

# Chinese Performing Arts

No. 1  
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劇國

- Empowering and Promoting Chinese Performing Arts Culture
- Let's Bridge the Culture Divide with Theatre
- On the Subjectivity of Theoretical Construction of Xiqu—Starting from Doubt on “Mei Lanfang's Performing System”
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- Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Qi Rushan and Early Xiqu Directors
- Return to Silence at the Golden Age—Discussion on the Gains and Losses of Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber*



国际戏剧协会  
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院  
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The Center Of International Theater Studies-STA

CAI Yan: emillecai@hotmail.com

CHEN Ying: cyening@126.com

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# Empowering and Promoting Chinese Performing Arts Culture

TOBIAS BIANCONE

Dear researcher, dear practitioner, dear reader:

Having visited China since 2008 and residing in Shanghai since 2015 I am observing the performing arts culture in China with an increasing admiration and awe. Having the privilege of watching performances of highest profile, I am able to experience and enjoy the gems of Xiqu (the Chinese music theatre form), drama and even experimental forms of theatre.

Being educated to watch Western kind of drama or opera, and living most of my time in Western countries, I got used to see a theatre and opera style that followed the European traditions. I also witness in the performing arts education institutions in Europe and America that, the acting students and the stage directors always fill their minds with structures and forms of the playwrights of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, of Russia and Germany, of Great Britain and France, of the Nordic Countries of Europe, as well as of all the other European countries' and the North and South American playwrights involved.

But traveling to different Asian countries, I could feel that there were other forms that could be shown on the stage or in open spaces. Other aesthetics. Other rhythms. Other songs. Other ways of singing. Since shifting away of putting my focus only on the Western traditions in theatre and related performing arts, and focusing on the continent I am living now, the Asian and Pacific regions seems to be able to astonish my over and over.

Even before settling down in Shanghai, I became aware of the richness that China has to offer. Just think of Xiqu, the Chinese form of music theatre (Chinese Opera is a misnomer), has 348 different ways to perform, and the performances are not just reduced to acting, singing and moving in the scene, it may even have acrobatic and dance in it.

Nevertheless, to reduce China to Xiqu would be unfair, as playwrights have written plays that follow the European tradition but differ from the Western plays as they pick up Chinese themes and Chinese traditions. They are able to astonish and surprise the audience with a special touch that cannot be seen in any other culture.

Is the Western way of theatre or performing arts superior to the Eastern way, to China? Or is the Chinese way to perform their dramas and Xiqu more important than the Western way. Neither nor. It is my strong conviction that there is no culture that is superior to another culture. Even if we can feel that there are hegemonic or even colonialization tendencies to observe, even today, I consider that all the cultures are equal. And the entirety of the cultures of the world is what makes this planet rich and is able to bring interesting views and different kinds of beauty to the audience, to audiences in the East and West.

This publication is intended to bring the Chinese Performing Arts Culture to you with texts for the researchers, performing artists and students in the performing arts – to everybody who is interested in the performing arts on a global scale.

The publication invites researches and practitioners to share their views on the Chinese Performing Arts Culture. If you have a text and illustrations to contribute, please get in touch with the co-editors, Gong Baorong or myself.

Reading about *Chinese Performing Arts* is just a beginning – to experience the play in video form or over Internet maybe a further step on your way of research and discovery. But evidentially and eventually, to watch a performance life is the genuine experience for becoming aware of the richness of performing arts culture of this world – in our case, the Chinese Performing Arts Culture.

I invite you to read the first volume of *Chinese Performing Arts* and recommend to you to watch a Chinese drama or Xiqu whenever a performance is offered in a location near you.

**TOBIAS BIANCONE**

*Director General of the International Theatre Institute ITI; President of the ITI/UNESCO Network for Higher Education in the Performing Arts; Honorary Professor of the Central Academy of Drama.*

# Let's Bridge the Culture Divide with Theatre

GONG BAORONG

It's October now, Autumn is in the air, and in this most gracious month, the very first issue of our magazine *Chinese Performing Arts* is almost ready for publication after years of effort on the part of many people of Shanghai Theatre Academy in their different capacities. As its chief editor, I can't help but feel like writing a few lines in honor of this moment. Forgive me please, if I sound too egotistical.

As the simple name *Chinese Performing Arts* suggests, the magazine is intended to promote Chinese theatre and drama on the broad stage of the whole world and to win over more and more people in different cultures for the unique aesthetic of Chinese performance arts. As Chinese culture is profound and glorious, so Chinese performing arts are spectacular and deep-rooted, simply an inexhaustible treasure. Historically, it can be traced back at least to the Han Dynasty (around 2 BC); and archaeological evidence definitely speaks origins far remoter in time. Even if we consider the much later full-fledged Zaju<sup>1</sup> in Song Dynasty (960-1279) as its starting point, Chinese theatre still claims a history of more than a thousand years. As for its variety, there are at least 348 types of Xiqu<sup>2</sup> native geographical distribution, is unparalleled in the world. Regarding its repertoire, there is a scholar who states that Jingju alone boasts more than 5,800 works, while more conservative researchers have counted over 1300. So, how unimaginably large the whole collection of Chinese theatre including all genres would be! As far as its vitality is concerned, all the 348 types of Xiqu are much alive on different stages and, in particular, at least 200 traditional works of Xiqu are still being performed. It is a pity that, due to various historical and cultural reasons, the international popularity and impact of Chinese theatre is pale against that of western theatre.

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1 An ancient Chinese genre of theatre combining song, dance, acrobatics and storytelling etc.

2 The Chinese word 戏曲 is generally translated as Opera or Chinese Opera, but this translation is now contested and trends to be replaced by its Pinyin Xiqu since the two genres are so different. Consequently, in our journal, we prefer to use Xiqu to stand for its old translation, also Jingju instead of Peking Opera to name 京剧.



Year 2016 is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of two great dramatists in the world, Shakespeare of the United Kingdom and Tang Xianzu of China. However, while various activities commemorating Shakespeare were taking place all over the world, those in honor of Tang Xianzu, including academic seminars or related performances, were few, and mostly in China. The only few events abroad celebrating Tang Xianzu was sponsored mainly by overseas Chinese. If Shakespeare study has long been a world phenomenon, Tang Xianzu study is only a cottage case so far. Even inside China, the situation is no less asymmetric. According to Professor Li Ruru, a theatre scholar from the University of Leeds UK, the number of academic achievements of Chinese scholars studying Shakespeare was as high as 23,000, while those about Tang Xianzu was a small fraction, 3,000. Confronted with such a huge contrast, how can we not sigh with emotion and regret, or feel like sitting on pins and needles? Is Chinese theatre too crude to attract more people? Or is Chinese theatre so unique that it naturally alienates itself from foreign audiences? Are Chinese dramatists are complacent that they never want to reach out to “foreigners”? The answer to the above questions is all no. Xiqu is unusually brilliant and the actors are highly skilled, as is recognized by experts, scholars, and ordinary audiences. No matter whether in the past or present, the performances of Chinese theatre abroad have left an impressive record and received warm welcomes from numerous foreign audiences and compliments from experts and scholars.

In the last century, Mei Lanfang made a sensation when he took the initiative to promote the quintessence of Chinese culture in Europe and America with his successful tour of Jingju shows. The art of Jingju has not only impressed ordinary audiences, but also fascinated great dramatists such as Brecht and Meyerhold. In fact, in the history of modern theatre in Europe and America, besides Meyerhold and Brecht, from Brook to Grotowski, Schechner to Mnouchkine, who has not felt the compelling beauty of oriental theatre? Who did not absorb the nutrition of oriental theatre, including Xiqu, in his creation and theory?

Although Chinese performing arts including Xiqu and drama are treasures in the world, Xiqu has made significant contribution to the development of modern and contemporary western theatre, and there have been Chinese actors who shine brightly with unique artistic light on international occasions, still the popularity and acceptance of Chinese performing arts in the world are extremely far from satisfactory, and its influence frustratingly limited: Compared with that of western theatre, it is infinitesimal. Even inside China, it is by far incomparable to that of western theatre. For this very reason Shanghai Theatre Academy, as one of the oldest institutions of higher learning for theatre arts in China, feels the urge to shoulder the responsibility of disseminating Chinese theatre arts in the world. We decided to create this professional magazine in order to make up for the severe inequality and imbalance that has too long been in the East-West dramatic exchange. We hoped that professionals and theatre enthusiasts alike, from all over the world, could have more opportunities to learn about the history and current situation of Chinese theatre, including Xiqu, as well as its unique theatrical theories, artistic

characteristics, and representative dramatists and works. Most fortunately this decision was strongly supported by the UNESCO-ITI headquartered in Paris, which helped us successfully register in France. From then on we started to push forward at full strength.

Then we found ourselves in a position to defend: In this digital age, why bother to publish a paper magazine? Indeed the print media is retreating and admittedly we are engaging in an enterprise that is a bit Don Quixotic. But not for nothing. We believe that screen reading can never equal the experience of paper reading. The internet transmits information far and wide, but it also buries information quicker and deeper. In addition, the digital media is unable to break common readers' browsing habits and guide them to stories deep but never sensational. People who are not already familiar to and curious about Chinese theatre would rarely find themselves at a site about it. Therefore, in order to win over more potential readers around the world, we must have online magazines, but we should not ignore traditional paper media. The paper magazine also has its irreplaceable advantages. First, it is solid and tangible, more intuitively appealing. Readers can hold it alone in their hands, smell the ink, and feel intimate. They will be more reluctant to put it down if the design is beautiful and the printing is fine. Second, a thematic magazine like this one is better company: even if you find an article not so interesting, you can jump over to another one, instead of simply throwing away the whole magazine. You can put it away and come back to it at any time. So, we have come so far for this paper magazine. We hope that it will not only of some help to experts on Chinese theatre, but also interest readers outside, so far.

With that in mind, we have seriously tried to make this magazine entertaining, informative and intellectually provocative, in order to attract both scholars and ordinary readers. This first issue features the Jingju master Mei Lanfang, the most influential representative figure of Chinese theatre. Considering the needs of experts and scholars, this magazine specially invited Chinese and international experts on Mei Lanfang to explore his performing art and its dissemination in the world, as well as report and discuss the latest development and trends of Mei studies. On the other hand, with ordinary enthusiasts in mind, we have devoted a few sections to information and introduction. For example, some introductory articles about the development of Jingju, Jingju's Huadan (a female role type) and Mei Lanfang theatre are there in conjunction with the special topic of Mei Lanfang. In addition, in order to meet the needs of foreign theatre peers who are eager to know about modern Chinese theatre works, an introductory section of excellent modern theatre is to be found: This issue talks about Tian Han's Jingju Tale of the *White Snake* and Huang Yuan's Kunqu *Fifteen String of Coins*. In the future, we expect to keep these sections, but we are also ready to change in response to advice from readers.

As a Chinese saying goes, everything is harder in the beginning. Now, with the publication of this inaugural issue of *Chinese Performing Arts*, we are finally taking the first step up. We are eagerly looking forward to receiving advice and support from

friends from anywhere so that we can improve on the current basis and truly realize the good wishes of building a bridge of communication between people of all countries: let our hearts connect better through arts, and may our bond of friendship become stronger and more resilient through theatre, in particular!

*GONG BAORONG*

*Professor of Shanghai Theatre Academy; Chief Editor of Chinese Performing Arts*

# On the Subjectivity of Theoretical Construction of Xiqu —Starting from Doubt on “Mei Lanfang’s Performing System”

CHEN SHIXIONG

**ABSTRACT** The lack of subjectivity and originality was once a weakness of the construction of Xiqu theory. The questioning of “Mei Lanfang performing system” is a typical example. Whether Mei Lanfang’s art is a “system” should be proved by performance practice, not just by its oral expression and literature. Taking Meyerhold’s “Organic Modeling” and Stanislavski system as examples, this paper proves that “system” can be formed and implemented first, and “literature” later, thus, no excessive demands should be made of Mei Lanfang’s. Compared with European and Russian performing arts, Oriental performing arts have natural subjectivity, profound historical accumulation and high originality. The theoretical value of Mei’s “system” can be deepened and improved by future generations in exploration.

**KEY WORDS** Xiqu Theory, Subjectivity, Mei Lanfang, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Performing Arts System, Literature, Practice

Before the period of “Western learning extending to the East”, Xiqu theories were quite pure and self-contained. However, after theatre theory was introduced into China, the situation had changes immensely. In the different historical periods, as the political, economic, and cultural relationships between China and foreign countries change, our original Xiqu theories have been influenced by the Western a profound manner. For example, we learned from the theatre theories of the Soviet Union overwhelmingly in the 1950s. In the new times of the reform and opening-up policy, we were keen to introduce and employ Western theories. The discourse systems of the foreign dramatics

have dominantly cut down the survival space of our national art theories, leading to insufficiency in the cultural and theoretic confidence. Up to today, the construction of Xiqu theories is still faced with various issues. How to enhance the subjectivity of China's dramatics? This paper is supposed to give some opinions starting from the argument that "Whether 'Mei Lanfang's Performing System' can be established or not."

## Part One

Can "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" be established? This question has been disputed for several years. Why "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" Cannot Be Established?<sup>1</sup> and Some Doubt About "Mei Lanfang's Performing System"<sup>2</sup> are two papers illustrating the reasons why the system cannot be established. The former reads, "... any argument in favor of 'Mei Lanfang's Performing System' is not valid enough, thus ineffective." However, "The key to whether it's valid or not is to figure out whether Mei Lanfang had said something different from Stanislavski's System or Brecht's System, and whether he had put forward systematic notions different from those two systems and further provided well-reasoned arguments to illustrate these notions..." In fact, what Mei talked in the different historical periods about the "Jingju spirit," in a broad way, was exactly the aesthetic spirit of Chinese opera, or that he was just talking about for someone who had influenced him or that who had influenced Mei was voicing his own opinions, or who had influenced Mei was expressing his ideas through the words of Mei's. How many ideas are there that he himself has realized? We cannot jump to conclusions on this point, or we cannot come to conclusions without making a profound analysis. In other words, the academic circle has not distinguished and accessed Mei Lanfang's literature in a careful way and even regarded Mei's casual citations as Mei's independent opinions. It is apparent that "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" cannot gain a foothold if it has been demonstrated in this way.<sup>3</sup>

This conclusion seems to be logically undeniable, for it is reminiscent of professor's demands on students' academic rigor. However, on reflection, we can find it not reasonable enough because Mei Lanfang was not a theorist or a scholar, but a performing artist, thus whether his performance can be said to be a "system" or not should be proved by his performing activities in the first place. Second, we should not put exclusive emphasis on what he "said," what he expressed, who expressed the

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1 Zou Yuanjiang. Why "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" Cannot Be Established? in *China Culture Daily*, Edition 3, Feb 13, 2009.

2 Zou Yuanjiang. Some Doubt About "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" . In *Hundred Schools in Arts*, 2, 2009.

3 Zou Yuanjiang. Why "Mei Lanfang's Performing System" Cannot Be Established? In *China Culture Daily*, Edition 3, Feb 13, 2009.



ideas, and whether “Mei Lanfang’s literature” can be “distinguished and accessed in a careful way”. We might as well take Meyerhold from Russia as an example to discuss this question.

Zavadski<sup>1</sup>, a Russian director, said in an article titled *My Reflections on Meyerhold* that Meyerhold held that “the foundations of directorship are merely some rules, which ... can be described in a really concise way. He believes that directing art is just like accurate mathematics, and it is its poetic illusion and imagination that make this kind of art exciting.”<sup>2</sup> For example, Meyerhold’s “Concept of Organism Plastic Art” is depicted in an extremely pithy way. The year 1998 saw the publication of *The Historical Materials and Related Papers about Meyerhold’s Creation Methods* in St. Petersburg, in which it includes an article about a syllabus that Meyerhold focuses on the “Concept of Organism Plastic Art”, the notes written by Eisenstein when taking classes, the notes made by Korenev during lessons and a teaching outline for a National Advanced Theatre Master Program (the first point of part one is mainly about the “Concept of Organism Plastic Art”, and there are ten lines altogether). All the literature adds up to merely over ten pages and are just more than 10,000 Chinese characters when translated into Chinese. Certainly, these outlines are not easily understood without the instructions by the teachers. Anyway, just as Meyerhold said, these “literature” are indeed “quite concise.” After reading these outlines, we would understand that there is no magnum opus in the posthumous works of Meyerhold like Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares*--at least it has not been discovered and released—Perhaps the reason lies here.

The above example proves that the performing and directing theories, whether in an “oral” or “written” form, are usually expressed in a concise manner. In fact, Meyerhold not only did not write any voluminous works as Stanislavski did, even he himself did not develop his system by writing his works first. According to *Stanislavski’s Life and Creation* edited by Vinogradskaya, August 1st, 1911 witnessed the official announcement by Moscow Art Theatre that Stanislavski’s System had been successfully established. On that day, Stanislavski was rehearsing *Hamlet* written by Shakespeare and *The Living Corpse* created by Lev Tolstoy and meanwhile explaining the courses related to the “System” to the performers.<sup>3</sup> In the chapter named “The Experience of Promoting the ‘System’” of the book titled *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski wrote down the following words:

... In my view, my “System” has been rather complete and accurate. What should be done next is to apply it to the practical circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

1 Zavadski (Юрий Александрович Завадский, 1894–1977), who is a well-known director for staging the Russian and Western European modern plays and won Lenin Prize once and the State Stalin Prize twice, held the post of the president of the Central Theatre of the USSR army from 1932 to 1935 and took charge of a studio at the same time.

2 Рясов А. Ю. Режиссерская методология Мейерхольда. 2. Драматургия мейерхольдовского спектакля: мысль, зритель, театральный монтаж. СПб.: РИИИ, 2004. С.260.

3 Виноградская. И.Н. Жизнь и творчество К. С. Станиславского. Летопись в 4 т. М.: МХТ, 2003. Т. 2. С.293.

4 Станиславский К. С. Собрание сочинении. В 8 томах. Т. 1. С.428.

As is known, *My Life in Art*, Stanislavski's memoir, was published in English in 1924 and in Russian in 1926. Though his *An Actor Prepares* was finished when he was still alive, and it was published after he passed away. That is to say, his "System" had been formed and promoted before he completed his "literature" on his deathbed. For the same reason, we cannot make excessive demands on Mr. Mei Lanfang. When Americans awarded him an honorary doctorate, they possibly did not ask Mr. Mei to submit his doctoral dissertation or certificates that can prove his English skills.

## Part Two

Actually, the first person to have referred the art of Mei Lanfang as a "system" in the world is not a Chinese but is likely to be Meyerhold, which can be confirmed by the letter written by him on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1935. He wrote this letter at a sanatorium in Crimea to Benderski, the 33-year-old president of Theatre School Attached to Meyerhold Theatre. Meyerhold wrote in the letter that he was recovering so he could write to expound on his ideas about the guidelines and faculty staff for the school. It was quite a long letter and there would be at least 3,000 characters if translated into Chinese. He wrote, "What should be included in the elementary knowledge part of theatre (referring to the directing courses—citer) are basic knowledge about directing, stage setup, music effect, the steps and editing of the repertoire rehearsal, and Stanislavski's, Meyerhold's and Mei Lanfang's Systems of Directing."<sup>1</sup> This idea is worth our attention that such a great director, who enjoys worldwide fame, not only regards Mei as an excellent actor, but also as an innovative director who can be on par with Stanislavski and Meyerhold. What is even more noticeable is that Meyerhold used the word "System." He considered Mei as a director and Mei's art "System", which may be the first time in the world. Meyerhold wrote this letter two months later after Mei Lanfang concluded his performing tour in the Soviet Union. Did he ever mention Mei Lanfang's Performing System after that?

The author hasn't worked out the answers to the question yet. However, it's unlikely that Meyerhold casually and accidentally used the word "System", because it is not an ordinary letter, but a long one that discusses how to compile the syllabus for a theatre school in a serious tone. A mere look at his evaluations of Mei makes us know that his word of "System" is a thoughtful one.

Meyerhold referred to Mei's art as a "System" proves that he did not place too much emphasis on the number of "literature" or whether an artist's theories have been systematized. Compared with European and Russian performing art, the oriental ones themselves are naturally subjective, history-steeped, highly original and of value for

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1 Мейерхольд В.Э. Переписка. 1896-1939.М.1976. С.343.

theoretical studies. Then, the so-called “System” is not necessary to be demonstrated in the form of “literature.” Can the various and intricate movements of a great performer not be presented, expressed and recorded through the form of body language? The body languages can also constitute a symbol system, which is out of the question in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when semiotics has highly been developed, not to mention the fact that Mei Lanfang has left lots of written literature.

Another important reason why Meyerhold called Mei’s art a “System” is that he regarded Mei as his confidant and a member of the “assumption” theatre family that he cherished after he watched Mei’s performance. According to recollections of Gladkov, a good friend of Meyerhold, Meyerhold once said, “All kinds of theatres possess assumption in their own way, and one type of assumption is totally different from another.... The theatre of our era is most characterized by the assumption of Mei Lanfang or that of Carlo Gozzi.”<sup>1</sup>

In the winter of 1936 when Meyerhold addressed an audience of college graduates, he spoke of the importance and diversity of the body movements in drama, saying “Mei Lanfang is one of the performers who have attached great significance to movements in China. I have started to study that long before, but I was focusing on the Japanese Kabuki... Theatre of China bears great resemblance to that of Japan in terms of movements. Then, the movements are endowed with enormous significance. However, when it comes to movements, what instantly came to people’s mind are those of ballet... Chinese and Japanese theatres are quite unique in this respect because the movements of their performers are profoundly realistic in nature. All of their movements originated from the folk dance. The folks danced as they walked along the street with loaded poles on their shoulders or as they moved the goods from plate trailers to a store. These movements are considered as dances, which are based on strong rhythmicity. And the degree of rhythmicity determines that of dance. Therefore, there arises realism in the movements. Take the presentation of a person standing at the stern and putting a peddle into the water for example. It’s one of the elements of dancing movements. Now that movements are of rhythm, which conforms to the poetic metres. These elements are acceptable, just like a stave on which there are many notes and vertical lines used to separate the bars. For the Chinese performers, all things are pictured as building blocks, small sticks, something hollow, something round and the like. When on the stage, he always bears these things in mind. Can Russian performers present these things accurately? No, they can’t. The reason is that such a culture and such movements still haven’t existed on our Russian stage, but we have already moved towards these, and maybe it will come true in the period of 25 to 30 years. The glory of future theatre is apparently to be established on such a foundation.”<sup>2</sup> What Meyerhold said means that he believes that Mei Lanfang’s performing art is a flower of stylization

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1 Gladkov A. K. Мейерхольд: В 2 т. М.: СТД РСФСР, 1990. Т. 2. С. 340.

2 Мейерхольд К история творческого метода. Публикации. Статьи. СПб., 1998. С. 68.

and assumption, which is rooted, in the bottom of real life. In his words, this is part of “assumption realism,” symbolizing the future of the theatre art.

Meyerhold not only predicted that the future Russian theatre would “move towards” Chinese opera, but took immediate action. One example is his direction of *The Woes of Wit* (the 2nd version of the play is renamed *Woe from Wit*) by Griboyedov, in which Meyerhold asked the actresses to mimic Mei’s movements in his performance. A critical article appearing in *Moscow Evening News* on November 17<sup>th</sup> in 1935 reads, “Dancing with a scarf in her hand by the heroine (acted by Zinaida Reich, Meyerhold’s wife) in the play is the same means as the ribbon dance by the Chinese performers in Mei Lanfang’s troupe... It’s a completely different means from a different theatre system and stage phenomenon.”

Why did Meyerhold think that their era approached Mei Lanfang the most? The answer is that he felt that his own theatre system approached that of Mei the most, which can be seen from the following points. Firstly, both Meyerhold’s System and the system of Xiqu consider the primary element of theatre to be the body (i.e. the physical movements of the performers). That is to say, the body is put first in the two systems, not like literary and psychological elements of theatre coming first in Stanislavski’s System. Secondly, both the systems are in favor of the division of types of roles (referred to as “Juese Hangdang” in the Chinese opera), while Stanislavski is against doing so. Thirdly, both Meyerhold’s performing methods and Mei Lanfang’s are “presentation art.” Meyerhold devised the well-known “Concept of Organism Plastic Art,” and he trained the performers to master a whole set of standard physical movements, which is similar to the training method in the Xiqu in principle. Fourthly, Meyerhold’s System attaches great importance to the “weird” means to highlight the characteristics of the artistic images (the characters’ images come first) through striking contrast. For example, his use of masks is similar to that of facial makeup in Xiqu. Fifthly, Meyerhold opposes the idea of “the fourth wall” and the pursuit of stage illusion, while he favors the communication between the audience and performers. Therefore, on the whole, Meyerhold’s notion of theatre and that of the Xiqu are linked, which is an important reason why he called Mei’s art a “system”. Although Mr. Mei had not completed any integrated and crucial works like Stanislavski and Meyerhold did when he communicated with the theatre masters like Meyerhold, *Forty Years’ Life on Stage*, his memoir, was dictated and transcribed twenty years later after his visit to the Soviet Union, and lots of correct and penetrating views are shown in this book, his speeches, and articles. Mei’s aesthetic ideas and pursuit are demonstrated firstly through his systematized performing art. Actually, “Mei Lanfang’s Performing System” does not represent somebody’s art, but the performing art of the whole Chinese opera. In this sense, to refer to Mei Lanfang’s art as a “system” is above criticism.

### Part Three

Some people objecting the idea of “Mei Lanfang’s Performing System” stress that a performing system must be unique, extraordinary, theoretically and original. Certainly, we must attach sufficient weight to that point. In fact, a lack of subjectivity and originality was disadvantageous in establishing Xiqu theories. Under the influence of theatre discourse and theories of the Soviet Union and the West for such a long time, China’s criticism theories suffered from the shortcomings such as rigidity, doctrinism and ignorance of our own national artistic and theoretical legacy. Even some high-level dramatists and theorists categorized the theatre performing art featuring the stylized thought as “experience art.” The theoretical misleading led to a roundabout course in our Chinese theatre criticism and theory study.

Nowadays, when sorting out the legacies from the Xiqu performing masters like Mei Lanfang and considering about the construction of performing theories of Chinese opera, we find that their legacies and what are achieved by Chinese scholars studying these masters are actually extremely fruitful. The collected works (such as *Qulv* by Wang Jide in the Ming Dynasty, *Quhua* by Li Yu and *Clear Minded Lesson* (i.e. Origin of Pear Garden) by Huang Fanchuo in the Qing Dynasty, *The Life of Traditional Xiqu Performers* by Gai Jiaotian in the modern times, and those by Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang) and the works about Xiqu performing theories by theorists (like Zhang Geng, Guo Hancheng, Wang Zhaowen, Ajia, Chen Youhan, Huang Kebao and the like) have laid foundations and preparations for the construction of Xiqu performing system. Now, many put forward the idea of naming this system Mei Lanfang, which might be most proper. The author believes the reasons for that are as follows.

Firstly, Mei Lanfang is the first performing master to have had considerable confidence in national art and a strong sense of subjectivity, and the first to have realized that Chinese have to communicate with major countries and regions in the world so as to circulate the theatre art of the Chinese nation. Xiqu has been described as “great” for several times by Mei Lanfang. He told Mr. Xu Jichuan as early as in 1930 that he had “intended to introduce the art of Xiqu to Asia, America, and Europe long before.”<sup>1</sup> The unprecedented grand plan was fully completed in 1935, after which, Mei made visits abroad quite a few times, and he went to the Soviet Union alone for four times. Other well-known artists like Zhou Xinfang went abroad to give performances after that. Of all of these masters, Mei’s contributions are mostly marked as extending influence of Chinese art to the world.

Secondly, Mei was good at making friends with intellectuals returning to China from studying overseas, taking heed to their criticisms and suggestions, and reformed the

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1 Fujing (Chief Editor). *A Complete Edition of Mei Lanfang*, Volume 7, Beijing Publishing House, The Chinese Theatre Press, 2016, p.3.



traditional Chinese opera, those making him an innovative performing artist. As is known to all, the intellectuals he befriended like Qi Rushan, Zhang Pengchun, and Yu Shangyuan are among the most outstanding ones that made the most important contributions to Chinese operas.

Thirdly, Mei Lanfang was a performing artist who had achieved an all-around and remarkable development in art, literature, painting and calligraphy, making him able to think through what theatre art was about, directly participate in playwriting, and direct the adaptation and writing of the plays according to the regular patterns of practical performances on the stage.

Fourthly, Mei was a farsighted and broad-minded performing artist and he was concerned about the destiny of our country and our nation and provided services for people positively by traditional Xiqu and for our nation-building and social development. These can be seen from the following facts. During the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-1945), he grew his beard to refuse performances for Japanese. After the founding of new China in 1949, he gave performances for the soldiers at the front, went down to the grass-roots unit to stage performances for the masses, voiced his helpful opinions, attended important events involving foreign affairs and so on.

Fifthly, Mei Lanfang was used to summarize the experience of performing art and then theorize the experience. Equally good with Stanislavski's *My Life in Art*, his memoir, *Forty Years' Life on Stage*, is a review and summary of his practical experience, with lots of explorations of the regularity of performing art involved. Correct and penetrating views can be seen from many of his remarks, articles, and letters.

Mei talked about his opinions and reflections on several occasions of the characteristics, history and the status quo, the inheritance, and innovation of Xiqu and the specific questions about its performing art, for instance, the extensive and profound nature of Xiqu, the apprentice enrollment by the traditional Xiqu school, the division of roles and the mechanism of training, the steps and methods of teaching four skills and five means, the relationship between the roles and the performing forms and the presentation of the real life, the relationship between "dances" and "songs" in the performing of Jingju, the relationship between the inner experience and outer movements of the Xiqu performers, the urgency of creating new scripts and corresponding solutions, how to deal with the relationship between historical reality and artistic fiction in creating the new operas about historical subject, how to deal with the relationship between form and content in Xiqu innovation, how to realize the new functions of Xiqu in the new society, particularly to conduct the guideline of "getting rid of the old to bring forth the new," to successfully carry out the Xiqu reform, and to meet the demands of national construction and people's aesthetics, and the outlook of space and time of the Xiqu stage, especially whether to use the stage setting and how to design the setting and so on.

