Cross-Dressing and Gendered Voice Representation in Cantonese Opera

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ABSTRACT
The practice of “cross-dressing” is frequently seen in Cantonese operatic performances, whether in the physical attire worn by actors in on-stage shows or in the “virtual” disguises adopted in operatic song performances. Most instances of cross-dressing are cases of actresses disguising themselves to play male roles, owing to the innate constraints of male voices that make it difficult for most men to imitate female voices. Especially in pure singing scenarios, audiences frequently encounter female singers performing in a male voice, or actresses performing male gestures to act out the roles that they assume. The cross-dressing aspect of the role blurs the boundaries between the two genders. As cross-dressing performance has traditionally been a part of Chinese opera, it is worthwhile to analyze the gendered aspects of such cross-dressing practices by adopting a Western gender-studies perspective. In the case of the complicated physical and mental aspects of cross-dressing performance, accurately capturing a vocal representation of the opposite gender may involve displacement leading to a misapprehension of the performer’s real-life gender. The combination and sublimation suggested by this ‘patchwork’-style of role crossover is therefore worthy of in-depth discussion regarding the degree of gender-boundary confusion, flexibility and feasibility presented by these operatic performances.

KEYWORDS
Cantonese opera; cross-dressing; impersonation; gendered voice; queer culture

KEYWORDS
粤曲; 易装现象; 反串; 两性声音; 酷儿文化

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1. Introduction

Frequently referred to as Yueju 粵劇 or daxi [大戲 “grand opera”] “due to the usually grand scale of production” (Chan 3), and commonly regarded as one of the gems of Chinese vernacular literature and culture, Cantonese opera is a treasure trove of artistic significance. As a heavily stylized traditional performance art form first popularized in the early twentieth century, it involves the embodiment of significant cultural knowledge and symbolism through the performers’ application of relevant operatic gestures, eye movements, costumes, on-stage props, and so on. Particularly remarkable and worth noting is the practice of “cross-dressing” (sometimes understood as transvestitism, a practice of assuming a role of the opposite gender from that of the performer), which is frequently witnessed in Cantonese opera performances, whether in the actual physical attire worn by the actors in on-stage shows or in the “virtual” disguises adopted during operatic song performances. It so happens that a majority of amateur performers are female (perhaps due to the requirement to sing the operatic scores in a very high register, which many male amateur singers find difficult, or impossible. Professional male singers are better able to cope with these demands). For this reason, most cases of cross-dressing are of female actors disguising themselves to play male roles, owing to the innate constraints of male voices, which make it difficult to imitate female voices (there are, however, still a small number of male performers who cross-dress and impersonate female voices). This article introduces the phenomenon of opposite-gender voice representation in the operatic setting and analyzes the feasibility and sensibility of cross-dressing practice at the site of this ambiguous gender encounter.

2. The features of cross-dressing in Cantonese opera

Cross-dressing performance first flourished from the early to mid-twentieth century. Li is of the opinion that “[u]p to the early 20th century, Cantonese opera […] had the scenario of] men playing women’s roles. In the early decades of the century there also emerged the all-female Cantonese opera troupes, which also began performing the ‘young civil-cum-military male’ roles” (“Cantonese Opera” 32). These theatrical customs paved the way for the creation of additional practices, such as male-to-female and female-to-male parody (Cui et al. 415). The significance of this phenomenon can be further supplemented by the following comment:

The beginnings of theatre in various cultures seem to be inseparable from cross-dressing and especially male into female cross-dressing [, but] Chinese opera [seemed to have] operate[d] as a site of contestation and negotiation among different ideological forces and resistant voices, specifically in terms of gender. (Li 155)

