
Intermedial Cross-dressing Performance as Cultural Intervention

CHENGZHOU HE 

Nanjing University, School of Arts, Nanjing 210093, People's Republic of China.
Email: chengzhou@nju.edu.cn

As a theatrical phenomenon, cross-dressing performance has passed down through many centuries and manifested itself in different parts of the world. In the era of film and television, it was adapted to and has appeared on screen, as a popular means of entertaining the audience, and so plays an important role in influencing public opinions on certain social and cultural issues, such as the politics of gender and interculturalism. In light of theories of gender performativity and cultural agency, the intermediality of cross-dressing performance is approached in this article, mainly based on a careful analysis of Li Yugang's solo shows on TV, the Chinese film *Farewell My Concubine*, and the American film *M. Butterfly*. By having the intermedial intersected with gender and interculturalism, this article argues that intermedial cross-dressing performance, on the one hand, has transformative power over gender politics, as it contributes to the gradual acceptance of differences in gender as well as other social categories. On the other hand, in some cross-dressing performances on screen, the subversive and the reiterative are blended together in cross-dressing performance, which undermines the legitimization of sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norms. In addition, the entanglement of intermediality and interculturalism in cross-dressing performance in such a film as *M. Butterfly* contributes to critical reflections on cultural and categorical boundaries, which has profound implications for cross-cultural communications.

Introduction

Paris Is Burning, an American documentary film (1990), is about the cross-dressing performance of a group of drags and their lives in the 1980s in New York. This film is significant for its representation of an important urban subculture, which later had a

huge impact on gender politics in the United States and beyond. As both an imitation and parody of binary gender norms, cross-dressing has prevailed across different media, such as theatre, film, TV and the internet, and has become a prominent cultural phenomenon in many parts of the world since the 1980s. In China, cross-dressing, which is deeply rooted in the theatrical tradition, such as Kun opera, Peking opera and Yue opera, has in recent decades re-emerged in various talent show programmes on TV and in some prestigious films, which have also been made accessible on the internet and won enormous popular appeal among generations of young audiences. Undoubtedly, the representation of cross-dressing in various media and across cultures, although ambiguous and controversial from time to time, has had transformative power on the cultural recognition of gender as well as the conventional understandings of social stereotypes and norms.

The different categories of intermediality that are embedded in the specificities of cultural productions and transmissions achieve performative effects as the intermedial events unfold under particular circumstances. The intermediality of cross-dressing performance, which comes along with the changing aesthetic tastes of the audiences, cannot be analysed without an integration of different approaches. By having the intermedial intersected with gender and interculturalism, this article intends to discuss the following questions: How is cross-dressing represented in and across different media? What complexities does cross-dressing performance entail as an intermedial event? How has cross-dressing performance been perceived and received under specific circumstances? Based on an analysis of some typical examples of cross-dressing performance across media, mainly in Chinese culture, but with a comparative approach, this article deals with cross-dressing performance and its implications both locally and interculturality.

The Transformative Power of Cross-dressing Performance across Media

As a theatrical and cultural phenomenon, cross-dressing performance has passed down through many centuries and manifested itself in different parts of the world. In Elizabethan England, women were not allowed to perform onstage, so men had to impersonate women and play their roles. For a long time, Italian opera featured a female impersonator, usually a castrato, who was castrated before puberty in order to retain the high notes and the ranges of his immature voice. In Chinese opera, the male *dan* (男旦) tradition (i.e., female roles played by male actors) lasted a very long time, and one of its greatest representatives in modern times was Mei Lanfang, who was known both domestically and internationally for his impersonation of ancient Chinese beauties onstage. The male-to-female impersonation seems to have universal appeal across cultures. As Lithgow (2005: 7) observes:

That the sight of a man playing a woman can indeed be hilarious. But it can also be horrific. And it can be deeply moving. Switching genders is the most

potent tool an actor has to startle an audience, whether his intent is to muse, to frighten, or to move them. It is a mysterious weapon, and its power is derived from the darkest, most unknowable mystery: deep down, what is the opposite sex really like?

