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Ma Haili

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Development of training and performativity in Shanghai Yueju

Ma Haili

This paper illustrates the development of training and performativity in a Chinese regional opera form: the all-female Shanghai Yue Opera (*Yueju*). All-female *Yueju* is currently the second largest opera form, out of over 360 different opera genres, in China. Its reputation rests on its femininity, which is expressed through music, gender roles and movements. *Yueju* is often compared to Beijing Opera (*Jingju*); whilst Beijing Opera (*Jingju*) is regarded as representing the Chinese national *Yang* culture, *Yueju* is representative of the national *Yin* culture. This Cosmological *Yin–Yang* balance, based on Neo-Confucian ideologies, symbolises the ultimate harmony of a society and brought about *Yueju*'s legitimacy. This paper suggests that *Yueju*'s femininity is a process of gender reconstruction, through training and performativity, formed under socio-psychological criteria and presented according to a particular political preference in history. *Yueju*'s development reveals the deeply embedded masculine domination in modern Chinese society.

Keywords: Shanghai, opera, *Yueju*, gender, performativity

Yue Girl Competition

In July 2006, the Shanghai *Yueju* Company (SYC) broadcast the Yue Girl Competition (*Yuenü Zhengfeng*), similar to the UK's *X-Factor*. It was an instant success and received the highest viewing ratings in Shanghai. In the following four years, this contest expanded from the SYC to include the dozens of professional *Yueju* companies in other cities. Its popularity extended nationally and internationally and this traditionally all-female opera genre was defined by the media as 'the representation of female fashion and style' (Liu 2006, p. 27).

The success of the Yue Girl Competition is further hailed by many male scholars, such as prominent Chinese opera scriptwriter Luo Huaizhen, as

'[having] brought out the essence of femininity (*roumei*), which makes *Yueju* representative of *Yin* culture, complementing the *Yang* culture of Beijing opera (*yanggang mei*)' (private interview, 8 July 2008). This *Yin–Yang* concept, developed as Neo-Confucian state ideology (195–115 BC), symbolises a complete and harmonious cosmological pattern and provides *Yueju*, this female art, with official legitimacy.

Bourdieu, the famous French sociologist, emphasises in *Masculine Domination* (2001) that unlike class and race, gender repression spreads across different fields, making it instantly invisible and masculine domination less identifiable. This is because our habitus, or behaviour, is made through historical and social processes, and the domination becomes an internalised acknowledgement, which we even perceive as 'natural'. Even when the domination is identified, the highly performance based gender difference is difficult to change – unless through a social movement (Bourdieu 2001, pp. 1, 89). This paper presents how Chinese women's performance based gender roles were required to change through three recent Chinese social movements; and how these changes affected the development of Shanghai *Yueju*. This paper aims to identify and reveal the deeply embedded masculine domination in Chinese modern society.

Formation of all-female *Yueju*, pre-1949

From private to public

Unprecedented social changes took place after China lost the Sino-UK opium war (1838–42) and was forced to bow to the Western powers. Modernisation was viewed as key to the rise of China; one of the core movements was women's emancipation. Confucian doctrine, which dominated China over two millennia, had placed women in an inferior position to men (Fung 1948, p. 192, Yuan 2005, p. 9); in the mid-nineteenth century, it was the male elite who first opposed Confucian doctrine and saw it as a shackle to China's modernisation (Wang 2009, p. 3). As a consequence of that, women's habitus changed: feet were unbound; long hair was cut short; women were encouraged to enter public spaces, such as schools, factories, offices and theatres. Shanghai, the gateway to China's modernity, embraced modern women most wholeheartedly. Feminists such as H. Li (2002, p. 119) commented on this achievement of emancipation as 'with one swift stroke of the pen (by men), Chinese women acquired equality and even the right to vote, which their sisters in the West had spent decades, even centuries, fighting for'.

