

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Female Theater Performers in 19th-Century China and Hungary

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Abstract. This paper investigates the systemic stigmatization of female performers in 19th-century Qing China and Hungary through a cross-cultural comparative framework. In both societies, women engaged in theatrical professions—though vital to artistic innovation—faced institutionalized marginalization. In 19th-century China, female opera performers faced explicit prohibition from public stage performances under Qing state decrees. They endured dual marginalization through institutional and social mechanisms: legally categorized as "degraded status groups" within the household registration system, their status was formally degraded below that of ordinary women. Simultaneously, pervasive social stigmatization conflated them with prostitutes in public discourse, regardless of actual professional distinctions. Concurrently in Hungary, actresses and ballet dancers, and other low-status theatre workers were publicly equated with courtesans or even sex workers; their professional dedication was obscured by societal fixation on their perceived moral transgressions. These parallel patterns demonstrate how patriarchal power structures exploited gendered stereotypes to suppress women's vocational agency. By conflating artistic labor with sexual misconduct, authorities in 19th-century Qing China and Hungary reinforced rigid gender hierarchies that confined women primarily to domestic spheres as wives and mothers, effectively excluding them from public creative expression.

Keywords: Female artistic labor, moral transgressions, gender hierarchies

1. Introduction

In 19th-century Qing China, people overlooked women's creative contributions to Chinese opera during its early development. Instead, they pushed women out of both performing and creative roles. Society and the government labeled all female performers as prostitutes. These women were seen as the lowest social class and held lower legal status than ordinary women. At the same time in Hungary, actresses, ballet dancers (especially low-ranking theater workers), were similarly linked to prostitutes and courtesans. Society's prejudice about their personal lives hid their hard work, dedication, and sacrifices from public attention. In reality, the stigma and prejudice faced by female performers in both countries during the 19th century revealed women's lack of voice in a male-dominated world. Women were expected to become good mothers and wives, leaving them with very few career choices.

This paper uses historical research methods including document analysis and historical comparison. By studying the observations and records about female performers in China made by Austro-Hungarian travelers Ferenc Gáspár and Gustav Ritter von Kreitner during their 19th-century visits, combined with relevant Chinese historical sources, the paper analyzes the social prejudice faced by female performers in 19th-century China and its underlying reasons. Furthermore, this paper compares the situations of female performer groups in both countries through a cross-cultural analysis, examining aspects such as social class and experienced prejudice in 19th-century Hungary.

2. Literature review

Based on existing records, there were not many Hungarians who traveled to China and left travel notes in the 19th century. As Fodor József stated, “Because of its geographical location, Hungary has little contact with the oceans and, compared to other nations, plays only a small role in exploring and describing distant parts of the world and foreign countries [1].” This shows that Hungary, due to its inland position, had limited access to maritime routes and therefore made fewer contributions to the discovery and study of faraway lands.

Hungarian scholar Dr. Györgyi Fajcsák has already provided a detailed summary of the travelers who visited China and the records they left behind [2], so this paper will not repeat that content. Here, this paper will only give a brief introduction to the travel notes of the two individuals that cites: one is Ferenc Gáspár (1861–1923), a Hungarian ship doctor, and the other is Gustav Ritter von Kreitner (1847–1893), an Austrian officer, geographer, and diplomat. Their travel writings serve as the main sources for the analysis in this paper.

In 1877, Kreitner traveled to Asia as a mapping expert with the Far East scientific expedition led by Hungarian nobleman Széchenyi Béla. He arrived in China for the first time in 1878. From 1878 to 1880, he traveled across China with the expedition team. Their journey included Shanghai, the Yangtze River region, the northwestern areas of Gansu and Qinghai, and the southwestern borderlands [3]. As a cartographer, he made detailed records of China’s geography. In his notes, he mentions of Chinese women’s clothing, appearance, and the way they rode horses [4].

