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中國戲劇

国际戏剧协会
International Theatre Institute ITI

上海戏剧学院
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On Liyuan Xi: A Lecture Compilation[1]

WANG Renjie

1. On "Gū" 孤

How should we introduce Liyuan Xi (literally Pear Garden Opera)? No one has ever systematically summarized its characteristics. There are only a few scattered articles here and there. So, I put a lot of thought into it and came up with three words: " 孤 " (Gū), " 古 " (Gǔ), and " 固 " (Gù).

The word " 孤 " (Gū) refers to solitude—lonely, isolated, and desolate. It's solitary, uncared for, and unloved, because it's a very small and ancient theatrical tradition. However, precisely because it is solitary, it must possess something unique. As we saw earlier, the drum and many of the instruments in the orchestra are quite ancient, some of which are rarely seen in other regional genres across the country.

In Liyuan Xi, the norms of basic skills training called "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines" (Shiba Bu Ke Mu) [2]. The roles like Sheng (the male lead), Dan (the female lead), Jing (the painted face), Mo (the old lead), and Chou (the comic-role) all follow the "Shiba Bu Ke Mu" system, which is like the phrase "a complete tonic," a generalized term. It doesn't necessarily refer to exactly eighteen steps, but can vary from there. The character "Mu" means "mother," suggesting endless possibilities and variations within this system.

1 This article was first published in *Fujian Art*, No. 6, 2020.[Translator's note]

2 The "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines," also known as the "Father-Mother Steps," serves as a foundational training sequence passed down through generations for the instruction of young xiqu apprentices.[Translator's note]

As a living fossil of Southern Song dynasty "Nanxi" (Southern Opera), during that time, the imperial family moved south, and the southern external imperial office was established in Quanzhou. Quanzhou, at that time, was a major international port, famously known as the largest in the East. After the Zhao dynasty took control of the regions south of Yangtze River, the imperial office relocated from Shaoxing and Wenzhou to Fujian, where it settled in Quanzhou.

At the time, customs tax revenues from Quanzhou alone accounted for one-twentieth of the national fiscal income. This economic prominence attracted tens of thousands of members of the Zhao imperial clan and nobility to settle in Quanzhou. Among the cultural traditions they brought from Zhejiang was the "Seven-actor Troupe" (literally "Seven-son Troupe"), which is now known as "Little Liyuan"[1]. When the "Seven-actor Troupe" traveled to perform, they carried two lanterns: one inscribed with "Seven-actor Troupe," the other with "Hanlin Academy." The latter was a symbolic designation, used by the performers to elevate their status—suggesting affiliation with the imperial household and implying a level of cultural prestige.

■ Mr. Wang Renjie's Lecture. All images in this article are from *Fujian Art*.

1 Liyuan Xi comprises "Large Liyuan" and "Little Liyuan"; "Large Liyuan" is further divided into two branches "Shanglu" 上路 (literally "Upper Road") and "Xia'nan" 下南 (literally "Lower South") .

This was a form of hall-based performance art. By modern standards, the stage space was no more than ten square meters. During performances—typically centered on tales of talented scholars and beautiful women—certain social customs were observed: female audience members, for instance, could only view the show from behind beaded curtains. The limited stage area necessitated a specific performance style, with actors trained in compact, refined movements such as "suibu" (tiny steps) and "diebu" (layered steps). After the founding of the People's Republic, performances were relocated to larger, proscenium-style stages. Many performers struggled to adapt to the expanded space, as they were unaccustomed to taking broader steps. This spatial transformation led to the gradual erosion of certain traditional techniques, resulting in a partial loss of the form's original aesthetic integrity.

For many years, we have been making a concerted effort to revive this tradition. Because of its compact nature—both in terms of stage size and cast—the performances typically revolve around themes such as romance between talented scholars and graceful ladies, loyalty and filial piety, moral righteousness, and the subtleties of social life. The number of performers rarely exceeds seven. On a stage barely over ten square meters, all seven actors might appear simultaneously. As you saw earlier, the staging is highly intricate: every turn or change in direction involves a series of stylized movements. At times, an actor must take three steps back just to move three steps forward—without those steps, they might risk stepping off the stage.

The orchestra also plays multiple roles. In addition to providing musical accompaniment, it assumes important dramatic functions. For instance, in scenes involving "neibai" (offstage or behind-the-screen dialogue), musicians often voice characters such as the emperor. In our production of *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* (Jie Fu Yin), the emperor never appears on stage—a choice some critics have described as avant-garde, though it is in fact rooted in long-standing tradition. Historically, the lead drummer would take on such roles, speaking lines offstage and even assisting with vocal support.

Movements in Liyuan Xi are minimal yet meticulously crafted. All gestures are required to follow a curved, circular path. Whatever the action, it ultimately resolves into a rounded form, reflecting harmony and fluidity. I recall that during a performance tour in the 1980s, some artists in Shanghai remarked that the essence of "kefan" (the codified patterns of performance) in Liyuan Xi could be captured in a single word: "roundness." Because of this highly formalized aesthetic, it resists the integration of realistic, everyday behavior. It is not naturalistic; rather, it is a rigorously stylized art form.

There are also many strict conventions. For instance, raising the hand must reach the level of the eyes and brows; folding the hands in greeting should align with the chin; and spreading the arms should not extend beyond the navel. For performers—especially those playing "dan" roles—posture must be graceful and disciplined. When "sheng" and "dan" characters make their entrance, they do so with hands placed over the heart, conveying dignity and composure. The feet must never be exposed to the audience; even while standing, they must be subtly concealed. As a result, all movements are small—refined, rounded, serene, and restrained. There are no large or exaggerated gestures in performance.

Another defining feature is the absence of "shuixiu" (long sleeves), and thus, there is no "shuixiu" technique in the training. Instead, hand gestures become especially expressive. Performers commonly use stylized positions such as the "lanhuazhi" ("orchid fingers") or the "Kuanyin hand". There is a wide repertoire of such gestures—graceful, varied, and full of rhythmic charm.

Footwork, too, is delicate. "Pao Yuanchang" (Full circular runs) are rare; instead, actors employ "sui bu" (tiny steps), "die bu" (layered steps), and various intricate turns and angled movements. The compact stage space demands a performance style that is subtle, tranquil, and composed.

Another hallmark of the form is its highly musical and choreographed nature: "yi bu qu, yi bu ke" ("one step per phrase, one movement per gesture"). As you'll see in *The Journey of Yuzhen* (*Yuzhen Xing*), every sung line is matched with

■ The Liyuan Xi repertoire *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln (Lü Mengzheng: Guoqiao Ruyao)*

a precise set of stylized movements. This intense formalism is most evident in "dan" roles. In fact, I personally believe that the expressiveness and elegance of "dan" performance in Liyuan opera surpass even that of Kunqu (Kunqu Opera).

The orchestra features the "Yajiao Gu" (Foot-pressing Drum), also known as the "southern drum", which differs markedly from the percussion instruments used in Jingju (Peking opera). Some refer to the drummer as the "commander of ten thousand troops," emphasizing his dual role: not only does he conduct the orchestra, but in some respects, he also guides the performers. At the same time, he must remain responsive to the actors, adjusting his rhythms in accordance with their movements—sometimes even using his foot to strike the drum.

The vocal style of Liyuan Xi is known as "Quanzhou qiang" (Quanzhou tune). This designation is relatively modern and has yet to gain full recognition in standard theatre historiography. However, evidence of its historical existence can be found in the Ming dynasty, during the Jiajing reign, when the play *Chen San Wu Niang*, also known as *Lijing Ji* (*The Tale of the Lychee Mirror*) , was published in print. The edition explicitly noted that it integrated "Chaozhou qiang" (Chaozhou tune) and "Quanzhou qiang", indicating that the Quanzhou style was already present at that time.

Today, mainstream theatrical discourse often cites the "five major vocal styles," but "Quanzhou qiang" is typically absent from that list—perhaps due to the relative isolation of the region or its limited cultural influence. The style is also

■ "Yajiao Gu" (Foot-pressing Drum)

■ National-level Intangible Cultural Heritage inheritor Chen Jimin performing the Liyuan Xi "Yajiao Gu".

constrained by geographic and linguistic boundaries: it must be sung in the Quanzhou dialect. Whether the performer is from Xiamen, Zhangzhou, or Taiwan, singing Liyuan opera requires strict adherence to this regional sound.

Spoken dialogue and sung passages in Liyuan Xi are divided into two categories: "wen" (literary) and "wu" (vernacular). As the names suggest, "wen" lines are delivered in classical literary Chinese, while "wu" lines are spoken in the local vernacular. This distinction is rigorously upheld. Another unique feature is the frequent use of the form of regional "Mandarin" that blends local dialects. It is markedly different from standard Mandarin and must be specially learned—even I haven't mastered it properly.

Liyuan Xi also preserves an extensive repertoire of over 200 "qupai" (fixed-tune melodies) and more than 300 instrumental pieces—far more than are typically found in other regional theatre forms. Northern tunes occasionally appear, and there are even rare instances of "kunqiang" (Kunqu tune), "qingyangqiang", and "yiyangqiang". We tend to be honest in attribution: whatever vocal style is used, we list it as such. For instance, the aria "E Mao Xue" (Snow Like Goose Feathers) from *Li Yaxian* is explicitly marked as "Kunqu".

In both performance and singing, Liyuan Xi embodies a style of restrained elegance. The tone is gentle, fluid, and lyrical—rarely forceful or high-pitched. For this reason, it is well-suited to portray the subtle emotions of ordinary urban life in modern plays. However, when tasked with representing soldiers of the People's Liberation Army or government officials, we find ourselves less at ease. We've made attempts—for example, with the modern drama *Zhang Side*—but the result often feels unconvincing. Particularly when a comic-role actor ("chou") plays a serious character, no matter how solemn his intent, the effect tends to remain comical. As you heard earlier, there is no use of booming gongs or crashing drums.

2. On "Gǔ" 古

What does " 古 " (Gǔ), mean? It refers to something ancient. It is generally said that Liyuan Xi has a history of seven to eight hundred years, making it a living fossil of Southern Song and Yuan dynasty theatre. Why is this claim made? Today, Liyuan Xi still preserves over eighty plays from the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties, with more than a third of them still being performed on stage. These plays adhere to the traditional structure of "Nanxi", such as the

well-known motifs of "Jing, Liu, Bai, Sha"[1]. Plays like *Wang Kui* and *Cai Bojie* are relatively complete in terms of their texts, performances, and music. For example, *Wang Kui* differs significantly from *Fen Xing Ji* (*The Burning Incense Record*). All of our plays, including "Jing, Liu, Bai, Sha," share similarities with "Chuanqi" (traditional Chinese opera), but they are more ancient and simpler in style. The plots are less intricate, and the language is not as sophisticated. These characteristics support the argument that Liyuan Xi is a living fossil of Southern Song and Yuan drama.

A strong piece of evidence for this is the play *Zhu Wen Taiping Qian* (*Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin*), which is frequently performed. This play is recorded in *Nanxi Xulu* (a record of Southern Opera) under the title *Zhu Wen Gui Zeng Taiping Qian* (*A Female Ghost Gives Zhu Wen the Taiping Coin*). While we once had this title, the complete script was missing. The *Yongle Encyclopedia* only includes three excerpts, suggesting the play had already been lost in Southern Song drama. In the 1950s, an elderly artist found a copy of this script at a second-hand market. It was a manuscript from the Qing Dynasty, from our Liyuan Xi Seven-actor Troupe, dating back to the Daoguang period, and it contained three complete acts. By the 1990s, several of Liyuan Xi's plays, including excerpts, were officially printed, complete with illustrations. In the 1980s, the sinologist Pier van der Loon discovered these versions in a European university library (the related publications were released in the 1990s). Additionally, a *Lijing Ji* manuscript was found by Ouyang Yuqian in a Tokyo library, which indicates that Liyuan Xi was already being printed and published during the middle and late Ming Dynasty, including its excerpt plays. Therefore, the history of this genre does not start in the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, but must be traced back two hundred years earlier, as the formation of a theatre genre requires a lengthy maturation process.

The theatre historian Liu Nianci argued that the current performance style of Liyuan Xi is rooted in the Ming dynasty. He believed that it was during this period that performance art could reach such a high level of sophistication and intricacy. In contrast, during the Song and Yuan dynasties, "Nanxi" was still a form of folk song sung in alleyways, and it needed several centuries of

1 "Jing, Liu, Bai, Sha" 荆刘拜杀，"Jing" refers to *Jingchai Ji*《荆钗记》(*The Story of the Hairpin*), "Liu" refers to *Liu Zhiyuan Baitu Ji*《刘知远白兔记》(*The Tale of Liu Zhiyuan and the White Rabbit*), "Bai" refers to *Baiyueting Ji*《拜月亭记》(*The Moon Worship Pavilion*), "Sha" refers to *Shagou Ji*《杀狗记》（*The Story of Killing the Dog*). These four plays, collectively known as the "Four Great Nanxi Plays" 四大南戏 , are representative works of "Nanxi" (Southern Opera) that flourished in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties.

development to reach its current state. Based on existing printed scripts, it can be said that by the Ming dynasty, Liyuan Xi had already reached a mature form.

The discovery of the play *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin* led many Chinese theatre historians to boldly affirm that Liyuan Xi, alongside Puxian Xi from Fujian, are living fossils of "Nanxi", or the echoes of "Nanxi" in Song and Yuan Dynasties. This conclusion is widely accepted.

However, there remains some controversy. The disagreement centers around the origin of "Nanxi". Theatre historians generally hold one of two views. One perspective asserts that "Nanxi" originated in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, a claim that is widely accepted and supported by many scholars. According to this view, Quanzhou, Putian, and even Chaozhou inherited "Nanxi" from Wenzhou. This theory is particularly popular among scholars from Wenzhou, and even the Wenzhou municipal government strongly supports it.

In contrast, in the 1960s, Liu Nianci led a team from the Institute of Theatre Studies in Chinese National Academy of Arts, along with numerous experts from the Fujian Provincial Institute of Arts, on an extensive field investigation of "Puxian Xi" and Liyuan Xi. After several months of research, he published a monograph titled *New Evidence on Nanxi*, in which he proposed a new theory: "Nanxi" emerged simultaneously in the southeastern coastal regions of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong. This theory has been met with skepticism, particularly in Wenzhou and broader Zhejiang circles, including from Fu Jin, a Zhejiang native himself, who expressed doubts about this claim.

As for us, we take a more relaxed view. Whether Liyuan Xi is a living fossil of "Nanxi" or the birthplace of this art form, the important thing is that we have preserved its repertoire. For instance, "Nanxi" plays were traditionally named after the protagonists. This naming convention is found in both Liyuan Xi and Puxian Xi, reflecting a clear tradition from "Nanxi".

So, while Liyuan Xi and Puxian Xi may be isolated, sometimes we can still claim the role of the elder. Kunqu is often called the "ancestor of all theatre," but even experts have raised doubts, as there are other theatre forms in the northern regions that are older. It is indisputable that Kunqu is the "teacher of all theatre," but the title of "ancestor of all theatre" is still somewhat contested.

The ancient nature of Liyuan Xi and Puxian Xi is unquestionable, but how "ancient" they truly are remains uncertain. Back in the day, theatre was looked down upon, and as a result, there were no detailed records, like those in the puzhi (genre catalogues), and even the term "Nanyin" (Southern Music) wasn't documented.

■ "kefan" (the codified patterns of performance) in Liyuan Xi

Now, I would like to address the relationship between "Nanyin" and Liyuan Xi. Some experts refer to Nan Yin as the "ancient music of the Central Plains." In the past, "Nanyin" was called "Nanqu". "Qu", as the name suggests, is a general term for traditional theatre and folk arts. However, in recent years, to apply for UNESCO recognition, the term was changed to "Nanyin", distinguishing it from theatre.

Regardless of its origins, Liyuan Xi has fostered many art forms in southern region of Fujian province, but now people no longer recognize its roots. Some even claim that the parent is the child. We have no way to argue this, and frankly, we don't contest it.

3. On "Gù" 固

" 固 "(Gù) refers to something that is solidified, stubborn, or steadfast — holding on to the old, even when incomplete or imperfect. The Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe was established in 1953 with approval from the Ministry of Culture as a provincial-level state-run troupe. Without state support, it might have been difficult to sustain. For over sixty years, our troupe has carried a mentality as if on the verge of collapse.

In the 1950s, there were three (private) Liyuan troupes in Quanzhou. After the Cultural Revolution, they all disappeared. After the reforms and opening-up, there were one or two hundred amateur Gaojia Xi troupes in Quanzhou, and one of our retired artists tried to establish a Liyuan Xi troupe, but after two or three years, it ended without success. Liyuan Xi will always remain a single troupe, and it's even harder to imagine that changing now. I remember in the 1980s, Mr. Ma Shaobo once said that a single tree cannot make a forest — we needed more troupes. Now, that's even more unlikely. So, Liyuan Xi will forever be a singular troupe.

Though I have retired, I still feel just as connected to the troupe as everyone else. A famous director once came to direct a production of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* with our troupe, and everyone, from the orchestra to the stage staff, not

to mention the actors, was watching him closely, worried that he might alter the unique flavor of Liyuan Xi, which made them feel a bit uneasy.

For decades, we've held the belief that we must preserve the essence of our art. If this troupe fails, or if the taste of Liyuan Xi fades and is replaced by grander productions like others — mixing in various elements here and there — we would truly be letting down our ancestors, even though those other productions may be wonderful!

But because we are unable to take that path—and doing so would funDa Mentally alter us—any such change would amount to a loss of the art itself. That's why everyone in our troupe, from top to bottom, shares the same conviction: we must not let that happen. We tread very carefully, constantly alert to the risk of any misstep. One wrong move, and this art form could disappear. If Liyuan Xi and Puxian Xi were lost, then Chinese xiqu, as a living stage tradition, would effectively lose two hundred years of its history. Only Kunqu would remain, standing alone. So, we cannot let it vanish.

I still remember during the Cultural Revolution, our performers were all sent to the countryside and suffered great hardships. By the time the movement ended, most of the veteran artists were already gone. One of the most famous Liyuan Xi performers, Cai Youben , was completely illiterate, yet he held in his memory more than thirty "Little Liyuan" plays—everything from the scripts and music to the full performances. That entire generation, which embodied three major performance lineages, has largely passed away.

Now, the responsibility of preserving and passing on the tradition falls to those born in the 1950s, such as Zeng Jingping and her peers. They have taken on the duty of inheritance. This art has always been passed from one generation to the next. Many who once took it lightly have now stepped forward with a strong sense of responsibility, dedicating themselves to teaching young performers and safeguarding the direction of Liyuan Xi's future.

As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended, we launched what we called the "second rescue." Nearly forty years have passed since then, and throughout this time, we've worked with quiet dedication—steadily and earnestly—even under extremely difficult circumstances. We've managed to recover and preserve a significant number of plays, many of which are still being performed on stage today. We've also trained several generations of young actors, and there is another group still in training, not yet graduated.

We regard these young people as if they were our own children—cherished and cared for like only sons and daughters. We hope they will grow into their

roles and carry the tradition forward. What we fear most is losing it. If we lose it, we will have let down not only our ancestors and our descendants, but also every one of you here with us today.

Audio Editing: Yuan Wei
Photography: Yuan Wei
Proofreading: Zhi Feng

WANG RENJIE (1942–2020)
The renowned Liyuan Xi playwright.

Liyuan Xi: Eight Hundred Years of Legacy[1]

XIE Zichou

Among the old photos of the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe, two in particular moved me the most. One photo captures the troupe's first director, Cai Youben— a renowned master of the "Seven-actor Troupe" — surrounded by the first group of trainees admitted after the founding of the Experimental Troupe: students from the 1956 actor training class, gathered around the "Yajiao Gu" (Foot-pressing Drum) as they practiced the most traditional "Seven-actor Circle"[2] method of passing down Liyuan Xi. The stern look on the old troupe leader's face in the photo gives the impression that if one of the students mispronounced or sang a word incorrectly, he would immediately correct it with a blow of a drumstick on the head.

■ Former director Cai Youben imparting his skills through the traditional "Seven-actor Circle" teaching method of Liyuan Xi. All images in this article are from *Fujian Art*.

1 This article was first published in *Fujian Art*, No. 2, 2014.[Translator's note]

2 Liyuan Xi troupes are typically formed with adult performers. When a new troupe is formed with children, they first undergo formal training. Each troupe recruits only seven people, who then learn from a master in a formation known as the "Seven-actor Circle 七角围," with the seven performers gathered around the teacher. [Translator's note]

■ Veteran artist He Shumin narrating traditional plays in front of a recorder.

In another photo, He Shumin (affectionately called "Wu Min Gu" by the children of the Liyuan Xi), a famous veteran artiste of the Shanglu school and one of the earliest female performers in the history of the Liyuan Xi, is hunchbacked and sitting at a table, holding the microphone of an old-fashioned cassette recorder in her hand as she struggles to recount the traditional repertoire of the Liyuan Xi, and it seems to me that from the photo I can hear her hoarse but sonorous singing and singing. It seemed to me that I could hear her hoarse but resonant singing from the photographs.

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage depends on the oral traditions passed down from one generation to the next, with masters imparting knowledge to their apprentices through careful, hands-on teaching. This rigorous process of inheritance directly impacts the preservation and value of the cultural heritage. In their youth, the old director Cai Youben and He Shumin also learned every word, every melody, and every step with strict discipline from their teachers. Tracing further back, this lineage of transmission spans dozens, even hundreds, of generations, culminating in the rich, 800-year history of Liyuan Xi. What is most remarkable is that despite being illiterate, the old director Cai Youben single-handedly dictated nearly a million words of scripts, song scores, and performance techniques for the Little Liyuan school, earning him the title of a master of his generation.

It is the eternal destiny of intangible cultural heritage that people die and art dies. Luckily, the Liyuan Xi was established after the liberation, and the salvage of the records by a large number of other new literary and art workers prevented the Liyuan Xi from repeating such a mistake. At that time, their predecessors had the foresight to orally rehearse all the traditional repertoire in its original form, and after the records were complete, they proceeded to arrange and adapt the repertoire. In the troupe's archive, the rows of late Qing

■ A group photo of veteran artists.

Dynasty scripts, oral recordings, videos, handwritten scripts, and musical scores are the treasures that preserve the essence of Liyuan Xi. They form a solid foundation for the future transmission of art and academic research. Under the leadership of these predecessors, the first actor training class in Fujian Province was established in 1956. Through the efforts of the old director, Yao suqin, and other renowned artists, a rigorous modern educational system for Liyuan Xi's performance, music, and recitation was gradually developed, followed by actor training classes in 1957, 1959 (Class A), 1959 (Class B), 1960, 1960 (Music Class), and 1961. After the Cultural Revolution, additional classes were formed, including those in 1977, 1978 (Troupe Representatives), 1985, 1989, 1997, and 2007. This established a clear and uninterrupted lineage of transmission, which is rare in the context of national intangible cultural heritage. For the 60th anniversary exhibition of the troupe's founding, we specially arranged photos from the same performance and scene according to generational lines of inheritance, resulting in dozens of sets. In recent years, the stage has frequently seen the traditional plays in their inherited versions. These are all part of the "passing on the torch" that every Liyuan Xi disciple takes pride in. After all, the life of Liyuan Xi lies in its transmission!

Liyuan Xi is the most complete and well-preserved descendant of the Southern Opera tradition from the Song and Yuan Dynasties. It is also one of the Chinese theatre troupes that most resolutely upholds traditional repertoires, music, and performance techniques, staying true to the core of classical Chinese Xiqu. Since entering the new era (1976-1988), while focusing on preservation and inheritance, the troupe has consistently adhered to the artistic principle of "returning to the roots while innovating," allowing traditional elements to thrive in new works, and blending them organically with modern theatrical concepts and contemporary audience tastes. It avoids the trend of large-scale

productions and avant-garde experimental theatre, instead maintaining a focus on Xiqu, stylization, and the genre's distinctive characteristics. By adhering to the delicate, refined, and elegant spirit of Liyuan Xi, this approach has gradually become a collective awareness over the past sixty years of development.

The troupe's creative works—whether in scriptwriting, music, stage design, or performances—most fear the criticism "it lacks the flavor of Liyuan Xi." The troupe's playwrights craft scripts that always provide ample space for Liyuan Xi's unique style. The composers' music, fresh and pleasing at first, still retains the essence of Liyuan Xi's distinct charm. The veteran actors from the 1956, 1957, 1959, 1960, and 1961 classes, along with younger generations of actors from the 1977, 1989, and 1997 classes, have a deep understanding of these artistic spaces and nuances. For example, in *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, one can clearly observe the traces of traditional solo performances from the female roles of Liyuan Xi. In *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, the traditional duets between the male and female characters in Liyuan Xi are expertly extracted, refined, and elevated.

In the 2003-2004 National Stage Art Excellence Program, Liyuan Xi was hailed for its "brilliant return to Chinese classical Xiqu." Personally, what I experienced and still recall vividly is the repeated creative detail in *The Record of Zhu Bian and the Cold Mountain* (Zhu Bian Leng Shan Ji) in both 2009 and 2012. On the wedding night, in 2009, Lin Cangxiao's portrayal of "Zhu Bian" was sober, while Zeng Jingping's portrayal of "Princess Xuehua" cleverly borrowed the traditional form from *Su Qin*, where "Zhou Shi lights the lantern." In a gentle, caring gesture, the princess helped dress Zhu Bian, subtly conveying her character's shyness and spontaneous nature. In 2012, Lin Cangxiao's "Zhu Bian" was drunken, and Zeng Jingping's "Princess Xuehua" once again drew from the traditional form in *Guo Hua*, where "Wang Yueying enters the mountain gate." She draped Zhu Bian's arm around her shoulder, teasing him affectionately and pushing him back and forth to rouse him from his drunken stupor. To the average audience, this might seem like a refreshing stage technique, but it is, in fact, an intricate blend of the artistic elements passed down through centuries in Liyuan Xi, beautifully brought to life by contemporary actors.

Not to mention the "Princess Farewell" scene, where Princess Xuehua's entrance is marked by a powerful, emotionally resonant foot-drum technique. While it may feel modern, it is, in essence, timeless, embodying both Liyuan Xi and the broader tradition of Chinese Xiqu.

As early as the late 1980s, when many domestic theater productions were focused on pushing for breakthroughs and innovation, the Liyuan Xi Troupe

■ The 1956 Class Liyuan Xi Inheritors' Performance of *Chen San Wu Niang*.

distinctively proposed a long-term plan for the preservation and inheritance of "restoring traditional short plays of Liyuan Xi." Since 2000, the troupe has placed even greater emphasis on preservation and inheritance, a focus that is vividly reflected in *Chen San and Wu Niang*. In this production, the character designs of "Huang Wu Niang" and "Yi Chun" were returned to traditional Liyuan Xi costumes, replacing the commonly used palace-style attire with plain shirts, skirts, and chest ribbons that are characteristic of Liyuan Xi. Troupe leader Zeng Jingping learned from Liyuan Xi veteran Cai Xiuying, and the revival and preservation of plays such as *Da Men* and *Liu Zhi Yuan* marked significant achievements and experiences from this period.

In the creation of new productions, the troupe has consistently emphasized the presentation of Liyuan Xi's distinct characteristics. At the same time, they have skillfully incorporated traditional elements in ways that resonate with the modern era and meet the evolving aesthetic expectations of contemporary audiences. The resounding success of the refined version of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* strongly validated this approach, providing the troupe with unwavering confidence to continue down this path. This refined version of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* has become the most beneficial Liyuan Xi production for the troupe since its establishment, both in terms of honors and material gains. After receiving the Ministry of Culture's second Excellent Reserved Play Award in 2013, it embarked on a nationwide tour, which received widespread acclaim. Notably, the renowned theater researcher and critic Fu Jin wrote an article in *People's Daily* titled "The Inspiration of Liyuan Xi's *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*," in which he praised the troupe's commitment to preserving the unique

■ The 60th Anniversary Group Photo of the Fujian Experimental Troupe of Liyuan Xi.

characteristics of their regional art form. He lauded, "More importantly, it is the historical development, artistic depth, and contemporary achievements. From these three perspectives, Liyuan Xi is unquestionably a major theatrical tradition!"

Being named one of the top 39 "National Key Troupes for Local Drama Creation and Performance" by the Ministry of Culture is a recognition and tribute to the 60 years of inheritance and development of Liyuan Xi by both the government and society. Although the evaluation form for the application is only a few pages long, it represents the cumulative effort and dedication of generations of Liyuan Xi disciples over six decades, offering a brilliant display of "building on a solid foundation for a remarkable breakthrough."

"In rescuing and preserving traditional Liyuan Xi plays, we must strive to restore their original appearance without randomly incorporating modern elements. It's akin to trying to repair ancient Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze vessels with modern aluminum alloys," said Master Wang Renjie, who frequently emphasized this point. "As long as we preserve the 18-step performance system of Liyuan Xi and uphold its traditional music and vocal style, Liyuan Xi will never be distorted." These principles have guided the troupe's approach of returning to tradition while embracing innovation over the past decade.

The young actors and staff of the troupe hold the three words "traditional drama" in the highest regard. It is a core task they must complete each year, and failing to do so by year's end means their annual evaluation will be deemed unsatisfactory, which may result in demotion in both rank and salary the following year. A glance at the troupe's records from the Youth and Narcissus Flower competition reveals a striking fact: over 90% of the entries are traditional plays, with only a small portion being new works. Few would dare to enter a commercially transplanted play into the competition. As Wang Renjie once stated, "Young actors must hold a reverent, almost religious, respect for the tradition of the genre, so that Liyuan Xi will neither be altered nor fade away."

Since the turn of the new era, Liyuan Xi has made significant and remarkable strides in both preserving its traditional art and innovating its performances. Notable accomplishments include the restoration and transmission of traditional works. Liyuan Xi also conducted lecture tours at top universities such as Peking University, Nanjing University, Renmin University, Fudan University, and the Shanghai Theatre Academy. The training of the 1997 and 2007 generations of young inheritors, the establishment of a Liyuan Xi teaching and practical base at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, and the upcoming five-year European tour starting in 2014 all represent significant milestones.

