Gender Representations in Peking Opera and Popular Music in China

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Abstract: Music can reflect the creation of a community culture, as well as the ideas and values of the time. Despite the variety in musical genres, such as classical music, dramatic music, dance music, pop music, and heavy metal music, the meaning of the music is the same in that it communicates and exchanges emotions with the listener. Additionally, gender roles are an important part of social culture, and gender differences can be seen in all aspects of daily life through the fact that women are often seen as socially vulnerable. It will discover what information is given about gender representation and what effect this has.

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1. Introduction

Music can reflect the creation of a community culture, as well as the ideas and values of the time. Despite the variety in musical genres, such as classical music, dramatic music, dance music, pop music, and heavy metal music, the meaning of the music is the same in that it communicates and exchanges emotions with the listener. Music can evoke the emotions of the audience, which can be sad or joyful, for example. Additionally, gender roles are an important part of social culture, and gender differences can be seen in all aspects of daily life through the fact that women are often seen as socially vulnerable. It will discover what information is given about gender representation and what effect this has. Therefore, Chinese Peking opera and pop music as used as examples to analyse the gender representation and to explore the image and status of women in music.

The development of Peking opera has occurred under the traditional patriarchal society of China. In the past, almost all of the actors and spectators were men; even the female roles were played by male actors (Zuguang, 1984). This paper interprets the phenomenon of man playing the female roles in Peking opera from the perspective of feminism and explores whether these factors affect the gender representation of music. Moreover, Peking opera has been influenced by social and cultural factors, and women now have the opportunity to watch and even participate in
the performances. In contrast to Peking opera, popular music is one of the most widespread types of music in modern society. Through the changes of the times and the spread of feminism, the female image in popular music has also evolved from passive and vulnerable to independent and strong (Baranovitch, 2003). By the beginning of 21st century, female singers were better represented themselves and stereotypes were gradually rejected. Therefore, both Peking opera and popular music have been influenced by feminism to varying degrees; performers can influence the expressions of music and make positive changes to the image and status of women in music. Popular music involves an interaction between the singers and the listeners to spread information and express emotions, so through analysing the lyrics and the melodies, the gender representation of popular music can be discovered.

Besides, a few women realised that mankind must strive for freedom and equality, but also women must also pursue their independence. Hence, a series of feminist movements become popular around the world, resulting in the emergence of well-known feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. De Beauvoir was a French writer who was an advocate of feminism who wrote the book *The Second Sex* in 1949. She regarded sex and gender as different: a person is born with a biological sex but gender is the result if social construction, thus, gender can be changed (Moi, 1994: 164). Butler is a third-wave feminist who opposes Beauvoir’s view of the body. Butler raises the notion of the performativity of gender, pointing out that body is the center of gender research. Simultaneously, she raises the concept of gender ‘performativity’— “is not to be found in the feminist account of differently socialised and encultured bodies, or in the psychoanalytic dispositions formed in the familial Oedipal drama” (Hey, 2006: 440). This paper analyses gender representation in Peking opera and pop music by referring to the feminist theories of de Beauvoir and Butler.

Some questions are raised in this research. Is the gender representation of music fixed? Is it affected by the social environment? Do the representations of gender in music become a stereotype in cultural communication? Whether people have been stereotyping for woman in music? This essay will begin by explaining the meaning of music. It then explores how the feminist notions of de Beauvoir’s and Butler have affected the development of society and raised the awareness of gender. Lastly, it will explain the effects of female roles and representations of gender on Peking opera and popular music separately at different times in China’s history. At the same time, it investigates whether the role of women has changed in the society due to the development of popular songs in Beijing opera and in China.

2. The Impact of Music

Music is not only having a spiritual meaning in people’s lives, but it is also an object of art in which people can place on their thoughts and emotions. At the same time, music is an abstract art that reflects the emotions of human reality and is an integral part of human and spiritual civilization. The reason for this is that music
compositions not only contain a melody and lyrics but also contains’ emotional, social and cultural backgrounds. Also, depending on the nature of the music, it can be divided into different genres like religious, classical, folk, drama, dance, pop music, heavy metal, and electronic music, for example (Negus, 2010:1). Although the genres of music are varied, and the style of music is ever-changing, the meaning of music transmission is the same; it communicates with the listener and exchanges emotions with them.