In historical perspective, there was a “long-term displacement of the female on the stage, the cultural and social construction of ‘femininity’ in masculine terms, the dissymmetry between men playing women and women playing men, [and] the longstanding prejudice that women were lesser performers who merely played themselves rather than creating roles” (Li 30). Today, in contrast, cross-dressing or queer representation by female performers is commonly seen in the Cantonese opera setting, and is readily accepted by audiences of the refined art. This unusual interaction between female and male representation has
already become a ubiquitous norm in the opera setting. Especially in the case of bare operatic song performances, a "subgenre of Cantonese opera... which lacks costumes, stage settings and acting" (Chan 8), the audience frequently encounters female singers performing in male voices, making masculine gestures to suit the roles they assume in operatic songs, while still being dressed in the fancy female evening costumes, showing that "performativetranssexualization [which] clearly goes beyond sartorial transvestitism" (Tan 208). There are also certain male actors who frequently perform the roles of old ladies, given their significantly lower vocal registers: in performance "all female-role actors sing in Zi hau [zihou 子喉, meaning 'female voices,' i.e., 'falsetto voice'] except that an actor should employ Ping hau [pinghou 平喉, meaning 'male voices' or lower-pitch voices, i.e. 'natural voice production'] if he or she impersonates an aged woman" (Chan 9–10). Sometimes scripts contain parts explicitly written to be played by a performer of the opposite gender (such as in Qiao Pan An 俏潘安 [The Dainty Gallant] and Loutai Hui 樓台會 [The Butterfly Lovers]). In these cases, the cross-dressing aspect has created significant ambiguity in the boundary between the two genders.

Male impersonation by actresses has become so well accepted that audiences accept the impersonation by the actor as being "real." Discussing the opposite scenario (i.e., a male cross-dressing as a female on stage), Li notes, "[i]n capturing the essence/psyche of the female sex, a male transvestite can be transformed into a 'woman' that everyone takes as 'real'" (Cross-dressing 165). Likewise, a skilled female impersonator of male roles captures almost perfectly the spirit of a man, and makes her audience believe that she is a real man, and thus they fall for her. One celebrated example was the renowned Yam Kim-fai 任劍輝 [Ren Jianhui] (1913–1989) (see Figure 1), who "was a specialist cross-gender performer [whose] forte was to play [the role of] 'man.' (So too was the case for her opera works.)," was given the epithet 'Ximi Qingren 戲迷情人 [The Lover of All Opera Fans] (Wong 55), and "deferentially referred to as 'Yidai Yiren,' [一代藝人], or 'The Artist of a Generation'" (Tan 202).

As most research in the field has been conducted in Chinese, I argue that it is practicable to explore the possibility of generating issues in Cantonese opera with Western gender theories, so as to bring the analysis to a global stage. The ambivalence derived from switching between an impersonated voice on the stage and that of a real-life scenario might best be scrutinized in a framework acceptable to receptors worldwide, if the subject of Cantonese opera could be put to a new point of interest in the international context as well. Simone de Beauvoir, considering a psychological influence within traditional Confucian teaching, identified that in accordance with the philosophy one should “become” a woman (xix). Further building on this idea, Judith Butler notes that “[i]f there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (43). The quotations, in this case, also apply equally to the process of construction of a male gender by a female body continuously engaged in operatic performance. The actress’s heart and soul have been blended with those of a man. In doing so, she has to put extra and ultimate emphasis on the way she talks, the gestures that pertain to a man, the actions required for a male-gendered appearance, and the like. These male elements eventually become rooted in the artist herself and in the minds of the audience members. The dichotomy of the artist’s “real self” versus her “performed self” is then hardly
identifiable on the basis of such “to-become” process—her real self has partially been concealed by the operatic voice of the role she acts out. However, without exception, the gendered voice representation can only serve the performance purpose on the stage, but never becomes the actress’s real “self.”

3. Representation of a queer discourse in performance

There should be reasonable debates on whether the concept of “queer” created by LGBT theorists relates well to the practice of cross-dressing in performance. “Queer,” as the term might apply to cross-dressing performance, “generally corresponds to that commonly understood by queer theorists[,] in that it similarly challenges supposedly stable binaries such as male/female, gay/straight, and sex/gender” (Tan 202). Conceptually, “queer” has always been closely associated with sexual minorities and transgendered individuals:

Queer theory is concerned with questioning the binary structures by which sex, gender and sexuality are conventionally understood, whereby all human persons are required to identify/be identified as either male or female, either masculine or feminine and either heterosexual or homosexual. (Carroll 6)
In applying the concept to Cantonese opera performance, the practice of cross-dressing, and thus the transformation of identities into the opposite gender described in the operatic scripts, may partly, although not entirely, pave the way for queer discourses during on-stage performances. The ideas are clearly closely related, but definitely present a quandary for audiences, requiring a significant degree of displacement of expectations. As a kind of disparity between the roles and the real selves of operatic artists is perceived, several aspects of cross-dressing are engendered and are subject to discussion below as per their gender-boundary confusion, flexibility, and feasibility for on-stage performances.

