hongkongers tend to not acknowledge the value of their own culture. They tend to consider cultures from the West and mainland China as superior and more legitimate (6–8). My study of the general attitude toward female wenwusheng and Cantonese opera exemplifies the cultural inferiority mentality that I have witnessed (Leung 1998).

My second reason for choosing Cantonese opera as my dissertation topic can be traced to my changing listening habits. When I was studying in Beijing, I listened to many Chinese opera genres but not Cantonese opera. The turning point was my decision to applying for the master’s program in ethnomusicology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), whose entrance exam required knowledge of Cantonese opera. In order to prepare for the exam, I studied

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11 I particularly liked the musical refinement and meticulously stylized choreography of kunju, the percussion of Peking opera, the melodies of Shaoxing yueju, and the use of banhu of Henan and Hebei bangzi.
Cantonese opera by reading books written by Hong Kong ethnomusicologists and watching Cantonese opera recordings.

After adding Cantonese opera to my listening list, I felt closer to it than any other genre. Due to the familiar language, voice, and music, some of the Cantonese opera songs remind me of my childhood and pull at my heartstrings in ways that other genres cannot. My origins and early environment are also a key to understanding my emotional attachment to Cantonese opera. My experience resonates with that of Sai-shing Yung (2006), who was also born and grew up in Hong Kong and who turned his research interests to Cantonese opera after reaching middle age. In his preface to a book on the recording industry and Cantonese operatic songs and narratives (guangdong quyi) in Hong Kong, Yung briefly describes his research trajectory with a poetic metaphor. The opening sentence of his preface is, “In the course of my romantic relationship with academic research, Cantonese opera and Cantonese operatic songs are my first lover” (1). After describing how Cantonese opera music had accompanied his study during high school and college, he writes that, even though he was engaged with Western literary theories (“second lover”) and later kunju (a “sophisticated, classic beauty” as his “third lover”) during graduate school, his “first lover” still haunted his heart (2–3).

Similarly, when Jing Tsu (2010) writes about the re-Mandarinization process in post-Japanese-colonial Taiwan, she mentions the lack of a “heartfelt, native allegiance” experienced by the local Taiwanese, whose native languages were Hokklo and Hakka. Even though they adopted the official national language of Mandarin, an emotional attachment was still missing (6). Likewise, I have also noticed that it is my “nativeness”—not only in language, but in music, jokes, and cultural knowledge—that contributes to the intimate feelings that I have discovered and experienced when listening to Cantonese opera. After discovering my Hongkonger identity

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12 The original wording is “在與學術研究談戀愛的道路上，粵劇粵曲是我的初戀情人.”
when living in Beijing, the habit of listening to Cantonese opera was like a quest for a forgotten or hidden sound self.

During the process, I also discovered Lung Kim-sang (b. 1944), a female wenwusheng superstar who was active from the 1970s to 1992, when she moved to Canada (see Fig. 1.3). Between 2004 and 2006, she came back to Hong Kong for annual performances. All the shows played to full houses. The enthusiasm of her fans did not cool despite over a decade of waiting. Her re-appearance on the operatic stage prompted me to pursue this topic. First, I was impressed by the zeal of her fans. Second, she has a same-sex partner, like Yam did (Tai, interview, 2013). However, while this kind of gender dynamic between stardom and offstage “open secrets” only appears in an implicit way in the entertainment press, it has not been systematically studied in scholarly works. Third, her “retirement” in 1992 and return to the stage in 2004 represents a typical story among those Hongkongers who established their career in the 1980s and 1990s, lost confidence in the future of Hong Kong after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and then migrated to other countries but continue to travel frequently between two homes. Their connections with Hong Kong, in terms of business, economics, and sentiment, were hardly broken. Although the diaspora is beyond my scope, Lung’s case, which exemplifies a “Hong Kong story,” urged me to investigate the complexity of Hongkongers’ cultural and national identities.
Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic and archival research conducted in Hong Kong from September 2012 to August 2013, followed by three one-month field trips in December 2013, December 2014, and August 2016. My ethnographic research involved observation, informal conversation and interviews with practitioners and fans, as well as my own Cantonese opera training. Archival research took place at CUHK, the Hong Kong Film Archive, and the Hong Kong Central Library, focusing on both published and unpublished materials.

Cantonese Opera Training

At the start of my research I approached Leung Sum-yee, a Cantonese opera female wenwusheng and teacher. Before founding her own Cantonese opera school for amateur learners, Leung had worked as a research assistant for an ethnomusicologist at the Chinese Opera Information Centre (COIC) at CUHK. During my fieldwork year, I was taking comprehensive lessons—including singing (changke), fundamentals (jibengong), and acting (yanke)—at her school, and volunteering as a backstage crew member for her troupe’s monthly performances. Going through basic training in sheng (male role-types) performance not only allowed me to
learn how to evaluate performances, but also provided me with bodily experience that enhanced my understanding of different gendered signifiers of the genre. Through participant-observation during rehearsals and performances, I also learned many practical details in preparing a performance and running a troupe, which are usually not documented in either scholarly writings or the entertainment press.

**Performance**

“Spectators come to the theater to hear the subtext. They can read the text at home.”

Konstantin Stanislavski

During my fieldwork, I regularly attended an average of one to two performances each week. By going to the theater, I became more familiar with both canonical and non-mainstream works; I learned about veteran and novice actors and their styles; I compared different versions of the same plays; and, more importantly, I observed the audiences. As one of my research interests is the relationship between fandom and stardom in the highly commercialized Cantonese opera circle, it is crucial to observe audience members’ reactions in the theater and their interactions with actors offstage. In addition to attending both formal and informal fan club gatherings, I also made friends with some opera regulars, who later became helpful interlocutors who shared their experiences of watching Cantonese opera and pursuing female wenwusheng.

Unlike many ethnomusicology works on Cantonese opera that focus on the musical or literary details of the works (e.g., Chow and Cheng, eds. 2008; Tai 2014; Yu 2001), I have adopted Nancy Guy’s approach of studying “opera live” by examining the details of performances. Without denying the significance of music, it is “the details of the performance—

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14 As the majority of Cantonese opera audiences is middle-aged and older women, I found that I was often one of the youngest people in attendance. Out of curiosity, many Cantonese opera fans were interested in initiating conversations with me, or were willing to talk to me when I told them about my research.
the exquisite moments brought to life by singers through their voices and embodied presence—
that touch listeners deeply” (2015: 159). In Hong Kong, people usually say, “to watch Cantonese opera” (taihei or tai jyutkek, Ca.), which reveals the importance of its visual elements (exemplified by costumes and zuogong). My observations suggest that the liveness and audience members’ embodied experiences in theater are often more important than the quality of the performance or the play. Therefore, I study Cantonese opera performances as both sonic and social events, in which the interactions between audience and actors onstage and off are as important as the stage performances themselves. Female fans are stigmatized as laypersons of Cantonese opera because very often they do not know when actors sing something incorrectly. While I agree with this observation, based on my conversations with them, I would add that they do not simply follow artists blindly. Rather, they tend to pay more attention to other non-musical details in performance, such as gestures, facial expressions, subtleties of speaking tones, improvised jokes, and costumes. As making video and audio recordings during most live performances has not been allowed since the early 1990s, fans’ descriptions and experiences of past performances (despite their inconsistency) are a helpful source for future study.

**Interlocutors**

When my interlocutors learned that I intended to approach a novice or rising female wenwusheng, they occasionally suggested that I interview those who were more famous or established. Yet this project is not only about superstars; rather, its focuses more on how less established actors climb the ladder to fame. By investigating this process, I gained better insight not only into the roles of fans and their interactions with idols, but also into the ecosystem of the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong, which is relatively different from that in China and Taiwan.
Although I conducted one-on-one interviews with thirteen people (including actors, musicians, teachers, fans, and a former radio host), a significant portion of information was obtained from observation and casual conversations with practitioners and audience members. Just as in Hong Kong society more generally, explicitly addressing homosexual topics and homoerotic desires, or confronting others’ acceptance of alternative gender presentations and romantic relationships is not particularly welcome in the Cantonese opera circle. People tend to engage in such practices or to know about them—and, in many cases, personally accept them—without openly discussing them (Kong 2014; Leung 2008). Some of the important information that I gathered regarding gender and sexuality was expressed in implicit ways as a subtext, or during casual conversations without the presence of a recorder. Very often interpreting interviews as literal accounts was insufficient, and I cross-referenced the behaviors and casual conversations of interviewees with their more formal interview statements as well as with those of other interlocutors.

Archival and Other Materials

My archival research was conducted at the COIC and the Chinese Music Archive of the Music Department at CUHK, the CUHK libraries, the Resource Centre of the Hong Kong Film Archive, and the Hong Kong Central Library. I collected both published and unpublished materials from the 1930s until the present, including scholarly works, entertainment press, practitioners’ memoirs, program notes, performance flyers, newspaper and magazine clippings, and both fieldwork and commercial audio and video recordings.

During my fieldwork year, I also attended conferences and talks on Cantonese opera, including the “Cross-dressing in Cantonese Opera Films” seminar¹⁵ as part of the “Male

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¹⁵ Held at the Hong Kong Film Archive on November 25, 2012.
Impersonation in Hong Kong Cinema” program, Yuen Siu-fai’s talk on different role-types in Cantonese opera,\textsuperscript{16} and the 2013 International Seminar on Cantonese Opera in Memory of the Centenary of Madam Yam Kim Fai.\textsuperscript{17} These events enhanced my understanding both of my dissertation topic and the research interests of local scholars and opera practitioners.

**Literature Review**

*Chinese Opera*

Chinese opera has been a popular topic in the scholarship of a range of disciplines. It has been used as a lens to understand the social and cultural history of both dynastic and modern China (Chou 1997, 2004; Goldman 2012; Goldstein 2007; Ho 2005; Jiang 2009; Kang 2009; Lee 2009; Li 2010; Luo 2005; Mackerras 1975; Ng 2015; Silvio 1999, 2008; Stock 2003; Yeh 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Yu 2011). Evolving around sociopolitical changes, study of Chinese opera has informed us about modernity and nationalism in both Nationalist and Communist Chinas (Chou 1997; Goldstein 2007; Guy 2005; Jiang 2009; Mackerras 1975; Stock 2003). Often perceived as role models and embodiments of social progressiveness, national stars of Chinese opera were used to promote state ideologies and represent the new nation-states (Goldstein 2007; Jiang 2009; Kang 2009; Li 2010; Stock 2003). These stars exemplified how modernity as well as western technology and ideologies could be adopted in early modern China (Goldstein 2007; Li 2010; Yeh 2003, 2007). Discussions of the roles of the entertainment print industry in the early twentieth century in creating a new means of consumption and patronage (Chin 2012; Goldstein 2007; Yeh 2003, 2004, 2007; Yung 2013) have provided me a fruitful perspective on the print commodities, taken largely from the periodical press, in my study. Instead of treating tabloids

\textsuperscript{16} Held at the Koshan Theatre on December 21, 2013.

\textsuperscript{17} Held at the Polytechnic University January 12–13, 2013.
and magazines as sources of factual materials, I study them as another “public stage” for actors and another space through which to create fans.

Social class and patronage have been widely studied. Traditionally speaking, due to the social stigma associated with Chinese opera actors, even for top-notch stars who make a good salary, social power is not proportionally reflected in star status and wealth. The actor-patron relationships are rather complex in terms of exchanges of social, cultural, and economic capital (Jiang 2009; Kang 2009; Yeh 2003, 2005). Homosexual bonds and sexual contact between (cross-dressing) actors and their patrons were, historically, not uncommon—and are still prevalent today (Chen 2007; Goldstein 2007; Kang 2009; Li 2010; Silvio 2008: 218). Such actor-patron relationships have been frequently presented as different forms of fictive kinship, such as adoptive mother-and-daughter relationships in yueju (Jiang 2009: 115–32). Although I do not think sexual relations between actors and patrons of Cantonese opera are common in today’s Hong Kong, emotional intimacy presented in both a homoerotic manner and fictive kinship between female wenwusheng and their fans are noteworthy.

Issues of gender and sexuality have also attracted scholars’ attention (Chan 2002; Chan 2005; Chou 1997; Goldstein 2007; Jiang 2009; Kang 2009: 115–144; Li 2003; Li 2012; Mackerras 1975; Silvio 1999, 2008; Tan 2000; Tian 2000). From the dynastic period to the contemporary stage, the performing body has been a site for both reinforcing and transgressing patriarchal authority as well as preexisting gender norms (Chan 2005; Chou 1997; Goldstein 2007; Li 2003; Tan 2000; Tian 2000). Western gender, queer, and performance theories have been applied by scholars who take textually-oriented and ethnographic approaches to the study of gender performativity in Chinese opera (Chan 2005; Li 2003; Silvio 1999). Taiwanese opera (koa-a-hi) provides a good basis for comparison for my study because it has commonalities with
Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. Both have been feminized for their status as regional operas (being subordinate to Peking opera, the “national opera”) and their unbroken tradition of female cross-dressing (Silvio 1999, 2008). The interplay between queerness, class, local Hokklo cultural identity, and the making of Taiwanese national identity is an enlightening perspective through which I investigate the identity dynamics enacted in female wenwusheng performance.

Studies of the all-female troupes and female wenwusheng of Cantonese opera, and female singers of Cantonese operatic songs (yuequ) have also provided helpful sources. While some studies provide a general understanding of the activities, social status, reception, and styles of female performers of Cantonese opera music in the early twentieth century in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Macau, and Shanghai (Chin 2012; Huang and Shen 2007: 125–72; Wan 1995; Xie and Huang 1990; Yung 2012: 129–49), others feature more recent iconic figures in postwar Hong Kong (Lum 2004, 2005, 2013; Lam, ed. 2004; Tan 2000; Wong, ed. 2013). The quality and credibility of these works vary. While some are informative, with in-depth analysis and archival backup, others do not document the sources of their information. Some works uncritically flatter top stars (especially Yam Kim-fai). Nonetheless, some of these authors have personal connections with individual collectors whose rare and unpublished materials, such as live recordings in the 1960s, may benefit future studies.

It is generally believed that Cantonese opera in Hong Kong has been free of political drama (Yung 2004: 44). Local scholarship on the direct relationship between Cantonese opera and local politics is relatively scarce. The few articles that, to various extents, deal with the political role of Cantonese opera are mostly related to CCP propaganda (Ip 1995; Lee 2014; Yu 2003, 2011). While Siu-yen Lee’s (2014) preliminary study examines how Cantonese opera was used by the local communist workers in Hong Kong during the 1950s–1970s to promote CCP
ideologies and anti-colonial sentiment, Siu-wah Yu (2011) briefly discusses the political agenda behind the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage recognition of Cantonese opera in the post-1997 era. Despite the length and depth of these works, they have challenged the prevailing myth of the politically immune and only profit-oriented environment of the local Cantonese opera scene. The political role of Cantonese opera in evoking a pan-Chinese cultural identity and the sentiment of national belonging to the PRC is a significant topic to be explored in future scholarship.

Nancy Guy’s (2005) monograph more explicitly deals with Peking opera within the political reality of the Republic of China (ROC) on the island of Taiwan. She discusses how the post-1949 Nationalist regime in Taiwan attempted to preserve and disseminate Peking opera in its pre-Communist form in order to legitimate, culturally and thus politically, its claim as “China.” Since Taiwan and the PRC became reconnected in the late 1980s, Taiwanese practitioners have adopted repertoire, performance practices and styles, and aesthetics from the mainland. Through increasing contact with mainland performers, feelings of inferiority have also grown among local practitioners in Taiwan. A similar story can be found in the Cantonese opera scene in Hong Kong. The genre has been shared by both Hong Kong and Guangdong. Despite the fact that the development of Cantonese opera in post-1949 Guangdong is not as vigorous as that in Hong Kong, mainland actors, who received “systematic” and intensive training at state-run institutions, are considered superior to Hong Kong actors—among whom many perform part-time or become full-time actors relatively late in their lives. Both examples illustrate well the naturalized relationship between cultural authenticity and land of origin.
**Cross-dressing in Performance**

*Opera Studies*

In theater, cross-dressing is about both body and voice, and a fundamental commonality shared by these is that they both are products of the interplay between nature and culture (Andrée 2006; Blackmer and Smith, eds. 1995; Feld, et al. 2004: 334). Although both the physical body and materiality of the voice are considered natural attributes, they have been gendered, classed, racialized, and distinguished by age in society and history. During performance, both body and voice are mediums and agents in the process of making meaning (Dame 2006; Dunn and Jones, eds. 1994; Feld, et al. 2004). They also resignify, contradict, and reinforce each other. With the presence of a body, is gender seen or heard when cross-dressing occurs on the operatic stage? Can we hear a gender in singing? Does the body (de)gender voice, and vice versa? Throughout my dissertation, these are some of the questions I engage regarding gender performativity as presented in the bodies and voices of female *wenwusheng*.

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, feminist musicology has moved from studying women’s works and musicians to gender relations and power structures in music (Cook and Tsou, eds. 1994; McClary 1990; Solie, ed. 1993). Issues of gender and sexuality in the opera world—“a shrine to heterosex” (Reynolds 1995: 141–42)—have attracted increasing attention in scholarship (Abbate 2001; Andrée 2006; Blackmer and Smith, eds. 1995; Hadlock 2000; Koestenbaum 1993; McClary 1990; Smart, ed. 2000). Meanwhile, studies concerning queer subjectivity in both opera and absolute music by gay and lesbian musicologists have been on the rise (Brett, Wood, and Thomas, eds. 2006; Koestenbaum 1993; Wood 2006). Rather than treating voice as a cultural text, more scholars have stressed the “performative dimension of vocal expressions,” which highlights the “dynamic, contingent quality of both vocalization and
audition” and their interrelationship (Dunn and Jones, eds. 1994: 2). While earlier musicological studies neglected or denied the erotic and bodily experience of music (McClary 1990: 53–79), some gay and lesbian scholars began to write frankly about their sensual relationships with opera and singers’ voices. More importantly, these scholars address how their sexual and operatic experiences intersect (Abel 1996; Brett 2006; Koestenbaum 1993; Wood 2006). Although I did not actively seek out self-identified gay audience members or actors during my fieldwork, the intersected sexual-operatic experience did provide a rich perspective for examining homoeroticism between female fans and their favorite actresses both onstage and off.

Some scholars have shown that vocal timbre signifies not only gender and sexuality, but also the age, political power, and social legitimacy of characters in music theater (André 2006; Dame 2006; Reynolds 1995). When examining the casting of female wenwusheng for the characters of refined scholar-type characters, the studies of trouser roles in Italian opera are particularly helpful. Despite the changing practices and reception of trouser roles throughout the history of opera, the female voice has been used to portray the characters of pure, innocent boys, asexual supernatural beings, lower-class young men, and immature manhood—none of which are considered competitors of normalized men or masculinity (which are mostly signified by tenor, baritone, and bass voices) in worldly patriarchal society (Reynolds 1995: 141–42; Blackmer and Smith, eds. 1995). Although many of my interlocutors said they did not have a preference for the biological sex of wenwusheng, the importance of the materiality of female pinghou and its relation to the characters that female wenwusheng frequently play are worth considering.
Fan and Star Studies

As the phenomenon of female fans pursuing female wenwusheng is a notable characteristic of the Hong Kong Cantonese opera scene, my dissertation also concerns fandom and stardom. Media studies scholars have studied fans, mostly of pop culture, as a cultural text and phenomenon in relation to political economy and cultural production. Fans are not passive, uncritical, excessive, exploited consumers, but active agents who engage in the meaning making of the culture they consume (Dyer 1986; Fiske 1992; Grossberg 1992; Jensen 1992; Kelly, ed. 2004).

The entertainment press also plays a determining role in both portraying star images and making stars in the pop culture scene (Dyer 1986, 1998; Gledhill, ed. 1991). Just as “actors [in films] become stars when their off-screen life-styles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance” (Gledhill 1991: xiv), rising female wenwusheng’s offstage personas are also crucial in star making. As Cantonese opera is now a subculture in Hong Kong, this process is less manipulated by the commercial media, and depends more on actors’ performances, word of mouth, and actors’ relationships with audiences. Therefore, I also examine the significance of fan club events because offstage mingling is a means for rising female wenwusheng to connect with their supporters and attract more fans.

Cantonese opera stardom operates differently than pop culture in the Anglo-American context. I found that the theoretical framework focusing on commodified emotional intimacy in the anthropological studies of Japanese pop culture fits my study well (Kelly, ed. 2004; Robertson 1998; Yano 2002, 2004). Personalized emotional bonds between fans and stars are a better way to explain the complexity of gendered dynamics between fandom and stardom in this context.
Cross-dressing and Queer Studies

Gender is performed in everyday life, materialized through the body (Butler 1990, 1993). Studies on cross-dressing challenge the naturalized relationship between sex and gender, and between gender identity and sexual orientation (Garber 1992; Halberstam 1998; Valentine 2007). Femininity is perceived as artificial and more performable while masculinity seems to be a natural attribute that is monopolized by heterosexual (white) male bodies and less performable (Halberstam 1998: 240). When considering women’s cross-dressing, people tend to draw a simple, misogynist conclusion that it is an empowerment for women to play the privileged opposite sex. Judith Halberstam (1998) argues for “masculinity without men,” meaning masculinity is not just confined to male bodies. Moreover, masculinity on female bodies should not be simply understood as an imitation of maleness or an appropriation of male power, which echoes Marjorie Garber’s (1992) argument that cross-dressers should be studied as cross-dressers (my emphasis), rather than imposing upon them either-or categories, or treating them as a substitute for the opposite sex or gender. More importantly, Halberstam suggests that female masculinity also plays a role in the process of defining “orthodox Masculinity” (my emphasis).

Likewise, in Cantonese opera, many people consider the female wenwusheng to be a substitute for male wenwusheng and that only the masculinity embodied by men is orthodox. Yet, if there exists a difference between male masculinity and female masculinity, then the popularity and success of female wenwusheng have problematized the naturalized relationship between the male body and orthodox Masculinity. In other words, the presumption that female wenwusheng are an imitation or an alternative form of orthodox Masculinity—embodied by male wenwusheng only—is also challenged. It is also noteworthy that while the female masculinity in Cantonese opera not only forms a dialectical relationship with male masculinity in shaping orthodox
Masculinity, it also has impact outside the opera circle. One of my purposes in studying female masculinity in this popular entertainment genre is to link this alternative form of masculinity to the broader social context. The female masculinity exemplified by Yam Kim-fai not only spoke to the independent working women in the 1950s and 1960s (Ho 2005), but also played a significant role in the identity formation processes of many sexual minorities in Hong Kong (Kong 2014; Xiao, et al., eds. 2008).

Garber’s (1992) argument not only opposes the rigid dualism present in some studies of masculinity and femininity, but also highlights the role of cross-dressing as a “third term.” She considers that this “third term” is not a new term or category per se, but “a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility” (11). The enabling and empowering nature of this “thirdness” is also adopted by Elizabeth Wood (2006) in her study of Sapphonics in Italian opera. Emphasizing a lesbian sensibility in experiencing and studying opera, Wood explains that Sapphonics is “a way of describing a space of lesbian possibility, for a range of erotic and emotional relationships among women who sing and women who listen” (27).

In her book on queer cinema in Hong Kong, Helen Leung suggests that, rather than treating particular films as a genre or type, the concept of queer be used as a process or perspective for interpreting films. Likewise, it is also important to note that my purpose in discussing a queer aesthetics of a heterosexist world such as Italian opera and Cantonese opera is to suggest the effects of a queer reading (2008: 2, emphasis in the original). My attempt to address the homoerotic desires of female fans evoked by female wenwusheng’s performances is neither to imply that these fans are bisexuals or lesbians nor to suggest that female wenwusheng are performing lesbianism. Rather, by studying the queer overtones of this cultural practice, my
project attempts to enrich our understanding of the early history of queer cultures in Hong Kong before the emergence of Anglo-American LGBTQ discourses there in the 1980s.

Leung’s discussion of the implicitness of queer sentiments in Hong Kong cinema also opposes the dominant LGBTQ discourse, which encompasses identity, personhood, and social activism. The notions of implicitness and an underlying dynamics—suggested by the use of “undercurrent” in Leung’s book title—are important to my project because most of the female fans with whom I spoke are in heterosexual marriages. While I recognized the dynamic of homoeroticism between these fans and female wenwusheng, I did not find that they were interested in actually pursuing a sexual relationship with their idols. Moreover, most fans are neither familiar with LGBTQ issues nor care about local tongzhi (ethnic-Chinese sexual minority) cultures and movements. In fact, many are politically conservative and even homophobic. What I address here are the effects of performances and the performative homoerotic sensibility they evoke.

The significance of my queer reading of female wenwusheng performance as an enabling space goes beyond gender politics. Leung’s metaphor of “undercurrent” articulates the underlying ambivalence and fluidity that characterize the web of identities embraced by many Hongkongers. Just as the seemingly contradictory attitudes of the Hongkonger mainstream toward queer culture—a person may be hostile toward tongzhi social activism but accept behaviors relevant to gender and sexual variance at the same time (Kam 2008; Kong 2014; Leung 2008: 4)—so too are their cultural and political identities neither static nor comfortably aligned with the either-or Hong Kong-Chinese binary.
Women’s History

Due to frequent contact between and population flows among townships and cities of the Pearl River Delta area (see Fig. 1.4) and the majority Cantonese inhabitant population in Hong Kong in the twentieth century, it is important to contextualize my project within the social history of this geocultural area. While women’s history in early modern China mostly sheds light on middle- and upper-class women and heteronormative gender discourse (especially the May Fourth Movement discourse)\textsuperscript{18} in national centers such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin, I found studies on working women in the Pearl River Delta area to be more helpful (Chin 2012; Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975).

Angelina Chin (2012) reinterprets the national discourse of women’s emancipation by demonstrating how economic, social, and legal changes drew lower-class women from domestic to public spaces in Guangzhou and Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s. In a chapter devoted to occupations, Chin asserts that one of the popular occupations these women took on was that of the entertainer (nüling), whose job it was to sing Cantonese operatic songs at urban teahouses. The emergence of these female singers not only bolstered the rise of actresses in commercial theaters, but also popularized the female pinghou voice in the recording industry.

Working women also represented a new kind of consumer power in the early twentieth century. During this period, despite the national discourse of “New Women” that focused on free heterosexual love (see, for example, Wang 1999), marriage was still more of an economic social

\textsuperscript{18} The May Fourth Movement is a milestone of the “New Culture Movement,” which took place between the 1900s and mid-1930s. The May Fourth Movement was named after the demonstration by university students in Beijing against the decision of the Versailles Conference on May 4, 1919. Generally speaking, leaders of the “New Culture Movement” attempted to adopt Western ideologies and sciences for political and intellectual reforms in China. Confucianism and many traditional culture and values were the reasons blamed for the backwardness and weakness of the country. It featured new cultural practices (such as replacing the classical Chinese with the new vernacular writing style), democracy and sciences, and the emancipation of the individual (especially women).
institution. Historical and ethnographic studies of working women who practiced alternative marriages and lifestyles—such as delayed transfer marriage (bu luojia), spirit marriage (minghun), and sworn spinsterhood (zishu)—in the Pearl River Delta region (Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975) deepen my analysis of the star image of Yam Kim-fai, an icon of both female wenwusheng and cross-dressing actresses in films in the mid twentieth century. As Yam was also known for the fandom of her spinster domestic helpers (who are also portrayed in some of her films), studies of economically independent lower-class women have enriched my understanding of the social context of her stardom and the rise of female masculinity.

![Map of South China Sea and cities surrounding the Pearl River Delta](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Guangdong_location_map.svg)

**Fig. 1.4 Cities surrounding the Pearl River Delta.**

**Queer Studies**

A growing body of scholarly works on different gay, lesbian, and queer experiences in non-Anglo American contexts have diversified the scholarly discourse on sexual minority subjects (see, for example, Blackwood and Wieringa, eds. 1999; Chou 2000; Kong 2011, 2014; 2016).

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Lai 2014; Leung 2008; Malave and Manalansan, eds. 2002; Martin, et al., eds. 2008). It is important to note that while the Chinese term tongzhi became popular in the late 1980s to refer to people who exist under the broad umbrella of sexual minorities—meaning people with non-normative genders and/or sexualities—it also marks the particularity of queer experiences in Chinese societies (Chou 2000; Kong 2011; Leung 2008). Compared to Anglo-American queer discourse, which emphasizes issues of identity, visibility, civil rights, and activism, queer cultures and narratives in Hong Kong (and other Chinese societies) appear backward, “pre-identity,” and even homophobic in the face of the “global gay” narrative (Leung 2008: 3–4). In the literature on Hong Kong sexual minorities, many self-identified tongzhi do not consider their “gay identity” their top priority of personhood. Rather than coming-out stories, many of their anecdotes describe their experiences of passing for a straight being in everyday life, maintaining a heterosexual marriage and family with long- or short-term same-sex affairs, or keeping a same-sex relationship without being confronted or coming out (Chou 2000; Kong 2011, 2014; Xiao, et al., eds. 2008). It is more about doing than saying, living rather than naming. These works provide me insight into the fluid, uncertain, non-confrontational, and implicit characteristics of queer experiences in Hong Kong. More importantly, this literature also demonstrates that it is not uncommon for tongzhi to refer to Yam Kim-fai when discussing a queer sensibility, experience, or desire (Kong 2014: 73; Leung 2008; Xiao, et al., eds. 2008: 10–16). It exemplifies how a star of a seemingly heterosexist traditional art form can serve as a queer cultural icon.

**Structure and Trajectory**

Following this introduction, this study is structured in six chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the hangdang (role-type) system in Chinese opera and the wenwusheng role-type. The concept of hangdang is essential for understanding the history and definition of wenwusheng in Cantonese
opera. After that, I focus on how practitioners of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong understand the *wenwusheng* role-type differently, as informed by my ethnographic work. These ethnographic data not only lay out the social context for the rest of my dissertation, but also show how recent practices in Hong Kong challenge the conventional understanding of *hangdang*.

Chapter 3 investigates gender performativity in singing and acting in performances of female *wenwusheng*. I first discuss how Cantonese opera performances and repertoires are gendered. Second, drawing upon feminist and queer musicological literature pertaining to Italian opera, I examine how vocal timbre in Cantonese opera signifies not only gender and sexuality, but also political power and social legitimacy. The final section focuses on how gender is performed in female *wenwusheng*’s experimental performances and recordings that feature multiple gender impersonations. By analyzing two stage performances and an experimental audio recording, I highlight the denaturalized relationship between voice and vocal gender, and between the performing body and gendered role-types.

The phenomenon of female fans pursuing female *wenwusheng* is a notable characteristic of Hong Kong’s Cantonese opera scene, which prompted me to examine fandom and stardom in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 provides both the historical and social background of the emergence of actresses and female audiences in Chinese opera in the early twentieth century. I also describe fans’ behaviors in Cantonese opera and how female *wenwusheng* climb the ladder of stardom. In Chapter 5, I bridge the literature on Chinese opera patronage with that of fan studies in Japanese pop culture to illustrate the interdependence of fan-star relationships. Drawing upon my observations during fan club events and performances, I study the interplay between actresses’ public, onstage performances and their informal, offstage interactions with fans. Beyond the exchanges of social, cultural, and economic capital, I investigate the gendered dynamics between
female wenwusheng and their predominantly female middle-aged fans from the perspective of commodified homoerotic emotional intimacy.

Merging the theoretical framework in the previous chapters with Garber’s concept of “thirdness” as an enabling space, Chapter 6 employs an intertextual reading of an iconic female wenwusheng, Yam Kim-Fai (1913–1989). I explore how Hongkongers (re)create the multifold significance of this cross-media star through analyzing her films, popular tabloid magazines, practitioners’ memoirs, a history of working-class women with alternative marriages in the early twentieth century, and an oral history of sexual minorities in the past decade. By studying Yam’s (re)presentation on different “public stages,” I examine how her star image and its queer overtones are subjected to the processes of asexualization and resexualization. This chapter not only enhances a regional understanding of cultural history in early modern China, but also traces the lineage of early queer cultures in popular entertainment prior to the emergence of queer discourses in Hong Kong.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 7, attempts to connect the issues discussed in Chapters 2 through 6 at a deeper conceptual level. Here I interpret performances of female wenwusheng within a broader framework concerning the colonial history of Hong Kong. I argue that, from the perspective of colonial mentality, the queer body of female wenwusheng embodies both an inauthentic masculinity and inauthentic Chineseness. This inauthenticity, intertwined with an internalized sense of cultural inferiority and equivocal sentiments of national belonging, can also be understood as key to the ambivalent cultural, national, and political identities displayed by Hongkongers.
Chapter 2

Defining and Problematizing Wenwusheng

Introduction

I’m not the wenwusheng [literally, “civil-martial male role-type,” male lead in Cantonese opera] of tonight’s show. I’m just playing the third xiaosheng [young courteous supporting male role-type, specializing in singing] (disan xiaosheng).

Doris Kwan Hoi-shan (informal conversation, 2013)

I am not a [female] wenwusheng. It seems like I am not relevant to your research subject. Therefore I do not think I am a suitable interviewee.

S. Chan (email communication, March 20, 2013)

The first epigraph captures my brief conversation with Doris Kwan, a rising female cross-dresser in Cantonese opera, when I saw her by chance during my fieldwork in summer 2013. She said she was having a performance that night. I asked her about the details. After telling me the title of the play, she added that she was not the wenwusheng but the supporting xiaosheng of the show.

The second epigraph is quoted from an email response from S. Chan. As she is one of the first female cross-dressers in Cantonese opera with whom I became acquainted personally, I invited her for an interview by email. However, she wrote that she was not a female wenwusheng. Later, I found out during another occasion that she identified herself as a xiaosheng.

Like many other ethnographers, one of the first things I tried to do in the field was to seek out the interlocutors for my research subject. Actresses Doris Kwan and Chan were my initial targets because I had seen performances in which they had cross-dressed as wenwusheng. Used to understanding this concept as a composite role-type of two preexisting role-types—xiaosheng and xiaowu (the young martial male role-type) I was alarmed by these two actresses’ disavowal
of their identities as female wenwusheng. These short conversations also urged me to contemplate the meanings of wenwusheng, a keyword for my research project. While talking with other informants, I also found that the meanings that wenwusheng carried often went beyond the operatic stage and signified an impeccable balance between wen (singing and acting) and wu (acrobatics) performances.

This chapter will introduce the concept of role-type before examining the history of the wenwusheng since its emergence in the early twentieth century. Based on my ethnographic and archival data, I will then investigate how the wenwusheng role-type has been understood differently throughout its history. By examining various meanings of wenwusheng in relation to the evolution of the role-type classification system, and factors of aesthetics and economic power, I problematize the applicability of the traditional definition of role-type in Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

**Defining Wenwusheng**

*The Role-type Concept*

Wenwusheng has been the male lead role-type in Cantonese opera since the 1920s. According to the *Dictionary of Chinese Opera and Narrative* (1981), hangdang and jiaose are used interchangeably to describe “role-type,” a classification system in Chinese opera that categorize characters. However, in contemporary Hong Kong, hangdang and jiaose are usually distinguished as “role-type” and “character,” respectively. In this study, I follow the conventional distinction between role-type and character. Characters (jiaose) are the persons in the story designed and named by playwrights. In most cases, characters are not duplicated in different plays, even those written by the same playwrights. However, in each opera genre, there exist a limited number of role-types. While the number of characters is unlimited and is
expanding along with the growing repertoire, the number of role-types stays relatively stable and fixed.

**Fundamental Principles**

To understand the concept of role-type, one must know the fundamental principles of Chinese opera performance. Generally speaking, actors’ bodies are the major medium for conveying meanings and telling stories. Instead of having elaborate sets as backdrops on stage, the narratives rely heavily on both verbal means through singing and reciting, and the nonverbal medium in the conventional, highly stylized movements and gesturing that are utilized by the actors’ bodies (zuogong). Although zuogong is very often translated as “acting” in English, it not only means “acting” in the Western sense, but also refers to the stylized body movements and gestures (Li 2010: 58). For instance, the basic stage setup of “one table and two chairs” can be used to stand for a mountain, a fortress, or a bed, according to the context, lyrics, and actors’ zuogong. This kind of minimal and yet conventional stage design is derived from the aesthetic principle that (re)presenting realism is not as important as transmitting and evoking sentiment (qing). Borrowing the principal aesthetic aim of traditional Chinese painting, Chinese opera emphasizes portraying the meaning (xieyi) rather than (re)presenting realistically (xieshi) (Wichmann 1991: 2). Chinese opera works as a signification system in which both actors and audiences need to acquire knowledge of the codes in stage setup, costumes, props, music, role-types, and zuogong to be able to understand the performances.

As many opera genres share the same folktales and adapt essential repertoires from other genres, it is common to see different genres with similar titles, plots, and characters in their plays. However, the same characters may be played by different role-types across genres. For instance, the leading male character Liu Mengmei from *The Peony Pavilion*, a famous play from the late
sixteenth century, is usually played by the *xiaosheng* role-type in *kunju* opera (an ancient genre from Kunshan), but by the *wenwusheng* role-type in Cantonese opera.

**Role-type**

Chinese opera features a wide variety of stock characters, played by actors who have gone through long-term, arduous training, specializing in a particular role-type. Role-type can be understood as a signification system that consists of different sets of conventional codes. Traditionally speaking, each role-type is rigidly defined by clusters of “physical and vocal conventions and patterns of stylization” (Wichmann 1991: 7). Factors such as vocal projection, speaking, costumes, makeup, gestures, physical movements, singing, and musical accompaniment signify different aspects of the characters, including gender, age, social status, marital status, occupation, and personality (ibid.; Yung 1989: 2).

Throughout the history of Chinese opera, a few generic role-types have developed into a wider range of rigidly defined ones. When speaking of Chinese opera as a whole, there are four generic categories of role-types—*sheng* (male role-types), *dan* (female role-types), *jing* (male painted-face role-types), and *chou* (male clown role-types) (see Chart 2.1). Owing to both exchanges between genres and the development of individual genres, some role-types overlap while some are unique to particular genres (although each Chinese opera genre has its own way of classifying its roles). For the role-types that can be found in more than one genre, the importance of these role-types may vary from genre to genre in spite of the similar styles and functions. For instance, both Cantonese opera and *kunju* opera have the *xiaosheng*. While the *xiaosheng* is an important role-type and plays many male leads in *kunju* opera, in today’s Cantonese opera the *xiaosheng* usually plays supporting roles.
Biological Sexes of Actors vs. Genders of Role-types

The conventional and abstract principle of Chinese opera highlights actors’ artisanship and outweighs many personal aspects of the actors such as age and biological sex. Based on Judith Butler’s theory, Siu-leung Li explains that a “pretty woman” (played by a male dan in his study) on the Chinese operatic stage is not necessarily beautiful because of the actor’s biological sex and physical appearance, but his mastery of artistry. The highly stylized, conventional, and artificial nature of gender configurations in Chinese opera, that are at once distanced from and resemble masculinities and femininities in real life, accentuate Butler’s postulation that gender performativity is a citational reiteration of prior, authoritative sets of practices and codes (Li 2003: 180–81). Traditionally speaking, the biological sex and gender of the actor are never a determining factor of the gender of the role-type s/he practices.
Concepts of Wen and Wu

The wen-wu binary, usually translated as “civil-military,” is a fundamental way to categorize performance styles, role-types, and repertoires in Cantonese opera. Wen literally means civil, polite, educated, literary, and cultured.⁠¹ In Cantonese opera, it refers to sections or repertoires that feature singing and zuogong as the primary way of conveying meanings of the plot. During the early 1900s, when each role-type was still rigidly defined, xiaosheng and huadan (a young female role-type) were the two leading role-types to perform wen plays or sections. These role-types enact mostly scholars, royal family members, court officials, and well-to-do men and women characters in plays.

When performing wen plays, musically speaking, actors are evaluated by the subtleties of their vocal qualities, clarity and accuracy of enunciation, breath control, and individual renditions of the songs. In terms of zuogong, people would look carefully into the use of water-sleeves (shuixiu),² facial expressions, and details of gestures and postures (see Figs 2.1 and 2.2). Wen performances are usually set up to narrate stories and express sentiment, ranging from romantic and familial love, patriotism, happiness, grief, and sadness to anger. Responsible not just for delivering the plots clearly, a good wen performance is also supposed to have the power to move audiences emotionally.

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¹ The character “wen” can also be used as a noun to refer to writing or language.
² Water-sleeves are two pieces of cloth that are attached to the edges of the sleeves of the costumes. Usually in white, they are made of very thin, light, and smooth materials. They can be folded and unfolded during the performances. The technique of water-sleeves (shuixiu gong) is an essential skill that all actors, especially those who focus on the wen performances, need to master.
Fig. 2.1 A dan actress showing off her water-sleeve skill (shuixiu gong).^3

Fig. 2.2 The sheng actor at the center rapidly waves his water-sleeves to represent that he is riding a carriage on a rough road. Photo taken by the author at Ma Wan, Hong Kong (April 29, 2013).

By contrast, wu literally means martial, valor, and military power. Wu in Cantonese opera refers to sections or repertoires that highlight physicality and acrobatic skills. With the help of exaggerated costumes and props, actors showcase the impeccable control and coordination of their vigorous and deft bodies through choreographed and stylized acrobatic movements. Wu performances feature fighting scenes with extensive use of stage weapons (see Fig 2.3) and challenging movements such as backbends, doing a standing split, jumping up high, and doing flips (see Fig. 2.4). Besides the leading actors, many supporting wu specialists (wushi) are

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involved in the _wu_ scenes (see Fig. 2.5). Rather than narrating the plots, the major functions of _wu_ scenes are to display actors’ acrobatic skills, exhibit the overall standard of the entire troupe, bring the play to a climax, and excite the audiences. _Wu_ role-types include _wusheng_, _xiaowu_, _wudan_ (martial female role-type), and _wuchou_ (martial clown role-type) in the traditional “ten role-type system” (_shida hangdang_), which I explain below. The characters played by these role-types are mostly warriors, generals, wandering swordsmen, thieves, and professional assassins. Despite the fact that both male and female role-types have intensive _wen_ and _wu_ training, performances, and repertoires, _wen_ is very often essentialized as feminine while _wu_ is masculine.

Fig. 2.3 An acrobatic scene between two actors—a _dan_ (left) and a _sheng_ (right)—fighting with spears. Photo taken by Toni Chau in Shatin, Hong Kong (December 16, 2012).
Fig. 2.4 An acrobatic scene featuring two sheng actors’ wu skills involving back flips and jumping. Photo taken by Toni Chau in Shatin, Hong Kong (December 16, 2012).

Fig. 2.5 Wu performances usually feature fighting between two parties. Teamwork is always involved. This photo shows a protagonist (center, in white) fighting against a group of soldiers of the enemy (played by wu specialists). Photo taken by the author at Hang Hau, Hong Kong (May 21, 2013).
The Emergence of the Six-Pillar System and the Wenwusheng Role-type

Traditional Ten-role-type Categories

As wenwusheng is a composite role-type that is derived from two older role-types (xiaowu and xiaosheng) from a more traditional role-type classification system, it is important to understand the background of the transition from the old “ten role-type system” (shida hangdang) to the new “six-pillar system” (liu zhu zhi) in the 1920s. According to scholars of Cantonese opera, there were ten to twenty-five\(^4\) traditional role-types in Cantonese opera before the emergence of the six-pillar system (Chen 2007: 163–64; Lai 2001: 160; Lai 2010: 46–47; Ng 2015: 61; Yung 2006b: 57). I adopted the ten role-type system in my project because it is a more frequently mentioned system that includes the more important ten role-types. Please also note that the ten role-type categories that were included in the system and the orders among all these categories varied over time (YDC 2008: 333–34; ZXZGJ 1993: 296–97). According to the Grand Dictionary of Cantonese Opera (Yueju da cidian), by the end of the Qing dynasty, the ten role-type system included the categories of wusheng, xiaowu,\(^5\) huadan, zhengdan (a respectful, elegant [married] female role-type), zhengsheng (a male role-type typifying righteous, middle-aged literati or civil servants), zongsheng (a male civil servant or emperor who sings), xiaosheng, gongjiao (an old male role-type enacting righteous, loyal characters), huamian (a “painted-face” male role-type enacting characters ranging from loyal and heroic to crude and evil), and chou (clown role-types) (YDC 2008: 333–34). However, it does not mean that there were only ten actors. Generally speaking, there was more than one actor under each category; the number

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\(^4\) Sources show that different classification systems appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. While some show ten role-types (YDC 2008: 333–34; ZXZGJ 1993: 296–97) in a system, some list twelve (YDC 2008: 346; Lai 2010: 47), thirteen (YDC 2008: 346), and twenty-five role-types (Lai 2001: 160).

\(^5\) Xiaowu can be understood as a younger version of the wusheng role-type. Traditionally, while wusheng actors usually wore beard to represent an older age of the characters, xiaowu actors usually showed entire faces when playing the young, handsome martial characters (Luo n.d.: 70). Compared to wusheng, xiaowu had more singing in their performances.
varied based on the scale and budget of the troupe.\textsuperscript{6} Rankings were strictly defined for all actors of the same category. For instance, under the wusheng category, most troupes had the principal wusheng and second wusheng. Third, fourth, and even fifth wusheng were hired by larger-scale troupes (see Chart 2.2). In the past, when a troupe was hired, it was supposed to provide performances during afternoons and at night. Before the growth of indoor theaters and the improvement of lighting systems, the better and more experienced casts (for instance, the principal and second wusheng) performed during the day and the less skilled and younger casts (for instance, the third or fourth wusheng) took care of the night (and overnight) shows (Luo 1958: 7–9). While the daytime casts featured the stars and core actors of the troupes, the nighttime casts allowed supporting actors to gain stage experience. Inevitably, the tickets for daytime shows were more expensive than those for the night shows.

When the ten role-type system was popular, plays were usually designed to allow actors from most, if not all, role-types to perform and showcase their skills. Yet the ten role-types were hierarchical. Some role-types were more important, had more substantive parts, and played the leading characters in the plays. Thus the actors of these role-types got paid more than the others. Prior to the emergence of the “six-pillar system” and the wenwusheng role-type, wusheng was the most important role-type of a troupe. Thus actors who played the leading wusheng functioned as the troupe’s brand name and directly affected the ticket sales.

Theoretically speaking, each role-type has its own performance techniques,\textsuperscript{7} repertoire, vocal projections, facial expressions, makeup, and costumes to represent certain types of characters in terms of age, gender, social status, occupation, and personality. All role-type

\textsuperscript{6} According to Wing Chung Ng, a full-scale troupe in late Qing consisted of 130 to 140 people (2015: 29). According to Chen Feinong, in the 1910s and 1920s, a large-scale troupe consisted of at least 158 people including 66 actors, 11 musicians, and 81 crew members. He also listed out the numbers of actors of each role-type category. Taking some of the role-type categories as examples, there were three wusheng, six xiaowu, and thirteen huadan (2007: 155–57).

\textsuperscript{7} Presented in the movements of different parts of the body such as eyes, fingers, heads, and feet.
categories were rigidly defined and for an actor to cross role-types was not acceptable (Yung 2006b: 55). Due to the strict hierarchy between role-types in a troupe, crossing role-types might lead to conflicts of interest among actors.

However, since the 1920s, it has become common for actors to switch from one role-type to another or to play more than one role-type (Luo n.d.; YDC 2008: 880, 903–04). The new trend of crossing role-types resulted from rapid changes on the increasingly competitive commercial stages. Breaking the rigid boundaries between role-types was not only to satisfy urban audiences’ desires for novelty, but also a more economic way for the companies to showcase their top casts. Company impresarios and theater owners could now draw more audience members by hiring only a few versatile stars.

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8 Crossing role-types happened not only in Cantonese opera, but also in Peking opera. One of the renowned examples is Mei Lanfang’s attempt to blur the boundaries between the role-types of qingyi (virtue, married women) and huadan (lively young women) when reconstructing qingyi as part of his opera reform project (Jiang 2009: 34).
Chart 2.2 The most popular ten traditional categories of role-types. Most of the role-types (except zhengsheng and gongjiao) include more than one actor. The numbers of actors of each role-type vary in different troupes. I use the cast of one of the performances of the Renshounian Troupe, a top-notch troupe in the 1920s, as a reference (shown on Ng 2015: 49).
The Six-Pillar System

Starting in the 1920s, the traditional ten role-type system was gradually replaced by the six-pillar system. A new classification system of role-types, the six-pillar features only six actors—one actor from each role-type—rather than six categories of role-types. These six role-types include *wenwusheng, zhengyin huadan* (principal female role-type), *wusheng* (male martial role-type), *chousheng* (male clown role-type), *xiaosheng*, and *erbang huadan* (supporting female role-type). The “six-pillar system” became popular along with the flourishing urban life—most significantly coinciding with the growing number of indoor permanent theaters (versus temporary, outdoor theaters in the countryside)—in a few wealthier Cantonese-speaking cities such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Macau. Urban theater owners hired different Cantonese opera troupes to perform for various lengths of time depending on the reputations and receptions of the troupes. In order to maximize the profits, both theater owners and the troupe managers tried to cut budgets by hiring fewer actors, especially those who played the marginalized role-types. They preferred to spend money paying star actors (Yung 2006b: 72). Meanwhile, the frequent cultural exchanges and emerging modernity as well as technology in these cities also nurtured urban theatergoers’ demands for novelty in new plays. Instead of performing plays that allowed for a wide range of role-types from the traditional ten role-type categories to showcase their skills, new plays were written to feature only six actors, mostly highlighting the *wenwusheng* and *huadan* (Leung 1997: 664).

**Role-type Voices vs. Gendered Voices**

Vocal projection is the essential signifier to indicate gender, age, and temperament of the characters and therefore one of the factors in distinguishing role-types. In the transition from the ten role-type system to the six-pillar, the vocal projection of some role-types also underwent
changes. Traditionally speaking, each role-type has its own unique vocal projection. For example, in the early twentieth century, some sheng role-types had their own vocal projections—such as xiaosheng hou (literally, “xiaosheng’s throat”), 9 xiaowu hou (literally, “xiaowu’s throat”), 10 and wusheng hou (literally, “wusheng’s throat”). 11 When referring to singing, “hou” (literally, “throat”) has two meanings—gendered vocal projection and gendered melodic nuances—and these two definitions very often overlap. The subtle differences between traditional hou of different role-types disappeared when the ten role-type system was gradually replaced by the six-pillar system (Chen 2007: 1). In the transition, as many actors began to break the boundaries between role-types, the diversity of vocal projections gradually shrank to only three generic types—pinghou (literally, “plain throat” or “flat throat”), zihou (literally, “child’s throat”), and dahou (literally, “large throat”)—for all role-types.

Pinghou refers to the natural, non-falsetto voice people use in everyday life. It is used by actors who play the sheng and older dan role-types. Sharper, thinner, and higher, zihou is a falsetto voice, an octave higher than pinghou. It is used only by those who play the younger female role-types. Compare to pinghou, it usually takes a longer time to master zihou.

In terms of both vocal projection and melodic nuances, dahou can be understood as a variation of pinghou. Dahou, also known as baqiang (literally, “tyrannical throat”), is a natural, non-falsetto, rougher voice 12 used (occasionally) by actors who play heroic male characters

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9 Traditionally, xiaosheng actors used a silvery falsetto voice in most cases and only switched to natural voice when ending melismas. However, xiaosheng actors began to replace falsetto voice with natural voice in the 1920s (Lai 2010: 207).

10 When the ten role-type system was still popular, the xiaosheng and xiaowu actors sang in falsetto. Zhu Cibo (1892–1922), a top xiaowu actor in the early 1900s, is believed to be the first person to adopt pinghou—a natural vocal projection—in the xiaowu role-type (Chen 2007: 1; Ng 2015: 48).

11 According to Chen Zhuoying’s description, wusheng hou, traditionally called “yü dai zuo,” is a combination of the falsetto zuo pie voice and the natural rou hou voice (2010: 15).

12 Dahou is defined quite differently in the sources that I consulted. According to Chen Zhuoying (1908–1980), a versatile songwriter and author of Cantonese opera and Cantonese music in the mid-twentieth century, dahou is a generic term for the high-pitched, powerful vocal projection, with or without the use of falsetto, of a few male role-types in the traditional ten role-type categories, including zuopie and baqiang (2010: 15). Defining dahou differently
(Yung 1989: 73–74). In many cases, the actors who play this kind of character use *pinghou* throughout the entire play, only switching to *dahou*—meaning singing a third to fifth higher—in a few phrases or excerpts to intensify the emotions or to signify a valiant temperament.

**Emergence of Wenwusheng**

It is commonly believed that the *wenwusheng* role-type was first introduced by the superstar actor Liang Shaohua (1901–?), who was originally a top-notch male *xiaowu* in the early 1920s (Chen 2007: 164; Lai 2010: 167; Yung 2006b: 57).\(^\text{13}\) Liang Shaohua was invited to join the Dazhonghua Troupe, one of the leading companies, which had already cast another top *xiaowu* star called Liang Xian. Liang Shaohua and Liang Xian were “equally good” and it was difficult to hierarchize one as principal *xiaowu* and the other as second *xiaowu*. Finally, Liang Shaohua came up with the solution of naming himself *wenwusheng* (YDC 2008: 348, 924, 1266). Along with other composite role-types such as *wenwuchou* (a clown role-type that is good at both *wen* and *wu*) and *wenwudan* (a female role-type that is good at both *wen* and *wu*), *wenwusheng* was a fashionable gimmick that “bridge[d] the normative divide of civil and military dramas, and exhibit[ed] a broader range of emotions and strengths” to feed audiences’ growing demand for novelty in various aspects—such as plots, costumes, music, and stage backdrops—in the increasingly competitive urban commercial theaters (Ng 2015: 52, 59).

Theoretically speaking, the *wenwusheng* role-type is derived from two preexisting role-types—*xiaosheng* and *xiaowu*—from the traditional ten role-type system (Chen 2007: 164–65; Lum 2004: 52). The *xiaosheng* role-type features scholarly male characters who are young, good-looking, romantic, and gentle. Singing and *zuogong* are the essential performance skills for *xiaosheng* actors. The *xiaowu* role-type accommodates male characters who are warriors,

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\(^\text{13}\) Yung Sai-shing writes that *wenwusheng* emerged as a new role-type by 1922 at the latest (2006b: 57).
military officers, and chivalrous, young, and good-looking, but vivid, brave, and righteous. While acrobatic skills were the primary performance techniques, singing became increasingly important in the training of xiaowu in the early 1900s because some xiaowu actors who were gifted vocalists also began to perform wen plays as gimmicks (Yung 2006b: 57). During the transition from the ten role-type system to the six-pillar system, the labeling of and distinctions between a few sheng role-types—wusheng, xiaowu, and wenwusheng—were relatively loose. In writings about early-twentieth-century Cantonese opera, it is not uncommon to see the same sheng actors being labeled with different role-types. Even though the term wenwusheng has been widely circulated for over half a century, it is still used interchangeably with xiaowu and xiaosheng by some practitioners and critics today.

