Chinese Performing Arts

No. 12
December 2025

中國戲劇

- The Rise and Development of Musical Theatre in China
- Behind the Scenes: Creation and Production Practices of Original Chinese Musicals
- Connecting Eastern and Western Thought and Poetics: Director XU Jun and His Musicals
- The Practical Foundation and Development Path of Jingju in New Era Beijing
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- Overview of Chinese Theatre in the first half of 2025

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The Rise and Development of Musical Theatre in China

YANG Jia

As a member of the inaugural Musical Theatre Performance Class established in 1995 at the Central Academy of Drama—the very first program of its kind in China—I have personally experienced the transformation from student to professional performer and ultimately to educator. Over the past thirty years, I have witnessed the growth of China's musical theatre market and the rapid emergence of a new educational landscape. From its tentative beginnings to its current dynamic expansion, this Western-born art form has not merely taken root in China but has flourished with a distinct allure and vitality.

In retrospect, musical theatre in China was once an uncultivated terrain. Audiences knew little about it, and the market was essentially a blank slate. Yet it was precisely our generation of early pioneers—driven by passion and a steadfast commitment to the art—who dared to enter this unexplored field. We devoted ourselves not only to the stage but also to the backstage labor that quietly nurtured and expanded the nascent musical theatre market.

Meanwhile, musical theatre education began to take shape. From the first few institutions that offered specialized training to the growing number of universities and private academies that participate today, a relatively complete educational system has gradually developed. Year after year, talented performers have emerged from these programs. They shine on domestic stages and also embody the skill and professionalism of Chinese musical theatre artists on international platforms.

This essay revisits the rise and development of musical theatre in China and pays tribute to this journey—one characterized by both formidable challenges and unprecedented opportunities.

I. The Introduction and Staging of Western Musicals in China

In the 1980s, following China's reform and opening-up, a number of artists began traveling abroad and turned their attention to Western musical theatre. At that time, Professor Shen Chengzhou, then Deputy Director of the Wuhan Opera and Dance Drama Theater, became the first theatre practitioner to introduce Western musicals to China. In 1987, through his collaborative translations, the China National Opera House staged full Chinese-language productions of two American musicals: *The Music Man* and *The Fantasticks*. In 1988, Professor Xu Ronglian from the Shanghai Theatre Academy translated and directed *My Fair Lady*, marking the first staging of a Western musical at a Chinese arts institution.

The introduction of Western musicals fundamentally transformed the long-standing, monolithic structure of musical theatre in China. It initiated an irreversible trend toward diversification and provided the essential foundation for the development of musical theatre education.

Subsequently, under the strong advocacy and support of President Xu Xiaozhong, the Central Academy of Drama established China's first musical theatre training program in 1995, launching the cultivation of the country's first generation of musical theatre performers and directors. After forming a cooperative partnership with Japan's Shiki Theatre Company, led by Mr. Keita Asari, the Central Academy of Drama presented Chinese-language productions of *The Cat Who Wished to Be a Man*, *West Side Story*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and several other works.

■ Production still from *The Cat Who Wished to Be a Man*

■ Production still from *West Side Story*

In 1996 and 1998, the China National Theatre for Children staged the original Japanese musicals *The Emperor's New Clothes* and *The Blue Bird*, injecting fresh vitality into China's children's theatre market.

The melodies of *The Sound of Music*—including the widely beloved "Edelweiss" and "Do-Re-Mi"—had long been known to Chinese audiences through the film adaptation. In 1998, Cheng Fangyuan Studio staged a Chinese-language production of the musical, and its recognizable narrative together with its enduringly appealing score helped bring Chinese audiences even closer to the world of Western musical theatre.

Nevertheless, it was in Shanghai at the beginning of the twenty-first century that the large-scale introduction of Western musicals truly took shape, igniting several waves of popular enthusiasm. The Shanghai Grand Theatre played an indispensable role in this process, both in importing European and American musicals and in cultivating a receptive market environment.

In September 2011, after five years of renovation, Shanghai Culture Square reopened as a modern performance venue with a primary focus on musical theatre. In addition to presenting productions, the venue organized a range of arts events for its members and offered free musical theatre courses. These initiatives not only cultivated a dedicated audience base but also provided Shanghai residents with a major cultural center that integrates live performance, art exhibitions, and immersive cultural experiences.

Subsequently, Asia United Corporation launched Chinese-language versions of *Mamma Mia*! and *Cats*. Both productions premiered in Shanghai before embarking on nationwide tours, further expanding the reach of musical theatre across China.

■ Production still from *Mamma Mia*!

■ Production still from *Cats*

From the introduction of Western classics to the staging of Chinese-language adaptations, Western musicals have become increasingly familiar and beloved among Chinese audiences. Today, they constitute a widely enjoyed cultural offering. The importation and performance of these works have had a positive and enduring impact on the development of China's own musical theatre.

II. The Development of Original Chinese Musicals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Both the introduction of Western musicals and the staging of Chinese-language adaptations ultimately served the same purpose: to build experience, nurture talent, and lay the groundwork for creating musical theatre with distinctly Chinese characteristics.

It is commonly accepted—an understanding now well established in the theatre community—that the history of original Chinese musicals began in the early 1980s. Yet a more careful tracing of the lineage reveals earlier origins. As early as the 1920s, pioneering artists were already experimenting with forms that resembled musical theatre. Drawing on the tradition of "xuetang yuege" (school songs), Li Jinhui's children's song-and-dance dramas, which combined singing and dancing to advance the narrative, incorporated several fundamental elements of the musical. This early tradition, along with the later folk dance dramas of the revolutionary base areas and the new operas of the 1960s, provided invaluable foundations for the development of a national musical theatre form.

1. Original Works of the 1980s

China's reform and opening-up in the 1980s created exceptionally fertile conditions for the emergence and growth of original musical theatre. During this period, many visionary theatre practitioners travelled abroad, experienced the transformative power of Western musicals firsthand, and returned inspired by their artistic vitality. Through multiple pathways and perspectives, they introduced Western musical theatre to China, hoping that this integrated form of "singing, dancing, and acting" would take root, flourish, and ultimately evolve into a modern, distinctly Chinese musical theatre tradition.

This dynamic cultural moment sparked a surge of original creative activity across China's theatre scene. Representative works from this era include *The Young People in Our Village*, *Fangcaoxin* (Fangfang, heart of grass) , *Dacuoche*

■ Selected news coverage of *Fangcaoxin*

(Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?), and *Special Zone Rhapsody*.

Among these, *Fangcaoxin*, created by the Nanjing Frontline Opera Troupe and premiered in Nanjing in 1983, made a particularly strong impact. Its theme song, "Little Grass," quickly spread nationwide and remains widely known today. The production also achieved remarkable box-office success, reportedly becoming the first original Chinese musical in two decades not only to recover its full investment but also to yield a significant profit.

2. Original Works of the 1990s

In the 1990s, the creation and performance of original Chinese musicals entered a period of arduous exploration. Representative works from this era include *Rebirth of Youth*, *Sea Breeze Blows*, *White Reed*, *Red Kapok*, *Yangge Romance*, *Chinese Butterfly*, *The Legend of Hero Simao*, *Future Ensemble*, and *Jade Bird Garrison*, among others.

Amid the surge of a market-oriented economy, some musicals pursued "big investment, big spectacle, big production" models inspired by Western musicals, often at the expense of dramatic and artistic quality. Many of these productions met with repeated failures. It was not until the premiere of *The Legend of Hero Simao*, produced by the Zhuhai Musical Theatre Troupe, that the situation began to improve.

In 1999, the staging of *Jade Bird Garrison* ushered in a new dawn for the original musical scene in China. Produced by the General Political Song and Dance Troupe, this work marked a significant advancement over earlier productions in terms of scriptwriting, directing, and cast selection. Most notably, the musical composition stood out. The score was crafted in response to the dramatic needs of the story, skillfully integrating three singing styles—traditional Chinese, bel canto, and popular song—while incorporating musical elements from Southwest ethnic minorities. This created a rich and diverse musical language with strong regional characteristics.

The musical's theme song, "My Heart's Eternal Love," quickly gained widespread popularity after the premiere. In recent years, it has become a favorite selection for many singers in major competitions, and it has been included in the vocal curriculum of major music conservatories across China.

■ Production still from *Jade Bird Garrison*

III. The Diversified Development of Original Chinese Musicals in the 21st Century

From the early 1980s through the late 1990s, the localization of musical theatre in China remained largely an experimental process. However, after nearly two decades of accumulated experience, the development of original Chinese musicals has gradually matured in terms of creative practice, talent cultivation, and the performance market. New productions are emerging continuously, with increasingly sophisticated production values, more open formats, and diverse stylistic approaches. Chinese audiences' interest in and enthusiasm for musical theatre have reached unprecedented levels, marking the beginning of a new stage of exploration in original Chinese musical creation. These works can broadly be categorized as follows:

1. Urban-Themed Musicals

As musical theatre has continued to develop and attract larger audiences, urban-themed musicals have become particularly effective at evoking emotional resonance. In recent years, productions in this category have proliferated. Representative works include *On the Road*, which depicts the courier industry; *The Ideal City*, centered on the construction industry; and *Reverse Life*, which explores the psychological growth of urban residents.

The 2020 staging of *On the Road* was adapted from the eponymous television drama, which had received four nominations at the 2020 Magnolia Awards. The musical sets its narrative starting point in 1999, tracing the development

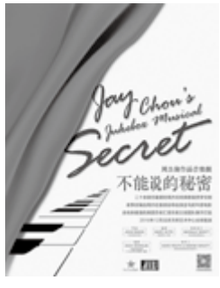
■ Production still from *On the Road*

of the courier industry over the past two decades and portraying the struggles, life trajectories, and professional achievements of leading figures such as Yao Yuan and Lu Xiao'ou.

2. Jukebox Musicals

A jukebox musical is a stage production created using pre-existing popular music. The songs chosen are often well-known, allowing for an immediate connection with the audience. Jukebox musicals generally fall into two categories: one is Biographical type – centered on important figures in the music world, such as singers or composers, whose own songs are used to narrate their life stories. The other is Compilation type – content is more flexible, and the musical is composed of a medley of popular and well-known songs, without a biographical focus.

Classic Broadway jukebox musicals include *Mamma Mia!* and *Singin' in the Rain*. In the 21st century, China has produced several notable jukebox musicals, including Jay Chou's *Secret*, the collaborative work *In the Mood for Sorrow* by Liu Xiaoyi, Wu Shihe, and Huang Shujun, and Fan Chong's *I Want You*.



■ Poster for *Secret*

■ Production still from *Secret*

Secret, produced by a Broadway creative team and adapted from Jay Chou's eponymous film, uses musical storytelling to portray the protagonists' "unspeakable" time-crossing romance. Each character is given a distinct personality, and the production vividly depicts campus life. In addition to faithfully adapting the film's narrative, the musical incorporates 24 of Jay Chou's classic songs, including *Starry Mood*, *Listen to Mom*, *Simple Love*, *On the Roof*, *Rice Field*, and *Nocturne*, making it the first fully Broadway-produced original Chinese-language jukebox musical.

3. Modern "New Guofeng" Musicals

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many Chinese performing arts companies have increasingly focused their creative attention on traditional cultural subjects, such as themes drawn from Chinese Xiqu (opera) and classical literature. Through innovative artistic approaches, they have produced stage works that are both fresh and visually striking. Representative productions include the xiqu-inspired musicals *The Long River* and *West Chamber*, as well as "New National Style" musicals such as *The Orphan of Zhao* and *Invitation to Wine*.

Among these, *The Long River*, which premiered at the Shanghai Grand Theatre in December 2008, is widely regarded as a landmark work in the genre. The story follows the young woman Meng He, who disguises herself as a man to travel to the capital in search of her father. Along the way, she falls in love with Jin He, a scholar who injures his hand while breaking ice. To help him succeed in the imperial examination, she sits in for him, triggering a series of comedic misunderstandings and unexpected events. The creative team included Yu Qiuyu, Stanley Kwan, and Zhang Shuping, with Ma Lan in the lead role. As the promotional materials describe, the production is "a beautiful combination of cross-disciplinary experimentation, a reimagined creation by a group of artistic visionaries."

The musical skillfully integrates the singing style, gestures, and performance techniques of Huangmei xi, infusing both the lyrics and the music with profound and uniquely Chinese cultural imagery and resonance, while simultaneously reflecting a modern aesthetic sensibility.

■ Production still from *The Long River*

4. Nationalized Musicals

In domestic musical theatre creation, one of the enduring artistic pursuits for Chinese creators has been to produce works that integrate the aesthetic style of Western modern musicals while preserving the essence of Chinese national tradition. Notably, Chinese theatre practitioners have consistently adhered to the principle of "absorbing broadly while centering on 'self'," emphasizing the cultivation of domestic musical theatre with distinct national character and cultural ethos, and striving to convey the spirit and soul of the nation through their works.

Representative productions include the Guizhou-origin musical *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, the ethnic-themed musical *Meeting You Is My Destiny*, and the Jiangnan (south of the Yangtze River) style musical *The Fifth Maid*. Among these, *The Fifth Maid* stands out as a distinguished exemplar of musical nationalization. The work tells a steadfast love story enriched with vivid local folk elements. Its most striking feature is the integration of *Tian Ge*—a treasured form of Jiangnan folk song. The production draws on a wide range of *Tian Ge* melodies, alternately gentle and exuberant, infusing the musical numbers with a richly varied expressive palette.

■ Production still from *The Fifth Maid*

Although musical theatre is an imported art form, *The Fifth Maid* adapts it with remarkable sensitivity, fully tapping into both national and regional traditions. The result is a production that leaves a lasting impression on audiences and powerfully demonstrates the deep integration of Chinese cultural aesthetics within the musical theatre form.

5. Ethnic Minority Musicals

Chinese culture is vast and profoundly diverse, with each ethnic group contributing its own distinctive artistic traditions. In the twenty-first century, this cultural richness has given rise to a growing number of ethnic minority musicals, each characterized by a strong national aesthetic and expressive cultural identity.

Representative works include the Tibetan musical *Tian·Meng* (Heaven·Dream), the Dong ethnic musical *Pingxiao Yudi* (Jade Xiao and Flute), the Tu ethnic musical *Flowers*, *Songs of My Sisters*, and the Mongolian musical *The Heroic Sisters of the Grassland*. Among these, *The Heroic Sisters of the Grassland* is based on the true story of the Mongolian girls Longmei and Yurong, who braved a blizzard to save their commune's flock of sheep. Supported as a 2016 National Arts Fund project for large-scale stage productions, it is widely regarded as the first musical in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in the full, modern sense of the term.

■ Production still from *The Heroic Sisters of the Grassland*

In sum, over the past three decades, Chinese musical theatre—whether in terms of artistic talent or the range of productions—has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from scarcity to abundance and from simplicity to diversity. In the context of globalization, Chinese musicals are flourishing toward a healthier and more diversified future.

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[Yang Jia, "A Study on the Creative Model of 'Xiqu Musical' in Domestic Musicals," *Theatre Arts*, no. 3 (2022): 132–140, 189.]

[2] 杨佳：《音乐剧在中国——走进音乐剧（六）》，《中国音乐教育》2008 年第 9 期，第 47–49 页。
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Behind the Scenes: Creation and Production Practices of Original Chinese Musicals

LUO Sha

Introduction

Musical theatre remains a relatively niche art form in China, with a fixed and limited audience base. Domestic original musicals have historically struggled to gain broad attention. In recent years, however, several productions have gained widespread popularity—driven by media promotion, evolving consumption patterns, and content innovation—attracting young audiences to theatres and sparking discussions about plotlines. Nevertheless, the overall creative environment for domestic musicals still requires ongoing adjustment. Behind-the-scenes stories—both onstage and off—deserve greater attention and systematic documentation to stimulate creative vitality, encourage meaningful interaction among audiences, production teams, and performers, and promote the dissemination and influence of original Chinese musicals both domestically and internationally.

I. Overview of the Development of Original Domestic Musicals

The development of original Chinese musicals can be divided into four stages:

Stage 1: Introduction and Cultivation (1981–1989)

This period began with the premiere of *Our Young People Today* in 1981, the first original Chinese musical. Over a dozen musicals were produced during this

stage, mostly by song-and-dance troupes, with themes focused primarily on revolutionary history.

Stage 2: Emergence and Breakthrough (1990–2000)

During this period, musicals increasingly embraced commercial attributes, diversified dissemination channels, and incorporated national and religious cultural elements. Musical genres became more varied—for instance, the children's musical *The Emperor's New Clothes* adapted a Western fairy tale for Chinese preschool audiences, while the Kaixin Mahua troupe introduced musical comedies. Production entities broadened as well: Hong Kong Fun Entertainment co-produced Jacky Cheung's self-directed *Snow Wolf Lake*, and Li Dun's team created *The Legend of the White Snake*.

Stage 3: Accumulation and Expansion (2000–2010)

This stage saw creators learn from earlier experiments that were often overambitious, narratively thin, or stylistically uneven. As a result, the creative approach became increasingly refined and sophisticated. University-affiliated teams began contributing actively, producing works such as Peking University's *A First-Class University Begins in the Bathhouse*, Tsinghua University's campus musical *Hearing Flowers Bloom*, and Beijing Dance Academy's *Hero*. Cross-media collaborations also started to flourish—for instance, Taiwan's Mr. Wing Theatre Company adapted Jimmy Liao's picture book into the musical *The Subway*, marking an early experiment in blending literature and stage performance.

Stage 4: Transformation and Adjustment (2010–present)

The rise of digital media profoundly influenced musical dissemination and content. Musical theatre students and performers increasingly shared behind-the-scenes stories on media platforms, narrowing the gap between audiences and practitioners.[1]

During the localization process, musicals expanded in language diversity. Cantonese musicals—such as *Meeting a Girl from 1941*, *The Love Story of Sam and Sally*, and *White Snake Green Snake*—flourished. Other regional-language productions included the Minnan-language *The In-Laws Next Door* and Taiwan's *April Rain*, performed in Hokkien, Japanese, and Hakka.

1 李华，中国原创音乐剧的发轫与成长（1980 年—2022 年），北京：中国音乐出版社，2022, 203–205. [Li Hua, *The Emergence and Growth of Original Chinese Musicals (1980–2022)*, Chinese Music, 2022(06): 203–205.]

■ Production still: Jacky Cheung in the musical *Snow Wolf Lake*

Domestic musicals increasingly integrated with picture books, animation, film, cultural tourism, and other media. Notable examples include the multimedia film-musical *The Sound of Movies*; the cultural-tourism musical *Jinsha* (Golden Sand); animation-based musicals *Music Up* and *Turn Left*, *Turn Right*; the magic musical *The Joker's Game*; and *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*, adapted from Jin Yong's novel. Musicians also contributed: Jay Chou created the jukebox musical *Secret* (based on his film), and the band Black Panther produced *Apple*.

A number of "new guofeng" musicals—such as *Yang Jian* (God of War), *Ci Qin* (The Deadly Attempt to Assassinate Qin Shi Huang), and *Six Records of a Floating Life*—have emerged, drawing inspiration from China's rich traditional cultural heritage, adapting myths, legends, historical events, and supernatural tales to align with contemporary aesthetics.

Musicals have continually adjusted themes and narrative forms in response to social realities and current events, reflecting growing humanistic concern and philosophical reflection. Examples include the earthquake-relief musical *Searching All the Way* (2009); Tao Ran's *Eileen Chang* (2010), invited to the 2nd International Women's Theatre Festival; and *Mask*, the first anti-pandemic musical produced by the 2017 cohort of Beijing Dance Academy musical theatre students, performed through a hybrid dance-theatre and livestream format. Some musicals have reached international audiences—for instance, *King's Table* became the first Chinese musical to "go abroad," with Korean director Oh Se-hyuk acquiring its rights; and the dual-female-lead musical *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* had a residency run in South Korea from July to September 2024.

