

**Xiqu and Modernisation:
The Transformations
of the Chinese Traditional Theatre in the
Process of Social Formation of Modern China**

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For the degree of Ph. D. at Middlesex University

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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There is an inherent sociality and collectivity in the theatre. Theatrical activities, like other cultural productions, involve a great many elements seeping through, in and out and between the theatrical institutions and other vectors of the social space. Theatre is both a result of and simultaneously one of the many constitutive factors in the process of social formation. This thesis examines the conventions of *xiqu* and its transformations in relation to the modernisation in China since the second half of the 19th Century.

The introduction of Western theatre architecture in the last decade of the 19th Century in Chinese cities was probably the most important catalyst for the metamorphosis of *xiqu* into its present form. The changed parameters of the newly constructed theatres injected new possibilities into productions and changed the theatrical consciousness of the audience. The *jingju* form provides a particular case in point. It was initially developed into a distinctive regional *xiqu* as a consequence of the merging of a number of existing regional forms, the performances of which in the

capital were only made possible by modern communications and transportation. Its subsequent popularity in the principal cities was inseparable from its development in the modern theatres.

The cinema was introduced to China at about the same time as Western theatre architecture. *Xiqu* films were first produced as records of performances to extend the commercial possibilities of the *xiqu* market. As film language improved in its refinement and aesthetic grammar, cinematic aesthetics took over and *xiqu* films started to take another direction. As more features of its stage aesthetics were replaced by camera treatment, *xiqu* films ceased to be a genre of *xiqu* and became instead a genre of cinema. This clear-cut distinction was especially obvious in the *xiqu* films produced in Hong Kong, where market forces were relentlessly fierce.

Nowadays *xiqu* is facing the same challenges as all other theatre forms in the globalised market-place. To survive it must find a way to remain competitive and commercially viable. At the same time, it must rediscover its artistic edge by offering experimental and innovative productions in order to make itself artistically relevant and attractive to its contemporary audience.

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CHAPTER ONE

Aim and methodology

This thesis sets out to develop an integrated approach to analysis of *xiqu*, sometimes referred to as the Chinese opera, since the modernisation of the Chinese society. It takes into account the studies of texts, performance actualities, production contexts, and cultural and social factors, giving each of them equal importance in the transformation of the convention of modern *xiqu*. Large bodies of literature have been written on modern Chinese history, the changes of Chinese culture in the 20th century and the transformation of the *xiqu* convention throughout the centuries. Yet there has not been any attempt to read the three together in a mutually informed relationship. This thesis articulates this relationship of the three since China's modernisation, so as to make possible a materialist approach to *xiqu*, which I believe could better provide a reading of *xiqu* in its milieu. This will provide a perspective other than the heritage approach to *xiqu* that has been dominating discussion of this theatrical form. This will be the major contribution of this thesis as a piece of academic study.

An equal emphasis on history, culture and form is necessary for this investigation. The limit in scale and length of this thesis means that a selection of materials presented is inevitable. Therefore, extended textual analysis has to give way to a degree so that adequate room could be given to discussion on history and culture, and their relationship with the theatrical form. This justifies the selection and editing of materials in this

thesis.

The fundamental conviction behind this approach is humanist. My basic belief is that aesthetic experience is a part of a holistic life experience made up of the numerous faculties of the human consciousness, which interact on one another, each as essential as any other. Thus, it is impossible to draw a complete distinction between an audience's theatrical experience and their overall life experience.

The texture of a performance does not only lie in the textual and technical details, it is also determined by both the intellectual and the sensual experience the audience undergoes. It is not only impossible to "know the dancer from the dance"¹, to take Yeats' beautiful and profound metaphor literally, it is also impossible to tell the subjective condition of the reception of the dance, which manifests itself as a whole structure of the audience's social and personal framework, from how the dance is actually received by that audience. To deal with the highly complex and intricate structure of the subjective experience, a multi-disciplinary approach is needed. It must draw on tools and materials from a number of subjects especially within the various faculties of Humanity studies. Particular issues and problematics are most effectively investigated and clarified by the employment of analytical tools from particular disciplines. The choice and combination of the analytical tools employed depends on the specific needs in the study of the theatrical form in question. It is a

¹ W.B. Yeats, *Among School Children*, collected in *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry* (Suffolk: Pan Books Ltd, 1990), 130.

primary principle of this study that the engagement with critical and analytical theories has to arise out of concrete, specific and practical needs in the examination of certain aspects of *xiqu* performance. Otherwise, theatre criticism could easily be seen as serving to justify certain social or cultural theories. This latter approach may seem unobjectionable within the discipline of sociology and cultural studies. But it courts the risk of superficiality, even distortion, within the realm of theatre studies, the corollary of which is the theatrical form itself.

Two points on this multi-disciplinary approach should here be noted. First, for the above reason, no single one of the analytical tools and disciplines employed in this thesis, or indeed any combination of them, makes up the central theoretical framework of this study. They are seen as legitimate and diverse tools of analysis to be employed in an empirical spirit to facilitate investigation of certain aspects of *xiqu* in the Chinese society since its modernisation. But this is not to imply any theoretical inconsistency. The theoretical backbone of the whole thesis is predicated on Raymond Williams' articulation of art as social praxis. Art at the same time reveals and shapes the structures of feelings of certain social situations. Indeed mutually constitutive relations is the key concept. Other analytical tools and cultural theories applied in this thesis provide assistance in solving problems in the understanding of certain issues concerning *xiqu* practices as one of the many constitutive elements in the overall social process in the midst of the Chinese modernisation.

Second, although any form of art and theatre as a part of the wider

social process should be understood as pertaining to the realm of all artistic and theatrical production, it would be inappropriate to claim applicability of the analytical tools applied in this study of *xiqu* to any other forms of theatre. It should be borne in mind that the theoretical tools must be selected dependent upon the concrete needs that arise from the investigation of the specific circumstances of the theatre form in question. A separate and different set of multi-disciplinary tools would have to be designed for critically appraising another theatrical form.

In summary, the general aim of this study is to elaborate a critical rather than a descriptive approach to theatre studies, and especially to the study of the historical development of certain theatrical forms. This is necessarily an integrated approach with a high level of disciplinary flexibility, in order to highlight the complex nature of theatre production in its nexus of historical and cultural contexts. At the same time, the high level of flexibility and the practical orientation of such an integrated and multi-disciplinary approach mean that it can only make sense when applied more rigorously in relation to specific phenomena. Therefore, it has to be demonstrated in an actual and concrete analysis, in this case, *xiqu* since the modernisation of Chinese society. This is the specific aim of the present study.

Theatre and society

Participation in a theatrical activity in any sense is also taking part in a social gathering. The inherent features of sociality and collectivity of both the production and reception of any theatrical works imply that all theatrical activities are intricately woven into the social fabric. It is more so the case with the theatre than with other artistic and literary productions that can be conducted in a more private context, although also necessarily within historical and cultural confines. The increasingly developed theories on the relationship between art and the society in fields including Marxist studies, cultural studies and sociology are indeed very useful tools for theatre studies. They allow three-dimensional analysis of theatre forms by bringing into consideration the process of elements seeping through in and out between the theatrical and other domains of the social space.

The rise of cultural studies in the 1960s represents a shift in the focus of literary and art studies. It is a very useful methodology for the investigation of the transformation of theatrical form in relation to its social context. In cultural studies, a canonical approach is replaced by looking at works as texts informed by its milieu. Works of art are looked at as cultural productions prior to artistic productions.² A critical approach is preferred to appraisals. Stuart Hall in his essay written as an insider on the

² One good example of such an approach is Tony Davies' "Education, Ideology and Literature" published in *Red Letters*, no.7, 1978, 4-15. In this article he argues that the singling out of a body of texts as canon and the establishment of the institution of literature is related to the educational practice in which an ideological national unity was constructed with no regards to the class differences emerging in late 19th Century England.

work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of the University of Birmingham locates structuralism as the moment when culture was taken as praxis rather than a signifier for other activities. This is formulated under the influence of structural linguistics and the semiology of language. Ferdinand de Saussure's model of signification and the subsequent supplement and reinforcement of the model provided by Roland Barthes and other structuralist linguists establish language 'as a practice' operating according to 'its internal forms and relations, its internal structuration'.³ Barthes simply explicates the arbitrariness of signs. These signs indeed form rather than reflect human perception of the world. The structuralists have foregrounded the constitutive nature of signifying systems to the production of meaning, rather than taking signifiers as transparent carriers of some extrinsic and already fixed realities. So, truth and meaning are not there to be described, but constantly being constructed, by language or signs. Hall is correct in stating that

... the strongest thrust in 'structuralism' as a mode of thought is toward a radical diversity – the heterogeneity of discourses, the autonomization of instances, the effective dispersal of any unity or ensemble, even that of a 'relatively autonomous' one.⁴

Semiology as a descendent of Saussure and Jakobsen has found its way into the analysis of communication. It is so influential that Richard Rorty

³ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems", in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis ed., *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-79* (London: Routledge in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1980), 33.