**Defining Female Wenwusheng**

**Cross-dressing vs. Fanchuan**

Although I use the word “cross-dressing” in English to refer to women playing the male role-types in my studies, I want to point out that the use of the Chinese term “fanchuan”—by practitioners, scholars, and laypersons—to refer to cross-gender performance is inaccurate. In today’s Hong Kong, many people consider the English word “cross-dressing” equivalent to the Chinese term “fanchuan” when referring to performances in both Cantonese opera and pop culture (Cheung 2014: 140–45). However, the original meaning of fanchuan (fan, literally “reverse” or “opposite”; chuan, literally “occasional acting”) in the Chinese opera context refers to crossing role-type performances instead of crossing gender (ibid.; Chou 2004: 243).

Chinese opera features highly stylized performances requiring that actors go through intensive training to master the conventions and essences of their role-types. Traditionally

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14 For instance, sheng actress Yam Kim-Fai was labeled as xiaowu, xiaosheng, and wenwusheng by different people in different contexts (Lai 2010: 393; Lo 2004: 7; Pak 2004:143; Yilin 1939 [51]).
speaking, actors’ ages and biological sexes are not determining factors when choosing their role-types and when audiences evaluate actors. After a period of foundational training, actors choose or are assigned by their masters a role-type. In most cases, actors are supposed to specialize in one role-type throughout their lifetime.

_Fanchuan_ performances refer to those situations when actors play the role-types that they do not specialize in and only do so occasionally or for special purposes. When the male actor Mei Lanfang, the most renowned male _dan_ of Peking opera, specializing in the _qingyi_ role-type (a female role-type enacting chaste, virtuous married women), it was not a _fanchuan_ performance. However, when Mei played _wusheng_ (a martial male role-type) in 1921, even though he was a man and played a male role-type, it was a performance that entailed crossing role-types and was thus considered as a _fanchuan_ show (Cheung 2014: 140–45).

A similar example in Cantonese opera can be found in _Sixty Years of Cantonese Opera_, one of the most significant writings about early history of Cantonese opera. The author Chen Feinong (1899–1984), an active male _huadan_ and later teacher, used the word _fanchuan_ when referring to the photos in which he played the _sheng_ role-types, including _gongjiao_ and _laosheng_ (borrowed from Peking opera; a middle-aged or elderly male role type).

However, many of my interlocutors in Hong Kong used the word _fanchuan_ to refer to female _wenwusheng_. In the _Grand Dictionary of Cantonese Opera_ (_yueju da cidian_) (2008), in addition to the meaning of crossing role-types, the definition of “_fanchuan_” also includes the practice of male actors playing the _dan_ roles and female actors playing the _sheng_ roles—crossing the biological sex and/or gender of the actors (YDC 2008: 310).

In my project, I would prefer to keep the definition of “_fanchuan_” as crossing role-type performances. As the meaning of “cross-dressing” refers to the practice of wearing the clothes of
the opposite sex (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2017) and thus is closer to describing the female wenwusheng—women playing the leading male role-type of Cantonese opera—whom I study, I use the word “cross-dressing” instead of “fanchuan”15 throughout this dissertation when referring to performances and actors who cross biological sex and/or gender.

**The Emergence of Female Wenwusheng**

**Female Troupes**

Actresses on public stages of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong and the greater Guangdong region were a new phenomenon at the turn of the twentieth century. In dynastic China, Confucian sexual morals—sex segregation and restraining women in private domains—made female entertainers in public settings a social taboo. Yet, literature shows that actresses existed throughout the history of Chinese theater. They were usually found in court and private troupes that were hired by wealthy families as live-in performers and performed only for the families and not for the public (Chou 1997: 139; Jiang 2009: 26–28; Li 2003: 40–41). The Qing court also banned women on operatic stages in the late eighteenth century (Ng 2015: 89). Male actors and male troupes monopolized the public theater scene until the late Qing era when both the court and the traditional mores and values were under increasing threat owing to various aspects of foreign influence—such as military invasions, missionaries, and the introduction of Western science and ideologies. These political-cultural changes encouraged women’s involvement in public domains and drove lower-class women to perform on the public stage. Women working in show business were gradually destigmatized to different extents in numerous parts of China and overseas Chinese communities. In the Cantonese opera circle, earlier accounts of women’s

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15 In all the conversations and interviews in which “fanchuan” was used by my informants to refer to males playing dan or females playing sheng, I also translate it to “cross-dressing.”
involvement in performance as early as the 1880s in Singapore and the United States and 1900 in Hong Kong are documented (Ng 2015: 89–90).

Sex segregation was still practiced to different extents in the early 1900s. Coed troupes (nan nü ban) were banned until 1933 in Hong Kong and 1936 in Guangzhou (Lai 2010: 192–95; YDC 2008: 745–46). It was considered morally corrupt for actresses to work and stay with male actors in a troupe because the performance venues were usually a contained space in which actors and crew members worked and lived closely together with limited privacy. However, single-sex troupes were active before these prohibitions on coed troupes were lifted.

Female troupes were relatively marginalized in terms of performance venues, income, and exposure in the entertainment press. Unlike the male troupes which had more opportunities and resources to perform in newly built permanent theaters in cities in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, many female troupes were itinerant and were hired to perform at festivals and religious celebrations in the countryside. Although materials documenting female troupes are relatively scarce, there are accounts of some large-scale female troupe performances in cities, such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Macau, Shanghai, and Tianjin by the late 1910s. A local essayist in Guangzhou wrote that the first female troupes were formed around 1915–16 (Yuehua bao, quoted in Ng 2015: 90) although other sources show that the female troupes did not appear until 1919 (Chen 2007: 157–58; YDC 2008: 745); and, Cantonese Opera Performance in Shanghai: A Draft History shows that female troupes, which were more popular than male troupes in Shanghai, began to perform there in 1910 and remained active until the mid 1930s (Huang and Shen 2007: 64–71, 165–72). Despite the disagreement regarding the inception of the

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16 According to Lai Kin, coed troupes were not restricted by any laws or taboos but were rather prominent on overseas stages in North America and Southeast Asia (2010: 192–93).
first female troupes, it is commonly agreed that they were active from the late 1910s to a few years after coed troupes became legal in Hong Kong and Guangzhou in the mid 1930s.

Cross-dressing Actresses

In female troupes, some actresses inevitably needed to cross-dress and play the sheng role-types. By the time that female troupes were popular, the Cantonese opera world was also experiencing a transition from the ten role-type system to the six-pillar system, and thus the wenwusheng role-type was introduced. Yet, most sheng actors, both female and male, were trained and labeled as xiaosheng or xiaowu rather than wenwusheng. Female sheng who were good at both singing (wen) and acrobatics (wu) were also labeled as female xiaowu (nü xiaowu).\[17\]

The end of the prohibition against coed troupes urged top actors from female troupes to join those from the prestigious male troupes and form mighty coed troupes such as the Taiping and Juexiansheng Troupes. By the mid-twentieth century, single-sex troupes and male dan actors gradually vanished while numerous female sheng remained active on stage. While some of these actresses became wenwusheng stars, others switched to the dan or turned their careers to the silver screen with straight acting (Lum 2004: 51). Among the sheng actresses from the female troupe period, Yam Kim-fai was the most renowned and influential. I will discuss her in detail in Chapter 6.

The criticisms of female troupes are relatively antithetical. The negative side marginalizes female troupes as cheap, unprofessional, vulgar, obscene entertainments for tasteless, lower-class, and rural audiences. This marginalization was both spatial and economic. Except for the short heyday around 1920 of the two most prominent female troupes, which

\[17\] For instance, a few sources labeled Yam Kim-fai and Kei Siu-ying (Qi Xiaoying) as female xiaowu (Lai 2010: 393).
performed regularly at grand indoor theaters in Guangzhou, most female troupes were active in rural villages and alternative, less prestigious performance venues in urban Guangzhou and Hong Kong. These alternative performance venues included the recreation areas that were located on the roofs of the department store buildings in urban Guangzhou (tiantai ban and gongsi ban), and wine and tea houses (chaju ban), which charged audiences less. Although a few larger-scale female troupes gave their performances at indoor urban theaters, both their frequency and ticket prices were not comparable to the male and later coed troupes (Lai 2010: 194; Lum 2004: 48–49; Ng 2015: 88–91; Yung 2006b: 74–75).

A misogynist voice is also ubiquitous in these criticisms. Above all, the sheng actresses are a factor that is attacked most fiercely and frequently. Imbalance between wen and wu is a frequently mentioned weakness. Female sheng are usually belittled for being incapable of representing valiant, heroic masculinity because they had smaller and physically weaker bodies (Luo n.d.: 54).

To the contrary, some comments compliment the female troupes as being serious, modern, fashionable, and creative (Chen 2007: 83). Some even acclaim that particular troupes or actresses surpassed their contemporaneous male troupes and male stars (Luo n.d.: 55; Huang and Shen 2007: 64–71, 165–72). However, some successful female sheng were usually labeled as successors or female counterparts of particular male sheng stars; thus actress Huang Lüxia was known as the “female Ma Si-tsang” (nü ma shi zeng), Chen Pei-mui as the “female Sit Kok-sin” (nü xue jue xian) and Yam Kim-fai as the “female Gui Mingyang” (nü gui ming yang) (Tan 1959a). Apparently, the reputations of female sheng were perceived as the outcome of imitating, associating, and identifying with male stars. Despite their success, female sheng were still advertised by affiliating with—if not subordinating to—male sheng.
Wen-wu-sheng: A Balance between Wen and Wu?

Ideally speaking, a wenwusheng is the sheng actor who has virtuosic wen and wu skills and has the best balance between the two among all the sheng in the troupe. “Excellence in both wen and wu” (nengwen nengwu or yunwen yunwu) is always used to applaud a wenwusheng actor; such remarks are written by critics, used on gifts and greeting cards offered to actors, and mentioned in everyday conversation (see Fig. 2.6). Yet, in practice, are the wen and wu skills of each of today’s active wenwusheng equally good? What is considered a fine balance between wen and wu? In my fieldwork, I encountered various kinds of opinions on the wen-wu relationship.

*Fig. 2.6 This banner was a gift from a fan. At the bottom, one of the phrases is “excellence in both wen and wu” (yunwen yunwu). Photo taken by the author at the Koshan Theatre, Hong Kong (July 27, 2013).*

“Heavy Wen, Light Wu” or “Heavy Wu, Light Wen”?

“Heavy Wen, Light Wu”

It is not uncommon to hear people, both practitioners and theatergoers, criticizing
Cantonese opera for focusing too much on *wen* performances, especially romantic love stories, rather than *wu* performances. The criticism “heavy *wen*, light *wu*” (*zhongwen qingwu*)—meaning “*wen* outweighing *wu* performance”—was more severe when referring to female *sheng* players in female troupes in the early twentieth century. However, sources show that emphasizing singing and the narrative of plays rather than acrobatics has been a characteristic of Cantonese opera since the early twentieth century.

In his oral history, Chen Feinong remarks that *wen* rather than *wu* should be emphasized in training. He recalls a common belief that the [excessive] acrobatic training affected breathing (*qi*) and weakened singing skills (2007: 57). Belonging to the older generation who witnessed the transition from obeying the strict distinctions within the ten role-type categories to the six-pillar system and the composite role-types, Chen’s comment may come from his own background, in which the focus on *wen* and *wu* skills was rigidly divided by role-type. Role-types that featured *wen* performance—such as *xiaosheng* and *huadan*—were expected to possess excellent singing and *zuogong* skills with minimal acrobatic performance. To the contrary, role-types that featured *wu* performance—such as *wusheng*—were supposed to showcase their acrobatic skills rather than singing.

The “heavy *wen*, light *wu*” principle remained popular and is still supported by younger actors today. Yam Dan-fung, a female *wenwusheng* in her early thirties, remarked:

> How many minutes in a play are designed for *wu* performance? There are not more than 20 or 30 minutes for you to showcase your *wu* skills even if you have extraordinary techniques and energy. But singing and speaking are required throughout the entire play. A good voice is more important (interview, 2013).

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18 Plays with romantic love stories between young scholars and beauties (*caizi jiaren*) are sometimes labeled as the “mandarin duck and butterfly” school (*yuanyang hudie pai*). The “mandarin duck and butterfly” school is a pejorative term for the love fictions written in Classical Chinese during the 1910s and early 1920s, and later broadly refers to those of popular love stories in the Republican era (1911–1949) (Jiang 2009: 275).
However, some practitioners considered that the *wen-wu* balance changed over time and varied in different places. Tai Shun-wah (1942–2015), an active musician of Cantonese opera from the 1960s to early 2000s, explained that the “heavy *wen*, light *wu*” practice was rather like a regional phenomenon in Hong Kong. It was more accurate to describe the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong alone than the genre as a whole. Tai added that Cantonese opera actors in mainland China worked harder in their *wu* training because all full-time actors were state employees. The state-run troupes in China provided not only facilities and instructors, but also stable incomes and benefits even if the actors were injured from training or performing. The situation in Hong Kong was rather different. First, not many full-time actors could afford stable places and instructors to practice *wu* skills. Second, most full-time actors were freelancers and had unstable incomes from performing. If they were seriously injured from practicing or performing challenging *wu* scenes, they would need to stop performing for a period of time (if not for good), which would directly affect their livelihoods. In order not to risk ruining their own bodies and affecting their incomes, actors in Hong Kong tended to avoid risky *wu* scenes and lean toward *wen* performances (Tai, interview, 2014).

“*Heavy Wu, Light Wen*”?

Yet some practitioners ignored the limited resources in Hong Kong and held a different opinion on the *wen-wu* balance. For instance, my teacher Leung Sum-yee, a female *wenwusheng* around sixty, emphasized that the *wu* training must be solid because it was a fundamental requirement to become a *wenwusheng*. In teaching she focused more on the visual spectacles in *wu* than the subtleties in singing. Like some older generations of actors, Leung also believed that singing skills were difficult and too abstract to teach and that actors could find for themselves the best ways to sing. From her perspective, it was hard for younger actors to move their audiences
emotionally with their singing and acting in *wen* performances anyway. Yet virtuosic *wu* skills could impress audiences and gain supporters more easily. Having been training mostly amateur actors and beginners for at least two decades, Leung emphasized that singing and acting skills would improve when one gets older and acquires more life experience. Since female *sheng* generally have the advantages of better skin and higher voices to play the young male romantic scholar-type protagonists, as long as they sing well, they would not look too bad on stage. However, to become a full-time *sheng* actor is a different story. Believing that female bodies are generally weaker, she thought that full-time female *sheng* need to work particularly hard on developing their *wu* skills to be able to stand out.

It is also noteworthy that when Leung referred to actresses playing the *sheng* role-types, she tended to use the term “female *xiaosheng*” (*nü xiaosheng*) rather than “female *sheng*” (*nü sheng* or *kun sheng*), “female *xiaowu*” (*nü xiaowu*), or “female *wenwusheng*” (*nü wenwusheng*). As *xiaosheng*, as a supporting role-type in the six-pillar system, features singing and rendering the characters of young romantic, and, in some cases, cowardly scholars, Leung’s preferred use of “female *xiaosheng*” also implies the inferiority of female *sheng*. Herself a female *wenwusheng*, Leung often held a bias that women playing *sheng* are never as good as their male counterparts, mostly because she believed that the masculinity in Cantonese opera is embedded in male bodies. The kind of masculinity female *sheng* could accomplish is a “softer” one—the *xiaosheng* type—which focuses more on lyrical singing and a good-looking face rather than the physical vigor. Weighing *wu* more than *wen* in *wenwusheng* performance and believing in the biological determinism of actors’ bodies, Leung’s opinion implies that only male actors qualify as *wenwusheng*, while female *sheng* can only really play the *xiaosheng* role-type.
“Heavy Wen” and “Theme Songs”

The convention of featuring “theme songs” (zhutiqu)\(^{19}\)—the signature songs of the plays—is also closely related to the practice of *wen* outweighing *wu*. While it is hard to determine whether theme songs were a cause or product of “heavy *wen*, light *wu*,” I would rather suggest that these two practices have been mutually reinforcing each other for decades with the rise of Cantonese operatic song recordings and *getan* (song halls).\(^{20}\) A convention by the mid twentieth century, theme songs can be understood as equivalent to renowned arias in Italian opera. Mostly solos or duets lasting from fifteen to forty minutes, theme songs are excerpts from plays that highlight individual actors who play the leading roles. The circulation of theme songs—or the process of how a song became a theme song—relied much on the mass print industry, recording industry, and radio broadcasting. Lyrics of theme songs were printed in some daily newspapers, program notes, songbooks, and liner notes of recordings for mass consumption.

The musical characteristics of these Cantonese operatic song recordings are also noteworthy. When making recordings, only excerpts—not the entire play—are selected. Most of the tracks are less than thirty minutes long. Directed at urban opera lovers for their indoor consumption, the lyrical solos and duets of top stars, accompanied by stringed instrumental ensembles, were most likely to be included on these recordings. Spoken dialogue and percussion music became less important.

During my fieldwork, I frequently observed the performances of theme songs. When theme songs were sung, all the lights were turned off, leaving one or two spotlights shining on the actors who were featured. The performance of the theme song was usually regarded as the

\(^{19}\) The emergence and popularity of “theme songs” are closely related to the rise of the Cantonese operatic song records in the mid twentieth century.

\(^{20}\) Very popular in the 1920s and 1930s, *getan* refers to the Cantonese operatic songs that were sung in teahouses and playhouses. Singers (mostly females) only sang the famous excerpts from the Cantonese opera repertoire with no acting, operatic makeup, or costumes. For details, see Chin (2012: 99–127), Lu (1994), and Lum (1996).
climax of the play and audience members paid special attention. Even in outdoor bamboo theaters—where the atmosphere was less serious and audience members had more mobility during performance—they usually avoided leaving their seats, eating, or talking when the theme song was sung.

“Excellence in Both Wen and Wu”: A Rhetorical Ideal or an Actual Practice?

While some practitioners support the “heavy wen, light wu” imbalance and some advocate the opposite in wenwusheng performance (and Cantonese opera in general), others tend to consider “excellence in both wen and wu” more as an ideal than as an accurate depiction of any wenwusheng nowadays. Martin Lau Kwok-ying, a principal musician of Cantonese opera in his late thirties, commented that it is rare to find a wenwusheng who excels in both wen and wu. Understanding this from a rather practical perspective, Lau suggested that wenwusheng does not refer to versatility in both wen and wu, but an inclination toward either wen or wu. Instead of striving for a perfect balance between both skills to achieve the “nengwen nengwu” ideal, actors should understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and carefully choose a skill to develop in order to make a name for themselves. Without saying that either wen or wu training should be neglected, Lau explained that, if one is good at wu, s/he should also work hard on singing. Yet the purpose of practicing singing is not to become a bookish, gentle, scholarly-type (wenzouzou) wenwusheng. Rather, better singing skills would complement well her/his wu performance.

Highlighted by the composite role-type of wenwusheng, the ability of “adopting wu style when singing in wen plays” (wenxi wuchang) and “combining wen style when playing wu plays” (wuxi wenzuo) has become a symbol of versatility. Wenxi wuchang is usually used to refer to some wen scenes in which actors are able to present the confrontational threat and anger by avoiding rendering the scholar-type characters too gentle, submissive, or coward. Taking Yam
Kim-fai as an example, even though her signature plays are mostly *wen* repertoire of romantic love stories between scholars and beauties (*caizi jiaren*), she is also remembered and acclaimed for her *xiaowu* style and “*wenxi wuchang*” when performing some scenes in *wen* plays, such as a righteous scholar (still a *wen* character) fiercely confronting the corrupt authorities (Lo 2004: 94–95; Yung 2004: 42). Although *wuxi wenzuox* is less mentioned, it basically reminds actors not to overact the *wu* characters by making them too brutish, rough, reckless, violent, and uncivilized. The purpose is to confine the characters of the *wenwusheng* to a benevolent but brave, righteous, respectful hero.

While having excellent *wen* and *wu* skills seems rhetorical or ideal, *wenwusheng* actors are expected to have at least good enough skills to handle both *wen* and *wu* performances, to be versatile, and to be able to fine-tune their performance styles when rendering different characters.

**Aesthetics: Sheng, Se, and Yi**

“*Sheng*, *se*, and *yi*” are three fundamental criteria that people look for when evaluating an actor of Chinese opera. *Sheng* means sound or voice; *se* means physical appearance; and *yi* means artistry. During my fieldwork, I often heard both practitioners and audience members talking about these three criteria, and yet they seemed to have different ways of evaluating them. Some people interpreted *sheng* as the first and most important attribute an actor should possess. Without an innately good voice, pursuing a performance career in Cantonese opera is hopeless (Chen 2007: 47, 53). *Se* comes next. It is believed that appearance can be improved by makeup and costumes. *Yi* is least important because artistry is not an innate quality but can only be achieved by industriousness and rigorous training.

Martin Lau characterized “*sheng*, *se*, and *yi*” with the progression that takes place in an

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21 The character *sheng* 声 in “*sheng*, *se*, and *yi*” is different from the *sheng* 生 role-type in spite of the same pinyin Romanization. The former means sound while the latter means male. In order to avoid confusion, I will add “voice” when referring to *sheng* in “*sheng*, *se*, and *yi*."


actual performance:

A wenwusheng very often begins singing from “behind a curtain” (neichang) [when the actor sings the opening phrase from the liminal space between the front and back stages where the actors stand (the hudumen)]. [. . .] The voice comes first. Before entering the stage and being seen (liangxiang), if the wenwusheng has a broken voice (laan seng, Ca.)\(^{22}\) or sings out of tune, the performance will be ruined. When he or she enters the stage, before artistry [with a sequence of singing and zuogong or wu movements], you will see the face and physical presentation (se)\(^{23}\) (interview, 2013).

Lau explained that wenwusheng need to pass through all three stages in this kind of performance sequence. After singing an impressive opening phrase (sheng [voice]), their physical appearance (se) will be judged. Audience members may still lose attention or interest before their artistic skills (yì) are showcased if they do not find the wenwusheng attractive.

Yam Dan-fung echoes Martin Lau’s comment on the importance of sheng (voice):

Once an experienced actor tried to explain to me the importance of singing, saying “if an actor is not good-looking, the audience may close their eyes. But if s/he does not sing well, the audience can’t block their ears!” (interview, 2013).

Others referred to the “sheng, se, and yì” construct as an ascending order of technical achievement necessary to become a successful Cantonese opera actor. They regarded a good voice as a gift that requires minimal effort to acquire. They believed that whoever has a good voice can sing well easily. This also explains why many actors, both amateur and professional, learn singing before becoming interested in acting and receiving formal training. As for se, if the wenwusheng has a good-looking face and body shape to fit the role-type, he or she may look attractive on stage and become a desirable actor rather than merely a singer. However, the fact that an actor has both sheng (voice) and se does not guarantee that he or she has a promising career. He or she must be diligent and enduring to master all aspects of performance and reach greater artistry (yì). The process of becoming an accomplished artist is long; it may take decades.

\(^{22}\) His original wording is “爛聲.”

\(^{23}\) “Physical presentation” is the original term in English that Martin Lau used to refer to se.
Therefore, while *sheng* and *se* may grip audiences more easily, only *yi* can secure and keep those followers, and gain connoisseurs’ appreciation. Moreover, it is the *yi* and unique personal style of an actor that distinguish him or her as an artist or a star rather than a copycat or “craftsman.”

While *sheng* (voice) and *se* seem to be two easily understood concepts, *yi* is a criterion that is very often presented through *sheng* and *se*. After decades of performances, an actor usually knows how to compensate for the weaknesses of her/his singing and appearance while aging. Thus *yi* can also be understood as those skills that are acquired from accumulating stage experiences. In the following section, I will discuss the interplay between *sheng* and *se* with *yi.*

**Sheng**

**Good Voice vs. Good Singing Skill**

Practitioners and audiences commonly agree upon what a good voice should sound like. As the narratives of Cantonese opera rely heavily on verbal communication, clarity in enunciation in singing and reciting is considered an indispensable skill. Comparing recordings and performances since the mid-1900s, I found that many famous actors and singers at that time had ringing, hoarse, nasal, silvery voices, while those in the past three decades generally have non-raspy, resonant, expressive voices. Despite the changing aesthetics throughout decades, a good voice generally refers to a rotund voice that can deliver lyrics clearly in both low and high registers.

Although an innately bright voice certainly plays a crucial role, the skill of how to utilize the voice is more important (Luo n.d.: 53). If the actor does not know how to utilize his/her voice, his/her vocal cords and thus career could also be ruined. Some actors have good voices but their singing is still not enjoyable.

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24 Some actors are criticized for merely copying the movements without deeply understanding what they are doing or the essence of their performances.
On the contrary, it is not uncommon to see critics pointing out the weaknesses of the voices of famous stars:

We are often misled by the “enjoyable singing by a poor voice” aesthetics, which focuses mainly on the singing techniques, and neglects other aspects of a performance (Zhu 1993: 48).

[Female wenwusheng] Yam Kim-fai’s voice is not bright enough but her singing technique is excellent. Her enunciation is clear. She can utilize her voice up and down freely and smoothly. Her singing is full of charisma, which made her on par with other top [male] wenwusheng such as Sun Ma Si-tsang (1916–1997) and Ho Fei-fan (1919–1980) (Luo n.d.: 53).25

Instead of being acknowledged for their gifted voices, some successful actors like Yam Kim-fai were acclaimed for their talents in artistic accomplishment through diligence and the capability of utilizing their voices skillfully.

While some people regard singing as a relatively easy skill to master as long as one was born with a good voice, some actors take singing techniques more seriously. Lau Wai-ming, one of the leading female wenwusheng in the recent decades with an acclaimed voice, spent most of the time studying scripts to seek out the best way to sing her part. Lau found that some techniques can compensate for deficiencies of vocal quality, especially for females singing pinghou. She suggested that if a female pinghou singer does not have a deep voice in the lower register, she should seek ways to hide her weakness. Singing certain phrases an octave higher is the most common and acceptable way to solve the problem. Yet Lau preferred studying the textual and musical relationships. She explained how, when preparing the performance of Tea Boat (su xiaoqing yueye fan cha chuan),26 she found that her voice was not stable or clear enough when singing a line about the lake water. She finally came up with the solution to

25 Luo Liming (aka “Chen Canggu” and “Li Ji”) (1903–1968) was a veteran journalist, songwriter, and critic of Cantonese opera.
26 It is an infrequently performed play written by Au Man-fung. I attended the performance at the Koshan Theatre on March 27, 2013.
compensate for the thinness of her female voice by lightening the enunciation and reducing the volume, which would also match the meaning of the “placid lake.” She believed that, because of the textual meaning, this arrangement would not affect how others evaluated her singing skills (interview, 2013).

*Sheng:* Does the *Wenwusheng* Have the Best Voice?

It is also important to note that, in a stage performance, the voice of the *wenwusheng* is also amplified by a modern sound system. This is especially the case when the *wenwusheng* actor is also the producer of the performance. Mini wireless microphones that are worn under actors’ costumes have been used in Cantonese opera performance for at least three decades. Before a performance starts, crew members distribute microphones to major actors. A deliberate hierarchy is reflected here. Not only is the best microphone reserved for the *wenwusheng* actor, but the volume of her/his microphone is often turned up. This arrangement not only helps the *wenwusheng* actor deliver her/his speaking and singing more clearly, but is also intended to give the audience the impression that s/he has a good—or the best—voice.

*Se*

*Se* is always mentioned when people evaluate actors. The character of *se* has multiple meanings and has been translated differently in English by scholars who write about Chinese opera. Providing four literal meanings of the character *se*—1) color, 2) prettiness, 3) eroticism/erotic desire and 4) reality/appearance—Siu-leung Li translates it as “prettiness-eroticism” in his work because he sees this component in Chinese opera as an attraction stemming from appearance with underlying erotic desire (2003: 174). Given that Chinese opera is an art form that displays actors’ bodies and that the erotic gaze always exists in performing arts, the additional component of “eroticism” in Li’s translation of *se* is helpful, especially in
discussing sexualities and gendered identities in cross-dressing performances (which I will elaborate on in Chapter 6).

Using male dan cross-dressing in Peking opera as an example, Li illustrates the close connection between se and yi in critical Chinese opera discourse. The se-yi relation is rather contradictory and yet mutually compensatory. While young actors usually look better than older actors, they have not accumulated as much artistry. Even though the youthfulness of actors is a determining factor of se, yi—artistry that is mostly achieved by veteran actors after decades of performance experiences—is a means to at once conceal the actors’ biological sex and construct “pretty women” on the Chinese operatic stage (2003: 178–82).

Se-Yi Relation in Cantonese Opera

When discussing se, one factor that is missing in Li’s argument is the importance of makeup. Wearing makeup is a crucial skill that Cantonese opera actors need to learn beginning in the early stages of their training. Some full-time actors who had been performing for at least three decades revealed that it is a life-long process to learn how to wear makeup (Lau W., interview, 2013). While some wanted to keep improving their stage appearances, others saw a need to change their makeup as they aged. The principle of “practice makes perfect” is also key. Over years or decades, actors should know how to hide the shortcomings of their inborn facial features to meet the ideal appearance in Cantonese opera. While aging is inevitable, actors compensate for this with their growing experiences in doing makeup. In other words, if yi is understood as artistry—an outcome of experiences and practices—se and yi are inseparable. Se can also be acquired through the mastery of makeup skills.

Moreover, the idealized se or prettiness is sometimes narrowly defined by actors’
youthfulness. Actors in Hong Kong still use heavy makeup in stage performance, in which the thick white oil-based paint plays a crucial role in concealing the actual texture of actors’ skin—an indicator of their ages. Youthfulness in stage performance—of both characters and actors—is very often presented by smooth, delicate skin, even when seen from faraway. As it is believed that female actors usually have better skin—or take better care of their skin—than male actors, female sheng have advantages in physical appearance when playing the wenwusheng role-type characters, many of them being young, romantic, handsome men.

However, this is also a way that some practitioners and critics distinguish connoisseurs from layperson Cantonese operagoers. While better skin and good facial features of female wenwusheng contribute to their se, their fans are very often denigrated for being shallow because they are only attracted to the actresses’ se rather than yi—that is, their success in presenting the idealized masculinity of wenwusheng. To many of these practitioners and critics, a female wenwusheng’s se is not only superficial, but also effeminate. This opinion also explains why the masculinities of female wenwusheng are often questioned and female sheng are sometimes labeled as female xiaosheng instead.

Se and Body Shape

When discussing se with my interlocutors, many of them immediately directed the conversations to body shape, or, more specifically, height. Although no one has clearly said what an ideal height should be for a wenwusheng, and it has changed over the decades, a wenwusheng actor should not be too short on stage—never under 5’3”. According to my observations, later affirmed by an actress, the wenwusheng in a performance is rarely shorter than the dan actors (Wai, interview, 2013). Being relatively tall is an advantage when playing a wenwusheng.

27 While Cantonese opera actors in Hong Kong are still using the traditional style, which is heavier and more exaggerated, most Chinese opera actors in mainland China have changed to lighter makeup, whose style is closer to modern plays and reveals actors’ actual facial features more clearly.
However, this is not a strict standard, but relative. I found that if an actor is too tall compared to other actors—over 5’9”—s/he may be considered as breaking the visual harmony of the entire picture. If apparently shorter than others, especially those playing the dan role-types, the actor was deemed not convincing as the lead male of the play.

**Body Shape and Role-type**

While many interlocutors agreed that body shape affects an actor’s pursuit of a wenwusheng career, it is commonly believed that body shape also predetermines a performer’s role-type. A big body—too tall and/or overweight—is also not ideal for the wenwusheng role-type, as this kind of body is perceived as too macho, rough, threatening, or aggressive for the characters of wenwusheng. Actors with this body type are usually assigned to other sheng role-types, such as wusheng and chousheng, playing martial, heroic, royal characters or those with supernatural powers, such as (middle-aged or older) generals, emperors, monks, and guardians of heaven or hell. For instance, Leung Sing-bor (1908–1981) was once a top wenwusheng in Singapore and Malaysia and later changed to chousheng when he gained weight in his late thirties in 1946 and 1947 (Tan 1959b; YDC 2008: 955–56). A more recent example is Alan Tam Wing-lun, one of my sheng interlocutors who is now in his early twenties. Having practiced Cantonese opera since the age of three, Tam has a relatively solid foundation in both wen and wu skills and has acquired rich stage experience. During my fieldwork, even though he was qualified for the male lead on many occasions, he was usually disenfranchised from the wenwusheng role-type due to his well-built body—a tall, overweight body with a thick back—and was assigned to play wusheng, chousheng, and even laodan (the elderly female role-type).

28 Traditionally, chousheng served as clowns only, playing silly, funny, ugly, lower-class male characters. A few famous chousheng performers in the 1940s and later were also good at playing other role-types, such as hualian (the painted-face heroic or macho male role-type). Since then, some heroic, macho characters (painted-face or not) have been assigned as chousheng.

29 “Liang Xingbo” in pinyin Romanization.
Yet being “too tall” and “too slim” is also not ideal for a wenwusheng body. While wu and masculinity are usually presented as occupying more physical space—by the actors’ bodies, costumes, movements, and voices—actors with a slender body type, possessing a smaller skeleton and narrower shoulders, are considered to be too weak for the wenwusheng role-type.

For instance, Sam Chan Chak-lui, a female sheng in her late thirties, is taller than most of the actors, both male and female, on today’s Cantonese operatic stage (see Fig. 2.7). However, her body is usually seen as too slim and thus not strong or masculine enough for an all-around wenwusheng. As mentioned above, a tall body is not always an advantage and may break the visual harmony of the stage; casting Chan with some shorter actors sometimes resulted in audiences’ dissatisfaction. Having relatively narrow shoulders and a thin body, Chan is usually assigned to play the xiaosheng role-type or minor scholar-type characters which feature speaking and singing rather than acrobatic display.

Fig. 2.7 Sam Chan Chak-lui (center), a female sheng, is taller than most of the actors on today’s Cantonese operatic stage in Hong Kong.30

**Yi Constructing Se**

Having a tall body is not as advantageous as having a body whose parts are proportionally good.

Doris Kwan Hoi-shan (interview, 2013)

Although the body shape component of *se* is usually understood as a biologically determined factor, the aesthetic is not absolute. There is no doubt that a relatively tall body is an advantage in becoming a successful *wenwusheng*, but a “proportionally good” body is more desirable. None of my informants could articulate precisely what this “right proportion” is. However, during my Cantonese opera lessons and observations, I found that the right proportion is not purely biologically determined, but can be constructed, or at least improved, through lengthy training. In her teaching, my teacher Leung Sum-yee often reminded students to put their hands at the right position around their waists while posing and standing: “the ideal male character body [onstage] has a longer torso and shorter legs; and the ideal female character body [onstage] has a shorter torso and longer legs.” She also cautioned female *sheng* students to avoid making their hips too prominent. Much attention to the angles and intensities of different parts of the body must be paid in the course of training in order to present a good-looking gendered body on stage. Thus, to conceal the shortcomings of and to highlight the advantage of one’s physical body is considered a skill acquired throughout an actor’s career.

**Se and Costumes**

Costumes play a significant role in improving physical appearances, concealing the physical limitations of some actors, and constructing *se*, mostly by exaggerating actors’ body shapes to make them look taller and bigger. While studying the details of different costume parts is beyond my scope, I wish to introduce two popular items or designs whose purposes are to exaggerate actors’ body sizes.
Despite the fact that performers for the wenwusheng role-type should have a certain height, the white thickened soles attached to sheng’s shoes—gaoxue (long boots) and wensheng xie (shoes for male wen characters or performances, see Fig. 2.8)—are used to make the actors taller. Although the thicknesses of the soles are relatively standardized, some shorter sheng actors chose or tailor-made their shoes with extra thickness while taller actors such as Sam Chan have thinner soles.

To make sheng actors’ bodies look thicker and wider, white padded cotton vests (mianyi) are worn under the outer garments (see Figs. 2.9 and 2.10). For martial costumes, extra thick shoulder pads are used to exaggerate the sizes of actors’ shoulders under the heavier outer garment, making them look stronger, more athletic, and thus more masculine.

Besides the help of thick-soled shoes and padded vests, details of costumes are also major factors in improving actors’ se. Cantonese opera costumes are mostly tailor-made. Apart from sizes, all the details of the designs of the garments—materials, patterns, colors, and embellishments—are chosen by the actors. When explaining a proportionally good body is more advantageous than a tall body, Doris Kwan Hoi-Shan, a female wenwusheng, added that paying close attention to different parts of costumes would make a difference regarding the actors’
physical appearances. The example she provided was one of the most successful male wenwusheng from the 1970s: “Lam Ka-sing (1933–2015) is not particularly tall. But details like making the waist belt thinner and putting it lower can make him look taller and slimmer (xiuchang) on stage.” When innate physical appearances are not ideal for the wenwusheng role-type, improving stage presentations with acquired skills of designing costumes is also a telling example of the close connection between se and yi.

Fig. 2.9 A sheng actor preparing his cotton vest. Photo taken by Lam Hiu-wai (August 8, 2015).

Fig. 2.10 A sheng actor wearing a cotton vest before putting on operatic costumes. Photo taken by Lam Hiu-wai (August 8, 2015).

**Authenticity of Wenwusheng’s Se**

Having said that the presentations of body shapes can be improved with the aid of costumes and long-term training, I also wish to discuss some of the doubts and disparagements
about *wenwusheng* bodies that I have encountered in theater, interviews, and informal conversations. It is noteworthy that they are mostly about female *wenwusheng* bodies, such as “her neck is too long,” “her face is too short,” “she has a baby face,” “her hips are too big. She shouldn't have played *sheng*,” and “she looks too fat after binding her breasts.” On the contrary, I rarely found people paying such close attention to male *wenwusheng* bodies except in regard to their heights and weights. This reflects that when men are playing *wenwusheng*, the “authenticity” of their bodies attracts less attention.

As some people consider that the dispositions or temperaments of actors also contribute to *se*, the “authenticity” of female *wenwusheng* rendering male characters is also frequently questioned. The consistencies between their onstage and offstage personas along with sexualities were of common concern, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 6.

**Wenwusheng in Today’s Hong Kong**

Traditionally speaking, no actors in Cantonese opera can become the male or female leads at the outset of their performance careers. With a long hierarchical ladder to climb, every actor is supposed to start with minor roles and move on to more important ones after advancing their skills. However, this convention has been changing over the past four decades. It is not uncommon to find some active *wenwusheng* in today’s Hong Kong who have skipped the process of playing minor roles.

Keeping the aforementioned “*sheng*, *se*, and *yi*” factors of becoming a *wenwusheng* in mind, I will now discuss more recent factors that determine whether an actor can achieve the status of *wenwusheng*—primarily economic factors—and what it really means to be a *wenwusheng* in today’s Hong Kong. Through this process, I also question the conventional definition of role-type in Cantonese opera.
Marketability

If people buy tickets after seeing your name on the advertisement, then you can become a *wenwusheng*.

Mak Bing-wing (quoted by Yuen Siu-fai, interview, 2014)

With minimal government support, Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong are highly commercial and rely mostly on the ticket sales and economic power of the troupes. The above statement was recalled by Yuen Siu-fai (b. 1945), a veteran versatile actor, when I asked him what qualified one to become a *wenwusheng*. His response explicitly conveys that the *wenwusheng* is the guarantor of ticket sales. It is commonly believed that audiences usually look at the *wenwusheng* cast as a brand name when considering buying a ticket. The *wenwusheng* is a magnet for audiences (M. Lau, interview, 2013; Yuen, interview, 2014). Given that *wenwusheng* actors are the most highly paid among all actors in most cases, the fame of the *wenwusheng* is also a determining factor that directly affects the box office.

Generally speaking, those actors who have virtuosic *wen* and *wu* skills can become *wenwusheng*. However, this is not always the case in reality. Yuen Siu-Fai provides a good example through the complicated situation of casting. Granted the title of “versatile master” (*wanneng laoguan* or *wanneng taidou*) (*Hong Kong Opera Preview 2001* [5]), Yuen is without doubt a talented actor who has played almost all role-types in the six decades of his performance career. He founded his troupes and became a *wenwusheng* in the 1980s. Highly respected by many of my interlocutors, he has been acclaimed as a “real *wenwusheng*” in today’s Hong Kong (Tai, interview, 2013). These interlocutors basically shared the opinion that Yuen is a gifted

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31 The original quote of Martin Lau is “文武生擔飛,” literally “the *wenwusheng* undertakes the tickets [sales].”
32 He started his performance career as a prodigy in films at the age of seven and then became active in films, Cantonese opera, and later television shows. Within the last three decades, he has been active on the Cantonese operatic stage only.
actor with solid foundation in both wen and wu skills, and is very encyclopedic owing to his long engagement in the circle.

Although he is one of the most active actors in these recent two decades,\(^{33}\) he has been playing mostly the supporting roles of the six-pillar system.\(^{34}\) Why has Yuen rarely taken the wenwusheng role in the last two decades? Zhu Lū (?–2014), a veteran Cantonese opera journalist and critic, wrote:

A wenwusheng actor does not necessarily have virtuosic skills (hao gongfu). The most important criterion is the charisma to appeal to audiences (guanzhong yuan). Without implying that the skills of today’s wenwusheng are poor, [. . . ] I want to take Yuen Siu-fai as an example. His skills have been widely applauded by the majority of theatrogoers. Yet who will pay for a ticket to see him perform when he plays the wenwusheng role-type? (1993: 48)

Zhu Lū’s comment may be quite exaggerated or biased; however, she pointed out a crucial element that makes an actor a wenwusheng beyond her/his “sheng, se, and yi.” The “charisma” of a wenwusheng is rather vague and subjective but worth discussing. Even though Yuen is widely recognized as an outstanding actor, he, at least in the recent decade or two, does not have the power to attract audiences to pay to see him playing the wenwusheng role-type. In other words, his performances as supporting roles always impress audiences and practitioners but he himself rarely serves as the brand name of a troupe. Possible reasons include his broken voice and declining se—his aging physical appearance and small physique compared to other actors in the past three decades. Although he is very knowledgeable and has good singing skills to compensate for the weaknesses of his voice and aging body, he also admitted that he did not have a group of hardcore fans to secure the ticket sales (Yuen, interview, 2014). Thus his marketability as a wenwusheng to draw audiences to the theater is not as high as other active wenwusheng who have larger groups of fans. In the highly commercial environment of

\(^{33}\) He has over two hundred shows on average every year.

\(^{34}\) The role-types Yuen often plays include xiaosheng, chousheng, wusheng, and laodan.
Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, fans are both an indicator and a factor of an actor’s marketability, which I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5. Yet Yuen also mentioned that fans can be nurtured by the actors’ economic and social power (ibid.).

**Economic Power**

To gain a foothold in the Cantonese opera circle is never easy. One needs to have a certain economic power to found a troupe [to play the leading roles].

Cen Meihua (2007)

To be [a] successful [wenwusheng], in addition to economic support, you still need to keep a determined and ambitious attitude. Even if your audience is small, you should not get frustrated or give up. You will be [widely] accepted one day. But [the premise is that] you need to spend lots of money and time.

Zhu Lü (1993: 48)

Both Cen Meihua’s and Zhu Lü’s comments may contradict the traditional belief that only poor people make a living as Chinese opera actors. These comments, written by two veteran journalists of Cantonese opera, reveal a recent change. They accurately observe that actors over the last three decades have transformed their economic power into success. During my fieldwork, many of my interlocutors mentioned financial support as an indispensable factor to becoming a wenwusheng. Paying tuition, renting rehearsal places and storage, and acquiring costumes and performance supplies are indispensable, continuing expenses.

In Hong Kong, actors, both amateur and full-time, are self-funded. Becoming a full-time actor is a relatively difficult decision people make, especially within the last four decades, as Cantonese opera is not as popular as before. Lacking full-time Chinese opera schools, most of the actors in Hong Kong begin their training in their teen years. Cantonese opera lessons for children and teenagers are usually offered as paid extracurricular activities. Unlike the full-time

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35 Traditionally speaking, being a Chinese opera actor is a mean profession and only people from poor families sold their children to opera troupes to lessen their economic burden. It was a way to make a living rather than a choice the actors made for themselves.

36 The Chinese Opera Programme at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts is the only full-time training program of higher education in Hong Kong. Unlike the institutes in China, which enroll students for secondary education, the program at HKAPA only accepts students for tertiary education who have finished secondary school.
training in China, teenage actors in Hong Kong take lessons and practice after school and during weekends. After finishing secondary school or receiving a college education, many of these teenagers or young adults keep practicing Cantonese opera. Some choose to keep their full-time, opera-unrelated jobs and pursue Cantonese opera as a hobby, learning and performing as amateurs. Others choose to devote themselves to becoming full-time actors. One of the differences between these two types of actors is that the former type invests their leisure time and income to put on irregular performances in which they play the leads in excerpted plays (zheixi). The latter type of actors starts their careers by joining full-time troupes. The process of climbing the ladder from junior roles to more important roles or top stars takes at least a decade. However, these actors accumulate not only stage experience along the way, but money and social connections as well.

**Major Expenses: Wardrobe**

Your wardrobe needs to be ready before people invite you to perform!

Martin Lau Kwok-ying (interview, 2013)

Costumes and supplies are the major expense of wenwusheng actors. During my fieldwork, almost all the actors—amateur and full-time, young and veteran—mentioned the economic pressure of expanding their wardrobes for different characters and plays. I will first explain this economic pressure before discussing how young wenwusheng have coped with it.

Even though some costume companies provide rental services, actors who have decided to pursue Cantonese opera as a full-time job or who play the “six-pillar” roles regularly prefer to acquire their own costumes. Both veteran and young actors state that owning personal costumes (sihuo) is a must if one wants to play the protagonists. When sharing his performance experience, Alan Tam rhetorically asked, “How dare you dream of playing the protagonists if you don’t own
your costumes?”37 (informal conversation, 2013). In other words, being able to play the six-pillar protagonists—and especially the wenwusheng role-type—depends not only on the actor’s artistic skills and experiences, but also on the size of his/her wardrobe. It is a convention for the protagonists to wear a different costume in each act even though the script does not require this. When talking about the expenses of acquiring costumes, Martin Lau explained the importance of costume variety as follows:

Let’s say an actor plays the wenwusheng role-type for tonight’s show. Generally speaking, there are six acts in a play. S/he is the wenwusheng of the play and needs to perform in at least four acts. Then s/he needs at least four sets of costumes. Okay, s/he may choose not to change for every act. But the plot is usually about a young scholar, [played by the wenwusheng] who would take the civil service examination (keju) and later becomes a government official. The actor needs at least two sets of costumes—one for a scholar, one for a government official—to indicate the changes of social statuses and occupations. Very often, there is a wedding scene in which the young man would marry the beautiful woman [played by the huadan]. So the wenwusheng actor needs to prepare a red groom costume. Therefore two to three sets of costumes are the basic requirement [of playing the wenwusheng role-type] to perform a play. But you do not only do one play. Your wardrobe needs to be ready before people invite you to perform (M. Lau, interview, 2013).

The average cost of a basic scholar’s costume ranges from HK$2,000 [approx. US$260] to HK$3,000 [approx. US$385], and that of a basic stage armor (kao) is at least HK$10,000 [approx. US$1290]. Acquiring various sets of costumes is a heavy economic burden for many new actors and even rising stars. Martin Lau continued explaining the economic burden of young actors:

Even if you are a rising star and you are getting higher pay than other actors in your generation—let’s say, you earn HK$1,000 [approx. US$130] for a performance and HK$30,000 [approx. US$3850] a month—it costs at least HK$500 [approx. US$65] an hour for a private singing or acrobatic lesson. . . . It costs at least HK$2,000 or HK$3,000 for a basic costume and at least HK$10,000 for a better one. And you can’t just wear one costume for the entire play [if you are playing the “six-pillar” protagonists]. You need to own at least two sets of costumes for one play. . . . How can a young actor survive [without extra economic support]? (ibid.)

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37 The original quote is “無衫學咩人做戲呀？”.
As acquiring costumes is a must when playing the six-pillar roles, taking private lessons—
singing, acting, or acrobatics—has become less compulsory and more of a luxury for many
actors, including some more established actors (ibid.; Lau W., interview, 2013).

Martin Lau’s commentary is based on cold calculation. The reality that young full-time
actors are facing is even worse. First, most of the Cantonese opera actors are freelancers who get
paid each time they perform. It is rare for actors to work every day. Over the last three or four
decades, opera troupes have tended not to duplicate their programs too frequently. In other words,
even if a six-pillar actor has ten shows for various troupes in a month, s/he usually plays different
character and different plays in each show. Unless actors are very experienced, have an
extraordinary memory, or are familiar with their parts in the plays, performing ten plays in a
month is considered to be a heavy, if not impossible, workload. Therefore, even if a novice actor
is good enough for the six-pillar roles, without extra economic help, her/his performance income
cannot afford the growth of wardrobe.

Playing Minor Roles: Accumulating Money and Stage Experience

Yet, some actors do perform almost everyday in different plays. They play mostly the
lowest-ranking (xialan) or very minor roles, performing in groups as soldiers, servants (meixiang
and jiading), maids, and villagers. The troupes usually provide the uniform-like costumes (see
Fig. 2.11). They have minimal lines and acting responsibilities, performing in some basic,
formulaic ways—such as soldiers marching in certain ways, and housemaids lining up behind
their masters (usually played by six-pillar actors).
As previously mentioned, the average wage for younger actors is relatively low. Those who are better than average may earn only HK$1000 (approx. US$130) for playing supporting roles alongside more established actors. However, the average salary for xialan actors is even lower—between HK$350 (approx. US$45) and HK$500 (approx. US$65) per day. Yet the minimum amount of preparation required for the xialan and minor roles attracts some actors to perform almost daily. The purpose of performing these roles also range from earning extra income to amateurs performing as a hobby. While some are high school or college students, others have part-time or full-time jobs during the day.\(^{38}\)

Given that uniform-like costumes are provided by the troupes and minimal preparations are required for xialan and minor roles, it is also noteworthy that some novice actors who are qualified for more important roles also play the minor roles for top stars. In fact, climbing the ladder from the lowest-ranking roles is a traditional path all actors went through in the first half...

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\(^{38}\) As mentioned in Chapter 1, these minor role actors also exemplify why I also claimed that a strict dichotomy between professionals and amateurs common to other performing arts or Chinese opera genres does not adequately describe the Hong Kong operatic stage.
of the twentieth century. Nowadays many actors, young and old, still believe that observing from “standing at the back [of other experienced actors]”—meaning performing minor roles for the masters—is a fruitful learning experience. Moreover, conventionally speaking, the wenwusheng actor is expected to be one of the most experienced and encyclopedic actors of a troupe, who should be able to provide ad hoc guidance or decisions when encountering novice actors’ inquiries and unexpected situations. Therefore, even if one has strong economic power, the experiences and significances of playing minor roles are not downplayed. The path from playing minor roles to wenwusheng helps actors accumulate money, knowledge, and stage experience.

**Other Expenses**

Besides costumes, other regular expenses such as tuition for private lessons (singing, acting, or acrobatics, as briefly mentioned above), rehearsal space and warehouse rentals, and hiring a personal dressing assistant (yixiang) during performances also increase the economic burden of younger actors. Preparing and putting on Cantonese opera costumes is a relatively complicated procedure, which sometimes cannot be done by the actor him/herself and requires one or two people to help. Younger actors who cannot afford to hire a yixiang usually seek help from their colleagues, friends, teachers, or family members.

For instance, Doris Kwan, an up-and-coming female wenwusheng around forty who quit her full-time human resources job a few years ago, first had her Cantonese opera teacher as a volunteer yixiang when just becoming a full-time actress. During the few months that her teacher volunteered, her mother was also learning how to become a yixiang. Both Kwan’s teacher and parents were very supportive and did not charge her. Kwan’s mother soon became Kwan’s personal yixiang wherever she performed. Kwan’s mother even paid for her own trip when her daughter had performances in Singapore and Malaysia.
From Part-time to Full-time Actors

Doris Kwan’s story can partly explain the importance of economic power in pursuing a wenwusheng career in today’s Hong Kong. A university graduate, Kwan held a stable, well-paid human resources position for years before pursuing her performance career full-time in the late 2000s. While still working full-time, she kept learning Cantonese opera and performing the wenwusheng role-type occasionally in her teacher’s amateur troupe. Even though her interest in the stage life grew over the years, she did not see a promising future for herself as a full-time actress. The major concern was being unable to make a decent living from performing full-time. Meanwhile, she was also preparing a considerable savings before reaching a crossroad in her life. After a few years, she found that it was getting harder to obtain a good balance between her work and advancing opera skills. In her early thirties, she finally made a daring move, quitting her full-time job and devoting herself to Cantonese opera. During the transition from part-time to full-time actress, she also gave Cantonese opera lessons to children and worked as stage manager for professional troupes in order to lessen the economic burden. In the meantime, she started playing minor roles in professional troupes for money, connections, and stage experience. Over the past five years, she has had increasing opportunities to be cast for more important roles and even the wenwusheng lead.

Similar paths from amateur learner to full-time actor can easily be found. It is also important to add that, even after becoming full-time actors, many of them still hold at least one part-time job to lessen the financial pressure. Some of their jobs are related to Cantonese opera, which include teaching Cantonese opera to children and amateur adults, working as a stage manager, instrumental accompanist, and lighting or sound technician for other troupes, and as a makeup artist for children and amateur performers. Given that neither stable income nor a
promising prospect is guaranteed or predicted, it is also common to see people stepping in and out of the Cantonese opera circle as full-time actors.

**Money Makes a Wenwusheng**

What qualifies an actor as a *wenwusheng*? Whoever has money can become a *wenwusheng*.

Martin Lau Kwok-ying (interview, 2013)

Martin Lau’s comment on the mediating relationship between money and the *wenwusheng* role-type can be applied to both full-time and part-time actors. Here I want to focus on the luckier full-time *wenwusheng* who have received financial support from their families or patrons. This financial support is a long-term endorsement because it usually takes at least a decade for full-time actors to establish their names, to have frequent performances, and thus to sustain relatively stable incomes or savings. The most telling example of a female *wenwusheng* star made by patrons is Koi Ming-fai, who will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

In this section, I concentrate on the example of financial support from families. Wai Chun-fai, a female *wenwusheng* around fifty, started her after-school training in 1980 while going to secondary school and became a full-time actress in her late teens in the mid-1980s. She had built up a relatively good network with established practitioners when receiving training at the Bak Wo Cantonese Opera School from 1980 to 1983. During my interview with her, I asked about her path to becoming a *wenwusheng*. She responded proudly, “I’m very lucky. I have never played the roles of lower-ranking soldiers. I was already a *wenwusheng* when I first started performing.” When looking at the archival materials of her early performances, I found that the other *sheng* actors for the supporting roles were more experienced than her and would also have been qualified for the *wenwusheng* role-type. After interviewing some older informants and looking at information on Wai in magazines, I suggest that the “luck” Wai referred to would be
better understood as economic power rather than persuasive talents and techniques. Wai came from a well-off family. She was not only financially supported by her parents, but also by a wealthy fan-then-impresario for the past three decades (Tai, interview, 2014; Wai Chun-ying 20th Anniversary Brochure 200039).

