

# Chinese Performing Arts

No. 10  
December 2024

戲中  
劇國

- An Overview of the Development of Yuju Performance Activities in China
- A Review of the Overseas Dissemination of Henan Yuju Over Seventy Years of New China
- Henan Yuju Theatre The Third Troupe and Its Management
- Interview on the Creation of the Stage Adaptation of *Les Misérables* in China
- Recognition, Imagination, and Reconstruction:  
*The Legend of the White Snake* in 21st-Century Western Theatre
- Introduction to Classical Plays (X)
- Chinese Theatre in the First Half of 2024



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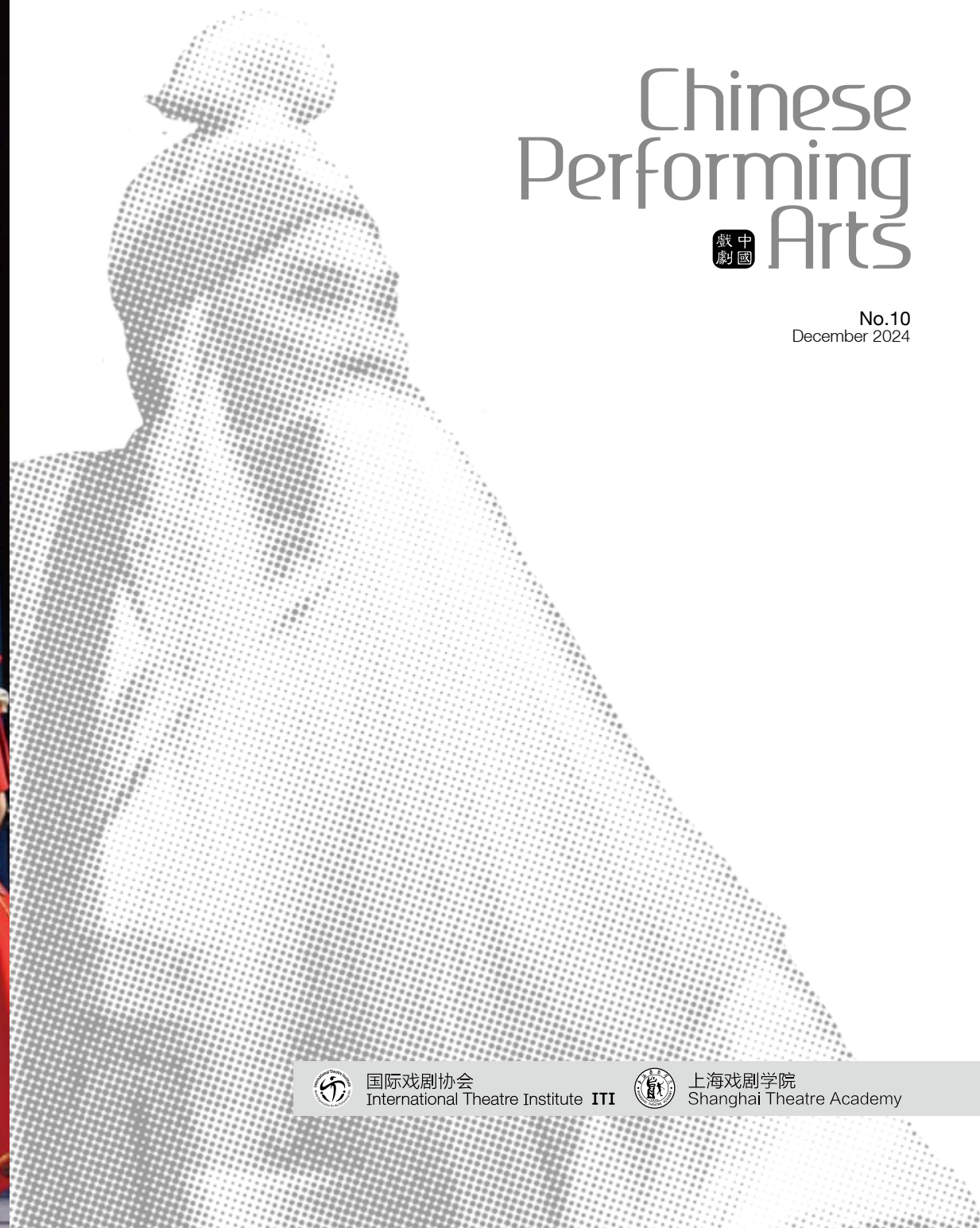
上海戏剧学院  
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# An Overview of the Development of Yuju Performance Activities in China

LI Yukun

Ancient texts describe the traditional world as divided into nine regions, with Yu Zhou, also known as "Zhong Zhou", positioned at the center. This region has historically been considered a pivotal source and origin of Chinese civilization. "Zhong Zhou" refers to present-day Henan Province, which has long served as a crucial route for the spread and exchange of Chinese culture. The Central Plain culture that emerged and developed here became the core of ancient Chinese civilization and has held a prominent place throughout its history. In this fertile land, the theatrical culture is equally rich and ancient, playing a vital role in the development of Chinese xiqu. Scholars have noted: "The cultural roots in the Henan-Luoyang region are the breeding ground for national xiqu," and "The Central Plain region, the heartland of the Chinese nation, is the cradle where Huaxia Yuju was nurtured."<sup>1</sup> Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Henan has gradually become a hub for various regional vocal styles. During the late Qing and Republican periods, Henan witnessed a proliferation of local xiqu troupes and diverse dramatic genres, achieving significant accomplishments and vividly demonstrating the transformation and evolution of regional xiqu within a dynamic cultural landscape.

## 1. A Brief Exploration of Modern and Contemporary Yuju (Bangju) Performance Activities

The Yuju culture in Henan, which developed on the fertile soil of Central Plain culture, is exceptionally rich, with elements such as music, dance, and drama present since the Neolithic era. The Jiahu bone flute unearthed in Wuyang, featuring a seven-note scale, is estimated to be around 8,000 years old according to expert analysis. Yang Jianmin notes: "The primitive song and dance performances marked by the Jiahu bone flute represent the nascent stage of dramatic culture. They heralded the first musical notes of primitive song and dance."<sup>1</sup> As early as the pre-Qin period, the Central Plain region, including Henan, saw the emergence of a three-person dance. This dance involved "three people manipulating cow tails, dancing in eight segments," using simple props and rhythmic accompaniment, indicating a relatively mature form of primitive song and dance. During the Spring and Autumn periods, Huaiyang and Wanqiu served as recreational and sacrificial sites for nobles as well as venues for Chen state residents' songs and dance. These locations, where shamanistic dances were performed year-round, represent the earliest documented dramatic venues in Henan. From the Han to the Tang dynasties, Chinese culture reached its peak, marking a flourishing period for Henan's xiqu culture. Zhang Daxin asserts: "The 'Ta Yao Niang' popular in the Henan (present-day Qinyang) area from the Northern Dynasties to the Sui-Tang period represents the highest standard of song and dance drama."<sup>2</sup> Wang Guowei commented: "Both of these have songs and dances to present a story; whereas previously there were songs and dances but not used to narrate a story, and though stories were performed, they did not combine songs and dances; they are exemplary cases of refined xiqu."<sup>3</sup> By the Song Dynasty, the economy had flourished unprecedentedly, and Kaifeng, as the political, economic, and cultural center of the Song, saw the emergence of specialized dramatic venues called "goulan wanshe," some of which could accommodate

1 张大新:《中原文化与民族戏曲的形成和发展》,《文艺研究》,2012年第8期,第96页。[Zhang Daxin: "Central Plain Culture and the Formation and Development of National Xiqu," *Literature & Art Studies*, 2012, Issue 8, p. 96]

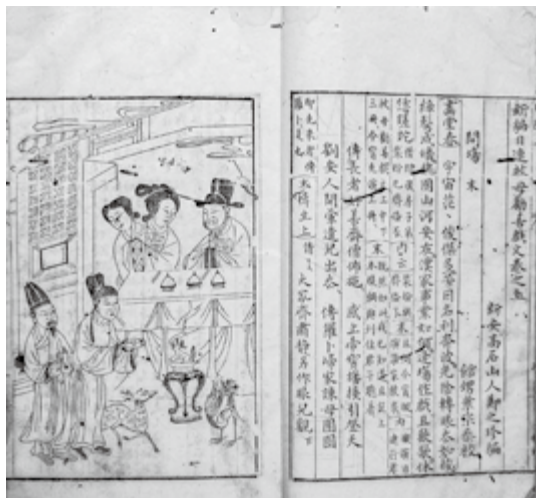
1 杨建民:《中州戏曲历史文物考》,文物出版社,1992年,第23页。[Yang Jianmin: *Historical Artifacts of Central Plain Xiqu*, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1992, p. 23]

2 张大新:《中原文化与民族戏曲的形成和发展》,《文艺研究》,2012年第8期,第97页。[Zhang Daxin: "Central Plain Culture and the Formation and Development of National Xiqu," *Literature & Art Studies*, 2012, Issue 8, p. 97]

3 王国维:《宋元戏曲考》,见王国维《王国维论据》,中国戏剧出版社,2010年,第6页。[Wang Guowei: "History of dramas in Song and Yuan Dynasties," in *Wang Guowei's Theoretical Writings*, China Drama Publishing House, 2010, p. 6]



■ The tomb mural of Han Xiu, the Right Vice Minister of the Tang Dynasty during Emperor Xuanzong's reign, features a remarkable piece titled "Performance Scene of Ta Yao Niang".



■ The manuscript of the zaju *Mu Lian Rescues His Mother*.

thousands of people<sup>1</sup>. Compared to earlier periods, xiqu performances in the Song Dynasty were more widespread and frequent. In particular, in the capital Kaifeng, *Dongjing menghua lu* (The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor) records: "On the fifteenth of the seventh month, the Ghost Festival... the entertainment troupe, after performing the Qixi Festival, continued with the zaju 'Mu Lian Rescues His Mother' until the fifteenth, with the audience increasing exponentially." Evidence indicates that by the late Northern Song period,

dramatic activities had expanded from urban centers to the broader rural areas of Henan. After the Jingkang Incident, Henan was engulfed in war, and its people displaced, but xiqu performances in the region continued unabated. The Yuan Dynasty marked a peak in the development of Chinese xiqu, yet there are few records of local xiqu activities in Henan. Nevertheless, dramatic activities in Henan persisted throughout this period.

Hu Shi, a Ming Dynasty scholar, wrote in *The Pearl Boat* that many literati in Henan during the Ming Dynasty were engaged in xiqu creation. Statistical data on xiqu artifacts reveal that Henan was notably active in building theater structures during the Ming Dynasty, reflecting a high frequency of xiqu activities in the region. By the Qing Dynasty, xiqu activities in Henan reached their zenith. Styles such as Kunshan and Yiyang continued their dominant status from the Ming period. Additionally, Henan's folk traditions included various genres such as Luoxi, Tu Bangxi, and Yue Diao, along with diverse xiqu styles. Around the Qianlong period in the Qing Dynasty, several local xiqu genres, including Henan Bangzi, began to emerge. The variety of genres and styles in Henan's theater scene during this time significantly influenced its development. The Yiyang style was one such influence; Feng Jihan noted, "In its early years, Yuju inherited the dynamic artistic style of Yiyang, which featured acrobatic martial arts and was accompanied by large drums and gongs. It also preserved many historical dramas, such as those about Yang Jiye, Yang Liulang, Jingde, and Zhang Fei. Forty years ago, Henan Bangzi dramas primarily featured 'Eight-Ton' plays, indicating traces of Yiyang style influence in their repertoire."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Luoxi had a significant impact on Henan Bangzi. Feng Jihan observed, "Yuju adopted numerous plays from Luoxi and incorporated many performance techniques from Luoxi. Furthermore, forty years ago, many plays in the five major Yuju schools were performed entirely in Luoxi style."<sup>2</sup>

Xiqu activities in Henan reached remarkable heights during the Qing Dynasty. Theatrical performances were integral to various events, including deity worship ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and seasonal festivals, often characterized by their large scale and extended duration. Across the extensive regions north and south of the Yellow River—whether in inns, teahouses, temples, or on the streets—performances were a ubiquitous presence wherever people gathered. By this period, xiqu had become an essential component of daily life in Henan,

1 孟元老撰、伊永文笺注：《东京梦华录笺注》，中华书局，2006年，第144页。[Meng Yuanlao, annotated by Yi Yongwen: *Annotations on the "Dongjing menghua lu"*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2006, p. 144]

1 冯纪汉：《豫剧源流初探》，河南人民出版社，第10—11页。[Feng Jihan: *Preliminary Study on the Origins of Yuju*, Henan People's Publishing House, pp. 10–11]

2 冯纪汉：《豫剧源流初探》，河南人民出版社，第11页。[Feng Jihan: *Preliminary Study on the Origins of Yuju*, Henan People's Publishing House, p. 11]

deeply intertwined with the cultural and entertainment practices of its people. Yang Jianmin's research indicates that most of the well-preserved ancient theater buildings in Henan date back to the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, highlighting the region's vibrant theatrical activity at that time.

Since 1840, China has experienced significant transformations in social structures, economic systems, and cultural ideologies. "Theater was among the first art forms to feel these changes. Simultaneously, innovations within theater contributed a small ripple to the broader wave of modern reforms."<sup>1</sup> In this new historical context, Henan's local xiqu entered a new phase of development, evolving in response to the changing times. This evolution involved shifts in performance venues, artistic forms, audience demographics, aesthetic styles, and role structures, marking the onset of urbanization and modernization.

For this analysis, I adopt the periodization approach from Sun Jianjie's *Research on Henan Theater in the Late Qing and Republican Periods*, dividing the recent century of Henan's local xiqu development into two phases, delineated by the "Shi & Li Competition" of 1914.<sup>2</sup> The first phase, from 1840 to 1914, was characterized by Henan's local xiqu predominantly existing in rural areas and being closely tied to folk culture, often referred to as the "Rural Era" of Henan xiqu. This period saw folk theater centered around performances for deity worship and daily rituals such as weddings and funerals. Liao Ben remarked: "In the late Ming and Qing dynasties, theatrical performances held an absolutely crucial position in Chinese folk life, creating a scenario where theater was ubiquitous in every town and village, and people could not go a day without seeing it. Theater became an inseparable part of people's major cultural activities throughout the year, from rituals and festivals to daily interactions and entertainment. Theater entered and firmly occupied the spiritual space of urban and rural communities with the prominence of folk culture."<sup>3</sup>

1 康保成:《中国近代戏剧形式论》,漓江出版社,1991年,第2页。[Kang Baocheng: *On Modern Chinese Theater Forms*, Li Jiang Publishing House, 1991, p. 2]

2 The "Shi & Li Competition": In the fall of 1914, the renowned actress Shi Qianyun brought her troupe to Kaifeng, performing at the old theater in Beiyang Market. That winter, another famous actress, Li Jianyun, brought her troupe for the third time, performing at the Zhi Xiang Tea House in Caoshi Street, Kaifeng. At that time, Li Jianyun was far more prominent than Shi Qianyun in Henan. Shi Qianyun's arrival in Kaifeng was highly sensational, and Li Jianyun's subsequent appearance sparked a fierce rivalry between the two, representing a significant event in the development of Henan's local xiqu during the Republican era.

3 王昉:《戏曲是传统文化的载体与中国人的精神家园——戏曲史家廖奔访谈》,《文艺报》,2014年12月31日,第2版。[Wang Fang: "Xiqu as a Carrier of Traditional Culture and the Spiritual Home of the Chinese People—An Interview with Theater Historian Liao Ben," *Literature & Arts Press*, December 31, 2014, p. 2]

The period after 1914 is considered the later phase, during which Henan's local xiqu transitioned from rural to urban development, reaching its peak achievements. This era is thus termed the "Urban Era." In the fall of 1914, the renowned actress Shi Qianyun and her troupe performed at the old theater in Beiyang Street, Kaifeng. That winter, another prominent actress, Li Jianyun, also performed in the city at the Zhi Xiang Tea House. At that time, Li Jianyun's reputation in Henan eclipsed that of Shi Qianyun. The simultaneous performances of the two actresses in Kaifeng city, highlighting their rivalry, became a significant event in the history of Henan's local xiqu during the Republican era, known as the "Shi & Li Competition." This event profoundly influenced the development of Henan's local xiqu in the 20th century, allowing it to enter teahouse theaters and challenging the stereotype that it was solely for the lower class. This shift led to widespread recognition from both the general public and intellectuals.

With the rise of new media such as newspapers, Henan's local xiqu quickly gained prominence, achieving a status comparable to Jingju and Kunqu and securing an equal place in urban theaters. The "Urban Era" also marked the beginning of its modernization. By the 1920s, it had become routine for Henan's local xiqu to be performed in major city theaters, with many troupes moving into urban venues. The teahouse theaters in Henan's central cities experienced a final phase of glory, serving as a bridge from traditional to modern theater.

In the history of Yuju development, intellectuals like Fan Cuiting and Wang Zhen'nan played key roles in its reform, enhancing its artistic quality through advancements in both literature and performance. Chen Xianzhang was pivotal in modernizing Yuju, blending traditional excellence with contemporary elements. He not only preserved and refined traditional repertoires but also infused them with a modern spirit. Chen Xianzhang's notable works, including *Hua Mulan*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, *Interrogating Hong Niang*, and *The Siege of Hongzhou*, later became classics representing the Chang School style.

## 2. The Development and Transformation of Contemporary Yuju Performance

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Henan Bangzi (Yuju) experienced significant transformations. Initially, due to limited experience

and the constraints of social conditions, Yuju's development went through a period of disarray. However, with the attention of the party and government, various initiatives were introduced, such as training classes for xiqu performers, observation performances, play critiques, and script promotion. These efforts were spearheaded by state-run troupes, who rehearsed and staged model performances. Many professional folk troupes also underwent substantial changes, leading to an unprecedented flourishing of Yuju. In directives issued by the Ministry of Culture regarding the leadership and management of professional folk troupes, it was noted: "Aside from a few troupes still operated by private owners and some groups with unstable memberships, the majority have adopted the 'republican troupe' model, where performers manage and run the troupe themselves."<sup>1</sup>

From 1949 to 1966, Yuju modern theater entered its second phase of development, closely tied to national xiqu reform policies. The state implemented a "three-pronged" approach to repertoire: revising and adapting traditional plays, writing new historical plays, and creating modern plays. This policy directly propelled the rapid advancement of xiqu, including Yuju. By the end of 1953, several small-scale xiqu observation performances had been held in major cities like Kaifeng. State-run troupes regularly toured the province, inviting local xiqu artists and leading actors to observe in the provincial capital. In 1953 alone, over 4,000 people participated in observation activities with the Provincial Opera Troupe and the Provincial People's Troupe. Cultural and educational departments across various cities organized these observation activities in a structured manner, with some participants traveling over 800 miles to watch the People's Troupe's performances. Following each observation, discussion sessions were held to exchange insights and experiences.

During these tours, state-run troupes sent directors and leading performers to folk troupes to offer practical assistance and guidance. In return, folk troupes sent members to train and collaborate with actors from the state-run Provincial Opera Troupe and People's Troupe. These exchanges, along with the guidance from state-run troupes, significantly enhanced the overall performance level of the folk troupes.

In December 1956, the Henan Provincial Cultural Department organized the first xiqu observation performance festival in the provincial capital of Zhengzhou, which showcased the results of Yuju's adaptation efforts. Among



■ The poster for the 1958 Yuju film *Mu Guiying Takes Command*, featuring Ma Jinfeng in the leading role.

the many adapted works, *Mu Guiying Takes Command* stood out as the most representative achievement in revising and adapting traditional Yuju repertoire. The play features Mu Guiying, a 53-year-old heroine, taking up command once again. It garnered praise from Jingju master Mei Lanfang, who later adapted it into a Jingju production.

Thanks to the efforts of playwrights like Chen Xianzhang and Yang Lanchun, Yuju theater achieved remarkable success across various types of productions. Traditional plays such as *Mu Guiying Takes Command* and *Qin Xuemei*, newly adapted historical dramas like *Hua Mulan*, and modern dramas including *Chaoyang Valley* and *Liu Hulan* all flourished. Notably, *Chaoyang Valley* and *Hua Mulan* became instant sensations upon their debut, quickly gaining nationwide popularity and becoming cultural icons of Henan. In the 1960s, productions such as *People Happy Horse Call*, *Li Shuangshuang*, and *The Melon Garden* were widely staged, becoming enduring classics that remain popular to this day.

1 马紫晨：《河南梆子概述》，湖北人民出版社，1955年3月第1版，第16页。[Ma Zichen: *An Overview of Henan Bangzi*, Hubei People's Publishing House, 1st edition, March 1955, p. 16]



■ A still from the 1963 Yuju film *Chaoyang Valley*.



■ A still from the 1956 Yuju film *Hua Mulan*, featuring Chang Xiangyu in the leading role.

By 1979, following a period of disruption, traditional Yuju plays made a return to the stage, and the long-dormant work of revising and adapting these plays resumed. In 1981, Song Ci revised the classic Yuju play *The Duel with the Spear*, starring Ma Jinfeng, which swiftly became a staple of the Yuju repertoire, leaving a lasting impact. By the mid-1980s, with the rise of popular culture, audience tastes diversified, leading to a shrinking space for xiqu's survival. Starting in 1984, the xiqu world entered a clear state of crisis, with dwindling audiences and struggling troupes. Discussions of "crisis," "extinction," and "decline" became widespread, and it became widely accepted that xiqu needed innovation to survive and thrive.

This drive for innovation was prominently displayed at the first Henan Theater Competition in December 1985. *The Legend of the Peony* significantly challenged traditional script structures, downplaying plot and theme while rebranding itself as a "poetry drama." Similarly, the mythological Yuju, *The Princess of West Lake*, emphasized formal innovation, incorporating dance-like movements and bold elements of gymnastics and acrobatics to captivate audiences with its visually appealing performance. By the late 1980s, the wave of avant-garde experimentation began to recede, and Henan's xiqu creation returned to realism. However, this new realism delved deeper into introspection and rich thematic exploration, as seen in modern dramas like *The Stone Dream and Drunk in the Countryside*, as well as the newly adapted historical drama *Empress Wu and Shangguan Wan'er*.

In 1987, *The Stone Dream* was the only modern xiqu selected to participate

in the inaugural China Arts Festival in Beijing, making it one of the few Henan productions to be showcased at a national-level artistic event in the late 1980s.