A particularly notable achievement is the troupe's ongoing commitment to public Liyuan Xi performances since moving to the Liyuan Classical Theatre at the end of 2008. These include the Lantern Festival performances, Liyuan Weekend, May Day performances, and summer performances. These efforts have changed the local habit of not purchasing tickets for performances in Quanzhou, drawing theatre enthusiasts from across the country, who have organized groups to visit the city specifically to watch Liyuan Xi. This local troupe in a smaller city has achieved extraordinary success with regular theatrical performances, a rarity even for larger, more established arts troupes in major cities.

I distinctly remember the first "Liyuan Weekend" performance on the evening of Saturday, May 9, 2009, when the troupe performed traditional pieces, only 19 people attended. As the performance drew to a close, the actors sat backstage, uncertain whether to continue the following week with such a small audience. With confused expressions, they asked the stage supervisor, "Should we bow after the show?" The stage supervisor, after a moment's hesitation, decisively instructed, "Prepare for the curtain call!" If it hadn't been for that night, when the actors insisted on bowing despite the small crowd, demonstrating professionalism and respect, the respect and support of the audience, which has been vital to the troupe's continued success, might never

have been earned.

At one point, troupe leader Zeng Jingping was deeply concerned about the audience's reaction to the newly restored traditional plays *Wang Kui* and *Zhu Shouchang*, as well as how the young actors would be evaluated. However, a comment on Weibo, "The inheritance is on the way," instantly filled us with confidence. This simple yet profound message not only acknowledged the long-term effort to preserve the art but also compassionately understood the inevitable struggles and setbacks along the path of inheritance. It provided the troupe with the emotional strength to rise after every fall and continue forward.

The life of Liyuan Xi lies in its inheritance. From the Song and Yuan dynasties to today, we have always been on this path...

XIE ZICHOU
Playwright of the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center

Generational Transition and the Tension Between Opportunity and Crisis: A Preliminary Study on the Development of Liyuan Xi from 2014 to 2024

WANG Yizhen

Abstract: For the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center[1], the decade from 2014 to 2024 marks a critical turning point in the development of Liyuan Xi. During this period, the Center successfully concluded a five-year collaboration with the MC93 Theatre in France, highlighting the expressive strength of Liyuan Xi through mutually enriching cross-cultural exchange. Simultaneously, the Center entered a phase of generational succession. Ensuring a smooth and stable transition of performers and production teams emerged as a central concern. In the post-pandemic era, a cultural revival trend has gained momentum within China. Seizing this opportunity, the Inheritance Center led the organization of two Nanxi showcase festivals, reinforcing its cultural presence. However, challenges persist in the area of generational succession: whether the younger generation of performers can fully take up the mantle of "returning to the roots while opening new paths" remains a question only time can answer.

Keywords: Liyuan Xi, generational transition, cross-cultural exchange

1 In 2012, due to shifts in cultural policy, the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe was restructured into the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center. Following the restructuring, few adjustments were made to its cultural functions, operational mechanisms, or personnel composition. The primary change lay in its institutional status, which shifted from a "partially state-funded public institution" to a "fully state-funded public welfare institution." 参见《福建省梨园戏传承中心内部机制改革方案（初稿）》，2012 年 5 月，福建省梨园戏传承中心资料室存档。[See *Internal Reform Proposal of the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center* (Draft), May 2012, archived in the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center Documentation Room.]

1. Reviving Classical Works and Creating New Plays

Repertoire development is a direct reflection of a theatre troupe's creative vitality. As an ancient form of xiqu, Liyuan Xi's repertoire building has traditionally focused on two main approaches. The first is the revival of classical traditional plays. As the saying goes, "To grow a tree tall, one must strengthen its roots." For the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center, whose artistic philosophy centers on "returning to origins and innovating anew," reinforcing the foundation means restoring traditional classics.

According to records, since 2014, the Inheritance Center has restored a number of traditional full-length plays, including *Wang Kui* (2014), *Cai Bojie* (2014), *Zhu Shouchang* (2014), *Zhu Maichen* (2016), *Liu Wenlong* (2017), *Gong Keji* (2017), *Lü Mengzheng* (2018), *Chen San Wuniang* (2019–2020), and *Baili Xi* (2023).[1] The revival of these classic plays differs from the "legend-ization" adaptations commonly seen during the Seventeen Years period (1949-1966). Instead, the Inheritance Center adheres to the oral versions passed down by veteran artists or fragmentary handwritten scripts. These plays are reconstructed and staged through a technique combining short play segments, aiming to restore the original performance style of Liyuan Xi as faithfully as possible.

Among these restored works, *Zhu Maichen* stands out as the most representative, both in terms of artistic achievement and frequency of performance. As one of the "Eighteen Pengtou"(eighteen retained repertoire titles) of the "Shanglu" school of Liyuan Xi, *Zhu Maichen* is a prime example of the genre's "jubai xi", a style also referred to as "spoken drama within xiqu." In the 1950s, due to missing portions of the oral script, artist Lin Rensheng adapted it using elements from the Yuan zaju *Zhu Taishou Fengxue Yuqiao Ji*, creating a new version titled *Yuqiao Ji*. This adaptation reimagined Zhu Maichen as a moral exemplar who was concerned for the world and disinterested in fame and gain, while also refining the image of his wife, Zhao Xiaoniang. Although the adaptation elevated the characters' moral stature, it diminished much of their original earthy vitality and the folk humor present in the oral version—a quality some referred to as its "clam flavor."

In 2016, the Inheritance Center decided not to adopt the Seventeen Years adaptation but instead restored the play based on six segments from the

1 Data provided by the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center Archive. Special thanks to the Archive for assistance in the preparation of this article.

oral script: "Introduction," "Forced to Write," "Scolding Dong," "Sweeping the Streets," "Entrusting Zhang Gong," and "Negotiation."[1] In 2017, the play toured cities such as Peking University, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Jinhua, receiving enthusiastic acclaim and triggering renewed national interest in Liyuan Xi. The popularity of this "jubai xi" among audiences of various ages and regions is not only due to its witty, lively dialogue but also because the actors, during both spoken and sung portions, skillfully employed complex physical stylization to express emotional nuances, captivating both the eye and the ear.

The restoration of traditional full-length plays like *Zhu Maichen* holds significant cultural value. First, the unaltered oral versions preserve a rich array of Hakka proverbs, offering valuable material for studying the Quanzhou dialect. For example, *Zhu Maichen* contains numerous Hakka idioms; during the national tour, pre-show lectures were even held to explain these expressions to the audience. Second, the oral scripts closely reflect the late Qing-era style of Liyuan Xi. Restoring them means recovering lost stylized routines, which contributes significantly to reconstructing and enriching the performance system of Liyuan Xi. Secondly, considerable emphasis has been placed on the creation and development of newly adapted plays. During this period, the Inheritance Center produced and staged seven newly written historical plays and one modern drama. Among these, *The Imperial Tablet Pavilion* (*Yubei Ting*, 2015) is particularly noteworthy. Adapted from the traditional Peking opera of the same name, the Liyuan Xi version presents a radically restructured interpretation of the original. First, the dramatis personae are streamlined: secondary characters are removed to focus solely on the emotional entanglements and misunderstandings among the three central figures—Meng Yuehua, Wang Youdao, and Liu Shengchun. Second, the narrative perspective is shifted: the Liyuan Xi adaptation centers on Meng Yuehua, offering a subtle and intricate portrayal of her psychological struggles. This approach aligns seamlessly with Liyuan Xi's renowned capacity for expressing the inner lives of female characters, allowing the dan (female role) tradition full scope for emotional nuance. Third, the thematic core is inverted: the most striking departure lies in transforming the original plot—where Wang Youdao divorces Meng Yuehua and later reunites with her—into a narrative in which Meng chooses to leave of her own accord. Rather than reconciling, she walks away alone, shedding her culturally imposed identities as wife and daughter. Through this act of self-liberation, she reclaims her agency as an individual, re-examines her existential conditions, and ultimately embarks on a conscious journey of

1 专题片：名城群英会之梨园法国风，泉州电视台 1 套，2016 年 4 月 7 日。[Documentary: *Heroes of the Historic City: Liyuan in the French Wind*, Quanzhou TV Channel 1, April 7, 2016.]

departure. This subversive reworking dismantles the original's endorsement of female chastity and fidelity, offering a profound critique of traditional moral narratives.

Yingxiong Hudan (*Intrepid Hero*) represents the only modern play in Liyuan Xi created in nearly four decades.[1] In 2021, to commemorate the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, the Inheritance Center adapted the 1958 film *Yingxiong Hudan* into a modern Liyuan Xi production of the same title. The play recounts the story of Zeng Tai, a Communist reconnaissance chief who, posing as the captured Nationalist vice commander Lei Zhenting, infiltrates enemy territory in the early years of the People's Republic. After enduring repeated tests, he wins the enemy's trust and ultimately leads the successful eradication of Nationalist spy forces entrenched in western Guangxi. The adaptation remains largely faithful to the film's storyline, with only minimal trimming of characters and details. This production represents a bold experiment—an attempt to expand the expressive boundaries of a time-honored genre—and carries a certain degree of significance. However, it must be acknowledged that the final result suggests a spy thriller of such high tension may not be well suited to the aesthetics of Liyuan Xi. On the one hand, the numerous scenes of combat were not effectively translated into the genre's signature technique of rendering martial arts through civil stylization, thereby exposing Liyuan Xi's relative weakness in martial performance. On the other hand, the script adheres closely to the film's narrative structure and plot mechanics, placing emphasis on logical progression and factual detail. This approach leaves limited space for the lyrical and emotional introspection that constitutes one of Liyuan Xi's greatest artistic strengths.

1 In 1984, Wang Renjie's *Fenglin Wan*《枫林晚》(*Autumn in the Maple Forest*) marked an earlier attempt at modern Liyuan Xi and was regarded as a success at the time. However, it saw increasingly fewer performances after the 1990s and virtually disappeared from the stage by the early 2000s. This disappearance likely cannot be attributed solely to shifting ideological tastes, but rather to a funDa Mental aesthetic mismatch: the non-stylized, de-dramatized nature of modern drama left no room for the richly codified and meticulously structured performance vocabulary of Liyuan Xi—particularly its "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines." As a result, modern plays risked diluting or even dismantling the genre's unique expressive power. Wang Renjie recognized this dilemma and did not pursue further modern drama projects following *Fenglin Wan*. 参见《马少波、李慧中、胡小孩谈〈枫林晚〉》，见《梨园纵横谈——梨园戏评论文选》（一），福建省梨园戏实验剧团编（内部编印），1986 年 9 月，第 59 页。[See: "Ma Shaobo, Li Huizhong, and Hu Xiaohai Discuss *Fenglin Wan*, in *Perspectives on Liyuan Xi: Selected Critical Essays*, Vol. 1, compiled by the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe, internal publication, Sept. 1986, p. 59.)

2. Generational Transition and the Continuity of Tradition

Generational succession is vital to the survival and development of any theatre troupe. The Inheritance Center has placed significant emphasis on cultivating young performers and creative talent—an effort most clearly reflected in the renewal of its team of playwrights. Over the past decade, nearly all newly produced plays have come from emerging writers within the troupe. Among them, *The Imperial Tablet Pavilion*, *Lady Lady Li*, and *Yingxiong Hudan* were all written by Zhang Jingjing.

Originally from Nanjing, Zhang was first drawn to Liyuan Xi in 2008 after watching a video clip of Zeng Jingping performing the aria "Wushan yun san" ("The Clouds Disperse over Mount Wu") from *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*. Mesmerized by the distinctive aesthetics of Liyuan Xi, she resigned from her position at the Jiangsu Performing Arts Group and traveled across provinces to Quanzhou, where she became a playwright with the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe. Zhang's journey was not merely personal idolization, but rather a sincere admiration for the unique artistry of Liyuan Xi as represented by Zeng. After more than a decade of living in Quanzhou, Zhang has become fluent in Southern Fujian and deeply immersed in the region's customs and culture. At the same time, her perspective as an outsider allows her to critically reflect on the region's cultural conservatism. Her playwriting is marked by nuanced psychological portrayals, a distinctly female gaze, and culturally reflective interventions that revitalize tradition with subtle innovation.

Another young playwright at the Inheritance Center is Xie Zichou, whose style is deeply influenced by Wang Renjie. Xie's work emphasizes the intrinsic aesthetic characteristics of Liyuan Xi and a return to the core of traditional xiqu. His writing exhibits several defining features. First, his plays are not concerned with profound ideological narratives but instead focus on the emotional entanglements within family structures—between parents and children—exploring the possibilities and limitations of traditional ethical values in contemporary society. His works, including *Ding Lan Ke Mu* (*The Carving of Ding Lan*), *The Empress Dowager's Birthday Celebration* (*Tai Hou He Shou*), *Lady Ni Educates Her Son* (*Ni Shi Jiao Zi*), and *Ti Ying*, all center around themes of familial affection and moral duty. Second, Xie excels at depicting psychological conflict through subtle, intimate settings, often using the personal to reflect broader themes. In *The Empress Dowager's Birthday Celebration*, for example, Empress Dowager Li—the birth mother of Emperor Shenzong—faces a wrenching dilemma when her own father is found guilty of corruption, leading to the deaths of freezing soldiers. Caught between filial loyalty and national law, she ultimately persuades her father and brother to surrender, under the pretense of a birthday tribute. Though set in the world of emperors and officials, Xie avoids grand scenes, instead focusing on the emotional struggle of a woman navigating conflicting loyalties between family and state. Third,

his work shows a strong awareness of genre. His scripts align aesthetically with the dignified and harmonious "Shanglu" tradition within Liyuan Xi. Fourth, Xie employs a conscious use of dialect. A native of Quanzhou, he is intimately familiar with local idioms and folk expressions, which he weaves skillfully into his scripts, infusing them with regional color, wit, and vitality.

The essence of xiqu is passed on through its performers. The continual renewal of actors is a core element in the survival of any troupe. Since 2014, Zeng Jingping has consciously stepped back from the stage to make room for younger performers. After starring in two newly written plays, *Yubeiting* and *Chen Zhongzi*, as well as one traditional play, *Zhu Maichen*, she has seldom appeared on stage, shifting instead to roles as director or artistic director in the creative process. A case in point is the revival of the classic *Chensan Wuniang*, in which all the leading roles were taken on by actors born in the 1990s. In the past decade, the creation and production of newly written plays has also largely been undertaken by young performers and crew, though often under the guidance of senior artists such as former troupe leader Zeng Jingping, Gong Wanli, and Xu Tianxiang. For instance, in *Lady Ni Educates Her Son*, the role of Lady Ni is played by young actress Du Bingying. In Xie Zichou's script, Lady Ni is depicted as fierce and headstrong—a significant challenge for Du, who specializes in the "dadan" (mature female) role type typically associated with dignified, graceful women. With inspiration from Zeng Jingping, Du broke with convention by blending techniques across role types, incorporating "jiaopo chou"(elder female clown) movements into the performance framework of "dadan" and "xiaodan" (young female), ultimately creating a distinctive stylization unique to Lady Ni. Another promising young actress is Zheng Yasi. She has frequently performed with the troupe in France and, in 2018, represented the company in the Franco-Chinese collaborative project, bringing a successful close to a five-year international partnership. As Zeng Jingping's only direct disciple, Zheng's performances strongly reflect her mentor's style. She has delivered notable performances in *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin, Scholar Dong* and *Lady Li*, and *The Constable and the Female Thief* (*Zaoli yu Nüzei*). More recently, she has taken on leading roles in new productions such as *Lady Ni Educates Her Son* and *Ti Ying*, often delivering surprisingly original interpretations. In *Lady Ni Educates Her Son*, though trained as an "erjiadan" (a role positioned between the "dadan" and "xiaodan" types), Zheng plays the role of Xiao Fukun, the young son of Lady Ni (with the adult Fukun portrayed by fellow young actor Zeng Yukun). To take on the part, she had to abandon the familiar techniques of her trained role type and instead adopt the performance methods of "tongchou" (child clown) and "xiaosheng" (young male). Her portrayal of Xiao Fukun exuded an engaging sense of innocence and charm. Both the revival of traditional plays and the creation of new ones have provided ideal platforms for the growth of young performers. In rehearsing traditional works, they refine their basic skills and strengthen their understanding of the aesthetic system embedded in the physical vocabulary of Liyuan Xi. Meanwhile, the creation of new works gives them space to creatively combine, transform, and innovate upon those stylized movements, further developing their capacity for artistic invention.

3. Cross-Cultural Exchange and the Presentation of "Nanxi"

From June 2 to 25, 2014, the Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center was invited by France's MC93 Theatre to embark on a performance tour across Paris, Lyon, and Athens. This tour marked the beginning of a five-year collaborative partnership between MC93 and the Inheritance Center. Between 2014 and 2018, the center toured Europe three times, presenting newly adapted productions such as *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* and *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, along with the traditional excerpt *Da Men*. Notably, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* ran for eight consecutive performances in Paris, setting a new record for Chinese xiqu in France.

This cross-cultural exchange held significance on several fronts. First, the five-year collaboration broke away from the conventional one-way model of overseas performances and instead fostered a dynamic, reciprocal exchange. In April 2016, the Inheritance Center invited the French team to Quanzhou, China, to engage in in-depth discussions and workshops on script adaptation and actor training methods. On April 11–12, under the direction of three French directors and performed by six French actors, two adapted scenes—"Dengqiang ye kui" ("Climbing the Wall and Peeping at Night," from *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*) and "Shitan" ("The Test," from *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*)—were performed in French, using spoken dialogue and lyrical recitation, alongside Liyuan Xi performances on the same stage. This juxtaposition revealed the essential differences between spoken drama and xiqu: the former pursues realism, seeking naturalness in movement, speech, and emotional expression; the latter pursues beauty, requiring actors to transform the character's thoughts and actions into highly stylized, symbolic, and structurally refined aesthetic forms through codified performance techniques. Second, the duration and scale of this Sino-French exchange surpassed those of previous international performances. Although Liyuan Xi has a history of performing abroad—having toured the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, and other countries—those were primarily commercial tours within the Southeast Asian cultural sphere. The European tour, by contrast, marked the first time this centuries-old genre gained broader international recognition, demonstrating its potential to transcend regional boundaries. This holds great significance for a traditional art form so deeply rooted in local culture. Third, this sustained and mutually enriching exchange helped to further highlight the unique artistic qualities of Liyuan Xi. In fact, the aesthetic shift in Liyuan Xi's stage design is closely linked to these European tours. In 2014, at the request

of French director Soëmone, the stage design for *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* was drastically simplified: only a narrow platform (7 meters deep by 5 meters wide) and side aisles remained. In the Rouen version, the platform was even tilted slightly toward the audience. Traditional elements such as the large window lattice, lotus-patterned curtains, and other decorative backdrops were replaced with neutral dark curtains—or removed entirely. The lighting design also abandoned realistic motifs such as southern Fujian red brick floors, tree shadows, and stone-paved paths, instead relying on subtle gradations of solid color to create a minimalist and ethereal stage space. This marked a true return to simplicity and essence

In 2020, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Liyuan Xi's international exchange activities came to a halt. In the post-pandemic era, how this traditional form of xiqu might regroup and regain its cultural momentum has become a pressing question for Zeng Jingping and the emerging generation of Liyuan Xi practitioners. Faced with an increasingly complex global context, Liyuan Xi has shifted its focus inward, turning its attention to the domestic stage. Beginning in 2023, the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center initiated and hosted two editions of the National "Nanxi" Performance Festival. Together, these two festivals gathered 23 forms of xiqu, featuring 76 performances of traditional "zhezixi" (excerpt scenes). These festivals hold particular significance in the history of Chinese xiqu. They mark the resurgence and identity assertion of regional forms such as Liyuan Xi—forms that diverge from the more widely recognized styles of Jingju and Kunqu. While the modernization of Chinese xiqu has yielded certain achievements over the past century, it has also led to critical issues, most notably a growing homogenization of the art form. This tendency manifests in two key ways: the increasing influence of spoken drama aesthetics on xiqu, and the transformation of local forms to resemble grand national genres. The "Nanxi" festivals reveal this phenomenon clearly. For instance, "Chaoju", a form geographically and genealogically close to Liyuan Xi, has undergone a series of reforms. Today, despite retaining its vocal traditions, much of its movement, costuming, and makeup has shifted toward the aesthetic frameworks of Kunqu, Jingju, and Yueju—an evolution that is both striking and lamentable. By organizing festivals themed around "Nanxi" and assembling forms descended from its tradition, Liyuan Xi aims to foreground its distinctiveness. This effort constitutes a deliberate response to the homogenizing forces at work in the modernization of Chinese xiqu. As Fu Jin has observed, the "Nanxi" Performance Festivals led by Liyuan Xi not only enhance the cultural visibility of this ancient form, but also reaffirm the diversity and multidimensionality of the Chinese xiqu landscape.[1]

1 参见傅谨：《南戏表演传统的再发现及其文化意义》，《福建艺术》2023 年第 5 期，第 8 页。[See Fu Jin, "The Rediscovery of Nanxi Performance Traditions and Their Cultural Significance," *Fujian Art*, no. 5 (2023): 8.]

It is evident that in the post-pandemic context, Liyuan Xi has taken significant steps in the realm of cultural re-engagement, particularly in the area of "bringing in," and these efforts have already yielded noteworthy results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, over the past decade, the Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center has remained committed to the artistic philosophy of "returning to origins while opening to innovation". The revival of a series of classic traditional plays has played a crucial historical role in enhancing the artistic framework of Liyuan Xi. The troupe has also made notable achievements in cross-cultural exchange. The reciprocal dialogue between Chinese and French theatre has further emphasized the aesthetic essence of Liyuan Xi, while also promoting a shift in the aesthetic construction of its stage space.

However, it is important to recognize that the development of the Inheritance Center over the past ten years has not been without its challenges. First, the younger generation of performers and creative staff still require more time to mature and consolidate their skills before they can fully carry forward the legacy of Liyuan Xi. Experiments with modern drama or efforts to "break out of the circle" may not be the most pressing concerns for the new generation at this stage. What is more crucial is for them to immerse themselves in and thoroughly understand the artistic wealth created by their predecessors. Second, the troupe's capacity for creative adaptation remains somewhat limited. This is especially evident in the new productions created by the Inheritance Center in recent years, which still need further refinement. The root cause of this challenge lies not only in scriptwriting but also in the young performers' ability to artistically transform and embody new material. Whether Liyuan Xi can sustain the spirit of innovation that characterized the Wang Renjie era in the face of today's complex cultural landscape will require further time and development to fully assess.

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Incorporating the Essence of Liyuan Xi into My Blood[1]

ZENG Jingping

1. Life at the Art School Without a Defined Role

Both of my parents are stage actors. From a young age, I traveled with them to perform in various cities. When I was about five or six years old, I even had small roles in the troupe. I grew up immersed in the life of an actor, and was very familiar with the world of theatre. However, my parents did not want me to pursue this career. In 1977, I secretly applied to the Quanzhou Art School to study Liyuan Xi without their knowledge. At that time, I didn't really understand what Liyuan Xi was; I only knew it was a form of art.

During my time at the art school, I went through the voice change period. My voice became rough, I was small, and I didn't have an especially beautiful face or any distinctive features. As a result, throughout my five years at the school, my teachers never assigned me a fixed role. There were times when I considered dropping out. However, my parents encouraged me, saying, "Since you've chosen this path, you can't quit halfway. If it doesn't work out, it's never too late to change course." I listened to their advice and decided to stick it out.

Over the five years at the art school, my understanding of Liyuan Xi developed gradually. Although I never had a fixed role and mostly played secondary or supporting characters, with the lead roles far out of reach, this situation provided me with a different kind of learning experience. Playing supporting roles gave me the chance to observe the lead performers closely. I paid

1 Originally published in *Journal of National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts*, No. 11, 2016.

particular attention to their weaknesses in performance and made a conscious effort to avoid making the same mistakes myself. This turned out to be an excellent learning process, and over the years, I accumulated a great deal of experience.

2.From a Penniless Page to an Expressive Ghost Lady

After I joined the troupe, I had the good fortune of working with Master Su Yanshuo. At the time, he was directing *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin*, one of the earliest handwritten scripts in the Liyuan Xi tradition. It's widely considered one of the plays that best embodies the distinctive characteristics of the genre. Mr. Su wanted to build upon the traditional version performed by veteran actors, and he cast me as the character "Yi Li Jin."

Only three scenes of this ghost play survive today. In the original staging, the focus was mostly on the living characters, with minimal development of the ghost figure and little nuance in the spiritual transformation between humans and ghosts. When I took on the role, I enriched this dimension by adding transitional moments that captured the shifting presence of the ghost.

For instance, in the first appearance, the ghost wears a gauzy veil and shows no expression, singing a solitary phrase in a haunting, ethereal tone. In her second appearance, she removes the veil, holding a lantern and a handkerchief, dressed in pink. She is still a ghost—but already transformed from before. Later, when Zhu Wen appears and she prepares to reveal herself, the ghost must go through a process of "becoming" a living girl.

Before she meets Zhu Wen, there is a stylized passage of performance. Then, just before she knocks on the door, she flicks her handkerchief—a gesture now quite different from earlier ones. At this point, she is no longer simply a ghost; she is a ghost transformed into a spirited young girl. Her eyes and movements must possess a distinctive "ghostly energy"—an agile, fleeting quality that sets her apart from ordinary people. The gaze, the expression, the gesture, the intensity, and the psychological pacing all need to be handled with delicacy and precision.

When the scholar begins looking for her, she suddenly places her hand on his shoulder. In that moment, she is no longer a ghost at all—she has become a real girl. "Here I am!" she seems to say. That transformation captures, with great clarity, the essence of the "erdan" role type: a girl full of charm, wit, and vitality.

As the performance unfolds, the ghost-turned-girl keeps finding ways to charm the scholar, trying to make herself seem endearing. But before she can confess her feelings, there needs to be a buildup—after all, she's still a ghost, and what occupies her mind is different from what a normal girl would think or feel. Her inner world is not quite human, and that difference must be expressed on stage.

For example, she might suddenly blow out the lamp, longing for physical closeness and playfully teasing the scholar in the dark. These gestures—delicate and mischievous—belong to a ghost's domain. And yet, this is precisely where Liyuan Xi's elegance, subtlety, and restraint find their strength. All of these scenes were designed to follow the traditional ethos of Liyuan Xi. Mr. Su Yanshuo never allowed anything that would violate these principles. If we had broken the rules—allowing excessive or inappropriate physical contact—it would have destroyed the careful emotional balance between male and female characters that Liyuan Xi maintains so well. I fully agreed with this approach.

There's another important detail. After the lamp is blown out, the girl knocks and re-enters, asking: "Could you light the lamp for me before I go?" Just as the scholar is about to light it, she blows the candle out again. In the pitch dark, the scholar stumbles around clumsily. But the girl, feeling a sudden tenderness, gently guides him toward the candle so he can find it. This small gesture shows the ghost's kindness—her lingering sense of humanity.

Once the lamp is relit, the scholar still doesn't understand her feelings and says, "You can go now." But what is the ghost girl thinking at this moment? She has spoken her lines, she's extinguished the light, she's expressed everything—but she still hasn't said "I like you." So she begins to cry. This is a classic move—a girl's tearful confession—but again, it's not quite human. She cries while he's watching, but the moment he turns away, she smiles. The emotional shift is so subtle, so delicate—full of nuance and ambiguity.

During rehearsals, Teacher Su asked us to design three different sets of movements. He would choose the one that best matched the emotion and tone, and we would further refine it. He once said to me: the traditional patterns and stylized movements of Liyuan Xi still have immense potential—they can be developed, enriched, and deepened. That insight became a turning point for me. From 1985 onward, I began learning from him how to refine and expand the "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines" of Liyuan Xi.

At that time, Mr. Su Yanshuo taught me the traditional stylized forms of Liyuan Xi and repeatedly reminded me to truly understand and internalize them. "You may refine and enrich traditional Liyuan Xi plays," he said, "but you must never step outside the framework." Later, when working on *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, I consciously applied this principle throughout the production.

Since childhood, I had a naturally expressive body and a passion for dance. Because many movements in Liyuan Xi are relatively ambiguous, I boldly created some choreographed gestures of my own. *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* tells the story of a widow's secret night journey to visit a scholar. She leaves her bedroom, exits the hall, crosses long corridors, and finally walks through a garden to the west gate to find him. There were many traditional stylized steps that could have been used to depict this journey, but at the time I avoided them, thinking the steps felt rustic. Relying on my shallow understanding of the play, I designed some classical dance movements that I believed were more elegant. These gestures were indeed beautiful, but my use of them lacked maturity and finesse.

A widow's inner world is immensely complex. At the time, I reduced it to a single idea: "I miss him. He's leaving. He will surely accept me. Tonight, there must be a resolution." Though partially accurate, this interpretation failed to express the emotional turmoil—her hesitation, shyness, and the ten years of repressed longing for the scholar. I was young. If I were to reinterpret *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* now, I would pour endless energy into that monologue. I would have countless lines to deliver, infinite gestures to express her tenderness, uncertainty, self-doubt, and all the suppressed emotion. I would guide the emotional rhythm through subtle variations in pacing and nuanced pauses within the stylized framework.

While percussion, music, and lighting can support a performer's subtle shifts in rhythm, these nuances ultimately depend on the actor's own sense of timing—nothing can replace that. The rhythm and melody of the body do not come from the music; they are embedded in the movement itself. The actor's psychological rhythm is, in essence, a form of musicality. The finest emotional changes are conveyed through the actor's internal musical instinct. A skilled performer uses that instinct to master tempo and emotional expression.

The charm of classical dance and its control over inner rhythm is undoubtedly something that xiqu actors should learn. The most sophisticated process lies in blending those qualities into the ke bu of Liyuan Xi. The stylized steps in Liyuan Xi are subtle and restrained. Each movement, from beginning to end, follows strict rules and may seem unremarkable. But the essence lies in how an actor enriches it—how they give the form life, fluidity, and a kind of spiritual resonance.