Overall, original Chinese musicals demonstrate strong vitality and a diversity of themes and forms. However, localization has revealed persistent theoretical

■ Poster: Original musical *MASK*

and practical challenges: immature creative mechanisms; incomplete industry chains; limited market influence; insufficient integration of stage elements; suboptimal stage effects; scarcity of professional talent; and the absence of effective localized training systems.[1] As a young imported art form, Chinese musical theatre has often exhibited a "first-ever" fixation—such as the first TCM-themed musical, the first anti-corruption musical, and the first magic musical. Mu Yu observes that few Chinese musicals have truly reached global audiences, and that identifying key points for word-of-mouth dissemination is more important than pursuing "first-ever" titles. Promotional claims of "first-ever" must be substantiated. Original Chinese musicals should leverage national musical elements and authentically tell Chinese stories, focusing on content quality and creativity.[2]

With the rapid growth of streaming media and generative AI—disrupting traditional artistic production—sustainable development of original Chinese musicals requires cooperation among government, industry, education, and creators. It demands ongoing theoretical innovation, practical exploration, effective use of new technologies and platforms, integrated online–offline and human–AI collaboration, deep excavation of local cultural elements, improved production capabilities, and the cultivation of versatile musical-theatre talent with solid professional skills and interdisciplinary perspectives.

II. From Inside to Outside the Theatre: Gradual Attempts to "Break into the mainstream" in Musicals

The complex and diverse media environment has posed both challenges and

1 春轩子，中国原创音乐剧的发展现状、问题与对策研究，北京：戏剧艺术出版社，2021, 112–124+164. [Shi Chunxuanzi, "A Study of the Current Situation, Problems and Countermeasures in the Development of Original Chinese Musicals", Theatre Arts, 2021(06): 112–124+164.]

2 慕羽，中国原创音乐剧的"首部"情结，北京：艺术评论出版社，2018, 85–90. [Mu Yu, "The 'First-Ever' Fixation of Original Chinese Musicals", *Art Review*, 2018(06): 85–90.]

opportunities for the development of domestic musicals. Traditionally confined to theatres, musical interactions have now extended to social media, film, and other platforms. Many musical practitioners actively collaborate across fields to explore the ecology and production of musicals, attempting to "Break into the mainstream" and reach broader audiences.

This interactive approach allows audiences to understand musicals from multiple perspectives—production processes, historical development, and creative motivations—enhancing their appreciation of innovative forms and thematic content. On platforms like Bilibili, dedicated video channels such as "The Half" (Waiting Offstage) explore performers' behind-the-scenes stories, offering viewers insights into the lives of theatre practitioners beyond the stage. The channel covers a range of content, including theatre visits, genre introductions, musical press events, and interviews with producers and performers. For instance, in the musical *Age of Awakening*, Li Leyao (playing Li Dazhao) and Yu Xiaolin (playing Chen Duxiu) shared their experiences working together over time and how they embodied their respective roles. Historical figures like Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu can feel distant or abstract to audiences, but actors' reflections "humanize" these figures, revealing their emotions and courage, and allowing viewers to connect with them through stage details and behind-the-scenes interpretation. Actors also note that the creative process is completed in interaction with the audience: viewers not only gain a deeper understanding of the musical but also provide valuable feedback for refinement. For example, the original version of *Age of Awakening* suffered from overly dense musical transitions and a rapid pace, making scene changes difficult to follow. After audience feedback, the second version streamlined redundant transitions, improving the overall viewing experience.[1]

In *The Butterfly on the Bund* 1939, lead actress Zhang Qindan explained in a "The Half" interview that, while female performers have often attracted audience attention in past musicals, they were typically scattered across different productions and played minor supporting roles. This play,

■ Promotional image: The musical *Age of Awakening*

1 李乐尧一看于晓璞就哭了？大树采访倾斜45度丨音乐剧《觉醒年代》候场专访 . Bilibili. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1oWnZeNEqS/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=7c138112f6eca9bd0775331cdc80560f [Li Leyao and Yu Xiaolin Discuss Their Backstage Experiences in Age of Awakening,The Half.]

■ Musical actors share their experiences in the production *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939*

however, fully showcases the charm and complexity of its two female leads. In the interview, Zhang Qindan and Zhao Jiayan discussed the challenges of performing together, their psychological states, the lyrics or scenes that moved them most, and their personal backstage habits and reactions to tension. These insights reveal the authentic emotional and psychological states of actors on and offstage, highlighting the dedication of performers and production teams to refining musicals.[1] Video interviews provide additional channels for practitioners to share perspectives, reveal backstage details, and interact with audiences, sparking curiosity and encouraging theatre attendance while deepening appreciation of musicals.

The documentary *Behind the Musical* focuses on backstage staff, capturing the realities of the industry. For example, the stage manager of *Flowers for Algernon* coordinated and refined every cue and movement, creating the emotional highs and lows that audiences experience. "A curtain separates two worlds: people come and go onstage while backstage staff rush about," as the documentary notes.[2] Similarly, a musical theatre graduate blogger shares the history, production processes, and creative insights of musicals via self-media platforms. Using their graduation work *Mask* as an example, they analyze inspiration sources, song production methods, and narrative reflections, showing that musicals progress and evolve through interaction

1 音乐剧《蝶变》张沁丹对赵嘉艳：让女演员更多被看到，"烟熏蛋"曾经是最"不搭"的一组？丨候场专访 . Bilibili. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1gN411V7Tc/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=7c138112f6eca9bd0775331cdc80560f [Zhang Qindan and Zhao Jiayan Discuss Backstage Experiences in The Butterfly on the Bund 1939, The Half.]

2 纪录片《音乐剧背后的他们》01 舞台监督 . Bilibili. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1aK4y1C7Uj/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=7c138112f6eca9bd0775331cdc80560f [Behind the Musical Episode 01: Stage Manager].

between creators and audiences.[1] These behind-the-scenes insights break stereotypes, reduce emotional distance, and maintain the "dynamic vitality" of musical theatre through the connection of performers, production teams, and audiences.

III. From a Single Form to a Multi-Ecological Extension: Active Transformation of Musicals

Domestic musicals have evolved from single-format productions to multi-ecological collaborations. Industry practitioners actively explore cross-media performance forms in the new era. For example, the Dragon TV program *The City of Musicals* invited celebrities and musical actors to compete in musical challenges, introducing audiences to the history, charm, and diversity of musicals. The program also produced original musicals, such as *Cat's Cradle* and *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939*, with socially relevant themes—*Cat's Cradle*, for instance, examines campus violence—enriching cultural content and enhancing the social impact of domestic musicals.

The variety show format also attracted commentary from online influencers. A musical actor sharing their reactions and analysis on Bilibili discussed production processes and performance elements while casually watching and sharing snacks with friends. Such down-to-earth engagement reduces barriers and brings musicals closer to the public, stimulating discussion and raising awareness.

Cross-platform performances expand interactions between audiences and actors. Judges and industry experts share opinions and expectations, while audiences contribute feedback via comments and livestream chat. This interaction disseminates musical culture, informs stage presentation, and provides valuable references for subsequent transformation and cross-media collaborations of domestic musicals.

1 自己来做一部音乐剧？手把手教你做！音乐剧制作指南 + 毕业大戏 vlog. Bilibili. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1gy4y1m75G/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=7c138112f6eca9bd0775331cdc80560f [Creating Your Own Musical: Production Guide + Graduation Vlog]

IV. From "Importing" to "Going Global": Overseas Resonance of Chinese Musicals

■ Performance screenshot: Original musical *Cat's Cradle* in the program *The City of Musicals*

Initially, musicals were introduced by pioneering practitioners who adapted Western musical forms with local aesthetic and national characteristics, representing the "importing" stage. Today, mature domestic original musicals are increasingly attempting to "go global."

For example, Korean actor Anna Lim, who studied in China, attended a performance of *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* at the Asia Building in Shanghai. Deeply moved by the story, she collaborated with the Chinese team a year later to bring the Korean-language version to Seoul's University District stage. During the opening stage greeting, Anna Lim said:

"The butterflies that soared freely in China have finally landed in Seoul. Just as you saw, when I watched it in Shanghai a year ago, I cried so much that a Chinese audience member offered me a tissue. That memory feels like yesterday. Over the past year, I have been looking forward to it creating a new wave here in Korea."

The production adapted costumes and narrative elements to better suit Korean audiences.[1] Through collaborative efforts between domestic and international practitioners and cultural exchange, some Chinese original musicals have completed overseas residencies or remakes, generating cross-cultural resonance.

■ Anna Lim shares her reflections on *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* during the stage greeting segment.

1 中字韩文版音乐剧蝶变首演 舞台问候 . Bilibili. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1ox4y1x7sw/?share_source=copy_web&vd_source=7c138112f6eca9bd0775331cdc80560f [Korean-Language Premiere Stage Greeting of *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939*.]

Conclusion

Exploring the behind-the-scenes stories of Chinese original musicals not only restores the creative ecosystem but also promotes dissemination and audience engagement. Commercial transformation and cross-platform interaction remain ongoing challenges, requiring optimization of media strategies, production operations, and industry coordination.

While development inevitably involves trial and error, continuous interaction among creators, performers, scholars, and audiences has driven breakthroughs and innovation in domestic musicals. In today's digital age, balancing onstage and backstage attention, analyzing audience needs and market trends, and maintaining artistic integrity while incorporating humanistic and contemporary reflections will allow Chinese original musicals to mirror societal changes, tell stories with distinct national characteristics and global perspectives, and attract diverse cultural audiences at home and abroad.

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Reconstructing Traditional Culture within a Contemporary Aesthetic Context: An Analysis of the Aesthetic Expression of "Guofeng" Musicals

YANG Naliu

In recent years, "guofeng"—a youth-driven cultural trend rooted in traditional Chinese culture—has increasingly intertwined with broader social and multicultural currents, creating a powerful cultural wave and prompting a collective return to tradition. More specifically, "guofeng culture" refers to a youth subculture informed by traditional aesthetics. Its rise has drawn the attention of creators born in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, inspiring a wave of original Chinese musicals that reinterpret traditional culture through contemporary sensibilities. These artists blend China's historical and cultural heritage with modern popular culture, creatively and progressively transforming traditional cultural elements. They infuse their works with Chinese aesthetics and philosophical reflections, without stressing whether the art form is "native" or "foreign." Instead, they adopt art languages recognized worldwide to tell Chinese stories.

Conversely, the modern form of musical theatre has also stimulated renewed interest in "guofeng", "guochao" (national chic), and "guocui" (national essence). It extends the lineage of Chinese culture, releases what may be called "Eastern genetic codes," and highlights a distinctly Chinese form of modernity in aesthetic experience. Amid this flourishing revival, original "guofeng" musicals such as *Wukong* (2020), *The Throne and the Poetry* (2019), *Smash The Wall* (2023), *The Orphan of Zhao* (2021), *Yang Jian* (2023), and *Invitation to Wine* (2023) have emerged as vibrant contributions to China's path toward cultural modernity.

I. Innovative Narratives Expressing Traditional Chinese Spirit

The idea of the "guofeng community" originated from the smaller and more niche "gufeng" (ancient-style) subculture, itself part of a youth-driven "ACG" (anime–comic–game) sphere. To broaden its cultural influence, this community actively adjusted its existing cultural framework, adding new elements to make it more professional and mainstream. Meanwhile, original Chinese musicals have also been exploring innovative narrative strategies to reinterpret traditional culture within contemporary aesthetic contexts. The emergence of "guofeng" musicals thus reflects a shared emotional resonance and creative impulse among both groups.

In traditional Chinese culture, mythological consciousness is deeply embedded in everyday life, and virtues such as loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and modesty remain central moral ideals. The musical *Wukong* constructs a world filled with absurdity, satire, and dark humor. Within a contemporary context, the production portrays a flawed yet forgivable hero whose humanity, divinity, and demonic nature intertwine to create dramatic depth and power. As director Liu Xiaoyi notes, "Every steadfast choice Sun Wukong makes is a rebellion against the mundane, a confrontation with the sorrow of being human, erupting with boundless courage." Under the pulse of rock music, Sun Wukong embodies the spirit of rock itself—fierce, free, and relentlessly alive. This reimagining also challenges audience expectations: staging a classic figure without falling into clichés—offering freshness while retaining the core spirit—is an enduring artistic dilemma.

Yang Jian tells a story of self-discovery and upward struggle. As a hero who is "half-human, half-god," Erlang faces ominous prophecies and a frightening appearance, choosing a blood-soaked path toward godhood. In protecting his sister and splitting a mountain to save his mother, he overcomes doubt, innate imperfections, and fear of the future, ultimately becoming the legendary War God—Erlang the Sacred Divinity. His journey demonstrates not only heroic conviction and lofty ideals but also the possibility of inner redemption.

Original Chinese musicals also strive to integrate cultural memory and historical inheritance. Drawing inspiration from history, they reinterpret emotional, social, and political tensions from fresh contemporary perspectives. *The Throne and the Poetry* explores the dual identity of Li Yu by splitting him into two characters—"the Poet" and "the Emperor"—whose contrasting values and beliefs collide within a surreal psychological battlefield. These two selves, mutually dependent yet perpetually at odds, embody the multi-layered nature of Li Yu's inner world. Through shifting emotional terrains—innocence, awakening, despair, and transcendence—the work reimagines the human pursuit of beauty and fate while forging emotional resonance with modern audiences.

Invitation to Wine brings Li Bai's dramatic life onto the stage, using "poetry, wine, and sword" as its aesthetic weapons. Through grandeur and lyricism, the musical captures Li Bai's unyielding spirit, visionary dreams, and passionate vitality. In *Nan Kong* (Southern Confucianism, 2024), the protagonist Kong Zhu embodies the moral integrity and spiritual lineage of the Confucian tradition. The production intricately intertwines the cultural motifs of "Confucius" and "the chess piece"—a hallmark of Quzhou's heritage—using the dynamics of a Go match to propel the narrative. In its dialogues rich with Eastern philosophical resonance, the musical conveys the elegance of Song-dynasty culture, the devotion to nation and family, and the enduring essence of traditional virtues.

These original musicals draw on China's abundant mythology and captivating historical narratives. By integrating the essence of traditional culture, creators illuminate the profound spiritual and cultural forces rooted in the collective Chinese soul. Whether re-imagining ancient myths or tracing the humanistic light within historical figures, these works aim to carry forward China's millennia-old cultural heritage. Their staging, dialogues, and lyrics all reflect deep respect and affection for tradition—unlocking hidden cultural codes and enabling ancient wisdom to shine anew in contemporary society.

Ultimately, these works are not only contemporary artistic explorations shaped by current cultural interests; they also function as meaningful channels through which elements of traditional culture are revisited and reimagined. Through the medium of theatre, they invite audiences to traverse time and space, engaging with worlds of imagination, mythology, and historical reflection. In doing so, they foster a deeper awareness of China's rich cultural heritage and its continuing relevance in the present. Such creative practices offer valuable perspectives for the future development of original Chinese musicals.

II. Music Blending with a "Chinese Aesthetic"

"Integration" has long served as a primary creative strategy in musical theatre composition, allowing different musical genres and styles to intermingle while absorbing popular elements to maintain a sense of freshness. As cultural exchange between China and the West deepened, Chinese popular music

gradually moved toward internationalization, bringing new possibilities to the musical language of Chinese original musicals. Based on their study of Western musical theatre composition, Chinese composers have increasingly emphasized the re-engagement with "tradition" and the incorporation of "the popular". Through the cultural resonance embedded in traditional folk melodies and distinctive instrumental timbres, they seek to establish an immediate connection with Chinese audiences.

Music, as an ancient cultural form, possesses strong regional and historical attributes. Audiences interpret its meanings through accumulated listening experiences, producing cultural associations that nourish the spirit and imagination. This connection also grounds Chinese original musicals more firmly within the global cultural landscape.

Among the various musical sources integrated into Chinese original musicals, Chinese rock has been the most adaptable and continuously evolving. Introduced to Mainland China through Hong Kong and Taiwan pop singers in the late 20th century, it soon merged with local popular music to form a hybrid "pop rock." After absorbing elements of folk and traditional culture, it eventually developed into a distinctly Chinese form of rock. Empowered by the spirit of Chinese culture, this once Western musical idiom acquired unmistakably Chinese characteristics and offered an expressive mode particularly compatible with Chinese original musicals.

In the new era, Chinese original musicals have also embraced the aesthetics of "Guofeng"—literally "national style"—a contemporary cultural trend.

As the precursor of "Guofeng music," the earlier "Gufeng subculture" existed largely as a niche community devoted to ornate, refined, and classically inspired musical and visual styles. "Gufeng music" uses the traditional pentatonic mode as its foundation, combining Chinese instruments with Western orchestration and electronic synthesis. First widely used in online games, it quickly became popular among young audiences and entered the realm of mainstream pop. Despite controversies that arose when the style expanded beyond its original subculture, the compositional logic of "Gufeng music" provided Chinese original musicals with valuable strategies—infusing musical theatre with recognizable national characteristics while retaining its broad popular appeal.

The musical *Tang Xianzu* (2016), composed by Prof. Xu Jianqiang of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, exemplifies this integrative approach. Its 31 musical numbers draw on Kunqu, Pingtan, Huaiyang xi, Caicha xi, Nuo rituals, and Yihuang xi while simultaneously incorporating rhythm and blues, jazz, rap, and rock. The result is a layered fusion of "ancient style," "operatic style," and "modern style." Similarly, the musical *Qu Yuan* (2019) blends a Western symphonic ensemble with electronic music, combines national instruments with electric timbres, and draws upon Chu dialect poetics to express the poet's patriotic fervor—revealing a deeper artistic cultivation within the Gufeng idiom.

More contemporary "Guofeng pop" combines traditional Chinese classical aesthetics with a modern sense of style. Its melodies generally follow traditional modal patterns, featuring solo instruments such as the guzheng (a plucked zither), xiao (a vertical end-blown flute), pipa (a pear-shaped lute) and dizi (a transverse bamboo flute), while integrating Western instruments such as guitar, piano, and strings without letting them dominate. By absorbing the spiritual essence and aesthetic expression of Chinese culture, Guofeng music lends Chinese original musicals a distinctive, youthful, and culturally rooted identity.

The musical *The Throne and the Poetry* uses modern arrangements infused with classical folk timbres, evoking poetic imagery such as "the court still echoes with farewell songs, tears falling before the palace maids"—a symbolic reflection of Li Yu's tragic life. *Wukong* reimagines the mythological universe through a contemporary Guofeng musical language, while *Yang Jian* draws from the deep soil of Chinese folk music and integrates cyberpunk aesthetics to transform traditional cultural symbols into modern expression.

As Chinese aesthetic principles and philosophical concepts permeate musical theatre creation, Chinese original musicals no longer struggle with the dichotomy of "local vs. foreign." Instead, they adopt an internationally intelligible artistic language to tell Chinese stories while attracting younger audiences through the revival of "Guofeng" and "Guochao." Academic institutions (the "academy school") have played a particularly vital role in this development.

For example, the Shanghai Conservatory of Music's original musical *Loyalty* (2021) integrates rock, jazz, and folk balladry into a rigorous operatic framework, while Jiangnan melodies and Shanghai operetta infuse the piece with regional character. Its diverse musical idioms not only sonically embody the characters' dramatic actions but also generate surging emotional momentum, invigorating historical figures and clarifying its revolutionary theme.

The Central Academy of Drama's musical *The Family* (2020) inherits the creative principles of traditional Chinese music, incorporating Sichuan folk songs and regional opera elements to enhance national and local identity. With 28 musical numbers ranging from lyrical to humorous to impassioned, it narrates the awakening of a younger generation resisting outdated social structures.

Academy-based creators, unburdened by commercial pressures, uphold artistic rigor and purity. Their works cultivate students' values and aesthetic sensibilities, fostering intellectual, moral, and creative development. Meanwhile, by actively engaging with the public and exploring models that unite industry, academia, and research, these works embody the inclusiveness and accessibility characteristic of modernity—injecting new vitality into Chinese original musicals.

III. Interpenetration of the Real and the Imagined

Originating in the West, musical theatre is known for its compact narrative rhythm and vivid emotional expression, often leaving audiences with an impression of exuberant energy. By contrast, Chinese aesthetics emphasize slowness, tranquility, subtlety, restraint, and the artistic practice of "liu bai" (leaving spaces)—a sensibility shaped by centuries of cultural tradition. When these differing aesthetic rhythms meet, the "Guofeng musical" emerges as a new cultural synthesis, addressing the increasing need to adapt musical theatre to Chinese audience expectations.

Chinese aesthetics pursue the dialectical interplay of the "real" and the "imagined," constructing layers of poetic meaning through the dual framework of music and drama. The "imagined realm" arises from and expands beyond concrete reality; the two coexist, mutually generating significance. Onstage, time and space become fluid and malleable, while "blankness" evokes emotional resonance and conceptual depth.

