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Reclaiming Cross-Dressing: Masculinity Construction in the All-Female Yue Opera's Shakespearean Adaptations

Abstract: Because it offers the stage such scope for polyerotic interpretation, cross-dressing has held an irresistible appeal to theatre practitioners across times and cultures, including Shakespeare in early modern England. The Shakespearean cross-dressing theatre, however, has long excited critical disapprobation as a cultural form which excluded women. However, can cross-dressing as a theatrical device be reclaimed by women as an alternative mode of Shakespearean performance? What academic and practical significance can a reversed, all-female casting of Shakespearean production offer? This paper will argue that the Chinese Yue opera's Shakespeare adaptations may shed light on how gender impersonation can be used to express women's wishes and desires.

As the second largest Chinese opera genre, Yue opera is a theatreform in which all roles are played by actresses for a predominantly female audience. Interestingly, Shakespeare is also Yue opera's most adapted foreign playwright. *General Ma Long* (2001, an adaptation of *Macbeth*) and *Coriolanus and Duliniang* (2016, an adaptation of *Coriolanus*) are two representative specimens of Yue opera Shakespearean adaptations with all-female casting. The male protagonists of both are played by cross-dressed actresses.

How do Yue opera female performers, whose style is generally perceived as soft and feminine, stage the Shakespearean war heroes famous for their bloodthirsty masculinity? Deploying a theoretical framework based on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Bertolt Brecht's account of the epic theatre, this essay aims to examine the masculinity construction in the all-female Yue opera Shakespearean adaptations, in order to open a discussion of how cross-dressing can be used to deconstruct and reassemble gender norms.

Keywords: Shakespeare, cross-dressing, Chinese opera, feminist theatre, Judith Butler, Bertolt Brecht.

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Although “there was no law prohibiting women from appearing on the English professional stage” (Rackin 115) in the early modern period, Shakespeare’s company remained an all-male one. While some Shakespearean scholars once deemed the cross-dressing convention as a sign of Shakespeare’s excellence in dramaturgy, for it shows “Shakespeare’s ability to see through the limitations of conventional gender expectations” (Case 25), more now comment on the inherently misogynistic nature of boys-playing-women. As Case remarks in *Feminism and Theatre*, whether for the sake of maintaining “the celibacy of the stage” (22) or making room for homoerotic flirtation, the exclusion of female bodies “makes the fictional female upon the stage the merchandise necessary to facilitate [mainly males’] erotic exchange” (26). Although Shakespeare’s all-male stage has inevitably allowed “men [to] appropriat[e] female power, symbolically striving for their own androgynous unity while rejecting the actuality of women” (Dolan 7), cross-dressing itself as a theatrical device can nonetheless be used to “produce[] fissures where feminists can find footholds for producing deeper, more radical fractures” (Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* 2). How can female theatre practitioners reclaim cross-dressing to perform Shakespeare? While many Western all-female Shakespearean productions struggle in justifying their casting choice and suffer from “social and economic marginalisation” (Aaron 18), there is one Chinese opera genre that has spontaneously developed an all-female performing tradition. Through their female-to-male cross-dressing¹ in Shakespeare adaptations, we are given a unique opportunity to examine how women can play with coded gender norms—even with those encoded in classic scripts designed for all-male performance—so as to satisfy their fantasy and imagine new kinds of gender construction.

As the second largest opera genre after Beijing Opera, Yue opera is the only all-female opera genre in China. Due to “the legitimation of Beijing opera as ‘the national theatre’” (Li 18) in official ideology, Beijing opera and its male cross-dressing tradition have created a misperception of Chinese opera as a male-dominated theatre. However, as Siu Leung Li points out in his monograph *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera*:

¹ Although the field of cross-dressing is often connected with Trans Studies, it would be arbitrary to consider all cross-dressers as incipiently transexuals. Since transgender is still a newly introduced and sensitive Western concept in China, and many Yue opera male impersonators have struggled through their life to separate their stage persona from their personal life, it is inappropriate to assume all Yue opera’s cross-dressers have any transgender tendency. Unless explicitly stated by the performers that they desire to transition to other gender identities in their personal lives, this article will regard the self-identified gender of the performers as in line with their biological gender.

