

## Restaging Feminist Modernity with the ‘Shackles’ of Traditional *Chengshi* Aesthetics in *Liyuanxi Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*)

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### Abstract

The system of performing codes known as *chengshi* has continuously been regarded as an impediment to the modernisation of *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre). These rigid codes—which include ways of speaking, moving, and role types—are at once inconsistent with and ‘unrepresentative’ of modern life. They have therefore become financially and aesthetically ‘uncompetitive’ compared to the West-derived spoken drama which has become the taste of contemporary Chinese audiences. With regards to *xiqu* reform and modernisation in contemporary China, practitioners and researchers have debated whether *chengshi* should be reformed in *xiqu* and how to reconcile *xiqu*’s aesthetic tradition with its modernisation. This article argues that it is conformity to the traditional *chengshi* aesthetics that paradoxically promotes feminist modernity in the *liyuanxi* performance *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*), written by Zhang Jingjing and performed by the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe in 2015. Following a re-framing of the intracultural reinterpretation of classical scripts in the context of *xiqu* reform, I will further elaborate the traditional *chengshi* subtleties that promote the protagonist’s female agency in this production and relocate female representation in *liyuanxi* on the topography of Chinese modernity and feminism.

*Xiqu*, the traditional operatic form of theatre, is among the more predominant types of performance in contemporary China. Its most salient feature lies in ‘*chengshi*’, a set of performance vocabularies derived from the summarisation and abstraction of quotidian experiences, such as ‘*changqiang* (vocal styles), *nian* (speaking), *shenduan* (body movements), and *hangdang* (role types)’ (Shanghai Arts Institute 169). However, with its illusionistic, slow-paced, and intricate performing conventions, *chengshi* has been taken as an impediment to *xiqu* modernity. Uncompetitive with generally ‘modernity’-oriented, West-

derived spoken drama, a chief concern in contemporary *xiqu* is whether its *chengshi* codes should be retained or abandoned. A specific type of *xiqu* I will be exploring here is *liyuanxi* (Liyuan opera): a Hokkien-language genre boasting a history that is over eight hundred years old. The main characteristics of *liyuanxi* are its classical, elegant movements and melodious, tender vocal and instrumental tunes that considerably predate and differ from the well-known *xiqu* genre of *jingju* (Peking or Beijing opera). In other words, it retains relatively more ‘traditional’ performance aesthetics than other *xiqu* genres: therefore, its use of *chengshi* is arguably vital.

The central case study of this article is the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe’s (or FPLET) *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*; 2015): a *liyuanxi* adaptation of a classical *jingju* script.<sup>1</sup> The original narrative features a patriarchal husband divorcing his wife after suspecting her of infidelity, then taking her back when her chastity is confirmed. The FPLET version, composed by the female playwright Zhang Jingjing,<sup>2</sup> rewrites the passive wife in the feudal patriarchal society into an ‘awakened’ woman with more independence—taking a more active role in the divorce. The ‘intracultural’ practice of adapting an extant narrative employed by Zhang should be considered in the contexts of *xiqu* reform: a complicated and controversial issue interweaving with Chinese societal modernisation since the founding of the PRC in 1949. The reform has continuously been surrounded by the conflict between tradition and modernisation, between localisation and westernisation.

Josh Stenberg regards this production as ‘conservative experimentation’, because the ‘generic conventions’ of *xiqu* ‘are largely

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1 Due to the limited length of the article, the plot of the *jingju* production will not be summarised in detail. For more information on this see Josh Stenberg (326). There is also a contemporary Taiwanese *jingju* adaptation of this play discussed by Stenberg (327-330) and Daphne Lei (42-63).

2 All the Chinese names mentioned here will follow the Chinese cultural convention that introduces the surname before the given name (e.g., Zhang Jingjing instead of Jingjing Zhang), except when the person’s name order is widely recognised in global scholarship.

