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Xiaoyao Lu

United World College of South East Asia, lu95771@gapps.uwcsea.edu.sg

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The Identity Crisis in China's National Drama: Vilification and Erasure of the Homosexuality of the Dan in Peking Opera, 1910–45

Xiaoyao Lu

United World College of South East Asia

The homosexuality of male dan actors — female impersonators — in the renowned Peking Opera has long been the subject of tabloid speculation and intellectual criticism since the 19th century, and yet little is said about it in modern-day China. While scholars have ascribed the cause of this change in perceptions of dan homosexuality to events of 1910–20s, including the work of Mei Lanfang, domestic political and economic change, and Japanese influence, I argue that Western and Soviet influence spanning from 1910–45 was the driving factor behind the vilification and heterosexualisation of dan actors.

I show the absence of homophobic stigma surrounding dan actors in fin-de-siècle China, before the introduction of Western ideas by the New Culture Movement. I then illustrate how the New Culture Movement's import of Western sexology (1910–35) created homophobia and vilification toward dan actors. Finally, I examine how American and Soviet praise for dan actors (1930–35) was connected with the immediately subsequent heterosexualisation of dan actors in Chinese literature (1935–45) by showing that these new writings incorporated the rhetoric of American and Soviet commentary of dan to deny their homosexuality.

Introduction

In the winter of 1929, Mei Lanfang, the famous *dan* actor of the Peking Opera, left for his legendary tour in the United States. During this visit, he became known to his American fans as “A Great King of Actors”, and received honorary doctorates from the University of Southern California and Pomona College — a feat that no other figure in Peking Opera has ever replicated.¹ The curtains to his show rose before members of the American elite, including First Lady Edith Wilson, prominent philosopher John Dewey, and New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker.² Banquets were held in his name with exorbitantly priced tables sold at up to \$1000.³ However, behind this façade of international recognition and glory, perceptions of *dan* actors in China were undergoing tumultuous changes due to the performers’ associations with homosexuality.⁴ During this period, the homosexuality of the *dan* and one of the last representations of queer Chinese culture was erased, and a heroic but necessarily heterosexual image of *dan* actors was established in its place. This image, purged of its historical homosexuality, continues to exist in both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (ROC) today.

There is an ongoing academic debate about how, and more contentiously, why this change occurred. To answer the first question, I premise this essay on Kang Wenqing’s “two

¹ Herbert Matthews, “China’s Stage Idol Comes to Broadway,” *New York Times*, Feb 16, 1930, <https://www.nytimes.com/1930/02/16/archives/chinas-stage-idol-comes-to-broadway-mei-lanfang-modestly-known-as.html>; Rui Zhang, “Peking Opera Artist Receives US Honorary Doctorate,” accessed August 1st, 2023, http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2016-05/23/content_38515495.htm.

² Nancy Guy, “Brokering Glory for the Chinese Nation,” *Comparative Drama* 35, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2001-2): 377, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41154150>.

³ Guy, “Brokering Glory,” 377.

⁴ *Dan* actors in this essay will refer solely to male *dan* actors of the Peking Opera.

Min Tian, “Male Dan: The Paradox of Sex, Acting, and Perception of Female Impersonation in Traditional Chinese Theatre,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 17, no. 1 (2000): 78–97. Although some women began having the opportunity to perform *dan* roles at his time, this was still a more marginalised practice due to them being banned from theatre for the Ming and Qing dynasties, and thus, male *dan* were considered as irreplaceable by female actors.

shifts” model of *how* perceptions of *dan* homosexuality changed. Based on this established timeline of the shifting discourse around *dan* actors, I argue that the main cause of these changes was the role of foreign influence, a break from current historiography. This new perspective is significant because it bridges the gap in the transformation of Chinese culture from including homosexuality to complete heterosexuality, and reveals the role of cultural imperialism from the West in writing the queer and cultural histories of China.

There are two main academic views on how opinions of *dan* homosexuality changed in early 20th century China. Kang Wenqing leads the predominant perspective that there were two changes in the way intellectuals and the public saw *dan* actors. According to Kang, the first change was a shift from intellectuals’ acceptance and romanticisation of *dan* actors in the late imperial era to the role’s fall from grace in 1910–30, during which New Culture intellectuals vilified *dan* actors as homosexual prostitutes.⁵ The second occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s when Chinese literature began heterosexualising the actors.⁶ These two changes have also been identified respectively by Guo Chao in his book *Chinese Theatre and Male Dan* and Wu Xinmiao in his article about post-1935 Chinese public discourse.⁷ On the other hand, Catherine Yeh contends alone that only one main change occurred, during which the *dan* actor became a “national” star from 1910–30, citing a newspaper’s popular opinion poll and various magazine writings.⁸

⁵ Kang, *Obsession*, 118–134.

⁶ Kang, *Obsession*, 135–144.

⁷ G. Chao, “Between Scholar-Intellectuals and Theatrical Aficionados,” in *Chinese Traditional Theatre and Male Dan: Social Power, Cultural Change and Gender Relations* (Routledge, 2022), 74–92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003050278>.

Wu, “Public Discourse,” page number not displayed. Wu wrote that far fewer attacks towards the actors’ supposed homosexuality after 1935, when Mei visited the Soviet Union. This matches the second mid-1930s shift Kang describes.

⁸ Catherine Vance Yeh, “Politics, Art, and Eroticism: The Female Impersonator as the National Cultural Symbol of Republican China,” in *Performing “Nation”: Gender Politics in Literature, Theater, and the Visual Arts of China and Japan, 1880–1940*, ed. Doris Croissant, Catherine Vance Yeh, and Joshua S. Mostow (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 295–312. *Sinica Leidensia*, Volume 91.

To discuss perceptions of the homosexuality of *dan* actors, I regard Kang's "two shifts" model as more relevant. Although Yeh could be right in that *dan* actors became popular with the general public, which is the group her historical sources focused on, they had less influence than the New Culture intellectuals in creating the rhetoric around the *homosexuality* of *dan* actors. Radical intellectuals of the New Culture Movement were far more engaged in the discourse around science, morality, and sexuality, and had more reign over perceptions of certain groups in Chinese society. This essay echoes Kang's view that by the conclusion of the early 20th century, *dan* actors had first changed from tolerated homosexual prostitutes to immoral and aberrant corrupters of society, and then to heterosexual heroes of the Chinese nation, as this was primarily evidenced by intellectual writings.