In the 1990s, popular culture became mainstream, and rural-themed xiqu once again gained prominence. This era saw the emergence of several outstanding modern dramas, including *Hei Wa Reunites His Wife with Her Former Lover*, *The Son Grows Up*, *Talented Bai Bucheng's Hundred Failures*, and *The Father, the Son, and the String*. During this period, "the value orientation of literature increasingly shifted towards traditional culture; the rise of cultural conservatism, efforts to promote national essence, nostalgia, and retro tendencies became the dominant trends of the 1990s."<sup>1</sup>

In 1990, Henan Province hosted its third drama competition, reflecting a resurgence of traditional plays. Four adapted traditional works stood out: *Hua Mulan*, *The Lost Child*, *The Leper Woman*, and *The Legend of the Leper Woman*. In 1991, the Asian Traditional Theater International Symposium was held in Beijing, featuring a showcase with excellent plays from over ten different genres nationwide. Notable Yuju productions, such as *Da Ji Zhuang*, *Hua Mulan: Journey*, and *The Talented Prodigy*, were part of this showcase. That same year, the National Cultural Department organized a regional xiqu showcase—the Qin-Jin-Yu "Golden Triangle" xiqu exchange meeting. This event highlighted excellent traditional and newly created plays from the three provinces, including Yuju performances of the new historical play *The Talented Prodigy*, the traditional play *The Lost Child*, and the modern play *Five Blessings Arrive*.

The year 2000 marked a historical turning point for Henan drama. The modern Yuju play *Woman Sesame Oil Maker* won the Grand Prize at the Sixth China Arts Festival, filling a previous gap in Henan's national-level art events and signaling the rise of Yuju in the 21st century<sup>2</sup>. From 2001 to 2019, new Yuju productions such as *The Red Plum Under the Blade*, *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, *Su Wu Tending Sheep*, and *Chang Xiangyu* continuously emerged and garnered national awards, marking a period of notable success.

Luo Huaizhen, Vice Chairman of the China Dramatists Association, stated, "Yuju is no longer just a local prosperity; it is participating in the grand cycle of

1 张志忠：《1993 世纪末的喧哗》，山东教育出版社 1998 年版，第 16—17 页。[Zhang Zhizhong: *The Clamor at the End of the Century 1993*, Shandong Education Publishing House, 1998, pp. 16–17]

2 李红艳：《论改革开放 40 年的河南戏剧》，《中华艺术论丛》2021 年第 25 辑，第 130—131 页。[Li Hongyan: *On Yuju in the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up*, *Chinese Art Review*, 2021, Issue 25, pp. 130–131]

Chinese xiqu and, overall, influencing the creation and development of Chinese xiqu."<sup>1</sup> In summary, since the beginning of the new century, Yuju has genuinely entered a period of rising prosperity.

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1 罗怀臻、李红艳：《重新崛起中的中原戏剧——著名剧作家罗怀臻访谈》，《东方艺术》2005年第16期，第12—13页。[Luo Huaizhen and Li Hongyan: Zhongyuan Drama in a New Rise—An Interview with Renowned Playwright Luo Huaizhen, *Oriental Art*, 2005, Issue 16, pp. 12–13]

## Artistic Characteristics of Yuju

ZHANG Daxin

Yuju, formerly known as "Henan Bangzi" or "Henan Gao Diao," is a quintessential representative of Henan local Xiqu and an important member of the Chinese dramatic family. It ranks not only among "China's Five Major Xiqu Genres" but also alongside Jingju and Yueju as one of the "Top Three Chinese Xiqu." Currently, it is the most widely popular and influential regional drama. The origins of Yuju can be traced back to the ancient "Henan Ode" from the Yao and Shun eras. Its development is rooted in the zaju performed in the teahouses and theaters of Song and Jin dynasty cities. The singing style of Yuju evolved from the "Xiansuo" (string and accessory) music, which itself was derived from the Northern Song dynasty's various palace tunes. The "Bianliang Tune," emerging in the mid-Ming period, incorporated elements of folk songs, Qinqiang, and northern string music and served as the precursor to Yuju.

During the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty, Lv Gongpu of Luoyang city introduced the "Mi Le Laughs" in the ten-character tune, causing a significant transformation in the "Bianliang Tune" and giving rise to the "Xiangfu Tune." This new form thrived under the guidance of the "Jiangmen" and "Xumen" schools. In the 1930s, Fan Cuiting, a graduate of Henan University's inaugural Department of Literature and Education, left his official position to pursue a career in the arts. He established the "Yusheng Drama Society," renovated the "Yusheng Theater," recruited performers, wrote, and directed new plays. Additionally he expanded the Xiangfu Tune's singing style, updated accompanying instruments, implemented a strict management system, and developed a "tailored education" model for training dramatic talent. This modernization elevated Henan Bangzi, once disparaged by people from other provinces, into Yuju, a prominent representative drama of Henan and ultimately recognized as China's largest regional xiqu genre.

As a significant member of the Bangzi family, Yuju has absorbed influences from the string music of the Northern Song and Yuan periods, as well as the

Kunshan, Yiyang, and other local styles. Its performance art has continuously incorporated techniques and experiences from Jingju, Qinqiang, Yueju, and Chuanju, resulting in its distinctive regional characteristics and artistic style.

## 1. Musical System

Yuju music is part of the Bangzi vocal system and is classified as a banqiang (rhythm-based) genre. Its development is rooted in the Northern Song dynasty's musical system, which was based on various palace tunes. The early musical style of Henan Bangzi was derived from the "Bianliang Tune," which evolved from string music. The Xiangfu Tune, which became popular around Kaifeng at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, is the foundational tune of Yuju. Due to significant dialectical variations in the Central Plains region, the Xiangfu Tune absorbed local phonetic characteristics as it spread. This led to the emergence of different regional styles with unique vocal traits: the "Yuxi Tune," centered in Luoyang; the "Yudong Tune," centered in Shangqiu; and the "Shahe Tune," popular in Luohe, Xuchang, and other southern Henan areas. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the relocation of the provincial capital from Kaifeng to Zhengzhou, the areas east of Zhengzhou began to be referred to as Yudong, and those west as Yuxi. The Yuxi and Yudong Tones gained prominence due to the geographical advantage of the political center, while the Shahe Tune became increasingly marginalized, and the Xiangfu Tune weakened or even mutated. Recently, many xiqu experts have advocated for the revitalization of Yuju, stressing that it must begin with the revival of the Xiangfu Tune. From a linguistic and phonetic perspective, all "Four Major Yuju Tones" adhere to the "Central Plain Standard Pronunciation" based around Kaifeng and Luoyang, but there are noticeable differences in tonal execution and rhyming due to local phonetic variations.

The musical structure of Yuju is based on a ban-style variation system with four primary patterns: Slow Ban, Erba Ban, Liushui Ban, and Fei Ban. In the 1930s, Fan Cuiting, building on the vocal techniques observed in performers like Chen Suzhen, gradually enriched the Xiangfu Tune's four main patterns, expanding them into fifty-four sub-patterns. These patterns are applicable not only for dan (female roles) but also for sheng (male roles) and jing, chou, and mo (types of roles).

In the instrumental accompaniment of Yuju, the primary percussion instruments for martial scenes include the ban drum, tang drum, large gong, hand cymbals,



■ Yuju Artist Chen Suzhen

small gong, and bangzi. Traditionally, the literary accompaniment instruments were the two-stringed (pi hu qin), yueqin, and sanxian. These instruments did not harmonize well with the robust and intense melodies of Henan Bangzi. Fan Cuiting observed that the leading string instrument in the Shandong xiqu troupe was the resonant banhu. After some experimentation, he decided to replace the two-stringed instrument with the banhu as the main instrument for Yuju. Subsequently, he introduced the erhu, sheng, dizi, suona, and pipa, which brought a harmonious balance to the accompaniment music, incorporating a wide range of tonal colors and maintaining a rich, harmonious sound. Modern Yuju also includes Western instruments, such as violins, cellos, brass, and woodwinds. There are over 300 traditional accompaniment tunes in Yuju, including more than 130 suona tunes, over 20 dizi tunes, and over 170 silk-string tunes.

## 2. Role Categories

In Yuju, roles are typically divided into four types of Sheng, four types of Dan, and four types of Jing. The "Four Sheng" include: Laosheng (old male roles), Dahong Lian (red-faced male roles), Erhong Lian (second red-faced male roles, often martial roles), and Xiaosheng (young male roles). The "Four Dan" consist of: Zhengdan (principal female roles, often Qingyi or virtuous women), Xiaodan (young female roles, including Huadan and Guimen Dan), Laodan (older female roles, including Wudan, Shuai Dan, and Daoma Dan), and Caidan

(female clowns, or Chou Po). The "Four Jing" are: Dajing (black-headed roles), Dahua Lian (big flower-faced roles), Erhua Lian (second flower-faced roles), and Sanhua Lian (third flower-faced roles, often clowns). There are also variations like "Five Sheng," "Five Dan," and "Five Flower Faces" that denote additional roles and categories. While actors generally specialize in one specific category, many are versatile and also perform roles across other categories.

### 3. Vocal Styles

The vocal style of Yuju embodies the straightforward, cheerful, open-hearted, and bold character of the Central Plains people. It is broadly distinguished by five key features: First, its sound is resonant and grand, with a rhythmic, powerful delivery that is both soaring and intense. Second, the vocalization is smooth and clear, with a natural and heartfelt quality. Third, the rhythm is distinct and dynamic, shifting from passionate vigor in moments of anger to melancholic reflection in sadness and lightness in joy. Fourth, the style is both unpretentious and lively, flowing with dramatic contrasts—powerful like a waterfall, gentle like a murmuring stream, and mournful like a faint mist or a plaintive lament. Fifth, it is direct and straightforward, often with humor and a strong "local flavor." Male roles are known for their energetic movements, while female roles display lively and dynamic stage presence. Characters such as Ye Hanyan, Zhou Fenglian, Hongniang, Mu Guiying, Hua Mulan, Liu Jinding, and Jiang Guizhi are typically portrayed as passionate and forthright. Jing and Chou roles, like Qi Pin Zhi Ma Guan, Cheng Yaojin, Cang Wa, and Hou Quan, are humorous and witty; their performances are full of lively gestures and dialogues. Thanks to its broad vocal range and varied dynamics, Yuju is suited to both grand historical dramas and lighthearted comedies.

The core of Yuju's vocal system is the Xiangfu Tune, which originated in Kaifeng. The Xiangfu Tune follows the phonetic standards of the Central Plains with precise pronunciation and a full tonal range, making it the most authentic style of Yuju. Over time, it absorbed elements from other local operas and folk tunes in the Kaifeng area. Through centuries of refinement, it developed into a high-pitched, intense, and melodious style, rich in ancient simplicity. The Xiangfu Tune primarily uses the pitch "5" as its main tone, with melodies that rise and often blend natural and falsetto voices, giving it a wide range and smooth flow. Male voices are high-pitched and powerful, female voices are dignified and graceful, while Jing roles emphasize resonance, Sheng roles focus on clarity, Dan roles are graceful, and Chou roles are humorous. Lyrics in

the Xiangfu Tune are simple and easy to understand, typically composed in 7- or 10-character lines. A popular saying goes, "It's better to sing ten lines than to speak one line of dialogue." Small Sheng roles often use the Erben voice, Xu Sheng roles combine the main and Erben voices, Dan roles typically use a small voice, and Chou roles often use a mixture of main and Erben voices.

The founder of the Chen school, Chen Suzhen, began studying opera at the age of eight and debuted on stage at ten. By sixteen, she was praised as "the Mei Lanfang of Henan," earning the title "Queen of Yuju" at seventeen. By the age of twenty, she was the leading figure in the "Top Three Yuju Schools" and was honored as "the Yuju King" at twenty-two. Chen's dedication and innovation allowed her to excel in singing, recitation, acting, and martial arts, steering Yuju towards a more dance-like, technical, and refined form of performance, setting a standard for future Dan roles. Her vocal style is noted for its elegance, vitality, and clarity.



■ Yuju artist Chang Xiangyu

Yan Liping, founder of the Yan school, was born as Yan Guirong in Fengqiu County, the birthplace of the Xiangfu Tune. She began studying under Xiangfu Tune master Yang Jinyu at ten and became a disciple of Jingju master Mei Lanfang in 1954. Yan developed the Yan school with its graceful, expansive vocal style and subtle, expressive performances, making significant contributions to the Shahe Tune's development and dissemination. The Yan school's vocal style is characterized by precise pronunciation, emotional expression, an expanded range, and an emphasis on innovation through repeated practice, resulting in an ethereal and evocative style. Notable works include *Qin Xuemei*, *Butterfly Cup*, *The Pendant of the Jade Tiger*, *Jade Hairpin*, and *Journey to Turtle Mountain*, with her portrayals of Qin Xuemei, Hu Fenglian, and Yan Lanzhen becoming widely known.

In the evolution of modern Yuju, the Yuxi Tune (also known as Xifu Tune), widely performed in the mountainous regions of western Henan, gained prominence alongside the Xiangfu Tune. Its frequent staging on hillside platforms earned it the nickname "Kao Shan Hou" (Mountain Roar). This tune is distinguished by its deep, resonant, and full-bodied vocal quality, utilizing a powerful natural voice. The low and clear tones, paired with crisp enunciation, make it particularly effective for conveying emotions of sorrow and indignation. The music tends towards a solemn and tragic grandeur, with Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou roles all employing a robust natural voice, often with a descending tonal finish. The

vocal style is known for its desolation, tragedy, depth, and richness. Performers rely entirely on their natural voice, projecting with large, open sound and frequent nasal tones, making the style especially suited to the portrayal of tragic themes.

The most notable exponents of the Yuxi Tune include Dan performers such as Chang Xiangyu, Cui Lantian, and Tang Lanxiang, as well as Sheng performers like Jia Baoxu, Wang Ershun, Wang Suichao, and Li Shujian. Particularly significant is Chang Xiangyu, who, despite her foundation in the Yuxi Tune, did not limit herself to it. She adeptly integrated elements from the Xiangfu Tune, Jingju, Kunqu, and musical theater to form the unique "Chang School" of artistry. The Chang School's vocal style is defined by its broad and unrestrained delivery, precise enunciation, bold performance, and refreshing vigor. Chang Xiangyu's celebrated "Red-White Flower Trilogy" (*The Romance of Hongniang*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, and *Hua Mulan*)—all polished over time and consistently performed—epitomizes the mastery of the Chang School in both vocal technique and performance artistry. In these three iconic works, Chang Xiangyu alternates between Huadan, Qingyi, Wusheng, and Guimen Dan roles, continually refining her vocal and performance techniques, blending elements from various traditions to craft enduring classics.

Experts well-versed in Chang Xiangyu's career summarize her contributions to Yuju in two key areas: her innovative creation and expansion of the Yuju vocal style and her professional, methodical approach to Yuju performance. Another important artistic school originating from the Yuxi Tune is the "Cui School," founded by Cui Lantian. The Cui School's vocal style is unpretentious, with subtle and restrained expression, precise character portrayal, and sincere emotion. Cui's singing is known for its articulate diction and emotional depth, enriching the overall vocal delivery. The Cui School's style is fluid, natural, profound, and melancholic, with lingering notes that captivate the audience. Cui Lantian's classic performances include the renowned "Four Great Tragedies" of the Cui School: *Peach Blossom Hermitage*, *Qin Xianglian*, *Three Times in the Sedan Chair*, and *The Seedling Seller*.

After the Xiangfu Tune spread eastward to the Shangqiu region, it evolved into the Yudong Tune, which, while similar to the Xiangfu Tune, is characterized by more vigorous, bold, and high-pitched qualities. To meet changing audience tastes, the Yudong Tune has become more playful and humorous, with female voices often featuring elaborate vocalizations and male voices commonly using the "natural voice." The performance style shifted from the Xiangfu Tune's "high-stage singing" to "face-to-face singing." Female voices in the Yudong Tune include more ornamental passages, blending high and low pitches, and



■ The three leading actors of Henan's major xiqu genres gathered in Zhengzhou, from left to right: Ma Jinfeng, Cui Lantian, Yan Liping, Chang Xiangyu, Zhang Xinfang, and Shen Fengmei, photographed in 1979.

utilizing both natural and small voices, giving it a lively and charming quality. Male voices are rugged and bold, frequently alternating between the secondary and natural voices.

Ma Jinfeng, a key figure among the "Five Great Dan" and "Six Great Dan of Yuju," made significant contributions to the development of the Yudong Tune. Trained in her youth by Xiangfu Tune master Ma Shuangzhi and later by Yuxi Tune expert Yan Changgeng, Ma Jinfeng transcended sectarian boundaries, synthesizing various vocal styles to create the distinctive "Ma School" and the "Shuai Dan" category. In 1953, she adapted Yan Changgeng's "Lao Zheng Doong" (Old Campaign Eastward) into "Mu Guiying Takes Command," which received acclaim and guidance from Jingju master Mei Lanfang during its Shanghai performances. The production, also staged with renowned Jingju artist Gai Jiaotian, caused a sensation when it was performed in Beijing in 1956. It was later adapted into a film and performed in various opera genres, earning the title "Luoyang Peony." The "Ma School" is known for its robust, unrestrained style, bright and lively presentation, and clear, fresh quality, likened to scattered pearls or a clear stream, and charming like floral fragrance.

The Xiangfu Tune also spread to southern Henan, where it was influenced by the Yiyang Tune, Yue Tune, and local folk tunes. It merged with forms such as Zhui Zi to evolve into the "Shahe Tune," also known as the "Southern Route Tune," centered in Luohe, Xuchang, and Zhoukou. Its vocal style is marked by high pitch, melodic variation, and resonant tones. Yuju master Sang Zhenjun,

who was prominently active in the Xuchang and Luohe regions, is regarded as a leading figure of the Shahe Tune. Sang Zhenjun began learning Henan Zui Zi from her mother in childhood and later studied Yuju with Xiangfu Tune artist Zhao Qinghe, focusing on Guimen Dan roles and also performing Qingyi and Daomadan roles, making her debut at the age of fourteen. She developed the "Sang School" of singing by integrating elements from Xiangfu, Yudong, Yuxi, Shahe, and Henan Zui Zi, resulting in a unique style. Her performances are marked by subtlety, restraint, and appropriateness, avoiding rough vocalizations and exaggerated movements, and featuring a dignified, elegant stage presence with a rigorous yet relaxed style. The renowned writer and critic Tian Zhonghe praised the "Sang School" as the most musically beautiful and versatile among the Xiangfu Tune styles. Notable works include *The Embroidered Shoes*, *Beating the Princess*, *White Lotus*, and *Peach Blossom Hermitage*.

In addition to the regional dialect-based vocal styles, several prominent schools in Yuju have developed, each marked by the lineage and teachings of renowned performers. These schools include the Chen, Chang, Cui, Ma, Yan, and Sang styles. Among these, the Chen, Yan, and Sang schools are rooted in the Xiangfu Tune, with Yan and Sang emerging as leading figures in the Shahe Tune. Chang and Cui, while representing the Yuxi Tune, have also played significant roles in integrating and enhancing various vocal styles.

Overall, the Dan roles in Yuju showcase distinct qualities: the Chen School is known for its long, flowing style; the Chang School for its high, vigorous tone; the Cui School for its rich, profound quality; the Ma School for its resonant, bold sound; the Yan School for its subtlety; and the Sang School for its lingering, expressive nature. Beyond the Dan roles, other notable vocal styles in Yuju include the Tang School, represented by Lao Sheng (old male roles) Tang Xi; the Li School, represented by Black Face role Li Sizhong; the Niu School, represented by Chou role Niu Dechao; and the Wang School, renowned for its "Wenxiaosheng Master" and "Sheng and Dan Dual Excellence," represented by Wang Sujun. The development of these diverse vocal styles has greatly enriched the vibrant and flourishing landscape of Yuju.

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## Creation and Reception of Henan Yuju Repertoires

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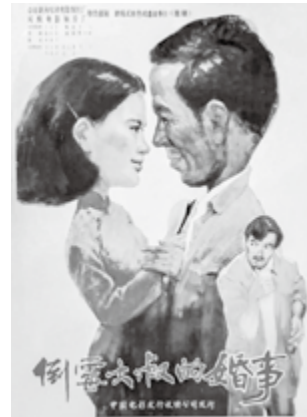
Yuju, also known as Henan Bangzi and colloquially referred to as "Kao Shan Hou" (Mountain Roar), has an origin that remains largely unverified. Scholars generally trace its roots back to the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, with its definitive form being established during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods. In the early 20th century, amidst the wave of "drama reform," intellectuals such as Fan Cuiting and Wang Zhen'nian played pivotal roles in transforming and refining local Henan Bangzi, which gradually shaped the primary style of Yuju performance. Over time, Yuju evolved into various regional styles, including Yuxi, Yudong, Gao Diao, Xiangfu, and Shahe, each giving rise to numerous representative plays. Notable examples include Chang School's *Hua Mulan*, Hai School's *Roll Up in a Mat*, Niu School's *Interrogating the Lady of the Edict*, Chen School's *Three Times in the Sedan Chair*, Cui School's *Qin Xianglian*, Ma School's *Mu Guiying Takes Command and Hua Da Chao* (also known as *Cheng Yaojin Pulling Out the Stakes*), Yan School's *Qin Xuemei*, Sang School's *White Lotus*, Zhang School's *Pacifying Eastern Liao*, and Song School's *Carrying the Wedding Litter*, among others.

### I. Preserving Tradition and Innovating Yuju Traditional Repertoires Under the Influence of Agricultural Culture

Henan, as a major agricultural province, has long sustained a stable agricultural production system and rural way of life, fostering a rich cultural atmosphere deeply rooted in farming traditions. Yuju, as a local theatrical form, is shaped by the historical culture, geographical environment, lifestyle, folk customs, and traditional music and dance of the Central Plains region. The aesthetic preferences of its primary audience—farmers—have directly influenced the



■ The poster for the 1963 Yuju film *Chaoyang Valley*.



■ The poster for the 1987 Yuju film *The Marriage of Uncle Unlucky*.

themes and evolution of Yuju repertoires.

Yuju's subject matter largely stems from everyday life, mirroring the social realities of the Central Plains while drawing from and incorporating the vast wealth of folk literature, including storytelling, historical romances, and legends. Many traditional Yuju plays are based on local legends or folktales, such as the Bao Gong dramas, stories of the Yang Family Warriors, Water Margin stories, and Yue Fei plays, often set in the context of Kaifeng. Notable examples include *Three Times in the Sedan Chair*, *Peach Blossom Hermitage*, and *Wang Jindou Borrows Grain*. Modern Yuju plays, such as *Chaoyang Valley*, *Li Shuangshuang*, and *The Marriage of Uncle Unlucky*, depict the real-life experiences of Central Plains farmers, conveying authenticity and warmth while showcasing a strong regional cultural identity.

Yuju traditional repertoires typically refer to works written and performed before the May Fourth Movement, but in a broader sense, also include newly adapted historical dramas or revised traditional plays. In terms of content and themes, Yuju's classic traditional repertoires can be divided into four categories:

(1) Promoting Patriotism and Honoring National Heroes: Plays like *Hua Mulan*, *The Siege of Hongzhou*, *Mu Guiying Takes Command*, and *Executing the Son at the Gate of the Camp* depict patriotic heroes who sacrifice their personal interests for the nation. These works celebrate loyalty and patriotism.

(2) Depicting the Struggle Between Good and Evil and Celebrating Just Officials and Righteous Figures: Plays such as *The Case of Chen Shimei*, *The Eight Righteous Figures*, *Yao Gang's Campaign Against the South*, and *Burning Zidu* highlight the clash between justice and evil, portraying upright officials seeking

justice for the people and promoting the values of fairness and righteousness.

