

Chinese Performing Arts

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- The Art of Qinqiang: Development and Dissemination
- Qinqiang Performance at the Temple Fair in Gansu Province
- The Balance between Personal Style and the Aesthetics of the Times:
On Li Mei's Qinqiang Performing Arts
- Opportunities and Challenges for Traditional Chinese Xiqu in the Era of Convergence Media
- The Peony Pavilion Across East and West: An Analysis of Three Cross-Cultural Adaptations
- Introduction to Classical Plays (IX)
- Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2023



国际戏剧协会
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院
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戲劇

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CONTENTS No.9
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INTRODUCTION

- 2 The Art of Qinqiang: Development and Dissemination
/ GUO Hongjun

STUDIES OF QINQIANG

- 13 Qinqiang Performance at the Temple Fair in Gansu Province
/ YANG Yufeng
- 22 An Analysis of the Dissemination of Qinqiang in Japan over the Past 30 Years and Strategies for Future Promotion
/ ZHANG Ruohu

ROLES, ARTISTS AND THEATRES

- 28 The Balance between Personal Style and the Aesthetics of the Times: On Li Mei's Qinqiang Performing Arts
/ WANG Miao
- 38 Reform and Development of Qinqiang Troupes in Xi'an in the New Era
/ YANG Yao

TODAY'S STAGE OF CHINA

- 47 Opportunities and Challenges for Traditional Chinese Xiqu in the Era of Convergence Media
/ REN Tingting

THE SPREAD OF CHINESE THEATRE

- 59 *The Peony Pavilion* Across East and West: An Analysis of Three Cross-Cultural Adaptations
/ MA Hui
- 70 Chinese Xiqu in Thailand: Focusing on Teochew (Chaoju) Troupes
/ Pomrat DAMRHUNG
- 75 Dissemination of the Traditional Chinese Staging Techniques through English Publications up to the 1980s
/ DU Wenwei

INTRODUCTION OF CLASSICS

- 91 Introduction to Classical Plays (IX)
/ CHENG Jiaojiao

OVERVIEW

- 100 Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2023
/ HONG Qiao

The Art of Qinqiang: Development and Dissemination

GUO Hongjun

Qinqiang is a type of Bangzi Xi that is popular in five northwestern provinces (regions) of China. It originated in the areas of Shaanxi and Gansu and is commonly known as Bangzi Qiang.¹ In historical documents, it has also been referred to as Xiqin Qiang, Qinchui Qiang, Gansu Diao, among other names.² The exact period of its formation is unclear, with various theories attributing its origins to the Qin and Han dynasties, the Tang dynasty, the Ming dynasty, or the Qing dynasty. Qinqiang is considered the progenitor of the Bangzi Xi genre. It is generally believed to have taken shape in the late Ming dynasty, evolving from folk music and storytelling arts while incorporating the strengths of ancient traditional xiqu such as Zaju and Kunqu. During the Jiaqing period of the Qing dynasty, Qinqiang gradually developed into five major branches: East Qinqiang, West Qinqiang, South Qinqiang, North Qinqiang, and Central Qinqiang.

East Qinqiang, also known as Tongzhou Bangzi, is popular in the eastern part of Guanzhong region. It preserves the vigorous and impassioned characteristics of Qinqiang, often featuring the distinctive "ān ān" dragging tones, widely recognized as "ān ān Qiang" among the local populace. By the late 19th century, the Guanzhong region boasted over 30 renowned Xiqu troupes, with some counties and villages hosting their own. However, by the 1930s, Tongzhou Bangzi gradually declined and faced extinction. West Qinqiang, also known as West Bangzi or West Mansion Qinqiang, originated

around Fengxiang and spread westward to places like Tianshui and Lanzhou in Gansu, extending even into Qinghai and Xinjiang. The oldest West Qinqiang troupes trace back to the early 17th century. Compared to Tongzhou Bangzi, West Qinqiang is known for its gentler, more elegant, and refined musical style. South Qinqiang, also known as Handiao Kuangkuang, is popular in the southern Shaanxi region of Hanzhong city. Historical records suggest Qinqiang troupes from Zhouzhi first performed in Hanzhong in the mid-17th century, introducing Qinqiang to southern Shaanxi. By the late 19th century, troupes in Hanzhong city integrated traditional Qinqiang with local folk music and regional xiqu elements, often using local dialects prominently in dialogue. North Qinqiang, prevalent in northern Guanzhong region around Fuping, Liquan, and Lintong, is also known as Agong Qiang. Its singing style is characterized by gentle and melodious tones. Central Qinqiang, also known as Xi'an Luantan, is popular in Xi'an and its surrounding areas. By the mid-19th century, it assimilated the strengths of both East and West Qinqiang, dominating the theatrical scene in Xi'an. In the first half of the 20th century, it gradually spread westward, influencing the three major Qinqiang schools within Gansu province. Today, when referring to Qinqiang, it generally denotes the Central Qinqiang, represented by Xi'an Luantan.

The traditional Qinqiang orchestra comprises two sections: the civil section and the martial section. The civil section includes accompanying instruments such as banhu (spike tube lute with wooden soundboard), erhu (membraned spike tube lute), gaohu (high-range membraned spike tube lute), yangqin (hammered dulcimer), yueqin (short-necked box lute), Di (flute), sanxian (fretless long-necked membraned box lute), suona (shawm), sheng (mouth organ), and others. The martial section predominantly features instruments like gangu (small high-pitched xiqu drum), baogu (large high-pitched xiqu drum), yazi (bamboo plaque clappers), bangzi (claves used in northern Chinese Xiqu), guoluo (large xiqu gong hung with a string), naobo (small cymbals with bowl-shaped bells), timpani, and triangle. During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China era, Shaanxi province, Gansu province, and other regions witnessed the emergence of renowned Qinqiang artists such as Li Yunting, Liu Yuzhong, and Su Zhemin, who were prominent figures of their time. From the 1940s onward, performers like Kunling Huang Jinhua, Wang Xiaoling, Yu Qiaoyun, and Xiao Ruolan began to shine on the Qinqiang stage.

Since the 20th century, Qinqiang troupes have flourished throughout the northwest regions. In 1912, Li Tongxuan, Sun Renyu, and others founded the Shaanxi Yisu Troupe, which integrated xiqu creation, education, and performance. It became a renowned troupe in the modern xiqu reform

1 Bangzi Qiang (梆子腔) is one of the most widely spread vocal systems in traditional Chinese Xiqu. In some regions, it is characterized by the use of hardwood clappers to mark rhythms. — Translator's Note

2 In the context of Chinese Xiqu, "Qiang" (腔) and "Diao" (调) refer to specific styles or tunes used in the performance. "Qiang" typically denotes a particular melodic or rhythmic style within an Xiqu genre. "Diao" refers to the tune or melody used in the performance. — Translator's Note



■ Li Tongxuan, the first president of the Yisu Troupe

■ Sun Renyu, one of the founders of the Yisu Troupe

movement. The Yisu Troupe upheld the banner of xiqu reform, rising to prominence on the 20th-century Qinqiang stage with revolutionary fervor and a grand vision of social transformation. It actively utilized local xiqu for educational purposes, exploring ways to enlighten the lower classes and rectify social mores. The Yisu Troupe consistently aimed to supplement social education and promote social change through script creation, student training, and theatrical practice.

The troupe adeptly navigated the clash and fusion of old and new orders and ideas, adapting to social and cultural changes by innovating in themes, content, and stage presentations. After years of arduous exploration, the reformed Qinqiang troupe, Yisu Troupe, finally established a foothold in Xi'an's competitive theater scene, influencing other troupes—a remarkable achievement. As an xiqu troupe, the Yisu Troupe not only achieved notable success in harnessing the educational function of xiqu but also accumulated substantial experience in the development of Qinqiang art. Despite its reforms, the Yisu Troupe remained true to the essence of Qinqiang, preserving the traditional Bangzi xiqu style while making appropriate adjustments to its performance style and vocal techniques in response to the evolving times and audience preferences.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Shaanxi Yisu Troupe was taken over by the government and renamed the Xi'an Yisu Troupe. The Xi'an Yisu Troupe continued the traditions of its predecessor, actively exploring

talent cultivation, repertoire inheritance, and innovation. Since its founding in 1912, the Shaanxi Yisu Troupe adhered to a policy of not admitting female students. Before 1949, it enrolled over 600 students across 13 terms, with no female students. In 1949, during its 14th term of admissions, the Yisu Troupe broke this old convention by admitting several female students, including Zhang Yonghua, Chen Miaohua, and Quan Qiaomin.

Since the 20th century, in addition to the Yisu Troupe, Xi'an has had more than 30 folk Qinqiang xiqu troupes, including the Sanyi Troupe, Zhengsu Troupe, and Shangyou Troupe. Unlike the Yisu Troupe, the Sanyi Troupe operated differently as a folk troupe, long employing renowned Xi'an Qinqiang performers like Lu Shunzi, Wang Wenpeng, and Zhang Shouquan to perform alongside the troupe's students. Their repertoire mainly consisted of traditional plays such as *Hulu Valley*, *Yellow River Array*, and *Breaking into the Palace and Embracing the Battle*, which showcased the passionate and vigorous artistic characteristics of Qinqiang and were deeply loved by the working class.

Su Changtai's disciple, Ye Jinshan, made outstanding contributions to the development of the Sanyi Troupe. During his leadership, he recruited six batches of students, training two to three hundred individuals, including notable figures such as Su Zhemin and Su Yumin. Su Zhemin was exceptionally talented, with a handsome appearance and a sweet, clear voice, excelling in the use of both true and falsetto voices, especially in the art of dragging tones, thus enriching the singing art of young male roles in Qinqiang. Although Su Yumin's innate talent was slightly inferior to his brother's, he greatly benefited from his brother's teachings, inheriting his repertoire, singing, and performance techniques. Additionally, he extensively learned from others, ultimately perfecting the Su School's art of young male roles.

The Su family not only established the century-old Sanyi Troupe but also created the exquisite "Su School" art for young male roles in Qinqiang. In the 1920s and 1930s, Xi'an had over 30 folk Qinqiang troupes, including the Zhengsu Troupe, Qinzong Troupe, and Jiye Troupe. In 1938, the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region Qinqiang Troupe was established in Yan'an. Since its inception, the troupe created and performed many modern Qinqiang plays reflecting revolutionary themes, which were well-received by the local people. In the 1940s, numerous Qinqiang troupes in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border Region used new Qinqiang to depict revolutionary content, creating and performing many modern plays that were highly popular among the masses.

In the northwest provinces and regions, Qinqiang troupes include the Lanhua



■ Qinqiang Special Effect: Fire Tricks

Troupe and Xinxing Troupe in Lanzhou, the Pingle Troupe in Eastern Gansu, the Juemin Troupe in Ningxia, and the Yunyu Troupe in Qinghai, among others. Traditional Qinqiang in Gansu highlights roles such as the Xusheng (senior male role) and Hualian (painted face male role), with performances often characterized by acrobatic and intense acting. Gansu Qinqiang frequently features supernatural plays and uses special effects like "fire tricks," "blood effects," and "paper flag stunts."

Since the 1920s and 1930s, the influx of Shaanxi actors into Gansu has promoted the teaching, popularization, and dissemination of Shaanxi Qinqiang. This exchange has allowed Gansu Qinqiang to retain its distinctive acrobatic style while incorporating the refined vocal techniques of Shaanxi Qinqiang, thereby overcoming the limitations of its earlier, more primitive singing style.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, specialized Qinqiang

troupes were established across the five northwest provinces and regions. Notable examples include the Shaanxi Provincial Theatre Research Institute, which was founded based on the Minzhong Troupe, the Xi'an Yisu Troupe, established from the Shaanxi Yisu Troupe, as well as the Xi'an Sanyi Troupe, the Shaanxi Military Region May 1st Troupe, the Urumqi Qinqiang Troupe, the Xining Qinqiang Troupe, and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Qinqiang Troupe. In 1954, Tibet also established a Qinqiang Troupe. After its formation, the troupe recruited over 60 students in Shaanxi and, following a year and a half of training, joined the Qinqiang Troupe in Tibet in 1956.

In the early 1950s, Qinqiang troupes actively advanced the "xiqu reform" movement, aimed at "reforming people, plays, and institutions." While this movement had some negative effects, it undeniably spurred the development of Qinqiang art. The social status of Qinqiang actors improved, and their professional and personal recognition grew stronger. Many distinguished veteran performers not only actively participated in performances but also took on apprentices, passing on their skills and cultivating future Qinqiang talent.

As a result of the theater reform, plays with significant feudal superstitious elements or those featuring horror and violent themes were banned, leading to a cleansing of the Qinqiang stage. Beginning in the 1960s, influenced by contemporary cultural policies, Qinqiang troupes started to create and stage modern plays. However, from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, with the expansion of cultural and entertainment options and shifts in aesthetic tastes, Qinqiang faced a crisis. Many county-level troupes struggled to survive or even disbanded, and municipal and provincial-level Qinqiang troupes also faced significant challenges.

Entering the 21st century, Qinqiang troupes have capitalized on the increased national focus on traditional culture and ongoing reforms in the arts system. Alongside the refinement of traditional plays, they have also introduced new historical and modern dramas. The Shaanxi Opera xiqu Research Institute, known for its tradition in modern play creation, has launched several contemporary Qinqiang works that have made a significant impact both within the Qinqiang community and across the nation.

The Story of Xijing is a prominent modern Qinqiang play produced by the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute in the new century. Directed by Zhao Mingzhe from the National Theatre of China, the play was guided by the vision of "capturing the essence of Qinqiang, portraying contemporary life, drawing on traditional roots, and exploring modern expressions." During rehearsals, Zhao emphasized the importance of adapting traditional Qinqiang conventions.



■ The playbill for *The Story of Xijing*

He encouraged lead actor Li Dongqiao to fully utilize traditional techniques and display his "unique skills." Under Zhao's direction, Li performed the scene where Luo Tianfu carries a burden with dramatic physical movements, such as straddling and splitting, achieving a striking theatrical effect.

Traditional Qinqiang performances rely heavily on "Luan Tan"¹, which is used for narration, emotional expression, and character development. The playwright created several substantial "Luan Tan" segments for Luo Tianfu. Thanks to Zhao's meticulous direction and the actors' dedicated performances, these segments received enthusiastic applause from

the audience and enhanced the character portrayal.

Although Li Dongqiao is traditionally known for performing Xiaosheng (young male role), the character of Luo Tianfu, in terms of age and status, is more suited to a Xusheng. Li adapted the performance and vocal techniques of Qinqiang's male roles to fit the character, focusing on development rather than adhering strictly to traditional roles. This approach preserved the traditional Qinqiang standards while making suitable adjustments to align with contemporary aesthetic needs, ensuring that modern plays retained the charm of traditional Qinqiang while appealing to today's audiences.

Since 2012, actress Liu Ping of the Ningxia Qinqiang Theatre, together with director Zhang Manjun and others, has introduced a highly influential trilogy of modern Qinqiang plays from Ningxia: *Flower Voice*, *Dog Master's Nirvana*, and *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang*.

In July 2012, the Ningxia Qinqiang Theatre created and performed *Flower*



■ Stage Photo of *Flower Voice*



■ Stage Photo of *Dog Master's Nirvana*



■ Stage Photo of *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang*

¹ The colloquial term for a singing segment, where Qinqiang performers refer to a specific segment of singing or a piece of melody as "one board of Luan Tan."

Voice, a modern Qinqiang play reflecting the relocation of immigrants from the southern mountainous areas of Ningxia. The play, with its epic style, highlighted the regional characteristics of Ningxia's traditional "Flower" songs based on the foundation of traditional Qinqiang.

Dog Master's Nirvana is a significant drama work from the Beijing People's Art Theatre in the 1980s. In 2014, the original playwright Liu Jinyun adapted it into a Qinqiang version. Despite concerns that adapting such a significant modern play into a local genre might lose its profound thematic content, the Qinqiang adaptation proved successful. Some experts even believe that the Qinqiang version of *Dog Master's Nirvana* is more compelling than the original drama.

Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang is the third major production by the Ningxia Qinqiang Theatre following the success of *Flower Voice* and *Dog Master's Nirvana*. This play is adapted from the eponymous epic poem by Li Ji. The original narrative poem *Wang Gui and Li Xiangxiang* is a classic in modern Chinese literature, focusing on revolutionary and red narratives. Adapting it to reflect contemporary characteristics posed a challenge for both the playwright and director. Director Zhang Manjun placed the choir and piano accompaniment on stage, making new attempts in musical form and staging. This approach received mixed reviews, with some experts feeling that it strayed too far in its pursuit of "musical drama." Critics also had varied opinions on the play's stage presentation and Qinqiang music design, suggesting that the piano accompaniment diluted the traditional Qinqiang percussion and banhu music expression. Despite its imperfections, the Ningxia Qinqiang Theatre's trilogy represents a significant exploration in modern Qinqiang theatre, accumulating valuable experience in this genre.

Qinqiang originated and flourished in China's northwest region, where it is highly valued by local audiences. However, its unique language and regional style have posed challenges for its expansion beyond this area. During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, the acclaimed dan performer Wei Changsheng introduced Qinqiang to Beijing and Yangzhou. Despite this exposure influencing other theatrical forms, Qinqiang did not establish itself as a distinct genre in these regions.

The Shaanxi Yisu Troupe, established in 1912, aimed to disseminate Qinqiang across the nation and advance cultural reform through theatre. Starting in April 1921, the troupe performed in Hankou for over a year, making a notable impact in Wuhan, though it did not maintain a lasting presence. In 1932 and 1937, the Shaanxi Yisu Troupe also toured Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, and other regions for several months. Its performances in Beijing were especially well-received,



■ Stage Photo of *The Zhao Orphan*

garnering significant attention and acclaim, as highlighted by numerous articles in Beijing-Tianjin newspapers and interactions with theatre figures such as Qi Rushan.

In November 1958, Shaanxi Province organized a troupe, composed of prominent members from the Yisu Troupe and the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute, to perform in Beijing. They showcased classic Qinqiang plays like *Three Drops of Blood*, *Flaming Steed*, and *The Zhao Orphan*, earning high praise from experts, scholars, and audiences alike. In October 1959, Shaanxi organized another theatrical tour for National Day performances in Beijing, followed by a tour of thirteen provinces and cities, including Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Yunnan, and Guizhou. This extensive tour, lasting nearly six months and covering tens of thousands of miles, significantly broadened the reach of Qinqiang art.

Since the 1980s, Qinqiang has begun to gain international recognition, performing in countries such as Japan, South Korea, Iran, Finland, Germany, and France. In November 1981, the Xi'an Qinqiang Friendship Troupe traveled to Japan, where they performed traditional plays such as *Touring the West Lake* and excerpts like *The Cabinet's Secret* and *The Wedding Siege* in Kyoto. These performances received high praise from Japanese scholars and local audiences.

One highlight of *Touring the West Lake* is the "fire blowing" stunt, where the actor blows fire continuously, sometimes dozens of times. Japanese theaters typically have regulations against open flames on stage. The troupe repeatedly assured the theater that this traditional stunt, a staple of Qinqiang, had never

caused an accident in its history. Eventually, the theater allowed the stunt to proceed, with fire trucks stationed outside as a precaution. Fortunately, the fire trucks were not needed.

In the 21st century, the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute has continued to perform internationally, including in South Korea, France, Belgium, the United States, and the Netherlands. This ancient art form has not only crossed the Tongguan Pass and left the northwest region but has also journeyed from Asia to Europe and from the East to the West, leaving a significant mark in various countries.

GUO HONGJUN

Associate Professor at Shanghai Theatre Academy

Qinqiang Performance at the Temple Fair in Gansu Province

YANG Yufeng

On the 8th day of the fourth lunar month, celebrated as the Buddha's birthday, a large crowd gathers around the Buddha statue at Daxiang Mountain in Gangu County, Gansu Province. The lively audience clusters beneath the stage to watch renowned Qinqiang performer Dou Fengqin present her acclaimed play, *The Execution of Qin Ying*. Every note, sigh, and expression from Dou Fengqin mesmerizes the thousands of spectators below. These temple fair performances are an annual tradition, held in various villages and towns throughout Gansu.

Gansu, a remote region in the northwest, is known for its ancient customs and strong Buddhist and Taoist traditions, with temples, grottoes, and shrines scattered throughout. After the Lunar New Year and before the spring plowing begins, the sound of drums and gongs heralds the start of temple fairs, where people gather to pray for good weather and health.

In the squares in front of temples, vendors set up various stalls and call out to attract customers. Just as people enjoy watching performances, so do deities, making temple fair plays a crucial source of income for major troupes. It is no exaggeration to say that Gansu's temple fair performances have supported Qinqiang troupes across the five northwest provinces. These performances differ from city theater shows, featuring unique customs and intriguing practices.