Wai’s career in Cantonese opera ebbed and flowed. According to her, the worst time she experienced was having only three shows a year. For a few years in the 1990s, she quit the Cantonese opera circle and tried out her luck as an actress at a television station. She emphasized that her return to Cantonese opera was due to her great interest in it (Wai, interview, 2013). As far as I know, Wai, unlike other actors such as Doris Kwan, neither had taught Cantonese opera lessons nor played supporting roles for other actors for extra income. Even after performing for over three decades, she was still taking private acrobatic lessons. Although Cantonese opera performance can be considered as a continuing learning process, I would argue that it was Wai’s economic power—stemming first from her parents and her fans—that allowed her to keep advancing herself, investing in productions, and maintaining the wenwusheng status.

Wenwusheng as a Ranking

I’m not the wenwusheng for tonight’s show. I’m just playing the third xiaosheng (disan xiaosheng).

Doris Kwan Hoi-shan (informal conversation, 2013)

As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, this is what Doris Kwan told me when we met by chance one day during my fieldwork. During my research, I saw many sheng players of Kwan’s age playing wenwusheng for this show, but supporting sheng role-types for other wenwusheng in other shows. All of this prompted me to question whether the wenwusheng is a fixed role-type.

39 “Wai Chun-ying” is the previous stage name of Wai Chun-fai.
Depending on the context, *wenwusheng* can be understood as a position in the six-pillar system, in the entire troupe, or in the Cantonese opera circle. In some training programs, like the “Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase”\(^{40}\) at the Yau Ma Tei Theatre, the *wenwusheng* role-type is usually assigned to the top *sheng* actors. Taking the *wenwusheng* role-type is like acknowledging these actors’ rankings. Doris Kwan, for instance, always played the *wenwusheng* role-type in the amateur troupe that was founded and run by her teacher. She was undoubtedly the best *sheng* actor of the troupe. However, when she was cast with professional troupes or the one at the Yau Ma Tei Theatre, her role-type varied from minor *sheng* roles to the *wenwusheng*, depending upon which other *sheng* actors were included.

The self-funded performances are rather different. Actors, both part-time and full-time, usually play the leading roles—*wenwusheng* for *sheng* and *zhengyin huadan* (principal *huadan*) for *dan*—when organizing their performances with their own funding. However, the *wenwusheng* actors in these performances may not be the best *sheng* actors; they often invite more established actors with handsome compensation to play the supporting roles. One of the purposes is that these (novice or amateur) *wenwusheng* actors may benefit from working with the more experienced actors. Some generous and helpful veteran actors may advise the less experienced *wenwusheng* actors during rehearsals. Another purpose is that the organizers want to attract larger audiences by strengthening the casts with a few renowned actors.

*Wenwusheng as a Star*

Having said that *sheng* actors sometimes take the role of *wenwusheng* and sometimes do not, it is also important to note that this practice further consolidates the symbolic meaning of *wenwusheng*. If a full-time *sheng* actor always plays the *wenwusheng* role-type, it indicates, or at

\(^{40}\) This is a government-funded program founded in 2012. All the casts are determined by the artistic directors, who are renowned actors. The young actors do not need to pay for the production expenses (such as theater rental, musicians, and backstage crew).
least gives the impression, that s/he is a top-ranking actor in the circle (with the assumption that s/he does not have strong economic power to shower her/his performances with money). Once an actor appears as a wenwusheng frequently, it implies that her/his status as a wenwusheng—an acclaimed top sheng actor—is relatively established and thus s/he may not easily step down to play supporting sheng roles for another wenwusheng. Therefore, some sheng actors prefer advertising themselves as wenwusheng—for instance, on business cards and in social media (see Fig. 2.12)—rather than referring to themselves with a generic term—sheng.

![Image of Wai Chun-fai's Facebook page]

Fig. 2.12 On her Facebook page, actress Wai Chun-fai advertises herself as a wenwusheng. In the short description, she writes: “[I’m a] wenwusheng of Cantonese opera, [I] like making friends, [I] love Cantonese opera.” In her bio, she puts “wenwusheng of Cantonese opera.” For personal interests, she lists “watching drama” [movies and/or Cantonese opera performances] and practicing Cantonese opera.” Screenshot by the author on May 26, 2015.

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41 Facebook page of “Cantonese Opera Wenwusheng Wai Chun-fai.”
https://www.facebook.com/pg/%E8%A1%9B%E9%A7%BF%E8%BC%9D-Waichunfai-%E7%B2%B5%E5%8A%87%E6%96%87%E6%AD%A6%E7%94%9F-176475005712098/about/?ref=page_internal.

42 Wai wrote “睇戲” (taihei, Ca.) in “personal interests.” 睇 literally means watch or see. 戲 literally means drama or movies. Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong use “睇戲” to refer to both “going to a movie” and “attending a Cantonese opera performance.”
According to many practitioners and critics, most of the sheng actors over the past four decades have only been interested in becoming a wenwusheng (Tai, interview 2014; Yuen, interview, 2014). Their preferences for the wenwusheng role-type resulted from the dominance of plays that feature only wenwusheng and zhengyin huadan. Playing the wenwusheng role-type attracts more attention. Owing to the close, cross-pollinating relationship between Cantonese opera and the film industry in mid-twentieth-century Hong Kong, some people even understand wenwusheng as equivalent to the male lead (nan zhujiao) in contemporary films. Similar to films which usually contain only one male lead—who is a star—the wenwusheng in Cantonese opera has also been regarded as the only spotlight among all sheng actors. The star effect of the wenwusheng actor sometimes overshadows the characters s/he plays. Fans of wenwusheng actors are sometimes denigrated for over-flattering their idols with insufficient attention to their actors’ artistic sophistication. Some wenwusheng actors were criticized for “being themselves” rather than “rendering the characters.” This kind of critique usually refers to the established and good-looking actors (Kung, interview, 2013; Kwan, interview, 2013; M. Lau, interview, 2013; Leung, interview, 2013; Yuen, interview, 2014).

A common example of famous wenwusheng always being themselves instead of rendering the characters is exemplified by the use of beards (xu or rankou). Made of animal hair, human hair, or plastic in different lengths, thicknesses, and colors (black, gray, or white), beard hair is attached to a wire frame that hooks over the ears and rests on the upper lip. The beard usually covers about a third of the actor’s face (see Fig. 2.13). Beards are worn by those who play the father, middle-aged, or elderly male characters. Many wenwusheng actors, especially females, are reluctant to wear beards during performances. Some avoid playing the older male characters while some simply ignore the practice of wearing a beard when playing these
characters. For example, Loong Koon-tin, a top male wenwusheng around fifty, ignores the conventional costumes when playing the leading male character of Emperor Chu in *Emperor Chu’s Farewell to Concubine Yu*. Emperor Chu is a classical sheng character that can be found in various Chinese opera genres. As the Peking opera version is very famous, actors in Cantonese opera usually follow its costumes—wearing a painted face and a long, thick, black beard—when playing the character Emperor Chu. As previously mentioned, costume in Chinese opera is another signifying system that conveys rich information about the characters. Thus, some experienced practitioners and critics emphasized that dressing properly (*ning chuan po, mo chuan cuo*) is a way to show an actor’s knowledge, professionalism, and artistry. In this regard, Loong has been disparaged by one of my interlocutors for betraying the dressing conventions for the sake of showing his good-looking face (see Fig. 2.14). It is believed that a professional actor should devote her/himself to the different characters instead of just performing the actor her/himself and reminding the audiences that s/he is the same star whichever characters s/he plays.

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43 The original phrase is “寧穿破，莫穿錯.”
Yet audiences’ perspectives very often contradict with those of practitioners. Jill (a pseudonym), a fan of Doris Kwan, once gave me a ticket to a full-house show in which Kwan played a supporting middle-aged male character (see Fig. 2.15). I was surprised because Chan had been one of the most devoted and supportive fans of Kwan, who always tried not to miss any of her performances. She first hesitated to tell me the reason for skipping this performance. After a while, she admitted that she did not want to see Kwan wearing a beard because the beard would affect Kwan’s appearance. I asked her whether she had seen Kwan wearing a beard and her response was negative. From her tone and hesitation, I would suggest that, to some fans or

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audiences, conventional dressing practices are less important than their perceptions of *se* of the *wenwusheng*. Not only a veil partially covering the “good-looking face,” a beard is also an age signifier, which would spoil some fans’ imaginations of the idealized masculinity of *wenwusheng*, which is closely tied up with vitality, youth, and handsomeness.

![Fig. 2.15 Doris Kwan wears a thin, black beard when playing the character of a middle-aged general in *Changbanpo*.](image)

**Conclusion: Is the *Wenwusheng* a Role-type?**

A few actors from XXX Troupe [who were born and trained in mainland China but are now studying and working in Hong Kong,] told me that they study the *wenwusheng* and *zhengyin huadan* role-types. I was shocked. I asked them in my heart, “well, how do you study *wenwusheng* and *zhengyin huadan*? Are the *wenwusheng* and *zhengyin huadan* role-types that one can learn?” They are so ignorant.

Milky Cheung Man-shan (informal conversation, 2014)

While the traditional plays feature various role-types, the majority of those that were written after the 1930s shine a spotlight on the principal *sheng* and *dan*, i.e., *wenwusheng* and *zhengyin huadan* (Leung 1997: 664). The comment of Milky Cheung, an amateur *dan* actress,

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researcher, and archivist of Cantonese opera, leads to the point that I want to make: it is improper or inaccurate to understand wenwusheng as a role-type as traditionally defined—that is, as a rigidly defined signification system that consists of different sets of conventional codes presented by physical bodies and music to signify the different genders, ages, social statuses, and personalities of the characters. Similar to the trend that the diversity of vocal projection of each role-type has shrunk to basically two gendered voices—pinghou and zihou—in recent decades, there remain basically two generic role-types that are defined by gender—sheng and dan—that actors can choose when they start learning Cantonese opera.

As this project is about wenwusheng, I will focus the following discussion on sheng only. In the process of learning sheng, there are no specific clusters of techniques or rules for wenwusheng. The distinction between wenwusheng and other sheng role-types appear as a hierarchy more than actual differences in terms of performance. In other words, I would suggest that wenwusheng is more like a ranking or status of prestige than a role-type, according to the traditional definition of role-type. Rather than distinguishing characteristics in training and performances, a wenwusheng is better understood as an emblem of either a top sheng actor or an economically prestigious, self-made star.

Once an actor appears as an active wenwusheng, s/he rarely “steps down” to play supporting role-types for another wenwusheng. As previously mentioned in the section on wenwusheng’s marketability, Yuen Siu-fai (b. 1945) is an exception. In summary, Yuen was acclaimed by some of my informants as one of the few “real wenwusheng” and highly respected in today’s Hong Kong opera circle. Even though he has been active for decades and founded some troupes in which he has played the wenwusheng since the 1980s, he has been playing mostly supporting roles of the six-pillar system over the last two decades. More importantly,
known as a “versatile master,” Yuen held a series of performances in December 2013 when commemorating sixty years of his performance career to showcase his talents in playing different role-types. He played the leading protagonist in each of these shows and the covered role-types ranged from the mainstream (wenwusheng) and traditional but then-marginalized role-types (xiaowu) in Cantonese opera, to those role-types that are borrowed from Peking opera (caidan [equivalent to female comedian] and laosheng).

While I attended two shows of the series and many other performances of Yuen over the past few years, I am not interested in discussing whether he gave convincing renditions of each

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of these role-types. Rather, I want to use his example to further question the conventional
definition of role-type. Even though he was not the first actor to switch between different role-
types and be acclaimed as a “versatile master,” the act of putting on this series of performances
can be interpreted as his understanding of the fluidity of role-types in Cantonese opera as an
outcome of being a long-term active practitioner and observer of the field. While most actors in
the early twentieth century were bound by the traditional convention of practicing only one role-
type and not changing to another role-type unless necessary, Yuen has demonstrated how the
traditional definition of role-type is not much applicable to Cantonese opera in today’s Hong
Kong.

The different sheng role-types are not clearly defined by highly stylized conventions;
boundaries between different sheng role-types are increasingly blurred. Except for a few sheng
actors who specialize in particular role-types such as wusheng, xiaosheng, and chousheng and
study the specific techniques and styles of these role-types, the basic training that most sheng
actors receive is relatively general. This general training only offers a foundation and an essential
idea of how sheng role-types are to be played. Most sheng actors, especially those who are not
yet established wenwusheng and who lack strong economic power, are expected to be flexible
and versatile enough to take on different non-wenwusheng role-types when being invited to play
supporting roles. While special techniques of certain role-types require lengthy, rigorous training
and practices, many sheng actors focus on acting and the subtleties of tone and speed in

48 An earlier “versatile master” (wanneng laoguan) is actor Xue Juexian (1904–1956), who first made his name as a
male huadan and then switched to the wenwusheng role-type after the lift of the ban of coed troupes.
49 Actors usually changed their role-types when they encountered difficulties in continuing their original role-types
due to physical changes such as voices, body shapes, and injuries.
50 For instance, wusheng is expected to possess good xugong (literally “beard skill,” the technique of manipulating
beards) and zuoche (literally “riding a carriage,” with the absence of the prop carriage, actor needs to use body
movements and gestures to present the scene that s/he is riding a carriage including sitting comfortably, going uphill,
and traveling on uneven surface).
51 Compared to tone and speed, vocal projections are relatively hard to change.
speaking when playing different role-types. The versatility of sheng actors helps them to gain performance opportunities and exposure in the process of climbing up the ladder to the wenwusheng.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, each role-type is a rigidly defined signification system that comprises clusters of conventional codes that are displayed through physical bodies, voices, costumes, and music. However, the increasing demand for versatility among sheng actors not only reflects the wenwusheng role-type as an indicator of economic power, stage experience, and ranking, but also challenges the conventional definition of role-type, revealing that it is no longer applicable to today’s Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.
Chapter 3

Gendering Plays, Playing Genders

Introduction

In the Cantonese opera circle, some people use the term “dowry plays” (jiazhuang xi) to refer to actors’ signature plays. In Chinese society, dowry usually reflects the wealth and social status of the bride’s natal family. Therefore, in the context of Cantonese opera, “dowry plays” not only indicate actors’ strengths and individual styles (which are inherited from their teachers), but also serve as a determining factor in defining and ranking them as actors. This metaphor also reflects the importance of plays in actors’ careers. After examining the changing meanings of both the wenwusheng and role-type (hangdang) in contemporary Hong Kong in Chapter 2, this chapter looks deeper into how gender is actually performed. In the first part of this chapter, I examine how repertoire is gendered and conversely, how repertoire genders a wenwusheng actor.

As voice is an indispensable gender marker in theater, the discussion of gender and repertoire leads to the question of how voice is gendered. The second part of this chapter focuses on the gender signification system in the sonic dimension of Cantonese opera. I investigate the process of gendering voices in both operatic and concert settings in regard to gendered dress codes, theatricality, and the political legitimacy of certain kinds of vocal timbres.

The third part is an extension of the previous with a different approach. I study how female wenwusheng undo gender in their special performances. By analyzing two ethnographic examples of double cross-dressing performances on the operatic stage, and an audio recording which features multiple gender impersonations, I highlight the denaturalized relationship
between voice and vocal gender, and between the performing body and gendered role-types. Following this, the concluding section highlights a leading female wenwusheng of the past two decades to exemplify what repertoire, performing style, as well as experimental performances and recordings tell us about how female wenwusheng position themselves today and how they are potentially impacting Cantonese opera at large.

**Repertoire**

Historically speaking, the rich repertoire of Cantonese opera repertoire can be categorized in different ways based on theme, performance style, performance practice, origin, and creative process. The frequently performed repertoire of commercial productions today comprises contemporary plays that were composed or rearranged in Hong Kong and Guangdong between the 1920s and 1970s. In terms of performance style, plays can be categorized into wen and wu—which has been briefly introduced in Chapter 2 and will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. Another type of repertoire is ancient or traditional formulaic plays (chuantong paichang or gulao paichang) from the nineteenth century. Although they are no longer popular and are only occasionally performed, their role as the foundation of Cantonese opera performance cannot be overlooked.

**Traditional Formulaic Plays and Zuogong**

Despite their declining popularity, traditional formulaic plays have been fundamental for generations of actors to learn zuogong—highly stylized choreographed movements. Nowadays, the term “traditional formulaic play” does not necessarily mean a complete play. It is better understood as segments of standardized zuogong to signify certain moments, actions, and scenes. For example, the most common ones that are used today include “writing an indictment” (xiezhuang) and “getting up on a horse” (shangma). Many contemporary and newly arranged
plays borrow elements from traditional formulaic plays to enhance dramatic effect. Each segment is accompanied by a unique set of percussion patterns with or without melodic instruments. Given that the early Cantonese opera was mostly performed by itinerant troupes on temporary stages, props and stage settings were minimal. By the late 1800s, actors had developed hundreds of symbolic sequences of miming movements to help deliver stories. Scripts in the first half of the twentieth century provided only synopses (*tigang xi*). Most of the time, actors needed to fill in the suggestive scripts with both improvisation and their prepared singing excerpts as well as traditional formulaic sequences.

Thanks to the rise of permanent indoor theaters in cities, urbanites’ thirst for novelty, and the use of modern technology, introduced in the 1920s and 1930s, the use of backdrop became increasingly elaborate and realistic. Thus abstract *zuogong* and traditional formulaic plays gradually lost their function, importance, and popularity. Inevitably, many traditional formulaic plays were also lost. Meanwhile, beginning in the 1950s, there was an increasing demand that actors follow details on scripts and rehearse (Chan 1996: 77–81), thereby doing away with improvisation.

Transmission of traditional formulaic plays still relies heavily on one-on-one instruction and observation because these detailed movements are never documented on paper. Over the past three decades, a few veteran actors who grew up watching and learning traditional formulaic plays have been increasingly alarmed by the loss of this “unique Cantonese opera tradition.”

**Dichotomies in Repertoire**

Contemporary plays are generally categorized as either *wen* or *wu* according to their performance styles and plots. Although many plays contain both *wen* and *wu* scenes, if a play...

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1 These actors include Yuen Siu-fai (b. 1945), Lee Lung (in his sixties), Yau Sing-po (b. 1934), Law Kar-ying (b. 1946), and Chan Ho-kau (in her early eighties) (Hong Kong Public Libraries).
includes at least a scene of extensive wu performance, it is more likely to be categorized as a wu play. This section focuses on the gendered relationship between wen and wu plays, and how it is directly related to the stylistic differences characterizing female and male wenwusheng.

Gendered Dichotomies

Wen performance—singing and zuogong—is gendered as female or feminine while wu—acrobatics—is male or masculine. It is important to note that the gendered wen-wu dichotomy is also similar to how the essentialized gender roles of many societies are differentiated by the private-public and soul-body parameter. Through singing and zuogong, wen performances feature characters narrating their experiences and expressing feelings. Very often wen performances portray interpersonal relationships between lovers or family members. Many wen portray romantic love stories between young male scholars and female beauties (caizi jiaren), played by wenwusheng and principal huadan respectively. This style of play is also labeled as the “mandarin duck and butterfly” school (see note 18 in chapter 2). All these feelings are relatively personal and the themes of wen plays tend to belong to the private or domestic domain. Performances that inspire love are related closely to delicacy, gentleness, and even weakness—the “feminine” attributes.

In contrast, the wu performances usually feature battle scenes and patriotic stories in which heroic characters fight for their countries or tribes, or take revenge on behalf of their emperors or loyal, righteous family members. The themes in wu plays have closer connections to the public sphere, politics, and patriarchy. Moreover, given the fact that men dominated the public sphere in traditional Chinese society, wu plays inevitably include more male characters than female.

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2 Stories from the literary classics Romance of the Three Kingdoms (sanguo yanyi) and Water Margin (shui hu zhuan) are popular elements for wu plays in Chinese opera.
The gendered relationship of the *wen-wu* dichotomy is also manifested sonically in the accompanying instruments. “*Wenchang*” is a term for both *wen* scenes and string ensembles, while “*wuchang*” is used to refer to both *wu* scenes and percussion ensembles. The *wenchang* ensemble consists of a string ensemble with lighter percussion; the *wuchang* is mostly or solely percussion instruments with or without the *houguan* (double-reed pipe), which are loud and somehow piercing. Sonically speaking, *wu* scenes are more powerful and driving while *wen* are more refined and lyrical.

**Wen-Wu Dichotomies as Hierarchy**

The *wen-wu* dichotomy and its underlying gendered relations are often used to hierarchize actors and audience members. Although many people believe that an impeccable rendition of a *wen* play requires profound artistry (*yi* or *gongjia*), my conversations with both practitioners and audience members illustrate that artistry is often narrowly defined by just those two skills which mostly feature physicality—*wu* and *zuogong*—without taking singing into account. Many of them also value *wu* performances more highly than *wen*.

**Rehearsing and Performing Habits**

Before further explaining the hierarchized relation between *wen* and *wu* performances, it is important to learn about practitioners’ rehearsing habits in recent Hong Kong. As most of the actors are freelancers and troupes are formed ad hoc, regular or intensive group rehearsals are rare for two major reasons. First, financiers do not want to spend money on renting a spacious rehearsing place, and paying actors and musicians extra money to rehearse. In most cases, actors rely on their own preparations and past experiences to cope with any situation that may come up in live performances.

Second, I often hear practitioners say that actors, both supporting and leading casts, are
too busy for regular group rehearsals. As the shows in Hong Kong usually do not repeat the same repertoire on consecutive nights, troupes need to prepare a different play for each night. For the active actors, the number of different plays they perform in a month varies from three to over a dozen. Most of my actor interlocutors vented to me that they were frequently overwhelmed with memorizing different plays within a short period of time, and that this is a stressful and time-consuming task in their professional pursuit. It is especially the case for rising stars because many of them did not want to lose performance opportunities and they tended to take many major and minor roles (sometimes in the same plays). One of them described the stress with a metaphor, “It is like a student life with ongoing exams. You need to keep studying and taking exams. The difference is that you don’t see the end” (Kwan, interview, 2013).

In most cases, the high variety of repertoire is still possible because the frequently performed Cantonese opera repertoire today features mostly wen plays, which rely heavily on the singing (mostly solos or duets) of two to three leads, and rarely require substantial teamwork. Lead actors tend to prepare for performances on their own and may or may not have rehearsal(s) with their partners before each performance. Very often, the more experienced actors brief the supporting actors on the day of the show. Hence, making mistakes, forgetting the script, and lacking coordination are very common and thus generally acceptable—as long as actors can fix the mistakes on the spot and keep the performance going.

**Wu Performance**

However, wu performances require intensive instruction in acrobatic skills as well as both individual and group practice to make the show acceptable, although mistakes are still common. The frequently observed mistakes include the lead actors missing the catch when supporting actors throw a spear, inaccurate timing or positioning of jumping or turning movements, and so
forth. Despite the fact that spectacular wu scenes, with bustling percussion accompaniment, are sensational and please audiences relatively easily, mistakes (major or minor) are also more noticeable compared to those in wen performances. Wu scenes require high coordination between actors. Given that many movements require speed and accuracy, even if one actor makes a minor mistake, the entire team may be immediately messed up.

As rehearsals of wu scenes are supposed to be intensive, the preference for wu performances is often used to rank troupes, actors, and audience members. Arranging a sizable group of experienced supporting actors to perform acrobatic sequences in splendid costumes is a conventional way that large-scale troupes show off the size of their casts, capital, and status. For individual actors, regardless of outcome, putting up a wu performance usually reflects the effort and time (and perhaps money, too) that they have invested.³ It also reflects their confidence and diligence. Thus, when a troupe includes wu scenes or plays in its program, both the show and actors are generally taken more seriously and regarded as professional because “artistry” is displayed in wu performances. Moreover, audience members who prefer wu performances are also considered to be those who know how to appreciate “real art” and take the quality of the shows more seriously.

Wen Performance

Compared to wu plays, wen performances generally require fewer group rehearsals, creating the impression that performing wen plays is easier as they take less effort to prepare. This illusion is also manifested in other biases related to both Cantonese opera (as a genre) and its wen performances. For instance, given the imbalance between wen and wu performances and the emphasis on star singers since the early 1900s, it is not uncommon to hear Cantonese opera

³ It is difficult to recruit experienced actors who have good wu skills because that they are expensive to hire and they are unlikely to play minor roles unless the major casts are very privileged masters or their teachers.
being criticized as “singing drama” or a “musical (yinyueju) sung in the Cantonese language” because many actors focus only on singing and neglect zuogong as well as wu skills. When compared to Peking and kunqu operas, Cantonese opera music is more syllabic. Many people—including Cantonese opera practitioners, audiences, and non-Cantonese people—downplay singing skills, such as control of breath and melodic embellishment, and tend to believe that a gifted voice is all that is required for good singing. Although audience members are generally satisfied as long as actors do not make obvious mistakes, some disdain wen performances for “singing with insufficient zuogong” when actors fail to pepper their performances with stylized choreography to enhance visual presentation and facilitate dramatic expression.

Many people think wen performances are easier, actors (especially young female wenwusheng) and audience members who favor wen plays are very often viewed as amateurs and groupies, respectively. Some practitioners advocate the idea that “real artistry” contains excellent wu skills and that knowledgeable audience members should not only choose to watch wen plays. In the past three decades, some actors, musicians, and playwrights, such as the House of Cantonese Opera Troupe (yueju zhijia) (1993–2000), have tried to break the dominant “mandarin duck and butterfly” convention by adding more wu plays as well as producing and reviving wen plays that are loaded with political or patriotic themes (Yuen, interview, 2014).

Although Cantonese opera reform is beyond my scope, I still want to draw readers’ attention to the House of Cantonese Opera Troupe, as it is one of the most prolific troupes over the past three decades that advocated newly written, adapted, and revived repertoire that consists of substantial wu performances and public subjects (see Lai 2010: 468–78). It is not a coincidence that its core members are mostly male wenwusheng who were struggling to rise in the 1970s and 1980s (for instance, Yuen Siu-fai, Leung Hon-wai, and Lee Lung), when the
Cantonese opera stage was still “monopolized” by the female wenwusheng star Lung Kim-sang and the male wenwusheng star Lam Ka-sing (Ip, interview, 2013). By bringing the themes of plays and performances from the relatively private domain to the public sphere with more male characters (played by male actors), this was also an attempt to masculinize the genre.

**Men’s/Masculine Plays? Women’s/Feminine Plays?**

Today actors perform a wide range of plays and yet wenwusheng actors are often expected to follow the paths of the stars of their own biological sex. Although plays are usually loosely categorized as either wen or wu, some exist in a border zone between the male and female wenwusheng’s repertoire. This section examines how the concept of wen-wu intertwines with various gendered dichotomies pertaining to repertoire.

**Gendered Repertoire**

Although practitioners and critics rarely deliberately categorize plays as male or female wenwusheng’s repertoire, many plays are gendered at the perceptual or practical level. For instance, if a play was premiered and frequently performed by a male wenwusheng in the 1960s or 1970s, it is very likely to be considered as a male wenwusheng’s play today because, as noted above, for most of the twentieth century, it was common for playwrights to tailor-make plays for Cantonese opera stars. Playwrights worked closely with actors to create scenes and excerpts that could both highlight the actors’ talents and conceal their weaknesses. Hence plays were a crucial device in fortifying stardom.

However, the close working relationships between playwrights and actors began to fade in the late 1970s and 1980s when many renowned playwrights retired, moved to foreign countries, or passed away, at the same time that Cantonese opera retreated from a mass entertainment to a subculture with a smaller circle of fans (Lai 2010: 420–22; Leung 1997: 669–
79). Since then, the core repertoire performed was basically passed on from the previous three decades. Unlike actors prior to the late 1970s, the performance styles of today’s actors are, to a certain extent, shaped by this existing repertoire. It is rare to see actors establish their own styles and fame with new plays. Wenwusheng, for instance, inevitably inherit the signature pieces of the stars of their biological sex. Despite the fact that wenwusheng actors commonly crossing the sex line—performing the plays of the other sex’s repertoire—the perceptions of both audience members and practitioners are affected by the earlier stars. When a male wenwusheng performs a masterpiece of an earlier female wenwusheng, audience members may not hold very high expectations because it is a “women’s play” and vice versa.

“Masculine” Plays, “Feminine” Plays

As previously discussed, wen plays are generally gendered as feminine and wu as masculine; audience members also prefer male wenwusheng to play the “masculine” plays—wu plays and wen plays with political themes—and that female wenwusheng perform wen plays. According to my interlocutors, many tend to prefer female wenwusheng to be cast as romantic young scholars willing to give up their careers for the women they love in the plays. Ip Sai-hung, a former director of Radio 5, Radio Television Hong Kong, commented that female wenwusheng have advantages over their male counterparts in playing the characters of lovesick young scholars because audience members do not like to see a “real man”—male characters played by male actors—languishing too much over their lovers (interview, 2013). As masculinity is essentially associated with being rational and enduring hardship, male characters who display intense personal feelings are better portrayed by female than male wenwusheng.

4 For instance, a female wenwusheng is expected to perform signature pieces of earlier female wenwusheng stars such as Yam Kim-fai (1913–1989) and Lung Kim-sang (b. 1944) while a male wenwusheng is supposed to inherit the repertoire of male wenwusheng stars such as Mak Bing-wing (1915–1984) and Lam Ka-sing (1933–2015).

5 This is the only radio station in Hong Kong that has daily broadcasts of Cantonese opera music.
Another interlocutor echoed Ip’s point. Cecile Kung, a Cantonese opera fan in her early forties, shared with me that, although she did not have a special preference for the biological sex of wenwusheng, female wenwusheng are good at rendering the characters of lovers, but not husbands (informal conversation, 2013). In Cantonese opera, married men are usually associated with maturity and more serious social as well as familial responsibilities; Kung’s critique supports the interconnection and consistency between wen-wu, private-public, female/feminine-male/masculine dichotomies discussed above. “Serious” gendered social and political roles are reserved for “real men” while personal romances should be enacted by “fake men”—unmarried male characters played by female wenwusheng.

Singing Voices and the Legitimate Gender

Although neither Ip nor Kung explicitly mentioned the relationship between voice and the portrayal of masculinity in wen plays, differences of vocal timbre between male and female wenwusheng should be taken into serious consideration to better understanding their critiques. In musical theater, vocal timbre signifies not only the gender, but also temperament, political power, and social legitimacy of the characters. Understanding the effects of using trouser roles in Italian opera is helpful in explaining the casting of female wenwusheng in a wen repertoire. Here I again quote Margaret Reynolds (1995) who notes that as opera became “a shrine to heterosex” in the nineteenth century, most of the trouser roles were of purely innocent young boys or asexual supernatural beings (141–42). These characters are usually not the competitors of normalized men or masculinity in the worldly patriarchal society.

In the introduction of En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera, Corinne Blackmer and Patricia Smith briefly discuss the possible sexual implications of Cherubino, the

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6 See Dame 2006; Reynolds 1995; Wood 2006.
trouser role from Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Mozart cast a mezzo-soprano or soprano for the character of Cherubino, who is a coming-of-age, lovesick, charming, rebellious, adventurous, irresponsible teenaged pageboy. Blackmer and Smith ask, “[a]nd what is the bigger threat to the [C]ount, a male Cherubino in his wife’s dressing room or a female Cherubino?” (1995: 11).

Although their discussion focuses on homoeroticism (which I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6), I want to first focus on how a female’s voice signifies the immaturity of the teenaged boy, and reinforces the deviance of the character.⁷ Mainstream or normalized masculinity is presented by tenor, baritone, and bass voices in Mozart’s opera. The use of a female voice for Cherubino marginalizes the character’s masculinity and thus minimizes its threat to legitimate masculinity (presented by male voices) and existing patriarchy.

Although voices of Cantonese opera are not gendered based on the singers’ sex, like that in Italian opera, most of the interlocutors I have communicated with are able to distinguish the biological sex of the *wenwusheng* actors. Following the discussion above, *pinghou* voices sung by male actors often signify legitimate or heroic masculinity and greater political and social power. In contrast, female *pinghou* voices are dissociated from the socially and politically dominant male characters in the public domain. As *wu* repertoire focuses more on public domain and *wen* on personal feelings, the former tends to be reserved for male *pinghou* voices. Female *wenwusheng* inevitably have to perform—and, perhaps, end up performing better—young romantic lovers in *wen* plays.

*Crossing the Gendered Dichotomy of Repertoire*

Female *wenwusheng* performing “men’s repertoire” is a double-edged sword. Their gendered identities and physical bodies are always considered when people discuss their

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⁷ Cherubino is not only a sexually curious (and active) and coquettish teenaged boy who attracts many girls of his age, but he also tries to cross the social class boundary to flirt with the Countess.
performances. On the one hand, the supposition that female wenwusheng never acquire wu skills as well as their male counterparts is ubiquitous. They are expected to polish their wen skills and remain in the female wenwusheng’s lineages (such as that of Yam Kim-fai).

On the other hand, female wenwusheng are more encouraged and appreciated for their attempts at giving wu performances. In some cases, the quality of these performances is not as valued as the fact that they are performed by female wenwusheng. For instance, I attended the female wenwusheng Lau Wai-ming’s\(^8\) performance of a Lam Ka-sing (1933–2015) masterpiece in 2014. Known for both wen and wu skills, Lam was a male wenwusheng star between the 1960s and early 1990s. During Lau’s performance, right after the wu scene ended, I overheard a man in the audience sigh and say, “A woman. No solution,” meaning “it’s a female wenwusheng. There is no way the performance can be good.”\(^9\) This could be interpreted as a negative (and sexist) comment, but it was not too harsh compared to other comments that I have heard. Not only does this comment illustrate the bias I mentioned earlier, it also shows that the performer was “forgiven” even when the wu performance was not satisfying because she is a woman. It is the physical limitations of female bodies that are to blame. Nonetheless, when female wenwusheng give successful wu performances, they are sometimes more impressive than their male counterparts. Female wenwusheng Wai Chun-fai told me, “I once heard someone in the audience being puzzled about my biological sex. S/he said ‘this actor looks like a woman. But women usually don’t have excellent wu skill like this. So is it a man or a woman?’” When a female wenwusheng crosses the men-women’s repertoire boundary and “gives a good wu performance, the show is more impressive” (Wai, interview, 2013).

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\(^8\) Lau performs mostly wen repertoire.

\(^9\) From my perspective, her wu skill was much weaker than her wen, and it was even below average compared to all the wenwusheng performances I have seen.
However, a similar double-edged sword does not apply to male wenwusheng when they cross the gendered repertoire boundary. They usually do not include “female wenwusheng’s repertoire” as their own essential repertoire. Even when they do, they usually do not receive as much applause as those female wenwusheng who cross the gender line and play “men’s repertoire.” This observation leads to a broader question that I need more in-depth ethnographic data to answer in the future: is the female wenwusheng itself is a gender—a lower-ranking or effeminate male gender category? Following the prevalent gender hierarchy, when female wenwusheng, as an inferior male gender, play the “men’s repertoire,” they cross-dress into a more privileged gender. Even if their performances are not always satisfying, their efforts are acknowledged because it can be interpreted as worship of masculinity and a stronger and superior gender. Yet when male wenwusheng play the “women’s repertoire,” they enact a subordinate gender and thus are not encouraged by others regardless of the outcome.

**Gendering Voices**

Although people rarely explicitly talk about vocal timbre differences when referring to gendered repertoire, the factor of voice should be taken into account. A primary communicative vehicle, the voice is a juncture between nature and culture (Barthes 1977; Dunn and Jones, eds. 1997; Feld and Fox 1994; and Feld, et al., 2004), and largely contributes to gender performativity both in everyday life and expressive culture. This section examines how voice is gendered in Cantonese opera.

**Gendered Voices and Dramatic Functions**

In both Italian opera and Cantonese opera, voice categories are determined based on gendered voices and thus musical gender dualism is asserted. Generally speaking, the classification of gendered voices in Italian opera relies on both the biological sex and vocal range
of the singers. A female bel canto singer is usually categorized as alto, mezzo-soprano, or soprano while a male is a bass, baritone, tenor, or countertenor. The bel canto vocalizing “has the effect of exaggerating the difference between male and female sounds” compared to everyday life (Robinson 1994: 289). In contrast, gendered voices in Cantonese opera are determined mainly by the vocal quality and range of the singers regardless of their biological sex.

As discussed in the previous chapter, vocal projections in Cantonese opera are generally categorized as gendered voices, including pinghou, zihou, and dahou. Zihou is designated for younger female role-types, pinghou is used for male role-types of all ages, children, and female role-types of (married) middle-aged and older women such as mothers and grandmothers, and dahou is a variation of pinghou used for heroic male role-types.

It is also important to note that the vocal timbre of zihou signifies female sexuality and reproductivity and is used for young female characters only. For child characters of both sexes and older female characters—who are assumingly sexually inactive or past menopause—pinghou is used instead. In other words, while the zihou voice indicates youthful femininity of sexual and reproductive potential, pinghou signifies both asexuality and masculinity.

**Training**

When one starts learning Cantonese opera singing, the first thing s/he needs to decide is to choose pinghou or zihou. Yet it is not always a free choice. Some teachers advise singers based on their vocal quality, temperament, and biological sex. In spite of the popularity of female cross-gendered singing of pinghou, some teachers prefer “straight singing” and assume that female beginning singers should learn zihou. For instance, my Cantonese opera teacher, Leung

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10 Listeners can easily distinguish female singers from male because they sing in a range an octave higher.
11 Doris Kwan, a female wenwusheng, recalled her first Cantonese opera singing lesson at the Chinese Opera Information Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the late 1990s when she was still a college student. She had expressed her interest in learning pinghou to Professor Chan Sau-yan, who was the director of the Center
Sum-yee, shared with me that unless a female beginner’s voice is particularly deep and low, she usually advises the student to learn zihou.

To many practitioners, the principles and ways of projecting pinghou and zihou voices contradict each other. Some teachers warn female beginners to carefully choose between pinghou and zihou because they believe that once the female singer is trained in pinghou, her vocal cords will “thicken” (bian cu), making it hard to sing zihou again. However, if she starts with zihou singing, she can still switch to pinghou easily.

Yet, one of my interlocutors disagreed with this belief. He explained that both pinghou and zihou have their own ways of vocal projection. The training is like two different paths because different tissues of the vocal cords are used. As the trainings are different, they do not contradict each other (Tai, interview, 2013).12

Despite these different opinions, they shared the view that vocal cords become “loose” (song) and “thick” (cu) with aging, so it becomes harder for older women to continue singing in zihou. It is not uncommon for female singers to switch from zihou to pinghou after reaching a certain age.13

**Gendering Pinghou Voice**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, some sheng actors, especially those who are not top wenwusheng, occasionally play the laodan (elderly female role-type). This kind of cross-gender and cross role-type performance is possible because a laodan sings and speaks in pinghou voice.

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12 Actress Chan Ka-ming is a good example. She started her career as a sheng performer but switched to the dan role-type in her early or mid-twenties. In her early sixties now, her zihou voice is still very sharp and bright.
13 For some actors, it is also a switch from dan to sheng role-types. For instance, Tang Pik-wan (1924–1991) and Ng Yim-hung (in her late sixties) changed their role-types from huadan to wenwusheng after reaching middle age.
Yet playing older characters is usually not considered as a career or a style that actors should pursue because these characters are mostly minor roles in the mainstream Cantonese opera repertoire. Both actors and audience members pay minimal attention to the performance of these characters. During my fieldwork, for instance, except for a few male actors, most were not interested in studying how to perform elderly role-types (such as laosheng and laodan) or characters. While the training in Cantonese opera focuses mostly on young sheng and young dan role-types, how to perform older characters of both genders is usually not included in the basic training. In fact, sheng actors performing the older characters (especially female) often are perceived as lower-ranked, implying that they are not competitive enough for the major male characters—mostly the younger ones—in the play. Even if this kind of performance is only done occasionally for money and/or stage experience, many aspiring sheng actors do not spend too much time preparing for the performance. Actors tend to render older characters based only on their experience and observation.

Theoretically speaking, it is zimuhou instead of pinghou that is used for laodan (Chen 2010: 17; Yueju heshishang 2004). Zimuhou is a combination of both natural projection and falsetto, used by both sheng and dan actors in the early 1900s (Yueju heshishang 2004). However, when today’s sheng actors occasionally play the laodan, they basically sing in pinghou voice with no falsetto. In the live performances I attended in the past few years, I did not discern any clear distinction in the timbre of sheng actors performing male and older female characters, except that they tried to make their voices more nasal and slightly softer when playing the latter. According to two veteran actor-teachers, most of the active actors nowadays do not know—or cannot demonstrate—the actual differences between the vocal projections of zimuhou and
pinghou, and basically use the latter when playing both male and older female characters (Leung, interview, 2013; Yuen, interview, 2014).

In sum, I suggest that the timbre of pinghou alone does not signify the gender of the characters. It is the theatrical components—dramatic roles and plots, costumes, makeup, gesturing—that inform the audience whether it is a male or older female character (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.2). In theatrical productions around the world, a primary role of the voice is to signify the gender of dramatic roles. Although a given vocal timbre usually signifies only one gender, exceptions are not uncommon. In her study of treble voices in nineteenth-century Italian opera, Naomi André (2006) examines how these voice types embody both masculinity and femininity simultaneously. Treble voice types, such as castrati, trouser roles, and countertenors, embody both masculinity and femininity simultaneously and have been used interchangeably for both male and female dramatic roles. The same singer may play a male role tonight and a female tomorrow. These voice types challenge the naturalized relationship between voice and gender. Likewise, the sound of the pinghou voice alone does not definitively signify an absolute gender. Rather, this deep, non-falsetto timbre signifies only the absence of female sexuality or reproductivity (which is signified by the falsetto zihou voice), indicating both male and older female characters as determined by the theatrical components. Eventually, it is the theatrical frame that distinguishes whether the pinghou voice enacts a male or older female character.
Cross-gender Singing in Cantonese Opera

While cross-dressing performances in Chinese opera have ebbed and flowed in the past century, the sonic dimension, what I call the “cross-gender singing” in my study—singers singing in the gendered voice of the opposite sex—seems to attract less attention than cross-dress acting. Despite the fact that the way voices are gendered in Cantonese opera is less restricted to the singers’ biological sex and that cross-gender singing has a relatively long history, the sonic dimension of cross-dressing in Cantonese opera is still understudied.

Cantonese Operatic Song (Yuequ)

Before discussing the sonic dimension of cross-dressing, I introduce the concept of “Cantonese operatic song (yuequ),” another major form of Cantonese opera music performed in Hong Kong. Divorced from this theatrical setting, Cantonese operatic song refers to rearranged excerpts that are adapted from Cantonese opera plays. This vocal genre became popular with the
rise of teahouses, singing halls, and the recording industry as part of urban life in cities such as Hong Kong and Guangzhou in the early twentieth century (Lai 2010: 272–89; Yung 2006a). In today’s Hong Kong, Cantonese operatic song is usually sung in private music clubs and Cantonese operatic song concerts (yuequ yanchanghui) (see Fig. 3.3). Some major differences between a Cantonese opera performance and a Cantonese operatic song concert are that acting, traditional operatic attire (including thick oil-based makeup, and elaborate costumes and headdresses), zuogong and wu movements, and stage setups are basically all absent in the latter. Without operatic costumes and stage settings, singers in concerts, who dress in modern attire, deliver meanings through lyrics, voice, and minimal gesturing. Compared to a Cantonese opera performance, fewer resources, such as money and labor, are required to hold a concert. Therefore, Cantonese operatic song concerts are frequently given by both professional and amateur vocalists. Moreover, due to its popularity, this form of performance not only plays an important role in preserving and promoting Cantonese opera music, but also encourages amateur participation and thus secures the income of many full-time practitioners, such as musicians and teachers.

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14 Cantonese opera song concerts are similar to Italian opera concerts, in which vocalists sing renowned arias with accompanying orchestras on stage.

15 While actors in Cantonese opera need to memorize all the details of their performances, it is acceptable for singers in concerts to hold a booklet of lyrics in their hands throughout the performance.
“Clothes Make the Man”?: Authenticity in Cross-gender Singing

During my study, I found that cross-gender singing in modern attire—as another set of gender codes—in concert settings is not entirely free of concerns with sexualized and gendered embodiment. Although many of my interlocutors claimed that they had no preference for male or female pinghou, some suggested that the pinghou voice is better sung by men because “male pinghou is more natural (ziran).” While the biological sex of many pinghou singers is easy to distinguish, this is not always the case.

So when people discuss the “natural pinghou voice,” how do they hear gender? Or, can they hear gender? This subsection explores the process of authenticating vocal gender in cross-gender singing. Two ethnographic anecdotes and online discussions, described below, will illustrate the complex relationship between visual and sonic presentation in cross-gender performances, in both operatic and concert settings.

In a documentary about male dan in Hong Kong titled My Way (qian dan lu) (2011), Paris Wong Hau-wai, one of the few male dan, recalls the discouragement and harsh criticism

\[16\text{ Facebook page of Yuen Siu-fai. July 23, 2013.}
that he received from his mother for playing the *dan* role-type. I followed up on this during my informal interview with him. When asked if it was the *dan* outfit that his mother disliked most, he clarified that she actually preferred to see him singing in a full Cantonese opera costume and makeup than in modern attire (see Fig. 3.4). He elaborated that the operatic costume and heavy makeup could better conceal the physical signifiers of his biological sex—his angular face and dark skin tone, which are gendered as masculine in Hong Kong nowadays. His mother’s comment reveals an expectation—from the spectators’ perspective—that visual and aural presentations of gender be consistent.

This anecdote also illustrates the importance of stage costuming. While heavy facial makeup and elaborate headdresses serve as “nonpermanent masks” (Beeman 1993: 382), two primary functions of masks are to conceal or depersonalize the performers, and to transform their identities (“masks,” *The Cambridge Guide to Theater 2000* [Banham, ed.]). In Cantonese opera, costuming covers not only the actors’ physical bodies and faces, but also their social and psychological selves. The makeup, headdress, and costume facilitate an otherness that allows actors to reshape their “imaginative sense of self” (Emigh 1996: xix), thereby transforming themselves into the characters they are playing, from the perspective of both actors and audience.

Fig. 3.4 Paris Wong dressing up for a performance.17

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In operatic settings, the characters’ gender, age, and social status are strictly defined and signified by traditional operatic costumes. The gender line in this dress code is clear. Therefore, audience members rarely mistake the gender of the characters even before the actors begin to sing or speak. By contrast, when actors perform in concert, they are free to choose any style of clothing, mostly in a modern or hybrid style, from western evening gowns to tuxedos (Fig. 3.3) to modified Chinese qi pao (Mandarin gowns for women) (Fig. 3.5). Nonetheless, this freedom has become a conundrum for some female pinghou singers because their dress choices are often taken into account when listeners evaluate their cross-gender singing.

A second anecdote concerns commentary on a female wenwusheng’s concert appearance. The remarks of one of my interlocutors further complicate the relationship between modern gendered dress codes and the voice of cross-gender singing, from the perspective of both

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audience members and practitioners. An interlocutor once criticized the outfit of a popular female pinghou singer for being too dressy, feminine, flamboyant, and shiny in her concerts.\textsuperscript{19} By feminine outfits, this interlocutor meant, for example, sexy, puffy, or lacy evening gowns.

While most operatic concerts feature duets between pinghou and zihou, she added that if a female pinghou sings with a zihou partner, she should not dress herself up in as feminine a style as her partner. She should present herself in at least “unisex” (zhongxing), if not “male” (nanzhuang), attire. In other words, when two women sing in two differently gendered voices, their attires should match the gendered sonic relationship.

My third example is selected from a few YouTube videos and their accompanying commentary. These videos are live recordings of two concerts of Koi Ming-fai, one of the most active and renowned female wenwusheng since the early 1990s, with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in 2004 and 2005. Despite the success of these concerts, some YouTube viewers harshly criticized the actress’s concert appearance, targeting the dissonance that they perceived between visual and aural gendered presentations.\textsuperscript{20} Some were used to seeing this actress in her Cantonese opera costume; however, in this concert video she appears in an evening gown, prompting one viewer to write, “Why did Koi Ming-fai disguise [herself] as a woman?”\textsuperscript{21} The apparent discomfort experienced when this feminine-looking woman sang with a pinghou voice caused another viewer to write, “I prefer her to be in men[’]s costumes [sic].” In another comment, a viewer questions the authenticity of the actress’s vocal gender and even attempts to rate the voice by quantifying it as “65% male and 35% female.” Although these comments seem

\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=500234459996215&set=a.500224829997178.118509.100000289966581&type=3&theater (Facebook page of Wong Pik-kei 2012).
\textsuperscript{21} The original quote is “點解蓋鳴輝「暉」辦「扮」女人？” without using any gendered pronouns.
to be biased personal attacks, the underlying expectation that a deep voice should come from a masculine-looking body was also echoed by many of my interlocutors, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

At the beginning of this subsection, I posed the question of whether people can hear gender and how. After discussing the three examples above, I now suggest that perceiving a cross-gender singing performance involves not just listening for a gender, but also listening for a body. The processes of listening for a body and of authenticating a vocal gender are not limited to the sonic dimension, but are closely tied to cross-dressing, in which dress codes in cross-gender singing are also taken into serious account. While the dress codes of performers in concerts are not restricted, their choices of attire are still under scrutiny. Gender authenticity becomes more vulnerable, especially when dress codes are not consistent with the gendered voice. The first anecdote reveals that traditional operatic costumes are less problematic. Rather, full cross-dressing is preferable to those who, ironically, may prefer “straight singing.”

Traditional operatic costuming not only works as a signification system with relatively strict codes for indicating the gender of characters, but also provides a space that better accommodates cross-gender singing. While gender ambiguity is basically absent in this signification system, costuming serves as a desirable, powerful veil of the biological sex of the cross-gender performers and help them pass as the other gender in a performance. To a certain extent, this cross-dressing practice with operatic costumes also mitigates listeners’ anxiety caused by cross-gender singing.

The two examples above discussing female pinghou singers illustrate that “naturalness” is sometimes more closely related to gendered dress codes than the materiality of the voice. The denaturalized relationship between gender and the voice also demonstrates that listening is not an
objective process of perceiving sound, but an active and cultural act (Dunn and Jones 1997: 8) that also requires the “period ear” (André 2006: 9–12). Although popular music is beyond the scope of this project, the prominence of female deep voices in Cantopop in Hong Kong prior to the early 1990s also provides a useful perspective in understanding the controversy over female pinghou singers’ feminine modern attire in concert settings. Between the 1970s and early 1990s, most of pop song divas (such as Jenny Tseng, Paula Tsui, Anita Mui, and Sally Yeh) used lower, thick chest voices. Starting in the mid-1990s, the top female singers (such as Faye Wong, Joey Yung, and Kay Tse) have tended to sing in thinner, delicate head voices. While Cantopop in the 1970s and 1980s, among other mass entertainment forms, was largely influenced by Cantonese opera, the industry in the past two or three decades seems to have lost its operatic flavor in terms of musical idioms and vocal quality. Since around the mid-1990s, thin, high-pitch head voices have become more desirable for female singers and thus consistency of gender codes between the visual (females in feminine outfits) and the aural (females singing in higher voice) has become the norm. I suggest that this changing aesthetic in pop music and the normalized gender conformitivy in mainstream culture contributes to the discourse surrounding the naturalness of the female pinghou voice. In-depth research on the interrelationships between deep female voices in Cantonese opera and Cantopop music has yet to be conducted.

Love Duets between Two Women: Gender Authenticity and Homoeroticism

Having said that the materiality of the female pinghou voice alone does not definitively signify an absolute gender, the ambivalent sonic gender in cross-gender singing also leads to the

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22 Borrowing art historian Michael Baxandall’s concept of “period eye” and Clifford Geertz’s “emphasis on how art works within culture,” Naomi André urges for the need of the “period ear.” She writes, “making meaning out of the past involves not only our collection of data, [ . . . ] but also our interaction with our reconstruction of the broader cultural context the original audience experienced” (2006: 11).

23 For instance, some Cantopop songs borrowed short tunes from Cantonese opera, the Cantopop accompanying music used Chinese musical instruments, and the vocal projection of many singers was also similar to that of Cantonese opera singers.
controversy over homoeroticism in concert settings. A discussion in an online Cantonese opera forum illustrates the interplay between physical bodies, dress codes, gestures, vocal timbre, musical sound, and lyrics in love duets sung by two female singers, one pinghou and one zihou.24

Beifeng: Every time when I sit in the audience watching a performance of love songs sung by a female pinghou singer and a [female] zihou singer, I feel like I am watching [two] lesbians (nü tongxinglian zhe) acting intimately in public! How can two women openly exchange romantic words [in singing] with each other?

Cuncaoxin: You must not be a fan of Yam-Pak [Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin]!

Nuojiya: Don’t take it too seriously. Just close your eyes and listen [to the singing].

Daxiaojie: You are wrong. Have you ever seen Yam and Pak touching each other’s hands when singing in modern attire?

Cuncaoxin: . . .

Ha: You are right. There are so many lesbians (nü tongxinglian), old and ugly (you lao you lou),25 performing onstage! They are really ugly and strange (lou ren duo ba guai).26


“Female pinghou and zihou singing on stage” (nü ping yu zihou zai taishang duichang),
online forum comments (Ah Lap Net [Ali yuequ tiandi], 2013)

Although several issues are entangled in this short but vibrant discussion, I will focus here on authenticity in female pinghou singing and the possibility of a homoerotic reading in this kind of performance. Before I start my analysis, I want to add that some people in Hong Kong

24 Various authors, Ah Lap Net, 2013.
25 The original wording is “又老又陋.”
26 The original wording is “陋人多八怪.”
27 The original wording is “陰陽怪氣.”
had bias toward middle-aged amateur singers (predominantly married women). Based on the content of this discussion and my fieldwork observations, I think this discussion mainly targets performances of these amateurs rather than those by professional singers and actors.

Despite the fact that none of these respondents provide a detailed description of what a convincing pinghou sounds like, the presence of the singers’ gendered bodies is an important component in a singing concert even though no acting is expected. Nuojiya and Daxiaojie hold slightly different opinions on the authenticity of pinghou singing based on the biological sex of the singers. Nuojiya’s comment suggests that perception—and the resulting homophobic anxiety—is caused by the visual presentation of the pinghou singer (“just close your eyes and listen [to the singing]”). Even though Nuojiya implies that seeing a woman singing in pinghou may affect the enjoyment of the performance, s/he seems to advocate that the music (rather than the biological sex or gendered appearance of the singers) is the factor that audience members should pay most attention to—and to believe that a convincing or good pinghou singing is not limited to men only. In contrast, Daxiaojie emphasizes that all female pinghou singers and actresses fail to perfect their skills of pinghou singing, which makes them sound neither like a “man” nor a “woman” (“gender ambivalent [yinyang guaiqi],” “neither-man-nor-woman [bunan bunii]”). Even though s/he acknowledges the success of two female wenwusheng superstars, her/his commentary still implies that the pinghou singing is basically a biologically determined attribute of men.

