

A comparative study of cross-gender performance: Li Yugang in China and Prince in the United States

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Abstract. This paper conducts a comparative study of the cross-gender performances of Li Yugang and Prince, examining the historical and cultural contexts behind their performances, their artistic careers, their challenges to gender norms, and the social stigmatization and bullying they faced as a result. The study finds that Li Yugang integrates the traditional Peking Opera "male dan" role with contemporary popular elements, relying on the cultural legitimacy of Peking Opera. In contrast, Prince disrupted gender boundaries through music and attire, though his later public statements occasionally contradicted this approach. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper analyzes how both artists support this theoretical framework, while also highlighting the ways in which inconsistencies between their public and private lives across different media platforms complicate the theory.

Keywords: gender performativity, androgyny, social stigmatization, cross-cultural analysis

1. Introduction

By the mid-Qing Dynasty, women in China were prohibited from performing on stage, yet "female roles" remained indispensable in theater. As a result, the art of the male dan (male performers of female roles) began to take shape. In the first half of the twentieth century, male dan performances reached their peak, exemplified by the "Four Great Dan" (四大名旦). As scholar Wang Dewei notes, "Owing to the physiological constitution of men, male performers could, through physical training, develop a unique vocal technique suited to the thin and narrow vocal cords required for female roles. Consequently, their voices displayed a diversity and tension unattainable by women" [1]. Although dan actors historically held low social status, as Zhou Huiling argues, "External determinants such as costume and posture constitute the primary sites through which culture disciplines gender differences—whether in daily life or on stage. Because these external determinants can be put on or taken off, they are employed by artists and socially recognized as art." This framework positioned cross-dressing on stage as a form of refined, entertaining art [1]. However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, male dan were regarded as products of feudal ideology and were severely suppressed. While the art form experienced partial revival following the Reform and Opening-Up, the rigorous training requirements for male dan, coupled with the persistent lack of widespread audience acceptance of "gender fluidity", intensified the challenges faced by modern performers. Nonetheless, the tension between this performance form and contemporary gender concepts, along with state support for promoting cultural heritage such as Peking Opera, created highly favorable conditions for Li Yugang's male dan performances.

Similarly, in the West, women were initially barred from performing on stage, such as during Shakespeare's era. By the Victorian period, performers typically imitated female form, voice, gestures, and attire to achieve a "realistic" effect. In the early twentieth century, however, drag performances within Harlem's ball culture, led by African American and Latino LGBTQ communities, embraced "extravagance", transforming the art form into a symbol of identity. By the 1970s, San Francisco's Cockettes and the British glam rock movement began challenging traditional gender norms, expressing diverse gender identities on stage. Gradually, this art of gender expression moved from an LGBTQ subcultural phenomenon to mainstream aesthetic appreciation. In the 1980s and 1990s, gender-ambiguous performance merged further with popular music, giving rise to Prince's androgynous performances.

Although Li Yugang and Prince exhibit very different performance styles, both challenged traditional gender norms. Li Yugang fuses the aesthetic of traditional Peking Opera male dan with contemporary popular elements, while Prince deliberately blurred gender expression through a combination of funk and rock music, high heels, lace, and makeup, directly questioning Western cultural definitions of Black masculinity. Therefore, this paper compares the cross-gender performances of Li Yugang

and Prince, exploring how they challenged conventional gender concepts. Furthermore, it examines the negative public discourse and social stigmatization they endured, revealing the pressures and bullying faced by cross-gender performers of their time. This study also attends to the complexities of their gender presentation. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, it analyzes inconsistencies in their performances and behaviors across social media platforms, life stages, and public versus private contexts—encompassing acts that conform to theoretical expectations as well as those that complicate or extend Butler's framework. Finally, the paper considers contemporary societal acceptance of cross-gender performers and offers insights into how such artists should be regarded.

2. A comparison of Li Yugang and Prince

2.1. Comparison of life experiences and performance styles

2.1.1. Life experiences

Both Li Yugang and Prince faced arduous paths to fame, rising from humble beginnings to public recognition.

