# *Women Playing Men*

YUE OPERA AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SHANGHAI

*Jin Jiang*

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*Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*

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University of Washington Press
*Seattle and London*

The publication of *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* was generously supported by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange and by the Donald R. Ellegood International Publications Endowment.


Printed in United States of America
Designed by Veronica Seyd
14 13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1



University of Washington Press
PO Box 50096, Seattle, WA 98145
www.washington.edu/uwpress

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Jiang, Jin.
Women playing men : Yue opera and social change in twentieth-century Shanghai / Jin Jiang.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-295-98843-6 (hbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-295-98844-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Theater—China—Shaoxing—History and criticism. 2. Folk drama, Chinese—China—Shaoxing—History and criticism. 3. Women in opera. 4. Popular culture—China—Shanghai. I. Title. II. Title: Yue opera and social change in twentieth-century Shanghai.
PN2876.S53J53 2008
792.0951'132—dc22 2008024174

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984.

Dedicated to the memory of my dear mother

PANG WENRUI (1920–2002)

and to my father

JIANG PEINAN

# Contents

# Preface

This book attempts to seize a moment in the history of Chinese women, of Shanghai, and of China's nascent modernity before it is lost. It presents a social and cultural history of the unique phenomenon of an all-female theater, "women's Yue opera" (*nüzi Yueju* [lit., "women's Zhejiang opera"]), or simply "Yue opera" (Yueju), in the context of the rise of an urban popular culture in modern Shanghai. Women's Yue opera, which originated in the Zhejiang countryside, became a popular form of theater, specializing in love dramas, between the 1930s and 1960s in the metropolis of Shanghai. Banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), it was revived immediately after, only to become a theater enjoyed by a small number of fans and art professionals in more recent decades. If each era has its own popular culture, and if China's reform era has adopted a globalized popular culture of rock and roll and *gongfu* movies, then women's opera represents a popular-culture phenomenon of a past era. Although the opera has retained its artistic identity and will continue to be performed into the conceivable future, the social, political, and cultural significance it bore in previous periods is rapidly being replaced by a new set of contemporary meanings. The actresses and audiences who made Yue opera a popular phenomenon were aging as I began my research in the mid-1990s, and many have since passed away. It is urgent to preserve the voices of the women of Yue opera, speaking directly about their relationship with the opera and what the opera has meant to them. Moreover, while some earlier performances have been preserved on audio- and videotapes, the historical context and human relationships that shaped these productions must be rescued, or they will be lost.

I arrived on the scene in time to carry out some of the rescue work, conducting the first round of interviews in 1995–96 and following up with more interviews and conversations. The most important of these were interviews with actresses in the first and second generations of Yue opera, who personified the opera's success. Born during the 1920s into rural and peasant families in the poor countryside of Zhejiang, these women, who were mostly illiterate, joined opera schools in their early teens in order to make a living; they drifted to Shanghai with the flow of Zhejiang immigrants in the 1930s and 1940s and, with their performances both in the theater and in society, established Yue opera as the most popular theater in the city during the ensuing decades. The stories they told about their lives and careers not only testify to the genre's history but also reveal the ways in which these women allowed various rhetorics to mediate their narratives of this history and their own experiences.

The audience members I interviewed were mostly from middle- or upper-class families with education levels ranging from primary school to college. They are representative of the most important part of the audience, those who helped shape the opera with their financial, social, and emotional support. Their stories, combined with the actresses' recollections of female patrons and fans, provide access to the social and imaginary worlds of middle-class housewives and daughters. These women, the Yue opera actresses and audience members, represented a large segment of the female population in Shanghai in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

This segment of the city's population and Yue opera as a major popular-culture production of this group have so far been overlooked in studies of modern Chinese history. The negligence has much to do with the modern Chinese political and intellectual leadership, which, for most of the twentieth century, was not interested in popular culture but focused on rescuing China from imperialism and building it into a modern nation and state. The Nationalist government (1928–49) and the People's Republic of China (PRC [1949–present]) each made efforts to mobilize the population for its version of nation building, and both attempted to use popular arts as means of mass education and mobilization. In the eyes of this leadership, market-oriented popular arts that focused on the private, mundane concerns of individual citizens were unnecessary, selfish, and trivial, to say the least, and harmful and dangerous, at worst, as they encouraged people to indulge their personal feelings and kept them from devoting themselves to the nation. Thus, both left-wing and Nationalist intellectuals criticized popular literature of the Republican period (1912–49), lumping different strains together

under the pejorative term "mandarin ducks and butterflies school of fiction," and studies of popular literature did not begin to emerge until the 1980s. Similarly, while the Nationalist government despised popular theaters and entertainments, the PRC government tried to transform them into state propaganda tools with which to glorify the communist revolution.

Besides suffering the elite bias against popular genres in general, women's opera was stigmatized further because of lingering prejudices against women and women's culture. Modern China's intellectual and political leadership promoted and popularized the concept of liberating women from the "feudal" tradition marked by bound feet, arranged marriage, and lack of access to education and work outside the home. The problem is that the elite assumed the role of liberator, and the concept of women's liberation was shaped largely within the framework of nation building: women had to be liberated in order to better serve the nation as good mothers, good wives, good teachers, good workers, and even good soldiers. Both the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) demanded that women revolutionaries act within the frameworks of their respective Party ideologies, considering a separate women's movement narrow-minded, unnecessary, and unacceptable. While giving women intellectuals little room to establish their subject position as women,[1] both parties also shared a contemptuous attitude toward women who had little interest in or appeared unsusceptible to political and intellectual nation-building discourses—the Nationalists largely counted these women out, and the Communists tried to reform them. For both Nationalist and Chinese Communist parties, the illiterate actresses and bourgeois housewives and daughters associated with Yue opera appeared to be a backward mass indulging in its own small, mundane concerns of sex, love, and the family, ignorant of national politics. The opera also became notorious for elaborating the purportedly excessive, trivial emotions of love and desire while having little concern for the nation's struggle. Thus, in the name of the nation, the old misogynist bias sneaked back in under the new rhetoric of women's liberation, denying historical significance to a large number of women and their culture.

