

# Chinese Performing Arts

No. 7  
July 2023



- Chuanju Rooted in Ba-shu Culture and History
- The Unique Performing Skills of Chuanju
- Tian Mansha: A Multifaceted Artist Rooted in Chuanju and her Innovations
- The Metropolitan Living Space: On the Emotional Pattern of Yu Rongjun's Works
- A Study on the Overseas Performance History of Chinese Contemporary Xiqu Troupes
- Introduction to Classical Plays (VII)
- Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2022



国际戏剧协会  
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院  
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戲劇

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# Chuanju Rooted in Ba-shu<sup>1</sup> Culture and History

DU Jianhua

Chuanju is a local Xiqu genre popular in the Sichuan Province, Chongqing, and various other locations in China. It comprises more than 6,000 repertoire selections, five species of singing (with various musical forms and singing styles), and a rich variety of performance patterns and techniques. Successive local playwrights and performing artists have, over time, implemented aspects into the art of Chuanju that resulted in distinctive regional, cultural, and artistic characteristics, which remain quite unique in the Chinese theatre oeuvre. Chuanju was formed during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng and Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty (around 1722-1795). Since the middle and late Qing dynasty, Chaunju mainly continues in China's Southwest Official Dialect area, that is, today's Sichuan, Chongqing, and parts of neighboring Guizhou, Yunnan, Hubei, Hunan, and Tibet, and is the most influential local Xiqu genre in southwest China.

## I. The long-established Ba-shu theatre culture

Today's Sichuan and Chongqing were a part of Ba-shu in ancient times. The formation and development of Chuanju and its distinctive regional, cultural, and artistic characteristics closely related to the Ba-shu cultural soil from which it grew. The Sichuan Province, known as the "Land of Abundance", is

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1 It refers to the central and eastern Sichuan Province and surrounding areas today. [Translator's note]

located in the Sichuan Basin in the hinterland of southwest China. It maintains a subtropical monsoon climate, with superior natural conditions, providing a stable production and living environment. The land is fertile, allowing people of this region relative ease at achieving self-sufficiency. In addition to the aforementioned aspects, the local people are protected from famine by water conservation projects such as the Dujiangyan, which helps control hydrological conditions. Sichuan is also the only province in China that has two major rivers (the Yellow River and the Yangtze River) flowing through it concurrently. Although it is surrounded by plateaus, it is connected to all provinces in the Yangtze River basin by virtue of the golden waterway. With an area of approximately 567,000 square kilometers, Sichuan contains people of all ethnic groups living and working hard for generations, creating a splendid and brilliant Ba-shu culture together.

In the ancient Yin and Shang Dynasties (about 1300 B.C.-1046 B.C.), Sichuan and Chongqing found fame through their songs and dances. In the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.), there existed many towers where the citizens could listen to various tunes in central Sichuan, and theatrical plays were very prevalent. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907A.D.), scenes of singing and dancing in central Sichuan prospered, and, similarly, theatrical performances flourished. There even existed the saying, "the theatre of Sichuan was the best of the whole country". During the Northern and Southern Song dynasties (960-1279A.D.), there were already records of "Sichuan Zaju" being performed in the Goulan Washe . In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), watching lanterns and enjoying Xiqu became a popular custom in central Sichuan, and Kunqu, Yiyang Qiang and some local Xiqu genres were introduced into Sichuan from different channels. Local folk Xiqu combined aspects from each other and developed together, laying the cultural foundation for the formation of Chuanju.



■ Mianzhu New Year Painting of Qing Dynasty : Chuanju Characters Welcoming Spring

## II. "Huguang Filling Sichuan"<sup>1</sup> and the Formation of Chuanju

As the most influential local Xiqu genre in southwest China, Chuanju is known as the epitome of Chinese Xiqu. This is mainly due to the relatively complete and systematic preservation of the five major types of Chinese Xiqu singing, i.e., the five major Xiqu music singing modes: Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Huqin Qiang (Pi Huang), Tanxi (Bangzi Qiang), and Deng Diao (local minor tune), as well as many traditional repertoire selections.

At the end of Ming Dynasty and the beginning of Qing Dynasty (around 1600-1644 A.D.), frequent wars scoured the lands, bringing devastation to the formerly prosperous and safe Sichuan. Decades of war led to hardship among the people in Sichuan and the desolation of their fields, while famine and plague led to a sharp decline in the population. After the unification of the Qing government, in order to resume production, the migration policy of "Huguang Filling Sichuan" was implemented for more than 60 year—from emperor Shunzhi to emperor Kangxi (around 1638-1722A.D.). This migration completely changed the population structure of Sichuan. Millions of people from more than 10 provinces, such as Hubei, Shaanxi, and Fujian, poured into Sichuan from all directions, occupied the wasteland, multiplied and lived, and reinvigorated the main body of Sichuan's population.

Immigrants from all provinces entered Sichuan, bringing with them not only their agricultural techniques, cash crops, and means of production, but also their native cultures, folk customs, dialects, and local Xiqu. While the great migration to Sichuan was in full swing, the Central Plains of China and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River entered the prosperous High Qing era (around 1681-1796A.D. ) during which the country found peace and arts flourished. The art of Chinese Xiqu entered a "flowering" period. Not only did the Kunqu and Gaoqiang that appeared in the Ming Dynasty spread throughout the country, but the emerging local Xiqu genres, represented by Bangzi, Pihuang, and small plays with minor tunes also flourished.

At the beginning of the migration to Sichuan, most of the immigrants lived in clans and the population grew rapidly. They strictly adhered to the family motto "It is better to abandon the field of ancestors than to abandon their

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1 It refers to a large-scale migration that occurred during the Qing Dynasty in which many people of other provinces migrate to Sichuan, and it is said that residents of a dozen provinces, including Hubei, Jiangxi, Fujian and Guangxi, were among the migrants. [Translator's note]



words", and formed groups of different dialects. After decades of integration and development of Ba-shu local culture and immigrant foreign culture by the Jiaqing and Daoguang dynasties (around 1796-1850A.D.), the foreign Kunqu, Gaoqiang, Pihuang Qiang, and Bangzi Qiang had all been performed in Sichuan native dialect. Given the number of the immigrants from Hubei, Guangxi, Jiangxi, and Shaanxi, art forms like Gaoqiang, Bangzi, and Pihuang were more easily accepted by the immigrants, with Gaoqiang from Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei being especially favoured and eventually finding the most popularity. However, due to the great differences between the Wu dialect and Sichuan dialect, as well as its highly literary form, everyday citizens in Sichuan found Kunqu more difficult to understand. Kunqu repertoire, therefore, were gradually sung in Gaoqiang. As a result, the pattern of Chuanju, with Gaoqiang as the main body, Kunqiang, Huqin, Tanxi and Deng Diao as branches, gradually formed and solidified.

A landmark for the formation of Chuanju was the second year of Yongzheng in the Qing Dynasty (1724), when a troupe of more than 20 people arrived in Chengdu from southern Sichuan and began enrolling students, establishing a Qinghua Class. This class continued for over a hundred years in southern and western Sichuan, and its successive generations of later disciples continue to this day. Once formed, Chuanju quickly spread to Guizhou and Yunnan. Sichuan is adjacent to these two provinces in geographic location, language, and folk customs, similarities that facilitated the spread of Chuanju and allowed it to take root and develop in local areas.

### III. Sichuan Folklore and Chuanju along the Rivers

Chuanju entered a prosperous period in the middle and late Qing Dynasty, with a wide range of repertoire, fusion with Sichuan local tunes, and lyrical adaptation to the Sichuan dialect. These aforementioned changes highlighted the character of the Sichuan people and formed distinctive Ba-shu regional cultural characteristics.

During the Qing Dynasty, the modern theatre had not yet manifested, so performance and dissemination of Chuanju as a comprehensive art could not be separated from the Xi Lou (theatre) and Xi Tai (stage).

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Xi Lou and Xi Tai existed as integral parts of temples, guild halls, and ancestral halls. If a temple existed, there must

follow a Xi Lou, with Xi Tai directly opposite the position where the divine lie. The performance was first to honor the gods and ancestors, and then for entertainment. From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, there were many ancestral halls, temples, and guild halls in urban and rural areas of Sichuan, forming spectacular architectural wonders. As would follow, many Xi Tai and theatrical groups also existed in various locations, and performing and acting increased in popularity.

Regarding the ancestral hall. Rural clan ancestral halls made-up a major feature of the ancient Sichuan countryside. After decades and hundreds of years of reproduction, the early immigrants from all over the country developed huge families. They established clan ancestral halls as important places for common worship of ancestors and discussion of family affairs. In the ancestral hall, there existed a Xi Lou, where the clan would raise money to hire a theatre troupe to perform at the clan gatherings and deliberations, annual festivals, birthday entertainment, weddings, and funerals.



■ Ancient Xi Tai of Overpass Tower in Luocheng Town, Jianwei County, Sichuan.  
Photographed by Du Jianhua

Regarding the temple. In ancient Sichuan, citizens commonly prayed for good fortune and payed respect to the gods during monthly temple fairs. These prayers occurred not only at temples such as the Chenghuang Temple, Chuanzhu Temple, Guanyin Temple, etc., but also trade union offices. While at larger towns and docks, there are generally at least three or four temples. They regularly held temple fairs and invited the troupes to perform, an event labeled as temple fair plays. These fairs lasted from three to five days to more than a month. Temple fairs also chose different plays according to different themes. For example, a Guanyin Temple Fair might focus on *Fragrant Hill Scroll*, the Buddha Temple Fair will present *The Story of Yellow Robe*, and the Spring Festival Temple Fair will generally perform lantern plays or festive plays. Wuhou Temple in Chengdu is a shrine of the ruins of Shu-Han Dynasty, where the ancestral hall of Zhuge Liang and the ancient tomb of Liu Bei are located. Every Spring Festival, a large temple fair would be held to pay tribute to Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei, the monarchs and ministers of the Shu-Han Dynasty. Concurrently, there were performances that eulogized the ties between brothers Liu, Guan, and Zhang, such as *The Peach Garden Oath* and *Meeting at an Old Town*.

Regarding the guild hall. With the development of commerce and trade, merchants in various provinces established their own guild halls and public offices, such as the Shaanxi Guild Hall, Jiangxi Guild Hall, Huguang Guild Hall, Jiangnan Guild Hall, Yunnan Guild hall, Guangdong Guild Hall, etc., which can be found in various water and land terminals within large and medium-sized cities. In the late Qing Dynasty, there existed 13 provincial guild halls in Chengdu. Local merchants from all over the country often spared no expense with regards to the construction of the guild halls, generally resulting in extremely luxurious buildings that defined the local landscape. Xi Lou were built in all the guild halls, with as few as one and as many as three or four Xi Tai. Mr. Li Jieren, in his work *Stagnant Water with Ripples* vividly described the grand performances in Chengdu's guild halls: "There are three or four stages in every guild hall, which are resplendent and magnificent. The Jiangnan Hall in Chengdu is the richest, with five or six hundred plays a year and at least two or three Xi Tai in use in one day." The previous quote demonstrates the prosperity of Chuanju performances at that time. Over time, the guild hall gradually evolved into the temporary lodging of troupes traveling from south to north.

Sichuan comprises a vast territory, and the artistic characteristics of different Chuanju schools are also inextricably linked with the natural geographical characteristics of Sichuan. From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (the first half of the 20th century), the styles vary according to the natural



■ Xi Lou at Yunnan Guild Hall in Yibin City, Sichuan



■ Xi Lou at Zigong Shannxi Merchant Guild Hall

division of the Tuojiang River, Minjiang River, Jialing River, and Yangtze River basins in Sichuan. The differences are expressed in the "Four kinds of Chuanju along the Rivers", with different artistic characteristics formed and characterized by their special singing, representative repertoire, or unique performances. For example, the "Xia Chuandong" (Lower reach of Yangtze River and East of Sichuan) Chuanju, represented by Chongqing, is unconventional and mixed with various singing styles.

#### **IV. Reforming and Innovating with the Development of the Times**

The ancient Chuanju form has always evolved with the times. In the 31st year of Guangxu's reign in the Qing Dynasty (1905), the "Xiqu Improvement Association", the first official Xiqu management organization in Sichuan history, established itself in Chengdu. The Association pronounced "Improving Xiqu and Assisting Education", as its slogan and implemented measures such as inviting celebrities to write improved scripts, organizing demonstration performances, building new-style Xiqu gardens, and evaluating artists to promote the development of Chuanju in a healthy, civilized, and progressive direction. There appeared many repertoire selections on the stage that promoted the autonomy of marriage, advocated scientific knowledge, dispelled ignorance and superstition, and praised modern life and new ideas. The foundation of Chuanju' s emphasis on literary mastery was thus established, and a positive tradition of standardized and rigorous Chuanju performances formed.

The "Revolution of 1911" broke out in 1911, and not only overthrew the government of the Qing Dynasty, but also brought about the "revolution" with regards the Xi Tai. The revolution brought about a large number of plays reflecting current events, many centering about the "Road Protection Movement" and the "Revolution of 1911" in Sichuan at that time. With the appearance of these works on the stage, the art of Chuanju underwent epoch-making changes from content to form. Previously, the stage of Chuanju was filled with traditional plays wherein the actors wore ancient costumes and related stories of ancient people. Suddenly, a large number of revolutionary men and women, as well as scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants in suits, cheongsams, military uniforms, and work uniforms, took over as the main characters on the stage, dramatically altering the aesthetic of the stage, and injected new concepts such as democracy and freedom of the times into Chuanju. According to incomplete statistics, there are more than 200 repertoire selections reflecting current affairs and contemporary costumes of that time, a

large number of which were compiled and performed by Sichuan people and were characterized with the most Ba-shu temperament and the characteristics of Sichuan people.

After the July 7 Incident of 1937, the national Anti-Japanese War broke out. The National Government moved its capital to Chongqing, turning Sichuan into the rear area of the country. Guided by the slogan of "Revitalizing Chuanju", Chuanju artists devoted themselves with great enthusiasm to the movement of anti-Japanese and national salvation and "reviving Chuanju". They produced a large number of new plays themed with anti-Japanese and national salvation, such as *Hot-blooded Youth*, *Going to War without Telling my Father*, and *The Eight Hundred Warriors*, which became popular among the audience during this period.

## **V. Bringing forth the New through the Old, and Reforming and Developing**

It was after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that the 300-year-old Chuanju was comprehensively and systematically recorded, arranged, adapted, and studied in terms of script, music, performance, and stage art. Under the guidance of the literary and artistic policy of "Let a Hundred Flowers Blossom, Weed through the Old to Bring forth the New", Chuanju underwent a comprehensive reform from script to stage, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

The first is the reform of Gaoqiang music. The traditional singing of Gaoqiang is accompanied by percussion music and pure singing. The drummer is the chief conductor of the band, with four other members of the ensemble playing the tanggu (a kind of drum in China), gongs, cymbals, chops and suona, etc. The drummer also holds the position of "Bangqiang" (vocal accompaniment). Bangqiang remains a major feature of Gaoqiang, its most basic function being the setting of tone for the actors' singing. However, it also serves various functions such as explaining the plot, describing the environment, expressing the voice of the role, and commenting on behalf of the audience. In the past, Bangqiang were usually sung by a male, which was eventually deemed unpleasant to listen to. In the 1950s, the role changed into female Bangqiang, changing the singing to a more soft, gentle, and melodious role. It was a unique change for the Chuanju band to set up a special role of Bangqiang. Currently, string accompaniments have been added to the Gaoqiang music in

new repertoire, while traditional plays still maintain the pure singing.

The second change is the systematic arrangement and adaptation of traditional repertoire. In the 1950s, the cultural authorities of the Sichuan province established repertoire appraisal offices in Chengdu and Chongqing, creating adaptations of more than 300 traditional repertoire selections to "turn decay into magic". The adaptations manifest changes in the following ways: Clearing up outdated customs, obscenities, superstitions, and other inappropriate story content, character images, ideological themes. There is a balance between the appreciation interests in the old, and injecting into the cultural thinking of the new era. For instance, the phenomenon of polygamy, very common in traditional plays, has been changed to monogamy, so that the story structure, intention, and expression methods also change. For example, the classic comedies of Chuanju, such as *Master Joe's Adventure*, *Husband Hunters*, *One Shoe*, *Autumn River*, *Tracking Traces Based on Footprints in the Snow*, etc., are all representative works that bring forth new ideas on traditional plays during this period.

The third is the change in the way of acting. Under the influence of drama, the theatre performance generally implemented the split-scene system, changing the traditional system of cutting the play into two parts of the former and the latter.

The fourth change is that of the introduction of the director system, a change which improved the overall quality of Chuanju stage art.

The aforementioned reform allowed Chuanju to adapt to the aesthetic needs of a wider audience, and its creative method of combining realism and romanticism, its features of expressing tragedy in a joyful way of acting and mixing the sadness with happiness were highlighted. Concurrently, the development of land transportation also gifted Chuanju a wider space for development, and it spread from a corner of the southwest to the whole country.

In 1982, the Sichuan provincial government suggested the slogan of revitalizing Chuanju and formulated the policy of "rescue, inheritance, reform, and development". Along with social trends of China's reform and globalization, Chuanju took the initiative to integrate into the trend of social change in the face of the globalization and the arrival of various foreign theatrical genres. Under the guidance of the slogan of revitalizing Chuanju, more than 400 new large-screen plays have been created during the past 40 years, outstanding repertoire selections leading the way in the Xiqu world. Chuanju writers,

represented by Wei Minglun and Xu Fen, have created another peak of Chuanju art at the turn of the century, with a series of innovative works with advanced concepts, innovative reforms, novel techniques, and far-reaching meaning. Wei Minglun created a sensation in the Chinese theatre world with a series of works including: *A Scholar from Bashan*, *Pan Jinlian*, *Chinese Princess Durandot*, and *Face Changing*, etc. In particular, *Pan Jinlian*, known as the absurd Chuanju, swept through the Chinese theatre world armed with a whimsical construction of traveling through history and blending ancient and modern Chinese and foreign characters in one play (a decision which in turn triggered a controversy). While Xu Fen, a female writer, exerted great influence on the Chinese theatre world with her plays *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Sister Tian and Daoist Zhuang Zhou*, and *Stagnant Water with Ripples*, etc.

In conclusion, at the turn of the century, Chuanju acted as the leader reformation in theatre and pioneered vast numbers of excellent repertoire for the Chinese Xiqu world.



# The Unique Performing Skills of Chuanju

WANG Juan

It is the basic feature of Chinese Xiqu to express the plot by artistic means such as singing, reciting, acting and martial arts, in other words, to perform the story by singing and dancing. The programmatic, virtual and imaginative nature of "singing and dancing" is the basic principle for depicting things and shaping characters in Xiqu performance. While the mature and systematic "Four Skills and Five Means", performing patterns, and techniques are the basis for the artistic creation of Xiqu actors.

As one of the major local genres of Chinese Xiqu, Chuanju is also in a style of shaping characters through patterned skills. The skills of Chuanju can be roughly divided into two categories: the 'basic' skills and means, and the 'special' ones. The "Four Skills and Five Means", which include singing, reciting, acting, and martial arts, and gestures, eye expressions, postures, steps and rules are the basic skills and means.

Lingzi Skill (skill of waving the feather), Shuixiu Skill (skill of waving the water sleeves), Zhezi Skill (skill of dealing with the clothes in different ways), Shanzi Skill (skill of making all kinds of movements with the help of the fan), Aizi Skill (skill of playing the dwarf), Maochi Skill (skill of waving the hat-wing), Rankou Skill (skill of waving the beard), Shuifa Skill (skill of waving the water-immersed hair), and Caiqiao Skill (skill of stepping on the stilts) are all special skills.

The basic skills and means mainly refer to the general skills applicable to all kinds of actors and characters, among which "singing, reciting, acting and martial arts" are more holistic in performance, while "gestures, eye expressions, postures, steps" is an extension of the skill of "acting".

The special skills and means on the other hand mainly refer to some particular techniques that some types-of-roles or characters need to master in order to portray the unique personalities of the roles in the play or express their complex mood in a certain situation. Special skills and means are also patterned, but

focus more on the technical aspects of the performance.

Chuanju performance is not only concerned with the standardization of skills and means, but also pursues originality. It has systematically inherited the artistic tradition of the "five major singing" styles since the Ming and Qing dynasties, and is exemplary among many Xiqu genres. At the same time, it has absorbed the profound cultural essence of the Bashu region, and is characterized with richer and more vivid connotations, more colorful forms, and stronger artistic expression. For example, the "One-hundred Character Finger Language" of gesture means and the the Wensheng skill of dealing with the clothes in different ways have been widely praised by the theatre community.

Gesture means refer to the actor's skills in expressing emotions and depicting objects through standardized hand gestures, such as the orchid-shaped finger and Buddha's hand shape used by Dan roles, and the lotus-leaf palm and sword-hand used by Wu Dan roles. The finger techniques used in Chuanju performances are so rich that previous generations of artists have summarized them into one hundred characters, called "One-hundred Character Finger Language", with one character representing a specific finger technique.

Different types-of-roles and characters can find their own beautiful and accurate finger techniques according to different situations and intentions in their performances. For example, "sky, earth, sun, moon, night, wind, cloud, thunder, rain, snow; crown, belt, clothes, sleeves, shoes, shaking, swinging, rubbing, pulling, playing; grass, wood, bird, flower, fragrance; you, me, go, come, turn" and so on.

When pointing to the sky, the actor leaves his left hand akimbo, and uses his right finger to point up from the tip of his nose, with eyes looking at his right finger, left foot in front, right foot behind. When pointing to the clouds, the actor puts his hands behind the back, takes a step back with his right foot (then the left), stands with his hands side by side, moves his body form right to left, and takes a step forward with his left foot, as if flowing clouds were curling around.

Through the virtual gestures of the actors, the situations of interpersonal interaction, social phenomena, changes of the seasons, mountains, sun and moon are all mimicked and introduced to the limited stage, realizing the imaginative expression of "Mutual Promotion between Reality and Virtuality".

Zhezi Skill refers to a variety of skills and techniques performed by using the traditional Chuanju costumes "Zhezi (pleat)" worn by the characters. It is most commonly used in the type-of-role Wen Xiaosheng (young male actors), with elegant, subtle, light and agile movements to show the character's "scholar



■ A Wen Xiaosheng dressed in Zhezi (pleat) and Piaodai (Streamers)



■ Zhezi Skills

style". The fabric used for Xiaosheng's pleats is generally crepe de Chine, which is light and elegant, with high slits for easy performance. Their water sleeves are not the extension of the sleeve of the pleat, but the long sleeves of the "fragrant sweatshirt" worn inside the pleat, which is inspired by the clothing characteristics of Sichuan Paoge Association.

Through the use of the pleats and water sleeves, the actors can perform light and sprightly dance movements such as kicking, biting, flying and spinning the pleats. The techniques of the Zhezi Skill mainly include kicking forward and backward, biting, topping, hooking, blending, flicking, tidying, and spreading the lappets of the clothes. Through a series of patterned performances, it advances the plot, reveals the characters' state of mind, and makes the performance attractive in both form and spirit.