Emergence of all-female *Yueju*

Chinese opera is a synthetic art form, which is to 'tell a story through singing and dancing' (Wang 2007, p. 3). *Yueju* derives from a type of popular improvised singing in Zhejiang province, Eastern China. Yue is an ancient name for the Shenxian region, Zhejiang province, and Ju means drama and opera. Throughout its development, this art form had various names, but for

consistency, in this article the name *Yueju* is used to address this Zhejiang originated Shanghai operatic genre, unless otherwise stated.

Until the early twentieth century, commercial *Yueju* was all-male, as were all other opera forms. In 1923, a Shanghai businessman Wang Jinshui, originating from Shenxian, organised the first all-female *Yueju* troupe, aiming to take it to Shanghai for commercial gain (Gao 1991, p. 41). Wang's all-female *Yueju* troupe had 20 girls aged 9–12 years. This was for the purpose of delivering early training as well as to follow strict gender selection criteria.

(1) Pre-selection on youth and beauty

In the pre-1949 period, the base of pre-selection in *Yueju* was founded on youth and beauty (Gao 1991, p. 87). Takarazuka, a Japanese modern all-female theatrical music performance, is often compared to *Yueju*, as they share many artistic similarities. Here is how Takarazuka scholar Robertson (1998, p. 12) describes the important link between pre-selection and socio-psychological preference in this art form:

Unlike 'primary' gender, which is assigned at birth on the basis of an infant's genitalia, secondary gender is based on both physical (but not genital) and socio-psychological criteria, namely, height, physique, facial shape, voice, personality, and to a certain extent, personal preference. Secondary gender attributes, or markers, are premised on contrastive gender stereotypes themselves.

Extremely similar to Takarazuka, *Yueju* pre-selection is to suit the conventional 'idealised' gender roles for the Chinese 'socio-psychological criteria': tall male, petite female, the male has a bigger, squared face and the female an oval one. Even after the long training period, if there is a change in a student's physique, they would be asked to change performing gender roles accordingly. For example, should a girl who has specialised in the female role grow taller and bigger than her peers during her teenage years of training, she would be asked to switch to the male role. This pre-selection is to ensure that the concept of beauty suits the conventional socio-psychological expectation *before* being reinforced through further training.

Although the pre-selection became much stricter at a later stage of *Yueju* development, for this first all-female *Yueju* troupe Wang had limited choices. Wang had difficulties in recruiting female *Yueju* students, since in early twentieth century rural China families still clung to convention and a young woman's position was at home. In order to show his sincerity Wang entered his own youngest daughter first; he then promised high payment to all students, during and after a three year apprenticeship (Gao 1991, p. 43). This economic lure was difficult for any rural family to turn down and it was under basic youth and beauty pre-selection that the first all-female *Yueju* troupe was formed.

(2) Vocal training and performativity

Yueju derived from Buddhist chanting; by the end of the nineteenth century a series of songs, consisting of a collection of stanzas, were developed and they were called *Fuzi*. A typical *Fuzi* could be like this:

One's life could be compared with a bow,
 Every day one regards himself as a hero.
 Until one day the bow is fully open,
 But that is the moment when all is lost.
 (Fu 2002, p. 2)

Memorising *Fuzi* was the start of vocal training, the more *Fuzi* one could remember, the more competent one's improvisation skill would be by placing different stanzas with different sets of music. The famous example was when one of the male *Yueju* singers was tested by the head of his village: the singer was asked to sing, using the theme of the water pipe in the hands of the head of the village; he allegedly sang from early morning to lunchtime, with no intention of stopping (Gao 1991, p. 15).

Because nearly all members of the all-female *Yueju* troupe were illiterate – as were most male teachers – vocal training was carried out from male teacher to female students directly: a male teacher would sing to a group of female students each line of an established all-male *Yueju* song and the female students would repeat and memorise the words and the tunes until they fully internalised them.