Gáspár served as the ship doctor on the Austro-Hungarian steam warship Zrínyi and took part in the East Asian naval cruise during the years 1885–86. During this time, he sailed with the ship into China’s inland rivers, such as the Min River and the Yangtze River ect., where the Austro-Hungarian fleet displayed its flag and carried out diplomatic and commercial activities [5]. This shows that he arrived in China during 1885–1886, especially in the eastern coastal and inland river regions. What makes him stand out is his special attention to Chinese women. In his writings, there are many descriptions of their appearance, behavior, and other related aspects. Interestingly, he also gave explanations for these observations. For this reason, his work is the most frequently cited source in my paper.

3. Prejudice faced by Chinese female theater performers during the Qing dynasty

In the travel notes of several travelers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was mentioned that all Chinese opera performers were male. Behind this phenomenon was the reality that Chinese female theater performers faced discrimination.

3.1. Records by austro-hungarian travelers on the ban of female theater performers in 19th-century China

Ferencz Gáspár described his experience of watching Chinese theater in Shanghai in his work. He wrote: "Nevertheless, in every scene, there is a character on stage representing a woman. As we have already mentioned, these are young men, mostly with feminine faces. Their costumes, clothing, way of walking, and voices imitate so faithfully the unique dress, movements, and voices of Chinese women that, despite our personal knowledge, we could hardly believe that the woman standing before us was in fact a man [6]." Similarly, Kreitner Gusztáv also mentioned this phenomenon: "We agreed to watch a martial play, one that also included a female role. It is known that Chinese ladies are not allowed to perform on stage, and their roles are played by men [4]."

Gáspár tried to analyze the reasons why women were not allowed to perform on stage in Chinese society. He wrote: "In China, actors stand at such a low level of social status that their children are not even allowed to take the imperial civil service examinations. In fact, actors belong to the lowest class; they are forbidden to marry so that their group does not grow [6]." In any case, the author correctly pointed out the contemptuous attitude that Chinese society held toward the group of actors.

In China's feudal society, the entertainment industry—which had no link to agriculture or material production—was regarded as a low and dishonorable profession [7]. As a result, theater performers and their children were usually placed in the legal category known as "degraded status groups", who were not permitted to take the imperial civil service examinations. In the legal hierarchy, these groups ranked below the "good citizens," a term referring to ordinary people such as scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and state-recognized merchants (including those involved in salt and tea trade), as well as soldiers and salt workers. While good citizens had access to official exams and the freedom to marry, members of degraded status groups were seen as the lowest in society and faced long-standing restrictions in areas such as marriage, education, and employment.

However, Gáspár's explanation about the marriage of actors does not fully match the records found in the Great Qing Legal Code. Actors were not forbidden to marry altogether, but they were not allowed to marry "good citizens". According to the law, ordinary citizens (good citizens) could not marry people from the so called "degraded status groups", including actors, prostitutes, singing girls, and servants. Violators would face legal punishment [8]. This law mainly applied to low-status men, who were forbidden to marry women of higher social standing. In practice, however, many men of ordinary status—especially those from wealthy families—still took women of low background as concubines. Yet it was extremely rare for a man of good status to take a low-status woman as his legal wife [7].

Gáspár's analysis is generally accurate. It was precisely because the status of performers and prostitutes was considered low that the Qing dynasty placed very strict limits on who could enter these professions. According to the Great Qing Legal Code, it was forbidden to buy sons or daughters from respectable families and force them to become prostitutes, actors, or musicians. It also banned human traffickers from coercing women into prostitution or using threats and force to profit from their exploitation [8]. In other words, the law prohibited forcing women of good social status to enter so-called degrading professions, which would cause them to lose their respectable status and become members of the degraded class.