When listening to music, people have emotional reactions. Whether the emotion comes from the audience’s perception of the work or from the music itself, the basic characteristics of music as that it is a work of art. In other words, music is an expression of feeling, even if the audience and the creator have different emotional responses to the music. Additionally, the rhythm and intensity of the music, as well as the intention of the composer, can include the audience in the atmosphere of the music. This means that music can affect the audience’s mind and perceptions, whilst evoking their emotions.

Music of any period is a cultural production of the society of this time; it can become a conduit to reflect social values and group thinking. For example, composers have written songs with nationalistic themes to express patriotism in many countries, like the Czech composer Bedrich Smetana whose music utilizes the Czech national culture to create a set of symphonic poems called *My Homeland.* This piece describes the Czech landscape and its history in order to express patriotism. It can be seen that the content of music can reflect the social, political, artistic and cultural development. Furthermore, much popular music often expresses the dissatisfaction of the middle class with their social status, as well expressing the themes of love. (Laphil, n: p). A Chinese song called *Legend of the Dragon* was written by Hou Dejian under the creative background of the United States government announcing it was cutting off cooperation with Taiwan in 1978, which inspired Taiwanese national sentiment (Onedayinmay, n: p). Therefore, the meaning of these music can to resonate with different people but evoke the same emotions. Moreover, the meaning of music lies in its deep meaning rather than its superficial expression, which is mostly constructed social culture.

### 3. Feminist Writer and Their Theories

In music, women have always been restricted whether in the West or in China. As most musicians and composers are man, only a few women can be educated by music. This kind of oppression is seen not only in music but in other aspects of society. Therefore, a few women realised that mankind must strive for freedom and equality but women must also pursue their independence. From the first-wave women’s movement in the early 19th century to the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s to the third-wave feminist movement at the end of the 20th century, these three female movements improved the status of women in society. Many
respected feminist theorists have emerged at these stages, such as, Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler.

As a second-wave advocate of feminism, de Beauvoir was a French writer who wrote the book *The Second Sex* in 1949. She regarded sex and gender as different: a person is born with a biological sex but gender is the result of social construction. Thus, gender can be changed (Moi, 1994: 164). For example, when a person is born, their gender is often defined. If a person is born a female, people will often tell her what a girl should look like, what a girl should wear and what a girl should do, especially her parents and teachers. Given enough time, this person will see herself as a girl and will follow female norms. Therefore, the female body does not necessarily mean the biological sex a person is born with but is a gendered identity which is affected by the social environment and cultural construction; it is a formed concept of self-awareness. Hence, this concept of gender is the result of social impositions and distortions. (Moi, 1994: 150).

De Beauvoir’s theory *The Second Sex* is regarded as a milestone in the development of feminism. This is because it profoundly reveals that the patriarchy is universal and stable across the social classes, and that men not only control women through man’s rights, but also by restricting and oppressing women’s social status through social customs, education systems and ethics. Therefore, de Beauvoir considered that the female body to be a process of social construction and also a problem for women, and women can only depend on the transcendence of the body to change their life situation or emancipates themselves. Moreover, feminism has not only helped the development of women by changes in communities, which are gradually discounting people’s stereotypes of women, but it has created the independent and self-directed image of women in society.

Compared with de Beauvoir, Butler doubts de Beauvoir’s feminist theory that gender is a socio-cultural construction, and that a person is born with a biological sex, especially the theory of the transcendence of the body. In contrast, Butler has an opposing attitude on these issues. She thinks that "gender is an expression of sex", and the body, gender and sex are all a social construction (Lloyd, 2007: 42). Therefore, Butler raises the concept of gender performativity ‘is not to be found in the feminist account of differently socialised and encultured bodies, or in the psychoanalytic dispositions formed in the familial Oedipal drama’ (Hey, 2006: 440). She argues that:

Gender does not necessarily proceed from biological sex and gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one (Horner, 2000: 1).