Those who don't understand are often bold; those who do, become cautious. While I've come to understand a bit more now, I still wouldn't say I fully grasp everything. Back then, my approach did meet with some skepticism. I

remember feeling deeply wronged—I cried for an entire day after performing *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin*. Mr. Su Yanshuo came to console me, saying, "Liyuan Xi has a rich tradition built upon the dedication and artistry of generations of performers. Now that you're stepping into roles they once played, it's only natural that they feel a bit uneasy. But your changes remain within the bounds of Liyuan Xi's aesthetic—you're not in the wrong. You must believe in yourself. This kind of struggle is something every artist must go through."

It was with *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin* that my role type gradually became clear: the "erdan". I believe Mr. Su was absolutely right in assigning it to me. I'm not tall, and my figure isn't particularly striking. My eyes and face may not resemble the typical "erdan" role type. But he noticed something others might overlook—my facial muscles when I smile and the shape of my mouth. These, he said, were especially well-suited to the temperament of the "erdan".

In fact, the role that has left the deepest impression on me wasn't the female ghost in *Zhu Wen's Taiping Coin*, but rather the young pageboy Laixing in *Li Yaxian*. That was truly my introduction to the stage. Laixing appears in only two scenes, and I was reluctant when first cast. After all, no young girl wants to play a goofy little servant, awkwardly standing onstage in an unflattering costume. But the senior performers insisted I take the role.

There was one scene where Li Yaxian and Zheng Yuanhe exchange flirtatious glances. Laixing stands nearby, which looked awkward and a bit foolish. The director told me to sit off to the side and avoid looking at them directly, so I wouldn't appear too silly. To cope with the awkwardness, I began absentmindedly playing with the tassels tied around my waist. This little gesture unexpectedly made the audience laugh—they felt it was exactly what a real pageboy might do.

Later, after Li Yaxian went inside and Zheng Yuanhe was left rejected at the door, only the two of us remained on stage. I thought to myself: what would Laixing do now? Surely he would go to the door and try to peek or listen. So I walked over, shaped my hand like a doorframe, looked from top to bottom, and pretended to listen closely. I was "making up business" on the spot, but it felt natural—and to my surprise, the director didn't object.

Perhaps it was precisely because of that bit of improvisation that, during our mid-1980s tour in the Philippines, director Wang Renjie added a brand-new scene for Laixing—the one in which Li Yaxian sells him. A small, seemingly insignificant moment of creative invention ended up bringing unexpected delight and new opportunity.

3. Lady Li and I Growing Together

Scholar Dong and Lady Li was a production created in 1993, and the story behind it is quite long. After winning the Plum Blossom Award in 1989, I quickly ventured into opening a clothing store, which turned out to be quite profitable. One day, when the Plum Blossom Award actors were performing in Quanzhou, I was on my way to Shantou to restock. A friend called and asked why I wasn't attending, and I felt a bit disappointed and sad. However, being too shy to face the situation, and having already left the troupe, I knew returning wasn't an option.

Soon, in 1993, I opened a bookstore. By then, Director Wang Renjie had finished the script for *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* and planned to use it for a performance review. But the troupe hadn't started rehearsals yet. The role of Dong Sheng had been assigned to Gong Wanli, but the role of Lady Li still hadn't been filled. The head of the Cultural Bureau reached out to me, hoping I would return to the troupe to play Lady Li. I had been waiting for a chance to go back, so I took the opportunity and rejoined the troupe.

Twenty days later, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* was rehearsed and performed, winning an award and receiving great feedback. It marked the release and

■ The Liyuan Xi masterpiece *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* features Gong Wanli as Scholar Dong and Zeng Jingping as Lady Li. All images in this article are from the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

explosion of years of accumulated experience. Since then, from *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* onward, I've become more and more immersed in Liyuan Xi, gradually discovering its essence. After returning to the troupe in 1993, a warm current has continuously nourished me—that warmth came from the people of the Liyuan Troupe and the spirit of Liyuan Xi.

The stage presentation of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* at the start was not what it is today. It underwent several rounds of changes. The first was a semi-circular platform designed by Su Yanshuo. The second change occurred during a performance in Taiwan. The head of Taiwan's Yayin Art Company liked the play but didn't care for the stage design, so it was changed to resemble the small stage typical of short operatic performances.

In 2000, I went to study at Shanghai Theatre Academy, where I met Director Lu Ang from the Directing Department. At the time, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* was being prepared for selection in the Fine Works Project, which led to the idea of inviting him to direct the play. This marked the first time in over fifty years of Liyuan Xi that an external director was invited to direct a play, causing quite a stir in the troupe.

Director Lu Ang toured Quanzhou and was deeply inspired by the unique architectural style of the ancient buildings there. This inspired his vision for the stage design of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*. He designed the stage to resemble a performance space based on the style of traditional Minnan four-sided halls, a design that perfectly aligned with the style of Liyuan Xi.

Lu Ang's arrival significantly enhanced the lighting and stage design, elevating Liyuan Xi as a comprehensive art form. This was his greatest contribution to *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*. He showed great respect for both Liyuan Xi and the actors, rarely interfering with our performances, but he was meticulous about the details. For example, in the fifth scene, there is a line in the lyrics that goes "The sun shines brightly," but when the line is sung, there is no lighting on stage. The actors raised the issue, saying, "How can we sing 'the sun shines brightly' when the lights aren't on?" However, Lu Ang had a clear vision and insisted that the lighting in this scene must remain dim. The actor, though, was very serious and refused to sing "brightly." In the end, Mr. Wang Renjie had to change the lyrics to "gray and dim," which reflects the dedication and seriousness that everyone brought to the performance.

There was also an interesting incident during this period. After Lu Ang finished directing the play, we organized a group of experts to watch it. After the performance, some people felt that Lady Li's role had been reduced and asked playwright Wang Renjie and Director Lu Ang whether they had cut any of Zeng Jingping's scenes. Both of them responded that no scenes had been cut; in

fact, some had even been added! As a result, a meeting was held to discuss the issue: If no scenes were cut, why did it feel like Lady Li's role had been diminished, and why did the play seem less engaging? While Dong Sheng was the central character, Lady Li was the key figure who controlled the pacing of the entire play. Now that the character controlling the pacing had been reduced, how could the play still work?

Wang Renjie and Wang Pingzhang both called me over and asked, "We've added four songs, and the lines have increased. The stage blocking has hardly changed; the only difference is the visual style. Why does it feel like the play is lacking?" With their help, I quickly identified the problem: I had focused all my attention on designing my vocal style and movements, but I had neglected the relationship between me and the other actors. At the time, I had just studied *Da Men*, a solo performance with four major singing sections that total over fifty minutes. After learning it, I subconsciously wanted to apply what I had learned to *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, thinking I was being clever and proud of myself. However, because I had little opportunity to perform *Da Men* after learning it, I hadn't fully understood it and was still in a vague state of comprehension. So, during the adaptation process, I focused entirely on making my movements look graceful and ensuring my vocal style was refined, while ignoring the most crucial element—the relationship between the stage and the characters. On stage, it seemed that every adjustment I made as Zeng Jingping was flawless, and I looked very attractive. But the performance lacked depth because I had forgotten the purpose of these movements. Lady Li's actions were all for Dong Sheng, and no young woman would simply dress up beautifully and stay locked in her room admiring herself.

For example, in the second scene, I enter wearing a cloak, and I had meticulously adjusted my posture. But as I stepped out and saw Dong Sheng, I didn't truly look at him because I was focused on how to hold the cloak at the right angle to step forward. I neglected to convey the alluring charm to Dong Sheng. As a result, throughout the two-hour performance, I was caught up in self-admiration, forgetting to transmit that energy to Dong Sheng. Without this exchange, the play faltered. As an actor, you must give, and the play must give. If you don't offer anything, your counterpart won't engage with you.

Lu Ang elevated *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* in its "Fine Works Project" version, raising the level of the art form and refining it. However, over time, my perspective began to evolve, steering me toward a more minimalist approach. For example, I started experimenting with reducing some of the lighting. I realized that when lighting or stage design supports the actor's performance, it can instantaneously intensify and remind the audience of certain emotions. Yet, this approach also limits the audience's psychological space, narrowing their

capacity for appreciation. Why not allow the audience to think for themselves, rather than relying on external elements like lighting or stage design? Traditional theater left much more room for the audience to interpret, but now we are constricting that space. Is this progress or regression? For Liyuan Xi, we need to embrace subtraction—removing everything unnecessary from the stage, creating a cleaner, more ethereal space that allows actors to shine. With a rich performance tradition like Liyuan Xi, which approach best suits it? Which method provides the actor with the most freedom to shape their character? Today's audience has the option to either go to the theater or watch performances online. What are we leaving for those who choose to attend the theater? This is something we need to reflect on.

In 2013, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*'s collaboration with France further deepened my minimalist stage concept. The French are very deliberate with their use of lighting, almost "sparing with light," emphasizing spiritual and conceptual elements. Often, the simpler the stage, the higher the demands on the actors. The French reworked the lighting for this small stage, removing all scenery and creating a bare, unadorned stage—pure and minimalist. Naturally, this raised the expectations for the actors.

Scholar Dong and Lady Li has been performed for over two decades, evolving from its original half-circle small platform to Taiwan's traditional small stage, then to Lu Ang's elevated version with stage design and lighting, and ultimately to the French minimalist stage. Each transformation has yielded valuable insights. This journey has not been easy.

4. Da Men: Imitation First, Transformation Later

In June 2000, after a performance, an elderly woman in her eighties approached me and asked if I knew a Liyuan Xi play called *Da Men*. I said I had heard of it. She then asked, "Do you know how to perform it?" I replied that I didn't. "Would you like to learn it?" she continued. I was stunned.

Her name was Cai Xiuying. She had started performing Liyuan Xi at the age of twelve and later transitioned to Gaojia Xi, becoming a formidable "wudan" (female role skilled in martial arts). *Da Men* was a play known among Liyuan Xi practitioners, but no one knew how to perform it anymore. Now this elder was offering to teach me—how could I not be thrilled?

So I began studying *Da Men* with Master Cai Xiuying. We agreed to meet every afternoon from three to six, studying for three hours each day. Every time she

■ Traditional Liyuan Xi repertoire *Chen San: Da Men,* with Zeng Jingping as Madam Huang Wuniang.

taught, she would lightly apply makeup and dress neatly—always dignified and graceful. On the first day, she explained the play to me in segments, describing every detail. I suddenly realized how complex and demanding this piece was.

The second day, I overslept and arrived five minutes late. I knocked repeatedly before she opened the door. Standing calmly in the doorway, she said, "It's hot today. You don't need to come anymore. You're already well-known—you don't need to learn this play. Go home."

I was completely caught off guard. Until then, colleagues liked me, leaders valued me—no one had ever spoken to me that way. Her quiet words hit me hard; I could tell I had truly disappointed her. Ashamed, I didn't dare say a word. Seeing her distant expression, I said goodbye and turned to leave.

But as I reached the third floor, I stopped and asked myself, "Am I really going to walk away? Am I going to let this opportunity to learn Da Men slip through my fingers?" No—I had to try again.

I went back upstairs and knocked on the door once more. She opened it but still told me to leave. In desperation, I swore: "From now on, if I'm ever late

again, you don't have to teach me anymore." She looked at me in silence for a moment, then finally let me in.

The moment I entered, I almost cried—on the table sat a glass of iced water and a slice of cake. Master Cai Xiuying had been testing me. If I hadn't returned, I would have lost my chance to learn *Da Men* forever.

From that day on, I was never late again. I studied with her for three full months and eventually learned the entire play. I recorded the whole process, but even then, there were many parts I didn't fully understand. During lessons, there was no room for improvisation—I had to imitate her movements exactly. For example, many of her gestures were sharp and angular, and she constantly emphasized these edges. I figured it was partly because of her age, and partly due to her long experience performing Gaojia Xi, which demands bolder, more exaggerated movement. It was also likely that, in passing on the play, she deliberately amplified these motions so I would follow precisely. As a result, the rounded fluidity I was used to wasn't there. At times, it felt awkward to me.

After I had finished learning the entire play, I invited Master Cai Xiuying to the theatre to watch the dress rehearsal. She was visibly moved by what she saw. The next day, she called me over, prepared a table full of dishes, and spoke to me with heartfelt sincerity: "You don't need to follow exactly what I taught you. You should feel free to explore your own ideas and make changes." Her words moved me deeply. I was filled with admiration for her generosity of spirit.

Over the next ten years or so, I gradually came to understand why Master Cai Xiuying had been so insistent on emphasizing the sharp lines and exaggerated movements in her teaching. Take, for example, the skirt-lifting gesture. At the academy, the standard sequence we were taught was: roll the hand, lift the skirt, and as you exit, touch the head, skirt, and shoes. But Master Cai Xiuying's version didn't raise the hand as high. The movements seemed sharper, more angular. At first, they felt awkward to me, lacking in smoothness or grace. But slowly, I came to realize that rolling the hand from that lower position actually looked more refined. To achieve that kind of elegance, one had to refine the gesture—to soften the angles and smooth out the edges. What Master Cai Xiuying taught me was the flavor within the angles; to polish and complete it was something I had to do myself.

Another gesture in *Da Men* involved lowering a mosquito net. The whole sequence shifts as if in a dream. When you're longing for someone, even the act of touching an object can become unconscious—your attention is elsewhere. Performing that action from such a state of mind can better capture the emotional world of an ancient woman at that moment. To portray this convincingly, you must carefully control how the action is delivered—

choosing what to use to express what you feel, and how to send that message outwards. Your inner state must be composed, and the imagined emotion must be summoned and released, directly or indirectly. Once your emotional state is in place, everything else follows naturally.

In the short piece *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln* (*Lü Mengzheng: Guoqiao Ruyao*) , there was a moment when the young lady was about to enter the kiln and the male actor suddenly reached out to hold my hand. I was completely unprepared. In the past, such gestures were only ever symbolic—used to support a movement, like preventing the lady from falling—never actual contact. But this time, I felt the warmth of his hand. It wasn't something you'd ever find in the traditional repertoire. My first reaction was to laugh—I thought, "What am I supposed to do with this hand?" But the moment the actor extended his hand, the audience already knew what was coming. So in that instant, I had to follow the audience's breath and go with it—and in doing so, we fell into perfect rhythm with one another.

The path I must walk—the single-plank bridge ahead—is one the audience cannot cross for me. It's up to me to show them just how narrow that bridge

■ Traditional Liyuan Xi repertoire *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln* (*Lü Mengzheng: Guoqiao Ruyao*), with Zeng Jingping as Liu Yue'e and Lin Cangxiao as Lü Mengzheng.

is, and how fearful I am to walk it. In this kind of stylized performance, every detail must be precise and fully realized. Today, as long as the atmosphere is supported by music, sound, and a single well-executed gesture, the audience will respond intuitively. They still leave space to appreciate and imagine alongside the performance.

I don't know whether the stylized conventions of xiqu can fully convey every kind of scene. Perhaps some actors can achieve that, or perhaps certain genres can—but I cannot, at least not yet. In executing each movement from start to finish, I've developed a particular habit: I begin by imagining the temperament of the character, aligning it with the qualities of my role type. Then, within that framework, I search for the voice that belongs to her.

Once I've found her voice, I look for gestures that do not merely conform to the typical movements of the role, but are shaped by the imagined temperament of the character. It is that temperament that supports my choice of role type. Through the structure of the role, I choose the voice and physicality; and through those, I begin designing the movements, distributing the emotions, and then testing and expressing them.

5. Tradition Has Made Me More Grounded

The most challenging aspect of performance is mastering a sense of "balance"—add one measure too much, and it's excessive; take one away, and it's insufficient. It is precisely this sense of balance that evokes desire in the audience. So, where does this balance come from? It emerges naturally when one has accumulated enough depth and maturity in traditional repertoire. Once that threshold is crossed, the sense of proportion begins to appear on its own.

Many performers rely on intuition for long stretches in their careers. I've always been something of a rebellious actor. I grew up in a very old and richly layered theatrical tradition, yet I've resisted following the director's formulas or staying strictly within the genre's framework. This isn't out of disrespect or rejection of my tradition—far from it. In fact, throughout the process of embracing and understanding its conventions, I've constantly searched for ways to make the tradition better, to improve myself, and to bring greater depth to the characters I portray. I'm still searching, still exploring. I often feel I haven't arrived yet—that I can always do better.

When I rely on instinct to build a character, talent comes into play. That talent may offer a fleeting sense of physical and emotional satisfaction. At a particular

■ Newly adapted Liyuan Xi play *The Constable and the Female Thief,* with Gong Wanli as Yang Yisuo and Zeng Jingping as Yizhi Mei.

moment onstage, it might even feel like brilliance. But when the full arc of the performance is complete, it might not flow as smoothly or coherently as I had imagined. Instinctive performances can be impulsive and imprecise. Each performance becomes a concentrated outpouring of the actor's body, emotions, and energy—but it's rarely fully mature. It can be spontaneous and even spark magic, but those sparks are momentary. Without thoughtful reflection, they fade. Only by constantly refining and challenging myself—discarding what doesn't work, thoughtfully reworking what remains, and learning to calm my mind—can I begin to achieve consistency and control in future performances.

What allows an actor to become still? It is the richness of experience in traditional theatre. When I first started learning *Guoqiao Ruyao*, it wasn't anything like how I perform it now. The accumulation of life experience helps an actor quiet their heart—and that quietness gradually seeps into the performance. The more you desire something on stage, the less likely you are to achieve it. But after being tempered by life, your approach becomes less driven by personal ambition, and your performance begins to settle into a deeper calm. You interpret a role slowly, allow the pressures of life to shape you, and come to cherish every second of emotional release on stage—the flow and expression of feeling becomes something you deeply value.

No actor can fully realize Stanislavski's ideal of complete, up-close experience—not entirely. This is especially true for performers of traditional xiqu. To live completely within the stage world would mean never fully returning to real life. Every actor has their own family, culture, and background. They undergo rigorous professional training, and during that process, they begin to partition their intent: which parts they want to learn, which they don't; which

they can grasp, and which they only imitate. This filtering process exists in the mind throughout one's training.

The word "interest" is crucial. Without genuine interest, there is no way in. But once you enter, only then can you talk about experience. And in the process of embodying a character, you gradually form a relationship with her. For instance, when working on *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, choosing a role type and vocal style is already a step toward approaching her. It's not that you say, "I want to experience this character" first; rather, you enter into her through the act of making choices. When selecting a singing pattern or melodic phrase, her image already exists in your mind, beginning to merge with your inner self.

When you choose a gesture, her temperament begins to emerge. You gradually refine her physicality, seeking the most expressive angles. When releasing a gesture, you're also deciding how energy should shift—if she needs to be unrestrained, then the elasticity and force of the hands must burst outward; if she needs to be gentle, then it shows in the softness of the eyes and fingers. You start to feel your way into that place where movement almost arrives, but not fully—hovering between presence and suggestion. Slowly, a kind of inner temperament takes form. It becomes the shadow of the character—not imposed, but arising naturally in the process. You can't force it, and you can't capture it by simply writing the character's backstory. It must emerge from within, through the continuous refinement of voice, gesture, and imagination.

Certainly, it's also crucial to be familiar with my stage partner. During rehearsals for *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, there were countless moments of friction between "Dong Sheng" and "Lady Li"—including arguments—but once we stepped onto the stage, we had to show mutual tolerance. It's impossible to like every actor's personality, but you must engage with their artistic style. You need to step into the soul of the character they're shaping, to feel it—including understanding the movements they choose. We always rehearsed together; there was no separate creation. This soul connection unfolds gradually through each passage of singing and every gesture.

For example, in the scene where Lady Li removes her shoes in *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, my performance is always changing—you will never see the same scene twice. Teacher Wang Pingzhang once said, "This won't do. You need to settle on something, and you must preserve it." But I can't do that because I'm working with different actors. In every performance, I have to adjust my body. What I see and feel makes me instinctively desire change. This urge to change fuels my desire to create anew, to experiment, to feel excitement even in repetition through small adjustments. Perhaps fixing the movements would aid in preservation, but I find it difficult to lock them down. My unpredictable performance often brings spontaneous reactions from Dong Sheng during the live show.

For instance, one night during the performance, after I removed my shoes, my foot was still covered by my skirt. He knew I was going to remove my shoes, and when the skirt covered them, he instinctively lifted the hem slightly. When he saw my shoes, I suddenly felt shy. These were spontaneous moments, not in the rehearsal. When he helped me take off my shoe, I would sink down a little afterward. But I felt that wasn't quite enough—audiences sitting at a middle distance wouldn't catch it. The softening of my heart needed to be clearer, so I added a subtle twist to my body after the shoe came off, as if saying, "I don't want this," creating a sense of playfulness. These details were added on the spot during the performance.

When he moved to take off my second shoe, I didn't let him—continuing the idea that I didn't want it. I tried to walk away, but he stepped forward to stop me. Then, he reminded me, "There's still one more shoe." I told him no, turning away as I said it, but at the same time, I was already lifting my other foot. When he saw this, he understood that I was silently giving permission. He naturally took my hand and placed it on his shoulder—so I could lean on him and not fall. This kind of feeling emerged naturally in the moment.

Conclusion

I have many dreams yet to be fulfilled. There is a saying in the play, "Fifty is only halfway through life," meaning that fifty is just the beginning. When I was younger, I was bold, but now my courage has diminished. I cannot face the audience without at least three rehearsals. *The Imperial Tablet Pavilion* and *Zhu Maichen* were both like this. I spend a month getting the lines and blocking right, then let it settle; the next phase is the second rehearsal, where I must pause and establish the entire structure before fine-tuning it. Afterward, I focus on costumes and makeup, try it again, and let it settle once more. Before facing the audience, I rehearse once more—working at my desk, recording, adjusting, and testing before each performance.

How could I dare to change what the genre has given me? After a lifetime of performing in Liyuan Xi, I still don't fully understand it. I am only beginning to understand, but many others still don't. When they strive for beauty and brilliance, they often fall short simply because they haven't fully grasped it. With a hundred flowers blooming and a hundred schools of thought contending, we must approach everything with an open heart. Perhaps, sometimes, I can absorb something new, without hastily criticizing it. In time, it will naturally come

■ Traditional Liyuan Xi repertoire *Zhu Maichen: Forced to Write*, with Lin Cangxiao as Zhu Maichen and Zeng Jingping as Zhao Xiaoniang.

back to us.

The essence of Liyuan Xi lies in walking into the theatre and breathing in unison with it. My understanding of Liyuan Xi has only just opened the door, and I have only just stepped inside. I have picked only one petal from the splendid garden of Liyuan Xi, using just a little. Perhaps I have not picked enough, so I will gather a bit more. If it doesn't suit me, I might put it back; or perhaps I will realize that this particular color is not right and try another. I need to internalize the essence of Liyuan Xi into my body, soul, and thoughts. Only when the essence of Liyuan Xi flows through my blood can I truly say, "This is Liyuan Xi.".

ZENG JINGPING
Renowned Liyuan Xi Performing Artist, troupe Leader at Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

Inexpressible Expression — A Reflection on Zeng Jingping's Impromptu Micro-theater Performance

GUO Chenzi

1.

Suddenly, I find myself at a loss for words. For instance, "On November 22, 2020, at 2:00 PM, invited by Professor Lü Xiaoping from the School of Liberal Arts at Nanjing University, I attended a performance by Zeng Jingping and her colleagues in a basement converted into a mini-theater in his villa"—how dry and uninspiring this statement sounds! At the very least, it should read, "On the 8th day of the 10th lunar month in the Gengzi year of the Chinese sexagenary cycle, during the Minor Snow, at the sincere invitation of Mr. Lü, the renowned Zeng Jingping, a leading figure in Liyuan Xi, visited his home to perform." Only then would the experience feel properly conveyed. Terms like "observed" feel too modern and detached, while "appreciated" has become a clichéd phrase in real estate advertisements. In this moment, I am simply at a loss for words. After experiencing Liyuan Xi up close, I wish I could express my feelings in classical Chinese—not as a form of exaggeration or an attempt to be archaic, but because modern vernacular falls short in conveying the depth of my gratitude and reverence. The plainspoken language feels too "plain," unable to match the classical techniques and structures of the performance; it seems too casual to capture an event that, despite unfolding in a concrete building, managed to recreate the elegant aura of ancient gatherings. Yes, the performance was small in scale, but its uniqueness made it truly an "event." The challenge lies not only in the limitations of plain language, but also in the inability to find the right words for it.

I also cannot settle on the right literary form. Is this a critique? A prose piece? And, how should I define this experience? "An impromptu micro-theater performance" is a retrospective label. What should I call the performers and the others present? The formal "Zeng Tuan" (troupe leader Zeng) or the fan-favorite "Zeng Gu Niang" (Miss Zeng), or perhaps just "Gu Niang" (Miss)? These official titles, which have become synonymous with "teacher," don't seem quite right. And as for the colleagues present, should I refer to them as "Professor X" or "Doctor X," or simply call them by name, as peers would? Suddenly, I find myself at a loss. Apart from their names, there are no titles or honorifics, and this feels strange in the context of the particular setting and atmosphere. Could I really just list their WeChat nicknames?

After the performance that day, it seemed as though everyone was struck silent, clapping, still clapping, and then clapping again...

2.

Though it was a private gathering, I was still taken aback upon arriving at the performance space—surprised, yet somehow not unexpectant—to find that there truly "was" a sense of "stage". The performance area, about twenty square meters in size, was lit by three simple theatre lamps, each covered with orange filters. There was light, but not brilliance; brightness, but not glare. A lamp hung above the foot drum, another softly lit the flutes and "xiao" (Chinese flute) nearby, while a third cast a glow over the horizontally held southern "pipa" to the left. Opposite the audience were several small percussion instruments, including flat clappers, dimly lit by a lamp from the upper rear.

The atmosphere was subdued, but unlike the shadowy aesthetics Tanizaki Junichiro cherished—his kind of shade arises from the obstruction of sunlight. That day was overcast and rainy; the sky already heavy, the indoor lighting, instead of fighting the gloom, infused the space with warmth—like the toned background of a silk painting. This dimness seemed purposefully aged, giving the room a sense of calm permanence, a stillness that had shed all theatrical excess.

We were close—so close that even in the low light, every movement was clear. And in the absence of dazzling brightness, what emerged from the dusk was not spectacle, but time itself: long, quiet years made visible.

I had seen xiqu performed in black box theaters before. They may discard

the proscenium arch, surround the stage with audiences on three sides, draw viewers into proximity with musicians and actors. But no matter how near, it was never "this" near. Compared with the intimacy of that day's "stage," even the smallest xiqu venues felt spacious. The greater distinction, though, was in the lighting: even in experimental black box setups, the lighting typically mimics that of the Western proscenium—blindingly bright on stage, while the audience vanishes into darkness. It becomes a world of opposites: light and dark, black and white—two realms, rigidly divided. But here, light existed on a spectrum. It was not about contrast, but gradation; not separation, but shared space. The difference in lighting alone reshaped the entire aesthetic.

A small space, dimly lit—thinking back, it felt like ink settling on xuan paper: the performer painted, while the presence of the audience spread like a gentle wash.

I regretted arriving so punctually—I missed seeing Zeng Jingping's impromptu adjustments to the space. I'd once heard her speak, in the reception room of the Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe, about her ideas for transforming everyday settings into performance spaces. For her, with a few subtle changes, a space need not only become a theatre—it can transform the relationship between performer and audience, offering an entirely new experience of the art.

In recent years, her *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* was staged at the Athens Arts Festival, in an avant-garde venue converted from an abandoned factory. *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln* (*Lü Mengzheng: Guoqiao Ruyao*) was performed during the Shanghai Performing Arts Xintiandi Festival, not in a theatre, but in the ground floor of a small villa called Club No. 1. In Quanzhou, she took part in a production at the Hillsborough Theater—a private space cluttered with artifacts collected by the founder of Hillsborough Culture, where audiences stood and watched at close range.

What matters is not the venue, but the performance. It is the performance that turns any space into a theatre. And yet, it is also the "space of performance" that imparts new meaning to even the most familiar gestures.

Tea is beloved in southern Fujian. That day's performance felt like being invited to a fine tea gathering—tasting one steeping after another, one delicate infusion following the last. The atmosphere, the choice of pieces, the intricacy of every detail—each was like the tea implements paired with the right leaves, the precise control of water temperature and timing. Everything was just right: warm, restrained, and deeply soothing.

3.

Like Ms. Zeng, the four musicians were dressed entirely in black—black tops, black pants, black socks. Seated on the floor with her back to the audience, she remained still until the southern tune "pipa" and foot drum began to play. Then, gently striking a small gong, she slowly rose, began to sing, and with unhurried poise, eased into movement. There was slowness, and then there was grace.

From within three meters, one could clearly see how her foot met the floor: the heel touched first, then the sole lowered in time with the rhythm. One could also see the nuance of the "Little Liyuan" turn—not just the heel and sole, but the side of the foot and the toes followed in sequence. Her black socks resembled embroidered shoes; her gait, refined and distilled, seemed drawn from centuries of stylized movement once performed in such shoes.

It is said that when Meyerhold witnessed Mei Lanfang's hand gestures, he was so moved that he declared some actors' hands ought to be cut off. What, then, would he have said about the footwork of Liyuan Xi performers? How many actors' feet would be found wanting?

If such artistry is found in the feet, how much more in the posture of the waist and limbs? The slight bend of the knees, the ineffable softness of each movement—every pose could have been lifted from a classical scroll painting of courtly women. Whether in *Da Men*, *The Journey of Yuzhen* (*Yuzhen Xing*), or *Boiling Congee* (*Zhu Mi*), each gesture felt timeless. Every movement, every line spoken or sung, embodied a poise shaped by another era's social codes—a different body, a different bearing.

Whether conveying longing, sorrow, contented solitude, or the idleness of dawn, each emotion spoke through a unique corporeal language. It left one wondering: had an ancient figure stepped out of a painting, or had we all returned to antiquity together?