1. The Head of the Temple Fair and Writing Plays

In Gansu's rural areas, visiting temples and burning incense on the first day



■ The April 8th Cultural Temple Fair at Daxiang Mountain in Gangu County, Gansu Province



■ Dou Fengqin played the role of Princess Yinping in the Qinqiang piece *The Execution of Qin Ying*

of the Lunar New Year is a cherished tradition, where people make wishes and seek blessings from the deities. It is believed that fulfilling these vows is important, and watching performances is a popular activity. It is also thought that deities enjoy theater, making temple fairs a way to show gratitude for their blessings.

The organization of the temple fair falls to the Head of the Temple Fair, a community-based role rather than an official position. This role is typically rotated among adult men in the village. The Head of the Temple Fair is responsible for overseeing village funerals and religious ceremonies. However, the most crucial task throughout the year is negotiating contracts with theatrical troupes and hosting the actors, a responsibility known as "writing plays."

Large temple fairs, such as those held at Fuxi Temple in Tianshui and Daxiang Mountain in Gangu, typically occur on fixed dates like the 15th day of the first lunar month, the 2nd day of the second lunar month, the 3rd day of the third lunar month, the 5th day of the fifth lunar month, and the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. For these major events, the Head of the Temple Fair usually signs contracts with troupes six months in advance. In contrast, smaller temple fairs lack fixed dates and are often scheduled during the agricultural off-season.

In Gansu, a temple fair performance typically lasts four days and includes eight shows—one in the afternoon and one in the evening each day. Each performance runs for about three hours and usually features one major play and two smaller ones. Current market prices for these performances vary: renowned troupes like the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute and the Xi'an Yisu Troupe charge over 30,000 yuan per show. Second-tier troupes such as the Ningxia Qinqiang Theatre and the Gansu Qinqiang Troupe charge over 20,000 yuan per show. Municipal and county-level troupes, like the Dingxi Troupe in Gansu and the Zhouzhi Troupe in Shaanxi, generally charge between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan per show. Prices depend on the troupe's reputation and strength. In villages with fewer residents and limited economic resources, local or semi-professional troupes (often referred to as "scattered troupes" due to their high actor turnover) are hired, with performance costs around 7,000 to 8,000 yuan. The expense is typically shared among the villagers, and local businesses with financial resources may also contribute sponsorship.

In addition to the performance fees, the organizers of the temple fair are responsible for the accommodation and meals of the troupe members. Twenty years ago, actors were typically housed in the homes of villagers with more spacious residences and better economic conditions. Today, due to societal development and changing lifestyles, troupe members usually stay in local

stage and shatters the eight tiles before departing.

The Celestial Official then makes a solemn entrance, and offerings such as whole pigs, sheep, a measure of rice and flour, copper coins, and five-colored cloths, prepared by the audience, are brought to the stage. The Head of the Temple Fair leads the villagers in presenting these offerings before the Celestial Official, burning incense and making a vow to "ask the Celestial Official to open his golden mouth and reveal his jade teeth."

The Celestial Official recites four lines of poetry and declares that a new stage has been built in a specific village or region according to the decree of the Jade Emperor. He then calls on Zhao Gongming, who uses a "Five Thunder Bowl" (actually a regular porcelain bowl) to strike the four corners of the stage. Following this, a performer dressed as the "Chicken-biting Immortal" brings a live red rooster onto the stage, bites off its head, and spreads the blood around the stage and on the stage pillars to ward off evil spirits. The Head of the Temple Fair then directs everyone to set up a long ladder, and the Chicken-biting Immortal nails the rooster's head to the center beam of the stage before throwing the dead rooster down.

Finally, the Celestial Official scatters copper coins and grains around the stage, wishing for abundant local wealth and a bountiful harvest. This ritualistic performance, rich in folk magic elements, serves as a living relic of the origins of Chinese xiqu in religious ceremonies.

If "Opening the Stage" is a solemn and sacred ritual, then "Farewell to the Stage" is filled with local warmth and hospitality. During the afternoon performance, the sudden burst of firecrackers signals the arrival of villagers, led by the Head of the Temple Fair, who bring an array of food to the stage. This includes cigarettes, alcohol, fruits, steamed buns, stir-fried dishes, and local specialties. In Jingning County, where roast chicken is renowned, "Jingning Roast Chicken" becomes a highlight of the farewell ceremony.

In recent years, some temple fairs have adapted to modern times by presenting large gift boxes. During the performance, the actors and musicians take a break as the food is delivered to the backstage. The troupe leader comes out to bow and thank the villagers. Afterward, the actors and musicians return to the backstage to enjoy their meal, resuming the performance once they are finished, marking the conclusion of the "Farewell to the Stage."

Since actors often perform again in the evening, they tend to wake up late the next day. Many people hurry to the backstage for makeup without having lunch. The "Farewell to the Stage" serves not only as a gesture of appreciation



■ The grand ceremony of worshipping Fuxi, the Great Ancestor of Humanity, at the Fuxi Temple in Tianshui City, Gansu Province.

for the actors' hard work but also as an opportunity for villagers to showcase their local wealth and culinary skills to visiting outsiders. As a result, the village's best cook is typically chosen to prepare the meal, or professional chefs may be hired.

Although traditional society often placed theater actors in a lower social status, Gansu's rural inhabitants seldom adhere to such hierarchical views. They treat the actors as honored guests and ensure they are warmly received.

hotels and guesthouses.

Temple fairs also often invite renowned performers to enhance the event's appeal, with collaborating troupes serving as "supporting acts" to stage the renowned performers' signature works. The fees for these star performers are calculated separately. For example, prominent figures in the northwest like Dou Fengqin, Li Xiaofeng, and Zhang Lanqin charge between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan for a major performance and around 8,000 to 10,000 yuan for a smaller play. The fees are closely related to the performers' fame and skill.

Typically, only economically prosperous large towns or wealthy individuals can afford to invite these star performers. Often, these sponsors are theater enthusiasts themselves. By funding the temple fair, they not only fulfill their admiration for the stars but also enhance their reputation in their hometown and advertise their businesses, achieving multiple benefits with one effort.

2. The Ceremony of Opening and Farewell to the Stage

Temple fair performances differ significantly from city theater productions and involve unique rituals, with the "Opening the Stage" and "Farewell to the Stage" ceremonies being among the most notable.

In Gansu, every village features a theater, usually located across from a temple. The Fuxi Temple in Tianshui still boasts a traditional ancient theater with ornate carvings, though most village theaters have been replaced by modern concrete structures.

Before a new stage can be used in a rural area, it must undergo the "Opening the Stage" ceremony, which must be performed by a professional troupe. This ritual, also known as "Stage Settling", "Stage Sacrifice", or "Stage Breaking", begins with sealing the stage with five-colored threads and attaching small yellow paper flags to them. The stage is decorated with symbols: the "Vermilion Bird" in the front, the "Black Tortoise" at the back, the "Azure Dragon" on the left, and the "White Tiger" on the right. Eight tiles are placed in front of the stage according to Bagua (Eight Trigrams) positions. Once the actors are on stage, the Head of the Temple Fair gives each of them a silver dollar to hold in their mouths as a form of sealing. Next, a performer dressed as the god of wealth, Black Tiger Zhao Gongming, appears on stage and uses a whip to break the five-colored threads. Accompanied by the music of a suona (a traditional horn), the immortal Liu Hai makes an appearance. Zhao Gongming then circles the



■ Glimpses of Ancient Theaters in Rural China



3. Repertoire and Taboos

Though temple fair performances are designed for human enjoyment, their primary purpose is to honor the gods, which sets their repertoire apart from regular theater productions.

The afternoon performance on the first day of the temple fair usually features two short plays: *The Celestial Official Bestows Blessings* and *Offering Thanks at Fragrant Mountain*. The first play depicts deities bestowing blessings upon the human world, while the second shows mortals expressing their gratitude to the gods, reflecting the essence of the temple fair. The final night's performance typically features *The Longevity Picture*, which tells the story of Liu Hai overcoming numerous trials to become an immortal. During this concluding performance, Liu Hai, now an immortal, throws a tray of "money" (actually coins) into the audience, who eagerly scramble for these tokens, symbolizing good fortune from the gods.

In addition to these staple plays, other performances often focus on deities and emperors, drawing from popular folk novels such as *Investiture of the Gods*, *The Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *The Yang Family Generals*. Notable plays include *Storming the Palace and Seizing the Battle*, *Out of Tangyi*, *Return to Jingzhou*, and *Execution at the Gate*.

Fire-color effects are frequently used during performances. This technique

involves stagehands holding torches in one hand while scattering pine resin onto the flames with the other, creating a dramatic smoky effect that adds to the mysterious atmosphere when deities make their entrance.

Recently, as audience tastes have evolved, plays about love and family have also gained popularity at temple fairs. However, for those seeking traditional Qinqiang plays centered on deities, attending a temple fair in Gansu remains the ideal experience.

When selecting plays for temple fairs, understanding certain taboos is crucial for troupe leaders. Foremost among these is avoiding the depiction of deities worshipped at the local temple fair. For instance, if the local temple venerates Erlang Shen, performing *The Lotus Lantern*, where Erlang Shen is portrayed as a villain, would be inappropriate. Similarly, if the temple honors the Three Heavenly Maidens (Yunxiao, Bixiao, and Qiongxiao), staging *The Yellow River Formation*, in which the Three Maidens face a tragic end, would be unsuitable. There is an old legend among Qinqiang actors and audiences: in a place where the temple fair worshipped Guan Yu (Guan Er Ye), an actor inadvertently performed *The Fall of the Wheat City*, which depicts Guan Yu's greatest defeat. The performance was interrupted by dark clouds, and the actor playing Guan Yu reportedly died on stage. While this legend may be exaggerated, it highlights the seriousness of these taboos.

Additionally, when performing historical plays, it is advisable to avoid characters with the same surname as the majority of the villagers. For example, if most villagers have the surname Chen, performing *The Case of the Abandoned Beauty* would be problematic, as the protagonist, Chen Shimei, is a villain who abandons his wife and children and commits murder. Performing such a play in a predominantly Chen-surnamed village could be seen as an insult, potentially leading to disputes or refusal to pay. Due to these taboos, troupe leaders and the Head of the Temple Fair must exercise great caution in choosing plays.

Gansu's temple fair performances have a rich history, featuring unique rituals that preserve many traditional elements of agricultural society *xiqu*. These performances have long served as the primary form of entertainment and spiritual solace for people in these remote and impoverished regions. Despite the advancements of modernization, temple fair performances continue to maintain their unique charm and captivate audiences.

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■ *The Celestial Official Bestows Blessings* performed at the temple fair



■ *Offering Thanks at Fragrant Mountain* performed at the temple fair

An Analysis of the Dissemination of Qinqiang in Japan over the Past 30 Years and Strategies for Future Promotion¹

ZHANG Ruohu

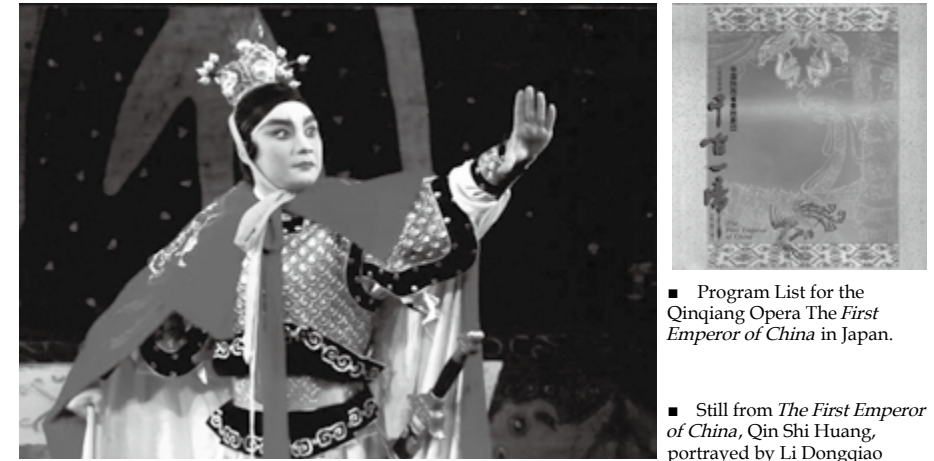
Compared to Jingju and Kunqu, Qinqiang was introduced to the world somewhat later. Nevertheless, it has made numerous international appearances over the past 30 years, performing in countries such as Japan, South Korea, the United States, France, and Italy. This brief discussion will focus on the dissemination of Qinqiang in Japan.

1. Basic Situation of Qinqiang's Reception and Dissemination in Japan

According to reports from the *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as well as field surveys conducted at several libraries and museums, including the National Diet Library of Japan and the Waseda University Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Qinqiang has been enthusiastically received by Japanese scholars and the general public since 1992. Japanese scholars have introduced and conducted preliminary studies on Qinqiang. This reception can be summarized in two main aspects.

1.1 Active Exchange Performances

According to reports from the *Asahi Shimbun* and other media, the Shaanxi Qinqiang Troupe of China made its debut in Japan in May 1992, performing the large-scale Qinqiang play *The first Emperor if China* in 14 cities, including Tokyo,



■ Program List for the Qinqiang Opera *The First Emperor of China* in Japan.

■ Still from *The First Emperor of China*, Qin Shi Huang, portrayed by Li Dongqiao

Kyoto, Nagoya, Osaka, and Sendai.¹ This tour was sponsored by the Nippon Cultural Foundation and Asahi Shimbun to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan. With a total of 70 members and a 20-member music group, this was the largest Chinese traditional theater troupe to visit Japan. Despite the language barrier, the two-and-a-half-hour performance was highly praised. The unique and captivating music of Qinqiang, with its powerful and gentle moments, left the audience mesmerized. The performance, featuring dramatic elements like flame spraying, tusk spitting, and teeth grinding, made a lasting impression. Unfortunately, due to the high requirements for venues, equipment, and material conditions, *The first Emperor if China* remains a unique example of such a large-scale production in Japan. More commonly, there have been smaller-scale visits and performances of selected repertoire segments.

¹ 《〈空间〉〈千古一帝〉中国陕西省·秦腔剧团 我们的热情化为火焰》，东京晚报，1992；《明星诞生（古都西安的传统戏剧〈千古一帝〉的魅力：上）》，朝日新闻晚报，1992；《火焰之中（古都西安的传统戏剧〈千古一帝〉的魅力：中）》，朝日新闻晚报，1992；《在舞台下（古都西安的传统戏剧〈千古一帝〉的魅力：下）》，朝日新闻晚报，1992。[Space, *The first Emperor if China*, the Qinqiang Troupe in Shaanxi Province, China, Our Enthusiasm Turns into Flame, Tokyo Evening News, 1992; The Birth of the Stars: The Charm of the Traditional Theater of the Ancient Capital Xi'an, *The first Emperor if China*, I, Asahi Shimbun Evening News, 1992; Amidst the Flames: The Charm of the Traditional Theater of the Ancient Capital Xi'an, *The first Emperor if China*, II, Asahi Shimbun Evening News, 1992; Under the Stage: The Charm of the Traditional Theater of the Ancient Capital Xi'an, *The first Emperor if China*, III, Asahi Shimbun Evening News, 1992;]

¹ This article has been published in Chinese Theatre, Issue 3, 2022.



■ In 2018, Japanese Noh master of National Treasure status, Sakai Otoshige, performed the classic piece *The Concubine Yang* in Xi'an

For instance, in 1996, the Qinqiang Art Troupe from Yulin, Shaanxi Province, performed *Monkey King*—a traditional Qinqiang play based on *Journey to the West*—in Takatsuki, Osaka.¹ The witty plots, lively rhythms, skillful movements, and beautiful singing allowed the local audience to appreciate the charm of Qinqiang and gain insight into the mythical figure of the Monkey King. In 2019, the Xi'an Sanyi Troupe, featuring top actors and musicians, performed highlights from *The Flaming Foal*, including "Fish Watching" and "Flower Watching", as well as Qinqiang music pieces like "Qinqiang Pai Zi Qu" and "Little Red Peach" in Japan, making a significant impact.

Simultaneously, Japanese theater troupes have visited China to collaborate with Qinqiang performers. In 2018, during the Sino-Japanese cultural exchange event "2018: Looking Back at Chang'an," Noh master Otoshige Sakai from Japan and renowned Chinese Qinqiang actor Hou Hongqin performed the classic play *The Concubine Yang*. This was the first instance of a Qinqiang performance combined with traditional Japanese Noh theater, showcasing the deep cultural connections between China and Japan and highlighting Qinqiang's timeless appeal and the diverse nature of traditional Chinese culture.

1.2 Theoretical Research and Promotion

Japanese scholars such as Tanaka Kazunari, Komatsu Ken, Hirabayashi Norikazu, and Shimizu Takuno have extensively studied and introduced

1 《本周推荐·23号(大阪)》, 朝日新闻晚报, 1996。[*This Week's Recommendations · No. 23 (Osaka)*, *Asahi Shimbun Evening News*, 1996.]

Qinqiang through articles and books. For instance, Tanaka Kazunari, in his *A History of Chinese Performing Arts*,¹ mentions Qinqiang and its influence on other singing styles. Komatsu Ken's work, *On the Prototype of Qinqiang*,² discusses the origin and development of Qinqiang.

Among these scholars, Shimizu Takuno, a professor at Kobe Shoin Women's University, has made the most notable contributions. Between 1992 and 2013, he visited Xi'an and other locations in China more than ten times for in-depth field research on Qinqiang and its transmission methods. He also studied Qinqiang intensively at Shaanxi Normal University at his own expense. His articles include *Traditional Chinese Xiju from the Perspective of the Training of Qinqiang Actors*,³ *Ethnography of Anthropology for Performing Skills Learning: Viewing Qinqiang Education in Xi'an, China, from the Theory of Physical Techniques*,⁴ and *The Process of Adaptation of Traditional Theater from the Perspective of Museum Construction and School Establishment: A Case Study of Qinqiang*.⁵ In *Ethnography of Anthropology for Performing Skills Learning*, Shimizu covers five chapters: the theory of physical techniques, the current situation of Qinqiang education in Xi'an, the scene of Qinqiang education (daily teaching and repertoire education), the actual performing arts learning process (including the overlap of learning processes, linguistic practice, and social relations), and the ethnographic significance and practice methods of performing arts learning. His detailed investigation of Qinqiang-related institutions and troupes, such as the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute and Shaanxi Arts School in Xi'an, uses Moss's theory of physical techniques to analyze Qinqiang education, comparing it with Ikuta Tsuma's Japanese dance. This comprehensive and in-depth study is unparalleled among Japanese scholars.

1 田仲一成:《中国戏剧史》, 东京大学出版社, 1998。[Tanaka Kazunari, *A History of Chinese Performing Arts*, University of Tokyo Press, 1998.]

2 兴膳教授辞官纪念中国文学论集编辑委员会:《兴膳教授辞官纪念中国文学论集》, 汲古书院, 2000。[Editorial Committee of the Commemorative Collection of Chinese Literature by Professor Xingshan When His Resignation, *Commemorative Collection of Chinese Literature by Professor Xingshan When His Resignation*, Jigu Library, 2000.]

3 朱浩东:《比较思想文化论集 观光·环境·共生》, 三一书房, 2006。[Zhu Haodong, *Essays on Comparative Thought and Culture: Sightseeing, Environment, and Symbiosis*, Sanyi Study, 2006.]

4 戏剧研究中心纪要编辑委员会:《戏剧研究中心纪要6 早稻田大学21世纪COE计划<戏剧的综合研究与戏剧学的确立>》, 早稻田大学戏剧博物馆, 2007。[Editorial Board of the Theatre Research Center Summary, *Theatre Research Center Summary 6: Waseda University 21st Century COE Program "Comprehensive Research in Theatre and the Establishment of Theatre Studies"*, The Waseda University Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, 2007.]

5 韩敏:《在中国社会的文化改观诸相》, 风响出版社, 2015。[Han Min, *Cultural Changes in Chinese Society*, Fengxiang Publishing House, 2015.]

These examples show that Japanese scholars have not ignored Qinqiang. On the contrary, despite limited resources, they have actively promoted and researched it, achieving noteworthy results. Although their accomplishments may not yet be groundbreaking, their scholarly dedication and efforts are commendable and worthy of recognition.

2. Preliminary Perceptions and Reflections on the Dissemination of Qinqiang in Japan

Based on the dissemination of Qinqiang in Japan over the past 30 years, we have the following preliminary understandings and reflections.

Firstly, it seems that the understanding of Qinqiang by Japanese academia and the public is still at a relatively basic stage. Even though there are some academic works and papers, they are largely superficial introductions, far from the level of in-depth research seen with Jingju and Kunqu. Therefore, more efforts from Japanese scholars are necessary. Through their research and introductions, the Japanese academia and public can gain a deeper understanding of the artistic principles and charms of Qinqiang, potentially making it an academic topic of interest. This would allow for analysis and evaluation of Qinqiang from an external perspective.