## Part Four

As a great actor serving people heart and soul, Mei Lanfang did not leave any works with a whole set of theories like *An Actor Prepares* by Stanislavski when still alive and in good health. Reading his collected works, we can find that what he thought about Xiqu seems to be not systematic enough, but pretty comprehensive and profound and can be deepened and enhanced through the theoretical explorations by the younger generations studying theories. The key is to avoid being entrapped into the discourse system of foreign theatre theories when practicing theoretical thinking and generalization. As theorists like Ajia and Chen Youhan have described, we should learn from and apply foreign theories. Terms in Stanislavski's system such as "experience," "presentation," "representation," "sub consciousness," "top task," "consistent movements and inconsistent movements," "loneliness in public," "communication," and so on can be applied in the art of modern drama, and can also be used in the art of Xiqu. However, we must draw more on the notions and categories of the traditional national art, and we can draw on the excellent outcomes of the poetics and theories of literature, songs, paintings, and music in the ancient times. Stanislavski learned the word "situation" from Pushkin's works and turned it into a concept of "situation" in the theatre. Similarly, Meyerhold learned the word "assumption" from Pushkin, and then he proposed the idea of "assumption theatre." What the two theatre masters did is acceptable, and we can take in the fruits of the ancient theories about literature and art.

During the process of establishing the performing art system in the name of Mei Lanfang, it's worth drawing on the experience of the Soviet Union. Thanks to the substantial progress made in studying Meyerhold in Russia since 1980s, it has been found that Meyerhold's system is a system of "presentation art" dramatically different from that of Stanislavski, from which we should learn. Some of Meyerhold's literature just on his conception or criticism of specific plays has not been refined and elevated, but now the world boasts an astounding number of his works. Three really thick volumes have already come out, and the expected number of his collected works can be eight volumes. These works contain the essence of theories or can be said to be of high value, which is the very reason why the present Russian scholars still cleave to seeking, sorting out and studying what Meyerhold has left with great enthusiasm even though the economy is in recession. As Besochinski, a Russian theatre studies scholar, said that in *Meyerhold and the Early Dramatics* "Meyerhold's method has provided the basis for new schools of criticism in different development periods, which is to say, both the school of sociology and the most attractive schools started from theatre practices based on Meyerhold's experiments. Every school with theatrical thinking has argued about Meyerhold's method, which is beyond reproach in the aspects of history and methodology. Meyerhold's System will continue to exist as an advancing, inexhaustible

and unpredictable system as before.”<sup>1</sup>

We should adopt the same attitude toward the precious heritage left by Mei Lanfang. When turning to learn from Meyerhold's System, we can never ignore and we must pursue the originality of theories when trying to establish a performing system with Chinese characteristics in the name of Mei Lanfang. The lesson of “leaning to one side” in history cannot be forgotten.

As early as in 1958, Chen Youhan wrote in his *A Tentative Discussion of Stanislavski's System and the Traditional Performing Art of Xiqu*, “We should establish our own system of the performing art. Thanks to hundreds of years of creation and accumulation, the traditional performing art of our Xiqu is quite rich and profound, the basic laws of which are consistent in spite of the tremendously various genres. What we haven't done is to study and sort out these operas in a systematic and comprehensive way, and to make a summary on a theoretical level. In my opinion, we can and we should nurture a group of China's Stanislavski, and form a creation and training system out of our Xiqu performing art, by the internal technology and external technology. During this arduous, complex, meticulous and glorious process, Stanislavski's System is the best tutor and reference for us.”<sup>2</sup>

What a brilliant comment! The author believes that it would be better if Meyerhold's System could be added into “Stanislavski's System”. We are surely to usher in a new prospect in the construction of theatre theories, if we are to adhere to the principle of subjectivity by continuously drawing on the essence of foreign theatre theories and to uncover the treasures of our national dramatics with immerse efforts.

*Chen Shixiong*  
Professor at Xiamen University.

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1 Мейетхольд К истории творческого метода. КультИнформПресс, Санкт-Петербург, 1998., С. 225.

2 ChenYouhan. *A Tentative Discussion of Performing Form of the Stage Art of Xiqu*. Shanxi People's Publishing House. 1958.

# The Worldwide Significance of Mei Lanfang's Performing Art

ZOU YUANJIANG

**ABSTRACT** It is not hard to trace the quiet reversion of the European theater after Mei Lanfang's visit to the Soviet Union. A delirious fever, to look "east"--to worship and learn from the body-performing aesthetics of Xiqu, the Chinese traditional theater, has been lasting until now. Those direct or indirect ideological roots and stage references have very close connection with the aesthetics of Xiqu conveyed by Mei on the Soviet stage to the most outstanding European theater professionals. Mei's performing arts have directly influenced the development of the world modern theater. Therefore, it has made extensive worldwide significance: it has prompted the western theater professionals to bid farewell to the naturalism, led the re-exploration of the expressiveness of the performer's body, and also inspired to increase the intensive training of the "pre-expressivity" of the performers.

**KEY WORDS** Mei Lanfang, Performing Arts, The Worldwide Significance

There is no doubt that Chinese performer Mei Lanfang's performing art on the Soviet Union stage in 1935 has created profound worldwide significance. We can find evidence in the long article published in the *Literature newspaper* by famous Soviet Union playwright Tretyakov. In the article, he said, "Mr. Mei is not only the treasure of the modern Chinese theater art, but also the giant of the whole Chinese theater art history. His great reputation results from his beautiful, masterly and charming performance, various dressing-up, deafening and brilliant stage effects and softening techniques. His major achievement also lies in the ability of enriching the insignificant sounds and rhythms and blending the mental activity into his performance. His performance reappears the age of the Revolution of 1911 of China. His greatness and significance lie in helping the Chinese theater art become a global phenomenon. Mr. Mei, on his own, breaks the national boundaries for the Chinese theater art and makes it enjoy European

and American people's support. This is really unprecedented. Meanwhile, foreigners never found the exotic theater difficult to understand but took it a great show of art."<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, we even can say that Xiqu, being represented by Mei, directly influenced the history of modern world theater around 1935. Since Mei's visit to the United States in 1930 and especially his visit to the Soviet Union in 1935, a delirious fever, to look "east"—to worship and learn from the body-performing aesthetics of Xiqu, has been lasting until now. Western dramatic theorists were continuously exploring how to use the quintessence of the Chinese theater art for reference to establish new performance theory to save western theater. Among them, no matter Russian Meyerhold's "organic modeling", German Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect", or British Gordon Craig's dream "Theater artist" (Uber-Marionette); Whether French Antonin Artaud's "Cruel drama" that pursues non-verbal "body theater", Polish Jerzy Grotowski's "Theater of sources" (1976~1982), or Danish Italian Eugenio Barba's "pre-expressivity", German Erika Fischer-Lichte's "behavior performance", and the like, all of them criticized and deviated from the traditional western theater notions. Especially, they were discontented with the severe weakness of body performance of the western theater after the World War II. Those direct or indirect ideological roots and stage references have very close connection with the aesthetics of Xiqu conveyed by Mei on the stage of Soviet Union.

## 1. To prompt the western theater to bid farewell to naturalism

Actually, as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Von Schiller has presented reform advocates about the naturalism tendency of the western theater art. He advocated, "We should get rid of the poor technique of pure imitation of nature and bring air and sunshine to the art. To fulfill this goal, I believe, there is a most speedy way--to use symbolic technique. It can replace concrete things in the pure art range which belongs to poets, or in the places where cannot be shown but only be understood by insight. By now, I could not explain the 'symbolic' concept in details in the literature theory, but I think, this question is worthy of discussion. Once this technique can be applied, it could turn out to be like the following: the literature would be purified and its range would be narrowed, with more deliberate thoughts and stronger art appeals." Then, in the 1930s, German scholar Vincenz Hundhausen, who had taught in Beijing University, gave his comments on this remark, "when reading this passage, we, on the one hand, feel ashamed that our European theater art is so far away from the dream expressed by Schiller, and even away farther and farther; on the other hand, we have found that this dream had been assiduously pursued by the Chinese theater art and has come true In Chinese traditional theater (Xiqu), those useless things to the character shaping

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1 Tretyakov: The Soviet Union Writers' Views on Mei Lanfang's Performance, in *Shen Bao*, March 19, 1935.



are all thrown away or only implied at most. Everything is far from the reality, but again closer to the truth...”<sup>1</sup> Although Schiller had presented reform advocates to break down naturalism long before, the western academia and show business didn't place the flag of reform on the European stages until the 1930s. Meyerhold was the most radical innovator then. He pointed out sharply, “... the Russian theater was influenced deeply by that of Germany, France and Britain. Theater art in these countries has degenerated to a form of naturalism only. They make everything on the stage like real things, as rigid as taking photos. Russian theater has no vigor as that of those countries. This is conservation, not progress. Now the young theater people in Soviet Union, including me, object to the expression technique of naturalism and begin to study how to break down these downfall conventions. We have found that the theater art of Britain, Spain and China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was quite distinctive. Then I read and began to study the expression technique of the Chinese theater art. Having watched some old plays of Japanese Kabuki recently, I realized that it had developed from Chinese theater art.” Mei once talked about his contact with Meyerhold:

*Meyerhold watched my show in “Da Yu Sha Jia” (Levying Fishing Tax) and said to me with great excitement, “The father, his daughter, and two oars, with no any other stage settings, showed the river landscape. The audience imagined there poetic but also real life on the river. So great! It really inspired me.”*

Mei recalled, “One day, Meyerhold invited me to a theater. It was also a story on water. There was a stage-sized cloth on the stage with some holes in it. Suddenly, some people came out from the holes. Meyerhold said to me, ‘this is the way we use to express water on the stage. Compared to yours, how stupid it is.’”

Obviously, Meyerhold extremely hated the trend of naturalism in the western theater of that age, but yearned for the aesthetics of the Chinese theater art represented by Mei's art. The great Chinese theater man, Ma Yanxiang once recalled, “I visited the Soviet Union in 1936, the year after Mr. Mei's visit there. Meyerhold invited me to enjoy his new play. On the theatrical bill, I saw ‘To Mei Lanfang.’ He said, ‘I found that the movements of Xiqu were in curve after I watched Mr. Mei's performance, so I used it in this play.’”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. To lead western performers to explore the expressivity of “body”

It is necessary to note that, the day before Mei and his Troupe leaving the Soviet Union, namely, at 5:00 p.m. on April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1935, for the suggestion of Zhang Pengchun, a

1 [G] Wolfgang Kubin: *Study about “Yi”*, Beijing University Publish, 1997, p.149-150.

2 Xu Jichuan, The Development and Impact of Mei Lanfang's Performance System--Mei Lanfang and Artists in Zhui Yu Xuan, Xu Jichuan and Xu Yuan, *Reminiscence of Maestro Mei Lanfang*, p.43-44.

Chinese director, Mei invited the Soviet Union colleagues to a seminar to discuss the aesthetic character of Xiqu. At the end of the seminar, Zhang explained in details about the tendency of posturing in Xiqu, which could offer a possibility for western theater experiment. He said, "All the movements, music and the like of Xiqu are totally postured. By 'totally postured', I mean that all the movements and music have fixed forms. For instance, Xiqu has its movement and music modes. These modes are like letters and alphabets. Piece them together, and you can make a play. Therefore, Xiqu is totally postured, just like Chinese painting. For example, there is a unique Chinese way to draw landscapes. It is not real but it is clear enough with cloud, mist and mountains in it. Every tree or stone is different from a real one, if you take a close look at it. The features of Xiqu are the same as that. All the movements and music are formulated. So the correct technique is developed. In spite of the existence of such alphabets of art, Chinese performers are never bound to these letters. They can still show their talents and creation in art. I believe you can see it from Mr. Mei's performance."<sup>1</sup> The art of "totally postured" begins with Tong Zi Gong (a kind of Chinese Kong-fu for the training of kids) and explores continuously the aesthetic expressivity of theater performers. Though we could not affirm whether the famous Soviet Union dancer Ulanova had been in the seminar or not (From Zhang's summary, we noticed that a famous dancer did took part in the discussion and made some remarks.), we can feel the unconscious influence of the theory above, because years later Ulanova also explained the relationship between formulation and performance by using this metaphor of letters-piece-into-alphabet. She said, "Every single letter is meaningless, but when they are pieced together, countless meanings are created. Ballet movements also can express rich contents when they are put together." Mei once commented, "Her remark just hits the dancing principle. In fact, no variety of dances in the world can live without this truth. It depends on how performers use and organize these letters."<sup>2</sup> Because ballet and Xiqu are both pure art, Ulanova, a top ballet artist, is sensitive and approval of the principle, which is essential to Xiqu with singing, speaking, acting and acrobatic fighting as its main contents. Therefore, it is not strange that she considered ballet movements in the same way.

But for the western academia and drama, they got into knots about the meaning of the theater performer's "body". Then, what does physical "body" mean (Körperlichkeit) for performers on the stage? German scholar Helmut Plesner called it "substance itself".<sup>3</sup> In his opinion, the body of a performer has a contradiction, that is, the extrinsic body

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1 This summary was showed by Zhang Pengchun to the journalists. He brought Mei Lanfang Troupe back from the Soviet Union to China in May, 1935, and presented the summary of the symposium on April 14th to the Chinese foreign ministry. Later a report named "Mei Lanfang Troupe Returning Home with Honor" was published in the newspaper *Current Affairs* on May 6, 1935. This summary is much more correct than Creberg's free translation. Especially, the three main points about the Chinese theater art (Xiqu) narrated by Zhang himself are more accurate.

2 Mei Lanfang, *Flowers with Intense Aromas—The Ballet of the Soviet Union National Grand House Visiting China*, in *Wenhui Newspaper*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1959.

3 [G] H.Plesner, *On Actor's Anthropology*, Frankfurt, 1982, p.407.

(the physical substance of the body) versus an image shaped by this body. To shape a character means that the performer has to control his extrinsic body and use the body as a shaping tool. This is the so-called “self-withering”.

Having realized the contradiction of the performer’s “body”, Craig (1872-1966) put forward to sending off the performers from theater and replacing them with supper puppets. The reason was that the substantial materials of performance (the performer’s body) could not be processed and monitored freely.

*Man’s nature tends to be free, therefore, man proved himself: As an existence of “substance”, he is useless to theater art. In today’s theater, man’s body is used as “substance” which makes what you can see unexpected and occasional. ... Just as what we have said, art can’t tolerate “unexpectedness” and “occasionality”. Hence, what actors present on the stage is not artistic work.<sup>1</sup>*

The above statement is quoted from Craig’s *The Actor and the Uber-Marionette*:

*Man’s nature tends to be free, therefore, man proved himself: As a kind of “substance” in theaters, he is useless. In modern theaters, men and women’s bodies are used as materials, so it is something occasional. We have mentioned that the art can’t tolerate any occasionality. So, what actors show is not the artistic work but the expression of continuous occasionalities.<sup>2</sup>*

What is “occasionality” or “unexpectedness”? Craig has expressed clearly. That is, “A performer’s physical movements, facial expressions and voices are all dominated by ups and downs of his emotions.” The emotions control him and he is at the emotions’ beck and call. But “once his emotion controls his reason, occasional things will absolutely arise continuously.”<sup>3</sup> What is “self-confession”? It means that a performer expresses him uncontrollably and pushes him forward on emotion. Craig advocated replacing emotional performers by “Uber-Marionette”, just because puppets are not “self-expressive people”.<sup>4</sup> Whereupon, it naturally leads to a new performance technique: a performer has to stop expressing himself and begin to express something else. He can never imitate anything or anyone, but has to imply something symbolically. Thereupon, his performance will not be of personal style. He will abandon his “self-expression”, and use his body and voice like materials but not parts of his body. For this purpose, we have to create a symbolic performance style based on creative imagination.<sup>5</sup>

But how did performers create a new performance technique, which would not be controlled by emotions? Craig didn’t make a clear answer. Although he pointed out explicitly: “Art can be the product of fine design only. Therefore, we use those materials

1 [G] Erika Fischer-Lichte. *Ästhetik des Performativen*, translated by Yu Kuangfu, East China Normal University Press, 2012, p.110.

2 [E] Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theater*, translated by Li Xing, Culture and Art Press, 1986, p.154-155

3 Ibid, p.154-155.

4 Ibid, p.297. This is the definition of “Uber-Marionette” given by Gordon Craig.

5 Ibid, p.298.

that can be calculated precisely to create any art work,” he refused to agree that “men are those materials.”<sup>1</sup> Here, the “men” he referred to were the performers of realism. Then how could they make those emotion-controlled performers to control their own emotion and perform accurately? Apparently, Craig did not find a more effective way. Of course, it could yet be regarded as a strategy to let performers put on masks “to rebuild facial expressions on the stage”<sup>2</sup>, that is, to use masks to cover the facial expressions which, Craig believed, bring little value to performance. In the context of losing personal characters, a performer was forced to pay attention to the various expression means of his body, and then he could learn to control his body and become a well-adapted performance material. But, how could the extrinsic masks help performers to control their bodies effectively and create some artwork accurately and stably? That is where the real problem lies.

Beyond doubt, the performers of Xiqu, with perfect and well-adapted expressive ability, are the ideal “theater artists” pursued by Craig. Xiqu has never directly used the performer’s body as a material in the theater performance. On the contrary, its expressiveness, in all respects, is based on the extremely complicated, difficult and profound Tongzигong. And the final goal of the six-year, eight-year or even ten-year professional training is to help the future performers of Xiqu to control their bodies’ effectively through meaningful forms of body expressiveness and finally create the aesthetic image accurately and stably on the stage. Jiao Juyin, Chinese theater expert, once said, “The Chinese dancing art is quite different from that of other dances.... It requires long-term training of performers’ bodies. Performers are capable of controlling their bodies freely and accurately.”<sup>3</sup> For the Chinese theater performers, their “bodies” were forged by elaborate processing through the formulation of extremely complicated singing, speaking, acting, fighting (dancing); finger and hand skills, eye expression, body movements, foot position and their rules. The “bodies” are connected, well-adapted and expressive “material” systems. They can produce “art” perfectly and completely at any time through well-trained systematic tunes, body movements, speaking and acting. In fact, the purer an art form is, the more obvious this aesthetic characteristic is. In 1935, Mei watched some Ulanova’s ballet performance, e.g. *Swan Lake*, in Moscow, and he appreciated her acting very much: the performing is full of thoughts and emotions, without any redundant movement.<sup>4</sup> Just as Ulanova said, “At the beginning of my dancing career, technique training drew my most attention, time and energy, but the training did not lead me to the direction of acrobatics. I must improve my technique and master more dancing movements to dance continuously and naturally, like water flowing. Only this ability can express great emotions and dance will be of

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1 [E] Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theater*, translated by Li Xing, Culture and Art Press, 1986, p.154.

2 Ibid, p.148.

3 *Collected Work of Jiao Juyin*, Culture and Art Press, 2005, p.161.

4 Mei Lanfang, Flowers with Intense Aromas——The Ballet of the Soviet Union National Grand House Visiting China, *Wenhui Newspaper*, Oct. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1959.

generalization and be poetic.”<sup>1</sup> It’s just like those artists of Qunqu (a variety of Chinese local operas), Qiao Huilan, Chen Delin, etc., based on their solid Tongzigong, who could “act accurately and never go out of form”<sup>2</sup> after they had learned the foot position, tunes, speaking and acting of a play. Only in this way, the performance can be greatly emotional, metaphysical and poetical.

The so-called “act accurately and never go out of form” is the very art pursued by Craig. It is a kind of “Uber-Marionette-mediated and fine designed” art. His dream “Uber-Marionette”, in fact, is a “paragon of perfect performer—adaptive, nonself-centered, compliant and expressive.”<sup>3</sup> Here the word “compliant” means performers’ obeying the director’s guidance completely. The main connotation of Craig’s dream “Uber-Marionette” is close to the characteristic of Xiqu performers. According to Craig, the so-called “paragon of perfect performers” means the ability of the perfect body movement rhythm. In *The Art of the Theater*, he mentioned, “the theater art is neither performance nor play scripts, or neither stage settings nor dancing, but it includes all of them: movements--the soul of the performance; dialogues--the torso of the script; lines and colors--the heart of the setting; rhythm--the quintessence of the dancing.” Among the above elements, “movement” is believed as “the most valuable part... The theater art roots in movements--dancing.” To fulfill his desire for the expressiveness and absolutely perfect dancing ability of “Uber-Marionette”, Craig once even wanted to invite gymnasts, dancers, acrobats or models to the performance he directed.<sup>4</sup> He firmly believed that “the first playwright should be the son of a dancer. That is, he was the son of the theater, but not the son of a poet.”<sup>5</sup> As to this, he drew great inspiration from the dancing of his lover Isadora Duncan, the modern dancer.

In December 1904, in Berlin, Craig watched the free and unrestrained show of Duncan. Just as Stanislavski recommended excitedly to all the audience at the spot and admired Duncan’s dancing greatly, Craig was shocked by the show and even fell in love with this dancing spirit immediately. The couple both believed the nature of theater art could be found in the rhythm of body movements. Duncan’s highly talented improvisational dancing, with the music of Gluck, Beethoven and Chopin, helped Craig draw the conclusion: the modern drama is degraded. The mark is “the lack of a theater artist--the artist for a show in theaters.”<sup>6</sup> Then, what is the definition of “a theater artist”? A theater artist is an “expressive performer”—being adaptive to the performance of various contexts—a “paragon of perfect performer”. But obviously, Craig and other European outstanding companions did not directly understand the real meaning of the

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1 Mei Lanfang, Meetings with Ulanova, in *People’s Daily*, December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1957.

2 *The Complete Works of Mei Lanfang I*, Hebei Education Press, 2001, p.564.

3 [E] Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theater*, translated by Li Xing, Culture and Art Press, 1986, p.327.

4 *Supper Puppets--Berlin 1905-1906*, Gordon Craig’s Scripts. *Collected Works of Gordon Craig*, Arsene’s library, Paris.

5 [E] Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theater*, translated by Li Xing, Culture and Art Press, 1986, p.2.

6 [E] *Ibid*, p.7.

paragon comprehended until 1935 when Mei performed in Moscow.

In March 1935, the Soviet Union government to Moscow for a five-week visit invited Craig. He was welcomed warmly by well-known drama professionals Meyerhold, Tairov, and the like. During this period, his most important gain was “several meetings” with Mei, except for his meetings with old friends Stanislavski and Danchenko (Russian playwright), and newly-acquainted Zavadski (director), (puppet show expert), Eisenstein (film director), Piscator (German producer and director), Brecht, and the like. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Craig’s long-cherished “paragon of perfect performer” influenced his followers Yeats (Irish playwright), Reinhard (German director), Adolphe Appia (Swiss stage designer), Jouvet Planchon Copeau, Barrault (French director and stage designer), Meyerhold, Annenkov, Tairov, Vakhtangov (Russian director), Eisenstein, Hevesy (Hungarian dramatist), and the like. But even to today, we have no idea about how the great man remarked Mei’s performance, which was closest to his dream. This outstanding theorist, who was honored as “prophet”, “seer”, “guide”, “master”, “revolutionist”, and “reformer” of the symbolism by the western theater companions, actually presented his dream about theater art only, but he could not find the shortcut to that in his day.

Actually, not only Craig didn’t find the way to the theater dream, but Artaud, who said “the theater art is of the orient” and tried to seek the shortcut to “Body Theater” from the oriental drama, also milked the bull and was poles apart from the dream. Obviously, more and more western theater colleagues pinned their hope of saving the lifeless western theater on their imaginary “oriental theater”. For example, Artaud’s follower Ariane Mnouchkine of Théâtre du Soleil (Theater of the Sun) in Paris, said, “The unique characters of theater art were from Asia, and western drama people never created any true form. The ‘form’ of theater art on our lips definitely refers to something of Asian theater. What we are looking for is the form. Asian theater is our source.”<sup>1</sup> Artaud and his followers trained theater performers strictly by what they lean from Asian theaters. Is this similar to the trainings of Xiqu performers? The answer is no. The superficial similarities could not cover the essential discrepancies.

Inspired by the show of dancers of Bali, Artaud realized that “each muscle’s quivering or each eye movement is out of precise calculating.”<sup>2</sup> Only getting through such formulated trainings, performers “are able to make everything in his performance workable and figure out the approach to the best effect”.<sup>3</sup> But Artaud’s “best effect” was quite different from the aesthetic effect of the Bali dancing and Chinese Xiqu, because the trainings to practise Cruel Theater were based on “crazy” and fierce inner heart experience and non-formulated emotional expression. He said, “Only when performers feel scared truly, can

1 [F] Mnouchkine, *The Theater Is Oriental*, Drama. Edition2, 2003.

2 [F] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater of Cruelty--Theater and Its Double Images*, China Drama Press, 2006, p.50.

3 Li Zanguang, *Body Shaping, Inner Heart, and Overall--Artaud’s Performance Theory and Its Art Practice*, in *Film Art*, Oct. 1987, p.50.

their performance make audiences scared, too; only the performers suffer hardships, can they help others to understand the hardships.”<sup>1</sup> This is the exact explanation of Cruel Theater—a performer should face his inner heart cruelly and inspire his instinctive fear, repression and desire. Only in this hysterical way could he achieve the fearful and strange emotional expression (postures) with his body. Obviously, it is poles apart from the accurate magnificent performance of either the Bali dance, or Xiqu, which depends on the complicated and hard formulated trainings of the performers since their childhood. British philosopher Wittgenstein (1889-1951) once asked, “What is fear? What meaning does it contain? To make a definition with body movement, I will “perform” what is fear.”<sup>2</sup> Obviously, linguistic description focusing on psychological state more is rather limited, but the ambiguity in language can be presented more clearly by body movement. Nevertheless, the body presentation of “fear” varies among performers. To “perform fear” advocated by Wittgenstein aims to present the general state of fear by daily movements. This notion conforms to the western performance theory, which highlighted the reappearance of life like “fear”. Another different body presentation is that of Xiqu. Performers’ body movement in Xiqu is highly formulated and alien to daily life all because they have been trained to do that since their childhood.

That is, the “scene” presented by this “complicated” “body expressions”<sup>3</sup> and the “image” contained in the “thoughts” are not the equivalent “scene” and “image” in real life, but the deformative, abstract and ultra-realistic ones out of life. Obviously, neither Artaud nor Wittgenstein understood the oriental aesthetics of Xiqu in which performers “present scene with body expression”.

### 3. To inspire western theater performers to have intensive training of “pre-expressivity”

It should be stated: in 1935, Brecht suddenly became aware of that the art of Xiqu was not experiential expression but a presentation, after he had watched Mei’s show. “When he is on the stage and begins his show, Mei has already created the image”. To say that “he has already created the image” means that the plot lines and character’s destiny have been revealed by opening remarks and self-introduction. There has been no suspense. The audience is to see how the performers present it. The stage image has

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1 Ibid, p.47.

2 [B] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by Tang Chao and Fan Guangdi, San Lian Book Store, 1992, p.262.

3 The aesthetic expressive core of Kunqu is that “the body expression are complex, but they are all scenes”, which was mentioned in *Shen Yin Jian Gu Lu* (An Anthology of Kunqu Opera). Hong Weizhu, *Thesaurus of Kunqu*, National Center for Traditional Arts, in the 95<sup>th</sup> year of Republic of China, p.639.



been formed and formulated. And what the character behaves is presented by singing and dancing. “Singing and dancing are nearly the whole of the stage expression.” The formulated movements are “pure performance”.<sup>1</sup> In brief, in the experiential performance, the character image can never be created before the performance, and it requires the performer to inspire the similar emotions and impulse of the character every night. During this process, the image comes out gradually and is created finally. While, in Xiqu, performers show formulated movements, by singing or dancing, which don't obey the instructions of emotions but of “pure performance”. All they do is to sing and dance with body movements. Therefore, Xiqu is presenting “how to do” and guide the audience to enjoy the beauty of “form”. On the other hand, the experiential theater is presenting “what to do” and let the audience know the characters with the company of the tension of the story. The latter focuses on the story (reflection of “reality”), while the former focuses on the form (creation of “beauty”).

Since Xiqu focuses on presenting art, it is not important for the performers to explain the plot, roles and their personalities as the experiential performers do. For the former, their focus is always the beauty and grace of the formulated but complicated movements with many varieties as well. This is the “pre-expressivity”—when he is on the stage, a performer has “created the image”. Western theater colleagues have been crazy about this magic expression after Mei fully showed his “pre-expressivity” on the Soviet Union's stage. Grotowski proposed “Theater of Sources” in his *Journey to the East*.<sup>2</sup> The “meeting with the oriental”, mentioned by Grotowski, means, “to find the sources of the common body techniques before they appeared”—“the Pre-differentiation Art”: “poems are songs, songs are curses, and movements are dances”.<sup>3</sup> In 1962, Grotowski made a short learning visit to China.

Later, he wrote an article and spoke highly of the exquisite performance of Xiqu performers. He even noticed the differences between the “softness” of the “somersault” in Jingju (Peking Opera) and the “ovreal softness” required in western drama. He was also interested in the performers' techniques of breathing, articulation and image shaping. He believed that it's instructive to the reform of western theater art he was engaged in at that time. Comparing Grotowski's *The Training of Performers* recorded by Franz Marina in 1966 to the record of the training by Eugenio Barba from 1959 to 1960, we can see a divide in 1962 when Grotowski visited China and studied on Jingju, because his ideas after 1962 become more oriental than before. Peter Brook, the world

1 Brecht, *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, §76. Translated by Zhang Li, see *Modern Foreign Playwrights' Views on Drama*, China Social Sciences and Publishing House, 1982, p.118.