Chinese opera theatregoers and fans are obviously aware of the female Yueju opera that is arguably the most successful regional opera today, at a time when the most representative regional opera, Beijing opera, is waning and the most prestigious, Kunju opera, is literally dying, with their male transvestite² traditions almost eradicated in contemporary China. (41)

Despite the lack of international recognition, Yue opera never ceases to embrace new subject-matter to cope with the times. Its relatively shorter history has given this opera genre fewer limitations when adapting stories from other cultures. Since a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation in 1942, nine Shakespeare plays had been adapted by Yue opera up to 2016 (Zhongqi Jiang 31), making Shakespeare its most adapted foreign playwright. The latest Shakespearean adaptation is an all-female *Coriolanus* (2016) by the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe. As a way of participating in the global commemorations of the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, this production adopted a rather modern style, and premiered not in its native habitat Hangzhou but at the Peacock Theatre in London 2016. Earlier in 2001, the Shaoxing Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe presented *General Ma Long*, an adaptation of *Macbeth* in a more traditional and localised style. This production features the only Macbeth played by an actress in Chinese theatre history so far. Both centering on military themes rather than on romance, these two productions stepped out of their comfort zone and offered a rare opportunity to examine how this all-female theatre genre at once constructs manhood and feminises Shakespeare. The recordings of the two productions are both available online for the public.³ It is the purpose of this essay to explore the potential of theatrical cross-dressing in Yue opera Shakespeare adaptations through a theoretical model building on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Bertolt Brecht's notion of epic theatre.

² Coined by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910, transvestism (Latin for cross-dressing) is a term that contains pathological connotations. Therefore, many members of this community prefer the term "cross-dresser" (Garber 4). To avoid unnecessary offence, this paper will not use the term "transvestism." However, some of the references that appear in this paper still use "transvestism" as a synonym for cross-dressing due to time and culture reasons.

³ The whole recording of *General Ma Long* production can be found here: *YouTube*, 2 August 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq6uLbPu5yI>. The whole recording of *Coriolanus and Dulinian* production can be find here: *YouTube*, 14 April 2020, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnIXzNPOH4U> (first half), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7KK5wsJqzs> (second half). Both productions have Chinese subtitles.

The Female-To-Male Cross-Dressing Tradition of Yue Opera in Chinese Theatre History

Cross-dressing has long been an integral part of Chinese theatre history. The “‘naturalistic representation’ of gender” (Chou 131) on the Spoken Drama (huaju) stage only emerged as a side-effect of the incursion of Western realism in the early 20th century. Although Beijing opera’s leading position “among the more than three hundred traditional operatic forms existing in China today” has misled many to take “male transvestism as a norm on the traditional Chinese stage” (Li 19), female cross-dressers have an equally strong presence in Chinese theatre history. The earliest record of Chinese female theatrical cross-dressing can be traced back to the reign of the Tang emperor Suzong (756-763), which is later than the first recorded male cross-dressing, in the third century (Li 33). The shorter history by no means implies any less significance of female cross-dressing onstage: as Li Siu Leung remarks, “the first full-fledged Chinese theatre (in the 13th century) was distinguished by female cross-dressing, not male transvestism” (38). The prosperity of cross-dressing and mixed-sex casting in the 13th-century Chinese theatre have also revealed that “a performer’s sex was not the primary consideration for the role he or she played onstage” (Chou 134) in Chinese theatre. The all-female practice of Yue opera is not only an embodiment of the centuries-long cross-dressing tradition on the Chinese opera stage, but also an outcome of a particular era in Chinese history, namely the Republican Era (1912-1949).

Originating as “a peasant form of story-singing in the Zhejiang countryside in the mid-nineteenth century” (Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men* 26), Yue opera emerges from the underclass and is a representative of the minor opera (xiaoxi). According to Jin Jiang (*Women Playing Men* 29-31), the repertoires and acting styles of the minor opera differ from the major opera (daxi), such as Beijing opera, which was developed by the government, aristocrats, and intellectual elites. The major opera normally embodies the authoritative ideology and scholar-official aesthetics by featuring stories about the vicissitudes of the empire, while the repertoire of the minor opera mainly consists of tales of urban life, among which romantic stories of the “young scholar and virtuous maidens” (caizi jieren) prevail. As the imperial system was dismantled, the masculine imperial narratives of the major operas gradually lost its appeal to the new Republican audiences, who were more drawn by the minor operas with topics more relevant to their lives. Because of their relatively feminine narratives and romance-based repertoires, minor operas are quite suitable for women’s performing style. As the “anti-masculine ideal of masculinity” in late imperial China had long deemed male heroes with feminine appearance more attractive (Wu 29), scholar-beauty romances (caizi jieren) “privileged the representation of ‘soft’ masculinity” (Wang 41). Therefore,

female cross-dressers actually possess natural advantages when performing young scholars in these stories.

