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THEATERS OF REFORM AND REMEDIATION: XIQU (CHINESE OPERA) IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

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BY

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This dissertation is dedicated with love to the memory of my father,

Peter Rebull (1938-2014) and to my mother, Helen

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation excavates performance practice from the study of the literary, transcultural and intermedial adaptation practices of xiqu (Chinese opera) in the mid-twentieth century. Xiqu reform was the politically fraught adaptation of both text and technique, driven by engagement with the idea of indigenous theater as the public face of Chinese culture. Whether before or after 1949, xiqu remained a shifting target, battered by pressures towards political weaponization in content and what I term 'vernacularization' in technique, reflective of a move away from theatricality and towards a relative mimeticism. I focus on the connections of the Xiqu Reform Movement of the 1950s to the wartime era that preceded it, in order to demonstrate that its ideological agenda was not a project of simple repression, but inextricably tangled with both the politically inflected aesthetic debates of the previous decades and long-standing trends in the theater industry.

While one line of inquiry is how Republican discourse of how and how far to hybridize with foreign forms haunted state interventions in the industry, I also pursue how artists themselves used performance practice to direct reform. Experimentation with the use of a director, new acting and staging techniques, and the continual refinement of play content towards audience tastes were all characteristics of the late Republic that the state attempted to co-opt after 1949. These elements of performance constitute the specific expression of xiqu aesthetics, and the project to reform them was colored by dynamic concerns for the balance of adaptation with preservation. Reform was oriented toward defining 'China' for foreign audiences and also for itself, investing xiqu with the weight of national tradition to counteract the foreignness of other theatrical forms and media. Examining the archive of these adaptations, this dissertation considers reform through the lens of remediation, divided into chapters by print, stage performance, and film. In reassessing 1950s theater, I demonstrate that reform was the dialogue of state intervention in national xiqu culture

with pressures from developments in theater arts initiated by practitioners; it is through the refraction of adaptation to other media that traces of performance practice emerge.

Preface

This project started with an interest in examining the changes made to xiqu, or indigenous Chinese theater or "opera," through the mid-twentieth century as examined through different media. By breaking down xiqu into its component parts, I sought to tell a clearer story about the politicization of theater in its aesthetic elements—visually, aurally, and through storytelling. It had already been established that most major intellectuals and political leaders of the first half of the twentieth century saw the theater as a significant weapon of social change, pending its successful reform, and I wanted to know what these specific areas had as a role in that.

Around the time I was forming this project, two major studies had just been published, Joshua Goldstein's *Drama Kings* and Jiang Jin's *Women Playing Men*, which together established significant inroads into the study of xiqu history, first by looking broadly at the social and aesthetic changes in Peking opera from the end of the Qing to the beginning of the Second World War, and second, in examining the politically and socially complicated rise of *yueju* (越剧) in the 1940s.[1] These studies were both produced by historians and opened an English language niche for a topic that had been previously the purview of only a few musicologists and theater specialists, despite thriving as a discipline in China.

Most studies from China focus on either the 'modern' (*jindai* 近代) or 'contemporary' (*xiandai* 现代) periods, divided around 1949. Zhang Lianhong 张炼红, Li Wei 李伟 and Fu Jin 傅谨 all stand out as major contributors to the study of Maoist xiqu, from the literary, historical and theatrical fields, respectively.[2] Others, like Fu Xuemin 傅学敏, or Jia Zhigang 贾志刚, whose three-

[1] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

[2] Each of these scholars has produced multiple works on Maoist era xiqu reform. Of these, Li and Fu have each written works that take a broad view, encompassing the whole of the twentieth century. Fu Jin's latest work, 20 *shiji Zhongguo*

volume work now serves as the latest reference point for histories of 'modern era' xiqu, deliberately end before 1949.[3] Even English language studies tend to focus on one side or another of this divide, though typically with some form of acknowledgement of the "other side": Jonathan Stock and Jin both dedicate only a chapter to post-49 developments (encompassing the entire period to the modern day).[4] While Liang Luo comes at this topic from a different, biographical angle, focusing on Tian Han, even she covers the 50s glancingly in a single chapter and conclusion, and puts his mid-century play *White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan* 白蛇传) within the dual frames of the themes of his own life's dramatic output, and of a decades-long dialogue between Chinese and international avant-gardes.[5] Brian DeMare's more recent work, *Mao's Cultural Army*, also the output of a historian, is an exception in its balanced coverage of the 40s and 50s, but this comes at a cost: his references to the 40s are within the context of the theater work of the Chinese Communist Party and overlook the contributions and influence of people like Tian Han.[6]

The field has also seen growth from the very broad to the very specific. Min Tian takes an expansive look at the interplay of xiqu with western theater history over the course of the twentieth century, while Ruru Li uses a series of mini-biographies of Peking opera stars to cover developments

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xijushi 20 世纪中国戏剧史, 2 vols. (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2017), was published too late to be included in this dissertation. Notably, the volumes of this book are divided into pre- and post-1949.

[3] Fu Xuemin 傅学敏, *1937-1945 Guojia yishi xingtai yu guotongqu xiju yundong* 1937-1945 国家意识形态与国统区戏剧运动 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2010); Jia Zhigang 贾志刚, *Zhongguo jindai xiqu shi 1938-1949 (xia)* 中国近代戏曲史 1938-1949 (下) (Beijing 北京: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2010).

[4] Jonathan Stock, *Huju: Traditional Opera in Modern Shanghai* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[5] Liang Luo, *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[6] Brian DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For a competing example that takes Tian Han's work as a different model than the Yan'an approach (as well as Mei Lanfang's), see Li Wei 李伟, *20 shiji xiqu gaige de sanda fanshi* 20 世纪戏曲改革的三大范式 (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2014).

over the century.[7] By contrast, Wilt Idema makes a case study out of the transformations of a single xiqu play, "Tianxian pei (天仙配)," complete with a rich supply of translated primary sources, to examine reform in the first seven years of the People's Republic, including the impact of adaptation to film.[8] Within this field, as well, is a growing niche for the study of xiqu film as a unique problem of adaptation across media, significantly boosted by the 2010 production of a special issue of *The Opera Quarterly* exploring xiqu film of the Maoist era in depth. Since then, others have started to turn to xiqu film as a genre and not just as an aesthetic mode, as in David Der-Wei Wang's brief inclusion of Fei Mu's (費穆) xiqu films within his study of the aesthetics of the "1949 crisis," or Stephen Teo's exploration of the genre for *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*.[9]

My place in this has been evolving as I have watched these works emerge. This project was always intended to be comparative of the era immediately before 1949 and the period after it as part of the greater effort to demonstrate that the classical (and in China, still prevailing) periodization of theater history on either side of the establishment of the PRC effectively obscures any connections that might be helpfully drawn between them. I intended with this focus to do more than refer to post-49 developments as a period of dramatic shift or upheaval, or to locate 1950s production solely in the context of its leftist forebears. I also wanted each chapter to explicitly discuss both decades, rather than relegating discussion of the different decades to different chapters, at the risk of minimizing the complexity of the political and artistic situation going on at the time.

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[7] Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008); Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).

[8] Wilt Idema, *The Metamorphosis of Tianxianpei: Local Opera Under the Revolution (1949-1956)* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015).

[9] David Der-wei Wang, "A Spring that Brought Eternal Regret: Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the Poetics of Screening China," chap. 7 in *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Stephen Teo, "The Opera Film in Chinese Cinema: Cultural Nationalism and Cinematic Form" in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765607.013.0012..

While I originally thought at first I would focus on the 1940s—as if establishing a foundation from which to explore the developments in the next decade, at some point along the way, it became clear that it was better to center the focus in the xiqu reform movement of the 1950s, and excavate the connections to the 1940s and before. This approach fit best with the original motivating question of why and how the government put such stakes in a particular aesthetic image and sound. Why was it not just aesthetically preferable but ideologically necessary to change the appearance of xiqu—especially when the stated target of state reforms was to reorganize the industry by restructuring and registering companies? The latter goal is more easily comprehensible in terms of the interest of the state in controlling theater as a means of propaganda. Changing the sound and gesture of xiqu, by contrast, seemed like an oddly obsessive project that would be clear to only the theater cognoscenti and not necessarily to either those in the highest ranks of power or even target audiences. On top of this, it was actually risky, since the state's goal was to keep audiences educated through entertainment, not alienated.

In conjunction with attention to this side of the project came recognition of the fact that the historical record of these changes took place through mediation, whether to film or to record, and any effort to study theater was going to have to take account of this. Thinking along these lines led me to go beyond film to consider print and theater as media in their own right, too. It was in the course of researching the aural side of reform, however, that I discovered working with records in China is deeply frustrating. There are innumerable roadblocks to acquiring the actual gramophone records to listen to (and the technology to support it, since 78s remained the industry standard until the LP was reverse-engineered in 1958). The common excuse offered by nearly all audio archivists is that there's no need to hear the record because it's already been converted to commercial CD—never mind that these recordings appear in highly divergent qualities between different branches of the China Record Company and are, in the worst case scenario, demonstrably mislabeled and

without clear means of identification. These concerns will continue to shape my research questions moving forward, as I am still interested in the sound of xiqu reform. For the sake of the dissertation, however, the logical thing was to focus instead on three chapters, on print, theater and film.

The project to reconstruct what performance was, even if now just in visual terms, means unavoidably that the major story in each chapter is going to revolve around the clash between realism (specifically socialist realism as the aesthetic standard of the state) and xiqu's presentational, theatrical mode. What made this a difficult balancing act was the need to determine the extent to which changes were acceptable without compromising on the national identity that xiqu represented. This is more complicated than it might seem, because both realism and nationalism are significant aspects of the theater world pre-1949, a world against which the Communists were resolutely defining themselves antithetically. Nationalism in particular had been meaningful to nearly all political players, from the Nationalist (*Guomindang* 国民党) government to the Communists, to members of the theater industry who felt a sense of patriotism without necessarily adhering to a particular set of political or ideological beliefs. It is impossible to speak of nationalism without speaking of realism, however, because the introduction of this aesthetic mode into xiqu performance came about by intermingling with foreign sources.

Thus, the question of the remediation of theater to itself comes to be heavily involved with the problem of how transnationalism is expressed in the theater world. In some respects, this is a discussion of how xiqu responds to spoken drama (*huaju* 话剧), but ultimately, this is not a simple or easy exchange as both genres in China are in constant flux, in dialogue with outside forces (and with each other). One initial question is how to represent transnationalism after the apparent closing of the iron curtain. Presumably, dialogue outside of the Socialist bloc was circumscribed, but regardless of contemporary politics, transnationalism in China was more than just the influence of Soviet theater on xiqu, or the restriction of outside influences to Soviet models. It is true the Chinese

invited Soviet theater experts to their academies, but their own conferences and discussions make it clear that they continued to be predisposed to experiment with performance and production techniques that are a remix of international ideas from the first half of the twentieth century, and not purely contemporary Soviet theater.

This confusion and its political nature can be seen in part by the sheer variety of language in use to talk about theater reform. While it was largely accepted that *xiju* (戏剧) was the blanket term for all forms of theater, *xiqu* (戏曲) was unambiguously indigenous Chinese theater, and as such, could be interchanged with other, more pejorative words, like *jiuju* (旧剧), or 'old theater,' and the even more derogatory *jiuxi* (旧戏), 'old play-acting.' This conscious self-positioning of xiqu as humble (by comparison to a modern western tradition that was now subsumed by *xiju*) was accompanied by an equally complex and politicized set of words for 'reform.' Where plays in the Republican era had been advertised as "improved" (*gailiang* 改良), the discussion of the Maoist era was predominantly about "reform" (*gaige* 改革). And despite this apparently clear divide, the years immediately after 1949 put an almost equal emphasis on "reform-and-advance" (*gaijin* 改进), as in the "Xiqu Reform Bureau": *Xiqu gaijin ju* 戏曲改进局. Notably, this is a different term than the 'reform' of the "Xiqu Reform Movement" that they ran: *Xiqu gaige yundong* 戏曲改革运动.[10] It is hard to say what motivated this selection of vocabulary, though ultimately the language problem was evaded in print entirely with the abbreviation '*xigai*' 戏改; however, the politics of the valuation of xiqu remained.

It is partly on account of the complexity of the international politics undergirding theater reform that I dedicate such a significant portion of chapter two to exploring the Chinese adaptation

[10] This term "xiqu reform movement" is more commonly used by contemporary scholars to describe the 50s, but was used by Zhou Enlai at least as early as 1951. See Zhou Enlai 周恩来, "Zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 政务院关于戏曲改革工作的指示," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, May 7, 1951.

of a Korean classic, *Tale of Chunxiang* (*Chunxiang zhuan* 春香传). The questions that drive discussion however, are focused on understanding the dynamics that were the immediate motivation for that particular production—what were the technical elements of production that were borrowed or hybridized, and why? What did each side have invested in ensuring the final production looked and sounded "right"? What has been left undone is a more extensive contextualization of the play within the scope of the last generation of Chinese-Korean relations, how the Chinese government's own history of propaganda for the Korean War fits into the designs of the production team, how intra-Asian racisms play out in the finished product, and why the play was used the way it was, for diplomatic purposes beyond Sino-Korean relations. These questions address the significance of the play beyond its role as an example of transnationalism in technical theater in Maoist China. So much of the play seems to encode a theatrical metaphor of political relations between the two nations, that it raises the question to what extent its technical language might even be seen as typical of transnational production in the 50s. Whether its strategies are unique or not, at a minimum, it is representative of the complex layers of the political nature of theater in the Maoist era.

Although I am interested in disrupting the historical periodization before and after 1949, I have maintained the traditional break at 1937 as a starting point for the dissertation. In part this is in response to the literature: Joshua Goldstein's work *Drama Kings* in particular makes claims about the historical structure of drama reform that are arced around this period before the Japanese invasion of Shanghai. While I do not intend to challenge the validity of his claims about changes to sociality or the epistemology of aesthetics (the rise of a realist modernism, for one), I do hope to suggest that the narrative of reform that he so carefully explores actually has a complex "after-history" beyond the conclusion of his book.

This periodization is useful to some extent for establishing a focus on the lesser-known voices of the theater world as it existed in the 1940s—including those who are not part of the

traditional leftist front of reform. The theater world that leftists (and others) sought to reform was itself a moving target, constantly reacting to the pressures of international theater and film. Even those who self-identify as conservationists are in practice not interested in preserving an antique form so much as pursuing a different agenda of reform from explicit hybridization with western drama. In my dissertation, I make a point of bringing out this side of the community, the Shanghai Drama Preservation Society (*Shanghai guoju baocun she* 上海国剧保存社) in part because they are not well represented in theater history, despite what appears to be a significant print influence and substantial money and power to last at least through the beginning of Japanese occupation (as well as a less clearly organized presence in the post-war era). Their work, particularly promoting an aesthetic loosely premised on 'conservatism,' and in constructing a print media arena for policing these forms, is potentially more influential than their near-erasure from history suggests.

Without doubt, the Shanghai Drama Preservation Society and their associates emerged from the political movements of the 1930s. The attempt to focus on developments in theater from occupation onward actually obscures what I believe is continuous unfolding in the political discourse about the theater. What appears to be far more significant than political occupation is the apparent shift in audience tastes, with the emergence of a new audience for spoken drama. Jiang Jin's work has demonstrated that this in no means detracted from the power of xiqu, but it may have had an impact on the developments within the xiqu world, and only further research to contextualize that moment of transition will make that clear.

The transition between the 1940s and 1950s may have actually had the least visible impact in the chapter on film, which by the nature of the boom in xiqu film, is focused on the latter half of the 50s. The chapter on film engages in two projects—one in the reconstruction of the political significance of gesture as a changing aesthetic and as an index of the effects of the reform campaign seven years in, and one in the exploration of the concept of entertainment as an often overlooked

force directing reforms. In scholarship so far, the prevailing acknowledgement of the force of entertainment in reform comes from Siyuan Liu's reading of the failures of the reform movement; as he identifies it, the brief restoration of the canon was a means to relieve both the script famine and the economic struggles of professional troupes, which were driven by audiences abandoning the theater once traditional plays were no longer available.[11] I increasingly feel this is a point that needs to be re-examined more closely, particularly in light of DeMare's work on the success of amateur troupes in rural Hubei in 1950-51[12]: what made audiences flock to see newly written productions of highly ideological melodramas by non-professional troupes, to the extent that authorities had to struggle to keep amateur troupes from turning professional? Were Hubei audiences a local phenomenon that was not being repeated widely across the nation? What makes being professional unique to audiences (and not just the government), in their tastes for particular shows?

Amateur troupes are beyond the scope of this study, but the nature of spectatorial habits, whether at *ad hoc* stages, professional theaters or in cinemas, is something I feel needs to be explored further. The existing literature to some extent follows the leftist theater theorists from the 1930s in making the claim that audiences (especially rural ones) were more likely to be unable to distinguish between reality and representation; it is often suggested this is a product of theater architecture (or lack thereof) encouraging the blending of realities. For example, Siyuan Liu's research into the drama movement in rural Dingxian follows Xiong Foxi in finding that audiences preferred to "feel they are mingling with the performers."[13] Xiaobing Tang similarly suggests that the street theater movement of the 1930s saw its greatest successes when the space between performance and reality was broken

[11] Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in the Early 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61, no 3 (October 2009): 404.
[12] DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army*, 179-208.
[13] Siyuan Liu, "'A Mixed-Blooded Child, Neither Western Nor Eastern': Sinicization of Western-Style Theatre in Rural China in the 1930s," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 279.

down and the audience enlisted into a common new identity.[14] The different successes of amateur troupes, professional companies, and xiqu films suggest that greater clarity is needed in determining when and how it can be stated that an audience fails to recognize the limits of representational space, and to what extent this is involved in engaging them to commit to attend shows. This is particularly meaningful in the space of the cinema where there is not necessarily the kind of breakdown in architecture that supposedly helped disintegrate the integrity of representational space. Did the popularity of xiqu film have anything to do with an immersive experience in the cinema? If film spectator habits were primarily escapist, what did that mean for the plays these films were adapted from?

As a final comment, one obvious constraint on the study of xiqu film is the temporal delimitation of 1959. I deliberately stretched this date further than what might be considered reasonable from within a strict view of theater policy history because of cinematic productions like *Zhuiyu* 追鱼 (Chasing the Fish Spirit). As a historical romance, this film is so frilly as to be almost devoid of political content short of the rote negative portrayal of the landed classes. While I suggest the popularity of xiqu films extends primarily from their role as entertainment, there is an extensive political history of power plays made by figures like Tian Han that is worth excavating more. It appears that the politics of the theater world had a significant impact on the politics of the film world, and not just vice versa. These are all questions I plan to pursue in the coming years as I continue with this project.

[14] Xiaobing Tang, "Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Toward a New Form of Public Art," *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* E-journal no. 18 (March 2016): 22. Tang also acknowledges that itinerant street theater troupes had significantly varying success in this endeavor depending on their location. See ibid., 40-41.

Introduction

Getting at Performance Practice

In the first years of the Maoist era, theater was not just a cultural phenomenon but a political mission, with indigenous theater (xiqu 戏曲) the focus of government committees and a state Xiqu Reform Bureau (*Xiqu gaijin ju* 戏曲改进局) that issued directives targeting everything from the repertoire to the institutions of the industry. This state apparatus sought to bring xiqu[1] in line with the socialist realist aesthetics and Maoist principles of revolutionary art that had been established at Yan'an in the previous decade. Believing in the power of theater to rapidly spread ideological messages and goals, officials were eager to harness the popular energies it aroused as a primary form of entertainment for the masses, in order to make rapid gains with political campaigns to restructure the nation and popular culture with it; reforming the basic industry of the theater was an essential step in this process. The proliferation of directives over the first decade of the People's Republic of China (PRC), however, reveal the silhouette of a tango with the realities of on-the-ground execution that was much messier and conflicted than the initial idealized vision of reform first crafted in 1949.

[1] Xiqu is the untranslated term for indigenous theater, or sung theater. Few translations of the term are unproblematic: the most common rendering, opera, suggests confusion with actual Chinese productions of Western style operas, 'traditional' theater invites the reader to look past the continuous stream of innovations in the theater (and to indulge in a form of orientalist thinking about Chinese theater that sees it as a relic of the past), even 'indigenous theater' itself is a term that subtly disenfranchises Chinese spoken drama productions as somehow inauthentically Chinese. Many of the other traditional theaters of East Asia are rendered in their original pronunciations: kabuki, noh, bunraku, and p'ansori are just a few. I choose to use the term 'xiqu' to follow in this general regional tradition, rather than attempt for some claim of cultural equivalency with a western form of theater. This is in keeping with terminologies used within the Theater discipline, and not following the use of 'opera' that is common in Area Studies. In this dissertation, this is an attempt to meet this artistic genre on its own terms. That said, the regional form for Beijing has one of the longest histories on the world stage and has commonly been known as Peking opera. This terminology captures some of the colonial feeling that structured the reception of the form both domestically and internationally, during the Republican period; since this dissertation will cover both the end of the Republican period and the beginning of the PRC, I use Peking opera in lieu of the equivalency "jingju" to reflect this spirit of the times. This also reflects the fact that 1940s references to Peking opera were often inconsistent in their own terminology: jingxi 京戏, jiuju 旧剧, guoju 国剧, and pingju 平剧 are just some of the terms that are thrown about interchangeably; a standard English translation mitigates the need for extended explanations of the politics underneath this confusion. Its continued use to refer to productions in the 1950s is for clarity's sake, rather than an explicitly political agenda.

Scholars have raised many reasons to explain why reform was rolled out with so many difficulties. One common narrative is that local bureaucrats oppressively regulated regional companies or individual actors, burdening them with so many restrictions that survival of the company, or sometimes the star, became threatened. Another adds that actors took it upon themselves to impose self-censorship with harsher measures than the government demanded, in an effort to avoid local criticism, despite the hit they would take to their income from lost ticket sales.[2] Both of these are indebted to the discourse of the reform movement as leaders evaluated it during the 1950s, and are valid critiques of genuine deficiencies that the state failed to anticipate or address. Beyond this, however, lies a more complicated picture of the relationship between artists and bureaucrats, not just in dated, ingrained social biases that stigmatized actors, but in a fundamental divide between how bureaucrats conceived of the work of reform, and how actors went about executing it. I contend the activities of actors in the 1950s were not merely reactive to the new political forces that they faced, but that their practices drew heavily on the complex histories of fragmented reform efforts of the late Republican era.

Another way of conceiving of this problem is to consider it in light of the categories devised by Diana Taylor, of the archive and the repertoire.[3] Where the archive refers to the material documentation of performance that is preserved and handed down, the repertoire is a form of embodied practice, teachable but ultimately ephemeral. A rich archive of published and unpublished sources that stem back to the Bureau and its affiliates offers at times what appears to be a surprisingly honest assessment of reform (and at other times, accounts filtered by the political prerogatives of the day). Far from either simple repression or politicization, success of the reform

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[2] Fu Jin 傅谨, "Jin wushinian 'jinxi' luelun 近五十年'禁戏'略论," in *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiju de xiandaixing yu bentuhua* 二十世纪中国戏剧的现代性与本土化, ed. Fu Jin 傅谨 (Taipei 台北: Guojia chubanshe 国家出版社, 2005), 199-213.

[3] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16-32.

movement was measured through the subjective category of aesthetic gain, encompassing adaptations toward socialist realism and alterations to non-verbal performance. The more challenging question, therefore, and the target of this dissertation, is how to trace back the activities of the repertoire: what exactly did real performance do for politicians and audiences? Even more specifically, since the artistic decisions of performance were still the purview of actors themselves, and they were not perfect ideologues of the new regime but the product of years of interaction with reform efforts of various stripes before liberation, what did actors do in the reform of their own art?

If viewed instead as the product of artistic and theatrical innovations in performance practice, xiqu reform takes on greater complexities and tensions than its role in either the political or intellectual debates that unfolded in the press. Performers engaged in concrete formal and stylistic experiments that responded to audience tastes, social contexts and political pressures. Far from isolated by the conventions or traditions of their art, artists interacted technically, artistically and commercially with other genres of the entertainment industry, including cinema and spoken drama. Though I retain an investment in understanding the nature of the state intervention in the continuation of Republican theater debates, I am primarily interested in how artists themselves instigated and directed reforms. How did the mix of intellectual aesthetic debates, official policies and performer innovation guide the decisions and landmarks of reform? How did these reforms raise and address questions on the specific content of xiqu aesthetics, and how did interactions with other media challenge or refine those conclusions? What were the mechanisms the reform project used to address, shape and interact with the aesthetic sensibilities of its audiences, and what was at stake for audiences and proponents of reform pending their success or failure?

This dissertation tackles these questions by considering adaptation through the lens of mediation. This means engaging with the historical records of performance in recognition of the fact of their potential distortions in the recording of both that event and the history encoded by it. Given

that historical performance is an intangible, inaccessible phenomenon, at best tangentially related to contemporary performance practice (the 'repertoire'), reconstructing the world of 1950s performance requires a varied approach, with consideration for the limitations and adaptations of each of the media that filtered accounts of performance. What did reform look like in print, on stage, and on screen? Each of these media reflects a different form of interaction with the distinction between archive and repertoire, in the selective editing of recording performance.

The Intellectual History of Theatrical Aesthetics in the 1950s

The 1950s are generally not viewed overall as a period of "openness," and consequently any characterization in this vein regarding theater practice must be taken within the greater political context of the era. It cannot and should not be ignored that the immediate effect of government policies on xiqu reform was to induce widespread censorship, both at the hands of local cadres and in the form of self-censorship in troupes who feared for their livelihood. Even when the official list of banned plays was limited to 26, companies wisely took this as 26 *categories* of banned works, rather than a handful of unperformable works.[4] Fu Jin identifies the period after 1953, when the list of 26 plays was announced, as a period of greater relaxation among theater companies, but even then, the vast majority of traditional plays remained in a limbo state of "awaiting revision," presumably acceptable after reform, but unperformable in the meantime.[5] While newly written modern plays (often of poor quality) proliferated on stages to dwindling audiences, traditional plays all but withered away, leaving actors in an increasingly dire economic state, with a severely restricted repertoire. This situation was to remain largely unresolved until the softening of government policy

[4] Wang Du 王督, "Huanying kaifang jinxi 欢迎开放禁戏," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 11 (1957): 14.
[5] Fu, "Jinxi," 218.

towards the end of 1956.[6] It is this general picture that has led to characterization of the early 50s as repressive, dry and artistically void.

This representation suggests a uniformly oppressive bureaucratic force that hides the numerous fractures that existed in the crafting and implementation of reform, from the uppermost levels of bureaucracy down to the countryside. The scope of this dissertation excludes the general situation in the countryside except as characterized by major leaders of the reform movement: in their eyes, the space away from the cities was one of precarity for actors themselves. As has been uncovered in studies of theatrical practice in Yan'an, rural regions were more likely to continue ages-old contempt for professional actors, all while maintaining a lively amateur theater tradition.[7] Particularly once xiqu reform directives began in earnest, professional troupes bore the onus of this social stigma in the form of threats of harsh sanctions against their livelihood should they continue to stage banned plays, or to fail to comply with registration requirements or meet any other government directive. This did not imply that top leadership was any less biased in their own calculations; bureaucrats and actors continued to be at odds over the tactics and goals of reform, with actors in general disadvantaged against bureaucrats. It was this situation that lead the famed *dan* performer Cheng Yanqiu (程砚秋 1904-1958) to pun on the title of the Xiqu Reform Bureau (*xigaiju* 戏改局, [abbrev.]) as the Xiqu Butchering Bureau (*xizaiju* 戏宰局) after attempting unsuccessfully to allow more plays of the 1930s onto the stage; the name was an indictment both of reform policies and of the treatment of major actors within the bureaucracy.[8]

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[6] Even then, Siyuan Liu notes that claims of success from reformers may have been overrated: the policy shift in 1956 may have come under the auspices of announcements of success, but it was more likely that a significant portion of the repertoire was simply restored through political spin, making the previously unacceptable performable once more, as a means to rapidly reverse the trend of dwindling audiences. See Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61, no. 3 (October 2009): 404.

[7] Ellen Judd, "Cultural Articulation in the Chinese Countryside, 1937-1947," *Modern China* 16, no. 3 (Jul 1990): 277-8.

[8] Liu, "Theatre Reform," 398.

This depiction of the 1950s, however, disguises the breadth of innovation and unobtrusively ideological plays that managed to make it onto stages during the decade. Beginning with widely divergent staging practices in the early years of the decade, the decade ended with the proliferation of xiqu films, often distinguished primarily by their romantic themes, rather than a strict exhortation of the ideology of class struggle. Many of these films were also hailed as traditional classics, even if they had undergone revision to meet the moral and ideological standards of the Xiqu Reform Bureau. It is noteworthy that the Bureau's goals went beyond asserting certain facts about class identity and struggle, and extended into moral policing of the nation, instead; in part this had to do with a notion of the theater as fundamentally educational, characteristics that had heavily marked both the critical realist plays of the 1930s and the propagandistic output of wartime productions in the 1940s.[9]

While from the state's perspective, reform could trace its intellectual heritage back to Mao's *Talks* at Yan'an in 1942, the vision of a theater of social reform had a venerable history by mid-century, reaching back to the end of the Qing dynasty. The PRC's first directive on the reform of play content had an almost uncanny echo with Chen Duxiu's (陈独秀 1879-1942) 1904 essay "On Theater (*lun xiqu* 论戏曲)" in prohibiting the performance of gods, ghosts or demons, or sexually explicit content.[10] This kind of superficial coincidence was rooted, however, in the conception of the theater as a tool of social education, a theme which had run continuously among leftists who supported theater reform.

[9] Critical realist plays are not nearly as well known as critical realist films, but many production of major stars of the 1930s did engage in social commentary, even when the moral messages were relatively simplistic like in Cheng Yanqiu's *Unicorn Purse* (*Suolinnang* 锁麟囊 1940), or Xun Huisheng's *Inspection of the Jade Bracelets* (*Kan yuchuan* 勘玉钏 1934). That their morals may be simply rendered (a critique of class contempt in *Unicorn* and an indictment of both greed and traditional attitudes towards women in *Inspection*) is in no way a comment on the complexity of structure of these plays, both of which were edited from dynastic sources by major xiqu playwrights of the Republican era. These plays may have been overlooked because after liberation, they were rarely performed (and in principle, banned) until the 1980s.

The notion of 'leftist theater reformer,' however, may run counter to Republican theater history as popularly conceived. May Fourth leftists are generally associated with their complete rejection of indigenous theater, and have been painted in opposition to preservationists like Zhang Houzai (张厚载 1895-1955).[11] This dualistic vision does not permit for easy categorization of theater practitioners who actively sought reform. In part because theater reformers were not unified in their vision, it is difficult to lump them together in a single political category. Many were sympathetic to leftist causes, but not all leftist theater workers held common beliefs about what a future reformed xiqu would look like. Desired changes ran the gamut from the development of a theater of social causes to humanitarian reforms in theater training. For many reformers, the redemption of xiqu was not just to develop new plays with social messages, but also to actively change the aesthetic content of xiqu to specifically incorporate elements of western spoken drama.

The idea of hybridization that became increasingly popular after 1925 disguises another major shift in thinking about theater aesthetics that would remain an undercurrent of debates on the theater for decades to come. Joshua Goldstein identifies this post-May Fourth moment as one where the epistemology of theater aesthetics shifted to recognize a fundamental divide between Chinese theater, as a presentational, symbolic, theatrical mode, and western spoken drama, as representational and realist.[12] This distinction would play a key role in future efforts at hybridization, particularly by leftist-inclined theater practitioners, and among those who engaged with any form of western dramatic theory. This divide informed the language of aesthetic critique in

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[10] Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, "Lun xiqu 论戏曲," in *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan* 陈独秀著作选, eds., Ren Jianshu 任建树, Zhang Tongmo 张统模, and Wu Xinzhong 吴信忠 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai renmin chubanshe 上海人民出版社, 1993), 86-90.

[11] Zhang's classic text defending xiqu in his debate with May Fourth ideologues is Zhang Houzai 张厚载, "Wode Zhongguo jiuxi guan 我的中国旧戏观," *Xin qingnian* 新青年 5, no. 4 (1918): 39-44.

[12] Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 184. Goldstein is careful to point out that the creation of these aesthetic opposites did not necessarily mean that older ways of viewing the theater were immediately defunct; nevertheless, the effects of this divide impacted all who consumed leftist writings and philosophies on the arts, including several key figures of the reform movement.

the 1930s into the 40s and even early 50s, in theater broadly (including both spoken drama and xiqu), where plays were analyzed in terms of their proclivities towards "life" (*shenghuo* 生活; realism), or "technique" (*jiqiao* 技巧; theatricality).[13] Others specifically within the xiqu world used their own language of aestheticism (*xieyi* 写意) to distinguish xiqu from the more realist (*xieshi* 写实) approach of western drama; this was a language that would be picked up by the film director, Fei Mu (費穆 1906-1951) and used extensively in exploring the aesthetic difficulties of creating xiqu film. Though this dichotomy had origins that predated the PRC, the language of *xieyi* and *xieshi* continued to dominate discussions in the 1950s that explored problems reconciling the expressive, theatrical aesthetics of xiqu with the realist, representational mode of film. Once this aesthetic split had appeared, there was no apparent resolution to the idea of a contradiction between these two poles, for any medium of xiqu production.

Joshua Goldstein's cultural history of Republican era xiqu gives the fullest depiction available in English of the changes both within theatrical culture and of the theater in society, in his account of how Peking opera rose to the status of national traditional culture, as traced through the career of Mei Lanfang. His account ends in 1937 in part because the upheavals of wartime disrupted theatrical activity from reformulating play content and style to the geographic dispersal of actors and material resources necessary for production. However, Goldstein also argues that this periodization marks the culmination of the epistemological system that posits Peking opera as "pure aestheticism, a form that was positioned as the antithetical opposite of mimetic realism" and consequently structurally opposed to both the West and the modern.[14] While the terms of discussion may have shifted in

[13] Edward Gunn, "Shanghai's 'Orphan Island' and the Development of Modern Drama," in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, ed. Bonnie MacDougall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 41.
[14] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 292.

different directions for different periods, this aesthetic divide actually remained an entrenched part of the intellectual conception of xiqu's ontological identity for some time to come.

In the following decades, xiqu continued to be the subject of reform debates and to innovate with theatrical practices on stage and off, while facing mounting pressures from other entertainment genres, including film and spoken drama.[15] The selective appropriation of performance techniques from other genres, state endorsements, and popular successes with audiences suggest practical resistance in all corners to the theoretical assignment of anti-modernity. At the same time, reflection and debate on xiqu's 'pure aesthetics' were induced by experiments transplanting it to different media, like film, which already had medium-specific aesthetic codes that could not be guaranteed to integrate smoothly. The conditions, qualifications and directions of the reform movement were moving beyond the logic that informed the cultural position of Peking opera before the war. Artistic changes in the spirit of reform became an uninterrupted feature of theatrical production through and after wartime for a rising number of commercially successful regional genres, some of which were finding a niche in the mainstream for the first time.

In 1937, the Japanese occupation of Beijing, Tianjin and the parts of Shanghai outside the foreign concessions caused major disruptions to the political, economic and social flows affecting popular culture both broadly and locally.[16] Occupied Shanghai has been seen as deprived of the

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[15] There are many studies of film culture of the Republican period that chart the economic and cultural reasons behind the film industry's rise past the theater. According to Chang-tai Hung, 1937 was labeled the "Year of Spoken Drama." Chang-tai Hung, "Female Symbols of Resistance in Chinese Wartime Spoken Drama," *Modern China* 15, no. 2 (April, 1989): 149. Edward Gunn's studies of wartime theater in Shanghai emphasize the unprecedented success of spoken drama troupes (Gunn, "Orphan Island").

[16] Edward Gunn's 1980 account of the ephemeral lives of theatrical troupes under intense political pressures in "solitary island" Shanghai (mostly spoken drama, but also xiqu) in *Unwelcome Muse* speaks to the difficulties of engaging in theatrical activities under the occupation; at the same time spoken drama was flourishing as never before; Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Chang-tai Hung provides one of the most comprehensive efforts at examining wartime popular culture in China outside of the occupied areas; his account is one of the few to look at popular theater in areas outside Yan'an (Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994)). For studies of Yan'an performing arts, David Holm's examination of the reforms of yangge dance and drama remains one of the best resources for charting the development of Maoist arts policies and the minute movements of debates on theater reform among intellectuals at the Luyi academy (David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon

intellectual and innovative vanguard that drove artistic experimentation during the previous decades, and saturated instead with escapist entertainment or sporadic pockets of resistance; this image may unfairly deny wartime Shanghai the complexity of aesthetic experimentation that continued earlier debates under the exigencies of occupation.[17] Rather than dividing up theatrical productions into explicitly patriotic or escapist categories, it may be possible to see the traditional theatrical stage as a continued venue of experimentation and reflection on the cultural health of a nation under siege, where even the fundamental notions of artistic control and the nature of the artistic process were under interrogation and negotiation. The consolidation of theaters, studios and other material resources for the production of popular entertainment culture enabled Shanghai to continue to serve as a theatrical center even in wartime, albeit under growing pressures and restrictions from the occupation government.[18]

The potent blend of cultural, social, intellectual and institutional forces that Goldstein described in the rise of Peking opera had similar impact on other regional operas in wartime Shanghai. One of these, the Shaoxing import *yueju* 越剧, followed a similar path to success in part by capitalizing on changing economic and political cultures, the mobilization of social networks of class, native-place and gender, and the use of new forms of mass media, including radio,

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Press, 1991)). More recently, there has been a small boom of studies of specialized genres within Shanghai wartime popular culture to add to Gunn's account of spoken drama theater (1984), including film (Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)), literature (Nicole Huang, *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* (Leiden: Brill, 2005)), and *yueju* (Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009)).

[17] Most studies focus on the activities of the foreign concessions, or the attempts of Zhou Xinfang and others to stir up patriotic support even in the face of Japanese censorship laws. Jia Zhigang gives a brief but typical account, aligned to the standard Communist-inflected moral history of the theater (that views the CCP's reform movement as a morally cleansing force on the theater), by describing the city entertainment market transforming into a sea of "vulgar" (低下) shows, with high-brow activity pushed into academic conferences and training schools; this characterization glosses over the role that performances in the academies held within the entertainment market, as they were not necessarily sealed off from the public. Jia Zhigang 贾志刚, *Zhongguo jindai xiqu shi 1938-1949 (xia)* 中国近代戏曲史 1938-1949 (下) (Beijing 北京: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2010), 26-33.

[18] Gunn (1984). Zhou Xinfang's commemorative anthology also indirectly reveals some of this artistic vibrancy. *Zhou Xinfang yishu pinglunji* 周信芳艺术评论集 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 1982).

gramophone recordings and film.[19] Though Jin Jiang's rich social history of *yueju* is one of a small but rising number to discuss xiqu reforms in English, her approach situates it as one more phenomenon in the underpinnings of *yueju's* success, as equally important instrumentally as the economic changes that facilitated new ticket prices and theater-going habits. Political activism and association with the underground Communist Party in Shanghai significantly helped *yueju* find particular strength in negotiating their post-liberation political position, an act in which they were active participants and not just passive recipients of the manipulation of state benevolence. These broader cultural, social and economic changes from the 40s to the 50s became leverage for many other local xiqu genres to find toeholds in the expanding Shanghai theatrical market; although not all were commercially successful beyond the city limits, the dynamic record of their artistic innovations mimicked tactics of the Peking opera stage and challenges accounts of a loss of vitality among smaller traditions.[20]

In part, this success of regional xiqu genres was tied not just to local affiliations and loyalties, but to the fact that production of traditional plays remained a significant draw for audiences. The softening of censorship in 1957 led to a tremendous rebound in the staging of traditional plays to apparent widespread popularity. Experiments by art film directors in the latter half of the 1950s

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[19] Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men*. Strictly speaking, none of these technologies is new (see, for example, Carlton Benson's discussion of radio culture in 1930s Shanghai (in Sherman Cochran, ed, *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900-1945* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999), 91-132), or Sai-shing Yung's examination of gramophone records of Cantonese songs in predominantly the 1910s-30s (Rong Shicheng [Yung Sai-shing] 容世诚, *Yueyun liusheng: changpian gongye yu Guangdong quyi (1903-1953)* 粤韵留声：唱片工业与广东曲艺 (1903-1953) (Hong Kong 香港: Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi 天地图书有限公司, 2006)); Andrew Jones also treats the impact of gramophone technology on the cultural reception of music in the Republican period (Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001)). These technologies were, however, new to yueju in the late 1930s.

[20] Jonathan Stock makes this criticism of Colin Mackerras in regards to another Shanghai xiqu genre, huju/shenqu 沪剧／申曲. Huju rose from humble origins as a balladry-based street opera to dominate the airwaves of Shanghai radio broadcasts by the mid-1930s, with more than three times the amount of programming for Peking opera; only the undifferentiated quyi arts of tanci balladry and storytelling surpassed it in broadcast hours (Jonathan Stock, *Huju: Traditional Opera in Modern Shanghai* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122). Stock's research into radio broadcasts reveal that yueju (either as 越剧 or as 绍兴文戏) was not even listed; this account is at odds with Jiang Jin's interviews with residents who recalled hearing radio broadcasts of yueju as part of the ambient sound atmosphere of

brought unprecedented critical and popular success.[21] By this point in the decade, however, the state had established a significant say over the type of 'traditional' aesthetic that should be restored. Where early plays of the 1950s often featured stage spectacle, this was met with the dismay of critics speaking for the state, which promoted relatively simply staged, plot-driven, actor-centered performances. This vision of simplicity was perhaps at best, however, a distortion of a particular idealization of tradition endorsed by a relative few, whose aesthetic stance was essentially a political one, in the rejection of flashy Shanghai style or '*haipai*.' The operatic stage is rich in 'traditions,' including among these the famed, distinct schools of Beijing style and Shanghai style, but even the theatrical world of the Jiangnan region saw a wide variance in performance practices from country to city, and from stage to stage, during the Republican period.[22] Nevertheless, the specter of this monolithic form of tradition surfaces and resurfaces through the policies put forward by the Xiqu Reform Bureau.

Though it was led by many former figures of the Republican cultural left, like Tian Han, these accounts of xiqu emerged from a murky institutional apparatus, which incorporated major stars of the Republican era as figureheads of theater companies and schools, but quietly disenfranchised them from contributing substantively to the direction of reform.[23] Though apparently a union of leftist intellectuals and actors, it was the former and not the latter who had the ultimate say over xiqu reform. Even those theater practitioners with leftist intellectual credentials often had greater sway over the direction of reform than the words or actions of actors themselves. Given their influence, the weight of the inheritance from the prolonged intellectual struggle of the

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wartime Shanghai (Jiang, *Women Playing Men,* 132-4). It's conceivable that the difference between these two is partly explainable by the rise and popularity of yueju recordings; huju radio performances were almost all live.

21 Gao Xiaojian 高小健, *Zhongguo xiqu dianyingshi* 中国戏曲电影史 (Beijing 北京: Wenyi chubanshe 文艺出版社, 2005), 116-201.

22 Li Zigui 李紫贵, *Yi Jiangnan* 忆江南, with Jiang Jianlan 蒋健兰 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 1996), 1-17.

23 Liu, "Theatre Reform," 398.

Republican era over achieving 'modernity' on the stage, reflected in the tug of war between theatricality and realism, continued to find expression in the first years of the PRC.

This account risks downplaying or otherwise overlooking the effect of actors themselves. Perhaps the most famous account of an interaction between an actor and the state was the government's subtle control of Mei Lanfang after he espoused a position on reform that was considered too conservative; his deferential response recanting his original position has set the tone for viewing actors as either passive or easily controlled by the state. To be sure, many bureaucrats were poised to take advantage of their positions to extract what they wanted from companies under their purview, where resistance was not always an easy option, especially in smaller localities.[24]

However, stars were not without recourse to alternative methods of controlling the terms and direction of reform. For all that bureaucrats dictated the terms of directives and the official direction of reform, many prominently ranked theater practitioners were not pawns within the system. Many of the former stars of the Republican era became skilled at manipulating their position and influence through public displays or use of their fan base, behaviors and structures that were not supposed to exist in the collectively minded world of post-liberation theater production. Collaborations with bureaucrats and engagement in politically significant projects were other means that actors could use to assert greater control over performance, or to push productions that engaged in otherwise risky depictions of class relations.[25] It is examples like these that demonstrate, despite practical obstructions within the system which suggest a continued opposition between

[24] This clam must be tempered by the fact that the countryside was also, on occasion, a space of resistance against the central government, where both locals and touring companies took advantage of their distance from highly ranked authorities to perform otherwise banned works. Liu, "Theatre Reform," 405-6.

[25] Examples include both *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (*Shiwuguan* 十五贯; 1956, discussed in chapter 3), which had a proletarian villain and bourgeois hero, and *Tale of Chunxiang* (*Chunxiang zhuan* 春香传; 1954, discussed in chapter 2), which showed classes blending together instead of engaged in struggle, a feature that had been the stated cause of banning Cheng Yanqiu's *Unicorn Purse* (锁麟囊) from the stage.

actors and bureaucrats, when viewed as a widespread process encompassing stage productions and film adaptations, xiqu reform resists attempts to dichotomize it into simple binaries.

The xiqu audience is both an elusive figure and one that demands attention. Their influence was credited with bringing back the health of the theater industry after the restoration of traditional plays, their consumption of xiqu film drove the remarkable success of the genre, raising its cultural soft power, and their voices were modeled in multiple periodicals and speeches of the 50s by leaders seeking to direct reform. Despite this significance, audience behavior and attitudes remain observable only through the filter of indirect references. Published columns were likely to be manufactured to generate the impression of a particular progressive view among the people, while comments made by officials charged with navigating reform were subject to misperceptions of the general audience or a desire to purposefully mischaracterize them to make a rhetorical point for reform goals. Accounts in memoirs produced years after the Maoist era must be taken within a context that respects the distortions of memory, or even the continued commitment to the revolutionary ideology of reform among actors. The force of audience tastes on the entertainment industry must be taken seriously, however, and in light of their apparent preferences for traditional fare, it may not be knowable how effective the work of the reform movement was in sculpting particular ideological mentalities. Still, the work of the reform movement shared with performance in general a tendency to mold the subjectivities of audiences, and it is consequently worth considering the technologies of this influence and the embedded history undergirding it.

Performance Technologies for Educating the Citizen

Although Chinese theater reformers mainly saw the theater as a pedagogical tool, reflected early on in lectures to the public during performance, they also eventually came to the idea of the

theater as a model of civic behavior, capable of remolding public culture.[26] Xiaobing Tang has argued for the emergence of a politicized sense of mass identity directed at a sense of national self as a consequence of both the street theater movement of the 1930s, and the Nationalist, or *Guomindang* (国民党), government's own efforts at including popular art forms in the cultivation of a national moral character, albeit primarily through spoken drama and not xiqu.[27] In the context of an indigenous theater faced with rising cultural influence on the international stage, through the tours of Mei Lanfang and others, and challenges at home from intellectuals who saw foreign forms of theater as not only preferable but a suitable replacement for xiqu, however, it cannot be questioned that xiqu has an intimate connection to national identity. In this light, the work of reform—as undertaken by most leftists—is both an aesthetic project and one that is fundamentally engaged with fashioning and refashioning the definition of the national citizen, as the target audience of most indigenous theater productions.

On the one hand, xiqu plays that engaged in social critique had a pedagogical intent for audiences, presumably in search of a more civic-minded citizen, attuned to problems of social inequities especially between classes. On the other, there was no shortage of escapist plays without an apparent message of social uplift or moral responsibility. Yet even here, audiences were being trained subtly in the appreciation of aesthetic shifts towards realism as part of the integration of western theater styles; the increasing desire for and use of realist elements on Shanghai stages and in the waterways of Jiangnan revealed an audience that was far from detached from the ramifications of the epistemological shift of the mid-20s, even if they were not actively engaged in intellectual

[26] Wartime resistance plays were sometimes premised on this idea that audiences would mobilize like the characters they saw. Xiaobing Tang, "Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Towards a New Form of Public Art," *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* E-Journal 18 (March 2016): 21-50.

[27] Tang, "Street Theater," 29. The Guomindang, or Nationalist Party, governed China during the Republican era; their cultural program of reform in the 1930s was aimed at using popular literature and the arts to morally reform the citizenry.

written debates and analysis.[28] The work of reformers reveals a deep-seated anxiety about aesthetics of the theater, and the creation and defining features of the aesthetic sensibilities of the national citizen as their addressee.

Given that so many theatrical projects of the Republic were dedicated to hybridization between xiqu and western forms of drama (even those filtered by Japan), China's history of semi-colonialism by both Japanese and western powers becomes a relevant and complicating factor in the notion of national self-determination. These aesthetically hybridized projects posed reform as a process that suggested a modeling of the Chinese citizen as a figure of the world, necessarily cosmopolitan. This process was not necessarily meant to be undertaken as a form of global education, however; the emphasis to the audience was not on hybridity, but on their unimpeded, even unconscious acceptance of modifications to xiqu that would bring its aesthetics into dialogue with world theater movements. There remained significant tension, however, with the continued perception of the average xiqu fan as either an old-fashioned traditionalist or an entertainment seeker lacking a sense of social responsibility or concern for China's perpetual status as 'backwards.' After all, the enlightened, responsible citizen who was the target of both the Nationalist government's culture-building project and the patriotic mobilization of Chinese Communist Party-supported street theater troupes was presumed to be a consumer of spoken drama, and not xiqu.

Against this political history of involvement in the arts, the international travels of xiqu become all the more deeply entangled in the colonialist narratives positioning China politically on the world stage. Where xiqu had been reviled at home in part because of its connotations with an

[28] Li Zigui has a number of anecdotes that reveal a taste for vivid realism among rural audiences, particularly in martial plays where the effect would contribute to the overall spectacle of performance. Shanghai stages of the era similarly engaged increasingly in moves toward realism, whether as dramatic as driving a car on stage, or as subtle as changing a tigerskin costume of the child general Li Cunxiao 李存孝 to more closely resemble the tiger ornaments worn by children in the south. On Li Cunxiao, see Li, *Yi Jiangnan*, 80-3.

old culture that had been repeatedly humiliated on the international stage through wars, the unequal treaties and colonization, its presentation to the world by performers like Mei Lanfang reinforced the orientalist idea that China was a country firmly attached to the past and unable to modernize.[29] This is not to suggest that xiqu practitioners were engaged willfully or otherwise in cultivating the ideal colonial subject. The complex field of xiqu production lacked a unified vision for an ideal audience member, unlike the specific goals of leftist reformers. The network of xiqu aesthetics with international theater trends mixed instead with the growing association between xiqu and national theater to produce a national subject deeply embedded in colonial modernity, retaining many of the negative associations of colonial China but increasingly familiar with (if not necessarily conversant in) transnational practices in the theater.

This history of slow acculturation to international forms and styles of theater is an important backdrop to the work of reform in the 1950s, and the role of theater in the mobilization of cultural soft power early in the PRC. Earlier, at Yan'an, experimentation with reforming local art forms generated lively debates on the nature of proletarian art.[30] The turning point came in 1942 when Mao Zedong confirmed the value of using traditional art forms for their popular appeal in his Talks at the Forum on Literature and the Arts.[31] This acceptance of xiqu tied together its own national and transnational complex with concerns for a national art to represent the new China. As Liang Luo argues in the preface to her discussion of Tian Han's dramatic output of the early 1950s, the obsession with national form and style that was part of the left's general project of the 40s, and an

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29 Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 276-8.

30 Yan'an continues to constitute a specialized area of research in the development of Maoist art policy.

31 Although understood historically as a major landmark in the development of arts policy, the talks did not resolve debates at the Luyi academy; reformed versions of the regional yangge dance-drama form still faced obstacles in audience comprehension and appeal. Formal efforts to mediate the gap ultimately produced two philosophies of reform: advocates of shorter plays in the style of the original regional drama, and a larger group in support of longer plays with elements of spoken-drama. See David Holm, "Folk Art as Propaganda: the Yangge Movement at Yan'an," in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, ed. Bonnie MacDougall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 21-28.

undercurrent of xiqu reform more broadly, was ultimately for early theater reformers a "cultural strategy with a global vision."[32]

The transnationalism that formed the substratum of xiqu production became the grease that facilitated its move to national art, in part because it was already prepared to stand as a modern national symbol. Its association with tradition was the grounds on which the PRC placed a philosophical emphasis on its role as proletarian art and its justification as a national symbol. But even before state-directed xiqu reforms, undertaken with specific western models in mind presumably for the sake of removing the colonial associations through modernization (by western standards), xiqu aesthetics had long been the subject of remodeling by international standards. Despite a certain number of specific directives and concrete strategies of reform promulgated in the first years of the 50s, the political work of the early PRC primarily added the element of a particular vision of a spectatorial identity, bringing focus to what had originally been a patchwork approach to the integration of international norms. This new vision, however, could not be written into the reform of xiqu without feeling the impact of the history of its past placement in international understandings of xiqu and the effect of its continuous aesthetic work towards modernization.

Intermedial Interventions

The decision to use media as an organizing rubric for the dissertation may be rooted in the benefits this brings to reconstructing the repertoire, but it is taken with the consideration that understanding mediation is contingent on acknowledgement of the limitations that each medium places on the representation of performance. The interaction of these perspectives does not necessarily bring a fleshed out image of performance culture, itself—this would be difficult to prove in any instance because the field was so unstable both place to place, and during each year of the

[32] Liang Luo, *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Performance and Politics* (Ann

Maoist era, as the movement made adjustments to itself following both internal complaints and external criticisms from nationwide political campaigns. The vagaries of reform meant that there was no one stable image of ideal performance coming from the top, and difficulties with execution all but guaranteed that local practice was destined to be much more variable, whether from city to country, or between an essentially privately run troupe (though typically with some form of government monitoring or assistance) and the companies designated to represent the nation at the premier xiqu houses.

The situation as represented in these pages is even more complex as two of the central case studies do not fit neatly into any of these categories: both major companies behind *Tale of Chunxiang* (春香传; 1954) and *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (十五贯; 1956) began as minor troupes who were elevated to more prominent positions specifically during the opening runs of these plays, as it became evident they were headed for success. The other examples are less invested in the fates of specific companies, but in the range of performance possibilities suggested at different points of the reform campaign by the experience of many troupes staging the same play. The multivalent historical record of company activity in this case is not a simple tool for the reconstruction of the performance event, but one means of getting at the reconstruction of freeze-frames in the history of performance culture, ones that reveal something of the inner workings and negotiations of the reform process as it unfolded.

At the same time, the fact of the media of consideration cannot be ignored: different media encourage different cultures of consumption, draw on different conventions and engage audiences at different levels than the staged event itself. Print sources were likely to be curated and edited specifically to promote a particular ideological line, even if that line was subject to negotiation within the bureaucracy. It is unclear if theater producers were more likely to be affected by print sources

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Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 198.

than a viewing audience; journals repeatedly attempted to produce articles in the voice of the people, especially for the sake of public criticism campaigns or other efforts to direct public opinion on a particular matter of reform. At the same time, printed articles also revealed, on occasion, beliefs by high-ranking bureaucrats that companies responded only to audience demand, catering to local tastes that were presumably for (unhealthy, unedifying) spectacle; this is a highly different audience than the "local voices" of the *Theater Report* would suggest. And considering the amount of self-censorship that went on among companies, it remains difficult to determine to what extent audiences really were the source of self-correction, and not, say, fear of a particularly zealous local cadre with control over performance permits.

What print captures, however, are descriptions of staging that deployed a range of techniques that suggest some of the contours of standard practice across regions. There is no such thing as a neutral performance report when the author is by necessity selective in detail and choice of words, and critical reports of the early 1950s were further complicated by also committing to a particular ideological project, however ill-defined in terms of technique. The details marked as noteworthy by the critics of early theater periodicals stand out, however, as tantalizing hints of the kind of interpretations of 'realism' that were being made by local companies, no matter how they were judged by critics. These accounts cannot be analyzed as judgments made simply in terms of the ideological goals of socialist realism, since they were addressed to a genre distinguished by its theatricality, whose limits and definitions were both in flux. At the same time, the act of description engages in necessary discursive violence, placing the performance event within frames of reference determined by the parameters of historically informed rhetoric about the theater. In other words, on the one hand, performance practice decisions were being made from terms that were the product of negotiation between new ideological norms and earlier aesthetic standards, and on the other, the way

of talking about this was itself wrapped up in a tangled web of historical influences on the way xiqu is discussed in terms of its aesthetic goals.

In a somewhat similar way, xiqu films were the product of negotiations with both history, and with contemporary debates on the nature of the genre of xiqu film adaptations. Under state mandates to produce stage art documentary, directors grappled as well with not only the accurate creation of a particular xiqu aesthetic, but recreation of genre-specific philosophies on the representation of time, space, dramatic unfolding and choreographed motion.[33] These considerations required reflection on medium-specific aesthetics, and frequently produced singular results, as in, for example, the representation of the specialized performance category of operatic ghosts on screen.[34] At core was a question that would persist through 1950s debates and into productions of later years, of to what extent the medium mattered in the re-creation of classic stories from stage to screen.[35] And as with print cultures, xiqu film producers were obliged to confront the pre-liberation history of xiqu films, even if only to establish what kinds of aesthetic approaches were to be eschewed. Directors and others in the film industry were at pains to develop an aesthetic language for xiqu films that was at once seemingly new, consistent in its symbolism, framing, and decoupage, and yet silently in distinction from films of an earlier era, whether this meant the productions of the Japanese colonial power in Beijing, or the output of condemned bourgeois directors.

Efforts by film directors to establish a genre of xiqu film and to determine its guiding principles of production vis-à-vis the aesthetic questions of adaptation pushed the spotlight back towards questions of entertainment, presented as a need to meet the aesthetic expectations of audiences for film productions, rather than just near-static recordings of stage action. State support

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33 Weihong Bao, "The Politics of Remediation," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 260-9.
34 Judith Zeitlin, "Operatic Ghosts on Screen," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 229-245.

for xiqu films that did more than just document performance inside a theater reflected most clearly the possibility of official recognition of the value of entertainment. Technically, this was a position the government had never left; the theater was expected to provide education to the people in an aesthetically satisfying way, and failures in this regard were condemned just as performances of un-reformed traditional plays were, if perhaps not as loudly. What xiqu film also did, however, was bring back the possibility of spectacle, an avenue of performance that had been cut off on stages early in the 1950s by a government eager to inhibit *haipai* style shows.

This tension between entertainment and spectacle was yet another of the ambiguities of the reform movement in action. Where this tension played out in the acting world in other forms, adaptation to film seemed to sidestep this problem by framing it as one effect of the aesthetics of film (where fancy sets and splashy special effects were both spectacle and part of the normal apparatus of film) versus theater. The two media were not always in conflict, however, especially when it came to determining the visual aesthetics of xiqu film. Examples of mutual influence between media became increasingly common; though the camera could single out particular bodily gestures, the performance of operatic gesture itself became a means of re-drafting the cinematic space of mise-en-scène.[36] Inherent to both (the filmic framing of theatricality and the theatrical framing of filmic space) was recognition of the appeal of an aesthetics of visuality.[37] Even if the subject of filming was not the most lurid hit show off Shanghai stages, the deployment of filmic techniques in service of the theater paid homage to the visuality of either medium.

The fact of adaptation to other media is itself important because of the way it changes the theatrical process into archival form. However, this act of adaptation may also be viewed as

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[35] Kristine Harris explores this with much greater specificity in her discussion of the multiple remakings of *The Red Detachment of Women*. Kristine Harris, "Remakes/Remodels: *The Red Detachment of Women* Between Stage and Screen," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 316-342.

[36] Xinyu Dong, "Meeting of the Eyes," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 205-216.

refashioning of the earlier form, in a process of remediation. Bolter and Grusin define remediation as a form of double logic, where the effect of intermedial adaptation is paradoxically "to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation…to leave us in the presence of the thing represented."[38] Such an act of erasure carries with it an idealized promise of acquiring the root object, and for 1950s xiqu, in an era of relative instability coming on the heels of decades of large shifts in aesthetic sensitivities, remediation may have extended the illusion of pinning down an exact xiqu aesthetic. Certainly for print-based critics, this was a goal of the creation of criticism, even within a format driven by the tendency to present verbal descriptions of the production without obvious judgment, or at least, with judgment reserved for only the very end. Yet particularly in the case of film, this erasure is highly problematic, since it comes at the apparent cost of the exact aesthetic that it would otherwise seek to present: the realist medium of film paradoxically requires medium-specific innovation in order to preserve a sense of the theatricality of xiqu.

These problems with aesthetics were endemic to the theater world from the end of the May Fourth era. It is partly for this reason that the theater itself is included as one of the media under examination within the context of adaptation. Remediation of the theater is viewed in this dissertation on at least two levels: the institutional and the conceptual. In the former category are technical changes to reorder the nature of production that range from restructuring the company to the way different companies are integrated with the state. The latter is grounded in the historical context of aesthetic debates that reach back to the mid-20s, reflecting on the modernity of the theater and its relationship to movements in the theater industry across state boundaries, and especially in Europe and the Soviet Union. These two levels, the institutional and the theoretical, are

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[37] I intend for this observation to apply equally to productions from all areas, as theatricality is a consideration of xiqu film regardless of production locale, but it should be clear from viewing the corpus of xiqu films that 'visuality' is more applicable to southern productions (most evident in their complex sets) than northern ones.

[38] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 5-6.

fundamentally inseparable from each other, as restructuring took place under the aegis of a project to effectively 'modernize' xiqu, in terms borrowed from the international theater scene.