Secondly, Qinqiang performances in Japan are currently concentrated in metropolitan areas like Tokyo and Osaka, with rural areas yet to be explored. Qinqiang is popular in the vast rural areas of northwest China, which fully reflects its folk nature. Exploring performances in the Japanese countryside could further validate its folk nature.

Based on these observations, we propose the following preliminary reflections and recommendations.

Firstly, Recognize the Special Significance of Qinqiang's Dissemination in Japan and Strengthen Efforts to Promote It: Although there is no definitive evidence to confirm that Qinqiang originated in the Tang Dynasty or even the Qin Dynasty, comparisons with Tang Dynasty literature and art increasingly reveal cultural traces from that era within Qinqiang. In a sense, Qinqiang is a living fossil of Tang culture. Given that Tang culture has profoundly influenced Japanese culture, Japanese people's appreciation for Tang culture is unmatched. Therefore, spreading Qinqiang more widely in Japan could significantly enhance the recognition of historical cultural exchanges between the two countries and

strengthen contemporary communication and identity.

Secondly, Improve the Dissemination Effect of Qinqiang in Japan through Various Methods: Language barriers in singing and dialogue pose significant challenges for Japanese audiences. Utilizing screen displays and on-site translations can help the audience enjoy Qinqiang without textual or linguistic barriers. Selecting historical theatre pieces, especially those myths and legends familiar to and enjoyed by the Japanese, is crucial. Recently, large-scale Qinqiang performances have included traditional stringed and woodwind instruments and orchestras. While this symphonic accompaniment may not be necessary in China, it could be more effective in Japan, where Western music has been embraced earlier. Additionally, integrating Qinqiang with Japanese theatre could allow Japanese audiences to find more points of connection between the two cultures.

Thirdly, Encourage the Chinese Xiqu Community to Contribute to Qinqiang's Spread in Japan: Qinqiang has received far less academic attention than Jingju and Kunqu. This disparity is partly due to Qinqiang artists focusing more on communicating with folk audiences rather than engaging with scholars. However, the academic community also shares responsibility, as some scholars consider Qinqiang vulgar and offensive, lacking artistic appreciation. Chinese Xiqu scholars should further explore Qinqiang's unique artistic charm and professionally introduce it to the Japanese academic world and public. They should also identify development issues, especially in its foreign dissemination, and propose effective improvement suggestions to help cultivate a deeper artistic connotation.

Large-scale cultural exchanges between China and Japan began in the Tang Dynasty, and Qinqiang, originating in Chang'an, the Tang capital, vividly reflects the cultural form of that time. This also offers a glimpse of the prosperity of cultural exchanges between China and Japan during that era.

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The Balance between Personal Style and the Aesthetics of the Times: On Li Mei's Qinqiang Performing Arts

WANG Miao



■ Li Mei's Portrait

Born in 1969, the famous Qinqiang actress Li Mei was admitted to the training class of Shaanxi Opera Research Institute in 1980, and mainly engaged herself in the types-of-role as Zhengdan (mid-aged female role) and Xiaodan (young female role). In 1985, she received much praise from audiences and experts for her performance in the highlight "Ghost Complaint" from *Wandering by the West Lake*. For over 30 years, she has been immersing herself in the world of Xiqu, and actively exploring the Shaanxi local Xiqu genres of Qinqiang, Meihu and Wanwanqiang. She has mastered the singing skills of many Xiqu genres and excelled in both roles of scholars and those capable of martial arts, becoming one of the iconic figures of Shaanxi local Xiqu. Since 1996, she has won the Plum

Blossom Award for Chinese Theatre twice, the Wenhua Award twice, and the Magnolia Award twice, and has been known as "a plum blossom of Qinqiang" (which in Chinese pinyin is homophonic with her name "Mei").

In the mid-to-late 1980s, young actors represented by Li Mei began to appear on the stage of Qinqiang, which, to some extent, reversed the embarrassing situation of temporary deficit in manpower of Qinqiang, brought in new talents and new fashion, and profoundly influenced the artistic style of Qinqiang



■ Li Mei studied acting techniques in a training class when she was young

over the past forty years. As soon as Li Mei appeared on the stage, she was recognized by the audience and experts for her role as Li Huiniang¹ in *The Regret by the West Lake*, after which she also had outstanding performances in newly created plays such as *Cai Lun* and *Yang Qiniang*.

Entering the 21st century, Li Mei has starred in modern plays such as *The Late Blooming Rose* and *The Big Tree Moving Westward*. In recent years, she has also performed the newly created play concerning about Li Huiniang *Continuing the Red Plum Love*, which is created on the basis of traditional plays such as *The Story of Red Plum* and *Wandering by the West Lake*. Over the years, Li Mei has made considerable achievements in both classical and modern Xiqu performances. On the basis of inheriting the artistic accumulation of previous generations, she has given full play to her voice advantages, singing and reciting cleanly and performing gracefully, which to a certain extent represents the performing artistic achievements of the Qinqiang's female role Dan since the 1990s. She has also found a new balance between her personal style and the aesthetics of the times, emphasizing the aesthetics of traditional Xiqu while focusing on the integration of aesthetic elements of the contemporary times.

¹ This is a character from the traditional Qinqiang play *Wandering by the West Lake*, which was adapted from the Ming legend *Red Plum Pavilion* (《红梅阁》). Li Huiniang is a beautiful, kind and constant woman who transformed into a vengeful female ghost with a sense of justice and passionate bravery after being murdered.



■ Li Mei plays Li Huiniang in "Ghost Complaint" from *Wandering by the West Lake*

1. The Characteristics of Keeping up with the Times: Inheritance Regardless of Gender and Inclusiveness

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Danjue actors of Qinqiang were mainly Qiandan¹, both in the folk troupes and in the improved troupes like Yisu Troupe. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Qinqiang circle saw the emergence of Kundan such as Meng Cuiyun and Yang Jinfeng. On the basis of learning and inheriting the performing style of Qiandan, Kundan has given full play to their innate advantages of women in voice, appearance, body and other aspects, forming a kind of style with not only the singing characteristics of Qiandan but also the natural beauty of female. They not only pay attention to singing techniques such as words-spoken and Penkou, but also have the ability to utilize their acoustic cavity freely. Around the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Kundan artists represented by Xiao Ruolan, Xiao Yuling, Yu Qiaoyun almost completely broke away from the influence of Qiandan and were able to interpret the Danjue roles from the female perspective. It was their generation of performers who brought about a complete shift in the style of Qinqiang Danjue: modernization. This shift is a trend of the times, and a common phenomenon among all theatre genres in China. Its essence is the continuation

of the improvement of traditional Chinese Xiqu in the process of modernization, such as the reduction of singing and increase of spoken parts, the fusion of stylization and realism, and the emphasis on the literary and ideological nature of the scripts.

Li Mei and her peers have learned from the actors of Xiao Ruolan's generation, but at the same time, they also have significant differences. As the process of modernization accelerated, traditional performances are forced to reform in rhythm, melody, and other aspects, which is particularly prominent in Li Mei's performances, as seen in her starring roles in plays such as *The Regret by the West Lake*, *Continuing the Red Plum Love*, *The Late Blooming Rose* and *The Big Tree Moving Westward*.

Firstly, Li Mei's style presents more commonality than the individuality of a particular actor or theatre genre. *Wandering by the West Lake* is a play with a long history, the origin of which could be traced back to the Ming Dynasty's legend *The Story of Red Plum*. After 1949, it became a sensation with Ma Lanyu as the starring role, and became a reserved repertoire. Li Mei, who also played Li Huiniang at the beginning of her career, has combined the characteristics of many of her predecessors. In *Wandering by the West Lake*, she has inherited the basic norms of Ma Lanyu's performance, but made some adjustments such as increasing the range of her movements, so that the image of the "goddess of vengeance" was constantly confirmed and strengthened.

Secondly, Li Mei's performance has accepted the norms of contemporary aesthetics and explored a balance between stylization and realism. Traditional Chinese Xiqu is an art form of "storytelling through singing and dancing", with the characteristics of freehand, virtualization, and symbolism, and the stylization is the commonality of stage performances abstracted and refined in long-term practice. Since the entry of Western realistic theatre into China in modern times, the freehand traditional Chinese Xiqu has encountered severe challenges and threats, as the views of advocating life-like performances, breaking out of the stylization have become incessant. So balancing freehand and realism has become an important topic that countless performers have been exploring over the past hundred years. When Li Mei stepped onto the stage, it was the time when the art of traditional Chinese Xiqu was at a low ebb. The strong impact from film and television forced Xiqu to transform quickly so as to adapt to the aesthetics of the times. Fortunately, Li Mei has found a way to balance between stylization and life-like, freehand and realism in her modern theatre performances.

Leaving Behind the True Love, *The Late Blooming Rose*, and *The Big Tree Moving Westward* have all been marked the traces of her exploration and evolution. Especially in *The Late Blooming Rose*, Li Mei has shaped a selfless mother-like sister named Qiao Xuemei who lives in an urban village. The final

¹ It referred to the female role played by the male, as opposed to Kundan, and began to appear in 1870. Zhao Jiemin was an early Qinqiang Qiandan with a verifiable history, and has trained a number of outstanding performers in Yisushe and other troupes or organizations. Since the 1960s, it began to fade from the stage as the cultural environment changed.

highlight is the core and climax of the whole play: Her sister-in-law comes back to celebrate her birthday, the family reunites, and Li Mei expresses her sixteen years of pent-up emotions in a large section of singing "ten no losses and nine no regrets". It seems that there is no complicated stylization, but every move and gesture is the norm of traditional Chinese Xiqu, and the life-like performances have also been integrated. Li Mei has used the word "vivid" to express the aesthetic pursuit of her own performance, "how to act vividly and shape the characters with flesh and blood is a test of the actor's comprehensive quality."¹ "Vivid", on the one hand, refers to the artistic authenticity of the character images, i.e. to make the audience feel the reality of life from the stage performances. On the other hand, it refers to the fullness and uniqueness of the characters' personality, and is "this" particular individuality shaped from the common stylization, which reflects the process from the universal to the individual.

Thirdly, Li Mei's performances show great inclusiveness. *Continuing the Red Plum Love* is a play that Li Mei has been working hard on in recent years, which has incorporated the strengths of multiple theatre genres of Cantonese Yueju, Yuju, Hebei Bangzi, and Jingju. Compared with her earlier works, Li Mei's inclusiveness is more strongly reflected in this play, "Every famous master has her own shining points that no one else can replace. They have all taught me what they are proficient in, so that I have the opportunity to absorb



■ Li Mei's Performance Photo



■ Li Mei in *The Late Blooming Rose* and *The Big Tree Moving Westward*

1 张静:《根植于内心的自信与坚守——记李梅从演员到院长的蜕变之路》,《西部大开发》,2017年6(上)。
[Zhang Jing, Confidence and Perseverance Rooted in the Heart: On Li Mei's Transformation from Actor to Dean, West China Development, June 2017 (Part 1).]



■ Li Mei in *The Top Scholar's Matchmaker*

the strengths of all of them and continue to use these in my performances, which is why I have made such achievements."¹ Another notable feature of Li Mei's performance is her breakthrough in the types-of-role. Among the many characters she has shaped, such as Meng Bingqian in *The Big Tree Moving Westward*, she has involved multiple types-of-role including Xiaodan, Zhengdan, and Laodan (aged female role).

Li Mei's performing style is unique and has always followed the pace of the times with great innovation. As Chen Yan has put it, "For Li Mei, a mature artist, there are indeed always numerous topics about her. She is an artist who has undoubtedly formed her own school and artistic style and is worth the efforts to study. In fact, it's better not to rush to establish her own school, since establishing one would be counterproductive to being stuck in the fixed ways or patterns."²

2.Traditional Singing and Scientific Vocalization

Compared with her peers, "singing" is Li Mei's greatest strength. Whether it's the lingering and tender "resentment rising three thousand feet" in *Ghost*

1 张静:《根植于内心的自信与坚守——记李梅从演员到院长的蜕变之路》,《西部大开发》,2017年6(上)。
[Zhang Jing, Confidence and Perseverance Rooted in the Heart: On Li Mei's Transformation from Actor to Dean, West China Development, June 2017 (Part 1).]

2 陈彦:《李梅:当代秦腔领军人》,《中国戏剧》,2011年第11期。[Chen Yan, Li Mei: A Leading Role in Contemporary Qinqiang, Chinese Theatre, No. 11, 2011.]



■ Li Mei plays Lu Zhaorong in *Continuing the Red Plum Love*



Complaint, or the sobbing and tearful "ten no losses and nine no regrets" in *The Late Blooming Rose*, or even the large singing sections from beginning to end in every scene of *Continuing the Red Plum Love*, she is able to sing them all with ease.

In the singing style of the older generation, "Yi Qiang Dai Zi (match the words with singing)" is a more common singing method. Traditional audiences are often familiar with the plot and libretto, and the focus of their appreciation is often shifted to the treatment of the singing. However, since modern times, literary and ideological qualities have become important indicators for measuring a play. Especially since the new period (the reform and opening up), the way of words speaking and singing has determined whether the play can accurately express the words and convey the meaning, and whether the audience can accurately understand the theme of the play. The biggest feature of Li Mei's singing is that she speaks words quite clearly, like pearls and jade falling on the plate, which depends on her long-term training and skills obtained in her childhood. "Penkou" is one of the singing techniques, in which the actors focus on the strength and penetration of the words they spoke out. Li Mei's Penkou is not as obvious and exaggerated as that of her predecessors, and she has achieved a balance between emotional expression and the use of techniques. For example, the last character "duan"(which means break) in the sentence "the steel knife cuts my head)" is sung out directly and clearly, but it is also full of tension and emotion, making the singing technique no longer dull. In particular, in *The Late Blooming Rose*, Qiao Xuemei's parallel singing "my life is not that bad" has become a classic for the audience to sing.

3.From *Ghost Complaint & Killing Lives* to *Continuing the Red Plum Love*

Li Mei is famous for the highlights *Ghost Complaint & Killing Lives*, which is derived from the traditional Qinqiang play *Wandering by the West Lake*. The first half is mainly singing, and the second half is mainly "zuo" (referring to the performing skills of traditional Chinese Xiqu), which incorporates Qinqiang's techniques and performing patterns such as blowing fire, shaking hair, and plunging down, etc. It is highly ornamental and is a classic repertoire. In this play, she has utilized her innate advantage of voice, changed the mournful and somber singing style of her predecessors, and performed with a magnificent aura.

From *Ghost Complaint & Killing Lives* to *Continuing the Red Plum Love*, it can be said that this is a "pilgrimage" journey for Li Mei. For her, the former signifies her first step on the artistic path, while the latter undoubtedly carries a



■ Li Mei plays Li Huiniang in *Continuing the Red Plum Love*

summarizing nature. This nature is firstly reflected in the concatenation of the story. The story of Li Huiniang is constantly being adapted, with several parts being accepted or rejected, and Li Mei actually performs a comprehensive version of Li Huiniang. Secondly, the characterization of Li Huiniang has been strengthened and enriched, and the plots preserved in various theatre genres have been transposed into this play. Thirdly, the advantages of her singing have

been utilized and the singing segments have been increased, so as to maximize the strengths of her voice. And finally, Li Mei has achieved the sublimation of her personal performing arts by playing the character of Li Huiniang in *Continuing the Red Plum Love*. In a word, through this play, she has not only broken through the limitations of types-of-role, but also the theatre genres and singing styles, becoming a specimen of open exploration of Qinqiang in the 21st century.

As Li Mei has put it, the two main attractions of *Continuing the Red Plum Love* are: "bringing together the four major types-of-role of Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou" and "the unique skill of Qinqiang: blowing fire". The former refers to the fact that there are complete types-of-role in the play and the play deserves watching. Besides, Li Mei has broken through the strict boundaries of the Xiaodan and Zhengdan within the Dan types-of-role, allowing the types-of-role to serve the characters. The latter is about the relationship between the role of Li Huiniang and the unique skill of Qinqiang. There are many unique skills in traditional Chinese Xiqu, but only a few of them have been preserved, and the fire blowing is fortunate to be preserved to this day for the character Li Huiniang.

Conclusion

Li Mei's Qinqiang artistic career can be seen as a Xiqu phenomenon, which represents the transmutation of Qinqiang style in the changing times since the 1990s, highlighting the exploration of modern plays' singing, reciting, playing performing skills, and playing martial arts in the modernization of Qinqiang, especially the exploration of how to express modern life through Xiqu. Her performing experience urgently needs to be summarized and refined into the text, and only in this way can the exploration of the modern plays of Qinqiang since the 1990s, which she represents, become a readable, researchable, and observable object.

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Reform and Development of Qinqiang Troupes in Xi'an in the New Era

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In China, which has a long history and a vast territory, Xiqu is a unique style of culture and art. Influenced by various differential factors such as natural geographical environment, social and historical changes, regional cultural psychology, and dissemination and communication, Chinese Xiqu art has shown significant differentiation within it in terms of expression forms and ideological themes, which is mainly manifested in the form of different Xiqu genres. As the most popular and well-received Xiqu genre in the vast Northwest of China, Qinqiang has a great influence. It pays attention to and expresses the joys and sorrows of marriage, funeral, and every stage of life, and also reflects and interprets the morals, ethics, and the situations and problems in life. Qinqiang is the life song and the soul of the people in the Northwest of China.

In terms of external form and expression, Qinqiang is undoubtedly a rough art form. Scholars have used "broad singing and loud voice which catches the audience and makes them feel sorrowful within" to describe its artistic characteristics, which is very accurate. However, the eternal vitality of art has always been due to the word 'new'. The Qinqiang of the past is different from it today because of the different environments of the times, the different circumstances of the world, and the different artistic atmospheres. Under the guidance of technological change, the beauty of Qinqiang has constantly seen new themes and creativity in its form, connotation and dissemination. How the ancient Qinqiang can be inherited and developed in a high-quality way, and how it can approach and even "fan" young people, so that the ancient can be revitalized, is the most important concern of Qinqiang and the problem it is trying to solve at the moment. In recent years, the three major Qinqiang troupes in Xi'an (the capital of Shaanxi Province), Xi'an Yisu Troupe, Xi'an Sanyi Troupe, and Shaanxi Opera Research Institute, have actively explored the inheritance and development of Qinqiang, and have made relatively promising

achievements.

1.Xi'an Yisu Troupe: Sticking to Arts and Integrating with Culture and Tourism

Among the numerous Qinqiang troupes in Xi'an, Yisu Troupe is undoubtedly the one with the longest history and the greatest influence. It stands in the center of the ancient capital Xi'an, and is near the Bell Tower. Since its establishment in 1912, it has gone through more than a hundred years. Despite the changes of history, successive generations of people from Yisu Troupe have always sung and performed, passing on the tradition with difficulty like athletes in a relay race.

Entering into the 21st century, people from Yisu Troupe have upheld the fundamental principles and break new ground, and continue to create new achievements on the basis of their predecessors. In the past decade, Yisu Troupe has, on the one hand, searched for spiritual support from the centennial accumulation, and on the other hand, embraced the new theme of the times,



■ Promotional Poster for the 3D Qinqiang Film *Three Drops of Blood*.



■ The Theatre of Xi'an Yisu Troupe



■ Performance stills from the classic traditional Qinqiang *Three Drops of Blood* by the Yisu Troupe in Xi'an

making a lot of efforts in the inheritance of theatre genres, repertoires and talents. They have made great efforts to establish the Xi'an Yisu Troupe Cultural Research Institute, which collects and organizes the precious literature of Yisu Troupe and implements all-round protection of scripts, venues, repertoires and historical materials of of time-honored brand cultural relics protection units.

Over the past hundred years, Yisu Troupe has created and performed 600 to 700 Qinqiang plays, and among them, many original plays have become Qinqiang classics. In the course of its long-term performing activities, it has developed a unique artistic style, and has been listed as a national intangible cultural heritage protection base. In the past ten years, under the guidance of the theory of intangible cultural heritage protection, it has strengthened the revival of classic repertoires, and re-launched more than 80 traditional plays with significant influence in history, such as *Three Drops of Blood*, *Soft Jade Screen*, *Diao Chan*, and so on. At the same time, it has also created and rehearsed *Bride of Liuhewan*, *Yisu Troupe* and other modern Qinqiang plays that are very different from traditional ones in form and content, which are highly received by the society and has won it a good reputation. In order to expand the publicity of itself, Yisu Troupe has produced a TV documentary *A Hundred Years of Yisu Troupe* which was broadcast on CCTV, and has also cooperated with the film studio to shoot *Three Drops of Blood* and *Bride of Liuhewan* into 3D movies, which has not only expanded the social influence of the ancient Qinqiang and Yisu Troupe itself, but has also left valuable materials for Qinqiang. The Qinqiang cartoon *Three Drops of Blood* has also been

broadcast on TV stations in Pakistan and other countries.