In the musical *Nan Kong*, for instance, the technique of "liu bai" permeates the entire staging. Rather than using realistic sets, the minimalist stage evokes the refined elegance of Song-dynasty aesthetics. Light and shadow create expanses of emptiness that amplify dramatic space and philosophical breadth while granting performers expressive freedom. As visual director Ren Dongsheng notes: "The characters become part of the scenographic composition." The sliding horizontal structures allow seamless shifts between scenes, reflecting larger historical transitions while emphasizing the relationship between characters and space.

Similarly, *The Throne and the Poetry* uses multimedia, lighting, and stylized scenography to construct powerful symbols. The towering pillar resembling an oversized calligraphy brush signifies Li Yu's lifelong entrapment. Flowing, water-like lighting reveals the desires, conspiracies, and sincerity hidden in the human heart. Through these layered symbols, the production draws poetic vitality from Chinese aesthetics.

The musical *Yang Jian* uses director-choreographer Liu Xiaoyi's signature fusion of martial arts and dance to manifest the protagonist's inner conflict between opposing cosmic forces. The intertwining of agile choreography and fluid martial movement heightens emotional tension while embodying an ancient spiritual lineage.

The musical *Ci Qin* (2023) adopts the "xieyi" (expressive) aesthetic of traditional Chinese theatre—using suggestive gestures, stylized movement, and non-realistic space to construct poetic meaning. Here, "imagined space" grows from "real space," and audiences complete the artistic world through their own imagination.

Nan Kong again serves as a representative example: its poetic scenes—"ginkgo silhouettes," "galloping horses," "rivers surging"—generate a vast imaginative landscape, inviting audiences into the cultural depth of southern Confucianism. Traditional colors such as pearl white, pale red, lotus pink, celadon, and Xiangfei tone reflect the understated elegance of Song-dynasty attire, contrasting with the bold vermilion and gold of official spaces to balance ancient and contemporary aesthetics.

In The Orphan of Zhao, a similar dynamic unfolds. The 45-degree transformation of the proscenium stage, combined with minimalist props and symbolic staging, allows "the imagined to surpass the real." The climactic "scroll unveiling" sequence uses modern technology to create an immersive experience: a massive "scroll frame" slowly opens to reveal historical tableaux, enveloping both protagonist and audience in a shared journey through time.

Through this poetic blending of the real and the imagined, the musical constructs a tight yet expansive narrative space that activates both physical and aesthetic dimensions.

Conclusion

In the new era, the rise of "Guofeng culture" has ignited cultural confidence among younger generations, providing Chinese original musicals with opportunities to expand genres and markets. A wave of works drawing on

mythology and history has emerged, seeking to express the cultural spirit embedded in the Chinese soul. Yet the rapid commercialization of Guofeng culture has also brought challenges, such as superficial appropriation of traditional symbols, misinterpretations of cultural heritage, and careless alterations of classical texts.

While Guofeng aesthetics have attracted large youth audiences, the essence of musical theatre remains rooted in the “modern” experience. Chinese original musicals must therefore preserve artistic advancement while extracting the most refined elements of Guofeng culture—interpreting traditional heritage through a dialectical and contemporary lens.

In the future, Guofeng musicals are likely to continue drawing inspiration from the aesthetic traditions and cultural sensibilities of China. By integrating long-standing cultural heritage with contemporary artistic forms—and by exploring a dynamic interplay between the real and the imagined—they may offer a distinctive Chinese artistic perspective to the broader landscape of global musical theatre.

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Musical Theatre: A Vivid Reflection of Shanghai’s Cultural Development

YANG Mei

Originating in Europe and the United States, musical theatre—renowned for its modern, accessible aesthetic, strong commercial appeal, and inventive fusion of diverse performance elements—has become one of the most radiant forms of contemporary stage art worldwide. In recent years, as the global momentum of musical theatre continues to intensify, the genre has also taken root in China, especially in Shanghai—a cosmopolitan city where the grace of Jiangnan culture (regional culture south of the Yangtze River), the openness of Haipai (Shanghai’s modern urban culture) sensibility, and the legacy of revolutionary spirit coexist. Within this vibrant cultural landscape, musical theatre has flourished with remarkable vitality, resonating deeply with the city’s artistic temperament. Today, it stands as a distinctive cultural emblem of Shanghai, vividly reflecting the city’s development and its unique charm as a global cultural metropolis.

I. Tracing the Early Footprints of Musical Theatre in Shanghai

A historical look at musical theatre in Shanghai reveals that the city’s connection with the genre dates back to the 1920s–1940s. During this period, many Broadway musicals were adapted into Hollywood musical films, which reached Shanghai almost simultaneously with their international release, captivating local audiences in rapid succession. These films also introduced numerous Broadway stars to Chinese viewers. It is no exaggeration to say that 80 to 90 percent of Hollywood’s musical films at the time were distributed and screened in China. In this sense, the dissemination of Hollywood musical cinema offers a fascinating reflection of Broadway’s early development within modern China.

■ (left) Poster for *Hua Fang Yuan* (1930 Shanghai release)
■ (right) Poster for *Shui Shang Yue Fu* (1936 Shanghai release)

Although many of these luminous moments have faded into history, their enchanting songs and dances continue to shimmer faintly across China's archival newspapers and magazines. For example, the American musical-theatre milestone *Show Boat* (1927), translated in China as "Yanyi Chuan", was adapted by Hollywood into a black-and-white musical film in 1929 and crossed the ocean to be screened in Tianjin and Shanghai in 1930 at the Beijing Grand Theatre—under the titles "Hua Fang Sheng Ge" (Painting Boat Melodies) in Tianjin and "Hua Fang Yuan" (A Romance on the Show Boat) in Shanghai. In 1936, a newly produced film version was released in Shanghai once again, this time under the translated title "Shui Shang Yue Fu" (Music House on the Water).These significant moments are well documented in the programs and promotional materials of Shanghai's major theatres. Evidently, Shanghai and the world of musical theatre were already in close dialogue long before the genre's formal establishment on Chinese stages.

The stylish artistic trends introduced by Broadway and Hollywood soon became integral components of Shanghai's modern cultural aesthetic, exerting profound influence on China's evolving performing arts. Li Jinhui—celebrated as the "father of Chinese popular music"—created numerous children's musical plays in the 1920s and 1930s, including *The Sparrow and the Children*, *Little Painter*, and *The Grape Fairy*. These works not only incorporated elements of traditional Chinese music but also embraced the innovative spirit of Western artistic forms. Li's pioneering contributions were central to the rise of China's first generation of musical performers. Among them, Zhou Xuan—beloved for her graceful beauty and golden, shimmering voice—became an enduring emblem of old Shanghai and a cultural icon remembered across generations.

The book covers of three children's musical plays composed by Li Jinhui, from left to right: The Sparrow and the Children, The Grape Fairy, and Poor Qiuxiang.

■ The book covers of three children's musical plays composed by Li Jinhui, from left to right: *The Sparrow and the Children*, *The Grape Fairy*, and *Poor Qiuxiang*.

II. Capturing the Splendor of "Shanghai Stories" in Musical Theatre

As a city rich in cultural heritage and modern vitality, Shanghai has long led the domestic musical theatre market. From the early 21st century, the city began importing international musical classics such as *Les Misérables*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Cats*, while actively participating in Chinese-language adaptations, including *Mamma Mia!.* These efforts have significantly fostered the development of original Chinese musicals, particularly in Shanghai, giving rise to a series of outstanding productions centered on Shanghai stories. These works not only showcase the city's unique charm and historical evolution but also reflect contemporary society's respect for cultural heritage and its transmission, bearing considerable cultural significance and social value.

1. *The Winter of Three Hairs* (2012)–Composed by the renowned musician Sanbao, this musical is adapted from Zhang Leping's classic *Sanmao* (Three Hairs) comic character. Set in 1930s–1940s Shanghai, a period of striking diversity, the story juxtaposes the modernity of high-rise buildings and luxurious ballrooms with the warmth and bustle of traditional alleys and teahouses. Sanbao intertwines music and drama to

■ Production still from the musical *The Winter of Three Hairs*

connect Sanmao's wanderings—through hunger, cold, and loneliness—with Shanghai's thriving yet challenging social landscape. The musical is not only a profound portrayal of individual fate but also a heartfelt tribute to Shanghai's distinctive culture and humanistic spirit of the era, making it a classic in the "Shanghai Stories" musical repertoire.

■ Production still from the musical *Shanghai Bund*

2. *Shanghai Bund* (2014)– This Shanghai original production, remarkable for surpassing 100 performances, tells a complex and poignant love triangle among Xu Wenqiang, Feng Chengcheng, and Ding Li against the backdrop of the ever-changing Shanghai Bund. The musical integrates elements of both Eastern and Western culture through lifestyle, mindset, and costume design. It features modern characters dressed in Western-style suits and qipao (cheongsam), alongside traditional figures wearing changshan and bupao (long gowns and robes of old Shanghai).Through song and dance, the show revives classic Shanghai-era music, including *Ye Lai Xiang* (The Evening Primrose) and *Rose, Rose, I Love You*, offering audiences a fresh experience. With compelling plotlines, memorable songs, and striking visual effects, the production transports audiences to a time of passion, loyalty, and romance, while encouraging a positive and appreciative outlook on life.

■ Poster of the musical *Shimmer: A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII during WWII*

3. *Shimmer*: *A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII* (2015)– Directed by Shanghai native Xu Jun, this musical, set during World War II, narrates touching stories of Jewish refugees and Shanghai citizens. Through the musical theatre format, the production vividly recreates historical realities, allowing audiences to experience the era's atmosphere and emotions. It highlights the support and care extended by Shanghai residents and the lives and psychological changes of Jewish refugees, offering a poignant historical memory. By combining meticulous historical detail with compelling musical and theatrical presentation, the production achieves a high artistic standard. It has contributed significantly to the development of local Shanghai musicals and successfully reached international stages, becoming the first Chinese musical to perform on Broadway, marking a milestone in China's global musical influence.

■ Production still from the musical *Spring Shanghai, 1949.*

4.*Spring Shanghai, 1949* – An original musical by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, this production is inspired by students of Hongkou Jiguang High School (formerly McLaren High School). Set at China's 1949 turning point, it follows patriotic youths embracing a new era. Through six acts—"Spring Festival", "Spring Outing", "Spring Chill", "Spring Thunder", "Spring Waves", and " Spring Scenery"—the musical portrays the cruelty of reactionaries alongside the courage and wisdom of those pursuing a brighter future. Performed by the conservatory's music theatre faculty and students, all characters are teenagers, creating a vibrant youthful energy. The musical incorporates Haipai culture and Jiangnan culture, emphasizing the interplay of lyrics and dramatic expression. Its stage design blends realism with imaginative expression, reflecting explorations of Chinese style, musical theatre form, and contemporary aesthetics.

■ Production still from the musical *National Anthem.*

5. *National Anthem* (2011)– Created by the Shanghai Opera House, this musical depicts the friendship and collaboration between composer Nie Er and playwright Tian Han, culminating in the creation of *The March of the Volunteers*. Structured around "listening to the people's suffering" and "sounding the call for national salvation," the musical blends Shanghai urban culture with the backdrop of wartime resistance. Rather than presenting Nie Er's life chronologically, it focuses on five years in Shanghai, depicting his observations of society, empathy for ordinary people, and indignation at injustice. The musical celebrates patriotic spirit and blends the charm of old Shanghai with the fervor of wartime, showcasing the depth of red culture and its contemporary value.

6. *Myth of Love* – This contemporary, Shanghai-flavored musical explores subtle modern relationships while embedding the city's urban observations and reflections on women's love experiences. Its distinct Shanghai character is conveyed through three elements: extensive use of Shanghainese in dialogue and lyrics, replication of iconic urban landmarks like Anfu Road and Wukang Road intersections, and incorporation of local details such as cafes, bicycles, and building textures. Musically, the show blends tango, jazz, and

■ Production still from the musical *Myth of Love*.

other styles, vividly portraying Shanghai's bustling, cosmopolitan, and romantic culture. As a Shanghainese-language musical, *Myth of Love* perpetuates Haipai culture while highlighting the city's openness and inclusivity.

III. At the Forefront of the "Shanghai Brand" Musical Scene

Shanghai has emerged as a central hub for the development of Chinese musical theatre, achieving remarkable progress in artistic innovation and market expansion. Notable trends include the rise of New Guofeng musicals, the emergence of non-standardized performance spaces, the introduction of French and German/Austrian musicals, and the creation of original English-language musicals with global production teams—all hallmark achievements establishing Shanghai as the national leader in musical theatre, a "Shanghai brand" in the domestic market.

1. New Guofeng Musicals – Originating from Shanghai originals such as *Wukong*, *The Throne and the Poetry*, and *Smash The Wall*, followed by *Yang Jian* and *Imperial Guards*, these works fuse traditional Chinese culture with modern musical theatre forms. By integrating poetry, historical narratives, and traditional opera elements with contemporary music styles such as pop, rock, and electronic, these musicals revitalize classical cultural stories. Shanghai's rich cultural resources and innovative capacity make it an ideal cradle for New Guofeng musicals, promoting both domestic development and international appreciation of Chinese culture.

■ Posters of the New Guofeng Musical Series: *The Throne and the Poetry, Wukong,* and *Yang Jian* (from left to right).

2. Resident Musicals in Non-Standard "New Performance Spaces" – Venues like Shanghai Asia Building and Shanghai Great World have fostered innovative, immersive small-theatre productions, exemplified by *Apollonia* and *Santa Lucia*. Breaking traditional stage-audience boundaries, these shows engage audiences directly, providing unprecedented interactive experiences. By experimenting with scriptwriting, stage design, and performance styles, such productions diversify Shanghai's musical theatre scene and cater to increasingly personalized cultural tastes.

■ Poster of the Musical *Apollonia*

■ Production still from the musical *Santa Lucia*

3. Introduction of French and German/Austrian Musicals – French musicals are celebrated for their romantic, poetic style, while German/Austrian productions are noted for musical rigor and narrative depth. Shanghai, as a gateway for international cultural exchange, has recently introduced works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, *Mozart!*, *Elisabeth*, and *Rebecca*. These productions expose audiences to European musical innovations and cultivate a sophisticated urban audience capable of appreciating high-quality performance, influencing domestic markets nationwide.

■ Production stills from the German musical *Elisabeth* and French musical *Romeo and Juliet*

4. English-Language Musicals with Global Production Teams – Shanghai's new productions of *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* and the original musical *Lady M* (2024) mark a new path: English-language musicals produced by international teams. From scriptwriting to stage design, these works

■ Production stills from the Musicals *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* and *Lady M.*

embrace global standards, showcasing Shanghai's innovation and providing strong support for the internationalization of Chinese musical theatre.

Conclusion

In summary, Shanghai's musical theatre journey embodies a rich history and artistic vitality, emerging ever brighter through time. Today, propelled by innovation, it soars on the international cultural stage, with each development worthy of close attention. As a synthesis of music, drama, and dance, musical theatre vividly reflects the development of Shanghai's urban culture. It enriches the spiritual and cultural life of its citizens, enhances the city's cultural landscape, and drives the growth of cultural tourism, boosting Shanghai's international visibility.

As night falls and theatre lights illuminate the city, musicals take the stage once more, captivating audiences and celebrating Shanghai's steadfast and flourishing cultural journey.

Note: All images are sourced from the internet.

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A Stage Within a Stage Connects to the World: Exploring Overseas Dissemination Pathways and Development of China's Domestic Musicals

FAN Xiaowei, LI Yawen

Introduction

The overseas dissemination of Chinese musicals can be traced back to the mid-20th century. At that time, the Guangxi song-and-dance drama *Liu Sanjie* introduced Chinese folk music elements to the international stage through a combination of "Eastern folk songs + theatre," performing over a hundred shows across East and Southeast Asia. In the early 21st century, the original Jiangsu opera *Zheng He* toured Malaysia and Singapore, presenting Chinese maritime history through the Western opera form and earning local media acclaim as a "cultural envoy of the Maritime Silk Road." In 2025, the Zhejiang musical *Nan Kong* staged at Singapore's Marina Bay Sands Arts Centre portrayed the story of Confucius's descendants, illustrating Confucian culture. Such productions foster cultural exchange internationally; however, their large scale and high costs pose challenges to sustainability and commercial operation.

In terms of commercial musicals, starting in 2005, Jacky Cheung's stage musical *Snow Wolf Lake* toured globally in Mandarin, resonating strongly with audiences in Singapore, Malaysia, and beyond, with sold-out performances. The production cost over HKD 100 million, marking it the most expensive

■ Poster of *Snow Wolf Lake*

show in Hong Kong history, with promotional expenses exceeding HKD 15 million and over 300 staff involved in front and backstage operations. Stage props, equipment, lighting, sound, and costumes weighed a total of 150 tons and required 15 large shipping containers.

Unlike large-scale musicals that rely on a "high investment, large stage, wide publicity" model for overseas dissemination, small-scale musicals can more easily overcome geographic, cost, and cultural barriers. Over the past five years, the overseas dissemination of Chinese musicals has followed a "small-scale, high-impact" trend. This dissemination is not merely an export of artistic forms but also reflects the diverse expressions of contemporary Chinese cultural concepts.

I. Current Status of Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Domestic Musicals: From Scattered Experiments to Clustered Exploration

1.Geographic Spread: From East Asia to Global Points

Initially, Chinese musicals overseas were concentrated in culturally proximate East and Southeast Asia, targeting overseas Chinese, students abroad, and enthusiasts of Chinese culture. These productions often focused on grand historical narratives. In recent years, dissemination has expanded to Europe, the Americas, and Southeast Asia. For example, in 2022, segments of the small-scale musical *Cat's Cradle* (English version) were showcased at New York's International Musical Theatre Workshop, using a suspense theme to bridge cultural gaps and attract attention from local performance institutions. By 2024, Chinese small-scale musicals had been staged in over 20 cities across 12 countries, with more than 300 cumulative performances, gradually forming a multi-point global dissemination pattern.

■ Cast photo from the musical *King's Table*.

2. Dissemination Mode: From "Passive Invitation" to "Active Operation"

Early overseas dissemination relied heavily on invitations from international arts festivals or cultural institutions, such as *Black Mary Poppins* at the 2019 Bangkok International Theatre Festival and *Rachmaninoff* at the 2021 Melbourne Chinese Arts Festival in Australia. While this lowered the entry barrier, the pace of dissemination and audience coverage were limited by organizers, resulting in lower autonomy and commercial potential.

Recently, production teams of Chinese original musicals have explored more proactive international collaborations. For instance, in 2024, the Nordic-mythology-themed Chinese musical *King's Table* was licensed to Korea and staged in Seoul's Daehangno district. Similarly, the immersive small-scale musical #0528 was prepared for the Korean market through co-production, with Chinese teams deeply involved in the creation and operation of the Korean version, ensuring accurate transmission of cultural content.

3. Case Study: *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939*—A Model of Cross-Cultural Exchange

In July 2024, the Korean premiere of the Chinese cultural musical *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* was successfully staged in Daehangno, Seoul, achieving an average occupancy rate of 95% within two weeks. The musical, set in 1939 Shanghai in a villa on Yuyuan Road, tells the story of two women maintaining

their ideals amid chaos, combining internationalized musical styles with Eastern aesthetics.

In January 2023, following sold-out performances at Shanghai Grand Theatre, this play attracted attention from Korean production company Never Ending Play. In producing the Korean version, both teams carefully balanced cultural adaptation and fidelity, accommodating Korean audiences' aesthetic preferences while preserving the original cultural essence, making this a representative example of cross-cultural musical collaboration.

II. Core Advantages of Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Musicals: The Unique Strength of "Small and Beautiful"

1. Thematic Advantage: Small Angles, Broad Resonance

Early development involved introducing and adapting international musicals, such as the London West End original *SIX* (based on historical figures/events), *Apollonia* (depicting life in Depression-era New York), or Korea's *OZ* (focused on youth romance). With accumulated experience, more Chinese original musicals entered the market.

Contemporary creators favor themes that combine local specificity with universal human concerns. For instance, *Light Keepers and King's Table*,

■ Production still from the Chinese-language version of the musical *OZ*.

produced by Amazing Musicals, portray stories set in 19th-century Britain. Despite the foreign setting, themes of loneliness, responsibility, and companionship resonate universally. *Light Keepers* performed successfully, selling out for months. In 2023, its performance at Singapore's Chinese Cultural Arts Festival elicited strong audience resonance, becoming one of the festival's most popular overseas shows. In 2024, an English version starring three foreign actors premiered in Shanghai, while *King's Table* was licensed for localized Korean production.