Li Yugang initially wandered and took various odd jobs, performing wherever he could earn money. Once, when he was so destitute that he contemplated drowning himself, he was fortunately rescued by a beggar by the river. Later, while working in a music and video store with only 200 yuan to his name, he spent much of his time listening to Teresa Teng's songs. His career turning point came in 1998 during a residency at a bar: when a female performer was absent, he performed a duet—singing both male and female parts in *"For Whom" (Wei Le Shui)*. After the performance, he received 500 yuan from the audience, equivalent to a month's salary. From that moment, his unique cross-gender performance talent was recognized [2]. In 2006, his participation in CCTV's *Avenue of Stars (Xingguang Dadao)* stage further popularized him among the general public, establishing him as a "grassroots artist". He combined the traditional Peking Opera male dan art with contemporary popular music. Nevertheless, his distinctive performance style exposed him to considerable media and private harassment. In 2009, after joining the China Song and Dance Theater, he was recognized as a "National First-Class Actor", transitioning from a "folk artist" to a state-recognized performer. Subsequently, he performed overseas, appeared on the Spring Festival Gala stage, and acted in stage dramas, thereby expanding his role beyond male dan to that of a cultural ambassador for performance.

Prince Rogers Nelson was born into a musical family. Although his parents' divorce in childhood affected him, it also drove him into music at an early age. By seven, he could proficiently play the piano; by thirteen, he had mastered guitar, bass, and drums. In 1978, at nineteen, he signed with Warner Bros. Records, managing all aspects of his musical composition and production, establishing himself as a musical polymath. His 1979 album *Prince*, propelled by the single *"I Wanna Be Your Lover"*, topped the R&B charts. Between 1993 and 2000, he adopted the unpronounceable "Love Symbol" as his stage name, earning the moniker "the artist formerly known as Prince". He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004, returned to the top of the Billboard album charts in 2015, and tragically passed away on April 21, 2016, at Paisley Park Studios in Minnesota at the age of 57.

2.1.2. Performance styles

In terms of performance style, Li Yugang introduced several innovations to make his "female persona" more readily accepted. Departing from the heavy traditional Peking Opera costumes, his attire is lighter and more breathable. He consulted renowned makeup artist Mao Geping to design makeup suited to his facial features. He also leveraged the strength of his male body, extending silk ribbons to twenty meters for visually striking movements. Through practice, he discovered that a "graceful" gaze could be conveyed through variations of fullness and emptiness—primarily using fullness while supplementing with subtlety—to enhance depth and layers of expression [3]. When Li Yugang revived the almost-lost male dan art by integrating Peking Opera with contemporary music and dance, his innovative style attracted a broad audience. Yet his male dan identity is not universally recognized by traditional Peking Opera practitioners, as he lacked systematic training from childhood and did not adhere to specific schools. Instead, he blended popular music and dance, simplifying many Peking Opera elements. Even Mei Baojiu, a descendant of Mei Lanfang, publicly denied that Li represented the male dan tradition. Nonetheless, most of Li Yugang's performance elements derive from Peking Opera, making his work a modernized evolution of the male dan art form.

Prince's performances often included high heels, lace outfits, and other elements reflecting a fluid gender image. He frequently performed shirtless, revealing a lean yet muscular physique. Prince openly stated his preference for high heels, attributing it to "women liking them", which served not only as a fashion statement but also as a deliberate refusal to conform to gendered clothing norms [4]. His androgynous persona drew ridicule from contemporaries, who mocked him as "playing new wave rock in heels". His alternative album *Lovesexy* featured a cover depicting him nude—a lithe, petite, androgynous figure surrounded by white and lavender flowers—reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. His pose is feminine, with one

leg lifted to accentuate its form while concealing others; one arm stretches back, the other rests just below his nipple. Masculine traits are also visible: chest and abdominal hair and a faint pencil mustache [5].

The fundamental difference in performance essence lies in approach. Li Yugang gained early attention through the contrast between his "seductive female" stage persona and his masculine offstage self—creating dramatic tension by juxtaposing performance and biological gender. In contrast, Prince consistently presented an androgynous image aligned with his self-identified gender expression.