⁴ Hall, 32.

uses the term 'the linguistic turn'⁵ as his verdict on the way human minds work in this era. Semiology has proven itself competent in describing communicative acts as systems. It offers to identify elements in a communicative act as discrete items and assess each of their functions and effectiveness in the system as a whole. Its application in theatre studies by critics including Keir Elam and Herbert Blau has proven especially fruitful. Its object of studies is the *langue* of theatrical practices. It provides a common while relatively value-free vocabulary with which the complex configurations of the countless variety of theatres can be discussed on a common basis. Moreover, it allows isolation of certain elements in a performance and for them to be put under scrutiny when investigation of certain formal or ideological problematics call for such focused attention.

Semiology allows theatre forms to be perceived not only as monolithic formal unities, but also as conglomeration of numerous parts or signs. The process and format of coming together of signs operates according to a set of rules, or grammar, that is as arbitrary as the signs themselves. This quality of make-believe is one that the theatre has always been self-celebrating. Like language which is not only the tool, but also the agent of thinking for the subject of utterance, a theatrical language also guides, allows, limits and constitutes the content or message of performance. Once again, structuralist analysis emphasizes the role of the forms in the production of meaning. Hall adapts the structuralist idea of language speaking man and extends it to the full span of cultural practices

⁵ Richard Rorty ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

through the prism of structuralism:

Modern structuralism proposed instead to think of men as spoken by, as well as speaking, their culture: spoken through its codes as systems.⁶

The “means” of expression is no longer seen as the tool, or a disinterested facilitator that allows and hinders expression. Rather, it is part of the expression itself. This allows the possibility of conceptualising the relationship of form and content in other than a dichotomous manner. Theatrical forms are not seen as the ready vessels at artists’ disposal for their message pre-existent yet in a free-flowing state to take shape. Neither is *a priori* in relation to the other. The application of the structuralist methodology and its implication of the arbitrariness of the sign systems to theatre studies allows form and content to be perceived in a relationship in which one contributes in establishing the other. Theatre studies along this line should put under examination not the message, or idea, or ideology, explicated in certain artistic forms; but culture, or cultural productions as integrated activities, as praxis.

Both sociology and cultural studies have denounced the view of seeing aesthetics as transcendental qualities. The beheld is judged against its background of social and cultural values which are ‘a function of our everyday extra-aesthetic existence’.⁷ Louis Althusser has examined the formation of these values that inform the beholders’ judgment on a work

⁶ Hall, 30.

⁷ Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (London, MacMillan, 1994), 81.

of art. The individual is interpolated by the ideologies propagated through the numerous ideological apparatus including family, school and church. Art and literature being one of these apparatuses logically would go in accordance with the current values towards, or ideology of, the art. Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony that dominates the value system of the society is a similar concept of Althusser's dominant ideology, while hegemony affords a more holistic view and takes into account the totality of social life being organised in certain orders according to the hegemonic ideology. Therefore, it emphasises more on the dynamic process of the material social life than Althusser's concept of ideology has done. If aesthetics is also taken as ideology with a social origin, artistic production is essentially social in nature. There is no need for any argument between art being either an artistic or a social product. The former is subsumed under the latter.

Williams' revision of base/superstructure

Both Althusser and Gramsci's models are useful in the contextualisation of a work of art. However, Raymond Williams is dissatisfied with them since in both models, ideology is taken as external and 'imposed'⁸ entities whilst art results in being nothing more than passive reflection of the hegemonic values. Williams' project of delineating a comprehensive theory of the relationship between art and society is continued in his various books. His meticulous explication on the relationship between art and society arrives at the conclusion that the two are constitutive of one another on the material level. It is by far one of the most solid and satisfactory models of cultural materialism in dealing with the position of art in society.

Williams sees culture as a pro-active human activity within the totality of the process of social formation. For him, the simplistic reductionist theory of reflectivity is the main fallacy of many strands of cultural Marxism. Hall spots the significance of *The Long Revolution* in which discussion on culture acquired a new turn:

It shifted the whole ground of debate from a literary-moral to an anthropological definition of culture. But it defined the latter now as the 'whole process' by means of which meanings and definitions are socially constructed and historically transformed, which literature and art as only one, specially privileged, kind of social communication.⁹

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 109.

⁹ Hall, 19.

Hall's observes is that in *The Long Revolution*, not only is transcendental aesthetics thrown out of the window, there is also no place for the idea of a canon since art and literature have ceased to be seen as an embodiment of either absolute or transient morality and beauty. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams offers a detailed argument for his version of materialism with specific regards to artistic production. It is an immanent critique on the popular reductionist and idealist cultural Marxism from within the tradition of Marxist materialism. His redefinition of a cultural materialism aims to position cultural praxis as an interactive practice in the process of social formation. In such a way, culture, and art, are seen to be active agents intermingling with other social practices including economic and political in the unfolding of the social order.

Williams starts by reviewing the model of base/superstructure as two separate parts of the social reality. He carefully traces the original use of the term base and superstructure in Marx's own writing to the 1851-2 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and the 1859 *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

Upon the several forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, a whole superstructure is reared of various and peculiarly shaped feeling, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life. The whole class produces and shapes these out of its material foundation and out of the corresponding social conditions. The individual unit to whom they flow through tradition and education may fancy that they constitute the true reasons and premises of his

conduct.¹⁰

...With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological – forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.¹¹

Williams observes that the original emphasis of this base/superstructure model as shown in Marx's writings is placed on the relational correlation of the various social forces. The use of the terms is figurative and metaphorical. However, later Marxists in the transition from Marx to Marxism have taken this metaphor literally, thus the determining base and the determined superstructure is developed as a theoretical doctrine. It has also become the basis for Marxist cultural analysis in which culture is taken as a secondary reality which plays a passive role in social process.

This is the very point where Williams departs from traditional Marxism and develops his critique. He started by stating that base and superstructure are neither 'precise concepts', nor 'descriptive terms for observable "areas" of social life'.¹² The emphasis on the relationship of

¹⁰ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon", quoted in Williams, *Marxism*, 76.

¹¹ Karl Marx, "Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy", quoted in Williams, *Marxism*, 75.

¹² Williams, *Marxism*, 78.

the various social forces should remind analysts of the unstable dynamics in the social process, rather than implying 'relatively enclosed categories' or 'relatively enclosed areas of activity'.¹³ Therefore, the essence of the concept of a "superstructure" is not so much that it is a realm of human activities which is carried out in the ideological plain, but that they cannot be understood unless seen as 'rest[ing] on a "foundation"'.¹⁴ The traditional view on base/superstructure as fixed entities in fact reifies society as abstract structuration and overlooks the complexity of integrated humanity that needs to be expressed through their activities and interaction with their objective conditions. Indeed in many Marxist works, the categorisation of the "base" and "superstructure" is taken so far that the transformation of the latter according to the changes in the former is seen to be sequential, with a time lapse in between.¹⁵ Williams takes this as the corollary problematic of orthodox cultural Marxism, since the categorisation of social activities results in the abstraction of them as concepts of human activities, losing sight of the fact that all these activities constitute one another. Therefore Williams draws a clear distinction between mechanical materialism and historical materialism, with the former 'seeing the world as objects and excluding activity' and the latter

¹³ Williams, *Marxism*, 78.

¹⁴ Williams, *Marxism*, 77.

¹⁵ One demonstrative example is Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in which he stated, "The transformation of the superstructure, which takes place far more slowly than that of the substructure, has taken more than half a century to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production." In Hannah Arendt ed., Harry Zohn trans., *Illuminations*, (NY: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-8.

‘seeing the material life process as human activity’.¹⁶

Further problem in this base/superstructure model arises from the dogmatic Marxist economic determinism. The base being dominated by economic relations is taken as the major determinants in social formation. Williams is aware of the discontent with this over-emphasis on economics on the part of many cultural Marxists. He pointed out that a number of revisions have been made in order to enrich the model of determinism by identifying other determinants in terms of psychological, mental and formal structures. He finds justification for this more complex picture by quoting a passage from Engels’ letter to Bloch in 1890 stating that:

Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure ... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*.¹⁷

Recognition of other determinants no doubt brings other elements into the picture and results in a less simplistic view of determination. Although it does not offer any alternative explanation of the dynamics within the determination model, Williams still finds this new picture useful because that it draws into the picture all kinds of social forces which are in interaction or even contradiction. This new model challenges the

¹⁶ Williams, *Marxism*, 70.

¹⁷ Quoted in Williams, *Marxism*, 79-80.

assumption of absolute determination by certain fixed and hegemonic external economic forces that are beyond individual will in dogmatic determinism, as if the process of formation is unilateral and once-and-for-all. He traces the origin of the idea of a such rigid determining forces to the English translation of Marx' origin use of the word *bestimmen*,

The root sense of "determine" is "setting bounds" or "setting limits". In its extraordinarily varied development, in application to many specific processes, it is the sense of putting a limit and therefore an end to some action that is most problematical. ... The abstract idea presupposes a powerlessness (or unsurpassable limits to the power) of the participants in action.¹⁸

Williams' objection does not point to the significance and the actuality of determination, but to the failure of understanding these instances of determination in a historical way. Indeed any articulated relationship between social forces has to be taken historically. The model of determination can only be taken as conclusion at its particular historical moment of happening, or of analysis. He made the important distinction between abstract objectivity (external conditions being out of the control of individual will in the absolute sense) and historical objectivity (the external conditions men are born into without any control). It should be on the latter that the theory of determinism lies in order for it to function as sound social analysis. The idea of abstract determinism is useful, however, as he went on to point out, when it is itself historicised. It is an experience of capitalist expansion when the individual is aware of the rapid and

¹⁸ Williams, *Marxism*, 84.

irreversible loss of control of his or her objective conditions, subsequently generalising it into a permanent condition. It is also the environment in which contemporary art is produced.

