

Zhu Yingtai's Gender Fluidity: A Critical and
Sociohistorical Context for *The Butterfly Lovers* Canon and
Gender Identity and Gender Performance in *The Love
Eterne*

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Abstract

The Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (The Butterfly Lovers) is one of China's most well known love stories; it has been told and retold over the years. In the twentieth century, there have been many media adaptations of this ancient folklore: films, stage adaptations, television dramas, concertos, and even animated films directed toward young children. Not only does this demonstrate how Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai in *The Butterfly Lovers* are cultural icons that has withstood the test of the time, it also showcases exactly how pervasive the story is in Chinese media and popular culture. The process of each new variation and retelling gives a uniquely different perspective to the story as it also reflects the sociopolitical atmosphere of each retelling and interpretation. Due to the distinct popularity of *The Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, the story can be read in relation to China's sociopolitical changes and gender relations during the early to mid twentieth century by analyzing the dominant themes of gender performativity and the act of cross-dressing in various texts from the 1920s through the 1960s, as they also reflect the transformation of women's role at the time.

By using Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity (which argues that gender can be defined based on an individual's actions and behavior and is not something that is predetermined or fixed by an individual's anatomy) and focusing it on Director Li Han Hsiang's film adaptation of *The Butterfly Lovers*, this essay examines Zhu Yingtai's gender fluidity and its broader socio-cultural implications¹. Hsiang's *The Love Eterne* is the most recent, well known, and widely celebrated interpretation of the Liang-Zhu legend as it has enjoyed the "greatest circulation in the Chinese diasporas" and it is still quintessential interpretation that many people think of when they think of *The Butterfly Lovers* canon². Additionally, *The Love Eterne* has also been the subject of modern scholars in relation to this particular text in and of itself, it has produced a myriad of queer or alternative readings/adaptations and academic articles which I also want to explore in this project.

¹ *The Love Eterne*, dir. Li Han Hsiang, per. Betty Loh Ti, Ivy Ling Po, DVD, Shaw Brothers Studio, 1963. Produced by The Shaw Brothers studio.

² Tan See-Kam, "Huangmei Opera Films, Shaw Brothers, and Ling Bo: Chaste Love Stories, Genderless Cross-dressers and Sexless Gender-plays?" *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media Jump Cut* 2007. [Http://www.ejumpcut.org](http://www.ejumpcut.org). Web. <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/TanSee-Kam/text.html>>. 2007

Introduction:

The Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai has had a rich history to Chinese-speaking audiences since its inception. According to Roland Altenburger, “[t]he earliest records of the story can be traced to early historical accounts... in collections of unofficial history and from Song dynasty on”, the story found its way into local gazetteers and were then circulated and preserved through professional storytellers and through popular genres, not limited to performing dramas such as song-drama *zaju* and southern-style song-drama *chuanqi* (168). The Liang-Zhu legend has been traditionally viewed as a tragic love story between two star-crossed lovers³. It has achieved great cultural status in Mainland China and its diasporas, although naturally details of the Liang-Zhu legend vary depending on the text⁴. The variations of the text can be confusing to readers as plot elements are sometimes drastically altered or extended when the folklore was passed down via song-ballads or adapted for stage/opera performances for dramatic effect.

Idema states that the earliest records of the Liang-Zhu were from the Song dynasty and they were brief references to the literary characters opposed to complete transcriptions of the tale (xiii). However, these references often discussed the Liang-Zhu legend in relation to local monuments such as temples and the alleged gravesites of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, as many villages in the past and even in the present, often argue

³ Wilt. D. Idema, *The Butterfly Lovers: the Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai: Four Versions, with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 2010), xiii.

⁴ Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing In Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 110.

that they are the birthplace of the Liang-Zhu legend. The very earliest records are often short and vague and give the bare basics of the folklore without giving details about the characters or their motivations; however the stories became more fleshed out and were circulated once they were adapted into ballads in from the 12th century onward. Idema also credits Li Maocheng's temple inscription from the early twelfth as possibly one of the earliest authentic and detailed sources of the folklore (xvi). However, one of the retellings from the Ming Dynasty (preserved in woodblock and possibly dates two centuries prior), the anonymous *Ballad of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai's Common Study as Sworn Brothers* in ballad-story shows how some details were inconsistent. Many of the small inconsistencies or Zhu Yingtai's clever tricks were ignored in later stage or drama adaptations, only to be revived centuries later to perhaps give Zhu Yingtai more character depth and agency; these aspects of her character can be seen in the relatively modern film adaptation *The Love Eterne*.

It is interesting to note how the Liang-Zhu changes with the time period: Idema notes that liberties are frequently taken with the Liang-Zhu ballad from the sixteenth century onward wherein Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai are resurrected and given a happier ending for stage-adaptations and audience response (xxi). In fact, the stage adaptations kept one of the most quintessential scenes of the Liang-Zhu ballad wherein Zhu Yingtai attempts to hint about her true gender to an oblivious Liang Shanbo to little success⁵. Whereas the Liang Shanbo in these adaptations initially had suspicions concerning Zhu Yingtai's gender, he was eventually so convinced of Zhu Yingtai's male

⁵ Idema *The Butterfly Lovers* xxii

presentation and performance that his obtuseness was thus explained. Therefore, Idema's interpretation of Liang Shanbo's personality and obtuseness differs greatly from other scholars such as Jin Jiang and Siu Leung Li.

Nevertheless, despite the many interpretations and variations of the Liang-Zhu folklore, many of the tenets of the story has remained consistent throughout the centuries and the more well-known versions that stick in most people's memories are the ones that have been adapted onto the stage or film. It is useful to have a general understanding of the most basic plot elements of the Liang-Zhu/*The Butterfly Lovers* canon to comprehend the gender fluidity and gender performativity of *The Love Eterne* adaptation, especially in relation to the gender-play that exists in the film, compared to the earlier retellings and adaptations of the original folklore.

From the earliest records of the Liang-Zhu canon, the basic premise of the story is centered around Zhu Yingtai, the protagonist and heroine: she is a wealthy young girl who lives home and makes a decision to masquerade as a boy to pursue her studies at an academy. In the process, she falls in love with her classmate Liang Shanbo, with whom she forms a strong bond to a point where they are as close as 'brothers'⁶. While their love is requited, other social and cultural factors make it impossible for these two lovers to be together. Zhu Yingtai is betrothed by her father to young gentleman of another prominent family and has no choice in the matter. Once he learns that he and Zhu Yingtai cannot be

⁶ In most variations of the tale, Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai perform a ceremony at their first meeting and take an oath of brotherhood together.

together, Liang Shanbo dies of heartbreak. Sick with grief, Zhu Yingtai passes by his grave during the wedding ceremony and visits his tomb to pay her respects. The grave opens up before her. Seizing this opportunity, Zhu Yingtai jumps in and Liang Shanbo's grave seals shut; thus the two lovers are at last reunited together in death⁷. In Post-mortem, the lovers are transformed into butterflies - which is how the story receives its namesake, although Liang-Zhu's transformations into butterflies was actually "later addition to [the] narrative framework" of the canon (Altenburger 174). Since these two star-crossed lovers are only reunited post-mortem, it is easy to draw parallels between this story and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, this folktale is also frequently referred to as the "Chinese *Romeo and Juliet* story" and it is equally revered and well known to Chinese audiences as its western counterpart (Idema 2010).

