Mustache as Resistance
Representation and Reception of Mei Lanfang’s Masculinity

Guanda Wu

Kyōgekitēbō (jingju manual), a handy guidebook to Chinese jingju (Beijing opera) produced for welcoming Mei Lanfang’s third (and last) formal trip to Japan in 1956, begins its introduction to the greatest nandan (male players of female roles in Chinese theatre) of the 20th century with a forward by Uchiyama Kanzō, the owner of the well-known Uchiyama Bookstore in Republican Shanghai.1 In this opening text, Uchiyama perceptively notes the dual identities associated with the dan (female roles) player in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in the early 1940s: on the one hand, Mei was known as a celebrated actor of female roles; on the other hand, he was hailed by Uchiyama as “a great mustached man” (hige no ijōbu) (Uchiyama 1956:4).2 In lieu of a survey of Mei Lanfang’s stunning artistic achievements onstage, Uchiyama’s introductory text focuses on the story of how Mei as “a great mustached man” had repeatedly refused to return to the stage in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. Mei’s mustache, as Uchiyama’s phrase hige no kōsen (the mustache’s resistance) suggests (1956:4), served as an embodied marker of masculinity that indicated both the maestro’s decision to halt his stage career and his resistance against Japanese aggression during the latter part of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

While the Chinese actor’s remarkable construction of femininity onstage has been well documented in a substantial body of English-language literature, Mei Lanfang’s complicated performances of masculinity have just begun to garner scholarly attention. In his recent study of the artistic transformation of jingju from 1870 to 1937, during the transition between the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and the early Republican era (1912–1937), Joshua Goldstein employed what he calls “the split between the real and representation” to describe the essence of the Republican understanding of a nandan’s gender alteration between on- and offstage (2007:250). While this is how we understand the nandan’s theatrical acting today, such an understanding was historically new in the early Republican era. In the Beijing pleasure quarters of the Qing dynasty, nandan not only performed onstage as female characters but also presented socially feminine bodies offstage by serving as singing waiters and male courtesans. Hence, these beautiful boys of the Qing presented coherent femininity transcending the boundary of the stage, which made a distinction between the real and representation unnecessary, if indeed it ever existed. This new epistemological split encouraged the spectator to apprehend a nandan’s

1. This research would have been impossible without the support of three generous sources of funding. The East Asia Library at Stanford University awarded me a travel grant that allowed me to study its collection of early-20th-century publications on Chinese and Japanese theatres in March 2015. My research trip to the Yenching Library at Harvard University in May 2015 was supported by a travel grant from Yenching and a Thesis Research Travel Grant from the University of Minnesota.

2. Chinese and Japanese names are given in their conventional order, that is, the surname first, followed by the given name. All translations from Chinese and Japanese are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
femininity “as an aesthetic illusion, a performance contradicting the real fact of his biologically (and socially) male body” (251). Such hermeneutics of a nandan’s performance of gender in part resulted from the introduction of science-sanctioned gender normalcy during the Qing-Republic transition: as a “civilized” male subject of the newly founded republic, a nandan’s gender presentation offstage had to conform to the social expectation of his biological sex. In other words, men should act like men offstage, even if they performed femininity onstage. However, in the long 19th century (1770–1911), coherent presentations of femininity both on- and offstage were much desired in the reception of dan players in Beijing’s pleasure quarters, Mei Lanfang’s direct precursors (see Goldstein 2007:251; Goldman 2012:17–60).

Goldstein’s study of the Qing-Republic nandan is useful in looking at the representations and receptions of Mei Lanfang’s masculine body, as well as the impact on Mei’s theatrical enactments onstage, in a different cultural and historical setting: from the Second Sino-Japanese War to the end of the maestro’s life in 1961. While much of the available literature privileges his rendering of femininity when interpreting Mei Lanfang’s pathway to national iconicity, I contend that Mei’s performances of masculinity have contributed equally to his durable reputation (in China in particular). Not only did audiences after the war read Mei’s embodiment of Chinese beauties onstage in relation to once mustached gentleman offstage, and vice versa, but they also saw his dramatic characters exhibiting a female masculinity that became increasingly prominent in Mei’s later-career repertory.

