

Chinese Performing Arts

No. 8
December 2023



- Looking Back in Wonder: Sino-Foreign Dance Exchanges of the Past Over 100 Years
- The Emerging Aesthetic of Independent Dance
- The Legacy Unveiled: *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*
- Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Classic: A Temporal Journey of Oriental Romance
- Examining the Global Dissemination and Evolution of Chinese Xiqu: Confronting Challenges and Dilemmas in this Decade
- Introduction to Classical Plays (VIII)
- Chinese Theatre in the First Half of 2023



国际戏剧协会
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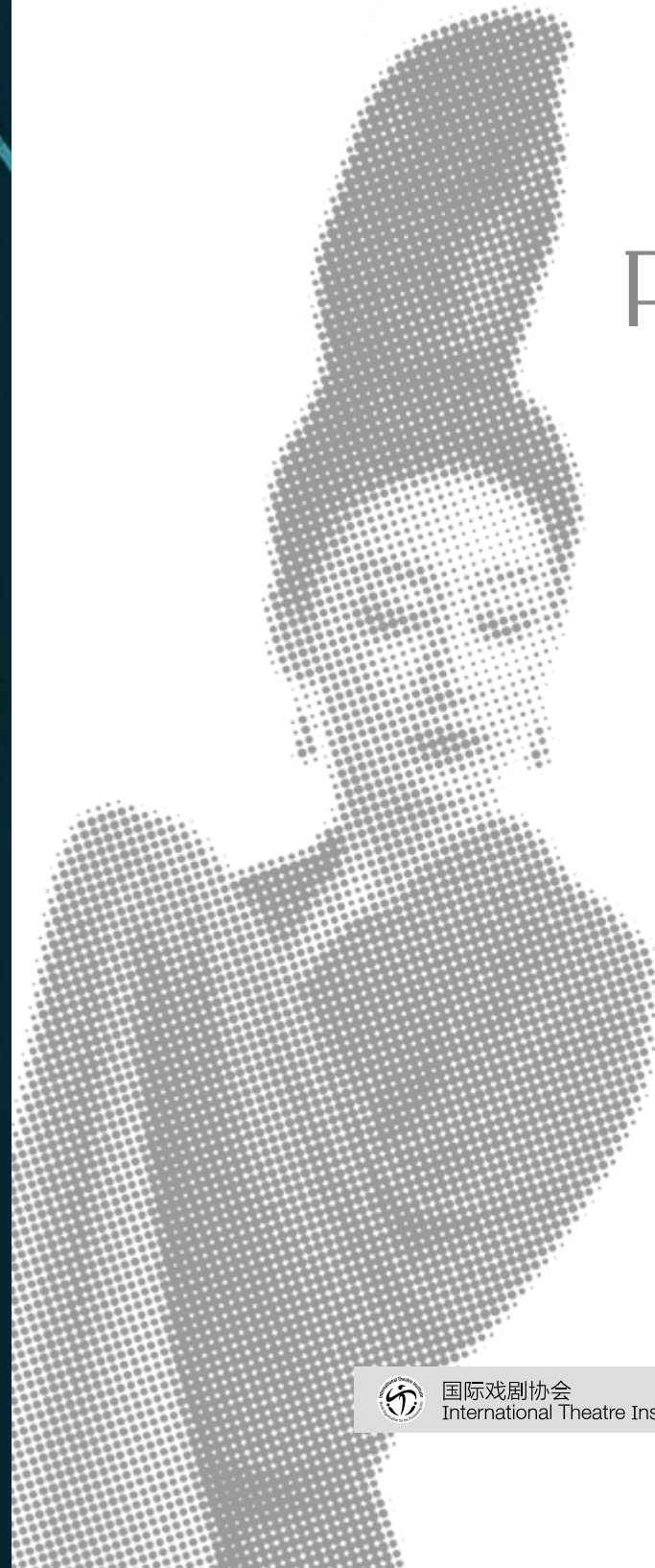
上海戏剧学院
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Looking Back in Wonder: Sino-Foreign Dance Exchanges of the Past Over 100 Years

Ou Jianping

ABSTRACT: Dance, as a non-verbal art and language that well combines both body and mind while with nothing to hide, has been maintaining a magic function to surpass all the obstacles caused by race, skin color, verbal language, politics, etc. since ancient times, which obviously makes this paper on the history of Sino-foreign dance exchanges more significant as both the exchanges themselves and their research will certainly help the mutual understanding between humans as dance is the simplest and straight forward way to communicate. Following the general timeline of these historical events in the Sino-foreign dance exchanges, this paper will start from Shanghai, "one of the three metropolitan cities in the world" at the beginning of the 20th Century, and focus ballet and modern dance, the two major dance forms on the international stage, for the past over 100 years, along with other dance forms and aspects, for the final purpose of drawing a spectacular panorama with so many historical personalities, dance companies and their representative works, as well as tremendous changes and unexpected progress, great varieties of dance concepts, consciousness, methods and techniques, plus a much bigger global dance community.

KEY WORDS: Dance; Sino-Foreign Exchanges; Shanghai; Ballet; Modern Dance

1. Why Should We Start the Research of Sino-Foreign Dance Exchanges from Shanghai?

Conduct a research of Sino-foreign dance exchange history, we must start from

Shanghai, because the turmoil in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century led to its economic downturn, and as a result, Harbin in the northeast China lost its geographical advantages, as well as the position of economic and cultural center in the Far East area, which in turn gave Shanghai an opportunity to replace it, with its geographical advantages such as convenient shipping, warm and moist climate, as well as an open-mindedness and the courage to be the first, etc. of the Shanghainese which greatly helped the establishment of a new center in the Sino-foreign dance exchanges.

Following the immigration wave caused by the World War I, Anna Pavlova (1881-1931), the world famous Russian ballerina, left the turbulent Russia in 1914 and took her own small-sized ballet company to do a global tour and in 1922 they danced in Shanghai, "one of the three metropolitan cities in the world" (together with Paris and Berlin) at the beginning of the 20th Century; besides, another Russian ballet dancer George Gancharov (1904-1954) opened a ballet school in Shanghai in 1927, with another Russian ballerina Vera Volkova (1904-1975) joining him two years later; what is more, the later on world renowned U.K. ballerina Margot Fonteyn (1919-1991) received her elementary training here, thus giving Shanghai a fairly striking place on the world map of ballet, and in turn this European aristocratic art has started to take root in China from here ever since then.¹



■ George Gancharov (the man with his right knee on the floor), Vera Volkova (the ballerina in another mans arms) and Sergei Toropov (the man standing straight and supporting her) are dancing together in Shanghai, 1930s.

¹ Ou Jianping. Shanghai Ballet in the History of Chinese and Foreign Dance Exchange (Part I & II). *Journal of Contemporary Research in Dance*, No. 1 2016 & No. 2, 2017.



■ The young Margot Fonteyn is wearing a skirt delicately tailored in Shanghai and dancing a solo in this metropolitan city in 1930s.

To write about the history of Sino-foreign dance exchanges, we must start from Shanghai, because from 1931 to 1934 and 1936, Mr. Wu Xiaobang (1906-1995), the "Father of Chinese Modern Dance," came back to China from his six year study in Tokyo for a succession of three times, and his first landing place is always nowhere but Shanghai; in addition, he opened his first dance school, respectively set up his two dance research institutes, and successively gave his two recitals, always in Shanghai; in another word, he always chose Shanghai to start his Sino-foreign dance exchange activities each time he came back to China.¹

2. Before Founding of the Peoples Republic of China

Greatly enlightened by both "Mr. Democracy" and "Mr. Science," China, as an ancient civilization, re-opened its door to the outside world at the beginning of 20th century. Miss Yu Rongling (1882-1973), the daughter of Yu Geng, the Chinese ambassador of the late Qing dynasty to France, became the only Chinese student of Isadora Duncan, the "Mother of Modern Dance" in 1901, thus being able to dance many Duncans dances, and she came back to China in 1903, and personally danced the Duncans *Greek Dance* for the Empress Dowager Cixi in the Chinese court in 1905.²

As the Chinese middle class rose up, Chinese womens leisure lifestyle became popular, and the idea of "Strengthening our Health to Save China," put forward by Mr. Kang Youwei (1858-1927), the reformist leader of early modern China, created a huge following, the first book on western social dances was published in Shanghai in 1907, many newspapers in the big Chinese cities like

¹ Wu Xiaobang. *My Career as A Dance Artist*. China Theater Publishing House, 1982, p.10-29.

² Liu Fengzhen. Yu Rongling, A Dance Artist in the Court of Qing dynasty. Dance Group (ed.) *Stories of the Chinese Dance Artists in the Ancient Time*. People's Music Publishing House, 1983, p.132-139.



■ *Buttefly Dance*
Yu Rongling is dancing Isadora Duncans representative piece, 1905



■ *White Jade*
Inspired by her visit to the Heavenly Temple in Beijing, Ruth St-Denis is dancing her self-choreographed solo, 1925

Shanghai, Beiping(old name of Beijing), Nanjing, began to introduce western dances, some foreign song and dance shows came to perform in Shanghai, and between 1925-26, Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) and Ted Shawn (1891-1972) the pioneer couple of U.S. modern dance, came to dance with their company in Shanghai (twice), Beiping, among other cities on their Far-East tour, and exchanged their respective expertise with Mr. Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), the Peking Opera master in Beiping.¹

While in Tokyo respectively studying ballet at Dance Research Institute of Takada Masao (1895-1929) and Modern Dance at the Dance Research Instituted of both Eguchi Takaya (1900-1977) and Miya Misako (1907-2009) for altogether six years, Mr. Wu Xiaobang came back to China and became a patriotic dance artist with his solo classics like "*March of the Volunteers*" (this heroic song was selected as our National anthem when the Peoples Republic of China was founded in 1949 and he danced this solo in a succession of five times at Anti-Japanese front in 1938), "*Ugly Face of A Traitor*" among others just to fight against the Japanese invaders and the Guomingdang authoritys

¹ Wang Kefen, Long Yinpei (ed.). *A History of Chinese Dance Development in Early-Modern, Modern & Contemporary Periods: 1840-1996*. People's Music Publishing House, 1999, p.44-45.



■ Ruth St.-Denis and Ted Shawn meet Mei Lanfang in Beijing, 1925



■ *March of the Volunteers*
A self-choreographed solo danced by Wu Xiaobang himself in a succession of five times at Anti-Japanese front, 1938

betrayal of China, and published the first serious dance book in China "*Introduction to the New Dance Art*" well combining Modern Dance principles and Chinese societal practice, which was printed four times within three years from 1950-1952 and consider the very small Chinese dance community during that particular time, as many as 30,000 copies are unimaginably magic! In short, Mr. Wu is the most important contributor to the Chinese dance art since 1930s up till now.¹

In 1934, Isadora Duncans most popular autobiography *My Life* received its first Chinese version translated by Yu Xijian published by the Commercial Press (Shanghai), and got three different versions soon as "a Bible to free college girl students minds" and countless versions since China has stepped into the "Reform & Opening-Up" period.²

1 Wu Xiaobang. *Introduction to The New Dance Art*. Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Joint Bookstore, 1950-1952; and People's Theater Publishing House, 1982.

2 Han Yi. Isadora Duncan's Autobiography *My Life*, and the Spreading of Its Chinese Translations. *Dance Art*, No.2, 1986, p.135-145.

In 1937, when the "War Against Japanese Invasion" broke out in China, foreign dancers abruptly stopped coming to China and almost all the Chinese artists began to do the themes against Japanese invaders all over mainland China; however, in Shanghai, the film circle kept producing a feature film "*New Years Coin*" by imitating the Hollywood musicals and the U.S. child prodigy Shirley Temple (1928-2014), thus presenting a Shanghai-born eight-year-old talent named Hu Rongrong (1929-2012), who had happened to study ballet with the Russian dancer Nicolai Sokolsky at age of five and became one of the Chinese ballet pioneers in her later years.¹

In 1939, Ms. Dai Ailian (1916-2006), a patriotic overseas Chinese dance artist arrived in mainland China via Hong Kong from the Jooss-Leeder Modern Dance School in Dartington, U.K., and joined the patriotic dance movement against Japanese invasion led by Wu Xiaobang and his wife Sheng Jie (1917-2017). Afterward, they jointly and independently choreographed and danced many powerful works, and greatly stimulated the patriotic spirit at the front and rear, thus receiving the honorary title together with Wu Xiaobang as "Mr. Wu and Ms. Dai."²

In 1941, Zhao Dexian joined the Ballet attached to Harbin Symphony Orchestra and danced in many ballet classics like *Swan Lake*, and opera classics such as *The Prince Igor*, etc. thus being honored as the "Prince of the Chinese ballet."³

In August of 1949, China Youth Delegation went abroad for the first time, and participated the "2nd World Festival of Peace and Friendship for Youth and Students" in Budapest, Hungary, and two of their five dances "*Waist Drum Dance*" and "*Grand Yangge Dance*" got Special Prizes, which is the first time for the Chinese dancers to get international awards.⁴

On October 1, the Peoples Republic of China was founded which marked a brand new period for the Sino-foreign dance exchanges.

1 Yang Jie. *Hu Rongrong: A Miracle on the Chinese Ballet Stage*. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 2013, p.24-30, 41-45.

2 Ou Jianping. *The Modern Dance: Theory & Practice*. Art and Culture Publishing House, 1994, p.259-260.

3 Wang Kefen, Liu Enbo, Xu Erchong, Feng Shuangbai (ed.). *A Grand Dictionary of Chinese Dance*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2010, p.681.

4 Feng Shuangbai, *A 100-Year History of Chinese Dance (1900-2000)*. Hunan Fine Art Publishing House, 2014, p.414.

3. After the Founding of the People's Republic of China

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, dance, like other art forms, has received great attention from central and difference leveled governments, subsequently, countless dance, drama and fine art schools and academies, music conservatories, professional song and dance ensembles, drama theaters, as well as community cultural centers were established everywhere all over mainland China, and dance was always an inseparable part of them all; meanwhile, all the Sino-foreign dance exchange activities were put into the cultural exchange programs between Chinese and foreign governments, and as a result, many artistic delegations were organized on a large scale for going abroad, and they never worried about their budgets.

The Year of 1950 witnessed the birth of New China's professional dance community when Central Academy of Drama was established first, an attached

dance company set up soon and they premiered the first Chinese dance drama named "*The Peace Dove*," with the scenario by the Japan-trained theater master and its first President Mr. Ouyang Yuqian (1889-1962), and the dances choreographed mainly by Ms. Dai Ailian who also danced the solo on pointe, for the purpose of answering the call by The World Peace Congress with its headquarters in Sweden. However, this dance drama met with very severe criticism as "Big legs are running all over the stage and the workers, peasants and soldiers couldn't bear to see them," because by that time most of the Chinese audience had not been used to seeing women dancing with their legs "bared."¹



■ *The Peace Dove*
A solo danced by Dai Ailian on pointe, from a full length dance drama of the same title, mainly choreographed by her, 1950.



■ *Points in Space*
A Modern Dance choreographed by Merce Cunningham with the concept of *I Ching* and the "Chance-Decided Choreographic Method," 1986

In 1951, this dram academy simultaneously organized the "Course for Training the Dance Movement Cadres" headed by Mr. Wu Xiaobang and "Choi Seunghuis Dance Research Course" for the well-known Korean dance artist (1911-1969), thus cultivating a large number of backbone talents in management, choreography and teaching for the Chinese dance development in future.¹

To many peoples surprise, in the same year of 1951 when the Sino-U.S. relationship had fallen to the bottom, and on the other side of the ocean, the U.S. modern dance artist Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) began to study and make a good use of "*I Ching*" (*The Book of Changes*), the very gem of Chinese traditional philosophy, and gradually invented the "Constant Change"-Based Aesthetics and "Chance-Decided Choreographic Method," thus training a large number of innovative choreographers for European and American dance world. Doubtlessly, this case has showed us that the communication of historical documents and the in-depth research without political prejudice shared the same importance in the history of Sino-foreign dance exchanges.²

1 Wang Kefen, Liu Enbo, Xu Erchong, Feng Shuangbai (ed.). *A Grand Dictionary of Chinese Dance*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2010, p.187.

1 Dong Xijiu, Long Yinpei, Lan Heng (ed.). *The Foundation Stone for New China's Dance: Part I & II*. Tianma Publishing House, 2008.
2 Ou Jianping. The I Ching's Profound Influence on Merce Cunnningham's Dance Aesthetics. Wang Wenzhang (ed). *The Sinology's World: A Collection of Papers on Sinology Studies*. Shenghuo-Dushu-Xinzhishi Joint Bookstore, 2019, p.633-652.

From 1952 to 1960, China enjoyed a honey-moon period with its Soviet "Big Brothers" and the Soviet government kept sending its best dance companies to tour China, each with several hundred members, such as the Red Flag Song & Dance Company of Soviet Army, National Folk Dance Company, Ballet of Moscow Music Theater Named after Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, Moscow Bolshoi Theater Ballet, and the breathtaking dance performances they presented all over China not only enabled Chinese people from state leaders to dancers and common audience to experience the Soviet folk dances artistically-staged by the talented master Igor Moiseyev (1906-2007), and the splendid appearances of the Soviet ballet dance artists well represented by the great ballerina Galina Ulanova (1910-1998), plus the infinite charm of the Western ballet classics such as *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *The Thundering Path*, *The Stone Flower*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, etc. but also exhibited the tremendous power of dance, as a non-verbal art and language, to vividly present a great country with economic strength, political unity and cultural prosperity.¹

Comparatively speaking, the most significant achievement during this honey-moon period could be cited as the establishment of Beijing Dance School, a first ever professional dance school in new China, suggested by Mr. Wu Xiaobang, and founded by the Cultural Ministry of China in 1954. Through the two counties cultural exchange program, the Soviet government respectively kept sending six ballet experts including Olga Irina, Valentina Lumyantseva, Tamara Leshevitch, Nikolai Sheleboolenikov, Victor Zaplin and Pyotr Gusev (1904-1987) in eight years from 1953-1960, to systematically teach the Chinese teachers and students Ballet Technique, Character Dance, Pas de Deux and Choreography, while restaging *Vain Precautions* (1956), *Swan Lake* (1958), *Le Corsaire* (1959) and *Giselle* (1960), and Miss Bai Shuxiang was honored as the "first white swan in China" although, it so happened that she became extraordinary owing to her hard-earned 32 fouettés as Black Swan in the same ballet, which was the strictest technical standard Mr. Gusev absolutely persisted in; in another word, if any company would like to stage *Swan Lake*, they must be able to meet this standard, and currently world-famous National Ballet of China was actually based on the cast of this first Chinese version of *Swan Lake*, which was first set up as the Experimental Ballet attached to the Beijing Dance School in 1959.

It is also during this particular period of time, the Soviet experts Zaplin and



■ Soviet ballet expert Olga Irina is giving a daily class, 1954



■ Soviet ballet expert Pyotr Gusev is rehearsing the *White Swan* solo for Bai Shxiang, 1958

¹ Ou Jianping. The Western Ballet Serves China Well for the Past 70 Years. *Arts Criticism*, Nov. 2019, p.7-21.

Gusev respectively directed their Chinese students to create two full-length Chinese themed dance dramas *The Magic Lotus Lantern* (1957) and *The Chinese Mermaid* (1959). As important bridges, several young interpreters played such a decisive role that could never be over-estimated, they are Zhu Liren (1936-2016), Ba Li, Yang Xiulan, Xian Jiping, Yang Yi, Miao Lin and others, and only Zhu stayed at the school all his life time, and made a great contribution in helping Beijing Dance School develop into an internationally famous dance educational institution and introducing other advanced European and American dance culture into China.¹

On August 24, 1956, Chairman Mao Zedong put forward the general principles guiding the Chinese arts creations as follows: "Make the past serve the present and foreign things serve China, and weed through the old to bring forth the new," which greatly encouraged the Chinese dance artists, and in the September of the same year, Ms. Sheng Jie took a Chinese dancers delegation to visit Soviet Union for more than sixty days while Mr. Guo Mingda (1915-2014) came back to China in the same year after eight years study of Modern Dance in the U.S., and all of whom having made great contributions to the Sino-foreign dance exchanges in their own ways in the following years.

In 1957, Marie Rambert (1888-1982), the Polish-British ballet director took her London-based Ballet Rambert to dance in China as the first top class Western ballet to visit this country, and therefore, they were warmly received by Premiere Zhou Enlai.



■ Premiere Zhou Enlai is warmly receiving Marie Rambert and all her company members, 1957

¹ Xu Dingzhong, Li Chunhu, Liu Xiuxiang, Wang Feiye. *A History of Chinese Ballet*. China Minzu University Press, 2016, p. 47-71, 79-89.



■ *The Red Detachment of Women*
A full-length Chinese ballet classic by the Central Opera and Ballet Theatre, 1964

By the end of the same year, suggested by Premiere Zhou, Beijing Dance School opened an Oriental Music & Dance Course by firstly inviting four experts from Indonesia, which led to the establishment in 1962 of the world famous Oriental Song & Dance Ensemble focusing the vocal and instrumental music and dance from the countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹

On March 18, 1960, Shanghai Dance School was founded, with the full support from Cultural Ministry of China, and Beijing Dance School as well, thus constructing the second important training base for the Chinese professional dancers. On June 25 of the same year, the Sino-Soviet relationship broke down, and the last two Soviet ballet expert couple Gusev and Lumyantseva left China for their home country, which forced the Chinese ballet professionals to move independently onto their own way. Fortunately, two young Chinese ballet choreographers Miss Jiang Zuhui (1934-) and Mr. Wang Xixian (1933-) came back from Soviet Union after systematic study of the choreographic concept, innovative consciousness, scientific method and collectivist sense of honor at National Theatre Institute named after Lunacharsky for five years, thus laying a more solid foundation for the Chinese ballet to be independent in future.

On September 21, 1964, Li Chengxiang, Jiang Zuhui and Wang Xixian joined forces in producing a full-length Chinese ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*

¹ Wang Kefen, Liu Enbo, Xu Erchong, Feng Shuangbai (ed.). *A Grand Dictionary of Chinese Dance*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2010, p. 746-747.



■ *The White-Haired Girl*
Another full-length Chinese ballet classic by Shanghai Dance School, 1965

by adapting an international award winning feature film of the same title on the Central Opera and Ballet Theatre. What is more, on June 13, 1965, Hu Rongrong, Fu Aidi, Cheng Daihui and Lin Yangyang also jointly choreographed another full-length Chinese ballet *The White Haired Girl*, based on the Chinese New Opera of the same title on Shanghai Dance School. And the two Chinese ballet classics were simultaneously named "The Masterpieces of Chinese Dance in the 20th Century" in the year of 1994.¹

According to the historic records, there were only a few dance exchanges happening during the Cultural Revolution from 1966-76, that is, a China Performing Arts Company repeatedly visited Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Guiana, North Korea and Sudan for a spell of three times.²

4. Since the New Period of "Reform & Opening-Up"

Since 1978 when China began to adopt the "Reform & Opening-Up Policy," the Sino-foreign dance exchange activities became normalized and much diversified, with all kinds of come-and-goes gradually increased via governmental and non-governmental channels, for example: Dai Ailian took the lead in participating the celebration of the 100th birthday of the great Hungarian dance scholar Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), respectively organized in UK and France in 1979; Germany-located Stuttgart Ballet came to dance *Onegin and Romeo and Juliet* in China, and left great influence on the new creations of



■ While touring Washington D.C., members of the first China Art Troupe was cordially received by President Jimmy Carter, 1978.



■ And the famous Chinese ballet choreographer Li Chengxiang is meeting the U.S. modern dance choreographer Martha Graham.

Chinese ballets in 1980; and what strikes me most is that the Sino-U.S. dance exchanges came into a period of intimate interaction during this time as the diplomatic relations between the two countries would be formally established on January 1, 1979, so both sides kept sending troupes and delegations to each other, such as the first ever China Art Troupe toured five big U.S. cities like New York, Washington D.C. from June to July of 1978, and they were not only cordially received by President Jimmy Carter but also arranged to watch the worlds top performances by New York City Ballet, and Martha Graham Dance Company, Merce Cunningham Dance Company, etc., whose techniques, creativities and aesthetics are totally different both from the Chinese cultural tradition or the Russian ballet system.

Furthermore, Ms. Chen Jinqing (1921-1991), the first Principle of Beijing Dance Academy, took the first Chinese delegation to visit the 1st US International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Mississippi; upon his first tour to China with a U.S. cultural delegation in the same year, Ben Stevenson (1937-), a world-famous & U.S.-based U.K. ballet teacher and choreographer, began to teach in China constantly for about twenty years owing to his first sight love with the Chinese dancers, and became the first "Honorary Professor" of Beijing Dance Academy; and Ms. Michelle Vosper (1954-), a young interpreter in the same delegation later joined the NYC-based Asian Cultural Council and became its Hong Kong representative, thus being able to help this author and many other Chinese dance and cultural professionals conduct their study tours around U.S. from mainland, as well as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan Regions; Charles Reinhart (1930-), the Director of American Dance Festival, took the first U.S. dance celebrities delegation to China in 1980 and was warmly welcomed by Mr. Wu

1 Zou Zhirui. *New China's Ballet History*. Tsinghua University Press, 2013, p.37, 41-49.

2 Wang Kefen, Liu Enbo, Xu Erchong, Feng Shuangbai (ed.). *A Grand Dictionary of Chinese Dance*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2010, p.751.



■ Wu Xiaobang (fourth from left in the first row) is warmly receiving Charles Reinhart (fifth from left in the same row) and his U.S. dance celebrities delegation in Beijing, 1980

Xiaobang, Chairman of Chinese National Dancers Association and Founding Director of Dance Research Institute under China National Academy of Arts (CNAA), and all the important Beijing-based dancer artists and scholars, who also attended their lecture filled up with the latest information on the U.S. ballet, modern dance and academic researches, at CNAA.

Other U.S. dance celebrities coming to China in this period included the Avant Gardé choreographer Alwin Nikolais (1912-1993), who gave a lecture in Beijing on his magically lit abstract dances, and emotionally met his Chinese student Guo Mingda after 25 years separation; and meticulously organized by Lanlan Wong (1951-), Genevieve Oswald (1923-2019), the founding curator of Dance Collection attached to New York Public Library, gave lectures in China on the U.S. modern dance and showed films of Martha Grahams masterpieces such as *Lamentation*, *Cave of the Heart*, *Appalachian Spring* while Ross Parks gave 12 days intensive class of Graham Technique to the most talented Chinese young dancers like Liu Min, Yang Hua, Hua Chao, Jiang Qi.