In *Boiling Congee*, the performer tries to fetch water but cannot reach it. She struggles to move a stone that falls into the stream; only then can she draw water. To light a fire, she must first twist a wick; with the wick, she gathers flame; with flame, she kindles the fire. The sequence is detailed and complex. Yet the magic lies not just in the conjuring of something from nothing—this famed objectless performance—but in the persistent joy threaded through each act: the joy of cooking, of labor itself.

In this most mundane of tasks—cooking a pot of porridge—there is the wonder of creation itself, as if we are witnessing the moment humankind first discovered that raw grain could be boiled into soft, nourishing food. One cannot help but marvel, even without knowing the story—that Liu Yue'e, daughter of a wealthy family, has chosen to follow the impoverished scholar Lü Mengzheng. It is, quite simply, the joy of living. Let the rivers and oceans rage, let floods destroy and storms roar—in their aftermath, there remains the quiet stream from *Boiling Congee*, and the lingering warmth of a bowl of porridge.

Form tempers feeling; and feeling clings to form. The world changes, yet emotion remains bound to its own nature, and stylized form endures as something ever watchable, ever moving. That afternoon, through the art of Liyuan Xi, time slipped quietly back—by a thousand years.

4.

On traditional xiqu stages, it is typical to have "a table and two chairs." Liyuan xiqu, however, is even simpler, often featuring only a wide bench. On that day, even the bench was omitted. Sitting directly opposite the audience was a fashionable, muscular man with a small braid on his head. I later learned that he was skilled at playing many instruments, which made it a bit unfortunate for him, as his musical talents weren't fully showcased. Instead, he spent quite some time playing the role of a living backdrop and stage manager. He remained in one spot, handing the performer the umbrella from *The Journey of Yuzhen* and, at the right moment, taking it back from behind. Suddenly, a wisp of smoke rose from the light above his head, transforming the dim room into something reminiscent of a desolate, remote wilderness. How he achieved that effect remains a mystery. As the performer moved, he mirrored their actions, sometimes turning sideways or turning his back to the audience, subtly diminishing his presence.

The southern tune "pipa" performer observed Miss Zeng, occasionally repeating the plucking of the strings to accompany her movements. At the beginning of the performance, Miss Zeng ascended the stage while playing the small gong herself. The small gong eventually became the bowl used to serve the gruel in *Boiling Congee*, which she placed before the nanpa player, as if offering soup. This marked the conclusion of the scene.

The drum master and Miss Zeng were in perfect harmony, their rhythms and

performance beats seemingly attuned to each other, responding as though by instinct. A few drum strokes would match the movements of the performer—not too much, not too little, perfectly in sync. It was a magical and seamless interaction.

In the *Da Men* segment, a half wall to the left of the audience seemed to catch the performer's attention during the performance. It naturally became a mirror for self-pity, as the performer began performing for the wall, perfectly capturing the mood of melancholy. The shadows of the performer's figure and gestures on the wall grew more tender and intimate. In the *The Journey of Yuzhen* excerpt, the performer walked slowly to the flute and xiao player, matching the beat. He took the flute from the player's hands, and the musician instantly understood. When the next section began, the performer replaced the flute with the shakuhachi (a Japanese bamboo flute), which had a deeper tone, better complementing the singing.

Improvisation and real-time adjustments were at play, with the performer also acting as the director during the performance. It was both an expression and an experience, a balance of alienation and immersion. The long-standing debate in the theater world over "methods" and "systems" seemed irrelevant here. What was on display was both expression and experience, with elements of both alienation and immersion. The performer, along with the musician, wasn't just multitasking but was fully engaged in both roles. The performer was mindful of the music while completing their performance; the musician remained aware of the performer while playing. Both the performance and the music demanded full concentration and self-awareness. In such a small space, it was impossible to ignore the presence of the audience.

Theoretical discussions became irrelevant, but they reminded me of Nanyin (Southern Tune), which shares a deep connection with Liyuan Xi. In a Nanyin ensemble, after a song ends, anyone who wants to sing volunteers, anyone who wants to take over the clapper does so, and those who can play the xiao pick it up and continue. It's a kind of "community," where everyone collaborates and adjusts as needed once they're on stage. Nanyin has likely realized the ideal of "musical culture," where "music" seeks harmony. Traditional xiqu, at its core, is a musical drama—rooted in "musical" thinking. With a small stage, when the performers are surrounded by musicians and both interact with each other, xiqu truly becomes "xi" (drama) and "qu" (tune) intertwined.

5.

Coming back to his senses after expressing admiration, playwright Mr. Cao Lusheng summarized the performance he had just witnessed with words like "condensed," "refined," "focused," and "purified." He remarked that future Chinese xiqu will likely head in two extremes: the grand and the tiny.

The "tiny" undoubtedly refers to the "Little Liyuan" style within Liyuan Xi. Historically, "Little Liyuan" was a troupe-based style, originating from the end of the Northern Song Dynasty, when the imperial family relocated south. The External Clan Office of the Southern Song Dynasty was established in Quanzhou, where the royal family brought their troupe from Bianliang (today's Kaifeng). The seven child performers, playing the roles of Sheng (the male lead), Dan (the female lead), Jing (the painted face), Mo (the old lead), Chou (the comic-role), Tie (supporting female roles), and Wai (supporting male roles), formed the "Seven-actor Troupe." Unfortunately, their prosperity was short-lived. In 1276, when the Yuan army invaded Fujian, many officials were killed, and the royal household's troupe was scattered, merging with the local "Xia'nan" (literally "Lower South") troupe and the "Shanglu" (literally "Upper Road") troupe from Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

All the delicacy, subtlety, and attention to detail came from small spaces. "Little Liyuan" embodied this, as did Kunqu—both involve the meticulousness of embroidery. Unfortunately, "small" is often dismissed, whether by choice or necessity. Chinese drama tends to move towards grand narratives, massive themes, and elaborate stage designs. When will it return, in all its glory, to the delightful charm of the "small"?

The performance style of "Little Liyuan" rivals that of Kunqu, both originating from household troupes. Perhaps it developed earlier, or maybe due to the regional customs of Fujian, or because of the different texts it relied upon. Unlike Kunqu, which was passed down from Ming Dynasty scholars, "Little Liyuan" is more grounded, with simpler, more rustic qualities. In *The Journey of Yuzhen*, the rugged journey of Wang Yuzhen in search of her husband; in *Boiling Congee*, Liu Yue'e, who had never known hardship but now faces it with innocent resilience; in *Chen San Wu Niang: Da Men*, Wu Niang's restless, sleepless thoughts—all these radiate a more folk-like, more robust emotional quality. They are patterns painted on a noble foundation, balancing both the foundation and the patterns. The form and the ritual enhance the content.

Liyuan Xi, especially "Little Liyuan," along with Kunqu, represents the essence of Chinese xiqu, or at the very least, is an undeniable root. The question now is:

how has modern Chinese xiqu evolved, and what does contemporary Chinese xiqu look like? Before us, we now have a mirror to reflect on.

6.

After the performance that day, and in the days that followed, I often found myself thinking: if playwright Mr. Wang Renjie, who passed away at the end of May, had come to Nanjing, would he have been there? What would he have said? Would he have stepped outside for a cigarette first? And, amidst the swirling smoke, would he have once again felt proud of the Liyuan Xi he had cherished all his life? If he were there, would he have written a seven-character quatrain or a regulated verse, perhaps on his phone, sharing it on his WeChat Moments?

And what about Miss Zeng? Would she have remembered Mr. Wang too? I recall, just months earlier, beside Mr. Wang's memorial, watching the youngest members of the troupe bid him farewell through a Liyuan performance. Her expression was unusually stern, her eyes intense, as though afraid that the slightest mistake would betray Mr. Wang's memory. The young actors, with tears in their eyes as they faced his portrait, murmured, "Mr. Wang always treated these young ones with such kindness…"

Ah, I've wandered too far. How could I not think about it?

7.

I still can't find the right words, nor the right style. To describe the performance venue and the distance from the stage that day, I feel "meters" is the wrong measure—it should be "feet" or even "zhang" (a traditional Chinese unit of length). Reflecting on that performance, it seems the expression should be found in the language of poetry and lyrics, something that resonates with all in attendance. The most awkward part is that I can't even settle on a proper frame of reference. Was it a literary gathering? Unfortunately, the "audience" were simply that—audience members, with no ability to join in playing the qin, chanting poetry, or painting. This was clearly not like the entertainment of the "Seven-actor Troupe" era, where the audience came as participants.

The people who came were there out of reverence, with no ulterior motives. Aesthetically, they were all "new youth," with no attachment to old traditions. Someone jokingly said that this was a "star-chasing" moment for Mr. Lü, but even as a "fan," there was no such high-level treatment.

I couldn't help but recall the comments made about Jingju (Peking opera) master Mei Lanfang when he visited Soviet Russia. Of course, I don't dare compare myself to such great talents as Meyerhold or Brecht, but I do wonder: when did it happen that watching local culture and drama started to feel like encountering something foreign, as if I were an outsider, unfamiliar with it all? Or perhaps it's because this theatrical tradition had been interrupted long ago, and I had never experienced such a form of viewing before?

Each time I watch Liyuan Xi, it feels like confirming the judgment that "the past is a foreign land." Moving upstream against the current of time feels like entering a different space altogether. Every encounter with Liyuan Xi feels like a reunion after a long separation, yet the next meeting always feels like the first encounter. It's always a mixture of familiarity—"we used to be like this, expressing ourselves this way"—and strangeness—"so this is what we once were, with expressions and gestures that now seem unfamiliar."

That day's performance subtly reminded me that the pace of "modernity" is still slow, because true modernity encompasses the continuation of tradition and a calm approach to the past. How could it be anything like me, stumbling and struggling to find the right words?

GUO CHENZI
Associate Professor at Shanghai Theatre Academy.

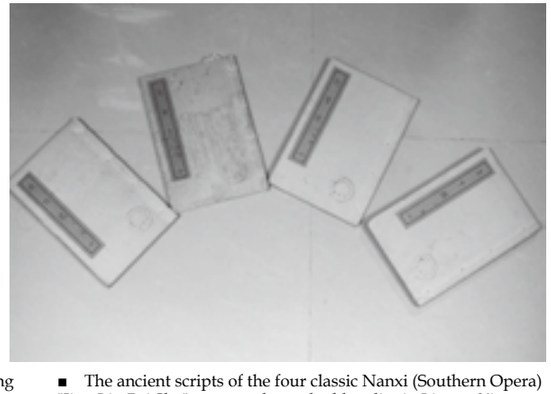
More Traditional, More Modern: An Interview with the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center

GONG Baorong, ZENG Jingping, and others

GONG Baorong: First, could you please introduce the name "Liyuan Xi" to us?

XIE Zichou: The revered figure in our Liyuan tradition, the ancestor we honor, is "Marshal Tiandu", whose birth name was Lei Haiqing. Lei Haiqing was a renowned court musician during the Tang Dynasty. During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, the court established a musical institution called the Liyuan, which was located in a royal garden also named Liyuan. Lei Haiqing became the most celebrated artist in this institution. After the An Lushan Rebellion broke out, Lei Haiqing chose not to flee with the emperor and was eventually captured by An Lushan. An Lushan attempted to force him to perform, but Lei Haiqing refused, resulting in his execution. He became a martyr and was later revered as a god. In Liyuan Xi, we honor Lei Haiqing as our patron saint. The institution he belonged to was called Liyuan, so we proudly refer to ourselves as descendants of Liyuan. When the government later formalized the name of our theatre, they continued this tradition.

■ In Liyuan Xi, the deity Lei Haiqing is revered under the honorific title "Marshal Tiandu" and is popularly known as "Lord Xianggong."All images in this article are from the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.



■ The ancient scripts of the four classic Nanxi (Southern Opera) "Jing Liu Bai Sha" preserved as valuable relics in Liyuan Xi.

■ The traditional "goulan xiaotai" (small pavilion-style playhouse) structure of Liyuan Xi.

GONG Baorong: What do you think is special about the history of Liyuan Xi?

XIE Zichou: Actually, during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, Kunqu was still in its early stages, but by then, we already had fully developed scripts for Liyuan Xi. When we say Liyuan Xi has an 800-year history, we are referring to the fact that during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, we already had a complete and mature set of scripts. Considering the speed at which culture spread in ancient times, it typically took at least 300 years for a theatre form to evolve from its inception to maturity, with complete scripts being passed down. Based on this, we can estimate that Liyuan Xi originated in the early Southern Song Dynasty, around the 13th century. During the Southern Song Dynasty, an official from Fujian wrote a memorial to the imperial court, stating that the customs in the southern Fujian region were problematic—farmers were not planting crops but were instead building makeshift stages on the streets to perform plays. The memorial does not specify the type of theatre, but based on records from the Ming Dynasty, we can infer that the street performances mentioned in the memorial were most likely Liyuan Xi.

■ In 2006, Liyuan Xi was selected for the inaugural National Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China, ranking second among traditional xiqu genres, just after Kunqu.

GONG Baorong: What is distinctive about the different schools within Liyuan Xi?

XIE Zizhou: Liyuan Xi comprises three main schools: "Shanglu" (literally "Upper Road") school, "Xia'nan" (literally "Lower South") school, and the "Little Liyuan" school. The "Shanglu" school originated during the Song and Yuan dynasties, when troupes performing "Nanxi"—early Southern Opera—from Zhejiang and Jiangxi came to Quanzhou to perform. At the time, Quanzhou was a bustling port city. These troupes eventually settled there and gradually adapted their speech from the Zhejiang and Jiangxi dialects to the local Quanzhou dialect to better suit local audiences. In those days, administrative divisions were called "lu" ("roads"). Zhejiang and Jiangxi lie north of Fujian, and in the southern Fujian dialect, "north" is referred to as "shang" (upper). For example, traveling to Beijing would be called "shang Beijing". Conversely, traveling southward would be referred to as "xia" (down), such as "xia Guangzhou" for a trip to Guangzhou. Thus, the dramatic tradition that migrated from northern regions and fused with local language and customs became known as the "Shanglu" school. This school tends to favor plays rooted in traditional Confucian ethics—loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness—and has preserved many ancient "Nanxi" scripts.

In contrast, the "Xia'nan" school features stronger local Quanzhou characteristics. It developed from local folk tales, songs, and dances. Compared to "Shanglu", "Xia'nan" is more rustic and grounded in grassroots culture—more boisterous, more rough-edged.

The school with the highest artistic standards is the "Little Liyuan" school. Its origins date back to the Southern Song dynasty, when members of the imperial family fled south during wartime. Some of them settled in Quanzhou. These aristocrats had maintained private troupes in the imperial court and continued that tradition after relocating. However, with the fall of the Southern Song and the rise of the Yuan dynasty, royal patronage disappeared. These court troupes were forced into civilian life, giving rise to the "Little Liyuan" school. The name "Little" Liyuan comes from the fact that, unlike the adult performers in the "Shanglu" and "Xia'nan" schools, the "Little Liyuan" troupes were composed of children, all under the age of sixteen.

In earlier times, troupe leaders would search for children from impoverished families—usually around five or six years old—and sign ten-year indenture contracts. These children would train and perform from ages six to sixteen. Since they were too young to analyze characters or understand dramatic interpretation, their training was based purely on imitation. Masters demonstrated every movement, and the children learned by memorizing and copying exactly. As a result, the "Little Liyuan" performance system became highly standardized—each gesture and posture passed down through strict repetition. Unlike "Shanglu" and "Xia'nan", where notable star actors could emerge, "Little Liyuan" had no such figures—everything depended on the teacher. The quality of a "Little Liyuan" performance was entirely determined by the quality of its instructor.

The first director of the Liyuan Xi Troupe, Cai Youben, was the most renowned teacher of the "Little Liyuan" school in the Quanzhou area. Although he was illiterate and couldn't read a single word, he had memorized over 500,000 characters' worth of scripts, lyrics, and scores. He carried in his mind the entire traditional repertoire of "Little Liyuan"—the scripts, the songs, the music, and even the stage movements. So, when the Liyuan Xi Troupe was established in 1953, the first thing we did was ask scholars to record his knowledge, line by line. It was a race to rescue an invaluable piece of intangible cultural heritage.

Among the classic works of the "Little Liyuan" school, *Chen San Wu Niang* remains widely performed today. From the "Shanglu" tradition, notable plays include *Zhu Wen* and *Zhu Maichen*. In more recent times, with the original works created by Wang Renjie, the newly adapted Liyuan Xi reached a new artistic peak.

GONG Baorong: We all know that Liyuan Xi has its own unique role types ("hangdang") and stylized conventions ("chengshi"). Could you explain these in more detail?

LIN Cangxiao: Liyuan Xi features seven traditional role types: "Sheng", "Dan", "Jing", "Mo", "Wai", "Chou", and "Tie". The first three—"Sheng" (male roles), "Dan" (female roles), and "Jing" (painted-face roles)—are relatively straightforward. What sets Liyuan Xi apart is the distinction between "Mo" and "Wai", both of which represent older male characters. The key difference lies in their social status: "Wai" refers to older men of higher rank or education, while "Mo" usually portrays men of lower status, such as loyal old servants.

The role type "Tie" is especially unique. The term comes from traditional architecture—when two beams didn't fit perfectly, a small wooden wedge ("tie") would be inserted to stabilize the structure. In Liyuan Xi, the lead female role is always the "Dan", while all supporting female roles are collectively called "Tie". For instance, a maid would be a "Little Tie", an elderly mother an "Old Tie", and a noblewoman a "Lady Tie".

In the "Little Liyuan" tradition, the entire troupe consisted of just seven children—each representing one of the seven role types—forming what was known as the "Seven-actor Troupe". Because of the limited cast, each performer would play multiple roles, switching from one character to another from scene to scene. In contrast, the "Shanglu"and "Xia'nan" schools were composed of adult performers, often with multiple actors for each role type.

The instruments used in Liyuan Xi are also highly traditional—such as the "dongxiao" (vertical bamboo flute), "dizi" (transverse flute), and "sanxian" (three-string lute). One of the most distinctive is the "Yajiao Gu" (Foot-pressing Drum), a percussion instrument unique to "Liyuan Xi". The drummer controls the rhythm by placing a foot directly on the drumhead, making the drum master the key timekeeper for the performance.

Liyuan Xi's stage design is extremely minimalist—even simpler than the "one table, two chairs" setup of "Jingju" (Peking Opera). It typically uses a single long bench draped with a cloth. This bench is highly versatile: it can represent a hall seat, a bed in a maiden's chamber, or even a city wall when stood upon by an emperor or general.

Let me also introduce the "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines" (Shiba Bu Ke Mu) , the foundational system of stylized movement in Liyuan Xi. You can think of them as the alphabet of Liyuan Xi—basic units that actors can combine and adapt to suit a character's emotions and actions. Unlike other traditional Chinese theatre forms, Liyuan Xi does not use "water sleeves" (long, flowing sleeves), so its hand gestures are especially rich and expressive.

■ The gesture "Xianggong Mo" from the "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines" of Liyuan Xi.

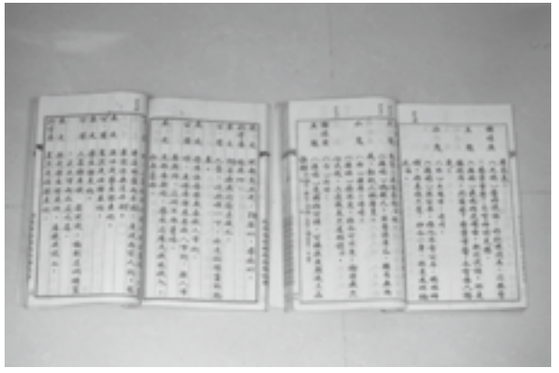
■ The gesture "Qibu Dian"("seven-step Skip") from the "Eighteen Fundamental Training Routines" of Liyuan Xi.

For example, "hand passing the brow" indicates beauty, "drooping hands" suggests a maid or a person of low status, "raised hands" signals direction, and "parted hands" denote symbolic action. One of the most sacred gestures is "Xianggong Mo", used to express extreme emotional intensity. Another, "Qibu Dian" ("seven-step Skip"), conveys deep sorrow. Nearly every emotion can be articulated through the "Shiba Bu Ke Mu", offering a highly refined and intricate expressive language.

GONG Baorong: How are students typically recruited for Liyuan Xi training?

XIE Zizhou: Our troupe was founded in 1953, and by 1956 we had already recruited our first cohort of students. It was the earliest actor training program in all of Fujian Province at the time. This group became the first to inherit the artistic legacy of pre-Liberation (before 1949) performers. A second cohort followed in 1957, and in 1959 we recruited two more groups. That year, Mr. Tan Kah Kee, a patriotic overseas Chinese philanthropist, developed a strong interest in Liyuan Xi, which led us to establish two training classes—Class A and Class B. The original plan was for Class A to remain in Quanzhou, while Class B would travel to Xiamen to establish a new Liyuan Xi troupe. However, before the students completed their training, Mr. Tan sadly passed away, and both classes remained in Quanzhou. As a result, Xiamen missed its opportunity to form its own troupe.

In 1960, we enrolled another class, divided into two sections: one for actors and one for musicians, marking the formation of a professional Liyuan Xi orchestra. At that time, the training cycle was quite short—typically one year of foundational training followed by stage performance in the second year. The



■ The *Zhu Wen* manuscript of Liyuan Xi, recorded in the Ming Dynasty's *Yongle Encyclopedia* as a "surviving piece from the Song and Yuan dynasties, and the only known copy in the country," and the *Wang Kui* manuscript of Liyuan Xi, recognized as "the earliest script of Nanxi and a surviving piece from the Song and Yuan dynasties."

Quanzhou Arts School officially established a Liyuan Xi major in 1977, offering students the opportunity to earn a secondary vocational education diploma while also receiving cultural courses. Following the 1977 cohort, the school admitted students in 1985, 1989, and subsequent years, with new cohorts typically enrolling every decade, including those in 1997, 2007, 2018, and 2019.

GONG Baorong: In today's rapidly evolving theatrical landscape, with an abundance of performances and ever-diversifying styles, it sometimes feels as though traditional xiqu is losing its original essence. Yet Liyuan Xi remains unique—even modern works retain a deeply traditional flavor. What's your perspective on this, Director Zeng?

ZENG Jingping: I believe that the transmission of Chinese xiqu must be approached dialectically today. This applies to how we teach, disseminate, preserve, and perform the art. Xiqu is often associated with formalized stylization ("chengshi"), but the more codified a form becomes, the more it can blunt a performer's instincts. Stylization can be restrictive—but it is not only that. The genre's former glory can create a sense of complacency among practitioners. When problems arise, many are quick to look outward—to blame society, funding, or government policy—rather than engage in self-reflection.

Personally, I've never been fully content with either the state of my genre or with myself. I was fortunate to receive awards early in my career, but these accolades did not bring simple joy; they came with responsibility, motivation, and the need for deeper thought. I've always had a bit of a rebellious streak. Early on, I realized there were problems with the traditional methods of xiqu

■ Initiated by Zeng Jingping, the Liyuan Xi has held three consecutive National Nanxi Performances from 2023 to 2025.

training. My own physical attributes didn't suit any single role type clearly—I trained in "guimendan" (refined young women), "xiaosheng" (young male leads), and "chou" (comic roles). This cross-disciplinary training helped me develop an expansive way of thinking and a tendency toward creative exploration.

I constantly ask: How can our culture showcase its distinctiveness? How can we innovate? What kind of broader, even global, perspective should we adopt to examine our genre? We must consider Liyuan Xi not just as a regional art form but as a contribution to the collective artistic expression of humanity. That is the most crucial question when we talk about inheritance.

Throughout my artistic journey, I've often asked myself: What does the audience need in our time? And what can I offer them? These are the essential questions that artists of Liyuan Xi, and indeed all traditional xiqu practitioners, must continually ask themselves. Inheritance is a complex process—it cannot simply mean preservation. True inheritance must be deeply and actively connected to the present moment.

GONG Baorong: So tradition and modernity are inseparable. How do you view their relationship?

ZENG Jingping: Tradition must be upheld. There are elements we can never

afford to lose—take, for example, the "Shiba Bu Ke Mu". Every performer must begin with them, mastering them with precision and refinement. Only on that foundation can true creativity emerge. We must remain steadfast in preserving tradition, and not compromise or abandon it simply in response to commercial pressures or logistical challenges.

Some works, for instance, must be performed on small stages—such as *The Constable and the Female Thief*. Its spatial constraints—just six to seven meters—demand an intense performance energy. The precise rhythm and movement, the feeling of taking three steps forward and three steps back, can only be fully expressed in such an environment. This is why we sometimes have specific requirements for our performance venues.

Passing down traditional art is no easy task—it requires deep love. Many of our staff cannot rely on this work alone to make a living. They are constantly thinking about survival. Yet, once they step into the theater, into that atmosphere, they instantly forget life's hardships and return to a state of artistic

■ The "Seven-actor Troupe" roles performed by the inheritors of the 1997 class of Liyuan Xi.

purity. This is what it's like—we keep running, keep pushing forward. It's hard, but it's also immensely rewarding.

When it comes to tradition, there are three crucial responsibilities: inheritance, preservation, and protection. Achieving these goals involves a very practical challenge: attracting young people through various means, sparking their interest, and encouraging more of them to care about and study Liyuan Xi. The ultimate aim is to help people recognize the profound beauty of this genre. In a sense, it is in the steadfast protection of tradition that we discover what is truly modern.

GONG Baorong: I imagine that the process of preserving Liyuan Xi also involves challenges related to dissemination—both domestically and internationally. What kinds of obstacles have you encountered in that regard?

ZENG Long: Today, we have more platforms for dissemination than ever, but very few people are truly committed to doing it well. We've been exploring different approaches ourselves. Beyond performance and creation, we place a strong emphasis on how to attract younger audiences and build meaningful connections with them. Real dissemination is never one-sided—it has to be mutual, born from shared interest and resonance.

We have many volunteers who support us in various ways. As this process unfolds, more people are drawn in and join our efforts. At the heart of dissemination is the need to create high-quality work and then find partners who can help amplify it. Often, we can't rely solely on our own efforts—we need to step out and seek external resources and alliances.

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XIE ZICHOU
Interviewee, Playwright at Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

LIN CANGXIAO
Interviewee, Actor at Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

ZENG JINGPING
Interviewee, Renowned Liyuan Xi Performing Artist, troupe Leader at Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

ZENG LONG
Interviewee, Director at Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

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The Operational Practices of the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe

GUO Yu

The Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe (FJLYT)[1], established in 1953, is the world's oneandonly professional troupe dedicated to the performance of Liyuan Xi. Known as the "living legacy of Chinese Southern Xiqu from the Song and Yuan dynasties", Liyuan Xi embodies a rich cultural heritage and holds deep historical significance. As the inheritor and protector ofof this ancient Xiqu tradition, the troupe undertakes a profound cultural responsibility and mission.

Since its inception, FJLYT has been devoted to the preservation, transmission, and advancement of Liyuan Xi. Over the years, the troupe has safeguarded the art form's rustic charm and unique style while innovatively integrating tradition with modernity. This dedication has led to the creation of numerous outstanding plays that have won national awards, such as *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, and *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*. These plays have made a significant impact on the Chinese Xiqu tradition and have been featured internationally, highlighting the enduring appeal of Chinese Xiqu to audiences worldwide.

The troupe has assembled a cohort of exceptional artists, such as Zeng Jingping and Wang Renjie, who are both distinguished figures in Liyuan Xi and key drivers of the troupe's development. Under their leadership, FJLYT has been deeply involved in international cultural exchanges, playing a pivotal role in promoting and elevating the global stature of Liyuan Xi.

In 1999, ZengJingping was appointed as the head of FJLYT, undertaking the profound responsibility of guiding the troupe. During aperiod when traditional Xiquwas experiencing a downturn and FJLYT faced challenges to its survival, Zeng remained steadfast in her commitment, making tireless contributions to the preservation and development of Liyuan Xi.

Over the past two decades, with Zeng Jingping's its efforts, the troupehas produced numerous outstanding productions and nurtured a new generation of performers who have become the core strength of FJLYT. Accessibility of Liyuan Xi is improved by regular performances and artistic activities, while innovative and modern performance styles are explored alongside the preservation of tradition. Through these efforts, the troupe has solidified its leadership within the Xiqu community and greatly boosted the global recognition of Liyuan Xi.

1.Regular Public Benefit Performances of Liyuan Xi

As with many other traditional Chinese Xiqu forms, Liyuan Xi is a genre that requires urgent preservation. In recent years, Quanzhou has gained popularity as a tourist destination, and attending Liyuan Xi performances has become one of the primary attractions, greatly boosting box office revenue. However, the survival of Liyuan Xi still largely depends on financial support from the government.

One reason is that Quanzhou is a city where free performances are commonplace—held in streets and teahouses—leading local audiences to expect shows without charge. Although most paid performances in theaters offer higher quality, many locals remain reluctant to pay for tickets. Another reason is that younger audiences, who are generally more willing to invest in cultural products, show little interest in traditional Xiqu. They are often more drawn to avant-garde and sensory-stimulating performances, as well as popular cultural forms like anime and musicals.

The Liyuan Experimental Theater Troupe has devoted considerable efforts to address this situation. One of the major initiatives is the hosting of public benefit performances. This is not just an imperative and encouragement from the local government, but also a funDa Mental strategy for FJLYT's promotion: traditional Xiqu must concentrate on growing its market and increasing accessibility.

Liyuan Classical Theater, whichopened in late 2008, has served as a new stage for showcasing the ancient art of Xiqu. For the past 16 years,

1 In 2012, due to shifts in cultural policy, the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe was restructured into the Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Inheritance Center.

FJLYT has consistently held regular public benefit performances at this venue, which stands as a rare testament to excellence and resilience in the operation and management of self-run theaters by Chinese theater troupes. ThemoveenableLiyuan Xi enthusiasts to enjoy professional performances at highly affordable ticket prices and invite those unfamiliar with the art form into the theaterto appreciate its traditional beauty.