Historical objectivism and thus determinism stand with the hidden implication of a whole process of dynamics going on before and after the moment of crystallisation in analysis. There was a whole ensemble of human activities before it that has shaped the present condition, and a whole ensemble of rebound, striking of balance and transformation to come after. In this process the economic, political, cultural and all other aspects of human activities interact, inform and contradict the others. In the cultural domain, these processes manifest themselves as continuous entries and exits of what Williams describes as “pre-emergent” (those forms and formats as yet to take definite and recognised shape), “emergent” (those have already taken shape and been recognised) and “residual” (those recognised and losing their vitality after their time) practices.¹⁹

Williams then goes on to argue for a materialist nature for art and cultural production. The categorisation of art and culture as something belonging to the “superstructure” implies that artistic production is exiled from the realm of material production, which in the dogmatic base/superstructure model belongs exclusively to the “base”. Williams explicates two reasons for this. Firstly, it is part of the class distinction in which art is perceived as something “higher” than manual and mechanical

¹⁹ Williams, *Marxism*, 121-7.

work performed by the lesser classes in everyday lives. This has to be related to the class values attached to the activities of leisure and aesthetic pursuits. Secondly, material production in Marx's time and afterwards has been understood as production of economic commodities. Art is not fetishised as commodities but is produced for its own sake, and the labour involved in artistic production is not abstracted. Williams reminds us if for these reasons art is not counted as material production, the notion of material production itself is very much the product of its time. It is the time of industrial revolution when material production is understood as capital production and labour forces are understood as abstracted.

Foregrounding the material reality of artistic production is central to Williams' project of defining a position for cultural practice in society. For him, artistic production is material in its very nature. Sculptors, painters and craftsmen deal with actual materials while the publishing procedure is necessary for any writing projects. Dramatists are deeply involved in the physical and material qualities of the stage, stage properties and even the physicality of the actors. He also pointed out that these material aspects in artistic production already imply a certain social order behind the availability and manifestation of these materials. The artistic experience of creation and reception is necessarily an experience of certain social relations. By the same token, any invention and exploration of the mode of artistic production including transformation of forms and production technologies necessary bring about changes in the social relations of the production forces involved.

The base/superstructure model with culture being located in the latter results logically in a reflection theory of art. Being consistent with his theory that the medium (language in the cases of literature and text-based theatre) plays a part in the constitution of meaning, Williams starts his criticism of reflection theory at the physical metaphor of the term “reflection”. The implication of mirroring immediately assumes two distinct categories that in fact belongs to the realms of base and superstructure which he has already refuted. By acknowledging a material nature to artistic production, he is able to conclude that creative activities are at the same time ‘material’ and ‘imaginative’. He brings in the Frankfurt School’s concept of mediation into his discussion. Art mediating between individual consciousness and society does perform a kind of constitutive function, be it interpretation, comprehension, or repression and sublimation in psychological terms. The advantage of the concept of mediation is that art is situated within the formation of social totality and the act of mediating is also a form of material activity in constituting this totality. If art is to mediate (in this way also constitute) reality rather than to mirror it, the problem of art being faithful or distorting to reality does not exist.

Structures of feeling

By now Williams has established the following on the nature of culture and thus art:

1. The model of base/superstructure is only valid as a relational inquiry, therefore there is no point in saying that of art and culture belong exclusively to the exclusive realm of superstructure.
2. Economic determinism is a simplistic view of social process. Instead, various social forces including artistic and cultural activities all interact and contradict each other in social formation.
3. Historical materialism emphasises social formation as a process of continuous human activities. Artistic and cultural practices can be recognised as pre-emergent, emergent and residual practices that co-exist and are carried out simultaneously in the society.
4. Artistic and cultural productions are at the same time material and imaginative. The labour involved is a form of production forces in material production. Therefore, it could not belong exclusively and simplistically to the realm of superstructure even in a relational analysis for any certain historical moment.
5. Art is not a reflection of reality. It is one of the many elements that constitute social reality..

According to these claims, art is real and significant in its own right as a component in material history. Williams formulates the theory of “structures of feeling” to articulate the relationship between art and society as a continuous interactive and constitutive process. This process is

crystallised in the idea of convention of art forms. Specifically dealing with the theatre, he stresses that the working of any theatrical signification system depends on a 'tacit consent'²⁰ for creators and recipients to meet. Only with such a tacit consent 'precede[ing] the performance'²¹, can the work be understood. This agreement manifests itself as accepted art forms, or style, or devices. He goes on to elaborate this point,

Forms are thus the common property, to be sure with differences of degree, of writers and audiences or reader, before any communicative composition can occur.²²

For Williams, a social theory of culture emphasising artistic forms is basically founded on its denotation for a relationship between the individual project and collectivity. Any innovation in form is a struggle against the limits and boundaries set by the existing form. An innovative work of art is necessarily an instance of 'material articulation'²³ in the experience of this individual/collective relationship.

I would like to add two dimensions to the concept of convention. First, convention is a way of saying "form" with all its implication of accumulateness. There is a historic sense embedded in the idea of a convention. What is recognised as the prototype of any theatre form at any point of time is necessarily the result of years of practices and

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), 13.

²¹ Williams, *Drama*, 15.

²² Williams, *Marxism*, 187.

²³ Williams, *Marxism*, 191.

transformation. Some experiments settle in and become essential features. Others are discontinued and forgotten. In the case of *xiqu*, one example is Mei Lanfang's various experiments with costumes. He replaced the late 19th century suits with much less bulky one-piece dresses inspired by ancient paintings. They allow much more movement and are more compatible with the image of 20th century women after the introduction of liberalism into China at that period. Meanwhile, there have been countless innovations experimented through history which were much less successful and have disappeared. The abundant application of stage machinery in Shanghai in the first half of the 20th century is a good example. It was discontinued after World War II. This is discussed in greater details in Chapter Four. Therefore, the idea of convention refers to form being put in a historic perspective. A convention inevitably inherits and embodies perspectives which do not belong exclusively to the present historical moment. It can be said to be nostalgic in nature since it always stays with one foot in the past. This nostalgia can be highly productive. It offers possibility of alternative perspectives to the present. For example, the tradition *xiqu* *The Zhao's Orphan* puts heavy emphasis on the significance of self-sacrifice for justice, even against one's own country. It stands directly opposite to the Chinese nationalism much advocated in China today.

To trace the development of a convention involves tracking down series of destabilising and stabilising instances of the form. These instances denote not only the result at each point of development, but also the momentum for further transformations in the process of activities.

They can go in all kinds of directions and detours. The overall picture in historic perspective should not be abstracted into a unidirectional progression. On the contrary, each step in the process represents a lived experience at the moment of activity.

Second, the tacit consent underlining a theatrical convention takes on much more of a collective nature than other art forms that can be produced and received in private. The live nature of a theatrical performance requires a certain degree of comprehension on the spot during the performance from the audience to be truly communicative. It is, therefore less tolerant to idiosyncrasies for reasons of communicativeness.

What substantiates the form at each instance of artistic creation is what Williams calls a structure of feelings. It refers to the human experience of everyday life in its totality. The experiences of all the different realms of life converge to be formative to the work of art. Within the artists' creativity, they are arranged in a certain order to form something 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests' and communicating through 'by direct experience – a form and a meaning, a feeling and a rhythm – in the work of art, the play, as a whole'.²⁴

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affect elements of consciousness and relationship: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a "structure": as a

²⁴ Williams, *Drama*, 18.

set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.²⁵

Since human experience in society is lived and in progress all the time, the structures of feeling are a living process and never stay put. Forms therefore do not simply renew or rejuvenate themselves. Instead, they transform and new forms emerge all the time as invented by the ever-changing structures of feelings in everyday life, be this process a continuity, or as series of shock and sudden breaks. Even the re-emergence of old forms should articulate a structure of feelings specific to the current time of its re-emergence. This picture is then enriched by the idiosyncratic proliferation of individual and situational creativities manifesting themselves as styles. Structure of feelings is the theoretical bridge between art and society. The correlation of the two can be seen in the fact that, as Williams points out, radical formal innovations are always accompany of major transitions of social systems. The adoption of the theory of structure of feelings in theatre studies has a critical significance. It is a substantial theoretical grounding to relate the individual work to its period, and to look at a singular practice as a step in a process of social praxis.