(3) *Physical training and performativity*

In Chinese history, opera singers formed the lowest group within society, along with prostitutes and beggars; throughout history, very few intellectuals contributed to this art form (Liu 2006, p. 19). This social phenomenon further consolidates Chinese opera as an oral art and places performers at the centre of creativity; this is what Scott (1983, p. 67) describes as the Actor's Theatre, in comparison to the Western Director's Theatre: '[in the Actor's Theatre] a typical play script is little more than a skeletal indicator ... the actors with their instinctive command of form and content required no script to set a live performance in action'. This 'instinctive command' comes from long and merciless training, which was often not just an artistic creative desire, or lust for economic success, but the sheer need for survival.

When physical training was introduced into this first all-female *Yueju* troupe, it was also the first time that physical training appeared in *Yueju*. As 'manager Wang, who had some familiarity with the opera market in Shanghai, believed that in order to appeal to the Shanghai audience, it was not enough for *Yueju* to have only singing'; therefore a *Jingju* martial male performer was hired to provide the female students with basic physical training (Gao 1991, p. 45). Similar to oral training, physical training is again passed down directly from teacher to student. From their male teachers, the first all-female *Yueju* students had four aspects of training: eyes, body, hand movements and feet movements (Lu and Gao 1997, p. 169).

To train the eyes, the teacher would hold burning incense and move it around in front of the student's eyes; the latter must follow the movement of the stick with only the eye balls, without turning and moving the head or any other part of the body. This training ensured the actor had a pair of sparkling eyes with which to communicate and capture the hearts of the audience throughout the performance.

The other training was to reinforce conventional 'idealised' gender roles for the Chinese socio-psychological criteria of 'beauty': the dominant masculine male and the submissive feminine female. Taking the standing position as an example, both the male and female roles start from exactly the same initial position: body straight, facing the side of the theatre, without moving the hips, the waist is turned to bring the upper torso around to face the audience in the middle of the theatre. Then, to 'act a man' the male role stands with feet in a 'T' shape and straightens the back; each hand is placed by the side, opening the arms into a rounded shape; the shoulder blades are 'opened' to show the chest whilst looking straight ahead. To 'act a woman', on the other hand, the female role places the right leg, with foot tiptoed, behind the left leg, resting the weight on the left leg; hands are put together with finger tips lightly touching, placed to one side; the shoulder blades are 'closed', the chin is lowered and the eyes are averted downwards before looking up at the audience. This standing position is corrected by the teacher meticulously and practised by the student repeatedly until it is fully internalised and the assigned gender role can be performed naturally.

Later *Yueju* training takes at least three years for students to synchronise the movements fully. The first all-female *Yueju* performers 'graduated' after receiving only three months' training from the male teachers, as Wang was eager to make commercial gain through this first all-female *Yueju* troupe in Shanghai.

Austin (1962) and Bourdieu (2001) pointed out that masculine domination often placed emphasis on the female body. In the late 1920s, Shanghai had dozens of well-established all-female opera forms to accommodate the rising male appetite for consuming new female public images (Gao 1991, p. 41). The first all-female *Yueju* troupe comprised rural girls aged 9–12, having had only a few months village opera training, based artistically on direct imitation of their male teacher; they had neither high artistic skill nor sexual connotation to attract the Shanghai audience (Ying 2002, p. 57). This troupe lasted for only a few weeks before leaving Shanghai to tour around Zhejiang; and it gradually dispersed. Despite its failure, Wang set the model for the all-female *Yueju* troupe; it was after him that many all-female Zhejiang *Yueju* troupes were formed and entered Shanghai.

Subjective Yueju, femininity and love

Early all-female *Yueju* had strong sexual content, as production scripts and performances were designed by the original male performers to entertain a male audience. For example, *Widow Ma's Inn* was a popular early *Yueju*, in which there is a 'Three Grabs' scene, when a male customer tried to 'find' Widow Ma in darkness. As the actor moved around on stage, the lyrics were sung: 'The first grab is on your breasts, the second grab is between your legs, and with the third grab I got hold of you' (Ding 2001, p. 29). These songs were not only offensive to the young female singers, but also insulting to the increasing number of young females in the audience (Yuan 2002, p. 38). By the early twentieth century, there were 52 cotton mills employing 33,000 female workers and the majority of the workers were from Zhejiang (Honig 1986, p. 250). It was the aspiration of both the young performers and the fast

rising young female working class audience to seek a specific female *Yueju* style to represent their own identity.

