

Chinese Performing Arts

No. 6
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国际戏剧协会
International Theatre Institute ITI



上海戏剧学院
Shanghai Theater Academy





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中國
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On the Artistic Characteristics of Huangmeixi

ZHOU Hui

Huangmeixi is a well-known cultural and artistic symbol of Anhui and one of the five major local Xiqu genres in China. It received nomination and acceptance into the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in China in 2006 and has been hailed as "the country music of China" by people of other nations. As a young genre which emerged relatively later than others, Huangmeixi formed its own distinctive artistic characteristics, although its history is not as long as that of Jingju and Kunqu. Currently, in the context of urbanization, information spread, and globalization in the 21st century, we inevitably face the modern transformation of traditional arts, that is, the task of modernization. To explore and study the artistic characteristics of Huangmeixi not only proves conducive for a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of it, but ensures that there occurs no loss of its unique value in the process of modern transformation.

Cultural Trait: Folksy elements

The "Folksy" attribute is one of the most important features of Chinese Xiqu, and it is also the most remarkable artistic characteristic of Huangmeixi. Originating from the "Huangmei Tune" in Hubei, Huangmeixi was born, developed, and grown among the country population, so its "Folksy" elements are not only deeply rooted, but also incisively and vividly manifested in the plays.

The "Folksy" elements of the traditional repertoire, needless to say, are often reflected in the titles. Small plays such as *Making Tofu*, *Gathering the Pigweed*,

Spinning Yarns, Selling Groceries, and the larger plays including *Leaving the Inn*, *The Story of a Silk Handkerchief*, and *The Story of Buckwheat* all reflect folk actions. One observes that the daily life, and the joys and sorrows of ordinary people compose nearly the entire content of Huangmeixi. Through these plays, we might vividly feel the unique life style, spiritual outlook, emotional aspirations, and regional customs of people from a certain area.

Another example is the classic *Female Prince Consort*, released in the 1950s and performed even in modern times. Judging from the title alone, we recognize it as an "imperial court play". However, upon learning of various plot points, we conclude it is actually a folk tale disguised in "courtly trappings". First of all, the play repeatedly highlights and emphasizes the "folk background" of the female protagonist Feng Suzhen, such as "Min Nv"¹'s name is Feng Suzhen", "Your honorable princess, I have a plan for the best of both sides" and many other lines. Meanwhile, her motivation and purpose for ascending to Number One Scholar in the imperial examination is not out of career ambition, but for pursuing her beloved. Here, love and marriage transcend meritorious deeds, praising Feng Suzhen's loyalty to love and revealing the folk interest of the work. Secondly, although the emperor and the prime minister in the play are noble, they have neither the temperament nor the demeanor of the noblest, nor the actions and deeds corresponding to such expectations. They show their concern for children's marriage, but nothing more. For these two characters, in fact, there obviously exists a strong criticism and irony, making them the butt of jokes, and shaping a sharp contrast with the image of Feng Suzhen. These aspects, which are completely different from those of the "imperial court plays", demonstrate that these are characters created by creative subjects who have profound folk experience and clear folk consciousness. They created characters according to what they thought the "emperor" and "prime minister" act as.



■ Stage photo of *Gathering the Pigweed*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photo of *Making Tofu*
Source: Anhui Art School

1 “民女”, Folk women's modest appellations for themselves. [Translator's note]



■ Stage photos of *Female Prince Consort*, Sun Juan as Feng Suzhen
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

Entering the new century, although Huangmeixi strives for breakthroughs and transformations, its “Folksy” elements remain prominent. The art form’s adherence to and persistence of “Folksy” not only allows Huangmeixi—an art form continuously adjusting to the times—to continuously retain that independent personality, but also personalizes the works with its essential audience members. The best illustration of this is the newly-created Huangmeixi *Xiao Qiao’s Marriage with Zhou Yu*. This play is based on the history of the “Three Kingdoms” and depicts the war from the female perspective of Xiao Qiao, who has just married Zhou Yu. It highlights the suffering of people caused by the war and turmoil, and praises Xiao Qiao’s infatuation and kindness. However, unexpectedly, the creator ingeniously integrated the characters and plots of the traditional small play *Making Tofu* into this play, and associated them with Xiao Qiao. In this way, characters like Xiao Qiao and Zhou Yu who did not originally consist of those “Folksy” elements draw closer to folk life and hence win more audience favor. Thus, this play on the theme of “Three Kingdoms” convincingly won the audience’s favor for its down-to-earth traits.

Aesthetic Interest: Popularity

The aesthetic interest of “Popularity” of Huangmeixi closely relates to its cultural trait of “Folksy”. Popularity does not equal any degree of vulgarity. Popularity simply means being in line with public standards and retaining an ease of understanding. As a product of agricultural civilization, Huangmeixi not only “tells the story of the common people”, but also aims to entertain the public.

Therefore, it inevitably prefers simplicity and popularity over complexity and vulgarity, and differs from the elegance and obscurity of Kunqu or the nobility and profoundness of Jingju. In essence, whether the aesthetic interest of a genre is characterized with elegance or popularity will not determine its quality. Comparatively speaking, genres that are easier to understand tend to enjoy a higher popularity and a wider audience base. The “Popularity” of Huangmeixi not only manifests in its content, but also in its form; not only in the choice of subject matter, (that is, the life it reflects and the images of the characters it creates,) but also in the language and performance paradigm it adopts.

The tendency of “Popularity” in the subject matter selection can also be seen from the elaboration of “Folksy” above. Most of the performances consist of daily trivialities, and the characters are mainly villagers, peasant women, peddlers, servants, the old, the weak, and so on, all of which are “common things” and “common people” in common life. Such content not only lays an internal foundation for “Popularity”, but also influences and decides the “Popularity” of its language and performance paradigm.

Whether in traditional plays or newly created ones, whether it is written by villagers or literati, and whether the characters in it are male or female, noble or lowly, elegant or vulgar, the language is always easy to understand. For



■ Stage photo of *Xiao Qiao's Marriage with Zhou Yu*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

example, in *The Lady from Huizhou*, there is a line that reads as follows: “After a long way of bumping up and down, I can’t wait to pee now.” And in *Xiao Qiao’s Marriage with Zhou Yu*, there occurs the following line: “I will not allow him to sleep with me unless he buys the soy beans back today. Just like smoking the bacon over a fire pit in front of a cat, I will let him drool like that cat without any method.” In fact, even Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu, both aristocrats in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, sing such “vulgar” phrases like “Knock if you can't push it, kick if you can't knock it, smash if you can't kick it, and call someone if you can't smash it” in Huangmeixi. If the early requirement for the “Popularity” of its language was to perform to plough men, peasant women, old women, and village children who had never read a book or attended school, it is obvious that Huangmeixi, which entered the information age of the 21st century, does not need to consider such demand. The only reason why “Popularity” often raises a warning to practitioners of the art is due to the artistic characteristic of Huangmeixi. Only by persisting and evolving can Huangmeixi maintain its own unique artistic charm and value.

In addition to language, the performance paradigm of Huangmeixi also strengthens its aesthetic characteristic of “Popularity”. For example, in the play *The Couple Watching the Lantern* which was performed in imitation of the actions in life and permeated with a rich flavor of life, the husband jokingly sings, “The fireworks are shining high, and the fire sparks are scattering all around. Oy, oy, something goes wrong. My wife's trousers are on fire.” His wife hastily bends down and tugs at the trousers to see if they are burned. Such an



■ Stage photo of *The Couple Watching the Lantern*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photo of *Much Ado About Nothing*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photo of *A Dream of Red Mansions*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photos of Huangmeixi *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photo of *The Lady from Huizhou*
Source: Anqing Zaifen Huangmei Art Theatre

action within a performance rarely appears in other genres. It not only reflects the “Popularity” of Huangmeixi, but also shows the happiness and sweetness of regular young couples and the loveliness and simplicity of the wife. Another example is the pursuit of Dong Yong by the Seventh Fairy in *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*. From the wide roads to narrow ones, she always “takes the initiative”. When walking towards each other, she deliberately bumps Dong Yong with her shoulder and does so again and again. When these tricks were exposed by Dong Yong, she even blatantly blocks his way and refused to let him pass by. When the play was later adapted for film, director Mr. Shi Hui intended to remove these scenes, but later found that only with these scenes could this be called Huangmeixi *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*. The pursuit of “Popularity” in performance and some corresponding adjustments in other aspects make those Huangmeixi repertoire which are adapted from the world classics still share their distinctive aesthetic characteristics.

Meanwhile, the “Popularity” of the Huangmeixi performance paradigm is also reflected in the regional customs shown through the singing and dancing scenes. For example, the singing and dancing in *The Lady from Huizhou* not only creates a festive and lively weddings atmosphere, but allows the audience to naturally understand the unique marriage customs in this area.

The “Popularity” of the Huangmeixi performance paradigm helps bridge a gap between general public audiences and allows for more easily understood and accepted performances.

Self-system: Openness

Given the late emergence of Huangmeixi, one might assume the art form retains a relatively weak foundation and little legacy. On the other hand, its short history allows for less boundaries and a more fluid state. It can, for example, continuously enrich and improve itself by learning and borrowing from other genres. Huangmeixi developed from the "Huangmei Tune" or "The Song of the Tea Leaf Pickers" in Huangmei, Hubei province, and has undergone a process of transformation from pure music to theatre. This process transformation occurred during a time when the idea of “Openness” initially formed. When Huangmei Tunes from the Hubei Province were introduced into Anqing, Anhui Province, Anqing was surrounded by abundant local folk art resources and a conducive environment for theatre. Just as a fish in a large body of water, while absorbing nutrients from Jingju and other Xiqu genres, it also gained nourishment from folk songs, dances, and rap arts, thus rapidly growing, developing, and transforming, eventually forming a new genre of local Xiqu — Huangmeixi. At this time, it was not only nourished by the various art forms mentioned above in terms of singing and music, supported by Qingyang singing and Hui tunes in terms of repertoire, but also influenced by Hui tunes in terms of performance forms. Finally, it borrowed accompaniment parts including gongs and drums, and make-up from Jingju.

In 1935, Huangmeixi opened into Shanghai for the first time. Although initially a little overwhelmed by the brand new cultural space, the art form broadened its horizons, observed the beauties and merits of other genres and art forms, and reflected upon its own deficiencies. Therefore, it not only accelerated its own development, but also solidified its unique artistic charm in opening up and embracing the times. In 1952, it stepped into Shanghai again. As opposed to the first visit, during which Huangmeixi performances won little to no attention, it won the praise of professional musical practitioners in Shanghai and was widely reported by the media. On one hand, this success may have been garnered due to the new era and new cultural environment post-founding of the People’s Republic of China, which provided Huangmeixi a somewhat blank slate onto which to form content. On the other hand, much success must be attributed to the ideal of “Openness”, which enabled it to resonate within the

new era, and allowed development and prosperity in modern times.

The “Openness” of Huangmeixi is notably reflected in the two classics: *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *Female Prince Consort*. Observing their stage presentations, one notes that *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* inherited more from Yueju, while *Female Prince Consort* draws more from Jingju. The “Openness” of Huangmeixi not only allows these two works their own goals to learn and draw from, but also honors both as classics despite their great differences in terms of form and style.

With regards to widely absorbing and integrating elements from other Xiqu genres and artistic forms, Huangmeixi has always maintained a strong curiosity and goodwill towards modern technology. After all, technology promises the expansion of audience and allows traditional arts a more fashionable and charming presentation. As early as in the 1950s and 1960s, Huangmeixi cooperated with the movie industry and shot such Huangmeixi films as *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *Female Prince Consort*. In the 1980s and 1990s, with the widespread popularity of television, in addition to maintaining its close relationship with movies and producing several films like *Daughter Of The Dragon King* and *Meng Jiangnv*, Huangmeixi made full use of the TV and launched TV series such as *Zheng Xiaojiao*, *The Legend of the Seventh Fairy and Dong Yong*, and *Female Prince Consort* and more than ten “Huangmeixi musical TV series” including *The Romance of West Chamber* and *Peach Blossom Fan* which were controversial at that time. In the 21st century, the film *Life and Death Challenge*, TV series *Li Qingzhao*, and musical TV series *February* and *Benediction* were all produced. During this period, Huangmeixi



■ Still of Huangmeixi film *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Still of Huangmeixi film *Female Prince Consort*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

■ Still of Huangmeixi musical TV series
The Romance of West Chamber



■ Still of Huangmeixi musical TV series *Li Qingzhao*



■ Still of Huangmeixi musical TV series *Family*



■ Still of Huangmeixi musical TV series
Fate in Tears and Laughter



■ From left to right
Posters for Huangmeixi films
Daughter Of The Dragon King,
Life and Death Challenge and
Against the Fire

also combined with radio and released plays such as *Sorrow in the Han Palace*. Modern technology not only allowed the aforementioned projects, but was applied to the stage, as well. In addition to various acoustic changes, photoelectric equipment and other tools that emerged and upgraded with the progress of science and technology all found their way into production. Huangmeixi, for example, released the first 3D holographic stage play *The Cowherd and Girl Weaver* in China. Although there exist a few new topics to be considered and solved about this play, the combination of Huangmeixi with 3D technology obviously proved an unprecedented breakthrough, bringing a new aesthetic feeling to the audience.

Huangmeixi learned and borrowed from other Xiqu genres and art forms to combine with movies, TV series, and radio plays. It then integrating with 3D technology in an unprecedented breakthrough for the medium of performance. Huangmeixi constantly demonstrates its “Openness” and inclusiveness, allowing a continuous slew of innovations with regards to its development.

If the “Folksy” elements and “Popularity” are the sources of the charm of Huangmeixi and the foundation of its value for existence, then “Openness” provides the motivation for it to continuously introspect and innovate, allowing it to keep pace with the times. Therefore, to maintain and strengthen its characteristics of “Folksy”, “Popularity”, and “Openness” not only respects and furthers the continuation of its tradition, but furthers its survival and development in the future while neither sacrificing its own individuality, nor losing its characteristics solely in the pursuit of fashion and modernity. Therefore, if done properly, it can become the main representative of its distinctive characteristics forever.

ZHOU HUI

Director of Innovation Research Office of Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

An Exploration of the Modern Transformation of Huangmeixi

Yi Zhou

With the modern transformation of Chinese society, the modernization of Xiqu arts has gradually become a topic of the times that attracts much attention and extensive discussion. As a local genre within the broad concept of "Chinese Xiqu", Huangmeixi is naturally included in such discussion. Like other genres, it has not always innovated, developed, and modernized as quickly as market forces might require. Therefore, an important task involves the exploration and analysis of its current state in order to provide guidance from a theoretical perspective. Ideally, with such introspection and study, future innovations might come naturally and easily.

The necessity for change and the nature of Huangmeixi

The development of the times, changes in society, progress of science and technology, and the rebirth of people's production, life style, and various ideas have not only changed the environment in which Huangmeixi develops (after all, Huangmeixi originated from agricultural societies), but also enacted fundamental changes in the aspects of the culture it attempts to communicate with, the characters it shapes, the social functions it undertakes, and its channels of dissemination. Therefore, Huangmeixi is bound to make changes and adjustments in its content, themes, and a variety of other aspects. Additionally, the emergence of new-style theatres and various modern stage devices and equipment reveal the necessity for adjustments.

In order to continue its development, Huangmeixi must modernize. However, the question remains whether a Xiqu genre which emerged from a relatively isolated agricultural civilization, possesses the conditions and possibilities to

change? Huangmeixi is a young Xiqu genre which appears comparatively late in the history of art forms and benefits from a fluid form, seldom bound by traditions, and free from the burdens of long historical trends. Its youthful history allows for freedom. This fluidity allows for the possibility of synthesis with other Xiqu genres and art forms according to the requirements of the times and the needs of its own development, and easy integration with modern technology.

The modern need for innovation proves an often terrifying necessity for older art forms, but the remarkable fluidity of Huangmeixi reveals change as a favorable option, and one with abundant pathways.

The three levels of modern transformation

The modern transformation of Huangmeixi is mainly reflected in three aspects; thoughts and ideas, subject matter and content, and technical means. These three aspects exactly constitute the three levels of a theatrical work beginning from its conception and ending in its performance. Thus, this paper will attempt to explore and analyze the modern transformation of Huangmeixi from the aforementioned aspects.

(1) The modern transformation of thoughts and ideas

The modern transformation of Huangmeixi in thoughts and ideas is mainly reflected in the addition and manifestation of modern consciousness, philosophical thinking, and a humanistic spirit.



■ *Much Ado About Nothing*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ *A Dream of Red Mansions*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

■ Left: *Thunderstorm*
Source: Anhui Huangmei
Opera Theatre

■ Right: *The Lady from
Huizhou*
Source: Anqing Zaifen
Huangmei Art Theatre



Beginning with the 1986 Huangmeixi *Much Ado About Nothing*, (an adaption of the English Shakespeare play of the same name,) there have occurred successive adaptations from other mediums into Huangmeixi. For example, works such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* (based on the Chinese classic of the same name), *The Lady from Huizhou*, *Peacocks Southeast Travelling* (adapted from a long Yuefu poem of the same name), *On a Wall and Horse* (adapted from a Yuan-Dynasty Zaju of the same name by Bai Pu), *Thunderstorm* (based on the drama of the same name by Cao Yu), and *Against the Fire* (based on the novel of the same name by Lu Yanzhou). These productions, while based on classics, differ greatly from the traditional interpretations and are characterized by modern thinking and humanistic feelings. Huangmeixi *A Dream of Red Mansions* provides a clear example. As its playbill declares: "The director of this play has seized the psychological characteristics of contemporary audiences' aesthetic transformation from emotion to philosophy, and has pioneered a unique approach, taking Jia Baoyu's personal activities as the main line, and Baoyu's and Lin Daiyu's love as a secondary line to highlight Baoyu's image as a rebel against the feudal system, giving people a philosophical enlightenment."¹ *Thunderstorm*, provides a similar example, in which the production adapted the original feudal criticism into an in-depth exploration and concentration on the theme of human nature, rather than the trivial entanglements of married life in the feudal era.

The modern transformation of the thoughts and ideas within Huangmeixi reflects a new spiritual connotation and a significant enhancement of its cultural quality. Huangmeixi now aims to fully connect with the outside world, especially

1 Playbill of the Huangmeixi *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The Art Reference Room of Anhui Huangmeixi Theatre

modern times, and resonate with contemporary audiences.

(2) The modern transformation of subject matter and content

The modern transformation of the subject matter and content of Huangmeixi is firstly based on the changes of the era, social life, and its own artistic function. For example, modern plots often involve national and international affairs, a far-cry from the trivial matters of daily life or agricultural issues that often dominated older story-lines.

Compared to the primary focus of older works such as “common people” and “common things” which are “old”, “limited” and “close-to-life”, new subject matter focuses on the “new”, “grand” and “far-reaching”. There are many examples such as *Jiang Jie*, which expresses the tenacious and resolute struggle within the spirits of the revolutionary martyrs; *The Conscientious Village Official*, which eulogizes the advanced deeds of outstanding Party (Communist Party of China, aka CPC) cadres in the new era; *The Expectation in the Big Eyes*, which addresses the "Hope Project" aimed at helping out-of-school children in poverty-stricken areas; *The Blossom in May*, which expresses the great moral sentiments of the CPC's loyalty to the people; *Deng Jiaxian*, which glorifies the lofty sentiments of Deng Jiaxian, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a famous nuclear physics expert of China; *The Bay of Hui People*, which reflects the unity of various ethnic groups and the closeness of the military and the people as a family; *Not One Loss*, which illustrates the great achievements of China's "Poverty Alleviation" and a brand new look at the new socialist countryside; and so on. The plays with such subject matter and content have distinctive realistic significance and propaganda function, and play an indispensably important role in "relaying



■ Stage photo of *Jiang Jie*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Poster of *Deng Jiaxian*
Source: Anqing Zaifen Huangmei Art Theatre



■ Playbill for *The Blossom in May*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

Chinese stories, spreading Chinese voices, and letting the world know a comprehensive and colorful China".

Secondly, due to the overall improvement of Huangmeixi screenwriters' professional and cultural level, the necessity to explore more plot possibilities and enhance its cultural profundity, and the strive to meet the diverse aesthetic needs of audiences in the new era, Chinese classical literature, dramas, modern and contemporary novels have also become subject matter, with *A Dream of Red Mansions*, *On a Wall and Horse*, *Thunderstorm* and *Against the Fire* mentioned above providing wonderful examples.

During this period, with the increasingly frequent cultural exchanges between China and the West, Huangmeixi has also chosen famous Western literature as its subject matter and productions such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* adapted from Shakespeare have also found their way into the repertoire.

The modern transformation of the subject matter and content of Huangmeixi has helped to expand its fields of expression, enrich the diversity of characters, added to its contemporary flavor, and reshaped its temperament and style.

(3) The modern transformation of technical means

In order to adapt to the changes of subject matter and content, the modern theatre's mirror-frame stage, and the audience's expectations within the increasingly diversified culture, Huangmeixi must explore and change technical aspects of its stage presentations, ideally modernizing every level of its conception. The modern transformation of its technical means mainly manifests in the reconstruction of the approaches to script-writing, directing and acting, and the renewal and application of technological equipment.

Firstly, the modern transformation of script-writing is most obviously observed in the transition from the "changed-scene play" to the "fixed-scene play". Mr. Chen Duo, a drama theorist, embarked on an in-depth and detailed study. He pointed out the following: "What's the meaning of 'the structure with separate acts and scenes of ordinary dramas'? The basic principle is that the stage space in an act or in a scene is fixed in one space and the time is also continuous, which can also be called 'fixed-scene play'." ¹ However, "the traditional Xiqu is structured in a different way. It does not require that the

1 陈多. 戏曲美学 [M]. 成都: 四川人民出版社, 2001 年 9 月版: 第 208 页. [Chen Duo. Aesthetics of Xiqu [M]. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, September 2001 edition: 208.]

written events be fixed in a few spaces or organized into 'facets'. Rather, it is a 'scattered' presentation, linking the 'dots' into 'lines' that flow through different time and space. Thus, the time and space of the stage is not fixed and keeps changing as the 'line' moves around. That's why people call it 'changed-scene play'. ”¹ On the surface, “changed-scene play” and “fixed-scene play” are just two different ways of text structure. In essence, however, the two styles deal with stage time and space in vastly different ways. One flows in a “linear” style, while the other follows the style of fixed “time-and-place”; One pursues the freehand aesthetics of scenes changing with the movements of people, while the other adheres to a more realistic view of drama. As early as in the 1950s, the literary and art theorist Mr. Wang Zhaowen expressed his worry for the transition from “changed-scene play” to “fixed-scene play”, arguing that “we can in no way cast aside tradition and write scripts in a structure with separate acts and scenes of an ordinary drama...that is the first thing that goes against the artistic characteristics of drama.”² However, when confronted with these two options, and with the participation of new cultural workers and the advocates of the slogan “modernize Xiqu”, the transition from “changed-scene play” to “fixed-scene play” has become an irreversible modernization trend of Chinese Xiqu. From *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *Female Prince Consort* in the 1950s to *The Lady from Huizhou* at the end of the 20th century, and then to *Thunderstorm* and *Xiao Qiao's Marriage with Zhou Yu* in the new century, the majority of works are “fixed-scene plays” with separate acts and scenes akin to ordinary dramas.