3.1. Female cross-dressing as male characters on stage

Taking Yam Kim-fai as a celebrated example: she collaborated with Pak Suet-sin 白雪仙 [Bai Xuexian] (b. 1928) in co-acting various Cantonese opera performances and operatic films, which were tremendously successful, with Yam representing the leading male role and Pak the female protagonist (Tan 204–5). Here, the queer discourse is embedded with the usual arrangement of Yam being a talented xiucai 秀才 [a learned scholar] and Pak a beautiful and gentle maiden in her boudoir waiting for her true love, which cultivates a sense of harmony between the caizi 才子 [an intellectual, with “a reflection of his cultural cultivation and literary talent” (Tso 119)] and jiaren 佳人 [a fair maiden]. As a cross-gender performer, Yam’s male gendered voice always represented a stereotyped ‘man of charm’ who takes the lead and moves the audience, even despite this constructed, pseudo-gender identity. Following Yam’s metamorphosis, the boundary between the two sexes is solidified due to Yam’s convincingly masculine performance.

Compared with the tailor-made fanchuan 反串 [called “cross-gender impersonations” by Tan (209)] scenarios, there is never any ambiguity in Yam’s attempts to construct a ‘real’ masculine identity and impression, for she successfully created a kind of what I call “literary fantasy” against a “literal fantasy,” with the former denoting a fantasy that may be achieved only by literary means, such as through drama, film and literature, in contrast to a more realistic portrayal of a woman’s craze for a man. Based upon her captivating performances of various operatic stories featuring a brave, handsome and kind-hearted protagonist, she no doubt fostered a somewhat elusive queer [or, homosexual] devotion among her female opera fans. In a strict sense, it is debatable whether we can attach the concept of queerness to the zeal that Yam’s fans held for Yam the actor, who actually only performed the aforementioned literary fantasy on stage—thereby becoming a kind of fictitious deity-like actor who was offered a high degree of devotion by her audiences. Much of the passion felt for Yam by her followers also derives from the seemingly perfect love encounters demonstrated in the famous “Big Four” Cantonese opera titles: Di Nü Hua 帝女花 [The Flower Princess], Zichai Ji 紫釵記 [The Legend of the Purple Hairpin], Zaishi Hongmei Ji 再世紅梅記 [The Red Plum Blossom Reborn] and Dieying Hongli Ji 蝶影紅梨記 [The Red Pear Blossom by the Butterfly Shadows]. The love stories in these titles are constructed around an idealized love relationship, of a sort envied by most female audiences; while the ‘gender ambiguities’ [xingbie aimei 性別曖昧] created by the aspect of cross-gendered performance has been seen as a source of artistic motivation in literature [and hence, in opera.
performances as well] that is highly attractive (Wu 178). In this case too, there is again a vague and puzzling distinction between the literary and literal fantasies, which serves as an appropriate juxtaposition to the ‘real self’ and the ‘performed self’ discussed above.

It is worth noting that contextual significance is also important in determining the degree of reception afforded to male and female cross-dressers on the stage. Generally speaking, literati and intellectual characters [wensheng 文生] are more suitable for representation by female actors, while warriors [wusheng 武生], which are usually more masculine in temperament, are usually understood as being more suitable for portrayal by real-life male performers, though there are even some male-impersonators that are competent at playing both types of roles. For these reasons, few audience members would object to Yam presenting herself as a kunsheng 坤生 [a male-impersonating performer], acting such roles in a way “more manly than a man” (Luo 32). The persuasiveness of her male-gendered voice is further strengthened by a combination of masculine wonder and charm resulting from the universal and collective hope held by her fans in the audience.