These elite biases against popular and women's cultures were compounded with a methodological pitfall in the study of modern China's history, namely heavy reliance on written texts and printed discourses. Reliance on written materials inevitably gives privilege to elite activities, since intellectual and political elites, mostly men, produced much of the written texts of the period. While such research is not necessarily thereby

rendered invalid and may be valuable when taken on its own terms, collectively it nonetheless may have produced an understanding of history that overemphasizes elite influences while viewing popular activities only as "resistance" to elite intentions. The paucity of voices coming directly from the nonwriting public could have the effect of reducing the majority of Chinese people to objects of elite intentions. Similarly, the lack of women's voices could render Chinese women subalterns in history, with the result that feminist and women's histories of China are framed as critiques of male elite use of women's issues for men's political purposes rather than focusing on issues and significations that concerned women. It is thus crucial to find the voices of these subalterns through oral and performance-related materials outside the print media, and Yue opera provides precisely such a source.

My discovery of Yue opera was actually a rediscovery of an experience from my Shanghai childhood. When I entered primary school in 1962, the government assigned my mother to work as an administrator for the Shanghai Yue Opera House. I often went to the theater with my mother for evening performances because there was no one at home to take care of me. My mother would put me on one of the front seats reserved for her while she worked backstage. My classmates and friends considered me extremely fortunate because the opera was very popular and tickets were hard to obtain. But college-educated Chinese revolutionaries, including my mother, who was not happy with her job assignment, generally looked down on local operas as old-fashioned and backward, and Yue opera, with its love stories, was considered particularly vulgar and trivial. Sure enough, this childhood experience was buried in my memory after I entered college in the late 1970s. Absorbed in the grand narratives of the nation's modern destiny, I stopped going to the opera. It was during my years at Stanford University in the 1990s, informed by the emerging trend of cultural studies in the most general sense, that I reconnected with this childhood experience and became determined to register the voices and experiences of these women in historical writings.

When I went back to Shanghai in 1995–96 to research the topic, I found that my mother loved Yue opera. In her retirement, she enjoyed listening to Yue opera and Beijing opera tapes and watched the opera channel almost every day. My father, also a college-educated New Culturist and a fan of spoken drama, had considered local opera backward and feudal when he was younger; now local operas on television were his favorite entertainment. Among a variety of local opera genres, Yue opera and Beijing opera

were my parents' favorites: my mother favored Yue opera over Beijing opera, while my father preferred Beijing opera to Yue opera (a typical gender division in China's opera culture). Though it was now too late, my mother even regretted that she had not learned to write scripts for Yue opera. My parents never explained their newfound appreciation of native operas to me, as if it had all happened naturally and there was nothing to explain. They were retired from their job assignments and perhaps also from the revolution and revolutionary rhetoric, at least to some degree. They could now just enjoy themselves or be entertained by anything that appealed to their senses, without feeling the need to judge their tastes according to external standards. Their appreciation of native operas, in other words, was not the result of a sudden realization of the social and political significance of these forms. They were indeed puzzled by my interest in Yue opera, thinking that important historical events and figures would have been more appropriate subjects, not an insignificant type of theater that only entertained. Mother had great respect for her actress colleagues at the Shanghai Yue Opera House, whom she regarded as independent, resourceful, and hardworking women, and introduced many of them to me for interviews, but she still thought I should have picked a more important topic than Yue opera.

Interestingly, the majority of Yue opera actresses and audience members were not concerned about the stigma placed on them by people who were better educated in elite ideologies. The women of Yue opera functioned within a world of value of their own making and made judgments based on their own perspectives. Yue opera plays were considered shameless in depicting excessive romantic emotions, while Yue opera fans were thought to be notorious for their unrestrained public displays of passion for their favorite actresses and for the genre. Political and intellectual elites dismissed the theatrical and social world of Yue opera as trivial and meaningless, as they were unable to understand it within their own ideological frameworks. In order to understand the world of Yue opera, the historian must enter it by exploring the mundane experiences of the women of Yue opera and leave ideology at the door. "Courageous, empirical fidelity to experience can, under certain circumstances at least," as Peter Fuller points out, "cut through ideology. Experience is not *wholly* determined by ideology: it is very often at odds with it, causing constant ruptures and fissures within the ideological ice-floes."[2] An empirical study of Yue opera is likely to produce different pictures and refresh our understanding of the history of modern China.

Grounded in testimonies of Yue opera's women and theatrical productions, and aided by archival, newspaper and tabloid, and other historical records, this work attempts to reconstruct a meaningful world of Yue opera as it existed for the opera's actresses and fans. A variety of oral and performance-oriented sources provides access to the experiential and imaginary world of Yue opera women. Onstage performances (recorded or live), their reception in the larger public arena, performers' narratives of their lives and art, and audience members' accounts of the impact this art had on their lives are fascinating materials for historical analysis of what I call the "Yue opera phenomenon," a highly visible public display of women's emotions in a growing urban society.

Such an approach yields a history that shows, in contrast to the elite bias, that Yue opera was an important cultural production answering the needs of a newly forming urban society. The Yue opera love drama represented an effort to explore dramatic changes in sex, gender, and family relations in a rapidly modernizing city, and it helped the new urban dweller connect with these changes. Supported not only by women but also by the general public, the Yue opera love drama developed an artistic sophistication that brought the genre national and international recognition. Yue opera masterpieces, including *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai), known since the 1950s as *The Butterfly Lovers*, and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou meng), had a far-reaching influence on the popular understanding of love and desire, gender and family relations, and the ethics and aesthetics of a modern urban life.