(3) Portraying Everyday Life and Praising Virtuous Characters: Works like *Da Ji Zhuang*, *The Flower Boat* (also known as *The Mistaken Mandarin Ducks* or *Double Wedding*), *Wang Lin Divorces His Wife*, and *Killing the Dog to Persuade the Husband* focus on family ethics and human relationships, upholding values like family harmony, respect for elders, and love for kin.

(4) Mythological Themes: Plays like *Huaguo Mountain*, *White Lotus*, *Splitting the Mountain to Rescue the Mother*, and *Flooding Sizhou* reflect people's desire for a better life and their wish to conquer nature.

These classic repertoires emphasize moral evaluations of characters. Figures like Hua Mulan, Mu Guiying, and Chen Shimei symbolize specific moral values, either positive or negative. The sharp contrasts between good and evil characters convey traditional values such as loyalty, filial piety, and integrity.

For the common people, the theater was a place of learning. Stories of loyal ministers, filial sons, chaste women, and righteous husbands from Chinese history were regularly performed on stage, imparting basic historical and cultural knowledge as well as life lessons. Xiqu actors served as teachers, embodying morality and human nature and illustrating the consequences of virtue or vice through their performances of singing, acting, and martial arts.

In traditional society, Yuju performances—whether through open-air mobile shows or regular theater presentations—were closely intertwined with the lives of ordinary people, most of whom were illiterate. Yuju became an essential part of their daily lives, fulfilling entertainment, spiritual, and social needs. At the same time, Yuju performances carried the important mission of promoting moral ethics, passing down cultural knowledge, and spreading social values. By watching or participating in Yuju performances, people learned traditional customs and moral concepts while being influenced by the values of traditional Chinese culture. The development of Yuju from its inception to the present demonstrates how Yuju's traditional repertoires have consciously or unconsciously helped to disseminate social values, educate the public, and contribute to societal progress.

## II. Development and Transformation of Modern Yuju in the Changing Rural Society

Modern Yuju refers to scripts performed in the Yuju style that are based on modern history and life stories from 1919 onward, following the May Fourth

Movement. The 1930s marked a critical period of transition for Henan Bangzi as it evolved into modern Yuju. Intellectuals such as Fan Cuiting, Wang Zhennan, Zhang Jietao, Li Lingwu, and Jiang Wenzhi entered the Yuju scene, resulting in the emergence of professional playwrights and the end of Yuju's "scriptless" era. This period also saw the formation of a highly influential group of Yuju playwrights. Among them, Fan Cuiting and Wang Zhennan played pivotal roles in Yuju's reform and development, bridging the old and the new.

With the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan, Fan Cuiting created works such as *The Heroine*, *Victory and Return*, and *Relieving the Nation's Crisis*. Wang Zhennan contributed with plays like *Crying at the Great Wall*, *Fighting for the Land*, and *Razing Dens and Leveling Courts*. These playwrights applied modern theatrical concepts to create new plays that not only served as powerful tools for wartime propaganda but also laid the foundation for a playwright-centered model in which the literary quality of the script drove Yuju's development.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yuju saw tremendous growth. Traditional troupes were reorganized, and with the government's emphasis on theatrical culture, a large number of young people became involved in xiqu, propelling Yuju to become the largest regional xiqu genre in the country.

Starting in the 1950s, modern play creation, led by the Third Troupe of the Henan Yuju Theater, once again transformed Yuju's style. Outstanding rural-themed plays, such as *Chaoyang Valley*, not only served as exemplary works for the creation of modern xiqu but also left researchers with many topics worth exploring. *Chaoyang Valley* used characters to drive the plot and employed new scriptwriting techniques to depict the inner worlds of its characters, creating a group of lively and fully fleshed-out figures and establishing the play as a classic of modern Yuju.

In the 1960s, a series of modern Yuju plays emerged, including *Li Shuangshuang*, *The Good Daughter-in-law*, *From Winter to Spring*, and *Apricot Blossom Encampment*. While these plays covered a wide range of topics, their artistic style remained anchored within a stable structure without breaking away from the framework established by *Chaoyang Valley*.

In the 1980s, Yuju playwrights turned their attention to the complex emotions and thoughts of people in the new era, sparking a new wave of modern Yuju creation. Notable works from this period include *The Marriage of Uncle Unlucky*, *The Sequel to Chaoyang Valley*, *When the Son Grows Up*, *Talented Bai Bucheng's Hundred Failures*, *The Stubborn Father-in-Law and the Tough Daughter-in-Law*, *A Life Full of Dreams*, and *Mother-Daughter Grudge*.

By the 1990s, with the efforts of a new generation of playwrights, Yuju drama creation entered a period of prosperity. Since 1990, nearly 30 Henan Yuju works have won various national awards.

Looking at these nationally recognized works from the end of the last century, most Yuju plays reflect real life, especially those depicting the joys and sorrows of rural and grassroots people. Many songs and verses from this period have become Yuju classics, passed down and sung by the masses.

In the new century, the creation of new historical dramas and modern plays has largely focused on grand narratives that promote mainstream values, often featuring loyal officials, virtuous generals, and heroic role models as key characters. While plays that reflect significant historical events and exemplary figures are still necessary, they tend to feel somewhat distanced from contemporary life. This has led to a somewhat singular trend in creative themes. One of the reasons Henan Yuju remains beloved by its audience is its groundedness, its reflection of the ordinary lives of everyday people—a fine tradition in Yuju creation.

As we advocate for cultural diversity today, the subject matter of Yuju plays should also embrace diversity. While elevating the cultural taste, refinement, and literati influence of Yuju, we must not neglect its grassroots and folk qualities.

### III. Creative Reflections and Audience Analysis of Henan Yuju in the New Era

The year 2000 marked a significant shift in the themes and content of Yuju works. Prior to 2000, award-winning Yuju plays predominantly reflected the lives of grassroots people, such as *Talented Bai Bucheng's Hundred Failures*, *The Ugly Sister-in-Law*, and *The Marriage of Uncle Unlucky*. These works underscored Yuju's grassroots, grounded, and folk character, which is its greatest strength. However, this focus also constrained Yuju's ability to explore broader social and historical themes. Post-2000, the focus of award-winning Henan Yuju plays shifted towards mainstream themes, including works like *The Village Official Li Tiancheng* and *Jiao Yulu*, as well as newly written historical dramas such as *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* and *Su Wu Tending Sheep*. These plays adopted grand narrative techniques, celebrating historical heroes and role models. While this approach was beneficial for national award evaluations, it created a degree of alienation from the general audience, making it more challenging to evoke empathy from ordinary spectators.



■ The poster for the Yuju *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, featuring Li Shujian in the leading role.



■ A still from the Yuju play *Su Wu Tending Sheep*, featuring Li Shujian in the leading role.

Historically, whether in traditional plays before the May Fourth Movement, reformed plays of the Republic of China, or modern Yuju, ordinary people have always been the core audience. When playwrights engaged with creation from an equal perspective and established a natural connection with the audience, Yuju thrived. Conversely, when Yuju distanced itself from the people, the countryside, and the core values of agrarian culture, it suffered a decline. In traditional society, early Yuju plays resonated with grassroots audiences due to their clear moral distinctions and commitment to moral judgment, allowing Yuju to thrive in rural communities. As Yuju evolved into an influential form of spiritual exchange, lower-class intellectuals actively contributed to its creation, integrating Confucian values. The deep intervention of state political power further embedded Confucian values into all aspects of xiqu activities.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, several Yuju plays gained widespread popularity and long-lasting influence, such as *Hua Mulan*, *Chaoyang Valley*, and *Mu Guiying Takes Command*. These successful plays demonstrate a tacit agreement with the audience—they fulfill the aesthetic needs of the broad Yuju audience and align with their collective psychology. These plays were crafted to address the specific psychological needs of the Yuju audience at that time.

To this day, ordinary people remain the core audience for Yuju. Its widespread appeal is partly due to its emphasis on "form over content." Rather than striving for literary or highbrow content, Yuju focuses on its attraction to the masses. In performance, actors must first understand the plot, immerse themselves in their

roles, and grasp the values represented by the characters. This preparation enables them to deliver precise and engaging performances, using expressive singing to vividly bring characters to life and communicate their values to the audience. The audience is not just a passive recipient but an active participant and respondent. During a Yuju performance, the audience immerses itself in the world created by the xiqu, enjoying its charm. Through repeated interactions in this communicative setting, the audience gradually absorbs the values embedded in traditional Yuju plays.

In summary, Yuju serves as a medium for transmitting traditional social values, presenting these values in a vivid, observable, and engaging manner through dynamic characters on stage. This approach achieves extensive, multi-layered, and cross-generational dissemination of traditional values.

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## A Review of the Overseas Dissemination of Henan Yuju Over Seventy Years of New China

LIANG Shuai

Xiqu boasts a history spanning nearly a thousand years in China, and it continues to thrive with its vibrant vitality and unique cultural characteristics. Henan Yuju, a local form of xiqu originating from Henan, stands as the largest regional theater genre in China. Predominantly popular in Henan, Hebei, Shaanxi, Hubei, and surrounding areas, it has been recognized as one of the first national intangible cultural heritages. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Yuju has ventured abroad numerous times, performing in over 30 countries and regions and earning considerable acclaim both domestically and internationally. The dissemination of Yuju overseas has been significantly bolstered by the support of overseas Chinese communities, particularly since the era of reform and opening up. In regions with Chinese expatriates, there has been a profound enthusiasm for cultural offerings from mainland China, serving as a vital means for them to connect with their heritage. Reflecting on Yuju's seventy-year journey of international dissemination reveals numerous achievements and valuable experiences that warrant our attention and reflection.

The initial spread of Yuju overseas primarily focused on socialist countries. Despite facing numerous challenges, notable achievements were made. In 1952, Chang Xiangyu traveled to Vienna, Austria, to participate in the "World Peace Conference." During her return journey through the Soviet Union and Hungary, she performed several plays, including *Mulan*, at various gatherings. This marked the beginning of Yuju's international journey, which has now extended for over seventy years. In 1953, Chang Xiangyu led a troupe to North Korea to perform for soldiers, and the Henan Yuju Troupe also visited North Korea to entertain the Chinese Volunteer Army. These patriotic efforts greatly boosted the morale of the soldiers in Korea, and Chang Xiangyu's contributions, including the donation by her "Xiangyu Theater Company," became a cherished

part of Chinese art history. After the National Day celebrations in 1956, Yuju performer Gao Jie and musician Shang Xiupu joined the Chinese Musicians Delegation on a tour of Northern Europe, introducing Yuju to Finland, Norway, Sweden, and other countries and gradually increasing its recognition in the Western world.

During the Cultural Revolution, cultural exchanges between China and other countries were temporarily suspended, and there are no records of Yuju troupes or individuals performing abroad. However, the global artistic and academic communities continued to show interest in Yuju. According to records from the University of Illinois Library in North America, a performance of the Yuju play *The Cosmic Blade* was featured in a concert of Chinese classical music held by its music department in September 1977.

Since the reform and opening up, major state-run theater troupes have balanced the staging of traditional plays with the creation of new works. As international openness has deepened, the internationalization of Yuju has entered a new phase. In July 1996, to mark the 10th anniversary of the friendship between Henan Province and Mie Prefecture in Japan, the Zhengzhou Yuju Troupe, led by Hu Meiling, performed *Carrying the Wedding Litter* and *Subduing Jiang Wei* in Mie Prefecture with a cast of over twenty members. These performances were warmly received and highly praised by local audiences. Following this, in 2000, Hu Meiling was invited to Singapore by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, making it the first collaboration between Henan Yuju and an international symphony orchestra. In April 2000, at the invitation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Wang Xiling led the Zhengzhou Yuju Troupe in performing classic Yuju plays such as *Carrying the Wedding Litter* and *Mulan*, garnering a strong response and significant success.

Unlike live stage performances, films offer a more convenient means of dissemination and a broader audience. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, Yuju has sought to reach international audiences through film collaborations. In 1956, the Changchun Film Studio released the Yuju film *Mulan*, starring Chang Xiangyu and Zhao Yiting. This film greatly accelerated the international dissemination of Yuju, with lines like "Liu Da Ge's speech is so biased" becoming widely known. *Mulan* thus became synonymous with Yuju in the Western world, creating the first cultural impression of Henan for many foreigners—an influence that persists to this day. Early Yuju films also include *Mu Guiying Takes Command* (1958) by Ma Jinfeng, *Chaoyang Valley* (1963) by Wang Shanpu and Wei Yun, and *Sesame Official* (1979) by Niu Decao. Thanks to the dedication of Yuju filmmakers, the art form has found new vitality amid challenges. Today, Yuju films remain a crucial way for international audiences to engage with this traditional art form.

When discussing the early international dissemination of Yuju, we must recognize the significant contributions of Yuju troupes from Taiwan. In April 1952, Zhang Xiuyun, known as the "Yuju Queen," established the Zhongzhou Yuju Troupe on Phu Quoc Island in Vietnam. Upon returning to Taiwan in 1953, it was renamed the Flying Horse Yuju Troupe. In addition to the Flying Horse Yuju Troupe, other groups such as the Huanglong Yuju Troupe, the Tiger Yuju Troupe, and the Jaguar Yuju Troupe also emerged in Taiwan. These troupes became vital cultural channels for mainland veterans in Taiwan, allowing them to express their nostalgia and connection to their homeland. On January 1, 1996, the Flying Horse Yuju Troupe was incorporated into the Guoguang Opera Company's Yuju division and was renamed the Taiwan Yuju Troupe in 2008. Since the 1980s, Wang Hailing has led the troupe with the mission to "promote Central Plains culture and preserve the new sounds of Yuju." In 1987, Wang Hailing performed *The Sachet Story* and *Da Ji Zhuang* at the Singapore New Image Arts Festival and in Seoul, South Korea, marking the first international performances of Taiwan's Yuju. In late 1991, Wang Hailing's troupe performed *The Sachet Story* at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City, making it the first troupe from both sides of the Taiwan Strait to perform there. In May 1994, the troupe was invited to perform in France, Germany, Italy, and Singapore, and in 1997, they performed *Wang Kui Betrays Guiying* and *Tang Bohu Pursues Qiuxiang* in the UK, earning high praise for their exceptional performances. The Taiwan Yuju Troupe has also engaged in cross-cultural exchanges, including its first production of the renowned Italian opera *Turandot* in 2000. Taiwan Yuju has been a pioneer in the internationalization of Yuju, making substantial contributions to its global expansion. Reflecting on its history, the Taiwan Yuju Troupe has established a strong presence on the island of Taiwan, becoming a significant force alongside Gezaixi and Jingju in Taiwan's theatrical landscape. Taiwanese Yuju productions often incorporate Western theater elements and modern dramatic concepts, with less emphasis on traditional Yuju conventions.

Since the early 21st century, with robust support from the Henan Provincial Party Committee and government, Yuju has accelerated its international outreach, entering a new phase of global expansion. This period's international dissemination of Yuju can be summarized by four key elements: a representative program, "Pear Garden Spring"; a representative troupe, the Henan Yuju Troupe; a representative actor, Li Shujian; and a representative playwright, Chen Yongquan.

Launched in 1994, the Henan Television program "Pear Garden Spring" is not only a flagship initiative of Henan Satellite TV but also a crucial platform for showcasing Henan's culture globally. The program is rooted in the Central Plains but extends its reach nationwide and internationally. It has captivated audiences both in China and around the world, bringing Chinese xiqu to

international prominence. On September 17, 2006, "Pear Garden Spring" successfully hosted "Pear Garden Songs" at the Sydney Opera House in Australia, marking a significant moment for Yuju on the world stage and garnering sustained interest from Chinese communities globally. In 2007, the "Pear Garden Songs" performance team toured South America, including Venezuela and Brazil. In August 2017 and April 2018, the program held notable xiqu performances at the Edinburgh Cultural Arts Center in the UK and the China Cultural Center in Russia, respectively. To date, "Pear Garden Spring" has toured nearly 30 countries and regions, significantly advancing the international dissemination of Yuju and enhancing Henan's global image and reputation. The program has expanded from a focused content dissemination approach to a multi-faceted format, adapting its content for television audiences while highlighting the unique charm of Henan culture. It has become a bridge for the international spread of Yuju.

The Henan Yuju Troupe comprises three key divisions: the First, Second, and Third Henan Yuju Troupes. The First Henan Yuju Troupe, originally the "Xiangyu Troupe," founded by Chang Xiangyu, focuses on traditional repertoire, featuring notable productions such as *Mulan* and *Mu Guiying Takes Command*. The Second Henan Yuju Troupe specializes in historical dramas and newly adapted historical plays, with representative works including *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* and *Qingfeng Pavilion*. The Third Henan Yuju Troupe is known for modern Yuju plays, with prominent productions like *Chaoyang Valley* and *Woman Sesame Oil Maker*. Each troupe has carved out its own niche and achieved significant breakthroughs, shaping a new era for Henan Yuju. Today, Henan boasts a vibrant theatrical landscape with these three troupes as its cornerstone, working in harmony with local troupes and greatly advancing the international reach of Yuju.

In 2009, the Henan Yuju Troupe was invited by the Chinese Cultural Center in Paris to participate in the Fourth Chinese Theater Festival. The Second Henan Yuju Troupe kicked off the festival at the Paris City Hall's New Century Theater with their major historical play *Qingfeng Pavilion*. Lead actor Li Shujian won the Best Actor Award at the festival. In 2010, Henan put together a cultural exchange delegation led by the Second Henan Yuju Troupe to participate in the Happy Chinese New Year events hosted by the U.S. Department of State, making a significant impact.

Here are some notable Yuju artists:

**Li Shujian** is a prominent figure in the "Yuxi School" of Yuju, specializing in the "laosheng" role. With decades of stage experience, he has starred in numerous acclaimed productions, including *The Great Enthronement*, *Qingfeng Pavilion*, *The Village Constable*, and *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*. Li is one of the most commercially successful Yuju actors of contemporary Henan and

a leading force in modern Yuju art. In 2008, he led the *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* troupe to perform at the Rome Music Center in Italy, marking the first international cultural exchange performance of a complete Henan Yuju production and the debut of Henan stage art in Europe. The performance received high praise from audiences. The troupe later took *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* to the U.S., performing at the American Theater Center on Broadway in 2013 and at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood in 2016. Li Shujian is the only Chinese performer to bring a full Yuju production to the world's top stages, significantly expanding the influence of Henan Yuju and Chinese culture. His troupe has visited over twenty countries and regions, including France, Italy, and Thailand, establishing a distinguished reputation for Henan's international cultural exchanges. Another of Li's notable productions, *Qingfeng Pavilion*, was featured at the Black Sea International Theater Festival in 2013 and performed at the 14th International Theater Festival in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 2017, achieving great success. Additionally, renowned Yuju actors like Wang Quanwen and Jia Wenlong have also performed abroad, showcasing Yuju's unique charm from various perspectives.

**Chen Yongquan** is a contemporary eminent Yuju playwright who has made significant contributions to dramatic writing. At the turn of the century, his play *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* received widespread acclaim, particularly after its passionate performances by Li Shujian and others. The play was praised as "Chinese opera" by the American Theater Festival following its U.S. debut. *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* not only introduced Western audiences to the beauty and charm of Chinese Yuju but also allowed them to appreciate the deep-rooted rational spirit and character of the Chinese nation. It served as a crucial channel for cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding. This demonstrates the universal significance of Chinese values beyond historical and national boundaries. In recent years, Chen Yongquan has created works such as *Feng Yu Gu Yuan (Wind and Rain in the Old Family)*, *A Q and Kong Yiji*, and *Righteousness Above the Clouds*, which have garnered various domestic and international awards. Chen has become one of the most active Yuju playwrights today and has also lectured and engaged in academic exchanges at international universities, contributing to the global dissemination of Yuju.

Driven by the momentum and exemplary impact of Yuju's international performances, other regional Chinese xiqu from Henan have also ventured abroad, sparking a global wave of interest. In 2003, the Zhengzhou Quju Troupe was invited to the U.S. for cultural exchanges and subsequently toured five states with their production *Roll Up in a Mat*. In August 2019, the Henan Yuediao Art Preservation and Inheritance Center performed the Yuediao children's fable *Mother Mouse Selects a Son-in-Law* at the Namur Arts Center in Belgium. In September, at the invitation of the Gyeongju Art Festival

Committee in South Korea, Shen Xiaomei led the troupe of *Laozi* for a five-day cultural exchange performance in Korea. Currently, Henan enjoys a favorable position with Yuju, leading the way and regional operas advancing in tandem. The Henan theater community is actively showcasing the unique charm of Henan's local operas to the world, becoming a vibrant representative of Central Plains culture.

In academic research, Yuju scholars from Henan have actively projected China's academic voice internationally, gaining recognition from scholars worldwide. In 2009, at the invitation of King's College London, a collaborative production of the Yuju play *Yue/Shu (Commitment/Restraint)* from mainland China and Taiwan participated in the "Fourth Shakespearean Biennale in the UK." In 2010, Henan Yuju experts, along with a Taiwanese Yuju troupe, traveled to Singapore for the "Asian Yuju: Contemporary Style" event and the Asian Yuju Forum, marking the first cross-national Yuju forum in its history and highlighting its international influence. In 2012, over a hundred experts and scholars from the U.S., Japan, and both sides of the Taiwan Strait gathered in the ancient city of Kaifeng for the "International Academic Symposium on Central Plains Drama Culture." The drama from the Central Plains, represented by Yuju, was reviewed and explored extensively during the symposium. Today, Yuju research features a model that integrates scholars from Henan University, the Henan Provincial Art Research Institute, and various generations. A growing number of international scholars are engaged in studying Yuju history, comparing it with other dramatic forms, and exploring its cross-cultural dissemination. Significant achievements include works such as *Chinese Yuju* and *The Complete Works of Fan Cuiping*, which effectively promote Henan Yuju and Henan culture abroad. To further enhance the global presence of Henan Yuju, the Henan Provincial Political Consultative Conference established the Chinese Yuju Cultural Promotion Association in June 2010. Its objective was to coordinate resources and boost the promotion of Henan's dramatic culture both domestically and internationally.

With a history spanning nearly a thousand years, Chinese opera is undoubtedly a window into Chinese civilization, and Yuju stands out as one of the most dazzling jewels in this rich heritage. The values promoted by Yuju—loyalty, benevolence, and justice—will continue to be an inexhaustible spiritual resource for people around the world.

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## Li Shujian's Path to Developing the Art of Yuju

LI Yukun & WANG Xin



■ Yuju artist Li Shujian (1962-)

As a national intangible cultural heritage, Yuju is one of the five major Chinese Xiqu genres and has been passed down for a hundred years. Entering the new century, China's excellent traditional culture has begun to face the world with the process of global integration, moving towards an international development pattern. Under the leadership of Li Shujian, a leading figure of Yuju in the new era, Yuju has spread worldwide, realizing ideological exchanges across languages, cultures, and nationalities in different countries.