Given the premise of *how* the Chinese discourse around *dan* actors changed, this essay explores *why* this vilification and heterosexualisation of *dan* occurred. There are three main theories in the current historiography which attempt to explain this shift. The first, proposed by Joshua Goldstein in his article "Mei Lanfang and the Nationalisation of Peking Opera", was that Mei Lanfang's work from 1912–30 desexualised the *dan* role, and by purging it of its erotic implications, Mei, by extension, removed the homosexual appeal of the *dan*.⁹ The second, proposed by Catherine Yeh, was that a myriad of domestic influences caused the changing perceptions of *dan* actors, including economic growth and domestic politics.¹⁰ Yeh also hinted

⁹ Joshua Goldstein, "Mei Lanfang and the Nationalisation of the Peking Opera, 1912-1930," *Positions: East Asia Culture Critique* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 377–79. Goldstein writes that by connecting *dan* performance and "national culture", Mei Lanfang successfully appealed to China's political climate in the 1920s, consequently desexualising *dan* actors in the Chinese eye.

¹⁰ Yeh, "Where is the Centre of Cultural Production," 74. Yeh writes that the new post-imperial Chinese economy caused a cultural transformation that propelled *dan* actors to domestic stardom and national representation.

Yeh, *Performing 'Nation'*, 215. Yeh writes that the improvement of the *dan* image "in large part the result of literati/politicians . . . demonstrating their power to reset public taste."

that Japanese influence during Japan's occupation of Chinese regions could be a third reason for these changes.¹¹

However, the established “two shifts” timeline of intellectual vilification (1910–34) and heterosexualisation (1935–45) of *dan* actors reveal two gaps in these previous theories. For one, none of them explains why perceptions of *dan* homosexuality worsened from 1910–34, and for another, these writings imply that the improvement of Chinese opinions towards *dan* actors took place during the 1920s, which contradicts how *dan* actors continued to suffer intense humiliations up to 1935.

To remedy these inconsistencies, I propose an alternate theory: that Western and Soviet influences, readily absorbed by intellectuals of the New Culture Movement, caused the demonisation and subsequent erasure of *dan* actors' homosexuality instead of domestic and Asian influences. This contributes to the academic debate in two ways.

First, my analysis of *why* the *dan* homosexuality discourse changed adheres to the new “two shifts” framework about *how* it changed, making it more academically relevant compared to previous writings premised on an older historical account of how these changes occurred.

Second, my focus on New Culture literature around *dan* actors situates the academic debate about the perception of *dan* culture in the broader political context of 20th-century China. At the time, the New Culture Movement was a symbol of the nationalistic and iconoclastic reaction against the Qing monarchy and the Republic of China's weak response to Western and

¹¹ Yeh, *Performing 'Nation'*, 215. Yeh argued that Japan was an arbiter for Chinese tastes because it embodied Western values, allowing its affirmation of *dan* actors during the 1920s to influence Chinese perceptions of *dan* actors.

Japanese imperialism and the 1916–28 era of warlordism.¹² At the time, New Culture intellectuals imported Western ideas about science, morality, and sexuality, and established them as a new intellectual authority, entrenching Western homophobia.¹³ Importantly, the Movement's members also gained core roles in major political factions, especially in the forming Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which later rose to power, causing its ideas to remain relevant to the present day.¹⁴ By exploring the evolution of the New Culture Movement's ideas around *dan* homosexuality, I engage with the broader story of cultural self-colonialism, and how Chinese homophobia as we know it today came to be.

By adopting Kang's new framework of how perceptions of *dan* changed and drawing upon themes in the broader history of 20th-century China, I answer the question of why opinions of *dan* shifted in a way that is more faithful to the broader histories of both *dan* actors and Chinese society. Indeed, my argument that foreign influence caused the changes in the rhetoric around *dan* homosexuality is strongly consistent with broader academic work about the state of homophobia in imperial and republican China. Pioneering works of Chinese queer history, such as *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* by Bret Hinsch and Kang's book on early 20th century Chinese homosexuality, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in 1900–50*, suggest that the introduction of foreign sexological ideas in early 20th century China significantly reduced the level of acceptance for homosexuals.¹⁵ This essay

¹² Roberts, J. A. G. "Warlordism in China." *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 45/46 (1989): 26.

¹³ James Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Council on East Asian Studies Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1983), 4; Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity — China, 1930–37* (California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 234. Liu illustrates this by analysing a central New Culture work, the Compendium by Cai Yuanpei, then president of Peking University, which all but completely submitted to the West. According to Liu, the Compendium was a "self-colonising project in which the West served as the ultimate source of authority in terms of which one had to renegotiate what was meaningful in Chinese literature."

¹⁴ Zhidong Hao. "May 4th and June 4th compared: A sociological study of Chinese social movements." *Journal of Contemporary China* 6 (1997): 79–99.

¹⁵ Bret Hinsch, *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1–3. Hinsch describes some level of acceptance for homosexuality throughout the dynasties of imperial China prior to the introduction of Western sexology to China in the post-imperial era.

crystalises what this deteriorating acceptance looked like by demonstrating how foreign influence aided in the rewriting of Chinese traditions and culture to the erasure of queer presences, which has contributed to Chinese heteronormativity to this very day.¹⁶

I. The Social Context of 1900s China: Perceptions of Dan Actors Before the New Culture Movement and the First Wave of Change

Before the New Culture Movement of 1910–20s, intellectuals had a long history of interacting with *dan* actors in the Peking Opera and documented them as homosexuals. Despite this, most of these writers were not explicitly critical of *dan*, and if they did, the negativity was usually centre on their prostitution rather than their homosexuality, and equated *dan* with female prostitutes.¹⁷ This implied a level of acceptance towards *dan* homosexuality before the rise of the New Culture Movement.