When the emergent Chinese women's liberation movement of the mid-1910s freed many women from domestic confinement and encouraged them to participate in social activities, more and more female performers, characters, and audiences appeared in the theatre. The forerunner of Yue opera, Shengxian little opera, initially flourished in rural areas (as did other minor operas), where the official ideology about gender hierarchy was less rigid. Women in the countryside, as an important part of the labour force, enjoyed more freedom and therefore had more access to this informal theatre form. Due to urbanisation and the prevalence of gender-equal notions in major cities, Yue opera, which did not exclude women in the first place, attracted from the 1930s through the 1940s an enormous female audience in Shanghai, the culturally most influential and open city in southern China. All these factors led to the rise of Yue opera as a female-dominated theatre, catering specifically to women's tastes. Nowadays, all-female Yue opera troupes, deploying male impersonators, enjoy more popularity than the all-male and gender-straight Yue opera in the Shanghai market and have come to dominate that region's native theatre.

Even though both are impersonating the opposite gender onstage, it is necessary to separate male cross-dressing from female cross-dressing practices as they have rather different causes. The male cross-dressing theatre, as seen in the Elizabethan theatre and in Beijing opera, came into being because women were unable to appear on stage due to strict gender regimes and/or misogynistic cultures. However, female cross-dressing theatre, such as women's Yue opera and the Takarazuka Revue Company in contemporary Japan, are the outcome of particular artistic choices of the theatre makers rather than a practical necessity, for at no time were men forbidden to appear on the public stage. These theatre practitioners insist on an all-female cast because they believe that male impersonation by actresses can ensure a specific aesthetic for female audiences. While cross-dressing is considered a necessary strategy for men's theatre to cope with strict gender regimes, it functions as a vehicle for women-dominated theatre to carry their dramatic expression.

Butler and Brecht in Cross-Dressing: Gender as Performance and Gender as Epic Acting

In order to examine how cross-dressing can denaturalise gender onstage and turn the stage into "a privileged site for feminist analysis" (Diamond, *Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real'* 62), we need a theoretical framework that can both de- and reconstruct performance. As one of the most influential contemporary gender theorists, Butler advances the notion that the nature of gender is

constructed by proposing that gender is performative. Even though Butler's 1993 assumption has been much criticised in recent years by trans activists as "an example of cis-sexism" as it "conflates sexuality and gender identity" (Joubin, *Shakespearean Performance through a Trans Lens* 76-77), I still believe that such criticism largely derives from a misunderstanding of Butler's theory. By providing my own interpretation of Butler's gender performativity theory, this article aims to illustrate the inspirational function cross-dressing can offer beyond sex-role stereotyping.

The transgender community's backlash towards Butler emerges mainly from the misinterpretation described by the theorist themselves in a 2021 interview as "voluntarist interpretation of the performativity of gender" (Otwarty Uniwersytet, 2021). Dissenters believe that when Butler asserts that gender is a performance, it is implied that "gender is like choosing clothes to put on" and gender is seen "as a 'choice' rather than as an essential and firmly fixed sense of self" (*Gender Performance: The TransAdvocate interviews Judith Butler*). In a 2015 conversation with Cristan Williams from *TransAdvocate*, Butler clarified that they does not see gender as a choice:

Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person's felt sense of gender was therefore "unreal." That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. (*TransAdvocate*)

Nevertheless, I do not agree that Butler is limiting the exploration of gender identity by saying gender is performative, just as I would contradict the assumption that cross-dressing reinforces gender stereotyping, even though both can conveniently be read that way. "Gender performance" and "gender performativity" can be easily mixed, yet Butler has clearly stressed that "[p]erformativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance" (*Bodies That Matter* 59). The concept "performative" stems from linguist J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. In his book *How to Do Things With Words* in 1962, Austin put forward the linguistic term "performative utterances," which are statements "that enact what is uttered" (Drouin 26-27) rather than simply describing something. To say gender is performative is to emphasise that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). Just as a marriage is actualised by the saying of "I do" as part of a wedding ceremony, by acting out the gender identity one is assigned or chooses, gender becomes substantialised. What Butler trying to convey through their performativity theory is not that gender is unreal, but that gender is a culturally formed phenomenon which is being produced and reproduced all the time.