As China kept opening its door to the outside world, many foreign modern dance artists came to China as individuals, such as Marian Sarach, Alan Goode and Patricia Lent, Elisa Monte and David Brown from U.S., Margie Gillis from Canada, Birgit Åkesson from Sweden, Janet Randell from U.K., Rena Gluck, Rina Shoenfeld from Israel, Fuji Mieko from Japan, Iris Park from South Korea,

Astad Deboo from India, Don Askor and Janet Mottis from Australia, who enthusiastically showed Isadora Duncans "Free Dance," or heir own dances while teaching different modern dance techniques for free in most cases. At the same time, other established modern dance artists like Alvin Ailey, Trisha Brown, Ohad Naharin, Hong Sin-cha, Eiko and Koma, Paul Taylor, Lar Lubovitch, Jennifer Muller, Mark Morris, David Parsons, Benjamin Millepied from U.S., Pina Bausch, Sasha Waltz, Henrietta Horn, Anna Huber and Lin Yuan Shang, Dieter Baumann and Jutta Hell from Germany, Anna Wyman, Wenwei Wang from Canada, Richard Alston, Mathew Bourne, Wayne McGregor, Akram Khan from U.K., Angelin Preljocaj, Jean-Claud Gallotta, Francois Raffinot from France, Alejandro Morata from Spain, Tim Rushton from Denmark, Rami Beer, Jeannette Ordman from Israel, Manjusri Chaki-Sircar from India, Amagatsu Ushio from Japan, Yuk Wan-sun from South Korea, Graeme Murphy, Muriel Tankar from Australia, kept taking their well-known modern dance companies to tour China and greatly opened our eyes and minds to such a fact that there could be 100 ways to do the modern dance. Meanwhile, we have also learned to be patient and tolerant with some of their works that might not be pleasant to look at and that would possibly be one more progress weve made through these dance exchange activities.

Looking back in wonder at the Sino-foreign, and particularly the Sino-U.S. dance exchange history, we must give our heartfelt thanks to those Chinese-American dance artists such as Ruby Shang, Lanlan Wong, Chiang Ching,



■ *The Dancing Ink*
The Israeli-American choreographer Ohad Naharins masterpiece, inspired by Wang Fangyus Chinese calligraphy and performed by Naharins NYC-based modern dance company in Beijing, 1986



■ *The Isle*
The Korean-American choreographer Hong Sin-chas masterpiece performed by her NYC-located Laughing Stone Dance Theatre Company in Beijing and Tianjin, 1989

and Yen Lu Wong, as they took the lead in coming to China and teach Modern Dance when we just moved into this "Reform & Opening-Up" period; moreover, our profound gratitude should be given to the Asian Cultural Council (ACC) as they kept giving grants to over thirty Chinese dance professionals in different fields since 1984 such as Jiang Huaxuan, Men Wenyuan, Zhao Ming, Yang Meiqi, Zhang Ying, Ou Jianping, Jin Xing, Chen Weiya, Gao Chengming, Shen Wei, Sang Jijia, Xing Liang, Li Hanzhong, Wen Hui, Hou Ying, Shi Xuan, Zhou Niannian, Dai Jian, Wu Yandan, Huang Doudou, Fei Bo, Yu Xiao, Zhang Zhenxin, Huang Xin, so that they could study Modern Dance technique, choreography and criticism at American Dance Festival (ADF), watch all kinds of dance performances in NYC, and conduct an academic research into the history of American higher dance education starting from Wisconsin University at Madison 1917-1926, up till now in NYC...thus not only changing their personal lives by enabling them to do many creative works, but also greatly enriching the dance exchanges between our two countries.

By Comparison however, the most influential achievement out of these Sino-U.S. dance exchanges should be cited as the first Modern Dance Experimental Program at Guangdong Dance School (1987-1992), which purposely resulted in the establishment of the first internationalized modern dance company in China name Guangdong Modern Dance Company in 1992. The far-sighted project was originally proposed by Yang Meiqi, the Principle of this Guangdong provincial dance school while visiting the States and getting greatly inspired by the creativity of the U.S. modern dance she personally witnessed both at ADF and in NYC., and politically examined and officially approved step by step by Guangdong Provincial Cultural Bureau, financially supported by ACC, respectively headed by Mr. Richard Lanier and Mr. Ralph Samuelson, and finally realized by ADF, headed by Charles Reinhart who kept sending Sarah Stackhouse, Ruby Shang, Douglas Nielsen, Lucas Hoving, Linda Davies, David Hechoy, Chiang Ching, Stuart Hodes, Claudia Gitelman, Betty Jones and Fritz Lüdin, Jack Arno and Carol Park, altogether 13 master teachers with great dedication to teach in Guangdong. Naturally, Yang Meiqi was appointed as the companys founding director and Willy Tsao, its artistic director, who had supported the program and the company from the very beginning with his international experience as the founding director of his own company, the Hong Kong-based City Contemporary Dance Company since 1979, and his family money until 1998 when he moved to Beijing where he first worked as artistic director of Beijing Modern Dance Company in 1999 and independently founded his own company as Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company since 2005; and the best representatives of this first generation of Guangdong modern dancers include Qiao Yang, who got the first gold medal from the Fourth Paris



■ Part of the first group of ADF-trained dancers at Guangdong Dance School with Yang Meiqi (fourth from the second row), Charles Reinhart (fifth from the same row) and Ruby Shang (sixth in the same row), 1988



■ Shen Wei's representative work *Folding*, performed again in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2009

International Modern Dance Competition in 1990 and has kept dancing ever since then respectively in Guangzhou and Hong Kong for more than thirty years; Shen Wei, who has successfully combined both Chinese traditional culture and Western modern concept and got so many international awards, the most recent one being the Samuel H. Scripps/ American Dance Festival Lifetime Achievement Award given to him in 2022, and Zhao Liang, who is based in Beijing but has tour both at home and abroad with his innovative dance theater works.¹

The rise of Guangdong Modern Dance Company has succeeded leading to the gradual establishment, all at Beijing Dance Academy, of the Modern Dance Experimental Program in 1991, the two-year Diploma Program in Modern Dance 1993-94, and the four-year B.A. Major in Modern Dance since 1995, with the first generation faculty of three hard-core members: Zhang Shouhe, who had been sent to study modern dance at Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts, was appointed as its head; Wang Mei, who had been sent to study modern dance at Guangdong's program, as its backbone teacher; and this author, who had studied modern dance theory & criticism at ADF and in NYC twice in 1988 and 1993, as a guest teacher; and two talented dancers and choreographers graduating in 1995 are Gaoyan Jinzi and Wang Yuanyuan, the former respectively became the first group of dancers of Beijing Modern Dance Company, and its second Director after Jin Xing left; the latter was kept by Beijing Dance Academy as a teacher upon her graduation, then got trained at California Institute of the Arts, and finally founded the Beijing Contemporary Ballet Theatre; and by now both have become internationally well-known modern choreographers with many foreign commissions for their own or other companies.²

Totally unexpected to many people, Yang Meiqi started a second modern dance training program at Guangdong Asian TV Performing Arts Academy, with the support mainly from France this time, and elaborately trained another group of talented modern dancers such as Dai Jian, Duan Ni, Ma Kang, Chao Ke, Wu Yandan, of whom Dai respectively joining Shen Wei Dance Art and Trisha

1 Ou Jianping. From "Beasts" to "Flowers": Modern Dance in China. Ruth Solomon and John Solomon (ed.). *East Meets West in Dance: Voices in the Cross-Cultural Dialogue*. Harwood Academic Publishers, GmbH, 1995.

2 Ou Jianping. Dance Exchanges between China and U.S.A.: 100 Year Years' Retrospective, Present Situation & Suggestions for the Future. Jia Leilei (ed.). *A Binational Conversation on Bridging Cultures: The Second China-U.S. Cultural Forum Collection of the Theses*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2011, p.222-251.

Brown Dance Company, both in NYC; Duan becoming the backbone member of the internationally popular TAO Dance Theatre; Chao Ke directing the 9 Contemporary Dance Company in Beijing.¹

The steady growth of the Chinese economy and the constantly-enlarged need for the Chinese market have led to the increased number of performing arts agencies from originally two, CPAA (China Performing Arts Agency) directly under the Cultural Ministry of China, and Beijing Performing Arts Agency under Beijing municipal government, to some tens, only to take Beijing for example. Furthermore, as the opening of all this large scaled international platforms such as Shanghai Grand Theatre (1998), China Shanghai International Arts Festival (1999), "Meet in Beijing" Festival (2000), newly-built Tianqiao Theatre (2001), Beijing Poly Theatre (2003), The National Center for the Performing Arts (2008), Tianjin Grand Theatre(2012), foreign dance companies of all styles have come to China in a continuous stream; but the largest scale and the most expensive dance companies, plus the best box office, have always been the classical ballet companies because Chinese audience could immediately recognize their artistic and monetary values, and as a result, up till now, all the western ballet companies have toured China, particularly the six world tops as Paris Opera Ballet, Mariinsky Ballet, Moscow Bolshoi Ballet, New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and U.K.s Royal Ballet, plus Scala Ballet in Milan, Royal Danish Ballet, Royal Swedish Ballet, as well as Stuttgart Ballet, Hamburg Ballet in Germany, Bejart Ballet Lausanne, Netherland Dance Theatre, Rambert Dance Company, Cullberg Ballet, Compania Nacional de Danza, Ballet de Monte Carlo, Boris Eifman Ballet, etc. from all styles of Pre-Romantic to Romantic, Classical to New-Classical, Modern to Contemporary, in short, we have been extremely lucky to experience this full sense of balletic kaleidoscope, and in turn our cultural life and spiritual world have been raised to such a height that could never be dreamed of before the "Reform & Opening-Up" Period!

In the same period, audiences in many different countries got the opportunities to see the high quality performances of both Chinese themes and Western classics given by our National Ballet of China, Shanghai Ballet, Liaoning ballet, Tianjin Ballet, Guangzhou Ballet, Suzhou Ballet, Chongqing Ballet, among which *The Red Detachment of Women* by the National Ballet has danced in the splendid Paris Opera, the very birthplace of Western ballet while *The White Haired Girl* has also danced on many mainstream stages abroad, and

1 Ou Jianping. Chinese Dance, So Old and So New. *Chinese Cross Currents: Culture, Art and Society*, Vol.1, No.3, July-September 2004, p.50-69.

both have receive great recognitions from the well-known ballet critics and the common audience at home and abroad. In addition, in 2012, Prof. Zhang Ping, on behalf of Beijing Dance Academy, took the lead in establishing a Confucius Institute of Dancing at Goldsmith College of London University, and the Chinese teachers there have worked hard to promote the Chinese dance culture through their teaching and lecturing, etc.¹

5. Two Major Issues to be Explained or Answered

Although we have achieved a lot in the Sino-foreign dance exchanges, there have been two major issues to be explained or answered: Firstly, there has been a severe unfavorable balance between the Chinese and foreign dance imports and exports;² secondly, we have extremely worried about the strong attack of the Western culture to our Chinese culture.

About the first issue, that is something more practical, we could fully explain it with the well-known Marxist idea that "The economic base determines the superstructure". In another word, before our Chinese per capital GDP ranks among the top in the world, it will be an unrealistic illusion to change this unfavorable balance between the Chinese and foreign dance imports and exports! Because the Chinese traditional culture, of which weve been so proud of, is far from the contemporary Western audience, while our contemporary works are totally based on our contemporary life, the most significant event of which is that weve just solved the problem of absolute poverty, therefore, we do have so many bitter stories to tell, but the contemporary Western audiences dont want to pay for these; instead, they want to see something that could deeply empathize with them by providing them with both refined and popular tastes, plus optimistic humor so as to enrich their tedious job and release their intensive life; they need something that could inspire their creativity and eventually lead to their better life... but we simply couldnt provide them with such art works in a long period to come as weve been living such a different live, and particularly on such different economical levels.

1 Ou Jianping. The Western Ballet Serves China Well for the Past 70 Years. *Arts Criticism*, Nov. 2019, p.7-21.

2 Ou Jianping. Four Major Problems Demands Prompt Solution in Dance Exchanges between China and Foreign Countries. Jia Leilei (ed.). *A Binational Conversation on Bridging Cultures: The Third China-U.S. Cultural Forum Collection of the Theses*. Culture and Art Publishing House, 2013, p.348-349, 371-372.

About the second issue, that is something more conceptual, I prefer to quote my answers to both U.S. and Chinese press just to show my constant point of view on the so called attack of the Western culture to our Chinese culture, and to eventually summarize the panorama Ive drawn so far on the Sino-foreign dance exchanges for the past over 100 years:

Opening China to the Western Avant Gardé dance forms doesnt hurt socialism. To me, China is strong enough not to be swallow up by any outside influences.¹

This is what I said in one breath when interviewed by Ms. Nancy Cacioppo of the New York state-based *The Journal-News* during my first ACC granted U.S. study tour. I still remember that she was greatly surprised to hear what I said and closely asked me that At your young age of early thirties, how could you have made such a remark with so much proud of you country? I immediately replied, "I am indeed from the younger generation after the Cultural Revolution, but ever since then I got the best trilingual education on both undergraduate and graduate levels, and I love reading, translating, thinking and writing, always with a historical and comparative mind, and what I said is exactly what Ive strongly believed in!"



■ May everyone dance happily in this global village...

■ The full page interview with Ou Jianping, this author, in *The Journal-News*, New York, 1988

1 Nancy Cacioppo. Dancing His Way to Peace. *The Journal-News*, Rockland County, New York, September 30, 1988.

How time flies as thirty-four years have passed like a twinkling by now ... However, as the Chinese economy has been developing smoothly, the cultural confidence of the Chinese people continuously increased all this years, the belief of this author mentioned above has not only been stronger, but also more likely to be realized!

As for the ultimate meaning of all our dance exchanges within this global village, I'd like to use what I wrote on the screen to conclude the dance episode entitled "*The Rhythm of Life: Chinese Dance and Western Ballet*" from the CCTV series "How Civilizations Are Appreciating Each Other" as the keynote speaker mainly on the Western ballet: "When the different civilizations are appreciating each other, the world will be blessed with harmony and unity!" I believe, this sincere hope for the world peace could be shared by everyone in this turbulent world.

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The Emerging Aesthetic of Independent Dance

QING Qing

In this article, we delve into the world of "independent" dance, a term used to describe a unique dance community within China that has flourished outside of the established dance system. This exploration is rooted in the contemporary landscape of domestic dance. It's important to note that "independence" is not a rigidly defined concept or a fixed classification; rather, it represents a distinctive dance phenomenon within China that warrants thoughtful examination and contemplation. While freelance choreographers, dancers, and related professionals outside of China also emphasize the autonomy of their work, the practices of China's independent dance community stand out due to their remarkable commitment to experimentation and their acute awareness of pertinent issues. These practices have left a profound imprint on both dance education and creative processes within the established system, a influence that continues to gain strength. This prompts us to address several key questions in this article: What has led to the emergence of such a unique community? How do the dance ideologies and creations of this community differ from those of mainstream dance? And finally, how should we comprehend and evaluate this phenomenon within the ever-evolving context of modernity in China?

1. The Genesis of Independent Dance

In a prior publication, I expounded on my interpretation of the term "independent" from multiple perspectives. "Firstly, it denotes their non-affiliation with any state institutions and their lack of access to the benefits and support

provided by various domestic organizations. They operate entirely within the market, symbolizing economic self-sufficiency. Secondly, they harness the forces of globalization and the burgeoning trend of contemporary art, actively and consciously aligning themselves with the international stage. They embrace novel artistic concepts and forms that remain largely unperceived and unaccepted by the mainstream dance and theater communities. Within this fervent realm of ideas, they engage with the local environment and its issues with a profound spirit of inquiry, reflecting a form of independence in both artistic ideology and stance. In parallel with this artistic independence, they also attain individual artistic autonomy in the human sense, thereby establishing authentic personal subjectivity. Naturally, another dimension of independence pertains to their relationship with the mainstream dance sphere and its mechanisms. Their artistic practices seldom enter the purview of the mainstream dance world.¹ These four facets of meaning continue to epitomize the current essence of "independent" dance.

The term "independent dance" finds its direct roots closely intertwined with the emergence of independent image. On one hand, Wu Wenguang, a prominent figure in early independent documentaries, was also a representative figure in the realm of independent dance, collaborating with dancer Wen Hui. On the other hand, during the 1980s and 1990s, independent documentaries centered on everyday individuals, shedding light on the rollercoaster ride and inner struggles of ordinary people amidst societal changes and the influences of a market-driven economy. Both of these facets significantly contributed to the acknowledgment and adoption of the term "independent dance" by independent dance artists. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of an independent creative stance, firmly advocating that artistic creation should be guided by their own independent judgment and expression.

In 1994, Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang co-founded the Living Dance Studio, marking it as the pioneering independent dance studio in China. The name "Living Dance" is intimately intertwined with their profound concerns for the contemporary realities of life and a strong sense of humanism. In April 2005, they established the Grass Stage Workshop, commencing its official operations. The workshop adopted the motto "100% life, 0% art," emblazoned on self-designed T-shirts, as a testament to their artistic philosophy. This ethos

1 卿青. 行动的身体和主体——当代舞蹈的本土实践. 文化艺术出版社, 2022: 1-2. [Qing Qing. *The Embodied Actions and Subjects - Indigenous Practices of Contemporary Dance*[M]. Culture and Arts Publishing House, 2022: 1-2.]

centers around life itself or the individuals of the present day, embodying their commitment to directly confront the present, society, and defy established artistic conventions and norms, while forging their own creative standards. The workshop predominantly focuses on two core domains: dance creation within the Living Dance Studio and the delivery of lectures, education, and participation in arts festivals that revolve around dance and documentaries. Notably, the Grass Stage Workshop initiated a noteworthy initiative known as the Young Choreographers Program, which spanned six years. This program served as a fertile ground for nurturing and showcasing works, providing vital support for the development of a cohort of emerging young independent choreographers.

Certainly, the Grass Stage Workshop is not the exclusive genesis of the independent dance community. In fact, during the same period, new dance experiments sprouted in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. This development was partly attributed to the open environment within China and the burgeoning of contemporary visual arts. It was also closely tied to the overarching trend of modern dance in China. In Beijing, theater director Tian Gebing and dancer Wang Yanan embarked on their journey into contemporary dance during this era, culminating in the establishment of the Paper Tiger Studio. Meanwhile, figures like Zhang Xian and dancer Xiao Ke came together to form the Miao Art Group around 2005, actively participating in dance events in Shanghai, including the Niao Niao Art Festival and Concept Art Festival. Additionally, the Grass Stage Troupe, founded by writers Zhao Chuan and Wu Meng in Shanghai in 2005, found common ground with independent dance activities. Remarkably, they continue to be an influential and active group. Most of these grassroots group founders were born in the 1960s, and their formative years were marked by the cultural fervor and enlightenment of the 1980s. They bring profound insights and reflections on the destinies of individuals, ordinary people, and the societal transformations during China's transition period. Furthermore, their early exposure to avant-garde theater concepts and methodologies from abroad ignited their exploration of independent dance, solidifying their position as pivotal figures in the domestic independent dance scene.

Hence, it is imperative to initially delineate the relationship between independent dance and mainstream dance, as well as their ties to what these pioneers delineate as contemporary theater. This elucidation forms the basis for why this article interprets their explorations as independent dance and employs it as a fundamental theoretical premise for scrutinizing independent dance within China.

2. Independent Dance and Contemporary Theater

When we examine the creative work of independent dance artists, two distinct characteristics emerge that set them apart from mainstream dance in China. Firstly, there's a heightened focus on the body itself rather than solely on dance movements. Secondly, there's a redefined concept of theater. This shift often places independent dance artists at the intersection of contemporary dance and contemporary theater, with some even explicitly identifying themselves as contributors to contemporary theater. Moreover, these contemporary dance artists frequently collaborate with art galleries, and their experiments are warmly embraced within the visual arts community. They are often seen in the visual arts world as representing a form of contemporary dance that runs parallel to contemporary art, underscoring the strong connection between independent dance and experimental theater and visual arts.

Consequently, independent dance not only symbolizes intellectual independence but also occupies a pioneering role within the Chinese artistic landscape. It has introduced numerous innovative elements in terms of concepts and visual forms, effectively embodying a fresh aesthetic in the realms of dance and theater. These characteristics align with the analysis of contemporary theater outlined in Hans-Thies Lehmann's book, *Postdramatic Theatre*, which illustrates the contemporary resonance of Chinese contemporary dance within the global context of globalization. The Chinese translation of this book was published in 2010 and played a pivotal role in shaping the practices of domestic independent artists.

These diverse artists, each pushing the boundaries and experimenting within their respective fields of dance, theater, or contemporary art, have directed their endeavors toward a new form of theatricality or a novel theater aesthetics. Currently, this new aesthetics awaits further discussion and research within China.

This new dance ideology and practice represent a significant departure from the understanding of dance within the mainstream dance circles in China, although they are not entirely disconnected. For many years, the mainstream dance scene in China, both in education and creative endeavors, has predominantly revolved around Chinese classical dance, traditional folk and ethnic dances, and ballet, with a strong emphasis on technical proficiency and stylistic elements. While modern dance began to gain traction in China in the late 1980s, with pioneering groups like the Guangdong Experimental Modern Dance Company emerging in 1992 and the introduction of modern dance

programs at institutions such as the Guangdong Dance School in 1987 and Beijing Dance Academy in 1993, it did not substantially alter the institutional landscape within the mainstream dance community.

The development of independent dance emerged within the experimental spaces created by modern dance in China. For instance, Wen Hui, a graduate of the Beijing Dance Academy's choreography department, once took modern dance classes with the Jin Xing Dance Theatre and forged a lasting friendship with Jin Xing. Lian Guodong, on the other hand, embarked on his journey in modern dance from the grassroots level, whether it was with the Beijing Modern Dance Company, LDTX Modern Dance Company, or Jin Xing Modern Dance Company, gaining invaluable hands-on experience. Many younger independent dancers, including Gu Jianyi, Zheng Hesong, Pan Xiaonan, Wang Xuanqi, and others, received recognition and mentorship from Gao Yanjinzi, the artistic director of the Beijing Modern Dance Company, before venturing into the dance world. Similarly, Tao Ye, the artistic director of TAO Dance Theater, evolved into an independent choreographer during his years of study and performance with the Beijing Modern Dance Company. These are just a few examples, as many independent dancers have undergone training in modern dance. As they toured the world with dance companies, they broadened their horizons and encountered the openness and relatively liberal concepts of modern dance, effectively preparing them for their future creative endeavors.

There is also a conceptual issue that requires clarification, specifically, the differentiation between modern dance and contemporary dance. In the late 1980s, the introduction of "modern dance" courses in China already encompassed various postmodern dance experiments from abroad. In the Western context, modern dance typically refers to specific techniques and dance concepts developed in the 20th century, primarily between the 1920s and 1950s. These include Martha Graham's contraction-release technique and Doris Humphrey's fall and recovery technique, among others. These techniques had already been deconstructed by avant-garde artists like John Cage and dancer Merce Cunningham and were completely discarded in the radical experiments of postmodern dance choreographers at Judson Memorial Church. These postmodern choreographers triggered a major explosion in dance concepts and methods.

However, according to independent dancer Lian Guodong, modern dance companies in China primarily emphasize "body technique as the primary creative tendency in modern dance... Different modern dance companies tend to exhibit similar styles and qualities. In short, everyone is dancing and creating

in the same way."¹

In 1994, two years after the establishment of the Guangdong Modern Dance Company, Wen Hui was invited to the United States for further studies. Her focus was on two postmodern dance luminaries and interdisciplinary artists, namely Meredith Monk and another artist, Ralph Lemon. Monk was an unconventional figure associated with Judson Memorial Church, following the ideas of Antonin Artaud. She transformed the theater into a magical realm, assembling various stories and fables in a montage-like spatial manner, exploring the diverse possibilities of theatrical space. On the other hand, Ralph Lemon was a conceptual artist who blended multiple mediums, including dance, theater, and visual imagery, in his creative endeavors. The conceptual ideas regarding the body, contemporary dance, theater, and the corresponding training and creative methods of these two artists significantly broadened Wen Hui's horizons.

Upon her return to China, Wen Hui created her inaugural work, *100 Verbs*, which brought everyday actions and life to the stage. This work not only marked the inception of her unique artistic style but also laid the foundation for what she would later describe as "documentary theater" in her artistic journey. The establishment of the Living Dance Studio by Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang further fostered the incorporation of everyday bodily movements and actions, even involving ordinary individuals in performances. This approach bestowed independent dance with a distinctive aesthetic pursuit, setting it apart from contemporary dance in China and expanding the horizons of the younger generation.

3. The Current State and Future of Independent Dance in China

It is evident that the development of independent dance has undergone significant transformation driven by the evolving perspectives of independent dancers. This shift can be attributed to their departure from rigid choreographic notions that overemphasize technique and style within the domestic dance circles. Instead, they have been influenced by their participation in

contemporary dance festivals worldwide and their continuous interaction with the visual arts. Independent dance artists in China have made remarkable intellectual leaps, drawing from their newfound understanding of dance and theater, as well as their observations of art and the local environment. Consequently, they have progressively identified their unique entry points and developed their own methodologies.

In Wang Ge's assessment of Wen Hui's Living Dance Studio, he offers a compelling perspective, noting that "Wen Hui has spent nearly two decades reintroducing dance into the realm of everyday life, whether in public spaces or private spheres." He further elaborates, stating, "Wen Hui broadens the boundaries of dance, integrating it into life, society, politics, and history." This assessment is truly captivating. Wen Hui's creative works, spanning from her early pieces like *100 Verbs*, *Birth Report*, and *Dancing with Migrant Workers* to her recent productions such as *Listening to Third Grandmother's Story* and *Red*, consistently center around the everyday lives and memories of ordinary people. She demonstrates a willingness to cast individuals with no formal dance training as her performers, consciously exploring the unique qualities of their bodies. In her view, the body is not merely a technically trained dance body but a body shaped by culture and society. By presenting such bodies, behaviors, and images from daily life on the stage, she constructs her own theatrical poetics.