The stereotypical association of *dan* actors with homosexuality — although not always true — existed as far back as the 17th century and grew until the 1900s. In the mid-1600s, Chinese playwright Li Yu was already treating the homosexuality of *dan* actors as a matter of fact, stating that they “[pleasured] people of the same sex in their beds.”¹⁸ Since Li worked in theatre, his observations on *dan* actors likely had some level of credibility. A similar work of fiction from the 18th century, *Pinhua baojian* (A treasured mirror for the appreciation of flowers), was more detailed, describing its protagonist engaging in homosexual relations with

Wenqing Kang, *Obsession: Male Same-Sex Relations in China, 1900-50* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 6. Kang writes that the attempt to modernise China under the pressure of national crisis resulted in a “reconfiguration of indigenous knowledge about male same-sex relations”.

¹⁶ Tian, “Male Dan,” 92.

¹⁷ “Peking Opera,” *China Culture Tour*, last modified December 11, 2022, accessed July 19, 2023, <https://www.chinaculturetour.com/culture/peking-opera.htm#:~:text=Peking%20opera%2C%20also%20referred%20to,Qianlong%20Emperor%20on%20September%2025>.

¹⁸ Yu Li, *Lian Cheng Bi* (c. 1650; Beijing: Zhonghua diancang, n.d.), 1-2. <https://www.zhonghuadiancang.com/wenxueyishu/lianchengbi/>.

two *dan* actors.¹⁹ Considering that the idea of *dan* homosexuality was a significant part of the novel's plot, it was probably quite a common, if not mainstream perception.

Beyond works of fiction, historical accounts also evidence the prevailing view that *dan* actors engaged in homosexual relations: an 1884 report book on the social customs of Tianjin, *Jinmen zaji* (Miscellaneous notes on Jinmen), classified *dan* actors as a lower class because they sold their bodies, which heavily indicates the prevalence of their practice of homosexual prostitution considering that this classification applied to all of them without exception.²⁰ The *dan*'s homosexual practices were explained more bluntly by the 1916 *Qingbai leichao* (Qing unofficial reference book), which described how unpopular male actors had to frequently resort to homosexual prostitution to support themselves during the Qing dynasty.²¹ The expectation that *dan* actors attracted other men was even self-evident in the features that *dan* actor training schools selected for — sexually appealing, feminine looks, which usually appealed to most men of the time.²²

However, despite this overwhelming amount of evidence for *dan* homosexuality, this stereotypical characterisation of homosexual prostitution was only predominantly applicable to unsuccessful *dan* actors, as the more popular ones could “choose to meet the most intimate and the most influential.” As per *Jinmen zaji*, the more well-off *dan* actors from Beijing usually only acted as drinking company and could avoid sexual contact with patrons. However, due to the prevalence of tabloids and magazines reporting on homosexual encounters between actor and patron, by the turn of the century, *dan* actors were consistently seen as “sexual objects on

¹⁹ Tian, “Male Dan,” 83.

²⁰ Shou Zhang, *Jinmen zaji*, (Tianjin: Unknown Publisher, 1884), 49.

²¹ Ke Xu, *Qing Unofficial Reference Book* (清稗类钞; Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1916), 5926–6021.

²² Tian, “Male Dan,” 82.

and off the stage” who may be “required to serve [male] officials sexually in a private household” as homosexual prostitutes.²³

Although *dan* actors were seen as homosexual prostitutes, they were not stigmatised far more than their female counterparts. A variety of sources equate *dan* actors and female sex workers in terms of status. In 1878, an intellectual writer under the pseudonym of Sheng Yilan noted that the phrase referring to *dan* actors, *xianggong*, was “borrowed from the term for courtesans”, implying that the perception of the nature of their work was likely similar.²⁴ This was supported by Wang Shunu in *Zhongguo changji shi* (history of prostitution in China). Wang notes that historically, male actors were referred to as “hua”, the same expression used for female prostitutes. Furthermore, the phrase for visiting their house, “da cha wei” was synonymous with “going to a brothel.”²⁵ This lexicon surrounding *dan* actors indicates that they were viewed in the same way as female prostitutes despite homosexual implications that have existed since the 17th century, illustrating a largely ambivalent Chinese attitude towards *dan* homosexuality before the arrival of the New Culture Movement.

Dan actors may have even benefited from their homosexual status. The aforementioned history of prostitution in China praised *dan* actors as better companions than female prostitutes, seeing them as more cultured and tasteful.²⁶ This preference for *dan* actors over female prostitutes indicates that they were not marginalised for their homosexuality, but were instead normalised and even fetishized. This view is echoed by renowned sinologist Colin P. Mackerras in *The Rise of the Peking Opera*, who wrote that *dan* actors “[could] best be compared not to

²³ Sophia Tingting Zhao, “Reorienting the Gaze in Mei Lanfang’s Lyrical Theatre: Performing Female Interiority,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 2 (2016): 397, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24737189>.

²⁴ Zhang, *Qingchao fazhishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 246.

²⁵ Wang, *Zhongguo changji shi*, 317–28.

²⁶ Wang, *Zhongguo changji shi*, 317–28.

ordinary prostitutes but to high-grade courtesans”, implying a level of respect for *dan* which did not apply to most prostitutes.²⁷ By the turn of the century, *dan* actors may have even been less frowned upon compared to female prostitutes at the time and suffered from little homophobia.

II. The New Culture Movement’s Attack on *Dan* Homosexuality and its Roots in Western Pseudoscience

On May 4th, 1919, at the height of the New Culture Movement, over 3,000 students protested the terms of the Versailles Treaty in Tiananmen Square. In the 1910–20s, this movement produced a group of nationalist and iconoclastic intellectuals who exalted Western ideas and gained important positions in Chinese universities and political movements, allowing them to heavily influence the public discourse not just during the 1910–20s, but the 30s and 40s as well.²⁸ Using the homophobic beliefs they gained from Western sexology, these influential New Culture intellectuals launched an all-out attack on *dan* homosexuality from 1910 to 1930.

