

# **The Use Of “Public” Women: Commercialized Performance, Nation-Building, And Actresses’ Strategies In Early Twentieth-Century Beijing**

by

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## **Abstract**

In the male-dominated theatrical world, actresses strategically relied on personal connections to survive. As “public” women and agents of mass media, they were utilized by men for different purposes. Theatrical managers and male audiences were intent to turn actresses into sexual objects in licentious plays, whereas nationalist reformers recruited actresses for mass mobilization. Actresses participated in the nation-building cause through presenting diverse human roles whose stories conveyed either new ideologies or historical values. The fictional plots of women’s emancipation, however, provided a learning process in which actresses could adopt the concepts of personal rights, self-determined marriage, and economic autonomy. The Chinese state, despite minor variations, always sustained the ideals of gender distinctions and opposed or restrained women’s public roles. The stories of actresses’ survival and prosperity nonetheless demonstrated the tremendous endurance, flexibility, intelligence, and strength of Chinese women.

## **About the Author**

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## **The Use Of “Public” Women: Commercialized Performance, Nation-Building, And Actresses’ Strategies In Early Twentieth-Century Beijing**

Unlike most women of the era, stage actresses in early twentieth-century China were characterized by their public lives. Theaters were considered semi-public spaces in which different people could acquire the same access if they paid admissions. Working in theater, actresses were viewed, judged, appreciated, and commented on by spectators, journalists, dramatists, and officials alike. Actresses broke the rules of gender distinction and acquired a certain degree of freedom outside their homes because they generally worked with male actors, troupe managers, and theater owners and, more often than not, also consorted with male fans. As agents of popular culture, they also purveyed political ideologies, moral values, religious beliefs, and common grievances, thereby informing and influencing society at large. Many actresses achieved professional success and fame, putting forth a new, unorthodox, and powerful image of women that contrasted with the conventional view of women as domestic and submissive.

Recent feminist theory has reframed the conceptualization of actresses in the history of theater. Scholars of European and American theater now concur that actresses were extraordinary working women, competing with men and often succeeding in a male-dominated public arena. These pioneers challenged the traditional notion of gender traits as inherent and immutable. Many actresses drew high salaries, organized theater companies, and wrote and directed plays, achieving unprecedented fame and fortune. In addition, by playing male characters onstage, they openly challenged entrenched definitions of femininity and womanhood (Davis 1991; Howe 1992; Dudden 1994; Aston 1995), just as their American counterparts at the time successfully used the theater to publicize the fledgling suffrage movement and women’s rights in general (Auster 1984).

This freedom, notoriety, and economic clout came at a steep price, however. Violation of conventional feminine virtues invited condemnation, and competition with men for professional status and prosperity caused tension and resentment. What is more, maintaining a physical presence as a character in the public sphere invited objectification; a beautiful young performer might be treated as a mere sexual plaything subject to constant harassment or even assault. The dilemma facing actresses—or what Faye Dudden has called the “body problem” (1994:3)—was this: increasing economic security and professional growth also brought increasing exploitation and alienation from the domestic realm from which women rarely strayed. They faced two mutually exclusive options: the mundane but decent existence of traditional domesticity, or the disgrace and rootlessness of potential stardom.

The emergence of actresses in early twentieth-century China epitomized a new trend in which women sought opportunities for education, employment, and political engagement beyond their homes. Like their Western counterparts, Chinese actresses had to fight their way into a man’s world and deal with the “body problem” and unrelenting social prejudice. They needed to adapt to traditional norms and institutions while maintaining a psychological balance by playing the roles of both working women and

domestic wives and mothers. In addition, actresses were always involved in the negotiation between the demands of the ordinary audience and the politicization of the theater by the nationalist elite.

What meaning did an actress derive from public life in early twentieth-century China? How did she develop strategies for succeeding in the male-dominated theater world and moderate the constant pressure from the state, the male elite, and other restrictive forces? How did the larger issues of nation-building, the infiltration of Western culture, and the market economy shape her identities? The answers to these questions are key to understanding the gendered public sphere in China a century ago and the fate of women who transgressed the inner/outer boundaries to compete with men in the public world. Although scholars of Chinese theater have explored the ways actresses challenged Confucian norms of gender distinctions and the repression of this new trend by the state and by realistic dramatists,<sup>1</sup> no one has investigated the public dimension of actresses' lives. I investigate three aspects of actresses' connections to the public world: 1) their alienation from the mainstream of traditional womanhood and their subsequent approaches to survival; 2) the objectification and commodification they experienced in the entertainment market and their resistance to these processes; and 3) how reformers used actresses in the nationalist mobilization and how the state constructed the image of public women. To gain an understanding of actresses' identities and status, I examine "a range of activities, social organizations, and historically specific cultural representations" (Scott 1996:169). I chose Beijing as my research site because the theater was highly developed there and actresses were active and well documented in source materials.

### **The Path Toward the Theatrical World**

The traditional approach to studying gender differences, which relegated men to the "public" arena and women to the "private" arena, has been criticized by feminist scholars. Scholarly research has shown that the two separate domains, or spheres, are actually interdependent and fluid (Ryan 1990:3-18). Scholars of Chinese women's history protest any casual application of the two-sphere hypothesis, arguing that the family, community, and the state in Imperial China constituted a continuum rather than distinct and opposing spheres. Historically, Chinese women transcended their domestic roles and involved themselves in public life through writing and publication, education of their children, and advising their husbands. They supported the state and sustained social order through their moral command of their families (Bray 1997:52-54; Mann 1997:15).

Although the demarcation of these domains varied by context, the majority of Chinese women were most strongly identified with domestic life and underrepresented in the public domain. Confucian sexual separatism was both spatial and social, and the official ideology defined women's public presence as amoral and unwomanly. Though out of reach for the vast majority of women, public life retained considerable appeal as an agency for policy-making on behalf of the common welfare, and an avenue for accruing political power that could influence the distribution of wealth and the definition of social values (Ryan 1990:8). Because the public sphere was considered dominant, or superior, to the private sphere, women struggled to gain entry.

Actresses pursued a career in the public world in part to satisfy their artistic interests, but more likely, perhaps, to have access to potentially high salaries and the relative power that accompanied them. As entertainers, they were similar to courtesans; both were alienated from mainstream family life and were probably able to choose only one type of female sexuality at any given time.<sup>2</sup> Yet actresses were even more “public” than courtesans, as they performed for cross-class and cross-sex audiences, traveled widely, and enjoyed a high profile in the news media. Unlike members of the female elite, who usually achieved public influence through male-sponsored publications, actresses were more independent, popular, and highly paid. Their physical presence on the public stage and direct contact with ordinary people might have provoked envy in the minds of elite women who spent most of their time in the inner chambers and participated in public life only through the intermediary actions of their husbands and sons. Compared with common laborers, actresses enjoyed even more advantages. Although many came from poor working families, they obtained professional skills, relatively higher incomes, and more recognition in society. Like most women who gained opportunities to work in, visit, or affect the public world, however, actresses rarely severed their ties with the family domain. They navigated between the two spheres and assumed multiple identities as professional women, daughters, wives, and mothers. Their credibility in the theater depended on the support of their kin, friends, and colleagues. These actresses’ life stories once again confirm that the public and private domains were highly intertwined, and that exclusively “public” women did not exist.