Mei Lanfang and the Japanese

The Prewar Bond

Although Mei Lanfang’s trip to Japan in 1956 was eagerly anticipated by numerous progressive individuals and groups, the presence of the once mustached gentleman in postwar Japan still elicited hostility from those who were anxious about the political signification of the visit at the height of the Cold War. Tension escalated as Mei’s troupe premiered at Tokyo’s Kabuki-za on 30 May. The Chinese company was greeted by anti-Communist leaflets composed in a

3. The employment of the concept “female masculinity” is inspired by Judith (Jack) Halberstam’s celebrated study of the masculine effects displayed by the female body (1998). However, differentiating itself from the cases of female masculinity that Halberstam investigates, Mei Lanfang’s theatrical construction of the masculine female roles does not necessitate a female identifying performer. Hence, it invites us to reconsider the alleged symbiosis between female masculinity and the female sex.
4. It was precisely this prewar tie that made Mei’s trip to Japan possible in the mid-1950s, given that the formal relationship between the People’s Republic of China and Japan didn’t exist until 1972.

5. For a thorough study of Mei Lanfang’s formal visits to Japan during the Republican era, see Tian (2012:15–56).

6. According to Mei Shaowu, a son of Mei Lanfang, during Lanfang’s initial stay in Hong Kong, his father wore a mustache only on occasion. The mustache was firmly in place after the British-ruled city was taken over by the Japanese in December 1941, immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor (in Ozaki 2004:298).
the Dachang airport in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. A current snapshot of Mei appeared in *Taipingyang zhoubao* (Pacific Weekly), a Shanghai-based newspaper edited by Chinese collaborators, along with a report by a journalist who interviewed Mei at his residence in Shanghai (fig. 1). Seemingly in reference to both his meeting with the actor and the photograph, the journalist noted: “after seeing Mei Lanfang, my immediate impression was that he has been aging fast. His face was rather drawn, his spirits were quite low, and a mustache that he retained above the lips added more years” (Wen Xiong 1942:467).

The mustache, as it is alleged to be exclusive to a postpubescent male body, functions as both a marker of the male sex and a token of biological maturity. Perhaps because it is considered to be something granted by nature, the complicated interplay between theatricality, citationality, and the power of self-assertion through the stylization of the mustache often remains obscured by the disguise of naturalness. And precisely in line with this reductive consideration of the mustache, the complicit journalist viewed Mei’s mustache to be a natural and thus inevitable product of decrepitude, insinuating that the middle-aged actor was physically incapable of maintaining his demanding acting profession. While this failure to apprehend the theatrical power associated with facial hair is not uncommon, it is nonetheless undeniable that both on the theatrical stage and off the mustache remains arguably the most compelling (and certainly the handiest) object to foreground the masculine body of a cross-dressed performer, or to make a youthful male appear more mature.

Yet, given the fact that it belonged to (or appeared to belong to) the body of a male player of female roles during the war of resistance, Mei’s mustache was more than a marker of masculinity and/or maturity. With its profound sense of self-expression, the mustache, at the empirical level, embodied a resolute departure from his onstage femininity and a performative dismissal of the glamorous androgyny for which Mei’s body was best known. Because this disassociation from the feminine occurred at the pinnacle of the war of resistance, at the allegorical level, Mei’s mustache further symbolized an unyielding, and now unmistakably male, Chinese body.

Beginning in the early years of the Republican era and continuing through his triumphant touring performances in Japan, the United States (1930), and the Soviet Union (1935), Mei Lanfang’s personal body had been imagined as increasingly representative of China’s national body (Yeh 2008:205–39). After the outset of the war, the famous nandan seemed to be aware of a potential opportunity for his internationally known feminine body to be manipulated to
reinforce the national metaphorical dichotomy between a masculine Japan and a feminine China. Mei’s stunning decision to halt his stage career therefore circumvented the very prospect of projecting his Chinese body as an attractive feminine character before the Japanese militarists as well as their Chinese collaborators, especially when the onstage femininity could be read stereotypically as having “submissive” and “effeminate” attributes. Hence, his adoption of the mustache proved to be a particularly astute move not only because the facial hair’s startling presence rejected the possibility of bestowing the Japanese with a glimpse of a feminized Chinese male, but also because as a putative and inevitable product of nature it exculpated the wearer himself from being persecuted for his (surreptitious) resistance.