Li Shujian was born in 1962 in Linru County, Henan Province, the birthplace of Quju, and Li Yulin, Li Shujian's ancestor, was a popular actor at that time. Born in the countryside, Li Shujian's family was

not rich when he was young. At the time, due to a three-year famine, Li Shujian had become sick and weak, leading his father to believe that he had starved to death and had him thrown on a medicine slope. Fortunately, with the insistence of his grandmother, he was able to regain his life. It was precisely this poor living environment that gave the young Li Shujian the idea of singing in the theatre, which he believed could give him a living and allow him to travel all over the country. As a result watching theatre became the most important part of his



■ The scene of Li Shujian working his way through school at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in 1985.

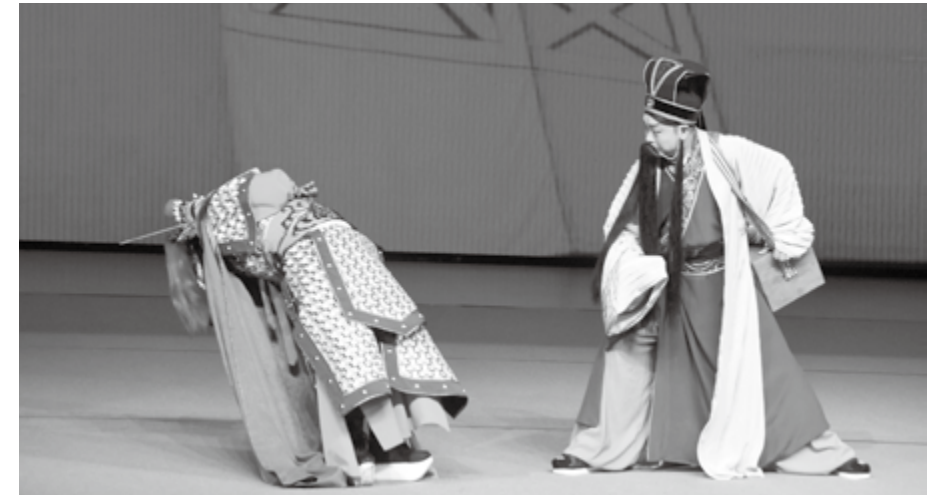
childhood. He got into the backstage of the theatre to watch the actors put on make-up, memorized the libretto and hummed in class, and became a little fan of Xiqu. The rural fields became the initial performing stage to realize his dream.

With this dream comes a path to his artistic pursuit. Initially, Li Shujian was admitted to the Commune Troupe, which was his first theatre stage and also his first attempt to transition from a farmer to a theatre performer. After a year of hard work, he successfully participated in the rehearsal of the Yuju *Chaoyang Valley* and felt the sense of achievement brought by performing for the first time. Unsatisfied with the status quo, he was soon left and got admitted to the County Troupe and followed them to perform in various parts of the country. But unfortunately, this troupe kicked him out after changing their leader. Unwilling to give up, he auditioned for 17 troupes in two years but was rejected one after another because he could not act. He mustered his experience and honed his will through continuous failures, and eventually, the use of his superior voice conditions got him admitted to the Luoyang Xiqu School as he wished, and began his formal study career. At school, he practiced the basic skills diligently and successfully joined the Luoyang Yuju The Second Troupe after graduation, slowly making his way to the center of the stage. In 1984, he went to Beijing to study and became a student of the famous Jingju master Ma Changli by chance. Thanks to the help of his teacher, he became an auditor at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. He seized this opportunity to develop himself, rising early and staying late to observe a large number of famous artists and repertoires. After two years of arduous study, he was able to grow holistically, and a new chapter in his artistic career began.

After completing his studies in Beijing, Li Shujian served as the deputy head of the business of the Sanmenxia Yuju Troupe, and became the head of it in the following year. During this period, he adapted and staged the historical

theatre *Qingfeng Pavilion*, which won him the 10th Plum Performance Award in Beijing, the highest award for Chinese theatre performance. Winning the Plum Performance Award was Li Shujian's first dream since he started his artistic pursuit. The accomplishment of this dream served as both a powerful testimonial to his transition from an incapable actor to a successful Xiqu performer and a source of great encouragement for him. The ten years of experience in the Sanmenxia Yuju Troupe helped him reach his first artistic peak while also maturing and stabilizing him.

After winning the Plum Performance Award, Li Shujian had his second dream, which was to rehearse several good plays that people would like, remember and have value in spreading and passing down. This dream was realized in the Henan Yuju Theatre The Second Troupe, simply referred to as The Second Troupe for short. At the beginning of 2000, Li Shujian took the initiative to join The Second Troupe. At that time, The Second Troupe had the worst conditions among the eight provincial troupes with insufficient lighting equipment, shabby stage backdrops, and scarce performers, which made it difficult to support even the most basic normal performances. Faced with such wretched conditions, Li Shujian was so shocked. But the more difficult the conditions were, the more it inspired his fighting spirit. He quickly adjusted his mindset and first led the troupe to perform in Sanmenxia, Lingbao, and other areas he was familiar with. With his superb acting skills, the troupe opened up the performance market to a certain extent and earned a good income. Afterwards, he won the opportunity for the troupe to perform in Beijing. It was this performance that made him realize an important problem, which was, how to continue to capitalize on The Second Troupe's proficiency in adapting historical theatre so that the repertoires could bring forth the new through the old. The outdated content and the old-fashioned expression techniques of the repertoires were indeed one of the main problems faced by Yuju after entering the new era. In response to this problem, Li Shujian, relying on his long-term experience in acting and his profound grasp of the repertoires, adapted the traditional historical plays from the ideological point of view of the repertoires, giving the classical plays a contemporary connotation. After careful consideration, he decided to start his adaptation from the classic historical play *The Orphan of Zhao*. This play was a famous historical masterpiece that has been passed down for many years. It mainly conveyed the spirit of sacrificing one's life for righteousness and unyielding will, and its strong tragic feeling resonated with Li Shujian's Yuxi Tune. He invited the young playwright Chen Yongquan to adapt it, and transform the original, shifting the focus from the revenge of the orphan to the righteous Cheng Ying. This adaptation highlighted national integrity and human brilliance, and injected nuances and value orientations of the new era. Along with running around to raise funds, he inspired everyone to practice, and presented the slogan, which read "unifying



■ Li Shujian played the role of Cheng Ying in *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*.

and hard working (is the driving force), rolling stones up the mountain (is the spirit), stepping out of the predicament (is the determination), and daring to be the first (is the goal)." It was under such circumstances that *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* won the Gold Medal in the 9th Henan Provincial Theatre Competition. It also won 14 national-level awards, including first place in the Wenhua Award and first prize in the Audience's Favourite Theatre at the Seventh China Art Festival. With this play, Li Shujian was awarded the Plum Performance Award for the second time in the 25th Plum Performance Award for Chinese Theatre Competition. The Xiqu film based on this play was also widely acclaimed and won the Best Foreign Language Xiqu Film Award at the 15th Los Angeles International Home Theatre Film Festival. The successful performance of *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* proved the vitality of The Second Troupe in the new era under the leadership of Li Shujian. He revived The Second Troupe, and The Second Troupe also provided him with a stage to display his talents in turn. These exceptional feats proved that Li Shujian is not only an excellent Yuju performer but also an outstanding troupe manager and leader.

Yuju belongs to the people of Henan, but also all the Chinese people. Only by performing and singing with sincerity can one gain the support and love of the people. Li Shujian, who had already produced works that were popular with Chinese audiences, had a third dream at this time: to perform and



■ Li Shujian led the troupe to perform *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* on Broadway in the United States in 2013.

sing Yuju outside of China. He has led Yuju to visit 28 countries and regions around the world, including ten trips to Taiwan, China for cultural exchanges and dissemination of Yuju, making significant contributions to the cultural interactions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. In 2008, *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* landed in Europe and was performed and sung in Italy and France. In 2009, *Qingfeng Pavilion*, which was adapted and improved from *Qingfeng Pavilion*, participated in the 4th Chinese Theatre Festival in France, and Li Shujian was awarded the title of "Best Male Actor." In 2013, *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* was performed on Broadway, the centre of American theatre, making Yuju the second Chinese Xiqu genre to enter Broadway, 83 years after Master Mei Lanfang's performance on Broadway in 1930. And in 2016, it was again performed in the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, the centre of world cinema. Initially, Li Shujian was worried whether the foreigners would be able to understand the style and language of Chinese Xiqu. He was afraid that it would be difficult for them to understand and accept the way Chinese Xiqu was performed. However, the warm applause from the audience and a series of positive feedback after the performance completely relieved his anxious heart. At the Royal Thai Theatre, 84 additional seats were added to accommodate the overflow audience. After the performance, hundreds of spectators crowded the stage to take photos with him. This taught him that art had no national borders, and that what belonged to one nation also belonged to the world. He integrated excellent Chinese traditions and spiritual values of the times into the repertoires of Yuju and conveyed them to audiences around the world

through exquisite performances and unique voice. This has enhanced the influence and self-confidence of the Chinese culture, and provided a dynamic vehicle for telling the Chinese story and singing the voice of China.

Li Shujian won many honors in performing arts, explored and articulated three performing methods in practice. The first was the perfect unity of characters, actors, and the audience. The second was the comprehensive application of classicism, realism, and romanticism. The third was the organic integration of the "spirit" of Jingju, the "reality" of drama, and the "flavor" of Yuju, thus forming a new performing style and system of Chinese Yuju. In terms of artistic creation, he always adhered to his unique aesthetic pursuit, interpreting the "loyalty, filial piety, chastity and righteousness" of the Chinese nation through four works: *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, *Qingfeng Pavilion*, *Su Wu Tending Sheep*, and *Righteousness Above the Clouds*. Such a creative idea of modernized interpretation of the traditional classic plays has formed his unique creation characteristics. He also had his style in characterization, singing and tunes. Compared with the heroines of the past, his portrayal of Cheng Ying, Zhang Yuanxiu, and other male characters added a bit of vigor and strength to Yuju. This addition marks the beginning of a new chapter in Yuju's portrayal of a fresh characterization of heroic characters while also reflecting the recent tragic beauty highlight. He also succeeded in externalizing characters' complex psychological outlook into stylized theatrical action, fusing the virtuality of traditional Chinese Xiqu with the realism of modern drama. This made it possible to depict the real, vivid imagery of the common heroes and to successfully integrate performance and experience. While shaping the characters, he was also adept at manifesting the spirit of the Chinese nation from his characters. He strived to rely on the charm of Chinese people's great benevolence and righteousness demonstrated by the protagonists to captivate and emotionally connect the audience at home and abroad. For example, in *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan*, he dealt with the role of Cheng Ying in an artistic way that differed from that of the original and the Jingju version. In the play, he portrayed the role of Cheng Ying in the form of the former Xusheng and the latter Laosheng, showing Cheng Ying's heroic spirit of sacrificing his own son to save the orphan, not caring about his own life and death, and defying the power and nobility, and reproducing Cheng Ying's noble character on the stage. Through the high integration of psychological experience and external stylized performances, the play *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* thus gained universal significance. The same goes for Zhang Yuanxiu in *Qingfeng Pavilion*, who transformed from a simple and benevolent poor man to a fierce and roaring "lion." In terms of singing, Li Shujian has improved the Laosheng singing style of Yuxi Tune based on his own characteristics, and formed the infectious Li School singing style. Owing to his admiration and fascination for Wang Ershun's singing, he felt compelled to investigate and sort out the traditional



■ Li Shujian played the role of Zhang Yuanxiu in the play *Qingfeng Pavilion*.

Yuxi Tune singing style. He learnt about the singing methods and techniques of using words, enunciating words, and the skills of Runqiang. Ultimately he formed the singing style characterized by both Wang Ershun's loud voice, wide vocal range, and mellow rhyme, and other Yuxi Tune masters'. This included using qi to support the voice, using sound to convey emotions, singing sadness with emotions, and using sadness to convey hatred. All of these made the Yuxi Tune, which was originally good at expressing twists and turns of emotions, appear even more solemn and desolate. Li Shujian was a master of creating songs that reflected the mood of the scene and the emotional shift of the characters. By doing so, he helped audiences both locally and internationally achieve spiritual communication through emotional resonance. For example, Li Shujian's singing in the final scene of *Su Wu Tending Sheep*, moved from being soft to high-pitched with ups and downs to symbolised the nation's energy. The audience was left feeling refreshed by the compact rhythm.

Over the years, Li Shujian has developed his own collection of first-hand knowledge about the principles governing the creation of Xiqu and the operation of the performance market. On Xiqu creation, Li Shujian notes that it should not be narrowly understood as an exclusive product of traditional culture, rather it should express its national spirit rooted in the times. The new historical plays such as *Cheng Ying Rescues the Orphan* which Li

Shujian skillfully adapted and created during his time in The Second Troupe, demonstrate his realization of new performances and adaptation of old plays in the creation of Yuju. On the operation of the performance market of Xiqu, he also formed his own unique insights, which can be summarized as the "three-three" model. The first is the "three-in-one" marketing strategy for Xiqu. The successful performance of a play cannot rely solely on the art troupe or academy acting as the principal performer; it also requires the necessary public opinion that comes from online promotion and economic support from well-known enterprises, to have a full range of protection. Secondly, a play should be viewed by three different kinds of audiences. For Yuju, although the rural audience is the main body, the urban and foreign audience significance cannot be ignored. They constitute the potential audience group and are crucial for its future development towards a wider stage. Thirdly, according to different target groups, a play should have three different ways of performing. The stages in rural areas are mostly simple, and the performances are often carried out on the stages set in the square or on the container truck. Besides, the audience group is very mixed, with both males and females, as well as young and old people. Furthermore, most performances take place in the noisy and bustling marketplace. So Li Shujian believes that the rural performances should be "hot" in order to adapt to the performing environment. In urban areas, there are special theatres for performances, and the audience is mostly from the intellectual class, so the performances have to be a bit more "reserved". On the international stage, he asserted, to convey the charm, content and information of Xiqu to foreign audiences, it is necessary to use body language and stylized performances as much as possible, and to achieve the exchange of ideas between actors and audiences with less singing and more performing and dancing. Meanwhile, after many years, Li Shujian has also summarized his exploration of the Xiqu market into four sentences: "Traveling thousands of hundreds of mountains and rivers to find the market, making thousands of hundreds of efforts to shape the image, producing high-quality products through thousands of hundreds of refinements, and thinking of thousands of hundreds of approaches to run into prosperity."

As a renowned contemporary Yuju master, Li Shujian has made remarkable contributions to the inheritance and dissemination of the art of Yuju, and has pushed it towards the youth, modernization and the world. We enter the era of Convergence Media, he actively welcomes and embraces new things, accurately captures the trend, and uses "Internet+Xiqu" to popularize and disseminate Yuju. He has synchronized the Xiqu performances on stage and in the backstage areas with the online live broadcasting that "has flown into thousands of homes," using online platforms as channels. This makes it more convenient and intuitive for ordinary people to watch the play, and strengthens the fashionable and realistic expression of traditional culture. Using cross-



■ The grand performance of *Qingfeng Pavilion* at the Centennial Lecture Hall of Peking University in 2017.

boundary communication means, he has brought the art of Xiqu closer to the audience and young people, and actively explored new ways to cultivate and expand the audience and market of Xiqu. At the same time, in order to promote the inheritance of the art of Yuju and the cultivation of a new generation of young performers, he has been actively promoting Yuju on campus. The " 'Ba , Da, Cang' Voice" is one of the Xiqu promotion activities elaborately created by Henan Li Shujian Xiqu Art Center, which has gone into Peking University, Tsinghua University, Zhengzhou University, Henan University, Fudan University, Wuhan University, Sun Yat-sen University and other institutions of higher learning. Through a series of activities themed on students' experiences, such as repertoire-sharing sessions, singing lessons, make-up lessons, and performance training, the students of the universities have the chance to "really listen, really see, and really feel", and experience and understand the charm of the art of Yuju.

In addition, to enrich and integrate the theory of Yuju, Henan Li Shujian Xiqu Art Center has invited many famous masters to write a series of *Chinese Yuju*. This is the first large-scale series of books that has comprehensively introduced Yuju in the history of its development. It has provided a more expansive introduction to Yuju from the dimensions of history, director, performance, music, repertoire, stage art, etc. Since there is no known published book series on Yuju, this is a significant scholarly work that closes a theoretical gap. With a strong

sense of responsibility and mission, Li Shujian has left a scientific, accurate, comprehensive and systematic reference document for Yuju's research and heritage for future generations.

The dreams of the three stages during the performing career has always inspired Li Shujian to be strict with himself. After steadily honing his acting and singing skills, he at last accomplished the astounding journey from a rural cattle herder to winning the "Plum Performance Award" of Chinese theatre twice. For Yuju, he is not only an outstanding contemporary performing master, but also a new era inheritor and international disseminator of it with artistic sentiment. He has proved the possibility of Yuju going on the international stage, explored the path of using Yuju as a carrier to broaden the international dissemination of the Chinese national spirit, and played an important role in building cultural confidence and assisting the construction of a culturally strong country.

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## Henan Yuju Theatre The Third Troupe and Its Management

WANG Luyao

Taking Chinese Yuju as a point of focus, I will inevitably examine the artistic characteristics and the operation mode of Henan Yuju Theatre The Third Troupe (simply referred to as The Third Troupe for short), which is one of the representative troupes of Yuju.



■ Yang Lanchun (1920–2009), the playwright and director of the modern Yuju classic *Chaoyang Valley*, is known as the "Father of *Chaoyang Valley*."

### 1. A Highly Cohesive Art Group

The predecessor of The Third Troupe was the Henan Provincial Opera Troupe, established in 1952 with only one purpose: to express real life in an artistic form that was popular among the masses. The majority of the personnel of the troupe came from various song and dance ensembles of various places. Before these new literary and artistic workers entered The Third Troupe, they had no foundation of Yuju at all and even discriminated against Xiqu. During the era

■ This is an old photograph treasured by the Henan Yuju Theatre The Third Troupe. It was taken on January 1, 1964, and captures the troupe's performers performing the Yuju *Chaoyang Valley* for central government leaders at the Huiren Hall in Zhongnanhai.



■ Stills from the Yuju film *Chaoyang Valley*, 1963.

of war, they were not only the propagandists of the troops, but were also the soldiers. They got together to create and practice modern theatre, which is how this art form of Yuju emerged from scratch. Their incredibly strong comradeship allowed them to overcome every challenge that arose during this time. The Third Troupe's first-generation members, including Yang Lanchun, Wang Jixiao, Liang Sihui, Liu Lanfang, Wang Shanpu, and others firmly believed that this troupe was a collective, and that it was not like the state-owned troupes that had been restructured from traditional Xiqu troupes. It was not managed by the main actors, but rather run democratically. Its creation mechanism ensured individual choices would not influence the entire troupe, and actors were assigned their roles according to the needs of the play. This collective decision was also fair. The actors who took the leading roles in one play may become background actors in another, singing chorus and moving props, regardless of primary or secondary roles or factions.

The independently created and rehearsed *Chaoyang Valley* by The Third Troupe received the attention of national leaders as soon as it debuted. It premiered on March 20, 1958, and a month later it was performed for Zhou Enlai and other leaders of the CPC Central Committee in the auditorium of the Military District of Henan Province. In the summer of the same year, it was invited to Beijing

to participate in the National Exhibition of Modern Xiqu Themes, and *People's Daily* and other mainstream media published commentaries on it. In 1963, it was made into a Xiqu art film, the release of which not only preserved the precious image records but also increased and enlarged the dissemination of this work. On the evening of December 31 of the same year, it was performed to Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, and other central leaders at Zhongnanhai and was highly praised. Looking back at *Chaoyang Valley* performance history, it clear that the troupe has always received support from the government's administrative forces.

## 2. To Establish a Complete Set of Yuju Modern Play Creation Team

In 1952, the Henan Provincial Opera Troupe was established. It absorbed many excellent new literary and artistic workers to co-complete the creation of Yuju modern plays. The most notable aspect of *Chaoyang Valley*'s foundational work in this field was the establishment of a full Yuju modern play creation team, whose creation style was known as "The Third Troupe School" in the theatre industry. They not only insisted on rehearsing modern plays themselves but also provided valuable experience for other troupes in Henan Province to perform modern plays, and have always carried the banner of modern play creation in China steadfastly. This creation team could be divided into four directions: director, music designer, choreographer, and actor.

This creation team was composed of the first generation of participants from The Third Troupe. Over the course of three decades, its overall style has been consistent, with a core focus on establishing a close connection with the masses, especially the peasants, leading to representative works that have a strong and long-lasting flavor of "human touch." Yang Lanchun has pointed out that the success of *Chaoyang Valley* lies in the fact that "although the setting is about the 'Great Leap Forward', it has been preserved to this day because it is written about and acted with 'human touch'."<sup>1</sup> Gao Jie, who played the role of "the mother of Shuanbao", believed that the play's characters "subjective consciousness" differed from that of the rural women in previous

1 侯舒文：《豫剧三团培养了我——张平访谈》，李利宏、汪荃珍主编《口述三团》，河南人民出版社，2012年，第69页。[Hou Shuwen, *Yuju Troupe The Third Troupe Has Cultivated Me: An Interview with Zhang Ping*, edited by Li Lihong and Wang Quanzhen, *Oral Description of the Yuju Troupe The Third Troupe*, Henan People's Publishing House, 2012, p. 69.]

Xiqu works. This is because the performers, through visits, life experiences and performances in the countryside with their plays annually, became aware of the primary source of happiness of the peasants since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). "The deeper significance of the heartfelt joy of the peasants, represented by her (the mother of Shuanbao), as a result of the great changes in the countryside, and their infinite confidence in the future of their lives lies in the fact that they were engaged in the change of the old environment in the attitude of masters and builders."<sup>1</sup>

Yang Lanchun, the core figure of The Third Troupe, was not only the helmsman of the troupe as they navigated the ocean of art but also the founder of Yuju modern plays. Chinese Xiqu theorists such as Zhang Geng and Guo Hancheng has developed a long-lasting friendship with him because of Xiqu. "He is an artistic genius from the countryside, and is shaped by our Chinese national and folk culture. He has applied such talent to his scripts and directorial work, achieving great success."<sup>2</sup> "Lanchun appreciates life and is familiar with it; he never looks at it with disdain or brag about it like a peddler. As a result, his works have distinct tendencies, are authentic and rich in content, and exhibit China's traditional national aesthetic traits."<sup>3</sup>

This complete set of Yuju modern play creation team is unique to The Third Troupe. Although they have experienced several failure in their explorations, their hearts are united. Through several performances, they formed a high degree of tacit understanding, and worked together to create the "golden age" of the troupe. As the 1980s approached, their creation team gradually lost the original spirit they once possessed. They invited masters from all over the country, whose artistic attainments far exceeded those of the troupe's first generation members to join them. However, there was a fatal problem with the new creation mechanism: even with their high intelligence, these experts who held the discourse of national artistic creation could not quickly integrate into a

1 贺宝林：《我与豫剧现代戏一起成长——高洁访谈》，李利宏、汪荃珍主编《口述三团》，河南人民出版社，2012年，第85页。[He Baolin, *Growing up with Yuju Modern Plays: An Interview with Gao Jie*, edited by Li Lihong and Wang Quanzhen, *Oral Description of the Yuju Troupe The Third Troupe*, Henan People's Publishing House, 2012, p. 85.]