The popularity of *The Butterfly Lovers* canon in Chinese culture and media cannot be emphasized enough. It is in fact one of the most beloved folktales in Chinese culture and has been described as "China's favorite love story" (Altenburger 166). Over the years, it has been retold and adapted into a plethora of different mediums ranging from folk ballad, plays, dramas, concertos, television dramas, films, etc. In its early history, the Liang-Zhu story was popular and particularly resonated with commoners. The non-elites were drawn to the story because they could see their own qualities reflected in both Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai: the hero and heroine were "completely unlike the [other] young men and young women [in other literary works or performance genres] described

by feudal intellectuals”⁸. The personal qualities and values of the characters Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo transcended social class, thus it would be easy to imagine that it would appeal to both commoners and elites. Certainly, the elites were taken enough with the timelessness of the story of two tragic lovers to think it was significant enough to be recorded. As historical records often praised the Confucian “righteousness” or “chastity” of Zhu Yingtai’s character as a woman to devote herself to a man she loves (Liang Shanbo), it is possible that Zhu’s loyalty to her lover could be seen as a good model of Confucian fidelity for young women. Alternatively, the story can also act as a cautionary tale for young women: that although “a smart woman may have no problem in fooling men most of the time, but eventually her smarts will turn against her, and she would be better off accepting her allotted role” (Idema 2010 xxxv). Nevertheless, reason withstanding, *The Butterfly Lovers* story proved popular throughout the centuries where the legend started off as a poetry and circulated namely as poetry before it was adapted into ballads and into stage and dramas. In the Qing dynasty the Liang-Zhu folktale shared many elements similar to other *caizi-jiaren*, or “scholar-beauty”, romance stories, a popular sub-genre of fiction that frequently features women and girls who manage to pass themselves off as men. Like Zhu Yingtai, most of them do so under specific circumstances that make their decisions plausible: their cross-dressed act was necessary because their life was in danger or they were portrayed to be so intelligent that it was understandable for the audience to see why they would choose to act on their desire to

⁸ Ying, Ah. "Foreword." Trans. Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-Yi. *Love under the Willows* (Peking: Foreign Languages, 1956), 2.

participate in the male-dominated public spheres of politics and administration. In these circumstances, the female protagonists were expected to safeguard their chastity and avoid romantic endeavors and their cross-dressed act was simply a means to an end and temporary – since usually they resume female attire and fulfill the role befitting of a Confucian wife or daughter (Idema 2010). It would be a fair assessment to say that since the early twentieth century, we have interpreted *The Butterfly Lovers* canon terms in light of the May Fourth Movement when the intellectuals and commoners alike appropriated the story as political and ideological propaganda; thus modern-day scholars and the general Chinese populace tend to read the folklore and equate it with modern-day values of equality.

The Retelling of the Liang-Zhu (*The Butterfly Lovers*) During the Republican Era (1911-1949)

In the 1920s, this story experienced a surge in popularity during the May Fourth movement for multiple reasons. The May Fourth movement had been a turning point where Chinese intellectuals challenged traditional values; therefore it was not surprising that many scholars were drawn towards this tale because of the anti-feudal, anti-Confucian themes. Roland Altenburger proposes that Chinese scholars rediscovered and became interested in this folklore because it was an appropriate medium for them to “pro[ject]... some issues of their own times, such as the struggle for women’s rights, and the concept of marriage based on love” (167). Zhu Yingtai’s thirst for knowledge and education in a traditional society helped support the budding women’s liberation

movement of the time (and also later during the Cultural Revolution); many people believed that traditional Chinese values and women's illiteracy was the root cause of Chinese backwardness and lack of progress⁹. Since Zhu Yingtai was able to successfully manipulate the traditional system to become educated despite societal adversity, she became a fictional role model for Chinese women to better themselves. Zhu Yingtai's desire for higher education was regarded as a representation of young women with similar wishes, who wanted to receive an education equal to their male counterparts.

Additionally, Zhu Yingtai's strong spirit and her unwavering pursuit for romantic love was something that appealed to the romantic ethos of Chinese intellectuals of that time period (Hung 102). The mere idea of unarranged 'free love' fascinated the anti-feudalists, who wished to move away from the traditional arranged marriages. However, the doomed relationship between Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo suggested that such a concept – a marriage based on love and freedom of choice - could not exist in traditional China¹⁰.

On a separate level, the Liang-Zhu lore also resonated with May Fourth intellectuals for another reason since it serves a separate message: equality could exist between the sexes and within marriage, however that is entirely dependent on the modernization of China. If China does not change its out-dated, backward ways, society's men and women would remain trapped in a harmful feudal state - one wherein females, half of China's population, remains illiterate and unable to make meaningful

⁹ Idema The Butterfly Lovers xxxv

¹⁰ Idema The Butterfly Lovers xii

contributions to aid China's progress. During the Republican era (1911-1949), deeply felt changes in China connected the May Fourth supported rhetoric of free love and marriage to the social and ideological remaking of family and redefinition of gender relations as a product of modernization; in order for China to form a strong a national identity to combat western dominance. For that to happen, the Chinese populace (which included the women) needed to free themselves of its outdated feudalistic practices and work towards bettering society as a whole by combating the patriarchal customs and allow females access to education. In order for these changes to occur, it was clear that women needed to find their own agency: Chinese literature, entertainment, and media thus became a vehicle to spread this type of progressive propaganda by prominently featuring/infusing these forms of entertainment with May Fourth thought.

Since the protagonists in *The Butterfly Lovers* so nicely exemplified the ideal of true, romantic love that the intellectuals in the May Fourth Movement admired and sought after, this story and studies of the legend generated of great interest during the 1920s and 1930s, which coincidentally coincided with scholars' revival of interest in Chinese folklore. Altenburger credits the folklore movement's role in rediscovery of "the folk literary heritage was indispensable, it proved instrumental in projecting onto this favorite folk narrative some issues of their own times, such as the struggle for women's rights" (167) and the idea of 'free love' that permeated Chinese literature, media, and entertainment.

The romanticization of this ‘free love’ concept in the legend was also not limited to scholars and intellectuals. Fei-Wen Liu also theorized that women in rural Jiangyong transliterated this story into *nüshu* script (“female writing”) because it reflected certain Confucian social realities for women that transcended class boundaries in addition to providing an outlet for them to project their romantic or education aspirations or fantasies.

Some of the same factors that rejuvenated interest in *The Butterfly Lovers* during the May Fourth Movement also served as a foundation for further widespread popularity of this story after China’s communist takeover in 1949. Fei-Wen Liu notes “[t]he image of Yingtai pursuing an education fit perfectly with the communist ideology of female emancipation” (244). It is easy to draw some ties of the Chinese Communist Party’s sociopolitical ideology (equality, women’s rights, etc.) to the gender politics and pro-women education messages that exist in the legend itself.

However, this is not to say that this Liang-Zhu folklore and similar stories did not face critiques from elites and politicians in the twentieth-century because it also received its fair share of criticisms. Whether or not the Liang-Zhu story was considered to be beneficial or detrimental for the May Fourth New Culturalists or the CCP’s respective causes is subjective since the story itself is a bit of a contradiction. The folklore does contain elements that advocate for anti-feudal traditions that exemplifies certain May Fourth New Culturist ideals: it criticizes the tradition of arranged marriage, it promotes female education, and the relationship between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai is focused

on pure, romantic love. However, the story itself is also a symbol of Chinese backwardness – it is a relic of Confucianism. Furthermore, elites and intellectuals also criticized the folklore because popular fiction and entertainment was focused on what was perceived to be ‘trivial emotions’ of love and desire while having little concern for the nation’s struggle¹¹. During the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1915-23), “popular fiction and entertainment focusing on the emotion of love or *yanqing* (lit. ‘elaborating on feelings’) was a target of criticism from China’s intellectual and political elites” for being too trivial and indulgent with little significance since it did not appear to actively help solve the problems of inequality between the sexes nor did it provide an answer to the calls of female education¹².