However, as a sign of resistance nonetheless, Mei’s mustache was as emotionally stirring as any overt manifestos against the Japanese occupation. Feng Zikai, a caricature painter who fled Southeast China upon its fall to the Japanese, was deeply heartened by likely the very same photographic portrayal of Mei. According to Feng, a photograph featuring the mustached Mei Lanfang, taken from a newspaper and sent by his friend from Shanghai as a gift, remained the only decoration in his rather empty room in Chongqing, the Nationalist regime’s wartime capital in China’s hinterland, until the end of the war (Feng 1961:4). Unlike the collaborators, who viewed Mei Lanfang’s mustache as a sign of aging and disheartenment, Feng contended strikingly that the mustache made Mei not only look more glamorous than his signature dramatic characters such as Xi Shi and Yang Yuhuan, but also resonate with Mencius’s ideal of a “great man” (dazhangfu), a moral exemplar who cannot be “deflected by power or force” (weiwu buneng qu) (Mencius 2009:62). By reminding him of the hardship that Mei had to endure in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, the photographic image motivated the caricaturist to bear extreme adversity during the war (Feng 1961:4).

The Mustache
Its Sources and Historicity

In addition to the strong sense of self-assertion Mei displayed through his mustache, his wartime performances of masculinity also bring to light the historicity and citationality of the mustache itself. During the Qing-Republic transition, the mustache appeared to function as a prominent point of signification in the (re-)fashioning of the codes of modernity, along with other culturally susceptible forms that decorated the exterior of a body, such as hairdos, spectacles, and clothing. Historically speaking, this phenomenon was unprecedented because the mustache, in China’s pre-modern times, was rarely viewed to be an entity independent of, and certainly not more prominent than, other types of facial hair. Yet, owing to a series of complicated circulations of renewed notions of masculinity across the globe, the practice of mustache trimming proliferated among the upper- and middle-class ranks of the Republican male population.

Among the diverse sources of Republican gentlemen’s mustache fashions, the Japanese, intriguingly, played a particularly critical role in introducing this masculine convention to its continental neighbor. Allegedly influenced by the Europeans, Japanese male subjects adopted stylized mustaches as part of their codes of civility after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. In 1899, when a cohort of Japanese gentlemen led by Goto Shinpei, then the civil administrator of the colonial government in Taiwan, toured the southern Chinese coastal city Xiamen, their mustaches, along with other noted differences in dress, tellingly distinguished the Japanese tourists from their local Chinese hosts (fig. 2). In his 1924 essay “On the Mustache,” Lu Xun, a Japanese-educated writer often regarded as China’s greatest of the 20th century, recalled that upon one of his homecoming trips from Japan in the first decade of the 20th century, he was perceived by other Chinese nationals, mainly because of his mustache, to have a Japanese appearance (1981:177).

However, upon the advent of the Republic of China, neatly trimmed mustaches (often in contrast to cleanly shaved beards) gradually became less representative of a national distinc-
Mei Lanfang’s Mustache

Figure 2. A group of Japanese gentlemen, led by Gotô Shinpei, visited the Southern Chinese city Xiamen in 1899. Their mustaches distinguished the Japanese tourists from their Chinese hosts. (From Shashin kurabu: ichimeTaiwan jinbutsu shashinchō 1901:n.p.; courtesy of National Taiwan Library)

tion. By retaining impressive mustaches, Republican gentlemen, including some of the most prestigious of the time, collectively contributed to the circulation and proliferation of new codes of masculinity in China, despite their widely divergent cultural and political stances. The famous mustache wearers included, but were certainly not limited to, Sun Yat-sen, a bourgeois nationalist and the founding father of the Republic of China (fig. 3); Duan Qirui (a.k.a. Tuan Chi-jui), one of Sun’s major rivals and a three-time premier of the Republic (fig. 4); Li Dazhao, one of the founders of China’s Communist Party (fig. 5); and Zhang Zuolin, an anti-Communist warlord who hanged Li in 1927 (fig. 6).