It is also worth mentioning there is also a structure of feelings substantiating each act of reception. Every viewing of the text can be different even by the same reader. Needless to say, Roland Barthes' theory of the death of the author and the definition of a "readerly text" bring out the idea of a multiple text. The meaning of the text is created through the

²⁵ Williams, *Marxism*, 132.

reading and interpretation on the part of the reader, literally for a piece of writing, metaphorically for a work of performance or visual arts. Every time the text is visited (even by the same spectator), an altered structure of feeling generates a new meaning for it. Each interpretation is like pinning down a butterfly on the collector's board. The butterfly keeps reincarnating into its unfathomable manifestations to form a most wonderful collector's board that extends to the infinite. Buddha taught that one cannot cross a river twice. The second time round, the water is not the same water, and the person is also altered therefore not the same person. Every time a text is revisited or staged, it is substantiated by a different structure of feelings. And in the same auditorium, one should also allow for deviation in reception by individual members of the audience since they all operate in different mindsets. But although an ideal standard audience does not exist, it does not invalidate Williams' model because it is the act of interaction between art and the society, between the individual aesthetic faculty and the collective social formation that is put in question, not the actual content of individual reception.

By attributing a constitutive quality to art in society and positioning it within material process, art is free of the constraint of standing outside material reality. By bridging the private and the public in artistic creation with the concept of structure of feelings, art articulates the experience of everyday life in its totality, but not possessing a totalising perspective in order to correct false consciousness, as critics such as Georg Lukacs demand. Williams has presented art as an active agent together with other

social practices in the material process of social formation. Art becomes a much more democratic practice since it does not only articulate the emancipatory consciousness, but also the struggling, the confrontational, even the confused and the conformed feelings. What is more important is that it shows social formation can be potentially democratic through the participation in the creation of culture, which is constitutive in nature in the society.

CHAPTER TWO

Xiqu and history

Xiqu, often referred to as the Chinese opera in the West, is the indigenous form of theatre in China. The words *xi-qu* literally mean drama-music. The name of the form summarises its essence: a dramatic narrative being set to music. Music provides the fundamental pace and rhythm for the whole piece. All actions and gestures are timed to the rhythm provided by the percussions. All movements and speech must coincide with particular points at the musical score. Precision is of vital importance. Acting is stylised. The stage follows minimalism. It stands in diametrical opposition to a Naturalist theatre.²⁶ There are many different theories on the origin of *xiqu*. The majority of scholars agree that it originated from a variety of sources including ancient rituals, religious and royal court dances, popular entertainment called *baixi* (literally meaning “one hundred games” referring to street carnivals with a wide variety of shows, tricks, games on display and stalls selling numerous items) and story-telling with music.²⁷ The convention was stabilised into a form very similar to its present practice at the latest by the 16th century.

²⁶ Three very good references on the art form are Tao-ching Hsu, *The Chinese Conception of the Theatre* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985); William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Paul Elek, 1976); and Jo Riley, *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1997).

²⁷ Works on this issue have been abundant. One authoritative and concise reference is *Zhongguo Xiqu Shilue* [*A Short History on Chinese Xiqu*] co-written by Zhou Yude, the current President of The Academy of Chinese Opera, with Yu Chong and Jin Shui. It was published by The People’s Music Press in Beijing in 1993.

Like many other traditional art practices, *xiqu* has taken on an aura of antiquity, which seems to justify an intrinsic and essential value of the practice itself. Moreover, mainstream *xiqu* criticism has been dominated by two strands of approaches. One is a highly formal approach that focuses exclusively on the technical aspect of the form. Artistic achievements are often attributed to the individual talents of players. The 1950s saw an interesting development of increasing emphasis on acting and especially singing in terms of *pai*, literally meaning schools, referring to the distinctive styles of certain masters. For example, *Meipai* acting is playing in the style of Mei Lanfang in female roles²⁸. *Mapai* acting is playing in the style of the master Ma Lianliang in old male roles. One reason for this was an attempt to promote *xiqu* by making use of star effects. But this approach takes technical merits as an absolute and universal value, and the development of form merely as an accidental result of the artists' personal tastes and creation. This approach loses sight of the context of artistic production and its significance as a social activity.

The other mainstream *xiqu* criticism is an East/West comparative approach. Although a comparative approach usually illuminates the distinctive features of the entities being compared, most comparative work on *xiqu* and Western theatre today more often than not displays a lack of historic perspective. One example is the popular decontextualising

²⁸ Characterisation in *xiqu* is done in terms of *hangdang*, lines or types of roles. Each line of roles is used to represent a certain type of people by stylising the physical attributes, behaviour, gestural, vocal and speech patterns of that type of people in reality. Players are assigned to a specific line (or lines in some cases) at rather an early stage of their training. The four main lines of roles are *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *jing* (painted face) and *chou* (clown). Each line is further sub-divided in different ways in different regional operas. For example, in *jingju* (Beijing opera), *sheng* is sub-divided to *laosheng* (old male), *xiaosheng* (young male), and *wusheng* (martial male) roles.

comparison of the Elizabethan Globe theatre to 18th and 19th Centuries teahouses in Chinese cities for *xiqu* performance. Since many of these studies are prompted by a discontent with the rigid form of modern mainstream theatres, they emphasise similarities between the respective historical venues which both embrace the sense of openness. The opposite side of the coin is overlooking their differences. The changes in *xiqu* performing venues throughout the centuries are overlooked. The heterogeneity of the physical reality of the numerous teahouses is simplified into the quintessential image of the teahouse.

Another example of a comparative approach is textual analysis comparing *xiqu* scripts and the dramatic structures of certain concepts in European drama such as tragedy and comedy. This inevitably means an imposition of theories of Western theatre, such as the tragic or the comic in these cases, onto *xiqu*. This kind of decontextualisation of the text is so popular that it has indeed become a phenomenon. This kind of criticism is made without any consideration on the specificity of the Chinese structures of feeling at the time of creation and production. Nor has it clarified its own motive in the analysis. This approach is epitome of old fashioned comparative literature assuming self-validity. It fails to historicise itself as an historical product in the imperialist epoch. In view of the inadequacy of these two concurrent mainstream approaches, Williams' theoretical model is particularly apt and suitable to be applied to the analysis of *xiqu* performances in the modern era in order to make out a more holistic picture of the role *xiqu* plays in social formation.

One common fallacy that impedes exploring the constitutive nature of *xiqu* in society is its association with Chinese history and traditional culture. *Xiqu* has, as mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter, taken on an aura of antiquity which seems to justify an intrinsic and essential value of the practice itself. In fact in many provinces *xiqu* have been receiving Government attention and subsidies on the basis of preserving cultural inheritance.²⁹ One example is the 1982 campaign of “Rejuvenating *chuanju* [Sichuan opera]”, with all its overtones of responsibility to the past in the verb “rejuvenate” [*zhenxing*]. Another example is even more revealing of how this approach to *xiqu* operates on an institutional level. Among the genre oriented sub-committees of Drama, Music, Dance, Visual Art and Literature of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, awarding grants to *xiqu* is dealt with in the sub-committee of traditional arts together with other forms of Chinese folks arts. The rationale for subsidising *xiqu* is its being “traditional”. Once *xiqu* is seen as a historic icon, the audience does not see the performance as live anymore. They go to a *xiqu* performance as a cultural experience rather than a theatrical

²⁹ There are many variations of the *xiqu* conventions which are basically regional. The numbers given of existing variations range from two hundred to four hundred from research to research. In Chinese these variations are referred to *difangxi*, literally meaning regional theatres. They vary from one another in two major aspects. One is the dialect, the other is the degree of stylisation. Each *difangxi* performs in its own regional dialect with its specific elocutionary features that in turn determine the musical quality of the form. The composition of the score and the accompanying instruments differ from one another accordingly. Secondly, they differ in the degree of theatrical stylisation, and each is enriched with specific technical skills as part of its acting convention. These include techniques such as the famous *bianlian* (changing face) in *chuangju* (Sichuan opera), and the excellence in the usage of the pair of long feathers fixed on helmets in *huiju* (Anhui opera). But all *difangxi* share the same fundamental principles of theatricality. Therefore it is fair to treat them as one system of theatrical aesthetics. In present China, each province or town subsidises its own indigenous form of *difangxi* in the form of supporting an official company. There are general directives from the Central Government on policies towards *xiqu*, but each regional government sets down the details and degrees of support by themselves.

experience. *Xiqu* becomes a three-dimensional visual trick. The focus of spectacle is the idea of some remote past embodied in *xiqu*, rather than the actual content and execution of the art. Whatever the works want to say or however well they say it are lost to its audience. This kind of reception limits the communicative power of *xiqu* as a theatre art. It is received through the mediation of its historic aura and signification of the image of China's past.

Within Nietzsche's project of so-to-speak deconstructing teleology, his comments on men's sense of history is particularly helpful to our understanding of the historic association borne by *xiqu*.³⁰ He suggests that unlike 'unhistorical',³¹ animals, men are historical creatures in the sense that they have memory of the past. He calls the different ways of relating to this memory the three species of history, the 'monumental', 'antiquarian' and 'critical'.³² This is a point that post-structuralists have taken up and elaborated. In his model, history cannot be seen as a stable external entity. In fact, it does not necessarily be so. Interest in history is never interest in the past. One cannot make any interpretation of the past, indeed to anything, from nowhere. On the contrary, history is always a subjective view of the past assumed in order to facilitate or satisfy certain interest in the present. Different needs in the present call for the adoption of one or combination of his three species of history. They can inspire

³⁰ Nietzsche is concerned about history as such, ie, a bourgeois narrative of progress. It is not in the Marxist sense of material history specifically with which Williams takes issue.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History in Life", *Untimely Meditations*, R. J. Hollingdale trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 61.