Xiao Ting (Wen Huazhang), a Chuanju performing artist, once said that Release Pei shows the "Zhezi Skill" of Wen Xiaosheng in a very comprehensive way. When Huiniang told Pei Yu that she was a ghost who had suffered unjust treatment when alive, Pei Yu was so shocked that he turned around and jumped onto the back of the chair with the skill of "kicking the pleat backward",

and looked at Huiniang in the pose of standing on one foot. Then he jumped down from the chair with the skill of "spinning and flying the pleats" by "kicking the pleats on both sides backward". He then rushed to Huiniang while carrying his lappet, and looked at her carefully after using the skill of "flying the pleats".

Following this, the candle was placed on the bottom of his backward-curved foot, and he used the skill of "turning his leg to kick the lamp and roll the pleats" to kick up the candlestick, which landed impartially in Huiniang's hands. These perfect performances of the "Zhezi Skill" were considered to be so extraordinary that they have made this play a classic in Chuanju.

The unique creations in Chuanju performances are not limited to these. What is even more amazing are the special skills that are full of artistic wisdom, carefully created by the artists at key points in the development of the play, in order to enhance the expressiveness of the theatre, the impact of the plot, and the explosive force of emotions by combining a variety of skills and means. Some of them are very original and imaginative in their methods of expression, while some are quite unique and exquisite in performing techniques.

These techniques of expression, because of their unique conception, and the difficulty of imitation, have an air of mystery and are regarded by the theatre world as the incomparable classic of Chuanju's original performance techniques. Here are a few examples:

### **I. God's Light Appearing in a Sudden: Ti Huiyan**

Ti Huiyan is an original skill of Chuanju. The so-called Huiyan is actually a Buddhist term, which refers to a pair of eyes that can penetrate everything in the mortal world. In Chuanju, the term Huiyan refers to the fact that some gods, such as Lingguan and Wei Tuo, have a third eye in the middle of their foreheads, which can see through the immortals and the world affairs.

The skill of Ti Huiyan is used in the Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake: Jinshan Temple*. *The Legend of the White Snake* is a classic traditional Chuanju play in full-length, which portrays the legendary love story of the White Snake and Xu Xian. Xu Xian was trapped inside Jinshan Temple by Fahai. The White Snake tries and fails to free him, and is left no choice but to fight her lover's captor, Fahai.



■ Chuanju Skill: Ti Huiyan (Photographed by Yu Xiaowu)

When it was difficult to tell who would win, Fahai called Wei Tuo out, who came onto the stage at a slow pace at first, and then turned to a fast pace. After saying "Wait for me to open my Huiyan", he suddenly lifted his foot to kick his forehead, and an eye immediately appeared there. This is what we often called "Ti Huiyan". It seemed that the opening of the Huiyan had allowed the divine light to possess Wei Tuo, and he suddenly showed strong and boundless divine power. So it can be seen that this unique skill contributed a lot to shaping the image of Wei Tuo as an immortal. In fact, it is said that this unique skill of "Ti Huiyan" was first created by Kang Zilin, the "Sage of Chuanju", when performing *Jinshan Temple* in the 1930s.

## II. Turning Nothing into Something: Qian Yanxian

The Chuanju *Shooting Eagles* is a part of the full-length play *The Palace of King Fan*, telling the love story between a noble young lady and an eagle-hunting

young man who fall in love with each other at the first sight. The young lady Yelv Hanyan from the marquis went to the temple fair with her sister-in-law, and happened to run into the eagle-hunter Hua Rong who was chasing after an eagle. They looked into each other's eyes and fell in love immediately.

The sister-in-law then used her thumb and forefinger to pull an imaginary love thread out of Hanyan's eyes first, and then one out of Hua Rong's eyes. Then she tied the two love threads into a knot and pulled them back and forth. The two also swayed back and forth simultaneously with the tugging of the two virtual "threads", and they didn't snap out of their infatuation until the sister-in-law popped the knot with her index finger. This three-minute performance is called "Qian Yanxian" (Connecting Eyes by an Imaginary Thread) which graphically portrayed the infatuation of a young man and woman who fell in love at first sight. Although the thread is virtual, the audience could see it through their own imagination.

### **III. One Person Playing Two Roles (with the help of a puppet): Lao Beishao**

The performance of Mulian Xi has accumulated numerous artistic creations that once existed in the history of Xiqu performance but have now disappeared and are called the "living fossils" of Chinese Xiqu. The performance form of the combination of puppet and human, which has long existed in the Chuanju *Relieving the Poor by the Huiyuan Bridge* is one of these rare "living fossils".

When Mr. Fu, a landlord in ancient China, was relieving the poor by the Huiyuan Bridge with his wife, a white-haired couple with a dumb husband and a paralyzed wife came to ask for help. The dumb husband carried his paralyzed wife up and down the slope, across the ditch and across the Huiyuan Bridge, trembling towards the bridge. The wife spoke with his husband from time to time, and the husband nodded in time as a response. The two supported each other, and their feelings were very harmonious.

This scene was all completed in the process of marching, with both complex body postures and delicate psychological portrayals, and was commonly called "Lao Beishao" (the older carrying the younger).

What is peculiar is that the performance of these two roles were done by only one person. The actor performed the bent, tired body and legs of the dumb

■ Chuanju skill "Lao Beishao" in *Relieving the Poor by the Huiyuan Bridge*  
 Image source: Zhenxing Chuanju Troupe of Pixian County



man with his real body, while his head was dressed as the paralyzed wife. While the body of the paralyzed wife and the head of the dumb man were made of puppet props. The actor hid his left hand inside his clothes and manipulated the fake head to make it nod and swing to complete the response with the paralyzed wife. Due to the unique creativity of the combination of puppet and human in this part, which can reflect the ability of the actors and deserves much appreciation, it is often performed as a one-act play, and has been retained on the stage.

#### IV. For Psychological Hints: Shua Zhuhuo

Candles are originally used for illumination, but in Chuanju, the brightness or darkness of the candlelight is often used to indicate the psychological changes of the characters. The Chuanju highlight *Shi Huaiyu-Awaken from Dream* is one of the best examples that has used this unique skill of "Shua Zhuhuo" (Playing with the Candlelight).



■ Chuanju *The Ungrateful Lover*  
Cui Guangli as Li Hui niang, He Hongqing as Pei Yu (Photographed by Yu Xiaowu)

*Shi Huaiyu·Awaken from Dream* is one act of the full-length play *Fengcui Mountain*. It tells the story of Shi Huaiyu, a martial-arts scholar who became the number one in the imperial examination and killed his wife in order to curry favor with those in power. The ghost of his wife comes to his home to claim his life. When Shi hears the knock on the door, he opens it with a candle in hand, and when the door opens, the ghost of his wife Lianniang wafts into the room, and the candlelight in his hand immediately extinguishes. He puts his hand aside the candlelight to block the wind, and the candle flares up again. This is repeated three times. The brightness and darkness of the candle not only highlight the eerie atmosphere before his wife captured him alive, but also implies the psychological changes within: calm outside but fearful inside. The application of this unique skill here is quite appropriate, and it has been well used in such plays as *The Ungrateful Lover* and *Releasing Pei*.

## V. Externalization of Inner Emotions: Bian Koutiao

"Koutiao", also known as "Rankou", is a prop that represents the beard of a



middle-aged or elderly man in Xiqu performances. It is made of horsetail or human hair. It has different types such as "San" (Three, three tangles of beard), "Man" (Full, a whole piece of beard connected together) and "Zha" (Bundle, two tangles of thin beard that can be picked out separately), representing figures of different ages and personalities respectively.

In some plays, when the characters suddenly have intense emotional changes or hallucinations, their beards will change on the spot with the development of the plot, which is called "Bian Koutiao" in jargon. The performance concerning the beard has many performing patterns including "holding in both hands", "spreading out", "flicking", "flinging", "blowing" and so on.

When Zhang Decheng, from the older generation of Chuanju artists, played the emperor Chongzhen in the scene *The Picture by Tieguan-Writing the Imperial Edict*, he made full use of this skill. *The Picture by Tieguan* is a full-length legendary play of Chuanju, telling the story of the collapse and downfall of the Ming Dynasty under the onslaught of a peasant uprising. When it comes to the scene *Writing the Imperial Edict*, Emperor Chongzhen knew that he had no way out and was determined to kill himself. He steps out slowly to the beat of the gong and earthen bowl, wearing a soft King hat, a black beard, a plain yellow Taoist robe, and a pair of court boots. When pacing to the "Jiulongkou", he suddenly slips and falls to the edge of the stage. His hat, boots and yellow robe then fly to the back of the curtain.

When he regains his footing, he has taken on a completely different outlook: his white hair is disheveled, his black beard had turned into a white beard, his face is stained with white ash, his feet are bare, his eyes are dull, presenting a decadent outlook of impending death. The huge contrast between the characters' images in the blink of an eye makes the despair, grief and anger of the character completely externalized, giving the audience a strong visual impact and inner shock.

In 1959, the previously mentioned Chuanju highlight 'Shooting Eagles,' which was performed in four Eastern European countries, also used the skill of "Changing the Koutiao (Beard)". It occurs after the eagle-hunter and young lady first meet. When parting with each other, Hanyan's sister-in-law, who was traveling with her, hires a carriage to take Hanyan back to her house, with the role of the coachman was played by the same actor who played Hua Rong. Hanyan thought that the coachman was Hua Rong and leaned forward, hoping to see clearly who on earth he was. The coachman originally wore a short beard. But when Yelv Hanyan came to identify him, the beard of him disappeared instantly, which externalized what Hanyan thought into an intuitive

image. This performance of changing the beard to complete the role conversion aroused the audience endless reverie, and was quite lively and interesting.

## VI. Like Magic: Cang Dao

"Cang Dao" (Hiding the Sword) is one of the famous unique performing skills of Chuanju, which is similar to magic. The actor will hide a sword about a few feet long in his sleeve, which cannot be seen at all. But at the moment when the role requires violent action, the actor would suddenly pull it out. When it is noticed, the sword would disappear instantly back up the sleeve.

According to the needs of the plot, the actors alternately perform the "Cang Dao" and "Chou Dao" (Pulling the Sword out), which are unpredictable, subtle and fantastic. It not only shows the psychological changes and behavioral characteristics of the roles in the play, but also satisfies the psychological needs of the audience for novelty and adventure.

The skill of "Cang Dao" has been used by Peng Haiqing, a famous Xiaosheng actor, when he played Xiao Fang in a scene of the Chuanju *Fighting in Hongtai Mountain-Xiao Fang's Killing on the Boat*. *Fighting in Hongtai Mountain* is a famous traditional full-length play, which tells the story of the habitual thief Xiao Fang who murders a lady's husband and to kidnap her, before going on a spree killing his own friends and becoming a local governor. Eventually, he is found out and sentenced to death.

*Xiao Fang's Killing on the Boat* is one act of the whole play. When going to the tomb to worship his ancestors and sweep the graves during Qingming Festival, Xiao Fang meets Jin Dayong and his wife. Seeing the beauty of Jin's wife, he has the idea of murdering Jin and forcibly taking possession of his wife. So he lies that he could send them back to their hometown. After the two were deceived into the boat, he quickly pulled his sword out and slashed at Jin. But it suddenly occurred to him that there were many people coming and going at the ferry, so he hides the sword without being noticed. The whole process of Xiao Fang's "Chou Dao" and "Cang Dao" had been seen accidentally by Gengniang. But Xiao denied it and took off his coat to let her have a close see, and Gengniang found no trace of the weapon. Such a magic-like performance of hiding the sword properly shows Xiao Fang's cunning and viciousness, and his nature as a habitual thief.

These unique skills are like a string of pearls in the crown of Chuanju, highly respected and loved by Chuanju fans at home and abroad. Their vitality lies not in their unattainable and difficult techniques, but in their extraordinary creativity in portraying characters and advancing the plot, as well as the rich imagination and powerful expressiveness they display in dramatizing the techniques.

It can be argued that they bring into full play the aesthetic characteristics of Chuanju including the virtualized method of expression, the patterned artistic means, the rhythmic stage rhyme, and the symbolized image systems, and are of great aesthetic and artistic value. Therefore, they are the most shining points of Chuanju that glow among various genres of theatre in Chinese Xiqu.

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# The Magic Face-Changing in Chuanju

WANG Yifei

"Face-Changing" is a means of expressing the drastic changes of characters' emotions in Chuanju. The art form is partially famous for the actor's rapid and continuous changes of facial make-up in front of the audience on the stage, a skill unique to Chuanju. The facial make-up in Chinese Xiqu refers to the color graphics sketched on the characters' face according to different fixed patterns, and provides a unique way to shape the character's image.

## I. Face-Changing in Chuanju: Passed on only Inside the Chuanju Circle

Currently, all the face-changing modern audiences observe stems from the Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake-Jinshan Temple*. Wang Daoling seduces Xu Xian to seek refuge in the Jinshan Temple, and Lady White travels to the Temple to Fahai to claim back her husband. Thus, the divine troops descending from heaven led by Fahai and the shrimp and crab generals (played by humans) led by Lady launch a fierce battle. During the fight, the magic weapon of Fahai, that is, the "Purple Gold Cymbal Bowl" (played by a man) is used to capture Lady White. As the two fiercely fight, the Bowl also changes his facial expressions in accordance to his emotions: sometimes fierce and sometimes angry. He changes his facial make-up seven times, vividly demonstrating his emotional states, including the insolence when looking for Lady White, the excitement when finding her, the joy when imagining his victory at catching her, and the anger after she escapes. These visually impactful changes also demonstrate the supernatural abilities of immortals and monsters.

This traditional performing skill has been passed down in among Chuanju circles for years, and in the past, almost every troupe had one or two actors who were capable of face-changing. Since the performance of *The Legend of*



■ Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake Jinshan Temple*

*the White Snake* requires this unique skill, face-changing was mostly mastered by the troupe's Wusheng and Wuchou actors. By contrast, leading roles of the theatre generally did not practice this technique. In the late 1980s, with the popularization of television and the rapid development of media technology, face-changing in Chuanju swept the country due to its elusive nature and strangeness, quickly becoming a hot topic in public opinion.

Although the art of face-changing is not strictly confidential, Chuanju artists have long consciously followed an unwritten code of conduct: passing the form on only within the Chuanju circle. If an individual were to break the code, he or she would be blamed and ostracized by their peers. Currently, face-changing in Chuanju is well-known all around. At Chinese traditional theatrical buildings, tourist attractions, campus communities, TV variety shows, and new media short videos, we often observe face-changing performances interdependent from the theatre. There even exist advertisements on the Internet for training face-changing. Generally, however, judging by the skill level of the online content, viewers recognize the videos do not originate from a Chuanju artist.

## II. The Origin of Face-Changing in Chuanju

When, who, and what troupe invented the unique skill of face-changing in Chuanju? There is no record in history books or local chronicles, so there exists no way to check. However, where history and theory ends is where the writers and artists begin. At the close of the 20th century, Wei Minglun, a playwright known as the "Ba-shu Genius", compiled a Chuanju called *Face-Changing*, performed by the Sichuan Opera Troupe and won the honor of National Quality Stage Production. The story is as follows: there lived an itinerant entertainer named Shui Shangpiao ("floating on the water" in Chinese), who excelled at face-changing. All year round, he lived alone in a small boat, making a living by performing arts, and, perhaps surprisingly, found fame at many corners of the country. In order to pass on this unique skill to future generations, he wanted to adopt a son. Unexpectedly, deceived by a trafficker, he brought back a little girl named Gouwa, the start of a series of soul-stirring tragic stories. Gouwa wanted to learn the skill, but Shui Shangpiao stuck to the ancestral rule of passing on only to male actors, not females. Gouwa accidentally burned the face-changing mask, and left the boat with remorse, but again fell into the



■ Chuanju *Face-Changing*, written by Wei Minglun, illustrated by Li Cuizhi

hands of traffickers. In order to redeem her mistake, Gouwa even escaped with a kidnapped little boy she met and sent him to her grandfather's boat, resulting in Shui Shangpiao's being caught in prison as a human trafficker. To save her grandfather from prison, little Gouwa sacrifices her own life.

Although the story of *Face-Changing* is fictional, the character of Shui Shangpiao is based on real life. There existed many vaudeville troupes touring around Sichuan, and the artists in these troupes were skilled in acrobatic skills such as striking forks, throwing knives, and changing faces. The Chuanju troupes would often invite them to perform in some special productions, such as the 48-book *Mulian Xi*. Around 1860-1875, Chuanju was already in its heyday, with temples, stages, and troupes all around. Numerous troupes traveled year-round on land and water piers, moving from state to state and performing their skills. Many artists who had not yet found fame would travel to these troupes to perform, in the hopes that they could make a living, as well as broaden their horizons and learn the ways of performing along different rivers. Such performance careers were known as "Pao Tan" in Chuanju jargon, and these artists were commonly referred to as "Pao Tan Jiang". According to old artists, the face-changing technique was first applied to the Chuanju *The Tower Of Repentance* by so-called "Pao Tan Jiang".

The traditional play *The Tower Of Repentance* is also known as *Three Changes*. The story is as follows: A gambler named Qiu Yuanrui has wasted all his fortune, and sentenced his wife Yueniang to prostitute herself to pay off his gambling debts. Yueniang cries to the hero Bei Rong about her husband's evil deeds, and Bei Rong generously pays off Qiu's debts and persuades him to return to the right path. However, Qiu persists on his bad habits and even sells Yueniang into a brothel. Bei Rong rescues Yueniang, and the two become brother and sister without blood relationship. Bei Rong becomes a swashbuckler who robs the rich to help the poor. For the convenience of traveling around all corners of the country, he learns the art of polymorphing and performs said skill to make a living. One day, while performing on the street he first uses the mask to change into a brave and powerful man with green face and red hair, then into an old man with snow-like white beard, and a third time into a scholar wearing a green scarf and a blue gown, amazing the crowd. In fact, these three changes were particularly unique in that they were not "pulling the thread to change facial make-up". They were known as "the former three changes", in which the actor first uses a mask, then puts on a beard, and finally changes the costume. Later, Bei Rong is chased by the official army for robbing the royal silver. He continuously uses the polymorph to evade arrest, first with a blue face, then a red face, then a black face, and then a Ba Er Face (disguised as a teenager). These "latter three changes" were indeed "pulling the thread to change facial make-up", and this creative development was thanks to the

acrobatics in the characterization of Chuanju by the "running beach people", initiating the face-changing in Chuanju. Easily observed, then, is that Chuanju remains a comprehensive art, having been nurtured by folklore and absorbing a wide range of artistic nutrients, constantly enriching its performance set.

According to the late Mr. Yan Shupeì of Chengdu Qunsheng Chuanju Troupe, there exists also a process of change in the materials used to create facial make-up. At first, paper was used, but it was easily broken. Pig bladders were used next. After being washed, scraped, and dried, the bladders were crafted into facial make-up which proved strong and durable. The process, however, proved too tedious. Later, light and thin silk was used, convenient for both making and using, and this material and method of making survives to this day.

### III. *The Legend of the White Snake*: Making Face-Changing in Chuanju Famous Around the World

The most successful and influential combination of the face-changing skill and plot is the Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake*. The story of the white snake is almost known to all people in China, and can be performed in almost every local theater genre. But the Chuanju version contains its own unique characteristics. For example, the Green Snake in Chuanju can change between



■ Face-changing in Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake*



male and female, initially played by a Wusheng and later a maid of the White Snake. In traditional plays, the Green Snake is required to face-change rapidly. In the *Broken Bridge* scene after the *Jinshan Temple*, the defeated Lady White and Xiao Qing, who has turned into a female, move to a broken bridge where they come across Xu Xian, having just escaped from a mountain. Xiao Qing, enraged, points at Xu Xian with her sword. In the traditional play, there were performances of spitting fangs, followed by the face-changing of golden, red, and black facial make-up successively. The method of "wiping to change facial make-up" is used.

Presently, the face-changing of Cymbal Bowl in the Chuanju *The Flooding of Jinshan Temple* represents an innovative idea proposed by the famous dramatist Xi Mingzhen and the performing artist Yang Youhe during the reform of the traditional repertoire in the 1950s. They suggest applying the face-changing in *The Tower Of Repentance to The Legend of the White Snake*. After repeated practice by young actors of the time, such as Hu Mingke and Sun Decai, they finally found the trick of continuous face-changing of the "Purple Gold Cymbal Bowl". Lady White leads her shrimp and crab generals to fight with Fahai and the divine troops descending from heaven, trying to save her husband Xu Xian. Fahai owns a special weapon named Purple Gold Cymbal Bowl. This Bowl was specially designed for suppressing the monsters and was personified in the performance, played by a human being. There occurs a fierce battle, a seeming stalemate. Furious through the battle, his face changes suddenly, continuously morphing between green, red, blue, black, and white faces. Mistakenly thinking he had finally caught the white snake, his facial make-up changes into white with a smile. Upon his realization that the white snake had escaped, his angry is so overwhelming that his facial make-up changes into black. It then turns gold, at once majestic, hideous, grotesque, and full of mystery. It is appropriate to apply such a unique technique in the performance of mythological theatre. Face changings' aesthetic basis mainly derives from its accurate representation of characters' emotional changes and the mystery of its execution. Therefore, the production was highly praised by audience members and experts as soon as it debuted.

Since the 1950s, *The Legend of the White Snake* finds performances from Sichuan to Beijing and Shanghai, and in the 1980s, it toured to four European countries and dozens of countries and regions in Asia, Europe, and the United States, spreading face-changing into fame both domestically and abroad. The older generation of Chuanju artists knew very well the principle of "Art is precious for its subtlety", and never used their skills indiscriminately. Face-changing in Chuanju is only used in a few repertoire pieces, and its frequency is limited. Specifically, the act must be consistent with the identity of the character. Generally speaking, only immortals, monsters, and goblins in mythological

plays retain such functions, as demonstrated by the "Purple Gold Cymbal Bowl" and Green Snake in *The Legend of the White Snake*, and the Banana Elf in *Princess Hibiscus*. The application of face-changing techniques provides characters with a magical effect, adding an air of supernatural presence to the characters. Normal characters stemmed in the real world, however, are not supernatural. Therefore, the use of face-changing techniques in modern theatre requires a reasonable explanation. The Chuanju *Gold*, performed by Chongqing Chuanju Theatre and adapted from Cao Yu' s play *The Wilderness*, remains one of the first Chuanju productions selected into National Quality Stage Production. Face-changing was successfully applied to the character Jiao Daxing in this play. The character Qiu Hu sneaks into Jiao's house, in order to kill Jiao Yanwang (Jiao Daxing's father) for revenge. In a drunken haze, he mistakes Jiao Daxing for Jiao Yanwang, who had killed his father. Here, through face-changing, Jiao Daxing instantly changes into the facial make-up of Jiao Yanwang, vividly portraying Qiu Hu's strong emotion of revenge. The aforementioned example is a successful example of face-changing in modern theatre.

#### IV. The Ingenious Use of Face-Changing

Chuanju is a traditional Xiqu art rooted in folk practices. During its long and difficult history, Chuanju artists attempted development of their unique skills in order to prevail in a fiercely competitive market. As a result, a wealth of techniques and means of expression accumulated within the Chuanju artform. Face-changing follows a similar history. In addition to the well-known "pulling the thread to change facial make-up", there exist also "wiping to change facial make-up", "blowing to change facial make-up", "Using Qigong to change facial make-up", and "Using masks to change facial make-up" in traditional Chuanju performances. Although those methods are not as influential and well-known as "pulling the thread to change facial make-up", their performances in different productions also have their own merits, fully reflecting the ingenuity of artists of all ages.

