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# **Gender Politics in the Figuration of Woman Warriors in Chinese Opera: Mulan and Bright Pearl**

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## **Abstract**

The woman warrior is one of the most threatening unconventional female figures to the global patriarchal imagination. Woman warriors, as historically different and culturally specific as they are, share one common behavior; they act in defiance of their assigned gender roles. Many of them transgress the dress code and disguise themselves as men;

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many are put to death in the end. Through an analysis of the traditional and today's revived and revised representations of woman warriors in Chinese opera, this paper investigates how the body of the woman warrior embodies tension points where a complex negotiation between the empowered and empowering woman and an oppressive but posed-and-masked-as-natural male narrative is subtly played out.

### Key Words

containment; female body; femininity; Kunju opera; masculinity; patriarchy; representation; transgression; subversion .

## **Gender Politics in the Figuration of Woman Warriors in Chinese Opera: Mulan and Bright Pearl**

The woman warrior is one of the most threatening unconventional female figures to the patriarchal imagination. There has been no lack of this unsettling "warlike woman," to use Edmund Spenser's phrase, in literature and theatre from different corners of the world: Hua Mulan from a Chinese poem of the Northern Dynasties (386-550) who often reappears in fiction and the stage (traditional opera and spoken drama) in contemporary times; Spenser's Britomart, who carries on a mission that involves saving British civilization (Shepherd 10), and the sexually threatening "Amazon" Radigund in the *Faerie Queen*; Ludovico Ariosto's Bradamante (*Orlando Furioso*), who is the model of Britomart; Torquato Tasso's Clorinda (*Gerusalemme Liberata*), who is the unknowable woman who must be unmasked to find "a positive image that reveals [her] true nature" (Petroff 40); Richard Wagner's Brünnhilde (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*), whose laughter at Siegfried's death has rendered her "a thorn in interpretations of her character" (Abbate 208) which oscillate between "tragic heroine" and "romance victim" (209).

These woman warriors, as different and culturally specific as they are, share one common behavior; they act in defiance of their assigned gender roles. Many of them transgress the dress code and disguise themselves as men; many are put to death in the end. How the body of the woman warrior negotiates gender ideologies is what I intend to investigate here through an analysis of the theatrical representations of Chinese woman warriors.

### Rereading and Reinventing Mulan

The term “woman warrior” will remind many Anglo-American readers of Maxine Hong Kingston’s now canonized work *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) — in which Fa Mu Lan (Hua Mulan),<sup>1</sup> the legendary Chinese woman warrior and a household name in the Chinese cultural tradition — is reinvented into a hybrid construct by Hong Kingston in the context of American multicultural politics. Hua Mulan was first immortalized by an anonymous Chinese poem which tells the story of how Mulan disguises herself as a man and joins the military in her elderly father’s stead for ten years. Finally she returns home with glory and awes her male colleagues when she removes

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<sup>1</sup> Since Maxine Hong Kingston was born into a family of Cantonese origin, she remembers Hua Mulan (spelling following the convention of the pinyin system) in its Cantonese romanization: Fa Mu Lan.

the disguise and reveals herself as a beautiful woman.

Hong Kingston's Fa Mu Lan is a far cry from traditional Chinese representations in that her woman warrior is virtually no longer "Hua Mulan" but a composite figure of a woman warrior reconstituted in a hybrid of different Chinese warriors from folklore, legends and histories.<sup>2</sup> These underlying warrior figures include several female ones and at least one male. An obviously appropriated male warrior figure is the national hero General Yue Fei (1103-41) of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), whose mother tattooed the four characters *jingzhong baoguo* ("serve the country with adamant loyalty") on his back. Similarly, Hong Kingston's woman warrior's back is also tattooed with oaths and names by her parents.<sup>3</sup> Mixing Yue and various traditional Chinese woman warrior figures, the woman warrior reconstructed by Hong Kingston had, in her own words, the "power to remind" her that she would not "grow up a wife and a slave," but a "warrior woman" (20) and "female avenger" (43). It can also remind us to pay attention to how the representations of the woman warrior in traditional Chinese opera function in the

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<sup>2</sup> Thus the presence of the Cantonese romanization "Fa Mu Lan" instead of the more official PRC putonghua/pinyin or ROC *guoyu*/Wade-Giles "Hua Mu(-)lan" in Hong Kingston's text can be read with significant semiotic meaning: the denial of monolithic authority and the celebration of marginality.

<sup>3</sup> The narrator recounts, "'We are going to carve revenge on your back,' my father said" (34).

patriarchal ideology in Chinese society.

Decades before Hong Kingston's Chinese-American reinvention of Mulan in narrative fiction, Mei Lanfang had already re-presented this woman warrior in his Beijing opera play *Mulan congjun* [Mulan joins the army], first performed in 1917, with the intention of arousing the nationalism and patriotism of the Chinese people against foreign imperialism and promoting sexual equality between men and women. The legend of Mulan was also readapted by Chinese opera playwright Ma Shaobo several times between 1943 to 1951 for the sake of "encouraging the revolutionary fighting will of the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese people" (Preface 2).<sup>4</sup> It was the "patriotism" of Mulan that was put in the foreground in the early 1950s during the Korean War in which the People's Republic of China fought the "U.S. imperialists" (Yan Huizhui). But before any modern playwright or Chinese opera actor usurps this legend, Mulan has to be, before anything else, appropriated as a Han-Chinese by race — since the historical authenticity of Mulan and her ethnicity has long been lost in the traces of textual reproduction. In Ma's adaptation, Mulan is presented as a native of Yan'an — the holy land of the Chinese communist revolution.

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<sup>4</sup> Chang-tai Hung's *War and Popular Culture* (1994) contains a section on the figure of the woman warrior in spoken dramas: "Female Symbols of Resistance: Patriotic Courtesans and Women Warriors." See especially 72-78 for a discussion of the Hua Mulan plays during the Sino-Japanese War.

Hundreds of years before Mei and Ma, the late Ming writer and painter Xu Wei had already adapted the story of Mulan into a short *zaju* play that had a great influence on the representation of women in Chinese drama by later male and female playwrights. Xu's play *Maid Mulan Joins the Army in Her Father's Stead* differs from Mei and Ma's versions of Mulan in that it places more emphasis on filial piety and chastity than nationalism and patriotism.