Similarly, the CCP was also critical of the Liang-Zhu folklore for the same reasons. Jiang states that the “[m]odern China’s intellectuals and political leadership promoted and popularized the concept of liberating women from the ‘feudal’ tradition marked by bound feet, arranged marriage, and lack of access to education and work outside of home” and their goal of liberating women was to better serve the Party “as good mothers, good wives, good teachers, good workers, and even good soldiers” (xi) which was not exactly compatible with the Liang-Zhu folklore since again, the main focus of the story was on “trivial emotions of love and desire” without real concern for bettering the collective nation¹³. However, despite these criticisms from intellectuals and

¹¹ Jin Jiang, Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009) xi

¹² Jiang 4

¹³ Jiang xi

political leadership alike, the Liang-Zhu legend still remained well known and popular throughout the 1920s through the 1970s and even today – evident in the many stage and film adaptations of this story. After all, despite the feudal elements in the folklore – the *yueju* version managed to achieve the support of the PRC state, and when it was adapted into China’s first 35 color film in 1954, it attained unprecedented success nationwide and internationally¹⁴. The cultural power of *The Butterfly Lovers* canon is timeless. Thanks to the variety of factors - most notably the appeal of a cross-dressing female protagonist and gender-bending situations - the legend is a prime example of a story that manages to balance between promoting progressive ideals while retaining the charms of its traditional, feudal setting.

The Liang-Zhu folklore underwent significant changes over the years as a reflection of the sociopolitical climate of China and its diasporas. In the spirit of the May Fourth New Culturists who became interested in the folktale earlier, in 1946, the Xuesheng Company of Shanghai, an all-female *yueju* opera troupe, restaged *The Butterfly Lovers*. They staged their interpretation with emphasis on “the theme of free love and marriage” while eliminating so-called “feudal” elements as bawdy eroticism and plots related to reincarnation and other ideas from popular religions. This play’s interpretation of the Liang-Zhu folklore is significant since it appears to have changed or set a new standard of how the two leads are later portrayed in future adaptations. The protagonists were played by actresses Yuan Xuefen (Zhu Yingtai) and Fan Ruijuan (Liang Shanbo) respectively. In addition to playing Zhu Yingtai, Yuan was also the

¹⁴ Jiang 105

script writer and director of their production. In Yuan Xuefen's *yue* opera's version, Zhu Yingtai is "independent-minded" and Liang Shanbo "woman's man" who is kind and sincere and is major turning point in how contemporary Chinese society has viewed Liang Shanbo's character and personality¹⁵. In fact, this kinder, more sincere version of Liang Shanbo can be seen in *The Love Eterne* when Liang (played by Ivy Ling Bo) insists on looking after Zhu Yingtai when she is ill. Prior to Fan Ruijuan's portrayal of Liang Shanbo in "the folk versions of the story told during the Qing and Republican periods", Liang Shanbo was purposely portrayed to be "comically cunning, salacious, and dull" so that that he would not be able to piece together Zhu Yingtai's true gender despite living in the same room as her¹⁶. This newer interpretation of Liang Shanbo's character suggests that he is kind and is book-smart, but he also lacks a certain awareness that makes many scholars and readers/viewers wonder how he could have been so blind not to realize his best friend was a woman. Indeed, Idema points out the interesting contradiction with *The Butterfly Lovers* canon concerning Liang Shanbo's thick-headedness when it concerns Zhu Yingtai's true gender and provides his own compelling interpretation of the situation:

Liang Shanbo's obtuseness in these scenes [Liang Shanbo's failure to understand Zhu Yingtai's hints about her true gender before she departs for her trip home] contradicts his earlier suspicions that Zhu Yingtai may be a girl because of certain aspects of her appearance and actions. But as

¹⁵ Jiang 102

¹⁶ Jiang 104

Zhu Yingtai has a ready answer to all his questions, she eventually manages to silence his doubts, to such an extent that later he cannot imagine her to be a girl (2010 *xxii*).

Regardless of Idema's interpretation, the new modern interpretations from the early 20th century, Liang Shanbo now became a "bookish young man, a little naïve regarding women, but sincere, tender and affectionate upon realizing his love for Yingtai" (Jiang 104). Xuefen's character interpretations of Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo has transformed the way people have viewed these beloved characters, especially in regards to Liang's character. Since Fan Ruijuan has taken the role and turned Liang's character into a meeker shadow of his earlier folklore counterparts, this has become the familiar archetype that modern day people have come to associate with Liang Shanbo's character: he is portrayed to be similarly good-natured if naïve and Zhu Yingtai's intellectual inferior in both 1954's Wang Tian-Ling's *yue* opera film *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (The Romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai) and Li Han Hsiang's 1963 *huangmei* musical *The Love Eterne* and he is less suspicious of Zhu's motives or true gender identity. Liang Shanbo is portrayed to be more of an idealized romantic lover in these contemporary adaptations most likely because his actions toward Zhu Yingtai would have been better received by a modern Chinese audience and it had the effect of making him become more likeable.

The Significance of Cross-dressing in the Love Eterne

The act of cross-dressing in the *Legend of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* can be viewed as one of the reasons for the folklore's popularity: not only does it serve as a plausible plot device for Zhu Yingtai to pursue her dreams of attending a male school to learn Confucian teachings, but it also flirts with the idea of a young noblewoman subverting traditional Chinese gender hierarchy. Altenburger notes that this trope of a female impersonating a male is standard in Chinese literature (166) and suggests that male attitudes towards female-to-male cross-dressing in literature tend to be indifferent, a woman would be allotted more power and freedom in drag, thus she would be regarded as someone who is "upgrading in social status" (171). While there are some who frown upon this transgression of the gender hierarchy, the female-impersonating-a-male trope is quite pervasive in the Chinese literature, possibly because famous female cross-dressing protagonists like Zhu Yingtai and Hua Mulan pose little threat to the male-dominated society. In almost all cases, the females' transgression in the male world is temporary and they ultimately return to their female representation, as that is the case in this story.

Idema does, however, stress that while many people in a patriarchal society such as China may view cross-dressing females to be "unnatural" they are more sympathetic or tolerating of the practice because they can see the reason or motives behind such an action as it is "understandable that women aspire to the status of men" they think it would be quite unnatural and even more scandalous for a man to aspire to become a woman (qtd. in Altenburger 171). Such a statement only further emphasizes the gender inequality: males are viewed to be superior it is more acceptable for a woman to want to become a member of the dominant society who holds male power. For the

opposite to occur – a man to willingly impersonate a woman for non-comedic purposes – is unthinkable and condemned as unreasonable. Instead, they are viewed to be lowering themselves by leaving their position of power to becoming a member of a subservient class.