Since its establishment, Yisu Troupe has attached importance to the educational and promotional functions of Xiqu, and has actively participated in the construction of local culture. In recent years, it has actively responded to the national call and the aesthetic needs of the people, creating modern plays that adapts to the aesthetics of the times and reflecting contemporary social life. In 2020, the Qinqiang modern play *The Daughter of the CPC* has been produced, which is adapted from Jingju and is a passionate work depicting the martyrs of the Communist Party of China. In 2021, another modern play *Dream Weaver* has been created to tell the stories of the first batch of textile workers and the model worker Zhao Mengtao, who was famous in China in the 1950s. This play was starred by Hui Minli, who is now a "national model worker". Such kind of theatrical activity, in which a model worker plays a model worker, is very expressive of the Chinese people's admiration for the spirit of hard work. On the occasion of the 110th anniversary of the founding of Yisu Troupe in 2022, it has also presented the traditional Qinqiang play *The Story of Chengying Saved the Orphan of Zhaoshi* and the historical Play *Zhaojun's Journey* which tells the story of Wang Zhaojun. It attaches great importance to both the inheritance of classic plays and the creation of new scripts, as well as performances in both urban theatres and rural temple fairs.

Qinqiang is the most influential Xiqu art form in Northwest China. Yisu Troupe is located in the millennium old capital Xi'an where there are profound cultural deposits and excellent tourism and cultural resources, and the fusion of culture and tourism has created unique effects. In order to promote the integration of culture and tourism, Hui Minli, the president of Yisu Troupe has made positive efforts which has caused a series of chain reactions and greatly changed the appearance of the architectural environment of Yisu Troupe, prompting the government to increase the financial support for Qinqiang. As a deputy to the National People's Congress (NPC), Hui Minli has repeatedly proposed legislative protection for Qinqiang to the government at important meetings. After years of research and the participation of people of insight, the *Regulations on the Protection, Inheritance and Development of Qinqiang Art in Shaanxi Province* was officially implemented on January 1, 2022 onwards. This local regulatory document has provided legal and policy support in many aspects, including the responsibility of government departments and individuals for Qinqiang protection, the cultivation of Qinqiang talents, and the development of Qinqiang art groups, which have been highly praised by all sectors of society, especially practitioners and core audiences of Xiqu.

Although Qinqiang art has a long history, it is difficult for more young people to



■ The Shaanxi Qinqiang animated Series *Three Drops of Blood* won the "2019 Best Chinese Animated Film Award" in Pakistan

■ Promotional Poster for the Qinqiang Cartoon Series *Three Drops of Blood*



accept it due to its inherent artistic expression and communication methods. In the face of this problem, Yisu Troupe has taken the initiative to "open its doors" to greet the audience. It has closely combined the dissemination of Qinqiang with tourism, and has explored a path to build a Xiqu cultural park with a high degree of combination of Xiqu viewing, tourism and social interaction. In 2016, based on their staff dormitory, Yisu Troupe has established a miniature exhibition hall where some historical and cultural materials are displayed to introduce its history, and has received the attention of scholars, college

students, ordinary tourists and the media from all over the country. Anyone who has walked into this exhibition hall has all been shocked. Hui Minli has keenly seized this opportunity and proposed the idea of building a cultural block centered on Yisu Troupe to the higher authorities. After several years of efforts, the cultural block was officially opened in September 2021. The quaint but stylish block not only includes the Yisu Troupe Centennial Museum and the Chinese Qinqiang Art Museum, but also an open-air theatre stage and the time-honored cuisine, etc., integrating "museum, exhibition, performance, tourism, experience and interaction". Tourists from home and abroad can wander through the block, watch performances, taste the delicious food, learn about Chinese Xiqu culture, and experience the history and fashion of the ancient capital Xi'an. Over the past two years, various cultural activities have been regularly held in the Yisu Troupe block, and it has become a new landmark for local cultural tourism. Now if we go to Xi'an, after visiting the majestic Bell Tower, follow the rough and vigorous Qinqiang sound in our ears, what catches our eyes is the quaint yet modern century-old Yisu Troupe.

2. Centennial Sanyi Troupe: A Cyber-Star Troupe Rooted in the Countryside

Among the numerous Qinqiang troupes in Xi'an, there is also a century-old troupe, that is, the Sanyi Troupe, which is as famous as the Yisu Troupe. Unlike Yisu Troupe, who is passionate about integrating into the cultural construction of the city and creating tourism business cards, Sanyi Troupe has put more effort into the development of the grassroots performance market. In recent years, Sanyi Troupe has visited almost all rural areas in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, with online and offline performances benefiting more than 10 million viewers. The Spring Festival is the grandest festival for Chinese people, especially in the northwest rural areas, and this is also a time when Sanyi Troupe has the most performances. After the Spring Festival, Sanyi Troupe generally starts from Xi'an and tours all over Shaanxi Province, and also to Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang and other provinces and autonomous regions. Often, it is just after a performance and another performance order has been signed for the next one, and the performance site often gathers tens of thousands of viewers, filling inside and outside. Meanwhile, most performers of Sanyi Troupe are cyber stars on new media and short-video platforms, and most of them have hundreds of thousands of fans. During the performances, the actors would open the live broadcasting room for real-time live streaming and interaction, which is very lively. Such an approach not only brings income



■ The Sanyi Troupe held a New Year's performance on the ancient city wall of Xi'an

to the actors, but also cultivates a lot of audiences, and also allows us to see more possibilities for the modernization, the Internet dissemination and the creation of a unique cultural circle of Xiqu.

Continuous performance is inseparable from the supply of high-quality "products". In recent years, Sanyi Troupe has continuously launched new plays, cultivated talents for performing arts, and released new works on traditional, newly-edited historical, and modern themes. It has successively organized and rehearsed new plays such as *The Past of Northern Shaanxi*, *The Concubine Yang*, and *The Hatred between Mother and Son*, and has inherited or transplanted nearly 60 excellent traditional plays that are well received by Xiqu fans, such as *Flame Colt Three Drops of Blood*, and *The Case of Chen Shimei*. Besides, it has also taught highly recognizable classics such as *Flame Colt*, *Exchanging a Civet Cat for a Prince* and *Zhou Ren's Returning Home* to young

performers, which have been well received by audiences.

As for the learning of Xiqu performances, without long time and extremely arduous efforts, it would be impossible to gain any achievement. So Qinqiang performers all attach great importance to training young talents. In 2016 and 2020, Sanyi Troupe has selected 22 and 15 students respectively to form a reserve force, and has invited some retired senior actors to cultivate them, providing oral teaching that inspires true understanding within. After several years of study, some of the young actors have taken up the responsibility of major roles. The Plum Performance Award is the highest honor in the field of Chinese theatre performance. In recent years, the Centennial Sanyi Troupe has won this award three times. These Plum Performance Award winners have an inspirational effect on the entire cast and can also help to increase the competitiveness of the troupe in the market.

3. Shaanxi Opera Research Institute: Cultivating Talents and Exemplary Performing

The responsibility for the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese Xiqu will ultimately fall on the young people. The Shaanxi Opera Research Institute has done a very good job in strengthening the construction of talent teams for the inheritance of traditional Chinese Xiqu. Founded in 1938 in Yan'an, it was born amidst the flames of revolution. After decades of development, it has created numerous works that are well-known to the people and is now a Xiqu art group of considerable scale. It has not only Qinqiang troupes, but also troupes which performed the local Xiqu genre of Shaanxi like Meihu and Wanwanqiang.

In recent years, the Institute has made many attempts and explorations in the training of talents for Xiqu performance and creation. Due to its abundant artistic resources, it has given full play to the elder artists' role of "transmission, assistance, and guidance", and has established a professional teaching team consisting of skilled inheritors and professional and efficient educators, creating a relatively complete mechanism for the learning and passing on of Xiqu. For example, mature performers from the Institute can serve as teachers in Xiqu schools, undertake the teaching of basic lessons and repertoire classes, and also help young students rehearse plays. In order to cultivate more talents, it also recruits students for training courses in the Northwest region, and organizes commissioned training courses in cooperation with Xiqu vocational



■ A View Inside the Shaanxi Opera Research Institute



■ The Shaanxi Opera Research Institute's Outstanding Production *The Female Generals of the Yang Family*

schools. These primary school students recruited from all over Northwest China not only do not need to pay tuition and accommodation fees, but can also receive a certain amount of living allowance. Due to the guarantee of funds, some rural children who enjoy Xiqu will actively apply for vocational Xiqu colleges, which, to some extent, has solved the problem of student enrollment.

Since the reform of the cultural system, Shaanxi Opera Research Institute has retained the staffing of public institution. And because of government funding, it has a good financial treatment and working environment, and has become the most attractive troupe with many performing talents. In terms of traditional works, the performances of its actors are considered to be of exemplary value. And in the creation of modern theatre, it has also demonstrated strong vitality. In recent years, the works *The Late Blooming Rose*, *The Big Tree Moving Westward*, and *The Story of Xijing*. it has produced have been regarded as the "trilogy" of modern theatre. These works often focus on issues in social development, actively publicize advanced deeds, and have a great deal to do with the real life of the people and government policies, thus creating a considerable impact and also reinforcing their core position in the field of modern theatre.

Shaanxi is one of the birthplaces of Qinqiang, and its capital, Xi'an, is an ancient city. Qinqiang, the spiritual soul of the people of Northwest China, has "pervaded" the ancient city for hundreds of years. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Qinqiang troupes represented by Yisu Troupe and others have been recreating their splendor in inheritance and innovation, and the ancient Qinqiang is still glowing with a new light in the modern city.

YANG YAO
Host of Shaanxi Media Convergence (SMC)

Opportunities and Challenges for Traditional Chinese Xiqu in the Era of Convergence Media

REN Tingting

Under the influence of multiculturalism, traditional Chinese Xiqu is gaining acceptance and admiration among young audiences through new methods of dissemination and presentation. Recently, a video of Chen Li, a recipient of the Chinese Drama Plum Blossom Award and a national first-class performer of Ganju, teaching at Nanchang University went viral. Dressed in traditional xiqu attire, Chen Li demonstrated the charm of Ganju, captivating students in the classroom who responded with fan-like enthusiasm, making it an extraordinary xiqu appreciation class. As a traditional xiqu genre of Jiangxi province and a national intangible cultural heritage, Ganju has become a trendy topic among young people due to Chen Li's popularity, bringing it to the attention of a broader youthful audience. We are witnessing a growing number of young people becoming xiqu fans after experiencing its charm, while others are learning about xiqu through fragmented and trendy popular elements.

For example, the cross-genre song "Wu Jia Po 2021," blending Jingju and pop music, went viral on the TikTok platform, garnering fervent support from millennials and Gen Z. Yueju is also increasingly resonating with young people through video games. In recent years, the rise of short videos and live streaming has introduced new ideas to the xiqu industry. Live streaming, in particular, breaks the spatial and temporal limitations of traditional theaters, creating a massive audience dominated by young people. The competitions among xiqu performers in live streaming rooms and the audience's tipping can be seen as an innovative development and creative transformation of the traditional "xiqu competition" and grand performances in the new era.

Professor Zheng Chuanyin of Wuhan University believes that this new method of disseminating xiqu will create opportunities for traditional xiqu in the new era:



■ Chen Li giving lectures at Nanchang University

"The real-time interaction between performers and audiences on live streaming platforms will inevitably guide xiqu creation and performance to meet the intellectual and emotional needs and aesthetic preferences of the audience, helping to overcome the tendency of xiqu to become detached from the masses and implement the 'people-centered' approach."¹

Using popular culture to package xiqu art has become a new path for traditional xiqu to break through the impact of multiculturalism. This approach has also been applied in the exploration of contemporary xiqu stages. In 2023, the phenomenally successful production *New Dragon Gate Inn*, created by renowned Yueju performer Mao Weitao, became a standout in contemporary

Chinese theater. Adapted from the classic 1990s Chinese film *New Dragon Gate Inn*, the production tells a traditional martial arts story, drawing fans of the film and martial arts enthusiasts into the traditional theater.

The Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn* presents traditional Yueju art from a "young person's perspective" while preserving and respecting its essence. The script adaptation emphasizes the dramatic conflicts within the inn, accelerates the pace of the drama, and incorporates themes such as "the martial world," "chivalry," and "emotional entanglements" that interest young people. The performance introduces the concept of environmental theater, attracting young audiences with an immersive interactive experience that breaks the conventional viewing relationship of Yueju. The actors' movements blend clean and crisp martial arts actions with aesthetically pleasing dance moves. The costume design incorporates traditional style elements, striving to find a balance between tradition and modernity.

Over two years, the play was performed 1,000 times in Shanghai, with each show fully booked. The audience ranged from 18 to 30 years old, and the show became so popular that there was a scramble for tickets on major online platforms. On a short video platform dominated by young users, the play garnered tens of millions of views. It can be said that the *Yueju New Dragon Gate Inn* realized Mao Weitao's creative goal in theater practice: to attract new audiences, maximize the market, and bring viewers into the theater.

However, in stark contrast to these phenomena, the box office for traditional xiqu theaters remains tepid. Even with a significant number of complimentary tickets, traditional xiqu venues like Chang'an Grand Theater and Mei Lanfang Theater have an occupancy rate of only around 75%, coupled with a notably aging audience. Official data indicates that over 80% of the audience for traditional xiqu channels are over 50 years old. Younger individuals, who prefer fast-paced entertainment, are generally disinclined to attend xiqu performances. This situation presents a paradox: while there are signs of a potential xiqu revival, traditional xiqu theaters are struggling in the era of mass entertainment. This raises the question: can isolated success stories revitalize the entire industry's ecosystem?

Affected by multiculturalism, xiqu has become a niche culture often overlooked by younger audiences. The challenge for traditional xiqu artists is to transform xiqu into a popular culture of the new era. The success of Chen Li's xiqu classes, the popularity of xiqu elements on online platforms, and the phenomenon of *New Dragon Gate Inn* all demonstrate that, with proper exposure, traditional xiqu can indeed become contemporary popular

1 郑传寅：《直播PK、打赏与戏曲传播研究报告》，《戏曲艺术》2024年第1期，第1页。[Zheng Chuanyin: Research Report on Live Streaming PK, Tipping and Xiqu Dissemination, Xiqu Art, No. 1, 2024, p. 1.]



■ Mao Weitao directing the actors' rehearsal for *New Dragon Gate Inn*



■ Stage photos of the Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn*

culture. Therefore, finding ways to make traditional xiqu accessible and appealing to young people is a crucial issue for its continued development in the new era.

While xiqu that reaches young audiences through popular songs and mobile games is still in the phase of element dissemination, this approach alone rarely provides a deep understanding of xiqu. These fragmented elements may spark initial interest, but without engaging with the essence of the art form, their appeal is short-lived. A more effective approach is to use media platforms to present xiqu stories in their entirety. For instance, xiqu scholar Guo Mei, on her WeChat video account "Xiqu Veteran Guo Mei," interprets classic xiqu with a modern aesthetic. Her 4-minute video, *The Peony Pavilion: An Earth-Shattering Love*, received over a thousand likes and shares, with many young viewers expressing their interest in Du Liniang's perspectives on love. On Bilibili, the blogger "Bengdeng Cangcang" combines current trends with humorous storytelling to present traditional xiqu. With 118,000 followers, this blogger's most popular xiqu video has achieved 486,000 views. Immersing young people in complete xiqu stories through such engaging media presentations is key to maintaining and growing their interest.

At the same time, using modern media to create trending topics around xiqu and involving enthusiastic and dynamic young people in the conversation can further ignite their passion for exploring xiqu. Historically, xiqu art gained significant attention through traditional media. In the early 20th century, the "New and Old Drama Debate" was a major topic. Zhang Houzai, a young xiqu enthusiast and a student at Beijing University, engaged in a debate with May Fourth New Culture Movement scholars in the journal *New Youth*. In his defense of xiqu, Zhang wrote "My Impressionistic View of Drama," a theoretical cornerstone for understanding xiqu's essence today.



■ Screenshot from Guo Mei's WeChat Official Account video *The Peony Pavilion: An Earth-Shattering Love*

Today, xiqu continues to spark discussions on modern media platforms. In 2022, the costume idol drama *A Dream of Splendor*, adapted from Guan Hanqing's Yuan dynasty zaju *Rescued by a Coquette*, sparked significant feminist discourse. The series, starring renowned Chinese actress Liu Yifei, aired during Tencent Video's summer season and received accolades such as Tencent's Annual Favorite Series and Annual Membership Favorite Series. It drew a large number of young viewers on video media platforms, bringing the classic xiqu *Rescued by a Coquette* into the spotlight. The original story emphasizes Zhao Pan'er's quest for freedom and her chivalrous spirit in saving her sisters despite her courtesan status. However, the TV adaptation reimagined Zhao Pan'er as a character striving to escape her lowly status and find perfect love, while the male lead's role in rescuing Zhao Pan'er undermined the female autonomy emphasized in the original. Many netizens argue that *A Dream of Splendor* purports to champion female independence but instead promotes an idealized male fantasy, diverging from the original work's values. Leveraging social topics to stimulate scholarly discourse, engage young people with classics, and cultivate an appreciation for xiqu and traditional culture is a



■ Liu Yifei plays Zhao Pan'er in the television series *A Dream of Splendor*

crucial mission for modern media.

The integration of dramatic art with modern media forms, such as film and television, is a historical evolution. Initially, modern media like film and television relied on xiqu but gradually developed into independent and mature art forms. Throughout this evolution, xiqu has preserved its core essence while exploring new opportunities through collaborations with film and television.

The first xiqu film, *The Battle of Mount Dingjun*, was released in 1905, and the 1963 film *Wu Song* continues to highlight the refined performance art of actor Gai Jiaotian. In the mid-20th century, television, which was then emerging, began to embrace xiqu art by broadcasting live performances of renowned xiqu masters. This was followed by the introduction of xiqu TV programs, such as "CCTV Air Theater", which began in 2003 and allowed xiqu enthusiasts to enjoy performances from home, offering greater viewing convenience. With the arrival of the digital age, we have entered a new era of modern media characterized by the deep and comprehensive integration of various media forms. As a result, the collaboration between xiqu art and new media has become increasingly complex and diverse.

Today, the integration of drama with modern media has reached an unprecedented level. History demonstrates that leveraging contemporary technological platforms while preserving the essence of xiqu art is crucial for attracting new audiences to traditional theaters. The ultimate goal of merging xiqu with modern media is to draw audiences into theaters to appreciate xiqu art firsthand. Using modern media to entice audiences into traditional theaters is more meaningful than merely capturing their attention through contemporary platforms. This is the core intent of performance artists who employ popular methods to engage young people. Despite Chen Li's classes attracting 200 million views online, she says, "I don't aim to become an internet celebrity.



■ Xiqu director Li Zhuoqun



■ Stage Photo of *Hero Wu Song*

My greatest achievement is seeing young people engage with and fall in love with Ganju. This motivates me to continually innovate and enhance the course experience."¹

While traditional theaters once served as the primary form of entertainment for ancient people, today's era, overflowing with entertainment options, has transformed theaters into spaces for reflection and deeper understanding. Mao Weitao, despite her bold innovations in traditional Yueju, remains optimistic about the contemporary revival of traditional theaters: "Given the fast-paced nature of modern life, we need to slow down. The theater might be the best place for that. When we enter the theater and spend two hours quietly enjoying the performance, we relax because we form a close emotional connection with the performers, and our emotions align."²

Chen Li and Mao Weitao's exploration of traditional xiqu on the contemporary stage exemplifies the cultural ethos of xiqu artists seeking a balance between

1 李梓源：《让非遗在课堂上“活”起来》，《中国政协报》2024年4月12日，第010版。[Li Ziyuan: Bringing Intangible Heritage to Life in the Classroom, China CPPCC News, April 12, 2024, p. 010.]

2 茅威涛：《寻找越剧和生命的价值》，《中国文艺评论》2021年第5期，第109页。[Mao Weitao: Finding the Value of Yueju and Life, China Art Review, Issue 5, 2021, p. 109.]



■ Stage Photo of *Death Do Us Part*

inheritance and innovation. Regarding the era's innovations in xiqu art, Mei Lanfang believed that to keep pace with the times, xiqu could "move" in its evolution—that is, its presentation and thematic content could continuously innovate according to contemporary needs, but the core of xiqu stage techniques should remain unchanged. Mei Lanfang's views provide valuable theoretical insights for today's xiqu innovations.