2 张庚：《杨兰春编导艺术论（序言）》，王鸿玉主编《杨兰春编导艺术论》，中国戏剧出版社，1993年，第2页。[Zhang Geng, *On the Art of Yang Lanchun's Choreography and Direction* (Preface), edited by Wang Hongyu, *On the Art of Yang Lanchun's Choreography and Direction*, Chinese Theatre Publishing House, 1993, p. 2.]

3 郭汉城：《杨兰春剧作自选集（序言）》，杨兰春著《杨兰春剧作自选集》，中国戏剧出版社，1993年，第2页。[Guo Hancheng, *Selected Works of Yang Lanchun* (Preface), by Yang Lanchun, *Selected Works of Yang Lanchun*, Chinese Theatre Publishing House, 1993, p. 2.]

theatre genre. Because it is difficult for a person to master a theatre genre over his or her lifetime, especially the music of the genre. Another alarming concern was the "aphasia" of theatre critics. A simple and easy-to-understand truth became a forbidden point for them to comment. The creation mechanism of profit maximization erased the original intention of Yuju modern plays to "write plays for the people," resulting in no one watching and the absence of classic plays like *Chaoyang Valley*. Such a problem was not only found in the creation of Yuju modern plays, but was also common in many theatre genres. "Some of the so-called 'creation' was to find famous artists everywhere to create plays. However, these well-known artists are ignorant of local theatre genres and local customs. They created a few 'Da Lu plays (common plays)' that were out of touch with the local atmosphere, especially those without local language characteristics and unique lifestyle. Subsequently, they would present gorgeous and dazzling displays with lighting, scenery and stage presentation. Ultimately, these genres became increasingly 'dim' on the road to success. If a local theatre genre is detached from the local reality and the local audience, it will mostly fail in achieving a cross-border and groundbreaking success."<sup>1</sup>

### 3. The Theatrical Concept of Drawing on the Strengths of Many Others

During the rehearsal of *Liu Hulan* in 1955, experts, scholars and audiences have all pointed out that its biggest problem was the lack of inheritance of the tradition of Yuju. With this perspective in mind, The Third Troupe decided to study both Chinese and Western arts, forming the theatrical concept that leveraged on the strengths of many others.

To begin with, The Third Troupe insisted on learning from Western theatre theory, with Stanislavski's directing system serving as the troupe's guiding theory for performances. The performances of The Third Troupe differ from the traditional style of the classical plays of The First Troupe and The Second Troupe. Under Yang Lanchun's leadership, many actors practiced the principle of "from real life to 'real life' on the stage." "The performances of the actors in The Third Troupe are deeply influenced by the Russian Stanislavski's acting

1 陈彦：《国内外戏曲专家为戏曲保护、传承、发展献计献策》，《中国社会科学报》，2023年2月27日。[Chen Yan, *Domestic and Foreign Xiqu Experts Provide Suggestions for the Protection, Inheritance, and Development of Xiqu*, Chinese Social Sciences Today, February 27, 2023.]

technique and are relatively close to modern drama.— everything in The Third Troupe is new. Although they also learn from ancient-costume plays, the most important thing is they inherited the dramatic style—Yinghuan and Shuanbao in *Chaoyang Valley* are different from Yang Zirong and Li Yuhe in *Jingju*. Although all of them are modern plays, *Chaoyang Valley* is characterized with more life flavor."<sup>1</sup> Yang Lanchun believed that the biggest difference between modern and classical plays lay in the portrayal of real situations. For modern plays, the characters and events presented resonated with the audience. It would be difficult for the audience to immerse themselves in the viewing experience if



■ A still from *Liu Hulan*, 1955.

they were not real. Based on this understanding, he has always regarded the characters' experience as the primary criterion for rehearsal. Every year, The Third Troupe had to spend three months living and experiencing life in the rural areas. Their frequent trips to the countryside to work with farmers influence *Chaoyang Valley*'s idyllic character, which was relaxed and natural. In addition to Stanislavski's theatre theory, The Third Troupe also sent their actors to professional institutions such as the Central National Opera House and the Shanghai Vocal Music Research Institute to learn and practice Western art. Throughout their development journey, these new performers explored how to preserve the fine traditions of classical Xiqu by utilizing the knowledge of Western composition methods, Western instruments, and bel canto singing. A variety of singing techniques were utilized in the vocal music of *Chaoyang Valley*. The composer created new singing melodies and background music, and used a variety of composing methods such as counter-tone and modulation in the singing of the actors. The music of this play gives people a rich, three-dimensional, and novel aesthetic feeling. Yang Lanchun has summarized the creations of The Third Troupe in terms of music creation for modern plays in four points: the utilization of chorus, the innovation of the

1 金涛：《豫剧与斯坦尼表演体系—访河南豫剧院艺术总监、导演张平》，《中国艺术报》，2014年7月28日。[Jin Tao, *Yuju and Stanislavski's Acting System: An Interview with Zhang Ping, Artistic Director and Director of Henan Yuju Theatre*, China Art Daily, July 28, 2014.]

single mode of Yuju by the modern composition methods, the daily lifelike dialogues being composed as duets, trios and so on, and the combination of singing with other means of expressions like the theatre. All these creations are practical experiences gained through extensive study of Western art theories.

Secondly, The Third Troupe studied traditional Yuju in great details and took notes from it. Going from not knowing anything about Yuju to being proficient composers of Yuju, music designers such as Wang Jixiao and Liang Sihui did not only put in a lot of efforts themselves, but they picked up many techniques from the older-generation of Yuju artists. In Kaifeng, Luoyang, Shangqiu, Zhengzhou, and other places, they "were exposed to a lot of Henan local Xiqu arts in one place after another of ground stalls, roundhouses, mat-sheds, teahouses and theatres."<sup>1</sup> These music designers dedicated their entire lives to the learning of traditional Xiqu. They visited various troupes of different regional Xiqu genres in Henan Province, collected and organized precious Xiqu records and notated their descriptions. They then used this information to study and publish Yuju scores, analyze the modern singing style of Yuju and publish a collection of it, laying a solid foundation for subsequent Yuju music creations. The music of *Chaoyang Valley* showcases not only a strong style of Yuju, but also distinctive singing styles from different genres to create distinct characters. To put it simply, the play's arias struck a balance between modernity and tradition through their musical inheritance, having both the feeling of singing and the distinct flavor of Bangzi. During the rehearsal of *Xiao Er Hei's Marriage* (Yang Lanchun proposed learning from the older-generation Yuju artists. He invited "huadan" (young female characters) renowned for their exceptional body movements from both the First and Second Troupes. This allowed The Third Troupe to understudy these teachers and acquire the performing style for *Picking Up the Jade Bracelet*. Yang Lanchun instructed Liu Lanfang, who played the role of Xiaoqin: "After they have performed it once, you follow and learn from them. After they have made it for you, make it stereotypical, and reproduce every movement well, like a photo." The actors understood and recognized the director's guidelines, "Yang Lanchun did not copy as it was, but accepted critically. He did not use all of the traditional theatrical stylized movements...but rather whatever was suitable for the plots or the characters...We originally rehearsed it very lifelike, but later improved its aesthetics through theatricalized means,

1 王基笑：《朝阳沟好地方：豫剧唱腔 116 首解析》，人民音乐出版社，1999 年，第 660 页。[Wang Jixiao, *A Good Place Chaoyang Valley: Analysis of the Singing of 116 Yuju Plays*, People's Music Publishing House, 1999, p.600.]

which proved to be very popular to perform in the rural areas."<sup>1</sup> Learning from the traditional Yuju is not only a crucial factor for the play to become a reserved repertoire of Yuju modern play, but also a creation principle that must be observed when traditional Xiqu moves forward. Performers such as Gao Jie, Ma Lin, Wei Yun, and Liu Lanfang all learn from famous artists of major genres according to their own characteristics. They do not only learn singing, but also study all aspects of the "four skills and five methods".

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1 赵培强：《学好民族艺术，反映现代生活——柳兰芳访谈》，李利宏、汪荃珍主编《口述三团》，河南人民出版社，2012 年，第 120-121 页。[Zhao Peiqiang, *Learning National Art Well and Reflecting Modern Life: An Interview with Liu Lanfang*, edited by Li Lihong and Wang Quanzhen, Oral Description of the Yuju Troupe The Third Troupe, Henan People's Publishing House, 2012, pp. 120-121.]

## The Chinese Premiere of the Drama *Les Misérables* – A Discussion on the Translation of the Chinese Script

NING Chunyan

2024 marks the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France. The anniversary coincided with the Chinese premiere of Victor Hugo's stage play *Les Misérables* at the Poly Theatre in Beijing. This large-scale production is a collaboration between the Beijing Magnificent Culture Yanghua Co., Ltd. (abbreviated as Yanghua Theatre) and Le Théâtre National Populaire (TNP). The production featured National Theatre of China actor Liu Ye in the lead role, was directed by French director Jean Bellorini, and had a cast of 16 Chinese actors and musicians. In the first half of the year, the play toured 16 cities across the country and will perform at TNP-Villeurbanne in Lyon, France, in early November 2024. The 2024 tour spans 17 cities in both China and France, totaling 39 performances.

I was invited by Yanghua Theatre to translate the script for *Les Misérables* and served as the primary translator during rehearsals, as well as the assistant to the French director. A month after the project launched in March 2023, I completed the translation of the adaptation by Hugo's son, Charles Hugo, and Paul Meurice, the version initially selected by the production team. When the play premiered in Paris in 1878, Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was still alive. The script features around 50 named characters, and the Chinese translation consists of approximately 50,000 words. While the storyline is compelling, its format resembles that of a television series script.

In early April, while submitting my translation to Yanghua Theatre, I happened to be in Paris and hoped to meet with director Jean Bellorini to gain insight into his directorial intentions; unfortunately, we could not meet. In mid-June, just three weeks before the first rehearsal in Beijing, I received a new version of the script from Mathieu Coblentz (Bellorini's collaborator). During the intense

translation process, I realized that this was the true text of Hugo, closely capturing the essence of the novel. The format of the script is akin to that of a lengthy novel. By the end of July, during the initial rehearsals, the director and Mathieu added subheadings resembling chapter titles, with 29 chapters in the first volume and 33 in the second. This new script aligns more closely with Bellorini's creative style and retains the literary quality of Hugo's work, posing a significant challenge for the actors: over a dozen performers alternately serve as narrators, transforming into the characters as they tell the story.

My initial draft of the translation was gradually revised during the first stage of rehearsals in July; it was refined in collaboration with the actors. The goal was to remain faithful to the original text while ensuring the language was elegant and melodious, allowing the lines to be easily delivered and immediately understood by the audience. My guiding principle in drama translation for many years has always been constantly refining and seeking lively, vivid dialogue aimed at providing the director and actors with a seamless connection to the original work. I was fortunate to work with outstanding actors like Liu Ye, allowing Hugo's literary legacy to come alive through their performances!

This adaptation selectively compiles and collages the original text without rewriting a single line, aiming to preserve the essence of Hugo's literary language. It is predominantly narrative in style, resembling a lengthy novel, with only a small amount of dialogue interspersed. The script does not include a character list at the beginning but features over 30 characters. The completed translation totals approximately 40,000 words. During the initial rehearsals, each paragraph was assigned to the actors, creating a dynamic akin to a choir with divided parts or a poetry recitation featuring both solo and group readings. The final performance lasts three and a half hours, which presents a significant challenge for Chinese audiences. Furthermore, the play feels more like a grand literary work, giving the audience the impression that they are collectively



■ Poster for Yanghua Theatre's production *Les Misérables*

reading Hugo's novel in the theater alongside their neighbors.

The first volume chronicles the legendary journey of Jean Valjean, who, after being sentenced to 19 years of hard labor and subsequently released, is transformed into "an honest man" by the Bishop's kindness. As mayor, he guides the community toward prosperity and rescues Fantine and her daughter, Cosette. His mental journey during the events in Champmathieu is nothing short of a thrilling intellectual/thinking storm. The second volume presents the 1832 Paris uprising through Valjean's eyes, highlighting the poignant street battles involving characters like Marius, Éponine, and Gavroche.

Before its Beijing premiere, *Les Misérables* was first previewed at the Suzhou Bay Grand Theatre on January 19-20, 2024, where it received a warm welcome from the audiences. Many friends from Shanghai drove two hours specifically to attend the show. Young viewers took to social media platforms like WeChat, Xiaohongshu (Small Redbook), and Douyin (TikTok) to share their impressions, highlighting the novelty of the experience, with several audience members moved to tears. However, some expressed disappointment that they did not witness a grand spectacle but rather a captivating reading performance by the actors, akin to an audiobook.

Fortunately, the official premiere in Beijing on January 27, a week later, garnered unanimous praise from the audience, including theater professionals and French residents in the capital. This day also marked the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France. After the performance, an internal gathering was held for the cast and the French Embassy in China, where the embassy praised Bellorini's direction, set design, lighting, and music.

Following the Beijing premiere, the production coincided with the traditional Chinese holiday of Spring Festival, resulting in a relative hiatus in performances throughout February. In early March, *Les Misérables* moved to the Shanghai Grand Theatre, launching a three-month tour across 16 cities in China. The Shanghai performance received acclaim from both theater professionals and a wide audience, reflecting the success of the Beijing premiere. During this period, a seminar was held at the Shanghai Theatre Academy that featured many experts offering insightful analyses of the production.

Notably, the Shanghai performance was initially expected to include French subtitles, similar to those in Beijing. However, due to the smaller number of French audience members in Shanghai, subtitles were ultimately not provided, which did not impede their understanding or appreciation of the show. Mr. Pierre Pinhas, president of Association la Scène France-Chine, shared his thoughts on the experience:



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

"It was a performance unlike anything seen in China before. There was no melodrama, no shocking stage effects, not even epic realism in the performances, nor high-tech elements like video projections. For more than three hours, the audience of about a thousand remained fully engaged, with no one taking out their phones and no one leaving midway. In my seven years of watching performances in Chinese theaters, this was truly a first."

Mr. Pinhas commended director Jean Bellorini for breaking conventions, respecting the original novel, and presenting a dramatic work that captures the essence of the book. This stands in stark contrast to the current trend of arbitrary adaptations that distort, betray, or diverge from the author's original intent.

Pinhas noted that the play is infused with the charm of linguistic artistry and directorial finesse. This indicates that the actors transitioned seamlessly between narrator and character, while Jean Bellorini's set design was both minimalist and grand, with lighting that boasts strong symbolic forms and a sculptural quality, creating a striking contrast against the overall dim scenery. "During the performance, one gradually discovers halos that either overlap in various forms or isolate particular characters. These halos reveal the non-material aspects of the characters' souls: cast into the abyss of suffering by the harsh realities of life, they represent the only hope for those struggling—

collective hope in *Les Misérables*, which resonates with us as well," Pinhas reflected. He explained further, "The characters in *Les Misérables* are reflections of ourselves; they move us to tears, whether slightly or profoundly. Jean Bellorini does not allow us to escape these emotions; he has sanctified Fantine, Gavroche, and Éponine."

Mr. Pinhas's review resonates closely with Professor Lu Ang's reflections from the Shanghai Theatre Academy:

"Through an integrated narrative structure, *Les Misérables* presents the vast content of Victor Hugo's 1.2 million-word masterpiece on stage in a panoramic manner over 210 minutes. It fully utilizes the stage's potential, employing an exceptionally refined, minimalist, and clear approach to poetically depict the loves, hates, and conflicts of numerous characters, including Jean Valjean, Fantine, Cosette, Marius, and the Bishop. The portrayal of the struggles between good and evil in human nature under intense circumstances is particularly poignant, making these dilemmas both dynamic and moving. Notably, the performance extensively quotes Hugo's original text, rich in detailed psychological insights, vividly illustrating the complex mental activities and desires of the characters in specific situations. This continually evokes audience empathy and reflection on the events



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

and actions of the characters, prompting deep contemplation. This innovative narrative method and structure offer valuable insights, expanding the temporal and spatial dimensions of the stage while also delving deeply into the characters' souls to uncover the underlying motivations."

I'm delighted to see audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds embracing this performance. Participating in the entire creative rehearsal process and collaborating with exceptional artists like Bellorini and Liu Ye has truly been a privilege! While I have translated works by 17th-century Molière and 18th-century Marivaux, as well as several 20th-century French playwrights, I had never tackled a 19th-century French author—until now, with Hugo! I felt a profound responsibility to capture the depth and grandeur of the master's literary style in my Chinese translation. Director Bellorini's meticulous respect for the original language transformed me into a kind of spokesperson for Hugo. During rehearsals, when the actors wanted to adjust certain lines, they would consult me. After carefully referencing the original text, I ultimately made decisions in collaboration with the director.

Additionally, I served as the rehearsal translator, quickly and accurately conveying the director's intentions, particularly regarding the actors' performance guidance, including clarity of line delivery, emphasis on tone, coordination with the music, and staging. This role positioned me as a conduit for the director's vision. When translating the director's requests, I often unconsciously articulated the correct pronunciation and tonal emphasis of the lines, a habit developed from my years of acting and teaching dialogue.

In rehearsal, I employed professional terminology familiar to the actors to facilitate a quick grasp of the director's intent; when people didn't notice my presence, it indicated the smoothness of the translation. Just as this translation aims to eliminate the "foreign accent" typical of overseas plays while maintaining the poetic beauty of the novel's written language, it also strives for a grounded localization. This applies to the translation of song lyrics as well as character names. For instance, the street urchin "Gavroche" is consistently rendered in my version as "Ga Luoshi," rather than "Ga Fuluoshi." I adhered to principles of transliteration that align closely with French pronunciation while also considering that Chinese names typically consist of three characters, aiming to avoid awkward pronunciations during stage performance. In selecting the Chinese names, I referenced three published translations of *Les Misérables*: one by Li Dan and Fang Yu from the 1980s, another by Pan Lizhen (2010), and a third by Li Yumin (2018). I also consulted the Shanghai Film Studio's 1978 dubbed version of *Les Misérables* (1958, starring Jean Gabin).

When translating the narrative language and dialogue, just like with character names, I focused on accurately conveying the original meaning while ensuring the language was concise, straightforward, and easy to recite, in line with contemporary Chinese expression. The goal was to use localized, accessible language that avoids rigid and awkward phrasing. In capturing rhythm and tone, I aimed to stay current. These translation principles were familiar to me, thanks to my experience with various works from different eras. The challenging aspect was likely translating the rhymed verses, which required precision and conciseness while ensuring fluidity and rhyme.

For example, in the first act of the play, there is a poem I titled "Fantine's Poem," which appears in the first volume as a reflection of Fantine sharing her unfortunate past with Madame Thenardier. This poem is not taken from Hugo's novel but is rather a significant excerpt from *A Villequier, Les Contemplations, IV PAUCA MEAE, XV*. Additionally, in the second act, there is a song we called "Paris Trembles," originally titled "Le Sacre" in French, taken from Hugo's poetry collection *The Punishments (Les Châtiments, V-I)*. In translating these two poems, I strived for conciseness and attention to rhythm, aiming to adhere to the traditional forms of Chinese poetry, such as five- and seven-character lines, ensuring clarity of meaning while recreating the poetic essence and evoking the desired imagery.

On March 3, 2024, the China Drama Research Center at Shanghai Theatre Academy, the Shanghai Script Creation Center, and the Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* production team jointly held a seminar on *Les Misérables*. Over 30 scholars and critics from Shanghai, Nanjing, and Zhejiang participated in



■ Paris tremble, ô douleur, ô misère!



■ Jean Bellorini, Ning Chunyan and Liu Ye

a multi-dimensional and in-depth discussion of this Sino-French collaborative drama. Editors and reporters from various media outlets, including Shanghai's *Wenhui Bao*, *Jiefang Daily*, *Shanghai Theatre*, and *The Paper*, attended the event and offered widespread praise for the production. Here is an excerpt from the remarks of art critic Fang Jiajun:

"Within the constraints of the theatrical stage, the Chinese version of *Les Misérables* preserves the integrity of the story while delivering a strong dramatic impact. This achievement is due to the screenwriter and director's deep understanding of the literary original and theatrical staging, enabling them to make insightful choices and creative adaptations. The three-and-a-half-hour performance showcased the talents of both the screenwriter and director. I particularly appreciated the Chinese translation of the French script. The dialogue is crafted with precision and care, highlighting the poetic qualities and aesthetic appeal of the language. This results in a dense flow of lines that are both smooth and rhythmic, creating a charm that harmonizes

literary and performative aspects. The emotional resonance is distinctly 'Chinese,' reflecting how Chinese audiences engage with language and adhering to fundamental principles of aesthetic appreciation. Throughout the performance, audiences were not overwhelmed by a barrage of awkward, foreign-sounding phrases. The rising tide of language and the wave of pathos created a truly remarkable dramatic effect."

The Chinese stage adaptation of *Les Misérables*, marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France, launched in early 2024. As this article goes to print, the cast of the Yanghua Theatre team is preparing for performances in France. Wishing them great success in their upcoming shows!

NING CHUNYAN  
Professor at Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts

Thanks for Yanghua Theatre giving all photos copyright.

## Interview on the Creation of the Stage Adaptation of *Les Misérables* in China

Jean BELLORINI & NING Chunyan

**Ning:** Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Chinese audiences are quite familiar with your work; in 2014, you brought your directorial production *La Bonne Ame du Se-Tchuang*<sup>1</sup> to the Beijing People's Art Theatre<sup>1</sup>, one of the most prestigious national theaters in mainland China, established in 1952 as the first public theater of the new China. In 2019, you presented *Liliom* at both the Beijing People's Art Theatre and the Harbin Grand Theatre. This time, you were invited by Yanghua Theatre<sup>2</sup>, a private theater company founded in 2008 by artistic director Wang Keran. How has your understanding of China evolved since your previous visits? Can you share how *Les Misérables* came to you?

**Bellorini:** No problem, mei wen ti (laughs, speaking in Chinese). My previous visits left me with a very positive impression of China; I sensed a vibrant atmosphere everywhere, and the audiences were incredibly friendly. During those trips, I only had brief stays, mostly interacting with the technical staff at the theater, without engaging deeply with the creative side of Chinese theater. This time, however, it's a genuine collaborative effort. Yanghua Theatre is one of the few professional private theater companies in China, boasting top-tier production standards and a fantastic creative environment. Mr. Wang Keran, the artistic director, saw my play *Un instant* at the Printemps des comédiens festival in Montpellier in 2018 and appreciated it greatly. In 2021, Yanghua Theatre reached out to invite me to direct *Les Misérables*. I'm particularly

<sup>1</sup> One of the most prestigious national theatres in mainland China, it was the first public theatre established in the new China in 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 2008, this private theatre company was established by artistic director Wang Keran, who is also a theatre director.