It was not until the late 1930s that all-female *Yueju* had a major artistic surge. During the Japanese War (1938–45), many elite Zhejiang families came to Shanghai as refugees; all-female *Yueju* was not only a nostalgic comfort for the families but was also viewed as a safe entertainment environment for the female members of the elite families to enter. It was a common practice for young female *Yueju* performer to be ‘adopted’ by a ‘mother’. These elite female patrons provided the female performers with generous financial and political support. It was under this unique female clan patronage system that all-female *Yueju* flourished.

Actor’s Theatre allowed the female performers to take charge of artistic development. Many of them hired a modern artistic team, including director, script writer and musicians, to tailor new productions for them and to develop their individual artistic styles (Gao 1991, p. 120). Improvisation tradition meant the performers were constantly able to create and renew *Yueju* artistic style. Yuan Xuefen, a veteran *Yueju* performer, remembered how she used to go around many other opera performances and watch western films in between her own appearances, and then incorporated the learned music, singing and movements, as well as realistic settings, into her next performance (Yuan 2002, p. 90). Under constant artistic reform, a subjective all-female *Yueju* emerged.

This subjective *Yueju* places conventional submissive feminine women at the centre of the stage, telling stories of their suffering and their desire for love and freedom (Gao 1991, p. 131). *XiaoSheng*, the male impersonator, developed into an idealised gentleman figure, feminine rather than masculine in personality; he would cherish and offer eternal love to his beloved, which was a new concept only developed in early twentieth century China. *Yueju*’s popularity soared; in 1942, *Shen Bao* (*Shanghai News*) described all-female *Yueju* as being ‘so popular, it seems to have overtaken other forms of entertainment, and has become the leader of all operas’ (quoted in Ying 2002, p. 8). Before the eve of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949, all-female *Yueju* had become the unique language of communication between women, the repressed gender: it gave them a voice in modern China.



Figure 1 Famous *Yueju* performer Ying Guifang and her stage partner Zhu Shuizhao in 1940s Shanghai (Ma 2010, p. 111).

Institutionalised reform of all-female Yueju, 1950–78

Yueju masculinity

Yueju's pre-1949 popularity amongst the female population was viewed by the Party as a valuable tool to propagate new party ideology, in order to 'tap women, a vast reservoir of power, to construct a great socialist society' (quoted in Cohen 1986, p. 294). In 1950, directly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Shanghai *Yueju* Company was founded¹ by the Party-State; and all other *Yueju* companies had to register with the regional governments. *Yueju* was institutionalised.

Mao's famous statement on women's emancipation was: 'do not love feminine dress but army uniform', conveying that love was to be reserved for the Party rather than individual bourgeois indulgence; masculinity rather than femininity was hailed for women's new equality. In 1952 Premier Zhou Enlai pointed out that: 'in *Yueju*, female performers are limited to playing masculine, revolutionary roles ... *Yueju* must reform' (quoted in Ying 2002, p. 295). It was against this background that *Yueju* began artistic reform, emphasising masculinity.

1. On 12 April 1950 the Eastern China *Yueju* Experimental Company was established, under the Eastern China Military Culture Bureau. On 23 March 1955, the company was expanded, reorganised and renamed Shanghai *Yueju* Company.

(1) Pre-selection on youth and 'beauty'

In 1954 the first state *Yueju* training school recruited 40 young male students for the first Acting Diploma course. In 1959, the first group of male *Yueju* students graduated; productions with revolutionary themes, with a mix of male and female performers, were staged. According to the memories of many SYC staff, male *Yueju* performers were 'booed by the (female) audience when they walked on stage' and the audiences chanted 'we want female *XiaoSheng!*' throughout the performances.