When film became a dominant means of public entertainment, cross-dressing performance was manipulated to attract the audiences, who were curious about its process of transformation. In addition, the peculiarities of cross-dressing were taken advantage of in the plot to set up some dramatic situations and gags. In many twentieth century Western movies, cross-dressing is employed as an effective means to create comic atmosphere in a romantic comedy, and its manifestations include men dressed as women or women dressed as men. As Lithgow (2005: 8) argues:

Female impersonation retained its stature as reliable comic relief with the invention of the 'flickers' in the early 20th century, maintaining this status through the silent era all the way to the present. Therefore, when in 2000 the American Film Institute listed the 100 funniest movies, it came as no surprise to me that the gender-bending classics *Some Like It Hot* and *Tootsie* ranked number one and two respectively.

Since the 1980s, cross-dressing comedy shows have abounded on Western television, such as the character Edna Everage. The actor's real name is Barry Humphries, an Australian comedian, who first cross-dressed as Aunt (later, Dame) Edna Everage in his performances onstage and achieved great success. 'Dame Edna is, in fact, a theatrical phenomenon: the only solo act to play (and fill) the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane since it opened for business in 1663 with Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Humorous Lieutenant*' (Lahr 1992: 2). When his cross-dressing performance was remediated on Television, he became even more popular.

Humphries's cross-dressing performance is characterized by a blending of comedy and drag. In addition to its comic effects for entertainment, the public images of such cross-dressing performances serve to enlighten people about the fluidity of gender identity, which is consequential in challenging gender norms and defending the rights of various minorities groups. Therefore, cross-dressing performance becomes embodied with ideological implications for social justice for those who live in the margins of society. Richard Schechner says,

Butler argues that gender as performed in contemporary Western societies enacts a normative heterosexuality that is a major tool for enforcing a patriarchal, phallogocentric social order. Thus Butler politicizes non-heterosexual (queer, gay, lesbian, drag, etc.) sexuality and positions these behaviors in opposition to the hegemonic male-dominated/defined social order. (Schechner 2002: 132)

During the 1950s to 1970s, cross-dressing, which used to dominate traditional Chinese theatre, almost disappeared as it was generally dismissed as abnormal or degrading in the revolutionary discourse, which echoes what Lu Xun once

commented on male *dan* in the 1920s. In his article ‘Lun Zhaoxiang Zhi Lei’ (‘On Photography and the Like’, 1924), Lu Xun was highly critical of female impersonation:

Female impersonators, however, come across as being most extraordinary because they do not always let us feel at ease. They appear to the opposite sex from the perspective of either men or women. Men see in them women and women see in them men. They are thus forever on display behind the windows of photo studios, and in the hearts of the Chinese people. (Quoted in Wang 2003: 133)

In China, modernity and revolution are often associated with masculinity, while feudalism and anti-revolutionary activities are often symbolized by ‘unnatural’ women’s images, such as ‘small-feet old women’ and feminized men. During the Chinese revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, images of masculinity were vigorously praised and propagated, while feminized men were demonized and marginalized. However, in the aftermath of the reform and opening up of China at the end of the 1970s, cross-dressing went through a revival, not so much in theatre, as the impersonation tradition of male *dan* actors was discontinued, but in cinema and on TV. One of the most successful films which features cross-dressing is *Bawang bieji* (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993), directed by the fifth-generation Chinese film director Chen Kaige, in which an internationally acclaimed film star Zhang Guorong (Leslie Cheung) plays the major role of Cheng Dieyi. Other films include *Donggong xigong* (*East Palace, West Palace*, 1996), and *Mei Lanfang* (*Forever Enthralled*, 2008) in which Li Ming, another leading Hong Kong actor, plays Mei Lanfang.