³² Nietzsche, 61.

different actions in the present. There is no use of history if it cannot 'serve life'³³. Each of the three sense of history he suggests:

... pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance.³⁴

Monumental history is to relate to the monumental greatness of the past. It is a selection of moments to be remembered. The aim of evoking monumental history is to prove that greatness was once possible, therefore should be possible again. However, Nietzsche warns of the danger of extolling greatness in the past which makes one lose sight of the emergent greatness, though might be of a different kind, in the present.

Antiquarian history is to worship insurmountable greatness in the past while repudiating any possibility of equal greatness in the present. Antiquarian history succeeds in mummifying rather than either conserving or engendering life. Nietzsche uses the image of a museum-minded man clinging to minute details on objects to exemplify an antiquarian man's historical obsession:

The antiquarian sense of a man, a community, a whole people, always possess an extremely restricted field of vision; most of what exists it does not perceive at all, and the little it does see it sees much too close up and isolated.³⁵

³³ Nietzsche, 59.

³⁴ Nietzsche, 67.

³⁵ Nietzsche, 74.

Antiquarian history endeavours to retain in the image of the past, so much so that the past itself is fetishised. Both monumental and antiquarian senses of history are also responsible for the obsession to preserve *xiqu*, I would say, as if preserving a family jewel. But such an approach to *xiqu* is futile. The more the jewel signifies the nobility of the family, the more they want to preserve it. Very often, what is treasured in the family is not the intrinsic value of the jewel, but the fact that it has been owned by a number of preceding generations. Not only the jewel itself is fetishised, so is the history of it. But even this cannot remain constant. The meaning of the jewel changes for each generation. Moreover, however much the jewel might appear to its various owners of different generations, its chemical properties can hardly remain stable over time.

While truth is not the concern for both monumental and antiquarian history, it is cardinal to critical history by its very nature. Monumental and antiquarian history often distort and beautify the past in order to prove itself worth imitation in the present, or simply insuperable. A critical sense of history is usually invoked at times of crisis. It looks into the past to conduct a genealogical review of the present situation in order to find remedy for the present. The result of China's critical sense of history in a number of historical moments in the 20th century led to the conviction that her conservative and feudal traditional culture has caused the contemporary political crisis. There have been attempts to reform or even replace it with Western culture. The intellectuals and patriots during the May Fourth New Culture Movement called for total Westernisation under

the profound influence of Western liberalism. They believed that the sufferings in the society can only be alleviated by the elimination of traditional and feudal social values. The Cultural Revolution took as its target any remnants of traditional cultural practices. *Xiqu* with all its historic associations has often been taken as a metonym of this culture to be abandoned. Indeed there are moments in the 20th century *xiqu* is seen as something relating to national shame and to be rid of. This is particularly apparent in the early century.³⁶ Although the Chinese people's attitude towards their national history has been changing all the time, one thing remains the same: the formal association of *xiqu* with historical China inevitably causes it to be mingled with the issue of the national and historical identity of China. This connection further complicates the position of *xiqu* in the process of social formation in modern China.

Nietzsche specially speaks of the impact of monumental history on art. Monumentalist values are antagonistic to contemporary art. Anything contemporary is 'not yet monumental' therefore 'unnecessary, unattractive and lacking in the authority confirmed by history'³⁷. Therefore the connoisseur of art are those who destroy contemporary and living art. This is a problem that *xiqu* productions nowadays are facing. The antiquarian

³⁶ *Xiqu* was twice dismissed by the majority of the literati after the 1911 Revolution, and by some enthusiasts within the Communist Party during the Cultural Revolution between 1966-1976. The reason for its fall in popularity was its association with traditional Chinese culture. The antagonism towards traditional culture at these points of Chinese history is an important issue, but the scope and scale of this thesis does not allow me to deal with it. For reference see Edward L. Dreyer, *China at War, 1901-1949* (London and NY: Longman, 1995); and Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Wenhua da geming shinian shi [History of the Ten Years of the Cultural Revolution]* (Hong Kong: Chaoliu Publishing Co).

³⁷ Nietzsche, 72.

eye cast on Chinese history is also cast on the history of *xiqu*. To the antiquarian man, *xiqu* today is no more than an imitation of *xiqu* in its heyday in the past when it was popular among the populace at large. The connoisseur seeks to see past productions in performances today. *Xiqu* meanwhile is compelled to relate to the past and its own past instead of the present.

The criterion of greatness for antiquarian history conforms to what happened in the past. It finds the presence of greatness only in the past. The antiquarian man devotes his life to the preserving and conforming to this past greatness. His personal identity is dependent on an assertion of the collective identity. The sense of history of the collective brings him a feeling of glory through a sense of belonging:

The possession of ancestral goods changes its meaning in such a soul: they rather possess it. The trivial, circumscribed, decaying and obsolete acquire their own dignity and inviolability through the fact that the preserving and revering soul of the antiquarian man has emigrated into them and there made his home. The history of his city becomes for him the history of himself ... thus with the aid of this "we" he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city.³⁸

There is always a nationalist sentiment in the idea of national history. Like other countries which have been under colonial exploitation, nationalism was a crucial strategy to exert China's autonomy. Unlike young countries such as Singapore that exert themselves in the present, the

³⁸ Nietzsche, 72-3.

sense of Chineseness is built on the historical ground. It is particularly important when the massive phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora has to be dealt with. The construction of a monolithic static cultural past is made available to a variety of diasporic Chinese living in modern situations which differ enormously from one to another. Yet this sense of Chineseness helps to articulate the sense of alienation of diasporic Chinese in an overseas environment, and to find a cultural buttress that provides security and a sense of belonging. Very often, their relation to China is without material content. This is further aggravated by the controversial political popularity of the present Mainland Government. What is constructed is a cultural China (continuous and permanent, not even limited by geographical existence since it is believed that culture as everyday practice travels with the “people”) as differentiated from the political China (transient and accidental). The contact with Chinese culture through *xiqu* is without substance. The idea of China received in vivid colours, sharp shapes and forceful singing on the *xiqu* stage ironically leaves the impression of irretrievable distance such as with faded black and white films, such as with vinyls and their crackling sounds.

Xiqu in the context of Chinese modernity

To look at *xiqu* merely as a re-enactment of ancient texts does not do justice to it as specific cultural production at specific historic instances. One might insist that the traditional pieces in its repertoire are in fact historical products, but its re-enactment is necessarily substantiated by its structure of feelings specific to the time and milieu of its re-enactment, not its original production. Like all other forms of artistic activities, *xiqu* is engaged in a mutually constitutive process with all other aspects of life, and is very much a part of material production. The results of the interaction between *xiqu* practice and other aspects of life are crystallised and made easily visible in the highly stylised codification of *xiqu* performance since stylisation by its nature elaborates the features of what it sets out to represent.

This study adopts to the analysis of *xiqu* Williams' model of the relation of art and society articulated in the theory of structure of feelings. It aims to contextualise *xiqu* productions. A piece of *xiqu* performance needs to be looked at in relation to the whole convention; and in relation to society, not *the* society as a reified and abstract objective frame, but society as a living and formation process in the constitution of which *xiqu* plays an active part.

In order to see *xiqu* in action as a social praxis, one must specify the actual social context and historic instance one is looking at, rather than treating the convention as a timeless entity. The scope of inquiry of this

study is *xiqu* in the Chinese communities since the modernisation of the Chinese society. For the sake of discussion, I suggest giving the somewhat arbitrary definition of the year 1840 in which the Opium War, the first international war on a large scale fought by the *Qing* government, took place as the beginning of modern China. Modernity and industrial capitalism were introduced into China since. China's defeat in the Opium War caused it to be opened up to the West and the subsequent introduction to modern entities. Together with its autonomy, China lost its control over the pace and mode of modernisation. The influx of new technology and social system affected every aspect of Chinese life. The bulk of the impact of these transformations surfaced in the 20th century. Drastic changes were felt in every facet of people's lives on a daily basis in a century that Eric Hobsbawm has described as 'the age of extremes'.³⁹

Before proceeding to see *xiqu* in action in modern China, let me first clarify the background of Chinese modernisation. Modernity is an umbrella term referring inclusively to the phenomenon since the 19th century of a large-scale application of scientific and technological advancement in human life as a form of progress and to the resulting ways of life, social structure and individual consciousness. However, the uneven global distribution of wealth, the heterogeneous pre-modern regional cultures and the varying pace of modernisation have constituted significant variables in different communities and resulted in vastly different content and implications of modernity in different communities. Therefore

³⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus Books, 1994).

clarification of the term as applied to China in such a period bears theoretical relevance to this discussion since it defines the boundary within which the transformation of the *xiqu* convention takes place.

Modernisation as a way of life originated in Europe as a result of achievements in science and technology. The direct outcome of the industrial revolution is mass production and a general increase in the efficiency of production through specialisation and division of labour. A Marxist perspective is useful here as it draws a connection between the changes in mode of production and the social structure. This process of modernisation, in which a radical transformation of the mode of production from small-scale industries to large-scale mechanical production was facilitated by the universal industrial use of the steam engine, corresponded to further advancement of the capitalist social order. This particular historical period is referred to by Marxists as industrial capitalism. In the capitalist world, capital is the principal means of production and the aim of production in turn aims at accumulation of capital. The ever-increasing efficiency of industrial production required an expansion of both a hinterland for raw materials and also a market for the circulation of capital. Colonisation provided room for the expansion of industrial capitalism.