This examination of the remediation of theater to itself is useful especially for establishing not just what reformers wanted theater to become, but also what aspects of the theater were echoed in its reconstruction. In Bolter and Grusin's view, remediation is not limited to the adaptation of one medium to another, but includes the possibility (even inevitability) of adaptation within a medium, either by making reference to the medium, itself (like a play-within-a-play) or to earlier versions of the work in question.[39] In part, their definition is indebted to the interrogation of the word 'medium' itself as representative of remediation: "[A medium] is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real."[40] Efforts to re-create a specific ideological worldview as staged social reality are part and parcel of the reform movement, and this view of remediation helps to explain why the layers of historical experience with reform efforts in Peking opera, in particular, are an inseparable part of what otherwise appears to have been a political project entirely delimited by the specific goals of the Communist Party. At the heart of study of the remediation of the theater within itself is a greater understanding of the palimpsestic history of the political goals of refashioning the stage.

Embodied Practice: Recapturing the Repertoire?

In the theater, the body of the actor, including physical presence and gesture, is the locus of theatricality above and beyond the accompaniment of physical sets. This is especially true in xiqu, which depends on known conventions to make clear that a specific arrangement of a table and chairs represents an interior setting or a mountain locale. While not all xiqu genres may have used

[39] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 49.
[40] Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 65.

the same level of stylization featured in Peking opera, formulaic gestures were a feature of indigenous Chinese theater that had long been taken as representative of the art. Xiong Foxi's five-year theatrical experiment in Ding Xian County (1932-1937) famously hybridized spoken drama with the local yangge operas by preserving the use of song, but no less important to its success was the inclusion of conventionalized (*chengshihua* 程式化) gestures as part of the general performance aesthetic.[41] In his account of the Ding Xian experiment, Siyuan Liu points out that, though perhaps not intentional, this decision to include aestheticized gesture and symbolism returned to the basic theory of hybridization put forward in 1925 during the short-lived, and ultimately unsuccessful National Drama Movement. That earlier call to hybridize indigenous theater with Western forms sought to preserve the 'aestheticized,' or *xieyi* style of Chinese theater art rather than attempt a more mimetic realism.[42]

The dominant trend of mid-century acting technique was a move toward vernacularization, from the expressively theatrical to a more mimetic realism. I use the term 'vernacularization' to refer to the decisions made by xiqu performers to adjust the stylized conventions of their art closer to spoken drama; behind this word is an understanding of the vernacular as the everyday, or, in the context of gesture, natural movement. This raises questions as to what constitutes the 'natural'; all gesture, whether in the theater or out of it, is constructed, by virtue of requiring a particular cultural or other interpretive framework for comprehension. Spoken drama, as a performance art, is bound by certain conventions of its own with regard to actor movement, produced from the considerations of dealing with an audience in typically one direction, and at some distance; it seems that all stage performance art requires at a minimum some degree of physical exaggeration. That these

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41 Siyuan Liu, "'A Mixed-Blooded Child, Neither Western nor Eastern:' Sinicization of Western Style Theatre in Rural China in the 1930s," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no 2 (Fall 2008): 273-4.

42 *Xieyi* is explicitly the term used in the National Drama Movement, and may mark the earliest such instance of its use in the description of xiqu aesthetics. For both earlier proponents of the National Drama Movement and Xiong, conventionality included basic questions of dramaturgy including the use of symbolic objects on stage and set design; in

movements are not regarded by theorists of the 1950s as 'theatrical' is suggested by the rhetoric praising some gestures as appropriately 'realist.' What was appropriately realist fell within certain limits, however: critics were also capable of condemning some gestures as 'naturalist' (too verisimilar, and thereby undesirable). The conflict between these two terms suggests that movement, in addition to the codes placed on it by the conditions of the theater, must also respond to an ideological frame that extends beyond the simple rejection of expressionist acting. In that spoken drama was more likely than xiqu to use gestures synonymous with their real world counterparts, or at least, comprehensible without former knowledge of a symbolic presentational system, I have used the term vernacularization to indicate translation from operatic conventions to performance more characteristic of the representational spoken drama stage.

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that these terms are contingent and relative, between two poles that are actually aligned on a continuum. Siyuan Liu's work on the afterlives of the *wenmingxi* (文明戏) into the early PRC in the form of "popular spoken drama" or *tongsu huaju* (通俗话剧) reveals that performance language was itself negotiable between these extremes, with this less exalted form of drama occupying a space somewhere between spoken drama and xiqu. The performance language of *tongsu huaju* was considered an operatic (and hence more native) version of spoken drama.[43] These two forms of drama, xiqu and spoken drama, thus were positioned, even if artificially, as aesthetic opposites encoded with the similar opposing binary of nation/world.

Although they may have had nationalist defenses on their side, xiqu practitioners struggled to reconcile the demands of realism in stage art with an ideological justification of the preservation of traditional, stylized gestures. But the roots of this particular tension went back through the 1940s to the Lu Xun Arts Academy (Luyi) at Yan'an, and the writings of Zhang Geng, among others, who

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light of the minimalism implied in the conventional approach, however, conventionality should be considered as inclusive of stylized, symbolic (non-mimetic) gesture.

struggled to determine the limitations of adaptation of traditional arts towards spoken drama aesthetic objectives. This was particularly true in the days before Mao's Talks, which affirmed the ability of playwrights to rely on traditional forms. In practice, newly written plays were only a small proportion of dramatic output; the vast majority of plays staged at Yan'an were actually traditional plays which had been adapted in some capacity.[44] At the heart of this aesthetic dilemma was the preservation or adaptation of the stylized aesthetic so emblematized by traditional acting gestures with their prescribed stances and motions. Acting theory in xiqu was not simply the adoption of realism; practitioners struggled for well over a decade to determine not just whether features of traditional xiqu acting should be retained but how to fundamentally alter them without compromising on a presumed essential aesthetic.

For all that the repertoire was actively passed down as embodied practice from teacher to student, the changing political tides towards theatricality, particularly as it was inflected with nationalism, may have greater influence on technique than what might be otherwise surmised as a learned tradition. In other words, what was actually performed on xiqu stages during the 1950s and even 1940s may well be within certain confines of theatricality that would be viewed as vernacular today, when attention to xiqu has shifted predominantly towards historical reconstruction with an eye expressly (perhaps even excessively) turned toward theatricality.[45] This may be brought home even more clearly by the fate of the performance techniques of *huadan*, whose flirtatious moves were too salacious for the 1950s stage and whose repertoire was consequently severely curtailed.[46]

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[43] Siyuan Liu, "Tongsu huaju 通俗话剧 (Popular Spoken Drama) in Shanghai in the 1950s and early 1960s" (paper presented at the annual meeting for Chinoperl, Toronto, Canada, Mar 16, 2017).

[44] Zhongguo jingjuyuan 中国京剧院, ed., *Jiuju geming shiqi de kaiduan* 旧剧革命时期的开端 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 2005).

[45] This project of reconstruction is similarly influenced by the aesthetic language of its own day, which is inclined toward a particular emphasis on and interpretation of beauty which Max Bohnenkamp has termed glamour, and which is less invested in realism than in visuality itself. Personal communication with Max Bohnenkamp, Mar 20, 2017.

[46] Siyuan Liu discusses the case of one actor in particular, Xiao Cuihua, whose career was all but ruined by the restrictions of the reform movement. Ironically, Xiao was allowed to teach his techniques, but performance of them was

Although token moves were made to enable these actors to teach their techniques to students, their prohibition from the stage ultimately weeded them out from the repertoire, even to the extent that even star actors like Xun Huisheng (荀慧生 1900-1968), one of the "four major dan" (*sida mingdan* 四大名旦), saw entire plays created in the late Republic lost to following generations, to become the topic of extensive reconstruction work in later decades.

Unlike many Chinese studies of xiqu reform from Zhang Lianhong to Li Wei, Fu Jin and others, this dissertation is not meant to include an evaluation of the success or failure of xiqu reform, so much as a closer examination of its workings in the interest of recovering the elusive history of past performance practice. Inasmuch as this search for the repertoire is a search for a practice that was itself the sedimentation and reinvention of earlier performance practices, there is a deep investment in exploring the history of the theater in its aesthetics, politics, and remediated forms. The core of this inquiry however, is one that must remain fundamentally hollow: history records only the various images of the theater as it was desired to be, and as it was perceived to be by different factions in different places at different times. There is no conclusive, comprehensive style of performance that can be identified from this study either for any regional genre or as national art. The image of national drama that is deployed so often by different groups is ultimately a play of politics with a shifting, ideologically inflected mythology of national style. And within these claims to national art lies a deeply complicated history of interaction with international forces, colonialism, and remediation.

Consequently, what follows entails a substantive look at the government programs, directives, bureaucrats and policy shifts of the Reform Movement, and actions from the theatrical community beyond those that might be read as responses, to include watershed moments where

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forbidden. This did not seem to achieve the desired effect of keeping it within the repertoire, as many of Xiao's choreographies were ultimately lost. Liu, "Theater Reform," 399-402.

xiqu productions helped to change the terms of debate and instigate redirections in the movement from leadership at the top. This is not just a question of identifying places where history has been written in such a way as to exclude, homogenize or diminish particular contributions from xiqu practitioners, as members of a frequently demeaned art form.[47] The effort to reconstruct the repertoire involves recognizing it as a dynamic process between artists and the state, the product of power relations within the bureaucracy and within dated social systems that were biased against actors. And even this general picture as historically inherited is itself the product of individual biases by producers of mediated records of performance. While tracing these influences, I have endeavored to maintain an eye on the impact of nationalism on the rhetoric of debate, particularly within the context of its emphasis (and occasional de-emphasis) within transnational terms. The source of that transnationalism imparts a relative significance to aesthetic decisions impacting the repertoire, whether the work of xiqu artists themselves, or leftists with a more venerated association with the upper ranks of political power. It is through the unpacking of these power dynamics and political moves that the shifting repertoire of the reform movement might be reconstructed.

Chapter Summaries

Divided into chapters by different media, this dissertation explores how dynamic reforms informed aesthetic change as it was rendered in print, stage performance, and film. I isolate these aspects to highlight how adaptation was an act of interpretation fundamentally concerned with defining 'China' for foreign audiences, but also as an act of self-definition for the citizenry, investing xiqu with the weight of national tradition to balance against the foreignness of other cultural theatrical forms and media with foreign origins. These different media are not merely technical

[47] This phenomenon has been described in multiple accounts of the development of any major style or history associated with the nation, but one of the earliest and most significant is Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

elements in service of theater, but art forms whose interaction with xiqu yielded a variety of artistic exchanges, negotiations, compromises and developments. Through a reassessment of 1950s theater, I argue that reform was the negotiation of a direct intervention in xiqu culture, in dialogue with international developments in theater arts and acts of remediation that applied pressure to the shifting valuations of a national theater art and aesthetic.

In the first chapter, "Adaptation in Print: Critics of the 1940s and 1950s," I examine the use of the periodical press as a vehicle for feedback on reformed performances and on the reform process itself. Following the ideological and artistic work done at Yan'an in the 1940s, repertoire standards were reworked to hew to a new line of socialist realism. While political wranglings over changes to classic content often take center stage in historical accounts, periodicals reveal theater of the early 1950s explored widely divergent staging techniques and symbolism to yield a result much less stable in its interpretations of realism. The consequence for xiqu practitioners was paradoxically a rhetorical and critical emphasis on a return to "tradition," or forms of staging that had been promoted by a group of (self-titled) conservationists during the 1940s.

The second chapter, "A Transnational Stage: Worldly Forces in Institutional and Structural Reforms to Theater," looks closer at what institutional practices of production truly entailed in this era, as a product of transnational developments and pressures. By study of this period, during which private troupes were moved under state ownership, I explore the intersections of government-directed reforms to industrial practice and the redirection of internal tension within the industry over the state of the art as measured against international trends. In exploring the rise of the xiqu director, I examine how broader theater debates during wartime on the capacity or need for xiqu to adapt its staging practices came together in the early PRC to inflect reform efforts with international strains of modernist discourse. This desire of xiqu practitioners to remain competent in

international standards and trends is transmuted by the enlistment of theatrical personnel into state cultural diplomacy projects after 1949.

In my third chapter, "Locating Theatricality on Screen: Performance Practice and Xiqu Film in the Changing Tides of Reform," I look at the opportunities and limitations that film brought to xiqu innovators, particularly amidst their own debates on whether or not performance practice should retain its symbolic, theatrical movements or adapt toward more vernacular, or naturalist, forms of realism at the expense of one of the defining features of China's national theater. Through the perspective of these politically charged debates on the future of theatrical gesture, I explore the influence of the film industry's own dialogue on the goals of adaptation, between preserving the theatrical experience and emphasizing the medium specificity of film; at stake is the fate of embodied theatricality on a socialist realist stage--and screen.

Each of the chapters in this dissertation compares aspects of production before and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It begins in 1937 with the Japanese occupation of major parts of China and the disruption that posed to theater production as well as the ability of major theorists to interact freely among each other. Discussion focuses on bringing together the 40s and the 50s as a unit, but does not extend beyond 1959; this is not a reflection of periodization in theater reform from the viewpoint of official policy but rather a means to consider how intermedial adaptation created an afterlife for the general trends of the reform movement as it moved from stage to screen. It resituates actor-initiated innovations within the history of theater reform, by demonstrating the continuities and breaks in performance practice as actors, musicians, and artists engaged with adapting political demands. More importantly, I identify fractures within the reform movement that reveal theatrical practice was far more complicated than implementing an ideological program of socialist realism. The movement engaged a politics of national identity that had deep

historical roots and was fundamentally shaped by the interplay of different media industries engaged in nationalist projects, all of which came together in determining the fate of xiqu.

Chapter 1

Adaptation in Print: Critics of the 1940s and 50s, and the Changing Face of Xiqu

Between 1944 and 1955, Tian Han wrote and revised a script for publication of *The Legend of White Snake* (*Baishe zhuan* 白蛇传), the tale of the disrupted romance between a snake spirit and a mortal man, no fewer than three times. This process was filled with numerous twists and setbacks: the script was censored by the Guomindang government quickly after its first release, then after liberation, given a prominent performance venue at the first National Day celebrations in Beijing in 1950, then put to the knife twice more over the next five years, with the participation of names no less famous than the head of the propaganda arm of the Ministry of Culture, Zhou Yang (周扬 1907-1989), Peking opera director, Li Zigui (李紫贵 1915-1999), and respected senior Peking opera performer, Wang Yaoqing (王瑶卿 1881-1954).[1] The play was published in 1950 as part of a new "People's Drama Anthology," and represented in part an effort to create a new revolutionary canon of xiqu plays for liberated China. Yet two years later, a respected critic published a detailed analytical critique of the play in one of the nation's most prominent newspapers, the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报); within a month, a re-titled, streamlined version of the play was performed at the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention (*diyijie quanguo xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui* 第一届全国戏曲观摩演出大会) at the end of 1952.

White Snake was a prominent example of how xiqu reform and script adaptation was meant to work under the new regime: traditional scripts were adapted by a team of artists and cultural workers according to a set of ideological principles, performed and then critiqued in the periodical

[1] "Beijing wenyijie qingzhu guoqing—zhunbei qunzhongxing wenyi jiemu 北京文艺界庆祝国庆—准备群众性文艺节目," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Sept 28, 1950, 2. Tian Han 田汉, *Jinboji* 金钵记 (Shanghai 上海: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1951).

press. Adaptation in this context refers somewhat narrowly to the notion of script reform, or updating traditional scripts by ideological principles. In practice, these written decisions carried real world implications for staging practices, making the word 'adaptation' inseparable from theater technique; that the state recognized this fact is reflected to some degree in the number of criticisms that were published that addressed primarily the details of stage presentation. The choice of the word adaptation is not based on original Chinese sources, which were more inclined to refer simply to 'xiqu reform,' but affords some measure of recognition of the fact that these new productions were remediations of earlier theatrical practice. It is not meant to disguise the fact that these productions were also mediated by their representation in the press, whose writers were very self-conscious of their influence on (or at least, their capacity to influence) the development of a particular theatrical aesthetic. The cycle of adaptation attempts, critical reviews and revisions established the official ideological position and aesthetic appearance of xiqu, but in the process offered glimpses of paths not taken. The accounts of these attempts offer a means of reconstructing the richness of theatrical practices during the transition between the 1940s to the 1950s.

Though not unified across localities or even between levels of the bureaucracy, the aesthetic consequences of adaptations held implications for key questions for the new regime: how would the narrative of its own history be represented through representations on stage? What would the new ideological demands of the theater mean for its aesthetics? How could this ideological message be made to fit traditions of the theater that included mythological legends, tales of the supernatural and fantasies? Behind these questions lay concerns that the technology of the theater, including the aesthetics of stage productions as well as the updated content of plays, had direct influence on the interpretation of legend and its impact on audiences.

Xiqu reform officials encouraged the open discussion of adaptations in print, in critical reviews, witness reports and personal testimonies of actors, directors and adapters. Through these

avenues, the aesthetic decisions made in the adaptation process were talked about and made potentially visible to a significant portion of the population. Though significant articles were published in the *People's Daily*, which served as the mouthpiece of government xiqu reform organizations, many of these publications were put out in specialty journals edited by members of the xiqu reform committee. These journals were produced in Shanghai, but despite a noticeable regional bias in their coverage of local xiqu reform activities, many of their articles were intended for a national audience in both tone and content.

Professional xiqu critics[2] of the early PRC shared a surprising number of characteristics with a group of xiqu critics active in Shanghai in the previous decade, who produced commentary on both Peking opera and regional operas for activities in the greater Shanghai region, and who were deeply concerned with the preservation of an aesthetic system they viewed as imperiled. Just as reform leaders were concerned with the construction of a critical voice as a significant part of the outward appearance of the reform project after liberation, critics in the 1940s were likewise deeply absorbed by the problems of constructing and policing both professional standards and aesthetic ones. Their activities, though just a small part of a greater flourishing entertainment scene in the 1940s, left traces on the critical side of the xiqu world, offering an alternative voice to leftist dramatists who were engaged in other parts of the country. I seek to understand the impact of this community and their contribution to the way that xiqu aesthetics were formed through print.

Xiqu reform was a process that was built on trends already in motion from previous decades. Too broad a practice within the nation to be easily policed by either the central government or local

[2] Professional in this case does not indicate that these critics were employed solely by publishing reviews of plays; that said, the Xiqu Reform Bureau indicated early on that they expected critics to play a significant role in guiding the reform process, and a number of individuals, like Dai Bufan 戴不凡, published so actively that they are remembered today primarily for their contributions as critics. Based on this historical vision, and the respect accorded to their views, I refer to these critics as professionals. Nor every critic of the early 1950s went on to such illustrious careers as Dai, but because of their significance to the movement in that moment, in this chapter, I include these lesser-known names as professionals, also.

cadres, xiqu found many avenues for reform and experimentation during the transition between the 1940s and 50s. As a concept, theater reforms predated policy initiatives, experiments at Yan'an or by other leftist playwrights, and movements directed by cadres; theater practitioners at all levels of stardom were engaged in a process of innovating and experimenting whether for contemporary political gains or for the enhancement of artistic expression. I aim to explore the connections that exist between Republican practices and the new aesthetics of adaptations that emerged in the early PRC. In so doing, I explore how the adaptation process induced changes in the aesthetics of performances and how these changes fed back into a greater system of understanding the theater.

Adaptation was at the heart of the reform movement, yet was more than just a new arrangement or transcription of an existing traditional play. This work was seen as less intensive than the work of a playwright or creator, yet still more demanding than simply adjusting lyrics to match the musical modes of the target xiqu type. Adaptation entailed ideological revisions to plot structure and character speech, alterations to staging practices including choreography, sets and lighting, and musical changes and considerations designed to impact the emotional nuancing of everything from individual characters to the overall atmospherics of the play. These changes tested the limits of the core aesthetics of theatrical practice, even when not adapting from one medium to another, but moving from an earlier version to one whose form and content were governed by a new set of ideological principles.

For the first three years of the PRC, the central question regarding the scope of adaptation was actually about the limits of its negative image: the preservation of tradition, and how tradition was to be defined. These questions coalesced around mythology, or how to preserve and use legends associated with particular theatrical stage effects to direct audiences to certain ideological truths. Though many plays went through multiple revisions during the first few years, *White Snake* is one of the most prominent cases of adaptation, both because of its high popularity with audiences in the

1950s and, in the case of the Peking opera version, by virtue of its famous author, the playwright Tian Han (田汉 1898-1968). Whereas other plays had a smaller distribution or existed only within the repertoires of particular local operas, *White Snake* was widely known and performed seasonally.[3]

Its wide accessibility and popularity during the end of the Republican period and the beginning of the PRC gave it a rich history of interpretations which accretively brought about changes in the characterizations of each of the main characters: the snake spirit Bai Suzhen (白素贞), her mortal husband Xu Xian (许仙), and the monk who tries to rescue him, Fahai (法海). The process of reform, though driven by ideological demands, was built on trends that crossed between decades that were invested in the identity of the tragic romantic heroine. Adaptation was the vehicle of this transition, and the growth of adaptations in the beginning years of the PRC accelerated this process to dynamic and contrasting results.

I look closely at the first three years of the PRC, a period when the traditional plays that were staged were under close governmental scrutiny, in order to examine how the reform process was articulated and tested through adaptations and their critical successes and failures. I am curious about the way the aesthetics of the new regime were formed, both through critical reviews in the periodical press and through experiments in productions, including staging practices. I ask how adaptation served as the proving ground for testing the direction of reform. How did adaptation accommodate articulations of experimental or alternative impulses opened up by the demands of xiqu reform? How did adaptation serve as a historical vehicle for connecting trends in operatic aesthetics and audience tastes across decades? I am particularly interested in the "invisible" side of script adaptation, the staging practices that undergirded the success or failure of the adaptation, and which were themselves the subject of scrutiny by adapters and critics alike. Behind all these

[3] The setting of one of the central scenes during the Dragon-boat (*duanwu* 端午) Festival meant that it was often performed around that time of year.

questions lies a basic interest in how theater practitioners reinvented their art through adaptation, whether motivated by political, commercial or artistic gains.

Adaptation in Xiqu Reform

Discussions of reform permeated intellectual debates on the theater throughout the first half of the twentieth century. What had begun as a strident debate between some May Fourth intellectuals like Hu Shi (胡适 1891-1962), Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881-1936), and Qian Xuantong (钱玄同 1887-1939) who dismissed traditional theater in favor of spoken drama, and conservationists like Zhang Houzai who sought to uphold it as national tradition, eventually settled into more subdued discussions of reform, often by theater practitioners who were deeply invested in both preservation and research and experimentation with Western theories and production strategies. Significant public discussions of the theory of xiqu reform largely stabilized and subsided after the mid-1930s, at least among individuals committed to reform. Without the extremity of the earlier debate, theater reform became less of a focused movement than a collection of sporadic efforts by both leftist intellectuals and xiqu practitioners. In spite of this loose organization, reform ('gailiang 改良') remained a selling point of xiqu productions during the 1930s, particularly in reference to productions of the major stars. While Shanghai retained its status as a center of theatrical debate largely because it remained a production center for the major xiqu-focused publications, the occupation of eastern cities by the Japanese and the exodus of leftist theater theorists to the Communist base at Yan'an and large cities of the southwest, like Guilin and Chongqing, ultimately dispersed discussions of reform.

The success of reformed xiqu projects at Yan'an during the war brought a new focus to reform. There, the goal of bringing ideological content to the people drove adaptation efforts both of local xiqu genres and of traditional Peking opera. The exigencies of war had induced leftist

playwrights in other parts of the country to make similar changes: Tian Han's time in Guilin resulted in resistance-themed updates to Peking opera scripts and also with local *guiju* (桂剧). The key to these reform measures was adaptation; modified traditional plays were both more likely to find success with audiences, and less likely to encounter censorship in areas still controlled by the Nationalist government. As liberation swept through the country after the war, these strategies of adapting traditional plays became the cornerstone of efforts to educate and reach out to the populace.

In the time period from the war of resistance going into the PRC, there was a sense of heightened purpose around drama that beyond its educational function, its capacity to mobilize the people to action identified it as a higher calling. Though new plays had been the core of the drama movement during the 1930s, the wartime experiences with local drama west of the occupied zones had moved traditional drama to the forefront of reform efforts. A prologue to the 1950 edition of Tian Han's first xiqu adaptation of the white snake story, *Golden Begging Bowl* (*Jinboji* 金钵记), placed it within a tradition of theater reform that viewed its own efforts as central and essential to nation-building: "The process of development of Chinese new drama or the process of the re-creation of old plays, in truth is all the process of the battle against reactionary, retrogressive enemies, both domestic and foreign."[4] This rhetoric called attention to the strength of a contemporary sense of nationalist social mission that was perceived to be an innate potential of the theater in general, and 'old plays' in specific, as popular fare.[5] Equipped with this emotional power over audiences, traditional plays themselves became as dangerous as weapons in their impact; in the eyes of

[4] "中国新戏剧的发展过程，或旧戏剧的改造过程，实际上是和一切反动落后的内外敌人的斗争" Tian Han, *Jinboji.*

[5] The romanticized view of the importance of the theater may have roots in earlier decades, but may also reflect a contemporary trend toward a significant degree of self-mythologizing, or dramatic retellings of the lives of actors, often as a thinly veiled cipher for the nation (or at least, nationalism) in their embodiment of patriotic fervor and melodramatic sacrifice. This may be part of the motivation for producing films like *Anecdotes of an Actor* (二百五小传), which romanticized the history of the xiqu reform effort from Republican training schools to liberation; this film is still extant and has been converted to DVD but remains relatively rare.

reformers, at best they induced apathetic stupor, and at worst, pushed audiences away from the goals of liberation.

Adaptation was at the core of xiqu reform from its beginning. In order to cope with the pressing demands of orchestrating a concrete design for reform for individual troupes while simultaneously implementing it for identified plays, on July 11, 1950, the Ministry of Culture of the central government established a Committee for Xiqu Reform (*xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui* 戏曲改进委员会) which was charged with planning the policies and work of xiqu reform; the appraisal and adaptation of scripts was clearly identified as their primary responsibility.[6] The committee designated three principles to guide adapters in evaluating scripts, each open to interpretation: spreading superstition and a feudalistic slave morality that benumbed and menaced the people, spreading obscenity and violence, and debasing and dishonoring the speech and actions of laborers.[7] In clarifying some of this list, reformers specified the need for care in distinguishing mythological legends, deemed positive as records of feudalistic struggle against oppression, from superstition. The category of superstition, however, remained broad, as a place to classify plays that 'menaced the people.' Examples were provided, including depictions of hell and reports of karmic retribution, which superficially made the classification appear reasonably limited, but in reality, this disguised the volume of work in adapting traditional plays structured around divine or supernatural retribution that would fall into this category. The principles of adaptation would require actual experimentation and practice in order to further refine these distinctions.

From 1949, the basic principles of play appraisal were to categorize plays as either fit for

[6] "Zhongyang renmin zhengfu wenhuabu chengli xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui—queding xiqu jiemu shending biaozhun 中央人民政府文化部成立戏曲改进委员会－确定戏曲节目审定标准" (Jul 27, 1949 [sic; actual date 1950]), in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编 (Changchun 长春: Changchunshi di shiyi yinshuachang 长春市第十一印刷厂, 1984), 19-20.
[7] Ibid.

adaptation or banned from the stage.[8] The definition of adaptation consequently became intrinsically connected to the question of censorship. In practice, the central government identified relatively few plays to be explicitly banned.[9] Local cadres were more likely to take the process much further, resulting in an uneven and unpredictable spread of adapted titles, and confusion among artists and cultural cadres alike. Rather than risk ideological error, adapters shied away from efforts that might challenge the definition of a successful adaptation. As the requirements for successful adaptations remained open to interpretation, plays identified as adaptable remained untouched for increasing amounts of time, effectively enforcing self-censorship. Though in the early 1950s the numbers of traditional plays performed were not comparable to the widespread staging of newly written modern plays, there remained a committed audience for traditional fare, and consequently a constant call for adaptation. The density of policy decisions, campaigns, programs and bureaucratic institutions suggested a focus to reform efforts, but in practice, the central government was in a constant give-and-take with cadres in local administrations over the speed, style and direction of reform efforts.

In order to address mounting concerns and confusion over all parts of reform, on May 5, 1951, the State Council (*zhengwuyuan* 政务院) issued a six-point directive on xiqu reform, the "5/5 Directive," that aimed to clarify the goals of reform, and stabilize and control its progress. The selection and approval of traditional plays for adaptation was the first item on the list, intended to be carried out in cooperation with a majority of performing artists and through the affirmation of published critical reviews, as an explicit alternative to administrative fiat or bans on plays.[10] Once again, in practice, success varied: traditional artists were more likely to defer to state-appointed cadres (or cultural workers) on most matters, including artistic decisions, a subtly hierarchical culture

[8] Ibid.
[9] Fu Jin 傅谨, "Jin wushinian 'jinxi' luelun 近五十年'禁戏'略论," in *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiju de xiandaixing yu bentuhua* 二十世纪中国戏剧的现代性与本土化 (Taipei 台北: Guojia chubanshe 国家出版社, 2005), 199-213.
[10] "Zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 政务院关于戏曲改革工作的指示" (5/5/1951)

that had been evident even at Yan'an.[11] A report that followed a year later suggested subtle authority problems remained entrenched, as it re-emphasized the importance of sharing responsibility for the appraisal and adaptation of plays between artistic authorities, xiqu specialists and new cultural workers (权威艺人、戏曲专家及新文艺工作者). Without censuring local cadres, the report explicitly ordered deference to traditional artists in the matters of both appraisal and adaptation.[12] In this political dance, the consequences for play adaptation effectively entailed self-censorship, as artists awaited clearer direction on ideological reform. Enmeshed in the delicate difficulties of negotiating authority between local cadres and traditional artists over both play selection and adaptation, xiqu reform was dependent on critical reviews as the only concrete measure of affirmative progress in script reform.

The *People's Daily* and trade journals that specialized in xiqu were the places where directions in xiqu reform were adjusted. As the primary venue for xiqu related articles in 1950, the weekly *Xiqu Report* (*xiqu bao* 戏曲报) both kept the pulse of reform efforts in the public eye, and tailored the direction of reforms through the careful selection of articles for publication. Along with other theater journals in the early 1950s, the *Xiqu Report* was filled with calls for attention to script reform, personal accounts from theater workers of their experiences with newly adapted plays, and critical reviews of new adaptations. These reports almost unanimously stressed the changes that brought plays in closer alignment with contemporary campaigns, but also called attention to the myriad means theater troupes were using in presenting newly adapted stories to the public. Critics were unified only in their position that adaptations were preferable to traditional plays. Writing in mid 1950, Shanghai-based critic and theater worker Liu Housheng (刘厚生 1921-) summed up the prevailing attitude easily: "In all, adaptation is over a thousand times better than performing old

[11] Ellen Judd, "Cultural Articulation in the Chinese Countryside, 1937-1947," *Modern China* 16, no. 3 (Jul 1990): 269-308.
[12] "修改与审定旧剧目，必须切实依靠艺人，与艺人通力合作来进行." "Zhongyang wenhuabu guanyu jinxing xiugai yu shending jiujumu gongzuo de zhishi 中央文化部关于进行修改与审定旧剧目的指示" (Apr 22, 1952).

plays."[13] The means and direction of adaptation, however, were still unclear.

When approaching adaptation more generally, detailed strategies retreated into ideology. The principle seemed to be that personal transformation into a better citizen and supporter of the party would create the necessary substrate for intuiting appropriate changes. A lengthy article from a local xiqu troupe recommended that actors recite slogans of support for Maoist thought as a precursor to undertaking the reform of traditional plays.[14] Not every troupe must have been as ardent, but reform leaders did pick up on a tendency toward overcompensation in adaptations, though in some cases, not until audiences complained that the new versions were worse than the old.[15]

Adaptation excesses posed as much of a concern to reform leaders as reticence among theater workers. In spite of some specific goals for identifying and eliminating particular performance practices, adaptation was not meant to be destructive of traditional forms. Although the first-person reports of adaptation experience that were published in the *Xiqu Report* were often too specific to their individual plays, or simply too cautious, to volunteer brief generalizations or offer strategies, their presence was likely intended as a guide for potential adapters. For example, the account of the adaptation of *Fighting Against the Chariots* (*Tiaohuache* 挑滑车), a traditional Peking opera title, may have been intended as encouragement to adapters of plays with long traditions to see their work as composed of both research and preservation, so that unique staging or performance excerpts like choreographed singing would not be lost.[16] In light of the practice of widespread censorship of traditional plays, accounts like this offered a public line that adaptation was not meant to be a stark rejection of classical repertoire.

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[13] Liu Housheng 刘厚生, "Xiao lun chuangzuo yu gaibian 小论创作与改编," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 1, no. 4 (Mar 18, 1950): 2.

[14] Mo Yiping 墨遗萍, "Gaizao jiuju de yidian xinde 改造旧剧的一点心得," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 1, no. 8 (Apr 14, 1950): 5-6; continued in 1, no. 9 (Apr 22, 1950): 11-13.

[15] Yang Shaoxuan 杨紹萱, "Zenyang xiugai jiu juben 怎样修改旧剧本," *Xin Xiqu* 新戏曲 1, no. 1 (Sept 1950): 33-36.

[16] Cheng Jun 成骏, "Gaibian 'tiaohuache' de jidian jingyan 改编'挑滑车'的几点经验," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 1, no. 6 (Apr 1, 1950): 5.

Ultimately, these descriptions of model adaptations were either too specific to extract general principles from, or were simply too subtle in demonstrating moderation in reform against the fervor with which ideological imperatives were promoted. Writing a year later in 1951, Yang Shaoxuan (杨绍萱 1893-1971), the former head of the Yan'an Pingju Academy and assistant director of the Xiqu Reform Bureau, published an overarching message to performers that deliberately highlighted the value of preservation, whether to assist artists on stage or to conserve the role of traditional theater as a document of the true expression of historical consciousness.[17] Though his argument stayed within the context of the necessity of adaptation, Yang's article pointed to mounting concern among reform administrators at the difficulty of curbing the excesses of adaptation.

As long as officials remained vague about the concrete demands of adaptation, the process of xiqu reform moved by trial and error, with adapted productions sent forth for evaluation at the hands of drama critics. In the May 5th Directive in 1951, the published critical review was designated a key avenue of control over reform efforts, to the exclusion of bans and administrative orders.[18] In a call to arms to bring out more xiqu critics later that same year, Yang Shaoxuan called the dearth of critics the first problem of traditional literature and arts, and especially important for xiqu because of the power of performance to deeply sway the thinking and consciousness of the audience.[19] The difficulty seemed to lie in not only reconciling traditional plots with the demands of critical reading in terms of class struggle, but dealing with the difficulties of establishing the connection between the new critical reading of the adaptation with the traditions of stage performance. For this, a body of knowledgeable specialists of theater practice was required. Although official calls for critics sounded

[17] Since the question of historical preservation was a determining factor in the divide between mythological legend and superstition, Yang took an increasingly polarized position, eventually splitting the problem into one of form and content. Yang Shaoxuan 杨紹萱, "Lun xiqu gaige zhong de lishiju he gushiju wenti 论戏曲改革中的历史剧和故事剧问题," *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧 3, no. 6 (1951): 40-44.

[18] "Zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 政务院关于戏曲改革工作的指示" (May 5, 1951).

[19] "旧戏曲会经演唱得'深入人心'而成为观众思想意识的组织部分" Yang Shaoxuan 杨紹萱, "Kaizhan xiqu wenyi pinglun 开展戏曲文艺评论," *Xin xiqu* 新戏曲 1, no. 2 (Oct 1950): 2-4.

as though the profession needed to be constructed from the ground up, a long tradition of aesthetic critique already existed from the urban centers of Beijing and especially Shanghai.

Policing the Role of the Drama Critic

The drama critic was elevated to a key structural position in the Xiqu Reform Bureau's designs for the cultivation of script adaptation and reform, consolidating and heightening the impact of a profession that had been much more loosely defined in the preceding decade. Critics would henceforth act as natural reins on the reform process, focusing particularly on written reviews. Toward this end, there needed to be a body of critics with reliable standards. Though there were no solely professional critics, as most significant voices in print were also state-appointed workers in some other aspect of the theater, government support helped consolidate and lend significance to the genre, particularly as critical reviews were being used to similar effect in other fields like film.

This capacity to police aesthetic content and popular opinion may not have been as evident for critics of the 1940s. Though the heyday of the debates over the value of national drama had largely passed after 1937, reviews, analyses and discussions of xiqu remained a fixture within the periodical press for the 1930s and 40s. Many of the more serious-minded drama-centered journals tended to emerge and fold within a few years. Newspapers and pictorials with staying power prominently featured xiqu as part of regular entertainment columns, sustaining a lively fan culture that likely did not appear as threatening to ruling officials as journals that openly envisioned theater as a tool of the resistance against Japanese occupiers. Though the focus of publishing activity was Shanghai, distribution of some journals included Beijing, reflecting the fact that Peking opera absorbed the attention of most xiqu publishers, even if regional operas were occasionally also featured. In part because of the variety of publications and their intended audiences, critical reviews tended to be highly irregular.

When the major debates had subsided by the end of the 1930s, what remained was a varied mix of theater adherents who studied all aspects of xiqu, including amateur performance, and fans who were invested primarily in entertainment and star culture. Though there were many who fell into the latter category, a core of theoretical thinkers including many leftist dramatists, who were invested in the capacity of the theater to effect social change, continued to produce journals that explored concepts of the theater more broadly, without specific differentiation between xiqu and spoken drama. This group consisted largely of reformers who were interested in Euro-American and Soviet theories of drama and in spoken drama in particular. Among the xiqu fans, however, was a core of connoisseurs who followed developments in the theater world closely and participated in journals and radio programs with the intent of educating audiences about the aesthetics of traditional theater, and policing the maintenance of those standards of performance.

Within this group of connoisseurs, cries repeatedly went up reflecting a deep concern over the quality and content of the critical review. Though critical reviews were as old as the profession of acting itself, by the end of the 1930s, the approach and content no longer formed a single genre with a unified aesthetic standard. At the end of the Qing, the prevailing avenue of critical appreciation was through close analysis of individual performers, a practice that continued in the Republican period even if social critics condemned the culture of decadence and debauchery that surrounded the convention. The 1920s crisis over the preservation or abolition of xiqu brought with it the need to defend a core aesthetics that could be identified with national identity, even if it was in continual evolution and flux. Even after these debates abated, there remained an abiding concern over the form and quality of the critical review as the primary means of building connoisseurship around this core. Increasingly this concern centered on the essential knowledge and capabilities of the drama critic. In that reform was the pervasive undercurrent of all discussions of xiqu during the first half of the 20th century, the question of aesthetics was one built around a core of uncertainty

that followed the innovation and adaptation process. With revisions of the standard repertoire a common feature of Shanghai stage practice, adaptation was one of the most prominent places where critics could observe a crisis in aesthetics, and concomitant to this, a crisis in the capabilities of critics themselves.[20] At its most basic level, concern over the role of the drama critic was concern for the future of xiqu.

Theater reviews were the staples of entertainment columns and specialty magazines, and examples of each flourished in the last decades of the Republic. Reflecting their close connection to urban popular culture, theater publications varied immensely from semi-serious entertainment columns in large newspapers like the *Shenbao* (申报) and *Dagongbao* (大公报), to tabloid fare in general interest periodicals like *Essay Pictorial* (*liyan huakan* 立言画刊) and *369 Pictorial* (*sanliujiu huabao* 三六九画报) to journals like *Drama Study Monthly* (*juxue yuekan* 剧学月刊) dedicated to more formal, academic discussions. Leftist critics and playwrights centered their efforts in formal settings like *Drama Study Monthly*, *Chinese Drama Magazine* (*banyue xiju* 半月戏剧) and *Theater Times* (*xiju shidai* 戏剧时代), and later, following the changing exigencies of war, *Theater Year* (*xiju chunqiu* 戏剧春秋), or in other similar venues that encompassed both traditional theater and the relatively young field of spoken drama. A similar cycle followed a number of specialty magazines exclusively dedicated to xiqu, like *Ten Days of Theater* (*shiri xiju* 十日戏剧) (formerly *Theater Bi-weekly* (*xiju xunkan* 戏剧旬刊)), *Theater Pictorial* (*xiju huabao* 戏剧画报), and *Tale of a Xiqu Fanatic* (*ximizhuan* 戏迷传), which continued to circulate through the late 30s and 40s with many articles by and for fans.

Particularly at the end of the 1930s, columns regularly appeared filled with existential anxieties over the quality of theater reviews. At core, commentators worried about the loss of true

[20] Li Zigui 李紫贵, *Yi jiangnan* 忆江南, with Jiang Jianlan 蒋健兰 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1996), 80-112. Li picks several plays from the repertoire of members of the family of Gai Jiaotian and traces their evolution from stage practice to costume design.

connoisseurship and expertise in the face of mounting quantities of reviews that focused exclusively on the physical appearance of the actors at the expense of a discussion of aesthetic techniques. Though just as likely to feature updates on the living and eating habits of Shanghai actresses, even *369 Pictorial* and *Essay Pictorial* also ran discussion boards for fans concerned about the possible future demise of 'old plays.' Though belief in the power of drama to influence audiences had become an unquestioned standard by the 1930s, the dismay over a loss of connoisseurship was wedded to a belief in the necessity of reviewers to mediate and regulate the way audiences came under that influence:

> If wrong ideas are used to indoctrinate the reader, and guide the reader down the wrong path, then the degree of dramatic knowledge of the critic is a very serious issue. What's more, if the critic has an abundance of dramatic knowledge, but also wants to present an argument on what is right, he must be sure that he doesn't harbor any other prejudices. Otherwise, the degree [of severity] of setting forth an incorrect argument, imparting biased judgments and misleading the reader is worse than not having abundant dramatic knowledge.[21]

In spite of other debates about the use and value of the theater, its role as implement for social change had become unquestioned, boosting the educational power of the critic.

In this climate, a small coterie of Shanghai based theater critics took it upon themselves to erect critical standards for both reviewers and their reports. This group, many of whom were members of the self-styled National Drama Preservation Society (*guoju baocun she* 国剧保存社), saw themselves as standard-bearers for a traditional aesthetic under threat by careless reviewers and trending audience tastes for innovative performance techniques. While many other theorists of Peking opera technique were individuals associated with the fan cliques that surrounded major xiqu stars like Qi Rushan (齐如山 1875-1962) for *dan* performer Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳 1894-1961) and Luo Yinggong (罗癭公 1872-1924) with Cheng Yanqiu (程砚秋 1904-1958), these individuals were

[21] Jing Bo 镜薄, "Biaozhun jupingzhe 标准剧评者," *Shiri xiju* 十日戏剧 1, no. 25 (1939): 13. 使把错误的思想灌输给读者，把读者引导到一条错误的道路上去， 所以评剧者对于剧学的程度是一个很严重的问题。更有进者，即使剧评者的剧学丰富，但是也要立论公正，切不可怀有别的成见，否则立论不正，判断阿私，贻误读者的程度，更甚于剧学不丰的错误。

self-made experts, but not associates of the major stars and styles of xiqu. In many ways, members of the society had more in common with traditional literati connoisseurship from the end of the Qing dynasty, in that they were experts at a distance, seeing themselves as arbiters of taste and maintaining published identities that rotated through numerous pseudonyms and style names; the critic Zhang Xiaocang (张肖伧 1891-1978) had as many as fifteen different style names that were used in publications.[22] The society maintained a publication issued every ten days, though editorship varied between the head of the society, Zhang Guyu (张古愚 1905-2008) and Zheng Guoyi (郑过宜), both of whom focused on trends in Peking opera, particularly in the Shanghai region, and who also dedicated large sections to fan accounts and critiques of performances by '*piaoyou*' (票友) or amateur actors. Though the society managed to sustain a xiqu-focused weekly magazine for five years, after the Japanese occupation of the foreign concessions in 1941, they dispersed into other periodicals, though with no less fervent a call for the need to manage the qualifications and boundaries of their profession.

This attentiveness to the responsibilities of the critic was a topic that frequently emerged among these fans. Writing in *Tale of a Xiqu Fanatic* in 1939, Shi Bingjiu (施病鳩), an active, published xiqu critic since the end of the 1920s, set forth an idealized definition both of the responsibilities of the critic and of their essential prerequisites:

> All those who occupy the theater and use their superior senses to take in the sounds and changes of the stage, and who fuse this into their thinking and feelings, regardless of the strength of their power to do this fusing, are all termed "the audience." Now there are people among them whose senses are more sensitive than the average audience, whose power to fuse is also strong, and who therefore are able to hear what the average audience cannot, to see what the average audience cannot, to consider what others cannot, to feel what others cannot, and then take the result of this fusion and turn it into commentary, to record it in an article and display it to others, and not to be controlled by the masses, or

[22] Shen Daren 沈达人, "Jingju pinglunjia Zhang Xiaocang 京剧评论家张肖伧," *Yishu baijia* 艺术百家 102 (2008): 136. While some pseudonyms were used specially for regular columns, it is a possibility that the sheer number used by society members was intended to enhance the impression of their numbers on readers.

> deceived by new techniques from the performer. They are firm in their confident opinions, and have a deep knowledge of drama. These who have a fair-minded and unbiased public opinion—these are called 'critics.'[23]
>
> The Duty of the Critic: Newspaper editorials are those which inspect the happenings of all phenomena that occur in any world society. With correct ambition, they add unbiased praise and stern rebukes, and contribute to the truth. The work of the 'drama critic' is not any different than this, only its object is what is seen on the stage. When we speak now of their duty, indeed it is not outside of the whole purview of praise, rebukes and contributions.[24]

Shi proceeds to itemize sample situations among play types and performer styles that the would-be critic could use to lay out a system of theatrical value, beginning with plays that respond to contemporary issues or offer historical value, and proceeding through to the castigation of actors who give lackluster performances. Like many of his compatriots, he laments the tendency of critics to offer propagandistic reviews that either sang the praises of a particular actor or attacked a rival star.

On some level, editorials like Shi's most strongly reflected anxieties over a change in aesthetic culture from a presumed purist ideal to star-centered culture, where reviews and editorials served as propaganda both for and against particular actors in the effort to sway public opinion. This concern was shared with leftist critics like Ouyang Yuqian. Leftist criticism, however, was just as likely to condemn these trends for failing to meet perceived European aesthetic standards, which were presented as structured around the analysis of scripts, plots and characters, rather than actors and their techniques. Shi rejected these more radical complaints in favor of an approach that remained grounded in an aesthetic ideal that was presumed to stay constant over time, and which was policed by a publishing intelligentsia uniformly steeped in theatrical knowledge.[25] Most conservative critics remained committed to this idealistic vision, even while reporting a consistent decline in the quality of reviews that attempted to comment on traditional artistic techniques.

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[23] Shi Bingjiu 施病鳩, "Lun 'juping' 论'剧评'," *Ximizhuan* 戏迷传 2: 4 (1939): 13.

[24] Ibid., 日报社论之作，乃观察任何世界社会所发生之一切现象，具正确之目光，加以无私之揄扬，严正之斥责，真理之贡献也。"剧评"之作，未尝异于是，惟其对象则为看台耳，今言其任务，亦不外揄扬斥责与贡献诸事.

[25] Shi Bingjiu 施病鳩, "Lun 'juping' 论'剧评'," *Ximizhuan* 戏迷传 2: 5 (1939): 14.

Significantly, this belief in the power of the drama critic to influence the aesthetics of the stage, and with it, the tastes of the audience and the behavior of the stars, suggested a special role within xiqu reform (defined broadly over the decades), as an arbiter of the decisions that went into adaptation. Here was the natural development of the combination of the classic role of the xiqu connoisseur as someone who offered corrections to star actors and the greater moral project of the Guomindang government to change society through popular culture.[26] This critical world had emerged not in practice with artists as in the old days, but in a print medium, suggesting a changing target audience from the actors themselves, whose literacy even in the 1930s was still not guaranteed, to theater intellectuals who had enough connections to the theater world to direct specific reforms. By leveraging the public venue of the print journal, in theory, the critic had the power to directly influence the adaptation of performance techniques and scripts; in practice, the reality of the burgeoning print market for periodicals in all the major cities made this kind of power harder to employ.

Though set forth in terms that suggest clarity of identity and purpose, these calls-to-arms did not appear to coalesce around a strong movement. Ultimately, these critics were writing largely for each other or other like-minded compatriots who comprised a conservative minority among xiqu fans. Popular xiqu culture was dominated by and organized around star personalities and, in Shanghai, interest in innovative staging practices, areas that the conservative critics saw as secondary to analyses of the traditional core operatic arts of singing, acting, reciting and fighting (*changnian zuoda* 唱念做打). Though as serious-minded as leftist dramatists and also in favor of judicious reforms to traditional xiqu rather than dogmatic preservation, the conservative voices in Shanghai

[26] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 74. Goldstein describes the connoisseurs within old-style projection stage theaters as both critics and resources for actors in that they could offer correction of regional accents or other pronunciation issues. Critics of the late 30s appear to have taken this tradition and combined it with the moral imperatives pushed by the government instead.

remained on the fringes of other unfolding discussions on the reform of old plays, traditional forms and new experiments with artistic direction. From a practical standpoint, they retained only limited influence to restructure the majority of critical reviews against the surge of popular interest in contemporary performance practice. However, their detailed work in researching, reporting and preserving records of changes in xiqu practice, and fears for the loss of a traditional aesthetic remained a powerful and persistent undercurrent of concern among intellectuals over the changes to xiqu through the 1940s and across the 1949 divide.

Just as anxieties over the role of the critic were harbingers of concern for the future of drama, discussions of drama reform (*xiju gailiang* 戏剧改良) surfaced regularly in the years after the close of the war of resistance. Many members of the Preservation Society, like Zheng Guoyi and Zhang Guyu, joined an association for the reform of drama (*Zhongguo xiju gaijin xiehui* 中国戏剧改进协会) in the beginning of 1946 in order to continue publications and discussions focused on both the history and future directions of xiqu.[27] Their concern continued to manifest in periodicals after liberation, though without leading positions in government institutions of reform, their impact never again reached the heights it held at the end of the 1930s.[28]

Drama criticism was inherently a practice that invited reflection on the aesthetic aims and priorities of reviewers and theater practitioners, and this genre gained focus in the years after 1949, as the government turned to published reviews as a means of controlling the direction of developments in literature and arts. Reviews in drama journals and in the *People's Daily* were primarily

[27] Zhang Geng 张庚, ed., *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Shanghai juan* 中国戏曲志：上海卷 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo ISBN Zhongxin 中国 ISBN 中心, 1996), 908-9.

[28] Articles in the *Xiqu bao* periodically appear with one or another of the pseudonyms of members of the society. In at least one instance, a reader reply was published to an article supposed penned by someone with a pseudonym of Zhang Guyu, but the article in question did not appear in the issue where it was referenced. The editors of the *Xiqu bao* refuted the extremity of the complaints in the reader's letter, attempting to affirm the general tone of the article which argued in defense of traditional aesthetics as part of national pride; however, its absence from its intended publication may have been a sign that members of the society were not always in the favor of the Xiqu Reform Bureau.

driven by political focus, offering commentary on the political successes and failures of adaptations, however witness reports of different shows were no less important a tool for describing and policing aesthetic trends and changes. Though this trend was in some ways a natural extension of reviewing practices during the Republican period, it took its ideological roots from Mao's Talks at Yan'an. Even if not specifically aimed at drama criticism, the Talks explicitly targeted critical reviews of literature and arts for development, drafted on a dual, interdependent standard of excellence in both ideological content and artistic form.[29] Works were not to be judged solely on either their political or artistic merits, but by the successful combination of both.

The academic climate of research and experimentation at the Lu Xun Arts Academy at Yan'an was the birthplace of many of the artistic policies and theories of artistic production that governed the theater world after the foundation of the PRC. The prevailing creative model for the traditional arts mixed newly written content with the structures of traditional form, an approach commonly summarized in the slogan "putting new wine in old bottles" (*jiuping zhuang xinjiu* 旧瓶装新酒). In this setting, even the meaning of this phrase was contested as workers gradually revised the metaphorical referent of "old bottles" from bare plot structures of traditional works to conventional acting formulas and other elements of stylistic form. Initially, it was more often the case that workers used an original work for inspiration on the structural framework of newly written plays; the 1938 play *On the Songhua River* (*Songhua jiangshang* 松花江上) brought the basic plot of the traditional play *Fisherman's Revenge* (*Dayu shajia* 打渔杀家) to the northeast to battle the Japanese.[30] Similar resistance-themed updates were used by leftist playwrights in other parts of the country. Tian

[29] Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话" in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编 (Changchun 长春: Jilin sheng xiju chuangzuo pinglunshi 吉林省戏剧创作评论室, 1984), 199-201.

[30] Wang Peiyuan 王培元, *Kangzhan shiqi de Yan'an Luyi* 抗战时期的延安鲁艺, ed. Zheng Naxin 郑纳新 (Guilin 桂林: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社, 1999), 255-6.

Han's 1944 update to the White Snake story, *The Golden Begging Bowl* wove in themes of resistance by polarizing the heroes and villains, making it easier to relate them to contemporary war efforts. Traditional scripts and plots, however, were still subject to heavy revisions; the core of the new model, regardless of its period of development before or after Mao's *Talks*, emphasized mainly the introduction of new, revolutionary or resistance themes whether through sloganeering or complete revision of the content of a character.[31] Though in the spirit of innovating with traditional xiqu, these plays shared more in common with original productions than new arrangements of existing works.

Adaptation was an essential component of the work at Yan'an, however. The Pingju Research Troupe maintained over 40 traditional titles in their repertoire, each of which had undergone some degree of revision and alteration.[32] The direction of efforts in adaptation took a sharper turn after Mao's public affirmation of the new xiqu play *Driven to Mt Liang* (*Bishang liangshan* 逼上梁山, 1943), based on a tale from the traditional novel *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传). In a publicly posted letter to playwrights Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming (齐燕铭 1907-1978) in which he hailed the play as the beginning of a new era (*hua shiqi de kaiduan* 划时期的开端), Mao effectively confirmed a model for the new standards of artistic success, matching the political and aesthetic criteria in the *Talks*.[33] Research and revision of traditional plays had been central activities of the Pingju Research Troupe from its earliest days, seen both as research material for cultural

[31] A significant portion of Tian Han's operatic output at the end of the 1930s were newly written productions: the most well-known include *Jianghan yuge* 江汉渔歌, *Xin'ernv yingxiongzhuan* 新儿女英雄传, *Xin yanmenguan* 新雁门关, and *Yue Fei* 岳飞. See Lu Wei 陆炜, *Tian Han juzuolun* 田汉剧作论 (Nanjing 南京: Nanjing daxue chubanshe 南京大学出版社, 1995).

[32] Wang Peiyuan, *Kangzhan shiqi de Yan'an luyi*, 259.

[33] Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "Zai Yan'an kan le "Bishang Liangshan" hou xie gei Yang Shaoxuan, Qi Yanming tongzhi de xin 在延安看了《逼上梁山》后写给杨绍宣、齐燕铭同志的信" in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编 (Changchun 长春: Jilin sheng xiju chuangzuo pinglunshi 吉林省戏剧创作评论室, 1984), 225. Wang Peiyuan suggests that Mao's approval may have been assisted by the fact that the play closely followed the aesthetic principles laid out in the *Talks*.

cadres and as a means of ensuring that the masses were exposed to only healthy ideological content. Mao's support for Peking opera undergirded the continued work of revision and adaptation even in the face of continued criticism that it lacked revolutionary value as a traditional form.[34] Following the premiere and public approval of *Mt Liang*, however, the focus of activities shifted away from rewrites and adaptations, and towards the production of new plays written expressly for traditional genres.

This blend of newly written xiqu plays and revised traditional plays continued to distinguish the xiqu reform movement as it developed in the post-war period and in the first three years after liberation. Initial efforts at xiqu reform combined precipitously with other projects of liberation of traditional artists; rejection of any of the hallmarks of the old society entailed the widespread rejection of traditional plays for their associations with feudalism. Plays that weren't banned outright could spend an indefinite amount of time in limbo, marked as awaiting revisions.[35] Facing an increasingly limited selection of performable plays, troupes faced a sudden and immediate need for essential skills in adaptation, yet without clear guideposts for undertaking and approving revisions, years of experimentation awaited.

Adaptation at Liberation

Script reform was a central pillar of the xiqu reform movement in its opening years under the PRC. At the formation of the Committee on Xiqu Reform, ostensibly a body for the suggestion of policies and plans for reform, their first duty was designated instead as the adaptation and creation of scripts.[36] In outsourcing this work to different theater companies, the Committee

[34] Wang Peiyuan, *Yan'an luyi*, 260-261.
[35] Fu Jin, "Jin wushinian 'jinxi' luelun," 199-213.
[36] "Zhongyang renmin zhengfu wenhuabu chengli xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui—queding xiqu jiemu shending biaozhun 中央人民政府文化部成立戏曲改进委员会－确定戏曲节目审定标准" (original date 7/27/1950).

ensured that the opening years of the PRC saw a wide range of strategies for operatic revision; plots were rewritten, newly added into, meshed with plots from other sources, or even left minimally touched. The most common adaptation strategies sought to update traditional tales by tailoring them to contemporary campaigns, from land reform and marriage reform to support for the Korean war and the struggle against landlords. Some moved the plot to the present day, or used the original setting to suggest parallels with contemporary politics, and still others relied heavily on symbolism.

At its outset, adaptation was understood to mean script adaptation, with work happening off-stage, in the hands of writers or cultural workers collaborating with artists. An art form whose lyrical content is highly integrated with musical structure, performance technique and dramatic atmosphere, xiqu was functionally highly dependent on collaborative activity. Adaptation had historically encompassed music selection, stage design, and all aspects of production, though within its own peculiar social hierarchy, centered on the star performer as the main interpreter. This new form of collaboration was understood to mean a mix of experts in respective fields like politics and dramatic convention, with presumably equal social standing even if not equal knowledge. Though it was taken for granted that the reality would remain different, with gaps in both political and artistic knowledge among collaborators, the goal remained, as explicitly stated in policy, for actors to reform their understanding through political education as part of the intrinsic process of reform.[37] But even this ideological prerequisite was open to a wide degree of interpretation, including who ultimately had the political authority to serve as the theater expert in adaptation work.

Early reform efforts saw a widespread array of examples of zealous implementation of all

[37] Liu Housheng, a prominent Shanghai based critic and theater worker who was extensively involved in reform at the outset, does not use exactly these words; however, his description of entrenched attitudes of deference among traditional actors and theater workers toward cultural cadres seems to be consistent with the depiction of working conditions at Yan'an described by Ellen Judd and which was likely to have persisted into the early 1950s. Regardless of whether these knowledge gaps were seen as tolerable by either reform officials or actors themselves, it appears they were assumed to be a constant obstacle. Equal collaborations, like the one Tian Han describes with the actor Wang Yaoqing for the final adaptation of *White Snake,* seem likely to have been highly idealized. Tian Han 田汉, "Prologue" in *Baishe zhuan* 白蛇传 (Beijing 北京: Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社, 1955), 2.

aspects of policy well beyond script adaptation, extending specifically to political education and thought reform. Repeated calls for enthusiasm or zeal (*jijixing* 积极性) created a culture that enhanced either the encouragement or denunciation of the expression of particular ideological aims, and which proved difficult to curb.[38] Though liberation was hailed as a time of social renewal for xiqu actors, restoring social and political status to a profession traditionally frowned upon, many stories emerged of uneven implementation both between and within troupes. While some theater groups left the cities for the countryside, others reorganized or formally disbanded under threat of forced eviction. Occurring mainly in public demonstrations, the heavily theatrical process of liberating the lower social classes was carried out at all levels of local administration; in a process that was likely echoed in other cities, the city of Nanjing encouraged city troupes to hold sessions for actors of smaller parts to 'speak bitterness' to actors of leading roles.[39] Accounts of actor transformations flourished in the periodical press along with self-criticisms. Though the enforced participation of cultural cadres in script reform could have been taken as grounds for relaxed standards for artists, troupes were likely to have set unassailable revolutionized thought as a necessary qualification; at least one troupe required its members to study Maoist thought as a prerequisite to script reform.

Though aware of inconsistencies in the degrees of participation in these new reform campaigns, xiqu reform bureaucrats initially continued to target the problem of inadequate adaptation production as one of a lack of enthusiasm. In a report on problems in reform published at the end of 1951, xiqu reform committee member Ma Yanxiang (马彦祥 1907-1988) addressed the lack of performable scripts as "primarily because we have insufficiently realized the spirit of the

[38] Zhang Lianhong 张炼红 and Liu Housheng 刘厚生, "'Xigai' zai fansi: xin zhongguo de wenhua lixiang jiqi shijian—'lao xigai' Liu Housheng fangtan lu "戏改"再反思：新中国的文化理想极其实践－'老戏改'刘厚生访谈录," *Xiandai zhongwen xuekan* 现代中文学刊 (*Journal of Modern Chinese Studies*) 5 (2011): 4-16.
[39] Yan Pu 嚴樸, "Zenyang fadong yiren 'suku' 怎样发动艺人'诉苦'," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 1 (May 20, 1950): 7.

instructions of the State Council."[40] In practice, the situation on the ground was highly varied from locality to locality, in ways that both under- and over-shot anticipated results.