Takingthe first step is always difficult. In its early stages, public benefit performances faced numerous challenges—some shows in a theater with over 500 seats drew only a dozen or so audience members. Today, however, the membership club proudly counts thousands of registered members. Audiences have shifted from favoring only free performances to actively purchasing tickets, a transformation facilitated by public benefit performances that have cultivated a culture of paid attendance for Liyuan Xi among Quanzhou residents. By 2011, following only two years of development, the troupe's public performance seasons held during the Lantern Festival, Labor Day, and National Day had garnered significant attention both domestically and internationally.

Since 2021, May has been officiallydesignated as the regular Wang Renjie Performance Month,featuring annual performances of heritage plays. In addition to the designated performance seasons, public benefit shows are staged every weekend, continuing as a tradition.Through the process of holding public benefit performances, young actors have honed their skills on stage, and a new generation of young audience members has emerged as key supporters of Liyuan Xi.

2.Arts Appreciation Activities

FJLYT collaborates with local primary schools and kindergartens in Quanzhou to provide regular educational programs promoting Liyuan Xi. Typical activities include school-organized student visits to the Liyuan Xi Heritage Center, where they can watch performances and tour the theater, as well as the troupe dispatching actors and staff to schools for educational sessions. These programs generally encompass an introduction to the history and various schools of Liyuan Xi, alongside the basic gestures, movements, and postures integral to its performances.

Moreover, Liyuan Xi has launched initiatives to promote South Fujian traditional culture on school campuses. Through a range of educational initiatives, such as

skill demonstrations and performance training, students acquire a foundational understanding of traditional culture. These endeavors not only stimulate students' interest in South Fujian traditional Xiqu and enrich their artistic sensibility and cultural knowledge but also play a pivotal role in cultivating national pride, preserving the heritage of traditional Xiqu, and advancing aesthetic education within educational institutions.

In addition to regular educational outreach, the Heritage Center has also organized numerous thematic performances, including the 'Liyuan Xi HIGH Experience' series in recent years, the intangible cultural heritage showcase for Children's Day, the 'Intangible Heritage Happy Afternoon' performance, the 2023 Children's Day special intangible heritage performance, the 2023 thematic seminar for music educators in primary and secondary schools in Fujian, and the 'Eight Types of Fujian Drama Entering Schools' initiative, in collaboration with the Fujian Provincial Drama Association. These activities have brought students into the theater, allowing them to experience Liyuan Xi up close. Not only have they enriched the students' cultural lives, but they have also planted the seeds of a passion for Liyuan Xi in their hearts, fostering a future generation of potential audiences for the art form.

Furthermore, FJLYT has collaborated with Huaqiao University to establish a cultural practice base for university students, organizing various exchange activities. In the summer of 2024, Huaqiao University hosted the "Joint Harmony Exchange Camp, " which brought the Chinese Music Center of Tennessee State University and the Chinese Orchestra of Carleton College in the United States to the Fujian Liyuan Xi Heritage Center for learning and exchange activities. Zeng Long, a young director from the Heritage Center, also delivered a lecture on Liyuan Xi at Huaqiao University's Quanzhou campus.

Under the guidance of the "Aesthetic Education Overseas Chinese Heart" Counselor Studio, 15 students from the School of Business Administration at Huaqiao University formed the "Magnificent Liyuan, Aesthetic Education Overseas Chinese Heart" Youth Practice Team. Leveraging the public cultural resources of the Fujian Liyuan Xi Heritage Center, the team carried out aesthetic education initiatives aimed at young people from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. Their efforts were centered on the preservation and promotion of Liyuan Xi, inspiring students from these regions to actively engage as both custodians and ambassadors of Chinese culture.

3.Cultivation and Maintenance of Successors

Zeng Jingping places great emphasis on the training of the next generation of performers and staff. The troupe entrusted the provincial Xiqu school to recruit students specializing in Liyuan Xi performance and instrumental music. Given the shortage of teaching staff at the school, Zeng Jingping actively collaborated with the performing arts school, arranging for troupe members to mentor students while also hiring retired renowned artists to assist with professional training. She further promoted the professional development of troupe members by selecting them for advanced study at prestigious national art institutions, thereby fostering a well-rounded team of artistic talents within the troupe.

At the same time, Zeng endeavors to provide as many practical opportunities as possible, encouraging troupe members to participate in various competitions. During her tenure as the troupe's director, more than 40 individuals from the troupe won notable awards in national and Fujian provincial showcases and competitions.

The Inheritance of Liyuan Xi Requires Comprehensive Talent Development Across Various Roles. In 2012, with the aim of cultivating outstanding actors, teachers, directors, and researchers, FJLYT collaborated with the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA)to establish a teaching and practice base for Liyuan Xi. Following the establishment of this base, 12 exceptional young actors from FJLYT were sent to NACTA to study, under the high expectations of Zeng Jingping. She hoped that after their studies, students would bring their experiences back to FJLYT, providing valuable insights and models for the future cultivation of Liyuan Xi talent, and nurturing artists, educators, and administrators.

Training an exceptional Liyuan Xi actor requires a significant investment of time. The "Liyuan Class, " a training program established by FJLYT to cultivate professional Liyuan Xi performers, enrolls students only once every 10 years. Unlike typical short-term training courses, students in this program spend approximately six years learning before they can take on supporting roles in performances and more than 10 years before they are able to assume lead roles. The lengthy development process for talent in Liyuan Xi is due to the art form's refined, reserved, delicate, and rigorous performance style, which makes actor training highly demanding. Without at least 10 years of study, it is challenging to master the complexity required for lead roles. Since Zeng Jingping assumed leadership of the troupe, the 'Liyuan Class' has held three admission cycles.

The phenomenon of celebrity adoration, commonly seen in musical theater fan circles, is also prevalent among Liyuan Xi audiences. Veteran performers, whose faces are familiar to the audience, often elicit a sense of familiarity and receive considerable applause, while the efforts of younger actors on stage are frequently overshadowed by the prominence of their senior counterparts.

This is an inevitable journey for young performers. According to Zeng Long, a director at FJLYT, stage performance provides actors with a much faster path to growth compared to offstage training. The troupe actively creates platforms for young actors to showcase their talent. For instance,during a national tour of *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*, troupe leader Zeng Jingping brought along four young female performers, all just 20 years old. Since they were too inexperienced to perform an entire show, Zeng arranged for them to perform in parts, allowing them to gradually gain stage experience. Similarly, during the regular public benefit performances held every week from Friday to Sunday, the young actors have ample time to gain hands-on experience on stage and hone their acting skills.The frequent performancesallow them to continually practice, building and enhancing their confidence through repeated appearances on stage.

The most crucial factor for the preservation of ancient Xiqu is the retention of practitioners—it is essential to ensure that those willing to dedicate themselves to this field can remain in it. For many traditional Chinese Xiqu forms, the insufficient influx of new talent and the loss of experienced practitioners are inevitable challenges. The primary difficulty faced by professionals lies in their extremely low income, which is insufficient to sustain a livelihood. Compared to the meager fixed salaries they earn in troupes, the remuneration from commercial performances they participate in as individuals is considerably more lucrative.

Zeng Jingping noted that of the 30 or so students who studied Liyuan Xi performance alongside her, only four remain in the profession today. Nationwide, the number of behind-the-scenes staff in Liyuan Xi—including directors, scriptwriters, and instrumentalists—amounts to only about 150 people. Zeng believes that engaging in Xiqu should be a heartfelt and voluntary pursuit. Moreover, the initial investment in training Liyuan Xi performers is significant, both in terms of funding and time. These individuals dedicate a substantial portion of their lives to honing their performance skills, and it is imperative to ensure they can live without financial concerns, allowing them to focus on the preservation and advancement of Xiqu.

Government funding for the troupe has indeed increased significantly in recent years. Back in 2010, FJLYT received 4. 46 million yuan in government subsidies. According to the 2023 financial report, the fiscal allocation for that year was 20. 3 million yuan, approximately 4. 5 times the amount received over a decade ago.

4.Liyuan Xi in the Era of Youth-Oriented Marketing

Zeng Long, a graduate of the Acting Department at the Central Academy of Drama, currently serves as a director at FJLYT. Zeng Long established the "Shang Haoting" Band, which means "the best sound" in the South Fujian dialect. This ensemble, designed to appeal to younger audiences, is composed of Liyuan Xi inheritors from the 1989, 1997, and 2007 cohorts. They experiment with an entirely new style by integrating elements of popular music into traditional Liyuan Xi, adapting Xiqumelodies and South Fujiandialect songs.

Zeng Long has made numerous attempts and efforts to make Liyuan Xi more youthful and modern. Immersive Liyuan Xi performances have proven to be a promising idea. In 2018, FJLYT was invited to perform three shows of *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln* at the Shanghai Xintiandi International Arts Festival. During the final performance, they broke the conventional proscenium-style relationship between audience and performers by removing seating and allowing the audience to follow the actors, watching the performance up close while walking through the venue. "Where the actors move, the audience follows. " This marked Zeng Long's first attempt at combining Liyuan Xi with immersive performance. However,as early as 2005, Zeng Jingping had already experimented with immersive elements of Liyuan Xi in collaboration with international artists in Europe through the project *Global Soul*.

In October 2019, the innovative immersive Liyuan Xi *Lü Mengzheng: Crossing the Bridge into the Kiln* was staged at Wudianshi in Jinjiang, incorporating choir performances into traditional presentations. Later in December 2019, the immersive Liyuan Xi *The Journey of Yuzhen* was performed on Qingyuan Mountain. In November 2020, Zeng Long and the Shang Haoting Band eturned to perform *Chen San and Wuniang* at the same venue. This outdoor performance intertwined tradition and modernity, featuring a combination of traditional Xiqucostumes and casual attire, traditional Chinese instruments alongside Western ones, and operatic singing styles with popular music. The

innovative approach to staging attracted extensive attention.

Zeng Long is someone with a contrarian mindset and a constant sense of urgency. He believes that the survival and development of Liyuan Xi depend on capturing the hearts of young audiences. While innovation in form may attract viewers impulsively, he argues that in order to win more favor from the audience, Liyuan Xi must prioritize content creation.

In 2023, Zeng Long and his team adopted the approach of "staging traditional Xiqu in new spaces" and collectively created *Chen San and Wuniang: Parallel Time and Space* and *The Great Ennui: Cyberpunk*. These two productions received widespread acclaim at the Shekou Theater Festival in Shenzhen and the China Experimental Xiqu (traditional opera) Exhibition. By integrating contemporary forms of expression into ancient traditional Xiqu, these works infused Liyuan Xi with youthful vitality and pioneered new pathways for its preservation and promotion.

The inheritance of tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive. Cross-disciplinary new art forms serve as a wonderful bridge, and by combining traditional arts with popular forms, they can attract greater attention from younger audiences. This is the innovative vision of this young team.

In addition to live performances in innovative formats, the Shang Haoting Band actively utilizes new social media platforms to promote and disseminate Liyuan Xi. By sharing performance videos, behind-the-scenes clips, and actor interviews, they have introduced more people to the charm of Liyuan Xi and expanded its influence among younger generations. As of now, their Douyin account, "Bo Le Theater - Shang Haoting, " has amassed 53, 000 subscribers, with their posted content receiving 253, 000 likes.

Conclusion

Fujian Provincial Liyuan Xi Experimental Troupe has opened up a new path for the development of Liyuan Xi, through a dual approach of innovation and preservation. Over the past decade, the troupe has undertaken a series of effective efforts that have not only preserved the essence of traditional Liyuan Xi performance but also infused it with new vitality by incorporating modern elements and exploring diversified dissemination channels. Through a range of initiatives—from the establishment of regular public benefit performances

and experiments with immersive productions to the cultivation of young actors and the promotion of international cultural exchanges—the troupe has consistently prioritized the preservation of tradition while breaking new ground with innovation, aiming to attract a broader audience of younger viewers and potential practitioners.

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Yu Rongjun's *The Crowd*: The Concepts of Individual and People from the Angle of Alienation Techniques in Epic Theatre

Paulo Ricardo BERTON, Agnaldo Stein da SILVA, Cristian Corrêa de Magalhães MENNA, Gaetan José Santos DAUSSY, Matheus Yoshino RUSSO

Abstract: This article examines how Chinese playwright Yu Rongjun (Nick Yu), in his 2014 play *The Crowd*, adapted from Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* , explores the often opposing yet interrelated concepts of individual and the collective. Drawing on techniques of the alienation effect from Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre theory, Yu conveys these tensions through dramatic devices such as number of characters on stage, speech delivery and discursive form. As a literary genre rooted in performance, drama here fulfills a triple function: to entertain, inform and to stimulate critical reflection in its reader/spectator.

Keywords: Playwriting, Asian Drama, Epic Theatre, Subject/People

1. Introduction

Chinese theatre is undoubtedly one of the oldest among all the traditions of performing arts that have come down to us today (BRANDON, 1993). This artistic way of expressing ideas both about more universal issues involving human existence, as well as situational contexts that affect the immediate survival of each one of us, has existed since then throughout the history of this country of enormous cultural richness and geopolitical importance on a planetary level. Its development is marked by increasingly sophisticated dramatic forms, such as Zaju and Kunqu.

This article, then, demonstrates the continued relevance of Drama in Mandarin

society through the analysis of *The Crowd*, written by Nick Yu in 2014. By presenting notable historical events of the *Zhongguo* (China), Yu not only informs the layman (primarily the foreign reader of his play) about the political-social trajectory of his country over nearly half a century, but he does so by drawing on literary sources from the Western tradition, specifically the works of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). From Ibsen, Yu appropriates the classic structural opposition found in the history of drama, specifically in his play *An Enemy of the People* (1882), between individual will and collective duty. In The Crowd, we meet a protagonist whose life's mission is to exact revenge on the person responsible for his mother's death, while participating in important historical moments in the formation of contemporary China. The importance of balancing the needs of the individual and the group is evident in Wang Guoqing's interactions with the other characters, who are engaged in their own revolutionary and professional activities, which are predominantly social in nature. Yu's portrayal of Guoqing's events also reveals another aesthetic connection to the West, this time with the epic aesthetics of theatre, as theorized by Bertolt Brecht. Here, the ontological principles of this literary genre – such as intersubjectivity, the eternal present and the discursive form of dialogue – are combined with epic elements, whose objective is not to eliminate the ideas of increasing tension, character, dialogue and conflict, but to annihilate elements of the reception of the artistic work – such as the illusion of reality and identification – in order to provoke a critical and conscious reaction from the reader/spectator, including during the exhibition of the theatrical show. These structural tools abound throughout *The Crowd*, for example at the beginning of scene two, where, as we watch Wang Guoqing tossing and turning in his sleep on a hotel bed in Hong Kong, we also witness another character on stage vaguely referred to as "Man 3", who describes what happens to the protagonist, breaking the basic principle of drama, which is "showing" (*mimesis*) as opposed to "telling" (*diegesis*), in a clear interpolation of elements foreign to the drama itself, starting with the figure of the narrator:

> Man 3 - 2014. July. Midnight. Hong Kong. Hotel. Outside. It's pouring. Splattering hard. Lightning cuts through the window into the room; the white sheets look ominous. Wrapped in these sheets, Wang Guoqing twists and squirms. The bed is squeaking and groaning, about to fall apart. Thunder rumbles. Splatter. Squeak. Rumble. Splatter… squeak…rumble… (YU, 2019, p.3)

The article is organized into subchapters that provide a literary foundation, enabling a clearer and more coherent subsequent analysis. Thus, we explore how *An Enemy of the People* resonates in *The Crowd*, and finally, we examine some of the techniques of epic theatre, particularly *V-Effekt* (alienation effect),

which, as previously discussed, aims to prevent emotional identification on the part of the viewer. In subchapter three, equipped with this prior knowledge, the reader encounters a literary, thematic and structural analysis of Yu's play, examining how its construction reflects the previously identified influences.

In An Enemy of the People, Ibsen explores the tension between the individual and the collective. According to John Gassner (1954), Dr. Stockmann represents Ibsen himself, challenging his adversaries with the protagonist's emphatic assertion that the majority is always wrong. Ibsen himself affirms this view in a letter to his editor Frederik Hegel, dated September 1882:

> Dr. Stockmann and I got on so very well together; we agree on so many subjects. But the doctor is a more muddle-headed person than I am; and because of this and other peculiarities of his people, will stand hearing a good many things from him, which they perhaps would not have taken in good part if they had been said by me. (IBSEN, 1905, p. 359-360)

The plot centers on Dr. Stockmann, who discovers a source of contamination at the town's bathing station, a symbol of regional prosperity. As he attempts to make the contamination public, Dr. Stockmann comes into conflict with his brother, the town's mayor, as well as members of the merchant class and the press, who deem the disclosure unwise and fear its potential repercussions for the town's growing economy. Each group's vested interests contribute to an alliance aimed at concealing the truth beneath the town's image of prosperity. Dr. Stockmann is ultimately branded as "an enemy of the people" and faces mounting pressure from all sides to retract his position.

Ibsen's play presents a clear instance of the suppression of individual expression in the face of mass opinion. In *Generic Complexity in Ibsen's An Enemy of the People*, Thomas Van Laan addresses the theme of individual versus collective, describing the text as "twice defined as Right versus Might" (VAN LAAN, 1986, p.100). A "tyranny of the majority" emerges, shaping a collective ethic that exerts social pressure on the individual, as embodied by Dr. Stockmann. Van Laan further elaborates on this theme, identifying another key concern in the play: "the right of the individual to free expression of his ideas, especially to their expression without fear of reprisal" (VAN LAAN, 1986, p.100).

The notion of an absolute truth is also challenged in the play, as noted by Brandes (1872), who argues:

> An Enemy of the People, in this reading, is not a presentation of a truth, with a protagonist who serves as the dramatist's spokesman, but rather a study of how people—including the protagonist—respond to a truth in the light of their own

■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

> human limitations and needs and bend it, consciously or otherwise, to their own purposes. (BRANDES 1872 apud VAN LAAN, 1986, p.98)

2. The Alienation Effects of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre

Alongside Ibsen and his *An Enemy of the People*, which centers on the thematic opposition between the individual and the collective, Nick Yu draws on structural elements of epic theatre in composing *The Crowd*, aiming to position the spectator in a critical and reflective stance during the performance.

The dramatic and epic literary genres diverge in several key aspects. As Patrice Pavis (1999) notes, drama – already conceived as a hybrid in Classical Greece – contains several epic elements that Nick Yu also incorporates into *The Crowd*. For example, Pavis describes "... the poetic journey of the hero through places and times" (PAVIS, 1999, p.130), which appears in Yu's play through the opening didascalia announcing: "Time: several decades in the past and in present" (YU, 2019, p.1), or: "mass scenes and interventions by a choir" (PAVIS, 1999, p.131, emphasis added) as illustrated in the epilogue of Yu's play:

> Man 3 (exaggerated) - A flock of crows. They're thirsty, looking for water everywhere.
> Man 2 - The crows see a bottle. Water inside.
> Man 1 - But not much. The bottle's neck is small. The crows can't get to it. What to do?
> Woman 1 - What to do?
> Woman 2 - What to do?
> Woman 3 - What to do? (YU, 2019, p.57)

The term "epic theatre", coined by the German theatre director Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) in the 1920s, stands in contrast – according to Anatol Rosenfeld – to Aristotelian dramatic theatre, which is restricted to the inter-individual dialogue of characters whose wills are in conflict (FURTADO, 1995). According to Rosenfeld, if, on the one hand, we have Drama as a continuous present and dramatic theatre as a form that originates characters who live in this present through action, epic theatre, in turn, breaks with rigid units of time, space and action, codified by French neoclassical dramatic theory, thereby giving rise – often implicitly – to a narrator figure, who diegetically structures the sequence of events presented to the audience (ROSENFELD, 2016). It would be like saying, therefore, that in dramatic theatre it is the action that moves the plot through the concatenation of events, while in epic theatre it is the figure of a narrator who selects them arbitrarily. Rosenfeld also states that in drama, the playwright effaces his presence, he does not have a specific character or function that narrates what has already happened, forcing the action to be continuous, without selecting the parts of the events to be told and filling the gaps between them (ROSENFELD, 2016). In drama, the illusion is created that things happen almost in real time, before the public's eyes, as if events were unfolding for the first time, allowing the audience to identify with the characters and thereby enabling catharsis, the purging of anxieties possible, leading to the final result: the audience leaves the theatre purified and with no desire to act (FURTADO, 1995).

Elements such as the presence of a narrator, the variation in time and space that permits a multiplicity of visual elements, and the interweaving of distinct events and episodes – hallmarks of epic theatre – enable the action to transcend the limited framework of human behavior determined solely by conflicting wills. Instead, they allow the play to explore broader social contexts, including everyday situations not directly tied to interpersonal conflict. This facilitates the depiction of the social determinants of human relationships, integrating the fable into a wider framework where direct social interference in the otherwise closed causal structure of Aristotelian drama becomes more apparent (ROSENFELD, 2016).

For the German director Bertolt Brecht, a contemporary of Piscator, the differences between dramatic theatre and epic theatre are crucial, as they enable epic theatre to fulfill its ultimate aim: the didactic objective of social transformation. (FURTADO, 1995). Brecht emphasizes the potential of epic theatre to enlighten audiences about the necessity of societal change and thereby contributes to the reinvention of contemporary theatre as an instrument for fostering critical thought. This leads to a historical, dialectical, materialist form of theatre that rejects audience identification and the cathartic purgation typical of Aristotelian drama, instead promoting a critical and reflective attitude within the audience (FURTADO, 1995). While Aristotelian poetics regards catharsis as a central aim of tragedy, Brecht insists on breaking the illusion fostered by Aristotelian drama precisely to prevent such catharsis from occurring. He argues that this dramatic form, grounded in Greco-classical concepts such as *moira*, persuades the audience of the inevitability of the characters' fate. In contrast, epic theatre enables the depiction of a non-essentialist view of human nature – one that does not follow a linear path toward an inevitable tragic end (ROSENFELD, 2016). Inspiring reasoning, logic and lucidity would be fundamental conditions to demystify the idea that tragedy is the immutable nature of the human being, so much so that in an interview with a Berlin newspaper, Brecht does not spare his opponents:

> I don´t let my feelings intrude in my dramatic work. It'd give a false view of the world. I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed. (WILLET, 1964, p.14)

For Brecht, ultimately, the nature of tragedy is, first and foremost, historical and, if that is so, then it can be contextualized.

Thus, action in epic theatre is both historical and dialectical, aiming to eliminate the illusion of dramatic theatre, thus breaking the idea that human nature is immutable and promoting critical reasoning and the motivation to change society (ROSENFELD, 2016). To this end, Brecht advocates transforming our experiences into something foreign to our daily lives, in the hope that we will once again look at our old problems with the critical judgment of someone looking at something new, trying to understand them (FURTADO, 1995). It thus synthesizes a materialistic and dialectical aesthetic in opposition to illusionist or naturalist theatre, employing distancing techniques to historicize tragedies – such as in his rewritings of Antigone and Coriolanus – representing facts and people as historical elements, revealing that the nature of tragedy is, above all, historical and subject to change.

Nick Yu, in *The Crowd,* makes use of these distancing techniques used by Brecht to produce an alienation effect, as illustrated earlier in this subchapter. We conclude this brief study on epic theatre, as a curiosity, by listing some of the different techniques and a classification proposed by Rosenfeld himself (2016). These include: narration (explicit or non-explicit), film projection, music, chorus, songs, pantomime, posters, comments of various types, irony, parody, caricature and grotesque style, paradoxical elocution and, mainly, the specific performance that transforms the actor into the character's "narrator".

3. The Crowd

The Crowd (2014) was written by Yu Rongjun following an invitation from the Hong Kong Arts Festival to adapt Henrik Ibsen's An Enemy of the People. The production was directed by Deng Weijie and starred actors from the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. The play toured several locations, including international venues such as the 2015 Norwegian Literature Festival. It was also adapted into different versions, including a 2016 Spanish-language production staged by the Confucius Institute of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru and directed by Marissa Béjar. This marked the world premiere of a play by Yu

■ Figure 1 - Photos of the Chinese production of *The Crowd*
Source: https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_18535228

performed in Spanish.

Comprising fourteen scenes, along with a prologue and an epilogue, the story of the play is narrated by six actors (three men and three women), who each play multiple roles and also serve as narrators. This narrative structures is already indicated in a note on the play's first page, which introduces the characters, the temporal and spatial settings, and includes a quote from the Chinese philosopher and politician Guan Zhong (circa 720 - 645 BC), from the work *Guanzi*: "A motley crew may come together lightly, but with time, repulsion is inevitable – cordial but never close." (ZHONG apud YU, 2019, p. 1). The action spans several decades, from 1967 to 2014, and revolves around the protagonist Wang Guoqing. At the age of thirteen, he witnessed his mother's death – she was shot by Ding Jianguo. Years later, upon discovering that the killer was only imprisoned for three years, Wang Guoqing travels to Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong with the intention of taking revenge into his own hands, an obsession that will haunt him for decades. As the protagonist declares: "I'm a man with a vendetta. [...] My mother's murder. I must avenge. At all costs, even if..." (YU, 2019, p. 25). Upon locating his enemy's son, Ding Liming, Wang begins to follow him and discovers that he is a successful judge who maintains a mistress and consorts with prostitutes. Using glasses equipped with a hidden camera, Wang records an intimate encounter between Ding and a prostitute at a private club and uploads the video online in an attempt to defame him.

The plot of the play, set across major urban centers, depicts bustling cities filled with the noise of people, cars, indistinct sounds, and the cawing of crows. It is interesting to note the similarity between the words "crowd", which gives the play its title, and "crow" – a resemblance that appears to go beyond mere phonetic coincidence. The presence of these animals – along with the crowds

– permeates the entire story. The fact that crows are scavenging animals that haunt human environments in these cities invites reflection on the direction of growing urbanization in major metropolitan areas. This thematic concern with socioeconomic transformations in China is also evident in other works by Yu, such as *Captain* and *House Guest*.

The crow also evokes its varied symbolic associations across different cultural traditions, such as the three-legged crow found in ancient Chinese mythology, its connection to Apollo in Greek mythology, or the mysterious bird from the famous poem by Edgar Allan Poe, which repeatedly utters the word "Nevermore." The narrator reflects on its meaning through Poe's haunting description: "[...] this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore" (POE, 2015, p. 24). It is worth mentioning that Yu's play begins and ends with references to crows – birds that are at times embodied by the actors on stage. The protagonist himself (portrayed by Man 1) becomes closely associated with these birds following his confrontation with his rivals, as illustrated in the scene discussed below:

> Wang Guoqing falls over suddenly.
> Woman 1 - A crow. That crow.
> Woman 2 - A crow on the ground.
> Woman 3 - A dead crow on the ground.
> Man 3 - It lays there stiffly.
> Woman 1 - A street cleaner walks over.
> Woman 2 - You all right?
> Man 1 - Yeah.
> Woman 1 - She sweeps the crow into the pan.
> Man 1 - I'm being swept into the pan by her, then tipped into the bin. My stiff body hits the bin with a thud. (YU, 2019, p. 55)

In this encounter, Wang Guoqing discovers that his mother's killer died decades ago. Moreover, the killer's son has already expressed emotional detachment from his father. As a result, Wang Guoqing's obsession with revenge appears futile and ultimately self-destructive – it has consumed nearly his entire life. In a striking analogy, he becomes both Prometheus and the eagle that pecks his liver. The play thus reveals how an individual's obsessive pursuit of a goal can lead to personal ruin. Simultaneously, it also explores how the formation of collective groups can suppress individual distinctiveness, a theme that will be further examined later.

Throughout the play, a series of important events in modern Chinese history set the scenes. Scene 2, which takes place in 1967, takes place between two arsenals. While Wang Guoqing's mother tries to flee the growing political turmoil

in Chongqing with her son, as did several people at the time, we also see the division between families and acquaintances during that time, as in the case of the father and older brother of Wang Guoqing, who are on different sides of the conflict. The reckless recruitment of inexperienced youth is also highlighted through the young man Ding Jianguo, who plays with a gun and shoots for mere entertainment, causing a murder.

The play also reflects, for example, China's economic reform under Deng Xiaoping and entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO). We are faced, then, with a China that is more integrated into the global economy, undergoing rapid scientific and technological development. This transformation leads to accelerated urbanization and access to "double-edged swords" – most notably, the internet. While the internet facilitates greater access to information and knowledge, it also enables digital virtual crimes, as what is done by Wang Guoqing in the play, when exposing intimate videos. This process of economic expansion also encompasses cultural issues, including the influence of Western countries such as the United States. One example is a line spoken by Ding Liming's lover: "Who's your honey? I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof, took you so long. Come in, quick" (YU, 2019, p. 37). This line references the title of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, both the 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tennessee Williams and its subsequent Hollywood adaptation.

We can find common points between Yu's and Ibsen's plays, such as in the phrases spoken by the protagonist, Dr. Stockmann: "The most insidious enemy of truth and freedom among us is the solid majority" (IBSEN, 1978, p. 355) or "The majority is never right. I say, never! That's one of those social lies that any free man who thinks for himself has to rebel against. Who makes up the majority in any country-the intelligent, or the stupid?" (IBSEN, 1978, p. 356) and finally "[...] the strongest man in the world is the one who stands most alone" (IBSEN, 1978, p. 386).

If we compare the protagonists of the two plays, we find that both are individuals facing the dilemma of upholding their convictions against the dominant opinion of the crowd. In this configuration, the group is likewise criticized as a collective organism that prioritizes immediate interests or conformity, often at the expense of truth and morality. A similar phenomenon occurs, for example, in *The Visit of the Old Lady*, by the Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921-1990), in which the character of Claire Zahanassian offers the citizens of the ruined town of Güllen an exorbitant sum of money on the condition that someone kills Alfred Krank III, the man she once loved and who abandoned her in her youth. James Walter Mcfarlane's perspective in Henrik Ibsen: *A Critical Anthology* (1970) on Dr. Stockmann offers a valuable

parallel to Wang Guoqing relentless quest to uncover his mother's killer:

> Ibsen rarely fell into this error again, perhaps only in the character of Doctor Stockmann, the "enemy of the people", where, as in Brand, we remain in some doubt as to whether the poet wishes to portray a hero or a fanatic, a profound or an obtuse mind, a character who tends toward the sublime or the grotesque. (MCFARLANE, 1970, p.226)

The Crowd explores the relationship between individuals and the group – specifically how people reconcile personal desires with collective demands. Moreover, it raises the question: is it possible for an individual to assert personal opinions in the face of group conformity? Similarly, Yu addresses these dilemmas within a contemporary urban setting, adapting the classic tension between individuality and conformity to a rapidly evolving societal context. As *The Paper* (2022) points out, in addition to Ibsen's work, Yu also drew upon stories about "groups", such as the case of August Landmesser, a German who allegedly refused to perform the Nazi salute in a 1936 photograph during the launch of the ship Horst Wessel, thereby expressing his dissent toward Hitler's regime.