It is no coincidence that in many of the colonies, colonisation and modernisation took place together. It would be straightforward if the aim of colonisation involved merely the ownership of land and natural resources. The circulation of capital, however, requires a much more

complicated model. The expansion of the market means the creation of needs and demand in the colonies for the goods produced by the colonial masters' home industries. The often quoted Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon have articulated the creation of a colonised psychology. It is a process of internalisation of colonial values through religious and educational apparatuses, in the guise of civilisation. In this way, the colonised subjects desired what they were taught to desire and led a social and economic life that could be recuperated into the system of European capitalism.⁴⁰

A more technical scenario was depicted in Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto*, which was the starting point for both Memmi and Fanon, and indeed all political and cultural Marxists:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zone; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal

⁴⁰ See Albert Memmi, *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, Howard Greenfeld trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); and Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Constance Farrington trans. (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971.)

inter-dependence of nations. And as in materials, so also in intellectual production ... The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.⁴¹

What I differentiate as “modern China” from its pre-modern days is inseparable from the introduction of the Western mode of industrial capitalism. I am not suggesting that China only developed into a capitalist society under colonial influence. In fact there have been debates on whether an early form of capitalism was already present in China in the 14th and the 15th Centuries. This is an argument generally held by Mainland economists. However, this is refuted in Yu Yingshi in his groundbreaking work *Zhongguo jinshi zhongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen* [*Religious Ethics and Merchant Mentality in China since the 15th century*]. Yu maintains that exchange and accumulation of wealth are common in all cultures. Such activities cannot serve as adequate evidence for the existence of capitalism. He attributes this commonly held view as conscientious adherence on the part of Mainland scholars to Mao Zedong's proposition that the commodity economy of Chinese feudal society would have gradually transformed into capitalism even without foreign

⁴¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Samuel Moore trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 83-84.

influence.⁴² To Yu, whether capitalism existed in China before the pre-modern period is 'the wrong question to ask'.⁴³ After all, capitalism *per se* as analysed by Marx was specific to the situations of Western Europe. What is important here is both Yu and his Mainland counterparts agree that it is during the colonial influence of the 19th century, with the influx of modern means of production, that *industrial* capitalism was introduced into China. This resulted in an overall transformation of daily life in China, and therefore represents the watershed between pre-modern and modern China.

Before the sudden introduction of industrial capitalism, the basic economic structure of China remained almost self-subsistent. Family members were engaged in farming and hand weaving to provide for the basic needs of food and clothing. There was trade for surplus products and luxury goods, but trade was more active for products which were impossible to be home produced, salt for example. Nevertheless it did not assume a determining position in the overall economy.

The critical change took place in the colonial period beginning from the second half of the 19th century. Although China as a whole was not occupied by any single coloniser, most of its territories were carved up into zones under the influence of the various imperialist countries. Their

⁴² Quoted in Yu Yingshi, "Xu" [Introduction], *Zhongguo jinshi zhongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen* [*Religious Ethics and Merchant Mentality in China since the 15th Century*], (Taipei: Lianjing Press, 1987), 57.

⁴³ Yu Yingshi, "Introduction", 59.

influence was so overwhelming that it was hardly possible for China to exercise its sovereignty in any real sense. Since the 1840 Opium War, Britain, followed shortly by other imperialist powers, was able to force trade on China. The import of cheap products generated by industrial mass production in these countries altered the market and production pattern of China. One of the first signs was the rapid increase in the import of British yarn and cloth.⁴⁴ Home-based hand weaving was forced out of the market. It broke up the traditional combination of household farming and hand weaving, which was the root of China's self-subsistent natural economy.

The introduction of new means of production in the form of machinery led to even more drastic change in the occupational and geographical distribution of the Chinese population. Heavy industries and other manufacturing industries were established. These were accompanied by the abolition of the institution of *co-hong*, an institution consisting of a number of companies designated by the Chinese government to deal with foreign trade, as imposed on China in the 1842 Sino-British Nanjing Treaties. The purpose of setting up this institution on the part of China was to regulate the not altogether desirable yet inevitable foreign trade. At its abolition, the format and scope of foreign trade gradually went out of China's control. In 1845, the first branch of a British bank was established in Hong Kong, followed by the second one in Shanghai in 1848.⁴⁵ Such an

⁴⁴ The transformation of China's economic structure under imperialist pressure has been heavily researched. One of the studies supported by a great deal of statistical data was Wang Xiangyin and Wu Taichang ed., *Zhongguo xiandai shangye shilun [A History of Commerce in Modern China]*, (Beijing: China Finance and Economy Press, 1999). Data on import of British yarn and cotton is quoted on p.4-6.

⁴⁵ Data quoted in Kong Jingwei, *Jianming zhongguo jingzhi shi [A brief history of the*

alien financial infrastructure was instituted specifically to facilitate foreign trade. The whole situation resulted in a higher degree of division of labour, and rapid urban expansion in some cities caused by an influx of the rural population into the urban areas to provide unskilled wage labour.

The application of modern means of production was received in China in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, capitalism produced the cheap commodities which were the 'heavy artillery with which it [the imperialist bourgeoisie] batters down all Chinese walls', as Marx accurately observed. On the other hand, confronted with the disintegration of the familiar self-subsistent life and the failure to survive with the existing means of production, the newly introduced modern ways were recognised as the only chance to combat foreign economic aggression and exploitation. Therefore, a series of systematic imitations of the West was introduced from the second half of the 19th century onwards. Firstly there was Westernisation in the industrial and military aspects, then in terms of a general social and political reform, and finally the climax of Western influence as expressed in the motto of "Westernisation on all fronts" of the 1919 May Fourth Movement.

The development from an agrarian economy into industrial capitalism in the West that took centuries to complete was compressed into decades in China. One of the results has been the uneven pace and extent of modernisation among different geographical areas. Since China's Western initiated modernisation aimed primarily at facilitating foreign trade (as

Chinese economy], (Jilin: Jilin University Press, 1986), 140.

purposed by the foreign powers) and coping with them (as a matter of urgency on the Chinese side), it is the handful of primate cities that underwent the intense experience of rapid modernisation. The majority of the rural areas were plunged into further poverty as they suffered the breakdown of their self-subsistence without the opportunities and means for the alternative modernised life-style.

Xiqu practice has been operating within the overall social process, interacting with and articulating all these changes through the transformation of its form. The changes in Chinese life brought about by the new capitalist and late capitalist social order have materialised into the actual prevailing conditions of *xiqu* productions. In this connection, the Frankfurt school critic Walter Benjamin has demonstrated that one good strategy to foreground the material dimension of artistic production is to offer analysis of the correlation of art and technological advancement. In his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”⁴⁶, he delineates the effects on the aesthetic domain brought about by changes in production forces, hence the production relation in a society. For Benjamin, the changes in technology around 1900 were the social cause for the change in the idea of beauty and the meaning of art in its time. In the first place, mass production and reproduction was made possible for the first time. The arrival of photography with its practice of negative development also makes the idea of the original and authenticity meaningless. This is characterised by ‘a decline of aura’ in works of art. He sees this as positive since art is more available to bigger masses. It

⁴⁶ Benjamin, 217-252.

frees art of its elitist existence. In this way, the function of art is more political, therefore critical, than ritual. The traditional 'cult value' of art should be replaced by an 'exhibition value' in contemporary art. Artistic creation should be designed for reproducibility. Formal qualities and production modes of art inevitably alter.

Benjamin's work terminated at his tragic death in the 1940s. He was not to see how mass art was later on recuperated by the commodity market and stripped of its progressive potential. But the correlation he draws between the changes in technology, hence material reality, and the social position of art is insightful. His stance on photography is a useful model for our analysis as an analogy. China in the 20th century, like the rest of the world, saw tremendous advancement in production technology. The shock was particularly acute in the beginning of the century when Western scientific knowledge was brought in. The new technology was concomitant with the whole capitalist social system with its industrialist and economic practices. These have drastically changed the production relations in the Chinese society. Indeed, it was at the turn of the 20th century when *xiqu* was performed for the first time in a proscenium arch theatre with all the features of a Western theatre institution. Around the same time, *xiqu* production in term of films started to be introduced. Both aroused the need for alterations in the form of *xiqu*. One must not lose sight of the material dimension of these practices, not only within the theatre industry, but also in daily life. After all, what is craftsmanship to *xiqu* critics is in fact the details of the performers' living reality. They lived years of daily training and immersion to yield the achievement that would

be applauded by the audience probably for no more than one minute. These instances of material actualisation of social transformation provide a solid anchor for the examination of *xiqu* as a part of the overall social process. Therefore, the modern theatre and the cinema, the two new containers of *xiqu*, will form the main body of analysis in this study. They will be dealt with separately in Part Two and Part Three respectively.

