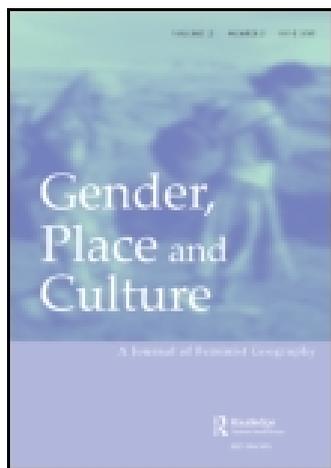


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Performance and the politics of gender: transgender performance in contemporary Chinese films

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Performance and the politics of gender: transgender performance in contemporary Chinese films

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This article focuses on two different genres of gender transitivity or impersonation. First, male actors who impersonate female characters. The two examples used to examine these impersonations are Chinese films *Farewell My Concubine* (Ba Wang Bie Ji 1993) and *Forever Enthralled* (Mei Lanfang 2009). Both films are based on the historical practice of *dan* in Peking Opera. Second, women who cross-dress as men for the sake of transgressing into the public sphere that had traditionally been forbidden for women. The main example of this is *Hua Mulan* (2009), a live action movie based on a Chinese legend of a female warrior called Hua Mulan, who disguises herself as a man to replace her father in the military service. Based on my close reading of the transgender performance in these Chinese films, the article will engage discussions of Western gender theories by Garber, Butler and Halberstam to examine the discourse and politics of gender and sexuality in contemporary China. To be more specific, a critical analysis will be carried out in the following three aspects: first, gender performativity is not necessarily subversive, but only suggests that heterosexual norms are arbitrary and unnatural. Second, rather than challenging heterosexism and gender binarism in contemporary China, the three films seem to support and consolidate the gender hierarchy. Thirdly, the category of transgender is intersected with art, identity and ideology in the specific social and historical settings. The contextualized analysis not only sheds new light on the implications of transgender in contemporary Chinese culture and politics but also questions the universalism of Western gender theories in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords: transgender; performance; performativity; Chinese film; Peking Opera

In contemporary gender studies, ‘transgender’ has come to be used as:

an umbrella term for a wide variety of bodily effects that disrupt or denaturalize heteronormatively constructed linkages between an individual’s anatomy at birth, a nonconsensually assigned gender category, psychical identifications with the sexed body images and/or gendered subject positions, and the performance of specifically gendered social, sexual, or kinship functions. (Stryker 1998, 149)

Transgender includes a range of gender identifications, such as transvestite, cross-dressing, transsexual, drag, impersonation and so on. Instead of a unitary identity, there are diverse transgender subjectivities (MacDonald, 1998; cf. Hines 2006, 50).

Transgender behaviour has for a long time been separated from homosexuality, which is apparent in the relevant theoretical considerations. Although the queer can become obsessed with the idea of ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan 2002; cf. Hines 2010, 601), transgender phenomena can be both antiheteronormative and heteronormative. They ‘constitute an axis of difference that cannot be subsumed to an object-choice model of

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antiheteronormativity' (Stryker 2006, 7). Queer approaches to transgender often fail to explain the differences in gendered identifications, which are situated in social, cultural and political specificities.

Transgender phenomena are not just about sexuality and identity, but are also about revealing the new changes and problems in our globalizing and globalized society and culture. In *Transgender on Screen* Philips (2006, 4) claims that 'representations of transgender are already leading the way towards new conceptions self increasingly defined in terms of the images that popular culture reflects back to it'. In the early 1990s West, there had been a number of mainstream films featuring transgender performance, but very few after that. More recently, there is increasing recognition that more research on queer and transgender phenomena outside of the Anglo-American context is needed (Johnston and Longhurst 2008; Leung 2006). In China, *Farewell my Concubine* (Ba Wang Bie Ji, 1993) started a series of Chinese films featuring cross-dressing, including two recent big productions *Forever Enthralled* (Mei Lanfang, 2009) and *Hua Mulan* (2009).

It is important to note that the representation of cross-dressing in these Chinese films is mediated through theatre and literature. That there has seldom been direct treatment of the subject in contemporary Chinese films is interesting: for one, it may indicate that time is not yet ripe for Chinese films to represent similar transgender images to those in the Western films. For the other, the films are taking advantage of the general curiosity of cross-dressing in traditional Chinese theatre to increase their box-office takings, especially in the international market.

Cross-dressing in theatre, which has had a long tradition in both East and West (Garber 1992; Ferris 1993; Li 2006), is different from drag which is considered to be a recent Western phenomenon. Drag often parodies and subverts gender stereotypes, but impersonation exposes gender through performance (Halberstam 1998, 232; Philips 2006, 29). In other words, though the gender boundary of male/female has been literally transgressed in cross-dressing, the act itself may not have any transgressive or subvertive value in terms of gender and sexual politics (Lim 2007, 72–73; Li 2006, 165; Lau 1995, 23). Instead, cross-dressing in films is often used to reflect upon other social and cultural issues. *M. Butterfly* (1993),¹ for example, triggered heated discussions on cross-dressing, performativity and sexuality in juxtaposition with nationalism and orientalism (Garber 1992, 234–266; Senelick 2000, 206–208; Chow 2007, 129–131).