Younger directors like Pan Xiaonan also engage ordinary individuals as their actors, and in her case, even her performers are everyday people. Nevertheless, she possesses the ability to capture the poetic essence of dance within the routines of walking, running, and jumping in daily life. Her recent work, *Diary Helps Composition*, powerfully captures the inner radiance of ordinary individuals entwined in the daily tapestry of life.

Hou Ying, who initially studied modern dance in Guangdong and later pursued dance education in the United States, drew inspiration from the principles of contact improvisation developed by postmodern dancer Steve Paxton. She adopted an approach that involved opening up the body, allowing it to dynamically engage with the present moment, the self, others, and the environment. Her creations consistently exude a contemplative quality, unfolding slowly like a ritual.

In contrast, Tao Ye translates the concept of the circle into various concrete bodily movements and amplifies them through changes in the number of performers. Each of his works emphasizes specific body parts' movements or particular modes of motion. His "Numeric Series" creations, which strip away

1 连国栋. 中国现代舞及当代身体剧场现状的批判和反思. 北京舞蹈学院学报, 2013(2):9. [Lian Guodong, "Critique and Reflection on the Current State of Chinese Modern Dance and Contemporary Physical Theater," *Journal of Beijing Dance Academy*, 2013(2): 9.]

elements such as gender, narrative, and characters, immerse the audience in the raw energy within the dancers' bodies and the boundless possibilities of bodily motion. As a result, his dance productions attain an abstract and profound essence.

After initially aspiring to become a modern dancer, Li Ning, who had a background in sculpture, eventually changed course. He turned to the study of fine arts, incorporating techniques from life drawing and delving into extensive theoretical knowledge. Through this exploration, he uncovered a means of utilizing the body as both a material and a medium to tap into its expressive potential. In his theatrical works, Li Ning employs various collage techniques, juxtaposing the body with other materials to create unfamiliar human forms and unique relationships between individuals and objects. This approach is his response to the multiple forms of alienation prevalent in contemporary society.

In recent years, Li Ning, along with the Guangdong-based dance collective Er Gao, has produced dance pieces like *Disco-Teca*. These performances serve as sociological investigations on the stage, with settings in dance halls from the 1980s and a soundtrack predominantly featuring popular songs from that era. Dancers, adorned in various flamboyant costumes and executing exaggerated movements, unleash the full spectrum of their physical energy. The exuberance found within these dance halls stands in stark contrast to the everyday constraints of social norms. The stage thus forms a temporary social space, erasing distinctions of identity, class, and various other boundaries, making it a groundbreaking sociological exploration.

Independent dancer Lian Guodong's works consistently carry a reflective and critical undertone. He delves into the conditions of individuals within their real-life environments, aiming to construct his interpretation of human states through the body and other mediums in his works. His approach is analytical, utilizing various movements or behavioral segments to piece together the circumstances and images of the individuals he seeks to portray. For example, in *I Didn't Said Anything*, individuals are positioned in a backward arch, supporting their bodies with both arms and legs while wearing red boxing gloves on their feet.

Xiao Ke, renowned for her prowess in conceptual dance creation, frequently stages performances in public settings, referring to them as "events." These events provide participants with opportunities to reflect on their daily lives through their experiential involvement. These participatory activities also, to some extent, prompt individuals to recognize the social dimensions of dance. Furthermore, Xiao Ke has produced numerous works in various spaces,

including art galleries and theaters. One recent and noteworthy piece is *Xiao Ke*, a collaborative project with French conceptual choreographer Jérôme Bel, named after Xiao Ke herself. This work adopts the format of Jérôme Bel's portrait series, which some domestic audiences initially found challenging to embrace. In *Xiao Ke*, she employs language to narrate her dance experiences while simultaneously using dance to demonstrate each style she has mastered. Within the concise 70-minute performance, it elucidates an individual's relationship with their era and society, inviting a critical examination of the various conceptual underpinnings of dance.

The examples of these few independent dance artists mentioned above highlight how independent dance has introduced an unprecedented level of openness to the Chinese dance scene. It has redefined people's perceptions of dance, revealing its diverse facets and multifaceted explorations. Dance is no longer confined to being a mere showcase of technique and entertainment; it has evolved into a medium that can aid individuals in understanding themselves on a physical level and in constructing new subjectivities. Dance has the capacity to engage with the present moment, contemplate reality, and embody the public nature of art. This represents a novel form of dance that responds to contemporary life and experiences, signifying a fresh aesthetic in the realms of both dance and theater, an area that demands further exploration within China.

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Current Developments and Aesthetic Characteristics in the Creation of Chinese Dance Drama

JIANG Lin

ABSTRACT: In recent years, the creation of Chinese dance drama has shown significant developmental momentum, with numerous productions gaining recognition in both the market and academia. This thesis aims to delineate the foundational context of the formation and development of Chinese dance drama creation, analyze trends, and summarize its aesthetic characteristics.

KEY WORDS: Chinese dance drama creation; aesthetic characteristics; dance aesthetics

In 2019, dance drama claimed three out of the ten awards in the "Wenhua Award," the highest government honor for professional stage art sponsored by the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This made it the most awarded category across all theater genres. Notably, *The Eternal Wave* (2018), a dance drama produced by the Shanghai Dance Theatre, directed by Han Zhen and Zhou Liya, and written by Luo Huaizhen, stood out for its artistic excellence and commercial success. On January 23, 2022, the production celebrated its 400th performance, marking a significant milestone as the first dance drama in China to surpass 100 million RMB in box office revenue within three years.

Since the 1980s, over 700 dance dramas have been produced in China. However, quality is not solely determined by quantity, and truly remarkable productions, those considered "sensational," are relatively rare. As of the first half of 2022, *Confucius* (2013), a dance drama produced by the China National Opera & Dance Drama Theater, directed by Kong Dexin, and written by Liu



■ *The Eternal Wave* (2018)
Image source: Shanghai Dance Theatre

Chun, has been performed over 400 times, accumulating a box office revenue of over 100 million yuan. Another noteworthy production is *Crested Ibises* (2014), created by the Shanghai Dance Theatre, directed by Tong Ruirui, and written by Luo Huaizhen. This dance drama, recipient of the highest award for Chinese dance drama, the Lotus Award, has been performed over 300 times and achieved a box office net profit of 50 million yuan. While the success of "sensational" works is often measured by box office figures, it is also essential to consider their impact and relevance.

Dufu (2016), a dance drama produced by the Chongqing Song and Dance Ensemble, directed by Han Zhen and Zhou Liya, and written by Tang Dong, is another Lotus Award-winning production with substantial box office success and over 2.5 billion online views. Notably, the dance segment *Satire on Fair Ladies*, a key element of the performance, has garnered over 2.3 billion online views. *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* (2021), a collaboration between China Oriental Performing Arts Group and the Palace Museum, brings to life the renowned Chinese painting from the Song Dynasty, "A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains". The keyword "blue-green waist," representing a distinctive movement in the play, has become a trending topic on social media. Despite the less prosperous performance market in 2022 due to the epidemic, the production has been staged over 100 times.

Forming a majestic mountain takes time. The emergence of anything in the world undergoes a process of incubation and development. Why has Chinese dance drama experienced such rapid growth and produced numerous outstanding works? To answer this question, we must trace back to the origins of its creation and delve into its inception and evolution.



■ *Dufu* (2016)
Image source:Chongqing Song and Dance Ensemble

1. The Formation and Current State of Chinese Dance Drama Creation

1.1 The "Nationalization" Process of Imported Art

Looking back on the extensive history of music and dance in China, we can observe the inherent elements of dance drama. However, modern and contemporary Chinese audiences and creators still perceive it as an imported art. Before the twentieth century, China did not have its own dance drama productions. It wasn't until the 1930s that Aaron Arshalomov (1894-1965), a Russian Jew, made "the earliest attempt to establish Chinese dance drama"¹ Drawing from a script by American female writer Vanya Oakes, he composed *The Dream of Wei Lien*(1936), also known as *Incense Shadows*. This piece narrated the story of young men and women breaking the shackles of feudalism and freely falling in love. Three years later, Wu Xiaobang, a Chinese dancer who had returned from studying in Japan, created the symbolic three-act dance drama *Poppy Flowers* (1939). This work metaphorically "compared the poppy to Japanese imperialism, the two families (the Butcher and the Madman) to German and Italian fascists, and the two men and the serfs, symbolizing the

masters of the land, to the patriotic forces of anti-fascist aggression."¹

From the inception of Chinese dance drama, the creators aimed to nationalize it. While Arshalomov was not Chinese, his work began with the aspiration to develop Chinese national music. Despite *The Dream of Wei Lien* being created in a novel form, it incorporated Jingju costumes and utilized Jingju's swords and spears as props. The confrontation between the young man and the evil forces, safeguarding the heroine Huilian, drew entirely from Jingju martial arts. Wu Xiaobang's concept of "New Dance" traced its roots to the modern dance ideas from Europe that had permeated Japan. However, his creation of dance drama sought to amalgamate the expressive techniques of foreign modern dance with the realities of Chinese life. Inspired by Wu Xiaobang, Liang Lun committed himself to addressing the issue of national dance forms. For instance, in 1950, he created *Braving Wind and Waves to Liberate Hainan*, the first song and dance drama after the founding of the PRC, which incorporated Li dance² derived from folklore. Concurrently, *Peace Dove*, the first ballet after the founding of the PRC in the same year, synthesized traditions of Chinese folk dance. It transformed the aristocratic form of the "swan" into the "feathered dove," symbolizing the masses. However, both the structure and expression means of the ballet made more extensive use of Western techniques and methods.

It is undeniable that Chinese dance drama was significantly influenced by foreign countries, especially the Soviet Union, during its initial stages of creation. Since 1954, there has been an increasing number of Soviet troupes touring in China. Numerous Soviet dance theories have been translated into Chinese, and Soviet choreographers visited China to teach and rehearse classical ballet representative works such as *La Fille mal gardée* and *Swan Lake*. However, the process of nationalizing Chinese dance drama has never ceased. Choreographers aimed to establish a "classical ballet system" where Chinese classical dance and Western ballet could complement each other. While learning from Western ballet, they also drew inspiration from traditional Chinese Xiqu, resulting in the creation of national dance dramas like *Magic Lotus Lantern*, *Dagger Society*, and *Lady of the Sea*. These works can be roughly divided into two categories regarding structure: "one is Xiqu without singing or speaking, and the other is ballet without variation. The former

1 姜椿芳. 创立中国舞剧的最早尝试——忆阿甫夏洛穆夫的音乐创作活动 [J]. 舞蹈论丛, 1981(4): 46. [Jiang Chunfang. The Earliest Attempts to Create Chinese Dance Drama: A Recollection of Arshalomov's Music Creation Activities [J]. *Dance As Sciences*, 1981(4): 46.]

1 吴晓邦. 我的舞蹈艺术生涯 [M]. 中国戏剧出版社, 1980: 36. [Wu Xiaobang. *My Dancing Career* [M]. China Theatre Press, 1980: 36.]

2 Li dance: the traditional dance of the Li ethnic minority in China.[Translator's note]



■ *The White-Haired Girl* (1964)
Image source: Shanghai Ballet

features pantomime to compensate for the absence of language, and the latter is characterized by dance passages loosely related to the plot."¹

In the context of Chinese dance drama, there is a notable development line where troop dance groups follow the path of "New Dance" and "New Dance Drama," extracting the language of dance drama from real-life, especially themes related to the military. Representative works in this category include *Five Red Clouds*, *Butterfly Loves Flower*, *Five Heroes of Lang-ya Mountain*, and others. This period, catalyzed by political movements, saw the peak of the "nationalization" of Chinese dance drama in the 1960s. The ballet *The Red Detachment of Women* (1964) has become a symbol of revolution, nationalization, and the popularization of Chinese ballet.² Creators aimed to break the classical ballet pattern represented by *Swan Lake* and produce a dance drama portraying proletarian revolutionary fighters in the theme of proletarian revolutionary struggle. The primary goal of these works is "revolutionization" to depict the heroes of the proletariat, revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers as protagonists. This approach is also evident in the ballet *White-Haired Girl* (1964). While utilizing ballet techniques like Allegro, Pirouette, and Pointe, and upholding basic ballet norms of "Turn-out" and "Pull-

1 赵大明. 谈舞剧艺术观 [J]. 舞蹈, 1988(11): 4. [Zhao Daming. On the Artistic View of Dance Drama [J]. Dance, 1988(11): 4.]

2 于平. 中国当代舞剧发展史 [M]. 人民音乐出版社, 2004:80. [Yu Ping. History of the Development of Chinese Contemporary Dance Drama [M]. People's Music Publishing House, 2004:80.]

up," these works integrate postures, gestures, and facial expressions from Chinese folk dance and Xiqu, blending these "new" expressions with ballet. Even today, they remain vibrant in the Chinese performance market, with *The White-Haired Girl* having over 2,000 performances and *The Red Detachment of Women* over 4,000 performances.

In contrast to ballet, Chinese national dance drama did not see significant development until the late 1970s. The choreographer of the dance drama *Flowers and Rain on the Silk Road* (1979) revitalized dance imagery from the Dunhuang frescoes, employing the expression method known as "Dunhuang Dance," thereby advancing the nationalization of dance drama expression. Subsequently, dance dramas employing nationalized expression methods proliferated, including *Flight to the Moon* and *Princess Wencheng* in the 1970s, *Fengming Qishan*, *Dancing Girl of Tongque Platform*, *The Pearl Lake*, and *Senjidema* in the 1980s, *Tale of Chunxiang*, *Ashima*, and *Dunhuang - My Dreamland* in the 1990s, *Forbidden Fruit under the Great Wall*, *Goddess and the Dreamer*, and *Thousand Hand Bodhisattva* (Guan Yin) in the 21st century, as well as *Confucius*, *Dufu*, *Awakening Lion*, and *Cavalry*, among others.

Notably, since the 1980s, Chinese dance dramas have entered a stage of literary adaptation, as creators sought to infuse more "nationality" from literary classics.¹ Dance dramas like *New Year's Sacrifice*, *Thunderstorm*, *Home*, and *Lin Daiyu* were adapted from Chinese literary classics during this period, where the infusion of "nationality" became a requisite. From the mid-1990s to the early 21st century, the approach to adaptation gradually shifted. For instance, although *Raise the Red Lantern* and *He Returned On A Snowy Night* were both based on literary classics, they provided fresh perspectives and gradually deviated from the originals. The trend of literary adaptations has persisted, expanding beyond Chinese literature. Notably, the dance dramas *Railroad Guerillas* and *Jane Eyre*, both recipients of the Lotus Award in 2013, were adapted from Chinese and foreign classics, respectively.

1.2 "Contemporary" Development and the "Market-oriented" Trend

In broad terms, we categorize "Chinese dance drama" into three main genres: Chinese ballet, Chinese national dance drama, and Chinese contemporary dance drama. Concerning their dance expression methods, "Chinese ballet" is a novel form influenced by Western ballet, particularly Russian ballet,

1 冯双白. 新中国舞蹈史: 1949-2000[M]. 长沙: 湖南美术出版社, 2002:124. [Feng Shuangbai. The Dance History of the PRC: 1949-2000 [M]. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2002:124.]

assimilating Chinese stylistic elements. The Chinese national dance drama encompasses three primary categories: Chinese classical dance drama, Chinese folk dance drama, and Chinese minority dance drama. Within this spectrum, the expression methods of "Chinese classical dance drama" draw inspiration mainly from Jingju and Kunqu, traditional forms of Chinese Xiqu. Additionally, it incorporates elements from Dunhuang Dance and Han & Wei Dynasties' Dance, revived from Dunhuang frescoes and colored sculptures, as well as carved stone (brick) representations from the Han Dynasty in Nanyang.¹ Differing from Chinese ballet and Chinese national dance drama, the expression method employed in Chinese contemporary dance drama lacks a distinctive 'nationalized' style of China, placing it within the realm of dance dramas featuring a "non-typed expression method."

The emergence of the "contemporary" style and language in Chinese dance drama can be traced back to the 1980s. The impact of Western modern thought significantly influenced the traditionally secluded Chinese dance realm, introducing a new aesthetic principle to the expression method of dance. This principle advocated the integration of individual subject consciousness into the ontological consciousness of dance drama. The term "psychological structure" of dance drama gained popularity, and dance dramas with modern concepts gradually developed in China. Building on the foundations of realism, these productions incorporated creation techniques from Western modernism and postmodernism. For instance, the 1982 dance drama *Fan Yi* employed the technique of "stream of consciousness" without changing scenes, revealing the protagonist's inner world. Two decades later, the adaptation *Thunder and Rain* (2002) exhibited typical postmodern qualities. The technique of "stream of consciousness" reappeared in the 2018 dance drama *Deep in Memory*. Another example is *Death of Mingfeng* (1985), which used the psychological activities of characters to construct time and space, introducing the technique of "montage." This technique found further development in *The Eternal Wave* more than thirty years later, marking a breakthrough in the cross-media narrative of dance drama. Some scholars have noted that in the transition from traditional to contemporary dance drama, certain productions exhibit characteristics of both.² For instance, *Heroic Little Sisters on the Grassland*

1 于平. 中国当代舞剧创作综论 [M]. 中国文联出版社, 2018:3. [Yu Ping. A Comprehensive Overview of the Creation of Contemporary Chinese Dance Drama [M]. China Federation of Literary and Art Articles Publishing House, 2018:3.]

2 慕羽. 文艺思潮衍变下的中国当代舞剧 [J]. 民族艺术研究, 2022(2):115. [Mu Yu. Chinese Contemporary Dance Drama Under the Change of the Trend of Thought in Literature and Arts [J]. Ethnic Art Studies, 2022(2):115.]



■ *The Peony Pavilion* (2010)
Image source: National Ballet of China

(2017), *The Eternal Wave*, and *Tide of Era* (2021) incorporated rhythmic pantomime alongside abstract and symbolized physical expression methods. On the other hand, dance dramas like *The Peony Pavilion* (2010), *Legend of Beauty* (2012), and *White Snake-Revelations* (2021) represent contemporary explorations influenced by postmodern thoughts. These works aim to evoke more subjective and personal feelings in the audience while emphasizing the interaction between the works and the viewers.

To some extent, this shift in the creators' attitude towards their audiences also reflects another trend in Chinese dance drama production, namely, "an increasingly market-oriented approach." While the Chinese dance industry has historically encompassed a complete process of production, distribution, and reception, these processes were primarily driven by non-market considerations and often served political propaganda purposes. For a long time, the connection between the creation of dance drama and the marketing of performances was not strong. However, with the establishment of the market economy system, dance drama creators have placed greater importance on the relationship between their artistic production and marketing. Since the 1990s, dance groups within the Chinese state system underwent reforms, leading to the establishment of several new self-run dance companies. Collaborations between these dance companies and performance companies have become more frequent. For instance, in 1995, the Chinese Performing Arts Agency (CPAA) hosted a performance by the National Ballet of China, triggering a "performance craze" for the troupe. Moving into the 21st century, Zhao Ruheng, once the choreographer of the troupe, recognized "the importance of having a robust marketing department and cultural agent for the

troupe."¹ Another example is the Shanghai Urban Dance Company Ltd. Since its establishment in 2003, it has successfully produced and performed dance dramas like *Farewell to My Concubine* (2003), *Dream of the Red Chamber* (2004), and *Hua Mulan* (2005) in collaboration with major performing groups, receiving enthusiastic responses from the market.

In recent years, throughout the creation of dance dramas, even mainstream productions are placing increased emphasis on the "market-oriented" trend, aiming to draw more audiences into theaters. Their focus has shifted not only towards fostering empathy with the audience during the creative process but also towards recognizing the pivotal role of marketing teams and performance agencies. Simultaneously, major performance groups have come to acknowledge the marketing potential of online media, especially short video platforms. Elements such as the "blue-green waist" in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* and the "Lanfen Leg" in *The Eternal Wave* have gained widespread traction on various short video platforms, contributing to the continuous promotion and popularity of these two dance dramas.

2. Aesthetic Characteristics of Chinese Dance Drama Creation

2.1 Drama as the Plot and Dance as the Ontology

For the majority of Chinese dance drama creations, the drama plot plays an extremely significant role. In the early stages of creating large-scale Chinese dance dramas, the understanding of dance drama expression techniques typically began with "pantomime narration." Zhang Tuo, the scriptwriter of *Dagger Society*, once mentioned applying Stanislavski's theatrical method to dance drama by rehearsing the script in pantomime form initially.² This

1 马夫, 骆驼坦步, 终铸辉煌——与中国舞协副主席、中央芭蕾舞团团长赵汝蘅对话 [J]. 舞蹈, 2001(1): 23. [Ma Fu, Camel's Placid Walking Will Eventually Achieve Brilliance: A conversation with Zhao Ruheng, Vice President of the China Dancers Association and Head of the National Ballet of China [J]. Dance, 2001(1): 23.]

2 张拓. 《小刀会》创作的历史回顾——兼论民族舞剧的发展道路 [M]. // 文化部艺术局、中国艺术研究院舞蹈研究所编. 舞蹈舞剧创作经验文集. 人民音乐出版社, 1985: 75. [Zhang Tuo. Historical Review of the Creation of Dagger Society: Also On the Development of Chinese National Dance Drama. Dance and Drama Creation Experience Anthology[A]. Chinese Art Bureau of Ministry of Culture and Dance Research Institute of Chinese National Academy of Arts, ed. People's Music Publishing House, 1985: 75.]

creation method persisted until the late 1970s when the "symphonic narrative" or "polyphonic" approach was introduced to China. Shu Qiao, a representative figure among Chinese choreographers, was impressed by the collaboration between music and dance in Stuttgart Ballet's *Onegin*, prompting her to embark on active exploration. Shu Qiao departed from the old form of "pantomime + dance," advocating that the literary script should not be structured before choreography and that choreography should be elevated to the level of structure.¹ During this period, scholars referred to dance drama as "the most lyrical theatre genre," highlighting one of its main aesthetic characteristics as "lyricism with dramatic connotation."² By the late 1980s, Xiao Suhua, a student of Yury Nikolayevich Grigorovich (1927-), returned to China to promote the "symphonic choreography method," contributing to the shift of Chinese dance drama from a "drama-based dance structure" to a "music-based dance structure." Since then, the ontology of dance in dance drama has been repeatedly mentioned and emphasized.

The emphasis on the "ontology" of dance in dance dramas continues to have a lasting impact. In recent years, scholars in the field of Chinese dance drama argue that the creation of dance dramas should treat them as dance rather than drama. They suggest that the dramatic essence of dance dramas emerges from the transformation of plot and action into the development of emotional cores, conveyed through the emotional expression of dance movements.³ These conceptual changes are evident in numerous recent dance drama creation practices. For instance, *Dufu*, instead of following a traditional linear structure, adopts a "dance-based drama" approach, composed entirely of blocks of dance segments. Zhou Liya describes her use of the "image-seed" approach in *Dufu* as a "poetic generalization." Similarly, *The Eternal Wave* breaks away from a linear narrative rhythm, initiating with themes of "love" and "faith" and integrating characters and events into dance segments through scene transitions.

However, this does not imply that the creation of dance drama should

1 舒巧. 结构——结构上升为语言 [J]. 舞蹈艺术, 1984(8). [Shu Qiao. Structure: Lifting Structure to Language [J]. Dance Art, 1984(8).]

2 隆荫培. 从《高山下的花环》谈舞剧的审美特征 [J]. 舞蹈论丛, 1984(1): 11. [Long Yinpei. On the Aesthetic Characteristics of Dance Drama from Wreaths at the Foot of the Mountain [J]. Dance As Sciences, 1984(1): 11.]

3 张麟. 走向舞剧创作的本体自觉——舞剧《永不消逝的电波》创作方式的美学评析 [J]. 北京舞蹈学院学报, 2020(4): 22. [Zhang Lin. Towards the Ontological Consciousness of Dance Drama Creation: An Aesthetic Analysis of the Creation Mode of The Eternal Wave [J]. Journal of Beijing Dance Academy, 2020(4): 22.]

completely divorce itself from drama. As Luo Huaizhen, the scriptwriter of *The Eternal Wave*, pointed out, in the past, "dance drama did not pay enough attention to the script, the real mainstay of content, nor did it have enough support." He attributes the success of the play to "the literary nature of the script."¹ In essence, a dance drama needs genuine substance to transcend mere visual entertainment. This emphasis on depth is crucial, echoing the reason why dance art evolved into an independent art form since the 18th-century ballet d'action.

2.2 "Expressive" Choreography Aligned with Character

Chinese aesthete Li Zehou, in his work *On Artistic Types*, pointed out that "The aesthetic characteristic of dance art lies in the fact that it is not primarily a reproduction of the behavior of characters but an expression of their inner hearts: not to reproduce things but to express their personalities; not to imitate but to compare. It requires the use of highly refined and patterned dance language (expression method) to reflect reality by focusing on the expression of people's inner emotional changes."² The aesthetic characteristics of "expression personalities," "comparison," and "expression of people's inner emotional changes" that he emphasized in dance art are also evident in the creation of dance dramas.

After the changes in choreographic techniques and creative concepts in the 1990s, Chinese dance drama creators have generally realized that the expressive methods in dance dramas should serve the portrayal of characters' images and personalities, allowing them to convey their inner emotions. For instance, in 2000, Li Chengxiang, a choreographer and former head of the National Ballet of China, explicitly stated that choreographers should employ suitable dance expression methods aligned with the actions of characters, based on the emotional flow of their personalities. He emphasized that dance dramas should use the expressive means of music and dance to depict the multifaceted characteristics of roles in the plot's development.³ Wang Mei, a choreographer of modern dance, provided a more profound reflection. She believes that the creation of dance drama should no longer be centered on

plots or events but should fully explore "psychological activities," with a focus on "characterization" and "motivation" as the most crucial elements. It can be said that works like *Thunder and Rain*, *Swan Lake Record* (2006), and *Luoshen Fu* (2009) are all products of this aesthetic approach to dance drama.