2.2. Social acceptance and stigmatization

2.2.1. Social acceptance

Li Yugang's acceptance by the public is largely attributable to the aesthetic visual effects of his performances and the cultural legitimacy underpinning the traditional male dan art form. As Wang Dewei observes, Li's performances "benefit from the physiological constitution of men; male performers can, through physical training, develop a unique vocal technique suited to the thin and narrow vocal cords required for female roles. Consequently, their voices exhibit a diversity and tension unattainable by women" [1]. This ability to sing across vocal registers is itself a rare skill, endowing his performances with an impact that transcends biological gender. At the same time, the carefully cultivated "graceful" gestures and elegant posture he displays on stage reflect exceptional bodily training and mimetic skill, creating an ambiguous allure that allows audiences to experience a tension between masculine bodies and feminine qualities. In contemporary patriarchal Chinese society, this type of imaginative engagement with a cross-gender performer constitutes a novel, vibrant experience—sometimes even regarded as "fashionable". Moreover, Li Yugang rose to prominence through *Avenue of Stars*, a program designed for grassroots artists. Audiences were naturally drawn to his perseverance and extraordinary journey, generating further attention and support. Subsequently, Li was promoted as a performer reviving the traditional male dan art, a distinctive cultural identity that brought additional recognition. His performances in Sydney and on world tours positioned him as a cultural ambassador for Chinese art. Recognizing his potential to promote traditional culture, the state officially endorsed him as a "National First-Class Actor". With official recognition and state media promotion, public acceptance of this cross-gender performance style gradually increased.

Prince's acceptance, in contrast, was shaped by his musical talent and social developments. As a male singer with a four-octave vocal range, he could seamlessly switch between rich, resonant male chest tones and piercing falsetto, an ability that defied traditional gendered expectations of vocal performance, enabling him to express both masculine and feminine qualities through sound. On stage, Prince combined strength and grace, delivering explosive, power-driven male movements alongside delicate, fluid gestures that conveyed a feminine sensibility—an amalgam of traits that could hardly be categorized within conventional gender norms. His music fused rock, funk, soul, and pop, while his performances incorporated striking visual elements such as the color purple, high heels, and lace, solidifying his position in the music industry. The broader social environment also contributed to his acceptance. The growing influence of LGBTQ communities prompted a critical reassessment of "white-centric" perspectives and binary gender norms, making challenges to traditional gender increasingly visible and socially supported. Prince's fashion-forward and visually impactful stage personas further drew admiration from audiences, enhancing appreciation of his unique artistic appeal.

In sum, the fame of both Li Yugang and Prince is partly rooted in the visual distinctiveness of their cross-gender performances, their innate capacity to express gender through performance, and the cultural context of their times.

Li Yugang's ability to sing in a female vocal range under male physiological conditions—a product of rigorous training—is itself a rare skill that imparts a transcendent impact. Coupled with his meticulously crafted "graceful" posture and elegant movements, his stage presence creates an ambiguous interplay between male physicality and feminine aesthetic, eliciting nuanced imaginative engagement from the audience.

2.2.2. Stigmatization and bullying

Although Li Yugang has gained recognition from many people, attitudes toward gender diversity in contemporary China remain relatively conservative.

On social media, he is frequently insulted with terms such as "effeminate", "eccentric", and "perverted". Historically, Chinese culture has placed great emphasis on the aesthetic appeal of men performing as women; it is commonly expected that male performers portraying female roles should be "true beauties". However, Li Yugang's appearance in female roles was not conventionally beautiful, leading to frequent attacks on his looks by audiences and even ridicule from other nandan performers, labeling him as "disfiguring femininity". He recounted: "One night in June 2001, after a performance, I returned backstage to change costumes and encountered a troupe resting there. One of them glanced at me and said disdainfully, 'What's the big deal? He's just a bit effeminate.' Another chimed in, 'Next time, I'll take some female hormones; maybe I can sing better than him!' They went back and forth, making indirect comments, and every word felt like a needle stabbing my heart" [2]. On stage, Li Yugang was also subject to direct criticism and even physical attacks. Early in his career, when his performance was not fully

refined and conveyed a "neither masculine nor feminine" impression, some audience members threw bottles at him. Later, when performing *Good Days* on a larger stage, he recalled: "I was hit with a tomato on my face after one line, and then another tomato was thrown at me on the next line" [6]. These experiences led him to temporarily abandon performing and switch to running a domestic services company.