Notably, similar to Mao Weitao's dedication to traditional theaters, the Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn*—despite its numerous attempts at reforming traditional practices—maintains the aesthetic essence of Yueju's impressionistic, poetic, and symbolic qualities. Behind this phenomenon, a new generation of xiqu producers and directors are using avant-garde methods to uphold the xiqu theater's territory. For example, Li Zhuoqun's small theater xiqu *Hero Wu Song* explores a new path between classical forms and modern concepts. It introduces innovations in promotion, script pacing, costumes, props, and musical arrangements, while retaining the core plot elements of traditional Jingju pieces such as *Wu Song Fights the Tiger*, *Choosing the Curtain* and *Tailoring the Clothes*, and *Lion Tower*. The theme further deepens the spirit of Wu Song in the original work.

Li Zhuoqun's *Hero Wu Song* breaks the mold of modernity and enriches Pan Jinlian's character to highlight Wu Song's role, returning her to a supporting role



■ Stage photos of the Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn*



■ Stage Photo of *A Love Beyond*

and leaving the stage for Wu Song. More importantly, the actor Wei Xuelei, who plays Wu Song, attracts young audiences with his youthful appearance and handsome portrayal, demonstrating the continuity of xiqu's art forms in young performers. As an 80s xiqu director, Li Zhuoqun has created a series of classic works such as *Death Do Us Part*, *A Love Beyond*, *The Spring Banquet*, and others. These works, while highly acclaimed by young people for their fresh interpretations, vibrant character designs, and stunning promotional videos, retain the core plots of traditional dramas and focus on traditional themes. They use avant-garde exteriors with rhythms and visual effects that align with modern viewing habits to attract audiences while respecting the spiritual core of traditional xiqu.

Since the beginning of the new era, traditional Chinese xiqu art has been engaging in modern experiments while adhering to the principle of maintaining its essence. As technology advances and theater concepts evolve, traditional xiqu will continue to advance its modern development by balancing the



■ Stage Photo of *The Spring Banquet*

preservation of its core elements with technological innovation, fostering coexistence and integration with modern media. The pursuit of staying current is unending. By continually infusing new ideas, we can build a vibrant new ecology for xiqu art and drive the prosperity and revival of the entire industry.

REN TINGTING

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The Peony Pavilion Across East and West: An Analysis of Three Cross-Cultural Adaptations

MA Hui

Since its inception, *The Peony Pavilion* has garnered significant attention and become a beloved classic subject to numerous adaptations. The Kunqu version of the play, in particular, gained international recognition when it was listed as part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2001. In recent years, various stage interpretations of the play have emerged, each offering a unique perspective.

This article explores three notable stage versions: Bai Xianyong's Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, the Japanese-Chinese collaboration starring Band Tamasaburō V, and the American adaptation directed by Peter Sellars. These versions were selected for their representation of diverse cultural approaches: Bai Xianyong's adaptation reflects a contemporary Chinese perspective on traditional xiqu, Tamasaburō's version demonstrates how Japanese artists interpret Chinese traditional theater within an Eastern context, and Sellars' production offers a Western reinterpretation of the play.

The analysis of these versions highlights two key aspects of contemporary adaptation: modernity and tradition. Modernity involves the creators' responses to current trends and audience expectations, while tradition concerns the preservation and continuity of xiqu. The different backgrounds, locations, and aesthetic views of the creators result in varied contemporary renditions. Comparing these adaptations sheds light on the evolving trends and significance of cross-cultural drama.

1. The Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*: "Youth" and "Orthodoxy" in the Role of the "Knowledge Supervisor"

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which premiered in 2004, was produced under the guidance of Bai Xianyong. Notably, Bai Xianyong was not the director but rather a "knowledge supervisor," assuming roles as leader, organizer, producer, and manager.¹ He established the broad creative vision, leaving specific details to a team of 18 behind-the-scenes creators with expertise in Kunqu and international stage design.

Bai Xianyong's creative approach can be encapsulated by two key concepts: "youth" and "orthodoxy." He emphasized that "youth"² aimed to engage and nurture young audiences and actors, while "orthodoxy"³ reflected a commitment to tradition. The "youth" elements in this version include:

- a. Young Actors: Shen Fengying and Yu Jiulin, the lead actors, were both under 25 when selected and were newcomers from the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of China.
- b. Youthful Script: The script was adapted to enhance Liu Mengmei's role, balancing the male and female leads to better portray the love story between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei and appeal to younger audiences. For instance, scenes from "The Portrait Discovered" and "Calling at the Portrait" were combined to highlight Liu Mengmei's character, making it comparable to Du Liniang's classic scenes "An Enchanting Dream" and "Retracing the Dream".
- c. Stylish Stage Design, Lighting, and Costumes: The stage design integrated elements of Chinese calligraphy and painting in a minimalist style. Modern lighting and sound technology were utilized, and the costumes featured traditional Su embroidery, offering a luxurious yet understated elegance.

Bai Xianyong hoped that these elements would make *The Peony Pavilion*

- 1 黄树森：《白先勇文化范式》，白先勇主编《圆梦：白先勇与青春版〈牡丹亭〉》，花城出版社 2006 年版，第 13 页。[Huang Shusen: Bai Xianyong's Cultural Paradigm, in *Dreaming the Dream: Bai Xianyong and the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion*, edited by Bai Xianyong, Huacheng Publishing House, 2006, p. 13.]
- 2 白先勇：《姹紫嫣红开遍——青春版〈牡丹亭〉八大名校巡演盛况纪实》，《圆梦》，第 91-92 页。[Bai Xianyong: All the Colors Blooming—A Record of the Tour of the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion by Eight Prestigious Schools, in *Dreaming the Dream*, pp. 91-92.]
- 3 汪世瑜：《青春版〈牡丹亭〉的舞台总体构想》，《圆梦》，第 100 页。[Wang Shiyu: The Overall Stage Concept of the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion, in *Dreaming the Dream*, p. 100.]



■ Bai Xianyong



■ The Poster of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*



■ Stage Photo of Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*

more appealing to young people, encouraging them to fall in love with the traditional art of Kunqu. However, these "youthful" elements are largely symbolic. What young people first notice is the romantic story of the talented scholar and beautiful maiden, along with the stage design rich in calligraphy and painting elements. They are drawn to a story akin to costume drama love stories and are fascinated by the refined culture of calligraphy, painting, and Su embroidery. Kunqu becomes an accessory to these symbols, or it itself turns into a commodified symbol. In *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard posits that modern society has transformed into a consumer society of excess products, where people consume cultural symbols with ideological significance. Symbolic consumption becomes a channel for individuals to gain identity and prestige. When cultural arts become consumer goods, sales and attention become the only metrics, leading to the traits of fashion, entertainment, and

commercialization in cultural consumption. Bai Xianyong's original intention in producing *The Peony Pavilion* was to attract young people and pass down Kunqu, so using cultural symbols as "bait" is understandable. However, consuming these symbols does not necessarily elevate the audience's artistic appreciation; it may even undermine the work's significance. Through cultural symbols rather than specific content, young people gain a sense of cultural elevation, while "the original meaning of culture becomes merely an inherent, secondary function."¹

On the other hand, "orthodoxy" represents Bai Xianyong's adherence to tradition, specifically manifested in two ways:

- a. Respect for the Original Work: Based on the principle of "only cutting, not altering,"² the original 55 scenes were condensed into 27, preserving the full spirit of the play.
- b. Emphasis on Apprenticeship: Bai Xianyong had Zhang Jiqing take Shen Fengying as her disciple and Wang Shiyu take Yu Jiulin as his disciple, following the traditional apprenticeship ceremony.

The emphasis on apprenticeship is particularly noteworthy. Traditional xiqu is passed down through "oral transmission and personal instruction," where artists impart performance techniques such as singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts to their apprentices, making these skills exceptionally valuable through long-term practice. Thus, the apprenticeship ceremony is a serious matter. Bai Xianyong's insistence on this tradition aimed to honor it. However, due to time constraints, the two lead actors had less than a year to learn from their masters, making the ceremony more symbolic than substantive.

Bai Xianyong, as a "knowledge supervisor," approaches culture as a commodity, similar to a corporate knowledge manager, and attempts to promote it in the form of a finished product.

1 [法] 鲍德里亚:《消费社会》, 刘成富、金志刚译, 南京: 南京大学出版社 2000 年版, 第 111 页。
[Jean Baudrillard: *The Consumer Society*, translated by Liu Chengfu and Jin Zhigang, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2000, p. 111.]

2 朱栋霖:《论青春版〈牡丹亭〉现象》,《圆梦》, 第 188 页。[Zhu Donglin: On the Phenomenon of the Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*, in *Dreaming the Dream*, p. 188.]

2. The Japanese Style of *The Peony Pavilion*: Kabuki Master's Professional Experimentation

Bandō Tamasaburō V, a renowned Japanese Kabuki "onnagata" actor¹, has deep connections with traditional Chinese xiqu. He mentioned that both his grandfather and father had interactions with Jingju, sparking his early interest in Chinese traditional xiqu. Over 20 years ago, Bandō watched Zhang Jiqing's performance of the Kunqu *The Peony Pavilion* and was deeply moved. He dreamed of performing Kunqu someday, believing that the delicate nature of Kunqu resonated with the essence of Japanese Kabuki.

However, mastering the essence of Kunqu is no easy task. The stage version of *The Peony Pavilion* was a collaboration between Bandō Tamasaburō and the Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of China and did not include the entire play. When performed in Japan and China in 2008, only four scenes, "Traveling around the Garden," "An Enchanting Dream," "The Portrait," and "The Roving Soul," were staged. Different performers replaced the "Flower Gods" scene in the "Stacked Flowers" segment. In the 2010 Tokyo performance, the scenes "The Tryst" and "Resurrection" were added. The 2013 Paris performance further included "Calling at the Portrait" and "The Infernal Judge." Bandō continuously learned new scenes, resulting in a fluid performance style. This analysis primarily references his 2008 performances at Kyoto Minami-za and Beijing Huguang Guild Hall.

As a Kabuki artist, Bandō Tamasaburō introduced numerous creative innovations in his performances. Firstly, he reinvented the makeup style, adopting the Kabuki makeup technique with a paler base and fine eyebrow and eye lines, reminiscent of Ukiyo-e, yet with richly expressive facial expressions distinct from traditional Kabuki performance. For example, in "An Enchanting Dream" scene, Bandō's delicate eye movements, shy demeanor, and restrained smiles were exceptionally detailed. Secondly, there was a unique distribution of roles, with Bandō and Chinese actresses Liu Zheng and Dong Fei collectively portraying Du Liniang, while Liu Mengmei was played by Yu Jiulin. Bandō aimed to contribute to the revival of male Dan actors through this collaboration. Thirdly, the stage setting included retaining the Kabuki "hanamichi" in Japanese performances, using it as a performance space. In *The Peony Pavilion*, the hanamichi served not only as an entrance and exit pathway but also as a

¹ In Kabuki, male actors who play female roles are called onnagata, equivalent to "nandan"(male dan) in Chinese traditional xiqu.



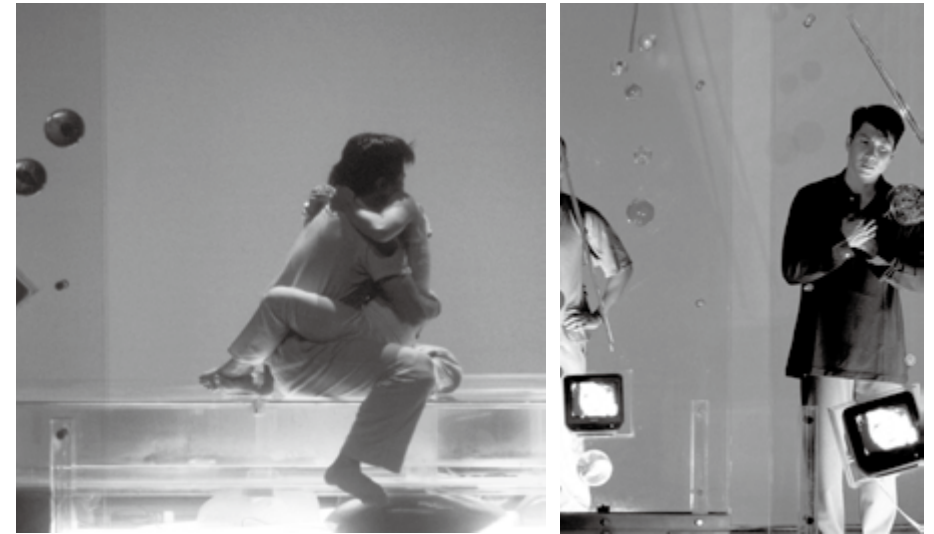
■ Bandō Tamasaburō V plays Du Liliang in the *The Peony Pavilion*

performance area during scene transitions. In "An Enchanting Dream," Liu Mengmei ascends and descends via an elevator from the hanamichi. Lastly, the lighting design was flexible and varied, unlike the predominantly white light in traditional Kunqu. For example, the warm pink lighting in "An Enchanting Dream" created a romantic atmosphere, while "The Portrait" showcased a gradual transition from morning to evening light.

As a Kabuki artist, Bandō Tamasaburō's rendition of *The Peony Pavilion* carried a strong personal touch, reflecting a fusion of Chinese and Japanese art. Both China and Japan share an Eastern cultural atmosphere with many commonalities in artistic perception. Kunqu and Kabuki are both recognized as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, relying on live transmission through master-apprentice relationships. Bandō's integration of Kabuki elements into Kunqu contributes positively to the global dissemination of Kunqu. However, Bandō's interpretation cannot be considered a pure form of Kunqu but rather an unconventional adaptation. It is admirable that Bandō, nearly 60 years old, embraced the role of a novice to learn Kunqu despite his status as a Kabuki master, though this also carried a sense of "professional experimentation."

3. The Western Style of *The Peony Pavilion*: Oriental Cultural Appropriation by an American Opera Director

Peter Sellars, a renowned contemporary American director, is known for works such as *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and various Mozart operas. In May 1998, at the Vienna Arts Festival, he directed a three-hour-long version of *The Peony Pavilion*, which premiered in two parts. The first part, titled "An Enchanting Dream," was based on the original scene and included additional segments such as "The Dream Retraced," "The Portrait," and "Unitimely Death." In this part, Sellars employed two sets of actors: Hua Wenyi and Michael Schumacher performed as Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei in traditional Kunqu and stylized modern dance, while Lauren Tom and Joel de la Fuente performed in a Western dramatic style. The second part, titled "Three Nights of Secret Union," depicted scenes from "The Infernal Judge" to "Resurrection" from the original play. This section was dominated by Tan Dun's music, with soprano Huang Ying and tenor Xu Linqiang portraying a third pair of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. On stage, two or three pairs of protagonists performed in parallel, expressing the characters in different ways. Tan Dun's music "sometimes sounded Chinese, sometimes Indian, with pre-recorded choruses evoking medieval chants (referred to by the ensemble as Tibetan songs), but



■ Stage photos of Peter Sellars' Production of *The Peony Pavilion*

most of the time it was rock music"¹

Sellars's stage design featured large wheeled plexiglass screens with over 20 embedded video monitors. These screens were arranged on stage like traditional Chinese screens, dividing performance areas. In "An Enchanting Dream," Lauren Tom and Hua Wenyi applied makeup while sitting on either side of a transparent screen, creating a mirror-like effect. In "The Portrait," Sellars used video monitors to cleverly depict Du Liniang's self-portrait, with Lauren Tom filming close-ups of her face and projecting them onto multiple stage monitors. This stage design was inspired by Wu Hung's book, *Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, which discusses the Yongzheng era's "Twelve Beauties Screens"². These screens depicted

1 Catherine Swatek: Boundary Crossings: Peter Sellars's Production of *Peony Pavilion*. *Asian Theatre Journal*, Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 2002, p.153.

2 [美] 巫鸿: 《重屏: 中国绘画的媒材与再现》, 文丹译, 上海人民出版社 2009 年版, 第 174 页。
[Wu Hung: *Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, translated by Wen Dan, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2009, p. 174.]

women in a "feminine space"¹, conveying longing and anticipation for a lover. Sellars used plexiglass screens and projected actor images to create a similar "feminine space" on stage, but the audience could see through this enclosed space, scrutinizing Du Liniang's physical features and her boudoir items. This stage design could be described as "erotic," "sensual," and "sexy," resembling 19th-century Western opera's depiction of the Orient.

Overall, Sellars's production of *The Peony Pavilion* was not authentic Kunqu, but rather, as he described, "an American avant-garde opera"². He utilized Kunqu elements to construct an imagined Oriental cultural atmosphere, attempting to create a sense of mystery. However, this appropriated Oriental culture was more a product of Western imagination. As Edward Said noted: "The Orient is almost a European invention. Since antiquity, the Orient has been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, and remarkable experiences in the minds of Westerners"³. Said emphasized the Western perception of Oriental culture as a collage and appropriation of cultural fragments. Sellars perhaps aimed to create an opera form that was "polyglot, multicultural, multimedia, resonant with the times, dialogical, and dialectical..."⁴. However, excessive multicultural collage merely juxtaposes different cultural elements without achieving true cultural integration.

Conclusion

Before delving into "cross-cultural theater," we must first understand the concept of "cross-culturalism." This term predates "cross-cultural theater" and is often defined as the interaction between two or more distinct cultures. Indian scholar Rustom Bharucha suggests that cross-culturalism can only occur within a country, a phenomenon he refers to as intra-culturalism. While he recognizes the differences between cultures and their potential for interaction, he argues that India must first achieve internal cultural dialogue and integration.

1 Ibid., p. 184.

2 Bob Graham: *The Tent Where Harmony Lives*, *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, February 28, 1999, p.34.

3 Edward Said: *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p.1.

4 Peter Sellars: Exits and Entrances: On Opera, Artforum XXVIII.4(1989):23, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Volume 14, Number 1, 2004, p.107.

This perspective highlights that cross-culturalism is not limited to international interactions but also occurs within nations.

The trend of cross-cultural theater adaptations began in the 1970s with directors such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Richard Schechner, who incorporated elements of Eastern cultures into their works. This trend marked a significant move towards cross-cultural theater that sought to engage with the Orient. Although the international theater community has yet to reach a consensus on the definition and theoretical framework of "cross-cultural theater," this does not preclude us from discussing it as a theatrical genre. However, the concept of "cross-cultural theater" is somewhat ambiguous in Chinese. In contrast, French theater scholar Patrice Pavis used the term "inter-cultural" in his 1996 book *The Intercultural Performance Reader* to describe cross-cultural phenomena. In this context, "cross-cultural theater" refers not only to cultural exchange but also to the pursuit of genuine integration, hence the term "intercultural theater."

Regarding stage presentations, various versions of *The Peony Pavilion* can be classified as "cross-cultural theater." For instance, the youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* attempts to modernize classical xiqu but falls short of true integration. Similarly, the Japanese and Western versions of *The Peony Pavilion* only incorporate disparate cultural elements on stage without achieving genuine exchange or integration. To create true "intercultural theater," a meaningful connection between different cultural elements is essential. One potential approach is using the body as a link, merging diverse cultures to develop a comprehensive art form. Greek director Theodoros Terzopoulos asserts that the body is universal and, by transcending social labels, it can facilitate intercultural communication. Therefore, could the fusion of classical and contemporary physicality through long-term, intentional training lead to the creation of a truly "cross-cultural theater" or "intercultural theater"? This remains a thought-provoking question.

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Chinese Xiqu in Thailand: Focusing on Teochew (Chaoju) Troupes

Pornrat Damrhung

Chinese xiqu is called "Ngiew" in Thai. Traces of this type of Chinese performance date far back in Thailand's history, largely due to China's long-standing trade and diplomatic relations with Thailand, and especially because of China's diaspora in Southeast Asia. The large influx of people from Chaozhou (Guangdong) to Thailand since the 1800s has resulted in most Chinese xiqu in the country being based on the Teochew (Chaoju) tradition. This tradition evolved from Ming dynasty xiqu and incorporated various Nanxi (Southern xiqu) forms that blended elements of Yiyang qiang (Yiyang-style xiqu), Bangzi Xi, Kunqu, and Pihuang (Jingju music) with Chaozhou vernacular folk arts. This includes the use of the Teochew dialect, music, and Gece (15th-century song medleys).

Teochew became a distinct regional theatre with identifiable aria and musical tunes using the Teochew dialect for singing and dialogue. This made it a key cultural form for maintaining and reproducing Chaozhou communal identity. Chaozhou theatre performances remain important for entertaining the gods and the elderly in Teochew communities across Thailand.