The recent creation of Chinese dance drama continues to exhibit this aesthetic feature. For instance, in the dance drama *Goddess and the Dreamer* (2010), an exploration into the inner world of its protagonist, Cao Zhi, is depicted through a dance segment where a group of dancers lifts the beauty Zhen Mi aloft, expressing his inner torment and powerlessness over his fate. In the dance drama *Guan Gong* (2015), movements aligned with the characters' personalities are designed to make the image of Guan Gong closely resemble the historical prototype in both appearance and spirit. This approach highlights his humanity and divinity while externalizing his inner world through dynamic dance images. Another example is the contemporary dance drama *Deep in Memory* (2021), created from the choreographer's inner life experiences. The protagonist, Zhang Chunru, is no longer a portrayed historical image but a witness of contemporary society. Her grief and anger as she explores the truth of history are fully revealed through the dance movements.

Conclusions

The creation of Chinese dance dramas extends well beyond the mentioned works. In its nearly ninety years of development, it has traversed numerous transformative stages, yielding a diverse array of intricate styles and characteristics. Whether in the past or in the present, the aesthetic features articulated by numerous creators and dance dramas cannot be exhaustively delineated in this paper. They will persist on the stage for continued appreciation and evaluation.

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1 林霖. 爱与信仰是人文主义的亘古命题: 专访《永不消逝的电波》编剧罗怀臻 [J]. 上海艺术评论, 2019(8): 12. [Lin Lin. Love and faith are the Eternal Propositions of Humanism: An interview with Luo Huizhen, the Scriptwriter of *The Eternal Wave* [J]. *Shanghai Art Review*, 2019(8): 12.]

2 李泽厚. 美学论集 [M]. 上海文艺出版社, 1980: 101. [Li Zehou. *Essays on Aesthetics* [M]. Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1980: 101.]

3 李承祥. 舞剧的审美特征 [J]. 舞蹈, 2000(6): 18. [Li Chengxiang. The Aesthetic Characteristics of Dance Drama [J]. *Dance*, 2000(6): 18.]

The Legacy Unveiled: *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*

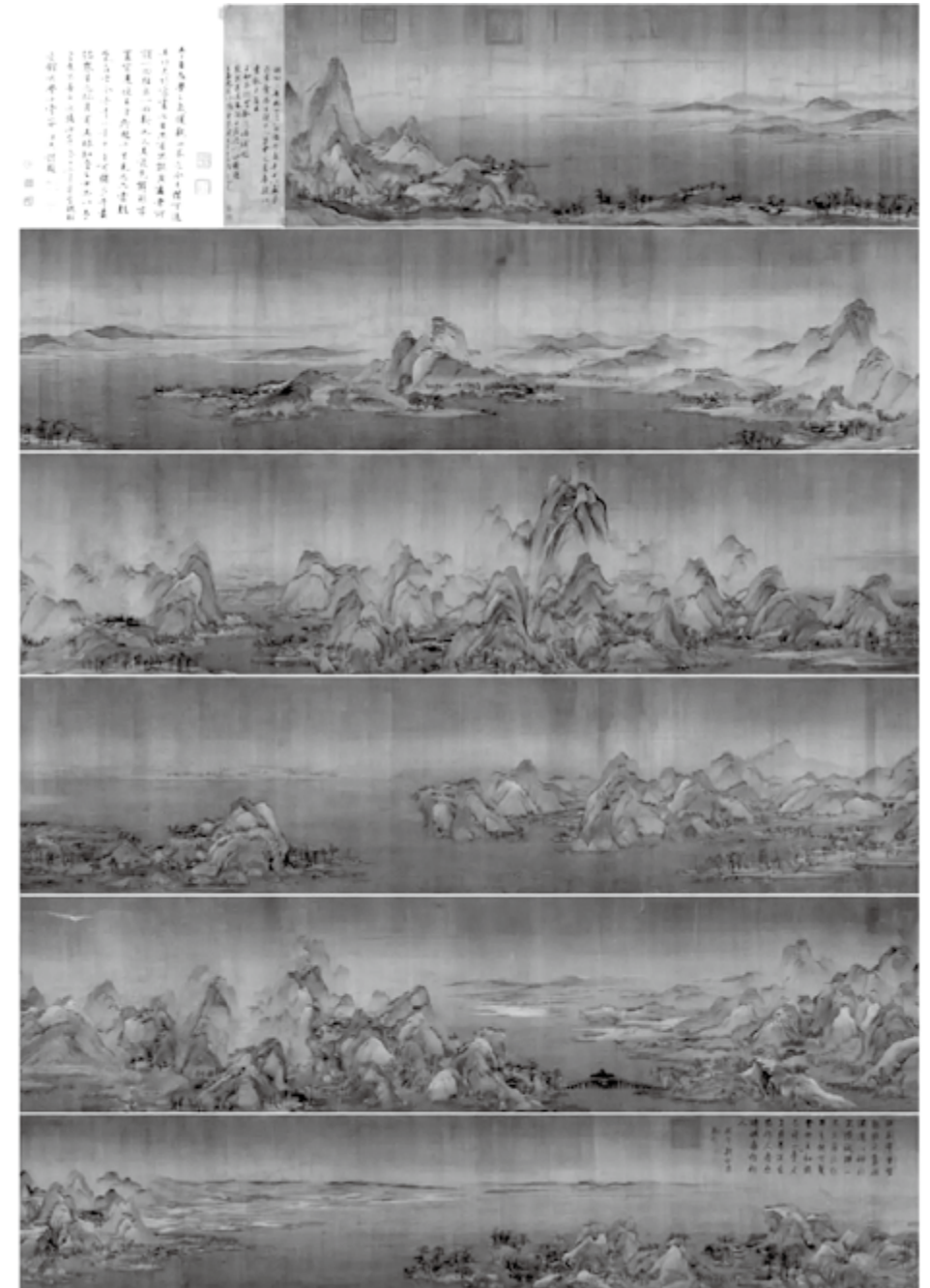
WU Zhi'an

In April 1113 AD, the renowned late Northern Song Dynasty artist Wang Ximeng finalized his silk masterpiece *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. Spanning 51.5 cm in height and 1191.5 cm in length, the scroll depicted vast waters, towering peaks, and scattered villages and pavilions nestled among the natural landscape. Embracing the traditional "blue and green landscape" style prevalent since the Sui and Tang dynasties, Wang utilized mineral pigments like stone blue and stone green. Over 900 years later, in contemporary times, this timeless artwork is reincarnated in a new form.

The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting, a poetic dance drama, weaves a narrative tapestry that transcends time and space, delving into both the past and present. It chronicles the tale of a modern-day researcher at the Palace Museum, known as the "Scroll Exhibitor," who delves deep into the study of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. Venturing into Wang Ximeng's inner sanctum, the protagonist bears witness to the artist's painstaking quest for the perfect "blue-green" imagery during the creative process.

On August 20, 2021, *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* made its grand debut at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, marking the commencement of its inaugural nationwide tour. Tickets for all tour cities were in high demand, a testament to the drama's widespread appeal. On New Year's Eve 2022, excerpts from the performance graced the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, earning accolades from millions of viewers and igniting a surge of online trends and shares.

Continuing the tradition of preserving and promoting traditional Chinese culture, *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* celebrates the timeless transmission of artistic masterpieces across generations,



■ *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*

igniting a phenomenon-level resurgence of Eastern aesthetic appreciation. Choreographers Han Zhen and Zhou Liya, both luminaries in the Chinese dance realm, transport audiences on emotional odysseys, seamlessly intertwining "dance within paintings" and visual spectacles of "painting within dances," all while showcasing their distinctive aesthetic prowess.

1. The Creative Journey of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*

Han Zhen and Zhou Liya's involvement with *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* can be traced back to as early as September 2017. During this time, the Palace Museum launched the special exhibition "A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains: Traditional Chinese Landscape Paintings," offering a rare opportunity for the public to admire these masterpieces. Zhou Liya and Han Zhen patiently waited in line for over two hours to explore the exhibition. Fast forward two years to February 2020, Zhou Liya and Han Zhen received a call from their superiors, tasking them with creating a dance drama inspired by traditional Chinese culture. Among the ten esteemed traditional Chinese paintings, *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* evoked memories of the profound impact the artwork had on them back in 2017.

Driven by their instincts as dance choreographers, Han and Zhou recognized the immense potential for dance within the intricate mountain ranges depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, a potential that may go unnoticed by the average viewer. Legend has it that the painting was crafted by Wang Ximeng, an 18-year-old apprentice of Emperor Huizong during the Song Dynasty. Shortly after completing the masterpiece, Wang Ximeng departed from this world, leaving little documentation about his life. The transmission of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* over 900 years, coupled with the limited information gleaned from inscriptions and seals, presented a formidable challenge.

Thus, throughout the year and eight months of the creative process for *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, scriptwriting took precedence for one year and three months. The creative team embarked on collective visits to the Palace Museum to seek inspiration, with the museum staff offering invaluable insights.

The staff provided specialized guidance for the creative team during their visit to the Palace Museum's Conservation and Restoration Center, where they observed museum personnel engaged in the restoration of cultural relics.

This afforded the creators insight into the interaction with artifacts and the approaches taken in conservation efforts. Consequently, the creative team extended an invitation to Wang Zhongxu, a curator at the Palace Museum, to offer overarching guidance for the production, assuming the persona of the "Scroll Exhibitor" within the drama.

The "Scroll Exhibitor" immersed themselves in the study of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, traversing through time and space to immerse themselves in the world of Wang Ximeng, and to witness the creation of this masterpiece. This character dynamic laid the foundation for the narrative structure of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, intertwining various timelines. However, an additional challenge for the scriptwriters was how to integrate the story into a broader temporal and spatial framework. National-level master craftsmen and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage contributed further inspiration to the creative process.

Who was the creator behind *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*? It undoubtedly emerged from the hands of the young Wang Ximeng 900 years ago. Even a millennium later, we are fortunate enough to encounter it again. Apart from the painter himself, credit must also be given to the technical craftsmen, laboring people, and artisans. Similarly, the creative inspiration of the production team not only stems from the landscapes depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* but also from the vast folk scenes behind this legendary painting—the painstaking efforts of the painters, the meticulous carving of the seal engravers, the meticulous work of the silk weavers, the stone seekers who sought the perfect stone, the careful selection of brushes by the brush makers, and the meticulous refining of ink by the ink makers. If the survival of the artwork until today is a historical accident, then its enduring vibrancy over a millennium is undoubtedly the result of the many traditional crafts of the Chinese nation. *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* tells not only the story of the painter but also the stories of those ordinary artisans who have been submerged in the river of history. For those nameless and forgotten artisans, this drama also serves as a tribute to their legacy. It is often said, "Paper lasts for a thousand years, silk for eight hundred," meaning that while paper can endure for a thousand years, silk can only last for eight hundred years, after which it may deteriorate or break apart. This includes the colors and mineral pigments depicted in the painting, which we can still see today. We must also express gratitude to generations of archaeologists, artifact restorers, and researchers, without whom it would be difficult for us to encounter these artifacts and understand the history and stories behind them.

In the dance drama, whether it's the artisans who passed down their crafts from a thousand years ago, the cultural relic restorers dedicated to preserving



■ Portrait of Cultural Relic Restorers

heritage in the present, or each of us focusing on our respective roles at this moment in time, we all serve as bearers and inheritors of culture as time flows onward. According to director Han Zhen, every cultural treasure passed down through the generations of the Chinese nation, from ancient times to the present, is imbued with the dedicated contributions of those who experienced and shaped history. When we find resonance with the souls of those who came before us, our creative structure gradually converges inward, in a process of slow embodiment. Unrolling scrolls, examining seals, singing silk, seeking stones, practicing calligraphy, refining ink, and entering the painting—these clear narrative threads of "from tool to path" slowly unfold, forming the seven parts that outline the narrative structure of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*.

In addition to depicting the artisans involved in the "Scroll Exhibiting" process, such as the "stone seeker," "ink maker," "silk weaver," "seal engraver," and "brush holder," the dance drama introduces an abstract representative figure—"blue-green." "blue-green" not only takes the form of a beautiful woman from the Song Dynasty but also embodies a dynamic, solemn, and aloof artistic temperament. The imagery of "blue-green" has its basis in reality. Mr. Wang Zhongxu, the curator of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, noted that the original artwork utilized mineral pigments that would emit a gem-like glow in dimly lit environments. Drawing from this detail, the creative team distilled the precious imagery of "blue-green," expressing both the value and uniqueness of

the painting, as well as the creators' understanding and yearning for classical aesthetics.

"blue-green" serves as an emotional catalyst between the Scroll Exhibitor and Wang Ximeng, as well as a connection and cue for each chapter in assumed time and space. It represents the visual pinnacle of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* and embodies the aesthetic refinement throughout the entire drama. Beginning with the concept of "stillness," the directors crafted a series of choreographic movements such as "awaiting quietly," "gazing at the moon," "descending clouds," "contemplating deeply," "solitary steps," "perilous peaks," and "reclining rocks," imbued with the reserved and introspective tone found in Song Dynasty paintings. These movements exude serenity and elegance, leaving room for interpretation, aligning seamlessly with the aesthetic style of the entire drama.

For instance, the viral "blue-green Waist" dance move is derived from the "perilous peak" in the "blue-green" imagery, symbolizing the steep and precipitous peaks depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. This movement requires the dancer to step forward with the right foot in a half lunge, while the left foot supports behind, slowly tilting the upper body backward to 90° before returning to an upright position. Throughout the entire motion, the dancer must coordinate and exert force from multiple body parts, including the abdomen, waist, and legs, to maintain a straight and stable upper body



■ "blue-green" promotional photo: Actor on the right portraying "Perilous Peak" (Photography: Wang Xufeng)

while tilting, creating the illusion of parallelism with the ground. Metaphorically, this represents the steepness and ruggedness of the peaks, with the dancer merging seamlessly with the landscape, transcending the self into a state of oblivion.

"Blue-green" encapsulates the refined essence of Eastern natural beauty, reflecting the creators' aspiration to infuse the entire drama with a more expansive and profound spatiotemporal dimension.

Through extensive research into traditional culture, directors Han and Zhou discovered that throughout the dynasties, the people of the Song Dynasty possessed a refined aesthetic taste, favoring extreme simplicity, tranquility, and implicit restraint. However, translating this aesthetic into stage presentation and embodying it in the movements of the actors proved to be immensely challenging. They encountered these challenges multiple times during the initial rehearsals, often feeling uncertain about whether the innovations or breakthroughs they aimed for were correct, given their lack of prior experience. This level of anxiety was unprecedented for the two directors, who had not faced such difficulties in their previous works.

The second challenge they faced was breaking the dancers' habitual emotional dance and performance styles and reconstructing them. This task was arduous for the directors and even more daunting for the actors.

To overcome these challenges, directors Han Zhen and Zhou Liya attempted to guide the actors using a plethora of poems during rehearsals. "We often say, 'If one can embrace mountains and rivers in their heart, only then can they paint them with their brush strokes.' This poetic sentiment reflects our understanding of literati in traditional Chinese culture." For instance, when rehearsing the 'singing silk' segment, they employed poetry like 'Gently swaying with light steps, dancing gracefully with the waist.' This allowed the actors to evoke the intended sensation. Similarly, during rehearsals for the 'blue-green' segment, they employed literal imagery, such as 'Waiting until September eighth in autumn, after my flowers bloom, all other flowers will be eclipsed. The fragrant scent will permeate Chang'an, and the entire city will be adorned with golden armor.' With such vivid imagery, the directors conveyed to the actors that there is no room for the tender gracefulness associated with young girls in this dance. Instead, they must embrace a state that is grander, more dignified, and historically meaningful. This state exudes extreme certainty within meekness, akin to a cosmic shift at the moment of stepping out. "

After overcoming numerous challenges, the dance drama gracefully captures the passage of time, seamlessly blending movement with stillness, and conveying profound meaning through its austere and distant demeanor. Thus,

A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains seamlessly transitions from the canvas to the stage.

2. Aesthetic Exploration in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*

While the actors rehearsed, various elements of stage presentation, such as set design, styling, costume design, lighting design, composition, and others, were thoroughly examined to delve into the aesthetic essence and cultural significance of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, a timeless classic painting. This effort effectively conveyed the Chinese sentiments and Oriental allure portrayed in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. Each aspect aimed to highlight the inherent Chinese-style romance of the painting, giving the entire production a distinctly indigenous flavor.

Visually and aesthetically, the production reflects the refined aesthetic pursuits of the Song Dynasty depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. Costumes and props adhere to the characteristics of the era, emphasizing the understated and simplistic "beauty of reason." The stage imagery, employing techniques like "without and within paintings" and establishing connections between objects and subjective perception, allows the audience to appreciate the beauty of traditional Chinese painting from diverse viewpoints.

In costume design, the creative team extensively researched Song Dynasty paintings and texts to



■ The official portrait of a female official in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* and the depiction of a female official in the Song Dynasty painting *Portrait of Empress Cao*



■ The official portraits of the five craftsmen in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*.

capture the aesthetic features and clothing styles of the period. From the bright red round-collared robes worn by female officials to the spirited light pink scholar robes of the Hanlin Painting Academy, these costumes not only showcase a rich diversity with subtlety but also reveal the elegance of the Song Dynasty through the folds of their sleeves. This subtle integration creates an atmosphere of refinement and beauty.

The artistic depiction of traditional craftsmanship activities such as seal engraving, silk weaving, stone extraction and grinding, brush making, and ink making in the drama presents the five artisans in costumes inspired by Song Dynasty folk craftsmen. Each detail radiates simplicity, as though traversing through time to

showcase different tones, distinctive characteristics, and unique appearances on stage.

The seal engraver is portrayed with a sense of rhythm, stability, and assurance, dressed in a deep indigo hue accented with red ink paste. The silk weaver embodies the image of a delicate artisan, gracefully emerging from a misty, morning-hued painting, adorned with the colors and essence of spring. Hence, a subtle sage green is chosen, with sleeve elements integrated into the design to convey a sense of labor.

The stone seeker is depicted as an aged figure trekking through mountains, clad in modest attire with weathered features, measuring time with each step on a lifelong quest for paint-worthy stones. Their attire is predominantly ochre with traces of cobalt blue particles, reminiscent of the enduring marks left by time.

The brush maker is represented as a woman in simple, slightly rugged attire, primarily in deep rouge, displaying nimble and skilled movements in her legs and hands, reflected in the tailored fit of her outfit, complemented by an apron to evoke a sense of labor.



■ The portrait of "blue-green"

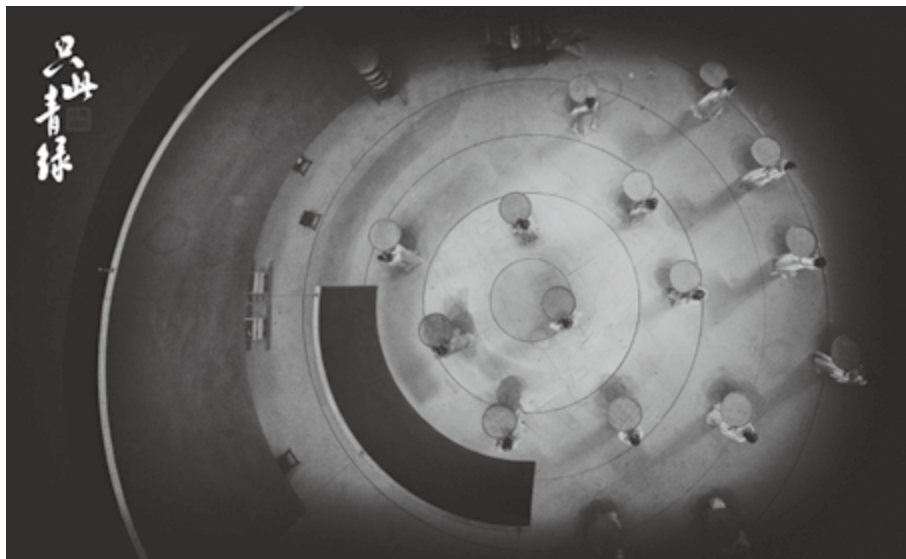
The ink maker embodies the spirit of perseverance with the phrase "light glue pounded by ten thousand pestles, raising the smoke of ten thousand pines." Their attire features a charcoal black hue enhanced by lampblack gray, with glossy fabric textures and patterns reminiscent of the oil-burning process in ink making.

These heritage artisans prioritize portraying craftsmanship and labor, blending artistic expression with everyday life, thereby embodying the seamless continuity between tradition and modernity.

The "blue-green" imagery serves as the crowning glory of the entire drama, emanating a subtle yet captivating aura reminiscent of blue-green hues. With each step, it conjures a sense of fluidity, seamlessly connecting the landscapes like flowing water and drifting smoke, as if elegantly traversing across water while gazing at the moon. The costume design reflects the slender elegance favored during the Song Dynasty, with sleeves layered like rolling hills and skirts wrapped around the waist, symbolizing overlapping mountains akin to those depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*, showcasing the refined aesthetics of the Song era. Drawing inspiration from the colors of the painting, the palette incorporates shades of green and blue, as "blue-green" emerges from the artwork and eventually merges back into it. Though "blue-green" remains silent, every movement and gesture resonates profoundly, embodying

the notion of silent yet pervasive grandeur.

In the realm of music design, the creators aimed to infuse the score of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* with a distinct "Song Dynasty temperament" to authentically capture the essence of each chapter. They achieved this by integrating sound effects inspired by the creation and production process depicted in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* – such as brush making and ink making. This approach helped to craft an auditory atmosphere that is elegant, poetic, and emotionally resonant, reminiscent of the Song Dynasty era. The musical composition of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* predominantly draws from Western orchestral music, enriched with the sounds of various ethnic instruments carefully selected to complement the actions depicted in the seven different chapters. For instance, pastoral scenes are accompanied by the melodic strains of the pipa and bamboo flute, while the "Ink Making" section incorporates the tones of the xiao and shakuhachi, evoking a sense of chivalry akin to the spirit of "wandering alone under the heavens." These musical elements, seamlessly integrated with the visual narrative, resonate with the character scenes portrayed in *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. Furthermore, the recurring presence of the guqin throughout *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* evokes vivid imagery of verdant mountains, azure waters, and meandering streams, serving as the backbone of the entire musical score.



■ The concentric stage of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* (Photography by Wang Xufeng)

In Chinese painting, ink is categorized into five colors to modulate its density and wetness, thus achieving lively effects in image depiction. The term "five colors" may denote scorching, dense, heavy, light, and clear tones, or it may encompass dense, light, dry, wet, and black hues. While the phrasing varies, the essence remains consistent, signifying the diverse nuances of ink color. "Ink color" serves as the foundation for the lighting tones in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, adhering to the principle of "color emerging from colorlessness," allowing the ink color to recede into subtlety after being enriched with vibrant hues.

In stage design, the conventional square stage is ingeniously replaced by a design featuring concentric circles, symbolizing the "scroll" motif in Chinese traditional culture. Ground rotation platforms and aerial arc mechanical movements are integrated into the stage design to create a scenic effect where "the heavens rotate three circles, the earth rotates four circles, and movement is possible in all directions," evoking aesthetic delight reminiscent of the unfolding of a scroll.

In *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, the stage visuals also make extensive use of negative space, employing simple imagery complemented by intricate lighting to convey the narrative and delve into the characters' psyche. For instance, consider the scene depicting Wang Ximeng laboring alone on



■ *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* - Wang Ximeng painting in the cold winter (Photography: Wang Xufeng)

the masterpiece *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* amidst a harsh winter. The stage is adorned with minimal props, featuring only a painting desk and a backdrop resembling a "white wall." Wang Ximeng is portrayed alternatively engrossed in his work, warming his hands, and gazing pensively into the night sky... The predominant color scheme of the stage visuals is black, with a solitary beam of light illuminating Wang Ximeng, casting his solitary silhouette onto the wall. This minimalist stage design resonates with the Song Dynasty's penchant for simplicity, effectively capturing Wang Ximeng's solitary painting session by the frosty window, thereby accentuating the depth of his inner world. The strategic use of negative space on stage, reminiscent of techniques found in traditional Chinese painting, eschews ornate forms, thereby providing the audience with a more expansive realm for visual and psychological exploration within the realm of dance.

The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting has traversed a remarkable journey from its conceptualization to its triumphant accolades, spanning nearly three years. Reflecting on its trajectory from inception to the present, the production has epitomized the spirit of craftsmanship, achieving numerous milestones: it was a pivotal project supported by the "Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China Stage Art Boutique Creation Project"; it secured funding from the National Art Fund in 2022; it received sponsorship from the Beijing Cultural and Art Fund in 2021; it was featured in the inaugural white paper dedicated to youth in the new era, titled "China's Youth in the New Era," released by the Information Office of the State Council; it was honored with inclusion in the "Top 100 Literary and Artistic Works List" published by the Chinese Academy of Arts; it was among the second batch of projects selected for inclusion in the National Cultural Industry Development Project Library; it garnered the prestigious "Wenhua Award" in September 2022; and it achieved a record-setting run of 18 consecutive performances of a Chinese dance drama in a single city at the Beijing Poly Theater.

The premiere at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing garnered over 247 million impressions across People's Daily's media platforms; the segment "Entering the Painting" featured on the CCTV program "National Treasure Exhibition Season," amassing 2.44 million views; the segment "Blue - Green" showcased at the Bilibili New Year's Eve Gala, attracting a real-time online audience of 180 million viewers; and the dance drama segment graced the stage of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, reaching an audience of over 8 billion people, with related Weibo, Douyin (tiktok), and trending topics appearing more than 10 times. Rough estimates suggest that media coverage of the dance drama has reached billions, with over 2,050 official media reports and five appearances on CCTV's "Xinwen Lianbo" news program. People's Daily

has conducted special reports, featuring titles such as "Inheriting the Millennia-old Cultural Heritage (Voices from the Scene)," "Premiere of the Dance Drama 'Only This Blue and Green,'" and "*The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* Stages Hundred Performances, Lead Dancer Meng Qingyang: Lucky to Meet 'Blue - Green,'" while People's Daily Online has published 26,480 related news articles and 687 special reports. Exposure across all media platforms, including People's Daily's official website, official Douyin account, official WeChat public account, and official Weibo account, has reached tens of millions of times, with Weibo hashtag reads exceeding 1.9 billion and discussions surpassing 490,000.

WU ZHI'AN

Producer & General Manager of Curtain Matters (Beijing) Culture Communication Co., Ltd.