According to the website, a crucial reference in the creation of the play was *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, a seminal work by the Frenchman Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), first published in 1895. The work significantly influenced later studies, such as Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). Le Bon's thesis revolves around the change in behavior seen in people when they form a collective, considering that the group exerts a powerful influence on the individual and the person can act impetuously under the action of a suggestion, without being fully aware of their actions. According to the author: "This impetuosity is the more irresistible in the case of crowds than in that of the hypnotized subject, from the fact that, the suggestion being the same for all the individuals of the crowd, it gains in strength by reciprocity" (LE BON, 2002, p. 8). And, further on, he concludes: "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will" (LE BON, 2002, p. 8). It is worth highlighting, as has already been said, that the opposite extreme is also problematic, that is, the unbridled search for selfish purposes, which we can relate to the characterization of idealists made by the Irish playwright and thinker George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) when publishing one of the most known studies from Ibsen's work, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, he points out this category of people as the greatest danger to society due to their readiness to pursue and defend purely individualistic ideals (SHAW, 1917).

In relation to the conflict between individual and collective freedom, *The Paper* (2022) points out that an experience from Yu Rongjun's childhood was also important material for the construction of his work. When he went fishing and prepared his bait, he realized that those fish were like sardines, promptly following a single fish that led the group. The same could be said of a person, for example, who is in a public square and in which a group of people begins to dance around him: even though the usual circumstances of this place would make it difficult for this first person to dance, the collective creates a force that influences her, as occurs in scene 11 of the play. In this scene, three couples wearing floral shirts begin dancing in a public square, until a man walks away, taking off his floral shirt and revealing himself to be Wang Guoqing. The character, played by Man 1 who narrates the scene in third person, says that Wang Guoqing observes the dancers, even though they, outside of there, perform different professional roles: "But now, they're all dancers in the square" (YU, 2019, p. 41). The scene continues, recalling Plato's myth of the cave, which appears in *The Republic*, and the play's ending in which whoever frees himself may end up giving in to the "darkness" imposed by the collective:

One of the women gradually dances out of the crowd. She stops to watch the dancers ponderously. She takes off her floral shirt. She is the Girl.

> Man 1 - A girl walks to this street corner. Starts yelling at the dancers angrily.
> Woman 2 (with her hands on her waist) - Stop dancing. Stop the racket.
> Man 1 - The music and the dancing continue. No one pays any attention.
> Woman 2 (with her hands on her waist) - Look how old you are! You should know better!
> Man 1 - The music and the dancing continue. No one pays any attention.
> Woman 2 (with her hands on her waist) - You know this is public nuisance, eh? I'm going to sue you. You've got family, kids. Don't you realize other people still need to live? Hey, I'm talking to you. Are you all animals? Are you all idiots? Idiots! Idiots!
> One of the men walks to the boom box. He turns a dial, the music becomes louder.
> Man 1 - The girl watches them.
> The Girl watches this group. She gradually calms down. Then slowly puts on the floral shirt and join in the dance again.
> Man 1 - Wang Guoqing watches these people. He's a bit frightened. He longs to be one of them, but is also scared of becoming them. (YU, 2019, p. 41)

Yu's understanding of the theme present in his work also justifies his use of the alienation effect, aiming to make the audience aware of the theatrical illusion, maintaining individual reason and judgment, and not becoming fanatical, paranoid and emotional excess. It is possible to identify these distancing

techniques in *The Crowd*, such as the explicit use of narrators describing theirs and other characters' actions and the characters distancing themselves from the actors through the representation of multiple characters by each actor. Yu also reinforces the distancing and the breaking of the text's illusion of reality through the opening and closing of the play narrated by an actor, including adding the actual performance time of the productions: the first line of the play is "Seven-thirty. Evening. Theatre. Audience arrives. Performance begins" (YU, 2019, p. 2), and the last, "Nine thirty in the evening. Theatre. Lights. Performance ends. Audience leaves" (YU, 2019, p. 57), both containing an indication in a footnote to adjust to the moment of presentation of the show. Other examples of the use of the alienating effect are the various pauses, silences, sound effects or lighting changes narrated by the actors, as seen below:

> Woman 3 - The sun cools down gradually, setting over the other side of the hills. The moon rises. The woman's face hovers in the color of the night, like the blurry moon shrouded in layers of cloud.
> Man 3 - Silence.
> Woman 3 - Silence.
> Man 3 - The silence before a battle.
> Woman 3 - Deadly silence.
> Man 3 - Lights dim.
> Lights fade to blackout. (YU, 2019, p. 14)

In the excerpt above, in addition to the actions told to the audience by the actors, the silence that sets the scene (which is opposed to the moment of silence itself) and also the turning off of the lights are mentioned, factors that illustrate the strong presence of the effect of Brechtian alienation in the composition of Yu's play, which uses it in line with the objective that the spectator has a critical stance towards the facts narrated, not allowing himself to be carried away by the scenic illusion.

4. Final Remarks

After presenting an analysis of *The Crowd* (2014) by Chinese playwright Nick Yu, we aim to contribute to the thematic focus of this edition of the magazine, that is, a foreign perspective on Chinese drama, highlighting its thematic diversity, cultural richness and aesthetic sophistication. Our theatre staging and dramatic writing study group (NEEDRAM) firmly believes that cultural exchanges are always fruitful and positive, from the perspective of knowledge

and understanding of other realities and contexts. Art in general brings people together, as many human experiences are universal and shared, even though circumstances may differ. In this work, we can observe that the conflict between wanting and duty is inherent to any society that organizes itself for the common good. Sacrifices need to be made, which Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and his theory of the social contract already taught us (2003). Alongside these similarities, which make cultures so different, we also find differences that invite us to reflect on our own situation. The Chinese socio-political trajectory, besides being unique, is quite different from the Brazilian one, if we think for example about the centuries that constitute the civilization of one nation and another and the presence (or absence) of the social phenomenon of war, with its armed conflicts, external interests, throughout their histories. Even so, despite these peculiarities, the very fact of being united under the BRICS flag shows that different cultures have a lot to benefit from bilateral, and in the specific case of the bloc, multilateral, economic agreements. And so we return to Yu's play and the multi- and transcultural aspect of this article, since it respects and values the differences between cultures at the level of literary analysis, but at the same time is interested in fruitful but always tolerant dialogue, by accepting the challenge of offering a vision of a Chinese play from a South-Brazilian perspective (here we make a point of highlighting the Brazilian territorial dimension, a fact shared by both countries, with their cultural specificities).

The Crowd is at the same time a lesson on fifty years of Chinese History, in the aesthetic form of the dramatic literary genre, an in-depth study of human nature, at its most primal and instinctive, when feelings impede the exercise of common sense and reason. The characters' difficulty in instructing Wang Guoqing to reveal his plan for revenge is a metaphor for the constant attempt that society makes with the aim of guaranteeing a minimum quality of life for the population, which often has to give up on personal projects in favor of greater well-being, which can be seen in the following passage:

> Man 3 - Forget, Guoqing.
> Man 2 - It's in the past, Guoqing.
> Man 1 - You can choose to forget, or force yourself to forget. But I – can't. (YU, 2019, p. 18)

And finally, the crows. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (2001) enlighten us about this enigmatic and recurring figure from *The Crowd*, showing us once again the constant need for caution when dealing with multicultural aspects:

> It seems that the conclusion to be drawn from a comparative study of the customs and beliefs of numerous peoples is that the symbolism of the crow only

> took on its negative aspect recently and almost exclusively in Europe. (...) Thus, in China (...) it is the symbol of filial gratitude. The fact that the crow feeds its father and mother is considered by the Han as a sign of a prodigious reestablishment of social order. (...) A three-foot crow appears in the bosom of the sun, according to carved stones from Han times. (...) These three feet, emblem of the emperors of China, correspond, like the tripod, to solar symbolism: birth, zenith, twilight. (CHEVALIER, GHEERBRANT, 2001, p.294, own translation) [1]

Thus, we come to the conclusion that Yu uses a perfect commanding image to express both the internal psychological issue of the protagonist, who is moved by filial gratitude to his mother who died in front of him at the tender age of thirteen, and the idea of reestablishment of social order in a country that has gone through severe political turbulence, having to deal with external threats and internal ideological divisions at the same time. After these events in the micro and macro spheres, the individual and social spheres find a balance, even if provisional, a homeostasis that reorganizes the elements of each of them, bearing in mind the need to move forward, always. As the crow character concludes in the prologue of the play: "(*Stares at the audience.*) I've drunk enough. I fly away. (*Blackout.*)" (YU, 2019, p. 2)

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1 In the original: Ao que parece, a conclusão a tirar de um estudo comparativo dos costumes e crenças de numerosos povos é que o simbolismo do corvo só tomou o seu aspecto negativo há pouco tempo e quase que exclusivamente na Europa. (...) Assim, na China (...) ele é o símbolo da gratidão filial. O fato de que o corvo alimente seu pai e sua mãe é considerado pelos Han como o signo de um prodigioso restabelecimento da ordem social. (...) Um corvo de três pés figura no seio do sol, segundo pedras esculpidas do tempo dos Han. (...) Esses três pés, emblema dos imperadores da China, correspondem, como a trípode, a um simbolismo solar: nascimento, zênite, crepúsculo.

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The Youth-Oriented Aesthetics and Communication Strategy of Kunqu *The Peony Pavilion*

FU Guisheng

The Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion* has played a crucial role in the transmission and revitalization of Kunqu culture. To fully appreciate its historical significance, one must consider the trajectory of Kunqu's decline and revival over the past two centuries. Since the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns of the Qing dynasty, Kunqu—long regarded as the paragon of classical Chinese xiqu (opera)—has faced challenges of dwindling audiences and shrinking cultural space. As public aesthetic preferences shifted, genres such as Jingju (Peking Opera) began to dominate the stage, gradually marginalizing Kunqu.

By the late Qing era, independent Kunqu troupes had become increasingly rare. To survive, they often relied on collaboration with Jingju troupes, leading to the hybridization of Kunqu and other regional styles. In the early Republican period, northern artists such as Han Shichang and Bai Yunsheng, with the support of Beijing literati, sparked a brief revival. In the south, artists of the "Chuan" 传 generation from the Suzhou Kunqu Transmission Institute struggled to maintain the tradition in Shanghai's commercial performance scene, but ultimately could not escape marginalization.

In the 1950s, the Kunqu play *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwu Guan*) attracted notable public attention but soon faded from the spotlight. To preserve the Kunqu lineage, institutions like the Shanghai Xiqu School trained new generations of performers—including the "Kun Class I," "Kun Class II," and later the "Shi" and "Ji" cohorts—thereby reinforcing the continuity of the art form. Nevertheless, these efforts merely managed to sustain a fragile cultural ecosystem.

A turning point came in 2001, when Kunqu was inscribed by UNESCO as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity." This international recognition marked a milestone in Kunqu's history and ushered in new opportunities for its development. Against this backdrop, Bai Xianyong, in collaboration with artists and scholars from mainland China, Taiwan, and beyond, produced the Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion*, with the Suzhou Kunqu Troupe as its foundation.

■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

Premiering in 2004, this production quickly became a cultural phenomenon. It toured extensively in China and abroad, reaching an audience of over one million and generating a remarkable cultural impact. No other stage work in the early 21st century has maintained such enduring popularity. The Youth Edition not only nurtured a new generation of Kunqu enthusiasts, but also affirmed the continuing vitality of classical art in contemporary society. It represents a landmark achievement: the rare success of a single production revitalizing an entire traditional genre.

1. Bai Xianyong's Vision of a "Cultural Renaissance" and His Exploration of a New Kunqu Aesthetic

Bai Xianyong is a contemporary writer, critic, and cultural scholar of international renown. He began his academic journey in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Taiwan University and later earned an MFA from the University of Iowa. He subsequently taught Chinese literature for many years at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Since the 1960s, Pai has been an active figure in literary and artistic circles, achieving significant accomplishments particularly in literature and theatre.

Throughout his long career, Bai has maintained a deep commitment to the preservation and revitalization of traditional Chinese culture in the face of modernity. He has offered a critical reassessment of the post–May Fourth Movement tendency to reject tradition, highlighting the consequences of cultural rupture. As he once observed: "We must rediscover and reengage with our cultural heritage... We need to reconnect with the source of our own tradition and integrate it into the global cultural context... We must gradually reconfigure our traditional culture while introducing and synthesizing modern cultural elements."[1] For Bai, traditional Chinese culture constitutes a

1 白先勇：《世纪末的文化观察》，《树犹如此》，联合文学出版社有限公司，2002 年版，第 175–181 页。[Bai Xianyong, "Cultural Reflections at the Turn of the Century", in *Even the Trees So Remain*, Uni-Editions, 2002, pp. 175–181.]

foundational core. He advocates a reevaluation of its enduring value and calls for its reconstruction through contemporary means. Central to his intellectual and artistic pursuits is the goal of revitalizing tradition in the present age. As one scholar notes: "Guided by this vision of a 'cultural renaissance,' Bai Xianyong has, over several decades, launched and embodied a one-man cultural revival—through both his personal commitment and wide-reaching influence—in Chinese communities around the world."[1] This vision has been realized across multiple platforms: his founding of the literary journal *Modern Literature*, his promotion of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and his tireless advocacy for Kunqu are all expressions of this broader cultural mission. Therefore, to understand Bai's aesthetic innovations and artistic practices in revitalizing Kunqu, one must look to his deeper commitment to a cultural renaissance as both inspiration and framework.

Bai Xianyong is a devoted Kunqu enthusiast who has repeatedly expressed his deep affection for the art form in interviews and writings. It is precisely this heartfelt attachment and his persistent vision of cultural revival that have served as the spiritual impetus for his decades-long engagement with Kunqu practice. In 1946, at the age of nine, he attended a performance of "The Interrupted Dream" ("Youyuan Jingmeng") in Shanghai, featuring Mei Lanfang and Yu Zhenfei—a formative experience that left an indelible impression on him and seeped into his soul. In 1978, he saw *The Palace of Eternal Life* (*Changsheng Dian*), performed by Cai Zhengren and Hua Wenyi, which rekindled his profound fascination with Kunqu.

Over the years, Bai also integrated Kunqu elements into his literary work. His 1966 novella *The Interrupted Dream* draws on Kunqu themes, and he personally adapted it into a stage play, which was performed in Taiwan and mainland China in 1982 and 1992, respectively. These encounters gave Bai a deep and perceptive understanding of Kunqu's aesthetic power, and he became completely enchanted by its beauty. He once remarked: "Kunqu is, above all, about beauty—its language is beautiful, its movement is beautiful, its music is beautiful, and its emotional world is beautiful. It is a synthesis of beauty, one of the greatest cultural and artistic achievements of the Ming and Qing dynasties."[2] It is precisely because of this profound understanding

1 白先勇：《一个人的‘文艺复兴’》（代序，作者为刘俊），广西师范大学出版社，2019 年版，第 4–5 页。[Bai Xianyong, *A One-Man Renaissance* (Preface by Liu Jun), Guangxi Normal University Press, 2019, pp. 4–5.]

2 白先勇：《一个人的‘文艺复兴’》，广西师范大学出版社，2019 年版，第 121 页。[Bai Xianyong, *A One-Man Renaissance*, Guangxi Normal University Press, 2019, p. 121.]

and passionate love for Kunqu that Bai has remained highly attuned to its cultural ecology. Over twenty years ago, he perceptively recognized the grave challenges Kunqu faced: the aging of performers trained in the 1950s, the absence of a new generation of actors, and a widening generational gap in the audience. Confronting this crisis, Bai took decisive action and devised a feasible rescue strategy.

He selected Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion* as the cornerstone of his revival project. He invited veteran Kunqu masters such as Wang Shiyu and Zhang Jiqing to train young performers and, with a discerning eye, cast Yu Jiulin and Shen Fengying in the lead roles. Using the Suzhou Kunqu Troupe as a production base, he assembled a team of outstanding artists and scholars from both mainland China and Taiwan to participate in the project.

Bai also made a bold strategic move by targeting university campuses as key venues for performance and promotion, actively seeking to cultivate a new generation of Kunqu audiences. "My Kunqu is for the audience of the twenty-first century," he proclaimed. After two years of production, the "Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion*" finally premiered, generating widespread acclaim and marking a milestone in the contemporary revival of traditional Chinese theatre.

After the success of the "Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion*", Bai Xianyong continued to produce works such as *The Jade Hairpin* (*Yuzan Ji*) in 2009, *The White Robe* (*Bai Luoshan*) in 2016, and *The Righteous Knight* (*Yixia Ji*) in 2018. In the new version of *The Jade Hairpin*, he restored the original style of Kunqu's "elegant section" ("yabu"), while in *The White Robe*, he combined Western and Chinese tragic concepts. Throughout his practice of "one play, one style," Bai continually deepened his aesthetic philosophy.

Following the success of the "Youth Edition of *The Peony Pavilion*", Bai published a series of commentaries. These works gave him the opportunity to discuss his motivations and guiding principles for his productions. He introduced and expanded upon the concept of a "New Aesthetic of Kunqu," which soon became the theoretical foundation of his artistic endeavors.

Bai Xianyong has written extensively in articles, interviews, and speeches about his views on Kunqu's aesthetics and the intentions behind his productions. These discussions have helped to form the core of his "New Aesthetic of Kunqu," which centers around three main ideas. First, the definition of Kunqu's aesthetic: "Kunqu has its own set of aesthetics. It is abstract, expressive,

■ A Still from *Les Misérables*

lyrical, and poetic—these elements remain unchanged."[1] These four key characteristics—abstractness, expressiveness, lyricism, and poeticism—are central to any Kunqu creation. Secondly, Bai advocates for a creative principle that blends the classical and the modern: "Our core principle is to respect the classics without being bound by them, to utilize modern elements without excess, with the classical as the foundation and the modern as the application. By cautiously integrating modern elements into the classical tradition, we create a work that is both classical and modern."[2] This principle aligns with Bai's broader philosophy of cultural "Renaissance." He observes that Kunqu performances come in two forms: one highly traditional, requiring profound skill and aimed at expert audiences, and the other, larger-scale performances that create a complete stage experience, from lighting to set design to costumes. The latter is the direction he took with *The Peony Pavilion*, aiming to present Kunqu in a way that younger audiences could appreciate while still preserving its classical roots.

Thirdly, Bai focuses on harmoniously incorporating elements of Chinese music, calligraphy, and painting into Kunqu, restoring the elegant style of Kunqu's "yabu" section: "We decided to maintain the refined style of the new *The Jade Hairpin*, restoring the original 'yabu' style."[3] He further explains: "Our culture is one of lines—our calligraphy, our paintings, and Kunqu are all made of lines. When you watch Kunqu dance, especially the flowing sleeve movements, you can almost sketch them as brushstrokes. The flute's sound, too, resembles a parabolic arc—all made of lines. This unity between calligraphy, Buddhist statues, and Kunqu creates a harmonious whole. When they are brought together, they enhance one another. This is the 'New Aesthetic of Kunqu' we are striving for, where classical elements are reimagined, breathing new life into them."[4]

Bai's aesthetic vision emerges from his extensive literary background and decades of engagement with Kunqu. His concept of "new" elements serving to transform the "old" reflects a deep commitment to the classical beauty

1 白先勇：《昆曲新美学》（上），《文史知识》，2014 年第 1 期，第 104 页。[Bai Xianyong, "New Aesthetics of Kunqu" (Part 1), *Literature and History Knowledge*, 2014, Issue 1, p. 104.]

2 白先勇：《白先勇的昆曲之旅》，商务印书馆，2016 年版，第 3 页。[Bai Xianyong, *Bai Xianyong's Kunqu Journey*, Commercial Press, 2016, p. 3.]

3 白先勇：《云心水心〈玉簪记〉琴曲书画昆曲新美学》，人民文学出版社，2011 年版，第 5 页。[Bai Xianyong, *Yunxin Shui Xin: The New Aesthetic of Kunqu in The Jade Hairpin*, People's Literature PubLady Ling House, 2011, p. 5.]

4 白先勇：《昆曲新美学》（下），《文史知识》，2014 年第 3 期，第 84–88 页。[Bai Xianyong, "New Aesthetics of Kunqu" (Part 2), *Literature and History Knowledge*, 2014, Issue 3, pp. 84–88.]

principles of "form and acting" ("ti-yong"), which he believes are crucial to the enduring tradition of Kunqu.

In addition, to attract young people to the theater, Bai Xianyong has actively delivered speeches and made media appearances, dedicating himself to the establishment of Kunqu courses in university curricula. He founded Kunqu Centers at Peking University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and National Taiwan University, offering Kunqu appreciation courses under the title "New Aesthetics of Kunqu." He invited Kunqu scholars and performing artists to serve as instructors, fostering the development of Kunqu's aesthetic appreciation among university students. Through this initiative, Bai has sought to connect the ancient art form with a new generation, creating a positive ecosystem for Kunqu's transmission and ensuring its relevance in modern society. This is undoubtedly a decision made with historical foresight. The youth-focused rejuvenation of Kunqu, initiated through these efforts, is based on the art form's aesthetic traits and strategically targets a specific demographic. By showcasing a series of classic productions, this approach gradually nurtures a new generation of audience members, ultimately forming a sustainable cultural ecosystem. It is a comprehensive cultural initiative with far-reaching and inspirational significance.

2. The Textual Construction and Stage Aesthetics of the "Youth Version of *The Peony Pavilion*"

Bai Xianyong's goal in the practice of the "New Aesthetics of Kunqu" is to achieve "authenticity, orthodoxy, and propriety," bridging the traditional with the modern in contemporary theater, so that audiences can experience the artistic charm of traditional Kunqu within a modern aesthetic context. The key idea of his Kunqu practice is to use the "new" to empower the "old." This approach manifests primarily through the handling of "change" and "immutability" and the careful balance of aesthetics throughout its implementation.

Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, the refinement of Kunqu has been shaped by three main groups: the literati, the musicians, and the performers. The literati infused their taste and intellectual flair into the text, giving Kunqu its refined and elegant character. The musicians meticulously honed the musical structure, achieving perfection in the art of singing. The performers devoted themselves to the stage and their craft, giving Kunqu its graceful and delicate appearance. Over time, through historical accumulation and cultural sedimentation, Kunqu

developed stable traditions in voice, literature, performance, and stage design, which became the foundation of Kunqu aesthetics. Literature and performance are historical memories solidified into artistic essence, forming the core elements that preserve the traditional aesthetic form and spiritual meaning of Kunqu. These elements belong to the realm of "immutability." However, "immutability" does not mean that nothing can change. To adapt to the modern theatrical environment, adjustments must be made, and the degree of these adjustments is a true test of the creator's skill.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, "legendary" plays were often lengthy, usually consisting of about 50 acts, with *The Peony Pavilion* reaching 55 acts. Performing the entire play would take several days, making it somewhat lengthy. To address this, excerpts ("zhezixi") were commonly performed. Over the span of more than 200 years from the late Ming Dynasty to the early Qing, about 10 excerpts from *The Peony Pavilion* were frequently performed. These excerpts encapsulated the essence of the original play's performance.

To connect these loosely related excerpts into a cohesive performance script, the playwrights, who were three Kunqu scholars, dedicated five months to the task. They adhered to the principle of deleting but not altering the original material, refining the plot by focusing on key events closely related to the central theme. The unnecessary details were reduced, and the storylines were connected with the main motifs of "dream-inspired death", "love reborn through love", and "the fulfillment of love" to streamline the narrative. The disconnected plots and details were carefully woven together with intricate stitching, eventually condensing the play into 27 acts. The structure was established with the divisions "Love in Dream" (first act), "Love in Death" (second act), and "Love in Life" (third act), simplifying the complexity and faithfully presenting *The Peony Pavilion*'s narrative logic and artistic spirit.

"Zhezixi" are complete performance units, each presenting a relatively independent storyline and showcasing distinct acting techniques. To string together these dispersed excerpts into a cohesive performance, the arrangement of roles and their respective importance needed to be carefully rebalanced. Director Wang Shiyu, a renowned Kunqu "xiaosheng" (young male role) artist with deep expertise and vast experience, believed that the core emotion in Tang Xianzu's original work was the shared ideal of love between Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei. To emphasize the spirit of the original work, he felt it was necessary to focus more on Liu Mengmei's character. Therefore, he adjusted the traditional emphasis on Du Liniang's "dan" (female role) performance and adopted a dual focus on both the "sheng" (male) and "dan" (female) roles.

Following this concept, Wang structured the play's main plot as follows: "The first act, "Love in Dream", spans from life to death, expressing the longing for love; the second act, "Love in Death", spans from death to life, illustrating the pursuit of love; the third act, "Love in Life", spans from life to living, emphasizing the practice of love, with a focus on the passion and courage required for this practice."[1]

In the first act, the scenes "Interrupted Dream" and "Search for the Dream" were supplemented by "Declarations of Ambitions", which not only introduced Liu Mengmei earlier but also subtly suggested that their connection was formed through a dream, thus tightening the plot. In the second act, the scenes "The Portrait Discovered" and "Admiring the Portrait" were merged into one sequence, and a previously omitted song from "The Portrait Discovered", "The Tapestry of Riches," was added, transforming it into a 30-minute solo performance by the "xiaosheng" (young male) character. In the third act, the five scenes—"Wedding", "Arrival in Hangzhou", "Stranded at Huaiyang", "Torture", and "The Emperor's Verdict"—focused on Liu Mengmei's struggles in real life, such as striving for love and preparing for an exam, reinforcing the ideal that "love can surpass reason."

Wang Shiyu's idea had been brewing for years, and decades ago he had harbored a desire to create a play centered on Liu Mengmei. This youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* fulfilled his dream. "We always wanted to write a play focused on Liu Mengmei, and this time, through these three acts, we've made it happen. For example, the double ‘Garden Tour' and double ‘Search for the Dream.' The first ‘Garden Tour' was Du Liniang's ‘Garden Tour', and the second ‘The Portrait Discovered' was Liu Mengmei's ‘Garden Tour'. One is joyful and vibrant, the other is desolate and tragic. Du Liniang's ‘Search for the Dream' was about waking from her dream and heading toward death. Liu Mengmei, through "Declarations of Ambitions", "On the Road", and "The Portrait Discovered", searches for the dream. Afterward, he awakens Du Liniang, saving her from death, turning them into two truly loyal companions. This is the double ‘Search for the Dream.' Although the timeline is not explicitly clear, we now rearrange it to clarify the line."[2]

1 白先勇编著：《牡丹还魂》，文汇出版社，2004 年版，第 101–102 页。[Bai Xianyong, *The Resurrection of the Peony Pavilion*, Wenhui Press, 2004, pp. 101-102]

2 傅谨主编：《白先勇与青春版〈牡丹亭〉》，中央编译出版社，2014 年版，第 82 页。[Fu Jin ed., *Bai Xianyong and the Youth Version of The Peony Pavilion*, Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2014, p. 82]

The narrative arrangement of the double "Garden Tour" and double "Search for the Dream" effectively tightens the entire performance, achieving a more concise and engaging viewing experience.

The traditional Kunqu stage, characterized by "one table and two chairs" and a "scenery following the performer," exudes an ethereal, poetic quality. This aesthetic, which has been passed down for over a century, is influenced by modern developments in performance space, stage design, lighting, and other technical aspects. As young audiences increasingly seek visual stimulation, adjustments have been made in the presentation of the performance, marking one of the most significant changes in the modernization of traditional Chinese xiqu. These adjustments are primarily reflected in the adaptation of costumes, music, and scenery to align with traditional aesthetics. The guiding principle remains the traditional aesthetic ideal of "lotus rising from the water," incorporating elements of calligraphy, painting, and guqin music to create an elegant, otherworldly beauty. What appears to be a fresh aesthetic is, in fact, rooted in ancient charm.

The youth version of *The Peony Pavilion* maintains the classical aesthetic spirit while introducing bold innovations in stage and costume design. Theater designer Lin Kehua, whose stage design is "based on emotion and feeling," merges the aesthetics of Suzhou gardens with modern Zen influences. He reinterprets garden elements, such as ponds and lotus leaves, as curved walls, harmonizing with the performers' graceful movements to achieve a minimalist and light aesthetic effect.

Costume designer Wang Tong, a gifted artist, adheres to the aesthetic principles of "expressiveness and simplicity" and the concept of "not overshadowing the performance." He strikes a perfect balance between traditional opera costumes and modern design concepts, particularly in his treatment of color. The soft, muted hues of light blue, green, and pink not only reflect the characters' temperaments but also evoke a fresh, elegant, and ethereal beauty. "Accompanied by Liu Mengmei and Du Liniang, this pair of beautiful lovers creates an atmosphere that is pure, refreshing, and full of youthful vitality."[1]

In addition, Wang Tong drew inspiration from Chu culture, embroidering twelve seasonal flowers on the white cloaks worn by the Twelve Flower Goddesses. In

1 白先勇编著：《牡丹还魂》，文汇出版社，2004 年版，第 143–144 页。[Bai Xianyong, *The Resurrection of the Peony Pavilion*, Wenhui Press, 2004, pp. 143-144]

the "Flower Stacking" dance, the graceful and light design received widespread praise.