2 Ronald Grimes. Route to the Mountain, A prose meditation on Grotowski as pilgrim. in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*. 1997. Lisa Wolford & Richard Schechner (ed.) New York: Routledge . P270.

3 Zbigniew Osinski. Grotowski Blazes the Trails: From Objective Drama to Art as Vehicle. in *The Grotowski Sourcebook*. 1997. R.Schechner and L.Wolford (ed.) New York:Routledge. P384-385.

famous British director, was a great proponent of Grotowski's exploration in theater art. He published *The Empty Space* in 1968, based on a series of his own lectures in 1965. Obviously, the concept "empty space" was directly influenced by the performance of Beijing Jingju Troupe and Taiwan Jingju Troupe in London.

As Grotowski's close partner, Eugenio Barba was not only a recorder of his exploration of Poor Theater, but also an important narrator and impeller of his ideas on theater art. In *A Dictionary of Theater Anthropology—The Secret Art of the Performer*, Barba gave the definition of "Pre-expressivity": "For the performers, there is a common basic level in the structure of performance which is called 'Pre-expressivity' (structure level) in the theater art anthropology... It refers to how to show a performer's vigor, how to create a present image and finally to draw the audience's attention." There is apparently no doubt that the above statement was influenced by the aesthetics of performance in Xiqu.

Italian scholar Nicola Savarese, a researcher of ISTA (International School of Theater Anthropology) which was founded by Barba in 1979, once claimed, "For two centuries, almost all the ideas and scientific researches about performers were conducted in the field of psychology, which led the researches and practice of theater art to a dead end." For researchers in ISTA who tried to break it down, "the correct choice of a reference is decided by the stability of the chosen performance." The so-called "stability of the performance" is to find the "most common law in performance", which is "a structure mode built on the basis of some principles and long-term practice", when researchers do deep analysis on how a performer is developed. Therefore, Savarese believed, "The traditional Asian theater arts play a unique role in our school. Although they are quite different from each other, they do form a solid inner structure in the long-term strict training of performers. Jingju, Japanese Kabuki, Indian Catakari Drama and Bali Ballet are all the case." "A solid inner structure" here refers to the formulated skills and techniques, the footstones of the "pre-expressivity" which was highlighted by Barba. Savarese pointed out: "it is the very pre-expressivity training that helps a performer to control his stage image or 'theater life' in a technical but not psychological way." This "technical way", for instance, can create the theatrical Wushu (fighting) with oriental features. Savarese stated, "there is a new discovery of the relationship between Wushu and personal character: learning Wushu helps a learner have different awareness about his real physical body and 'another body'. When doing movements of Wushu, the 'another body' becomes 'existent'. (The 'another body' is not really existent, but it is a new feeling out of different consciousness.) This 'existence' is distinctly important for the performer if he hopes to gain new life for his stage show from the audience's appreciation. Perhaps, it is for the visible presentation of theater that Wushu, though it is not made for stage show, has brought great influence to oriental theatrical effects. "

Additionally, the "technical approach" adopted by oriental performers in pre-expression also created the amazing aesthetic effect of "luxurious balance". Savarese believed

that the good oriental performers “give up their daily life balance and keep a posture of instability or non-daily-life balance... It needs more physical strength to expand physical tension and then finally achieve his self-expression. As if trying to code them, the oriental theater performers sorted out this special balance long before and formulated some basic postures. Learners have to understand and master these formulated skills through training and practice...In the formulated performance of the east and the west lies in a rule like this: walking, moving and body balance of daily life are deformed. The foundation of this special technique is the change of balance, that is, the unstable balance. To resist to ‘nature’, the oriental performers pursue a state of luxurious balance which needs great effort to achieve but has no practical value at all.”<sup>1</sup> In order to illustrate the stage vigor resulted from the “technical way” in the process of “pre-expression” of the oriental theater performers, Savarese took Mei’s “stilts” Kong Fu as an example and quoted a few paragraphs from Mei’s book *Stage Life for 40 Years* about how to practice the basic actions of Qingyi (a sort of female role in Jingju), especially how to fight with spears or swords on stilts and run in circles on the icy ground in cold winter days. He stated his discovery about the secret of Mei’s vigor on stage like this: the untouchable vigor exactly comes from the concrete and tangible training of *Kong Fu*. However, it is not only the concrete training, but also the state, beyond any description, that we call the performer’s “image”.<sup>2</sup> Actually, the so-called “state, beyond any description,” originated from the hard Tongzigong, which is beyond reach but yearned for by western theater people.

In conclusion, since Mei’s visit to the Soviet Union, there has been a delirious fever in the European theater circle: to look “east”—to worship and learn from the body-performing aesthetics of Xiqu. It has been lasting until now. The western theater colleagues have been continuously exploring how to take the quintessence of Xiqu as reference and establish some new performance theories to save western theater. Those direct or indirect ideological roots and stage references have very close connection with the aesthetics of Chinese Xiqu conveyed by Mei on the Soviet stage. His performing arts have directly influenced the history of the world modern theater, therefore, it has extensive worldwide significance: first, it prompted the western theater people to bid farewell to the naturalism. They began to extremely hate “being as the real life and as rigid as taking photos” on the stage. Second, it led the re-exploration of the expressiveness of the performer’s body. The performer’s perfect and well-adapted expressivity of Xiqu is the dream “theater art” that was pursued by the western theater professionals. Third, it also inspired to increase the intensive training of the “pre-expressivity” of performers. The amazing aesthetic effect of “luxurious balance”

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1 [I] N. Savarese, Stage Images of Oriental and Western Performers, *Paper Compilation on Chinese Theater Art International Academic Symposium*, April, 1987 (internal printing).

2 *The Complete Works of Mei Lanfang*, p.25, p.34.

presented by the oriental performers in “pre-expression” and its “technical way” are attractive to the western professionals.

*Zou Yuanjiang*  
*Professor at Wuhan University.*

# Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Qi Rushan and Early Xiqu Directors

FU QIUMIN

**ABSTRACT** The word “director” is an imported term from the West, but it plays an important role in modern Chinese Xiqu. Since Wang Yaoqing and Qi Rushan were given the title of “director” by books and newspapers in 1920s, Jingju or opera directors have gone through over 90 years. As a national theatre, Jingju leads the trend of local operas. So when was the term and function of “director” introduced into Jingju? What are the form, reference, and development of Jingju in the early-stage directing theories? The author will carry out investigations under this subject. The paper will study three Jingju masters, Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and Qi Rushan, respectively to explore the historical ideology of “director” and “direction”, the directing practice of Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan, and the directing idea of Cheng Yanqiu.

**KEYWORDS** Early-stage Jingju Directors, Direction, Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Qi Rushan

## 1. Historical conception of “director” and “direction”

In the exploration of the history of Jingju directors, first of all the two key defining terms, “director” (*metteur en scène*) and “direction” (*mise en scène*) must be involved. According to the definition in *Dictionnaire du theatre*, written by the famous French professor and senior theatre theorist Patrice Pavis, “a director is the one who takes charge of putting the play on stage. He undertakes the aesthetic responsibility, organizes performances, selects performers, visualizes the text, and employs various feasible

stage means.”<sup>1</sup> The specific work of directors is “direction”. Broadly speaking, “‘direction’ refers to whole stage expression techniques such as scenic design, lighting, music and actors’ performances... In a narrower sense, the term refers to a task including the arrangement and adjustment of various stage components in a certain period of time and space.”<sup>2</sup> In China, however, the use of these two terms are often mixed up, and in most cases “director” replaces “direction”. For the academic preciseness of this paper, I assume that it is necessary to distinguish the two terms.

In tracking the history, before the advent of “director” and “direction” in history, Chinese and western theatres had a similar application ideology: the leading performers in the troupe generally took the director role.

In the west, “director” and “direction” both belong to new terms. “The function and terminology of directors originated approximately in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term ‘direction’ is novel: it first appeared in 1820, and came into the public view in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It was also during this period that the director became the ‘official’ chief in charge of the stage performance. Before that, the director role was undertaken by the stage manager or leading performers themselves.”<sup>3</sup> André Veinstein also confirmed the point: “It has at least been about 135 years since the ‘birth’ of directors in France.”<sup>4</sup> In ancient Greek theatres, actors themselves acted as organizers and issued orders. From the collapse of the Western Roman Empire to the beginning of the Renaissance in the middle Ages, performance organizers were responsible for both the ideological and aesthetic aspects of the mystery play. Set decorators usually organized the theatres during the Renaissance and Baroque. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, famous performers or stage managers generally played the role of the director. In terms of popular research findings, it was not until the director’s centralization of power was emphasized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen of Germany, Antoine of France, and Constantin Stanislavski of Russia, that the Western role of director turned from a mixed concept to an independent ideology, and the director became the “formal” leader of stage performances. This promoted the director’s role to be listed as a discipline and become an independent art category. Another significant reason for the appearance of “director” was the rapid development of stage machinery and electro-optical technology.

In China, there was also no such concept as “director” in the traditional operas, but the role of director constantly existed, and more than a few people more or less acted like it in an efficient way. Like western theatres, the traditional Chinese operas never

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1 Patrice Pavis (France), *Dictionnaire du Théâtre [Dictionary of Theatres]*, French Version (Paris : Dunod (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), 1966), p.204 ; Chinese Edition, trans: Gong Baorong & Fu Qiumin, Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2014.

2 Ibid, p.210.

3 Ibid, p.204, p.210.

4 André Veinstein, *La Mise en scène théâtrale et sa condition esthétique*, in *Theatre Direction and its Aesthetic Condition*, Paris: Librairie théâtrale, 1992, p.120.

considered “director” as an independent job. Instead, the performers, playwrights or gangers played the role, so it also appeared to a mixed ideology. The “Lingzheng Zhi Shi (acting instructor)” and “Yuegong (musician)” of Tang Dynasty, “Moni (hero)” in the poetic performances of the Song Dynasty and “Yinxi (narrator)” in the script-based performances of the Jin Dynasty, “Sechang (musician manager)” in the poetic performances of the Song Dynasty, “Youshi (senior teacher)”, “Banyanjia (performing artist)” and “Banyanzhe (performer)” in the opera performances of the Ming Dynasty, and “Shuoxi Shifu (acting master)” of Jingju can all be regarded as old names of directors in different periods of Chinese history. According to literary materials, the term “director” was introduced into China from the West in the 1920s. In 1924, the title of “director” first showed up in the titles of the film *A Poor Heart*, directed by Gu Kenfu and Chen Shouyin, and screenplay written by Lu Jie. During the time, only the term “director” was brought to China but “direction” was not. The latter term was directly substituted by “director”, sometimes referring to people, but sometimes referring to the specific work of directors.

So when was the term “director” brought into operas? And when did director become an independent ideology in China? This involves Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan in Jingju. Mei was famous for acting and Qi was famous for playwriting. As for when it comes to directing, the two masters must be studied together. In terms of material analyses, it is found that no full-time staff ever rehearsed operas for Mei except for Qi and “Mei fans”, whether in the adaptation of traditional operas or in the creation of new ones. However, Qi clearly wrote in *Fifty Years of National Opera*, “From 1900 during the regime of Emperor Guangxu to the early Republican era, there was no one rehearsing operas due to the unstableness of the public. It had not been advocated again until I started to write operas for Lanfang in the fourth year of the regime of Emperor Guangxu. I at first rehearsed every scene involving Lanfang in person... From the fourth year in the Republican era, there was a better social atmosphere of opera rehearsing in the following two decades than in the late Qing Dynasty.”<sup>1</sup> I notice two points in this passage. First, Qi officially took part in the directing work of Mei’s operas from 1915. Second, the reason why the directing work in Jingju was valued, restored and developed was that Qi directed them for Mei. In his memoirs, Qi also repeatedly highlighted the fact that he directed operas for Mei: “I wrote to him over twenty operas, and I rehearsed each one of them in person. Adding the Kunqu Opera he learned, I organized more than forty operas for him in total.”<sup>2</sup> According to Qi himself, he had been working with Mei continuously as both a playwright and a director, but the problem was that Mei never gave Qi a formal director’s title with a modern significance, and Qi’s self-affirmation of being a director for Mei also began in the 1960s.

1 Qi Rushan, *Fifty Years of National Opera*, in *Collected Works of Qi Rushan*, Vol. 5, Publishing Committee of Posthumous Works of Mister Qi Rushan, 1964, p.104.

2 *Qi Rushan Memoirs*, Baowen Tang Bookstore, 1989, p.116.



Looking at other materials, it is found that there are already public written records on Qi Rushan acting as a director. When the famous playwright Luo Yinggong once visited Mei's manor and saw Qi give directing advice on Mei's postures, Luo then asked Qi to rehearse operas for Cheng Yanqiu. Luo even wrote a poem Haiku for Qi Rushan: "...Just to borrow the beautiful performance of Mei, to dance on stage covered with a woollen blanket. People admire Mei's wonderful dance, but never see Qi's diligent instruction. Sometime in the future, his contribution will turn to legacy, and his disciple Cheng will inherit it to impress the world..." *Morning Newspaper of Beijing* published this poem in April of 1928 and added an editor's note: "everyone knows the name of Mei Lanfang, but it is Mister Qi Rushan who has helped Mei gain the reputation. There are only a few individuals in the world able to undertake Qi's work. He is both the playwright and director of most famous operas of Mei. This poem by Luo Yinggong is a work of games but really shines, so it is necessary for it to be released to the public."<sup>1</sup> From Qi's self-narration and Luo's poem to the editor's note of *Morning Newspaper*, I can conclude that Qi indeed participated in the "direction" of Mei's operas, and *Morning Newspaper* endowed Qi with the title of "director".

After the term "director" was introduced into China in 1924, Ajia wrote a preface to the book *Collation and Supplementation to Theatrical Troupe Serial* edited by Luo Yinggong: "Wang Yaoqing is most proficient in Theatre Studies, capable of writing new operas and producing new tunes, as well as directing operas..."<sup>2</sup> In the theatrical books and newspapers, Wang Yaoqing and Qi Rushan are at the top of the list as well-acknowledged "early Jingju directors". This is the groundbreaking starting point of the history of Jingju and even the history of Chinese opera directors.

However, in practice, the directing role of Wang Yaoqing and Qi Rushan was not perfect, and not completely equivalent to the implication of modern directors. Taking Qi as an example, "I at first rehearsed every scene involving Lanfang in person, and I would watch rehearsal of some other important scenes, because of their relationship to the big picture. As for other scenes like interludes, although I would rehearse them once or twice, I did not take much charge of it."<sup>3</sup> This self-narration of Qi is very clear, indicating his specific way of participating in the rehearsal. First, he rehearsed the protagonist's scenes in person. Second, he watched rehearsal of some other important scenes depending on circumstances. Third, he was not in charge of interludes. This demonstrated that apart from Mei Lanfang's scenes, all the other scenes were rehearsed by performers themselves and Qi only gave suggestions. Nevertheless, this might have something to do with the fact that Qi spoke some French and visited France for three times, watching the plays and receiving certain influences from western theatres. He

1 Liang Yan, Research on Qi Rushan's Theatrical Studies, in *Morning Newspaper*, No. 129 (1928), April 15th, 2008, Academy Press (Xue Yuan), p.254. Notes: the author highlighted the term "director".

2 Ibid, p.256.

3 Qi Rushan, *Fifty Years of National Opera*, China Theatre Press, 1998, p.104.

had stepped out of the stereotype that protagonists rehearsed operas by themselves in Jingju, which endowed his role of director with a certain independent ideology.

The method Qi rehearsed operas for Mei was supposed to design postures and appearances for performers from the perspective of overall conception. However, some descriptions in Mei's writings indicated that his postures and expressions were not entirely created by Qi. He himself also joined the direction to a certain extent. As Qi confirmed, in operas like *Qingwen Tearing Fans* and *Daiyu Burying Flowers*, "he does not need me to install postures and expressions for him. He is an expert for them. I only stay aside giving advice now and then."<sup>1</sup> This implies that during Mei's rehearsals, sometimes it was Qi that designed postures, expressions, and appearances, and in other time it was Mei that designed them for him. It is said that onlookers are most clear-minded, and in this case, Qi Rushan was Mei Lanfang's most clear and bright "mirror". Yet considering from a quantitative point of view, I am supposed to give priority to Qi rather than Mei, for normally it was Qi that designed and proposed ideas at first but Mei would not directly accept them all. Instead, he filtrated and re-processed the ideas, referring to the view of other "Mei fans" to infuse collective wisdom before finally putting the ideas into practice. Therefore, Mei and Qi's direction worked in a complementary way of convection, which was an inextricable form. This meant that the directing role had broken away from the mixed ideology of directors and performers and transited to a semi-independent and semi-mixed ideology.

Regrettably, although Mei and Qi cooperated for twenty years, and despite the fact that Qi was mentioned as a director by Morning Newspaper, it did not arouse more concern among Chinese citizens. Because Mei did not give the title of director to Qi or himself, Qi was never officially awarded a title of "director" with a modern significance in Jingju. The reason for this might be that there were no such titles as "director" in operas during that era, not to mention considering direction as a distinct and vital work. So Mei Lanfang, as a protagonist and troupe leader, naturally inherited the theatrical tradition that the "Shuoxi Shifu (acting master)" was acted by leading performers or gangers, but did not realize that he and Qi Rushan both took part in the director's work. The traditional mixed ideology of performers and directors also left most Chinese opera critics unaware of Mei's involvement in directing. Therefore, in the sense of direction, both Mei and Qi can be regarded as Avant-couriers of Jingju directors.

Although Mei did not give himself or Qi the title of directors, he unprecedentedly established in his Jingju organizing form the directing function and director's title with a modern significance. In his trip to the United States in 1930, in order to integrate with the title of "director" in western theatres, and to achieve greater success in his performance in the U.S., Mei hired Zhang Pengchun, a lecturer in the US, to become his first formal director. However, Zhang was only temporarily hired twice by Mei for

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1 Ibid, p.119.

short terms during his journey in the U.S. and his travel to the Soviet Union. According to written records, Zhang played a major role in translation and diplomacy in the U.S. and USSR. Nonetheless, Mei's engagement with Zhang took the first step in separating Jingju director from the mixed ideology, endowing it with independent significance. It wrote an important page in the history book of Jingju as well as opera directors.

During this age, Ouyang Yuqian also directed and performed Jingju in cities like Shanghai and Nantong, but he actually transferred from stage play to Jingju. Cheng Yanqiu was the first person with a real Jingju actor background that confirmed his director's work in public. From August to October 1933, a few months after Cheng returned from a study tour in Europe, the journal *Drama Monthly* published a paper entitled *A Perspective of Play Directors* dictated by Cheng Yanqiu and recorded by Liu Shouhe and Tong Jingyin. As its name implied, the paper discussed stage play directors, but it actually involved both stage plays and operas. Cheng admitted without preamble in Preface that he directed operas: "Although I do not have experience in directing stage plays, I indeed directed 'music theatres'."<sup>1</sup> This "music theatre" refers to traditional operas with singing and music, so Cheng is supposed to be the first opera director in the history of Jingju and even the history of operas, who came from a Jingju actor background and determined his own title of director in a formal manner. He not only affirmed his status as an opera director, but also comprehensively and systematically introduced his directing ideas on plays and operas to the public for the first time, through the work *A Perspective of Play Directors*. Thus, the year of 1933 can be seen as the birth year of the first monograph on plays and opera directors in China, and Cheng laid a foundation for opera directors to turn from mixed ideology to independent ideology, both theoretically and in practice.

## 2.The directing practice of Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan

Mei Lanfang's works, such as *Forty Years' Life on Stage* and *Collected Works of Mei Lanfang*, taken down by his secretary, have far exceeded his predecessors in length and have jumped out of experiential records of pithy formulas or quotations, but they still basically belong to the memory-based perceptual experience of performing. Collected works of Qi Rushan and Qi Rushan Memoirs do not have special topics on opera directors either. Instead, he only briefly introduced "aspects of the rehearsal" in operas in the fourth chapter of the paper *Fifty Years of National Opera*.

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1 Cheng Yanqiu, *A Perspective of Play Directors*, recorded by Liu Shouhe & Tong Jingyin, originally in *Drama Monthly*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 8 & 10(1933), also in *Collected Works of Cheng Yanqiu's Plays*, ed. Cheng Yongjiang, Hua Yi Press, 2010, p.75.

In Qi's elaboration, rehearsal procedures of Mei and Qi can be detected: the first step is the deskwork as a playwright and director, and the second is the rehearsal. Deskwork consists of three procedures: creating the script for stage performances, designing costumes and appearances, and devising performance postures. The script should only be finalized after repeated discussions between individuals and groups. Normally, Mei and Qi would pick a theme and discuss it with his brain trust members, and then Qi would write the first draft of outlines (scene outline). After group discussions, Qi would modify the text again. The design of costumes, appearances and protagonists' postures should be considered in coordination with music and scene setting. This indicated that their deskwork was a collective creation by playwrights, directors, performers and the brain trust, in a mixed-design form of written texts and stage performances.

There are five stages in the process of rehearsal: reading the script, playing against other performers, first group rehearsal, continuous group rehearsal, and dress rehearsal. "Reading the script": individual rehearsal of performers, including clear speaking and cadenced singing. This traditional method of managing the singing and speaking script requires the director (Paixi Shifu [acting master]) to help each actor deal with the coordination between the singing/speaking and scenes.

"Playing against other performers" is also called "separate rehearsal": a small-group rehearsal with opponent actors. It contains singing/speaking, postures, and expressions. This stage emphasizes the rehearsal of the main paragraphs in the opera based on the design and rehearsal of individual role. The point is to adjust or modify individual performances through communications with opponents, so as to incorporate it into the overall conception of the director.

"First group rehearsal": the first collective task in the direction, which involves the director's specific layout and confirmation on the integral conception of the performance. The director should coordinate works of various departments, to establish the "scenery outline", "intonation outline", "walk-on outline", "prop outline" and "costume outline", and finally determine the "scene outline". The "scene outline" is the text outline of performances, a scene-by-scene structural outline arranged according to the order of performers going on or off the stage. It clearly lists the abstract of each scene, names of actors with their characters as well as the time they go on or off the stage in each act, and names of dancing and martial arts. This outline is normally posted on the walls of rehearsal halls and backstage area. There are also scene plots like this in western theatres, often seen in the "masked comedy". In this comprehensive stage of direction, Mei extremely underlined the coordination between postures and setting/lighting, for he and Qi would sometimes put in a few setting and lighting elements.

"Continuous group rehearsal": successive detailed rehearsals with all crews on the spot. It is a continuous rehearsal without putting makeup on and it can be interrupted now and then.

“Dress rehearsal”: a make-up rehearsal of all performers. “Dress rehearsal” is an indispensable procedure in modern directors’ work. However, it only applied to students at old-type opera school during that age. Experienced actors did not need to dress up for rehearsals. In fact, Mei and Qi also had dress rehearsals, but in a particular way, which Mei called the “trial performance”. According to Mei: “... I put on the new costume that had been amended for three times and walked onto the small stage. I showed them multiple dancing postures one by one, postures of which I figured out with Mr. Qi. The audience today came intentionally to pick up flaws, for they would step to the front stage right away to correct any inappropriate things once they saw one.”<sup>1</sup> It can be noticed in Mei’s description that this dress rehearsal form named “trial performance” by Mei is not similar to the meaning of dress rehearsal in stage plays and modern operas. First, the theatre was very small. Second, the off-stage “audiences” were special: they were experts in the field or friends. Third, the performance was not continuous: whenever “audiences” discovered problems during performances, they were able to walk to the front stage to rectify. Fourth, the trial performance included appearance rehearsal: the performer conducted trial performances to harmonize postures and sceneries with only costumes on the high stage. During the procedure of dress rehearsal, Mei paid special attention to the presentation of individual performing style and “perfectness” of the character’s external form of expression. In fact, western theatres also have the term for “trial performances”, which is “*démonstration de travail*”. This is a method of individual preparation for the performers to understand art, meaning that actors sometimes conduct performances during the preparation, in order to validate a character or direction in the aspects of voice, movement, memory and so on. Its ideology is very similar to what Mei described.

The five rehearsal modes mentioned above are the rehearsal procedures and practical quintessence that Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan worked together for over twenty years, also reflecting the rehearsal method of other operas and troupes at that time and showing the entire rehearsal pattern of Chinese modern operas. If I compare Mei and Qi’s rehearsal process and ways of direction with the western realistic plays, it can be said that they have similar rehearsal procedures but distinct nature: western theatres create characters from inside to outside with appearances being supplementary. Mei and Qi’s method, however, is from outside to inside, considering the appearance as principle, which means that the design code of external postures, expressions, and costumes, as well as the appropriate coordination between acting and music/scenery, is the axis of rehearsal and *mise-en-scène*. Mei and Qi’s rehearsal was not limited to the inheritance of tradition. Mei did not allow he to become a ‘marionette’ of Qi, but endowed him with the autonomy to create roles.

In Mei’s works, I found many “stage directions” analogous to the *mise-en-scène*. Mei

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1 Mei Lanfang, *Forty Years of Stage Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Episode, recorded by Xu Jichuan, China Theatre Press (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), 1961, p.73.

especially emphasized the acting of performers in stage directions, like criterions of facial expressions, ideographical expressions of postures and eyes, alternations of stage atmospheres, dramatic sudden changes and so on. On an empty stage, *mise-en-scène* and the schedule of going on or off are important parts of opera direction. They constitute the organic network of performance exteriors, with *mise-en-scène* being net lines and the schedule of going on and off stage being adapter rings for net lines. Mei and Qi's direction basically inherited this symbolic and formalized traditional opera stage management, but they also made new management in terms of the distance perception of space, visual sense of audiences, and aesthetics of stage composition. For instance, they utilized a small number of western setting and lighting elements, indicating their turns from specification to flexibility.

### 3.Directing theories of Cheng Yanqiu

Cheng Yanqiu was not only the founder of Cheng-school performing arts in Jingju, but also the director of his own operas, and he was also engaged in the diffusion and research in directing theories. He could be regarded as the first master who systematically expounded directing theories in China. Due to the limited length of this paper, I only take his book *A Perspective of Play Directors* as a sample to discuss his several directing ideas with neglect of his directing practice. When the article came out, Chinese stage plays of that time just walked out of the germination stage and still remained in a state of hesitation. Cheng established a systematic directing theory through his own experiences as an opera director and rational thinking, and also through on-the-spot investigations of western theatre directors, especially the encounter and consultation with the famous theatre director Reinhardt in Germany. As soon as he returned from the West, he published *A Perspective of Play Directors*, laying a precious foundation for the establishment of Chinese directing studies.

The whole book is very systematized and detailed in categorization, divided into twenty-nine chapters in total. It comprehensively expounds the director's authority and division of jobs, director's accomplishment, desk work, rehearsal procedures, makeups, costumes, settings, props, lightings, colours, performers' postures, expressions, physical training, pronunciation issues, stage management, etc. The followings are two crucial ideas:

#### a.The theory of "integrity of the director supremacy"

One idea Cheng highlighted in the article is that directors should have the supreme power in theatres. He was the first opera actor who witnessed Reinhardt's directing. At first, he both revered and feared the centralization system of directors' rehearsal. He

sighed unfeignedly, “It’s so respectable but frightful!”<sup>1</sup> It can be said that as an actor, his fear stemmed from the difficulty in abandoning the advantage of “actor-centered system” in the creation of traditional operas, which gave priority to actors. However, he was inspired through communications with Reinhardt and other western directors as well as good on-the-spot investigations, and these experiences altered his outlook of the directors. In the second chapter *The Director’s Authority and Division of Jobs*, he said openly, “The director should have the supreme power because it is widely acknowledged that he bears the weight of the life of theatres.” He also required all performers and stage participants to “absolutely obey him, and he has the command power over them.”<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, Cheng’s fear was not out of thin air. The side effect of the director-centered system was that directors gained over-arbitrary power. Later, some western performers and co-workers considered their initiative to be limited, so the director-centered system was challenged and questioned over the 1960s and 1970s in the West, and there appeared waves of the pursuit of collective creation. In China 1933, however, the “actor-centered system” still dominated the entire theatre world, and directors were just new-born. It was subversive to replace the old “actor-centered system” with the new “director-centered system” in theatre concepts. Therefore, Cheng recommended this new theatrical system of division of jobs to Chinese citizens, settling a theoretical foundation for opera directors to step to independent forms, which possessed a pioneering significance.

On the premise of putting forward “director-centered system”, Cheng Yanqiu explained the relationship between directors and performers concretely, “The director is to regenerate performers, planting a mysterious seed inside their inner life. The seed will sprout in a certain period of time, transforming all their actions and spirits in a certain situation.” Cheng defined the responsibility division between directors and performers as that “the actor’s responsibility lies solely in his relationship with other actors on the stage, but the director is obliged to inspect all departments relevant to the performance before the show starts.”<sup>3</sup> Because Cheng cut the responsibility of director and performer in terms of time and personnel relationship: the director takes the responsibility before the performance and the performer takes it from the start of the performance. The director is fully responsible for the performance, but the actor only bears partial responsibilities. It is the primary mission for directors to plant and cultivate “seeds” of life within actors’ heart. To illustrate the point, Cheng also likened directors to doctors and army commanders: doctors must prescribe different medicines according to similar and different conditions of patients, and army commanders must have absolute authorities in the war. Therefore, he concluded that performers should utterly obey the director.

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1 Cheng Yongjiang, *Collected Works of Cheng Yanqiu’s Plays*, Hua Yi Press, p.30.