Secondly, the modern transformation of direction and performance of Huangmeixi underwent such developments as the establishment of a “director system”, the learning from other Xiqu genres and artistic forms, the diversified explorations of stage styles and means, and the integration and return of “tradition”. In the 1950s, with the emergence of full-time directors and the “director system”, the director and performing arts of Huangmeixi took the first steps towards modernization. From then on, it has undergone recreation under the directors’ unified conception and guidance, not only dismissing the once simple performance form of “Three Playing and Seven Singing”³, but improving

1 陈多. 戏曲美学 [M]. 成都: 四川人民出版社, 2001年9月版: 第208页. [Chen Duo. *Aesthetics of Xiqu* [M]. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House, September 2001 edition: 208.]

2 王朝闻. 继承·创造. 王朝闻文艺论集(第二集)[C]. 上海: 上海文艺出版社, 1979年10月版 第121页. [Wang Zhaowen. *Inheritance and Creation*. Wang Zhaowen's Collected Essays on Literature and Art (Second Collection) [C]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, October 1979 edition: 121.]

3 Where the performance was accompanied by three people playing percussion instruments and seven people singing on stage



■ *Fate in Tears and Laughter*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ *On a Wall and Horse*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



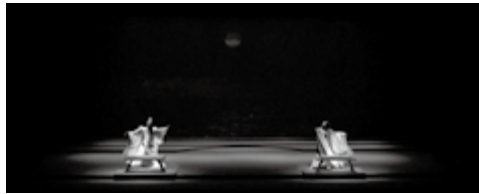
■ *A Dream of Red Mansions*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

performance, singing, music, costumes, makeup, and setting through observation of Yueju, Jingju, Hui Tunes, and Yuexi Gaoqiang. For example, the *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *Female Prince Consort* from that period used not only standardized body movements, singing, performances and blocking, but also cyclorama settings, flats of theatrical scenery, and various props. Not only did makeup and costume fit the identity of the characters, but also the accompaniment of the folk band and chorus behind the scenes. After the 1980s, in the face of the emerging "Xiqu crisis", in order to save itself, Huangmeixi continued to explore modernization in terms of directing and acting. It gradually broke through the once realistic scenery and presented a variety of stage settings. It created several new approaches to directing and acting, such as the "screen-type" stage style of *Fate in Tears and Laughter* and the "platform-type" of *The Lady from Huizhou*, the "stream of consciousness" and the handling of multiple theatrical spaces in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, and the symbolism in *The Lady from Huizhou*. In the new century, faced with a dwindling audience and stark future, Huangmeixi has been increasingly aware of its own advantages and striven towards modernization by means of "integrating and returning". For example, *On a Wall and Horse* not only fully demonstrated the charm of stage symbolism and virtuality, but created a lively and interactive relationship between the audience and actors. *Thunderstorm* created a vividly artistic stage space, and, after learning and borrowing from figures in traditional plays, designed choreography and costumes that matched the characters' identity and temperament. Perhaps its greatest achievement, however, was the masterfully tense atmosphere through the use of percussion and externalizing the character's psychology.

Thirdly, the modern transformation of Huangmeixi in terms of equipment and technology is mainly manifested in widely used stage devices such as acoustic equipment, lamps, slide projectors, and so on. Among them, amplification



■ A stage photo of the 3D holographic stage play *The Cowherd and Girl Weaver*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ A stage photo of *Xiao Qiao's Marriage with Zhou Yu*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

equipment evolved from wired vertical microphones, to chest mics, and then to headsets. The lamps have developed from the former backlight and iodine tungsten lamps to the current LED lamp and computer lamp. Additionally, there exist now car platforms, turning platforms, lifting platforms, etc. These devices are now commonly used in a large number of Huangmeixi productions, enhancing their modernity to a large extent. For instance, the 3D holographic stage play *The Cowherd and Girl Weaver* makes use of 3D technology to directly create a stage landscape that allows the mythological world to be visually presented on stage; a complete "liberation" for designers that improved of the means of stage performance for Huangmeixi. The car platforms and lifting platforms in *Xiao Qiao's Marriage with Zhou Yu* provide multiple possibilities for moving props and characters onto the stage. Finally, turning platforms aid in the realization of the shifts in scenes from reality to memory for the characters in the play, highlighting the traditional freehand aesthetics with modern technology.

Pros and cons

The modern transformation of Huangmeixi proves a necessity in order for the art form to remain funded and attended. However, as every coin has two sides, there are inevitably pros and cons in this process.

On the one hand, as opposed to the static state of "Museum Art", which focuses on deliberately imitating and vigorously preserving tradition, the modern transformation of Huangmeixi pursues a fluid form that enables its "survival" in the present as a malleable and fluid art-form. Therefore, comparatively speaking, its modernization has broadened its means of expression, enriched the fields of subject matter and content, and enhanced its possible aesthetics.

It both expresses new content and conveys new concepts concurrently with society, and it narrows the distance between traditional Xiqu and modern audiences, aesthetics and preferences.

On the other hand, new methods, content, and concepts might not be assimilated into the art form without fundamentally changing its inner philosophies; especially the adoption of elements such as realistic aesthetics and Western arts, which to a certain extent affect and change the traditional artistic characteristics of Huangmeixi's spiritual core. While the wonders afforded from the variety and complexity of modern technical equipment and stage devices undoubtedly impresses audience members, it complicates grassroots level performance in simple venues, and obscures the original artistic charm of Huangmeixi, having given rise to the a wave of actors who rely on scientific and technological forces to conceal their own deficiencies.

The modern transformation of Huangmeixi now approaches half a century, demonstrating strong vitality and verifying its infinite artistic possibilities. However, for those proponents of the real essence of "modernization", one must not simply reflect modernization in one or two levels, but should comprehensively modernize the harmonious unity of thoughts and ideas, subject matter and content, and technical means. According to this standard, then, although its modern transformation has been quite effective, there is still much to be done.

YI ZHOU

Director of Innovation Research Office of Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

An Interesting Stage Innovation --Tracing the Origin of Huangmeixi *On a Wall and Horse*

LI Ni

In 2001, the Anhui Huangmeixi Theatre adapted the Yuan-Dynasty *Zaju On a Wall and Horse* by Bai Pu(1226-1306) into Huangmeixi, a production that proved both a critical and monetary success. The performance maintains a high daily viewership on the internet even now. Wu Yaling, who played the heroine Li Qianjin in the performance, won the "Plum Performance Award", the highest honor for theatrical performance.

Bai Pu, a famous writer of *Zaju* in the Yuan Dynasty, together with Guan Hanqing, Ma Zhiyuan, and Zheng Guangzu, holds a title as one of the "Four Great Masters of Yuan-Dynasty *Zaju*". *Pei Shaojun On a Wall and Horse* is based on a poem written by Bai Juyi during the Tang Dynasty. The poem is as follows: *Pull up the silver bottle with silk rope from the bottom of the well-Forbid the man and woman to combine privately*. The poem relates the following story: A lady from a rich family lives in her boudoir, lonely and unhappy. During the warm spring season during which the grass greens and flowers bloom, she visits the garden to play. She climbs a small cliffside in order to observe on the streets outside of the wall. A young and handsome man happens to be riding by. The two falls in love at first sight and marry in private. Afraid of being discovered by his father, the young man hides the young lady in the garden and they live together for five or six years. Later, the young man's parents discover the two and they force the young lady to return home, thus initiating the tragedy. Bai Juyi compares the difficulty of free marriage between these two young people as sharpening embroidery needles on a jade hairpin and drawing water from a well with a silver bottle bolted with silk thread. A tragic mood pervades the whole poem.

Bai Pu's interpretation of this poem through *On a Wall and Horse* does not

change the essential plot or characters, but completely transforms a poem full of sadness into a comedy. The script depicts the joyful love story between Li Qianjin and Pei Shaojun. These two fall in love and marry after their first sighting on the wall and on the horse. Then, Pei secretly hides Li in his back garden. Unfortunately, Pei's father discovers them. In extreme anger, he drives Li Qianjin back to her own home. Later, after succeeding in the imperial examination, Pei Shaojun returns to pick Li Qianjin up, but she firmly refuses his pleas. Even Pei's father Pei Xingjian puts aside his former airs to plead with her, but she insists on refusing. At long last, however, due to the crying and pleading of their children they happily reunite again.

Comedy is an extremely important theatrical genre, and like audiences of other nations around the world, Chinese audiences greatly enjoy comedic elements in their entertainment. When compared with comedy, tragedy generally presents a more compelling and thoughtful form of entertainment. People are especially willing to shed tears for the characters in the play. A product of the aforementioned attitudes, then, is that there remain far fewer comedies throughout history, as they take an inferior placement when compared to tragedies. However, Bai Pu transformed a tragic rhyming poem into a perfect comedy with intricate stories, a marvelous plot, and a happy ending for all, a change welcomed by all generations of different social status. The work has been passed down as a classic of Yuan-Dynasty Zaju. This play occupies an important place in the history of Chinese literature for its outstanding ideology and superb artistic level, along with a script that has been inducted into various collections of Xiqu scripts.

Due to the limitations of the subject matter and style, comedy could not directly express the serious "thoughtful nature" that tragedy and serious theatre so often presented. This play did not find performance for quite a long time. It was not until 1959 that it was finally found and performed by Yu Zhenfei and Yan Huizhu and adapted into a movie in 1963, that people realized its value. Finally, the work solidified itself as a classic of Xiqu stage art. The value of *On a Wall and Horse* performances in modern times not only lies in the truth that the work presents a popular comedy within a high artistic level of performance, but also that it allows the audience to appreciate the special value and distinct thoughtful philosophies of comedic performance among the popular performances of tragedies and serious theatre of that time.

A Leapfrog Innovation

Ever since the "Controversy of the Hua and Ya" in the Qing Dynasty, the

boundaries of Chinese Xiqu have gradually become clear. The Jingju and Kunqu which belong to “Ya” tend to express emotions in the “Qupai Style”¹ with rigorous metrical form. The local Xiqu which mainly belong to “Hua”, resort to the easily comprehensible “Banqiang Style”². Huangmeixi—originating from the countryside—drew inspirations from countryside living and was thus full of rural and natural atmospheres. Unrestrained emotions and freedom dominate the culture of Huangmeixi. Since its birth, it bears no strict norms. Its initial scale was small, with folk tunes dominating the sung material. It seemed there existed no fixed routines of theatrical genres for it. As long as something was set to stage, people would accept it as inherent in Huangmeixi. For example, there exist the very old-fashioned *The Couple Watching the Lantern*; *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, a story about the love stories between fairies and mortals; *Female Prince Consort*, a picture of the life in the imperial court; *A Dream of Red Mansions*, an exploration into aristocratic mansion life; and even an adaption of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Huangmeixi either adopts a structure that does conform to the division of acts or scenes, or it strictly divides them following dramas or other genres of Xiqu. No matter which approach has been adopted, there occurs no sense of incongruity. The genres seem naturally formed. Therefore, one must acknowledge Huangmeixi as a genre with great inclusiveness and plasticity.

The adaption of Yuan-Dynasty Zaju into Huangmeixi presented a “leap-frog” innovation filled with great difficulties. Firstly, there exists an extremely important feature of the text and sentence structure of Zaju. The writing must combine elegance with regards to use of language with many allusions and emphasized rhymes. Huangmeixi, on the other hand, provides a more lifelike chanting and singing and represents a close transcription of the oral language of the general population. These two practices, then, represented opposite ends of the spectrum; “elegance” and “vulgarity”. In order to turn an “elegant” work of the classical repertoire into the “vulgar” and extreme Huangmeixi, the adaptation of the script proves a tremendous difficulty, especially preserving the nuance of the elegant lines while transforming them into a more vulgar and less-educated dialogue. However, Huangmeixi proved extremely effective at absorbing the advantages of other artistic categories. In the face of the very different Yuan-Dynasty Zaju, the playwright Chen Wangjiu transformed the strict “Four acts with the option of a wedge” structure of Zaju into an Act-Scene structure more accessible for modern audiences, he changed the elegant written lyrics

1 With Qupai as the basic structure, several different Qupai are combined in complete sets to form the music of a play or a theatre highlight.[Translator's Note]

2 Taking the symmetrical two sentences as the basic unit of the singing, and evolving into different rhythm forms according to certain variation principles on this basis. [Translator's Note]

into everyday language, and he changed the subtle and introverted comedic elements of Zaju into simple and understandable folk fun that led to easy entertainment for the general public.

An Attempt at “Stage Symbolism”

The theatre invited Li Jianping, Professor of the director department of Shanghai Theatre Academy, to direct the play. Li Jianping has been exposed to the art of Xiqu since his childhood and is well versed in its subtleties. He is also a strong advocate of Xiqu aesthetics. After gaining control over the script, he carefully studied it and mulled upon it for long periods of time. He studied the performance versions of Yu Zhenfei and Yan Huizhu, and finally decided to adopt a special way to rehearse the play, that is, the "Stage Symbolism" commonly used in drama.

We know that Xiqu performances are characterized with virtuality, formality, and the freehand style, manifested by the statement “Traveling all over the world in just a few steps, and forming an army with only a few persons.” Of course, there are also plots such as climbing up a mountain, stepping into a river, riding on a horse, sitting in a sedan chair, sailing in a boat, swimming, going upstairs or downstairs, opening and closing doors, eating and drinking, etc., which all show the unique aesthetic characteristics of Xiqu. The means of expressions of Xiqu are also very rich. There, however, never existed the concept of “Stage Symbolism”, a tactic specific to western theatre. “Stage Symbolism” is a symbolic expression often used in the theatre, which does not coincide with reality, but is acceptable to the audience. This quality was a completely imported idea qualitatively different from the three characteristics of Xiqu mentioned above.

The director found certain scenes in the script inconvenient for performances on stage:

The second scene “Unwilling to read”: How might one show Pei Shaojun’s immense displeasure? A suffocation so powerful when confronted by the full house of Four Books and Five Classics that he wanted to escape from his study?

The fourth scene “On a wall and horse”: When Pei Shaojun opts to purchase flowers in Luoyang on a horse, he sees Li Qianjin inside the high wall and the love story takes place following the event. However, how to deal with that high wall? Should we [production] still paint a wall to erect on the stage like the



■ Stage photo of Kunqu *On a Wall and Horse*

version of Yu Zhenfei?

The fifth scene “Jumping over the wall at middle night”: There is a plot point where Pei Shaojun needs to jump over the high wall. How to show that? Should he pretend to jump? Or is there any other method?

The eighth scene “The hairpin broke and the bottle fell”: Pei Xingjian deliberately sets obstacles for Li Qianjin by making her sharpen a jade hairpin into an embroidery needle on a rough stone, and forces her to draw water from a well by hanging a small silver bottle suspended with a silk thread. Should we also imitate Mr. Yu and build the actual props?

If we resort to the means of “Stage Symbolism”, all these problems could be solved. So the director introduced this means into the rehearsal theatre of Huangmeixi for the first time. Although Huangmeixi is very inclusive in its nature, there are still obvious doubts when new ideas are introduced. The virtuality, formality, and freehand style of Xiqu are all manifested in the state of the characters performed by the actors. That is to say, the actors all perform in the first person the act of climbing up a mountain, stepping into a river, riding on a horse, or sitting in a sedan chair. While in “Stage Symbolism”, one is prone to using the set props or the bodies of the supporting actors to show another object, something that Huangmeixi performers are unaccustomed to.

For the second scene “Unwilling to read”, a study full of books is required, but the aesthetic requirements of Xiqu make it impossible to pile up bookshelves and books on the stage. The director asked for four actors (“bit parts”) holding physically massive books rotating and chanting around Pei Shaojun, creating the stage image of Pei Shaojun being overwhelmed by numerous books.

For the fourth scene “On a wall and horse”, Pei Shaojun passes by on a horse

outside of a wall before suddenly seeing Li Qianjin inside it. The action of riding a horse proves relatively easy to show, since a whip is enough for the actor to perform the state of horseback riding. The scene of Li Qianjin slowly climbing the hillside inside the wall can be represented by the physical movements of going up the stairs in Xiqu. But what about that wall? The director arranged the four "bit parts" in a row, forming a "Human Wall" between the two. As their feelings gradually deepen, the "Human Wall" shortens in both stature and the rhythm of the music, so that there is no barrier to the communication between Pei and Li. During this process, the actors who form the "Human Wall" also express astonishment and incomprehension at the emotive eye contact between the two future lovers, fully demonstrating ordinary peoples' views on the private affairs of men and women in feudal society.

For the fifth scene "Jumping over the wall at middle night", Pei Shaojun decides to jump over the high wall at middle night at the invitation of Li Qianjin. There still remains that "Human Wall" in front of him. At first, the "bit parts" stick to the duty of the wall to prevent Pei. But for such a scholar like him, it is almost impossible to jump over such a high wall. Just as his anxiety reaches a limit and he prepares to jump, the "bit parts" squat down together, allowing him to jump over easily, and bringing the romance a happy ending, fully reflecting the kindness of those "bit parts".

For the eighth scene "The hairpin broke and the bottle fell", Pei Xingjian said to Li Qianjin viciously, "Put the jade hairpin in your hair on the stone and grind it into a needle. If it doesn't break, it's a god-sent marriage. If it breaks, don't blame me for being heartless. You, woman, do you dare to grind it?" At this point, the director asked one of the "bit parts" to roll forward and then prostrate himself on the ground with his back arched, and his back became a symbolic grindstone. After the jade hairpin was broken, Pei Xingjian then forced Li Qianjin to use a silver bottle to draw water, and the director had the four "bit parts"



■ Stage photo of Huangmeixi *On a Wall and Horse*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre



■ Stage photo of Huangmeixi *On a Wall and Horse*
Source: Anhui Huangmei Opera Theatre

crouch down and hand-in-hand with each other to form a well.

In the end, when Pei Xianjian apologizes and begs Li Qianjin to go home with him and marry Pei Shaojun again, Qianjin took this opportunity to retaliate and asks him to draw water with a silver bottle, akin to what he forced her to do earlier. Qianjin states that if he fails, she wouldn't go with him. Pei Xingjian threatens Qianjin with his death and pretends to intend on jumping into the well to commit suicide. No one stops him. He has no other choice but to ridicule himself and point out that the wellhead is too small to jump in. However, the four "bit parts" posing as the wellhead suddenly increase the vacancy and shout in unison: "Master, the wellhead is big enough now!" This incredibly embarrasses Pei Xingjian, and at the same time showed the bit-parts obvious love for Qianjin and hatred for Pei Xianjian.

Interestingly, the four "bit parts" also play the roles of palanquin bearers, soldiers, watchmen, citizens, household servants, flag bearers, etc. in other scenes, and they are important factors in forming the unique external expression of the play, bearing quite onerous tasks. The director felt that simply calling them "Four bit parts: A, B, C and D" in the performance manual did not grant enough respect to their energy, physical strength, and status in the play. He broke the convention and refers to them as the four "big parts". These four actors are greatly cheered, and to this day remain highly respected.

On a Wall and Horse remains a very interesting comedy and retains high artistic value that deserves attention even today. The original generation of actors have entered their middle age, and some of them have even passed away. I sincerely hope for a generation of younger actors interested in presenting this work of art to audience members, again.

Li Ni

Theatre Director of Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center

The video link of the Huangmeixi *On a Wall and Horse* : <https://www.bilibili.com/video/av882891931>

Folk Narrative of the Traditional Repertoires of Huangmeixi

WANG Kui

Huangmeixi is the most representative Xiqu genre in Anhui province. There has always been a saying about its traditional repertoire, which states “there are 36 big plays and 72 small plays in total”.

In fact, “36” and “72” are not accurate numbers. In 1958, the Repertoire Research Office of Anhui Provincial Bureau of Culture compiled and printed the *Compilation of Anhui Traditional Repertory - Huangmeixi*, which included 127 traditional repertoires of 84 small plays and 43 big plays.

Most of them describe the trivial, interesting, or melancholic episodes in the lives of ordinary people. Even if they involve historical events or fairy stories, or even in some cases if they spread the themes encased in Taoist doctrine, they are often developed in the way of folk narrative, presenting a strong folk taste.

The Depiction of Folk Life

The traditional repertoires of Huangmeixi mostly draw materials from the lives of the common people and strive to vividly depict the joys and sorrows they encompass.

The small play *The Couple Watching the Lantern* is a typical example of this, taking as its theme a folk carnival full of amusement. Its plot runs as follows;

During the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the first lunar month, farmer Wang Xiaoliu and his wife go into town to see the lanterns. They walk and watch happily, until suddenly the wife is overcome by sadness, and wants to

go home.

Xiaoliu hurries to ask why, only to realize that his wife's beauty has attracted the fiery eyes of a strange man, which made her very uncomfortable. Xiaoliu hurriedly goes forward to negotiate, and invites the man to see things from his perspective: "If I also stare at your wife like this, will you be happy?"

The stranger soon leaves, and Xiaoliu and his wife carry on their excursion, taking in the various novel and unique lantern performances, before finally going home with satisfaction.

The lively and festive atmosphere in the play, seconded by the simple plot and lifelike badinage of the couple presents the peaceful and happy life of ordinary people. The tension created by the stranger's stare – soon solved by the husband's protective instincts – show a lifelike portrayal of provincial life which has made Huangmeixi beloved across China.

Another small play *Gathering the Pigweed* is a comedy in an idyllic and arcadian style. When the young female lead Tao Jianhua accidentally breaks two bamboo shoots while gathering pigweed, Jin Xiaomao, the young boy in charge of the bamboo shoots, assumes that she had come with the intention of stealing bamboo and trampled on the stalks in her haste.

Only when Tao Jinhua is able to explain herself is the misunderstanding cleaned up. Jin Xiaomao, out of guilt for his false accusation, offers to pay for the reparation of Jinhua's now broken bamboo basket, but Jinhua doesn't accept. So Xiaomao gives Jinhua a lot of bamboo shoots and escorts her home. In return for his kindness, Jinhua treats Xiaomao to the traditional Anqing delicacy of egg fried rice. From among the descriptions, we can feel the positiveness, kindness, and innocence of rural teenagers as well as the harmonious interpersonal relationships forged in the countryside.

Another play, *Meeting at the Blue Bridge*, focuses on the pursuit of freedom and happiness of young men and women in the old days against the backdrop of the feudalistic arranged marriage rites of the time.

It focuses on 17 year-old Lan Yulian, a 'Denglangxi'¹ who has been made to live in the countryside home of her betrothed's family's house while her prospective groom comes of age (he is still not yet 13).