One recent move in transgender studies is to link the issue of transgender with other crossings of categorical territories, which is used to address critical and political questions.

"Trans" thus becomes the capillary space of connection and circulation between the macro- and micro-political registers through which the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states and capital-formations, while "gender" becomes one of the several sets of variable techniques or temporal practices (such as race or class) through which bodies are made to live. (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 2008, 14)

Recent work of other scholars also

illustrates the importance of developing an intersectional analysis of transgender that keeps a critical eye on how the category of "transgender" is cut through with variables of "race," ethnicity, geographical location, sexuality and age – as well as distinct (trans) gendered positionings. (Hines 2010, 600)

In *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Marjorie Garber asserts that the transvestite represents a 'category crisis' by 'disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social or aesthetic "dissonances"' (Garber 1992, 16) and is seen to challenge the notion of a fixed or coherent identity. For her, 'transvestism is a space of possibility and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of

male and female, but the crisis of category itself' (Garber 1992, 17). It is along this line of critical inquiry that the present article intends to investigate the dynamics between transgender, cultural geography and nationalism in contemporary Chinese films.

The significance of this study is at least two-fold: first, the uniqueness of Chinese transgender performance has not yet been adequately discussed. In the Chinese films, female impersonation on stage is generally portrayed in a positive light, but the stories about the performers off stage unfold very differently. Dieyi, indulged in his illusional world of feminine beauty and operatic excellence, has undergone tremendous trauma in his sexual and emotional experiences amid the turbulent historical periods in twentieth century China. Mei Lanfang is gradually established as a national hero through promoting Chinese opera abroad and resisting the request to perform for the Japanese army during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) in order to show his patriotism. In terms of female-to-male cross-dressing, Hua Mulan's story is embedded in the narratives of Chinese moral ethics and nationalism. The filmic representation of transgender performance is shown to be intersected by issues of art, sexuality and national ideology. Second, it remains to be explored whether Chinese transgender performance will raise questions for existing Western gender theories. In 'Re-placing gender? Reflections on 15 years of *Gender, Place and Culture*', Johnson (2008) echoes a number of other scholars in stressing the importance of international dialogue to question universalizing theories and meta-narratives. She suggests that it is useful to listen to multiple voices and pay attention to cultural specificities. In this context, I argue that a study of transgender practice in contemporary Chinese films will question and enrich the relevant discussions of transgender.

Male 'dan', authenticity and gender trouble

The film *Farewell My Concubine* (hereafter referred to as *Farewell*), directed by Chen Kaige, star of Chinese fifth-generation cinema directors, and adapted from Hong Kong writer Lilian Lee (Li Bi-hua)'s best-selling novel of the same name, is mainly about a love triangle involving two actors of the Peking Opera, Cheng Dieyi, Duan Xiaolou and a former prostitute named Juxian. Douzi (boy Cheng Dieyi) and Shitou (boy Duan Xiaolou) grew up together in a Peking Opera training school, but Douzi, due to his delicate features and feminine looking, was trained to impersonate a female role, namely *dan*. During their apprenticeship, they learned to act in a well-known play called 'Farewell My Concubine', which not only binds them together but also foreshadows in some ways their fate. To better understand what happens in the film, it is necessary to know the history of *dan* in Peking Opera and the story of the play *Farewell*.

Dating back to the thirteenth century, *dan*, or female impersonation, matured in the early twentieth century, with Mei Lanfang being its greatest master. The continuous popularity of female impersonation onstage in Chinese history is reflected in social, cultural and artistic terms. According to the Confucian doctrine, men and women should be segregated for the sake of patriarchal social order. So far as the theatre is concerned, women were usually not allowed to play onstage and female impersonation was used in their place. During certain historical periods, boy-actors became targets of 'male love', especially among the literati class. In *Pinhua Baojian* (The Precious Mirror for Judging Flowers 1849), a classic work of male homoerotic fashion during the late Qing dynasty, there are detailed descriptions of the daily lives of young female impersonators and their patrons who support them financially and give them protection. So, female impersonation was frequently charged with the ambiguities of gender and eroticism. 'Only a blurry line remained between female impersonation and male prostitution, and beautiful boy actors

could be treated as if they were beautiful girls' (Wang 2003, 145). Meanwhile, female impersonation has been considered as of great artistic value in China and in the West (Goette 1993). As a man performing female roles, he has to observe and study femininity carefully and then represent the particularities of woman on stage in a convincing manner. Wen Ruhua, a renowned veteran male *dan* actor, says: 'The male *dan* is not imitating woman in a simple way. It is acting woman – a recreation of the tenderness, loyalty, courage, and elegance of Chinese woman' (Li 2006, 210).