From all literary, film, and television adaptations of the folklore, there is no indication that Zhu Yingtai identifies as anything other than a cisgendered heterosexual female – “cisgendered” or “cis” being someone who identifies with the gender and sex they were assigned at birth - despite dressing in drag. This is especially true in the Shaw Brothers’ 1964’s film adaptation *The Love Eterne*. I would argue that Zhu Yingtai is quite comfortable in identifying as a woman; it is very possible that she is frustrated with the patriarchal society she is a part of where her gender means she will always be subservient to men and she lacks freedom to pursue her passion for learning, but she is still comfortable with the body she was born and she is not nor does she want to identify as a transgender male¹⁷. In other words, while Zhu Yingtai views cross-dressing as a necessary means to an end. After all, her ultimate goal in the beginning of the film is to obtain an education at the academy. However, she has no desire or interest in becoming a

¹⁷ Academics like Siu Leung Li and Tam See-Kam often refer to Zhu Yingtai as a ‘transgender’ character. From my understanding, both are using it as an umbrella term offered by transgender activist Leslie Feinberg wherein she/he defines it as “an umbrella term to include everyone who challenges the boundaries of sex and gender” (qtd in. Li 2006).

I personally feel as though this definition is too broad and ambiguous to apply to Zhu Yingtai in relation to this particular gender performance discourse therefore the definition I used refers to her as a cisgendered woman who is fine with her assigned sex/gender at birth based on her genitalia and would be fine presenting as a female if it were not for societal restrictions on women.

man despite presenting as a male for the duration of her time spent in Hangzhou. Despite the differences between the status quo of women and men, Zhu Yingtai thinks of herself as a woman and would have no desire to alter that. Later, Yingtai's ultimate wish is to marry Liang Shanbo and become his dutiful wife, thus Zhu Yingtai's self identification as a cisgendered heterosexual female is a constant in every mainstream adaptation of the folktale. However, what can be up for debate are two variables that we can glean from textual and film adaptations: Zhu Yingtai's gender performance and Liang Shanbo's sexual orientation in *The Love Eterne*¹⁸.

Liang Shanbo's Sexual Orientation Debate and An Examination of Gender Performance in *The Love Eterne*

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* generated a lot of publicity in the field of gender/queer academia when it was first published in 1990 due to Butler's revolutionary ideas regarding gender identity and constructions of gender relations. Since its publication it has become one of the most significant texts that have significantly reshaped postmodern feminist and queer theory. Butler has been credited with introducing the concept of the 'gender performativity' or gender as performance to a broad audience and cause people to rethink the way they view societal constructions of gender and sex.

Butler defines gender as a stylized repetition of socially established meanings that are performed by the body as it "actively embodies certain cultural and historical

¹⁸ Using Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity from *Gender Trouble* (1990).

possibilities” (272). Thus gender is not an expression of biology nor is it a stable identity; rather it is created by individual everyday actions, which makes up what Butler calls “gender performance”. By using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and seeing how it can be applied to Zhu Yingtai in *The Love Eterne*, it is possible to analyze Zhu’s gender identity in relation to her actions and bodily performance as she navigates the dichotomy of true feminine, true masculine, and androgyny when she is in and out of male drag especially in terms of how Betty Loh Ti’s portrayal of Zhu Yingtai differs from others in the past. Applying Butler’s gender performativity to *The Love Eterne* helps bring Betty Loh Ti’s portrayal of Zhu Yingtai’s gender fluidity throughout the film, particularly her actions and her behaviors into focus.

In terms of queer scholarship on the Liang-Zhu legend, a topic that has been of interest for many academics, media critics, members of the LGBT community and that is the subject of Liang Shanbo’s sexual orientation. Academics and casual fans alike have attempted to analyze and critique Liang Shanbo’s ready acceptance of the Zhu Yingtai’s true gender and how quickly he accepted and returned her romantic affections. As Si Leung Li notes, “... readings of Liang-Zhu are betrayed by an old question asked by generations of readers and spectators: How could Liang not have seen through Zhu's disguise and guessed her real gender after three years' of studying together, much less after he given so many further hints by Zhu during the farewell trip and parting at the Eighteenth Mile Pavilion?” (118) Li goes on to speculate that a possible reason for Liang's willingness to accept Zhu's cross-dressing act and fall in love with her by

proposing "[c]ould the person that Liang loves deep down, without self-awareness be the 'male' Zhu at school?" (118)

The idea of Liang Shanbo being gay has been debated by academics such as Li and Tam See-Kam. In fact, both scholars have also been interested in another intriguing element to the Liang-Zhu cross-dressing discourse: in popular twentieth-century female *yueju* opera, an actress traditionally plays Liang's role, thus adding another layer of double-cross-dressing into the gender performance of *The Butterfly Lovers*. This is indeed the case with both 1954's Wang Tian-Ling's *yue* opera film *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* (The Romance of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai) and Li Han Hsiang's 1963 *huang-mei The Love Eterne* which lends itself to non-heteronormative interpretations of the text as well as adding another aspect of gender performativity to consider in relation to spectatorship.

The art of cross-dressing, as discussed before, is an essential part of the traditional story. In all variations of the folklore, Zhu Yingtai spends a significant amount of time at school disguised as a male student studying Confucian classics and becoming closer to Liang Shanbo. Thus it is not surprising that the story puts quite a bit of emphasis on how Zhu Yingtai manages to disguise herself as the opposite sex and maintain her cover at an all-male school. It is quite easy to see why they would focus attention on this important aspect of the story; first of all, it is interesting and appealing for the people to read about or watch a young woman attempt (and succeed) to assume a male identity. The curiosity factor is possibly responsible for why cross-dressed females remain to be a timelessly

popular trope in both Eastern and Western literature and media. Secondly, it also provides skeptical audiences with reasons as to how Zhu Yingtai managed to keep up the façade for years: her disguise is meant to be realistically imperfect - usually either their teacher/headmaster or his wife suspects but decides to keep her secret or Liang or her classmates pester her with questions about her traditionally feminine traits or strange behavior. Zhu Yingtai, clever as she is, is always ready to give them a plausible explanation or divert their attention elsewhere which is apparently how she manages to keep up her ruse for so long. Frequently Zhu Yingtai's slips or mistakes provide humor and comic relief to the situation – the reader and audience is aware of Zhu Yingtai's uncomfortable situations and understand why she is so ardently passionate about equality between genders while other characters remain ignorant and unaware of any hidden meanings. Thirdly, Zhu Yingtai's level of freedom while in her cross-dressed state demonstrates how male privilege surpasses anything that her life as a sheltered young woman had offered her – which provides a layer of sociopolitical commentary on the Confucian hierarchy, power dynamic between genders, and the low status of women. The public sphere in traditional China is limited for only men and women are not allowed to participate in public life outside the home; ergo, it is easy to see how Zhu Yingtai's role as a woman changes depending on her location and her attire and when she 'presents' as a woman.

As a female in male drag, Zhu Yingtai must be able to 'perform' her role convincingly enough so that she is can pass as a male student by adhering to the social decorum, through her gestures and posturing, and ability to blend in with the other

students. Butler believes that gender is merely a social construct. Gender lacks meaning until we assign gender with what is considered masculine/feminine/androgynous.

Although it originally lacked meaning - society and people brought gender into existence and assign it social meaning, thus it signifies that all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (Salih 55). Salih concludes that Butler interprets "gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely a sequence of facts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'"(55) which is how this concept of gender performativity is introduced. Butler states that "gender is a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being" (33) which not only implies that gender is form of process, it is also one that is not flexible and allows a person to simply choose to be male/female via gendered acts - it is not always a conscious choice on the part of the performer. The concept of gender performativity is then brought up: "gender proves to be performance - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25) and it is easy to see how this can be applied in the case of Zhu Yingtai and her attempt to keep up her male drag masquerade: not only is she dressed in a man's clothing, she must adapt to her new role and learn to speak/gesture and behave like young scholar.