The scene in the first act of Xu Wei's play in which Mulan unbinds her bound feet in order to disguise herself as a man before she embarks on her military adventure reveals an oppositional dynamic of containment and subversion at work. This foot-binding motif is not found in the original "Ballad of Mulan" which dates back many hundreds of years to a period when foot-binding was not yet prevalent. It is common knowledge today that the bound foot as a fetish signifies the ultimate subjugation of women in late imperial China. Xu's insertion of the most oppressive patriarchal constraint on women is, itself, revealing enough and, needless to say, in modern versions, including Mei's, the figure of the bound foot is totally erased.

Xu's Mulan, in order to put herself in the shoes of a man, must undo (although only temporarily) the containment of the patriarchy epitomized by this foot-binding. The undoing of the fetish unleashes the female from male control and renders her a power that surpasses man's. Her late actions justify what she says in the play before changing into male disguise:

“standing on earth, supporting the sky” [*lidi chengtian*] (352). Mulan’s military prowess is fully demonstrated in this play, as there is no lack of acrobatic fighting indicated in the stage directions. Yet, unbinding her feet makes her worry about how she will get married when she returns from the battlefield with a pair of enlarged feet. Readers and spectators in the past would feel relieved when Mulan immediately tells of a magical soaking treatment that can re-shrink the feet to the size of a “golden lotus” (352).

In this way, the unconscious feminine subversion is immediately contained by naturalized masculine values, a point that is further illustrated by the theme of chastity running through out the entire play. Mulan gets her parent’s consent to playact as his father’s double only on the condition that she keeps her virginity — the most valuable price of women as commodities of exchange in the imperial past. In response, Mulan sings, “Be at ease, mother. I’ll return to you a virgin daughter” (354), and she does keep her promise. Upon her return after more than ten years of absence, she employs a metaphor for her virgin body in her joyous tune: “returning to you the same non flower-bearing bud” (361). The androgynous body is immediately kept in check by the non-deflowered female body within and her subordination to the patriarch—the father — is taken for granted. Mulan’s crossing of gender lines is only provisional. At the end of the day, as all Chinese people have been so familiar with the story, Mulan is decorated by the emperor, returns home, removes her male garment, is reunited with her family, and, in Xu’s



version, gets married as arranged by her father. She comfortably befits herself into the space prescribed by the Confucian gender system.

With frequent references to other women paragons throughout the text, Xu's Mulan was constructed in the Confucian tradition of the "virtuous woman." In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mulan was constructed by Mei as a patriot and a voice for women's equal rights. Early in the play she says, "I wish to share my country's sorrow. This is the same to men and women" (*Mulan congjun, Xikao daquan* 575). As an ideology, patriotism supercedes gender boundaries and tames Mulan's potentially subversive androgyny. Very near the end of the play, Mei speaks through Mulan with a modern consciousness of sexual equality, but within the limit of accepted national values:

You warriors should realize that if women are determined to establish themselves, they become the same as men. Since women's education does not prevail in our country, ordinary women all become trash. Were all our country's men as strong as Mulan, we would have nothing to fear of the barbarian countries, even if there were ten folds of them. (593)

However, all progressiveness and transformative potentiality, overt or hidden, ultimately translates into the traditional

values of filiality (for the family) and loyalty (for the country) that run through the text and are given one last fanfare at the end of the play (594).

After a survey of historical records of military women and imaginary representations of the Chinese woman warrior in Chinese opera, Barbara M. Kaulbach argued that “[n]one of the woman warriors on the Chinese stage are allowed activities that could potentially bring about social change” (77) and concluded that structurally they “behave in principally the same way: brave fighters in times of war, they resume their woman role at the end of the war” (80). Joseph R. Allen also argues that the traditional version of Mulan is not “primarily the story of military action but rather of returning home” (346). Focusing on visual illustrations of Mulan across centuries, he further argues that “the most recent and culturally most divergent versions are ultimately also tales of domestication” (346). Xu’s Mulan is in the beginning fighting for the cause of man, as the play’s title suggests that she “joins the army in her father’s stead.” She is entirely a substitute for man. Nothing can be more symbolically powerful than the scene in Mei’s version in which Mulan’s father orders his old military uniform to be altered to fit Mulan’s body (*Mulan congjun, Xikao daquan* 576). Mulan’s male garment in this specific condition is as empowering as it is domesticating.

Also obviously blended into Hong Kingston’s construction of the Chinese woman warrior are the legendary stories of the Yang family generals and their women, again of

the Northern Song period. According to the legends told in traditional drama and fiction,<sup>5</sup> three generations of the family's men were all killed in battles against invading "barbarians"; their widows, who were audacious warrior women, took up their husbands' roles to protect their country and fight against the alien enemies.

Stories of the Yang family woman warriors enjoy great popularity in today's regional operas. The ever popular full-length Beijing opera play *Yangmen nüjiang* [Women generals of the Yang family], was first adapted by Fan Junhong and Lu Ruiming in 1960 and subsequently made into a classic Beijing opera film. This full-length play was also staged by the China Beijing Opera Company [Zhongguo Jingju Yuan] at the Bicentennial Anniversary of Beijing Opera held in Beijing in January 1991.

Like Mulan, the Yang family woman warriors are substitutes for men, but this time the men are dead men. On

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<sup>5</sup> There are many plays from the Yuan Dynasty onward that dramatize the military adventures of the Yang family generals and their widows. An often mentioned early play is *Yangliulang diaobing po tianzhen* [Yang, the sixth son, deploys troops to destroy the Heaven's Gate battle formation], in *Quanyuan zaju waibian* [Sequel to complete works of Yuan drama] *Yangjiafu shidai zhongyong yanyizhuan* [Chivalric stories of several generations of the Yang family generals], prefaced 1606 by Qinhuai moke [pseudonym] (Ming) is one of the most popular versions of the saga in long narrative form.

one level, the women are represented as a projection of the male, as man's complimentary opposite. However, more space of resistance has been negotiated out of this text. This Beijing opera, on the one hand, reinforces a sexual hierarchy which "obscures and legitimizes the way gender is imposed by force"; yet, on the other hand, this patriarchal discourse in re-inscribing, re-presenting and re-producing itself is caught in a paradoxical condition of chronic self-dismantling, which culminates in the total absence of the "Father." In order to contain the powerful and transgressive woman generals, the Father must make himself *absent* and *invisible* — it is news of the death of the last male general of the Yang family that touches off the plot of this play.