In the new millennium, there emerged a new phenomenon of cross-dressing performance on TV, especially in talent show programmes, with *Xingguang dadao* (*Avenue of Stars*, 星光大道) on China Central Television as the most well-known, which witnessed the dramatic success of some grassroot performers almost overnight. One of the most representative performers is Li Yugang, whose charm and cross-dressing performance did not just overwhelm the domestic audiences, but also deeply impressed an international audience in many places all over the world. In addition, there appeared a number of young performers imitating Li Yugang, including on talent shows, which rendered cross-dressing performance into a nationwide cultural phenomenon with far-reaching consequences on gender and cultural politics.

While working as a bar singer, Li Yugang developed his talent for singing in both male and female voices. Having received some training from a *dan* actor of Peking opera, he took part in the talent show competition, *Xingguang dadao*, in 2006 and won third place in the yearly final, which made him a pop star and idol among many young people. Ever since, Li Yugang began to hold personal concerts both in China and abroad, in which he impersonated some well-known ancient beauties such as Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan and Yang Guifei. His cross-dressing performances were broadcast on TV, transmitted through DVD, and watched on the internet, which further attracted a huge number of audiences, many of whom turned into his

devoted fans. Then, he was invited to perform at the Spring Festival Gala of China Central Television successively in 2012 and 2013, which consolidated his reputation as an artist of cross-dressing performance. It also means that he and his art were both officially approved by the authorities and enthusiastically supported and welcomed by the majority of audiences in China, which has profound cultural implications.

While indebted to *dan* performance in Peking opera, Li Yugang's cross-dressing performance is very different from opera and attained a unique style. He does not hide his real identity as a man. Instead, he takes advantage of his ability to sing and perform both male and female parts, which usually surprises his audiences in a pleasant manner. In an interview, he spoke candidly: 'I'm not exactly an opera singer. I don't wear oil painting makeup, and I make my own costumes, which are different from traditional Peking Opera costumes' (Huang 2012). While Li Yugang has appropriated and remediated Peking opera, his cross-dressing performance itself is characterized by an intermedial mingling of opera, talent show, fashion, modern choreography, music concert, and so on, which not only satisfies the aesthetic taste of the new generations, but also renders the performance a commercial success.

The wide appeal of cross-dressing performance represented by Li Yugang demonstrates that the boundaries and norms in terms of gender, race, class, and even cultural identity can become arbitrary and fragile. Concerning the cultural significance of drags, Butler explains: 'I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (Butler 1999: 174). Although it was not as politically subversive as the drags in the West, the cross-dressing performance of Li Yugang and others like him has great potential for challenging various social stereotypes and conventions. As I argue elsewhere:

The cross-dressing performance represented by Li Yugang transgresses the boundaries between man and woman, traditional and modern, local and global, marginal and mainstream. The crisis of category that this trespassing entails has proven significant for cultural reform and renewal. (He 2013: 168)

On a positive note, cross-dressing performance both in China and elsewhere has been embodied with transformative power over public sentiments towards social liberalism and justice. As Garber states:

[Cross-dressing] offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male,' whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural. The current popularity of cross-dressing as a theme in art and criticism represents an undertheorized recognition of the necessary critiques of the binary thinking. (Garber 1992: 10–11)

The intermedial representation of cross-dressing contributes to the gradual acceptance of differences in gender politics so that the public become more open to a diversified ecology of gender as well as other social categories. In the meantime,

it is also true that there remain all kinds of controversies around and prejudices toward cross-dressing, revealing gender anxieties in different social and cultural circumstances.

Ambiguities in Cross-dressing on Screen

The cross-dressing performance in mass media that is intended to entertain audiences does not necessarily entail subversive effects against gender and social norms, but instead can lead to a reiteration of the binary mindset in support of the patriarchal ideology. ‘For male characters, wearing women’s clothing is liberating in some way . . . or it functions as a way of reinforcing stereotypes . . .’ (Maschio 1986: 162). With regard to comic cross-dressing performance on TV, the subversive and the reiterative are often blended together so that any one-sided interpretation sounds coercive and unconvincing. Furthermore, cross-dressing that is represented as delusionary and comic on screen, is sometimes manipulated as a means to undermine the legitimization of sexual orientations outside of the heterosexual norms.