I would argue that embracing the theatrical side of gender can offer more freedom for gender exploration both on- and offstage. Although mixing up “gender is performative” as “gender is a performance” can be a common mistake, these two assertions do not contradict each other in Butler’s theory. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) Butler has declared: “my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical” because “the two are invariably related, chiasmically so” (xxv). The overlap between the theatrical and linguistic connotations of performative also contains intriguing potential for the study of cross-dressing. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler uses Nietzsche’s philosophical viewpoint to dismantle gender ontology, which at the same time also accords with the nature of theatre: “‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (*Gender Trouble* 33). This explains why Plato distrusted theatre and mimesis as there is “no ideal standing beyond its representation and ordering the universe” (Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* 11). By rejecting a “doer” behind the deed of gender, Butler’s gender performativity theory helps to consolidate the closeness between gender and theatre: “gender—like theater—is automimetic. Both are imitations of an action, and action is always already mimetic” (Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* 11). Therefore, the theatrical performance aspect of gender can further make gender “a domain of agency or freedom,” which is also what Butler stressed in her 2021 interview:

I think I still believe that we are formed from very early days through gender assignment and gender norms, expectations that society has of us, but we are not trapped fully within those terms. We can work with them and sometimes play with them, that we can open up spaces that feel better for us or more real to us. We are both culturally constrained and to some degree free. Gender is a site where we feel that. (Otwarty Uniwersytet, 2021)

When pointing out the absence of any “‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes” (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 522), Butler’s theory does not wish to deny the authenticity of individual gender experience, but to shed light on the fact that gender is socially scripted, which, in turn, suggests the possibility that individuals can also play with it if they know how to write the script. As Butler puts it: “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it” (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 526). Therefore, by playing the opposite gender onstage, theatrical cross-dressing is a direct window to observe how certain costumes, gestures and characterisation are associated with gender. A study of such “script” in cross-dressing would help us better recognise how gender constructions are formed and inscribed on the body, which could also enlighten us to develop new vocabularies of gender for our own needs. Furthermore,

Butler also argues that desires do not originate from our personhood but from social norms in *Undoing Gender* (2004) (2), which could explain the same-sex casting choice beyond social prohibition: men know better what kind of female characters their fellows want to see onstage, and male characters played by female impersonators can fulfil the desires of female audiences better than the performances by their male counterparts. By exposing the performative nature of gender and the social construction of desires, Butler provides the theoretical foundation for cross-dressing to become the tool of denaturalising gender and reconstituting desires. As for how to optimise the role of cross-dressing to turn the stage into “a laboratory in which to reconstruct new, non-genderized identities” (Dolan 10), we need someone whose theoretical endeavour is to revolutionise the representational apparatus of theatre itself. That, perhaps surprisingly, is Brecht.

By “[d]emystifying representation, showing how and when the object of pleasure is made, releasing the spectator from imaginary and illusory identifications” (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 83), Bertolt Brecht aimed to establish a new version of dialectical theatre in contrast to the empathic Aristotelian theatre. Whether it was Brecht’s intention or not, the basic means and purpose of epic theatre “contained a profoundly feminist impulse” (Solomon, *Materialist Girl* 43). As “[t]he cornerstone of Brecht’s theory” (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 84), the alienation effect aims to make the familiar strange onstage so that spectators would take social factors into account instead of simply empathising with the characters. Characters’ behaviors were to be shown “in quotations” or be demonstrated rather than be identified with. If such epic acting can be applied to gender, that is to say, if the gender of a character can be alienated onstage, spectators may be able to realise that gender, like other identities, is a social construction rather than a natural attribute. Cross-dressing, in this sense, perfectly exemplifies the alienation effect: “gender is exposed as a sexual costume, a sign of a role, not evidence of identity” (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 85).

Since “the familiar cannot be rendered strange without first being established as familiar” (Solomon, *Materialist Girl* 47), Brecht requires a certain mechanism to “evoke familiar characters and situations quickly” (52) for alienation to take effect. This accounts for Brecht’s fondness for parable and his invention of an original acting concept, Gestus, both of which contain the potential for the feminist deconstruction of gender. Can gender become a parable? Can stereotyping somehow be liberating? This is where Chinese opera becomes relevant.

As “[t]he explosive (and elusive) synthesis of alienation, historicization, and the ‘not, but’,” the Brechtian Gestus represents “a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau” in which social meanings are encoded (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 89). The Gestus would enable spectators quickly to

understand the character and the social embodiment without believing the actors have become the characters.