Towards a social theory of *xiqu*

To look at *xiqu* as social praxis, I expect to make it possible to articulate the operation of its form in relation to the social conscious and unconscious, not only as a passive recipient, but as a constitutive agent in the process of social formation. Once again, the analogy of language is useful. Like language, the theatrical language of *xiqu* is a social fact. It is the convergence of all social forces organised in a certain structure that gains material articulation, at the same time constitutive of the totality of society. Each utterance, or performance, works within the grammar system, yet constitutive to the future development of the grammar system and the relationship of the subject of utterance. It is important to bear this in mind, so that 'the living speech of human beings in their specific social relationships in the world' would not be 'theoretically reduced to instances and examples of a system which lay beyond them'.⁴⁷

I would also like to justify my singling out the two major transformation of *xiqu* in modern China, namely, *xiqu* played in modern theatres and *xiqu* films, as the main body of the present study. In this way I am able to emphasise changes since it enables me to present formal innovations and artistic achievements not as still shots, but as moving images. I will stress experiments as phenomena of pre-emergents, emergents and residuals. But I do not attempt to trace a comprehensive narrative of the history of *xiqu* in the 20th century. The objective of this study is to develop a social theory of *xiqu*. It seeks to arrive at a historic

⁴⁷ Williams, *Marxism*, 27.

perspective, not a historic narrative. My selection of these two significant moments of transformation aims to stress instability. The works chosen for demonstration represent phenomena which are a part, rather than the whole, of reality. Since my aim is to develop a vision on the process of transformation, I believe that my focus and choice of case studies are valid. Moreover, any discursive homogenisation of works in the same period would be a simplification. Any attempt at historicism based on a selection of works which is only a part of reality is suspicious in its motive. This study itself will constitute a part of material reality and it seeks to provide a vision of the complexity of *xiqu* as an element of social formation. The transformations of the convention is taken as the result of interactions with the social reality rather than a history of aesthetic progression. The latter is seen to be a simplification.

To develop a social theory of *xiqu* and of art does not necessarily repudiate the idea of aesthetics. On the contrary, it anchors the reflection of its aesthetic value to a concrete and tangible domain of material history. If one adheres to Foucault's discourse theory and accepts the post-Althusseurean position of interpellation of subjectivity, there will be no room for intrinsic aesthetic values and autonomous aesthetic experience at all. Yet this is not necessarily the position this study takes, nor is it within the scope of this study. To focus on the social aspect of the artistic experience in *xiqu* practice is not taking the debate away from the consideration of its formal quality. Rather, it sharpens the focus on the formative factors and significance of the form. After all, the essence of aesthetic experience has to be dealt with in a more philosophical

environment before it can be useful to theatre studies.

Indeed, any analysis of this kind cannot leave out concrete analysis of the performance actualities. One way to demonstrate the constitutive nature of *xiqu* as a cultural practice in China is to trace the mutual informing elements in the form of *xiqu* and in other respects of social domain in the Chinese society. Patrice Pavis has delineated the connection between performance behaviour and cultural attributes in an anthropological perspective. He identified performance as an organised behaviour. Based on Levis-Strauss' theory of the spontaneous nature, he exploits the antinomy and looks at the actor's stage behaviour that reveals the triumph of the cultural order over his body.⁴⁸ One obvious example in *xiqu* is the representation of femininity.⁴⁹ The subtle gesture and the subdued mannerism of the basic acting requirements for a *qingying* role (usually used for female characters of acceptable social, often also moral, positions) are in tune with the rhythm of the daily life of females in such situations. It also coincides with the social requirements of the behaviour of such females. On the other hand, the representation of such a "virtuous woman" helps to perpetuate the ideal female image. The actresses and actors' acting out on stage of such behaviour, together with the imitation

⁴⁸ Patrice Pavis, "Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?" in Patrice Pavis ed., *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Pavis' use of this theory aims at establishing a correlation between culture and the theatre as a theoretical basis toward a theory of interculturalism. Although I do not totally agree with his development of the theory of interculturalism that follows, I hold that his view on the correlation between culture and performance is valid and sound.

⁴⁹ According to Williams' model, the relationship between the performed and the reference should not be locked into the reflective idea of representation. Regarding the system of *hangdang*, while one talks about representation on the *xiqu* stage in terms of characterization, one must not lose sight that this kind of representation also informs the imagination of the ideal female among the Chinese communities.

on the audience part, form part of the material reality.

The same interaction is found between certain formal qualities of *xiqu* and other aspect of material reality. These include political practices, resources availability, technical innovations and many others. All these are arranged in a certain order and are experienced materially, forming the specific structure of feelings for individual pieces of *xiqu* performance. The significance of the idea of art being constitutive in nature lies in the material nature of art. The concept of structure of feelings emphasises experience as a continuous process. Williams has pointed out how one can deal with the bigger picture of history from the location of the theatre,

... we can look at dramatic methods with a clear technical definition, and yet know, in detail, that what is being defined is more than technique: is indeed the practical way of describing those changes in experience – the responses and their communication; the “subjects” and the “forms” – which make the drama in itself as a history important.⁵⁰

The above justification of pertaining to social theories is that examination on the society illuminates the formation of the form, if not the interaction. This is true but there is a further truth to it. As Williams, Benjamin, Adorno and many other great critics of art and culture in the past demonstrate, their concern for the arts is inspired by an ardent devotion to life, to humanity. The idea of structure of feelings allows bridging between art and society, between the individual experience and the collective. Theatrical activity itself bears no social or metaphysical

⁵⁰ Williams, *Drama*, 20.

significance. It is practiced as participation to life. If this relation is not taken into account, the greater significance beyond the textual would be lost.

It is also worth noting that my adoption of Williams' cultural Marxist position has nothing to do with China's affiliation with socialist movements in the whole of the 20th century, or its being at present a socialist country, at least in name. Marxism before it is a political doctrine, it is in the first place theories of social analysis. It is also in this sense that I find cultural Marxism most useful and of more universal application. Of course it bears an association to the larger political, indeed social ideal, carried in socialism in the broad sense. I find it acceptable and highly pertinent to my analysis.

CHAPTER THREE

Theatre Consciousness

This part of the thesis explores how in the metropolitan cities of modern China, the introduction of modern theatre architecture and the simultaneous transformation in the *xiqu* convention was part of the social process of modernisation. It attempts to read *xiqu* as a constitutive element in social formation during China's modernisation. The life in metropolitan cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and the then colonised territory of Hong Kong were the most representative of such transformation. Therefore, the present study will focus on the changes undergone in the *xiqu* convention in these cities. The architectural style, the spatial relation of the different parts inside the theatre and the building materials used are all the results of ideological and economic considerations. Yet, these considerations are not something extrinsic to architecture. It would be a simplification to say architects are merely accountants who passively conform to what is available to them to build what society wants. Architects are also members of the society and share the values and aspirations of their contemporaries, among whom are the users of the buildings including the players and audience. More important, these expectations of the theatre reflect what society thinks theatre is and what it is there to achieve. Aesthetic judgements on beauty, on the theatre and on architecture do not go beyond the ideology of the time. All these mingle together and constitute each other as in a mutually dependent network.

I will examine in this part of the thesis the theatrical experience in the new modern theatres as compared to that in old performance venues in terms of the reception consciousness. Needless to say, there is nothing to exclude the players and other individuals involved in the production side from sharing the features of such an experience. However, the functional status of the players requires of them a different type of concentration and focus of attention. Their point-of-view is adopted according to their individual function in the production. Anyone on the production side needs to take into account much more intense considerations of certain details than others. This is different from the more spontaneous, if not evenly distributed, pattern of attention focus on the reception side. The former is affected by another set of factors which includes, for example, the psychology of acting. This kind of consciousness in the theatre is particular rather than general. The focus of concentration for production personnel is tasked-based and specific and tends to be more on an individual basis. Since it is the purpose of this discussion to delineate a common theatre-going experience in the two types of theatres, I will focus on the reception rather than the production side.

Phenomenology has in recent decades been adopted in the examination of theatrical experience. The works by Bert O. States and Stanton B. Garner focus on human experience, in its totality, of viewing a performance.⁵¹ This theatrical experience is the result of intending, in the

⁵¹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckoning in Small Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985). Stanton B. Garner, Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

phenomenological sense,⁵² the stage content, both human and inanimate, both mobile and static. The set of a performance, its properties, the human bodies, the colours, the lighting effects, all spatial and temporal happenings occurring on stage are viewed as components of an experience that has an overall structure. This structure is experienced simultaneously in its totality and by its many fragments. Phenomenological theatre studies as demonstrated by States and Garner delimit the realm of theatre experience within the boundary of the stage. What happens on stage is arbitrated by directorial planning. It has not yet taken into account the elements outside the performance texts in the formation of an audience experience, including the location and layout of the performing venues, the configuration and atmosphere of the auditorium. It assumes all human sensations to operate in the same intensity, and with categorical concentration on stage occurrences, at all times. Even though under-developed in this aspect at the present, phenomenological theatre studies have made a significant contribution to our understanding of

⁵² In the simplest terms, to intend an object in the phenomenologic sense means to approach it with our senses. Edmund Husserl defined it in a very specific manner, "The terminology expression, deriving from Scholasticism, for designating the basic character of being as consciousness, as consciousness of something, is intentionality. In unreflective holding of some object or other in consciousness, we are turned or directed towards it: our 'intentio' goes out towards it. The phenomenological reversal of our gaze shows that this 'being directed' is really an immanent essential feature of the respective experiences involved; they are 'intentional' experiences." (Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology*, extracted in Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater ed., *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, (London and NY: Routledge, 1988), 16.) Other critics of phenomenology follow on to elaborate the concept. One very comprehensive explanation is given by Hammond, Howarth and Keat, "Experience as it were, always refers to something beyond itself, and therefore cannot be characterised independently of this. (Conversely, it is claimed, no straightforward sense can be given to an outer, external world of objects which are not the objects of such experiences.) One cannot, for example, characterise perceptual experience without describing what it is that is seen, touched, heard, and so on. This feature of conscious experience is called by phenomenologists its 'intentionality'; and what is that is experienced – such as the cocktail that Sartre perceived – is often termed the intentional object." (Michael Hammond, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat, *Understanding Phenomenology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991).

theatre. By taking into account the subjective process of intentionality, it has drawn one step closer to the heart of the aesthetic experience, continuing from the point where an almost mechanical semiological analysis leaves of theatre.