Given the realization of this kind of literary fiction, one of the most amazing artistic attractions of a male-impersonator might be the belief that “one cannot be sure of whether the performer is a male or female” [ci xiong mo bian 雌雄莫辨] (Lin 421). Such a belief, common to audiences of Cantonese opera performances, might result from the female performers’ desire, through cross-dressing, to resist the archetypal “androcentric” concept, while Yam herself could also conceivably be seen as an artistic image of “androgyny” from a Western perspective (Wu 176). In the case of Yam, the effect seems to have become so deeply rooted in the minds of the populace that there was speculation that Yam was originally a male (Wu 175). This is a puzzling phenomenon, as Yam only played male roles on the stage, behaving and talking with masculine characteristics in accordance with her audiences’ expectations, while continuing to live as a woman in real life.

Thus, in the case of Yam’s performance, masculine wonder and feminine recognition cross over from on-stage perceptions into real-life situations (both characterized by the fictitious and subjective beliefs of the audiences) and are blended together into a collective unconsciousness. Even those who were clear-minded about the distinction between Yam’s realistic and fictitious roles were still willing to cope with the popular intention to treat her as a male actor, as, so to speak, a “dream lover” in the minds of the audiences. That is to say, the mentioned collective unconsciousness is derived from a relatively high degree of the audiences’ willful intention to incorporate their minds with that of the cross-dressing protagonist (indicating feasibility of the performed role), which helps provide a sentimental and pleasant experience to the opera goers.

Initially, performance of fanchuan was usually only a temporary practice that appeared in one or more individual scenes in specific operatic performances based upon the requirements and contents of a work’s title (such as in the cases of The Butterfly Lovers and The Dainty Gallant mentioned above, with the former describing the heroine cross-dressing as a young man and ‘intruding’ into a study composed only of male students, and the latter featuring a lady cross-dressing as a man in order to run away from a pre-arranged marriage fixed by her parents), or would only be employed by certain specific fanchuan actors or actresses across various operatic titles. Later on,
the practice of *fanchuan* was extended to include crossovers in different operatic roles in the form of male-to-female or female-to-male cross-dressing performances (Wang 431).

For instance, *The Dainty Gallant* has been described as a “gender comedy” [*xingbie xiju* 性別喜劇] (Yun) in which Koi Ming-fai 葉鳴輝 (b. 1967), a male impersonator, plays the role of Chor Wan 楚雲 (originally named Wan Siu-pan 雲小鳜), a female character described as having cross-dressed as a man. Like Yam Kim-fai, Koi Ming-fai has been praised for successfully “crossing over” between male and female appearances, but according to Yun, Koi initially felt confident in her ability to portray the character because the character herself is described as a woman playing a man, yet Koi’s “square” facial contours produced rather the opposite effect, with most members of the audience believing that Koi’s performance was more like that of “a male impersonating a female” in the last scene, in which Chor Wan narrates from her recovered, female identity (Yun). This comment is arguably justified, as it implies that most people’s minds are still deeply rooted with a stereotypical image of both sexes—how archetypal men and women should look like. However, in Koi’s case, although there always exists great difficulty in differentiating among different cross-gender performers: “[s]uch identifications in turn characterize the queer gaze that locates *fanchuan* performers with a spectrum of ‘fluid’ genders: male, female, both or neither” (Tan 209). The boundary of gender displacement is thus fluid and ambiguous, and may sometimes be mismatched. Such a boundary is framed depending on different interpretations, and that is what leads to an ambiguous dividing line of the gender roles in opera performances.

Figure 2 below shows Koi Ming-fai in both *sheng* [生 the leading male role] (front) and *dan* [旦 the leading female role] (back) attires on the cover of a house program for the opera *The Dainty Gallant*. In the image, a mirror has been set behind the *sheng* to show the reflection of the *dan*, highlighting a shift between genders and perhaps also the psychology and characteristics of the respective gender roles. What is more, the Chinese title of the brochure, “Xu long jia feng zheng guashuai” [literally “A Fake Dragon and a Phony Phoenix Rivalling to Lead on the Battlefield,” translated into “The Artistry of Gender Switching in Cantonese Opera” in English. In Chinese culture, the “dragon” traditionally represents a male, while the “phoenix” typically represents a female], implicitly suggests a cross-gender aspect to the on-stage performance. Specifically, the title highlights the lack of “reality” of both of the two sexes and comments on the accepted Confucian ideology of gender segregation between male and female. Li comments that “The shining actresses of the ‘young civil-cum-military male’ roles in Hong Kong Cantonese opera since the 1950s […] have not only rivalled their male counterparts but also developed a certain defining style of ‘female’ performance of these roles” (“Cantonese Opera” 33). Still, it is often amazing to appreciate a kind of flexibility about such handy switch between male and female roles in the same performance, from which the audiences could be able to catch some subtle interchangeability following their sentimental appeals.