Butler also claims "[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency" (137). In *The Love Eterne*, Zhu

Yingtai 's behavior and actions in her male drag state can highlight the heteronormative matrix and societal/cultural gender expectations for females and males: members of both are expected to perform/do their gender well. Salih believes that "[g]ender is a 'corporeal style,' an act (or a sequence of acts), a 'strategy' which has cultural survival as its end, since those who do not 'do' their gender correctly are punished by society" which people can see by analyzing what is perceived to be traditionally 'masculine' or 'feminine' and what is acceptable behavior for members of the two genders (58). Society tends to be critical of anything that does not fit neatly into these heteronormative categories: in both *The Love Eterne* film and in many of the traditional Chinese texts of *The Butterfly Lover* canon, Liang finds it strange when he notices that Zhu Yingtai has her ears pierced because that is a practice that is only for females, and this indicates that any deviations of the norm can result in suspicion of 'false' gender from the perpetrator. The pierced ears are then a prominent unspoken divider in imperial China that differentiates women and men. For someone like Zhu Yingtai, who is supposed to be a young man, the presence of her pierced ears mark her as different and it is considered peculiar and worthy of notice. It would be an overstatement to say that Zhu Yingtai is punished by society for not adhering to the dress code for men, but what is true is that this aspect of her otherwise impeccable disguise marks her as different, effectively Othering her. It is a feminine trait on a man and naturally, it inconveniences her and it is one of the many challenges Zhu Yingtai faces when she is masquerading as a male student.

Butler states that all forms of gender are parodic, however, some forms of gender performance can be more parodic or exaggerated than others, especially when it is performed in a subversive manner. Drag is often one of these instances where it can be both subversive and parodic than normal gender parody; "by highlighting the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed, parodic performances such as drag effectively reveal the imitative nature of all gender identities" (Salih 57) by reinforcing stereotypes of said gender.

In *The Love Eterne*, we see how the protagonist Zhu Yingtai subverts both traditional male and female gender roles and utilizing her familiarity with the cultural expectations of men and women to achieve her goals. One of the main plot points is the act of Zhu Yingtai cross-dressing. By attempting to keep up her male drag masquerade, the audience witnesses her successes and near-failures throughout the film and how Zhu Yingtai navigates the rocky terrain of gender identity in a patriarchal society.

Arguably, the main conflict in this film is how Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shangbo cannot be together despite their pure love and devotion to one another, thus epitomizing the romanticized trope of 'star-crossed lovers'. However, that is only the surface conflict. The real conflict in the film is how Zhu Yingtai struggles with both the patriarchal gender politics in traditional Chinese society and her gender identity, and to a lesser extent deals with the desires and functions of her body within a specific, oppressive cultural context.

Immediately, when we are first introduced to Yingtai we can see that while she is beautiful and appears to be a proper young Chinese noblewoman, she stands out from the

other females in the film – traditionally feminine girls and women by the sheer strength of her willful spirit and her voracious appetite for higher learning; she is marked different from them. This is where we can use Judith Butler’s theories to understand the place Zhu Yingtai finds herself in society. Butler’s main thesis is that gender is performance and throughout the film we discover Zhu Yingtai’s real gender only occurs when she stops trying to enact the dichotomy of true feminine and true masculine, both which are false, and allows herself to be more androgynous or relying on her androgynous traits - such as her intelligence. Whenever Zhu Yingtai attempts to mimic the cultural expectations of the gender she wants to present – she is usually uncomfortable in her own skin and does not neatly fit into either gender binary category.

Eventually Zhu Yingtai subverts her assigned gender role and Confucian expectations for young women by her strong spirit and defying proper decorum – mourning the loss of her one true love and showcasing her loyalty to Liang Shanbo by joining him in death; despite societal expectations that pressure her to become Ma Cui’s wife. It has been established from the very beginning that Yingtai almost always gets her way due to her stubborn nature and steadfast refusal to accept society’s expectations without thoroughly questioning them and annoying other authority figures such as her parents in the process. In retrospect, however, Zhu Yingtai’s small victories pale in comparison to her ultimate wish to marry the person she loves. Her parents’ refusal to break off Zhu Yingtai’s engagement and allow Zhu Yingtai marry Liang Shanbo is significant since as it appears to be the first time her intelligence and strong spirit does allow her to get her way. Thus, despite being brilliant and exceptional, Zhu Yingtai is

like every other young Chinese noblewoman of her time. She is still confined by traditional Chinese customs and societal expectations; she is expected to play her role as a filial daughter and go through with the arranged marriage her parents have decided for her.

In terms of outward appearance and surface actions, when we first meet Zhu Yingtai, she is dressed in a feminine manner befitting of a wealthy noblewoman of her position: her hair is elaborately styled, jewelry and accessories adorn her ears, every stitch of her fine clothing is covered in heavy embroidery. In short, she looks like the perfect Chinese daughter. However, in stark contrast to her beautiful clothes and surrounding finery, Zhu Yingtai appears unhappy and frustrated with her current circumstances. As the chorus helpfully informs the audience, “[Zhu Yingtai is] watching students going to school... stares at her books and sighs” which establishes her character as someone who aspires for something outside her station in society. More importantly, however, is Zhu Yingtai’s actions in this opening scene: when the female servants in the household bring her food, they all speak in soothing coaxing tones and their meals are all rejected by Zhu Yingtai who dismisses them in a very agitated, forceful manner that leaves the maids with no choice but to obey their young mistress. Her behavior is borderline rude and decidedly not befitting the traditional stereotype of Chinese women being soft-spoken and mild-manner, another character-establishing moment.

The audience can see that Zhu Yingtai is much more than what first meets the eye: the second action we see her engaging in is trying to manipulate her way into being

allowed to go to school in Hangzhou by feigning serious illness. Rather than simply brood about her situation, she has concocted an ambitious plan with the help of her most loyal maid Yin-Xin to help convince her parents to allow her to go to school with men by playing into her parents' concern for her health. It is equally entertaining and admirable as a spectator to see the lengths of which Zhu Yingtai goes to in order to keep up her illness masquerade when she learns that her mother is coming to see her. Not only does she rush to bed to pretend she is bedridden, but she has her maid hide all evidence of the food she has actually consumed (to keep up with the masquerade that she has not eaten for several days) and Zhu Yingtai attempts to make herself look as frail and docile as possible – a complete contrast to her previous pacing and barked orders to the servants just moments before.

In a way, this is when the audience first suspects that the act of masquerade is not foreign to Zhu Yingtai and she is not above manipulating the situation and her parents' emotions and concern for her to suit her personal purposes. Zhu Yingtai is all too aware of her gender performance in this scene – she plays the role of the meek, bedridden daughter to perfection. It is clear that she has internalized her culture's particular feminine role and as a result must force herself to perform it in a masterful way that will benefit her own personal gain. Butler states that what Yingtai is experiencing is “the construction of the gendered body through a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences” (416). In this scene, Yingtai purposefully excluding or hiding certain masculine or androgynous traits, such as able-bodiedness, while emphasizing her

feminine weaknesses and delicate constitution since females are considered to be the fairer sex. Thus, it is socially acceptable for her to be frail and delicate.