In China, *Farewell My Concubine* is known for being one of the first films to represent both a cross-dressing performance of male *dan* in Peking opera and his troubled sexuality. While it was applauded by many for its role in overcoming homophobia among the audiences, it nevertheless was also criticized for queering the queer, with its emphasis on the abnormality in queer identity, especially in terms of the excessive violence and shame associated with the so-called ‘distorted’ gender identity. Ever since the film won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1993, the cross-dressing performance and its impact on gender identity have been a favourite topic of academic work, which has been carried out in different contexts and from a variety of perspectives. Benzi Zhang, for instance, views *Farewell* as epoch-making for breaking the “languageless” silence in search of an appropriate voice to express homosexual experience and anxiety, which are situated in the most painful and violent period of Chinese history’ (Zhang 1999: 104). E. Ann Kaplan’s response, however, exemplifies the doubleness of criticism. On the one hand, she finds the gay imagery in the film stereotypical; on the other, the introduction of gay sexualities was thought to be unprecedented and ‘should be recognized as progress’ (Kaplan 1997: 271). In light of the differences in criticism, it is feasible to analyse how the intermedial representation of cross-dressing performance from stage to screen appeals to the audience and what kind of impact this film has had on public sensibilities of homosexuality in contemporary China.

It was argued that the opera school’s strict training and discipline might have affected Dieyi’s gender identity. At the opera school, Douzi, boy Cheng Dieyi, is selected to play a *dan* role due to his girlish figure and delicate nature. His everyday training chiefly involves ‘the stylized repetition’ of female-coded acts and singing, which are regulated by the master via cruel punishment. He is trained to walk and gesture like a woman, to sing in a womanly, high-pitched voice – mannerisms which all aim to shape him into a female figure – and further required to perform these

stylized acts intensively in order to perfect his female role. Due to this extraordinary female impersonation and performance regimen, Cheng Dieyi apparently assumes a 'feminine' nature in his gestures, tastes and desires that are indexical of his differences. Although in his adulthood Dieyi wears men's suits, the film suggests that he has developed a fascination with women's dress, especially through his narcissistic gaze at his mirrored reflection, wearing cosmetics and costumes backstage at the opera house.

When the transformation that Dieyi has experienced onstage and offstage is embedded into the film, the intermedial reference to opera on screen reveals the potential of cross-dressing performance in challenging social norms and shaping one's gendered self. Whether the mere repetition of cross-dressing can have a decisive impact upon one's sexuality and gender remains doubtful. If this causality was the case, then we might expect all male *dans* to become queer. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau rightly points out: 'femininity in Beijing [Peking] Opera is a translation, not necessarily a transgression' (Lau 1995: 23). In effect, the fact that some *dan* actors were queer used to be a taboo topic in opera circles. Moreover, Dieyi's transgression could be better explained by the theory of gender performativity. Butler uses the example of drag queen performance to argue that gender is not fixed and biologically determined, but performatively constructed. Yet she is not explicit about how such a transformation of gender identity might take place. In response to criticism of *Gender Trouble*, Butler re-examined her theory of performativity based on individuals' will or choice, emphasizing the regulatory force of gender norms. In her later book, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993: 95) states: 'performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-representation; nor can it be simply equated with performance'. While performance assumes a coherent and a priori subject that can take full account of its agency, performativity emphasizes the social norms that affect gendered practices. Dieyi's queer identity is complicated in that it is not just formed as a result of his theatrical impersonation but also constructed through violent regulation and mistreatment.

