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Staging Femininity: Yue Opera's Aesthetic Reinvention in Xie Jin's *Two Stage Sisters*

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Abstract

Opera functions not merely as a performative art but as a critical site where gender is constructed, contested, and reimagined through embodied practice. Among China's diverse operatic traditions, Yue Opera (Shaoxing Opera), as represented in Xie Jin's Two Stage Sisters (1964), distinguishes itself through its radical reconfiguration of theatrical femininity. Unlike Peking Opera, in which male 'dan' actors historically dictated the artistic ideal of womanhood, Yue Opera positioned female performers at the centre of artistic production, enabling them to redefine gendered performance on their own terms. Despite extensive scholarship on Yue Opera's aesthetic innovations, its ideological function in subverting entrenched gender hierarchies and reshaping performative agency remains underexplored. This study examines how Two Stage Sisters foregrounds the transformative role of Yue Opera's female performers, arguing that their artistic evolution was not merely an aesthetic shift but a reconstitution of the performative space itself, wherein women became both the subjects and architects of their representation. Employing a qualitative approach, this paper integrates Judith Butler's Feminist Performance Theory, which asserts that gender is a performative construct shaped by repeated cultural enactments, to analyze how early Yue Opera performers redefined femininity on stage. Through a close reading of Two Stage Sisters, the study interrogates the interplay between gendered performance and socio-political change, contextualizing the protagonists Zhu Chunhua and Yuehong within the ideological landscape of the 'New China' era. The findings reveal that the film captures not only the artistic reinvention of Yue Opera's pioneering female performers but also the broader socio-political struggles that accompanied their ascent. By positioning these performers as active agents in redefining the ideological and aesthetic parameters of their craft, this study highlights their enduring legacy in shaping operatic femininity and contributes to broader discourse on gender, performance, and cultural agency in Chinese theater.

Keywords: Chinese theatre, feminist performance, operatic femininity, Two Stage Sisters, Yue Opera

Introduction:

Chinese opera has long served as a performative space where cultural values, historical narratives, and social hierarchies are encoded and enacted. Among its various forms, Peking

Opera has traditionally dominated the landscape, establishing itself as the highest artistic expression of classical Chinese theatre. Within this tradition, the representation of femininity was historically dictated by male 'dan' actors, who meticulously embodied and performed the idealized attributes of womanhood. Through stylized movement, voice modulation, and elaborate costuming, these male performers constructed a theatrical femininity that was both aesthetically refined and ideologically constrained, reinforcing Confucian notions of gender roles. However, the emergence of Yue Opera (Shaoxing Opera) in the early 20th century marked a radical departure from this model. Originating as a regional theatrical form performed exclusively by women, Yue Opera redefined the relationship between gender and performance, not only challenging the male-dominated structures of Peking Opera but also allowing female performers to craft their own narratives of artistic and social identity. The significance of Yue Opera extends beyond its aesthetic innovations; it represents a crucial intervention in the politics of gendered performance. Unlike Peking Opera, which relied on male interpretations of femininity, Yue Opera positioned women as active agents in theatrical production, granting them unprecedented authority over their representation. This transformation was not merely artistic but ideological, reshaping the cultural space in which femininity was performed and perceived. The transition from male-dominated to female-led performance traditions signaled a broader shift in gender dynamics within Chinese theatre, yet its deeper implications for feminist performance studies remain under examined. While existing scholarship has explored Yue Opera's stylistic and musical evolution, less attention has been paid to its ideological function as a site of gender negotiation and resistance.

Two Stage Sisters uses the theatrical world of Shaoxing as a metaphor for political and social change. (Marchetti 1989). Xie Jin's 1964 film *Two Stage Sisters* offers a rare cinematic representation of this transformation, capturing the artistic and socio-political struggles of Yue Opera's pioneering female performers. Through the trajectories of its protagonists, Zhu Chunhua and Yuehong, the film presents a nuanced exploration of how female performers navigated the intersecting forces of tradition, artistic agency, and political change in mid-20th-century China. While *Two Stage Sisters* has been analyzed within the context of socialist realism and Chinese revolutionary cinema, its role in foregrounding Yue Opera as a space of gendered resistance remains critically underexplored. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by examining how *Two Stage Sisters* not only documents but also actively participates in the ideological reconfiguration of operatic femininity. By employing Judith Butler's Feminist Performance Theory, which posits that gender is not an innate identity but a performative construct reinforced through repeated cultural enactments, this study investigates how *Two Stage Sisters* frames Yue Opera as a medium through which female performers subvert traditional gender hierarchies. The film's depiction of Yue Opera's transformation reveals that its female performers were not merely adapting to historical change but were actively redefining the artistic and ideological boundaries of their craft. This study positions *Two Stage Sisters* as a critical text in feminist performance discourse, illustrating how Yue Opera functioned as both a site of artistic reinvention and a subversive challenge to established gender norms in Chinese theater.