The first attack on *dan* actors arrived in the form of a 1912 announcement in the *Zhengzong aiguo bao* (orthodox patriotic newspaper), a nationalist ally of the New Culture Movement.²⁹ It criticised *dan* opera houses which “seduced boys from respectable families, [and] made them sexually attractive,” branding the intermixing of intellectuals and *dan* actors as a “hotbed of the filthy and the foul.” Given the prevailing narrative that *dan* actors were homosexual prostitutes, this was likely a direct reference to their sexual relations with men.

²⁷ Colin Mackerras, *Rise of the Peking Opera, 1770-1870: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 152.

²⁸ Yunzhi Geng, "From Cultural Movement to Political Movement," in *An Introductory Study on China's Cultural Transformation in Recent Times* (New York: Springer Link, 2015), 315–8.

²⁹ Baidu Baike, "Zhengzong aiguo bao," last modified August 2, 2020, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/正宗爱国报/23170383>.

With the homosexual status of *dan* actors established, the author further comments that *dan* actors have “contaminated” the whole country with their homosexuality and invited “[ridicule] by foreigners”.³⁰ This comment was critical, because it construed *dan* homosexuality as a threat to national pride, and brought the private homosexual relations of *dan* into the context of post-imperial China’s struggle for a place in the international order. The fact that *dan* actors were seen by the author as so pernicious to China meant that to the nationalists behind the self-proclaimed patriotic newspaper, *dan* homosexuality constituted more than the exchange between the actor and the patron, but also had a dimension of immorality and backwardness that contrasted China’s efforts to modernise and gain international respect. Indeed, the very existence of such a denigrating commentary on *dan* homosexuality by self-proclaimed patriots — who themselves claim to mind national problems rather than the sexual relations of private individuals — is highly revealing; it displays the inherently homophobic idea that these same-sex relations were not a private matter, but rather one that could be publicly judged and, according to Kang’s analysis in *Obsession*, tied to the fate of the new Chinese republic.³¹

The newspaper was not alone, however, in supporting the idea that *dan* actors were sexual aberrations and thus a threat to Chinese modernity. This view was echoed by one of the most famous New Culture intellectuals, Lu Xun. In his 1924 article, “Lun zhaoxiang zhilei” (On photography and the sort), Lu Xun claimed that *dan* actors can attract men because the audience “see the female character performed by the male actor” rather than the masculinity of the actor themselves, resulting in homoerotic attractions. He remarks that this is “most worrying” as a part of Chinese national culture, thus appealing to the threat of Chinese identity potentially

³⁰ Cixi Zhang, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao* (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1988), 1243.

³¹ Kang, *Obsession*, 116.

being tarnished by *dan* homosexuality in the same way the previous newspaper did.³² Sarcastically, Lu Xun also writes that the “greatest and most eternal art of our China is men dressing up as women”, and given his known belief that tradition clashed with Chinese modernisation, his characterisation of something as “eternal art” essentially equates to calling it backwards.³³ As Min Tian analyses in his book, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage*, Lu Xun branded *dan* cross-dressing, and more importantly, the homosexuality it espouses, “as symptomatic of the declining of Chinese nationality”.³⁴

This concern of *dan* homosexuality being problematic for Chinese modernisation and damage international perceptions of China can also be found in other New Culture writings. In 1929, an issue of the New Culture journal *Wenxue zhoubao* (literature weekly) launched especially scathing criticisms against *dan* actors in anticipation of Mei Lanfang’s performances in the United States. It contained articles titled “Please Save Our International Reputation” which exclusively “[refuted] the artistic value of male *dan* actors” because of their homosexuality. Furthermore, it condemned famous *dan* actor Mei Lanfang to be an “abnormal person” and decried his visit to the United States as “flaunting aberrations”, continuing previous homophobic rhetoric.³⁵ The criticisms from this journal were not an isolated case. According to Wu Xinmiao’s analysis in his journal article “Public Discourse Before and After Mei Lanfang’s 1935 Soviet Union Visit”, this type of harsh vilification filled with homophobic

³² Shuren Zhou, “On Photography and the Sort (论照相之类),” in *Grave* (坟), (Beijing: Beixin Shuju, 1929), 167-75.

³³ Julia Lovell, *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 81.

³⁴ Min Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage: Chinese Culture Placed and Displaced* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 144.

³⁵ Zheng Zhenduo, “Dadao nanban nüzhuang de danjue; dadao danjue de daibiao ren Mei Lanfang” (down with the *dan* actors in women’s clothes; down with the representative *dan* actor Mei Lanfang), *Wenxue zhoubao* 8, no. 3: 62–65.

connotations was “a very common style” for articles about *dan* actors, and these criticisms of *dan* homosexuality remained prevalent throughout the 1920s.³⁶

The Chinese literature in the years 1910–30 was extremely clear in showing intellectuals’ negative views towards *dan* homosexuality. In those years, intellectual opinions of *dan* took a sharp turn for the worse. This is contrary to the assumptions of previous studies, rendering them insufficient to explain why this deterioration occurred. After re-examining how homophobic principles came to be part of the New Culture narratives around *dan* actors in the first place, an alternative interpretation for the cause of change emerges: the import of foreign ideas.

Homophobic ideas entered the 1910–30 New Culture intellectual discourse through the Movement’s import of Western scientific ideals to re-evaluate Chinese culture and society. To the intellectuals, Western scientific knowledge included a pseudoscientific branch of sexology, which regarded homosexuality as inherently wrong and pathological.³⁷ As New Culture intellectuals heavily borrowed from Western knowledge, these homophobic ideas began to appear in their writings. The most poignant example of this was an article by written vernacular author Yu Muxia. In the social commentary paper *Shanghai linzhao*, he borrowed from Western sexology to explain the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality, stating that “mutual attraction between men and women is very common,” whereas “homosexuality, between men or between women, is simply sexual perversion.”³⁸ Importantly, this concept of ‘sexual perversion’ was a Western concept that had not appeared in Chinese literature before,

³⁶ Xinmiao Wu, “Public Discourse Before and After Mei Lanfang’s 1935 Soviet Union Visit,” *Du Shu* (读书) 42, no. 3 (2020), page number unmarked on journal website, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/4117635.html>.