As represented in the film, the rules of opera training dictate that one must be punished until one can perfectly repeat acts as instructed. After suffering severe beatings for stumbling over lines, Douzi and his companion at the opera school, Laizi, seize an opportunity to escape from the troupe together, indicating Douzi's refusal to perform his female role. They eventually return to prevent the Master from punishing Shitou (boy Duan Xiaolou) for helping them escape. Laizi hangs himself with a rope in the training house after witnessing the Master brutally beat Shitou and Douzi. Laizi's death shocks Douzi into the realization that he must accept his fate: the fate of being a male *dan*. There seems no way out except death.

Douzi suffers from another, and more overtly violent regulation when a theatre agent visits the troupe to select new talent for eunuch Zhang's birthday banquet. Douzi is told to sing the song he always stumbles over, and again he incorrectly recites the same line – 'I am by birth a maiden, not a boy' – singing instead: 'I am by birth a boy, not a maiden'. His failure somehow enrages Shitou, who picks up a smoking pipe, thrusts it into Douzi's mouth and churns vigorously. With blood

flowing from his mouth, Douzi recites the song again, this time correctly. Shitou's sudden, cruel treatment seems to force Douzi into an internal identification with the female role he plays. Later, in eunuch Zhang's mansion, Douzi must confront the gender he is regulated to identify as for the first time. After successfully performing *Farewell My Concubine* at the birthday banquet, Douzi is brought to Zhang's private room, alone, where Zhang sexually abuses him, reinforcing Douzi's subordinate position as a 'woman'. To eunuch Zhang, Douzi is nothing but a whore, a clear reflection of the social oppression of women in general, and, in turn, the male *dan*. The impact of violence on Dieyi's gender identity has been noted in most research on this film. Some critics protest that these episodes of violence perpetuate the definition of female gender in Douzi (boy Dieyi) as 'created by pain and deprivation, maintained by substitute satisfactions' (Lau 1995: 24). However, most scholarship fails to acknowledge that representing homosexuality as a result of violence and suffering negates the normalcy of the queer. To de-naturalize the queer is to degrade it. In this regard, the life of a male *dan* in opera circles is a valid subject for the film, and the representation of cross-dressing from theatre to screen in it becomes a cultural intervention.

It is of great importance to investigate how audiences respond to cross-dressing performances in Peking opera, and its accountability for gender trouble in *Farewell*. According to Judith Halberstam, gay shame 'records the exposure, in psychoanalytic terms, of the subject's castration; indeed, in a psycho-analytical framework, one would be tempted to say that castration is central to shame and that shame is central to femininity' (Halberstam 2005: 64). At first, Douzi strongly resists his assigned role of male-to-female impersonation in the opera training school, as implied by his repeated error in singing 'I am by birth a boy, not a maiden' instead of the correct 'I am by birth a maiden, not a boy'. Each time Douzi makes this mistake, his palms are severely beaten. This cruelty is visually emphasized through a close shot of Douzi's wounded, bloody palm. Douzi's insistence on being 'by birth a boy' reflects his fear of, or shame in, being recognized as a feminine male. 'For a man, wearing women's dress undermined the authority inherently belonging to the superior sex, and placed him in a position of shame' (Howard 1988: 423–424). Halberstam discusses different solutions to the discomfort of 'gay shame', including the urge to aestheticize. Through a process of aestheticizing shame, a feminine male can turn into 'the idealized and phallic woman who often becomes an excuse for exquisite but dangerous investments in beauty and art' (Halberstam 2005: 65). Performing Peking opera, Dieyi gradually learns to appreciate the feminine beauty in *dan*. The longer he practises *dan*, the more immersed he becomes in his role as a female impersonator.