These new productions intended to give women, the repressed gender, new equality and legitimacy by providing new masculine 'beauty' to *Yueju*. However, as we have seen in the first section of this paper, the conventional feminine beauty in Chinese opera, the 'idealised' gender roles, had always kept the Chinese socio-psychological criteria. The pre-1949 all-female *Yueju* subjective identity was based on femininity, within the zone of comfort and understanding of the conventional women's psychological realm to voice their innermost desires for love and freedom. This top-down arbitrary change took away not only femininity, but the subjective voice and identity with which the female audience could associate and also their ways of expressing themselves. The masculine 'beauty' has remained a challenge for the female *Yueju* audiences to be associated with until this day.

(2) Vocal training and performativity

By the late 1940s, *Yueju* singing had established the reputation of a gentle and natural vocal voice, with half a dozen established styles. The most popular style was the male impersonator Yin (Guifang) style, identified through slow and rhythmic feminine singing portraying a gentle scholar's love. However, Yin's style was inconsistent with the Party's view of women's masculine equality; she was not recruited into the SYC and was 'banished' to southern

Fujian in the late 1950s. The style favoured by the Party was the masculine voice quality of the male impersonator Fan Ruijuan.

Fan is one of the few *Yueju* performers who did not use her natural voice, but a skilled presentation of a 'thick' male voice, which involved 'storing' the voice in the mouth before projecting it. For example, to sing this line: 'Mother brought a letter back from YingTai' from *Love of the Butterfly*, the natural pronunciation would be: 'mu qin dai hui ying tai xin'; Fan style makes it: 'mu(o) qin(g) d(u)ai hu(e)i ying(ng) tai(ei) xin(ng)', which gives the sentence a stronger, nasal, back of the throat sound; projecting the recognised masculine vocal qualities of 'deep' and 'thick'. Premier Zhou Enlai selected *Love of the Butterfly* (1951), with Fan starring in the production, to show to a number of Western delegates including Charlie Chaplin. After the show, Zhou proudly presented Fan Ruijuan to the guests, who were indeed amazed to discover that the male role, Liang Shanbo in the play, was performed by Fan, a 26 year old male impersonator (Ying 2002, p. 311). Masculinity, rather than femininity, became the new favoured *Yueju* vocal form.

However, Fan is one of the very rare examples of a successful skilled female singing style. Large numbers of skilled masculine singing styles were created for male and female singers but none became popular. In *Yueju Singing Research* (1960) composer Guan recorded the first six *Yueju* singing styles, rated according to the number of followers of each style. They included three female roles: Yuan (Xuefen), Fu (Quanxiang) and Qi (Yaxian), and three male roles: Fan (Ruijuan), Xu (Yulan) and Lu (Jinhua); all were female performers. The battle to reform *Yueju* vocal quality from femininity to masculinity continues.

(3) *Physical training and performativity*

In 1950, traditional *KunQu* and *Jingju* physical training were further introduced into *Yueju*, together with a full set of roles including; male (shen), female (dan), painted face (jing) and jester (chou), so that '*Yueju* could now perform traditional all-female love themes as well as the new martial fighting and political themed productions' (Lu and Gao 1997, p. 322). We have discussed how different standing poses were designed to suit the conventional Chinese socio-psychological criteria of gender preference; we will now look at how walking is practised to reinforce the idealised masculine male role and submissive female role.

It is well known that in the early twentieth century male Beijing opera actors training for female roles were made to wear small wooden blocks representing the traditional 'bound feet' of high class women, to give the perfect traditional female aesthetic beauty: submissive and demure. In *Yueju*, female walking involves the same highly controlled training and performativity to achieve this aesthetic standard. The female role first presents a submissive standing pose. As discussed before, knees are then slightly bent and a piece of paper is placed between them; the student would then walk by gently lifting the tip of the foot and presenting it forward, the walking speed will increase gradually without the student changing body posture and, most importantly, without dropping the paper. When the posture is finally drilled into the student, she may take away the paper and progress to a run.