Discrepancies between official policy, local cadres, and actual implementation of reform continued to manifest over years, in spite of official attempts to restrain over-corrections. Retaining control of the standards of the adaptation process was focused on two areas of concern, first articulated in July 1950, at the founding of the Committee on Xiqu Reform: differentiating lewd, lascivious plays from love stories, and distinguishing mythological legends from plays that spread superstitious beliefs. By explicitly listing approved romantic plays, the committee was able to prevent the banning of traditional plays like *Story of the Western Wing* (*xixiangji* 西厢记), but without a similar list, the statement on myth and superstition left open a substantial space for confusion. Eliminating accounts of hell, tales of karmic justice or horror plays, the committee established as their official position:

> Examination work should focus on differentiating superstition and mythological legend, because many legends are the unrestrained imaginative explanations of the ancient peoples for natural phenomena, or are a kind of protest against [injustices in] human society, and the search for an ideal world. These types of legend not only have no harm but are even beneficial.[41]

Without further clarification, cultural workers at all levels of the bureaucracy struggled to make sense of the finer points of the distinctions. In spite of published discussions in drama journals over the course of 1950, in his December 1st address to the National Conference of Xiqu Workers, Tian Han, head of the Xiqu Reform Bureau, only requoted this passage in its entirety, without further

[40] "原因主要是由于我们对政务院"指示"的精神体会得不够." Ma Yanxiang 马彦祥, "Yijiuwuyinian de xiqu gaige gongzuo he cunzai de wenti 一九五一年的戏曲改革工作和存在的问题," *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧 3, no. 8 (Nov 1951): 42-46.

[41] "Zhongyang renmin zhengfu wenhuabu chengli xiqu gaijin weiyuanhui—queding xiqu jiemu shending biaozhun 中央人民政府文化部成立戏曲改进委员会－确定戏曲节目审定标准" (July 27, 1950).

refinement.[42] By the time the final conference report had been published in the *People's Daily*, *White Snake* and *Journey to the West* had both been identified as outstanding legends whose creativity and beautiful imagery encapsulated the struggle of the common people; this summary, however, went way further than committee members intended, accidentally approving the entire canon of plays themed to *Journey of the West*.[43] Though the upper echelons of the Xiqu Reform Bureau remained consistent with their position, the confusion over the distinction between legend and superstition remained a nearly constant concern for reform workers in the first two years of the PRC.

The Legend of White Snake was one of the most oft-cited examples of a mythological play that deserved preservation, yet was also one of the most common targets of revision in the name of battling superstition. In mid-1950, historian and scholar Huang Zhigang (黄芝冈 1895-1971) published an article attempting to follow official distinctions in classifying dozens of traditional plays or play-cycles; as if in testimony to the certainty of its status, *White Snake* appeared in the first paragraph as the quintessential example of a mythological play that was both trash and treasure.[44] Within the month, a reviewer offered assessment of two de-mythologized *White Snakes*, and, citing Huang's article, called instead for its conversion to a 'human' romance.[45] What appeared to be the start of a lively debate quickly disappeared from the papers until October, when xiqu reform leader Ma Shaobo (马少波 1918-2009) offered an analysis of the distinction between myth and superstition which closely followed Huang's lead in opening with a confirmation of the status of

[42] Tian Han 田汉, "Wei aiguozhuyi de renmin xin xiqu er fendou 为爱国主义的人民新戏曲而奋斗," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Jan 21, 1951. The actual address was delivered on Dec 1, 1950.
[43] "Wei jianshe aiguozhuyi de renmin xin xiqu er fendou: quanguo xiqu gongzuo huiyi bimu 为建设爱国主义的人民新戏曲而奋斗：全国戏曲工作会议闭幕," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Dec 17, 1950.
[44] Huang Zhigang 黄芝岗, "Lun 'shenhuaju' yu 'mixinxi' 论'神话剧'与'迷信戏'," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 4 (Jun 10, 1950): 63-66.
[45] Jin Yiping 金倚萍, "'Baishezhuan' gaibian de shangque 白蛇传改编的商榷," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 5 (Jun 27, 1950): 92-93.

White Snake as an approved play.[46] This article, which had been first presented as a speech at the xiqu division of a Beijing school for the arts, affirmed both official approval of *White Snake* and the awareness of the depths of confusion that still plagued xiqu adapters.

White Snake variants proliferated in the early 1950s. Performances so saturated entertainment markets that there emerged a jaded but pithy couplet to sum up the coverage: "flip through the paper, no need to look; the *Romance of Liang and Zhu* and *Legend of White Snake* 翻开报纸不用看，梁祝姻缘白蛇传."[47] The *Legend of White Snake* had maintained popularity with audiences even in the decades before the 1950s. As a traditional seasonal play, *White Snake* was also performed annually for the *duanwu* festival, to coincide with the temporal setting for the central reveal of Bai Suzhen's demonic nature. Even throughout the year, popular scene selections, including "Jinshan Temple," "Stealing the Heavenly Herbs," and "Broken Bridge," recurred regularly in programs and reviews during the 1930s and 40s.[48] Given the high frequency of performances, *White Snake* could be regarded as a staple of the repertoire of most *dan* performers, and a source of inspiration to new playwrights. Throughout the 30s and 40s, a diverse range of periodicals featured newly written plays, though not always xiqu, themed to the romance at the core of the legend.[49]

Alongside the distinction between mythological legend and superstition, the 1950 statement of the Committee on Xiqu Reform required a similar distinction between romances and lewd or lascivious plays. Unlike the effects of the anti-superstition campaign on myth-based xiqu, the

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[46] Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Mixin yu shenhua de benzhi qubie 迷信与神话的本质区别," *Xin Xiqu* 新戏曲 1, no. 2 (Oct, 1950): 1.

[47] A variant on this includes *Western Wing* (西厢) in place of '姻缘.'

[48] See, for example, photo essays and written reports in *Ten Days of Theater* (十日戏剧) (1937-1939) and *369 Pictorial* (三六九画刊) (1940s).

[49] See, for example, Gu Yiqiao 顾一樵, "Bai Niangniang 白娘娘," pts. 1-5 *Shidai gonglun* 时代公论 1, no. 8 (1932): 33-38; 1, no. 9 (1932): 38-43; 1, no. 11 (1932): 41-45; 1, no. 12 (1932): 36-39; 1, no. 13 (1932): 41-43, or Liu Nianqu 刘念渠, "Bai Niangzi 白娘子," pts. 1-4, *Chunqiu* 春秋 6, no. 1 (1949): 39-49; 6, no. 2 (1949): 61-70; 6, no. 3 (1949): 59-71; 6, no. 4 (1949): 61-65. A reference exists to a one-act play "Baishe yu Xu Xian 白蛇与许仙" by Xiang Peiliang 向培良 in the *Zhongguo huijiao jiuguo xiehui huibao* 中国回教救国协会会报 3, no. 2 (1940) though I have not located the actual script.

contemporary campaign for marriage reform worked to the advantage of romances, and consequently to the core plot of *White Snake*. The elevation of the romance was well-matched to the campaign on marriage reform, and facilitated the condemnation of feudalistic practices prohibiting 'free love,' the opportunity to choose one's own partner.[50] Though similar in their targets, these performances were far from unified. Different regional xiqu genres retained differing fragments of the original *Thunder Peak Pagoda* (*Leifeng ta* 雷峰塔) plot that was the source for *White Snake*, which while making it an easy target for adaptation, made it also easier for widespread variation in approach.[51] Plots varied both on account of differing traditional source material and updates to connect it to the present day, and on the sheer addition or subtraction of scenes and characters. The central characterization of the romance and its obstruction differed significantly following contemporary efforts at innovation, however the unifying characteristic among different adaptations of *White Snake* was the elevation of the focus on romance.

The core story of the elevation of a supernatural tale to romantic legend traces the contours of a gradual move toward a more humanized Lady Bai. Operatic antecedents of a demonic romance with a white snake traced back to the Ming dynasty, as the *chuanqi* (传奇)*, Thunder Peak Pagoda*, and continued to develop in the Qing, with the appearance of a second version with an alternate ending including a son who excels in the civil service examination and returns to reunite with his mother.[52] The addition of the alternate ending added a degree of humanity to Bai Suzhen, slightly attenuating her demonic aspects. As Bai Suzhen grew more sympathetic, she fell more naturally into the role of romantic heroine, subtly enhancing the central romantic core of the plot. The intensification of the association of the play with the romance was possibly assisted by the common retention of the

[50] The first law on marriage reform was passed in 1950 establishing equal rights among marriage partners to choose each other, and banning concubinage.
[51] Pan Hongdong 潘红东, *Baishe gushi yanjiu (shang)* 白蛇故事研究 （上） (Taiwan 台湾: Xuesheng shuju 学生书局, 1980).
[52] Wilt Idema, *Precious Scrolls from Thunder Peak* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009).

romantic scene at Broken Bridge, an excerpt often considered to have high artistic value, particularly in the Peking opera tradition. The intersection of this romantic core with the early 1950s marriage campaign, which stressed the rights of women to choose their own partners, only pushed Bai Suzhen to greater heights. By 1955, Fu Xihua, in the introduction to his expansive, three-volume collection of *White Snake* stories across multiple folk performing arts traditions, characterized Bai Suzhen as an iconic heroine, an invarying image across art forms in her persistent rejection of standard feudalistic morality for women.[53]

Her operatic incarnations during the 1950s were also unwaveringly consistent in this regard; the ambiguity of her character was systematically diminished or eliminated entirely in favor of boosting her heroic image. Where the original Bai Suzhen was possessed of a highly ambiguous morality that presumably discouraged audiences from sympathizing with a demonic figure, the elevation of the romance brought with it a desire to see her less problematically, and at the same time to enhance the redemptive qualities of her character. Scenes like "Stealing the Magic Herb," where Bai risks her life to obtain an essential ingredient to save Xu Xian, were featured regularly in pictorial inserts of Republican era periodicals; even if this martial excerpt did not explicitly feature romance, it unquestionably enhanced both her moral uprighteousness (from the viewpoint that she was stealing the herb from a miserly immortal for the express purpose of saving a life) and, depending on staging, her qualities as a martially competent heroine.[54] In possibly the most dramatic moral shift, however, Bai Suzhen went from spreading plague in an attempt to boost Xu Xian's

[53] Fu Xihua 傅惜华, *Baishezhuanji* 白蛇传集 (Shanghai: Shanghai chubanshe, 1955), 2.

[54] Pictorial representations typically render her at some point in or near victory. Some versions of this scene, however, require Bai Suzhen to struggle significantly in battle, whether because she is gravidly pregnant, or because she is fighting a stronger immortal, or, for a reason unstated in the plot, because she has been put in such a state of idealized femininity that a certain amount of weakness enhances her sympathetic appeal.

pharmacy business in the original *chuanqi*, to true heroism as a nurse treating plague victims, in Tian Han's 1944 *The Golden Begging Bowl*.[55]

While Bai Suzhen was slowly and gradually anthropomorphized, Xu Xian underwent a similarly dramatic shift in character and motivation. The victim of Bai Suzhen's well-meaning but destructive schemes to bring him success and profit, Xu Xian traditionally retained an ambivalence toward Bai Suzhen that frustrated some Republican era commentators eager to see the romance develop. A review in the *369 Pictorial* in 1942 passionately decried Xu Xian's intermittent cowardice:

> If we're going to speak of 'idiotic nonsense', like Xu Xuan[56], that piece of work, he really is too hardhearted. He's cowardly, he's suspicious, and entirely lacks initiative. Even if you look at his refusal to recognize her, or complete renunciation of any romantic vow, that kind of 'dutiful ethics,' he's still intolerable. Bai Suzhen truly could be called lacking in judgment, doggedly favoring such a little nosewipe.[57]

On the one hand, the rising quantities of vitriol against Xu Xian reflected an increasing sympathy for Bai Suzhen as the demonic qualities of her character were downplayed in favor of her emotional human traits. On the other, this heightened desire for the romance was less a consequence of the development of individual characters as plausibly a reflection of a growing investment in tragedy, by strengthening the romance before its doomed collapse at Fahai's intervention.

The vilification of Fahai was a later alteration than changes to either Bai Suzhen or Xu Xian, and in his role as a somewhat martial monk, he became an opportunity for directly exploiting connections to contemporary events. The incorporation of resistance themes was a natural wartime outgrowth of the theater of social causes, though not always welcomed by local authorities who banned plays that were too explicit in their critiques. In keeping with this move towards more patriotic updates to traditional plots, at least one version of *Thunder Peak Pagoda* in 1945 featured

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[55] "Liao yi," *Jinboji*, 44-46.

[56] Xu Xian was often seen as Xu Xuan in the late imperial period.

[57] Shutang huaju 树堂话剧, "Baishe zhuan zhi yishuguan 白蛇传之艺术观," *Sanliujiu Huakan* 三六九画刊 14: 5 (1942): 20. "我们说句《痴人说梦》的话，像许宣这快料，实在太不够朋友。既懦弱，又猜疑，浑无主义。即就他那反眼若不相识，全不念一点香火情的这一种德行，已属要不得。白娘子亦可谓有眼无珠，偏偏就看准了这样一个拉腕儿."

Fahai leading a charge against the occupying Japanese, an unexpectedly heroic role more in keeping with his original status as demon-queller. *The Golden Begging Bowl* also combined patriotic elements with Fahai's character, though to opposite effect: instead of Bai Suzhen inducing a plague as was traditional, Fahai turned traitor, joined forces with bandits[58] and led his monks in spreading germs along with the rumor that the plague was supernaturally sent.[59] These kinds of changes may have been motivated by patriotism, but their incorporation of modern themes was yet another area of contention for some critics: by the mid-1940s, calls for the arts to lead social reform and resistance had become so familiar to audiences that at least one commentator complained against the need for so many playwrights to 'scientize' and 'democratize' traditional plays, beginning with Fahai.[60]

In a post-war environment, the performance of *The Golden Begging Bowl* at National Day celebrations in 1950 may have helped propel White Snake-themed plays towards the romantic core. Heightening the polarization between heroes and villains, Tian Han cast Bai Suzhen, Qing'er and Xu Xian all sympathetically, against a malicious Fahai, rather than play extensively with either mixed feelings from Xu Xian about the demonic nature of his wife, or with the destructive qualities of interacting with the supernatural, features that had been much more prominent in the early Qing editions. Sympathetic romantic leads were retained through multiple updates of the script when it was finally titled *Legend of White Snake*, in 1952 and 1955. This restructuring around the romance went hand-in-hand with the development of a tragic female heroine, a feature which may have been in keeping with pre-existing trends for melodrama and tragic heroines in entertainment culture of the 1940s and earlier.[61] Certainly, Bai Suzhen's tragic quality was well-matched to the heroines of the

[58] Specifically *wokou* 倭寇, pirates who were traditionally thought of as Japanese.
[59] Dai Bufan 戴不凡, "Ping《Jinboji》Tian Han zuo Zhonghua shuju yijiuwulingnian chuban 评《金钵记》田汉作中华书局 一九五○年出版," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Sept. 12, 1952, 3.
[60] "Cong Fahai heshang kang ri shuoqi 从法海和尚抗日说起," *Wenyi zazhi* 文艺杂志 3 (1945).
[61] There is arguably a natural connection between the development of Bai Suzhen's character and the treatment of women in 1920s and 30s films as ciphers for the nation; she was at once increasingly the projection of male desire and a literal embodiment of 'masquerade' and 'performance,' terms that Miriam Hansen has used to describe the ambivalence

other popular mythological legend plays, *The Romance of Liang and Zhu* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯与祝英台) and *Cowherd and Weaving Maid* (*Niulang zhinv* 牛郎织女).

It was the placement of the focus of this central tragic conflict that occupied adaptation efforts over the transition between decades. As Bai Suzhen grew in anthropomorphic qualities, the question became whether the central tragedy was one of Bai Suzhen's downfall or the foiled romance. The first would have villainized Xu Xian; the latter, any of the characters whose mortal expectations or understanding of the supernatural world obstructed the budding romance. Adapters in the early 1950s tended to this latter option, partially redeeming Xu Xian at the expense of the positive characteristics of the intervening monk Fahai. The most prominent example of this transition to heroic yet tragic romance was visible in the responses to the evolution of Tian Han's rendering of the white snake story. In a detailed 1952 critique in the *People's Daily*, critic Dai Bufan (戴不凡 1922-1980) condemned *Golden Begging Bowl* for relying on a system of divine justice to justify Bai Suzhen's pursuit of Xu Xian, instead of granting her the courage to seek free love for herself.[62] Though constructed around a critique of feudalistic oppression of independently chosen romance, critiques like Dai's increasingly heightened the sympathetic yet tragic nature of Bai Suzhen's position. Though Tian Han did not offer a direct reply to Dai Bufan, his own later revisions of the central characters were modelled around both their romantic and tragic potentials. In his introduction to the 1955 edition of *White Snake*, Tian Han offered another interpretation of Xu Xian:

> He represents all lovers trapped in the violent battle between selfless love and the desire for self-preservation. He is kind, but also vacillating. If he didn't falter at all, then there would be

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of film heroines who move seamlessly between identities that reflect character choice and determination by social circumstance. For Bai Suzhen, it may not have been a case of constructing a social critique through her own doubly encoded character, but a question of drawing on audience familiarity with this trope of affective spectatorship to mobilize sympathy for her character. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 16-18.

[62] Dai Bufan, "Ping 'jinboji,'" 3.

> no tragedy; if he faltered completely, then he would have become a negative character. Previously, Buddhist plays of *White Snake* handled Xu Xian in the latter way, and in this way destroyed Xu Xian, and also destroyed Bai Niangzi.[63]

Ultimately, even this vacillation remained detached from the question of Xu Xian's devotion to his wife; when Fahai informs him of Bai's demonic nature, Xu precludes the possibility of fear by proclaiming her "a good person" (倒是一个好人了).[64] Tian's solution may have subtracted complexity from the motivations and emotional relationship between Bai and Xu, but it moved Bai Suzhen strongly into the position of sympathetic, tragic heroine.

While Tian was moving through his own process of revisions to the *White Snake* story, in the very early 1950s, local cultural arts workers and even professional actors wrangled with the ramifications of writing a human-shaped, supernaturally endowed snake as a revolutionary, antifeudalistic heroine. A common solution simply subtracted the supernatural elements, heightening the romantic plot by recasting Fahai as more purely villainous, obstructing a natural pairing in the name of preserving the traditions of the ruling classes.[65] With Bai Suzhen cast as a mortal woman, the tragic romance with Xu Xian offered fitting material for restructuring the plot to incorporate allusions to the ideal of 'free love,' or self-arranged marriage partnerships that did not require parental approval. Framed within the romance, Bai Suzhen could either be paired with a sympathetic paramour in Xu Xian with whom to fight patriarchal expectations, or remain a tragic heroine oppressed by both feudalistic demands and an indifferent lover; both circumstances presented an opportunity not only to stress resistance to feudalism but also to connect the play to the campaign for marriage reform.

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[63] Tian Han, Preface to *Baishezhuan*, 4. 他代表了忘我无私的爱和自我保存欲望剧烈战斗的情人。他是善良的，但也是动摇的。他若完全不动摇，便没有悲剧；他若动摇到底，便成了否定人物。以前的佛教戏《白蛇传》便是像后者那样处理许仙的，那样便毁了许仙，也毁了白娘子。

[64] Tian Han, "Shang shan 上山," *Baishezhuan*, 46.

[65] Xiqu bao bianjibu 戏曲报编辑部, "Guanyu 'Hongzongliema' he 'baishezhuan' 关于'红鬃烈马'和'白蛇传'," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 3, no. 6 (Nov 5, 1950): 479.

A sample approach in the northeast, "*Bai Niangzi* 白娘子," recast its subject matter in the spirit of marriage reform but at the expense of mythological legend, and also most of the original scenes that were associated with the play. The plotline demythologized Bai Niangzi, dispensed with the subplots surrounding Bai Niangzi's moral ambiguity in order to render her a more perfect tragic heroine, and centered instead on the conflicts of arranged marriages. A dramatic toss-up of characters added a hostile concubine of Bai's father, an amorous cousin, and traveling valiants to accompany Xu Xian in his quest against corruption. The trails of oppression and intrigue eventually led to rumors of snake spirits, both false and real confessions and the execution of all villains so that the heroes could escape into the mountains.[66] Though upheld as a successful example of a play that met the requirements of encouraging both antifeudalism and marriage reform, *Bai Niangzi* was criticized for its efforts to repackage Fahai's villainy without recourse to supernatural solutions that would explain his hostility to both Bai Suzhen and the romance.

Other plays sought to include traces of the long history of the original source material, even within this political, ideological rubric. In the original *Thunder Peak Pagoda*, Bai Niangzi twice interferes with human affairs in order to smooth her pursuit of Xu Xuan: once by stealing silver from the local treasury to offer to the impoverished Xu, and, after his escape from the authorities, again by spreading plague among the people to encourage Xu's pharmacy business. A Hangzhou version, *New Lady White* (*Xin Bainiangzi* 新白娘子), from June, 1950, shuffled these events to turn the tale into a chronicle of the corruption of those with power: in the style of Robin Hood, Bai Niangzi acquires money from corrupt officials in order to help Xu Xian start a pharmacy, but after their secret is exposed by Fahai, is required to pay off his jailkeepers in order to procure his freedom. Fahai later pays off Xu's shop assistants to scare him on the *duanwu* festival with two snakes and the

[66] Jin Yiping, "'Baishezhuan' gaibian de shangque," 92-93.

suggestion that Bai and her maid were both snake spirits that only Fahai could disperse.[67] With corruption at its core, much of the second half of the original play was rendered unnecessary, including the birth of a child, Bai's defeat by Fahai, her immobilization under the Thunder Peak pagoda and her reunion with her son, which were, ironically, nearly all the scenes that had historically been most popular with audiences.

The exclusion of these scenes was an adaptation strategy that was tailored to a notion of dramatic structure that sidestepped the myth/superstition problem by emphasizing the romance, but their elimination was elsewhere justified on purely aesthetic grounds. In an article in the *Tianjin Xingbao* a few months earlier, A Ying (阿英 1900-1977) had criticized the addition of scenes describing the birth and filiality of a son as obscuring the central message of the play, without adding to the artistic value intrinsic in other scenes like "Broken Bridge." In response to this article, as prominent an artist as Mei Lanfang approached his secretary and collaborator Xu Jichuan (许姬传 1900-1990) to adapt a version of just "Broken Bridge" from *White Snake*.[68] Even here, Mei bypassed the question of whether or not to include the mythological components by breaking down the story into two plotlines, the romance between Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian, and the supernatural battle with Fahai, in order to discard the latter.[69]

Tian Han's revision of *The Golden Begging Bowl* into *White Snake*, now complete with mythological elements, brought the play widely recognized approval following the successful performance of the newly updated version in late 1952. With *White Snake* a centerpiece of the new canon of approved xiqu plays, the Xiqu Reform Bureau encouraged local xiqu genres to adapt these

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Xu Jichuan 许姬传, "'Baishe zhuan' de gaibian '白蛇传'的改编," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 2 (May 27, 1950): 28.

[69] This may not have been a reflection of confusion over superstition so much as caution. Mei Lanfang was characteristically discreet in his participation in contemporary politics, but may have been even more likely to forbear from taking a stance after falling on the wrong side of xiqu reform policy a few months earlier at the end of 1949, with his comment that xiqu should "take steps without changing the form"—a position that was rejected by reform officials on the principle that form and content could not be easily separated.

plays into their individual styles; by 1953, thirteen regional genres had a complete *White Snake* play in their repertoire.[70] The first edition of *White Snake* had borrowed heavily from *The Golden Begging Bowl* but with some trimming of the plot. This streamlining continued more extensively with the final edition in 1955, after experiences with the play on tour around the country and work with actors at the Peking Opera Experimental School.[71] Defending the decision as enhancing the mythological atmosphere of the play, Tian Han deliberately altered the 1955 final edition to include a wind spirit sent by Fahai to deliver Xu Xian away before the meeting at Broken Bridge, in a gesture that seemed aimed directly at conclusively resolving the question of whether or not *White Snake* could retain its supernatural aspects.

Mythological legend plays like *White Snake* became one of the key settings for negotiating the give and take of reform. Few other plays were as iconic in representing the problem as an injustice to traditional legend. At times, it appeared as though only the officials of the Xiqu Reform Bureau actually knew what constituted the difference with superstition and how to make the distinction for individual plays—even to the exclusion of other high-ranking members of the state. In 1950, the *People's Daily* described committee members as approving the entire myth cycle surrounding *Journey to the West*, in spite of explicit references to the contrary; for the next year, multiple published reports and directives from the Ministry of Culture were at pains to distinguish certain Monkey plays from the more slapstick, special effect-laden routines, like *Pansidong* 盘丝洞, that had dominated theater stages in the Republican period.[72] These efforts to control performance culture show both the

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[70] Zhang Lianhong 张炼红, "Cong minjianxing dao 'renminxing': xiqu gaibian de zhengzhi yishi xingtaihua 从民间性到'人民性'：戏曲改编的政治意识形态化," *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 1 (2002): 43.

[71] Tian Han, *Baishezhuan*, 1.

[72] Two examples of published articles include Ma Shaobo, "Mixin yu shenhua de benzhi qubie," 1, and Ma Yanxiang, "Yijiuwuyinian de xiqu gaige gongzuo he cunzai de wenti," 42-46. The Ministry of Culture also specified Monkey plays by name when it issued approval of the continued performance of serial plays ("Zhongyang wenhuabu jiancha bing jiuzheng Hengyangshi gongsiying jutuan paiyan xuanyang fengjian mixin, shenguai de jiu liantaixi 中央文化部检查并纠正衡阳市公私营剧团排演宣扬封建迷信、神怪的旧连台戏" (Oct 5, 1951). Competing renditions of *Pansidong* (*Cave of the Spider Spirit*) filled Shanghai stages in the 1930s; an extremely popular version by the brothers Zhang Dapeng and

lingering effects of Republican tastes and the power of the Reform Bureau's prohibitions.

Though after the end of 1950, reports in newspapers and journals unanimously reiterated the redeemable qualities of legends, in practice, local cadres struggled with the implications of falling on the wrong side of this distinction. In an incident that was repeatedly quoted in both drama journals and in the *People's Daily*, a cadre in Xuancheng in Anhui Province interrupted the performance of *White Snake* in opposition to the presence of a supernatural snake spirit as a feudalistic remnant.[73] Controversy over the appropriateness of the supernatural elements of *White Snake* was resolved only when both the Peking opera and *yueju* troupes performed versions in the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention at the end of 1952. The plays at this convention were reviewed extensively prior to performance, and audio recorded live throughout the month-long festival.[74] After the Convention was deemed a success, localities were encouraged to adopt these confirmed adaptations into their repertoires, effectively creating a canon of performable plays.

White Snake adaptations appeared frequently at the center of the mythological play problem in large part because there was a clear divide between the higher officials of the Xiqu Reform Bureau and local cadres. Though the party had intended for critical reviews to operate as one of the main checks on excesses and ideological errors in the adaptation and reform progress, in practice, the work of setting limits took place across multiple venues, and progressed in unpredictable fits and starts as reports filtered in from localities. This is not to say the government did not attempt to find other methods of control on the movement: the announcement of the 'three reform' policy (reforming the plays, reforming the people, reforming the institutions) induced the Xiqu Reform Bureau to advance reform programs across institutions, from schools to committees and conference

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Zhang Erpeng featured a special effects sequence where Zhu Bajie's head detached and was tossed around the stage. For a fuller account of the Zhang brothers' innovations with *Pansidong*, see Li Zigui, *Yi jiangnan*. Parts of their routine may have been featured in the 1927 film of the same name, parts of which were recently rediscovered in Norway.

[73] Luo Yong 罗雍, Rui Yun 瑞云, and Wu Yunxing 吴运兴, "Duzhe laixin 读者来信," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Sept 8, 1951: 2.

[74] Portions of these are still extant and have been converted to both CD and mp3.

meetings, all of which took part in expediting discussion of the nuances of adaptation. Journals dedicated to xiqu featured editorial boards comprised entirely of Xiqu Reform Bureau members who may have been more inclined to use the editorial process to minimize the impact of non-mainstream voices from print.[75] And yet in spite of so much formal bureaucratic architecture underpinning the different structures of reform, the realities of execution remained fixed in the actual decisions of performance and censorship, made in the hands of actors and local officials.

For the majority of plays prior to 1952, confusion continued unabated, particularly as superstition appeared to serve increasingly as a catch-all for many of the plays that had been popular in the 30s and 40s. *The Treasured Lotus Lamp* (*Baolian deng* 宝莲灯) and *Fighting Against the Chariots* (*Tiaohuache* 挑滑车), also Republican favorites, were just two of many plays that occupied the cracks in the definition, coming down as superstition in some reports, and as legend in others, in a process that evolved in invisible lock-step with progress in the Bureau's refinements in announcements about adaptation over the course of 1950-51. Though *White Snake* plays were popularly thought of as commanding the periodical press, it was another approved mythological play, *Cowherd and Weaving Maid*, that dominated discussion at the end of 1951, focusing not only on the question of approved content, but the nature of adaptations of form.

Stage Images

Stage images (*wutai xingxiang* 舞台形象) was a broad term that included a range of staging practices and performance techniques, from the body of the actor to the greater set. The original

[75] By end of 1950, the only published mention of converting *White Snake* into a non-mythological play occurred obliquely in the *Xiqu bao*, in a rejection notice for an adapted script that appeared on the very last page of the issue. The generally positive tone of critical reviews and essays in journals before 1953 changed after xiqu and spoken drama were folded together into the dominant theater journal of the Maoist period, the *Xiju bao* (*Theater Report*), with an increasing tendency toward collections of articles unified in sustained criticism of individual plays, like the ill-fated *Mafengnv* 麻风女.

distinctions for identifying superstitious plays in the May 5th Directive isolated six elements explicitly from performance technique (*biaoyan fangfa* 表演方法), each without explicit definitions: cruelty and savagery, horror, obscenity, enslavement (or plays that inhibited the expression of resistance), national shame, and anti-patriotism.[76] In practice, what was actually at stake was the balance between the depiction of the elements of theatrical storytelling that had flourished in the Republican era, from stage violence to special effects, and the preservation of unique operatic performance techniques.

As much as the government was invested in script appraisal and adaptation, the reform of 'stage images,' or performance practice, was still a significant early goal of the reform movement. Though the first three years after liberation were marked by the uneven yet exuberant reorganization of play scripts into various states of censorship, surviving adapted titles varied extensively in performance practice. Though calls to clear 'unhealthy' images from the stage persisted for years, most critical reviews limited discussion to the aspects of plot and character development that spoke to ideological demands, reserving performance practice for more technical discussions by and for actors. After Mei Lanfang's late 1949 suggestion to "take steps without changing the form (移步而不换形)," was rejected by reform leaders, implying that form and content were indivisible, the question of reforms to performance technique could not be easily dismissed, yet the degree of change remained an open question. In July, 1950, the Shanghai periodical *Xiqu Report* posted a reply to a reader's concerned letter that xiqu reform had not gone far enough in removing "absurd" practices like sung introductions to characters, or the traditional use of impressionistic acting techniques as stand-ins for concrete props.[77] Situating xiqu technique in terms of national pride and identity, the editors not only affirmed the centrality of 'formulaicism' (*chengshihua* 程式化) to

[76] "Zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi" (May 5, 1951).
[77] "Guanyu jiuju de biaoyan fangfa 关于旧剧的表演方法," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 8 (Jul 8, 1950): 159.

traditional aesthetics, but uttered an explicit rejection of reform tactics that would force xiqu closer to spoken drama; however, the central position remained unchanged, that reform of content would naturally induce changes in form.

The question of how content would change form remained hazy. Initially, adaptations of content were presumed to induce changes in form without any additional external effort; a feat which was presumably achieved on account of new lyrics requiring changes to the traditional musical *qiang* (腔), which would have impacted the atmosphere of the scene. In practice, reviews commonly complained of perfunctory attitudes to new adaptations, in some cases merely adding slogans for popular campaigns while leaving the majority of the script unchanged. To some extent, these concerns were pragmatic, born of benign reluctance among both actors and audiences to take up new changes; dealing with a diverse range of actor fears from an inability to remember new lines to the loss of traditional audiences, *yueju* (越剧) theater worker Yuan Sihong (袁斯洪) recommended avoiding the public use of the idea of adaptation altogether, simply changing all identifying information in the plot so that all that remained was an allusion to the original.[78]

From the critical perspective, sloganeering approaches were just as likely to be blamed on actors as on writer-adapters; at best, this was read as a reflection back on the degree of understanding and enthusiasm for correct ideological thought, and at worst, as a subtle comment on personal character. An alarming letter addressed to an anonymous actress published in the *Xiqu Report* condemned the superficial use of slogans in performance not as detrimental to the play, but as a reflection of the failure of the actor to sufficiently revolutionize thought and feeling. The rationale was that passion on stage was necessary to reflect correct ideology, in order to mobilize audiences to do the same. The failure to do so was a fault that was characterized not just as catering to audiences

[78] [Yuan] Sihong [袁]斯洪, "Gaige jiuju hou de yanchu kunnan wenti 改革旧剧后的演出困难问题," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 1, no. 10 (Apr 29, 1950): 15.

but as reflective of a dangerous desire to recreate stardom in class-based terms.[79] Startlingly close to a thinly veiled threat in its rejection of claims of personal transformation, the letter pointed to a rising tide of interest in elevating acting technique and staging practice as equally important targets of reform.

Underneath the ideological adaptations and against critical calls to change, many troupes were still dependent on Republican staging practices. By the end of 1951, calls to clean up the traditional stage reappeared across journals and through different levels of the bureaucracy, even in spite of rapid campaigns to reform actors and scripts that both inhibited the performance of more traditional fare and encouraged the production of newly written modern plays. Though critical reviews remained ambivalent about the concrete details of performance by training their focus on ideological goals, a rising number of complaints over flashy techniques appeared in editorial sections and articles. The phenomenon appeared to be most concerning on the east coast, where cities like Shanghai still maintained traditions of complex staging that had developed in the 1930s and 40s. In late January 1951, the East China Ministry of Culture held a conference specifically to target the problems of 'stage images.'[80] In spite of this attention, the majority of attendees were xiqu reform bureaucrats whose distance from contemporary theater practice rendered their discussion too abstract for realistic proposals for change; their choice of topics touched only tangentially on contemporary practice, primarily targeting the practice of walking on stilts to resemble bound feet. The actor Li Ruilai (李瑞来 1914-1986) was the lone voice to point out that stilt use was already in decline, and that the acting world was already absorbed by a different set of new staging techniques

[79] Li Qing 李晴, "Gei yige xiqu nvyanyuan de xin 给一个戏曲女演员的信," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 5 (Jun 17, 1950): 90-94.
[80] "Wutai xingxiang wenti zuotanhui 舞台形象问题座谈会," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 4, no. 1 (Feb 20, 1951): 16-19.

identified as 'new form' (*xin xingshi* 新形式), distinguished by new choreography, lighting and sets.[81]

This gap between bureaucratic goals for the theater and awareness of actual theater trends in practice persisted in spite of these efforts at dialogue with the acting world. Near the end of 1951, Ma Shaobo drafted a list of seventeen 'ugly images' of xiqu performers for *People's Drama* that aimed explicitly at performer technique, beginning with the standard list of disapproved items like obscenity and horror, and proceeding through a litany of detailed practices from kowtowing on stage to the use of ugly *lianpu* (脸谱) and costumes.[82] Ma's substantial, highly detailed list covered a range of techniques that ultimately may have been more presumed or feared habits than actual practices: tea drinking on stage and the use of thrown pillows to protect the actor's costume from damage during stage action may have still existed in more remote regions, but had already begun to disappear from Shanghai and Beijing stages in the Republican period when criticized for disrupting the realism of the performance. More surprising, as well as nasty, was Ma's detailed description of nose wiping or urinating or defecating on stage, practices which were rarely described elsewhere.[83] Though Ma's descriptions paint a picture of traditional xiqu as had existed decades prior, audience members that wrote letters to the editors of drama journals were more likely to complain of practices that had more in common with Shanghai innovations from the 20s to 40s, like explicit realism; at least one letter-writer protested the chaos of using of a real snake brought on stage for a performance of *White Snake* in Nanjing.[84]

The looseness of the distinguishing qualities between mythological legend and superstition

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[81] Ibid: 18. "总而言之，所谓新形式并不是指话剧的形式，我们这次在北京看的《金钵记》，水漫金山这些场面有着新的舞蹈形式，并用灯光来帮助了布景装置，无疑是新形式"

[82] Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Qingchu xiqu wutaishang de bingtai he chou'e xingxiang 清除戏曲舞台上的病态和丑恶形象," *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧 3, no. 6 (Sept 1951): 25-29.

[83] It seems likely urination and defection were faked, but using liquid or some other substance for realistic effect. A commentator in the previous issue described seeing a performance of a troupe in Tianjin which staged a fake child peeing onto another character. Qin Fen 秦芬, "Chengqing xiqu gaibianzhong de hunluan sixiang he yanchuzhong de chou'e xingxiang 澄清戏曲改编中的混乱思想和演出中的丑恶形象," *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧 3, no. 5 (Aug 1951): 66.

[84] Ibid.

opened up space for debate on the merits of many traditional plays that had been popular in the late Republican era, by pitting interpretations of feudalistic resistance against the use of horror, violence, slapstick humor and many other special effects. The debate was so all-encompassing that even discussions of *lianpu* could be marshalled as evidence for or against particular characters or plays.[85] At stake in these discussions was the evolving direction of bureaucratically dictated code of aesthetics, attempting to balance the patriotic discourse that supported traditional aesthetics in the national drama movement with its negative connotations of the urban bourgeoisie. Stage imagery, including choreography as well as set design, and performance aesthetics, including actor techniques, were a key part of this negotiation.

Efforts to build an ideological performance aesthetic were uncoordinated, ad hoc responses to different trends in adaptations. Calls for xiqu reform were more likely to capitalize on xiqu's propagandistic and educational function in encouraging the deliberate incorporation and support of other contemporary campaigns, like marriage reform or land reform.[86] To some extent, this was a continuity with theater trends from the 1940s that had used historical plays to focus either on the resistance or another indirect critique of society or politics. Even plays rewritten with ideological fervor and updated to match contemporary political campaigns, however, were likely to experiment freely with staging techniques and special effects. By the summer of 1951, the classic mythological legend that gripped critics embroiled in the discussion about adaptation was another play besides *White Snake* to enjoy the prominent approval of government officials, *Cowherd and Weaving Maid* (*Niulang zhinv* 牛郎织女).

A traditional seasonal play, *Cowherd and Weaving Maid*, which set the traditional tale of ill-fated

[85] At the conference in early 1951, the number of colors in a mask was raised as a possible indicator of horror, marking the character as superstitious, whereas the masks of famous characters like Bao Gong and Jiang Wei which contained traditional symbols, had to be defended from similar charges.

[86] "Ba xigai gongzuo yu tugai xuanchuan jiehe qilai 把戏改工作与土改宣传结合起来," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 3, no. 3 (Sept 20, 1950): 323.

romantic longing between a mortal cowherd and a divine weaving maid, had become the subject of increasing attention from adapters in different cities and regional xiqu genres. As a mythological play and consequently subject to closer scrutiny, *Weaving Maid* and its sister incarnation *Match Across the Heavenly River* (*Tianhepei* 天河配) created sufficient interest that the monthly *New Xiqu* (*Xin xiqu* 新戏曲) created a discussion forum specifically for its reviews.[87] The main issue at stake had become the need to reconcile the breadth of adaptation strategies to a more coherent aesthetic approach, even if one which was subordinate to ideology. Two productions in particular caught critical attention, a Peking opera version from Wuxi, and a Pingju version adapted by Wu Zuguang, though the comparison afforded the opportunity to discuss the broader range of performance practices on stages.

Though structured around ideological critiques of the successes and failures of the new adaptations, efforts to classify productions by the extent of their adaptations pointed to a chaotic display of both adaptation strategies and staging techniques. Production styles were grouped into categories by the extent of written revisions to the actual script itself, ranging from significant updates incorporating contemporary political campaigns, issues and slogans, to the essentially untouched. Among the common strategies which had roots in Republican stage practice were the use of real oxen on stage,[88] and the incorporation of contemporary popular songs; Xinxing jutuan (新兴剧团) chose a song from Yan'an, "Brothers and Sisters Clear the Wasteland (*Xiongmei kaihuang* 兄妹开荒)."[89] The majority of performances, however, were more closely tied to contemporary

[87] "Niulang zhinv wenti taolun teji 牛郎织女问题讨论特辑," *Xin xiqu* 新戏曲 2, no. 5 (Oct 1951): 11-24. It must be noted that *Niulang zhinv* and *Tianhepei* are considered separate plays in the repertory, but they share a common storyline. The editors of *Xin xiqu* treated them as interchangeable in the placement of articles concerning the legend, so I have followed suit in considering both adaptations of the legend as a single unit, whether under one title or the other. Since the main adaptations under discussion are titled *Cowherd and Weaving Maid*, I have gone with this title.

[88] Qin Fen, "Chengqing xiqu gaibianzhong de hunluan sixiang he yanchuzhong de chou'e xingxiang," 66.

[89] Xiao Bao 晓报, "'Xin Tianhepei' yuanzexing de cuowu "新天河配"原则性的错误," *Xin xiqu* 新戏曲 2, no. 5 (Oct 1951): 17-18.

events, like the play written by xiqu reform politician Yang Shaoxuan, indirectly alluding to international relations though a struggle between doves and owls, and inserting patriotic slogans, in this case, a line of Lu Xun's poetry that had appeared in Mao's "Talks" from Yan'an.[90] The Wuxi performance was the most extreme example of this type.

Within a year of its premiere, the Wuxi play became polarizing. The Wuxi production introduced place names identifiable as North Korea and Taiwan, and a villain who represented President Truman with underlings whose names approximated words like 'tank,' 'airplane' and 'gunpowder,' and who deployed nuclear weapons against the heroes.[91] Cowherd and Weaving Maid were guided by an old man whose name resembled 'truth,' and who introduced the principles of farming labor through oxen that symbolized tractors. Aside from references to anti-American imperialism, land reform, and the study of socialism, even the theme song was set to the tune "Buying mellow wine (*gu meijiu* 沽美酒)" in order to hint at the slogan of "putting new wine in old bottles." Accompanying the breadth of modern allusions in the play itself, staging tactics drew on a contemporary Soviet children's film, translated in Chinese as "Baohexiandi 宝盒仙笛."[92] Though the original review in the *Xiqu Report* had been generally favorable, within months, more nuanced discussions filled both theater journals and even the *People's Daily*. At the heart of the matter was the question of how far adaptations should go in converting traditional stories into contemporary allegories. By late autumn, amateur critics and prominent members of the political literary scene alike called for a more conservative, reasoned approach to revisions, approaching traditional tales with an ideological respect for their role as the fossilized traces of historical struggles against feudalistic

[90] Ai Qing 艾青, "Tan 'niulangzhinv' 谈《牛郎织女》," *Xin xiqu* 新戏曲 2, no. 5 (Oct 1951): 12-14. The line in question was from a 1932 poem,"横眉冷对千夫指，俯首甘为孺子牛," which originally connoted an unyielding spirit of resistance against an enemy.

[91] Xu Feng 徐风, "Niulang zhinv de xin yanchu 牛郎织女的新演出," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 3, no. 2 (Sept 5, 1950): 311.

[92] I cannot be sure of the solidity of this reference, but this is possibly the 1941 film "Volshebnoye zerno," released in Austria in 1948 and featuring a somewhat similar story of a mortal man encountering an item with supernatural powers.

oppression by the ruling classes.[93] By the end of 1952, in his final report on the National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention published in the *People's Daily*, Zhou Yang rejected the Wuxi adaptation approach as anti-historical, settling the debate against radical, experimental adaptation.[94]

In many ways, these critiques were actually taking aim at the aesthetics of stage imagery. Read together, these articles formed a trend in critical tastes indirectly supported by reform officials, who appended their own brief commentary to the ends of articles they disagreed with, toward a fairly conservative aesthetics that eschewed technical innovations on the stage as derivative of an urban popular culture associated with the bourgeois classes. Movable sets, live animals on stage, lighting effects and the screening of other films on stage during the show were all selling points of Republican staging practice, and were each used in different *Weaving Maid* productions, yet these shows were almost unanimously derided in print. Repeatedly singled out for censure were the practices of showing the goddesses bathing on stage and the use of slapstick humor, both of which were the innovations of Liu Yizhou (刘艺舟 1875-1936) for the New Stage in the Republican era, credited at the time for revitalizing an otherwise staid seasonal play.[95] Though these practices fit within the rubric of prohibited stage images in the May 5th Directive, these print accounts of the plays reflected continued staging practices with particular familiarity with the operatic scene of the 1940s, and within that, with cutting edge performances.

By comparison, movable sets, film screenings and other widespread Republican staging practices may have only been targeted by critics once a critical mass formed for discussion of the

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[93] In addition to Ai Qing, see Wu Duan 武端, "Zenyang zhengque de chuli niulangzhinv gushi 怎样正确地处理牛郎织女故事," *Xin Xiqu* 新戏曲 2, no. 5 (Oct 1951): 11-12.

[94] Zhou Yang 周扬, "Gaige he fazhan minzu xiqu yishu—yijiuwuyinian shiyiyue shisiri zai diyijie quanguo xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui shang de zongjie baogao 改革和发展民族戏曲艺术－一九五二年十一月十四日在第一届全国戏曲观摩演出大会上的总结报告," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Dec. 17, 1952, 3.

[95] Xu Heizhen 许黑珍, "Tianhepei: Liu Yizhou tiyi, Xin Wutai shouyan 天河配： 刘艺舟提议，新舞台首演," *Ximizhuan* 戏迷传 2, no. 4 (1939): 11. The original staging called for a real pool to be used on stage with semi-clad young women; later renditions in 1951 incorporated film footage of the scene instead.

play in October. Though critics were careful to hedge their praise for Wu Zuguang's *pingju* (平剧) adaptation on ideological grounds, ultimately it was this production that won the most critical favor, in part because of the simplicity of staging.[96] Removing live animals and the scenes of the goddesses bathing, the play was praised mainly for taking the legend 'seriously' (*renzhen* 认真), or in terms of content, for the absence of potentially critical references to contemporary politics; functionally, straightforward, simple plot narration began to be associated with simpler staging.[97]

The problem of staging styles was becoming increasingly unavoidable at exactly the time of the debates over *Cowherd and Weaving Maid* partly because style was partially interchangeable with both stage images (舞台形象) and form (形式). Many of the plays that had been banned or disapproved during the first few years of the PRC were associated with the special effects-laden serial plays that had dominated stages in the 40s, while awaiting adaptations that were expected to bring about changes in form. A report from Hengyang at the end of 1951 indicated mounting concern among actors as audiences for new plays began to dwindle, seeking a return instead to Republican style serial plays; reflecting the extent of how comprehensive the category of superstition had become, the government allowed both serial plays and movable sets by situating the criteria for approval squarely in terms of superstition.[98] The regional military Ministry of Culture rescinded this permission within a year, citing the decision as a grave error in the adaptation of performances, as local troupes had taken advantage of the decision to return to traditional stagings of longer myth

[96] Zhang Yinde 张印德, "Duiyu pingju 'Niulangzhinv' yanchu de jidian yijian 对于评剧'牛郎织女'演出的几点意," *Xin Xiqu* 新戏曲 2, no. 5 (Oct 1951): 19-20.

[97] This seems to have been the case for Peking opera; it's not clear whether regional operas followed suit, or were as likely to innovate with adaptations to such a degree.

[98] "Zhongyang wenhuabu jiancha bing jiuzheng Hengyangshi gongsiying jutuan paiyan xuanyang fengjian mixin, shenguai de jiu liantaixi 中央文化部检查并纠正衡阳市公私营剧团排演宣扬封建迷信、神怪的旧连台戏" (Oct 5, 1951).

cycles like *Fengshenbang* (封神榜).[99]

The question of which technical and aesthetic touches could be retained or even developed in staging practice found some resolution at the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention in 1952. The direction of critical reviews over the course of 1951-1952 had pointed towards a traditional aesthetic and away from the more radical of Republican staging practices, and from gestures that could have been seen as converting the operatic aesthetic to match spoken drama. In this regard, the new aesthetic evoked the position of the conservative critics of the 1940s, in spite of the official position of the Reform Bureau that changes in content would naturally induce changes in form.

Adaptation itself was what facilitated movement and negotiation in the progress of reform. Embroiled in the problems of distinguishing and rescuing legends from superstitions, and romance from lewdness, xiqu reformers remained deeply entrenched in the practices and trends of the preceding decades. Beginning with a small set of ideologically themed ideas on content, reform leaders struggled with adding just enough guidance to effect change while curbing excessive responses from local cadres. While local officials continued to wrangle with the concrete limits of reform, the different attempts at adaptation found a startlingly wide array of possibilities for connection to contemporary politics. This itself may have been a connection to theater practices of the previous decade that also emphasized contemporaneity and social relevance.

Attempts at adaptation were articulations of innovation and of tradition of different kinds. Adaptations of traditional plays, particularly those with long histories like *White Snake*, brought with them a wide range of variants combining different elements. The 40s were a time of heightened

[99] "Zhongnan junzheng weiyuanhui wenhuabu dui Hengyangshi paiyan fengjian, mixin liantaixi cuowu de jiuzheng he zhishi 中南军政委员会文化部对衡阳市排演封建、迷信连台戏错误的纠正和指示" (Jul 21, 1952).

awareness of romance and melodrama in the theater, and these trends became increasingly evident in adaptations during the first few years of the PRC. *White Snake* and *Cowherd and Weaving Maid* were just two examples of mythological legends that capitalized on the presence of a tragic heroine, making changes to plots and supporting characters in order to emphasize the central tragedy that paired with the romance. These stories also attempted to craft shared fantasies of a fossilized, tragic yet heroic history of resistance against oppression. The new regime was likely to encourage the development of these tragic identities as a means of emotionally motivating the audience in the name of the greater fight against feudalism, in that audience members could identify with characters like the anthropomorphized Bai Suzhen regardless of her demonic origins, as tragically oppressed.

The tastes of audiences themselves may have played directly into spinning out the time to develop a performance aesthetic, as troupes were inclined to stick with successful staging practices in order to keep audiences. With the majority of local leaders more fixated on the problems of content in adaptation, it took time for performance style to emerge as a focus and not just a theoretically indivisible part of xiqu reform. Considering the quantity of published images that accompanied publicity in journals, newspapers and published script anthologies for the Performance Convention in 1952, it is likely that the convention settled the question of whether or not to maintain Republican era performance aesthetics at the same time as it handled the question of the approval of script adaptation.

Though reform leaders were not neglectful of the question of 'stage images' and style, it was not initially a prominent topic of concern in the press. In that members of the Xiqu Reform Bureau comprised the editorial staff of trade journals, ultimately the government controlled the range of voices that appeared in print, even when presenting debates, dissenting views and audience reports. It was indirect means like the long discussions on legend, history and the superstitious play problem that may have brought performance aesthetics into greater prominence in public discussions. The

plays that fell into the mythological legend or superstition debate were the most likely to innovate with different kinds of staging, especially elaborate moving sets or other previously successful tactics from urban Republican practice. The range of practices involving the staging of these adaptations revealed that dictums on content of plays would not necessarily lead inevitably to a particular form; the development of a unified vision for what stage images should look like was consequently a major project that unfolded in the press through critical reviews, but only heading into the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention, after the first two years of reform had already focused on the adaptation of content.

Even when stage images did grab the attention of xiqu reformers, initially, leaders were largely concerned with a set of dated aesthetic practices that may have differed both from performances at large, and from what actors themselves saw as the future direction of their art. While these articles and restrictions on stage practice could have been intended for rural troupes who were not expected to have the means for elaborate staging, the journals that carried these reports were more likely to circulate in urban settings; the troupes who had the easiest access to these articles were also in the best position to see them as inapplicable, or at most, as confirmation of a base of revolutionary credibility. With all forms of discussion in the periodical press monitored intently, sluggish responses to these injunctions were likely to be revealed only in self-criticisms rather than protests against their relevance or usefulness. The prevailing and officially encouraged atmosphere of enthusiasm for government programs made it even less likely that troupes would risk their reputations through public criticism of state-initiated policies. With the question of staging styles and images relegated to a position of benevolent obscurity, troupes were left with considerable freedom in staging practice.

Though public discussion was run by significant leaders of xiqu reform, and journals and critical reviews were both seen as instrumental to developments in stage images, reports on

adaptations, performances, and even conferences all leave traces of a blend of performance practices. In urban centers, troupes that still depended on ticket revenue for income were more likely to pursue traditional Republican practices, like realism and the use of film, as draws for audiences. At the forefront of drama, actors were invested in a 'new' staging, distinguished both by its use of modern technology and its separation from staging practices for spoken drama. This new approach is explicitly identified in 1950 as distinct from older practices, and may reflect moves by actors themselves to innovate separately from bureaucratic discussions based heavily in theories of form and content.

On the bureaucratic side, xiqu reform leaders were more likely to intertwine the question of form with ideology, aiming for a comprehensive theory of both, built around solutions to the problems that arose with script appraisal. It is likely that association with the bourgeois classes may have made Republican staging practices less desirable, or that the simpler staging of Yan'an practice would have been influential on leaders attempting to direct aesthetic change. Xiqu became surprisingly one of the few places in the arts where practices based on strict realism were not desirable. Though there appears to have been reluctance to identify directly with the band of conservative Shanghai critics from the 40s, there were traces of associations with them through the call for simpler staging and the linking of national pride with traditional aesthetics.[100] The self-consciousness of both PRC and 1940s critics of their power to direct public opinion connected them across the decades; the struggle to theorize adaptation was in effect effort to control and establish a critical voice.

This commonality may ultimately have been helped by the influence of the city itself, as a

[100] Most of the conservative critics appear to be largely silent after 1949, possibly on account of poor class associations. Zhang Guyu, as an exception, may have been published twice (once under a pseudonym) in the *Xiqu bao*, though it also seems likely that he was the author of the article that was never actually published in spite of the posting of a reader reply. It is pure speculation, but Zhang may have been more acceptable to party leaders than the other critics on account of spending time during the war in Xi'an helping the resistance.

place with established patterns of the production of influence. Though the government may not have made a conscious effort to coopt the critical forum established by the Shanghai critics, the city had an established history of influencing public opinion through the genre of the critical review in published periodicals, which assisted in creating sway for traditional aesthetics. The tendency of the Shanghai critics to pursue interest in the activities of *piaoyou* and smaller regional operas itself created a model of the construction of the xiqu journal which continued to manifest in early PRC periodicals. In spite of their general disappearance as major voices of reform after 1949, the 1940s activities of conservative critics of Shanghai contributed to setting the stage for the establishment of a traditional aesthetic after liberation. Through this sphere of influence, Shanghai critics and periodicals set the tone for an artform with national reach.

Chapter 2

A Transnational Stage: Worldly Forces in Institutional and Structural Reforms to Theater

If adaptation of play content and aesthetic style defined the immediate crossover between the Republic and the PRC, adaptation writ large, as the gradual reform of the institution of the theater, was the greater project of both the 1940s and the 1950s. The dominant trend of the era was the intermingling of theater cultures, especially the reform of local traditions towards the production practices and stylistic features of spoken drama. Some of these changes were codified in government missives from the new regime, under the auspices of the greater injunction of 1951 to "reform the plays, the people and the institutions." Others were changes that were already in motion from theater trends at the end of the Republican era.

While the theater reform movement targeted specific, concrete measures of institutional change, artistic change was an organic outgrowth of broader currents in theater debates and practice from before 1949. Restructuring of company positions, the adoption of new figures like the artistic director and the overhaul of actor training and rehearsal practices were measures motivated by social critiques of the theater that had deep roots in the Republican period. Just as criticism of the social institutions of the theater industry had been entangled with artistic reform in that earlier era, these changes entailed aesthetic consequences for PRC actors. Changes to the structure of the industry were inseparable from reconceptions of the artistic execution of theater, and the interconnectedness of these two structures had been noted by reformers of Chinese theater long before the xiqu reform campaign officially began.

Though it appears that xiqu had become rhetorically separated from spoken drama by the end of the 1920s, the following decade demonstrated how impossible such a divide would be to maintain against the international flow of actors and ideas across borders. Leftist playwrights and directors guiding the changes in indigenous theater were fundamentally engaged not just with

foreign theater as a conceptual category but as an adapting avant-garde and modernist practice deeply in touch with international trends. However, in part because xiqu was so closely bound to a notion of the necessity of reform from even the end of the Qing dynasty, actors of all stripes, leftist or otherwise, could not avoid grappling with the question of not whether but how to reform xiqu for a global frame. The rise in popularity of spoken drama at the end of the 1930s provoked another ripple across the xiqu world, where engagement with the various bodies of foreign theater theory for spoken drama was expected of socially conscientious actors, whether the goal was to mobilize patriotic support for the resistance or simply to reject labels of backwardness associated with indigenous theater.[1] At stake was the adaptation of the balance of speech and song, as well as a turn toward script-centered practice, realism and a change to the basic character of the theater towards an increased emphasis on dramaticism as opposed to theatricality.[2] Where the latter emphasized flashy technique as a means of drawing audiences, dramaticism was defined by plot development. The fundamental question became how would xiqu interact with these international theater trends against the demands of its own audiences and critics? And how would it do so in a state of political fragmentation and semi-colonization, where lines of communication could not be counted upon? Even assuming interconnectedness between parts of the nation, could reformers unify behind a single model or vision of reform for the theater? If the instinctual answer to these questions is to

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1 Edward Gunn, "Shanghai's "Orphan Island" and the Development of Modern Drama," in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979,* ed. Bonnie MacDougall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36-37. Gunn marks 1935 as the year that saw a sea change in the acceptance of spoken drama, which only intensified in the two years following. It is clear that by 1937, a reform-minded xiqu critic, particularly one with patriotic goals for the theater toward mass mobilization, could not afford to ignore consideration of spoken drama.

2 Fu Xuemin 傅学敏, *1937-1945 Guojia yishi xingtai yu guotonggu xiju yundong* 1937-1945 国家意识形态与国统区戏剧运动 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2010), 247-8. It was not, however, that traditional theater lacked in complex plots; serial plays (*liantaixi* 连台戏) were an increasingly popular dramatic genre during the 20s-40s, and even the performance of scene selections (*zhezixi* 折子戏) may have depended on audience familiarity with the longer plot of the plays from which they were extracted. Despite this, contemporary performance practice was organized around the principle of the variety show. The move towards performances exclusively featuring complete narratives was motivated by complex factors including rising popular demand, but was also a matter of convenience for playwrights seeking a more direct vehicle for political messages.

look for signs of multivocality in the larger reform movement, what then became of these interactions as they clashed and evolved across the 1949 divide?

What became evident was a growing divide between rhetoric espoused about the theater and the practical experience of reformers on the ground. This chapter examines this divide through the lens of transnationalism. On the surface, this is challenging on two accounts. First, the "nation" was not a solid entity during wartime, not just because of colonization, but also because of entrenched, bitter feuds between the Guomindang and the Communist Party; were the boundaries of this fragile identity undermined, redefined, or reinforced (or some combination of each) in the engagement with foreign theater? Secondly, the period of the 1950s in Chinese theater history is not typically associated with international politics, yet the era was born of a half-century of intensive interactions with foreign drama. This history gives xiqu unique qualifications for confronting its political duties under the new government post-1949. The nationalization of the theater and its concomitant politicization in the first half of the decade was more than a project of ideological propaganda; xiqu's tangled history with representing the nation as the national drama inflected politics at all levels, from the local to the international, as regional theaters sought to place themselves within this new regime, all while responding to state demands for specific models of modernization deeply informed by western practice.

The international element continued to surface in new xiqu productions of the 1950s, despite drastic changes in the political context, and in connections with other modernist theater movements. While attention is rightfully drawn to the influential interactions between Soviet theater and Chinese drama, themes of internationalism in xiqu facilitated experimentation with the theater cultures of other nations as well. While the state stood to benefit from theatrical diplomacy and remained invested in the outcome of collaboration, these projects were just as likely to be undertaken by semi-independent companies. One such transnational production, the Korean

melodrama *Tale of Chunxiang* (*Chunxiang zhuan* 春香传, 1954) stands out because of its apparently overwhelming success: sold out for 89 consecutive shows including an extended run, the play is claimed to have reached an audience of over 90,000 people.[3] Record sales of the music flourished and other regional operas rapidly adapted the play into their native forms. For months, images of Chunxiang surfaced in the *Theater Report* (*Xiju bao* 戏剧报), the primary theatrical magazine of the era, and accounts of performances peppered newspaper reports. How did a Korean play come to be featured on the traditional stage of a Chinese regional opera? What did it mean for a regional opera, and not the national drama, Peking opera, to undertake a project of international political significance—what was the basis of transnationalism in Chinese indigenous theater that made reasonable this independent foray by a low-ranked theatrical company into international politics?

Tale of Chunxiang is at once both a typical and an unusual instance of transnational theater. The production was both indebted to the history of embedded international connections between China and the world, and in apparent rejection of it through the embrace of the public rhetoric of a new post-war world order. While not explicitly an experimentation in form or hybridization, the production could not evade some of the critical questions of cross-border collaboration, including how to weave together the tangled web of significance for each national entity without undermining the project to cultivate a new collective spectatorship—even if it remained unclear who the target of this new spectatorial mode was, Chinese audiences or international ones. Far beyond the spectacle of the instrumentalization of Korean culture, the play crystallized critical moments in the self-fashioning of both China and North Korea, revealing hidden fractures behind the façade of socialist solidarity that ran deep into the roots of transnational theater in China.