Viewed within the vast world of popular culture, it becomes clear that popular genres such as Yue opera mattered; elite ideologies appeared to be remote and often irrelevant, while the radical leftist invasion during the Cultural Revolution was destructive. Also, contrary to elite bias, popular-culture genres in general were not at all opposed to building a modern, strong Chinese nation, and many major productions placed their stories against the backdrop of landmark national events. The difference lies in the focus: while elite ideologies made the nation-state their top concern, requesting people to serve the state, popular productions focused on people and their mundane lives, oftentimes influenced by the status of the nation-state. In short, the popular-culture regime had its own value and was full of meanings that were important to the population. These values and meanings may not have entirely agreed with elite ideologies but were equally influential in shaping the nation's modern citizenry.

While the agenda of popular history is to give voice to the subalterns

in historical studies, such projects are undertaken not by the silenced people themselves but by historians on their behalf, and most historians write for their academic colleagues. Yet, as Stuart Hall points out in his discussion of Gramsci, there would be no "organic intellectual formation . . . without 'an analogous movement on the part of the mass'" who "rise themselves to higher levels of culture and . . . extend their circle of influence towards the stratum of specialized intellectuals, producing . . . groups of more or less importance."[3] That is, the alleged subalterns, in fact, have raised their voices in the popular realm and asserted their influence in society; in that regard, they needed no help from professional historians. These people and the popular phenomena they created, however, are underrepresented in written history, and it is up to the historian to incorporate their stories into broader historical narratives. This book thus does not intend, and cannot claim, to speak for the people who created the Yue opera phenomenon; it is rather an effort to register the experiences and imaginations of these people and to understand the significance of their stories in the history of modern China.

# Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful to two great mentors, Harold L. Kahn and Lyman P. Van Slyke, who not only taught me high standards of scholarship but moreover continuously exemplified for me ways to live a moral and fulfilling life. Their wisdom, humor, and guidance have supported me through the past years. Van shared with me the story of his beloved aunt, who became an actress and, although disowned by her father for her choice of profession, provided for Van's father's education—a story that resonates with the experiences of the Chinese actresses featured in this book. Hal's comment that "drama imitates life imitating drama" helped me to see the Yue opera history as a process by which the actresses, the audience, and the opera mutually constructed one another in creating a public-culture phenomenon. It was during numerous such interactions with my teachers that this project was incubated and began to take shape.

I am also grateful to Gail Hershatter, Hanchao Lu, Edward Gunn, and Timothy Brook, who carefully read through an early version of the entire manuscript and offered constructive and detailed suggestions for revision. Their insights helped me to make the book conceptually clearer, more focused, and better structured. Bryna Goodman, Thomas Metzger, Elizabeth Perry, Charlotte Furth, Susan Mann, Wen-hsin Yeh, Dorothy Ko, P. J. Ivanhoe, Chen Jian, Mary Lou Roberts, Paul Robinson, Ann Waltner, Tobie Meyer-Fong, and Shannon Sweeney read and commented on parts of the work at various stages, and their questions and critiques were very useful as I struggled to make sense of the manifold materials. I especially want to thank Reiko Shinno and Mark Swislocki for their friendship and generous assistance. Reiko's enthusiasm about the project and our numerous conver-

sations were both fun and inspiring, while Mark faithfully proofread every chapter for ideas as well as for errors.

I want to thank my former colleagues Martha Kaplan, John Kelley, Shao Jing, Yu Zhou, Peipei Qiu, Aili Mu, Maria Hoehn, and Ismail Rashid for reading and commenting on various parts of the work. Questions and criticisms from Max K'o-wu Huang, Chien-ming Yu, Ping-chen Hsiung, Chen Yung-fa, I-chun Fan, Hsiao-T'i Li, and other colleagues at Academia Sinica and from Kohama Masako, Suetsugu Reiko, Nishimura Shigeo, Shao Yingjian, Egami Sachiko, Maeyama Kanako, Ishikawa Teruko, and Sato Masayuki over my various talks on the subject in Taipei and Tokyo were challenging and stimulating. I especially want to thank local Yue opera researchers Ding Yi and Qian Yonglin at the Yue Opera Museum in Shengzhou (formerly Shengxian), Zhejiang; Gao Yilong, Lu Shijun, and Huang Dejun in the research branch at the Shanghai Yue Opera House; and Qiu Yawei and Qiu Wenguang with the Shengxian Native Place Organization in Taipei, who generously shared their ideas with me and allowed me to have access to their collections, interview records, stage photos, and precious old Yue opera recordings. In addition, Chang P'eng-yuan at Academia Sinica kindly gave me his personal copies of the precious eight volumes *The Complete Works of Qi Rushan*. Credit is also due to Zhang Jishun, Xu Jilin, Yu Weimin, and Li Beibei for their support and wonderful collegiality.

Special appreciation goes to the librarians who assisted me in the East Asian Collections at Stanford University, the Harvard-Yenching Library at Harvard University, the Shanghai Municipal Library, the Shanghai Municipal Archives, the District Archives of Hongkou and Huangpu in Shanghai, the Yue Opera Museum in Shengzhou, the Library of the Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo at Tokyo University, the National Library of Japan, the Foreign Affairs Archives in Tokyo, the Fu Ssu-Nien Library of the Institute of History and Philology, and the libraries in the Institute of Literature and Philosophy and the Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica in Taipei. Without their efforts, patience, and willingness to help, this project would not have been possible.

I would like to express my gratitude to Lorri Hagman at the University of Washington Press for her faith in this project as well as for her patience and guidance. The comments from an anonymous reviewer for the Press pushed me to further revise and improve the chapter on the audience for opera. Laura Iwasaki proved to be an excellent copyeditor who meticulously corrected typos and inconsistencies in the rendering of translated terms and smoothed the flow of the text. Correspondence with Mary Ribesky has been

a pleasant experience as she is always warm, professional, and responsive. Because of them, the production process was an enjoyable experience.

Risako Ide kindly checked romanization for Japanese sources. My students also helped prepare the manuscript: Mauricio Castro checked the references and notes, Jin Tao helped with stylistic details, and Li Bin aided in the preparation of the Index. I am deeply grateful to the many friends, students, and colleagues who helped to make the book better, although I have no way to list everyone who has helped. All remaining mistakes are, of course, mine.