This stereotype extends to *Yueju* male gender construction, from footwear to walking style. The male role wears high plaster padded shoes and the thickness of the sole often reflects the trained performer's skills and levels in

balancing and controlling her movements. Before the male role makes any move, again a masculine pose is adopted as described before; to make movement, the actor places emphasis on the ankle whereby the foot is lifted and a small inward circular movement made in order to show the audience the thickness of the sole, before the foot is stretched out and placed a step forward. The speed of the walk gradually increases until, with slightly bent knees and tightened thighs and ankles, the performer could easily run on stage in these shoes. Whilst the female walking pose presents 'submissiveness' and 'closeness', the male walking conveys 'grandness' and 'openness'.

In a highly contradictory fashion, although these traditional trained and constructed gender roles were further introduced into *Yueju*, they were at the same time perceived as repressive and regressive and therefore denounced. Realistic movements, imitating the modern working class, often dominate new *Yueju* productions. The struggle for modern Chinese women to gain new equality continues.

Objective *Yueju*, from oral to written

The key change, turning subjective *Yueju* to objective *Yueju*, was the compulsory written music score and opera script, introduced for artistic improvement, but more so for ideological censorship. As nearly all female *Yueju* performers were illiterate, the creative power inevitably transferred to a group of mostly male directors, script writers and composers who were assigned to the SYC to 'help' *Yueju* development. These male creators, in many ways, improved the quality of *Yueju* overall. However, they were more often than not unfamiliar with the unique *Yueju* genre, linguistically and musically; they were learners of *Yueju*, compared to the *Yueju* performers who had internalised knowledge through early years of vocal and physical



Figure 2 Premier Zhou Enlai with *Yueju* performers in army uniform in 1950s China (Lu and Gao 1997).

training. This new order of creation became what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann referred to as the conflict that may arise between experts and practitioners: 'What is likely to be particularly galling is "the experts" claiming to know the ultimate significance of the practitioners' activity better than the practitioners themselves' (quoted in Scott 1983, p. 94). Yet this institutionalised reform meant there was little space for negotiation between the male creator, the female performers and the female audiences. This change finally removed *Yueju* as the subjective art of the women themselves.

What came next was the most controversial development of Shanghai *Yueju*. On the one hand, *Yueju* declined in popularity and, according to the memory of the SYC senior staff, by the early 1960s throughout each performance the theatre echoed with the noise of chair flipping, as the audience walked out of the theatre one by one. On the other hand, however, under the direct sponsorship of the Party-State, many Shanghai *Yueju* companies were dispatched to provinces across China to 'support local culture' and by the beginning of the 1960s *Yueju* became the second most prominent operatic form, after *Jingju*. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) the SYC was closed down, with intermittent re-openings for politically themed productions with increasingly declining popularity (Ying 2002, p. 336). By the end of the 1970s, the popularity of Shanghai *Yueju* had declined to its lowest point historically.

Commercialisation of *Yueju* in the post-Mao era

Return to private space

From 1978 China launched economic reform. Under rapid urbanisation the expansion of the urban population led to increasing pressure on urban employment (Gold 1985). To manage this social change, male sociologists began to argue that women should accept their 'natural' differences, urging women to return home and to leave the public space for males to toil and compete. This argument continued, with the high point coming on 8 March 2001, when National Congress member Wang Xiancai in the National Congress meeting (the highest national official meeting in China) called for 'women to return home ... to release labour pressure and enterprise burdens; women returning home is a sign of social advancement and economic development' (Liu, 2001: 13). It was with another swift stroke of the pen by the male elites, with equally sound arguments and justifications, that Chinese women's social position was again changed.

From the 1980s corporations only generally used female workers during their 'golden age' from their teens to their twenties, and by the end of the 1990s state company unemployment increased to 11 million, the majority of whom were women (H. Li 2002). Western scholars observed that in the post-Mao era, 'glamorous film and television actresses, not women revolutionaries, currently seem to be the most popular female role models' (Hooper 1984, p. 329). Young men increasingly expressed agreement with the Confucian adage 'a woman without talent is virtuous' and regarded traditional feminine virtues of gentleness and devotion as measures of female quality (*Beijing Review*, No. 37, 1983, pp. 26–27). Femininity, which Mao's era

tried to eliminate with an iron fist, swiftly returned, and became a valuable asset for women seeking to gain equality and legitimacy.