In addition to these notable mustaches of early Republican gentlemen, another critical source was also likely responsible for Mei Lanfang’s wartime mustache. In the fall of 1941, upon the eve of the fall of Hong Kong to the Japanese, Mei and his two teenage sons watched the Hollywood political comedy The Great Dictator (1940), starring and directed by the very famous Charlie Chaplin. One of the Chinese maestro’s closest counterparts in the West, Chaplin had befriended Mei during the nandan’s tour of the United States in 1930 and was in return warmly received by him in Shanghai during the comedian’s trip to Asia in 1936 (Mei Lanfang 1962:50–54). Mei Shaowu, one of the sons attending the initial screening, identified the mustache of Chaplin’s characters as a source that might well motivate his father to maintain his own (in Ozaki 2004:297–98), given that the senior Mei was apparently moved by his acquaintance’s satirical performance, elucidating its antifascist implications in depth to the youth and watching the film, astonishingly, “some seven times after it was first viewed” (Mei Shaowu 1984:82–83).

For a globalized Hollywood spectatorship, Chaplin’s highly stylized mustache, featuring a thick and protruding center with completely shaved edges, known as the “toothbrush” style, was essential to the comedian’s best remembered cinematic persona, the Tramp. As a strategic mustache wearer, the British-born Hollywood tycoon might well have captivated his Chinese acquaintance with the mustache’s magic power of transformation. Because Chaplin rarely sported a mustache offscreen, it became a site-specific token that reminded his fans of the distinction between the hilarious characters and Chaplin’s various serious social roles (dedicated filmmaker, committed activist, affable gentleman, passionate if controversial husband, among others). As both a perceptive spectator and an astute emulator, Mei not only seemed to discern the mustache’s potential use for alternating between personae, but also ascribed to the meager bodily apparatus an additional gendered implication by employing it only in the space exterior to the theatrical stage where he had performed female roles.

However, with The Great Dictator, Chaplin’s mustache of course became more than a practical marker of an altered identity. In that film, the comedian’s mustache clearly mimicked that of Adolf Hitler, the toothbrush mustache’s most notorious bearer in modern times. In the West, due to his sardonic treatment of the fascist regime in 1940, Chaplin was lauded as a visionary, a
Figures 3–6. Famous mustache wearers (clockwise, from left): Sun Yat-sen, the Provisional President of the Republic of China (from Zhongguo geming ji 1912:n.p.); Duan Qirui, three-time premier of the Republic (from Da zhonghua 1916:n.p.); Li Dazhao, head of the Peking University Library (from Beida shenghuo xiezhenji 1921:13); Zhang Zuolin, early Republican warlord (from Shibaotuhua zhoukan 1924:n.p.).
Mei Lanfang’s Mustache

As the history of the toothbrush mustache in the post-WWII era suggests, variably styled mustaches, in addition to functioning as highly invested semiotic signs in modern times (markers of gender, maturity, civility, altered personae, among others), also make and participate in cultural and performance history as nodal points linking emotions and memories, not only to affective life but also to political history itself. (Although, as we have seen in the contemporary Chinese representations of the Japanese officers, memories often are distorted, as they always invite deflection in one way or another.) Mei Lanfang’s mustache remains memorable to date, partly because, like Chaplin’s, it functions effectively as both a marker of identity and an emotional and mnemonic nodal point.

In early Republican China, while Mei’s body was viewed increasingly as emblematic of the Chinese state on the transnational stage, the actor’s personal accomplishment delighted some who longed for international recognition of indigenous drama’s aesthetic merits. At the same time many feared that the nandan’s androgynous body would embarrass the nation before foreign eyes. The latter camp included some of the most influential intellectuals of the age,
including Lu Xun, who was remembered for, among other things, his poignant critique of female impersonation and Mei Lanfang in particular. It was thus in the immediate aftermath of the war that the Chinese as a whole, for the first time, fully embraced the correlation between the nandan and the Chinese nation.