One day, March 3rd to be exact, on a rare springtime excursion from the

1 等郎媳, daughter-in-law waiting for the son of a family to grow up to marry. [Translator's note]

prison-cum-home of her in-laws to draw water at Blue Bridge, Lan Yulian meets a male scholar named Wei Kuiyuan – a 23 year-old in a similar position to herself as he is waiting for his wife to reach marrying age (she is not yet 9).

When Wei Kuiyuan first meets Lan Yulian at the Blue Bridge, he is attracted by her appearance, and after chatting, he becomes deeply moved by her sincerity and enthusiasm. When Yulian stops him from drinking cold water to avoid catching a cold, he falls in love with this gentle and considerate woman.

Both characters were troubled by their parents' designation of their respective marriage partners, and thus the two hearts find solace in one another. Yulian gradually falls in love with Kuiyuan, but the reserved manner of a young girl made her afraid to accept the love expressed by him, so she picks up her bucket and turns to go home.

Kuiyuan panics. He grabs her bucket and blocks her way. A standstill follows. He drops down to his knees and expresses his true feelings to Yulian, who finally reciprocates as the two fall in love, and they become determined to marry each other, rather than their intended matches.

However, they quickly realize that they can only do this secretly. And so, they agree to meet on the full-moon night of August 15th at the Blue Bridge, and leave together under cover of darkness.

As such, *Meeting at the Blue Bridge* can be seen as an archetypal example of Huangmeixi, as it takes a small, momentary everyday meeting, and infuses it with the passions of the country people to rally against the very real-world context its characters find themselves in (in this instance, arranged marriage).

The Promotion of Folk Ethics

The reason why Huangmeixi is so popular is that it is good at presenting the folk customs of the region, as well as the trivial goings on and subtle feelings brewed in country life.

Its repertoires are always permeated with genuine and proud feelings for the pastoral, promoting folk ethics and morals with the help of the life experiences of the characters in the plays, which are often educational as well as entertaining.

One such instance, *The Story of Buckwheat*, criticizes the unjust behavior of disrespecting the poor and admiring the rich, and demonstrates the plain

folk's ethical values. Its focus is fiery female Wang Cuihua who must attend a birthday party held at the home of her snobbish and social-climbing mother.

To begin, Wang Cuihua chants against the world of snobbery as soon as she steps onto the stage: "Even if the poor live in a downtown area, no one cares about them. Even if the rich are far away in the mountains, distant relatives will visit them. Money and power can help win the respect of others. How pitiful my poor family is, no relatives come to visit".

In the play, we see how poverty means not only material pressure, but also spiritual burden. In order to prepare gifts for the do, Wang Cuihua is forced to borrow money from her sisters-in-law, but gets refused by all. She has no choice but to make buckwheat buns to take to the birthday party, which causes great humiliation.

Her snobbish mother greets her eldest and second daughters with smiles, but when she saw Cuihua, her face turns cold as ice. She throws away the buckwheat buns and ushers Cuihua to the kitchen to cook, ordering the servants to keep a close eye on her to prevent her from stealing oil and salt.

The children of these three sisters were all grandchildren of the Wang family. When the eldest daughter's child cried, they ordered the maids to hug and feed him more cakes and fruits; When the second daughter's child cried, they asked the maid to carry him to the garden to play, cracking the gold-rimmed lotus bowl to make him happy, since they were both "children of rich families". When Cuihua's son Xu Xibao was hungry however, he is only given a bowl of rancid tofu soup, which is only has the oil skimmed off for fear that "the poor would not have money for medicine if they felt ill". Xibao smashes the bowl angrily, which irritates the couple of Million Wang very much. They scold and beat, and eventually drive away Cuihua and her son from the party.

It just so happens to be freezing cold outside the party, too treacherous to walk home in. The two are forced to rest in the stables temporarily. When the party host hears this, she accuses Cuihua and her son of trampling on the straw and disturbing the feeding of the donkeys and horses at this coldest of times.

Having no other choice, Cuihua and Xibao go home hungry, braving the snow. The plays theme of disrespecting the poor and admiring the rich among blood relatives is designed to shock and force questions to be asked.

Indeed, pitting parental snobbery against the child's desire to be filial is one of the most frequently performed themes in Chinese folk Xiqu. In such stories, the sons and daughters who were previously discriminated against often later become wealthy and powerful, at which point they will tease and satirize the snobbish and deny the behaviour of disrespecting the poor and admiring the

rich.

Another play, *Making Tofu*, satirizes the bad habits of being fond of eating and averse to work.

Wang Xiaoliu and his wife make a living by making tofu, but Xiaoliu is addicted to alcohol and gambling and often lies. As the new year approaches, Xiaoliu's wife asks him to sell yarn to buy soybeans to make tofu. Instead, Xiaoliu goes gambling and loses all his money, only carrying a bag of yellow sand as masquerading as soybeans to delude his wife.

Angry, his wife scolds and punishes him after finding out. She is forced to borrow soybeans from a neighbor, and orders Xiaoliu to push the mill to help in her preparations, Xiaoliu is so lazy, and unable to take anything seriously or make himself useful, that he fools around and pretends to hang himself rather than help out.

By slow degrees however, the wife is able to get through to him, and over the course of the play Wang Xiaoliu becomes determined to change his mind and be a down-to-earth, helpful person.

The play, and its exaggerated lead Xiaoliu, helped to build an archetype character who idles around all day and eats his head off, while playing petty tricks which became common in Huangmei performances.

Through humour, and a realistic script with recognizable characters, these plays work to show the audience that they must deny the behavior of idleness and non-agricultural work, expressing the simple wish of "If men and women are very hardworking, then they can be self-sufficient for all meals".

The Artistic Images of Everyday Life

There are many typical images active on the stage of Huangmeixi, which are different from the common images of theatre productions written by literati. For instance, the heroes of Huangmeixi theatre are by no means 'special' people. Some of them are passionate and spirited, some are shrewd and capable, some are hard-working, and some are brave in a fight – but they are all rooted in the ordinary. In short, they are all artistic images from everyday life that meet the aesthetic expectations of the grassroots, unpretentious audience.

The core character of *Leaving the Inn*, Liu Fengyang, is a prime example of this. Her story centres on her unhappy marriage to her husband, and subsequent

affair with Cai Mingfeng.

Eventually, Cai Minfeng decides to leave to return to his hometown. Liu Fengyang begs for him to stay, but he is unmoved. Shocked, hurt and betrayed by her lover's sudden departure, Liu Fengyang attempts to prevent him from going. First she throws his luggage around, and soon she resorts to attempting to physically restraining him, and the two have a violent fist-fight.

When the fight ends, Liu Fengyang is still determined to go with Cai Minfeng, regardless of what it means for her reputation as a married woman. Of course, however, she cannot, and Cai minfeng leaves alone. Her heartfelt determination to escape her miserable marriage is relayed in more than 300 lines of singing, which make up the highlight scene of the piece. Although vulgar and shallow, the lyrics are very philosophical and were the summary of the life experiences of the lower class.

In the end, when Liu Fengying learns that Cai Mingfeng has been killed by her husband, she is so grief-stricken that she crosses thousands of miles to offer her condolences. After paying her homage, she throws herself into the river and drowns.

On the basis of this melodrama, in which an everyday relationship is given the platform of epic, an image of a woman who is of great affection and righteousness but has met someone unkind remained forever in the character-gallery of Huangmeixi.

In another classic *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, the Seventh Fairy from the heavenly palace is transformed into a girl from a village who is intelligent and kind as well as naughty and cunning.

This fairy, dissatisfied with the lonely life in the heavenly palace and moved by the filial piety and miserable encounters of Dong Yong, takes the form of a country girl to secretly go down to earth and pursue happiness.

She meets with Dong Yong and stopped him three times. For the first time, her sudden blocking attracted Dong Yong's attention, and she took the opportunity to ask his name and where to go. The second time, she deliberately bumps into him, but preemptively accused him of hitting her. The third time, she was about to repeat the same trick, but Dong Yong was on his guard and backed away, making her almost fall. Subsequently, the two shared their life experiences.

In order to comfort Dong Yong, the Seventh Fairy also claimed that she shared the same misfortune with him and said that "as long as you are willing, I would love to--" After a short pause, she eagerly sang "marry you", completing her "female-chasing-male" action. Such bold and straightforward behavior of the

Fairy will engages the audience to the extent that they do not feel alienated by the supernatural context. Instead, the magical elements are seen as a metaphor for the power of natural love and affection in the lives of ordinary folk.

The Pursuit of a Natural and Simple Aesthetic Style

Mr. Wang Chang'an has points out in *The Positioning of Huangmeixi - The Popular Cultural Matrix of Huangmeixi* that: 'Huangmeixi was born in the countryside...What it faced was 'a cultural desert'...which has determined that it could only develop itself according to the ideals and interests of all walks of life, and could only win claps from among the 'cultural desert', thus forming its matrix stereotype as a popular culture'.

It is in the countryside, then, that Huangmeixi gradually finds its own position on the basis of learning from others. It rapidly develops under the recreation of artists and bursts out new inspirations in continuous performances.

The music of Huangmeixi includes three types: Zhu singing, Hua singing, and Three singings¹. On the whole, the tune is melodious and simple, with a lively rhythm, distinctive national characteristics and special local features.

Among them, Hua singing is developed on the basis of folk songs and is mostly used in small plays that show the life of the grassroots communities. As such, these plays are often called "Hua singing small plays". They have relatively fixed and dedicated tunes, which are not used in conjunction with each other. The singing is composed of simple sequences of lines and interspersed with supplementary (sentences added to complement the tone and strengthen the emotion). Its tunes are vigorous and simple with lively and light melodies, strong rhythms, and a rich flavor of life.

Examples of this are Fangxiانشa Tune, Wugeng Tune, Jishui Tune, Dragon Boat Tune, Chair Tune, Smokebag Tune, and so on, all of which are fresh and lively with uniqueness. In 1952, musician He Lvting watched the performance of Huangmeixi in Shanghai, and he wrote an article to express his concern and love for it, especially mentioning its simple and vigorous singing, which made people feel as if they "smelled the earth in the countryside and the fragrance of mountain flowers".

1 The general term for the three singings of "Cai singing", "Xian singing" and "Yinsi singing". [Translator's note]

The Huangmeixi, which originated from the folk, was limited by various conditions in its early stage and did not form a stylized performance system. However, it was good at simulating and reproducing the life of the grassroots, that is, the so-called "Xiao Zuo", which required actors to pay attention to their daily life. As such, the audiences also knew to regard "whether their performances are close to the real conditions in life" or "whether their performances give attention to the details" as the criteria for evaluating the quality of an actor.

The performance style of Huangmeixi, which manifests the reality from the virtuality, can transform the limited time and space of the stage into a free flowing one, which can give actors much freedom, and bring the audience a realistic and natural aesthetic feeling. In *Meeting at the Blue Bridge*, actress Yan Fengying has cleverly used a white silk as a prop, She firstly used it instead of buckets and poles, and sang while dancing. After arriving at the well, she then uses it again as a well rope to simulate the scene of drawing water from the well. When drawing the second bucket of water, she holds her breath and exerts all her strength, as if the bucket would fall to the bottom if she didn't exert herself, pulling the bucket out of the well gradually, with her forehead beaded with sweat and her cheeks red. Then she sits by the well, simulating the action of shaking the fan by swinging that white silk again. When singing the lyrics of "three fans and four fans, the wind is coming", Yan Fengying smiles and looks excited, giving people the feeling that the refreshing breeze is touching their faces. In 1958, Mei Lanfang watched Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang's performance of *Meeting at the Blue Bridge* in Hefei and praised this way of performance as very creative.

Originating from the countryside, Huangmeixi holds a folk standpoint during its long-term development, adopts folk narratives, vividly presents folk life, and promotes folk ethics, gradually forming a folk and popular aesthetic character, and its individual characteristics and theatrical advantages. The development of Huangmeixi in the new era can only achieve real success if reasonable innovation is made on the basis of full respect for its tradition.

An Analysis on the Development of Huangmeixi over the Past Decade

LIU Kun

Originating in Huangmei County, Hubei Province, and later spreading to Anqing City, Anhui Province, Huangmeixi represents one of the five major Xiqu genres in China. However, with the rapid development of movies, television, and short videos, traditional Xiqu productions face decline. Huangmeixi also faces problems such as audience loss, rigid creative concepts and an aging audiences, and increasing calls for reform. In order to better integrate with the new era, practitioners of it have tried to break the geographical restrictions and sought cooperation with media to enhance the otherwise limited communication.

The arc of Huangmei Xiqu is an inspiring one; from a small local genre that originated and developed in Hubei and Anhui, to one of the five major Xiqu genres in China; from “the old three repertoires” *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, *Female Prince Consort* and *The Story of a Silk Handkerchief*, to *Benediction* which won the 30th Plum Performance Award in 2021, and then to *Jade Fairy* which won the "Best International Repertoire Award" at the BeSeTo Theatre Festival in South Korea. Huangmeixi strove for development through its initial performance difficulties, and gradually expanded out of Anqing to an international stage.

Some original and newly-adapted Huangmeixi from the past decade

The earliest pioneering figure with regards to Huangmeixi is Yan Fengying. From 1953 to 1965, she starred in such large plays as *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*,

Female Prince Consort, and *The Cowherd and Girl Weaver*, works then adapted for film, solidifying Huangmeixi's quick spread across the country¹.

Since Chinese reform and global expansion, the Anhui Huangmeixi Opera Theatre recruited a group of young actors, including Wu Qiong, Ma Lan, Wu Yaling, Yang Jun and Yuan Mei, who later became the "Five Golden Flowers" of their field. Due to the joint efforts of these outstanding actors and the staff behind the scenes, Huangmeixi has "entered a new prime."



■ The statue standing in front of Yan Fengying's former residence which is sculpted after her classic portrayal in *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*

At the beginning of the 21st century, the original Huangmeixi "Huizhou" trilogy (*The Lady from Huizhou*, *Once Upon a Time in Huizhou*, *Out of Huizhou*) and other repertoire of Han Zaifen and her team attracted wide attention, feeding Huangmeixi the popularity necessary to reinvigorate what had been a gradual decline during the 1990's.

In the past decade, Huangmeixi sought

1 张悦：《解域与突围——近现代黄梅戏文化传播研究》，合肥工业大学出版社，第10、11页 [Zhang Yue, *Breaking--A Study on the Communication of Huangmeixi Culture in Modern Times*, Hefei University of Technology Press, p10.11.]



■ Still of *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, Yan Fengying as the Fairy Princess



■ Still of *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*



■ Stage photo of *Old Party Branch Secretary*
Source: Anqing Institute of Huangmei Opera

progress in stability and succeeded in gaining it. This paper will elaborate on the development of Huangmeixi from the perspective of repertoire creation and communication.

(1) The innovation of Huangmeixi works in the past decade

After the "Huizhou" trilogy, no relatively influential works presented themselves for an extended period of time. This creative drought ended with the appearance of the newly-adapted *Old Party Branch Secretary* in 2018, a production that ushered in new inspirations with regards to the development of Huangmeixi.

Adapted from the Huangmeixi *Before Hu Jiugen's Retiring from Office*, *Old Party Branch Secretary* enjoyed a high attendance rate during its performance. The reason behind the success is nuanced, but on the one hand, perhaps success was due to the grounded subject matter; it mainly focused on peoples' livelihood. On the other hand, since it was the closing play of the 9th China (Anqing) Huangmeixi Art Festival, publicity was widespread. However, although the theme of the work limited itself to rural life, few rural audience members could afford to go to theatres and urban audiences were unfamiliar and uninterested with rural life, resulting in a mismatch between the repertoire and the audience. Therefore, the performances of *Old Party Branch Secretary* only ever found performances in the Anhui Province. Outside of various performances in schools, there also occurred no rehearsals or commercial performances.

It is gratifying to observe the newly-adapted *Benediction* by Anqing Zaifen Huangmei Art Theatre in 2021 broke through the limitations faced by *Old Party Branch Secretary* and achieved even higher accolades. *Benediction* was adapted from the classic novel of the same name by Lu Hsun. Both the novel itself and the character Xianglin Sao in it have already left a deep impression on the Chinese population. Therefore, the subject matter naturally intrigues a wider range of audience members and might be publicized more easily and widely. The mismatch between the repertoire and the audience for *Old Party Branch Secretary*, therefore, ceases to exist as an issue. Once premiered, *Benediction* was highly praised by the theatre industry and won the Plum Performance Award unanimously.

Also in 2021, the theatre created and rehearsed *The Immortal Yang Kaihui*, which metaphorically depicted the development of the Chinese Communist Party's new-birth, difficult explorations, and survival in difficulties and hardships through Yang Kaihui's ideological transformations in three periods. The creative team's choice of such a great female figure like Yang Kaihui as the theme is pioneering, echoing the current trend of awakening feminist consciousness and triggering the resonance of young audiences. It is worth mentioning that the scriptwriter Chang Yong boldly applied Montage techniques into Xiqu, and inserted Xiangju into Huangmeixi. All of these breakthroughs are refreshing for the audience. Additionally, the stage design, costumes, and make-up all abandoned the fancy commercial style and returned to the simple layout of "one table and two chairs". The focus is on the story itself and the actors' performances, with simple lighting and changes of scenes to show the transformations in the background of the times. Two flashback scenes present within the play naturally bring out the images of Yang Kaihui in her teenage and youth, not only providing the young actors an opportunity to represent the image of Yang Kaihui through three periods, but also contribute to the practice of Huangmeixi in the form of "old actors' teaching the new", allowing audiences to become familiar with the young actors.

From the works above, one observes that the creation philosophy of Huangmeixi in the past ten years closely followed the development of the times, and the creative team continuously sought breakthroughs in the context for the new era.

(2) Seeking new operations and new audiences

On July 16, 2018, *Jade Fairy*, produced and rehearsed by the Anqing Huangmeixi Art Theatre, won the "Best International Repertoire Award" and "Best Playwright Award" as the only sole representative play from China, and the main actor Xia Yuanyuan won the "Best Actor Award". In the winter of the same year, it was staged at the 4th Shanghai Small Theatre Festival and

attracted much attention.

Adapted from a Yuan-Dynasty Zaju, *Jade Fairy* was the first small-theatre Huangmeixi, a testament to the creative team's active explorations of the unknown fields. In the middle of the stage, there exists a large hemp rope that binds the six characters together. The rope reflects the indestructible spiritual shackles from the past to the present, illustrating the character's resistance and struggles and the author's compassion for their ultimate fates.

Yu Dengyun, Dean of the Anqing Huangmeixi Art Theatre, spoke as follows: "From the beginning of conception to the production and rehearsal, our goal was to promote the work to foreign markets, cooperate with private cultural enterprises, let professional people do professional things, and spread the excellence of Huangmeixi". "Chinese Xiqu should not only be performed for Chinese citizens, but for citizens from other nations, as well. Judging from the performance of *Jade Fairy* in South Korea, the goal of the first phase has been achieved."

Since the 21st century, Huangmeixi has introduced modern technology with regards to stage building, hoping to attract young audiences with impressive



■ Stage photo of *Jade Fairy*
Source: Anqing Institute of Huangmei Opera

"visual stimuli", to better attract the newer generations. However, repertoire such as *Peacocks Southeast Traveling* and *Jade Fairy* are inclined to performance in smaller venues, resolutely abandoning large-scale production in terms of the stage art, showing the flexibility of ideas that production teams work with.

Traditional Xiqu, having been nourished in a comfortable environment with state funding for years, contained a number of creative teams that lost their drive for innovation and competition, ultimately resulting in lower quality productions. However, from the words of Dean Yu, one observes that *Jade Fairy* took the initiative to compete in the international market, and the practitioners of Huangmeixi guide the work with their full attention. So from the perspective of development, the work is full of vitality, excitement, and commitment.

The combination of Huangmeixi with new media

With recent technological development and the rise of more convenient means of communication such as movies and TV series, Huangmeixi fell into a desperate situation. Fortunately, the practitioners of it refused to give up. Recent efforts to rejuvenate the art form worked hard to combine it with short videos, VR, and popular songs, in an effort this traditional art fresh with regards to its mediums.

(1) Short video as the medium

In modern society, short videos occupy a large amount of people's fragmented time. Due to the ease of viewership and the strong and immediate entertainment value, short videos attract people of different ages and maintain a high viewer stickiness. Contrastingly, there exists a high barrier to entry and a plethora of social rules required to attend theatre performance. In addition to the entertainment value, plays require audience introspection, and therefore enjoys a smaller, albeit loyal, following. Although the emergence of short videos has certainly negatively impacted traditional media, it has also provided more possibilities for the spread of Xiqu.

In recent years, although some apps related to Huangmeixi have appeared, they have not essentially changed the status quo of its traditional and singular content. The emergence of short video platforms has played a role to a certain extent. The short videos have promoted the "re-creation" of Huangmeixi by everyday users, especially attracting a number of young people. On the platform, fans might also interact with professional Huangmeixi actors to enhance the

possibility of return users. If possible, one hopes to attract a part of the short video fanbase to the theatre, so as to complete the task of combining audience members who would otherwise remain separate.

However, there exist obvious limitations for short videos. The professional degree of singing uploaded by different users varies greatly, an aspect which might negatively affect expectations of Huangmeixi..

(2) The combination of Huangmeixi with VR

VR gives people a sense of environmental immersion by simulating a virtual environment with a computer. This technology has been gradually used in all walks of life, and traditional Xiqu is also trying to combine with VR for better development.

In 2017, Anhui Satellite TV made use of VR technology to simulate the master of Huangmeixi, Yan Fengying, "reappear" on the Spring Festival Gala stage. The audiences were shocked by this reunion with Yan Fengying across life and death, and the applause and cries lingered on and on for quite a long time. Clearly science and technology can illicit strong emotional reactions from people, and the nostalgia and love for Yan Fengying was clearly observed.

Jacky C.P.Chan et al. from The City University of Hong Kong have designed a dance training system using Motion Capture and VR technology. The virtual teacher can be projected on the screen by means of 2D projection to complete training interactions with the trainees, yielding impressive results. This invention might also be applied in the training of Xiqu body movements, which not only aids the problem of the lack of Xiqu teachers and the difficulties in popularizing the courses on Xiqu performing and body movements, but allows for the taking advantage of VR to promote Huangmeixi. It can be said that it is quite a way to kill two birds with one stone.

(3) The combination of Huangmeixi with pop music

The addition of Xiqu singing into popular songs not only maintains a sense of nationality, but also demonstrates the characteristics of the times. For example, the pop music work *Outside the Peony Pavilion* incorporated many elements of Huangmeixi in an effort to add familiarity. Additionally, Anhui singer Xu Song invited Huangmeixi performer Zhu Tingting to participate in the recording of his new song *If Then 2020*, in which Zhu sings a section of *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* in the verse and also adds a section of Huangmei folk song in the chorus. As of November 1, 2021, the first common search after entering "Xu Song *If Then 2020*" on Baidu is "Xu Song *If Then 2020* Huangmeixi", illustrating that the popular songs of Anhui singers have brought attention to Anhui local Huangmeixi.