Meng Qingyang

WU Naonao

Meng Qingyang was born in Zhoukou, Henan Province, in 1992. As a child, she was thin and weak due to her limited appetite. Concerned about her nutritional intake, her parents encouraged her to engage in physical activity and enrolled her in a dance training class at the age of five, which ignited her passion for dance. Despite not having a structured dance education plan, Meng Qingyang attended dance classes diligently, rain or shine. Her enthusiasm for dance remained unwavering, prompting her to express her desire to pursue professional dance training in Beijing in 2001. Though hesitant to see her endure hardships, her parents ultimately supported her decision for her future development. At the age of nine, Meng Qingyang embarked on a journey to Beijing to pursue her dance education.

In 2006, her dance piece *Dunhuang Music Drum* earned her the Outstanding Performance Award in the Classical Dance Group category at the 8th "Tao Li Cup" Dance Competition. The following year, she clinched the "First Prize for Performance" at the 10th Beijing Dance Competition.

In 2008, Meng Qingyang was accepted into the Classical Dance Department of the Beijing Dance Academy (BDA). Since then, she has demonstrated unwavering dedication to her studies. Not only did she diligently tackle her coursework, but she also actively addressed feedback from teachers during breaks and dedicated her spare time to preparing for competition rehearsals. In 2009, her personal dance piece *The Ode for Lanling King* earned her the gold medal at the 9th "Tao Li Cup" Dance Competition. Additionally, her performance in *Flying Apsaras* led to her selection as an exchange student by BDA for a dance art exchange program with Brigham Young University (BYU) in the United States.

Following her graduation from BDA in 2012, Meng Qingyang joined the China Oriental Performing Arts Group, marking the beginning of her journey as a

professional dancer. Recognized for her exceptional talent and outstanding performances, she quickly rose to prominence within the troupe and assumed leading roles.

On April 17, 2014, Meng Qingyang clinched the Silver Individual Award at the 29th April Spring Friendship Art Festival in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with her solo dance piece *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River*. She also received the "Outstanding Young Performer Award" from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In 2015, she showcased her talent on a grand scale, performing as the lead dancer in *Nichang along the Silk Road and Spring Sunshine over the Earth* at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. In 2018, she took on the lead role in the dance drama *Lan Huahua*, portraying a rural woman from northern Shaanxi Province who bravely challenges feudal customs in pursuit of love and freedom. Her portrayal earned her the "Silk Road Contribution Award" at the 5th Silk Road International Arts Festival. The following year, on May 13, 2019, she participated in the performance of "Amazing China: Music, Dance, Poetry, and Painting" to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Later that year, on September 30, she took the lead in the dance drama *The Story of the Spring* as part of the music and dance epic *Stride Forward, the Nation*. On October 5 of the same year, she wowed audiences with her performance of "The Rooster at the Dawn" from the play *Chinese Story: The Twelve Zodiac Signs* in the variety show "Dance Smash". In this challenging performance, actors were required to balance on one leg on a high platform and execute two and a half minutes of independent movement. "The Rooster at the Dawn" also participated in the overseas tour of top dancers organized by the Chinese Dancers Association in the same year.

In 2021, Meng Qingyang took on a leading role in the original poetic dance production *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*. Inspired by the masterpiece *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains* by Northern Song Dynasty painter Wang Ximeng, the performance vividly depicts the grandeur of the landscape through a fusion of powerful and graceful dance movements. In this production, Meng embodies the essence of "blue-green," marking her first portrayal of a character in her dance career. "Blue-green" isn't a specific character but rather represents the soul of *A Panorama of Rivers and Mountains*. The creative team derived the imagery of "blue-green" from the mineral pigments used in the painting, specifically mineral blue and mineral green, thus creating the symbolic role of "blue-green."

Over the past decade with the Oriental Song and Dance Company, Meng Qingyang has graced stages of all sizes, portraying a diverse array of roles and accumulating a repertoire of productions, each contributing to her growing list



■ Meng Qingyang portrays the "blue-green" character in Dance Drama *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*

of accolades and burgeoning popularity among audiences. Reflecting on her body of work, Meng acknowledges that while none may be deemed flawless, she poured her utmost effort into each performance. Every role, significant or not, has served as stepping stones in her journey of personal and professional growth, leading her to the pivotal role in *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*.

Behind the portrayal of "blue-green" lies the profound heritage of traditional Chinese culture, steeped in historical significance spanning thousands of years. Meng reflects that had she undertaken this role in her early twenties, her interpretation might have been superficial. However, with years of experience and accumulated wisdom, her understanding has deepened, enriching her perspective and imbuing her portrayal with newfound depth. Now in her thirties, Meng finds that embodying "blue-green" has instilled in her a sense of tranquility, determination, and empowerment, prompting her to slow down and connect more deeply with her inner self. It's as if this embodiment of nature's essence has bestowed upon her a subtle yet profound energy.

Prior to her appearance on CCTV for the 2022 Year of the Tiger Spring Festival

Gala, *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* had already graced stages 51 times across 14 cities in China since its premiere at the National Grand Theatre in August 2021, garnering widespread acclaim. In 2022, it clinched the prestigious 17th Chinese Government Award for Culture and Arts, the "Wenhua Award." Currently, the production has completed over 140 successful tours nationwide and has embarked on its journey of global touring. Meng Qingyang's exceptional portrayal of the "blue-green" character has captured widespread attention, earning her the National First Grade Performer award in 2023.

WU NAONAO

Theatrical Critic of Curtain Matters (Beijing) Culture Communication Co., Ltd.

An Introduction to China Oriental Performing Arts Group

Anna Wu

China Oriental Performing Arts Group Co., Ltd., a state-level performing arts and cultural organization, was restructured from the China Oriental Song and Dance Troupe. It serves as a pilot unit for the reform of the national cultural system and has been honored with the title of "China's Top 30 Cultural Enterprises" for three consecutive years.

The predecessors of the China Oriental Performing Arts Group include the Central Song and Dance Troupe, the Oriental Song and Dance Troupe, and the China Light Music Troupe. Among them, the Oriental Song and Dance Troupe, established in January 1962, boasts a wealth of artists with profound artistic achievements and significant influence both domestically and internationally. It has fostered a team of professional artists of outstanding scale and caliber in China, producing and accumulating numerous classic stage performances and fine repertoire. Additionally, it has organized and executed numerous large-scale art projects with considerable influence throughout China.

Moreover, the troupe has served as a "cultural ambassador" representing China, visiting over 100 countries and regions across five continents, fostering friendships and cultural exchange worldwide. As it enters a new era, the China Oriental Performing Arts Group continues to uphold and promote the Oriental artistic spirit of embracing excellent Chinese and foreign cultures, showcasing artistic richness, and staying attuned to contemporary trends. It expresses patriotic sentiments and highlights Oriental characteristics through unique artistic styles and characteristics.

China Oriental Performing Arts Group has always attached great importance to excellent professional skills. The older generation of artists such as Meng Yu, Gu Jianfen, Li Guyi, Mo De Ge Ma, A Yi Tu La, Yao Zhuzhu, Cui Meishan, Liu Bingyi and Peng Qingyi have dedicated their lives to the cause of the arts

and have been enshrined in the arts annals of the PRC. They have participated in large-scale performances of classics of the times, such as the revolutionary epic *Red in the East* and so on.

In recent years, New Era performers have been involved in various state events and cultural performances, including BRICS Night, anniversary commemorations, and celebratory occasions. They've also delivered special performances as expressions of gratitude, entertained aviation workers, and visited universities across China.

China Oriental Performing Arts Group remains steadfast in their commitment to music and dance creation and performance, with a focus on six key business segments: artistic creation, diverse performances, international exchanges, arts education, cultural and tourism integration, and digital innovation. Their goal is to foster artistic innovation, increase enterprise revenue, and promote career development. In recent years, the group has produced a plethora of remarkable plays such as *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*, *The Poetic Su Dongpo*, *Blooming*, and *Invitation to Wine*.

Some of their notable works include:

Share Diversity and Prosperity Together

Produced by China Oriental Performing Arts Group, *Share Diversity and Prosperity Together* is a song and dance theater production that showcases representative works from various countries and ethnic groups worldwide. Through dramatized artistic expression, the production connects the stories both on and off stage. Audiences are immersed in the ancient and melodious music of Indian tribes, transported to feel the gentle sea breeze of the Bay of Bengal with hints of coconut, invited to revel in the passionate love songs of the Western Regions, and enchanted by the allure of Arabian nights. With performances infused with rich regional customs and contemporary elements, the production aims to present an international artistic extravaganza that harmonizes Chinese and foreign cultures, showcasing the diversity and splendor of global civilization.

Blooming

The musical theater production *Blooming* narrates the inspiring journey of Zhang Guimei, who has dedicated over 40 years to the mountainous regions of Yunnan Province, spearheading the establishment of China's first free girls' high school and enabling nearly 2,000 girls to pursue higher education.

"I was born to be a mountain, not a stream, and I aspire to gaze down upon the valleys of mediocrity from the summit of excellence..." This poignant portrayal encapsulates the enlightening ethos of Yunnan Huaping Girls' Senior High School, echoing Zhang Guimei's unwavering commitment to living a life ablaze with purpose. Through her ethos of "burning life like a lamp," the production illuminates the practice of selfless dedication, where each flicker of effort serves to kindle hopes and dreams. "Blooming" endeavors to bring forth a more profound and authentic theatrical experience, allowing audiences to witness the transformative power of resilience and determination firsthand.

Singing for a Thousand Years

Presented by China Oriental Performing Arts Group, *Singing for a Thousand Years* is a captivating vocal ensemble characterized by the essence of Chinese national style, contemporary trends, and rhythmic diversity. This collection seamlessly integrates the timeless poetry, verses, and melodies penned by traditional Chinese literati and writers with ancient musical motifs and modern sounds. Through a dynamic fusion of acappella, bel canto, and pop elements, it explores a spectrum of stylistic combinations, unveiling innovative possibilities on the musical stage.

With a delicate, exquisite, and refined approach, the production harmoniously blends poetic verses and melodies, capturing the essence of rhymes and artistic expression. It delves into the intrinsic purity of music and the depth of stage presentation, endeavoring to unearth and showcase the aesthetic essence of traditional Chinese culture.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Classic: A Temporal Journey of Oriental Romance¹

HUANG Qizhe

This is the "heterophony" that has never been seen on the Kunqu stage before!

On the afternoon of the 25th, our reporters visited the set of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*—Shanghai Grand Theatre version 2022" in the rehearsal hall of the Shanghai Grand Theatre. Zhang Jun and Shan Wen, the leading performers, were rehearsing the scene "Calling at the Portrait". Unlike its traditional version, Du Liniang (portrayed by Shan Wen) was already standing beside Liu Mengmei (portrayed by Zhang Jun) before he called out "Beauty" to the portrait. Her presence can be interpreted as that of either a ghost or a girl from the dream. However, Du Liniang's first line should be "A riot of deep purple and bright red...", which is a line from "Silk Robe", the most well-known representative tune in "An Enchanting Dream". What is even more surprising is that this tune, originally sung by Du Liniang when she is wandering around the garden alone, is now sung by both performers in harmonic polyphony. This adjustment brings us both refreshing and familiar feelings.

The significance of disassembling and restructuring in the "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*—Shanghai Grand Theatre version 2022" lies in the innovative approach taken by scriptwriter Luo Zhou. Through the disassembling and restructuring of lyrics from different scenes, Luo Zhou transforms the original dream of Du Liniang in Tang Xianzu's work into a dual polyphonic narration involving both Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei's dreams.

¹ The Chinese version of this article was first published in Wenhui Daily on July 26th, 2022. [Translator's note]



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

This process of disassembling and restructuring extends beyond the script to encompass the stage performance and music, contributing to the creation of an individual interpretation of *The Peony Pavilion* within each viewer's heart. Initially hesitant to take on the role of scriptwriter due to the abundance of existing versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, Luo Zhou was ultimately persuaded by the producer Lin Kai's assertion that there must be a unique interpretation of the play in her own heart.

Similar to Shakespeare's Hamlet, Tang Xianzu, known for his adeptness at "creating dreams", has left behind a legacy that continues to inspire countless interpretations and imaginations. Thus, the seemingly "drastic" disassembling and restructuring of the script serves to breathe new life into this timeless classic.

Disassembling involves dissecting significant plots and crucial elements from the original work, while restructuring entails organizing them according to new narrative clues. The enduring appeal of classics lies in the boundless interpretive space they offer, with each restructuring presenting fresh possibilities akin to a tangram puzzle. Consider the first act, "Calling at the Portrait," in "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" as an example. In this rendition, the dialogue spoken by Liu Mengmei is drawn from the original scene of "The Portrait Discovered."



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

The implication is that additional scenes, such as "Ambitious Thoughts" and "Admiring the Portrait," from the original version are also incorporated into the first act of this adaptation.

And this isn't merely a haphazard creation by the creators. To some extent, it's a "hidden plot" inherent in the original work. In "Ambitious Thoughts," Liu Mengmei recounts a recent dream: "Suddenly, half a month ago, I had a dream. In it, there was a garden, and under a plum blossom tree stood a beauty, neither tall nor short, seemingly bidding farewell and welcoming simultaneously. She said, 'Liu Sheng, Liu Sheng, our meeting marks the beginning of our destined relationship and the start of our success.' Thus, I changed my name to Dreamer of Plum Blossoms, with Chunqing as my courtesy name. Indeed, 'short dreams and long dreams are all just dreams, and the passing years are but a blur!'" However, due to time constraints in performances, "Ambitious Thoughts" is often omitted from condensed scripts of *The Peony Pavilion* today. Consequently, many contemporary audiences are unaware that *The Peony Pavilion* is not only Du Liniang's dream but also Liu Mengmei's.

Once such a polyphonic narrative text is established, the challenge of bringing it to life on stage falls to the director, Ma Junfeng.

To enhance the audience's understanding of the intertwined dreams of the two characters, the director opted to place Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang, who traditionally "appeared separately" in previous versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, on the same stage. During a rehearsal scene, we observed in "Calling at the Portrait" that Liu Mengmei appeared first, followed by Du Liniang, reenacting the scene of a "Traveling around the Garden" amid blooming flowers. Despite the absence of props and scenery, the performances of the two actors effectively conveyed the concept of a "dual Traveling around the Garden" unfolding in the same space but at different times. This technique, common in contemporary stage and film productions, may be best understood by modern audiences.

How should Xiqu music ultimately depict two individuals from different time periods appearing in the same space? Composer and flutist Sun Jian'an is not satisfied with mere rounds or repetitions; rather, he strives for a more cohesive musical expression. Thus, he employs the technique of "heterophony," commonly found in Chinese folk music and occasionally experimented with in certain Jingju and Yueju performances. However, applying this technique to Kunqu, with its 600-year history, is a bold move. Having served as the appointed flutist for Zhang Jiqing, the mentor of ShanWen, Sun Jian'an has shifted his focus to composition over the past decade. Invited to reorganize, adjust, and explore *The Peony Pavilion* in his compositions, Sun Jian'an has also resumed his role as a flutist. This underscores his deep affection and commitment to this work.

He expresses confidence in another excerpt revealed during the visit, "The Tryst." Having participated in various versions of *The Peony Pavilion*, including the Master's Edition (2014) and the Quintessential Edition (2005), he particularly favors this version. He finds "The Tryst" challenging to present, yet crucial for advancing the plot. Previous renditions of "The Tryst" by major Kunqu theater troupes have adhered to traditional Kunqu techniques. However, this version promises to surpass them in both musical refinement and actor collaboration. Through actors' interactions on the rehearsal stage, the distinct and subtle expressions of Liu Mengmei's infatuation and Du Liniang's spirituality are vividly and ingeniously portrayed.

He also shared a humorous anecdote with us: Tong Qingqing, a young drummer from the Shanghai Grand Theater, with whom he first collaborated, introduced his own innovation during the performance. Instead of the traditional rough crowing sound, Tong Qingqing used the drum to signify the fifth watch of the night when the spirit of Du Liniang must return to the netherworld. "His drumming is both haunting and somewhat eerie," he remarked, offering his

heartfelt praise to the younger generation.

The evolution of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" represents the culmination of each creator's unique interpretation of the classic. "Among my over 500 performances of *The Peony Pavilion*, this one stands out as the most 'contradictory'," remarked one of the creators. This iconic piece holds a cherished position in the repertoire of Kunqu performers, often serving as a cornerstone of their training. Zhang Jun and Shan Wen exemplify this tradition, with Zhang Jun having portrayed various versions of *The Peony Pavilion* throughout his illustrious career, ranging from abridged renditions to full-scale productions. For more than a decade, he has mesmerized audiences with live performances set amidst real garden landscapes. When asked about the frequency of his performances, he casually mentioned, "at least 500 times," a modest estimate that likely belies the true extent of his experience, considering performances during his formative years and daily rehearsals.

This version represents more of a return to youth for him than a simple task. With each portrayal, actors often run the risk of growing weary of familiar characters. However, Liu Mengmei exudes such youthful energy and vitality that embodying her feels rejuvenating. Shedding weight has become his initial ritual in preparing for this role. During a press conference, he revealed that he had already lost an additional five Jin after an initial 10 Jin loss over 45 days. It's evident he was serious about shedding another 10 Jin before stepping onto the stage.

In addition to physical changes, Zhang Jun also underwent necessary mental adjustments for his portrayal of this character. He described this version as the most contradictory he had encountered, not due to collaboration with Shan Wen or conceptual differences with other creators, but rather due to the delicate balance required to blend elements of the past and future in a contemporary interpretation of the classics. As an example, he mentioned adjustments made to the music, where harmonies reminiscent of Qing Dynasty tunes were incorporated.

Continuous adjustments were also needed in collaboration with his partners. In a way, traditional opera partnerships resemble those in competitive sports, where partners often remain consistent throughout one's career. Although theater troupes in the Yangtze River Delta region all trace their lineage back to the "Chuan" generation of Kunqu masters, they exhibit stylistic variations. Zhang Jun explained that Shanghai Kunqu performers are predominantly influenced by the Shanghai style, characterized by stronger emotional expression, while Shan Wen's performance style, influenced by senior Kunqu

performers from Zhejiang Province, is more introverted.

Unlike traditional performances, which may involve temporary mixed arrangements or performers assuming unfamiliar roles, this new version requires the integration of two distinct styles into a cohesive work without direct contradictions. Shan Wen emphasized the importance of finding a balanced arrangement that is both comfortable for the performers and enjoyable for the audience.

Zhang Jun further elaborated, stating, "For instance, in the line 'but now face to face we stand, wordless though hand in hand' from 'Red Peach in the Mountain' in 'An Enchanting Dream,' performers from Shanghai sing 'word(ddd) less,' while those from Jiangsu sing 'word(!!!)less'." While such nuances may be imperceptible to the audience, ensuring a seamless blend of the two styles is crucial for enhancing the overall audience experience and is also more readily accepted by professionals in the field.

The internal conflict extends beyond the stage. Lin Kai, the producer, had to forego a costume worth 20,000 yuan because a magnificent costume for one of the characters had already been crafted by Lai Xuanwu, the winner of the Hong Kong Film Award for Best Costume Design. This was before Xi Zhonglu, an actor renowned for martial roles in operas, was selected to portray the character by the Shanghai Grand Theatre. It's far more gratifying to witness his portrayal, given his considerable fame in the role. Upon careful consideration, the loss backstage pales in comparison to the impact it has on stage.

HUANG QIZHE
Journalist of *Wenhui Daily*

To Live and Die in a Dream

LUO Zhou

When the Shanghai Grand Theater invited me to reorganize and adapt *The Peony Pavilion*, I was filled with apprehension. My task was to delve back into the original work and decipher its "code."

The essence of *The Peony Pavilion* revolves around two dreams: the dream of Du Liniang in "An Enchanting Dream," and the dream of Liu Mengmei in "Ambitious Thoughts." While "An Enchanting Dream" is well-known, "Ambitious Thoughts" holds particular significance. Among the 55 highlights in Tang Xianzu's romantic masterpiece, *The Peony Pavilion*, the Prelude serves as an introduction to the content, with "Ambitious Thoughts" following closely behind.



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

In "Ambitious Thoughts," Tang Xianzu writes: "Half a month ago, Liu Mengmei dreamed of a garden. Under a plum tree in the garden stood a woman of exceptional beauty, neither tall nor short, who appeared to beckon to him. She addressed him: 'Liu Sheng (referring to Liu Mengmei), Liu Sheng, we are destined to be together, and you are on the brink of success.' Consequently, he changed his name to Mengmei, with Chunqing as his courtesy name." This dream, one could argue, bestowed upon the male protagonist a "new lease on life."

So, chronologically, is this dream the beginning of the story?

I don't think so.

In fact, the dream in "Ambitious Thoughts" does not conclude and extends through seven highlights to the tenth scene, "An Enchanting Dream," seamlessly merging with Du Liniang's dream.

Upon closer examination of "An Enchanting Dream," several anomalies emerge. Since Du Liniang didn't know Liu Mengmei, why did he say, "Dear Miss, where haven't I searched for?" Furthermore, he remarked, "Since you, my dear sister, are well versed in history and various books, why not compose a poem to praise the willow branches?" Clearly, this wasn't their first encounter.



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

In the original script of "An Enchanting Dream," Liu Sheng delivered four lines of poetry upon his entrance, conveying the sentiment: "When the yellow warbler meets the warm wind, her song becomes gentle and joyful. When men and women fall in love, they cannot help but smile. A path of falling flowers drifts down into the water, and today Ruan Zhao meets a fairy at the Tiantai Mountain." These lines, absent in adaptations like "Sewing White Furs" and many performances, elucidate Liu Mengmei's origin: He emerges from his own dream. The term "love" here denotes his encounter with the beauty under the plum tree. Then, a pivotal line of recitation follows: "I followed Miss Du back by the way, how come I can't find her?" This suggests that due to their prior encounters and interactions under the plum tree, Liu Mengmei had the opportunity to acquaint himself with her and make a passionate courtship that, while seemingly sudden, was grounded in rationale. It's worth noting that the notion of "marriage" was initially proposed by Du Liniang.

Tang Xianzu has crafted a striking dramatic structure in *The Peony Pavilion*, incorporating two highly modern narrative methods: the cutting and restructuring of timelines, and the closed loop.

But why do we describe it as forming a closed loop? Commonly understood, "The Peony Pavilion" recounts the tale of Du Liniang, who "dies in a dream," perishing for love and then being revived by love. Without Du Liniang dreaming of Liu Mengmei, she wouldn't experience joy in her dream. Absent that joy, she wouldn't plummet into sadness and despair. Without that despair, she wouldn't meet an early demise, lying buried beneath a plum tree, nor would she discover her betrothal to Liu Mengmei in the underworld. Conversely, without death and The Infernal Judge, Du Liniang's soul wouldn't enter Liu Sheng's dream. Without Liu Sheng's dream, there would be no Liu Sheng in Liniang's dream, no dream of Liu Mengmei for Liniang, and no joy within the dream.

Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang are both the cause and effect of each other's existence.

My aim is to convey this concept to the audience. Only "True Love" can rupture the grim, endless loop, encapsulating the central theme of *The Peony Pavilion*: Love, once ignited, is eternal. Lovers may perish for love, yet those who are deceased in love may be reborn. Those unable to perish or be reborn for love have not experienced "True Love."

Inspired by this, our rendition of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" has returned to the original structure of Tang Xianzu's script, with Ambitious Thoughts, Liu Mengmei's dream, serving as the "prologue". This is followed

by the sequences of Liu Mengmei's search and wanderings, his illness at the Plum Blossom Temple, "The Portrait Recovered" and "Calling at the Portrait", calling out Du Liniang after several affectionate address, and having a pleasant association with Liniang in "The Tryst".

However, a pressing question arises: "How long can a ghost like her coexist with a human?" Thus, Du Liniang "could not evade" "shocking Liu Sheng" and decided to confess her true nature as a "ghost". In the original text, Liu Mengmei's initial reaction upon hearing this was one of "fear". How could he accept that the person sleeping beside him (his beloved) was a "ghost"? And how could he willingly risk the consequences of "Opening the coffin to see the corpse, all be beheaded regardless of whether being the head or not", by opening the tomb to welcome the charming Miss Liniang?

The Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe's quintessential rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* ingeniously revolves around the theme of "dreams" as the connecting thread. However, I believe there is room for further enhancement. Therefore, I have integrated "An Enchanting Dream in the Garden", as well as "Ambitious Thoughts" and "Retracing the Dream", into this scene through mutual recollection and narration. This approach allows both Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei to distinctly recognize the "closed loop that links the beginning and the end". While for Liu Mengmei, Du Liniang may merely exist as a beautiful dream, for Liniang, Mengmei is the sole key to breaking the closed loop of her life and death. Should he refuse to believe, or believe but fail to take the risk, Liniang will remain forever trapped beneath the plum tree, ensnared in the boundless and eternal cycle of life and death.

It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps this "Liu Mengmei" was not the first scholar encountered by "Du Liniang". Perhaps, before him, there were countless scholars who had the dream of "meeting the beauty under the plum blossom tree" and heard the "crying for help" of the beautiful and pitiful soul imprisoned under the tree. They all changed their names to "Liu Mengmei" and came to the Plum Blossom Temple countless times. But none of them were able to "succeed". Starting with "lust" and ending with "fear", they stopped and turned away until this "Liu Mengmei" came. How to bridge the gap between life and death? The answer should be "True Love". Only "True Love" can make people risk regardless of their life and death.

It's fair that only those who dare to "die" can receive "life" back, isn't it?

"True love" is like a ray of bright light in a dark night, breaking through the suffocating, repetitive, and endless ambiguous "love affairs". Liniang's body

had been buried in the soil for a long time, and on this day, she finally departed from under the plum tree. Looking back, she could still see that the plum tree was charming and the fruits were lovely. But no one knows for sure whether the next girl who sleeps here can be as fortunate as her.

Re-encounter with the Classics

MA Junfeng

My bosom friend Calvino has an intriguing take on what defines a "classic": "Classics are those works that people often mention as 'I'm rereading ...' rather than 'I'm reading ...' for the first time." On initial reading, we often experience a sense of *déjà vu*, but upon revisiting, we discover deeper, hidden meanings. This is the allure of classics. *The Peony Pavilion* unquestionably falls into this category, and I am confident that rediscovering it will still evoke a refreshing and unforgettable experience.