### 3.2. Male cross-dressing as female characters on-stage

While female cross-gender performers have proven more popular in recent decades, in the early twentieth century there was a more widespread trend of male cross-dressers
across Chinese opera traditions (including Peking opera [Jingju 京剧], Kun opera [Kunju 崧剧], Cantonese opera and other forms). “The tradition of male cross-dressing on stage [...] is a long and consistent one [...]. In Chinese operatic performances, the female impersonators, the tan [dan], followed prescribed and highly stylized techniques for the enactment of female roles” (qtd. in Li 37). Sit Kok-sin 薛覺先 [Xue Juexian] (1904–1956) and Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳 (1894–1961) dominated as the “Master Operatic Artists in the South and the North” [Nan Xue Bei Mei 南薛北梅] (Pan and Cui 131), with the “South” here referring to Cantonese opera and the “North” Peking opera. Sit Kok-sin, the master of Cantonese opera, was “good at acting as wenwusheng [文武生 civil-cum-military male roles], but could also do fanchuan into female characters” and was therefore “labelled ‘an all-round actor’” (Wong 352). Figure 3 shows Sit Kok-sin appearing in both male and female operatic attire. His roles usually involved cross-gender performance, whether in on-stage performances, operatic films or in modern-style movies.

Some contemporary male performers dedicate themselves entirely to cross-dressing performances of female roles. They are frequently referred to as qian dan 乾旦 [a female-impersonating performer, as opposed to the opposite, “kunsheng,” described above]. Their fanchuan moves are neither temporary nor limited to one or a few titles, but rather they often devote their lives to this type of cross-gender artistic impersonation. Mei Lanfang is a famous example of this type of performer. In the field of
Cantonese opera, there are few prominent female-impersonating performers in Hong Kong, as finding success in this professional path is widely considered to be exceptionally difficult. The Hong Kong movie *My Way* (2012) portrays the process of cultivation and the thorny path to success for these female-impersonators through the case of a young female-impersonator named Wong Hau-wai (b. 1982) (see Figure 4), who is depicted as being passionate about performing female roles without reference to any gender theory notions of “cross-dressing” (Tan). However, with such performers faced with a lack of opportunities and appreciative audiences, the male-to-female path of cross-gender performance seems to be severely underrepresented in comparison with that of female-to-male cross-dressing in the contemporary age, as the former one is certainly not as flexibly presented as the latter one. The degree of audience receptivity differs significantly between the two cases, possibly due to the gender composition of the audiences—usually female audience members are more attracted to male performers (or female performers cross-dressing as males). “[T]his gender-blending figure seems to represent […] for many female audiences throughout the ages an ideal imaginary of [a] ‘man’. A larger than reality concept of the male sex that is apparently more desirable than the men in real life […]” (Li” 33). Therefore, the gendered voice representation of pseudo-female Cantonese opera performers might be less appreciated than performances by actresses cross-dressing as males, who are also more flexible and meticulous in terms of their voice projection capabilities and sartorial appearances.

Figure 3. Sit Kok-sin in male (left) and female operatic attire (right) (Extracted from Pan and Cui 136–7).
3.3. Male cross-dressing as old women characters on-stage

