Sexual Artifice Through Transgression: The Revival of Cross-Gender Performance in Jingju

Abstract

This study is about—and beyond—the unprecedented revival of cross-gender performance in theatre, especially the male-to-female cross-gender performance in jingju (Beijing Opera), known as nandan. Through years long pre-investigations of the scene, archival work of its history, and case studies of individuals, this project examines the specificity and universality of the (in)coherences between sense of gender, sexuality, gender identities, gender mannerisms, transgressive desires and cross-gender performance behind the advocate of “historical authenticity” and “the return to the social and cultural norm.” Over twenty informants have contributed to the research with their narratives and observations in the scene.

The project ends up with the observation that the transgressive potential of performing out of one’s biological sex is peculiar not only to one individual or one theatrical form, but to humankind in general. The conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis may subvert some of the prevailing epistemologies of gender and sex. Firstly, there is no singular gendered subject. Gender discourse only exists in a “signifier-and-signified” relation to the subject’s perception of other gendered bodies. Secondly, it is not precise to claim that gender is socially or culturally constructed. Gender is reconstructed or amplified out of its ontological attributes based on biological differences, whose existence should be acknowledged. Reiteration does not precisely “do” gender, but may affect it to some extent, as there is a core sense of gendered self, albeit unsettled oftentimes, which is “inalienable” and “inseperatable.” Thirdly, gender may be performable, as in jingju, while gender performance and gender performativity are interchangeable only when they are not placed in a context to discuss their association with identity. In this sense, incoherence does not only exist between gender, sexuality and desires, but also between gender identities, gender mannerisms and gender behaviors. It may be concluded that gender transgression should not be understood on its own terms, but in a context of all social and cultural regulation and institutionalization that regard the interchangeability of signifiers of maleness and of femaleness as a threat to mainstream perception.

Keywords: cross-gender performance, gender and sexuality, jingju, nandan, theatre, gender transgression, gender relativity, transgressionism