

Peking opera persuasive essay

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Modern observers in the West may not understand why, but they can certainly recognize when males are used to portray female roles in the Chinese theater. A quote from Act 2 Scene 7 of David Henry Hwang's opera, "Madam Butterfly," provides a useful example of how and why males are used to play female roles. There, a male singer who plays female roles in Beijing Opera deceives a French diplomat into thinking he actually is a woman.

He explains that males take the female roles "because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" This explanation resonates on multiple levels with varying degrees of irony, suggesting that gender is as performative in life as it is in theater. To this end, this paper examines how men playing the tan role in the Beijing Opera define and enforce the idea of femininity by performing the female role to determine how men perform femininity on stage in the Beijing Opera.

A summary of the research is provided in the conclusion. Review and Discussion Background and Overview. The importance of actors and acting has long been celebrated in China; in fact, the first document concerning "actors" can be found in the Records of the Great Historian, written by Sima Qian (145-90 BCE), who was appointed to the court of Emperor Wu (reigned 141-87 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty (cited in Thorpe 269).

Likewise, the use of male actors to portray female characters also has a long history in China, although many contemporary researchers consider its origins to be primarily in the last century and a half. According to Tian (2000), "The art of male dan --specialists in female roles -- is one of the

most important issues in traditional Chinese theatre, especially in jingju (Beijing or Peking opera)” (78).

Beijing opera, or literally “opera of the capital,” emerged in the mid-19th century in China by incorporating components of huidiao from Anhui, dandiao from Hubei, and kunqu, the traditional opera that had predominated the country since the 14th century; performed in Mandarin, the dialect of Beijing and of the traditional elite, the jingxi musical verse plays came to be performed throughout China, although most provinces and many major cities developed their own operatic variants using local dialects (Brandon 2).

As Beijing opera spread out from its original roots in Beijing to become an actual national theatre in China, there were some issues that arose concerning tradition and innovation. For instance, in his book, *Diasporas and Interculturalism in Asian Performing Arts: Translating Traditions*, Um (2004) reports that, “The art as performed in Beijing was considered the 'pure' form, referred to as 'jingpai' ([Bei]jing style). But somewhat paradoxically, innovation was only regarded as truly successful if it was recognized in Beijing.

For instance, liupai, the schools or styles of acting representative of the creative work of individual actors, could only be established through the validation of Beijing audiences and critics” (161). Before the mid-20th century, Beijing opera was considered to be actor-centered, both in terms of performance as well as the creative process; this mindset meant that all major creative work was either accomplished by or supervised by the actors but even this creative work had to be approved by Beijing (Um 161).

In fact, “ An actor's original composition, scripting, staging and performance achieved the power of long-term influence and continuity only when Beijing conferred liupai status” (Um 161). According to Brandon (2006), Beijing operas are highly conventionalized in terms of movements, costumes and makeup; the respective attitudes of the individual characters in Beijing opera products are communicated through traditional postures, steps, and arm movements.

In addition, both actors and actresses wear carefully applied face paint to indicate which characters they portray and various acrobatic movements are often employed to suggest violence (Brandon 2-3). Other devices are also used in Beijing opera to communicate what may not be readily discernible to uninitiated Western observers, but which are immediately recognized by Chinese audiences.

For example, musical accompaniment for Beijing opera is provided by a small orchestra of stringed and wind instruments, wooden clappers, and a small drum; brief interludes of spoken narration allow singers to rest periodically during the characteristically lengthy performances; these devices also carry with them understood conventions that convey important points to be made (Brandon 3). As noted above, the Beijing opera has traditionally employed an all-male cast, including males portraying the female parts; however, during the late 20th century, Beijing opera expanded its scope to admit female actors as well (Brandon, 2006).

The most popular male performer in the Beijing Opera was Mei Lanfang, who played mostly female roles; he introduced the art form to an international

audience by touring in Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Brandon 3). In her chapter, "Traditional theater in contemporary China," Elizabeth Wichmann (1988) reports that, "Beijing opera has been the nationally dominant form of theater in China for at least one hundred years. However, it is only one among more than 360 indigenous, or traditional, forms of Chinese theater currently being staged" (184).

The salient features of Beijing opera today can be traced to the Yuan dynasty, when the particular styles of costume and makeup were indicative of the nature of the character wearing them (Wichmann 184). According to this author, "At least in terms of refinement and elaboration, the Beijing opera (jingju) and other allied styles of Qing dynasty regional theater probably represent the high point of Chinese stage costume, and their styles of 'painted face' makeup are more numerous and complex than the stage makeups of any other culture or period" (Wichmann 2).