3.2. Female theater performers and prostitutes in the Qing dynasty

In the Qing dynasty, female theater performers were largely regarded as prostitutes [9,10]. According to a record in Volume 25 of Dingli Cheng'an Hejuan (Compendium of Established Legal

Precedents and Statutes), written by Wang Shan in the 46th year of Emperor Kangxi's reign (1707), under the section titled "sexual offenses," there is an entry called "Prohibition of Female Performers Entering the City." It states: "Although the authorities have already banned women from performing in theater, there are still female performers who ride into the city to make a living through their art. In name, they are actresses, but in fact, there is no difference between them and prostitutes. Some immoral officials and common people are obsessed with them and may even spend all their family wealth on them. Therefore, it is necessary to ban these women from entering the city. If any female performer is found inside the city, she will be punished according to the laws concerning prostitutes entering urban areas. [7,9]"

The main reason for banning female performers from the stage was that, throughout Chinese history, they were widely associated with prostitution and faced discrimination. In *Qinglou Ji* (Biographies of Yuan Dynasty Courtesan-Performers), written by Xia Tingzhi in the late Yuan dynasty, 117 female performers are recorded. Many of them were prostitutes, while some were wives of male performers. This shows that, regardless of whether they were directly involved in sex work, the line between female performers and prostitutes was often unclear [10].

This perception continued into the Ming and Qing periods. In the late Ming and early Qing, influenced by cultural trends of the time, many prostitutes began to study and perform Kunqu opera. In particular, some courtesans in the Jiangnan region were often invited—or volunteered—to take part in theater performances because of their artistic talents. As a result, it was common for prostitutes to also be female actors. [10,11]

It could also be observed that when feudal literati recorded female performers in the arts, they often emphasized these women's physical beauty. Among the audience watching female opera performances in brothels, there were many vulgar men who cared only about the performers' appearance and bodies, rather than their actual artistic skill. Because of the close ties between female opera performers and prostitutes, a common prejudice developed: that these women used their looks and bodies to attract customers, disturb the minds of the audience, and tempt men to spend large amounts of money [11]. Moreover, when women performed on stage, they were publicly showing their appearance and bodies, allowing the audience—especially male viewers—to see them through an accepted and legitimate channel. This behavior directly went against the norms found in the *Book of Rites*, which emphasized strict separation between men and women and avoiding direct contact. An article titled *Chinese Theatres*, published in the *North China Herald* on December 29, 1866, also confirmed that even in the second half of the 19th century, this tendency to blame female performers for men's improper behavior still existed in China—and was even supported in Western countries.

"The arguments which may be advanced in proof of the immoral tendency of female acting are patent. They have been and are to the present day made use of in England also. To youths who would be satisfied with a single visit to a performance where men only are engaged, the spectacle of female actors offers an unwholesome attraction, leading them to incur expense beyond their means. They sit up far into the night, to the obvious detraction from their capacity for work on the following day; they go again the next night, with similar and worse results and, eventually, having exhausted their own slender store of cash, they rob their employers in order to obtain the means of gratifying the unwholesome craving [12]."

In the 19th century, female opera performers in China were more active in treaty ports such as Shanghai and Tianjin, as well as in the colonies and concession areas controlled by European powers. Within the concessions, Qing government laws did not apply, so theaters that allowed women to perform on stage first appeared in Shanghai (the earliest Chinese city with a foreign

concession), and later in Tianjin, Hankou, and other opened ports. However, at the same time, female stage performances were still officially banned by the government. In the 16th year of the Guangxu reign (1890), the Qing court prohibited female performers from acting, claiming that all-female troupes were harmful to public morals [13]. During the Tongzhi period (1861–1875), theaters featuring female performers were mainly located in the Yangjingbang area of the French Concession, where Huagu Opera and Tanhuang performances were common. Inside the old walled city of Shanghai, there were only a few street performers [14]. Therefore, according to the notes of Hungarian travelers, since female performances were officially forbidden, foreign visitors coming to China during this time may have rarely seen these performers, even though women were already playing an active role in the theater scene.

4. A comparison of female theater performers in 19th-century China and Hungary

In the 19th century, female performers in Hungary and China showed clear differences in terms of social class. This situation came about because the two countries used different standards to define social hierarchy—especially the distinctions between the middle and lower classes. In Hungary, the clearest standard for defining the middle class was related to economic conditions. A family's income shaped the lifestyle they could afford, including their housing choices and leisure activities. In general, the basic condition for a middle-class lifestyle was to have an apartment with at least three rooms and at least one servant [15]. Based on this standard, many Hungarian female performers in the 19th century were able to reach the level of middle-class living.