"Wiping to change facial make-up" makes up the most common method in Chuanju. It is the easiest way to locally change the characters' facial expression. The actors first fix the paint throughout different areas of the face, such as eyebrows. At abrupt plot changes or when the character suffer great psychological shock, the actors turn around, either burying their heads or covering their faces with a cloak. Within these brief moments under the cover of the cloak, they smear the paint around their faces with their hand.

The color of their face changes immediately to show the sudden change of their expressions caused by inner conflicts. This wiping can be partial, such as wiping the areas around only the eyes. However, one might also paint the whole face red or gold according to the needs of the plot.

"Blowing to change facial make-up" is a technically difficult but ingenious method of face-changing, and is used to show the dramatic emotional changes of the characters. Prior to entering the stage, actors apply more oil to certain parts of their face and place black soot on the ground. During certain plot developments, the actors fall to the ground and blow the soot with their mouth. The soot stains their face, often creating ugly and horrible expressions, while also indicating their dark side and inner fear. In the Mulian Xi *Breaking Vegetarian*, Lady Liu kills a dog to resume a diet that includes meat (breaking vegetarian). When picking up the huge bowl and drinking the dog soup, the actor blows ash prepared in advance in the bowl onto her face. When she emerges from behind the bowl, her face has changed, indicating that the divine retribution had come.

"Using masks to change facial make-up" is also a common means of artistic expression. The traditional Chuanju *Capturing Sanlang Alive* relates the story



■ "Blowing to change facial make-up" in Mulian Xi *Breaking Vegetarian*

of the deceased Yan Xijiao, whose ghost is unwilling to move on with a lonely existence and returns to the earth during the middle of the night in search of her former lover Zhang Wenyuan (nicknamed Sanlang). Zhang Wenyuan is initially terrified upon hearing that Yan Xijiao's ghost has returned. Later, however, he observes that Xijiao retained her beauty, and he cannot help but fall into her trap and subsequently fall to hell with her. In this play, the actor who performs as Yan Xijiao directly changes her face by putting on a mask, a practice known as "using masks to change facial make-up". This is the most direct and simple way of face-changing, that is, to cover the face with a mask made of paperboard. Some put the mask over their head with a string, while others put a buckle on the back of the mask that can be held by their teeth.

"Using Qigong to change facial make-up", as the name implies, requires the actor to use Qigong to gradually turn his/her face red. There were such requirements in performances of the traditional Chuanju *The Story of Pipa·Noise*. Cai Bojie travels to the capital for the imperial examination in hopes of graduating into a top scholar. After his success, he marries the prime minister's daughter and lives in the prime minister's residence, foregoing his initial home for three years. A severe drought ravages his hometown. His wife Zhao Wuniang serves his parents porridge, while herself eating the chaff and the potherbs. At first, his parents thought that Wuniang was eating something good secretly. When they discover she hid herself to eat the chaff, they were moved to tears. Cai's mother grabs the chaff and eats it, but chokes on it, panting and blushing. This performance requires the use of Qigong to redden her face, blossoming an unexpected dramatic effect here. In early years of Chuanju performances, Zhang Shufang, a famous Chuanju actor in Chongqing, excelled in this face-changing method and often presented amazing performances. This technique, however, has been lost to time.

## Famous Repertoires and Artists Leading Chuanju Forward

GONG Ping

In the 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Chuanju, as a local Xiqu genre, has experienced two peaks in its development and is highly praised in the Chinese theatre circle for its excellence.

The first peak was in the mid-1950s, when a large number of innovative plays, represented by the classic comedies such as *Husband Hunters*, *Master Joe's Adventure*, *The Misfits Tan Ji'er*, *The Legend of the White Snake* and *The Legend of Fu Nu* became famous in the Chinese theatre world. These



■ Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake Borrowing an Umbrella on a Boat*  
From left to right: Liu Yi as Xu Xian, Yang Kunhao as the ferryman, Liu Su as Xiao Qing, Ni Hong as Bai Suzhen, photographed by Yu Xiaowu.



■ Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake Jinshan Temple*  
From left to right: Zhou Ting as Bai Suzhen, Xie Zhanghong as Xiao Qing, photographed by Yu Xiaowu.



■ Chuanju *A Scholar from Bashan*, written by Wei Minglun, featuring Chen Zhilin and He Ling as the scholar and his wife.

plays toured to more than ten provinces and cities in China, including Beijing and Shanghai, and also visited four countries on behalf of China in Eastern Europe, including East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, opening up the foreign exchanges of Chuanju.

The second peak was in the 1980s and 1990s after the reform and opening up, when the playwrights represented by Wei Minglun, Xu Fen, and Long Xueyi presented plays such as *Yi Danda*, *A Scholar from Bashan*, *Stagnant Water with Ripples*, *Face Changing*, *Jin Zi* and *Uncle Shan Kang*, which have won various awards from the Ministry of Culture, China.

It can be said that these are the two periods when Chuanju has made its most outstanding achievements since the founding of PRC, and also the brilliant era when Chuanju stage talents emerged. The following is a brief analysis and introduction of the representative writers, works, and important performing artists of Chuanju in the late 20th century, as well as their influence in the 21st century.



■ Chuanju *Yi Danda*, written by Wei Minglun, featuring Chen Zhilin and Liu Yi as Yi Danda and Hua Xiangrong.

■ Chen Zhilin, a two-time Plum Blossom Award winner, portrays Yi Danda in Chuanju *Yi Danda*

## I. A Rich Treasure Trove of Chuanju Repertoires

While focusing on the representative writers, works, and performing artists of Chuanju in the late 20th century, it is necessary to review the overview, formation path, and artistic characteristics of Chuanju repertoires. According to *The Dictionary of Chuanju Repertoires* published in 2000, about 6,000 plays were included, among which more than 2,000 were traditional repertoires formed before 1949, while the rest were adapted, transplanted from other theatre genres, or newly created after 1950. According to the limited statistics we have, there were about 1000 newly-created and adapted plays after 1980.

The traditional repertoires of Chuanju come from a wide range of sources. First, they were brought to Sichuan in the middle of the Qing Dynasty along with the introduction of the four major singing styles of Kunqiang, Gaoqiang, Pihuang Qiang and Bangz Qiang, and the main repertoires of the four major singing styles of China have been inherited in Chuanju.

Second, they came from the creation of Sichuan literati. Numerous scholars and prominent personages participated in the creation of the plays, which together contributed to the extremely high literary achievement of Chuanju repertoires. From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, there were famous Chuanju writers such as Zhao Xi, Huang Ji'an, Ran Qiaozhi, Liu Shiliang, Liu Huaixu, He Guishou, Xu Wenyao and Wu Boqi. Their works are characterized by strong literature, large quantity and wide circulation, and are one of the most characteristic, literary and long-lasting parts of the Chuanju

repertoires.

Third, they came from the accumulation of performances by Chuanju artists and are mostly highlights. Generally, they are distinguished by their performances, vivid forms, and considerable numbers.

Fourth, they came from a large number of plays concerning current affairs and dressed in fashions of that time which have been created and performed since the Republic of China, as well as plays with modern themes adapted from novels, dramas, foreign theatres and other genres of theatre. There are dozens of plays in Chuanju that represent foreign themes, involving more than a dozen countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and the United States, with multiple sources and rich expressions.

The largest number of traditional Chuanju plays are historical romances and legendary plays, the contents of which have a direct relationship with classical Chinese novels and Ming and Qing legends. Chinese literary masterpieces such as *Annals of Kingdoms in East Zhou*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Romance of Sui and Tang Dynasties*, *The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants*, *Generals of the Yang Family*, *The Legend of Yue Fei*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Journey to the West*, *Strange Tales from a Lonely Chinese Studio*, and many more, can all be found in corresponding Chuanju repertoires. For example, 142 plays of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* series have been compiled and published.

In short, Chuanju has a large quantity of repertoires, a wide range of subjects, and a variety of forms of performances. These repertoires reflect the character of the Sichuan people, highlight the characteristics of Bashu culture, do well in comedy expression, and form the unique style of Chuanju which is characterized with numerous comedies, performs tragedies in the form of comedies, and highlights sorrow through laughter.

## II. Innovation and the First Peak

The first peak of Chuanju repertoire creation occurred in the 1950s. The founding of the PRC in 1949 has brought about great changes to the times, and also put forward requirements for the survival and development of traditional Xiqu, opening up a new voyage for the innovation of traditional Chuanju. In order to meet the basic needs of the troupes to survive and people's desire for entertainment, "Xiqu Improvement Committee" was established in Chongqing and Chengdu in 1951.



From 1954 to 1956, a "Repertory Appraisal Committee" was set up in Sichuan Province to organize and adapt the repertoire of Chuanju in Chongqing and Chengdu, and to provide the troupes with repertoires that met the requirements of the times. During this period, 322 traditional plays were included in the repertoire appraisal (i.e., collation and adaptation). The number of the plays from other places which were not formally included in the "appraisal" but were collated and adapted was also considerable.

From this, a large number of excellent repertoires have emerged, such as *Husband Hunters*, *Master Joe's Adventure*, *The Misfits*, *The Story of Peace-Making Marriage*, *One Shoe*, *Tan Ji'er*, *The Legend of the White Snake*, *Autumn River*, *Tracking Traces Based on Footprints in the Snow*, *The Radish Garden*, *The Woman General Mu Guiying*, *The Green Waves and Red Lotus*, *The Palace of King Fan*, and *The Legend of Fu Nu*.

These plays struck to the heart of their audiences and made some of the characters archetypes. For instance, the famous traditional play *Master Joe's Adventure* was a light romance about the story of a man who forcibly made a beauty his concubine but made a botch of it instead. It successfully portrayed a stubborn scholar, Master Qiao, who was both honest and conceited and acted righteously but recklessly, making him a household name in China in no time.

Another example is the ancient costume play *Husband Hunters*, which told the farcical story of all the families with daughters in Qiantang County out looking for sons-in-law to marry their daughters. In the tale, Li Yu, a scholar, is forcibly dragged to attend weddings three times in one day because of the emperor's beauty contest for concubines and the faint officials' malconduct. This play is known as a classic that reflects sadness through happiness and hides the sorrow emotions in the comic expressions.

The young actors Li Wenyun and Luo Yuzhong, who played the roles of Master Qiao and Li Yu, also became famous at once all over China. Under the arrangement of the Ministry of Culture, these repertoires toured nationwide repeatedly. Since most of them were comedies with novel plot structures, unique characters, and artistic tastes, they were highly recognized by cultural figures in Beijing and Shanghai at that time, such as Guo Moruo, Ba Jin, Xia Yan, Shen Yanbing, Yang Hanshang and Tian Han, and so on. Chuanju thus established a unique position in the national theatre circle.

The rich repertoire of outstanding plays have contributed to generations of Chuanju performing artists. In the 1950s and early 1960s, its heyday arrived where talents sprung up like mushrooms. Older artists such as Zhang Decheng, Zhou Mulan, Jia Peizhi and Wu Xiaolei were still active on the stage by this juncture, and the four famous artists Liu Chengji, Zhou Yuxiang, Zhou

Qihe and Chen Quanbo who played the role of Chou characters were in their pomp.

The four most famous Huadan Chen Shufang, Jing Hua, Xu Qianyun, Yang Shuying, and the new generation Li Xiaofei and Zhao Youyu also rose to notoriety at this time. The rising stars Liu Shiyu, Zuo Qingfei, Lan Lai, Luo Yuzhong, Xiao Chuan, Wang Yang, Ren Tingfang, and so on also gradually came to the fore. At that time, there were nearly 200 Chuanju troupes in Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Hubei, and Tibet. The richness of the repertoires and generations of excellent actors together formed what was recognized as the golden age in the history of Chuanju.

### III. The Second Peak and Contributions of Chuanju Writers

The reform and opening up of China in 1978 brought about another peak in the development of Chuanju. Different from the golden age in the 1950s, this time Chuanju was confronted with the opening of the country's doors and the influx of various literary and artistic trends and styles from abroad.

In the face of the colorful and complicated art world with numerous elements, Chuanju, which has a long history, seemed to have recovered its long-suppressed creativity. From the late 20th to the early 21st century, a group of playwrights represented by Wei Minglun, Xu Fen, and Long Xueyi shone in the theatre world with their elaborate works, pushing Chuanju to a new peak.

Wei Minglun, known as an "Evil Genius" of Ba-shu, was a playwright with a distinctive personality. His theatre creations were at their peak in the 1980s and 1990s, when he openly shouted out his creation manifesto of "One play a year, and one play a manner change" and put his creative philosophy into practice in a series of successful creations.

He produced a series of repertoires such as the romance *Yi Danda*, the modern play *The Fourth Girl*, the Qing - Dynasty costume play *A Scholar from Bashan*, the reform-oriented *Double Ninth Festival*, the absurd Chuanju *Pan Jinlian*, the historical romance *Sunset on Qishan Mountain*, the adaptations of the foreign plays *Chinese Princess Durandot* and *Good Woman·Bad Woman*, as well as the play set in the Republic of China *Face Changing*.

The emergence of *A Scholar from Bashan* attracted the attention of the national theatre community, and it was also a landmark work for Wei Ming Lun to ascend to the peak of Chinese theatre art. Yu Qiuyu, a scholar of Chinese

theatre culture, commented; "The performance of *A Scholar from Bashan* has already lifted our spirits. The skillful technique and beautiful libretto without the tired sluggish, exuberant arguments and pretentious pathos of the usual literati plays of the time, simply bringing to life the narrative structure and mocking charm...A truly noteworthy powerhouse of playwriting has emerged."<sup>1</sup>

Wei's plays are ingenious in conception, vivid in image, sharp in writing, and characterized with huge ups and downs in plot and great changes in facial expressions and emotions, fully displaying the local customs of Sichuan and the characteristics of the Sichuan people. For example, the eccentric Yi Danda in the theatre world, the Bashan scholar who was persistent and pedantic but dared to plead for the people, and the itinerant entertainer Shui Shangpiao (floating on the water in Chinese), who was hell-bent on the notion of his son siring a grandson, were all unique artistic images on the stage. Among the 50 projects selected by the Ministry of Culture of China in the 21st century as National Quality Stage Production, Yi Danda and Face Changing were both included, and *A Scholar from Bashan* won the Wenhua Award.

In addition to a large number of award-winning works, Wei also has an absurd Chuanju, *Pan Jinlian*, which made a sensation in the Chinese theatre world in the 1980s and was described as a "verdict-reversal work". Taking the story of the traditional Chuanju *Wu Song Kills His Sister-in-law* as the main line, he incorporated women and female journalists from ancient and modern Chinese and foreign films, novels, history, such as Lu Sasha, Anna Karenina, and Wu Zetian, as bystanders in the play, allowing them to directly evaluate the tragic fate of a woman like Pan Jinlian who suffered a lot of bullying but committed the crime of murder.

Because of the absurdity of its creative techniques and the profundity of revealing social ills, this play has aroused a hundred schools of thought to contend in the theatre circle, and has thus become a landmark work that broke through the traditions of the Chinese theatre circle in the late 20th century.

Unlike Wei Minglun who was born from the grassroots and grew up in a troupe, Xu Fen, a female writer, is a scholarly playwright who graduated from Peking University. From the 1960s to the present day in the 21st century, Xu Fen, who is now in her nineties, has been active in the world of Xiqu and has produced many excellent works including *Stagnant Water with Ripples*, *Sister Tian and Daoist Zhuang Zhou*, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *Yan Yan*, *Wang*

1 《大匠之门——序魏明伦》载《魏明伦剧作精品集》P2 东方出版社 2007 年出版 [The Gate of the Great Artisan: Preface by Wei Minglun in The Collection of Wei Minglun's Plays, Oriental Press, 2007:2.]



■ Plum Blossom Award winners Wang Chao and Yu Jia star in Chuanju *Dust Settled Down*.



■ Plum Blossom Award winner Wang Chao portrays the role of the fool in Chuanju *Dust Settled Down*.

*Xifeng, Wildest Dreams, The Torrent Family, Mulian Saving His Mother, The Wife of the Governor Dong Zhuju, Lady Macbeth, The Story of Red Plum, Dust Settled Down, Splashing Water in Front of the Horse, etc.*, which enjoy a high reputation in Chinese theatre world.

She pursues the dialectical and philosophical nature of the plays, adheres to the concept of "empty stage art" in Xiqu, advocates the simplicity and ethereality of the stage, and specializes in the non-scene conversion writing of the script. All the points mentioned above have been practiced in her creation. Marked by *Stagnant Water with Ripples*, the new explorations of traditional Xiqu returning to the stage under the guidance of new ideas has begun.

In 1994, the Chuanju *Stagnant Water with Ripples*, based on Li Jieren's novel of the same name, won the first prize in the Wenhua Award of the China Arts Festival and was hailed as a milestone work in the reform of Xiqu in the new era. It portrayed a group of typical Sichuan people: the vigorous and frank country woman the little aunt Deng; the simple, honest and submissive shopkeeper Cai Fool; the bold and forthright Luo Desheng in the robe; and the seemingly shrewd local wealthy landlord Gu Tiancheng with wretched words and deeds. Their love and hatred, sorrow and joy, and separation and reunion reflect the specific social environment of the turbulent Chinese society in the late Qing Dynasty.

Even to today, Xu Fen is still working on new plays tirelessly, and has recently released the small theatre plays *A Scholar's Adventures* and *The Flower Falling and the Water Drifting*. Her plays have been transplanted and performed by

more than 10 theatre genres, making her an evergreen tree of the Chuanju art garden.

Chen Qiaoru, a two-time Plum Blossom Award winner, portrays the role of the Empress in Chuanju *The Flower Falling and the Water Drifting*.

Graduating from Sichuan University, Long Xueyi is a scriptwriter of Chongqing Chuanju Theatre and has written numerous Chuanju plays. He is famous in the theatre world for *Jin Zi*, which has been selected as National Quality Stage Production in the first batch. This play has led the way and has won various awards in Chinese theatre. *Jin Zi* was adapted from Cao Yu's famous play *Wilderness*, but the supporting role in the original play, *Jin Zi*, has been changed to the leading role.

There were six characters in all, covering various types-of-role including Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, and Chou. The characters in the play were vivid and distinctive, and the use of dialect was appropriate and intriguing. Its brilliance lies in the fact that it has taken the traditional expression method of Chuanju as the core force of the stage art and organically integrated in the modern artistic vocabulary, creating a new Xiqu paradigm with strong Sichuan characteristics and modern aesthetic features, and reaching an unprecedented height in the integrity of comprehensive art.

If we want to explore the common characteristics of these outstanding playwrights, it would be that they have been immersed in the troupes for



■ Chen Qiaoru, a two-time Plum Blossom Award winner, portrays the role of the Empress in Chuanju *The Flower Falling and the Water Drifting*.

decades, are adept in independent thinking, have a large number of plays with excellent quality, master skilled writing techniques, and have a profound cultural literacy, clear theatre concepts, and the spirit of the literati of Bashu.

#### IV. Chuanju Performing Artists in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, looking back at the 300-year history of Chuanju and its vibrant and spectacular development in the late 20th century, and reviewing the evolution of it in the early 21st century, we can clearly see the following:

At the beginning of the 21st century when excellent works have been particularly needed to promote its development, due to the natural factors of the fading out of old writers and the absence of new generation of leading playwrights, although there are indeed a lot of newly-created productions of Chuanju, their influence nationwide has waned.

The artistic production and development of Chuanju has taken on a new pattern and new forms due to the National Quality Stage Production Project implemented by the Ministry of Culture of China from 2002 to 2007 and the protection of intangible cultural heritage, which has been implemented and legally guaranteed since 2006.

During this period, a group of new generation performing artists who have come to maturity have taken up the important task of driving the development of Chuanju. Since 1985, there have been more than 20 winners of the Chinese Plum Performance Award and the Wenhua Performance Award in Chuanju. The leading figures represented by Shen Tiemei, the winner of the Plum Performance Award and the president of Chongqing Chuanju Theatre, Chen Zhilin, the president of Sichuan Chuanju Theatre who has won the Plum Performance Award twice, and Chen Qiaoru, the president of Chengdu Chuanju Theatre, are both theatre managers and stage core forces. They have won new honors and a new generation of audience for Chuanju through the stage masterpieces they have continuously created.

Born into a family of Xiqu performers, Shen Tiemei is the vice president of the Chinese Theatre Association and one of the few recipients of the Chinese Plum Performance Award. She has been performing for more than 40 years and has played dozens of artistic images, with Jin Zi in *Jin Zi*, Li Yaxian in *Li Yaxian*, and Sun Shangxiang in *Three Sacrifices to the River* being the most outstanding.

She sings beautifully, performs delicately, moves nimbly and has accurate

expressions in her eyes. Under the tutelage of Chuanju singing artist Jing Hua, she has made even greater achievements than her teacher, bringing the art of Gaoqiang singing in Chuanju to a new height. On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Ministry of Culture held for the first time an award competition for Outstanding Preserved Repertory. Among a number of excellent repertoies nominated, the Chuanju *Jin Zi*, starring Shen Tiemei, ranked first.

Chen Zhilin has won the Plum Performance Award twice. He looks handsome when dressed up with solid basic skills, mainly playing the roles of Xiaosheng (a type-of-role). However, he is a comprehensive talent with a wide range of performing skills, and is capable of playing many types-of-roles, even the



■ Shen Tiemei, the recipient of the Plum Blossom Award.



■ Shen Tiemei portrays the character of Jinzi in Chuanju *Jin Zi*.



■ Chuanju *Jin Zi* performed by Chongqing Chuanju Theatre, starring Shen Tiemei, with photography by Guo Sansheng.



■ Shen Tiemei portrays the character of Sun Shangxiang in *Chuanju Three Sacrifices to the River*, with photography by Deng Xiaojun.

Xusheng and Chou roles. In particular, his voice is loud and clear, and can change between high and low freely, forming his own style and never failing to make a name for himself. He also has a sharp eye, putting Wei Minglun's *Yi Danda* and *A Scholar from Bashan* which were created in the 1980s back onto the stage after his recreation.

He is especially good at shaping characters. In *A Scholar from Bashan*, he played the role of an old scholar with the skills of Laosheng and Chou, vividly portraying the artistic image of a conscientious man who transformed from a pedantic, obscurantist, and timid scholar to a conscientious intellectual who took great pains to plead for the people but was killed by the feudal imperial power.

Chen Qiaoru, who has also won the Plum Performance Award twice, is a naturally beautiful Chuanju actress with excellent "voice, outlook and skill". Born into a family of Xiqu performers, she grew up on the stage of Chuanju and has been a leading actress from the small county troupe to the big theatre in Chengdu. For her use of costume and make-up, her versatility in singing, acting and acrobatics, and her full singing and emotions, she is quite popular among the audiences, and has played the first leading role in dozens of big plays.

She can play both Huadan and Guimen Dan (young unmarried lady role in Chinese Xiqu), as well as Wudan and Daoma Dan (female role versed in martial arts). When playing the role of White Snake in the Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake*, she played the roles of Guimen Dan and Wudan in succession,



showing her marvellous skills.