1.Evidence of Ngiew in Thai History

Evidence of Ngiew in Thai history can be found in old mural paintings on Buddhist temple walls and in journals of French diplomats under King Narai (r. 1656-1688) during the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767). Journal entries from 1687 by François Timoléon, Abbé de Choisy (1644-1724) refer to Cantonese Chinese xiqu performed at the residence of Constantine Phaulkon, King Narai's

chief minister from 1685 to 1688. Additionally, the French Jesuit missionary Père Guy Tachard (1651-1712) remarked on short, entertaining Chinese xiqu pieces included in a parade of varied performances used to welcome French diplomats led by Simon de la Loubère. De la Loubère, who was in Thailand from 1687 to 1688, also wrote a journal entry in 1687 referring to 'Chinese drama' as a high-performing art showcased at royal funerals to honor deceased kings of Ayutthaya.

From the mid-1700s, King Taksin the Great (r. 1767-1782) of Thonburi is said to have included Ngiew in the grand procession that brought the Emerald Buddha from Vientiane (Laos) to Ayutthaya. Besides featuring Khon (court masked dancers) and other performances with traditional Thai Piphat musical ensembles, there was also a Chinese xiqu troupe that joined the journey south to Bangkok with the Buddha image.

With the current Chakri dynasty based in Bangkok, starting from 1782, Ngiew (Chinese xiqu) has predominantly been a performing art within Chinese communities who settled in various parts of Thailand, particularly in Bangkok. It has been performed in Chinese communities and for Chinese gods at various shrines and during other seasonal celebrations, with troupes hired by the local Chinese community. Chinese xiqu plays an important role in maintaining and creating Chinese culture in Thailand. Although several languages are used for Chinese xiqu in Thailand, the most common performances are in the Chaozhou dialect, reflecting the ancestral homeland of the majority of Chinese people in Bangkok.

During the Chakri Dynasty, Chinese xiqu in Thailand flourished particularly during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868-1910), featuring both Thai and Chinese troupes. Schools were established to teach Chinese xiqu, and regular xiqu houses called 'Wik' were found on Yaowarat Road in Bangkok. Chinese xiqu remained popular well into the 20th century and up to the 1960s. Between 1952 and 1962, Thailand had about 100 highly active Chinese xiqu troupes, most of which performed in the Teochew dialect and were based in Bangkok.

By the late 1960s, however, many xiqu theaters in Chinatown had disappeared, and theater troupes reorganized. As cities grew and entertainment options diversified, many Chinese families moved from Bangkok's Chinatown to other parts of the city, accessing various cultural forms through modern media technologies. Consequently, the popularity of Chinese xiqu began to decline from the 1980s. Despite this, performances at shrines and local community events for festivals or annual occasions remained important. Most young

people today experience Chinese xiqu primarily through television or films.

2. Innovations in Chinese Xiqu troupes in Thailand

In recent decades, Chinese xiqu has undergone various innovations to survive. One approach has been to use the Thai language to reach audiences who do not understand the Teochew dialect. This was notably done in political xiqu at Thammasat University during the student protests of the 1970s. Additionally, Teochew xiqu incorporated new storylines and plots, including performances of the Ramayana in Chinese xiqu style and other adaptations of traditional stories. These strategies have been employed to better meet the interests and needs of audiences, showcasing the efforts of Chinese xiqu troupes to adapt to the evolving cultural situations of Chinese communities in Thailand.

This adaptability means that "old-style xiqu" is not just an art form expressing China's cultural identity. While a few Teochew xiqu theatres remained open, most performances shifted to being done for the gods at Chinese shrines and for local community events and festivals. A xiqu company is like a mobile school, teaching about good and evil and providing a source of learning about amazing historical stories.

Up to the 1990s, there were as many as 80 active Chinese xiqu troupes in Thailand. Larger troupes often had 100 members, with scores of people in the audiences. Throughout the 21st century, the number of troupes has shrunk, starting with the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 (before which there were more than 70 troupes), and again since the COVID-19 pandemic (at the start of which there were about 20 troupes). Xiqu troupes are often based in cultural organizations tied to Chinese communities, which also have links to Chinese shrines. Today, there are not only fewer troupes, but each troupe is much smaller than in the past. Audiences are also smaller and older. Some of the better-known troupes often secure contracts to perform from Chinese shrine committees for up to 10 years into the future.

As of 2023, there are fewer than 20 active Chinese xiqu troupes in Thailand, most of which are based in Bangkok's old Chinese neighborhood known as Yaowarat. These troupes often tour Chinese communities throughout the country (Nakhon Sawan, Nakhon Pathom, Ayutthaya, etc.). Most commonly, these troupes are hired to perform at shrines and temples for the gods by local shrine organizations. A troupe will perform for free, and audiences typically

consist of 20-100 people. For a night-long performance, the troupe may receive 20-40 thousand Thai baht (640-1000 USD).

3. Notable Chinese Xiqu Troupes in Thailand

Several notable Chinese xiqu troupes in Thailand have garnered significant recognition. One of the oldest and most renowned is the Teochew troupe called Qing Nang Yu Lou Chun (Chae Lang Ngek Lao Chun) [Blue Sac Yulou Chun], which has a history spanning over 80 years. This troupe has performed for the royal family and even traveled to Hainan Island in China. It is run by Thirapatnon Anankawin, who also manages the Thai Teochew Opera Association. The troupe comprises about 40 members and 200 freelance performers.

Another distinguished troupe is the Sai Yong Hong troupe, which consists of more than 30 members, including 5 from China. The primary audience for both these troupes tends to be older Thai-Chinese adults, who often bring their grandchildren to help them connect with a cultural tradition passed down through generations. Other active Teochew troupes include Sai Bo Hong (Lao Sai Bao Feng or Old Supreme Treasure Harvest), Yong Hong Troupe, and E Lai Heng Giah Tuang.

Another famous troupe is run by Master Meng Por. Pla (Zhuang Meilong), who is nearly 80 years old and owns the Meng P. Pla xiqu troupe. He founded the Thai-Chinese Arts and Culture Center in the 1980s to preserve and develop Chinese xiqu. As both an xiqu and Chinese musical instruments teacher, he was the first to perform Teochew xiqu using the Thai language for dialogue and singing, making it accessible to the general public. He has also spearheaded efforts to incorporate xiqu into television and social media productions, such as Sanae Nang Ngiew.

Having been active in this industry for more than 50 years, Master Meng has witnessed significant changes in xiqu, especially the decline in viewership for Teochew xiqu due to the dwindling number of people who understand the Teochew dialect. He believes that incorporating Thai into xiqu scripts and adapting stories to suit contemporary times can help revitalize this art form. He has adapted the famous local tale of the ghost-woman Mae Nak Phra Khanong to be performed in Teochew xiqu style but in the Thai language.

Master Meng contends that the language or nationality of the performance is not as important as conveying moral lessons to the audience. He sees their

work as international xiqu, having translated Teochew scripts into Thai to broaden its appeal. The essence of xiqu, according to him, lies in the moral teachings embedded within the performances.

One notable performance of the Meng Por. Pla troupe took place in 2015. This special Ngiew performance was held at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Arts to celebrate HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's 60th birthday. Meng Por. Pla created a unique play based on the Eight Immortals (ba xian) and their journey to the Queen Mother of the West. For this event, he and his troupe trained university professors and business alumni to perform Ngiew for the princess and her distinguished guests.

Another major Ngiew performance occurred during the funeral of King Rama IX in November 2017. For this event, the Chae Lung Ngeek Lao Choon troupe, as part of the Teochew Ngiew Preservation Society of Thailand, organized a grand performance titled "Eighty-Nine Deities Honor the King." This massive production featured 275 actors and 89 orchestra musicians.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the number of Ngiew troupes in Thailand, reducing them to about a dozen and limiting their annual performances from 300 to fewer than 100, even for the most renowned troupes. During this period, Ngiew troupes increasingly utilized social media platforms to reach wider audiences.

In the post-pandemic period, the remaining Teochew xiqu troupes in Thailand continue to survive, deeply rooted in Chinese associations and institutes dedicated to training and promoting Ngiew performances. These troupes remain connected to many Chinese temples and shrines, supported by Teochew communities throughout the country.

Dissemination of the Traditional Chinese Staging Techniques through English Publications up to the 1980s

DU Wenwei

The traditional Chinese theatre known as *xiqu* is a broad term denoting a total of more than 300 regional operatic dramas which share more or less a common composite of staging techniques and acting styles though distinct in local dialects, music patterns and the number of role categories employed. It also refers to the theatrical aspects of all the different genres of drama such as *nanxi*, *zaju*, *chuanqi*, *kunqu*, *jingju* and various regional xiqu except modern *huaju*, the Western-style spoken drama that emerged in the twentieth century. Focusing on the American stage, this survey will categorize the history of the dissemination of Chinese staging techniques in English publications into three periods: (1) the nineteenth century up to the 1910's; (2) the period from the 1910's to the 1940's; and (3) the period since the 1950's. The divisions of the three periods are marked by two theatrical events: the staging of *The Yellow Jacket* in 1912 and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in 1938. *The Yellow Jacket* was the first American all-inclusive imitation of Chinese theatricality on stage. It started a tradition of using a series of theatrical conventions to stage "Chinese" plays by American players. *Our Town* was the first play with an American theme that had ever consciously employed Chinese staging techniques. Since the production of *Our Town*, the innovative use of Chinese staging conventions has become part of the theatrical practice on the American stage in search of liberation from theatrical realism. Meanwhile, comprehensive scholarship on Chinese drama and theatre has begun to appear. My intention in the division of these three periods is to see what kind of English scholarly resources was available for and may have contributed to these theatrical practices.

The first period began with the publication of John Francis Davis' translation of the Yuan *zaju* play *Laos sheng er* (*An Heir in His Old Age*) by Wu Hanchen in

London in 1817. It was the first book in English that had ever treated Chinese drama as its sole subject. The translation was prefaced with Davis' 42-page introduction to the Chinese drama entitled "A Brief View of the Chinese Drama and of Their Theatrical Exhibitions." Along with the descriptions of structures of theatrical companies and various locations of performances, there is an account of the staging practices:

A Chinese company of players will at any time construct a theatre in the course of a couple of hours; a few bamboos as posts to support a roof of mats, and a floor of boards, raised some six or seven feet from the ground; and a few pieces of painted cotton to cover the three sides, the front being left entirely open, are all that is required for the construction of a Chinese theatre...Indeed a common apartment is all that is necessary for the performance of a Chinese play. They have no scenical deception to assist the story, as in the modern theatres of Europe...thus a general is ordered upon an expedition to a distant province; he mounts a stick, or brandishes a whip, or takes in his hand the reins of a bridle, and striding three or four times round the stage in the midst of a tremendous crash of gongs, drums, and trumpets, he stops short, and tells the audience where he is got to; if the wall of a city is to be stormed, three or four soldiers lie down on each other to "present the wall."¹

Though briefly stated, this description reveals five aspects of the Chinese staging practice. First, the stage was simple and temporary. (Davis may have made a mistake by stating that the Chinese players used "a few pieces of painted cotton to cover the three sides" of the stage. In fact, the traditional Chinese stage before 1908 left its three sides--the front, left and right--open.) Second, there was no scenery created on the Chinese stage as opposed to that on its contemporary Western stage. Third, the characters used symbolic props and gestures to create dramatic action. Fourth, narration aimed at exposition of the plot. Fifth, percussion and wind music accompanied the movement of the actor.

This description was then followed by Davis' survey of various accounts of Chinese theatrical "exhibitions" at court from European spectators--ambassadors and travelers--from 1692 to the time Davis wrote his introduction. The accounts described acrobatic shows, rich costumes adorned with jewels, the charming movement of the actor's hands, and characters ranging from emperors in royal robes, warriors with painted faces, supernatural beings who emerged from a cloud of fire and smoke, to comedians who performed farces.

1 John Francis Davis, trans., *Laou-seng-urh, or, An Heir in His Old Age* (London: John Murray, 1817), x-xi.

The accounts also pointed to a thematic variety--the existence of tragedy, comedy, historical plays and plays of domestic life. The dramatic language was partly recited, partly sung and partly spoken. What seemed to impress these Western viewers most was "the grand pantomime" exhibited in battle fighting and in imitation of animal figures.¹

As to dramatic form or structure, Davis did not seem to be aware of the existence of various dramatic genres as explicated in the above summary, though he cited the source of his translation--*Yuanren baizhong qu* (*One Hundred Yuan Plays* i.e. *Zang Maoxun's Yuanqu xuan*). He summarized the dramatic form as follows:

The lyrical compositions, which prevail more in tragedy than in comedy, certainly bear a strong resemblance to the chorus of the old Greek tragedy; like the chorus too, they are sung with an accompaniment of music. The translator seems to think that these passages are chiefly intended to gratify the ear...

The opening or prologue of a Chinese drama, in which the principal personages come forward to declare the characters of the piece, and to let the audience into the argument or story on which the action is to turn, bears a strong resemblance to the prologue of the Greek drama, and particularly to those of Euripides.

In comedy the dialogue is carried on in the common colloquial language, but in the higher order of historical and tragical plays, the tone of voice is elevated considerably above its natural pitch, and continued throughout in a kind of whining monotony, having some resemblance to, but wanting the modulations and cadences of, the recitative in the Italian opera; as in this too, the sentiments of grief, joy, love, hatred, revenge, etc. are, in the Chinese dramas, usually thrown into lyric poetry, and sung in soft or boisterous airs, according to the sentiment expressed, and the situation of the actor; they are also accompanied with loud music, the performers being placed on the back part of the stage.²

Added to the list of aspects of the Chinese staging practices as Davis observed were the opening introduction of characters, the seating of the music players on the back part of the stage, and the function of lyric lines to show characters' inner emotions.

The play *Lao sheng er* was the first Chinese play ever translated into English and only the second to be translated into any European language, with *The*

1 Ibid., xviii-xxix.

2 Ibid., xlii-xliv.

Orphan of Zhao (*Zhaoshi gu'er* being the first play translated in French by the Jesuit Premare (which was adapted into various English versions in the previous century). With some omissions of indecent language and repetitious passages, the translation conveyed the spirit of the original, rendering both lyric lines and spoken dialogues into their English counterparts.

Twelve years later, Davis published his English translation of another Yuan *zaju* play *Han gong qiu* (*The Sorrows of Han*) by Ma Zhiyuan.¹ Although he was aware that Chinese made no regular classification of comedy and tragedy, Davis was at liberty to call it a tragedy because he thought it met the European definition: "The unity of action is complete, and the unities of time and place much less violated than they frequently are on our own stage. The grandeur and gravity of the subject, the rank and dignity of the personages, the tragical catastrophe, and the strict award of poetical justice, might satisfy the most rigid admirer of Grecian rules."² In his brief introduction to his translation, he did not give further information about the performing aspects of the Chinese drama except that the original scripts of all Chinese plays were "eked out... by an irregular operatic species of song...in unison with a louder or a softer accompaniment of music...intended more for the ear than for the eye...rather adapted to the stage than to the closet."³

In 1836, Davis also devoted half a chapter to a discussion of Chinese theatre in his famous book *The Chinese*.⁴ In the chapter, Davis supplied a full account of the translations of Chinese plays in European languages up to the time of his writing in a chronological order: the Jesuit Premare's French version of *Zhaoshi gu'er*, Davis' English versions of *Lao sheng er* and *Han gong qiu*, and Stanislas Julien's French version of *Huilan ji* (*Chalk Circle*, English versions of which appeared in the 1920's and 1930's)-- all these being originally Yuan *zaju* plays. He also quoted extensively from his earlier observations discussed above. The new descriptions in this chapter concerning Chinese theatrical practices included the use of "ascend and descend" (shang 上 and xia 下 for entrance and exit), "say aside" (*beiyun* for speaking aside), and male and female role types--all these were mentioned with introductory remarks which lacked a

1 John Francis Davis, trans., *Sorrow of Han*, in his *The Fortunate Union*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for the Oriental Translation Fund, 1829), pp. 215-243.

2 Ibid., p. 216.

3 Ibid., p. 217.

4 See Chapter 16 of *The Chinese*, by John Francis Davis, 1836 (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., rpt. 1972), vol. 2, pp. 172-189

discussion of their respective function. The significant part of his discussion was his constant references to Greek and Shakespearean theatres from a comparative point of view, which made his understanding of the Chinese theatre more accessible to the English speaking public. Being the first scholar to introduce the Chinese drama and theatre to the English-reading public, Davis made a unique contribution to the Anglo-American knowledge of Chinese staging practices.

In the 1837-1838 issue of *The Chinese Repository*, a Canton-based English journal, there appeared an English translation, by a correspondent, of a Chinese farce entitled *The Mender of Cracked China-Ware* (that could be back-translated into "补缸"). In the editor's introduction to this little piece, Davis' effort was acknowledged and the purpose of translating a farce was stated as the intention of introducing the Chinese histrionic art of a different nature from the previous four translations. Yet the source of the farce was not identified. The little piece dramatizes a story of how the beauty of a Lady Wang causes the mender to break into pieces the cracked jar that Lady Wang asks him to mend. She finally agrees to be married to the mender. The light piece offered an example of comic dialogue and clown gestures, providing the English reading public with the comic aspect of Chinese drama.

Around the same time, the French sinologist A. P. L. Bazin published his *Théâtre Chinois ou Choix de Pièces de Théâtre composées sous les empereurs Mongols* (Paris: A l'Imprimerie Royale, 1838) which contained his French translations of four Yuan *zaju* plays: *Zhou Meixiang*, *He hanshan*, *Huolang dan*, and *Dou E yuan* --all from the same collection *Yuanren zaju baizhong*. A decade later, *The Chinese Repository* (Vol. XVIII, No. 3, March, 1849) published an English review introducing Bazin's book to the English-reading public with S. W. Williams' English translation of *He hanshan* under the title of *The Compared Tunic* based on Bazin's French version. The book review reiterated Bazin's brief account of the history of Chinese theatre dating back to the Tang Emperor Xuanzong and translated Bazin's remarks on the structure of the Yuan *zaju*. Although Bazin's remarks did not surpass in scope Davis' observations on the Chinese theatrical practices, the former focused on the Yuan *zaju* plays specifically. Bazin analyzed the structure of the *zaju* play in greater detail based on these play scripts. (Further information about the themes of the Yuan *zaju* was supplied in Bazin's 1850 book *Le siècle des Youên*, which contained summaries of more than a dozen Yuan plays. Bazin's 1841 French version of the *chuanqi* play *Pipa ji* reached the English public almost a century later through Bill Irwin and Sidney Howard's *Lute Song*.)

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the English versions of two comical pieces entitled *A-lan's Pig* and *The Borrowed Boots* (*Jie xue*) and two plays of the early Jingju style entitled *The Yellow Stork Tower* (*Huanghe lou* and *Jen Kuei's return* (*Fenhe wan*).¹ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, William Stanton published *The Chinese Drama* (Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1899). It was a collection of his English translations of three plays and two narrative poems. The three plays he translated were *The Willow Lute*, *The Golden Leafed Chrysanthemum*, and *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau*; all of them had first appeared in the *Chinese Review*. The collection included his essay entitled "The Chinese Drama." Although the author did not specify the Chinese origins of these plays, it is safe to say they were of the Cantonese origin because Stanton's essay on the Chinese drama focused on the Cantonese theatre; moreover, *The Sacrifice for the Soul of Ho Man-Sau* has been one of the most famous plays in the repertoire of the Cantonese Yueju.

What concerns us here is Stanton's essay on the Chinese drama. For the first time in history, Stanton introduced plays and performances of the Cantonese style. Of its total length of 19 pages, he devoted five pages to staging techniques, seven pages to role types and their acting styles, and five pages to the description of a theatrical company's activity and performances of various plays. In addition to the aspects of the Chinese staging techniques pointed out by previous Western authors, the following practices were noticed and explained more clearly by Stanton:

There were large substantially built theatres in Hong Kong, Macao and Canton. The backs of the stages, which are fixtures, are handsomely painted, but the subjects painted have no relation to the plays performed...As in temporary structures, the green-rooms are at the back of the stage and there are two doors, one on each side, leading from it to the stage, the one on the right being generally used as the entrance, and that on the left for exit. Mountains, mountain passes, rivers, bridges, city-walls, temples, graves, thrones, beds and other objects are represented by an arrangement of chairs and benches, while the passage of rivers, horse-riding, unlocking doors and entering houses where not even a screen exists between the visitor and those he visits, the climbing of mountains and numerous other actions are depicted by pantomimic motions that

1 Borrowed Boots (*Jie xuan, jingju*), trans. J. Edkins, in his *Chinese Conversations*, Shanghai: 1852; also in *China Review*, 2 (1873-1874), 325-332. Chinese Farce (*A-lan's Pig*), *China Review*, 1 (July, 1872-June, 1873), 26-31. The Yellow Stork Tower (*Huanghe lou, zaju or jingju*), *Far East*, 1 (September 1876), 57-66; 2 (October 1876), 81-89. Jen Kuei's Return (*Fenhe wan, jingju*), in George Carter Stent, *The Jade Chaplet in Twenty-four Beads*, London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883, pp. 72-112.

are perfectly understood by the audience.¹

Stanton described the layout of the stage more accurately than Davis in that he pointed out the three sides open to the audience, how the entrances and exits are effected on stage and how scenery is symbolically created by an arrangement of chairs and detailed pantomimic motions. In addition to these clarifications, Stanton introduced one dramatic device unknown to his Western contemporaries:

Actors in leading characters, on their first entry in a piece, usually sing or recite about a score of words and then start off to introduce themselves, by giving a condensed history of the character they are about to personate. Throughout a play, too, the audience are taken into the actors' confidence, and sometimes addressed direct, in a way unknown with us.²

Although narration by characters had been mentioned by previous Western authors, it was mainly meant for the description of the imaginary scenes and for the history of the characters, which could be deduced from the translated texts. What Stanton introduced here is the third function: characters address the audience directly to create an atmosphere of interaction between the active performer-character and the passive spectator, which could be realized only in the performance. Moreover, Stanton introduced twenty-five role categories with explanations about the characters these role types represented. They belong to the Cantonese theatre though Stanton did not specify it.