By *gestus* Brecht meant a rich ensemble of theatrical representation, including language, body stance, pitch, facial expression, speech rhythms, and sound patterns—any theatrical means through which actors could physically depict human beings as social creatures in a world governed by power struggles. (Guntner 110)

This coincides with the performance ideology in Chinese opera. In Brecht's article *Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst* (1957), where the alienation effect is first mentioned, Brecht "celebrated the Chinese theatre's ability to manufacture and manipulate *Gestus*" (Martin 77). To elaborate on the signs and referents system of Chinese theatre,⁴ Brecht gives an example of how the alienation effect is created in a scene full of *Gestus*. Through an excerpt from a Beijing opera play he saw in Moscow, Brecht describes how a fisherwoman onstage uses performing skills to demonstrate rowing a (non-existent) boat in both the fast current and in a quiet bay. Brecht noted that "this voyage has a historic quality" (14) as this scene is so well-known by the audiences that the performer's attitude has both acknowledged and even induced such awareness. The fisherwoman scene has demonstrated that the theatrical system of Chinese opera is based on a consensus between the audience and performers. Such emblematic nature is most vividly reflected in the role-type (*hangdang*) convention of Chinese opera. Characters in Chinese opera are categorised into different role-types according to gender, age, occupation, and other social identities. Each role-type possesses its own set of highly stylised acting conventions. Gender, like age and social status, is fixed by a specific stage formula, thus detaches itself from the performer's body and becomes a kind of *Gestus*. With certain costume and training, performers can successfully reproduce characters' gender identities regardless of their own gender. Such employment of gendered *Gestus* is not only appreciated but also celebrated by Chinese opera audiences, which is why the largest and the second largest opera genre in China—Beijing opera and Yue opera—are both characterised by cross-dressing.

Yet the gendered *Gestus* on the stage of Chinese opera has also inevitably faced criticism such as "reinforc[ing] notions of naturalized gender behavior" (Solomon, *Materialist Girl* 53). That is also why casting women in women's roles onstage in the 1930s China was deemed an improvement in theatre as it "freed women from the formalism invented by men and encoded

⁴ Here Brecht means the traditional Chinese opera rather than westernised Spoken Drama.

in the performances of female impersonators” (Martin 82). However, such criticism also overlooks the progressive and feminist potential epic acting of gender can promise. Just as criticising a parable for being oversimplified is to remain on the surface, regarding cross-dressing as stereotypical fails to recognise that such Gestus exceeds the stage and signals a possibility of dismantling the gaze. In Solomon’s *Materialist Girl: The Good Person of Szechwan and Making Gender Strange*, she points out that what Brecht called “the gestus of showing, the performer acknowledging that she is being watched and enjoyed” (53) is an empowering alternative for performers to break away from the fetishised “to-be-looked-at-ness.” This kind of “looking-at-being-looked-at-ness” is what takes place on the Chinese opera stage, where, in Brecht’s belief, the alienation effect is achieved. There is no fourth wall in Chinese opera as the performer “makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at” (Brecht 14). Such awareness of representation applies to cross-dressing as well—both performers and audiences of Beijing opera and Yue opera acknowledge that the gender of the character is part of the play. By detaching gender from performer’s own body, gender becomes something “paradoxically available for both analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity” (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 89).

To return to my initial question: Does cross-dressing reaffirm or deconstruct gender? The Butler-Brecht theatre model offers an alternative answer: Cross-dressing can reinvent gender. While Butler has asserted that gender is a performance, Brecht’s theatre furthermore points out that gender can be performed through the epic acting technique Gestus. In the following, I will return to Shakespeare’s original text and the performance of all-female Yue opera adaptations in order to closely analyse how gender as Gestus is assembled, performed, and transformed into a kind of art to satisfy women’s desires and fantasies in Yue opera.

What Maketh Man?: Masculinity in the All-Female Yue Opera Shakespeare Adaptations

Although Caius Martius Coriolanus may be perceived as one of the most emphatically male tragic heroes in Shakespeare, the ontology of his masculinity is always under question. Lehnhof observes that “no Shakespearean character exposes this dynamic [that early modern masculinity is not a natural given; it must always be achieved] more dramatically than the protagonist of *Coriolanus*” (360). Even the hero himself has noticed the connection between masculinity and theatrical effect: “Would you have me / False to my nature? Rather say I play / The man I am” (3.2.14-16). As “he negatively associates play-acting with effeminacy” (Lehnhof 355) and dissimulation with depravity, Coriolanus’

rejection of performance exposes his “sexualised fear that it will unman him” (354). Coppelia Kahn also notes that Coriolanus’ antitheatricalism caused by his preoccupations with manliness suggests that “his masculinity might be only a costume he wears (like Macbeth’s ‘borrow’d robes’), artificial rather than natural” (*Roman Shakespeare* 154).