Also of special interest concerning the figuration of the Chinese woman warrior is the episode in which Hong Kingston's woman warrior gives birth to a baby in the midst of a war while hiding on the battlefield (40). This is not part of the literary tradition of the Mulan legend but is reminiscent of a stock scene in several *daomadan xi's* ("sword-and-steed woman warrior plays")<sup>6</sup> in which a woman warrior, either a Han-Chinese or a "barbarian," gives birth while fighting in a ferocious battle and then either wins or loses on account of

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<sup>6</sup> The *daomadan* role-type can be considered a specialized subdivision of the *wudan* ["military female"]. The *daomadan* in general specializes in playing woman generals and wears the military armor while the *wudan* plays civil women who excel in martial arts, who are typecasted as bandits, demons, etc.

this biological-sexual function, the battle's result depending on the play of cultural politics in specific contexts. This thematic episode recurs often in plays relating to the military adventures of the Yang family against alien enemies.

In contrast with European opera and drama, the woman warrior role-type in Chinese opera is unique in its widespread presence in the general repertoire and in its imposing representation of the power of women in terms of sociopolitical status, physicality and supernatural power, depending on the individual theatrical character depicted. (The closest Western operatic counterpart that one can think of being perhaps Wagner's Valkyries, especially Brünnhilde, in his *Ring* cycle.<sup>7</sup>)

The physicality of the Chinese woman warrior in the use of the body in dancing movements and acrobatic acting renders this role-type a distinguished lure. Displayed in the physical prowess of the body of the *daomadan* and *wudan* performers and the characters' dangerous potential to displace men, the Chinese woman warriors appear to be a fabulously strong female sex that is a potentially disruptive force in the patriarchal order. Yet the theatrical representation of this figure is repeatedly imbued with layers of gender politics and frequently entangled with racial domination in which woman as the Other is often subordinated in one form or another. In

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Clément's psychoanalytic -feminist reading of *The Ring* and Brünnhilde and opera in general is inspiring toward arereading of women representations in Chinese opera.

addition to returning home, the woman warrior can be undone through captivity, such as Hu Sanniang in *Hujia zhuang* [The manor of Hu], one of the most popular *wudan* plays in both Beijing and Kunju operas. This disorderly woman is first relegated as an object of desire by the deformed Wang Ying, nick-named “short-legged tiger,” and is defeated and captured at the end. The woman warrior can even be condemned to death like the “barbarian” warrior princess Bright Pearl [Mingzhu] in *Tiangang Zhen The Big Dipper Battle Formation*, though it is also in this extreme form of silencing that more subtle textual politics of resistance can possibly be played out.

#### The Virtual Cross-Dresser and the Alien Other: Princess Bright Pearl

I shall move on to a close reading of a current performance text of *The Big Dipper Battle Formation*, a “sword-and-steed woman warrior play” from the most prestigious and historically influential Kunju opera, that enacts an episode from the saga of the Yang family generals: the sixth son of the family sets forth to fight against an inimical Other—Princess Bright Pearl, a pregnant “barbarian” woman warrior of the kingdom of Liao, which is challenging Song China’s hegemony over the great landmass of East Asia. Through a critique of the ideological assumptions of this play, I shall demonstrate how the patriarchy is obliged to simultaneously empowering the subversive feminine — the woman warrior figure — while appropriating and containing it

within an oppressive representation posed and masked as natural. As feminist theatre critic Gayle Austin states, “[plays] combine verbal and nonverbal elements simultaneously, so that questions of language and visual representation can be addressed at the same time, through the medium of an actual body. They contribute a unique field of examples of women’s representation” (3). The present discussion will take into account the acting and costume—the body—as well as the dramatic text.

*The Big Dipper Battle Formation* is a “select-scene-play” [zhezixi] which originated from an episode from a *chuanqi* play *Xianglin Xian* [Birth of the lucky star] written by the late Ming playwright Yao Ziyi.<sup>8</sup> The performance of *The Big Dipper* had been preserved for generations in the traditional repertoire of the Northern Kunqu school. This play was one of the showpieces in the repertoire of the noted Northern Kunqu performer Ma Fengcai (1888-1939), a transvestite actor specializing in the *daomadan*.<sup>9</sup> In the following generation

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<sup>8</sup> According to Huang Wenyang, *Quhai Zongmu Tiyaoyao* [Synopsis for A Bibliography of Plays] Vol. 1, 650 and Zhuang Yifu, *Gudian Xiqu Cunmu Huikao* [Comprehensive catalogue of existing traditional music drama titles] Vol. 2, 948.

According to Zhuang, the Beijing Library’s collection has an edition of *Xianglin Xian* dated 1736, the first year of Emperor Qianlong. Other sources state that this play has been lost.

<sup>9</sup> For a brief biography of Ma, see *Zhongguo xiquzhi: TianjinJjuan* [Annals of Chinese music drama: Tianjin volume], 432.

another transvestite actor Wu Xiangzhen (d. 1990), who was recruited into the Beijing Northern Kunqu Opera Company in the 1950s was renowned for his performance of this play. Yang Fengyi, the current leading player of *Big Dipper* learned it from Wu.<sup>10</sup> The play was revived by the Company in 1983. A rendition that made major changes to the traditional version was completed in October 1988, taking into consideration the new cultural context for the production and reception of Chinese opera in late 1980s China. The immediate success of this version has made it the standard text ever since. It has been classified a play of the category of “preserved repertoire” [*baoliu jumu*], indicating the play’s status in the Company’s repertoire and the fact that it is considered valuable and officially endorsed. The play has often been performed on the Company’s tours outside of Mainland China. The most recent performance by Yang in the leading role with

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Ms Yang Fengyi, winner of the Plum Blossom Award and Deputy Director of the Beijing Northern Kunqu Company for making the script and video of the play available to me and for her explanation of her stage interpretation of the dramatic character. I first watched the performance of the play at the Hong Kong Cultural Center on November 17, 1989 on an occasion in which all six Kunqu troupes from China were, for the first time, gathered together to celebrate this traditional theatre. In December 1994, I attended another staging of this play at Ms. Yang’s “special performance” [*zhuanchang*] in Beijing.



the Company took place in Taipei on March 18, 2002, presented by the New Aspect Cultural Foundation [Xinxiang Wenhua Jijinhui]. The analysis followed focuses on this new version and is based on a performance script dated July 16, 1989, a live performance that I saw in Hong Kong on November 17, 1989, and a video recording of a performance at Jixiang Theatre [Jixiang Xiyuan] in Beijing on November 26, 1988. At critical points in the analysis, I shall also examine the differences between the new and the tradition versions.