Objective YueJu through revived femininity

The Party-State has been calling for SYC market reform since the 1980s, with commercial performance directly linked to its existence. The SYC had long struggled with this reform – until the production of the Yue Girl Competition.

In 2006 Xu Peilin, a highly commercially minded self-employed businessman, proposed a deal with the SYC: to co-produce a new television show, namely the Yue Girl Competition. The popularity of this show was mentioned at the beginning of this paper and it is this show that revived not only the SYC, but *YueJu* as a whole, nationally. However, the rise in popularity was not reconnecting with the *YueJu* audience through artistic innovation and development, but rather by re-presenting *YueJu* through objectified youth and feminine beauty.

(1) Gender pre-selection on youth and beauty

In 1984, with the support of the Shanghai Municipal Government, the Shanghai Opera School began to hold *YueJu* classes, recruiting students between 14 and 16 years of age, both male and female, with the training running for four years² (Lu and Gao 1997, p. 98). By 2006, the SYC had large numbers of well-established male as well as female *YueJu* performers, with full ranges of trained roles; the artistically mature age was around 40.

However, the criteria for contestants to enter this Yue Girl contest are: a) professional *YueJu* performers specialising in the young female role (*dan*) and young male role (*sheng*)³ only; b) females aged between 16 and 35 years only. These pre-selected criteria ensure not *YueJu* artistic quality, but that the contestants have the most desirable feminine values in the post-Mao era: youth and conventional feminine beauty.

(2) Vocal training and performativity

In 1981, based on the six popular singing styles of the 1960s, the SYC published a further seven most popular singing schools, making a total of 13. The seven new schools were: young female roles: Wang (Wenjuan), Lü (Ruiying), Jin (Caifeng) and Zhang (Yunxia); and young male roles: Yin (Guifang), Bi (Chunfang) and Zhang (Guifeng), in which Zhang (Guifeng) is the only older male role (Lu and Gao 1997, p. 225).

Instead of encouraging the display of individual singing style, in the Yue Girl Competition the pre-selected young female was strictly based on their imitation of the established schools. Each female contestant must select singing clips of 8 minutes from the established productions of the 13 schools only. Under social pressure to present the 'beautiful' feminine voice, the contestants uniformly sing in the more desirable soft, natural female voice, with limited aesthetic challenge to conventional practices of gender and vocal sound. The quality of *YueJu* in this contest is widely regarded as 'gentle and sweet', even the once most masculine Fan style.

2. The classes originally ran for three years and from 1994 it was extended to four years.

3. Older male and female roles were introduced into this programme after the initial success of this show.

(3) *Physical training and performativity*

As Bourdieu (2001, p. 26) points out: 'femininity is imposed for the most part through an unremitting discipline that concerns every part of the body and is continuously recalled through the constraints of clothing or hairstyle'. Wu Zhaofen, the famous *Yueju* script writer regards *Yueju*'s traditional costume, long sleeves, hairstyles and make-up as key to *Yueju* being recognised as possessing the most conventional aesthetic feminine quality, and hence gaining soaring popularity in today's China, whilst other operatic forms are generally in decline (private interview, 8 July 2008).

This conventional feminine quality requires further training and performativity. For example, 'orchid fingers' are the symbol of Chinese opera. Before one can pose with different styles of 'orchid fingers', one must first 'shape' them. The student places her hands in hot water to soften them; the fingers are then straightened and bent backwards, as far away from the palm as possible, and held in this position for as long as possible. This exercise is repeated often until when the fingers point outwards they are naturally bent, to resemble the aesthetic appearance of the orchid leaf. Thereafter various different poses can be added. 'Orchid fingers' are not only an important symbol of aesthetic beauty; they function in opera performances to present the ideal feminine pose. The fingers hold up long sleeves, the traditional symbol of high class status for women. When the high class woman needs to manoeuvre the long sleeves, the performer uses 'orchid fingers' to hold the sleeves and to control the movement of the sleeves through their wrists. To lift up the sleeves; to throw away the sleeves; to hold them in a bundle and circle them in the air, whilst placing the backs of both hands together to express complex feelings; all of these motions require the actor to manoeuvre through the 'orchid fingers' and the wrists, whilst keeping other parts of the body in line with what we discussed above, either standing, walking or running.