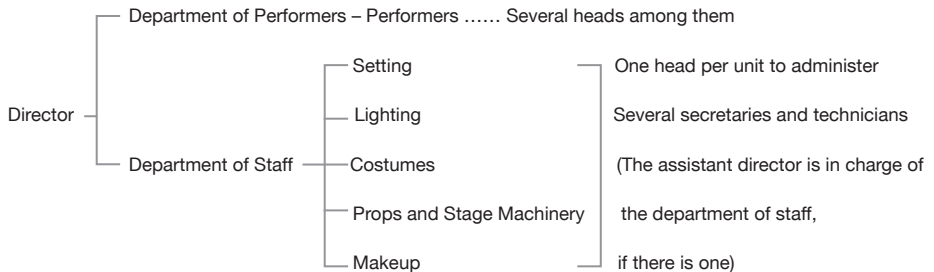
2 Cheng Yanqiu, *A Perspective of Play Directors*, recorded by Liu Shouhe & Tong Jingyin, originally in *Drama Monthly*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 8 & 10(1933), also in *Collected Works of Cheng Yanqiu’s Plays*, ed. Cheng Yongjiang, Hua Yi Press, 2010, p.77, p.78.

3 *Ibid*, p.78.



Cheng believed that the ultimate goal of the director-centered system is to achieve the “integrity” of the performance: “The reason for a theatre to be presented to the audience attributes to the consistency of various departments; obviously, the lighting and setting need to be consistent, as well as the scenery and acting. Everything must be coherent so the theatre can deliver an efficacy to the audience. If one worker in all departments acts as a smarty-pants and fails to listen to the director’s order, the director’s whole deal will be immediately destroyed, which means that the theatre is completely ruined and the performance becomes a disastrous defeat. Thus, the director should have the supreme power over all the people under command.”<sup>1</sup> Because the director is related to not only performers, but all members of various departments such as text and scenic design, Cheng agreed with the concept that “the theatre is comprehensive art”. He proposed that in order to transform the “dead” script into a “living” image, it requires various arts like setting and lighting to coordinate with the performance of actors, and the director is the coordinator who brings integrity to separate elements.

Cheng considered the director’s work as a systematic project with its specific subsystem organizations. The organization of subsystems should be adjusted according to time and space but never stick to old ways stubbornly. The organizational chart is as follows:



Today in China, both stage plays and operas are operated under the “director-centered system”. Analyzing from this reality, Cheng Yanqiu was indeed the leading standard bearer of the director-centered system in China. So, is the opera supposed to be actor-centered or director-centered? Is the theatre art of actors or art of directors? Those are other subjects that are worth studying and discussing.

#### b.Directors and management of performance subsystems

Cheng Yanqiu believed that the key work of a director is to direct performers, which consists of three specific points: motivation and qualification, group action, and

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p.79.

personality transformation on the stage.

The first point involves the choice of actors. Cheng suggested that a qualified performer should possess the following characteristics: A. innate talent and perseverance for required long-term training, as well as a sound physical condition able to endure performing control; B. a firm and flexible voice good at changing tones and conveying emotions; C. the ability to transform personal mood according to the plot; D. the capacity of understanding characters' movements, sounds and looks, and expressing them to the outside world. The second point concerns the actors' spirit of collective cooperation. He indicated, "Every performer is a part of the whole play. A single actor's excessive or insufficient performance can break the harmony of the complete show."<sup>1</sup> The third point refers to the actors' performing ability. Cheng indicated that after reading the script, an actor should have the ability to imagine the behaviours and actions of his character in mind and to externalize them into actual stage movements. Those who lack this ability to create characters can only conduct recitation of scripts.

When explaining the director's function, Cheng proposed a pair of performing questions on which are still controversial today—"true self" and "false self", "No matter on what stage, and no matter what role you play, you stay calm and perform a play steadily and clearly. This is your fixed 'true self'. Master every standard posture and do not casually distort it due to fear of being dull. Under this formula, when you practice on the stage again, your 'false self' will be made and elaborated as lively as possible. 'True self' and 'false self' complement each other, so spontaneously the consciousness of characters can be fully expressed, and there no longer exists an actor's own consciousness. Performers like this are true performers."<sup>2</sup> Here I discuss the problem of the stage performance relationship between the performer "I" and the character "he", which involves three levels of acting: the first level requires actors (true self) to learn standardized performance before standing on the stage, so they can perfectly reproduce the modality no matter which roles they are playing. "True self" in Cheng Yanqiu's illustration does not exactly refer to an actor's "ego" in daily life, but the "I" gone through professional performance training. At the second level, actors should study how to make use of acting techniques to present the character "he", which is "false self" in Cheng's definition. The third level indicates the most ideal state of acting: "true self" and "false self" are well digested by the actor and shown on the stage naturally and seamlessly.

How does "true self" and "false self" integrate? And how can an actor reach the ideal state of performance? Cheng made concrete explanations on these questions. He assumed that it is necessary to start from the first level, the training of basic skills of an actor. Concerning the physical training of the performers, Cheng summarised it into

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1 *Ibid.*, p.110.

2 *Ibid.*, p.111.

four aspects: the first is “cultivation of hygiene”, meaning that actors should keep clean physically and mentally before the performance so that their acting can be free and relaxed. The second is “waist movement”, referring to training the flexibility of the body to do free bends and stretches. The third is “limb exercise”, emphasizing the training of hands and feet. The fourth is “head movement”, which indicates free rotations of the neck, contractions of facial muscles, mouth opening and closing, looking left and right, and facial-wrinkle control in crying and laughing. He suggested that it is due to the usual rigorous training that “every movement of professional actors on the stage makes sense”.<sup>1</sup>

Cheng also elaborated on techniques of using gestures to express emotions in his book. Take eye movements as an example: wide open of eyes to express anger; gaze to express meditation; squint to express contempt; looking down to express depression; squeezing to express deception; opening eyes to express surprise; hazy eyes to express drowsiness, and closing eyes to express rest for mental tranquillity... As for body movements, throwing chest out to show courage; bowing back to show begging; relaxed the low back to show tiredness; wagging from side to side to show excitement; reclining to show romantics, and sitting straight to show respect... Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards. It can be found that the specific content discussed by Cheng originates entirely from the training and acting methods for the standardized movements of opera performers. As Huang Fanchuo of Qing Dynasty described in “eight essentials of postures” in *Original Features of Jingju*, the specific way for actions to express emotions is to “distinguish the eight shapes, separate the four states, lead with eyes, shake the head slightly, keep the steps stable, direct with the hands, rehearse in front of a mirror, and practice every day...The rich expression: cheering face, smiling eyes, flipping fingers, and slow sounds... The four states: joy, anger, grief, and surprise... The annoyed expression: angry eyes as a priority, wrinkling nose, chest puffed out, and hating voice...”<sup>2</sup> Pithy performing essentials have made human behaviours and expressions categorized, typified, schematized, enlarged and standardized, but they are precisely the essences accumulated by Chinese opera artists in the past generations, and they have been transformed to the characteristics of opera performance.

However, Cheng did not simply stick to opera tradition. Instead, he deepened and developed it, elaborating especially on the performance of “pre-action”. He cited the action of a woman intending to kiss a man as an example, “She is not supposed to directly kiss the man. There must be words and plots making her enamoured in the first place, and there should be a temporary standstill after speaking. Her eyes should look down and then look up, followed by a slow embracing action, and she can then finally

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1 Ibid.,p.112.

2 Huang Fanchuo, *Original Features of Jingju, Integration of Chinese Classical Opera Works*, Vol. 9, China Theatre Press, 1959, p.20.

kiss him.”<sup>1</sup> This set of preliminary performance, which Cheng called “fluctuations of a series of movements and postures”, is normally not noticed by the audience, for what the audience concerns are the final resultant actions of embracing and kissing. Cheng believed that acting is formed by connections of a series of “pre-action” + “action result” in order, which supports the actor to complete a plot and a play. Thus, he highlighted the importance of “fluctuations of postures”.

In terms of emotional expression, Cheng supposed that the significance of the actor's physical movements lied in expressing emotions and intentions: “The substantial posture is the representation of inner spirit. It is necessary for an actor to produce the equivalent emotion for a posture before presenting it.”<sup>2</sup> Actions come from the heart, and the external expression originates from the intention. Therefore, when actors demonstrate a certain body movement, they must possess an inner feeling for this action in the first place. Without true emotions, actors can only build false actions, and the audience's reception of the actors' performance will be lost. Every posture and expression relates to various body parts, and a meaningful posture is supposed to be a close combination of every segment from the spirit to physical bodies, all of which are indispensable. “Actions and expressions are a completely natural fluctuation connecting the inside and outside of the body. Thus, directors must detail the status and environment of characters to performers.”

Cheng also talked about the principle of stage performing aesthetics. “A movement of actors must have both a purpose and a reason. The performance should not include too many gestures, for too many will only paint the lily, yet too few of them will produce imperfection. Thus, like rising, standing, sitting, and lying, all behaviours of an actor stay under the attention of the audience. This indicates that actors should make a maximum effort at every moment to satisfy the audience's requirements.”<sup>3</sup> Here, Cheng raised a question on how a director helps performers grasp the sense of proportion in their acting to prevent it from being either too much or too little. In addition, actors must pay attention to the aesthetic image of audiences, so regardless of standing or turning around, they should not face directly or turn their back to the audience, but keep sideways towards the audience to be artistic. Actors should not be shut out by others on the stage, but they are not supposed to block others either. These viewpoints are the typical basic common sense in opera performing. Cheng concluded, “There is no absolute modality for expressions. If there was one, the status of famous opera performers would no longer exist... So postures must be transformed from the mind... Acting is merely depicting an individual in society, and we are also individuals in society, so there will eventually be a role depicting ourselves. That is the most appropriate one

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1 Cheng Yanqiu, *A Perspective of Play Directors*, recorded by Liu Shouhe & Tong Jingyin, originally in *Drama Monthly*, Vol. 2, No. 7, 8 & 10(1933), also in *Collected Works of Cheng Yanqiu's Plays*, ed. Cheng Yongjiang, Hua Yi Press, 2010, p.117.

2 *Ibid.*, p.114.

3 *Ibid.*, p.112.

for us to play.”<sup>1</sup>

Through the analysis of Cheng Yanqiu’s directing ideas in the above two aspects, it is found that the structural frame of Cheng’s directing theory originates from the West, but when it comes to acting skills, it is basically illustrated based on performing principles in Xiqu, with typical Chinese characteristic. Up to now, regardless of Chinese plays or books about opera directing theories, most of them have similar descriptions to the book *A Perspective of Play Directors*. Therefore, Cheng Yanqiu can be regarded as the first master who systematically expounded the directing theory in the literal form of Chinese language. Unfortunately, Chinese stage plays and operas are separately governed. The opera field assumes that what Cheng talked is about play directors, irrelevant to operas. The drama circle, however, believes that Cheng is just a genuine opera actor. Consequently, no one really pay attention to the academic and practical value of this book.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I took Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and Qi Rushan as research objects to tease out the early historical pattern of Jingju and even opera directors, as well as their directing practice and theories. The three masters made precious contributions, both in practice and in theory, to introducing the term “director” into China and separating directors from the mixed ideology. Ever since Wang Yaoqing was given the title of director by Ajia and Qi Rushan by *Morning Newspaper*, Jingju, or, Xiqu directors, have gone through over 90 years, despite that directors are merely a tiny segment in the thousand-year-long history of traditional operas. But do operas need directors or not after all? Do the traditional operas belong to performing art or directing art? There are still so many questions that need us in the later generations to investigate.

*Fu Qiumin*  
Chief Editor of *Confluents*, France

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.117.

# Return to Silence at the Golden Age — Discussion on the Gains and Losses of Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber*

WANG YONG'EN

**ABSTRACT** Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber*, including *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, *A Smile from A Maid*, and *Prudent Xiren*, earned fame for the innovation in many aspects of the productions and extensive advertisements they became known for in the early years of the Republic of China. However, as time went on, these three *Red Chamber* failed to live up to what is regarded as Mei Lanfang's classic performances. The reasons for the change in their evaluation were the excessive commercial consideration in the creation of Mei's *Red Chamber*, the biased understanding of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the overemphasis on external forms of expression, and the lack of theatricality of the works. All these factors combined to make Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber* fail to survive Mei Lanfang. Actually Mei himself had given them up when he was still alive.

**KEY WORDS** Mei Lanfang, *Red Chamber*, New Plays in Ancient Costumes

## Part One

Mei Lanfang was one of the most important Jingju artists in China during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He not only helped develop the performance art of Dan (female lead role) but also elevated the overall level of Jingju and extended its influence to the world, which in turn, contributed tremendously to the development of Chinese theatres.

Born to a family of Xiqu artists, Mei Lanfang was exposed to the power of Jingju from an early age. Mei Lanfang had performed more than 100 Xiqu during his career. Over 30 of his Xiqu were done in the Mei style he and his team became recognized for.

*Red Chamber* is Jingju adapted by Mei Lanfang and inspired by the classical Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. There are three *Red Chamber* Mei performed: *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* (February 1916), *A Smile from A Maid* (also known as Qingwen's Tearing A Fan, June 1916) and *Prudent Xiren* (December 1927). These *Red Chamber* were tailored for Mei by scholars such as Qi Rushan, Li Shisong, Luo Gang and others, with Mei's personal beauty and acting strengths and styles in mind. The performances were well received when the Xiqu came out.

*Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* is based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. There are 6 scenes in total in the play. In the first scene, the manservant Mingyan brings to Baoyu (the hero in the novel) story collections and romances like *Romance of the West Chamber* for amusement. In the second scene, Baoyu brings the books to read in the Grand View Garden. In the third scene, Daiyu (the heroine in the novel) grieves over spring, takes pity on the fallen withered flowers, and is collecting and burying them in a flower tomb. The fourth and the fifth are transitional scenes in which Xiren (Baoyu's leading maidservant) and Zijuan (Daiyu's leading maidservant) respectively go to the Grand View Garden to find Baoyu and Daiyu. The sixth scene is about Baoyu and Daiyu's meeting in the Grand View Garden. They bury the flowers and read *Romance of the Western Chamber* together. After Baoyu is called away by Xiren, Daiyu, on her way home, passes by the Pear Fragrance Court, and happens to hear the opera of the *Peony Pavilion* that is being played inside. She was impressed by the sentimental lines she hears. The sixth scene is the key part of the whole play, which describes Daiyu's sentimental character vividly.

*A Smile from A Maid* (also known as Qingwen's Tearing A Fan) is based on the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This Xiqu is in the style of a festival-greeting light comedy, set during the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival and consists of four scenes. The first scene sets the stage with Qingwen (one of Baoyu's major maidservants and the heroine in this Xiqu) falling out with Xiren (Baoyu's leading maidservant) over something and being rebuked by Baoyu after breaking a fan. Qingwen is unhappy and angry, and Xiren's attempt to pacify her only makes her more irritated, which leads to a quarrel between her and Xiren. The second and third scenes are interlude scenes. In the fourth and final scene, Baoyu makes the grand gesture of apologizing to Qingwen and letting Qingwen rip any fans as she feels like ripping, and as a result Qingwen feels better and the master and maid make up.

*Prudent Xiren* is based on the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of *Dream of the Red Chamber*. This is a one-act play about how Baoyu (the heroine in the novel and the play) hates to study for official selection examinations, and yet enjoys hanging around with girls. Xiren (Baoyu's



leading maidservant) tries to persuade him to study seriously and avoid spending too much time with girls inside their large household, but Baoyu refuses to listen to her. Xiren then pretends to be angry to find out if Baoyu will care a little bit for her and finally makes him compromise temporarily.

These Xiqu were scripted by Qi Rushan and some others specifically for Mei Lanfang, when Mei was bent on performing “new plays in ancient costumes.” Mei had directed and performed *Chang'e Flying to the Moon* in August 1914 with great success, thanks to his many innovations involving costumes, makeup, music and dance. In many senses, that success laid a foundation for Mei's three *Red Chamber*, which all turned out to be tremendously successful and acclaimed.

Impressed by the extremely high box office sales of the *Red Chamber*, many other troupes of different genres of Xiqu decided to produce their own *Red Chamber*, set off a quite a new wave of adapting *Dream of the Red Chamber* for stage. While Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber* were most enthusiastically received and Mei himself considered the leading icon of this of “*Red Chamber* wave,” these three Xiqu did not wear well through the tide of time and were eventually abandoned by him, and thus failed to become classic Mei style Xiqu as many of his other works. The decline as well as these Xiqu merits deserve extensive discussion.

## Part Two

Mei Lanfang's series of *Red Chamber* were highly innovative, which led to the enthusiastic responses of audiences at that time. This innovative style can be attributed to Mei's great understanding of Jingju: “When I went back to Shanghai for the second time, I understood more deeply that the future of Xiqu would be different, in response the changing needs of the audience and times. I don't want to stand still in this old circle and be restricted by it. I want to go on a new path to seek development.”<sup>1</sup> This was also the inspiration behind Mei directing and performing new plays, his desire to perform in “new plays in ancient costume.” He wanted to a renewed sense of vitality brought into the Jingju. Beijing and Shanghai audiences were very different. Beijing audiences were familiar with Jingju, which emphasizes, “listening.” They referred to watching a play as listening to a play. The audience in Shanghai had a different style in how they enjoyed theater. They paid more attention to the visual effects of a production. Mei Lanfang recognized this difference when he first performed in Shanghai and it prompted him to reform Jingju to accommodate both audiences' expectations. With the help of Qi Rushan and others, Mei designed much innovation for the *Red Chamber*. No matter in

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1 Mei Lanfang, *40 Lives Annually on the Stage* (Part I), recorded by Xu Jichuan: Unity Press, 2006, p.235.

costume, music, choreography, stage setting and drama structure, the three Xiqu were evidently different more traditional Jingju and these innovations themselves were enough to attract the audience's attention.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* was such a classic that every educated person in China then was familiar with it. It could be said that there was a Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu in the heart of every viewer of these *Red Chamber*. The actor that performed Lin Daiyu was often the key to the play's success. Before Mei performed the *Red Chamber*, there had been operatic productions based on *Dream of the Red Chamber* in Beijing, as early as the reign of Emperor Guangxu. In one of the productions, for example, Chen Zifang played Lin Daiyu and Han Liu played Jia Baoyu. To appear as a noble young lady in traditional Xiqu, Daiyu was always dressed with a bulky hairstyle with flamboyant headwear and a short elaborately embroidered cape. Audiences often burst out laughing at sight of the heroine because her looks were so different from the audience's expectation. However, Daiyu played by Mei Lanfang in *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* "wore a soft-silk lined short gown with front buttons on the right, a soft-silk long dress and, around the waist, a short apron made of soft yarn which had been folded up just before make-up. She also put on ribbons, with a jade pendant on both sides. When going back to the room, a plain soft-silk short embroidered cape was added, with 8 colorful embroidered flowers on it."<sup>1</sup> Daiyu's hairstyle was also different from the character's traditional Jingju looks: "[She] wore the hair in three tiny buns in the front making up a neat triangle with jade or pearl flower jewelry beside them."<sup>2</sup> Before this play the costumes of traditional female lead roles on the stage of Jingju had often been monotonously the same, one being hardly distinguishable from another, and could not manifest the feminine beauty of the character at all. However, Mei's style not only emphasized Daiyu's femininity but also suggested the inner self of the character. Lin Daiyu's skirt tightly tied around the waist accented her physical beauty by showing her person like "a delicate willow swaying in the wind." In previous Jingju, the female lead roles had always worn very long hair, long enough to reach much below the hip, which disrupted the natural proportional beauty of the human figure, while Mei Lanfang's Lin Daiyu wore much shorter hair, which came to a stop somewhere above the hip, looking much lighter and helping make a livelier image. The female roles at that time liked to wear hairpins all over the head to show the character's wealthy background, but Mei's Lin Daiyu had a much simpler but more elegant hairstyle. Mei's interpretation of Lin Daiyu's was successful because it reflected the elegant and refined temperament of Daiyu. This kind of looks, different from what had been prevalent in older Xiqu, were innovation at its best, and fit in very well with the audience's imagination of Daiyu. Someone noted, "In the third scene, Mei showed up in the role of Daiyu, wearing an ancient costume.... The audience was enchanted when she entered with such

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1 Ibid, p.272.

2 Ibid, p.272.

elegance... such 'fairy looks,' as if Daiyu really came to life."<sup>1</sup> Lin Daiyu's costumes and hairstyle had been designed as inspired by ancient (particularly the Tang Dynasty, 618-907) portraits of noble ladies. Mei's "modern plays in ancient costumes" highlighted the aesthetic beauty of the characters and swept away the monotony of costumes of traditional female lead roles. Subsequent *Red Chamber* produced by others borrowed heavily from Mei's innovative costume designs, as Ouyang Yuqian (1889-1862) did in his version of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*.

The stage design of Mei's *Red Chamber* was also extraordinary. The third and sixth scenes in *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* both have very unique scene settings. In the third scene, a boudoir is set up as Daiyu's room, but when she is about to leave the boudoir to bury flowers, the stage changes into a setting with a vibrantly painted landscape. In the sixth scene, when Daiyu passes by the Pear Fragrance Court and stops to listen to the play that is being staged inside the court, a rockwork is placed close to the backdrop of a garden, with a peach and a willow on either side. With well-tuned light pouring upon them, the scene becomes very realistic. The scene setting in *Prudent Xiren* is even more unusual: the whole scene was set with real furniture. Since it was a one-scene play, such an arrangement posed no problems. For this scene Mei Lanfang even used his own mahogany furniture, and some antique works of calligraphy and paintings he had collected. Such elaborate and exquisite scenic design was more typical of those Jingju produced in Shanghai, radically different from the minimalism of traditional Xiqu that were still often seen in Beijing. Today, many people are finding fault with much of the design, pointing their fingers at the contradiction between such a scenic design and the special aesthetics of Xiqu. However, such a setting gave the audience unprecedented visual stimulation, and therefore was also a meaningful innovation.

These three *Red Chamber* were unique in dance and singing. Jingju stresses "No sound with no singing, no movement without no dancing," Jingju's performances and acting on the stage, however, had long been prescribed. Qingyi (virtuous and elite women) were traditionally portrayed as dignified, and they often had not much physical movement on the stage, always appearing a bit rigid. Mei broke these stereotypes in his performance, combining singing and dancing as had often been seen in Jingju far back in history. In *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, Mei Lanfang designed a "flower hoe dance" in which Daiyu danced and sang while holding a flower hoe, showing Daiyu's proud and aloof personality. The design not only reflected Daiyu's feeling of deep resentment, but also added artistic value and created a beautiful atmosphere. In the script for *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, there are many directions about the combination of action and singing. For example, in the third scene, Daiyu is supposed to do the action of "collecting flowers"<sup>2</sup>

1 Master of Plum Blossom House: Mei Lanfang's First Performance of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, in *Shen Bao*, January 16, 1939.

2 *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, *Anthology of Mei Lanfangs Performance Scripts*, China Drama Publishing House. 1959, p.78.

while singing the line “I take a sachet to collect fallen flowers.” When Daiyu hears the *Peony Pavilion*, she sings, “Where are this song and the flute melody from?” Then immediately she has to perform a series of actions indicates “she listens,” “she listens again,” and “she falls into deep thinking and then listens again,” to show that she is deeply touched by what is hearing. All these expressions make Daiyu's image richer and more relatable. In *A Smile from A Maid*, Mei Lanfang choreographed a “firefly-catching dance” for Qingwen, the heroine in the Xiqu, one of Baoyu's major maidservants. Later he recalled: “Catching fireflies is different from catching butterflies. Butterflies fly high, and there are more posture changes in representing one's effort to catch one of them, while fireflies fly low, and then the acting of catching one of them is very much reliant on the movement of the waist and legs. Catching butterflies was a common scene in many plays, but there hadn't been any scene of catching fireflies for reference, so this firefly-catching dance can only be called a mere creation of my own.”<sup>1</sup> The firefly dance was more difficult than a butterfly dance because fireflies fly low, the performers could not stand straight to perform, and the scope of the performance was greatly limited. It then depended on the performers' capability to make the action of catching look lithe and graceful. Mei played it with elegance and natural flow in the scene, this was highly appreciated by the audience. The “firefly-catching dance” and the “flower hoe dance” have become classic dance movements of Mei Lanfang's. In addition, Mei choreographed new dancing movements that depict a lonely cloud, ganoderma lucidum picking, swinging jade pendant, gently touching the pond water, rotating pheonix, wind-catching and feather-picking on the basis of classical dances of China, which played an important role in portraying characters, creating atmosphere and enhancing the artistic effect of Mei's *Red Chamber*.

The three *Red Chamber* including *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* were attractive not mainly because of the stories. Their enthusiastic receptions were largely because of Mei's exquisite performance. Xu Jichuan once said, “I have seen Lin Daiyu in different Xiqu for decades. The other actors only show her pride, cold pride, but never poetry in this character... Mei's *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* is exactly in line with Cao Xueqin's meticulous description of crimson grass (one of Daiyu's nicknames in the novel)... When watching other people playing Lin Daiyu, I think they're superficial and not poetic, because the performers themselves don't have the temperament of a poet. It's not enough to perform Lin with just frowns and tears”<sup>2</sup>. Mei Lanfang's accurate grasp of Daiyu's role came from his cultural accomplishment, his own personality. Jiang Miaoxiang, a Xiao Sheng (actor for young male characters) who had worked with Mei Lanfang for a long time, analyzed in detail how Mei created the role of Daiyu. He took the sixth scene of Daiyu's listening to the play as an example: “When Lanfang went upstage and acted listening to the two songs from the *Peony Pavilion*, he not only changed his postures but also changed his facial expressions along with lyrics. After

1 Mei Lanfang, *40 Lives Annually on the Stage* (Part I), recorded by Xu Jichuan: Unity Press, 2006, p.294.

2 Xi Jichuan. *Xi Jichuan's Notebook of Art Scene*, Zhong Hua Book Company, 2007, p.98.

listening to a section, Lanfang repeated the lyric and his mood and tone were also different.” When Daiyu hears the last line, “pretty like a beautiful flower, transient like years flowing like water,” she repeats the line again and again, “her tone is getting lower each time, and she looks fascinated, spellbound.” “Later in the interlude of [anti-Erhuang lento], Lanfang’s eyes were melancholy, his body slightly swayed to the left side of the rockwork beside the stone wall. He sat down weakly with hands leaning on the stone surface, which conveyed Daiyu’s mood at that time vividly.” Jiang Miaoxiang quoted Yao Yufu, who was on the same stage with Mei Lanfang, “When Lanfang performed this play, the audience could see that there was a fire burning in Dai Yu’s heart, but the flame was suppressed and could not burst out.”<sup>1</sup> Mei Lanfang effectively depicted Lin Daiyu’s ice-cold exterior and fiery poetic interior as the novel does. Mei Lanfang also gave full play to his performing skills in *Prudent Xiren*. This is a short play with a simple plot, but Mei independently held up the play with a vivid performance. “The play was extraordinary among Mei’s new Xiqu. There was only one scene but it lasted 2 hours. There had never been such great plays since the appearance of new Xiqu. Also, throughout the performance there was no scenery staff coming up for scene change, only the characters on the stage, which was quite unusual and interesting. Nobody other than Lanfang had the creativity, who opened a new era of Xiqu.”<sup>2</sup> “When Lanfang played Xiren, he played her in such a manner that she alternates so subtly and yet so expressively between the many different shades of emotion: anger, annoyance, irritation, amusement, secret amusement etc. The unique expressiveness was incomparable.”<sup>3</sup> Mei Lanfang’s acting skill was the decisive factor for the popularity of the *Red Chamber*. The scripts were defective, but Mei Lanfang made up for the perceived deficiency with the beautiful looks of the lead role that he shaped, with his meticulous and delicate acting skills and dulcet singing, which was a typical case of “performer’s ensuring the success of a Xiqu.”

Although there are no complete visual recordings of Mei Lanfang’s three *Red Chamber*, we can still hear the exquisite vocals from the records produced of his work at that time. Mei Lanfang was invited by EMI to record a short fragment of *Daiyu’s Burying the Flowers* in 1920. Someone commented on it: “...but the melody was incredibly flexible. The tune of ‘worrying for nothing’ was extremely roundabout. There was also hidden bitterness in ‘epiphyllum in the mirror.’ And it was hard to find out Xipi (one of the two chief types of music in traditional Xiqu) mixed in the play if he/she was not listening carefully.”<sup>4</sup> The Japanese Minabe Shutaro once commented on Mei Lanfang’s singing in *Daiyu’s Burying the Flowers*: “Mei’s such a great singer. In addition to singing in accordance with the prescribed singing method of Xiqu, he also tried to express his

1 Jiang Miaoxiang. On Mei Lanfang’s *Daiyu’s Burying the Flowers*, in *Mei Lanfang Art Review Collection*, China Drama Press, 1990, p.431-432.

2 New Scripts for *Prudent Xiren*, in *The Theater Monthly*, Volume I, Issue 6. 1932.

3 *The News*, January 18, 1929.

4 She Yu. Mei Lanfang Records, in *Shen Bao*, March 22, 1921.

character Daiyu's personality and feelings through vocal as much as possible. This is a new attempt for creation."<sup>1</sup> There was also a record of a short fragment of Mei's Prudent Xiren. Someone commented on Mei-style singing after listening to the record: "... he sang it with such sentiment. The tune is so cadenced and melodious that it made one feel 'lost in the tune.' Among his singing of the four and a half lines, the third line, 'I here pick up an embroidery needle to carefully embroider the lovebirds' and the 'pick up an embroidery needle' part was especially beautiful."<sup>2</sup> Both Mei Lanfang's singing skills and his handling of the whole music were rather effective. Mei Lanfang integrated his own feelings and understanding of the characters into the performance so that he could not only display the characters' personality, but also make the singing pleasant and contagious. All these showed Mei Lanfang's superb performing skills and also made up an important part of the success of the *Red Chamber*.

Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber* was so popular because of the extensive innovation in them. Mei Lanfang's creativity and ingenuity on stage supported the transformation of the art form and brought marketability into the Xiqu. Mei Lanfang and other famous performers launched a large number of plays in just a few years. Everyone had to create "new" things to attract an audience. There was great enthusiasm and competition on and about the Xiqu stage.