Structurally, the dramatic situation and action of the play are derived from and move forward in rigid pairs of binary oppositions of contradiction, resistance and oppression. Two levels of hierarchical oppositions can be discerned: one is the gender opposition of male and female, the other the racial and cultural opposition of the “civilized” and the “barbarian”: Song-China versus Liao. Not only is the dramatic world of the play patriarchal, but the ideological underpinning and discursive perspective are also ethnocentric. At the beginning of the play, Yang swears to wipe out the *hu'er* (“barbarians”), and the four Song generals, in the course of combat, shout repeatedly to Bright Pearl, “Barbaric girl, surrender!” The Liao people were viewed by Song-China as less civilized people lurking along the Song Empire’s border. Adopting a self-elevated ethnocentric point of view, in which it regarded itself as civilized and occupying the center of the world, China gave itself the designation *Zhongguo* — “the Central Kingdom.”

The play's main protagonist is the Liao princess, but the dramatic perspective is one of Chinese and male. Bright Pearl also speaks from a Sinocentric viewpoint, when she commands her troops, she addresses them twice as *xiaofan*, meaning "little alien barbarians." This is not an exceptional case, as it is conventional in traditional Chinese theatre that non-Han characters refer to themselves as "barbarians."

This type of unnaturalness underpinned by a culturally biased perspective has been overwhelmingly naturalized in Chinese opera. This play of the cultural politics of gender is further implicated in the power politics in contemporary China where racial minorities are subordinated under the Chinese Communist Party under the guise of "ethnic autonomy," the best known example being the question of Tibet. Because of ethnic politics, at least the outer appearance of the "barbarians" on stage has been turned as respectable as Han people. Cultural hegemony, racism and sexism are always intermingled. Woman/Bright Pearl is represented as the Other/Liao and Man/Yang is represented as the Self/Song (China). In *The Big Dipper*, the opposition between man and woman at the same time implicates racial and cultural contradictions.

The leading role in this play is a woman, Bright Pearl, and it is a drama of the tragic death of an admirable, gallant and unyielding woman. But Yang and his men, representing man and the civilized, are the first to come on stage and the last characters who remain alive in triumph on stage in the end: in the last moment of the play the dead body of Bright

Pearl — a woman — lies in front of a group of warrior men, Song generals and soldiers, who freeze in triumph in a theatrical pose of stylized convention of *liangxiang*, literally meaning “showing (the) face,” a consummation of emotions and manifestation of power relations in a momentary freezing of facial expression and body gesture in Chinese operatic acting.<sup>11</sup> A man has the first as well as the last lines of the play. Hence, in the beginning are (civilized) man and his words and in the end it is again the same (civilized) man and his words. The predominant female presence is “wrapped up” in a male narrative, a system of patriarchal jurisdiction, a universe of the Law-of-the-Father in the Name-of-the-Father. The play’s overall structure is interwoven with a series of bi-directional movements between female empowerment and containment.

The play begins with Yang’s entrance. He sings:

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<sup>11</sup> Lois Wheeler Snow uses the word “pause” to translate *liangxiang* (31) and “Bright Appearance” (Glossary) for a literal translation. This is not accurate. *Liang* in the compound *liangxiang* is a verb, meaning “to show.” However, her brief English description of this term is useful to further illustrate this performance convention: “A convention of Peking opera. It is a still, statuesque pose assumed for a brief moment by the principals and others while entering or leaving the stage, sometimes after a dance or an acrobatic feat, in order to bring out sharply and concentratedly the spiritual outlook of the characters” (Glossary).

Heroic generals and soldiers,  
Men like tigers and leopards.  
The might of the army is great,  
Earth moving and mountains shaking,  
I shall sweep away the Tartars [*hu'er*].<sup>1 2</sup>

Finishing the tune,<sup>1 3</sup> Yang recites:

Entrusted with the imperial edict, commanding the  
army to withstand the Great Liao.  
Tartars advancing here will have their souls  
annihilated.  
Over the three barriers, my mighty name makes  
people tremble,  
With a loyal heart, I protect the Song Dynasty.

I, Yang Yanzhao, am guarding the three barriers on  
imperial edicts. The repugnant Liao army has  
repeatedly violated the border. Not long ago the

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<sup>1 2</sup> Translations of this play are based on a stencil-print script dated July 16, 1989.

<sup>1 3</sup> The term “tune” is used instead of “aria” to denote a *qupai* [literally “tune-title”] because the concept of “aria” in European opera is not exactly the same as that of a *qupai*. The word “tune” is relatively more neutral in referring to an organized structure of musical sounds.

scout reported that the principal general of the Big Dipper Battle Formation had been killed in battle. Taking advantage of this fine chance, I shall destroy the Big Dipper Battle Formation. Meng Liang and Jiao Zan have been sent to find out about the strength of the enemy but haven't reported.

Elements of the two hierarchical oppositions of man/woman and civilized/barbarian are inscribed in Yang's short opening tune. Men, described as heroes, are represented in the metaphoric allusions to fierce animals, or more accurately, predators: tigers and leopards, and Sinocentrism is registered in the term *hu'er* that Yang, a Song-Chinese general, uses to refer to the Liao army. In traditional Chinese historical discourse, various insulting terms meaning "barbarians" have been set against the world *Han*, which is often used to also mean "Chinese" and implies a highly developed, advanced civilization (the adoption of the term from the mighty Han Dynasty). From a Sinocentric point of view, the Song Dynasty was weak and vulnerable from the beginning, in contrast to the dynasties Han or Tang, for instance. Throughout its history, the Song Dynasty was threatened by other inimical "barbaric" races — in opposition to the "civilized" Chinese self.

The *hu'er* in the play *The Big Dipper* are represented as the alien Other threatening the power of Song-China. The regime that Yang, a man, represents is the legitimate center;

the alien race that is represented by Bright Pearl, a woman, the Other, is illegitimate. In this representational construction, the two levels of contradictory oppositions of man/woman and civilized Chinese/primitive barbarians are contaminated to the extent that they are presented as natural and given.

Following Yang's opening lines, his subordinates Meng Liang and Jiao Zan return from the battlefield and report:

*Meng:* The commander of the Big Dipper Battle Formation was killed. Princess Bright Pearl has taken up the important task in his stead.

*Jiao:* That Princess Bright Pearl is pregnant. How can she lead the army to fight a battle? We should take advantage of this great chance to launch an assault.