More alarmingly, this bullying extended beyond social media and stage performances into his private life. When his parents learned about his cross-gender performances, his mother asked: "Xiaogang, what exactly are you performing outside? People in our hometown in Xi'an saw your performance and said you're neither man nor woman! You've been a good child all your life—don't bring shame to us! Since ancient times, women dressing as men were called 'heroic women,' but a man dressing as a woman? Doesn't that make people look down on you [2]?" His family's lack of understanding deepened his sense of isolation. Moreover, his family members themselves faced criticism; some even came to Li Yugang's parents' home to question their parenting. He stated that at one point he was afraid to go home or answer his parents' calls, fearing his mother would break down in tears over his "bringing shame to the family". Even in everyday life, Li Yugang endured considerable pressure. He often went shopping alone to buy cosmetics, needing to test products repeatedly at counters to ensure proper application. On one occasion, he overheard sales staff whispering, "Is he gay? Or is he sick?" Faced with such hostile speculation about his sexual orientation, he could only respond, "It's for my girlfriend." Malicious assumptions about his sexuality pervaded his daily life, with some even claiming that he had undergone gender reassignment surgery.

Similarly, Prince also faced media criticism very similar to that experienced by Li Yugang. He was labeled as "effeminate", a "girly man", and "weird". His peers in the music industry openly criticized him. During an interview with Oprah, Prince was deeply offended and subsequently gave fewer interviews. When asked, "What do you think people think of you?" he admitted, "I'm sure I've been quite strange over the past two years." When Oprah followed up, asking, "What do you want people to know about you?" he could only reply: "the music." Faced with more pointed questions about gender—"You often display both masculinity and femininity, so people assume you're gay. Does that bother your life?"—Prince bitterly smiled and responded, "whatever floats the boat" [7]. This indicates that he was acutely aware that society viewed him as "odd", but what he truly wanted to be recognized for was his identity and work as a musician, not his gender expression. Musician Rick James even publicly mocked him as a "mentally deranged young man", claiming, "He sings songs about oral sex and incest" [8]. Critics focused not on Prince's music or artistry itself, but on the content of his lyrics, construing him as "crazy".

In 1981, Prince experienced one of the most direct and hurtful instances of bullying at a live performance. Band member Matt Fink recalled in the book *I Will Die 4 U*: "We went on stage before the sun had set, around six or seven in the evening. Two minutes into the first song, the audience—hardcore hippies—looked at Prince and thought, 'What is this?' They began booing and flipping us off" [9]. Brown Mark, the band's bassist, remembered: "Then I noticed food flying through the air like dark clouds. Imagine 94,000 people throwing food at each other; it was the craziest thing I've ever seen. My shoulder was hit by a bag of fried chicken; then my guitar was struck by a large grapefruit, throwing the tuning off." Faced with such extreme hostility, the young Prince felt helpless and saddened. After performing the fourth song, *Uptown*, he abandoned the concert and left the venue in tears, flying alone back to Minnesota. This violent backlash reflected a segment of the audience whose traditional conception of "Black masculinity" had been profoundly disrupted by Prince's high heels, heavy makeup, and flamboyant, androgynous stage persona.

People also persistently speculated about Prince's sexuality. During the early stages of his career, the public often conflated his artistic image, gender expression, and sexual orientation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prince was widely assumed to be gay. In a 1983 interview with *Musician* magazine, he was asked:

Musician: Do you think people think that you're gay?

Prince: Well, there's something about me, I know, that makes people think that. It must stem from the fact that I spent a lot of time around women. Maybe they see things I don't.

Musician: People always speak about a feminine sensibility as if it's something negative in a man. But it's usually very attractive for most women. Like a sensitiveness.

Prince: I don't know. It's attractive for me. I mean, I would like to be a more loving person, and be able to deal with other people's problems a little bit better. Men are really closed and cold together, I think. They don't like to cry, in other words. And I think that's wrong, because that's not true [10].

Fundamentally, Prince himself did not accept the traditional expectations of masculinity in American society, which discouraged vulnerability, intimacy, and open self-expression. People assumed he was gay not based on any evidence of his private life, but because he frequently associated with women, appeared in public in heavy makeup, wore high heels, and donned flamboyant clothing. He was often labeled a "freak", "pervert", or "faggot". At the time, mainstream American society was far from ready to accept such nonconforming expressions of gender.