On 10 October 1945, the first National Day of the Republic of China after the war, Mei Lanfang’s testimony about his life during the Japanese occupation appeared in Wenhui bao (The Standard), a Shanghai newspaper revived after years of suspension during the Sino-Japanese conflict. In addition to a textual reference to Mei’s mustache, the publication also featured prominently two recent photographic portraits of Mei (fig. 8). Whereas the text was mainly devoted to bitter memories of the past, the photos were wholly about the revitalized postwar present. While at the top of the page Mei emerges as a rejuvenated actor who shaved off his mustache in preparation for his formal return to the stage, inset midway through the text the nandan appears as the unyielding female loyalist of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in the kunqu (Kun opera) play Ci hu (Slaying the Tiger), a play presented by Mei in one of his initial reappearances onstage.

As a matter of fact, the display of the two contrasting illustrations embraced a fashionable exhibition convention that was initiated in the early Republican era — photographs featuring an actor in his/her dramatic roles juxtaposed with those depicting the person in “real” life. Although actors in general were subjected to this exhibition convention, Republican publications favored nandan as its privileged subjects. In a typical representation of a nandan’s dual identities (figs. 9 and 10),

Figure 8. Mei’s own writing on his life during the war, with Mei as a clean-shaven resurrected actor and Mei as Fei Zhen’e in Ci hu (Slaying the Tiger). (From Mei Lanfang 1945:2)

7. For an in-depth English-language study of Lu Xun’s attitude toward nandan and Mei Lanfang, see Li (2003:15–26).
the actors are separated spatially from their roles. The elaborate stylization of the costuming, makeup, posture, facial expression, and hairstyle greatly distinguished a female dramatic character from a mundane male person as he appeared in Republican everyday life.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to detail how the photographic juxtaposition of a nandan’s dual identities profoundly contributed to an altered reception of male specialists of female roles after the early Republican era, it is noteworthy that this maneuver encouraged a post-Qing spectator of nandan to read the “women” onstage as “artistic,” “theatrical,” and thus “fictional,” while comprehending the “gentlemen” offstage as “natural,” “mundane,” and therefore somehow “essentially true or real.” This very understanding of the nandan’s gender duality became increasingly prevalent, if not exclusive, toward the end of the early Republican period, owing to an epistemological turn during the Qing-Republic transition. In Qing Beijing, as previously mentioned, the connoisseurship of the dan favored a coherent femininity that transcended the boundary of the theatrical stage. After the founding of the Republic, however, an epistemological division between “artistic” femininity onstage and “natural” masculinity offstage became increasingly essential to the identity of the female impersonators of the newer generation(s). This was because the social acceptance and aesthetic explicability of the nandan’s stage portrayals of women have been conditional upon their cogent presentations of masculinity offstage.

Yet, in the aftermath of the war, the photographic representations of Mei Lanfang’s dual identities were no longer preoccupied with an epistemological distinction between reality and fiction—as the nandan’s remarkable use of his mustache confirmed the ostensible “truth” about his male sex, one would not need to redundantly point out that the beautiful woman onstage was plainly the outcome of his long-term dedication to the art. Hence, in the postwar era, the reading of Mei Lanfeng’s dual persona was much different from the way it was previously perceived. In the Standard, the display of Mei’s theatrical rendition of the Ming loyalist Fei Zhen’e is unlikely to be coincidental. Belonging to what I call the “dramas of resistance,” Slaying the Tiger tells of a Ming woman’s transformation from a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court into an assassin who aspires to retaliate against the rebels. If prior to the war the distance
between his female characters and the handsome gentleman as he presented himself in everyday life was incommensurable, as displayed in the Standard, this distance has been bridged by the shared patriotism between the nandan and his character, as Mei’s dramatic persona was also politically invested in the ethos of postwar nationalism.

In line with the Standard, Changfeng huabao (The Changfeng Pictorial), another Shanghai-based late-Republican publication, also revealed how some kind of political affinity between Mei and his dramatic character transcends their conspicuous difference of gender in the postwar photographic representations of the nandan. In early 1946, a set of five photographs of the patriotic nandan was featured in the publication’s opening issue (fig. 11). The Changfeng photos en masse present readers with a sequence of images covering Mei Lanfang’s biographic trajectory from the late Qing to late Republican periods. The nandan appears in the illustrations chronologically as a 15-year-old student actor (circa 1909), an 18-year-old grandson with his grandmother (circa 1912), a mustached gentlemen (early 1940s), an over-50-year-old artist who had shaved off his mustache to welcome the Chinese victory over the Japanese imperialists (mid-1940s, shortly after the war), and Mei’s female character Yu Ji in Bawang bieji (Farewell, my concubine; date unspecified).8