³⁷ Kang, *Obsession*, 6.

³⁸ Yu Muxia, “Tongxing lian'ai,” *Shanghai linzhao*, 1933.

signifying a direct Western role in cementing homophobia in the early days of the Republic of China.³⁹

As the New Culture Movement translated and absorbed Western sexology, their vilifications of *dan* homosexuality incorporated the homophobic rhetoric present in those writings. Repeatedly, different New Culture intellectuals argued or implied that the actors' relationships with other men were 'perversions' that 'contaminated' and threatened the nation.⁴⁰ These ideas mirrored the themes of immorality and pathology that major Western sexological texts ascribed to homosexuality. One of these writings was the 1886 foundational Western sexological work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing. A core claim that von Krafft-Ebing puts forth was that homosexuality was a "moral vice" in the form of a pathological "sexual perversion."⁴¹ This was supported by German psychologist Albert Moll, who deemed homosexuality a sign of pathological degeneration, and that only heterosexual sex was natural.⁴² These ideas likely found their way into the New Culture consciousness through the translation work of New Culture intellectuals themselves. Yang Youtian, one such intellectual, treated these homophobic characterisations as scientific facts and translated them into Chinese, thus giving them a direct avenue to mould the way intellectuals saw *dan* homosexuality. In his article, "Tongxin'ai de wenti" (the issue with same-sex love), Yang argued that homosexuality was a "sexual perversion", and cited von Krafft-Ebing and Moll as his sources.⁴³

³⁹ Kang, *Obsession*, 31.

⁴⁰ Cixi Zhang, *Qingdai yandu liyuan shiliao*, 1243.

⁴¹ Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1886; New York: Arcade, 2011), 185–92.

⁴² Harry Oosterhuis, "Albert Moll's Ambivalence about Homosexuality and His Marginalisation as a Sexual Pioneer," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 28, no. 1 (2019): 1–43, doi:10.7560/JHS28101.

⁴³ Youtian Yang, "Tongxin'ai de wenti," in *A Collection of Discussions On the Issue of Homosexuality* (Shanghai: Beixin Shuju, 1930), 2–6.

It is important to note, however, that the attitudes towards homosexuality in Western sexology during this time were nuanced and not uniformly homophobic, but the more homophobic narratives were the ones absorbed by Chinese intellectuals. Alternate psychological authorities like Havelock Ellis and Sigmund Freud were more sympathetic to homosexuals, famously not characterising homosexuality as a disease in their writings.⁴⁴ According to *Gay Lives*, a book on the Western homosexual experience by Paul Robinson, Freud and Ellis also both subscribed to the belief that homosexuality was innate, a stance which allowed them to make the argument that it was an illegitimate basis for discrimination considering that it is completely arbitrary.⁴⁵ As such, there were also strong voices in Western sexology at the time which were accepting of homosexuality.

However, despite this nuance in Western sexology, its homosexual ideas were the ones more readily absorbed by nationalistic Chinese intellectuals concerned with explaining the supposed inferiority of the Chinese people, and were used to decry *dan* actors' homosexuality as immoral.⁴⁶ The fact that intellectuals repeatedly cited the West's potential judgement and ridicule as a justification for homophobia further implies that New Culture criticisms were based on Western judgements. This strongly suggests that the harsh New Culture rhetoric towards *dan* actors was heavily inspired by Western homophobic theories if not a direct consequence of them.

However, this new, stigmatised characterisation of *dan* actors as socially divisive homosexuals did not last long. In the next decade, *dan* actors rose to international acclaim, and

⁴⁴ Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*, (New York: New American Library, 1988), 2–12.

⁴⁵ Paul Robinson, *Gay Lives*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), XII–XIV.

⁴⁶ Guo Chao, "Between Scholar-Intellectuals and Theatrical Aficionados," in *Chinese Traditional Theatre and Male Dan: Social Power, Cultural Change and Gender Relations* (Routledge, 2022), 74–92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003050278>.

when the cultural authorities of the New Culture Movement — the United States and the Soviet Union — came together to express their admiration for the *dan* performers, Chinese intellectuals immediately followed suit. Near overnight, accusations of *dan* homosexuality ceased, and literature began treating the sexual association of *dan* with other men with a new type of rhetoric: denial.

III. International Recognition of *Dan* Actors and How it Changed the Chinese Intellectual Discourse

From 1930 to 1935, Mei Lanfang, hailed as the leader of *dan* performers and the Peking Opera, visited the United States and the Soviet Union and received widespread acclaim. Immediately after, from 1935–45, New Culture-affiliated intellectuals produced literature that not only embraced *dan* actors as a national symbol but also omitted or actively denied their homosexuality, constituting a second shift in the rhetoric around *dan* homosexuality. Not only is the temporal correlation between foreign input and changes in perceptions indicative of their causal connection, but narratives from foreign commentary on *dan* actors frequently appear as themes in this new writing, further establishing the role of American and Soviet influence in the erasure of *dan* homosexuality.

The explosion of international acclaim and attention towards Chinese culture first came on February 23, 1930, when the *New York Times* published *Mei Lanfang, Ambassador in Art* during Mei's visit to the United States. The long article featured on the first page of *Drama-Music* praised the work of Mei with uncompromising affirmation, writing that even the accomplishments of the “extremes of stylisation in [American] experimental theatres” could not compare to “the pure art” of Peking Opera.⁴⁷ Mei's *dan* performances were applauded as

⁴⁷ J. Brooks Atkinson, "Mei Lan Fang, Ambassador in Art," *New York Times*, February 23, 1930, <https://www.nytimes.com/1930/02/23/archives/mei-lanfang-ambassador-in-art.html>.