observed’, though ‘the gender ethics are revised’ (324). However, the claim of ‘technical conservation’ and the reversal of gender dynamics in Stenberg’s discussion (339) perhaps fails to more fully consider the debates around *xiqu* reform since 1949. In response to *xiqu* reform’s demands of cultural modernity and purification of obsolete *xiqu* conventions, FPLET, the *liyuanxi* troupe behind Zhang, tends to rediscover *xiqu*’s own narrative system and aesthetic tradition before the broader cultural assimilation of other/Western cultures. The theatrical regeneration from within echoes what Brian Singleton calls an ‘intracultural’ practice ‘found in the reappropriation of folk traditions’ as ‘a political as well as cultural resistance to the commodification of “traditions”’ in his exploration of Indian local theatre (96). In other words, the generic innovation of *xiqu* does not necessarily include radical artistic innovation. Instead, a dynamic incorporation of modern consciousness into its traditional aesthetics provides a viable model for contemporary *xiqu* transformation. This article argues that the very observance of traditional *chengshi* aesthetics of *liyuanxi* ‘paradoxically’ promotes feminist modernity in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*. I will frame the intracultural reinterpretation of traditional scripts along the axis of *xiqu* reform, demonstrate the traditional *chengshi* subtleties that facilitate the heroine Meng’s female agency in terms of performance, and relocate the female representation of both women characters and playwright in *liyuanxi* on the topography of Chinese feminism and modernity.

### **Intracultural Reinterpretation on the Topography of *Xiqu* Reform**

Intracultural practices, as they are used in this production, have proved to be important in the process of *xiqu* reform. Critical opinions diverge regarding the most appropriate way to reform *xiqu* in terms of the conflict between tradition and modernity. The Chinese *xiqu* historian Zhang Geng’s model of categorisation has been adopted in *xiqu* scholarship since the 1950s: classical plays, newly created/re-written historical plays, and modern/contemporary plays (245). Greatly

influenced by socialist ideology, Zhang Geng suggests that only modern, ‘realist’ plays can represent the ethos and aesthetics of the socialist era (343-345). While Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak advocates reform that incorporates ‘popular innovations’ into ‘both new and extant plays in order to reach the broad, “semi-educated” urban audience as well as “semi-literate” peasantry’ (165-166), Fu Jin contends that *xiqu*, as an illusionistic art built upon its *chengshi* aesthetics, is incompatible with modern plays that incorporate Western realism (376-378). However, informed by Yang Ming’s exploration of *xiqu* modernisation through recent *kunqu* productions (182),<sup>3</sup> I contend that the ‘reinterpretation’ of historical texts in a modern context—while using traditional forms—can enable *xiqu* modernisation and make it relevant without affecting its style.

As a reworking of a classical *jingju* script, the production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* exists in tension between traditional aesthetics and modern audiences and culture: a challenge also faced by other adapted scripts. Unlike the scholars above, Dong Jian disapproves of a clear demarcation between nationalisation (tradition) and modernisation (Westernisation), with a replacement of ‘the modernisation of nation’ with ‘the nationalisation of modernity’ (Dong 32). The blurring of the modernity/tradition distinction has also been echoed by Siyuan Liu, who proposes two strategies of ‘modernities’ against ‘old’ theatre during the 1950s *xiqu* reform: purification and hybridisation. While purification ‘involves a decisive break with the past and a rigorous process of purification’, hybridisation refers to ‘hybrid modernity’ at once ‘distanced from the past and continuous with it’ (Liu 202). During the 1950s, the two strategies had a destructive effect on the development of some regional *xiqu* genres through artificially demarcating between ‘scientific’, civilised modernity and archaic, feudal tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic system of *liyuanxi* is similar to that of *kunju*, with authenticity—or in Wichmann-Walczak’s words, characteristic ‘flavour (*wei*)’—as a defining feature: hence targeting a more culturally and theatrically literate audience.

Assimilating provincialism and elitism as its discursive cornerstone since the 1950s, *liyuanxi* was assigned to a refined, ‘elite’ level in the process of ‘purifying’ specified by its distinctive *chengshi* aesthetics. Unlike the case of other regional genres, this reform indeed rescued the almost extinct *liyuanxi*, but it was again damaged by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which exerted destructive effects on various aspects of Chinese culture—specifically here through a mechanical integration of the Stanislavski performing system built upon socialist realism. After 1976, however, the urgency to retain Chinese local traditions and aesthetics in pursuit of modernity has been put high on the agenda of *xiqu* reform in reaction to the rise of nationalism (Fu 40). The local traditional aesthetics of *liyuanxi* have been re-evaluated and rediscovered as a ‘living fossil’ of *xiqu*, rejuvenating this genre up to the present.