Farewell, one of the classical plays that often involves female impersonation, is based on a historical story in ancient China. It is about Xiang Yu (232 BC–202 BC), the self-styled 'Hegemon-King of Western *Chu*' who battled for the reunification of China with Liu Bang, the eventual founder of the powerful Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD). Surrounded by Liu Bang's forces and on the verge of total defeat, Xiang Yu called for the company of his favourite concubine Yu Ji. Realizing the dire situation that had befallen them, she committed suicide with Xiang Yu's own sword to show her loyalty to the king, which had been taken as a feminine virtue in feudal China. Over the centuries, this story has been passed down through written and oral forms, including Peking Opera. From a critical gender perspective, its popularity is problematic for it has obviously catered to the patriarchal rule and the repression of women throughout the Chinese dynasties.

In the film *Dieyi* (played by Leslie Cheung [Zhang Guorong]) has become a famous *dan* actor, especially for his role of playing Yu Ji, the concubine. She becomes more and more identified with his role as a woman and falls in love with Xiaolou (played by Zhang Fengyi), the player of the King. He swears that he would do exactly what Yu Ji does in the play – 'being faithful to the husband until death'. Meanwhile, Xiaolou takes a liking in and later gets married with a prostitute Juxian (played by Gong Li). Disappointed, *Dieyi* falls into a homosexual relationship with one of his patrons Mr Yuan, which seems to follow the pattern of boy-actors and upper-class men as depicted in the old Chinese writings regarding the lives of female impersonators (Wu 2004, 2). The complicated relationship among *Dieyi*, Xiaolou and Juxian unfolds through the Anti-Japanese War and the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). When they are reunited many years later, *Dieyi* and Xiaolou rehearse the play *Farewell* on an empty stage, at the end of which *Dieyi* commits suicide with the sword in the same manner as Yu Ji does in the play. Cheng *Dieyi*'s tragedy illustrates the gender trouble that a *dan* actor may have gone through in the midst of social and political upheavals in twentieth century China.

Fifteen years after *Farewell* was crowned with the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1993, a Chinese biographical film *Mei Lanfang*, entitled *Forever Enthralled* in English, also directed by Chen Kaige, was released and shown in the 2009 Berlin International Film Festival. Based on the life of Mei Lanfang (played by Leon Lai), the film consists of four important episodes in his life: challenging his master, the then largest opera star Shi Sanyan (played by Wang Xueqi); his love affair with Meng Xiaodong (played by Zhang Ziyi), who is the best for impersonating male characters; his successful performance tour in the USA and his patriotism during the Anti-Japanese War. In the film, Mei Lanfang is shown to be both a talented actor and a respectable personality. Unlike *Dieyi* in *Farewell*, Mei Lanfang is well known both for his images of unsurpassable femininity that he has embodied onstage and for the display of extraordinary masculine demeanour offstage. Nevertheless, the depiction of Mei Lanfang lacks the kind of psychological complexity and depth embodied in the characterization of *Dieyi*. In an interview with Alexandra A. Seno, the director Chen Kaige made a comparison between his two films about Peking Opera: '*Farewell My Concubine* is fiction, Mei Lanfang existed in history' [Seno, Alexandra A. "Back for an Encore: Filmmaker Chen Kaige uses Opera

Again to Help Explain Chinese Society” (*Newsweek*, January 19, 2009)]. So naturally, Chen had much more freedom with the story in *Farewell* than in the biographical *Mei Lanfang*.

In Peking Opera, female impersonators are required to constantly imagine themselves to be women. Ji Yunba (1724–1805), a well-known writer of the Qing dynasty, recorded in his notes what a male *dan* had said about his experience of performing a female role.

Taking my body as a female, I have to transform my heart into that of a female, and then my tender feelings and charming postures can become truthful and lifelike. If a trace of male heart remains, there must be a bit that does not resemble a female . . . (Tian 2000, 84)

Mei Lanfang (1951, 100) also claimed that the identification was ‘the highest realm’ of the art of female impersonation and traditional Chinese performing art in general. Demanding as it is, some *dan* performers transgress their gender identity in their everyday life. That homosexuality is a taboo within the circle of Peking Opera betrays the instability of gender and sexuality of the impersonators. *Farewell* marks a serious effort in dramatizing the potential conflict of gender and sexuality among the *dan* performers.

What makes sense of these interlinking narratives/representations is a theory of gender as a construct that must be performed. In *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, Garber (1992, 250) says, ‘this is the scandal of transvestism—that transvestism tells the truth about gender’. Talking about the performances of drag, Butler (1999) notices that there are three contingent dimensions of corporeality, namely anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. She then argues that

if the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (1999, 175)

To this, I would like to add another dimension of gender impersonation: how gender is perceived by audiences. In the case of *dan*, the performance arouses interesting confusions among the audiences. In the eyes of the male audiences, the *dan* is a beauty, on whom they could legitimately project their erotic desire; while for women, the *dan* is no doubt a handsome man with great talent and charm. Mei Lanfang used to be followed by both male and female fans. It was reported that ‘not only girls but 18 year old male spectators would have liked to marry Mei’ (Tian 2000, 82). The ‘transgender gaze’ (Halberstam 2001) on the one hand transgresses the compulsory male and female boundaries; on the other hand, it may have significant impact on the gender identification of the impersonators, as is evident in the case of Dieyi. Therefore, the theory of ‘transgender gaze’ provides different but complementary perspectives to the problems of gender and identity in the Chinese impersonation from those of Butler (1999) and Garber (1992).