Despite the difficulties faced by male cross-dressing performers as a whole, one popular type of cross-dressing performance is the portrayal of elderly women by male performers. Major differences in the performance demands for the roles of younger and elderly women can be seen in their respective singing registers, operatic gestures and attire. As in the case of performers specializing in sheng roles, male actors who specialize in performing the roles of older women practice singing in their natural singing voice to maintain a good balance between male and female vocal characteristics (as older women usually speak in a lower register), while those who specialize in playing young maidens need to sing in a falsetto voice to imitate the higher vocal registers of younger ladies. Although less attention is given to male actors impersonating older women because they are not major characters, they still serve the function of harmonizing the atmosphere of the drama by creating a balance of power between the more significant cross-gender performers and these more minor actors. Though the latter are less appealing for most audiences, the refined skill of actors performing this specific role is still icing on the cake. Sometimes these impersonators also perform the roles of clowns (and in actual performances they often manage to switch between playing both old ladies—often mother roles—and humorous clowns in the same production). In such a way, witnessing the interaction between the pseudo and real gender identities of a young Chinese knight being impersonated by a female and a gentle (or fierce) mother/elderly woman being impersonated by a male performer is a perplexing and highly stimulating experience for the audiences. This also creates a bewildering predicament for the cross-gender performers themselves, as “[t]he Chinese stage cross-dresser has to always [chang] [常] retain the ‘heart-mind’ [i.e. thoughts and feelings] of the opposite sex and transform his/her own ‘heart-mind’ into that [those] of the opposite sex” (Li 165). The “retention” and “transformation” here results from a refined bodily and mental performance that re-imagines a popular gender discourse on the stage, against

Figure 4. Wong Hau-wai arranging himself in female operatic attire (Provided by Cheuk, Danny (director of My Way) and CNEX Fund).
the underlying psychological contemplation of the distinction between the sexes in reality.

Ban Ri An 半日安 (1902–1964) (as shown in Figure 5 below), who specialized in playing chou丑 [comedian] and jing淨 [painted-face] roles, gained much fame and applause for his cross-dressing performance as a fierce mother-in-law in the well-known opera Hu Bu Gui 胡不歸 [Why Don’t You Return?] (Wong 39). Perhaps it was due to Ban’s overwhelming success that audiences began to associate the roles of old ladies with these impersonators; in other words, audiences came to accept as natural cross-dressing male performers appearing in the roles of old ladies, just as they had come to love the way that female cross-dressing performers would perform male roles. In short, audiences’ insistence on the segregation of gender representations on the stage decreased, so long as the subject was able to represent him/herself in an appropriately pleasant way.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned, there has been a lack of investigation and discussion of cross-dressing in Cantonese opera in academia in recent decades, though there are some prominent and influential studies published in Chinese. In assessing cross-dressing performance, the audiences’ attention is usually directed to the way that performers present themselves,
with the focus being on the eye movements, gestures, sartorial characteristics, and singing techniques of the particular gender that a performer is impersonating. In order to convincingly act out the role of the opposite gender, the cross-dressing performer not only needs to adopt an appropriate gendered voice, but it is also indispensable that the performer incorporate his/herself into the ‘thoughts and feelings’ of the performed voice:

These classical Chinese theories on impersonating the other sex are vested in the binary oppositions of form/appearance [xing] [形] on the one hand, and essence/psyche [shen] [神] on the other. This cultural operation is still based on a system of binary gender, the structure of the female “heart-mind” versus the male “heart-mind” is still operating as the basic epistemological principle. (Li 165)

Hence, the essence or spirit of the successful cross-dressing opera performance gives off sparks that penetrate into the psyches of the audience members. This might be why the crystallization of xing and shen (as mentioned in the above quote) features the challenge of overcoming a feasible dichotomy projected onto the devoted passion of the performers. Cross-dressing, and thus cross-gender performers, strive to successfully embody appropriate gendered voices for the roles that they impersonate, even in cases where the part requires them to imitate both genders (generally speaking, even female actors have to mime female-gendered characters on stage, and there still exists some discrepancy between the literary voice and the actual real-life voice of the female performer). The virtual metamorphosis that takes place as the performer takes on an opposite-gender role has been viewed as occupying an ambiguous yet popularly accepted boundary in Cantonese opera performances. As I have argued above, female performers who impersonate males, who have a greater degree of flexibility in modifying their vocal registers and who look more natural with effeminate features than in the opposite case, have contributed to the proliferation of cross-dressing practices in contemporary Cantonese opera. In short, the differentiation caused by the various types of imitation and impersonation, in concealing the original sex and gender identity of the performer, offers numerous interesting possibilities for analysis and contemplation. The Western theories of gender studies and queer discourses are conducive to, in such cases, more extensive research opportunities in exploring various aspects in the study of Cantonese opera in future. This East-meets-West experiment certainly sublimes and transforms traditional angles of looking at Chinese performing arts. Thus, Cantonese opera, with its rich traditions of cross-dressing performance, deserves greater scholarly attention and broader global recognition.

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