In response, Yang says, "I have not the heart to take advantage of someone's precarious position." It is Jiao Zan who convinces Yang by saying: "Supreme commander! It has been, ever since the ancient times, a necessity of war to take advantage of the enemy's weakness. Supreme commander, you shouldn't miss this great chance." Earlier on, Yang's words ("With a loyal heart, I protect the Song Dynasty.") have shown his virtue of being "loyal to the emperor and loving one's country," a virtue required of a righteous man in imperial China. Now, he is depicted as a self-righteous

Confucian military hero, a Big Man who does not take advantage of someone's precarious position; however, he soon puts aside his moral conscience temporarily to strive for a practical objective. This pragmatism may not be un-Confucian after all.

On the part of Bright Pearl, pregnancy is a metaphor for a body in danger, a moment of the weakening of the empowered female body. It is largely because women in the past had no control over pregnancy — yes or no, where and when — that they were at the mercy of the patriarchal order. Even though a woman was as physically as powerful as a man and to an extent challenged the coherence and stability of the patriarchal order, it was difficult for her to escape from its containment and victimization. Meng Liang's words, "Princess Bright Pearl has taken up the important task in his [her husband's] stead," reveal how the role of woman is understood from a male perspective: woman is only a substitute, a substitute for man. Later on, this notion of woman as substitution is also spoken through the speech of Bright Pearl.

Bright Pearl makes her first appearance in the second scene of the play. As a general, she performs the *qiba* [literally "the overlord rises up"] — a sequence of patterned, stylized, valiant dance movements representing a warrior's preparation for war.<sup>14</sup> There are two points to make here.

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the performance convention of *qiba* originated in the imperial past from the Kunqu performance of *The*

First, in the traditional version, Bright Pearl's first entrance was played out in the conventional set piece of *dianjiang* ["reviewing the army and assigning tasks to the officers"] which requires no acrobatic dancing. Second, now that the more static scene has been replaced by an action sequence, further female empowering is in place. Woman warrior characters in other plays, while dazzlingly demonstrating military skills in the *qiba*, also unmistakably and at once reveal their feminine fragility. The acclaimed performance as Hu Sanniang in *Hu Jia Zhuang* by Wang Zhiquan, the distinguished *wudan* from Shanghai Kunju Opera Company, is an example *par excellence*.

The characterization of Bright Pearl in this post-1988 theatrical representation has been changed from that of a traditional woman warrior type who was no less feminine than any ordinary woman, to a forthright and fiery man-like woman. But the stage appearance of Bright Pearl is "man-like" only in terms of temperament, since a physically pretty female face has been cast as this warrior princess. On stage, this figure embodies an ambivalent crossing of intense femininity and excessive masculinity — as seen in terms of the frequent and strenuous acrobatic fighting sequences throughout the play. The actress is required to perform this *qiba* in a masculine and powerful manner. More important for the present analysis,

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*Hegemon King Says Farewell to the Concubine*. "The lord rises up" is Jo Riley's translation (*Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance* 296).



conventions and movements originally belonging to the *qiba* of the male military role-type [*wusheng*] are borrowed to strengthen Bright Pearl's masculine characterization, constituting another "infringement" of a specific male domain. In this version of the play, Bright Pearl is an unusual woman warrior in Chinese opera, she differs from the traditional examples because she is a super-powerful woman who resolutely rivals men in physical power.

She sings when performing the *qiba*:

I am here in military uniform and full of vigor,  
In charge of the Big Dipper Battle Formation,  
wielding the spear and wearing the armor.  
Born an enchanting and fragile beauty,  
I didn't care to take up a needle,<sup>1 5</sup>

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<sup>1 5</sup> As Simon Shepherd points out in *Amazon and Warrior Women*, "The business of needlework is a stock emblem of femininity, and of woman's social place: modest, passive, ornamental. Its rejection by female fighters is commonly insisted on: Tasso's Clorinda finds it necessary to abjure these attributes in order to fulfill herself as a woman" (7). But cultural processes are full of exceptions. Dorothy Ko has pointed out that in seventeenth century China, embroidery was at a time turning into a respectable art form practiced even by some scholar-officials. This was one of the "playful transgressions" that Ko uses to argue that "the Ming-Qing gender system was more flexible in practice than what the official ideology would have

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in Chinese Opera: Mulan and Bright Pearl •

Love only to play with swords and spears,  
Leading brave troops and maneuvering battle  
formations,  
I dare say that even grown men are frightened.

And then she recites:

I am Princess Bright Pearl. My husband was the  
commander of the Big Dipper Battle Formation.  
Because he was unfortunately killed in fighting the  
Song army, I am taking up this important task in his  
stead. Previously the scout reported that the Song  
army was about to assault our Big Dipper Battle  
Formation. Therefore, I am in full battle array,  
ready to meet the enemy.

There is a recurrent theme in Chinese narratives, drama,  
historical narratives and legends that on occasion such as,  
when the man dies fighting for his emperor and country, and  
is thus absent from “his-story,” the woman will substitute for  
him to accomplish the unfinished cause. To sacrifice for the  
emperor and for the regime was the highest ideal and honor  
for a Big Man in the feudal tradition of China. If in an  
emergency situation in which it was necessary and  
unavoidable to let a woman take up aman’s job, she was only

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one believe” (175).

considered a mere substitute, acting only as a deputy of the absent man, as in Mulan's case in which her father is "out" and virtually absent due to old age. Women finish the incomplete job for men and are represented as men's complement. Bright Pearl — the woman — is not represented as fighting for her own cause, but for the man: a he-self in opposition to the she-other, a supposedly real and universal self that is absent in this play yet still tightly holds the power to dominate. Let us not forget that allowing the Hegemon King the chance to break out from encirclement by the enemy without hindrance is what Concubine Yu willingly dies for.