Totally identifying with the concubine Yuji, Dieyi believes that he is Yuji, the idealized 'woman', an illusion which empowers him to combat his 'gay shame'. As Cui argues,

Through the impersonation of woman, he becomes an opera star and gains the power to seduce others. This success teaches him how to find femininity a refuge from the harsh realities of the outer world. Thus, costume and

makeup, with their potent cultural meanings, become so important to Dieyi that he seldom removes his mask. (Cui 2008: 158)

Dieyi feels confident and proud of his femininity, when female impersonation onstage is widely supported and appreciated by the contemporary audience. Essential to traditional opera, the aestheticizing of feminized men is embedded in the popular culture of that time.

Later, living in the radical period of revolutionary homogeneity during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Dieyi realizes that he can no longer aestheticize 'gay shame'. He becomes addicted to opium, which brings harm to both his voice and figure. Once Peking opera and female impersonation are criticized as feudal and decadent, Dieyi's pride in his art gradually diminishes, rendering him completely confused about his gender identity. When he and Xiaolou are reunited after the Cultural Revolution, they perform together again on an empty stage. Dieyi once again repeats the mistake in reciting: 'I am by birth a boy, not a maiden'. Immediately following this recitation, he kills himself with the King's sword, like Yuji, onstage. Here, the intermedial reference to the tragic story between the King and his concubine in the opera adds another layer to the trans-medial process from theatre to screen in the film. For Dieyi, his failure to aestheticize this gay shame through art, thus transforming it into pride, makes life utterly 'unliveable'.

Nevertheless, it is important to realize that Dieyi chooses suicide to express himself and to assert his homosexual identity. Thus, suicide as a climactic action in the film evokes different responses and becomes vague in its message. In general, Dieyi and his female impersonation are not presented as a threat but rather a release of the pressure enforced by a patriarchal system. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that drag performances, which highlight the performative nature of gender, are not necessarily subversive, but can re-instantiate the hegemonic system of binary gender in many ways, and buttress the status quo as much as subvert it. Positing drag performance as either subversive or reaffirming of dominant cultural models of gender and sexuality is overly simplistic. Defining drag as ambivalent, Butler contends that heterosexual culture produces drag for itself:

I would be reticent to call them subversive. Indeed, one might argue that such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task. (Butler 1993: 126)

As far as *Farewell* is concerned, the intermedial representation of a *dan* actor as gay should not be regarded as subversive, but rather serves as an exception that the heterosexual social regime would display and then suppress as deviant.

The Entanglement of Intermediality with Interculturalism in Cross-dressing

Apart from its intervention into gender politics, intermedial cross-dressing performance also contributes to critical reflections on social norms and conventional boundaries. While ‘disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic “dissonances”’ (Garber 1992: 16), cross-dressing performance signals a crisis in the categorial mindset. The dismantling of borders in one category has reverberating consequences in other fields as well. As Stryker *et al.* (2008: 14) argue:

‘Trans-’ thus becomes the capillary space of connection and circulation between the macro- and micro-political registers through which the lives of bodies become enmeshed in the lives of nations, states, and capital-formations, while ‘-gender’ becomes one of the several set [sic] of variable techniques or temporal practices (such as race or class) through which bodies are made to live.

In cultural studies, cross-dressing is intersected by various issues in different areas, including interculturalism in the era of (anti-)globalization.

In his international tours, Li Yugang is able to entertain local audiences as his cross-dressing performance does not just arouse certain kinds of nostalgia among overseas Chinese communities, but it also entails a liberating spirit, which has been claimed as a kind of soft power in conveying new and open images of China and Chinese cultures. Similarly, the success of *Farewell My Concubine* in global cinema reveals the attraction of traditional Chinese culture, although the film has also been criticized for orientalizing Chinese culture and displaying primitive visions to satisfy the curiosities and stereotypical misconceptions of Western audiences. Nevertheless, the reception of cross-dressing performances across cultures contributes to an inquiry of interculturalism from both inside and outside, and vice versa. The distorted imagination of the other is often magnified in the interactive process of cross-dressing performance across media, demonstrating cultural anxieties. In *M. Butterfly* (1993), directed by David Cronenberg, and adapted by David Henry Hwang from his play of the same name (1988), the male Peking opera *dan* actor Song Liling is engaged in a love affair with the male French diplomat René Gallimard. This relationship has cross-dressing criss-crossed with other border crossing issues such as nationalism and cultural identity.