“China’s national drama” in the United States, and acclaim rose from throughout the American elite, with the list of tour sponsors in New York reading “like a who’s who of American high society.”⁴⁸

However, America’s approval of the Peking Opera as a cultural treasure was not enough to end the Chinese intellectuals’ criticisms of *dan* actors. As Tian explains in *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage*, “Chinese responses to his success were far from being unanimously positive” and “hardly reached a consensus.” Challenges from left-leaning individuals were particularly common. In 1930, leftist journalist Zou Taofen criticised Mei’s *dan* role as something played with by old male officials who were mentally abnormal, continuing the rhetoric of homophobic vilification from the 1910s and 20s.⁴⁹ In 1934, New Culture intellectual Han Shiheng slammed the cross-dressing and homosexuality of *dan* as “immoral and uncultured”.⁵⁰ In the same year, Lu Xun also returned to his criticism of Mei, suggesting that he should “use an unknown pen name to complement his own acting”.⁵¹ The source that was most indicative, however, of continued vilification towards *dan* actors, was a 1932 article in the Tianjin newspaper *Tianfeng bao*, which deems the “filthy deeds of *dan* actors” as the cause of the Chinese national crisis. After extensively expounding upon *dan* homosexuality, it comments that the Republic of China “is on the verge of extinction because such freaks and monsters exist.”⁵² Clearly, the critical tone of the Chinese rhetoric towards *dan* actors had not exactly abated in the early 1930s and echoed the homophobic connection between national crisis and homosexuality made by writers from the 1910s–20s,

⁴⁸ Na Liu, “Mei Lan-Fang’s American Tour and China’s Images in the U.S.,” *Global Journal of Human-Social Science* 22, no. 6 (2022): 23, https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume22/3-Mei-Lan-Fangs.pdf.

Guy, “Brokering Glory,” 384–89.

⁴⁹ Zou Taofen, “Mei boshi de gongxian,” *Shenghuo* 5, no. 27 (1930): 490–93.

⁵⁰ Wu, “Public Discourse.”

⁵¹ Zhou, “Lüelun Mei Lanfang ji qita,” 169.

⁵² Dafeng Sha, *Tianfeng bao*, January 20, 1932.

This was because, at this time, foreign influence was not enough to capture both camps of Chinese intellectuals. The nuance here is that two opposing factions arose from the New Culture Movement, and American approval for *dan* actors could only change the opinions of one of them. As Arif Dirlik explains in his article “The New Culture Movement Revisited”, the New Culture Movement gave rise to both the Liberals, a group which believed in notably American values like liberty and individualism, led by Hu Shi who was ostensibly pro-West, and the Communists, a more radical group which embraced iconoclasm and revolutionary change, led by Cheng Duxiu and Li Dazhao, to whom the capitalist United States was anathema.⁵³

For the Liberals, the United States’ approval of *dan* actors meant that they must follow suit by praising or at least accepting Mei’s work and the Peking Opera as a quintessential part of Chinese culture. Indeed, it was Hu Shi, the leading figure of the Liberals himself, who helped to select plays and write introductions for Mei’s performances in the United States.⁵⁴ This demonstrates that the United States’ acceptance of Mei’s proposal to perform was enough to elicit the Liberals’ firm approval of his *dan* act. This American influence on the Liberals can explain the improvements in Chinese perceptions of *dan* actors between 1930–34 that previous scholars have used to justify their arguments.⁵⁵

However, the Communists were the group that could explain some intellectuals’ continued opposition to *dan* actors despite American praise. By the 1930s, they had become a

⁵³ Arif Dirlik, “The New Culture Movement Revisited: Anarchism and the Idea of Social Revolution in New Culture Thinking,” *Modern China* 11, no. 3 (1985): 252–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009770048501100301>.

⁵⁴ Shuwen Cao, “A Peking Opera LP Record at the Princeton University Library,” *Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia* 13, no. 2 (2022): 147–157, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jciea-2022-0008>.

⁵⁵ Goldstein, “Nationalisation of the Peking Opera,” 382.

strong voice in the Chinese discourse. Many intellectuals had aligned themselves or sympathised with the Communists as they became “disillusioned and frustrated” with problems the Liberals and the far-right Kuomintang failed to solve and “turned to ideological radicalism and political revolution.”⁵⁶ To these more radical individuals, the opinions of the United States held little sway. This was because before 1936, Communists opposed the Americans as an imperial power trying to meddle in Chinese politics and society with ill intent, and thus they did not see the United States as the same cultural authority that they were to the Liberals.⁵⁷ Therefore, intellectuals on this more radical side of the New Culture Movement could remain adamantly opposed to *dan* actors despite positive American opinions of the performers, and this accounts for the opposition to *dan* from 1930–34. This more radical and adamant group could only be convinced by a different international cultural authority, one that aligned more closely with their communist ideals.

Indeed, in 1935, when Mei went on tour in the Soviet Union, these dissenting voices were stifled. Just as in the US, he received great critical acclaim from prominent Soviet practitioners, some of whom compared the “Mei Lanfang Performance System” with Germany’s Brechtian theatre and Russia’s Stanislavski’s Naturalism — the world’s two most highly renowned, distinctive, and internationally recognised models of drama.⁵⁸ Needless to say, this was a decisive affirmation of the cultural and national value of *dan* performances in Peking Opera by the Soviets. Furthermore, in a panel discussion of Mei’s performances among prominent Russian theatre practitioners, the great Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein even

⁵⁶ Young-Tsu Wong, “The Fate of Liberalism in Revolutionary China: Chu Anping and His Circle, 1946-1950,” *Modern China* 19, no. 4 (1993): 458, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189116>.

⁵⁷ Michael M. Sheng, “America’s Lost Chance in China? A Reappraisal of Chinese Communist Policy Toward the United States Before 1945,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 29 (1993): 138, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2949955>.

⁵⁸ Wu, “Public Discourse.”

compared Mei's practice to that of Shakespeare's, and praised his great virtuosity, commenting that he had "an absolutely startling ability to function in all registers of art."⁵⁹

It was at this point that Chinese discourse around *dan* actors' images experienced a fuller shift to affirmation, which was accompanied swiftly by heterosexualisation. According to Wu Xinmiao, previous to Mei's visit to the Soviet Union, literary works focused "mainly on criticism of Mei Lanfang and old theatre,' but after, "it centred on reports of success and the comments of the Soviet Union trip by Mei and his associates."⁶⁰ By the 1940s, this affirmation had erased homosexual stigmas around *dan* actors. Literature and even tabloid articles about *dan* homosexuality had become rare.⁶¹ What appeared in replacement of these writings that attacked *dan* homosexuality was a wave of literature that instead denied entirely the existence of homosexual relationships between the actors and patrons.