Bright Pearl's masculinely stylized movements in the *qiba* and the contrast between a weak and a strong woman's image in her lyrics show that she is powerful to the point of physically surpassing man. She is threatening because of her potential to displace man and disrupt the hierarchical social binary of male/female — a violent hierarchy in which the former term governs the latter. However, just like the socially constructed representation of woman as "enchanted, fragile beauty working with needles," Bright Pearl the woman warrior is also always a male-construct. She is fabricated by the patriarchal consciousness out of its constant fear of the destabilizing female Other — in Bright Pearl's case, an ever-empowering woman with determination that equals that of a "tragic hero." The male narrative thus attempts to deprive her of independence and autonomy. Socially, Bright Pearl has no identity of her own. Her position of commander is inherited

from her husband. It *origin*-ally belonged to a man: in a patriarchal system, men of course ally the *origin* with themselves and mask it as natural. When Bright Pearl announces, “I am Princess Bright Pearl. My husband was the commander of the Big Dipper Battle Formation . . . ,” she is defining herself as predicated on her husband’s entity, attributing herself to her husband. Her statements after the utterance of her name and title undo her as a female *subject*. In this theatrical representation, the constitution of a woman’s identity is constructed as dependent on the center of the male-*I* that displaces any space for a female-*I*. This specific representation of the woman warrior is a paradoxical effect of the patriarchy’s *failure* to suppress woman’s recurring subversion and its simultaneous need to reiterate containment.

In showing her effortless victory over Yang’s four deputy generals and her undisputed leadership of the Liao army, Bright Pearl displays a prowess surpassing most men. But in the narrative she is unable to sustain her victory due to the biological actuality that she is shortly to give birth to her baby. This biological-sexual difference determines her failure. She sings right before confronting Yang:

Ah! Knowing that a woman hero can overcome a  
grown man,  
Enduring the pain in the stomach, pushing the horse.  
My hips feel like as if they were stabbed by swords,  
Bursts of war drums rolling altogether.

Bright Pearl is thrown into a predicament — giving birth during a battle — by factors out of women’s control, the inability of controlling pregnancy. In this case, she is doomed by her biological sex as a woman. Yet the general representation of the pregnant woman warrior giving birth on the battlefield is not a coherent one since childbirth can also be a factor leading to victory. The “battle formation” which carries sorcerous power, is a unique concept in the traditional Chinese military novel and it is a recurring device in the Yang family saga.<sup>16</sup> At times, it is because a woman warrior gives birth while being trapped in a formidable battle formation that the formation is dismantled, due to the desecrating presence of the unclean blood from the delivery that is an exclusive female function. Whether this is represented as beneficial or ruinous on the battlefield, the blood from delivery is always a

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<sup>16</sup> “Battle formation” is a translation of the Chinese term *zhen*, which in this context refers to a kind of magic warfare in which troops are arranged in the form of mazes to prepare for a battle. It appears often in the military adventure novels (also referred to as “military romance” by some critics) in traditional Chinese literature. See Hsia 352-7 for more details of *zhen* and its use in Chinese novels. *Zhen* is also frequently seen in traditional theatres; for instance, the Beijing opera play *Tianmen Zhen* [The Heaven’s Gate battle formation] is another popular piece that dramatizes an episode of the Yang family woman warrior Mu Guiying, who is also one of the leading roles in *Yangmen Nüjiang*.

formidable feminine force of destruction. Male power is incompatible with unique female physical capabilities since man has not been given the female multiple physical capacities of gestation, birth and lactation. By “referring to his [literary] creation as to his child,” man has been “appropriating the life-giving act of childbearing” in literature (Trinh 37) is also able to abuse the woman who performs these physical capacities through a textual victimization of her. Bright Pearl is unable to maintain her usurped male power, for in this specific theatrical representation she must give birth in the midst of a battle and this exclusive female physical capability dismantles her resistance.

After she is defeated by Yang, Bright Pearl expresses her grief and sorrow in a type of tune borrowed from Beijing opera because the existing Kunqu music was not considered effective enough for the emotional intensity of dejection. Again, this is a major change made to the traditional Kunqu version. A *daoban* (the “Interjective Aria”<sup>17</sup>) characterized by its intense, stirring and tragic quality is added:

Trembling with fear, pain in the stomach, body  
without strength,  
Dry and cold, empty valley, hanging cliff, where to

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<sup>17</sup> This is the term used by revered ethnomusicologist Rulan Chao Pian in her study of Beijing opera “arias” [*banqiang*]. Pian 1975.

shelter?  
Pity me, cherishing lofty but empty aspirations,  
Hard to escape the dangerous situation.  
Pity me, swathed in iron clothes,  
Hard to fight the stubborn enemy.  
Looking at the Big Dipper, looking at the Big  
Dipper,  
Bursts of grief, tearful eyes, blurred and misted.  
Dreadful, dreadful, flag falls and the person  
annihilated,  
Verging on a hopeless situation.  
Oh, my husband!  
Fighting desperately to avenge my husband, will  
unbending.  
Defying death, will unbending.

Commenting on the tragic grief of the great ancient poet Qu Yuan (ca. 340-278 B.C.), the renowned historian Sima Qian (145?-1490? B.C.) wrote, “Heaven is the origin of humankind. . . . People in destitution cannot help but cry to heaven” (*Shiji* [Records of the historian]: *Qu Yuan Liezhuan* [Biography of Qu Yuan]). In the play *The Big Dipper*, we have the representation of a woman in destitution crying to her (dead) husband. Why is it that man in distress cries to heaven — “the origin of humankind” — while a woman in a similar situation cries to her husband? Does man come from heaven and woman from man? Is this a culturally dislocated echo of the description of the creation of woman in the Judeo-

Christian *Genesis*? When Bright Pearl is “verging on a hopeless situation,” what she cries out is “my husband” and what she has on her mind at that moment is avenging her husband’s death. Even on the threshold of death what she regrets is her failure to avenge her husband. That which has driven her to fight and defy death is the naturalized role for a woman as a substitute and complement of man. Earlier in the play, an overemotional inclination is seen in Bright Pearl’s rejection of her subordinates’ advice not to personally lead the army against the Song troops. After giving birth, Bright Pearl returns to fight to her final death, further implying that she is irrational in throwing her weak body back on the battlefield in order to rekindle an already finished battle. Ironically, the forthright and fiery elevation of the masculine characterization of Bright Pearl in this new version of the play also leads her to her own destruction.