A Fellowship for the Study of Women in Asia from the Center for East Asian Studies at Stanford University funded a four-month research trip to mainland China, and a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies/Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation enabled me to spend six months at the Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo in Tokyo, Japan, and three months at the Academia Sinica in Taipei. Summer grants from Vassar College supported multiple research trips to mainland China, and a grant from the Pujiang Talents Program sponsored by the Shanghai Municipal Government supported the final stage of this work.

This book is dedicated to my late mother, whose aspiration to live a meaningful life by expressing her literary talent beyond political and domestic boundaries has inspired and shaped my academic career, and to my father, who provided an open, liberal, and intellectually stimulating family environment for me and my brothers and sister to grow up in freely.

# Women Playing Men


Geographical expansion of Shengxian opera

*Introduction*

# Opera, Gender, and the City

One of the most important cultural changes in modern China was the feminine opera culture that grew out of its Qing period (1644–1911) masculine predecessor. This modern feminine opera culture achieved its most mature form in several popular opera genres, including "*ping* opera" (*pingju*), which flourished in Tianjin; Yue opera, which became popular in Shanghai; and the "boy-singers' opera" (*gezaixi*), which thrived in Xiamen (later Taipei). The rise of a feminine opera culture in coastal cities reveals much about the gendered nature of social and cultural changes in the twentieth century.

Women's Yue opera, a popular social and cultural phenomenon created by the actresses and audiences of Yue opera in Shanghai, was a concentrated expression of the historical rise of women in public culture in modern Chinese society. It was also the most popular theater in Shanghai for half a century, from the late 1930s through the 1980s. Although women's Yue opera originated in the countryside of Sheng county (Shengxian, present-day Shengzhou City), Zhejiang, it took shape in Shanghai in the 1930s, where it underwent two major transformations—from a rural to an urban entertainment and from all-male to all-female performers. The opera thrived in Shanghai in the 1940s to such an extent that it overtook Beijing opera and the native "Shanghai opera" (Shenqu or Huju) to become the most popular theater in the city. In the 1950s and 1960s, the opera gained national and international influence through frequent performance tours as well as films of Yue opera master plays such as *The Butterfly Lovers*, of 1953, and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, of 1962, and became, arguably, second only to Beijing opera on a nationwide scale in terms of the size of its personnel

and audience. Why and how did a female opera capture such a large audience, and what does Yue opera's success tell us about the gendered nature of China's cultural modernity? More specifically, perhaps, as Shanghai nurtured women's Yue opera, in what sense did the opera embody some of the city's peculiar gender and popular characteristics?

One answer to these questions lies in the love drama that tied the opera, the audiences, and the city together in forging a peculiar urban popular culture. Romantic love became one of the most important themes in popular culture as new patterns of family, gender, and sexual relationships began to emerge in twentieth-century Chinese society, which was undergoing tremendous modernization. While this transformation was occurring nationwide, changing family, gender, and sexual relationships had their most concentrated manifestations in treaty-port cities and generated an overflow of cultural products that reflected these changes in the form of the love drama. The love drama became an essential element in various genres, encompassing elite melodramatic productions of leftist films in the 1930s and 1940s as well as popular literature and entertainment such as "mandarin ducks and butterflies" fiction,[1] "Shanghai-style" (Haipai) literature, Shanghai opera, and women's Yue opera. As a response to the popular need to address these deeply felt changes, this culture of love in turn discursively shaped popular perceptions and understandings of changing sex and gender relationships.

Ever since the May Fourth New Culture Movement (roughly 1915–23), popular fiction and entertainment focusing on the emotion of love, or *yanqing* (lit., "elaborating on feelings") culture, was a target of criticism from China's intellectual and political elites, and international scholars overlooked it as they privileged studies in elite culture. This situation began to change dramatically in the 1980s, and a great number of monographs on Republican Shanghai's popular culture have since appeared. Perry Link led the way with his pioneering study of the "mandarin ducks and butterflies" school of fiction, while in the 1990s, Wei Shaochang, Wang Dewei (David Wang), Zhang Gansheng, Yang Yi, and Wu Fuhui followed up with more detailed and expanded studies of popular fiction in Republican era Shanghai. In the meantime, Paul Pickowicz, Yingjin Zhang, and Poshek Fu examined popular film of the period, and Leo Ou-Fan Lee's 1999 study surveyed the fields of fiction, film, and café as representatives of a modern urban culture in Republican Shanghai. Together, these works created a rich literature of popular fiction and film in Republican Shanghai and explored the question of the city's cultural modernity.[2]

Building on the existing literature, this investigation of women and gender in Shanghai's popular-culture scenes intervenes with its chosen temporal and spatial strategies. Temporally speaking, the existing scholarship focused on Republican Shanghai, with an underlying assumption that the communist takeover in 1949 caused a rupture in the city's cultural development. However, as an increasing number of China historians question whether the change of regimes in 1949 should be taken as the line dividing modern Chinese history, the cultural historian needs to follow cultural changes into the People's Republic of China in order to examine continuities and ruptures after 1949 and to develop a fuller picture of cultural changes in modern China. As the footsteps of Yue opera actresses crossed the 1949 divide, and Yue opera continued to develop under communism, this investigation follows its subjects into the popular-culture scenes of CCP-run Shanghai.

Spatially, this volume is designed as a social history of popular culture in modern Shanghai and, as such, is located at the intersection of social history and cultural studies. Cultural studies treats cultural phenomena as meaning systems that individuals and social groups create for themselves under certain circumstances. The strategy of the social history of culture is to focus on the producers and recipients of culture and thereby to observe changing social structures and power relations. Viewed from this angle, women's Yue opera was a social phenomenon closely related to the emergence of women into urban public space and changing gender relations in urban society during the period. The story of Yue opera thus takes us to areas that have not yet been adequately explored in studies of the city's public culture, namely, women's cultural activities and "traditional" native operas as important components of an overall picture of Shanghai's cultural modernity.