For centuries Chinese actresses worked either in the imperial court, wealthy households, or itinerant troupes. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, they encountered increasing opposition and censorship from the ruling elites who upheld the goals of female chastity and sexual separatism, and condemned actresses for setting unethical examples for young audiences, threatening social stability, and ruining the family economy. Due to the official prohibitions against female performance in public, actresses gradually disappeared in late Ming and early Qing (late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries) China. The theatrical performance was thus undertaken by male actors, and women, if they learned performing arts, could only work as courtesans in private quarters. It was only through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that actresses began to resume their previous splendor and reemerged in major cities. The growing population of urban immigrants (the vast majority of whom were male), the relaxed governmental control of social life, poverty and political disorganization were all factors in the increasing recruitment of actresses by the entertainment industry. As early as the 1870s, troupes of actresses performed for private occasions in Beijing. Sibling actresses You Jinhua and You Yuhua entered the city during the late Guangxu reign (1874-1908), performing in a mat-shed theater for a few days before being ousted by local authorities. Zhao Bingjun, Home Minister of the Republic, lifted sanctions against actresses in 1912 as a means to stimulate the local economy. With police permission, the theater manager, Yu Zhenting, subsequently invited a group of actresses from Tianjin to join him in Wenmingyuan Theater. The following decades brought prosperity to many actresses, indicating growing public approval of their profession as well as their increasing commodification by males (Wang 1986:58-59; XJYK 2:10:1, June 1930; and 3:1:1-4, October 1930).<sup>3</sup>

Through feminist eyes, the Chinese theater serves as a very clear example of male chauvinism. The theater was a workplace for both male and female actors. The integration of the sexes, however, didn’t

eradicate gender distinctions but rather suggested another way of subjugating women. Usually humble in origin, and living outside socially defined constraints, actresses often found themselves alone and vulnerable. They were powerless against the authority of male instructors and managers, discriminated against and harassed by male audiences, and subject to the discipline of established theatrical rules. Social prejudice against female performers was tremendous, and parents always had difficulty in relinquishing their daughters to acting companies. Actresses lacked either physical or political access to the male-controlled theatrical guild in Beijing.<sup>4</sup> Women were even considered harmful to the theatrical enterprise; when a new theater was built, its manager would conduct an “opening stage” (*puotai*) ceremony to exorcise female ghosts (Wang 1992). In addition, gender hierarchies were standard in actors’ troupes. Among male actors, those who played the *dan* (young female) roles usually ranked at the bottom of the hierarchy and had to offer miscellaneous services to others, while the *laoshe* (old male) actors were honored as pillars of the companies (Zhang 1937:2:841-2).

Girls became theatrical apprentices at very young ages, and rarely consciously decided to enter the profession. Their desperate parents or guardians usually made the choice for them in response to financial concerns. As the entertainment industry boomed during the early twentieth century, many plebian families in Beijing and surrounding areas saw opportunities for their daughters. Training opera singers quickly became a profitable business. Only very gifted and hard-working girls, however, succeeded to the stage. The average apprenticeship lasted about five years, and students usually stayed with their tutors or were coached at home, rising at dawn to practice elocution and other fundamental skills. In the afternoon, they could sit backstage to watch and learn from real actors. For all their efforts, apprenticed actresses did not have days off or earn incomes. Any lapses in practice or mistakes in rehearsals could invite physical punishment. The difficult life and strict discipline in the training period generally didn’t overwhelm the young apprentices, however. Many eagerly sought the opportunity for upward social mobility and competed for good teachers and stage roles (Zhang 1967:12-4; Xin 1982:226-238; Zhang and Cao 1988:1-16).

After finishing their apprenticeships, young actresses started their careers in lower-class quarters, hoping to be noticed by more prestigious theaters. Low pay, chaotic working environments, and harassment from managers with gangster connections were standard (Xin 1982:170-6). Ai Lijun, for instance, began her stage career at age 18 in Tianqiao in early 1930s (Cheng 1990; Zhang 1951; Liang 1989:83-6).<sup>5</sup> She was an alternate (*zuobao*) actress who waited backstage from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., playing whatever roles needed filling at any given moment. Actresses who worked at Tianqiao were frequently humiliated, and they struggled to find positions at bigger theaters. Some Tianqiao actresses went so far as to change their names when they left for larger, more prestigious theaters (Bai and Shen 1986:207-15; Xin 1982:295-302; Wang 1985:84-160; and XJYK 1:3:3-4, August 1928).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the experience of working in the lower-class districts helped actresses develop artistic maturity and achieve fame. Theater-going was a hobby for the elite and commoners alike, and the former normally groomed and promoted their favorite. Actresses could achieve popularity and high incomes shortly after they began performing, and many actually overtook their male counterparts professionally and financially.

How did actresses cope in such a hostile workplace? First, they had to seek external connections and patronage to secure work, gain status, and enjoy protection offstage. Although formation of external/internal ties proved helpful, oftentimes they were problematic in their own right. Successful actresses were talented, dedicated, and manipulative. They built their careers on private, most likely hetero-social, networks. Their self-reliance was achieved by accommodating conventional social institutions and values, such as kinship, the family, and the concepts of filial piety and personal loyalty.

Actresses relied heavily on support from their own families, since many of them originated from artistic families and received their training from parents or relatives. Since the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368), Chinese law discouraged men in “decent” society from marrying actresses. Discriminatory regulations and public prejudices contributed to the formation of a tightly knit performers’ society, in which colleagues married each other and trained their offspring, a custom that actually improved performers’ talent and art (Pan 1941:7-8; Tan 1995:71). After the abolition of lower-caste, or “debased people” (*jianmin*), in the eighteenth century, descendants of entertainers were not required to continue their family occupations; however, most performers persisted in teaching their children the theatrical arts. Children from these families benefited from training and kinship connections, which paved the way for their education, employment, and professional success.

Girls were also bought in the name of adoption by proprietors of theaters, managers of brothels, wealthy actors, and courtesans, and trained to be actresses. Susan Mann writes that courtesans who lacked legitimate family ties simply invented them. Networks in the brothels were formed by “adoptive mothers” (*yangmu*) and “adopted daughters” (*yiniu*) where surrogates and blood ties were matrilineal (Mann 1997:139). In Chinese theater, adoption was common, and false kinship ties between an adopted daughter (*yangnü*) and adoptive parents (*yangfu* and *yangmu*) offered family-based benefits. Unfortunately, the “adopted daughter” ruse was used to disguise the sale and purchase of women (Gronewold 1982:37-50). Agents of entertainment houses bought girls either directly from destitute families, or through procurers who tricked or kidnapped girls.<sup>7</sup> Courtesans and star actresses often created their retirement security or professional heirs by adopting and training young girls.<sup>8</sup>

Female students, as well as established actresses, were expected to fulfill the traditional “daughter’s duty” toward their biological or adoptive parents. They had to obey, do household chores, contribute earned income, and, in some cases, submit to arranged marriages. Kinship ties strengthened family control over young, inexperienced girls. Vulnerable in the male-dominated entertainment enterprise, girls relied on the protection and support of their parents or guardians, who could be managers, accountants, assistants, or even pimps. Gail Hershatter (1997) described a brothel madam in Shanghai who rented a house, hired courtesans and servants, obtained a license, and single-handedly resisted extortion by hoodlums. At the same time, however, she was also an abusive procurer of young girls (Hershatter 1997:69-112). Many actresses had similar commanding mothers (or adoptive mothers) known as *kantaode* (the beach watchers) because they protected their daughters from unwanted advances by men. Woman Li Bian, for instance, was a manipulative and successful “businesswoman” who helped the Ping Opera Star, Bai Yushuang, found a troupe. When Bai was expelled by Beijing authorities, arrested in Shanghai, and even accused of murder, Woman Li Bian always managed to

come to the rescue. This same woman, however, treated Bai as a “money tree” (*yaoqianshu*) and even prevented her marriage to safeguard profits (Li 1980; Guo 1988; Zhang and Cao 1988:29).