Indeed, it cannot be guaranteed that men are constructed by their male bodies, or that women can only be constructed by the body of a woman. Thus, Butler points out that gendered identity is repetitive, unstable and performative, which
means that it only exists in acts (Lloyd, 2007: 48). Gender involves people trying to imitate the behaviours and thoughts of femininity or masculinity in order to produce a certain self-consciousness. In other words, Butler believes that human gender practice is a performance of a gendered body, and that gender action must also demonstrate repeat performances like a social drama. Through the feminist revolution, women have gradually gained self-awareness and more rights and have been given the opportunity to learn music, which means that there has been a significant increase in the number of female participants in music. Therefore, female notions can be used to analyse musical genres, to understand the relationship between music and gender; and to explore the the social roles of women at different times in history.

4. Gender Representations in Peking Opera and Popular Music

(I) Peking opera

In the early China, women were always struggled under the oppression of male culture and language; they not only had a low status but they also had no power of discourse. China experienced several wars of all sizes around the 20th century, for example, the May Fourth Movement is an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal patriotic movement, which dominated by young students in 1919; and during the Second World War from 1939 to 1945, China to resist Japanese aggression is not only reduce the amount of money but also caused huge casualties. Although these wars caused harm to China in varying degrees, they allowed for more foreign cultures to spread into the country. From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, both Qiu Jin and Hu Binxia earliest feminist representatives in China, were influenced by Western feminist theory when studying in Japan. When they returned to China, they organised a political and social reform movement that focused on women’s rights to fight patriarchal society (Roves, 2010: 59). Thus, Chinese women began to resist the patriarchal society to gain the rights to freedom and equality. Many countries including in China, feminism refers to the beliefs and actions that seek more equal rights and opportunities for women suggesting a social revolution that changes and ends women’s status of oppressed status in realistic way so as to achieve gender equality and harmony (Harris, 2013).

Traditional Chinese music has not only experienced centuries of development, but it also contains information about the development of human society. Chinese opera art first appeared thousands of years ago and it is now mature, creating a unique cultural phenomenon. ‘In China, opera is more akin to a Western operetta or musical. It is a mixture of singing and speaking, prose and poetry, and even dance and acrobatics’ (Siu, 2014: 2). As a theatrical genre, Chinese opera includes aspects of Chinese classical and folk music and is good at expressing composer’s thinking and habits. For Peking opera, also called Jingju or Beijing opera, ‘is a form of Chinese opera which combines music, vocal performance, mime, dance and ac-
robatics. It arose in the late 18th century and became fully developed and recognized in the mid-19th century’ (Goldstein, 2007: 3).

Peking opera is a type of the theatrical genre, which containing narrative lyrics and inventive sounds that can reflect the changes of the times. Additionally, Peking opera is also known as a national opera as it is the representative of modern and traditional Chinese drama culture. Peking opera combines the characteristics of the local operas in the various provinces in China, reflecting the living conditions and the cultural features of peoples throughout the country. The parts played in Peking Opera also have their own characteristics and are divided into four roles: Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou. They represent men, middle-aged men, young men and women, respectively.

After thousands of years of social development, China has formed a unique environment of gender culture. ‘Gender is, like music, defined by culture, time/history, situation, and experienced/performed by an individual’ (Burns, 2001: 14). Thus, both the social environment and the gender of the performers have a certain impact on the gender of the music. Peking opera is intrinsically gendered as the roles are classified by gender. Peking opera was a male pursuit in early Chinese society, and most of the themes were based on politics, history and wars. Similarly, there was no actress in the early Peking opera that all of the characters were played by men; most of the audiences members, composers and lyricists were male; and the content of the music was arranged from the masculine consciousness and the male gaze (Harris, 2013: 27).