[3] Zhang Geng, et al., eds., *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi: Shanghai juan* 中国戏曲志: 上海卷 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo ISBN Zhongxin 中国ISBN中心, 1996), 208-209.

A Brief History of Transnational Theater in China

Transnationalism is a concept that needs to be situated in context with other popular terms for describing international theatrical production, including interculturalism and cosmopolitanism. Why specifically transnationalism? What does it offer that these others do not? After all, at stake in each of these terms is a concern with the relations of power between entities, especially in the form of cultural politics. In her detailed analysis of the nuances of transnationalism as a hermeneutic rubric for understanding theater, Amanda Rogers argues that transnational theater production has the capacity to "physically and imaginatively create new configurations of place, identity and culture that are always in the making," with an emphasis on performance as emergent, continuously producing interactions between existing paradigms of the nation and newly formed networks.[4] By contrast, interculturalism is not bound as closely to the unending workings of a dialectic, but enables connections between cultures including those smaller or larger than the nation-state, and which consequently challenge the organizing force of the nation on identities and spectating habits. And while this understanding of the productive blending of spaces and identities resonates with all three of these terms, cosmopolitanism operates within the project of engaging with and mediating the distinctions of otherness; transnationalism, in its insistent awareness of state boundaries, is more inclined to put the focus on the tension between the blending of identities and the policing of them.[5] The 'trans' of transnationalism speaks to this capacity for theater to construct new identities across multiple borders, including both the conceptual and the political. This is true especially when in dialectical relationship with the identities within those borders, rather than simply the notion of bilateral cooperation in 'international' theater. Rogers' understanding of transnationalism is useful specifically because she does not limit interpretation to only present day movements towards

[4] Amanda Rogers, *Performing Asian Transnationalisms: Theatre, Identities and the Geographies of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 12.

post-nationalism, or situations of globalization and cosmopolitanism, as do many scholars on the topic, but leaves open the possibility of retroactive application to earlier historical international configurations. These historical networks do not depend on latter-day definitions, however stable or not, of global discourses, and equally should not be read as reductive to systems of colonial power, however accurately this described the political situation in East Asia.

Significantly, transnationalism does not always challenge the primacy of the nation-state as it traverses those borders, but may in certain circumstances acknowledge and affirm them, instead.[6] While one of the main effects of transnational productions is to cultivate a type of spectatorship invested in the formation of a new identity from the relation between the two sides, transnational projects are not uniformly transgressive, and even as an emergent form of new identities, can re-inscribe an awareness of nationhood and cultural separation. The circulation abroad of historical theater traditions as representative of a nation is one way in which this identity is intentionally preserved intact, even if spectators are encouraged to engage in a form of appreciation which frays those boundaries.

Historically speaking, transnationalism in the theater, writ large, had a complex history in the first half of the twentieth century, even if the configurations of the "nation" that it intended to represent were by no means as clear as the paradigms of the early Cold War; the question of what constituted national theater disguised deeply embedded anxieties about what could and should represent the nation, as well as to what extent this theatrical tradition should engage with international forces. Despite widespread condemnation from leftist intellectuals outside the theater world who called it the manifestation of a civilization in decline, Peking opera had multiple performers and advocates who sought first to position indigenous theater as national drama, and second, to promulgate it to the world at large. The strategies for redeeming the art were, however,

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[5] Rogers, *Performing Asian Transnationalisms*, 10.

widely divergent in their means and success. Early attempts involved hybridization between indigenous and western forms of drama, at the level of genre. Typically, these theaters did not deliberately highlight the participation of either cultural entity, though these projects could not have been undertaken without a keen awareness of the criticisms attaching xiqu to national culture as 'backwards,' or in need of reform. Hybridization, and with it, transnationalism (in terms of the productive blending of ideas across national boundaries) were woven into the history of the creation of a national drama: the founders of the short-lived National Theater Movement, Yu Shangyuan (余上沅 1897-1970), Zhao Taimou (赵太侔 1889-1968), and Wen Yiduo (闻一多 1899-1946), trained in the US before coming back to Beijing to found a theater department at the National Arts School in 1925.[7] Their attempt to blend Peking opera with spoken drama was ill-fated for a number of reasons, including the opposition of contemporary intellectual movements, organizational difficulties at their own school, and a lack of official support.[8] The movement, however, anticipated the emergence of other similar hybridization attempts, including among the better known, Xiong Foxi's (熊佛西 1900-1965) theater experiment to blend spoken drama with *yang'ge* (秧歌) theater in Ding County (Hebei Province) in the 1930s.[9]

The involvement of foreign influence was key to the most effective strategies to redeem xiqu in the popular eye. However, this was achieved not through formal hybridization, but rather through rhetoric alone. Qi Rushan effectively repackaged Peking opera as an antiquated art form for the consumption of American and European audiences on Mei Lanfang's tours in the 1930s.[10] This 'living museum' display was one of the first instances of transnationalism (in Rogers' sense of theater

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6 Rogers, *Performing Asian Transnationalisms*, 74.
7 Siyuan Liu, "The Cross-Currents of Modern Theatre and China's National Theatre Movement of 1925-1926," *Asian Theatre Journal* 33 no. 1 (Spring 2016): 2.
8 Liu, "Cross-Currents," 16-28.
9 Siyuan Liu, "'A Mixed-Blooded Child, Neither Western Nor Eastern': Sinicization of Western-Style Theatre in Rural China in the 1930s," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25 no. 2 (Fall 2008): 272-297.

as an emergent practice) to reify national boundaries along ideological lines. In reducing and simplifying a Chinese tradition for western audiences, the Mei Lanfang tours employed what Joshua Goldstein has called a 'tactical orientalism.'[11] This rhetorical presentation cultivated a reception of the art that isolated Peking opera as both noble tradition and fossilized curiosity, even if its supposed antiquity made it uniquely qualified to represent the civilization (and with it, the nation) of China. The international audiences addressed by this discourse were, at least superficially, understood as an 'other' to the Chinese national self, leaving behind the question of whether (and how) domestic audiences might respond.

This rhetoric, problematic as it was, still enabled a rise in respect for indigenous theater. Though elite theater critics questioned the grounds on which xiqu was packaged for sale to the west, the cachet of international success improved its popular standing; western recognition challenged the validity of xiqu's rejection by many May Fourth intellectuals.[12] In practice, far from isolated or mired in the past, those who could worked actively to enhance the international flow of ideas and influences to undergird this image of international relevance. By the 1930s, an increasing number of actors had accrued enough economic and social capital to be able to undertake international tours or research trips abroad; this work concretely encouraged the continuous development of a transnational network of theatrical ideas expressed in both aesthetics and technique. As one example among many, the great *dan* actor Cheng Yanqiu traveled to Europe in 1932, visiting with the intent to observe opera music across six different nations.[13] His commitment to study was profound: enrolling in the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, Cheng apparently intended to undertake a three-year

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[10] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 270.

[11] The phrase 'tactical orientalism' is Goldstein's shorthand for this phenomenon, see Goldstein, ch 8.

[12] Goldstein, 278-9, 288.

[13] Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋，"Fu ouzhou kaocha xiqu yinyue chuxingqian zhi liyuan gongyihui tongren shu 赴欧洲考察戏曲音乐出行前致梨园公益会同人书," in *Cheng Yanqiu xiju wenji* 程砚秋戏剧文集, ed. Cheng Yongjiang 程永江 (Beijing 北京: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2003), 17-18. Originally sent Jan 3, 1932.

course in training in western singing, though this plan was curtailed after multiple exhortations to return to China.[14] Though it may be hard in this instance to separate personal goals from larger political ones, these trips were typically justified by a desire to gather enough information to assist with the reform of Chinese theater, reinforcing the message that indigenous theaters needed the assistance of western techniques.

Goldstein suggests that the rise of Peking opera as national drama brought with it a reification of the boundaries between xiqu and spoken drama, as reflective of an increased awareness and policing of presentational and representational aesthetic modes, and a concomitant rejection of hybridization.[15] While it is true that the 'civilized plays' (*wenmingxi* 文明戏) and contemporary costume dramas (*shizhuangxi* 时装戏) decreased in the 1920s, the work of Xiong and other leftists is an important reminder that hybridization was not completely abandoned as an aesthetic reform strategy. While I am indebted to Goldstein's keen perception of the aesthetic shift in this era, I would suggest that this bifurcation did not actually discourage reformers of indigenous theater from continuing to engage with international theater trends in spoken drama. The international transit of major stars reinforced the transnational flow of ideas and influences well into the 1940s; Goldstein's description of the shift away from hybridization may have been a function of the changing rhetoric around xiqu rather than a reflection of its reality. Within the theater world, the development of a transnational network of theatrical ideas among practitioners and theorists came about through both international tours and the laborious process of translating major texts, including efforts of the 1940s to capture all of Stanislavsky's output. Stanislavsky became such a central name to acting theory after 1949, that it is worth exploring the spread of his ideas more closely.

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[14] Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 97-98. Li provides this information as a 'puzzle' in Cheng's character which she subtly relates to the possibility of personal discomfort with the xiqu acting profession.

[15] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 134-137.

The acting theories of Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) were introduced slowly to China over the course of the 1930s and 40s.[16] Though the country was ostensibly concerned with the Second Sino-Japanese war, political rivalries between the Guomindang and the CCP kept the environment politically charged even outside of occupied areas, so that even association with Soviet culture was a potential liability in Guomindang controlled areas. This likely deterred the spread of Stanislavsky's writings more broadly, even without the interference of the geographic disruptions of occupation. In Tian Han's script of the late 1940s, *Liyuan chunqiu* (梨园春秋), a colorful account of xiqu reform to that point through the eyes of an amateur actor, possession of Stanislavsky's writings on acting theory was a cause for detention by local officials.[17] Though the play was suggestive of polarization around this Soviet theorist on a broader scale, name recognition remained low, and translations appeared to circulate mainly within circles affiliated with either leftist politics or the spoken drama movement.

Limited though these groups sound, spoken drama was well integrated with the film and xiqu industries. While it is true, as Min Tian says, that Stanislavsky was widely read only in the 1950s, his influence may have been more pervasive in the previous decade among professional theater circles than is commonly perceived.[18] Zheng Junli (郑君里 1911-1969) is one of the most famous names closely associated with the translation of Stanislavsky into Chinese, bringing with him the attentions of both the theater and film worlds.[19] Zheng translated multiple texts related to

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[16] Stanislavsky's writings were effectively interpreted or ghost written by his students and followers; *An Actor Prepares* was published first in 1936 in English, separate from the companion volume originally intended as its second half, *Building a Character*; the first Russian edition was not prepared until after his death in 1938. His student Grigory Kristi selectively edited the text making it more palatable to contemporary political tastes (by eliminating references to soul or spirit); Kristi also adapted the unfinished manuscript *Creating a Role* to conform to the demands of socialist realism. See Laurence Senelick and Sergei Ostrovsky, eds., *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 394, and 499.

[17] The play was turned into a film in 1949.

[18] Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement: Twentieth Century Chinese-Western Intercultural Theatre* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 160.

[19] Zheng was an extremely well known actor and director for Lianhua Studios in the 30s and 40s, who may be best known for directing the film *A Spring River Flows East* (一江春水向东流). Zheng was also the head of the Shanghai

Stanislavsky's system, including *Acting--the First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky, a director of Stanislavsky's First Studio, in 1937.[20] The focus of his efforts however was on the seminal text *An Actor Prepares*, which took from 1937 to 1943 to complete.[21] Working together with Zhang Min (章泯 1906-1975), Zheng translated the first two chapters of *An Actor Prepares* from its English version, publishing them in the *Dagongbao* 大公报 in 1937, then in other Chongqing-based publications after he escaped from occupied Shanghai.

Zheng's departure for Chongqing after the start of the war guaranteed that Stanislavskian theories were available to the major theater groups and scholars working in the hinterlands, including Tian Han and Ouyang Yuqian. And despite the limitations of available translations, Li Lun (李纶 1916-1993) recounted that the system was well known among spoken drama groups working at Yan'an, where the director A Jia (阿甲 1907-1994) picked it up and attempted to adapt it for use with xiqu.[22] Both areas in the interior could have taken influence from theater circles in Shanghai where in 1939, theater practitioners organized a memorial for Stanislavsky, one year after his death, including translations of eulogies and portions of his writings.[23] Though still regarded as a niche

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National Salvation Performing Troupe No. 3 *Shanghai jiuwang yanju sandui* 上海救亡演剧三队 which performed propagandist dramas en route to Wuhan and Chongqing.

[20] Richard Boleslavsky, *Yanji liujiang* 演技六讲, trans. Zheng Junli 郑君里 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai Liangyou tushu yinshua gongsi 上海良友图书印刷公司, 1937).

[21] The collaborative finished translation was published as a book by Xinzhi shudian 新知书店 in 1943. Wang Honghua, Guo Rukui, Zhang Genfa, Hu Du 王洪华, 郭汝魁, 张根发, 胡度, eds. *Chongqing wenhua yishu zhi* 重庆文化艺术志 (Chongqing 重庆: Xinan shifan daxue chubanshe 西南师范大学出版社, 2000), 306. The work of an actor weighed heavily on Zheng's mind during this time; immediately after the translation, his own essay, "How Does an Actor Prepare his Role? 一个演员如何准备他的角色" was printed and reprinted in installments in multiple journals during the 1940s, including 天下文章 2, no. 1 (1944): 21-33 and 2 no. 2 (1944): 67-74, and 春秋 2 nos. 3-5 (1945). The "prepare" in Zheng's title is not the same as the Stanislavsky translation: *Yanyuan ziwo xiuyang* 演员自我修养.

[22] Li Lun was the head of the research department of the Luyi Pingju research group (鲁艺平剧研究团) from 1940 to 1945 and served in many high administrative functions of xiqu reform after 1949. Li Lun's account is a recollection decades after the fact and as such is subject to all the risks of inaccuracy attendant to old memories. "A Jia zichuang tixi 阿甲自创体系" in *Zhang Geng A Jia xueshu taolunji* 张庚阿甲学术讨论文集 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 1992), 161. Li's essay is dated to 1987.

[23] Li Xiao 李晓, *Shanghai huaju zhi* 上海话剧志 (Shanghai 上海: Baijia chubanshe 百家出版社, 2002), 318. From a survey of wartime periodicals, *Theater Arts* (*Juchang yishu* 剧场艺术) was a major clearinghouse for these essays.

interest within the theater industry, this geographic distribution let Stanislavskian theories gain considerable traction over the course of the 1940s.

Even apart from spread through personal contacts among the theater world, Stanislavsky's writings were disseminated through diverse publications in the periodical press, including some based in Chongqing as well as in Shanghai. While Zheng and Zhang may have been the first to tackle a major work, multiple translators worked on Stanislavsky's other essays throughout the 1940s. The 1939 memorial led to multiple articles published in *Theater Arts* (*Juchang yishu* 剧场艺术), including a competing partial translation of *An Actor Prepares* by Shi Zhi 式之; considering that the original text had been only partially published in English in 1936 and fully collated in Russian only after Stanislavsky's death, the appearance of multiple translations so soon after the original suggests considerable attentiveness to the director among Shanghai theater workers.[24] Though limited in number, discussions of his work were published alongside these translations, including responses from other major theatrical figures, like John Gielgud, reacting to the system.[25] Even translations of Stanislavsky's biography *My Life in Art*[26] were available as early as 1938, published serially in *Theater Arts* by Shu Mao 叔懋 (Jiang Chunfang 姜椿芳 1912-1987), though a consolidated publication didn't appear until 1953.[27] While popular knowledge of Stanislavsky may not have been widespread, it is clear that the professional theater community was a supportive early niche.

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[24] [Geng] Shi Zhi [耿] 式之, "Yanyuan ziwo xiuyang 演员自我修养," pts. 1-5, *Juchang yishu* 剧场艺术 1, no. 4 (1939): 1-4; 1, no. 6 (1939): 8-15; 1, no. 7 (1939): 14-16; 1, no. 10 (1939): 15-21; 1, no. 11 (1939): 9-17.

[25] John Gielgud, "Du 'yanyuan ziwo xiuyang' de ganxiang 读'演员自我修养'的感想," trans. Lan Yang 蓝洋, *Juchang yishu* 剧场艺术 2, no. 4 (1940): 94.

[26] Originally published in Russian in 1925 before his famed acting treatises; the memoir was itself an expansion of an earlier version published in America in English in 1923. See Senelick, *The Soviet Theater*, 272.

[27] Min Tian cites 1953 as the year the biography first appeared, but the first five chapters of the work were translated from Russian in five installments in 1938 and the first half was published as a book in 1941; Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐 suggests these articles may have been widely known within the theater community. See Min Tian, *The Poetics of Difference and Displacement*, 159-60; Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐, "Shitannisilafusiji tixi zai Zhongguo 史坦尼斯拉夫斯基体系在中国," *Zhongsu youhao* 中苏友好 3, no. 9 (1951): 3; Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐, *Jiao Juyin wenji 2 lilun* 焦菊隐文集 2 理论 (Beijing 北京: Beijing renmin yishu juchang xiju bowuguan 北京人民艺术剧场戏剧博物馆, 2005), 340n1. Shu Mao is one of many pen names of Jiang Chunfang, who is better known for his work on the encyclopedia, but who spent the years just prior

It has been common to see leftists as responsible for bringing western theater theories and practices into China and xiqu stars as accountable for exporting Chinese theater to the west, but for neither theater leftists like Yu and Zhao, or practitioners, like Mei and others, was international exposure a one-way street. Both sets of theater artists were aware of and influenced by trends in modernist theater theory and practice abroad and within China, and stayed in contact with international movements, in spite of narratives that depicted the nation, and xiqu in particular, as mired in the past and unable to modernize.[28] These influences were by no means unified or even coherent to one another: by the 1930s, modernist theater in western Europe had come to mean art that broke with the representational, whereas the Zhdanovian Soviet Union that Mei visited in 1935 had already begun to critique abstractualism in favor of revolutionary romanticism.[29] These myriad concepts, of direct realism and its opposite, total art, all had their points of entry into Chinese theater through the divergent visions of reform offered by different stars. In this regard, theater, even within its sovereign territory, was not just porous to foreign ideas but actively transnational in practice.

The history of blending theatrical forms and adopting foreign aesthetic ideologies meant that the world of Chinese theater theory of the 30s and 40s was a deeply embedded network of international forces. Leftist dramatists who either had trained abroad, like Ouyang Yuqian (欧阳予倩 1889-1962), Tian Han and others, or had remained in China but read widely on European theory, like Zhang Geng, remained in dialogue with western theory, both through studies of history

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to this publication working as a Russian translator and building connections with the theater and film world. Sitannisilafusiji 斯坦尼斯拉夫斯基, "Wo de yishu shenghuo 我的艺术生活," trans. Shu Mao 叔懋, *Juchang yishu* 剧场艺术 2-8 (1938).

[28] See for example, Liang Luo's research into the connections between the European avant-garde and the Chinese avant-garde (albeit biased towards spoken drama output rather than xiqu) in *The Avant-Garde and the Popular in Modern China: Tian Han and the Intersection of Politics and Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

[29] Haun Saussy, "Mei Lanfang in Moscow, 1935: Familiar, Unfamiliar, Defamiliar," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 17.

and translations of contemporary works.[30] The increasingly close alliance between the Communist party and the Soviet Union also meant that Soviet ideas on the arts began to appear more frequently in discussions of aesthetics; published mentions of 'formalism' (*xingshi zhuyi* 形式主义), a key term of criticism opposed to realism in Soviet aesthetics, spiked in the last years of the 1940s.[31] Most major drama figures continued to engage with European theories during the 1940s even after Soviet ideas began to take precedence, regardless of location, at Yan'an or in the hinterlands.

The international exposure among major theorists and actors and their continued engagement with spoken drama (representational drama) in particular reflects a model of transnational practice that had continuities throughout the Republican era. Significantly, this history of practice not only continued in spite of changes in the aesthetic regimes of the 1920s to make the presentational more distinct from the representational, but ideas of international engagement moved deeper into the countryside and into more remote genres of regional theater. The advent of war provoked a need for drama that could rapidly convey patriotic messages of resistance, which only furthered acceptance of hybridization with vernacular forms of drama. Though he came down in the 1920s as a vocal critic of indigenous theater, the *dan* actor and director Ouyang Yuqian continuously worked with xiqu all through the 1940s, and experienced a career trajectory that ultimately rendered him iconic of transnational practice.

Ouyang Yuqian's career was defined almost from the beginning by his reputation for deploying his knowledge of spoken drama technique into his revised plays. Ouyang's fixation on

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[30] See for example, Max Bohnenkamp's discussion of Zhang Geng's western influences to his design for the music-drama *White Haired Girl* in "Turning Ghosts into People: *The White Haired Girl,* Revolutionary Folklorism and the Politics of Aesthetics in Modern China" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014), especially ch 3. Joseph Levenson has also made the argument that early 1950s China theater was an extension and development of Republican era internationalism and its own goals of achieving international recognition for China through cultural forms, though he makes the case primarily through analysis of the importation of Western drama to China, whether before or after liberation. See Joseph Levenson, *Revolution and Cosmopolitanism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

[31] This claim is based on a brief survey of Republican periodicals; while formalism enjoyed a brief period of popularity in the mid 30s and in 1941, it didn't emerge with such frequency again until 1948 and 1949, at that time, mostly in periodicals related to the Soviet Union or otherwise in translations from Russian.

hybridization extended far beyond initial experiments in the early years of the Republic, in spite of their questionable successes. Early wartime efforts first in Shanghai, and then later in Guilin, included revisions to both the classics and his own newly-written plays to accommodate patriotic messages using tactics more closely associated with spoken drama than xiqu: plot development was deliberately stressed at the expense of sung emotional displays. His Peking opera *Liang Hongyu* (梁红玉), first created in Shanghai in 1937, was a model of both this artistic approach and patriotic content. A contemporary critic noted the play succeeded mainly by significantly "increasing spoken lines over sung lines; and also, [even] the dialogue started to break old conventions, as non-rhyming dialogue increased and rhymed dialogue decreased."[32] In content, the play lambasted traitors broadly, and by implication, the local government head and Japanese collaborationist, Wang Jingwei (汪精卫 1883-1944), bringing Ouyang enough political fallout to force him to leave Shanghai for Guilin that year.[33] *Liang Hongyu* subsequently became the first play he adapted into the local opera *guiju,* eventually also adding *Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇, Peking opera 1937; *guiju* 1939) and *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan cong jun* 木兰从军, *guiju* 1939), all tailored to resistance themes, and all adapted with spoken drama principles.[34]

Beyond scriptwriting, Ouyang made a number of substantive changes to performance style as play director. In this regard, he was driven by an aesthetic vision heavily influenced by foreign theatrical developments, which he openly acknowledged. In a conference held in September 1940, Ouyang reported that in his staging of *The Fisherman's Revenge* (*Yufuhen* 渔夫恨, Peking opera, 1934),

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[32] Yi Yong 易庸, "Ouyang Yuqian de jiuju zuopin; jianlun jiuju gaige 欧阳予倩的旧剧作品；兼论旧剧改革, " *Xiju chunqiu* 戏剧春秋 2, no. 3 (Sept, 1942): 19. "白的分量增加，多于唱词，而且对白开始打破旧习，不上韵的对白增加，上韵的对白减少." (Yi Yong is a pseudonym of Liao Mosha 廖沫沙). Yi suggests that this is a feature of all his recent adaptations, but makes note of it particularly in the context of *Liang Hongyu*.

[33] Qiu Zhensheng 秋振声, Yang Yinting 杨荫亭, "Guiju fazhanshi shang de fengbei 桂剧发展史上的丰碑," in *Ouyang Yuqian yu guiju gaige* 欧阳予倩与规矩改革, eds. Qiu Zhensheng 秋振声, Yang Yinting 杨荫亭 (Guangxi 广西: Guangxi renmin chubanshe 广西人民出版社, 1986), 12.

he choreographed the entry of a character carried by four men; the audience of the time took this as completely natural for the performance.[35] The source of this idea, however, had come from the Soviet production of a Shakespearean play, an inspiration that went beyond theoretical readings to draw from a foreign source that was already transnational in its nature.[36] This kind of performative borrowing was a longtime habit for Ouyang, who had been in the practice of using the performance techniques of other cultures since his work in the civilized plays in the 1910s, where he borrowed extensively from the choreography of Japanese onnagata.[37] Ouyang's deep familiarity with foreign staging practices from choreography to technical theater were an inseparable part of his reform work in Guilin.[38]

Ouyang may not have regarded himself as any great theorist so much as a practical reformer. His skill was in his facility with both the contemporary fashions in theater production in China and the advances being made in the west, though his approach routinely put the emphasis on bringing Western elements wholesale into xiqu.[39] Idealism and the valorization of western theater marked his earlier efforts with the unsuccessful Nantong Actors Academy (*linggong xueshe* 伶工学社) in the early 1920s. There, idealization of western drama drove him to push students towards the uncompromising incorporation of more techniques like the use of western music and musical instruments like the piano, despite their lack of popularity.[40] Ouyang emphasized the emulation of western techniques extensively, reaching from staging practices to cultivating audience habits, and

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34 Yi, "jiuju zuopin," 18-19.
35 Yao Ping 姚平, ed., "'Guojia zhi shang' 'baodexing' yanchu zuotanhui '国家之上' '包得行' 演出座谈会," *Xiju chunqiu* 戏剧春秋 1, no. 1 (November 1940): 13.
36 Ibid.
37 Siyuan Liu, "Performing Gender at the Beginning of Modern Chinese Theatre," *TDR: The Drama Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 41.
38 Yao Ping, "zuotanhui," 13.
39 Ibid.
40 Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 229-230.

carried this focus with him from Shanghai into the hinterlands in spite of reduced resources and apparent loss of international exposure.[41]

The isolation of the hinterlands did not equate to a loss of knowledge or interest in international theater, however; though remote, *guiju* practitioners were keenly invested in keeping up with developments in Western theater. It is revealing of how pervasive criticisms of xiqu had become that Ouyang was not the original provocation to reform. Even before his arrival, *guiju* critics described their local drama as "rotten (*fujiu* 腐旧)" because of the failure of performers to understand the value of art, defined indirectly as performances that were not explicitly crowd-pleasing, and thus invested in standards that went beyond local traditions: "actors are without even common sense in art…and practitioners are mostly of the generation that is only after profit" (*yanyuan haowu yishu changshi…er yecizhe you duo xi weilishitu zhi bei* 演员毫无艺术常识…而业次者又多系唯利是图之辈).[42] In spite of rural origins and small audiences, critics and practitioners were motivated to look to spoken drama, and western practices more broadly, for inspiration in artistic reform, even if this meant mechanistic reproduction of foreign techniques.[43] As an example, Ouyang's attempt to emulate the bright lighting effects that he borrowed from the Soviet stage led to resistance in Guilin, mostly because of his desire to use footlights, which locals identified as passé.[44] Though Ouyang had grounds for complaint that, aesthetically, *guiju* was behind the times, both sides were undeniably invested in modernization by international standards.

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41 Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩，"Houtai renyu (zhi yi) 后台人语（之一）," *Wenxue chuangzuo* 文学创作 1, no. 1 (Sept, 1942), in 欧阳予倩与桂剧改革, 22-25.

42 "Bushi shidai yaoqiu guiju qiantu shuwei andan 不适时代要求桂剧前途殊为暗淡, " in 欧阳予倩与桂剧改革, 103. Previously published as "Bushi shidai yaoqiu guiju qiantu shuwei andan 不适时代要求桂剧前途殊为暗淡, " *Guilin ribao* 桂林日报, May 3, 1936.

43 There were multiple camps on approaches to the reform of *guiju*, including one that advocated for its complete conversion to spoken drama; it is evident that, remote as it was, Guilin was far from cut off from developments in the big cities of the east coast, and may even have put extra emphasis on data about foreign theatrical practices. See Qiu, Yang, "fengbei," 6.

44 Ibid.

Ouyang's vision of interconnectedness with the global stage (and the West in particular) can be read as predicated on the older philosophical model of "making foreign things serve China" (*yang wei zhong yong* 洋为中用). The resistance he encountered, whether from students at Nantong, or actors in Guilin, revealed the tensions inherent in this nature of transnational project, as if the dialectic between an international connectedness and national consciousness could be symbolically embodied by Ouyang himself and the actors he directed. Ouyang's brand of transnationalism is representative of only one form of international networking. It is not evident that he changed his philosophy in theater reform by any great degree over the Republican era, and it is worth questioning to what extent this philosophy of borrowing foreign things to serve China was shared by major theater reformers of the 40s, as leftists shifted their tone towards preservation under severe conditions of reform. At the same time, it is difficult to deny that this model influenced international tours of the 1930s and 40s. The end result of even Cheng's longer stay in Europe was not any collaborative project to create a new hybridized theater but research tours to glean information from foreign practices to deploy in theaters back home. Xiong's work in Hebei was similarly a self-directed practice of hybridization, aimed at local audiences only. The dominant mode of thinking among active reformers was to use the knowledge of cutting-edge practices abroad to influence the productions of local theater in China, even if only for Chinese audiences, and even if those audiences were not always aware they were witnessing theater informed by international standards.

Behind these performance-oriented changes lay a specific reform goal common to many reformers, regardless of a leftist political bent: at the forefront of western-inspired reforms was the development of an artistic director. It may be no coincidence that the theater practitioners with the most international exposure or training became some of the best known directors of 1950s theatrical production: Huang Zuolin (黄佐临 1906-1994), Jiao Juyin (焦菊隐 1905-1975), Ouyang Yuqian,

and, to a lesser extent, Cheng Yanqiu all fell into this category. While Huang and Jiao are much better known for their spoken drama work, all of these figures participated in the xiqu reform movement. The creation of the position of the artistic director and its influence from the 1930s and 40s on the 1950s is consequently worth a closer look.

The Emergence of the Director

Theater histories are often told through the biographies of their directors and the artistic philosophies they used to innovate theatrical production styles; even the history of spoken theater in China is dominated by the careers of Huang Zuolin, Jiao Juyin, and A Jia, among others. However, excepting a period of time beginning at the end of the Republican era, traditional Chinese theater was historically performed without a designated director.[45] Pre-performance artistic interpretation did have precedents in traditional xiqu, but without the formal trappings of a professional category. Traditional troupes typically had a play master or *shuoxi xiansheng* (说戏先生) who could assist actors in learning new roles, however this position lacked the authority typically conferred on an artistic director in the modern European sense.[46] Star performers who organized supporting companies in the Republican era directly interpreted for their colleagues, but this did not extend past orienting the company to changes to traditional performance or music.

The decision to use a director in indigenous theater came about as a natural outgrowth of international exchanges with the European theater world. The rise of a director's theater was a relatively recent development in Europe, occurring just since the end of the 19th century; its origins

[45] While the position of the director has a fragmented history, the tasks of the director are arguably an inextricable part of theatrical production, and as such, it is possible to trace a historical tradition of directing through the 20th century and into dynastic China, where literati troupe owners could plausibly fill the position, particularly those with some familiarity with scriptwriting. Defined as a professional position, however, the director is a reasonably young modern category with multivalent traditions, sometimes simultaneously self-contradictory and discontinuous with each other. This has not kept scholars from constructing histories of theater direction in China from existing literati notes; see, for example, Gao Yu 高宇, *Gudian xiqu daoyanxue lunji* 古典戏曲导演学论集 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1985).

are commonly credited to the discipline and output of artistic director Ludwig Chronegk in the Meiningen Theatre in the 1870s.[47] Though the notion of a true director's theater, or *regietheater,* wouldn't take hold until the second half of the 20th century, by the 1930s, theater history was already distinguished by the work of multiple directorial powerhouses, like Alfred Jarry, Andre Antoine, Edward Gordon Craig, and an institution, the Moscow Art Theater, marked by names like Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov and others.[48] It was into this world that actors like Ouyang Yuqian and Cheng Yanqiu ventured in the early 1930s.

Cheng Yanqiu's trip to Europe in 1932 and 1933 was a foundational moment in his development of a comprehensive set of suggestions for reform. In Germany, he had the opportunity to interact personally with the famed director, Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), who was based at the Deutsches Theater until forced by worsening political circumstances to return to Austria in 1933.[49] Reinhardt's theories of spectacle, grounded in the revolving stage, the integration of the actor with the other technical elements of the theater, like lighting and set design, and the use of the actor's body as a source of theatricality, all would have resonated with Cheng's experiences of traditional xiqu, particularly as it was staged in Shanghai.[50] However, what most impressed him was the European emphasis on the necessity of intensive rehearsal prior to performance; Reinhardt claimed to need a minimum of three weeks of rehearsal time compared with the 2-3 times that xiqu actors

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46 "Ruhe jianli xinde daoyan zhidu zuotanhui jilu 如何建立新的导演制度座谈会记录," *Xin xiqu* 新戏曲 1, no. 2 (October 1950): 12.

47 Edward Braun, *The Director and the Stage: From Naturalism to Grotowski* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982), 12-13.

48 Braun, *Director*, 22-76.

49 Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Theatre as Festive Play: Max Reinhardt's Productions of *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Jews and the Making of Modern German Theatre,* eds. Jeanette Malkam, Freddie Rokem, Thomas Postlewait (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 220. It should be noted that Fischer-Lichte describes Reinhardt at the time of this particular production in the early 1900s, rather than as Cheng would have met him in 1932, however, the techniques and approaches she describes are broadly characteristic of Reinhardt's overarching style. Cheng's later recommendations for xiqu reform called for greater artistic unity, which would have been consonant with Reinhardt's philosophy. Also, "Zhouyou oulu fanping zhi Cheng Yanqiu dui geguo xiju zhi yinxiang tan 周游欧陆返平之程砚秋对各国戏剧之印象谈," *Huabei ribao* 华北日报, April 8, 1933.

50 Fischer-Lichte, "Festive Play," 224.

met to prepare a performance.[51] This directorial prerogative on mandating repetition and refinement from actors extended beyond theater into film and into the music world of the Berlin Hochschule, as well, highlighting another difference between Chinese styles of production and European ones.[52]

On his return to Beijing, Cheng set forth 19 proposals to reform xiqu drawn from his experience of European theater; of these, the sixth was an injunction to promote the authority of the director above all else.[53] This appeared in among recommendations that ranged from regulating the acting of facial expressions, to nationalizing the theater, and creating guilds to support increased interaction among actors of different nations. While many of these other recommendations created a supportive infrastructure for theater practitioners on and off the stage, this call for an artistic director flew in the face of the actor-centered traditions of xiqu. While Cheng acknowledged that calls for a director were more common in the spoken drama movement that had begun to blossom in China, he attached his diagnosis of the xiqu world as comparatively complacent to common leftist criticisms of traditional theater as "numb" (*mamu* 麻木) and "backwards" (*luowu* 落伍).[54] There was neither acknowledgement of the intensity of the structural shift that would be required to institute a directorial system, nor much room for gradual adaptation in light of the urgency with which he demanded this fundamental, institutional change.

However, in light of his insistence on directorial reforms to xiqu, it is curious that he wrote an entire treatise on the director for the spoken drama stage, instead. "A Glance at the Spoken Drama Director" (*huaju daoyan de guankui* 话剧导演的管窥) was written the year of Cheng's return

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51 Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋，"Cheng Yanqiu fu ou kaocha xiqu yinyue baogaoshu 程砚秋赴欧考察戏曲音乐报告书," May 10, 1933, in 程砚秋戏剧文集, 74.

52 Cheng Yanqiu, "Cheng Yanqiu fu ou kaocha," 75.

53 Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋，"Guanyu gailiang xiju de shijiuxiang jianyi 关于改良戏剧的十九项建议," in 程砚秋戏剧文集, 61. Previously published as "Guanyu gailiang xiju de shijiuxiang jianyi 关于改良戏剧的十九项建议," *Beijing chenbao* 北京晨报, Aug. 20, 1933. "导演着威权要主于一切."

54 Cheng Yanqiu, "Cheng Yanqiu fu ou kaocha," 75.

to China, and expounded at greater length on the importance and responsibilities of the director.[55] Cheng explicitly laid out how the director could serve as the artistic focal point of a production, assessing everything from sets to music to how the actors were trained and expressed themselves on stage.[56] It is clear from Cheng's other writings that he was deeply influenced by his encounter with Reinhardt; his report of his travels in Europe cited the director more than once as justification for his advice on xiqu reform in multiple elements of staging.[57] Arguably, it was the older director who inspired Cheng's lengthy treatise on directing, presenting an authoritarian view of the director which would have coincided with Reinhardt's broad scope of control. The fact that Cheng advanced a view of the director without explicit commentary on its application to xiqu may have tacitly served as recognition that reforms to operatic traditions of authority and performance practice would entail serious changes to accommodate this new vision of an artistic leader.

Cheng's insistence on the need for an xiqu director was not a motivation broadly shared across the theater world: Jiao Juyin held a perspective on xiqu that saw the tradition as so rigid as to invalidate the need for a director. This opposition came from a surprising corner: Jiao collaborated with Cheng in the founding of the Chinese Theater Vocational Academy (*Zhonghua xiqu zhuanke xuexiao* 中华戏曲专科学校 (hereafter, *Zhonghua xixiao*)) early in the 1930s, and spent years heading the school, which was the primary competitor of the traditional acting school, the Fuliancheng *keban*, and one of the few successes among reform-minded training schools.[58] As head of the Academy, Jiao had years of experience putting on both traditional and experimental plays, in addition to the training and culture-oriented reforms that distinguished the school. However, after Jiao eventually left the school to study European theater in Paris, he dismissed the idea of using a

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55 Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋, "Huaju daoyan de guankui 话剧导演的管窥," in 程砚秋戏剧文集, 84-149. Previously published as "Huaju daoyan de guankui 话剧导演的管窥," *Juxue yuekan* 剧学月刊 2, nos. 7-8 and 10 (1933).
56 Ibid.
57 Cheng Yanqiu, "Cheng Yanqiu fu ou kaocha," 74-75, 81.

director in an art form distinguished by its extensive system of conventions, in his dissertation *Today's Chinese Theater* (*jinri zhi zhongguo xiju* 今日之中国戏剧).[59] Actors were expected to be so familiar with their art that they could effectively serve as their own directors. Failing this, the backstage general manager could keep record of entrances and exits for a particular play, as a general reference point for all, subsuming yet another aspect of the director.[60]

It bespeaks the complicated picture of xiqu direction that two leaders of the same theater school could hold opposing opinions on the value of the professional director to xiqu, particularly considering that Jiao Juyin, rather than Cheng Yanqiu, was regarded as the liberal, reformist, leftist thinker. Where leftist May Fourth critiques of indigenous theater were united in their severity and rejection of the form, the positions of theater reformers were highly diverse in approaching changes to both the art and the infrastructure of the theater. The failed 1920s experiments with reform by Ouyang Yuqian and Yu Shangyuan are but two examples of this heterogeneity, and the *Zhonghua xixiao* makes clear that no unity of opinion had been reached in the 1930s, either, in spite of increased exposure to international theater. With the question of whether there should even be an xiqu director still unresolved, it was fundamentally unclear where such a professional would come from, whether actors, stage and company managers, or scriptwriters, all of whom had a say in the organization and production of a play.

In the midst of this confusion, there were multiple reformists from highly divergent backgrounds who stepped into prototypical visions of this role. Ostensibly the head of the *Zhonghua xixiao*'s reform committee, Weng Ouhong (翁偶虹 1908-1994) considered himself a scriptwriter, but contrary to the traditional reserve of older writers like the school's headmaster Jin Zhongsun (金

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[58] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 231-235. Ouyang Yuqian's Nantong Linggong Xueshe which was also reform-minded, folded after only a couple years.

[59] Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐，"Jinri zhi Zhongguo xiju 今日之中国戏剧" [1938], in *Jiao Juyin xiju sanlun* 焦菊隐戏剧散论 (Beijing 北京：Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 1985), 371-372.

仲荪 1879-1945), who limited collaboration to just the discussion of lyrics and plot, he involved himself extensively in the production of plays. This included serving unofficially as the rehearsal master (*paixiren* 排戏人), writing out the music for the orchestra, providing instructions to stage managers, and picking costumes for actors.[61] He was known for spending the majority of performances backstage, rather than in the audience, and for all intents and purposes, served as a performance director for the academy.[62] In so doing, Weng effectively reinvented the role of the scriptwriter, becoming "neither a literati author, nor an actor's writer."[63] His new notion of the scriptwriter starting with an image of the stage in mind already was in itself revolutionary for its time.[64]

Weng's case may have been an exceptional one: he was an amateur actor from an early age and was a fervent supporter of the theater, in just the right age cohort to be enthusiastic about reform.[65] His self-ascribed duties made him into an artistic visionary of the stage, à la the Saxe-Meiningen tradition of authoritarian control, though his motivations did not stem from an intimate knowledge of the European tradition. The degree of micro-management he used was previously unseen on the operatic stage, a point that he even later acknowledged as directorial in all but name.[66] There also is the possibility of reading Weng's tactics as a misdirected enthusiasm rather than a principled take on the creation of a director; his experiences with the theater did not include extensive research into western techniques and trends, but were formed from an insider's perspective on amateur theater. Weng's memoirs cite the years spent at the *Zhonghua xixiao* as a slow

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60 Ibid.

61 Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹, "Qianyan 前言," in *Weng Ouhong bianju shengya* 翁偶虹编剧生涯 (Beijing 北京: Tongxin chubanshe 同心出版社, 2008), 5.

62 Ibid.

63 Weng Ouhong, "bianju shengya," 6. "既不是文人编剧者，也不是演员编剧者."

64 Ibid.

65 Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹, "Youyin quanliushui xiatan 幽咽泉流水下滩" in 翁偶虹编剧生涯, 15. Weng was 26 at the time he was officially hired by the school; he had been recruited by Jiao for some time, but had put off joining because of fears it would disrupt his performances.

labor of traditional professionalization learned by facing down passive-aggressive instances of resistance from teachers, students and the school's rehearsal master.[67] In spite of this, even in light of the fact that his job did not require him to have any interaction with students, Weng negotiated his way into the directors' circle for multiple plays, often with the blessing of Jin Zhongsun.[68] His participation in production was the exception, not the norm, for typical scriptwriters, taking over roles like choreographing and musical composition that would have ordinarily been filled by multiple other members of a theater company.

It would be difficult to situate a singular definition of the director against the wide variance in staging and rehearsal practices between regional theater types, between varying levels of professional acting, and between the competing northern and southern traditions of Peking opera, represented respectively by Beijing and Shanghai. It is on account of this that Megan Evans has argued for an openness in the conception of the xiqu director, to accommodate the shifting performance practices and aesthetic goals of the first half of the 20th century.[69] Even the nature of the performance script was fundamentally open, ranging from fully scripted lines and choreography, to plot summaries, to the tradition of the *mubiaoxi* 幕表戏, or "curtain outline plays."[70] In this most barebones of scripting strategies, actors were provided with only the plot scenario and a set of character guidelines, then were expected to improvise their lines in live performance, reacting ad hoc to the exigencies of their co-stars, the responses of the audience and other conditions of the performance situation. Though closely associated with virtuosic performances among the major stars on stages of the early Republican era, curtain outline plays continued to thrive in regional

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66 Weng, "Qianyan," 5.
67 Weng, "Youyin quanliushui xiatan," 17.
68 Weng, "Youyin quanliushui xiatan," 19.
69 Megan Evans, "The Emerging Role of the Director in Chinese *Xiqu*," *Asian Theatre Journal* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 471.
70 Evans, "Emerging Role," 476.

traditions throughout the Japanese occupation as well.[71] Finite artistic decisions in the *mubiaoxi* were the purview of the actors, limiting the role of the director to providing the outline and general character guidelines.

Directorial decisions were not the domain of an exclusive professional category, depending instead on the performance context. The directorial function could be considered split up among actors, though a more common situation would place casting, blocking, costuming and staging responsibilities on a designated 'rehearsal master' or *paixiren*, leaving the task of crafting lines and music to the actors. Though the 'play master' or *shuoxi xiansheng* was the conventional instructor within an average xiqu troupe, in charge of teaching new plays to the company, the 'rehearsal master,' actors, and, within training academies, teachers, could all be effectively seen as directors.[72] It was not uncommon in these initial years of experimentation with direction to have multiple directors; the *Zhonghua xixiao* had as many as five for the production of *The Fate of Hong and Bi* (*Hong Bi yuan* 宏碧缘), all actors.[73] As occasion demanded it, this role could be divided up into categories by specialization in the martial arts or in literary plays, to break up the choreography and design by the different emphases of particular scenes. Each of these categories would later be regarded as close approximations, or prototypical forms of the professional director.

Without the support structure of a formal professional category for the operatic director, initial efforts at creation were marked by their hybridization with other professions within the theater, commonly actors, as a natural extension of existing performance practices. In the earliest instances, experimentation with 'curtain-outline' plays encouraged actors to take artistic command of the performance, though this was mainly interpreted as the marshaling of forces to make their

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[71] Jonathan Stock reports that this was the primary staging practice among Huju actors up until the broad directives of xiqu reform changed rehearsal techniques in the early 1950s. Jonathan Stock, *Huju: Traditional Opera in Modern Shanghai* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 118-120; 162.

[72] "Ruhe jianli," 9.

[73] Weng, "Youyin quanliushui xiatan," 19.

entrances and lines at the right time; Zhou Xinfang (周信芳 1895-1975) became one of the best known actors to engage with this form.[74] Since many star plays were features predominantly for a single actor, these hybridized directors (the stars of their own shows) may have had little investment in controlling other artistic elements of production aside from instructing company actors and negotiating with the musicians, since the primary effect of the show was carried mainly in their own performance. It took relatively constant pressure from practitioners influenced by Western ideas of total theater to bring about a shift in perceptions that would have allowed the director to stand out as the artistic authority of a production.

By the 1930s, reform-minded actors across China were all experimenting with direction, including first and foremost the leftist polymath Ouyang Yuqian, whose capacity as a teacher was no small contributing factor to the recognition he was garnering as director.[75] Professional distinctions aside, Ouyang is credited with being the first to think comprehensively about xiqu performance, from more than just performance and song, to the integration of all elements of production towards a common theme.[76] Even at the *Zhonghua xixiao*, experimentation with direction was encouraged largely by Wang Yaoqing (王瑶卿 1881-1954), best known as the pre-eminent actor of the late Qing and early Republic. His sympathy for the comprehensive approach to theater espoused by Weng Ouhong marked him as part of the progressive front, and became one more example of an actor who believed in the capacity of xiqu to not only withstand, but demand professional direction. From here, the effects of the ideologies of these big names began to trickle down toward more ordinary actors. As a case in point, the Shanghai-trained actor Li Zigui (李紫贵 1915-1999) held

[74] Li Zigui 李紫贵, *Li Zigui xiqu biaodaoyan yishu lunji* 李紫贵戏曲表导演艺术论集 (Beijing 北京：Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社， 1992), 12.
[75] Li, "biaodaoyan," 14.
[76] Li, "biaodaoyan," 15.

only moderate success as an actor, but made a name for himself interpreting the works of leftist dramatist Tian Han, specifically as a professional director.[77]

Li's own history of the director in China makes much of the influence of the Communist party in encouraging reform to play production, pointing to both the work at Yan'an and the work of the underground party with xiqu actresses in Shanghai.[78] It is possible that the war and subsequent revolution motivated theater reform through the need to structure messages and morals that were easier to control from a production design modeled on the west. Leftists who were likely to be significant leaders within the theater industry, especially in the realms of theater theory, were also often sympathetic to the Communist cause, strengthening the link between the two. Nevertheless, the professional xiqu director was not exclusively a Communist creation, nor even necessarily a leftist figurehead, so much as a consequence of the increasing interplay and influence of western theories of theater direction with indigenous traditions.

While Weng Ouhong is exceptional within the field of common practices for professional scriptwriters in the Republican era, his degree of involvement in production was not necessarily without historical precedent. As early scholars of the director were quick to point out, the literati scriptwriter could easily be seen as filling the role of artistic director, particularly going back into dynastic history; writers like Kong Shangren (孔尚任 1648-1718), the author of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇), included enough direction with the language of the script as to be seen as a general artistic visionary.[79] Establishing this tradition of writer-directors was one way of validating the indigenous theater tradition against claims of belated development vis-à-vis the west.[80]

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[77] Zhu Wenxiang 朱文相, *Xiqu biaodaoyan lunji* 戏曲表导演论集 (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2008), 221.
[78] Li, "biaodaoyan," 15-16.
[79] "Ruhe jianli," 9.
[80] Evans, 472.

Despite this sensitivity to theatrical history, theater officials were clear-eyed both about the differences between dynastic theater (without a category for professional director) and contemporary practice, and the influence of western ideas on local theater.[81] Particularly in Shanghai, inter-generic borrowing had been a common practice between theater and film for decades, and the tradition of an authoritative film director significantly impacted local theater practices like *yueju* (越剧) and *huju* (沪剧), especially when members of the film industry began to work in theater during the Japanese occupation.[82] From one point of view, the tendency for local xiqu troupes to rip storylines from the film industry had been in place for some time.[83] With the benefit of professional direction, however, attention began to shift from just the negotiation of physical performance practice and blocking on stage, to a more comprehensive mindset, addressing the coherence of actors with sets and costumes, for example.[84] It is especially striking that *yueju*, the emergent popular xiqu choice for middle-class Shanghai audiences, and *huju*, the form preferred by most working-class audiences, both turned increasingly to directors, proving that absorbing western influence was far from just a high-brow activity.[85] What pressures spoken drama and film brought to xiqu's adoption of a professional director as a consequence of economic competition were significantly enhanced by the pragmatics of wartime exigencies for members of the entertainment industries.[86]

Intergeneric influence affected more than just Shanghai theater, however; even in Yan'an, local cultural workers were also early adherents of an operatic directorial system rooted in western ideas. In a special issue for the founding of the Yan'an Peking Opera Institute, the dramatist and

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81 "Ruhe jianli," 9.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 12.
84 Ibid., 9.
85 Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 106-138; and Stock, *Huju*, 155.
86 Jiang, *Women Playing Men*, 106-138.

critic Li Lun promoted the creation of a directorial system as an essential step in reform towards a production style that would permit richness of interpretation through the collective vision of a director and actors, while bringing performance techniques away from calcification in individual performance schools.[87] This notion of a director placed an emphasis on rehearsals and teaching actors performance techniques, aspects that most clearly challenged the traditional methods of performance preparation and approximated the role of the western director much more directly than the collective work done at the *Zhonghua xixiao* only a few years earlier. The separation between the differing sets of knowledge of actors and cultural workers posed its own challenges, however. Even as late as 1942, cultivating a class of directors competent in both traditional performance languages and the more desirable acting approaches preferred at Yan'an, which Li calls "scientific" (*kexue* 科学) but which presumably were 'realist,' remained one of the significant tasks left to complete in Yan'an's reforms.[88]

The confluence of directorial efforts in xiqu from Yan'an, the hinterlands, and in even among the smaller xiqu genres in Shanghai began to congeal at the end of the 1940s, even though implementation was still largely limited to cities or places where leftist dramatists (or their publications) had left their influence. That western influence was felt so significantly through the work of leftists and others who had traveled abroad should not devalue the effect of transnational networks within urban locales like Shanghai.[89] The rise of the director was not the product of leftist interventions into otherwise stagnant indigenous traditions, in spite of structured reform activities in both Guilin and Yan'an, so much as the result of the interaction of these significant reformers with

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[87] Li Lun 李纶, "Jianli pingju daoyan zhidu 建立平剧导演制度," in *Yan'an pingju huodong shiliaoji* 延安平剧活动史料集 (Beijing: Wenhuabu dangshi ziliao zhengji gongzuo lingdao xiaozu, 1985), 124-129.

[88] Li Lun, "Jianli," 128.

[89] Jonathan Stock makes a similar point about performers of *shenqu* in 1940s Shanghai; unable to retreat into retirement during the war, they responded to changes in the entertainment industries by appealing to audiences through the inclusion of modernizations like the use of a director. See Stock, *Huju*, 155.

the impact of international forms of entertainment culture imported into the cities, or spread by the written word to areas further abroad, and adopted per need by local companies.

The development of the theater world immediately post-liberation was marked by the assistance of Soviet experts, as it was in many other industries. Specialists in spoken drama were installed in academies in Beijing and Shanghai, and multiple experts lectured to actors and other practitioners in the early years of the 1950s.[90] Rather serendipitously, however, the Soviet Union had just restructured its own theater industry in the late 1940s, doing away with the position of the artistic director, entirely—a radical shift following the epoch of strong directors that had characterized the decades before.[91] The new model required plays to be managed by producers, who were directly subordinate to a political administrator whose knowledge of the theater was by no means guaranteed.[92] It is all the more striking in light of this fact that Chinese theater practitioners of the early 1950s were so deeply committed to the development and institution of a directorial system for xiqu.

The institutional framework and rhetorical work that went into the building of a directorial system began almost immediately after liberation. Discussions of the role and function of a director were a regular feature in periodicals of the early 1950s, and instituting a directorial system was the topic of a conference as early as 1950, and continued to arise in public discussion for at least the next four years.[93] Companies began to regularly include a credit for a director, even if that individual was sometimes also the lead actor. Furthering the impression of efficacy, published commentaries from successful actors often spoke positively of the advice they received from their directors,

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90 Constantine Tung, Colin Mackerras, eds., *Drama in the People's Republic of China* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 141.
91 Senelick and Ostrovsky, *The Soviet Theater*, 483.
92 Ibid.
93 Li Xihua 李曦华 wrote a serial column titled "The Work of the Director" "Daoyan gongzuo 导演工作" that appeared in the *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 for 15 installments, 新戏曲 1, no. 8 (April 1950) to 2, no. 10 (August 1950). The conference was held in October of that year. See also Tian Han 田汉，"Yinianlai de xiju gongzuo he juxie gongzuo—1954 nian 10 yue 5 ri zai Zhongguo wenlian quanguo weiyuanhui 一年来的戏剧工作和剧协工作

particularly in hit plays.[94] In the spoken drama world, names like Jiao Juyin and Huang Zuolin were beginning to stand out as artistic directors, and the system of personality-driven director-led productions was taking shape in the model of the west.

There were a host of factors that early reformers identified as roadblocks to the successful implementation of a directorial system for xiqu. Many of these basic questions had to do with the essentials of staging: how would actors interact with sets?[95] How would realism be accounted for in the expressivity of traditional performance technique? There were practical concerns as well over the literacy rate of actors, then still very low, and the restructuring of troupes to a more equitable system.[96] Not least among these was the concern that even after making all the appropriate changes to both performance and the theatrical system, that actors themselves would still resist the implementation of a director, as an infringement of their own artistic authority, and as a force pushing them away from typical practice towards a more demanding and foreign rehearsal system.[97] These were changes that went beyond ideological principles or even the betterment of quality of life for actors, to challenge the basic production process.

Yet in spite of the fact that the Xiqu Reform Bureau had made the establishment of a directorial system for xiqu a mandatory requirement, xiqu direction remained essentially a function in name only.[98] Major cross-over figures like A Jia, who maintained more than a passing familiarity with the xiqu world despite his work with spoken drama, established some authoritative weight as xiqu directors, but for the majority of companies, the position was not lauded with the same respect.

——1954年10月5日在中国文联全国委员会，10月8日在剧协常务理事会上的报告," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 10 (1954): 4-5.

94 See for example Wang Chuansong 王传淞, "Wo yan 'shiwuguan' li de Lou Ashu 我演'十五贯'里的娄阿鼠," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1956): 8-9.

95 "Ruhe jianli," 12.

96 Ibid., 12-13.

97 Ibid., 12.

98 Zhang Geng later passed an assessment of the opening years of the reform movement as having failed to make the director a proper specialized topic of research. See Zhang Geng 张庚, "Daoyan zai xiqu gexinzhong de zhongyaoxing 导演在戏曲革新中的重要性," *Xiqu yanjiu* 戏曲研究 14 (1985): 1.

Prizes may have been awarded for best director of a xiqu play at festivals, but the publicity campaign that surrounded a production ultimately focused on celebrity, whether in the scriptwriter, as in the plays of Tian Han, or in the star actors, themselves. As a case in point, at the East China Xiqu Study Performance Convention (*huadongqu xiqu guanmo yanchu dahui* 华东区戏曲观摩演出大会) in 1954, the play that won awards for best director and best acting had articles that appeared about it in *Theater Report* from only lead actress Wang Wenjuan (王文娟 1926--), or other critics commenting on the play, and none from directors Hong Mo (洪漠 dates unknown) or Shi Jingshan (石景山 1920- ?).[99]

The director remained an enigmatic figure in bureaucratic discussions of reform for the majority of the 1950s. Most commentaries or reviews of reform focused on the work of actors or the questionable attitudes of cultural cadres assigned to companies after institutional restructuring.[100] An exception who did recognize efforts to institute the directorial system, Ma Yanxiang acknowledged that the majority of companies lacked a position for the director because of an inherent confusion over the responsibilities of the role, especially as compared with the rehearsal master.[101] Calls for the institution of a more robust system of direction continued to proliferate whether in reports from top officials like Tian Han, or in editorials to the *Theater Report* over the rest of the decade.[102] Partly this roadblock stemmed from a lack of trained personnel and training classes, however, partly it also was a consequence of top-down mandates on company restructuring.

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[99] Gong Mu 龚牧, "Chao Zhong renmin youyi de huaduo – yueju 'Chunxiang zhuan' de yanchu 朝中人民友谊的花朵－越剧'春香传'的演出," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 2 (1955): 52-53. See also Wang Wenjuan 王文娟, "Wo zenyang chuangzao Chunxiang de xingxiang 我怎样创造春香的形象," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1955): 40-43.

[100] See, for example, Zhou Yang 周扬, "Gaige he fazhan minzu xiqu yishu 改革和发展民族戏曲艺术," *Wenyi bao* 文艺报 24 (November 1954), in 戏剧工作文献资料汇编; 续编, 127-138.

[101] Ma Yanxiang 马彦祥, "Gonggu bing kuoda xiqu gaige gongzuo de chengji 巩固并扩大戏曲改革工作的成绩," *Juben* 剧本 10 (1953).

[102] For example, Tian Han, "Yinianlai," 4-5. And also, Ma Fengsun 马凤荪, "Xiqu jutuan ying jianli he jianquan daoyan zhidu 戏曲剧团应建立和健全导演制度," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 5 (1956): 38.

Among other social reform aims, institutional restructuring aimed to bring professional folk xiqu troupes into similar working configurations as spoken drama companies, where an artistic director was a given presence. To some extent, the artistic direction of the troupe was accounted for in the responsibilities of cadres assigned to the troupe once it registered with the local government, as they were accountable for encouraging both play selection and rehearsal structure.[103] In that no position was explicitly designated for the director among existing troupe leaders, at best, the role of the director was placed on equal footing with other aspects of artistic production, whether scriptwriting or performing, a condition that marked it as separate from the authoritarian rank it held in the world of spoken drama. Yet despite the lack of distinctive authority, in principle, every professional troupe had a director under the new regime.

The position of the director was officially eliminated entirely during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 in the spirit of collectivism,[104] so that mid-century experimentation with xiqu directorship exists under historical conditions discontinuous from later traditions established in the reform period. Still, the temptation among scholars is to write histories in the style of European theater, where significant, influential individuals create paradigm shifts.[105] The leaps and turns of development, however, belie a much more complicated picture of historical, artistic, and political forces. The new regime established political standards to be met in the production process that were highly influenced by western norms of theater practice. On the one hand, this was a natural outgrowth of ideas that had been introduced in the early 1930s, and implemented gradually in the 1940s in select locations like Shanghai and Yan'an, whether through conscious intervention by an elitist intellectual left, or by circumstantial developments that encouraged intergeneric borrowing,

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103 "Wenhuabu guanyu jiaqiang minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao he guanli de zhishi 文化部关于加强对民间职业剧团的领导和管理的指示," May 26, 1954 in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编, 48.

104 It should be noted that Jiang Qing 江青 took an especially strong hold over artistic direction, building up authority in a way that the typical xiqu director had lacked in the previous two decades.

not just of storyline content, but of production practice as well. This marked a relatively rare instance of an aspect of pre-liberation Shanghai theatrical production that was not only allowed to exist but encouraged after 1949.

On the other hand, the motivations behind the promotion of the director were still deeply entangled with the systems of transnational connections that were first established under the structures of semi-colonialism that had distinguished the late Republican era. Where notions of belated modernity had informed efforts to reform indigenous theater from the 1920s following exposure to spoken drama, the establishment of independence after 1949 ultimately did little to halt the machinations of this logic, which continued to color the visions reformers had of how the theater should properly function, from the training and rehearsing of actors to the implementation of a unified artistic vision for the stage. Though reformers may not have viewed it from this particular theoretical framework, neither were they unaware of the influence of Euro-American entertainment on their own industries. Tian Han's opening words to the conference on the director in 1950 identified this source directly as the origins of the professional director in the years prior.[106] Nevertheless, the presence of Euro-American theories of theater production and direction had been circulating among leftists in particular for so many years, that it was likely far more than just the exposure to western film and theater in China that encouraged attention to the director, but the nexus of intellectual ideas about theatrical exchange and hybridization that continued to surface in the 1950s.

Transnationalism in the 1950s

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105 See, for example, Megan Evans, both "The Emerging Role of the Xiqu Director" and her PhD dissertation "The Evolving Role of the Xiqu Director in Xiqu Innovation" (PhD diss, University of Hawaii, 2003).
106 "Ruhe jianli," 9.