Although the representations of Mei, as his offstage persona and his thespian embodiment of Yu Ji, also seem to continue the aforementioned early Republican convention of dual display, the Changfeng, like the Standard, seemed to be more interested in conveying the political message shared by Mei Lanfang and his female character rather than suggesting an essential dis-

8. A closer reading of this late Republican publication’s images would lead to some riveting findings. As a matter of fact, the 1907 photo that depicts the teenage actor challenges Mei’s coherent pattern by having Mei’s male body trespass onto the domain of the theatrical stage. While details about this particular play remain unknown, in the image, the female role specialist appears to play, astonishingly, a young male character. The braided queue, perhaps the most explicit marker of a male body of the Qing dynasty, in addition to the posture and costuming, defies any ambiguous reading of the character’s gender.
Mei Lanfang’s Mustache

The Dramas of Resistance
The Cosmic Blade and the Like

On the early Republican stage, it was generally thought that Mei Lanfang did not surpass other dan players in some of the traditionally esteemed areas of expertise such as singing technique, acrobatics, and movement (Goldstein 2007:146). Instead, his highly refined “stage appearance (banxiang), carriage, and beauty” (146) were thought to be the key to Mei Lanfang’s preeminence. Scholars of Chinese visual culture have thus described jingju’s burgeoning emphasis on visual allure during the early years of the Republican era as a “visual turn” (Dong 2010:201–03), a transition “from listening to watching” (Pang 2007:133–63). Mei Lanfang, as both a proponent and beneficiary of this altered expectation, attained his ascendancy among the dan players by refashioning jingju’s rendition of female roles with his superiority in sexual appeal.
In the mid-1920s, when the nandan’s seductive power was perhaps at its pinnacle, the triumph of the plays featuring the alluring beauties was partly evidenced by Mei’s reluctantly stated preference for performing these plays. On 27 October 1924, during his second formal visit to Japan, Mei was invited to speak to a group of noted Japanese writers and theatre critics in a colloquium sponsored by the journal *Engeki shincho* (New currents of theatre). When asked to address the question, “What are Mr. Mei’s most satisfying performances?” by the playwright Kume Masao, the nandan at first tackled the inquiry with his usual humility by asserting that none of his works were satisfying and that the histrionics all looked unsightly to him (*Engeki shincho* 1924:10). But when Kume insisted on an answer, Mei eventually confessed that, while in his preexisting program, *Yutang chun* (The story of Su San) and *Daiyu zanghua* (The flower’s funeral) were the plays that he “enjoyed performing” and “found interesting”; among the later scripts, *Luoshen* (Goddess of the river Luo) was preferred (*Engeki shincho* 1924:10).

Pertaining to jingju’s Qing repertoire but refashioned by Mei with new stagecraft, *The Story of Su San* introduces a romance between a promising Confucian scholar and a faithful courtesan, perhaps the most prevailing scenario in classical Chinese drama. As Republican theatrical rewrites of premodern literary canons, *The Flower’s Funeral* and *Goddess of the River Luo*, however, were first staged in 1916 and 1923 respectively, and were exclusive to Mei’s repertory. Regardless of the generic difference, what all three productions shared was the nubile beauty role, whose essential allure rests on a combination of physical delicacy, behavioral submissiveness, and moral innocence.