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

grateful to producer Anaïs Martane<sup>1</sup>, who laid much of the groundwork for my visit during the pandemic. Her extensive experience in Sino-French cultural exchanges is invaluable for fostering collaboration between the Chinese and French teams.

**Ning:** Anaïs's husband, Liu Ye, is the lead actor in this production. I understand that when Yanghua Theatre announced the Chinese version of *Les Misérables* in early 2021, Liu Ye actively expressed his desire to play the role of Jean Valjean. He is a highly regarded actor in mainland China, having starred in numerous films and won three Best Actor awards. Although he is affiliated with the National Theatre of China, he hasn't performed in a stage play for over a decade. Since you have never directed Chinese actors before, what were your thoughts before your arrival?

**Bellorini:** Before I arrived in China for the initial rehearsals in July 2023, I was a bit concerned that Liu Ye might appear too young for the role of Jean Valjean, as he looked very handsome in photos. However, he proved to be an excellent fit for the character, especially during the second phase of rehearsals. When I returned to China in December 2023, I was pleasantly surprised by Liu Ye's deep understanding and interpretation of the role. Given the significant international events of that fall, I believe that, as a perceptive actor from a

multicultural marriage background, he sensed the social responsibility inherent in the drama. Liu Ye infused his portrayal of Jean Valjean with his personal experiences and depth. He is a truly exceptional actor with world-class talent, free of the pretensions often associated with big stars. He is a natural leader among the cast, and we are incredibly fortunate to have him in our production.

**Ning:** In 2009, you directed *Tempête sous un crâne*, based on Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which received enthusiastic acclaim from audiences at the Théâtre du Soleil in France. It was Arianne Mnouchkine who supported you and she saw the play and loved it very much. How does the *Les Misérables* you are creating in China differ from *Tempête sous un crâne*?

**Bellorini:** They are completely different. In 2009, we performed in a small theater with fewer than 200 seats at the Théâtre du Soleil, with significantly fewer actors. I retained some directorial techniques, such as having the actors serve both as storytellers and as characters. However, Yanghua Theatre's production is designed for a large stage. I saw *Dream Like a Dream*<sup>1</sup>, directed by Stan Lai, performed at the Beijing Poly Theatre, which has over 1,000 seats, and the scale of the stage was impressive. The cities where *Les Misérables* will tour in China are all large theaters, with around 1,000 seats, as part of the Poly Theatre network. Creating a production for such expansive venues with intricate stage designs and performances requires a completely new directorial approach. Additionally, much of the music in this production was spontaneously created in collaboration with the cast during the rehearsals in China. Most importantly, the script is entirely new; I worked with Mathieu Coblentz on a fresh adaptation that expands the storyline and introduces more characters.

**Ning:** Yes, I'm well aware. As the rehearsals were wrapping up at the end of July, you and Mathieu were still making adjustments to Jean Valjean's lines in the script. I heard that Mathieu played Marius in *Tempête sous un crâne* at the Théâtre du Soleil, where he was your actor. How do you choose your collaborators, like Mathieu and costume designer Macha Makeieff<sup>2</sup>? Véronique Chazal, the set designer, and Sébastien Trouvé, the sound designer, are also long-time partners of yours. Their collaboration with the Yanghua Theatre team in China has gone smoothly, and everyone thinks your French team is fantastic!

<sup>1</sup> Anaïs Martane graduated from the Chinese department of INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales) and is of French-Jewish descent.

<sup>1</sup> *Dream Like a Dream* is a renowned play by Taiwanese playwright and director Stan Lai, with a runtime of six hours.

<sup>2</sup> French director, playwright, and set/costume designer. She served as the president of the Théâtre National de Marseille La Crié from 2011 to 2022.

**Bellorini:** We think the Yanghua Theatre team is fantastic too! We're like one big family now, with no distinction between French and Chinese. We are all part of *Les Misérables*. Mathieu and I were once classmates at L'École Claude Mathieu in Paris. He is a very serious and humble person, making him a rare collaborator. Macha is a talented director and my senior; she is also a uniquely nuanced costume designer. I frequently invite her to design costumes for my productions, and she often asks me to do the lighting for her plays. Véronique and Sébastien have collaborated with me on many projects as well. These are people I've met through various theatrical endeavors, and our shared understanding and appreciation have drawn us together. A director needs a well-coordinated team to realize their vision—not just skilled and talented individuals, but also people with good character and shared interests.

**Ning:** Friends in the Chinese theater community admire your versatility. When did you decide to pursue a career in theater?

**Bellorini:** When I was in middle school, around the age of 11 or 12, I realized during a drama class that standing on stage and performing had a magical power over the audience. From that moment, I knew I wanted to work in theater. Both of my parents are doctors, and no one in my family is involved in theater. However, I was deeply influenced by my grandmother, a pianist. I received piano training from her at a young age, which instilled in me a strong affinity for music.

**Ning:** That explains why music plays such a crucial role in your directorial work. How do you approach the relationship between music and drama? For instance, did you have the seeds of the music in mind when adapting the script for this production? You mentioned to the Chinese actors in rehearsals, "In our performance, every time the music appears, it represents a moment of suspended time for the characters..."

**Bellorini:** When I read the original novel, I could distinctly feel the rhythm of the music. During the preparation for this project, Yanghua Theatre initially intended to use a script adapted by Hugo's son. However, I found it unsuitable because it presented the plot of *Les Misérables* in a mechanical way, lacking the lyrical quality and charm of the original text. Therefore, the version we are currently rehearsing involves selecting passages from Hugo's novel that maintain a clear narrative while also preserving the lyrical sections that reflect the characters' thoughts and the author's attitude. We constructed the script by balancing these two elements. The poetic and lyrical parts created space for musical development during rehearsals, resulting in each character having their own musical theme. The actors must play the role of storytellers while also



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

transforming into their characters, seamlessly transitioning between the two to convey the story, the author's perspective, and the emotions to the audience—all of which heavily rely on the music.

**Ning:** You mentioned in rehearsals that the text, music, and lighting are the three core elements of your direction for *Les Misérables*. You have great respect for Hugo's text. How did you conceptualize the music? Why did you decide to have the accordionist and drummer on stage, integrating them into the performance?

**Bellorini:** In this play, music is not merely a label; it is deeply woven into the fabric of the piece. I have a strong aversion to the notion of "not enough drama, just add music" in France. Here, the music aligns seamlessly with the actors' breathing and heartbeat, always complementing the text. Alongside four or five main themes and songs, we also incorporate many ambient sounds to enhance the environment. The accordion, in particular, is a beloved instrument among Parisians and a staple of French chanson. To portray the street battles of Paris in 1832 in the second half of *Les Misérables*, the accordion's timbre captures the revolutionary spirit of the uprising. Thus, during the later stages of

rehearsals in July, we had all the actors practice a few chords on the accordion. Yanghua Theatre's musician, Erica (Chen Minhua), not only plays the piano but is also well-versed in the accordion. As soon as I arrived in Beijing, I decided there would be a fixed piano on stage and a movable accordion. Erica naturally found her place in the actors' performance space during rehearsals while holding the accordion—this wasn't specified; it developed organically. When the chorus of revolutionaries sang "Paris Tremble," she stood in the front row with the accordion, joining the actors in the song, all of which was improvised during rehearsals. The drummer, Zhang Ruijia, initially struggled to coordinate with the actors' performances, as he was used to playing jazz in bars and had never been part of a stage production. Fortunately, he eventually found his rhythm and mastered the entire piece.

**Ning:** Li Jing, who plays the Thénardier, is a renowned Chinese traditional Xiangsheng-crosstalk performer. During rehearsals, you praised his performance for combining a storyteller's attitude with the ability to quickly embody his character, along with a strong command of language, which is a key strength of crosstalk performers. Hua Qi, who plays Madame Magloire, is a Suzhou pingtan (traditional talking & singing) performer, and her narrative and interpretation skills are also evident. Lin Jifan, portraying the Bishop, is a famous Kunqu (Chinese traditional opera) actor, educator, and painter. How did you select these actors? Could you also discuss your relationship with them as



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

a director?

**Bellorini:** Before I arrived, I asked Yanghua Theatre to assist with casting. I wanted actors from diverse backgrounds and professions with varying heights, body types, experiences, and temperaments to create contrasts between the actors' lives and their roles. The cast should reflect human diversity rather than uniformity. Our current approach to casting is quite different from the rigid standards of 50 years ago. Now, the female lead in a romantic play can be plus-sized, while a supporting character, like a waitress, can be conventionally attractive.

The relationship between a director and each actor is unique, much like a romantic relationship—there's no one-size-fits-all answer; it varies from person to person. For example, Luo Yongjuan, who plays Gavroche, opened up with her singing from day one, which was wonderful. Zhang Keying, who plays Fantine, was one of the first to understand that actors can actively contribute to the director, which is precisely what the director seeks. A director must love their actors, much like a parent loves a child. In our company, we are like family. The only way to show this love is through respect, and maintaining a strict attitude is essential—guiding the actors to respect the text is paramount. The story in *Les Misérables* reflects the eternal values of humanity and is highly relevant today. I can no longer tolerate dark, brutal, or overly entertaining works on stage; there are too few that address human nature. I believe it's possible to find a balance that incorporates philosophical and profound elements while still offering aesthetic pleasure.

**Ning:** Liu Ye holds himself to very high standards. I heard from Anaïs that he wakes up at 5 AM to rehearse, and after the rehearsals concluded at the end of July, everyone's task was to memorize their lines before you returned in mid-December. Liu Ye even took on a film project during the summer. When rehearsals resumed in December, he was the first to memorize large sections of his lines, inspiring all the other actors. He often selflessly helps his fellow actors by demonstrating the director's ideas and finding time to discuss the play with them. This team is filled with love, as both you and Liu Ye are individuals with great compassion!

**Bellorini:** We are very fortunate! Actors are like craftsmen on stage; they should be involved in every aspect of the production, including scene changes, while also performing and maintaining the rhythm of the music, much like a flowing dance. Once in the theater, with the addition of lighting and music, we can achieve a complete stage presentation. That's why I require the actors to be present for the lighting aspects of my stage work, helping them understand



■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

that everything happening in the theater is connected to their performance. Speaking of performance, rehearsals are not about repetition; each session is about discovering the accurate expression of the character's inner feelings. For example, Fantine needs to convey her tragic fate with tears, but I asked Zhang Keying<sup>1</sup> to hold back her tears. She must feel emotionally driven to the point of tears while keeping her eyes full without letting them fall. Even after performing 100 shows, she must maintain that intense emotional state.

**Ning:** When Fantine dies, her body gently rises from the bed, her soul transcending, while Mr. Madeleine continues to speak to the empty bed. The audience

should feel as if the body on the bed is still present. I particularly appreciate how you handle this as a director, along with many other staging choices. For instance, the dining scene at the Bishop's house, where the table and chairs are lifted and moved by the actors to the rhythm of the music while Madame Magloire narrates. How did these directorial choices come about?

**Bellorini:** Many ideas begin as vague and uncertain. Before rehearsals, I only had a hazy image in mind. It's during the rehearsal process, through collaboration with the cast and crew, that these ideas gradually take shape. I need to communicate constantly with the actors and the team. For example, the idea of the moving furniture arose from discussions with Zheng Wuyan, who plays Champmathieu. He pointed out that the first act feels more stable and quiet, which inspired me to incorporate the movement of the furniture,

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Keying left the production team during the tour and Fantine has been played by Tao Hui since April 2024 at Wenzhou Grand Theatre, Jean Bellorini came to China for a few days specifically to rehearse with Tao Hui.

creating a dreamy staging that emerges from the characters' imaginations right from the beginning.

**Ning:** This aligns with what Brook says—that directors feel their way forward in the dark, gradually clarifying the characters and staging of the entire play. This method of directing is quite common in France. However, in China, actors are generally used to directors providing clear staging and positioning, telling them what to do, and sometimes even demonstrating it. That's why everyone says you've brought a breath of fresh air to our work.

**Bellorini:** While foreign directors have their own styles when staging productions in China, contemporary Chinese theater creation should be quite similar and not too different from that in France, Germany, or other Western countries. As long as directors have the freedom to imagine and collaborate with the actors in the rehearsal space, they can generate many fresh ideas. Many uncertainties can only be resolved in the rehearsal room through "shi yi shi."<sup>1</sup>

**Ning:** Yes, you're absolutely right. In addition to your direction of this Yanghua Theatre production of *Les Misérables*, Polish director Krystian Lupa collaborated with Chinese actors from Propel Performing Arts & Media to create *Mo Fei* a few years ago.<sup>2</sup> However, productions like *Les Misérables*, *Mo Fei*, and *A Madman's Diary* remain relatively rare in China. Therefore, contemporary Chinese theatre creation needs this form of deep collaboration with foreign directors to advance. Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup> The phrases "shi yi shi" (try it) and "mei wen ti" (no problem) are two Chinese expressions that Bellorini frequently used during his nearly 50 days of rehearsals in China. Along with "ni hao" (hello) and "xie xie" (thank you), these phrases make up his limited Chinese vocabulary, yet they were sufficient for him to build strong connections with the Chinese actors in the rehearsal space.

<sup>2</sup> Polish director Krystian Lupa was invited by Beijing Propel Performing Arts & Media for three consecutive years to present his works in China: *Persona. Marilyn* (May 2014), *Woodcutters* (May 2015), and *Heldenplatz* (June 2016). In June 2017, he created and staged *Mo Fei* in China, adapted from contemporary Chinese writer Shi Tiesheng's works. In June 2021, Lupa also created and staged *A Madman's Diary*, adapted from the novel of Lu Xun.

# A Type of Free Indirect Discourse Drama: A Review of the Narrative in Yanghua Theatre's Production of *Les Misérables*

ZHAO Yinghui

**Abstract:** In 2024, Yanghua Theatre's adaptation of *Les Misérables*, part of the cultural exchange marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France, embarked on a nationwide tour in China. This production stands out for its narrative sophistication, fully "harnessing the potential of drama as a narrative and discursive art" while remaining faithful to Hugo's original work. The adaptation transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the stage and delves deeply into the psychological nuances of its characters by skillfully employing free indirect discourse and transforming narrative discourse. It masterfully interweaves perspectives from the original author, the director, actors, narrator, and characters, resulting in a poetic drama that "exists solely in the realm of our imagination."

**Keywords:** *Les Misérables*, Yanghua Theatre, free indirect discourse

## Introduction

As part of the cultural exchange program commemorating the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and France, the Yanghua Theatre produced a Chinese-language adaptation of *Les Misérables*. This was directed by Jean Bellorini, Artistic Director of the French National People's Theatre (Le Théâtre National Populaire, T.N.P.). Since January 2024, the production has been touring cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Changsha, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Wuhan, and Chongqing. The production is also scheduled to premiere at the French National People's Theatre in November 2024.

Victor Hugo's monumental work *Les Misérables* (1862) has captivated generations of readers with its dramatic, complex narrative and its grand, compassionate themes. This literary classic has been adapted into various forms of art, including films, musicals, television dramas, and Jingju (Peking opera). Noteworthy adaptations include the French musical by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, which premiered in 1980 and was subsequently translated into multiple languages and performed worldwide. Tom Hooper's film adaptation based on this musical was released in 2012 and also achieved significant success.

Given the original masterpiece's significance and the many outstanding adaptations it has inspired, what makes Yanghua Theatre's version of *Les Misérables* unique?

## I. Drama as the "Art of Narrative and Discourse"

The uniqueness of this production primarily stems from director Jean Bellorini's approach: instead of striving to rival the original text, he aimed to "explore the potential of drama as an art of narrative (récit) and discourse (parole)."<sup>1</sup>

The notion of treating drama as an art of narrative and discourse is particularly compelling. Firstly, referring to drama as the "art of narrative" is distinctive in itself. Prior to Brecht, drama was traditionally regarded alongside other forms of discourse, such as narrative. For example, Plato, in *The Republic*, categorized narrative, drama, and a blend of both based on the degree of imitation<sup>2</sup>. Aristotle, in *Poetics*, defined drama as the art of imitation through performance, contrasting it with epic, which employs narrative.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent theater theorists have generally advised against incorporating narrative into drama.<sup>4</sup> Brecht's innovation was his "non-Aristotelian drama," which successfully integrated

1 Caroline Châtelet: "Tempête sous un crâne, les plaisirs de la langue." <https://sceneweb.fr/tempete-sous-un-crane-de-victor-hugo-par-jean-bellorini/>

2 柏拉图:《理想国》,郭斌和、张竹明译,北京:商务印书馆,1986年,第94-97页。[Plato: *The Republic*, translated by Guo Bin and Zhang Zhuming, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1986, pp. 94-97]

3 亚里士多德:《诗学》,陈中梅译,北京:商务印书馆,1996年,第42页。[Aristotle: *Poetics*, translated by Chen Zhongmei, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1996, p. 42]

4 赵英晖:《斯丛狄、巴赫金与现代戏剧的"叙事性基本结构"》,《当代外国文学》2021年第3期,第139-146页。[Zhao Yinghui: "The Narrative Basic Structure in Modern Drama: Brecht, Bakhtin, and Others," *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2021, Issue 3, pp. 139-146]

narrative and drama—elements previously considered incompatible for two millennia. Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* stands out for its fusion of narrative and drama. In this production, each actor not only portrays their character but also acts as a narrator, conveying the character's story.

However, Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* is not a Brechtian narrative drama. Bellorini's approach to narrative does not aim to prevent the audience from immersing themselves in the fictional world or to transform them into detached observers and critics, as Brecht intended. Instead, Bellorini seeks to expand and enrich the fictional world by narrating the characters' stories, ensuring that even audiences unfamiliar with the original text or the historical context of two or three centuries ago can comprehend the play.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, Bellorini is exploring a new method of constructing drama, posing thought-provoking questions: "Does drama only exist in what actors perform and what audiences observe? Does it only exist in the visible? Is there not a drama that exists solely in our imagination? Might it exist elsewhere?"<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the view of drama—whether termed "drama" or "theater"—has been that it does not emphasize discourse. The term "drama" implies action, referring to the imitation of action, while "theater" suggests the performance relationship established by various dramas. Since Grotowski highlighted how "poverty" in drama can be, there has been a growing belief that as long as the performance relationship exists, drama exists. Bellorini, however, challenges this assumption, aiming to create a "drama that exists only in our imagination."<sup>3</sup> His approach involves a significant amount of narrative elements, with the proportion of narrative in the actors' lines sometimes surpassing their characters' dialogue. The lead actor exemplifies this approach, starting with "an eight-page monologue."<sup>4</sup>

1 《当观众和演员的想象力在剧场上空汇聚时 可能戏剧就产生了》，中国青年网，2024年1月9日。["When the Imagination of the Audience and Actors Converges in the Theatre, Drama May Be Born," China Youth On Line, January 9, 2024. [http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129\\_15049755.htm](http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129_15049755.htm)]

2 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让"好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]

3 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让"好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]

4 《刘烨重返话剧舞台，首部中文版《悲惨世界》本周亮相，4月来杭》，杭州网，2024年1月20日。["Liu Ye Returns to the Stage, First Chinese Version of *Les Misérables* Premieres This Week, Coming to Hangzhou in April," Hangzhou Net, January 20, 2024. [https://hznews.hangzhou.com.cn/wenti/content/2024-01/20/content\\_8677903.html](https://hznews.hangzhou.com.cn/wenti/content/2024-01/20/content_8677903.html)]



■ A group photo of the creative team for *Les Misérables*, produced by Yanghua Theatre.

Thus, Bellorini's approach transforms drama into "the art of discourse," embodying "the pleasures of language."<sup>1</sup> Characterizing drama as "the art of discourse" is itself distinctive. Compared to various literary forms and even some performing arts, drama's reliance on language has traditionally been less emphasized. Both Plato and Aristotle considered drama as the art of imitation, where traditional drama presents an absent action either as it is or with various modifications to immerse the audience, with language serving merely as a tool for imitation. Contemporary drama has introduced elements that highlight the performance itself rather than a fictional world, leading to an unprecedented development of "self-referential" dramatic elements.<sup>2</sup> However, except for a few plays aimed at deconstructing language,<sup>3</sup> language has remained challenging to position as the core of drama. Often, "the core symbol of drama is the actor's body."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, whether in traditional mimetic drama or contemporary self-

1 Caroline Châtelet: "Tempête sous un crâne, les plaisirs de la langue". <https://sceneweb.fr/tempete-sous-un-crane-de-victor-hugo-par-jean-bellorini/>

2 Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Trans. Ledru, Philippe-Henri. Paris: L'Arche, 2002, p.20.

3 Such as those by French playwright Novarina.

4 Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Trans. Ledru, Philippe-Henri. Paris: L'Arche, 2002, p.150.

referential drama, both performance and observation are crucial for drama's existence, meaning that all drama inevitably relies on some physical space and time.

Bellorini's "art of narrative and discourse" integrates "literature and drama,"<sup>1</sup> shifting the drama from the stage to an expansive realm of thought. Chinese director Zhang Rui noted, "During rehearsals, we intentionally asked actors not to act, which is somewhat paradoxical. On one hand, we want to see the actors' genuine feelings on stage, but on the other hand, we do not want to see them create false character portrayals."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, actors do not rely on imitation or action but instead, "stand on stage, surrounded by the audience and music, sharing their own feelings, describing passion, (...) and creating an emotion together with nearly a thousand people,"<sup>3</sup> allowing the audience to "find a pleasure similar to reading during the viewing process."<sup>4</sup> This approach reflects the director's exploration of the differences between reading and viewing, invoking the imaginative engagement associated with reading in an age of visual culture. While Brecht used narrative to prevent audiences from becoming absorbed in the visual spectacle, Bellorini employs narrative and discourse to guide the audience in constructing a vast historical panorama that transcends the immediate visual limitations.

## II. Free Indirect Discourse in Drama

How does Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* achieve the seamless transition between "performer and expresser"?<sup>5</sup> As a play adapted from a novel, how

- 1 《中文版话剧《悲惨世界》在京首演，中法艺术家联袂创作 210 分钟大戏》，北京日报客户端，2024 年 1 月 28 日。["The Chinese Version of *Les Misérables* Premieres in Beijing: A 210-Minute Epic Created by Sino-French Artists," Beijing Daily App, January 28, 2024. <https://news.bjd.com.cn/2024/01/28/10689201.html>]
- 2 《当观众和演员的想象力在剧场上空汇聚时，可能戏剧就产生了》，中国青年网，2024 年 1 月 29 日。["When the Imagination of the Audience and Actors Converges in the Theatre, Drama May Be Born," China Youth Online, January 29, 2024. [http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129\\_15049755.html](http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129_15049755.html)]
- 3 《中文版话剧《悲惨世界》首演，经典绽放多才新意》，新浪网，2024 年 1 月 29 日。["Chinese Version of *Les Misérables* Premieres: Classic Reimagined with New Talent," Sina, January 29, 2024. <https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/2345597047/8bcef87702001ic8h>]
- 4 《当观众和演员的想象力在剧场上空汇聚时，可能戏剧就产生了》，中国青年网，2024 年 1 月 29 日。["When the Imagination of the Audience and Actors Converges in the Theatre, Drama May Be Born," China Youth Online, January 29, 2024. [http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129\\_15049755.html](http://fun.youth.cn/gnzx/202401/t20240129_15049755.html)]
- 5 《中文版话剧《悲惨世界》首演，经典绽放多才新意》，新浪网，2024 年 1 月 29 日。["Chinese Version of *Les Misérables* Premieres: Classic Reimagined with New Talent," Sina, January 29, 2024. <https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/2345597047/8bcef87702001ic8h>]

does it "preserve the direct dialogue between the author and the reader"?<sup>1</sup> We believe this is accomplished through the use of free indirect discourse.