After liberation, transnationalism became a feature more openly associated with nation-building than with the more amorphous artistic and intellectual exchanges that had marked the Republican era. Where international missions of the previous era had been organized by performers themselves, the new state took a keen interest in the deployment of cultural groups in the cultivation of its international presence. Governmental leaders were keen to create an image of China that could vanquish the associations of weakness that had come to characterize the nation from its losses in the opium wars through its semi-colonization by various foreign powers.[107] While this reinvention entailed internal restructuring, the experience of the Chinese revolution was intended to serve as an international model, rehabilitating the reputation China held on the world stage.[108]

The official model of diplomatic relations post-1949 laid out a vision of internationalism which led China to "lean to one side." This phrase, coined by Mao, has been read as a mandate to unify China with leftists, and Soviets in particular.[109] The full text of the article expanded the framework of allies along with the Soviet Union, to be with "People's Democratic Countries, and with the proletariat and the broad masses of the people in all other countries," categories that ultimately are closely bound with the political formations that took shape in the early Cold War.[110] Although there were practical security reasons for China to ally against US forces that they perceived as threatening, a union with an international proletarian movement also embodied Mao's desire for China to transform its global image into a bastion of progressive ideals of equality and justice to model to other nations.[111]

The performance and staging of nationhood was consequently mediated by a transnational mode of thinking, grounded in proletarian internationalism. On the one hand, in the real work of

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107 Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 51.
108 Chen, *Mao's China*, 51.
109 Chen, *Mao's China*, 50.

creating a national cultural infrastructure, nation-building relied heavily on Soviet models, as did the various culture industries, supported as they were by the presence of Soviet experts, including ones for theater. On the other, within the theater industry, indigenous theaters directly expressed the spirit of internationalism, both through theatrical diplomacy abroad, and as hosts of invited theater traditions at home. The performing arts were the pre-eminent cultural form for establishing national identity and standing; aside from China's own internationally touring theater companies, visits in the mid-1950s by Russian ballet troupes,[112] Indian dancing groups,[113] and Japanese kabuki companies[114] among many others signified a larger global phenomenon of cultural diplomacy through the arts.[115] These theatrical activities can be considered transnational, both in the sense of carrying cultural theater traditions across national borders, and in the potential for the cultivation of new identities through the formation of new networks, such as those unifying the Soviet bloc.[116] The emphasis on proletarian internationalism that undergirded early efforts at theatrical diplomacy created a discursive space that transcended national boundaries, yet fit cleanly within a framework of transnationalism.

Theater was an integral part of international diplomacy efforts in the first decade of the PRC. As the Korean War slowly drew to a close, China built its own principles of international

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110 Ibid. (Jian Chen's translation).

111 Ibid., 51.

112 He Jingzhi 贺敬之，"Huanying sulian guoli mosike yinyue jutuan zai Zhongguo de yanchu 欢迎苏联国立莫斯科音乐剧团在中国的演出," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 11 (1954): 16-17.

113 Luo Li 罗立，"Ji Yindu xiao beleiwu jutuan yanchu de 'zhengqu pengyou' 记印度小芭蕾舞剧团演出的'争取朋友'," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 7 (1955): 19.

114 Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳，"Wo kan Riben gewuzhi de yanchu 我看日本歌舞伎的演出," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 11 (1955): 15-17.

115 Photographic records also indicate the presence of Czech and Polish dancers, Burmese theater groups, and companies of Soviet minorities. *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 11 (1955).

116 Rogers, *Performing Asian Transnationalisms*, 10-11. It should be noted that the project of transnationalism, even in this relatively early era, decades away from its more common usage in contemporary theater, is distinct from the work of interculturalism, where the identification of different cultures could be deployed to directly undermine the notion of the national boundary; transnationalism, though it shares a project of cultivating critical spectatorship with interculturalism, retains an awareness of the nation as a defining limit, and is consequently more engaged with notions of geographic flow.

policy in 1952 around nonaggressive, non-interventionist relations between sovereign states.[117] A program of cultural diplomacy that encouraged the mutual admiration of especially the traditional arts underscored the message of cultural appreciation over more aggressive approaches. The arts were a venue for demonstrating both international competence through the adaptation of foreign works, and for establishing legitimacy for the nation by claiming the rights to a long heritage of traditional culture. The exchange of theater troupes with other countries brought with it both a heightened recognition of cultural difference, and the potential for negotiating that difference by means of novel global understandings of identity in the new Cold War environment.

This version of theatrical transnationalism grounded itself in a notion of aesthetic appreciation built on a conceit of universal comprehensibility even when performance languages are distinct or alienating. Even earlier in the Republican era, the idea of an international 'language' of theater is what enabled Mei Lanfang and others to plan tours to Japan and the west, where theatrical exchange was planned around careful curation, going beyond the rhetorical packaging of the art as 'primitive' or 'frozen in time,' to the selection of works that were expected to transcend comprehension difficulties. Early exchange efforts with xiqu sought to curate shows towards more dance-oriented selections, including the streamlining of the plots of "civil plays" (*wenxi* 文戏), or plays that largely featured singing, for their martial sequences. Against the backdrop of repeated artistic exchanges across multiple national borders, these initial concerns for the intelligibility of Chinese xiqu rapidly began to give way. By 1955, modern *yueju* adaptations of *The Butterfly Lovers* (梁祝 *Liangzhu*)[118] and *Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji* 西厢记) were being performed to positive

[117] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *The China Threat: Memories, Myths and Realities in the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 57. The basic premises that she cites included mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, nonaggression, noninterference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Cf. Tucker, 57-60.

[118] *Liangzhu* is the abbreviated title of *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯与祝英台

audience reception in both the Soviet Union, China's long-standing artistic mentor and ally, and further afield, in East Germany and Eastern Europe.[119]

The idea of cross-cultural intelligibility was ultimately an idealistic one propagated by government officials, rather than one embraced by theater practitioners. The kinds of genre-based integrations and alterations that had distinguished theater reform efforts in the 1940s and before began to be challenged during the 1950s. At the core of many complaints about the official xiqu reform process was a perceived tendency towards dogmatism (*jiaotiaozhuyi* 教条主义), a criticism that was common to many arts. Passing his criticism through this lens, Zhang Geng (张庚 1911-2003) denounced excessive structural changes as a form of Western dogmatism (*xiyang jiaotiaozhuyi* 西洋教条主义).[120] Artists were inclined to lean on Western forms in both music and spoken drama at the expense of traditional performance practice. This held true even in concrete measures; traditional instruments could be swapped out for a fuller orchestra. In contrast to rosy reports about the success of xiqu reforms, Zhang pointed to the disappointment among local audiences who failed to recognize their traditional dramas after reform; such a phenomenon was reflective of challenges to the fundamental structure of traditional performance practice.

Zhang's complaints about xiqu reform suggested a deep-seated unease among local reformers, in particular. Using *chuju* (楚剧) as an example, Zhang claimed that older performers were unfamiliar with the new techniques and unable to adapt, to the point that some began to drift away from xiqu altogether. Compounding the problem was the failure of the new plays to attract audiences, let alone new young performers, contributing to dwindling numbers of practitioners. And

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[119] Li Shaochun 李少春, "Yige Zhongguo yanyuan suokandao de Yindu 一个中国演员所看到的印度," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 7 (1955)： 20-23; Yuan Xuefen 袁雪芬, "Beijing-Moscow-Berlin 北京－莫斯科－柏林," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 11 (1955): 11-14. Actors' reports of international tours often read like travelogues, albeit with the focus on audience reception and meetings with foreign dignitaries.

[120] Zhang Geng 张庚, "Fazhan minzu yishu bixu fandui yangjiaotiao 发展民族艺术必须反对洋教条," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Sept 9, 1956, 7.

at core, the reforms themselves were altering the intrinsic structure of *chuju* to such an extent that the tradition itself was imperiled.[121] The loss of audiences and practitioners was disguised entirely by reports of success in xiqu reform, a fact that could not be challenged without investigation by higher authorities. Significantly, Zhang paints a picture of an authentic folk practice in the countryside, both among practitioners and their audiences, pure of foreign influence and fundamentally challenged by the kinds of foreign-dominated changes suggested to their art; this image fits well within his conservative critique of reform that he was gradually building during the mid-50s. This critique fails to take into consideration, however, the history of other provincial genres like *guiju* which had pushed for reform as early as the 1930s, apparently under pressure to stay current with modern theater by using western forms as inspiration for artistic change. If anything, Zhang's rhetoric is not based in ethnographic research, despite his claims, so much as the tradition of criticism that emerged in the May Fourth era, when the emerging divide between representational and presentational aesthetic modes had encouraged the depiction of xiqu as somehow pure of foreign influence.

Undergirding these problems was the continued rhetoric of primitivism, backwards-ness, and modernization as part of the discourse of reform. Though Zhang is careful not to condemn the artistic successes of the May Fourth era, the central issue remained the perseverance of these May Fourth ideas about the need to modernize indigenous theater through the adoption of Western techniques. Zhang argued for the development of tradition through selective reflection on Western forms in the research of local ones, rather than the replacement of one aspect for another[122]:

> If we are obstinate, and do not reflect on foreign theories that have already been systematized, this is wrong. But to put absolute faith in the premises of theories created by foreigners from the lessons of foreign artistic practice, to think that we can follow these

[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.

> premises for practical use in our own national art, to make this the absolute standard of measurement of our national art— this is completely in error.[123]

Zhang never makes explicit how he views what such a reflection and integration of foreign and Chinese theories might look like, only that the importation of foreign things was to be avoided. His implicit rejection of Ouyang's model of hybridization, and explicit invocation of May Fourth criticism as problematic revived a critical tradition that was just as old as the thinking he condemned. On the one hand, this appeared to be a rejection of older discursive models of transnational thinking still latent in the theater industry; on the other, this can also be viewed as a discursive move itself in the interest of promoting greater conservatism in reform, rather than acknowledging the complexity of the history of transnational practice in indigenous theater.

As Zhang's chosen example reveals, the early years of the 1950s were marked by an intensive cataloguing of regional xiqu types across the country, enhancing the prestige of previously marginalized genres at the expense of some of the pre-eminence of Peking opera on stages. While the aging stars of the Republican era nearly all earned their fame through Peking opera, the changing environment of the 50s, with its valuation of hybridizing practices in smaller, provincial forms provided, in theory, a space for lesser known stars to shine. This was evident in the variety of genres selected for inclusion at the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention; what also became clear at that event was that the patriarchs of the theater world would not be disappearing any time soon, as they won awards for Peking opera plays and established a subtle hierarchy within the theater world that theoretically placed the once-named "National Drama" on top.

Yet the success of Peking opera was mirrored by prizes awarded to a younger generation of female stars from the regional opera *yueju*, a regional xiqu genre popular largely among Shanghai female audiences as well as in Zhejiang more broadly. These women reflected a tradition that had

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[123] Ibid. 如果深闭固拒，不去借鉴外国已成系统的理论是不对的，但迷信外国人从外国的艺术实际中所总结提升理论的条文，以为可以逐条运用在我国艺术实际上面，成为衡量我国艺术的绝对标准，那却是完全

emerged only recently, developing its theatrical presentation only since the 1930s, and its most complex musical modes only in the years immediately prior to the convention. Its emergence on top of the podium was reflective in part of the deeper work done politically by major stars in Shanghai during the 1940s to align themselves with the underground Communist Party, but as a nascent form of xiqu, questions remained as to how far it could go in competing with Peking opera for national prominence. As one of the big winners of national prizes in 1952, *yueju* was primed for greater exposure on international tours, but it would take significant work from multiple star-led companies to help propel it into contention with Peking opera as the representative of national drama.

A Korean Classic on the Chinese Stage: Transnationalism in *Tale of Chunxiang* (春香传)

Indigenous theater in the Maoist era went through a lengthy period of politically mandated reform to adapt traditional subject matter to new, socialist political themes. Both American scholar Steven (Siyuan) Liu and Chinese scholar Fu Jin have described how these new ideological requirements resulted in censorship, including both public criticism campaigns and the voluntary abandonment of questionable repertoire, drastically reducing the number of traditional classics that were still staged.[124] In the years after 1952, the year of the repertoire-setting First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention, traditional plays began to rebound from the zealous implementation of censorship guidelines that marked the beginning of the PRC.[125] Even so, the account of the near constant, anxiety-inducing work of politically motivated adaptation and critique has come to

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[124] Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61 no. 3 (October 2009): 387-406. Fu Jin 傅谨, "Jinwushinian 'jinxi' luelun 近五十年'禁戏'略论" in *Ershishiji Zhongguo xiju de xiandaixing yu bentuhua* 二十世纪中国戏剧的现代性与本土化 (Taipei 台北：Guojia chubanshe 国家出版社, 2005), 199-251.

[125] Censorship is a blanket term for practices of prohibiting or self-inhibiting performances whether on ideological grounds, or as part of larger campaigns to reduce vulgarity and obscenity on the stage. The government endorsed new restrictions on performance content for a broad range of reasons, of which the strictest definition of ideology was only

overshadow the surprising prominence of artistic output in the 1950s with only a nod to contemporary ideology.[126]

Tale of Chunxiang was one such production, focused on romantic melodrama, rather than political ideology. Though newly written for the Chinese stage, if the national distinctions of its provenance are overlooked, the play would technically be classified as an adaptation of a classical work: *Tale of Chunxiang* had a long, rich history in Korean literature, especially in the oral performance arts. The narrative followed a romantic arc that had echoes, and potential antecedents, in the Chinese Yuan Dynasty play *Tale of the Western Wing* in its emphasis on the right of young lovers to choose their own partners.[127] Set in the Joseon dynasty, *Tale of Ch'unhyang* recounts the travails of Ch'unhyang, the daughter of courtesan, when her illicit romance with the higher-class son of a local governor, Yi Mongryong (Li Menglong in Chinese) is threatened by the lust of a corrupt local official. Though shy at first, Ch'unhyang accepts Mongryong's marriage proposal, only to have their plans disrupted by his departure for the capital to take the civil service exams. In his absence, Ch'unhyang stubbornly resists efforts to press her into service as a prostitute. Her loyalty lands her in jail, where she languishes until Mongryong's return, now as an official inspector, to castigate the corrupt official and rescue Ch'unhyang. A classic romance, the tale is crafted around the depiction of feminine loyalty and integrity in the course of challenging traditions of class relations and official power hierarchies, themes that were consonant with socialist values.

Considering the popularity of the story to Korean audiences, as well as its critique of traditional, feudalistic social structures, it may have been an obvious choice for use in cultural

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one. Censorship practices in the form of public criticism campaigns were stepped up after 1950. See Zhang Geng 张庚, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu* 当代中国戏曲 (Beijing 北京, Dangdai chubanshe 当代出版社, 1994), 41.

[126] It is possible these plays were prominent largely because once backed by the state, they could be performed widely without fear of repercussion, and audiences were drawn more to less blatantly ideological plays.

[127] See Yun Se-p'yong 尹世平, *Chunxiang zhuan* 春香传, trans. [Tao] Bing Wei [陶]冰蔚 and Zhang Youluan 张友鸾 (Beijing 北京: Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社, 1956), 3. For clarity, I will use *Tale of Ch'unhyang* when referring to the Korean productions and tradition, and *Tale of Chunxiang* when referring to the Chinese xiqu adaptations.

exchange, though an exchange of this sort was initially far from consideration. During the Korean War, China sent numerous theatrical delegations to perform for the troops on the frontlines; these were morale-boosting tours rather than efforts at cultural diplomacy. Most tours were by major stars, for short amounts of time, which made the eight-month tour in 1953 by the Yueju Troupe of the Cultural Workers' Troupes of the Military Commission Political Department (*Junwei zong zhengzhibu wenyi gongzuo tuan yueju tuan* 军委总政治部文艺工作团越剧团) all the more exceptional. Though incorporated into the new bureaucratic structure of the young PRC, this group was comprised of members who had worked together as Xu Yulan's *yueju* troupe during the 1940s.[128] At the eve of the close of war, the Kaesong Drama Troupe invited the troupe to a performance of a spoken drama rendition of *The Tale of Ch'unhyang*, setting the stage for the idea to adapt the tale into *yueju*. As a romantic melodrama, *Tale of Ch'unhyang* held many affinities with existing *yueju* repertoire, especially *The Butterfly Lovers* which the troupe widely performed in Korea, and it may have been a natural outgrowth of the theatrical exchange to contemplate adaptation. This decision quickly received the full support of the North Korean government, who sent performers of the operatic version from the National Classical Arts Theater (国立古典艺术剧场) in Pyongyang.[129]

These adaptations to different genres were far from atypical: *Tale of Ch'unhyang* resurfaces frequently in Korean arts, beyond the oral performance tradition and theater, to include literature and film. Famously, *Ch'unhyang* was the first sound film produced in Korea in 1935; less well-known outside of North Korea is a literary version combining the oral and written traditions which was

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[128] Xu Yulan in particular was one of the "ten sisters of *yueju*," all leading actresses, who in 1947 had signed a contract to found a cooperative theater for the sole production of *yueju* plays. This had been an unprecedented move to forego economic competition among troupes for the sake of the development of this all-female art form, and contributed significantly to the promotion of *yueju*. See Jiang, *Women Playing Men*, 156-7.

[129] Zhuang Zhi 庄［莊］志, Introduction to *Chunxiang zhuan* 春香传 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文艺出版社, 1962), IV. (Zhuang's name is commonly seen as 莊 in other sources, but is printed as 庄 in this edition).

produced in the north in 1954.[130] In the theater, multiple versions of *Ch'unhyang* abounded, from the most classic of *p'ansori* traditions to western style modern drama; included among these was an apocryphal tale of *Ch'unhyang* emerging as the first instance of sung theater (*ch'anggŭk*), a multi-player off-shoot of *p'ansori* that emerged in the early 20th century, and the form that was sent to Kaesong.[131] By the early 1940s, Korean *ch'anggŭk* included a subset entailing all-female casts in the performance of 'women's national drama' (*yŏsŏng kukkŭk*). These groups specialized in melodramas and other works of high sentiment, including the Ch'unhyang story; the first complete production for women's national drama, "A Flower in Prison," was itself a retelling of *Tale of Ch'unhyang*.[132] Though unsuccessful, this 1948 production initiated a wave of popularity for all-female drama troupes, which flourished in the first half of the 1950s. Audiences for these all-female troupes were mostly female, and plays were largely melodramas—all of which were characteristics that resonated with the production style and context of *yueju* culture coming out of the 1940s. The popularity of the Ch'unhyang tale goes beyond its association with female forms of drama, but the timeliness of this connection could well have influenced the decision to choose this particular play for an audience of an all-female Chinese theatrical troupe.

Regardless of the impetus for the initial decision, the rapid reinforcement of government support suggested alternate political motivations as well: in the immediate aftermath of the Korean war, governmental emphasis on the Ch'unhyang tale was also one way to establish cultural legitimacy behind the new political authority in the north, while simultaneously reclaiming control of a tradition that had been a constant presence in colonial popular culture. The 1954 production was not the first

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130 Translated into Chinese by [Tao] Bing Wei and Zhang Youluan in novel form for Zuojia Chubanshe in 1955-6.

131 Andrew Killick, "Korean *Ch'anggŭk* Opera: Its Origins and Origin Myth," *Asian Music* 33, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2002): 44. The dominant historical account is evidently riddled with errors, including whether or not the theater was modeled on xiqu (likely not), and whether or not a *Tale of Ch'unhyang* was created first. Exactly what happened to this form after its initial emergence at the beginning of the 20th century is similarly ambiguous, but the general consensus is that it was suppressed by Japanese colonial forces until the mid-30s.

132 Andrew Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 111. "A Flower in Prison" was closed after only 4 days, and is unlikely to have been the version shown to the Chinese delegations.

instance of cross-cultural interpretation of the tale: in 1938, Murayama Tomoyoshi directed a Japanese-Korean production across colonial lines, which played with the integration of *kabuki*, *p'ansori* and spoken drama. As Nayoung Aimee Kwon has noted, this earlier production was criticized by Korean commentators, potentially in protest of colonialist attitudes that colored the project, by singling out inaccurate details of costume and design, features she identifies as 'colonial kitsch.'[133] The 1954 *Chunxiang* was not, however, like the earlier production, intended as an experiment in hybridizing traditional Korean theatrical forms with *yueju*. This makes it all the more striking that once the decision to make a *yueju* adaptation had been confirmed, the National Classical Arts Theater commissioned their own experts to assist explicitly with the development of music, choreography, costume and set design, the same targets of complaints about the 1938 production.[134]

The colonial taint did not, however, prevent the inclusion of a scene that had been criticized in 1938 for its lack of historical realism. A moment for the male hero Li Menglong to drink with his servant Fangzi was maintained intact, presumably on account of the consonance with socialist themes critical of traditional class distinctions. Here, postcolonialism is entangled with the socialist politics of this instance of transnationalism: where the lack of historical accuracy had led to accusations of inauthenticity in the colonial era, the 1953-4 North Korean government had newly pegged its definition of national selfhood to a history built of these kinds of transgressive (and implicitly, progressive) scenes of solidarity across class boundaries.

Tale of Chunxiang was held up by contemporary critics as an emblem of international cooperation and understanding between North Korea and China, grounded in shared cultural beliefs. These were unsurprisingly identified as themes that resonated with early cold war rhetoric

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133 Nayoung Aimee Kwon, "Conflicting Nostalgia: Performing The Tale of Ch'unhyang (春香傳) in the Japanese Empire," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (February 2014): 133. "Colonial kitsch refers to the devaluation and exoticization of elements of the colony's culture becoming mass-produced objects for indiscriminate imperial consumption." Kwon, 115.

134 Zhuang, introduction, IV.

designed to promote the image of the socialist bloc as unified by moral values like humanitarianism; altogether, *Chunxiang* was promoted as a work that underscored the cultural (and political) alliance between North Korea and China, as well as their collective place in the discourse of socialist internationalism.[135] These ideological justifications were ultimately political moves to cultivate a specific mentality among audiences that was invested in collective identity on two levels: the shared political identity as socialist nations, and more interestingly, a specifically East Asian consciousness grounded in what was argued as cultural affinity. In the political realities of an immediately post-colonial era for both Korea and China, it may have felt politically essential to distinguish an East Asian consciousness separate from the one envisioned by the Japanese empire, even if this project took it away from the general themes of wider brotherhood among all socialist nations.

The political positioning of the play was directly at odds with the tactics of adapters, who were looking for ways to insert recognizable representations of Korean culture directly into the play without compromising on a Chinese identity. Even more ironically, in the process of adaptation, Korean culture itself was seen as a sticking point, rather than a natural connection between the two countries. Many of these anxieties manifested in the process of scriptwriting, which took far longer than was typical for a *yueju* play. In Korea, both scripts, the spoken drama and the opera, had been translated for the *yueju* adapters, together with 25,000 characters of other documents providing background information.[136] Though credited with spending many hours in study with Korean experts, the troupe was still script-less when it returned to China in January of 1954, and remained without even a first draft till well into spring. In April, in a show of diplomatic support, a North Korean Chinese Tour delegation brought a new version of the operatic script with them to

[135] Ibid. These themes were explicitly identified as the love of freedom and opposition to violence—themes that would have been particularly timely in light of the recent armistice. In addition, Bing Wei translates Yun Se-p'yong as explicitly identifying portions of the tale as humanitarian (*rendaozhuyi* 人道主义), particularly, if surprisingly, in descriptions of the noble classes. Yun, introduction to *Chunxiang zhuan*, 6.

Shanghai; this edition had been translated by the secretary of a high-ranking general, suggesting approval from the upper echelons of political control, and putting political pressure on adapters to adhere to the new version.[137] Through intense collaboration between troupes, the first complete draft of the script was initially finished on April 15, 1954, led by primary adapter Zhuang Zhi (庄志 1920-2003). After the departure of the Korean delegation, however, revisions continued, even as the play moved into rehearsals towards an August premiere. Though the challenges of adapting between genres must be acknowledged, the delays appeared to be primarily driven by disagreements on what Chinese audiences could culturally tolerate. At odds with the quantity of research and background information provided, scene arrangements and character personalities both were altered on the grounds of barriers in national character and lifestyles between the two nations.[138] Characteristics that marked the piece as Korean were tied up in choreography (two separate scenes of women dancing) and music, particularly in the entrances to arias, as well as costume and set design.[139] The resulting production focused on sounds and images of Korean culture, reflecting the work, at least superficially, that Korean specialists had emphasized in Kaesong.

Yet despite Chinese claims to intensive study of these elements, and what may be read as a Korean attempt to rewrite the presentation of Kwon's 'colonial kitsch' towards greater cultural authenticity, hybridization was an unavoidable component of the finished product. Costumes followed traditional Korean clothing designs, yet some had to be outfitted with 'water sleeves' in order to preserve the capacity of the actor to use traditional *shenduan* (身段), or conventionalized

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136 Zhuang, introduction, V. Though it seems reasonable that a music-based theater would seek out a music-based script for adaptation, the translator of the spoken drama script ultimately was unable to continue with adaptation work, which, among many other reasons, may have contributed to the decision to use the operatic version.

137 Zhao Xiaosi 赵孝思, *Xu Yulan zhuan* 徐玉兰传 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文艺出版社, 1995), 200-201.

138 Zhuang, introduction, V.

139 Music was clearly one of the selling points of the play; a 1957 report on music reform cites the *yueju* version of *Chunxiang* as a model of successful reform toward more expressive music, and the scores for several of the songs were appended to the end of the 1961 edition of the script.

gestures, during performance.[140] Korean music was suggested in the accompaniment to the dance sequence that opens the play, but arias were constructed within the rules of traditional Chinese musical *qiang* (腔).[141] Even sets were designed on Korean principles but executed in the spirit of traditional Chinese landscape painting.[142] In spite of this, nowhere did adapters make open claims to the hybridizing techniques they had settled on. On the contrary, authentic sets and costumes were presented as such an essential highlight that detailed drawings and graphs were appended to the publication of the Yueju script in 1955, with hybridizing details de-emphasized (see figs. 1.1 and 1.2).[143]

Fig 1.1

[140] Zhang Geng, et al., *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Shanghai juan*, 219.

[141] Music was clearly one of the identified critical successes of the play; a 1957 report on music reform cites the *yueju Chunxiang* as a model of successful reform—not for its creative incorporation of Korean elements, but because it moved toward more expressive music. Though this was also common practice for most script publications of the early Maoist era, the scores for several of the songs were appended to the end of the 1961 edition of the script.

[142] Zhang Geng, et al., *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Shanghai juan*, 219.

[143] Huadong xiqu yanjiuyuan 华东戏曲研究院, ed. *Huadong difang xiqu congkan: disiji* 华东地方戏曲丛刊: 第四集 (Shanghai 上海: Xin wenyi chubanshe 新文艺出版社, 1955), insert. The pictorial insert of the February 1955 edition of the *Theater Report* shows Xu Yulan dressed as Li Menglong, complete with water sleeves; the dress for Chunxiang and other female characters was modeled more closely on Korean costumes.

Fig. 1.1, continued. 1955 script: Li Menglong's costume for the love scenes is in the upper left corner, with water sleeves visually downplayed; his costume for the traveling interlude (lower left corner) doesn't appear to feature water sleeves, at all. (Chunxiang's costumes are on the facing page).

Fig. 1.2, Xu Yulan as Li Menglong in the February, 1955 *Theater Report*: water sleeves prominently displayed, as is typical for a xiqu actor. The length of the robe is also far more typical of the xiqu stage. No other of Li's costumes is pictured.

The emphasis in Li Menglong's costume on Chinese characteristics over the more Korean presentation of Chunxiang ultimately may not have been coincidental. The presence of water sleeves on Li Menglong's costume would have been much harder to disguise in practice than the graphs in the 1955 script suggest, and images of Xu Yulan in costume show her posed stereotypically in Chinese xiqu form with the water sleeves folded over the edges of the outer robe (see fig. 2). The classically Chinese presentation of the male lead, particularly in the romantic scenes, lent the aura of national symbolism to the romance on-stage, one that played into attempts to shape public opinions

about Korea. Zhao Ma has suggested that large-scale propaganda efforts were required to encourage support for the Korean War, after years of poorly policed gang violence by Koreans in Japanese-occupied Beijing generated bitterness in Chinese-Korean relations among common citizens in the late Republic. The primary strategy in mobilizing sympathy for Korea entailed rendering Koreans as feminine against China's own masculinity.[144] Against this backdrop, the costuming of Menglong and Chunxiang takes on added significance: Chunxiang's costumes throughout the play are uniformly Korean in style, continuing the association between Korean-ness and femininity, but Menglong's appearance in the courtship scenes in particular was marked by his apparent Chinese-ness. The play may have been a visual reminder of the way the state encouraged its citizens to view Koreans, but the romance specifically underscored a political message how international relations between the two countries should be perceived.

The core of the adaptation project consequently seemed caught between one level of political public discourse and a different kind of political reality, no less entangled with contemporary politics, in artistic execution. On the one hand, it was publicly argued that the *Chunxiang* story was made more accessible to Chinese audiences by a shared heritage of literary references and poetry, highlighting the cultural overlaps generated by centuries of dynastic interaction.[145] On the other, the development story behind *Chunxiang* emphasized the uniqueness of Koreana vis-à-vis the contrast with Chinese traditions, visible even (or perhaps, especially) through their hybridization, thereby preserving cultural boundaries—or even emphasizing them to fit within contemporary gendered propaganda about the two nations. The exchange also rested uneasily between promoting the sense of equality between the two cultures, and the assertion of Chinese traditions that threatened to reduce the identified Korean characteristics to a flair of exoticism. This

144 Zhao Ma, "Using the Past to Interpret the Present." (Presentation at the annual conference for the Association of Asian Studies, Toronto, Canada, March 16-19, 2017).
145 [Tao] Bing Wei and Zhang Youluan, *Chunxiang zhuan*, 103.

tension was never explicitly resolved: Wang Wenjuan used the political surface narrative of equal cultural exchange in her 1980s memoir when she noted that Korean audiences tended to call her by the character of Zhu Yingtai, from *The Butterfly Lovers*, which was frequently performed at the frontlines, but that after her return to China, local audiences took to calling her Chunxiang.[146] This narrative suggests widespread popularity for *Chunxiang* that fails to account for its rapid disappearance from the active repertoire in favor of adapted Chinese classics like *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦).[147]

Even so, the official public narrative was one of unrelenting success. While critical attention remained on the fact of the international exchange rather than the artistic decisions, the finished product ultimately won awards for best script, outstanding performance, best director, best musical performance, and best stage design in the East China Xiqu Study Performance Convention at the end of 1954.[148] These artistic achievements cannot be easily divided from the political success the play had already received. No note was made of the artistic hybridizing gestures in critical responses to the play; nearly all publicity output emphasized the play's transnational roots, hailing the adaptation critically, if melodramatically, as the fruit of an artistic friendship with North Korea sealed in blood,[149] referencing its wartime origins.[150] Though a Korean reaction to the adaptation wasn't published in China until the end of 1955, when it came, praise was lavished on the *yueju*

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146 Wang Wenjuan 王文娟, "Huiyi wode wutai shengya 回忆我的舞台生涯," in *Yueju yishujia huiyilu* 越剧艺术家回忆录, (Hangzhou 杭州: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe 浙江人民出版社, 1982), 65. It should be noted that this phenomenon was likely restricted to just the mid-50s; after the 1958 premiere of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (starring the same team of Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan), Wang was more widely known by her character of Lin Daiyu, and this association is the one more commonly remembered today.

147 Even an attempted revival in the 1980s amounted to only the creation of a video for the archive, found only in specialty stores, today.

148 Gong Mu 龚牧, "Chao-Zhong renmin youyi de huaduo: yueju *Chunxiangzhuan* de yanchu 朝中人民友谊的花朵－越剧'春香传'的演出," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 (February 1955): 52.

149 Ibid. 越剧《春香传》是朝中人民鲜血凝成的友谊的结晶

150 Ibid., 52-53.

adaptation for the depth of research into Korean culture and fidelity to the original tale.[151] When taken side by side with the *yueju* company's visible evidence of culturally motivated adaptations to the original, such effusive praise cannot avoid the intimation of exaggeration, even if only for diplomatic reasons. Yet this international praise of the *yueju* version served as affirmation of the adaptation's ambassadorial goals.

The Chinese critical emphasis on the production's Korean origins laid stakes in cultivating a spectatorship invested in a notion of socialist citizenship that crossed national borders. This fit broadly into the greater historical emphasis on proletarian internationalism in the first half of the 1950s. The success of the production was even contextualized as the teleological outcome of sustained public interest in the Chunxiang tale (and Korean culture, by proxy) after exposure to both a Korean opera and a dance version in 1953, prior to the premiere of the *yueju* version.[152] These extended exchanges made the *yueju Chunxiang* appear to be the end result of years of cultivation of cultural competency, though it remains unclear what the extent of this kind of arts-based cultural exposure truly was, particularly outside the major urban centers of Shanghai and Beijing. Regardless, such a narrative fit smoothly into the emphasis on diplomatic connection that sat at the political heart of *Chunxiang*.

For the Chinese side, this project was more than a post-colonial assertion of a new socialist identity for the world stage; the assertion of Chinese characteristics and insistence on the uniqueness of a Chinese cultural consciousness are inseparable from the play's success, which consequently calls

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151 Cui Wenqi 崔文岐, "Zhongguo renmin shi Chaoxian renmin zui qinmi de pengyou 中国人民是朝鲜人民最亲密的朋友," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Nov 21, 1955, 5.

152 These are far from the only cultural exchanges between Korea and China, though the attention of the Chinese press was lavished on what Chinese performers did for the troops (of both sides, China and Korea) on the frontlines of the Korean War, rather than the fruits of artistic exchanges between the two nations. Gong is an exception in pointing out the history of Korean artists in China, though he does not emphasize the extent of the potential influence of these experts. As a case in point, Choi Seung-hee, one Korea's most pre-eminent modern dancers, was sent to Beijing in 1951, ostensibly to perform for Zhou Enlai, but became a semi-permanent fixture in Beijing, intermingling with other dancers and actors; a more practical goal of this arrangement was likely to evacuate her from the warzone. It was her performance of excerpts of *Chunxiang* that Gong referenced in his article. Gong, 52.

into question why a regional opera would be not only allowed but encouraged to represent the nation. Presumably, Peking opera, which had been synonymous in the Republican era with 'national drama (*guoju* 国剧),' was the most historically qualified to serve in international diplomacy. The initial months of negotiation over the script offered a window of opportunity for the state to step in and redirect Korean collaborative energies toward this older, more prestigious art. Yet *yueju* rose practically unchallenged.

Peking opera was not without adherents willing to engage in cultural exchange. The Mei Lanfang-trained actress Yan Huizhu (言慧珠 1919-1966) was also a member of a performance contingent sent to entertain the troupes in North Korea; drawing on her experience arranging and directing her own adaptation of the *yueju*, *The Butterfly Lovers*, she successfully adapted *Tale of Chunxiang* from the *yueju* version for the People's Great Stage (*renmin da wutai* 人民大舞台) following her return to China.[153] Though based on the *yueju*, there were still differences between the two productions. Comparatively, this Peking opera version placed a stylistic emphasis on language as the primary mode of artistic expression, through a focus on formulaic speech and more formal language, where the *yueju* version relied on both acting and its newly developed sentimentalized musical modes, which were an outgrowth of musical trends from the close of the preceding decade. In the *yueju* version, light-hearted banter in the scriptwriting contributed to a fittingly shallow characterization of the clown; the Peking opera version by contrast develops these secondary characters (the *chou* (丑) and *huadan* (花旦): Fangzi and Xiangdan) independently of the leads. The literary quality of the Peking opera version arguably could have placed it on firmer diplomatic ground than the more colloquial *yueju*.

[153] The play's success, in this instance, is measured by the effusive applause for each scene of the play in performance and self-reported high ticket sales. As told by Yan Qingqing 言清卿, *Fenmo rensheng zhuangleijin* 粉墨人生妆泪尽, with Yu Zhi 余之 (Shanghai 上海: Wenyi chubanshe 文汇出版社, 2009), 106-107.

The key to understanding the political rise of the *yueju* version may ultimately have much as much to do with internal theatrical politics as with the history of international collaboration that buttressed Xu Yulan's troupe as the first to engage in adaptation. A case in point is the rendition of the primary lead, Chunxiang herself. This character was built in large part around her silence, from the awkward pauses in her first meeting with Li Menglong to her quiet resistance of the villainous magistrate's advances. Were it not for the acting, Chunxiang would be constructed largely through mediation by other characters, whether Li Menglong's vision of her in the opening scene, the spread of the tale of her resistance and imprisonment among local farmers, or in the interpretation of her assent to marriage by Li Menglong's servant. For the vast majority of the betrothal scene, Chunxiang remains completely silent, from the moment of revelation of Li Menglong's hidden presence in the garden, through his negotiations with her mother for marriage, including and in spite of Yuemei's attempt to elicit her daughter's inner feelings.

The Peking opera version ultimately rendered Chunxiang within a known model of *qingyi* (青衣 or leading female role), where her shyness could be read for humor and her righteousness strategically deployed for the full expression of indignant rage at the magistrate's corruption. The *yueju* Chunxiang by contrast is played consistently for pathos, and because of this, the physical language of her performance became all the more important, a fact made apparent by Wang Wenjuan's attentiveness to the development of gesture to express different psychological states.[154] In an extensive account of her artistic decisions in rendering Chunxiang's physical comportment published in the *Theater Report* following a successful first year of performances, Wang Wenjuan described her experience of the character as much more complex, however:

> When Chunxiang discovers [Li Menglong's] arrival, her surprised joy is without end. Embodying a feeling of not knowing what to do, I run into the studio to hide. Afterwards,

[154] Wang Wenjuan 王文娟, "Wo zenyang chuangzao Chunxiang de xingxiang 我怎样创造春香的形象," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1955): 40.

> with an expression bewildered and awkward, yet intent on maintaining solemnity and etiquette, I respond to mother Yuemei's call to come out and meet him. From this point, in this scene, by the rules, I may only sit by Yuemei and Li Menglong, neither speaking nor singing. But, Chunxiang's inner feelings during this time are extremely complicated. I cannot treat this whole scene as a meaningless role, staring like a piece of wood; my feelings must interact with the other characters on stage, and simultaneously endow the character with the appropriate movements and expressions.[155]

This turn to bodily acting performance was also fortuitously a means of demonstrating the mastery of Stanislavskian acting theory, which was being heavily promoted through xiqu conservatories and professional houses during the first half of the 1950s, the practice of which required the actor to internalize the emotional experiences of the character.[156] Compared with Peking opera, *yueju* acting conventions aligned more closely to the spoken drama techniques that appeared with increasing frequency in xiqu productions mid-century, and which xiqu actors were encouraged by the state to adopt. This affinity for genre blending with spoken drama conventions may have enhanced the political trendiness of *yueju* productions and contributed to its rise to national prominence.

Wang Wenjuan was not a prolific writer, which makes notable her extended piece in *Theater Report*, a magazine that typically featured much shorter articles.[157] As the official organ of the state's position on the theatrical arts, *Theater Report* was an arena strictly controlled, whether writing critical reviews, tour and festival reports, or essays on the creation of characters. Wang's essay was in the mold of a genre of instructional writing on acting that had been a feature of theater periodicals from the foundation of the PRC, and which emphasized the physical and emotional work of internalizing a character in the Stanislavskian model. Even here, however, the work was framed by contextualizing Chunxiang first and foremost as an act of cultural diplomacy binding together China

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155 Wang, "Chuangzao Chunxiang," 41.

156 Wang Wenjuan notes in her memoir that she worked exceptionally hard on her acting skills during the early 50s, particularly in the internalization of character thoughts and feelings, and in the production of *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Tale of the Western Wing* in particular; Chunxiang was in the model of these other romantic heroines and likely received the same treatment. Wang, "wutai shengya," 65.

157 It has been suggested that Wang was largely illiterate, and that her published pieces were ghostwritten; this closely aligns with the political nature of her 1955 article in particular. Personal communication with Kwok-wai Hui, August 2012.

and North Korea. Capping the piece, the international significance of the play propped up the justification for exploring the character in deep detail, narrating the internal emotional life of Chunxiang through each scene of the play. Wang's emphasis on her internalization of the thought processes of a Korean heroine conveniently drew together both the principles of Stanislavskian acting theory and the notion of a close bond and deep understanding between the peoples of North Korea and China, reinforced pedagogically for readers exploring the narratization of Chunxiang's emotional life.

This story of *Chunxiang's* production is as much about the rise of Xu Yulan and Wang Wenjuan as it is about the rise of *yueju* more generally. The genre had been in steady ascent from the end of the 1940s, with the preeminent success of *The Butterfly Lovers*, starring a different team of Fan Ruijuan (范瑞娟 1924-2017) and Yuan Xuefen (袁雪芬 1922-2011). The play earned the support of the Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, who had been a fan of *yueju* performances since at least 1946, and who became a prominent advocate for *yueju* more broadly during the early 1950s.[158] Beyond its success with the upper echelons of Chinese politicians, the play was filmed and reproduced across the nation, ultimately representing China at an international film festival in Czechoslovakia, where it won the prize for best film score; the film was similarly screened successfully for dignitaries, including Charlie Chaplin, at the Geneva Convention in 1954.[159] *The Butterfly Lovers* was conveniently also set in the model of tragic romance suffering under the feudal oppression of marriage rights, where tragedy and melodrama served as the central attraction, features that allowed *Chunxiang* to build easily on this base of popularity. In 1954, *yueju* actresses were looking not to assert its position,

[158] Zhou is credited with seeing the propaganda potential of *yueju* after witnessing its sizeable reception in Shanghai. Jiang, *Women Playing Men*, 149. Zhou's influence should not be over-estimated, however: he similarly supported Cheng Yanqiu in his bid to join the CCP and yet remained unable to persuade the Reform Bureau to approve some of Cheng's signature plays for performance. See Liu, "Theatre Reform," 398.

[159] Lanjun Xu, "The Lure of Sadness: The Fever of Yueju and The Butterfly Lovers in the Early PRC," *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 119n5. See Xu Lanjun's discussion of the *Liangzhu* craze following its showing in Geneva:

so much as to retain it, rather than face the fate of most one-hit wonders. As a diplomatic production, *Chunxiang* played directly into these goals, cementing the image of *yueju* as another operatic national voice, especially in light of the official attention lavished on the *yueju* and not the Peking opera, despite the latter's famous adapter. It was the prestige of the *Chunxiang* project that facilitated the move of Xu's troupe from a small wing of the military to becoming the second troupe of the main theater house for *yueju* in Shanghai, the East China Xiqu Research Institute (*huadong xiqu yanjiuyuan* 华东戏曲研究院), expanding the range and influence of the institute.[160] Whereas most other *yueju* stars, including most of the "ten sisters," had dispersed to the urban hubs around the Shanghai metropolis after 1949, Xu and Wang went on to wildly successful careers both on stage and on screen.[161] Their contributions and popular successes played a significant role in securing the fate of *yueju* for at least the remaining time before the complete rupture posed by the ten years of the Peking opera-focused Cultural Revolution.

The production experience of *Tale of Chunxiang* is revelatory for the deep connections it exposes with earlier, Republican models of transnationalism. The adversarial model that pitted Ouyang as director against his actors can be roughly mapped onto the production process of *Chunxiang*. Visible in the slow labor to produce the first draft of the script, adapters clearly struggled to balance the projection of Korean-ness with the firmness of Chinese cultural identifiers. The diplomatic pressures they were under pushed them towards closer fidelity to the Korean source material, while the stakes of national standing, only so recently achieved with *The Butterfly Lovers*, encouraged greater insistence on the immutability of certain Chinese characteristics of indigenous theater. With an end goal marked by its supposed lack of hybridity, it is easy to imagine Chinese adapters seeing Korean cultural attributes in much the same way that Ouyang viewed 'foreign things'

Xu Lanjun, "'Aishang' de yiyi: wushi niandai de liangzhure ji yueju de liuxing '哀伤'的意义：五十年代的梁祝热及越剧的流行," *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 6 (2010): 54-61.

160 See the discussion of the Yue Opera House's political power in Jiang, *Women Playing Men*, 183-188.

as supplementary to Chinese drama. Yet the political discourse that sanctioned the production (from both the Chinese and the Korean sides) disguised the workings of this dialectic under cover of cultural brotherhood.

Transnationalism gives us the means to reassess the inner politics at stake in *Tale of Chunxiang*. This is an era where the prevailing hermeneutics of colonial modernity in the previous decades, in their transition to post-coloniality, were colored by their intersection with the new rhetoric of socialist internationalism coming from the Socialist bloc, pitting budding national consciousness against a discourse of transnational unity. At the same time, these two nations were peculiarly engaged in a particular rewriting of that discourse to focus on East Asian cultural brotherhood (even unity, in later years), as a specific regional permutation of internationalism—one that ran the risk of revivifying dated hierarchical structures that separated East Asian nations from Western ones.[162] While apparently counter to the rhetoric of equality in socialist internationalism, this unified the two nations in a post-colonial political configuration that rejected Japanese identity, but on specific, socialist terms.

From the Korean side, this project was more than just a political expediency or a product of wartime. The Korean emphasis on particular cultural markers in production appears to have uncanny resemblance to specific criticisms of the earlier international production of the play, and might be read as an effort to reclaim ownership of a history otherwise dominated by the decisions of its colonial, Japanese director. After all, this project came with extensive support from the North Korean government, despite, in the beginning, decidedly less involvement from Chinese political leaders, who were more concerned with the pre-eminent representatives of *yueju* (who had filmed *The Butterfly Lovers*), rather than the workings of a smaller, lesser known troupe. If the Korean side

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161 Jiang, *Women Playing Men*, 183.

162 In the midst of the Sino-Soviet split, the company was sent again to Korea, in 1961, presumably to insure that this political alliance would remain intact. This time, propaganda materials stressed the common heritage between Korea and

saw this as a historical opportunity to assert their own nationalism, the bind on Chinese adapters is even more forceful: there were political ramifications to every alteration of a script that had come approved from the highest levels of power.

It is unclear if Chinese adapters were aware of the Japanese production or not, or knew why their Korean counterparts were so invested in cultural presentation, but it is apparent that their own agenda was to create *yueju*, at least as the dominant framework within which to deploy these other signifiers of Korean culture. It is here that the dialectic of transnationalism is particularly in force: against these diplomatic pressures, adapters had reasons to maintain formal boundaries as they sought to maintain the position of *yueju* as national voice. In so doing, they simultaneously asserted a form of Chinese nationalism: this was *Chinese* theater presenting a Korean story. And yet both of these nationalisms, Korean and Chinese, were bound by the overarching political propaganda of the play, that it reflected an alliance that went beyond political roots to cultural ones. With so much at stake nationally and internationally, the success of the theatrical project of *Tale of Chunxiang* was overdetermined, in spite of artistic compromises made along the way.

In spite of surface rhetoric in propaganda, *Tale of Chunxiang* revealed the deep tensions that underlaid the performance of transnationalism. The play was multiply encoded with cultural and political meanings for either side, weaving into this tangled skein a politicized history of the performance of national culture, and negotiations of the local with the national and the transnational. Although these tensions raise questions about the effect on spectators, ultimately, given the level of control the state maintained over both theater culture and printed materials about the theater, it may not be possible to know what *Chunxiang* meant for popular audiences. The advertisements in the *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 over the fall of 1954 invariably claimed shows were sold-out, sometimes to the point of not even bothering to add a number to call the ticket

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China, rather than highlighting the specific differences of adaptations made to present Korean characteristics. See

booth. A significant subset of these performances were dedicated exclusively to work units (*danwei* 单位), suggesting for at least some of the 90,000 who saw the show, either attendance was involuntary, or the final audience tallies were artificially inflated.[163] Despite this apparent demand, after the show's sweeping success in the December performance convention, the play did not return to the stage again, except by special invitation for diplomatic officials: *Chunxiang's* international message was carried through repeat performances for the prime minister of Burma in 1954, five months after the signing of a joint declaration of peace,[164] and eventually to a Korean tour in 1961, when alliances were in need of reinforcement during the Sino-Soviet split.[165] Yet the publicity machine for *Chunxiang* harnessed the image of popular success and sold it across media platforms, from daily newspapers to trade journals, but perhaps no less could have been expected after the North Korean government had invested significant manpower into assisting with production.

In spite of this apparent success, the play shortly became eclipsed by other productions, especially the adaptation of *Dream of the Red Chamber*; the mobilization of nationalism in this latter production is less fraught with the tensions underpinning an international consciousness, and did not require the smoothing over of a gap between discursive rhetoric and theatrical fact. What the transnational project behind *Chunxiang* did achieve was to put a regional dramatic art form onto the international stage, and in the process, consolidate *yueju's* position as an art form capable of representing the nation, amidst a rise in political significance provoked in part by support among the upper echelons of politicians. Though the critical press praised the characters of *Chunxiang* in ways that were affirming of interpretations in multiple genres, no other local xiqu rendition of the play won the awards and recognition of the *yueju* version, including the Peking opera version, and despite

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Zhuang, introduction to *Chunxiang zhuan*.

163 *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, from August 1954 through January 1955. The play took a hiatus in November to prepare for the upcoming xiqu convention.

164 "Miandian zongli Wu Nu jingguo Nanjing dadao Shanghai 缅甸总理吴努经过南京达到上海," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Dec 14, 1954, 1.

success with audiences, the Peking opera version was never deployed to the same political audiences as the *yueju* adaptation. The Peking opera version of *Chunxiang* was also highly successful with audiences, however, and its failure to win national recognition may have been due not simply to the fact of its imitation of an original adaptation, but to contemporary domestic politics of theatrical nationalization.

Organizational Reform (*gaizhi* 改制) and the Problematic Politics of Nationalization

Though the number of privately managed troupes far exceeded the capacity of the state to support all through subsidy, from the end of 1952, nationalization of troupes was identified as a goal, with state companies positioned to become exemplars of both artistic performance and company management.[166] This latter goal was one of the primary targets of xiqu reform, to reform the institutions (*gaizhi* 改制). Even if the three major facets of xiqu reform, the plays, the personnel and the institutions, were a product of the early 1950s, only play adaptation saw quick results; implementing large scale changes in personnel training and organizational structure required most of the decade. While the primary focus of play and personnel reforms involved reorientation toward ideological goals, the third pillar was a more pragmatic issue for the government. Institutional reforms were multifaceted, affecting both backstage management and staging practices. While spoken drama troupes were as much the target of these changes to performance culture as xiqu and

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165 Zhuang, introduction, V.

166 "Wenhuabu guanyu zhengdun he jiaqiang quanguo jutuan gongzuo de zhishi 文化部关于整顿和加强全国剧团工作的指示" December 26, 1952, in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编, 39-43. "State troupes are the main force of the people's theatrical professions, and should strongly pursue reform and improvement in the content and thought of plays, in performance art, and in troupe management, in order to bring the theatrical arts to more closely match the needs of nation building, to enliven the spirit and livelihood of the people, to cultivate a superior moral caliber in the people and to more effectively serve the vast people. 国营剧团是人民剧团事业的主要力量，应在剧目思想内容上、表演艺术上和剧团的经营管理上，力求改进和提高，使戏剧艺术更密切地配合国家建设，丰富人民精神生活，培养人民的高尚道德品质，更有效地为广大人民服务." Ibid., 39.

musical troupes, the net effect was to bring all theatrical groups into practices that resembled the conventions of modern spoken drama.

This was a large-scale attempt to simultaneously unify and modernize theatrical conventions. In the 1940s, the exigencies of wartime propaganda needs had justified the use of roving troupes, ad hoc performances and street theater;[167] a 1952 directive sought to transform this itinerant quality into one organized around theaters with permanent companies.[168] Performances in temporary venues for occasional events were curtailed, companies were required to set seasonal programs in advance, stars were expected to retire from administrative positions in order to focus on their art, and seasoned actors were guided towards artistic direction or advisory roles.[169]

A continued emphasis was placed on the reform of company leadership and management. This had initially been a subset of targeted reforms in the May 5th Directive, where the goal was the professionalization of selected traditional troupes under state management, whether directly (*gongying* 公营) or cooperatively (*gongsiheying* 公私合营) or through assistance (*siyinggongzhu* 私营公助).[170] The overarching goal was to separate administrative work from artistic leadership, and to redistribute administrative responsibilities to departments of the Ministry of Culture, leaving actors in charge of artistic direction and consultation. In an echo of the similar administrative practice in the Soviet Union, administrative heads of companies did not necessarily come from theatrical

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167 Xiaobing Tang, "Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Toward a New Form of Public Art," *Cross Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* E-journal no. 18 (March 2016): 21-50.

168 This model was indebted to Soviet theater administration, which had also undergone reorganization after WWII, newly falling under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. In the new postwar rubric, all theaters were to be modeled on the Moscow Art Theater, in that each theater would have a permanent company with a set program of monthly shows, while on state subsidy. Even before 1946, the administrative head of the theater was a political position, often drawn from personnel with limited or no understanding of the theater, with the artistic director in a subordinate role. In 1949, the position of the artistic director was canceled entirely, and replaced with a producer who remained subordinate to the political head; this model persisted until the 1980s. See Senelick and Ostrovsky, *The Soviet Theater*, 483. Considering the influence of Soviet guidance on theater as in other areas of the arts, this organizational shift may be why no explicit mention is made of an artistic director in any of the directives on theater organization during the early 1950s in spite of considerable work during the Yan'an period to develop the position, and continued conferences in the early 50s.

169 "Wenhuabu guanyu zhengdun he jiaqiang quanguo jutuan gongzuo de zhishi 文化部关于整顿和加强全国剧团工作的指示" (December 26, 1952).

backgrounds. Mutual training and study between traditional actors and designated cultural workers had been a feature of the theatrical environment at Yan'an, so in many ways, the early 1950s were an extension of these same working practices; they were also, however, a continuation of the same flaws: editorials repeatedly called for cultural workers to eliminate prejudices against traditional artists (*yiren* 艺人).[171]

Regardless of the level of state involvement, folk troupes were intended to transition from private management (*yezhuban* 业主班) towards a collective style (*gongheban* 共和班). Traditional troupe structure included musicians, star actors and bit players, ranked hierarchically for payment purposes by the prominence of their role, and a general business manager, or *jinglike* (经励科), whose main duty aside from backstage management, the assignment of roles, and play selections, was to act as booking agent for the company, arranging performances in different venues.[172] This arrangement fell afoul of the new regime on two counts: first by the wage ranking of players, and second, by the potential for the *jinglike* to embezzle funds. Institutional restructuring heavily involved the redistribution of money management, beginning with the elimination of the *jinglike*, and

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170 "Zhongyang renmin zhengfu zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 中央人民政府政务院关于戏曲改革工作的指示," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, May 7, 1951, 1.

171 For example, the *Renmin ribao* editorial "Jiaqiang dui minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao 加强对民间职业剧团的领导," on May 23, 1954: "坚决纠正干部中任何轻视艺人的想法和做法."

172 The *jinglike* originated in the Qing dynasty as a troupe member who couldn't act but who had skill as a middleman, either as a negotiator, or through personal connections at the local yamen. By the Republican era, this role had become consolidated and professionalized into a regular position, one of seven regular supportive or managerial positions in the troupe. See Qi Rushan's description in "*Guoju yishu huikao* 国剧艺术彙考," in *Qi Rushan quanji* 齐如山全集 (Taipei 台北: Chongguang wenyi chubanshe 重光文艺出版社, 1964), 6:465-6. Other later descriptions of the *jinglike*, in the *Zhongguo xiqu quyi cidian* 中国戏曲曲艺词典 (Shanghai 上海: Shanghai cishu chubanshe 上海辞书出版社, 1981), and Wu Tongbin 吴同宾, *Jingju zhishi cidian* 京剧知识词典 (Tianjin 天津: Tianjin renmin chubanshe 天津人民出版社, 2007) take a more authoritarian view, ascribing general troupe management to the role along with the hiring of star players, dictating the ranking of performers for ads and playbills, settling of accounts, managing the house and resolving conflicts in the troupe. It appears that with time, the listed responsibilities of the *jinglike* tend to multiply, along with the legends of their sordidness. The *jinglike* was one of a set of industrial figures in charge of the staging process. In his memoir, Li Zigui describes another, the *paixia,* who was in charge of registering itinerant troupes and assigning stages along the waterways of the Yangzi river, as a for-profit job with a high tendency towards the abuse of power. The *paixia* was a rural equivalent of the *jinglike,* who operated in more urban settings. For a description of the rural theater economy in the early Republican era, see Li Zigui 李紫贵, *Yi Jiangnan* 忆江南, with Jiang Jianlan 蒋健兰 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1996), 6-7.

moving towards collectivization in phases, including hybridized, semi-private troupes en route to a full collective where players were paid equally, with opportunities for bonuses.[173] While fiscal equality leveled one dimension of troupe hierarchy, not all aspects of troupe structure were intended to adhere to radical equality.[174]

The core of the new troupe structure was built around leadership positions. The elimination of the *jinglike* dismantled one of the most powerful positions of the troupe, opening up the possibility of separating troupe administration from artistic leadership. Whereas star performers used to hold administrative positions in the running of their own troupes, the government proposed to leave senior troupe members (*yiren*) in charge of artistic direction, and let members of the Cultural Bureau serve as advisory members to the troupe on administrative affairs. In lieu of *jinglike* were individuals responsible for implementing artistic reforms, selecting plays, training new performers, and running rehearsals often with the assistance of assigned cadres or work groups, and in conjunction with guidance from nationalized troupes. These reforms were designed to facilitate economic independence foremost, so that troupes could transition to self-management in all respects of production.

In many respects, the directive on troupe leadership spelled out the individual steps of the entire staging process, though with an emphasis on the capacity of designated leaders to advise actors and other company members on political knowhow. Stages acquired their own managerial committees in charge of safety and sanitation, as well as the political knowledge of workers in their employ. In the ideal *gongheban*, the internal structure of the company was reworked to improve communication among actors, writers and musicians, and moderate the relationships of masters and

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173 "Wenhuabu guanyu jiaqiang dui minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao he guanli de zhishi 文化部关于加强对民间职业剧团的领导和管理的指示," (May 26, 1954) in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编, 47-50.

174 "Jiaqiang dui minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao," 1. The two extremes identified as measures to avoid were the use of a patriarchal system (家长制) and radical democratization (极端民主化); the extremity was the problem, as new troupe

disciples away from the intensive apprenticeship approach of the traditional Republican *keban*, while including a component of political study.[175] Though national companies were expected to advise local ones on the technical aspects of programming repertoire and training for actors, there was a natural blend between using the concrete tactics of running a professional company as a measure of success, and using its actual artistic output.

Artistic guidance consequently became an area of concern. While inexperience with business management and the new payment system were reasonably easy deficiencies to address, companies continued to suffer from a lack of acceptable scripts and artistic guidance. Of these two problems, the script shortage formed the center of criticism.[176] Artistic and managerial assistance from national companies could only proceed with an approved repertoire, and even after the extremes of censorship had been curtailed, companies were criticized for erring on the side of conservatism in script adaptation.[177]

In theory, the decision of the Ministry of Culture to limit censorship to just 26 plays rendered local performers with a lot of latitude in selecting plays for performance.[178] In practice, companies continued to perform the same small selection of approved plays, in spite of low audience turn-out; politically safe plays weren't appealing, and many crowdpleasers had been shelved for political concerns.[179] Despite efforts to curb excessive tendencies, self-censorship continued to be encouraged through media pressure, with coordinated waves of condemnatory reports appearing

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leadership was intended to be democratic, but still structured. The state feared a loss of discipline in a system that either had no leader, or multiple leaders.

175 The *keban* operated on indentured servitude, with students signed into contracts of seven years of service where all profits from performance went to the troupe master in exchange for training, often using infamously harsh methods, including corporal punishment. The students of the *keban* were held in an extremely hierarchicalized relationship with the troupe master, as disciples bound by loyalty, rather than as simple students. The *keban* were criticized even in the Republican era; *keban* training techniques were isolated for reform in the PRC as early as the 5/5 (1951) directive. For a more detailed description of the *keban* system, see Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 33-38.

176 "Jiaqiang dui minjian zhiye jutuan de lingdao," 1.

177 Ibid.

178 Fu, "Jin wushinian 'jinxi' luelun," 199-251.

in the *Theater Report*.[180] The campaign to ban the pingju Leper Girl (*Mafeng nv* 麻风女) in 1954 was one of the most prominent concerted efforts against a xiqu play, but campaigns routinely crossed genre boundaries; the attack on the film *Tale of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan* 武训传; 1950) led to the banning of all plays dealing with Wu Xun.[181] Even though the 'script famine' (*juben huang* 剧本荒) remained a concern for companies, on the surface of things, official censorship was not to blame; in reality, regulation of repertoire became intimately connected with government control over the nationalization process.

Though private troupes had continued to exist side by side with national companies in the first few years of the 1950s, nationalization picked up speed in 1954, following state-initiated movements that were taking place across industries. Under the auspices of the older, 1951 directive to reform the "institutions" (*gaizhi* 改制) of xiqu, major theater companies nationalized completely, and smaller ones began a process of semi-privatization (*gongsiheying*), moving under partial state control. In October 1954, the Ministry of Culture moved to consolidate and organize the existence, movement, repertoire and personnel of professional companies through registration requirements.[182] Registration with the local cultural bureau was required of all companies, regardless of the state of privatization in their management; performances by unregistered, or ad hoc theater troupes were officially curtailed. This put concrete measures into place for the Ministry of Culture to gain intimate control over actual theatrical practice, beyond the more abstract guidelines for censorship.[183]

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179 Fu Jin 傅谨, "Baihua qifang yu tuichen chuxin: ershi shiji wushi niandai zhongguo xiju zhengce de chongxin pinggu 百花齐放与推陈出新：二十世纪五十年代中国戏剧政策的重新评估" in *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiju de xiandaixing yu bentuhua*, 253-269.