During the production of *M. Butterfly*, some scenes were filmed in China, and Chinese actors participated in the filming. In addition to the combination of a Chinese and foreign creative line-up, the film constructs a narrative with Chinese–English ‘bilingual’ film language, which foregrounds the influence of Chinese culture. In order to perfectly present the opera performances in the film, the film director invited John Lone, a Chinese actor with a background in Peking opera, to play the role of Song Liling, and Chinese artist Guan Hongjun to be art consultant. The Peking opera performance in the film presents authentic classic arias, such as *The Drunken Concubine*. Although the singing and lyrics are unfamiliar and obscure

to foreign audiences, the film insists on this alienating method of performance in a foreign language to showcase the wonder of Peking opera.

In the form of ‘play within a play’, *M. Butterfly* presents cross-dressing performances of male actors in three scenarios: the opera performance of *Madame Butterfly* by Song Liling, the Peking opera performance of *The Drunken Concubine* by Song Liling, and *Madame Butterfly* as a cross-dressing performance by Gallimard in prison. These three ‘plays within a play’ run through the whole film and become its prominent form of intermediality, which in the meantime highlight the twists and turns of cross-cultural communication.

In the film, Song Liling’s cross-dressing perfectly interprets a femininity that marks the unique charm of the *dan* role in Peking opera. Back then, when Mei Lanfang was the king of the Chinese *dan* role, his stage appearances fascinated both male and female audiences. In this movie, the beauty of Oriental women presented by male actors on the stage deeply impresses the Frenchman, Gallimard. The traditional women’s clothing, exquisite makeup, and elegant and charming posture arouse his imagination about a perfect woman, and fascinate him. While a long shot shows Song Liling, who is performing on the stage, the camera then uses a close-up shot to slowly sweep across the audience watching the play, and then focuses on Gallimard among the audience. The camera gets closer and closer to him, until a close-up highlights his concentrated and entranced expression. Gallimard’s ‘male gaze’ not only reflects the male hegemony within the patriarchal system, but also the Western cultural fantasy for the Orient. Song’s performance of the *dan* role, seen through the lens of the film, is a re-enchantment of Gallimard’s imagination of Oriental culture as feminine. As Lei writes:

The Orient is feminine; China is feminine; Chinese opera is feminine, and Chinese opera players are definitely feminine. Limited knowledge of Chinese opera in the West and the popularity of Mei Lanfang perhaps contributed to the feminization of Chinese opera. (Lei 2006: 234)

In Gallimard’s eyes, no matter what Song’s true gender, as long as he appears as an ideal female image, he will always be his fragile flower – Madame Butterfly. Therefore, Gallimard’s gaze on Song not only reflects cross-cultural misunderstandings, but also reveals the ideology of Western-centrism. In this way, Gallimard, the ‘voyeur’ or the staring subject, like Song Liling, is also placed under the gaze of those cinema viewers.

Gallimard’s fascination with Song does not just derive from his appreciation of the art of male *dan* roles, but also his penchant for the femininity presented by cross-dressing, so much so that he stages his own drag show in prison. In order to play Madame Butterfly, Gallimard puts on heavy make-up, long hair, and fancy clothes on the spot, performs a dramatic monologue, and finally commits suicide like Madame Butterfly. Standing at the centre of the stage (prison), surrounded by the audiences, his ‘heroic’ self-transformation and martyrdom are exposed to the gaze of his fellow prisoners. This Western male who used to be the subject of gaze is now playing Madame Butterfly, a fragile flower, and an object to be gazed at by both the

on-lookers present and the cinema viewers. This transformation of the relationship of gaze evokes a sense of alienation and self-reflection in the audience, who as subjects of the gaze have to confront the boundaries of gender and race in a cross-cultural context.