The success of Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber* was also in part due to the media's promotion of the arts. With the changes in lifestyle and ideas as well as the development of technology, various "new" media were introduced in China. Newspapers, magazines, and radio stations influenced people's lives, and gradually became the main ways for people to obtain information. Information could be spread to the population in a very short time. Newspaper advertisements were often used for the publicity of performances, and the publicity of the *Red Chamber* were unprecedentedly extensive in both Shanghai and Beijing. There were many reviews, stills, anecdotes, comments, etc. about the Xiqu and their scripts in the newspapers as soon as Mei Lanfang's *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* came out. Many readers knew about them even though they had not seen the Xiqu. When Mei Lanfang went to Shanghai, for his third performance, the audience in Shanghai had already known about *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* through the newspapers, and could not wait to see it. *Shen Bao* publicized the play of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* as below.

The latest, the most beautiful, the unbeatable, and the most popular Xiqu in the country, *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* is the most favorite masterpiece of Mr. Mei. As the most beautiful person, he is the best performer for the best Xiqu, the number one famous play. Marvelous and elegant, it has got praise across the country. There have been

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1 Yoshida Toshiko. A Report on Mei Lanfang's Public Performance in Japan from 1919 to 1924, *Mei Lanfang's Art Review Collection*, p.675.

2 Donghai. Record of *Prudent Xiren*, in *Shen Bao*, March 23, 1928.

thousands of positive reviews about it in Beijing and Tianjin. Painters have been trying to capture his most beautiful images on the stage of this Xiqu. All newspapers have kept talking about it. Thus no further comment from our paper is necessary. The first play is not yet scheduled, but it has sold out already. We welcome and would love to have you all but we feel deeply sorry for the theatre house's limited capacity of seating. To make up for it, we have tried hard to ask Mr. Mei for extra performances. Mr. Mei rarely accepts such requests, but he agreed this time because he did care about you and appreciated your attention.<sup>1</sup>

Such enthusiastic promotion was indeed encouraging. On May 20, 1928, *Qiang Qun Bao Daily* based in Beijing announced about Mei Lanfang's performing *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* with a large section of advertising: "This Xiqu is one of the popular Xiqu of Zhuiyuxuan (the name of one of Mei's villas), which has been popular all over the country in the past ten years. Those who have listened to this Xiqu are all acknowledged that it creates the most beautiful artistic atmosphere. It is because Mr. Mei is playing, as Daiyu and the essence of her are best portrayed through his performance. Lines from the *Romance of the Western Chamber* are quoted in fun; a song from *Peony Pavilion* is sung ... the most moving scene, portraying the deep love in the tender heart. The last reversal is especially excruciating, beautifully excruciating. In this sunny weather, you cannot miss this soul-stirring and famous Xiqu. Please come early to ensure a good seat." Under this powerful promotion, Mei Lanfang's performance achieved unprecedented success. Master of Plum Blossom House described the grand performance: "When Mei Lanfang came to Shanghai in the fifth year of the Republic of China, he brought his new ancient costume Xiqu *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* to the stage. Seats were all booked once there was his play, and the reputation was even better than that of *Chang'e Flying to the Moon*."<sup>2</sup> Mei Lanfang also said: "The third time I came to Shanghai, I sang more than forty days on the Tianchan stage... The performances of these two Xiqu (*Chang'e Flying to the Moon* and *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*) took up one-fourth of the total at that time, and every play sold out."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, promotion from the media made a great contribution to the success of the popularity of his *Red Chamber*.

### Part Three

Although Mei Lanfang's three *Red Chamber* were a hit, they did not become classic plays of the Mei style. The reasons behind this are worth discussing.

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1 *Shen Bao*, October 29 and 30, 1916.

2 Master of Plum Blossom House: Mei Lanfang's First Performance of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, in *Shen Bao*, January, 1939, p.16.

3 Mei Lanfang, *40 Lives Annually on the Stage* (Part I), recorded by Xu Jichuan: Unity Press, 2006, p.273.

As mentioned before, the most direct motive for Mei Lanfang's Xiqu was commercial. Driven by commerce, the main concern of the creation was not whether the plays would become a classic, but whether they could cater to the audience's aesthetic preferences to maximize profits. These three *Red Chamber* captured the audience's attention through uniqueness and creativity. In the ever-changing metropolitan cities of China, Mei brought a new Xiqu experience, new enough to enchant the audiences and make them overlook these Xiqu's flaws. The novelty that initially attracted the audience would in time lose its freshness. Therefore, new things may shine for some time, but they often disappear quickly. Mei Lanfang's three *Red Chamber* were marked by obvious commercial imprints. As the first "modern play done in ancient costumes," *Chang'e Flying to the Moon* had been very popular. Therefore, taking advantage of the popularity, Mei Lanfang's production team brought out *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*. The story of *A Smile from A Maid* takes place during the Dragon Boat Festival, and it was created to be a play for the festival. In the past, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival had been marked by plays like *Hun Yuan Box*. The audience had already got tired of the play's ridiculous and irrelevant plots. In order to seize the performance market of the Dragon Boat Festival, the *Xiqu A Smile from A Maid* only took a dozen days to finish from conception to dressed rehearsal.<sup>1</sup> Mei Lanfang said that the play was only for commercial considerations. *A Smile from A Maid* was a short story with a comic style, which was totally different from *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*, a new experience for his audience. Of course, it was no sin for them to take into account the box office sales. However, art should never be over- controlled by the box office or it could become restricted.

The novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* is China's number literary classic of the genre, and so many people are familiar with. It is rich in content, with profound meaning and numerous characters. The characters are famous for their complexity, vividness, and profundity. Novels and dramas are two different types of art: one defining characteristic that separates them is the temporal dimension. Drama is a stage art, which is restricted by time and space, while the novel is free from these restrictions. The adaptation of the novel for Mei's *Red Chamber* was focused on a specific chapter or a character. Such adaptations can make things simple and convenient for stage performance. There were cases of such reductive adaptation for *Red Chamber* between the 1910s and 1920s, and Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber* were no exception. For example, the complex character of Xiren in the original novel is well developed, thus it is hard to simply clarify her as a "good" or "bad" person. Xiren is slippery and cunning, but she is kind-hearted and loyal. So is Qingwen, who is capable and honest but also arrogant and irritable. The interpersonal relationship is often subtle in the novel. But in *A Smile from A Maid*, Xiren is characterized as a back-stabber opposite of Qingwen. Qingwen directly takes aim at Xiren as soon as she appears on the stage: "Only Xiren is cunning and crafty. I can't help looking down on her. I will ignore her even if I would be hated by all others." And Xiren proves their vexed relationship the moment she enters: "She wins all the favor

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1 Mei Lanfang, *40 Lives Annually on the Stage* (Part I), recorded by Xu Jichuan: Unity Press, 2006, p.292.



and makes other girls inferior. I, Xiren, promoted by the madam and pitied by Baoyu, try to be the best in Yihong Garden (Baoyu's residence). Qingwen annoys me and never compromises. Fortunately, she is bad-tempered and sharp-tongued, and has offended many people. Now I will just give way a little and let her suffer the consequences of her quick tongue, only then will she stop making me mad."<sup>1</sup> Such a dictatorial and arrogant tone is quite different from that of the docile Xiren in the novel. Qingwen, clever and innocent in the original novel, is a lovely girl. However, Qingwen opposes Xiren in every aspect in this play, showing a sharp and bitter character, reflecting no loveliness at all. There are some minor frictions in the novel occasionally between Xiren and Qingwen, but they are far from being irreconcilable opposites. The relationship between these two people in *A Smile from A Maid* is too superficial, and Xiren is seriously vilified. This reveals that the spirit of the original work is not grasped well. Certainly, this is also related to the cultural tradition of Xiqu. Xiqu tend to define the sharp divide between "good and evil, beauty and ugliness, praise and derogation." Therefore, it has formed a formulaic and superficial character expression of good and evil like operatic facial make-ups that paints a binary opposition, making it inevitable to simplify characters in Xiqu and unconsciously label them as simply "good" or "bad" even when dealing with characters with complicated personalities.

Before launching a series of "modern plays in ancient costumes," Mei Lanfang had rehearsed several "new plays in modern costumes," such as *A Strand of Linen Thread*, *Deng Xiagu*, *Tide of Officialdom*, which had been well received, showing that Mei Lanfang had always been innovative. However, it can be seen that Mei's innovation mainly focuses on costumes, stage art, vocal arias, etc. It is undeniable that these are important parts of artistic innovation to reform forms of expressions as they are directly presented on the stage, having a great impact on the audience's visual experience. Thus such innovations had been expected to be welcomed by the audience. However, the external form of a work should not be overemphasized at the cost of meaning and significance. If the inherent requirement of Jingju is left behind, then the artistic vitality of such a work will be reduced.

Take the most popular stage setting at that time for example. Traditionally, the philosophy of stage setup was like the idea of freehand brushwork; many of the performance designs were based on a stage with minimal physical objects. Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber*, however, were too realistic in stage settings. For example, *Prudent Xiren*'s stage space was filled with large props, which interfered with the actors' performances because many stylized impressionistic actions contradicted the scene. These innovative methods of creating drama were ultimately incompatible with the freehand and impressionistic performance style of traditional Xiqu, thus it failed to develop as a new productive means of expression, and ultimately, it would be put on

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1 *Qingwen Tearing A Fan, Collections of Jingju* Vol.31, China Library the Tenth Year of the Republic of China Edition.

the shelf. *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* had the same problem. It used a realistic setting, which reduced the mobility that the stage of Xiqu should have and interfered with the actors' performance. Gradually, it was also abandoned because of the inconveniences in changing scenes.

The costumes from Mei's *Red Chamber* were recognized as successful, but there were also the problem of inconsistency in dress styles. Take *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* as an example. Daiyu was dressed in ancient costumes, while Baoyu, Xiren, Zijuan and other people still wore traditional Jingju costumes and hairstyles. Bao Yu, a literary figure, wore a pleat, with a lengthened waistcoat, looking like Yue Yun (a famous warrior). Xiren and Zijuan all wore bulky hair, dresscoat, waistcoat, and belt, as servant girls always did in traditional Jingju. Such inconsistency disrupted the stage effect.

*Dream of the Red Chamber* is so long that one could hardly imagine how difficult it would be to interpret the masterpiece on the stage. Mei Lanfang's three *Red Chamber* were scripted by accomplished literati and the scripts are great works in their own right. Although they broke a lot of undesirable conventions existing in romantic dramas of Jingju, but the scriptwriters were caught in two typical problems of Chinese literati who tried to pen a script a stage performance: weak plotting and stylistic over-refinement.

Plots occupy an important position in Jingju. The ups and downs of a plot and the joys and sorrows of the characters are the main attractions to the audience. Kong Shangren (a famous dramatist in the Qing Dynasty, author of the drama *Peach Blossom Fan*) once said in "A Note to the *Peach Blossom Fan*": "Stories are stories because they are strange. People only tell strange stories."<sup>1</sup> The "strange" is about the plot. It refers to the twists and turns, ups and downs, and the unpredictability of the plot, which brings the audience an aesthetic satisfaction. But these are basically invisible from Mei Lanfang's *Red Chamber*. For example, the main content of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* are Baoyu and Daiyu reading the *Romance of West Chamber* together and Daiyu listening to the music. Throughout the play, the plotted contradictions are not evident enough, the emotional revealing too dull and the audience's response relatively half-hearted. At the same time, there are also problems in the arrangement of scenes. Of the six scenes, only the third and sixth scenes have plots, and the rest are all transitional. The appearance of Mingyan, Xiren, and the Zijuan has no effect on the development of the plot. Frequent transitional scenes and appearance of irrelevant characters make the whole play trivial and weaken the expression of the key scenes. For example, *Prudent Xiren* is a one-act play with a simple story. Its script has been lost, and only the lyrics and spoken parts are preserved, but we can still get a rough picture of the content of the play. It is basically the same as that in the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and there is no major change. In the original novel, this episode only focuses on the expression of

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1 Kong Shangren: A Note to *The Peach Blossom Fan*, in *The Peach Blossom Fan*, People's Literature Publishing House, 1982 edition, 3.

Xiren's "orthodoxy" thought, just one side of Xiren's complex character, because there are many descriptions about Xiren's behavior before and after that. The Xiqu *Prudent Xiren*, however, is full of Xiren's preaching to Baoyu. It is long and tiresome. It lacks the conflict between characters and the development of plot. The whole play is dull. Even though there were exquisite costumes and realistic scenery, it was hard to make up for the dullness of the story. Qisong, a famous follower of the Mei style, recalled the debut and said: "The play was so bare that there was never any climactic moments... It could really freeze the audience."<sup>1</sup> This kind of feeling fully shows that the plot of *Prudent Xiren* is flat and dull, lacking ups and downs, which is difficult for the audience to identify with the characters when watching. The problems of *A Smile from A Maid* are similar to that of *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers*. There are many characters on the stage but only three are central: Baoyu, Qingwen, and Xiren. The dramatic conflicts in this play are dull, the interpersonal relationships not multi-layered, and the stage atmosphere rather indifferent. Baoguan, Yuguan, Daiyu, Sheyue, Qiuwen, and others have little to do with the plot. Their main roles in the play are to activate the stage; otherwise, the performance would have been even less interesting

There was a "battle" between the so-called Sensational Sector and Polite Sector of Xiqu in the Qing Dynasty. Although some scholars today have doubts about whether there were fierce competition and confrontation between them, it is an indisputable fact that it was "when one falls, the other rises." Kunqu (representative of the Polite Sector, the polite style of Xiqu) is famous for its high taste. After continuous improvement by literati, Kunqu developed beautiful aria as well as elegant and exquisite diction, which represented the aesthetic taste of literati and scholar-officials. Kunqu sprang up in the middle and late Ming Dynasty and was once hugely popular around the country. However, it began to go downhill in the Qing Dynasty, and its "elegance" was gradually elbowed away from the mass. At that time, other Xiqu (categorized together as the Sensational Sector) had begun experimenting with a simple and down-to-earth style and largely replaced Kunqu. In the final analysis, the Sensational Sector won the competition by its closeness to people and simple language. Jingju is an art epitome of the Sensational Sector. It also won the favor of the audience with its pop tastes and flamboyant style and eventually became the most widely spread Xiqu. Mei Lanfang's think tank was composed of literati, who, after seeing the many problems in Jingju, such as plain dictions, outdated themes and so on, advocated reform of Jingju. Their original intention was good since they adopted a method to develop Jingju with the aim of elevating it. Both the previous "modern plays in fashion costumes" and the subsequent "modern plays in ancient costumes" were works of that effort. This kind of elevating and "polishing" was specifically reflected in the *Red Chamber*'s selection of "politer" stories from the novel and the stylistic over-refinement. These three plays were all about love affairs. Whether it is Daiyu's burying the flowers or Qingwen's tearing the fan or Xiren's persuading Baoyu, none is dramatic enough in terms of the plot: there is no apparent

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1 Qi Song. *Talking about Mei Lanfang*, Baowentang Bookstore, 1988, p.222.

tension or sharp conflicts. The pacing of the plot is slow and the scene is simple. The creator was hoping to shift the audience's attention from the superficial storyline to the inner world of the character, but their creation, which was against the principle of dramaticity, was hard to develop sustainably in the end. For the audience, it was very difficult to have a strong interest in such works after the initial sense of freshness disappeared.

The reason why *Red Chamber* achieved good box office sales was that they were actually guaranteed by "big names." At that time, the performances often relied on famous actors or actresses to attract the audience and gather attention. The audience watched the play mainly because of the famous actors or actresses who were the product of the commodity economy and an important guarantee for the box office. Mei Lanfang undoubtedly had box office appeal. Although there were obvious defects in the three Xiqu, Mei's appearance in them was sure to make them sell out. Mei Lanfang's excellent acting was the guarantee for the quality of the performance. If Mei Lanfang did not play the Xiqu, it would have been hard to achieve this kind of effect. Conversely, a good and powerful play gives an actor enough space to perform, instead of relying too much on the performance of a certain actor. All the three Xiqu have the problem of relying on the specific performers to guarantee the play rather than the play to guarantee performers.

Zhou Yibai once made a pertinent comment on the "modern plays in ancient costumes:" "Although 'modern plays in ancient costumes' were novel, their selection of materials all ignored reality, and the words and phrases were too flowery. Fortunately, the audience at that time attended for the purpose of recreation and most of them were content with superficial understandings. As long as the costumes were novel and the postures beautiful enough, it would satisfy their curiosity...Although there were one or two masterpieces, most of them were flawed this or that way. In a word, it's easy to make a hit if you make full use of a particular strength. The audience would not care about the characters, identities, behaviors, or motives as long as a Dan (actor right for female lead role) was starred."<sup>1</sup> Although Zhou's comments are not entirely aimed at Mei's *Red Chamber*, they are essentially relevant.

The three *Red Chamber* including *Daiyu's Burying the Flowers* is an accomplishment of Mei Lanfang's innovative exploration of Jingju art. Through exploration, Mei Lanfang had a deeper understanding of Jingju and came to realize what kind of innovation Jingju would really need. Jingju is a popular art, which cannot be separated from the general aesthetic taste of the audience. Jingju consists in unique conventions that are closely related to stylized performance. It is acceptable to absorb some realistic methods from western drama but they can only be supplementary to Xiqu performances and

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1 Zhou Yibai: *The Long Draft Edition of Chinese Drama History*, Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House, 2004, p.565.

should not be allowed to upstage Jingju's convention of stylized action. So, a tentative conclusion is, any attempt to reform Jingju should not be just superficial or partial, should first of all examine Jingju as whole, and should never do any change at the expense of the essential characteristics of the Xiqu.

# The Formation of Jingju

ZHANG WEIPIN

Originating from the Hui Troupes and formed in Beijing, Jingju is the most representative Xiqu style in modern China and the epitome of traditional Xiqu culture. In line with “a combination of culture and music,” Jingju’s language largely conforms to *Zhongzhou Yinyun* (literally central China’s rhyme and rhythm) as do all mainstream Northern and Southern Xiqu since the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) Dynasties and also bears influences from the Beijing dialect. Its vocal and musical features are essentially similar to Kunqu; while its performing styles is a mixture of Kunqu and other indigenous Xiqu in China, and has long been very much reliant on its peculiar Chinese “role type system,” as a result, its stage actions are often a combination of descriptive (realistic) representation and stylized performance. In terms of its cultural affinity, Jingju collectively reflects the characteristics of Beijing culture as well as influences from the royal court.

A narrow definition of Jingju refers to Xiqu performed in Beijing; while a broader definition includes performances outside Beijing that adhere to the standards and regulations of Jingju.

## “A Hui Troupe Enters Beijing”

For the most years of the reign of Qianlong, Kunqu were prevalent on Beijing’s polite theatrical stages, and it was called the “Polite Sector.” However, Qin (the northwestern part of China) Vocal and Beijing Vocal were more popular with the average urban residents, and their performance was generally more exciting, thrilling and sensational. So they were called the “Sensational Sector.” Beijing Vocal especially prospered and produced many famous actors, among who were the so-called “Top Thirteen Peking Vocal Actors.” There appeared “six famous troupes that took turns to perform at the nine gates of the city.” However, the situation changed when Qin Vocal actor Wei Changsheng came to Beijing in 1774 and attracted larger audiences with his sexually



■ Picture of “A Hui Troupe Enters Beijing”

suggestive performances, and so Qin Vocal took centerstage and elbowed away Beijing Vocal to the margin. As a result, many Beijing Vocal actors chose to cooperate with Qin Vocal actors, gradually leading to “the mixing of Beijing Vocal and Qin Vocal.” However, this did not last long. Wei Changsheng’s risqué performances were banned by the government and Wei was expelled from the capital.

Wei Changsheng eventually ended up in Yangzhou, the center of the Hui Troupes. With the arrival of Wei Changsheng, the Hui Troupes had been good at both “polite” and “sensational” performances and now they absorbed Wei Changsheng’s Qin Vocal performing methods, with their repertoires expanded and stage techniques and resources increased, a more solid foundation was hence laid for its future amazing growth.

Then for Emperor Qianlong’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on September 21, 1790, Zhejiang officials who were responsible for hosting the event brought into Beijing the Hui Troupe “Sanqing Troupe,” who had been touring Zhejiang.

In Beijing, the Sanqing Troupe did not get to perform inside the Forbidden City, just in front of the emperor. However, their performances outside the Forbidden City but inside in the capital city were extremely successful. The average Beijing folks just fell in love with them. As a result, the Sanqing Troupe did not return south after the emperor’s birthday celebration, but settled down in Beijing and began competing with other Xiqu there. This incident marked a new beginning in the history of Xiqu, and historians call it “Hui Troupe Enters Beijing.”

The Sanqing Troupe quickly developed widespread fans and exerted its influence on the Xiqu stages of Beijing, which attracted more Hui Troupes to Beijing. In 1803, at least five other Hui Troupes, namely Sixi, Hechun, Chuntai, Sanhe, and Songzhu, made appearances in the capital. During their competition with other Xiqu, Hui Troupes gradually expanded by absorbing local artists in Beijing and from other Xiqu genres, and therefore became the most powerful Xiqu genre in the capital through its huge inclusiveness.

From the final years of the reign of Emperor Jiaqing to the 10th year of Emperor Daoguang (1831), many Hubei artists (e.g., Yu Sansheng, Wang Honggui, Liliu, etc.) came to Beijing, bringing along a new kind of Xiqu with them, called Han Tune. These new artists specializing in Han Tune already had frequent collaborations with Hui Troupes before they relocated to Beijing, so instead of forming their troupes, they joined the Hui Troupes and performed together. This was later referred to as “the confluence of Han Tune and Huiju.” This confluence not only brought more artists to the thriving Hui Troupes, but also enriched their performances. Around the year 1833, Sanqing, Sixi, Hechun, and Chuntai, the so-called “Four Major Hui Troupes,” were the most four famous Hui Troupes in Beijing. By then, Hui Troupes had gained a foothold in Beijing, and were effectively integrating a whole variety of Xiqu genres into themselves, leading to unprecedented prosperity.

So, around 1840, a new genre of Xiqu finally broke out of its cocoon, Jingju, the epitome of modern Xiqu.

## "Sizhen Tang" Cheng

So by the 1860s, more than 70 years after the Sanqing Troupe entered Beijing, Hui Troupes had developed their Xiqu into a completely different type of Xiqu. The representative figure of this new Xiqu was undoubtedly Cheng Changgeng (1811-1880).

Cheng Changgeng, whose given name was Chun and style name Yushan, was born in Qianshan, Anhui province. Cheng began to train a Huiju actor at his very tender age. After completing his training, he followed his father to Beijing, becoming a member of the Sanqing Troupe. As older actors of Sanqing Troupe retired from the stage, Cheng eventually took charge of the troupe. He then enrolled apprentices and passed on performing skills under the name of “Sizhen Tang,” which literally means the “Four-Motto Study.” Cheng is an important figure in the formation and development of Jingju. His personal experiences and character transformations in Xiqu defined some of the changes from “Hui Troupe” to “Jingju.”

When the Sanqing troupe went to Beijing, its actors mainly performed Dan (female role)





■ Portrayal of Cheng Changgeng

plays, characterizing vivacious and unmarried young women on stage. Therefore, there were still risqué elements in the early performances of the Hui Troupe. However, due to policy changes enacted by the later Qing Dynasty, the tunes sung by the Sanqing Troupe, including Luantan (literally sensational instrument playing), Bangzi (literally clappers), and Xiansuo (literally strings), were banned, thus bringing a crisis to the survival and development of the troupe. Fortunately, the Sanqing Troupe was able to adapt to the policy changes.

In 1852, the second year of Xianfeng Emperor's reign, the Qing court banned plays with elements of "decadent music, intense fighting scenes, vicious traitors, and thieves," severely restricting Huadan plays (plays featuring young female roles) and Wusheng (martial arts males) which had been very popular with the audiences. Experiencing multiple strikes, the Hui Troupes' plays featuring Huadan were mauled. Luckily, through their collaboration with Han Tune artists, who brought a group of different plays (e.g., many Old Sheng plays, plays that feature old male roles) with them, the blow from the government was buffered. Hui Troupe performances began to shift to Old Sheng plays, and subsequently, Old Sheng actors (actors trained for Old Sheng roles) became representative of Jingju. Cheng Changgeng played a pivotal role in this process.

First, Cheng Changgeng abandoned the vocal performance characteristics of Hui Troupes. Vocal performance in Xiqu is closely correlated with Chinese language and culture. By introducing Kunqu's more polite vocal performance, Cheng Changgeng laid the foundation for Jingju to become a national Xiqu through its integration with Chinese cultural traditions.

Second, Cheng also tried to institute the norms of Kunqu on his stage. For his "Sizhen Tang" (Four-Motto-Study) training sessions, he invited professional Kunqu teacher Zhu Hongfu to teach students. Among the students, Qian Jinfu won Zhu Hongfu's favor with his piety and diligence. Zhu secretly taught Qian personally acquired performing skills. Later, almost all the famous Jingju artists learned acting directly or indirectly from Qian Jinfu. Qian's set of exercises and performance techniques, known as the Qian School, became synonymous with authentic Jingju. Qian's concepts of performing skills, which were later absorbed and further developed by Yu Shuyan, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun, and other famous Jingju performers, became the guiding theory of Jingju.

## The Head of the Jingzhong Temple

The Jingzhong Temple was the guild organization of Xiqu artists at the time, but it was very much under the supervision of the royal family. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, the Imperial Household Department, a royal domestic affairs management department, exercised administrative power over Xiqu troupes. The Imperial Household Department promulgated imperial edicts concerning Xiqu, such as the prohibition of plays, the establishment of troupes, and regulations for performances. Therefore, the department was responsible for Xiqu practices such as banning performances during times of national mourning or special dates marking the death of emperors, queens, princes, and princesses. Under the Imperial Household Department, the Jingzhong Temple was responsible for the implementation, supervision, and reporting of personnel who violated the regulations.

The Jingzhong Temple held great power over Xiqu troupes. For example, according to stipulations, Xiqu performers have the freedom and right to choose which troupe to perform or sing for or to transfer from one troupe to another. However, the personnel change must first be examined by the Jingzhong Temple and reported to the Imperial Household Department for approval before it could take effect. Such a practice had much to do with the organizational structure of the Troupe System.

The so-called Troupe System was an organizational structure where all performers in the troupe completed their own respective roles and duties to complete performances. Because of the division of labor, everyone was indispensable. Handymen and

performers were all equal in person and status. In the early days of the Hui Troupes, the Troupe System was already established: all members were equal and the main characters, supporting characters, and accompanists did not differ in importance. The troupe collectively decided on Xiqu for performances; performance tasks were shared by troupe members and revenues evenly distributed among them. It was also strictly reinforced that actors in one troupe must not perform in another. This system was maintained until the years of Tongzhi.

As some of the main and famous performers gained popularity, the situation changed. Audiences' attention generally concentrated on the main and popular actors. Supporting performers and obscure actors gained far less attention. As a result, the status of the famous performers in troupes improved, and over time, the gap between the famous and the lesser performers became bigger and bigger. Meanwhile, the audiences' pursuit of famous performers was getting stronger and stronger. People hoped to see many famous actors from different troupes in one performance, and the famous actors also hoped to make more money. Therefore, some employers invited a troupe as the basic performing troupe and then invited famous artists from other troupes to join them and perform on the same stage, which resulted in what later became famous-actor-dominated troupe selection.

However, Cheng Changgeng, along with many other representative Jingju masters then, continued to advocate the Troupe System. He himself was a famous actor, breaking the Troupe System would actually benefit him, but Cheng saw the disruptive influence in the change. He took into account the interests of as many people as possible in the entire Xiqu industry. Therefore, Cheng devoted his whole life to opposing Xiqu performers who performed for other troupes and resolutely supported the Troupe System.

So Cheng Changgeng was really an admirable figure in the history of Jingju. On the one hand, he had the courage to innovate and break from the old habits and customs of the Hui troupes; on the other hand, he appeared even more courageous when he defended the Troupe System against a prevalent practice. He was not only a founding figure of Jingju, but also the defender of the ethics and system of the Xiqu industry. That's why he has been described as the "head of the Jingzhong Temple."

## **Hui and Bang Troupes Went to South and the Name "Jingju " Appeared and Stuck**

Commercial theaters first appeared in Shanghai during the years of Daoxian (Emperor Daoguang and Emperor Xianfeng). The Sanya (or Shanya) theater, established in 1851 (some report 1842 or 1850) was the first theater in Shanghai. Audiences would watch

plays sitting at square tables while drinking tea sold by the theater. Because Sanya only collected money for the tea instead of tickets for performances, it, along with other similar theaters, were referred to as teahouses. Things changed in 1876, when a new theater called “Man Tingfang” (literally a courtyard full of flowers) was opened in Shanghai. This theater was modeled after “Beijing-style” theaters and consisted of a classical Chinese “projecting stage.” There were multiple seat choices, such as ordinary, main hall, balcony, and box seats, and ushers in the theater would arrange seating for the audience. Furthermore, there were hawkers who sold snacks inside the theater. Not only did this new type of theater seem fresh and novel, but also in addition, the boss of “Man Tingfang” invited troupes from Tianjin to perform. These performers from Tianjin sang Xipi and Erhuang, which were popular in Beijing but rare in Shanghai. In fact, although Jingju had taken a mature form in Beijing, the name “Jingju” had not yet appeared. Locals in Beijing called this form of Xiqu “Pei Huang,” “Jing Erhuang,” “Huang Qiang,” “Luantan,” “Huabu,” and so on. Meanwhile, audiences from Shanghai referred to Xiqu sung by the Tianjin performers as “Beijing Tune.” Similarly, these troupes also began to be known as “Beijing Troupes.”

Before that the Sanqing Troupe’s success in Beijing had been a motivating force for the development of those other Hui Troupes that had stayed and remained active in the south. Over the years they had developed and prospered as well. Beginning in the Daoguang Emperor’s reign, Huizhou merchants invested in performing troupes one after another. Xiqu dealers from Huizhou purchased children from poor backgrounds at low prices, and after a period of specialized training, made them perform in Hui Troupes. Thus, the Hui Troupes of the south gradually expanded to many other areas in China. Some of them later combined with local Xiqu to form new Xiqu. Quite a few assimilated into Beijing Troupes after the rise of Jingju. Yangzhou and Anqing were the activity centers of the later Hui Troupes.