One of the first of these heterosexualising writings was the 1937 short story *Tu* (rabbit) by prominent author Lao She. According to Kang, in this work, Lao She "denied the sexual relationship between the *dan* actor and his supporter" and "disputed the characterisation of *dan* as . . . men who engaged in sexual relationships with other men."⁶² Significantly, Lao She had been strongly influenced by New Culture thought, famously writing that "May Fourth (the New Culture Movement's famous protest) gave me a new soul."⁶³ However, despite his loyalty to the New Culture Movement, his denial of the homosexuality of *dan* actors was directly at odds with the Movement's exposure and vilification of it. This reveals a second shift — from

⁵⁹ Janne Risum, "Minutes of 'Evening to Sum Up the Conclusions' from the Stay of the Theatre of Mei Lanfang in the Soviet Union," *Asian Theatre J.* 37, no. 2 (2020): 328–75.

⁶⁰ Wu, "Public Discourse."

⁶¹ Kang, *Obsession*, 135.

⁶² Kang, *Obsession*, 140.

⁶³ Qingchun Shu, "Wusi geilewo shenmo," in *All Works of Lao She*, 649–50 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), 649–50.

homophobic criticism to heterosexualising denial — in the intellectual discourse about *dan* homosexuality, occurring exactly as both the Soviets and the West began to praise the *dan* actor.

Indeed, there is a temporal match between when this rhetoric changed and when foreign influence became sufficient to satisfy both branches of the New Culture intellectuals. The Liberals aligned with the Americans, and the Communists with the Soviets. Therefore, the Americans' acclaim for *dan* performance in the 1930s changed the stance of the Liberals, while the Communists remained adamantly opposed to *dan* until 1935 when the Soviets voiced their approval. The timeline at which intellectual factions changed stances matched directly with the time at which their respective cultural authorities showed their affirmation for *dan* actors — a phenomenon unlikely to be a coincidence.

A closer examination of post-1935 heterosexualising *dan* literature further reveals direct connections to foreign rhetoric. There were broadly two ways in which *dan* actors were heterosexualised: masculinisation — which, in the heteronormative Republic of China, detracted from their homosexual image — and nationalisation — which painted *dan* actors as symbols of the nation rather than Lu Xun's pre-1935 conception of them as homosexual consorts of imperial oppressors.⁶⁴ Revealingly, both of these two narratives first appeared in the foreign commentary about *dan* actors, appearing to have later been imported and replicated in Chinese intellectual works.

The nationalisation narrative appeared in the play *Qiu haitang* (begonia, also the main character's name), a commercial success written in 1942, which described a *dan* actor who resisted the homosexual harassment of male officials and pursued a relationship with a young

⁶⁴ Zhou, "Lun zhaoxiang zhilei," 167–75.

and educated woman. According to Kang, there were various evocative pieces of symbolism including the name of the main character himself, which identified the character to symbolise the Chinese nation.⁶⁵ This nationalisation of the *dan* actor was present also in another successful play, *Fengxueye guiren* (the man who returned on a snowy night), which depicted a *dan* actor eloping together with his sponsor's concubine to "stop being rich people's toys" and "join the effort to save the nation."⁶⁶ These two works of theatre exemplified the theme of 'nationalising' *dan* actors to make them representative of the Chinese cultural identity.

This idea — that *dan* actors represented China — was not a Chinese one. Before the influx of foreign compliments of *dan* performance, many Chinese individuals did not even see *dan* actors or the Peking Opera as a representative of China. As Tian analyses in *Mei Lanfang and the Twentieth-Century International Stage*, some believed that "it was an absurd and sad thing to have Mei represent Chinese art abroad" and even saw this representation as a "pernicious habit".⁶⁷

Instead, this idea is predominantly found in American and Soviet rhetoric from the 1930s. For instance, the 1930 New York Times article which referred to Mei Lanfang as an "ambassador in art" conveyed the idea that the *dan* actor was an ambassador and a representative of China's national pride.⁶⁸ Similarly, the way Soviet practitioners labelled Mei's *dan* act as a system of performance comparable to that of Russia's Naturalism and Germany's Brechtian theatre also affirmed *dan* and Peking Opera as a Chinese national symbol. These ideas soon spread into China through the reporting of major Chinese newspapers and magazines like *Shen bao*, *Da wanbao*, *Chen bao*, *Yong bao*, and *Dagong bao* as they quoted notable foreign

⁶⁵ Kang, *Obsession*, 142.

⁶⁶ Kang, *Obsession*, 142.

⁶⁷ Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the International Stage*, 62.

⁶⁸ Atkinson, "Mei Lan-fang, Ambassador in Art."

figures' compliments to Mei Lanfang.⁶⁹ Thus, it is highly likely that the Western and Soviet characterisation of *dan* actors as a Chinese national symbol entered the post-1935 Chinese discourse, and was responsible for 'nationalising' *dan* actors in Chinese literature.⁷⁰

This makes foreign influence culpable for the heterosexualisation of *dan* actors. As Kang pointed out in *Obsession*, nationalisation was invariably tied to heterosexualisation: after "Peking Opera had been elevated to the status of a national opera", the homosexual relationships between actors and officials "could no longer be recklessly suggested in public".⁷¹ Thus, to rid *dan* actors of their homosexual stigma in consideration of their now-irreplaceable place in the national consciousness, intellectuals began to actively heterosexualise their image in Chinese literature.⁷² The West's place in this causal link is that it was what elevated the Peking Opera to national prominence and thus scrutiny in the first place, making it the precursor of its heterosexualisation.