Similarly, *Macbeth* is also a play in which Shakespeare acknowledges that manhood is achieved through the display of particular qualities rather than something congenital. As Bailey notes, “[d]iscussions of manhood in flux and under siege have been central because gender disturbance provides the explanation for Macbeth’s self-defeating choices” (192). Macbeth’s greatest inner torment derives from the inescapable fact that he lives in a society where “true manhood is synonymous with heroic violence” (Wells 117). Macbeth’s descent into the moral abyss is unavoidable, when his “dearest love” (1.5.56), Lady Macbeth, calls his manliness into question: “When you durst do it, then you were a man;” (1.7.48). It is his desperate attempt to prove that “I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47). *Macbeth* is a story about how a violent manhood “designed to validate man’s power and authority, paradoxically undermines man’s autonomy and independence of thought and action” (Howell 19). Echoing the problematic nature of the acclaimed heroic valour in *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus* also dramatises a similar belief that “manliness in the early modern period could [only] be achieved and expressed” through one thing: warfare (Lehnhof 360). Therefore, one can conclude that what Shakespeare explored in both plays is the destruction that such valorisation of heroic savagery can cause to both the individual and the society.

Yue opera takes the violent aspect of masculinity into consideration when adapting these two bloodthirsty Shakespearean plays. As an opera genre best known for its excellent portrayal of “young scholars and virtuous maidens” (caizi jiaren) romances, the all-female Yue opera repertoire offers very few precedents for the staging of violent masculinity. Though Yue opera practitioners took different approaches in the two productions, they both resort to Gestus to substantiate the performative nature of manhood and violence. In the adaptation of *Macbeth*, carried out in traditional Yue opera style, the Macbeth figure Ma Long is first portrayed through the formulaic fighting sequence of the combatant (wusheng) role-type, as per traditional Chinese opera performance convention. Ma Long first appears onstage with a 30-second incredible stylised martial art fighting sequence, which is the most visually obvious Gestus of his masculinity in this production. Through a series of prearranged movements and acrobatic actions, a female performer can obtain the identity of a masculine General. In other words, rather than trying to achieve a believable manly outer appearance, the masculinity of Ma Long is validated through this 30-second Gestus. At the same time, choosing the acrobatic fighting

Gestus also echoes Shakespeare's proposition that manliness equals violence in *Macbeth*. Besides exhibiting violence directly through the physical Gestus in *General Ma Long* production, Yue opera adapters also encapsulate violence within the hero's masculinity into a social Gestus—the military. That is to say Ma Long's manhood is generated onstage through his military identity. The name of this Yue opera production is *General Ma Long* instead of simply *Ma Long* like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which shows the significant priority of his military Generalship in this production. Additionally, choosing "General" rather than the equivalent title of "Thane of Cawdor" or "King of Scotland" as his core identity to be put in the title represents this production's understanding that whatever political success Macbeth achieves, the essence of his identity and manhood is most essentially linked to the military.

As the traditional opera acting conventions lose their effect when the Yue opera *Coriolanus* adaptation is designed in a modern-day setting, Yue opera transforms costumes into Gestus to achieve the ultra-masculine identity in this production. While an overall masculine temperament is created through commoners' leather and denim jackets, windbreakers, and boots, this Yue opera production focuses on Coriolanus' extraordinary martial prowess as the essence of his manhood to distinguish Coriolanus' incomparable machismo from others. As part of the army uniform, beret symbolises militarism as the same group of actresses playing plebeians instantly transform themselves into Roman soldiers by putting berets on onstage. Since the play implies that "manhood [...] is less an outcome of elemental or substantial alteration than an unstable effect of addition, accumulation, and performance" (Lehnhof 359-360), "the gendering activity" (Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare* 144) war functions as "an institutionalised site of maturation in which boys are constructed as men by learning to fulfil mandates of masculinity" (Dittmann 659). Named after the Roman god of war, Martius deems warfare as the hallmark of his manhood, which in this production is embodied by the beret that he never takes off throughout the play.