## *Women's Culture*

Feminist and gender analysis provides the most important framework for this study, one that enables the historian to "discover" a women's culture centered on Yue opera in modern Shanghai's public space. The rich text of this women's culture reveals three historical processes: the rise of the opera, the rise of its actresses, and the rise of a large female audience in Republican Shanghai. Furthermore, an investigation centered on Yue opera reveals a more general trend of feminization of popular entertainment. Researchers of Shanghai culture, such as Leo Lee and Yingjin Zhang,

have noticed the prominence of women and female images in Shanghai's popular-culture industry. They, however, have concerned themselves mainly with questions such as how men produced and consumed female images in the public domain, or what kind of meanings women and female images provoked in the minds of urban men. Few saw women as active producers of culture, and the important phenomenon of feminization of popular entertainment went unnoticed.

This volume focuses on women as historical agents and cultural builders who created the Yue opera phenomenon. The core narrative of this work concerns the trio of the opera, its actresses, and its female audience in modern Shanghai, exploring how the female producers and consumers of Yue opera made the opera such a success, and how the rise of the opera in turn helped these women redefine their social status and identity. It follows the lead of a cluster of inspiring feminist studies in the history of women and gender in China offered by such historians as Charlotte Furth, Gail Hershatter, Dorothy Ko, and Susan Mann that find women actively contributing to and at the center of historical changes.[3]

In his study of the means by which jazz was transmitted from black American ghettos to British suburbs, Simon Frith notes: "To understand why (and how) the worlds of jazz (and rock) are young men's worlds we have, for example, to understand what it means to grow up male and middle-class; to understand the urge to 'authenticity' we have to understand the strange fear of being 'inauthentic.'"[4] Similarly, to understand Yue opera is to understand what it meant to be female and immigrant in a modern metropolis during an era of profound social change, and in order to understand the urge to display emotions publicly through staging or attending Yue opera performances, we have to understand the pain of being silenced or not taken seriously, for such existential conditions sparked the particular experiences and emotions that underlay the ethics and aesthetics of the opera. As the actresses and audience of Yue opera struggled for respect and status, and for the right to express themselves publicly, they created a distinct women's culture—a defining monument in Shanghai's cultural landscape.

The rise of women in society represents arguably the most fundamental change in China in the twentieth century, a change that affected every aspect of Chinese life. Women's entrance into the cultural market, both as consumers and producers, represented perhaps the most important force in shaping a modern culture of love in twentieth-century Shanghai, while women's Yue opera was the most concentrated manifestation of this feminine power. Through the success of women's opera, the actresses and audi-

ence of Yue opera helped establish private feelings and mundane experiences as a major theme of modern life, making the "feminine" concerns of the everyday equally as important as the "masculine" public discourse of nationalism and modernity.

## *Popular Opera*

Studying Shanghai culture at the level of popular opera opens a way toward probing a world outside the print universe. Chinese opera is an important subject for historical research because it was, until the mid-1980s, a prominent part of Chinese life and culture. Contrary to the idea, common among non-Chinese, that Chinese opera is defined by Beijing opera, numerous opera genres have existed in China over the past millennium; Beijing opera and Yue opera are relatively new genres, having originated only in the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, respectively. Opera traditions in China have been traced back to at least the "southern opera" (*nanxi*) that matured during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and the "miscellany opera" (*zaju*) of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), and, in the five centuries between the mid-Ming (1500s) and the last decade of the twentieth century, local operas made up the most important form of popular entertainment for the vast majority of Chinese people.[5] While all Chinese operas shared a basic artistic format combining music, singing, speech, dance, and postures in order to narrate a story, each genre distinguished itself mainly by the local tunes and dialect it used in singing and speech. Theoretically, there were as many genres as there were dialects; in fact, various official statistics indicate that there were more than three hundred genres during the nineteenth and the twentieth century up to the 1980s.[6]

Although Chinese operas shared a basic format and a rich repertoire of plays, which developed and accumulated over centuries, each genre had its own ways of rendering these plays in order to cater to local taste. For a modern scholar trying to grasp the idea of "Chinese opera," it is imperative to note that what was most important for the artists of each genre and their audiences was the local identity of the opera, an identity manifested in the operatic rendering of the tunes, dialects, and vocabularies that reflected a local population's particular sentiments and tastes. Sung in local dialects and tunes for the local population, local-opera and storytelling genres were the most direct and authentic expressions of the life experiences and imaginations of the Chinese people in their various local environments. As such, these local operas contain a great deal of infor-

mation about local populations—their living environment, their daily struggles, and their identities. As these genres also shared a common repertoire of plays across geographic and dialect areas and across time, they provide firsthand materials with which to study Chinese life and culture, both as locally and temporally specific and as a dynamic system that connects the historical with the contemporary and local or regional experiences with national imaginations.

Most important, the oral and performance-oriented materials of local operas provide access to the real "popular" world outside the discursive spaces produced by the writings of elite men and women. Most local operas had humble origins in rural populations. While some were transformed into more elaborate forms, such as Beijing opera and Yue opera, most remained local, small-scale phenomena. Most local operas in the latter half of the Qing dynasty were initially oral and performance oriented. As access to written opera scripts was limited, and owing to the generally low rates of literacy among peasants who became actors, performances of local operas were based mostly on actors' improvisations, albeit with the help of some sketchy plot outlines and a few lines of lyrics established by famous actors. Improvisation was such an important element of Chinese opera that, until the 1950s, few actors followed script lyrics closely, even though by then the literacy rate among actors had gradually risen, and scripts had been widely available, at least in cities, for almost the entire Republican period. Most so-called playwrights were in fact story writers whose main job was to create the plot and main characters and who only sometimes included a few lines of lyrics in their scripts. Actors would take these bare-bones scripts and flesh out the story onstage by adding lyrics and speeches of their own, inspired by interactions with their stage partners and in reaction to audience responses. Most scripts of popular plays published during this period were not created by playwrights for opera troupes but were written records of well-established performances.