It is also noteworthy that this online discussion thread starts with Beifeng’s uneasy feeling of watching two women singing about romantic love in public. Cunxincao immediately relates this kind of performance to a rumored same-sex couple (the female wenwusheng Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, Yam’s long-time female huadan partner and rumored lover—who I
will discuss in detail in Chapter 6). Then Ha agrees with Beifeng by elaborating that the Cantonese operatic song circle is full of “old and ugly lesbian” (you lao you lou nü tongxinglian) (amateur) singers. Although this statement may be exaggerated and is hard to verify, it affirms the existence of a homoerotic overtone. However, the underlying derogatory, if not homophobic, tone towards women singing love duets on stage is prevalent. Although Cunxincao’s comment suggests that people who like Yam and Pak should also accept or tolerate the homoerotic overtone of women’s love duets, the urge to asexualize and un-queer this kind of performance is noticeable (“not a homosexual [tongxinglian],” “I never touch other’s [female singer’s] hand”). Homoeroticism is both acknowledged and denied throughout the discussion.

This discussion also reflects a diversity of opinions regarding the relative weight of the different components of a cross-gender singing. While some people listen to the gendered sound, many expect a consistency between vocal timbre and visual presentation. The physical bodies of the singers are inevitably present and inscribed in the performance, to various extents. Without the theatrical frame—composed of, for instance, elaborate operatic costuming and gesturing—female pinghou singers seem to perform under stricter scrutiny in terms of gendered voice, modern dress code, and their proximity to and interactions with other female singers.

**Undoing Gender in Acting and Singing**

*Double Cross-dressing: Female Wenwusheng Cross-dressing as Huadan*

When discussing gendered voices, it is also noteworthy that some Cantonese opera plays require the wenwusheng actors to switch their voices to zihou for short sections for special dramatic effect. Very often zihou singing enables a wenwusheng’s fanchuan (“crossing

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28 The most frequently performed such plays include *The Charming Pan An* (qiao pan an 俏潘安), *Uproar at the Palace* (qingxia nao xuangong 情俠鬧璇宮), and *A Comedy at the Flower Field* (huatian baxi 花田八喜).

29 Here I use *fanchuan* both as a verb and a noun.
role-types,” see Chapter 2) performance as a huadan, with or without changing to a huadan costume. Most of these scenes and plays are comedic, in which the inadequacy of singing zihou and performing huadan is expected and thus forgiven. In a live performance, when the wenwusheng actor starts singing the first phrase in zihou, audience members usually respond with zealous applause as encouragement regardless of the vocal quality.30

Generally speaking, cross-dressing performers carefully design and pay close attention to every detail, including their outfits, makeup, vocal projection, speech, songs, gestures, body movements, and facial expressions. Some cross-dressing performances, especially comical ones, confront audience members’ assumptions of the coherence between biological sex and gender by exaggerating certain gender codes. These performers undo a gender by exaggeratedly displaying the process of performing a gender—for instance, staging how people struggle to imitate and maintain a certain set of gender codes and presentations. The seemingly natural, innate gender attributes are now presented as artificial and scripted (Butler 1990; Garber 1992).

A wenwusheng’s fanchuan performance as a huadan carries a similar effect. It also brings out the issue that, for both male and female actors, the ability of giving an impeccable performance of the huadan role-type and femininity is a skill acquired through intensive training. The seriousness and quality of the huadan performance are usually not major concerns. Improvised lines, jokes, and odd gestures are not only accepted but also expected in this kind of performance. Very often the wenwusheng (along with other actors) move strategically between “front stage” and “backstage” by repeatedly reminding audience members that what s/he is doing is a fanchuan role, which is an absurd joke and thus should not be taken seriously.

30 Given that pinghou is considered to be a natural voice, when dan actors fanchuan as sheng and sing pinghou, they usually do not get as much applause as wenwusheng do.
Taking a live performance of the female *wenwusheng* Lau Wai-ming\(^{31}\) in 2014 as an example,\(^{32}\) mistakes and inadequacies were covered by her improvised jokes, awkward gestures, and laughter. Lau played the character of a swordsman who falls in love with a princess (played by the principal *huadan*). In the play, in order to save the princess from an unwanted arranged marriage, the swordsman sneaks into the palace disguised as a female servant to meet with the princess. Lau needed to dress, act, and sing as a *huadan* in one scene. Please note that Lau’s performance is also a double cross-dressing: an actress cross-dresses as a *wenwusheng* to play a male character, who later disguises himself as a woman.

In this double cross-dressing scene, after a lively and fast instrumental prelude\(^{33}\) that accompanied Lau as she entered the stage, she told the audience members that she was unable to sing in *zihou*. When the prelude ended and the music moved on to a new section, she cleared her throat.\(^{34}\) While the audience members were eager to hear her *zihou*, she did not sing the first words but laughed. The accompanying musicians repeated the short opening phrase to encourage her to try again. This time she sang with the music and finished the song. However, throughout this short song, many of the words were either missed or not clearly enunciated. During this scene, her speaking was also carefully slow with poor delivery, mispronunciation, and low volume. When she did not have a line, she sometimes exaggerated the *huadan* gestures by overly twisting her waist and hips. Yet this *fanchuan* performance was well received with lots of applause and “encore” calls during and after this scene. Regardless of the mistakes and quality of

\(^{31}\) Lau is one of the practitioners who believes that once a female singer starts her training in *pinghou*, she will lose her ability to sing *zihou*. During the interview, she added that at the earlier stage of training, she could still sing in both *pinghou* and *zihou*. But after some time she had lost her *zihou* voice (Lau, interview, 2013).

\(^{32}\) It was the play *Uproar at the Palace*, performed at the Koshan Theatre on January 2, 2014. This play is a signature piece of Lam Ka-sing (1933–2015), a famous male *wenwusheng* who was active between the 1960s and early 1990s.

\(^{33}\) This prelude is a short tune entitled *xiaoluoxiangsi* (literally, “small gong and lovers missing each other”). It is usually used for comical contexts to accompany an actor’s onstage entrance or (often silent) miming movements.

\(^{34}\) Actors usually do not clear their throats onstage unless necessary due to sickness.
the performance, a *wenwusheng*’s attempt to sing *zihou* and perform the *huadan* role-type is very often encouraged.

Lau’s double cross-dressing also exemplifies gender performativity in Cantonese opera. In another *fanchuan* performance by her that I attended in March 2013, there was a section in which another *huadan* (played by an actress) taught her how to act like a woman onstage. The instructions dealt with subtleties such as the direction and angle of different body parts, including the limbs, fingers, neck, head, and eyes (see Fig. 3.6). The contrast between the *huadan* actress’s graceful demonstration and Lau’s clumsy imitation highlights the artificiality of gender in Cantonese opera (here the *huadan*). By staging how a *fanchuan* actress learns to act as a *huadan*, this scene also challenges the assumption that females have an advantage in picking up the *huadan* role-type. In sum, it denaturalizes the relationship between actors’ biological sex, their gender roles, and the role-types they practice.

![Fig. 3.6 A series of photos of how female *wenwusheng* Lau Wai-ming (left) *fanchuan* as a *huadan* and imitates her *huadan* partner Chan Wing-yee (right) in a scene of *A Comedy at the Flower Field* (*huatian baxi*). Photo taken by the author in Ho Sheung Heung, Hong Kong (March 2013).](image)

**Serious Fanchuan**

While a *wenwusheng*’s *fanchuan* performances as a *huadan* are usually for comic purposes, Koi Ming-fai, one of the most acclaimed *wenwusheng* actresses in the past two

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35 This is a show performed at an outdoor bamboo theater as part of the Hung Shing Festival in Ho Sheung Heung (see Fig. 1.1). Lau’s fans were excited and some even tried to violate the rules to take pictures of Lau dressing in a *huadan*’s outfit.
decades, has been relatively serious about singing zihou and playing the huadan role-type in live performances. My purpose in discussing her huadan and zihou performances is not to make any artistic or technical judgments, which are relatively common in the press and among practitioners and audience members. Rather, I examine how gender is performed, bent, and blended musically by analyzing an experimental audio recording of hers.

Crossing role-types (fanchuan) is not rare in today’s Hong Kong. As discussed in Chapter 2, many role-types under the same gender category are loosely defined. While some actors fanchuan for more performance opportunities and income, some veteran actors do so as a gimmick to demonstrate their versatility and talent. It is important to note that when sheng actors fanchuan, it is relatively rare to see them playing the young huadan roles and singing in zihou. Even in the case of Yuen Siu-fai, who has tried almost all role-types, I was not able to find any accounts of him playing the young huadan roles or singing in zihou. Yuen often demonstrates his versatility by switching between different sheng and laodan role-types, which both require pinghou voices. In contrast, when Koi attempted to demonstrate her multiple talents, she chose to expand her horizons to a different gendered voice, which is generally considered to require more challenging vocal training for pinghou singers.

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36 Koi played the huadan role-type with both comedic and serious characters in a series of performances for the twentieth anniversary of her troupe in 2010 (Zhuo 2010: 18–19). As Cantonese opera and opera songs highlight love stories and duets of young sheng as well as dan and marginalize other supporting role-types, a straightforward explanation of Koi’s huadan and zihou performances is that, she, as a superstar of Cantonese opera, may want to remain in the spotlight even when she crosses role-types. Another simple explanation is that Koi herself, like a few other female wenwusheng, had dreamt of becoming a beautiful huadan when she started her Cantonese opera lessons. In fact, many actresses are attracted to Cantonese opera due to the spectacular and elaborate outfits, and the graceful and elegant presentations of huadan. The principal huadan usually shares the spotlight with the wenwusheng and thus is supposed to be the most beautiful and the best dan actor of a show. I suggest that, when doing a fanchuan performance, Koi’s serious rendition of huadan can also be considered as taking these opportunities to fulfill her huadan dream.
Undoing Vocal Gender: Gender B(l)ending in the Sonic Dimension

Koi tends to take her zihou singing and huanan performances seriously. In 1998, she released the CD entitled Butterfly Lovers: Farewell that features multiple gendered voices all sung by her—pinghou as male characters, zihou as female characters, and pinghou sung by female cross-dressing characters. Among dozens of CDs that she has released, this one caught my attention because all the vocal parts were sung only by Koi herself. Engineered and mixed in the studio, this CD includes three duets: the first features pinghou and zihou voices; both the second and third duets have two pinghou vocal parts and a few phrases of zihou singing. In the second and third duets, the two pinghou parts are designed for a male character (I call this “straight pinghou” for convenience) and a female character in the disguise of a man in the plot (hereafter “cross-dressed pinghou”).

While Koi’s zihou and pinghou voices are easy to distinguish in the first duet, the two pinghou parts in the second and third duets are not too distinctive from each other. However, when listening to the recordings more carefully, I can distinguish Koi singing the “straight pinghou” part in her usual way in terms of vocal quality, enunciation, and volume. In Cantonese opera singing, the pinghou tends to sing melismas while prolonging the open vowels, such as “a” and “ɔ” (see Figs. 3.7 and 3.8), while zihou on the closed vowel “i” (Fig. 3.9). When Koi sings the “straight pinghou” part, she adopts the standard way of articulating a pinghou voice by using a more open mouth and louder voice, and emphasizing the open vowels such as “a” and “ɔ” by

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37 I have seen female teachers of Cantonese operatic songs do pinghou-and-zihou singing performance more often than full-time actors.
38 The Record title in Chinese is “梁祝：十八相送” (Fung Hang FHCD 9803).
39 I use IPA symbols.
40 The shape of the mouth is more open and round.
41 The shape of the mouth is more closed and flat.
rounding the lips and lowering the jaw when singing the melismas. When she sings the “cross-dressed pinghou” part, she tends to make her voice softer, more nasal and subtle, with a tendency to articulate the closed vowel “i” by spreading the lips when singing melismas. In addition, she also emphasizes the dental sound of consonants, such as “ʃ” and “s,” which is a characteristic of zihou singing.

Although this recording has not yet attracted much attention from Cantonese opera fans, practitioners, or scholars and the intentions of releasing this recording are not clear, this is still a bold attempt to manipulate a voice, with the help of studio technology, in experimenting with both bending and blending vocal gender. During the deep listening process in an attempt to distinguish Koi’s “straight” and “cross-dressed” pinghou voices, I was paying close attention to catch the subtle differences of timbre and enunciation. This deep listening experience was also a process of decoding the nuances of gender signifiers in Cantonese opera singing. Some of the characteristics of the “cross-dressed” pinghou voice reminded me of the female pinghou voices of some beginners and the mistakes I made during my learning process. The differences between Koi’s “straight” and “cross-dressed” pinghou voices, to a certain extent, manifest how women overcome biological limitations in the course of maturing their pinghou vocal projection skills. Hence, it is also a process of undoing the vocal gender of the pinghou. Similar to the double cross-dressing in acting discussed in the previous section, this recording demonstrates how gender is performed in the sonic dimension regardless of its reception.

42 For instance, listen from 18’03” to 19’03” of Track 3 “Farewell” on Butterfly Lovers: Farewell (Fung Hang FHCD 9803)
43 For instance, listen from 11’34” to 12’20” of Track 3 “Farewell” on Butterfly Lovers: Farewell (Fung Hang FHCD 9803)
Fig. 3.7 A wenwusheng actress sings melisma with prolonging the open vowel “a.” Photo taken by the author in Ma Wan, Hong Kong (April 29, 2013).

Fig. 3.8 A sheng actor sings melisma with prolonging the open vowel “n.” Photo taken by the author in Yung Shu Wan, Hong Kong (May 5, 2013).

Fig. 3.9 A huadan sings melisma with prolonging the open vowel “i.” Photo taken by the author in Yung Shu Wan, Hong Kong (May 5, 2013).

(Re)gendering Female Wenwusheng and Cantonese Opera

Commodities and the Gendering of Wenwusheng

The way that Koi genders her wenwusheng performance is not limited to her involvements in operatic and concert settings. It is important to note that Koi is also the most prolific Cantonese opera actor in producing karaoke discs (VCD\textsuperscript{44} and later DVD)\textsuperscript{45} and that her rise to stardom coincided with the emergence of karaoke culture in Hong Kong in the early and mid 1990s. This concluding section discusses the significances and effects of these commodities as well as Koi’s career on the local Cantonese opera scene.

Usually sold in record stores and the lobbies of her performing venues, Koi’s karaoke discs are rather popular among both Cantonese opera fans and amateur singers and actors.\textsuperscript{46} These karaoke discs contain videos that imitate stage performances, feature famous scenes—mostly duets—performed by Koi and her huadan partner with minimal supporting actors.

Viewers may choose to sing to the accompanying music with muted voice, or watch the video as

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\textsuperscript{44} VCD is an abbreviation of video CD, which is a common form of video recording in Asia since the early 1990s. Although its quality is not as good as DVD, it is more affordable and thus still remains popular in Hong Kong nowadays.

\textsuperscript{45} Music from the videos is also extracted to produce audio CDs, which are produced along with the karaoke discs.

\textsuperscript{46} For instance, when amateur singers and actors hold parties, they take turn singing to these karaoke discs and play them as background music.
if it is a live recording of stage performances.

**Changing Performance Practice**

As practicing singing with a live ensemble is not cheap, these karaoke discs have a prospective market among amateur singers and actors, for whom they serve as a more affordable learning tool. However, the use of this prerecorded accompanying music is not ideal for practitioners because, in traditional practice, melodic and rhythmic nuances are relatively flexible and are determined by the singers; and accompanists of a live ensemble need to follow them on the spot (Chan 1991; Yung 1989). If singers use karaoke discs to practice, they need to follow the musical details on the discs in order to match their prerecorded accompanying music. In this way, singers’ individual creative skills are not developed.

**Changing Aesthetics**

As a popular commodity for amateurs, Koi’s karaoke discs focus mostly on *wen* over *wu* scenes. *Wen* scenes contain substantial singing portions, accompanied by mostly string instruments with minimal percussion. In contrast, *wu* scenes feature physical movements that are accompanied by heavy percussion and require a larger group of *wu* actors. Sonically speaking, the *wu* scenes are too loud to be consumed indoors. Hence, *wen* excerpts are not only more marketable, but also more economical in terms of production expenses.

Moreover, musical differences between karaoke discs and live performances are mainly manifested in the accompanying music. Percussion-only sections are largely shortened or even eliminated on the discs. As these discs are designed for karaoke purposes, the melodic instruments, especially the leading string instrument *gaohu* (high-pitch fiddle), the leading string instrument of Cantonese opera, often dominate. Even for the free-tempo quasi-singing-quasi-

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47 In Hong Kong, the average cost of singing a 30-minute song with a live ensemble at Cantonese operatic clubs is HK$300–400 (approximately US$40–50). In order to save money, some amateur singers and actors prefer traveling to Shenzhen, mainland China for practice.
speaking *gunhua* phrases, which are originally sung with no accompaniment, the discs still provide accompanying music to help singers sing in tune.

It is important to note that the variety of commercial karaoke discs is very limited due to high production expenses. Both the video and audio recording industries of Cantonese opera music over the past two decades have been basically monopolized by Koi. Despite the fact that personal styles are still highly valued, the monopolized market may make her recordings essentially the authoritative or standard renditions to some audience members (and even practitioners). These products also (further) canonize both the essential repertoire and musical styles. Just as the emerging recording industry in the early twentieth century shaped the styles of contemporary Cantonese opera music (Lai 2010: 285–88; Yung 2006a), this kind of commodity has played a role in the past two decades not only in gendering Koi’s onstage persona and boosting her stardom, but also in sculpting the aesthetics of Cantonese opera.

**Being a Wenwusheng or a Female Wenwusheng?**

Cantonese opera scholar Lum Man-yee (2013) suggests, with the support of archival sources, that “female *wenwusheng*” (*nü wenwusheng*) should be categorized separately as a sub role-type (*ci hangdang*). More specifically, she illustrates how Yam Kim-fai was often evaluated as a *female wenwusheng* instead of simply a *wenwusheng* in the 1950s and 1960s. Even though I find Lum’s argument problematic because she does not clearly distinguish role-type and sub role-type, the materials she presents still exemplify well how a different aesthetic has possibly been developed to evaluate female *wenwusheng* performances, and this has provided me a conceptual framework with which to analyze Koi’s and other female *wenwusheng*’s professional pursuits.

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48 In fact, there are not many Cantonese opera karaoke discs on the market because the production expenses are relatively high and not many people are interested in investing money even for superstars.
Given that Koi is renowned for her singing skill and that her recordings focus mostly on *wen* over acrobatic *wu* performances, it is hard to determine whether her performance style has accommodated to her recordings and the market or if the success of this commodity has shaped (or further consolidated) her style into its *wen* focus. Except in the first decade of her Cantonese opera career, Koi rarely performs plays that require substantial *wu* elements.

In her seminal book *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber (1992) suggests studying the cross-dresser as a separate entity rather than to appropriate it as a variation or imitation of preexisting gendered categories. It is more fruitful to investigate the interplay between cross-dressing and the existing norms (within the imposed gendered dualisms), and how the former, as an enabling space for new possibilities, resignifies the cultural realities (9–13).

Elaborating on Lum’s and Garber’s theses, when looking at Koi’s career, the impression of her weak *wu* skills (like those of other female *wenwusheng*), her serious *huadan* and *zihou* pursuits, and the popularity of her recordings as a matter of fact go hand-in-hand in paving her path to a feminine *wenwusheng*. Instead of advertising herself as an all-around *wenwusheng* who excels in both *wen* and *wu* skills, she has showcased her versatility in a different way, by leaning toward a “feminine” side or embodying femininity—occasionally playing the *huadan* role-type and singing in the *zihou* voice. All these efforts can be interpreted not only as a means of positioning herself as a *female wenwusheng*, but also as contributing to the process of gendering *wenwusheng* performances at large.
Chapter 4

Unconditional Loyalty:
The Rise of Female Spectatorship

Introduction

Cantonese opera performances in Hong Kong have been regarded as entertainment for predominantly middle-aged and older married women. Yet not only has this gendered cultural phenomenon not been thoroughly studied, but female patrons or fans have not been taken seriously by practitioners. Despite their tremendous support of the genre, practitioners usually view female fans as a crowd of ignorant and excessive consumers. This chapter investigates the dynamics between practitioners and female fans in light of the following questions: What makes practitioners disdain female fans? What do the fans see in a performance if their perspectives are different from those of practitioners? What makes fans pursue an idol? How are fans and fandom made?

After laying out some historical background concerning female spectatorship of Cantonese opera, based on my ethnographic data I define and locate female fans of female wenwusheng in the theater. Following this, I investigate fandoms that were performed inside and outside the theater.

The Emergence of Female Spectators and Performers

The traditional Confucian ideology and late Qing law restricted women from public theater both as audience members and performers. Prior to the early 1900s, audiences of public Chinese opera performances were mainly male, because respectful women were discouraged and even prohibited from participating in activities that took place in public domains (Lai 2010: 274–
Both female audiences and female performers were new cultural phenomena as a result of women’s increasing mobility due to various factors, such as the declining power and authority of the Qing court (which banned females’ participation as performers and audiences), and a series of cultural and political reforms that challenged traditional values and encouraged women to partake in public domains. Female performers did exist in Chinese opera in dynastic China.1 Yet the association of these women with private lives and a second job as courtesans concerned the Qing court (1644–1911). In 1723, the Yongzheng emperor replaced female court performers with eunuchs and even banned women’s participation in commercial theaters outside the court. The reemergence of female performers on the public stage and the rise of female audiences in cities—such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Hong Kong—which had extensive contact with foreign powers in the early twentieth century were evidence of colonial modernity (Goldstein 2007: 20–21; Yeh 2003: 25).

**Women in Modern China**

In order to better contextualize the emergence of female fans and actresses in public theater, in this section I will lay out some historical background on the women’s movement in the early 1900s. It is important to note that the women’s movement in this period was never a separate socio-economic-political movement to fight for gender equality, but an essential agenda of social reform and modern nation building. Although the Chinese women’s movement was to a certain extent influenced by Western feminisms, it was first stimulated by and aimed to serve Chinese nationalism. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, along with modern technology, science, and democracy, feminisms were also introduced to China. In the eyes of Chinese reformers, writers, and intellectuals—predominantly males, also coined as “New
Culturalists”—all of these elements with Western origins were considered as indispensable factors of the military and political success of foreign powers such as Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Influenced by Social Darwinism in the West, Chinese New Culturalists intended to rebuild a strong modern nation by replacing Confucian practices with Western models. Many traditional customs, values, morals, and social orders of Chinese society were questioned and abolished.

Unlike the Euro-American first-wave feminisms, the early women’s movement in China was initiated and actively participated in by men. The early Chinese feminist discourses were basically a male construct. The traditional feudal society largely governed by Confucian ideology was always blamed for the thousands-of-years oppression of women. The weak nation of China was deemed to be a result of this half dysfunctional Chinese population. Emancipating women was an attempt to awaken half of the population in order to strengthen the nation against foreign powers. These discourses not only advocated for women’s autonomy in monogamous (heterosexual) marriages, but also encouraged them to leave their private, domestic spaces and enter the public domain (Chin 2012; Wang 1999).

Women’s entry into the workforce was one of the most significant changes of the women’s movement during the Chinese Enlightenment period. Wage labor not only helped women become economically independent, but also granted them mobility and autonomy. Even

1 The category of “New Culturalist” refers to people who were involved in creating and promoting new literature and new thoughts regarding nationalism, modernity, democracy, and social order between the late 1890s and the mid 1930s.
2 Exemplified by footbinding, this oppression entailed no rights to property ownership or inheritance, no access to education, arranged marriage, no right to divorce, chastity of widows, and tolerance of concubinage.
3 It is hard to pin down the time frame of the “Chinese Enlightenment” or “New Culture movement.” Many scholars consider that it began in the late Qing dynasty when Western ideologies were introduced into political and intellectual discourses. Yet the May Fourth Movement in 1919 is a historically and symbolically important event in the New Culture movement. A political, cultural, nationalist student-organized movement in Beijing after the Versailles Conference, the May Fourth Movement grew from new ideas about the reform of China that had been circulated nationwide since the beginning of the 1900s. Criticisms of traditional culture as well as values and proposed solutions still continued until the mid 1930s. Here I take a broader time frame, from 1900 to the beginning of Sino-Japanese War in 1937, when referring to the Chinese Enlightenment period (Schwarcz 1986; Wang 1999).
though women from humble origins did not obtain as much attention as these “New Women” 
(*xin nüxing*)—a group of privileged women who had better access to education in 
metropolises—*in the intellectual world, female performers and spectators benefited from the 
early Chinese feminist discourses and became more visible in society.

**New Consumers, New Aesthetics**

A popular, good actor is one who can appeal to women.

Qi Rushan 1964: 87, quoted in Jiang 2009: 33

Prior to the 26th year of Guangxu’s reign [A.D. 1900], when women were prohibited in 
the theater, the performances [of festival plays] were not taken seriously. The 
performances became a spectacular event since women were allowed to go to the theater 
[ . . . ] Since then, some veteran stars in Beijing have said that a good actor needs to gain 
support from women. To gain their support is to gain popularity. If an actor can only 
attract men, s/he has support from officers (*guanke*) only. His/her popularity is way lower 
[ . . . ].

Qi Rushan 1964: 87

By the early 1900s, the phenomenon of female spectators had gained special attention 
from actors, playwrights, and scholars of Chinese opera across genres and time. This section 
begins with two epigraphs from the writings of Qi Rushan (1877–1962), “probably the most 
influential, encyclopedic, and prolific expert” on Peking opera in the twentieth century
(Goldstein 2007: 2). Belonging to the literati in the late dynastic and early Republican China, Qi 
was a playwright and active critic who studied both Chinese opera and Western drama. One of 
his major contributions was reforming and modernizing Peking opera with Mei Lanfang (1894– 
1961), an iconic figure of the Peking opera male *dan* who was known for his artistry and reform 
of the *qingyi* (virtuous married woman role-type). While Peking opera has a long tradition of 
patronage by the literati and male higher-ranking officials in the late Qing and early Republican

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4 They usually received education at home taught by private teachers or in private (girls’) schools that were founded 
and run by either Western missionaries or local educators.
era (Kang 2009; Yeh 2003), both Qi and Mei were aware of the importance of the newly emerging female audiences in the new society.

In her monograph on Shaoxing yueju opera, Jin Jiang (2009) features the history of female sheng performances, female troupes, and female fandom. She provides an explanation of the gender imbalance in the Shaoxing yueju opera audiences by quoting Qi:

Take a couple: if the husband wants to see a show but his wife is not interested, the wife will prevent the husband from going. If, however, the wife wants to go but her husband does not, the wife will make her husband go with her. In a family situation, a husband could go to the theater by himself without bringing the children along. But if the wife wants to go, then she would most likely bring her children with her. Among circles of friends, men often go to the theater by themselves or with one other friend, but they rarely treat their friends to opera shows. Women, on the other hand, like to gather in groups and go together. Thus, if an actor can make one woman come, she will bring many more with her to the theater. If an actor can make one man interested, the man may not come at all if his wife is not interested. As the saying goes: “A popular, good actor is one who can appeal to women” (Qi Rushan 1964: 87, quoted in Jiang 2009: 33).

Mei Lanfang had a more critical comment on female audiences:

Female audience members were new to the theater and thus naturally lacked expertise. Since they came only to view the lively atmosphere (kan re’nao), they would certainly pick out the pretty ones first (Mei Lanfang 1954: 128, quoted in Jiang 2009: 34).

Despite the sexist attitudes of Qi and Mei, these statements reveal the concerns of the leading practitioners on the emergence of female audiences. On one hand, they acknowledged the potential power of female theatergoers. It was clear to them that, in order for actors to gain popularity, they needed to attract or even cater to the nascent female audiences. On the other hand, they were doubtful of women’s major intentions for going to the theater and their ability to appreciate Peking opera.

Although these two comments were written decades ago on the topic of Peking opera, doubts about female audiences’ artistic tastes and their ability to appreciate performances remain prevalent among practitioners and critics in today’s Cantonese opera scene, which I will
elaborate on later in this chapter. As the growth of female audiences coincided with the introduction of modern technology and new consumption of the opera, in the next section I will discuss how new technology—such as audio recording and radio broadcasts—enriched the experience of consuming Cantonese opera and cultivated female audiences.

Audio Recording: New Media, Consuming Habits, and Aesthetics

New media from modern technology such as audio recording, video recording, and radio broadcasts have changed the ways, habits, and nature of consuming Chinese opera since the beginning of the twentieth century. Extensively discussed by scholars such as Andrew Jones (2001) and Sai-shing Yung (2006a; 2012), the early recording industry of Cantonese operatic music is beyond the scope of my project. My purpose in discussing early recordings of the genre is to contextualize how new technology resulted in new ways of consumption and new spectators.

After the invention of American Thomas Edison’s phonograph in 1877, German-American Emil Berliner’s gramophone in 1894 made the mass production of audio recordings possible. During the turn of the twentieth century, several (multinational) record companies were founded and very soon expanded their interests from musics from Asia to the prominent potential markets in Asia. A British colonial port, Hong Kong was one of the targets of these record companies. The first recordings were made in 1903 by Fred Gaisberg, a young American recording engineer and assistant to Berliner, who led the team of the British Gramophone Company to record local musics in several cities in the “Far East.” On the other side of the Pacific, Cantonese operatic songs were also recorded in and sold to the local Chinese community

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5 Such as Pathé Frères (est. 1897) in France, Gramophone Company (est. 1898) in U.K., and Deutsche Grammophon Company (est. 1898) (Yung 2006a: 42).
6 The 1903 Chinese record collection includes “Cantonese Records” and “Mandarin Records.” The former category reports that 142 pieces of music recorded in Hong Kong consisting of subcategories of “male voices,” “female voices,” “duets, trios,” and “instrumental records.” Most of the pieces are songs sung by Cantonese opera performers (Yung 2006a: 46–47).
in San Francisco by Edison Records (Yung 2006a: 50–55, 74–75). The gramophone very soon became a commodity in Chinese-populated metropolises such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore.

**Where to Consume Opera?**

Jones discusses Chinese gramophone culture within the space-time paradigm of modernity. He astutely points out that new listening habits, new musical tastes, as well as new and more heterogenous audiences were products of the popularization of gramophones (2001: 54–59). Here, taking Cantonese opera music as an example, the traditional way of listening to or consuming the music was derailed from its original contexts of public, live performances in theaters, teahouses, and brothels. However, the gramophone “turned the performance of music into a material object” (Chanan 1995, quoted in Jones 2001: 55) for private, individualized consumption. Consuming Cantonese opera music was no longer necessarily a public activity, but could be carried out in private domains. In terms of the time and space of consuming Cantonese opera music, consumers were now taking a more active role. They no longer needed to passively wait for a live performance. They were now able to stay home listening to the songs or singers they liked whenever and however many times they wanted. The emergence of the gramophone and, later, the radio in households and workplaces cultivated female opera lovers in the following decades.

**What to Consume?**

Gramophones had a relatively significant impact on changing the habits of consuming Cantonese opera. A stage performance usually lasted for at least three and a half hours, in which some scenes were relatively uninteresting, especially those of junior actors playing minor roles.
because many of them started performing even before they were presentable.\textsuperscript{7} Therefore, it was a convention that audience members arrived late, left their seats, and wandered around the theater. They stayed still in their seats only when the leading actors performed and they did not much care about the performances of these junior actors. As the early commercial gramophones did not record the entire play, but selected only the most renowned excerpts, consumers could now listen to actors’ signature songs or later coined “theme songs” at home instead of spending the entire evening in the theater for just a few songs.

While visual enjoyment—of costumes, actors’ bodies, actors’ movements and acrobatic performances—is as important as the aural elements in stage performance, gramophones provide only one dimension—musical sound—for Cantonese opera lovers to consume. Singing and melodic instruments became more important than speaking, display of physicality (\textit{zuogong} and \textit{wu}), acting, and percussive instrumental music. In his study of early gramophones, Yung writes that, among the earliest recordings by Gaisberg in 1903 and The Victor Talking Machine Company in 1913, songs sung by \textit{xiaosheng} and \textit{huadan}—two singing-focused role-types—outnumber those of other role-types, including \textit{wusheng} and \textit{xiaowu}. This preference was contrary to the conventions in stage performance during that era in which \textit{wusheng} and \textit{xiaowu} were the leading male role-types and often functioned as a brand name of a troupe in stage performances (2006a: 24, 82–85). While percussion-only sections are usually used to accompany special displays of body movements\textsuperscript{8} that can only be seen on stage, melody-focused segments are more adaptable to the new one-dimensional media of the gramophone and radio broadcast.

\textsuperscript{7} Very often their names were not listed on the advertisements, their participation in live performances was more of an opportunity to gain both humble income and performing experience than entertaining the audiences or making a name for themselves.

\textsuperscript{8} Such as acrobatics and non-verbal patterned performance segments that highlight actors’ control of body movements.
As a result, the rise of gramophones not only led to increasing attention to individual songs and singers, but also to the standardization of some song excerpts—in both lyrics and melodic ornaments. Inevitably, the version recorded on gramophones more easily became an authoritative rendition for others to study. And yet, this outcome does not lead to a simple conclusion that gramophones eliminated the diversity of styles and individual creativity of the singers. To a certain extent, gramophones helped popularize and establish individual styles or schools (liupai or pai) because both listeners and learners could now imitate a style and master the subtleties more easily by listening to the recordings over and over again.

Other New Media

Along with the popularization of gramophones and later, radios, the rise of the print industry in several Cantonese-populated cities in the early twentieth century also played a significant role in seeding and nurturing both Cantonese opera lovers and actors. Lyrics—sometimes with melodies—were printed in daily newspapers, entertainment tabloids, program notes (xiqiao), and compilations of songs and instrumental music which targeted both Cantonese opera lovers and amateur learners.⁹

Beyond a commodity, these new media have also played an important role in preserving and documenting Cantonese opera music. Due to actors’ lack of education and insecure fear of being surpassed by others, lyrics and music were passed down orally with no or minimal notation. Masters considered their signature songs and plays to be a private treasure that they were reluctant to share with others, including their disciples (M. Lau, interview, 2013; Leung, interview, 2013; Yam 2012: 32–37, 42–45). Even though the master was generous and willing to

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⁹ Published in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, a significant portion of the collections of vocal and instrumental music was written, edited, and arranged by some influential musicians and playwrights of the time such as Qiu Hechou (1880–1942), Pan Xianda (?–?), and Chen Zhuoying (1908–1980). Many of these publications have very clear pedagogical purposes. For details, see Chan, et al., eds. (2015).
teach a junior actor a song, s/he did not always provide a written form of his/her performance version. The learning process relied more on the junior actor's observations and note-taking. Although most of the commercially available printed versions of Cantonese opera music were not directly transcribed from the masters’ performances or recordings, the print industry went hand in hand with the gramophone and radio in providing a cheaper and more convenient way of consuming, popularizing, and transmitting Cantonese opera music.  

**Radio Broadcasts**

Although gramophones were not affordable to every household in the early twentieth century, records were broadcasted on radio. Radio has been a dominant form of mass media in Hong Kong since the early twentieth century. Since the establishment of Radio Hong Kong (RHK) (later named Radio Television Hong Kong [RTHK]), the first official, government-funded radio station, in June 1928, radio became a new, inexpensive way of consuming Cantonese opera music. Cantonese opera music was a major musical genre broadcast by RHK and the later-founded Redifusion (1949–1973). The broadcasted Cantonese opera music included live stage performances in indoor theaters, gramophone discs that were borrowed from record companies, and live performances by local instrumentalists and singers who were invited to the station to perform (Lee 1989: 153). Despite the changes in broadcast hours, program schedules, and content, and the expansion of channels throughout the following decades, Cantonese opera music has remained a major component of daily broadcasts—even today in at

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10 When discussing radio broadcasts in mid-twentieth century Hong Kong, Wan Chin writes that some commoners with basic literacy often sat in a Chinese herbal tea store, where the radio was on all day long, and read the printed lyrics of Cantonese opera songs. Listening to radio with lyrics in hand was not only a way to learn Cantonese opera music, but also functioned as a means to learn how to read (Chin 2008: 32–33).

11 Radio Hong Kong was the only radio station for two decades until the establishment of Redifusion, a commercial radio station, in 1949.
least one channel.\textsuperscript{12} Radio has accompanied many people both at work and at home since the mid-twentieth century.

**Working Daughters: Female Spectators in Cantonese Opera**

Before TV became affordable to most of the households in Hong Kong in the mid 1970s, free radio broadcasts played a crucial role in disseminating information in the twentieth century when literacy, especially among women, was still low, and free, compulsory basic education was not yet enforced by the government. Female fandom in Cantonese opera was nurtured by both the new consuming power of the emerging “working daughters,”\textsuperscript{13} and the rise of the record industry as well as radio.

Cantonese opera in Hong Kong nowadays is regarded as a world full of middle-aged and older married female patrons. A former director of Radio 5, RTHK, Ip Sai-hung acknowledged the consuming power of these “working daughters” as a significant force in female fandom. Ip pointed out two significant groups of Cantonese opera fans: majie (female domestic helpers who practiced sworn spinsterhood) in the 1950s and 1960s; and female factory workers from the 1960s to the 1980s, when Hong Kong was developing its light industries such as textile and electronics manufacturing (before most of the factories were relocated to Guangdong for cheaper labor and rent in the late 1980s) (interview, 2013). During my fieldwork, although I did not ask about the family and educational backgrounds of the female fans that I met, most of them belong to this generation. Whether they were students, factory workers, secretaries, or housewives between the 1960s and 1980s, radio was without doubt part of their daily life. Even though more

\textsuperscript{12} Before the emergence and rise of Cantonese pop songs in the 1970s, Cantonese operatic songs and other Cantonese narrative musics (such as Cantonese nanyin, yueou, and longzhou) were the major vocal musical genres that were broadcast on the radios (Lai 2010: 405).

\textsuperscript{13} “Working daughters” is adopted from Janet Salaff’s monograph *Working Daughters of Hong Kong: Filial Piety or Power in the Family?* (1981). Salaff’s study explores the relationships between the burgeoning industrial economy and women’s changing positions in their natal families, marriages, and in society at large in the first half of the 1970s. My use of “working daughters” here is to highlight the factor of family obligation of the working women—both actresses and audience members—and their social classes.
ethnographic data are required for deeper analysis, I follow Ip’s point in suggesting that radio kept playing a significant role in cultivating a newer generation of female fans, who now make up the majority at theater today.

**Locating the Fans**

*Who are the Fans?*

After some reflection, I realized that I’m not a *yam mai* [fan of Yam Kim-Fai]. Sister Yam [Kim-Fai] did act very well and her stage achievement undoubtedly made her a superstar. But I go to performances of all famous performers [not only Yam’s]. I like to analyze performances rationally (*lixing fenxi*). I never flatter.

Ng Suk-mui 2004: 106

“Oh, why are you here for Ah Wu’s [Lau Wai-ming’s] performance? Do you like her?” asked Ah Sa, a woman in her late fifties or early sixties who frequented Doris Kwan’s performances. She continued, “I’m a *wu mai* [fan of Lau Wai-ming]. I’ve been going to Ah Wu’s performances for fifteen years. I began to support her even before she quit her job to become a full-time Cantonese opera performer. I like her. I liked her at first. Then last year, I saw Ah Shan’s [Doris Kwan’s] performance for the first time. Since then, I’ve been supporting Ah Shan. But these days she has no performances, that’s why I’m here at Ah Wu’s performance today.”

Field note: A conversation with Sister Ha, a frequent audience member of Doris Kwan, while waiting for the minibus after leaving Lau Wai-ming’s performance at a bamboo theater at Lei Yu Mun (May 31, 2013)

In Cantonese language, “mai” (Ca.; *mi* in Mandarin) is a character that is used to refer to “fans.” The character can be translated as to get lost, to confuse or to be confused, to bewitch or to be bewitched, and to be obsessed with or crazy about. It is usually used together with another object such as “*hei mai*” (Ca.; *ximi* in Mandarin; meaning “fans of Cantonese [or Chinese] opera”) and “*jam mai*” (Ca.; *ren mi* in Mandarin; meaning “fans of Yam Kim-fai”). In the second epigraph above, an except from my fieldnotes, Ah Sa suggests that she liked Doris Kwan’s performances better than those of Lau Wai-ming, even though she identified herself as a “*wu mai*.”
Scholars have shown how “fans,” “aficionados,” and “connoisseurs” are used as class labels to distinguish different kinds of excessive consumers or patrons. Depending on the context, the connotations of these labels range from pathological, obsessed, vulgar, emotional, well-informed, or knowledgeable, to superior.

What do Cantonese opera audiences and practitioners mean when they refer to “fans,” “mai,” or “fan-si”? How can we distinguish fans from other audience members? Generally speaking, fans are the most visible and excessive consumers (Grossberg 1992; Kelly 2004: 7; Lewis 1992: 1). Compared to ordinary audience members, fans devote much more money, time, and energy to and establish an intensive emotional bond with the objects of their attention—performers, playwrights, or plays. Studies on fandom have shown that fans are not passive consumers but active social agents who (re)make the meanings of the objects that they fan-tasize about (Kelly, ed. 2004; Lewis, ed. 1992).

Fans: Both Consumers and Practitioners

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, many full-time Cantonese opera performers first started as Cantonese opera fans and then became “amateur” (yeyu) or “community” (shetuan) singers or actors with full-time jobs to support their interests. A significant group of culture producers, many “amateur” and “community” performers, with limited time and resources for rehearsals, learn how to perform by imitating established professional performers. Very often they go to the theater for the purpose of watching how others render the same pieces they are going to perform. Apart from stage performance, commercial audio and video recordings are major referential sources for amateur or novice professional performers. In sum, a significant number of “Cantonese opera fans” are at once consumers and active producers in the industry.
Later in this chapter, I will discuss how some female wenwusheng performers, who were fans of a star, were influenced by their idol in the course of pursuing a professional performance career.

Cantonese Opera Fans vs. Fans of Individuals

Among all the audience members, there also seems to exist a difference between fans of Cantonese opera (yueju mi, daxi mi) and fans of individual actors, for example “jam mai” (fans of Yam Kim-fai). The two are not exclusive but often tend to overlap. And yet, in many cases, fans of Cantonese opera and fans of individual actors are perceived and treated as two different entities. Cantonese opera fans are usually not too picky when it comes to the casts of the leading roles in the performances. Although they may have a preference for particular programs and which actors play the leading roles, spending a night—and meeting friends—at a Cantonese opera performance is entertainment and a part of their lives. In contrast, fans of individual actors usually do not go to any performances but those of their idols. For example, many fans of Lung Kim-Sang (b. 1944), a superstar of female wenwusheng, stopped going to any Cantonese opera performances after she left the stage and moved to Canada in 1992.

Even though “Cantonese opera fan” has a relatively positive connotation in today’s Hong Kong, being a fan of an individual—especially of a female wenwusheng—is sometimes negative. To many of my interlocutors, fans of female wenwusheng are the “obsessed individuals,” part of a “hysterical crowd” (Jensen 1992: 9), ignorant consumers, or “a whole bunch of mindless middle-aged married women cou re’nao [who want to be part of the lively atmosphere]”14 (M. Lau, interview, 2013).

My study focuses on the fans of individual female wenwusheng. These include the following types of audience members:

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14 The original wording is “一班師奶湊熱鬧”. 

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1) Those who identify themselves as a fan of a particular female wenwusheng, for example “jam mai” (fans of Yam Kim-fai) and “wu mai” (fans of Lau Wai-ming). “Mai”\textsuperscript{15} is a word often added after a performer’s name to refer to her/his fans. The most common ones I have heard include “jam mai” (fans of Yam Kim-fai), “jam baak mai” (fans of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin), “paau mai” (fans of Lung Kim-sang), and “wu mai.” Not every group of fans has a special name containing the word of “mai” to refer to themselves. Groups with “mai” are mostly identifiable as stalwart fans.

2) Those who constantly attend a particular female wenwusheng’s performances and/or participate in the activities held by her fan club.

3) Those who actively volunteer and help, in terms of money, labor, and networking, at a female wenwusheng’s performances and events. After constantly going to an actress’s shows, some patrons begin to support the actress in additional ways. They usually start by offering pocket money after performances as encouragement and extra financial support for the actress. After becoming closer to the actress, some patrons may volunteer to help with trivial errands or logistics when the actress has performances. Patrons with greater social power may bring in more patrons and even more performing opportunities or exposure.

4) Those who collect a particular female wenwusheng’s performance ephemera for non-research purposes. These materials range from audio/video recordings, photos, newspaper clippings, magazines, memoirs, books, autographs, and program notes to memorabilia (see Figs. 4.1 and 4.2).

5) Those who usually only attend the performances of their idols. I have acquaintances who are fans of individual female wenwusheng. When they saw me at multiple performances

\textsuperscript{15} The character mai  迷 literally means “to get lost,” “to confuse,” “obsessed,” “crazy about,” and “fan.”
of different female wenwusheng, they were surprised and eager to ask me why I was there. They thought I was a fan of the female wenwusheng who performed in the previous shows at which they saw me. My frequent appearance at different female wenwusheng performances seemed to puzzle many of my theatergoer acquaintances even though I had told them about my research.

6) Those who actively participate in non-performance events—for example, memorial events and talks—on female wenwusheng who have passed away or are no longer active on stage. For example, I was told by Siu-wah Yu, an ethnomusicology professor in Hong Kong, that (academic) talks on Yam Kim-fai were always packed with jam mai. Among them, many were not interested in the content of the talks. For this group of devoted fans, their tributes—the very act of going to the talks, their attitudes, and intentions—matter more.16 These events function like a ritual of commemorating Yam, continuing her impact, and renewing her fame.

7) Those who actively build websites of individual female wenwusheng, share their information such as news, audio/video recordings, and photos, as well as participate in discussions in the forums. They may or may not live in Hong Kong. Many of them have either migrated from Hong Kong to North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom, or originate and live in Guangdong. Some of them have seen these actresses’ stage performances while others became fans of the actresses after watching their video recordings.

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16 In a two-day symposium on Yam Kim-fai (2013), I saw quite a few middle-aged audience members falling asleep or acting impatiently during the talks. Siu-wah Yu shared with me an anecdote of him giving an academic talk on Yam Kim-fai’s performance. He showed a clip from the Cantonese opera film The Red Robe (da hong pao) in which Yam was cast as the male lead. After his presentation, a Yam fan came to him and asked him how many DVDs of The Red Robe he owned. Yu replied, “one,” but the fan was very dissatisfied and said, “Only one?! You should get ten copies!” Yu asked, “Why?” The fan responded immediately, “To show support for Sister Yam!”
Spatial Relationships as Social Relationships

Fans are often perceived as the group of people who know best and care the most about their idols (Condry 2004: 19; Yano 2004: 48). However, “knowing best” and “caring the most” conflict with each other in many cases. In his ethnographic study of Japanese hip-hop fandom, Ian Condry suggests that what defines a fan is not one’s objective knowing—information about the objects of attention per se—but the intensity of his or her emotional attachment to that information. It is the “passion of commitment rather than depth of knowledge” that distinguishes
fans from ordinary consumers, researchers, and reporters (Kelly 2004: 8). Although it is not discussed much by actors, some musicians and teachers of Cantonese opera have a more critical view of fans by commenting that their devotion to a particular star is owing to their lack of knowledge and judgment (M. Lau, interview, 2013; Leung, interview, 2013; Tai, interview, 2013). In Cantonese opera, the majority of fans of individual stars are usually seen as a group of ignorant or even “mindless” consumers. The stereotype of “mindless” fans\(^\text{17}\) in Cantonese opera originated with the fans’ deliberately selective knowledge about both performances and the idols’ offstage lives. Driven by their passion, their knowing is highly subjective and sometimes seen as “uncritical.” They tend to choose what to know, believe, emphasize, share, and remember to fulfill their own interests and desires. Scandals and criticisms of their idols are usually neglected, silenced, and defended.

*Mapping the Female Wenwusheng’s Fans in Theater*

Fans as “uncritical,” passionate spectators can also be studied in terms of the spatial relationship within a theater. Audience seating is significantly symbolic. Stalwart fans usually occupy the front rows. However, the front rows are not necessarily the best seats for audio and visual enjoyment. In some theaters, the accompanying ensembles are placed in the orchestra pit. Even though actors use portable wireless microphones during the performance, people sitting in the front rows may be overwhelmed by the percussion instruments (*luogu* or *jiyue*)—especially gongs and cymbals—which often obscure other string instruments and the actors’ voices. In many indoor and outdoor theaters, the stages are too close to—and sometimes higher than—the front rows. Given the convention that actors come close to the edge of the stage when they have lines, only one actor is visible from the audience’s view if seated in the front rows. Due to the

\(^{17}\) Nonetheless, it was not much discussed by the actors themselves. I suggest that the actors did not want to affect their star status by admitting that their fans are ignorant, “mindless,” or uncritical.
close proximity, these audience members can choose only one performer or even one part of her/him to watch at a time. It is hard to view the entire stage and know what other actors are doing. As a result, focus on an individual actor overshadows the nature of teamwork in theater. Yet, a mutual relationship between the star system and fandom is fortified by this spatial relationship and spectatorship.

Seating: Performing Interpersonal Relationships

If the front rows are usually not the best spot from which to view a performance, then why are they so often reserved for or occupied by stalwart fans and important guests of the leading actors, especially wenwusheng? My observations in theaters suggest that the physical space between the fans and their idols is also a performance of interpersonal relationships. The act of fans sitting in the front rows is itself an exhibition. Fans come to the theater not only to see, but also, perhaps more importantly, to be seen by both their idols and other audience members. As many front row tickets are reserved by fan clubs or troupe staff before these tickets become available to the general public, people who gain access to them are either themselves fan club members, or have connections with some stalwart fans or staff. Sitting in the front rows is usually considered to be a privilege that indicates a certain social power, at least in the Cantonese opera circle. In many cases, the closer to the stage one sits, the more important s/he is to the leading actors or to the troupe. Sometimes, to show their hospitality, the troupe staff reserves the front rows and even gives the first row to guests from overseas and researchers—people who are often considered to be the ones that may offer the actors prospects in terms of performance opportunities, exposure, and fame. In these cases, providing better seating to watch the stage performance is not as important as performing interpersonal relationships and building connections offstage.
Even if the performance does not get a full house, the front rows are usually fully occupied if the leading actors have fan organizations, official or otherwise. Very often troupe staff members who are in charge of the sales of the most expensive tickets have been loyal, trustworthy fans for years or even decades. People who sit in the front rows are the fans that the leading actors personally know or are able to recognize. Sitting in the front rows also makes photography, as well as offering pocket money and presents to the idols easier when the shows end. On one hand, fans want their faces to be seen by actors to show their presence and support. On the other hand, it also helps the idols remember their faces and develop deeper interpersonal relationships.

“Behaving” Fans in the Front Rows

Traditionally speaking, sitting still and keeping quiet during performances were not typical of Cantonese opera audiences. Talking, snacking, drinking tea, and walking in the audience were common practices, especially in bamboo theaters. Yet audience members generally stayed more focused when the leading actors sang a “theme song” or performed substantial wu scenes. Over the past few decades, along with the growing number of indoor government-run theaters—and thus the stricter rules enforced by ushers—and the improvement in education, more Cantonese opera audience members have adapted Western classical music concert manners, trying to minimize the disturbance of others. Despite the gradual changes, it is still common to see audience members—especially older people—talking, snacking, arriving late, leaving their seats, or singing along with the actors during the performances.

Seating also affects theatergoers’ discipline in theaters. Sitting among a large group of focused fans, who may know each other, also makes individuals minimize “improper” behaviors.

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18 Bamboo theaters are temporary, outdoor theaters that are made of long bamboo sticks. In Hong Kong, they are usually built in the countryside for performing ritual operas during village festivals.
Therefore, grouping fans in the front rows can be interpreted as a form of segregation that is constituted for and by fans. This segregation not only provides a better surrounding environment for fans to see the show and causes less disturbance of the performers, but also serves as a wall barring the fans from harsh criticisms made by non-fan audience members. Sharing opinions during the performance is a common habit. It is not rare to hear negative commentaries being expressed in straightforward or even austere ways, especially among audience members sitting in the back. Some also like comparing the performing actors with those whom they have seen before. In contrast, fans sitting in the front rows rarely say anything negative during the performances even when their idols make obvious mistakes. Hence, the front rows also serve as a protective zone for both the fans and the reputation of their idols.

As fans are usually the most enthusiastic and identifiable theatergoers in the audience, grouping them in the front rows instead of having them scattered all over the theater is also a way to showcase the size of the fan base and thus the popularity of actors. It is important to note that, except for the shows of a few (semi-retired) leading stars, the low number of ticket sales of most Cantonese opera performances in recent years worries many practitioners, financiers (banzhu, zhuhui, and cehuaren), and sponsors. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is a common belief that the wenwusheng actor is the brand name of the troupe and is the one who is responsible for a significant portion of box office. Therefore, reserving tickets for wenwusheng’s fans and grouping them in the front rows are ways to show everybody, especially the producers and

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19 For instance, Yau Sing-po and Yuen Siu-fai, who are both veterans and usually play the supporting role-types such as chousheng, wusheng, and xiaosheng. When they played the leading roles in some grander productions, they had (almost) sold out all of the tickets. Another example is the superstar female wenwusheng Lung Kim-sang (b. 1944), who was always playing the leading role-type and was very active between the 1970s and 1992. In 1992, she quit her performance career and moved to Canada. Since 2004, she has performed occasionally for some grand fundraising and memorial performances. Most of the performances played to a full house.
sponsors, a number of guaranteed ticket sales and thus the marketability of the wenwusheng. In this sense, fans are not just onlookers, but also active performers of their idol’s stardom.

Fans as Obligated Consumers

Ticket sales are the major source of actors’ income and a means to deploy their status. Selling a “ticket package” (taopiao) is a common and efficient way of securing an income. In many cases, a troupe performs more than one show—usually a series of performances (yi tai xi) with two to seven shows over two to six consecutive days—in the same venue. A ticket package is a set of tickets for all of the shows. It is common for top actors to set up order forms of ticket packages when the series of performances last for more than three days (see Fig. 4.4). However, there is no discount on buying the package. Very often packages include only the most expensive tickets at their original prices. The cheaper seats and discounted tickets—for senior citizens aged sixty or above, full-time students, and disabled people—are usually not included in the package. For the audience, one of the purposes of purchasing packages is to be able to secure the front row seats. As the majority of regular operagoers are middle-aged and older women (among which
many are over sixty and are eligible for senior tickets), the act of buying ticket packages functions as a gesture to show their support, both financial and moral, to their idols and the troupes.