In conclusion, Li Yugang faced three dimensions of bullying: First, the historical emphasis in nandan art on aesthetic beauty and femininity, which subjected him to criticism when his female portrayal did not conform to traditional standards of "beauty". Second, social gender norms demanding masculine traits, which caused even slight feminine qualities to be labeled "perverse". Third, the tendency to conflate stage persona with personal life, linking cross-gender performance to morality, sexual orientation, and family upbringing. Prince experienced similar triple-dimensional bullying: First, his artistic persona challenged American

societal expectations of traditional masculinity; his "soft masculinity" was perceived as threatening, earning him labels like "effeminate" and "weird". Second, his lyrical focus on sexuality heightened public discomfort and resistance, linking him to "perversion". Third, media and public discourse conflated gender performance with sexual orientation, equating his artistic expression with his private life, which deeply affected him personally.

2.3. Analyzing the gender complexity of the two through gender performativity theory

2.3.1. Li Yugang

On stage, Li Yugang strives to emulate the appearance and demeanor of a beautiful woman. His "feminine temperament" is not innate; rather, it is cultivated through careful observation and repeated practice. For instance, when performing *The Death of Yu Ji*, he meticulously studied the facial bone movements of an assistant crying, learning how to cry beautifully and gracefully. He also taught himself makeup, hairstyling, and costume design [6]. This illustrates that what has traditionally been considered "innate" female temperament can, in fact, be entirely replicated through a series of standardized cross-dressing practices and imitation. Offstage, however, he typically appears in "ordinary male attire" for interviews [1], often shocking audiences. This strategy was noted early in his training. His first male dan teacher advised:

"Yugang, when you first auditioned, if you had moved around too much beforehand... I would never have accepted you if your voice and movements were overly feminine!" Li asked, "Why not? Wouldn't a male learning to act like a woman be closer to the truth?" The teacher replied, "The greater the contrast, the better the effect. When a woman is fresh and graceful, no man can match her. Likewise, when a man is alluring, no woman can imitate it. You have a truly masculine form; learning to act feminine creates a striking contrast" [11].

Although he became famous for this contrasting image, his early performances still displayed considerable "masculinity". For example, he would enter the stage dramatically, presenting himself in a healthy, sunlit image, singing a classic old song from the TV series *Shanghai Bund*. In doing so, he showcased courage and vigor, wearing a crisp white suit with the collar turned up, expressing masculinity without appearing rigid [11]. These choices indicate that, at his core, Li Yugang still identifies with the traditional image of a Chinese man rather than desiring to fully embody femininity.

In middle age, Li Yugang has cultivated a "delicate scholar" image on social media. He rarely posts videos as his female persona or participates in competitions in that guise. His photos frequently feature him wearing robes, posing amid traditional Chinese architecture. This "fragile scholar" image is strategically aligned with Chinese cultural concepts that integrate yin and yang elements, effectively transcending traditional male–female binaries [12]. By framing his delicate features as a "scholarly refinement", he reinterprets his lingering feminine traits as markers of talent and cultural sophistication, gaining societal legitimacy. As noted, "The scholar's fragility was not considered a weakness; rather, it was a sign of his cultivated sensibility and a marker of cultural distinction" [12]. This delicate, refined image aligns with his identity as a cultural disseminator, transforming perceived vulnerability into elegance and artistry, matching audience expectations for a jingju artist. Consequently, his cross-gender performance no longer depends on feminine physical appearance; it is reconceived as a "legitimate male identity". This allows him to display gender-fluid performance while avoiding overt challenges to mainstream masculinity.

In his private life, Li Yugang still largely adheres to traditional male identity. For instance, when testing lipstick at counters, he applies it to his hands and lips but claims it is "for his girlfriend", concealing his cross-gender persona. As his income increased, he expected his girlfriend to be a full-time housewife to assert his male role in the household. When she refused, he impulsively threw her saxophone out of the door, causing a serious rupture in their relationship; she was a leading saxophonist in China [11].

From the perspective of gender performativity theory, Li Yugang's male dan performances demonstrate that gender can be enacted. His cross-gender performance is not an expression of his inner gender identity but a means of livelihood. He initially chose male dan roles to earn more—raising his nightly wage from 40 yuan to 80 yuan plus tips. He observed assistants crying to mimic the "aesthetic skeletal expressions of sadness", self-taught makeup to achieve a "beautiful visage", and designed costumes to create a "beautiful form". Even his parents could not recognize him as their son, mistaking him for a woman. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory that gender is the effect of repeated performative acts; there is no inherent "core gender" prior to performance.

However, Li Yugang's practice partially diverges from gender performativity theory.