Students also attempted to form personal and professional bonds with their theatrical instructors. Not only did actresses acquire skills from mentors, they established career connections, and in some cases declared themselves heirs to their masters’ schools. Without these connections, aspiring actresses encountered difficulties finding employment.<sup>9</sup> Young actresses, therefore, were more inclined to join well-established schools than strike out on their own. Once an actress conducted the *baishi* (bowing to the teacher) ceremony, her loyalty toward her teacher was secured. The girl’s parents usually sent a middleman to flatter the master and negotiate a contract that specified the duration of training, tuition, and profit shares. This contract granted the master absolute authority over the girl during her apprenticeship. If a girl quit or ran away, her family would be forced to pay compensation (Bai and Shen 1986:217; Chang 1990:55).

The relationships between actors and actresses defy easy categorization. Theatrical artists belonged to a profession which was generally looked down upon by the public, and they shared the harsh experience of being exploited, abused, and harassed either by their employers, the police, local bullies, or other oppressing groups in the society. It was not uncommon that they provided compassion and assistance to one another, yet they were also torn apart by the gender hierarchy in which well-established senior actors were regarded as masters and patrons, while actresses were degraded in the belief that they used their looks to compensate for their lack of talent. Star actors rarely recruited or worked with young actresses, who were relegated to simple or comic pieces. Since 1912, however, co-acting became a popular form of the theatrical expression. Although it underwent a short period of prohibition due to the male elite’s condemnation of its violation of Confucian separatism and perceived negative public influence, it was finally permitted by the local government in 1928. This change of the theatrical policy offered actresses opportunities to co-star with top-rate actors. Theater managers were willing to offer higher salaries, and male stars began to coach junior actresses. In the Peking Opera, actor Wang Yaoqing accepted Xin Yanqiu, Du Liyun, Hua Huilin, Wang Yurong, and the Three Li sisters, and actress Xue Yanqin studied with celebrated actors Mei Lanfang and Shang Xiaoyun. These women rose to stardom and their artistic accomplishments matched those of their masters. This newfound cooperation between actors and actresses was reciprocally beneficial; actors could boost sales by acting with their female trainees, whereas actresses improved their skills and raised their reputations (Qin 1937).

Actresses intentionally associated with male theatrical patrons. Chinese tradition dictated that courtesans should win the favor of eminent literati to boost their own reputations (Tao 1993).<sup>10</sup> Actresses developed an analogous relationship with the same strata of male elites. A rich fan could buy costumes and goods for the actress he admired, encourage his friends to attend her shows, and publish flattering poems and reviews in the mosquito press.<sup>11</sup> Some wealthy admirers even formed fan clubs and underwrote popularity polls in newspapers to support “their” actresses (XJYK 1:11:1-3, May 1929; 3:1:1-4, October 1930; Li 1967:121; Liang 1989:60-66).<sup>12</sup> Patronage had a price, however; actresses had to reciprocate with companionship, sexual favors, and, in some cases, marriage.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, actresses created a shared sisterhood of information, opportunities, and struggle. The social barriers and prejudice against actresses forced these women to be conscious of their common predicament and offer mutual aid. This resulted in the formation of group solidarities, typically rooted in kinship ties, regional identities, and master-pupil relationships. The sisterly cooperation, nevertheless, worked more as a survival mechanism than as a political impulse. It was not uncommon for senior actresses to offer professional guidance to their juniors. For example, Hua Furong, a leading actress in the Ping Opera, provided voluntary instruction to Xin Fengxia, who admired Hua's acting style and imitated her singing. Hua even arranged a role for her protégé in her own play. Xin Fengxia developed a genuine partnership and friendship with such actresses as Hua Shulan and Li Zaiwen. Drumsong singer Wei Xiqui also remembered a number of sympathetic actresses who generously shared their own artistic sensibilities with her (Xin 1987:26-29, 269-281; Zhou 1985). On the other hand, actresses hardly presented a united front. As far as scholars can ascertain, no organizations or charity institutions for actresses existed in early twentieth-century Beijing. Stage accomplishments, fame, and income stratified actresses, and professional competition further divided them (Xin 1987:98-99).

### **The Commercial Use of Female Sexuality**

When a woman became a performer, her sexuality might be thought of as transferring from a private concern to the public interest. Male audiences expected stage performers to be young and beautiful, and entertainment managers were quick to discover the profit that resulted from exhibiting the female sex. Market forces thus turned actresses into erotic stars, although actresses to some extent resisted or moderated exploitation of their bodies.

The commercial value of an actress was determined by diverse factors: artistry, age, and physical appearance. Female theatrical careers usually covered three phases totaling about fifteen years: 1) a progressive age between fifteen and twenty; 2) a golden age between twenty one and twenty-five; and 3) a declining age between twenty-six and thirty (XJYK 1:11:8-9, May 1929). Although most of the audience in Beijing respected the traditional stagecraft and more likely "listening to the drama" than "watching the drama," they admired good looks and impressive physical builds. An actress's "beautiful appearance" was at least as important as her talent. As a result, actresses were objectified as sexual commodities that, if inaccessible physically, could at least be visually subjugated.<sup>14</sup> Success often depended on "confirming, rather than challenging, the attitudes to gender of their society" (Howe 1992:37). Fear and humiliation over the public display of their bodies haunted even the most accomplished actresses. As the celebrated clapper opera singer Liu Xiqui lamented in the 1920s,

Unfortunately [Xiqui] takes the acting job and sells her skills to support her mother. It is so pitiful that she has to sacrifice her beautiful appearance and become an entertainer (XJYK 1:12:4, June 1929).

Images of actresses as sexual objects were underscored by "lascivious plays" (*yinxi*), in which women performed indecent acts to satisfy men's sexual appetites. As Elizabeth Howe reveals, English dramatists exploited women's sexuality by creating lurid acting roles, including nudity, rape, sexual comedy, and even "breeches" roles (1992:37-65). In upper-class Chinese drama, explicit sexuality

was less acceptable, so sexual metaphors and symbolism prevailed. In lower-class urban theaters, however, actresses were further exploited in blatant pornographic skits. This new stage fashion began in Shanghai, where actresses exposed their bodies to please spectators.<sup>15</sup> Actresses in Tianjin, Beijing, and other cities followed by the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup> An official document from 1896 characterized “lascivious drama” in this way:

A scholar and a young woman embrace, expose their bodies, and make sensual noises. A *huadan* actress acts in a lust-filled manner. Apart from the acting, dirty language can also arouse an audience’s imagination (Shenbao 25 July 1896).

Among regional operas, the Ping Opera was best known for romantic plots and passionate acting (Han 1987). Leading actress Bai Yushuang earned notoriety as a “licentious performer” (*yinling*), demonstrating her boldness in the play “Catching Flies” (*Zhuocangying*) in which three female fly spirits attempt to seduce two young men. According to one document, “Bai and other two actresses played the roles of fly spirits. They dress in tight white cloth and long scarves, with red *dudou* in front. Their pants are narrow and high above their knees. During the entire performance, the stage was illuminated by colorful lights. The actresses sang and danced as if they were naked. Both the story and lyrics are obscene” (Beijing Archive 1933, 2:3:102, 15 February).<sup>17</sup>

Official reports in the 1930s indicate that Bai was not alone in her audacity. Many other Tianqiao actresses titillated lower-class audiences with coquetry, especially when interacting with males. Audiences responded enthusiastically to the bawdy language and gestures:

The Sanyouxuan (the Three-Friend Theater) has adopted co-acting, which is quite salacious. The actresses are called Daxiangjiao (Big Banana) and Damianbao (Big Bread). Both are in thirties and dressed coquettishly. Their acting is lascivious and their words vulgar beyond acceptance. The lower-class audiences respond wildly and cheer loudly. When the actresses collect money from spectators, they always make off-color jokes (Beijing Archive 1934, 2:3:261, January).