Theatrical Femininity in Chinese Opera: Peking Opera vs. Yue Opera:

Chinese opera has historically functioned as both a cultural artifact and a performative space where gender is constructed through stylized embodiment. Among its various forms, Peking Opera has long dominated as the most prestigious and internationally recognized form of Chinese theater. Its aesthetic conventions are deeply tied to Confucian gender ideology, particularly in its reliance on male 'dan' actors to portray female roles. The tradition of male performers enacting femininity can be traced back to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties when social restrictions prevented women from performing on stage (Goldstein, 2007). Peking Opera's 'dan' actors underwent rigorous training to perfect an idealized, highly codified version of femininity, emphasizing grace, submissiveness, and controlled expressivity. Through meticulous bodily discipline, vocal modulation, and stylized movement, these male performers did not merely represent women, they created an aestheticized and often static model of womanhood that reinforced Confucian patriarchal values (Li, 2010). In contrast, Yue Opera (Shaoxing Opera), which originated in Zhejiang province in the early 20th century, introduced a radical departure from this tradition. Unlike Peking Opera, which remained rigid in its gender conventions, Yue Opera quickly gained popularity for its all-female troupes, allowing women to perform both male and female roles (Jiang, 2012). This shift not only disrupted the dominance of male 'dan' actors but also redefined how femininity was performed and perceived on stage. Female performers in Yue Opera brought a different sensibility to gender representation, imbuing their performances with lived experience rather than inherited convention. Consequently, Yue Opera's aesthetic, which emphasized lyrical melodies and emotionally expressive acting, allowed for a more fluid and dynamic exploration of female subjectivity (Hu, 2015). The transition from male-led to female-led performance traditions in Chinese opera was not merely an artistic evolution but an ideological transformation. Yue Opera, by cantering female performers, offered a counterpoint to the rigid, patriarchally defined femininity of Peking Opera. As scholars have noted, the presence of women in Yue Opera "allowed for a more nuanced and self-authored representation of gender, one that could both align with and challenge dominant cultural narratives" (Chow, 2018, p. 134). However, despite this fundamental shift, Yue Opera's significance as a site of gender resistance has remained critically underexplored, particularly in cinematic representations.

Yue Opera and Feminist Performance Theory: A Theoretical Framework:

The intersection of gender and performance in Yue Opera can be effectively examined through the lens of Judith Butler's Feminist Performance Theory, which argues that gender is not an inherent identity but a performative act shaped by repeated cultural practices (Butler, 1990). Butler's theory challenges the notion of stable gender identities, instead proposing that gender is constructed through repetitive performance. Examination of the "drama-within-drama" device in Two Stage Sisters, in which several excerpted opera segments are inserted into the film's narrative, reveals that it serves both political and humanistic purpose. (Sun 2023). In the context of Yue Opera, this framework provides a valuable perspective for understanding

how female performers in *Two Stage Sisters* navigate, negotiate, and ultimately redefine femininity through theatrical embodiment. Yue Opera's rejection of male 'dan' actors disrupts what Butler (1993) describes as the "heteronormative matrix," wherein gender roles are continuously reinforced through cultural repetition (p. 15). By allowing women to play both male and female roles, Yue Opera performers demonstrate the fluidity of gendered expression, subverting the rigid binary imposed by traditional Chinese opera. In *Two Stage Sisters*, Zhu Chunhua's transformation from an innocent rural girl to an empowered actress reflects this performative process, as her journey within the opera world mirrors broader shifts in gender ideology. The film presents Yue Opera as not only an artistic medium but also a space where femininity is actively redefined. Moreover, Yue Opera's emphasis on emotional realism and personal expressivity aligns with what Butler (2004) describes as the "disruption of hegemonic gender scripts through embodied resistance" (p. 54). Unlike the highly stylized movements of Peking Opera, Yue Opera allows for more naturalistic expressions of emotion, granting female performers a level of agency not afforded to them in other operatic traditions. This agency is evident in *Two Stage Sisters*, where the protagonists' performances on stage blur the boundaries between theatrical representation and lived experience, illustrating how gender is continuously constructed and contested through performance.