Since the rise of Yue opera is very much indebted to the growing female audiences in Shanghai in the early 1920s, masculinity in this female constructed theatre is not only a theatrical effect but also a fetishised performance catering to audiences' desires. The female-dominated Yue opera theatre offers a space where there are fewer restrictions on women's behaviour and expression. Reversing the cross-dressing on Shakespeare's stage, "[w]hen men play women, [...] in these traditions—all non-naturalistic—the male actor becomes the fetishized women" (Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* 11), the male impersonators in Yue opera offer the fetishisation of manhood on their female bodies. Jin Jiang has observed in her study of the Yue opera history that "the fans of women's Yue opera often unabashedly and unrestrainedly express their strong affections towards their favourite actresses in public, regardless of what others think" (*Poetry and Politics* vi). In these two Yue opera productions,

minor female roles take every opportunity to express their fascination with the male protagonist's body as a wink to the female audiences offstage. In *General Ma Long* production, one of the witches figure bluntly expresses her fondness for Ma Long by lifting his clothes and exclaiming: "You are so handsome. I like you!" The eroticisation of male bodies are even more explicit in the *Coriolanus* adaptation since it is set in a contemporary background. Even without any nudity in this scene, Coriolanus standing on a chair still positions him as an idol whose body serves for objectification. Coriolanus can barely move when one of the male commoners lifts his gown and hugs his thighs. The fetishisation of Coriolanus' body reaches a climax when two females hand him their ballots by holding his hands and touching their cheeks and foreheads suggesting erotic obsession and sexual desire.

Comparing the two all-female Yue opera productions, we can see certain similar tendencies in the male characterisation when women take over the ideological apparatus of theatre. In Yue opera, the antithesis of Shakespeare's stage where "[m]en [became] objects to be gazed at and assessed" (Louie 99), the male characters function as the idealised incarnation of female fantasies. As Jin Jiang observes, the young male impersonators in Yue opera "embody women's ideal men—elegant, graceful, capable, caring, gentle, and loyal" (*Women Playing Men* 223). Yue opera's Macbeth and Coriolanus are both endowed with certain qualities that are desirable by women, which is most vividly reflected in their emotional expressions towards their spouses. In Shakespeare's original play, Macbeth leaves Lady Macbeth descending into madness alone by coldly referring to her as "patient" (5.3.37) and only giving an indifferent and brief epitaph of her death—"she should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). However, Ma Long in the Yue opera adaptation not only actively tries to protect his wife from the ghosts, but also uses an one-minute aria singing to express his desperation as her body is removed from the stage. Similarly, Yue opera's version of Coriolanus is also much more affectionate and expressive in his interaction with Virgilia, compared to the character from the original text who is "Shakespeare's most opaque tragic protagonist" (Maus 2789). While in the Chinese literary tradition "warrior-fighter is often depicted as having no romantic feelings whatsoever" (Louie 23), the "feminized narrative of qing, or feelings" (Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men* 216) of Yue opera tends to portray male characters as romantic lovers in order to satisfy female audience's imaginations. Contrary to men playing women according to men's taste in the male-dominated theatre, "Yue opera's construction of the male on the female body yielded a kind of masculinity that served women's interests and helped define the feminine" (Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men* 231).

However, I have to note with regret that these two all-female Yue opera adaptations have consciously downplayed gender issues in the original Shakespeare texts. In order to "assimilate[] Shakespeare into the fabric of local

worldviews and representational practices” (Joubin, *Chinese Shakespeares* 16), Yue opera adapters have shifted the focus from gender to ethics in these two productions. With almost no sign of Macbeth’s “pronounced lack of secure gendered identifications” (Bailey 202), the cross-dressed protagonist Ma Long shows no anxiety about his masculinity. Similarly, despite the ubiquitous patriarchal fear that “any passionate relationship [with women] will endanger or threaten his masculine identity” (Howell 5), the Yue opera *Coriolanus* is neither afraid nor ashamed to show his affection for his wife. While “Shakespeare’s heroes and villains are [...] sometimes hard to tell apart” (Wells 141), Yue opera *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* are almost glorified into morally upright characters.

Although such an artistic choice in adapting Shakespeare may seem to be a reactionary one for a female-centred theatre genre, it is actually in line with the long-established tradition of Yue opera. As Radway observes in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, “in ideal romances the hero is constructed androgynously” (12). Yue opera becomes a perfect platform for romantic stories due to their androgynous aesthetics, particularly embodied by the male impersonator’s body. The romance-centred ideology of the all-female Yue opera is also what limits this theatre’s further exploration in the gender sphere, as romances are essentially “a ritual effort to convince its [recipients] that heterosexuality is both inevitable and natural and that it is necessarily satisfying as well” (Radway 13). Since romances can only serve as a release and escapist space for female fantasies, Yue opera never intends to overthrow gender hierarchy or challenge heterosexuality. By idealising Shakespearean antiheroes and their romantic relationship, these Yue opera adaptations inevitably overlook the insidious patriarchal power structure within these plays. It is rather disappointing but natural to see that Yue opera, a theatre genre dedicated to telling the perfect romantic story, only seeks solutions to gender trouble by creating an ideal male hero.