First, he often appears offstage in ordinary male clothing, signaling to the audience that his stage persona is not his "true self". Offstage, he embodies a strongly masculine identity. While this confirms that gender can be performed, it simultaneously reinforces a gender binary: onstage he is either an "exquisitely beautiful woman" or a "handsome, masculine man". His girlfriend noted that on stage she sees a beautiful woman, offstage a male partner; she mentally separates the two. This contradicts the notion of inherently blurred gender boundaries.

Second, his transition from the vigorous "Xu Wenqiang" image in early career to the middle-aged "delicate scholar" persona may reflect both a personal character evolution and a shrewd cultural strategy. The feminine qualities that once made him a target of bullying were skillfully merged with socially valued masculine traits, producing the historically esteemed "scholarly elegance"

and "artistic refinement". This shift reduces the pressures and social risks previously associated with cross-gender performance, while leveraging the legitimacy of "cultural inheritance". He is no longer perceived as a "feminized man" but as a "cultural elite" and "custodian of tradition", thereby minimizing direct conflict with mainstream masculinity. This approach differs from the political context of gender performativity theory, which often challenges male-dominated social structures. Li Yugang's performances, by contrast, are embedded within traditional Chinese culture, depoliticized, and socially sanctioned [1].

Ultimately, this divergence is partly due to societal pressures regarding gender in China. Situations such as purchasing cosmetics in public reinforce expectations of "masculine behavior", influencing his later strategic cultivation of the "delicate scholar" persona as a form of social legitimation.

2.3.2. Prince

From the perspective of stage performance, Prince favored wearing flamboyant clothing, especially purple outfits, and he also enjoyed makeup and high heels. He created the female persona "Camille" to provide comfort when he was mocked for his small stature [13]. Musically, in his album *Controversy*, he posed the questions "Am I black or white? Am I straight or gay?" but deliberately refused to answer them, intentionally blurring his identity. While displaying feminine traits, he also avoided being labeled "gay", a term with strong social connotations.

In media interviews, his public persona differed somewhat. In an Oprah interview, when asked if he truly enjoyed a "normal, everyday" life, he described himself as private and "clean in normal day", acknowledging that he had appeared "quite strange" to outsiders over the past two years, but he wanted people to know only the music [7]. These statements both rejected rigid gender labels and redirected attention to his artistry, while leaving some ambiguity for interpretation. Prince's love for high heels was well known; he reportedly favored platform boots and Cuban-heeled shoes because "women like them". Thus, his choice of heels was partly influenced by external factors such as female approval, rather than a full personal identification. In a Chris Rock interview, when asked, "The androgynous thing, was that an act, or were you searching for your sexual identity?" he replied: "I don't suppose I was searching, really ... I think I was just being who I was ... and being the true Gemini that I am. And there's, um, there's many sides in that as well ... And there was a little acting going on, too." He admitted that while being himself, there was a certain degree of performance in his gender presentation.

In his private life, he adhered to a vegetarian diet and "clean" routines [14], which clashed with traditional American ideals of masculinity, where meat consumption is often associated with strength. Vegetarians were perceived as lacking masculine power. In the Oprah interview, she asked how people addressed him in his personal life. His mother-in-law Nelly Garcia called him "son-in-law", and his bassist Hayes called him "bro", mostly masculine terms. A female friend remarked that he seemed very masculine when around her: "he is really a man." He married a woman and had children [7]. This shows that, in private life, he did not reject traditional masculinity; in fact, his masculine traits were more prominent compared to his androgynous stage persona.

However, like Li Yugang, he experienced shifts in middle age. His attitude toward homosexuality evolved over time: in a 1985 interview, he stated, "I don't dislike homosexuals, but I think it's wrong", while in 1998 he told *The Advocate* that he "didn't see anything wrong with homosexuals; they seemed fine" [15]. This flip-flopping, combined with his 2000s conversion to Jehovah's Witnesses, led to a 2008 *New Yorker* interview in which he commented: "God came to earth and saw people sticking it wherever and doing it with whatever", suggesting opposition to sexual freedom and homosexual behavior. He was publicly labeled as "anti-gay", angering LGBTQ fans who had previously admired his gender-bending performances.

Prince's political inclinations were also complex. Though his music often resonated with LGBTQ audiences, he once donated \$2,000 in 1990 to Minnesota Republican Senator Rudy Boschwitz for reelection [16], and he publicly supported religion without endorsing any political party.