Peking opera is a cultural phenomenon that cannot be separated from the influence of social culture, and it maintains the traditional characteristics of inheritance. Many people think that only women can express the features of morbidezza but the role of Dan in Peking (Li, 2010: 3). Dan is one of the most attractive roles in Peking opera and is the collective name for all female characters appearing in Peking opera in the Qing dynasty. All Dan roles are played by males who show a female image and to imitate a female voice, presenting a mellow aria and an elegant posture. The main reason for the existence of the Dan is that the social system in the past did not allow men and women to be on the same stage. It was seen as necessary to maintain the strict segregation of genders, and women were prohibited from participating in the performance industry. While the female roles are indispensable figures in Peking opera, this is only shown through the artistic expression of men dressing as women to express female images under the oppression of the feudal social system.

For the actors that impersonation females, they had a dual identity as they had one gender cognition in life, and another one in drama. Their performances and training led to an inevitable identity confusion for the actors. Therefore, men imitating the image of women through a disguise and their voice can reflect the Butler’s theory of the concept of gender performativity, showing that gender itself is not similar to biological sex. For instance, Mei Lan-fang was well-known for playing
female roles and he was the most important representative of the Dan role (Li, 2010: 55). He conveyed the essence of the feminine characteristics to the audience as he had a sweet voice and a delicate performance, so his musical performance often affected the audience, making them forget his male identity. In 1919, his performance called Lady Chang’e Flee to the Moon in Japan, he needed to dressed like a classical beauty in traditional Chinese paintings and his performance caused a great sensation (Pan, 1995: 15).

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, important changes were made in the status of women in Peking opera. Firstly, at the same time as China’s May Fourth Movement of 1919, Peking opera was criticised by the new cultural movement and was influenced by the foreign feminist movement. Mei Lanfang was involved with the reformation of Peking opera throughout the 1950s, experimenting with changes in costume, scenery and performance style. Also, gradually changed the Dan performances of the past that featured erotic relationships between men and women. They focused on creating a group of virtuous, strong, and chivalrous and new female images (Zuguang, 1984: 9). These feminine images were combined with many categories of Dan like Gui Men Dan and Dao Ma Dan, which showed diverse characteristics and positive images. For instance, in Farewell My Concubine, Consort Yu’s character is passionate, firm and inflexible. In Mu Guiying Takes Command, as a female hero, Mu Guiying is not only a wife, but can also fight on the battlefield (Zuguang, 1984: 9).

The rise of the Peking opera Dan and the women’s liberation movement were inextricably related. Feminism encouraged a number of actresses to join the Peking opera industry, which has brought great changes to the roles and the plays of Peking opera. In the early 20th century, when the Western feminist movement and theory spread to China, Peking opera has also been influenced by feminism, which mean that adjustments were made to include actresses and female audience members (Pan, 1995: 1). Therefore, a large number of actresses became involved with Dan, which expanded the influence of the role. The participation of female actresses solved the problem of gender misplacement in ontology. As many actors learnt how to imitate female images in their youth to perform Dan roles the prolonged gender displacement of the actors led to psychological confusion (Min, 2000: 1). The inclusion of women meant that the actresses did not need to psychologically adjust when they were playing the role of the female Dan. Indeed, the voices of the actresses were soft and sweet, so they did not need to change to play the Dan roles. Therefore, they did not need to change their gender identity either like the actors did.

(2) Popular music

In all music genres, popular music is a typical product of mass culture, and it can be highly influential on gender roles by repeat performances of different genders. This is different from Peking opera’s one-way communication with the audience as it becomes a two-way communication, formed by the interaction between
the singer and the audience. The purpose of popular music is widespread recognition and universal popularity in society, while the meaning of the lyrics is recirculated through repeat performances. Additionally, popular music as an art that is constantly being practiced and sung. It is repeated and reinterpreted by the listeners, strengthening the gender consciousness and gender identity of the songs. It can also change the gender identity through gender performativity and can challenge the traditional definitions of gender.