In the process of crafting the script, Tang Xianzu left behind some subtle clues that are not easily discerned but become "extremely frightening upon careful



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

consideration." However, for over 400 years, these clues went unnoticed by most. It wasn't until Luo Zhou conducted a close analysis of the original text that these hidden hints, planted by the author, were uncovered. Luo Zhou meticulously, boldly, and creatively engaged in "substitution and composition" of the textual materials, weaving together the realms of dream and reality, entwining illusion and truth. The aim was to immerse the audience deeply into the narrative and accompany the protagonists as they traverse the boundary between life and death.

In the world of theatre, there's an old adage: "There are a thousand Hamlets by a thousand directors." Just like Shakespeare, the eminent master of his era, Tang Xianzu's greatness lies in the enduring quality of his works, capable of withstanding the interpretations and deconstructions of various epochs and directors, as well as performances across different theatrical genres. In this endeavor, our aim has been to present a work that resonates aesthetically with contemporary sensibilities, deeply intertwined with modern concepts of love, yet remains faithful to the essence of the original piece. We aspire for this rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* to be both timely and timeless, simultaneously contemporary and classic.

I firmly believe that stage performances belong to the present moment.



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

In crafting this version, we've adhered to the principle of "upholding the fundamentals while breaking through boundaries." By staying true to the essence of Kunqu performance and aesthetics, we've sought to transcend the traditional confines and experiment with new performance styles. Centered around the theme of "True Love," we've meticulously edited, restructured, and rearranged the original storyline to construct a fresh narrative logic. While preserving the foundational aesthetics of freehand staging, we've dared to innovate beyond conventional Kunqu performance norms, seamlessly integrating contemporary design elements into the performance space. Our goal has been to elevate the quality of the performance to its zenith while presenting the ancient art of Kunqu in a contemporary guise through strategic packaging, amplification, and presentation. In essence, our aim is to render *The Peony Pavilion* relevant to modern audiences.

This time, we've titled the play "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*". The term "re-encounter" was indeed my idea, born from a blend of countless moments of frustration, helplessness, annoyance, and anger. During the entire two-month period in Shanghai, marked by the suspension of public performance activities from April to June 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented

sense of anticipation surged within me. For the first time, my yearning to return to the theater was intense and urgent. I longed to "re-encounter" fellow artists, reconnect with friends in the theater industry, and reunite with the audience through my works.

Maslow coined the term "peak experience" to describe a profound sensation that people seldom encounter in their lives: "It's a trembling, euphoria, and satisfaction that originates from deep within." This feeling is so intense and powerful, yet rare enough to leave a lasting imprint on everyone. My aspiration is that when this rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* "re-encounters" the audience in the theater, it will evoke this transcendent experience that surpasses time, space, and the past.

MA JUNFENG
Director of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

About Myself, Beyond Myself, From Myself

Zhang Jun

In my 37-year career in the performing arts since 1986, I have had the privilege of portraying Liu Mengmei in over ten adaptations of *The Peony Pavilion*. These performances have spanned a wide range, from traditional stage productions encompassing the entire five-act play to condensed 75-minute versions set in real park landscapes. I have graced stages in campus auditoriums, various theaters, as well as iconic venues such as castles in France, museums along Fifth Avenue in New York, and gardens in Moscow. Despite the diverse settings, each rendition of the iconic line "Don't you know floral beauty disappears with running water and fleeting years" has allowed me to explore different nuances and performance styles.

In the autumn of 2022, I had the privilege of participating in an entirely new rendition of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*," adopted by Luo Zhou and produced by the Shanghai Grand Theatre. This production condenses Du Liniang's "resurrection" tale into a concise three-hour performance, divided into four acts and two preludes: "Prelude (Mengmei)," "The Portrait Admired," "Prelude (The Roving Soul)," "The Tryst," "Love Vows," and "Resurrection."

While previous versions have primarily focused on Du Liniang's perspective, this rendition places greater emphasis on the male viewpoint embodied by the character I portray, Liu Mengmei. It delves into intriguing questions such as why he was ensnared in the dream, why he adopted a new identity, why he developed feelings for Liniang despite their disparate statuses as ghost and human, and why he defied ethical norms by unearthing the grave. Through this exploration, the production endeavors to unravel the intricate interplay between life and death to its fullest extent.

While causality represents an irreversible logic in science, it often unfolds differently in the artistic realm. *The Peony Pavilion* has been interpreted and



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*", Zhang Jun portrays Liu Mengmei

performed by generations of artists over the centuries, evolving in its melody, lyrics, and spirit. Each rendition has influenced subsequent interpretations, resulting in a continuous exchange of glory that resonates to this day.

Sun Jian'an, the composer, has incorporated two harmony pieces for Liu Mengmei into the well-known classic tunes of "Silk Robe" and "Red Peach in the Mountain" when designing the music for this version, presenting a significant challenge for me. How so?

As we all know, unlike the Banqiang style, the Qupai style of Kunqu employs the Chinese bamboo flute as its primary instrument, running parallel to the voices of the performers, thus establishing a stable and harmonious auditory experience. It not only serves as an independent musical expression but also provides guidance for singing and dancing, offering auditory support for performers to synchronize with the melody and rhythm. Having sung "Red Peach in the Mountain" for over thirty years, every note, word, rhythm, and breath of the piece is deeply engraved in my mind, forming a sort of muscle memory akin to a conditioned reflex. Therefore, it is quite challenging for me to deviate from my ingrained memory and sing it in heterophony, a contrasting



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*", Shan Wen portrays Du Liniang (right)

approach without the flute, all while being subtly influenced by the original rendition of Du Liniang.

Certainly, heterophony, while not uncommon in musical compositions, represents a form of polyphony crafted in a contrasting manner, also known as contrasting polyphony. Within heterophony, the same melody evolves through various variations, resulting in multiple divergent parts that may intertwine with or diverge from the main melody. Regarding rhythm, these variations may align with the main melody at times, embellish it when feasible, or simplify it as needed.

Polyphony has a rich history in Chinese folk music, evident in polyphonic folk songs among ethnic minorities in southwestern regions such as the Dong, Yao, Zhuang, Miao, and Maonan. This musical style, particularly heterophony, is also prevalent in traditional Xiqu, various Chinese folk art forms, religious music, Jiangnan Sizhu¹, and other traditional musical genres.

Throughout the 20th century, as there was increased interaction between Eastern and Western cultures, European polyphony works and their technical theories gradually found their way into China. Chinese composers adeptly fused these imported theories with their own rich folk music traditions, creating compositions that vividly depict Chinese social life and cultural landscapes. This fusion has given rise to a new musical tradition unique to China.

Fortunately, over the past twenty years, I have delved deeply into the systematic study of the musical characteristics of Western twelve-tone equal temperament and vocal music, building upon my existing foundation in Kunqu vocal styles. Additionally, through the scientific application of pitch and intonation and extensive training to overcome ingrained memory before performances, I have been able to execute the harmonic sections on stage more effectively. This results in a rhythmic sensation where the initial melody and polyphony sometimes align, sometimes run parallel, sometimes contrast, and sometimes complement each other during singing. This intriguing unity of opposites mirrors the interplay between Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang in their dual dreams within the play.

¹ Jiangnan Sizhu is a genre of traditional Chinese music that originated in the Jiangnan region of southern China. It features stringed instruments and bamboo pipes, typically including the pipa, erhu, flute, guzheng, and twenty-stringed zither. Known for its soft, melodious tones and delicate performance techniques, Jiangnan silk and bamboo music is frequently used as accompaniment for opera, dance, and folk song performances. [Translator's note]

In the opening scene, the faded glory of Du Liniang is juxtaposed against the decadent backdrop, while Liu Mengmei roams the decaying garden in a parallel space and time. Here, the composer introduces heterophony in the latter half of "Silk Robe," creating a vocal dialogue for the first time. This technique not only highlights the emotional, temporal, and spatial connection between the hero and heroine but also preserves the poignant emotion and soft whispers of the original melody.

Then comes the line from the final scene, "Oh, we seem to have met, somewhere we forget, but now face to face we stand, wordless though hand in hand," from "Red Peach in the Mountain." This line, inspired by their emotions after their pleasant time in the garden, is duplicated three times in parallel polyphony, maintaining the original high-spirited and resonant tune. Such composition seamlessly integrates with the lavish nature of the performance, exuding a strong sense of belonging. While the polyphony aligns comfortably with my vocal range and familiar singing technique, I must continually remind myself to allow my voice to contrast with that of Du Liniang's, a process I find immensely enjoyable during my performance.

When it comes to singing in Kunqu, it shares similarities with opera due to the complexity of its music. The performance of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" has been enlightening for me, as it has delved deeply into the composition and arrangement of Kunqu, including the occasional use of harmony. This has sparked my interest in exploring entirely new polyphonic relationships within familiar tunes in the future. It's clear that Kunqu requires the courage to evolve its music, and this production has inspired me to embrace that challenge.

In addition to singing, the design and execution of stage performances take precedence. In one particular scene during "Love Vows," both Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei reminisce about their dreams. Du Liniang shares her lovesickness and transition into a ghost without a soul, still attached to her past life. Ultimately, they both lament the impermanence and cyclical nature of love. This entire sequence can be viewed as a construct within the dream framework of Tang Xianzu's "Four Dreams of Linchuan," intricately interwoven across time and space with mutual causation. While scriptwriter Luo Zhou precisely depicted this in the script, I was responsible for designing the subsequent stage performance.

Firstly, when Liu Mengmei first hears about Du Liniang's confession of being a ghost, he is startled and staggers, almost falling in the center of the stage. This presentation not only conveys Liu Mengmei's fear but also challenges the performer to depict the variation and convergence of different emotions, a

design intended for a single character's performance. Regarding the interaction between the two characters, I devised three circles to guide the movements of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang:

The first circle involves Du Liniang walking around Liu Mengmei, who remains stationary at the center, as she slowly recounts her love story spanning life and death. This circular movement externalizes Du Liniang's inner world.

In the second circle, both characters complete a half-circle: as Liu Mengmei ponders whether the beauty of the garden will remain in his dreams, Du Liniang walks ahead with Liu Mengmei following, symbolizing the spatial intervention. When Liu Mengmei questions who was under the big mume tree before, Du Liniang exits the audience's view, and Liu Mengmei steps forward to the stage, intensifying his inner turmoil.

The third circle represents Du Liniang's response to Liu Mengmei's inquiry: "the living beauty in the garden, the dead one under the mume tree, they are both me, existing in a dream, alive or dead, wandering aimlessly." Liu and Du begin circling at different speeds, gradually increasing in pace until they abruptly stop, locking eyes as the surroundings fade into nothingness, leaving only each other. This moment symbolizes the transience of everything except love, echoing the ultimate loneliness expressed in "Dreams, long or short, are just dreams; years come and go like fleeting light." This sense of solitude may reflect Tang Xianzu's enduring theme across his works and serve as an unavoidable emotional reflection for those living in this world.

My generation of Kunqu inheritors is fortunate to have a stage that presents plays before our eyes, dreams that guide our path, and ambitions that fuel our hearts. In my lifelong artistic pursuit, I've traversed three stages: introspection, where I continuously refine my understanding of myself; expansion, where I seek to broaden my horizons and learn from others; and innovation, where I relentlessly pursue better and more unique artistic expressions. I firmly believe that, regardless of where you are on your artistic journey—whether you're a novice, still honing your craft, or a seasoned master—there are always uncharted territories in time and space waiting to be explored, offering opportunities to unravel the mysteries of the artistic world.

ZHANG JUN

Kunqu performer, portrays Liu Mengmei in "Re-encounter The Peony Pavilion"

A Contemporary "Two-Way Re-Encounter," Also a Re-Encounter Between the Audience and the Theater¹

PAN Yu

While it may not be deemed the finest rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* in recent years, the Shanghai Grand Theatre's interpretation holds a significant level of "meaning" among the many versions. Truly emblematic of 2022, it strikes a balance between contemporary innovation and adherence to the tradition of Kunqu, offering a glimpse into the beauty of Chinese classical art on an international stage. Although somewhat unconventional, it remains within the confines of propriety. Every aspect of the production is aesthetically pleasing, and as a paramount performance of Kunqu, *The Peony Pavilion* achieves a surprising level of perfection.

Shanghai Grand Theater debuted a fresh production of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" in the summer of 2022, a noteworthy feat in the performance industry. Commencing on August 11, it ran for five consecutive performances. The term "re-encounter" holds multifaceted significance. According to the producer, it signifies a "two-way convergence" between classical and contemporary art, as well as a reunion between the audience and the theater.

The Peony Pavilion, a legendary tale penned by Tang Xianzu during the Ming Dynasty, has graced the Kunqu stage for over 400 years, embodying the pinnacle of aesthetics within this 600-year-old theatrical tradition and standing as a crowning achievement of traditional Chinese xiqu aesthetics. Recreating such a pinnacle is no small feat, let alone garnering popularity.

Even before the play commenced, it sparked various controversies, which are inevitable for a new work that reimagines the script of *The Peony Pavilion*.

¹ The Chinese version of this article was first published on *The Paper* on August 12, 2022.



■ The antagonist Li Quan



■ Tutor Chen Zuiliang and The Taoist nun, Sister Stone

In this rendition, playwright Luo Zhou departed from Tang Xianzu's original timeline structure, instead framing the narrative around the two "dreams" of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. From the original 55 scenes, Luo selected key moments such as "Ambitious Thoughts," "The Portrait Admired," "The Roving Soul," "The Tryst," "Love Vows," and "Resurrection," weaving them together with a fresh structural approach. Director Ma Junfeng likened this approach to an "Inception" on the Kunqu stage.

It's challenging to gauge the effectiveness of this narrative structure, as it can be somewhat perplexing and even "bewildering" at times. When Liu Mengmei joins Du Liniang on stage during "Traveling around the Garden" and "Retracing the Dream", or when Du Liniang performs solo in "An Enchanting Dream", both actors and audience alike seem to seek logical grounding, almost as if in a trance. As the play progresses to "The Tryst" and "Love Vows", emotions among the audience reach a crescendo, and the scene of "Resurrection" is poised to deeply move them. However, the sudden introduction of a "dream within a dream" can abruptly reset the audience's emotional trajectory.

However, I must acknowledge that this daring adaptation deserves a toast, as it has infused *The Peony Pavilion* with a completely fresh creative outlook. Perhaps it's precisely this innovative starting point that has prompted the entire crew to view *The Peony Pavilion* from an entirely different perspective. In the past, regardless of the version, most adaptations involved merely deleting or modifying plot points and characters, or altering stage costumes and styles.

Or perhaps it's because of this approach that this version exudes an unmistakably contemporary vibe in every aspect, offering the audience, particularly those familiar with *The Peony Pavilion*, a remarkably fresh experience.

Stage visuals often offer the most immediate perception. In this production, the stage design seamlessly blends contemporary mirror designs with the aesthetics of Ming Dynasty picture books, presenting the audience with a vivid portrayal of classical Chinese beauty. What unfolds before the audience is a mesmerizing display of "carved beams and painted buildings" alongside "broken wells and ruins," exuding a sense of freedom and even illusion. The pavilions and the actors' performances interact with each other through mirrors, intermittently appearing and disappearing, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. This juxtaposition creates a captivating visual narrative that seamlessly merges the classical with the contemporary.

The lighting not only bathes the entire production in diverse hues, shadows,

and beauty but also lends ample focus to the performances. Particularly in the latter half, where only a freehand plum tree adorns the vast empty stage, the lighting takes on a minimalist and contemporary tone reminiscent of the traditional xiqu stage bathed in bright white light.

Costume designs from Taiwan, while adhering to the regulations of Kunqu costumes, have innovated primarily in patterns and colors. Overall, the more than a dozen sets of costumes remain breathtakingly beautiful, eliciting admiration from all who behold them.

However, for a Kunqu production, mere beauty, captivating stage design, and contemporary flair are not sufficient. The cornerstone of this traditional art lies in the realm of performance.

As a quintessential Kunqu piece, *The Peony Pavilion* has seen countless iterations over the centuries. Virtually every Kunqu actor and actress has graced its stage, with the play serving as a barometer of their mastery of Kunqu and a touchstone for their standing in the profession.

Hence, across the spectrum of *The Peony Pavilion* adaptations, Kunqu performers of all generations have dedicated themselves to refining their craft to ever higher standards. However, this repeated artistic inheritance can sometimes breed over-familiarity, resulting in a lack of novelty and allure. Presently, it's not uncommon for traditional repertoire performances like *The Peony Pavilion* to prioritize artistic skills to such an extent that dramatic elements, such as "character creation," are frequently undervalued or overlooked altogether.

In this rendition, Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei transcend their roles as mere archetypes of the "Guimendan" (young unmarried lady) and "Xiaosheng" (young male) characters in Chinese xiqu. They are endowed with more nuanced personalities and undergo significant changes beyond their Kunqu performances. While such depth is not entirely absent in other adaptations, the distinctiveness of this version lies in its incorporation of fresh ideas from both the script and the director. Additionally, the actors' solo performances contribute to a cohesive character portrayal and offer layers of expression that elevate this rendition to greater prominence.

Therefore, this version can rightfully be termed a "play," rather than a mere iteration of a new xiqu version.

Director Ma Junfeng, born in the 1980s, has helmed numerous productions, predominantly dramas that resonate with younger audiences. His focus likely

extends beyond the technical aspects of performance to encompass the overall texture and character depth of a theatrical work, as well as establishing emotional resonance with the audience. Reports suggest that during rehearsals, he consistently prompted actors to delve into the emotional dynamics and states of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang at each moment. This approach serves to amplify the nuanced subtlety inherent in Kunqu performances.

However, the realization of the artistic vision ultimately rests on the shoulders of the actors and actresses. In Kunqu, performers must possess a solid foundation in tradition and a stage sensibility that resonates with contemporary audiences to achieve a synthesis of traditional and modern stage aesthetics. Both elements are indispensable.

Fortunately, Zhang Jun and Shan Wen embody such qualities.

As leading figures in the contemporary Kunqu scene, they have portrayed these roles numerous times, their familiarity with the play and its characters woven into the fabric of their artistic lives. Their mastery of traditional Kunqu singing and acting techniques places them at the pinnacle of their generation.

It marks the first collaboration on stage between these two seasoned Kunqu artists, who have already reached a high level of maturity in their artistry. Indeed, it can be described as a remarkable "re-encounter." "Have we met before? It seems as though we've known each other for ages." For the confrontation scene between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei to truly shine, they need worthy opponents. Zhang Jun and Shan Wen form a dynamic duo, both possessing equal strength. Their synergy on stage sparks inspiration, allowing them to showcase their peak performance and infuse the production with a fresh texture.

Shan Wen has always been renowned for her beauty. Her portrayal of Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion* earned her the Plum Blossom Award, the highest accolade in Chinese xiqu. Under the tutelage of Zhang Jiqing, who is also celebrated for her exceptional beauty, Shan Wen embodied the role of Du Liniang. However, in this rendition, Shan Wen imbues Du Liniang with an additional spiritual depth, portraying not just "beauty" but also the profound essence of "love that transcends time and space." Throughout various scenes, this spiritual dimension adds a nuanced layer to her performance. Mastering and conveying such emotional depth in portraying Du Liniang is exceptionally challenging, requiring the actress's inner fortitude and a genuine comprehension of her character's essence.

Zhang Jun's familiarity with the character of Liu Mengmei is unparalleled.

Having portrayed the role in numerous adaptations, he may well be the sole "xiaosheng" actor to have appeared in all 55 scenes of *The Peony Pavilion* to date. However, audiences have seldom witnessed him enact so many scenes in a single performance, spanning three hours and maintaining a near-constant presence on stage from start to finish. This version showcases a youthful, restrained, and tender portrayal of Liu Mengmei, underscoring the character's "integrity." No longer confined to the role of the frail scholar typically seen in "An Enchanting Dream," Zhang Jun infuses passages like "Love Vows" with a sincerity and strength surpassing even that of Du Liniang. This depth of character portrayal reflects not only Zhang Jun's extensive stage experience but also his skill in crafting characters as a versatile actor.

Of course, it's undeniable that the presence of a talented and visually appealing duo on stage adds another layer of allure to the performance. After all, aesthetic appeal plays a significant role in the enjoyment of xiqu, wouldn't you agree?

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize the rich cultural heritage embodied by *The Peony Pavilion*. While this rendition of "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" breaks free from the constraints of traditional performance versions, it still honors the norms of traditional performances. Every word, every song, every movement, and every style harks back to its origins. Each moment of the performance is exquisitely crafted. Instead of discarding the legacy of 600 years, it leverages contemporary theater art to amplify, focus, and illuminate traditional art. It's akin to placing an antique cultural relic in the most splendid exhibition hall of a museum, adorning the exhibit with the latest contemporary concepts, and illuminating it with state-of-the-art lighting. Such an approach captivates both audiences familiar and unfamiliar with Kunqu.

"Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*" serves as a two-way bridge between the classical and the contemporary, offering a blueprint for rejuvenating traditional art forms.

The Ghosting in the Folding Space¹

ZHU Jinhua

As the summer heat lingered and the lotuses were in full bloom, the Shanghai Grand Theater resonated with the melodic strains of the Kunqu classic, "Silk Robe" : "It turns out that colorful flowers are blooming everywhere, but here, they seem to face only ruined wells and walls." This timeless piece of music, derived from Tang Xianzu's renowned Ming Dynasty work, "An Enchanting Dream" , reignited everyone's longing for theaters and stages.

Tang Xianzu once proclaimed, "Of the four Dreams I have created in my life, *The Peony Pavilion* is the work I take the most pride in." Among his "four Dreams", *The Peony Pavilion* has always held a special place. Its performances consistently draw large audiences and have become a staple of the theatrical repertoire. Today, over a dozen renditions grace the stage, each created by major Kunqu troupes with their own unique interpretations. For instance, the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe offers a comprehensive version, while the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group Kunqu Theater presents a quintessential adaptation, and the Jiangsu Suzhou Kunqu Theatre showcases a youthful rendition. Additionally, fixed venues such as the royal granary hall and royal garden in Beijing, and the garden setting of the Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Center at the Class Planting Garden in Zhujiajiao, host perennial performances of *The Peony Pavilion*.

Beyond Kunqu, the play has been adapted and performed in various regional opera styles including Jingju, Yueju, Huangmeixi, Ganju, Chuanju, Chaoju, and Cantonese Yueju. Moreover, versions have been staged as dramas, operas, dance dramas, and musicals. These diverse adaptations represent a myriad of interpretations and creative combinations, highlighting the multilayered

¹ The Chinese version of this article was first published in Xinmin Evening News on August 11, 2022. [Translator's note]



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

and complex nature of the original work and leaving ample space for future reinterpretations and performances.

"The 2022 Shanghai Grand Theatre rendition of Kunqu, 'Re-encounter The Peony Pavilion'," sets itself apart from previous versions by taking the theme of "dreams" as its focal point and narrative thread, seamlessly weaving it throughout the entire storyline. The encounters and romances within the dream world, as well as the enduring devotion upon waking, depict two captivating dreams where Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei converge and delve into each other's subconscious.

This rendition incorporates elements from the original scripts including "Ambitious Thoughts", "The Portrait Admired", "The Roving Soul", "The Tryst", "Love Vows" , and "Resurrection". Through deconstruction and reconstruction, a new theatrical structure emerges: beginning with the prologue "Mengmei" , followed by the opening sketch "The Roving Soul", and culminating in the highlights "Calling at the Portrait", "The Tryst", "Love Vows", and "Resurrection".

Among these highlights, only two are titled with the word "dream": "An Enchanting Dream" and "Retracing the Dream". These segments seamlessly



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

integrate well-known songs such as "Silk Robe", "Red Peach in the Mountain", and "Water in the River", enhancing the organic flow of the narrative.

The concept of "dream" in *The Peony Pavilion* extends beyond Du Liniang's visions to encompass the intertwined dreams of Liu Mengmei as well. This thematic thread begins in the second highlight, "Ambitious Thoughts", where Liu Mengmei experiences a profound dream: "In the dream, there was a garden. Under a plum tree in the garden stood a beauty, neither tall nor short, who seemed to welcome him...So he changed his name to Mengmei, with Chunqing as his courtesy name." His decision to alter his name illustrates the profound impact of this dream on his psyche.

By the tenth highlight, "An Enchanting Dream", Liu Mengmei enters Du Liniang's dream, expressing his relentless pursuit: "I haven't found you anywhere, Miss. Aha! You're here." Despite setbacks, Liu Mengmei persists, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries to seek out Du Liniang within the dream realm. Through the intricacies of dream interactions, the disappointment upon awakening, the lingering sense of loss, and the reluctance to bid farewell to the ephemeral beauty of the dream, Du Liniang, risking her life, "vainly attempts" to grasp the freedom to pursue her dreams and even seeks true love

in the realm of the afterlife.

In Liu Mengmei's persistent calls and Du Liniang's unwavering pursuit across the realms of existence, their love begins in the realm of dreams and ultimately materializes in reality. Liniang boldly pursues love while Mengmei steadfastly declares his affection. They are each other's catalysts, complementing one another's existence. It becomes evident that their initial encounter in dreams transcends the ethereal realm, transitioning from a realm of "virtual love" to the tangible world requiring "earthly rituals".

For actors embodying the quintessential Kunqu roles of Xiaosheng and Guimendan, it's almost inconceivable that they haven't portrayed the characters of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang in *The Peony Pavilion*. Often, their artistic journey in mastering the intricacies of Kunqu finds its zenith in a pivotal moment or excerpt from *The Peony Pavilion*. Even as they bid adieu to the stage, some may still find themselves revisiting roles from *The Peony Pavilion*. For many actors, decoding the nuances of Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang becomes a lifelong pursuit, immersing themselves endlessly in the world of this iconic play.

Numerous Kunqu actors have garnered prestigious accolades for their portrayal of leading roles in *The Peony Pavilion*. In the "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*—Shanghai Grand Theatre version 2022," both Zhang Jun as Liu Mengmei and Shan Wen as Du Liniang have had *The Peony Pavilion* as a cornerstone of their artistic journey. Zhang Jun's award-winning performance was in "Calling at the Portrait", while Shan Wen received accolades for her role in the rendition by the Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre. Their renditions of *The Peony Pavilion* have been honed through countless iterations, marked by thousands of rehearsals, meticulous character development, and exquisite performances. It is through their seasoned gaze, refined skills, and adherence to tradition that they seamlessly navigate the realm of dreams, offering audiences the delight of this "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*".

This rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* boasts a unique feature: a mirrored garden that enhances its allure. In the pivotal scene of "Calling at the Painting", a mirror device serves as the side curtain on one end of the stage. As Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang enter, their reflections, illuminated by the light, merge seamlessly with their physical selves and cast shadows on the ground. The interplay between the characters onstage, their mirrored images, and their shadows creates a mesmerizing effect, blurring the lines between reality and illusion, truth and falsehood. This reflection evokes notions of the "self," "ego," and "superego," prompting contemplation on how human desires and conflicts

seek resolution and redemption.

On the opposite end of the stage lies the backdrop of Du Liniang's back garden, featuring freehand-style depictions of ruined wells, pavilions, water features, and stone formations, adorned with projections of willow branches and plum trees. This condensed yet expansive space serves as a tangible, physical realm traversed by Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, a psychological and spiritual domain explored in their dreams, and a social and cultural sphere where they confront the challenges of worldly rituals following Liniang's resurrection.

In the scene of "Resurrection", the red railings positioned at the forefront and background of the stage ascend and descend alternately, delineating the boundary between reality and the dream realm. Through this folding space, Liniang and Mengmei venture into each other's dreams, where time and space are inverted, flipped, and layered, seamlessly weaving together past, present, and future. This dynamic interplay prompts contemplation on whose dream they are inhabiting.

The intricate patterns of flowers and birds adorning the costumes of the protagonists hold significant symbolism, intricately aligned with the characters' personas and fates in the narrative. As Liu Mengmei enters the stage, the garden backdrop adopts a desolate, monochromatic palette of black, white, and gray, contrasting with the vibrant, colorful scene that unfolds when Liniang makes her appearance. The shifting, dappled shadows cast by the trees, the myriad silhouettes and reflections of the characters, and the nuanced lighting, intricately woven into the plot, collectively contribute to the immersive theatrical experience.

Tang Xianzu is a maestro of dream-weaving, crafting multicolored, enchanting dreams that captivate audiences and draw them into the narrative. Through the vicissitudes of officialdom and life, the profound emotions of true love, and the themes of "chivalry," "affection," "Buddhism," and "immortality," Tang's repertoire extends far beyond a mere "re-encounter" with *The Peony Pavilion* alone. Indeed, it is his entire collection of "Four Dreams" that ensnares our hearts and imaginations.

A Brief Overview of the Performance History of *The Peony Pavilion*

LIU Shuli

In 1598, Tang Xianzu created *The Peony Pavilion*, known as *Reviving after Death* during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which quickly gained popularity nationwide upon its release. Tang Xianzu's letter addressed to the actors, "To Yiling¹ Luo Zhanger," indicates that *The Peony Pavilion* was performed by



■ Kunqu "Re-encounter *The Peony Pavilion*"

1 Yiling (宜伶): It is an address for the actors. [Translator's note]

actors in private homes and was well-received by audiences at the time. As one of the most influential traditional plays, it has been continuously performed from Tang Xianzu's era to the present day in the 21st century, receiving international acclaim and recognition around the world.

The performance history of *The Peony Pavilion* spanning over four hundred years can be delineated into two distinct stages: the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the modern era. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the primary performers were actors supported by affluent families, court entertainers, and professional artists. Performances took place predominantly in court settings, halls, and public theaters, with halls serving as the primary venues. In modern times, professional actors and amateurs have taken on the mantle of performers. The venues for performances primarily include public theaters such as tea gardens and theaters. Additionally, some amateur theatrical spaces also host performances of *The Peony Pavilion*.

1. The First Stage

No records of *The Peony Pavilion* being performed at the Ming Dynasty court have been uncovered. However, its performance at the Qing Dynasty court likely commenced during the reign of Emperor Jiaqing or earlier, as records exist from the reigns of Emperors Jiaqing, Daoguang, Xianfeng, Tongzhi, and Guangxu. During various celebrations, seasons, or solar terms, performances of *The Peony Pavilion* were staged at the Qing Palace. Additionally, actors were occasionally summoned to perform during the emperor's leisure time. These performers included eunuchs, inner-court performers from the Shengpingshu¹ theatrical troupes, and outer-court performers, also known as "inner court servants," employed by the palace from professional theatrical troupes.

The palace often presented lively plays depicting the peace and prosperity of the times, with the two scenes "Supervising Agriculture" and "The Infernal Judge" in *The Peony Pavilion* being prominent among them. "Supervising Agriculture" was commonly used as an "auspicious play" to kick off the troupe's performances, not restricted to specific festivals or solar terms. "The Infernal Judge" was popular for its portrayal of immortals and extravagant

¹ Shengpingshu (升平署): It was an institution in charge of palace theatre performances in the Qing Dynasty, also known as the Nanfu (南府). [Translator's note]

dancing performances by the judge. Additionally, the emperor could enjoy the Yingluan Play¹ performed by locals during his tours. During Emperor Qianlong's second southern tour, the Taiping Troupe staged 18 Yingluan Plays, including two from *The Peony Pavilion*: "Supervising Agriculture" and "A Pile of Flowers". The latter featured the appearance of fairies (the Goddess of Flowers and the December Flowers Goddess), creating a lively and festive atmosphere.

In total, the Qing Palace staged thirteen highlights from *The Peony Pavilion*, including: "The Family School," "Clearing the Garden," "Supervising Agriculture," "Traveling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," "Retracing the Dream," "Drawing a Self-Portrait," "The Servant Detective," "The Portrait Discovered," "Calling at the Portrait," "The Infernal Judge," "Hanging and Beating," and "The Happy Reunion".

Hall performances primarily encompassed presentations by family troupes and professional troupes. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, family troupes were the mainstay of Kunqu performances. Notable family troupes that showcased *The Peony Pavilion* included those led by Wang Xijue, Qian Dai, Wang Yongning, Zou Diguang, and Wu Yueshi in the Ming Dynasty, and by Mao Xiang, Li Mingrui, Zha Jizuo, Wang Wenzhi, and Yu Jinqian in the Qing Dynasty. Additionally, literati during the Ming and Qing Dynasties often staged *The Peony Pavilion* at banquets and farewell gatherings. While detailed records of specific repertoires performed by family troupes are scarce, Pan Zhiheng's commendation of the skills exhibited by Wu Yueshi's family-raised actors Changru and Jiangru suggests that highlights focusing on the central theme of love were frequently enacted. Moreover, family troupes may have presented highlights not commonly performed by professional or court troupes, such as "Parental Admonition" performed by Qian Dai's family-raised actors.

Professional troupes primarily catered to the general public. Towards the end of Emperor Qianlong's reign, there was a gradual decline in family troupes, and the focus of theatrical performances shifted from private halls to public theaters. Performances thrived, as noted by Cai Yinglong of the Qing Dynasty, who remarked, "*Reviving after Death and The Handan Dream* are popular and

¹ Yingluan Play (迎銮戏): A form of welcoming performance, originated from court rituals and gained popularity among the general populace. It was typically arranged by local officials and affluent merchants to greet the emperor during his inspection tours. The prominence of Jiangnan Yingluan Play can be traced back to Emperor Qianlong's six southern tours. Its content often featured praise for the emperor, well-wishes for longevity, and songs commemorating the period of peace and prosperity. The incorporation of innovative stage designs, intricate costumes, and diverse singing styles elevated the artistic caliber of Jiangnan Yingluan Play. [Translator's note]

widely praised throughout the country, even among the little kids."¹ During the Qianlong era, classic highlights became the "signature acts" of various types-of-role and roles. For instance, "Private Lesson," "Travelling around the Garden," and "An Enchanting Dream" were obligatory performances for Xiaodan and Tiedan, while "The Portrait Discovered" and "Calling at the Portrait" were mandatory for Xiaosheng. The highlights selected for each performance by professional troupes closely mirrored those staged in the palace, with most being adapted from the original script. Additionally, new highlights like "A Pile of Flowers" and "Ode to Flowers" were introduced, crafted by artists to reflect local customs, extol rulers, and entertain audiences.

In terms of format, court performances, family hall productions, and professional troupe shows primarily consist of highlights, with occasional full-length plays. As noted in the annotations of *The Final Version of Reviving after Death*, edited and revised by Banyuan (Tang Yunke), "The complete play comprises fifty-five highlights, requiring two days and two nights for a full performance. When time is limited, the performance may be rushed, leading to fluctuations in quality from time to time."

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, numerous literati dedicated themselves to revising *The Peony Pavilion* to enhance its stage performance effects. Among the existing literati-modified versions are Zang Maoxun's revision, Feng Menglong's renowned work *Mohanzhai's Redefinition of Romantic Encounters in The Peony Pavilion*, Xu Rixi's *Shuoyuan Revised The Peony Pavilion*, and Tang Yunke's *The Final Version of Reviving after Death*. Feng Menglong's rendition stood out as the most successful, with Wu Mei noting, "If there was a standout performance of Calling at the Painting by renowned actors, it would be Feng Menglong's version."² The artistic adaptation is also evident in scripts like *Sewing White Furs and Review on the Traditional Chinese Xiqu* during the reigns of Emperor Qianlong and Jiaqing. These scripts contain a total of thirteen highlights from *The Peony Pavilion*, including "The Family School," "Supervising Agriculture," "Travelling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," "Retracing the Dream," "The Departed Soul," "A Pile of Flowers," "The

1 《古本戏曲丛刊五集》影印清乾隆刊本蔡应龙《新制增补全琵琶重光记》文后附录《摘锦弁言》。
[See the appendix Zhai Jin Bian Yan in Cai Yinglong's *The New Supplement to the Complete Pipa Chongguang Record* in the photocopy of the Qing Dynasty Qianlong edition of *Guben Xiqu Congkan The Fifth*.]

2 吴梅撰：《冰丝馆本〈还魂记〉跋》，见《中国古典戏曲序跋汇编》（二），齐鲁书社1989年版，第1232—1233页。[Wu Mei: *The Preface to the Ice Silk Version of Reviving after Death* (See *The Chinese Classical Xiqu Preface II*). Qilu Publishing House, 1989, pp. 1232-1233.]

Infernal Judge," "The Portrait Discovered," "Calling at the Portrait," "The Happy Reunion," "Asking the Way," and "Hanging and Beating". While the literati's adapted versions retain a distinct literary flavor, the artist's adaptations tend to be more popular and adaptable to the diverse aesthetic interests of audiences.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Xiqu performers raised by families who staged *The Peony Pavilion* were typically quite young. As Pan Zhiheng mentioned, Yi Shi was only thirteen years old, while the family-raised performers under Shen Junzhang were all fourteen or fifteen-year-old girls. Li Xiangjun, the heroine of *The Peach Blossom Fan*, began learning the "Four Dreams of the Jade Pavilion"¹ from Zhou Ruisong when she was just thirteen, "demonstrating proficiency in all aspects of singing and rhythm."² Tang Xianzu himself once remarked, "The small garden should have young actors to perform to make the audience obsessed."³ Younger actors possessed a charming appearance and voice, although they may have lacked emotional depth. However, most masters of family troupes took the responsibility to train them in this regard.

In addition, in the dissemination of *The Peony Pavilion*, there is another special form called Qingchang, that is to say singing the arias without makeup and acting. *The Peony Pavilion* was widely sung as early as the Ming Dynasty, as recorded in *The Continuing Records of the Women Pleasure Boat*: "Yesterday, when I moored at Huqiu, I saw a little boy about eight or nine years old on a neighboring ship, singing *The Peony Pavilion: The Infernal Judgment* in its entirety without any pause or fuss. Isn't this what is commonly referred to as the voice of youth?"⁴ Additionally, many literati were skilled in singing, such as Daoist Yun Xian, who "is proficient in the music of *The Peony Pavilion* and has an in-depth understanding and mastery of it. Even mature and skilled musicians

1 Four Dreams of the Jade Pavilion(玉茗堂四梦): It generally refers to the Four Dreams of Lin Chuan (临川四梦), which are the combined names of four plays by Ming Dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu: *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Purple Hairpin* (《紫钗记》), *The Handan Dream* (《邯郸记》), and *The Nanke Dream* (《南柯记》). [Translator's note]

2 侯方域：《李姬传》，见侯方域撰《侯方域集》卷五，清顺治刻增修本。[Hou Fangyu: *The Biography of the Beauty Li*, see Hou Fangyu's *Collection of Hou Fangyu*, Volume 5, the revised edition engraved in *Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty*.]

3 汤显祖：《帅从升兄弟园上作》，见徐朔方笺校：《汤显祖全集》（二）诗文卷十八，北京古籍出版社1999年版，第786页。[Tang Xianzu: *Shuai Cong Sheng Xiong Di Yuan Shang Zuo*, see Xu Shuofang's annotated and revised *The Complete Works of Tang Xianzu II*, *Poems and Writings* vol.18. Beijing Ancient Books Publishing House, 1999, p. 786.]

4 个中生编：《吴门画舫续录·纪事》，见《香艳丛书》，人民文学出版社1994年版，第4843页。[Ge Zhongsheng (Ed.): *The Continuing Records of the Women Pleasure Boat: Chronicle*. See *Xiangyan Series*, *People's Literature Publishing House*, 1994, p. 4843.]

can't find any mistakes."¹ The tradition of Qingchang, *The Peony Pavilion* has persisted to this day.

2. The Second Stage

During the Republic of China era, *The Peony Pavilion* continued to serve as an enlightening play, laying the groundwork for various roles in Jingju. Dan actors typically began with performances of "Travelling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," and "Retracing the Dream," while Xiaosheng actors usually started with "The Portrait Discovered" and "Calling at the Portrait." In modern times, numerous renowned actors have showcased highlights from *The Peony Pavilion*. For instance, Zhu Lianfen and Xu Xiaoxiang, two of the "13 famous actors of Tongguang" during the Qing Dynasty, performed "Travelling around the Garden" and "An Enchanting Dream." Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun, and Cheng Yanqiu, part of the "Modern Four Famous Dan," presented "Travelling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," and "Chunxiang Disturbs Class." The repertoire performed by the Xianni Troupe, Suzhou Dazhang, and Daya Kunqu Troupe can be considered representative. In comparison with *Sewing White Furs*, there was only one additional piece, "Ode to Flowers," while the other 13 remained unchanged.

In terms of script structure choices, full-length plays have become scarce after the reign of Qianlong, with highlights dominating the stage. However, contemporary audiences, especially those abroad, are not as familiar with the plots, hence they tend to prefer full-length plays. Nevertheless, not all fifty-five highlights from the original work are performed; instead, the major ones are selectively excerpted and performed together. Most modern adaptations focus on shortening the play. As Hong Sheng once remarked, "The essence of *The Peony Pavilion* lies in the transition between death and life. The five highlights from life to death include 'An Enchanting Dream,' 'Retracing the Dream,' 'The Diagnosis,' 'Drawing a Self-Portrait,' and 'Mourning for the Loss,' while the ones from death to life are 'The Roving Soul,' 'The Tryst,' 'The Happy



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Association,' 'Love Vows,' and 'Reviving.'"¹ Contemporary adaptations often revolve around these ten highlights. One of the most representative adaptations is the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, comprising twenty-seven highlights in total. The first volume includes "Parental Admonition," "Private Lesson," "An Enchanting Dream," "Ambitious Thoughts," "Retracing the Dream," "Nu Die," "Drawing a Self-Portrait," "The Daoist Wizard," and "The Departed Soul." The second volume features "The Infernal Judge," "The Residence in Another Place," "Recalling the Beauty," "The Portrait Discovered," "The Roving Soul," "The Tryst," "Alarming at Huaizhou," "Love Vows," and "Reviving." The third volume comprises "Moving around for the Marriage," "Moving to Another Town," "Going to Hangzhou," "Defeating the Pirates," "Meeting the Parent,"

1 钱谦益著，清钱曾笺注，钱仲联标校：《牧斋有学集》卷三十二，上海古籍出版社1996年版，第1173页。[Qian Qianyi, with notes by Qian Zeng of the Qing dynasty, and proofread by Qian Zhonglian: Mu Zhai You Xue Ji. Vol. 32. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1996, p. 1173.]

1 《康熙原刊牡丹亭还魂记序跋》，见（明）汤显祖著，（清）陈同，谈则，钱宜合评；李保民点校：《国学典藏 牡丹亭》，上海古籍出版社2017年版，第196页。[The Preface and Postscript to the Original Edition of *The Peony Pavilion: Reviving after Death* in the Kangxi Era, in *The Collection of Chinese Classics: The Peony Pavilion*, authored by Tang Xianzu from the Ming Dynasty, evaluated by Chen Tong, Tan Ze, and Qian Yihe from the Qing Dynasty, and annotated by Li Baomin. Published by Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House in 2017, p. 196.]

"Mooring at Huaiyin," "Looking for Mengmei," "Being Forcibly Tortured," and "The Happy Reunion." Most full-length plays typically encompass the highlights from "Travelling around the Garden" to "Reviving."

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *The Peony Pavilion* has undergone adaptations and performances by major Xiqu schools and Kunqu troupes on the Chinese mainland. For instance, the National Style Kun-Su Troupe presented Zhou Chuanying's version in 1953, the Shanghai Xiqu School showcased Su Xue'an's adapted version in 1957, and the Beijing Kunqu Research Institute featured Hua Cuishen's adaptation in 1959. Similarly, the Chenzhou Xiang-Kun Troupe offered Yu Maosheng's version in 1962, while the Zhejiang Kunqu Troupe, with playwrights Zhou Shirui and Wang Fengmei, presented their adaptation in 1993. Other notable adaptations include those by the Zhejiang Jing-kun Art Theatre (by Gu Zhaoshen in 2000), the Jiangsu Kunqu Troupe (with various playwrights including Gu Duhuang, Hu Ji, Ding Xiuxun, and Zhang Hong), and The Northern Kunqu Theatre (by Shi Tao in 1981). The Shanghai Kunqu Troupe has also contributed several adaptations over the years, including versions by Lu Kanzhi and Liu Mingjin in 1982, Tang Baoxiang in 1994, Fang Jiayi in 1997, and Wang Renjie in 1999.

Since its designation as one of the first Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001, Kunqu has experienced a resurgence in popularity. Various versions of *The Peony Pavilion* have been staged in China, each with its own premiere time, choreographers, and performers. Here are some notable examples: The Youth Version, premiered in 2004 and produced by Bai Xianyong, with artistic direction by Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing. Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying starred as protagonists in this nine-hour production. The Campus Inheritance Version, debuted in 2019, was also planned and produced by Bai Xianyong, and directed by Wang Shiyu. Students from 16 universities, led by Peking University, collaborated in a two-and-a-half-hour performance. The Live Garden Version, directed by Tan Dun and featuring Zhang Jun as the protagonist, lasted 70 minutes. The Royal Granary Hall Version, directed by Lin Zhaohua and Wang Shiyu in 2007, with Zeng Jie and Hu Zhexing in starring roles, ran for 110 minutes. The Master Version was presented by veteran artists at the 2014 National Kunqu Inheritance Report-back Performance of *The Peony Pavilion* in Beijing. Additionally, there are other versions such as the Shanghai Kunqu Classic Version, Zhejiang Kunqu Royal Court Version, Suzhou Kunqu Youth Version, Jiangsu Kunnan Kunqu Version, Beikun Dadu Version, Xiangkun Tianxiang Version, and the Yongjia Version of Wenzhou Yongkun. In 2021, students from the Grade 2016 Small Kunqu Class of Suzhou Art School collectively performed a campus version of *The Peony*

Pavilion, lasting approximately two and a half hours. With qualified successors and numerous amateur Kunqu enthusiasts regularly performing arias or highlights from *The Peony Pavilion*, its legacy continues to thrive.

Domestic troupes have continuously received invitations to showcase *The Peony Pavilion* overseas. For instance, in 1986, Jiangsu Kunqu Theatre journeyed to France to present *The Peony Pavilion* at the Paris Autumn Festival, embarking on a month-long tour. Similarly, The Northern Kunqu Theatre, Hong Kong Jing-Kun Troupe, and Shanghai Kunqu Troupe have all had performances in France. In June 2010, the Royal Granary Hall version graced Italian stages. In April 2016, faculty and students from Shenyang Normal University participated in the 2016 Sam Wanamaker International Theatre Festival in the UK, offering excerpts from *The Peony Pavilion* (co-directed by Wang Yansong and Zhang Wei, with a duration of 4 minutes). The youth version stands as a symbol of Kunqu's revival. It has been staged over 400 times on the Chinese mainland and has toured extensively in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, Austria, Greece, Japan, and Singapore. According to Mr. Yu Jiulin, portraying Liu Mengmei and serving as Deputy Director of Suzhou Kunqu Theatre, the first overseas tour occurred in 2006, spanning four cities in the western United States over a month, earning accolades from local media as "the most significant influence of traditional Chinese Xiqu on American culture since Mei Lanfang's performances in the United States." In 2008, it achieved success with two rounds of six performances each in a fully commercial format in London. As of 2022, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* has been staged 54 times abroad.

In modern times, *The Peony Pavilion* has begun to be translated into foreign languages and performed internationally. Vincenz Hundhausen, a German professor at Peking University, translated highlights such as "Supervising Agriculture," "Clearing the Garden," and "An Enchanting Dream," which were performed at the auditorium of Peking Union Medical College in November 1934 and at the Shanghai Lanxin Grand Theatre in 1935. From the 1990s onwards, there was a surge in performances of *The Peony Pavilion* abroad, including various versions such as the pioneer version (directed by Peter Sellars, composed by Tan Dun, starring Hua Wenyi and Huang Ying in 1998, lasting three hours), the folk version (directed by Chen Shizheng, starring Qian Yi and Wen Yuhang in 1999, featuring all 55 highlights and lasting a total of 20 hours), the doll theatre version (directed by Feng Guangyu and Stephen Kaplin in 2000), and the Sino-Japanese version (starring Tamasaburo Bando and Yu Jiulin in 2008, lasting two and a half hours), among others. The impact of international dissemination is closely tied to the renown of directors,

composers, and actors involved.

The Peony Pavilion has also made its way onto the screen. The first film adaptation was "Chunxiang Disturbs Class" starring Mei Lanfang in 1920. In 1959, Mei Lanfang co-starred with Yu Zhenfei and Yan Huizhu in "An Enchanting Dream in the Garden." Additionally, there was a Ganju version of *The Peony Pavilion* in 1961. Following the 1980s, color films emerged, such as "The Peony Pavilion" starring Zhang Jiqing and Wang Hengkai in 1986, "Retracing the Dream" and "The Infernal Judge" starring Liang Guyin, "Travelling around the Garden" and "An Enchanting Dream" starring Wang Fengmei, "Travelling around the Garden" and "An Enchanting Dream" co-starring Hua Wenyi and Gu Tiehua, "The Portrait Discovered" and "Calling at the Portrait" featuring Yu Zhenfei's recorded voice and acted by Cai Zhengren, and "Travelling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," and "Retracing the Dream" with recorded voices by Yan Huizhu and Yu Zhenfei and acted by Zhang Xunpeng and Cai Zhengren, among others. With technological advancements, nearly every performance of various theatrical genres can now be livestreamed and accessed online, facilitating wider dissemination and greatly expanding the Xiqu audience base.

As a quintessential repertoire of Kunqu, *The Peony Pavilion* has been gradually adapted or transplanted into other forms of oral storytelling and singing, as well as various local Xiqu genres. Beijing Quyi, Zidishu, Tanci, Tanhuang, Xiaoqu, and other storytelling and singing art forms have all incorporated elements from *The Peony Pavilion* into their performances. Local Xiqu genres such as Pihuang, Gaoqiang, Huangmeixi, Yueju, Cantonese Yueju, Ganju, Yuju, and the Caicha Xi of Fuzhou have also produced adaptations of *The Peony Pavilion*. Additionally, there have been contemporary stage dramas, dance dramas, and television adaptations of the play.

Each adaptation represents a new creative endeavor that reflects diverse aesthetic pursuits. Some versions maintain a deep respect for tradition while also incorporating modern elements, while others take a deconstructive approach to traditional Kunqu, offering valuable insights into Chinese culture despite any limitations in fully showcasing the art of Kunqu. Overall, *The Peony Pavilion* has enjoyed a long history of performances with a large and diverse audience, numerous classical highlights, and various avenues of dissemination, thus playing a significant role on the global theater stage.

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Examining the Global Dissemination and Evolution of Chinese Xiqu: Confronting Challenges and Dilemmas in this Decade

HUANG Xirui

While Chinese Xiqu (usually translated as "opera.") has gained relatively widespread recognition overseas since the 1920s, establishing a stable audience base, it must be acknowledged that over the past decade, Chinese Xiqu's dissemination abroad has encountered significant challenges in this new era. The show of Chinese Xiqu tours have seen low attendance rates, with the majority of Chinese audiences. The age demographic of the audience tends to be older; the atmosphere of the live shows has always reminiscent of a "closed-circle celebration." It has become increasingly difficult to attract new Western audiences, making it challenging to break out of this inner circle. The prospect of recreating the cultural fervor of Mei Lanfang's tours from a century ago appears to be nearly impossible. If we into this these issue nowadays, four key factors contribute to these challenges:

Firstly, lack of reform in traditional Chinese Xiqu repertoire. Classic Xiqu works such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Drunken Beauty*, *Orphan of the Zhao's Family*, *Butterfly Lovers* (LiangZhu), *The Story of the Western Wing*, and *The Legend of the White Snake* began substantial overseas dissemination in the 1920s. However, after a century, these works have seen limited evolution. Changes have been primarily cosmetic, with more exquisite costumes and modernized stage settings. The character development and scripts remain largely unchanged, and the performance styles continue to mirror the past.

Another challenging issue is the absence of captivating new productions that can continuously perform in the modern era. While Chinese Xiqu has some new works in recent years, their narratives typically face immense cultural barriers and ideological differences, making it difficult for them to gain traction overseas. After their initial premieres, they are seldom restaged, which hinders

audience feedback and the potential for script refinement through continuous performances.

Furthermore, in comparison to traditional western form of theatrical genres like drama, opera, and musical theatre, which are more familiar to young western audiences, Chinese Xiqu has relatively low recognition overseas. In order to enhance their understanding of Chinese Xiqu culture requires accessible and comprehensible educational methods. However, because most Chinese Xiqu Troupes' promotion and public education efforts are concentrated on Chinese online platforms such WeChat and Weibo, they do not engage with Western social medias. This has led to a lack of awareness of Chinese Xiqu culture, among young western, making it challenging to pique their interest.