Despite their popularity in the first two decades of the Republic, Mei’s performances of these submissive beauties became less frequent by the mid-1930s and the fates of Mei’s signature characters from the preceding decades turned out to be rather mixed after Mei returned to the stage in 1945. Indeed, one could attribute the modification within Mei’s later-career repertory to his fading sexual appeal as the nandan reached middle age. But as Mei ascended from a popular local star to a nationally and internationally esteemed patriotic artist, his political concerns perhaps steadily took priority over his interest in monetary gain. This would become particularly true after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 when Mei performed under the aegis of the state, appearing at a variety of sites that were of political significance for the young Communist regime, including not only the makeshift stages by the side of rural fields and industrial facilities in China, but also the improvised underground studios in North Korea and the grandiose kabuki houses in Japan (see Mei Lanfang [1955] 2001:9; Mei Lanfang 1957). As Mei’s body was privileged as one of a very limited number of Chinese bodies that could move between the two widely divided ideological camps at the peak of the Cold War, his theatrical enactment was configured to appear congenial with the altered cultural and political milieu. However, it is noteworthy that Mei’s later-career repertory was composed not of predominantly new works but rather by reshuffling his preexisting plays. It was perhaps not only because the creation of traditional dramas became an increasingly treacherous endeavor under the new regime’s state censorship (Liu 2009:387–406), but also because the considerable size and breadth of his pre-existing repertoire provided Mei with numerous opportunities to use these malleable texts to negotiate with the new aesthetic rationales and political stipulations. This phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by the growing prominence of dramas like *Yuzhou feng* (Beauty defies tyranny, or literally, the “cosmic blade”) from Mei’s late-life career.

In contrast to the tales with tender, romantic sentiments, in which the youthful Mei Lanfang excelled, the *Cosmic Blade* tells of a married, solemn woman who rebels against her biological father. Set during the Qin dynasty (221 BCE–206 BCE), the play relates a fictional character named Zhao Yanrong to two genuine historical figures, the Qin’s last emperor and his corrupt minister Zhao Gao (Yanrong’s father), via a series of quasi-historical episodes. Intriguingly, perhaps due to its dull and protracted storyline, the *Cosmic Blade* held a comparatively marginal role in jingju’s classical program during the Qing dynasty and unfortunately remained peripheral even after it was polished by Mei’s theatrical genius in the 1910s. Regarding the undesir-
able reception of the play at the time, Mei candidly noted: “Whenever it was played, the box office performance was always not as good as I wished. When I toured to Shanghai for the first time [in 1913], during a stay of a total of 45 days, I performed the Cosmic Blade only twice. To learn about whether audiences are fond of a play or not, one could only count its frequency of being staged” (Mei and Xu 1957:146).

Despite its mediocre reception in Mei’s early career, in Wutaishenghuo sishinian (Forty-year life onstage), Mei’s memoir of his theatrical life during the first half of the 20th century, the Cosmic Blade is strikingly lauded as Mei’s “favorite” by Xu Jichuan, Mei’s secretary and the co-author of his autobiography (Mei and Xu 1957:148). When asked to comment on this particular play circa 1950, Mei himself also spoke of it repeatedly in laudatory terms. The Cosmic Blade was hailed by Mei as, successively, a play to which he “was addicted,” a production into which he “put the most effort in life,” and a dramatic piece that had constantly won his “exceptional fondness” since it was initially imparted to him by his master [in the Qing] (Mei and Xu 1957:146–48).

But one critical question now arises: how should we understand the noticeable discord between Mei’s claim that his “exceptional fondness” for the Cosmic Blade dated all the way back to the last days of the Qing and his choice of three entirely different plays as his favorites in conversation with the Japanese in 1924? This question perhaps needs to be understood as not only a historical question about Mei’s own artistic preferences, but also, more importantly, a historiographical inquiry regarding biographical self-making. To answer it, I call for a keen awareness of a canonizing inclination and political interests that might color Mei’s recollections of his early artistic inspirations and practices in the 1950s. Hence, the inconsistency within Mei’s own accounts perhaps suggests not only a historical turn, an altered interest in and a renewed assessment of his pre-existing repertoire, but also a historiographical tendency to recount the great patriot’s artistic trajectory with an emphasis on the interests and pursuits that were deemed to be politically meaningful in his postwar life.

It is precisely this kind of political orientation that illuminates the reason for initiating and expanding Mei’s stated passion for the Cosmic Blade. In Forty-Year Life Onstage, Mei Lanfang attributes his obsession with the play to the inspiration of Feng Gengguang, a Japanese-educated Republican plutocrat who remained a mainstay of Mei’s throughout the nandan’s career. According to Mei, the Cosmic Blade was “the most praiseworthy” play for Mr. Feng, mainly because it was rare for a woman in fiction to take bold action against tyranny and injustice (Mei and Xu 1957:146). Feng Gengguang was said to once liken Yanrong to the “great man” imagery conceived by Mencius, the masculine icon who cannot be “moved by poverty or privation, or deflected by power or force” (fugui buneng yin, weiwu buneng qu)9 (Mencius 2009:62).