Beginning in the reign of Emperor Tongzhi, with the restoration of traffic convenience between the north and the south, Hui troupes went south one by one along the Grand Canal, with many entering and residing in large cities such as Shanghai and Suzhou, becoming the main Xiqu troupes in these places.

During the Tongguang years, natural disasters frequently hit the north. The Bangzi Troupes, especially those from Zhili, went south and entered the theaters of Shanghai. While some of those artists returned to the north after short-term performances, many more settled down in Shanghai. Since then, Bangzi actors cooperated with counterparts from Lixia River and the South, and through interaction with each other, their unique styles were eventually integrated into Jingju.

Theaters both large and small were opened one after another in Shanghai, with most of them focusing mainly on Beijing Troupes. The competition was so fierce that almost all Shanghai theaters invited famous Xiqu actors from Beijing, and for a time, famous

Beijing performers came in flocks. Some returned to the north after a period of time, while quite a few people remained in Shanghai and became the representatives of the Shanghai Jingju.

On February 7, 1876, nine years after Beijing Troupes first appeared at Man Tingfang, "Shenbao Newspaper" published an article with the title of "Pictures of Operatic Artists," in which the word "Jingju" appeared for the first time. Since then, the term "Jingju" has spread throughout the country and gradually became the official name of this new type of Xiqu.

## The Aesthetic Taste of Jingju

During the formation of Jingju, not only was Jingju a unique art form, but it also gradually developed a relatively unique aesthetic taste. Its aesthetics is closely related to its cultural formulation. Seen from the origin and perspective of the Hui Troupes, Jingju's cultural formation has the following aspects:

Firstly, Jingju contains the scholar-officials' literary and musical tastes developed by Kunqu. Secondly, there are the values typical of pragmatism and utilitarianism of the Huizhou merchants. Third, Jingju adapted to the leisure and entertainment customs of citizens as well as the grassroot culture of farmers. This was the result of the Hui Troupes' interactions with different audience groups both urban and rural. The integration and synthesis of these different cultural elements have laid the foundation for the aesthetics of Jingju. However, Jingju 's aesthetic formation was also heavily influenced by the tastes of the royal court.

For many years, the Qing Dynasty's royal court was an important venue for stage productions. After the ending of the mourning period for the death of Empress Dowager Ci'an in the 9th year of Guangxu, the royal court was ushered into its peak season of Xiqu, very much because of Empress Dowager Cixi's fondness of them. The Shengping (a word in Chinese associated with songs and dances) Bureau of the imperial government recruited famous actors such as Sun Juxian, Yang Yuelou, Tan Xinpei, Wang Guifen, etc. to perform for the royal court. Through the Shengping Bureau, the court's artistic preferences influenced Jingju, shaping the aesthetics of Jingju, as is reflected in the following ways:

First, the stage performances became standardized as court performances had strict regulations. For example, the empress dowager decreed actors must recite and perform Xiqu based on scripts provided by writers of the imperial palace, which also consisted of details on costumes, scenes, props, etc. A copy of the scripts was placed on the official desks of the emperor and the empress dowager, and the actors had to obey

and conform to the scripts perfectly as the empress could check and examine the lines along with the performance. Under such scrutiny, the performers naturally performed cautiously and conscientiously, but the quality of performances also improved.

Second is the improvement of the style of the performances. Once Jingju entered the court, any vulgar and/or obscene performances or scenes were removed, so the Xiqu in a sense became purified. Furthermore, the Shengping Bureau regularly helped process and sort repertoires. They sent performance feedbacks to the civics, and this helped improve the quality and style of Xiqu performances.

Xiqu traditions come from different social and cultural classes, which can be roughly divided into literary culture, court culture, and folk culture. The cultural values and aesthetic tastes advocated and adhered to by the upper class and scholar-bureaucrats from the imperial courts were quite different from the ethics and aesthetics of the folks. In addition, the cultural orientation of royals did not entirely overlap with the values of scholar-bureaucrats. These different cultural interests had all played an important role in the formation of Jingju. In the end, through examination and integration of the royal court's artistic preferences, Jingju, developed its own uniqueness.

However, when Jingju entered the royal court and grew closer and closer to court tastes, the Qing Dynasty was overthrown. The establishment of the Republic of China ended the era of imperialism and Jingju was tossed back to the folks. Meanwhile, with the fierce collision of Eastern and Western cultures, the cultural formulation and the dominant status of Jingju again underwent major changes and found it confronted with severe challenges. However, with its exciting history and extensive base of audiences, Jingju remains without a doubt an important part of traditional Chinese culture.

*Zhang Weipin*  
*Professor at Shanghai Theatre Academy.*

# “DAN”

ZHONG JUNFANG

To the question “Who is Mei Lanfang?” most Chinese people will very likely mention his reputation as one of the “Top Four Famous Dan” of Jingju. But what is a Dan? Is it a Xiqu character? Or a title? What is the origin of Dan? What role does it play in a Xiqu?

## 1. Dan is “One Line of Business”

Xiqu, composed of verse, music, and dance, is a three-in-one comprehensive art form where some role types speak more, some sing more and some dance more. Therefore specific role types call for specific actors with specific skills. In accordance with such a theatrical form, Xiqu has long developed its own peculiar actor training system: from his or her very tender age one begins to train for a certain type of character, for his or her “line of business” in the theatrical industry. So a Dan is an actor or actress who has acquired performing skills right for a certain female role in a Xiqu. Xiqu also distinguish one from another according to the importance of a certain type of actor in a specific Xiqu: in Zaju plays of the Yuan Dynasty, scripts were divided into “Dan Scripts” where a Dan is to play the leading role, “Mo Scripts” where a Mo is to play the leading role, etc. To be more specific, in a “Dan Script,” Zheng Dan (the leading Dan, the proper Dan literally) usually is the lead singer, while other characters generally sing little or simply do not have the “privilege” to sing in the play.

Along with the growth of Jingju, the division of characters has been more nuanced. Based on differences in age and skills, Dan performers are further divided into specific Dan types. For example, actors for older female characters are collectively referred to as “Old Dan,” most of whom use natural voices when singing (e.g., *Li Hou in Striking the Dragon Robe*). It is worth mentioning that there was no special term for performers playing the role of Old Dan in early Jingju, as Old Sheng is to play the role where it is necessary. It was not until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century



■ A scene of Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu's *Stab Tiger*

that Old Dan became a specialty.

Performers acting young or middle-aged women are subdivided into Tsing Yi, Wu (martial) Dan, Daoma (light martial arts) Dan, Hua (flower) Dan and so on. A Tsing Yi is so called because the character, a decent, dignified young female, is invariably dressed in tsing (green) on stage, such as Bai Suzhen in *Tower Fete*. In addition, there exists another class of Tsing Yi, called Guimen (wealthy family) Dan, also known as Little Dan in Kunqu (e.g., Du Liniang in *Peony Pavilion*). Xiqu can also be divided into literary plays and martial arts plays according to the plot. The protagonists in martial arts plays call for Wu Dan and Wu (martial arts) Sheng (male role) who excel in martial arts. Wu Dan can be further divided between Wu Dan and Daoma Dan. Such performers often have to perform fighting scenes, and therefore, often master martial arts to a degree and are good at “Bazi Gong” (Xiqu weapon usage). Compared to Wu Dan, Daoma Dan perform more vocals, place more emphasis on singing, and convey more emotions. The martial arts designed for them highlight more on demonstrating the character's heroic temperament (e.g., Mu Guiying in *Mu Kezha*). Wu Dan, on the other hand, engages more in fighting scenes (e.g., Sun Erniang in *Fighting in the Shop*). Hua Dan generally acts particularly beautiful characters, which are usually extraordinarily clever and bright and rich in expressions. Their vocals are often smooth and skillful (e.g., Du Shiniang in *Du Shiniang*).



## 2. The History of Dan

Tracing back history, “Zaju roles” (e.g., Moni, Yinxi, Fujing, Fumo, Zhaunggu, etc.) appeared in the performances of Zaju during the Song Dynasty. At that time, “Zaju roles” mainly sang songs, danced, and performed as slapsticks featuring comic gestures and remarks. As Zaju moved toward character-centered performances favoring characterization and story telling over general entertainment, actor-training became more rigorous and more specialized and that was the beginning of the division between Dan, Sheng, etc.

Then where did the term Dan come from? Back in the Han Dynasty, many foreign words began to be used in Chinese society. The word “dance” widely used then in the Western Regions was transliterated as “Dan” in Chinese. The term “Hu Dan” often used then, means female dancers from the Western Regions. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the word “Dan” was often used to refer to dancers or performers. Since dancing was mostly dominated by women since ancient times, “Dan” gradually became a name for women. When Xiqu began to favor story telling and characterization, it began to use

■ A scene of Shang Xiaoyun's *Jinshan Temple*; A scene of Xun Huisheng's *Meilong Town*



“Dan” to refer to both female characters and performers for such characters. The status of “Dan” was established then.

Then another shift happened. When the focus of characters transferred from the centralization of image building to an admiration of the performers’ personal “performing skills” and the “characterization of characters” in Xiqu began to move to the modern “character system.” The appearance of the “Top Four Famous Dans” headed by Mei Lanfang is a representation of that system.

*Zhong Junfang*

*MA student in the programme of Xiqu at STA.*

# Shi Yihong, the Present-day Epitome of the Beauty of the Mei Lanfang School of Jingju

JYI

Adept at playing Dan roles (female roles), Shi Yihong is a well-known qingyi (or tsingyi, virtuous and elite woman) of the Mei Lanfang School (or Mei School for short) of Jingju from Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company, and among her major works are *Tale of the White Snake*, *Farewell*, *My Concubine*, and *Legendary Amazons*.

Looking at the artistic journey of this successful qingyi, what impressed me most was not only her title as a National First-Class Actress and the fact that she has acquired both the China Theatre Plum Blossom Award and Shanghai Magnolia Stage Performance Award, but also her persistent and open attitude towards the art of Jingju.

## **She dedicates herself to the stage of Xiqu**

As a teenager, Shi Yihong applied to Shanghai Xiqu School, and stood out among 3,000 candidates, eventually becoming a student there and beginning to train as a Daoma Dan (young female warrior). Among her teachers were renowned performers of Daoma Dan, including Zhang Meijuan, Zhang Minzhi, Lu Wenqin, Xu Meiling, Yu Yonghua and so on. Some shaped her voice, while others taught her how to think independently. Thanks to the knowledge and skills of these famous teachers and the beauty of the top-class Jingju art she experienced during her studies, Shi Yihong aspired to become a Jingju performing artist.

Shi Yihong entered the performing arts with the desire to become a Xiqu (Jingju as a sub-genre of it) performing artist and she has always been steadfast despite the industry being at a low point. 1995 to 2003 saw a bleak market in Xiqu performances. As Shi

recalled, “During that period, the audience didn’t need to buy tickets to watch a Xiqu performance at Shanghai Kunqu Troupe Theatre, situated at Shaoxing Road; there was only a donation collection box at the door. There were only a few octogenarians, no young people at all, sitting there watching the Kunqu while dozing off now and then.” At the time, the bleak setting of the Xiqu industry made people feel hopeless about its future, and many performers looked for other ways to earn a living. However, Shi Yihong stayed and continued to perform on the stage of Xiqu. She could have entered the movie industry and become a big star, but she gave up many opportunities offered.

She was rewarded for her perseverance in and loyalty to her career: she became a very popular Xiqu star. However, she never relents her dedication to her stage, regarding promoting Jingju as her life-long mission, trying to win over more and more people for the art form. Shi said in an interview, “I just want to offer more and more to the audience while I am still in good condition.” Shi could successively give four performances in a single day, and repeat performances in her mind during the intervals. In 2018, she was especially admirable enough to try and find time to learn many Xiqu such as *The Dream of a Lady*, *Yezhu Forest*, *The Story of Wang Chun’e Educating Xue Yi*, *Jin Yunu*, *The Story of Fei Zhen’e* and so on. A former classmate of Shi’s simply didn’t understand her work ethic, and asked, “Why do you still work so hard despite already being so successful?” “The young performers will follow our example. If we, the middle-aged performers, get lazy and slack, then the following generations will behave worse. Over these years, I have been bearing in my mind the honor and the audience’s liking. If I did nothing, I would feel guilty,” answered Shi.

■ Stage pictures of Shi Yihong



## She is a brave and brilliant innovator

While Shi Yihong has given performances on stage out of awe and love of the theatre art, she is also brave enough to make artistic innovations. Shi majored in Daoma Dan when studying at school, but after graduating, she was keen to learn more. What she learned was not just limited to a single opera character type, or merely the Mei School of acting method, or only the genre of Jingju, but instead she acquired expertise in many role types, both literary and martial arts roles; known mainly as a Jingju performing artist, she is also adept in Kunqu and luntan (a general name for opera styles other than Kunshan melody and Yiyang melody). She takes in the merits of other schools of acting methods, and other Xiqu genres to supplement and perfect her own skills. Shi takes an inclusive attitude toward whatever that is closely or remotely related to her art.

Trained initially as Daoma Dan (a young female warrior role type) as she did, Shi Yihong played the role of the gentle Du Liniang in the *Peony Pavilion*, a literary Kunqu, with Cai Zhengren acting the male protagonist. Generally speaking, personal style is at the core of different schools in Jingju. The Mei School refers to the art style of Mei Lanfang's performances. Traditionally, followers of the Mei School only follow Mei's particular style and perform the representative plays of this school. However, Shi believed that no school of acting should close itself to beneficial influences from the outside. Using the Mei School as her base while applying aspects of other schools, Shi took lead roles in classic plays of all the four major schools of Jingju: "Mei, Shang, Cheng, and Xun." For example, Shi performed in *The Story of Xue Xiangling*, a classic play of the Cheng School. She found it to be a great learning experience: she reconciled the feelings and affects of the character with her own vocal quality, instead of just imitating the personal performing style of the originator of this school, Cheng Yanqiu. To be more specific, her choice of the singing tune was of great importance for her performance in that play. The singing tune of the Mei School is typically clear and elegant, while the Cheng School tends to be low, enabling the audience to go into the depth and subtlety of the character's inner world. When Shi Yihong performed this play, she didn't present it with the style of the Mei School, nor simply mimicked the style of the Cheng School, but combined her own singing tune with the low tune of the Cheng style to synthesize a new style.

Shi's openness is not just to other schools of acting, or other genres of Xiqu, but also to foreign roles as well. Her Jingju interpretation of *Notre Dame de Paris* was her representative work, where Shi played the heroine, Esmeralda. Shi made artistic decisions based on the characteristics of this protagonist. To play a dancing girl from a foreign work, Shi realized her Xiqu dance movements would be inconsistent with the character of the original work. Shi Yihong believed that "the standards of performance in Xiqu need to be conformed to... but acting a foreign role you cannot just dance like a character in a traditional Xiqu." To this end, Shi chose to integrate elements of Western dances into her performance. As a result, in Shi Yihong's Jingju adaptation of *Notre Dame de Paris*, Shi alternated between dancing lightly and gracefully with the hemline of



■ Stage picture of Shi Yihong

her dress slowly swung, spun with tiny steps, and her every twinkle and smile displayed features of a Gypsy girl. The dance, which broke the regular patterns of Xiqu, captured the image of the character from the original work and received rapturous applause from the audience.

Shi's "transgression" against genre boundaries, role type restrictions, and "school" divisions has always received mixed evaluations, but she wasn't deterred from exploring more in the art world. Nothing can stop her, neither criticisms nor restrictions set by senior generations. As she said in an interview, "I do not regret that I performed in *The Story of Xue Xiangling* or the *Peony Pavilion*. I knew I would be criticized by some people, but I also see my effort has won over more young people for Xiqu. I would regret if I made no bold attempts when I was young." Innovation has to start somewhere. Old plays were once new plays. The movements and singing tones that are now regarded as traditional, also suffered lots of criticisms in the past. It's because Jingju absorbed the merits of other genres of Xiqu that it has dominated the stage of Xiqu. The true masters of Jingju are all good at learning techniques inherited from other genres, schools, and performers in order to perfect and enrich their own performances. For instance, Mei Lanfang learned the "paojian" technique (i.e., hiding an arrow in sleeve so that it can be used when necessary; Mei used this technique in *Changban Slope*) from Wang Yaoqing, and learned the "guifeiwupan" technique (Concubine Yang dancing on a jade plate) from *Changsheng Palace*, a Kunqu, and she used it in her performance in *The Drunken Beauty*. In this sense, Shi Yihong was not showing any disrespect for the art of the Mei School, but she inherited Mei Lanfang's spirit of constantly learning and making breakthroughs.



■ Stage pictures of Shi Yihong

### She is a devoted educator

Shi not only appears on the theatrical stage, but furthermore gives lectures. While live performances present the charm of stage art, unfortunately, most audiences are not interested in watching performances at theatres nowadays. Furthermore, many people may want to enjoy Xiqu, but don't understand it. Since the audience is unwilling to enter the theatre, Shi Yihong has chosen to approach them outside the theatre. Upon realizing students are most likely to turn into the audience of Xiqu, she conducted a series of public lectures on Xiqu. In the lectures, Shi detailed experiences of her performing career and presented the beauty of classic Xiqu postures and songs. The point of these lectures were to show people the beauty of Xiqu, move people through its charm, and enable people to connect with its spirit. Shi Yihong also emphasized "What we need is not just more professional talents performing Jingju. I look forward to seeing the groups that will watch the performances in the future. For children, to develop an interest and be exposed to Jingju when they are young will benefit their whole life." Shi has engaged in giving public Xiqu lectures for eight years. Over the past eight years, countless children have been inspired by her.

Shi Yihong declared that "this is the best era for Jingju," quite a bold statement for us to keep in mind and consider most closely. Perhaps it's that conviction of hers that has made possible her extremely powerful and steady presence in the centre of the stage of Xiqu.

*Jiyi*

*MA student in the programme of Xiqu at STA.*

# A Teacher & Friend of Mei Lanfang — QI Rushan

HUA SHAN

Qi Rushan (1875 - 1962) was an esteemed Xiqu theorist and playwright in the modern China. Growing up with the generous material basis and literature edification from his noble family, Qi studied the Four Books and Five Classics and learned to write eight-legged essays since his childhood, and went to the School of Combined Learning to study German and French in his youth. After graduation, he traveled to Europe to further his studies— focusing on European theatre in particular. After the outbreak of World War I, Qi returned to China and got acquainted with Mei Lanfang in 1914. Since then on, Qi had devoted himself to the creation and theoretic study of Chinese Xiqu and made significant contributions to Mei Lanfang in the formation of his Xiqu and style of performing arts. Starting from his knowledge about Xiqu, his views of theatre performances, and his relationship with Mei Lanfang, this paper tries to explore Qi Rushan about his attainments on Xiqu, his relationship with Mei Lanfang and his influence on Chinese theatre.

## Qi Rushan's Propositions of Xiqu

### 1. Trace Xiqu to its origin

In his works, Qi Rushan explicitly noted the origins of the songs and dances of Xiqu as well as evolution of some theatrical repertoires and types, providing historical materials as support for his views. Wang Guowei once asserted, "Xiqu acts out stories through songs and dances." This notes the importance of songs and dances to Xiqu, but Wang didn't define their origins. Qi Rushan traced the source of Xiqu songs and dances back to the remains of the ancient songs and dances, clarifying the origin and source of the incidental music. With regard to the fact that people claimed the music was too vulgar and syllables too flat in Xiqu, Qi did textual research and said, "The gongs and



drums in Xiqu performances originate from songs with cymbals and flutes in the Han dynasty. The tunes of gongs and drums come from the wind-drum music of the Tang and Han Dynasty, not far from the ancient times.” Besides, regarding the criticism that the syllables were not powerful enough, Qi held the opinion that the choice of musical instruments for Xiqu followed the ancient notion that “the tones of eight musical instruments can be harmonious in their orders.” On the contrary to the military arts in the west, the ruling class in the ancient China sought to be prosperous in the country, be calm in the people and be maintained in the stability as its prominent priority. Therefore, art became an appendage of the politics, music was a tool to indoctrinate the people, and the songs existed to govern the country. Qi Rushan had the opposite opinion on the proposal of the contemporary people to change the movements of dances. After his research, Qi realized that dances took priority over anything in Xiqu, that dancing style could be traced back to the earlier times, and that there were just dances without songs in the original Xiqu, and that the dancing styles and forms originated from the ancient dancing styles. For instance, the reciting poems and opening words in stepping on the stage and reciting poems and couplets in stepping off the stage were harmonious to the band and dancing teams of the Tang Dynasty, and the panegyrics and musical language in stepping on the stage. Therefore, they could not be changes voluntarily. Furthermore, Qi Rushan studied the origin of some specific plays of Jingju, such as *Ganlu Temple* from the Kunqu *A Map of Xichuan*, and *The Story of Ma Siyuan from Chuiqiang*, one of the major tunes of Huiju.

## 2. Learn from the past when arranging plays

In arranging the postures of the plays of Xiqu, Qi Rushan had the notion of following the traditional style, after intently studying and employing the dancing styles in the ancient times in a hope to promote the ancient dances through Xiqu. What he exactly did was to search the descriptions of dance movements from the classical Chinese poetry and then arrange them into the plays matched with plots and scenes. For example, Qi used the sentences (e.g. “The dancers are dancing lightly with cups and dishes in their hands, wishing the guests present a long life.”) from a poem *A Jin Poem of Dancing and Singing with Cups and Dishes in Magu Presents Her Birthday Gift*, a play performed by Mei Lanfang. Inserting such poetic dances into Xiqu makes it elegant, interesting and charming. Lu Xun used to comment the plays performed by Mei Lanfang: “the plays by Mei Lanfang were vulgar at the beginning. With the help of scholar-officials, the edited scripts of gently-presented *A Fairy Scattering Flowers*, and *Daiyu’s Burying the Flowers* with affection were specifically designed for Mei, just Mei Lanfang in the mind of scholar-officials”. It can be inferred from Lu Xun’s comments that after the postures were arranged by Qi Rushan, Mei’s performance was enhanced in quality and realm, accomplished from a vulgar situation to a graceful state, becoming Mei Lanfang in the mind of scholar-officials. Thus, we can also deduce that the dances applied by Qi Rushan are neither the ancient folk songs and dances highly praised by Xu Wei and Shen Jing, two dramatists in Ming Dynasty, nor the primitive dances integrated

into Theatre of Cruelty by Artaud, but the elegant dances conforming to the aesthetic standards of the ancient scholar-officials.

### 3. Simplify the expression form of Xiqu to highlight its internal spirit

Apart from stressing the feature of classic elegance, Qi Rushan emphasized the artistic beautification of theatre. According to Qi's inference of the origin and evolution of the Chinese theatre, Xiqu underwent two phases, i.e. singing to some musical instruments and theatre; the latter phase can be divided into three eras—the era of simulating, the era of depicting the realities, and the era of artistic beautification. We can generally know something about the concept of artistic beautification from an article named “On Artistic Beautification in Jingju” written by Qi.

The first is to stress the virtual image instead of real scene. The real objects are not permitted to present on the stage, for the props of same type are in the fixed pattern, exactly to that point. Each prop is not necessarily designed to conform to the atmosphere of the plays, and imitation is just enough. For example, the same incense burner can be used to burn incense in temples, and also to hold a memorial ceremony in the troop, and burn incense in the garden. The same tent can be used as the military tent in *An Empty City*, a classic traditional Jingju, and also as the embroidery pavilion in *The Story of Wang Baochuan and Xue Pinggui*, also a Jingju. The second is to beautify the figure movements. It's not essential to repeat each and every movement of the daily life, but it is needed to present beautiful look. For instance, there are special performing procedures for such movements as dusting, rowing, pointing and opening the door. Such gestures as being akimbo, throwing up the hands and grabbing the reins need to be presented by curves. This type of line movements can be called artistic beautification. It can be expressed: “No songs without sounds; no dances without movements.” Artistic beautification is to highlight the simplification of movements, which should also be regarded as the standard of the production of play scripts. A great number of poems should be quoted in the scripts. However, whether the creation year of the quoted poems can be later than the time when the story of the play takes place is highly controversial. Regarding this issue, Qi Rushan held the opinion that “it doesn't matter that the Xiqu words came out after the play event”. Instead, the after-event allusions can be used to enhance the economy and increase the interest of the plays. Moreover, there are no definite methods in the writing style. It is not needed to be serious in every detail in the plays of Xiqu. It is actually common that the predecessors recite the poems written by the later generations, and the former generations call the names of the later generations in Xiqu. Qi also thought that such an opinion could be summarized in the simplification viewpoint on Xiqu creation. This viewpoint was also common in history. For example, Wang Jide, a Xiqu theorist and playwright in the Ming dynasty, quoted *The Story of Yuan An*, a painting by Wang Wei in the Tang dynasty, in which peonies, cottonroses, and lotuses were painted in a same scene, for explaining the phenomenon that the artists in the Yuan dynasty didn't restrict themselves to the

order of the dynasties when writing plays and songs. Qi Rushan believed this viewpoint was very insightful. Qi's view is the continuation and development of Wang Jide's theory that "theatres should come from reality but should be used in an unreal manner."

## Qi Rushan's Outlook on Play Performance

### 1. To focus on plays first

Qi Rushan observed the phenomenon that the performers just focused on their own images but ignored the overall effect due to the differences in rewards and the preferences of the audience and so on. For example, they might design their performances according to the singing words and paragraphs of the scripts in neglect of the play plots; they might stress the importance of their roles when acting the plays as the priority and majority of the performances. Such phenomena already existed when Mei Lanfang gave his performances in his early years. In the year of 1913, as a role of Liu Yingchun in the play of *Fenhe River Bend*, Mei Lanfang on the stage did not have any "movement" and just listened to the actor as Xue Rengui singing the paragraph of Cave Door. Therefore, Qi Rushan stressed that each performer on the stage should focus on the overall effect of the play, showing their suitable expressions and postures according to the development of the plots and the performing contents of the other figures, rather than wandering while other actors in performance, thus having a negative influence on the overall effect of a play.

### 2. To identify the subtle differences

Apart from emphasizing an accurate simplification to convey the internal spirit in Xiqu performances, Qi Rushan demanded that according to the musical rhythms, the differences of the plots, the feelings of the characters and so on, the performers should present the subtle difference in each movement under the different circumstances and show the fine movements in the performing methods in every type of expressions such as tone and syllables of each sound. For instance, the expression of "smiles" can be divided into positive smiles, sneers, smile with anger, willful smile, forced smiles, frozen smiles, smile with pride, wild smile, smile with fright, stiff smile, silly smile, dull smile, dorky smile, smile with fear, and flattering smile etc. Qi also edited the specific performing steps and typical examples for these different smiles, with positive smiles in consistent volume in the whole play. For instance, in aria after the character entering the cave dwelling in *Wujiang Slope*, the performers should sneer with a low volume and short breath.

## The Cooperative Relationship Between Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang

The scholars have been holding different opinions about the relationship between Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang. Some scholars thought that without the silent contribution of Qi Rushan, behind-the-scenes strategist, Mei couldn't have been so resplendent in his art, if Qi hadn't written scripts for Mei or polished up his postures. As Qi Rushan said in his biography, "I helped him to write all the plays and to design all his postures". Other scholars thought that Qi was just one of the participants in rehearsing the plays for Mei, and he might just boast his contributions in composing the plays and rehearsing the posture. As Mei Lanfang wrote in his *Forty Years' Life on Stage*, "My step to rehearse the new play is that first some Xiqu fans search intentionally the meaningful materials which could be composed into the scripts at any time, and then one of them would be appointed to drafting and outlining the episodes. I just heard the friend frequently responsible for composing the draft and outlines is Mr. Qi Rushan." Therefore, some scholars inferred that Qi did not play an important role in the creation of Mei Lanfang's plays, just an "outline writer". In fact, the outline writer is the writer of the first draft. If there is no draft, it could be difficult to process the revision in the later period. Qi Rushan had laid the foundation for the final completion of the script, and indeed he was very contributive. As for why Mei emphasized that Qi was an outline writer, their sayings were different, because of their unequal personal positions. In mind of Mei Lanfang, Qi Rushan was just one of "Mei gangs" in supporting and helping him and Mei was supported by a group of people. However, to promote the development of Mei's career was all of Qi Rushan's work for twenty years. Qi clearly knew everything he had done for Mei so his statement might be somewhat subjective inevitably. But, Qi Rushan's contributions would not be deflected because of his exaggerative statements from his personal affection.

Besides, it can be seen from a sentence of "Mr. Qi taught Mei how to dance," from a poem written by Luo Dunrong, a poet and Jingju playwright, that Qi Rushan played a substantial role in writing and directing the dances for Mei Lanfang.

But there is no evidence to show that Qi was good at dancing, so the author concludes that Qi did not teach Mei Lanfang the corresponding postures and movements one by one. As an outstanding connoisseur of Xiqu performances, Qi Rushan is of fine aesthetic taste and extraordinary ability to discriminate and appreciate the art. The author infers that Qi must have found the dance examples in a sea of materials and classics, and helped Mei Lanfang to appreciate the original state of classic dances through his explanations and analyses, for specific development and creation of the art. Furthermore, in sorting three letters written by Qi Rushan to Mei Lanfang, Mr. Wang Xiaofan found that appellation of Mei by Qi changed from "Artist Wanhua" to "Mr. Wanhua" to "brother Wanhua", it can be concluded that their relationship becomes increasingly intimate from the mutual respect at the beginning.