These cases demonstrate that "small-angle, broad-resonance" storytelling effectively communicates emotional depth across cultures, forming a core competitive advantage for overseas dissemination.

2.Cultural Advantage: Resonance of Traditional Roots and Contemporary Expression

Chinese musicals overseas often balance traditional depth with modern expression. For example, *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* uses visual and auditory cues—such as qipao (cheongsam) and jazz—to evoke Republican-era aesthetics while exploring female empowerment, garnering a 9.9 rating in Seoul. Similar historical contexts between Shanghai and colonial-era Korea enhance emotional resonance.

Another example, the original musical *Shan Hai Jing* (Classic of Mountains and Rivers), inspired by Chinese mythology, integrates shadow puppetry and Jingju (Peking Opera) vocalization with immersive multimedia, reaching Southeast Asian audiences and conveying Chinese traditional culture effectively. In a market largely defined by musicals inspired by Norse and Greek mythology, its stage design and young cast create a vivid imaginative Eastern mythscape that enhances accessibility for international audiences.

■ Production still from the musical *Shan Hai Jing*.

China's musicals increasingly adopt diversified cooperation mechanisms. Yitai Haoxi established a Korean

branch to implement co-production and localized adaptation across the production chain, from The *Butterfly on the Bund 1939* to #0528. Other works like *Shan Hai Jing* and *Kung Fu* target Southeast Asian Chinese communities through school partnerships and cultural exchange, achieving “cultural output + educational implementation” .

III. Strategies to Optimize Overseas Dissemination of Chinese Musicals

1. Deepen Cultural Adaptation: Build a “Local Core + International Expression” System

Sustainable cross-cultural dissemination requires prioritizing artistic quality. Successful overseas cases are often widely recognized domestically. Creative teams should focus on universal themes and character emotions rather than relying solely on local cultural symbols.

For example, Shanghai’s MOriginal small-scale musicals *For Ever Love* and *Ties of Shooting Stars* exemplify this approach. *Ties of Shooting Stars* adapts a Japanese story, while *For Ever Love* depicts 1970s–1980s romance across Shanghai and Hong Kong. While retro for overseas audiences, these themes attract attention in East Asian musical markets, demonstrating that domestic success is a prerequisite for international adaptation.

Music quality is critical. Well-composed songs significantly enhance audience engagement. High-quality translation and adaptation further ensure accurate conveyance of content, with strategies such as projected lyrics or minor musical

■ Adapted from the works of Higashino Keigo, production still from the musical *Ties of Shooting Stars*.

■ The musical *Ties of Shooting Stars* featuring the TruSound 360° immersive audio system

adjustments for immersive small-theatre experiences. The Korean version of *The Butterfly on the Bund 1939* maintained fidelity to the original plot while adapting lighting, staging, and musical arrangements to align with audience reception, preserving the cultural core while facilitating comprehension.

2. Strengthen Brand Operation: Construct a “Online + Offline” Communication Matrix

Key brand strategies include: Firstly, Establish long-term overseas exposure through official accounts on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, sharing clips, behind-the-scenes content, and fostering a stable fan base. Borrowing from Korean small-theatre musicals, overseas audiences can participate in costume or song adaptation decisions to increase engagement. Secondly, Collaborate with local ticketing platforms (e.g., Ticketmaster in the U.S., Interpark in Korea) and media/influencers to hold previews and creator interviews, expanding publicity coverage.

It is important to recognize that marketing strategies differ between domestic and overseas markets. Casting decisions that cater to fan bases may not translate overseas, requiring careful consideration of audience reception and fan-driven dynamics.

Conclusion

The overseas practice of China’s domestic small-scale musicals provides a new model for cross-cultural theatre exchange. Through flexible creative mechanisms and diverse collaborations, these works achieve emotional and aesthetic resonance across cultural contexts. With the maturation of creative systems and deepening international cooperation, Chinese musicals are poised to participate in global cultural dialogue in increasingly diverse forms.

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Connecting Eastern and Western Thought and Poetics: Director XU Jun and His Musicals

RONG Yu

In the vigorous rise of China's musical-theatre industry—particularly over the past decade—when the market has expanded rapidly but the artistic originality of local works has yet to reach full maturity, director Xu Jun has carved out a distinctly innovative path. His representative musicals—including *Shimmer: A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII*,[1] *The Love of the White Snake*,[2] *The Orphan of Zhao*,[3] *Hamlet*,[4] and *Lady M*—span themes from the classical to the modern, from East to West. Each production embodies the principle of "one play, one aesthetic mode": open, diverse, and consistently infused with the contemporary Chinese stage artist's acute observations and timely reflections on culture, musical-theatre forms, and dramatic aesthetics.

Over the course of a decade of creation, Xu Jun's work demonstrates a sustained exploration of the "Sinicization" of musical theatre—a modern Western stage art—through the perspective of a contemporary Chinese director. Luo Huaizhen has praised his works as "a successful model of Chinese expression in musical theatre."[5] Xu's adept reconfiguration of traditional Chinese xiqu (opera) techniques and integration of Chinese "xieyi" (expressive abstraction) aesthetics is far more than a mere ornamental "addition" to Western musical paradigms; it represents a bold transformation. By organically

1 Premiered at Shanghai Culture Square on 3 September 2015.
2 Premiered at Shanghai Hongqiao Art Centre on 20 April 2019.
3 Premiered at Shanghai Culture Square on 27 May 2021.
4 Premiered at Shanghai Culture Square on 11 May 2023.
5 诸葛漪．上海原创音乐剧〈哈姆雷特〉首演，郑棋元、金圣权唱响经典文本 [eb/ol]. 上观新闻 , 2023-05-12. https://www.shobserver.com/staticsg/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=611497 [Zhuge Yi, "The Original Shanghai Musical Hamlet Premieres…," Shanghai Observer, 12 May 2023.]

infusing the Chinese artistic concept of "creating a world of poetic vision" into the narrative-driven core of mainstream musicals, Xu not only produces acclaimed original works but also projects a distinctly contemporary Chinese sensibility onto the global musical-theatre stage.

■ Director Xu Jun

Born in Shanghai in 1962, Xu Jun was admitted in 1974, through competitive selection, into the Shanghai Huju Opera Company, where he underwent rigorous traditional xiqu training. He first rose to prominence in 1979 and quickly became one of the company's leading actors. Over a decade, he starred in dozens of Huju productions, including *The Thunderstorm*, *Flower of the Alley*, *Xuanzi*, *Waterloo Bridge*, and *Hazy Moon*, *Fuzzy Bird*, many of which have become Huju classics. Throughout the 1980s, Xu Jun was a household name in Shanghai and earned the title "the foremost young male role of Huju."[1]

At the height of his performing career, Xu chose to pursue a different artistic path. In 1993, he entered the directing department of the Shanghai Theatre Academy. After completing his undergraduate studies, he continued in the master's program under Professor Xu Qiping. This dramatic shift—from the inheritance of traditional Chinese xiqu to systematic training in modern Western theatre and film directing—provided Xu with deep and broad artistic nourishment. Creators with dual expertise in both classical Chinese xiqu and professional directing are exceedingly rare in China. During his graduate studies, Xu developed a profound interest in Meyerhold's "conditional theatre" and "biomechanics," which later became crucial reference points shaping his stage aesthetics. [2]

1 徐俊．我崇尚写意的舞台 [N]. 北京晚报 . 转引自北晚在线 , 2018-08-02. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1607653286231531877&wfr=spider&for=pc. [Xu Jun, "I Revere the Expressive Stage," Beijing Evening News Epaper, 2018.08.02.]
2 徐俊．说上海话的尹雪艳——沪语话剧《永远的尹雪艳》创作分析 . 收录于刘俊 . 跨界观照与多维审美：白先勇戏剧影视作品研讨会论文集 [C]. 南京：南京大学出版社 2024:300. [Xu Jun, "Yin Xueyan in Shanghainese: A Creative Analysis of the Huju Play Forever Yin Xueyan," in Liu Jun (ed.), Cross-Boundary Perspectives and Multi-Dimensional Aesthetics: Proceedings of the Symposium on Pai Hsien-yung's Dramatic and Film Works Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2024, p. 300.]

■ Director Xu Jun

I.Modern Reinterpretations of Classical Subjects: *The Love of the White Snake* and *The Orphan of Zhao*

In 2015, Xu Jun's first musical, *Shimmer: A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII*, was selected—within a week of its premiere—to open the 17th China Shanghai International Arts Festival. This marked the first time in the festival's history that an opening production came from a private theatre company and the first time a musical held this position—remaining the only musical to do so to date.[1]

After this success in contemporary subject matter, Xu turned toward modern reconstructions of Chinese classical themes, a realm that offered greater creative freedom but also posed significant challenges. Xu consistently places the "text" at the center of musical-theatre creation, with "modernity" as his guiding principle. From script to staging, the process becomes a unified artistic creation under his directorial vision.

The musical *The Love of the White Snake* is an adaptation of Tian Han's version of *The Legend of the White Snake*. Its purpose is to employ the musical-theatre form to "unearth the modern spirit and the shared logic concealed within deeper layers of meaning, thereby realizing the aesthetic value of dual

1 The production later toured on Broadway in 2016, and in 2017 was invited to Tel Aviv as a special cultural event for the 25th anniversary of China–Israel diplomatic relations.

■ Production still from the musical *Shimmer: A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII*

imagination—allowing audiences not only to review the old, but also to discover the new."[1]

As the librettist, Xu Jun reconstructs the narrative through a modern lens, foregrounding the paradox between two underlying logics: the logic of "love" that arises from the hearts of living beings—embodied by Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian—and the logic of "order" upheld by Fahai in his defense of cosmic balance. This conceptual tension forms the structural backbone of the story, connecting its three major conflicts: the Realgar Wine test during the Dragon Boat Festival, the battle at Jinshan Temple, and Bai's eventual self-imprisonment beneath Leifeng Pagoda. Xu undertakes bold revisions, excising several traditional episodes—including "the marriage," "stealing the immortal herb," "the Broken Bridge encounter," "reunion," and "subduing Leifeng Pagoda"—thereby subverting long-established aesthetic expectations of Chinese audiences for this tale.

Character reconstruction is central to Xu Jun's creative approach. For Bai Suzhen, he integrates her triple identity as "human", "snake spirit", and "immortal", allowing the dynamic tensions of these facets to unfold throughout the narrative. Ultimately, Bai elects to drink the Realgar Wine voluntarily, destroying her human form and confining herself under Leifeng Pagoda to atone for the slain living beings and to "await love," achieving a tragic sublime.

1 徐俊．不仅“温故”更是“知新”[N]．中国文化报，2018-09-12(3). [Xu Jun, "Not Only 'Reviewing the Old' but also 'Discovering the New'," *China Culture Daily*, 12 Sept. 2018.]

■ Production stills from the musical *The Love of the White Snake*

Similarly, Xu Xian is reimagined. Freed from the timid scholar persona inherited from classical spirit tales and subsequent xiqu adaptations, he is presented as an ordinary mortal imbued with greater courage and moral responsibility. Consequently, Xu Xian's actions throughout the musical are deliberate and self-directed, rather than hesitant, evasive, or passive.

The "Classical Neo-Aesthetics" proposed by Xu Jun establishes the artistic foundation of the play. The production employs a modern symphonic musical structure, and—after extensive discussions with composer Fang Shaoqing—integrates ancient instruments from the Stone Age and Bronze Age to cultivate a mythic, trans-temporal sound world. The stage design adheres to an expressive, abstract approach: a fully mirrored floor suggests the reflective surface of a lake, while minimalist symbolic elements—light columns, eaves, and a broken bridge—form the visual vocabulary. Paired with predominantly sidelight-based illumination, these elements sculpt the actors' three-dimensional presence and shift organically through the interplay between light and scenic components. The result is a series of evocative stage images—majestic mountain temples, the washed-blue clarity of West Lake after rain, and moonlit river mists—conjuring an atmospheric Jiangnan landscape that dialogues with the characters' inner states, leaving an ethereal space for the actors' performance.

Prior to floor rehearsals, the cast underwent several months of Kunqu movement and speech training—an exacting task for performers trained primarily in musical theatre. Once absorbed into their performances and woven together with the physical vocabulary created by Danish contemporary choreographer Lene Bonde, this training endowed the actors with a new stage temperament that resonates with the production's trans-temporal mythic aesthetic. As Kunqu artist Yue Meiti notes, such advanced innovation could only emerge from creators equally grounded in both xiqu and stage directing.

Xu Jun characterized *The Love of the White Snake* as both a careful experiment and a daring venture. Drawing upon the text and dramatic context, he even wove into the production as many as thirteen elements of intangible cultural heritage[1], thereby showcasing "the vibrant vitality of national culture within a mythically translogical framework".[2] In Xu Jun's subsequent musicals, many of these inventive qualities were further accentuated.

1 冷梅．"白蛇"暗藏的十三种惊艳 [N]．青年报 . 2019-03-24(4-5) [Leng Mei, "Thirteen Stunning Hidden Elements in *White Snake*," Youth Daily, 24 March 2019, pp. 4–5]

2 徐俊．不仅"温故"更是"知新" [N]．中国文化报 , 2018-09-12(3). [Xu Jun, "Not Only 'Reviewing the Old' but also 'Discovering the New'," *China Culture Daily*, 12 Sept. 2018.]

The libretto of the musical *The Orphan of Zhao* is adapted from the play of the same name by British poet and playwright James Fenton[1]. Among the many modern adaptations of this story, Xu Jun regarded Fenton's version as offering "a lesson from another land" in confronting the dilemmas faced by Ji Junxiang's Yuan zaju in a contemporary context—namely, can a parent die, or can a foster father be killed?[2]

Fenton adheres closely to the story's two core narrative actions: Cheng Ying offering his child to save the orphan, and the orphan killing his foster father. By endowing both the peasant healer Cheng Ying and the orphan Cheng Bo with modern individual agency, and by crafting plausible motivations for both the rescue and the revenge, Fenton preserves the original theme of the "revenge" tragedy while simultaneously directing the audience's attention toward the respect for individual life. Notably, the completely new creation of Cheng Ying's parent–child consciousness gives this long-forgotten symbol tangible presence and voice, exposing to the audience the moral and emotional depth behind Cheng Ying's noble act. This innovation effectively prevents the theme of revenge from being absorbed or diluted by the traditional Chinese ethical framework of "loyalty and righteousness," thereby averting a potential modernity crisis.

■ The main visual poster of the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*.

Xu Jun's musical adaptation "recreates and reshapes the entire work according to the principle of

1 Fenton wrote the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2012 season "A World Elsewhere". It was the RSC's first creative interpretation of a Chinese drama, directed by then-artistic director Gregory Doran. Previews began at the Swan Theatre on 30 October 2012, and the run concluded on 28 March 2013, with a total of 60 performances.

2 参见徐俊．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"——音乐剧《赵氏孤儿》导演阐述． 收录于［英］詹姆斯·芬顿等．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"［M］． 上海：上海译文出版社．2021:311. [See Xu Jun, "Directorial Reflections on the Musical *The Orphan of Zhao*", in James Fenton et al., *Towards the Future of the "Orphan of Zhao"*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2021, p. 311.]

■ Production stills from the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*

strengthening narrative propulsion."[1] In this adaptation, the character of the soul of Cheng Ying's son, who appears only in the final scene of Fenton's play, is transformed into a figure that moves through the entire musical and is continually redefined with shifting layers of meaning. In musical numbers such as "Song of Fate," which opens the production, and "Road to Revenge," which begins the second act, his prophetic, chant-like vocal lines function as a kind of Greek chorus, carrying strong elements of foreshadowing and symbolism.

He also appears in every scene involving death, as well as in places touched by his brief life. Although he moves wordlessly, his presence is unmistakable, prompting the audience to oscillate between an omniscient viewpoint and the soul's subjective gaze. This destabilizes a linear sense of narrative time and allows the interplay between life and death, brightness and darkness—rising and receding in tension and parallel—to suffuse the theatrical space.

Beyond trimming certain plotlines and characters from Fenton's script, and employing a structure of parallel, interwoven scenes to present simultaneous action, Xu Jun's directorial inventiveness is most clearly demonstrated in the second-act number "Unveiling the Scroll." In the original play, Cheng Ying discloses the wrongful deaths of the Zhao clan and the orphan's true lineage to Cheng Bo by painting a scroll—an episode that, in earlier stage productions, was consistently rendered as a spoken retelling.

To avoid the repetitiveness inherent in conventional narration and to enhance the orphan's sense of agency, Xu isolates the picture frame as a symbolic spatial motif and constructs a layered relationship between narrative and stage space:"A massive scenic installation and sculptural character images serve both as a microcosm of the entire production and as a symbolic device."[2]

As the scroll is lifted from the ruins, the figures depicted within it step out of the frame. Painter and viewer thus enter into a play-within-a-play reenactment of history made present. "The figures in the scroll are no longer mere symbols; their destinies and cries pierce the 'surface' of the painting like a rising tide, sweeping the orphan into their midst and compelling him toward choice and action."[3]

1 参见徐俊．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"——音乐剧《赵氏孤儿》导演阐述． 收录于［英］詹姆斯·芬顿等．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"［M］． 上海：上海译文出版社．2021:315. [See Xu Jun, "Directorial Reflections on the Musical *The Orphan of Zhao*", in James Fenton et al., *Towards the Future of the "Orphan of Zhao"*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2021, p. 315.

2 参见徐俊．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"——音乐剧《赵氏孤儿》导演阐述． 收录于［英］詹姆斯·芬顿等．走向未来的"赵氏孤儿"［M］． 上海：上海译文出版社 .2021:317. [See Xu Jun, "Directorial Reflections on the Musical *The Orphan of Zhao*", in James Fenton et al., *Towards the Future of the "Orphan of Zhao"*, Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2021, p. 317.]

3 Xu Jun, ibid., p. 317.

■ Production stills from the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*.

Grounded in the modern sensibilities embedded in the text, Xu Jun's second-degree creation integrates music, scenography, lighting, costume design, and performance into a distinctly modern aesthetic marked by pronounced dramatic tension. This unified style symbolises the story's timeless texture—its exploration of human nature across the boundaries of space and time.

The musical score fuses classical orchestration with rock elements, foregrounding sharply defined musical motifs. Visually, the production draws on contemporary artistic idioms, favouring a minimalist and ethereal design language. An irregular, slanted platform rises from the forestage; to its left, a fractured city wall collapses into a deep fissure; and a monumental picture frame materialises and recedes in shifting moments of the drama.

Large-scale, expressionistic projections work in concert with the lighting and set design, dynamically partitioning the performance space and offering actors multiple zones of movement and interaction. At the same time, these visual elements, operating in a heightened expressionist register, intertwine environment and character, activating and extending the spectator's imaginative engagement.

In training the actors, Xu Jun adopts a gentle yet incisive approach. He guides them individually, helping each performer grasp the underlying logic of acting within every given circumstance. At the same time, he provides precise instructions for stage blocking, movement, physicality, and emotional expression. As he explains, "When an actor turns on stage, they must consider the speed of their steps, the appropriateness of their hand gestures, and the angle at which they lift their eyes. These physical expressions must be repeatedly explored and practiced during rehearsal in order to discover the most fitting combination of character behavior, tone, and physical movement. Only then can the actor build a character who truly 'stands' on stage."[1]

Xu Jun believes that a director's responsibility is "to discover the full extent of an actor's expressive potential, and to understand how much room they have to shape a role."[2] The production spans sixteen years between the first and second acts, meaning that Cheng Ying must perform the entire latter half in a

1 徐俊．在音乐剧中融入中国写意精神 [J]．新剧本，2024 (1):28. [Xu Jun. "Integrating the Spirit of Chinese 'Xieyi' into Musical Theatre." *New Script*, 2024 (1): 28.]

2 冷梅．让《赵氏孤儿》走进 700 年后的年轻人心里，这位"苛刻"的上海导演在想些什么？[N]．青年报，2021-05-31．转引自青春上海 News—24 小时青年报．http://www.why.com.cn/wx/article/2021/05/31/16224353251155301260.html. [Leng Mei. "How Can The Orphan of Zhao Reach Young Audiences 700 Years Later? What Is This 'Exacting' Shanghai Director Thinking?" Youth Daily, May 31, 2021. Reprinted from Youth Shanghai News—24-Hour Youth Daily.]

■ Production stills from the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*.

stooped, hunched posture—a tremendous challenge for any musical performer.