Likewise, the distinctive Beijing opera walking styles of the dan (female roles) and sheng are clearly recognizable in other traditional forms, just as are the stylized hand and eye movements of the huadan (Wichmann 2). Although some localized forms of theater have not include certain role types (the jing being the role type most frequently excluded), the walk, posture, and gestures techniques used for every other role type traditionally included in each form and can be recognized by modern Chinese audiences without fail as belonging to that role type throughout the various forms of traditional Chinese theater (Brandon 3).

Vocal stylizations, though, in many cases are significantly different from one theater form to the next, being reflective of a specific role type and of the specific form of theater (Brandon 3). In Beijing opera, actors portraying female roles typically use distinctly different vocal ranges and tonal qualities, including extremely high natural register production, midrange chest-supported nasal production, and a type of vocal production that is similar to the yodel, in which the performer must have a very wide vocal range (Wichmann 187).

According to Wichmann (1988), “ Through their combined imagery, the vocal and physical stylizations of each role type convey the primarily Confucian values and resulting behavior patterns traditionally deemed appropriate by society for each type of role thus portrayed” (187). Historic Influences on the Use of Male Actors for Female Roles in Beijing Opera. Fortunately for contemporary historians, there is a good account of how male actors came to portray female roles in the Beijing opera in the historical records.

According to Guy (2001), Beijing opera is just one of more than 360 different regional forms of Chinese opera that differ primarily according to the regional dialect used in song and speech as well as in their musical materials. “ In comparison with many of the world's other great musical theater traditions such as Japanese Noh, Italian opera, or Javanese wayang, Peking opera is a relatively new form. Its birth is popularly traced to 1790” (Guy 377). In reality, though, the origins of the male dan role can be traced back much further in Chinese history.

For example, in her essay, “ Male Dan: The Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre,” Tian (2000) reports that, “ The tradition of the male dan can be traced back to ancient music and dance. It probably dates back as early as the Han dynasty (206 B. C. -A. D. 219)” (78). A highly regarded scholar of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Jiao Xun (1763-1820), cites a source suggesting that in the Han dynasty, there were also male actors that impersonated jinu (female singers and dancers), a tradition that served as the basis for the convention of female impersonation later called zhuang dan (Tian 78).

By the end of the Wei dynasty (220-264), Emperor Cao Fang, who reigned from 240-254 CE, was reported to have enjoyed watching his young male jesters portray nubile young women whose excessive wantonness was an embarrassment to onlookers (Tian 78). Likewise, Emperor Xuan Di, who ruled from 578-579 CE of the North Zhou dynasty (557-581), issued a decree that required handsome young men of the city to dress as women and to sing and dance inside the imperial court for the emperor and his entourage (Historical records of the Beijing theatre cited in Tian at 78).

During the reign of Emperor Yang Di (605-616) of the Sui dynasty (589-617), from January 1 to January 15, a period in Chinese history when foreign princes and visitors were taxed by the Emperor in the form of tribute, thousands of singers and dancers gathered and performed in the country’s capital; the majority of these performers were dressed as females, and wore flowers and jewelry (Wang 190 cited in Tian at 78).

By the mid-7th century, during the Tang dynasty (618-906), the Chinese empress requested that women be prohibited from taking part in any theatrical performance, a proclamation that resulted in the conventional segregation of male players and female singers and dancers employed at the court (Tian 78). Emperor Xuan Zong, who ruled from 712-756, was responsible for the development of the Liyuan (“ Pear Garden”) and Yichunyuan (“ Pleasure House”); the Liyuan used male performers exclusively while the Yichunyan used female singers and dancers (Tian 78).

According to Tian (2000), “ It is highly possible that the performances by the Liyuan actors might have involved female impersonation. It is clear that outside the court, jiafu xi (a performance featuring female impersonation) was part of various performances and entertainments in the Tang dynasty” (78). Historical accounts confirm that many male actors were proficient at playing female roles; furthermore, there is also historical evidence that confirms boys dressed as women performed for aristocratic families (Tian 78).

During the Tang dynasty, a highly popular performance that involved female impersonation was the folk singing and dance performance known as “ tayaoniang” (stamping and swaying wife). These performances were characterized by the wife being impersonated by a man, who complains about being beaten by her inebriated husband and sings to the rhythm of “ her” dance while the audience responds in chorus (Cui 1959: 18 cited in Tian at 78).