Aside from nationalisation, the alternative rhetoric of masculinisation also caused the heterosexualisation of *dan* actors, and it too appeared first in foreign discourse. In "Moustache as Resistance", Guanda Wu describes how Chinese newspapers juxtaposed the masculine image of actors without makeup and their feminine onstage appearance. Wu notes that this encouraged readers to see the *dan* actors' identity as women onstage as "fictional, while comprehending the gentlemen offstage as 'natural'" and "essentially true or real."⁷³ This masculinised and distanced *dan* actors from their effeminate appearance. Kang also

⁶⁹ Tian, *Mei Lanfang and the International Stage*, 126.

⁷⁰ Wu, "Public Discourse."

⁷¹ Kang, *Obsession*, 133.

⁷² Kang, *Obsession*, 134.

⁷³ Guanda Wu, "Mustache as Resistance: Representation and Reception of Mei Lanfang's Masculinity," *TDR* (1988-) 60, no. 2 (2016): 131, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43835057>.

corroborates this, writing that the image of *dan* actors saw a “growing emphasis on masculinity” during the 1940s.

Like nationalisation, this masculinisation of *dan* actors was also an idea first to be found in the West, indicating that foreign influence was a likely source for this narrative too. The *New York Times* hailed Mei Lanfang as “A Great *King* of Actors” after his performances of female impersonation in 1930, complimenting him as a male performer, rather than fixating on the femininity of his art.⁷⁴ With Chinese newspapers hanging on to every word, this Western commentary embedded with the masculinisation of *dan* actors made its way into the Chinese discourse. This rhetoric of masculinisation then heterosexualises *dan* actors, because, as Tian wrote in 2000, their association with femininity was the premise for their homoerotic attractions.⁷⁵

This similarity of narratives between the foreign commentary during the early 1930s and the heterosexualising *dan* literature of the late 1930s and 1940s means that not only did the post-1935 heterosexualising trend bear a temporal correlation to the foreign appraisal of the *dan* actor, but it also used borrowed rhetoric from the foreign commentary itself to heterosexualise the actors. This suggests that the heterosexualising second shift of perceptions around *dan* actors was also a product of international influence.

Conclusion

The rise of *dan* actors and the Peking Opera from an analogy of homosexual prostitution to its current heterosexual glory took far more than economic growth and the work of one man

⁷⁴ Matthews, “China’s Stage Idol.”

⁷⁵ Tian, “Male Dan,” 82.

as previously suggested. Instead, this ascension involved a collective bowing of heads by Chinese intellectuals to the Western and Soviet cultural authorities and the erasure of all homosexuality from the Opera's actors. The twin changes in the discourse around *dan* actors paint a more nuanced picture of how Chinese intellectuals imported Western ideas. Unlike the prevailing characterisation of foreign influence in Chinese thought, there was not just a static absorption of Western ideas in the form of books and research, which was the source of the vilification of *dan* homosexuality 1910–30, but also a dynamic attempt to 'catch up' and align with the changing popular opinions of the West and the Soviets, which drove the heterosexualisation of the *dan* actor in 1930–45. In the end, both of these methods through which Chinese intellectuals attempted to align the Chinese discourse with Western ones altered the sexuality of Chinese culture to make for the heterosexualised Peking Opera today.

In the modern day, the impact of the intellectuals' Western ideas on *dan* actors remains palpable in Peking Opera. The *dan* role, in both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, faces extinction due to socially conservative ideology that largely grew prominent during the 1920s; the very same ideology that was informed by the import of Western thought in the 1920s.⁷⁶ Fewer Opera masters are willing to teach new *dan* performers, and the likes of Mei Lanfang never reappeared to rejuvenate interest in the *dan* role. Perhaps this essay overlooks a third wave of change in perceptions towards *dan* actors, one in which they vanish entirely from the Chinese cultural consciousness due to social attitudes caused by deeply ingrained Western homophobia — a change that is unfolding in the present day.

This still-ongoing history of how *dan* identity changed in the Chinese intellectual imagination speaks to a wider context of homophobic cultural colonialism throughout Asia, in

⁷⁶ Tian, "Male Dan", 92.

which the West ingrained hateful and marginalising rhetoric into the societies which it oppresses, erased any representation of homosexuality in their cultures, and irrevocably damaged parts of tradition that have been associated with homoeroticism for most of history. The Chinese tale of *dan* actors is not an isolated one and should be connected with similar histories of other nations to form a fuller understanding of how Western homophobia shaped culture, literature, and art throughout the countries that it has oppressed.

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Lian Cheng Bi was a social commentary novel written by playwright Li Yu, which had great emphasis on critiquing the status quo of 17th century Qing China, including descriptions of a wide variety of characters of different social positions. As such, it is a valuable source to consider for understanding the perceptions of *dan* actors in ancient China, especially considering that Li himself was a playwright, meaning that he likely had more realistic conceptions of *dan* actors than most.

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The *Qing Unofficial Reference Book* was a history of the Qing dynasty written in imitation of similar histories of the Song and the Ming dynasties widely covering events, individuals, and opinions. Xu Ke, a scholar-official of the late Qing, used various other historians’ works, journals and newspapers, and archival information kept by his family to create the work. Even though the truth of such information is hard to verify, his comments on the social standing of *dan* actors, which this essay references, have a high level of credibility since Xu was a member of the Qing dynasty himself. Therefore, even if his conclusions were subject to his own biases, this was to some extent representative of the Qing.

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Shanghai Linzhao was a tabloid newspaper in written vernacular, which the New Culture Movement proposed. In it, Yu Muxia mainly wrote short articles on the changing society of Shanghai and the lives of average citizens, to entertain the readers of the tabloid. In

“Tongxing Lian’ai”, he introduces the general public to the concept that homosexuality is a type of sexual perversion. This not only revealed his homophobia as a New Culture intellectual, which is analysed in the essay, but it also showed that the general public’s opinions towards homosexuality were probably ambivalent to start with, considering that Yu treated the issue as something akin to entertainment which could be included in his tabloid article.

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Zhou Shuren is referred to as Lu Xun, his pen name, in this essay, as this is what he is most widely known as.

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