The woman warrior Mulan

So far, most of the attention on transgender performance has been focused on male-to-female cross-dressing; women’s cross-dressing has been strangely ignored (Ferris 1993, 6; Solomon 1993, 144; Halberstam 1998, xi). In Chinese theatre and culture, female-to-male cross-dressing has been and remains to be active, such as in yueju (yue opera) and the mass media today. Female transvestism in theatre can be traced back to mid-Tang dynasty (618–907). In the Yuan dynasty, female-to-male impersonation became very popular, and actresses in general were given more attention than actors and enjoyed the kind of freedom that was unusual in traditional Chinese society. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, actresses were forbidden onstage most of the time. Nevertheless, the tradition of male

impersonation never stopped, thriving particularly in the private troupes (Li 2006). One of the most well-known female transvestite figures, in literary writings as well as in theatre, is Hua Mulan, whose story was in 2009 adapted into a Chinese film of the same name, directed by Ma Chucheng and starring Zhao Wei as Mulan.

'The Ballad of Hua Mulan', the original source for the film adaptation, was first written down in the sixth century. It tells the story of a young woman who, disguised as a man, willingly replaces her old, sick father in the army. After winning many battles, the emperor, called 'the Son of Heaven', bestows honours and gifts of compensation to the brave soldiers. Surprisingly, Mulan asks for one thing only – a fast horse to take her home. Upon returning home, she removes her soldier's armour and changes into her civilian clothes. After fixing her cloudlike hair and doing her makeup, she reappears in front of her fellow soldiers. Completely shocked, they cannot believe that the valiant warrior they have fought beside for years is a woman. The last lines of the poem seem to offer an explanation, but in a rhetorical way:

Travelling together for twelve years
 They didn't know Mulan was a girl.
 The he-hare's feet go hop and skip,
 The she-hare's eyes are muddled and fuddled.
 Two hares running side by side close to the ground,
 How can they tell if I am he or she? (Frankel 1976, 72)

It is implied here that gender is not a natural fact, but a social construct. Mulan is both a warrior and a woman, not one or the other. As an example of 'unwomanly women', Hua Mulan has been compared to 'Joan of Arc' in the West.

The story of Hua Mulan has been widely known both in and outside of China. In the US, Maxine Hong Kingston embarks on a different interpretation of Mulan, in an American cultural context, in her novel *The Woman Warrior* (1975). In the story called 'White Tigers', Kingston recounts her mother's story of Mulan, who receives training by an old couple in the mountains. After returning home, she becomes a warrior under the guise of a man and creates a massive army. During the war, she is joined by her husband secretly and gives birth to a baby, whom her husband then takes away when he leaves. Later, she kills the baron who once took away the sons of her village. By comparing her life in the US and the story of Mulan, Kingston accuses the sexist prejudices of some Chinese living at the Chinatown, who would say, 'There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls' (Kingston 1989, 46). In this case, Mulan is used to promote women's independence and self-reliance rather than filiality and obedience in the traditional Chinese patriarchal ideology.

In 1998, Disney popularized a cartoon version of the legend with its take on *Mulan*. Although it was a commercialized children's version, the inter-media adaptation helped to bring the legend of Hua Mulan to a much broader audience. One important change in the Disney film is that Mulan's female identity is discovered by the military doctor, which is contradictory to what is written in the poem. In 2005, Disney released *Mulan II*, a sequel to the 1998 version. In both films, there are many Chinese cultural elements, such as The Great Wall, Chinese Dragon and *Taiji*. However, Western individualism in the films is completely new: Mulan dares to openly oppose the local government's decree, goes against her father's decision and does what she pleases. It is made obvious that Mulan impersonates a man to replace her father in the military mainly in order to prove her

individual value and her capability. In the Disney films, the image of Mulan is dislocated from its original cultural context and becomes embodied with the Western feminist spirit.

The series of Mulan adaptations both in and outside China in the recent decades paved the way for a big budget production of the film *Hua Mulan* (2009), which reveals a different but consistent attitude towards cross-dressing. In the Chinese history, stories of female cross-dressing often refer to the women's need for self-protection in situations of emergency, their desire for a more outdoor or exciting lifestyle, or the necessity to take part in war and revolutionary activities.² Generally speaking, female-to-male cross-dressing is more readily accepted than male-to-female cross-dressing in all cultures (Garber 1992, 38). Supposedly, this has something to do with the fact that female-to-male cross-dressing is usually perceived as dressing up, and as an upgrading in social status (cf. Altenburger 2005, 171). In addition, it is represented as just the temporary transgression of the boundaries of gender, which will finally be corrected so as not to entail any real subversion of male power (Lim 2007, 72). In the different remakes of *Hua Mulan*, she always reappears as a woman in the end.