When performing at the same venue for more than two consecutive days, troupes usually do not duplicate any shows in their repertoire. Fans do not always like all of the programs of the ticket packages they purchase. Practically speaking, they are not always able to attend all of the shows in each of the consecutive nights, especially when the venues are far away from their homes and work places. Ticket packages make the fans more committed or “obligated” to attend all the shows. Sometimes they give away the tickets to their friends or other fans for free. At other times they go to the shows “involuntarily” just because they do not want to waste the tickets they have paid for. By contrast, from the troupe’s and actors’ perspectives, ticket packages guarantee sizable audiences to the shows.

Moreover, to bolster the box office and help with the performance expenses, fans sometimes are asked or volunteer to purchase more tickets than they need, especially when the shows are scheduled in a larger venue or when ticket sales are slow. They sometimes bring their family members or friends to the shows. The “ticket package” is a good marketing strategy, which not only brings in a larger audience, but also seeds future fans, especially of rising stars.
Seeding Performance Opportunities

Some devoted fans are relatively selfless in helping their idols in pursuing their careers. In March 2013, I attended a ritual opera (shengongxi)\textsuperscript{20} of the female wenwusheng Lau Wai-Ming in Ho Sheung Heung, a village that is at least an hour away from the city (see Fig. 1.1). It was a series of performances—six shows in five consecutive days—for the annual Hung Shing Festival (hong sheng baodan) (of which I attended the shows on the last two days) (see Fig. 4.5). I was amazed by the enthusiasm of Lau’s fans when entering the theater and seeing that the first few rows were packed with people who wore the same T-shirts and vests on which Lau’s photo, name, and autographs were printed.

\textsuperscript{20} Ritual opera refers to the Chinese opera performances that are held as part of the ritual to celebrate the birthdays of supernatural guardians and commemorate the ghosts. For details, see Sau-yen Chan (1991; 1996).
However, I heard a few fans complain about the time they needed to spend traveling since they lived far away from the village. Some fans even took a half or full day off work to attend the performances. During an intermission, one of the fans told me that she needed to leave early because she lived two hours away, and that she had to wake up early to work the next day. After seeing my shocked face, she added that Lau’s personal assistant wanted everybody to show up for every show. A few weeks later, I found out from another fan that Lau’s personal assistant was pushing all fan club members to attend all of the shows because it was the first time Lau had performed for the village. If the festival’s organizing committee in the village (zhuhui) saw a large crowd of fans, it would be more likely to hire Lau again in the following year.

Actually, the annual performance of the following year at the village was not the only performance opportunity that Lau aimed for. One night, both Lau’s personal assistant and fans were well prepared for the arrival of a guest from the United States, who was interested in inviting Lau to perform overseas. As the expenses to invite an actor to perform overseas are rather steep, this guest came as a representative of the hosting organization in the United States and served as a “quality control” inspector before issuing an official invitation and paying any expenses. In sum, while Lau performed onstage, her fans performed offstage by showing the size of her fan base and that the enthusiasm of her supporters mirrored her star status. Despite the resentment of some weary individuals, fans were not merely a group of passive viewers, but also a crucial part of the exhibition of Lau’s stardom. These fans helped determine prospects for future performance opportunities—both in Hong Kong and abroad.

Midnight Shuttle Buses: Seeding Fans across Hong Kong

Cantonese opera audience members are distributed all over Hong Kong. To accommodate fans from different places, many female wenwusheng provide after-performance shuttle bus
services. Since the early 1980s, the distinction between the city—Hong Kong Island and Kowloon—and the countryside—the New Territories and outlying islands—has been blurred due to the rapid development and urbanization of the latter, and improvements in public transportation. And yet many older Hongkongers still perceive it as a long distance and are reluctant to travel from “urban” to “rural” and vice versa unless necessary. In order to attract city residents to attend performances in the New Territories and outlying islands, more established female wenwusheng would provide shuttle bus services to take audience members back to city centers after performances. The fact that performances usually end between 11 p.m. and midnight makes theatergoing a regional activity as most of the shows are held in the city. After-hours public transportation is inconvenient and expensive, especially for elderly women. Courtesy or charged, shuttle bus services are still helpful to some audience members.

Some more ambitious and financially secure troupes and wenwusheng arrange shuttle buses that are free of charge to bring audience members from the city back to the centers in the New Territories. It is a means to attract more people from remote areas to attend their regular performances. For instance, as I observed in the past decade, the Ming Chee Sing Chinese Opera Troupe (est. 1990)\textsuperscript{21} usually arranged three to four free shuttle buses to bring audience members back to different parts of the New Territories when it had night shows at the Sunbeam Theater, North Point, on the Hong Kong Island.\textsuperscript{22} This kind of courtesy shuttle aims to attract more operagoers and new fans.

\textsuperscript{21} Featuring the female wenwusheng Joyce Koi Ming-fai, the troupe was founded in 1990 by a businessman and his wife who are both Cantonese opera fans; it has become the largest-scale Cantonese opera troupe in Hong Kong over the past two decades.
\textsuperscript{22} For instance, for the shows on the nights of August 8–12, 2012, four courtesy shuttle buses dropped operagoers off at the centers of New Territories East (Shatin), New Territories West (Tsuen Wan and Tuen Mun), Kowloon West and New Territories Northwest (Mei Fo and Yuen Long), and New Territories North (Taipo, Fanling, and Sheung Shui).
Female Fans as Mindless Audience?

Despite the rise of female spectators in the twentieth century, female audiences have not always been held in the same regard as male theatergoers in Chinese opera in general. In the quoted excerpt discussed on page 152, Mei Lanfang mentioned that the new female theatergoers in his time “lacked expertise” in watching Peking opera and “would certainly pick out the pretty ones first.” He implied that women were more likely attracted by the superficial aspects (se) of the performers rather than their artistic skills (yi). This misogynist viewpoint also prevails in Cantonese opera circles today.

Traditionally speaking, for both men and women, watching the performance is not the only purpose of attending a Cantonese opera show, for both women and men. Theatergoing also has its social functions. Theater is a place where audience members socialize with friends, acquaintances, families, and neighbors. My observations during fieldwork resonate with Qi Rushan’s comment quoted earlier that women usually go with company. Due to the habit of socializing and thus the resulting noise during performances, female audiences are often not taken seriously and are criticized by practitioners, critics, researchers, and some other theatergoers. Some of my interlocutors disdained the ignorance of audiences as a major reason why Cantonese opera had deteriorated in the recent three decades. Some “misbehaving”—talkative—female audience members are viewed as people who have nothing to do at home, want to meet friends, and prefer to be entertained comfortably in an air-conditioned place to fill their evenings. Some female fans are even regarded as groups of “mindless women” or “sheepheaded women” who blindly pursue and flatter their idols (M. Lau, interview, 2013; Tai, interview, 2013).
“Generous” Female Fans: Scapegoats for the Decline of Cantonese Opera

In the mid-1990s, Ma Lung, a veteran essayist and Cantonese opera critic, shared his insights on the causal interrelationship between actors’ artistic achievements as well as audience attitudes and expectations:

[Generally speaking,] the Cantonese opera audiences have developed into two extremes. One type is the elderly audience who goes to the theater because of nostalgia. They do not expect much [from the performances]. They are the “free ticket” regulars. [...] Another type is the younger audience members. What they look for is an overall perfection of a stage production rather than the impeccable artistry [of the actors]. Therefore, [today’s] actors are very lucky. They do not need to work hard to advance their artistic skills. As long as they know how to please the new generation of audiences, they could become idols. They no longer strive hard for artistic breakthrough. As a result, the diversity of audiences’ tastes has shrunk and thus the ticket sales have been affected. In order to fulfill audiences’ preferences, actors dare not try anything experimental. This influence is as harmful as setting a time bomb to the prospect of Cantonese opera. How can we not worry?!

Ma Lung 1994

Echoing Ma’s comment, some older actors who went through traditional ways of rigorous and even brutal training also criticized today’s audiences for being too “forgiving.” Audiences are too generous in clapping and praising the actors even though the actors make obvious mistakes or do not fulfill the basic requirements when performing some challenging sections. This kind of “generosity” is harmful to actors’ careers and the prospect of Cantonese opera because the excessive applause may give the actors the sense that they can easily pass so they will not work as hard as they should (Lau, interview, 2013; Leung, interview, 2013; Tai, interview, 2013).
Consuming a (Visual) Spectacle

Northerners say “listening to Chinese theater” while southerners call it “watching Chinese theater.” [. . .] Let me make a bold assumption that southerners only know how to “watch” Chinese theater. Yet, when talking about “listening to Chinese theater,” nine out of ten people do not have the ability [to appreciate the music]. Due to this phenomenon, our [recording] company is publishing a songbook as a supplement to the audio recordings. By reading it, buyers now can study and understand the music. This is a way to cultivate a listening habit, which will please many people.”

Deng Songjiao 1930: 10

The observation of Deng Songjiao, the Xin Yue Ji (a booklet published by the New Moon Records [xin yue changpian]) editor, in the epigraph above is still true in today’s Hong Kong. Theatergoers still tended to watch Cantonese opera instead of listening to the musical nuances. While theatergoers generally have a relatively weak knowledge of the musical components, the phrase “overall perfection of a stage production”—quoted from Ma Lung above—refers to a formalized presentation of the spectacle rather than the achievement of any one component, especially music. Here spectacle refers to the costumes, stage setups, lighting, plots, and the size of the supporting actors in dancing and acrobatic scenes. Many audience members nowadays pay close attention to the visual aspects, mostly presented in actors’ costumes and stage setups. From my experiences of going to live performances, I have heard more compliments on actors’ colorful, well designed costumes than on their singing or acrobatic skills. During my interview with Wai Chun-fai, one of the leading female wenwusheng in the recent three decades, she was very excited to tell me about her new production and the rerun of the play she had premiered a year earlier. She talked mainly about the costumes, plot, number of the supporting acrobatic actors, and the stage setup—mostly components that contributed to the visual spectacle. Showing me pictures of her new costumes and sharing her experiences of designing her costumes, she stressed that audiences wanted to see new things [my emphasis] (Wai, interview, 2013).
Costumes not only serve their function—in signifying gender, age, socioeconomic class, and occupation—in the play, but also carry various symbolic meanings of the actors. The variety, quality, materials, ornaments of the costumes—which are coined as *hangtou*—indicate various aspects of actors’ achievement—knowledge, popularity, wealth, social power, and artistic skill. The economic pressure caused by acquiring costumes has been discussed in Chapter 2. Yet investments in *hangtou* are not unique to Cantonese opera. According to Jin Jiang, Shaoxing *yueju* opera actresses in the Republican era\(^{23}\) also felt pressure to dress well onstage because it was a way to show their higher incomes, and to maintain their attractiveness and popularity in their circle (2009: 114). Therefore, *hangtou* is not merely sets of costumes to feed theatergoers’ visual appetites, but also a kind of social and symbolic capital. This is the same in Hong Kong; as costumes are the personal property of actresses, better *hangtou* mark higher status.

An ethnographic account of a live performance also supports this symbolic significance of *hangtou*. In one of Wai Chun-fai’s performances, she suddenly came up with an impromptu line, saying “see? All my costumes tonight are brand new, as I told you before! I didn’t lie.” At the end of the line, she made a proud face and smiled. Many audience members, especially those sitting in the front rows, responded with applause and laughter. This brief, impromptu statement shows the actress’s intent to show off her other “skill”—a “skill” to be able to make extra money to acquire new costumes, which deserves compliments by the audience.

Both practitioners and audiences pay much attention to *hangtou*. Many actors and theatergoers admitted that they were first attracted to Cantonese opera because of the colorful and lavishly embroidered costumes. In some cases, splendid costumes outweigh the performance itself. Some of my interlocutors described some plays was not popular because the plots are

\(^{23}\) Since the establishment of the PRC, all the state-run Chinese opera troupes in China provide their actors with costumes; actors do not need to own their costumes. However, troupes in Hong Kong are not state-run and actors are responsible for their own costumes.
about stories of commoners or poor people, whose costumes cannot be too colorful or elaborate due to the socioeconomic statuses of the characters. They added that these plays are rather boring to watch if the actors do not have excellent artistic skills—singing, zuogong, acting, and acrobatics. Rather than assuming that ornate costumes catch more attention from audiences than actors’ artistic skills, I would suggest that costumes and thus hangtou very often compensate for actors’ artistic insufficiency. In performances in which many dazzling costumes were displayed, I have even heard from some theatergoers that “it was worth paying for the tickets only to see the spectacle of costumes.”

Speaking from the consumers’ perspective, audiences regard the visual excitement of hangtou as an indispensable component in the commodified spectacle.

**Mindless or Informed Audience?**

Many female fans are aware of themselves being seen as ignorant groupies and tried to dissociate from this stereotype. A common means of protest was to show their knowledge of Cantonese opera. Theater is not only a space to watch performance, but also a site in which audience members perform their identity as informed consumers. Some audience members want to be considered knowledgeable by talking about the plots and characters, comparing the performance to those that they have seen in the past, and singing along with the actors.

In one of Lau’s ritual opera performances, a middle-aged woman in the audience told me how she became the actor’s fan. She was a “paau mai” (Ca.; meaning “fan of Lung Kim-sang”) and chasing Ah Paau (Lung’s nickname) everywhere before Ah Paau moved to Canada in 1992. Comparing Lau with Ah Paau and praising Lau’s voice, she emphasized that she came to the theater for “real art,” not for chitchat. In a brief conversation with her, I could sense that she had an urge to show me that she was different from other Lau fans because she really knew how to appreciate Cantonese opera.

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24 The original quote is “淨係睇衫都抵.”
Loyalty is also a means of protesting the perception of “mindless fans.” In order to avoid being perceived as fad followers, many of Lau’s fans emphasized that they had been “wu mai” for years or even more than a decade. Some of them frankly told me that they were not interested in Cantonese opera until they saw Lau’s performance years ago. These fans also attempted to show their expertise in Cantonese opera or at least in Lau’s performances. One of the subjects they were interested in discussing was their favorite plays and characters. Some fans pointed out particular scenes, gestures, or movements that they liked most when sharing their past opera experiences. Although they rarely talked about the musical subtleties and acrobatic skills—which are more technical and may require more insider’s knowledge and expertise—their comments still showed another kind of knowledge, which came mostly from their experience in evaluating Lau’s emotional involvement in acting and ability to render the characters. However, this kind of knowledge or criterion of evaluating a performance is not typically acknowledged by practitioners as expertise.

**Authoritative Prototype of Female Wenwusheng**

Cantonese audiences are fond of comparing actors. Interestingly, I have heard more comparisons between two female *wenwusheng* than either between two male *wenwusheng* or between a female *wenwusheng* and a male one. Among my interlocutors, many hold a prototype when watching performances. This prototype is based on Lung Kim-sang (b. 1944) who is a disciple of Yam Kim-fai (1913–1989) and the most active female *wenwusheng* between the 1970s and the early 1990s. Lung’s success prompted many young women and schoolgirls to learn Cantonese opera in the 1980s and 1990s. Among these young women, some pursued Cantonese opera as a full-time career but many gave up on their dreams after a few years. Among today’s active female *wenwusheng*, many grew up watching Lung although most of them
claimed that Yam is both their idol and role model (Lau W., interview, 2013; Wai, interview, 2013).

Regardless of their denials, traces of Lung in today’s active female wenwusheng have been clearly observed (Ip, interview, 2013; Kwan, interview, 2013; Leung, interview, 2013; Ma 1994; Tai, interview, 2013). When Lung started her performance career in the mid-1960s, Yam was semi-retired from the stage. Many theatergoers, especially Yam’s fans, began to support Lung and regarded her as a substitute for Yam. Their nostalgia and devotion to Yam gradually transformed into a projection of Yam’s style onto Lung. Saying that the two actresses are similar is more rhetorically significant for preserving Yam’s legacy than an accurate description of their performance styles. Under the protective shadow of Yam, Lung gradually became a superstar of Cantonese opera in the mid-1970s and “monopolized” the stage— as seen by some of her contemporaneous practitioners—until she emigrated to Canada in 1992.

**Inheriting Fans**

During my study, Koi Ming-fai (b. 1966), Wai Chun-fai, and Lau Wai-ming were the most active female wenwusheng. When Koi and Wai were rising in the early 1990s, many critics, practitioners, and theatergoers were concerned whether these two young women could become successors of Lung. However, some people also criticized them for over-imitating Lung (Tai, interview, 2014; Tam, informal conversation, 2013; Wong, interview, 2013; Xiaoshengtang 1991).

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25 At the beginning of Lung’s performance career, Yam and Pak Suet-sin, another master of Lung, not only provided Lung and her troupe with enormous financial support (such as hiring various teachers for training and acquiring costumes), but also with other necessary resources to climb the ladder of star, including connecting Lung with the best playwrights, musicians, impresarios, crew members, and journalists.

26 Some people think Lung overshadowed all her contemporaneous wenwusheng, both male and female, and homogenized the style of performances, repertoire, and audiences’ tastes.

27 The real name of the actress is “Tang Man-yee.” “Wai Chun-fai” is her second stage name which was changed in 2010 from her first stage name “Wai Chun-ying.”
During my fieldwork, I was a regular at the performances of these three actresses. I found that many audience members in their shows were familiar with all three actresses and had attended their performances. It is noteworthy that many were (and still are) Lung’s fans and followed her performances all over Hong Kong during her heyday. While it is taboo for fans to mention another competitor of their idol at the performance venue, some of them were eager to tell me that they became fans of the later female wenwusheng only because Lung stopped performing. Some admitted that a few years after Lung left the stage, they were searching for another female wenwusheng. They hopped between shows of different cross-dressers. While some finally settled on Koi or Wai, other found that no female wenwusheng satisfied them and gradually lost enthusiasm for Cantonese opera and stopped going to live performances until they discovered Lau. While the end of “Lung’s monopoly” also marked the rise of a few male wenwusheng\(^\text{28}\)—of which many were more experienced than Koi and Wai—it is noteworthy that many Lung fans did not turn to a male wenwusheng but continued to seek out a Lung copycat. Female wenwusheng tended to have the advantage of inheriting Lung fans. Preceded by Yam, Lung’s stardom cultivated both a new generation of female wenwusheng and audiences’ preferences for cross-dressers.

**Conclusion**

Within a century, female audiences had been widely cultivated by modern technology and became the major patrons of Cantonese opera. Among my female theatergoer informants, many were fans of Lung Kim-sang. Favoring female over male wenwusheng reflected that Lung (and Yam) played a significant role in shaping the aesthetic preferences of the majority of the audiences—in terms of physical appearances, vocal projection, performance style, and repertoire.

\(^\text{28}\) Such as Yuen Siu-fai (b. 1945, see Chapter 2), Leung Hon-wai (1944–2011), and Lee Lung.
Despite the stereotype that female fans of *wenwusheng* actresses are ignorant middle-aged housewives who attend the theater for the “lively atmosphere,” these fans are active consumers as well as agents in building and maintaining the star status of their idols. Very often their support is not only financial or material, but also social and moral. Fans’ loyalty in supporting an idol also protests the stereotype of mindless followers. An actress needs supporters to make her a star; and fans also seek out their idol’s performances in order to keep or renew their enthusiasm. Fans understand that their physical presence and, more importantly, the fandom they perform are a means of keeping their idols active onstage. This chapter has touched upon the mutually beneficial relationships between actresses and their fans. In the next chapter, I look more closely at onstage-offstage relationships between stars and fans as well as the multiple roles that fans play in their idols’ lives and careers.
Chapter 5
Performing Fandom, Performing Stardom

Introduction

On September 24, 2012, I went to the female wenwusheng Lau Wai-ming’s performance for the first time. Held at the Queen Elizabeth Stadium in Wan Chai, Hong Kong—a venue usually reserved for pop music concerts—it was a comedy performed in Cantonese opera style for both lovers of Cantonese opera and laypersons alike. When I entered from the pouring rain, the first thing that met my eyes was a spectacle in the lobby—it was full of flower baskets and six-foot tall pull-up banners printed with Lau’s photos, offered by her fans (refer to Figs. 5.1 and 5.2 for similar photos). I was impressed because this was rare in Cantonese opera performances, with the exception of two superstars, Lung Kim-sang and Chan Po-chu. Both were active between the 1960s and 1980s and have given only occasional, special performances in the past decade. I wondered if I was behind the times, not aware of a new superstar in Cantonese opera. I decided to approach Lau and her fans for this project. While I attended her performances and became familiar with her fans, I also heard negative commentaries about them from other interlocutors. The one I frequently heard is that Lau did not deserve this fame and her fans were “ignorant groupies.”

My intention here is not to study whether Lau and other female wenwusheng deserve their popularity. Rather, my observations prompted me to study fandom and stardom. As fans are perceived as “excessive consumers” who invest extra money, time, and energy in their idols (Kelly, ed. 2004), what roles do fans play in an actress’s career? Can fans make their favorite
actress a “star”? Moreover, what do fans obtain in return? What are the major factors that sustain fans’ devotion and enthusiasm?

To investigate fan-star relationships in the performing arts, I borrow from anthropological literature on Japanese pop culture that addresses emotional intimacy and social relations. Christine Yano argues that what fans of enka, a Japanese pop music genre, consume is a “commodified intimacy,” an idealized relationship embedded in the commercialization of a star that impels fans to consume related materials or events excessively and “seek greater communion” with their idols (2004: 42–44). Material objects, for example, are often used by fans to actualize this kind of intimacy. William Kelly suggests that fans “possess” their idols through different tokens (2004: 9). The more material examples include photos and autographs, as well as commercial recordings and memorabilia. The more “abstract” examples, such as handshakes, live performances, and glances from the idols, also channel fans’ intimacy.

The concept of intimacy helps me understand the paradoxical aspects of Lau’s case. Despite the fact that some people criticized her for not deserving her popularity, and that her fans were aware of weaknesses in her performances, many of these fans still remained very helpful, supportive, and loyal to her. The commercialized “stars sell, fans buy” equation is translated into or packaged as intimacy—whether this be virtual or imagined interpersonal relationships. Even though fans are not always “satisfied” with the actress and her performances, the emotional attachments that are involved sustain their zeal.

Based on my direct engagement with Lau’s fans and those of other female wenwusheng, this chapter investigates the reciprocal relationship between fans and stars. First, I will focus on how the different roles that fans play in productions illustrate various kinds of emotional intimacy. Second, I will discuss how this intimacy is cultivated and archived in live recordings.
Asymmetries in Fan-Star Relationships

The statuses of the two parties [fans and stars] in the relationship are, for the most part, unequal. [. . . ] In entertainment, status differences are marked by prestige; privilege, wealth, and celebrity create a chasm of inaccessibility.

Christine Yano, 2004: 47

Exchanges between socioeconomic capital, cultural capital, and affect are ubiquitous in fan-star relationships. In her article on the fandom of *enka*, Yano complicates the general understanding of the asymmetric fan-star relationship in pop culture. Given the fact that it is a relationship between one and many, it is unlikely that the investment and intensity will be equal on both sides. However, fans find ways to personalize their relationships with their idols for their own purposes (ibid.). Yano shows that, on one hand, the “commodified intimacy” that fans consume is “an ideal form embedded in the commercialized [fan-star] relationships” (ibid.: 42);
on the other hand, *enka* stars position themselves more as “servants to fans” with humble origins, rather than as urban-born, cosmopolitan superstars, which shortens the star-fan distance and even reverses the typical asymmetry that is easily found in pop cultures (ibid.: 48).

Both personalizing of fan-star relationships and asymmetries are also observed between female *wenwusheng* and fans. However, these relationships have neither as large a chasm between the two parties as those in the entertainment industries (such as pop music and films), nor stars who act as “servants to fans” as in *enka*. Although Cantonese opera is also a popular entertainment form, its consumption habits are quite different from those in the pop music and film industries of Hong Kong. Compared to pop and movie stars, actors of Cantonese opera are more reachable and seem to have closer interpersonal relationships with their fans because they do not belong to any production company and have more freedom in interacting with their fans. Even though the status differences between fans and female *wenwusheng* are still marked by prestige and celebrity, these actresses are much more accessible compared to pop stars. For example, it is not hard for audience members to approach female *wenwusheng* after performances, visit them back stage, and interview them, which I will discuss in detail later in this chapter.

Moreover, while stars in pop culture industries are usually believed to have socioeconomic prestige, it was—and still is—not always the case in Cantonese opera except for a few top stars. For centuries, entertainers in Chinese society were stigmatized by the traditional Confucian ideology, especially Chinese opera actors (*xizi*),¹ regardless of the enormous fortune some top stars made (Mackerras 1975: 78–81). Traditionally speaking, Chinese opera actors came from humble origins and were sold at an early age to opera troupes by their parents. Although this is no longer the case since the mid twentieth century, the inferior associations with

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¹ “*Xizi*” is a derogative term for actors.
actors are still deeply rooted in today’s Hong Kong. Even though the most influential and successful Cantonese opera actors may become wealthy and admirable, they are often disenfranchised from the upper-class circle. Many fans belong to the middle or upper class and, in fact, have stronger socioeconomic power than their idols. If socioeconomic power is a determining factor in asymmetric fan-star relationships, the asymmetries are rather fluid—or even reversed—in Cantonese opera.

Such relationships in all forms of Chinese opera have been complicated in terms of the exchange of various forms of capital (Goldman 2012: 17–60; Jiang 2009: 106–38; Kang 2009: 115–44). Jin Jiang discusses the exchange of social and cultural capital in the fictive kinship between fans and actresses (2009: 125–32). Like Jiang, Kang examines the relationships between male dan and their male patrons in Peking opera at the turn of the twentieth century. Beyond just the sexual relations, as Kang points out, there existed a mutual enhancement in which the social prestige of the patrons, the popularity of the actors, and emotional intimacy were involved (2009: 119–23). Despite the different time, space, genre, and perhaps the absence (or silencing) of sexual relations, both Jiang’s and Kang’s approaches are worth considering in investigating Cantonese opera.

**Crossing Public-Private Boundaries**

In Yam Kim-fai’s time [the 1950s and 1960s], stars were more mysterious (shenmi). But now [Cantonese opera] stars are easier to approach personally.

Lau Wai-ming (interview, 2013)

This epigraph reveals the institutional changes in constructing star images over the decades. Unlike the mid twentieth century, when the star-making of Cantonese opera actors largely relied on the entertainment press, what fans access today are both the person and the offstage persona of their idols through direct mingling. In the past three decades, offstage fan-
star mingling activities such as fan club events, dinners, and birthday parties have become increasingly popular and important. Such offstage mingling contributes to the making of star images.

In most cases, audience members are allowed to wait at the backstage entrance after the shows. When they see the actors they admire, they are free to present them with gifts and/or red pocket money, take photos with them, and express their feedback. It is even easier to have a more personal interaction with the actors who are not yet established because they have fewer fans and are most likely leave the performance venue by public transportation (while more established actors would be picked up by personal vehicles from backstage). In order to accumulate supporters and build up a good image, many young actors present a friendly and welcoming attitude when being approached by strangers and when listening to their feedback.

During my fieldwork, I both witnessed and heard about fans becoming acquaintances of or friends with female wenwusheng in this way. After a period of time, actresses might agree to go for a late supper with their supporters. Deeper interpersonal relationships between actresses and their fans often begin with such after-show suppers. Yet, it is noteworthy that gender difference also existed in fan-star interpersonal relationships. Given that audiences were predominantly female, closer relationships with actresses were far more common than those with actors, because male actors tended to stay away from scandals (Kwan, interview, 2013).

**Multiple Roles of Fans**

Fandom in Cantonese opera is basically observed in a homosocial setting—female fans pursuing female wenwusheng. Many female wenwusheng prefer a homosocial fan circle because they are very concerned about their public images and, as suggested above, try to avoid scandals with the opposite sex. Within a relatively homosocial environment, both actresses and their fans
tend to feel freer to actively interact and establish interpersonal relationships. It is also important to note that gender plays a crucial role in these fan-star relationships. Many of the roles that fans take would not be possible if these fans were men. Here I examine the various social relationships maintained between fans and star actresses, and how they contribute to the cultivation of emotional intimacy.

**Fans as Business Partners**

**Employers and Performance Partners**

In Hong Kong, the phenomenon of fans playing the roles of employer and performing partner to their idols is relatively common. As discussed in the previous chapters, like the *piaoyou* tradition in other Chinese opera genres, many Cantonese opera aficionados are themselves active amateur singers or actors. Some amateurs hold vocal concerts, in which making money is not the purpose. Rather, they need to cover different types of expenses.\(^2\) The quality of these amateur singers varies. In order to attract larger audiences, many wealthier singers invite and pay their idols to perform with them.

This practice directly benefits professional actors both socially and economically. From the professional actors’ perspectives, this is an easy way for them not only to make quick money, but also to explore other resources through social networking. First, this kind of concert is shorter than a regular opera performance. Second, singing in concerts requires less time to prepare and demands less physical and mental energy. Performers do not need to dress up in a whole set of operatic costumes. While actors of opera performance need to memorize all the lyrics, lines, acting, gesturing, and acrobatic movements, performers in singing concerts are allowed to hold a booklet of lyrics in hand throughout the performances. In sum, these concerts

\(^2\) Expenses include venue rental, costumes, fees for musicians and teachers for both performances and practices, flyers and posters, and salaries for the MCs and backstage crew.
are easy gigs for professional actors. Third, since amateur singers have less performance experience and want to spend extra time and money to prepare before performances, professional actors may earn a significant amount of money by giving lessons and/or coaching rehearsals. Fourth, professional actors may be introduced to other amateur singers and fans by their wealthy hosts. These are chances for the actors to expand their social connections with other socioeconomically privileged Cantonese opera aficionados. Therefore, even though performing with amateur singers is not always an enjoyable and satisfying working experience, professional actors are still interested in performing in such concerts for the sake of extra income and networking.

**Labor of Love: Fans as Volunteers**

Fans also demonstrate their devotion by actively volunteering for their idols’ public events, mostly performances. Volunteering is not merely a common way to show their support and loyalty, but also a way to develop deeper interpersonal relationships with their idols. By engaging in part of the productions, volunteers cross the line between crew members and audiences and make themselves (semi-)insiders of the production team. Since not just any fan is allowed to volunteer, volunteers seem to be an idol’s most privileged, special, or even favorite fans.

**Volunteering at Performances**

In many troupes, the *wenwusheng* actor is the producer of the performance, especially those novice actors and rising stars who want to save money by not hiring others. Many trivial tasks need to be done when preparing a show. It is common to see fans volunteering for different tasks in order to minimize the expenses for their idols. For instance, during my fieldwork, every time Lau Wai-ming had ritual opera performances, some of her fans arrived in the villages early
to help. Pre-performance tasks included decorating the venues with Lau’s pull-up banners, hanging LED light boards, putting up signs to give directions from bus stops to bamboo theaters, putting “no photography, video, or audio recordings” signs inside the theaters, and distributing tickets (see Figs. 5.1 and 5.3). During intermissions, some fans also distributed flyers and performance schedules. After the last shows ended, they stayed behind to help pack up. While some volunteers were housewives who had relatively flexible schedules, others had daytime jobs. Sometimes they needed to take a day or half day off to volunteer. If they could not make it, they would coordinate with other fans, making sure Lau would get sufficient help.

Fans who are closer to their idols are responsible for other tasks which require stronger trust—usually those dealing with money and privacy—from the actresses. While some fans become personal assistants of their idols after volunteering for years, others take care of tasks such as wardrobe (yixiang), advertising, ticketing, scheduling rehearsals and performances, organizing fan club activities, and publicity.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Fig. 5.3** An LED light board, which shows Lau Wai-ming’s name, hung inside a bamboo theater. Photo taken by the author in Tai O, Hong Kong (March 3, 2013) (see Fig. 1.1).

**Volunteering Overseas**

Many Hong Kong actors, both novice and established, are active not only on Hong Kong local stages, but also in overseas Cantonese-speaking communities such as Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and North America. Some wealthier fans contribute even more time and money, traveling with their favorite female *wenwusheng* when the actresses are invited to perform
overseas. When they travel with their idols, they are responsible not only for their own traveling expenses such as air fare, accommodation, and meals, but also volunteer during the trips.

For instance, Edith (a pseudonym) joined her idol Emily’s (a pseudonym) 2013 and 2014 trips to North America. An unmarried Chinese-Singaporean woman in her early forties, Edith became a fan of Emily after watching her show in Singapore in 2012 for the first time. As a division manager at a logistics company, Edith traveled to Hong Kong for business trips every now and then and sometimes managed to arrange her trips to match with Emily’s performance schedule in Hong Kong. According to Edith, Emily and her personal assistant needed enormous help during their North American trips. In order to save money, Emily did not hire or sponsor anyone but her assistant to travel with her. They packed all the costumes in multiple bulky suitcases. During the trips, they were seriously short-handed while transporting all the suitcases and being involved with trivial, laborious tasks backstage. Although Edith had been Emily’s fan for a relatively short period of time and had only limited knowledge in handling performance tasks, her gender, fluency in English, socioeconomic power, marital status, and social skills made her an ideal travel company-volunteer among all Emily’s fans for these North American trips.4

Public Relations and Marketing Agents

Some of the volunteer tasks undertaken by fans are more engaged in the public relations sphere. As movie stars are “defined by the fact of their appearing in films” (Dyer 1998: 61), movies are not merely cultural texts that contribute to the making of star images, but also powerful vehicles of publicity. Likewise, in the Cantonese opera circle, it is widely believed that

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3 Most of Lau’s closest fans were married women in their fifties and sixties and had children. Many did not speak (good) English and were not well-traveled. It might be hard for them to help Lau in her overseas trips even if they could afford the traveling expenses.
4 Many fans of Lau have been supporting Lau for over a decade.
actors’ appearances on stage are a major way to boost their publicity. While it is a convention for actors and musicians of pop culture, both in Hong Kong and in the United States, to hire agents or production companies to seek out job opportunities, manage their schedules, and increase their exposure, Cantonese opera actors usually conduct all these tasks by themselves with the help of their family members, teachers, fans, and friends. This subsection discusses how fans help create performance opportunities for their idols and manage their public images and relations to audiences.

All actors in Cantonese opera in Hong Kong are freelance actors and most of the troupes are ad hoc teams. Therefore, the cast of each show—even in the same troupe—never stays the same. This is even truer for the cast in supporting roles. Opportunities to be cast in supporting roles in larger productions are also crucial for rising stars in making their names. The frequency of actors’ performances indicates their star status, which also manifests in advertising materials—posters and flyers, which are displayed and distributed at various performing venues all over Hong Kong (see Fig. 5.4). Despite the fact that people do not attend all performances or know the actors (especially those who play supporting roles), printed advertising materials are powerful media because they help audience members remember actors’ faces and names even without seeing them perform. Therefore, these printed advertising materials are means to increase actors’ publicity and create (an impression of) (rising) stardom.

Besides performance opportunities, good public images and relations are also important to actors’ careers. Given the relatively confined social circle and the teamwork-oriented nature of Cantonese opera productions, an actor’s development is largely built upon word of mouth. Actors’ relationships with other practitioners (including actors, musicians, teachers, and crew members) are determining factors in the path to success. Established actors and musicians are
good resources for novice actors. They may become mentors who teach novice actors and introduce the new faces to the audiences by including them as supporting cast in their own productions.

Many fans of rising female *wenwusheng* also understand the importance of performance opportunities and the support of veteran practitioners in the making of a new star. During my fieldwork, I observed fans actively helping their idols acquire performance opportunities, develop better social relationships with the veterans, and establishing strong public images. An example is found in fans of Doris Kwan. Sister Na (a pseudonym), a devoted Kwan fan who is in her early sixties, shared with me her intentions and strategies to help Kwan climb the ladder of fame.

For instance, when Kwan was hired for minor roles with the Kam Sing Fai Troupe in 2013, Sister Na tried to show Kwan’s rising stardom. She once suggested reserving group tickets for the performance via Kwan even though tickets were available to general public. After figuring out the number of tickets Kwan’s fans needed, Sister Ha asked Kwan to purchase tickets from Wai Chun-fai, both the producer and *wenwusheng* of the Troupe. Sister Na explained that she wanted to impress Wai by showing Kwan had some core supporters who would attend Kwan’s performances even when she played minor roles. Furthermore, Sister Na intended to convince Wai to keep Kwan in the future cast because Kwan was a rising star who could contribute to part of the box office sale.

At the end of the performance, Sister Na and other fans shouted Kwan’s name during the curtain call. According to my observations in theater, calling out a supporting actor’s name at curtain call is relatively rare. Later, Sister Na explained that even though Kwan played a minor role that night and there was little room to showcase skills and talents, she still wanted to show
everybody that Kwan was a promising actress and had a group of fans.

Sister Na also realized the significance of Kwan’s public images. In 2013, when Kwan played the male lead under the directorship of Wan Fei-yin (a top huadan actress in her early sixties), Sister Na purchased an extra gift for Wan while preparing one for Kwan. She explained that it was necessary to acknowledge Wan’s effort along with Kwan’s by presenting gifts to both of them. She added that it was Wan’s first time casting Kwan for the male lead, and that she wanted to thank Wan for this opportunity and her mentoring during rehearsals. By showing gratitude to Wan in public, Sister Na wanted to impress both Wan and the audience members that both Kwan and her fans were grateful, thoughtful, and humble—attitudes that are highly valued in the Cantonese opera circle. My other observations from fieldwork informed me that actors and their fans are, to a certain extent, considered a single entity.\(^5\) The incident with Sister Ha exemplifies how fans’ behaviors also had possible or indirect influences on their idols.

In sum, while following their favorite female wenwusheng, female fans are active volunteers contributing to various aspects and extents, according to their abilities, backgrounds, and relationships with their idols. The multiple roles of fans in making a star cannot be understated when studying the reciprocal relationship between fandom and stardom. More importantly, even though most of the volunteering tasks sound trivial and easy to manage, they are not randomly assigned to fans who want to volunteer. The assignment is built on the actress’s trust of the individuals. Therefore, even though fans volunteer their time, money, and energy, they are earnest and proud because these activities distinguish them from other fans, granting them recognition as part of the production team and as trustworthy, loyal fans. Moreover, volunteering also provides fans more opportunities to have direct contact with their idols. These direct interactions and engagements not only allow fans to build deeper interpersonal

\(^5\) When my informants disliked a particular actor, they often criticized his or her fans as well.
relationships with their idols, but also actualize emotional intimacy—by both making and owning a star.

Fig. 5.4 Flyers of upcoming performances all over Hong Kong are usually placed next to the box office at performance venues for people to pick up. Photo taken by the author at the Koshan Theatre, Hong Kong (September 16, 2016).

**Fans as Mothers**

**Fictive Kinship**

Women’s expressions of [enka] fandom are often motherly. Christine Yano 2002: 132

In addition to the roles discussed above, I also observed closer relationships between female fans and their favorite actresses. As Yano observed that some female *enka* fans considered themselves to be surrogate mothers of male *enka* stars, a similar kind of motherly fandom also exists in Cantonese opera and other Chinese opera genres. Fictive kinship between fans and their idols has been a common practice in Chinese opera since the dynastic era and remains prevalent (and yet less formalized) in some genres today. In her chapter on patrons and patronage in Shaoxing *yueju* opera in Shanghai, Jin Jiang finds that “adoptive motherhood” was a “peculiar institution related to wealthy women and their patronage” of actresses between the 1930s and the mid 1960s. In this case, through a formalized ritual, a wealthy woman recognized her favorite star as an adoptive daughter. The adoptive mother now became a “protector” of the
star. Both parties benefited from this fictive kinship: the patron could show off her wealth and social status while the actress gained wider publicity as well as access, symbolic or virtual, to the upper class (2009: 125–26).

In Hong Kong, the relationship between female wenwusheng Koi Ming-Fai and her fans, Mr. Lau Kam-Yiu and his wife, is perhaps the most telling example of fictive kinship between stars and fans in recent decades. A relatively reliable rumor has been circulating for over two decades that Mrs. Lau, in particular, used to be a Lung Kim-sang fan and wanted to become her close patron in the late 1980s. When Lung refused, Mrs. Lau was angry and decided to patronize a new actress in order to replace Lung as the top star of female wenwusheng. She then turned to Koi and made her a rising star by providing tremendous financial and social support (Ip, interview, 2013; Yuen, interview, 2014).

Since the beginning of Koi’s career, the Lau couple has played multiple roles as her “protectors.” With the Laus’ support, Koi founded her own troupe, the Ming Chee Sing Chinese Opera Troupe, in 1990. Around the same time, she was adopted by the couple as an “honorary daughter.” In order to make Koi a star by enhancing her social capital and boosting popularity, the Lau couple made their fictive kinship public. Their support to Koi has always been beyond money. Before his death in 2011, Mr. Lau had served as Koi’s manager and financier for two decades, controlling all of Koi’s training, performances, publicity, and fan club. When putting on a performance, Cantonese opera actors are usually responsible for various tasks—such as reserving venues, contacting musicians and supporting actors, scheduling rehearsals, advertising, and selling tickets—on top of acting. In contrast, Mr. Lau took care of most of the administrative,

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6 The Chinese characters are “契女”.

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logistic, and trivial tasks in order to let Koi concentrate on acting. Moreover, through the Lau couple connection, Koi also gained opportunities to play in TV dramas at the Jade Television Station, a major TV station in Hong Kong, which made her more widely known (Tai, interview, 2013). Even when Mr. Lau passed away, his biological daughter, Alice Lau Kwok-ying, took over his management responsibilities. Neither their support nor the fictive kinship discontinued due to Mr. Lau’s passing. Their continuous support also reflects that Koi has been considered a member of the family.

It is also important to note that individual fans continuously providing enormous economic support is an exceptional case in today’s Hong Kong and Koi is widely regarded as a lucky actress (ibid.; Leung, interview, 2013; Yuen, interview, 2014). In contrast, a less formal form of fictive familial relationships between fans and actresses, as well as between actors and their teachers—with or, mostly, without any official recognition or ritual is more common.

During my fieldwork, what I usually observed was fans offering social and labor support (as discussed in the volunteering section), along with smaller amounts of money.

Fictive Mothers

Even without official recognition or ritual, many middle-aged and older female fans of female wenwusheng still serve as fictive mothers of their idols. These fans were relatively nurturing and empathetic regarding their idols. They often showed their concern by asking about their idols’ health and wellbeing. I frequently heard the following questions when they talked to their idols:

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7 For instance, while the backstages of most performance venues, especially bamboo theaters, are usually not guarded, Mr. Lau set up rules to block everyone except performers and crew members from entering the backstage area. Moreover, he strictly restricted audiences taking photos as well as videos and audio recording the performances, which is still allowed in many outdoor ritual opera performances of other troupes. Restricting audience members from keeping any photos and visual/audio recordings of live performances is not just a way to protect the sale of her commercially released visual and audio recordings, but also to prevent people from circulating records of poor performances because making mistakes on stage is very common (Leung, interview, 2014).
“Do you feel cold? Are you wearing enough clothes?”
“Are you feeling better now? Have you seen a doctor yet? Have you recovered you're your cold (or injury)?”
“Have you eaten enough food? Don’t starve yourself. Your stomach will hurt.”

These are typical questions that mothers and grandmothers ask their children and grandchildren.

Not just expressing their concern verbally, some fans even take care of errands such as bringing the actresses warm food and daily necessities (from bottled water to makeup remover to play scripts). Although all these small tasks seem trivial and mundane, they are a means for fans to enact their motherly bond with their “adopted daughters.”

**Loving Mother and Vulnerable Boy**

The fictive mother-child relationship is reciprocal. The role of fictive mother would not be possible if the female wenwusheng did not accept her fans’ kindness. The actress’s private space is sometimes invaded but this is also simultaneously compensated for by fans’ support in various ways. Some female wenwusheng enjoy being treated as a vulnerable child that needs protection and attention both on stage and off. This mutual relationship is well exemplified by Lau Wai-ning and her fans.

On her personal website, Lau lists “Jia Baoyu” from the Chinese classic novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1791) as her favorite character because “he obtains attention and love from everyone” (Lau Wai-ning). Some of Lau’s fans told me that Jia was their favorite among all the characters she had played. One of them added that it was this character that immediately turned her into a fan when she saw Lau’s performance for the first time.

In the original novel, Jia is a refined, talented, innocent, romantic, sentimental, good-looking teenaged boy from a wealthy family—with the span of the story covering mostly his teen years.
years to early adulthood. In everyday life, he is surrounded by mostly women who spoil him, including young female maids and cousins of his age, his aunt, mother, and grandmother. The persona of this adorably vulnerable, immature boy—who passively attracts protection from the empathetic women surrounding him—was extended to and embodied in Lau’s offstage persona. On her website, Lau also frequently writes about her poor health conditions, stress, and emotional fluctuations. On the discussion page, her fans often express their support by encouraging her, telling her she has performed well, and asking her to take good care of her health. By enacting the character of Jia, Lau breaks the boundaries between her onstage and offstage personas to invite and satisfy her female fans’ empathy and motherly love. The intimate sentiment between Lau and her fans is actualized and facilitated in these direct interactions (both in person and via the internet). In return, Lau earns moral support, attention, and devotion.

**Embodying Jia Baoyu: Embodying Sexual Ambivalence**

It is noteworthy that Jia Baoyu is a popular character played by female wenwusheng and Lau’s embodiment of Jia is not an exceptional case. In this section, I will discuss both onstage and offstage embodiment of Jia exemplified by both female wenwusheng performance practices and my observation at one of Lau’s fan club events. The emotional intimacy that is evoked by the embodiment of Jia is rather complex. When playing the character, what a female wenwusheng manipulates is not only a boy or son figure, but also a liminal character in terms of sexuality. In the original novel, Jia is a coming-of-age boy who is innocent but flirtatious, faithful to one love but sexually curious about others. When the story is adapted to Cantonese
opera, the portrayal of Jia becomes asexual. Since only the teenage years to early adulthood of Jia is portrayed in the novel, this character also has minimal social and familial responsibilities in the Cantonese opera version.

**Voice**

During my fieldwork, I observed that female *wenwusheng* were better received than their male counterparts when playing Jia. First, female *pinghou* voices more effectively signify the ambivalent sexuality and youth, and downplay the seriousness and legitimacy of the deviant character. Female *pinghou* voices for Jia at once asexualize the character and performance, and thus lessen the threat to the “adult (patriarchal) world” that is potentially caused by this carefree, nonconformist, and attractive character.

**Costuming**

Second, the embodiment of liminal sexual ambiguity and ambivalence is not only exemplified by female *wenwusheng*’s performance of Jia, but is also manifested in their costuming preferences. As discussed toward the end of Chapter 2, in the makeup and costumes of Cantonese opera, smooth and light skin signifies youth and handsomeness, while an artificial beard signifies maturity; female *wenwusheng* generally look younger than their male counterparts. Some veteran practitioners have complained that female *wenwusheng* tend to avoid the characters of mature men or simply ignore the dress code. Yet audience perspectives very often contradict those of practitioners.

Even if some female *wenwusheng* follow the convention and wear beards, their fans do not always like it. As I related in Chapter 2, a devoted fan of a female *wenwusheng* gave up a ticket to a full-house show because she did not want to see her idol appear in a beard. This bride is not Lin in his bedroom, he does not acknowledge his bride. In the meantime, he learns about Lin’s death. Finally, he decides to leave his family and become a monk.
anecdote echoes that, for many female wenwusheng and their fans, the representation of the immature, softer types of masculinity is more desirable and important than following the dressing conventions and accurately rendering the dramatic characters. Moreover, this example also shows that it is precisely the ambivalent sexuality and youth typified in the character of Jia that is enticing to female fans of female wenwusheng.

Homoerotic Overtones

The motherly bond also translates into homoeroticism. As exemplified by Lau, who embodies Jia offstage, her mingling with fans during fan club events not only enacts gender fluidity and the softer type of masculinity, but also invites queer overtones.

At the annual dinner of Lau’s fan club in March 2013, Lau gave a few gifts to those whom she called her “most well-behaved fans.” During my interview with Lau, I asked her to clarify the meaning of “well-behaved.” She explained that the gifts were given to the most devoted fans, who “think and act from my perspective” (Lau, interview, 2013), which also echoes the motherly empathy previously discussed.

The emotional bond between Lau and her fans was also enacted materially. In order to win the gifts, fans needed to show that they possessed four items requested by Lau: her public event schedule sheet, the ticket package order form for her upcoming ritual opera performances, flyers of recent performances, and the pocket-size calendar card which had Lau’s photos printed on it. All four items had been distributed for free at past performances and fan club events. Being a loyal fan is often associated with keeping up with the idol’s performance schedule because the fan is expected to attend every show. Carrying all four of these items was not only a gesture to show one’s devotion to Lau, but also a way to help Lau advertise her performances.

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10 The original wording in Cantonese is “最乖嘅 fans.”
While the first three items listed above function directly as advertisements for actors’ performances, calendar cards are a popular piece of memorabilia that actors make to boost their stardom. They are usually designed in a wallet-size, bi-fold, color format. Taking Lau’s as an example (see Fig. 5.5), the actress’s photos and a twelve-month calendar are printed on both sides of the calendar card. It is important to note that keeping someone’s photos in a wallet is like carrying one’s significant others around. This example reflects that Lau expected her loyal fans to maintain an emotional intimacy with her.

During the dinner, this emotional intimacy was further intensified when she gave away a pillow with her photo printed on it to one of her most devoted fans. She added, “You are bringing me home. Hope your husband won’t be jealous. You may hold me tight in bed tonight.” Fans responded with laughter and one of them shouted, “She won’t be getting any sleep tonight.”

Although Lau’s joke is open to various interpretations, its connection to her favorite character is noteworthy. Taking advantage of the fictional character, the gender of the actress, and the homosocial environment of the dinner, this joke opens up a safe space that accommodates the possibility for the intermingling of sexual desires evoked by both onstage performance and offstage socializing, a space that allows both the actress and fans to experience the fluidity of gendered identities and sexualities.

When looking at the “commodified intimacy” between Lau and her fans, we also find that the exchanges of different kinds of capital are rather complex. While Lau’s stardom is largely based on her fans’ continuous loyalty, what she gains is not merely socioeconomic capital, but also moral support. In return, fans’ emotional intimacy with Lau is channeled not only onstage, but also offstage through tokens such as the pillow and ambiguous jokes.
Live Recordings, Imagined Space, and Archiving Intimacy

In addition to different roles that fans play in the process of fostering emotional intimacy with their idols, I also observed the importance of recordings in archiving this intimacy. Fans’ connections to their idols can also be channeled and cultivated through listening to, making, and keeping recordings. With the advancement of technology, fans have gone beyond collecting photos, newspaper and magazine clippings, and commercially available video and audio recordings to creating private, bootleg recordings. When the prohibition of unauthorized recordings was not strict prior to the 1990s, some fans made both video and audio bootleg recordings both in Hong Kong and overseas. Most of them were audio recordings and photos because audio recorders and cameras were more affordable and portable than video cameras.\(^\text{11}\) People brought these recordings home as souvenirs. Now, in the internet era, some of these “by-products” of live performances have been widely shared on open platforms like YouTube and the websites of Cantonese opera stars. This section discusses the relationships between bootleg recordings, fandom, and stardom. I focus on the roles of these recordings in (re)creating and

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\(^{11}\) When portable video recorders became an affordable good in the early 1990s, issues of copyright and piracy—in both pop music and Cantonese opera—had already become a common concern of the society. Unauthorized video recordings of live performances were mostly banned.
archiving fans’ emotional intimacy with their idols.

Creating and Maintaining Fan Communities

Watching or listening to recordings is often considered to be an experience that is not as authentic as attending live performances. Yet experiencing recordings in some cases has the same power as attending live performances. According to David Novak, recordings constitute “socialities” of performance and create musical communities (2013: 30). In his study of Japanoise, Novak describes how most listeners encounter the genre through recordings, and emphasizes that it is the recordings that connect listeners and allow them to imagine themselves as members of a community. Likewise, bootleg recordings of Cantonese opera that are shared on YouTube share a similar function. Many people are introduced to and become fans of the earlier female wenwusheng—such as Lung Kim-sang and her teacher Yam Kim-fai—through their audio and visual recordings when they are no longer active on stage. Such recordings play a crucial role in both forming and maintaining fan communities, especially of those inactive, retired, and deceased stars.

“Noise” as a Signifier of Liveness

It is also noteworthy that the quality of many YouTube recordings is generally poor: many excerpts are incomplete or interrupted, the balance between singing and the accompanying instrumental music is rarely consistent, and the noise in the audience sometimes obscures the music. However, feedback is relatively positive and many commentators are grateful for the opportunity to hear the live performances. The firsthandedness and liveness of the recordings compensate for the quality deficiencies. The presence of the “noise” (from the perspective of studio recording) and the rawness of the sound do not devalue these live recordings. Taking a bootleg recording of Lung Kim-sang and Mui Suet-sze’s “Kneeling by the Pond” from The
Outburst of a Shrew as an example,\textsuperscript{12} even though a viewer reports that the voices of the actresses are seriously overwhelmed by audience laughter,\textsuperscript{13} another counters that “you can hear the music when your heart is quiet [listening to it carefully without distraction]” (Bootleg Recording of “Kneeling by the Pond,” 2013). Listening to or watching these recordings from Lung’s time is sometimes like an act of pilgrimage to experience—or imagine—the allure of a superstar who is no longer active today. Rather than simply calling the conventionally unwanted sound “noise,” I suggest that the quality of these bootleg recordings often yields to the significance of the constructed transcendent feeling of experiencing live performances of the (semi-)retired star.

\textit{Authenticating Intimacy}

By analyzing fans’ somatic experiences—such as a pounding heart, tears, and cheers—when encountering their \textit{enka} idol, Yano argues that this kind of bodily engagement authenticates fan-star relationships as real (2004: 45). In the example I describe above, recordists document not only the sound, but also firsthand bodily experiences such as laughter, tears, and excitement. Fans’ actual physical presence and bodily experiences at live performances compared to the “lesser” experiences of listening to or watching a recording create a hierarchy of fans in terms of generation, degree of devotion, and thus authenticity. A fan’s very presence at a live performance suggests stronger physical, personal, and emotional connections to the idol. It not only grants these fans more “emotional capital” (Stevens 2004: 60), but also denotes the most ardent fans, who have been following Lung since the 1970s or 1980s. The act of sharing these recordings in the internet era also reflects unwavering loyalty.

\textsuperscript{13} One of the users writes that “I can only hear laughter in the audience. I cannot hear what the two actresses [Lung Kim-sang and Mui Suet-sze] speak and sing in the recording. What a pity!” (Live Recording of “Kneeling by the Pond,” 2013).
While recordists had experienced the live performances, those who listen to (and watch) the recordings on the internet can (re)imagine themselves being at a live performance through the “noise.” The liveness that is created by the “noise” provides a feeling of “being there” in the audience. In spite of the mediation, the “noise” still contributes to an aura or a sense of space that accommodates listeners’ (re)imaginations of their firsthand experiences in the theater.