## Influence from Qi Rushan

### 1. His influence on the art of Mei Lanfang and Mei-Style Jingju

As mentioned above, the dances and postures that Qi Rushan elaborately designed for Mei Lanfang plus Qi's unique aesthetics added to Mei's personal charm and artistic expressions and improved his creative ability, and elevated Mei Lanfang in his aesthetic taste of Xiqu performances. Of over twenty plays composed or participated by Qi personally, some plays such as *Mulan Joins the Army*, *Magu Presents Her Birthday Gift* and *The Story of Lady Lin* increased Mei's popularity and social influence. Some plays like *The Universal Pagoda*, *Chang'e Flies to the Moon* and *Daiyu's Burying Flowers* have been preserved as Mei's representative works up to today for ever-lasting glory.

### 2. His contributions to Xiqu performance and aesthetic theories

There had never been scholars studying the art of Jingju from the perspective of theories before Qi Rushan. Qi put forward his unique ideas from the aspects of stage performance, script editing and performance appreciation, giving detailed guidance to the performers how to act and the audience how to appreciate the plays. His concise summary of "No songs without sounds; no dances without movements" initiated the aesthetic study of Xiqu, and his study on reduction of the repertoires and on transition between the primary and secondary characters in the same play have provided the new study perspectives to the later generations.

In summary, the contribution from Qi Rushan had laid a solid foundation for Mei Lanfang's art of Jingju, and Qi's works keep brilliant in the study of Xiqu theories, but also shine flourishingly in Mei's art practice of Mei Lanfang.

# Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre

ZHANG WENJING

Located in the Xicheng District of Beijing and featuring remarkable Chinese traditions, Mei Lanfang Theatre boasts a capacity of 1068 viewers, with three viewing floors. The large building comprises a Xiqu house, an art exhibition hall for Jingju, a small theatre (video production hall), and a studio. As a major venue for important shows, the theatre is a window to present traditional Xiqu and culture to the world.

For quite some time, Chang'an Grand Theatre had been the only regular venue for large-scale Jingju shows in Beijing, and thus the development of the National Peking Opera Company was significantly crippled. However, in 2007, Mei Lanfang Theatre was established and officially opened to the public thanks to governmental support for the traditional art industry in the serendipitous climate brought by the nationwide preparation for the Beijing Olympic Games that was to come the following year. The theatre was built and named in honor of master of Xiqu and exceptional Jingju artist, Mei Lanfang. As the first head of the National Peking Opera Company, Mei Lanfang played a crucial role in connecting the past and future of Xiqu in modern China. The name of this theatre embodies the awe of Mei Lanfang as well as his special status in Xiqu. Meanwhile, it also reflects the responsibility that the theatre shoulders in revitalizing Jingju, promoting Xiqu, and spreading glorious Chinese culture and traditions. Mei Baojiu, a son of Mei Lanfang and a renowned performing artist in his own right, attended the inauguration of this theatre. Operated and managed by Beijing Guoyishengping Culture Co. Ltd., it has been the first Chinese theatre house with separate theatre and troupe management. The general manager, Zhang Delin, and the art consultant, She Sheng, are both professionals in regards to Chinese dramas. Both have relationships with Mei Baojiu and other prominent artists, in addition to extensive social connections in governments, businesses, and media. Zhang and She have "dedicated their life" to the prosperity of Mei Lanfang Theatre. In their management philosophy, the theatre is "mainly for Xiqu." They have spared no effort in promoting its image as an ideal venue for Xiqu.

To accomplish this, Zhang and She have been making every effort to furnish and improve the facility, to enhance its quality and cultural vibes, and hence to elevate the

experience of the viewers of Jingju here. As such, Mei Lanfang Theatre also serves as a “Museum of Jingju.” On the first floor, in the middle of the hall stands a copper statue of Mei Lanfang. The second floor contains five Premier Lounges (“Peony Room,” “Gold Pavilion,” “Elegance Room,” “Kylin Room,” and “Longevity Room”) named after featured Xiqu. On the third floor, Jingju figures can be found alongside a huge image of Guan Gong<sup>1</sup> on the wall, showing casing Chinese culture. Coupled with high-quality service, these settings have laid a solid foundation for the unique status of Mei Lanfang Theatre, distinguishing it from any other theatre house in the city.

In Mei Lanfang Theatre, audiences have watched not only Xiqu starring iconic figures such as the late Mei Baojiu, the late Ma Changli, and Zhang Xuejin, Zhao Baoxiu, and Tan Xiaozeng, but also the performances of excellent young and middle-aged talents like Li Yangming, Liu Kuikui, and Tang Hexiang. With the strong support of the resident National Peking Opera Company, Mei Lanfang Theatre has formed its own art features and brand. By genre, it offers a variety of productions, including Jingju, ethnic music, and ethnic dance dramas. It also organizes regular thematic events, for example, the “Spring Festival Drama Season” and the “Jingju Special Event—Highlights from Five Schools of Jingju.” What makes up the most important part of its repertoire are, of course, the many so-called Mei-school Xiqu (Jingju or Kunqu productions featuring the typical “Mei Lanfang Method” of acting) such as *Return of the Phoenix*, *The Fourth Son Visits His Mother* (both are Jingju) and Kunqu such as the *Peony Pavilion* and the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Other Jingju such as *The Tale Under the Willow Shade*, *Xie Yaohuan*, and *A Spirited Horse with a Red Mane* and Yueju such as *Butterfly Lovers*, and various other plays are also regularly staged. In general, the theatre is both a platform for major Xiqu and a trial field for new original plays. Among its original creations are *Mother Huang*, large-scale original Chuanju *Give Back My Rivers and Hills*. In addition it has also produced modern Jingju revivals like *The Butterfly Romance*. For nearly a decade, a large number of elder, middle-aged, and young actors, engaging in all the four major roles of Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou, have been active on the stage of Mei Lanfang Theatre, highlighting the charm of traditional Chinese dramas with sophisticated performing techniques. Mei Lanfang Theatre remains close with three troupes of the National Peking Opera Company, demonstrating constant vigor and artistic creativity.

To win over more viewers for traditional Xiqu, the theatre takes into consideration a combination of actors and tastes of audiences. For instance, Zhang Huoding’s fans are mostly university students, Gui Zhi and Li Shengsu are favored mainly by young and middle-aged people, and Chi Xiaoqiu, Wang Rongrong, and Xue Yaping are mostly appreciated by the elderly. Through superb casting arrangement, ticket-pricing strategies, especially themed drama seasons, and featured drama months, Mei Lanfang Theatre has reinforced its irreplaceable role in the heart of audiences.

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1 Guan Gong: a renowned General during Han Dynasty in Ancient China. (Noted by the translator).

Through brand enhancement, reasonable ticket fare, considerate drama combination, effective actor selection, and smart market operation, Mei Lanfang Theatre gained a firm foothold in Beijing just three months after its inauguration, with increasing box office numbers. To date, with the joint efforts of the National Peking Opera Company and the operating corporation of the theatre, Mei Lanfang Theatre has established its position as a major venue for Xiqu performances in Beijing.

*Zhang Wenjing*

*MFA student in the programme of Arts Management at STA.*



# National Peking Opera Company

KAI XIN

National Peking Opera is a national-level Xiqu company under the direct supervision of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism. It plays a crucial role in the development and dissemination of traditional Xiqu and culture. It has brought together a great number of excellent performing artists, playwrights, directors, composers, and stage design artists. With all these talents, elites, and unrivaled strengths, the company has established itself as a leading Jingju performing group.

Evolved from Yan'an Jingju Research Institute (established in 1942), National Peking Opera has been repeatedly re-structured and upgraded. In 1955, it was titled "China Peking Opera" (later renamed "National Peking Opera," as it is called now), and was the only national-level Xiqu Company, with Mei Lanfang appointed as its head. Since its founding, the company has strived to "cultivate excellent talents, produce high-quality performances, and create competitive opera plays," and has offered over 500 outstanding works, mostly traditional Xiqu. Based on its glorious tradition, it has formed its own artistic "personality" featuring "rich contents and thoughts, scrupulous attitude towards art, eye-catching stage designs, multitudinous schools of acting, and powerful expressiveness," and has made contributions to the prosperity and development of China's Jingju.

As it did at its incorporation, National Peking Opera consists of three troupes. The first troupe is comprised of veteran performing artists including Li Shaochun, Ye Shenglan, Yuan Shimei, and Du Jinfang. They are the best embodiment of the Jingju legacy and also the most innovative: they have produced more new works than the other two troupes. The second troupe is composed of a batch of excellent young and middle-aged artists (e.g., Jiang Qihu, Li Haiyan, Huang Bingqiang, Wei Jijun). Placing equal weight on tradition and innovation while exploring performing markets proactively, these artists have added new splendor to Jingju in the new era. Re-structured in 1994, the third troupe is more composite, made up of many of the country's first-tier actors, composers and accompanying musical instrument players (e.g., Zhang Jianguo, Dong Yuanyuan, Lv Kunshan, and Wang Runjing). They constantly offer both traditional and

modern shows with a focus on cultivating talents, while passing on and promoting Jingju to future generations.

Furthermore, National Peking Opera has added a Stage Art Center, a Performance Marketing Center, and a Creation Center, as well as other rehearsal facilities and the trial theatre house Changhe Yuan. The famous Mei Lanfang Theatre is its major venue. Set up in 2002, the Creation Center is responsible for research, creation, archiving, network development, and art supervision. Meanwhile, the Performance Center is in charge of the overall planning and implementation of creation, production, and business development. There is a clear division of labor between the troupes and the other functional departments. With collaboration and coordination, the organization as a whole promotes the advancement of Xiqu techniques and the essence of Xiqu in China and abroad.

In terms of its repertoire buildup, the National Peking Opera Company is devoted to “a creative adaptation of classical Jingju, revivals of ethnic art, and conversion of traditional culture and spirits.” It attaches equal importance to historical plays, modern plays, and traditional plays. In recent decades, the company has produced a wide range of new historical and modern plays, for instance: the newly adapted historical play *A River All Red and Female Generals of Yang Family*, romantic love stories *Tale of the White Snake* and *The Tale Under the Willow Shade*, revolution-themed plays *The White-haired Girl* and *The Legend of Red Lantern*, and more. When adapting traditional plays, artists have presented “old plays” in “new ways,” demonstrating exceptional performing techniques and innovation. Among the traditional plays they have adapted are *The Three-Fork Road Inn*, *Havoc in Heaven*, *Forest of the Wild Boars*, and *Battle of Jiujiang River Mouth*.

As a key representative of Xiqu, the National Peking Opera has engaged in international exchange as well. With its troupes visiting over 50 countries in 5 major continents, they have won repeated international acclamation, and made remarkable contributions to the spreading of Chinese culture. Apart from receiving foreign guests and organizing exchange performances all over the world, the company has also been offering Jingju courses in prestigious foreign universities, including Oxford. This enables more overseas people to develop a deeper understanding of the drama culture represented by Jingju.

The National Peking Opera Company is 64 years young now. Generation after generation, its artists have made extraordinary contributions to the preservation and development of Xiqu.

# Little Theatre of Xiqu in China

HUANG XUHE

On the evening of December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, *A Young Girl's Hatred of Her Heartbreaker*, a newly edited Xiqu, successfully staged at Red Auditorium of Changjiang Theatre in Shanghai. Since then, the nine-day Fourth Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival rings down the curtain officially. Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival is co-hosted by *Wen Hui Bao* and Shanghai Center of Xiqu, and formally settled down in 2018 in the reconstructed and reopened Changjiang Theatre.

The concept of “little theatre” originated from the “Independent Theatre Movement” toward the end of the 1800s to the beginning of the 1900s in Europe, which aimed to oppose the commercialization of traditional theatre and was highly experimental. Under the influence of Théâtre Libre led by André Antoine and the Art Theatre Troupe in Moscow, hundreds of little troupes and theatres bloomed in America in the early 1990s, forming what's known as the “Little Theatre Movement.” This movement led American theatre to a new historical phase, and brought a reference function to theatre movements in many other countries. During the 1950s and 1960s, the competition and rapid development of television caused a huge impact on performance of traditional Xiqu, in order to survive in the fierce competition, a new round of little theatre art emerged in European, American, and Asian countries, giving birth to their respective traditional dramas and operas of litter theatre.

Because of cultural differences, as an imported art, by evolution after brought into China, “theatre” was named “drama” in Chinese language by Hong Shen, a Chinese dramatist. Different from traditional Xiqu, Chinese dramas do not present stories through songs and dances, but borrow and transplant Western theatres. In terms of performing theories, Stanislavski's System is dominant. At the end of the 1970s, “experimental drama” came into being for several reasons: the opening-up policy, deep reflections of politics and culture, and a lack of funding. The year 1982 was the starting point, with *The Absolute Signal* by Lin Zhaohua, Gao Xingjian and others, followed by representatives such as Meng Jinghui and Li Liuyi and the pioneering dramas such as *Rhinoceros in Love* and *Sifan*. Since then, “little theatre drama” in mainland of China has

taken increasingly various forms and greatly inherited the experimental and pioneering nature of European experimental theatre.

How to define “Xiju of litter theatre”? Up to now, there is no agreed concept in the theatrical circles. Zhou Long, a professor from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, believes “little” corresponds to the relative viewing space of the large theatres, but does not merely and simply refer to “large” or “small” concept physically. There exist two officially translated terms about “little theatre Xiqu”—— “Xiqu Black Box Festival” in Beijing and “Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival”, which emphasize that Xiqu itself is different from the category of “drama”, and highlight the “experimental” characteristic of little theatre, and stress that Xiqu itself still is what Wang Guowei put forward “Xiqu is to act out stories through songs and dances”.

It's generally thought that 1990s is the beginning of modern “little theatre Xiqu” in the Chinese mainland. *Qin Qiong Meets Li Yuan*, performed by Zhou Long at National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in 1993, is regarded as the first experimental Xiqu of little theatre. In 1995, Zhou Long, in cooperation with China National Peking Opera Company and Greek Drama Troupe in New York, America, created and staged the experimental drama, *The Bacchae*, which was later staged at international theatre festivals in such countries and regions as Beijing, Hong Kong, Greece and Austria. In 1998, *Baal*, adapted from Brecht's theatre, was presented by Long and Theatre Action from Hong Kong, and its strong dramatic artistic characteristics and simultaneous presentation of various versions in languages of Chinese, English and German were highly appreciated internationally.

“Little theatre Xiqu” is most frequently performed in Beijing, the political and cultural center in China. After the millennium was ushered in, experienced Xiqu directors like Sheng Heyu and Zhang Manjun realized the gradual maturity of “Little Theatre Movement” of drama and the alienation between large theatre and youth and adapted and rehearsed “Jingju of little theatre”—— *Splashing Water before Horse*, in cooperation with the artists from Jingju Theatre of Beijing. The Xiqu is the first Jingju of contemporary significance and referred to as the origin of little theatre Xiqu, and it immediately became a phenomenal work after it was staged. Xiqu Theatre of Beijing, Beifang Kunqu House and National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts presented several Jingju of little theatre. *Three Women Ghosts*, created by Zhou Long and Yan Quanyi, integrated the tri-system of Jingju, Kunqu and Yueju and triggered much discussion. With Mu Guiying, Hua Mulan and Liang Hongyu, three well-known women in history, as the protagonists, Director Li Liuyi edited and directed *A Trilogy of Heroines During the War*, through which the script, directing and performing methods, stage design, music and the aesthetic process of audience were completely and “newly” orientated, termed revolutionary “Jingju of little theatre”.

Beijing Theatre Association and National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts jointly

held the First Performance of Little Theatre Xiqu and Academic Symposium in 2005. *Splashing Water before Horse*, *Mount Lanke* and *The Story of Chen Sanliang* were appreciated with great acclaim from insiders and laymen at Beijing People's Experimental Theatre. From 2012, in order to give full play to Beijing's leading role as the national cultural center, "Story in Beijing" was staged as an excellent play of little theatre, to encourage the development of little theatres. In 2013, *Six Records of A Floating Life*, produced by Jingju Theatre of Beijing, was staged at the second exhibition and performance of "Story in Beijing" excellent little-theatre plays. Since then on, little theatre Xiqu started to occupy a position in the theatre festivals and performance. In 2014, while the excellent little-theatre plays were organized continuously, the First Xiqu Black Box Festival was successfully held in Beijing, becoming an important event as a milestone in the artistic development of "little-theatre Xiqu", and symbolizing the establishment of its own position in theatrical circles. From October 16<sup>th</sup> to November 16<sup>th</sup>, hosted by Beijing Theatre Association, National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts and The Central Academy of Drama, over 50 performances of little-theatre plays were staged by 13 troupes from the whole China, including Jingju, Kunqu, Huangmei xi and Yuju, and highly appreciated by Beijing audience. Within one month, the artists from the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan presented the successful exhibition and performance to the audience of the modern time for the future of dramas and Xiqu. After three years of preparation, this festival was finally settled at Star Theatres, with Pu Cunxi to be the director of organizing committee of the festival and founder of Star Theatres, and Fan Xing to be the secretary general. In 2015, the exhibition and performance of excellent little-theatre plays were classified into Xiqu sector and drama sector for the first time, setting up the performance platform for excellent little-theatre plays and promoting the dissemination of little-theatre Xiqu. From 2013 to today, totally 112 performances of little-theatre plays had been staged at exhibition and performance of "Story in Beijing" excellent little theatre plays and Xiqu Black Box Festival.

With a long-standing tradition of Xiqu and a large number of the viewers, the Yangtze River Delta is an abundant region of Xiqu and drama art. Since the beginning of 2000s, the little-theatre Xiqu has entered Shanghai, thus providing a new option for the inheritance of traditional Xiqu in Shanghai. "Shanghai little-theatre Xiqu" based on the urbanized little theatres are naturally labeled with the metropolitan culture of Shanghai. Compared with orthodox Xiqu in Beijing, Xiqu is accepted into the little theatres with a more tolerant attitude in Shanghai. The artists are happy to renovate the dramatic forms staged at little theatres and the artistic innovation and commercial means are younger and bolder. In 2002 *Injury and Death*, written by Lu Xun, was adapted by Shanghai Kunqu Troupe, with the stylistic patterns and movements of Kunqu melted into its performance without any trace. After several revisions of this Kunqu, *Injury and Death* was preserved with only the basic framework of Lu Xun's original novel and flavored with Shanghai street plays and even folk comedy in its plots, with profound meaning in its refinement and the bitterness and helplessness of human beings behind some comedy-like and even farce-like scenes, thus was deeply admired by college teachers

and students and urban white-collar workers for its aesthetic grade of both refined and popular taste.

Since the First Xiqu Black Box Festival in 2014, various forums and art festivals on little-theatre Xiqu have been successively held across China, with the First Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival in 2015 being one of the representatives. Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival is clearly oriented for exploration and innovation: it intends to provide a platform for the growth of the young talents with creative ideas and to explore the incubation platforms for innovative and experimental plays and the platform for the communication and cooperation in the traditional Xiqu all over China. From the first festival, “Shanghai Little-Theatre Xiqu Festival” is themed with “exhalation - inhalation” in each session, in intention to “inhale” the nutrients of traditional essentials and “exhale” new creativity, new connotation, new form, and new idea, and invites the performance of outstanding little-theatre Xiqu from all over China on the same stage. Due to the obsolete expression forms in the traditional Xiqu and high age in the audience, its marketing value declines continuously. In the experimental Xiqu festivals of new Xiqu system, free tickets are not available and the performances are bought out with performance fees. The creation groups are encouraged to participate in the propagation and marketing by proportional share of box office, to lower down the fares appropriately and sell all the tickets for activating the concerns of the audience market. Besides, the repertoire for the experimental Xiqu festivals is widely introduced and propagated through various channels including newspapers, TV and new media, and the publicity materials are designed based on the current aesthetics principally, rather than the reputation of the performers, for attracting the audience of all ages through the purchasing and selling mechanism and marketing methods.

Up to 2019, Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival has been held for four sessions and the fascinating works were staged in every session. The Second Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival and Shanghai International Tang Xianzu-Shakespeare Theatre Festival jointly selected twelve works from the troupes and personal studios across China, including eight genres such as Jingju, Kunqu, Yueju, Chuanju, Yueju, Chuju, Liyuanxi and Hebei Bangzi. The Third Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival was held at Zhou Xinfang Drama Space in December 2017, and nine Xiqu were staged that year. The Fourth Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival was held at Red Auditorium and Black Auditorium of the renovated Changjiang Theatre in December 2018, and eight Xiqu in seven genres were staged, including Jingju, Kunqu, Yueju, Huaiju, Wenzhouxi, Huangmeixi and Liyuanxi.

It's notable that after renovation that the time-honored and unique Changjiang Theatre has become a professional theatre for little-theatre Xiqu in Shanghai and serves as a regular venue for holding Shanghai Experimental Xiqu Festival. Originally named Carlton Grand Theatre and reputed as “Home of Chinese Drama” and “The Name Card of Oriental Paris”, Changjiang Theatre enjoys a unique position in the entertainment industry

of Shanghai. Because its buildings were in bad condition, this Theatre was suspended in April, 1993 when it had been in use for seventy years. At the end of December of 2016, Changjiang Theatre was formally reconstructed and renovated into two small theatres—Red Auditorium and Black Auditorium, in which Red Auditorium is mainly responsible for the performances of small-scale Xiqu. This Auditorium was decorated in a traditional style, with the Chinese red as the major color and old-fashioned square tables and solid wood chairs for replicating the viewing atmosphere in the ancient times. And all the seats for 197 to 280 viewers are mobile in Red Auditorium. Xia Tian, the director of Changjiang Theatre, said that they are considering serving the audience tea and dim sum, if the performances are not affected, for reproducing the atmosphere of the traditional theatre. Black Auditorium mainly functions as a performance platform for various experimental Xiqu and small-scale pioneering Xiqu. Although smaller than Red Auditorium in area, the stage of Black Auditorium is more flexible and changeable. As a first professional and multifunctional experimental Xiqu theatre in Shanghai, the stage forms of six basic stage modes are created by the lifting and sinking the stage, projective soundproof screen and side curtain at Black Auditorium, including single-sided stage, double-sided stage, central stage, and extended stage and so on, which could be freely constituted in accordance with the performance demands. The holographic sound system, electronic acoustic projection technology and full-field-lights track setting are equipped in the stages, for realizing the effect of panoramic immersive performance. Consequently, Changjiang Theatre would become a first professional Xiqu theater equipped with holographic sound technology in Shanghai.

As an international metropolis, Shanghai has been featured with its own culture and sentiment and is full of inclusiveness. Therefore, “little theatre” originating from the Western culture is highly acceptable by the inclusive quality in Shanghai style culture. The innovative presentation of traditional Xiqu at “little theatres” provides great inspiration to the creators of the arts. The friendly attitude the dramatic workers in Shanghai to welcome the audience to step on the stage if they like opens up the cultural market of traditional Xiqu in a diversified development. Therefore, as one of the most vibrant cultural industries, little-theatre Xiqu has had a significant impact on the development of urban culture.

Firstly, little-theatre Xiqu provides a best platform for enlivening the mind and exploring the renovation of the arts. The exploration and practice on the Xiqu and dramas of little-theatre art in Beijing and Shanghai reflect the spirit to let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend. Secondly, little theatre Xiqu opens a new road for inheriting the traditional arts. In the new era, how to inherit traditional Xiqu and to attract the audience become the efforts of the little-theatre Xiqu. Thirdly, it provides a fertile soil for training young and middle-aged dramatic talents and open up a new world for the young performers ambitious to inherit the dramatic arts to thrive more quickly.

The emergence of the experimental Xiqu and dramas is an inevitable outcome in the

modernization of Xiqu and also an innovation to follow the ideological progress with the times, providing a practicable orientation for the future development of the contemporary Xiqu. How to integrate Eastern and Western cultures and brotherhood arts has to be considered for the long-term development of Xiqu. The emergence of little theatre Xiqu follows the trend of the time in collision between Chinese culture and foreign culture. Its permeation, reference and exploration to various artistic forms, and the innovation of experimental Xiqu are the internal driving force to promote the flourishing development of the new performing space in the little theatres. As its development scale has been formed, little-theatre Xiqu increases with its influence immensely for slowly forming its own quality. The prospect of little-theatre Xiqu and even traditional Xiqu will be much broader and brilliant.

*Huang Xuhe*

*MFA student in the programme of Arts Management at STA.*



# An Introduction of Contemporary Xiqu Classics (1)

HUANG JINGFENG

As the editor-in-chief pointed out in the preface, compared with the introduction of foreign theatre in China, the introduction and research of Chinese theatre in foreign countries are in serious “deficit”. However, our foreign counterparts, especially artists engaged in theatrical practice, are eager to have a real feel of Chinese theatre works—to comprehend Chinese theatre via representative plays rather than via theoretical papers of scholars. To satisfy this need, the journal opens this column to introduce to our readers leading playwrights and their works in contemporary Chinese theatre since the 1950s. It is expected that in time our readers and artists overseas will have a more specific and in-depth understanding of Chinese theatre during this part of history.

This issue focuses on the introduction of traditional Chinese Xiqu and its major creators and works. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the ruling party pinned part of its ideological construction on the popular recreational art form of Xiqu. The government actively pushed forward the reform of Xiqu. Those plays which had been influential during the old time were reinvented with new themes of the era. At the same time, stage art also underwent changes. The plays reaped a wide audience through media vehicles like films and broadcasts and became classics. Among them, new chronicle plays and modern plays synergized with the ideology of the time, taste of the intellectuals and need of the general public, resulting in an eruption of outstanding works. In a word, the Chinese theatre, including Xiqu and Huaju, seeks and inherits the tradition while absorbing and transforming the “imported”. It has been steadfastly moving forward on the path of preserving national characteristics and embracing the world.

## 1. Jingju *Tale of the White Snake*

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Tian Han began to radically

rewrite his old work *Jin Bo Ji* (Story of a Golden Bowl). In 1952, the rewriting was finally completed and he renamed it *Tale of the White Snake*, which was produced on stage by the China Xiqu Experimental School at China's First National Xiqu Festival. In 1953, its script appeared in the August issue of the *PLAY Magazine*, before its publication by Baowentang Bookstore in October. It was also included in *Xiqu Script Collection of China's First National Xiqu Festival*, which was published by the People's Literature Publishing House in December of the same year. In 1954, *Tale of the White Snake* was re-produced, and the script was mostly finalized and again published by the Writers Publishing House in June of 1955.

*Tale of the White Snake* is based on the eponymous folk tale known to almost everyone in China. While retaining the basic plot, the Xiqu endowed the story with a brand-new theme and significance through the re-shaping of characters and their relationships. When Tian Han created the original *Jin Bo Ji*, he extolled the natural power of love from the standpoint of the New Culture widely promoted in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially after the ending of the Qing Dynasty. In the article "How I Wrote *Jin Bo Ji*," he says: "Suzhen cried bitterly with her baby in her arms, 'Master Fahai, stop laughing. The natural power of love will not be suppressed by your golden bowl!' This scene is probably... most suggestive of the theme of the play." After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Tian Han, the director of the Bureau of Xiqu Improvement, decided to rewrite *Jin Bo Ji*. He made extensive and important changes to the original play and the rewriting was generally considered a great improvement. His *Tale of the White Snake* was widely recognized as an outstanding work that reflects Chinese women's struggle against social and cultural oppression, their pursuit of freedom, and the happiness of marriage. In other words, thematically *Tale of the White Snake* fitted in well with the new discourses about women's liberation in New China.

The story outline is as follows: During the Southern Song Dynasty, a white snake and a green snake, who had been "cultivating vital energy in themselves for immortality" in Emei Mountain for thousands of years, metamorphosed into two young ladies and went to Hangzhou, then one of the most prosperous city in China, due to their yearning for a mundane life. They named themselves Bai (White) Suzhen and Xiao Qing (Little Green), pretending to be a young lady and her maidservant. One day, when visiting the West Lake, they were caught in rain and met Xu Xian, a drugstore clerk, at the Broken Bridge. Xu Xian lent them his umbrella. Bai Suzhen fell immediately in love with Xu, who was young, handsome, generous and gentle and suggested that Xu come to her residence the following day so he could pick up his umbrella. Xu paid the visit and eventually married Bai. After the wedding, the couple opened a drugstore in Zhenjiang, where Xu sold medicines and Bai diagnosed diseases.

Fahai, a Buddhist monk of Jinshan Temple, believed that the arrival of Bai Suzhen was a misfortune, so he was determined to save Xu Xian and subdue the white snake. Fahai went to the drugstore and told Xu that his wife was a snake demon. He instructed that Xu might persuade Bai to drink lots of realgar wine on the Dragon Boat Festival day, saying that under the influence of the drink the snake demon would show her

real shape. The Dragon Boat Festival was an ominous day for snakes, so Bai pleaded illness and stayed in bed. After drinking with friends, Xu went back home and tentatively persuaded Bai to drink with him. Afraid of hurting her husband's feelings, Bai reluctantly drank the realgar wine and could not help showing her original form, which shocked Xu to death. To revive Xu, Bai flew to Penglai Mountain to steal *Ganoderma lucidum* in spite of her pregnancy. After a fierce fight against guards of the mountain, she was given the *Ganoderma* by Nanji Xianweng (the South Pole Immortal, or more literally the South Extreme Immortal) out of sympathy for her. Though Bai Suzhen brought Xu Xian back to life, the incident alienated the couple. To dispel Xu's worries, Bai transformed a white ribbon into a dragon, claiming that the appearance of the "dragon" (she claimed that what Xu had seen as a snake had actually been a dragon) was a sign of family prosperity. Xu was convinced and wiped off his suspicion.

Then when Xu Xian paid a visit to Jinshan Temple to worship Buddha, Fahai persuaded him to stay. Three days after Xu's failure to return, Bai Suzhen went to the temple with Xiao Qing to look for him and Bai got into a battle against Fahai in the sutra hall. Fahai summoned the guardians of Buddhism, while Bai rallied the support of the water races and finally flooded the Temple. Then the pregnant Bai fell ill and retreated. Worrying about his pregnant wife, Xu Xian escaped Jinshan Temple with the help of a novice monk.