In fact, Chen Qiaoru, Xu Fen and the composer Wang Wenxun are known as the "Iron Triangle" of Chuanju. Most of the plays written by Xu Fen, such as *Mulian Saving His Mother*, *The Story of Red Plum*, *Dust Settled Down*, *Splashing Water in Front of the Horse* and the newly produced *The Flower Falling and the Water Drifting*, have all been performed by Chen with great ease and skills. Those various roles she has performed have a variety of life experiences and personalities, some are kind and patient, some suffer humiliation but are still brave and resolute, some are distorted in human nature, and some are arrogant and jealous.



■ Wang Chao, the recipient of the Plum Blossom Award.

In addition to Shen Tiemei, Chen Zhilin and Chen Qiaoru, the representative inheritors of Chuanju, the national intangible cultural heritage, also include Xia Tingguang, Xiao Ting, Ren Tingfang, Xiao Demei, Xu Mingchi, Zuo Qingfei, Liu Yun, Cui Guangli, Yang Changlin, Xu Yongming and Luo Jilong. They have all taken up the important task of passing on the classic repertoire of Chuanju. Liu Yi, Wang Chao, Yu Jia, Wu Xi, Tan Jiqiong, Zhang Yan and other Young Plum Performance Award performers of the new generation of Chuanju who are in their prime have long assumed the responsibility of sending Chuanju to the campus and performing at the grass-roots level, and are more imaginative and practical in the transformation of Chuanju and the breakthrough of their skills.

History tells us that the development of a theatre genre relies on the innovation of the repertoires that keep up with the times. The creation and transmission of excellent repertoires is inseparable from the wisdom and contribution of playwrights and performing artists. It is their exploration and practice of innovation that has contributed to the development of Chuanju in the 21st century.

GONG PING

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## Tian Mansha: A Multifaceted Artist Rooted in Chuanju and her Innovations

GAO Shanhu

If asked to summarize Tian Mansha's life and work, even the individual herself could hardly be expected to answer simply. On one hand, she is a famous performing artist from Chuanju and a pioneer of contemporary Chuanju reform. She is also a director and teacher of Xiqu, and a manager, producer and researcher of art, having won numerous awards including two "Plum Performance Award", the "Wenhua Performance Award", the Leading Role



Award of the "Magnolia Theatre Performance", the "Special Award" of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) German Central Modern Music Theatre among others. She began the practice among Xiqu circles of buying scripts for performances out of her own pocket, and she was the first to establish a small theatre named after her own name. She conducted the first cross-border experiments in Chuanju, and the first to offer credit courses of Chuanju in foreign universities... In summary, her complex identity combines many honors and "firsts", but her exploration and pursuit of the art of Chuanju is not simply limited to such achievements.

■ Tian Mansha



■ Tian Mansha is teaching at Tel Aviv University in Israel.

Compared to the many talented Chuanju performing artists, Tian Mansha might be viewed as being born with meager talent, and it can even be said that she began her career from a relatively low level. However, her passion for the art, persistence, striving, and proactive desire for learning and artistic planning eventually paid dividends. Before the age of 17, She applied for the Chuanju School (Now known as the Sichuan Vocational College of Art) three times, but failed each time. She moved her goalpost and took the examinations from the provincial level to the municipal level, and finally to the district level. She was eventually admitted by a grassroots troupe, the Chongqing Shapingba District Chuanju Troupe. After five years in this district-level troupe, she was selected for the Chongqing Chuanju Theatre youth training team for a two-year period of learning due of her outstanding performance. At almost 25 years old, she was finally enrolled in the adult technical secondary class of the Chuanju School. The professional and systematic performance training and learning at the school enabled her to quickly expand her artistic visions and improve her artistic understanding. During this time, she honed her skills and learned to rehearse the representative repertoire of traditional Chuanju such as *Yinyang River*, *Wu Song Kills His Brother's Wife*, *Mulian Saving His Mother*, *Yang Qiniang Shooting Her Son*, *Killing the Dog* and so on. She successfully won the Plum Performance Award for some of these works. Later, she won the Plum Performance Award for a second time with three new creative plays, including the Chuanju *Stagnant Water with Ripples* based on a novel of the same name and *Lady Macbeth* adapted from Shakespeare's work. Again, she was selected as the vice president of Chuanju School for her excellence. Her striving, however, did not stop there, and she attended the Directing Department of Shanghai Theatre Academy for further study. At the end of her study, she was officially transferred by the Shanghai Theatre Academy as a talent introduction to serve as the Vice President of the Xiqu Academy, which has since opened



■ Tian Mansha in Chuanju *Lady Macbeth*.



■ Left: Chuanju *Stagnant Water with Ripples* received the Wenhua Award as well as all the individual awards.

■ Right: Tian Mansha portrays Deng Yaogu in Chuanju *Stagnant Water with Ripples*.

up a broader artistic path for her. The experience of beginning her journey from a grassroots troupe sharpened her will, forged a solid foundation for basic skills, allowed her to fully draw on the nourishment of traditional Chuanju, and taught her to advance her artistic goals and improve her various abilities in a down-to-earth and effective manner.

In the process of performing and creating Chuanju, Tian Mansha adheres to the principle of "Based on Tradition and Facing the Future", and absorbs the strengths of different art disciplines with an open mind, learning and applying them for her own use. She is adept at creatively learning and inheriting the traditions of Chuanju, innovatively transforming and developing it, breaking through the limitations of tradition and boldly experimenting with more possibilities for future development. Her creations and performances have roughly transitioned through several important growth stages: the first being mainly inheriting the tradition, the second stage being collaborating with others to innovate, and the third stage being creating works of her own. In 1995, she planned and invited Xu Fen, a famous playwright, to specially create a Chuanju *Stagnant Water with Ripples* for her, and bought the copyright for the first performance of this play. For a time, it was widely discussed in Xiqu circles, and this play was also called "the landmark work of Chuanju" by experts. During the rehearsal of this play, Tian Mansha contributed a plethora of new thoughts to the use of performing patterns in characterization. In particular, she viewed the adjustments of "rhythm" as a prime focus and realized breakthroughs and reinventions of movements in performing patterns. In 1999, she invited Xu Fen again to specially create *Lady Macbeth* for her, which combined the performance form of traditional Chuanju with Western stream of consciousness to create a female psychodrama with expressionism

as its main feature. In the process of performing and directing this play, she successfully practiced the re-creation of traditional Chuanju, and thus started her transition from actress to director. After becoming an artist-in-residence of the Zuni Icosahedron Experimental Theatre Company in Hong Kong in 1999, she began to explore the unknown possibilities of traditional Chinese Xiqu by venturing into experimental theatre. Between 2003 and 2006, she creatively combined the essence of the classic Chuanju *The Ungrateful Lover* and the experimental sketch *Fond Illusions*, and created a conceptual Chuanju *The Sentimental Sighs*, which she directed and performed herself. By modifying the performing patterns and creating new forms of expression, her works strive to pursue the ingenious integration of classical and modern beauty, and an organic combination of ideological content and artistic form. Her creative philosophy towards independent thinking, exploring new venues and her uniqueness solidified her as a pioneering figure in the reform of contemporary Chuanju, and also elevated her performance works as important parts of the representative works of contemporary Chuanju in transition. In her view, only by avoiding repetition, rejecting contentment within the status quo, and refraining from setting stagnant goals, can individual continue making progress. She often uses the following phrase to encourage herself: "Nothing is difficult in the world if Tian Mansha is willing to do."

For Tian Mansha, for whom the status quo provided no comfort, becoming an excellent performing artist of Chuanju was never the end of her artistic pursuits. She insisted on constantly pioneering breakthroughs and exploring different areas of artistic practice, and has thus achieved impressive achievements in the field of art in multiple capacities such as director, teacher, researcher,



■ Tian Mansha in the conceptual Chuanju *The Sentimental Sighs*

and manager. After 2006, she has taken a more private approach. In her own words, "I am not reluctant to leave the stage, since everywhere in life is my stage."

As a Xiqu teacher, she not only adheres to the traditional teaching method of oral teaching that inspires true understanding within, but also combines physical training techniques of foreign acting masters. By summarizing her own experience and training methods of Xiqu performance, she applied the teaching contents of "performance training methods" and "role creation" that she had explored and innovated into the Xiqu classroom. In 2012, she was invited to serve as a researcher of the "International Research Center for the Interweaving Performance Cultures" at the Free University of Berlin. During this time, she developed a set of her own performance training methods, and then brought these new methods back to the Shanghai Theatre Academy to better help her students. As a director, she has re-created and supplemented the traditional way of directing Chuanju, extensively absorbed new creation ideas of foreign theatre directors for her own use, and laid emphasis on the training of actors' breathing, rhythm, and body. She is also one of the chief editors of a book titled *Perspectives of Contemporary Chinese Directors*, translated into German, Chinese, and English, in which she has shared the artistic views of contemporary Chinese theater directors. As a disseminator of Chuanju and a theatre manager, she established the first small Xiqu theater in Southwest China, Mansha Liyuan Theatre, in 1993, and successfully explored the "small theatre Chuanju" performance that organically combined the traditional Chuanju with tourism theatre. The influence from this form of performance continues to this day, and continues to influence the forms of small theatre performances of Chuanju with regards to integration of culture and tourism in Sichuan. For her, each of these multiple identities is very important. They interact with, complement, and nourish each other, combining together to create a multifaceted artist of the highest caliber.

During the process of artistic creation, Tian Mansha also actively committed to the international exchange and cooperation of traditional Chinese theater. Over the past 20 years, she devoted herself to the research of both Chinese and Western theatre, pondering the relationship between tradition and modernity, and exploring more possibilities for dialogue between Chinese theatre, including Chuanju, and cultures all over the world. Since 2000, she set out from Hong Kong, China, and traveled to the world stage. She has been invited many times by international art institutions and festivals to bring Chuanju to perform or hold body training workshops in Germany, Holland, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Greece, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other countries. She has also found regular invitation to present lectures or participate in various performance seminars at foreign universities. In 2006, for example, she was invited to curate

the theater program of the art festival "China Between the Past and the Future" hosted by Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HWK, the World Cultural Center in Berlin), and invited artists from five major Chinese Xiqu genres<sup>1</sup> to participate in the performance. During this art festival, her conceptual Chuanju *The Sentimental Sighs* also premiered in HWK and found a warm reception. Since then, the work has been performed in many overseas cities such as Androp and Brugg in Belgium, Amsterdam in the Netherlands, Munich in Germany, and Rome in Italy. Many European audiences remarked that upon seeing it they not only understood it, but were moved to tears. In addition to creating theatrical stage works, she also co-edited with German experts the books *Living Memory: Chinese Xiqu in Contemporary Times* (2006) and *Voices from Chinese Directors* (2018), which were published and distributed in Germany.

Traveling between Chinese and foreign theatre, Tian Mansha comprises artistic and inspirational exchanges with artists from different countries and different backgrounds, and collaborated with various international art institutions and



■ Tian Mansha was awarded the "30 Years of Artistic Influence" award by the Asian Cultural Association (Hong Kong).

1 They refer to Jingju (京剧), Yueju(越剧), Huangmei Xi(黄梅戏), Pingju(评剧) and Yuju(豫剧).[Translator's note]



artists. These experiences have greatly broadened her horizons and enhanced her artistic concepts, giving rise to a deeper understanding of the diversity of stage creation and the infinite possibilities of stage space. Concurrently, her continuous and careful attention to the forefront of world art development makes her hyper aware of the value of traditional Chuanju and allows reflection on the dilemmas and deficiencies in its development. She pondered whether there were more creative transformations in the inheritance and development of traditional Chuanju. Are there perhaps different ways of expression in contemporary times? As Chinese Xiqu director Xie Pingan remakred, traditional Chinese Xiqu should "Rely on Tradition, Focus the Present, and Face the Future". In her own artistic practice and international cultural exchanges, Tian Mansha has come to realize more and more clearly that traditional Chuanju needs to be inherited and developed. More importantly, it needs to be transformed and recreated creatively. We should pay attention to both its past and future, and only then will it have a brighter future.



■ Tian Mansha collaborates with German experts as the co-editor of *Perspectives of Contemporary Chinese Directors*.

GAO SHANHU

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# The Development of the Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province

TENG Jingwen

Founded in 1960, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province (also known as Sichuan Opera Troupe), led by famous Chuanju performing artists Zhou Yuxiang, Zhou Qihe and Chen Shufang, is a national first-class theatre composed of graduates of the "Chuanju School of Sichuan Province".

The Theatre enjoys a good reputation in Southwest China and even the whole country for its artistic dedication to rigorous performances. Since its establishment more than 50 years ago, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province



■ Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province (also known as Sichuan Opera Troupe)

has always adhered to the literary and artistic principle of "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend".

It has produced and performed more than 200 outstanding traditional and modern plays. Among them, *Face-Changing*, *Yi Danda* and *The Scholar of Bashan* have twice won the Top Ten excellent plays of the National Stage Art Project, the Wenhua Award of the Ministry of Culture, the Excellent Works Award of the "Five One Project" of the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee, and the Award of Excellent Plays of Chinese Drama. Six have won the Plum Blossom Award for National Drama, 29 have won the National Wenhua Award, 24 have won the Outstanding Performance Award for Chinese Drama, and four have won the Magnolia Award for Shanghai Drama .

As one of the highly influential local Xiqu forms in China, Chuanju has a unique contribution and status to the history of Chinese drama and Bashu culture, and has rich research value for the folk customs, art and history of the Bashu region and other southwest provinces such as Yunnan and Guizhou.

As a national first-class company, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province plays an important role in the development of Chuanju and the public's demand for Chuanju, as well as being the backbone of the cultural construction and development of Sichuan Province. Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has made unremitting efforts in the repertoire construction and innovation of Chuanju, Chuanju talent training, market and audience expansion. Chuanju has not only carried forward the culture of Sichuan Province, and brought it to the attention of the whole country and the rest of the world.

## I. Repertory Construction and Innovation

Chuanju has a profound cultural heritage. Up to now, it has accumulated more than 2,000 traditional Xiqu. In the new century and the new era, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has experienced its own reform and progress, ending the cadre appointment system of "laymen leading experts" for many years, but choosing and cultivating "Liyuan leaders", which instill more professional blood into Sichuan Theatre.

The first president of the appointment system is Chen Zhilin, who graduated from Sichuan Chuanju School. He is a renowned Sichuan Chuanju civil and military actor and has won the Plum Blossom Award of Chinese drama twice. Starting with Chen Zhilin, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province knew that it had

finally ushered in a golden age of Chuanju, free from the old ideas of the last century.

### 1. Traditional Classic Plays

Chuanju has always been characterized by teachers and apprentices being taught by inheritance of past works. Key among these are Zhou Qihe's *Welcome Xian Shop* and *Investment Village Meets Beauty*, *Jiang You Pass*, and *Xiguan Crossing*; Zhou Yuxiang's *Xichuan Map*; Chen Shufang's *Flower Field Writing Fan*, and *Summer Appreciation*; and Zhang Qiaofeng's *Fu Nu Biography* among others.

Since the implementation of the "Hundred Xiqu Inheritance" project in 2013, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has systematically resumed the performance of classic plays of Chuanju and repertory plays of the theatre. In addition to the classic works mentioned above, The big- screen Chuanju *The Legend of the White Snake*, *The Story of Harmony*, *Yi Danda*, *Flaming Mountain*, *Husband and Wife Bridge*, and *Lying Tiger Order* have also been performed by Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province.

Meanwhile, many traditional folk Chuanju such as *Bao Gong Apologies*, *Three High Fives*, *June Snow*, *Palace Meeting*, *Wang Sanqiao*, and *Heaven Girl Scattered Flowers* have been restored.

Through the "Hundred Xiqu Inheritance" project, some traditional Xiqu that have been long dormant can be effectively inherited, not only enriching the daily performances of the theatre, but also letting the old people who have been fond of Chuanju in the past see the vitality of these classic Xiqu on the new stage, without forgetting the traditions and classics of Chuanju, while also letting a group of young and middle -aged actors master more classic Xiqu.

### 2. Innovative Brand Plays

As early as the end of the last century, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province premiered *Face-Changing*, Wei Minglun's adaptation of the film script of the same name, which was a great success at the China Arts Festival and Shanghai International Arts Festival, winning many awards.

Chen Zhilin concluded that the success of the play *Face-Changing* cannot be separated from "communication", starting from Chengdu, to Beijing, Nanjing, Hangzhou and even Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan and other places, to break the language barrier and regional restrictions, to win new and old audiences both north and south of the Yangtze River, so that people outside the Bashu

area also enjoy the high-level Chuanju performance.

In 2003, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Finance jointly implemented the "National Stage Art Fine Works Project", signifying a huge move towards reviving Chinese Xiqu. Chen Zhilin, the director, started with two Chuanju works, *Face-Changing* and the *Scholar of Bashan*. To modernize fully, Chen Zhilin moved to restore the relationship between the theatre and the screenwriters, securing the services of screenwriter Wei Minglun, to refine the script of *Face-Changing* and the *Scholar of Bashan*.

When it came to the formal performance, it was no surprise that the play caused a significant response. The revised drama has multiple climaxes,

■ Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province restaged *Face-Changing*



actors' lines are easy to understand and incisive, and the jokes land. Finally, the story ends in tragedy, causing the audience to think again.

Based on the success of this, in 2006, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province "excavated" Wei Minglun's other Chuanju from the 1980s, *Yi Danda*, with the aim of reintroducing the charm of Chuanju to the old and new audiences.

These three plays are known as Wei Minglun's "Sounds of Shu" trilogy. In a seminar, Wei Minglun proudly declared, "My three plays are the epitome of Bashu culture, with Chuanju being the pinnacle. Chen Zhilin has a visionary approach, showcasing the essence of Bashu culture through modernization. It represents the fusion of local specialties and the modernization of traditional arts."

From the success of the "Sound of Shu" trilogy, we can see that Chinese Xiqu had entered a new era. This modern Xiqu style has gradually replaced the traditional Xiqu performance of the past, and now innovations are required from the director to the music, scenery, lighting, sound, clothing and so on. This must be done to curry the favour of the audiences, and attract the young.

Take the second-time production of the *Scholar of Bashan* as an example. The directing team composed of Xiong Yuanwei, Ding Zhiguo, Zheng Desheng and others made bold changes to the play on stage. Because the story takes place in Bashan and Chengdu, lacquer painting, ink painting and watercolor painting are introduced into the play, and a series of characteristic cultural landscapes are painted, such as the Imperial City of Chengdu, Wangjiang Tower, mountains and forests in the small counties of northern Sichuan, and so on, forming a long scroll of rotating axis.

As the scroll moves, the plot moves forward step by step. The dark background adds a layer of historical gravity and vicissitudes to the story. Instead of piling up meaningless scenery, it uses pen and ink inherent to Chinese humanist paintings to compliment the onstage action acting as powerful symbolism to the audience.

In January 2020, in order to support the creation and dissemination of fine drama art, a film version of the production was ordered by the Chinese Dramatists Association, the Ministry of Finance and Chinese Federation of Literature, with assistance from the Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province. First-class director Zhang Zhong was invited to direct, and Plum Blossom Award winning actors Chen Zhilin, He Ling and Liu Yi starred.

In line with the principle of maintaining the artistic style of the Chuanju stage version of *Scholar of Bashan*, the film version retains the plot structure,

presentation mode, musical characteristics and stage art performance techniques of the stage version, supplemented by digital film production techniques and methods to transition successfully onto the film screen.

## II. Theatre Talent Training

Talent training is very important no matter where, as its sustainable development and continuous progress will lead to breakthrough acts, and the development of theatre is inseparable from the accumulation of talents.

To measure the comprehensive strength of a theatre, one simply has to look at its team of professional talents. Their development and training is essential to a theatre's ability to produce outstanding plays.

As mentioned above, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has revived excellent traditional Chuanju, such as *Royal River Bridge* and *Beating the Red Platform*, starring young actors Yang Kunhao and Zhang Yan, who were born in the 1990s, inheriting the traditional Chuanju repertoire and exquisite performance skills.

In 2017, the National Arts Fund funded a new production of the Chuanju called *The Voices of the Tudors*. In addition to starring Cui Guangli, winner of Plum Blossom Award, two or three groups of established actors were set up to train and cultivate young actors with practice, so that they could have the chance to perform in important plays.

In addition, since the establishment of the theatre, it has been adhering to the method of "teachers leading apprentices" to establish a stable inheritance system. In recent years, the theatre has carried out the "Famous Chuanju --Contemporary Chuanju Masters Special Work of Inheritance", inviting outstanding Chuanju performing artists to teach Chuanju highlights to young and middle-aged actors.

For example, Xiong Xiangang, a first-level actor from Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province, taught the classic Chuanju highlights *Selling Doors and Auction Pictures* to Wan Duo, an outstanding young actor of the theatre. In addition Peng Xinqi, a first-level actor from Chongqing Sichuan Theatre, taught *Touching Seals in Water Prison* to Yang Kunhao, an outstanding young actor from Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province.

Through a succession of plays, the troupe has gradually established a stable inheritance system of masters and apprentices, cultivated potential young actors and talents, and made the development of the theatre more vigorous.

In addition to its theatre performance practice and mentoring system, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province also encourages actors to participate in the biennial provincial young and middle-aged Chuanju competition, the triennial Sichuan Art Festival and other performance competitions. In order to further train the skill level of the actors through the competition, the theatre selects additional talents with potential to enter Sichuan Theatre through the competition. Frequent competitions provide a broad stage for young actors to show the art of Chuanju, enhance the popularity of actors, and make Chuanju more well-known.

Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province also selects outstanding talents from college recruitment to enrich the teams of actors. In 2014, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province commissioned the National Academy of Chinese Xiqu to train 12 actors, and in 2015, it recruited 28 college students and commissioned Sichuan Vocational College of Art to train them. After graduation, the troupe selects the best students to solve the problem of the shortage of outstanding talents in the theatre and make the actors more youthful and energetic, more academic, and more versatile.

### **III. Art Market Expansion**

Artistic creation needs the support of the market. If there is no open sales, enthusiastic audience and attractive publicity, then it is difficult to obtain good social and market benefits. Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has always been based on meeting the spiritual and cultural needs of the people and producing high-quality excellent plays.

Based on the social positioning of the theatre, besides giving priority to social needs, the economic benefits of a production must also be considered. Through the efforts of the whole institute, over the past ten years, the theatre has successfully opened up the performance market at home and abroad.

#### **1. Expand and Benefit the Public Welfare**

As the president, Chen Zhilin is not "superior". He was born as a Chuanju actor and as a result has a thorough view of the needs of the audience and the



market. He has been to several places at home and abroad with the theatre, and believes that the division of the audience should not be limited to the level of the calendar, but should be combined with the knowledge level of high, medium and low for comprehensive consideration.

As part of this, Chen Zhilin has spent a lot of time bringing performances to campuses. He personally took the theatre's famous works *Face-Changing* and the *Scholar of Bashan* on a tour to Tsinghua University, Peking University, Nankai University and other northern universities. We found that there is a tacit understanding between traditional Xiqu and contemporary youth. Even though there is a language barrier, in *Face-Changing*, The audience was attracted by the freehand, poetic stage and the gaudy, singable script language.

Such activities not only enriched campus activities, but also allowed Chuanju to be heard by more young people on campuses more than 1,000 kilometers away. From a higher level, it is a "two-way journey" between higher education and cultural undertakings, which enhances contemporary students' artistic appreciation and understanding of history and traditional knowledge.