Conclusion

In the face of the world's tendency towards fragmented information, audiences' attention to movies and televisions has begun to wane, and the traditional Xiqu is especially facing severe challenges with regards to viewership. Such a dilemma, however, urges Xiqu leave its comfort zone and pioneer transformations and self breakthroughs. From the newly-adapted *Benediction*, the original *The Immortal Yang Kaihui*, and small theatre *Jade Fairy*, it can be seen that Huangmeixi is actively responding to its status quo.

The development of Huangmeixi from small local plays into a household-known genre of xiqu manifests its amazing tenacity as a genre. It will definitely find its own way forward in the current era of information explosion.

Han Zaifen's Atypical Path to Huangmeixi

NIE Shengzhe

According to *Statistics on the Intangible Cultural Heritage Drama November 2021* issued by Tiktok on December 1, 2021, Huangmeixi - one of the five major Chinese xiqu - ranked first in terms of its influence, followed by Jingju, Yuju, Yueju and Qinqiang. Huangmeixi-related content received 238 million likes in November 2021, far more than other genres, which shows the extraordinary popularity of Huangmeixi against today's decline of Xiqu.

Besides its catchy vocal music, the large number of domestic young audiences attracted to Huangmeixi can also be attributed to a symbolic actress in the field - Han Zaifen.

If Huangmeixi is recognized as a plateau of Chinese Xiqu with its nationwide audience, Han Zaifen can be regarded as a peak of this plateau, whose existence brings splendor to the scenery.

In the spring of 1978, a Huangmeixi troupe from Anqing, Anhui Province went to the county where Han Zaifen lived to have trainees join their team. Han accompanied her classmate who wanted to audition for the troupe. When Han was about to leave with her classmate, the examiner, Chen Mingyou, found that Han looked very agile and asked after her. Having told Chen why she came here, Han was asked to sing a song, and



■ Han Zaifen (1968-)



■ Left: Portrait of Han Zaifen, Photographed on 3 March 1979

■ Right: Portrait of Han Zaifen, Photographed on 1 May 1980

she performed *The Waves of Hong Hu*, leaving a deep impression on those present. A few days later, Han was informed of her admission to the troupe, while her classmate who intended to join the team was rejected.

Han's whole family did not agree with her perusing art and putting aside her studies. However, Han had such a great fantasy about her possible future that she determined to get enrolled in the regional Huangmeixi troupe with her family kept in the dark. At first, Han was curious about the new environment. But after several months of boring training coupled with homesickness, the 10-year-old Han believed that her family were right, and that learning Xiqu was meaningless. Then she planned to return home and go back to school.

But it was not that simple.

Han's father, Han Nianzhong, is a very principled person. He asked Han to adhere to the path she chose and be serious about things. After all, it was Han herself who previously turned a deaf ear to the family and went to the troupe alone, but now was considering giving up. He also asked the whole family to stop giving their forthright opinions to Han, preventing them from influencing her. As a result, Han had no choice but to go back to the troupe after staying at home for nearly a month, bored and unwelcomed.

To sum up, Han "had to" take Huangmeixi as her lifelong career as a result of her impulse and her father's guidance.

The troupe in Anqing where Han lived with when she learned Huangmeixi was over 70 kilometers away from her county. She was the youngest in the troupe and had nothing else to do except singing and practicing day and night. Han, a 10-year-old girl, did not have too many plans at that time. She did not sit at any one person's feet and be his or her pupil as she realized that any and all adults in the troupe could be her teacher. She practiced every piece of music that she could sing, which swiftly enabled her to meet her potential. In addition, the head of the troupe, Ma Cailou, was a very strict person who supervised Han vigorously so that she could not step out of the troupe without permission. With no other entertainment, Han could only concentrate on improving her Xiqu skills. Every time the troupe performed, Han brought a small bench and sat at the stage entrance to learn from them. Gradually, Han was able to sing almost all of the actresses' parts in the troupe. And because of this, she became a substitute performer. Whenever any supporting role was sick or took a leave of absence in a regular performance, Han was the first choice to fill in the vacancy, even though she still appeared a little child. It was better than having no one to play the role.

The troupe leader wanted Han to star in a larger play, but found she was too young to play as a main role. Although Han was a good actress, she still looked childish in her teens. When she acted in the plays whose protagonists were more mature, audiences would think the show was for children despite the plot and subject matter. In 1980, the Anhui TV station sought for a young actress to join their 2-episode trail shot of a TV series, and the troupe recommended Han as she had the appropriate age and did not have heavy duties with the troupe to tie her down. After the two-month shooting had finished, Han became the first Huangmeixi performer familiar with the TV camera.

In 1983, Anhui TV decided to produce a TV series of Huangmeixi named *Zheng Xiaojiao*. The crew did not find the right person among a large group of candidates after the pilot, so they gave little Han, who they excluded from the list at first, a chance to play the role of Zheng Xiaojiao. In the trial, the director found that Han was accustomed to the camera and her performance was very skilled.

Zheng Xiaojiao is China's first live-action Huangmeixi TV series with 5 episodes. It was played on the China Central Television channel in prime time thanks to its novel shooting approach, compelling story, enchanting melody, and the crew and director's dedication. But the thing that lingered most with the audience was Han's exaggerated performance, which attracted an amazing viewership and made Han rise to fame nationwide.

Subsequently, although she was not given many chances on stage, Han was occupied in the film and TV series shooting. She starred in the movie *Fragrant Soul* and the TV series *Female Prince Consort* in 1985, and in the TV series *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* in 1986.

Han thought to herself that she was a Xiqu actress who should focus on the stage. Therefore, around the 200th anniversary of the Anhui troupe's visit to Beijing, she performed as the leading role in the Huangmeixi *The Xiehu Handkerchief* and *Yang Yuhuan*. In 1992 she starred in *Xi Shi*, a play tailored for her, and in 1995 she acted in *Southeast to Peacock Birds Fly*. But almost all of the Xiqu plays including the ones Han starred could not avoid the same fate against the decline of Xiqu – they eventually faded away from people's sights after a new play was on, no matter what awards and how many praises it had won.

As a result of this, Han was very confused about the status quo of Xiqu, and her passion for what she was beginning to see as a dying art form made her anxious.



■ Still from Huangmeixi TV series *Zheng Xiaojiao*



■ Still from Huangmeixi TV series *Female Prince Consort*



■ Stills from Huangmeixi TV series *Meng Lijun*

At this time, to her surprise, she was cast as the star in a 9-episode live-action Huangmeixi TV series *Meng Lijun*, which got the opportunity to be presented on the most popular channel and became a massive hit with the viewership reaching a record high in 1994. This was Han's second career highlight but again it left her wondering as to whether this type of success could be replicated on stage as opposed to on TV.

In 1996, after the shooting of a Huangmeixi movie called *The Love Story of Hui Merchants*, Han made up her mind to change the status quo of Huangmeixi on the stage and strive for some achievements.

As mentioned earlier, since the beginning of 1990, Han had performed in several stage plays in a row which did not enjoy great popularity. During each performance, despite compliments from relevant people and the media, Han could see from the eyes of the audience, except for a few theatre fans, that those plays did not arouse their interest at all, let alone resonate with the majority of them.

Han insisted that artists be innovative to achieve breakthroughs in Huangmeixi. She chose unhesitatingly to invite artists specializing in other fields to participate in the making of the show with the traditional musical characteristics

of Huangmeixi kept.

In 1996, for the filming of *The Love Story of Hui Merchants*, Han went to Huizhou, a city that left a deep impression on her. She seemed to be able to see the past of the ancient residences built around 600 years ago in Huizhou through their unique style and a touch of seriousness. Although they were empty now, the residences must have witnessed many moving and gripping stories. Han imagined and pondered that today's ancient buildings were the places where our forefathers lived and left their happiness and sadness. Thus, she determined to dig out the touching story behind those residences and show the life of their former owners on the stage, which she had confidence in turning into something brilliant.

In her continuous learning about Huizhou's history, Han found that behind almost every Huizhou merchant's success, there was a woman's sad story. According to the customs there, men had to leave their hometown at the age of 16, and after a few, a dozen of years or even decades they would return home to visit their family and relatives. In a poem on this theme, the Huizhou merchant has been on the go for most of his life and over years and his wife keeps waiting for him till her hair turns grey.

Han was inspired by the background and decided to bring the tragic but courageous story of women in Huizhou to the stage. Soon she put the idea into practice.

She invited big names in Beijing and Shanghai theaters including Chen Xinyi, Cao Qijing, Gao Guangjian, Xing Xin, and Dong Weijie to join in the creative process. They visited the Xidi ancient dwellings many times and held seminars frequently. With all efforts paying off, the theme on the fate of *The Lady from Huizhou* in the Ming and Qing dynasties (around 600 years ago) came into being. The story was named *The Lady from Huizhou*. The show consists of four acts – *Marriage, Wait, Sing and Return*, telling the life of a Huizhou woman spent in endless waiting, a most realistic portrayal of the tragedy of the women of Huizhou in that bygone era.

It requires a complete story and production team to turn an idea into a great play. Obviously, all of these cannot be realized without money. However, it was difficult for such a mixed team to apply for the same kind of financial support as orthodox, traditional Huangmeixi troupes could get. Therefore, Han had to invest the money she had earned in TV series over the years to finance the creation.



■ Set photos of *The Lady from Huizhou*

It is worth mentioning that the composers of *The Lady from Huizhou* boldly transplanted some expression methods from western music into the play. With the traditional singing method of Huangmeixi as the framework, national opera techniques were borrowed with careful consideration. As a result, the show is dotted with very innovative musical pieces that complement the feeling of closeness from traditional Xiqu with freshness from creativity, increasing the charm and vitality of the Huangmeixi stage the audience feel while enjoying it.

The high-quality of the musical accompaniment should surprise no one when its author is named. Dong Weijie, a famous composer from Shanghai Animation Film Studio, had creatively adopted modern techniques to make a full description of the charm of the ancient residences in Huizhou and the ups and downs once faced by the residents, which greatly enhanced the appeal of the traditional Xiqu. It is shocking and saddening to hear the sad news of Dong's recent passing during the writing of this article. Here, the author of the essay would like to express the appreciation for Dong's contribution to the music of *The Lady from Huizhou*.

Despite the brilliance of the music, it is Han that steals the show in *The Lady from Huizhou*, starring as both the main actress and the producer of the show. After the tortuous creation and production process, her work, a highly innovative play, finally came to the stage on June 30, 1999. Many audiences were immersed in the story after and it took them some time to gradually disengage from the afterglow.

It is note-worthy that despite the excellent response from audiences during the premiere of the play, *The Lady from Huizhou* was questioned by many experts.



■ Set photos of *The Lady from Huizhou*



■ Stage photo of *The Company*

But Han insisted on touring regardless of the controversy to give audiences the right to make their own judgements. After dozens of performances, the refreshing Huangmeixi finally received the acclaim from both the theater circle and common viewers.

The Lady from Huizhou has so far been performed nearly 1,000 times for more than 20 years since its debut in 1999.

After the success of *The Lady from Huizhou*, Han felt that Xiqu was supposed to not only tell the story of the past, but also reflect the current life of the people. During the SARS pandemic in 2003, a scientist she knew who had a passion for writing penned a play titled *The Company*, telling the story of a female Doctor of History who could not find a job and had to start her own business.

Han saw the potential in this story, and picked up the play for a Huangmeixi adaptation, becoming its producer. The making of the play went extremely well. The joint rehearsal was completed successfully only 19 days after its start.

The Company had its premiere followed by a seven show run at the Chang'an Grand Theatre in Beijing at the end of November 2003. It became a resounding success with full houses and special performances at Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Renmin University of China. The students from those universities said they would have certainly loved Xiqu if each Xiqu play was as attractive as this one.

At the request of the Beijing audience, the crew of *The Company* went back to Beijing in March 2004 for four consecutive performances at the Cultural Palace,



■ Poster of *Once Upon a Time in Huizhou*

which was so unprecedentedly popular that extra seats were added to the theatre with firefighting trucks on stand-by outside to ensure the safety of the bumper crowd.

The Company is the first Xiqu stage play mirroring the contemporary urban life of intellectuals. Han positioned it as a Huangmeixi play to have it distinguished from the traditional ones.

More recently, *Once Upon a Time in Huizhou* is a work with a strong personal style and a balance between convention and innovation creatively planned by Han.

The play was launched at the end of 2012 and toured nationwide in cities such as Anqing, Hefei, Guangzhou, Jinan, with extended runs in Shenzhen, Nanjing, Suzhou, Beijing and Shanghai. Its appearance at the National Grand Theatre in Beijing broke many records since the establishment of the theatre.

Once Upon a Time in Huizhou won Han the 27th Plum Performance Award, the highest award in the Chinese Xiqu circle, marking Han's second time to win the honor, making her the first artist be awarded the prize twice in Anhui Province.

Besides the artistic creation, Han also has her duty in other places. She is the head of Zaifen Huangmeixi Art Theatre, the dean of the School of Huangmeixi at Anqing Normal University, the member the National People's Congress, the vice president of the China Theatre Association, and the chairman of Anhui Theatre Association.

But, perhaps her greatest source of pride comes from her Zaifen Huangmeixi Youth Troupe established in 2010. Today the troupe is full of talents and famous young actors and actresses who can take charge of the Huangmeixi repertoire no matter it is old or new, and act as the main role in dozens of big plays.

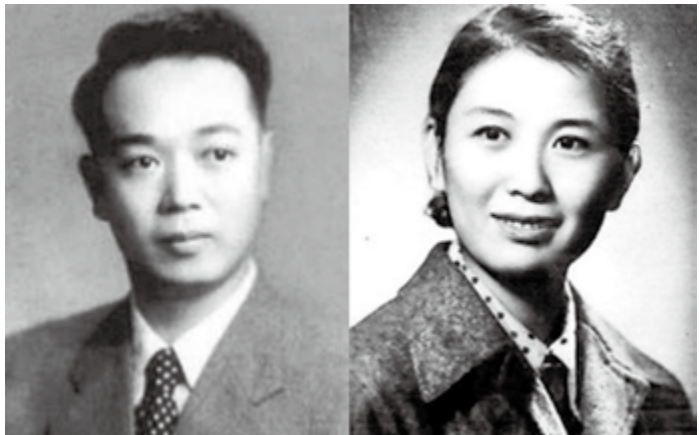
NIE SHENGZHE

Professor of Tongji University

Huangmei's Fragrance — — The Development of Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater

TENG Jingwen

Over the past two hundred years, the art of Huangmei gradually expanded out of rural fields to the urban stage, and, subsequently, the international stage. Following the founding of New China, Huangmei developed rapidly with support from various new policies. In 1953, the Huangmei Troupe of the Anhui Province officially began. It was around this time that Huangmei rose in popularity across the country. Two masters of Huangmei, Yan Fengying and Wang Shaofang, emerged from the newfound interest in the art-form. Huangmei grew into the most recognized and popular art-form in Anhui culture, while concurrently representing drama that was specific and iconic to the province. In 1988, the Anhui Huangmei Troupe expanded into the Anhui Huangmei Theatre,



■ Wang Shaofang (1920-1986) and Yan Fengying (1930-1968)



- Left: Ma Lan (1962-)
- Right: Huang Xinde (1947-5)

ushering in a number of winners of the Chinese Drama Plum Blossom Award and Wenhua Performance Award. Such winners included Huang Xinde, Ma Lan, and others. Huangmei artists took to the new stage to sing and deliver a plethora of outstanding performances, adding brilliance to the history of Huangmei and heavily contributing to the development, promotion, and creation of Huangmei art.

In 2013, Anhui's Huangmei Theatre was selected as the "National Key Theatre for Local Opera Creation and Performance" by the Ministry of Culture. It performs traditional Huangmei repertoire both at home and abroad throughout the year, including works such as *Marriage of the Fairy Princess* and *Female Prince Consort*. Repertoire such as *Pei Shaojun* and *Li Xiangjun*, *Story of Meng Jiangnv*, *Butterfly Love*, *A Dream Of Red Mansions*, *Everlasting Regret*, *Much Ado About Nothing* spread traditional Chinese culture adapted into the Huangmei art-form. There also exist such excellent works such as *Dusty Female Painter*, *The Wind and Rain*, *Thunderstorm*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *Backfire*, *Hu Xueyan of Huizhou Merchants* among others, as well as a new visual Huangmei stage play *The Cowherd and Weaver Girl*, *Xiao Qiao's Marriage with Zhou Yu*, etc. Fresh repertoire such as those aforementioned demonstrated characteristics intrinsic to the new era; works that adapted to the improvement and evolution of the times and the people's aesthetics, and such works received very warm reactions from the audience. The success of such works provides evidence to the strong vitality and unlimited possibilities Huangmei art possesses. It is worthy of our continued interest and innovative developments. In the process of audience affirmation and gradual market entry, it frequently won important awards in the art of Xiqu. Examples include: *A Dream of Red Mansions* winning the "Wenhua Award" funded by the Ministry of Culture; *Little Qiao's First Marriage* winning the 2014 "Five One Project Award" funded by the Central Propaganda Department, a project funded by the National Art Fund in 2015, and awarded "Wenhua Excellent Play" at

the 11th China Arts Festival. *Moonlight Everywhere* won the 2016 National Art Fund project funding project. In November 2019, the "List of Protection Units for National Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Projects" was announced, and the Anhui Huangmei Theatre Academy received qualification for a protection unit centered around the "Huangmei Project".

I. Facing Market Challenges

With the continuous development of society, the rapid development of technology, and the widespread popularization of TV and new mediums of social media (the internet, etc.), Huangmei, an Anhui cultural brand, faces severe market challenges. People's tastes change form very rapidly every day. Due to the impact of a global economy and global entertainment, the theater encountered unprecedented difficulties: lack of funding, loose management, and a high rate of personal exhaustion, all of which stagnated Huangmei's development. In 2001, Jiang Jianguo, an excellent Huangmei actor, took readership over the Anhui Huangmei Theatre. He called on all actors and staff to leave behind the passive concepts of "waiting, relying, and wanting", when faced with difficulties with regards to the challenge of marketing, market development, and successful performances. He widened the performance market through a variety of different venues, established a marketing network, and operated a series of large-scale performance activities such as the *Western Tour* and *Xi'an Huangmei Night*. After obtaining considerable market benefits, Jiang Jianguo changed the theater staffs' general goals. He focused on optimizing internal management, refining the performance management group, and enacted a series of incentives to stimulate employees' enthusiasm. As early as the beginning of the 21st century, Jiang Jianguo took initiative with regards to using his social influence to recruit sponsorship for the art of Huangmei. One method involved Huangmei to "advertise" local enterprises. Recently, the theater carried out multiple mutually beneficial arrangements with the *provincial electric power company*, *Yuangu Winery*, *Donghua Company* and other enterprises with strong cultural standing. Besides obtaining certain economic support, the theater also constantly expands the field of Huangmei through new Market potential and unprecedented combinations with new technology. For example, the "Tianxian with Tea Theatre" and "1912·Tianxian with the Big Stage" operated by the joint-stock system have been developed, and the Anhui Huangmei 3D Theater debuted in combination with the current business needs.

II. Repertoire Innovation

In 2013, when Anhui's Huangmei Theater held a series of celebrations for its 60th anniversary, Lang Tao, the then deputy director of the Anhui Provincial Party Committee's Propaganda Department, offered three hopes for the Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater in his speech: First, for achievements to come to fruition through the peoples' guiding, for it is better to meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the people; second, a hope to continue forwarding the spirit of reform and innovation, and striving to build a first-class cultural brand in the country; and third, to firmly establish a concept of talent and strive to create a new batch of Huangmei Opera talent teams.

By appearances the Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater achieved these three hopes. Regardless of the difficulties encountered in the development of traditional Xiqu, Jiang Jianguo and other actors and staff of the theater never gave up continuing this traditional art's legacy. The theater adapted traditional plays such as *Marriage of the Fairy Princess*, *Female Prince Consort*, *Fighting Pig Grass*, *The Couple Watching Lanterns*, etc., and also adapted famous foreign works such as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Red Propagandist*. However, Jiang Jianguo decided on the futility of advancement through using older works. "Fighting pig grass every day and watching lanterns every night" did not appeal to him as a long-term development plan. It seemed necessary to put innovative plays first, and to change from focusing on the past to living in the present. In addition to relying on the support given by the government, the theater devoted itself to the new creations, following the current cultural climate, and opted into rehearsing new works in different styles. While retaining traditional Huangmei repertoire, the theater ushered in a field of modern opera creation, such as the "Big Eyes Period" in cooperation with the "Rural Hope Project", *Muslim Bay* reflected the heroic mothers of ethnic minorities, and *Intimate Village Officials* praised advanced party members and cadres in the Anhui Province. Additionally, there also exist works such as the 3D holographic stage play *Ode to a Good Man in Anhui*, which, due to its novel format, visually attracts more audience members. During this period, a group of outstanding young actors emerged, and the theater acquired a number of highly educated and high-level professional artistic talents. The theater's firm actions and decisions solidified Huangmei as a national first-class cultural brand.

III. Talent Reserve

Since 2001, the theater formulated a course to train new talent, and set aside funding every year for young actors and actresses to study in art schools in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and the Anhui province. In addition to covering the cost of all tuition fees, actors and actresses also enjoyed wages, and transportation reimbursement. Over the years, in addition to acting, various majors such as directing, screenwriting, lighting design, and stage modeling found their way into the curriculum. The theater not only produces, but actively recruits; inviting a plethora of experts to present lectures at the theater, so as to improve the cast and crews' knowledge and professionalism.

In 2008, the theater and Anhui Vocational College of Arts jointly recruited 40 students majoring in Huangmei, comprising 30 actors and 10 band members, and hired some experienced retired actors for teaching. The theater actively cultivates more talented students. It was during this period that actors Wu Yaling, Li Wen, Jiang Jianguo, and Zhou Yuanyuan from the Anhui Huangmei Theatre successively won the Chinese Drama Plum Blossom Award. At the beginning of 2013, Cao Zhenghai, member of the Standing Committee of the Anhui Provincial Party Committee and Minister of Propaganda, attended the Anhui Huangmei Theatre to conduct special research, and proposed a new historical starting point and a theoretical ideology, "Continue to play the Huizi brand well, sing Huangmei for a long time, and strengthen the culture. The new development goal involves making new contributions to the construction of the province". Concurrently, it is emphasized that to realize Huangmei's prosperity and development, we must adhere to the principle of serving the people—focusing on various benefits; creation and production, high-quality plays, supporting the emergence of talents, and a respect for virtue and art. The aforementioned attributes also predicted the future development direction for the theater.