Prince largely exemplified gender performativity theory. He skillfully employed clothing and styling associated with femininity—high heels, lace, and more—making his feminine stage presence obvious. He created the Camille persona and refused to answer questions about being straight or gay on albums, adding an air of ambiguity that enhanced the subversive nature of his performances. His gender was fluid rather than innate; his appearance and behavior could be viewed as performative. The ambiguity made it difficult to definitively categorize him as male or female, proving that his identity relied heavily on performance, consistent with gender performativity theory. He openly admitted that part of his stage gender expression was performative.

Moreover, in middle age, his joining the Jehovah's Witnesses brought a stance against homosexuality, later contradicted by statements of support. This oscillation reflects a conflict between religiously influenced gender identity and his performative gender identity. He appeared publicly as androgynous less frequently, showing that social factors like religion significantly shaped his views and expression of masculinity. As a result, some of Prince's innate feminine traits were suppressed, molded, and expressed through traditional masculinity.

Both Prince and Li Yugang, therefore, rejected conventional notions of gender to varying degrees.

2.4. Current social acceptance and future possibilities

In contemporary society, the level of acceptance for transgender or gender-fluid performers has indeed increased significantly compared to the 1980s and 1990s, but it remains limited. In Western societies, drag or cross-gender performances have gradually entered mainstream culture. Such performances are no longer seen as the "strange behaviors" of marginalized groups, but are increasingly recognized as respected forms of art and entertainment, and sometimes even as symbols of identity or political stance. Nevertheless, even in the West, gender-fluid performers still face harassment, verbal abuse, and stigmatization from conservative groups. This type of bullying can cause severe harm to performers and may indirectly influence their personal transformations or shifts in public stance. Therefore, while the West has not fully embraced gender-fluid performers, their influence continues to expand.

By contrast, the acceptance patterns in Eastern societies are more complex. Chinese nandan (male performers of female roles in Peking opera) carry longstanding cultural legitimacy. Li Yugang leveraged this advantage, linking his performances imbued with "feminine" qualities to a nationally respected art form, thereby gaining recognition from mainstream society and even the state. His "scholarly gentleman" persona not only avoided being seen as a challenge to traditional masculine ideals but was instead regarded as a continuation of national culture. However, other performers not associated with traditional culture—for instance, the early career of Jin Xing—faced severe harassment and criticism. Historically, such performances were fully accepted prior to the Cultural Revolution. Thus, Li Yugang's relative acceptance in China stems from the convergence of national promotion of traditional culture, the threatened survival of nandan art, and his strategic positioning within these contexts. For other purely cross-gender performers, acceptance in China remains much lower than in Western societies.

Future enhancement of societal tolerance for gender-fluid performers could focus on three areas. First, education and cultural awareness: each country could contextualize and disseminate the historical and artistic value of gender performance to reduce public misunderstanding of "non-normative gender traits". For example, in China, this could be tied to nandan performance; in the West, it could emphasize the civil rights and political significance of transgender performances. Second, legal recognition and institutional support: in China, granting official status to nandan performers such as Li Yugang signals that they are state-certified, offering social legitimacy and structural protection. Third, fostering diverse narratives: both Prince's gender ambiguity and Li Yugang's "scholarly gentleman" persona demonstrate the pressures performers face in different contexts. Only within more diverse social environments can individuals maintain their gender expression without repeatedly having to prove they are "not abnormal".

3. Conclusion

Overall, contemporary society exhibits broader acceptance of gender-fluid performance than in the past, yet this acceptance still fluctuates under the influence of tradition, religion, politics, and cultural identification. Almost every transgender or gender-fluid performer continues to experience harassment from multiple social groups, enduring substantial psychological pressure. However, applying gender performativity theory alone to these performers provides an incomplete explanation. While Li Yugang's performances demonstrate that "feminine qualities" can be performed, the contrast between his on-stage and off-stage personas arguably reinforces traditional "gender binary" perceptions in the audience. Prince, while exhibiting gender ambiguity on stage and in private life, maintained conservative religious and political views that diverged from the left-leaning factions most supportive of gender diversity. Thus, individual cases cannot be fully generalized using this theory. Furthermore, enhancing social tolerance in the future requires coordinated efforts across education, institutional policy, and the diversification of social communities. Only through such multifaceted collaboration can transgender and gender-fluid performers be provided with broader spaces for survival, artistic expression, and recognition.

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