Xiqu is not only a performing art, but also a literary classic in its texts. On the importance of this, Chen Zhilin once said: "To rescue, protect and revitalize traditional Xiqu, we must cultivate young audiences. Where are the young audiences? On college campuses. Through the understanding and love of national Xiqu, it will promote the cultural quality education in colleges and universities and restore the confidence of the young generation in traditional aesthetics. Xiqu needs young audiences, and young audiences need elegant classical arts like Xiqu to cultivate themselves. Young college students should get close to the traditional culture of the Chinese nation again, understand and spread it, and we should let the traditional art and culture have young disseminators and lovers."

In recent years, not only college campuses, but also primary and middle schools and kindergartens have been invited by Chuanju to carry out campus Tours. This activity has been well received. It is the first time for many teachers and students to watch Chuanju. This activity not only cultivates students' interest in Chuanju and attracts them to come to Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province, but also sows the seeds for cultivating outstanding talents in front of and behind the stage in the future.

In addition to entering the campus, Chuanju has also been performed at the grassroots level. With the help of the government, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province gave hundreds of performances at the grassroots level. For these

performances, the theatre also created and performed more modern Xiqu to promote the spirit of The Times for the masses.

For example, *Bashan Red Leaves*, *Glow Reflected Qiang Mountain* and other plays take the advanced deeds of Wang Ying, Lan Hui and other cadres who practice the mass line of the Party as living materials, and promote the model image of Communists in the new era in the form of Chuanju popular with the people, carrying forward the great spirit of patriotism and love for the Party and spread it widely in the grassroots.

In addition, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province launches quality plays on behalf of Sichuan to participate in the national Art Festival, China Drama Festival and various major performance activities, and Tours the country after winning awards, so as to enhance the influence of Chuanju. For example, *The Sound of Tudor*, which was awarded as a project funded by the National Arts Fund in 2017, has toured more than 25 times and participated in the performance of China Drama Festival. It has been widely praised. On the national stage, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province has spared no effort to publicize the art of Chuanju to a wider area.

## 2. Overseas Performance Expansion

Not only the domestic market, but also going abroad and facing the world has always been the goal of Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province. It has always been keen to promote Chuanju to the international market and carry out overseas communication.

Before the establishment of the Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province, other Chuanju performing groups visited Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria to perform such traditional Xiqu as *Fu nu er* and *Tan Ji er*. This visit was completely guided by the government.

It was not until 1985 that *Legend of the White Snake*, performed by Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province, made a great success at the Third World Cultural Festival in West Berlin (Germany). The success of the play officially started the boom of Chuanju abroad, and the artistic charm of Chuanju was more known. A large number of excellent traditional Chuanju highlights were invited to tour overseas markets such as Europe, America, Southeast Asia, Japan and South Korea. Gradually, the government-led visiting performance changed to the market-oriented operation, mainly by foreign invitation and bilateral cooperation and negotiation.

After entering the new century, overseas performances of Chuanju have

become the norm, and the proportion of commercial performances has increased significantly. For example, in 2010, the Chuanju *Mirror Flower*, co-created and performed by Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province and France's National Opera of Lens, toured 15 cities in France, Switzerland, Luxembourg and other countries and regions for 109 days, 67 performances, and more than 50,000 audience members. It set a new high for overseas commercial performances of Chuanju. In international arts festivals such as the Busan International Arts Festival and the Chinese Xiqu Festival in Paris, Chuanju has also received the enthusiastic applause and high attendance.

Taking the *Mirror Flowers* as an example, at the special invitation of Charles Tordman, then director of Nancy Theatre of France, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province and the chairman of the Bridge Theatre Festival of France cooperated to adapt the Chuanju *The Flaming Mountain*, and performed it in various European countries.

The performance won universal praise and gained a good reputation. Shortly after the end of the show, Charles Tordman contacted the Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province and said he selected Chinese Qing Dynasty novelist Li Ruzhen's novel *Mirror Flowers* segment, directed by himself, to create an original new Chuanju stage play. From 2007 to 2010, after three years of rehearsal, it successfully set foot on its European tour.

The show is essentially a Chuanju, but it innovates in aesthetic expression and incorporates more modern elements - using lights to create a sense of obscurity, clouds and flowers commonly seen in traditional Chuanju are represented by lights, and the form of multiple curtains is adopted.

During its tour, the plays were presented to all French-speaking audiences, which was in line with the aesthetic taste of European audiences. In addition, foreign media and China Central Television also made special reports on the performance, which received great response. In this process, the actors not only gained more experience in overseas performances, but also had the opportunity to know how foreign artists' stage art expression methods and ideas combined with traditional Chinese Xiqu art.

At this time, Chinese and Western art realized further understanding and integration in cooperation, and at the same time laid a good foundation for the theatre's future operation in the international market. It can be seen as a valuable experience in the cooperation of transnational art institutions and in the operation of commercial performances.

Such successful cases tell us that the expansion of the overseas market is

enough to achieve both the reputation of the theatre and the box office. In the future, more excellent Chuanju will appear in front of more overseas audiences under the integration of Chinese and Western arts, letting them feel the beauty of Chuanju, opening for the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries, and gradually form an increasingly mature, interconnected and common cultural market.

### Conclusion

As a state-level troupe that inherits and carries forward the art of Chuanju, Chuanju Troupe of Sichuan Province plays an important role in the development of Chuanju and in meeting the social and cultural needs of Chuanju.

From the inheritance and innovation of traditional plays, to the promotion and performance of Chuanju, to the cultivation of outstanding talents, to the control and expansion of Chuanju in domestic and overseas markets, Sichun Chuanju Theatre is vital.

# Jing

ZHONG Junfang

"Type-of-role" is a unique performance system of ancient Chinese theatre. "Jing"<sup>1</sup> is a general term for certain secondary roles in Xiqu, and specific roles in the theatre are labeled "Jing characters".

Jing characters might also be referenced as "painted faces". Compared to Sheng and Dan, who rarely change the actor's original appearance when applying makeup, the faces of Jing characters are closer to masks that can be painted at will, an important aspect towards characterization. Distinguished stage images and exaggerated and colorful facial makeup are a distinctive visual feature of the aforementioned characters.

For different genres of theatre, given significant differences in terms of the repertoire and performing styles, the image systems and modeling features of the same type-of-role can vary greatly between various theatre genres. This paper will briefly outline the artistic characteristics of Jing characters among three currently prevalent theatre genres: Kunju, Jingju, and Chuanju.

Kunju originated in Kunshan, Suzhou, and is a local theatre genre of Kunshan, with the majority of actors and audiences being Suzhou people. As a result, most of the lines recited by Jing characters are in the Suzhou dialect, and their facial makeup has a variety of colors including red, white, and black, etc., most of which are in a format of full facial-makeup and represent different roles in different repertoire. There are loyal and virtuous generals such as Guan Yu, but also treacherous villains such as Qin Hui. The identities of the characters range from monks (such as Monk Huiming in *The Romance of the Western Chamber*) to the common citizens (like Guan Yu), and even to various immortals and

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1 Translator's note: Jing is literally a Chinese Pinyin which means clean in English. In the field of Chinese theatre, it refers to one of the main types-of-roles in Jingju.

ghosts. Modeling not only externalizes the expression of characters' natures and identities, but closely relates to the plot. Therefore, even if the facial makeup share the same color, the detailed makeup presented can still differ significantly given specific characters. For example, while sharing red facial makeup, Guan Yu in *Going to Meeting Alone* and Judge Hu in *The Peony Pavilion: The Judge in the Hell* own completely different details for their facial makeup.

During the course of the performance, according to the specific situation, Jing characters in different productions assume different performing tasks. In the beginning, Jing characters were responsible for gags which added comedic elements to the theatre, and often brought vaudeville like humor to performances. Jing characters in Kunqu inherited such performance practice. For example, as *The Peony Pavilion: The Judge in the Hell* stage setting is set in the hell, Judge Hu retains a fire-breathing performance as part of the play. In some plays, Jing characters also plays the most treacherous villain. For example, in the play *The Eight Heroes*, an adaption of *The Orphan of Zhao* (aka *Sacrifice*), Tu Anjia is a traitorous minister. Most of his lines take an official tone that fit his position as a minister.

Kunju has always attached great importance to the art of singing, and its language of is generally delicate and elegant. In Kunju, even for those Jing characters who play military generals, there exists a preference towards plots and plays with more lyricism, with singing being the main focus over scenes of combat. Since the overall style of Kunju tends to towards the elegant, the facial makeup is not heavily colored, but rather resembles Chinese paintings which are light-colored and elegant, neither too deep nor too pale. For example, the large bat on the forehead of the traitorous minister Tu Anjia in *The Eight Heroes: Disturbing the Court, Capturing a Dog* is painted in light color, much like an ink painting.

One of the major characteristics of Jingju is that it comprises aspects from hundreds of different schools. As for image-shaping of Jing characters, Jingju has both inherited and progressed in style when compared with Kunju. With more repertoire selections and more characters with distinct and unique personalities in Jingju, the differences in the characterization of Jing characters mainly manifest through different facial makeup. There exist more details to reveal, more personalities, and more emotions of the characters. For example, the eye sockets of Yao Qi, played by Jin Xiushan, in *Ascending to Heaven Terrace* are particularly narrow, which matches the physiological characteristics of Yao Qi, who needs to squint to see people as his eyesight declines in his old age. Another example is the old man Li Keyong in *The State of Shatuo*, whose

facial makeup is rounded to show his rich experience, profound sophistication, and tactfulness in dealing with people and things. The facial makeup of the same role is never static, and actors must incorporate their own understanding of the character in the process of handling the facial makeup to best create a unique artistic effect. For example, in traditional facial makeup, the Jing character Cao Cao is often drawn with large triangular eyes. While in *Catch and Release Cao Cao*, Hao Shouchen painted the corners of the young Cao Cao's eyes with a thin brush and light color, highlighting his treacherous and sophisticated features as a politician.

Jing characters are also known as "painted faces". According to the *Dictionary of Chuanju*, Jing characters can be further subdivided into "Kaojia Painted-face", "Paodai Painted-face", "Caoxie Painted-face", "Powdered Painted-face", "Cat Painted-face", "Martial Painted-face" and so on in Chuanju. "Kaojia Painted-face" are mostly military generals, such as Zhang Fei in *Meeting At An Old Town (Sworn Brothers)* and Xiang Yu in *Farewell My Concubine*. "Paodai Painted-face" are mostly civil officials, attaching great importance to singing and reciting, such as Tu Anjia in *The Orphan of Zhao*. "Caoxie Painted-face" often play the outlaws of the marshes or straightforward and rough characters, such as Zhang Fei in *The Reed Marshland*, with much attention to singing and acting. "Powdered Painted-face" is a kind of "Paodai Painted-face", often playing the role of treacherous and powerful ministers, such as Dong Zhuo in *A Set of Interlocking Stratagems*. When outlining the facial makeup, a light layer of water powder is often spread on the actor's face. "Cat Painted-face" is also a unique category of Jing characters of Chuanju. The roles defined as "Cat Painted-faces" are often the minions of the "Powdered Painted-face" or villains with evil intentions. "Martial Painted-face" refers to Martial Jing characters who play martial artists in performances. Such roles are found in both Jingju and Chuanju, and often appear when there are scenes of combat.

In sumamry, Jing characters in each theatre genre have both differences and commonalities. Although they are not protagonists, they are indispensable parts of ancient Chinese theatre performances due to their unique artistic charm, something worthy of continuous exploration and discovery by modern audience members.

ZHONGJUNFANG

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## "The China We Don't Fully Know": A Complete Transcript of the Symposium on "Contemporary Chinese Theatre" ( Part II )

MENG Jinghui & WANG Jing & Christophe TRIAU

**Christophe Triau:** You have mentioned the young people. What is their anger, their commitment or responsibility today? We know how much you value young people and their artistic expression, especially in the theatre festival where you are the general director. Is their anger the same as it was when you were young? Are they also nourished by the same artistic vocabulary? And are they pioneers like those in the 1980s?

**Pascale Wei Guinot:** It should also be noted that Meng Jinghui has an important and ideal position as an observer in China, which allows him to take a comprehensive view of all that is happening in the theatre industry. In addition to serving as the director of the National Theatre and his own studio, he is also the artistic director of several theatre festivals.



■ Meng Jinghui is being interviewed



**Wang Jing:** Yes, he is artistic director of five theatre festivals. And these festivals are launching new talents and new works every year, and are providing a platform for young creators. For me, he is not only an artist, a director, but also a guardian of young theatre people, always promoting the new forces of Chinese contemporary theatre.

**Christophe Triaou:** To give our French audience an example, in a place called Wuzhen in China, there is a very important and large-scale theatre festival with Meng Jinghui as the artistic director: the Wuzhen Theatre Festival. There is also Beijing Fringe Festival, for example, which provides opportunities for a lot of young and experimental theatre in China to showcase.

**Meng Jinghui:** Young contemporary theatre creators in China have the same things as we do, but there is also something different. What is different is that they have relatively less grasp of such things as sufferings and macro history. But the same thing is that we all want to innovate, to leave our own voices and traces of art in the world, so as to express ourselves and influence others. Our Beijing Fringe Festival has been presenting ten young directors every year for continuous 14 years. At present, the young theatre directors active on the theatre stages in China are those young creators who emerged ten years ago. So, from this point of view, young people in China actually have a strong desire to express themselves. They want to find a space in the theatre, and the



■ *The Seventh Day* on stage of Avignon

theatre can give them such a space to express themselves. It is true.

**Wang Jing:** And I would also like to add that Beijing Fringe Festival has been cooperating with Avignon-Off Theatre Festival since 2011. Every year, several young troupes have been selected to perform here. On the one hand, we want to show the works of Chinese contemporary theatre artists to European audiences. On the other hand, we hope our young theatre creators can draw inspiration, absorb nourishment, and collide with their peers to create sparks of cooperation. Meanwhile, the festival also invites excellent repertoires from the Avignon-Off Theatre Festival to Beijing every year to meet Chinese audiences. Therefore, this festival is also of great significance for cultural dialogues and exchanges.

**Meng Jinghui:** I think I'm kind of a man of split personality. Sometimes I hope more people could be with me, so we could prepare for the theatre festival together. But sometimes I need to be alone, as a director, to create my own theatre.

**Christophe Triau:** Can we see some recurring forms or themes in Chinese contemporary theatre? What are the issues that young Chinese artists are currently focusing on or that touch their hearts? Do foreign artists who come to China have an influence on them?

**Meng Jinghui:** For these young theatre directors, we need to see two or three of their productions to really find out their interests. They are actually interested in everything. Initially it is often about love affairs, family, things around them. After this stage, they would have the need to express more things and more profound themes. Young theatre directors in China have been oscillating between these two states, but they are also progressing in such oscillation. A director Li Jianjun made a work called *Ah! A Beautiful Day*, in which a dozen amateur actors sat in a row and told their stories at the same time. The audience wore headphones and had different channels in front of them, and they could choose anyone's story to listen to. This work shows great concern for the impact of society on people, while being particularly down-to-earth. And by the end, it is very warm. It is completely free from the petty sentiment, and is very broad, deep and touching. We can even regard it as a portrayal of the Chinese society. And most importantly the audience can choose what they want to hear on the spot. I asked him how he worked with the actors, and Mr. Li said he asked them to say what they were most interested in, what they were least willing to say, who they hated most, etc. In short, the actors were given a lot of questions. Little by little, they gave a very real outlook of society, and these stories form a microcosm of contemporary China. Then there are



■ *The Seventh Day* at the 9th Wuzhen Theatre Festival

also directors like Ding Yiteng, who do classical Chinese works and reinterpret them in a contemporary way.

**Wang Jing:** He will often use texts and themes from traditional Chinese Xiqu, but present them in a new and unique way.

**Christophe Triau:** Pascale, we talk a lot about directing, but in terms of rigorous script-writing, what's the script-writing like in China for playwrights?

**Pascale Wei Guinot:** That's exactly what I want to ask Meng Jinghui, namely, what is the current environment for scriptwriting? Could you please talk about the status of playwrights in Chinese theatre today? It seems that many works are currently created in the form of stage writing, by which I mean, rehearsals while the text is being formed. In recent years, it has become relatively rare to see a director bring to the stage the existing scripts that have been written in advance by the authors, i.e., publish a script first (literary adaptations are not included), and then performed. I've been thinking about something recently: We human beings have a huge library of classical scripts composed of the works of important playwrights from all over the world. Then the works herein have been performed by artists from all round the world, making cultural dialogues possible. Chinese directors have performed many works by Western playwrights, but very few Chinese scripts have been put onto stage by foreign directors. When I worked at Maison Antoine Vitez, a French theatre translation center, it was difficult to select high-quality contemporary Chinese scripts because there were not many plays that really struck a chord. Recently, someone recommended a script of Ding Yiteng to me. I love his work, but it was clear that this text was also a script formed during the rehearsal, not a work written by a playwright. Our center translates scripts so that French theatre directors could read and bring to the stage excellent ones by foreign playwrights, and we hope that more Chinese scripts could be seen. But for now, there seems to be some flaws in view of theatre scripts. We are curious about what on earth Chinese playwrights want to express to the world, and we hope they could contribute to this huge library of classic scripts. In fact, there was a time when there was a surge of playwrights in China. But at present, it seems that the freedom of expression for creators is being practiced more by directors, and the proper attitude of playwrights in writing scripts has vanished. How do you, as a director, view the relationship between directors and scriptwriters in China in a broad sense?

**Meng Jinghui:** In fact, in Konstantin Stanislavsky's time, he was very lucky since there were Gorky, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Mayakovsky and so many other writers writing plays to show that era. He had so many resources to use as

a director. But in our present society, directors usually grow up together with playwrights, face the world and express strong emotions towards people and the world together. Therefore, there must be fewer such cases. And it is a pity that we are not so lucky.

**Wang Jing:** There was a time in China in the 1980s when playwrights and directors cooperated well and good scripts emerged. But now, flaws do exist in our script creation.

**Meng Jinghui:** Right, it is lucky if a director can grow up together with a playwright. But it should never be an excuse of not creating scripts. I said to a group of my friends in literary field, "You guys, write some scrips please". And they said, "Sounds...not bad". In a word, the ideas and power that would come out of contemporary Chinese theatre, literature, and words in art all need our patient waiting. Probably no matter how much an era changes, there will always be some crazy people to do something, and we need to have faith and patience.

**Pascale Wei Guinot:** Maybe there are many good and classic works that we said are lying in the playwright's drawer now.

**Wang Jing:** Maybe they are waiting to be published and read.

**Meng Jinghui:** Perhaps in the next decade, they will spring up like mushrooms.

**Pascale Wei Guinot:** At Association de Recherche des Traditions de l'acteur (ARTA), for a long time, actors are no longer as interested in training sessions that focus on learning basic Xiqu techniques as they once were. But when we invite Xiqu actors to do training with a specific theme, the trainees will be more willing to participate. For example, if the Jingju actors drive the trainees to train through Brecht's works, *King Lear*, *Waiting for Godot* and so on, everyone will be more enthusiastic. I also think it would be great if we could invite Jingju actors to train French actors with contemporary Chinese texts. But unfortunately, there is no such well-known Chinese script.

**Wang Jing:** The excellent Chinese classical scripts haven't been widely spread abroad, either. If we ask European audiences if they can name a Chinese playwright or a Chinese play, I don't think most of them can answer anything. But if we ask the Chinese audience whether they know the name of a certain western playwright, I think everyone will blurt out: Shakespeare, Ibsen, Moliere, Chekhov, and so on.

**Meng Jinghui:** Take it easy. We now have excellent and shining works, works

of intellectual significance, and works that have an impact on the world (literary texts in a broad sense). We just need more time to make them known all over the world.

**Audience Member:** I personally like the works of Yu Hua very much. And I think it would be interesting to discuss life and death in the context of the epidemic. My question is: What do you think is the social responsibility of contemporary theatre? Under the strict control of the epidemic, how can theatre continue to connect with the audience?

**Meng Jinghui:** Chinese theatre is closely connected with storytelling. Often critics will say to some directors, "Do you know why you're not successful, because you are not good at telling stories". I think that the stories about who falls in love with whom, who has gone abroad, who has become an official, who has died, and so on, have been told too much in the stories of talents and beauties, emperors and generals in traditional Chinese Xiqu texts. So nothing interesting. The most important thing is how to tell stories. It would be great if there could be more abstract art and theatre in China! In the Soviet Union in the mid to late 1920s, a group of very beautiful and abstract buildings appeared. I think that under such different conditions in China, artists should seize this opportunity, not necessarily in a realistic way, but in a more artistic and fantastical way, to face this complex world.

**Christophe Triau:** And very often, a lot can be conveyed through the form.

**Meng Jinghui:** Right. At present, the whole world is in chaos. Is your heart in chaos? Then how to show this chaos? This is a test and challenge for artists. How can we maintain the independence and uniqueness of our feelings as well as the freedom to express ourselves in an incomprehensible world.

**Pascale Wei Guinot:** I think we have connected all that we have discussed before. The actors' performances, the poetic quality, the sense of freedom, and the importance of the concept of "fragment" in Meng Jinghui's work. Since I have witnessed the creation of *The Seventh Day*, I could feel these elements very strongly and realized that Meng Jinghui was indeed a poet. For me, this play is a very long poem. Regarding the concept of fragment, in Chinese, any word has many meanings, and they are like free electrons, expressing different meanings depending on how we organize them. The abstract performances are equally important in Meng Jinghui's treatment of the text. In addition, Meng has always worked with his actors and has the freedom of improvisation to a large extent. Once the actors know exactly what they are saying and in which way they are saying it, they could take different performing forms according to

the date and the moment (which did make it a bit tricky for the subtitle writers!). In terms of publishing, we can take a literary work created on the stage as basis, make some minor formatting changes, and publish it. I think that's what we lack most currently.

**Audience Member:** To better understand what you have said, I would like to ask whether this absence of such theatrical texts is due to a lack of script translation and circulation, or a lack of script publication in China? But you said just now that there are still many great texts. Whether there is a lack of them or not? If yes, then why?

**Wang Jing:** We have actually talked about two aspects. In the broad sense of literary creation, there are indeed a lot of good contemporary works in China including novels, poems, essays, and so on. But contemporary playwriting is weak and lacking compared with other literary creations.

**Meng Jinghui:** I think it's a matter of energy. The energy of theatre is not enough, and more efforts are needed. Chinese people mind the introduction, elucidation of the theme, transition to another viewpoint and summing up in their talking and writing. Culture requires communication. How does each of us live? What kind of cultural habits did my ancestors have? What are habits, myths, historical events, dreams and realities? All of these things are complicated. If there is no energy, if we don't have enough energy to pass on to others, then we can't communicate. If we had a little more energy, it would be great.

**Christophe Triau:** You have mentioned alternation, a kind of contest between combination and disassembly, between power and tenderness, which reminds me of *The Seventh Day*. This work retains all the nostalgia, love and reconciliation of Yu Hua's novels, but also at the same time carries a kind of anger and tension that we don't obviously feel while reading. There is combination and editing, the collision and symbiosis of two feelings and two ways of expression in it.

**Audience Member:** You said it is important to stay angry. I would like to ask what did you feel angry about when you were young?