Touching the present, chasing the past, carrying on the past and opening up the future; on this long journey, seeking up and down. Over the years, while founded upon the traditional Huangmei culture, the theater continues to forge ahead, aiming for common ground with a modern world while retaining certain traditional differences. The Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater deserves to be the leader of Anhui's Huangmei, assigning to it the responsibility of developing new works and continuing old Huangmei masterpieces. The Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater's immediate goal should comprise balancing the social benefit's of performance with economic success and retaining quality. In the celebration activities to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the

Anhui Huangmei Theatre Dean Jiang Jianguo said proudly that in the midst of the new wave of reform, the Anhui Huangmei Opera Theater will strive to achieve "being a leader and an example in the province's literary and artistic career. It will compete for first-class and build a brand in the national art troupe. In the further development of Huangmei to the world, the theater will embark upon the historical mission of "contributing and leading the way". We are determined to forge ahead, focus our efforts, meet new opportunities and challenges with a high degree of cultural awareness and cultural confidence, and play a greater role in the making of new contributions to the prosperity and development of the art of Huangmei. We eagerly hope that we might produce more excellent works, excellent actors, and carry forward this fantastic traditional culture."

TENG JINGWEN

Master of Arts Management of Shanghai Theatre Academy

Chou

ZHONG Junfang

Chou ¹ represents one of the four archetypes in traditional Chinese theatre, with the specific characters in the play referenced as “Chou characters”(comedic characters). Originally derived from “Fujing (vice-jing)”, Chou parallels the Jing characters. Upon initial inspection, there might not exist any clear differences between these archetypes, a common sentiment amplified by the respective nicknames of the aforementioned archetypes; Jing characters might also be referenced as “painted face” characters, referencing their often treacherous and wicked personalities. Chou characters, similarly, are often references as “little painted face” characters.

In general, there exist Chou characters from all walks and classes of life in ancient Chinese theatre regardless of gender. There are Yamen runners like those in Wu county in the famous play *Qing Zhong Pu* and treacherous ministers such as Yan Shifan, the son of the treacherous minister Yan Song in *Ming Feng Ji*. There are also ugly female characters with vulgar behavior, such as the ugly Aijuan in the Kunqu *A Wrong Kite*. The most famous Chou character, however, likely exists in Lou Ashu from Kunqu’s *Fifteen Guan-Ce Zi*.

A clear distinction between tragedy and comedy in ancient Chinese theatrical genres never existed in a codified manner. Often, parallel to real life, both tragic and comedic elements exist within the same play. Gags (impromptu comic gestures and remarks) with comedic effects are often performed by Chou characters. “Chou”, does not carry a derogatory connotation towards characters’ appearance or disposition, but represents a description of their comedic actions. If Chou were used as an adjective, then, its antonym would not be “beautiful” but “dignified.” Even if one is playing the role of a treacherous

1 Chou (丑) is literally a Chinese pinyin which means ugly in English. In the field of Chinese theatre, it refers to the comedic characters. 【Translator’s note】

minister, one is not a Chou character if there exist too many comedic scenes in comparison with other Chou characters in other plays. Compared with Jing characters whose whole faces are painted with powder, Chou characters have much less powder on their faces. The powder mainly concentrates in the area of eyes and nose, generally the size of a tofu block. Therefore, the actors' original faces might still be clearly seen by the audience. As to why the faces are not as covered, Qi Rushan explains the implication in the nature of Chou characters; they are not completely corrupted, and retain some innocence and kindness. In more recent adaptations, the Chou characters' benevolent and upright natures manifest more often and their stage image transitioned into a much more positive and personable light.

In addition to Qi Rushan's explanation, another frequently mentioned sentiment closely relates with emperor Tang Minghuang¹. He loved Xiqu very much and often played the role of Chou characters. However, considering his identity as an emperor, it was not convenient for him to perform on stage while showing his whole face to the audience. Therefore, he often tied a jade pendant over his face, just covering a part of his nose. Later, actors playing the Chou characters followed his example by applying powder over their faces. Over time, this method of make-up cemented itself as a fixed practice.

The use of "Chou" to summarize this type-of-role is based on the highly concise and freehand features of Chinese characters. As mentioned above, "Chou" does not simply regard a description of characters' appearances in the play. "Chou" represents a more nuanced generalization of the characters' funny behaviors and humorous speech. Therefore, the lines of Chou characters are flexible and varied, rich in riddles, two-part allegorical sayings, and other linguistic tricks. In terms of performance, there exist a variety of linguistic techniques such as Shuban² and Guankou³. With regards to actions, Chou characters usually stand with their legs bent, and will bend them to different degrees according to the needs of the characterization. There exist difficult physical stunts such as the "dwarf skill"⁴. Often, we observe characters with ugly appearances but a good inner nature. For example, Chong Gongdao in *Su San Escorted Under Guard* and the boatman in *Autumn River* are both

1 Tang Minghuang, whose name is Li Longji, is the seventh emperor of Tang Dynasty in Chinese history. **【Translator's note】**

2 Shuban literally means counting boards, in which Chou characters only recites without singing, with clapper as accompaniment. **【Translator's note】**

3 Singing, reciting or narrating many things in succession at a very fast pace. **【Translator's note】**

4 A skill in which the actors walk in the posture of squatting. **【Translator's note】**

characters advocating for justice, while being physically unattractive. However, there also exist ugly characters with inferior qualities, such as the rascal Zhang Lv'er who ruined Dou E's family in Yuan-Dynasty Zaju's *Injustice to Dou E* (aka: *Snow in Summer*).

In diving into further detail, Chou characters might also be separated into different categories based on their skills and clothing.

Based on the plot setting and skills displayed, one divides the Chou characters into Wenchou and Wuchou. Wenchou often appear in the Kunqu repertoire, and focus more on reciting lines. Wuchou, by contrast, are mostly found in local Xiqu such as Jingju, and pay more attention to acting and martial arts performance. Wenchou can be further divided into "Fangjin Chou" and "Paodai Chou". "Fangjin Chou" mostly refer to pedantic literati with Fangjin (square scarves) on their heads. While "Paodai Chou" usually play the roles of emperors and ministers, wearing official uniforms and gauze caps. Wuchou are mostly men of prowess who are excellent in martial arts, straightforward, and upright in personality (while simple in mind). Therefore, for them, playwrights often set scenes that bring joy and laughter to the audience, so as to lighten the atmosphere of the theatre and bring about more laughter.

Female characters of the Chou archetype known as "Chou Pozi (Ugly Middle-aged women)" or "Cai Dan (Young women)" are also noteworthy. These are female characters played by male actors. "Chou Pozi" are mostly middle-aged women with an ugly appearance who are engaged in the profession of matchmaking, etc., while "Cai Dan" are young female characters. They are mainly responsible for regulating the rhythm and atmosphere of the theatre on stage, and their behaviors are often more exaggerated than other types-of-roles. They value "acting" and "reciting" very much in their performances. In order to make the characters more nuanced, some characters seem to behave in a rough or unpolished way, but are still stable and reliable; some characters are calm in character, but lively in their actions. Thus, finding a balance between the various shades of personality poses a difficult challenge for the actors. With regards to make-up, they often apply white powder to their faces, applying large pieces of rouge on both cheeks, and occasionally add a little black mole, to highlight an ugly appearance.

In short, Chou characters are not a main role in most plays, but are quite essential. Without their light-hearted actions and lines, the effect of the performances might be greatly reduced. Chou characters can be found in all kinds of theatre genres. The rich variety of portrayal with regards to these characters presents a clear manifestation of the fact that Chinese dramas are

constantly parallel to the everyday life of the masses. Chou vividly expresses the condensing of ordinary trivialities of life into an artistic creation that can be appreciated by both the learned and the general.

“The China We Don’t Fully Know”: A Complete Transcript of the Symposium on "Contemporary Chinese Theatre" (Part I)

MENG Jinghui & WANG Jing & Christophe TRIAU

Christophe Triau: Hello, everyone! I’m Christophe Triau (Professor of Université Nanterre, France). It’s my great honor to be the host of this symposium at the Avignon Theatre Festival. Coinciding with the showing of director Meng Jinghui' s work, *The Seventh Day*, at this festival, our symposium will focus on contemporary Chinese plays. But we will also broaden and extend it a little bit, to explore the contemporary Chinese theatre, which we hardly know in Europe, and which is actually very important and rich, as is the vast territory of China. Today we will try to discuss in as much detail and specificity as possible, including the production, creation and aesthetics of theatre.

Before we begin, we would like to pay tribute to one person, Christian Biet¹, who would have been sitting here today, but unfortunately passed away all of a sudden two years ago. Christian has always been committed to the academic exchanges between France and China in the field of theatre, and has always been interested in contemporary Chinese theatre. He has edited, together with Wang Jing, who is sitting next to me, the “Special Issue on Chinese Contemporary Theatre” in the French core journal *Public Theatre*, and his last

1 Christian Biet (12 May 1952 - 13 July 2020) , a specialist in 17th century literature, the history of the theatre and the performing arts, was Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at the University of Paris-Nanterre and member of the Institut Universitaire de France. He founded the association Hybridités France-Chine in 2014 in France.He taught Chinese Theatre with Wang Jing in the course Extra-European Theatre at Nanterre University since 2015. He was the member of the artistic commission of Wuzhen Festival in China since 2019.Christian Biet died in a traffic collision in Poitiers on 13 July 2020 at the age of 68.



■ From left to right: Christophe Triau, Wang Jing, Meng Jinghui and Pascale Wei Guinot.
Source: Association of Hybridités France-Chine

interview before death was an exclusive interview with Meng Jinghui at the Wuzhen Theatre Festival with Wang Jing. At this moment, we miss him very much.

Now let me introduce our distinguished participants. Sitting in the middle is the director Meng Jinghui, who we are all familiar with, a representative figure of Chinese contemporary theatre with a unique theatrical aesthetics. The one next to me is Wang Jing, an important envoy, scriptwriter and producer of Sino-French drama exchanges, and the President of Association of Hybridités France-Chine. The furthest away from me is Pascale Wei Guinot, both a translator and a cultural envoy, and the head of the Chinese editorial board of Maison Antoine Vitez, a French theatre translation center.

First of all, we would like to put forward some questions for Wang Jing and our director Meng. In what context did *The Seventh Day* come to the Avignon Theatre Festival? It is far from a short or small production in view of its content and scale. How did it successfully make its journey to France? And for what reasons did director Meng choose to rehearse this work?

Wang Jing: Sitting here to share with you at this moment, I'm overwhelmed by a multitude of mixed feelings. It's really not easy for this work to come here, just like going to a battle without knowing the results. A year and a half ago, when

Avignon Theatre Festival had confirmed to invite Meng, I was both excited and apprehensive. Because it was the first time that Avignon Official Theatre Festival has invited an artist from the Chinese mainland, which was a great honor for Chinese theatre. But at that time, the whole world was still under the shadow of the epidemic, and international cultural exchanges were faced with many challenges and uncertainties. The border had not been fully opened; visa applications and international freight were faced with many complicated procedures and requirements; and the flight may be canceled at any time. Besides, China has also been adopting a strict policy of quarantine, so the team members have to go through a long period of quarantine when returning to Beijing...And none of these uncertainties could be resolved or avoided by any human effort. I had a phone call with Director Meng instantly, told him about all these risks, and asked him, "Dear Meng, would you like to participate in the next Avignon Theatre Festival?" With little hesitation he replied, "Of course we would like to go!" So I told myself, no matter how many unknowns and difficulties there are ahead, just go ahead. Then I carried forward a little bit every day, chose scripts and venues, pushed forward in stages according to the international performance production process, and finally made it step by step like walking a tightrope. Honestly speaking, before I'm here, I was almost on the edge of my seat. So long as the cast did not arrive at Avignon, the risk was always there. But fortunately, at the beginning of July, the performance set arrived in Avignon after a 2-month sea voyage. And on July 11th and July 14th, the art troupe and the technical team all arrived. When the whole group



■ Wang Jing is making a statement
Source: Association of Hybridités
France-Chine



■ Meng Jinghui is making a statement
Source: Association of Hybridités France-Chine



■ Wang Jing(left) and Meng Jinghui(right) are listening to the audience
Source: Association of Hybridités France-Chine

gathered in Avignon, I said to myself that we had already won this battle.

The fact that we have been able to do all this on the level of production is due to the conviction and persistence of the entire team. Of course, we would like to thank the Avignon Theatre Festival for being willing to take this risk with us. It was their unreserved support that gave us more courage and determination to do it even

though we all knew the uncertainties. I think the successful trip of *The Seventh Day* is of great significance in the current world: Art can really transcend all barriers and make communication and dialogue possible. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 globally for two and a half years, *The Seventh Day* is the first Chinese contemporary theatre to go abroad, and let alone the only piece to be invited onto the stage of the Avignon Theatre Festival. In France, people say that “nothing is impossible for the French”. And I would like to say that there is nothing that the Chinese cannot do. (Applause)

Meng Jinghui: Actually, I think it was not that hard. Sure, it was hard for the producers, but as a director, all I need to do was to focus on one thing: rehearsing the theatre well. When in Beijing, I told the actors that we knew someone in France, and we knew someone in the Foreign Ministry, and they really believed it.

Wang Jing: He was just trying to appease everyone.

Meng Jinghui: But we have good news: our quarantine period when back home has been changed from 14+7 days to 7+3 days, which proves that things are going better and better. Three years ago, after the performance of *Teahouse* at Avignon, Olivier Py, the artistic director of the Festival, asked me if I could do a new work at Avignon two years later. I have put forward three ideas: The first was that I wanted to get a hundred people to perform *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But of course this idea was turned down. The second was that I wanted to do the Chinese ghost story *Strange Tales from a Lonely Chinese Studio*. The third one was *The Seventh Day*. *One Hundred Years of*

Solitude contains too much content and too many people. Even though I had promised to do a 2-hour show, they didn't believe me and said I would make a 10-hour one! And we didn't get the copyright, either. Later, I thought that *The Seventh Day*, a work which revealed a contemporary writer's reflection on contemporary China, would be better.

Christophe Triau: If my memory serves me right, you have once directed Yu Hua's work *To Live*.

Meng Jinghui: Yes, I have directed Mr. Yu Hua's *To Live* ten years ago. This novel has also been made into a movie by Zhang Yimou, and the movie has won an award at the Cannes Film Festival. But I think my theatre-version *To Live* is better than his film, where only eight people lost their lives in total. But in Yu's novel, there are ten, and this number is exactly the same as that in my theatre. So I have respected the original. (Laughter) When the eighth person died, people were still in a low mood. But when the tenth person died, they entered another dimension and became happy. Because the tenth was a child, and in my theatre, I brought him back to life again as a symbol of hope. It is this boundary between life and death, this fiction and reality, that makes me respect Yu Hua's novel *The Seventh Day* so much. There is a lot of wit and humor in it about life and death, and that's why I chose it.



■ From left to right: Christophe Triau, Wang Jing, Meng Jinghui and Pascale Wei Guinot.
Source: Association of Hybridités France-Chine



■ Stage photos of *The Seventh Day*
Source: Avignon Theatre Festival's official website

Christophe Triau: In France, there are many misconceptions in our expectations and assumptions about Chinese theatre. For example, we would expect some traditional Chinese elements, or elements that are very different from Western theatre. However, contemporary Chinese theatre is in fact inextricably connected with Western theatre. There is even a cultural misinterpretation that some of us would regard the French public theatre (which is publicly funded) as the only model standard for artistic theatre. Yet the Chinese theatre industry has a completely different system from ours in terms of creation, production, and operation. To understand the context of Meng Jinghui's creation, for those who do not know much about Chinese theatre, it is important to understand the different types of Chinese theatre at the level of creation and theatre venue, that is "mainstream theatre," "commercial theatre," and the in-between "experimental theatre". Let's invite Miss Wang to tell us more about them.

Wang Jing: When we talk about Chinese theatre today, there are actually two main forms: One is Chinese Xiqu, or "opéra chinois" as it is called in France, which is rooted and developed in the soil of Chinese culture. As an ancient form of theatre, Chinese Xiqu has a history of more than 800 years with more than 300 different types. The other is "younger", and is a completely new form which we call "drama"(Huaju). Drama was born in 1907 as an "import" from the West to Japan and then to China. Therefore, in the development its for more than one hundred years, it has been deeply influenced by Western theatre. Mr. Meng 's theatre falls into the latter. We can also divide contemporary Chinese theatre into three main types. The first type is "mainstream theatre" or "thematic theatre", which are mainly produced by state-owned troupes and supported by government funds, with propaganda as the main task. The second type is "commercial theatre", which is profit-oriented and similar to the French private theatres that stage repertoires, with box office revenues and venue rentals as the main mode of operation. The third is "experimental theatre", which attaches great importance to the artistry of creation, focuses on exploring the pluralism of theatre aesthetics, and has a strong involvement in social issues, with folk theatre groups and independent artists being the backbone. But it is important to emphasize that these three types are not entirely different, they are overlapping and closely related. The pioneers of Chinese experimental theatre in the 1980s, i.e. those who explored theatre back then, were all creators from state-owned troupes. For another example, Meng Jinghui is a representative of avant-garde theatre, but many of his works are popular with young people and sell well at the box office. Moreover, some of his experimental works have been included in the category of "commercial theatre" since they are "evergreen" in performance. Besides, Mr. Meng himself is the director of the National Theatre

of China. The Chinese state-owned theatre has also produced many works that have carried out in-depth explorations in the aspect of theatre aesthetics. So the industry ecology of Chinese theatre has complexity.

Christophe Triaux: Mr. Meng, how do you position yourself at the intersection of all these different types? And could you please tell us a concise story about your creative experience and how you managed to construct your avant-garde theatrical language?

Meng Jinghui: I was a student in university in the 1980s, studying Chinese language and literature. At that time, various thoughts from the Western world swept over Chinese society and exerted a lot of influence on China.

Christophe Triaux: Right. And it refers to all the works and trends of thought of the twentieth century, not just the European writers of the 1980s. At that time, China was in the post-Mao and post-Cultural Revolution periods.

Meng Jinghui: I remember when I was in college, I saw a still stage photo of two people in hats standing in front of a tree. I thought it was so strange because I had never seen such a performance before. So I said to myself, I must rehearse one like that too. At that time, there were no copyright restrictions in China, so I staged *Waiting for Godot* at a coal pile when I graduated from graduate school. Not long after we played it, Samuel Beckett passed away. And soon afterwards, a copyright holder called me and said that we should respect the copyright. We hardly had the concept of copyright back then, and by now, 30 years have passed. After that, all kinds of theatre like symbolist theatre, expressionist theatre and surrealist theatre emerged in China. And various European theatre genres began to develop in China. For me, this is somewhat of a microcosm of the development of contemporary experimental theatre in China, at least in my own work. To put it simply, I spent ten years absorbing the nutrition of various European cultures. After that, I spent ten years in China to make what has influenced me into reality, and did a lot of experimental theatre. Then it took me another ten years to exchange our works in Germany, France and Russia. So from the beginning when we absorbed the nutrition, to creating in China, and then to connecting our works to the wider world, Chinese contemporary theatre is like a tree, growing while absorbing nutrition. There are not many like us, but there is a bunch of young people doing this.

Christophe Triaux: Pascale has been paying attention to Mr. Meng's works since the 1980s, and says that she can always see something very unique and symptomatic in them.



■ Stage photos of *The Seventh Day*
Source: Avignon Theatre Festival's official website



■ Stage photos of *The Seventh Day*
Source: Avignon Theatre Festival's official website

Pascale Wei Guinot: I understand why Meng Jinghui wants to categorize himself into the group of young directors in the 1980s, since I happened to have been to Beijing at that time. I'm from Paris, and my artistic reference then was the dancer Pina Bausch. I really wanted to get away from the theatrical idea of separating the actors' body from their spirit. I wanted to go to China to find a more comprehensive total theatre. When arriving in Beijing, I quickly noticed Mr. Meng's works. Right away I felt that his works contained something very mysterious, and I asked myself, "Under such circumstances, how could this young man have such a peculiar intuition, such a desire to break away from what he had learned in theatre academy and blaze a completely new and unique trail?" Because at that time, the academy was based on the Soviet theatre education system, which was dominated by the Stani system. But Mr. Meng soon realized what he wanted to do: he wanted to create in his own way, to have like-minded partners who could go along with him, and to invent his own form of theatre on this basis. I think one of the most interesting and moving things about his works is the way he directed his actors, or rather the way he worked with them, and the uniqueness of their performances. Today, 40 years later, I want to ask him: How could you have such an intuition when you were so young? How have you been able to continue on this path of creation

for decades, not only to keep up such high-quality theatrical performances, but also to keep improving them? Since this is indeed a long-term and continuous work.

Meng Jinghui: As a Chinese saying goes, anger makes a poet. When I was young, I was angry enough to have the feelings of a poet. In turn, when I am old, I can remain angry because I have the sentiment of a poet. Such anger doesn't mean being angry towards an event or a system. Nor is it simple. It is a kind of surging within the artist, a sense of responsibility and a demand to keep moving forward. Reading, living, and yearning for new knowledge are very important things for me. I've always thought that theatre directors are very lucky. Because film directors usually need to work outdoors. Usually, they couldn't shot movies anymore when they're 80. But things are different for theatre directors, who can continue to rehearse a theatre with a glass of water in the rehearsal room even when they're 90. Yesterday I watched a video of Peter Brook in his hospital bed, wearing a scarf and talking like a poet, with background music on. It was such a blessing that he maintained the energy and dignity as an artist until his death.

(Part 2 will be published in issue 7 of *Chinese Performing Arts*)

MENG JINGHUI
Chinese theatre director

WANG JING
President of Association of Hybridités France-Chine

CHRISTOPHE TRIAU
Professor of Université Nanterre, France

The Performance and Evolution of Xiqu During the Pandemic

LI Wei & ZHANG Lingyu

Introduction

China stepped into a national battle against disease since the sudden strike of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020. Lasting currently three years, the epidemic greatly influenced people's living styles and habits. As an art form highly reflective of current culture, contemporary Xiqu productions reflected the features of today's society, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Firstly, Xiqu subject matter changed. While Xiqu performances suffered a brief stasis during the first half of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the resumption of work and production witnessed the blossoming of numerous Xiqu productions centered around an anti-pandemic time frame, as well as those about the revolutionary tradition (a dedication to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC)). The performing venues changed drastically, entering an era of virtual "cloud" performances in advance due to the outbreak of Covid-19. The stasis and sluggish market for the arts at the beginning pandemic forced Xiqu to develop the internet as a new performing stage, incorporating live-stream performances, online exhibitions, and even new patterns of paid online performances. Online performance became quickly recognized by the Xiqu field for its convenience, low cost, and high popularity. "Cloud Performances" explored a new road for the development and modernization of Xiqu. Experimental Xiqu increased in popularity, along with modern Xiqu with newly organized costumes, brush-up rehearsals, and re-imagining of classics.