However, actresses in Beijing were not just seen as visual sexual objects whose popularity was based on their beauty and provocative acting. In traditional drama, costumes were loose and did not accentuate the female form. In this context, “amoral behavior” on the stage was most likely suggested by movement and ambiguous language. The popularity of these new dramas with onstage intimacy was squelched by government intervention, disapproval by elites, and Confucian moral codes. At the same time, though, many “serious” audiences wildly applauded excellent performances in singing, speaking, acting, and fighting.<sup>18</sup> Scholars and officials appreciated dramas about politics and female virtue, while commoners preferred religious, romantic, and violent ones (Zhao 1990:237-257). Actresses who played scholars, generals, or old women were not required to display themselves, and many *huadan* actresses focused on artistry rather than flirtation to impress audiences. Accomplished female artists usually detested the sensuality demanded by theater managers.

Actresses often became targets of sexual harassment offstage. In the workplace, young women were at the mercy of managers who could easily take advantage of them. As one theatrical rhyme noted:

The boss of a company won't employ  
An old man or small boy.  
Popular singers are what they prize,  
Poor singers are dirt in their eyes.  
The best age for an actress is eighteen, they say;  
But if they fancy you there's no getting away (Xin 1981:110).

Actresses were most vulnerable when they toured. Local power brokers, government agents, unscrupulous gentry, bandit chieftains, and local thugs threatened them with menacing propositions, asking them to attend drinking parties, to play *majiang* (a gambling game), to sing at a private celebration, or to be a "false daughter." Money and threats further subjugated female artists as sexual playthings. Numerous accounts reveal the anxiety, dread, and bitterness of traveling actresses (Cai 1984:43-54; Chang 1990:145-153; Wang 1985:117-118).

For many actresses, married life provided no respite, since having a theatrical star as a wife or concubine was indicative of a man's social status and power. Actresses were frequently treated as expensive commodities on the marital market, and their personal preferences were frequently ignored.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, however, many actresses longed for the escape that a marriage of free love could provide. Actresses had better opportunities for marriage than most Chinese women of the time because they worked with men, earned their own income, and were more independent as a result of their arduous apprenticeships and professional lives. To pursue a lover was also a means of rebelling against parental control and harassment by men. While marriage was considered a woman's destiny and a vehicle for social respect, it was also appealing to women who chose a very different path.

Actresses had numerous opportunities to form relationships with men independent of parental control. If parents or guardians disapproved of a relationship, an actress could elope or fight for her rights through lawsuits.<sup>20</sup> Some actresses sought marriages based on love; actress Du Yunhong rejected a rich man's proposal and insisted on marrying a young man she loved (XJYK 1:10: 6-7, April 1929). Xue Yanqin, one of the "four great *dan* actresses" in Peking Opera in the 1930s, married Puguang, the brother of the last Chinese emperor, Puyi. He even converted to Islam at Xue's request, divorcing his previous wife in the process (Yanjing 1976:111-130).

Another famous example involved Liu Xikui, who had turned down many wealthy suitors before finally marrying an army officer. As Liu said during a discussion with some literary men:

In terms of the state law, marriage freedom is an individual's sacred right. Some people dare to intervene into my marital affairs and thereby violate the law and ignore the principles of humanism. My marriage has nothing to do with others. If all men in Beijing and Tianjin? or the world? were like those people, then I would rather not marry at all. I would marry only a great man who can kill bandits on horseback and endure hardship,

a man who is bright, straightforward, honest, and simple. Otherwise, I would not marry for a lifetime (Zhang 1937:2:1241).

The notion of romantic love as a precursor to marriage, although a form of resistance, actually helped to bring an end to an actress's career. In nineteenth-century England, age, rather than marital status, played the greatest role in determining the longevity of an actress' career. English actresses could continue their profession after marriage, integrating child rearing and family life with the stage (Davis 1991:53). In China, however, married actresses were not appealing to audiences, because of traditional Chinese mores regarding female virginity. An unmarried actress aroused male fantasies and the hope of marriage. Xin Fengxia told a story of her colleague Mingxia, who secretly married an actor and concealed her pregnancy. Her baby was disguised as her little sister (Xin 1981:104-108). Marriage to an actor might not automatically terminate an actress's career; however, this new dual life created tremendous obstacles. Pregnancy and nursing would interrupt her work, and childcare was difficult to arrange. Living backstage with one's family was possible, but conditions were deplorable. Her reputation would erode, and her roles would become fewer and less important.

Finally, actresses had little chance of maintaining privacy. Young and beautiful women never lacked fans, patrons, and suitors, and thus experienced suspicion, rumors, and gossip regarding their personal lives. Additionally, because they were independent and self-sufficient, actresses defied the categorization assigned to them by Confucianism and thus aroused fear and jealousy in others (XJYK 1:2:7-8, January 1928; 1:6:8-9, November 1928; 1:3:1-2, August 1928; and 3:1:4, October, 1930).

### **Performing Modernity**

As actresses brought increased commercial success to the theater, they also brought increased political values. Nationalist reformers attempted to use actresses as political instruments for the nationalist mobilization. Theater served political elites as a form of cultural influence, which transmitted the dominant ideology to the population. Theater also satisfied the desire among the lower classes to see historical legends, tragedies and comedies brought to life in a manner that might violate official norms or political goals. Thus, on the one hand actresses were cultural agents controlled by the political elite, but on the other, they resisted this very control on behalf of the ordinary people who watched them perform.

The transformation of the theaters' repertoires and actresses' performing styles constituted an urgent agenda in the modern dramatic reform. As a powerful vehicle to diffuse the nationalist notion, the "new drama" (*xinxi*) was created in Japan. During the 1911 Revolution period, Chinese students spread the new drama to Shanghai and other major cities in order to arouse the popular sentiment against the Manchu rulers and to create a national consensus for radical changes. The new drama, or the "Civilized Drama" (*wenmingxi*), was a hybrid of the Western drama and the Chinese opera, featuring contemporary topics and political dialogues. In the 1910s and 1920s, dramatic reformers founded diverse troupes whose purpose was no less than the restructuring of the traditional culture (Oyang 1985). These troupes needed actresses to play women's roles and other prototypes in the transitional society.

Reformers considered actresses in the commercial theater to be merely a symptom of a sick country, contributors to corruption of public morals and the repression of women. Reformers thus sought to turn actresses from mere entertainers into political workers to further their nationalist propaganda campaign. Theatrical personnel became pawns to be used as needed for nation-building. “Theaters are big schools for the populace, and actors are teachers of audiences,” Chen Duxiu declared in 1905. “Without drama,” another reformer pointed out in 1908, “it is impossible to influence the rank and file with patriotic ideas” (Wang 1986:91-92). The political use of theater—a new version of the traditional “moral education from the high stage” (*gaotai jiaohua*)—was further proposed by the May Fourth journal, the *New Youth*, which discredited traditional drama as erotic, superstitious, and violent. At the same time, however, the magazine recommended new types of drama guided by Western realism (Chen and Dong 1989:92-96). Theatrical reformers expected actresses to create an image of new China.

With the goal of informing the masses of the national emergency and China’s entrance into the modern world, theatrical reformers established a cooperative working relationship with actresses. They created new plays, renovated historical dramas, assisted stagehands, and offered professional reviews. This cooperation, however, by no means mirrored the historical theme of literati-courtesan cohesion, but rather the political manipulation of female performers. Although actresses were given the opportunity to perform in “modern-dress dramas” (*Shizhuangxi*) to be part of the women’s emancipation movement, they were primarily tools rather than objects of the transformation.