Archiving Intimacy

With the rise of smartphones in the past decade, photo and video taking, and audio recording have become more convenient. During my study, it was not uncommon to see fans making bootleg recordings with their smartphones. Even with the increasing enforcement against such unauthorized recordings, recordists are still keen to show these recordings and photos to others. Yet, in order to avoid getting into trouble, they tend to carefully share the recordings only with those they trust instead of putting them on open platforms such as YouTube. For instance, Jenny (a pseudonym), one of Lau Wai-ming’s fans, knew that I was unable to attend certain performances and sent me some photos and videos that she took with her smartphone. When she shared them with me via WhatsApp Messenger\(^{\text{14}}\) on her smartphone, she added that everything was taken in secret and told me not to disclose any of her files. I was shocked when I received the files from her because she was a loyal fan and a frequent volunteer for Lau, sometimes, ironically, putting up the “no photography, video, or audio recordings” signs herself at the performance venues. Given that she was known and recognized by Lau, her assistant, and many other fans, she was definitely taking the risk of being caught when documenting the

\(^{14}\) A popular smartphone app in Hong Kong, WhatsApp Messenger allows users to send unlimited text messages, photos, videos, and voice messages for free.
performances without permission.\textsuperscript{15}

Besides the embarrassment and legal responsibility when being caught, taking photo and video is also a distracting act that presents recordists from concentrating on the live performance. In order to make sure the idol is filmed, recordists focus on the camera or smartphone screen and may miss the larger onstage picture. These photos or videos mainly capture the idol, leaving out other actors who are not too close to the idol. Moreover, since the recordings are usually taken in secret, both the visual and sound qualities are generally poor. So why do fans still sacrifice their attention for making poor-quality recordings?

As suggested by Novak, “[l]iveness is about the connections between performance and embodiment, which transform passing moments into repeatable encounters of listening” (2013: 30). Not only do the material objects allow fans to actualize and archive their experiences in the live performances, these recordings also create a transcendent space that they can revisit. Moreover, in her discussion on the recordings of live performances of American prima donna Beverly Sills, Nancy Guy writes that “[e]xperiential memory, as opposed to factual memory, can be understood as the difference between a person remembering herself (and how she felt) watching an opera versus remembering that she saw the opera” (2015: 160, original emphasis). Likewise, some fans of Cantonese opera are more concerned about archiving their embodied memories (how they feel) by capturing the images and sound of their idols rather than documenting the general picture of the show (what they see). In sum, these live recordings are a powerful medium for fans to simultaneously archive experiential memories, foster emotional attachments with their idols, and claim their authenticity as ardent fans.

\textsuperscript{15} From the distances and angles of the photos and videos, I assume that she was sitting in one of the front rows surrounded by other fans. My assumption was also supported by her habit of purchasing tickets in the front rows and sitting with other fans.
Fandom: Rituals of Performing “Chaos”

Fans play a vital role in simultaneously performing and fostering the stardom of their favorite female wenwusheng. At the beginning of this chapter, I gave my impressions of going to a Lau Wai-ming performance for the first time. It was the spectacle of gifts given by the fans—flower baskets and standing banners—in the lobby that displayed Lau’s stardom. Making spectacles, both sonic and visual, at performance venues was an attempt by fans to create or reflect the star status of their idols. This section investigates the various ways that fans make a star.

Creating Spectacles

Visual spectacles at performance venues were a crucial component in defining stardom. Not just decorations, flower baskets and standing banners were objects that displayed the sheer size of a generous, loyal fan base and thus an actress’s status. Taking Lau Wai-Ming again as an example, some actors seemed to have developed managerial strategies in creating visual spectacles by fans. While both flower baskets and retractable banners were gifts presented by fans, the latter were reusable and were kept by Lau. Every time that Lau had performances and fan club dinners, she displayed these banners. Flower baskets, however, needed to be purchased every time she performed. For convenience, either her assistant or one or two volunteers from among her most reliable fans placed group orders for flower baskets at a florist on behalf of other fans. Then they collected money from individuals at performance venues. Even though this kind of arrangement depersonalized the gift offering, it guaranteed the number of flower baskets being shown and thus the size of the spectacle. In this sense, making Lau a star overshadowed fortifying a stronger personal connection between Lau and her fans.
Memorabilia displayed by fans were an indispensable component of making visual spectacles at live performances. They included T-shirts, vests, caps, tote bags, and paper or plastic fans on which are printed an idol’s name and photos (see Figs. 4.1). While some of these items are sold or given away for free by actors or their troupes, some are made or customized by fans themselves (for example, the plastic fan in Fig. 4.1). Displaying the actress’s images and names on clothing and personal belongings is a way to make fans identifiable and thus to show the size of a fan base.

Both visual and sonic spectacles were made by fans both during and after performances. During performances, fans applauded, blew whistles, and waved glow sticks when their idol entered the stage. This was a rather new phenomenon in Cantonese opera in the past decade or two and some of my interlocutors believed that it was adapted from pop music culture. However, this phenomenon was not entirely acceptable in the Cantonese opera circle, and such fans were sometimes criticized for “making chaos.” One of my interlocutors commented that, if fans clap every time that their idol enters the stage, they clap for the actress, not for her rendition of the character in the play. This interlocutor added that actors and fans should consider that “serving the characters” is the primary job of professional actors (Kwan, interview, 2013). In other words, during performances actors should not “be themselves” but the characters that they play, and fans should evaluate the actors based on their performances rather than clapping mechanically for the actors.

Criticism of fans’ mechanical and untimely applause sometimes put female wenwusheng into predicaments. For instance, Lau Wai-ming’s fans have been known (or notorious) for excessive applause and whistles. While she believes that her fans should not be restricted in their ways of expressing enthusiasm and support, Lau also admitted that the applause and whistles
could possibly affect performances by causing actors to become distracted.\textsuperscript{16} From the perspective of her fans, while some also agreed that applause and whistle blowing were sometimes too mechanical and obligatory, others insisted that this sonic spectacle was necessary to reflect Lau’s star status.

\textit{“Chasing Stars”\textsuperscript{17}: Post-Performance Spectacles}

In the course of my study, spectacles continued after the shows ended. Some fans waited for their idols at the backstage door after a show. Established actors were usually picked up in vehicles by their assistants or drivers. When fans saw their idols leaving, they usually waved their hands and said goodbye to the actors. When a superstar of Cantonese opera, for example Lung Kim-sang in 2014 (see Fig. 1.3), left in her vehicle, the crowd sometimes blocked the road, trying to get close and take photos. Some fans even chased the vehicle when it was moving from the crowd. It is noteworthy that, although this kind of scene is common for pop music stars in Hong Kong, it is still rare for Cantonese opera stars.

During my interview with Lau Wai-ming, she revealed that she realized the importance of this spectacle and the “ritual” of fans greeting a moving vehicle. She implied that she enjoyed being surrounded by fans after a show or, to a certain extent, purposefully let this scene happen. When she recalled her relationships with fans, she shared that after a few years of being a full-time actress, she gradually understood that she needed to slow down her vehicle in order to allow her fans to greet her (interview, 2013). Despite the exhaustion after a long night of performance, she would rather accommodate the crowd so that more fans could greet her on the way. Not only a thoughtful gesture, it also prolonged the “chasing star ritual” and encouraged the performance.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16} Lau mentioned that actors may forget their lines when being distracted by an untimely whistle. \textsuperscript{17} “Fans pursuing stars” is often translated as “追星” (literally “chasing stars”) in Cantonese.}
of fandom in order to accentuate (or make the illusion of) her status of being a star, despite the fact that the crowd was never as large as that of other superstars such as Lung.

**Conclusion: Performing Fandom, Performing Stardom**

Through examining various fan roles, I suggest that, unlike star making in pop culture, which is primarily manipulated by production companies, fans played an indispensable and leading role in their idols’ paths to stardom. In the course of climbing the ladder of fame, female wenwusheng usually began accumulating their supporters when playing minor roles and performing in smaller-scale shows. It took a few years or even over a decade for a novice actress to be able to attract a considerable core supporters and achieve star status. During this process, the continuous support—economic, social, moral, and volunteer—of fans was essential.

Actresses understood the importance of maintaining good interpersonal relationships with their supporters. Thus their active engagement with fans in offstage social events had become imperative to the process of stardom. This offstage mingling allowed fans, to different degrees, to cross the boundary between public and private lives of actresses. Consequently, the offstage personas that fans perceived, consumed, and pursued were largely created through direct interactions rather than the heavily mediated images that were portrayed by the press. Fans’ firsthand socialization with their favorite actresses not only provided them stronger agency in both processes of star making and star image making, but also actualized and strengthened the intimate sentiments with their idols.

Intimate sentiments were more easily fortified through firsthand experiences. The firsthandedness was not only acquired through offstage fan-idol mingling, but was also well exemplified in fans’ valuing live performances and recordings—and their physical presence and bodily experiences—over the quality of their idols’ performances. For fans of (semi-)retired or
deceased female *wenwusheng*, while attending live performances and direct offstage mingling had become impossible, worship still took place via material objects such as (bootleg) recordings and magazine clippings. Although I was not able to compare the effects of live and studio recordings on fans, I suggest that live recordings were still powerful in engaging fans and fostering their intimate sentiments regardless of sound quality.

That fans of currently active female *wenwusheng* made unauthorized recordings during live performances was a telling example of authenticating fan-star relationships and archiving their bodily experiences. It also demonstrated that the resulting emotional attachments with the idols were sometimes more important than the very audio and visual enjoyment of live performances. Moreover, it partially explained why fans were often viewed by practitioners as “ignorant groupies” when they neglected the quality of performances and recordings.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my interest in studying fandom and stardom began with my informants’ criticism of Lau Wai-ming’s undeserved fame and her “ignorant groupie” fans. The cases of Lau and other rising female *wenwusheng* exemplified a reciprocal relationship between fandom and stardom. On the one hand, fans understood that their continuing devotion largely relied on frequently seeing their idols—in both stage performances and offstage mingling at social events. On the other hand, actors needed a sizable fan base and fans’ unwavering devotion to define their star status. Stardom was reflected by fan behavior and reactions both inside and outside theaters. The manifestation of an actress’s marketability and star status relied not entirely on her onstage performances, but also on her fandom.

Fans renewed and fortified their zeal and loyalty by continuously experiencing liveness in performances as well as partial involvement in their idols’ (semi-)private lives. Fan support and loyalty were perpetuated through the exchange of emotional attachments with idols. To conclude,
rather than simply viewing fans as a crowd of bewitched, ignorant groupies who passively consume what their idols offer, we can broaden the understanding of Cantonese opera fandom by studying how fan engagements actively contribute to the process of making an idol a star. The performance of fandom is also the performance of stardom.
Chapter 6

Queering Female Wenwusheng:
Cross-dressing Practice as Third Space in Opera and Cinema

Introduction

Rather than regarding Yam Kim-fai as a man, it is more accurate to say she is loved by thousands of fans. Those who chase Yam Kim-fai are not men, but a whole bunch of wealthy ladies.
[...]
The title “female husband” (nü zhong zhangfu) is not really suitable for an ordinary woman who has a man’s temperament. But we should grant Yam Kim-fai this privilege. On stage, she always appears as a “male husband” (nanren zhangfu); inside herself, she is a woman.
For this reason, people who see her performance for the first time may not believe she is a woman. They always show their doubt by saying, “If you say Yam Kim-fai is a woman, I will not believe that!” This is the success of Yam Kim-fai’s art. She can perform impeccably without showing any trace of femininity (nüren yiwei). She is filled with manly manners (xumei qigai).
The question “Who is Yam Kim-fai’s lover?” is asked by many fans. Let me explain to you in detail. There are two kinds of lovers Yam Kim-fai has: lovers in the “broader sense” (guangyi) and lovers in the “narrower sense” (xiayi). The former refers to the countless fans of which many dream of becoming her lover and follow her around. They include married women, young unmarried ladies, schoolgirls, and even working women.
[...]

Shangguan Yunhua 1946 (235): 8

While some studies suggest that cross-dressers in the performing arts are presenting an idealized womanhood or femininity (Kano 2001; Tian 2000) and manhood (Robertson 1998), these scholars still approach the effects of performances within sex and/or gender dichotomies.
By looking at female wenwusheng’s performances, my study of women’s cross-dressing in Cantonese opera attempts to go beyond simply asking whether these female performers also create the ideal manhood or masculinity from women’s perspectives. Marjorie Garber argues that cross-dressers should be studied as cross-dressers (my emphasis) and as a “third term.”
Extrapolating from her argument, I study female wenwusheng as a performative space for new
cultural and social possibilities. I consider the significance of female wenwusheng beyond a subcategory or a style of the wenwusheng tradition writ large. They are neither “male substitutes” nor “imitations of male actors.” The resulting thirdness in female wenwusheng performance emerges as a space that accommodates the possibility of intertwining the fantasies evoked by wenwusheng performance, as well as the fluidities of gendered identities and sexualities that are experienced by both actresses and audiences.

My ethnographic studies in Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how female wenwusheng and fans manipulate offstage mingling to create various kinds of meanings of the onstage performance to meet their own needs. This chapter explores the star image of Yam Kim-fai from three mediated perspectives: the entertainment press, cinema, and print presentations of Yam’s own self-reflections. In this way, this chapter investigates Yam as an intertextually constructed cultural icon of Hong Kong.

A Print-made Star

Entertainment Press: Another Public Stage

Tabloids have been a major source in Chinese opera studies. In her writings on how the rise of tabloids in the early Republican era (1911–1949) helped make national stars of Peking opera actors, Catherine Yeh (2003) suggests that tabloids served as another public stage where actors could extend or contradict their operatic persona and create a “culture of the voyeur” (23). By changing the social status of actors and their forms of patronage, the rise of the entertainment print industry created national stars for large-scale consumption (2003; 2004).

Nonetheless, the credibility of tabloid newspapers and magazines is one of the primary obstacles to studying the early history of Cantonese opera (Yung 2012: 129–30), and extends also to biographies and memoirs of performers that I encountered during my archival research.
First of all, these materials often do not provide the exact dates of the events, incidents, or occurrences in everyday life that they describe. Second, the way these narratives are organized also increases the degree of confusion because many of them are not written chronologically, but are arranged according to the stories, themes, or people who are involved. Without dates, it is hard for researchers to verify particular data even with additional supporting materials. Third, some narratives are written in a relatively dramatic way in order to make the texts more entertaining. The most doubtful components are the conversations and the ethnographic-like details in the texts. For instance, in Wu Liren’s *Biography of Yam Kim-Fai (ren jian hui zhuangji)* (1990), not only was the biography published (and more likely written) after Yam’s death, but many narratives sound like first-hand accounts without referring to any sources, which makes the biography less trustworthy.

Portrayals of actors’ daily and personal lives may fulfill consumers’ curiosity about the authenticity of their onstage personas. However, these print commodities never function as an objective report on or spokesperson for the actors. While reporting some factual data, these materials also reflect the audiences’ interests, and reshape their perceptions of the performers and thus of their performances. Therefore, my use of tabloids, biographies, and memoirs is more for the purpose of analyzing the discourses circulated in the press than treating them as primary sources of factual data regarding particular events. By disclosing or making up Yam’s everyday lives, these print commodities create a bridge not only between her and the general public, but also between the fantasy world—stage performances and films—and the real life of the actress.

Entertainment print commodities also create fans. Reading entertainment news provides a new medium through which fans can consume Cantonese opera outside theaters. Through letters from readers, theatergoers come to know whether other fans think and feel the same way they
do—even if the communities of fans and thus these discussions have been (partially) made up by
the press in order to boost their business or the popularities of particular performers. By studying
entertainment print commodities, I examine how this “public stage” works to create fandoms,
“image[s] of public personalit[ies]” of actors (Yeh 2003: 15), and social and cultural meanings of
female wenwusheng performance.

Cantonese Opera Entertainment Press

Entertainment periodicals featuring Cantonese opera did not exist until the early 1990s.¹ During the twentieth century, information regarding the active actors mostly appeared in film
magazines, and cultural or entertainment sections (wenhua ban or yule ban) in daily newspapers.
Length, quality, and credibility of these materials vary. While a significant portion advertises
performances, they also comprise trivia, short articles to promote actors and their performances,
or short review articles about particular shows. Articles featuring detailed interviews with actors
are rare.

Not considered to be serious or educational materials, many tabloids and entertainment
magazines are not kept in libraries or archives. The only entertainment periodicals of Cantonese
opera performers published prior to the 1990s that I could access were Yilin (literally, “Art land”)
and Ling Sing² (literally, “Stars”).³ Both Yilin and Ling Sing were bi-weekly popular magazines
that covered both local and foreign movies, movie stars and directors, and Cantonese opera
performers and performances. The major focus of these magazines was the local film industry.

¹ Today, at least four magazines on Cantonese opera are published monthly or every two months in Hong Kong: Yueju Quyi Yuekan (Cantonese Opera Magazine), Xiqu Pinwe (Hong Kong Opera Preview), Xiqu Zhi Lü (Journey to Chinese Opera and Drama), and Xiandai Xi qu (Modern Chinese Opera Magazine).
² “Ling xing” in pinyin Romanization. Even though “ling xing” is a generic word for stars, in the context of Hong Kong, “ling” specifically means “actors of Chinese opera” and “xing” refers to “film stars.”
³ Yilin was founded in Hong Kong in 1937. Ling Sing was founded in Guangzhou in 1931 and was closed in the
autumn of 1938 due to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The editors then moved to Hong Kong. After
WWII ended, Ling Sing resumed in Hong Kong in February 1946. The Resource Centre of the Hong Kong Film
As most of the film actors between the 1920s and 1960s in Hong Kong were Cantonese opera actors, these materials are helpful in studying the early construction of Yam’s star image.

“Female Husband” in Print: Asexualization and Resexualization

Yam Kim-fai was born in Nanhai, Guangdong in 1913 and began learning Cantonese opera around the age of fourteen under her maternal aunt Xiao Jiaotian, who was herself a female wenwusheng in an all-female troupe (Lo, ed. 2004: 7; Yam 2012: 18, 25). In her early teenage years, Yam was active in female troupes performing in rural areas. At the age of seventeen, she became more active on urban stages in Guangzhou. Yam moved to Macau in 1936 and lived there until after the end of WWII. During this period, she did some occasional performances in Hong Kong (Leung 2013: 19–20). By the time the war was over, she became increasingly active in both Cantonese opera and cinema in Hong Kong. She finally settled there and rose to superstar status in both media in the 1950s.

Yam is one of the actors who most frequently appears in print. Contents vary from her off-stage gendered identities, to marital status and personal life, to the gifts she received from her fans. There were rumors involving her and her huadan partners throughout her entire career. Her gendered identities, gendered roles, and sexualities caught much attention from the early entertainment press.

The chapter’s opening epigraph comes from a Ling Sing (235) article entitled “This ‘Female Husband’ Has Too Many Lovers. Yam Kim-fai Has Taken a Third Lover” (Shangguan 1946: 8), a reference to her same-sex partner, whom I will introduce below. While Yam has been more frequently referred to in mainstream media and by her fans as “opera aficionado’s lover” (ximi qingren), where most of those aficionados are women, “female husband” better captures the sexualized discourse surrounding her image. In this section, by borrowing Jennifer
Robertson’s (1998) study of takarazuka fanzines, I explore the processes of asexualization and resexualization of Yam, as epitomized by the phrase “female husband,” in the entertainment press to illustrate how an alternative and yet safe masculinity was created and legitimized for female consumers.

Female fans pursuing same-sex rather than male stars was an acceptable practice in Cantonese opera, Shaoxing yueju opera, and takarazuka theater. Robertson shows that some takarazuka fanzines did not avoid the topic of female homoerotic desire evoked in performances. Rather, for instance, a fanzine author tried to suggest that pursuing a takarazuka otokoyaku (male impersonator) was ideal for young women in a patriarchal society. Frankly acknowledging sexual fantasies of young women, this fanzine author also illustrated that choosing “same-sex love” and being infatuated with an otokoyaku was an optimal solution for both these young women and their families “because both partners are female, this being a case of same-sex love, their fathers won’t scold them” (185). By blurring the line between sexual fantasies with otokoyaku, and the actual same-sex practices of female fans with their partners, the fanzine author explicitly encouraged homoerotic desires and same-sex practices inside and outside the theater (184–87).

Another intriguing issue raised in Robertson’s study is that, even though the gender ambiguity of these otokoyaku offstage was sometimes considered social deviance, they were still perceived as asexual. Their gender ambiguity is characterized as “sexy but sexless” (81)—sexually attractive without any sexual activities being involved. From my perspective, these actresses were first asexualized (“sexless,” “asexual”), and then resexualized (“sexy”) to cater to female consumers.
Compared to potential boyfriends of young women, *otokoyaku* were depicted as sexless and thus non-threatening. The way *otokoyaku* were asexualized was not to silence their biological sex. Rather, their non-male biological sex—female—was highlighted in order to remind society that they were unable to conduct heterosexual sexual intercourse with female fans. Asexuality was especially important not only to the audiences but also to the actresses themselves. In order to keep the theater “pure,” all *takarazuka* actresses during their tenure were required to remain unmarried and allegedly heterosexually inexperienced (81).

The process of resexualization was facilitated by forging a consistency between the onstage and offstage gendered identities of *otokoyaku*. Some *otokoyaku* noticed that fans had a stereotype of what they should look like not only onstage but also offstage. *Otokoyaku* were expected to dress and act like a man in daily life. They were perceived as better than men because they were “more handsome and more refined” (81–82, 185).

**Asexualizing Yam: The Absent Relationship with a Man**

In the “readers’ inquiries” section in various issues of *Yilin* published between August 1937 and June 1938, there was an increasing interest in Yam Kim-fai’s personal life and requests for her photos and contact information. However, the editors were generally not very informative when it came to Yam’s personal life. One possible reason is that Yam was not active in Hong Kong, but mostly in Macau and Guangzhou until after the Japanese surrender in WWII in 1945. In Issue 18 of *Yilin*, when answering why they did not report Yam Kim-fai’s news, the editors wrote that “she did not have much news for us to report” (1937).⁴ In Issue 31 of the same magazine, the editors admitted that they were not close to Yam (1938).⁵ From these responses, I

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⁴ The original text is "她沒有甚麼消息可以給我們發表".
⁵ The original text is "我們跟任姑娘非常隔膜".
assume that Yilin, or perhaps the press in Hong Kong before the end of WWII, might not have had enough connections, information, or photos to reveal more about Yam’s personal life.

While the stereotype of promiscuity has always been applied to professional actors due to the proximity of male and female actors in the workplace and during performances, news of Yam’s relationships or marriage(s) with men and of her child(ren) was basically absent—or silenced—in the entertainment press. Rarely associating her with any socially gendered role of either men or women, the press played a significant role in asexualizing Yam. Even though some readers asked about her marital status and children, she was always reported as unmarried and childless (Yilin 1937[12], [13], [14], [18]). Distancing her from any associations with sexual relations with men—being a girlfriend, a wife, or a mother—simultaneously de-gendered her and asexualized her as a (hetero)sexually-inexperienced being.

Yet, some recent sources reveal Yam’s relationship with a man called Huang Su. Wu Liren’s Biography of Yam Kim-Fai (1990) mentions in passing that Yam Kim-fai was married to Huang Su. Information on Huang Su is scarce partly because he lived in Macau (Tsui 2007: 47–52). Given that Yilin was based in Hong Kong and Ling Sing was based in Guangzhou before WWII and then in Hong Kong after the war, these magazines might not have had ready access to information on Yam Kim-fai’s personal life in Macau.

The most detailed information that I could access on this topic was provided by Yam Bing-yee, who lived with Kim-fai in Macau until after the end of WWII. In her memoir, Bing-yee clarified that Yam and Huang were not married but were domestic partners. Huang was married to another woman when he met Kim-fai. An admirer of Kim-fai, Huang was a businessman and had extra money to take care of Kim-fai and her family during her earlier career in Macau (Tsui 2007: 47–50).
When describing this relationship, Bing-yee feminized Kim-fai, saying that “in her feminine attire, Sister Yam was tall and slim (gaogao shoushou), extremely sweet and gentle (wenrou wuxian). When she was with Uncle Huang Su, she really looked like a wise wife, a good mother (xianqi liangmu)” (ibid.: 50). Bing-yee emphasized that Huang loved Kim-fai very much. Even after Kim-fai became “good friends” (hao pengyou) with Pak Suet-sin (b. 1928), Kim-fai’s then life-long stage and domestic female partner, Huang did not complain or leave Kim-fai. However, Bing-yee added that “whoever appeared and whatever happened [in their relationship], Sister Yam was still Uncle Gun’s [Huang Su] intimate friend (hongyan zhiji) when he died” (ibid.). One day in the early 1950s, Kim-fai was very sick and Huang did not want her to continue traveling back and forth between their home and Pak’s. Huang selflessly suggested that Kim-fai move to Pak’s home and let Pak take care of her; this was effectively the end of their domestic partnership (ibid.: 53–54). Not only affirming the relationship between Yam and Huang, by paralleling this relationship to Yam’s with Pak, Bing-yee also attested to the rumor that the Yam-Pak relationship was beyond friendship, the significance of which I will develop later in this chapter.

Resexualizing Yam: Homoerotic Emotional Intimacy in Print

From the entertainment print materials published from the 1930s to today, I found that homoeroticism is both overtly stated and covertly hinted at when writing about female wenwusheng. Homoeroticism both between fans and female wenwusheng, as well as between these actresses and their rumored same-sex partners are depicted and evoked. To a certain extent, the press created a community of people who were attracted to homoeroticism because it provided a platform for fans to share and read about the reception of others in order to make sense of their own spectatorships and homoerotic desires. When both same-sex desires and
relationships were not explicitly narrated or discussed in mainstream media and everyday life in the mid-twentieth century, early traces of alternative desires and lifestyles could be found in the entertainment press.

**A Shared Lover**

Like *Takarazuka* fanzines, during the process of creating emotional intimacy between fans and stars, the entertainment press also attempted to discipline Cantonese opera fandom. The idea of sharing an idol-lover was promoted by both *Takarazuka* fanzines and Shangguan’s article. One *Takarazuka* fanzine article suggested that fans treat the star as the lover of many fans—“our lover,” not as a “personal lover” of their own. They were also reminded not to be disappointed when realizing how many rivals they had for the idol’s affection (Robertson 1998: 184).

Similarly, Shangguan wrote that he was “asked by many fans,” “who is Yam Kim-fai’s lover?” In this article, he acted like a spokesperson for Yam—expressing her love to her fans—by referring to her “countless fans” as lovers in the “broader-sense” (1946 [235]: 8). As in the *Takarazuka* fanzine, the word “countless” here reminded Yam’s fans that this imaginary lover did not belong to any one individual, but was shared by all. This made Yam an object of desire who was consumed by her fans en masse.

**“Female Husband”: Safe Lover, Legitimate Masculinity**

As a “shared lover,” Yam Kim-fai was also a safe lover who would not evoke men’s jealousy. Yam Bing-yee spent much of her childhood with Yam Kim-fai’s female fans who were prostitutes and dancing girls. When the prostitutes and dancing girls took her to work at banquets and dancing halls, they introduced her as “Yam Kim-fai’s younger cousin” to their male patrons. These patrons just glanced at her and then started chitchatting with their female escorts about
Yam Kim-fai. Bing-Yee explains that chasing a female idol was additionally beneficial for these female fans because their male patrons never got jealous of another woman (Tsui 2007: 16–18). In a patriarchal society, a woman’s body, including that of women of humble status—such as prostitutes, concubines, dancing girls, and servants—was very often considered the property of men or households, both symbolically and legally. Fighting and killing caused by improper proximity between male actors and their female fans was not uncommon in the early twentieth century. Some top male stars were killed by the husbands or boyfriends of their female fans due to adultery or scandals (Chen 2007: 200–05; Ng 2015: 112; Tai, interview, 2013). Therefore, women supporting a female rather than a male star was more acceptable in society.

A similar taboo was also observed by Jin Jiang in the all-female yueju opera in modern China. Jiang explains that familial and social relationships were the primary concerns in the traditional patriarchy. The silence surrounding intimate relationships between women was not necessarily a result of social taboos because these relationships were considered to cause no threat to patriarchal authority. Jiang suggests that husbands and fathers “were at ease” when their female family members attended “women’s opera” because “nothing serious could happen between women” (2009: 125).

While being in a heterosexual relationship or marriage is considered a way of possessing a woman, a “female husband”—a male impersonator—was not just acceptable but, in fact, preferable for the predominantly female fans of Cantonese opera. From this perspective, as a woman, Yam Kim-fai was never able to possess the bodies of these female fans in the way that men did, despite the fans’ emotional devotion. Therefore she became a legitimate, “safer” idol of embodying masculinity for her female fans.
If theater is a fantasy world and a successful sheng performance is to display idealized masculinity, then male sheng stars may embody a potential threat to the patriarchal order in a homosocially female audience. By contrast, the masculinity embedded in the asexualized image of Yam was relatively safe and containable. Thus, this female masculinity was also more legitimate.

**Authenticity of the Female Wenwusheng Body**

Is that a guy or a woman? This actor is so tall and has a thick, deep voice. But the face looks like a woman’s. … What’s its name? Chan Chak-lui? [Getting more confused] So is it a guy or a woman?

A conversation overheard at the Koshan Theatre, December 26, 2014

Generally speaking, the interplay between an actress’s “authenticity” and an audience’s fantasies occupies a crucial space in queering female wenwusheng performances. First, I will examine how today’s practitioners perceive themselves in terms of gendered personalities, self-identifications, and sexualities. Second, I will investigate the kinds of social and cultural meanings accentuated by the consistencies and inconsistencies between onstage and offstage personas in female wenwusheng performance.

**Gendered Personalities and Role-types**

Almost all my interlocutors—both audience members and female wenwusheng themselves—considered an actress’s decision to learn sheng role-types as directly related to her personality. For example, when I asked my female wenwusheng interlocutors about their own choices, they usually started by talking about themselves in a gendered way. They usually characterized themselves as relatively active and energetic people, who are not coquettish, elegant, graceful, or sweet enough to learn dan role-types:

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6 Gender of the third person is not indicated in spoken Cantonese. The word “kui” refers to both “he” and “she.”
I’m rather straightforward and frank (shuanglang). I’m not that kind of wishy-washy (ng de ng diu, Ca.)⁷ girl (Lai W., interview, 2013).

In my first lesson, the teacher told me to learn some fundamentals first. Then she twisted my hand to form a lanhua shou [“orchid hand,” a gesturing technique of dan]. I immediately noticed that she was teaching me to play a girl [dan]. [ . . . ] I didn’t tell her which role-type I wanted to learn. But I had chosen sheng. It’s because I’m not a coy person (ng hai gam nau ling, Ca.).⁵ I don’t care too much about being vain (ng hai gam zi zing, Ca.).⁹ After the first lesson, I told my dad ‘oh no! [in a worried tone]. The teacher taught me to play a girl [dan]. What should I do?’” (Yam, interview, 2013).

The adjectives both Lau and Yam used to describe themselves are highly gendered. In Hong Kong, “wishy-washy” (ng de ng diu, Ca.) is often used to describe people, especially dependent, immature, spoiled individuals or girls, who have a hard time or who are not willing to make up their minds or take actions. “Coy” (nau ling, Ca.) and “being vain” (zi zing, Ca.) usually refer to women and sometimes men in a derogatory way. On the contrary, “straightforward and frank” does not have feminine connotations and is often used to describe people who are clear-minded and carefree, likely to directly express their thoughts and feelings. As exemplified by Lau and Yam, many female wenwusheng considered their personalities as predetermining their choice of role-type.

The relationship between the gendered personhood and the gendered role-type in performance is not one-way. Some female wenwusheng have also been aware of how gender is performed in everyday life after learning the sheng role-types. Lau Wai-ming stated that she felt empowered and had fun “playing men” (zou naam zai,¹⁰ Ca.; literally, “being a young man”) in the early days of learning sheng. Being masculine and the resulting confidence even made her feel good in everyday life. She added that she could not distinguish herself from the characters

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⁷ The original wording is “唔嗲唔吊.”
⁸ The original wording is “唔係咁扭擰.”
⁹ The original wording is “唔係咁姿整.”
¹⁰ The original wording is “做男仔.”
that she played onstage. Nonetheless, she soon explained that she was affected by other female
sheng cohorts because she was young, silly, and naïve. Although she once thought that she was a
man, she emphasized that this period of time did not last long because she needed to work as a
secretary,\(^\text{11}\) which required her to wear high-heels and dresses. When she was narrating this in
the interview, I felt she had an urge to clarify that she no longer questioned her gendered
identities after at least three decades of performing sheng role-types, and that she had drawn a
clear line between stage and everyday life.

However, as previously discussed in Chapter 5, she seemed to be very conscious about
the importance of performing her onstage persona offstage. After making clear that she had no
desire to become a man, she also asserted, “If I looked and acted more like a man in everyday
life, I would have had more fans” (Lau W., interview, 2013). Her statement also reflects that
some fans are attracted to or expect consistency between female wenwusheng’s onstage gendered
presentations and their offstage appearances.

\textit{Mistaken Sex and Stage Name}

Revealed by the opening epigraph of this chapter, not every audience member knew Yam
Kim-fai was a woman. The misreading can also be explained in several ways. Apart from her
successful performances, Yam’s mistaken biological sex also came from her stage name. In the
early twentieth century, using stage names was the norm. The social status of Chinese opera
actors, among other entertainment performers, was very low in dynastic China. Traditionally
speaking, Chinese opera performers came from poor or opera families. Performing in public for a
living was considered to bring shame not only to the actors themselves but also to their

\footnote{11}\text{Lau Wai-ming has been practicing the sheng role-types since her teenage years. Before becoming a full-time Cantonese opera performer-teachers around 2004, she was working full-time as a secretary and spent weekday evenings and weekends practicing, performing, and teaching Cantonese opera.}
families. It became common for the performers (or their masters) to pick stage names instead of using their real family and given names. This social stigma of actors remains more or less ingrained in today’s Chinese society.

Stage names are highly gendered according to the genders of the role-types the performers practice. In Hong Kong, for sheng role-types, characters with Cantonese pronunciation such as “gim” (usually spelt as “kim”) (sword), “lung” (dragon), “long” (man), “haap” (swordsman), “fai” (bright) and “zeon” (usually spelt as “chun”) (handsome) are usually used for stage names. Using both “kim” and “fai” for her first name while keeping her family name, Yam’s stage name is undoubtedly male.

The misreading of Yam’s biological sex also reflects that, by the time Shangguan wrote his article, more than a decade after the repeal of the prohibition of coed troupes in 1933, female cross-dressing performance had already lost its popularity. Successful or active female sheng were relatively scarce. During and after the prohibition of coed performances, female troupes were marginalized; they performed in mostly rural areas or lower-ranking venues such as on the roofs of department store buildings. They were also lower paid, compared to the male troupes that were active in urban theaters (Luo n.d.: 56; Xie and Huang 1990: 54–56; Zhang 1990: 72). After the coed ban was lifted in 1933, a few female troupes remained active for a few years but finally faded out. Some renowned huadan from female troupes were invited by famous male stars to join them to form mighty coed troupes. Some female sheng performers from female

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12 This stereotype of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong changed around the early 1980s. Cantonese opera had been increasingly losing its popularity to TV, pop songs, and movies, which have signified urban life since the 1970s. In addition, with the rise of education and the economy, Hongkongers had better access to education and a variety of jobs. More people started to take performing Cantonese opera as a part-time job or interest rather than a life-long career.

13 These Chinese characters are “劍,” “龍,” “郎,” “俠,” “輝,” and “俊” respectively.
troupes changed their role-type to dan when joining coed companies or shifted their careers to the silver screen.

*Gendered Ambivalence: A “Man-Woman,” or an Ordinary Woman?*

Yam Kim-fai’s own reflections on her gendered identities over the course of her career are not much discussed in both the entertainment press and academic world. This section will focus on her memoir, examining how she viewed her own gendered identities as found in her *wenuwusheng* performances in different periods of time. I begin with three quotations from her writing:

Ever since I was a young child, I loved to perm my hair and wear makeup. In terms of personality, I was closer to female role-types. But my aunt [a female *xiaowu*] thought that I should follow her path to become a sheng performer because I was her disciple [. . .] (Yam 2012: 24).

Since I started learning Cantonese opera, I was chosen to learn male role-types … my aunt said that when I walked, I had no graceful-type of feminine beauty (*e’nuo pingting de nüxingmei*) [. . .] I was destined to play male role-types (ibid.: 176).

That night [after overhearing the commentary], I could not fall asleep in bed. I thought the so-called “ze sau ze goek”¹⁵ (Ca.; literally, “sister-hand-sister-foot,” meaning “sluggish”) was an accusation of women being weak and useless. It means that when they play male characters, they still can’t get rid of their innate femininity (*niüer jia de bense*). However, men could play female characters. The most famous ones who were still active onstage at that time included Qian Liqu (1888–1936), Chen Feinong (1899–1984), Su Yunlan, and so forth. No one had ever said they were “go sau go goek”¹⁶ (Ca.; literally, “brother-hand-brother-foot,” meaning “rough, manly manner”). Only women playing male characters were labeled as *ze sau ze goek*. This was an insult to women. I believed that we women could do whatever men do. So I decided to work hard, to study *zuogong* hard in

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¹⁴ This memoir was not originally a published book. It is a reprint of newspaper clippings from 1956. This reprint version was published in 2012 as a not-for-sale item by the Yam Kim-fai Research Project (*Ren Jian-hui yanjiu jihua*). According to the editor Tsang Ying-Sin (*Zeng Ying-qian*), this collection was originally published in a column called “Yam Kim-fai Self-Narration” (*Ren Jian-hui zishu*) in Wen Wei Po, a daily newspaper in Hong Kong, between June 1956 and October 31, 1956. The material was from a devoted fan of Yam, “Ms Ng,” who collected a copy of this column every day and kept them for decades until donating them to the Project. There are altogether 119 short essays. Judging from the writing style, word choice, and narration style, these essays do not look like as if they were written by ghostwriters or journalists. I believe they were very likely written by Yam Kim-fai herself.

¹⁵ The original text is “姐手姐腳”.

¹⁶ The original text is “哥手哥腳”.

order to make myself look majestic and heroic (weifeng linlin) without a trace of weak womanly manners (nüer routai). I need to protest today’s insult! (ibid.: 26–27).

Just as my interlocutors talked about their reasons for choosing sheng, Yam also took her gendered personalities, habits, and daily manners and habits into account. It was clear to her that learning sheng was not easy for women. Between the lines, she also revealed the misogynist bias toward actresses, especially female sheng. She noticed that she needed to work much harder in order to become as successful as other male performers—both male sheng and male dan. She seemed to notice that “innate femininities” (nüer routai) were obstacles to achieving success onstage.

Playing the sheng role-types also made Yam reflect on her gendered identities. The embodiment of masculinities in both performance and everyday life was seen as a process as well as a result of becoming a convincing female wenwusheng:

Since I was a young child, I loved sports. After growing older, I watched my aunt performing. Her masculinity and heroism (xiong jiu jiu zuofeng) [in performance] were what I yearned for (ibid.: 178).

I still had a shadow in my heart. I was worried that when I played men, I would have the ze sau ze goek problem. Therefore, when I had time, I paid close attention to some xiaosheng-type characters. I watched their behaviors, postures, manners, and styles of speech. I tried to understand and memorize [the details] in my heart. When I needed to play this type of character, I could imitate their presentations in order to get rid of some womanly movements (nüxing de dongzuo) (ibid.: 175–176).

When I was living in Guangzhou [in the early 1930s], if there was someone in special attire walking on the street, others would think her/him weird. Women and children would scream out loud and follow that person. When I performed in Hong Kong, I wore men’s clothes when going out and didn’t feel anything special. However, I dared not try it in Guangzhou. I had once tried going out in men’s attire. Some fans recognized my face. They mumbled to each other. [. . .] In addition, the police had banned strange clothing. Who dared take the risk? Therefore, in order not to get into trouble, I didn’t have a habit of wearing men’s clothes when I was in Guangzhou (ibid.: 180–81).
I am originally a weak, ordinary woman. Because of the stirring plots [of two patriotic plays] and audience applause, I suddenly forgot I am a woman. I [now] had no ze sau ze goek problem in my performance. I was compelling (huoqi shizu) and heroic (yinxiong bense). But someone referred me as “nanren po” [similar to the meaning of “butch.” Literally, “man-woman,” a derogatory term for masculine women].\footnote{The use of “butch” in this translation has no connotations with lesbianism or same-sex female relationships. It means only women with masculine appearances or manners. Within different contexts, the character of “po” has several meanings in Cantonese: old woman, maternal grandmother, mother of one’s husband (i.e., mother-in-law), and a generic, derogative label for women. All of these suggest post-reproduction asexuality.} Even though a girl acts masculine and likes to imitate men, she still doesn’t like to be called nanren po. I’m not an exception. Although I didn’t get angry easily, I couldn’t help but became irritated whenever I was called nanren po. [ . . . ] I gradually came not to care. I was not affected [by this kind of comment]. On the contrary, it helps me in my performance. The fact that more people call me nanren po also reflects that my physical appearance, manner, style of speaking, and behaviors are all similar to men’s. They won’t call a graceful woman nanren po, right? (ibid.: 174–75, 178)

Although earlier quotations showed that she felt she was closer to learning female role-types because she used to love dressing as a girl when she was young, later in her memoir, she also pointed out that her love of sports and passion for onstage “masculinity and heroism” led her to become a successful wenwusheng.

Later in her career, Yam seemed to view everyday cross-dressing and passing as a man as an offstage extension of a successful wenwusheng. Her rising reputation sometimes made her forget that she was a woman. She seemed to enjoy dressing as a man and walking on the street if she did not attract any unnecessary attention or trouble. However, the derogative label “nanren po” (butch) reminded her of her own sexual identity as a biological female. Yet, she gradually accepted this label as a compliment.

It is possible that Yam initially refused this label for the following reasons. In the Cantonese language in Hong Kong, nanren po has connotations with rough, ill-mannered, uneducated, working-class, and physically strong women. Even though Yam came from a humble social background, her achievement in Cantonese opera made her wealthier and more
respected, and surrounded her with many upper-class female fans. Any association with nanren po may have affected her image of a refined, bookish, romantic scholar-type young man on stage and thus her fans’ fantasies.

Blurring Multiple Boundaries: Yam in Films

Cantonese Cinema in Mid-twentieth Hong Kong

Between the 1940s and 1960s, Yam was cast in more than three hundred films. These films played a significant role in constructing her star image. Before discussing her personas in films in detail, I will provide some background information on Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong. While there are various ways to categorize films from the mid-twentieth century (as listed in Hong Kong Filmography, Volume 4: 1953–1959 [HKFA 2003: xx–xxi]), the classification system from Law Kar and Frank Bren’s Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-cultural View (2004) categorizes Cantonese films from the 1950s into five types—Cantonese opera films, costume martial arts films, romantic melodramas set as popular folktales, comical farce, and melodramas (174–75). This means of classification is based on the costumes (traditional Chinese or modern western style), contents, and historical settings of the films. For convenience, here I combine various classification systems together and categorize Yam’s films under two rubrics: “Cantonese opera films” (yueyu xiqu pian) and “Cantonese contemporary films” (yueyu shizhuang pian).

Cantonese opera films are basically a shortened, studio-shot version of Cantonese opera stage performances. These films are usually adapted from the existing stage versions with minimal film techniques. Basic plots, “theme songs,” music (including melodic instruments and percussion music), and costumes from the stage versions are mostly retained. Most of the
protagonists in these films were played by Cantonese opera actors. These films are about the old societies of dynastic China.

In contrast, Cantonese contemporary films are mostly stories situated in modern, urban Hong Kong, during the same era that the films were made or early days of the Republican era (1911–1949). Actors wear modern (western) clothing. A significant portion of Cantonese contemporary films are melodramas, in which the plots include both Chinese and western literary materials, radio stories, popular Hollywood films, and novels. Popular music, foreign tunes, and tunes from Cantonese opera are used in these films.

Yam was an active actress in both contemporary and opera films. In both genres, Yam mostly played male roles. Yet, in the early 1950s, Yam was cast as a young woman in at least twenty-five contemporary films (Lam 2004: 84). Most of these characters share a commonality: cross-dressing. The characters need to disguise themselves as men, switching between woman and man throughout the films, and finally returning to their real gender/sex in the end. However, these female characters are usually distanced from the mainstream femininity portrayed in other films at that time. Yam’s characters are either spinster domestic helpers or young women who need to disguise themselves as men for their families or to help other women escape from an unwanted marriage. Even though some of these characters do fall in love with men, their subjectivity in a heterosexual relationship is still very weak. While the contemporary films from the period usually have happy endings, where main characters marry or reunite with their loved ones, Yam’s female characters often stay single or sacrifice their own love and happiness.

In this way, some of these films spoke to Yam’s fans who were independent women. As shown in Shangguan’s article, her fans in the mid twentieth century also included working women. Her stardom arose with the wave of working women in the Pearl River Delta area (see
Fig. 1.4) as well as women’s increasing autonomy and consumer power in the early twentieth century. Here, I introduce a special group of Yam’s fans named majie (literally, “mother-older sister”), single domestic helpers who practiced the custom of sworn spinsterhood called zishu (literally, “self-comb”).

**Majie: New Women in the Pearl River Delta**

While the scholarly narrative of “New Women” during the Chinese enlightenment in the early twentieth century concerns mostly upper-class women at national centers such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. Studies of working-class women in the Pearl River Delta area are more beneficial to my analysis of Yam’s star image. This area was not only the epicenter of early Cantonese opera, but also has a relatively long history of independent, working women as well as alternative marriages and lifestyles.

In early twentieth-century China, marriage was not merely a social but also an economic institution. Women were financially dependent on their natal families before marriage and their husband’s families after. For commoners’ families, intensive farm work or housework was expected. The status of women in their husbands’ families was very low, especially before their grown-up sons married. Often living with her husband’s parents and siblings, a young wife was supposed to be obedient to her parents-in-law, husband, and other older male family members in the household.

According to Stockard’s study of unconventional marriage patterns in the Pearl River Delta area in the first half of the twentieth century, the fear of married life sometimes drove young brides-to-be or new brides to run away or commit suicide (1989: 118–22). While alternative kinds of marriage and the zishu custom had already become popular in some districts,
the resulting economic self-reliance and autonomy of female workers further encouraged women to choose their paths according to their own volition.

The zishu custom was popular in districts such as Shunde, Panyu, and Zhongshan from the late eighteenth century and reached its peak in the early 1900s. In the old days, unmarried girls tied their hair in braids while married women wore their hair in buns. The literal meaning of the two characters “zi” (self) and “shu” (comb) is “making the [hair bun] by oneself.” Women who practiced the zishu custom needed to tie their hair into a bun as an outward sign of their determination to stay single and have no relationships with men throughout their entire lives. Thus zishu women did not have husbands’ families to depend on. They worked very hard when they were young and saved money for their retirement. Even though they, more or less, financially took care of their parents and younger siblings, they had relatively high autonomy in living their lives.

Wage labor opportunities in the Delta area and neighboring cities further provided an economic ground for the zishu custom to consolidate as an institution outside the marriage system. One of the most common occupations of these zishu women was silk factory work in the Delta area, where the sericulture attracted many young women from commoners’ families at the turn of the twentieth century (Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989).

Besides silk factory workers, many zishu women from this area also moved to wealthier cities—both local and overseas, such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Singapore—where they worked as laundry workers and domestic helpers (majie). The decline of the sericulture and the increasing political instability in Guangdong between the late 1920s and the late 1930s urged more zishu women to move to British Hong Kong and Portuguese Macau, where many of them took up work as majie. Many majie lived with their employers’ families but some worked as

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“live-out” servants, residing with other *majie* (Chen, Li, and Wu 1987: 28–38; Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989).

**Majie and Actresses**

While other categories of Yam’s female fans were either financially dependent on their natal or husbands’ families, or their male lovers or patrons (if they were prostitutes or concubines), *majie* were economically independent working women, just like Cantonese opera actresses. In this respect, *majie*, as single, working-class women, may be considered part of the “New Women” discourse of early twentieth-century China.

Moreover, it is not hard to imagine that *majie* identified themselves with successful female performers such as Yam Kim-fai: Like *majie*, opera actresses were emerging independent women with humble family backgrounds who lived in a mostly homosocial space; also, they both shared similar migrant experiences. Yam had performed in Guangdong, Vietnam, and Malaya before gaining popularity on urban stages in larger cities like Guangzhou, Macau, and Hong Kong. I suggest that the shared hardship of being an independent woman under pressure from sociopolitical upheaval and an uncertainty of the future played a significant role in bonding this fan-star relationship. Yam’s success could also be read as a role model for these newly emergent independent women. My argument is well supported by one of her films, *That’s for My Love* (*wo wei qing*) (1953).

**Yam’s Zishu Women in Film**

In *That’s for My Love*, Yam Kim-fai was cast as Yam Fan, a *zishu* woman working at a hand-wash laundry that exclusively hires *zishu* women. All workers in the laundry call Yam Fan “big sister” (*daai gaa ze*, Ca.)—a way to show their respect. In a scene inside the laundry, a song is sung by all *zishu* employees, alternating between Yam Fan and the other women. The
characters of Yam Fan and her coworkers are presented as a cohort of zishu women. While all of
these characters use the zihou voice to sing, Yam retains her pinghou. Due to the involvement of
Cantonese opera actors in Cantonese cinema in the early twentieth century, the gendered voices
in opera—pinghou and zihou—were also transplanted in contemporary films. As contemporary
films in the mid twentieth century usually put the spotlight on a few leading actors and rarely
arrange group performances, the setting of this group singing was probably specially designed. I
suggest that this arrangement was to sonically distinguish the character of Yam Fan from the
other zishu women. Pinghou here was used to masculinize this character in relation to all other
zishu women, given that leadership, independence, and having a strong will were usually seen as
male qualities.

The lyrics of this song are also worth discussing. The entire song juxtaposes the
differences between zishu women’s current lives as spinsters as well as wage laborers and their
imagined married lives if they had followed the social norm and married men. Their worries and
fears of marriage range from laborious housework; poverty of the husband’s family; a husband’s
cheating or getting a concubine if he is wealthy; to abusive parents-in-law. Commentary on the
joy of being an independent (zili) zishu woman is highlighted in the song.

On the one hand, this song catered to zishu women by affirming that they made a wise
choice to be independent and to control their own lives. The song also spoke for them, telling
society that they were neither lonely, helpless, nor a burden on their natal families when aging.
Rather, they were an emerging group of modern, liberal, independent, as well as emotionally and
economically satisfied women.
Yam Kim-fai as a Feminine Wife

Apart from the voice of the majie discussed above, the gendered voice of the character Yam Fan in a dating scene in this film is also noteworthy. In most of the scenes throughout this film, including the laundry scene, the speaking and singing voices of Yam Fan are pinghou no matter if she is in women’s attire or a male disguise. However, later in the film, Yam’s voice is specially arranged. In the plot, Yam Fan disguises herself as the newly-wedded wife of her younger brother in order to help him get a decent job. There is a dating scene at a park that features Yam Fan and her pseudo-husband. Compared to the desexualized majie outfit—the plain, baggy clothes and hair bun that Yam Fan usually wears in other scenes—her costume in this dating scene is a relatively tight cardigan and Capri pants, and permed hair. This arrangement has been set up to visually feminize the character. While holding arms in the park, this pseudo couple sings a love song together but Yam Fan’s part is a lip-synced zihou voice, sung by a zihou singer offscreen. Replacing Yam’s raspy, low voice, this lip-synced voice was specially designed to sonically feminize and heterosexualize the character of the pseudo new wife in order to enhance the dramatic effect. And yet, I would argue that this lip-synced voice was also an attempt to distance Yam Kim-fai, the actress, from the character of the pseudo wife. It was a way to preserve the actress’s female masculinity from the heterosexualized feminine persona of the character.

Like other contemporaneous Cantonese contemporary films in the 1950s, this film also has a happy ending, in which Yam Fan promises to marry the man who falls in love with her at the moment they meet. This ending not only suited the heteronormative, commercial interests at that time, but also addressed the heterosexual, feminine persona of some zishu women and their acceptance of conventional marriage. On the one hand, this comedy mitigated the misconception
about zishu women’s hostility to men and conventional marriage. On the other, as zishu women ending up in heterosexual marriages was not uncommon, it might also function as a middle ground between the hardcore zishu women and those who later married men.

**Enacting Real Life in Films**

As dress codes are crucial for distinguishing one’s gendered identities, Yam’s Cantonese contemporary films were another stage for her play with gender. Here, I use the film *Lovesick* (*wei qing diandao*) (1952) to elaborate on how she crosses various boundaries—between man and woman, and between the actress herself and her dramatic characters.

Like *That’s for My Love*, in *Lovesick*, Yam played a woman who needed to change her gender several times throughout the film. She did so to manage her father’s business and to stop her beloved (a man) from marrying another woman. Here I will discuss two scenes that caught my attention. Yam plays the character Yam Ming-fai. Dressed in a women’s outfit, Ming-fai has a conversation with a female friend at a cafe:

Yam Ming-fai: *smiling at her female friend* I’m feeling so comfortable today. Wearing women’s clothes, I feel so natural (*ziran*). Disguising myself as a man is tiring. I’m not used to those fussy clothes. It [*a necktie*] made my neck as painful as being hung.

Her friend: Oh, yes. Sister Yam, why do you disguise yourself as a man all the time?

... 

Yam Ming-fai: You don’t understand so much. My father is very sick and has now returned to Singapore [*from Hong Kong*] for rehabilitation. He was worried that nobody would take care of his business. So he asked me to disguise myself as a man [*in order to work*] here.

Her friend: Still, you don’t have to disguise yourself as a man to do business.

Yam Ming-fai: He was worried that he would die. If he dies, I will receive his inheritance. [ . . . ]
This scene plays with crossing the boundary between Yam Ming-fai’s being a woman and a man, but also with blurring the line between this character and the actress Yam Kim-fai. The name of the dramatic character is an apparent reference to the actress’s name, changing one Chinese character, from “Kim” to “Ming.” Moreover, in the film, the character Yam Ming-fai is called “Sister Yam” by her friend. “Sister Yam” is a widely used nickname for the actress. By calling the character “Sister Yam,” the film attempts to cross the boundary between the actress and the character, and between real life and the fantasy world of the silver screen.