In *The Love Eterne*, Zhu Yingtai comes up with the idea to disguise herself as a male student in order to pursue her studies in Hangzhou: in this scene, the audience is informed of Zhu Yingtai's informed character trait of craftiness/intelligence because her plan to convince her parents is well-planned. She first manages to feign serious illness to a point where it concerns her parents greatly and they want to send for a doctor. Once she is successful in convincing them that they are ill, she then disguises herself as a young male doctor – an ingenious move since she then 'diagnoses' herself, proclaiming to her worried parents that Zhu Yingtai must be allowed to pursue her dreams otherwise she might waste away. This self-diagnosis aspect of the film differs from the pre-twentieth century versions of the tale founded in Idema's work, thus is it likely a dramaticization of the situation which elevates Zhu Yingtai to demonstrate her craftiness and how she takes control of the situation, putting herself as the dominant authority in the scene. She, of course, reveals herself to her parents at the end when they start to object to the idea: while they are concerned for their beloved daughter's health, they are also concerned about propriety and her personal safety – they tell her that it would be impossible for Zhu Yingtai to study even in disguise, because she would not make a convincing man. Zhu's reveal demonstrates that her male drag act is so convincing that even her own parents were fooled and could not recognize her, thus setting the stage that allows her to pass as a male student at school for three years.

The first scene in *The Love Eterne* is set up specifically so the audience becomes aware of a couple of Zhu's most overt attributes: she is crafty, intelligent, ambitious, *and* she can pass for a man if the situation called for it – thus she is able to 'perform' the role well. Zhu Yingtai's cleverness, which is her most distinguishing attribute, is continually highlighted. In fact, it is a constant theme throughout *The Love Eterne* and in most versions of *The Butterfly Lovers* since she has always been portrayed as the intellectual equal (or superior) of Liang Shanbo. Classmates, teachers, and occasionally even the narrator of the ballads often praise Zhu Yingtai for her clever mind: not only is she books-smart but she is also able to think quickly while on the spot. The scene is purposely long and drawn-out to highlight Zhu Yingtai's ability to adapt to her new male role. Despite a couple of awkward moments, but it is important to note that overall Zhu was able to fool her parents and convince them to allow her to pursue her studies.

However, it important to note that *The Love Eterne's* adaptation takes certain liberties that appears to highlight Zhu Yingtai's intelligence to the audience, possibly as a modern feminist statement that suited sociopolitical climate of China and the Chinese diasporas at the time of the film's release. In other variations and interpretations of this story, such as Wang Tian-Ling's 1954 version of the film, Zhu Yingtai is shown to be a less independent-thinker. Although she also manages to convince her father to allow her to go – she did not take the initial initiative¹⁹. Like her 1963 counterpart, the opening scene of the 1954 film shows Zhu Yingtai longing for an education in her bedroom with

¹⁹ Her mother is noticeably absent in this adaptation.

her maid. However, it is her maid who gives her the idea to pursue her dreams of an education with the words by casually mentioning that it is unfortunate that she was not a boy, otherwise her father would allow her to go – that plants the idea into Zhu Yingtai’s mind, thus she then disguises herself as a man to trick her father into letting her go.

Additionally, her role in the Wan Tian-Ling’s version differs from the Li Han Hsiang: Zhu Yingtai is half-doctor, half fortune-teller. Her ruse is only kept up for a very short duration before her maid gives her identity away. Ultimately, she achieves her purpose: she manages to convince her father to allow her to go by fooling him briefly, but Zhu Yingtai is not as convincing or sly as her *The Love Eterne* counterpart. In *The Love Eterne*, Zhu Yingtai–the-doctor takes great care in leading her parents on about her illness and slowly diagnosing Zhu-the-patient and emphasizing how dire her illness is – it is evident that she puts in a lot of effort and thought in how she goes about convincing her parents to allow her to go study in Hangzhou. Thus, when Zhu-the-doctor suggests that to solve Zhu Yingtai-the-patient’s mental (opposed to physical) illness is to allow her to “dress like a man”, she outsmarts the two of them when she reveals herself after securing their agreement to allow Zhu Yingtai-the-patient to go study if she is able to disguise herself well enough that her own parents would not recognize them. When she reveals herself – she the action itself is elegant and well executed. This is in contrast to the 1954 version where Zhu Yingtai’s father suspects something is amiss and she and her maid dissolve into distinctly feminine giggles when she takes off her male garb to reveal her feminine attire underneath. While the result was the same, the gender performance in *The Love Eterne* is much more convincing in that Zhu Yingtai is much more believable

and performs her role as a man well. The differences between the doctor-masquerade in 1954 film and the 1963 *The Love Eterne* could possibly be attributed to the different sociopolitical climate during the film. Although it's only ten years, it is possible that there were more calls for equalities in the sexes in the 1960s than the 1950s, thus there was more pressure or at least attention to detail to make Zhu Yingtai's first attempt at male drag to be moderately convincing and believable and to reinvent Zhu Yingtai to be a more 'modern', forward-thinking female protagonist than her predecessors.

In *The Love Eterne*, one of the focal points during Zhu Yingtai's time in Hangzhou is how she manages to keep her up her masquerade and 'perform' her role as a young male scholar adequately and believably. At the start of her journey, when Zhu Yingtai is traveling to Hangzhou, she and her maidservant Yin-Xin (who in an act of remarkable loyalty, also dresses in male drag and accompanies her mistress to school) keep to themselves when they encounter Liang Shanbo and his male servant Si-Jiu at the bridge. While Liang Shanbo and Si-Jiu openly look at the other two in curiosity, Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin do not make eye contact and attempt to ignore the two males and the silence that falls over the group is decidedly awkward for everyone. There are a few good reasons why Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin keep to themselves: perhaps they were unused to interacting with young men in their age group or because they did not want to risk having their true identities discovered before they even reach the school, but nevertheless their passivity in this scene can be read as 'feminine' in that they are still performing roles of the dutiful, quiet-but-not-heard daughter and loyal maid. Thus, it is not surprising that Liang Shanbo and Si-Jiu are the ones who initiate contact and conversation with Zhu

Yingtai and Yin-Xin, since both are acting with the cultural expectations of their gender identities firmly in mind.

Despite her best attempts to conceal her true gender, there are times when Zhu Yingtai in *The Love Eterne* forgets herself or struggles to ensure that her secrets won't be revealed. When she becomes sick at school, Liang Shanbo rushes to her bedside. The scene itself is reminiscent of the first scene when we meet Zhu Yingtai when she is hastily concealing evidence of her good health in order to fool her mother into thinking she is seriously ill. However, this time, Zhu Yingtai is actually sick and she has to quickly pull up her blankets and compose herself behind her bed drapes before she allows Liang Shanbo to see her. Believing that she is seriously ill, Liang Shanbo brushes Yin-Xin off when she tries to shoo him away from her mistress, instead he proclaims that he will stay by Zhu Yingtai's side throughout the night, "No, I'll stay [sleep] here tonight" and indicating that he will "attend to all [her] needs"²⁰. When Liang Shanbo tells Yin-Xin to sleep in the outer-bedchamber, Yin-Xin reacts with mild shock proclaiming that as an educated man, Liang should have known better than to suggest such a thing much to Liang's befuddlement.

ZHU YINGTAI: How can boys and girls sleep together!"

LIANG SHAN-BO: Are you implying that I'm a girl?

²⁰ Hsiang, Li Han, Dir. *The Love Eterne*, starting (30: 54) into the film.