In the last moments of the play, Bright Pearl appears in a representation of woman as victim, wearing soft white “fighting skirts” [*zhanqun*] — her shoes have always been white throughout the play. Having taken off her hard *kao* (the technical term for military armor in the system of Chinese stage costume) and *kaoqi* (military pennants), symbols of male power that she has temporarily usurped from men, she is now displayed as a fragile female body. Here is a subtle play of sign systems and the body in the Chinese theatre to produce delicate meanings. The Prague School semiotician Karel Brušák has commented aptly on the sign systems in the Chinese theatre: “[it] has devised a complicated and precise



system of signs carrying a large and categorically diverse range of meaning” (60), and further elaborates on the structure of signs of theatrical costume in Chinese theatre:

Chinese theatrical costume observes strict conventions . . . [and] is a complicated structure of signs. It differs from Western theatrical costume not only by its plurisignification but also by the nature of the referents. It reveals not merely the wearer’s social status, age, and so forth, but his worth, character, and so on. It reveals an interesting interdependence between aesthetic outlook and questions of technique. For the costumes used are always made from high quality, expensive materials painstakingly put together to fulfill to perfection the demands of stern convention, while at the same time upholding the immutability of that same convention by their own durability. (64)

A new set of *kao* in light blue and white was made to suit the new version of the play for its premiere on November 17, 1988 in Beijing, and Bright Pearl’s intention of seeking revenge and the final disposition of her body were further inscribed in her costume. The dominant color of her military armor is blue, the color of mourning for death to the Chinese, while her fighting skirt and shoes are white, the color of

mourning as well as death, itself. Since the beginning of the play Bright Pearl has been a mourner, mourning the death of her husband; and she dies in white — as the saying goes, “the dead wear white.” Fighting against the “perfect man,” she, an “imperfect man,” is destined to be defeated. The traditional representation of the woman warrior on the Chinese stage is from the beginning a male construct, the woman warrior is an imperfect (castrated) man, she is irrational, the weaker partner, always the weaker sex — the way Plato and Freud have defined woman in the West, as already demonstrated by Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

As shown above, the choice of color for the costume and for the painted faces is no casual undertaking (Zheng Chuanyin, *Chuantong Wenhua* 30-66). For instance, red is often taken to symbolize happiness, and another woman warrior, Liu Jinding, often appears in red armor in stage representations — in *Nü Shasimen* [Slaughtering Four Generals: The Female Version] for instance—since she is about to get married. In the traditional version of *Big Dipper* which we can still see on video, Bright Pearl is not a widow, and is thus not an avenger. She is not in mourning and she, too, wears red. She does give birth during battle in this version and therefore loses the military conflict. The curtain falls as she retreats under the protection of her deputy generals.<sup>18</sup> She is still a defeated

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<sup>18</sup> The synopsis given in Chen Weiyu’s *Kunju Zhezixi Chutan* [A preliminary survey of the select-scene-plays in Kunju opera] (1991) describes this earlier version, not the current one.

woman warrior, but without the tragic flaw of the insistence on a cause which leads to the tragic hero's downfall, as embodied in the new characterization of Bright Pearl. In this respect, a certain modern cultural sensibility was imbued into the latest reinvention in the late 1980s which responds to and reflects upon the traditions of Chinese opera.<sup>19</sup>

Of the different types of costumes in Kunqu, Beijing opera and other regional operas, *kao*, the military armor of the characters of both the man-general and woman-general, is fundamentally a male garment. "When it comes to physical labor, women's attire has almost always, of necessary, been the same as men's" (Solomon 178). The *nükao*, or female military armor worn for military physical labor, is the most male-oriented and *masculine* of the female costumes worn by female role-types. Symbolically, the woman warrior in Chinese opera is already dressed like a man, and let us not forget that in the cross-dressing tradition of Kunju and Beijing opera, woman warriors were played by men. In fact, a female performer playing the woman warrior role-type is virtually (cross-)dressing up to power. The actress playing the woman warrior is in this sense always inherently cross-dressing.

Carol Gilligan has noted that: "The sex differences

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<sup>19</sup> The main architects in the making of the new version are Shi Hongtu, then Company Director of the Beijing Beijing Opera Company [Beijing Jingjuyuan], and An Rongqing, a noted Beijing opera *daomadan* actress.

depicted in the world of fairy tales, like the fantasy of the woman warrior in Maxine Hong Kingston's . . . recent autobiographical novel . . . [,] indicate repeatedly that active adventure is a male activity, and that if a woman is to embark on such endeavors, she must at least dress like a man" (13). Hong Kingston's Fa Mu Lan is given "men's clothes and armor" (33): "I put on my men's clothes and armor and tied my hair in a man's fashion" (36). Figuratively, the Chinese woman warrior on the stage is clad in a male garment, with cosmetic modifications to represent woman's femininity, rather than femaleness.<sup>20</sup> One must not overlook the fact that in traditional Chinese theatre, it is a convention that "feminine beauty" in the stage representation of a female character played by the *dan* performer, no matter whether a female *dan* or a male *dan*, is an indispensable constituent factor for a successful and great *dan*. The woman warrior, physically strong yet displaying a male-defined feminine beauty, is defined in the terms of man. The woman warrior's body on the stage is like a tailor's peg-doll, in that its function is to carry sartorial attributes.<sup>21</sup> Her identity and power and all other attributes are granted by the garments she

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<sup>20</sup> The two terms used by Teresa de Lauretis, see "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" 1.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Elvin in his study of the Chinese "body-person and heart-mind" states that "the Chinese body (*shen*) is a peg-doll whose role is to be a carrier of corporeal and/or sartorial attributes" (267).

wears — the garments she has “stolen” from men. Even though clad in *kao* — the symbol of male power and of the perpetuation of that power as symbolized by its enduring quality material and the painstaking artistry of its tailoring — and has usurped (provisionally) a man-general’s position of power, Bright Pearl the woman warrior always remains an “imperfect man.” The costume has paradoxically become a trope of female appropriation of male power as well as the imprisonment and oppression of the female body. The woman warrior’s female subject is ironically put under erasure in her act of usurping male power by taking up man’s clothes (the military armor) and position (commander). The usurpation of male power coincides with the erasure of the female subject. Always an object and a complement of man, she is never allowed to be a successful rival to man. At best, she is acting as a deputy for the man who once owned her and continues to imprison her: obsessed with the dead man, Bright Pearl fights to avenge his death.

In her last spoken line, Bright Pearl cries out to the Song troops, who have won the battle and who are ready to withdraw. She orders them to stop their reckless provocation and states that she is there to fight them again. At this moment, she identifies herself to the Song army as *guniang*, which can be translated as “girl” in English. Earlier on when Bright Pearl is first asked by Yang to identify herself (“You who are approaching on a horse, are you Princess Bright Pearl?”), she answered, “Indeed, I am the supreme

commander.” From the status of a “chief commander” [*shuai*] to a “girl,” Bright Pearl’s different linguistic utterances are self-reflexive of her respective situations, first as a woman who is in the position of the power of a general/man, and then as a vulnerable woman, a male stereotype of a defenseless “girl.”