**Meng Jinghui:** When I was young, I felt that everyone owed me something. I had a crazy idea when graduating from college: why won't the Americans let me be a professor in America? I have learned a lot of Chinese knowledge and culture. Why don't Americans know me? I had so many strange ideas then. And some people even asked me, "Why are you so arrogant?" When I graduated from college, my girlfriend and I went to watch a mime performance

at the Exhibition Hall theatre in Beijing, and it was very badly performed. They tilted their heads and stretched their arms upwards when they wanted to show hope. The whole performance was very superficial and problematic. I was so angry that I kept discussing and complaining with my girlfriend during the show until the rest of the audience felt uncomfortable and stopped me. After the show, my girlfriend also broke up with me. In fact, the anger of youth is for no reason. It is the growth of youth, a rebellion against the perception of society. It is even not profound, and perhaps just a physical sensation. But the body of an excellent artist has memories. Their hunger, overeating, nightmares, etc., will resurface one day in the future. Now the living conditions seem to have improved. We don't need to worry about the basic problems of food and clothing, and can communicate in a decent and dignified manner. But beyond that, everything that disturbs the artist's mind, and his constant knowledge of the world, still makes him angry.

**Audience Member:** You have talked about your anger during youth. Then how do you view the audience's anger towards your work?

**Meng Jinghui:** After attending the Avignon Theatre Festival in 2019, *Teahouse* returned to the Poly Theatre in Beijing and performed five times. During one performance, someone stood up from the audience and shouted for a refund. The actors paused for two seconds then, and the air in the theatre was as if it had frozen instantly. However, that was actually the best performance of *Teahouse* because the audience and the actors formed an antagonistic relationship. More than a hundred people went out to refund, and at first I said no to the producer, and said let it go. And then the producer said, "Please, you're the artist, but if anything happens, the blame is on me". Later, after refunding, half of them left and the other half chatted angrily in the hall. When there were finally only about ten people left, I went out and gave them a talk about the *Teahouse*. After listening, they went back to watch it again. In fact, the relationship between the audience and the actors has been much better in this era. In the past, when surrealist films were released, director Brunel even had stones in his pocket and waited behind the film screen. When the audience got up in arms, he would throw stones. To be honest, I really like the angry state of the audience. I once made a Shakespeare play in Hong Kong where there was an intermission three minutes after the opening act and no break for two and a half hours after that. For me, we are not responsible for an audience that does not seek progress.

**Audience Member:** As for the audiences at Avignon Theatre Festival, you don't need to be afraid because we are audiences "who like to be angry". A few years ago at a show, some people left their seats in anger and came out



noisily from the Palais des Papes (Papal Palace). But we didn't care about them at all, because the audience that stayed were somehow the best. They totally belonged to that show and could even have a better viewing experience! So at Avignon, there is no problem with anger. I've seen your *Teahouse* and it's great. You start it with the background of an ordinary person, just like *The Seventh Day*, and then you go beyond it. Of course, not only the text, but also the voice and so on. Everything you do on the stage is very important. Maybe some people couldn't stand it, but when they get used to it, they will be full of enthusiasm. Thank you and I hope you will come back to Avignon again because your work is very interesting. We don't like things without power or appeal, and we also don't like to just "read" scripts. Since there are text for reading, we don't want to go to the theatre to hear the scripts read out without emotions!

**Meng Jinghui:** Thank you!

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# The Metropolitan Living Space: On the Emotional Pattern of Yu Rongjun's Works

HU Zhiyi

Yu Rongjun, chief artistic director of Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center (SDAC), has created several dozens of works, including plays, xiqu, musicals, physical theatres, and dramatic scripts. This paper focuses only on his plays, which mainly manifest within metropolitan living spaces, such as *Last Winter*, *WWW.COM*, *The Salty Taste of Cappuccino*, *Das Kapital*, *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven*, *Behind the Lies*, *Perfume*, *Midnight Havana*, *Activated Carbon*, *The Crowd*, and his recent work *House Guest*.

With most of his plays produced and successful to different extents, Yu Rongjun clearly grasps his own secret for success. Instead of writing scripts for the sake of the script, he starts from the theatre and moves onto the script, before returning to the theatre. Yu Rongjun is an optimistic gentleman by nature, a personality reflected in his plays. He usually depicts in his plays the living space of metropolitan city citizens within Shanghai. Presented from the perspective of ordinary people's daily life, his plays have a kind of tenderness, a kind of emotional pattern, that has since become a calling card for his theatrical presentation. Such tenderness or emotional patterns shown through the living space of the metropolitan city of Shanghai may just be his secret for success. This paper discusses Yu Rongjun's plays from two perspectives: the



■ Yu Rongjun

metropolitan space and the emotional pattern of his plays.

## I. Living Space of Metropolis

The metropolitan living shown in Yu Rongjun's plays is not always inherent. However, the setting has become increasingly common in his works and the following will focus upon these productions.

I first watched Yu Rongjun's play *Last Winter* starring Xu Chengxian. The play relates the story of house renting in Shanghai, a typical story about city life, also presented in Ding Xilin's *Compression* and Chen Baichen's *Wedding March* (though with different themes). The two plays depict the young's resistance against the "compression" of the landlord and the united resistance of young men and women. However, Yu Rongjun focuses on young love and the loneliness of old age.

In the play, Lu Shaofeng, a retired performer of the theatre, is a man of the stage. He does not recognize his living conditions or his loneliness until the death of his wife. Thus, he rents out his house on the condition that the tenant has time to chat with the landlord so that he can might speak with the tenant and ease his loneliness.



■ *Last Winter*

Selected in the book *Selected Scripts of Chinese Drama over the Century*, WWW.COM manifests the emotional issues of metropolitan people in a network era. Yu Rongjun claimed that this play, simple and old-fashioned as it is, bears his concern about Shanghai. (Yu Rongjun: "Art



■ *House Guest*

and Religion—from *WWW.COM*," *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P82) *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven* manifests the surviving anxiety, loneliness, and hopelessness of people in their city life, who are at the edge of being sent to the insane asylum anytime for one reason or another. *The Salty Taste of Cappuccino* depicts city people's reflection on family, marriage, and love through three stories, manifesting the mental state of city people about their being and lives. Directed by He Nian, *Das Kapital* manifests the relationship between capital and performing arts through the direct appeal for capital financing from the characters in the play to the audience.

Certain aspects of metropolitan life have been shown in other plays, including *Behind the Lies*, *Perfume*, *Midnight Havana*, and *Activated Carbon*. Taking *Behind the Lies* as an example, the playwright wrote, "The setting of the story changed to South America, Venezuela to be specific, when the rehearsals began. With the story's extension suddenly broadened, the play possesses more universality and imagination, though with a weakened representation of city, depicting a story happening in an interrogation room". (Yu Rongjun: "Behind the Lies-Postscript", *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P204) This play explores the relationship between a policeman of the interrogation room and a doctor who calls himself a surgeon. The policeman later discovers the doctor is actually a psychiatrist. There's dramatic connection between the interrogator and the interrogated. The policeman, who is actually the lover of the doctor's wife, is making love with the wife before the doctor arrives, causing the wife to have a heart attack; *Perfume* is set in three cities of Shanghai, Paris, and Deauville. The playwright said, "*Perfume* is written to arouse city people's memory of real life." (Yu Rongjun: "Behind the Lies-Postscript", *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P261) The story is about the "only" luxury priced perfume, prompting Yin Wen to mistake Chen Xi for the lover of An Hao (currently calling himself Paul). But Chen Xi's lover is actually the real Paul, a French perfumer. With An Hao missing, Yin Wen and Chen Xi travel to Deauville, where they find not Paul, but An Hao instead. *Midnight Havana* manifests the city's nightlife. The playwright said, "Every city has its real side. With flashy rushing daytime fading away, and the superficial mannered fakeness torn apart, the nighttime of the city presents its natural reality." (Yu Rongjun: "Behind the Lies-Postscript", *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P316)

*Activated Carbon* is a story set in Tokyo in the *Last Winter* of Yu Rongjun's *Winter of Two Cities*. The playwright remarked that the play manifests

young peoples' struggling for their lives in the city and the elder generation's helplessness towards life and their reflection on history. (Yu Rongjun: "*Behind the Lies*·Postscript", *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P371). The play depicts the relationship among Dong Xiongshan, his daughter Dong Mixue and son-in-law Chen Zilai. Dong Mixue and Chen Zilai have actually divorced, but Mixue asks Chen Zilai to pretend that their marriage remains intact when her father visits Shanghai from the mine in order to preserve an amicable atmosphere. The reason Dong Xiongshan visits Shanghai is to apologize to his former love for his lack of confessing his true feelings when Mei Yingxue was denounced during Cultural Revolution. However, when Dong Xiongshan finally finds Mei Yingxue with the help of Chen Zilai, he couldn't relate his words until he claims his mine back.

*The Crowd* relates the story of a boy whose mother was beaten to death by laborers during Cultural Revolution. As the boy matures, he searches for the murderer, intent on revenge, only to discover the murderer's son who tells him that his father committed suicide after he left the hospital in 1987. This play involves many cities: the violent setting of Chongqing during Cultural Revolution, whose tragic scene, though rarely shown in plays, is vividly presented by the playwright. The whoring scandal related to a judge from Shanghai is also one of the issues connected through the characters in



■ *The Crowd*

the play; the unlawful assembly occupying the center of Hong Kong is also presented by the scriptwriter. The theme of *The Crowd* is shown through this series of issues.

Produced for the Shanghai Oriental Art Center, *House Guest* is considered to be the best among his recent works, though Yu Rongjun disagrees. The author also disagrees, because this play contains the typical feature of Yu Rongjun's plays, but not necessarily anything more than usual. *House Guest* asks who is the host and who is the guest in a family. The play discusses the fate of three characters: Ma Shitu (played by Zhang Xianheng), Mo Sangwan (played by Song Yining) and Xia Mantian (played by Xu Chengxian). The question of who is the host and who is the guest in a family might also apply to a country as for who is the host and who is the guest.

*House Guest* comprises three acts, with Ma Shitu and Mo Sangwan having totally different identities and Xia Mantian's remaining the same. In the first act, Ma Shitu is a believer in emancipation, a "returner", Mo Sangwan is a laid-off textile worker, and Xia Mantian seems to be Mo Sangwan's soul mate, judging from the hint of their names in a Chinese poem, though the character only appears once without certain identity. In the second act, Ma Shitu is an "intruder", the vice-general manager of Tangshan Steel Company, while Mo Sangwan is the professor of Shanghai International Studies University and Xia Mantian is the deputy director general of Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism and Xiqu performer. In the third act, Ma Shitu transforms into an unidentified "mystery". Among the three acts, the second is the bulk of the play which includes eight scenes to fully develop the plot, while the first and the third can be regarded as the prologue and epilogue.

If the family matter of "who is the host and who is the guest" can be elevated to the national level, the fate of individuals and families is determined by that of the country in the play. Ultimately, the fate of any individual or family can be changed with the country's fate.

## II. Emotional Pattern of His Plays

Most of Yu Rongjun's plays echo with young people living in metropolitan cities, a result, perhaps, of his young age and young mind. He focuses on an emotional pattern founded in the living space of young metropolitans, which arouses empathy and resonates among the young audience in Shanghai.

His plays, including *Last Winter*, *WWW.COM*, *The Salty Taste of Cappuccino*, *Das Kapital*, *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven*, *Behind the Lies*, *Perfume*, *Midnight Havana*, *Activated Carbon*, *The Crowd*, *House Guest*, all employ the same emotional patterns.

*Last Winter* centers around a young couple renting house, and depicts the emotional exchanges between the young and the old. The old would call his late wife after his communication with the young, which shows the loneliness of the old.

*WWW.COM* finds its way through network conversation. Ai Yang under the nickname of "Fisherman's Tears", Cheng Zhuo under the nickname of "Trapped Beast in a City", Xia Yan, a college student majoring in French in University of Foreign Languages, and Sean, a Chinese food restaurant owner in Los Angeles USA talk about matters including love and career on the internet.

Perhaps a summation of the work appears from Cheng Zhuo: The city is a grassland with crisis everywhere.

*The Salty Taste of Cappuccino* comprises three stories. Yu Rongjun stated, "The three stories are closely linked intrinsically with no direct connection in the plot, though. The play depicts the relationship between middle-aged men and women in the city including marriage, emotion, family, and career through simple characters." (Yu Rongjun: "*The Salty Taste of Cappuccino*' Postscript", *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven—Selected works of Yu Rongjun*, Shanghai Jinxiu Article Press, 2008, P157).

*The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven* centers around the conversations of a group of the insane, taking place in the director's office at the insane asylum, and manifesting the emotional lose of city people.

Wu Suo: ...Look, have you noticed that people on the street, who do not know each other, yet share a common goal, ...which is money. ...On this street are these people, floating in the disappointment with flushed face and heavy breath!

*Das Kapital* reaches out to the audience through capital investment, forming an emotional interaction.

In *Behind the Lies*, both the doctor and the policeman confess during the interrogation their feelings towards the doctor's wife (who had been killed), and speak on living in the city, forming an emotional pattern between the interrogator and the interrogated.

Doctor: I cannot sleep without her. You know, she is the reason that I stay in this city, this cold city. She means everything to me.

*Perfume* employs the perfume as the emotional media between lovers in the city, captivating women with mistaken feelings.

Yin Wen: Night in Shanghai is charming and real. However, the past year was like a distant dream to me. I even wondered whether it really happened?

In *Midnight Havana*, the scriptwriter writes a memo: The night here in the city is being restricted, and concentrated in the dreamy scent of the bars and the perfume. Gradually, the darkening city is disappearing in our sight.

At the end of *The Activated Carbon*, set during a snowfall, the city is filled with joyous and melodious songs for the new year.

In *The Crowd*, the crow has become the leading image of the whole play. The beginning and the end present allegory about a crow drinking water, changing the whole play into an allegory. It presents the city of Hong Kong through flashback.

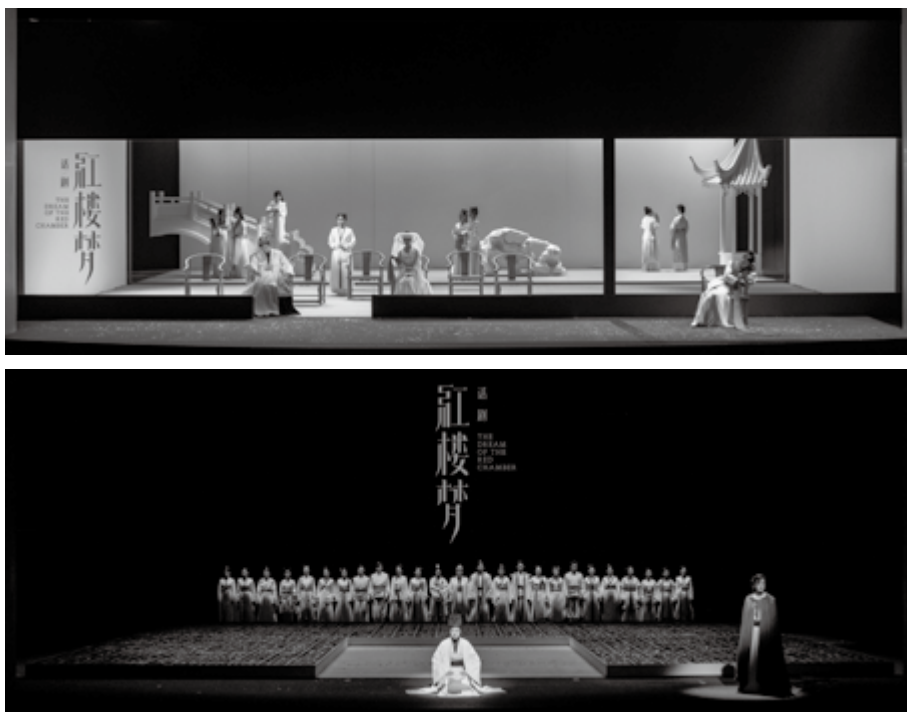
Man number 3: Out of the window, under this twenty-story building is the ground that holds up the city, which is concrete and damp, stretching into a mass. In the places separated by the iron fences standing on the ground sit masses of people, who extend to the distance without an edge. It packs this silent city in the night.

The image of *The Crowd* is manifested here. The setting then switches back to Chongqing, with the violence in Chongqing also the violence of "the crowd" and the millennium carnival in Shanghai a celebration of "the crowd", manifesting the scriptwriter's emotional pattern of sympathy. The story goes back to Hong Kong at its close.

*House Guest* adopts a two-way theme and structure, a hypothesis and a reality, so resulting in an emotional form full of allegories.

As the writer proposed in the preface, its theme is "an educated gentleman cannot but be resolute and broad-minded, for he has taken up a heavy responsibility and a long course". As the educated characters in the play, Mo Sangwan and Xia Mantian retain the responsibility to guide and enlighten, presented through imperceptible emotional patterns with Ma Shitu being the subject of both guidance and enlightenment. However, such guidance and enlightenment is a failure for the singing crowd. (However, an attitude is presented at least, which is to elevate the audience to the level of Chekhov, not





■ *The Dream of the Red Chamber*  
Photographed by Yin Xuefeng

the opposite.)

The stage setting is a single foreign-style house in Shanghai, forming an independent space. The door on the right side of the stage (seen from the audience's view) is the access to the stage for the characters. The subtitle for the singing of each scene is projected inside the house.

The stage design in the play connects the hypothesis of the stage with that of life. The house firstly belongs to the stage. Therefore, the demolishing of the house constantly mentioned in the play represents real life. As the house hangs above the stage, musicians playing the violoncello, accordion, and guitar appear within the setting, a representation of the stage. Ma Shitu refuses to leave Shanghai in the end, allowing the stage to begin again, fresh. With the whole play being a hypothesis, the stage becomes an assumption; an allegorical emotional pattern.

Due to the limited length of this paper, there some of Yu Rongjun's creations have been left unexplored, such as *Women in Their Forties*, *Super Responsibility*, *Winter of Two Cities*, *Drifting*, *New York Subway at Three AM*, *Angel in Wheelchair*, *Sigh to the Sky*, and *Floating Life*, most of which also manifest the living space of a metropolis.

Yu Rongjun wrote about fishermen, such as *Big Brother*; and plays that haven't been set to stage yet, such as *A lifelong Journey*. The adaptation works of Yu Rongjun are also a highlight of his success, such as *Love in a Fallen City (new version)* adapted from Zhang Ailing's novel, which fits the research question of this paper most: it centers around life in Shanghai, though the latter part of this play centers about Hong Kong. Yu Rongjun's adapted works also include *The Piano in a Factory* adapted from the film, *Blind Massage* adapted from Bi Feiyu's novel of the same name, 1977 adapted from the film of the same name, and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* adapted from the Chinese classical novel; Other adapted works such as *Jane Eyre* adapted from the novel of British novelist Charlotte Bronte and *The Count of Monte Cristo* adapted from French novelist Alexandre Dumas' novel of the same name also drew the attention of audiences all around. I have watched his *Love in A Fallen City (new version)*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and others. Most of his works have been translated into English, Japanese, Turkish, Bosnian, Hebrew, among other languages.

Yu Rongjun's plays are popular and well-received among city audiences, who not only feel the themes he tries to express, but also witness the realistic depictions of metropolitan living and the emotional nuances and patterns that come with it.

## A Brief Introduction to the Sources of Yu Rongjun's Works

LI Guchuan

Up to now, the famous playwright Yu Rongjun has created more than seventy stage works (including dramas, musicals, operas, Xiqu, dance dramas, physical theatre, and translated plays, etc.), many of which have been translated and staged by domestic and foreign theatres into more than ten languages, including English, Japanese, German, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, Turkish, Italian, Dutch, Romanian and Hebrew.

Throughout his works, drama still accounts for the vast majority. If his early works were born out of the impulse of expression, as he entered the mature stage of creation, his drama works gradually showed a good mastery of dramatic scriptwriting. On the basis of this, he continues to explore and innovate, forming his own artistic individuality and style.

The artistic individuality of Yu Rongjun's drama works cannot be separated from the turning point when he embarked on the path of scriptwriting. Many people may not know that he was once a medical student. In his junior year, he was simply an ordinary audience member. After watching *Othello*, he instantly had the idea of entering the circle of drama after graduation.

But it was an impulse to express that really drove him to take up the pen to write. On the Mid-Autumn Festival in the first year of working at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, Yu Rongjun, who was away from home and working alone in Shanghai, had the desire to express his homesickness after listening to a concert from the Inner Mongolia Orchestra at the Shanghai Concert Hall. After returning to his dormitory, he picked up his pen and wrote the first phrase of his playwriting, "go all lengths (wu suo gu ji in Chinese Pinyin)". This informed how he wrote all of his subsequent scripts, that is, to have the impulse, to have the feeling, and then "just do it".



■ *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven*

*The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven* was Yu's first play. It was first written in 1997. After working at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre for just two years, he drew inspiration from real-life events and wrote a play called *Go All Lengths*. Since he hadn't expected it to actually be performed on the stage, it can be

said that his creation of this time was completely free without any restrictions.

In 2001, *Go All Lengths* was renamed *The Insane Asylum is Next Door to Heaven* and premiered at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center. It told the story of a group of common people that made the audience know not whether laugh or cry, and one of the main characters named Wu Suo, another named Gu Ji, whose names combined to make the original name of the play. Immediately after its premiere, it became a classic of experimental drama of the Shanghai School. Since then, the Shanghai Drama Art Centre has rehearsed it twice in 2010 and 2019, each time endowing it with the characteristics of the times.

## I. Focusing on Contemporary Urban Life and Drawing Inspiration from It

The inspiration of the scriptwriter is often a kind of idea flickering in the moment, and is very illusory. But such kind of flicker comes from their thinking habits, from their work and life, and is the accumulation of real-life experiences. Most of Yu's plays focus on contemporary urban life, drawing inspiration from it and exploring the relationships between people. In his opinion, his creation inspiration comes from life and people. As he has said, "When I get along with people, I find that they are always related to my creation, whether it is a conversation, a reading, or a feeling after watching a performance, all of which can trigger my inspiration".

The inspiration for the drama *The Captain* came from Yu's personal experiences. Childhood memories and homesickness have always been the motifs of creation for him. Growing up in the countryside, Yu Rongjun always had a good impression of the rural landscape in his mind: the four distinct seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter, the blue sky, and the green grass, all were natural, neat and clean.

After arriving in Shanghai and coming into contact with such a bustling, lively and crowded city, he started to feel that his hometown was somewhat out of reach, and his impression of it began to become blurred. Just as Lu Xun has written in *The Hometown*, "The old house is getting farther and farther away from me". But when he went back one spring, his good impression of the hometown was shattered in a flash. There were only old people and children left in the village. The roads were wider but less tidy, and the ditches were overgrown and untended. Such a huge contrast indicated that an old countryside is gradually disappearing and a new one is taking its shape.

Yu's drama *The Salty Taste of Cappuccino* created in 2007 was also inspired by life. At that time, cappuccino was very popular in Shanghai, especially among the white-collar workers. About the "salty taste", Yu Rongjun thought it was the most basic taste in life, and when we taste the coffee carefully, we could find that salty taste between the bitter and the sweet. A third of espresso, a third of milk, then a third of milk foam, and finally a little cinnamon, together make a cup of fragrant cappuccino.