Yam’s contemporary films like this play a significant role in constructing Yam Kim-fai’s star image. Richard Dyer discusses how sound de-divinized film stars in the 1930s during the transition between silent to sound films (1998: 22). As human voice and the way actors speak contribute much to the perceptions of a star image, sound films both enhanced the naturalization of the medium and shortened the distance between audiences’ fantasy and the stars. Although all of Yam Kim-Fai’s films are sound films, her contemporary films also gave her a voice, which also resulted in de-divinizing the actress. First, compared to her heavy makeup and elaborate operatic costumes in stage performances, Yam’s appearance in contemporary films is more natural. Second, the scene I discuss here can be interpreted as a short interview with Yam. When TV and video interviews with actors were not popular in the 1950s and 1960s, this conversation between Yam Ming-fai and her friend in the film looks like a brief interview or dialogue with the audience. Although we do not know how much of the character speaks for Yam herself, I suggest that the answers may not be as important as the question of “why do you disguise yourself as a man all the time?” This is a question that many audience members might want to ask this cross-dressing superstar. The distance between audiences and the actress is compressed when the question was addressed in the film.
Moreover, Yam Ming-fai’s situation also paralleled Yam Kim-fai’s real life. Yam Kim-fai started learning Cantonese opera and sheng role-types after finishing elementary school because of her family’s financial burden. In both the film and Yam’s real life, impersonating a man was not a voluntary decision for interest or personal reasons, but for her family. While Yam was climbing the ladder to top star status between the mid-1930s and the mid-1940s, all-female troupes and female sheng were fading from the stage. I suggest that the fact that the character is the heir to her father’s business and property is a metaphor for Yam’s inheriting the art of her aunt as well as the tradition of female wenwusheng performance practice.

After coed troupes became legal in Hong Kong in 1933, forming such troupes with top stars of male sheng and female dan became a trend and marketing gimmick. As I mentioned in a previous section, some female sheng performers from all-female companies changed their role-type to dan when joining coed companies or shifted their careers to the silver screen. In her memoir, Yam also recalled the struggle of shifting her career to playing the huadan role-type:

I had thought about shifting my role-type [to huadan]. [. . .] [Playwright Xu Ruidai] told me that if I go “back to my original face” (huifu benlai mianmu) to play female role-types, I needed to work very hard for a few years. Even though I was willing to do that, I might not be popular. In addition, my voice was so used to pinghou. [. . .] True, voice is an important factor. [. . .] With this concern, I gave up the thought of going “back to my original face” (Yam 2012: 176).

It is noteworthy that Yam used “back to my original face” to describe performing huadan. This narrative reveals a naturalized relationship between biological sex and the gendered role-types. Although it was not dated, from the background information—the repeal of the prohibition of coed troupes, and the performances of patriotic plays—Yam may have experienced this struggle between sheng and dan role-types between the mid and early 1940s while seeing many former female sheng give up the tradition.
Staging Thirdness: Queer Overtones in Yam’s Cantonese Opera and Films

Onstage Lovers, Offstage Sisters

Yam Kim-fai’s Female Lovers

I started this chapter with a quotation from Shangguan’s article on Yam’s lovers. However, I have only discussed her lovers in a “broader sense”—her fans. Now I turn to her lovers in the “narrower sense”—meaning partners in a romantic relationship. The three lovers mentioned in the article were all former or current female stage partners of Yam, playing the principal hua dan role-type—Yuk King-fa, Tsui Yan-sum (b. 1918), and Pak Suet-sin (Shangguan 1946[235]: 8). Both Yuk and Tsui were Yam’s stage partners during the all-female troupe era. Information on these two actresses, especially Yuk, is scarce. One of the few sources was Yam’s own memoir, which only mentions their names in passing. Their names also briefly appeared when Yam’s romantic relationships were discussed (Wu 1990: 16–22, 43–47, 50–55). Yet, both Ling Sing and Yam’s memoir state that Yam’s relationship with Tsui discontinued when Tsui left the troupe for a performing tour in the United States. Among the three lovers, Pak Suet-sin is the best known, due to her artistic achievement, reform of Cantonese opera, and lifelong participation in both Cantonese opera and film.19 According to a few sources, Yam’s relationship with Pak was the longest among all the relationships she had before her death in 1989 (Tsui 2007: 60–61). Because there is richer information about Pak, my analysis in the last part of this chapter mainly focuses on the Yam-Pak relationship.

Staging Thirdness

While audiences play a significant role in the process of making star images, contrasting and fragmented readings on a given star image can always be found. As Dyer has suggested, to

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19 Her participation in Cantonese opera is not limited to performance prior to her retirement from the stage in 1961, but also to founding a new troupe for younger performers (Chor Fung Ming Opera Troupe 雉鳳鳴劇團) and training them during the 1960s and 1970s, funding academic research, and directing performances in the past decade.
study how a star is discussed by sexual minorities (gay men in his study) is not to investigate how they are represented by the dominant media. Rather, it is through the star that they speak to each other about themselves (1986: x). My purpose in discussing the Yam-Pak relationship is not to demonstrate lesbianism in the Cantonese opera world. Whether or not they were lovers is not as noteworthy as the effects of and the meanings attributed to the star image of Yam and her relationship with Pak.

Borrowing Garber’s (1992) framework in studying cross-dressing practices, Yam’s public personas—in Cantonese opera, cinema, and personal life as portrayed by the press—could also be studied as “third terms”—as cross-dressers—rather than considering her as either a substitute man (or “fake man” [jia nanren], as some of my interlocutors said), a special woman, or a subcategory of the wenwusheng tradition. Rather than arguing whether Yam embodied an idealized masculinity, it is more intriguing and worthwhile to examine Yam—as an icon of female masculinity, and, with Pak, as a role-model couple for sexual minorities in Hong Kong—as an enabling site for various generations of Hongkongers to create and refashion social and cultural meanings out of Cantonese opera and Cantonese cinema, the two seemingly heteronormative, heterosexist genres of popular culture. Having illustrated how Yam’s gendered identities and sexualities were presented in the press and cinema, this section focuses on the effects evoked by the “Yam-Pak” duo by bridging my analysis with the recent queer studies literature in Hong Kong. These effects exemplify Garber’s concept of thirdness as an alternative but empowering space that allows the possibility of experiencing and imagining the intertwining fluidities of gendered identities and sexualities.

20 Lum Man-yee argues that female wenwusheng is a sub role-type (2013).
The “Yam-Pak” Sisters

“Yam-Pak” (ren bai)—an abbreviated label of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin—has become an icon of perfect partnership in the Cantonese opera circle in Hong Kong. In her recorded interview with Radio Television Hong Kong, Pak recalled that she was fifteen and was a fan of Yam when the two first met in 1943 in Macau (RTHK 2005). At that time, Yam was already an emerging star who had gained fame in Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau, while Pak had just started learning Cantonese opera. Pak soon joined Yam’s troupe as a supporting huadan. Although she does not provide a specific year, Yam Bing-yee recalled that Yam Kim-fai and Pak had become “good friends” since they had arranged to stay in the same room while performing in a rural area (Tsui 2007: 58).

Bing-yee added that, “They [Yam and Pak] are good match, both at work [on stage] (zai gong) and in personal life (zai si). [. . . ] My view of their relationship (ta liang xiangjiao), due to my love of Sister Yam [Kim-fai] and the fact that I was married out [from the Yam’s family](waijia nü), I have nothing to say. As long as Sister Yam was happy, I accepted everything. That’s it” (ibid.: 58).

Sisterhood

Although fans’ receptions and perceptions are always unpredictable, they are informative and passionate consumers (Kelly 2004: 8). Because of their passion and fantasies, some fans may learn about their idols selectively or filter out unwanted information to suit their needs. News or rumors of female wenwusheng same-sex relationships are topics that many fans either avoid discussing or taking any initiative to find out. Yet, the Yam-Pak relationship is the most often discussed among relationships of all other actresses.
Some fans argue that Yam-Pak were not same-sex lovers and that they were just good sisters (hao jiemei), good friends who loved each other deeply. Some of these fans consider those who try to find out whether Yam and Pak were lovers not to be genuine fans. In the forum of a popular Yam-Pak fan website, a conversation between participants illustrated this dynamic:

Koi: I have a question that I have been interested to know. Were Sister Yam [Kim-fai] and Sister Sin [Pak Suet-sin] “tongzhi”\(^{21}\) [literally “comrade,” meaning Chinese sexual minorities]?

Wing: Of course not! They were just good sisters (hao jiemei).

Fiona: Sister Yam was an extremely nice person, one that you may not be able to find in a thousand years (qianzai nande de da haoren). I believe people accused them out of their jealousy of Pak Suet-sin, who became an intimate friend (guizhong haoyou, literally, “a good friend who is close enough to enter one’s bedroom”) of hers [Yam]. They were bighearted people. Even if they were tongzhi (of course they were not), what’s the problem? I have told my husband that, if I were Pak Suet-sin and had a good sister like Sister Yam, I would rather choose Sister Yam, not him.

Ray: Why did you cover for them? They were in love. It was just that their love changed over time. There existed friendship (youqing) and familial love (qinqing). Why couldn’t there be romantic love (aiqing)? “Tongzhi” is just a label. I believe even if you ask Sister Sin, she would not deny that. Of course she would not respond because she would not care.

Fiona: I just do not understand why there cannot be supreme love between same-sex friends, just like love between mother and daughter. Why must one associate a pure friendship with sexualized homosexuality (xingai de tongxinglian)? I never believed that how Sister Yam loved Sister Sin was homosexual. To conclude, everything has passed. We should respect them and not discuss it any more.

Wing: Yes, everything has passed. It is not the time to discuss this issue. If this issue is worth discussing, it has been discussed enough long ago.

“Thread 397,” online forum discussion, Sin Fung Net (liangcheng meijing xian fenming) (December 13, 2002)

\(^{21}\) “Tongzhi” (literally, “shared volition”) was first translated from “comrade” at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to unite people to overthrow the Qing court. It is believed that the term was adopted by an openly gay Hong Kong writer, Michael Lam (aka 迈克), in the early 1980s to refer to sexual minorities, including male and female homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgendered people. In 1989, Lam Yik-wah, another openly gay writer, used the name “Tongzhi Film Festival” for an LGBT film fest. Since then, “tongzhi” has become widely used—not only in Hong Kong, but also in Taiwan and China—to refer to ethnic Chinese sexual minorities.
It is important to note that wording such as “tongzhi” and “homosexuals” were not widely used in Hong Kong until the late 1980s. Instead, “good sisters” (hao jiemei) and “intimate friends” (guizhong haoyou, guizhong liangyou, or guizhong niyou)\(^{22}\) are often used to describe—by the early and today’s entertainment press and people who are involved in Cantonese opera—relationships between two women which are beyond friendship. This is an example how these terms were used in the 1950s:

Since then [her divorce], she [Kwan Ying-lin\(^{23}\)] never dated any men [. . .] after returning to China [from San Francisco], she performed in all-female troupes. Since partnering with [female] wenwusheng Tsui Hang-lam\(^{24}\) the two gradually became very close and finally grew into intimate friends (guizhong liangyou). Whenever they did not need to perform, they studied plays together. Their closeness was no different from that of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin nowadays. Their love can be considered beyond the love between parents and their child (qing yu gurou). Sister Ying [Kwan Ying-lin] had this good friend [Tsui Hang-lam] to comfort and accompany her (Luo n.d.: 56).

By juxtaposing Kwan’s marriage with a man and her later intimate relationship with a woman, the use of “intimate friends” implied a same-sex relationship between the two women. According to the author Luo Liming (aka Chen Canggu and Li Ji), a veteran journalist of Cantonese opera, Kwan was a retired huadan when the book was written. She was active in the 1920s and 1930s. The Yam-Pak relationship is included as a more recent reference for the readers at that time in order to make the same-sex relationship of the two older performers—Kwan and Tsui—more explicit.

“Good sisters” was also a term still used during my fieldwork to imply same-sex female partners. In spring 2013, it once came up in a conversation with a friend of mine named Lok (a pseudonymous)\(^{25}\) when we were discussing the career of Chung (a pseudonymous), a rising

\(^{22}\) Literally, good friends who are close enough to enter one’s bedroom.
\(^{23}\) “Guan Yinglian” in pinyin Romanization.
\(^{24}\) “Xu Xinglin” in pinyin Romanization.
\(^{25}\) Lok is a middle-aged woman who has become an amateur Cantonese opera dan actress for over a decade.
female wenwusheng in her early thirties. Lok, Chung, and her huadan partner have been learning Chinese opera under the same teacher for about a decade. Chung was good at singing but weak at acrobatics, while her long-term huadan partner was good at acrobatics but average in singing. I told Lok that in my opinion, they should partner with different people in order for their talents to be better developed. Lok responded that they would not split. I asked why. At first she was reluctant to tell me, but kept emphasizing that they would not change their stage partners. After a while, she became a bit impatient and said, “You don’t understand! They are good sisters (hao jiemei).” When she said “good sisters,” she stopped what she was doing—ironing costumes—and looked me in the eye with a strange smile. She added that Chung’s huadan partner had quit college to pursue a career in Cantonese opera with Chung. Lok continued that Chung had more fans than her partner, and that many troupes wanted to hire her as supporting sheng but she would have to turn them down if they did not also hire her partner. “Anyway, they are ‘good sisters’ (hao jiemei) and won’t leave each other,” Lok concluded. Although the content of this conversation has not been verified, Lok’s comments contextualize the use of “good sisters” in the Cantonese opera circle.

“Yam-Pak”: Role Model for Sexual Minorities

The “Yam-Pak” duo has been seen not only as a perfect partnership onstage, but also represents a role model among sexual minorities in Hong Kong. Some celebrities who have openly declared their homosexuality regard “Yam-Pak” as their idol. On the local LGBT radio show called “We Are Family” (zijiren), So Sze-wong26 (b. 1955), a TV cooking program hostess, thanked “Yam-Pak” for being a role model: “With their excellent triumph [in Cantonese opera performance], and being so faithful to each other for decades, they are really a shining example

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26 “Su Shihuang” in pinyin Romanization.
to us all” (Yinyuezu 2012). Anthony Wong Yiu-ming27 (b. 1962), an openly gay male pop singer-songwriter, also referred to Pak Suet-sin as a “supreme idol of tongzhi” when sharing a photo of himself with Pak on Facebook (Wong 2013).

Queer Overtones for Women

Beyond this, Yam-Pak has also occupied a significant place in the identity formations of women who became conscious of their own marginalized sexual desires while growing up in a time—prior to the mid 1980s—when access to information about alternative romantic relationships and networking with other sexual minorities was difficult. In two oral history projects on sexual minorities conducted by the “Study Group of ‘Her Stories’’—Her Stories 1950–2004 (2005) and Ai Love Women (2008)28—references to Yam-Pak are documented.

Funded by the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong government from 2004 to 2005, the Study Group was founded by a few gay rights activists and feminists to document the stories of “Hong Kong women who have same-sex desires” (oralhistory.wchk.org). This project conducted interviews with seventeen “women who are inclined to fall in love with women” (hui aishang nüren de nüren). Focusing on topics of sexual/gendered identities, sexualities, school lives, and social experiences with families, friends, and partners, all the interviews were conducted in Cantonese by the members of the Study Group between 2004 and 2008. The interviewees were made up of diverse religious, family, and educational backgrounds, gendered identities, relationship statuses, and occupations. Their ages ranged from 17 to 55 when the interviews were

27 “Huang Yaoming” in pinyin Romanization.
28 Original text is “她們的女情印記口述歷史研究室”. The full names of these two publications are: Her Stories (tamen de nüqing yinji xianggang hui aishang nüren de nüren koushu lishi 1950–2004她們的女情印記：香港會愛上女人的女人口述歷史 1950–2004) (2005); and Ai Love Women: An Oral History of Women who are Inclined to Fall in Love with Women (ai love nüren xianggang hui aishang nüre de nüre koushu gushi 艾爱女人：香港會愛上女人的女人口述故事) (Xiao, et al., eds. 2008)
conducted. Among them, four interviewees were in their fifties, of which two mentioned Yam-Pak.

Flower (b. 1953), who took an early retirement from a computer management position, identified herself as a nü tongzhi (Chinese female sexual minorities) and “used to like dressing herself in men’s outfits but never hoped to become a man.” She commented that “gay and les” [male and female individuals who are attracted to the same sex] nowadays in Hong Kong are very lucky (xingfu) because the society is much more open than before. She recalled that the subjects of same-sex relationships and desires were totally absent when she was growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. She added that even though people might have known others who were in same-sex relationships, they kept it to themselves (xinzao buxuan) and never openly talked about it (buhui jiangchukou) (Xiao, et al, eds. 2008: 15–16). When recalling the process of her own identity formation, she mentioned the Yam-Pak couple and her inquiry into Yam’s sexual/gender identity:

Before the age of thirty [prior to the early 1980s], the only thing I knew was [the relationship between] Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. I always thought Yam Kim-fai was a man! When I was in primary school, during Yam and Pak’s performances, I asked my mother “is Yam Kim-fai a man or a woman?” My mother replied, “Kids should not ask so many questions!” At that time, it was taboo to talk about this kind of thing [same-sex relationships]. But I had no other way to understand this. I liked girls but I never thought it was homosexuality (tongxinglian). I just liked girls. I also noticed that I tended to love dressing myself as a guy. That was it. I had a narrow mind. (ibid.: 17)

Were the performances—romantic scenes played by Yam and Pak, who usually acted as lovers in the plays—so real, so successful that they made Flower imagine they were lovers off-stage as well? Or had Flower overheard rumors of the Yam-Pak relationship during the performances? From the interview transcription, it is not clear to me when she knew Yam was a

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29 According to Chou Wah-shan, the Chinese words for “homosexuality” did not appear in major newspapers in Hong Kong until the late 1970s (2000: 79).
30 The original wording is “喜歡扮男仔.”
woman, and what made her suspect that Yam and Pak were a same-sex couple. However, in a society with limited resources, the Yam-Pak relationship and the alternative gendered presentation of a female celebrity—Yam—became the only references Flower had to identify with, despite her confusion and frustration.

Theo (b. 1949), another interviewee who referred to Yam-Pak, called herself “hardcore butch” (siying pai de butch)\(^\text{31}\) and described herself as “taking the men’s role to fall in love with women.”\(^\text{32}\) During her interview, she used both “hardcore butch” and “man” to identify herself. My discussion here is not intended to clarify her use of either term. Rather, I am more interested in discussing Theo’s identity formation through her dis/identifications with both Hong Kong and foreign stars. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, Theo was very aware of and agreed with the butch/femme role-play relationship within a female same-sex couple. Unlike Flower, Theo started building up networks with lesbian friends, both butch and femme, at a relatively early age—around fifteen or sixteen. While forming [rock] bands was still an almost exclusively male activity, Theo built up her gendered identity through this gendered musical activity with other butch friends, “doing what other guys did.”\(^\text{33}\) Theo and her cohort were also devoted readers of magazines of foreign (mostly U.S. and U.K.) bands. Theo wanted to become a male superstar like Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, and members of the Beatles. When talking about local stars, Theo mentioned Yam-Pak but with disidentification:

> For me, the Yam-Pak type relationship was, well, because I knew she [Yam] was a female, I did not wish to become like them myself. I wish to become a man! It means that I would probably wish to become Tse Yin [a famous, handsome male movie star during the 1960s and 1970s] rather than Yam Kim-fai. I would choose to become a real man (zhen nanren)! In addition, there was a Cantonese film star called Leung Mo-sheung. [In

\(^{31}\) The use of “butch” is from the original text, not my translation. It is assumed that this is also the exact wording used by the interviewees during the interviews.

\(^{32}\) The original wording is “以男人的角色去愛女人.”

\(^{33}\) The original wording is “幹那些男仔都幹的事.”
the past,] if you wanted to say one is very butch, you would say “Wow! You are just like Leung Mo-sheung.” So Leung Mo-sheung had become an icon [of butchness]. Actually, I don’t find her very butch. But she did wear men’s outfits in films. During those years, there were only a few of them [actresses] that had this kind of image [of dressing like a man] (ibid.: 10).

Despite the fact that Theo’s educational and family backgrounds are not documented, her use of the word “butch” and her reference to foreign male stars reveal that she was a relatively cosmopolitan youth—having good enough command of English to know the word “butch” and consume Euro-American popular music—in Hong Kong during the 1960s and 1970s. Clearly articulating that Leung Mo-sheung was “an icon of butchness,” Theo yet identified herself more closely with male stars than two local actresses—Yam Kim-fai and Leung Mo-sheung—despite their success in playing male roles in both films and Cantonese opera performances.

Leung Mo-sheung (b. 1930?) was a famous female pinghou singer who later performed as sheng on the operatic stage in the mid-twentieth century. Like Yam, she was also cast as both male and female characters in contemporary films. The information on her is scarce and most of the news about her focuses on her male attire and romantic relationships with female stars (Ling Sing 1946 [236]: 11).

For Theo, both Yam and Leung were just butch women, which she did not intend to become. Theo did not seem to have the identity crisis that Flower experienced. When asked if she was comfortable being a female, Theo mentioned that she had wished to change her sex when she was younger because being a male was the best way to love another women in a “very straight, very patriarchal world” (hao zhi hao nanren de shijie) (Xiao, et al., eds. 2008: 13). When asked if she considered herself a man, her response was “absolutely. My [butch] friends and I definitely considered ourselves men. Nonetheless, [ . . . ] we knew we were not.”

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34 See Note 31
35 See Note 31.
asked if she considered herself a lesbian, Theo, however, provided a negative answer and added that she and her “hard core butch” friends disliked the label “lesbian” and people who identified themselves as lesbians.

From the interview transcription, it can be assumed that, for Theo and some of the women who were involved in same-sex relationships in her generation, an intimate relationship with a woman was a male privilege. Role-playing—acting as and identifying with straight men—in a relationship with women was a means for these people to rationalize their desires. When hormonal treatments and sex change surgeries were not too accessible in Hong Kong, their identities were built upon picking male nicknames, dressing in men’s outfits, and adopting male hobbies. Although Theo disidentified with Yam and Leung, her reference to them revealed that these actresses represented an alternative category of gendered identity—in her words, “butch.” To be more accurate, I would suggest that it is a kind of female masculinity which constantly challenged the strict dichotomy of gender presentations in mainstream popular culture.

**Queer Overtones for Men**

When I see an intimate scene between a female wenwusheng and her huadan partner, even though I sit in the audience, I still feel my heart pounding. You know, when you are watching a performance, you are not just being an onlooker. You sometimes identify with one of the performers onstage. I like the sweet feeling and connection (hou lam, Ca.) between the loving couple.

Winnie Wan (informal conversation, 2014)

“[W]atching any actor perform, we have the sense of being in the presence of a liminal phenomenon that mediates between the real person and the character.”

Philip Auslander (2006: 102)

Yam’s cross-dressing performances in both Cantonese opera and films, and the “Yam-Pak” duo, speak not only to sexual minority women, but also to self-identified male tongzhi in Hong Kong (Chan 2005: 106–12; Kong 2014: 73). This section features the homoerotic subtexts

**Mr. Butterfly Lovers**

*New Love Story of Leung Shan-pak and Chuk Ying-toi* is a film with a combination of excerpts from both Cantonese opera film and contemporary film. The plot is about a newlywed couple—played by Yam Kim-fai (bride) and male actor Wong Chiu-mo (1912–?) (groom)—in a modern society setting, sharing their “romantic story” at their wedding banquet. The couple tells their guests that their story is similar to that of the “Butterfly Lovers” below. The Cantonese opera and the contemporary scenes alternate throughout the entire film. When the couple recalls the story, the scenes are in Cantonese opera setup—in terms of costumes, music, and scenic design. In the Cantonese opera scenes, the characters played by Yam consist of both *dan* and *sheng* role-types, gendered distinctively in both costumes and vocal projection (again, the *zihou* voice is lip-synced when she plays *dan*). Instead of analyzing the entire film, I will focus on the final moments, which depict a Cantonese opera scene highlighting a relatively long section (9.5 minutes) of singing and acting involving both Leung and Chuk (played by Wong and Yam respectively). Before that, however, I must briefly introduce the plot of the “Butterfly Lovers.”

“Butterfly Lovers” is a famous Chinese folktale from the Eastern Jin dynasty (265–420 CE) featuring a young man named Leung Shan-pak and a young woman named Chuk Ying-toi who cross-dresses. From a well-off family, Chuk wants to receive better education in another city. However, it is taboo for unmarried women to study and live outside their homes. In order to protect her own right to study as well as the reputations of herself and her family, Chuk cross-

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36 “Huang Chaowu” in pinyin Romanization.
37 The duration of the film is about 90 minutes.
38 “Liang Shanbo” in pinyin Romanization.
39 “Zhu Yingtai” in pinyin Romanization.
dresses as a man at a boarding school. During the three years of study, she and Leung, a male classmate, become best friends and call each other brothers. Yet Leung does not know anything about Chuk’s disguise. When Chuk leaves school for home, she lies to Leung by saying that “he” has a twin sister who looks very similar to “him” and is still unmarried. Chuk urges Leung to visit “his” home and propose to “his sister.” Leung happily accepts the idea. After arriving home, Chuk finds out that her parents have already arranged a marriage for her. Chuk does not give up the hope of marrying Leung and expects him day by day. Leung finally arrives but it is too late because Chuk’s parents have received the betrothal gifts. At home Chuk no longer needs to disguise herself as a man and meets Leung in a woman’s outfit. When the two meet, Chuk explains everything about her disguise and informs Leung about her arranged marriage. With great despair and a broken heart, Leung gets very sick and then passes away after leaving Chuk. On her wedding day, Chuk decides to visit Leung’s tomb on the way to her husband’s home. After arriving at the tomb, she laments and all of a sudden the tomb opens and she commits suicide by jumping into it. At the end the spirits of the two lovers turn into a pair of butterflies flying out of the tomb. Despite the deaths of both protagonists, the ending is not too bitter because the butterflies symbolize the freedom of love and the defeat of inhuman feudal ethics.

The scene I use in this analysis is the final scene, which takes place in front of Leung’s tomb. While all the versions I have seen—in both Chinese opera genres and films⁴⁰—match the original plot in which Chuk is in a bride’s outfit on the way to the wedding, this film genders Yam in another way by dressing her in a Cantonese opera xiaosheng’s costume and having her sing in pinghou voice throughout the tomb scene. Despite a relatively long musical section featuring the two actors’ singing, homoeroticism is presented not so much in music as in the

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⁴⁰ All the versions I refer to here are based on the same folktale. They include various versions of Meeting at the Chamber (lou tai hui) (Cantonese opera stage performance), Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (liang shan bo yu zhu ying tai) (Shaoxing yueju opera film) (1953), and Tsui Hark’s film The Lovers (liang zhu) (1994).
gendered wordings of the lyrics and acting (such as gestures, nonverbal expressions, tones of voices) of the actors.

The nine and a half minute long scene presents Chuk’s solo singing followed by Leung’s solo singing and then a duet with both actors. In both Chuk’s and Leung’s singing, some typically feminine wordings are used multiple times to refer to Chuk. For example, “good flower” (haohua) is used by Chuk herself, and “[women’s] affection” (fangxin), “red plum flower” (hongmei), “beauty” (hongyan, literally “red face”), “fragrant cheek” (xiangsai), “younger sister” (mei), and “chaste spirit” (zhen yun) are used by Leung. Although dressed in a xiaosheng’s costume and singing in pinghou voice, Chuk is still gendered—especially by Leung—as female throughout the songs.

Proximity between the two actors is another intriguing factor in creating the queer subtext. After Leung enters the scene, the two actors basically never cease bodily contact with each other. Physical intimacy is obviously highlighted in this scene. While physical intimacy in Cantonese opera is generally presented symbolically by touching the extended water-sleeves (shuixiu) and other stylized suggestive postures with minimal body contact (see Fig. 6.1), this scene features various kinds of physical intimacy between the actors, such as holding hands and arms, cuddling tightly, hugging cheek-to-cheek, and Chuk’s reclining his/her upper body on Leung’s back.41 It is rare in both Cantonese opera films and stage performances to see two actors in sheng’s costumes having intensive physical intimacy like this.

After Leung returns to the tomb and is followed by Chuk, the film turns back to and ends with the wedding banquet. The closing statement by the couple—still acted by Wong and Yam—is a harsh criticism of feudal morals. The groom (Wong) stresses earnestly that he and his wife are not much different from the Leung-Chuk couple except that they “took the initiative to fight against the old society and the old family [values] with a positive attitude.” Filmed in 1951, this line undoubtedly advocated freedom of (heterosexual) love and marriage. However, it could also be understood as the voice of a male tongzhi contending with prominent heteronormative family values, in which men were obligated to get married and bear sons to “continue their family blood” (see Kong 2014).

Lovesick Playboy: Mr. Yam vs. Miss Ng

In Lovesick, Yam was cast as the female protagonist Yam Ming-fai, who first disguises herself as the son of her father and then pretends to be Miss Ng to date her male working partner Cheung Pak-Ying. Yam Ming-Fai is in love with Cheung. However, she needs to conceal her female identity so that she can manage her father’s business. A jealous Yam Ming-Fai tries to steal Cheung’s girlfriends in different ways to stop him from marrying any of them. In one of the

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final scenes, Cheung confronts Yam Ming-fai (in men’s attire) after finding out that his marriage plan was ruined:

[Cheung angrily rushes into the office and bumps Yam Ming-fai’s desk while he is reading a newspaper. Both Cheung and Ming-fai wear men’s suits and neckties]

Cheung: Have I ever owed you an apology?

Yam Ming-fai: No, there’s nothing wrong with you. We’re good friends. We eat together and we live together. You don’t owe me any apology.

Cheung: Humph! Then you don’t need to ruin my life!


[. . .]

Cheung: You said we are good friends. But you knew that I was dating Ah Sin for some time. You stole my girlfriend. Okay, it doesn’t matter. It may be Ah Sin who betrayed me. I don't blame you.

Yam Ming-fai: Alright! Then that’s fine!

Cheung: Fine? Why did you do that again? [points at Yam Ming-fai]

Yam Ming-fai: I did it again? I did what?

Cheung: You did what? Why have you now ruined my marriage plan with Ah Ling?

Yam Ming-fai: Stop that! Please don’t accuse me. I’m not that kind of person. Please don’t trust any rumors.

Cheung: [Very loudly] They are not rumors! I have evidence! [Turns his body and walks away from Yam Ming-fai] Humph! I don’t understand what intentions you have. We’re such good friends. [Turns his body and walks back to Yam Ming-fai. Points at Yam Ming-fai] Why did you do that to me? [Yells] You tell me! Why?

Yam Ming-fai: [hesitantly] I …

Cheung: [Yells] Huh?!

Yam Ming-fai: [Very hesitantly] I … because … [mumbles and avoids eye contact with Cheung] … because …

Cheung: [Yells angrily] Because, because, because of what?!
Yam Ming-fai: [Speaks up, but still hesitantly] Because … just because of because! [Looks into Cheung’s eyes]

Cheung: [Yells more furiously] Because of what, emperor?

[A close-up] Yam Ming-fai: [Looks into Cheung’s eyes and speaks up] Just because … because I love you!43

[A close-up] Cheung: Because you love me?! You love me what?!44

[A close-up] Yam Ming-fai: That’s why I don’t want you to get married to others.45

[A close-up] Cheung: It’s not your business whether I get married or not!46

Yam Ming-fai: I just love you.47


This scene is rather short and lasts slightly over a minute and a half. Right after the line I quoted above, Cheung, in front of Yam Ming-fai, is happily reading a letter from Miss Ng, who sets up a blind date with him. Miss Ng’s letter is actually a response to Cheung’s personal advertisement in a newspaper. Cheung gets distracted by the new date and seems to forget his conversation with Yam Ming-fai.

Even though Yam Ming-fai is brutally scorned by Cheung after expressing his/her love, the queer overtone is still blatantly strong. The setting of this scene—the arrangements of costumes, directing, and scripts—is rare among contemporaneous films. With the visual—both protagonists in men’s suits—and audio—both actors speaking in low male voice—effects, this scene also serves as a coming-out act for male tongzhi.

43 Original line in Cantonese is "就咪為咗…為咗愛你囉。".
44 Original line in Cantonese is "你愛我？你愛我咩呀？".
45 Original line in Cantonese is "我所以唔想你同人結婚囉。".
46 Original line in Cantonese is "喎！我結婚唔結婚關你咩事得嚟？！".
47 Original line in Cantonese is "就咪係愛你囉。".
48 Original line in Cantonese is "你愛我？！你而家懵咗咩？！你而家神經㗎？！".
Interpreting this scene against Travis Kong’s study of male *tongzhi* in Hong Kong reveals further insights (2011; 2014). Like Kong’s informants—especially the older ones who were born before 1950—who were expected to “continue the family blood” by marrying women and having children (preferably son[s]) (2014), Cheung in the scene also shares a common family obligation with the men of his generation. When Yam Ming-fai says that they are “good friends” and that they “eat and live together,” Cheung does not deny that. It is noteworthy that “friends” is a term most of Kong’s informants use when referring to their same-sex lovers and sex partners in his oral history collection (2014).\(^{49}\) Going back to the film. Although Yam Ming-fai may not mean his/her relationship with Cheung is beyond friendship, their proximity (“eat and live together”) also invites multivalent interpretations and queer overtones.

Despite the fact that Cheung yells at Yam Ming-fai furiously, he neither shows any “homophobic sentiment” to Yam Ming-fai’s love nor explains why he cannot accept it. Instead, Cheung displays eagerness to meet a new female date—or a future wife. By immediately switching back to a heterosexual context after the short and yet interesting confession, I suggest that this scene intends to downplay the seriousness of the evoked homoeroticism without stigmatizing any desire between the two men. Moreover, the use of close-ups of both actors when Yam Ming-fai frankly expresses his/her love intensifies audience identification with either protagonist. In spite of its short duration and the absence of any body contact between the two protagonists, this scene opens up the possibility for queer overtones of male homoeroticism.

**Conclusion**

This chapter draws upon Garber’s theoretical framework of studying cross-dressing as a “third term” (1992); my study of female *wenwusheng* performance, as exemplified by Yam King-fai, implements Garber’s approach to studying cross-dressing as a space for new possibilities

\(^{49}\) In Kong’s oral history collection (2014), he transcribes and quotes the interviews word-to-word in Cantonese.
rather than appropriating the social actors and the effects of cross-dressing into preexisting either/or binary categories. By examining how to discourses surrounding the female wenwusheng Yam Kim-Fai, an icon of female masculinity in contemporary Hong Kong and Cantonese cultures, arises in different media and the intertextual relations between them, this chapter illustrates how thirdness is performed on various “public stages”—entertainment press, Cantonese opera performance, and contemporary film. Yam’s female masculinity has been cultivated through the ongoing processes of asexualization and resexualization in these media. Starting in the late 1930s, both the entertainment press and films tried to distance Yam from mainstream womanhood, gender roles, and female sexualities. I argue that these attempts intended to asexualize Yam in order to leave room for the resexualizing effect. The resulting alternative and yet legitimate female masculinity was consumed as a commodity of emotional intimacy by an emerging female consumership. This female masculinity, as echoed in her nickname, “female husband,” also opened up the possibility of a heterogender fantasy in homoeroticism. While the gender politics discourses of early modern China mostly focus on national centers, middle-upper class women, as well as free heterosexual love and marriages, this chapter contributes to the history of women in global perspective and broadens the horizon of “New Women” by shedding light on working class women—Yam and her majie fans as well as other unprivileged female fans—in South China.

As a superstar and cultural icon of both Cantonese opera and cinema, Yam’s impact is not limited to her predominantly female opera fans, but has also affected mass culture in postwar Hong Kong. The embodied thirdness in Yam’s star image not only speaks to female sexual minorities. The queer readings and identifications of their male counterparts have also enriched the complexity of this thirdness.
Garber’s study of cross-dressing also suggests that “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture,” which accommodates the possibility of various kinds of “category crisis” (ibid.: 16–17). After exploring how the existing gendered identity and sexuality categories are challenged by female wenwusheng performance in this chapter, in the next chapter, I will illustrate how political and cultural dynamics are enacted and restructured on the operatic stage.
Chapter 7
Performing Masculinity, Performing Chineseness: Negotiating Cultural Identities in Hong Kong-China Relations

Introduction

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Chineseness as a monolithic given linked to China has come under much interrogation and critique, but more refined critical interventions into the politics of Chineseness still await. Shu-meii Shih 2013: 19

The performance of female wenwusheng still continues in Hong Kong because there are not enough talented actors.

Mrs. Kong (informal communication, 2010)

Now that it is easier [after 1997] for mainland actors to move to Hong Kong, there are more “real men” (zhen nanren) to play the wenwusheng role-type. They have caused a threat to the female wenwusheng in Hong Kong. The cross-dressing tradition may gradually fade out.

Leung Sum-yee (interview, 2013)

As demonstrated in Chapters 4 through 6, many female fans still prefer a cross-dresser to a “real man” for the leading male roles. Since I became interested in this phenomenon about a decade ago, I have been told by both acquaintances who are Cantonese opera fans in Hong Kong and researchers in Guangzhou that the continuity of Hong Kong female wenwusheng is due to a lack of talented (male) actors (meiyou rencai). While I do not find this a convincing explanation, this perspective derives from the broader negative attitude towards Cantonese opera productions. The female wenwusheng practice is one production aspect that is frequently questioned.

The cultural authenticity and legitimacy of Chineseness have been vigorously discussed and challenged along with the rise of diasporic, postcolonial, and transnational studies since the late twentieth century (Chow 1992, 1993, 1998; Chun 1996; Shih, et al., eds. 2013; Tu, ed. 1994). Although “Chinese culture” or “Chineseness” appears to be a relatively vague concept and hard
to articulate, people generally hold what Gungwu Wang (2013) coined a “cultural spectrum of Chineseness” to claim some ethnic Chinese communities and their practices as “more Chinese” than others. This “cultural spectrum of Chineseness” is reflected in the myth that more authentic “Chinese cultures” are preserved in China proper (the PRC) than in any other Chinese-populated society such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Singapore. However, the rise of the recently codified “Sinophone studies”\(^1\) has challenged the notion that Chineseness is “a monolithic given linked to China” (Shih 2013: 19). While this scholarship has focused mostly on contemporary Hong Kong literature and cinema, the concept of divorcing Chineseness from China proper is important in understanding the cultural and political dynamics enacted on the Cantonese operatic stage in Hong Kong.

To claim authentic Chineseness is also to make a claim for political legitimacy. In her study of Peking opera in Taiwan, Nancy Guy (2005) illustrates that when the PRC reformed Peking opera and created model operas for propaganda purposes, the Nationalist government in Taiwan (post-1949 ROC) initiated the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement to preserve and promote the pre-PRC aesthetics of the genre both within Taiwan and overseas. As Peking opera has also been known as the national opera (guoju) since the early twentieth century, the Nationalist government’s ownership of the “unpolluted” form of the genre was a also way to claim a political mandate through cultural practice. However, since the connection between Taiwan and the PRC resumed in the late 1980s, Taiwanese practitioners have tended to consider the productions, repertoire, and actors from mainland China as more superior than their own regardless of the operatic reforms in and political interference of the PRC. Cultural authenticity is strongly attached to the land of mainland China and the rise of its political power.

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\(^1\) A rising discipline that problematizes the China-centric notion of Chineseness and studies cultural productions and articulations of the Sinitic-language communities that are beyond the boundary of China. See, for example, Chow 1993; Chun 1996; Shih, Tsai, and Bernards, eds. 2013; Tu, ed. 1994.


**Chineseness and Masculinity**

The naturalized relationship between masculinity and male bodies is similar to that between Chineseness and China proper. Gender, gay and lesbian, and queer studies have been challenging the former as if the scholarship in the recently coined Sinophone studies has been questioning the latter. Given their colonial past and port mentality, many Hongkongers tend to think of themselves as culturally inferior to Chinese mainlanders, especially in regard to preserving traditional Chinese culture (Abbas 1997: 6–7). Just as the word “Chinese” is too easily reduced to things and people from mainland China, masculinity is also often understood as a natural attribute of men. Performances of the “fake men”—female wenwusheng—are also seen as embodying the impurity of Chinese culture. In this chapter, I explore the political implications of the inauthenticity attributed to the female wenwusheng tradition under the growing threat of the normalized straight acting exemplified by male wenwusheng both from Hong Kong and Guangdong, who have become increasingly active on the Hong Kong operatic stage since 1997. I also explore how gender and cultural authenticity, as discursive formations, reflect the underlying political and cultural dynamics between Hong Kong and China.

**“One Opera, Two Cultures”**

When the sovereignty of Hong Kong was handed over from the UK to the PRC, the constitutional principle of “One Country, Two Systems”—meaning that Hong Kong could still retain its own political, economic, and legal systems under the auspices of the PRC—was promised. Wang Gungwu’s (2009) article entitled “One Country, Two Cultures” argues that it is the political culture rather than the political system that distinguishes Hong Kong from China. Given that Cantonese opera and operatic songs are shared among Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong and Guangdong, but different styles and performance practices have developed since the
early 1950s (Ching 2016; HKAPA 2014; Lee 2014; YDC 2008: 8–12, 978–980), in this section I borrow Wang’s metaphor of “two cultures” in discussing the stylistic split characterizing this single operatic genre.

After mainland China came under CCP control in 1949, the border between British Hong Kong and Communist China became more strictly enforced, which made it more difficult for people (including actors, musicians, and playwrights) to travel back and forth. Like many other refugees who sought shelter in Hong Kong and Macau during the endless wars in China in the first half of the twentieth century,² some practitioners of Cantonese opera decided to stay in the colony, while others returned to Guangdong after the establishment of the PRC. Since the 1950s, the stricter border enforcement has limited the exchanges between practitioners of Hong Kong and Guangdong, which gradually resulted in different developments of the same genre.

**Opera in Guangdong**

While the colonial government and then the SAR government in Hong Kong have exercised minimal interference with Cantonese opera productions, productions in China have been under CCP surveillance and censorship. Cantonese opera in Guangdong was severely condemned in the early PRC. During the late dynastic era, both Guangzhou and colonial Hong Kong were port trade cities and centers of vibrant cultural exchange, which nurtured the highly commercial and malleable Cantonese opera. However, during the early PRC era, the contents, performance practices, and styles of Cantonese opera were harshly scorned by the CCP for their traces of imperialism, capitalism, vulgarity, obscenity, and moral corruption (Gong 2004: 103–11; Ho 2005: 303–04; Lai 2001: 263–66; Yung 2012: 246–49). Under Mao’s regime, Lenin’s ideology of “art serves politics” was further magnified and implemented through a series of

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Chinese opera reforms that were conducted during the 1950s and 1960s (Lai 2001: 319–72). The CCP government took control of every aspect of the art form by institutionalizing and funding both training and performing units. Under the guidance of political leaders and cultural consultants, practitioners during the 1950s and 1960s changed both the contents of the plays and their performance practice in order to distance the genre from its affiliations with the “old society” to meet the new political order (ibid.).

Cross-dressing, especially by men, is one of the practices that was discouraged by the CCP. Gender performativity of role-types was naturalized and reduced to the biological sex of the actors. In Guangdong, the cross-dressing practice was basically discontinued in Cantonese opera institutions despite the fact that professionally trained female pinghou singers of Cantonese operatic songs were not uncommon.

**Opera in Hong Kong**

In contrast, during the colonial period, practitioners in Hong Kong were able to enjoy significantly more creative freedom while the colonial government attempted to stay “politically neutral” by not implementing any (explicit) restrictive cultural policies or censorship (Chin 2008: 58–63; Luk 1995: 70). Meanwhile, most of the Cantonese opera productions did not—and still do not—depend on government funding. Most of the training schools and performing troupes were and are privately owned. Minimal political or government interference resulted in a “natural selection” and profit-oriented ecosystem, which have allowed both the practitioners and audience members to decide the kinds of performances required to survive economically.

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3 Although I rarely come across materials discussing censorship in Cantonese opera productions under British colonization, in his article on the amateur Cantonese opera activities in communist organizations in Hong Kong, Siu-yan Lee writes that around the 1967 Riot, police raids of communist organizations were frequent and many practitioners were affected (2014: 131).
Theoretically speaking, which performance styles, practices, or theatrical topics will flourish, change, or fade out is for practitioners and audiences to decide.

**Opera in Post-1997 Hong Kong**

While female *wenwusheng* are free of political interference and continue to flourish in today’s Hong Kong, people’s attitudes toward this tradition are not totally immunized from political and social changes, such as the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong and accompanying changes in immigration laws. Since the late 1990s, new immigration policies have made it easier for mainlanders to visit, work, and even migrate to Hong Kong. Through the “Quality Migrant Admission Scheme,” launched in 2006, some accomplished Chinese opera actors—not only of Cantonese opera, but also of Peking opera and *kunqu*—have become permanent residents of Hong Kong. Most of these immigrant actors remain active on stage and/or make a relatively stable living by instructing private students.

Moreover, studying at the Chinese Opera Department at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) (founded in 1999) is another new way for mainland actors to obtain their permanent residency in Hong Kong. After three or four years of study at the Academy, some actors are employed by the Young Academy Cantonese Opera Troupe, which was founded in 2011 and run by the Programme at the HKAPA. According to the Basic Law, “Chinese citizens who have ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of not less than seven years” are qualified to apply for permanent residency. This HKAPA “package” has attracted an increasing number of Cantonese opera actors from China, who are interested in pursuing their careers in Hong Kong.

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4 Targeting people with higher education, or special skills or talents, the Scheme aims at “enhance[ing] Hong Kong’s economic competitiveness” (Immigration Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017).

5 See Article 24 (The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China 2012).
Although this new wave of immigrant actors includes both wenwusheng and huadan, the latter are not as active or influential as their wenwusheng counterparts in their new home. Though I have not been well equipped to study huadan performances or immigrant actors, based on my conversations with opera fans and practitioners, I am able to provide a simple explanation of the limited popularity of huadan. One of the major reasons is that the huadan singing styles in Guangdong are regarded as relatively homogenous. Many Hongkonger fans and practitioners have commented that most of the active huadan from the mainland sing in only one style, the Hong style (hongqiang, literally, the “red style”) (Su 1994: 7). This style originated from a female huadan superstar named Hong Xiannü (1924–2013). Hong made her name in Hong Kong as a Cantonese opera actress and film star in the 1940s and moved back to China during the early PRC era. Besides her artistic achievement, she is remembered by many Hongkongers for her political involvements and revolutionary-style singing, which embraced CCP ideology. In order to survive in Red China, she changed her voice from refined and graceful to piercing and forceful to signify her theatrical characters’ revolutionary spirit and determination to combat the “old society.” Due to the highly politicized content of her plays and the prevalent anti-communist sentiment in the colonial era, from the perspective of Hongkongers, the excessively sharp voices derived from the Hong style index the disastrous Cultural Revolution and other political turmoil in the PRC. Even though many local audience members that I have met are relatively politically insensitive, it is hard for Hongkongers to adapt to this kind of aesthetics because the Hong style never successfully planted its roots in mainstream performance. As most of the accomplished huadan actresses from China learned the Hong style, their performance opportunities in Hong Kong are inevitably affected.
Male *Wenwusheng* from Guangdong

In contrast, male *wenwusheng* from China generally have better luck with their performance careers in Hong Kong. A few of the new immigrant actors have attracted a sizable number of supporters by performing *wu* plays. Professional actors from China usually start their full-time, systematic, and intensive training at state-run institutions in their early teens and thus acquire better *wu* skills. In contrast, the only full-time Chinese opera school—HKAPA—is an institution of higher education that enrolls students who have finished secondary school. Before becoming full-time actors, Cantonese opera learners in Hong Kong receive part-time training on weekends and/or after school or work. The time they can invest is much less than that of mainland actors. According to my interlocutors and observations, Hong Kong actors performing substantial *wu* plays in the past three or four decades are not common; impressive *wu* performances are even rarer. All these factors have provided mainland actors advantages as their *wu* skills can easily make their names.

Moreover, it is commonly believed that male bodies are stronger than female bodies and better able to handle *wu* plays. Therefore, male *wenwusheng* from Guangdong are considered to be a double threat to local female *wenwusheng*, who are perceived to be able to only perform *wen* plays. This issue can also be explained by the effects of *wu* and *wen* plays. While the display of physicality in *wu* plays is more spectacular and more easily impresses and excites audiences, a successful *wen* performance relies on less discernible factors to move audiences, such as the actors’ sophistication and life experiences, a thorough understanding of the roles they are playing, and a meticulous rendering of their characters (for instance, the use of voice, singing, *zuogong*, and facial expressions).

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6 The Chinese Opera Department at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts was founded in 1999.
As local female wenwusheng actresses usually perform the same body of wen repertoire, a repertoire with which audiences are already familiar, giving a breakthrough performance is not easy: because some audiences expect the actresses to follow the recordings of certain iconic figures, such as Yam Kim-fai or Lung Kim-sang. In addition, the chemistry between actors is an indispensable element in a moving wen performance. Chemistry is more likely to flourish in a long-term partnership and through frequent rehearsals. As most casts are formed ad hoc and actors tend to prepare on their own and usually rehearse with others only once or twice—some actors even skip rehearsals when performing the frequently staged plays—many actors aim to make minimal mistakes. Sparks between actors may ignite only by chance. Therefore, audiences may find local female wenwusheng, who perform mostly wen plays, not as impressive as male wenwusheng from Guangdong.

Some interlocutors, such as Leung Sum-yee in this chapter’s third epigraph, expressed concern that newly immigrated male wenwusheng actors posed an increasing threat to local female wenwusheng. I cannot attempt to predict whether the female wenwusheng tradition will be overshadowed by these “real men” as well as their more “authentic masculinity” and will eventually fade out. Rather, I am more interested in examining the political implications, symbolic meanings, and the rationales behind this concern. More specifically, I discuss below the underlying and pertinent mentality of inferiority, which has been ubiquitous in the cultural and historical discourses of Hong Kong since its colonial era.

Embodying Inauthenticity

**Dual Inferiority Complex: “Hong Kong is a Cultural Desert”**

Hong Kong is a cultural desert (xianggang shi ge wenhua shamu). A popular phrase in the 1980s and 1990s when I was growing up.
It is hardly surprising that people will get the impression that Hong Kong is a place without history, without culture, without dissenting views, where all publications printed in a language other than English are considered mere evidence of barbarity.

Ping-kwan Leung 1998: 5

One of the effects of colonialism was that until as late as the seventies, Hong Kong did not realize it could have a culture. The import mentality saw culture, like everything else, as that which came from elsewhere: from Chinese tradition, more legitimately located in mainland China and Taiwan, or from the West.

Ackbar Abbas 1997: 6

To better understand the common assumption that the unbroken female wenwusheng tradition is a result of the lack of (qualified) male wenwusheng actors, it is important to contextualize these critiques within the prevailing cultural inferiority complex in Hong Kong. Doubting of the values and practices of Hong Kong Cantonese opera does not exist in a vacuum, but also in everyday life when discussing Hong Kong and its cultures. It is part of a cultural inferiority complex that is complicated, multi-layered, and deeply embedded in Hong Kong’s modern history. Hongkongers have generally regarded their cultures as worthless or consider Hong Kong as a place which “has no culture” (xianggang mei wenhua). For decades, Hong Kong has been called a “cultural desert” (wenhua shamu) despite its modernization, the success of its pop cultures (such as cinema and Cantopop), and its status as an international financial center.

In Chinese languages, the word “wenhua” (culture/cultural), in many cases, refers to a quality or substance that one acquires. It is often heard that “this person has wenhua” (ta hen you wenhua) or “this person has no wenhua” (ta mei wenhua). Not a neutral word, wenhua usually carries positive meanings or affiliations, and very often includes the meaning of high art. At the individual level, it can be understood as one’s education, cultivation, and/or refinement. When it is used in conjunction with society, it refers to civilization or high culture (Ching 2006: 11). The famous phrase “Hong Kong is a cultural desert” was first heard as early as the 1920s or 1930s (Chin 2008: 66). The general meaning is that Hong Kong is a materialistic and market-oriented
metropolis, where commercial pop culture and vulgar cultural products (such as Cantonese opera and pop songs) thrive, but the high cultures (mostly exemplified by Western classical music, ballet, visual art, and drama) and traditional Chinese culture (such as other Chinese operatic genres and calligraphy) survive with difficulty. Yet a deeper meaning of this phrase is well articulated by Ackbar Abbas’s (1997) concept of “reverse hallucination” (6), as discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, which signifies a reluctance or inability to recognize or acknowledge the existence or value of something. Hongkongers tend to undervalue their local cultures and consider them as commercial products with low artistic value and cultural capital.

“City of Transients”

In order to understand this sense of cultural inferiority, it is important to know Hong Kong’s historical background as a colony of migrants and an “in-between place” (Sinn 2009) or “city of transients” (Abbas 1997: 4)—in terms of both temporality and space. Hongkongers’ inferiority complex was created by their encounters with both Western cultures that were introduced by the British colonialists and mainland Chinese elites who came to Hong Kong for temporary (then permanent) shelter throughout the twentieth century. In the first half of the century, a major part of the Hong Kong population was made up of working class men and women and peasants from Guangdong. A tiny group of upper-class ethnic Chinese had resided in Hong Kong since the late nineteenth century, but the middle class did not expand until after the 1970s.

In the early twentieth century, Hong Kong’s trajectory to Chinese modernity was slightly different from that in the national centers in China, such as Shanghai and Beijing (Chan 2014; Chin 2008: 62–67; Tsai 2001: 104–07, 164–72, 187–90). For instance, when the May Fourth Movement advocated the Beijing-centered nationalist-modernity and “new cultures” in mainland
China—including modern written Chinese, Mandarin as the new “national language” (*guoyu*), Western ideologies, sciences, and democracy—the British colony responded differently. Not only did the local Chinese in Hong Kong sustain a more traditional way of writing Chinese, but, given the Cantonese dominated population, they were also reluctant to adopt Mandarin as their everyday vernacular. Inevitably, nationalist mainland intellectuals at that time tended to draw the simple conclusion that these differences in Hong Kong were a political gesture, and blamed the colonialists for hindering progressiveness and making them culturally backward. When the intelligentsia expatriates (*nanlai wenren*) from the national centers moved to Hong Kong in order to escape from the political turmoil and wars between the 1920s and 1940s, their culture shock, exemplified by the reluctance of local Cantonese to adopt *their modern Chinese*, inevitably made them label this colony as a cultural desert.

After both the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Chinese Civil Wars (1927–1936, 1946–1950) in mainland China ended, the establishment of the PRC still led refugees to Hong Kong. Some considered Hong Kong as a temporary shelter and would move back to mainland China after the political turmoil was over. Others viewed the ROC (now Taiwan) as their ultimate homeland and attempted to move to Taiwan via Hong Kong (despite the fact that many would end up staying in the British colony). Hong Kong was treated as a transfer point between the two Chinas. The majority of this generation of refugees does not consider Hong Kong home. Designating Hong Kong as “a city of transients,” Abbas explains that it is due to this “port mentality” that both people and things are provisional and ad hoc (1997: 4). Concrete local cultures and identities did not develop until after the 1970s, when the

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7 For instance, Governor Sir Cecil Clementi revived Chinese studies in Hong Kong and preserved classical Chinese by founding the Chinese department at the University of Hong Kong (Faure 2003: 20).
8 For instance, when the “New Cultural” advocator Lu Xun visited Hong Kong from China in 1927, he was shocked to see locals upholding many traditional Chinese practices, such as writing Chinese in a more traditional way (Faure 2003: 19–21).
first postwar Hong-Kong-born generation, who considered Hong Kong home, grew up (Luk 1995; Tsai 2001: 3–4).