As previously discussed, the “self-consciously anti-illusory and stagy” (Lei 277) characteristics of Yue opera, or Chinese Opera in general, have made this theatre genre a potential platform for testing feminist theatre models such as Butler’s gender performativity theory and Brecht’s epic theatre. By observing how gender representations onstage are assembled, the artificiality of gender performance can be exposed, and the patriarchal gender system may be challenged. However, echoing Brecht’s questioning of the “theater’s capacity to teach us a way to see critically, and to apply that critical consciousness to the world” (Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* 18) and Butler’s questioning of “whether the denaturalization of gender norms is the same as their subversion” (*Bodies That Matter* 215), I also doubt to what extent can this theatrical cross-dressing deconstruct gender categories onstage or call gender norms into question. Very much like the early modern Shakespearean stage, the cross-dressing convention on the all-female Yue opera stage is not designed to

challenge patriarchal society but to entertain the audience. As Solomon contends: "It's one thing to recognize that there are theater-like aspects of masculinity. It's another to feel authorized to assume the strength and self-sovereignty masculinity claims." (*Re-Dressing the Canon* 18) Despite the certain level of feminist awareness Yue opera demonstrates, what Shakespeare can not achieve through cross-dressing can also not be achieved by Yue opera at the moment.

I do not intend to excuse the reactionary nature of these productions, but I do believe that this idealised tendency of Yue opera can open a new discussion for feminist theatre. If depicting women as the perfect and stainless figures is a manifestation of the male gaze, is the glorification of male characters a natural consequence of the female gaze? Additionally, does this female gaze qualify as the feminist perspective? These questions may not lead to a clear answer, but they are definitely worth exploring for the new generation of female theatre makers. To study the male representations on the Yue opera stage is to explore how women can construct the opposite gender. Not only does such portraying men as objects of desire reveals that the masculinity ideal "is a social construct that is constantly being manipulated for the purposes of those who control the means to do so" (Louie 99), it also shows what many female audiences actually want.

Maybe the denaturalising of gender categories in Yue opera plays is not as effective as Butlerian and Brechtian feminist theatre theorists have envisioned, but Yue opera definitely offers a positive alternative for reconstructing masculinity. In Kahn's comparison of *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*, she points out that women in these plays seek to transform themselves into men by "root[ing] out of themselves and their men those human qualities—tenderness, pity, sympathy, vulnerability to feeling—that their cultures have tendered to associate with women" (*Man's Estate* 151). The men those women created are monsters "insatiable in their need to dominate, anxiously seeking security in their power and their identity" (Kahn, *Man's Estate* 151). However, Louie has indicated that the manhood constructed by women writers in twentieth century China is different from the traditional patriarchal construct of masculinity: "masculinity is associated with a whole array of characteristics such as youthful innocence, sexual naivete, tenderness and exotica—characteristics which traditionally have been associated with femininity" (28). Moreover, similar to the Western misogynistic notion that the instigation of the female forces contaminates masculinity, "masculine sexuality in the Chinese tradition [also] valued the ability to suppress one's sexual urges" (Louie 6). Contrary to the desexualisation of heroes in other Chinese operas and the defeminisation in early modern English patriarchal culture, the all-female Yue opera provides an alternative gender model in which not only the affinity to women is essential, men also need to draw on certain feminine qualities in order to be portrayed as the hero.

In this essay, I have examined the all-female Yue opera's adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* with a theoretical model combining both Butlerian and Brechtian theories. Despite its definite lack of intellectual self-awareness, the potential of the all-female Yue opera still deserves to be studied in depth. Even though Yue opera does not explicitly challenge the framework of heteronormativity, it still offers a sincere and authentic female perspective on Shakespeare. Here, women once subject to the male gaze have reclaimed the tool of cross-dressing to redefine gender and construct the world according to their own imaginations. Whether Shakespeare was a misogynist or not is not of any concern here. What interests Yue opera is the malleability of his works. By effeminising two bloodthirsty Shakespearean heroes, the all-female Yue opera has rewritten the gender representations in their adaptations.

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