I. The creation of modern Xiqu

1. The rise of revolution-themed Xiqu

With an increasing number of revolution-themed Xiqu, a plethora of wonderful productions emerged. However, upon converging stage presentation and style with the various plots, these productions show no obvious features of the Xiqu style, which are dissolved, to some extent, during the expression of revolutionary fights. Varying from the May Fourth Movement to the early days of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the plots involve various figures prominent during the new democratic revolutionary period, and surpass previous productions in the forthright nature of the revolutionary themes.

Yueju¹ *Maple like Flowers* is based on a story wherein secret agents from the CPC (including Zhu Feng and Wu Shi) lurked in Taiwan after the foundation of the PRC, focusing on this secret battlefield rarely explored in the history of our Party's revolution. These special revolutionary martyrs were rarely highlighted in previous Xiqu productions, raising *Maple like Flowers*' value. Xiju² *Candles in the Front* conveys the story of Zhang Tailei, one of the founders of the CPC. However, Zhang Tailei isn't the leading character of this play, which instead focuses upon the great sacrifices of the communists during the revolution from

1 Yueju (越剧), a Chinese opera genre from Zhejiang and Shanghai. [Translator's note]

2 Xiju (锡剧), a Chinese opera genre from Wuxi. [Translator's note]



■ Still from *Xiju Candles in the Front*



■ Still from Jinju *Yellow Flowers on the Battlefield*

a unique and unconventional perspective—Zhang's family. With more attention given to his wife and his daughter, the sacrifices of countless communist members weighs heavier on the audience, expressing the greatness of the works' spiritual power. Beginning from a clever perspective, Gannan Caichaxi¹ *A man's Long March* skillfully adapts the story of the Red Army's Long March into an obscure character's legend of keeping his promise, giving a more diverse account of the Long March by exchanging the leading ubiquitous hero for a common person. Jinju² *Yellow Flowers on the Battlefield* reproduces the working scenes of the Xinhua News Agency during the Anti-Japanese War through the description of subtle relationships between cadres of the upper echelon and cadres of working class, manifesting the complexity and authenticity of the revolutionary journey.

2. Popular topics of reality-themed Xiqu

Second only to revolutionary productions, reality-themed Xiqu also flooded into the Xiqu space. Depicting the outlook and features of the era, reality-themed Xiqu often enjoys more immediate attention, encouragement, and greater support. However, due to the complexity and contradictions of the real world, the production of reality-themed Xiqu proves difficult, with fewer masterpieces as compared to other genres.

Reality-themed Xiqu covers a wide range of content, including the construction

1 Caichaxi (采茶戏), a traditional opera flourishes in Ganzhou area in Jiangxi Province, which is developed from the folk songs in South Jiangxi. [Translator's Note]

2 Jinju (晋剧), a Chinese opera genre from Shanxi. [Translator's Note]



■ Still from Caidiaoju *New Liu Sanjie*
(*The Third Sister of Liu Family*)

and development of the CPC, (an example being Yueju (Shaoxing opera) *Under the Walnut Tree*), the lives led by the lower class, (an example being Cantonese Yueju *The House of 72 Tenants*), and the praise of moral models and models of the time such as Dianju¹ *Zhang Guime*. Additionally, the history and culture of locations with strong features are also focused upon in reality-themed Xiqu, an example being Yuju² *Dahe Anlan* (*Along the Yellow River*) presenting the Yellow River culture and Yue'ju *Samsui Women* presenting the culture of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Niche topics including poverty alleviation and anti-epidemic activities have become two popular topics of recent Xiqu creations: with *New Liu Sanjie* (*The Third Sister of Liu Family*) , a creation of Caidiaoju³ presenting poverty alleviation, and *Attached to Jiangcheng*, a creation of Kunju⁴ presenting the fight against the epidemic.

A landmark among anti-epidemic works, Kunju *Attached to Jiangcheng* depicts average citizens actively battling the epidemic in their everyday life in-lieu of grandiose narration forming a grand image of a group of heroes. With beautiful lyrics, elegant tunes, and an often delicate performance, it is a beneficial attempt in crystallizing a modern themed work: a work that both includes modern plot-lines, and retains the classical patterns and traditional rules of Kunqu, a combination of special significance with regards to the modernization

1 Dianju (滇剧), a Chinese opera genre from Yunnan. [Translator's Note]

2 Yuju (豫剧), a Chinese opera genre from Henan. [Translator's Note]

3 Caidiaoju (彩调剧), a Chinese opera genre originated from the rural song-dance in the region of Guilin and Guangxi Province. [Translator's Note]

4 Kunju (昆剧), one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera, evolved from the local melody of Kunshan. [Translator's Note]

of Kunqu. Based on the legend of Liu Sanjie in Guangxi, Caidiaoju *New Liu Sanjie (The Third Sister of Liu Family)* relates the story of Liu Sanjie leading her fellow villagers to seek wealth and development. Combining the themes of rural revitalization and the love story of the enthusiastic youths, *New Liu Sanjie* offers a visual and auditory feast of youthful beauty and liveliness. Dianju *Zhang Guime* describes the story of role model Zhang Guimei, founding an all-girls high school deep in the mountains. It depicts the giant gap between the developed and developing areas, expressing women's persistence and hard work in pursuing freedom and a bright future. Yuju *Dahe Anlan (Along the Yellow River)* relates a story of more than half a century, starting with two generations of father and son guarding and regulating the Yellow River. The grand and magnificent depiction matches the epic proportions of the story. Echoing traditional works of the past, the production provides sufficient room for the actor to present his talent by allowing him to play both the father and the son. The attempts at applying modern stage techniques like dynamic projection and wire work to the play should also be acknowledged, aspects that skyrocket this work above other contemporary works centered around the Yellow River.

II. Newly organized costume Xiqu

Although less in number, (only one fifth of modern Xiqu productions), recent productions of newly organized costume Xiqu are well received by the audience due to their general high quality. These productions cater more to the aesthetic needs of the audience than to winning awards, greatly reflecting the aesthetic features of classical Xiqu with more legendary stories and stronger stage vitality. It is worth noticing that both community troupes and private troupes retain special preference for newly organized costume Xiqu as it serves the role of daily performance and provides relatively ample reward at a low cost.

Newly organized costume Xiqu can be categorized into adaptations of masterpieces, adaptation of historical figures' stories, folktale and legend adaptations, cross-field adaptations, and so on. Recent adaptations of masterpiece include Kunqu¹ *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* and Ganju² *A*

1 Kunqu (昆曲), one of the oldest extant forms of Chinese opera, evolved from the local melody of Kunshan.[Translator's Note]

2 Ganju (赣剧), a Chinese opera genre from Jiangxi.[Translator's Note]



■ Still from Kunqu *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*



■ Still from Chuanju *Magistrate in Straw Sandals*

Dream in Red Mansions. Adaptations of historical figures' stories include Chuanju¹ *Magistrate in Straw Sandals*. Folktale and legend adaptations include Minju² *Lychee for Peach* and Jinju *Zhuangzhou Testing His Wife*. Cross-field adaptations include Jingju³ *New Dragon Inn*.

Based on the poem *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* by Shen Fu from the Qing Dynasty, Kunqu *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* adapts the love story of Shen Fu and Yun Niang. It represents a beneficial attempt at the combination of culture and tourism to develop theatre productions based on material that asked for immersive live Kunqu performance in real park landscapes. A costume play with a core message, Chuanju *Magistrate in Straw Sandals* presents an image of an upright and kind official within a setting of water distribution. Adapted from a legend of southern Fujian, Minju *Lychee for Peach* relates a sad love story with a breath-taking spiritual strength through an uncomplicated plot. The praise and respect for youth, love, and faithfulness delivered by the work greatly strengthens its connection with a human audience. The fresh and poetic stage presentation with a classical elegance also demonstrates a deep taste for classic oriental charm. Jinju *Zhuangzhou Testing His Wife* reconstructs the legendary story of *Zhuang Tzu singing with beating basin*. With Xie Tao playing the role of both Zhuang Zhou and Chu Wangsun, it overlaps the space-time of both reality and illusion, profoundly revealing the dual nature of humanity. The profound language and excellent performances elevated the play to a

1 Chuanju (川剧), a Chinese opera genre from Sichuan province. [Translator's Note]

2 Minju (闽剧), a Chinese opera genre from Fujian province. [Translator's Note]

3 Puju (蒲剧), one of Chinese local folk opera, originated from the ancient Puzhou in Shanxi. [Translator's Note]

high artistic level. Adapted from a martial arts film with the same name, Jingju *New Dragon Inn* offers a whole new interpretation with a performing practice unique to Xiqu, something completely lacking from film practice. Shi Yihong plays two contrasting roles of Jin Xiangyu and Qiu Moyan, whose excellent performance is one of the highlights. *New Dragon Inn* marks a difference in the modernization of Xiqu by utilizing more modern aesthetic features, (openness, inclusiveness, and boldness) while remaining respectful to classical Xiqu.

III. Reinvigorating the classics

The least produced genre of modern Xiqu, the brushing-up of classics, sees slow recovery under the nation's support. Most of these creations are beloved classics with high recognition and reputation; those that have stood the tests of the market and time.

The brushing-up of classics is mostly initiated by either the government or private organizations. Both the training programs for actors that are sponsored by China National Arts Fund and the "Operas for arrangement and adaption" listed by the "Script Support Project" aim to save and protect the classics through the brush-up rehearsal. Often the brush-up rehearsals are organized by the troupes or the actors themselves and center around classics that enjoy a high reputation among the audience.

Traditional Xiqu creations, such as Minju *Mei Yu Pei* and Puju¹ *Warming by the Fire* focus on the inheritance of performing arts. These two works are the representative pieces of Minju and Puju, typical in both tone and performance for their respective types. The skill and techniques of the characters are tested in a performance that attaches equal importance to singing and acting. The rearrangement and brush-up rehearsals of such traditional classics contributes not only to the preservation of classical Xiqu essence, but also its active inheritance. It is worth noting that the brush-up rehearsal and transplanting of the classics are no longer limited to costume Xiqu as attentions is drawn to classic modern Xiqu as well. The brush-up rehearsal of *The White Haired Girl* confirms the achievement of modern Xiqu development to some extent—it is an acknowledged modern creation that is both artistically mature and time-

1 Puju (蒲剧), one of Chinese local folk opera, originated from the ancient Puzhou in Shanxi.[Translator's Note]

proved. The productions of Huangmeixi *Daughters of the Party* and Kunqu *Since the Successors* are its proof.

The significance of Kunqu *Since the Successors* lies beyond those points mentioned above, as it also explores the feasibility of performing revolution-themed Yangbanxi¹ in the way of old Xiqu types like Kunqu. Yueju *Five Daughters Offering Felicitations* by Gu Xidong is considered a milestone in the history of Yueju, as its creation gave rise to the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe. It has played a significant role in the development of Yueju for more than half a century since its foundation. Therefore, more attention was drawn to the resurrection of *Five Daughters Offering Felicitations* from National Peking Opera Company. The transplanting of Jingju has made great efforts in the transformation from Yueju to Jingju, maintaining the essence of Yueju in its application of melody and the aesthetic habits of the audience. An interesting note is that it is also the opening opera of the Youth Troupe of National Peking Opera Company, an echo of the Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe. Is the present Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe the future of the Youth Troupe of National Peking Opera Company?

IV. The creation of experimental Xiqu

Compared with the aforementioned genres, experimental Xiqu is still a novel, but popular genre among recent Xiqu productions. With fewer human and material resources needed, the convenience of performance marks experimental Xiqu as much favored by young creators with limited resources available. The participation of these young creators also contributes to the unique manifestation of its modern sense and avant-garde nature, which, in turn, attracts more attention from younger audience. In fact, college students and artistic youth account for a large percentage of its audience. Recently, more old-fashioned and conservative Xiqu from remote areas like Wuju² and Puju have also set out in exploration of experimental Xiqu. More activities are held such as “China Experimental Xiqu Exhibition” hosted by Shanghai Centre of Chinese Operas and “Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival” hosted by the Beijing Theatre Association, providing a platform for the exchange and promotion of

1 Yangbanxi (样板戏), a name for the stage artistic works during the Cultural Revolution period in China. [Translator's Note]

2 Wuju (婺剧), one of the local operas in Zhejiang province, centered in Jinhua region. [Translator's Note]



■ Poster of Jingju *Death of Guangxu Emperor*

experimental Xiqu. The 62 creations of experimental Xiqu presented by the past three exhibitions since 2019 are only a small tip from which we can imagine the whole proverbial iceberg.

Recent works of experimental Xiqu primarily include the following kinds of works: the abridging of large-scale Xiqu, new arrangements of traditional Xiqu, and adaptation of the classics and original works. *Yuju Nan Hua Jing* is known for its performance, with Wu Suzhen's profound, exquisite, and layered expression of the main character Tian's mental state. The quiet calculations of the characters' mind is effectively delivered through the subtle performance of every eye-twinkle and smile, and every

gesture and movement. *Wuju Nameless* pioneered experimental Xiqu, by neither abridging traditional pieces nor re-interpreting classics, but boldly expressing the absurdity within Xiqu language in combination with a faint touch of humanity. It is a remarkable innovation and breakthrough in maintaining Xiqu traditions with its unique subject matter, philosophical themes, and the stage performance, itself. *Yueju The Diamond dust Aristocratic Family* began the exploration of immersive performance. The audiences enter the characters' world the moment they step into the theatre, seemingly travelling back through time to the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), a challenge to the normally fairly traditional viewing mode of other experimental Xiqu. Based on an unsettled case from history "The death of Emperor Guangxu", *Jingju Death of Guangxu Emperor* adapted from the modern crux play with the usage of attractive interlocking plots. Unique flavor is added to the production with its directing techniques including the psychological externalization of "watching the western clock" and the breakthrough of a Xipi waltz in Xiqu pattern. The excellent performance from the two young characters also added to its excellence.

Conclusion

The performing state of Xiqu presents generally positive trends over the past couple of years thanks to the combined contributions of professional troupes and the flourishing primary troupes. The productions are high in both quantity and artistic quality. On one hand, with greater importance attached to the Xiqu tradition, both the governmental authorities and individuals realized the importance of Xiqu itself, with more attention being paid to the protection and inheritance of traditional Xiqu. On the other hand, with a constant promotion of the modernization of Xiqu, stronger “modern” flavor has clearly manifested in the pursuit of modern themes, such modern sensibilities taking form in the stage presentation or “cloud era” of performance practices. Concurrently, the phenomenon of modern subject matter homogenization, materialized, an aspect that seems unique to the anti-pandemic time and the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the CPC.

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The Propagation of Chinese Xiqu through Overseas Mainstream Video Websites

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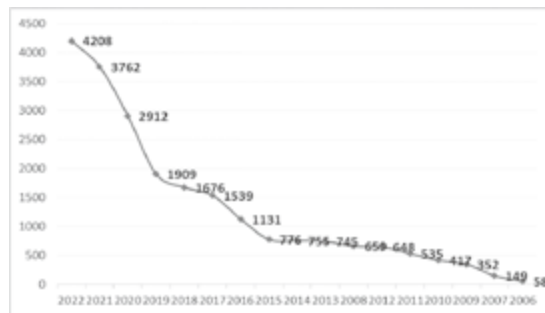
I. The transition of Xiqu propagation to cyberspace in the “post-epidemic” era

Physical interaction between people greatly decreased in the “post-epidemic” era, while the information flow in cyberspace greatly increased. People’s unprecedented dependence on the internet, big data, intelligent technologies, and other technological advancements allows for a new era for Xiqu propagation. A representative of fine and traditional Chinese culture, Chinese Xiqu faces more opportunities and challenges than ever before. Theatre, a typical “gathering” place, has reluctantly turned to the network under current circumstances after fighting for its stage.

Despite reproach from professionals and scholars towards this “off stage” presentation, the expansion of theatre into less expected venues seems necessary. Among these “off-stage” venues, network propagation is considered the root of various Xiqu performance “crises”. Network propagation is widely accepted due to its advantages in quantity, variety, coverage, availability, interactivity, and multiple perspectives over the more traditional venues. The enthusiasm of general audiences, which accounts for a large percentage of the audience, remains unaffected by the issues discussed within academic circles.

It is no exaggeration to say the market for physical performance, including Xiqu, has greatly shrunk in the past three years of this “post-epidemic” era, due, in part, to greatly decreased physical mobility. The opening night rates and general attendance experienced ups and downs during the epidemic. The network propagation of Xiqu moves the physical stage to a virtual cyberspace,

a space that, by its nature, flourished in the face of the pandemic. From Chart 1, we notice the number of videos relevant to *Peony Pavilion* in YouTube increased since 2019, when the epidemic started. Whether one wishes to admit it or not, it remains a fact that the propagation of Xiqu (a necessity for its survival and development), is largely decided by network propagation in this “post-epidemic” era.



■ **Chart 1** Yearly variation of numbers of the videos relevant to “Peony Pavilion” on YouTube

Of course, for performers, the transition to network performances remains a reluctant choice brought about by unfortunate circumstance. Accustomed to the attentive observation and warm applause from a live audience, performers performing in empty theatres without choruses of praise (once considered their highest honor) are not embracing network propagation with its bullet screen, comment section, likes, presents, and rewards from the viewers. However, both organizations and individuals are engaged in network performances for their survival during the epidemic.

As time goes by, especially during the past year and a half, network propagation of Xiqu is developing rapidly and greatly across the country through the effective promotion of social media and video websites like Bilibili and TikTok on a scope well beyond our imagination. “2022 Data Report on Xiqu Broadcasting on TikTok” released on April 14th, 2022 shows that there have occurred 231 Xiqu live broadcasts on TikTok since February, 2022, covering more than 300 Xiqu types. More than 800,000 scenes were broadcasted last year with more than 600 million active users uploading or watching Xiqu videos daily.

State-owned theatres including the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing, China

Pingju Opera Theatre, Shanghai Yue Opera House, and Hunan Huaguxi Opera Theatre as well as national ranked professional Xiqu performers like Henan Yuju master Li Shujian, Huaiju¹ master Chen Cheng, Jingju master Wang Peiyu, Huangmeixi master Han Zaifen started broadcasting one after another. The income of Xiqu anchors on Tik Tok increased by 232% and 73.6% of the live Xiqu programs received rewards in a year. Tik Tok has not only major Xiqu types like Jingju, Yuju, Huangmeixi, Yueju but also those endangered Xiqu types including Chaoju², Luju³, Huaguxi⁴, Nuoxi⁵ and Maoqiang⁶.

Undesirable features of social media such as limited video length and fragmented propagation have been alleviated with the launch of live broadcasting. Though offering audiences a sense of ritual similar to that of viewing live performance is an ultimate goal, scheduled live programs have their limitations. Traditional video websites retain such advantages as abundant classical programs, repeatable viewing, pausing and playing, all of which cannot be matched by social media. Its comment sections, especially with the bullet screen function added, are equipped with certain features of social media, contributing to an interactive user experience. Given current trends, it seems that boundaries between various media outlets are disappearing; trans-boundary media with multiple features undoubtedly being the main stream.

Certain distributors of professionally streamed Xiqu media, such as “Yitong Culture” and “Yunzhongye”, can only be enjoyed through an App, currently without a website channel, alienating potential audience members. With more demanding requirements on websites and apps alike, online viewing experiences with lower definition, limited bandwidth, or without projection functions will likely be deserted by an audience that demands a top quality viewing experience.

The paper bases its discussion primarily on video websites. All websites are available from multiple terminals and there are more web users than users of mobile phones and tablets. With regards to senior Xiqu lovers and net citizens

1 Huaiju (淮剧), a Chinese opera genre popular in northern Jiangsu. [Translator's Note]

2 Chaoju (潮剧), one of the ten best-known Chinese operas, which is sang in Chaozhou-Shantou dialects. [Translator's Note]

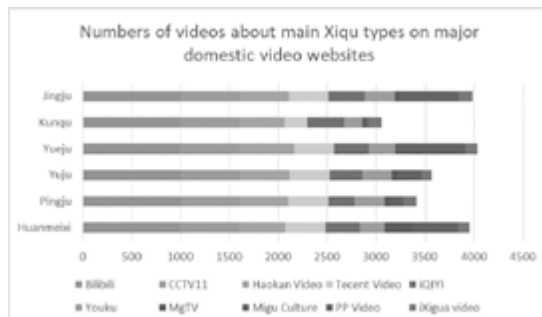
3 Luju (庐剧), a traditional local opera of Anhui province. [Translator's Note]

4 Huaguxi (花鼓戏), the most influential local small theatre originated from Hunan province. [Translator's Note]

5 Nuoxi (傩戏), a combination of history, folk customs, folk religions and original opera, an ancient way of Han population to worship god. [Translator's Note]

6 Maoqiang (茂腔), a traditional local opera popular in places of Shandong provinces. [Translator's Note]

from remote areas the same aforementioned facts hold true. As demonstrated in Chart 2, these abundant domestic video websites have played a lasting, stable, and significant role in the propagation of Xiqu, with Bilibili targeting the young, and the official Xiqu channel of CCTV11 and unofficial websites including Haokan Video and Tencent Video in particular, greatly contributing to the popularization of fine Chinese traditional culture including Xiqu.



■ **Chart 2** Numbers of videos about main Xiqu types on major domestic video websites¹

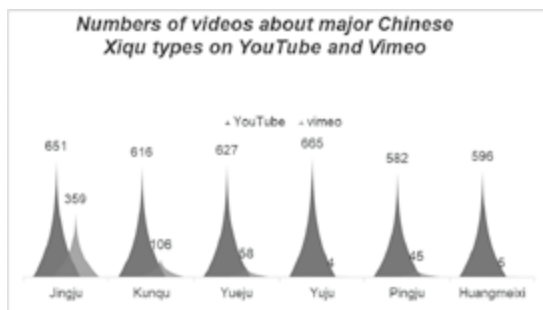
II. Current situation of the propagation of Xiqu through overseas mainstream video websites

Compared with the integrated content of domestic video websites, major video websites overseas use distinctive category features. Among the ten major video websites overseas, Netflix focuses on professional film/television content; Dailymotion (founded in France 2006) and Liveleak (founded in the same year) focus on hot topic/often unedited videos, while Twitch branded itself a broadcasting platform and a community for world-class game players and potential viewers. Through data retrieval of English keywords relevant to Xiqu, we found that compared to the intense network propagation of Xiqu domestically, propagation of Xiqu on overseas mainstream video websites remains very limited. Apart from the two major comprehensive video websites

¹ To relieve the pressure of the server, most video websites filtrate videos based on time, searching volume, hits and comment numbers, with “ancient” videos and videos of few viewing unavailable to the audience. For example, with 292,000 pieces of Jingju videos on iQIYI, only about 200 videos are available for viewing. Data in this chart is the numbers of open source videos only.

YouTube and Vimeo, the number of videos about Chinese Xiqu posted on other major video websites like Metacafe, Vine, and Ustream is very limited, if any.