The application of these symbols into the dram helped to form three different scenes. In the first scene, a woman's child died. Seeing this was like tasting a

■ The poster of *The Salty Taste of Cappuccino*



cup of bitter coffee. In the second scene, a man came home from meeting with his extramarital lover and wanted to divorce his wife who was not at home. This was like the cup of milk. So how to make a cup of cappuccino? Yu decided to make the third scene a two-person play, which was inspired by the episode of the song *Send In The Clowns* from the Broadway musical *A Little Night Music*.

This song was originally about the awkward scene of a couple of lovers meeting after many years, and for them, many things in life couldn't be sorted out normally. This was also what he wanted to express. Returning home from work one day, he played this song on a loop from five to ten o'clock, and created the third scene of the meeting of the two, which was to be the salty taste of the cappuccino.

## II. Focusing on the Temperament of Intellectuals

Yu Rongju tends to tell the truth from details in his works. In addition to urban life as his source of inspiration, the spirit of "Shi", which is unique to intellectuals, also supports his creations. The traditional patriotism of the "Shi" is their most valuable quality. The westerners used to call intellectuals "the backbone of the society", showing the status and importance of them. Yu also shared this sense of responsibility and patriotism, and therefore, his works often involve a reflection on society.

In 2011, he went to Zhoushan to collect some manifestations of the local culture. But what he found was that some fishing villages were disappearing, while some small islands were being developed. The road had become wider, and people had become richer. But something had been lost. Yu posited that it was the habits, the culture, the memories, and the traditions of the locals.

Looking at the unfamiliar islands of Zhoushan, he remembered the feeling of his hometown when he was a child. There are many similarities in this state of human existence, and then he connected these, gain and loss, tradition and memory which pushed him to create *The Captain*. Yu said that when he saw such scenes, he thought, "I'm in this profession, and if I don't write about these feelings, I'll be a little bit ashamed of myself. This may be the fundamental reason why I wrote this play".

Therefore, he used the technique of magic-realism to present a story of a man with fish, with himself, with nature, with society and with history. At the beginning, Feng Guoliang, a former captain, insists on returning to the island

which would soon be developed into a bathing centre, and from here he recalls his memorable experiences on the island. Yu boldly created an impressive plot where Feng went to look for the warmth between people and the ocean and between people in the past, called for the old hometown, and finally went to the sea to ask the fish for forgiveness and pray for the future of the descendants.

It can be said that the drama *House Guest* is Yu Rongjun's most remarkable work for the care of the intellectuals' sentiments. "Intellectuals of my father's generation have experienced ten years of turmoil, reform and opening up, and have faced tremendous social changes". Their fate has always been closely linked to the fate of the country, and their own emotions are also worthy of attention.

With this idea in mind, Yu spent nearly half a year reading a dozen books on intellectuals, exploring what intellectuals were like in different historical periods from ancient times to the present. He said, "Nowadays, intellectuals are sometimes more like guests in our country, but they used to claim that they were masters. Now they are old, and become guests instead. This is the relationship between people and society in *House Guest*". Yu said that this script was largely created on a plane trip, and this feeling of being a "guest" was extremely strong during his cross-country journey.

### III. The Narrative Leap in Adapted Works

Among Yu Rongjun's numerous drama works, many of them are adapted from novels, films and TV series. His adaptations do not simply change the way of performance and narrative, but pay greater attention to the delicate expressions of personal emotions of the characters in original works, and uses the unique expressions on the drama stage to superimpose narrative leaps on the original emotional expressions, thus realizing the innovation of the adapted works.

The drama *The Crowd* is adapted according to Ibsen's play *Enemies of the People* and is a true story. Before his creation, Yu Rongjun did a lot of thinking and studied a lot of group movements to analyze why people are fanatical - Why did they lose their minds? How did the group movements come about? Will this mania take a different form after many years? Is it possible that it continues to exist and survive, or is it still latent? Is it possible to explore the relationship between individuals and groups from a historical perspective? That is to say, what are the particularities and blind spots of people in their social

activities?

There is a record in the *Guan Zi*, "The crowd may share a common interest and may have a pleasant talk at first. But they cannot avoid attacking each other in the end. So keeping an appropriate distance is of great importance". Based on much thinking, Yu determined to interpret all this from the perspective of "the relationship between individuals and groups". The phrase "the crowd" popped into his mind, and became the name of his play.

Since *The Crowd* explores the relationship between the individual and the group, Yu wanted to keep the audience at a distance from the drama to appreciate it. He wanted to keep the audience calm, rational, and judicious, and not become fanatical, paranoid, or irrational. In the theatre, this attempt is actually rather risky. Because he wanted the audience to be interrupted all the time while watching, so that they could feel the "discomfort". He tried to use all kinds of stage cues, such as pauses, silences, sound effects or changes in lighting, to achieve this effect of maintaining a distance from the audience.

For him, the drama *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is like a dream about reality performed on a stage. Sometimes it is very heavy, reflecting the cruelty of reality. While in other instances it can be very light, like an illusory dream. Adapting *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is by no means an easy task. It is necessary to find the right angle, to change the flow of the narrative, to reflect the characteristics of the drama stage, and to resonate with the audience.

Yu Rongjun said that Cao Xueqin (the author of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*) was "cruel", because he directly told us the end of the story at the very beginning. Since the fate of the characters is doomed, whether they choose to comply or resist, everything has been already predetermined. So what matters is not the result, but the process. It doesn't really matter if Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu are together or not. What is important is the mental journey they go through with the audience and readers during this process.

Yu said of this, "I want to establish a connection with the audience through the medium of drama. And this connection is sometimes the confrontation, sometimes dialogue, and sometimes even a 'provocation'. But I think this is something I have to face in the process of creation, and I can't always follow the audience and lose my own thinking".

The screenwriter communicates with the audience through the script. To turn the pictures in their minds into dialogues on the stage, they need years of careful observation and personal experience of life, and to draw inspiration from it. Only in this way can the audience experience and grow with characters on





■ *The Dream of the Red Chamber*  
 Photographed by Yin Xuefeng

the stage.

According to Yu Rongjun, following tradition is not a criterion for judging the art of theatre, nor can it be a necessary requirement that contemporary theatres should obey or for attracting the audience. In his view, "Tradition is actually a trap that allures us creators to insist on copying and stops us from active innovation. And it will make us intoxicated with this elegant fun we are engaged in. Theatre art should be an expression and reflection of society, and it should be sharp and direct". Theatre should be a dynamic process that takes place in a specific context, and for drama and theatre art, tradition is sometimes there for us to break down.

*LI GUCHUAN*

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# A Study on the Overseas Performance History of Chinese Contemporary Xiqu Troupes

LI Chengwei

In the more than 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), save for special periods such as the 10-year "Cultural Revolution" and the recent "COVID -19" pandemic, the overseas dissemination of Chinese Xiqu can be broadly divided into three stages. The first is the initial "ice-breaking period" at the beginning of the founding of PRC. The second is the "development period" after the reform and beginning of the new period. The third is the "boom period" before and after entering the New Era (around 2012).

## I. Hardships and Initial Development in the Early Years of PRC Founding

Under a difficult situation wherein there existed only 24 diplomatic allies, and supported by the "Culture Going Before Diplomacy" policy, China approved a non-governmental troupe to travel to Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina, four countries that had not established diplomatic relations, in an effort to conduct cultural exchanges. This move opened up a new dimension in China's foreign affairs and lauded much praise. Afterwards, the art of Chinese opera has been gradually endowed with an unprecedented social responsibility.

During the initial years of PRC's founding, after gradual exploration and practice, the four-step pattern of "Culture Going Before Diplomacy", "Establishing Diplomatic Relations", "Signing Cultural Exchange Agreements" and "Strengthening Cultural Exchanges and Consolidating Friendly Relations" gradually formed. Among all the cases, exchange between China and Japan was exemplary due to the war between the two sides in the "Second World

War" (WW ). In 1956, a Chinese Jingju Visiting Delegation traveled to Japan for folk cultural exchange. Then on September 29, 1972, diplomatic relations were established between China and Japan. In 1978, the two sides signed the "Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship", and on December 6, 1979, the Agreement on Cultural Exchange. Following these landmark agreements, the two sides have opened an era of frequent exchanges, and there occur many performances in Japan to commemorate the "normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Japan", such as (1) The "10th Anniversary" in 1982: Beijing Jingju Troupe from April 6 to June 4 and China (Shandong) Jingju Troupe from September 4 to October 7 (both went to perform in Japan). (2) The "20th Anniversary" in 1992: Beijing Jingju Joint Performance Troupe from January 19 to February 29, Qinqiang Troupe of Shaanxi Opera Research Institute from May 16 to June 19, Sichuan Opera Troupe from May 21 to June 7, Zhejiang Shaoxing Opera Troupe from September 13 to 21, and Art Exchange Performance Troupe of Shanxi Opera in October. (3) The "25th Anniversary" in 1997: *the Records of the Three Kingdoms* Performance Troupe of Beijing Jingju Theatre in May, the Monkey King Jingju Art Troupe of Beijing Jingju Theatre in October, and the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Autumn all went to perform in Japan. (4) The "30th Anniversary" in 2022: Chinese Jingju Theatre from February 9 to April 30, China Youth Jingju Art Troupe from July 17 to 25, and Fujian Provincial Jingju Theatre from September 29 to October 27 all went to perform in Japan. The paths of cultural exchange with other countries follow a similar pattern.

In order to better break the ice in foreign affair situations, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the central government set up a large number of national troupes dedicated towards foreign cultural exchanges such as the "China Youth Cultural Troupe", "China Art Troupe", "Chinese Cultural and Art Delegation", "Chinese Cultural Delegation", "Chinese Ethnic Art Troupe", "Chinese Ethnic Minority Art Troupe", "Comprehensive Performance Troupe of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission", "Chinese Xiqu Song and Dance Troupe" and "Chinese Classical Song and Dance Troupe", etc. Most of these troupes are comprehensive art troupes composed of the most outstanding representative artists of various genres. They are selected in accordance with the actual needs of diplomatic work and the actual situation of the target countries. Among them, "Chinese Art Troupe" received the most attention, existed for the longest time, made the most visits and, perhaps, resulted in the greatest impact. It has accompanied national leaders on many visits, and has also been invited by leaders of friendly countries to perform. The art of Chinese Xiqu, a treasure of excellent traditional Chinese culture, has an irreplaceable position in it.

More importantly, the Party Central Committee of CPC and the central government have also established special Xiqu troupes to perform abroad in the name of the Chinese Nation, such as "China Yueju Troupe", "China Youth Jingju Troupe", "China Jingju Troupe", "China Cantonese Yueju Troupe", "China Teochew Troupe", "China Chuanju Art Troupe", and "China Jingju Small Troupe". Among all of these troupes, the "China Yueju Troupe" was the first troupe to carry out a visiting performance abroad on China's behalf. In 1955, the late Premier Zhou Enlai gave instructions: "In view of the agreements on cultural exchanges signed with the prime ministers of the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Germany (GDR), Yueju troupes will be sent to these two countries from July to September for visiting performances. The repertoires will be *Romance of the Western Chamber* and *Butterfly Lovers*, with Yuan Xuefen, Xu Yulan, Zhang Guifeng and Lv Ruiying playing the former, and Fan Ruijuan, Fu Quanxiang and Zhang Guifeng playing the latter. And it is better to prepare a piece of highlight and come to Beijing later for rehearsal."<sup>1</sup> Eventually, the two were performed in Berlin, GDR, and Novosibirsk, USSR, from July 2 to September 11, 1955, for a total of 37 performances over 70 days, with approximately 42,600 people attending the performances.

## II. Rapid Development and Boom Since the Reform and Globalization

In 1978, with reform and globalization, the development of Chinese society entered a "new period", and the development of culture also ushered in numerous fantastic opportunities. With the rapid development of various diplomatic causes, the overseas performances of Chinese Xiqu trend vigorously towards development. In the following forty years, foreign development strategies such as "Chinese Culture Going Global", "Belt and Road Initiative", and "Strengthening China's Cultural Soft Power" have found implementation. Concurrently, domestic supporting policies like *Several Policies on Supporting the Inheritance and Development of Traditional Chinese Xiqu* have also been issued. As a result, an unprecedented degree of attention has been paid to traditional culture, creating a favorable environment for it both internally and externally, and thus a boom in overseas performances of Chinese Xiqu

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1 袁雪芬. 求索人生艺术的真谛 [M]. 上海: 上海辞书出版社, 2002: 42.[Yuan Xuefen. Seeking the True Meaning of the Art of Life [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press, 2002: 42.]

occured. Although the tendency of government domination still exists, the ideal development of self-reliance has not been achieved, and shaking the status of Western theatre in Europe and the United States is still impossible. However, there has indeed been a number of promising phenomena compared to the past.

### 1. Multiple Performance Troupes Co-exist

One of the factors in the gradual decline of foreign cultural exchange activities from those "National Troupes" mentioned above in the 1980s and 1990s was the rise of other troupes. Provincial representative troupes such as "Beijing Jingju Joint Performance Troupe", "Beijing Jingju Art Joint Visiting Troupe to Japan", "Performance Troupe to Japan of Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture", "Shanghai Art Troupe", "Tianjin Jingju Art Troupe", "Yunnan Jingju Art Troupe" and "Guangdong Cantonese Yueju Delegation" appeared alternately. Star troupes such as the China National Jingju Theatre, Beijing Jingju Theatre, Shanghai Jingju Theatre and Northern Kunju Theatre gradually became headlining troupes. With National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts as the vanguard, Xiqu academies also gradually showed their comprehensive abilities. Local troupes like the Quanzhou Dacheng Troupe in Fujian Province also took spotlight in local areas. Under the leadership and support of the CPC and the State, Chinese theatre presented a team cooperation tendency of multi-level, multi-type, and multi-genre troupes.

### 2. Frequent Overseas Commercial Performance Invitations

In terms of data on Chinese Xiqu performances worldwide, Asia remains the most, with Singapore and Japan being the most prominent (most likely due to the Chinese audiences living there). The Min dialect (Hokkien) and Cantonese dialect have contributed greatly to the flourishing of Singapore opera, but most impressive is the frequent commercial invitations to perform Xiqu in Singapore. The Shanghai Yueju Theatre, Fujian Zhangzhou Xiangju<sup>1</sup> Troupe, Guangdong Chaoju Troupe, and Guangdong Cantonese Yueju Troupe were often invited by entertainment producers to perform in Singapore, and the Dunhuang Theatre (known as Chinese Theatre Circle locally) has also held "Singapore Local Theatre Festival (Exhibition)" numerous times. Even grassroots troupes such as the Hibiscus Chuanju Troupe in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, have been invited three times by Nippon Cultural Foundation. As such, it is clear that traditional Chinese Xiqu has begun to occupy a market share in some overseas regions.

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1 Xiangju: A local Xiqu genre popular in Taiwan and southern Fujian. [Translator's note]

### 3. The Emergence of Two Hot Events

In recent years, there have been two hot issues in the overseas spread of Xiqu. One is the overseas tour of Bai Xiangyong's youthful version of *The Pony Pavilion*, and the other is the performance of Zhang Huoding's team from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in North America, both of which have received much attention for their success and popularity. The former has become a model for the legacy and innovation of traditional Xiqu repertoire. The latter also received official praise, along with some criticism. Most of the criticism is due to its huge expenses and slanderous propaganda. Zhang Dinghuo himself is actually excellent, but comparisons of him to Mei Lanfang caused unfair discussion and even ridicule. Previous and subsequent overseas performances have not faced such similar censure, since they have all adopted a "big-ego" style of promotion that focused on the collective and the team. The contribution of it shouldn't be ignored. In light of the current situation faced by Chinese Xiqu, anything that can arouse scholars' research, social discussion, and the government's attention might be considered to have made a difference.

### 4. Overseas Performances Contribute to Domestic Development

As Lou Sheng won first place in the 30th Plum Performance Award, the China Theatre Association launched the call for "Chinese Theatre World Learning from Zhejiang Wuju<sup>1</sup> Theatre" after a full investigation. The Zhejiang Wuju Research Institute thus elevated itself into a well-known troupe. With a detailed study of its course of becoming famous, the author believes that much of the success derives from its reputation in early overseas performances. The Zhejiang Wuju Theatre visited 49 countries and regions in five continents, with a total of more than 300 performances and an audience of about 4.5 million. There were government assignments and even more commercial invitations. The managers of the theatre shifted their focus to publicity, and with the international success they enjoyed, they can find matching, or even better, success at domestically. Thus its extraordinary strength has been reflected and a brand effect has been formed, which further won the support of the government and the trust of the market. Currently, there occur about 500 performances of this theatre at the grassroots level, on campus, and for external exchanges every year, and they have participated in the New Year's Xiqu gala six consecutive times, and appeared on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala five consecutive times, which has

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1 A Xiqu genre originate from the middle and south of Zhejiang Province. [Translator's note]

formed a set of scientific and healthy troupe operation systems.

### 5.Children's Troupes Go Abroad

The talent pool of children's theatre determines the future trend of theatre world. In general, the requirements for juveniles to visit abroad are more demanding than their adult counterparts. However, the Middle School Affiliated to the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts once organized the "China Youth Jingju Troupe" to visit Canada from June 18 to July 3, 1987, and organized the "China Chunmiao Youth Jingju Troupe" to visit the UK from May 21 to June 30, 1993. Beijing Xiqu and Arts College organized "Teenage Boys-and- Girls Jingju Troupe" to visit Japan from August to September 1992, the "Beijing Children's Jingju Troupe" to Germany in October 1997, and the "Beijing Junior Jingju Troupe" to Japan on January 2, 2001. Shanghai Xiqu School organized "Shanghai Junior Jingju Troupe" to visit Japan from August 1 to 28, 1990. Tianjin Arts College has participated in the establishment of the "Chinese Youth Jingju Art Troupe" which has visited Japan twice from July 30 to August 7, 1997 and from July 17 to 25, 2002, the "Tianjin Children's Jingju Art Troupe" which visited Canada at the beginning of 1998, and the "Tianjin Art Troupe" which visited Japan from July 20 to August 19, 2007. The winner of the Plum Performance Award, organized by the Chinese Dramatists Association, traveled to Singapore from September 12 to 16 to participate in the celebration of the "Mid-Autumn Festival (Moonfest)" series. When these young children and teenagers are active on the overseas theatre stage, we are inevitably reminded of the embarrassing dilemma of foreign cultural exchanges in the early days of the founding of PRC, and then deeply gratified by the rapid changes.

## III. Under Great Burdens: Get Guidance From the Predecessors and Learn Experience From Others

Over the past seven decades, Chinese Xiqu has gone through the difficult times and gradually moved onto the right track of vigorous development with the wisdom of theatre practitioners of several generations. Although it is still in a difficult and slow stage of development, we are full of expectations and confidence of its future development. In addition to the efforts and dedication of theatrical workers, several measures in the practice have shown a high degree of effectiveness.

### 1.Making Full Use of Existing Platforms Overseas: Theatre and Cultural

## Festivals Hosted by Foreign Countries

The Chinese theatre world participated in countless overseas cultural festivals, the first of which being the "World Festival of Youth and Students". From July 31 to October 6, 1951, the 216-member "Chinese Youth Art Troupe", with Zhou Weiqi as its leader and Zhang Yunxi as the captain of the Jingju Team, traveled to the DRG to participate in the third "World Festival of Youth and Students". The troupe also seized this opportunity to tour 19 cities in Germany, Hungary, Poland, USSR, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Albania. This was the first time that China organized a large-scale cultural and arts team to participate in large-scale cultural activities overseas, an act that ultimately led to great impact and yielded a lot. Subsequently, in the name of the "Chinese Youth Art Troupe", China has participated in the 4th, 5th, and 6th World Festival of Youth and Students in Romania from August 2 to 21, 1953, in Poland from July 31 to August 30, 1955, and in the USSR from July 28 to August 11, 1957. From July 26 to December 8, 1959, it participated in the 7th World Festival of Youth and Students in Austria in the name of "Chinese Art Troupe". Until around the time of the reform and globalization, overseas theatre and performances swarmed in. Detailed sorting of the list and data of overseas festivals that Chinese Xiqu has participated in reveals that these festivals vary a lot in scale, influence, and quality. Among them, the Edinburgh International Festival, founded in 1947, which Shanghai Jingju Theatre attended in the UK from August 19 to 21, 2011, is one of the three major theatrical festivals in the world and has the greatest influence. The "Cervantes International Art Festival", the 25th of which was attended by Shandong Yantai Jingju Theatre from August 12 to November 5, 1989, and the 32th of which was attended by Sichuan Ethnic Art Troupe from October 8 to December 8, 2004, is also influential. Beyond those two, there exist numerous friendship theatre festivals, cultural festivals, and commemorative events held in overseas grassroots areas.

## 2. Creating Brand New Platform Overseas: China-founded Overseas Theatre and Cultural Festivals

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Chinese government began to take initiative to promote Chinese cultural products, cultural symbols, and cultural images overseas. After a certain degree of diversification, comprehensiveness, and depth was achieved, the "Chinese Culture Year" was born. Relevant activities will "cover most of the major cities and regions of the host countries



through sister cities, and include a wide range of fields"<sup>1</sup>. More than 200 activities such as the Chinese Culture Year, arts festivals, and cultural weeks have been held in more than 50 countries, providing a vast space for the performance of Chinese Xiqu overseas. For example, the Henan Jingju Troupe has gone to Brazil to participate in the "Chinese Cultural Festival" from April 12 to July 15, 2001. The Beijing Jingju Theatre participated in the "Chinese Culture Year" in Turkey from May 7 to 14, 2012. The China Jingju Theatre traveled to the United Arab Emirates "Chinese Culture Week" from February 22 to 25, 2010. The "Chinese Culture Year" with a series of activities has become an important platform for Chinese Xiqu to showcase its charm overseas, with the longest duration, widest scope, and greatest influence. Additionally, "Happy Chinese New Year", "Chinese Culture Festival", "Beijing Culture Week", and other similar activities are held in full swing. For example, what the Zhejiang Wuju Research Institute (which has been mentioned above) has participated in most abroad is the "Happy Chinese New Year" activity jointly launched by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, together with relevant national ministries, local cultural groups, and overseas institutions.

Reflecting on the past 70 years, many people actively promote the overseas dissemination of traditional Chinese Xiqu. The value of these efforts has far exceeded those projects themselves, and the courage, endurance, and wisdom contained are perhaps the most valuable commodity. At the present time, the overseas dissemination of traditional Chinese Xiqu is still developing, with relatively considerable quantity but general quality. There remains a long way to go to reach the ideal state of helping overseas audience truly fall in love with the charm of Chinese Xiqu, weakening the government's dominance and strengthening the market guidance, and achieving comprehensive layout, systematic investment, and automated returns. In the future, we must continue to work hard based on what our predecessors have realized.

In recent years, there are two main trends in the public opinion about the overseas performances of Chinese troupes. One side proposes that there are more scattered sites but less large-area influenced regions, more words but less achievements, more investment but less returns. And just as "a single spark cannot start a prairie fire", the overseas spread of Chinese Xiqu has not yet been able to make a great impact. By contrast, the other side holds the opinion that there have been occasions where it is hard to buy the tickets,

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1 李志飞、于海峰. 试论 "中国文化年" 现象 [J]. 理论界, 2007:109-111. [Li Zhifei, Yu Haifeng. On the Phenomenon of "Chinese Culture Year" [J]. Theoretical World, 2007:109-111.]

reception has been beyond expectation, and returning performances are requested, leading to the belief that Chinese Xiqu has blossomed around the world.