### **Resuming Female Agency within the Boundary of *Liyuanxi Chengshi***

Though a destructive strategy to some regional genres in the 1950s, Liu’s model of ‘hybrid modernity’ at once ‘distanced from the past and continuous with it’ (Liu 202)—if resituated on the landscape of *liyuanxi* reform—can demonstrate the feminist aspirations that FPLET’s *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* generates from its traditional generic *chengshi* conventions. Female agency is considered as a positive form of resistance within the patriarchal social system. For example, as the political scientist Lois McNay states, ‘the feminine subject is synchronically produced as the object of regulatory norms by phallogocentric symbolic systems and formed as a subject or agent who may resist these norms’ (59). There are moments when women, as ‘oppressed’ objects, are given agency to subvert the ‘oppressing’ institution. In *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, the delicateness of traditional *chengshi* practices serve to magnify Meng’s latent conjugal crisis, arouse her suppressed female consciousness, and facilitate her female agency in three aspects: namely, through her illusionistic marionette-like yet freely expressive body, the simultaneous juxtaposition of self-introductions (*zibao jiamen*), and female narrative and writing.

As a rewritten *jingju* play, there is no extant production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* in the *liyuanxi* repertoire. How to maintain its *chengshi* aesthetics, then, poses a challenge to the performers. The specific *chengshi* in *liyuanxi* is built upon *kemu*, *kebu*, and dance. ‘*Ke*’ designates the special body movements of *liyuanxi*, with its general principles known as ‘*kemu*’ (lit. the mother of *ke*). ‘*Kebu*’ (the step of *ke*) refers to more specifically codified movements with specific hand, eye, body, and foot gestures in line with the characters’ singing and speaking and the instrumental tunes (Wu 374). The performers thus follow the strict principle of ‘one line of lyrics in accordance with one step of movements’ (*yiju qu yibu ke*). The influence of puppet theatre also accounts for this rigid performing system, among other *xiqu* genres in the *Min Nan* (Southern Fujian) area (Wu 72).

With regard to the performing system based on ‘*kebu*’, the body is central to the performing system of *liyuanxi* as it is in other genres. The *xiqu* body is both ‘kinetic and sentimental’, namely, ‘the *xiqu* body moves in space, and it moves audiences’ (Wilcox 45). In other words, the body movements in *xiqu* externalise the character’s emotions, which touches the audience. The importance of sentimentalism or lyricism in *xiqu* performance gives rise to the representational principle of *xieyi* (a sketch of meaning): ‘[d]istinct from representational verisimilitude, *xieyi* seeks to convey the essence of things rather than to imitate their exact form’ (*ibid.*). Therefore, the abstract corporeal externalization of unspoken feelings is essential to *xiqu* aesthetics.

In *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, Meng’s illusionistic, marionette-like yet freely expressive body movements—especially the ‘hand dance’—articulate her female agency created through ‘regulated liberties’, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s term (102). Lois McNay formulates the concept of agency in feminist theory through a new understanding of Bourdieu’s idea of ‘habitus’ and ‘regulated liberties’: ‘[f]or Bourdieu, the temporality inherent to the concept of habitus denotes not just the processes through which norms are inculcated upon the body, but also the moment of praxis or living through of these norms by the individual’ (25). The *dan* (protagonist) actress Zeng Jingping succeeds

in rendering Meng's feminist liberties within the 'regulated' classical *liyuanxi* body. Taking small, mincing steps within the *chengshi* conventions, Meng's body identity 'involves the inscription of dominant social norms or the "cultural arbitrary" upon the body' (*ibid.*). Guilty and remorseful—limited by the social expectations imposed on women—Meng chooses to subdue her awakened female desire after the rainy night when she stays with the male stranger Liu.

Nevertheless, Zhang subverts the patriarchal system of ancestor worship through the moment of sexual metaphor. The moment of 'living through of these norms' by Meng as 'the individual', namely, 'the temporality of habitus', becomes a generative one that endows the individual with autonomy (McNay 25). Zhang clips the original *jingju* plot in which Meng forsakes her own filial piety by leaving her marital home to ritualistically honour her



husband's ancestors. Another scene is significantly added by Zhang: Meng's discovery of the beauty of 'spring'—a traditional metaphor of female sexuality in Chinese *xiqu*—on her way to sacrifice to Wang's ancestors for *Qingming* festival at his request.<sup>4</sup> *Qingming* festival is a traditional Chinese festival where the tombs of a family's ancestors are swept to show filial piety. However, a sexual awakening is embodied in Meng's lively singing in line with her 'hand dance' (*shouwu*), which undermines the patriarchal sacrificing system that lays great emphasis on filial piety. Unlike other genres adopting 'water sleeves' as an extension of costumes to create a visual effect, *liyuanxi* is characterized by its 'hand dance' with systematic finger gestures to

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<sup>4</sup> The discovery of spring is a traditional metaphor in *xiqu*. For instance, in *The Peony Pavilion* (1598) written by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), the *dan* Du Liniang discovers the full-bloom spring in her garden, indicating her awakened female sexuality.