Conclusion

The concept and practice of youth-oriented theater, which originated with Bai's *The Peony Pavilion*, has now become a prominent trend in Chinese xiqu creation. Numerous troupes and genres have adopted the "youth version" label for their productions, each bringing unique intentions and stylistic approaches in their execution. Youthification serves as a strategy employed by xiqu practitioners to reform and adapt in order to attract a broader audience. This exploration has transcended the traditional theater, sparking a wave of innovations from multiple perspectives, in various forms, and through diverse modes, which have contributed to the formation of new media, social, and cultural landscapes. Over the past two decades, the youthification of Chinese xiqu has become an effective tool for its creation and dissemination. It has reached a level of maturity in terms of both artistic form and aesthetic vision. This evolution, where a phenomenon has been internalized into a concept and gradually developed into a creative model, offers a new reference point for the creative transformation and innovative development of China's rich traditional culture in the process of modernization.

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From Tradition to Modernity: Paths and Challenges of Innovation in Chinese Xiqu within the Digital Media Context

MA Hui

Chinese traditional xiqu (opera), a treasured part of both national and global intangible cultural heritage, is distinguished by its unique artistic style and profound cultural roots. The tension between innovation and preservation has long been a central issue shaping its evolution. As an ancient yet still vital art form, the development of xiqu has been marked by resilience and reinvention—from Mei Lanfang's trailblazing tours in the West that reintroduced Chinese xiqu to the world, to the revival of Kunqu through the celebrated production of *Fifteen Strings of Cash*. Each era brings its own set of challenges.

Since the decline of Chinese xiqu in the 1980s, various efforts—such as the enactment of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Law" and initiatives from cultural institutions—have aimed to curb the disappearance of regional genres. While these measures have helped, they have not reversed the overall downturn. More than a third of xiqu genres remain endangered, younger audiences continue to dwindle, and new, widely popular productions are few and far between.

In the current era, the emergence, convergence, and transformation of digital media have further reshaped the landscape of artistic production. Traditional xiqu now faces renewed challenges. From a communication standpoint, modern technologies and platforms offer new avenues for performance and dissemination, enabling traditional xiqu to display its charm through diversified forms. At the same time, younger audiences are developing new aesthetic preferences, prompting an urgent need to reinvigorate traditional xiqu with contemporary relevance. This has become a key concern for both practitioners and scholars.

Creatively, new ideas and technologies are transforming stagecraft and audience engagement, giving fresh meaning to the "liveness" of xiqu. However, if the incorporation of digital tools strays from the emotional core and narrative logic of the form, it risks becoming an aesthetic or conceptual distraction. Thus, it is imperative to rethink the evolving relationships between xiqu and the theater, performers and audiences, and performance and media in this changing cultural ecosystem.

1. The Internet and Short Videos in Promoting Xiqu: Mere Dissemination of Fragments?

With the rise of the internet—especially short video platforms and livestreaming—traditional Chinese xiqu has been able to reach a wider and more diverse audience. New technologies such as short videos, livestreams, and virtual reality have redefined and revitalized the global dissemination of this age-old art form. Increasingly, xiqu performers and practitioners are using these platforms to create and present works, opening up new paths for the innovation and transmission of xiqu.

Take the Yueju production *New Dragon Gate Inn* (*Xin Longmen Kezhan*) as an example. According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, from its premiere in March 2023 to the end of that year, the production was performed 138 times and attracted an audience of 15,000.[1] While this is a considerable achievement for a traditional theatre production, the show's real breakout moment occurred in August 2023, when a livestreamed performance on Douyin (Chinese TikTok) drew 9.25 million viewers and went viral on social media. In particular, the performance of the two leading actors captivated audiences and became a trending topic. This livestream not only brought many new viewers into the theatre but also boosted the popularity of the Xiaobaihua Yueju troupe. However, much of the audience's interest was directed toward the actors rather than the storyline itself.

1 文旅部：《越剧〈新龙门客栈〉年轻化"突围破圈"的经验启示与对策建议》。 [Ministry of Culture and Tourism: "Experience and Policy Recommendations on the Youth-Oriented Breakthrough of Yueju *New Dragon Gate Inn*," https://www.mct.gov.cn/preview/special/kygz/9551/202401/W020240115521136850606.pdf](https://www.mct.gov.cn/preview/special/kygz/9551/202401/W020240115521136850606.pdf.]

The production company, Yitai Haoxi (A Good Show), drew on its earlier marketing experience with China's first immersive musical *Apollonia*, leveraging the strong popularity of Yueju in the Yangtze River Delta. The team engaged in membership campaigns, influencer promotions, Douyin livestreams, short video marketing, and even "ACGN"-style (anime, comics, games, and novels) events to attract younger audiences. Additionally, they released related merchandise, strengthening emotional identification—particularly among younger viewers. Nevertheless, *New Dragon Gate Inn* seems to be an exceptional case. Other Yueju productions presented during the same period failed to achieve comparable success.[1] The overall Yueju market did not experience a nationwide boom, revealing both the limits of such popularity and the ongoing challenges xiqu faces in attracting and sustaining interest.

Some xiqu-related phenomena and derivative works have also come into the spotlight. In 2024, a video of Ganju performer Chen Li giving a lecture at Nanchang University went viral. Wearing full costume, she demonstrated the charms of Ganju and inspired enthusiasm among students, introducing this national intangible cultural heritage to a wider and younger demographic. Chen remarked, "If traditional theatre wants to reach the general public, it must embrace the younger generation and make full use of modern communication tools."[2] The virality of her class stemmed from students posting short videos online, which garnered widespread attention and led to the "breakthrough."

Several key factors contribute to the phenomenon of xiqu "boundary-breaking" online. First is the inherent artistic charm of traditional xiqu itself. Second is its adaptation to the current media ecology, where fragmented and entertainment-oriented content is more easily received by younger audiences. For xiqu to stand out in this fragmented media landscape, it must find ways to capture attention without compromising depth. Yet, this same fragmentation brings challenges. On one hand, personalized content preferences lead to incomplete narratives and mosaic-like expressions, where behind-the-scenes glimpses and actors' daily lives often take center stage—mirroring the "fandom" culture.

1 For example, five other Yueju productions staged in Hangzhou during the same season received little attention on ticketing websites. Even in major markets like Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, and Guangdong, there was no visible Yueju boom. 参见王馗、沈勇、胡薇、周琪：《关于戏曲 " 破圈 " 现象的思考——戏曲当代生存空间观察》，《艺术评论》2024 年第 6 期，第 55 页。[See Wang Kui, Shen Yong, Hu Wei, Zhou Qi, "Reflections on the 'Breaking the Circle' Phenomenon in Xiqu: Observing Contemporary Xiqu's Living Space," *Art Criticism*, 2024, no. 6, p. 55.]

2 邓绪娟、刘紫娟：《让赣剧 " 圈粉 " 年轻人——专访南昌大学陈俐教授》，《当代江西》2025 年第 5 期，第 20 页。[Deng Xujuan, Liu Zijuan, "Let Ganju Win Over the Young—Interview with Professor Chen Li of Nanchang University," Contemporary Jiangxi, 2024, no. 5, p. 20.]

On the other hand, audiences' individualized demands have transformed dissemination practices: personalized and self-expressive content now replaces the unified voice of traditional theatre. While these shifts have expanded xiqu's audience and influence, they have also led to issues like "vertical-screening" and over-fragmentation, potentially impeding in-depth engagement with the art. Thus, even though some xiqu productions have achieved online virality, this does not equate to a full "breakthrough" for xiqu as a whole. The critical question remains: do these viral cases genuinely spark young audiences' lasting interest in xiqu, or are they merely temporary responses to fragmented, niche-oriented media trends?

Undeniably, if xiqu relies solely on fragmented dissemination of isolated elements, it may generate short-term attention, but without meaningful storytelling, it risks losing sustained viewer engagement. To address this, some xiqu scholars and artists have turned to new media platforms to interpret classic works through contemporary aesthetics and communication strategies, achieving significant impact. For instance, xiqu scholar Guo Mei has published video lectures on *The Peony Pavilion* via her WeChat video channel "Xiqu Old School: Guo Mei," which have garnered considerable likes and shares from young viewers. By using modern language and media to convey the themes and emotions of the classic, Guo helps make xiqu's artistic value more accessible.

Additionally, many young xiqu content creators now use social media to explain traditional stories in humorous and engaging ways. For example, a Bilibili creator reinterpreted a scene from the Yuju play *Hua Da Chao*, framing the character Cheng Qiniang's fish-eating moment as "the earliest mukbang in ancient China." This comedic retelling sparked widespread interest among younger viewers. Through such efforts, these creators not only enhance the dissemination power of digital media but also deepen the cultural transmission of xiqu, building cultural confidence and gaining international recognition. Creators like "Bengdeng Cangcang" further integrate trending topics with classic narratives, allowing young people to learn about xiqu's plots and cultural context in a relaxed and relatable way. By blending humor with modern cultural references, these content creators lower the threshold for younger audiences to engage with traditional theatre, increasing both participation and emotional resonance.

Ultimately, telling complete and compelling xiqu stories on new media platforms—rather than just showcasing fragments—is key to attracting and retaining younger audiences. This approach enables them to better understand the essence of xiqu and cultivates long-term interest and enthusiasm. In

doing so, it contributes to the revitalization of traditional Chinese theatre in the contemporary era.

2. Exploring Traditional Theatre Spaces: How Far Can Immersive Experiences Go?

Digital media has infused new vitality into traditional xiqu, yet the unique essence of theatrical art still lies in its liveness. As some scholars have pointed out, "we must continue to emphasize the theatricality of xiqu performances and avoid excessive vertical-screen stylization,"[1]—a caution that remains highly relevant. One prominent trend today is the immersive transformation of the theatre experience. Statistics show that the market size of China's immersive industry has reached 92.7 billion yuan, with investments increasing to 100.63 billion yuan and a total output value of 193.34 billion yuan, ranking first in the world.[2] This shift has facilitated a deeper integration between traditional culture and modern life, offering creators more space for innovation.

Immersive xiqu productions have demonstrated distinct artistic appeal. Traditional xiqu emphasizes stylized performance and live interaction, where, as noted, "xiqu performance pays great attention to the immediate effects of the scene. Actors use various means to strengthen direct communication with the audience, to excite them or elicit applause, thus increasing the overall theatrical atmosphere."[3] As creative practices diversify, immersive theatre designs have begun to reconstruct performance spaces, dissolving the conventional divide between stage and audience. Spectators become part of the narrative, engaging more closely with the characters and story. Notably, immersive designs also enable a return to the improvisational and open-ended qualities that were once central to traditional xiqu.

1 王馗、沈勇、胡薇、周琪：《关于戏曲 " 破圈 " 现象的思考——戏曲当代生存空间观察》，《艺术评论》2024 年第 6 期，第 57 页。[See Wang Kui, Shen Yong, Hu Wei, Zhou Qi, "Reflections on the 'Breaking the Circle' Phenomenon in Xiqu: Observing Contemporary Xiqu's Living Space," *Art Criticism*, 2024, no. 6, p. 57.]

2 陈之殷、李梦、金永成：《" 破圈 " 后传统戏曲如何更吸引年轻人》，《光明日报》2024 年 09 月 09 日 09 版。[Chen Zhiyin, Li Meng, Jin Yongcheng. "How Traditional Xiqu Can Attract More Young Audiences after Breaking the Circle," *Guangming Daily*, September 9, 2024, p. 9.]

3 叶长海：《曲学与戏剧学》，上海：学林出版社 1999 年版，第 138 页。[Ye Changhai, *Qu Studies and Drama Studies*, Shanghai: Xuelin Press, 1999, p. 138.]

Mao Weitao's production *New Dragon Gate Inn* serves as a compelling example of this fusion between traditional xiqu and modern theatre forms. Branded as an "environmental-style Yueju," the production retains the essence of Yueju while introducing an innovative artistic language and spectator model. Its ingenuity lies not only in script adaptation and performance style but also in its spatial design: the theatre is transformed into a desert inn, with a reconfigured small venue that fully immerses the audience. Spectators surround the stage and become spatially integrated into the performance. Moreover, the theatre's exterior is also themed—featuring a "New Dragon Gate Inn" bun shop, for instance—allowing audiences to enter the world of the play before the performance even begins. This immersive experience spans visual, auditory, and even gustatory dimensions, fully engaging viewers in a martial arts fantasy. The traditional wuxia narrative is reinterpreted through Yueju's unique performance style, vocal technique, and musical elements, bringing new artistic vitality to a classic story. As a result, the production has broken through the genre's conventional audience base, attracting many young viewers unfamiliar with Yueju and expanding xiqu's reach into broader cultural markets.

If traditional theatre once served as entertainment for ancient societies, it now functions—at a time when entertainment is ubiquitous—as a space for reflection and perception. As Mao Weitao has stated, "Precisely because of today's fast-paced and high-pressure life, we need to slow down. The theatre may be the best place to do so. When we walk into a theatre and quietly watch a performance for two hours, we are relaxed. At that moment, we emotionally project ourselves onto the characters. There is emotional resonance between the audience and the performers."[1]

In this evolving exploration of theatrical space, "site-specific theatre"—another form of immersive innovation—is gaining traction. Patrice Pavis noted that this form emphasizes "the search for a performance site—often unconventional, but historically significant or atmospherically distinct, such as freight yards, abandoned factories, city districts, courtyards, or suites. Into these spaces, classical or contemporary texts are introduced, with new lighting configurations and unexpected energy, while placing the audience in unfamiliar relationships to the text, the location, and themselves."[2] For traditional xiqu, site-specific theatre

1 茅威涛：《寻找越剧和生命的价值》，《中国文艺评论》2021 年第 5 期，第 109 页。[Mao Weitao, "Seeking the Value of Yueju and Life," *China Literature and Art Criticism*, no. 5 (2021): 109.]

2 [法] 帕特里斯・帕维斯：《戏剧艺术辞典》，宫宝荣、傅秋敏译，上海：上海书店出版社 2014 年版，第 213–214 页。[Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, trans. Gong Baorong and Fu Qiumin, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore PubLady Ling House, 2014, pp. 213–214.]

breaks free from the physical constraints of conventional venues. By combining regional xiqu with local cultural landscapes, this form offers a unique interactive experience rooted in both performance and environment.

A representative case is the 2022 production *Chengdu Stories* which takes the streetscapes of Chengdu as its backdrop, integrating chuanju (Sichuan opera) into everyday urban space. Here, the audience are both spectators and citizens; immersed in familiar cityscapes, they rediscover the distinctive charm of xiqu. This "real-setting plus" model not only brings xiqu closer to contemporary life but also blurs the boundary between art and reality, extending traditional performance from enclosed theatres into open social spaces. It provides new perspectives and possibilities for innovating and disseminating traditional arts.

Another example is *On Qingfeng Pavilion* (*Qingfengting Shang*), a Yuju (Henan Yuju opera) production staged in early 2024 and marketed as "immersive Yuju." The piece showcased spatial experimentation by replacing the proscenium stage with a T-shaped runway that extended into the audience. Actors narrated transitions directly and sometimes improvised from within the audience seating. However, such immersive elements were primarily designed to enhance engagement rather than to explore deeper spatial or relational dynamics between performers and spectators.

Clearly, immersive transformation poses both opportunities and challenges for xiqu creators. For instance, in environment-based works like *New Dragon Gate Inn*, the lack of a clear narrative framework can lead to dispersed audience focus. Thus, effective storytelling strategies are essential to maintaining narrative cohesion within immersive formats. Similarly, site-specific xiqu demands greater spatial and performative adaptability from actors. Traditional performances rely on rigorous stage conventions and formal gestures, but immersive and site-specific productions require actors to break from these norms, enter fluid interactional states, and engage in improvisation—all of which raise the bar for expressive skill and flexibility.

Moreover, the immersive theatre audience differs significantly from traditional xiqu spectators. Immersive works often attract those unfamiliar with xiqu—especially younger audiences—through novel use of space and interactivity. However, this also means that creators must have a keen understanding of new audience expectations and must strike a careful balance between retaining the artistic essence of xiqu and creating resonant experiences within modern contexts.

Looking ahead, creators might draw on xiqu works rich in participatory potential to drive further innovation. To meet the needs of contemporary audiences, creative teams may need to move beyond linear storytelling and explore multi-spatial, non-linear narrative models. In such productions, audiences might choose their own storylines or influence the plot's direction—an approach that poses profound challenges to traditional modes of xiqu creation. Audience receptivity remains a critical concern, particularly among younger viewers lacking a xiqu background. Given the uneven quality of current immersive xiqu works—some of which pursue innovation for its own sake—there is a risk of undermining the market's credibility. Responsible innovation grounded in artistic integrity and audience understanding is therefore essential for the sustainable development of immersive xiqu.

2.The Future of "Digitalization": Opportunities and Challenges

The digitalization of xiqu is an inevitable trend in its future development. Since the advent of xiqu cinema with *Dingjun Mountain*, over a century has passed, during which the integration of xiqu and cinema has undergone continuous technological and aesthetic transformations, from silent short films to sound, color, and 3D films. Early xiqu films struggled with limited appeal and poor box office performance, but with the advent of digital technologies like CGI and 4K, contemporary xiqu films have attracted new audiences with their innovative forms of expression. The essence of digital film imagery can be understood as "code–image"—that is, expressive audiovisual representations generated through digital code. Digital technology provides film with a generative aesthetic power, shifting the image from a "reproduction of reality" to a "creation of reality."[1] This feature not only deconstructs and reshapes reality but also, through ever-evolving digital technologies, creates cinematic images that surpass audience expectations, extending the boundaries of imagination.

Projects such as the "Jingju (Peking Opera) Film Project" and the "Plum Blossom Award Digital Film Project" have driven the creation of numerous digital xiqu films, including *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang Bieji*, Jingju, 2014), *Qin Xianglian* (Jingju, 2015), *Havoc in Heaven* (*Danao Tiangong*, Jingju,

1 姜宇辉：《数字＂海洋＂中的＂崇高＂与＂创伤＂———重思数字美学的三个关键词》，南京社会科学 2022 年第 10 期，第 127–136 页。[Jiang Yuhui, "The Sublime and the Trauma in the Digital 'Ocean': Rethinking Three Keywords of Digital Aesthetics," *Nanjing Social Sciences*, no. 10 (2022),pp. 127–136.]

2020), *Against the Flames* (*Ni Huo*, Huangmei Xi, 2012), *The Legend of the White Snake: Love* (Cantonese Yueju, 2021), and *The Daughter of Dunhuang* (*Dunhang Ernü*, Huju [Shanghai Opera], 2023). These works combine digital settings with traditional art forms, enhancing visual effects and audience immersion. For example, *Qin Xianglian* merges traditional sets with CGI, while *Against the Flames* employs dynamic camera work to capture emotional nuances, deepening the viewer's connection. The Daughter of Dunhuang uses CGI to animate murals and other effects, offering fresh visual appeal to the genre.

However, some productions have faltered due to a lack of harmony between digital environments and performances, diminishing the overall immersive experience and cinematic quality. In *Havoc in Heaven*, static digital clouds fail to connect with the actors, while *Farewell My Concubine* employs 3D and surround sound to enhance vocal and visual elements, yet struggles with the artificiality of its digital backdrops. By contrast, *The Legend of the White Snake: Love* represents a breakthrough. It uses 4K surround sound and CGI to create a story world that blends the real and the imagined. In scenes like "The Flooding of Jinshan Temple," the integration of CGI waves with the actors' movements successfully combines realism and abstraction, achieving a harmonious portrayal where "the scene resides upon the actor."[1] To succeed, xiqu cinema must strike a balance between narrative and theatrical environments—leveraging digital technology to push beyond traditional constraints and elevate visual effects and audience experience, while preserving the poetic abstraction and cultural depth of xiqu, avoiding an over-reliance on technology that could undermine its artistic integrity.

In addition to cross-media integration, emerging technologies such as the "metaverse" also offer new possibilities for the virtualization and digitalization of xiqu. In 2022, the Chinese government issued the "Opinions on Promoting the Implementation of the National Cultural Digitalization Strategy", aiming to build a comprehensive cultural big data system by 2035 and achieve a panoramic presentation of Chinese culture.[2] This policy sets a clear direction for the digital transformation of xiqu and related cultural data. The concept of the metaverse

1 谭铁志：《戏曲文化创意设计实践》，北京：中国轻工业出版社 2013 年版，第 27 页。[Tan Tiezh, *Practical Design of Xiqu Cultural Creativity*, Beijing: China Light Industry Press, 2013, 27.]

2 新华社 ：《中共中央办公厅 国务院办公厅印发〈关于推进实施国家文化数字化战略的意见〉》，https://www.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2022-05-22/3121695.shtml。[Xinhua News Agency, "The General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council Issue the 'Opinions on Promoting the Implementation of the National Cultural Digitalization Strategy'.]

saw rapid development in 2021, especially as digital technologies began to break down the boundaries of traditional media in fields like performing arts. Tech giants such as Meta (formerly Facebook), Microsoft, and NVIDIA have all outlined visions for the metaverse, with Roblox's CEO highlighting eight key elements, including identity, immersion, and an economic system. While some question the feasibility of the metaverse, advances in blockchain and AI provide strong support, suggesting that the metaverse is transitioning from concept to reality. In recent years, virtual figures such as "Mei Setian" and Yueju's avatar "Shangguan Wan'er" have helped promote traditional arts, expanding the diversity of xiqu performances.

Nonetheless, virtual characters cannot replace live actors due to the emotional and experiential differences between them. The liveness, spontaneity, and interactivity inherent in xiqu remain its core value. While the digitalization and virtualization of xiqu are inevitable trends, creators must stay rooted in the traditional essence of the art form, ensuring a balance between technological innovation and cultural continuity. As digital life continues to deepen, the digital development of xiqu warrants ongoing attention and exploration. Digitalization and virtualization offer new opportunities for creation and dissemination, but the traditional essence of xiqu must still be preserved.

Furthermore, the "digitalization" of xiqu should also focus on education. In regions like Taiwan, 3D scanning and motion capture systems have been used to digitally preserve xiqu movements, improving the accuracy and depth of teaching and academic research. These initiatives aim to address challenges such as the lack of standardized performance techniques and the application of emerging technologies. By training interdisciplinary talent, they also promote the growth of digital xiqu education and industry.[1] Expected future contributions include the development of digital teaching materials, the preservation and transmission of endangered performance techniques, and the creation of interactive learning platforms using VR and AR. Additional possibilities include integrating XR, holography, and NFT applications to develop innovative models of education and entertainment, driving the global spread and development of xiqu arts.

1 参考王台瑞:《迈向2030元宇宙世代数字人文之戏曲教育数字化战略建议》,《数字人文研究》2022年第4期。[See Wang Tairui, "Towards a Digital Humanities Strategy for Xiqu Education in the 2030 Metaverse Era," *Digital Humanities Research*, no. 4 (2022).]

Conclusion

In recent years, xiqu has ventured into cross-disciplinary and "boundary-breaking" experiments, resulting in numerous innovative works and attracting a new audience (though possibly temporary). However, despite the new possibilities that digital technology has introduced to xiqu creation, the essence of xiqu and its core performance elements have not undergone a funDa Mental transformation due to the diversification of its forms. The new media era has facilitated the widespread dissemination of xiqu, but it has also led to issues of excessive fragmentation and the prevalence of vertical video formats, which have compromised the integrity of its performances. The true charm of xiqu lies in the immediacy of its live performances and the interaction between actors and audiences, meaning the screen should never replace the authentic stage experience. The aim of new media should be to draw more audiences into theaters to experience the unique appeal of xiqu firsthand.

On a broader level, xiqu must evolve with the times to meet the emotional and aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences while avoiding disconnection from society's and the public's demands. While the protection of intangible cultural heritage has ensured the transmission of xiqu's cultural value, it has also posed challenges. The focus should be on making xiqu more "popular" by enhancing the promotion and image-building of its performers, utilizing multimedia and emerging communication methods, and steering xiqu back toward its traditional aesthetics to boost its market presence. For creators, the challenge lies in balancing continuous development and innovation with a commitment to the core of xiqu. This means fully leveraging the potential of digital media to promote the inheritance and growth of xiqu art. The key challenge is to strike a balance between digital technology and traditional physical performance, ensuring that xiqu maintains its "performative" and "live" qualities while fulfilling contemporary audiences' deep emotional and experiential needs.

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The Exploration of Chinese Spoken Drama in UK Theatres (2015-2024)

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As an internationally recognized theatre powerhouse, the UK has had a profound and indelible influence on the emergence of Chinese drama. Over the past few decades, the opportunity to perform in the UK has come to symbolize a prestigious and highly influential stage for Chinese theatre practitioners. This pilgrimage is filled with both the glory of representing Chinese spoken drama on the global stage and the anxiety of facing a significant challenge. However, in this land that has birthed numerous theatrical classics and playwrights, what is the current situation of Chinese spoken drama? This article focuses on Chinese theatrical works staged in UK commercial theatres over the past decade, analyzing their content, audience reception, and cultural connotations. It explores how these works serve as a means of cultural exchange, reflecting China's role as a "cultural diplomat" and their "inseparable otherness."

In the UK theatre market, works with Chinese elements can be broadly divided into three categories: the first is Chinese spoken drama produced and performed by Chinese theatre companies, including both state-owned and private performance groups; the second consists of English plays adapted or co-created by UK theatre groups, incorporating Chinese cultural elements, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company's adaptation of the traditional Chinese story *Doue Yuan* (*The Injustice to Dou E*) into *Snow in Midsummer*; the third category includes the theatrical works created or adapted by BEA (British East Asian) or/and BESEA (British East and South East Asian) theatre groups based in the UK, such as Yellow Earth Theatre (now known as New Earth Theatre) and Mulan Theatre Company. This article will primarily focus on the first category, namely the performances by Chinese theatre companies in the UK.

1.Chinese Drama Across the Sea

At the level of state-owned troupes, the China National Theatre's Huaju (Chinese spoken drama) production of *Richard III* was performed at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London from July 20–25, 2015. This production had previously been invited to the UK in 2012 to participate in the London Cultural Olympiad, and 2015 marked its second visit. Directed by the renowned theatre director Wang Xiaoying, the production was not merely a simple translation of Shakespeare's classic but a re-interpretation incorporating Chinese cultural elements to reflect the Chinese understanding of Shakespeare's work. Visually, the production integrated elements such as Chinese Xuan paper[1] sets, traditional Xiqu-style stage movement, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese traditional costumes, and masks drawn from Nuo opera[2], while the auditory experience featured Chinese percussion instruments, Xiqu-style singing, and Mongolian throat singing. The performers used Chinese to create a stylized performance, presenting a distinctly Chinese aesthetic tailored for a Western audience.

Rather than fully localizing Shakespeare's work, Director Wang chose to innovate in form while staying as faithful as possible to the content. This hybrid adaptation enhanced the visual appeal of the performance while retaining the local audience's familiarity with the iconic British story, minimizing the sense of "otherness" that might have been introduced by cultural differences. Throughout the rehearsal process, the creative team incorporated elements of traditional Chinese theatre and culture, such as Chinese scenic design, Chinese language, Chinese vocal techniques, Chinese instruments, and acrobatic stagecraft from Chinese Xiqu, all of which added a unique cultural flavor to the production. This "old wine in a new bottle" approach helped bridge the aesthetic gap between Chinese and British theatre creators and audiences.

On the commercial theatre company front, unlike the frequent international visits of national troupes, due to cost constraints, few privately-run Chinese troupes have performed in the UK from a purely commercial perspective over

1 Xuan paper (宣　纸) is a high-quality traditional Chinese paper originating from Xuancheng, Anhui Province. Renowned for its exceptional absorbency and durability, it is primarily used for Chinese calligraphy and traditional ink painting.Author's note.

2 Nuo opera (傩　戏) is a traditional Chinese folk opera,characterized by its use of elaborate wooden masks, symbolic costumes, and highly stylized movements.Author's note.

the past decade. In 2017, supported by the Beijing Cultural and Arts Fund, the Huang Ying Theatre Studio, led by theatre artist Huang Ying, brought two works to the UK for performances marking the 45th anniversary of China-UK diplomatic relations. These were *A Pipe Dream* (also known as *Cooking a Dream*) and *Macbeth*. Directed by Huang Ying with artistic guidance from the highly influential Japanese international practitioner, actor trainer, and director Suzuki Tadashi, *Macbeth* was a cross-cultural performance featuring actors from China, France, and Russia. *A Pipe Dream*, adapted from the Chinese traditional novel Zhen Zhong Ji (*The Story Book from Pillow*), is what Huang Ying describes as "New National Drama," a style influenced by the "Chinese National Drama Movement" and incorporating Western theatrical techniques with Chinese cultural symbols and operatic elements to tell traditional Chinese stories.

In the production of *A Pipe Dream*, Huang Ying used traditional Chinese instruments like Sanxian[1] and, At the beginning of the show, pots of yellow millet rice were cooked on the side of the stage, and after the performance, they were shared with the audience, aiming to engage the British audience's senses of sight, smell, taste, and hearing, offering a complete sensory experience of Chinese culture. The performance took place at the Southwark Cathedral in the UK, where the stark contrast between the realistic Christian church setting and the dream-like style typical of Chinese theatre setting added an unexpected cultural collision. At the same time, this Chinese theatre performance in a Western-style church seemed to become an intuitive presentation of a Chinese story wrapped in a Western theatrical shell. This unexpected cultural collision became the best embodiment of director Huang Ying's practice of his "New National Drama" style.

Without government funding, private Chinese theatre companies have rarely had the opportunity to perform commercially in the UK. An exception was the 2012 performance of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* in Chinese by the Shanghai Modern People Theatre at London's St Martin's Theatre, marking the 60th anniversary of the play's continuous run in the UK. However, this was not a spontaneous commercial performance but a special part of official commemoration activities.

In the past decade, most Chinese-language plays performed in the UK

1 Sanxian (三弦) is a traditional Chinese musical instrument with three strings, commonly used in Xiqu, folk music, and storytelling performances. It is more frequently found in the music of southern China. Author's note.

have been part of cultural exchange programs funded by the government or through variety festivals. Examples include Forging the Swords by the Chinese National Theatre, multimedia dance theatre *A Life on the Silk Road* (*Xingzhe Wujiang*), and physical theatre production *The Luocha Land* (*Luocha Guo*). These performances were all sponsored by the government to promote cultural exchange and showcase Chinese culture. As the exchanges deepened, Chinese theatre practitioners gradually reached a shared understanding: the dual barriers of language and culture are difficult to overcome. Therefore, works performed in the UK have increasingly featured de-verbalization, strong visual elements, and physical expression, as these techniques can bridge the cultural gap more effectively. Zhao Miao, the director of *the Luocha Land*, remarked that the final script of the performance contained only 1,150 words, a reflection of the growing trend of minimizing linguistic barriers.