Mulan's cross-dressing can be better explicated in light of Judith Halberstam's (1998) theory of female masculinity than Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity, although her story does challenge the stereotypical male/female binary. For Halberstam (1998, 9) female masculinity is:

the sign of sexual alterity, but occasionally it marks heterosexual variation; sometimes female masculinity marks the place of pathology, and every now and then it represents the healthful alternative to what are considered the histrionics of conventional femininities.

The masculinities of Mulan as well as a number of other well-known 'heroines' in Chinese history (Mu Guiying, Liang Hongyü and so on) have provided rich resources for reimagining and revising the Chinese gender stereotypes. It shows that masculinity is constructed and produced by and across both male and female bodies, and that to be transgender and a female is not contradictory at all, but rather mutually informative.

The re-idealization of heterosexual gender norms

The implications of transgender for the cognition of gender and sexuality have been discussed extensively. In *Gender Trouble* Butler (1990) makes use of the performance of drag as an example to discuss the concept of gender performativity. The gender parody in drag, according to Butler, illustrates a model of gender as purely an imitation without an origin, in which the inner truth of gender is but a fabrication. 'In the place of the law of the heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity' (Butler 1999, 175). When her discussions of drag performances had been partially received and criticized as suggesting that these performances of gender constitute the subversion of dominant gender norms, Butler revisited the same example in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). In this work, Butler makes it explicit that drag does not necessarily cause subversion. She emphasizes that 'there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (1993, 125).

That denaturalization and reidealization are intertwined in drag is what Butler consistently argues for in *Bodies That Matter* and her following works, constituting the core of her dialectical view of gender performativity. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler once again revisited the question of drag in response to the critical reception of her earlier writings. She says,

the point to emphasize here is not that drag is subversive of gender norms, but we live, more or less implicitly, with received notions of reality, implicit accounts of ontology, which determine what kinds of bodies and sexualities will be considered real and true, and which kind will not. (214)

There are others who agree with Butler that it is too simplistic to pose drag performances as subversive (Halberstam 1998; Philips 2006).

The transgender performance in the Chinese films clearly illustrates that gender is performative. The image of 'pretty woman' that Cheng Dieyi and Mei Lanfang impersonate onstage suggests that a woman can be convincingly played by a male performer through a mastery of skills. While in the other Chinese movie, *Hua Mulan* has impressed people around her in the guise of a courageous, brave and wise man and becomes promoted to the position of General. So, it does seem likely that gender has almost nothing to do with biological sex. However, Chinese transgender performance does not conform to Butler's theory of performativity. While to Butler, there does not exist a priori identity, the Chinese transgender performers believe in the essence of a biological sex. For the female impersonators like Dieyi and Mei Lanfang, they want to be transformed into 'woman' that people take as 'real' (Li 2006, 165).

The transgender performance in Chinese films does not intend to challenge or subvert heterosexism and gender patriarchy. When he accepts his identity as an 'inferior woman' in *Farewell*, Dieyi falls victim to patriarchal ideology. Like Yu Ji, a symbol of obedient woman, who belittles her own life to affirm her subordinate position to Master King Chu, Dieyi is ready to accept a subordinate position to Xiaolou, the player of Master King. When he sees his name in front of Xiaolou's on the theatre bulletin, he gets very angry and says, 'How can the Concubine's name appear before the Master King?' In his transgender fantasy, Dieyi does not liberate himself, but rather falls prey to male patriarchy. His habitual obedience is also apparent in his interactions with Mr. Yuan, one of his loyal fans and patrons. Once after the performance, Yuan enters the backstage to give Dieyi a set of lavish head dressings as a gift – an act symbolic of Yuan's intention to reinforce the 'transgender gaze'. During the whole process, Dieyi responds only with shy silence.

The representation of Mei Lanfang in *Forever Enthralled* is dominated by his masculine courage and determination. Although he was repeatedly asked by the Japanese army to perform, Mei refused to sing for them and endured an impoverished lifestyle until the war ended in 1945. Once an enraged Japanese army officer humiliated him, saying, 'You are but a presumptuous woman onstage'. Mei's immediate reply – 'Offstage I am a man' – is well known and widely praised among the audiences. While hiding in Hong Kong in 1942, he even grew and wore a moustache, which made any performance impossible. His patriotism further boosted his fame as a great artist. In this way, Mei also fulfilled his life mission as a theatre leader and hero to 'raise the status of the theatre-players'.³

The romantic but sad love story between Mei Lanfang and Meng Xiaodong, best actress of male impersonation, has been lavishly narrated and represented in the film. One of the high moments in their encounter occurs when they play together at a private gathering, where Mei Lanfang in his white Western suit takes up a female role and Meng in 'Qipao' (women's long close-fitting dress) acts as *Laosheng* (old gentleman). The perfect but strange combination of Mei's feminine voice and gestures with Meng's male voice and gestures completely subverts the naturalness of maleness and femaleness in our common experience. However, what they represent can still be recognised as distinctively heterosexual gender features.