The link between femininity and performativity could also be found in make-up. Unlike other Chinese operatic forms, *Yueju* male roles very rarely wear facial hair on a wired hook; instead, light shading is gently painted on the side of the face to give the 'masculine' effect. Similarly, instead of painting eyes as large and masculine, *Yueju* male roles are required to have the eyes lifted to give the feminine 'phoenix eye' effect. This is done by wrapping a strip of damp cloth around the edge of the performer's hair whilst gently lifting up the temple areas. When this strip of wet cloth is dried, the tip of each eye is tightened and lifted. Through this make-up, rather than transforming femininity entirely into masculinity, the male role in *Yueju* has a feminine quality reinforced.

The requirement of contestants in the Yue Girl Competition to display the 'professional young female and male roles' is therefore crucial, as latecomers and those with less professional training will not achieve the naturalisation of all the trained gender qualities ranging from movement to the minute details concerning every part of the body. This highly trained and performed *Yueju* femininity, based on the demure and the submissive, suited the conventional Chinese socio-psychological criteria for beauty, which have prevailed in China throughout the three epochs and social movements mentioned above. It is this objective femininity, rather than the subjective artistic development reflecting the innermost desires of performers and audience, which has once



Figure 3 Yue Girl Competition in twenty-first century China (You and Qin 2006, pp. 128, 130).

again allowed the rising popularity and legitimacy of the all-female Shanghai Yueju in post-Mao China.

Conclusion

In 2007, British Artistic Director Michael Walling, visiting the SYC, made the following observation about the organisation: 'a house of male leaders to lead a house of female actors' (private interview, 9 August 2007). In addition to the all-male senior administrators, the Yue Girl Competition was proposed by a male business entrepreneur Xu Peilin, and agreed to by the SYC, leaving female actors little say in the style and form of the programme. This reminds us somewhat of the formation of the first all-female Yueju troupe at the beginning of the twentieth century, when all-female Yueju were produced and managed by males as an objective art to cater for the male audience; only now in the post-Mao era it has become fully institutionalised.

Nearly one century after all-female Yueju's establishment, to hear male scholars such as Luo Huaizhen hail Yueju's popularity and legitimacy with the concept of *Yin* only further reveals the deeply embedded gender repression in Chinese society. For centuries, Chinese women were oppressed by neo-Confucian ideals, based on *Yin–Yang* doctrine. Since *Yin* should always correlate to *Yang* and could never develop itself independently, women should always be subject to their men. The justification of women's inferiority in this theory has long been regarded as the rationale for women's oppression throughout Chinese history (Yuan 2005, p. 9).

In contrast to the male administrators, businessmen and scholars' views, the Yue Girl Competition, as with many contemporary new Yueju productions, is perceived by veteran female Yueju audiences, many of whom grew up with Yueju in 1940s Shanghai, as: 'sweet but meaningless (*mei yisi*)'. This word 'meaningless' reveals the deeply unsatisfying social and cultural identity that Yueju is currently offering to the female audience. In the history of all-female Yueju development, this art form only briefly

obtained its subjective identity, through reform led by elite female patronage and female artists. Through the authentic voice, the most socially, politically and culturally repressed female group communicated and expressed their innermost dreams. This subjective voice diminished quickly and in the past half a century we see *Yueju* performers and audiences struggle to have their voice reinstated under the increasingly powerful institutionalised, commercialised, constructed regimes operated and controlled mainly by men.

This paper presents the development of training and performativity in Shanghai all-female *Yueju*, through which it reveals the deeply imbedded gender repression in a highly patriarchal Chinese society and the continuing struggle for women to gain a subjective voice in contemporary China.

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