As we have noticed, all the publications discussed above were printed outside America. While the American public had access to these English publications, they at the same time had the privilege of seeing actual performances of Chinese plays provided by various Chinese theatrical companies in the Chinatowns of big cities. As a consequence of this contact with the Chinese performances, articles and essays appeared in American magazines and newspapers, spreading further the knowledge of Chinese drama and theatre in America. (A discussion of these essays will be the subject of another article by the author.)

All the publications mentioned above demonstrated the scope of the literature in the first period of the introduction of Chinese drama and theatre to the English reading public. This period is characterized by books and essays

1 William Stanton, *The Chinese Drama* (Hong Kong: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1899), pp. 3-4.

2 Ibid., p. 12.

treating the Chinese drama as a whole without clarification of its different genres and distinct phases in its historical development. Most of these essays were occasioned as either an observation on seeing actual Chinese performance or an introduction to the publication of English translations of Chinese plays--mostly from the repertory of the Yuan *zaju*. The knowledge thus disseminated was experiential, non-systematic and occasional.

Different from the first period, the second period of scholarly dissemination of the knowledge of Chinese drama and theatre was distinguished by publications of works which were systematic studies of either the historical development or theatrical conventions. The first of its kind was Reginald Fleming Johnston's *The Chinese Drama* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd., 1921). Although it was only 36 pages in length, it aimed to introduce the historical development of Chinese drama and the environment of its theatrical performances. His descriptions of the village theatre and city theatre were valuable even though his definitions for different dramatic genres were inaccurate. In describing the bare stage in the Chinese theatrical practices in the city, Johnston made an insightful point:

The stage may contain one or two very simple articles of furniture; such as a chair or two, but frequently it is quite bare...Battle-fields, imperial thrones and courts, great rivers and mountains, moving armies, may all be represented on the stage by the simplest of conventional tokens. No wonder the Chinese have a proverb which declares that there is nothing so vast as a stage...What has been said regarding the absence of stage-scenery is applicable to all theatres which follow the Chinese dramatic traditions and accept all the old conventions--that is to say, the vast majority of theatres existing in China at the present day.¹

By quoting a Chinese proverb, he pointed out the aesthetic power of the bare stage which provides unlimited space for dramatic actions in a flow of time.

The following year saw Kate Buss' *Studies in the Chinese Drama* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1922). As compared to Johnston's book, Buss' effort was a considerable step forward because she made, for the first time in English, a comprehensive study of Chinese drama. While her account of the historical development of the Chinese drama was brief, her discussion of plays as literature and theatre was significant. Her study of the latter was systematic in that the role types, characters, actors, music, decoration, costume, and

customs of the playhouse were all treated with concrete descriptions. Her contribution to the Anglo-American knowledge of Chinese drama and theatre lies in the fact that an all-round view of the Chinese theatrical practices was presented to the English-speaking public in a single volume, the first American publication of its kind. What made her description even more innovative was her description of symbolism in gestures, costumes and properties. Her study revealed that symbolism in Chinese theatre exists in form and color.

Although Herbert A. Giles published his *A History of Chinese Literature* in 1923 which he claimed the first history book on the subject in any language including Chinese, his discussion of drama was not up to the standard of the rest of this pioneering work and added nothing new to contemporary theatrical knowledge in the English-speaking world. He contributed, if at all, to the Western knowledge of thematic content of Chinese drama by narrating the brief plots of six plays including *Xixiang ji* (*The Romance of the Western Chamber*) and *Pipa ji* without any reference to their respective dramatic genres and structures. He also translated an episode from Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan story entitled "The Flowery Ball." Giles' general attitude toward Chinese drama was condescending and he viewed Chinese drama as inferior to its Western counterpart. It seemed to him that little could be learned from the Chinese drama and theatre. About the same time, an English version of the French work *Le Théâtre Chinois* by Chu Chia-chien (Paris, 1922) appeared with excellent paintings and sketches made in Beijing theatres by the Russian artist Alexandre Jacovleff. No previous book had given such a vivid notion of the real theatrical appearance and its spirit as this volume of drawings did.¹

Another pioneering work of the subject in the 1920's was A. E. Zucker's *The Chinese Theatre* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1925). The author was a professor of comparative literature. His book was the first extended scholarly research work (234 pages) devoted solely to Chinese theatre. It included a valuable bibliography with annotations, which provided the public with the information of what kinds of resource materials were available at the time in English, French and German. The first five chapters of the book were devoted to the history of Chinese drama dealt with in the five historical periods: early history, the Yuan dynasty, the Ming dynasty, the Qing and the early years of the republic, and modern tendencies. The theatrical aspect was treated

¹ Reginald Fleming Johnston, *The Chinese Drama* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd., 1921), pp. 8-11.

¹ The information on Chu Chia-chien's book is from A. E. Zucker, *The Chinese Theatre* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1925), p. 228.

in the next three chapters in which Mei Lanfang was introduced in English as China's greatest actor. The last chapter was the author's observations on analogies between the Chinese theatre and the Western. In the chapter entitled "The Conventions," Zucker meticulously and correctly described major acting conventions of the Chinese theatre at the time based on his knowledge and his contact with actual performances. Understanding that the whole set of conventions had been developed in the long course of the history of Chinese theatre, he pointed out that his description did not represent anything permanent. Changes were continually occurring. The way in which his work differs from Buss' book is that Zucker saw the stifling effect of theatrical realism on the American stage at the time and that the realistic mode needed to be injected with new inspiration. His understanding and appreciation of Chinese conventions led him to believe that much can be learned by the West from the Chinese side. He made his point by saying: "It is a very striking fact that there is in many of our theatres at present an extreme reaction against a minute and pedantic imitation on the stage of the realities of everyday life. Because it is felt that too much attention to external things deadens the imagination of the spectators, stage managers of to-day are beginning to prefer once more a conventional presentation."¹ Zucker introduced Chinese conventional presentation as a model from which the Western stage could benefit. He was a competent advocate in this adventure. Like Buss' book, his made its way to the shelves of major American libraries.

The first comprehensive book on Mei Lanfang in English was published in Shanghai in 1929. The author was George Kin Leung (Liang Sheqian) who later wrote in English various essays and introductions on Mei Lanfang and the Chinese theatre which appeared in journals and playbills in the 1930's. The book has a foreword written by J. Leighton Stuart, the U. S. ambassador to China up to the 1940's. With an introduction to Mei Lanfang who made a successful tour in 1930, the American public, especially its theatrical circles, became intensely aware of the beauty of Chinese acting. Between 1929 and 1931, a number of books and articles in English on Mei, his U. S. tour and the Chinese theatre, appeared in America as well as in China. Mei Lanfang became both symbol and reality of the Chinese theatre.

The 1930's witnessed the biggest boost for spreading knowledge of the Chinese theatre as represented by the Jingju. This boost started with Mei

Lanfang's touring performances in America. In publications, L. C. Arlington's *The Chinese Drama* (1930) and Cecilia S. L. Zung's *Secrets of the Chinese Drama* (1937) were the major works. The former claimed to be a panoramic study of the Chinese theatrical art. Arlington's contribution to accumulating American knowledge of the Chinese theatre was his detailed account of the stage and its environment. His depiction left the reader with the deep impression that Chinese theatre facilitates the interaction between the actor and the audience--an aspect pointed out by Stanton. On the Chinese stage, Arlington agreed with the Chinese view, "the actor is the thing...because it is the actor, with his magnificent robes and grand gestures who transforms the stage into whatever he wishes it to be."¹ In his opinion, the central role of the actor whose acting evokes the audience's artistic imagination, the three sides of the stage open to the audience, the on-going activities of the audience in the tea-house type of theatre, and the empty stage freed from time and geography which leaves the mind untrammelled--all these constitute a "democratic" and "easy-going" theatre which allows free interaction between the performer and the spectator.² Zung's book was a comprehensive expository work on the Jingju. The new information in her book was contained in the second part which concentrates on the techniques of the actor's various movements such as sleeve, hand, arm, foot, leg, waist, etc. Each of the body movements was explained in a series of consecutive steps.³ The book served as textbook for dancing or theatrical movement rather than for staging. It provided rich resource materials for Western actors who wanted to absorb into their own acting some graceful dancing movements as exhibited by Mei Lanfang.

Mei Lanfang's Russian tour in 1935 also prompted articles in English on Mei and his theatre. Among them the most significant ones were Sergei Eisenstein's article "The Enchanter from the Pear Garden: Introducing to Russian Audiences a Visitor from China" (1935 in English) and Bertolt Brecht's "Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting" (1936 in English).⁴ Sergei Eisenstein was already a world-renowned film director. His view of Chinese theatre was

1 Lewis Charles Arlington, *The Chinese Drama: From the Earliest Times until Today*. Shanghai, 1930; rpt. Benjamin Blom, 1966, p. 27.

2 Ibid., pp. 27-29.

3 See Cecilia S. L. Zung, *Secrets of the Chinese Drama* (1937; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), pp. 77-148.

4 Eisenstein's article was published in *Theatre Arts* (New York), 19.10 (October, 1935), 761-770. Brecht's article appeared in Mr. Eric White's translation in *Life and Letters* (London) in the winter of 1936--quoted from John Willett, trans., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), p. 99.

1 A. E. Zucker, *The Chinese Theatre* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1925), p. 162.

based upon his concern that the West should learn from the Chinese theatre. Looking deeper into the Chinese theatrical practices which seemed peculiar to the Western stage, Eisenstein pointed out three fundamental principles from which the Western stage can benefit. The first was symbolism: "No matter with what aspect of the Chinese theatre you deal, each situation, each object is presented abstractly and often symbolically."¹ The second was the "multifariousness and elasticity" exhibited by the changing function of the one-table-and-two-chairs setting. "The multifariousness of meaning that astounds us when we examine the Chinese theatre forms the basis of any Chinese method of expression."² The third one was the imagery:

In its own sphere [the Chinese theatre] is the acme of perfection, the sum total of those elements which form the kernel of any art work--its imagery. The problem of imagery is one of the main problems of our new aesthetics. While we are fast learning to develop our characters psychologically, we still lack a great deal when it comes to imagery. And here we come upon the most interesting aspect of Chinese culture--the theatre. Imagery in Chinese art is emphasized at the expense of the concrete and the thematic. This emphasis is the antithesis of the hypertrophy of imagery upon which our art is still based.³

Eisenstein advocated a harmonious blend of the two extremes. These were the three areas where the Western stage could learn from the Chinese theatre more in spirit than in concrete methods, as Eisenstein envisioned.

Another European master, Bertolt Brecht, found a great aid in the Chinese theatre. He saw Chinese acting as convincing support for his theory of the "alienation effect." Noticing the Chinese conventions as other Westerners did, Brecht interpreted the alienation effect achieved in the Chinese theatre in the following way:

The artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic. A young woman, a fisherman's wife, is shown paddling a boat. She stands steering a non-existent boat with a paddle that barely reaches to her knees. Now the current is swifter, and she is finding it harder to keep her balance; now she is in a pool and paddling more easily. Right: that is how one manages a boat. But this journey

1 Eisenstein, 764.

2 Ibid., 766-7.

3 Ibid., 769.

in the boat is apparently historic, celebrated in many songs, an exceptional journey about which everybody knows. Each of this famous girl's movement has probably been recorded in pictures; each bend in the river was a well-known adventure story, it is even known which particular bend it was. This feeling on the audience's part is induced by the artist's attitude; it is this that makes the journey famous...The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e. to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the event. Yet the spectator's empathy was not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on.¹

Brecht used one of Mei Lanfang's performances entitled "Dayu shajia" (The Revenge of the Fisherman)", which he saw in Moscow, to illustrate his point.² His main concern was to learn from the Chinese technique to nurture a kind of acting which represents the familiar yet at the same time produces the unfamiliar--this combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar leads the audience into a position in which the familiar makes him identify himself with the character while the unfamiliar leaves him observing from a detached perspective.

It can be said that Eisenstein and Brecht elevated the Western knowledge of the Chinese theatrical conventions to a theoretical level. Their theories have exerted great influence on the Western stage including the American. The Chinese elements used in various non-realistic American theatres can be traced to the enthusiasm of these European masters.

The coverage of the Chinese theatre in its diversity began to be manifested in various essays in journals in the 1930's. These articles were mainly the work of two significant scholars: Yao Hsin-nung and George Kin Leung (whom I mentioned above). Their individual essays covered the theme and structure of the Yuan drama, the rise and fall of the *kunqu*, the Cantonese theatre, the painted face characters, the female impersonator, the male characters, etc. Their essays were all published in English journals based in China.

Besides books and articles on the Chinese drama and theatre, there appeared

1 John Willett, ed. & trans., Brecht on Theatre, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 92-93.

2 Brecht's play *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (1937) may have been directly inspired by Mei's performance of *The Revenge of the Fisherman*. See Mei Shaowu 梅绍武, *Wode fuqin Mei Lanfang 我的父亲梅兰芳* (My Father: Mei Lanfang) (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1984), p. 158.

a number of English translations of Chinese plays in the period between 1913 and 1938. The translations included a number of Jingju plays, two *zaju* plays and some scenes of *chuanqi* plays. The noted ones included James Laver and Ethel Van der Veer's respective versions of *Huilan ji* (*The Chalk Circle*) (1929, 1933), Yao Hsin-nung's *Madame Cassia* (*Qi shuang hui*) (1935), S. I. Hsiung's *Lady Precious Stream* (1935), S. I. Hsiung and Henry H. Hart's respective translations of *Xixiang ji* (*The Romance of the Western Chamber*) in 1936, and Arlington's *Famous Chinese Plays* (1937) which provided 12 Jingju plays, two *kunqu* plays and synopses of 19 other Jingju plays. These translations were within the reach of the general public. Moreover, Will Irwin and Sidney Howard's 1930 English version of *Lute Song* was made widely known due to its successful production on Broadway in 1946. The relatively wide circulation of these translations except Yao's *Madame Cassia* contributed to the American awareness of the diversified dramatic content of the Chinese theatre.

English publications on the Chinese drama and theatre in the 1940's were scarce. The third phase of the dissemination of the knowledge of the Chinese drama and theatre in America began in the 1950's when the study of the Chinese drama and theatre came to be accepted as a scholarly field. Since then, general studies of theatre history have surpassed all previous books from the first and second phases in both depth and accuracy. Books such as William Dolby's *A History of Chinese Drama* (1976) and *Chinese Theatre: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (edited by Colin Mackerras, 1983) were done with careful research and valuable references to the original Chinese sources. While the general study has developed in depth, specialized studies of each historical period in the Chinese drama and theatre have emerged. Significant books include Stephen H. West's *Vaudeville and Narrative: Aspects of Chin Theatre* (1977) for *yuanben* and *zhugongdiao*; Tadeusz Zbikowski's "Early Nan-Hsi Plays of the Southern Sung Period" (1974) for the early *nanxi* plays; Shih Chung-wen's *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama* (1976) and James I. Crump's *Chinese Theatre in the Days of Kublai Khan* (1980) for the Yuan *zaju* plays; the translations of *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng dian*, by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, 1956), *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*, by Chen Shih-hsiang, et al., 1976), *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*, by Cyril Birch, 1980) and *The Lute: Kao Ming's P'i-p'a chi* (by Jean Mulligan, 1980) which kept the real spirit of the original in content and style and contributed to knowledge of the *chuanqi* genre from the late Yuan through the Ming to the Qing dynasty; Colin Mackerras' *The Rise of the Peking Opera, 1770-1870: Social Aspects of the Theatre in Manchu China* (1972), a series of books by A. C. Scott in the

late 1950's and his translations under the title of *Traditional Chinese Plays* (3 vols., 1967-1975), which have greatly enhanced the Western knowledge of the Jingju. Representative plays of regional theatres have also been introduced in English; Bell Yung's *Cantonese Opera* (1989) explores the creative process that leads to the performance of this major local theatre. Adaptations of traditional theatre for the contemporary Chinese stage have been explored and evaluated in Roger Howard's *Contemporary Chinese Theatre* (1978) and in *Drama in the People's Republic of China* (edited by Constantine Tung, et al., 1987). The fundamental difference between this period and the previous two periods is that since the beginning of the latter half of the 20th Century, the study of the Chinese drama and theatre has become more scholarly and specialized by genres and historical periods. The emphasis has been historical and textual; the historical and textual materials have provided accurate source materials for the theatrical experts and practitioners.

This period also ushered in a comparative approach to the study. The comparatists in the field who were interested in the theatrical aspects of the Chinese theatre have based their studies mainly on the notion of a total theatre which aims at recreation of a theatrical work out of a written text through the director and actor's imaginative use of all the theatre's resources or on the notion of using Oriental theatrical techniques to enrich the modern Western theatre. Parallel and influence studies have been done to explore the experiences and possibilities of blending the two traditions. Studies of such a nature have been reflected in Leonard Cabell Pronko's *Theatre East and West* (1967), Tao-ching Hsu's *The Chinese Conception of the Theatre* (1985), and essays that have appeared in various journals by the 1980s.

To recapitulate, there have been three distinctive phases in the history of disseminating knowledge of the Chinese drama and theatre to the English reading public up to the 1980s. In general, the first phase served as an introduction to the Chinese drama and theatre. Its studies were generally descriptive and most essays were portions of larger cultural subjects. The "translations" were generally very free--some in content and others in style. The significance of the publications in this period lies in the scope of description of the staging practices: major Chinese conventions were introduced. The second phase signified the growing interest in the Chinese theatre in the English-speaking world. The studies of the subject were mainly independent of other literary genres and appeared comprehensive. To the benefit of the American stage, these studies concentrated largely on theatre as performance. Theoretical perspective on how to learn from the Chinese techniques also

appeared at that time. Beginning in the late 1950's, the third period in the study of Chinese drama and theatre came to be an academic field. As a result, serious books have been published since the 1960's. As its scope has been widened, studies in the field have specialized on various genres and historical periods. Plays of different genres and regions have been rendered faithfully. Scholarship has produced a rich and reliable resource for people in theatrical circles. The nature of the Chinese drama and theatre has been examined with accuracy and truer spirit. On the theatrical aspect, the focus of using the Chinese techniques on modern Western stage has remained as a continuation from the second period. In the past 30 years or so since the end of 1980s, the English-speaking world has witnessed a significantly larger number of publications and translations on Chinese drama and theatre and they deserve another comprehensive survey in a full-length study.

DU WENWEI
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Introduction to Classical Plays (IX)

CHENG Jiaojiao

Jingju Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom

Xi Shi is esteemed as the foremost among the “Four Beauties” of ancient China and is also regarded as an epitome of beauty. She lived about three thousand years ago during the late Spring and Autumn period in the state of Yue (present-day Zhejiang and Shanghai). After Yue was defeated by the state of Wu, its king, Gou Jian, was captured. Seeking revenge, Gou Jian selected the beautiful Xi Shi to be sent to the Wu king, Fu Chai. Infatuated with her beauty and pleasures, Fu Chai was rendered distracted while Gou Jian secretly prepared his troops. Ultimately, Gou Jian succeeded in defeating Wu, and thus, Xi Shi assumed the role of a female spy.

Xi Shi had a lover named Fan Li, often portrayed as a man who, understanding the larger national cause, chose to set aside his own love to support Xi Shi's mission of revenge. After the successful restoration of their country, the couple abandoned their wealth and fame to live a secluded and blissful life on a small boat.

Numerous historical Chinese theatrical works feature Xi Shi as the central character, including the Ming Dynasty play *The Washerwoman (Huansha Ji)* by Liang Chenyu and the early 20th-century *Jingju Xi Shi*, famously performed by the renowned Jingju master Mei Lanfang. These works typically focus on the narrative described above.