Cinematic Representation in *Two Stage Sisters*: Aesthetic and Ideological Transformation:

"The 1965 film *Two Stage Sisters* (Wu tai jiemei, dir. Xie Jin) was made in China when change was in the air that particularly affected urban intellectuals such as Xie Jin in Shanghai. The storm that followed was the Cultural Revolution, which began a year after the film was completed. The climate was already so inhospitable in 1965 that the film would never be formally released. Instead, it was screened to select audiences before being relegated to the shelves during the subsequent chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution, and Xie Jin was denounced in front of thousands of people (Berry 2005: 34). Stage Sisters remains a remarkable historical document to this day because it encapsulates a compelling effort to satisfy the contradictory requirements of state propaganda, classical Hollywood narrative continuity, and Soviet socialist realism." (Wicks 2009)

Xie Jin's *Two Stage Sisters* serves as a critical cinematic text that not only documents but actively participates in the ideological transformation of Yue Opera. Set against the backdrop of political upheaval in 20th-century China, the film follows the lives of Zhu Chunhua and Yuehong, two Yue Opera performers whose careers and personal trajectories embody the shifting dynamics of gender, artistry, and social change. The film's narrative structure, visual composition, and character development collectively underscore the evolving role of female performers in redefining operatic femininity. One of the film's most significant interventions lies in its visual depiction of Yue Opera as a space of empowerment. Xie Jin's cinematography frequently frames Zhu Chunhua in moments of artistic and emotional assertion, emphasizing her gradual transformation from an apprentice to a self-possessed artist. The use of close-up shots during her performances highlights the intensity of her expressions,

reinforcing the idea that her stage presence extends beyond mere performance; it becomes a site of ideological negotiation (Berry, 2005). This contrasts sharply with the film's earlier sequences, where Yuehong, under the control of exploitative male figures, appears visually confined within narrow, dimly lit spaces, symbolizing the restrictions imposed upon female performers in traditional operatic settings. The ideological stakes of the film are further heightened by its engagement with socialist realist aesthetics, which seek to align individual narratives with broader social progress (Clark, 2008). While *Two Stage Sisters* is often discussed in terms of its alignment with Maoist ideals, its depiction of female agency within Yue Opera suggests a more complex negotiation between state ideology and gender politics. The film does not simply present female performers as passive recipients of political change; rather, it portrays them as active participants in reshaping the operatic landscape. Through its depiction of Yue Opera's female performers as both artists and cultural innovators, *Two Stage Sisters* challenges conventional narratives of gendered performance, positioning Yue Opera as a transformative medium that extends beyond theatrical spectacle into the realm of socio-political discourse.

Conclusion:

The transformation of Yue Opera, as depicted in *Two Stage Sisters*, underscores the intersection of gender, performance, and socio-political change within Chinese theatre. Unlike Peking Opera, which historically relied on male 'dan' actors to construct femininity, Yue Opera emerged as a radical space where female performers redefined their artistic and ideological agency. By positioning women at the centre of both performance and production, Yue Opera not only challenged traditional gender hierarchies but also offered a dynamic reimagining of theatrical femininity. Xie Jin's *Two Stage Sisters* serves as a pivotal cinematic text that both documents and participates in this transformation. Through the trajectories of Zhu Chunhua and Yuehong, the film illustrates how female performers negotiated artistic autonomy within shifting socio-political landscapes. The film's visual language, narrative structure, and engagement with socialist realism highlight the evolving role of women in opera, moving beyond conventional portrayals of passive femininity to present them as active agents of cultural reinvention. This study, through the lens of Judith Butler's Feminist Performance Theory, has demonstrated that Yue Opera's significance extends beyond its aesthetic innovations, it functions as a site of performative resistance, where gender is continuously constructed, challenged, and redefined. By situating Yue Opera within broader feminist performance discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional art forms serve as mediums for negotiating gender identity. The findings suggest that operatic performance is not merely an artistic endeavor but a space where cultural memory, ideological shifts, and gendered power structures intersect. Future scholarship could further explore the role of Yue Opera in contemporary feminist movements, examining how its legacy continues to influence gender representation in Chinese theatre and cinema. Ultimately, *Two Stage Sisters* affirms that operatic femininity is not a static construct but a dynamic, evolving discourse, one that remains central to the cultural and ideological fabric of Chinese performance traditions.

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