Through the ancient sage’s eulogy of the “great man,” Mei’s rendering of the rebellious woman was strikingly reminiscent of the caricaturist Feng Zikai’s reading of the mustached gentleman during the war. Given the Confucian ideal’s misogynist formation10 and males’ exclusive privilege of embodying the epitome of gentlemanly virtue, the rebellious daughter seemed particularly commendable because she was perceived to embody some rather masculine traits by overcoming the alleged female inferiority, as Feng Gengguang’s account tellingly suggests.

9. For Mencius, three fundamental principles are essential to the character of one who shall be eulogized as a “great man”: “he cannot be led astray by riches and honor, moved by poverty or privation, or deflected by power or force” (Mencius 2009:62).

10. Mencius views the way of the “great men” and that of women as mutually exclusive, and the moral merit of the latter lies in compliance with patriarchal rules (Mencius 2009:62).
Represented by the *Cosmic Blade*, Mei’s highly ossified postwar repertoire foregrounded a number of what I call “dramas of resistance,” in which female protagonists are known for their extraordinary bravery in struggles against external assaults or internal despotism—at times even in the absence of their male counterparts. In addition to plays such as the *Cosmic Blade*, *Slaying the Tiger*, and *My Concubine*, the prevailing “dramas of resistance” include but are not limited to: *Mulan congjun* (*Mulan joins the army*), a play concerning a cross-dressed female warrior recently popularized in the West by the Disney animated movie; *Kang Jin bing* (*Against the Jin army*), a production first staged by Mei in 1933 in response to the Japanese attack on Shanghai the preceding year (fig. 12); *Shengsi ben* (*Eternal regret*), another play with anti-Japanese sentiments and known to the wider public through a 1948 cinematic adaptation; *Mukezhai* (*Muke village*), a classical fighting-intensive piece featuring a heroine named Mu Guiying, who is gifted in both tactics and martial arts; and *Mu Guiying guashuai* (*Mu Guiying takes command*), Mei’s own interpretation of the Mu Guiying story, which premiered in 1959 and was remembered as Mei’s first full-length dramatic creation during the PRC era and the last of the actor’s legendary life.

**The Eternal Unity**

**Between the Nandan Body and Chinese Body Politic**

In the concluding years of the maestro’s career, an increasing number of his dramatic characters were viewed as sharing the same uncompromising soul that was attributed to his patriotic gentleman persona in life. The burgeoning affinity between the “women” onstage and the gentleman offstage of course reveals that the body of Mei Lanfang—whether it took the form of a mundane person or a theatrical character—was a committed participant in postwar politics. This even appeared true after the body was deceased. On 8 August 1961, when the nandan par excellence died of heart failure, by order of the premier Zhou Enlai, Mei’s corpse was placed in a grand, exquisite coffin. Built of rare timber in the early Republican years yet preserved in a pristine condition, the luxurious coffin was originally reserved for the 1925 funeral of Sun Yat-sen, the mustached Republican statesman who made the modern Chinese nation a reality. At last and in perpetuity, Mei’s body and the body politic of China—like Mei’s dual identities themselves—have become one.

**References**

*Beida shenghuo xiezhenji*. 1921. “Tushuguan zhuren Li Dazhao xiansheng” [Head of the library, Mr. Li Dazhao], *Beida shenghuo xiezhenji* [Album of life at Peking University]:13. Beijing: Guoli Beijing daxue chubanbu.

Mei Lanfang’s Mustache


Shuntien shinpao. 1917. “Benshe juxuan dangxuanzhe ji cidianzhe zhipilou” [The announcement of the winners and runner-ups of our newspaper’s theatrical poll]. *Shuntien shinpao* [Shuntien Times], 2 November:5.

Shuntien shinpao. 1927. “Wudamingling xinjuduokui zuihouzhijieguo” [The final results of the poll regarding the five famed actors’ new plays]. *Shuntien shinpao* [Shuntien Times], 23 July:5.