Modern China's political and intellectual leadership tended to view oral and local traditions as barriers to the creation of a national identity. During the May Fourth New Culture Movement, they set off to overcome these barriers by promoting and popularizing standard Chinese (Mandarin) as the national spoken language and developing a new standard vernacular literary system based on it. A new standard, Chinese-based national language began to be established in the ensuing decades as it was used in education, official communication, and the mass media. Despite these efforts, local dialects and sentiments continued to be a major feature in Chinese

lives in urban centers as well as in villages and small towns, and local operas continued to express these local sentiments.

Most Western-language monographs on Shanghai's popular culture, however, have focused on the petty intellectuals closely involved in the production and consumption of popular fiction and film based on standard Chinese, while overlooking local-opera and storytelling genres and their native-place supporters, who formed a large urban population characterized by low literacy and/or low status along with a lack of interest or ability in reading and writing. This has been the case in part because of the difficulties the foreign researcher faces in accessing local dialects. Chinese scholars, in contrast, worked to produce histories and gazetteers of various local operas during the 1980s and 1990s as part of state-sponsored local gazetteer projects. Each established genre in modern Shanghai—including Yue opera, Shanghai opera, Huai opera (Huaiju [lit., "the opera from the Huai River," i.e., northern Jiangsu, also known as Jiangbeixi, Subeixi]), and Beijing opera in Shanghai—was honored with a gazetteer.[7] As the most popular opera genre in the city and the Jiangnan region, Yue opera also became the subject of a few popular histories, including Gao Yilong's *The Story of Yue Opera* (Yueju shihua) and Ying Zhiliang's *History of Yue Opera in China* (Zhongguo Yueju fazhan shi).[8] Yet these publications have not received adequate attention from historians, partially because these works focus on operatic developments instead of considering the social and political significance of the genres in the history of modern Shanghai.[9]

Focusing on Yue opera and drawing on other local-opera forms, the following chapters show that, in twentieth-century Shanghai, dynamic native-place and linguistic politics were basic elements in the daily lives of millions of new residents, and the status of various local operas was closely related to the status of their native-place patrons. Even with the current dominance of standard Chinese in the mass media and the educational system, most people still speak local dialects within their family and native-place groups, and native-place politics continues to play an important role in people's lives. In fact, most Shanghai women interviewed for this project could not speak standard Chinese (though they could understand it) let alone use it to communicate subtle and complex feelings.[10]

## *Urban Space*

The story of Yue opera and its women must also be a story about the modern city of Shanghai. Two factors formed the backdrop for the dra-

matic rise of Yue opera. First, women's Yue opera was part of the city's dynamic popular culture, shaped during the formation of Shanghai's capitalist economy and bourgeois population, a modern transformation that occurred first and foremost in Shanghai. Second, one salient feature of the city's popular culture was its obsession with women and love, a response to fundamental changes in gender ideologies and gender relations that, while taking place nationwide, were felt most intensely in the modern metropolis.

Shanghai, the largest semicolonial treaty-port city in China, was not only a physical place defined by its ports of call and complicated political jurisdictions; it also fueled China's modern transformation under Western influence. Shanghai is located at the mouth of the Yangzi River delta, backed by one of traditional China's richest areas, which is also noted for its cultural vitality, and facing the East China Sea, beachhead of the West's impact on China. Owing largely to its location, Shanghai developed rapidly into a regional and national center of the nation's modern economy and gained renown for its hybrid cosmopolitan atmosphere.

Colonial Shanghai provided a safe haven for economic development, as foreign powers sheltered China's most modern sectors and wealthiest industrialists from political disturbances and civil wars, and the city quickly grew into the largest industrial and commercial center in China.[11] In more concrete terms, modern Shanghai was built by large numbers of domestic migrants, who formed the largest share of the city's population. Shanghai in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had already become the largest city in China, and the foreign settlements comprised its most economically and culturally vibrant sectors. By 1935, Shanghai's population reached 3.6 million, of which approximately 1.6 million lived in foreign settlements, alongside about 60,000 foreigners.[12] The population in foreign settlements continued to grow, to 1.67 million by 1936, and then exploded, to 4.5 million in 1938, with the influx of refugees fleeing invading Japanese troops.[13]

The combination of the foregoing factors—ambiguous political sovereignty, a lack of ideological control, a high concentration in resources, and the rapid growth of a diverse population—produced a dynamic market for all kinds of cultural products, native and foreign, traditional and modern. Skyscrapers were erected along the Bund and Nanjing Road to house banks, customs offices, and department stores where imported luxury goods were displayed, showcasing the city's modernity. A few streets away in the narrow lanes along Fuzhou Road, brothels and opium dens prospered along-

side publishing houses, bookstores, printing services, and newspaper headquarters. Because it combined modern and traditional as well as native and foreign cultural forms, Shanghai captured the imaginations of both Chinese and foreigners. Their image of Shanghai was captured in turn by a distinctive urban popular culture manufactured by artists who availed themselves of the city's flourishing print industry and numerous entertainment venues.