Free indirect discourse is a key concept in narrative studies. In a narrative work, the narrator can present speech in three ways: direct speech, where the narrator quotes the character's exact words, typically marked by speech verbs (say, ask, declare, etc.), colons, and quotation marks; indirect speech, where the narrator paraphrases the character's words in their own language; and free indirect discourse, a hybrid of the two. Free indirect discourse is narrated by the storyteller but retains the character's tone and language level. While the narrator continues to refer to the character in the third person, the perspective shifts to an internal focus, providing commentary, exclamations, or narration from the character's viewpoint.

In Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables*, we observe two types of free indirect discourse: one that adheres strictly to the definition and another that can be considered free indirect discourse applied to narrative speech.

The following statement exemplifies the first type: "He had noticed the cupboard on the right as he came in from the dining room. The silverware was old and heavy, with the large spoons alone worth at least 200 francs. This was twice his wage for 19 years."<sup>2</sup> In this passage, "He had noticed the cupboard" is clearly the narrator's voice, while "on the right as he came in from the dining room" shows a blurring of narrative perspective. This can be interpreted as the narrator's environmental description or as the narrator adopting the character's perspective to directly convey the object that the character had long observed and remembered. Similarly, "The silverware was old and heavy" reflects this perspective blurring, but "with the large spoons alone worth at least 200 francs" is evidently Jean Valjean's estimate, revealing the envy and desire of someone recently emerging from extreme poverty when encountering valuable items for the first time. "This was twice his wage for 19 years" returns to the perspective blurring, which might be viewed as the narrator's estimate, but more accurately reflects Jean Valjean's own assessment, as only someone recently released from prison would measure an object's value against their meager prison

- 1 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让"好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024 年 1 月 22 日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]
- 2 雨果著，宁春艳译：《悲惨世界》舞台剧，中华戏剧出品，2024 年。经出品方及译者授权引用。[Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables*, translated by Ning Chunyan, Yanghua Theatre Production, 2024. Used with permission from the producer and translator]

wages. These sentences retain the emotional characteristics of the character's discourse and are intricately connected to the narrator's voice.

In Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables*, the second type of free indirect discourse is more prevalent. These instances are the narrator's words, which do not strictly adhere to the definition of free indirect discourse, but the actors imbue these lines with the character's emotions. For example: "Suddenly, Jean Valjean quickened his pace, moving past the bedside and heading straight for the cupboard at the head of the bed. The key was left on top, and he opened the cupboard. The first thing he saw was a basket of silverware. He took out the basket and strode across the room. Without thinking and disregarding the noise, he headed straight for the door, then into the small chapel, opened the window, and climbed over it with the support of the ground. He stuffed the silverware into his backpack, discarded the basket, crossed the garden, and leapt over the high wall like a tiger."<sup>1</sup> When Liu Ye delivers this passage, his speech is extremely rapid. Although the entire text refers to Jean Valjean in the third person, it is clear that the narrator psychologically becomes Jean Valjean in the midst of a hasty escape. The narrator identifies with the character, merging perspectives with Jean Valjean, thus imparting the third-person narration with the qualities of free indirect discourse.

The use of the first type of free indirect discourse in Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* can be understood as a result of Hugo's original text.<sup>2</sup> Free indirect discourse saw significant development in 19th-century Western novels, and Hugo's works frequently feature such phenomena. Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* retains the full narrative and dialogue from the novel.<sup>3</sup> The second type of free indirect discourse can be considered a novel achievement by Yanghua Theatre, showcasing the potential of any narrative discourse to become free indirect discourse in theatrical presentation. This aligns with James Wood's bold assertion in *How Fiction Works* (2008) that "everything in a novel's narrative discourse can be seen as free indirect discourse, as soon as one begins telling a story about a character, the narrative seems to be entirely

1 雨果著，宁春艳译：《悲惨世界》舞台剧，央华戏剧出品，2024年。经出品方及译者授权引用。[Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables*, translated by Ning Chunyan, Yanghua Theatre Production, 2024. Used with permission from the producer and translator]

2 Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables*, Tome I, Livre premier, Chapitre X. [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17489/17489-h/17489-h.htm#Chapitre\\_Xb](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17489/17489-h/17489-h.htm#Chapitre_Xb)

3 《《悲惨世界》导演手记 | "冉·阿让"好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]



■ A group photo of the creative team for *Les Misérables*, produced by Yanghua Theatre.



■ A group photo of the creative team for *Les Misérables*, produced by Yanghua Theatre.

at the service of that character, adopting their way of thinking and speaking."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the use of free indirect discourse highlights the characters' psychological states, emphasizing their moral dilemmas, reflections, and choices. Rather than simply depicting the dramatic ups and downs of a character's life, *Les Misérables* chronicles a history of ideological transformation. Without the depiction of the main character's inner struggles, the events in the story would lack necessity. Bellorini's aim is to "reveal the vast depths of the soul on stage"<sup>2</sup>. Traditionally, drama has excelled at depicting action rather than nuanced psychological activities. The use of free indirect discourse in drama shifts the focus to the characters' psychological experiences. Bakhtin noted that in novels, free indirect discourse involves words that appear within three interacting contexts and speech acts: those of the author, the narrator, and the character.<sup>3</sup> In drama, the variety of subjectivity and context is even greater. The multi-subjective and overlapping contexts of free indirect discourse blend the perspectives of the original author, director, actors, narrator, and characters, fulfilling Bellorini's requirement that actors should enrich their roles. Actors "need to blend the written language of the work and the character with their own unique experiences, while also reflecting the spirit of the contemporary world."<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

Pier Paolo Pasolini, in discussing "poetic cinema," equates poetic film language with the use of "free indirect subjective shots" and draws a parallel to free

indirect discourse. He uses Michelangelo Antonioni's work as an example, noting that "free indirect subjective shots" involve depicting reality through the character's perspective, effectively applying a filter of the character's viewpoint to the camera. The ultimate aim of this technique is for Antonioni to replace the character's view of the world with his own, thereby achieving "the greatest poetic freedom." Consequently, Pasolini often describes "poetic cinema" as "cinema where you can feel the presence of the camera."<sup>1</sup>

Yanghua Theatre's *Les Misérables* adopts a similar approach. It "never deviates from the lyrical nature of Hugo's original work,"<sup>2</sup> and through the use of free indirect discourse, it "establishes the work."<sup>3</sup> This approach infuses the production with the "poetry" that we "can feel in every work by Bellorini,"<sup>4</sup> revealing Hugo's world as "vaster than the sky," both profoundly melancholic and passionately uplifting.

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1 James Wood. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Picador, 2008, p.7-8.  
 2 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让" 好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024. Furthermore, as early as 2010, Bellorini staged *Tempête sous un crâne* (Storm in the Mind), a play adapted from *Les Misérables* at the Théâtre du Soleil. The title borrowed from a chapter in the novel reflects a crucial moment when Jean Valjean faces a difficult choice, ultimately choosing honesty and integrity at the cost of personal sacrifice. The title underscores the play's focus on portraying the character's internal struggles and transformation.]  
 3 巴赫金著，李辉凡等译：《巴赫金全集》（第二卷），石家庄：河北教育出版社，2009年，第516页。[Mikhail Bakhtin: Translated by Li Huifan et al. *The Complete Works of Bakhtin* (Volume 2). Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 2009, p. 516.]  
 4 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让" 好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]

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1 Pier Paolo Pasolini: *L'Expérience hérétique, langue et cinéma*. Trans. Pullberg, Anna Rocchi. Paris : Ramsay, 1983, p. 144-153.  
 2 法国国立民众剧院官网。[French National Popular Theater official website. <https://www.tnp-villeurbanne.com/manifestation/tempete-sous-un-crane/>]  
 3 《〈悲惨世界〉导演手记 | "冉·阿让" 好似刘烨的一场梦》，上海大剧院微信公众号，2024年1月22日。["Director's Note on *Les Misérables*: 'Jean Valjean' Feels Like Liu Ye's Dream," Shanghai Grand Theatre WeChat, January 22, 2024]  
 4 王婧：《让·贝洛里尼的戏剧三基调：话语，音乐，灯光》，《上海戏剧》2018年第5期，第44-46页。[Wang Jing: "The Three Tones of Jean Bellorini's Drama: Discourse, Music, Lighting," *Shanghai Theater*, 2018, No. 5, pp. 44-46]

# Recognition, Imagination, and Reconstruction: *The Legend of the White Snake* in 21st-Century Western Theatre

CHEN Wenqing & XU Yiting

Around 2010, Western dramas adapting the classic Chinese folk legend of the *White Snake* began to emerge. Notable examples include Giacomo Ravicchio's multimedia play *White Snake*,<sup>1</sup> Zhou Long's opera *Madame White Snake*,<sup>2</sup> and Mary Zimmerman's one-act play *The White Snake*.<sup>3</sup> These works collectively represent a significant trend in Western adaptations of the White Snake legend, showcasing distinctive cross-cultural traits.

## I. Subversion of Traditional Chinese Concepts of Love and Morality

Compared to recent innovative domestic works that challenge traditional norms, these Western adaptations of the White Snake legend aim to reconstruct the story and present novel ideas. All three Western adaptations focus on the cross-species romance between the White Snake and Xu Xian as their central theme. They preserve the traditional narrative and emotional core

1 In 2009, Italian-Danish director Giacomo Ravicchio, invited by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center, directed the play *White Snake*, which was later restaged in 2014 and 2019 and evolved into a multimedia theatrical work titled *White Snake*.

2 The opera *Madame White Snake*, with lyrics by Cerise Lim Jacobs and music by Zhou Long, premiered on February 26, 2010, by the Boston Lyric Opera at the Cutler Majestic Theatre and won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2011.

3 Mary Zimmerman directed and adapted the one-act play *The White Snake*, which premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2012 and was later featured as the closing performance at the Wuzhen Theater Festival in 2014.

of the legend while offering a subversive re-imagining of traditional Chinese concepts of love and morality.

*The Legend of the White Snake*, one of China's four major folk love stories, along with *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, *Meng Jiangnu's Bitter Weeping*, and *The Butterfly Lovers*, is widely celebrated for its poignant cross-species romance. Love, as a universal emotion and a perennial subject in literature, has a relatively low threshold for understanding and resonance. Therefore, love is not only the core theme of the White Snake legend but also its most direct and surface-level expression, making it a significant topic in Western adaptations.

The history of Western reinterpretations, dissemination, and reception of the White Snake legend provides context for the contemporary Western focus on the theme of love. As early as 1834, French sinologist Stanislas Julien translated and adapted the White Snake story into the book *Blanche et Bleue, ou Les Deux Couleuvres-Fées; Roman Chinois*.<sup>1</sup> In 1864, the English translation of *The Chinese and Japanese Repository* included serialized translations of *The Legend of Leifeng Tower* by Yushan Master.<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the 20th century, missionaries Samuel I. Woodbridge and diplomat Frederick D. Cloud translated and adapted the White Snake legend, creating *The Mystery of the White Snake*<sup>3</sup> and *Hangchow: The City of Heaven*<sup>4</sup>, respectively. These early Western translations, based on works like *The Legend of Leifeng Pagoda*<sup>5</sup> and *The Illustrated Tale of the Righteous Demon*,<sup>6</sup> inherited the rich narrative of the mature White Snake story, where the theme of romantic relationships became a focal point. Whether through the portrayal of Xu Xian's proactive pursuit of the White Snake in *The Mystery of the White Snake* or the depiction of the White Snake's theft of silver as a manifestation of erotic obsession in *Hangchow: The City of Heaven*, these adaptations transformed the ancient folk legend into

1 Stanislas Julien: *Blanche et Bleue, ou Les Deux Couleuvres-Fées; Roman Chinois*, Paris: Gosselin, 1834.

2 The Rev. James Summers: *The Chinese and Japanese Repository of Facts and Events in Science, History, and Art, Relating to Eastern Asia*. London: The Office of the Chinese and Japanese Repository, 1864.

3 Samuel I. Woodbridge: *The Mystery of the White Snake: A Legend of the Thunder Peak Tower, from the Chinese*. -C. Harald and S. C. & C. Gazette, 1896-9-4, 410.

4 Frederick D. Cloud: *Hangchow: The City of Heaven, with a Brief Historical Sketch of Soochow*, Presbyterian Mission Press, 1906.

5 (清)玉山主人:《雷峰塔奇传》,北京:华夏出版社,1995年版。[(Qing Dynasty)Yushan Zhuren: *The Legend of Leifeng Pagoda*. Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 1995.]

6 陈遇乾:《绣像义妖传》,陈士奇、俞秀山校,1876年版。[Chen Yuqian: *The Illustrated Tale of the Righteous Demon*, edited by Chen Shiqi and Yu Xiushan, 1876.]

modern love stories through detailed character portrayals and emotional depth.

Additionally, works by Chinese dramatists in the 1950s—such as Tian Han's xiqu *The Legend of the White Snake* and Zhao Qingge's novel of the same title—played a pivotal role in the dissemination of the White Snake story beyond China. Unlike the traditional Chinese ethical values reflected in late Qing versions, these works emphasized the freedom of romantic choice. This focus resonated with earlier Western reinterpretations and further shaped the spread, reception, and adaptation of the White Snake legend in the West. For instance, Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake* was directly inspired by Zhao Qingge's novel. Consequently, since the 20th century, the White Snake legend has been regarded in Western cultural contexts as a classic "love epic." In the new century, Western adaptations have continued to center on love themes and traditional plot lines. However, as noted earlier, the expression of love in contemporary Western adaptations diverges from the emotional depth of traditional Chinese versions, highlighting distinctively Western and modern sensibilities.

In the early phases of the White Snake legend's development, as exemplified by the *Records of Li Huang* from the Tang Dynasty and *The Tale of the Three Pagodas of West Lake* from the Song Dynasty, the emphasis was on promoting asceticism through the doctrine of "preserving heavenly principles and eradicating human desires." Later, from Feng Menglong's *Eternal Banishment of the White Lady Beneath Leifeng Pagoda* in the late Ming dynasty to *The Legend of Leifeng Pagoda* and *The Illustrated Tale of the Righteous Demon* in the mid-to-late Qing dynasty, the White Snake legend became more defined and fully developed. As the economy grew, so did people's self-awareness, and the emotional bond between Xu Xian and the White Snake received greater focus in artistic portrayals. Although the White Snake legend attempted to challenge notions of asceticism and racial discrimination, the relationship between Xu Xian and the White Snake was ultimately shaped by traditional Chinese moral norms. The White Snake's devotion to Xu Xian, her embodiment of a virtuous wife and mother, and the logic of repaying kindness infused the story's love theme with restraint and subtlety. In the end, the expression of love was absorbed into, or even dissolved within, the ethical framework of the husband-wife relationship.

In contrast, Western adaptations of the White Snake story present love with distinctly Western romanticism and a modern sensibility. First, their language is direct and passionate, in contrast to the restraint championed by traditional Chinese ideals of "feelings that arise from emotions but are curtailed by propriety." Western adaptations often have characters openly and passionately

expressing their love. Second, the ethical responsibilities that shape the actions of characters in traditional Chinese versions are notably diminished in Western adaptations, where love becomes the primary driving force. The focus is on the emotional intensity of the love between Xu Xian and the White Snake, as they transcend racial boundaries and make sacrifices for each other. For instance, in Giacomo Ravicchio's *White Snake*, Fahai's ambiguous affection for Xu Xian plays a significant role in his decision to tear the couple apart. Furthermore, unlike the hierarchical structure of traditional versions, where values like "the husband as head of the wife" and "demons are inferior to humans" place the White Snake in a subordinate position to Xu Xian, Western adaptations emphasize individual independence and the fulfillment of personal desires. This approach presents the relationship between Xu Xian and the White Snake as more equal.

In conclusion, when considering the transmission and reception of the White Snake legend, Western adaptations retain the love theme and key plot elements from the traditional story. Yet, with their expressive dialogues, strong romantic motivations, and emphasis on equality, they convey a modern, Western interpretation of love, distinct from the moralized emotional framework of traditional Chinese culture.

## II. Eastern Imagination and Mystical Atmosphere

As a traditional Chinese folktale, *The Legend of the White Snake* is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and serves as a representation of it. However, in a cross-cultural context, foreign cultures often lack the necessary cultural foundations to fully transplant such stories. Instead, these tales are deconstructed and reinterpreted within new cultural frameworks, leading to a form of cultural imagination that resembles the original but diverges in essence.



■ The poster for Giacomo Ravicchio's multimedia play *White Snake*



■ Stills of multimedia play *White Snake*

who adapted and reinterpreted the story.

In the Western imagination, the White Snake legend carries a sense of mysticism due to its unfamiliar characters, plotlines, and cultural background. Similar to Chinese kung fu, traditional medicine, and religious practices—subjects steeped in Eastern characteristics and often outside the scope of Western cultural understanding—the White Snake legend is often interpreted through a lens of "Oriental mysticism." The geographic and cultural distance further amplifies this mystique. For Western theater creators and audiences,

Contemporary Western adaptations of the *White Snake* legend exemplify this process of cultural imagination and reconstruction. These adaptations frequently portray the legend as an exotic fantasy from the East, creating a blend of mystery and modernity distinct from the classical Chinese aesthetic of the original story.

*The Legend of the White Snake*, as a tale of love between a human and a mythical being, naturally incorporates fantastical elements. Episodes like "The Dragon Boat Festival Transformation," "Stealing the Magical Herb from the Celestial Mountain," and "Flooding the Jinshan Temple" are based on Chinese traditions—local customs, folklore, and religion—that give rise to a variety of spectacular scenes steeped in cultural heritage. These fantastical elements captivated Chinese audiences and sparked the interest of Western creators,

this sense of mystery is not only inherent in the story but also profoundly shapes the direction of its adaptations and their reception. Through the use of music, set design, and lighting, creators emphasize the mystical atmosphere, which audiences further magnify through their imagination.

Simultaneously, in an effort to "recreate" an imagined Eastern aesthetic on stage, Western adaptations of the White Snake legend often extract certain elements of Chinese culture as symbolic markers—ink painting, traditional instruments, Chinese martial arts, and traditional costumes—and incorporate them into their productions. Both Giacomo Ravicchio's *White Snake* and Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake* use ink motifs in their opening scenes, while composer Zhou Long blends Chinese folk music with Western classical music in his opera *Madame White Snake*. Zimmerman also mirrored traditional xiqu costumes in her character designs. In cross-cultural contexts, cultural symbols represent the unique essence of a nation or ethnic group, and by actively incorporating these symbols, these productions assert a cultural identity, presenting an ancient Chinese legend on the Western stage.

However, despite the layering of Eastern cultural symbols, Western adaptations of the White Snake legend remain firmly grounded in Western and modern sensibilities. While the central characters—White Snake, Xu Xian, Xiaoqing, and Fahai—are retained, their personas are redefined with distinct Western traits: direct language, exaggerated expressions, open emotions, and liberal thinking. For instance, in the one-act play *White Snake*, White Snake embodies the traits of an independent Western woman. In the opera *Madame White Snake*, Xiaoqing, traditionally a male character in Sichuan opera, is transformed into a female character who openly declares her love for White Snake. In the multimedia drama *The Legend of the White Snake*, Fahai's ambiguous feelings for Xu Xian drive him to insist on separating the couple. Additionally, in contrast to the traditional emphasis on moral and social order in Chinese versions, Western adaptations incorporate more reflections on Western philosophical themes, such as White Snake's quest for self-discovery and the conflicts between love and justice, as well as broader philosophical explorations of existence, value, reason, truth, and freedom. Xiaoqing's final aria in *Madame White Snake* is a prime example: "Love, truth, freedom, justice—everyone has their own heaven. The desires of the heart have already corroded the heart's nirvana."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zhou Long: *Madame White Snake*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 315-316.



■ Composer Zhou Long



■ Zhou Long conducting the rehearsal with the musicians for the opera *Madame White Snake*.

Some cultural symbols are even deliberately omitted. For example, Robert Woodruff, an American director with little familiarity with Chinese culture, chose to abandon the use of Eastern cultural symbols when he directed the opera *Madame White Snake* and instead opted for a modern, street-style American aesthetic. This approach rendered the opera more contemporary and localized for American audiences.

At their core, contemporary Western adaptations of the White Snake legend re-imagine this traditional Chinese folktale through the lens of modern Western cultural expression, transforming it into a theatrical experience. In the process of cross-cultural adaptation, while the themes of love and the main plot points from the White Snake legend are preserved, the cultural heart of the drama shifts toward Western perspectives as the creators take on the story. Simplified cultural symbols replace the rich layers of Chinese folklore, local traditions, marketplace life, and the influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, which are fundamental to the original tale. The mystical and modern aspects are amplified, making Western versions of the White Snake a quintessential example of cross-cultural theater.

Interestingly, the three Western White Snake productions analyzed in this study are all international collaborations. For Western audiences, these plays present an imagined vision of the East, while for Chinese viewers familiar with the White Snake legend, these interpretations offer a sense of alienation, creating a dual layer of exoticism.



■ A Still from the opera *Madame White Snake*.



■ A Stills from Mary Zimmerman's one-act play *The White Snake*

### III. Modern Staging and Physical Expression

Western adaptations of the White Snake legend are grounded in modern Western theater but draw from the fantastical elements of this ancient Chinese folktale, which provide rich creative potential for stage expression. The intersection of Eastern and Western cultures on stage creates a modern theatrical art form that bridges both traditions and timelines, blending the old and the new.

The three Western White Snake adaptations—*The Legend of the White Snake* (a multimedia drama), *Madame White Snake* (an opera), and *White Snake* (a one-act play)—were all created around 2010, a period when modern stage design, particularly multimedia technology, had reached a high level of sophistication. To enhance the fantastical elements of the White Snake legend, these Western productions made extensive use of advanced stage design techniques, especially projection design. Projections are frequently used in these adaptations to construct immersive settings and move the narrative forward.