180 Liu, "Theatre Reform," 394.

181 *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 4 (1954). Multiple articles attack *Leper Girl* in this issue. This phenomenon is even stronger than the initial campaign against *Tale of Wuxun* in 1950 (in *Renmin xiju* 人民戏剧).

182 "Wenhua bu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan de dengji guanli gongzuo de zhishi," (Oct, 1954), in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编, 51-55.

183 Though the list of censored plays had become more crystalized after 1952, reducing the extent of self-censorship practices and helping to restore vitality to the theatrical economy, censorship was still the primary means of control. The

Registration requirements gave local branches of the Ministry of Culture complete power over professional theater, and within a year, abuses became increasingly evident. Accounts began to appear of provinces enforcing arbitrary timelines and statistical standards to meet the requirements for professionalization, while in other locations, registration became an excuse for class struggle sessions, or arrests and fines, bringing some companies to disband, or pushing individuals to the point of suicide.[184] In an effort to correct excesses, the Ministry of Culture issued a supplemental notice attempting to ease the pressure on actors, but confirmed that registration was to be the first step in comprehensive reorganization of the theater industry.[185] The uppermost echelons of the theater world were intended to lead the way, particularly through nationalization of their management.

Xu Yulan was among those who had incorporated their troupes with government institutions early on, eventually finding a permanent position as the second team of the Shanghai Experimental Yueju Company during the first widespread push to nationalize.[186] By contrast, Yan Huizhu remained a solo performer, following the economic logic of the time: comparable stars like Tong Zhiling (童芷苓 1922-1995) and Li Yuru (李玉茹 1924-2008) were earning much less per month as state performers than the Yan Huizhu Company could generate in the same amount of time.[187]

Yan Huizhu's initial indifference to the movement to nationalize theater companies ultimately backfired against her when, after nationalization became a widespread phenomenon

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process unfolded continuously over the first half of the 1950s, with corrections made through public criticism campaigns, as with the play, *The Leper Girl*; for a more detailed discussion, see Liu, "Theatre Reform," 393-4.

184 "Wenhuabu guanyu minjian zhiye jutuan dengji gongzuo de buchong tongzhi 文化部关于民间职业剧团登记工作的补充通知" (June 17, 1955), 56.

185 Ibid. "登记是整顿和改造工作的第一步……登记工作只是为剧团的今后整顿和改造工作做好准备，不应该要求在登记工作中来解决剧团的所有问题."

186 In January of 1954, the company became the East China Yueju Experimental Company, Second Team (*Xiqu zhi; Shanghai juan*). The East China Xiqu Research Institute with which they were affiliated changed names in 1955.

187 Yan, *Fenmo*, 107. Yan isn't specific with the exact profits of the Yan Huizhu Company, but lists monthly salaries for star state performers at around 1,100 to 1,300 renminbi, much less than what the company was used to producing.

across industries, she attempted to follow suit. After months floating between troupes as a guest star, she finally landed a permanent position with the Fourth Peking Opera Company of Beijing, a rank she resented as incommensurate with her pre-liberation success and fame.[188] In retort, she reported to the local bureau to register, as an indirect means of protesting the reduction in stage time she had been forced to take. Amidst the drama of her belated attempts at nationalization, performances of her version of *Tale of Chunxiang* were curtailed, in spite of its success with audiences. Yan Huizhu appealed the decision at the Ministry of Culture, to no avail. Following her failure, she published an editorial of her efforts in the *Wenhui bao* 文汇报, "I want to act," which dramatically rendered the moment as a two-hour stand-off in the snow to the detriment of her company and her own personal health. Enraged, Yan Huizhu announced her retirement from the stage and made a suicide attempt, the second in her life, landing her in the hospital and provoking her removal to Shanghai.[189] The Beijing response, which she included in her editorial, was to encourage her to avoid speaking about her experience at the Ministry of Culture lest it impact her reputation.[190]

From her efforts to register to her suicide attempt, Yan Huizhu was not a quiet presence throughout theater reform, and her personal altercations with the Ministry of Culture took on political ramifications when placed in the public sphere. Yan Huizhu's publication of "I want to act" coincided with early gestures of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and her decision to vent her frustrations publicly backfired against her when her affiliations and admissions created fertile ground for political targeting. The *Wenhui bao*, where Yan's two essays that month were published, was one of the few non-party newspapers that participated actively in the Hundred Flowers campaign, and

[188] Ibid. When she was finally given a permanent post, her salary was less than that of comparable stars, which she evidently understood as a form of sanction against her tardiness.
[189] Yan, *Fenmo*, 110. These details were omitted from both "Wo yan yanxi" and the letter to the audience that she published two weeks later, also in the *Wenhui bao*.

one of the first to come under attack when the rectification movement began.[191] Yan's choice of venue for her complaints against the Ministry of Culture coupled infelicitously with her personal admissions of political ignorance during the nationalization campaign, and it wasn't long before rumors began to float of a potential attack during the imminent Anti-Rightist rectification campaign. In response to Yan's first editorial, an overflow of letters from readers and fans inundated both the paper and the actress herself; moved, Yan published a second editorial as a letter to the audience thanking them for their support. Her effusive reply quickly became fodder for intimations of fanning anti-party, anti-socialist sentiments.[192] Yan's efforts to have *Chunxiang* reinstated had to be set aside, and a preliminary, lengthy self-criticism submitted instead, in order to avoid being openly labeled rightist. Though she successfully avoided the political fall-out of an open attack, any effort to restore *Chunxiang* ultimately had to be abandoned.

Yan Huizhu's experiences in nationalization demonstrated the differences between stars and smaller actors. For non-stars, cooperation with the state could result in official promotion where normal economic measures of success were no longer accessible. For pre-liberation stars, the government was willing to co-opt their fame, so long as they engaged fully with state efforts to reform the industry, yet cases like Yan's showed that stardom itself was no guarantee of state support. Aside from the belated timing of Yan's efforts to politicize herself, her actions marked her out as a star with special needs, a position that the government was explicitly attempting to dismantle. Yan Huizhu's actions may be an inextricable factor from the other political considerations behind the decision to curtail the Peking opera version of *Chunxiang* and suggest that

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190 Yan Huizhu, "Wo yao yan xi 我要演戏," *Wenhui bao* 文汇报, May 9, 1957. She reports the advice as coming from a Beijing "friend"; presumably, this meant the Cultural Bureau in Beijing.

191 Editorials published in the *People's Daily* in June and July of 1957 increasingly singled out the *Wenhui bao* for criticism, barely a month after Yan's letter. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: Volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 224-5n53. See also "*Wenhuibao* zai yige shijiannei de zichanjieji fangxiang 文汇报在一个时间内的资产阶级方向," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, June 14, 1957; and Mao Zedong 毛泽东, "*Wenhuibao* de zichanjieji fangxiang yingdang pipan 文汇报的资产阶级方向应当批判," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, July 1, 1957.

the politics of censorship were far more complicated than either soft bans or voluntary withdrawal of a play, particularly when fame was a factor.

Despite Yan Huizhu's account, *Chunxiang* was never listed on the official roster of banned plays, a restriction which, ironically, was to be lifted in early 1957, in the spirit of openness in the Hundred Flowers Campaign.[193] It is difficult to determine the extent to which soft bans like this were used, targeting the specific repertoire of particular companies rather than through explicit, broad spectrum censorship. Given the number of accounts of abusive practices during the registration campaign, it seems likely that repertoire may have been manipulated for a number of reasons beyond the ideological, whether to reduce the competition for promoted plays, or to control the performances of individual companies or stars. This kind of gray censorship suggested a balancing act that leveraged control of the repertoire against control of theatrical personnel, using each to check the other, in step with the political exigencies of each case.

At the core of these practices was a fragmented authority that saw censorship power split and negotiated among different levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Concretely, this meant that attempts by individuals to promote their companies or even further the standing of their regional xiqu forms must be considered carefully within the context of greater political positioning between actors and representatives of the state. Under these conditions, the powerful political associations made by *yueju* actresses, and Yuan Xuefen in particular, with members of the Shanghai underground Communist Party should not be taken lightly in the account of the rise of their art. At the same time, it is worth noting that at least the immediate benefits of this association extended mainly to Yuan Xuefen and her performing partner Fan Ruijuan, and it took additional work by actresses like Xu

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192 Yan, "Fenmo," 116.

193 "Wenhuabu guanyu kaifang 'jinxi' de tongzhi 文化部关于开放"禁戏"的通知," in *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Beijing juan* 中国戏曲志：北京卷, (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo ISBN Zhongxin 中国ISBN中心, 1996), 1439. The reprieve was short-lived as the ban was re-instated with the Anti-Rightist Campaign in July. The timing makes Yan Huizhu's story all the more strange; her account seems to be corroborated with references to *Chunxiang* in the *Renmin ribao*—which cease

Yulan and Wang Wenjuan to acquire similar positions of power for themselves. While well-positioned politically and artistically to achieve fame and success, the Xu/Wang partnership helped to cement a reputation for *yueju* that might otherwise have been limited by the focus on the primary partnership of Yuan and Fan.

The Peking opera *Chunxiang* had enjoyed official promotion throughout 1955, with the separate publication of the script, and pictorial reports of her performances in the *Theater Report*. The decision to discourage staging demonstrated a stark reversal which Yan Huizhu took as punishment for her reluctance to nationalize.[194] It is difficult to assess all the reasons why the Peking opera version would have been discouraged; though Yan's personal life may have held many ramifications in the domestic politics of theater reform both as adapter and as star, the *yueju* enjoyed a boost to its international reputation and cachet through the publication of the first official Korean response around the same time at the end of 1955. Though the Peking opera version never acquired the same level of support as the *yueju* version, the published script showed a level of refinement that justified audience favor above and beyond the draw of Yan Huizhu's personal fame and the political fervor for international friendship with North Korea. Ironically, considering the public rationale behind other censorship decisions of the era, it appears it was not flaws with the play itself that resulted in its disappearance from the stage, but the complicated internal politics of organizational reform.

The accounts of *Chunxiang* have been so sanitized, regardless of historical era, that it is all but impossible to get a direct account of the specific problems that held up production for months or the specific reservations of adapters or the concerns of their collaborators. Xu Yulan was no stranger to activism for the promotion of *yueju*: her history as one of the ten sisters of the art painted

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to mention the Peking opera version after 1956, even when listing adaptations of the play, an odd omission for so respected a dramatic genre and so famous an adapter.

194 This account according to Yan Huizhu's son, Yan Qingqing, and not in the published writings of Yan Huizhu.

her as someone personally invested in the rise of *yueju* as an art form, not just as the leader of a company in pursuit of self-enrichment. This makes it all the more tempting to read her work in *Chunxiang* as a politically calculated act of professional devotion to the national rise of *yueju*. The summer of 1954, however, when revisions and rehearsals for *Chunxiang* were at their height, Xu managed to find the time to take leave and get married, raising the question, whose pet project was this? The other actors in the company take no credit for the promotion of *Chunxiang*, Wang Wenjuan's public commentary, however copious, was likely ghostwritten and subject to other political prerogatives, the director receives no mention in the press other than to note his award for best director in the year's local xiqu festival, and primary adapter Zhuang Zhi was able to write modestly about his contributions only years after the original premiere. The public face of *Chunxiang* was apparently controlled mainly by the editors of *Theater Report* and editorials in major party newspapers. Was it the threat of the international embarrassment of failure that motivated the company to continue? The thought that their recently acquired status with the East China Xiqu Research Institute were to come into question if they abandoned the project? Were they under any kind of pressure from the Chinese state to persist in spite of technical difficulties? If so, the artists themselves were discreet well beyond the years of the play's success and into memoirs of the reform era.

Second-hand accounts of the play in later years have not grown any clearer. Both Xu Yulan and Yan Huizhu have multiple biographers who have more invested in hagiography than historical reconstruction. The sensationalistic details of their lives—the twenty pounds that Xu lost on tour in Korea, the suicide attempts of Yan Huizhu—certainly lend themselves more to captivating reading than an exacting attempt to discover who actually initiated the idea for a transnational adaptation, and who actually pursued it. At the same time, the prerogatives of star-centered biographers

perpetuate the obscurity that surrounded state initiatives, censorship practices, and the artistic independence of companies, particularly those who complied with reform goals like nationalization.

The managerial model that the Chinese adopted from the Soviets in the 1950s provided a lot of leeway for artistic experimentation, especially as it encouraged star performers to center their energies on artistic execution and reform, rather than administration. This by no means divided artistic ends from administrative interference, and experiences like Yan's suggest that artists were both rewarded for their cooperation with the government, and became more subject to insidious forms of control, where public criticism campaigns were the just the public face of many tactics used by government bureaucrats. Compliance with the political demands of the reform campaign was both the standard used to assess the freedom granted to theater companies and the weapon of bureaucrats who sought to exert any control over the arts, whether for personal gain or on behalf of larger political forces, like those that might have sought to promote the *yueju* version of *Chunxiang* over a competitor representative of national drama.

I do not want to suggest, however, that artists were completely disenfranchised from the control of their art. What Zhuang Zhi recorded of the production experience of *Chunxiang* also revealed the extent to which different members of the theater industry were able to work independently of the political apparatus behind the public discourse of theater more broadly. Particularly in the case of collaboration with the Koreans, the public record of rhetoric about the production ultimately exposed a yawning gap that existed between the players on the theatrical stage and on the world one. *Chunxiang's* postcolonial twist that ultimately tied together both China and Korea was concretely measured in different terms for each nation, and coincided only on a point of common identity that was easily subsumed and disguised by the rhetoric of socialist internationalism. While theater may have been a major force of propaganda in the early PRC, just as it had been in the decades prior, these discursive aims could not free themselves from established

theatrical practices engaging foreign ideas, theories and collaborators that had been established in the Republican era.

At the same time, it remains true that the degree to which indigenous theater blended (or should blend) with western drama was a point debated in both the Republican era and the early PRC. The rhetoric of the latter era may even have been deeply indebted to the discursive practices of early debates that had their origins in the growing awareness of a break in aesthetic regimes between western representational drama and the presentational mode of indigenous theater. Despite what critics may have called for in the name of nationalism or aesthetic purity (in either era), it remains not only unlikely but improbable that indigenous theaters, including Peking opera, could avoid engaging with foreign ideas, especially when such a wide political spectrum of performers, from Ouyang Yuqian to Cheng Yanqiu, were engaged in study of western theater for specific deployment in xiqu, well after awareness of this aesthetic shift took place. The use of a director in indigenous theater production is just one example of an arena in which this debate unfolded in real practice.

In recent years, attention has turned to the ways in which the early years of state-building were influenced not by 'Communist imposition,' as Tom Mullaney has put it, but by the sedimented layers of intellectual groundwork that marked the development of key fields during the first half of the Republican era.[195] The work of foreign scholars, including those from outside the Soviet bloc, formed the base upon which other academics constructed paradigms of knowledge which continued to thrive into the PRC, even if the ideological climate of the 1950s did not allow for the recognition of the influence of such history. Though there is no one single impactful foreign influence in theater in the Republican era—even western trends like modernism lacked a unified interpretation or presentation in China—the history of twentieth-century theater reveals many threads of connections

to contemporary foreign practices, especially European but also theater from within Asia. It is well recognized that one source of the influence of these sources comes by importation back to China through expat students of spoken drama but xiqu performers are not to be discounted as active reformers indebted to western models. Even in the absence of tours abroad, given the amount of literature available in translation, it would be impossible to say the operations of xiqu companies took place in an artistic vacuum from other forms of theater. Through reformers, as well as through the sheer cosmopolitanism of major urban centers, xiqu practitioners had many avenues connecting them to western practices.

Identifying the transnational in Chinese theater may not be as simple tracing back to a western paradigm to undergird or influence indigenous practice. The history of even as iconically western roles as the director were given local inflections through their gradual introduction to indigenous theater, which blended those responsibilities with comparable positions within their own troupes. Reflecting the variety of the traditions it influenced and the sources that informed it, transnational practice was itself inconsistent across regions, whether in urban centers or the rural provinces. More significantly, it was also separated from discourse about the theater that evolved at the same time. Both discourse and practice were transnational in their exploration of hybridization and occasional assertion of the need for the integrity of Chinese theater practice, but were disjunct from one another in their execution. The divide between what critics say and what actors do (even in spite of overlap in these categories) reflected a pattern that persisted from the Republican era through the early PRC. The willing tolerance of this divide laid the groundwork for the creation and sustenance of a transnational practice that evolved in only loose conjunction with state standards for the theater or official reform rhetoric, and played out independently on the players' stage.

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[195] Tom Mullaney, "Ethnicity as Language," chap. 2 in *Coming to Terms With the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

Chapter Three

Locating Theatricality on Screen:

Performance Practice and Xiqu Film in the Changing Tides of Reform

In 1956, the theater and film worlds were both overtaken by the phenomenon that was *Fifteen Strings of Copper*. A classic sleeper hit, in its first four months, the play went from a small-scale premiere in Hangzhou to sell-out crowds in Beijing, eventually drawing attention from high-ranking members of the government and theater world, and rapidly escalating into a popular and critical success. Zhou Enlai (周恩来 1898-1976) remarked that it was a model for the governing policy on xiqu reform, "let a hundred flowers bloom; weed out the old to let sprout the new" (*baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin* 百花齐放，推陈出新)[1]; even Mao Zedong, himself, pronounced that everyone in the nation should see it.[2] In its opening run, this kunqu (昆曲) play, a form that had suffered to attract audiences for decades, enticed over 70,000 people to repeated sell-out shows.[3] This dramatic turn of events led not only to success for the play itself, but the revival of interest in kunqu, and what appeared to be a sudden increase in attention in the preservation of endangered theatrical arts.[4]

The success of the play has long been read in the context of the political nexus that gathered around it; affirmations from the highest echelons of power seemed to propel its meteoric rise and dramatically expand its range of influence. The play has been credited with not just bringing back

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[1] "Wenyijie renshi juxing kunqu 'shiwuguan' zuotanhui: Zhou zongli chengzan zhege xi 'baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin' de bangyang 文艺界人士举行昆曲《十五贯》座谈会：周总理称赞这个戏'百花齐放，推陈出新'的榜样，"

[2] Zhang Geng 张庚，*Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu* 当代中国戏曲. (Beijing 北京：Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe 当代中国出版社, 1994), 45.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Tian Han 田汉，"Cong 'yichuxi jiuhuole yige juzhong 从'一出戏救活了一个剧种'谈起," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, May 18, 1956: 1. On paper, the Xiqu Reform Bureau had not neglected local xiqu genres; ethnographic work in the early 50s ultimately led to reports of hundreds of local xiqu types. On this front page editorial, Tian Han openly criticizes attitudes among officials who felt that endangered genres should be allowed to naturally become extinct, or who relied on outdated impressions of xiqu repertoire to lay down rules for companies, with the result that, far from supporting xiqu, numerous traditions had actually been suppressed, instead.

audience interest in kunqu, but encouraging a widespread return to the staging and adaptation of traditional plays, particularly those that depicted magistrates and other officials.[5] Behind this claim lies a complicated picture of bureaucratic power, contemporary political movements, changes to the repertoire from the initial returns of the xiqu reform movement, and the increasing influence of popular media, and film in particular, as forces for entertainment. By far the easiest of these influences to trace out are the numerous political conferences and proclamations of the Ministry of Culture. Undeniably powerful, the government is commonly read as a hegemonic force in the execution of xiqu reform; despite this fact, the realities of execution on the ground remained mired in the complexities of the entanglement of local policy enforcement with the audience demands of the entertainment market, on which the vast majority of companies still depended.[6]

This hidden force of audience demand for entertainment is a potent and unquantifiable factor in considering the response of the theater industry to reform efforts. By one measure, the audience is visible mainly through their absence: the fall in ticket sales following the suppression of the main traditional canon was a strike against newly written or adapted plays. What was immediately apparent by 1956 was that amidst these disappearing audiences, the theater industry was in crisis.[7] In the aftermath of the success of *Fifteen Strings*, a significant amount of attention was given to discussions of how to restore the traditional canon. The dearth of acceptable scripts rightly drew attention from the uppermost levels of the bureaucracy, and occupied the center of efforts to salvage xiqu reform. However, in addition to the question of what to perform, the problem of how to perform it was also of increasing importance to leaders within the theater community. Just as companies had taken a hard line with acceptable repertoire, actors were under pressure to adopt

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[5] Zhang Ling 张泠, "Kunqu wutai yu dianying yinmu: huishou 'shiwuguan' 崑曲舞台與電影銀幕: 回首《十五貫》," *Film Appreciation Journal (FA Dianying xinshang)* 电影欣赏 159 (Summer 2014): 33.

[6] For a greater discussion of this, see Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in the Early 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61, no 3 (October 2009): 387-406. Liu notes that the inhibition of the traditional repertoire had put companies in such severe straits that the government was compelled to step in.

realist acting techniques, beginning with the Stanislavskian method. That this, too, lacked popularity with audiences was visible only obliquely: generalized criticism of flashy technique used in place of realist acting suggested that some companies still relied on sheer skill at constructing spectacle as a means of attracting audiences.[8] Where the appetite for entertainment could be seen most keenly was in the increasing audience for xiqu film.

Fifteen Strings was adapted for the screen in the same year as its public premiere, by the Zhejiang Kunsu Theater Company (*Zhejiang kunsu jutuan* 浙江昆苏剧团).[9] It was produced just as xiqu films were beginning a steep rise in unprecedented popularity, but also as film directors and theater practitioners were deeply engaged in public conversations on the appropriateness of adaptation strategies. At its core, these were dialogues on the compromises and negotiations of putting an art predicated on the theatricality of expressionistic, formulaic acting amidst minimal sets and props into the medium of an art saturated with realism. Directors faced the fundamental question of how and to what extent to express the medium specificity of film, and conversely what of the theater constituted its indisputable aesthetic. Was there a minimum standard of certain characteristics to be met in order for a film to count as theatrical? Was it necessary that film assert itself through its own aesthetic language of optical tricks in shots and editing? What was alienating to audiences and what could satisfy their aesthetic expectations while delivering on the promise of entertainment?

Though these debates were concentrated in the mid-50s, the questions at stake in remediation between art forms with polarized aesthetics were not new to the era. Twenty years

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[7] Discussions of a 'script famine' were a direct consequence of significant drops in ticket sales.

[8] As one example of this kind of critique: Zhang Geng 张庚, "Xiqu biaoyan wenyi 戏曲表演问题" in *Zhang Geng xiju lunwenji 1949-1958* 张庚戏剧论文集 1949-1958. (Beijing 北京：Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 1981), 186.

[9] Fu Jin notes that opening night of this adaptation actually occurred on Dec 31, 1955, for a private audience, but the public premiere can still be claimed as occurring in 1956, the date preserved by most reference works. Fu Jin 傅谨, "Kunqu "Shiwuguan" xinlun 昆曲《十五贯》新论," *Wenhua yichan* 文化遗产 4 (2008): 26.

earlier, the film and theater director Fei Mu (費穆 1906-1951) had explored these same issues in both writing and film. While the history of theater on film has deep roots in Chinese cinema history, Fei's reflections marked one of the first attempts by a Chinese film director to construct an adaptation that captured the essence of the theater while deploying cinematic features and techniques. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to his first xiqu film from theater experts and popular audiences alike ushered in a new era of thinking about the genre and its implications for a national style of cinema, and what narrative film techniques could do for both the exposition of the plot and the enhancement of theatrical effects. Yet Fei remained unsatisfied with his approach, tinkering in each subsequent experiment with different ways of capturing or transmuting the different aesthetics of the two media. On the one hand, theater was the perfect vehicle for exploring his own desire to create an expressionist film aesthetic; on the other, Fei's respect for the stage required serious reflection on how to conserve the defining elements of theatricality without alienating either audiences or the image of an expressionist actor within a realist set.

This unresolved question of how to integrate theatricality with film lingered into the 1950s. Yet what occupied the directors of the decade is centered within the political ethos of that era, where socialist realism was the directive of all the arts, and the question of how to represent theatricality on film was one that unavoidably confronted ideological critique. Even before reaching film studios, the blend of conventional theatricality with realism had been a thorn in the side of xiqu practitioners since (socialist) realism became the buzzword of the arts. While many of the demands of the xiqu reform movement were met in the first five years after the announcement of its decisive policy of 'reforming the plays, reforming the people, and reforming the institutions,' these changes all targeted political consciousness: where possible, plays were revised to reflect ideological

principles,[10] actors were trained in Marxist thought, and even the structural changes sought to do away with 'feudalistic' practices.[11] Left unclear was how xiqu would respond to the artistic changes happening across the theatrical arts, and in particular, enact concrete measures on stage to address the aesthetic demands of realism. Years into the reform movement, this latent confusion had manifested in the marked decrease of productions of traditional plays. Aside from fears of misrepresentation of ideology and caricatures of the working classes, the classical repertoire also induced concerns over whether the use of aestheticized movements, including *shenduan* and actions like mimed gesture, constituted an infraction of the principles of realism.

The debate between theatricality and realism may not have been new to the 1950s, but it was made more relevant by the presence of trends towards the vernacularization of performance technique in xiqu, generally, in both decades. In that there existed both systems of performance language for the operatic stage (and all of its discrete genres), and one for the spoken drama stage, a kind of gestural multivocality existed with the same diversity as might be expected of spoken dialects. These 'languages' evolved and adapted freely to the demands of local audiences, in the years before liberation; for example, the Shanghainese *yueju* developed routinized performances using more naturalistic acting in response to the development of all-female troupes and the aesthetic pressure from Hollywood films, during the late 1930s and 40s.[12] The regularization of aesthetic requirements of realism across the nation following liberation challenged the diversity of this system. As Shang Wei has noted for the linguistic vernacular movement of the early 20th century, contrary to

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[10] Lest this sound like an overstatement in light of the earlier discussion of play scarcity, it should be noted that the vast majority of plays were simply shelved to await revision or underwent soft censorship, and were not successfully adapted, despite the claims of the Xiqu Reform Bureau. Siyuan Liu argues that their softening of censorship policies in 1956 to restore the range of the repertoire, in part to allow companies to return to staging popular traditional plays in order to ease their dire economic straits, was effectively an admission of failure in the reform movement. See Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform," 404.

[11] '改戏、改人、改制' This was the core of the Ministry of Culture's May 5th Directive (五五指示). See "Zhengwuyuan guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi 政务院关于戏曲改革工作的指示, " (May 5, 1951) in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编 (Changchun 长春: Jilinsheng xiju chuangzuo pinglunshi 吉林省戏剧创作评论室, 1984), 24-26.

popular opinion, the regularization of vernacular language is "inevitably accompanied by coercion, suppression, and exclusion, not to mention the homogenization and standardization that come with writing and print."[13] Similar forces conditioned the adaptation of gestural performance languages under the banner of realism.

It is unwise to use xiqu film as a transparent record of stage technique: too many adaptations were made both in the name of technical considerations of the limitations of the camera, and artistic considerations of the differences in aesthetic codes in the transition between media. The ephemeral nature of performance art, however, limits the possibilities for researchers, who are compelled to work from the archive, including the body of filmed productions. In this instance, indications of trends towards vernacularization of physical gesture visible in the published articles and speeches of the era cannot be easily separated from changes made to performance practice in the adaptation to film, when actors were faced with pressures from film directors to modify their art towards more verisimilar acting. Nevertheless, xiqu films of the 1950s do offer some sense of how performance language could be and was modified, and even capture a sense of stylistic distinction between different xiqu genres, and northern and southern schools between Beijing and Shanghai.

In this chapter, I review the development of xiqu film as an artistic genre that confronts the problem of integrating two diametrically opposed aesthetics. After examining Fei Mu's virgin effort at a xiqu film as the work that stimulated the development of the genre, I look at performance techniques in particular, as one locus of theatricality on screen. I explore the history of how the theater world reacts to the ideological problems of the 1950s in the concrete expression of acting techniques on stage, and the development of the position of higher authorities over time, as they attempted to resolve the issue of how to justify the expressionistic aesthetic of xiqu as an articulation

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12 Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 79-83.
13 Shang Wei, "Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China," in *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000-1919*, ed. Benjamin Elman (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 291.

of realism. This forms the foundation for probing how filmmakers in the mid-1950s explore ways to present theatricality in the realist modes of film, debate the need for a genre of xiqu film, and offer ideas for what ought to constitute preserving the essence of theatricality in a cinematic adaptation. The consideration of the theatrical and the cinematic form part of the basis for reconsidering the output of xiqu films in the latter half of the decade through the rubric of entertainment film. Xiqu may have brought new developments to cinema, just as cinema offered new opportunities for xiqu, but the combination of the two was significant especially for what it did for audiences, especially in light of the popularity of xiqu film domestically and even internationally over the end of the decade.

Fifteen Strings of Copper made concessions to contemporary trends of vernacularization of xiqu performance, including modifications to plot, dialogue and singing. The play, however, can be read as a reaction against contemporary trends in acting technique toward simplification or vernacularization, by openly depending on the strategic deployment of conventional stylized acting to convey the nuance and tension of key scenes. This is not to claim that performance technique in *Fifteen Strings* was devoid of touches of vernacular acting; characters were often developed through the use of a form of theatricality more conventional to spoken drama. What distinguished *Fifteen Strings* as both a play and a film was the emphasis on motion characteristic of xiqu, both as a general aesthetic mode and as gestural punctuation to points of tension in the production; altogether, this lent itself to an overarching theatricality defined by the disposition of the body of the actor and its movements. Stage performance, and its attendant characteristic of theatricality, were considered so essential to the production of the film *Fifteen Strings*, they were arguably the center of the approach to the adaptation. The success of *Fifteen Strings* as a film and a play helped initiate a conversation about aesthetic conservation in the physical language of xiqu performance, amidst a confluence of historical pressures from both officialdom and the arts to valorize theatricality in xiqu.

Murder in the Oratory **and the Origins of Xiqu Film**

The history of theater on film famously extends back to the first film produced in China, *Dingjunshan* (定军山), starring famed *laosheng* Tan Xinpei (谭鑫培 1847-1917), and filmed in 1905. Many of the major milestones of cinematic history are bound together with theater, including the first color film, *Resentment in Life and Death* (*Shensihen* 生死恨, dir. Fei Mu) in 1948, and the first color film of the PRC, *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* 梁山伯与祝英台, dir. Sang Hu 桑弧, Huang Sha 黄沙) in 1953, the success of which overseas would make xiqu film an international genre.[14] A number of films of theater were produced during the height of the Republican era, but often these were documentarian in aesthetic approach. *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan jingtang* 斩经堂) marked the first effort to combine the aesthetics of both stage and screen in cinematic output, rather than simply film a play from inside the theater. Fei Mu, eventually to be known as an accomplished art film director, worked with the pre-eminent *sheng* actor Zhou Xinfang (周信芳 1895-1975) and stage and screen actress Yuan Meiyun (袁美云 1917-1999) as an artistic consultant, rather than director, to produce the play for Hua'an Studios (华安公司) in 1937.

Murder in the Oratory is a tragic story of conflicted loyalties whose depiction of unyielding patriotism would have resonated directly with audiences facing the threat of Japanese aggression. Wu Han, a general under the usurper Wang Mang, is married to Wang's daughter, but learns from his mother that Wang is also the killer of his father, a fact that demands revenge. To do this, Wu is required by his mother to abandon his position under Wang to join the insurrection, and murder his

[14] I have followed Judith Zeitlin's translation of the 1948 Fei Mu film in her *Opera Quarterly* article as *Resentment in Life and Death* which most closely approximates the original Chinese; the film is also translated as *Eternal Regret* by David Der-wei Wang, in David Der-wei Wang, "Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the Polemics of Screening China," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765607.013.0004; and *A Wedding in a Dream* by Stephen Teo, in Stephen Teo, "The Opera Film in Chinese Cinema: Cultural Nationalism and Cinematic Form," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765607.013.0012.

wife; this latter requirement is painful for both of them, as the young lady Wang is a devout Buddhist and morally upstanding in all ways. The conflict between Wu's desire to be filial and his commitment to his wife forms the core of tension that threads through the greater patriotic question of loyalty. Though there is much anguish, the deed is finally accomplished, Wu's mother commits suicide, and Wu leaves with her remains to join the resistance.

Heralded with some careful positive publicity in the days before its release, the film was a tremendous popular success, attracting sell-out crowds in Shanghai from its premiere on June 11[15] to its final showing on July 15.[16] In the intervening month, it made a successful debut in ten cities, as far inland as Chengdu, and was noted to have attracted even foreigners to its Shanghai shows.[17] By the end of its run, it had set a three-year record high in ticket sales.[18] No doubt, some of this success was encouraged by positive reviews from major theater luminaries like Mei Lanfang and Tian Han in the days immediately after the premiere.[19]

Widely hailed critically, the adaptation made use of specific elements that would become benchmarks of cinematic production of theater adaptations in the following decades. Among these, liberal editing of the theatrical script, and the introduction of elaborate background sets were the most significant departures from the stage tradition (see fig 1).

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15 "*Zhan jingtang* yu *Mingmo yihen*《斩经堂》与《明末遗恨》" *Shenbao* 申报, June 11, 1937, 23. As dated here, in the lunar calendar; the release date in the Western calendar would be in August. (All cited dates from the *Shenbao* are all in the lunar calendar, or, as listed in the newspaper, itself).

16 "Zuihou santian 最后三天," *Shenbao* 申报, July 12, 1937, 21.

17 "*Zhan jingtang* de haozhaoli《斩经堂》的号召力," *Shenbao* 申报, July 4, 1937, 25. Producers advertised a free booklet with images from the film; though it is unclear exactly who or how many foreigners saw the film, this marketing trick made it clear they were easily included, as well.

18 "*Zhan jingtang* rengran keman 《斩经堂》仍然客满," *Shenbao* 申报, July 9, 1937, 23.

19 "*Zhan jingtang* kaiying de shengkuang Mei Lanfang dui benpian biaoshi jingyi 《斩经堂》开映的盛况梅兰芳对本片表示惊异," *Shenbao* 申报, June 14, 1937, 19.

Fig 2.1. Detailed, realistic sets and formulaic acting in *Murder in the Oratory* (*Beiyang Huabao* 北洋画报 32, no. 1574 (1937), 3).

Other elements emphasized the cinematic: camera angles reproduced perspectival shots, and though many shots reproduced the stillness of the theater (and the stagnation of Wu's indecisive struggle), others took advantage of the language of traditional filmic cinematography, like tracking shots, close-ups, and medium shots, all views that would be unachievable in the theater. These cinematic approaches made *Murder in the Oratory* the first xiqu film to resolve the problem of how to represent theater as a narrative form on screen.[20] The blend of cinematic with the theatrical was more than just an exercise in remediation, however, but the product of Fei Mu's long-standing passion for the

[20] Stephen Teo, "The Opera Film in Chinese Cinema: Cultural Nationalism and Cinematic Form," 3.

development of the unique aesthetics of film, particularly in the name of establishing a national cinematic style.[21] This endeavor was entangled with the theatrical in both cinematic practice, and in Fei's own attempts at constructing a unified cinematic theory.

Fei Mu, perhaps more than any other filmmaker of his time, was the most uniquely positioned to consider the dilemma between realism and illusion at the core of cinematic representations of traditional theater. This fundamental conflict was at the center of his own concepts of cinematic art, in general. Fei had, in his early years, laid out a vision of the cinema as an independent art form premised on the development of 'air' or '*kongqi* 空气', or an aesthetic that captured a mood through suggestion rather than explicit realism.[22] Though the filmic medium relies inherently on a practical realism at apparent odds with the theatricality[23] of xiqu, Fei explicitly identified the camera as an artistic tool: "the eye of the camera is increasingly more technical than the human eye, and consequently, through use of the camera, one can achieve different effects."[24] Though he made no mention of the stage within this short treatise, the word 'technical' stands out in this passage, not just for its unexpected combination with 'increasingly,' a sentiment seemingly at odds with the fact that the camera was arguably technical in its dispassionate recording of life from the moment of its inception. The term also echoed with contemporary theatrical debates between "technique" and "life," as substitute terms for "aestheticism" and "realism," respectively; in essence,

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[21] For more on this, see David Der-wei Wang, "A Spring that Brought Eternal Regret: Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang and the Poetics of Screening China" in *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 271-310.

[22] Fei Mu 費穆, "Luetan 'kongqi' 略谈 '空气'," in *Bainian Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan* 百年中国电影理论文选, ed. Ding Yaping 丁亚平 (Beijing 北京: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2002), 216-217. Originally published in *Shidai dianying* 时代电影 6 (1934).

[23] Weihong Bao initially follows Haiping Yan in using the word suppositionality to describe the inherent suggestiveness and stylized nature of xiqu performance, as a mode that keeps audiences aware of the work of the performer. See Haiping Yan, "Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama," in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65-89; Weihong Bao, "The Politics of Remediation: Mise-en-scène and the Subjunctive Body in Chinese Opera Film," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 256-290. As the title suggests, Bao eventually moves to the term subjunctive to describe the inherent possibilities for action in the body of the actor. Ibid., 262.

Fei claimed that the camera eye, and the range of what could be achieved with careful placement of the camera, was increasingly opposed to realism.[25] This aesthetic of 'air,' as David Der-wei Wang points out, is highly sympathetic to the symbolism of traditional xiqu.[26]

Though written a few years later in 1941, Fei's essay, "The Problems of Turning Chinese Theater into Film," described the problems of reconciling realism and its opposite, inherent to both traditional drama and his own identified aesthetic goals for film. Fei famously compared traditional theater to classical Chinese painting, as two genres that were defined by their stylization and suggestiveness, rather than an attempt at realism.[27] Yet at the same time, Fei defined traditional theater by its ultimate expectation that the illusions of performance, whether in acting or in costumes, would be 'sublimated' by the audience into realism.[28] His ideals for xiqu film involved the preservation of this essence through innovations with film itself, to blend realism and illusion, and create a cinematic version of an expressionist art.

In execution, Fei Mu ultimately built from the vocabulary he laid out in his original 1934 essay, through camera movements, editing and mise-en-scène. The cinematography of *Murder in the Oratory* is indisputably an essential element of the film's atmospherics: as one example, when Wu Han reveals to his wife that he must kill her, camera movements combine with mise-en-scène to visually express the oscillations of Wu's sentiments. The sequence begins with Wu Han towering over his crouched wife, murderous intent obvious from his half-drawn sword. The scene cuts to focus exclusively on Wang, documenting her reaction as she moves away from Wu, who is

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[24] Fei Mu, "Luetan," 216. "摄影机的眼睛，往往比人的眼睛更技巧的，因此，运用摄影机可以获得不同的效果."

[25] Zhang Geng criticized the playwright Cao Yu (曹禺) for his failure to grasp contemporary realism, using the same language (技巧) in 1937. See Edward Gunn, "Shanghai's 'Orphan Island' and the Development of Modern Drama," in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, ed. Bonnie MacDougall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 41.

[26] Wang, "A Spring that Brought Eternal Regret," 280. The idea is not that symbolism of the stage creates Fei's 'air' but that the system itself is sympathetic to Fei's aesthetic goals of creating an independent, national filmic language.

[27] Fei Mu 費穆，"Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinhua wenti 中国旧剧的电影化问题，" in *Shiren daoyan* 诗人导演, ed. Huang Ailing 黄爱玲 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 1998), 82.

subsequently shown slowly sheathing his sword, obscured by incense, easily read as symbolic of the clouding of his resolve. Wang recovers, and then slowly re-approaches him, with the camera tracking her movements laterally. The following cut, however, shows her from behind almost overlapping with Wu, who is in deep space and consequently somewhat minimized compared to Wang's figure. He initially reacts with pity to her words, but his steady advance towards her, and consequently towards the camera, causes him to visually grow on screen, using relative size to symbolize the reassertion of his filial commitment, as he explains the blood debt that binds him to this course of action. The following shot that tracks with Wang as she re-approaches her husband subtly enhances the intensity of their argument, couched in terms of both personal and national revenge, by tracking inwards, narrowing the audience's visual frame. Despite the fact that Wu will continue to struggle with his mission for the majority of the film, the symbolism of the mise-en-scène of this opening anticipates the tragic ending, just as much as camera movements facilitate the heightening of emotion within the scene.

While there may have been a theatrical impulse behind these cinematic elements in their efforts to replicate the atmospherics of traditional theater, they were ultimately in service of the filmic language Fei was attempting to create. This was not to deny his own deeply felt personal interest in the theater; Fei was a keen fan of Peking opera. Theatricality was just as important a goal of the adaptation, even if created cinematically. Overhead shots look down slightly on Wu Han, just as one might in the theater, and even if close-ups and perspectival shots broke up sequences cinematically, the vast majority of shots were taken from a distance, perhaps to preserve the feeling of observation in the theater, or to enable elements of theatricality, like sleeve gestures or motions with the pheasant feathers of Wu's headdress, to be visible on screen. Despite the distances involved, Fei Mu was not as assiduous in requiring all parts of the actor to stay in frame, unlike, for

[28] Ibid. "观众必须在一片迷离状态中，认识旧剧在艺术上的‘升华’作用，而求得其真实与趣味."

example, Eisenstein's recording of Mei Lanfang's *Rainbow Pass* (*Hongni guan* 虹倪关) in 1935; this concession to the cinematic affinity for closer shots had the perhaps unexpected effect of making theatrical gesture that much more noteworthy when it was specifically foregrounded.[29] Significantly for critics of the time, this meant the original acting technique, or, in the words of one critic, the "points of beauty in performance forms," was seen as deliberately preserved.[30] For at least some filmgoers, this was a fundamental blending of worlds: in one account, following the execution of one of Zhou Xinfang's lines, multiple members of the audience instinctively broke out in cheers before silencing themselves in recognition of the different demands of the cinematic theater audience.[31]

This was not an insignificant achievement: the presence of realistic sets and props had serious implications for the execution of traditional stage gesture, a challenge to the preservation of performance technique that Fei faced in each of his xiqu films. The xiqu film most closely associated with Fei's name was *Resentment in Life and Death*, his 1948 collaboration with Mei Lanfang, whose stardom contributed to the hype surrounding the film, as well as the fact that it was filmed in color—the first color film in China. When pressed for details about the film prior to its release, Fei was laconic about the specifics of his artistic decisions, except to express dissatisfaction with the end results of both of his better known previous xiqu films, *Murder in the Oratory* and *Song of Ancient China* (*Gu Zhongguo zhi ge* 古中国之歌).[32] For *Resentment in Life and Death*, Fei proposed two principles to

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[29] Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳，"Wode dianying shenghuo 我的电影生活," in *Mei Lanfang quanji* 梅兰芳全集, (Shizhuangshi 石庄市: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe 河北教育出版社, 2001), 4:121-131.

[30] Ying Fei 萤飞, "Mantan *Zhan jingtang* 漫谈《斩经堂》," *Beiyang huabao* 北洋画报 32, no. 1574 (1937): 3. "然一切表演形式上的美点，仍然保留."

[31] Zui Fang [Sang Hu] 醉芳 [桑弧]，"*Zhan jingtang* guanhougan 斩经堂观后感," *Lianhua huabao (Qilin yuefuzhiyi* Zhan jingtang *teji* 联华画报（麒麟乐府之一《斩经堂》特辑) 4 (1937): 8.

[32] Fei Mu 費穆, "Guanyu Mei Lanfang wucai dianying 'Shensihen' de tongxun 关于梅兰芳五彩电影《生死恨》的通讯," in *Zhongguo dianying yishu 1945-1949* 中国电影艺术 1945-1949, ed. Ding Yaping 丁亚平 (Beijing 北京: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2005), 463-466. Originally published in *Yingju congkan* 影剧丛刊 1 (Sept 30, 1948). Der-wei Wang counts four total xiqu films after *Murder in the Oratory*: *On Stage and Backstage* (*Qiantai yu houtai* 前台与后台), *Song of Ancient China*, *The Little Cowherd* (*Xiao fangniu* 小放牛), and *Eternal Regret*; see Wang, *Lyrical in Epic*

guide production, that the atmosphere of the film couldn't be completely artificial because Peking opera still aspired to communicate real emotions even through its symbolist form; and that every effort would be made to guide the audience into forgetting the set.[33] His approach to *Resentment* depicted the play through the techniques of montage and decoupage, rather than the unusual camera angles of *Murder*; in this regard, Fei leaned heavily on a classical cinematic language as a means of theatrical interpretation, an attempt at affective translation between media that has been read by at least one modern scholar as undermining the presentation of the theatrical.[34] But even at this point, 12 years after *Murder in the Oratory*, Fei remained deeply uncertain about the integration of formulaic gesture with cinematic realism, despite the centrality of its place in the question of xiqu films.[35]

Despite Fei's dissatisfaction with the film and its lack of fame relative to the later feature with Mei Lanfang, *Murder in the Oratory* set a conceptual bar for subsequent xiqu films. This is not to suggest that he stood out as an immediate model for 1950s xiqu film directors: his associations with the Guomindang New Life Movement in the 30s, and his slow, artistic approach to *Springtime in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun* 小城之春, dir Fei Mu, 1948) resulted in his condemnation as bourgeois and reactionary in the post-liberation environment.[36] His ideas, however, had undeniable influence, even if the man himself was rejected. The notion of a cinematic aesthetic to express theatricality pushed film to move beyond the theater-based stage documentary towards a studio production that deliberately sought to combine the aesthetics of the stage and screen. The film raised essential questions about the use of sets, music and performance techniques that would continue to haunt xiqu film directors for years to come. The same use of realistic sets to frame

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Time, ch 7, fn 6. *On Stage and Backstage* was actually filmed in 1937, not 1939, as cited; it was screened as a double feature to *Murder in the Oratory*, and advertised heavily in the *Shenbao* 申报.

33 Fei Mu, "Guanyu Mei Lanfang," 464. It is somewhat ironic in light of this statement that in one of the key scenes of *Resentment in Life and Death*, Mei Lanfang is framed with two looms, one life-size, and one more typical of the theatrical stage, in effect staging the core dilemma of the xiqu film, the conflict between principles of realism and abstraction, within the set, itself. See Wang, ch 7.

34 Teo, 4.

35 Fei Mu, "Guanyu Mei Lanfang," 465.

theatrical action would characterize the next major xiqu film after Fei's, *The Butterfly Lovers*, the first xiqu film after liberation, and another massive critical and popular success.[37]

Though Fei's contributions to the history of xiqu film were significant, his death in 1951 curtailed his immediate influence on later debates on xiqu film production. Film directors of the early PRC returned to a wide variety of experimental staging practices in the 1950s, indirectly evincing a hierarchy of comparative status among different genres of xiqu: the high traditions of Peking opera and *kunqu* were far more likely to see simpler sets and backdrops, even if camerawork made clear the space of filming was not restricted by proscenium style staging. Examples of regional operas, like *The Butterfly Lovers* (*yueju*) or *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* (*Tianxianpei* 天仙配 1955, dir Shi Hui 石挥, *huangmeixi*), were much more likely to use more fully realized sets and props; *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* even went so far as to include outdoor shots of landscapes edited into the opening sequence of song and dance. The variety of practices available between genres, as well as between film studios, brought with it a deepening, fractured discourse on the aesthetic needs, problems, and solutions for xiqu film. This problem with remediation was only one side of the equation: the theater world was equally wracked with debates on how to implement the new aesthetic ideologies of the PRC.

Challenges to the Repertoire

The theater world of the early 1950s was marked by fractious critiques and discord particularly at the local level over how to implement reform to the aesthetic codes of xiqu. On the one hand, realism was the undisputed aesthetic directive of all the arts, including xiqu; on the other, what this concretely meant in operatic terms was a source of much contention. The spread of

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[36] Olaf Möller, "Amongst the Ruins: The Two Poles of Fei Mu," *Cinema Scope* 1, no 45 (2011): 19.

Stanislavskian acting theory during the early 1950s popularized the idea of internalization of character experiences and psychology, but without access to a verisimilar means of physical performance style, operatic actors were reduced to off-stage verbal claims of the appropriate interiorization during the production process, often published in *Theater Report*.[38]

Historically speaking, this uncertainty over realism was not solely the product of ambiguous guidance from government officials in the Reform Bureau; the discursive battle between the idealization of 'naturalism' or the 'aestheticism' of traditional theater goes back at least as far as the 1920s, between May Fourth intellectuals and Mei Lanfang's associate, Qi Rushan.[39] As an early precursor of this terminology, the father of the field of Chinese drama history, Wang Guowei (王国维 1877-1927), as an advocate of Yuan dynasty drama, put forward as its values its 'naturalness,' both in direct vernacular language and in a simplicity of expression of emotion as a means of moving audiences.[40] These sentiments were shared closely with May Fourth thinkers (with whom Wang was not affiliated), in regards to drama, seeking a socially responsible theater that was direct and accessible, so as to more easily effect social change.[41] Realism was the byword of this movement, even if not all May Fourth radicals were in agreement on the finer points of how this mode of expression was to be carried out; their critique of indigenous theater applied most directly to its reliance on musical expression as a counterpoint to the language of spoken drama.[42]

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[37] For more on this film and its international significance, see Lanjun Xu, "The Lure of Sadness: The Fever of Yueju and The Butterfly Lovers in the Early PRC," *Asian Theatre Journal* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 104-129.

[38] For example, Wang Wenjuan's account of her creation of Chunxiang in 1954, or Wang Chuansong's report of his approach to Lou Ashu in 1956; as a genre, these articles were usually titled along the lines of "How I performed [character]," and generally recapped the plot of the play through the lens of the title character's emotional experiences; it is possible these accounts were ghostwritten in order to better convey the intended message. Tellingly, the majority of these articles were written by well-known actors who still leveraged some star power; in spite of the government's stated interests in dismantling the star system, leaders in the theater world were apparently willing to co-opt the lingering influence of star power for the purposes of spreading approved methods of performance practice.

[39] Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 137-150.

[40] Ibid., 138.

[41] Ibid., 139.

[42] Ibid., 142 and 149. Goldstein draws on Leo Ou-fan Lee to suggest the Romantic and Realist factions were not so significantly different from each other when all fell under the umbrella of May Fourth radicalism.

Qi Rushan, however, was the first to thoroughly construct a theory of traditional theater, drawing attention to the fact of its aestheticization rather than realism.[43] His approach to the theater over the following two decades established aesthetic expressionism as its core, where, as he famously put it, "no movement was not dance, no sound was not song." Increasingly, this came to be opposed to any element of realism on the stage, so that the practice of tea-drinking during performance, for example, was criticized in his system not for its disruption of narrative illusion, but for the violation of the ideal of aesthetic gesture. This included even moments where tea-drinking would have been diegetically justified: Qi's principles of drama required that the actor fake it, instead.[44] His opposition to hybridized forms of theater was just one of the first of many aesthetically justified arguments against realism in xiqu. These were not the only available philosophical positions during the 1930s, however, as many others, including dramatists like Xiong Foxi, continued to explore the possibilities of hybridization between western and folk forms, including both realism and aestheticism, interests that increasingly became closely associated with the Left and Communist approaches to the theater, in particular.[45]

After liberation, internal fractures emerged on how best to fulfill the ideals of realism on stage; some disapproved of vernacularized movement as too naturalist, while at the other end of the spectrum, theatricality was derided as too formalist. The stylized, codified movements and mimed gestures of xiqu were all easy targets for criticism. Particularly in instances where movement lacked resemblance to real life actions, codified movements were condemned as empty, abstract measures present solely for the purpose of beautifying the action, to be cut out from the repertoire. The consequences for xiqu's physical performance conventions were severe, potentially affecting everything from the miming of opening a door, to the use of water sleeve gestures, a staple of

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[43] Ibid., 153.

[44] Ibid., 154. It is worth noting that to Xiqu Reform officials, tea-drinking was frowned upon because of its violation of realism and not as a defense of theatricality.

expression. Uncertainties on the proper expression of Soviet theories of performance consequently put at risk the preservation of what Diana Taylor has termed the 'repertoire,' the body of acted performance practice.[46]

Though there had been some discussion of 'stage images' (*wutai xingxiang* 舞台形象) in the early part of the decade, the real focus on artistic presentation only took shape in 1954, initiating a concrete discussion of performance practice.[47] At a meeting of the Chinese Literature and Arts Association in October of that year, Tian Han openly acknowledged the ambiguity in concrete directions for artistic reform that had characterized the first years of the reform movement.[48] It wasn't that the problems of the early years had been resolved; there was still a chronic shortage of high-quality scripts, and traditional plays still remained effectively curtailed as companies feared reprisals for performances of historical plays that featured ideologically incorrect thought, or contained characters that were seen as lampooning the lower classes. In light of the pressing emphasis on the availability of performable scripts, other questions that had emerged regarding artistic change had gone unaddressed by the upper levels of the bureaucracy. In the absence of a unified direction, camps were beginning to emerge, divided into positions for and against significant changes to performance practice.[49] To describe these positions, Tian used terms that became shorthand for later critics of xiqu reform, violent (*cubao* 粗暴) and conservative (*baoshou* 保守).[50] Of these, the former category appeared to be the bigger, as Tian critiqued a general, widespread

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45 Siyuan Liu, "'A Mixed-Blooded Child, Neither Western nor Eastern:' Sinicization of Western-Style Theatre in Rural China in the 1930s," *Asian Theatre Journal* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 272-297.

46 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16-33.

47 Zhang Geng, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu*, 46-7.

48 Tian Han 田汉，"Yinianlai de xiju gongzuo de juxie gongzuo 一年来的戏剧工作和剧协工作——1954年10月5日在中国文联全国委员会， 10月8日在剧协常务理事会上的报告," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 10 (1954): 4-5.

49 Ibid.

50 The discussion of these terms peaked in the months directly after Tian's remarks, including an entire article by Lao She (老舍), in the December issue of *Theater Report,* dedicated to the two terms. Rather pessimistically, he described the reform situation as stuck between a rock of conservatism (performers too in love with their own technique to reform it)

disregard for preserving cultural tradition, leading him to characterize the reform movement as five years of "a battle to protect heritage."[51]

Given that Tian felt the general approach to reform had been too harsh, it is somewhat surprising that he then went on to criticize acting as too formalist. The greater list of continuing problems in xiqu reform was comprehensive, though his complaints were often vague, for example, that the directorial system was not robust enough, or that plays suffered from 'tedium' or 'lack of unity.'[52] For performance technique, however, the problem was explicitly the presence of non-realist gesture.[53] Linking performance directly to political knowledge, Tian implied that these 'weaknesses' were the result of reactionary thinking among theater practitioners causing trouble amidst unfocused reform goals:

> It is a shame that in the art world, some reactionary thinking still causes trouble, so that when idealists implement even the slightest of reforms, they must go in with a militant spirit. As for art, reform is without support, without a leader. Reformers are also lacking a clear aim and steady plan to move forward. We must change this situation.[54]

Tian's point on the lack of clarity in reform goals spoke to the heart of the matter. Ma Shaobo, writing in the month before the conference, anticipated many of Tian's critiques of the reform movement, including the complaint on the role of stylizations in realism, however his own diagnosis of the problems with reform at once embodied the vagueness of rhetoric from reform leaders, and set the stage for extreme responses.

Ma's assessment of xiqu reform approached each of the major aspects of performance through an ideological lens, even when it introduced what appeared to be essential contradictions

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and a hard place of violence (theater outsiders assigned to reform who lacked an understanding or appreciation of xiqu). Lao She 老舍，"Tan 'cubao' he 'baoshou' 谈［粗暴］和［保守］，" *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 12 (1954): 10-11.

51 Tian Han, "Yi nianlai," 4. "…加上当时有很多人轻视遗产，对遗产采取粗暴态度，这就使我们的工作变得更复杂、更困难起来。五年来我们进行了一场保卫遗产的战斗."

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid. "…表演中夹杂着非现实主义的东西…"

54 Ibid. 遗憾的是，就在艺术界也还有一种保守思想作祟，致使有志之士在进行哪怕是点滴的改革的时候，也怀着战战兢兢的心情。对艺术改革是缺乏支持，缺乏领导的。改革者也缺乏鲜明的目标和稳步前进的计划。需要改变这种情况。

between theory and the aesthetics of xiqu. His analysis of performance tendencies defended and delimited theatricality with so many ideological justifications that the distinction between respectful treatment of the art and flashy, crowd-pleasing formalism came down to a matter of degrees.[55] Actors who relied too much on the formal conventions of xiqu could be easily accused of pandering to audiences or pursuing individual stardom rather than the collective spirit of the troupe.[56] Ma, rather unhelpfully, demanded the preservation of stylized, theatrical acting techniques except when they were not reflective of a lived reality, or disturbed the realism of the play; that actions should be exaggerated, except when they were too exaggerated (无必要的外形夸张).[57] It is easy to see how this juxtaposition of opposites and splitting of hairs could have led to widespread confusion. And while puzzlement over the distinctions of ideologically correct acting presented one problem, in application, these criticisms were potentially more destructive than helpful: at worst, Ma's standards for performance technique suggested that bad acting, or lack of skill in integrating stylized techniques with the play, could be grounds for an attack on one's ideological purity. At best, as a yardstick of reform success, no matter how subjective, performance technique remained under politically charged pressures to vernacularize, whether as in the complete adoption of realist gesture, or as in the accommodation of stylized gesture towards realism through reduction and simplification.

Far from concluding in October, the debate continued unresolved in published articles and the guest-letters column for the remainder of the year, even as officials also met semi-regularly on

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[55] Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Guanyu jingju yishu jinyibu gaige de shangque 关于京剧艺术进一步改革的商榷," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 10 (1954): 10-11. Ma may be one of the few officials to admit that audiences were not intrinsically attracted to ideologically correct art, but continued to have a taste for spectacle.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid. Ma's critique is invested in some of the same rhetoric of artistic debates on realism in the 40s (技巧vs 生活), in an apparent attempt to blend contemporary debates on socialist realism with earlier ones that applied more to critical realism. While on the one hand, this could be read as an attempt to connect more directly with actors more familiar with the earlier debates or alienated by contemporary terms of ideological analysis, his discursive work may be a contributing factor to the lack of clarity, as the piece mobilizes a significant amount of jargon.

the topic of xiqu reform. Even though these letters were likely selected for inclusion on account of their consonance with the official position on xiqu reform, they go some way towards demonstrating the difference in nuance between top officials like Tian and Ma, and the average citizen, for whom the demands of realism allowed for greater leeway in dispensing with tradition. At the same time, the letters suggest the absence of a popular consensus even among these curated, approved responses. First and foremost in the section under "performance art" was the problem of conventions (*chengshi* 程式), a term that encompassed the formulaic gestures whether as small as beard-shaking or as large as set pieces like *tangma* (趟马), a conventional expression of traveling long-distance on horseback. Readers spanned the range from seeking to do away with conventions altogether to dismissing only conventionalized performance technique (*chengshihua de yanji* 程式化的演技) but preserving conventions, an apparent oxymoron, in the name of greater realism in performance.[58] Their distinction on this point was both subtle and overly simplistic: conventions that were deployed to convey fuller character development and emotional expression were acceptable, while conventions that expressed common or simplified emotions were rejected as technique. A typical expression, excerpted by the editors of the *Theater Report* read, "We cannot generally oppose 'conventionalized gesture,' but only oppose those who are unable to actively use these regulated postures, and who cause the performance to slide into formalist 'conventionalized performance techniques.'"[59] The move appeared to be purely rhetorical; in both instances, actors would be required to utilize conventionalized techniques for the expression of emotion, and the standard for what gestures made a character 'emotive,' rather than adding merely artistic finesse, was held subjectively by the

[58] "Duzhe dui xiqu de yishu gaige wenyi de yijian 读者对戏曲的艺术改革问题的意见," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 12 (December 1954): 32-33.

[59] Ibid., 32. "我们不能一般地反对'程式化的动作'，而只能反对那种不能活用这种规律化了的姿态的，使表演流入形式的'程式化的演技'.

audience. It appeared that even if conventions were to be retained, performance technique would be unable to escape unscathed.

Writing "Xiqu Performance Problems" in 1955, theater critic and deputy director of the Chinese Xiqu Institute (*Zhongguo xiqu yanjiuyuan* 中国戏曲研究院), Zhang Geng built on the defense of xiqu as realist that Tian Han and Ma Shaobo had established the year prior, but framed his argument in terms less critical of stylization. Mimed actions, he claimed, following Tian and Ma, were the distillation of generations of actors drawing from life and aestheticizing it; Zhang's new defense of stylized movements lay in its role as an expressive language to the knowledgeable observer, just as other traditional art forms, like ballet, used conventions to convey meaning.[60] By encoding expressive meaning related to the construction of character, conventional gestures and performance techniques could be salvaged from vernacularization, or worse, complete omission. Performance techniques that fell outside of this realm of rationalization by character were still subject to censure, however.[61] Conceptually, this distinction followed the same line of argument as the letters to the editor of the previous year, though with a slightly more tolerant scope: character-building expression could be retained effectively unaltered (departing from Ma's suggestion that these gestures needed to be toned down), but movements meant solely to wow audiences by showing off technique were unacceptable.