ZHU YINGTAI: As you are not a girl... How can I ask you to take care of me?²¹

Unsurprisingly, Zhu Yingtai forgets herself and voices Yin-Xin's concerns in this scene. Her exclamation indicates that propriety/chastity is still important to both Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin despite the fact that they are pretending to be males and certain lines still must not be crossed. When Liang Shanbo laughs and suggests that they are questioning his masculinity, both Yin-Xin and Zhu Yingtai are taken aback by their mistake. While Yin-Xin appears to panic, Zhu Yingtai immediately deflects by reaffirming Liang Shanbo's masculinity. She also references the gender roles between men and women wherein females are the nurturers/caretakers in an attempt to get discourage Liang Shanbo from pursuing this further. It does not go exactly as she plans as Liang Shanbo is determined to stay the night with her and personally see to her health, but Zhu Yingtai manages to convince him to use his own blanket so there is distance between the two (thus preserving not only her chastity but also theoretically minimizing any chance of Liang Shanbo discovering her true gender if they were to share a bed). In the morning after scene, Yin-Xin looks and she is immediately relieved to see that her mistress's chastity and her cover are both safe because kind-hearted Liang Shanbo fell asleep sitting by the heater.

²¹ Hsiang , Li Han, Dir. *The Love Eterne*. starting (31: 30) into the film.

At certain points, it appears that Zhu Yingtai's ability to 'perform' her role convincingly enough is interestingly paralleled by the actions of her maidservant Yin-Xin. Like Si-Jiu, Yin-Xin's role is intended to be comic relief, but she is essentially a prop in the film in that all her actions and dialogue is meant to draw attention back to her mistress and the main narrative. This can be seen when she slips and addresses Zhu Yingtai with a feminine title 'Miss' or Si-Jiu (whom Yin-Xin befriends) drags her off to go bathe with the rest of the men despite her adamant protests – the latter highlights the difference between Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin; it is meant to be comical because of course Yin-Xin cannot bathe with the men otherwise her true gender will be revealed, yet she is seen being physically dragged away in a state of ill-disguised panic²². Meanwhile, her mistress had used her wits and provided Liang Shanbo with a reasonable explanation for while she could not go bathe with the other men – again, with the emphasis on Zhu Yingtai's most prominent androgynous trait - her intellect. The parallels between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin and Si-Jiu are clear: Zhu and Yin-Xin are both cisgendered females in male drag with close ties with Liang and Yin-Xin, their very good friends. This is made especially clear after Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai become sworn brothers - their loyal servants perform the same act (although in a less refined manner), swearing brotherhood between the two as a reflection of the Liang-Zhu relationship. Since both Si-Jiu and Yin-Xin are meant to be comic relief characters (and their secondary purpose is to serve as props for their respective master and mistress), their

²² . Yin-Xin's predicament occurs off-screen since the focus of the scene is on Liang and Zhu but presumably her gender was not compromised.

actions are met with mild amusement from Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, but throughout the film their friendship and bond remains the same even after Zhu Yingtai and Yin-Xin return home and are forced to resume their traditional female role once again.

As a female posing as male scholar, there are also many times when Zhu Yingtai is faced with the dilemma between performing her assumed male gender convincingly that conflicts with her own personal desires as a young woman or the social conventions that restricts her true emotions. While Zhu Yingtai performs her culture's masculine role adequately, she has not internalized her culture's particular masculine role and as a result must force herself to perform it in a way that is uncomfortable for her because it goes against her culture's feminine role, one that she *is* familiar with: thus she struggles between the dichotomy of being a male scholar and a female young nobleman. Zhu Yingtai's initial awkwardness in her adopted male drag aside, she at least seems, initially, more comfortable and appropriate in her role as a young male scholar. Not only is she encouraged to pursue her intellectual interests at her new school, it is expected for a young scholar to question and voice his opinions and Zhu Yingtai is allotted more personal freedom than she experienced as a young woman quarantined in her own bedroom. However, the audience can see that despite these freedoms and privilege that has been granted to Zhu Yingtai in her male guise, she still struggles with reconciling her non-platonic feelings for Liang Shanbo with the role she has taken on that are not appropriate due to her perceived gender. She is not allowed to act upon her emotions for two reasons: because she is currently presenting as a male in her disguise, and because as

a young woman with her type of upbringing it is unseemly for her to being direct with her language when she wants to confess her feelings to Liang Shanbo. As a matter of fact, Zhu Yingtai's upbringing is possibly one of the major obstacles since she cannot simply tell him that she is in love with him; that would be *too* bold. When she uses metaphors that flies over Liang Shanbo's head, she is attempting to send a message through the language she familiar with – but unfortunately, Liang Shanbo is not well-versed in the subtleties and he is merely confused by her many references to “mandarin ducks” and interprets her rhetorical statements “if one of us were to be a woman...” to be a mild insult that insinuates that *he* is not masculine enough. Thus, Zhu Yingtai's upbringing means that throughout her typically convincing drag performance as a young man, she is still a well-bred young noblewoman underneath her male attire and it is reflected in her actions and concerns. For example, she is concerned about issues such as safeguarding her chastity like any young unmarried noblewoman would be in her situation. So during the aforementioned scene when Liang Shanbo wants to sleep in her bed and keep watch over her while she is sick, she is naturally as worried as her maid that Liang would figure out her true gender and does not want anything improper to happen between them before marriage. In short: although Zhu Yingtai is acting as the part of a young male scholar, she still adheres to and is influenced by her upbringing as a proper young woman in imperial China where interactions between the two sexes had been very limited.

When Zhu Yingtai is called home and Liang offers to accompany her along the way, her attempts to disclose hints about her true gender identity are unsuccessful. Zhu

Yingtai's greatest assets/strengths has always been non-gendered – cleverness and ingenuity. She utilizes her skills to try to make Liang Shanbo understand her true feelings without breaking social decorum of the time. Tan See-Kam explains the innuendoes and insinuations in one of her poems:

‘ Elder Brother Liang,

Always pick the *hua* (flowers) when the *hua* are ready for picking.

Don't wait till the *hua* have withered.

You will have a troubled heart when that happens.‘

In Chinese culture, flowers are gendered female and the term flower, is also slang for the female sex. in context.... the “*hua*,” have a self-referential meaning: it is Yingtai's way of hinting to Shanbo [sic] that she is in actuality a female person, that she desires him as a lover and mate, and that she wants him to pick up her the “*hua*” (woman) of his life, and take her as a wife (Tan See-Kam 2007).

However despite Zhu Yingtai's best efforts, Liang Shanbo does not understand the double-meanings in her witty poetry and Zhu Yingtai is left without the ability to articulate her true meanings because she struggles with the dichotomy of *performing* her role as a young man and her true female self, her role as a chaste young woman who

cannot speak directly on matters of love despite being outspoken on aspects of gender inequality in Confucian Classics. Zhu Yingtai is constricted by the traditional rules of proper female/male conduct and is unable to voice her feelings for Liang Shanbo. Her indirectness contributes to the doomed relationship because Liang Shanbo has to find out about her true gender identity and her affections for him through their schoolteacher's wife. If Zhu Yingtai had been able to be more direct and open with her emotions and been able to express them, without societal concerns of propriety, it is possible that Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo could have avoided their unhappy ending due to failure of clear communication.

There are times when Zhu Yingtai, Liang Shanbo, and other characters in *The Love Eterne* exemplify Butler's theory of gender performativity in terms of how females and males adhere to certain established social rules. However, the added layer of having female actresses portray cisgendered male characters adds an interesting element to the film that makes it difficult to ascertain whether it supports or defies Butler's theory of gender performance. While at school, Zhu Yingtai's male classmates are portrayed by both female and male actors: the implication being that the audience is not meant to notice the difference between male/female actors. The female actors are 'presenting' as male students; thus they are treated as though they are – much like Ivy Ling Bo's portraying the role of Liang Shanbo. In a way, the treatment of the female actors who portray these male students can also be read as sociopolitical commentary on Chinese society in the 1960s – a push towards egalitarianism in a time where the Chinese

Communist Party tried to promote equality between the sexes by defeminizing Chinese women.