In the climactic confession scene, when Cheng Ying reveals the long-kept secret to the returning general Wei Jiang, the entire song "Please Believe Me" must be delivered from a kneeling, curled-up position after the character has been beaten. Xu Jun required Zheng Qiyuan, who plays Cheng Ying, to embody a state "like a balloon that has been pricked and slowly deflates."[1] Zheng practiced and adjusted this section for a long time, ultimately releasing a portrayal that captured the utter humiliation of a man condemned by the masses, whose ancestral tombs have been desecrated, and whose inner world has been consumed by sixteen years of suppressed pain, fear, loneliness, and moral torment.

At that moment, the stage is stripped bare—only an old man driven by fate and a returning general of justice remain. One kneels, one stands; one confesses, one listens. A stark beam of light pierces the shadow of the broken city wall like a snowstorm that has fallen silently for sixteen years, settling on Cheng Ying's back. His tear-filled plea—"My long-suffered waiting will not be in vain. Justice

1 Leng Mei, ibid.

■ Production stills from the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*.

will return. And there is another child waiting for me to love"—merges with the frigid light, stirring the heart of every audience member.

Hailed as "a landmark achievement in original Chinese musical theatre," this production broke the long-standing pattern in Chinese original musicals of prioritizing form over content and music over literary depth. From its premiere, *The Orphan of Zhao* garnered exceptional acclaim and widespread attention; in terms of public discussion, cross-platform circulation, and overall impact, it remains Xu Jun's most influential musical to date. Xinhua News Agency praised the production for "adding an innovative version infused with international elements to the centuries-old legend of *The Orphan of Zhao*."[1]

Fang Jiajun similarly noted that "it not only represents a new wave in Chinese-language musical theatre but also allows audiences to witness anew the rich cultural imagery and immense spiritual force of Chinese drama."[2]

1 新华社．中英"混血"原创音乐剧《赵氏孤儿》首演 [EB/OL]. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1701072408812306903&wfr=spider&for=pc. [Xinhua News Agency, "The Sino-British 'Hybrid' Original Musical *The Orphan of Zhao* Premieres."]

2 方家骏．为什么这部音乐剧经得住观众挑剔？因为善良的微光灼痛灵魂 [EB/OL]．解放日报・上观新闻，2021-06-18. https://export.shobserver.com/baijiahao/html/377458.html. [Fang Jiajun, "Why Can This Musical Withstand the Most Demanding Audiences? Because the Tender Glow of Kindness Burns Into the Soul." Jiefang Daily·Shanghai Observer News, 18 June 2021]

In his Chinese-themed musical creations, Xu Jun consistently emphasizes the equal importance of literary substance and directorial reinterpretation. Through a cross-cultural lens and the aesthetic principles of "xieyi", he investigates how traditional narratives can be transformed within the musical theatre form. His work is deeply rooted in the "xieyi" tradition—employing spatial emptiness and flowing light to create poetic stage worlds—while boldly integrating cross-cultural theatrical vocabularies. By restructuring texts and interweaving multiple artistic media, he imbues classical stories with contemporary resonance, achieving an artistic vision in which traditional material engages with and interrogates modern existence.

II.Shakespeare in Chinese Musical Theatre: *Hamlet* and *Lady M*

Professor Xu Qiping's direction of the Shanghai Theatre Academy's third Tibetan class production of *Romeo and Juliet* (1981) marked a milestone as the first Tibetan-language Shakespeare play. The production toured Beijing and Tibet, received special commendation from the Ministry of Culture, and left a lasting influence. His mentor's dedicated research and creative engagement with Shakespeare laid the groundwork for Xu Jun's own ambitions in Shakespearean adaptation. "Great tragedies are necessarily challenging. In my mind, there have always been two peaks: *The Orphan of Zhao* and *Hamlet*."[1] Determined to tackle the latter, Xu Jun collaborated with his longtime lighting and multimedia designer Xiao Lihe, whose mentor Jin Changlei had designed the lighting for *Romeo and Juliet*. "Now we, two students, inherit the weighty expectations of our teachers. I see this as both a serious and romantic mission."[2]

Xu Jun's appreciation for Shakespeare stems from the playwright's incisive engagement with life's dilemmas, making drama "a contemporary digest of history, a societal summary." After multiple revisions, his adaptation ultimately drew on Liang Shiqiu's translation. To maximize the expressive potential of musical theatre, Xu Jun adjusted scene arrangements, sequencing, plot structure, and character portrayals. He centered the narrative on the conflict between the new King Claudius and Prince Hamlet, using Claudius's actions

1 杰群．音乐剧《哈姆雷特》莎士比亚经典的东方表达 [N]．中国青年报，2023-09-08(5). [Shen Jiequn, "The Musical Hamlet: An Eastern Expression of the Shakespearean Classic," *China Youth Daily*, 8 Sept. 2023 (05).]

2 Ibid.

■ The Musical *Hamlet* — Main Visual Poster

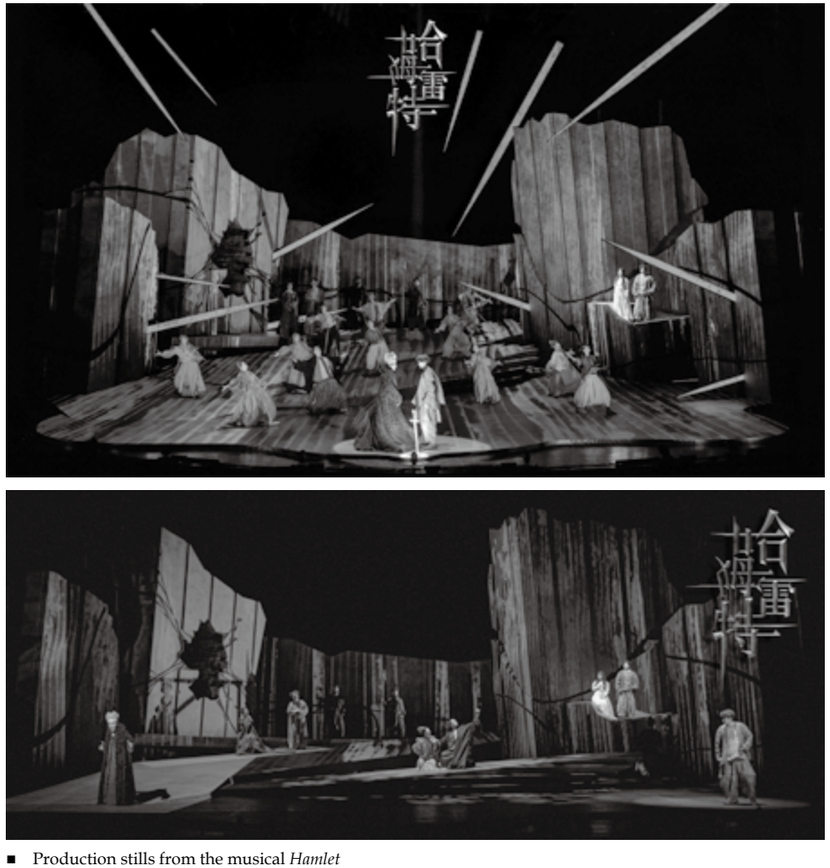
to counterbalance the audience frustration often caused by Hamlet's delays. This framing highlights Hamlet as a modern individual confronting the collapse of the "great chain of being" and seeking self-awareness. Subplots and minor characters were streamlined to focus dramatic energy on the escalating conflicts, allowing the production to achieve "both rich emotional expression and a subtle illumination of individual reflection."[1]

Xu Jun's reinterpretation of *Hamlet* foregrounds the prince's idealistic perseverance amid "spiritual distress." The stage design features towering, slanted gray walls surrounding staggered gray movable platforms, while the lighting and multimedia predominantly employ cool tones, evoking the texture of engravings and thereby accentuating the red of "blood" and the black of "poison." The actors' costumes span nearly every color, resembling oil paint yet crafted from linen, creating stark contrasts that underscore the distinctiveness of each character.

1 张素芹． 以东方美学呈现世界经典 [N]． 广州日报 . 2023-07-08(7). [Zhang Suqin, "Presenting World Classics through Eastern Aesthetics," *Guangzhou Daily*, 8 July 2023 (07).]

Xu Jun frequently utilizes Brechtian alienation effects in his staging. When Hamlet contemplates "to be or not to be" by the sea, or sings "nothing more to say" as he faces death, he directly confronts the audience, inviting reflection and questioning. In the scene *The Play*, Polonius and the troupe continuously engage with the audience from the auditorium, holding up a theatrical mirror that compels viewers to consider who lies behind the reflection.

In *Hamlet*, all characters meet unnatural or extraordinary deaths, and these deaths do not achieve the "catharsis" typical of classical Greek tragedy. Claudius's demise is far from gratifying, and it remains uncertain whether the ghost of the old king finds peace. Gertrude's fate leaves lingering questions—



■ Production stills from the musical *Hamlet*

■ Production stills from the musical *Hamlet*

did she truly understand Claudius's machinations against the old king and Hamlet? The deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern are steeped in irony, while Ophelia stands as the embodiment of innocence. The way characters confront death constitutes a central thematic thread of the production.

Xu Jun, therefore, crafts each death scene according to the character's identity and specific circumstances, using sculptural aesthetics to shape physical expression. These bodily gestures are harmonized with the stage design and lighting, so that each "moment of death" evokes a sense of otherness within the theatrical space, extending its presence into the realm of reality.

Lady M is a contemporary reinterpretation of *Macbeth*, adapted and composed by the British creators James Beeny and Gina Georgio. The musical constructs a backstory for Lady Macbeth and reorganizes the traditional narrative around her, using flashbacks and memories to disrupt the linear progression of the original story. The music is sung-through, adopting a more contemporary, popular style that incorporates elements of rap and other modern forms. Building upon the established text and musical structure, Xu Jun drew inspiration from Lady Macbeth's "dreamscape" and the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Lu Jiuyuan, particularly the notion that "my mind is the universe," to create a second-layer adaptation structured around "cyclical mirroring." Stage space and scene blocking are treated symmetrically and cyclically, rendering the story as if it were "her nocturnal journey" and opening for the audience "a space where reality and dream intertwine and merge."[1]

Compared with the frame-like staging and large-theatre format of Xu Jun's previous four works, *Lady M* was conceived for a more intimate, mid-sized theatre, with AB-style seating on both sides, minimizing the distance between audience and performers. The stage is arranged symmetrically along a central axis, with earth and sky able to invert at any moment. Two large turntables and six lift platforms provide spatial flexibility, supporting both movement and performance. At the vertical center stands a liftable symbolic "tree," representing nature, the "seed of time," and fate. Lighting and multimedia are employed to convey emotional temperature and render the characters' inner psychological states."In dreams, psychological terror and fear, intense love, and strong emotions are infinitely amplified, while the act of killing itself is concealed or beautified."[2]

1 徐俊．音乐剧《麦克白夫人》，找寻经典的当下回响 [N]．解放日报，2024-08-22(14). [Xu Jun, "Musical *Lady M*: Seeking the Contemporary Resonance of a Classic," *Jiefang Daily*, 22 Aug. 2024 (14).]

2 徐俊．音乐剧《麦克白夫人》，找寻经典的当下回响 [N]．解放日报，2024-08-22(14). [Xu Jun, "Musical

■ The Musical *Lady M*- Main Visual Poster

Consequently, all acts of violence in the musical are staged indirectly or partially obscured, often through spatial duels between characters. With audiences on both sides, Xu arranges movements along diagonal lines, using mirrored or inverted symmetry of bodies, combined with rotating floors and vertical lifts, creating a dynamically circulating flow of stage action. The stage thus functions as a vessel for emotion, inviting the audience to participate imaginatively in constructing the space, achieving an effect of "a realm emerging beyond the visible form."

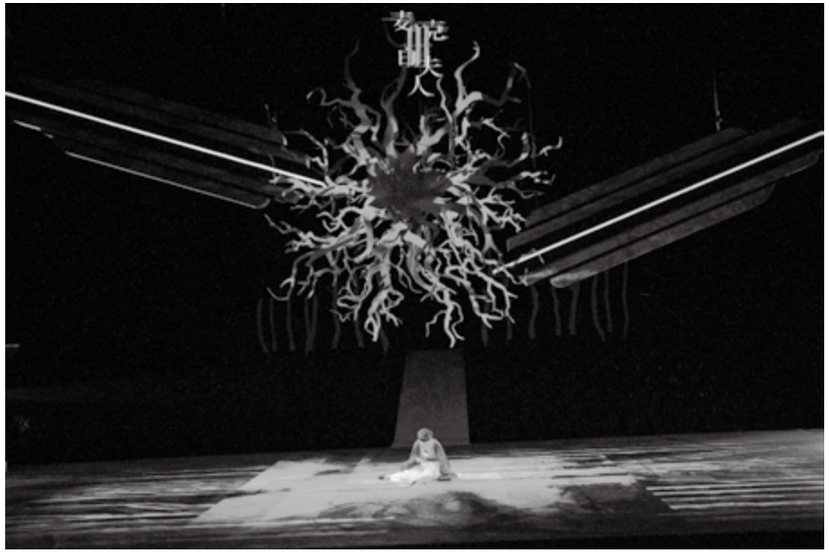
Xu Jun had previously experimented with bilingual staging in *Shimmer: A Story of Jews in Shanghai during WWII*, but *Lady M* is performed entirely in English, featuring musical theatre actors from Austria, Italy, and the UK participating in a Chinese musical for the first time. Their performance training revealed clear contrasts with native cultural practices; for instance, when conveying stylized, expressive movement, Xu required highly precise control over body shapes and gestures. In scenes depicting Lady Macbeth's interactions with her son in flashbacks, the actors were not permitted to use any props.

Xu Jun drew inspiration from Huang Zuolin's concept of "kinetic aesthetics" for actor training, emphasizing that the stage should create a convincing illusion through the actors' performance alone, rather than through the accumulation of physical objects. Initially, some foreign actors worried that performing without props might obscure the narrative and make it difficult for the audience to follow. Yet the final production demonstrated that both the actors and the international creative team were profoundly impressed by the modernized Chinese "xieyi" aesthetic projected on stage, which imbued the performance with a uniquely contemporary vitality.

Xu Jun believes that "just as *The Orphan of Zhao* once crossed oceans to bring the radiance of Chinese culture to the West, constantly sparking new dialogues, the 'Eastern' interpretations of *Hamlet* continue to inspire fresh readings, with its rich dramaturgy resonating across cultures."[1] In his reconstructions of Shakespeare for Chinese musical theatre, Xu emphasizes endowing characters with a modern consciousness through a strong problem-awareness, transforming the classic into a "contemporary brief history." In his cross-cultural translations and contemporary stagings, he consistently applies the Eastern "xieyi" aesthetic, allowing Western canonical texts to unfold new

Lady M: Seeking the Contemporary Resonance of a Classic," *Jiefang Daily*, 22 Aug. 2024 (14).]

1 沈杰群．音乐剧《哈姆雷特》：莎士比亚经典的东方表达 [N]．中国青年报 , 2023-09-08(5). [Shen Jiequn, "The Musical *Hamlet*: An Eastern Expression of the Shakespearean Classic," *China Youth Daily*, 8 Sept. 2023 (05).]



■ Production stills from the musical *Lady M*.

spectatorial dimensions through their spaces of silence and subtlety.

Conclusion: Renewing Contemporary Musical Theatre through Xieyi Spirit

Nurtured by Shanghai's cosmopolitan culture, enriched by traditional Chinese xiqu, and trained as a professional theatre director, Xu Jun has consistently pursued a practice rooted in domestic culture while remaining open to diverse influences, continuously exploring multidimensional possibilities for artistic expression. His musicals consistently foreground textual modernity and the secondary "xieyi"-inspired transformation, reflecting his aim of constructing a distinctly Chinese musical theatre. Over the years, he has established stable creative partnerships with artists such as composer Jin Peida (Hong Kong), lyricist Liang Mang, and lighting designer Xiao Lihe. In the current context of the rising "narrative musical," Xu actively advances an aesthetic that dynamically combines realism and "xieyi" expression.

In his works, literary, auditory, and visual-symbolic systems are equally emphasized, offering a "content-driven" model for China's original musical theatre. Whether integrating opera-inspired spatial construction into musical narrative logic or activating the cultural modernity of classic drama, Xu consistently engages in two-way excavation through cross-cultural collaboration. Building on experimental explorations that enhance the originality of Chinese musical theatre, his practice addresses a core question: how to renew contemporary musical theatre through national aesthetics, particularly the "xieyi" spirit. As Xu asserts: "Throughout the creation of musicals with Chinese characteristics, I have consistently adhered to the Chinese 'xieyi' spirit."[1] He elaborates:

"Integrating 'xieyi' into the stage language of Chinese musical theatre is to pursue a state of transcendence—where story, music, setting, and performance merge into one, conveying aesthetic resonance and the tension of life through refinement. The 'xieyi' of theatre emphasizes intentionality: actors must prioritize 'spiritual likeness' over mere physical resemblance. The setting follows the performer, the performer follows the setting, and the scenography emerges from the actor, creating rich, vibrant spaces. In musicals where form

1 徐俊．在音乐剧中融入中国写意精神 [J]．新剧本，2024 (1): 29. [Xu Jun. "Integrating the Spirit of Chinese 'Xieyi' into Musical Theatre." New Script, 2024 (1): 29.]

■ Production stills from the musical *Lady M*.

■ Production stills from the musical *Lady M*.

and spirit are harmonized, regardless of the source material, the work inevitably embodies the essence and style of Chinese culture. It is at once a musical with national characteristics and a musical with a global vocabulary—this is the creative direction I pursue and strive for."[1]

Xu Jun's dramaturgical practice extends beyond musical theatre. Over the past twenty years, his productions of spoken drama and traditional opera have frequently graced the stage. His recent direction of Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe's *My Grand View Garden*, which premiered in early 2025, generated significant cross-genre attention. By applying musical theatre aesthetics to classical opera, Xu has imbued traditional forms with new expressive dimensions, rejuvenating these art forms for younger audiences and drawing them into the world of Chinese xiqu.

From Xu Jun's body of work, it is evident that cross-cultural theatre goes beyond symbolic grafting; it connects the thought and poetry of Eastern and Western cultures, allowing different cultural lineages to coexist and give rise to new life on stage—a life deeply resonant with contemporary experience.

[Stage photos courtesy of the Shanghai Xu Jun Theatre Arts Center]

1 Ibid.

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The Practical Foundation and Development Path of Jingju in New Era Beijing

DING Wenqing, DAI Jinyi

Jingju (Peking Opera) represents the pinnacle of traditional Chinese xiqu (opera) and is often hailed as the "national theatre" of China. It synthesizes the strengths of regional xiqu forms such as Huiju (Hui Opera) and Hanju (Han Opera) while absorbing the essence of Kunqu, Qinqiang, and other traditional opera genres. The result is a distinctive artistic form, unique in its vocal style, spoken dialogue, performance techniques, and repertoire. Over its two-hundred-year history, Jingju has witnessed the vicissitudes of the Chinese nation and occupies an irreplaceable position in the more than eight-hundred-year history of Chinese opera.

In November 2010, UNESCO inscribed Jingju on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Following Kunqu (2001), Zangxi (Tibetan opera, 2009), and Cantonese Yueju (2009), it became the fourth Chinese xiqu tradition to receive this recognition, signaling broad international acknowledgment of its artistic and historical significance. In recent years, China's emphasis on its outstanding traditional culture has reached a new historical stage, recognizing it as a foundation for maintaining cultural confidence and positioning in a globalized cultural landscape. As a cultural treasure of the nation, Jingju has naturally drawn widespread attention. However, rapid social change and cultural diversification pose a pressing challenge: how can Jingju retain its artistic essence while achieving deep integration and innovative development in contemporary society?

Beijing, as both the cultural center of China and the birthplace of Jingju, has leveraged its abundant resources and rich cultural heritage to explore new paths that integrate the inheritance of xiqu with urban development.

I. Jingju as One of Beijing's Most Important Cultural Symbols

Cultural symbols are the most visible and accessible expressions of a city's cultural spirit. They carry historical memory while reflecting a city's cultural identity and developmental trajectory. Born in Beijing, Jingju is the city's most emblematic cultural symbol. The School of Arts & Communication at Beijing Normal University conducted a nationwide survey of university students on "the most representative Chinese and foreign cultural symbols" as part of a study on cultural soft power, identifying cultural symbols uniquely associated with Beijing.[1] The results showed that Jingju ranked highest. Among China's younger generation, it is recognized as the most well-known and representative symbol of Beijing culture, reflecting both an insightful understanding of world city development and a rational cultural recognition. Globally, major cities such as London, New York, Paris, and Tokyo are renowned for their distinctive performing arts cultures and have developed unique cultural activity brands.