At the root of the performance technique question lay a concern with drawing and retaining audiences, whose numbers had been falling steadily from the very beginning of the reform movement. Focused on the goal of educating audiences, the government initially frowned on performances that lacked a seriousness of purpose in disseminating socialist principles and lessons on class struggle. An article published in 1950 as a letter addressed to an anonymous actress went so far as to enumerate unacceptable genres, including scholar-beauty romances and heroic martial plays,

[60] Zhang Geng, "Xiqu biaoyan wenti," 182-186.

even when ostensibly adapted towards revolutionary purposes.[62] Even the acknowledgement that revolutionary plays were failing to draw enough audiences to support the financial stability of the company was rejected as grounds for continuing to stage the more popular, traditional works. In the face of this kind of extreme polemics, many companies took this to mean that traditional plays, with their historical settings in the feudalistic past, were off-limits, though newly written modern plays were both in short supply and often of low quality. The resulting 'script famine' (*juben huang* 剧本荒) was widely recognized by contemporaries as one of the main reasons for the decline in audience attendance over the first half of the 1950s.[63] Perhaps pointedly, this early example of public censure was framed as coming directly from the mouth of an honestly concerned, and naturally, ideologically correct audience member. Writing five years later, Zhang Geng revived the use of this hypothetical audience, those ideologically correct thinkers who were desirous of only performances that avoided displays of technique for its own sake; however in a significant twist, this rhetorical audience emerged only out of argumentation to defend the use of performance technique as a natural expectation of theater-goers.[64]

For most actors, the question of where to draw the line on approved performance techniques persisted, resurfacing in publications and in discussions at the performer's study conventions (*yanyuan jiangxihui* 演员讲习会), and contributing in part to the dearth of traditional plays on stage through the first half of the 1950s. It was in this latter venue that Zhang held the biggest platform; over half of his writings in the 50s were reports issued at the conventions,

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61 In this, he once again followed Tian and Ma.

62 Li Qing 李晴, "Gei yige xiqu nvyanyuan de xin 给一个戏曲女演员的信," *Xiqu bao* 戏曲报 2, no. 5 (Jun 17, 1950): 90-94.

63 "Fandui xiqu gongzuozhong de Guo Yuzhi 反对戏曲工作中的过于执," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 (6) 1956: 4-5. (Guo Yuzhi is the name of the lazy (and thus, hidebound) bureaucrat in *Fifteen Strings*.)

64 Zhang Geng, "Xiqu biaoyan wenti," 184-186. It is worth noting that the use of audiences as a tool for motivating reform among actors, (as well as other parts of the art world), became a full-fledged tactic of the government after the public campaign against the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan* 武训传 dir, Sun Yu) in 1951. Rather than

including the above essay, "Xiqu Performance Problems," on the expression of realism in xiqu.[65] Taking place over three years from 1955-1957, the conventions were ostensibly part of the governmental program to 'reform the person,' as part of the tripartite directive on reform issued on May 5, 1951.[66] In addition to basic political education, actors were trained in ethics, acting techniques including discussions of realism and formalism, and other issues in reform practices.

Zhang's footprint was especially visible on these events, beyond his participation: he was himself the architect of the conventions, from their conception to the construction of their guiding intellectual scope.[67] This marked an administrative highlight in his development as a theorist, educator and critic over the course of the preceding decade, beginning with his work in Yan'an. There, Zhang had been closely involved with the development of a hybridized form of drama that sought to draw influences from both China and the west, in the creation of 'new music-drama' or *xin geju* 新歌剧, of which *The White Haired Girl* (*Bai maonü* 白毛女) was by far the most famous example.[68] Zhang's interests in western theater theory were a significant influence on his early work with this iconic drama, but his involvement with traditional xiqu, rather than the music-dramas or spoken dramas that marked the beginning of his career, began in earnest after 1952 with his observation of the First National Xiqu Trial Performance Convention and his transfer to the Xiqu

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government dictums and bans, censorship primarily took the form of public criticism campaigns. See Zhang Geng, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu*, 41.

65 An Kui 安葵，*Zhang Geng pingzhuan* 张庚评传. (Beijing 北京：Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 1997), 199; 169. The report was issued at the 1955 convention.

66 改戏、改人、改制. Political education classes for actors had been initiated well before these conventions (see Zhang Lianhong 张炼红，"Xin Zhongguo xiqu gaige yundong chuqi de yiren jixunban: yi Shanghai, Beijing, Anhui wei li 新中国戏曲改革运动初期的艺人集训班：以上海、北京、安徽为例," *Zhongwen xixue zhidao* 中文自学指导 2 (2004): 27-31), but the inclusion of political classes was part of the justification of the Ministry of Culture's support for the endeavor. See Zhang Geng 张庚, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu* 当代中国戏曲, 48-49.

67 An Kui, *Zhang Geng*, 167.

68 Max Bohnenkamp, "Turning Ghosts into People: "The White Haired Girl," Revolutionary Folklorism and the Politics of Aesthetics in Modern China" (PhD diss, University of Chicago, 2014). See especially ch. 3.

Institute in February 1953.[69] Even at his initial position at the Central Drama Academy (*Zhongyang xiju xueyuan* 中央戏剧学院), he evinced an interest in encouraging students to study xiqu, revealing a fascination that suggested a deeper commitment than his early work with western theory would suggest.[70] His deep interest in establishing a formal body of theory to support indigenous theater coincided directly with the timing of the conventions, and his work on this front consequently engaged directly with contemporary concerns on the expression of realism through technique.[71]

Though the 1955 convention included discussions of performance technique as a product of respect for theatrical traditions, the focus of the second convention a year later explicitly put emphasis on eliminating the tendencies to view tradition, theatricality and the mixing of old and new styles as uniformly undesirable.[72] The repetition of themes may not have been a product of the failure of the first convention, so much as a result of the limited scope of its participants, which was restricted to northern xiqu genres, and only had 62 attendees in total.[73] The second convention was much broader in its selection, over four times as large as the first, at 279 participants, and drawing representatives of xiqu genres from all corners of China.[74] In this instance, the convention was organized around the exhibition of skilled performances by famed actors, and characteristic plays from different xiqu genres, putting a functional emphasis on the preservation of traditional performance. Zhang continued to lecture on the importance of opposing dogmatism in the execution of reform, particularly with regard to performance practice, and on other themes that

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69 An Kui, *Zhang Geng,* 146-147. His influence after 1949 was felt in ways beyond his administrative positions in the academies and committees, as he also served, inter alia, as the deputy chair of the National Association of Theater Workers. (Ibid., 144-145).

70 Ibid.

71 Zhang's famous theory of "lyric drama" (*jushishuo* 剧诗说), while initially articulated in the 1940s, didn't receive further treatment until the 1960s; even then, his articles use the nativist base of the theory to suggest reforms to spoken drama and music-dramas, traditions that had been imported into China. It appears that the majority of his intellectual focus in the 1950s was on the direction and success of xiqu reform.

72 Ibid., 170.

73 Ibid., 168-169. This number included bureaucrats as well as actors.

74 Ibid., 170.

modern scholar An Kui characterized in the late 1990s as "anti-left" (反对'左'倾的思想).[75]

Without negating the value of Western theater theory, Zhang raised the level of his rhetoric in challenging the application of Western values to Chinese theater:

> If we wanted to put the Stanislavskian performance system into practice in xiqu, we would first need to consider that it originated in the insights into spoken drama performance, and we here are talking about xiqu. One characteristic of xiqu is that is uses conventions to execute performance, so that the full range of emotions all have fixed expressions, but the first thing Stanislavskian theory does is oppose inflexible performances. Can we agree with certain people, and take Stanislavskian theory to reform operatic performance, abolishing our conventions? If we really did this, that would mean the complete destruction of the operatic performance system. But this situation has already truly happened: many places all criticize the "formalism" of xiqu actors, so that actors don't even dare to move— this is very disturbing.[76]

This direct challenge to Stanislavskian theory was a departure from standard understandings of contemporary, updated performance practice, but was evidently a direct response to what Zhang saw as an increasing threat to the operatic performance repertoire. While the third conference expanded its scope even further through simultaneous execution in both Shanghai and Guangzhou, it was ultimately cut short by the beginning of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, curtailing any further developments of this provocative critique. In part because of this collapse, the second conference in 1956, with its broad reach across the nation, held special significance in the development of

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[75] Ibid. An Kui's wording is suggestive, particularly in light of the timing. He is ultimately elliptical about the significance of Zhang's 'anti-left' leanings, and does not offer any further insight on his political situation during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the following year. Zhang's long-term membership in the party and proximity to major figures of power may have acted as insurance against personal attacks during most of the political campaigns. In spite of this, Zhang had initially come under fire for his beliefs in 1954, and went through over a decade of increasingly vicious critiques, including assignment to the category of 'bourgeois intellectual,' culminating in his persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Of his major articles produced during the conventions, it was his defense of the traditional historical play *Qin Xianglian* (秦香莲) that encountered the most opposition; in 1959, Zhang was required to write a self-critique directly in response to criticisms of this work. See An Kui, *Zhang Geng*, 192-197.

[76] "如果想把斯氏表演体系运用到戏曲中来，首先必须考虑那是从话剧表演的经验总结出来的， 而我们这里却是戏曲。戏曲的一个特点是通过程式来进行表演的，喜怒哀乐都是有固定的格式， 而斯氏是首先反对刻板的表演的。我们是否可以同意某些人的意见，拿斯氏的这一点来改造戏曲的表演，废除我们的程式呢？如果真这样做，那就把戏曲的表演体系完全破坏了。而这种情形也真在实行，许多地方都在批评戏曲演员的"形式主义"，弄得演员都不敢动了，这是很可怕的。" 张庚，"反对用教条主义的态度来"改革"戏曲" (August 30, 1956), in *Zhang Geng xiqu lunwenji* 张庚戏曲论文集, 256-257.

discourse around performance techniques.[77] The conventions served as a focal point for the dissemination of Zhang's criticisms of reform, in addition to his speeches at conferences during this three year period, and his ardent defense of tradition and theoretical justifications for the expression of 'real life' through stylized acting became broadly known. It was amidst this discursive environment that *Fifteen Strings of Copper* saw its overwhelming success.

Performance Technique Revisited: Fifteen Strings of Copper

Fifteen Strings of Copper was initially a relatively unassuming play, quietly maintained in the repertoire of a small kunqu company in the early years of the 1950s. The play underwent at least two different instances of revision and adaptation after 1949, trimming a three-day performance into a show just over three hours. Initial rewrites were begun in 1953 by the troupe, then known as the Guofeng Kunsu Theater Company (*Guofeng kunsu jutuan* 国风昆苏剧团), which continued to perform the play until 1955; in the fall of that year, a second round of revisions, based on the 1953 edition, resulted in a script that became the basis for the 1956 production.[78] Originally written by the Qing dynasty playwright Zhu Suchen (朱素臣, fl. late Ming/early Qing), *Fifteen Strings*, as ultimately adapted, is a tale of wrongful arrest after a murder/burglary gone awry. The daughter of the murdered man, Su Shujuan (苏戍娟) runs away before learning of the murder, and encounters a man on the road who happens to be carrying 15 strings of copper, the same quantity that her father had brought home just that evening. Local officials place the brunt of suspicion on the missing daughter, and when her companion is discovered to be carrying the exact amount of the missing money, both are taken into custody, tried, and sentenced to execution by the local official, Guo Yuzhi (过于执). The case eventually lands on the desk of Suzhou magistrate, Kuang Zhong (況鍾),

[77] An Kui, *Zhang Geng*, 171.

who heeds their pleas to investigate their case more thoroughly, and seeks a stay on their execution in order to return to the scene of the crime and conduct his own inspection. In the course of his investigation, new evidence comes to light, the carelessness of Guo Yuzhi is uncovered, Su Shujuan and her partner are exonerated, and Kuang Zhong uncovers the true murderer, gambler and miscreant Lou Ashu (娄阿鼠). The play premiered publicly on January 1, 1956 in Hangzhou, and toured in Shanghai successfully before bringing the performance to Beijing on April 10th.

In May, a cascade of events happened that drew *Fifteen Strings* into an even bigger spotlight. What had begun as a lukewarm reception in Beijing, a place where audiences were likely to be alienated by the language difficulties of understanding a play spoken at times in Suzhou dialect or with a heavy accent, turned around rapidly, following the publication of articles by prominent theatrical figures.[79] In mid-to-late April, an increasing number of top officials saw the play, including Mao, himself, who pronounced, after his first of two viewings, that all people in the nation should see it, as well.[80] On the 8th of May, it was announced that the play was going to be turned into a film by Shanghai Film Studios; on the 9th, the Ministry of Culture advised all regional xiqu genres to locate a copy of the script and adapt the play into their native repertoires.[81] Just over a week later, a conference on the play was held for theater luminaries and leading bureaucrats in the arts, as well as premier Zhou Enlai.[82] All aspects of the play were discussed and many praised, from acting to

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78 Fu Jin, "xinlun," 26-28. The Guofeng Company was later incorporated by the state in April 1956, and became known as the Zhejiang Kunsu Company (*Zhejiang kunsu jutuan* 浙江昆苏剧团).

79 Zhang Ling, "Kunju wutai," 32. In a comparison of company income from each performance, Fu Jin notes that the total income from a full house in May rose over 200 yuan from the same number of ticket sales in April; he relies on comparisons of reports of audience numbers with total income in different venues in order to deduce whether or not the house was sold out. From the inflation of this figure, he determines that the play had grown significantly in popularity. See Fu Jin, "xinlun," 24-25.

80 Huang Yuan 黄源，"Mao Zedong sixiang jiuhuole kunqu—wei zhuxi yibainian danchen jinian er zuo 毛泽东思想救活了昆曲－为主席一百年诞辰纪念而作，" *Wenyi lilun yu piping* 文艺理论与批评 1 (1994): 48.

81 "Kunqu "Shiwuguan" jiang shezhicheng dianying 昆曲《十五贯》将摄制成电影," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报，May 8, 1956, 3; "Wenhubu tuijian "Shiwuguan" 文化部推荐《十五贯》," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报， May 9, 1956, 3.

82 "Wenyijie renshi juxing kunqu "Shiwuguan" zuotanhui 文艺界人士举行昆曲《十五贯》座谈会，" 人民日报，May 18, 1956, 1.

scriptwriting to directing. Reports on *Fifteen Strings* continued to pepper the *People's Daily* for months afterward.

The attention garnered by *Fifteen Strings* led many to suspect its overwhelming success was connected to contemporary politics. The adaptation team, compiled by Tian Han, included the head of a regional department of the Ministry of Culture, Huang Yuan (黄源), along with Chen Jing (陈静 pen name: Chen Si 陈思), a *yueju* scriptwriter whose name would ultimately be credited with the actual writing of the script, and prominent members of the company, who began their work in the autumn of 1955. In that same year in July, the *Sufan* (肃反) Campaign began, which, like the Anti-Hu Feng Campaign six months earlier, had repercussions felt throughout the drama world.[83] *Sufan* was ostensibly a movement against counter-revolutionaries, meant to last two years, but was executed by means of 5% quotas for each locale, leading to a significant amount of unfounded accusations and arbitrary assignment of political labels, often targeting members of the intelligentsia.[84] It is consequently not without some irony that the campaign took as its aim "to raise awareness, clear out all spies, prevent deviations, and avoid wrongful accusations towards good people."[85] It was this last item that Huang took as inspiration for the play, focusing as it did on the proper management of cases through thorough investigation, in the name of avoiding harm done to 'good people.'[86] Guo Yuzhi's indifferent arbitration of the case was an example of subjectivism and 'bureaucratism' (*zhuguan zhuyi* 主观主义, *guanliao zhuyi* 官僚主义), or the peremptory use of

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[83] Huang Yuan 黄源，"Kunqu "shiwuguan" bianyan shimo 昆曲《十五贯》编演始末," *Xin wenhua shiliao* 新文化史料 2 (1995): 8-13. *Sufan* is short for Suqing ancang de fan geming fenzi yundong 肃清暗藏的反革命分子运动 (Campaign to clear out hidden counter-revolutionaries). Other sources include the two leads, Wang Chuansong (Lou Ashu) and Zhou Chuanying (Kuang Zhong) as part of the adaptation team; these two, as evidenced by the 'chuan' in their names, were members of the original class of kunqu students established in 1921 in Suzhou as part of a last-ditch effort to preserve kunqu practice.

[84] See Rudolf Wagner, *Inside a Service Trade: Studies in Contemporary Chinese Prose* (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), 27-69 especially pp. 34-35.

[85] Huang Yuan, "bianyan shimo," 8. 提高警惕，肃清一切特务分子，防止偏差，不要冤枉一个好人. This sentence is a quotation of Mao Zedong's instructions for the campaign.

[86] Huang Yuan, "bianyan shimo," 9.

authority, both targets of *Sufan*; Kuang Zhong, on the other hand, modeled the ideal of 'seeking the truth from facts' (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是). This was not without risks, as the heroic character of Kuang Zhong was squarely in the bourgeois literati class and the primary villain, Lou Ashu, a member of the working classes.[87] Huang consistently expressed his earnestness in wanting to support an objective of the *Sufan* movement, though it is possible that some officials intended the play to serve as a vehicle to protest the expansion of the movement, instead; this critique was later used against Huang during the Cultural Revolution.[88] At the moment of its conception and premiere, however, the play's positive connections to *Sufan* played a significant role in undergirding and augmenting its official success. This political support, besides ensuring the play's popular success, made *Fifteen Strings* into the center of discussions for ongoing artistic debates on realism, and its expression in traditional performance techniques, in particular.

The work that went into adapting the play made open use of inventive choreography, often blending traditional gesture with more vernacular movements. The oft-cited highlight from the play, "Interrogating the Rat," where Kuang Zhong, disguised as a fortune teller, probes Lou Ashu, is a key example of this melange, drawing on the natural propensity of the *chou* (丑) role to combine theatrical gesture with prosaic motion. Already deeply unsettled and on the run, Lou Ashu responds to Kuang Zhong's slowly unfolding pronouncements with an abundance of physical movements, ranging from twiddling his thumbs, at the more prosaic or vernacular end of the scale, to spinning in place or crouching on the bench, movements more in line with the *shenduan* of a *chou* (see fig 2.2).

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87 Ibid.

88 Fu Jin, "xinlun," 31. Huang penned patriotic memoirs of his contributions to *Fifteen Strings* during the 1990s, and seems to have genuinely felt support for Mao's campaign. See for example, a piece admittedly written for a Maoist celebration: Huang Yuan, "Mao Zedong sixiang jiuhuole kunqu." Huang repeated much of the content from this article in his less glaringly patriotically titled memoir a year later, suggesting his attitude to the content had not been specifically enhanced for the celebration.

Fig. 2.2 A mélange of the vernacular and different styles of theatricality: Lou Ashu (left) twiddles his thumbs in a vernacular way, and over-emotes, in a way that is typically theatrical on the spoken drama stage (I still term this 'vernacular' for the sake of its comparison to xiqu theatricality); Kuang Zhong's expression (assessing the effect of his words) is similarly theatrical in the manner of spoken drama. The relative rigidity of their torsos, and Kuang's arms, however, are more typical of xiqu theatricality. Scene from *Shiwuguan* 十五贯, directed by Tao Jin 陶金, filmed 1956 (Guangzhou: Guangzhou qiaojiaren wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi 广州俏佳人文化传播有限公司, [1999?]). DVD.

At the height of Kuang Zhong's revelations, when he seems to divine the surname of the victim, Lou Ashu moves from swinging his leg (as a sign of forced casualness) to somersaulting backwards off the bench, and then rapidly crawling underneath it to return to a standing position, a movement whose theatrical quality is announced by the use of gongs to punctuate the action (fig 2.3).

fig. 2.3: Lou Ashu scurries under the bench; Kuang Zhong is eminently theatrical, with the hallmarks of xiqu theatricality visually highlighted in the brightness of the water sleeves, the roundness of the arms and torso, the visibility of the fan, and in the way the beard stands out and consequently foregrounds its fakeness. Scene from *Shiwuguan* 十五贯, directed by Tao Jin 陶金, filmed 1956.

How convincingly could a comical, acrobatic movement like this be read as intrinsically realist? The standard for realism was set at expressing emotional content, but moments like this opened the door to alternative interpretations where theatricality might be allowed back on stages. In his critique of the play, even the well-known theater director and critic A Jia, despite concluding that all action should express emotional content in some way, described this moment as a single

conceptual unit with the impression of a rat that Ashu performs moments earlier, in spite of a brief pause between the two (fig. 2.4).[89]

fig. 2.4: Wang Chuansong, as Lou Ashu, mimics a rat, in vernacular fashion. Scene from Scene from *Shiwuguan* 十五贯, directed by Tao Jin 陶金, filmed 1956.

While the earlier impression is deliberate, the act of scurrying under the bench in a low, narrow space is equally evocative of rat-like behavior, and when seen in combination, could be read artistically as a performative realization of Ashu's evasive character, as well as metaphor for his current state of nervous flight. This interpretive line was not often deployed in defense of theatricality, however. According to Wang Chuansong (王传淞 1906-1987), the actor who played Lou Ashu, these actions were intended solely for emotional expression: originally used to express Ashu's carelessness during a moment of joy earlier in the conversation, the somersault was later

[89] A Jia 阿甲，"Xiang 'shiwuguan' de biaoyan yishu xuexi shenme? 向'十五贯'的表演艺术学习什么?" *Renmin ribao* 人民日报， May 18, 1956, 3.

moved to this point of surprise.[90] However, Wang reported that this response conflicted with the stunned look he normally would have performed to reflect Ashu's shock, revealing that more realistic expressions were available to choreograph the moment, yet discarded. Realistically, neither emotional state, joy or shock, is particularly suited for such an acrobatic gesture, except when intended theatrically. Wang's acknowledgement of the two possible gestural interpretations for the scene, and the success of the theatrical one, subtly offered a defense of theatrical motion even in the face of realist emotional alternatives.

In an early review of the play, A Jia underlined the continued relevance of concerns over performance technique when praising the choreography of Wang Chuansong and Zhou Chuanying (周传瑛), who played Kuang Zhong, particularly in this climactic scene.[91] Initially, his arguments echoed Tian, Ma, and Zhang in the evocation of stylizations as refinements of real gestures from life, which by now had become part of the standard arsenal in defense of performance technique. But here, he also made passing reference to an idea that would only become fleshed out in his essay later that year on "Truth in Life and Truth in Xiqu Performance Art," that the notion of perfect external gesture emerging from a proper understanding of the internal life of the character was "truly a destructive idea."[92]

While he stopped short of explicitly defending the study of traditional gesture as a prerequisite to undertaking a Stanislavskian approach, A Jia made his point clear through a close reading of "Interrogating the Rat." This psychologically driven scene, without song or heightened emotional displays, placed the work of development entirely on the significance of the acting, for which technique was indispensable. In addition to the fluidity and precision of their movements, A

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90 Wang Chuansong 王传淞, "Wo yan 'shiwuguan' li de Lou Ashu 我演‘十五贯’里的娄阿鼠," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1956): 8-9.

91 A Jia，"Xiang 'shiwuguan'," 3.

92 Ibid. "这实在是害人的说法"

Jia honed in on the expressivity of their acting.[93] In the context of performance technique, the stylized language of *shenduan* was mobilized even in their stage entrances, to convey the brazen confidence of Lou Ashu and the discretion and disguised intent of Kuang Zhong. Yet every action was understood to hold significance for contrasting the inspector and the criminal while developing the expression of internal character throughout the scene. A Jia went beyond Zhang Geng in asserting the inseparability of these specialized performance techniques from the development of the play, a fact he connects to the play's home genre of kunqu:

> "The reason why they are able to execute this performance on a lone, ordinary bench cannot be separated from these techniques. Of course, the whole play also has this characteristic, and [it could be argued that] all forms of xiqu emphasize these [technical skills], but kunqu emphasizes them at a little higher level."[94]

Placing this at the heart of his argument, A Jia tiptoed carefully around a defense of stylized gesture, framing his analysis with caveats that technique was "not to be taken as the starting point for thinking about acting," and that any performative display that did not come from an experiential understanding of the character was to be condemned.[95] His position, however, was undeniable: "But we must study [technique], keenly practice it; if you've truly mastered it, you only need to understand the methods of realism in performance in order to deploy it, and from there, develop it."[96]

Though it must be recognized that the choreography of the scene borrows from vernacular, prosaic motion, it does so in the context of the clown role, one that often draws liberally from life, and incorporates it within the greater context of theatrical action. It may also be true, as A Jia claims, that kunqu is an art form inherently inclined more than most genres towards theatrical action, and

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93 Ibid.

94 Ibid. "他们在一张简简单单的条凳上所以能表演出这场戏来的原因是和这些技术分不开的， 当然整个戏都具有这种特长，各种戏曲也都讲究这些，而昆曲讲究得更到家些。"

95 Ibid. "这不是要我们在表演时从技术出发"

96 Ibid. "但必须学它，苦苦地炼它；如要真正掌握它，只有在表演上懂得现实主义的方法始能做到， 从而也就发展了它"

tendencies towards vernacular movement would have been less noticeable in the greater context of aestheticized motion.[97] However, the greater effect on the xiqu community at large was a new emphasis on a return to stylized theatrical gesture; not necessarily as a natural product of an unbroken tradition, but as an aesthetic standard for performance. Partly this was a consequence of its success with audiences, but also of the overwhelming official approval given to the play, and the halo effect this granted to defenses of its aesthetic strategies for performance technique. A Jia's defense was not the only article praising *Fifteen Strings* in its initial run. Ouyang Yuqian and Xia Yan (夏衍 1900-1995) both critiqued the play positively in the *People's Daily*, and Mei Lanfang and Li Shaochun (李少春 1919-1975) both published reviews in the May and June issues of the *Theater Report* that specifically praised the acting of the two leads.[98] Appearing just weeks ahead of the start of the second performance study convention, these reviews used the play and its success to provoke a larger discussion about the value of tradition, including traditional theatrical gesture, on the contemporary realist stage.

The phenomenon of *Fifteen Strings* was tied in many ways to the tensions felt in the xiqu world over the pull between realism and theatricality in more ways than just the question of performance technique. One of the major changes of the adaptation group had been to convert the majority of the arias and dialogue from the original chuanqi into more conventional speech; this led at least one critic of the time to complain, "the revised version, especially the first half, gives one the feel of popular (*tongsu* 通俗) spoken drama (though, of course this is an exaggeration), but I think

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97 A Jia, "xiang 'shiwuguan'," 3.

98 Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩, "Tan kunqu 'shiwuguan' he 'changshengdian' de yanchu 谈昆曲《十五贯》和《长生殿》的演出," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, Apr. 16, 1956: 3; Xia Yan 夏衍, "Lun 'shiwuguan' de gaibian 论《十五贯》的改编," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报, May 17, 1956: 3; Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, "Wo kan kunju 'shiwuguan' 我看昆剧'十五贯'," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 5, (1956): 10-11; Li Shaochun 李少春, "Zhejiang kunsu jutuan "shiwuguan" de chengjiu 浙江昆苏剧团"十五贯"的成就," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1956): 6-7.

this is primarily because of a failure to grasp the characteristics of kunqu."[99] The sum effect of these changes was to make a vernacularized play even more like spoken drama, even if in reference to a genre (popular spoken drama) that was regarded as a midpoint between the acting styles of xiqu and spoken drama.

In a genre as 'formalist' as kunqu, the lasting impression of the play to contemporary scholars has continued to be one of hybridization and vernacularization, an effect which has been extended to its performance techniques, as well.[100] The play is not a formal revival of traditional gesture; it is undeniable that the lead actors in particular made adjustments to their physical movements, including changing formulaic gestures, as noted by many critics of the time.[101] Beyond the intentional use of invention in choreography, it would be incorrect in any event to assume that the performance techniques used in *Fifteen Strings* were unmodified through centuries of performance. It is impossible to speak of an unadulterated kunqu tradition. The repertoire faced attrition from a shrinking pool of students, and from within that community, ever-diminishing returns of performance competence as students learned only partial repertoires from the older generation. Even beyond these practical considerations, reconstruction work was an unavoidable reality of kunqu preservation. Written scripts outnumbered the known repertoire of performance conventions, and what performance interpretations were taught were often fragmented, existent only as selected scenes or *zhezixi* (折子戏); a complete play required knowledgeable invention. However, the play also revitalized a genre rich with stylized movements at exactly the time when high-ranking critics and actors were looking for an opportunity to construct a defense of theatrical gesture.

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[99] Liu Ling 刘龄，"Dui kunqu 'shiwuguan' zhengliben de yixie yijian 对昆曲《十五贯》整理本的一些意见," *Hangzhou ribao* 杭州日报，Jan. 13, 1956, 3, quoted in Fu Jin, "xinlun," 30n3. "整理本，特别是前半部，使人有通俗话剧的感觉（这当然是过分的说法），我想， 这主要是没有掌握昆曲特点的缘故."

[100] See, for example, Zhang Ling, "huishou," 34.

The success of the play brought about a sea change in xiqu performance in more ways than one. Perhaps most famously, it was credited by Tian Han, in a slogan that was reprinted in both the *People's Daily* and the *Theater Report*, as 'the single play that rescued an entire xiqu genre.'[102] Kunqu's precipitous state of decline was halted as the play gained both academic attention and audiences across the nation, and greater attention was placed on the recuperation of dying xiqu genres.[103] The valorization of the play also confirmed the importance of the traditional repertoire.[104] This carved a path for the resurgence of traditional plays to the point that in 1958, they occupied anywhere from 50-80% of all staged plays; the government responded with a new policy slogan "walking on two legs," which referred to the equal production of both modern plays and traditional ones, and was intended to balance theatrical output over the end of the 1950s.[105]

But significantly for traditional acting, the play also focused attention on the question of the vernacularization of acting techniques and the value of theatricality. Contrasting his position from his remarks in October of 1954, Tian expressed support for traditional performance techniques indirectly, through criticism of those who opposed the preservation of endangered operatic genres. He wrote of the common critique of kunqu, in particular, "it seems that except for studying some choreography and *shenduan*, or training the basic technique of performance, there is nothing 'new' to 'put out.'"[106] While his greater point went on to contradict this claim, including praise for kunqu's

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101 Aside from A Jia and Mei Lanfang, also Dai Bufan 戴不凡，"Zhou Chuanying he ta zai 'shiwuguan' zhong de yishu chuangzao 周传瑛和他在《十五贯》中的艺术创造," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 6 (1956): 10-11.

102 Tian Han 田汉, "Cong 'yichuxi jiuhuole yige juzhong' tanqi 从'一出戏救活了一个剧种'谈起," Originally published in the *People's Daily*, this article was reprinted in *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 (6) 1956: 4-5.

103 Zhang Geng, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu*, 45. Fu Jin also notes that in the years immediately prior, the government had established a kunqu student cohort and at least one master class performance (观摩演出) as part of the effort to preserve and revive the genre; these gestures were not as effective as the success of the play, however. See Fu Jin, "xinlun," 32.

104 Yang Hongjun 杨红军，"Tian Han yu kunqu 'shiwuguan' 田汉与昆曲《十五贯》," *Beijing dang'an* 北京档案, Nov 20, 2013, 53.

105 Zhang Geng, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu*, 58-59.

106 Tian Han, "Cong 'yichuxi'," 1. "似乎除了向他学习一些舞蹈身段或表演的基本技术训练之外，就没有什么"新"可"出"了." 'New' and 'put out' are references to Mao's slogan for xiqu reform, memorialized for the Chinese

lyrics and traditional repertoire, this affectation of the critic's position included his acknowledgement that traditional technique was of explicit value to xiqu reform.

Among its other virtues, the performance techniques of *Fifteen Strings* were specifically cited as a model for the nation to copy at the 8th National Congress in September of that year.[107] This amounted to an explicit rejection of the model of ever increasing hybridization and vernacularization of operatic language that had been the subject of experimentation up to that point. Amidst an exhortation to respect the historical conditions depicted in traditional plays without forcing modern ideas or slogans into the script, Zhou Yang added: "In the revolution of stage art, some have forced the forms of Western opera or spoken drama [onto traditional xiqu], to the point that it has damaged the unique style of xiqu; this kind of practice is also inappropriate."[108] This injunction served as a message directly from the highest echelons for theater practitioners to reject further experimentation with spoken drama and other simplifications of theatrical gesture, and return to more traditional staging practice.

This authoritarian view of artistic change deprives us, however, of the possibility of examining the influence of other, smaller or more indirect forces of change. The burgeoning genre of xiqu film created a new venue for experimentation, and the popularity of these films confirmed that they were accessible to a much broader audience; the impact of the aesthetic decisions made in these adaptations was not insignificant in light of their exposure. Although the adaptation of theater to film was fraught with its own aesthetic dilemmas, the transition to film offered an opportunity to merge theatrical debates on realism with filmic ones. Rather than struggling with striking the right

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Xiqu Institute in 1951, to "let a hundred flowers bloom, push out the old and put out the new 百花齐放，推陈出新." The first half of this phrase had appeared in his "Talks" at Yan'an.

107 "Zai Zhongguo gongchandang dibaci quanguo daibiao dahuishang, rang wenxueyishu zai jianshe shenhuizhuyi weida dashiyezhong fahui juda de zuoyong 在中国共产党第八次全国代表大会上，让文学艺术在建设社会主义伟大事业中发挥巨大的作用," *Renmin ribao* 人民日报，Sept 26, 1956, 4.

108 Ibid. "在舞台艺术的革命上，有些人硬套西洋歌剧或话剧的格式，以致损害了戏曲特有的风格，这种作法也是不妥当的."

balance between naturalism and formalism, theater practitioners along with filmmakers faced the challenge of deciding where to place the locus of theatricality on film. The same characteristics that were labeled formalistic and which prominent theater critics, those with official backing, repeatedly attempted to reconcile with realism were assets in the context of finding balance with cinematic realism. Though subject to official approval and monitoring, films provided a site for actors and filmmakers to find artistic latitude in defining the core features of xiqu art.

Xiqu film directors identified the fundamental problem in adapting xiqu to the screen as reconciling the expectations of the operatic audience with the filmic one. Broadly speaking, this was a distinction between the markedly aestheticized theatricality of xiqu, and naturalistic environment and action of film. Each of the major historical xiqu plays to be filmed during 1956 tackled this problem in a different way; *Tears on Barren Mountain* (*Huangshan lei* 荒山泪, dir Wu Zuguang 吴祖光, 1956) and *Song Shijie* (宋士杰, dir Ying Yunwei 应云卫, 1956), for example, maintained the vestiges of the basic Peking opera stage in the unadorned surfaces and simple props of the set. *Barren Mountain* even included a suggestion of the front curtain of the stage in the opening establishing shot of the film (see fig 2.5).

Fig. 2.5: *Tears on Barren Mountain:* spare set, and residual front curtain. This is the final resting position of the camera after tracking backwards from a close-up on the drawn scene outside the window as the opening shot; the camera has receded further than might be considered standard for a filmic presentation of the lead actor, to a position reminiscent of a seat in the theater. The arrangement of props, all facing an imaginary fourth wall, is also suggestive of a theatrical space rather than a filmic one. The life-size loom, on the other hand, is evocative of Fei Mu's similar use of a large loom in *Resentment in Life and Death*, intended there to satisfy the filmic aesthetic of realism. *Huangshan lei* 荒山泪, directed by Wu Zuguang 吴祖光, Disc 3, *Yingxiangzhong de jingju—jinian Zhongguo dianying dansheng 100 zhounian* 影像中的京剧－纪念中国电影诞生100周年 (1956; Beijing: Beijing wenhua yishu yinxiang chubanshe 北京文化艺术音像出版社, 2005), DVD.

Song Shijie balanced these remnants of staginess with cinematic touches like the use of action in deep space coming towards the camera, tracking shots, and shot/reverse-shot combinations that established the three dimensional quality of the set. The Cantonese play *Searching the Study* (*Sou*

shuyuan 搜书院 dir, Xu Tao 徐韬, 1956) by contrast, not unlike *Fifteen Strings*, used a fully realized set, with realistic props and ornate designs (see fig 2.6).

Fig. 2.6: *Searching the Study*: complex sets; though the curtain at the frame of this shot could be suggestive of theatricality, its placement on set, visibly behind the lantern, and cordoning off a separate, hidden space behind the action, makes it appear more diegetic. (Image cropped to highlight the realistic detail-work of the set, as well as the theatrical orientation of the actors towards an imaginary audience). *Sou shuyuan* 搜书院, directed by Xu Tao 徐韬, (Shanghai: Shanghai Film Studios上海电影制片厂, 1956).

The degree to which to depict theatricality varied from production to production, reflecting both the natural variety in the native performance languages of different xiqu genres, and the different styles of studios in different parts of the country, with northern studios more inclined toward simpler sets and camera angles evocative of the theater, and southern ones toward more elaborate, complex designs and cinematic techniques.[109]

[109] Gao Xiaojian 高小健，*Zhongguo xiqu dianying shi* 中国戏曲电影史. (Beijing 北京：Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 2005), 188.

Common to both styles, however, was the foregrounding of the actor's physical presence on screen, and in particular, the unique, expressionistic gestural language that distinguished xiqu from other forms of acting. This functional emphasis on the theatricality of movement as both an artistic highlight of the film and a form of disruption to the cinematic illusion of reality had roots in Fei Mu's treatment of *Murder in the Oratory*, and the similar techniques used in *Resentment in Life and Death*. On the one hand, it is perhaps no surprise that xiqu film isolated theatricality in the body of the actor; xiqu is, at the heart of its traditions, an actor-centered theater. On the other, the operatic aesthetic was defined in part by its spareness in both props and sets on stage, and the realization of these elements on screen could have posed a challenge to the primacy of the actor, and unquestionably required alterations to performance techniques. Certainly in xiqu films that leaned heavily toward cinematic techniques, like *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*, the presence of life-size props, like the loom and the mill, as well as complex sets that minimized the sense of theatrical performance space, functionally diminished the physical presence of the actor.[110] The same could not be said of theatrical gesture, however. Much in the same way musical numbers posed a significant disruption to the illusion of reality in Hollywood musicals, stylized gesture was a continual reminder of the artifice of the theater, even in adaptation.[111]

The conflict between aesthetic modes of the theatrical and the filmic seemed to many contemporary artists a matter of total opposition: the theatricality of xiqu would either be jarringly

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[110] See Han Shangyi 韩尚义, "Xiqu yingpian de zaoxing fengge 戏曲影片的造型风格," in *Zhongguo dianying lilun wenxuan* 中国电影理论文选, ed. Luo Yijun 罗艺军 (Beijing 北京：Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化艺术出版社, 1992), 614-5. He is critical of this approach as inappropriate for displaying theatrical arts.

[111] The argument has been made that these stylizations are easily forgotten among audiences accustomed to watching xiqu, and thus, are not disruptive of theatrical illusion; this has been one of the major critiques of Bertolt Brecht's mischaracterization of the Chinese stage in the foundation of his theory of *verfremdungseffekt*. This is true primarily in the theater. In a line of argument that had roots with Fei Mu's reflections on his adaptations, the filmic audience was more attuned to the verisimilar aesthetic mode of cinema and would have been more likely to be surprised by theatricality on screen. Whether or not this is true is debatable, particularly for audiences that had deep knowledge of xiqu; Sang Hu's account of a screening of *Murder in the Oratory* (cited earlier) suggests that audiences may have had an easier time with the unconscious integration of the two modes of spectatorship, until their behavior in the confines of the cinema made them self-aware of the blending of worlds.

out of place in the realism of film, or forced to adapt to such an extent that its intrinsic identity as an expressionist aesthetic would be compromised. The resolution of this conflict in the production of xiqu films was an issue of intense concern and lively debate. In articles published in film journals from 1954 to 1957, film directors presented a multi-sided discussion of approaches to the adaptation of xiqu to film.[112] Arguments varied from the use of documentarian style methods, like those used in *The Stagecraft of Gai Jiaotian* (盖叫天的舞台艺术 dir [Chen] Bai Chen 白尘, 1955) which largely preserved the image of the stage and largely filmed performance directly in the theater, to hybrids like *The Stagecraft of Mei Lanfang* (梅兰芳的舞台艺术, dir Wu Zuguang, 1955), which maintained a sense of stage without revealing a visible audience or frame, to those like *Searching the Study* or *Fifteen Strings* that used cinematic sets and props to construct a fully fledged diegetic reality. By the end of 1956, sides had been drawn between those who supported using film as a transparent medium for archiving operatic performance, and those, led by Zhang Junxiang (张骏祥 1910-1996), who felt that film presented the opportunity to use its distinct features in service of the production of a new art form, where compromises to the original material were to be expected.[113] Zhang issued his proposal in May of 1956, the same month that the filming of *Fifteen Strings* was announced; a rejoinder from Ruan Qian (阮潜 1913-1995) expressing the opposite opinion (that adaptations that emphasized their cinematic quality were sacrificing too much of the original theatrical content), and published a month later, specifically identified *Fifteen Strings* as a film to watch to see where the field developed next.[114]

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[112] These articles appeared in both trade journals and major newspapers like the *People's Daily,* and were collated by Zhang Junxiang 张骏祥 and Sang Hu 桑湖 into a single text, *Lun xiqu dianying* 论戏曲电影 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe 中国电影出版社, 1959).

[113] Zhang Junxiang 张骏祥，"Wutai yishu jilupian xiang shenme fangxiang fazhan 舞台艺术纪录片向什么方向发展？" in *Lun xiqu dianying* 论戏曲电影, 10-17. Previously published as "Wutai yishu jilupian xiang shenme fangxiang fazhan 舞台艺术纪录片向什么方向发展？" *Wenyi bao* 文艺报, May 1956.

[114] Ruan Qian 阮潜, "Guanyu wutai yishu jilupian 关于舞台艺术纪录片," in *Lun xiqu dianying* 论戏曲电影, 18-22. Previously published as "Guanyu wutai yishu jilupian 关于舞台艺术纪录片," *Wenyi bao* 文艺报, June 1956.

Regardless of the philosophical position of the filmmaker on the use of the filmic medium, for most, those who elected not to simply place the camera in the theater, the theatrical features of performance were central to the question of adaptation. Terminology varied but nearly every director made reference to xiqu's essential aesthetic as expressionistic (*xieyide* 写意的), or suppositional (*jiading* 假定), within which the body of the actor was virtual (*xunide* 虚拟的), or expressive of what contemporary scholar Bao Weihong refers to as 'subjunctive gesture' (*xunide dongzuo* 虚拟的动作).[115] As she points out, the concern that these directors had for this aspect of operatic performance overlooked their mimetic function in order to identify them as purely theatrical for the purposes of juxtaposition with film.[116] This was part of a two-step move that effectively evaded the problem of formalism that continued to plague theater practitioners; by opposing these gestures to the realism of film, they were labelled as definitive of xiqu. What made them of significant appeal to filmmakers in particular was their attachment to national heritage.

'Heritage' (*yichan* 遗产) was commonly brought up in theater circles throughout the first half of the 1950s, though its rhetorical weight did not seem to bear much weight affecting the discourse surrounding the aesthetics of theatrical gesture; even when valorized as a part of the significance of xiqu, gesture was still spoken of in terms of a need to adapt to realism.[117] For filmmakers, however, the creation of a national form expressive of national heritage was of much more pressing importance, considering that their medium had western origins. The desire for a Chinese style of film production was a topic that was far from new in the 1950s; even Fei Mu, with his xiqu films, could be seen as making an effort at establishing a national style, albeit one different

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115 Bao, "Remediation," 262.

116 Bao, "Remediation," 263.

117 Guang Weiran 光未然, "Xiqu yichanzhong de xianshizhuyi 戏曲遗产中的现实主义," *Wenyi bao* 文艺报 24 (1952), in *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian (xubian)* 戏剧工作文献资料汇编（续编). (Changchun 长春: Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan xiqu yanjiusuo 'xiqu yanjiu' bianji bu 中国艺术研究院戏曲研究所《戏曲研究》编辑部, 1985), 146-158.

from the efforts of 1930s leftist filmmakers invested in critical realism. Theater could easily serve as the impetus for the development of an iconic national style, whether from subject matter, or from the deliberate adaptation of aesthetic styles.[118]

From early on in the xiqu film debates, when articles still addressed the problem of "stage documentaries" (*wutai yishu jilupian* 舞台艺术纪录片), rather than "xiqu film" (*xiqu dianying* 戏曲电影), discussion already revolved in part around the question of heritage. In this, although there was an echo of the rhetoric used by theater circles, the emphasis on nationalism held deeper significance, where the whole of the tradition of xiqu could be posited as emblematic of the nation without consideration of its constituent parts. In an article on stage documentaries from 1954, Wang Yi (王逸), the director of a Sichuan *chuanju* (川剧) anthology, put nationalism first, even from his opening paragraph:

> "…to put our fatherland's rich operatic arts into film to recommend to audiences across the nation, and from this to promote the research and organization of xiqu heritage, without a doubt, is extremely significant work."[119]

The luster of nationalism sanctified the use of theatrical gesture without tangling with the questions of formalism and naturalism. Even if later directors, like *Fifteen String*'s Tao Jin (陶金 1917-1986), acknowledged in passing the presence of these concerns in the consideration of theatrical gesture, they were easily dismissed in light of the greater mission of xiqu film of conveying beauty and art, especially in the consideration of creating a specific xiqu film aesthetic; the theatricality of performance techniques could be taken for granted.[120] This line of argument could not avoid

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[118] Multiple scholars have since gone on to argue that China's national film aesthetic is one based in operatic theater, for example, Chen Xihe, "Shadowplay: Chinese Film Aesthetics and Their Philosophical and Cultural Fundamentals," in *Chinese Film Theory: a Guide to the New Era*, eds. George Semsel, Xia Hong, Hou Jianping (New York: Praeger, 1990), 192-204.

[119] Wang Yi 王逸, "Tan wutai jilu dianying 谈舞台纪录电影," in *Lun xiqu dianying* 论戏曲电影, 1-5. Previously published as "Tan wutai jilu dianying 谈舞台纪录电影," *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, Dec 18, 1954. "把我们祖国丰富多采的戏曲艺术拍为电影向全国观众推荐，并由此促进戏曲遗产的整理研究，无疑地这是极有意义的工作."

[120] Tao Jin resolved this issue by simply stating that the actors themselves would bring the truth of life and the truth of art concretely together, thereby avoiding the risks of both formalism and naturalism; he saw his own contributions to the

engaging in a form of cultural essentialism that painted the varied mix of regional traditions with a uniform brush, regardless of their degree of stylization or exaggeration in gesture; many local xiqu genres used considerably simpler gestural languages than the highbrow traditions of Peking opera and kunqu. This position was also indebted to the legacy of essentialism that characterized the narratives built around Peking opera during the Republican era, which Bao Weihong notes, includes the monolithic use of theater against film in discourses that aimed to establish film as a fully fledged cinematic art.[121] In many of the film discussions of the 50s, the theatricality of performance technique was primarily the purview of the actor rather than a directing decision, and consequently could be taken without interrogation, and allowed to prevail as both the artistic and patriotic center of the film—after making the appropriate number of concessions for realistic sets, props, and costumes.

Even if directors were generally in agreement about the value of traditional performance practices as expressions of nationalism, the valorization of these techniques was by no means a simple, settled affair. At the same time that film directors were framing performance technique discursively as a valuable part of the heritage of xiqu, however, the artistic conventions of the performance art itself were being challenged by pressures to move closer to the aesthetics of spoken drama. Filmic adaptations pushed the bar on verisimilar modifications to theatrical body language even further, as part of the considerations of the process of remediation; this could vary from asking actors to interact with concrete sets, to having them tone down the stylizations of common actions. The filmic output of 1956 made it clear that even among prestigious actors and productions, performance technique was open to experimentation. *Song Shijie*, not unlike *Fifteen Strings*, was driven by aesthetic principles that drew it closer to spoken drama, including for instance, the concerns of

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artistic side of the film as expressed through sets, props, and costumes. Tao Jin 陶金，"Shezhi xiqu yingpian 'shiwuguan' zaji 摄制戏曲影片'十五贯'杂记," in *Lun xiqu dianying* 论戏曲电影, 56. Previously published as "Shezhi xiqu yingpian 'shiwuguan' zaji 摄制戏曲影片'十五贯'杂记," *Zhongguo dianying* 中国电影 5 (1957).

plot economics rather than the artistic concerns of selected aria highlights. Another play concerning the corruption of the imperial bureaucratic justice system, *Song Shijie* made use of dialogue to push the action along, and relied heavily on simplified actions like walking, where the echo of spoken drama could be heard most clearly. Rather than moving in circular motion, more typical of the theatrical conventions of the xiqu stage, characters walked in straight lines, often into the camera, a direction that minimized the impact of physical motion, and emphasized the cinematic quality of the set. Although still within the conventions of Peking opera, characters like Song Shijie's wife, Wanshi, a *huadan* (花旦) played with earthy liveliness by Tong Zhiling (童芷苓 1922-1995), moved within the frame in relatively unadorned fashion, finger-wagging and gesticulating in a vernacular manner, details of realism more akin to spoken drama than to xiqu (fig 2.7).

[121] Bao, "Remediation," 264.

Fig 2.7. *Song Shijie*: Wanshi (Tong Zhiling) gesticulates vernacularly with her thumb towards an off-screen Song Shijie while conversing with more typically theatrical Yang Suzhen (Li Yuru; played as a *qingyi dan*). *Song Shijie* 宋士杰, directed by Ying Yunwei 应云卫 and Liu Qiong 刘琼 (1956; Beijing: Beijing wenhua yishu yinxiang chubanshe 北京文化艺术音像出版社, 2005), DVD.

The stylized gestures or formulas that conveyed emotion, intent and other aspects of character interiority were used only sparingly, and rarely required such specialized knowledge that the uninitiated would struggle to comprehend the emotional nuance of a scene. Trembling hands clearly indicated fear or excitement, shock or displeasure were clearly represented through largely realistic facial expressions, and Zhou Xinfang, who played the title character, relied only occasionally on operatic gestures like the use of water sleeves. Zhou, as the star of the much earlier *Murder in the Oratory*, may well have brought his own experiences in film production to bear in *Song Shijie*, adapting his own techniques toward greater realism from what he might have used on the stage.

The director of *Fifteen Strings,* Tao Jin, was aware of the larger debates surrounding the use of theatrical performance techniques from the theater world, but left the issue to be resolved by his lead actors, with his own role reserved for inserting his philosophy on xiqu films, a position he elaborated as part of the context of the greater discussion among filmmakers in an article for *China Film* in May 1957.[122] Tao fell squarely into Zhang Junxiang's camp, that the film medium should be used to redefine a new genre of performance art on screen, arguing that filmed xiqu ought to add something new beyond a record of the play, to respond to audience expectations of the cinema.[123] Some principles common to both spoken drama and film still guided the adaptation strategies for *Fifteen Strings*, including a fast-paced plot, driven by dialogue with relatively short singing interludes; these were streamlining changes Tao made as part of the effort to bring the film to a standard length for the cinema, rather than the longer stage version.[124] Singing and dialogue were not just edited, but sped up from their theatrical counterparts in order to both decrease the running time, and accommodate the desire of the filmic audience for a faster rhythm of storytelling.[125]

The brevity of sung portions of the play, and the scriptwriting itself helped put the focus on gesture as the artistic heart of the film. From one perspective, performance techniques were subordinate to the demands of film: Tao was explicit that "an objective environment has a direct influence on performance, and performance naturally adapts to an objective environment; this type of performance is what's truly not rigid, or mechanical—this type of performance is truly real, imbued with life."[126] This stance was no different in essence from what top theater officials had been advocating in the name of character development, though what Tao perceived as rigidity,

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122 Tao Jin is much better known for his work in spoken drama and fiction film features, first as an actor, then as a director. *Fifteen Strings* was his first of two forays into xiqu film; the second was *Xiyuanji* 西园记 in 1979, also a kunqu film. His interest in the topic appears to have been a form of native place pride; Tao was born in Suzhou.

123 Tao Jin, "Shezhi," 57.

124 Ibid., 50-53.

125 Ibid., 52.

126 Ibid., 54. 客观环境对表演会发生直接影响，表演也自然会适应客观环境，这样的表演才不是刻板的、机械的，这样的表演才是真实的、有生命的。

theater officials saw as flashy performance for its own sake. From another perspective, Tao resolved the long-standing conflict between the realism of film and the expressionism of xiqu by positing the relationship as this:

> "On stage in an abstract environment, without real doors, windows and stairs, actors must use the refinement of their art to perform as though there really were doors, windows, and stairs. In a film that has a real environment of doors, windows, and stairs, actors use performance as a means of expressing beauty…My intent for the artistic management of *Fifteen Strings of Copper* is to, within a comparatively realistic setting, demand the deployment of the beauty of xiqu art."[127]

Hiding behind 'beauty' as an unoffensive, vague aesthetic term, was sympathy for traditional performance techniques, without demanding their total adaptation to the verisimilitude of film or vernacularization to the realist codes of spoken drama. Even when Tao cites specific instances from *Fifteen Strings* where the gestures of the actors were regarded as completely realist (完全是写实的) without need for further adaptation (for example, knocking away dust and cobwebs, or pleading with the magistrate for one's life), these movements are all executed within an aesthetic framework established by xiqu, rather than by a more verisimilar approach to acting.[128] For instance, after Kuang Zhong knocks loose a cloud of dust, the reaction from the surrounding characters is not just to pull back or turn aside, but entails circular motion, spinning in place, while rhythmically swinging not just hands, but sleeves through the air. Tao, however, also acknowledged that even if realist in content, these movements were 'aestheticized' (*jiayi meihua* 加以美化), and consequently within a framework of operatic aesthetics; he consequently deliberately avoided using any substances to simulate real dust "for fear of ruining the choreographic movement."[129]

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127 Ibid., 55. 在舞台上抽象的环境里，没有真实的门窗、阶梯，演员要通过艺术的加工，表演的像有门窗阶梯一样的真实。在电影中的门窗、阶梯的真实环境里，演员通过表演表现动作的美...我对于《十五贯》影片的艺术处理的意图，就是在较写实的布景里要求发挥戏曲艺术的美。

128 Ibid., 55.

129 Ibid., 55, 57.

If the representation of theatricality on film was a central issue of xiqu adaptations, Tao Jin self-consciously let performance be one of the most important determining factors of the degree to which the film would pursue a realistic style.[130] Some decisions were evidently compromises between the aesthetic codes of realism and theatricality: no traditional stage make-up was used on the actors, but all *sheng* roles wore the same fake beards that could be seen in theaters.[131] More germane to performance practice, Tao allowed for actors to expressively use folding fans, even though the season was clearly set in wintertime. Tao was clear on his own philosophical take on theatricality: performance was the center of the play.[132] While some elements of physical gesture may have borrowed from the vernacular either for the sake of filmic realism or on account of inherent tendencies towards vernacularization, the film put the theatricality of movement in the foreground of every scene. Tao may have verbally agreed with Zhang Junxiang on the importance of a cinematic language for xiqu film, but his approach was grounded in the notion of fulfilling that which couldn't satisfy audiences in the theater; concretely, he placed this distinction in the presence of realistic sets.[133] Against this realist backdrop, the aestheticization of movement stood out as a prominent marker of theatricality even in situations that were not, in typical performance situations, expected to be 'theatrical,' in the way that Wang Chuansong's somersault marked a departure from a neutral or even 'realist' style.

The foregrounding of technique was also fundamentally a filmic effect. Though film directors may have struggled with where to put the onus of theatricality, films like *Fifteen Strings* made it clear that film could realize the world of the play while retaining theatricality in the focus on performance, and in particular on stylized motions, rather than mimed action, as the latter was obviated by the presence of the set. The contrast between theatrical action and cinematic realism on

130 Ibid., 56.
131 Ibid., 57.
132 Ibid., 51.

set grounded theatricality in the body of the actor, an effect that conformed easily to the natural expectations and viewing habits of theater-goers who were used to an actor-centered, expressionistic performance. The filmic output of the 1950s also turned away from Fei Mu's early strategies of decoupage, in favor of long takes, instead, which provided an undisturbed frame within which to highlight theatrical gesture.[134] The framing of aestheticized movement made prominent the fact of its theatricality, particularly against a naturalistic environment. This effect was particularly visible in *Fifteen Strings*, as a film of a xiqu genre particularly rich in stylized gesture, but all films that engaged with realistic sets as tactical cinematicism had a contrastive effect on theatricality as performed by the actor. The presence of theatricalized performances on film brought approval of traditional techniques home to the average actor in a way that even the well-attended conferences of the 1950s could not. And beyond the mobilization of upper level theater critics, performers, and bureaucrats in support of theatricalized gesture, the sheer popularity of these historical xiqu films with audiences may have built a momentum that was difficult to stop.

The larger justification of film directors during this historical moment, that theatrical gesture was important to conserve on account of its status as cultural heritage, fed back into discussion among theater practitioners as the nuances of a theatrical expression of realism were being teased out. Bao Weihong has read this historical moment as a point where Chinese critics took advantage of xiqu's aesthetic nature to express "local and historical agency in resistance to a hegemonic realism."[135] Such an account of underground resistance to ideology has its appeals, though the actual progression and intensification of rhetoric in defense of operatic aesthetics (and performance practice, in particular) occurred over a period of years, in lockstep with hypersensitive reactions from the field, where local implementation of government policies was often perceived as zealously

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133 Ibid., 57-58.
134 Teo, "The Opera Film," 4.
135 Bao, "Remediation," 268.

executed.[136] On this point, however, there is ample room for debate. The sheer number of xiqu companies compared to other forms of drama suggests that regulation of the theater world could not avoid irregularities in execution between localities, leaving many opportunities for corruption to go unchecked. Given the extreme state of economic precarity for most companies following the script famine of the mid-50s, xiqu companies were particularly vulnerable to any kind of zealous (or less optimistically, corrupt) implementation of policy from local cadres—limitations on repertoire or performance opportunities could break a company that was dependent on ticket profits and running close to insolvency. Top officials did eventually target material improvements for companies at around the same time as the position on performance technique began to soften; corruption appears to have been dealt with on a case-by-case basis, potentially leaving many to fall through the net. Regardless, judging from the language used in directives from the Ministry of Culture, the perception that top officials held of the way policy was implemented on the ground does not acknowledge the presence of corruption as a factor, and may not have reflected local circumstances closely

It is entirely possible that the debate on performance techniques was a product of this sensitive exchange between officials and the larger theater world they perceived, with escalating rhetoric designed to counteract overcorrections from responses to early criticisms of performance practice in 1954. The shifting position on performance technique in particular, suggests a more complicated relationship with realism among theater critics, who may not have been willing yet, in 1956, to abandon its idealization as an aesthetic mode. The rise of film debates, which began within months of the opening of the discussion on performance practice, but crescendoed mainly in 1956, may have helped to stabilize the discourse from its rocky start in the conference proceedings and

[136] I am basing this conclusion off of the summaries made by Zhang Geng and others in describing a general situation of the simplification of performance practice. A detailed assessment of local implementation practices would require extensive research at lower level archives. Contemporary accounts in English vary, with some claiming that the

performance conventions of the mid-50s. The addition of nationalist rhetoric in defense of operatic theatricality elevated an aesthetic issue into a patriotic one, reopening old debates on the viability of xiqu as a national theater while simultaneously pinning the locus of that determination onto the aesthetic of theatricality itself.

This state of affairs—the deployment of nationalist discourse in discussions of xiqu film, and the general pressures on xiqu to become more like spoken drama—remained true up until 1956. The prominence of *Fifteen Strings* as a play and as a film produced in the midst of these debates makes it a central figure of the discourse surrounding the preservation of traditional performance techniques. The phenomenon of *Fifteen Strings* and its attentiveness to performance both on stage and on screen immediately anticipated a shift in the way operatic aesthetics were discussed, led discursively from the top by theater and cultural officials holding the play up as an exemplar for the rest of the nation, and made concrete for the majority of the nation by the production and distribution of the film adaptation. The culmination of this year saw an official acknowledgement of the potentials for realism in traditional theatrical gesture and conventions through A Jia's statement, later published in the beginning of 1957, "Truth in Life and Truth in Operatic Performance Art," which avowed explicit approval of traditional techniques for the expression of interiority and ideological truths.[137]

From this point forward, the theater world began to speak of borrowing from the aesthetics of the operatic stage, as part of the 'nationalization' of spoken drama.[138] Jiao Juyin, the first major proponent of using operatic features in spoken drama, made his case through a study of the effect of

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countryside was a place of relative freedom and others that it was more heavily policed than the cities (see Liu, "Theatre Reform," 392).

137 A Jia 阿甲, "Shenghuo de zhenshi he xiqu biaoyan yishu de zhenshi 生活的真实和戏曲表演艺术的真实" in *A Jia xiju lunji (shang)* 阿甲戏剧论集 (上), ed. Li Chunxi 李春熹 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 2005), 103-126.

138 Jiao Juyin's production of *Tiger Tally* 虎符 in 1956 experimented with requiring his (spoken drama) actors to adopt xiqu techniques; in this case, interacting with the sound of the *luogujing* or percussion used to mark dramatic action. This may be the earliest reference to exchanges from xiqu to huaju post-liberation. Other critics of the era noted his inclusion of some aspects of theatrical gesture, as well. See A Jia 阿甲, "Xiqu chengshi bushi wanneng de 戲曲程式不是萬能的," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 8 (1957): 5-6.

operatic performance techniques on the expression of emotional content.[139] His suggestion that the drawn out, stylized and formulaic sequence of gestures used to express interiority on stage may actually be more realistic than verisimilar acting significantly marked a blurring of the hierarchies of gestural systems of signification used in the name of realism. This aesthetic pressure in the opposite direction from vernacularization ultimately began to become more entangled with contemporary political events than the domestic concerns of aesthetic borrowing among genres, when diplomatic relations cooled between the Soviet Union and China, between 1959 and 1961. Theorists in search of a national tradition to hold up against Soviet drama theories, like Stanislavskian acting, in particular, turned to xiqu; in what is potentially the most famous, and well-translated example, Huang Zuolin (1906-1994) established an analysis of the theater that posited Mei Lanfang as equal in significance and influence to Bertolt Brecht and Konstantin Stanislavsky.[140] With this article, he both challenged the hegemony of the Stanislavskian system in Chinese theater training, and formally validated the use of operatic aesthetics, capping the development of a line of thinking that had been braided between the fields of xiqu, film and spoken drama since the mid-1950s.