Hua Mulan is even more revealing of Chinese gender ideology than the other films. Like in the Disney animation *Mulan*, early on in the Chinese film *Mulan*'s female identity

is discovered by a low-rank commander called Wentai, who is later revealed to be a disguised prince of the emperor. A swimming scene is invented: Mulan sneaks out in the night to bathe in a pond and comes across Wenti there, who discovers her true gender identity. During the combats with the minority Rouran invaders, Mulan has impressed others as a brave and intelligent soldier. After a major victory, Mulan and Wentai are both promoted to generals and in the meantime Mulan and Wentai fall in love with each other, setting the story of Mulan completely within a heterosexual frame. In this sense, Mulan's cross-dressing does not provide scenes of misguided desire as her femininity is constantly recognised in and through the eyes of Wentai. The representation of Mulan's body that is feminised and sexualised reveals the importance of eroticism in the film, which is similar to the cinematic representation of Juexian especially in the scene where she and Xiaolou are making love inside their bedroom while Dieyi peers through the window (Cui 2003, 166–167).

In her famous essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey 'takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (1988, 57). With the famous Chinese actress Zhao Wei playing as Mulan, she is far from the 'non-sexual', 'de-feminised' woman warrior, but actually a beauty in male disguise. The filming strategies of *Hua Mulan* illustrate the logic of consumerism as much as the gendered narratives in the popular culture.

The ambiguity of transgender performance is embedded in the doubleness of interpreting Mulan. On the one hand, Mulan's adventure has repeatedly been invoked as perfectly challenging the patriarchal ideas of women's inferiority and sex-segregation.

In dressing as a man and undertaking masculine life-roles, Hua Mulan challenges long-held expected differentiation between the behaviour of men and women. Her departure from the feminine domestic realm to enter the masculine world of war-fare is at the core of her ongoing appeal. (Edwards 2008, 6)

On the other hand, Mulan's cross-dressing is just temporary and is done as a matter of urgency, which is characteristic of cross-dressing in theatre and cinema in general (Halberstam 1998, 207; Altenburger 2005, 171; Philips 2006, 16–17). This is not dissimilar with some English Renaissance comedies, in which the transvestite returns to 'normal' sex/gender roles and ends up with a happy heterosexual marriage, signifying the restoration of conventional order (Li 2006, 186). At the end of the Mulan film, Wentai and Mulan both return from the war and intend to get married. But for the sake of the peace between the empire and the Rouran minorities, Wentai the prince has to obey the emperor to get married with a Rouran princess. That Mulan is willing to sacrifice her love and support this marriage is affirmative of Chinese patriarchal ideology and, more importantly, nationalism.

Impersonation, nationalism and gender politics

'The greatest, most long-lasting and most popular art in China is man impersonating woman', said Lu Xun in 1924.⁴ The characteristic tone of irony here is supported by his critique of Mei Lanfang and female impersonation. In 'Lü Lun Mei Lanfang ji Qita' (On Mei Lanfang and Other Issues), Lu Xun (2005a) discusses Mei's cross-dressing performance in 'Tiannü Sanhua' (Fairies Spreading Flowers) and 'Daiyü Zhanghua' (Daiyü Burying the Flowers). Lu Xun says, 'rather than watching a ghostly fairy or sister Lin, most audiences would like to see a beautiful country girl, because she is closer to us' (vol. 5, 610). Through drawing some figurative association between the act of female

impersonation and the abnormality of Chinese culture, Lu Xun expressed his critique of the Chinese national character, which was thought to be responsible for the backwardness of China and its successive defeats by both Western imperialist powers and Japan in modern times. 'Lu Xun above all is worrying about the masculinity of the Chinese national character. He shares with contemporary intelligentsia a yearning for a strong, virile Chinese figure, as opposed to China's old emaciated, feminine image' (Wang 2003, 134). Lu Xun's criticism is representative of the nationalistic sentiment of many Chinese at that time, due to which female impersonation was vilified for the sake of social criticism.

Despite Lu Xun's criticism, Mei Lanfang has been respected as a national hero, a leading artist, and a great promoter of Chinese culture abroad. He visited Japan thrice (in 1919, 1924, 1956), the United States in 1930 and the former Soviet Union in 1935. During his overseas tours, Mei Lanfang popularized the Chinese classical drama among foreign audiences, which helped to change the stereotypical image of China and Chinese culture abroad (Weng 2009). In the film *Forever Enthralled*, Mei Lanfang's trip to USA was highlighted as one significant part of his career and life. During his American tour his name appeared many times in the headlines of many American newspapers, and he and his theatre were welcomed by some of the leading artists and fans of different ethnicities in USA. Among his contemporaries, 'there are perhaps a few who have made similar artistic achievements to that of Mei Lanfang. However, none has obtained so much international fame as Mei' (Weng 2009, 137; translation mine). Like his patriotism during the anti-Japanese war, his international fame has been positively received as contributing to the improvement of Chinese national image.