The capital's culture is a core element of Beijing's charm and a central concern in its development in the new era. Jingju, as one of Beijing's most important cultural symbols, plays an indispensable role in the city's cultural construction—a reality grounded in both history and contemporary conditions. In recent years, as Beijing has worked to establish itself as the "City of Performing Arts," Jingju has achieved significant progress. Notably, Beijing has not only preserved and protected Jingju as a vital cultural resource but also promoted its deep integration with contemporary society through a range of innovative measures.

This development manifests in five key areas. First, Beijing has created a diversified network of performance spaces. Modern theatres such as the Chang'an Grand Theatre serve as central hubs, complemented by traditional venues including the Jixiang Theatre, the Zhengyici Theater, and Huguang Guild Hall, along with numerous smaller theatres. Together, these form a citywide matrix of Jingju performance spaces, bringing the art form closer to audiences across the capital.

Second, Beijing has produced a growing number of high-quality Jingju works that integrate ideological depth, artistic excellence, and audience appeal, such as *Nashi Guisong* (Taking His Land to the Song Empire), *Di Nü Hua* (The Flower

1 王一川：《北京文化符号与世界城市软实力建设》，《北京社会科学》2011 年第 2 期，第 6 页。[Wang Yichuan, "Beijing Cultural Symbols and the Construction of World City Soft Power", Beijing Social Sciences, 2011, No. 2, p. 6.]

■ The Zhengyici Theater

Princess), *Li Dazhao*, and *Dazha Men* (The Great Hall). Some of these works preserve classic repertoire, while others reflect contemporary social realities, achieving a synthesis of Jingju's historical heritage and modern relevance.

Third, Beijing has cultivated a substantial pool of young Jingju talent. Through professional training in specialized institutions, mentorship from master artists, and platforms such as Jingju festivals and exhibitions, a sustainable generational structure of performers has been established, ensuring the healthy transmission of skills and knowledge from senior to middle and junior generations.

Fourth, Beijing has advanced the international dissemination of Jingju. For example, during the 2025 Spring Festival, Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing performed in Peru, Brazil, Sweden, and Norway, bringing the art form to global audiences and significantly enhancing its international presence.

Fifth, Beijing has promoted the integration of Jingju with modern technologies. Immersive experiences using virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR),

and other digital tools have expanded the ways audiences can engage with Jingju. For instance, the "Digital Jingju" project digitally reconstructs famous scenes, signature excerpts, and character costumes, transforming them into perceptible, interactive formats. Additionally, online live streaming and short-video platforms have further broadened dissemination channels. Leveraging these opportunities, Beijing can continue to enhance Jingju's creative vitality and influence through policy guidance, financial support, and talent cultivation, positioning the art form as a vital vehicle for showcasing both national and urban cultural soft power.

II. Strengthening Research on Jingju's Ontology and Communication Theory

Theory underpins practice; in an era of rapid artistic development, rigorous theoretical research becomes increasingly critical. The construction and refinement of a theoretical system for Jingju are essential for its sustainable growth. Within the context of Beijing's ambitions to become a national cultural center and a "City of Performing Arts," academic research should address two key dimensions:

First, deepening the study of Jingju's artistic ontology and developing a systematic critical discourse. This involves mapping the historical evolution, stylistic schools, and performance practices of Jingju to construct a theoretically robust framework, providing a solid scholarly foundation for the art form's scientific and sustainable development.

Second, strengthening research on the relationship between Jingju development and Beijing's urban cultural construction. Evidence-based evaluation systems can measure Jingju's social and cultural impact, helping artists to align with contemporary trends and guiding audiences toward a more profound appreciation of the art form.

In the mid-1990s, Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff proposed the triple helix model, based on biological concepts, to analyze new forms of interaction among government, industry, and universities in the knowledge economy. They identified these three actors as critical elements of an innovative institutional environment, interconnected by market demands to drive innovation.

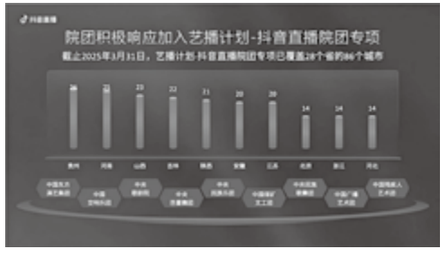
Beijing enjoys unique advantages for Jingju research. These include the National Peking Opera Company and Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing —

two nationally prominent companies—performance venues such as the Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre, Chang'an Grand Theatre, and Liyuan Theatre, as well as professional academic departments at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, Central Academy of Drama, and Beijing Vocational College of Opera and Arts. Moving forward, Beijing should foster closer collaboration among academic institutions, cultural policy bodies, and the Jingju community to advance both theoretical research and practical innovation.

Through symposiums, academic journals, and projects funded by the Beijing Social Science Foundation, research can be grounded in the city's cultural development while deepening understanding of Jingju. Building on classical paradigms, scholars can systematically analyze the ontology, evolution, cultural significance, and value dimensions of Jingju. By developing a comprehensive performance aesthetics framework combined with rigorous artistic critique, a contemporary theoretical system can be established to support Jingju's creative transformation and innovative development amid modernization.

In today's digitally-driven performance environment, it is also crucial to explore the dissemination mechanisms of Jingju. By leveraging internet-based strategies and digital technologies, the reach of the art form can be further expanded. A notable example is the "Arts Live-Streaming Program – TikTok Live Theatre Troupes Initiative," launched in April 2023 by the China Association of Performing Arts and Douyin under the guidance of the Market Management Division of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism—a pioneering initiative in the field.

Beijing can leverage its abundant Jingju performance resources to establish a digital creation and performance model that seamlessly integrates online and offline platforms, combining live and streamed performances. This approach enriches the supply of high-quality content and enhances audience engagement. Specifically, by building platforms and providing reporting resources, it supports collaborations between live-streaming and short-video platforms and Jingju troupes. For example, new media platforms offer professional training and traffic support to Jingju troupes and practitioners, encouraging more troupes



■ Scope of the Arts Live-Streaming Program – TikTok Live Theatre Troupes Initiative

and artists to bring live performances and educational initiatives into the digital streaming space, thereby unleashing the potential of Jingju through the fusion of art and technology.

III. Integrating Jingju Performances with Modern Life

The rich cultural heritage of Jingju has produced a wide variety of subjects and diverse performance styles across multiple schools. However, the enduring vitality of Jingju lies in its ability to continuously absorb contemporary cultural essence and incorporate modern aesthetics. Jingju itself emerged from the convergence of multiple theatrical traditions, with its artistic forms and performance systems rooted in historical collaborations with Huiju, Hanju, Qinqiang, Kunqu, Yiyangqiang, and Bangzi. Through ongoing artistic exchange and technical integration, Jingju gradually refined its core characteristics. Since the 1960s, the simultaneous promotion of traditional plays, newly written historical dramas, and modern plays has become the guiding principle for Jingju repertoire creation, greatly advancing the art form's high-quality development.

The new era defines the historical orientation of contemporary arts. The high-quality development of Beijing Jingju is not only reflected in the careful refinement and revival of traditional repertoires but also in the active exploration of modern themes and contemporary life. It embodies the principle of "following the rules of the ancients while creating something new." Any art form, including Jingju, risks losing its resonance if creative practice becomes detached from real-life experience, leading to a disconnect between aesthetic value and the spirit of the times, and diminishing its expressive vitality. Other theatre forms provide illustrative examples: Lao She's 1950 play *Dragon Beard Ditch* and the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe's modern play *Qiantangli* both resonate with audiences because they engage deeply with contemporary life and reflect the spirit of their times, rejuvenating artistic expression.

Beijing, home to China's top troupes and leading artists, bears a responsibility to mine contemporary social life for artistic inspiration. Jingju works should reflect the characteristics of the times, expressing modern emotions through traditional singing styles, portraying contemporary social forms and everyday life within established performance conventions, and integrating Jingju stage arts into urban life while continuously expanding their expressive and aesthetic boundaries. In this regard, Beijing has already undertaken significant initiatives,

■ The Promotional Poster of Jingju *Taking His Land to the Song Empire.*

particularly in newly written historical plays. For example, the Beijing Performing Arts Service Platform recently launched the "Outstanding Works of Chinese Traditional Culture" performance season, featuring both classic Jingju pieces by city-affiliated troupes—such as *Guarding the Nation·Visiting the Royal Tomb·Entering the Palace for the Second Time*—and adapted or newly created works, including the Yueju adaptation *Five Daughters Celebrating a Grand Birthday* and the historical play T*aking His Land to the Song Empire*. These works combine artistic value, historical depth, and contemporary relevance.

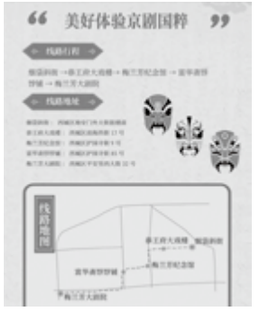
Each era produces its own unique art. While preserving the traditional charm of Jingju, Beijing must also strengthen the creation and staging of modern plays to align the art form with contemporary audience aesthetics. On one hand, Jingju should embrace social transformation, incorporating current events, people's lives, and national developments into its repertoire, using its unique performance techniques and aesthetic language to reflect contemporary Chinese society and spirit. On the other hand, innovation in performance is essential, employing modern stage technology, costume design, and musical elements to offer audiences a fresh and immersive theatrical experience.

IV. Creating Urban Spaces that Integrate Jingju

In recent years, immersive performances and live-streamed shows have grown in popularity, demonstrating that Jingju stage art need not be confined to traditional theatres. It can extend into Beijing's streets, parks, and public squares through interactive, experiential performances, bringing Jingju closer to citizens and embedding it into everyday urban life. In the context of modernization and Beijing's development as the national cultural center, urban renewal should not only focus on physical infrastructure but also on cultural functionality, integrating Jingju into the cityscape to create dedicated artistic spaces.

By the end of 2024, the Beijing Trade Association for Performances officially recognized and awarded the first batch of 25 "New Performance Spaces" at the municipal level, including traditional theatres such as the Zhengyici Theatre.

These new spaces not only transform the venues for artistic creation and performance but also signify cross-disciplinary expansion and a deeper connection between artists and audiences.[1]



■ Beijing "Experience the Essence of Jingju" Themed Tour Route.

Performing arts play a vital role in shaping urban culture. Globally, major cities are recognized cultural centers known for distinctive performing arts scenes and unique cultural event brands. Building on new performance spaces, Beijing can further develop urban art districts focused on creation, presentation, and audience engagement while integrating historical heritage, cultural imagination, and diverse characteristics. As an iconic cultural symbol, Jingju has enormous potential in this regard.

For example, ahead of the 13th China Art Festival, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism launched a themed cultural tour titled "Experience the Essence of Jingju" . This initiative covered key sites such as Yandai Xiejie in Xicheng District, the Gongwangfu Grand Theatre, the Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum, Fuhuazhai Pastry Shop, and the Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre.

Through this tour, residents and visitors could enjoy classic Jingju performances, deepen their understanding of its history and culture, and experience the fusion of tradition and modernity, appreciating Jingju's unique urban charm. Beijing should continue to promote such integrative models, leveraging and revitalizing cultural resources while enhancing regional planning. The inscription of the "Beijing Central Axis: A Building Ensemble Exhibiting the Ideal Order of the Chinese Capital" on the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2024 further provides an opportunity. Tea houses, theatres, guild halls, and modern venues along the Central Axis form a unique Beijing theatre ecosystem. While Broadway in New York and London's West End focus on Western musicals and plays, Beijing possesses traditional theatre resources centered on Jingju, forming a distinctive cultural identity for its development as a "City of Performing Arts." Going forward, Beijing can learn from global best practices, using new performance spaces to create Jingju-themed streets, parks, and cultural districts that combine historical exhibitions, performances, cultural interpretation, and creative industries, establishing world-class production and

1 胡娜．演艺新空间涵养艺术之美［N］．人民日报，2 024-01-23 (020). [Hu Na, "New Performance Spaces Cultivate Artistic Beauty", People's Daily, 2024-01-23(020).]

dissemination hubs centered on Jingju.

V. Expanding Societal Support for Jingju

Financial support is a common global practice for fostering cultural development. Many countries and cities maintain funding programs to support local arts. In 2016, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism established the Beijing Cultural and Art Fund—the first provincial-level cultural fund in China—aimed at promoting artistic creation, cultural exchange, and talent cultivation through innovative guidance and financial support, thereby stimulating social creativity. From 2016 to 2024, the Fund supported 925 projects, including 58 Jingju-related projects (~6%). By category: stage art creation (16 projects, ~3%), dissemination and exchange (14 projects, ~5%), and talent cultivation (28 projects, ~15%).

■ Beijing Cultural and Arts Fund–Supported Programs for Talent Development in Jingju Arts

The high proportion of funding for talent development demonstrates Beijing's strong commitment to Jingju inheritance, providing platforms for young artists to learn from established masters. Support for stage art creation and dissemination spans a wide range of applicants, including state-run troupes and conservatories (Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing, Beijing Fenglei Peking Opera Troupe, National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts), private troupes, performance companies, and social organizations, as well as individual applicants. This broad coverage stimulates creativity across the Jingju community.

Beyond government support, enterprises, social organizations, and individuals should be encouraged to participate in preserving, promoting, and innovating Jingju. Enterprises can sponsor productions, performances, and educational activities, enhancing brand image and fulfilling social responsibility. Social organizations can act as bridges, mobilizing enthusiasts, amateur performers, and volunteers to expand Jingju's audience. Individuals can contribute through donations, volunteer work, or in-kind support. Additionally, dedicated Jingju development funds and public welfare projects can channel more social resources into the art form, jointly fostering its prosperity.

Conclusion

Culture requires roots to endure and a soul to thrive. The flourishing of traditional culture is essential to safeguarding China's heritage. In the new era, Beijing's Jingju continues to grow in subject matter and performance forms, guided by two complementary currents. First, under the national strategy of cultivating cultural confidence and building a strong socialist cultural nation, preserving and promoting Chinese traditional culture strengthens national soft power. Second, as Beijing develops as the national cultural center, Jingju not only carries historical memory but also drives cultural innovation in the capital. Together, these currents promote the innovative development of Jingju stage arts, infusing them with vitality.

Beijing has supported Jingju through robust policies and a healthy industry ecosystem, yielding rich creative and artistic achievements. Looking ahead, strengthening theoretical research, promoting realistic creation, and innovating dissemination will ensure Jingju remains central to the "Grand Theatre in Beijing" cultural brand, serving as a benchmark for the live inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and radiating contemporary cultural vitality.

Funding: This article is a phase research outcome of the Beijing High-Level Cultural Talent Training Program project "Innovative Development of Jingju Stage Arts in Beijing in the New Era: Subject Matter and Performance Forms".

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Promotion and Exchange of *Chinese Performing Arts* in France and Belgium

LU Nan

Chinese Performing Arts (CPA) launched in 2019, is an English-language journal jointly founded by the Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA) and the International Theatre Institute (ITI), and hosted by STA's International Theatre Studies Center (ITSC). Its co-editors-in-chief are Tobias Biancone, Director General of ITI, and Professor Gong Baorong of STA, with an editorial board composed of scholars from around the world, including prominent French academics such as Patrice Pavis, Jean-Pierre Wurtz, and Ms. Fu Qiumin.

Dedicated to presenting the richness and diversity of Chinese performing arts to global readers, CPA introduces the unique aesthetics of Chinese theatre to scholars and enthusiasts worldwide. Its coverage spans Jingju, modern drama, Kunqu, Yueju, Cantonese Yueju, Huangmei Xi, Chuanju, dance, Qinqiang, Yuju, and more. Since its inaugural issue in October 2019, the journal has published

■ Exhibition of CPA at Paris 3.

■ Professor Gong Baorong, Editor-in-Chief of CPA, delivering a keynote lecture.

■ Representatives from Paris 3—including program directors and the university librarian—delivering opening remarks

ten issues, systematically documenting major genres of traditional Chinese performing arts and expanding their international visibility through its English-language format.

In December 2024, a delegation from the Shanghai Theatre Academy led by Professor Gong Baorong visited leading universities and arts institutions in France and Belgium. The visit aimed to promote CPA overseas and strengthen cooperation with theatre institutions in these two countries in academic research, cultural exchange, and the international dissemination of contemporary Chinese theatre.

The delegation first held academic lectures and seminars at Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, one of Europe's and the world's foremost centers for theatre studies. The humanities disciplines at Paris 3 consistently rank among the highest in France, and many fields are listed within the world's top 100. Professor Gong Baorong delivered a keynote lecture on the development of contemporary Chinese theatre, using "Chinese Performing Arts" as a focal point for discussion. Professor Chen Jun, Director of the Library and Editor-in-Chief of Theatre Arts, introduced the journal's structure and editorial vision. French sinologists, translators, and directors participated in a roundtable discussion, followed by enthusiastic exchanges with Paris 3 faculty and students.

During this overseas promotional tour, Professor Gong and the editorial team also visited the Belgian Centre for Theatre Research and the Royal Conservatory of Liège, where they held in-depth discussions with the institution's president and resident directors. The Conservatory is one of four major higher arts institutes in Belgium's French-speaking region and has long

■ The delegation meeting with the president and directors of the Royal Conservatory of Liège

■ The delegation presenting the French special issue of CPA to the artistic director of Opéra Royal de Wallonie-Liège

played an important role in cultivating theatre talents.

The delegation also visited the University of Liège Theatre, engaging its director in substantive dialogue on future cooperation. The University of Liège—one of Europe's oldest public universities—has evolved over two centuries into a world-renowned comprehensive institution known for its rigorous academic standards. Its theatre plays a key role in advancing theatre education and cultural development in the region.

Additionally, the delegation attended a contemporary theatre production at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie-Liège, participated in the post-show discussion, and presented the theatre's artistic director with a French-language special issue of CPA, "Le Spectacle vivant en Chine". These visits strengthened ties between CPA, the Shanghai Theatre Academy, and leading theatre schools and cultural institutions in France and Belgium, laying the groundwork for long-term, mutually beneficial collaboration.

Through academic exchange and institutional visits, CPA successfully expanded its visibility in European academic and artistic circles. The journal has enabled international scholars to better understand the historical development and contemporary landscape of Chinese theatre. This cultural outreach has further enhanced dialogue and mutual learning between Chinese and Western theatre traditions.

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Across Languages and Stages: A Century of Chinese Spoken Drama in the United States

YANG Yichen

Introduction

Since its emergence in the early 20th century, Chinese spoken drama has developed from an imported experiment into a complex and expressive modern art form. Beyond its flourishing in China, it has also made its way onto the global stage, where it has played a meaningful role in cultural dialogue—especially in the United States. From Hong Shen's pioneering work in introducing Chinese stories through English performances, to the mid-century appearances of modern Chinese theatrical canon, and to the collaborative campus productions and professional tours in later decades, Chinese drama has continually deepened theatrical and cultural exchange between the two nations.

This study traces more than a century of such encounters, showing how artistic exchange, translation, and adaptation shaped the public imagination of China in the United States. Rather than a linear history, it is a story of recurring engagement—where each generation redefines how Chinese drama can speak across linguistic, cultural, and ideological divides. Looking ahead, this longstanding dialogue continues to inspire new experiments in bilingual performance, collaborative theater-making, and potentially digital dissemination, suggesting that Chinese spoken drama's international journey is still unfolding.

1. Seeds of Exchange: Hong Shen and the Beginnings of China-U.S. Theatrical Dialogue

Hong Shen (1894–1955) was one of the key pioneers of modern Chinese drama and a trailblazer in China-U.S. theatrical exchanges. His time in the United States played a crucial role in shaping his artistic vision, as it was there that he received systematic training in Western theatrical theory and techniques. During this period, Hong Shen not only mastered Western methods but also creatively integrated them with Chinese themes, paving the way for the internationalization of Chinese drama. This transformative experience not only established his pivotal position in the history of Chinese spoken drama but also made him a vital cultural bridge between China and the United States.