Escorted by Xiao Qing, Bai Suzhen fled to the West Lake. Looking at the Broken Bridge, she thought of her encounter with Xu Xian and could not restrain her growing hatred of Fahai. Then Xu arrived, expressing his regret and sorrow at the sight of his wife in agony. Xiao Qing blamed Xu Xian for his betrayal, and when she drew her sword to kill Xu, Bai stopped her and told Xu everything. Having experienced the Jinshan Temple incident, Xu felt Bai's love for him was sincere and no longer feared Bai even after learning she was indeed a snake demon. On the contrary, he vowed never to be separated from Bai. Casting aside complaints, the couple lodged at the house of Xu's sister.

One month after Bai Suzhen gave birth to her son Xu Shilin, Fahai tried once again to destroy the couple's marriage, "covering" Bai with a golden bowl and cast a spell on her. Seeing Xiao Qing fail to rescue his wife, Xu Xian had to suppress his indignation and beg to Fahai for mercy. Bai was allowed to kiss her child goodbye before being confined in Leifeng Pagoda. Hundreds of years later, Xiao Qing came back with a group of immortals, defeating the guardian god of Leifeng Pagoda and set fire to it. When the pagoda fell, Bai Suzhen eventually regained her freedom.

Tian Han's *Tale of the White Snake* was put on stage through the combined efforts of director Li Zigui, sound designer Wang Yaoqing, and performers such as Liu Xiurong. Ever since then it has been regularly staged, again and again, for over half a century and most extensively accepted: Jingju practitioners regard it as a classic, Jingju training institutions use it as a textbook play and audiences consider it a representative piece of Jingju. The artistic quality of *Tale of the White Snake* has been a fundamental guarantee of its vitality. Both the text and its stage production are worthy of their classic status. The text has acquired its classic standing for the following reasons: Its folklore origin has



■ The Scene of “The Broken Bridge” of the Jingju *Tale of the White Snake*

made it relevant to the most extensive base of viewers, the story’s legendary association and realistic quality are most effectively unified; and its concentration on a single conflict is a radical structural innovation. Its stage production is equally classic: it is “game-changing” because older staging mode emphasized apparent acting skill showing-off at the cost of storytelling and characterization, while this production portrays vivid characters and expresses their inner selves; it stresses thematic coherence and representation effectiveness instead of drawing special attention to individual actors’ vocal or physical dexterity; it pays scrupulous attention to the tiniest detail, in sharp contrast to the older mode where some “external details” seemingly never mattered. In a sense, the production of *Tale of the White Snake* marked an aesthetic shift in Jingju. As a classic, *Tale of the White Snake* has continually aroused its audiences, aesthetically, and generation after generation.

## 2. Kunqu *Fifteen Strings of Coins*

Some night in November 1955, Huang Yuan, Director of the Zhejiang Provincial Bureau of Culture, invited Zhang Junxiang, Director of the Film Department of Shanghai Municipality, to watch Guofeng Kunqu & Suqu Company’s Kunqu *Fifteen Strings of Coins*. Huang Yuan was impressed by this intricate legal story, realizing its potential to be used to symbolize the conflict between two work styles: subjectivism and “realism.” Therefore, Huang decided to adapt the script to sharpen the theme.

The Kunqu *Fifteen Strings of Coins* performed by Guofeng originated from the “legend” (in China’s literary history, short stories are called “legends,” which are actually something between western short story and urban legend) *A Dream of Two Bears* by Zhu Suchen, a Suzhou dramatist in the Qing Dynasty. The original work consists of two storylines, respectively of the two brothers Xiong Youlan and Xiong Youhui. For their stage production, Goufeng made modifications to draw the story closer to a single narrative. Xiong Youlan’s part was simplified, but was not completely deleted. The work team under Huang Yuan believed that the double narrative structure contains too many twists and turns of the plot to be thematically unified. In order to represent the struggle between subjectivism and “realism” more intensively, his work team only retained the legal case of Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan, carrying out clear criticism through comparing the distinct attitudes and work styles of three officials towards the same case. The story of the revised Kunqu *Fifteen Strings of Coins* is as follows:

You Hulu is a butcher who had a meat shop in Wuxi County during the Ming Dynasty. One day he borrowed fifteen strings of copper from his deceased wife’s sister. He loved drinking and joking around, so when the drunken You Hulu returned home, he joked to Su Xujuan, the daughter of his deceased wife and her ex-husband, saying that the cash was a reward for selling her to a rich landowner and she would have to report to the buyer early the next day. Su believed You’s words and fled to her aunt for help on the same night while her drunken stepfather was asleep. A gambler named Lou Ashu was on his way home after losing money that night. When passing by You’s house, he noticed that the door was not closed, so he went in to buy some pork on credit. Seeing the fifteen strings of copper under You Hulu’s pillow, Lou tried to steal the money but unexpectedly woke up You. In the scramble for the copper, Lou killed You with a meat ax. The next morning, the victim’s neighbor Qin Guxin came over, only to find You dead. Together with some other neighbors, he reported the murder to the local government. Meanwhile, the neighbors also noticed the disappearance of Su Xujuan, so they set out together to look for the girl.

Unfortunately Su Xujuan was lost on her way to her aunt’s house in Gaoqiao, when she met Xiong Youlan by coincidence. Xiong worked for Tao Fuzhu, a traveling merchant, so Su asked Xiong to travel with her and direct the way. When Qin Guxin and You’s other neighbors caught up with Su, they witnessed her walking along with Xiong and found out that Xiong was also carrying fifteen strings of copper, but they did not know that the money was given to him by his employer for him to purchase wooden combs in Changzhou. Neither did they buy Xiong’s explanation. Instead they believed that Su Xujian had colluded with her lover Xiong Youlan to murder her stepfather, before stealing the money and eloping together. Therefore, they turned Su and Xiong over to the local government, expecting the county magistrate to uphold justice.

Guo Yuzhi, the Wuxi County magistrate, was a conceited official. He assumed that the young Su Xujuan had been seduced by Xiong and committed murder and theft, and then eloped because her stepfather had disagreed with her relationship. Under pressure of the testimony of the neighbors and the material evidence of the fifteen strings of

copper, Xiong Youlan and Su Xujuan confessed to false charges after torture and were condemned. As was the practice then, the two criminals were sent to Changzhou Prefecture for a check on the case and further to Zhou Chen, an even higher official, governor of Jiangnan, for the final check. Both the higher levels of court found no problem with the conviction by the county court and eventually a sentence of death was given, and Kuang Zhong, magistrate of Suzhou Prefecture, was to oversee the execution of the penalty. However, just before the execution, Su and Xiong complained of injustice, so Kuang Zhong instructed his people to make further investigation and learned that Xiong Youlan was indeed an employee of Tao Fuzhu and the money had really been given to Xiong for business purpose. Kuang immediately found himself in fierce inner struggle, but he resolutely decided to put off the execution, taking serious risks of offending his superiors. He had no right to try the case again, so he had to rush to the Court of Censors overnight to request for Governor Zhou Chen's permission of execution postponement and case re-examination. Zhou Chen was unhappy about Kuang Zhong waking him up at midnight. He considered Kuang "meddlesome," and reproaching Kung for being "transgressive" and "producing unnecessary troubles." Zhou Chen prevaricated, saying that "it was difficult for the Court to make the decision" and demanded Kuang to go back and carry out the execution. However, Kuang insisted that he could not murder innocent people wrongly convicted on false evidence. He offered to exchange his "gold seal" (a symbol of his official duty and power) as collateral for a chance to review the case. Zhou Chen agreed to give Kuang Zhong half a month for the investigation, but if Kuang failed before the deadline, his problem would be reported to higher authorities.

Kuang Zhong went to You Hulu's house for field investigation. Guo Yuzhi, the Wuxi Country magistrate who had made the first guilty conviction, kept him company during the inspection, but he fleered and scorned at Kuang and deliberately disturbed the investigation. With astonishing patience and perseverance, Kuang eventually discovered the clue to solving the case: a pair of lead-filled dices. This was a tool used by gamblers to cheat in gambling. With the help of neighbors, Kuang Zhong identified Lou Ashu as a major suspect. Lou Ashu had gone into hiding in the countryside after hearing about Kuang Zhong's arrival in Wuxi. He was so anxious that he decided to go to Dongyue Temple for divination. To avoid alerting the suspect, Kuang disguised himself as a fortune-teller and appeared in the temple too, to divine for Lou Ashu. Kuang was such a clever interrogator that after playing various verbal tricks, he cornered Lou psychologically and persuaded him to admit he had come for divination because he might get entangled in a legal case. Kuang then entrapped Lou into his ship and arrested him. Meanwhile, he sent people to raid Lou's residence, where they discovered more material criminal evidence including You Hulu's moneybag. Faced with incontestable evidence, Lou Ashu confessed to his crime and Su and Xiong were finally released and given back their money.

The images of the three officials in the play, Guo Yuzhi, Zhou Chen, and Kuang Zhong, are typifications of subjectivism, bureaucratism, and "realism." Chairman Mao Zedong, who had constantly advocated "realistic work style," was excited after watching



■ A court scene of the Kunqu *Fifteen Strings of Coins*

the show. He pointed out, based on the story, that bureaucratism in collusion with subjectivism was the biggest enemy of realism. Mao Zedong considered *Fifteen Strings of Coins* as a fable of great educational significance. The complicated case story in the Ming Dynasty broke the limitation of time and space, becoming an important part of the public discourses then.

Thanks to Chairman Mao's praise, *Fifteen Strings of Coins* became popular all over the country immediately. More than sixty years later, it is still regularly staged nationwide. The reason why *Fifteen Strings of Coins* has become a classic of contemporary Xiqu lies in its superb artistic quality. Its "modernized" structure and Kunqu's inherent artistic power have combined to make it a masterpiece with enduring glamour. The Guofeng Company's new production based Huang Yuan's script was such a success because conventions and innovations were evident in it. Its innovations were particularly effective in reflecting characters' inner world, making them rounder characters that modern viewers could more easily identify with. As for the script itself, it was wise of the writers to have made all the deletion and reduction, reorganizing it into a very neat story, devoid of the many distracting elements in the original "legend." With effective characterization, thematic coherence and stylistic unity the "new" *Fifteen Strings of Coin* has become an exemplary modern Xiqu.

*Huang Jingfeng*  
lecturer of Chinese Xiqu Arts at STA.

# Inventory of Chinese Theatre Creation in 2018

ZOU SHENGTAN

In 2018, China's theatre industry continued to grow steadily. Drama companies, theatre houses, both state-owned and private ones, were the major forces behind the daily supply of stage productions. In addition, relevant governmental departments and different institutions of academic studies and higher education were also involved in many of the theatrical events, including the National Exhibition of Outstanding Realistic Stage Art 2018, Tea Fragrance of China: the 1<sup>st</sup> National Caichaxi (Tea-leaf Jingju) Festival, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Beijing Exhibition Month of Outstanding Yuju, the 11<sup>th</sup> Pingju Art Festival, the 4<sup>th</sup> China Yueju Art Festival, the 7<sup>th</sup> China Kunqu Art Festival, the 8<sup>th</sup> China Huangmeixi Art Festival at Anqing, the 4<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Huju Art Festival at Pudong, Wuzhen Theatre Festival, Guangxi Theatre Festival, Hangzhou Youth Theatre Festival, Tianhan Theatre Week, Jing'an Modern Drama Valley, etc.

## Xiqu

### 1. Xiqu Gala

Xiqu was extraordinarily active in 2018, as can be described with the old Chinese saying: "the moment one exits, another one enters and takes the stage." What was most noteworthy was the unprecedented "Chinese Xiqu Gala" (1<sup>st</sup> Season) held in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province. From 2015 to 2017, the Ministry of Culture had organized a second nationwide survey of Xiqu, found that there were 348 genres of Xiqu alive in different regions and planned to let performers of all these genres take turns to come to Kunshan, the hometown of Kunqu, in the next three years. In 2018, 120 genres of Xiqu were presented as scheduled. These genres delivered successful repertoire of their own, and the performance of rare genres greatly widened the audiences' horizons. The "Xiqu Gala" not only raised the social attention toward Xiqu, but also fully demonstrated the government's attitude towards all these genres: they are determined not to leave



one behind.

## 2. New creations on realistic subject matters

Xiqu is the best representation of the unique characteristics of Chinese culture, and the government places high expectations on it. Since 1949, the country has been constantly supporting this art form. After the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the government increasingly called on all types of Xiqu organizations to create works that reflect the splendor of Chinese culture, present contemporary Chinese images, and explore international markets for Chinese works. There have been 135 preeminent new creations of Xiqu engaging in realistic subject matters since 2012, covering 58 genres such as Jingju, Kunqu, and Yueju. Since the year of 2018 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of China's Open and Reform movement, Xiqu practitioners did a lot of reviewing and discussion of the past 40 years while continuing to push ahead for realism. "Reality" and "modernity" were still the keywords of Xiqu in 2018. There were costume Xiqu like Kunqu *Gu Yanwu* (the name of an important historical figure), Qinqiang *Moon over the Northwest* (a title reminiscent of the Qin, Han and Tang Dynasties in Chinese history) and Dianju *King over the River*, all of which are set in ancient China, but works addressing modern subject matters account for the most new creations.

The compatibility between Xiqu and contemporary stories is always quite an issue. To use the old form for new stories requires a lot of transformation. In 2018, Xiqu practitioners tried tremendously for such transformation, but not all were successful. Actually the result was a bit embarrassing: for the numerous new creations there were only a few impressive works, including Jingju *Red Army Stories*, *Huju Daughter of Dunhuang*, and Qinqiang *Necklace*.

On July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the Xiqu *Red Army Stories* created by National Peking Opera Company premiered at MEI Lanfang Theatre in Beijing. The Xiqu is composed of three stories united by one major theme, memories of the revolution.

Apparently the three stories are very different from each other, but in spite of the differences the work is coherent in its Jingju interpretation. Its stylistic effect is impressive. The stylized action of traditional Jingju is creatively employed in it while elements from other art forms like dance, western drama, and western opera have also been absorbed to enable it to tell the modern-themed stories most powerfully.

It is worth mentioning that Zhang Manjun, the director of *Red Army Stories*, has been quite popular for his Xiqu telling modern stories. Her series of "Red Xiqu" attempt to solve the relationship issue between Xiqu and modern times, and find a feasible way for the traditional Xiqu to break through the siege of various forms of modern entertainment. It seems that her effort can be summarised in one phrase – "follow no set form," which means to pursue "new fashions" without compromising Xiqu's artistic integrity. The "fashions" refer not only to the variety of formal changes but also important transformation of narrative methods themselves. She extracts the "soul" of Xiqu and

drapes it with an appearance consistent with current aesthetic tastes. This is a truly wise move.

The creation of the Huju *Daughter of Dunhuang* took Shanghai Huju Theatre solid five years. It is a representation of the story of Fan Jinshi, the Emeritus Dean of Dunhuang Academy China. The Xiqu premiered on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 at Shanghai Oriental Art Centre. Fan Jinshi grew up in Shanghai, and after graduating from the Archaeology Program of the Department of History, Peking University; she resolutely went to work in Dunhuang, an extremely difficult small town in western China. She stayed there for more than half a century, devoting herself to the protection and research of the Dunhuang ruins. She has become an internationally reputed Dunhuang scholar, who almost singlehandedly changed the embarrassing situation where “Dunhuang is in China, but Dunhuang studies are overseas.”

The Huju starred Mao Shanyu, a famous Huju performing artist and a two-time winner of the Plum Performance Award. In the Xiqu, she acted Fan Jinshi of different ages: youth, middle age, and old age. According to the need of emotional expression of the protagonist, she borrowed the singing tunes of other genres like Jingju and Yueju; as a result, her characterization was extremely impressive and the story telling most powerful.

The Qinqiang *Necklace*, written by Xu Xinhua, has garnered high praises from experts and theatre fans alike since its premier on New Year's Day of 2018.

In the work the French writer Maupassant's *Necklace* is localized. It is set in contemporary Chinese society, about the leading character Han Xueying's borrowing, losing, and returning the necklace. Through contradictions among three couples, the Xiqu reflects the living conditions and spiritual pursuit of distinct contemporary social classes, initiating deep spiritual excruciations.

Li Mei, the two-time winner of “Wenhua Prize” and “Magnolia Award” and the Dean of Shaanxi Xiqu Research Institute, acted Han Xueying in the Xiqu. In virtue of more than a dozen traditional Xiqu styles such as “circle”, “flat turn”, and “turning over”, and long passages of singing tunes, she demonstrated the character's inner world and effectively shaped the protagonist's image. Her performance is wonderful embodiment of Xiqu's essence, which consists largely in stylized performance and poetic story telling.

There is a common feature in all the three outstanding Xiqu works engaging in modern realistic subjects. The reason why they are able to arouse multifaceted aesthetic experiences of different audience groups can be attributed to the openness of the works themselves. They stride forward on the road of the modern transformation of Xiqu. Their astute observation of modern China, the inclusiveness of their performance styles, and their creative stage designs all have contributed to their success, which manifests capacity and power of Xiqu.

### 3. Projects for Preservation and Promotion of Xiqu

#### a. Support for Xiqu Script Creation

In 2018, the Art Department of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism continued to implement script creation supporting projects, giving financial grants for fifteen new Xiqu scripts addressing realistic subject matters. China National Arts Fund sponsored 159 large-scale stage productions and other works in the same year, fifty-nine of which were Xiqu.

#### b. Continued Special Support for Xiqu under the “Inheritance and Development Plan of Chinese Outstanding Traditional Arts”

The Ministry of Culture initiated the project “Inheriting Xiqu from Masters—Contemporary Kunqu Masters Enrolling Apprentices” in 2012, in which each master taught two classical Xiqu highlights to two students. The project was first implemented in two sessions, in which twenty-four Kunqu masters were invited to pass on their art to fifty students. In 2015, the Ministry of Culture incorporated the promotional work for Kunqu Jingju, and other indigenous Xiqu into the “Inheritance and Development Plan of Chinese Outstanding Traditional Arts.” It further expanded the “Inheriting Xiqu from Masters” project. In 2018, the “Inheritance and Development Plan of Chinese Outstanding Traditional Arts” continued to be carried out.

#### c. Continuous Proceeding of Audio-visual Collection of Jingju

As a national cultural project, Audio-visual Collection of Jingju selects contemporary Jingju masters and their representative plays, filming their performances on the stage first and working on them in the studio, which is followed by performers dubbing themselves. The project utilizes modern technologies to repeatedly process the work and improve the film quality to produce a perfect art record. The project result not only is used for information preservation and public viewing but also provides major Xiqu enthusiasts and students with direct and accurate Xiqu teaching materials, indicating the project's significance in promoting the protection and inheritance of Jingju. From 2014 to the end of 2018, there were more than 200 Xiqu productions digitized in total.

### 4. Popularisation of Xiqu in Full Swing

#### a. Xiqu into Campus

In 2017, the Publicity Department, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Culture jointly issued the “Suggestions on the promotion of Xiqu on campus.” The essence of the suggestion is to strengthen the general transmission of basic knowledge about Xiqu, enhance students' understanding and experience of the art, and build a favorable environment for its inheritance and development. The “Suggestions” were fully adopted in 2018. From elementary schools to universities, and from metropolitan cities to small towns, knowledge about Xiqu was transmitted through

performances, demonstration classes, lectures, exhibitions, and training programs. In Beijing, for example, Xiqu clubs were set up in more than 500 primary and secondary schools.

#### b. Full cooperation between Media and Xiqu

In order to gain more audience, Xiqu has been transmitted in multiple forms through various media since the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2018, China's various media institutions did a particularly remarkable job at that. CCTV organized the second "Xiqu TV Quiz," which was the institution's first traditional culture program inviting average people to participate. In the form of a quiz show, it is at once challenging and entertaining, while telling stories about Xiqu and propagating knowledge about it. Among the other popular programs promoting Xiqu are Shanxi Satellite Television's "Stage King," Henan Satellite TV's "Operatic China" (Liyuan Chun), and Dragon TV's "Bravo China." "Stage King" is a competitive Xiqu program, in which Xiqu masters of different genres return to the arena and perform on behalf of their genres to compete for championship.

In 2018, the 3D Dolby Atmos Xiqu Film *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu* was impressive. Both the 8<sup>th</sup> Beijing International Film Festival and the 21<sup>st</sup> Shanghai International Film Festival held Xiqu film panels. "The Internet + Xiqu" has become a major mode of Xiqu transmission. In 2018, various Xiqu Applications for mobile devices sprang up constantly, such as the CCTV Xiqu App. They played a significant role in increasing social attention to Xiqu.

## Modern Chinese Drama

The following introduction to modern Chinese drama in 2018 is divided into three sections: new creations, re-interpretations and adaptations.

### 1. New works

In 2018, new Chinese dramas were mostly realistic works and mainly dealt with modern Chinese themes. The National Theatre of China launched three very remarkable new plays: monodrama *Life Between Heaven and Earth* (inspired by the famous short novel 'The True Story of Ah Q' by Lu Xun) directed by Liu Libin and scripted by Yang Zhankun, *A Life on the Silk Road* (playwright Wang Jing and director Zhao Miao), which represents the historical figure Zhang Qian who was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Western Regions in the Han Dynasty, and *Amnesty* written by Xu Ying and directed by Li Bonan, a courtroom drama set in the Republic of China (1912-1949), the "year's most brilliant production of the National Theatre of China."

*Life Between Heaven and Earth* was conceived at the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lu Xun's decease and was staged at Oriental Pioneer Theatre from March 8<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>. The creators expected the play to become a unique "Lu Xun production." The driving motive

of the play is to find out who is really to blame for Ah Q's tragedy. Ah Q's ghost returns to Wei Village to review his life, only to leave feeling more miserable. The original 20,000-word "The True Story of Ah Q" was rewritten by Yang Zhankun into a script of over 10,000 words. The play tells a very moving cautionary tale warning modern Chinese people to avoid Ah Q's tragic path.

In mid-to-late May 2018, *A Life on the Silk Road* produced by National Theatre of China was staged at Oriental Pioneer Theatre. It is a story of historical figure Zhang Qian's diplomatic mission to the Western Regions. It absorbs the magical fantasy in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, focusing on Zhang Qian's first thirteen-year journey to the Western Regions to demonstrate his patriotism and investigate into his complicated and mysterious inner world through dreams and fantasies. Zhao Miao, the playwright and director, said that the play is closely related to contemporary Chinese people's emotions, and it gives them an opportunity to look into their own inner world. The play highlights the concept of "total theatre." Actors' performance and diversified stage techniques work on each other towards an organic whole, all audio-visual experiences transform following the story and actors' performances. The play pursues a high-degree hypothetical nature to embody a simple and dynamic art spirit. It presents moving images, figures, limbs, modern dances, music, and ballad chanting. The protagonist Zhang Qian has no lines during the whole play; instead, it stresses that Zhang Qian is a "walker" who perseveres in what he is supposed to do.

*Amnesty* was first performed at the National Theatre of China from Dec. 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The play represents the real legal case of "Shi Jianqiao shooting Sun Chuanfang," which happened in Tianjin in 1935, and led the audience to reflect on how to weigh between comradeship and truth, between sensibility and law, through a series of court trials full of plot reversal and climactic moments. It stages exciting scenes of the fierce debate between the prosecutors and the defense lawyers. Different voices in the Chinese society then are also heard on the stage. The judge is caught between all kinds of forces and finally the murderer is spared.

The playwright Xu Ying said, "The contradiction between sensibility and law has always been an unresolvable issue. There exist the ultimate paradox, which was one of the reasons for me to write this play."

The play has its own characteristics in scenic design for adopting a rare two-floor stage. Although there was only one scene presented on the stage, the director Li Bonan skilfully utilised music and the change of light and shadow to establish distinct setting and form a strong contrast between the performing groups on the two floors: the bench and the bar; the stage and the audience; the memory and the reality; the private space and the public area.... The design not only distinguished the three trials in Tianjin District Court, Higher People's Court of Hebei Province, and Supreme Court of the Republic of China, but also produced a strong montage effect through combining abstraction with concreteness, enabling the audience to receive a multi-faceted watching experience. The play has a calm and objective tone, a simple and warm sensation and a deep and

rational spirit, which is of great practical significance in a society advocating the rule of law.

## 2. Reinterpretation

Lao She's *Teahouse* has long been a classic in modern Chinese theatre. On Oct. 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, a new revival of *Teahouse*, directed by Meng Jinghui, as the opening play of the 6<sup>th</sup> Wuzhen Theatre Festival, staged a subversive performance during nearly four hours. It opened the theatre carnival in an exultant manner. The theatre industry had hardly associated famous Chinese director Meng Jinghui with *Teahouse*, so their combination had been widely reported and discussed. This version of *Teahouse* showed apparent Meng's style. A steel wheel of 19 meters long, 16 meters deep and 11 meters tall was installed on the stage, implying that characters live under the wheel of era and destiny. Performers sat high and low on the wheel, shouting their lines. It was not a plain imitation of the original, but a stage presentation of its spiritual core, a local attempt of German Dramaturgy. Meng Jinghui claimed, "I got lost every day rehearsing the play, but I enjoyed it. It is a mental visit to Lao She, not just producing a play following his script." In Meng Jinghui's view, the keywords of *Teahouse* are oppression, starvation, liberty, friendship, time, and decease. Wang Lifa, the manager of the teahouse, who stays in the conflicting center of the "Teahouse Universe," engages in constant spiritual quests in solitude. Adhering to this reinterpretation principle, Meng's *Teahouse* transformed many important scenes in the original script. In the final scene of Lao She's script, Wang Lifa, Chang Siye and Qin Erye scatter joss paper they have collected to the air to offer sacrifices to themselves, to their about-to-end life. Meng's treatment of the scene conveyed a more thrilling power utilizing an overwhelming shower of paper scraps. The giant Ferris wheel turned, tables and chairs collapsed and paper scraps fluttered on the iron stand platform. The rhythm of electronic music stimulated the audience's physical senses when everything they saw was buried under the paper scraps...

## 3. Adaptation

Bringing literary works onto the stage was also an important component of this year's drama creation. Among them, three plays adapted from Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning novels, *Ordinary World*, *Blossoms* and *Someone To Talk To* are more impressive.

On Jan. 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the stage play *Ordinary World*, which was adapted from Lu Yao's same-name masterpiece, premiered in Beijing as this year's opening play at the National Centre for Performing Arts. The original story takes place in the Loess Plateau of northern Shanxi from the 1970s to mid-1980s. Focusing on the romantic relationship of four groups of characters, the play constructs the fate of a generation by showing their struggles between their beautiful ideals and the plain reality. A giant mill placed on the stage not only can be regarded as a different space but also symbolizes the oppression and restriction of life. *Ordinary World* has succeeded in the transformation from novel discourse to theatre discourse.

Adapted from Liu Zhenyun's same-name novel, the stage play *Someone to Talk To*, written and directed by Mou Sen, was performed at the National Centre for the Performing Arts from Apr. 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, and then it went on a nationwide tour in cities such as Harbin, Xi'an, and Shanghai. The original novel was once known as "China's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," and one of the producers of the play, Shi Hang, described it as "a novel like an onion to be peeled", and "it peels lots of people's mind, layer by layer, like an endless onion, each of them with tears." The original work actually adopted a "beaded" structure, which took one character to bring out another, to present a group picture of the average Chinese people. The director Mou Sen adopted a straightforward style in his on-stage narration, describing lower class people's ups and downs in calm tone and plain language to depict the life course of multiple generations.

Liu Zhenyun believed that there are two kinds of people in the world. The first is the great personage whose words are of great influence. The second group is the majority of individuals whose speeches are of little influence. Like Lao Yang who sells tofu, Lao Ma who drives carts, Lao Zeng who is a butcher, and Lao Zhan who is an Italian priest in the novel *Someone to Talk To*, they speak in the darkness throughout their lives. Liu Zhenyun said, "Mou Sen shows great respect for characters and the story, as well as for readers and the audience. The focus of the play is to allow those people of no importance from Henan, China, to speak their mind to the world. Mou was not satisfied with telling a story, he wanted to dig deep into people's mind."

On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018, *Blossoms* (Season 1), adapted from the same-name Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning work, premiered in Beijing. Jin Yucheng, the author of the original novel, is a Shanghai native, and *Blossoms* is a city novel "looking at Shanghai from a non-mainstream perspective". The stage's temporal and spatial restriction requires the playwright to make hard choices among the numerous characters and stories in the novel. The first season pays attention to three males of distinct social classes, Ah Bao, Hu Sheng, and Xiao Mao, respectively, depicting their life experiences during the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s. The play presents the corners of this famous modern metropolis, recovering memories of the city, the flavors of life and the significance of existence through inner transformations of the three male characters.

It is no exaggeration to say that the profound aspect of the stage of modern Chinese plays in 2018 owes a lot to the participation of literature. The three above-mentioned stage plays have shown us that Chinese theatre-makers as well as men of letters are ambitious to make representation of epic magnitude and depth in their telling of Chinese stories.

The year 2018 is of great significance in the modernization progress of Chinese theatre. Chinese theatre practitioners have been pushing forward with great enthusiasm and deep humility navigating restrictions, traditions, and modern plights.

*Zou Shengtan*  
Lecturer of Chinese Xiqu Arts at STA.







#### SHANGHAI THEATER ACADEMY

Hua Shan Campus: 630, Hua Shan Road, Jing'an,  
Shanghai, China 200040  
Tel: +86-021-62482920 Fax: +86-021-62482646  
Zip code: 200040  
Lian Hua Campus: 211, Lian Hua Road  
Hong Qiao Campus: 1674, Hong Qiao Road  
Pujiang Campus: 800, Chang Lin Road

#### INTERNATIONAL THEATRE INSTITUTE ITI

UNESCO  
1 Rue Miollis  
75732 Paris Cedex 15  
France

#### INTERNATIONAL THEATRE INSTITUTE ITI headquarters

1332 Xinzha Road, Jing'an,  
Shanghai  
China 200040  
Phone: +86 21 6236 7033  
Fax: +86 21 6236 3053  
info(at)iti-worldwide.org  
www.iti-worldwide.org



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