Fig. 1: Meng's final encounter with Wang and Liu (Lin Cangxiao, Zeng Jingping, Zhang Chunji). Zhang Jingjing's *Yubei Ting* (*The Imperial Stele Pavilion*), performed by the Fujian Province Liyuan Experimental Troupe, 2015.

externalise the character's emotions. Through the exuberant 'hand dance', the emotional female body enacted by Meng undermines the mature, disciplinary one institutionalised by the patriarchal society. Furthermore, her female agency culminates at the moment when she actively 'seizes' the 'brush pen' (a patriarchal symbol of writing and narrating) from her husband to write the divorce paper by herself, before pressing his finger as a seal on it. Just as the calculated use of the husband's finger grants her autonomy, the 'hand dance' becomes a subversion of patriarchal authority.



In addition to her paradoxically ‘confined-yet-free’ *xiqu* body, self-introduction (*zibao jiamen*) is another important form of *nian* (speaking)—one of the *chengshi* conventions that promotes her female agency. Though commonly regarded as an outdated *chengshi* practice in *xiqu*, *zibao jiamen* serves as an innovative way to expose the characters’ innermost emotions and foreshadow their conjugal crisis in this play (as the playwright does with Meng). Originating in a time when most *xiqu* audiences were illiterate, self-introduction was once an effective way for the audience to understand the story’s background. However, this practice has been discarded by many productions after the *xiqu* reform, due to its ‘tediousness’ incompatible with ‘realist’, quick-paced representations of life. It denotes a set of *chengshi* practices generally comprised of *yinzi* (lead-in singing), *dingchang shi* (the introductory poem sung by the characters), and *dingchang bai* (the introductory lines spoken by characters) and aims to introduce the characters’ names, hometown, and identity as well as foreshadow the plot (Zhu 294). All three parts are maintained in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, yet not without theatrical innovation.

Here the juxtaposition of two characters’ simultaneous, rather than alternate, self-introductions creates a strong dramatic tension from the different perspectives of the husband and the wife. The self-introductions take the alternate order of Meng following Wang in Zhang’s original script, which is lengthier than the final 2015 production. Alternating their lines sentence by sentence, the lead-in singing reveals Wang as a man merely intent on achieving career success and fame through the imperial examination, while Meng as a lonely wife distressed by her husband’s departure. In their *dingchang bai*, for Wang, it is ‘the day of examination’, whereas it becomes ‘the day of parting’ for Meng (Zeng Jingping 04:40-04:55). Meng shows concern for Wang’s safety and health during the journey, but Wang only cares about her chastity as a marital obligation. Hence, the intricately designed self-introductions disclose an inherent conjugal imbalance between a lonely, considerate wife and an indifferent, suspicious, fame-seeking husband.

Meng's female identity is reshaped through the privileged medium of her own narrative, enacted through the nuanced *liyuanxi* narration style. Alone in the titular Imperial Stele Pavilion with the stranger Liu, her interior monologue, intensified by the accompanied tunes of *liyuanxi*-specific instrument *nan gu* (southern drum, or foot-pressing drum),<sup>5</sup> illustrates a self-interrogation over her loveless and unreliable marriage. Her later rumination on that rainy night with Liu, expressed in her hand-writing of a poem as a souvenir of Liu's genteel manner, further reconfigures her female identity through a discovery of her own feminine charm. Instead of being objectified by the male 'gaze' of Liu, she actively restructures her own agency through her own 'praxis' of the gaze. In this sense, her identity as an autonomous 'woman' begins to emerge from her previous understanding of her 'self' as an obedient 'wife'. Her introspection and the cross-examination of her inner feelings, with *xiqu*'s emphasis on lyricism, propels her self-discovery and reconfigures her identity.

In summary, the 'regulated' *chengshi* practices of *liyuanxi* paradoxically enact Meng's female agency. Meng's female body enacted by the actress Zeng Jingping's *liyuanxi* body articulates female agency in her 'living through' of the social norms imposed on women; Meng's and Wang's simultaneous self-introductions (*zibao jiamen*) subvert the patriarchal power relations between genders; and Meng's female narrative and writing convey her female subjectivity as a 'woman' rather than a 'wife'.