Interpretations of the Liang-Zhu Gender Plays

In “Huangmei Opera Films, Shaw Brothers, and Ling Bo: Chaste Love Stories, Genderless Cross-dressers and Sexless Gender-plays?”, Tan See-Kam criticizes film critic influential Taiwanese film critic Peggy Chiao and renowned Taiwanese-American film director Ang Lee for their comments and viewpoints on the so-called ‘gender-blind’ spectatorship of the 1963 Shaw Brothers’ *huangmei* opera film adaptation of *The Butterfly Lovers*. Both Lee and Chiao believe that the practice of having *fanchuan* performers and the tradition of cross-sex performances is common and an integral part of the Chinese opera tradition²³. Thus, they rationalize that the audience is then familiar or desensitized to any homosexual/queer undertones to these performances. In this case, the audience would not think there is anything odd with the double cross-dressed casting and performance in *Love Eterne*. The fact that there are two actresses playing romantic opposites in the roles of Liang Shanbo (Ivy Ling Bo) and Zhu Yingtai (Betty Loh Ti) is not remarkable, even though Ling Bo is supposed to represent a man throughout and Betty Loh Ti spends a significant amount of the film in drag masquerading as a male student. Tan finds fault with their heteronormative and conservative viewpoint; he interprets that both Lee and Chiao look at the *Love Eterne* through a very narrow critical

²³ Chinese term for cross-dressing in the Chinese opera. In this case, actress Ivy Ling Po portrays Liang Shanbo, a male role.

lens and deconstructs their reviews and positions of the film on the issue of gender performance, representation, and spectatorship.

One of Tan's critiques is that both Chiao and Lee think that the 1960s was a very conservative time for China, Taiwan, and in the Chinese diasporas. Chiao and Lee argue that it wouldn't have occurred to the audiences to look at Ivy Ling Bo's cross-dressed act through a queer gaze or to think of any sexual or kinky hidden messages to the character portrayals (Tan 2). Tan asserts that this prudish and downright essentialist assumption on the part of Chiao and Lee is problematic since it erases the possibility of audience/spectatorships' same-sex or trans-gendered identification²⁴.

Tan suggests that since both Chiao and Lee regard this film with an air of childhood nostalgia, it may have played a crucial part in influencing their perception of *The Love Eterne*. Lee credits the movie as his inspiration to become a film writer and states that the film "always reminds me of my innocence" (Tan 2). This suggests Lee projected his own personal interpretation to the general audience. Likewise, Tan notes that Chiao is equally nostalgic and also links the viewing of *The Love Eterne* with her own childhood (Tan 2). Childhood nostalgia, in other words, is a likely factor in coloring both Chiao and Lee's perception of this film and adds to this idea that any queer undertones in the film as strange.

Although Tan finds Chiao and Lee's stances on *The Love Eterne* to be similar, he also notes the differences between their interpretations of the film. Chiao briefly

²⁴ Tan appears to use the term 'transgender' in his academic work to refer to third-sex or non-binary traditional female/male discourse.

describes the ‘surrogate male figure’ adoration from Ivy Ling Bo’s middle-aged female fans which Chiao attributed to Ling’s portrayal of Liang Shanbo as an representation of “‘no gender’ or ‘no gender difference’” (qtd. Tan 2). Therefore Ling’s portrayal of Liang Shanbo was regarded to be a ‘safe infatuation’ for married fans. Chiao’s take on the situation suggests some contradictory viewpoints regarding what constitutes as ‘male’, ‘male enough’ or ‘gendered’ and it clashes slightly with Lee’s insistence that spectators always viewed Ling’s character representation to be male and there was no confusion over the prospect of a female actress playing a male role. Tan is more critical of Lee’s morally conservative, heteronormative view of the 1960s audiences - which appears to be a projection of his own personal feelings than something based on fact. Tan refers to this as continually ‘misconstruing the audience as non-gendered’. He also expresses his bemusement that a progressive filmmaker such as Lee, who has produced films with queer protagonists such as *The Wedding Banquet* (1992) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2006). In this specific work, Tan spends a considerable amount of time deconstructing Lee and Chiao’s essentialist rationalizations that *The Love Eterne* was a sexless, chaste film for moviegoers and was seen as such by mainstream audiences when in reality their opinions were formulated by their own biased interpretations of the gender performance/roles. On the contrary, the queer subtext in the film does exist despite their opinions that express a strong heteronormative slant that denies “the queer gaze”²⁵. Tan strongly argues that *The Love Eterne* is a transformative film, especially with how it

²⁵ Tan, See-Kam, and Annette Aw, "The Love Eterne: Almost Heterosexual Love Story." *Chinese Films in Focus II* (London: BFI, 2008) 161.

recreates the Liang-Zhu legend. Not only does it have feminist potential with the reinvention of Zhu Yingtai's role, there are multiple layers of gender performance between the cross-dressing actors and the characters that has intrigued scholars and instigated an interest in connecting gender and queer theory with Chinese film. Additionally, the film itself provides a foundation for alternative forms of gender and sexual identification to be expressed and it even questions Chinese society's heteronormative matrix²⁶.

Conclusion

I argue that *The Love Eterne's* reinterpretation of the old Liang-Zhu folktale, Li Hsiang both honors and re-imagines the role of Zhu Yingtai's character to be a more progressive and arguably even feminist icon than any of her predecessors: although Zhu was originally a female cross-dressing protagonist, Zhu has developed into a transformative character whose character presentation has changed along with Chinese society in the twentieth century. For an *huangmei* opera film adaptation to cast two female actresses for the leads of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai can be seen as a reflection of the transformation of the social and ideological remaking/redefinition of gender relations in twentieth-century China. As discussed earlier, the role of cross-dressing serves as an essential tool for the remaking of this folklore since it adds multiple layers and brings into focus normative gender expectations in imperial China and even provided social commentary during the zenith popularity of the film's release.

²⁶ Tan and Aw, "The Love Eterne: Almost Heterosexual Love Story", 165.

In *The Love Eterne*, normative Chinese gender expectations and roles have been suspended, subverted, and gender stereotypes are even reversed when it concerns the portrayal of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, further emphasizing how one of the strengths of *The Love Eterne* is the gender-play that exists with traditionally Chinese dominant cultural constructions of performance and identity. Zhu Yingtai, the protagonist, defies dominant gender norms with the act of cross-dressing, which itself is reinforced with Liang Shanbo's character, Zhu's romantic lead, being played by a female actress which aids the queering of the gendered/sexed norms present in the traditional folktale.

The allure of female cross-dressing protagonists in Chinese literature and film has always been, in part, about flirting with subverting traditional gender hierarchy in an acceptable setting: 'acceptable' in this case meaning that it still upholds aspects of Confucian ideals or virtues. *The Love Eterne's* extended influence manifests itself in various ways, it even manages to set a foundation or a basis for the future queering of the Liang-Zhu folklore. Due to the multiple layers of gender identity/performance that can be found in *The Love Eterne*, it lends itself to queer interpretations quite well and consequentially it has opened up a relatively new field of scholarship on the Liang-Zhu legend and more modern alternative genderqueer interpretations of the folklore which merely reinforces the concept that the cultural power that this story possesses is nothing short of impressive.

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