Republican-era Shanghai manufactured modern romances in print. Ever since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) , the Jiangnan area had been home to China's most advanced printing industry, with the cities of Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou leading the way. Shanghai's printers built on this Jiangnan tradition by incorporating Western machinery and paper, and they soon became the nation's leading force in modernizing China's print culture. Shanghai's printing industry was the backbone of the city's commercial culture and helped shape cultural trends ranging from clothing fashions like the "cheongsam" (*qipao*), a modern urban dress for women, to the popular "mandarin ducks and butterflies" fiction.[14] Shanghai's printing industry was as capable of producing large numbers of inexpensive books in a short period of time as it was of producing refined prints. This capacity proved indispensable for the manufacturing of popular literature and gave Shanghai's popular literature its physical form. As the literary scholar Zhang Gansheng has pointed out, the great expansion of popular literature began with the appearance of daily newspapers with literary supplements in the early Republican period.[15] These literary supplements, with daily installments of serialized fiction, were soon rivaled by literary magazines, which published weekly, three times a month, semimonthly, and monthly and featured as many as a dozen fictional works in a given issue, often including three or four installments of longer works. If a series proved popular, an offprint would soon be produced. While the format of serialized fiction built on traditional links between storytelling and storytelling-style literature, it also made the mass consumption of fiction possible.[16] Popular fiction soon became an important part of everyday life for many Shanghai residents. As Zhou Shoujuan, the famous "mandarin ducks and butterflies" fiction author and editor of many popular literary supplements and magazines, including *Saturday* (Libai liu), recalled in his later years:

> There were not that many magazines in the early Republican period, so *Saturday* was very popular at that time. Every Saturday morning, readers waited at the door of the Zhonghua Library, where *Saturday* was distributed. As soon as the door opened, people rushed in to be the first to buy the maga-

zine. The situation somewhat resembled the morning rush for pancakes and deep-fried dough sticks at the neighborhood restaurants.[17]

People from all over the country flowed into the metropolis, attracted by its promise of opportunity, dazzled by its prosperity, amazed by its openness and sophistication, and frustrated by its coldheartedness and deception. Perhaps because they lived in such a legendary place, Shanghai people liked legendary stories. The best-selling writer Zhang Ailing, who began her career as a Shanghai writer in the early 1940s, titled her first collection of short stories *Legendary Stories* (Chuanqi). Commenting on the characteristics of Shanghai people, she wrote: "Shanghainese are abnormal products made of traditional Chinese people tempered by the high pressure of modern life and experienced in complex interactions among all kinds of old and new cultures. The result may not be so healthy, but there is a marvelous wisdom in it."[18]

These immigrants also carried with them their native-place identities, habits, and cultures. The largest immigrant groups, including those from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, deployed their native cultures as they competed for recognition in Shanghai's public spaces; native opera houses as well as regional restaurants, grocery stores, and native-place halls became marks of their claims to cultural significance. Major native theaters in Shanghai included Yue opera from Guangdong (which used the same pronunciation as Yue opera from Zhejiang but was written with a different character), "Suzhou story-singing" (*pingtan*), Huai opera from northern Jiangsu, Yue opera from Zhejiang, Shanghai opera from the nearby countryside, and "Shanghai-style Beijing opera" (Haipai Jingju). While first-rate Beijing opera troupes performed in high-class teahouses and theaters in the foreign settlements during the early twentieth century, and major Yue (Zhejiang) opera companies relocated to upper-tier theaters when Yue opera became popular in the 1940s, other minor operas continued to be performed mostly on the peripheries of the downtown areas, where their constituencies were concentrated. Jiangbei opera, for example, was performed mainly in small, shoddy theaters in working-class neighborhoods in Yangshupu or in the shantytowns of Zhabei for lower-class northern Jiangsu immigrants, while Shanghai opera was performed mainly in Nanshi, Huxi (western Shanghai), and Pudong (across the Huangpu River) for a mixed lower- to lower-middle-class local audience.[19]

Although the historical kinship between popular theatrical entertainment and popular literature is well known to modern scholars, it is worth

noting that a dynamic intertextuality between the two media created a symbiosis of popular culture in Republican era Shanghai. Virtually every popular novel published in Shanghai was adapted for popular theaters and storytelling genres as well as for the cinema.[20] Moreover, intertextuality went in both directions, for not only did local operas and storytelling venues compete to stage popular fiction works but writers also rewrote popular opera plays and Suzhou story-singing pieces as fiction.[21] Zhang Henshui's *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (Tixiao yinyuan) is one of the most remarkable examples of this intertextuality. Zhang's novel first appeared in daily installments, from November 1929 to 1931, in *Joyful Forest* (Kuaihuolin), a literary supplement to the major newspaper *Daily News* (Xinwen bao). A complete offprint first appeared in 1932. The novel was extremely popular in Shanghai and was quickly adapted to many forms of entertainment. An article published in *Coral* (Shanhu) magazine in May 1933 documented this phenomenon:

> Since Zhang Henshui published his novel *Fate in Tears and Laughter*, the novel has been used as a blueprint for various forms of entertainment, such as film, storytelling, Beijing opera, Guangdong opera, new drama [*xinju*],[22] Western opera, comic shows, puppet shows, Shaoxing opera [Yue opera], open ground operas, comic books, and folk songs. At the same time, several "sequels" and "alternative endings" have appeared on the market. . . . There are three versions of *Fate in Tears and Laughter in Suzhou Story-Singing* (Tixiao yinyuan tanci) being broadcast on Shanghai's radio stations, scripted by Yao Min'ai, Qi Fanniu, and Lu Dan'an, respectively.[23]

This intertextuality among various forms of popular literature and entertainment contributed to a diverse yet interconnected popular culture, organized by the marketplace and reflective of a distinctly Shanghainese sensibility.

One salient characteristic of this Shanghainese sensibility was its obsession with women and love stories. As the literary historian Yang Yi remarked about Shanghai-style, or Haipai, literature, referring to several generations of Shanghai writers from Bao Tianxiao to Zhang Ailing:

> *Yanqing* [elaborating on feelings] was the largest genre of Haipai literature. It seems no work could claim to be Haipai if it did not elaborate on the question of love. They [Haipai writers] especially appreciated the tears of Venus, and so their love stories were always sentimental. . . . The narrowness of the theme made it easy for Haipai writers to fall into the trap of

> scholar-beauty boilerplate, but once they rose above such hackneyed formulations, they could gain some insight into the mystery of sex and love between men and women.[24]

Regardless of its bias against "scholar-beauty boilerplate," Yang Yi's comment nonetheless aptly describes the orientation of Shanghai's popular entertainment and, indeed, Shanghai-style popular culture as a whole. The genre of love melodrama dominated literature, film, drama, opera, storytelling, and radio broadcasting. The prevalence of love dramas may be understood as a cultural convergence in modern Shanghai between the *yanqing* genre of the East and the melodrama of the West.