When Bai Yushuang toured Shanghai in 1935, for instance, she captured the attention of theatrical reformers such as Tian Han, Hong She, and Ouyan Yuqian, who helped Bai revise historical dramas with “anti-feudalistic” themes and guided the Ping Opera into the cinematic era. The Ping Opera film *Haitanghong* (Red Chinese Flowering Crabapple) told the story of an actress’s struggle in a patriarchal society. Columnists Zhao Jinshen and A Ying published essays defending Bai from conservative denunciations by complimenting her performance as decent and reform-oriented (Zhang and Cao 1988:23-25).

Another example of the alliance forged between reformers and actresses can be found in the partnership between Yang Yunpu and his actresses. The child of peasants in Gaoyang, Hebei Province, Yang became a successful *dan* actor in the Hebei Clapper Opera. Deeply influenced by Tian Jiyun, a leading actor and pioneer in theatrical reform when he joined Tian’s Yucheng Troupe in 1905, he devoted himself to the new drama movement. The first actress who became Yang’s theatrical partner was Liu Xikui, a twenty-year-old apprentice. With Yang’s guidance and partnership onstage, Liu emerged as a superstar in Tianjin and Beijing. Yang produced or edited new plays for Liu, which addressed popular concerns of the time. Among them was “The New Tulip” (*Xinchahau*), the story of a romance between a student and a patriotic prostitute, espousing revolutionary ideals and satirizing “fake Republicans.” Liu played the role of the prostitute who ended her relationship with her lover so he could dedicate himself to the defense of the motherland against foreign invaders (Wang 1986:62). After this play, Liu played more roles in dramas written and directed by Yang, and ultimately achieved great fame in Beijing.

In 1915, Yang founded the “Society for Pursuing Virtues” (Zhideshe, later changed to Kuide she), with the investments of a group of theater owners and wealthy actors, and became the troupe’s first director and playwright. This all-female troupe thrived for 24 years, and performed hundreds of “modern-dress dramas,” a clapper opera performed in contemporary dress. The scripts were adaptations of modern novels, movies, and reform-minded newspaper stories that embraced the ideals of free-choice marriage, family reform, the anti-opium campaign, the punishment of abusive rulers, the plight of the working class, and the nationalist salvation.<sup>21</sup> Yang established close ties with the Study Committee of Popular Education in the Education Ministry and adapted reformist scripts on their behalf. He enhanced the quality of his new dramas by seeking advice from young literati, and received remuneration from the government on several occasions. He also developed a friendship with the well-known amateur troupe of the Nankai School in Tianjin, which counted the young Zhou Enlai as one of its activists, adapting their shows and ideas to his own works (Wang 1986:159).

Yang’s construction of the reformist theater also worked in the interest of actresses. Many found employment opportunities in the Society for Promoting Morality (Kuide she) and learned both male and female roles.<sup>22</sup> By cross-dressing and performing male roles, actresses could challenge the established social order. Many clapper opera stars, such as Xian Lingzhi, Qing Fengyun, Xue Yanqin, and Li Guiyun, began their careers in this troupe. As a father-type figure, Young taught young actresses to read and write, and strictly monitored their behavior and social interactions.

Violence, flirting, and obscenities were forbidden onstage, and local officials were frequently invited to rehearsals to reinforce Yang’s “moral surveillance” (Wang 1986:99). Despite these restrictions, many actresses expressed their gratitude to Yang for his protection.

A review of the repertoire developed by the Society for Promoting Morality shows that national crisis and transformation provided a central theme for the reformist theater. In modern China, theater, along with school, literature, and news media, was utilized by the nationalist elite to build the concept of the nation. A nation is an imagined community created by cultural artifacts (Anderson 1991). Theater as a cultural artifact was being used to reformulate and strengthen a sense of national identity. To confront imperialist encroachments and become modern, non-Western societies have to adopt Western concepts, institutions, and technology; on the other hand, they also must preserve their cultural legacies to shape a national identity. The two seemingly contradictory trends were the central themes of the Society for Promoting Morality. Theater as a form of mass media provided nation builders an effective means of educating the masses in both the ways of the modern world and in their historical heritage.

More often than not, the Society for Promoting Morality performed revues that depicted a country in jeopardy. China was shown as wracked with imperialist divisions, political disorder, bureaucratic inefficiency, moral decay, class differentiation, economic failure, and technological backwardness. In contrast, Western countries embodied industrial power, advanced technology, democratic government, individual rights, and gender equality—components that sustain modern society. The Society for Promoting Morality constantly sponsored shows that compared China and the West, the traditional and the modern, and the weak and the strong, suggesting that China needed to “catch up.” The play “Correspondence,” for instance, highlighted the prevailing social and economic predicaments and

pointed out that only the enlightened new youth were able to save the country. A servant took his turn to complain in the play, “If you ask what things are oversupplied in China, I would say that illiterate folks are oversupplied. Under these circumstances, the modern schools are far from adequate. What can those folks do without education? In China, there are too few factories but too many unemployed people. How can people survive without employment? Similarly, we cannot produce enough, so we have to import more, and consequently weaken our hard currency” (Wang 1986:209). In the play, the central character, an educated wife, becomes suspicious of her husband, who is overseas, and decides to teach in an orphanage. The introduction to the script states that the play is intended to arouse enthusiasm in business and encourage youth to act on behalf of the nation.

In the nationalist discourses, the Manchu government was portrayed as an out-of-date, incompetent, and corrupt regime responsible for the country’s backwardness and humiliation. To achieve the goal of modernity, therefore, Chinese people should replace the Manchu government with a democratic one that would lead the country to independence. Many plays captured this theme of revolution through scripts about how the ruling elite abused power, accumulated vast personal properties, and sold national rights to foreigners. A play called “The Story of a Begging Hero” extolled a beggar who rescued a female student from an evil member of the gentry. The beggar later joined the revolutionary army and died in a battle against the gentry and with the Manchu officials behind him. The play depicted the gentry, bureaucrats, and police as evil puppets of the imperialist powers while showing strong compassion toward the oppressed commoners. The author condemned the abusive local elite through the confession of the son of the gentry, who said, “My father is a big gentry and my father-in-law is a high official. Everyone curses me for my lack of morality. It is because my father gives me too much dirty money.” The beggar represented the nationalist spirit, however. “A beggar enjoys freedom,” he boasted. “He is not afraid of the rent collectors, the imperialist powers, or the bandits” (Wang 1986:172-175). This play, like many others, served the purposes of both the reformers and ordinary citizens. The reformers proposed a revolution to build up a strong nation-state, whereas the commoners anticipated the elimination of class distinctions and improved living conditions.

The concept of nationalism provided Chinese with the theories, methods, popular support, and leadership to achieve modernity. Such a nation was able to withstand imperialist aggressions and claim equal status with Western powers. This modern nation could be developed only through adopting Western cultural artifacts, including the idea of gender egalitarianism. The new Chinese intellectuals associated a country’s backwardness and marginal economic power with women, and modernity and the values of science and progress with men. They positioned women “as symbolic of China’s lack of power, authority, and prestige as a modern nation-state” (Larson 1998:26). Indeed, recent publications show that the construction of gender is the foundation of nation-building (Sievers 1983; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Parker, et al. 1992; Duara 1998). Scholars find that, in many developing countries, the tropes of women—nation as female, woman as national mother and dutiful daughter, and woman as the symbol of femininity—were reiterated, even though cultural conditions vary (Parker, et al. 1992). Chinese reformers attacked the traditional social practices and beliefs that kept women illiterate, confined, and physically weak as barriers to modern progress, thus placing the issue of women’s emancipation in a nationalistic context.