Both Giacomo Ravicchio's *The Legend of the White Snake* and Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake* open with ink-wash projections. Ravicchio's production uses live projections of simple ink drawings to illustrate the karmic bond between Xu Xian and White Snake in a previous life, while *The White Snake* begins with a projection of the Chinese character for "White Snake" in calligraphy. Both productions utilize animated ink projections to create dynamic

backgrounds, allowing for seamless scene transitions and blending actor performances with stage settings, greatly enhancing the expressive potential of the stage. Similarly, in the opera *Madame White Snake*, projection design is used to depict the climactic "Flooding of Jinshan Temple," evoking the grandeur of Hollywood-style visual effects.

Contemporary Western adaptations of the White Snake legend have skillfully integrated multimedia technology into their productions, combining traditional theatrical elements like mechanical devices and lighting with modern storytelling techniques such as montage. This fusion enriches the narrative and heightens the artistic impact, creating a dramatic atmosphere that brings the fantastical world of the White Snake legend to life. The result is a stage that is visually captivating, mysterious, and infused with the exoticism of an imagined Eastern world.

Contemporary Western White Snake productions place a strong emphasis on physical expression and the body's role in performance. This approach highlights both the shared physical presence of actors and audiences in the theatrical space and the exploration of the body as a key dramatic resource. Western theater often relies on the body for storytelling, and the serpent-women figures of White Snake and Xiaoqing provide ideal opportunities for this type of physical performance. In Giacomo Ravicchio's *The Legend of the White Snake*, modern dance is used to depict the birth of Xiaoqing and White Snake. Their bodies twist and sway, fluid and graceful, embodying the fusion of "serpent" and "woman" that defines their hybrid identities. Likewise, Mary Zimmerman's *The White Snake* features two actresses who manipulate silk puppets with rods to portray the serpentine forms of White Snake and Xiaoqing. Their snake tails extend from beneath their costumes, and green and white parasols on stage are arranged to represent two giant serpents. The use of toy snakes and other props, combined with the performers' interactions with these elements, blurs the line between human and snake in both character and stage design.

Additionally, the actors' speech carries serpentine characteristics, especially in moments of heightened tension or anger when long, drawn-out hissing sounds emerge. Their bodies, too, begin to twist, sway, and spin like snakes, revealing the hidden serpent within. These physical expressions are particularly prominent in Xiaoqing, who has undergone less "civilization" and restraint compared to White Snake. The opera *Madame White Snake* employs similar techniques, and even Tian Qinxin's *Green Snake*, a Chinese-directed work created around the same time, uses a comparable approach, demonstrating a creative synergy that transcends geographic and stylistic boundaries.

In *Madame White Snake*, which features less physical performance than the other works, one striking instance of physical expression is the casting of Michael Maniaci, a male soprano, as Xiaoqing. Maniaci portrays Xiaoqing as a male character who had fallen in love with White Snake in a previous life, physically embodying Xiaoqing's ambiguous, androgynous identity. This highlights how the physical portrayal of the serpent-woman figure is not only central to contemporary Western White Snake productions but also a distinctive feature of their stagecraft.

As previously noted, the active incorporation of Eastern cultural elements is another key feature of contemporary Western White Snake productions. Creators skillfully blend Chinese cultural motifs—such as ink wash painting, traditional music, martial arts, and costumes—into the technologically advanced and modern Western stage, significantly enhancing the theatrical experience. This reflects both the creators' personal connection to Chinese culture—Zhou Long, composer of *Madame White Snake*, and librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs, for example, are both of Chinese descent—and their desire to innovate within the theater while meeting the aesthetic expectations of audiences. These factors transform the contemporary Western White Snake stage into a dialogue between tradition and modernity, East and West, underscoring the cross-cultural nature of these productions.

From Giacomo Ravicchio's multimedia drama *The Legend of the White Snake* to Cerise Lim Jacobs and Zhou Long's opera *Madame White Snake* and Mary Zimmerman's one-act play *The White Snake*, the White Snake legend has been reimagined by contemporary Western creators, offering a fresh perspective distinct from both the traditional tale and Chinese interpretations of the story. On one hand, the legend has become a testing ground for avant-garde theater concepts and a site for the collision of Eastern and Western cultures, allowing for a modern reimagining of this ancient myth. On the other hand, these adaptations have expanded the cross-cultural lineage of the White Snake tale, offering broader interpretive possibilities and deeper aesthetic significance, further demonstrating the legend's enduring cultural vitality. The journey of the White Snake—exported from China to the West and then re-imported back to China—provides a vivid example of cross-cultural exchange and a rich case study in cross-cultural research.

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## Introduction to Classical Plays (X)

CHENG Jiaojiao

### Chuanju *Pan Jinlian*

Pan Jinlian is a prominent female character from the famous Ming dynasty novel *The Water Margin* (Shui Hu Zhuan). In this ancient text, which centers on 108 male heroes rebelling against the government, female characters are relatively few and often depicted with limited depth. Pan Jinlian is one such character, portrayed as a villainous woman who murders her husband Wu Dalang, falls in love with her brother-in-law Wu Song, and engages in an affair with her lover, Ximen Qing. Over the past 500 years since the Ming dynasty, Pan Jinlian has become a widely recognized and reviled figure. In the novel, Wu Song avenges his brother Wu Dalang by killing both Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian.

The Chuanju (Sichuan Opera) *Pan Jinlian*, created in 1986, is adapted from *The Water Margin*. The playwright, Wei Minglun, a native of Sichuan, began composing many Chuanju scripts in the 1980s. *Pan Jinlian* is one of his notable works, alongside other significant pieces such as *Turandot*, *Princess of China* (1993) and *Face-Changing* (1995). Chuanju is one of the most influential forms of Chinese opera and has a large following in China. Wei Minglun is undoubtedly one of the most esteemed contemporary playwrights in Chuanju.

This play, *Pan Jinlian*, focuses exclusively on Pan Jinlian from the novel. Many operas across various Chinese dramatic genres feature Pan Jinlian as the protagonist, generally following a similar plot: Pan Jinlian, initially a maid in a wealthy household, is coerced into marriage with Wu Dalang, a short, unattractive but kind-hearted man, after rejecting the advances of her lecherous master. Discontent with Wu Dalang due to her lack of affection, Pan Jinlian



■ The playwright Wei Minglun (1941-2024).



■ Wei Minglun with the actors.



■ The cover of the 1987 edition of the script *Pan Jinlian*, written by Wei Minglun.

falls for his strong and heroic brother, Wu Song, who rebuffs her advances. Distracted, Pan Jinlian begins an affair with the wealthy and handsome Ximen Qing. When Wu Dalang discovers their affair, Pan Jinlian, influenced by Ximen Qing, poisons her husband. Wu Song eventually learns the truth and kills both Ximen Qing and Pan Jinlian to avenge his brother.

Different theatrical traditions highlight various aspects of Pan Jinlian's story, showcasing unique styles of physical performance and singing. In Wei Minglun's *Chuanju Pan Jinlian*, the focus is not on narrative or traditional Chuanju singing and performance styles but on a deeper exploration of Pan Jinlian's character and actions. This examination unfolds in three main areas: first, whether Pan Jinlian is an extremely wicked woman; second, whether she deserves sympathy in contemporary times; and third, what factors contributed to her tragic fate. To address these questions thoroughly, Wei Minglun introduces historical and literary figures from different eras and cultures into the play, engaging in cross-temporal dialogues with Pan Jinlian about female liberation and romantic freedom. These figures include Wu Zetian (China's first female emperor), Jia Baoyu (a sympathetic and admiring young man from the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*), Hongniang (a matchmaker in the Yuan dynasty play *The West Chamber*, akin to Cupid), and Anna Karenina. They counsel Pan Jinlian to pursue self-liberation and challenge unjust marriages with bold defiance.

Conversely, some characters in the play criticize Pan Jinlian's actions, such as Shi Nai'an (the author of *The Water Margin*, who consistently disparages



■ A still from Chuanju *Pan Jinlian*.

women in the novel) and a contemporary female judge, who advises Pan Jinlian to adhere to legal and moral standards and avoid actions driven by personal desires. Wei Minglun himself contends that Pan Jinlian is first and foremost a human being with a complex and multifaceted personality. Modern audiences should neither fully condemn her actions of murder and infidelity nor entirely praise her

rebellious behavior but should consider her character development within the context of a vibrant and tumultuous social backdrop.

Following its performance, the play generated significant discussion among audiences and scholars, having a profound impact. Many prominent drama researchers engaged in debates about the play's artistic value. In contrast to traditional Chuanju works featuring Pan Jinlian, Wei Minglun's interpretation introduces elements of absurdity. Influenced by the relatively recent arrival of the "Theater of the Absurd" in China, the play was referred to as "Absurdist Chuanju" at the time. This work is the most unified piece in Wei Minglun's dramatic career and represents his most substantial incorporation of Western modern theatrical concepts and techniques. The discourse surrounding *Pan Jinlian* extended far beyond the script, highlighting its significant social and cultural implications.

### Chuanju *Tian Jie and Zhuang Zhou*

Chuanju *Tian Jie and Zhuangzhou* is a seminal work by contemporary Chinese playwright Xu Fen, created in 1988 and first performed at the Chengdu Chuanju Theater. The play won the "National Excellent Script Award" in 1988 and has gained immense popularity in China. Its exploration and critique of female consciousness, showcasing a high level of artistic sophistication, has contributed to its popularity. The script has been adapted into various Chinese opera genres, including Huangmei Xi, Yuju (Henan Opera), and Jinju (Jin Opera in Shanxi). Many actors who performed in this play have received the Plum Blossom Award, the highest honor in Chinese theater.

Although *Tian Jie and Zhuangzhou* is a modern Chuanju work, its storyline draws from traditional Chuanju and ancient Chinese folklore about Zhuangzi Tests His Wife. Zhuangzi, a revered philosopher in ancient China, is known for his profound ideas on experiencing life within infinite time and space. Before achieving such philosophical greatness, Zhuangzi was an ordinary man. His wife was named Tian, a gentle and kind woman who respected her husband and fulfilled her duties and morals. However, Zhuangzi gradually neglected her due to his preoccupation with spiritual pursuits.



■ The playwright Wei Minglun (1933-)

One day, a young and handsome man from the Chu state, Prince Chu, visits Zhuangzi, but he is away. Tian receives the visitor and develops subtle feelings for him, though she rationally suppresses these emotions as Zhuangzi's wife. When Zhuangzi returns, he recounts an encounter: he met a young woman mourning her recently deceased husband, who had instructed her to remarry only after the soil on his grave had dried. Distraught, the woman was unable to determine whether her grief was for her dead husband or the still-moist earth. Zhuangzi decides to help by using his magic to dry the soil instantly. This encounter prompts Zhuangzi to question whether his wife would also rush to remarry if he were to die. He devises a plan to test her fidelity by pretending to die and then disguising himself as Prince Chu to seduce his wife.

Initially, Tian is overwhelmed by grief but is swayed by the youthful and passionate "Prince Chu" and agrees to his proposal. Zhuangzi, disheartened but unwilling to accept the truth, continues to test her by having his disguised self pretend to be gravely ill and claim that only the brain of a dead person can cure him. Torn between her love for the "Prince" and her unwillingness to harm her deceased husband's body, Tian is deeply conflicted. Seeing her suffering, Zhuangzi reveals his true identity and explains the situation. He offers her freedom to seek out the real Prince Chu and pursue a happier life. However, upon learning the truth, Tian is devastated, feeling that she has betrayed her husband and is a "bad woman." She is further anguished upon discovering that the real Prince Chu never sought her out. Overwhelmed by despair, she ends her own life. Zhuangzi is left questioning why, despite granting his wife freedom, she chose to commit suicide.



Stills from the Chuanju *Tian Jie and Zhuangzhou*.

Xu Fen's sympathetic portrayal of Tian may be influenced by her own perspective as a woman. Traditional xiqu with the *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* theme often concludes with a condemnation of the wife's infidelity, as seen in Jingju *The Great Coffin Splitting*, Qinqiang *Butterfly Dream*, and Yuju *Nanhua Hall*. These works typically suppress female rights and desires, though their performances are often so compelling that audiences overlook thematic flaws in favor of appreciating the actors' skills. Xu Fen modernizes the theme by incorporating elements of illusion, symbolism, and absurdity from modern theatrical techniques. She delves deeply into the characters' psychology and offers profound reflections on human nature. Through Xu Fen's Chuanju *Tian Jie and Zhuangzhou*, we witness Chinese xiqu's evolution from traditional forms to modern expressions in both ideological content and artistic style.

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## Chinese Theatre in the First Half of 2024

ZHONG Junfang

In the first half of 2024, China's first-tier cities enjoyed an influx of world-renowned theater troupes, alongside the revival and exhibition of numerous Chinese theater productions. Theatergoers were treated to exceptional performances spanning drama, xiqu, dance, children's theater, and musicals. Here is a selection of some of the most highly acclaimed production from this period, showcasing the eclectic talent and creativity displayed during this vibrant theatrical season.

### I. Spoken Drama

From the 8th to the 24th March 2024, the fifth production of Beijing People's Art Theatre's *Sunrise*, directed by Feng Yuanzheng and starring Lu Lu, Yang



■ A still from *Sunrise*

Mingxin, and Yang Jiayin, took the stage at the Capital Theatre. *Sunrise*, is one of the iconic works by celebrated Chinese dramatist Cao Yu. This production has been frequently performed, but this latest edition brings a fresh interpretation. Unlike previous versions, this production places a stronger emphasis on modern expression while delving more deeply into the essence of the text. Feng Yuanzheng presents the story from a new angle—that of the character Fang Dasheng—providing an insightful perspective on an otherwise familiar setting.

The play *Long Day's Journey into Night* was staged at the Beijing International Theatrical Center- People's Art Little Theatre on 6 June. It is a significant work from the later years of American playwright Eugene O'Neill. Premiered in 1956, three years after O'Neill's death, this autobiographical piece draws deeply from his personal experiences and spiritual explorations. Over the decades, it has resonated widely, allowing audiences to empathize, reflect on their own life journeys, and engage with profound questions about existence.

Director Zhang Tong believes that the play offers a rich expressive vocabulary on stage, where language, environment, and character actions work together to externalize the characters' inner lives. In this adaptation, some lines from the original play are streamlined to ensure the language supports the intensity of onstage conflict, allowing the characters' inner worlds to flow more naturally to the audience.



■ A Still from *Long Day's Journey into Night*



■ A Still from *Zhang Juzheng*

On 11 June, the historical drama *Zhang Juzheng*, written by renowned writer Xiong Zhaozheng, directed by Feng Yuanzheng and Yan Rui, and starring Feng Yuanzheng, Zhang Pei, Liu Zhiyang, Li Jinfeng, and He Jing, entered its second round of performances. As an original historical work, this production by Beijing People's Art Theatre explores the theme of reformers for the first time, depicting the vision and dedication of a generation committed to change and offering a contemporary interpretation of history. The stage, designed with a fluid, capitalist aesthetic, provides audiences with a refreshing visual experience. The play also boldly innovates by presenting the significance of Zhang Juzheng's reforms through a blend of realistic and non-realistic narrative time and space, using a condensed format. Audiences particularly noted the montage technique as a standout feature of the production.

On June 22, The Nine Theatre's production *Principles* was staged at the Suzhou Culture and Art Centre. *Principles* is a school fable that transcends reality and marks The Nine Theatre's new exploration of modern themes following their "Republican Intellectuals Series." The production embodies The Nine's unwavering commitment to discernment and idealism, alongside their steadfast defense and pursuit of truth and goodness. During the performance, an actor asked the audience, "Does anyone think I should resign for this?" With the lights on, the playwright's question was turned directly to the audience,



■ A Still from *Principles*

inviting them into the story and prompting deeper reflection on the play's themes.

## II. Xiqu (Chinese Traditional Opera)

From March 21 to May 9, the Wuhan "Opera Wharf" Chinese Opera Art Festival took place, spanning 50 days and featuring six types of xiqu. Ten xiqu troupes showcased works such as the modern Jingju (Peking Opera) *Protagonist*, the Cantonese Yueju pieces *Red Mane Blazing Horse* and *The White Snake Legend*, the Kunqu classic *Butterfly Dream*,

and 32 other captivating performances.

From April 2 to 9, the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe, in collaboration with the Young Theatre's spring and summer seasons, presented classic works, including the play *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, the martial pieces *Red Peach Hill*, *Shiqian Stealing the Armour*, *Flipping the Chinese Chariot*, and *The Red Mane Blazing Horse*, a Jingju performance showcasing both male and female actors in refined, comedic roles.

On the evening of April 28, the 9th China Kunqu Opera Festival, co-sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Jiangsu Provincial People's Government, opened in Kunshan. Over seven days, 16 outstanding Kunqu plays and excerpts were performed, with the highlight being the classic version of *The Jade Hairpin*, starring Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe's "Magnolia Award" winner Hu Weilu and Plum Blossom Prize winner Luo Chenxue. This version of *The Jade Hairpin* represents the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe's commitment to "preserving tradition while innovating." The two actors demonstrated exceptional synergy, achieving a seamless performance marked by subtle, intimate gestures, precise stage positioning, body language, nuanced vocal modulation, and meaningful glances. These unique qualities brought the characters' relationship to life without distracting or overshadowing

the drama.

From May 15 to 18, 2024, the Shenzhen Futian Jingju Masters Art Week was held as planned, featuring Jingju stars Yu Kuizhi and Li Shengsu. Staying true to its tradition of showcasing renowned performers, promoting Jingju, and benefiting the public, the event brought together leading figures in contemporary Jingju, including national first-class actors Wang Yue, Du Zhe, Guo Yaoyao, Ma Xiangfei, and Hu Bin, as well as promising young talents such as Lü Yaoyao, Zhu Hong, Liu Lei, and Chu Fengyi. The ensemble performed selected scenes from classic xiqu pieces such as *The Battle of Wujiapo*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, and *The Female Generals of the Yang Family*, providing a memorable experience for Jingju fans in Shenzhen.

On the evening of June 7, a special Jingju Concert was held at the Tianchan Beijing Opera Center Yifu Theater to commemorate the 130th anniversary of Mei Lanfang's birth and the 90th anniversary of Mei Baojiu's birth. Co-presented by the Beijing Opera Theatre and the Shanghai Opera Theatre, the event featured a gathering of esteemed Mei School performers and invited celebrated artists from other schools, including Qi School master Chen Shaoyun, Tan School successor Tan Xiaozeng, Ye School xiaosheng Li Hongtu, and laosheng artist Du Zhenjie. During the Dragon Boat Festival, the two theaters also jointly presented classic traditional xiqu pieces, such as *Farewell My Concubine*, *The Palace of Eternal Life*, and *Mu Guiying Takes Command*.

## III. Musical Theater, Dance Theater, and Children's Theater

The Cantonese version of the musical *I Am What I Am*, starring Chen Jieyi and Zheng Junzhi, was performed at the Guangzhou Grand Theatre from May 9 to 12. The production highlights the Lingnan lion dance culture and local traditions, showcasing various lion dance movements to express the perseverance and dream-chasing spirit inherent in Cantonese people.

On May 11, the dance theater *The Cat God in the Forbidden City*, written by Feng Li, premiered at the Shanghai Grand Theatre. The play tells the story of the "Cat God" and views the world through "cat eyes," offering audiences of all ages a glimpse into the Forbidden City, a symbol of Chinese history, civilization, and traditional culture. After the performance, Shi Zhanjun, editor-in-chief of *People's Daily*, praised the stunning set design, noting that the wide-angle perspectives created a vast yet clear scene with a symbolic and



■ A Still from *The Cat in the Forbidden City*

basic form. The curved main design, incorporating color and movement, was a brilliant touch. The cast brought together actors from three generations, including Liu Xiaoming, a "Plum Blossom Award" winner and national first-class actor, along with rising talents Song Jianlin and Yin Liang, as well as Xu Yuanbo and Li Yuanyuan, who had previously performed in the Japanese Shiki Theatre Company's *Cats*. The musical, adapted from the picture book of the same name, offers a family-friendly experience, showcasing the Forbidden City through the story of the "Cat God."

On May 21, the musical *Lady Macbeth* premiered at the Shanghai Culture Square. As a key work in the theater's "2022 Chinese Original Musical Incubation Program," the production brought together talented young British creators James Beeny and Gina Georgio, along with the renowned "Xu Jun Drama" theatrical company, to deliver a distinctive performance featuring an international cast and presented entirely in English. The musical is told from Lady Macbeth's perspective, offering a narrative filled with even more complex conflict than *Macbeth* itself. Director Xu Jun infused the production with his signature poetic and minimalist Eastern aesthetics, transforming the "Birnam Wood" prophecy from the original play into a central stage installation: a cluster of branches reaching outward. As the Macbeth family's fate unravels, the branches slowly rotate like the wheel of fortune, descending from above. Musically, the production employs choral arrangements to create a majestic

and solemn atmosphere throughout many scenes, intensifying the emotional resonance of the ensemble.

#### IV. Academic Information

On April 10, the "Qi School: Chen Shaoyun's Achievements in Performance Art" academic seminar was held at the Shanghai Jingju Culture Center. Over twenty experts from across the country, including Wang Kui and Shang Changrong, gathered to discuss and share insights on the current state of Jingju. They explored the extraordinary artistic achievements of renowned Jingju artist Chen Shaoyun in preserving and developing the Qi School and examined the far-reaching impact of his "Chen Shaoyun Trilogy"—*Substituting a Raccoon for the Prince*, *Success and Failure on Account of Xiao He*, and *Golden Thread Tune*—on the creation and performance of contemporary Chinese xiqu. Through the Chen Shaoyun phenomenon, the seminar also analyzed how current opera performances can inherit, evolve, and break free from traditional schools of thought.

On the afternoon of April 12, the "Performing Arts World—2024 Shanghai International Musical Theatre Festival" musical theater development forum and closing ceremony were held at Shanghai Culture Square. Hosted by the People's Government of Huangpu District and the Shanghai Grand Theatre Art Center and organized by the Huangpu District Cultural and Tourism Bureau and Shanghai Culture Square Theatre, the forum brought together five keynote speakers from China, Japan, the United States, South Korea, and Germany, along with industry experts, scholars, and media representatives. The forum, themed "Action," sparked a lively exchange of ideas and experiences, blending industry practices and academic research.

On 28th May, "Breakthrough and Rise: Higher Education Conference on Chinese Stage Art in the Age of Digital Intelligence" was held at Shanghai Theatre Academy. This conference, initiated by Shanghai Theatre Academy and jointly hosted by the China Stage Art Society and undertaken by the Stage Art Department of Shanghai Theatre Academy, invited representatives from 28 high-level art colleges and universities across China. It brought together nearly 100 experts, scholars, and industry leaders with the theme of "Breakthrough and Climbing," with the aim of discussing in-depth the new changes and development of the industry field. In the afternoon of May 18th, the conference held a seminar on "Cultivation of Innovative Talents in China's Digital Performing

Arts" in the Smart Classroom of Shanghai Theatre Academy, and on the 19th, keynote speeches on the themes of "Cultural Technology and Future Theatre" and "Challenges and Opportunities of Stage Art" were held in Duanjun Theatre.

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