The cultural historian Paul Pickowicz explained the origins of the genre of melodrama as it first emerged in industrial Europe:

> Melodrama, as Peter Brooks and others have suggested, is characterized by rhetorical excess, extravagant representation, and intensity of moral claim. It is an aesthetic mode of "heightened dramatization" that refers to pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation. The melodramatic genre was developed first in French theater in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, at a time when a significant post-revolutionary democratization of culture was taking place. Although melodrama is a distinctively modern form, its initial political thrust was conservative. The audience for melodrama included people from all social classes who were frightened and confused by the modern transformation of society. This new and powerful mode of representation had a major impact on European fiction in the mid- and late nineteenth century and has been kept alive by filmmakers and television producers in the twentieth century.[25]

The melodramatic genre, as Pickowicz has also pointed out, dominated the Shanghai-based Republican era film industry. Despite their efforts to infuse Chinese films with May Fourth thought in the 1930s, leftist filmmakers such as Sun Yu, Cai Chusheng, Wu Yonggang, Shen Xiling, and Xia Yan all became captives of the powerful melodrama format. Although Xia Yan and PRC film scholars claimed that 1930s films embodied the tenets of social realism, leftist filmmakers in the 1930s, as Pickowicz argued, "accepted without question the dominance of the melodramatic genre and thereby doomed to failure any chance they had to introduce complex May Fourth ideas."[26]

Perry Link, in his pioneering study of early Republican era popular lit-

erature, put forth a similar interpretation of the "mandarin ducks and butterflies" school of fiction, albeit without using the word "melodrama." He pointed out that various aspects of the historical setting and literary characteristics of "mandarin ducks and butterflies" fiction resemble those of popular literature in other industrializing and industrialized societies:

> The extent to which modern life patterns are inherent consequences of industrialism may not be entirely clear; but modern-style entertainment fiction (or television, in recent decades) has, for one example, consistently appeared in tandem with industrialism around the world. From its beginnings in eighteenth-century England this kind of fiction spread to Western Europe and America, in many cases through direct borrowing as stories were reprinted or translated across international boundaries.[27]

The genre of melodrama as summarized by Pickowicz, or that of popular fiction as defined by Link, was introduced to Shanghai in the early twentieth century via Japanese translations of Western fiction being mass-produced in Osaka.[28] It is of course no coincidence that Osaka and Shanghai, the foremost industrial cities of Japan and China, respectively, were the national centers of melodramatic productions.

Despite the fact that the development of the melodrama in China, Japan, and the West were all related to the process of industrialization and urbanization, the Chinese perception of this process, which shaped a Chinese version of the melodrama, was in many ways not the same. While the English word "melodrama" has no easy counterpart in Chinese, the two popularly used native terms, *chuanqi* and *yanqing*, capture much of the peculiarity of popular culture in Republican Shanghai.

First, the Chinese were not just "frightened and confused" by modern changes, as Pickowicz suggested of their Western counterparts, with regard to their uncertain future. For Chinese of the time, "modern," a term applied mostly to things Western, was a known quantity, and for many, modern things were both necessary and fascinating: necessary because China had to become modernized in order to save itself from foreign dominance, and fascinating because of the novelty and exotic origins of these things. Indeed, many welcomed the coming of the modern age with feelings of wonder and excitement, favorably impressed by the steamboats, trains and railways, telegrams, and skyscrapers as well as by the foreign gunboats and powerful rifles that threatened China's sovereignty. This sense of excitement and wonder toward modernity is captured in the native phrase

*chuanqi*, which means "romance," "legend," or "strange story."[29] Although the term originated to refer to a genre of fiction that was popular during the Tang dynasty (618–907), and later also was associated with a genre of Ming drama, it had also been used liberally to refer to fiction that recounted legendary or bizarre happenings. It thus struck Chinese of this period as appropriate for describing the wonder of Shanghai in the first half of the twentieth century.

Second, the most common form of melodrama in Republican Shanghai was the love story. The Chinese term *yanqing* probably comes closest to describing the content and style of the city's popular culture. *Yanqing*, as a genre of literature and entertainment, is characterized largely by a thematic focus on love relationships and a mode of aesthetics involving complicated plots and exceedingly sentimental expressions of emotions. *Yanqing* authors rarely exhibited much interest in politics in their work, and any political topic on which they touched for narrative purposes never interfered with their principal concern, the poetics of *qing*, or feelings. While some *yanqing* stories, like those related to mundane relationships among friends and siblings or between parents and children, do deal with the full range of human emotions, the majority focuses on love.

*Yanqing* literature and entertainment of this period also had deep historical and regional roots. Love stories in China can be traced back to at least the Tang dynasty, when they were a subgenre of *chuanqi* and therefore consisted of tales of unusual events. *Yanqing* arts emerged as an independent genre only in the seventeenth century, a period during which the Taizhou School, which argued for gender equality and intellectual-spiritual companionship, became influential in literary circles.[30] In the wake of the bloody Manchu conquest in the mid-seventeenth century, *yanqing* themes dominated literary and theatrical production in the highly commercialized urban areas of Jiangnan. Seventeenth-century scholar-beauty fiction and such famous *chuanqi* plays as Hong Shen's *The Hall of Eternity* (Changsheng dian) all focus on love.[31]

The Republican era fixation on *yanqing* signals one of the most far-reaching and deeply felt changes in twentieth-century China: the social and ideological remaking of the family and the redefining of gender relations. Concomitant with the May Fourth rhetoric of free love and marriage and gender equality were changes in family structure, most notably among immigrant families in large urban centers. The new urban settlers largely abandoned the traditional model of the multigenerational household and established nuclear families centered on an adult couple with children.[32]