Behind Bright Pearl’s demonstrative strength as a warrior woman is the hidden condition that she is participating in a war game: a men’s war game. She is to follow man’s rules of the game, and the rules are to play with bodily violence, metaphorized by her love of playing with swords and spears. Struggling inescapably in a man-centered world, Bright Pearl is inexorably entangled in this male war game. Her husband’s early death leaves her to complete man’s highest manifestation of noble spirit of loyalty — that of no retreat, no surrender. The last line of the play is uttered by the Song general after Bright Pearl dies in front of him and his men on stage. The final line turns out to be the ultimate homage that a warrior pays to another: “This is a true hero among women! Bury her corpse with good care. Withdraw!” [*zhennai nüzhong haojie, jiang qi shishou haohao yanmai, shoubing*] The white, fragile, dead female at his feet is thus transformed into a most respectable enemy, comparable to any men. It is important to note that part of the code of the man warrior and the hero is that he respect his strong and decent enemy in the Chinese military tradition, as best exemplified by many instances in the great classic long narrative *Sanguo Yanyi* [ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* ]. This heroic code of

behavior is equally applicable to women, and the female body of Bright Pearl is given the same deferential treatment as an honorary man.

In modern times, woman warrior figures in traditional Chinese opera have gained great popularity with the rise of the *dan* role-type. The emerging prominence of the *dan* in the early decades of the twentieth century was attributed to the growing awareness of women's rights in China. At the very beginning of her 1938 book on Chinese drama, which is dedicated to Mei Lanfang, Cecilia Zung says that "the Movement for the Emancipation of Women . . . accomplished the leadership of the 'tan' [*dan*]" (xxiii) in Beijing opera. It is true that from the 1920s to the mid-1940s, it was the *dan* that dominated the traditional Chinese stage, and it is also true that Mei's genius contributed enormously to the rise of the *dan*. The decade ranging from 1920 to 1930 saw the rise and prosperity of the so-called "four great *dan*" artists, with Mei the leader among them.<sup>22</sup> But it is important to keep in mind that they were all male *dan*, male "female" actors, men. Just how the Chinese women's movement in the early part of the century affected the rise of the *dan* in Chinese opera (if such a causal relationship did exist), Zung did not explain. It would take another full-length study to examine this issue in detail; however, it should be pointed out that the long tradition of domination of the public theatre by men,

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<sup>22</sup> The other three were Cheng Yanqiu (1904-1958), Shang Xiaoyun (1900-1976), and Xun Huisheng (1900-1968).

especially in Kunju and Beijing opera, saw a phenomenon of men playing the role of women on stage to appeal to the almost exclusively male audience (in the past, women's access to public theatres were oftentimes severely limited or even denied). In a man-centered culture, man himself constructs the female stereotype for himself, on stage and off stage. Man has attempted to appropriate the stage representation of woman by trying to immerse destabilizing female figures in the patriarchy. Female *dan* players were generally considered inferior in their artistic achievement, and interestingly enough, the stage image of the four great male *dan* performers were arguably "prettier" than that of their contemporary female *dan* performers, judging by the high quality plates of male and female *dan* performers in Zung's book, for instance.

Nowadays in Kunju and Beijing opera, as a general rule (there are very rare exceptions) *dan* role-types are taken up by women while some female performers still play the *sheng* roles. This is closely related to the Chinese communists' attitude toward gender and sexuality. The communists consider male cross-dressing as unnatural and unofficially stopped the training of the male *dan*. In any case, the naturalized feudal patriarchal discourse still underlines Chinese opera, regardless of the disappearance of the male *dan* and the rigorous reform of Chinese opera. Feudalism has reinscribed itself in a traditional art form censured by the Chinese communist regime as an oppressive feudal ideological residue, especially during the Cultural Revolution. The



communists' regulation of Chinese opera in the past forty years, while destroying much of the cultural heritage, has not only failed to unmask and cease the functioning of the feudal patriarchy with its ideology of the domination of the Other, but has perpetuated this discursive practice. The formation of the Chinese Communist Party functions fundamentally as a patriarchal political organization (Gilmartin, "Gender in the Formation of a Communist Body Politic"). Chinese women, while ironically metaphorized as "half of the sky" [*banbian tian*], are still largely playing a subordinate role in a patriarchal system that has blended Western communism and feudal Chinese ideology — Chinese women have not been given, but have been supporting "half of the sky."<sup>2 3</sup>

Tori Moi has said that contemporary feminism is "about transforming the existing power structures—and, in the process, transforming the concept of power itself" and

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<sup>2 3</sup> "The facade of sexual equality in contemporary Chinese society" (Li Ziyun 306) has been unmasked by writers and critics. For critical reflections on various aspects of the failure of women's emancipation in China and critiques of the marginalization of women's voices as signifiers of high-sounding political causes, see Tonglin Lu (ed.), *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society* (1993), and the section "Becoming Women in the Post-Mao Era" in Christina Gilmartin, et al. (eds), *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (1994).

rejecting the notion that “women’s relationship to power is . . . exclusively one of victimization” (148). The traditional Chinese woman warrior, a powerful Other who poses a potential challenge to man’s power and destabilizes man’s *I* and its centrality, is mostly reduced and represented in a male discourse as a “potential same-to-be, a yet-not-same” (Godzich xiii). Her subversiveness is continuously oppressed and rendered as another stereotype in the universe of male writing. In today’s revival and reinvention of the traditional play *The Big Dipper Battle Formation*, the representation of the woman warrior shows several tension points where a complex negotiation between the empowered and empowering woman and an oppressive but posed-and-masked-as-natural male narrative is subtly played out. The search for a power-transforming female representation in Chinese opera may not have circumvented victimization. However, as Judith Butler argues in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), that the normative “regulatory ideal” can never complete its materialization of “sex” through reiteration of regulatory norms, the repetitive subjugation of the feminine in Chinese opera through a reiteration of victimization is a sign that the regulatory patriarchal containment is necessarily never complete, and that the possibilities for revictimization open up a fracture in the discursive space to turn the patriarchy against itself and call into question the hegemonic force. The extraordinary escalation of the intensity of empowerment and victimization at once in the reproduction of the figure of Bright Pearl both textually and in performance is instructive. The possible

implosion of this contending site of representation embodied in the woman warrior can be reclaimed as a space of hope to begin with. This liminal space is also where the significance of rereading the representations of the woman warrior on the Chinese stage lies.<sup>2 4</sup>

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