However, women's rights issues can be interpreted and understood distinctively by different social categories. Chinese reformers promoted educated mothers and productive wives as tools for growth of national wealth, but women themselves might benefit from the associated increase in personal dignity, freedom outside the homes, and economic autonomy. This is probably why the young actresses in the Society for Promoting Morality loved to play the roles of new women who pursued husbands of their own choosing and professional employment. It can also explain why this "new women's show" was so appealing to female audiences (Wang 1986:218). The new women's spirit was best illustrated by the dramatic piece called "The Mirror of Freedom," in which a daughter of an elite family disobeys her father to marry her lover. Though the girl endures tremendous hardships, she finally achieves happiness. One of her speeches reveals the philosophy of the free-choice marriage. The daughter pulls out a handgun and says:

Your daughter is not threatening you today with the gun. She is striving for women's freedom and rights. I believe that the traditional marriage that is determined by parents and matchmakers is the result of China's isolation. Women are contained at home and know nothing about the outside world, which is why they obey their parents.... Your daughter is educated and hates this unreasonable custom. She intends to imitate the Western women and determine her own marriage (Wang 1986:149-150).

Parallel to marriage reform, the improvement of family relations provided another topic for plays by the Society for Promoting Morality. The ideal of the new family was derived out of admiration of the notion of the Western family, which was presumed to be smaller, more productive, and with more egalitarian relationships than its Chinese counterpart. The nation-state relied on family solidarity, however. When reformers suggested the abolition of such traditional practices as arranged marriage, concubinage, parental authority, and the employment of domestic slaves, they didn't necessarily oppose Confucian family values. The scripts adopted by the Society for Promoting Morality warned against those who took concubines, smoked opium, wasted money, trusted troublemakers, or mistreated subordinates, and advocated the notions of filial piety, benevolence, frugality, marital fidelity, and social harmony. In the play "The Root of Family Disaster," a rich official is murdered because he took the advice of his servant and married a concubine. The author wrote in the prelude: "Those who want to be virtuous wives and filial daughters have to watch; those who want to be good sons and cousins have to watch; those who want to find loyal and honest servants have to watch; and those who want to take concubines have to watch" (Wang 1986:140-141). The strengthening of conventional family values was actually a search for cultural authenticity and spiritual superiority in the face of rapid change and Western material culture.

Another contribution actresses made to the glorification of cultural authenticity was the recreation of heroine images on stage. While the new women, as cultural hybrids, were essentially Chinese and filled with the ineffable Chinese spirit, the traditional heroines were even better exemplars of the Chinese ethical strength. On the stage of the Society for Promoting Morality, virtuous women were depicted as having two-sided characters: self-sacrificing and fighting for justice. The two prototypes overlapped in their moral sensibilities and in their correction of men's wrongdoings. These women could be courtesans, maidens, scholars, soldiers, or housewives, but they shared common noble qualities. They

were presented by actresses as brave, upright, wise, and generous. Their stories denounced wicked males for injustice, deception, cruelty, and treachery, while setting examples for female resistance. In the play “Cold Man” (Buoxinglang), courtesan Chungui mistrusts scholar Xiang Dongping and spends all of her savings to buy Xiang a rank. Yet when Xiang traveled to an official post, he refused to recognize Chungui, who had been first abused as Xiang’s concubine and then sold to a brothel as a prostitute. Outraged, Chungui kills herself by drowning and returns as a ghost to seek revenge (Wang 1986:145-146). “Female Marquise” was another play about a young woman who was captured by her father’s killer and misunderstood by her fiancée. She avenges her father’s death, escapes from a mistrial, and finally achieves glory by fighting pirates (Wang 1986:206-207). Some playwrights packaged familiar moral stories in modern wrappings. “The Widow,” for instance, depicted female moral integrity, determination, and dedication to love through a tale of free love. The heroine, Kong Yunzhen, married for love the son of a rich merchant. The merchant found his runaway son and forced him to marry another woman; abandoned, Yunzhen rears her son. Eventually, she commits suicide to save her ex-husband’s family honor (Wang 1986:231-232). The drama served less to praise marriage for love than to honor motherhood and self-sacrificing virtue.

Actresses in the Society for Promoting Morality also played roles that served only the interests of ordinary audiences. Actually, many historical pieces or news stories show simple entertainment, with little political or moral significance. Thrilling, bizarre, outlandish, and compassionate plots were what the majority of spectators sought. Playwrights and directors had to find a compromise between the goals of propaganda and the interests of commoner audiences. Jennifer Robertson points out that, as dominant ideologies were rarely stable or effective, “It was in the interest of ideologues to allow some of the subtexts to surface some of the time, a practice tantamount to an affective approach to social control” (1999:112). Urban commoners suffered from dislocation, poverty, political turmoil, and the transformation to modernity. They were exploited and bullied by the powerful and wealthy, and needed an outlet for their anger and helplessness. When they saw bad guys being punished and justice served, they might share the feeling of victory with the play’s heroes or heroines. Women liked to see depictions of romantic tragedies or successful love marriages, which reminded them of their own experiences and gave them hope. Religious shows and action plays provided escape from lives of hard work and deprivation. As actresses performed for the benefit of ordinary people, their interactions with audiences produced a “performance consciousness,” a collective capacity to engage imaginatively in the construction of potential worlds which might subsequently influence the audiences’ actions (Kershaw 1992:25-99).

### **Government Policies Toward Actresses**

The late imperial government adopted contradictory policies toward the theater and the multiple functions it served in Chinese society. On one hand, the theater was entrenched in the public’s daily life, and the government had to tolerate its existence. On the other hand, the theater aroused suspicion and dissatisfaction among the ruling elite because it distracted people from work and caused them to spend money needlessly, behave immorally, and promulgate ideas and behavior that violated orthodox indoctrinations. The government thus regulated the times when plays were performed and the locations of theaters, supervised both actors and audiences, censored all stage programs, and added a Confucian

influence (Dolby 1976:114-183; Wu 1989:379-380, 388). The presence of women in the theater was considered inappropriate, because they might socialize with men or be carried away by the drama. In the name of defending female chastity and family order, the Qing government (1644-1912) banned females from theaters both as performers and patrons. The regime relied on traditional ideologies and gender roles to legitimate its rule,<sup>23</sup> and thus opposed women's presence in public or in the entertainment business. Since the Kangxi reign (1669-1722), the government had exiled female dancers from Beijing, and warned state employees not to mingle with them. Actresses were considered prostitutes and faced severe punishment if they dared enter the capital city (Wang 1981:20-86).

Government censorship was particularly austere during the Qing Dynasty, as the Manchu elite claimed themselves defenders of Confucian morality. Theatrical performances that jeopardized official image or the concepts of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, social harmony, and gender distinctions, or that praised popular rebellion, heterodox religion, and romance were strongly discouraged or even prohibited. Officials understood that ordinary citizens learned about history and morality from these dramas, and so could be misled by "wrong" programs. A Qing scholar expressed his concerns on the negative effects of the licentious shows:

If they see shows about evildoers, thieves, and amorous adventures in which clowns and *dan* performers act dissolutely, youths will lose their spirit. Men will escape from home to attend dramas, while women will dream of romance and commit adultery (Wang 1981:173-174).