Registered on February 15th, 2005, YouTube, established by Chinese American Chen Shijun and others, is the largest video website around the world, with its original company located in San Bruno, California. It was purchased by Google for \$ 1.65 billion, now generating billions of dollars in annual revenue. Millions of video clips are processed daily by the company, which provides comprehensive services including uploading, distribution, demonstration, browsing, and discussion. YouTube greatly outperforms any of its competitors in online videos of Chinese Xiqu, clearly outpacing Vimeo which ranks second.



■ **Chart 3** Numbers of videos about major Chinese Xiqu types on YouTube and Vimeo

With continuing fusion in media, YouTube gradually developed into a social media website majoring in videos with applications for mobile devices available for both Android and iPhone users. It has the interactive functions of many other social media, including posting, commenting, “like” giving, and video sharing. With new functions such as Hashtag and Live added, YouTube has stepped further into the fusion of media over the past decade. Chinese official media including People’s Daily and CGTN have started broadcasting on YouTube one after another, with CCTV putting the Spring Festival Gala on YouTube for the first time in February, 2015. CCTV11 (the Xiqu channel) has 23221 stock videos and 2096 open source videos on YouTube as of the end of October, 2022.

Based on factors including quantity and popularity, we have listed 92 YouTube users active in Xiqu contents through data sieving. Sorting through aspects

such as regions of the posters, features, number of the videos, Xiqu types, and viewing frequency, we have drawn the following conclusions from the sample of the 92 users: 1. users are mainly mainland Chinese or overseas Chinese citizens. Regions of Xiqu video posters are among optional fields. In other words, this field is not required in user's registration, leaving the field mostly blank. 41% of Xiqu video posters didn't fill in their region when registering. 23% of the users who provided such information are from mainland China, and 10% from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan; 14% are from America; others are from countries including England, Canada, Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand. There may be many Chinese organizations and individuals among these overseas users.

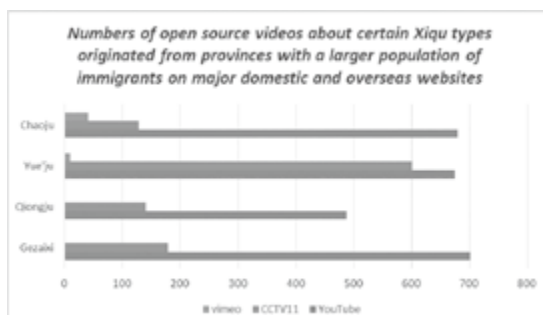
2. 40% of the users are individuals, making up the majority of viewers, with official media second to it, accounting for 23%, and nonofficial, non-profit as well as profitable organizations accounting for 13%. The network propagation of Xiqu and its physical propagation are two distinct systems. Nonofficial organizations and individuals have played a more significant role on the internet, accounting for most network flow. Given early registration, individuals might enjoy higher viewing frequencies although their numbers of the videos may not be so high. Among official media, CCTV11, CGTN, People's Daily, CCTV9, and National Center for the Performing Arts (descending order) are the top five organizations with higher viewing frequency. CCTV11, Shaanxi Media Convergence, CGTN, and CNTO London and CCTV9 (descending order) are the top five with most videos.

3. Network propagation home and abroad are not even in provinces with more overseas immigrants, including Guangdong, Fujian and Hainan. Chart 4 lists the numbers of open source videos of Gezaixi¹, Hainan Qiongju², Cantonese Yueju, and Chaoju in three major domestic and overseas video websites, involving Cantonese-spoken regions, regions of Chaozhou-Shantou culture, regions of Hainan culture, and Southern Fujian Dialect-spoken regions like Fujian and Taiwan. Given the shared culture of Guangdong and Chaozhou-Shantou, Xiqu genres from these regions retain a wider target audience range, while the target audience for Hainan Qiongju is relatively limited. The propagation of Xiqu from the other three regions except for Yue'ju is insufficient in CCTV 11 as an official media, with few videos in stock. Videos of these four Xiqu types on YouTube are similar in number. The difference in video numbers in domestic and

1 Gezaixi (歌仔戏), a traditional local opera of Fujian province. [Translator's Note]

2 Qiongju (琼剧), a Chinese opera genre from Hainan Province. [Translator's Note]

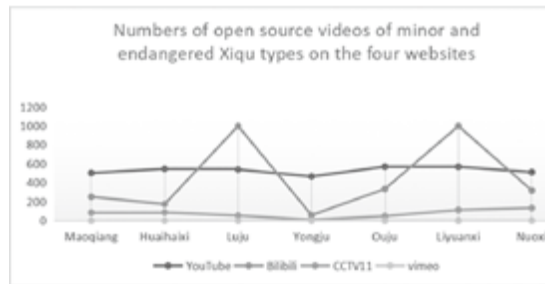
overseas websites serves as proof of the viewing trends of various countries. The preference of overseas Chinese towards video websites can also be shown through the differences in the numbers of videos on YouTube and Vimeo. The number of videos about these four Xiqu types remains fairly balanced, while the number of videos about Kunqu on Vimeo is only about a hundred, with dozens of Yueju videos, few Yuju and Huangmeixi videos and no Gezaixi and Qiongnu. Therefore, we can discern that network platforms and Apps are popularized by each other in certain regions and cultural circles among the overseas Chinese. This preference contributes to the number of videos about different Xiqu types on different media, which may not benefit their popularization among non-Chinese overseas. More attention should be paid to the popularization of Xiqu on websites that are not popular among Chinese.



■ **Chart 4** Numbers of open source videos about certain Xiqu types originated from provinces with a larger population of immigrants on major domestic and overseas websites

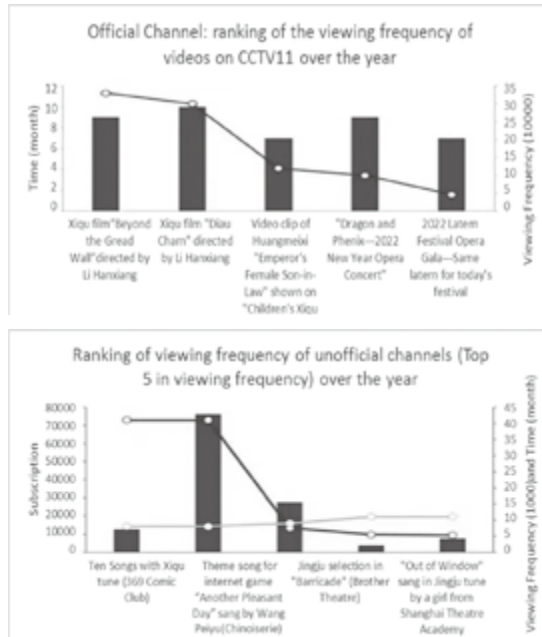
4. Apart from the major Xiqu types illustrated in Chart 3, YouTube covers a plethora of minor and endangered Xiqu types, with more diverse videos of such types than domestic websites. As the website with the most abundant Xiqu resources, Bilibili pales comparatively in its popularization of minor and endangered Xiqu types. Greater importance should be attached to these Xiqu types domestically and abroad by CCTV11 and official media. The number of videos about endangered Xiqu reflects the preferences of channels; clearly there exists insufficient attention paid to minor and endangered Xiqu, possibly a result from audience feedback. Chart 5 lists seven Xiqu types with different tunes. Listed as the State-level Non-material Cultural Heritage, Yongju (local Xiqu in Guangxi) experienced the largest drop in the number of videos on domestic and overseas video websites. Yongju, originally centered in Nanning, actually reached beyond Nanning and its surrounding regions into provinces

including Guangdong, Yunnan and Guizhou, and countries including Vietnam and Cambodia, finding a great audience and a promising market since its establishment, casting great influence on Southeast Asia. Compared to the numbers of videos about Yongju on YouTube (equaling, at least, its admirable position), its value is greatly underestimated by domestic video websites. As an overseas video website, YouTube presents a beneficial example in the popularization of endangered Chinese Xiqu for domestic media to learn from. Compared to major Xiqu types from mature and developed regions, minor and endangered Xiqu types from remote regions with a smaller audience find difficulty in physical popularization due to inconvenient transportation; a call for greater network propagation with or without the epidemic.



■ **Chart 5** Numbers of open source videos of minor and endangered Xiqu types on the four websites

5. There is no absolute correlation between user channel subscriptions, video publishing, and actual views. Only three channels have over 10000 subscriptions on YouTube based on the retrieval of key word “Jingju”, including CCTV 11 with 74400 subscriptions, Suzhou National Orchestra with 29800 and Jiaoyang Theatre with 27200. Registered on March 9th, 2013, CCTV11 ranks undoubtedly first in terms of subscription and number of the videos, with a total view count of 34.62 million. Defined as a professional Xiqu channel designed for the popularization and development of outstanding Chinese arts, CCTV11 remains the most influential Xiqu channel in China with the widest coverage, aiming to meet the aesthetic requirements of fans. Total views does not, however, represent effective viewing, perhaps completely separate from any propagation effect. According to the retrieval of key word “Jingju”, the video with the most regularly viewed clip stems from Jingju *The Case of Chen Shimei* posted by user “Ersu Kexing” with only 1520 subscriptions. It was viewed 3.6



■ **Chart 6** Ranking of viewing frequencies achieved by official and unofficial “Jingju” channels

million times in 14 months. However, the comment section of CCTV11 locked, preventing any audience feedback analysis. Chart 6 demonstrates the viewing frequency of official and unofficial channels, suggesting a similar propagation effect between official and unofficial channels at least in terms of viewing frequency.

6. Official propagation features fragmented and integrated propagation in the forms of video clips and elements of Xiqu, unfortunately revealing a low overlapping rate with the preferences of netizens. As represented in Chart 6, videos with top viewing frequency on Xiqu channels are Xiqu film, variety shows involving Xiqu, and Xiqu Galas, while videos of Guofeng Xige (theme songs for online games) and Xiqu sections in movies and television plays are among the top five on unofficial channels, among which, songs sung from Xiqu hold an overwhelming advantage. Such a situation is not unique to Chinese songs, foreign songs blended with Jingju also enjoy high viewing frequency. For example, the English song *If You Feel My Love* including multiple arias from Jingju *The Case of Chen Shimei*, sung by Blaxy Girls posted by

EHPMusicChannel with 2.37 million subscriptions, retains a view count of 2.11 million over four years. A particularly phenomenal statistic in Xiqu propagation overseas is that MV *Shennv Piguan* of a Xiqu figure for the mobile game “Yuanshen” enjoys a viewing frequency of 7.69 million with 12,000 English comments in more than nine months. Similarly, shown on Chart 6, *Another Pleasant Day* sung by Wang Peiyu is a song for the Wu Zhuangguan school in the PC version of the online game “Fantasy Westward Journey”.

Taking the classic *Peony Pavilion* as an example, currently boasting a view count of 1 million, we observe a work that is neither a piece of Kunqu that we have in our mind, nor a traditional Xiqu performance, but a form of folk art relevant to Yue’ju. Chorus videos of *Jingmeng* (Waking up from a dream) and *Yougou* (Underworld Marriage) by Ren Jianhui and Bai Xuexian rank top two with view counts of 1.44 million and 1.21 million respectively, followed by a video clip of Yue’ju *Peony Pavilion* by Yin Guang and Zhang Meifeng with view count of 110,000 remaining third. A video clip of *Peony Pavilion* performed in a combined form of Guqin and Kunqu also ranks among the top viewed Xiqu with more than 800,000 views thus far. Thus, the propagation of Xiqu in major video websites overseas mainly takes the form of fragmented propagation of Xiqu elements. Concurrently, the integration of Xiqu with other forms of entertainment like games, music, movies, and television plays also seems an irresistible trend of today and the foreseeable future.

III. The internet ecology and “network” strategy of Xiqu

It has become an important mission of national strategy to improve the overseas propagation of Xiqu as one representative of fine traditional Chinese culture. Early overseas propagation of Xiqu by Mei Lanfang and others resulted in a far-reaching influence and great significance. However, following the development of globalization in the era of networks, convergence media, Pan-media, and big data, there must be efforts made to step forward and to devote ourselves to the transition towards the network propagation of Xiqu with the support of technology, ideally creating proper global network for Xiqu.

Xiqu’s ecology has become a favored topic among academic circles over the recent decade, originating from the reality for the existence and development of Xiqu during the urbanization progress. Network ecology of Xiqu is a new term based on it. Compared to physical ecology, the network propagation ecology of Xiqu consists of various terminals as its tools, diversified media as

its platforms, and freer options for contents and comments as its focus. The scripts, performance, comments, and research of Xiqu can all be achieved and popularized through the internet, forming a virtual network ecological space that differs from the physical one. This virtual space is more diverse and integrated with more freedom than the physical space, which leads to its varying qualities, whether good or bad. It retains loftier expectations for both the suppliers and consumers compared to the physical world, which has a certain threshold for aspects like technological ability and propagation ethics.

A healthy, well-organized, and benign ecology has been created for the network propagation of Xiqu through policies, media platforms, suppliers and consumers. Tik Tok will spend one year to create an alternative theatre for ten theatres and 1000 professional Xiqu performers with an investment of considerable flow. The “alternate theatre” complements the first theatre (physical theatre) in theory, as the so-called “cloud theatre” allows for numerous liftings of various physical restrictions. Three years of the epidemic changed people’s attitudes towards the network propagation of Xiqu. For example, there exists a great difference between the Star Theatre that hosted many Xiqu Opera Black Box Festival and Yunzhongye that hosted many Internet Black Box Festival, with the former forced to migrate to the internet while the latter originated from the internet. With regards to Xiqu ecology, our attachment to certain culture stems from our collective memories and the viewing habits of enjoying Xiqu in the fields, theatres, tea houses. These aforementioned venues are being replaced by the internet, forming a new viewing habit among the young Generation Z.

While live performance may remain a viable venue across the country, network propagation is undoubtedly the major way to spread Xiqu overseas due to various restrictions including the epidemic, material resources, and time. The aforementioned data provides evidence that very few video platforms for Xiqu propagation overseas apart from YouTube exist; far from enough. While aspects like the number and variety of the videos on Youtube are actually more impressive than those of domestic websites, the viewing frequency and popularity of the videos remains low. Alternatively, there is still room for improvement for Xiqu propagation through official channels on YouTube, with a better integrating point of coverage of Xiqu types, varieties of the contents, degree of freedom, and descriptions. All things considered, the removal of the comment section undoubtedly removes the possibility of audience “feedback”, causing loss of important reference on how to better propagate. Similar to the situation domestically, benign ecology for overseas network propagation of Xiqu is also needed for the “network” battle. The following steps might begin

the process:

1. Awareness level. We should aim for a profound awareness of the great change brought by the epidemic to the world, resulting in long-term influence that not only changed the world temporarily, but perhaps for the foreseeable future. Thus, individuals must understand the high stakes of the matter, for if we do not attach enough importance to the network propagation overseas under this circumstance where the possibility of face-to-face propagation of Xiqu overseas is relatively low, the art form may fade away. We must call for an urgent transition from forced online performance to “online” activities initiated out of respect for the method of propagation.

2. Policy and regulation level. We might differentiate access to overseas websites and pave the way for those unofficial organizations and representative individuals that are dedicated to the overseas propagation of fine traditional Chinese culture. Regulations on copyright are also needed in network propagation of Xiqu overseas.

3. Content level. With peripheral, elemental, and fragmented propagation becoming more and more popular, it must take special preference to lead the audience back to Xiqu itself and even back to the theatre.

4. Producers level. Individual user Xiqu fans and practitioners are far more active than national organizations and troupes. On the one hand, encouragement, support, and positive guidance should be given to individuals; on the other hand, the leading ability of official producers should be improved.

5. Audience level. Audiences who are both the producers and consumers have played a leading part in the time of We-media. Differing from the general audience, audience members with certain professional qualities are keen on voicing their opinions, a main reason why they choose network propagation. Thus, greater guidance and supervision should be provided along with encouragement.

6. Feedback level. The attitude: “watch what I offer” without considering the need and requirement of the audience must be abandoned given an audience that will not hesitate to switch channels with so many choices at hand. Propagation of mainstream value should attach greater importance to the feedback.

Early pioneers for the overseas propagation of Chinese Xiqu would take a plethora of people and resources with them before going abroad, making preparations for a year or more with ample pecuniary value and time spent.

Transferring from steamship to train, from train to automobile, from automobile to carriage, they held on to this most difficult task expecting nothing in return while suffering a hard time of diseases, hunger, and even contemptuous looks and taunting from others. However, with mobile phones, tablets and computers at hand, we need only to move our fingers or click the mouse to popularize Xiqu overseas. What reason do we have for not doing a better job?

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Introduction to Classical Plays (VI)

LI Ran

Uncle Doggie's Nirvana

Uncle Doggie's Nirvana, was created by Liu Jinyun in the mid-1980s when there was a trend for reflections on the cultural revolution in China. It is a representative play of said trend, and a near-perfect work of Neo-realist Drama in terms of content and form combination.

Uncle Doggie's Nirvana, published in the 6th volume of Script monthly in 1986, was premiered at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in October the same year, and became a popular hit with audiences. It was welcomed as a masterpiece of playwrighting in the new era that embodied both thought and art. In 1995, the play was translated into English and premiered in New York. Liu Jinyun went there especially to help with the rehearsals and watch the performance. It was notable that the play received warm response from American audiences who did not find the story distant though it was about Chinese peasants. On the contrary, they regarded Uncle Doggie as close friend and strongly empathized with him. Since then, the play has been performed in many different countries like Japan and Singapore, performing at events such as the Singapore International Arts Festival.

The play presents the events of the past thirty years (prior to its being written) of rural life in areas of northern China, full of ups and downs, and revealed the cultural connotations with the story of an ordinary peasant, Uncle Doggie. Peasant Chen Hexiang, the protagonist of the play, was nicknamed "Uncle Doggie" because his father swallowed a dog alive and was stuffed to death



■ Stage photo of *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana*
 Source: The official website of Beijing People's Art Theatre

in bet to protect their two *mu*¹ of land from Landlord. Uncle Doggie was a penniless peasant but his life took a turn for the better when he harvested the sesame from 20 *mu* of Landlord-owned land as others were running away from the conflict in the War of Liberation. In the following Land Reform Movement, he attained ownership of the fertile land and big house from Landlord. He married the woman he liked, saved up money to buy land, and hung up a tablet saying “thousands of *qings*² of land” to show his newfound dominance after years of subjugation.

However, just as his dream was coming true, Agricultural Cooperative Movement began and the land and livestock became owned by the public. Uncle Doggie was overwhelmed and went mad. When Reform and Opening Up arrived and he regained his land, Uncle Doggie was too old to work. Worse still, his son, with the aim to build a factory and make a lot of money, insisted on knocking down the big house taken from the Landlord which symbolized high family reputation. The outrageous Uncle Doggie, whose land dream once again was destroyed by the pursuit of profits in a new era, set the big house on fire himself. The play progresses along with the emotional ups and downs

1 Mu is a traditional Chinese unit of land measurement. 1 mu equals 0.3295 acre. [Translator's Note]

2 Qing is a traditional Chinese unit of land measurement. 1 qing equals 100 mu. [Translator's Note]

resulting from the loss-gain-loss of land.

Speaking of the artistic goals of the play, the playwright Liu Jinyun said he was influenced by Xiqu and Modernism. For Xiqu, its elements could be found in the play's structure, time and space, dialogues, and communication; for Modernism, the psychological analysis in *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller gave him much inspiration. Liu Jinyun said, since the story of Uncle Doggie had a long time-span of over two decades and included several historic periods, it was easy for characters to be overshadowed by events. To avoid that, he focused on characters instead of the background periods and concentrated on characterization, especially the psychological description.

In terms of Uncle Doggie's characterization, the playwright said he had been living in rural areas for a long time and had a deep affection for peasants. However, he underlined that it was insufficient to just extol the simpleness and kindness of peasants or to sympathize with their misfortunes. He required himself transcend his manifestation object, not only feeling and learning something from their hard life but also thinking about its complex origins which might be related to history, reality, nature, and society. The historical consequences presented by the peasants led the playwright to ponder the fate of our nation. Finally, he decided that our nation needed a "metamorphosis" or "nirvana" to seek a way out.

The Mulberry Plain Chronicle

The play *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle*, written in 1988, represents contemporary Chinese drama. It represents the achievements of Chinese drama on many levels, including its depth of thought and artistic development. The play not only achieved success in literature, acting, and directing, but also reflected the maturity of the art of performing from the overall stage production.

Based on the novel of the same name (written by Zhu Xiaoping), the literary foundation of the play is relatively solid. From March to August in 1969, Zhu Xiaoping went to the countryside and become a member of the production teams there. His life in the countryside, which lasted around five months, left a deep impression on him.

In 1978, Zhu Xiaoping was admitted to the Department of Drama and Literature of the Central Academy of Drama. In 1985, the publication of his first novel



■ Stage photo of *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle*
Source: The official website of Guangzhou Dramatic Arts Centre

The Mulberry Plain Chronicle attracted substantial attention. Subsequently, he won the Novella award in the 1986-1987 given by the Ministry of Culture. Since then, Zhu Xiaoping has successively published "Sangyuan" and "Fulin and His Auntie", which make up the other parts of what is now known together as the *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle*. Influenced by the strong spirit of introspective and the unique spirit of exploration in the 1980s, Zhu Xiaoping's *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* has a unique historical perspective and life experience. The play *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* was an adaptation based on this series of novels.

In the five sections and twenty-two scenes of the play *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle*, there are neither obvious storylines nor actions nor concentrated contradictions or conflicts. There is even no one storyline that runs through. Instead, a series of events are combined into several episodes, and together, they show the lives in the northwest village of 'Mulberry Plain'.

Among them, are scenes designed to shock the audience into thought, the humiliation of a young girl, the killing of an old cow, and the suicide of the character called Caifang. The narrative structure of the play is different from the traditional drama structure. It does not tell the story of the fate of a character or group of characters with linear events but instead uses scattered fragments to show their lives. This unique structure is an obvious artistic choice, and it pursues the effect of realism.

This is not only a deliberate choice of the play adaptation but also a choice of the director. *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* has a unique focus on reflection and enlightenment in the new era and is considered to carry "a conscious sense of national introspection".

Although there is no leading storyline or event in the play, there is a leading

character: Li Jindou. The existence of this character ensures the unity of the play and enables each sub-theme to echo with each other. The design of this character is closely related to the theme.

Li Jindou is the captain of the Mulberry Plain production team. He is both simple-minded and cunning. This character breaks away from the typical hard-working, wise, straightforward, and lovely characteristics of the production captain, and is full of paradoxes and contrasts within him - kind but cruel, fair but selfish at the same time. Such a character is indeed a complex and vivid protagonist.

On the stage, *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle*, directed by Xu Xiaozhong, is probably the most widely recognized. In the 1980s, Xu Xiaozhong explored a unique Chinese drama style for the performing arts. When asked about his new theatrical paradigm, he once explained: "When using some new artistic techniques and artistic vocabulary, I try to make them as close as possible to the aesthetic orientation of nationality and folk art..., giving the audience the taste of the traditional Chinese folk art". *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* is an important achievement thanks to the efforts of several generations of artists.