The author finds that there are always texts that habitually comparing the current overseas performances of Chinese Xiqu with those of Mei Lanfang. After some comparisons, the first opinion most likely stems from disappointment, and the second was from readjusting expectations to deal with aforementioned disappointment. The first thought process tends to come from theatre critics who almost have nothing to do with overseas performances, and from academic debates. The second trend tends to come from theatre practitioners who are indeed engaged in overseas performances, and form official propaganda. Both are, of course, accompanied by strong subjectivity and utilitarianism.

To evaluate a work, we should first examine its purpose and course. At present, the situation faced by Xiqu troupes performing overseas is quite different from those faced by Mei Lanfang. It is true that Mei achieved a great deal in promoting Chinese Xiqu culture, but it is difficult to say that this was his motivation for planning overseas performances. Perhaps he and his team initially only intended to "shock Broadway" as they had once "shocked the whole of Shanghai", and did not anticipate that the "Mei Lanfang Performance System" would be included in the World's Three Major Performance Systems. That is to say, the original intention of the so-called well-planned trip to New York was perhaps much more innocent than posthumously imagined. However, today's theatre workers are embarking on their overseas journeys with a heavy burden, not only with their Xiqu performance skills, but also with the mission of presenting a positive country image and revitalizing Xiqu culture. Regularly, they need to be responsible for relevant government departments which provide support for them. In the face of the tremendous impact of the "COVID-19" pandemic and the great changes in international relations currently, the author misses Premier Zhou Enlai's encouragement at the initial stage: "No matter how difficult it is, as long as you can get in, it is a victory."<sup>1</sup>

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1 赵少华. 金色记忆——新中国早期文化交流口述记录 [M]. 北京: 作家出版社, 2011: 44. [Zhao Shaohua. Golden Memory: Oral Records of Cultural Exchanges in Early PRC [M]. Beijing: China Writer Publishing House, 2011: 44.]

## Introduction to Classical Plays (VII)

LI Zhijuan

### *Questions for the Living*

*Questions for the Living* was written by Liu Shugang in the mid-1980s. It was first published in *Play*, No. 5, 1985. In the same year, it was premiered in Beijing by the Central Experimental Drama Theatre, arousing the attention of theatre, cultural and social circles. In light of this success the editorial board of the magazine *Play* held a symposium for it, at which people praised its spirit of exploration and sense of innovation.



■ Playwright Liu Shugang (1940-2022)

In 1988, it was translated and staged by the Red Torch Theatre in Novosibirsk, USSR, as a cultural exchange repertoire between China and the USSR, and the author went to the USSR with a delegation of Chinese dramatists to attend the premiere. The "Rainbow" Publishing House of the Soviet Union also published it, and included it in a collection of plays in Russian translation. In addition it has also been performed in Japan, Singapore and many other countries.

*Questions for the Living* is based on a piece of social news in which the hero acts bravely for a just cause. Liu Shugang said that he once attended a meeting of representatives of heroic models who adhered to the public security cause. After hearing a hero's brave deeds, he did not want to write a eulogy, but a play.

Unlike the tall and flawless heroes in previous Chinese theatre productions, the protagonist of this work, Ye Xiaoxiao, is an ordinary employee of the theatre who loved fashion design and aspires to become a costume designer. Such an image of an "imperfect hero" made this play free from the political propaganda



■ *Questions for the Living*, Central Experimental Drama Theater, 1985 version



■ Stage set sketch of the 1985 version

and glorification of the day. Ye Xiaoxiao bravely stopped two thugs on a bus who were pickpocketing a passenger, only to be beaten by them. When he was attacked, none of the passengers on the bus helped him, and even the original victim who he had tried to help remained silent.

After his death, his ghost comes to earth and interviews the passengers on the bus that day to investigate why they did not help him. The ghost encounters young citizens, officials, newlyweds, rural siblings and restores the incident from multiple angles. These moral interviews also connect the fates of various characters.

The author, who had a sense of responsibility and justice, presented many dilemmas during the transformation of Chinese society such as the loss of moral sense, the impact on values, and bureaucracy in the form of social surveys. He was worried about the numbness of people, and through the mouth of the ghost, he repeatedly asked those present on the day of the incident, in an attempt to awaken the goodness in their souls.

As for the people's excuses, the ghost chooses to forgive. He didn't regret his own choice and understood everyone's desire for survival. When his friend asked if he hated the people on the bus, he replied, "Hate? Whom do I hate? ... I just felt a little lonely, a little lonely at that time". Finally, before walking into the cinerator, the ghost, with tears in his eyes, says to the living, "O people!



■ Still of the film *Questions for the Living* (1988)



■ Poster of the film *Questions for the Living* (1988)

"I am with you forever..." From this, we can consider that Ye Xiaoxiao is the embodiment of eternal human beauty and good will, reflecting a high degree of moral consciousness and containing the author's expectations for Chinese society and the world at large.

Since the reform and opening up of China, there has been an influx of Western thinking and a proliferation of translations of Western modernist works and theories. Chinese people have also gradually changed their previous conception of theatre and begun to explore theatrical forms. The author added a chorus to the play, and elaborated in the introduction, "It has a multifunctional chorus which uses rap, singing and dancing to connect the whole play. The effects of rain, snow, thunder and lightning in the play are also symbolically performed by them".

The value of the chorus also lies in dispelling the emotional impulse of empathy between the audience and the actors, producing a strong defamiliarization effect, and helping the audience to examine the plot and think in an objective and dispassionate perspective. The actors wore different masks to play various roles, making the transition of the plot more smoothly.

The non-linear narrative makes the plot more coherent and enhances the artistic expression of the drama. Therefore, it can be seen that this production has drawn on O'Neill, Brecht and Chinese Xiqu, influencing the Chinese theatre world with its rich and varied expressions and demonstrating that Chinese drama is being liberated from the rigid and homogeneous performance forms of the past.

### ***Those Left Behind***

In the 1980s, with the gradual deepening of the reform and opening up of China and under the joint action of multiple factors such as a change in official policy, the impact of the market economy, and a change in people's attitudes, the phenomenon of a "craze for going abroad" emerged in some of the more economically developed regions of China.

As a result, some couples separated, leaving their partners in China in a state of being "left behind". It was against this cultural background that Le Meiqin's *Those Left Behind* was born, which delicately describes the love story between a man and woman who were "left behind" in Shanghai.

There are few characters in *Those Left Behind*, and the plot is rather simple. In a bar in Shanghai, Naichuan, a researcher of the Medical College, met with the photographer Zidong. Their partners were both in the United States, and such similar experiences make them gradually familiar. In order to relieve their sense of loneliness, uneasiness, and loss when being "left behind", they set a love contract and became "contract lovers". They also put a deadline to such kind of relationship: if one of their partners returns home, their relationship must be terminated.

This work takes the development of the relationship between Naichuan and Zidong as the main line, and describes the marriage crisis in the boom of going abroad in detail, showing the new type of gender relationship in the transition of the times, and exploring the inner world and emotional life of the characters.

Naichuan and Zidong accompany each other at home, and gradually develop true love. However, constrained by their marital relationships and ethics, they have to control their emotions, and eventually their relationship as "contract lovers" adds to their mental internal friction and emptiness.

At the end of the play, Naichuan gets in touch with her husband and handles all the procedures for joining him in the U.S.. When Naichuan bades farewell to Zidong, Zidong even doesn't even know that she is pregnant with their child. They compare this short-lived love to "a bookmark stuck in an old book" and an unlit, damp New Year firecracker.

In July 1991, *Those Left Behind* was first performed by the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, directed by Yu Luosheng. By the end of that year, it had been



■ Stage photos of *Those Left Behind* (1991)

performed over 160 times. The reason why it was so warmly received was that it artistically reproduced the trending social phenomenon of the 1990s, and echoed people's complicated feelings after the opening-up of the country, triggering emotional resonance among Chinese people.

The author once said: "The characters in this play are all our familiar friends who live around us...The pain and joy, the separation and convergence, the destruction and reconstruction here are themselves just a few waves of the tide of the changing times". The director once said in an interview that "What happens here also happens in thousands of homes ...here it happens again, so close to you".

*Those Left Behind* is also a representative work of Chinese small theatre drama of the 1990s. It took the form of a salon and was performed in a space of about one hundred square meters, which was decorated like a bar. There were about 100 audience members in the bar, together with the actors. They can drink and dance together, and enjoy the warm and sentimental atmosphere of the theatre. The communication between the audience and the actors was thus enhanced, and the boundary between the audience area and the stage area disappeared.

According to Ms. Xi Meijuan, who played the role of Naichuan, the small theatre performance allows the actors to exercise their strain capacity. That is to say, actors need to have more careful control over their expressions, as every little movement can be clearly seen by the audience. "The biggest charm of *Those Left Behind* is the performance," critic Chen Gongmin said after watching. He praised the director's mastery of subject matter and style, saying that in the relatively small theatre space, the audience can see the performance up close, "even his shortness of breath and sweaty palms could be seen clearly".

The audience feel as if the actors are friends in their own lives, so it is easier to sympathize with the hidden romantic relationship between Naichuan and Zidong, and to feel the emotional connection between the characters' hearts and souls. In addition, thanks to the performance of this play, a real black box theatre has been established in Shanghai, pushing forward the development of small theatre practice in China.

LIZHIJUAN

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# Chinese Theatre in the Second Half of 2022

HONG Qiao

In the second half of 2022, the Chinese theater market remained subdued due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there were still numerous outstanding productions that struggled to carry out both online and offline performances. These productions encompassed various genres such as modern drama, newly adapted historical plays, traditional Xiqu, and dance dramas. Through their excellence, they successfully garnered the favor of the audience.

## I. Modern Drama

From September 1st to 15th 2022, the 13th China Arts Festival was held in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, showcasing the fruitful achievements of China's artistic development in recent years. Among them, the plays *Song of the Saihan*, *Teacher Guimei*, and *The Protagonist* received the Wenhua Award (the highest government award for professional stage arts in China) in the category of theater. Directors Wang Xiaodi, Mo Ernan, and Li Bonan were awarded the Wenhua Director's Award.

In 2022, China celebrated the 40th anniversary of its small theater drama. As the birthplace of small theater drama in China, the Beijing People's Art Theatre presented a series of small theater productions as a tribute to the 40th anniversary. On September 1st, the small theater play *The Bench*, directed by Feng Yuanzheng, premiered at the People's Art Theatre's small theater in the Beijing International Theatre Arts Center. This play is a small theater drama written by Soviet playwright Galin in 1983. The entire play takes place in a single "situation," namely a bench, with no scene changes. The plot is presented through the actions, dialogue, and subtle scene changes of two actors, a man and a woman.



■ *The Bench*

From September 30th to October 17th, the small theater play *The Eternal Flame of Van Gogh*, produced by the Beijing People's Art Theatre, returned to the stage of the People's Art Experimental Theatre. This production focuses on several key moments in Van Gogh's life and presents his simple

yet brilliant life and inner world through minimal props, set designs, and a straightforward creative approach.

The stage play *A Lifelong Journey*, adapted from the Liang Xiaosheng Contradictory Literature Award, made its return on July 23rd and August 12th at the National Centre for the Performing Arts and Guangzhou Opera House, respectively. Constructed with a scattered, non-linear, and multi-segmented narrative, this play creates significant dramatic conflicts within its three-hour duration, depicting the developmental process of Chinese society and the emotional journey of ordinary people.

On August 26th, 2022, the stage play *The Person of Activity Fluctuate* made its debut at the Tangshan Grand Theatre in Hebei. It participated in the 13th China Arts Festival and the 17th Cultural Director Award evaluation. Director Li Bonan won the "Cultural Director Award" for this production.

From August 18th to 21st and September 22nd, the classic work *An Interrupted Dream* by Chen Peisi was staged at the National Centre for the Performing Arts and Guangzhou Opera House respectively. Starring Liu Tianchi, Wu Gang, and He Yu, this play seamlessly integrates a twisting story with the beauty of Kunqu, providing the audience with a refreshing theatrical experience.

From September 9th to September 18th, the Shaanxi People's Art Theatre presented the "Mao Award Trilogy" consisting of *White Deer Plain*, *The Protagonist*, and *World of Plainness* in Shanghai, paying tribute to the 40th anniversary of the Mao Dun Literature Award.

From September 23rd to October 9th, the historical drama *Du Fu*, written by Guo Qihong and directed by Feng Yuanzheng, entered its third round of performances. This play portrays the rise and fall of the famous Tang Dynasty



■ *The Person of Activity Fluctuate*



■ Stage photo of *Double Dual*



■ *Double Dual*, Wuzhen Theatre Festival poster

poet Du Fu and his poetic world, allowing the audience to witness the historical panorama of the middle and late Tang Dynasty. The dialogue in the play is a mix of classical and vernacular Chinese, and Feng Yuanzheng emphasizes that "the poetry in the play should be spoken, like a conversation, using poetry as a means of dialogue." This allows the audience to understand the dialogue while experiencing the classical charm and poetic rhythm of the work.

From October 21st to October 23rd, the stage play *Faces in the Crowd* based on the novel by Feng Jikai, adapted by Huang Weino, directed by Zhong Hai, and starring Liu Mintao, made its debut at the Shanghai Cultural Square.

On December 24th and 25th, the play *Double Dual* by the Nine People Theater

Troupe was performed in Beijing. Following the success of *Four Machines* and *When We Two Parted* this play is another outstanding work in the series portraying intellectuals in the Republican era. The use of light and shadow on the stage creates a transformative setting between Nanjing and Beijing, presenting a story that unfolds over twenty years in the two cities.

## II. Xiqu

From August 13th to 23rd, the "2022 Hundred Xiqu (Kunshan) Festival" was held in Kunshan, Jiangsu province. Online performances and five extended events will continue until early October. The festival focused on showcasing outstanding productions by leading talents, supporting endangered opera genres, and presenting displays of extraordinary skills and performances. The opening ceremony featured the revolutionary-themed Kunqu opera *Qu Qiubai*, while the closing ceremony showcased the Cantonese Yueju *White Snake* starring Zeng Xiaomin. The performance seamlessly combined traditional and modern elements, demonstrating both literary and martial arts prowess.

On September 16th, the masterpiece *Death of Guangxu Emperor* by the Nanjing Jingju Troupe and Li Zhuoqun Studio premiered at the Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre in Beijing. The play tells the story of the investigation into the death of Emperor Guangxu, exploring eternal themes of love and freedom, ideals, and life.

On the evening of October 28th, the thematic performance *Faith* - commemorating the 80th anniversary of Shaoxing Yueju reform and the 100th anniversary of Yuan Xuefen's birth - was staged at the Experimental



■ Cantonese Yueju *White Snake*



■ Jingju *Death of Guangxu Emperor*

Theatre of Shanghai Theatre Academy. This performance was structured around seven letters from Yuan Xuefen, a reply letter from Premier Zhou Enlai, and a letter titled "Our Letter." Spanning nine chapters and featuring renowned actors such as Xi Meijuan and Shang Changrong reading the letters, the performance portrays Yuan Xuefen's real-life experiences and spiritual world, as well as significant events in Yueju Opera reform and the development of the art form.

On December 9th and 10th, the grand production *The Royal Consort of Tang* was warmly performed at the Shanghai Oriental Art Center. This epic tells the story of the courtly Tang Dynasty before and after the An Lushan Rebellion, with a mix of power struggles and love affairs. Renowned actress Shi Yihong presented a rare nine-minute feather dance during the performance, which was truly a sight to behold.

From November 19th to 20th, the Shanghai Kunqu Troupe presented the complete 55-act Kunqu *The Peony Pavilion* at the Shanghai Grand Theatre, performing the three parts of the play consecutively. This production showcased splendid performances by both male and female lead roles, as well as provided more space for other roles like the old man and the clown. At the end of each act, the actors recited exit poems, adding a touch of classical elegance. The staging of the complete play allowed the audience to witness rarely seen scenes, such as the plot after the revival of Du Liniang, providing a refreshing viewing experience and enriching the performance history of *The Peony Pavilion*.

On December 9th, 10th, and 11th, a special performance titled "Qingfeng



■ Poster of *Faith* - Commemorative Performance for the 80th Anniversary of Yueju Opera Reform and the 100th Anniversary of Yuan Xuefen's Birth



■ *The Peony Pavilion*

Rhymes Echo Through the Ages - Commemorating the 120th Anniversary of the Birth of Master Yu Zhenfei in Beijing and Kunqu Arts" took place at the Shanghai Tianchan Yifu Theater. The performance consisted of three separate shows: "Zhenfei, the Elegance - Commemorating the 120th Anniversary of the Birth of Master Yu Zhenfei in Beijing and Kunqu Arts," "Nishang Huayun: Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe's National Treasure-level Veteran Artists and Mid-generation Talents Showcase of Kunqu Opera Excerpts," and "Commemorative Concert for the 120th Anniversary of Yu Zhenfei's Birth - Beijing Kunqu Opera Excerpts Special." These performances were dedicated to commemorating the legendary figure in modern Chinese opera history, Yu Zhenfei.

### III. Musical, Dance Theatre, Opera, and other performances

On July 8th and 9th, the Shanghai Ballet performed their version of *The Lady of the Camellias* at the Shanghai Cultural Square, marking the reopening of the square after the pandemic and becoming the opening act of the post-pandemic recovery performances.

On July 15th and 16th, the classic dance drama *The Never-Ending Radio Waves*, which has already toured over 400 shows, made a comeback at the Shanghai Cultural Square.

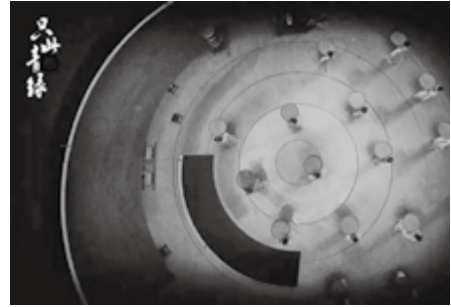
On July 15th and 16th, the "Gathering of Outstanding Young Acrobatic Talents in China 2022" was held at the National Theater in Beijing. Through the concentrated presentation of 12 exquisite acrobatic performances, the event effectively showcased and promoted outstanding young acrobatic talents through diverse approaches.

On August 16th, the large-scale ethnic dance drama *Awakening Lion*, produced by the Guangzhou Song and Dance Theater, returned to the Guangzhou Opera House. The production took the audience on a journey back in time, exploring the historical past of a hundred years ago. The play incorporates elements of southern boxing, lion dancing, and storytelling with wooden fish, boldly innovating in dance, stage design, lighting, and more. It embodies the enduring spirit of the lion culture and the continuous inheritance of the lion dance tradition.

The annual hit dance drama *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* produced by China Oriental Performing Arts Group continues to mesmerize



■ *Awakening Lion*



■ *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*

audiences at theaters such as Shanghai Cultural Square, Guangzhou Opera House, Suzhou Bay Grand Theater, and more. The production is a dance interpretation of the painting *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* and has received the highest government award for professional stage arts in China, the Wenhua Award, in September. The stage design of *The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* cleverly creates a concentric circle, recreating the unfolding process of a traditional Chinese scroll painting.

On September 30th, the original ethnic opera *Minning Town*, adapted from the TV series of the same name, premiered at the National Centre for the Performing Arts as a tribute to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.

On October 9th-10th, the dance drama *Du Fu*, which won the Dance Drama Award at the 10th China Dance Lotus Awards and was nominated for the 12th China Arts Festival and the 16th "Wenhua Award," performed at Shanghai Cultural Square. This production blends classical elements with contemporary dance vocabulary, combining poetry and dance through various artistic techniques to portray the poetic imagery of Du Fu in dance form.

On November 5th, the inaugural "Beijing Theater Festival" kicked off at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, lasting for over four months. It featured 35 offline performances, bringing together different theatrical genres, theater troupes, artists, and performers from across the country to exchange ideas in Beijing.

From November 8th to 13th, the 5th China Acrobatics Arts Festival with the theme "Unleashing Art in the New Era, Showcasing Skills for the Future" took place in Puyang, Henan province. Three acrobatic performances, namely *The*



■ *Du Fu*

*Butterfly Lovers*, *War Soul - Team No. 3*, *Water Show*, along with the magic show *Love at First Sight*, took the stage during the festival.

From November 11th to November 20th, 2022, the musical *The Orphan of Zhao*, directed by renowned Shanghai director Xu Jun, landed at Shanghai Cultural Square. The musical is based on the Yuan dynasty drama *The Orphan of Zhao* and adapted from the 2012 stage play *The Orphan of Zhao* by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It tells the story of Zhao, a minister of the state of Jin during the Spring and Autumn Period, who is betrayed and his family is massacred by the treacherous Tu'an Gu. His surviving son, the orphan of Zhao, is adopted by Tu'an and grows up faced with the dilemma of whether to seek revenge for his biological father.

On December 30th, the immersive one-act opera *Rita*, co-created by renowned composer Gaetano Donizetti and famous opera librettist Gustave Vaëz, was staged at Guangzhou Opera House, marking the finale of opera performances in Guangzhou for the year 2022.

#### IV. Academic News

From October 14th to 15th, the "2022 International Dance Day: Dance and Tradition - The Multidimensional Aspects of Traditional Dance" international academic forum, and the Shanghai International Youth Scholars Forum, were hosted by the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the Shanghai Representative





■ *War Soul - Team No. 3*

Office of the International Theatre Institute. The forum took place in a combined online and offline format. The forum covered five main topics: the cultural value of traditional dance, traditional dance in contemporary society, cross-cultural research and criticism of dance traditions, research on traditional dance from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, and the identity of traditional dance in modern society. Tobias Biancone, the Secretary of the International Theatre Education Association of UNESCO, sent his blessings through a video from Paris. Scholars from more than 20 domestic and international universities and research institutions shared their academic achievements.

On October 21st, the 5th World Theatre Education Alliance Presidents' Meeting was successfully held. The meeting was conducted online and attended by presidents and representatives from renowned theatre schools in China, Germany, Greece, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and other countries. The meeting reviewed the activities of the Alliance from 2020 to 2022, discussed the proposal for hosting the International Student Arts Festival in 2023, and through a show of hands, approved the proposal for Han Rong, the President of the Central Academy of Drama, to continue serving as the Secretary-General of the Alliance. The meeting also voted on proposals regarding the regular production of Alliance announcements and the establishment of a theatre education resource database.

From November 11th to 13th, the 9th China Higher Theatre Education Alliance Exchange Event and the 3rd College Student Theatre Performance, organized by the China Higher Theatre Education Alliance and hosted by Jilin College of the Arts, were successfully held. Due to the impact of the pandemic, the

exchange event was held online. The theme of the academic forum was "Exploration and Innovation in Performance Foundation Teaching." A total of 27 teachers from 16 universities delivered speeches and participated in academic exchanges during the thematic forums.

On December 29th and 30th, the "60th Anniversary of the Passing of Ouyang Yuqian and the Academic Symposium on the Compilation of the Complete Works of Ouyang Yuqian," hosted by the Central Academy of Drama and organized by the Institute of Theatre Arts, was successfully held online. Forty-six experts and scholars, including Ouyang Yuqian's descendants, students, and representatives from universities and academic institutions nationwide, attended the symposium to commemorate this pioneering figure in Chinese modern drama.



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