Last but not least, in the global art market, Chinese Xiqu as a genre must compete with various other art forms all over the world, including traditional genres like mainstream cinema, drama, musicals, and traditional operas, which typically enjoy larger market shares and greater recognition among western audiences. Emerging genres have even more diversity, such as interactive theater, where audiences can freely move within the performance space, choose their preferred storylines, and experience a high level of engagement. Additionally, experimental productions like improvisational theater, where each performance is uniquely improvised by actors, provide audiences with a novel experience as no two shows are identical. These immersive and experimental elements are aspects that traditional genres struggle to replicate, making them highly appealing to audiences.

Apart from traditional and emerging stage genres, contemporary entertainment has seen the rise of streaming platforms, such as the well-known Netflix and HBO, with Amazon and Apple also launching their own streaming services. These platforms have further fragmented overseas audience for Chinese Xiqu, as viewers now have a plethora of content options to choose from without leaving their homes.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of diversified entertainment and information, the challenge for traditional Chinese Xiqu to gain traction overseas and compete with these emerging genres and entertainment forms looms large.

Thus, The author would like to propose the following pathways and solutions for reference. These proposed solutions aim to revitalize and make Chinese Xiqu more appealing to international and younger western audiences, ultimately contributing to its continued success and influence abroad.

Firstly, strengthening reforms in traditional Chinese Xiqu productions:

Incorporate contemporary elements into traditional Xiqu texts.

In the original script, consider removing intricate and culturally specific content that may be challenging for overseas audiences to grasp. For example, the fan-tearing scene in *Dream of the Red Chamber* might be modified or omitted when performed in western countries, as many American audiences were pretty confused when seeing this action in the previous production, they do not understand the significance of the action. Such adjustments can enhance the accessibility of the productions.

Simplify costume designs and stage presentations, creating a more modern and less stereotypical depiction of China. Western audiences, especially the younger generation, have moved beyond the stage of exoticism for Eastern elements. Excessive use of Chinese cultural elements may be seen as aesthetically burdensome. Modern interpretations and stage settings often resonate better with young western audiences.

Establish stronger connections with contemporary social issues while retaining the core narrative of traditional Chinese Xiqu scripts. Consider modernizing the settings, changing character relationships, and adapting the original script creatively. For instance, in the *Butterfly Lovers* (the Chinese equivalent of *Romeo and Juliet*), Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai could be portrayed as contemporary university students rather than two students from ancient Chinese Man-only school. Such changes can enhance understanding and add novelty for Western audiences.

Secondly, support for new Xiqu productions: encourage and support the creation of new Xiqu scripts through official policies and institutions.

Non-political themes should receive incentives, such as university-based competitions and awards for new Chinese Xiqu scripts. Also, we could promote social participation by organizing competitions to collect new scripts. The winner of the new scripts competition could receive opportunities for collaboration with professional Chinese Xiqu theater troupes, work with famous directors and script publication. This approach encourages playwrights to draw inspiration from contemporary life, emotions, and societal issues, while still exploring historical, cultural, folkloric, and literary sources. In other words, it could make the new Chinese Xiqu scripts more relevant and fun.

Continuously support outstanding award-winner by facilitating their refinement based on audience feedback. This ongoing optimization process will enhance the quality and appeal of these productions. Sustained excellence is crucial for maintaining audience engagement during overseas tours as well as establishing

a strong international presence.

Thirdly, Consider incorporating elements of Western music into new Chinese Xiqu compositions. Most contemporary Chinese Xiqu productions already use pre-recorded electronic synthesized music rather than live orchestras. While the recorded music often combines Western orchestration with traditional Chinese instruments, the compositional forms and techniques have remained relatively unchanged. Integrating elements from various Western music genres such as pop, country, jazz, soul, or even rock-and-roll and rap could offer a novel auditory experience to western audiences.

This also necessitates universities to bolster the comprehensive development of musical literacy among students majoring in Chinese Xiqu Composition. This entails not only the study of traditional Chinese pentatonic scales (and their variations within the six- and seven-tone systems) , but also a robust foundational knowledge in Western music composition techniques. Students should acquire proficiency in various Western music genres or at least know the background of western music that have evolved since the 16th century. Such an approach ensures their preparedness for future Chinese Xiqu compositions, enabling them to seamlessly integrate both Western and Chinese composition techniques and adeptly employ the vocabulary of these two distinct musical languages.

Fourthly, it is imperative to bolster the promotion of Chinese Xiqu on overseas social media platforms. Chinese Xiqu troupes should establish official accounts on prominent foreign media platforms to engage with younger audiences abroad. Alongside disseminating information about overseas performances, these troupes should actively manage their social media accounts. The troupes could share captivating anecdotes about Chinese Xiqu characters, actors, disseminating trivia, and providing fundamental Xiqu knowledge to educate young Western opera enthusiasts. This approach will ignite their interest in the genre and aid in accumulating essential background knowledge, ultimately contributing to the expansion of the western audience in the future.

With the ascendancy of short video, it becomes imperative to render the dissemination of Xiqu overseas more accessible, or we could say “lighter”. Consider employing platforms such as TikTok for succinct video presentations or opt for dynamic explanations on YouTube as alternatives to text-based content, ensuring that Xiqu education becomes a more engaging endeavor.

Fifthly, Chinese Xiqu troupes can collaborate with local Chinese communities and educational institutions in various foreign countries and regions. They can

stage adapted Chinese Xiqu works as charitable performances in primary and secondary schools, as well as universities abroad. Furthermore, they should actively advocate for the establishment of Xiqu clubs within these educational institutions, offering students the opportunity to partake in the joys of performing Xiqu and nurturing a new generation of Xiqu aficionados.

Sixthly, Chinese Xiqu should be innovatively intertwined with other emerging theatrical genres, and cutting-edge technologies to captivate a younger overseas audience. As mentioned earlier, immersive theater has garnered substantial attention as a burgeoning genre. Xiqu can incorporate interactive elements into traditional productions, bringing the audience closer to both the actors and the story-lines. For example, in a production like *The Legend of the White Snake*, the narratives of the White Snake and the Green Snake could be presented as two parallel story-lines, permitting the audience to choose which narrative to follow—a concept akin to the successful immersive theater production "Sleep No More" at the McKittrick Hotel in New York.

Furthermore, with the proliferation of streaming platforms, including gaming, many young individuals have shifted their entertainment preferences away from traditional theaters. Rapid advancements in new technology have seamlessly integrated virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) into gaming and select film productions. By amalgamating Xiqu with state-of-the-art technology, audiences could experience Chinese Xiqu in VR or even partake in Chinese-Xiqu-themed gaming experiences, fully immersing themselves in traditional Xiqu stories and engaging directly with the characters in the stories. Such innovative approaches hold the potential to significantly resonate with younger western audiences and address the prevailing challenge of an aging overseas Xiqu audience.

The dissemination of Chinese Xiqu abroad nowadays demands a multifaceted strategy that transcends the confines of any single operatic genre. To effectively address the challenges that Chinese Xiqu has encountered in its international outreach over the past decade, it is imperative to draw upon knowledge from various disciplines, including contemporary social dynamics, technological advancements, cultural creativity, psychology, and sociology. This approach, in contrast to relying on a one-size-fits-all communication template, will enable us to formulate more sophisticated and context-specific solutions.

We need to continually innovate, always making an alignment with the forefront of developments in theatrical arts. Simultaneously, open and inclusive approach and perspective are essential.

We should strive for innovative development while building upon the rich traditions of Chinese Xiqu. Meanwhile, as we expand our presence overseas, we must also nurture our own growth, thereby contributing significantly to the enduring development of the genre Xiqu.

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Introduction to Classical Plays (VIII)

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The Newly-Adapted Kunju *Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty*

Kunju, a genre within Chinese Xiqu, employs a single singing style called Kunshan Qiang to narrate stories, originating during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty (around 1573-1620 A.D.). Broadly, Kunshan Qiang embodies the vocal expression in Chinese Xiqu, while Kunqu represents its musical style, particularly the oratorical singing off-stage. The term "newly-adapted Kunju" contrasts with traditional Kunju repertoires, denoting productions that are entirely new in plot, music, and singing. It encompasses both original works and those that adapt old stories with rewritten lyrics. Categorized by theme, these plays include historical dramas like *Princess Wencheng*, *Escorting Lady Jing On A 1000 Mile*, *Hairpin Phoenix*, *Emperor Taizong Of Tang Dynasty*, *Picture With Blood*, and *Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty*, among others.

Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty is a new historical play penned by the renowned scriptwriter Guo Qihong. This eleven-act drama draws from real historical events, including "Preparing For The War," "Appreciating The Xiao," "Stealthily Having Fun," "Encountering," "Mourning," "Leaving The Temple," "Accepting Surrender," "Discussing Poetry," "Feasting," and "Begging for cleverness". The narrative primarily unfolds the historical tale of Li Yu, the ruler of the Southern Tang Dynasty. Amidst Emperor Zhao Kuangyin's plans to conquer the region south of the Yangtze River, Li Yu becomes ensnared in his romantic affair with Zhou Yuying, indulging in poetry and love while neglecting court affairs. Ultimately, they both fall into Zhao's captivity, leading to Li Yu's tragic demise at the hands of Zhao Kuangyin due to his famed work *Yu Beauty*, celebrated throughout the region. The play's focal point lies in portraying the

profound contradictions and inner struggles of Li Yu's character. As noted by screenwriter Guo Qihong, "He embodies the dual roles of an emperor witnessing his kingdom's downfall and a remarkable poet. Such a profound contradiction is harmonized within one individual, presenting a uniquely compelling and complex personality. For a playwright, Li Yu's journey offers an intriguing subject rich in character development and legendary narrative."¹

The premiere of this play took place in 1987 at the Northern Kunju Theatre, featuring Ma Yusen as Li Yu, Hou Shaokui as Zhao Kuangyin, and Hong Xuefei as Zhou Yuying. Throughout the development of the plot, the actors skillfully employed varying singing voices and body language to depict the multifaceted nature of their characters. Ma Yusen, portraying Li Yu, adeptly portrayed the transition from initial panic and cowardice upon learning of his brother's hostage situation to a calm acceptance of his fate, encapsulated by his poignant declaration, "Li Yu originally came for poetry and should go with it." This portrayal masterfully encapsulated the dual identity of the deposed monarch and esteemed poet, elevating the character to a sublime level. Additionally, many of the lyrics in the play were adapted from Li Yu's original poetry, imbuing the performance with a plaintive and poignant essence, both simple yet profound. Similarly, Hou Shaokui, in the role of Zhao Kuangyin, commanded the stage with regal authority upon meeting the envoy of the Southern Tang Dynasty. Subsequently, as he witnessed Li Yu's genuine love for his wife Yuying, he conveyed a sense of remorse and longing, reflecting on his own lost love for Lady Jing. However, his hypocritical demeanor was exposed as he ultimately persuaded Li Yu to commit suicide under the pretext of the widespread fame of *Yu Beauty* throughout the region. As noted by Guo Qihong in *The Creation of Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty*, "There is no absolute positive or negative character in life... Such a perspective not only lacks theoretical validity but also fosters stereotyping and formulaic characterization in literary creation."² It is through the nuanced portrayal of characters and their inner conflicts that *Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty* captivates its audience.

After the successful premiere of this rendition of *Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty*, it underwent several rehearsals and adaptations. Notably, the Guangdong Chaoju Theatre reorganized its music and transplanted the play into Chaoju. In 1994, Zhang Sicong and Gu Song'en adapted it into a Yueju

1 郭启宏.《南唐遗事》创作琐记[J].当代电视,1988(04):29-31.[Guo Qihong. The Creation of Incidents of the Southern Tang Dynasty [J]. Contemporary Television, 1988(04): 29-31.]

2 同上.[ibid]

version, which was performed by the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yueju Troupe. Additionally, it was transformed into a television series under the direction of Yuan Munv. This illustrates that exceptional scripts can withstand the test of time, diverse theatrical genres, and various artistic forms, showcasing enduring vitality.

The Newly-Adapted Jingju *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu*

Jingju, also known as Jingxi, stands as one of China's national treasures. Originating in the mid to late Qing Dynasty, it has emerged as the most influential genre of Xiqu throughout China, with its epicenter in Beijing. The term "newly-adapted Jingju" distinguishes itself from traditional Jingju repertoires, encompassing entirely new plots, music, and singing styles, as well as adaptations that retain old story-lines but feature rewritten lyrics. A key characteristic of this genre is the infusion of modern consciousness into its characters, breaking away from the original stereotypical images and offering audiences a fresh aesthetic experience.

In 1988, the Shanghai Jingju Theatre premiered a newly-adapted historical drama titled *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu*, based on the classic novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Directed by Ma Ke, with Gao Yiming overseeing the singing design, the production starred renowned actors Shang Changrong and Yan Xingpeng in the roles of Cao Cao and Yang Xiu, respectively. The play unfolds the tragic narrative between Cao Cao and Yang Xiu. Following the Battle of Red Cliff, Cao Cao sought to stage a comeback, enlisting talented individuals and bringing Yang Xiu, a strategist, into his fold. However, their clashing personalities bred suspicion in Cao Cao's mind, ultimately leading to Yang Xiu's demise. The script offers a nuanced reassessment of Cao Cao, shedding light on his human nature and modern relevance. It delves into Cao Cao's conflicting emotions—his eagerness for talent tempered by jealousy—and deftly portrays his internal struggles as a rational and tactful leader. Furthermore, it explores the dichotomy between ideals and reality. Through these characters, the audience is invited to reflect on the tragic consequences arising from the discord between a monarch and his advisor, two figures who could have otherwise collaborated to achieve greater feats.

In the stage adaptation of *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu*, Shang Changrong, known for his portrayal of Cao Cao, boldly departed from previous performance conventions, crafting a fresh interpretation of the character that left a lasting

impression. Taking the character as the focal point, Shang flexibly adopted various performance techniques. For instance, he ingeniously merged different styles into one, allowing Cao Cao to simultaneously engage in both the "singing" of the copper hammer painted face and the "acting" of the frame painted face. Correspondingly, there were significant changes to the character's facial makeup, transitioning from the traditional "cold white" to "warm white," with larger red ink markings between the eyebrows. The placement of the "matchmaker mole," originally meant to denote ugliness, was shifted from the lower face to the eyebrow, transforming it into a symbol of nobility and authority, thus creating an entirely new facial aesthetic.

Moreover, while preserving the traditional characteristics of the role types, Shang Changrong skillfully incorporated various dramatic movements to imbue Cao Cao with greater vitality. Traditionally, the role of Cao Cao, as a copper hammer painted face, typically conveys a sense of authority and restraint, with emotions conveyed more through singing than acting. However, Shang Changrong introduced subtle gestures and movements to enhance Cao Cao's stage presence, such as expressing excitement by clapping his thigh upon discovering talent, or conveying regret through trembling hands after mistakenly killing Kong Wendai. These nuanced details seamlessly integrated with the character's external performance, enriching Cao Cao's portrayal and bringing him to life on stage with remarkable clarity and depth.

Since its premiere, *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu* has garnered numerous awards, including the "Golden Shield Award" from the Chinese Xiqu Society in 1989, the "Excellent Achievement Award" at the Shanghai Culture and Arts Festival in 1990, the "Excellent Achievement Award" at the Shanghai Literature and Arts Award in 1991, and the inaugural "Baosteel Elegant Art Award" in 1993, among others. In June 2018, a Jingju film adaptation of the same title, based on the original stage production, debuted at the Shanghai Film Festival. Subsequently, in October of the same year, the film received a nomination for Best Xiqu Film at the 32nd Golden Rooster Awards of Chinese Cinema. Renowned performing artist Pu Cunxin lauded its impact, comparing it to the profound resonance evoked by Shakespeare's plays. This Jingju rendition of *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu* has not only achieved significant artistic acclaim but has also become emblematic of modern Chinese Xiqu, with the film adaptation further enhancing its allure and cultural significance.

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Chinese Theatre in the First Half of 2023

HONG Qiao

In the first half of 2023, the previously subdued Chinese theater market experienced a gradual revival, heralding a long-awaited resurgence. Audiences flocked back to theaters, rediscovering the allure of live performances, with many productions offering profoundly captivating audiovisual experiences. These works spanned across various genres, ranging from modern drama to traditional Xiqu and dance drama. As performances resumed on a regular basis, academic exchange activities also regained their former vigor.

1. Modern Drama

On April 20, 2023, the Jing'an Modern Drama Valley held its opening ceremony along with the premiere of *Activity Changes Human* at the Daning Theatre in Shanghai. Running from April 20 to May 8, the event showcased a total of 23 productions, organized into six series: "Literary Adaptations," "Starlight Theatre," "Classic Revivals," "Original Fan Favorites," "Cross-disciplinary Diversity," and "International Perspectives." This lineup featured a mix of highly anticipated international productions and promising domestic originals. Highlights of the "Literary Adaptations" series included the



■ Modern Drama *Death Variations*



■ Modern Drama *Four Machines*

opening play *Activity Changes Human*, adapted from Wang Meng's novel, and Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum: A Novel of China*. Additionally, the series featured works like Caryl Churchill's *A Number* and Jon Fosse's *Death Variations*, winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature. This rendition of *Death Variations* retained the iconic "water stage" setting, emphasizing existential and spiritual dilemmas. Imagery such as water ripples, whirlpools, and giant waves reflected on the canopy enhanced the atmospheric intensity, metaphorically alluding to humanity's oppressive conditions and inner struggles.

On May 21st, the 9th Cao Yu Prize for Playwriting and the 31st China Theatre Plum Blossom Award were ceremoniously held in Guangzhou. Five outstanding works, including dramas like *Deep Sea* and *The Dreamer*, the Huaguxi opera *The True Story of A School Master*, *Minju Life*, and the drama *Dong Qichang*, were honored with the prestigious Cao Yu Prize for Playwriting, while 15 accomplished actors, among them *Luo Chenxue*, were recognized with the esteemed Plum Blossom Award.

Following this, from May 26th to 28th, the inaugural production of the Nine People Theater Troupe's Republican Intellectual Series, titled *Four Machines*, graced the stage at the China Grand Theatre. Drawing inspiration from an early 20th-century anecdote at Peking University, the play presents a fictionalized account of the humanities entrance examination held at the university in 1919. Through lively debates among intellectuals, the play provides a window into the

social dynamics of a bygone era. These debates not only touch upon issues of governance and education amidst turbulent times but also prompt reflection on the fate of the nation and the individual. While reason propels the narrative forward, the playwright's adept use of humor and wit ensures that the audience is engaged throughout, resulting in a captivating performance that elicits both tension and laughter.

On June 8th, the historical drama *Spear of King of Wu and Sword of King of Yue*, starring Pu Cunxin, graced the stage at the Beijing International Theater Center. Inspired by historical events, the play is crafted in rhymed prose, adding accessibility and depth to its narrative.

On June 20th, *Our Jing Ke*, written by Mo Yan and directed by Ren Ming, premiered at the Cao Yu Theater. Originating in 2011, this production seamlessly blends philosophical ponderings with light-hearted humor, providing both intellectual stimulation and entertainment. Departing from traditional drama structures, *Our Jing Ke* is divided into ten sections resembling chapters in a novel, unfolding a linear narrative with rich literary nuances.

2.Xiqu

On March 11th, the "2022 China Small Theater Xiqu Exhibition," co-organized by the Chinese Theatre Association, Shanghai Center of Chinese Opera, the Propaganda Department of the Huangpu District Committee of the Communist Party of China, and *Wenhui Daily*, took place in Shanghai. Huaju *The Shadow of the Shadow*, *Jingju Pure One*, and *In a Straw Cloak in Mist and Rain* were showcased at the Shanghai Wanping Theater and the Shanghai Changjiang Theater. In *The Shadow of the Shadow*, elements of stage design, costumes, and performance techniques are intricately intertwined, creating connections, entanglements, and puzzles. For example, the red ribbon held by characters serves as both a narrative device, delineating scenes, and a prop. It morphs into various forms: at times a building, at others a guqin (Chinese zither), and occasionally a pivotal point in the performance. This imaginative approach, coupled with innovative stage design, simplifies prop complexity and enriches the poetic ambiance of the stage. Furthermore, this thread symbolizes hidden connections between two or more stories, metaphorically representing life's interconnectedness and destiny, gradually unfolding within a single thread.

On March 28th, the new Guofeng environmental Yueju *New Dragon Gate*



■ Huaiju *The Shadow of the Shadow*



■ Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn*

Inn, directed by Mao Weitao, premiered at the Butterfly Theater in Hangzhou, heralding the beginning of a long-term residency model. Building upon the tradition of an all-female cast in Yueju, *New Dragon Gate Inn* adopts an "environmental theater" style, breaking the conventional "fourth wall" of traditional performances by extending the performance space into the audience seating area, effectively transforming the entire theater into an inn. The audience area is enclosed by railings, facilitating occasional interactions between actors and the audience. Audience members are not merely spectators but also integral participants in the play, receiving candies distributed by the characters and engaging in playful exchanges with the actors. According to artistic director Mao Weitao, while the play deviates from the traditional framed stage performance logic and narrative style, it nonetheless preserves and honors the essence of Yueju art and traditional theater. The play not only incorporates Yueju's earliest "recitative singing" but also seamlessly integrates "martial arts dance" with theatrical movements. Over the course of six months of performances, the play has seen its audience attendance rate increase from an initial 80% to 100%. It stands as a shining example of how traditional opera can innovate and transcend barriers, attracting a younger audience to theaters.

From June 22nd to 24th, the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe staged the full-length 55-act Kunju *The Peony Pavilion* at the Shanghai Oriental Art Center. The production starred Luo Chenxue, recipient of the 31st China Theatre Plum Blossom Award, and Hu Weilu, winner of the leading role award at the 31st Shanghai Magnolia Drama Performance Awards. This marked the play's return to Shanghai since its premiere in November of the previous year, and it was also the first time Luo Chenxue and Hu Weilu performed in Shanghai after winning awards for their outstanding performances in the play. Within the 55 acts, audiences enjoyed splendid performances by leading male and female roles, along with expanded opportunities for other characters such as old male characters and clowns. Each act featured a recitation of exit poems by the actors, adding a classical touch to the production. Presenting the full-length play allowed audiences to witness scenes rarely seen on stage before, such as the resurrection of Du Liniang, providing a fresh viewing experience and enriching the performance history of *The Peony Pavilion*.

3. Musicals, Dance Dramas, Operas, and Others

From February 26th to 28th, the Guangzhou Acrobatics Art Theater



■ Acrobatic Dance Drama
The Butterfly Lovers



■ Dance Drama *A Dream of Red Mansions*

presented the "National Art Fund 2022 Annual Communication and Promotion Support Project" — the grand contemporary acrobatic dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* at the Guangzhou Cultural Center (New Hall), marking the first performance of 2023. Over three consecutive evenings, the audience was treated to a visual extravaganza as the storyline unfolded, featuring a series of captivating acrobatic acts such as contortion, foot juggling, diabolo, and ballet on shoulders, each skillfully illustrating different elements of the narrative.

On the afternoon of April 9th, the original ethnic dance drama *A Dream of Red Mansions* concluded its 2023 tour with a final performance at the Shandong Provincial Theatre in Jinan. While staying true to the original work, the production infuses a unique modern humanistic atmosphere, appealing to a younger audience with its rich imagination and innovative aesthetics.

The narrative structure follows the traditional episodic format, dividing the drama into twelve chapters: Entering the Mansion, Illusions, Bitterness, Visiting Home, Strolling in the Garden, Flower Burial, Lantern Festival, Lost Jade, Wedding, Reunion, Flower Funeral, and Return to the Wilderness. Through a blend of traditional and modern dramatic dance techniques, the production interprets and deconstructs the themes of *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

Each of the twelve dance segments is individually titled and can stand alone

or be interconnected, collectively portraying the rise and fall of a wealthy household and depicting the diverse lives of its women. The stage design and costume styling incorporate numerous classical symbols rich in Chinese characteristics. For instance, before Daiyu's death, the projection of Xiang bamboo onto white gauze symbolically links her with the identity of "Lady Xiang," representing her noble character. During the final dance of the Twelve Beauties, the tall, narrow chairs behind them resemble tombstones, subtly hinting at the tragic fate awaiting the Twelve Beauties as they head towards decline.

4. Academic News

From April 23rd to 30th, the 2023 International Dance Day celebration and series of academic activities on the theme "Dance·Future: Traditional Development and Boundary Expansion," hosted by the International Theatre Institute, Shanghai Theatre Academy, and China Dancers Association, took place at the Shanghai Theatre Academy through a combination of online and offline formats. The event included roundtable forums, academic seminars, workshops, performances, and more. Tobias Bianconi, the Secretary-General of the International Theatre Institute, presented a certificate to Ms. Yang Liping, the designated speaker for the 2023 International Dance Day, during the celebratory performance. Scholars, artists, and choreographers from over 20 domestic and international universities and research institutions gathered to collectively explore the future of dance art.

On May 27th and 28th, the academic symposium "Brecht and Contemporary Theatre Art," organized by the Department of Dramatic Literature of the Central Academy of Drama and co-sponsored by the International Center for Critical Theory at Peking University and the Center for Marxist Literary and Cultural Criticism at the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, was held at the Changping Campus of the Central Academy of Drama. Approximately 50 experts and scholars from nearly 20 domestic and international universities and research institutions attended the conference to discuss various topics stemming from Brecht's theories and practices in drama.

On June 21st, the "Asian Theatre College Students' Research Project Launch Ceremony," organized by the Asian Theatre Research Center and hosted by the Central Academy of Drama, was successfully held online. This year's

college student research project focuses on "Investigation and Functional Study of Applied Theatre in Our Country," aiming to deepen the understanding of the practical role of theater through students' professional research and to promote public awareness and concern for theater. Ten research teams, comprising students from nine member colleges of the center, focused on applied theater in their respective countries, conducting investigations through field visits, questionnaire surveys, and discussions. They have produced fruitful research reports, which are now available on the center's official website following the launch ceremony. These reports, significant theoretical achievements in the fields of applied theatre and Asian theatre education research, will also be published under the title "Research on Asian Theatre Education: Current Situation and Promotion of Applied Theatre," contributing to the further development of applied theatre in Asia.

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