In a similar vein of Chinese nationalism, *Farewell* was criticized and even banned from screening in China in the early 1990s. That Chen Kaige situated a cinematic representation of Chinese culture in a feminized man like Cheng Dieyi with a homosexual bent was regarded by the conservatives as a 'practical' compliance with the Occidental image of the Oriental Other. Only the surface of Beijing [Peking] Opera, the colorful and the exotic, is shown, with the display of sex, drugs, and violence becoming an uncritical exhibition of 'oriental savageness' (Lau 1995, 23). In addition, the film was thought to be provocative in engaging the audience with an 'unusual public negotiation with the taboo question of sexuality in Chinese society' (22).

The representation of the anti-Japanese war in *Farewell* is regarded as problematic, too. Dieyi was reproached and later sued for performing Peking Opera in the Japanese army camp though he was forced to do so for the sake of saving Xiaolou.

In refusing to acknowledge the kind of nationalism that Peking Opera represents, and hence the implication of sanctifying a hero who performed for the invading Japanese, the film trivializes one of the most horrific wars of resistance that the Chinese have fought against invaders. (Wang 2003, 152)

It is perhaps even more irritating that Dieyi should have been impressed by the Japanese enthusiasm for Peking Opera. In any case, his humiliation is interpreted as symptomatic of the national trauma under the oppression and torture of the Japanese invaders. 'Impersonation helps flesh out gender and national authenticity in distortion,' says David Der-wei Wang (152).

Hua Mulan, the woman with masculine characteristics, is represented as exactly the opposite of Cheng Dieyi, the feminized man. Brave and loyal to the emperor, Mulan commands her army to defend the motherland. At one point, she vows in front of the army, 'the soldiers can betray me, the generals can abandon me, but I will never give away my motherland'. She repeatedly calls upon her fellow soldiers 'not to forget their duties to the country'. In the film, Mulan is shown to be not simply a brave fighter, but also a wise

commander. She manages to persuade the Rouran princess to collaborate with her in killing the Rouran King so that the countries of Rouran and Wei regain peace. Mulan has done all she can for the country, including sacrificing her love. The image of Mulan's cross-dressing has become central to the national discourse of gender and ideology.

In the socialist era, transgender on and off stage was generally relegated as destabilizing and destructive, and impersonation was literally forbidden.⁵ However, the situation has changed since the so-called 'end of the revolution' in the late 1980s (Wang 2011). Theatrical impersonation is in vogue again, but there are only a few artists today who can perform in that tradition. For example, the female-to-male impersonation of yueju has in recent years been welcomed both on domestic stage and in the international performance market (He 2011, 402–405). It is worth pointing out that the male impersonators of yueju do not intend to accurately imitate a man on stage, but appear like women dressing in male costume. Such convention is different from that in Kun Opera and Peking Opera, in which the transvestite should do his best to impersonate a woman onstage. 'The construction of gender resulting from cross-dressing in the two instances turns out to be a double movement: while the Jing-Kun transvestite actor veils his masculine body, the Yueju transvestite actress unveils her corporal femininity' (Li 2006, 196). This has something to do with the fact that a female who cross-dresses as a male does not appear androgynous. In addition, female homoeroticism has been less problematized in the contemporary Chinese popular culture (Martin 2010).

In terms of the female impersonation in Chinese popular culture, Li Yugang, an acclaimed performer of *dan* roles, has become widely known and often appears on TV,⁶ which represents the smooth crossover of traditional culture into mass media. However, the public opinion of cross-dressing, especially the male-to-female one, is still extremely diversified and remains unpredictable. Jin Xing, once the leading ballet dancer, after having discovered his attraction to men instead of women as an adolescent, decided to undertake sexual reassignment surgery in the 1990s. After that, Jin Xing reappeared as a female dancer onstage and became a controversial figure in the media. In the national 'Happy Boys Singing Contest' (2010), the male cross-dressing Liu Zhu aroused mixed responses and even caused some concern from the authorities, for whom the male-to-female cross-dressing may have negative implications such as, subverting norms and threatening the dominant social and aesthetic values. The transgender performance in Chinese mass media, which is an increasingly popular phenomenon, calls attention to the different social and cultural forces that shape the future of gender politics in China.

Conclusion

The representation of transgender performance in the Chinese films reveals the complexities in the relationship between gender (or sexuality), identity and ideology. On the one hand, transgender performance shows that gender identities are not stable and natural, but performatively constructed. On the other hand, body has its own agency, and gender norms cannot be easily subverted but are often re-idealized. In addition, border-crossing in gender and performance is highly dependent on locality in time and space. Transgender performance in the Chinese films is not fully comprehensible without taking into consideration the historical and social specificities, especially the history of Chinese revolution in the twentieth century. What the films have presented are not just 'phantoms of the opera' (Garber 1992), but fresh reflections on gender, sexuality and cultural politics as well as new mechanisms of film industry and mass media in China in the age of globalization and market economy.

The Chinese examples of transgender performance locate discussions of Western gender theories in the context of Chinese cultural and social specificities. This type of contextualized analysis sheds new light on the implications and complexities of transgender in cross-cultural contexts. In an effort to combine different approaches to the phenomena of transgender performance in the Chinese films, this study also offers a critique to universalism in theorising gender and sexuality.