A song becomes a male or a female song because of the gender of the singer, which is a method of gender-giving. Namely, the singer is demonstrating gender performativity. At the same time, male songs and female songs with distinctive gender identities may also be sung by different genders’ singers, which can reverse the gender identity of their songs (Lu, 2013: 140). Thus, it can be seen that the realisation of gender significance is related to Butler’s concept of gender performativity in transvestite performance. Butler believes that if gender is performativity, then the existence of gender is a performance effect. This means that gender performativity can maintain the established order of gender identity but it can also change and subvert it (Lloyd, 2007: 48). From the perspective of songs, although gender culture is dominated by male patriarchal culture, this does not mean that popular songs have a solid gender and cultural identity. Every part of pop music is related to gender, from the composers to the lyricists and singers. Additionally, although gender consciousness exists implicitly in the creative intent, the singer’s gender gives a song a dominant gender.

Chinese pop music has a history of more than 80 years and its development has been rapid. The theme of love is common in popular music and the lyrics are full of the gender stereotypes of men and women and their role in love. At the same time, the lyrics are about what people who feel towards love and gender relationship, reflecting the roles and the status of women in contemporary society. The lyrical content of pop music not only determines the direction of the melody, but is also the most direct expression of gender consciousness. This means that pop music has an important role in constructing and reinforcing effects of gender awareness (Baranovitch, 2003: 4). This is because, to some extent, popular music is a reflection of people’s psychological state even extending to their spiritual pursuits. Thus, the characteristics of the female images in pop songs reflect the public’s opinions and judgements on the modern image of women.

There are some stereotypes in the songs of male singers that describe the female image. Women are given a stereotyped image of being passive, weak, infatuated, vulnerable, sexual objects in the songs. Whether they are in love with a woman or are attracted to them, men are shown to appreciate beautiful women’s appearances in many songs. For instance, in 1999, a song from the frogs is called A Place of Love; the lyrics describe the men falling in love with women because of their appearances satisfy than the men. Moreover, men look at the women because they like their appearance. Additionally, in 2002, a song called Ai Yo by the male singer
Allen Lin features the lyrics, ‘Your eyes, talking and winking; looking at your lovely face, I realized I was in love with you’. The relationship between gender and love can be seen; men are often interested in women’s appearances rather than their inner beauty. From the examples listed above, it can be seen that as an object, women lack self-awareness and are passively controlled by men’s feelings.

The audience’s acceptance of songs also demonstrates gender differences; women are more inclined to passively accept the social and cultural norms transmitted by the songs. For example, the female images in songs in the past were often more conservative and feminine than women in the real world, which was not conducive to women’s liberation and gender equality. Until the 20th century, a variety of popular songs began to spread in China due to the development of economic globalisation, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan pop music. ‘The earliest foreign popular music to penetrate China came from Hong Kong and Taiwan’ (Baranovitch, 2003: 10). Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the popular music of this period showed the autonomy of women in the attitude toward love, but they still had to face the restrictions and the pressures of traditional norms.

*Love Runs Deep* is the title of a popular song created by Winnie Hsin in 1995. The lyrics are ‘Forever will my love be strong, because I know where my heart belong; No matter if we find out someday, it’s hard to say; Love has its price to pay’ (Kkbox, 2017: p). This is about a woman who decides to give up on love when she discovers that her partner does not know how to cherish their love. The female singer sings the song with a low voice and intense emotions, conveying sadness and determined emotions in both the melody and the lyrics. Also, this music can easily affects the emotions of the audience as it resonates with them.

In the early 21st century, feminist singer began to appear in pop music, attracting the attention of the audience. Feminism has gradually improved the status of women in society, and the lyrics of the songs in the early 21st century describe women with independent personalities and strong images. For instance, the Chinese girl group S.H.E, which is heralded the arrival of new forms of female groups. They sang a rock-style song called SHERO in 2010, the lyrics are ‘You can be, I can be, the one who will pass through hell and high waters for oneself shero; Like an empress brandishing her arrogant cloak; First turn around, first free yourself, first say goodbye’ (Bananaxmushroom, 2017: P). This song shows that a woman should learn to rely on herself to free herself. Additionally, the inclusiveness of popular music means that the song could include elements of rock music instead of relying only on lyrical expressions. It can be seen that music genres are not intrinsically gendered and can be used in unexpected ways.