In the crusade against moral corruption in the theater, bureaucrats identified outlaw actresses as scapegoats to be condemned for "promoting sex" onstage and making romantic love "fashionable" (Wang 1981:314-318). Such allegations continued through the end of the Qing and intensified when the trend of men and women acting onstage together emerged. Local authorities discovered that the love scenes were so powerful that even students of new schools were captivated. At that time, the Qing government was engaged in the New Policies reforms (1902-1911), and expected citizens? especially new intellectuals? to participate in the development of modernization projects. The actresses' performances obviously attracted viewers for reasons ranging from political concerns to personal enjoyment, and thus competed with the state for control of the masses. It was from this mindset that censor Li Zhuohua memorialized the throne in 1906, and requested that mixed-sex acting and onstage flirtation be forbidden:

School students are distracted into theatergoing when they watch a show. This phenomenon violates the principles of the school and the goal of cultivating useful personnel. Daughters of elite families will be involved in romantic adventures if they see a performance. The mixed plays will thus terribly impair moral codes and the people's honor (The First National Archive 1501:210, 4 May 1906).

Before a consensus was reached on how to deal with the mixed-sex acting, the government tightened its policy against so-called "licentious drama" (*yinxì*). In the Temporary Regulations of Violations by the

Qing Police Ministry in 1906, actresses who sang or performed in an erotic fashion faced a three- to ten-day jail sentence or a fine (The First National Archive 1501:107, 4 September 1906).

The Republican regime founded in 1912 initially lifted many repressive laws and expanded citizens' rights. Foot binding and domestic slavery were banned, professional schools were opened for girls, and women were allowed to enter public places. Feminist women raised their profile in public, organizing societies, publishing journals and newspapers, and launching suffrage campaigns. Actresses joined this "going public" movement and created examples of female employment. Their appearance onstage with men gave the fatal blow to the rule of public separatism and encouraged women to seek a hetero-social life pattern. During the succeeding years (1917-1927), warlordism undermined governmental intervention in the shaping of popular culture and gave rise to a chaotic but probably favorable political environment for the growth of actresses. The government, however, continued the Qing moral surveillance but accepted the programs permeated with the nationalist rhetoric and Western concepts embraced by the new intellectuals. A statute issued by Beijing police in 1912 required actresses to have their own dressing rooms in theaters and not to play minor roles with men. All "licentious and superstitious shows" were prohibited, as was obscene behavior in "romantic shows" (Jingshi jinchating 1915:367-370). In an attempt to separate sexes in the public sphere, co-acting and mixed troupes were banned in Tianjin and Beijing during the 1910s and 1920s, in conjunction with regulations against waitresses, prostitutes who visited movie theaters and restaurants, and female dancers (XJYK 1:5:2-3, October 1928; Gamble 1921:224; Wu 1989:448, 513). The governmental guideline ran counter to the commercial exploitation of actresses' sexuality, which was applauded by male audiences, and actresses found themselves caught between two mutually exclusive roles. On the one hand, actresses had to accommodate the requests of the theater managers who sought profit through arranging low taste shows. On the other, they must obey the official regulations against the unprincipled theater and behave themselves in public. The government attempted to prevent actresses from being involved in mixed-sex or amoral performances, as well as restrict the heretical impact of actresses on female audiences.

When the government tried to restore sexual segregation on stage, it also attempted to distinguish actresses from prostitutes, as a way to construct a positive image for public women. The Beijing police enforced the separation of actresses from workers in the sex industry. In 1916, the head of the Home Ministry alleged that actresses engaged in prostitution under the guise of women's liberation. He ordered local police to terminate that "amoral practice" and enforce the appropriate roles for women, such as "virtuous wives and wise mothers" (Chenzhong 4 October 1916). In 1917, the Beijing police reiterated the previous demand that actresses not invite customers to their homes, lest they be harshly punished (Chenzhong 23 February 1917). In accordance with police regulations, the Minister of Education, Fan Yuanlian, announced that students who seduced or eloped with actresses would be immediately dismissed from school (Chenzhong 3 March 1917).

The endeavor to build a decent image for actresses was even extended to the issue of fashion. As bellwethers of female fashion, actresses were advised to abandon any suggestive or outlandish clothes. In 1916, Beijing chief of police Wu Bingxiang prohibited female performers from wearing stylish clothes (Chenzhong 26 October 1916). Additionally, the police informed all troupes in the city that actresses

could not dress like men; violators would be fined and deprived of acting opportunities (Chenzhong 25 September 1917).

After the reunification of China by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) in 1928, the Nanking government (1928-1937) adopted a more authoritarian style in its management of the theater. Theater became the technology of nationalist penetration; actresses were assigned the mission of enlightening the common people and being role models for other women. The government expected them to be patriotic, public-minded, and self-disciplined, publicly exemplifying feminine virtues and cultural legacies.<sup>24</sup> Their shows should inform the audience about science and modern progress while cultivating national pride.

In 1932, the government established the “Examination Committee of Drama in the Social Bureau” to screen dramas, story telling, music, and cinema. The goal of the committee was “to improve the social mode and assist education” (Beijing Archive 2:3:48, October 1932-November 1933). Theatrical programs that fell outside those criteria were simply prohibited. The committee investigated alleged violations of its regulations, and advised the municipal government on corrective actions. At the same time, erotic shows were criminalized, and all scripts were consequently subjected to official scrutiny. Actresses could no longer walk downstage and flirt with audiences (Beipingshi Gonganju 1933:104-105). When Bai Yushuang performed the show “Catching Flies,” she was accused of being a “contaminant” and expelled from Beijing by the mayor (Zhang and Cao 1988:43-44).

In addition, the nationalist municipality upheld the virtuous standard for women in public. Women were treated as men’s private property who could harm male interests and violate the law through social mingling with men and pre- or extra-marital affairs. The police department continued to prohibit actresses’ and prostitutes’ fashionable clothes, ensured that couples who stayed in the same hotel room were married, strictly supervised public bathhouses for females, and forbade sexually mixed apartments for singles (Wu 1989:526, 531).

## **Conclusion**

When women gained entry into the early twentieth-century entertainment industry, they rediscovered an ancient legacy of performing—entertaining men through theatrical arts—that both liberated and constrained. Chinese theater provided women with an opportunity to market their sexuality in a manner that generally fell short of outright prostitution. Meanwhile, the trade provided lower-class girls a way out of abject poverty. Male popular culture increased demand for overtly sexual female performers, but the stage also allowed women to demonstrate the skills of self-sufficiency and professional accomplishment. For Chinese actresses, work did not entirely confirm the notion of male dominance and female submission; it also provided women an outlet for perseverance, courage, and talent.

Modern politics shaped actresses’ identities. Nationalist mobilization elevated their social respect and stature, as these women recaptured the traditional feminine values and suggested the direction of social

changes. Actresses faced conflicted expectations from different social forces. They were cast to be erotic entertainers, moral exemplars, propagandists, new women, or spokeswomen for commoners. They were transformed by the modern theater as much as they redefined the theatrical world. The new drama movement enabled actresses to understand their mission as educators of the masses. Actresses participated in the nation-building process through presenting diverse human roles whose stories conveyed new ideals, policies, concepts, and social conduct. The fictional plots of women's emancipation also provided a learning process in which actresses could adopt the concepts of personal rights, self-determined marriage, and economic autonomy. Actresses represented female submissiveness as well as rebelliousness. They also recreated role models onstage for women to imitate. Their performances opened a corner in the public domain for women to share their suffering, emotions, experiences, and hopes.