### **Feminism and Female Representation on Stage in China**

As the 'cultural inheritor' and the sole professional troupe of *liyuanxi* in mainland China upon its foundation, FPLET is famous for their

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5 With a centimeter of about five centimeters, the specialty of this drum lies in that the drummer (*gushi*) puts one foot on different places on the head of the drum to create a variety of tones, volumes, and timbres with the drumstick striking on it. The drummer usually has all the performing codes, including *ke*, *bai* (speaking), *chang* (singing), and each role type's personalities and emotional subtleties at their command to manipulate the timbre and rhythmic nuances of drumbeats, which should match the various actions of the performer (Wu 103-105).

innovative and successful restagings of classical or historical plays touching upon gender relations since the 1980s. Its late playwright, Wang Renjie, pioneered a new route of *liyuanxi* reform through his reinterpretation of female characters in successful, rewritten historical productions such as *Dong Sheng yu Li Shi* (*Scholar Dong and Madame Li*) (1994). As one of the successors of Wang in FPLET, the young female playwright Zhang Jingjing acknowledges the influence of Wang's works—which often staged feminist subjects. In a personal interview, Zhang notes how Wang's representations not only inspired her to become a playwright and to write female subjects, but informed her own female consciousness. These factors drove her to rework the traditional, patriarchal *jingju* play *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* from the female perspective of Meng (67).

There has also been a long tradition in Chinese theatre of borrowing historical female stories to meditate on women in contemporary society—as the representation of women on the traditional stage was far more biased and inadequate under patriarchal dominance. In this regard, the reworking of female characters in contemporary *xiqu* contributes to a re-evaluation and rewriting of feminist modernity. This kind of rewriting has been involved in a number of *xiqu* productions, such as the *chuanju* (Sichuan opera) *Pan Jinlian* (1985), the *yueju* (Shaoxing opera) *Xishi Guiyue* (*Xishi Returns to Yue*) (1989), and the Taiwanese *jingju* *Wang Youdao Xiuqi* (*Wang Youdao Divorces His Wife*, another version of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*) (2004). These productions explored the subaltern status of women and the suppression of female sexuality in feudal society to reflect current feminist issues. This intracultural dialogue with the past echoes Xiaomei Chen's (2001) argument, along with Liu Binyan's appraisal of Wei Minglun's rewritten *chuanju* *Pan Jinlian*, that 'instead of casting contemporary stories in traditional theatrical forms [...] one could appeal to contemporary audiences by rewriting stories from the traditional repertoires' in response to the *xiqu* crisis (Chen 207). Here the *xiqu* crisis refers to the dramatic decline of *xiqu* productions and audiences since the 1980s due to the invasion of more popular

entertainment forms such as TV and films. As the Taiwanese *jingju* scholar Wang An-Chi states, ‘the directionality of feminism has been diverted from the denouncement of patriarchy to the rediscovery of female subjectivity’ (153), which is also true in mainland China. Likewise, gender representation on the *xiqu* stage has transformed the representation of female characters from a male-centred perspective towards explorations of female emotions and sexuality.

This evolution of female representation in *xiqu* is intertwined with Chinese feminism—which had a different trajectory from its Western counterpart. The ‘home-leaving’ protagonist Meng Yuehua in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* is reminiscent of the female protagonist Nora in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879)—a theatrical symbol of female liberation in China since the New Culture Movement.<sup>6</sup> Ibsen’s play was considered by the Chinese to be Ibsen’s articulation of freedom in marriage, love, and the patriarchal family.<sup>7</sup> As an image of the ‘new woman’, the ‘Chinese Nora’ was no longer a daughter, wife, mother, lover, among other gender stereotypes, but identified as a female subject empowered with agency. Nevertheless, this ‘outspoken’ female agency—with Nora famously ending the play by leaving home—emerged in China like a shocking flash in the pan, and so was later silenced in literary narratives until the 1980s (Dai 3).<sup>8</sup> By this time, feminist consciousness was put in the cultural spotlight due to an increasing Western cultural influx, but the feminist movement still failed to benefit lower and lower-middle class female groups. Not until the early 1990s have ‘Chinese feminists enthusiastically embraced the global feminist concept of gender and used it innovatively to create

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6 The New Cultural Movement, heralded by such Chinese intellectuals with global visions as Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Hu Shi (1891-1962), and Lu Xun (1882-1936), was a movement during the 1910-20s that rejected classical culture and promoted a new Chinese culture based on Western ideals.