In 1916, Hong Shen enrolled at The Ohio State University to study ceramic engineering. While pursuing his technical studies, he took a course on "Modern Dramatic Techniques" and developed a deep interest in Western modern drama. During this time, he wrote a three-act English play, *The Wedded Husband*, inspired by the Late-Qing-born writer Bao Tianxiao's (1876–1973) novel *A Strand of Hemp* (*Yi Lü Ma*). The play explored themes of family ethics within Chinese society, blending Chinese cultural narratives with Western dramatic structures.

In April 1918, *The Wedded Husband* was successfully staged at Ohio State University, performed by a cast of both Chinese and American students, with Hong Shen himself taking the lead role. This event marked a historic moment as the first English-language play written and staged by a Chinese individual in the United States. The production received enthusiastic praise from local newspapers, highlighting its cultural significance. In 1921, the script was published in the prestigious American literary journal *Poet Lore*, making it the first English-language play by a Chinese playwright to appear in a Western academic publication. This accomplishment represented a milestone in the global dissemination of modern Chinese drama.

In addition to *The Wedded Husband*, Hong Shen authored other notable works, including the one-act play *Return* and the three-act play *The Rainbow*. These plays echoed the anti-imperialist and patriotic sentiments prevalent in China at the time, illustrating Hong Shen's commitment to using theater as a medium for social critique and political expression. Through these works, Hong Shen established himself as a dramatist who could skillfully merge artistic creativity with a strong sense of social responsibility.

In 1919, Hong Shen began his studies in drama at Harvard University, where he trained under the renowned George Pierce Baker (1866–1935). At Harvard, he deepened his understanding of Western theatrical theory and refined his creative techniques, setting the stage for some of his most influential works. Among the plays he wrote during this period, *Mulan Joins the Army* stood out as the most impactful and enduring.

In February 1921, *Mulan Joins the Army* premiered at the Cort Theater on Broadway in New York City. Inspired by the legendary tale of Hua Mulan, the play featured English dialogue rendered in the rhythmic style of traditional Chinese opera. It retained the costumes and performance techniques characteristic of classical Chinese theater, resulting in a striking blend of Eastern and Western artistic traditions. Performed by Hong Shen and a group of Chinese students from Columbia University, the production was staged eight times across cities including New York and Washington. It received widespread acclaim from American audiences for its cultural richness and artistic innovation. The proceeds from the performances, totaling over $10,000, were donated to flood relief efforts in China, further demonstrating Hong Shen's commitment to using theater as a tool for social impact.

Reflecting on the play's success, Hong Shen noted that the success of *Mulan Joins the Army*, performed in English, paved the way for future productions of Chinese drama—even those without English dialogue—to be warmly received in the United States. His observation proved prophetic. In 1930, the celebrated Chinese opera performer Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) toured the United States, captivating audiences and achieving tremendous success. Much of this enthusiasm stemmed from the foundation laid by Hong Shen's earlier efforts to introduce Chinese theatrical traditions to the West.

In 1922, Hong Shen returned to China and dedicated himself to the development of Chinese drama and cinema. One of his most notable works from this period was the three-act psychological drama *Zhao Yanwang* (*Yama Zhao*). By adapting Eugene O'Neill's (1888–1953) psychological and experimental techniques in *The Emperor Jones* to a Chinese context, Hong Shen created a groundbreaking piece of early Chinese modernist drama. This work exemplified his ability to merge Western theatrical innovations with Chinese themes, which promoted the modernization of Chinese theater.

Hong Shen's theatrical activities in the United States were groundbreaking, as his works were the first to present Chinese themes in English to American audiences, advancing the internationalization of Chinese drama. Through plays like *The Wedded Husband* and *Mulan Joins the Army*, he blended Chinese cultural elements with Western dramaturgy, showcasing a unique vision of

Chinese theater.

Moreover, by integrating Chinese and Western theatrical traditions, Hong Shen expanded the global reach of Chinese drama while maintaining its distinct identity. His legacy highlights the creative potential of cultural exchange, demonstrating how cross-cultural dialogue can inspire new forms of artistic expression. Today, his contributions remain a cornerstone of China-U.S. theatrical collaboration, emphasizing the lasting impact of cultural interaction.

2. On the Eve of the Founding of the P.R.C.: From White House Performance to Translated Adaptation of Chinese Canon

In 1943, at the invitation of the U.S. government, Chinese actress and playwright Wang Ying (1913–1974), then studying and working in the United States, performed the wartime drama *Put Down Your Whip* (*Fangxia Nide Bianzi*) at the White House. The play, a powerful protest against the Japanese invasion of China, was warmly received by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and senior officials. This historic performance not only highlighted the resilience of the Chinese people during a time of war but also made Wang Ying the first Chinese performer in history to appear at the White House.

Another significant work, *Peking Man* (*Beijing Ren*), written by Cao Yu, followed in its footsteps and left its own impression on the American stage. While *Put Down Your Whip* focused on urgent socio-political realities, Peking Man delved deeply into the complexities of family, tradition, and modernity, presenting a more introspective and universal narrative.

Cao Yu (1910–1996), often hailed as the father of modern Chinese drama, holds a unique and unparalleled position in Chinese theater history. Renowned for his masterful storytelling and psychological depth, he is celebrated as one of the greatest playwrights of the 20th century. *Peking Man*, a play completed in late 1940 is one of his iconic works.

In 1946, Cao Yu visited the United States at the invitation of the U.S. State Department. Some documents show that, during his stay, a Chinese-language version of *Peking Man* was performed by Chinese Americans in a western U.S. city in August that year. This marked the play's first staging on American soil, introducing it to a new audience in its original language. It was not until April 1949 that *Peking Man* had its official English-language premiere in the West.

The production took place at Los Angeles City College's Bungalow Stage and was part of a collaboration with Los Angeles State University, running for four consecutive nights, from April 27 to April 30.

The English adaptation used a script developed by Canadian playwright and director Reginald Lawrence, who had worked closely with Cao Yu to create the translation. However, this adaptation diverged significantly from the original Chinese text. The number of characters was reduced from 19 to 14, with some roles eliminated entirely. Other changes included the renaming and redefinition of characters to align with Western cultural and linguistic norms, including adjustments for easier pronunciation. For example, Chen Nai-ma (Nanny Chen) became "Nurse Huang," and "Su Fang" was renamed "Nan Fang." These adjustments reflected both cultural misunderstandings and practical challenges in adapting the play for Western audiences.

The English version also introduced structural changes, such as assigning the plot a specific year—1936, a significant year that marked the beginning of the joint effort of the Chinese Communists and Nationalists to resist Japanese aggression. Intermissions were added between acts, and specific time markers were included. However, translation errors, such as noting the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival as "The Moon Festival. October, midday," revealed a lack of cultural nuance.

The U.S. performances of *Put Down Your Whip* and *Peking Man* were groundbreaking efforts to introduce Chinese drama to Western audiences before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. These productions not only showcased the richness of Chinese theatrical artistry but also highlighted the challenges of adapting and translating Chinese plays for a different cultural context. Despite their imperfections, these early attempts to stage Chinese plays abroad laid the groundwork for the global appreciation of Chinese theater and its rich artistic legacy, underscoring the enduring significance of cultural exchange.

3. Campus Bridges: Chinese Spoken Drama in American Universities in the 1980s–1990s

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of Chinese spoken dramas "went abroad" through collaborations with American universities. These exchanges created important platforms for cultural transmission and cross-cultural dialogue in the

theatrical arts. Representative cases of this period include Ying Ruocheng's work in directing both Chinese originals and Western classics in U.S. institutions of higher learning, as well as the Nankai University English Drama Society's U.S. tour of an English-language *Thunderstorm* (*Lei Yü*). Such activities not only highlighted the artistic qualities of Chinese spoken drama, but also opened new pathways for Sino–American cultural exchange.

A particularly significant form of these intercultural initiatives involved Chinese theater artists entering American classrooms and engaging students through a combination of instruction and performance. Ying Ruocheng stands out as a prominent figure in this regard.

Ying (1929–2003) was one of modern China's most influential actors, directors, translators, and cultural mediators. Trained in English literature and fluent in both Chinese and English, he became a key figure in bridging Chinese and Western theater, particularly active during the 1980s. As one of the earliest members and later the vice president of the Beijing People's Art Theater, he not only performed in canonical Chinese works such as Lao She's (1899–1996) *Teahouse* (*Chao Guan*), but also translated and played the leading part in Arthur Miller's (1915–2005) *Death of a Salesman*—a Chinese production that Miller himself directed, which won recognition both domestically and abroad. Beyond the Beijing stage, Ying held roles as China's Vice Minister of Culture (1986–1990) and appeared in international films like *The Last Emperor* (1987), which further broadened his global profile. His life and career illustrate how an individual artist could operate as a powerful cultural intermediary: making Chinese theater legible abroad, enriching China's theater through international collaboration, and cultivating enduring platforms for intercultural dialogue.

In the early 1980s Ying was invited to teach at the University of Missouri and Virginia Commonwealth University, where he supervised student productions of modern Chinese plays. In 1982, he directed Missouri students in Ba Jin's (1904–2005) *The Family* (*Jia*), one of the most influential works of Chinese modern literature and drama. The play, adapted from Ba Jin's acclaimed novel, depicts the emotional and moral collapse of an aristocratic Chengdu household during the early Republican era, portraying the suffocating grip of feudal ethics on a younger generation yearning for freedom and self-determination. Under Ying's direction, the Missouri students explored the play's intergenerational conflict and humanist ideals through detailed character work and symbolic staging. The production not only introduced American audiences to the sociopolitical conscience of modern Chinese literature but also served as a practical lesson in how social realism could be rendered through performance.

Two years later, Ying extended this experiment into the realm of traditional performance by staging *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwu Guan*) with the Missouri Repertory Theater. The play, a crime drama originating from the Ming-Qing storytelling tradition, revolves around a gripping miscarriage of justice and the subsequent pursuit of truth. The story highlights the crucial importance of evidence-based investigation and the perils of subjective presumption, championing the timeless values of fairness and diligent governance. By presenting this story, Ying emphasized the enduring values of fairness, compassion, and karmic retribution embedded in Chinese performance traditions. His effort, often educational and experimental in nature, combined classroom learning with stage practice. In doing so, he cultivated future audiences and researchers, laying an intellectual and artistic foundation for an enduring interest in Chinese drama within American academia.

In 1993, Ying directed Liu Jinyun's (1938–2024) contemporary play *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana* (*Gou'erye niepan*) at Virginia Commonwealth University. The play tells the story of a peasant—mockingly called "Doggie"—and his family's elusive dream of prosperity across half a century of Chinese history. Structurally, the play borrows from the stream-of-consciousness techniques in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, making it a direct product of China-U. S. theatrical dialogue. This experiment demonstrated that Chinese drama in the United States could be understood not only through performances of canonical texts but also through contemporary original works. The production offered American audiences a distinctively "Chinese perspective," illuminating tensions and reflections in modern Chinese society. By staging these works, Ying fostered opportunities for academic discussion and comparative theater research, showing that what was being transplanted was not merely theatrical form but also cultural and intellectual approaches.

In the same year, his direction of *Death of a Salesman* with students at the College of William and Mary represented a kind of "reverse feeding," highlighting the unique mediating role a Chinese artist could play within American theater circles. Having previously collaborated with Arthur Miller in the Beijing production of the same play, Ying brought to the U.S. classroom a rare insider's understanding of how Western dramatic realism had been interpreted—and transformed—on Chinese soil. By guiding American students through this cross-cultural lens, he effectively reversed the usual direction of cultural transmission: instead of Chinese artists learning from Western models, here a Chinese practitioner reintroduced an American classic inflected with Chinese performative and philosophical sensibilities.

Parallel to Ying's personal practice, the English Drama Society at Nankai

University developed another channel for bringing Chinese drama to American campuses. This endeavor owed much to the efforts of Roland Fischer (Chinese name: Fei Nianhua), an American professor from St. Cloud State University who began teaching at Nankai in 1982 together with his wife. During their five-year tenure in the Department of English, the Fischers nurtured generations of students by encouraging them to stage Chinese plays in English, opening drama as a new pathway for language learning and cultural exchange. The group performed at more than ten universities and colleges across Minnesota and California, including St. Cloud State University, the University of Minnesota, and Stanford University, attracting a cumulative audience of over four thousand. The tour generated enthusiastic local press coverage and widespread interest among students and faculty. Reports in campus newspapers highlighted the production's vitality and the students' professionalism, emphasizing how this effort opened a new channel for intercultural exchange between young theater enthusiasts in China and the United States.

The following year Fischer led the same troupe on a second tour with Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*), deepening and expanding the momentum generated by their earlier success. Performed in English and adapted for American audiences, the play vividly portrayed the struggles and resilience of ordinary people in modern Beijing, offering an accessible yet thought-provoking introduction to Chinese social realism. These pioneering tours marked the first time a Chinese student troupe had brought such classics overseas in English, directly introducing modern Chinese theater to a wide body of young American audiences. Having established an enduring bond with Nankai, Fischer was later honored with the Tianjin Municipality's "Haihe Friendship Award" (2009). At the university's centennial celebration in 2019, the "Fischer Theater Fund" was inaugurated to recognize his devotion, ensuring that his vision of linking Chinese drama to the global stage would inspire future generations.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese spoken drama in the United States found its most fertile setting not on commercial stages but within universities. Campus theaters transformed drama into a space for education and cross-cultural exchange, free from market pressures and driven by intellectual curiosity. Collaborations led by Ying Ruocheng and Roland Fischer demonstrated how theatrical production could serve as language practice, cultural diplomacy, and artistic exploration at once. Rather than merely transferring Chinese plays into a foreign context, these ventures fostered collaborative environments where students and audiences engaged with new dramatic forms and social ideas. In this process, university stages became true cultural bridges, laying the foundation for academic study and cultivating

a generation whose understanding of modern China was deepened through performance.

4. New Voices: Chinese Spoken Drama on American Stages in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, Chinese spoken drama has developed a layered presence on American stages. This phenomenon continues the cross-cultural theater exchange that began in the 20th century, yet it also reflects the changing dynamics of globalization and cultural dialogue. Today, individuals, community troupes, academic institutions, and national theaters all contribute—in their distinct ways—to the "going global" trajectory of Chinese spoken drama.

Actor-director Jia Yiping (1977–) epitomizes the persistence of individual-artist-led cultural outreach. Born in Wuhan, Hubei Province, he grew up behind the stage of the Hubei Han Opera Theater, where his father was a performer. Immersed in this theatrical environment from an early age, he made his first stage appearance at three and later received formal training in drama. After graduating from the Central Academy of Drama, one of the most prestigious drama schools in China, Jia joined the National Theater Company of China, appearing in major productions, and won the Best Newcomer Award at the 7th Huabiao Awards (one of the three major film awards on the Chinese mainland) for his debut film *A Silent River* (2000).

Jia's move to the United States, initially made to accompany his family, coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which left him unexpectedly stranded in Southern California. The sudden disruption also gave him an extended period of reflection on the state of Chinese theater abroad. Observing the vibrant diversity of local performing arts alongside the near-total absence of Chinese spoken drama on American stages, he became increasingly aware of the gap between China's rich stage tradition and its limited international representation. Determined to address this scarcity, Jia mobilized his professional experience and artistic network to establish the Time Theater Collective (TTC) in 2022, a nonprofit company based in Orange County, California. Conceived as both a creative hub and a cultural bridge, TTC brought together theater practitioners from mainland China, overseas students, and local community enthusiasts eager to reimagine Chinese stories for English-speaking audiences.

In July 2024, Jia led the troupe to a new milestone with their own version of Cao Yu's *The Wilderness* at the Irvine Barclay Theater, the city's largest professional venue. Performed entirely in Chinese with English surtitles, the production transformed the setting and character relationships to suit a contemporary aesthetic, intensifying the play's violent passions and moral perplexities. The performance drew considerable attention from local reviewers and theatergoers, who praised its visual energy, intense performances, and its contribution to broadening the visibility of Chinese drama on the North American stage.

Jia himself played Qiu Hu, opposite Wu Jing—an actress from the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre who flew from Shanghai to join the cast—and supported by a team of graduates from major Chinese arts academies. The adaptation sharpened Cao Yu's psychological tensions, forcing every character to confront moral boundaries and emotional extremes. According to local reports, distinguished cultural figures and industry professionals attended the performances, reflecting TTC's growing standing in the local cultural scene.

Following the show, Jia invited the entire backstage team and volunteers onto the stage for a collective bow, thanking audiences for their support since the first preview in 2023, and commented that the production was the start of a long conversation between Chinese drama and American audiences.

When discussing future plans, Jia revealed that the troupe had received invitations to tour multiple cities throughout North America, with additional interest from Europe and China. He also announced an upcoming bilingual production of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, which will blend Chinese and Western theatrical traditions by incorporating Chinese performance techniques into the staging.

Jia envisions the company as a laboratory for crosscultural theater making, one that will attract young talents and build professional bridges between artists at home and abroad. His journey echoes the pioneering spirit of Hong Shen and Ying Ruocheng, demonstrating how individual initiative continues to propel China's theatrical voice across linguistic and national borders.

While community troupes like Jia's operate within local Chinese diasporas, student theater societies in American universities have also become significant cultural agents. Princeton Chinese Theater, founded by Chinese and Sinophone students at Princeton University, has carried forward both classical and contemporary repertoires. Its productions have included such canonical works as *Thunderstorm* and *Secret Love in the Land of the Peach Blossoms* (*Anlian Taohuayuan*), as well as an original play, *Waiting* (*Dengdai*).

Waiting, directed and written by Tan Juanhe of Class 2013, interweaves seven characters' stories around the shared theme of waiting—between memory and hope, reality and illusion. This creative synthesis demonstrates not only a reverence for China's dramatic heritage but also a new creative energy among younger generations abroad. Campus drama thus functions as both cultural preservation and renewal, giving Chinese spoken drama an intellectual and creative afterlife in the global academy.

Parallel to these grassroots and academic endeavors, state-supported cultural programs have played an equally central role in expanding China's international theater presence. National institutions such as the National Theater Company of China, the Tianjin People's Art Theater, and the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre have repeatedly toured the United States, serving as flagships of official cultural diplomacy.

In 2014, to mark the 35th anniversary of China-U.S. diplomatic relations, the National Theater Company of China presented two outstanding productions in New York and Washington, D.C.: *Richard III*, directed by Wang Xiaoying (1957–), and *Green Snake* (*Qingshe*), directed by Tian Qinxin (1968–). *Richard III* reimagined Shakespeare through a Chinese lens, blending stylized gestures, percussion, and a minimalist "two-tables–four-chairs" staging inspired by traditional Chinese opera. Subsequent large-scale productions, such as the Tianjin People's Art Theater's *Legendary Diva* (*Fenghua Juedai*), starring one of China's most prominent actresses Liu Xiaoqing (1957–), toured Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and New York. These performances continued the trend, demonstrating both the organizational capacity and artistic maturity of China's national theaters.

Yet despite these achievements, spoken drama continues to be overshadowed by more accessible forms such as music, dance, and folk arts. For example, the 2024 "Shanghai Day" at Lincoln Center featured ballet, traditional music, and animation exhibitions—but no live dramatic performance. This omission highlights the enduring linguistic and narrative barriers that hinder the international circulation of Chinese spoken theater. As *The New York Times* critic Jason Zinoman noted in his review "English King, Pacific Profile," the National Theatre Company of China's *Richard III* vividly exemplified this challenge: performed entirely in Mandarin and largely without supertitles, the production dazzled with its visual design yet left many English-speaking viewers detached, for, as Zinoman remarked, "the core of Shakespeare's greatness is his language." His observation captures a central tension in cross-cultural

performance—the difficulty of translating dramatic language without diminishing its emotional and aesthetic force. Consequently, even when Chinese theater achieves technical sophistication and artistic flair, its linguistic dependence makes it far less portable than nonverbal art forms whose meanings travel more freely across cultural boundaries.

Concluding Remarks

A century of Chinese spoken drama in the United States reveals a dynamic and enduring process of encounter rather than a completed narrative. From Hong Shen's early forays into transnational theater to twenty-first-century productions such as Jia Yiping's *The Wilderness*, each moment reflects an evolving conversation about how language, performance, and identity intersect across borders. These histories show that Chinese drama abroad has thrived most where curiosity outweighed hierarchy—on university stages, in community theaters, and in the small but persistent circles of intercultural collaboration.

Yet the story also exposes a persistent paradox: spoken drama, precisely because it depends on language and live interpretation, remains the most challenging art form to transmit globally. As critics like Jason Zinoman observed, translation often cannot convey the musicality and nuance that animate a play's emotional power. However, this vulnerability need not signal limitation. It may instead encourage new creativity—through bilingual performance, immersive technology, and cooperative playwriting that allow voices from different cultures to share the same stage without erasing their distinctions.