“Central Plain-ism” as Cultural Centrism

Among the refugees who decided to stay in Hong Kong, many were patriotic entrepreneurs and intelligentsia from wealthy cities in the north such as Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. Due to the language barrier and their more powerful cultural, social, and economic capital, many intelligentsia refugees did not assimilate into the local Lingnan-originated cultural scene in Hong Kong and even looked down upon it. Their patriotic sentiments caused them to feel ashamed of the colonial status of Hong Kong and they thus considered people “morally corrupt” and local cultures “backward” and “not-Chinese-not-Western” (Chin 2008: 64–69; Choi 1995: 57; Tsai 2001: 203–07). Resenting the destruction of traditional culture in modern China and holding themselves superior to the local Cantonese, these newcomers took on the mission to promote “Chinese culture” in the colony. By publishing books and making films, as well as founding colleges, news bureaus, and music schools, they imposed a “central plain” Chinese culture (da zhongyuan wenhua) in the city in the second half of the twentieth century, which has had a profound impact on its cultural scene. Gradually occupying a significant place in the spheres of mass media, publishing, higher education, and film production (Cheng 1997; Chin 2008; Lee 1997; Luk 1995; Ng 1997; Sze 1997; Wong 1997), their version of “Chinese culture” became more legitimate than that of the local Chinese cultures, such as Cantonese opera and Cantonese music.

In fact, the “central plain” cultural centrism established by the non-Cantonese northern immigrants is a vague or relative concept. It is more of a positioning or cultural bias than a

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9 Lingnan refers to the geocultural area located in southeast coastal China, including Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan Provinces, Hong Kong, and Macau. The majority of its population is Cantonese-speaking people.
constellation of cultural practices from a particular place or time. Although, historically speaking, the “central plain” narrowly refers to the Henan region in northern China, this term today is often used without specifying any geographical region. The exact meanings vary based on contexts. It is more a way to describe the cultural hegemony of the national centers represented by Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai. For instance, the Cantonese people in Guangdong experienced “central plain” cultural centrism over the past few decades when their native tongue began disappearing from the mass media and daily life. Yet, in the context of Hong Kong, this “central plain” cultural centrism is a relative concept that indicates a place or culture that is geo-culturally closer to the “central plain.” Carrying a looser meaning, it often refers to mainland China without specifying a city or province.

**Cantonese Opera is not Culture?**

Cantonese opera has now been included on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) lists. But I personally don’t think it is necessarily celebratory. Being internationally recognized does not mean that we [Cantonese opera] are genuinely recognized by Chinese nationals (zhongguoren). The world does not understand Cantonese opera. So why should we feel honored and pleased when we gain their [foreigners’] recognition? [...] Our goal is to have all Chinese and Cantonese (guangdongren) rather than foreigners (waiguoren) recognize us [Cantonese opera]. [...] We always think that things that are recognized by foreigners are good. This is an inferior mentality, long-term and deeply-rooted in the self-denial of Chinese culture.

Yuen Siu-fai 2011a: 14–15

This quotation from the speech of Yuen Siu-fai at the 2010 Chinese Opera Festival Conference reveals how the genre has suffered from “central plain” cultural centrism. Yuen expressed his resentment that even after gaining international recognition, Cantonese opera was still neglected and undermined by many Chinese nationals (zhongguoren), including ethnic Cantonese (implying Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers as well). He intentionally emphasized the Cantonese population (guangdongren) because they may comprehend this genre better than other Chinese due to the absence of a language barrier. He clearly asserted that Cantonese, rather
than foreigners, are the people who should keep Cantonese opera alive; and that other Chinese should also try to understand and take Cantonese opera more seriously. While doubting the impact of UNESCO ICH recognition, he implied that even though Cantonese opera is “internationally recognized” now, the status of the genre is still questionable because its target audience—Cantonese and, to a certain extent, Chinese—do not consider it “art” (yishu) or “culture” (wenhua).

While the refusal to recognize that Hong Kong has “culture” is common (Abbas 1997; Chin 2008; Leung 1998), the denial of Cantonese opera as “art” (yishu) or “culture” (wenhua) has also been prominent. This denial is twofold: on the one hand, local cultures (for instance, Cantonese opera and Cantopop) are considered not as refined and sophisticated as imported European high art; on the other hand, due to its colonial history, “Chinese cultures” (such as Cantonese opera and the Chinese language) practiced in Hong Kong are never as “pure” or “authentic” as those preserved and presented in China or Taiwan. This dual inferiority complex has also profoundly influenced how people view Cantonese opera as well as the female cross-dressing tradition in Hong Kong: while Cantonese opera has been marginalized by high culture, it has not been perceived as on par with its counterparts in Guangdong and with other Chinese opera genres, such as Peking opera.

The Western high culture genres, such as European classical music and ballet, that were introduced by the colonial government to the general public have had a significant impact on Hongkongers’ attitudes toward Cantonese opera. Many upper-class ethnic Chinese (gaodeng huaren) have also used Western high culture to mark their status (Luk 1995: 74–75). As Cantonese opera has been consumed by the masses, its traditional aesthetics and practices, which
do not fit the European classical music standards, have been termed “vulgar,” “backward,” and “tasteless” (Cheung 2011: 1; Ng 2015: 98).

Although the colonial government had no interest in turning Hong Kong’s population into British by forcing everyone to learn English, English proficiency did function as a marker of upper-class status for those Chinese who had access to colonial government officers and merchants. Cantonese opera, with its exclusive use of Cantonese language and as a local theater for the masses, was thus difficult to elevate to the status of “art.”

“Central plain” cultural centrism has also made many people think that the Cantonese opera actors in Hong Kong are not as good or professional as those from Guangdong regardless of the depth of their actual understanding. From my fieldwork observations, this cultural centrism very often exists as a myth. Some people simply believe that mainland practices or productions are generally better. For example, when I attended the 2013 Cantonese Opera Day as a volunteer and audience member, I saw a troupe from Guangdong that performed an excerpt with pre-recorded accompanying music. When I went backstage to help the amateur actors of my Cantonese opera teacher, I told them about the use of pre-recorded music and expected they would be as shocked as me. However, at least one of them, who had been learning Cantonese opera in Hong Kong for almost two decades, expressed admiration and regarded the performance as impeccable.

On the operatic stage, the relationship between actors and musicians is highly interactive (Chan 1991; Yung 1989). Even without improvisation, the lead percussionist (zhangban) watches actors closely, this musical punctuation signaling how singing, speaking, and body movements are phrased (Wichmann 1991: 238–62). For instance, when an actor enters the stage,

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10 Although there are examples of Cantonese opera sung in English, most were experimental productions performed in secondary school, and did not target the conventional audiences.
he or she should be accompanied by a (repeated) percussion pattern. When he or she stops at the center of the stage, the percussionist should simultaneously signal this action by punctuating it musically—before changing to a different pattern that accompanies a spoken line, a singing section, or the next series of body movement. Yes, actors’ precision through intensive practice should be acknowledged. But the issue is that, if actors perform with pre-recorded music, the real interactive relationship between actors and accompanying musicians is missing. This interactive relationship remains particularly important on the Hong Kong stage because actors usually do not have a fixed group of accompanists to rehearse with. Both actors and musicians need to learn how to deal with ad hoc situations. The next section discusses the practice of improvisation and its importance.

**Improvisation: Lackadaisical Attitude, Unseen Artistry, or Local Characteristic?**

[S]omething unique has been emerging from Hong Kong’s cities: it is Hong Kong Man [sic]. He is go-getting and highly competitive, tough[ented] for survival, quick-thinking and flexible.

Hugh D. R. Baker 1983: 478

Cantonese opera [in Hong Kong] is the most commercial among all Chinese opera genres. In mainland China, the government feeds the troupes. [ . . .] They can practice only one movement from 9 am to 5 pm. [ . . .] They use 340 out of 365 days in a year to rehearse. [ . . .] In the Hong Kong Cantonese opera circle, actors need to perform different plays one after another. All the way straight through [with not enough time to rehearse intensively]. But this is its culture (wenhua). It doesn’t mean that it has no artistic value. Its value is the adaptability and spontaneity (yingbian nengli) of its actors, characteristics which are also those of Hongkongers.

Martin Lau Kwok-ying (interview, 2013)

Echoing the British anthropologist Hugh D. R. Baker’s observations of Hongkongers in the early 1980s, Martin Lau, a Cantonese opera musician, also made a similar comment about Cantonese opera practitioners in Hong Kong. Lau pointed out that, due to its highly commercial environment, professional actors need to learn how to be highly adaptable and spontaneous in order to survive in this competitive circle. While those who look down upon Cantonese opera
often blame actors for their lackadaisical attitude and frequent mistakes.\(^1\) Lau acknowledged that being able to perform different plays every night and to correct mistakes on the spot are unique skills (and the “art”) of Hong Kong actors.

Because troupes usually do not repeat the same play on consecutive nights, both actors and crew members need to deal with any problem that arises within the limited time and space available. Mistakes, major and minor, are common in most (if not all) performances. The most common one is forgetting lines. Other mistakes vary from actors forgetting to enter the stage or entering at the wrong moment, to bringing the wrong props, to forgetting the props and lines, to crew members missing some stage setups. For instance, if actors or stage setups for the next scene are not ready yet, the actors onstage need to prolong their performance in order to give them more time to prepare. In most cases, they improvise lines, jokes, and body movements to save the situation.

The rapid turnover in plays from one night to the next means that actors very often do not have enough time to prepare their performances and memorize every single line of their scripts. Actors’ adaptability and improvisation skills are particularly important. Generally speaking, audience members in Hong Kong are relatively forgiving. As long as actors can keep the performance going by repairing mistakes spontaneously, they will not leave a poor impression on the audience.

Rather than laziness, improvisatory skill can be regarded as artistry, demanding a combination of talent, hard work, and stage experience. Sau-yan Chan states that the ability to improvise well requires not only a quick mind, but also profound knowledge of the structures of

\(^1\) In the first half of the twentieth century, it was common to see actors, especially the established ones, being addicted to opium and gambling, and losing volition in their performance career. Very often, forgetting scripts, making mistakes, and being absent or late to performances were caused by their addiction problems (Chan 1991: 65; Leung, interview, 2013).
both spoken dialogues and sung arias, the principles of rhyming, and a certain degree of
cultivation of Chinese literature (1991: 86).12 All these are basic knowledge for actors and yet
not as perceptible as their singing, zuogong, acting, and acrobatics skill. Therefore, improvisation,
as a more subtle and less overt phenomenon, is generally neglected and excluded from the realm
of artistry by people who hold a disdainful attitude toward Cantonese opera.

**Peking Opera Hegemony**

At the end of the talk, an audience member asked [the guest speaker Pei Yanling, an
acclaimed female wusheng (male martial role-type) of Peking and Hebei bangzi operas],
“Teacher Pei, how do you view the artistry (gongjia) of Cantonese opera?” Pei answered,
“May I be honest?” Then she spoke with no reservation, “To be frank, [I think] there is
no artistry in Cantonese opera.” The entire audience clapped.

Su Xing 2013

Pei Yanling has twice harshly criticized Cantonese opera [female wenwusheng] actress
Lung Kim-sang in public speech. It made many Cantonese opera actors angry. [. . . ]
[Compared to Peking and Hebei bangzi operas.] there are different criteria to evaluate
Cantonese opera. These differences often lead to a total denial of the genre. [. . . ] Back to
Lung Kim-sang [. . . ], it is difficult to purchase tickets for the first hundred shows of
their [Lung and her huadan partner Mui Suet-sze] performances.

Ho Ka-yiu 2004: 35–38.

“Central plain” cultural centrism is also expressed in the form of Peking opera hegemony.

The first quotation above from Su Xing, a blogger, concerns a lecture about Chinese opera on
June 22, 2013. The talk featured Pei Yanling, the accomplished female wusheng master of
Peking opera. Su recalled that the audience responded with applause to Pei’s comment that
“there is no artistry in Cantonese opera (yueju meiyou gongjia).” Pei further explained, “I believe
there existed artistry in the past. But it is lost now.” “You,” she encouraged the audience, “should
rediscover it.” Although I was not in the audience and cannot provide a firsthand observation, I
still wish to explain the audience’s reaction and give a deeper interpretation of this applause. No

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12 Non-Cantonese opera knowledge is also important in a successful improvisation. For instance, Leung Sing-bo, an
acclaimed chou actor who was renowned for his improvisation skills, was said to have great interest in Anglo
comedy movies and thus his jokes often showed a hybridity of Western pop culture, current international and local
social issues, and traditional humor in the Cantonese-speaking world.
doubt that the applause was a gesture to show appreciation of Pei’s frankness. And I share the blogger’s observation that the audience agreed with Pei’s opinion. This immediate approval echoes the general bias that Cantonese opera has no substance and is inferior to other genres such as Peking opera and kunqu—generally regarded as two of the most refined Chinese opera genres. Like the “central plain” cultural centrism of non-Cantonese immigrants, Pei’s critique acted as an authoritative voice affirming the inferiority of Cantonese opera.

Pei’s story did not end with this commentary, even though she immediately softened her assessment by saying that its artistry was lost in this generation rather than that it had never existed (Su 2013). Two weeks after her talk, a newspaper article reports that, after attending a Cantonese opera performance of the Battle at Wancheng (hereafter Battle) at the 2013 Chinese Opera Festival, Pei admitted that her earlier judgmental statement was wrong (see Fig. 7.1). The report also states that she expressed her high appreciation of the four masters featured in the show (Baozi 2013).

*Battle* was a newly arranged script from a traditional formulaic play (*chuantong paichang*), based on stories from the classic historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It also exists a play with the same title in Peking opera. The newly arranged Cantonese play at the Festival adopted elements from the Peking version.

So which elements of the performance altered her opinion? Pei’s changing demeanor prompted me to investigate which factors make a Cantonese opera production in Hong Kong “presentable.” In the Cantonese opera circle, the annual government-funded Chinese Opera Festival and the Hong Kong Arts Festival are two major events that practitioners take more

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13 This point of view is not only held by ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong and mainland China, but also in Taiwan (see Guy 2005).
14 Based on historical facts during the wartime of the late Han dynasty (AD 220–280), the stories of this novel have become a source that all Chinese opera genres draw on.
seriously than their regular commercial performances. As both Festivals are platforms to exhibit “Hong Kong culture” or “local Chinese culture,” the Cantonese opera programs may provide insight into what kinds of productions are considered “art” or “culture.” In this section, I discuss the Cantonese opera programs of these Festivals, supplemented with the details of Battle, to show how practitioners attempt to elevate the genre to the status of “art” and how this process has been influenced by Peking opera.

“Presentable” Plays

After browsing the Cantonese opera programs of both the Chinese Opera Festivals (2010–2016) and the Hong Kong Arts Festivals (1973–2016), I found a paradox between what is presented at the Festivals and what is performed everyday by privately-funded troupes in their commercial shows. While the commercial shows perform the classic repertoire dominated by love stories, many plays at the Festivals were advertised as “new Cantonese opera” (xinbian yueju) featuring historical stories and wu performances. There are two types of “new” plays: those fresh from local (actor-)playwrights’ hands, and those newly adapted from other genres (mostly Peking opera). Many “new” plays borrow elements from or are rearranged from traditional formulaic plays of Cantonese opera. Whether they are newly written or adapted, it is obvious that most of these plays highlight wu and zuogong—the major two skills that are considered artistry (Lai 2001: 161).

\[15\] Compared to regular commercial performances, the performances at the Festivals are usually taken more seriously. For instance, Battle was one of the most well-prepared performances that I attended throughout the course of this study. Both its wen and wu scenes showed meticulously planned choreography (zuogong) and extraordinary coordination between actors. No obvious or major mistakes were made. From the actors’ perspective, being selected to perform at the Festivals is prestigious because the team is, to a certain extent, seen as representing the local Cantonese opera circle. Participating in the Festivals is both recognition of the actors and a great opportunity for their publicity.
Substantial Wu Performances

The playwright and director of Battle designed a few spectacular scenes to showcase the supporting cast for the role of generals, dressing them in their elaborate warrior costumes (kao) and demonstrating their wu skills. The performance was also “presentable” in a literal sense, due to the splendor of its spectacle. Most privately-funded troupes of the past three decades have not been able to present spectacles of such scale because neither practitioners nor financiers are interested in investing in showcasing their supporting casts. As Battle was directly funded by the government, production expenses seemed not to be a concern. This production showed that, when resources are sufficient, veteran practitioners tend to consider wu performances as both presentable and representable of the genre.

Traditional formulaic plays and zuogong

Moreover, the Festivals have also been used as opportunities to display, promote, and preserve traditional formulaic plays and zuogong. Many of the new plays at the Festivals comprise wen scenes of substantial traditional formulaic plays and/or meticulously planned zuogong scenes (Ip 2013; Kung 2013).

Even though Battle features mostly wu scenes and male sheng actors, Chan Ho-kau’s—the only dan and female performers among the lead cast—performance attracted Pei Yanling’s attention. Chan was highlighted in two scenes, the sword-dance and seduction scenes. In the sword-dance scene, she demonstrated an impeccable balance between gracefulness and vitality. The seduction scene was a major wen scene of the play. The female lead seduces the male painted-face (hualian) lead (played by Yau Sing-po), the meticulously choreographed symbolic body movements were highlighted to depict the flirtatious sentiment that is exchanged between the two characters. When Pei modified her opinion about Cantonese opera after seeing Battle,

16 Funded and organized by the Cultural Presentations Section of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department.
she especially stressed her appreciation of Chan’s zuogong (Baozi 2013). This shows that, when performing wen plays, zuogong rather than singing is another essential factor in making Cantonese opera an “art.”

The Public

Another difference between the programs performed at the Festivals and everyday commercial shows is the subject matter. While the most frequently performed plays in commercial performances are wen plays that feature singing by the stars of the main cast and love stories with happy endings, the repertoire at the Festivals tends to focus on wu plays, stories loaded with patriotism, justice, and/or morality, sometimes with tragic endings. Battle is no exception. The play features some battle scenes and the tension between King Cao Cao (hualian) and his new mistress (female lead), who is actually an assassin destined to kill Cao. Even though the play also features their love affair, it is not a typical love story found in regular commercial performances. In the seduction scene, it was very clear to the audience that it is not the mistress’s personal desire or promiscuity but her patriotism and bravery that drive her to sacrifice her body. In the closing scene, when she has a chance to kill Cao, she chooses to let him escape in exchange for his promise not to overthrow the Han Empire. All personal sentiments and intentions are overshadowed by patriotic righteousness. By highlighting the public sphere and wu performances, Battle also exemplifies the desire of veteran practitioners to masculinize the genre at the Festivals.

17 Solo and duet theme songs (zhutiqu) by wenwusheng and principal huadan.
It is also noteworthy that many “new Cantonese operas” are actually adapted from Peking opera. During the process of adaptation, following the choices and styles of role-types in their original Peking opera version is often unavoidable. For instance, the painted-face role-type (jing or hualian) was highlighted in the programs of the Chinese Opera Festival in both 2012 and 2013. In Chinese opera, this role-type is often used for mature male characters who have distinctive personalities or dispositions: portraying either a very loyal, just, righteous, and brave being, or an evil, corrupt, immoral, and cruel one. In Cantonese opera, hualian is often used for supporting roles and thus attracts less attention compared to the leading role-types, wenwusheng and huadan.

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In contrast, in Peking opera, it occupies a more important place and has developed various styles (liupai).

As discussed in Chapter 2, many supporting sheng actors in Hong Kong occasionally take on the hualian role-type regardless of their training and past experience because they do not want to miss these performance opportunities. Despite the fact that Cantonese opera also has a hualian tradition, its subordinate role in the genre since the late twentieth century does not compel many actors to adopt it as their specialization. As formally learning hualian is basically impossible in today’s Hong Kong, actors’ renditions rely mostly on their own observations and imitations. Given that the Peking opera hualian tradition is relatively rich, with accessible video recordings, it has become a handy source of reference for Cantonese opera directors, playwrights, and actors when performing this role-type—by copying Peking costumes, painted masks, singing style, and zuogong.

When Cantonese opera actors adapt role-types from the Peking genre, the outcomes vary because role-types in the latter are more strictly defined and each of them has its own vocal quality, repertoire, makeup, and zuogong, which require relatively intensive training to master. Even when the masters of Cantonese opera perform the Peking-opera-adapted plays at the Festivals, performance quality is not guaranteed. For instance, when the encyclopedic sheng master Yuen Siu-fai performed two new plays of Justice Bao’s stories at the 2012 Chinese Opera Festival (see Fig. 7.2), he played the hualian role-type and intentionally changed his usual manner of vocal projection. In the program notes, he emphasized his adaptation of the Peking opera tongchui hualian voice, which is particularly bright, thick, and powerful in all registers (HKCOF 2012). Based on the performance I attended on July 28, 2012, I do not think he achieved this goal, although his voice sounded very different from the usual. I suggest that, in
imitating Peking opera styles, the performance quality of unfamiliar role-types is not as
important as the aspiration to elevate the artistry and status of Cantonese opera.

However, it seemed to me that Yuen’s effort in *Justice Bao* was appreciated and well
received by the audience. Regular Cantonese opera audiences tend to pay closer attention to the
narratives of the plays and actors’ acting skills. Given the language barrier, they are not familiar
with the repertoire and role-types of Peking opera and other genres in Hong Kong. Generally
speaking, Cantonese opera audience members are not huge fans of other Chinese opera genres.
*Justice Bao*, as a play adapted from Peking opera and sung in Cantonese, serves as a bridge
between the Cantonese and Peking styles, and broadens the horizon of Cantonese opera in
general.

Yet during this creative adaptation process, Peking opera has been highly favored and has
become, more or less, the only reference among all operatic genres. Worshipping Peking opera
as a more sophisticated genre, role model, and as an indispensable source for cultivating
Cantonese opera into a more serious art form is a phenomenon that has been imposed in Festivals.
Despite the fact that Cantonese opera is a relatively open genre that has benefited from other
genres, I consider that this “Peking opera model,” along with harsh criticism of Peking opera
masters such as Pei Yanling, is in fact an aesthetic and thus ideological hegemony that further
marginalizes Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

**Female Wenwusheng as Other**

*Diversifying and Masculinizing Cantonese Opera*

Even though Hong Kong did not experience any top-down opera reforms like China did,
individual troupes over the past decades have tried to develop the genre in different directions.
Yuen Siu-fai, an encyclopedic *sheng* actor discussed in Chapter 2, is one of the important figures
who have been actively involved in changing the local operatic scene. Over the past three decades, he has been engaged in the Festivals as an artistic director, organizer, playwright, and performer. His vision regarding the artistic preference directly influences the programming of the Cantonese opera performances at the Festivals. Frequently condemning the homogenous repertoire of Cantonese opera at public occasions, in private conversations, and in publications, Yuen has shown his disdain for \textit{wen} plays that feature mostly scholar-and-beauty (\textit{caizi jiaren}) love stories (Yuen 2011b; Yuen, interview, 2014). When advocating for diversification of Cantonese repertoire, he usually borrows from that of Peking and revives traditional Cantonese opera plays. Yet, he has been relatively selective and inconsistent when using Peking as a reference. One of the significant changes in Peking opera between the 1870s and 1930s is its feminization, as facilitated by the switch from a \textit{laosheng}- to \textit{dan}-centered repertory (Goldstein 2007). When Yuen adapts Peking opera repertoires and performance styles in Cantonese opera productions, he tends to favor \textit{sheng} over \textit{dan} role-types and male over female actors for the leading \textit{sheng} role-types, in addition to a stronger preference for \textit{wu} plays and historical themes—which also stress the public male-centered domain. Under his directorship, female \textit{wenwusheng} or \textit{dan} are rarely featured.

This disfranchisement of female \textit{wenwusheng} also reflects the bias that male \textit{wenwusheng} are more qualified to represent the local Cantonese opera circle. My reading of Yuen’s bias and intention is backed up by other discussions found throughout this dissertation, which reveal that many people are comfortable admitting that female \textit{wenwusheng} are second-class \textit{wenwusheng}. The popularity of female \textit{wenwusheng} and predominant scholar-and-beauty \textit{wen} repertoire is seen as a major factor in the decline of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong. Audiences are
considered ill-informed groupies whose tastes and expectations have decayed together with the overall quality of performances.

Moreover, as *wu* and historical-themed repertoires are considered masculine, I further suggest that Yuen’s artistic preference as practiced at the Festivals represents another attempt to masculinize the genre. Juxtaposing Yuen’s vision with that of Pei Yanling, I argue that Cantonese opera in Hong Kong—a significant aspect of which is the stardom and fandom of female *wenwusheng*—is regarded as a feminized Other. It is a genre gendered as feminine by the aesthetic hegemony of Peking opera. Furthermore, if the Festivals are meant to display “Chinese cultures,” then the Cantonese opera programs—which differ from the regular commercial productions—suggest that only the Peking-opera-influenced repertoire and style, and the male *sheng* actors who perform them, represent a more orthodox form of Chineseness. Therefore, the mainstream commercial Cantonese opera productions have also become Other in terms of Chineseness.

**Female Wenwusheng and Hong Kong Productions as Other**

As mentioned above, the impact of the recently immigrated actors from the mainland on the Hong Kong Cantonese opera scene has not been seriously discussed. While some hold the positive opinion that these actors have contributed to the genre’s development, others consider them a threat to local actors in this already competitive environment. Whether people like these actors or not, they recognize that their performance styles are different from those of local actors and believe they need to adapt to the Hong Kong performance environment. However, some immigrant actors look down on the local scene, preferring not to adapt.

Take Hong Hai, an immigrant Cantonese opera actor-instructor at the HKAPA. Already a professional actor in a leading troupe in Guangzhou before coming to Hong Kong to study at the
HKAPA in 1999, he mentions in an article that he had a hard time adapting to the new performing environment and audiences (HKAPA 2014). My interview with him also revealed his haughty attitude toward local performing conventions. For instance, while veteran local actors consider traditional formulaic plays fundamental in learning Cantonese opera performance practice, Hong described the prescribed sequences as like “canned food.” Perhaps influenced by the anti-traditional opera reforms and modern institutionalization of the genre on the mainland, he emphasized the novelty of plays and the importance of the playwright and director, asserting that a serious performance should not consist of mainly old sequences from traditional formulaic plays. He also hinted that upholding tradition would obstruct the development of the genre.

Rather than valuing those practices that depend on actors’ creativity and flexibility, he believes all details of music and movement should be scripted by directors and playwrights. Moreover, he wants to shorten plays from their usual about three hours length to an hour and a half. He also finds local audiences ill-informed, accusing them of caring only about the plots of the plays, and not the artistry and performance quality. By imposing mainland performance practices, he sought to change the aesthetic conventions in Hong Kong.

Like Pei and other mainland actors, Hong also tended to value acrobatic skills over the ability to meticulously render dramatic characters. One of my interlocutors, whom I will call Jes, a local female wenwusheng, joined The Young Academy Cantonese Opera Troupe (yanyi qingnian yuejutuan) under the HKAPA. In a production in which Jes played the male lead, Hong was the artistic director. It was an excerpt from a renowned local wen play that features the typical romantic story between a refined scholar and a faithful beauty. During the rehearsal of a drunken scene, Hong told Jes to do a front-flip movement (qiang bei) when singing the line “slippery path.” Jes refused politely by lying that she did not know how to execute the movement.
In Hong’s eyes, her response may have reinforced the stereotype of the “amateurish” Cantonese opera scene in Hong Kong, where female wenwusheng allegedly have weak wu skills and only know how to sing. During my interview with her, she explained that this scene, accompanied by relatively slow music, should feature graceful wobbly walking followed by a slow falling movement. If a rapid flip is added, she noted, the poetic aura will be destroyed. She remarked that she did not like the idea of doing an unnecessary and irrelevant acrobatic movement that does not suit the play only for the sake of showing off one’s wu skills. As an active professional actress who has been performing full-time since around 2000, she gradually found that her performance style did not fit that of the director and other mainland Troupe members, and left the Troupe after a year. She was also disappointed with the Troupe, which was dominated by mainland actors, for being too mainland-centric in terms of aesthetics and performance practice. Even when they performed a local classic play, the artistic directors were still reluctant to follow the original scripts or local performance conventions. She also pointed out—and this was echoed by a few other local interlocutors—that with this attitude, mainland actors at the HKAPA would have a hard time surviving on the commercial stage outside the institute. The status of these actors, as HKAPA graduates, seemed to grant them more cultural capital than local actors who did not attend the institute. With this status and more solid fundamental training on the mainland, many immigrant actors feel superior to local actors and that they deserve better opportunities. Many do not have extensive experiences on the Hong Kong commercial stage but do not want to accumulate their knowledge of local conventions and stage experiences by starting with minor roles, which makes them even harder to fit in the local circle.

Since Cantonese opera was named to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2009, the HKSAR government has seemingly provided increasing support for the genre.
However, some local practitioners and critics, who understand the importance of audiences, are skeptical about the top-down policies and government-initiated projects (Ho 2011; Yuen 2011a). Even though the Chinese Traditional Theatre Programme at the HKAPA, the only higher education institute which trains professional Cantonese opera practitioners, seems to be expanding with increasing governmental support, its impact on the Hong Kong scene is still questionable. With the dominant mainlanders as faculty and a higher enrollment of students from China, it is not uncommon to hear practitioners questioning whether the program is intended to serve the locals.

When I asked Jes whether she felt that female wenwusheng were unwelcome in the Troupe, she replied that female wenwusheng were not the issue, but rather that Hong Kong actors in general were suppressed in the Troupe. My other local interlocutors echoed Jes’s comment. A few interlocutors expressed resentment of a local male sheng actor who studied at the HKAPA. Even though his wu skills were as solid as those of his mainland classmates, he was assigned only minor roles in performances, in which the leading casts were mostly played by these classmates. My interlocutors thought this was unfair to local actors. Generally speaking, local actors felt marginalized by the Programme and the Troupe at HKAPA, one of the institutions that received the most resources from the government. Although the government’s support of Cantonese opera is not only limited to the HKAPA, the consequences and perhaps political agenda of these efforts are worthy studying in future.

Cantonese opera in Hong Kong was never circumscribed by the British colonial government; the genre was—and is still—largely determined by local audience tastes. But if there exists an official narrative or vision of Cantonese opera in post-1997 Hong Kong, it includes the phenomena described above: government funded programs and institutions,

20 Such as the “West Kowloon Cultural District” project.
Festivals, and visits of Peking opera masters. Although I do not have sufficient evidence to further explain the government’s political agendas and intentions, these official presentations of the genre do not reflect the real world of Cantonese opera, such as the popularity of female wenwusheng and the dominance of wen plays. Rather, I found that the “central plain” cultural centrism that marginalized people in the mid twentieth century still continues to thrive in today’s Hong Kong. By introducing more immigrant male wenwusheng actors, who represented orthodox constructions of masculinity and Chineseness, this disenfranchisement of female wenwusheng in the official narrative is legitimized.

**Performing Masculinity, Performing Chineseness**

If there existed only one standard in the [Chinese operatic] world, . . . Cantonese opera would have died out because it did not meet this [Peking-opera dominated] standard. However, not only did Cantonese opera not die out, in fact, it is flourishing. Today, when all the operatic genres in China are facing a survival crisis, both the performances and audience members of Cantonese opera [in Hong Kong] outnumber those of any other genres.

Ho Ka-yiu 2004: 37–38

Chineseness is not a category with a [sic] fixed content—be it racial, cultural or geographical—but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora.

Ien Ang 2013: 58–59

Similar to how the vibrant Chinese-language literature and cinema outside China proper contributes to the making of Chineseness, the popularity of female wenwusheng on the commercial stage in Hong Kong is also (re)defining masculinity in Cantonese opera—and, perhaps, outside theater as well. As illustrated in the previous chapters, the female wenwusheng body is not an appropriation of the privileged power of the patriarchal system, but an enabling space to accommodate the intersecting experiences and possibilities of alternative gendered identities and sexualities. Moreover, the interrogation of this queer body also reflects the ambivalent cultural and national identities experienced by Hongkongers. This queer body
provides a performative means of problematizing orthodox and peripheral Chineseness, and refashioning the cultural, national, and political meanings of being “Chinese” in post-1997 Hong Kong.
“Chineseness”: Chinese Culture as Political Affiliation

Chineseness, . . . frequently appears as an identificatory category not so much to designate one’s ancestral origin but to establish and reinforce certain political affiliations. Shu-mei Shih 2013: 18

In today’s Hong Kong, no one would deny that Cantonese opera is not representative of traditional Chinese cultural heritage. Yet, many Hongkongers tend to naturalize the relationship between Chinese culture, Chineseness, and China. The pro-PRC nationalists in Hong Kong have been using Cantonese opera as a means of constructing an imagined or actual cultural motherland in order to impose political affiliations with and a sense of belonging to the “ancestral land,” the PRC.

Although the HKSAR government has seemingly provided increasing support for the preservation of Cantonese opera, changes in educational and public policy that marginalize the use of Cantonese has made this support ironic. A state-sponsored large-scale, gradual Mandarinization process was begun in 1997. Mandarin was imposed while Cantonese was marginalized in public spaces, mass media, and school. The Chinese language Hongkongers communicate in everyday life—the spoken Cantonese, traditional Chinese characters, and the localized expressions and vocabulary in the written form—were further marginalized as not proper, informal, and inauthentic. One of the principal controversies involves the Education Department’s attempt to change the delivery language from Cantonese to Mandarin when teaching the Chinese language. Given that the Chinese languages are tonal languages, the sense of sound is important in experiencing an operatic performance. If Mandarin becomes a compulsory delivery language in the process of learning Chinese language at school,
Hongkongers may lose the sensibility of the nuanced connections between tonal sound, music, and language in opera performances. The government’s efforts to promote Cantonese opera and Mandarin contradict each other.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed pro-PRC forces at work among the Hongkongers attending Cantonese opera performances. For instance, on August 23, 2012, the amateur troupe of my Cantonese opera teacher gave a free daytime performance at the Koshan Theatre. I volunteered that day. When I walked out of the theater after the show, other audience members and I were greeted by Ann Chiang Lai-wan, a Legislative Council candidate at that time. The Legislative Council election was held on September 9, two weeks after this performance. Chiang, as a pro-PRC candidate, and her crew were campaigning outside the theater. I am not sure if the performance was sponsored by her political party. Nonetheless, her presence made it easy for the elderly women leaving the theater to associate her party with the fulfilling afternoon of Cantonese opera that they had just experienced free of charge.

Toward the end of my dissertation writing, a piece of recent controversial commercial production took place. On the PRC National Day in 2016, a new play, Chairman Mao, was premiered at the Sunbeam Theatre in Hong Kong, casting all local top-notch actors but no single (migrant) mainlanders. Li Kui-ming, the playwright-director-financier of the production, remarked that the play was apolitical and featured only Mao Zedong’s romantic stories and “human side” (Chen and Tsoi 2016; Shek 2016). Although I was not able to attend the performance or interview the actors, director, and playwright, from the photos of the performance and the background of the, I suggest that this production was not as apolitical as Li claimed. Li is a controversial figure in the recent Cantonese opera scene. He is a renowned feng shui master who has been doing business in mainland China. It was not until around 2011 that he
started to get involved Cantonese opera productions both as a playwright and a financier. While he seemed to have an enormous amount of money to invest in Cantonese opera productions, a few of my interlocutors were suspicious about the sources of his money and were puzzled about the ultimate intention of his investment.¹

From photos of the performances,² the tribute to Mao is rather explicit. In addition, controversial icons, such as Tiananmen Square flooded with the PRC flags,³ and the model-opera-like scenes, were shown during the performances to assert CCP authority. Moreover, traces of the Cultural Revolution were blatantly presented in terms of costumes, postures, and movements. While the year 2016 was the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), even though Lee tried to downplay the political connotations, the performances suggested otherwise. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that he has frequently cast mainland actors in his productions. His preference for local actors this time also made me wonder what the political agenda was behind the production.

All these recent observations fostered my interest in studying the political role of Cantonese opera in post-1997 Hong Kong. It is important to note that when Cantonese opera was placed on the UNESCO ICH list in 2009, this distinction was not granted to Hong Kong only. In fact, there was a joint application submitted by Guangdong and the SAR governments of Hong Kong and Macau. But, in the end, Cantonese opera is listed under the country heading of China. Siu-wah Yu’s (2011) foresees that the support of Cantonese opera by both the PRC and HKSAR governments will increase in order to serve the weiwen (to maintain social and political stability)

¹ One of them said, “I just don’t understand. If he wants to make money, he has lots of investment choices. All his Cantonese opera productions are not making profit. They are grand productions, just like burning money.”
² Access to photos via this link: http://www.operapreview.com/index.php/%E7%B6%B2%E4%B8%8A%E9%9B%9C%E8%AA%8C/%E8%88%9E%E5%8F%B0%E5%82%B3%E7%9C%9F/item/633-%E7%B2%B5%E5%8A%87%E3%80%8A%E6%AF%9B%E6%BE%A4%E6%9D%B1%E3%80%8B
³ For the generation of Hongkongers who virtually witnessed the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre via media, this place signifies CCP dictatorship and brutality.
and tongzhan policies (to unify the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan) (106–07). To elaborate on this, I suggest that UNESCO’s recognition of Cantonese opera has been understood and manipulated as a political act by the two governments rather than simply causing them to advocate for an art form. The genre itself largely relies on local audiences instead of international recognition (Luo 2016; Yu 2011; Yuen 2011a). Cantonese opera, as regional cultural heritage, is a convenient tool to tie the Cantonese-speaking former colonies (i.e., Hong Kong and Macau) and China together. Yet, the growth of a pan-Cantonese identity is not an ultimate goal, but a means to reinforce a sense of Chineseness. In my future work, I will explore how the relationship between a genuine zhongguoren identity and an emotional bond to the PRC are entangled with, attached to, and disguised in this cultural identity package of Chinese heritage.
### GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a tai</td>
<td>阿太</td>
<td>married ladies (usually wealthy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aiguo jiaoyu</td>
<td>愛國教育</td>
<td>patriotic education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aiqing</td>
<td>愛情</td>
<td>romantic love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ban ba</td>
<td>班霸</td>
<td>“king of the troupes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banzhi</td>
<td>半職</td>
<td>part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>banzhu</td>
<td>班主</td>
<td>the financier of a Cantonese opera troupe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baqiang (see dahou)</td>
<td>霸腔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bu luojia</td>
<td>不落家</td>
<td>delayed transfer marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bunan bunū</td>
<td>不男不女</td>
<td>neither-man-nor-woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caizi jiaren</td>
<td>才子佳人</td>
<td>young male scholars and female beauties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chang</td>
<td>唱</td>
<td>singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chaju ban</td>
<td>茶居班</td>
<td>Cantonese opera troupes that performed at tea houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changke</td>
<td>唱科</td>
<td>singing lessons or training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chongtou zuguo de huaibao</td>
<td>重投祖國的懷抱</td>
<td>reunited with one’s ancestral land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chou or chousheng</td>
<td>丑生</td>
<td>male clown role-types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chuantong paichang or gulao paichang</td>
<td>傳統排場／古老排場</td>
<td>ancient or traditional formulaic plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ci hangdang</td>
<td>次行當</td>
<td>sub role-type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cou re’nao</td>
<td>湊熱鬧</td>
<td>to be part of the lively atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cu</td>
<td>粗</td>
<td>thick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dahou (aka baqiang 霸腔)</td>
<td>大喉</td>
<td>literally, “large throat”; variation of pinghou; a natural, non-falsetto, rougher voice used (occasionally) by actors who play heroic male characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dan</td>
<td>旦</td>
<td>a generic term for female role-types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daxi or guangdong daxi</td>
<td>大戲／廣東大戲</td>
<td>Cantonese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disan</td>
<td>第三</td>
<td>third</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enka (Japanese)</td>
<td>二幫花旦</td>
<td>a Japanese pop music genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>erbang huadan</td>
<td>二幫花旦</td>
<td>supporting female role-type specific in Cantonese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e’nuo pingting de nuxingmei</td>
<td>娉娜娉婷的女性美</td>
<td>graceful-type of feminine beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fanchuan</td>
<td>反串</td>
<td>occasional performances in which actors play a role-type that they do not specialize in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
gaohu 高胡 “high-pitch fiddle,” the leading string instrument of Cantonese opera

gaoxue 高靴 long boots for sheng role-types, with white thickened soles

getan 歌壇 song halls

gongjia 功架 artistry

gongjiao 公腳 an elderly male role-type enacting righteous, loyal characters

gongsi ban 公司班 Cantonese opera troupes that performed at the recreation areas located on the roofs of department store buildings in urban Guangzhou

guangdongren 廣東人 Cantonese people

guansheng 舞台 Guanzhong (Guanzhou) region

guangfu hua 广府话 Guangzhou-based Cantonese language

guangfu hua 广府话 Guangzhou-based Cantonese language

guansheng 舞台 Guanzhong (Guanzhou) region

guansheng 舞台 Guanzhong (Guanzhou) region

guansheng 舞台 Guanzhong (Guanzhou) region

guansheng 舞台 Guanzhong (Guanzhou) region

guanzhong yuan 閩秀緣 female amateur singer from a respectful family

guizhong haoyou, guizhong liangyou, or guizhong niyou 閨中好友／閨中良友／閨中暱友 literally, “good friend who is close enough to enter one’s bedroom”; intimate friend with an implication of being a sexual partner

gunhua 滾花 literally, “rolling flower”; free-tempo quasi-singing-quasi-speaking style in Cantonese opera (similar to recitative)

guoju 國劇 literally, “national opera” or “national drama”; Peking opera

guoyu 國語 literally, “national language”; spoken Mandarin

haiqing 海青 long robes for scholar-type male role-types

hangdang 行當 Chinese opera role-type

hangtou 行頭 appearance; the variety, quality, materials, ornaments of the costumes

hao gongfu 好功夫 virtuosic skills

hao jiemei 好姊妹／好姐妹 good sisters

hao pengyou 好朋友 good friends

hei mai (Ca.) 戲迷 fan of either cinema or Cantonese opera

ho lum (Ca.) 好妳 sweet feeling and connection

hongqiang 紅腔 literally, the “red style”; singing style of Hong Xiannü

hongyan zhiji 紅顏知己 intimate (female) friend

hou 喉 literally, “throat”; gendered vocal projection; gendered melodic nuances

houguan 喉管 double-reed pipe
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>huadan</td>
<td>(leading) young female role-types in Cantonese opera; young female role-types featuring lively women characters in Peking opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huamian or hualian</td>
<td>literally, “flower face”; the “painted-face” role-type enacting characters ranging from loyal and heroic to crude and evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huaren</td>
<td>ethnic Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huaxia wenhua</td>
<td>Chinese culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huayu</td>
<td>Chinese language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hudumen</td>
<td>the liminal space between the front stage and back stage where the actors stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huifu benlai mianmu</td>
<td>literally, “back to my original face”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hung Shing Festival</td>
<td>an annual festival to celebrate the birthday of the god Hung Shing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huoqi shizu</td>
<td>literally, “filled with fire”; compelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jam baak mai (Ca.)</td>
<td>fan of Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jam mai (Ca.)</td>
<td>fan of Yam Kim-fai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jia nanren</td>
<td>literally, “fake man”; cross-dresser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jia ding</td>
<td>a generic term for male servants; in Cantonese opera, played by lowest-ranking actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiazhuang xi</td>
<td>literally, “dowry plays”; signature plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiangnan sizhu</td>
<td>“silk-and-bamboo” ensemble music of the greater Shanghai area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jianzhi</td>
<td>part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jiaose</td>
<td>characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jibengong</td>
<td>fundamental skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jing (see huamian)</td>
<td>male painted-face role-types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kan re’nao</td>
<td>to view a lively atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kao or dakao</td>
<td>stage armor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koa-a-hi</td>
<td>Taiwanese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keju</td>
<td>civil service examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kui (Ca.)</td>
<td>spoken Cantonese pronoun for “he,” “she,” or “it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kunju or kunqu</td>
<td>an ancient Chinese opera genre from Kunshan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laan seng (Ca.)</td>
<td>broken voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lanhua shou</td>
<td>literally, “orchid hand”; a gesturing technique of dan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laodan</td>
<td>elderly female role-type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**laosheng** 老生 middle-aged or elderly male role type

**liangxiang** 亮相 literally, “showing face”; a stylized pose in Chinese opera for the audience to see actors clearly and/or to applaud

**Lingnan** 嶺南 the geocultural area located in southeast coastal China, including Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan Provinces, in addition Hong Kong, and Macau

**liupai or pai** 流派／派 style or school

**liu zhu zhi** 六柱制 literally, “six-pillar system”; a classification system of six role-types in Cantonese opera

**liuxingqu** 流行曲 pop songs

**longzhou** 龍舟 a Cantonese narrative genre

**luogu (aka jiyue)** 鏘鼓 literally, “gong and drum”; percussion instruments of Cantonese opera

**mai (Ca.)** 迷 fan enthusiast

**majie** 媽姐 single, live-in female servants (mostly practicing sworn spinsterhood)

**meixiang** 梅香 a generic term for female servants; in Cantonese opera, played by lowest-ranking actresses

**mianyi** 棉衣 padded-cotton vest

**minghun** 冥婚 spirit marriage

**nan ban or quan nan ban** 男班／全男班 male troupes

**nan nü ban** 男女班 coed troupes

**nanlai wenren** 南來文人 literally, “south-coming intelligentsia”; intelligentsia refugees from mainland China to Hong Kong during the twentieth century

**nanren po** 男人婆 literally, “man-woman”; similar to “butch”; a derogatory term for masculine women

**nanren zhangfu** 男人丈夫 male husband or man

**nanyin** 南音 a Cantonese narrative genre

**nanzhuang** 男裝 men’s attire

**nau ling (Ca.)** 扭擰 coy

**neichang** 內場 literally, “inner space”; actors singing behind a curtain

**nengwen nengwu** 能文能武 excellence in both wen and wu

**ng de ng diu (Ca.)** 唔啱啱啱 wishy-washy

**nian** 唸 stylized non-pitched speaking or reciting in Chinese opera
nü

nü ban or quan nü ban

nü'er routai

nüling

nü sheng (aka kun sheng)

nüxing de dongzuo

nü zhong zhangfu

otokoyaku (Japanese)

paau mai (Ca.)

piaoyou

pinghou

putonghua

qiangbei

qing

qingyi

qinqing

qipao

quanzhi

rankou (see xu)

se

shangma

sheng

shenggang

shengongxi

shetuan

shida hangdang

shuanglang

shuixiu

nü

dd
nunf

nul

nuban

nuer
dun

nuling

nusheng

nuxing
deeuwzuo

nuzhong

dunf

otokoyaku

paamai

piaoyou

pinghou

putonghua

qiangbei

qing

qingyi

qinqing

qipao

quanzhi

rankou

se

shangma

sheng

shenggang

shengongxi

shetuan

shida

dhangdang

shuanglang

shuixiu

female

dud

dtunf

dun

female

dd

weak, womanly manners

dtunf

female entertainers who perform

dtunf

Cantonese operatic songs

dfemale

womanly movements

dtunf

female husband

dtunf

male impersonator in Japanese
dtunf

takarazuka

tunf

fan of Lung Kim-sang

dtunf

amateur actors or singers in Chinese

tunf

opera

didunf

literally, “plain throat” or “flat throat”;
dtunf

non-falsetto voice for male role-types

dtunf

and elderly female role-types in

dtunf

Cantonese opera

didunf

literally, “common language”; spoken

didunf

Mandarin

dtunf

a front-flip movement, indicating falling

dtunf

in Cantonese opera

dtunf

sentiments or emotions

dtunf

a female role-type in Beijing opera,
dtunf

enacting virtuous married female

tunf

characters

dtunf

familial love

dtunf

Mandarin-style gown for women

dtunf

full-time

dtunf

artificial beard in Chinese opera

dtunf

physical appearance; eroticism;
dtunf

prettiness; color

dtunf

getting up on a horse

dtunf

a generic term for male role-types

dtunf

voice

dtunf

Guangzhou and Hong Kong

dtunf

ritual opera

dtunf

literally, “community”; amateur

dtunf

literally, “ten role-types”; a

dtunf

classification system of ten role-types in

dtunf

Cantonese opera

dtunf

straightforward and frank

dtunf

“water-sleeves,” referring to extended

dtunf

sleeves of Chinese opera costumes that

dtunf

are made of very thin, light, and smooth
<p>| sigong     | 四功       | materials   |
| sihuo     | 私伙       | personal costumes |
| siying pai de butch | 死硬派的但 | hardcore butch |
| song   | 鬆   | loose |
| sze lai (Ca.) | 師奶       | middle-aged housewife; in some cases, a derogative term that also implies low class, ignorance, and being out-of-shape |
| taihei or jyutuk (Ca.) | 睹戲／睇粵劇 | to watch Cantonese opera |
| Takarazuka (Japanese) |  | Japanese contemporary all-female theater |
| taopiao   | 套票       | ticket package |
| tiantai ban (see gongsi ban) | 天台班      | synopsis plays |
| tigang xi | 提綱戲       | |
| tongxinglian | 同性戀     | homosexual or homosexuality |
| tongzhan   | 統戰       | “to unify the PRC, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan” |
| tongzhi    | 同志       | ethnic Chinese sexual minorities or homosexuals |
| toujia     | 頭架       | principal musician in a melodic instrumental ensemble, usually plays gaohu and/or violin |
| wanneng laoguan or wanneng taidou | 萬能老倌／萬能泰斗 | versatile master of Cantonese opera |
| weifeng linlin | 威風凜凜 | majestic and heroic |
| weiwen    | 維穩       | “to maintain social and political stability” |
| wen       | 文       | literally, “concerning literature,” “civil,” “polite,” “educated,” and “cultured”; singing and acting (skills) in Chinese opera |
| wenchang | 文場       | wen scenes; stringed ensembles for wen scenes |
| wenhua    | 文化       | culture or cultural |
| wensheng xie | 文生鞋     | shoes for scholar-type male role-types, with white thickened soles |
| wenxi wuchang | 文戱武唱    | adopting wu style when singing in wen plays |
| wenwuchou | 文丑       | a clown role-type performed by an actor that is good at both wen and wu |
| wenwudan  | 文武旦     | a female role-type performed by an actor that is good at both wen and wu |
| wenwusheng | 文武生     | literally, “civil-martial male role-type”; the leading male role-type of Cantonese |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wen-zhou-zou</td>
<td>bookish, gentle, well-educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu or wuda</td>
<td>acrobatics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu mai</td>
<td>fans of Lau Wai-ming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wuchtang</td>
<td>wu scenes; percussion ensembles for wu scenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wuchou</td>
<td>martial clown role-type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wudan</td>
<td>martial female role-type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wusheng</td>
<td>middle-aged or older martial male role-type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wushi</td>
<td>supporting wu specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu-tai guanhua</td>
<td>Mandarin-like “stage-vernacular”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wu xi wen-anzuo</td>
<td>adopting wen style when performing in wu plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xialan</td>
<td>lowest ranking actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiang-gang-ren</td>
<td>Hongkonger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xian-qi liang-mu</td>
<td>“wise wife, good mother”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiao-huo xiang-si</td>
<td>literally, “small gong and lovers missing each other”; a percussion pattern in Cantonese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiao-sheng</td>
<td>young courteous male role-type, specializing in singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiao-wu</td>
<td>young martial male role-type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xia-yi</td>
<td>narrower sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiao-qiao</td>
<td>program notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiao-zi</td>
<td>realistic (re)presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xie-yi</td>
<td>portraying the meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xie-zhuang</td>
<td>writing an indictment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xie-mei qing-ren</td>
<td>opera aficionado’s lover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xin nü-xing</td>
<td>“New Women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiong jiu jiu zuo-feng</td>
<td>masculinity and heroism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiqu</td>
<td>literally, “drama-song”; traditional Chinese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiu-chang</td>
<td>tall and slim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xizi</td>
<td>a derogative term for actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xu (aka rankou)</td>
<td>artificial beard in Chinese opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xu-gong</td>
<td>literally “beard skill”; the technique of manipulating beards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xue-mei qi-gai</td>
<td>manly manners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yam-Pak</td>
<td>the portmanteau for “Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yanchanghui</td>
<td>Cantonese operatic song concerts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yan-ke</td>
<td>lessons or training in acting and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>yangqin</td>
<td>扬琴</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeyu</td>
<td>業餘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yi</td>
<td>藝</td>
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<tr>
<td>yingbian nengli</td>
<td>應變能力</td>
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<tr>
<td>yinyang guaiqi</td>
<td>陰陽怪氣</td>
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<tr>
<td>yinyueju</td>
<td>音樂劇</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yishu</td>
<td>藝術</td>
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<tr>
<td>yixiang</td>
<td>衣箱</td>
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<tr>
<td>youqing</td>
<td>友情</td>
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<tr>
<td>yuanyang hudie pai</td>
<td>鴛鴦蝴蝶派</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yueju</td>
<td>粵劇</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yueju or Shaoxing yueju</td>
<td>越劇／紹興越劇</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yue’ou</td>
<td>寧謳</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yuequ</td>
<td>粵曲</td>
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<tr>
<td>yueyu shizhuang pian</td>
<td>粵語時裝片</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yueyu xiqu pian or yueju pian</td>
<td>粵語戲曲片／粵劇片</td>
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<tr>
<td>yunwen yunwu (see nengwen nengwu)</td>
<td>允文允武</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zai gong</td>
<td>在公</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zai si</td>
<td>在私</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ze sau ze goek (Ca.)</td>
<td>姐手姐腳</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhangban</td>
<td>掌板</td>
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<td>zhengdan</td>
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<td>zhengsheng</td>
<td>正生</td>
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<td>zhengyin huadan</td>
<td>正印花旦</td>
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<td>zhezixi</td>
<td>折子戲</td>
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<td>zhiye</td>
<td>職業</td>
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<td>zhongguoren</td>
<td>中國人</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese Characters</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
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<tr>
<td>zhonghua wenhua</td>
<td>zhōnghuà wénhuà</td>
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<td>zhongnan qingnü</td>
<td>zhòngnán qíngrǔ</td>
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<td>zhùhuì</td>
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<td>zhutiqu</td>
<td>zhùtíqu</td>
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<tr>
<td>zi zing (Ca.)</td>
<td>zǐ zíng  (Ca.)</td>
</tr>
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<td>zihou</td>
<td>zǐhòu</td>
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<tr>
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<td>zǐmùhòu</td>
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<td>zìshū</td>
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<tr>
<td>zuguo</td>
<td>zǔguó</td>
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<tr>
<td>zuo or zuogong</td>
<td>zuò ̣/zuōgōng</td>
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<td>zuoche</td>
<td>zuōchē</td>
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