Popular songs can also reflect a strong sense of feminism and can encourages women to create their own world and to care for themselves. For example, in 2014, Jolin Tsai’s *Gentle women* is a song was inspired by *The Second Sex*, written by de Beauvoir in 1949. Some of the lyrics are: ‘You are 0, you are also the infinity; vividly detailed, surpassing the boring ideals; I don’t need perfection; I don’t need
precautions; I am living simply’ (Onehallyu, 2017: P). This song encourages women to learn to love themselves, which conveying a new feminist form. So the image of women has gradually become independent, autonomous, courageous and strong. They abandon the constraints of the traditional society, whilst actively pursuing their own happy lives.

Popular music is a connecting between people and expressions of emotions. It can be found that the diversified development of female images is related to the development of society. The awareness of women’s independence has gradually become a commonly accepted value of society. The difference between the female image in pop music and the female image in people’s traditional views has changed. This is the reason why popular music embodies the concept of social culture and the mentality of the public due to the interaction of these factors. Moreover, each era has its own popular songs which express the true emotions that the society wants to express but cannot express through other means. Emotions are spread to the public through music, while the audience repeats the songs all over the world. Therefore, the significance of popular music is that it is widespread; the production of popular music circulates ideas of gender and is part of society and culture.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, music plays an indispensable role in people’s social lives. It does not only affect the emotions of the audience but also can reflect the relationship between social culture and gender roles. The purpose of music is to become popular making emotional communication between the performer and the audience. Both traditional Chinese music, in particular, Peking opera and popular music are social and cultural products related to the long-term development of society. Through research, it can be found that the gender representations of music are not fixed. As the textual identity and the cultural themes of music are variable, the gender awareness of music is also convertible.

The rise of the first-wave women’s movement in the early 19th century highlighted the oppression of the social system. Then, the second-wave feminist movement and the third-wave feminists emerged, and many feminists and feminist theories became known. The purpose of these movements was to improve the status of women in society. Feminist theory attempts to change the phenomenon of oppression under society and culture. From this point of view, de Beauvoir’s feminist theory focuses on understanding women’s subordination from a gender perspective. She emphasised that gender and the body are the results of social construction, and that females should transcend the body as a means of female liberation. She thought that the female body is troublesome and negative, which affecting the females by making them too weak to be independent from men. In contrast, Butler gives women’s bodies more of a positive significance from the feminist viewpoint. She presents the theory of gender performativity and criticises the distinction be-
tween gender and sex, emphasising that gender and the body are the results of the socio-cultural construction, and the body is not born fixed and can be changed.

In the past, China was a traditional patriarchal society. Female characters are also played by men in Peking opera, while women had no chance to participate in or learn music. With the development of traditional Peking opera, it can also be observed that the number of female participants in musical activities has shown an upward trend with the evolution of the times. Additionally, women did not have the chance to participate in music in the past patriarchal society of the past. It is not until after the 20th century stated that the women’s self-awareness was awakened and the feminism emerged, giving women more performance opportunities in music. As women’s talents and achievements have gradually been recognised the public, the number of female musicians has gradually increased.

Regarding the development of popular music, it can also be found that the lyrics and the melodies of many love songs at different times reveal the changes to women’s images and social status. In terms of lyrics, female images today are loyal, brave, independent and strong, which shows that society has been influenced by feminist thoughts. Female singers also consciously spread the idea of free and independent women through the melodies and the lyrics of their music to change audience stereotypes.

Whether discussing Peking Opera music or popular music, not only have they developed physically and mentally, but there is also cross-cultural influence from the critique of social culture and politics. Similarly, music is not intrinsically gendered but is changed by the social and cultural factors, as well as the gender changes of performers. Thus, music is related to the development of social culture, and it can show gender messages. The gender identity of music not fixed; it can change according to many elements, such as the singer’s gender, the composer’s gender and the audience member’s gender. Both the development of traditional Chinese music in the form of Peking opera and popular music can show the changes to women’s social roles and statuses in different periods. This research of popular music and traditional Chinese music not only can analyses the gender representation of music but also presents an understanding of female images and status in the music of different periods.

Works Cited