2.The Absence of Commercial Performances and the Significance of Government Support

Over the past decade, most of the drama performances in the UK have been supported by various Chinese government cultural funds or bilateral cultural exchange activities. Major events include the 2015 China-UK Year of Culture Exchange and the series of cultural exchange activities celebrating the 45th anniversary of China-UK diplomatic relations in 2017. Regular events include various annual theatre festivals held in the UK, such as the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The continuous supply of Chinese-language drama in the UK has to some extent opened up a market for Chinese-language theatre; however, it is evident that, relying on this small audience group, the sustainable development of Chinese spoken drama in the UK theatre market still faces significant challenges. As a highly language-dependent art form, theatre is constrained by factors such as venue capacity, the high cost of international touring, and cultural adaptation. Consequently, it is currently difficult for Chinese spoken drama to achieve widespread popularity and breakthrough in the UK local commercial market.

This also explains why, in the past decade, no Chinese spoken drama have taken place in the UK on a self-funded basis, without the purpose of participating in festivals, exhibitions, or cultural exchanges. After all, government-funded artistic works do not have to face the pressure of box office sales, whereas sustainable commercial performances, on the other hand, must rely on box office revenue to support their long-term operation.

Behind the absence of commercial performances, the only force maintaining Chinese theatre's journey onto the world stage is the strong financial support from the government.

Sinologist Colin Mackerras (2008) pointed out that for the past century since the birth of Chinese spoken drama, its development has always been closely linked to politics, revolution, nationalism, and social change. "...over the last century the history of Chinese drama is, to a large extent, a microcosm of Chinese history, but that politics has had more impact on the drama than the other way around ." After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the introduction and development of realist plays and Stanislavski's system of acting, as well as policy guidance, made this connection even more evident. Today, even Chinese drama on the international stage cannot escape the undeniable imprint of being closely tied to political policies. Although the revolutionary mission that Chinese spoken drama once carried in its early stages is no longer relevant, most of the current plays on international tours still carry the mission of showcasing China's excellent historical and cultural heritage. In this context, Chinese spoken drama has become one of the tools for bridging Chinese culture to the international stage.

However, even as it bears political tasks, it is clear that with changes in Chinese cultural policies, the content and form of the drama performances have gradually shown subtle shifts. Mackerras (2008) proposed that "Since the end of the Cultural Revolution the extent of foreign influence on and inspiration of Chinese theatre has strongly increased." But over the past decade, especially in the works touring the UK, this trend has seen a marked change. As Chinese spoken drama continues to move onto the international stage, the themes and creative directions of these works have gradually evolved. In 2012, the performances of *Richard III* and *The Mousetrap* continued to incorporate traditional Western dramatic elements, focusing more on the form of drama and international cross-cultural exchange. By 2017, works like *Macbeth* and *A Pipe Dream* by Huang Ying's studio demonstrated innovative attempts in Chinese theatrical creation, exploring the collision of traditional culture with modern ideas. These works retained the cultural foundation of traditional classics while incorporating modern theatrical techniques, discovering new narrative languages and artistic forms. Today, works such as *Forging the Swords* and *The Luocha Land* have become not only vehicles for cultural exchange but also profound reflections and interpretations of Chinese society, history, and future. The support of various levels of the Chinese government for Chinese spoken drama's overseas performances has provided a stable platform for this cultural consciousness and artistic exploration. It has not only promoted the diverse presentation of Chinese theatre on the world stage but also facilitated

deep dialogue between different cultures. Although Chinese drama began with the introduction and enlightenment of Western theatre, it gradually returned to and strengthened its native cultural characteristics as it developed. With the passage of time, it has found its own unique mode of expression. This process of returning to local characteristics is not only a symbol of Chinese spoken drama's self-identity but also an important contribution of Chinese culture to global cultural exchange.

Conclusion

In the past decade, under the support of the government, Chinese spoken drama has frequently participated in various Sino-British cultural exchange activities and successfully appeared in the United Kingdom. As one of the important funding sources supporting Chinese spoken drama's going global, the China National Arts Fund, in 2017, during the "13th Five-Year Plan" period, issued a statement which stated:

"Funded international (or overseas) dissemination, exchange, and promotion projects should also be: projects that promote contemporary Chinese values, reflect the spirit of Chinese culture, and represent the aesthetic pursuits of the Chinese people, projects that can tell the 'Chinese story' well, and have international influence and competitiveness as 'going out' projects."[1]

Fortunately, most of the Chinese spoken drama works that have entered the international stage have made achievements in promoting Chinese culture and enhancing the global cultural presence of Chinese spoken drama within the theatre world. However, whether this approach can truly spark Western audiences' interest in Chinese culture and further encourage them to enter theatres and purchase tickets for Chinese drama still lacks solid data to support it. The current situation, where national funds "push forward" the process, stands in stark contrast to the situation in which foreign theatre performances in China often face difficulty in selling tickets.

Nevertheless, with the gradual increase of Chinese cultural confidence and ongoing government support, Chinese spoken drama's visits to the UK over the past decade have shown a positive trend. However, relying solely on

1 Translated by author.

government funding may still limit future theatrical exchange activities to the realm of political and cultural exchanges, and it may be challenging to achieve marketization and a sustainable, virtuous cycle of development. Furthermore, given practical issues such as theatre capacity, relying solely on the influence of theatrical performances themselves is unlikely to change the current status of Chinese spoken drama performances in the UK in the short term. Based on past reviews by British local media, it can be observed that works that have a stronger emotional connection with local audiences or are more familiar with cultural references are more likely to be recognized by the market and critics. Therefore, how to break the language barrier and cultural divide, and build emotional resonance and cultural identity between Western audiences and Chinese culture, is the key to the sustainable success of Chinese spoken drama on the global stage in the future.

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Introduction to Classical Plays (XI)

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1.Liyuan Xi *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*

Scholar Dong and Lady Li is a landmark Liyuan Xi production written by Wang Renjie, one of the most celebrated playwrights from Fujian Province, China. Premiering in 1993, the play has become both a representative work of Wang's career and one of the most acclaimed modern pieces in the thousand-year-old tradition of Liyuan Xi. Upon its debut, the production garnered nationwide praise for its philosophical depth and contemporary sensibility. Most notably, it was recognized for its bold and incisive critique of the patriarchal restraints imposed on women within traditional Chinese marriage—marking a significant step in the intellectual modernization of Chinese xiqu.

The play is adapted from *The Crow*, a contemporary rural short story by You Fengwei. Wang Renjie transposed the setting from the present day to an imagined ancient past. The story centers on a wealthy household in ancient China. Master Peng, the aging patriarch, realizes his end is near. Rather than preparing for his wife's future welfare, he obsesses over the potential loss of her chastity after his death—an affront to his male honor he cannot accept. To prevent this, he hires Dong Siwei, a poor and socially marginalized tutor, to watch over his young, beautiful wife Lady Li after he dies.

Dong, nicknamed "Dong the Fourfold Fearer," is seen as harmless due to his timid nature. His nickname alludes to Confucius's "three fears"—fate, superiors, and wise counsel—with a fourth added: fear of women. After Master Peng's death, Dong fulfills his task with great diligence, shadowing Lady Li during the day and spying on her through walls at night. In this strange relationship of surveillance and control, mutual feelings gradually begin to grow. One night,

■ Stills from *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*.

Lady Li, unable to bear her loneliness, sings softly to herself. Dong, mistaking her song for a signal of infidelity, breaks into her room—only to discover she is alone. The barrier between them dissolves, and they finally choose to be together.

Aware that he has "stolen while on guard," Dong confesses at Master Peng's grave, seeking forgiveness. To his shock, Peng appears as a ghost, condemns Dong, and demands that he sever all ties and kill Lady Li to atone. But Dong, emboldened by love, confronts the ghost and firmly rejects Peng's cruel, patriarchal values. In the end, Scholar Dong and Lady Li are united as a couple, and the story concludes in joy and affirmation.

Wang Renjie's body of work is typically divided into two creative periods. His early phase, active primarily in the 1980s, is known for its philosophical inquiry and experimental spirit. In contrast, his later phase—beginning in the early 21st century—focuses more on preserving and exploring the expressive aesthetics of Liyuan Xi, often emphasizing performance over plot. Wang is at once a guardian of traditional Chinese theatrical heritage and a daring innovator, deeply engaged in cultural critique. *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* (*Jie Fu Yin*) and *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* belong to his earlier, more reflective period, both marked by philosophical resonance and cultural introspection.

With its tension rooted in historical and cultural psychology, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* presents a vivid satire of traditional moral dogma. The absurdity

of the premise—Master Peng fearing not death, but posthumous betrayal—is both comic and revealing. While the narrative appears centered on female desire, its deeper purpose is to deconstruct the rigid, often absurd moral codes that governed traditional Chinese society, particularly those oppressing women. These codes, as the play shows, have shaped behaviors and beliefs across generations. Through its critique of Peng's archaic values and the transformation of Dong from passive guardian to awakened lover, Wang Renjie celebrates natural affection, human freedom, and the purity of emotional connection.

Compared to the somber tragedy of *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* leans toward comedic brightness. Its characters pursue love and happiness with courage—especially Lady Li, who actively shapes her own destiny. Her consciousness of selfhood, love, and rebellion is powerfully affirmative. While both plays expose the crushing weight of Confucian patriarchal norms on women, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* embodies a sense of poetic justice, even utopia. Where *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* evokes Greek-style tragic grandeur, *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* offers a liberating, idealistic joy.

Zeng Jingping won her second Plum Blossom Award for her portrayal of Lady Li, having previously won the award in 1988 for *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*. In the 20th century, Liyuan Xi faced a serious decline—few young actors could master its challenging techniques, and a shortage of new, compelling scripts led to dwindling audiences. Yet beginning in the 1980s, the form experienced an unexpected revival. No longer a "museum piece," Liyuan Xi returned to the stage with renewed energy, often playing to sold-out houses. At the heart of this renaissance were the contributions of Wang Renjie. His innovative works—especially *Scholar Dong and Lady Li*—demonstrated that ancient theatrical traditions could indeed embrace modern aesthetics and resonate with contemporary audiences.

2.Liyuan Xi *The Lament of a Faithful Wife* (*Jie Fu Yin*)

Playwright Wang Renjie is nicknamed "Wang Three Widows" or "The Widow Playwright." This stems from a series of his works beginning with *Autumn in the Maple Forest* (*Fenglin Wan*, 1993), a Liyuan Xi production, after which he shifted focus from writing about youthful maidens to portraying widows who had endured significant hardships in life. *Autumn in the Maple Forest*, *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, and *Scholar Dong and Lady Li* all center on widowed

protagonists, earning Wang Renjie this unique moniker. His interest in such characters is rooted not only in his critical reflection on traditional Chinese culture but also in his efforts to align with the profound and introspective aesthetic qualities of the ancient genre of Liyuan Xi.

Across both Chinese and Western cultures, the figure of the widow holds a distinct and complex place. Social norms often impose harsher moral expectations on widows than on other women. In Eastern societies especially, widows are expected to embody the ideal of the virtuous wife and devoted mother. While some may inherit a degree of wealth, their inner emotional lives are often overlooked and repressed, with society denying them the right to personal feelings or desires outside the domestic sphere. In many cases, widows are not even identified by their own names, but only by their husbands' surnames. In the context of ancient Chinese feudal society, where women's status was low, widows were bound not only by external moral codes but also by internalized notions of chastity. As wives, they were expected to obey their husbands during their lifetimes and remain loyal to them after death, with remarriage forbidden. As mothers, they were charged not only with raising their children but also with sacrificing for their sons' futures in the imperial examination system. These conflicting pressures create rich dramatic tension, making the widow an ideal subject for theatrical portrayal. Traditional Peking operas such as *Lady San Teaches Her Son* (*Sanniang Jiaozi*) and *Bay of the Fen River* (*Fenhe Wan*) present images of flawless, self-sacrificing widows.

Wang Renjie, however, is a playwright deeply engaged in probing the historical and cultural underpinnings of his subjects, particularly human existence as shaped by cultural norms. The widow, as a figure embodying the suppression of human nature, naturally stimulates his creative exploration. The cultural weight carried by widows provides an effective vehicle for expressing his ideas. Moreover, the nuanced, refined, and expressive nature of Liyuan Xi makes it especially well-suited to portraying mature female characters who are inwardly restrained yet emotionally rich. The widow's complexity can thus be rendered with subtlety, achieving an artistic effect that invites repeated contemplation.

The Lament of a Faithful Wife premiered in 1987, performed by the Fujian Provincial Experimental Liyuan Opera Troupe, with Zeng Jingping starring as the widow Yan. In 1988, at the age of just 25, Zeng won China's most prestigious drama performance honor—the Plum Blossom Award—for her portrayal. The play tells the story of Yan, who becomes a widow before the age of twenty and raises her son alone. To secure his future in the imperial exams, she hires a private tutor, Shen Rong. Over several years, Yan develops romantic feelings for him. Just as Shen Rong is about to leave for the exams,

■ Stills from *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*.

Yan visits his room to test whether he returns her affection. Upon discovering that Shen is entirely focused on his career and uninterested in her, Yan decides to confess her love. Shen, fearing that rumors of a relationship with a widow would damage his prospects, sternly rejects her, citing the moral codes that "a scholar values integrity, and a woman values chastity." In shutting the door on her, he accidentally crushes two of her fingers. Overcome with pain and humiliation—for having desired a man rather than dedicating herself solely to raising her child—Yan severs the injured fingers and places them in a wooden box as a form of self-punishment.

Ten years later, her son, Lu Jiao, emerges as the top scholar in the imperial exams. The emperor, deeply moved by the story of his mother's self-mutilation as a sign of her unwavering chastity, wishes to commend her publicly. But Shen Rong, now an official, informs the emperor that Yan's action was not born of virtue but rather out of rejection and shame, accusing Lu of deception. To save her son from disgrace, Yan appears before the emperor to confess the truth. The emperor, recognizing her remorse, absolves her of all punishment and issues an edict commending her act, urging all widows in the empire to follow her example. Yan, unable to refuse yet aware that her feelings for a man would now be known nationwide, ultimately takes her own life.

Yan's tragedy reflects the broader suffering of women in ancient China—an embodiment of the long-standing oppression under patriarchal society. The play's tragic arc has deep contemporary resonance: a woman's courageous pursuit of emotional freedom is shattered by a rigid male-dominated system, offering no fairytale ending. It also serves as a pointed critique of the romanticized love stories so prevalent in Chinese literature. Wang Renjie's work in this play is marked by sharp irony and cultural critique.

As a playwright, Wang Renjie favors a composed and subtle narrative style. His works are not grand explorations of the soul but rather nuanced meditations on mood and sensibility. They seek not to confront the depths or intensity of life, but to savor its emotional texture and poetic essence. In *The Lament of a Faithful Wife*, he crafts a layered and poignant female voice, vividly expressing a unique feminine psychology and experience. The tension between the delicacy and beauty of womanhood and the heavy burden imposed by patriarchal values creates a historical collision of emotion and destiny—both weighty and ephemeral—that leaves a lasting artistic impression.

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Overview of Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2024

ZHONG Junfang

In the second half of 2024, Chinese theatre presented a richly layered landscape of innovation. Against the backdrop of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 60th anniversary of Sino-French diplomatic relations, the 75th anniversary of Sino-Russian ties, and the explosive application of artificial intelligence across industries, the theatre scene made marked strides in thematic storytelling, cross-cultural exchange, and technological-philosophical inquiry. However, the season has yet to yield a breakout hit on the scale of *New Dragon Gate Inn or The Eternal Wave*.

1. Creation: Systematized Mainstream Narratives Coexist with Explorations of Humanity

Driven by major national anniversaries, state-run theatre companies built a multidimensional creative matrix centered around three major thematic pillars. On July 1, the National Theatre of China, in collaboration with Shanghai-based institutions, premiered *Red Origin* (*Hongse Qidian*) at the Great Theatre of China. Based on Ye Yonglie's documentary prose, the production adopts a political-theatre framework to deconstruct the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party into six narrative units, each told from a youth's perspective. Its fragmented character construction breaks away from linear historiography, offering a dynamic and multifaceted interpretation of 1921's revolutionary memory within the contemporary theatrical space.

On August 28–29, the Yunnan Provincial Drama Theatre presented *The Long Waters of the Lancang* (*Lancang Shuichang*) at the China National Theatre. Drawing on elements of minority intangible cultural heritage, and under director

■ *War Flames Over the Lijiang* (*Lishui Fengyan*)

Wang Xiaoying's cross-cultural vision, the work successfully transforms ethnic symbols into a modern dramatic aesthetic.

To mark the 80th anniversary of the Southwest Theatre Movement, *War Flames Over the Lijiang* (*Lishui Fengyan*) premiered on November 2–3 at the Guangxi Provincial Art Museum. Blending realist themes with expressive stage design, the play focuses on the wartime era and honors the patriotic spirit and cultural commitment of artists like Ouyang Yuqian and Tian Han more than eighty years ago. Although such productions achieve a strong ideological presence, many still grapple with challenges like stereotyped characterizations and formulaic conflicts—highlighting the need to explore new aesthetic approaches within mainstream narratives.

In the realm of xiqu (traditional Chinese opera), creators are turning increasingly to intermedia adaptation, revitalizing classical texts with contemporary expression while delving into the complexities of human emotion and morality. Playwright Luo Zhou, for example, draws from the Tang-dynasty anecdotal collection *Youyang Zazu* to reimagine the inner journey of Wu Daozi, the legendary painter. The play explores artistic sacrifice and the intricacies of human nature in the pursuit of ideal beauty.

■ Huju (Shanghai opera) production *Seeking Emotion (Tan Qing)*

Premiering on December 18, the Huju (Shanghai opera) production *Seeking Emotion* (*Tan Qing*) centers on the figure of Wang Kui. It abandons the traditional tragic narrative surrounding Guiying, instead placing both characters in an emotionally charged dilemma, encouraging audiences to reflect as they watch. Performer Chen Yueyin, typically cast as a "huadan" (young female), takes on a "xiaosheng" (young male) role for the first time, crossing gender and role boundaries to portray a classical male figure. Musically, the production fuses traditional Huju melodies with modern musical elements, incorporating waltz, dual-manual keyboard harmonies, and drum kits alongside signature Huju forms like the "triangle beat" and extended vocal phrasing.

The Zhanhua Yugu Xi *What Night Is This* (*Jinxi Hexi*), adapted from the *Tang Legends: The Chivalrous Hero*, tells the story of three central figures—a former courtesan, a reformed thief, and an ungrateful man—who, despite their efforts to change, are once again ensnared by fate. Building on the raw performance style of traditional fisherman's drum, the play incorporates elements of dance, spoken theatre, and martial arts—such as stylized lifts and "flying thief" movement technique—to create dramatic tension and unique character presence. It portrays the decisive moments when characters confront the tension between good and evil, life and death, revealing how a single thought can determine one's moral direction.

The Xiangju (Hunan opera) production *Crossing the River* (*Zhou Du*), adapted from Shen Congwen's novel *The Border Town*, uses the regionally distinctive "gaoqiang" vocal style and a continuous, non-scenic structure to paint a poetic portrait of western Hunan. Meanwhile, the Xiju play *Liaozhai*: *The Purple Tail*, inspired by *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, reinterprets the supernatural genre through a contemporary lens, blending fantasy with classic deconstruction in a captivating narrative.

Private theatre companies, by contrast, have maintained a steady focus on contemporary realities, with relatively consistent styles. On July 11–12, *The Crocodile*, produced by Yanghua Theatre, written by Mo Yan, and starring Zhao Wenzhuo, Kaili, and Ada Choi, was staged at the Shengjing Grand Theatre. Featuring Shakespearean dialogue and vividly imagined conflicts, the play portrays a gallery of archetypal figures. It reflects Mo Yan's literary insight and formal experimentation while carrying sharp commentary on contemporary society and a clear cautionary tone.

From September 20–22, *Alley-Oop* (*Fan Shan Hai*), an original production by Theatre Jiuren, was staged at the Erqi Theatre in Beijing. Based on the true

■ *Alley-Oop*

story of a 1920s girls' basketball team at the Liangjiang Women's School, the production continues Jiuren's tradition of exploring broad social themes through intimate narratives. Shifting its focus to sports and physical movement, the play spotlights the transformation of young women as they overcome personal limitations. Its distinct setting and character relationships offered a fresh departure from the company's earlier works, delivering a renewed theatrical experience for loyal audiences.

2. International Showcases: Cross-Cultural Exchange and Mutual Enrichment

In 2024, China's international theatre exchange followed a dual-track approach, driven by diplomatic anniversaries and major arts festivals. Celebrating the 60th anniversary of China–France diplomatic relations, the Chinese-language production of *Les Misérables*, which premiered in January at Beijing Poly Theatre, reinterpreted Victor Hugo's literary legacy through a contemporary lens. In July, the Avignon Festival's China Focus featured over 20 productions, including the Henan Yuju piece *The Jade Bracelet* (*Shi Yujuo*) and the physical theatre work *White Snake*, creating a dynamic dialogue between traditional Chinese culture and modern performance aesthetics. In October, *Littoral*, presented at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, offered a cross-cultural reflection on the Mediterranean refugee crisis, as envisioned by French-Lebanese director Wajdi Mouawad—transplanted into the poetic waterways of Jiangnan.

In the context of the 75th anniversary of China–Russia diplomatic relations, Russia's Vakhtangov Theatre staged *War and Peace* on August 22 at the Shanghai Oriental Art Center, offering a stylized deconstruction of Tolstoy's epic. In November, Moscow's Masterskaya Theatre brought an eight-hour adaptation of *The Master and Margarita* to the Beijing People's Art Theatre, reshaping Bulgakov's magic realist text through a bold theatrical reconstruction. The Beijing People's Art Theatre International Theatre Showcase, themed "Boundaries," presented 27 performances from 9 countries over the course of 31 days. Among them, the Comédie-Française and the Théâtre National de la Colline—two of France's most prominent contemporary theatre companies—presented *The Tricks of Scapin* and *Littoral* at the Capital Theatre and Cao Yu Theatre, reflecting the flourishing theatrical exchange between China and France in this commemorative year.

On the academic front, theatre scholars and practitioners from China, France,

■ *Littoral*

Italy, Poland, and other countries gathered for keynote lectures and panel discussions, exploring key issues in artistic creation, international collaboration, and performance management.

3. Domestic Performances: Interweaving Forms, Traditions, and Spaces

(1)Beijing People's Art Theatre's Shanghai Tour Ignites Enthusiastic Audience Response

In November, during the 23rd China Shanghai International Arts Festival, the Beijing People's Art Theatre (Beijing Renyi) presented 15 performances of *Teahouse*, *Mutiny*, *Sunrise*, *Du Fu*, and *Beneath the Red Banner* in Shanghai. With compelling scripts and stellar performances, each show played to capacity audiences, marking the event as one of Shanghai's most celebrated cultural highlights of the year.

■ *Teahouse*

Alongside the performances, a rich program of exchange activities unfolded. Renyi President Feng Yuanzheng delivered lectures at Fudan University and the Shanghai Theatre Academy. The five actors of *Mutiny*—Feng Yuanzheng, Wu Gang, Wang Gang, Gao Dongping, and Ding Zhicheng—engaged in a dialogue session with students and faculty at STA. Artist Pu Cunxin participated in an interactive forum with audiences at the Shangyin Opera House.

Renyi also held a themed Party lecture and collaborative Party-building activities with local organizations. Simultaneously, a special exhibition on the history and work of Beijing Renyi was presented at the Shangyin Opera House.

(2)A Dynamic Matrix of Genres and Traditions Brings New Energy to the Stage

In August, the "Performing Arts World: 2024 International Theatre Invitational" in Shanghai showcased a multidimensional theatrical ecosystem through cross-genre and cross-regional programming. Celebrated Peking Opera performer Han Yijia presented the Cheng School classic *Triple Layers of the Actress's Song* (*Lingge Sandie*), while Hong Kong's Ju Percussion Group staged the multimedia music-theatre piece *Kafka's Four Rooms* in its Shanghai premiere.

The Wuzhen Theatre Festival featured a diverse array of works encompassing improvisational theatre, physical theatre, dance, music, traditional xiqu, magic, mime, and avant-garde performance. From December 10 to 19, the China Small Theatre Drama Festival received submissions from nearly 40 theatrical traditions—many appearing for the first time. Ultimately, 12 standout productions were selected for presentation, demonstrating both genre diversity and regional distinction.

(3)Theatrical Space and Urban Culture in Dialogic Exchange

From October 26 to November 3, the Guilin Arts Festival expanded the boundaries of environmental theatre through its innovative "Landscape Theatre" model. Performances were staged in natural and urban settings—Mountain Theatre (Elephant Trunk Hill), Tree Theatre, Cave Theatre (Reed Flute Cave), and Tent Theatre—fostering an organic integration of theatre with public space. Activities such as performance parades, artistic dialogues, civic arts initiatives, and theatre education programs turned the entire city into an "open-air theatre without walls."

In Wuzhen, traditional water-town elements such as canals, fences, and black-awning boats were creatively incorporated into performance design. The Shen Family Theatre Garden served as a traditional performance venue, while the reimagined "grey space" of a former turtle pond became a striking Water Theatre. The Wuzhen Internet Conference Center's Hall 3 also provided a shared performance site. Dutch company Pasmans' production *The Floating Diva*—with the titular character swirling her gown across the misty waters of Jiangnan—created a visual spectacle that not only mesmerized live audiences but also resonated widely across digital platforms.

■ *The Floating Diva*

■ *K.I. und Abel*

4. Artistic Innovation Through Technological Integration

(1)Generative AI Catalyzes Shifts in Creative Themes and Methods

From November 30 to December 14, the 7th "In-Between Theater Tech-Art Festival" in Beijing presented a series of performances that integrated AI technology into both form and content. Notable works included *Blank*, which featured AI-generated performance elements; *Command*, where AI infiltrated the performance process; and *Woyzeck Machine*, a collaborative game that incorporated AI in its creative development.

At the Wuzhen Theatre Festival, the Austrian Reinhardt Seminar staged *K.I. und Abel*, a production in which the director collaborated with Chat GPT to generate parts of the narrative. The play consciously highlighted the contradictions and errors produced by AI, thereby staging the internal conflicts and uncertainties of artificial intelligence. This approach offered a critical lens on the paradoxes of technological advancement and the ethical tensions it evokes.

(2)Digital Dissemination Propels Traditional Xiqu into the Mainstream

In December 2024, Anwan Troupe's eight performances in Xi'an attracted tens of thousands of spectators, with each show playing to full houses. As a private Qinqiang ensemble from a county town in northwestern China, Anwan achieved nationwide acclaim—touring across provinces, stirring audiences into collective choral responses, and amassing more than 2.3 billion views online. This cultural phenomenon has come to be known as the "Anwan Effect."

Anwan's remarkable success is not only rooted in the artistic quality of its repertoire but also in its innovative strategies of dissemination and branding. The troupe skillfully integrated traditional plaza-based xiqu performance with modern livestreaming platforms such as Kuaishou, leveraging influencer-style promotion to revitalize and popularize Qinqiang. By aligning regional theatrical heritage with cultural tourism initiatives, Anwan set a precedent for the contemporary communication and transmission of traditional performance art.

5. New Trends in Disciplinary Development and Academic Research

(1) Constructing the Theatre Studies of the Future

In response to the growing influence of artificial intelligence, the Shanghai Theatre Academy has taken the lead in conceptualizing a forward-looking discipline of theatre studies. Guided by the principles of "Chinese discourse, integration of science and art, international reach, and pioneering innovation," the institution proposes a model for the future of theatre education that integrates "AI + Art" across undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs.

A new triadic model of intelligent learning—combining instructor guidance, student initiative, and AI engagement—is being actively explored. General education courses such as "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence", "Art and AI Applications", and "New Opportunities in the Digital Age" are now regularly offered across the academy. Meanwhile, discipline-specific "AI+" courses are being developed to align with the unique attributes of theatre and performance, aiming to achieve a deep integration of AI technology and theatrical pedagogy.

(2) Renewed Scholarly Focus on Mei Lanfang

2024 marked the 130th anniversary of the birth of Mei Lanfang, one of the most influential figures in the history of Chinese theatre. A wide array of commemorative events and academic initiatives were launched in his honor. On July 23, the exhibition "The Radiance of Mei's Art: In Commemoration of the 130th Anniversary of Mei Lanfang's Birth" opened at the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum. Co-organized by the Chinese National Academy of Arts, the National Peking

Opera Company, the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, the Mei Lanfang Memorial Hall, and the Taizhou Municipal Government of Jiangsu Province, the exhibition highlighted Mei's artistic mastery, cultural ideals, and patriotic devotion.

From November 1 to 3, Nanchang University and the China Mei Lanfang Cultural and Art Research Society jointly hosted the "International Symposium on Performance Systems and the Development of Cultural Heritage: In Commemoration of Mei Lanfang's 130th Birthday". The symposium brought together over 120 scholars from more than 40 academic and research institutions in mainland China, as well as participants from Japan, South Korea, the United States, Singapore, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The conference explored Mei's artistic legacy from multiple dimensions, including performance systems, lineage and transmission, variations in repertoire, cultural dissemination, and international exchange.

A major commemorative symposium was held in Beijing on November 6, celebrating the 130th anniversaries of both Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang, further elevating the year's tribute activities. Leading academic journals such as "The Art of Chinese Opera" and "Cultural Heritage" launched dedicated sections on Mei Lanfang studies, offering in-depth scholarly perspectives on the inheritance and evolution of Peking Opera and the broader legacy of traditional Chinese culture.

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