However, *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom*, created in 1989, diverges significantly in plot and theme from many traditional theatrical works. Written by Luo Huaizhen, then a young playwright who had begun to make a name



■ Stage photos of Jingju *Xi Shi*, featuring Mei Lanfang as Xi Shi

for himself in the Shanghai theater scene, this play is noted for its integration of contemporary philosophical reflections into xiqu. In *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom*, the narrative unfolds after the state of Wu is defeated by Yue. With the Wu king, Fu Chai, having committed suicide, Xi Shi returns to her homeland with high hopes, expecting a joyful reunion with her family and a rekindling of love with her lover. Instead, she is met with disdain from the village women who grew up with her. They consider her tainted for having served the enemy and reject her.

Despite her national significance as a heroine of the restored Yue state, Xi Shi is not celebrated but rather seen as a constant reminder of King Gou Jian's past humiliation. Consequently, he wishes for her death. Fan Li, Xi Shi's lover, who had previously persuaded her to sacrifice her chastity and their love for the national cause, now distances himself from her. His possessiveness surfaces as he feels that Xi Shi, having been with other men, no longer wholly belongs to him.

The situation becomes even more dire when Xi Shi reveals to Fan Li that she is pregnant with Fu Chai's child. This news fills Fan Li with shame and fear, leading him to urge Xi Shi to abort the child. Xi Shi, realizing the superficial nature of the love she received and the lack of genuine sympathy for her sacrifices, breaks up with Fan Li. On a stormy night, she goes alone to give birth. When King Gou Jian learns of this, he demands the child be destroyed to prevent any remnants of the enemy. He relentlessly interrogates Xi Shi about the child's whereabouts. In her terror, Xi Shi clutches the child tightly and covers it with her wide robe, but in her desperate grip, she accidentally smothers it to death.

Upon discovering the child's death, Xi Shi, in her madness, questions the heavens and earth: Why was she created as such a beauty only to bring disaster and misery? Why is there no place for her in the world? Whose fault is this? Overwhelmed by despair, she jumps from a mountain, holding the lifeless body of her child.

As previously mentioned, there are many theatrical works in China that feature Xi Shi, but the Jingju *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom* approaches this well-known figure from a new perspective. In this version, Xi Shi is no longer just a simple female spy, a chivalrous hero who restores her country, or a tragic beauty from legend. Instead, she is portrayed as a deeply emotional and yet powerless individual struggling against the constraints of fate. She emerges from idealized portrayals and is presented as a real person, a common woman and young mother sacrificed and controlled by power amidst a harsh historical context. The complexity of the character reflects the influence of modern



■ Jingju *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom*, featuring Lijie as Xi Shi



■ Playbill of Jingju *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom*

philosophical ideas introduced to China since the 20th century on Chinese xiqu playwrights.

The play premiered in May 1989 at the Nanshi Theater in Shanghai, performed by the Hong Lou Troupe of the Shanghai Yue Opera(xiqu) Theatre, with Xue Mu as the director. The performance met with mixed reactions, as many were unable to accept such a tragic portrayal, sparking considerable debate in theatrical reviews at the time. Due to its experimental nature and market considerations, the Yue Opera Theatre did not stage it again in the following years.



■ Playbill of Jingju *Xi Shi Returning to Yue Kingdom*

It was not until 1995 that the Jiangsu Peking Opera (Jingju) Troupe adapted the play into Jingju for the first China Jingju Art Festival, achieving great success. People were not only struck by the profound tragic power and artistic effects of the play but were also captivated by its performance. The actress Li Jie, who played Xi Shi in the Jingju adaptation, won the prestigious "Chinese Theatre Plum Blossom Award," the highest accolade in Chinese xiqu performing arts.

Kunqu *Blood-Stained Hands*

Kunqu *Blood-Stained Hands* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's famous play *Macbeth*. It was performed by the Shanghai Kunju Theatre in 1986, with the script by Zheng Shifeng, directed by Huang Zuolin, and starring Zhang Jingxian and Ji Zhenhua. This production not only presented the play through the ancient and traditional art of Kunqu but also successfully localized Shakespeare's work to fit Chinese artistic sensibilities.

The history of adapting Shakespeare's plays for the Chinese stage dates back to the early 20th century. Shakespeare's plays in China have been transformed into various local storylines and staged in different forms of Chinese theatre. In 1986, the first "Chinese Shakespeare Festival" was held in Shanghai,



■ Kunqu Master Zhang Jingxian



■ Kunqu Master Ji Zhenhua



■ The poster of Kunqu *Blood-Stained Hands*

showcasing numerous adaptations of Shakespeare's works into Chinese operatic forms, such as the Huangmei xi *Much Ado About Nothing* and the Jingju *Othello*. Among these, *Blood-Stained Hands* was one of the most popular productions.

Most Chinese audiences are very familiar with the story of *Macbeth*. In the play, Macbeth kills the king and takes the throne, then murders the nobles who helped him, only to be ultimately killed by the son of one of those nobles amid moral condemnation and human guilt. Similar events have occurred throughout Chinese history, making the story and its themes resonate deeply with Chinese audiences and laying a solid cultural foundation for adapting it into Kunqu. However, the successful adaptation owes much to the director Huang Zuolin.

Director Huang Zuolin enjoys a stellar reputation in China. He studied drama under George Bernard Shaw at the University of Birmingham and later researched Shakespeare at the Royal College in Cambridge University, gaining early exposure to many Western plays. Huang believed that the ancient art of Kunqu was well-suited to interpret Shakespeare's dramas. He first enlisted the famous Shanghai xiqu playwright Zheng Shifeng, who adapted the characters, setting, and time period of *Macbeth* to fit a Chinese context and rewrote the dialogue in a classical Chinese style. Huang then conveyed his creative vision and stylistic goals to the actors of the Shanghai Kunju Theatre, including Zhang Jingxian, who played Lady Macbeth, and Ji Zhenhua, who played Macbeth. His direction was clear: *Blood-Stained Hands* should be Chinese, Kunqu, and Shakespearean. The actors initially struggled to understand how to perform this work since Kunqu is a highly classical Chinese performance art. Huang Zuolin provided them with the necessary artistic guidance.

The most artistically distinctive aspect of *Blood-Stained Hands* on stage is Lady Macbeth's performance. In Kunqu, the story is told through singing and dancing, so Lady Macbeth's expression of inner terror and her compulsive hand-washing could not be portrayed as in a typical play. Chinese xiqu requires the use of singing and dancing to convey such emotions. Kunqu is particularly adept at singing, using many relatively fixed musical melodies called "qupai" to express different emotions and storylines. For instance, to depict Lady Macbeth's immense terror, the melody called "Dou Anchun" was used, which has a somber and heavy musical style, creating an eerie and frightening atmosphere. Additionally, Zhang Jingxian used water sleeves to express Lady Macbeth's subjective feelings of terror and madness. Water sleeves, long white silk extensions sewn onto the costume sleeves, are rhythmically waved to convey emotions and enhance the visual beauty of the performance. This segment often received enthusiastic applause from the audience, eventually



■ Stage photos of Kunqu *Blood-Stained Hands*

becoming a standalone performance piece in Chinese xiqu tradition known as a "zhezi xi" or "highlight play," named "Madness in the Boudoir." Consequently, the character of Macbeth himself seemed somewhat overshadowed in the Kunqu adaptation.

Due to its accurate interpretation of the themes and characters of *Macbeth* and the brilliant performances enabled by Kunqu artistry, *Blood-Stained Hands* was widely acclaimed in China and received numerous awards. Initially, people believed that Kunqu, with its slow musical rhythm and delicate performance style, was more suited for love stories. However, *Blood-Stained Hands* revealed Kunqu's potential to tell thrilling tales and further showcased the allure of Shakespeare. The play was performed at the "Edinburgh International Festival" in 1987, where it was well-received by British audiences, who applauded for an extended period during the curtain call and praised Zhang Jingxian as "one of the most wonderful performers of Lady Macbeth."

CHENG JIAOJIAO
PHD at Shanghai Theatre Academy

Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2023

HONG Qiao

In the second half of 2023, the Chinese theater market was particularly vibrant. Various genres, including drama, Chinese xiqu, dance drama, and children's theater, flourished, offering audiences unique auditory and visual experiences.

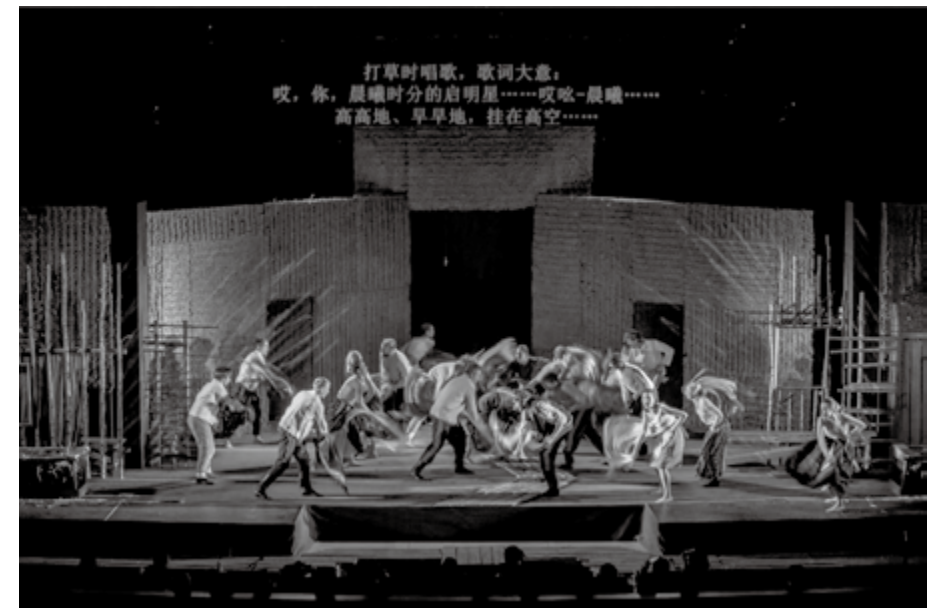
1. Modern Drama

On July 6th, a new production of *Son of Heaven*, written by Guo Qihong and directed by Tang Ye, premiered at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. The story revolves around Cao Cao and his three sons, shifting the focus from the usual depiction of political intrigue and conflict to their familial bonds and individual destinies. The stage design employed historical and substantial elements to create a poetic space, while the set design by Chang Jiang used enlarged and juxtaposed forms to build stage imagery. The stage setting included rotating platforms to create a dynamic performance space with varying heights, levels, and depths. The bronze mirror on stage suggested the characters' introspection, while the flying horses symbolized the theme that everyone is a "son of heaven."

From November 3rd to 5th, the drama *And Quiet Flows the Don*, adapted from the former Soviet novel of the same name, returned to the stage of Shanghai Culture Square after four years. This production, lasting eight hours and divided into two parts, abandoned thrilling war scenes to focus on the dramatic changes in the characters' fates, highlighting the profound impact of war on both the country and individuals. The play featured a single scene that transformed into various settings such as a village, military camp, riverside, or different family interiors through the actors' performances. This high level of stage hypothesization resonated with the performance style of Chinese xiqu.



■ Stage photo of *Son of Heaven*



■ Stage photo of *And Quiet Flows the Don*



■ Stage photo of *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*

On November 11th and 12th, the drama *The Law's Amour*, part of The Nine's Republican-era intellectuals series, was performed at the Shenzhen Binhai Art Center. The protagonists, lawyer Lang Shiyao and his wife You Shengnan, are well-known from *Double Dual*. *The Law's Amour* narrates their story of bonding in court and later parting ways. As the final chapter of the Republican-era series, *The Law's Amour* attempts to explain the fate of each character from the series, intertwining the outcomes of characters from *Double Dual* and *The Four Papers*, making it the most extensive and longest work in the series.

On December 20th, *Farewell My Concubine*, a new play written by Mo Yan and directed by Lin Cong, premiered at the Beijing People's Art Theatre. This production diverged from the traditional narrative of Consort Yu bidding farewell to Xiang Yu, focusing instead on the female characters Lü Zhi and Consort Yu, exploring their thoughts and decisions in the face of power and love. The stage design was equally innovative, featuring a spherical "central military tent" replacing the traditional stage and audience seating. Audiences entered the enclosed space by pulling back the tent curtains, sitting on mats at different

heights, surrounding the actors and becoming part of the performance. The stage designer stated, "We hope the performance space can wrap the audience and stage together, isolating external distractions and allowing them to listen to their inner voices."

On December 23rd, the stage adaptation of Wang Anyi's novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (Shanghai dialect version) premiered at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. The essence of the 270,000-word novel was condensed into a three-and-a-half-hour performance, showcasing the changes in Shanghai through the characters' fates. The stage featured three rotating platforms resembling clock gears, symbolizing the passage of time. The costumes changed according to the era, reflecting Shanghai's fashion from the 1940s to the 1980s. In three and a half hours, the audience witnessed not only the personal tragedy of Wang Qiyao but also the ever-changing urban landscape of Shanghai.

2. Chinese Xiqu

On the evening of July 15th, the experimental Kunqu *The Chairs*, adapted from the eponymous work by French playwright Eugène Ionesco, the father of absurdist theater, was performed at the Small Theater of Shanghai Wanping Theater. This production utilized the classic "one table, two chairs" style of Chinese xiqu to portray the multitude of "chairs" and the "shuttling" crowd through virtual performance. The performance not only employed traditional singing, speaking, acting, and acrobatic techniques to create unseen yet felt people and objects on stage but also explored new composite character portrayals through the actors' role changes in different scenes. Actors had to switch their roles according to the changing situations, playing characters such as laosheng (old male), laodan (old female), hualian (painted face), qingyi (young female), and even xiaosheng (young male) and xiaodan (young female). The cross-role performances of the two leading actors became a highlight of the play.

From October 10th to 31st, the 2023 Chinese Xiqu (Opera) Gala (Kunshan), hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Jiangsu Provincial Government, took place in Kunshan. Famous troupes, artists, and performers from various Chinese xiqu genres gathered in Kunshan, showcasing rich and distinctive artistic masterpieces to the audience through activities such as the National Chinese xiqu Performers' Showcase (Sheng and Dan roles),



■ Stage photo of Kunqu *The Chairs*

the National Leading Talent Training Program's excellent play invitations, the "World's Best Troupe" talent training class, and the "New Era Chinese Xiqu Talent Development" seminar. This event provided a broad stage for the aggregation, display, and exchange of Chinese xiqu troupes nationwide. Additionally, various "Hundred Plays+" activities were held, including the opening ceremony of the Museum of Traditional Chinese Opera, the "Watch Hundred Plays, Travel in Jiangsu" cultural tourism trip, and the Kunqu Hometown Carnival.

On the evening of December 19th, the Jingju *The Deer Call* premiered at the Small Theater of Shanghai Wanping Theater. The play was created based on the *Deer King Jataka Painting* mural from the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, incorporating the metaphorical element of puppets. Director Zhang Lei chose to use puppets to externalize desires, blending Jingju with puppetry, two forms of intangible cultural heritage, to bring new creativity to the small theater stage. The entire play's music included innovative elements on top of the traditional Jingju orchestra, achieving a "unique within the ordinary" effect. The stage featured both traditional Jingju instruments and a new orchestration combining ancient instruments like the dizi and camel bells with modern instruments like the handpan, highlighting an exotic, primitive, and powerful atmosphere.

3. Opera, Dance Drama, and Children's Theater

From August 25th to 27th, China's first artificial intelligence-themed dance drama, *AI in Love*, premiered at the National Centre for the Performing Arts. Set against the backdrop of Shenzhen's economic zone, *AI in Love* explores the future of Shenzhen's technological advancements. Yang Yicheng, Associate Professor at Nanjing Sport Institute's Dance Department, described the production as embodying Shenzhen's urban dance imagination and the emotional interplay between AI and city families. The drama incorporates elements of technology, language, and contemporary dance. The narrative follows the straightforward protagonist "Xiao Hai" through various life stages, utilizing nearly 40 scenes, over 20 dance segments, and more than 700 physical expressions to depict a reality where dance, urban life, and future visions intersect.

On September 15th and 16th, the large-scale original dance drama *Opera Warriors* was performed at the Shenzhen Grand Theater. Set in the Republican era, this play transcends traditional art forms by blending opera performance



■ Stage photo of *AI in Love*

with dance vocabulary. Since its debut in November 2011, it has been staged over 300 times worldwide.

From October 28th to 29th, the Palace Museum's first musical for children, *Ludian*, was staged at the Shenzhen Grand Theater. Inspired by the auspicious Palace Museum beast "Ludian," the creative team has spent three years perfecting a captivating blend of theatrical art, traditional culture, and modern technology to bring cultural relics to life. The production features not only the famed Cloisonné Enamel Aromatherapy Beast "Ludian" from the Wanli era but also the Kangxi-era Golden Cup of Eternal Stability, Shen Zifan's (Southern Song Dynasty) celebrated "Plum and Magpies," and the earliest surviving calligraphy work "Ping Fu Tie," which is over 1700 years old. This presentation highlights the enduring confidence and resilience of Chinese traditional culture. Each artifact was given a soul through unique designs and distinct personalities. From a child's perspective, the play innovatively explores cultural heritage preservation through engaging and touching stories about Lüduan and his artifact family members.



■ Stage photo of *Aida*

From November 1st to 5th, the National Centre for the Performing Arts presented Verdi's opera *Aida* with a 400-person cast, generating significant discussion. Sopranos Susanna Branchini and Sun Xiuwei, who portrayed Aida, depicted the character's emotional conflict between love and duty through challenging arias such as "O, Thou Joyful Day" and "The Blue Sky of Our Homeland." The intense emotional shifts and technical demands presented a formidable challenge for the performers. The stage design, featuring vast deserts, towering ships, and ancient Egyptian temples, recreated ancient Egypt on a grand scale, delivering a striking visual experience.

On December 7th, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre returned to the National Centre for the Performing Arts with their production *Send in a Cloud* after a four-year absence. The performance was divided into 12 segments, incorporating group, solo, and duet dances. *Send in a Cloud* is presented in multiple versions; under new Artistic Director Cheng Tsung-lung, the 26 Cloud Gate dancers were split into two groups, with each performance featuring only one group's selected segments. Despite the same musical structure, the varied presentations by



■ Stage photo of *Send in a Cloud*

different dancers offered a fresh experience, reflecting an innovative approach to rehearsing in separate settings over recent years.

4. Academic News

On October 28th, the academic seminar on "Theory and Practice of Modern Chinese Xiqu" was successfully held at Shanghai Theatre Academy. Hosted by the Shanghai Theatre Academy, guided by the China Tian Han Research Association, and organized by the Academy's Modern Chinese Xiqu Research Center, the seminar gathered over forty experts and scholars from across China specializing in modern Chinese xiqu theory and practice. The event provided a platform for in-depth discussions and exchanges on topics related to modern Chinese xiqu, including "Practices of Modern Chinese xiqu," "Creative Practices in Modern Chinese xiqu," "Theoretical Frameworks of Modern Chinese xiqu," and "Historical Perspectives on Modern Chinese xiqu."

From October 29th to November 4th, Shanghai Theatre Academy and the International Theatre Institute co-hosted a seminar, performances, and workshops on traditional performing arts from "Belt and Road" countries. The event featured seven performances, four workshops, and three academic seminars. Participants from countries involved in the "Belt and Road" initiative, including Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Brunei, Bangladesh, Belgium, and Italy, attended. The seminar topics included: "Traditional Performing Arts Education – Asia-Pacific Drama School Alliance Presidents' Meeting," "Traditional Performing Arts in the Digital Age" academic seminar, and "*Chinese Performing Arts* and the Global Dissemination of Chinese Drama." The performances included student works such as *The Brothers Karamazov* and the puppet show *The More Crazy, the More Real*.

From November 10th to 12th, the 2023 Shanghai International Young Scholars Forum (Drama Session) took place at Shanghai Theatre Academy, hosted by the Academy and organized by the Department of Drama Literature. The forum, themed "Mutual Learning of Domestic and Foreign Drama Theories, Generational Changes, and Local Construction," featured six discussion sessions: "Basic Theoretical Research in Drama," "Chinese Xiqu Research (Session 1)," "Chinese Xiqu Research (Session 2)," "Chinese Drama Research," "Foreign Drama Research," and "Cross-Cultural Drama Research." Experts praised the innovative research methods, materials, and perspectives of the young scholars, indicating a promising future for the field of drama studies.

From December 19th to 20th, the 10th International Stage Design Master Forum, co-hosted by the China Institute of Stage Design and Shanghai Theatre Academy, was held at the Academy. The forum, with the theme "Theatrical Space and Visual Metaphor," featured renowned Spanish stage designer Alfons Flores as the keynote speaker. Mr. Flores shared his creative insights with Chinese peers. The forum also included keynote speeches from prominent domestic stage designers, directors, and scholars such as Tan Ze'en, Bian Wentong, Ni Fang, and Shen Qian, along with academic discussions and master workshops.

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