On the other hand, the Hungarian middle class at that time was not allowed to engage in manual or productive labor. In other words, not all jobs that provided enough income for a middle-class lifestyle were considered respectable or appropriate for someone of middle-class status. Ferencz Pulszky, in his memoirs, offered an explanation of what was considered a respectable profession:

“(My father) believed that only landowners held truly respectable positions—those who did not hold office and depended on no one; that was a real gentleman... A government official, of course, was also regarded as a gentleman, but a financial administrator, even with a higher salary, received less respect, because many of them were foreigners or not of noble origin... Lawyers and doctors also fit into genteel society, even if they were not nobles, because they were still considered respected professionals; everyone needed them, they knew the most private secrets of the household. Still, they were not regarded as equals, because they lived in a state of dependence—not necessarily on an individual, but on the community. Among them, the most respected were those who attended county assemblies and were often appointed as lay judges [16].” This also helps explain why, in 19th-century Hungary, public opinion often viewed actresses as people who hovered on the edge of high society but were not fully accepted—those belonging to the so-called demi-monde—not truly part of the bourgeoisie [17].

At the same time, in 19th-century Hungary, female performers—including opera singers, stage actress and ballet dancers ect., as well as other women engaged in artistic performance—found it difficult to gain respect from the elite. This was mainly because their work did not match the traditional expectations of women in that period. In addition, their relatively high divorce rates, as well as their views and behaviors regarding sexuality, marriage, and lifestyle—which often did not follow the social norms of the time—further distanced them from acceptance. This situation was even more noticeable in the first half of the 19th century.

In feudal China, social status was not determined by one's lifestyle, property, or the amount of land owned, but rather by the type of work a person did or the way they lived. In the feudal hierarchy shaped by Confucian ethics, political structure, and economic system, the shi-da-fu class

—also known as the jinshen and shenjin class—formed the privileged group in society [18]. This system remained in place until the end of the 19th century. In short, in China, the living standards of privileged people could vary greatly. Even the poorest members of the shenjin class were respected by society and belonged to the privileged group. Their status was far higher than that of wealthy merchants or landlords. Meanwhile, women such as prostitutes and female singers, whose income and living standards could reach a middle or even upper level in society, were still considered to be at the very bottom of the social hierarchy.

5. Conclusion

In the 19th century, although female performers in China and Hungary differed greatly in terms of social and legal status, they were subject to similar forms of discrimination. Gáspár described an experience when he was a guest at the home of a man named "Kvong-Man-Sing." During his visit, the host invited six female singers from Suzhou. Gáspár wrote: "It is worth noting that these singing artists—the modestly paid 'lotus flowers' of Suzhou—draw their fine white silk, gold embroidery, and jade jewelry from the same source as our seventy-crown ballerinas and opera singers draw their silks, jewels, and their two-thousand-crown apartments [6]."

The meaning behind this passage is clear—these women were, in effect, hidden prostitutes. The idea of associating European female singers, ballerinas, and other women engaged in artistic performance with prostitution or labeling them as immoral is essentially the same kind of prejudice seen among Qing dynasty rulers and officials, who viewed female performers as prostitutes. This reflects a common attitude in patriarchal societies: treating women who might engage in sexual or emotional relationships outside the structure of marriage as morally fallen and labeling them as prostitutes. It also includes the belief that any intimate relationship outside of marriage should be seen as equal to prostitution and be morally condemned.

As a man within the intellectual elite of 19th-century Europe, Ferencz Gáspár's bias toward female performers mirrors the general opposition of the European upper-middle class to women who stepped outside the domestic sphere and gained greater personal freedom. Under the influence of this mindset, both the European and Chinese upper-middle classes selectively ignored the hard work, discipline, and professional dedication of these women, as well as their contributions to artistic creation and cultural development.

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