The play has left a lasting impact on Chinese drama in three key ways. The first is set-design. *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* included a giant turntable that could rotate up to 360 degrees, which represents the Mulberry Plain, and also the main stage designed by the creator. With the rotation of the turntable, the poverty, misery, and numbness of Mulberry Plain's life are presented to the audience. In fact, in the play, the turntable will be connected with the scenes as the story develops, and new symbols emerge because of that.

It's second great legacy is its focus on the combination of reality and imagination. The audience would experience both simultaneously; there are not only real plots and conflicts happening and unfolding but also internal conflicts echoing the external world.

The third and final lasting impact it has made regards its emphasis on the integration of emotion and reason in the pursuit of stage effects. *The Mulberry Plain Chronicle* surprised us by showing that the Chinese performing arts artists are moving from simply following Western drama theories, to organically integrating their own national drama tradition with Western drama theories.

Overview of Chinese Theatre in the first half of 2022

MA Hui

In the first half of 2022, the Chinese theatre market was still under the shadow of the epidemic, but there was no shortage of noteworthy productions. The first half of the year saw both adaptations and repertory productions of classic works, as well as many innovative plays combining film and drama, opera and drama, etc. There were both classic repertory productions by major directors of the Beijing People's Art Theatre and innovative attempts by crossover masters and young directors, adding a different style to the theatre stage. In terms of Xiqu, the Chinese stage has been enlivened by the reenactment of classical plays and the revival of innovative plays. In addition, in recent years, opera, dance and puppet theatre, among others, have increasingly appeared on the stage, with many major productions, each claiming a place on the contemporary Chinese stage.

I. Modern Drama

On 12 January 2022, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) production of the play *Westward Look at Chang'an* saw its sixth rehearsal appearance at the NCPA Little Theatre House. It is a five-act play written by Lao She in 1956, which tells an absurd and thought-provoking story at the beginning of the founding of New China. Miao Fu, a comic actor, portrays the con man in the play to perfection.

Having previously worked in the film industry, Ye Jintian has brought Zhang Ailing's novel *Love in A Fallen City* to the stage for a production at the NCPA from 6-10 January 2022. Ye Jintian has created a new theatrical aesthetic through "video + theatre". The film part highlights the delicate portrayal of the



■ Posters of *Love in A Fallen City*
Source: The official website of National Centre for the Performing Arts

characters and the montage creates the illusion of reality, while the mise en scene in the theatre space creates a spatial language unique to the director, forming a more abstract rhythm, giving the whole stage production a high level of "cinematic quality". It can be said that the combination of film and stage is the most distinctive feature of the play *Love in a Fallen City*, and many audiences were impressed by the combination of literature, drama and video in this theatrical journey. Although the combination of video and stage has long been seen on stages at home and abroad, the hand-held photography and black-white images in Ye Jintian's play present a "documentary" quality that complements the subtle beauty of the original novel and brings the audience an ultimate aesthetic experience.

Adapted from Lao She's 1926 novel, Li Bo'nan's Peking-style play *Lao Zhang's Philosophy* depicts the fortunes, sorrows and joys of a diverse group of nobodies in the town outside Deshengmen in the early years of the Republic of China during the chaos of the warlords, as well as the dreams they each pursue. The play is a bold adaptation and innovation based on a deep study of the original novel. The narrative and staging techniques are both new and traditional, with one person playing two roles and the dream world intermingling with reality, making this old production new again.

From 25 to 27 February, Beijing Fenglei Peking Opera Troupe presents the Jingju-style drama *Juer*, which showcases the historical heritage and cultural connotations of Jingju through the exquisite acting skills of the actors, nostalgic



■ Stage photo from *When We Two Parted*
Source: The official website of National Centre for the Performing Arts



■ Stage photo from *Jane Eyre* with Zhu Jie as Jane Eyre
Source: The official website of National Centre for the Performing Arts

scenery and a rare glimpse of the backstage of a traditional Xiqu circle, where traditional and authentic skills such as skill practice, make-up and costumes are portrayed.

From 4 to 13 March, The Nine, which has been making a name for itself in the theatre circle in recent years, produced *When We Two Parted*, the second time The Nine brought a theme in the period of Republic of China to the stage, following the acclaimed 2019 original play *Unfold My Loom*. The play continues the quality of detail that has always been the hallmark of The Nine, with a master specially commissioned to decorate the stage for the Suzhou Pingtan, a small Chinese ink painting of the stage transitions closely related to the plot development, and the eponymous theme song at the end of the play receiving

■ Stage photo from *Enjoy both Felicity and Longevity*
Source: The official website of National Centre for the Performing Arts



rave reviews from audience members.

The NCPA's production of *Jane Eyre*, adapted from Charlotte Bronte's novel of the same name, has not only had several rounds of hot performances at the NCPA, but has also been invited to make spectacular appearances at the Capital Theatre of the People's Art Theatre and the Beijing Guohua Pioneer Theater, as well as a national tour to Shanghai, Chongqing, Ningbo, Hangzhou and Fuzhou during its 13-year long run. From 11 to 14 April 2022, famous actors Zhu Jie and Pu Cunxin joined forces for the first time with the cast of the NCPA and National Theatre Company of China (NTCC) to present the 17th round of *Jane Eyre*, revisiting the classic and touching performance with everyone.

The Shill, directed by renowned comedian Chen Peisi, was performed at the NCPA and Tianjin Grand Theatre in June and July this year. Together with *The Balcony*, *The Shill* has been a companion piece of Chen Peisi's classic comedy series and is very popular with the public. In 2013, the play was revived by Chen Dayu, who took over from Chen Peisi with a cast of young actors. The "renovation" approach is striking. With its comfortable choreography, rich and dynamic lighting effects and, above all, fun and hilarious live interactions, the new version of *The Shill* is a joyful and entertaining production that retains the original style of the play and doubles the comedy. In addition to its performances in Beijing, the production toured to Shanghai, Nanjing, Ha'erbin and Tianjin, generating an overwhelmingly positive response nationwide. Up to now, *The Shill* is still the most performed play by the producer, Beijing Dadao Culture Programme Production, in the country - it has been performed in nearly 60 cities for nearly 500 performances.

An original work by young director Huang Ying, *Enjoy both Felicity and Longevity*, starring renowned comedian Yan Hexiang, has been selected for the National Arts Foundation's 2022 Communication and Promotion Grant. It tells

the story of a pair of comedians, Zhang Changfu and Li Yanshou, from their childhood ignorance to their old age, with the bittersweet experience of learning their craft, the sorrow of being tugged and beaten by fate, and the laughter and tears of reuniting after several ups and downs to recount their past.

The Guangzhou Dramatic Arts Centre has revived its epic play *Nanyue King* this year, staged from 20 to 29 May. First performed in 2006, the play has been revived several times over the past 17 years and has become a bright cultural card for Guangzhou. The play tells the story of Zhao Tuo, who founded the state of Nan Yue¹ in 204 BC. From the age of 30 to 106, he wrote a microcosm of the entire history of Nan Yue in a unique life history of over seven decades. Through the story of one man, the history of a city is revealed, showing the magnificent beauty and splendour of the process of history and the blending of life in the context of a great era.

1 The territory of Nan Yue included most of the present-day Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, parts of Fujian, Hunan, Guizhou and Yunnan, and the northern part of Vietnam. [Translator's note]



■ Stage photo from *Nanyue King*
Source: The official website of Guangzhou Dramatic Arts Centre

■ Stage photo from *To the World*
 Source: The official website of Guangzhou Dramatic Arts Centre



The Guangzhou Dramatic Arts Centre has produced and performed two rounds of the large-scale original drama *To the World* in January and June respectively. The play takes the representative enterprise of China's telecommunications development, "Guoxun", in the context of the construction of the Greater Bay Area as a window to show a microcosm of China's telecommunications development over the past 30 years. The whole play adopts a theatrical structure of "three parallel threads", with a large stage and multimedia technology, and a strong sense of technology to bring a new visual experience of modern simplicity, digital technology and rationality.

II. Xiqu

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the naming of the Beijing Quju¹ genre, the Beijing Quju Opera Troupe performed *Teahouse*, which was revived in 2021 and staged at the NCPA from 8 to 9 January. On the basis of respecting the spirit of Lao She's original work, the play makes full use of Beijing Quju's unique talking art and singing style, which is rich in Beijing's regional music, to further explore and present the deep meaning of the play.

1 Beijing Quju is one of the traditional operas of the region. It is based on the popular Beijing Qu opera of the single-string tune, and was first called "Quju" in 1952. 【Translator's note】



■ Stage photo from *Teahouse*
Source: The official website of Beijing Quju Opera Troupe

From 8 to 9 March, a large scale original historical xiqu *Huaya Canal*, created and performed by the Beijing Hebei Bangzi Opera Troupe, was presented at the NCPA. The play is based on the historical background of the controversy of the Hua and Ya in mid-Qing xiqu circles, and combines the origins of the Hebei bangzi genre with the personal experience of Yuan Xiaowei, a famous actress from the Qinqiang troupe. The story is about the survival environment and ecology of xiqu art in the context of the controversy of the Hua and Ya. It vividly shows the relationship between the canal and the development of xiqu art, and the rich and brilliant historical lineage carried by the canal culture.

National Peking Opera Company's modern Jingju (Peking opera) *The Legend of the Red Lantern* had two rounds of performances in Beijing in March and July respectively. Adapted from the Huju (Shanghai opera) of the same name, it has been more than 50 years since its creation and premiere, making it a landmark work in the history of modern Jingju and a highly popular classic model.

From mid-March to the end of April 2022, Shanghai launched the "Classic Chinese Opera Series", a series of performances of famous Jingju, Kunqu, Huangmei Xi and Yueju. *The Royal Consort of Tang* is based on Mei Lanfang's famous play *Tai Zhen Wai Zhuan* from the 1920s, which has a history of nearly 100 years and is a representative work of the Mei School. This new version based on various opinions and suggestions, combines the unique flavours

■ Stage photo from *Huaya Canal*
 Source: The official website of Beijing Hebei Bangzi Opera Troupe



■ Stage photo from *The Legend of the Red Lantern*
 Source: The official website of National Peking Opera Company



■ Stage photo from *The Royal Consort of Tang*
 Source: The official website of Shanghai Jingju Theatre Company





■ Stage photo from *Female Prince Consort* (left) and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (right)
Source: The official website of Anhui Huangmei Opera Troupe

of the "Peking School" and the "Shanghai School", and is reinterpreted with the aesthetics of the new era, reflecting the spirit of continuous reflection and polishing of the Mei School art in the process of development. The spirit of the art has been constantly considered and polished in the process of development.

From 25 to 26 March, Anhui Huangmei Opera Troupe presents two productions of Huangmei Xi, *Female Prince Consort* and *A Dream of Red Mansions*, with a star-studded cast interpreting time-honoured classics. The traditional classic *Female Prince Consort* is a tragic and joyful tale of the mainstream society, which tells the story of Feng Suzhen, the daughter of an official of the Qing Dynasty in Xiangyang, Hubei Province, who risks her life to save her husband and, after all the twists and turns, finally gets what she wants and makes a happy marriage. *A Dream of Red Mansions* uses different narrative techniques and character perspectives to advance the storyline and tell the audience a touching and heartfelt love story.

From 18-19 March, Jiangsu Performing Arts Group's Kunju Opera Company presented the kunqu *The Peach Blossom Fan (1699)*, led by national-level actors Shan Wen and Shi Xia Ming. The play is an iconic heritage play of kunqu, which draws on the love story of Hou Fangwei, a literary figure from the Restoration Society in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and Li Xiangjun, a famous prostitute from Nanjing, to write about the feelings of rise and fall with the love of separation.

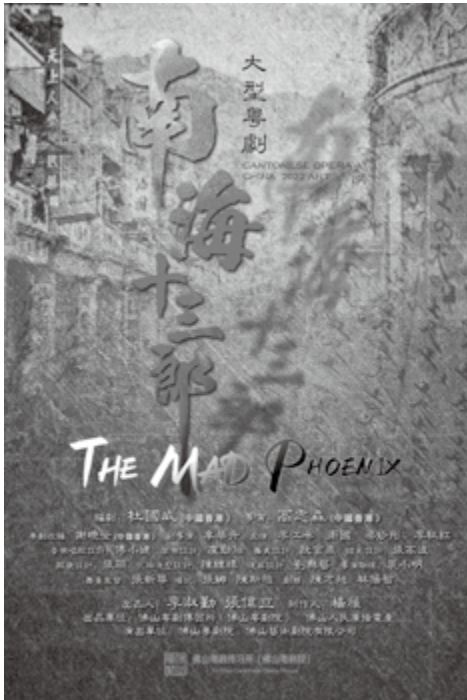
On 12 April, Hu Zongqi, director of the famous stay play *The Road We Have Taken*, joined forces with the Jiangsu Changzhou Huaji Ju Troupe to present

the Huaji Ju *Chen Huansheng's Problem of Eating*. The play is the first attempt to express the weighty subject matter in a piece of Huaji Ju and is a departure from traditional Huaji Ju. It takes the character of Chen Huansheng from Changzhou author Gao Xiaosheng's work and creates a new version of the character, starting with Chen Huansheng in his later years and telling his and his three children's hilarious and heartbreaking stories about land, food and eating at different times between the 1970s and 2018.

Also embodying the contemporary legacy of xiqu aesthetics is the contemporary kunqu *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River* presented by Shanghai Zhang Jun Kunqu Art Centre, running from 1-2 April. Inspired by the poem of the same name by the Tang Dynasty poet Zhang Ruoxu, the playwright Luo Zhou uses romantic and daring imagery to create a dreamy, traversing and profoundly poignant love story for this poet of little historical



■ Stage photo from *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699)
Source: The official website of Jiangsu Performing Arts Group's Kunju Opera Company



■ Poster of *The Mad Phoenix*
Source: The official website of Foshan Cantonese Opera Troupe

record. The play not only carries forward the tradition of the kunqu of scholar and beauty, but also elevates "love" to a philosophical reflection on the universe and life.

For Cantonese Yueju, the large-scale piece *The Mad Phoenix* had two premieres on 14-15 June at the Foshan Performing Arts Centre (Qiong Hua Grand Theatre). *The Mad Phoenix* is based on the tragic life story of the eccentric 20th century Cantonese Yueju playwright, Kong Yu Kau. This Cantonese Yueju follows Kong's life from his rebellious days as the 13th son of an official, to his rise in prominence as the top Cantonese Yueju songwriter and playwright of his generation, and eventually to his death in the late 70s. Due to his eccentric personality, many

were confused whether he was a genius or just simply insane. This earned Kong the nickname, The Mad Phoenix.

III. Opera, Dance Theatre, Puppet Theatre and Others

The NCPA's production of Puccini's opera *Turandot* was staged from 18 to 22 January 2022. As the NCPA's first self-produced Western classic, it started the pace of artistic production of opera at the Theatre. The production has not only had ten rounds of spectacular performances over the past ten years, but has also been filmed as an opera film to great acclaim. In the NCPA's version of *Turandot*, renowned composer Hao Weiya has been commissioned to write an 18-minute continuation of the opera, becoming the third person in the world to do so to date; renowned director Chen Xinyi has given it a



■ Stage photo from *Turandot*
Source: The official website of National Centre for the Performing Arts

profound interpretation of "love" and "heroism". The famous choreographer, Gao Guangjian, has created a "Chinese style stage" with a great sense of meaning; many gifted artists have joined together to create a new artistic realm for the production. In the NCPA version of *Turandot*, the heroine is given a more human expression than the fierce and vicious Turandot of many Western versions. Soprano Sun Xiuwei sings with great skill and delivers a layered performance, with the aria "In questa reggia" explaining the complex and multifaceted nature of Turandot's character. The aria "Del Primo Pianto", which follows the forced kiss by Calaf, is a compassionate and tender piece of music by Hao Weiya, who gives a very delicate interpretation of Turandot's emotional transformation.

National Ballet of China's *Olegin* runned from 13 to 14 June 2022. The ballet *Olegin* is based on the full-length poetic novel of the same name by the great Russian writer Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, choreographed by the master of "theatre ballet" John Cranko and set to music by Tchaikovsky, the three masters of the genre make this classic a star-studded production. In 2008, the artists of the National Ballet successfully rehearsed this world classic of theatre ballet for the first time. This work broke away from the formulaic form



■ Stage photo from *Onegin*
Source: The official website of National Ballet of China



■ Stage photo from *Dunhuang*
Source: The official website of National Ballet of China

of classical ballet, allowing each dance movement to serve the purpose of building the character and expressing the heart.

From June 9 to 10, another masterpiece by the National Ballet of China, *Dunhuang*, was staged at the NCPA. Based on the exploits of the first generation of heritage workers dedicated to the preservation and study of Dunhuang art, the dance showcases the great feat of young heritage workers who overcame many difficulties to protect their cultural heritage. The work tells the story of the fate of the desert and youth, faith and heritage behind Dunhuang's murals, and through the twists and turns of a pair of lovers who share a passion for Dunhuang art, it shows the ideal and dedication of "Dunhuang love" nurtured by a thousand years of civilisation and the desert, and is a heartfelt tribute to the people who have contributed to Dunhuang civilisation. It is also worth mentioning that the play is a unique and imaginative

"resurrection" of the glorious Dunhuang frescoes, creatively combining the toe-tapping dance of Western ballet with the figures in the Dunhuang frescoes, resulting in a breathtaking stage spectacle.

Two dance dramas by the China National Opera and Dance Drama Theater, *Li Bai* and *Confucius*, are staged back-to-back at the NCPA in early February 2022. Based on Li Bai's sense of family and country and his unbridled emotions of embracing the landscape, the dance drama *Li Bai* takes the life experience of being sent to Yelang in his later years as its starting point, and selects important points in Li Bai's life to reveal his inner world through his trade-offs and choices, creating a special character on the dance drama stage. It explores the customs and dance music of the Tang Dynasty with a typical Chinese cultural meaning and aesthetic. The dance drama *Confucius* takes a look at the life of Confucius as he travelled around the world, from his participation in politics and advice, his travels around the world, his desperate need for food, his poems, his return to Lu in his old age, his revision of the *The Book of Songs*, his writing of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, his making of rites and music, etc. The play illustrates Confucius' ideal of a world of commonwealth through the eyes of the present day.

From 4 to 6 February 2022, China Puppet Theatre's production of a large-scale mythological puppet play, *True and False Monkey*, was staged. The play is based on *Journey to the West*, one of the four classical Chinese masterpieces that is a household name. Performing artists from the China Puppet Theatre showcased the magic of traditional puppet art through artistic processing with their exquisite traditional staff puppet performance techniques.

■ Stage photo from
Li Bai
Source: The official
website of China
National Opera
and Dance Drama
Theater





■ Stage photo from *True and False Monkey*
Source: The official website of China Puppet Theater



■ Stage photo from *Matha*
Source: The official website of Art Space for Kids

The play not only features the transformation of the heaven into the sea, the 72 transformations of Sun Wukong and the duel between the real and fake Monkey King, but also the dance of the graceful Dragon Lady and the real and fantastical world under the sea, as well as the passionate martial arts scenes and the artistic and beautiful group dance performances.

From 25 to 27 February 2022, a new children's puppet show, *Matha*, was being staged in collaboration with the UK and China. The original production of the puppet show is from Catherine Wheels' *Martha*, one of the most famous children's theatre companies in the UK, which has toured Europe and other countries around the world for 10 years and is one of the company's classic works. This is the first Chinese version of the play, with the original British director, choreographer and other members of the original cast working together with talented young Chinese artists to immerse Chinese emotions and culture in all aspects of the story, language and emotional presentation, making it a heartfelt production for Chinese children by Chinese actors.

IV. Academic News

The International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) China Divisional Council Meeting was held in Beijing on 17 April 2022, with a combination of online and offline sessions due to epidemic prevention and control requirements. Hao Rong, President of the Central Academy of Drama, said that we have always supported academic activities, especially in the trend of internationalisation of

higher education, and the Academy attaches great importance to international exchanges and academic research. Afterwards, Peng Tao, President of the IATC China Divisional, gave a summary report on the work of the China Divisional over the past six years, and reported to the directors on the key points of future work. Over the past six years, the Divisional has promoted the development of Chinese theatre culture through the platform of IATC, while collaborating deeply with many theatre festivals and exhibitions in China, and publishing several critical books. Finally, the meeting proceeded with the election of the new Board of Directors. According to the nomination of the Chairman of the Board, Professor Xie Boliang was appointed as the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, and Professor Ma Wenqi, Professor Chen Jun and Professor Yan Quanyi were appointed as the Vice-Chairmen.

On April 23, 2022, the Modern Xiqu Studies Center of Shanghai Theatre Academy hosted the "High-end Forum on Stage Creation of Modern Xiqu", which was successfully held. More than 50 experts and scholars from more than 30 related units conducted in-depth discussions on the theme of "Stage Creation for Modern Xiqu". The forum was broadcast live on Tencent's conference platform, and over 50,000 people joined online, arousing great interest from the theatre academia and the industry. Several local theatre companies organised their entire staff to observe the conference as part of their party building branding to enhance the professional theoretical knowledge of their actors and actresses.

On the morning of 23 April 2022, the "Symposium to Commemorate the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the 'Left-Wing Drama Federation' and the Left-Wing Art Movement", hosted by the China Tian Han Research Association, co-organised by the Shanghai Theatre Academy, was officially held. The conference was divided into three sessions, with 22 experts and scholars delivering lectures. Due to the epidemic, the conference was held online at Tencent Conference instead, with 106 participants online. At the end of the conference, Director Song Baozhen of the Institute of Drama of Chinese National Academy of Arts and Professor Chen Jun, Director of the Department of Theatre Literature of Shanghai Theatre Academy, summarised the conference. Director Song Baozhen said that the conference was significant, not only in commemorating the left-wing theatre movement, but also in paying tribute to a large number of artistic sages represented by Tian Han, Xia Yan, Ouyang Yuqian and Hong Shen. She said that the papers presented at the conference covered a wide range of topics, not only on the phenomenon of the left-wing theatre movement, but also on the scope of the influence of the theatre movement in a broad sense, and that there were breakthroughs

in movement studies, journal studies, reception studies and writer studies. Song Baozhen also gave a comprehensive and incisive review of the papers presented at the conference. Professor Chen Jun also highly appreciated the significance of this conference in promoting Tian Han and left-wing theatre studies, and hoped that colleagues would add to the construction of "Tian Han Studies". Finally, Vice President Guo Chao thanked all the speakers for their wonderful sharing and all colleagues for their joint efforts, which made the conference a complete success, and declared the conference closed.

From 18 to 23 May 2022, the 4th World Theatre Education Conference and the 6th Asian Theatre School Student Drama Festival, organised by the Asian Theatre Education and Research Centre (ADERC) and hosted by the Central Academy of Drama in China, was held in a combined online and offline format through the official website of ADERC.

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