Actresses also were pioneering "working women," able and willing to change their dependent status by venturing into unfamiliar territory. Nonetheless, their experiences foretold the plights of countless other women who demanded equal opportunities in Chinese society—a society that dominated women as much as it exalted them. For actresses, the "body problem" worsened with prosperity and fame. Men regarded most women as sexual toys, expendable labor, or decorative ornaments. Women had to compromise for job opportunities and professional growth; effort and talent were not always the decisive factors in success. If they intended to work within the system, they had to accommodate the predominantly male social institutions. Additionally, actresses risked becoming caught up in the social transformations personified by the roles they played as political instruments. The Chinese state, despite minor variations, always sustained the ideal of gender distinctions and opposed or restrained women's public roles. In the case of Beijing, actresses were banned by the Qing court for threatening family values, monitored for demonstrating inappropriate female behavior by the Beiyang government, and used in an entirely new way to disseminate the official ideology of the Nationalist Party. The stories of actresses' survival and prosperity nonetheless demonstrate the tremendous endurance, flexibility, intelligence, and strength of these Chinese women. With little knowledge of feminist consciousness and little direction, actresses at the very least proved to other Chinese women that there were options for social and professional growth beyond the home.

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## Notes

1. Zhou Huiling (1996) analyzes cross-gender performances by women and the meaning of the May Fourth theatrical reforms. Weikun Cheng (1996) reveals the actresses' challenge of Confucian moral norms and social order.
2. Susan Mann (1993) argues that there were two foundations for women's sexuality: One was built on the family and child-rearing; the other was based on prostitution.
3. Records from 1930 count 194 accomplished actresses in Beijing theaters (XJYK, 2, no. 11 July 1930:1-15). Sidney Gamble witnessed that at least eleven theaters hired female performers in early Republican Beijing (1921:224).
4. The first theatrical guild in Beijing was established in the seventeenth century and led successively by actors Cheng Changgeng, Tan Xinpei, and Tian Jiyun. The guild owned two properties: the Loyalty Temple (Jinzhongmao) and the Theatrical Lodging (Liyuanguan). It served as a lodge and a charity home for actors, assisting with accommodations, retirement, burial, and poverty funds. In 1924, a new assembly hall was built, complete with a temple in the rear, called the Nine God Temple (Jiuhuangtang). The gods, some Buddhist and others Taoist, were all males. Actors, performing as priests, held a worship ceremony each September on behalf of the entire acting trade (Zhang 1937:2:1213-1219).
5. Tianqiao, or "Bridge of Heaven," was an old marble bridge outside Qianmen. Visitors crossed it to reach Tiantan, or the "Temple of Heaven." Since the fifteenth century, Tianqiao was an entertaining and commercial center for lower-class visitors (Bredon 1931:477; Cheng 1990; Zhang 1951; Liang 1989).
6. The gay quarter in the south city was divided into two areas along the Zhushikuo Street. Theaters on the north side of the street were considered elite playhouses and rarely hired performers from the Tianqiao theaters on the south (Xin 1982:296; Wang 1992; Cheng 1990:308).
7. Families were frequently deceived and females were taken away under the pretext of employment, marriage, or adoption. Women traffickers in Beijing were called "*zhazihang*" (human junk). They developed a network, jargon, and complicated strategies to seize women and then sell them to brothels or theaters (Li 1937:3:441-2; Lian 1995:447-51).

8. A well-known example was actress Bai Yushuang, whose adopted daughter with the stage name Xiao Bai Yushuang (Bai Yushuang Jr.) became her professional heir (Li 1980).

9. For instance, colleagues would not allow a drumsong singer to perform if he or she didn't have a teacher and belong to a school. Sometimes a master performer could confiscate the instrument and earnings of a novice who lacked a connection to a patriarch of the craft (Lian 1995:332-3).

10. Dorothy Ko (1994:255) defines the Chinese courtesan culture through three characteristics: "Its indispensable role in the public life of scholar-officials; the primacy of music and poetry as the vocabulary of social interaction and the recognition of women as artistic creators; and the permeability of its boundary with the domestic world."

11. "Mosquito press" refers to the urban newspapers and journals which focused on local news, scandals, and entertainment. Those publications were usually non-political and non-factional, catering to the taste of petty urbanites.

12. Several elections of female drumsinging stars were held in Beijing newspapers in the 1920s and 30s. The elected stars were granted the titles of "Ph.D.," "princess," or "prime minister" (Zhang 1936:48-9). Male elites patronized major theaters and visited the "Opera Houses" (Luoziguan) in Tianqiao to compete for the favors of young female singers (Zhang 1951:191-4).

13. Writer Zhang Henshui (1930), a patron of drumsong in Tianqiao, tells about a story of love between an upper-class boy and a drumsong girl. The boy offered an educational opportunity to the girl. In return, the girl showed him romantic affection.

14. "Sexual objectification," writes Catherine McKinnon (1982:541), "is the primary process of the subjugation of women."

15. Actress Zhou Yue once exposed her body on the stage for price. Another actress, Jin Yuemei, received a fine of \$50 for revealing her breasts during a show (XJYK, 1, no. 2 July 1928:6-8).

16. For instance, "Huaguxi" (the Flowering Drum Show) was popular in Hunan, Hubei, and Anhui in the 1890s for its romantic plots and debauched co-acting between a male and a female. "Tianjin shidiao" (the Tianjin Current Tune), a vulgar and lewd singing style derived from brothels, was also adopted by professional female singers in the north (Liu and Min Jie 1998:2:43).

17. In the 1940s, actresses in Peking Opera were also used by troupe managers to play vulgar and erotic shows to increase ticket sales (Liu 1995:51:171-87).

18. Amateur audiences enjoyed the drama not only through watching and listening, but also through “catching the spirit” (*guan qishen*), or understanding the acting style (Zhao 1990:164-170). Some dramatic fans took the side seats and concentrated on listening. They called theater-going not watching the drama (*kanxi*) but listening to the drama (*tingxi*) (Ding 1977:80-1).

19. In those years, no mothers of young actresses allowed their daughters to marry poor actors. “When you grow up you must find yourself a rich husband,” Xin Fengxa’s mother once told her. “Not an actor, mind you. You have got to improve yourself.” Sometimes, company heads also arranged marriages for their actresses. One of Xin Fengxa’s stage sisters committed suicide because she resisted the marriage arranged by her boss (Xin 1981:100-1, 108).

20. Bai Yushuang was involved in an elopement in the 1940s. She fell in love with an ordinary actor in her troupe and eloped to the man’s home village. She dressed as a normal peasant wife and endured the harsh rural life for six months (Guo 1988:7:105-21). Wang Juxian, a star actress, brought with her all the jewels and cash she had accumulated for years when she eloped with a fan of hers (Chenbao 22 June 1923). Cai Jinfeng and Zhenzhu Hua, the two stage sisters, each loved a college student. When their adoptive mother opposed their marriages, they filed a lawsuit against her (Chenbao 21 January 1922).

21. Kuide she put on 46 plays between 1915 and 1919. Among them, 17 were traditional and 29 were new (Wang 1986:138-39).

22. One hundred and ten actresses joined Kuide she between 1915 and 1918 (Wang 1986:85). Zhou Huiling (1996) argues that the May Fourth dramatists opposed cross-role acting and subjugated actresses to female roles in the newly emerging speaking drama (*huaju*) of Western realism. Kuide she, however, was a clapper opera company which, although it absorbed ideas and techniques from the speaking drama, still kept the cross-role acting tradition.

23. As Joan Scott (1996:173) points out, “Gender is one of the recurrent references by which political power has been conceived, legitimated, and criticized.”

24. Prasenjit Duara (1998:287-308) argues that, in the process of modernization, women were represented by the nationalist patriarchy as the embodiment of the Chinese authenticity. To defend Confucian femininity was a way to shape national unity.

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