7 Ibsen is generally acknowledged as one of the most influential foreign playwrights in China over the past century, where his most frequently adapted play has been *A Doll’s House* (He 118-135).

8 Between the founding of the PRC in 1949 and the 1980s, ‘state feminism’ dominated the gender paradigm in China (see Wang 41).

local practices' (Wang 40). Integrating global feminism into Chinese society has helped to redefine traditional gender norms and champion female agency in the new century.

It is against this social backdrop that the production of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* takes place. Zhang Jingjing asserts the female agency of her protagonist Meng as well as herself, which enables the play to engage with young female audiences. During the Shanghai Little Theatre *Xiqu* Festival in 2015, *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* tickets were sold out two months before its performance. The play was especially popular on tour in large cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Nanjing among young female audiences. Such witnesses have tendencies towards '[d]etraditionalisation, disembedding, the creation of a life of one's own [...] and the irresistible pressure to be more independent and individualistic' (Zheng 147-148). The term 'disembedding' comes from the first stage in Ulrich Beck's conceptualization of a triple 'individualization': 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the "liberating dimension")' (126). Contemporary Chinese society has witnessed its women become more independent, autonomous, empowered individuals who increasingly defy traditional gender paradigms.

Zhang's motive to rewrite this play originates from her own experience as an audience member of the original *jingjiu* performance that depicts Meng as a docile daughter and submissive wife. As a young female of the post-1985 generation,<sup>9</sup> Zhang received a bachelor's degree from Nanjing University, one of China's top universities. Her choice to become a playwright also went against her own father's will (Jingjing Zhang 67). Unable to identify with the play's patriarchal narrative, Zhang reimagines Meng's 'lived' female emotional and affectional subtleties as relocated from the oppressed closed space of domesticity to the free open space of the pavilion, thus re-identifying her not as a

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<sup>9</sup> This generation is generally considered too young to compose classical literature such as *xiqu* scripts.

‘wife’, but as a ‘woman’ alone with another man. The reworked story thus expresses the playwright’s understanding, respect, and support for Meng, behind whom millions of Chinese women once were and are still victims of patriarchy (*ibid.*). In this sense, though having not ‘elected to phrase their work in terms of feminism or similar terms’ (Stenberg 338), Zhang’s reworking is imbued with a feminist consciousness.<sup>10</sup> As Meng is endowed with the agency to escape from her marital plight, the writer has also matured as a contemporary female *xiqu* playwright breaking free from the fetters of a conventional patriarchal narrative paradigm.

Zhang further de-institutionalises the myth of love and marriage in *The Imperial Stele Pavilion*, a practice often employed by modern female playwrights to stage lived, dynamic female experiences and subjectivities. Traditionally, only a young ‘maiden’ boasts the right to pursue ‘love’ on the *xiqu* stage. However, the search for love is, of course, legitimate for a woman at all stages of her life—something that is not represented in traditional *xiqu*. Meng’s escape from a loveless marriage is authorised in Zhang’s adaptation because the reliance on men is obviously not a necessity for contemporary women. In the final encounter with her ex-husband, Meng further steps forward to subvert the overplayed dualism between loyalty and disloyalty with an emphasis on marriage’s volatility and unreliability, going beyond the original narrative’s traditionalised discourse of marriage and loyalty. This subversion creates a strong resonance for its female audience, especially those in large, competitive cities riddled with high divorce rates and numerous marital problems.

## **Conclusion**

As Dong Jian suggests, the sharp demarcation between tradition and modernity in the process of *xiqu* reform should be reconsidered. An organic interaction between traditional *chengshi* aesthetics and modern

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<sup>10</sup> This is also true for Ibsen. Though he did not call himself a feminist, his ‘Nora’ has become an icon of feminism.

consciousness stands out in the orientation of *xiqu* development in contemporary China. Traditional *liyuanxi*, as well as *xiqu* more generally, is struggling to survive in a contemporary Chinese market flooded by various entertainment media. In this regard, the gendered restaging of *The Imperial Stele Pavilion* demonstrates that an intracultural practice within traditional aesthetics turns out to be an appropriate way to strike a balance between tradition and innovation. Even the assumed ‘outdated’ *chengshi* narrative of self-introduction can become innovative. This production not only reveals the female plight in Meng’s time, but also performs a transformative, de-traditionalised female agency that engages in dialogues with its contemporary female audiences.

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