Fifteen Strings of Copper captured a key moment in the midst of the drama reform movement in the 1950s, when adaptation to new media, political influence and intellectual discussion all collided. It was at this point that a decades-long trend of vernacularization and adaptation towards spoken drama in xiqu performance began to soften, goaded by both government fiat and the influence of popular media. While theater practitioners discussed the nature of socialist realism for theatrically oriented xiqu, filmmakers intersected with debates of their own on the direction of film adaptations of xiqu. Though their discussion hinged on what the capabilities of film could do for

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139 Jiao Juyin 焦菊隐, "Guanyu huaju xiqu xiqu biaoyan shoufa wenti: lishiju "hufu" de paiyan tihui 关于话剧吸取戏曲表演手法问题－历史剧《虎符》的排演体会," in *Jiao Juyin xiju lunwenji* 焦菊隐戏剧论文集. (Beijing 北京: Huawen chubanshe 华文出版社, 2011), 96-106.

140 Tso Lin [Huang Zuolin 黄佐临], "The Chinese and Western Theatres: A Study in Contrasting Techniques," *Chinese Literature* 8 (1962): 101-111.

xiqu on screen, their consideration of xiqu isolated theatricality in bodily performance as its essence both for the art in general, and as an expression of national inheritance, thereby elevating the rhetoric surrounding performance and bringing it into focus after years of relative obscurity in the xiqu reform discourse. The arrival of *Fifteen Strings* as a xiqu film that foregrounded performance technique crystallized this phenomenon and embodied the moment when theatricality began to shift from potential ideological liability to indispensability as a defining feature of operatic performance.

Spectacle and Entertainment in Xiqu Film

If xiqu films of the mid-to-late fifties had a serious role to play in xiqu reform by inserting themselves into the performance technique debates, they also reflected a departure from the severity of regulation, self-censorship and suppression in the theater world. Though not without ideological justifications and connections to contemporary political campaigns, xiqu films of the 1950s reflected the lighter side of the revolution. While stage documentaries like *Tryst at Blue Bridge* (*lanqiao hui* 蓝桥会 dir Xie Jin 谢晋, 1954) or *The Stagecraft of Mei Lanfang* took a drier, more somber approach to the presentation of xiqu on film, the selection of plays like *The Butterfly Lovers* and *Married to a Heavenly Immortal* for filmic adaptation both challenged the notion that film should downplay its own media properties in favor of mimicking the theater experience, and that xiqu adaptations must consistently reflect serious-mindedness in the expression of ideological truth. Both *Butterfly Lovers* and *Heavenly Immortal* were technically tragedies, but the budding romance and suspense of disguised truths in both plays, (Zhu Yingtai's identity as a woman, and Qimei's identity as a goddess), occupied the majority of the screen time, rendering both films better known for the story of their romances than for their outcomes. Though, as the failure of the tragic romance of *Blue Bridge* to take similar hold of the popular imagination makes clear, the cinematic quality of these films was, at a

minimum, a factor in establishing their success.[141] Despite what the pronouncements of the Cultural Bureau had done to discourage the production of traditional plays in the theater, film established itself as a refuge for historical plays, romances, fairy tales and traditionally popular fare.

The theater world itself relaxed briefly in 1956-1957, even briefly lifting the censorship restrictions in the spirit of the Hundred Flowers Campaign in May, 1957.[142] This official respite was to be short-lived on account of the start of the Anti-Rightist Campaign a few months later in July; in practice, however, even if the general environment was more restrictive, it gradually became clear that some theater workers could be more daring with bending and stretching the restrictions of the Xiqu Reform Bureau on performance conventions. More often than not, political connections and savvy factored more highly into the success of a play than any review of its artistic quality, even when this entailed overlooking what appeared superficially to be violations of reform policy.[143] A notable case in point involves the return to the staging of ghosts, ostensibly prohibited as elements of superstition and horror, and written out of revised plays from the first half of the decade. As Judith Zeitlin discussed in the history of the production of the *yueju* film *A Test of Love* (情探 dir Huang Zumo, 黄祖模 1958), Tian Han and his wife, An E, in preparation for the newly staged revision of 1957, justified the reintroduction of a ghost character banned from the stage in a previous incarnation of the script, because Guiying's ghost wouldn't be 'horrifying' or 'ugly,' but 'beautiful';[144] this narrow interpretation of the wording of official policy opened the door to a return to the supernatural, while defensibly maintaining sentiments in keeping with the May 5th Directive.

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141 These films also enjoyed more broader popular support for their theatrical genres of *yueju* and *huangmeixi* than the *huaiju* (淮剧) of *Blue Bridge*.

142 "Wenhuabu guanyu kaifang 'jinxi' de tongzhi 文化部关于开放'禁戏'的通知," in *Zhongguo xiquzhi: Beijing juan* 中国戏曲志，北京卷, eds. Zhang Geng, et al. (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo ISBN Zhongxin 中国ISBN中心, 1996), 1439. Siyuan Liu notes that an astonishing 90% of the repertoire was reevaluated as 'not bad' or 'outstanding' following the self-examination of the reform movement in 1957, in an attempt to resolve the script famine. Liu, "Theatre Reform," 404.

143 Liu, "Theatre Reform," 403.

Tian Han, and An E, by association, may well have been afforded some artistic leeway by the extensive governmental power he controlled at that point in 1957, and this latitude might be read as a one-off event, were it not for the continued film productions of his other plays in the subsequent years.[145] The period from 1956 to 1963 marked a high point in the production of xiqu films, with the peak between 1959 and 1960: over 86 films were produced during this time.[146] For the Great Leap, begun in 1958, the attention of theater workers had turned away from traditional plays to the production of modern ones.[147] This made the presence of traditional or historical plays on film that much more valuable in responding to a long-standing demand from audiences.

It is hard, when viewing the canon of xiqu films of the 1950s, to avoid the conclusion that the genre was motivated not by idealized articulations of ideology, but by the logic of entertainment. In contrast with accounts from the theater world of plays updated with the insertion of political slogans, regardless of plausible credibility within the storyline, many of these xiqu films wove the ideological message into a feature film frame where anachronisms and other disruptions to the diegetic illusion (other than the non-representational quality of the play, itself) were unacceptable. It is not beyond credibility that theater suffered more for having a broader range of performance qualities and adaptation strategies than film, especially productions from the more prestigious studios. It is also possible that the necessity of repetition and its concomitant act of reinvention within the theater every night made it especially susceptible to policing, and in particular, self-censorship, whereas film, with its goal of a singular production in output, evaded over-zealous criticisms and regulations by calculating the risks in advance. This is not to suggest that filmmakers were immune from public criticism campaigns, the government's preferred form of political control

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144 Judith Zeitlin, "Operatic Ghosts on Screen: The Case of *A Test of Love* (1958)," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 232.

145 Zeitlin, "Operatic Ghosts," 222. Zeitlin notes that the prestige of the adapter in addition to the star power of the lead actress were factors in the selection of this *yueju* version for adaptation to film rather than the *chuanju* (川剧), for which this play was a representative work.

146 Gao Xiaojian, *Xiqu dianying*, 133.

of the arts after 1951, but that they were granted greater leeway to bias production towards the historical and fantastical than the majority of theater companies, for whom the traditional repertoire was largely forbidden. Where the theatrical world suffered under stiff interpretations of policy that seemed to pose challenges and limitations to every aspect of performance, whether in repertoire or in performance practice, from its initial PRC appearance in 1953, xiqu film flirted openly with the appeals of spectacle, especially the spectacle of what film could do in the service of fantasy fulfillment.

The promises of wish-fulfillment and escape offered by xiqu film fit neatly within the rubric of utopianism that Richard Dyer identifies as a central drive of entertainment culture.[148] This utopianism can be easily read as a critique of the lived experience of the real.[149] In the context of the early PRC, this utopianism need not, as Dyer claims, take the form solely of socialist ideology, but rather express multiple perspectives with the potential for social critique, of which the ideological is only one. Dyer defines utopianism as an affective code for the audience, a certain sensibility which is inspired by the social-cultural history (or histories) of signification of emotion in the production of the form of entertainment, like musicals and tap dancing for him, or xiqu film, in the context of this chapter.[150] Entertainment films direct the audience towards a particular sensibility, even as the audience's experience of that sensibility is filtered by historical and cultural experiences with the art form.[151] For xiqu film viewers, the history of xiqu's consumption is an inalienable part of the layers of affective responses in spectatorship, even if varied by genre, so that viewers of the more verisimilar, folk art-oriented *huangmeixi* bring a different kind of spectatorial expectation than they would to the complex history of the more widely known Peking opera. All xiqu genres of this era, in

147 Zhang Geng, *Dangdai Zhongguo xiqu*, 54-57.
148 Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia" in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 20.
149 Dyer, "Utopia," 26.
150 Ibid., 20-21.
151 Ibid., 21.

their endeavor to pursue socialist realism like other forms of theater, theoretically operated on a principle of empathy, with designs to elicit a particular affective response from the audience by having them relate to the characters on stage. However, even historically speaking, xiqu's expressionist aesthetics were equally invested in the construction of an affective response, though their deployment may have appealed to a broader range of purposes than purely the didactic, including, for instance, the creation of spectacle. It is this alternate regime of affective manipulation through expressionism embedded in the history of xiqu that creates opportunities for modes of spectating that challenge or subvert the ideological project of the socialist realist play or film.

In their pursuit of the expression of operatic theatricality, xiqu film directors might be seen as taking the operatic, whether through gesture or song, to attempt to activate a common sensibility through the embedded, cultural, affective history of the theatrical performance arts. This may have been through a sense of nationalist pride, or the feeling of entertainment associated with the theater, all presumably in the name of inculcating an ideological message. This conceit, however, could not ultimately account for the variations and gradations of affective responses embedded in this history, for example, associated with seeing Peking opera versus regional opera, or Mei Lanfang versus Yan Fengying (严凤英 1930-1968), the star of *Married to a Heavenly Immortal*.[152] Even if the theatrical implications of whether or not to use cinematic techniques in the production of xiqu film had not been the most pressing question of the era, the complexity of the history of operatic consumption stymies the simplicity of representing theatricality on screen, and controlling the affective responses

[152] It is worth noting that Shi Hui was distinctly aware of the advantages of working with *huangmeixi* as a genre that more closely approached realism than Beijing opera, so that it wasn't that all directors were thinking of theatricality as a monolithic entity of conventionalized movements (though, his extremely realist approach to the film actually had the effect of making theatrical gesture from the actors that much more striking when it did appear—however, the main onus of theatricality was placed on the singing). It is also significant that throughout his preparation process, of watching the play over 20 times, he made particular note of the audience reactions to various scenes, which informed his approach to the revision of the script; manipulation of audience affect was clearly a goal of the film, and may even have been considered part of the preservation of the theatricality of the original play. See Shi Hui 石挥, "'Tianxianpei' daoyan shouji '天仙配'导演手记," in *Shi Hui tan yi lu* 石挥谈艺录, ed. Wei Shaochang 魏绍昌 (Shanghai 上海：Shanghai wenyi chubanshe 上海文艺出版社, 1982), 245.

of audiences. The early, official critique of theatrical gesture as too flashy can be read as a reaction to the existence of these historical alternative, unapproved modes of spectatorial consumption, however, xiqu film directors at least initially, did not appear to consider the theatrical as potentially problematic in any way other than its aesthetic conflict with cinematic realism.

In modeling utopia for the audience, most musicals take advantage of the contradiction between the narrative and the musical numbers that disrupt the flow and illusion of that world; xiqu films likewise had to overcome the clash between the representational and the non-representational, this question being of central concern to xiqu film directors as how to preserve theatricality unobtrusively on screen. Unlike in musicals where the numbers can be significantly set off from the rest of the diegesis, the arias were typically coherent with the narrative world of the play, moving seamlessly between dialogue and song, with neither ever fully leaving the realm of the non-representational.[153] In the instances where narrative and number were meant to coincide rather than contrast each other, Dyer holds that the narrative world itself becomes utopian, often in an idealized past, playing out its contradictions with reality through narrative threats to that utopia.[154] From the socialist ideological perspective, for most xiqu films, despite a commonality with these utopian musicals in the dislocation to a historical time and space, the motive here is not a nostalgic longing for a lost golden age, as the feudalistic era was by definition undesirable, but a utopianism in the idealization of a historic proletariat. From another perspective, the material luxuriousness that typically went into costumes and headgear[155], another visual element of the theatrical, or

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153 I make this claim in consideration of their exaggerated, aestheticized and stylized deliveries; it is also possible, however, for both the arias and the dialogue to be read as representational, in that they advanced the narrative.

154 Dyer, "Utopia," 28. Dyer saw most numbers as expressive of utopia; this was where the contradiction between non-representational and representational modes could draw out the implicit flaws in reality.

155 Admittedly, this was more prominent in Shanghai productions than northern ones, but even Beijing and Changchun studios followed the traditional operatic convention of idealized, aestheticized costuming; for example, Zhang Huizhu (of *Tears on Barren Mountain*) was still dressed in fine, if simple, robes and with ornate headgear throughout the play, despite her poverty.

non-representational, was indeed a glorification of an age of sumptuousness,[156] where miscarriages of justice were corrected, or idealized relationships based on love could come into existence, even if they were often technically defeated in the end. This would seem to place the onus of utopianism not just on a subset of narrative content, but within the world of the play, itself, against the grain of the socialist reading.

For xiqu, the non-representational still had a non-narrative, and potentially utopian presence on screen, however, in the embodiment of gesture. While sources for the cultivation of the utopian sensibility can be found in the narrative, itself, the filmic mise-en-scène is another contributing component, even when the non-representational signs are contradictory with the plot; as an example, the non-representational or theatrical quality of costumes, sets, and movement in *Tears on Barren Mountain* render it an aestheticized, beautified world, despite the dire conditions of the plot. On the one hand, theatrical gesture is a constant presence of the non-representational on screen; if read as uniformly theatrical, without acknowledgement of the nuance of influence from vernacularization, realism and the pressures of other acting systems, gesture loses its power to serve as a utopian escape, except for possibly those in the audience who observe with a critical eye on performance skill. On the other hand, the layers of 'accenting' that appeared in gestural languages of 50s xiqu films make opportunities for the emergence of the utopian.

As a case in point, *Song Shijie*, a play that already uses vernacularization in its acting, is unafraid to deliberately play with the contrasts in acting between different role types and by means of this, establish a contradiction between operatic gesture and realist gesture. In what should be a dramatically charged scene, Yang Suzhen (杨素贞), bearing the letter that records her grievances, comes to the home of Song Shijie, who has just rescued her from local thugs on the street. In order to discover what has happened to Yang, Song's wife, Wanshi (万氏), acts as the intermediary in a

[156] Dyer's technical category for this would be 'abundance.'

discussion between the two, who are seated in different rooms, by repeating their lines almost verbatim. Song, as a *laosheng,* and Yang, as a *qingyi dan*, are both formal contrasts to the playful *huadan,* Wanshi; their exchange consequently involves a reinterpretation of lines through the lens of the conventional performance language of each role-type. The three roles thus form an exhibition of theatrical contrasts: Yang is entirely theatrical; Song is similarly inspired mostly by theatricality, though because his body language is simple and restrained to hand gestures and use of the folding fan, it has touches of the vernacular, which are enhanced in his interactions with Wanshi[157]; and Wanshi is nearly realist, particularly in body disposition and hand gestures, though with traces of the theatrical largely focused in the presence of the handkerchief she constantly carries, which is symbolic of the *huadan*. Although the camera movements, angles, and decoupage all significantly contribute to the overarching goal of the scene, to show Yang Suzhen and Song Shijie moving from isolation to an adoptive bond that will facilitate Song speaking on her behalf, the acting itself is a source of energy release for the audience. Tong Zhiling's performance as Wanshi deliberately plays with the bounds of the *huadan* language, at one point, parodying the exaggerated speech and pose of the *qingyi,* and at another executing a finger-wagging gesture that takes place during a moment where the center of attention has ostensibly shifted to Song, violating the normal protocol of focus on one actor at a time (see fig 2.8). What, plot-wise, is an emotionally charged scene is transformed by the virtuosic use of multiple registers of gestural language into a comic episode, achieving with the play of intermingling acting styles a display of energy that transmutes the heavy repression that accompanies the revelation of injustice. Tong's departure from the style of her co-stars creates what amounts to a utopian release for the audience.

[157] This may well have been Zhou Xinfang's own contribution to his performance of the role rather than a directorial decision by Ying Yunwei.

Fig 2.8. Tong Zhiling wags her finger after her lines are completed, and the case file (and with it the camera and focus of attention) are moved to Song Shijie by panning right. *Song Shijie* 宋士杰, directed by Ying Yunwei 应云卫 and Liu Qiong 刘琼 (1956; Beijing: Beijing wenhua yishu yinxiang chubanshe 北京文化艺术音像出版社, 2005), DVD.

Though there was overlap between stage and screen during the Hundred Flowers Movement, when the theater world turned to modern day plays (*xiandai xi* 现代戏) for the Great Leap, the film world began to separate, continuing its own focus on the adaptation of traditional plays. Arguably, this was the continued response of the film world to the policy of "using the past to serve the present" (*guwei jinyong* 古为今用), even though the theater world had turned to "walking on two legs."[158] Given that the traditional repertoire was the most popular of the three types of

158 Gao, *Xiqu dianying*, 181.

plays, this created a natural audience for xiqu film, particularly as a form of entertainment. Many xiqu film directors seemed willing to oblige, selecting plays for adaptation that included the fantastical or romances, or martial female heroines, all topics into which a simple ideological message could fit: free love, gender equality, or failing that, class oppression.

The director of *Song Shijie*, Ying Yunwei (应云卫 1904-1967) has been hailed as a supporter of both film and the theatrical arts, and had experience in adapting stage works for the screen from his pre-liberation films; his approach to xiqu film, as *Song Shijie* demonstrated, put an equal emphasis on both cinematic work and theatrical acting, though always with an eye toward audience appeal.[159] Though *Song Shijie* was a success both within China and in Sinophone markets, Ying's comments on xiqu repertoire (including the restoration of the banned play, *Yang Silang Visits His Mother* (*Yang Silang tanmu* 杨四郎探母) and the limitations of script reform efforts brought him dangerously close to being labeled a rightist in the ensuing Anti-Rightist Campaign.[160] After narrowly escaping persecution, his position as the head of one of the smaller studios in the Shanghai region was cancelled as studios were consolidated, and as his first job in his new position as director at Tianma Studios, he was assigned to direct the film adaptation of *Chasing the Fish Spirit* (*Zhuiyu* 追鱼, 1959), which had been popular with Shanghai audiences two years earlier.[161] This *yueju* play had its origins in an adaptation of a popular *xiangju* (湘剧), or Hunanese opera, version that Tian Han had seen in 1956, and which he encouraged the local cultural minister, Kang De (康德 1902-1967), to revise.[162] Inspired by the success of the *xiangju* in Shanghai, Tian's wife, An E (安娥 1905-1976), produced a *yueju* version, in the same month that she also produced *A Test of Love*, and two other plays, a feat of

159 Gao, *Xiqu dianying,* 171.
160 Shen Ji 沈寂, *Huashuo dianying* 话说电影（Shanghai 上海：Shanghai sanlian shudian 上海三联书店，2008), 44-45.
161 Ibid., 45.

energy that was to be among her last, as she suffered a stroke that impaired her writing ability at the end of that year.[163]

Even among its first adapters, there was a general recognition of the entertainment value of the play.[164] The basic premise of *Fish Spirit* was the love story between a fish spirit and the poor, aspiring scholar living in the estate of the rich family to whom he is betrothed. The conceit of the play lay in its interesting use of doubles: the Fish Spirit takes the shape of Mudan, the daughter of the Jins to whom Zhang Zhen is betrothed, in order to woo him, and the various other spirits of the lake take the form of Judge Bao and heavenly generals, when the Fish Spirit needs assistance. The resultant confusion on stage requires a degree of virtuosic acting from all pairs, as many lines were intended to be spoken or sung simultaneously. The entertainment value was only enhanced by the revisions made by Tian Han and others to play up the romance, both by allowing Judge Bao to approve of the demonic relationship, and by the acceptance of the Fish Spirit to lose her scales in her conversion to mortality, rather than allowing herself to be escorted away by Guanyin at the end.[165] In its positive use of the bourgeois figure of Judge Bao as well as its indulgent use of the supernatural, *Fish Spirit* had the hallmarks of the period of relaxation of 1956-57, the exact years it was written. By 1959, however, the theatrical scene had become more restrictive, making it more remarkable that the play was selected for adaptation. It is likely that, as in the case of *A Test of Love*, the political clout of Tian Han and An E, and the star power of the *yueju* version's lead actors, Wang Wenjuan and Xu Yulan, were ultimately factors that contributed to its primacy over the originating *xiangju* and even the revised Peking opera.

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[162] Li Zhiyan 黎之彦，"Tian Han gaibian xiqu 'Jinlinji' jishi (shang) 田汉改编戏曲《金鳞记》纪实 （上）," *Zhongguo xiju* 中国戏剧 11 (1991): 18-19.

[163] Tian Han 田汉，" 'Jinlinji' houji《金鳞记》后记" in *Tian Han wenji* 田汉文集 (Beijing 北京：Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出版社, 1983), 10:446-447. Tian Han took inspiration from the *yueju* and wrote the Peking opera "Tale of the Golden Carp" (金鳞记) from this edition. In his account of the production history, Tian's personal secretary, Li Zhiyan, notes that Tian directly contributed to the *xiangju* after Kang had completed a round of revisions.

[164] Li Zhiyan, "Tian Han gaibian," 18.

Mapped onto Dyer's categories of energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community, which were the utopian solutions offered to audiences' dissatisfactions with reality, many late 50s xiqu films align closely with most of the requirements of an 'entertainment' film.[166] Taking *Chasing the Fish Spirit* as an example, this film appeared at best only weakly connected to contemporary political campaigns (self-arranged marriage had been an ideological justification of romantic plays since the beginning of the decade), and its magical, mythic subject matter was yet another example of a late 50s play in contravention of the typically harsh interpretation of the May 5th Directive, divorcing it from other more overt, ideological aims. Examined through Dyer's categories, the film meets all the characteristics of entertainment:

Energy: Multiple scenes of transformation, from spirit to human, are scattered throughout the film, including the Fish Spirit's climactic abandonment of her otherworldly status at the end, rendered with acrobatic finesse by Wang Wenjuan.

Abundance: The basic plot of the play was set mainly within the estate of a high ranking official whose luxurious grounds offer an excuse for the sensuous environment of the realistic sets devised for the film. Zhang Zhen's wooden studio is equipped with solid, rich materials and multiple props, while the greater lands of the estate include real plants and a real lake. Arguably, even the Fish Spirit's transformations are examples of visual sumptuousness, both in her physical costuming, and in the filmic effects that were used to show her emerging from the lake and taking the form of Mudan.

Intensity: Dyer's notion of the capacity of an entertainment film to render a complex emotion simply, vividly, and unambiguously is characteristic of the *yueju* romance in general, and easily visually accessible through both *yueju's* own Hollywood-influenced realistic acting styles, and standardized performance conventions conveying emotional interiority.

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165 Ibid., 20.

Transparency: Dyer defines this primarily as an expression of love and romance, which fits closely to the greater part of *yueju's* repertoire of romantic operas. The romance between the Fish Spirit and Zhang Zhen is also conveyed in the spirit of true love, complete with self-sacrifice, as the Fish abandons her divinity to be with him, culminating their expression of love.

Community: Though the film is careful not to blend the bourgeois family of the official with the poor, aspiring scholar Zhang Zhen, the play establishes a connection with the audience through the use of choral asides, narrating the story of their romance and suggesting the existence of a larger, hidden community in support of their love.

It is notable that many of these characteristics were true of the original play, as well, suggesting that this turn toward entertainment was felt across industries from at least 1956, or at a minimum was shared in common with *yueju*, in particular. As a genre primarily consisting of luxuriously rendered romances, *yueju* may have been more inclined than other xiqu genres to meet these qualifications for entertainment as a natural outgrowth of its intrinsic qualities.[167] All the same, these characteristics were often accessible across a wide range of xiqu films, particularly after the Leap.

No discussion of xiqu film would be complete without mention of the general artistic director of Shanghai Film Studios, Han Shangyi (韩尚义 1917-1998). In what has become a classic treatise in the history of Chinese xiqu, Han laid out what he saw as the basic core of the problem with xiqu films in an article for Chinese Film (*Zhongguo dianying* 中国电影) in 1956, that theatricality was grounded in non-representational art, and the filmic contribution to adaptations was the addition of a representational, realist set; resolving the aesthetic contradiction between these two was an essential component of every xiqu film.[168] Much in the same way that Dyer had to break down his analysis of musicals in accordance with the way they treated their contradictions between the

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166 Dyer, "Utopia," 24.
167 See Jin Jiang's discussion of the appeals of *yueju* in *Women Playing Men*, especially 215-250.
168 Han, "Xiqu yingpian," 612-620.

narrative and the number, Han found that xiqu films covered a wide range of responses to the integration of the representational and the non-representational, though he is quick to condemn those that he feels do not go far enough in adapting the real to the theatrical. Unlike Dyer's emphasis on the disparity between story and style, however, the contrast was situated entirely within the realm of the visual, between the theatricality of the actor and the departure from the theater in the use of the cinematic world around them. Han had controlled the artistic design of multiple xiqu films, a fact which informed his opinions on the productions made to that date.[169] His approaches advocated for adaptation from both sides, with actors adjusting their performance techniques to respond to the environment, and filmmakers deliberately aestheticizing their sets to match the spirit of expressionism from the stage.[170] Though this aestheticization could be regarded as rendering the cinematic closer to the non-representational, Han's suggestions went instead for greater detail on sets, with varied colors, and ornate details to match the finery of traditional costuming.[171] The organizing principle behind this was to use the 'classical arts' as an inspiration for the scene, within the framework of the code of beauty in xiqu, downplaying the contradiction brought by naturalist approaches.[172] In this, whether deliberately or not, Han echoed closely the ideas of Fei Mu on bringing xiqu film closer to traditional Chinese painting, forging another link across the decades.[173]

Though Han was explicit about founding the contradiction between theater and cinema within a specific visual framework, conflicts between the representational and non-representational arguably occurred at multiple levels of the production, whether in types of acting style (as in *Song Shijie*), or cinematic techniques, like perspectival shots, and special effects in the name of realism. In the reality of the typical highly hybridized xiqu film, there are few easy distinctions between what

169 Luo, *Zhongguo dianying lilun*, 612.
170 Han, "Xiqu yingpian," 616-619.
171 Ibid., 617, 619.
172 Ibid., 616, 617.
173 Fei Mu, "Zhongguo jiuju de dianyinghua wenti," 82. Even if Han was aware of the earlier text, he may not have been willing to admit the connection, as Fei had been condemned for his bourgeoisie inclinations.

actually should be read as purely non-representational or representational; cinematic double exposures might render the theatrical more realistically on screen, but the kind of interpretive, symbolism-heavy camerawork used in films like *Murder in the Oratory* might be read as non-representational. Similarly, the 'theatrical' component of xiqu entailed both stylized conventions and mimetic gesture; the latter was a source of consternation for many film directors, particularly when realist sets were being used.[174] The distinction of what is representational or non-representational ultimately cannot be reduced simply to the theatrical and the filmic. This is not the only source of contradictions, however, as others may emerge from within the realms of the solely non-representational or its opposite. In that these films served on some level as a form of entertainment, however, a varied source of contradictions made for a richer pool of available vectors towards utopianism.

It is true that Dyer's interpretation of utopianism is rooted in a Western history of the term, and the ideals that he breaks down out of it may not necessarily correspond to a understanding of utopia more closely identified with Chinese cultural history; xiqu films may even be read more efficiently with other models of interpretation. Not all xiqu films will meet each of the categories of utopianism as easily as a romantic comedy like *Chasing the Fish Spirit*; some Peking operas, like *Tears on Barren Mountain*, for example, lend themselves more easily to an understanding rooted in melodrama as their primary expressive mode and affective goal. The inherent logic of melodrama as an act going beyond reality to unearth a particular moral truth is matched easily by the equivalent goals of socialist realism, in revealing an ideological truth made evident through class oppression and the suffering of the proletariat.[175] It is difficult to imagine an audience reveling in the poverty-stricken, inescapably oppressive world of *Barren Mountain*, for instance, where the pathos of

[174] For example, in *Song Shijie*, Zhou Xinfang ultimately had to open a real door when he went to steal the papers, because the miming action didn't look satisfactory on camera. See Han, "Xiqu yingpian," 619.

Zhang Huizhu's descent into insanity motivates tragic rage. Apart from the plot, however, the audience has the opportunity to lose itself in the artistry of the play, and Cheng Yanqiu's signature performance, in particular, through an appreciation of the theatricality rather than the storyline. Here, what might be read as utopianism requires not an investment in the narrative world, so much as an appreciation of the purely non-representational as an escape from the reality depicted in the narrative.

Xiqu films derive their power from the fact that as entertainment, they respond to the real needs of society, while simultaneously taking a stake in defining which exactly of those needs might be recognized and valorized.[176] For Dyer, these films entailed a solution for scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation, or the general states of a poor, overworked society faced with pressures of indoctrination and isolation, conditions that he identified with the ideological product of capitalism, but which can easily be read as a description of late 50s China.[177] The complexity of the viewing experience, through the interaction of what preconceptions audiences bring to the theater and what pleasures they take from the performance on screen, cannot be totally coopted by film directors, or at least not for any one particular ideological intent. The xiqu film's form of utopianism was not necessarily the ideological ideal envisioned by studio heads and producers. As Dyer states for musicals,

> "To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience. Yet to do this, to draw attention to the gap between what is and what could be, is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire. What musicals have to do, then, (not through any conspiratorial intent, but because it is always easier to take the line of least resistance, i.e. to fit in with prevailing norms) is to work through these contradictions at all levels in such a way as to 'manage' them, to make them seem to disappear."[178]

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175 Jason McGrath, "Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema" *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010), 349-350.
176 Dyer, "Utopia," 23.
177 Ibid., 26.
178 Ibid., 26. The ideology he refers to here is not socialism but capitalism, in that "the ideals of entertainment imply wants that capitalism itself promises to meet…The categories of the sensibility point to gaps or inadequacies in capitalism, but only those gaps or inadequacies that capitalism proposes itself to deal with." p. 23.

Xiqu film similarly deals with this 'gap,' which is an expression of the distance between utopia and reality, both as an ideological message within the narrative of the film itself, and as a counterpoint to the lived experience of the late 50s. Even many of those xiqu films that were tragedies still reflected a utopian drive in the vision of the potential reality that was to be defeated diegetically by feudalism or other socialist ideological enemies. In the real world of the Great Leap, the failed promises of socialist ideology may well have created a substantial gap to be filled by utopianism on the screen. The somewhat stale ideological formulas of late 50s xiqu film narratives in conjunction with the presence of historically rich forms of theatricality likely worked together to facilitate the possibility of alternative viewing practices.

Conclusion

In *Chasing the Fish Spirit*, as in *Legend of White Snake*, *The Butterfly Lovers* and other classic romances, it is the role of the woman to dissemble and to masquerade; though this formula was widely popular in traditional literature, it is also true that there is an echo of the suppositional, as an operatic aesthetic, in the conceptual ambiguity of the identity of the female heroine. In *Fish Spirit*, this openness is exploited visually in the spectacle of doppelgängers on stage, sometimes even in pairs of characters. The literalization of double vision is echoed on a number of other levels for the audience, where the capacity for double vision is part of the pleasure of watching, whether from within the narrative, comparing the truth with the perspectives of the characters, or from the objective standpoint in the theater where the body of the actor is a potential contradiction with the gender of the character, and even the embodied code of theatrical expression is a contrast with the awareness of the audience of the actor's bodily reality. What the entertainment function of these plays and their films indicates is that this double vision was arguably metaphorical to the lived

socialist experience of the arts, where one could be aware of the ideological import but not absorbed by it, and even capable of potentially disruptive consumption of it.[179]

Xiqu film underwent dramatic growth as a genre from Fei Mu's first artistic contribution in 1937 through the wide-ranging responses to the challenges of remediation during the 1950s. Throughout this period, the integration of film with xiqu raised fundamental questions about the representation of theatricality on film, and whether the techniques of the cinema would either realize or distort the aesthetic goals of the theater—or achieve yet another option in producing a new cinematic language. What the 1950s debates on xiqu film made clear was that the process of adaptation from stage to screen was still fundamentally mired in a heterogenous set of philosophies. The vast majority of films produced during the 1950s reflected some degree of compromise between strict documentarian approaches and ones that sought to blend filmic realism into the production. Often this was a concrete realism rather than a theatrical one, fleshed out in three-dimensional sets and shot sequences that established continuity, even when the material grounds of the production were adjusted to match the aesthetics of xiqu. In many cases, however, what undergirded this was not just a concession to audience expectations for the filmic genre, as directors suggested, but a subtle acknowledgement of the role that film played to satisfy audience needs for entertainment, particularly when adapting the repertoire most closely associated with popular reception in the theater.

If entertainment films are associated with generating and controlling a drive toward utopianism manufactured by contradictions, including between the representational and the non-representational, then xiqu films and their clash of aesthetic modes offered multiple avenues to

[179] See for example, Jason McGrath's discussion of the consumption of the model opera films during the Cultural Revolution. McGrath, "Realist Tradition," 344. Kristine Harris's discussion of *The Red Detachment of Women* develops this point through a study of the remediation of the central story over decades, leading up not just to an iconic figuration in the model ballet but to lives in the post-socialist world as well; the ideology of one incarnation was not as significant as the fact it was "a flexible myth, adaptable to any changing China." Kristine Harris, "Re-makes/Re-models: *The Red Detachment of Women* between Stage and Screen," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 338.

social critique, whether ideological or not, and whether through some part of the world of the narrative, or in the sheer beauty of performance itself. This tendency was even more noticeable in the films produced in the latter half of the decade, when the failures of contemporary political movements produced a desire for escapism that could be easily met by xiqu film. The conflict between realism and theatricality at the core of the xiqu film's utopian drive was more than just a filmic phenomenon, in that it could be staged for audiences through gestural language, making it a problem of the theater, as well as of the film world.

In theaters, however, gesture was an ideological issue germane to the arts more than to the daily lives of the audience. Even if the focus of the early years of the reform movement was on script adaptation and censorship, it did not go unrecognized that performance conventions were targeted as well, demonstrated in the outpouring of letters to the editor (even when carefully and selectively curated by *Theater Report* staff). Vernacularization towards a performative realism was just one of several ways physical performance practice was under pressure to change its appearance to better meet the aesthetic demands of the young PRC. The two sections of the repertoire that were most affected were those belonging to the *huadan* and the *chou*; both of these role types were criticized as offensive to the image of the working classes, particularly in that they were commonly used for humor. As Siyuan Liu has noted, the damage to some of this repertoire, for instance, the plays of *huadan* actor, Xiao Cuihua (筱翠花 1900-1967), who specialized in horror, ghost plays and the grotesque, has been lasting, with embodied practice of some plays entirely forgotten.[180] Liu's observation that the government maintained much greater interest in regulating performance practice rather than the archive of scripts speaks to both the political perils faced by performers who

[180] Liu, "Theatre Reform," 400-401.

maintained these works in their repertoire, and the threat to the repertoire itself, even before considering the pressures on the expression of gesture.[181]

Vernacularization, or the process of borrowing from the gestural language of another genre, has deep roots in operatic performance practice. Xiqu performers fleeing from occupied parts of China during WWII were confronted with audiences in the south and southwest who were not conversant in standard Peking opera gestures; by the necessity of their project of patriotic mobilization for the resistance, actors were required to adapt their movements towards more everyday gestures, in order to make their performances visually comprehensible.[182] It is also well-known that Shanghai stages experimented with concretely realistic sets or props, like real cars or animals on stage, conditions that would require the actor to adapt their movements to accommodate the environment, and limit the possibilities for symbolic gesture; even the traditional practice of mimetic gestures lose their function when no longer paired with an illusory set. The success of the spoken drama movement after 1937 might also be considered another influence on xiqu actors who were financially compelled to respond to audience tastes, encouraging greater hybridization between the gestural languages of spoken drama and xiqu. Fu Xuemin (傅学敏) made the development of spoken drama techniques in xiqu a cornerstone of her analysis of xiqu reform during the second world war, noting the primary changes as an increased attention to the 'dramaticism' (*xijuxing* 戏剧性) of the plot, an increase in spoken dialogue, increasingly realistic sets and a general increase in performative expressivity through body language on stage.[183] The prominence of spoken drama in

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[181] Numerous banned plays were included in publications during the 1950s, whether in general script anthologies or as part of special collections of a performer's oeuvre. Even if the critique of the plays rested on ideological grounds, this did not prevent publication; the same was not true for actual performances. This appears to be a general fear of the propensity for broad dissemination of (incorrect) political ideas through live performance. The literacy rate in China was still low at this point in the 1950s, and it's possible publication was approved through a particular kind of elitism, that the literate would also be politically enlightened. Liu, "Theatre Reform," 401.

[182] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 264-290.

[183] Fu Xuemin 傅学敏, *1937-1945: Guojia yishi xingtai yu guotongqu xiju yundong* 1937-1945:国家意识形态与国统区戏剧运动. (Beijing 北京：Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社, 2010), 246-256.

this era along with the emphasis on propaganda plays meant that the reform goals for xiqu performance were tailored to standards set by the spoken drama stage.[184]

It is possible that what 1950s critics saw as the crisis of operatic gesture was not simply, or even necessarily, experimentation with hybridization, as this had been ongoing for over a decade, but the tendency of actors to simply avoid stylized gesture entirely. Reliance on visual evidence from xiqu films of the era, even documentaries, does not allow for the easy distinction between vernacularized gesture used in the theater and adaptations that were made exclusively for the screen. Because stylizations were the target of unsystematic adaptation, there does not appear to be a standard language for talking about altered stylized gesture in published reports of the era, making it difficult to reconstruct what theatrical gesture of the time would have looked like. Any attempt to create such a systematic language would be encumbered by numerous obstacles, including the wide variance in degrees of stylization between the movements of different operatic genres: for example, *yueju's* naturalist motion compared with its older counterpart, Peking opera. Also complicating matters is the fact that far from being a fixed standard, gesture had always been subject to performer interpretation as part of the greater tradition of xiqu.[185] Mei Lanfang's adaptations to his movements in the filmed version of *Guifei zuijiu* 贵妃醉酒 (1955, dir Wu Zuguang) were not necessarily an answer to the times (of demands to avoid formalism), so much as part of the tradition of xiqu actors responding to challenges in their theatrical environment.[186]

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[184] Ibid., 251.

[185] There are various accounts from the Republican era of actors surprising one another, either with new lines or, in Tan Xinpei 谭鑫培's case, significantly delaying his entry on stage, which would have been an occasion for improvisation, likely including movement. An overly dramatized example of this is featured in Chen Kaige's film *Forever Enthralled* (梅兰芳), where the young Mei Lanfang improvises physical motions on stage to indicate his reaction to his partner's lines, much to the shock and delight of the audience (and indignant anger of Shisanye, from whom the spotlight had been stolen). While this incident is obviously fiction, other historical accounts of traveling troupes on the Yangzi river describe a situation where a company would be expected to adapt to the new stage conditions at every port of call, in many cases requiring revision to physical movements lest the actor tumble off the stage. See Li Zigui, *Yi Jiangnan*, 1-17.

[186] Though this film was recorded in 1955, six years earlier, Mei had publicly stated for the press that traditional forms should not be changed (一步而不换形); though he retracted this statement three weeks later under pressure from the Ministry of Culture, this statement potentially better represents his personal opinion, and might be taken in conjunction

On the other hand, the emphasis on national heritage that underlined the rhetoric of the defense of operatic gesture suggests that theater critics were increasingly concerned with the loss of traditional theatrical gestures entirely. Ironically, this emphasis on the preservation of national heritage ran the risk of reifying a tradition that was fundamentally dynamic, repeating the same kind of self-colonizing, orientalist overtures that characterized the promotion of Peking opera in the Republican era, particularly the publicity surrounding Mei Lanfang's 1930 US tour.[187] It is unlikely that the reform movement moved in lockstep with political relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC; the Soviet theater experts sent to China were each practiced in spoken drama rather than any classical form. However, it would draw an overly thick layer of paint over the discussion of the nationalization of forms to suggest that the theatrical world was devoid of any influence from international politics. The extent to which nationalization played a role in changing the tenor of debates on performance practice, as well as on the production of xiqu film, remains an open question for theater historians.

Though the process was slow and characterized by great caution in walking back claims that decried theatrical gesture as formalist, as well as many stops and starts in response to increasingly strident political movements, the gradual turn of opinion toward preservation of traditional acting came at almost the exact same time as the rise of xiqu film. The entertainment value of these works was a significant factor in encouraging the popularization of the forms of theatricality they endorsed, even when the films themselves were stylistically split across a wide range of interpretations of cinematic language. What xiqu brought to cinema ultimately was the emergence of a new form of cinema and cinematic language to accompany it, both major accomplishments of 1950s xiqu film. At the same time, these films were highly contingent on an understanding of the theatrical that rooted

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with his performance decisions for the film as evidence that the tradition he wanted to preserve was an inherently malleable one. For a description of one of Mei Lanfang's adaptations, see Han Shangyi, "Xiqu yingpian," 619.

itself in the bodily performance of the actor, thus bringing to xiqu an attention on the expressionism of the body that revivified both theatrical gesture and the language of the theatrical in realism.

[187] For more on the strategic presentation of Peking opera as a fossilized art form representing a culture frozen in history, see Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*.

Conclusion

The Ghosting of Transnationalism

This dissertation joins a growing body of work on studies of xiqu, as well as projects that explore the fundamental connection between the Republican era and the PRC.[1] The cumulative effect of these works has been to redefine the paradigms of historical study that assume a complete break in everyday practices across industries as a result of the change in political power. In light of the focus on image in the nation-building project of the early PRC, it is understandable that history might be written with an emphasis on the contributions (and disruptions) of the young regime. But it logically comes as no surprise that one era would evolve organically from another, with structures and systems of thought presenting continuities in spite of significant political change.

It is in light of these cross-era connections that it is significant to think of Marvin Carlson's characterization of the theater as a "memory machine."[2] Certainly, censorship and adaptation are major disruptions to the repertoire, but an audience doesn't have to witness the same shows to be able to experience a sense of hauntedness, invoked by familiarity with the actors, the music, even the architectural environment of the theater. The first years of the PRC are sometimes humorously characterized as an era of only three plays, *The Butterfly Lovers, Western Wing,* and *White Snake*,[3] with the implicit understanding that these three, as the "sole" works blessed by the government, were performed *ad nauseam.* What exploration of the newspapers reveals, however, is a widely divergent field of practices in adaptations of these works, ones whose appeal may not have been in the novelty of the adaptation, especially considering how often classic works were updated crudely with

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1 Examples include Tom Mullaney, Min Tian, Li Ruru, and others.

2 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2.

3 翻开报纸不用看，梁祝西厢白蛇传

ideological slogans, so much as in the experience of intertextuality between the new adaptation and the memory of its past incarnations—both as text and performance.

The pleasures of appreciating indigenous theater are inherently built on spectatorial habits that rely on memory: it is an art form that drew crowds explicitly for the experience of seeing a classic show, even if not always with new performers or other novelties. This maps very literally onto Carlson's definition of "ghosting":

> Unlike the reception operations of genre (also, of course, of major importance in theatre), in which audience members encounter a new but distinctly different example of a type of artistic product they have encountered before, ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context. Thus a recognition not of similarity, as in genre, but of identity becomes a part of the reception process, with results that can complicate the process considerably.[4]

Carlson's sense of 'identity' in this passage entails a kind of recognition of the ineffable, an echo where one may not have been expected or intended, with connections made that can alter the message of the work in front of the audience. I propose to take Carlson more literally, where his choice of the word identity may be read within a political context, whether reflected at regional, national, or transnational levels. The propaganda work of the theater of the 1950s was intended to inform the national sense of self; if taken in isolation, the propaganda itself is the common 'identity' to different productions. The reality for most theatergoers, however, was that this project of self-shaping was haunted by the history of similar cultivation of a national[5] identity in theaters of the Republican era.

Ghosting is one way of complicating a phenomenon that has long been observed in performance studies, that the theater is a place of history-making through cultural memory.[6] In

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[4] Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 7. It is worth noting that Carlson goes on to claim that xiqu, like noh and kabuki, is essentially ghosting thoroughly routinized, where all elements of performance are formulaic echoes of previous gestures (11). While this definition is mostly accurate in spirit, the actual practice of xiqu in the twentieth century is better defined by the ways these gestures that are intended to be "obsessive," are instead under near-constant pressure to change.

[5] In some ways, this is better understood as cultural since it is not always explicitly tied to political party or governmental entities, but rather to a set of values, which in some circumstances may have been promoted by the state.

[6] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

China's politically complicated twentieth century, this project is dominated by the implications of engaging with foreign forms and theories of theater as a means of controlling indigenous theater. In that transnational exchange encourages dialectical reflection on a national identity in contradistinction to the globally networked one, the shaping of xiqu through reform was in many respects a metaphor for cultivating a national image. This is especially true considering that the state's reform project was aimed at all xiqu genres, not any one in particular; this has been the motivating factor in keeping the frame of this dissertation open, even though its primary examples are drawn from the most iconic of China's xiqu genres, Beijing opera, *kunqu,* and *yueju*, all ones that would successfully represent the nation at different points in the 1950s.[7] What is key to add to this understanding of transnationalism, however, is the persistence of echoes in the theater, where the memory not just of former roles and plots haunt the theater but of former national projects embodied by different performers and productions.

In spite of attempts to use the major stars of the Republican era to rewrite the history of xiqu (and the public image of "China"), the state's project confronted the irrepressible, accumulated vagaries of xiqu's interactions with global trends in the theater which were invoked every time one of these luminaries took the stage. Mei Lanfang's tactical orientalism could not be easily stripped from performances of *Drunken Concubine* and the other works from his first international tours when they were re-performed in the 1950s, particularly when they were curated under the banner of 'stage documentary.' The sense of hallowedness that pervades Mei's documentary films stems both from their presentation as captured ("documented") tradition and from the aura that surrounded Mei as a figurehead of a national tradition, the persona he deliberately crafted during the 1930s. This sense of recaptured history is present even in spite of acknowledgements that choreography and other

[7] Other regional genres cannot all be said to have reliably sought the national spotlight; *chuanju* (川剧) practitioners in particular seem to have had—and still have—an inferiority complex compared with these three major forms, and it

performance details were carefully edited and justified for presentation on the silver screen. It was this question of what represented tradition and what parts of xiqu's past would be allowed to represent its present and future that increasingly occupied reform leaders of the 50s, who sought to put the reins on radical reform by invoking words like history and tradition, which were made meaningful by the fact of their association with national identity. The central question of what in xiqu represented the nation—and what role "tradition" (however interpreted) would play in that vision—were consequently indivisible from the state's reform project after 1949.

The central project of the preceding chapters has been the re-examination of the historical moment in the 1950s when indigenous theater was targeted by the state for directed, nationwide reforms, ones which took implicitly as their aim the development of an image of China to project to the world. Grounded in an investigation of the manifestations of reform through the media of print, theatrical practice, and film adaptation, each chapter seeks to restore some of the complexity of actual stage practice against the picture of a flatly ideological history of hegemonic state directives towards a particular socialist realist aesthetic regime. In some instances this entails identifying roots in the admittedly fragmented practices of the late Republican era, broken apart by geographic divides made impassable by wartime conditions. In other cases, attempts to connect these eras reveal instead that what is inherited across the 1949 divide is a deep discursive and practical instability in the way xiqu is conceived within the global framework by its practitioners and reformers.

The roots of this instability reach back to critical discourse created about the theater during the emergence of a shift in aesthetic consciousness to acknowledge the difference between the representational and the presentational, a consciousness that is consequently closely tied to nationalism. This nationalistic, "conservative" or preservationist strain has been largely framed in theater histories by the contributions of Qi Rushan in particular, as the founder of an influential

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seems likely that other genres would have experienced something similar. This is in spite of the fact that multiple *chuanju*

general theory of xiqu that focused on its aestheticism. This emphasis has come at the expense of the contributions of other preservationist critics who were active in Shanghai's "mosquito" press, like Zhang Guyu and Zhang Xiaocang. Working with other independent journalists (and often, amateur actors) to produce their own xiqu-focused publications, their Preservation Society set a model for critical analysis of actual productions, and for the distribution of knowledge about indigenous theater more broadly. Premised on a model of high-brow engagement with selective research into the history of xiqu traditions and a celebration of *piaoyou* (or amateur) performances, these critics advocated against extreme reform or the appreciation of the most innovative approaches used on Shanghai stages. Though markedly different from the prevailing xiqu columns of the era, which focused instead on the paparazzi-style fetishization of performer gossip, especially among the female teenage stars from the xiqu academies, their approach to theater appreciation and glorification of simpler staging practices both unified them with non-leftist critics of the previous decade and with the emerging world of theatrical trade journals in the early PRC.[8]

While the major theatrical trade journal of the PRC, *Theater Report*, became the mouthpiece of the state after its foundation in 1954, the early years of the PRC are marked by a greater range of voices and approaches to theater criticism. Within these accounts is a vision of a dynamic world of performance styles and widely divergent approaches to the initial demands for adaptation, particularly in staging. Some of the more blunt-force tactics used in adaptation, like the sloganeering insertions into traditional plays, were related at heart to the propagandistic messages that resistance drama had used during the war; no less a luminary than Tian Han had used a similar approach in at least one early version of *White Snake*, with Lady Bai and her maid turned into nurses for the war

films were made in the 1960s, often with remarkably high production values.

[8] Their interest in 'preservation' should not be read as explicitly 'antiquarian' or 'anti-innovation'; while the performances they reported on were typically reenactments of the classics, photographic evidence of *piaoyou* in full costume reveal that the average performer was in fact integrating changes that were being made in the repertoire, even if no verbal claims were made to acknowledge any indebtedness to evolving practice. What is key here is not so much a strict intellectual position so much as a rhetorical stance tied to discourse of the immediate post-May Fourth era.

effort. After liberation, however, the tide began to turn against these kinds of colorful renditions. Beginning as a slow reaction that moved up the chain of influence from critics to governmental leaders, resistance to these adaptations manifested first as a call to respect history, and later as a critique of flashy staging techniques. Here, however, was an example of a kind of dialectic writ large over decades: from highly hybridized productions of the 1930s and 40s, the emphasis was shifting towards a vision of xiqu more in line with the rhetorical stance of the preservationist critics of the late Republic, grounded in nationalist visions of aesthetic purity.

Outside of the cloisters of the 1940s xiqu preservationists, a greater debate flared over the reconciliation of realism (sometimes called "life") with traditional theater conventions (sometimes called "technique").[9] On the one hand, it is easy to assume that the participants in this strain of discourse were the ones still invested in hybridization with western models. Leftists made up the classical core of this camp, and it is possible to trace their rhetoric across the '49 divide in articles published in *Theater Report*, or in the emphasis on 'technique' as a buzzword for theatricality that predominated in discussions of performance gesture in the 1950s.[10] On the other, there are two groups of non-leftists who are ignored by this depiction of theater history: those who engaged with western theory independent of the terms of debate used elsewhere, and those who used these terms to nuance their own approach to theater theory. Members of the former included performers like Cheng Yanqiu, and in the latter, filmmakers like Fei Mu. Both Cheng and Fei demonstrate how western ideas interpenetrated performance practice in indigenous theater outside of leftist spheres of

[9] Edward Gunn, "Shanghai's 'Orphan Island' and the Development of Modern Drama," in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, ed. Bonnie MacDougall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 47.

[10] For example, Ma Shaobo's article on performance practice in 1954, or the language in the letters to the editor that were published in that same year. Ma Shaobo 马少波，"Guanyu jingju yishu jinyibu gaige de shangque 关于京剧艺术进一步改革的商榷," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 10 (1954): 10-11. Also, "Duzhe dui xiqu de yishu gaige wenyi de yijian 读者对戏曲的艺术改革问题的意见," *Xiju bao* 戏剧报 12 (December 1954): 32-33.

influence, leaving the core of xiqu theory in a greater state of uncertainty than might be suggested by the lasting influence of aestheticists like Qi Rushan.

This uncertainty is intrinsic to the practice of transnationalism in theater. Marked by tension between preservation of the core national identity and promotion of a cosmopolitan identity embodied in the new, hybridized production, transnational theater in China oscillated on the use of western practices from spoken drama in xiqu, and their theoretical reflection in the struggle between realism and aestheticism (or theatricality). For some during wartime, pressure to adopt western techniques combined with propagandistic demands of the theater to result in revision strategies that included increased emphasis on plot and dialogue (like Ouyang Yuqian's plays). For others, this pressure resulted instead in a vague need to express international relevance and modernization, expressible only through a spoken drama aesthetic regardless of its popularity with audiences, as in the reform movement in *guiju*.

For most companies, however, investment in foreign ideas was the purview of technical theater, including lighting, set design, and experimentation with the use of a director. Significantly, these experiments were widespread in the theater industry, particularly in Beijing opera but also in other regional forms, for years before the state became concerned with institutional reforms. Contrary to actor reports of continual efforts to use modern staging techniques, some high-ranking members of the Xiqu Reform Bureau were quick to paint a general picture of the industry as mired in old practices, perhaps to buttress the necessity of their directives. The divide between bureaucrats and practitioners visible within this uppermost echelon of state power (and echoed in the ranks below it) is deeply colored by power relations which disadvantaged actors and the innovations they were already making; it also reflects an intellectual debt to the rhetorical camps that emerged from the May Fourth era aesthetic break with realism, and the transnational practice which that represented. For example, Ma Shaobo's criticism of actors who wiped their nose on stage as

uncivilized is a manifestation of thinking that might be viewed as transnational (with orientalist overtones) in reviling actors for their failure to commit to a particular *western* vision of realism.[11]

The transnational history of xiqu thus informs its aesthetic dilemmas and compromises even more than a solitary campaign to push the arts towards socialist realism after 1949. If anything, the "socialist" aspect of socialist realism was the easiest to integrate; by far the harder nugget was the clash between realism and theatricality. A literal interpretation of realism was at the core of problems with adaptations of mythological plays right after liberation that eliminated all supernatural elements; this led almost inevitably to complaints that what had been compromised was China's own rich history of myths and legends, which required imaginative, theatrical staging. Similarly, a literal reading of realism was claimed to have stifled the ability of actors to freely use conventionalized gestures, and led in many instances towards a vernacularization of performance language, moving the traditionally theatrical toward a more naturalist vision of realism borrowed from the spoken drama stage. But the clearest articulation of the dialectic between realism and theatricality was in xiqu film, with distinctions reified and made apparent by the fact of remediation from stage to screen.

For filmmakers, the fundamental aesthetic conflict between the realism of their chosen medium and the theatricality of xiqu entailed an embrace of the discourse of aestheticism. This allowed them to bypass the vexatious challenges confronting actors who had no choice but to hybridize theatrical gestures with more vernacular ones, while constantly batting back questions about the appropriateness of their decisions: too conservative a change meant accusations of insufficient realism and, by extension, political awareness, and too radical meant complaints that tradition and, by extension, the nation were not being respected. The terms of the xiqu film debate

[11] Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Qingchu xiqu wutaishang de bingtai he chou'e xingxiang 清除戏曲舞台上的病态和丑恶形象," *Renmin xiju* 3, no. 6 (Sept 1951): 25-29. The irony is that many companies were going to great lengths to reproduce exacting realism on the stage, as in the use of a real snake in *White Snake* or the use of a liquid to emulate a child peeing.

of the mid-50s made clear that this discussion of aesthetics was fundamentally one about tradition, heritage and national pride, in both the representation of a national tradition on screen, and in the creation of a national voice in filmic aesthetics specifically for xiqu adaptations.[12] The problem of integrating realism and theatricality had manifested before in Fei Mu's earlier xiqu films, but despite his engagement with similar questions, PRC directors approached the problem as though it were completely new, presumably to distance PRC production from implications of bourgeois affiliation. While still concerned with the creation of an authentic film voice (represented as a question over the extent to which film should assert its medium specificity in adapting theater), these filmmakers took the complicated issue of hybridization from stage production and reduced it to a problem of integration with film's realist environment, rendering xiqu's essential nature one that was inherently—and unproblematically—theatrical. A key effect of this split was to (re)create a connection between theatricality and nationalism that was echoed in the attempts of film directors to articulate a national voice built around a notion of aestheticism.[13]

This transnational dialectic between western modes of theater technique and theory and Chinese ones continued to underlie nearly every level of industry practice and debate, as it undergirded many of the major objectives of the reform movement. To say that reform was controlled solely by embedded unresolved philosophical conflicts wrapped up in the varying needs for theater to express nationalism is, however, to overlook other significant influences in the behavior of the theater industry as a whole. Just as entertainment was a major driving force of innovation in the Republican era, the public and the entertainment industry continued to be

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[12] This is not to say that Chinese film didn't already have a national voice at this point; Cheng Jihua's seminal work on film history established that the leftists and critical realists of the 1930s marked a turning point in Chinese film history precisely because of the emergence of a sophisticated, national voice; see Cheng Jihua 称季华, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* 中国电影发展史 (Beijing 北京: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe 中国电影出版社, 1981). Even this version of history overlooks important contributions from earlier decades, like Hou Yao's *Romance of the Western Wing* (西厢记 1927). In more recent years, the aesthetic language of China's film tradition has been closely linked to xiqu film in particular, despite the actual, wide divergence in filming practices over the course of the twentieth century.

significant players in directing the success of early PRC reform. Direct measurements of this are often hard to prove: ticket sales included "sold-out" shows reserved for specific work units, or come from sources with a vested interest in inflation, like the producers of *Tale of Chunxiang*. On the one hand, the government gradually acknowledged that actors were in dire economic straits by 1956 in no small part because of audience losses engendered by the script famine and its concomitant repression of the traditional canon. This vision of audiences attracted mainly to the classics was included obliquely in critiques of companies as pandering to the crowd when they put on shows with "flashy technique." On the other, specially curated opinion columns or collated "interpretations" of public opinion put out by the editors of major trade journals like *Theater Report* or party newspapers like *The People's Daily* created a public image remarkable mainly for its ideological radicalism. This enabled the state to publicly present a spectrum of viewpoints entirely within the bounds of the revisionist core it identified as central to reform; the reality, however, was that resistance to the reform movement was manifesting on all sides, including leaders within the industry.

One key figure who has emerged as particularly, if unexpectedly, powerful, considering his relative youth and inexperience at the start of the PRC, is Zhang Geng, who utilized his position with the Xiqu Research Institute to direct reform. Zhang sometimes used unsourced reports of theater-going phenomena to suggest an image of general displeasure with the changes of the reform movement, or of companies threatened with the loss of their traditions from over-zealous critique, but his accounts must be tempered with the knowledge that beginning almost immediately from his direct affiliation with xiqu in 1953, his take on xiqu reform was more conservationist than most top leaders of the Reform Bureau. This did not stop him from taking an increasingly prominent role in critiquing and directing reform decisions, even when this potentially posed a threat to his own

[13] Ironically, despite the technical efforts of directors to avoid Fei's style of decoupage tactics in adaptation, their

political well-being. Zhang's narrow escape from persecution during the Anti-Rightist Campaign could have been a harbinger of things to come for those in the reform movement pushing for conservatism, but the flourishing of the xiqu film industry significantly changed the playing field after 1957.

The appeal and success of xiqu films with audiences reaffirmed the entertainment value associated with adaptations of traditional plays and helped to justify the pushback against the extremes of the first seven years of the reform movement. Xiqu films promoted acceptance of a more aesthetic vision of stage performance, a feature that was highlighted by its juxtaposition with the realism of film, and which was believed by at least some in the administration to continue to be a draw for audiences. At the same time, their exportability to places like Southeast Asia guaranteed that a certain language of aestheticization associated with the theater would develop a connection to nationalism that had long been latent in xiqu performance. In this larger realm, xiqu film, even as it was a product of decades of transnational thinking itself, continued to perpetuate the connection between transnationalism and xiqu in active dialogue with viewing audiences of the Sinophone diaspora and even beyond, to larger Asian communities around the Pacific rim.

The constant presence of transnationalism in xiqu's embattled struggle with reform meant that ghosting, particularly of nationalist themes, was an unavoidable phenomenon in theatrical history. Sometimes, this echo of history was used to reformers' advantage, as when encouraging ideological updates to classic plays, where familiarity with the base story was key to understanding the new reading of history that was being written into it. Other times, the haunting of memory was beyond their control; reformers may not even have been aware that their own dialogue on the nature of realism on the xiqu stage was one that drew its inspiration from post-May Fourth aesthetic debates that were continuously inflected by their interaction with international ideas. In the memory

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conclusion that film needed to express some degree of aestheticism was deeply aligned with Fei.

machine that is the theater, however, xiqu's fraught history with serving as national theater was an unavoidable presence in reform efforts, regardless of the media of discussion, and brought this politics to bear on each of the major questions and targets of reform, leaving a lasting, and self-perpetuating mark on the development of xiqu not only at mid-century, but for the years beyond.

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