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Notes

1. Based on a real life story, *M. Butterfly* (directed by David Cronenberg and adapted by David Henry Hwang from his play of the same name, written in 1988) concerns a love affair between a French diplomat René Gallimard and a male Peking opera *dan* actor Song Liling. Inspired by Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madam Butterfly*, the film dramatizes the fantasy of a Western man for an 'oriental woman', who turns out to be a man.
2. Another famous Chinese story of female cross-dressing is 'Liang Sanbo yü Zhu Yingtai' (Love Eternal) (cf. Altenburger 2005).
3. Mei Lanfang was obsessed all his life with the mission of 'raising the status of the theatre-players', which was urged by his uncle at the beginning of the film.
4. See Lu Xun (2005b). If not otherwise stated, all translations of Lu Xun were done personally.
5. In 1964, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai said,

But man playing woman will have to be gradually terminated. It is the same in the case of yueju opera, woman playing man will have to be terminated. [The art of the male *dan*] is allowed to be demonstrated on stage for a small number of people, for the purpose of testing out artistic validity. But it is not allowed to be carried out extensively (qtd. in Li 2006, 192)

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, not only was cross-dressing completely demonized in theatre or society in general, but also there was a new, unisex design, in which both men and women were dressed alike, worked alike and were expected to think alike, too.

6. Li Yugang appeared twice as a female impersonator on the Chinese Spring Festival Gala hosted by Chinese Central TV Station with a song 'Xin guifei zuijiu' (New Drunken Beauty) in January 2012 and another song 'Chang'e' (The goddess of the Moon). Li's repeated appearance at the biggest and most important festival in China is significant, not just for the actor himself, but also for the reputation of impersonation in traditional Chinese theatre.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

La performance y la política de género: performance del transgénero en las películas contemporáneas chinas

Este artículo se centra en dos géneros diferentes de transividad o personificación de género. Primero, los actores varones que personifican a personajes mujeres. Los dos ejemplos utilizados para examinar estas personificaciones son los films chinos *Adiós mi concubina* (Bawang Bieiji 1993) y *Cautivado para siempre* (Mei Lanfang 2009). Ambas películas están basadas en la práctica histórica del *dan* en la Ópera de Pekín. Segundo, las mujeres que se transvisten como hombres por el hecho de transgredir la esfera pública que había estado tradicionalmente prohibida para las mujeres. El principal ejemplo de esto es *Hua Mulan* (2009), una película no animada basada en una leyenda china de una guerrera del mismo origen llamada Hua Mulan, que se disfraza como hombre para reemplazar a su padre en el servicio militar. Basada en mi cuidadosa lectura de la performance del transgénero en estos films chinos, el artículo involucra discusiones de teorías occidentales de género por Garber, Butler y Halbertam para examinar el discurso y la política de género y sexualidad en la China contemporánea. Para ser más específicos, se llevará a cabo un análisis crítico en los siguientes tres aspectos: primero, la performatividad de género no es necesariamente subversiva, sino que sólo sugiere que las normas heterosexuales son arbitrarias y antinaturales. Segundo, más que desafiar al heterosexismo y binarismo de género en la China contemporánea, los tres films parecen apoyar y consolidar la jerarquía de género. Tercero, la categoría de transgénero está intersectada con el arte, la identidad y la ideología en los entornos sociales e históricos específicos. El análisis contextualizado no solamente arroja nueva luz sobre las implicaciones del transgénero en la cultura y la política chinas contemporáneas sino también cuestiona el universalismo de las teorías de género occidentales en los contextos interculturales.

Palabras claves: transgénero; performance; performatividad; cine chino; Ópera de Pekín

展演与性别政治：当代中国电影中的跨性别展演

本文聚焦性别过渡性或模仿的两种不同文类。首先探讨的是揣摩女性角色的男性演员，用来分析此一模仿文类的两个案例分别为霸王别姬（1993）与梅兰芳（2009）。两部电影皆是根据京剧中“旦角”的历史实践。再者是女扮男装以越界进入传统禁止女性参与的公共领域，主要的分析案例则为花木兰（2009）这部根据中国传奇所拍摄的真人动作片，在该传奇中，一位名为花木兰的女性军人假扮为男人以代父从军。本文根据我对这些中国电影中跨性别展演的细读，涉入盖博、巴特勒与海伯斯坦等西方性别理论的讨论，以检视当代中国有关性别与性的论述与政治。更明

确而言,我将在下列三方面进行批判性的分析:第一,性别展演性并非必然是颠覆性的,而仅显示异性恋的常规是武断且非自然的。第二,这三部电影并非挑战了当代中国的异性恋与性别二元对立,反而似乎支持并巩固了性别阶层。第三,跨性别的范畴与特定社会及历史脉络中的艺术、认同和意识形态相互交错。脉络化的分析不仅对当代中国文化与政治中的跨性别意涵提供新的观点,更同时质问了西方性别理论在跨文化脉络中的普适性。

关键词: 跨性别; 展演; 展演性; 中国电影; 京剧