Chinese spoken drama's path in the United States thus stands as a microcosm of modern cultural exchange itself—marked by missteps, breakthroughs, and continual reimagining. Its next act will be written by artists, educators, and audiences who transform the stage once again into a meeting point between languages and worlds. As long as this dialogue continues, the curtain may close on individual performances but never on the conversation they sustain.

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Introduction to Classical Plays (XII)

LI Zhijuan

Shang Yang

In 1989, Yao Yuan wrote the play *Shang Yang*, adapted from the historical event known as the "Reform of Shang Yang." Shang Yang was one of the most renowned politicians and military strategists of the Warring States period, and a leading figure of the intellectual school known as "Fajia" (the School of Law or Legalism). The play tells the story of how a slave in China's feudal society transforms his own destiny.

Born to a female slave, Shang Yang was prophesied at birth by a shaman to bring misfortune upon his family. His father therefore ordered his execution, but his mother hid him cleverly and saved his life. As a child, Shang Yang suffered constant humiliation; yet as an adult, his exceptional intelligence earned him the appreciation of Duke Xiao of Qin. With the duke's support, Shang Yang initiated a series of radical reforms, issuing policies that reshaped household registration, the system of military merit and titles, land ownership, and social customs.

To ensure the effective implementation of the new laws, Shang Yang punished nobles such as Prince Qian and Gongsun Jia when they violated them. His resolute actions established his formidable authority both within and beyond the court. The reforms rapidly increased the wealth and strength of the Qin state, laying the foundation for Qin's eventual unification of the six rival states and exerting an influence on Chinese society that lasted for millennia.

However, Shang Yang's harsh, unsympathetic governing philosophy—entirely from the standpoint of the ruler—gradually drew public controversy. His reforms

also infringed upon the interests of the old aristocracy, earning him deep resentment. After Duke Xiao's death, Shang Yang lost his political protector. The old nobles seized the opportunity to exact revenge, falsely accusing him of treason. Shang Yang was ultimately executed by the brutal punishment of "being torn apart by five horses."

The tragedy of *Shang Yang* lies precisely in this: although Shang Yang knew he was destined for disaster, he nevertheless chose to carry out his reforms—and accepted his fate with calm resolve.

Yao Yuan once served in the Nanjing Military Region, and he wrote several works depicting military life. For Yao Yuan, creating *Shang Yang* was a major challenge, as Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* – "Biography of Lord Shang" contains very little information about Shang Yang's life. Yao Yuan later wrote an essay describing how he relied on sparse historical records and imaginative reconstruction to complete the work. On the basis of historical facts and causal logic, he expanded the characters' personalities and relationships and developed the dramatic structure.

To enrich the portrayal of Shang Yang, Yao Yuan created three sets of relational dynamics for him: his relationship with his lover, with his political colleagues, and with his mother, who is depicted as a slave. These correspond respectively to the domains of love, career, and fate. In 1996, *Shang Yang* was premiered publicly by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre and achieved significant success. Director Chen Xinyi placed on stage several props resembling the terracotta warriors of the Qin dynasty. These terracotta figures not only foreshadow Shang Yang's eventual punishment—being torn apart by chariots—but also serve as symbols of Qin culture and of traditional Chinese civilization.

In the play, Yao Yuan does not idealize Shang Yang as a noble or flawless figure; instead, he acknowledges the cruel dimension of Shang Yang's character, a choice that generated some controversy. Shang Yang can be seen as a Machiavellian figure. Nevertheless, the playwright and the director sought to present him as a national hero who breaks free from the constraints of his slave origins in pursuit of freedom. Yao Yuan emphasizes Shang Yang's persistence, confidence, and courage in holding fast to his reformist ideals despite mounting opposition. Director Chen Xinyi believes that *Shang Yang* conveys China's need for a "spirit of giants, strength of will, and courage to renounce."

In the 1980s and 1990s, China was permeated with reflections on the past and contemplation of the future, and "reform" became a subject of broad social concern. Infused with a sense of romanticism, *Shang Yang* calls for reform

and, to some extent, captures the excited yet uneasy mood of that historical moment.

Go-man

n 1994, Guo Sixing wrote the four-act play *Go-man*. The drama follows He Yunqing, a Go master widely known as the "Go-man," who, on the day of his sixtieth birthday, suddenly resolves never to play again. Haunted by the memory of how his obsessive devotion to Go once caused the disintegration of his family, He furiously denounces his fellow players and smashes his Go board.

Soon afterward, He learns that Siyan—the son of his former wife—has developed a rare illness described as an "over-proliferation of brain cells." Siyan, much like the young He Yunqing, exhibits a pathological obsession with Go and a growing detachment from the real world.

Determined to cure Siyan of this destructive fixation, He challenges him to a match that becomes a contest of dignity and life itself. They agree that whichever of them loses must vow never to play Go again.

Go-man unfolds around the confrontation between an elderly master and a prodigious youth. The characters—such as the Go-man and the genius young player—are deliberately allegorical. As Guo Sixing explains, these figures "cannot be fully realistic; their personalities are not what matter… only their actions carry meaning."

In the final act, Siyan loses the match and dies. Alone in his empty home, He Yunqing receives the news of the young man's death and once again sinks into an unending void of despair.

Guo Sixing's creative work is closely tied to his personal background. Born in Beijing, he is a descendant of the renowned national Go players Guo Bailing and Guo Xuchu. Guo believes that Go—composed of only black and white stones—serves as one of the most compelling embodiments of the dualistic principles within traditional Chinese philosophy. For the "Go-man," the Go board contains infinite possibilities and concentrates within it the spirit of the cosmos.

In the stage directions for *Go-man*, Guo provides detailed instructions on how

the play should be presented. He hopes the production will evoke an Eastern poetic quality and allow the audience to experience the refined elegance of Beijing culture—an elegance he fears is gradually fading. Guo aims to create a stage environment that blends the real and the illusory, a common technique in traditional Chinese artistic practice.

Onstage, objects such as "doors, windows, beds, tables, chairs, Go boards, and stoves" should possess a sense of tangible realism. In contrast, Siyan's biological father—a "wandering spirit"—has no physical presence onstage but is represented instead by a single beam of light. Guo further envisions each of the play's four acts highlighting a particular natural element—"wind, snow, moonlight, and the color of the sky"—through expressive theatrical means.

Before becoming a playwright, Guo Sixing worked for fifteen years as a journalist at *Beijing Evening News*, producing a large body of reporting on theatre. His creative work was influenced by Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Zen philosophy. Guo believes that Dürrenmatt's *An Angel Comes to Babylon* and *Romulus the Great* offer a paradoxical way of understanding the world—one that resonates strongly with Zen thought. While reading *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* by Suzuki Daisetsu and Erich Fromm, Guo realized the affinities between postmodern theatre and Zen. This revelatory reading experience became the starting point of his playwriting. As he put it, "My fairy tale was finally born."

From the late 1980s to the 1990s, Guo wrote three stylistically related plays—*Fish-man*, *Bird-man,* and *Go-man*—known collectively as the "Idler Trilogy." In his daily life, Guo is someone who delights in simple pleasures; his love for fishing, bird-keeping, and playing Go inspired these works. The trilogy explores how people become excessively obsessed with something and derail themselves from reality. In *Bird-man*, a group of bird-keeping enthusiasts are committed to a psychiatric hospital; in *Fish-man*, the protagonist is willing to risk his life just to fish. Fish, birds, and the Go board all function as symbolic "signs." They are intimately related to humans, controlled by humans, and ultimately come to control them. The trilogy reflects Guo's philosophical reflections on the relationships between humans and society, humans and objects, and humans and the ecological environment.

Guo's plays are categorized in China as "experimental theatre." Emerging in the 1980s, this form of theatre—championed by writers such as Guo Shixing, Gao Xingjian, Zhao Yaomin, and Sha Yexin—broke away from the political and formulaic tendencies that had long dominated Chinese drama. Drawing extensively on Western modernist traditions, including Symbolism, Expressionism, and the Theatre of the Absurd, these works revitalized the Chinese stage and are regarded as having introduced Western playwriting methods into China while fostering a spirit of critical reflection on national character.

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Overview of Chinese Theatre in the First Half of 2025

ZHONG Junfang

In the first half of 2025, China's theatre sector demonstrated a diversified pattern of development across performance practices and creative production, guided by the core themes of "inheriting the classics and integrating innovation." Whether in the concentrated presentations of traditional xiqu (opera) and xiqu films, or in breakthroughs in the creation of spoken drama, children's theatre, and musical theatre, three major trajectories are evident: the contemporary expression of traditional elements, cross-media and cross-cultural integration, and the innovative reinterpretation of classic IP. Together, these developments have deepened artistic inheritance while expanding the boundaries of theatrical communication and cultural meaning.

I. Performance Practices: Multiple Forms in Coordination, Advancing the Contemporary Dissemination of Traditional Arts and Cross-Genre Dialogue

1. Xiqu Showcase: Cross-Genre Interpretations of Shared Themes Highlight Regional Aesthetics and Contemporary Expression

In the first half of the year, xiqu showcases were typified by Suzhou's "Denglin" Programme, which focused on cross-genre interpretations of classic traditional themes. By presenting the same story across different genres, the programme explored the potential for contemporary expression within traditional xiqu. The showcase encompassed Kunqu, Yuju, Chaoju, Liyuan Xi, Jingju, Cantonese Yueju, and more, forming striking artistic contrasts.

For example, under the theme of "The Orphan of Zhao", the Shanghai musical of the same name and Henan Yuju Troupe No. 2's *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* presented markedly different contemporary interpretations of the Yuan zaju classic. *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* reflects modern humanitarian concerns through traditional Yuju vocality, while the musical *The Orphan of Zhao* explores political ideals, individual values, and moral dilemmas through contemporary musical theatre storytelling.

Under the "Peony Pavilion" theme, Suzhou Dance Theatre's dance drama *The Peony Pavilion* reconstructs its poetic imagery through a fusion of modern and classical movement vocabularies, while the Suzhou Kun Opera Theatre's Youth Edition *The Peony Pavilion* (Essential Scenes) preserves the refined classical beauty of Kunqu's "shuimo diao" singing style while integrating modern aesthetics.

For the "Legend of the White Snake" theme, the National Peking Opera Company's Jingju piece emphasizes traditional stylized performance, whereas the Guangdong Cantonese Opera Theatre's *White Snake* centers its script on relationship dynamics relevant to contemporary youth, introducing innovations in performance and music aligned with modern aesthetics.

Additionally, the joint presentation of Chaozhou Chaoju Troupe's *Yichun* and the Fujian Liyuan Opera Heritage Center's *Chen San Wu Niang* further exemplified how xiqu continues to foster cross-genre artistic exchange—especially significant since the latter is itself a key work historically shared across multiple genres.

2. Xiqu Film Screenings: Commemorating the Centenary and Expanding the Reach of Chinese Xiqu

2025 marks the 120th anniversary of Chinese xiqu films, prompting a nationwide wave of screenings showcasing outstanding works. From national to local levels, various events have been organized to use cinema as a medium to broaden the dissemination of opera. Starting in April, the "2025 Heng You Hao Xi" campaign screened exemplary domestic opera films across 449 cinemas in 242 cities spanning 29 provinces.

From May 17, the Jiangnan Branch of the China Film Archive hosted a six-week consecutive screening series, featuring nine classic xiqu and drama films from different periods: *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (Kunqu), *Emperor's Female Son-in-law* (Huangmei xi), *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Yueju), *Sun Wukong beats the White Bone Demon Three Times* (Wuju), *Wild Boar Forest* (Jingju), *Li Huiniang* (Kunqu), *Teahouse* (spoken drama), *The Unicorn Purse* (Jingju), and *Fu Shan Goes to the Capital* (Jinju). Representing multiple genres and themes, these screenings not only traced the historical development of xiqu films but also

leveraged the accessibility of cinema to enable traditional xiqu to transcend the stage and reach broader audiences.

II. Creation and Performance: Parallel Inheritance of Classics and Innovative Breakthroughs, Deepening the Cultural Connotation of Drama

1.xiqu Creation: Coordinated Development of Traditional, Newly Written, and Adapted Works to Enrich Themes and Artistic Expression

(1)Inheritance of Traditional Xiqus: Centered on the “Here There is Xiqu” event held by the National Peking Opera Company at the People's Theatre of Beijing from June 1–14, classic Jingju pieces such as *Havoc in Heaven*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, and *Wu Zixu* were performed. By restaging and refining these traditional works, the performances preserved the stylized essence of xiqu while providing young performers with a practical platform to inherit and embody classic roles.

(2)Innovation in Newly Written Historical Xiqus: Contemporary interpretations of historical themes were emphasized. For example, the newly written

■ Production still from Yueju *Chong Yuan Ji*.

Yueju *Chong Yuan Ji* (Reunion), created by Luo Zhou and directed by Tong Weiwei, premiered at the Shanghai Yue Opera Theatre in February. Using the metaphors of “the union and separation of couples” and “the waxing and waning of mirrors,” the work reflected social changes across eras. In June, the National Peking Opera Company premiered *Gutu Xin Gui* (Homecoming to the Old Land), focusing on Zuo Zongtang’s historical campaign to reclaim Xinjiang. Actor Tian Lei portrayed a multifaceted late Qing statesman through a combination of Kunqu singing, sword dance, and equestrian performance, achieving an organic fusion of historical authenticity and artistic imagination.

(3) Exploration of Xiqu Adaptations from Film and Television: Leveraging classic film and TV IPs, opera works expanded thematic boundaries. For instance, the Shanghai Yue Opera Theatre staged *Zhen Huan* (Empresses in the Palace) in April, and the Xiaobaihua Yueju Opera Troupe’s *New Dragon Inn*, which has been in residence since March 2023, has become a key driver of Yueju popularity. By reconstructing cinematic narratives through the stylized language of xiqu, these adaptations attract younger audiences while injecting modern aesthetic elements into traditional xiqu art.

2. Spoken Drama and Children’s Theatre: Balancing Classic Restagings with Cross-Media Adaptations to Highlight the Multifaceted Value of IP

(1)Inheritance and Refinement of Classic Plays: The Beijing People’s Art

■ Production still from the Beijing People’s Art Theatre’s classic play *The Number One Restaurant in China.*

■ Production still from the original West End production of *Life of Pi*.

Theatre focused on its "Classic Preservation Restaging Plan," presenting the restaged play *Return on a Snowy Night* in March. In June, the classic play *The Number One Restaurant in China* celebrated its 600th performance, while The *Gin Game*, starring Pu Cunxin, ran concurrently. These classic productions achieved new breakthroughs in stage presentation, allowing young actors to inherit and develop the artistic legacy while embodying iconic roles.

(2)Cross-Media IP Adaptations: Domestic and international classic IPs were translated to the stage. In May, the National Centre for the Performing Arts staged a theatrical adaptation of Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite*, reconstructing the cinematic narrative within a theatrical space. In June, the original West End production of *Life of Pi* premiered in China, using puppetry to bring zoo scenes to life and featuring interactions between human actors and animal puppets. This approach explored the tension between intellect and animal instinct in human nature, expanding the visual and expressive dimensions of spoken drama.

(3)Popularity of Journey to the West-Themed Productions: Derivative works based on this classic have remained vibrant for over 600 years. Influenced

■ Production still from the children's theatre *Journey to the West*.

by the 2024 domestic video game *Black Myth: Wukong*, the story became a particularly popular theme in 2025. The China Children's Art Theatre staged the third part of the saga at Shenzhen Grand Theatre, while the Zhejiang Wuju Research Institute's *Sun Wukong Beats the White Bone Demon Three Times* received overwhelming nationwide demand. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Theatre Arts Centre presented a subversive adaptation that reinterpreted the traditional "exorcism and monster-slaying" narrative, drawing on early Yuan zaju texts to explore the philosophical significance of perseverance through the plot of "seeking the scriptures only to abandon them," offering a profound cultural reading of this enduring IP.

3. Musicals: Complementary Development of Domestic Innovation and Foreign Imports, Exploring the Boundaries of Artistic Fusion

(1)Domestic Musicals: Integration of Traditional Elements with Contemporary Themes

The Cantonese musical T*he King of Lawyers* exemplifies domestic innovation, filling a gap in the musical theatre portrayal of Hong Kong's legal world.

■ Production still from the Cantonese musical *The King of Lawyers*.

Centered on the theme of “redemption,” the production depicts the cunning lawyer Fang Tangjing as a “Faustian” figure who achieves self-redemption through defense and sacrifice, challenging the conventional black-and-white characterization typical of legal narratives. Artistically, the musical adheres to the principle of “standard Cantonese in lyrics,” exploring the expressive potential of the language in musical theatre. The composition integrates elements of Cantonese Yueju, shifting courtroom dialogue to song-driven storytelling, and incorporates nearly thirty musical styles, including Nanyin (southern tune), waltz, and rock. Innovations include performing Chinese instruments with Western orchestration, pairing Chinese melodies with Western harmonies, and adapting Cantonese operatic singing to Western operatic recitative. These approaches expand the artistic possibilities of domestic musicals. The production ran for twelve consecutive performances in Shanghai in June and ten in Beijing in July, offering audiences a rare experience that combines emotional depth with narrative coherence in Chinese-language musicals.

(2)Foreign Musicals: Deep Integration of Artistic Form and Thematic Expression

Among imported productions, *Singin’ in the Rain*, staged at the Beijing Arts Center Opera House from February 14 to 27, employed tap, Charleston, ballroom, and ballet to drive the narrative. Tap dance, in particular, served not only as a performative element but also as a symbolic expression of optimism.

■ Production still from the musical *Singin’ in the Rain*.

Marking the 55th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Italy, the Italian grand musical *The Divine Comedy*, adapted from Dante’s epic, used physical movement to create visual imagery, with pas de deux depicting the love between Francesca and Paolo, and a solo maple-leaf umbrella dance accompanying Pia’s solo. The musical structure mirrors the three realms of Dante’s narrative: the “Inferno” integrates heavy metal and electronic music with fragmented rhythms to portray the descent of souls; the “Purgatorio” features symphonic and classical string melodies guiding the penitents’ path to redemption; and the “Paradiso” employs choral singing and religious arias to evoke a pure, sacred divine atmosphere. Through this approach, the musical achieves a profound unity of form and thematic content.

III. Academic Information

From May 17 to 30, the exhibition *The Birth of the Classics: Archival Documentation of China’s Preserved Classical Theatre Works* was held at the Jiangnan Branch of the China Film Archive. The exhibition brought together theatrical artifacts, documents, and archival materials from 20 theatre troupes,

the Mei Lanfang Memorial Hall, the Suzhou Museum of Traditional Operas, and other cultural institutions. Featuring over 110 photographs and more than 50 physical objects, the exhibition created a cultural dialogue spanning time and space. Centered on four classic plays—*The Peony Pavilion*, *Legend of the White Snake*, *Chen San Wu Niang*, and *The Orphan of Zhao*—it systematically presented rare historical materials, including manuscript scripts, gongche notation scores, vintage records, stage design drawings, Republican-era playbills, and production photographs. The exhibition also offered in-depth analyses of each play's historical context, creative process, performance trajectory across different periods, and patterns of inheritance and innovation.

From June 8 to 10, the Central Academy of Drama hosted the international academic symposium *The Chinese Theatre System* at its Beijing campus. The symposium was organized around ten thematic sessions, including: Chinese philosophy, literary theory, and theatre tradition in relation to the Chinese theatre system; Eastern and Western theatre methods and their engagement with the Chinese theatre system; the Stanislavski system and its adaptation within Chinese theatre; Chinese theatre artists and the cultivation of innovative theatre talent; the history, current status, and practice-based innovations of Chinese theatre; and the development of Chinese theatre in the digital intelligence era.

In summary, in the first half of 2025, China's theatre arts demonstrated both a commitment to preserving and refining classical traditions and an active pursuit of innovation through cross-genre, cross-media, and cross-cultural exploration. From the regional characteristics of traditional opera and the centennial commemoration of opera films, to multidimensional adaptations of classic IPs and domestic and international experiments in musical theatre, these developments have provided multiple pathways for the transmission and evolution of theatre arts. At the same time, they have created practical platforms for the growth of young artists and the cultivation of audience aesthetic sensibilities.

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ISSN 2706-6967
9 772706 696009
PRICE: 10EUR