Furthermore, the representation of Chinese culture in the film is characterized by complexities, ambiguities, and fragmentation. Peking opera featuring cross-dressing carries the nostalgia and memory of overseas Chinese so that it becomes a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. In the meantime, Chinese culture in the film turns stereotypical. Because of the expression of homosexual love under the mask of a Peking opera male *dan* actor, Chinese culture represented by Peking opera falls into the cliché of stereotypes, which makes it liable to the reconstruction or re-enchantment of the Chineseness in the discourse of the Other.

It can even be said that Peking opera and *dan* roles are otherized in the film. The Peking opera performances in the film have become the cultural landscape of the Other under the mainstream Western lens. To some extent, the film presents a Western narcissistic cultural imagination embodied by the reorganization or collage of Westernized Chinese cultural elements that overshadows the subjectivity of Chinese culture. Of course, such kinds of cross-cultural representation and rigid conceptualization are not limited to this film, nor to other American films that represent Chinese culture, but rather they prevail in Chinese American literature as a whole. Perhaps it is true that the diasporic literature or culture in general can hardly avoid such cross-cultural traps. In a cultural market dominated by Western economic and cultural capital, Chinese culture often becomes the passive object imagined, re-constructed and narrated by Western discourse. 'Once Chinese cultural products enter the international market, their "Chineseness" will always undergo deconstruction, negotiation, manipulation and commercialization' (He 2022: 312). On the other hand, the film also asks the audience not to fall into a cultural dualism characterized by an either-or cognitive model, highlighting the value of intermediality, transgender and cross-culture. The dissemination of films, which respect the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture and recognize its charm in general, contributes to the overall image of Chinese culture and the communication between cultures. By means of film adaptations, Chinese cultural elements once again participate in the global cultural production and circulation, and are constructed and reshaped in intermedial performances. Therefore, such intermedial and cross-cultural works possess considerable vitality and cultural value.

As an intertextual, intermedial and even cross-cultural film, *M. Butterfly* not only involves the transformation and blending of media, but also deals with issues of culture, politics, race, gender and spectatorship. In the process of intermedial and cross-cultural communication, Chinese cultural elements such as cross-dressing will inevitably change or reshape the discourse of the Other. The Peking opera performance and other aspects of Chinese culture in *M. Butterfly*, which the film director uses to surprise and allure audiences, Western audiences in particular, turned out to be a palimpsest of cultural otherness in the intermediary production process.

Conclusion

The intermediality of cross-dressing performance, which involves literature, theatre, film and television, constitutes a prominent feature of modern culture in China and beyond, and has had significant implications in gender and cultural politics. As it is deeply embedded in specific social and cultural contexts, cross-dressing performance in different media is perceived and received locally. However, when it is represented across cultures and media, cross-dressing becomes entangled with other intercultural and transnational issues, the interactions of which would have consequences on our re-imagination and re-enchantment of the world.

The intersection of intermediality with such issues of gender and interculturalism provokes reflections on the boundaries of disciplines and existing paradigms of critical theories. As an interdisciplinary research area, intermedial studies would benefit from its engagement with other fields of scholarship, and vice versa. A renewed and replenished way of inquiry, based on interdisciplinarity and interculturalism, would enlighten us about the innovations of intermedial practices as well as their potential for cultural intervention.

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About the Author

Chengzhou He is Yangtze River Distinguished Professor of English and Drama at Nanjing University School of Arts and School of Foreign Studies and a Foreign Member of Academia Europaea. His research focuses on modern drama, performance studies, comparative literature, and critical theory. He won the Ibsen Prize in 2002 and was former President of the International Ibsen Committee. He is the author of *Henrik Ibsen and Modern Chinese Drama* (2004) and *A Theory of Performativity* (in Chinese, 2022).