Closely related to phenomenological inquiry of human experience is the concept of consciousness. This is an apt complement to phenomenological theatre studies since it emphasises the pluralistic structure of human experience in the complicated scenario of multiple sensational stimulation. It takes into account, for example, the issues of concentration and distraction, of attention and suppression. Consciousness studies are particularly useful in this discussion since they do not only demonstrate how the audience sensations are stimulated in different directions from one performance to another, as phenomenological theatre analysis does. They can also reveal how human attention operates differently in one type of (theatrical) situation to another, as in different types of theatres.

John Searle defined consciousness as 'those subjective states of sentience or awareness' when one is awake. It is what Husserl called 'psychic life' in *Phenomenology*.⁵³ Searle went on to give it a physiological identity, 'above all, consciousness is a biological phenomenon'. The distinction between consciousness and other biological phenomena such as digestion is in the former being a subjective

⁵³ Husserl, 17.

experience.⁵⁴ Like all other studies of material experience and construction of subjectivity, consciousness studies have to confront the issue of the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. A scientific description of the transition from sensory data collected through the various parts of the body to a construction of subjective sentience is not available. The ever-lasting debate on the relationship between body and mind continues. As a basic premises, however, consciousness studies reject the body/mind dualism. The clarity of this basic premise is adequate in the context of my discussion. The concept of consciousness is applied in my analysis of theatre reception. I aim to demonstrate that different physical settings in the theatre set different boundaries within which audience consciousness is delimited. This discussion does not concern itself with the actual neurobiological complication of the formation and source of consciousness. That inquiry is more pertinent to the fields of philosophy, psychology and biological science.

Searle has made the distinction between consciousness and intellectual mental activities since ‘many states of consciousness have little or nothing to do with knowledge’, and ‘it is not generally the case that all conscious states are also self-conscious’.⁵⁵ His definition is typical of analytical philosophy in the way he clarifies not so much what consciousness is, but also what it isn’t. He foregrounds the differences between the concept of consciousness and other related entities. These distinctions map out a

⁵⁴ John Searle, “The Problem of Consciousness”, on-line article.

⁵⁵ Searle.

number of related concepts including consciousness, knowledge, self-awareness, intellectual mental activities and by extension many others. They all operate simultaneously like a cluster of experiential mental processes. The arena of these activities is individual subjectivity. For each of these entities to remain in its place as assigned in Searle's picture of mental activities, there is the need to assume an intangible unity and totality of subjectivity. He calls it a 'unified conscious experience', which is identical to what Kant calls 'the transcendental unity of apperception'. Searle qualifies this totality in two aspects,

First, at any given instant all of our experiences are unified into a single conscious field. Second, the organisation of our consciousness extends over more than simple instants.⁵⁶

The first proposition guarantees that all the mental processes, although they might not be working towards a singular comprehensive consciousness at any one time, do operate side by side with one another and contribute towards one unified subjectivity. The plurality of sentience does not necessarily lead to schizophrenia. The second proposition suggests that this unity, or the totality of experience, is a structure with a temporal dimension. By extension, one can also add that consciousness is made up with instances of heterogeneous intensity of attention on different intentional objects, to borrow the phenomenological term. To describe this heterogeneity, Searle formulated the concept of a 'field of consciousness' with a 'centre and periphery of consciousness'. The content of

⁵⁶ Searle.

consciousness is arranged in a hierarchical structure. What is at the centre of consciousness is paid maximum attention to. The things at the periphery of consciousness are the 'background' against which the focus of attention is perceived, or sensed.

It is so far established that there is a continuum of reduction in attention intensity from the centre to the periphery of consciousness. Experience tells us that we are more self-aware of our mental activity that we pay the most intense attention to in any single field of consciousness, that is, at any instance of consciousness. In Gilbert Ryle's description of consciousness, this self-awareness, or the state of the mind being self-conscious of its action, is referred to as the 'self-intimating' act of the mind⁵⁷. We can also easily tell from our own experience that the more self-aware the mental activity is, the more voluntary it is. The mental activity at the periphery of consciousness is less controlled, therefore less controllable, by will. Also, our focus of attention can shift within a split second with or without the sanction of the will. In other words, the arrangement of the various aspects of intentionality, to use the phenomenological term again, shifts to form self-subsistent instances of consciousness. This is the state of the mind that fascinated Modernist writers including James Joyce and Virginia Woolf who superbly articulated this phenomenon by the writing device of stream of consciousness in their novels. Therefore, consciousness can be described as the conglomeration of mental activities that incorporates numerous phenomena and mental activities of different intensity and shape. The content of consciousness

⁵⁷ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books, 1966), 152.

has no pattern and afford no predictability. Its engagement is sporadic, inconsistent and discrete.

I have used the word 'involuntary' to describe the inclusion of entities and shifting of focus in our consciousness. A Freudian approach will probably object to the word and fill in the theories on the operation of the conscious, subconscious and unconscious. Although I believe these are important and necessary investigations for the pursuit of understanding of the human mind, I will not dwell on it since the scope of my discussion here is concerned with applying consciousness studies to theatre studies, rather than a theoretical investigation of consciousness itself. I am dealing with the generally accepted idea of consciousness as Searle delineates it as *fait accompli*. The study of the source and formation of consciousness is not within the scope of the present discussion.

Walter Benjamin has also applied the idea of consciousness in his proposition of the idea of the 'optical conscious' in his essay "A Small History of Photography". I find it comparable to the present discussion for the reason that it is also an attempt to deal with the mental process of reception of art works. It is more so for the reason that both his analysis and mine are concerned with the change of reception of artwork in relation to the change in human consciousness as a result of modernisation. Structurally, Benjamin's idea of the optical unconscious is also built on the observation of the uneven structure of consciousness in the reception of a work of art, in his case, photography,

For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. Whereas it is a commonplace that, for example, we have some idea what is involved in the act of walking, if only in general terms, we have no idea at all what happens during the fraction of a second when a person steps out. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, with which technology and medicine are normally concerned – all this is in its origins more native to the camera than the atmospheric landscape or the soulful portrait. Yet at the same time photography reveals in this material the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things, meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between the technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable.⁵⁸

Benjamin distinguishes the indiscriminating eye of the camera⁵⁹ that takes in all elements and put them on the same visual horizon from the human eye that sees things in a hierarchy of different degrees of contemplation. The camera in all fairness captures all visible items within the visible with equal treatments while the eye concentrates on some focal point against a background made up of other items. The background is the part of the consciousness that the eye sees but does not register. This is the part that Benjamin calls the optical unconscious. The photograph reveals

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography", *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter trans. (London, NY: Verso, 1997), 243.

⁵⁹ Advanced camera techniques offer a more selective vision for the camera through the use of the various lenses and speed. It no doubt helps to create an image that resembles more closely the cameraman's vision of reality. Yet this does not eliminate the camera's potential in capturing what was present at the time of shooting but unnoticed by the cameraman. Benjamin's theory is concerned with the essential nature of photography's way of seeing. It is still valid in spite of all the advances of photographic technology.

the optical unconscious that the human eye did not take in at the scene. The point he underlines is the change in perception, or in the way of seeing, brought about by a change in technology. Photography offers a chance at posterity not only to consolidate the memory of experience, but also to experience the new perception offered by the photograph. He is concerned with the relationship between the material condition and the modes of experience. The general direction he drives at is certainly profound and insightful. There is yet a refinement to be made. Freud's studies have long familiarised us with the conscious, the subconscious and the unconscious. Benjamin equates what is not registered as being seen to what is not seen. However, whether one sees something or not cannot always be confirmed in a clear-cut manner. There is a difference about things being written on the periphery of consciousness from them not being written at all. Things that are taken in as a part of one's consciousness, although inattentively, play a part in constituting the moods and tones, if not knowledge, of the experience. I will even go so far as to say that *mémoire involontaire*, as depicted in Proust's works, precisely confronts the uneven formation of the various parts of consciousness. Therefore, experience conceptualised in its totality is not like a seamless one-cell egg with a smooth surface. On the contrary, it is more akin to a conglomeration of items with irregular shape and undulating surfaces.

Theatre going distinguishes itself from other experiences of the arts by the fact that the audience immerse themselves in the theatrical environment rather than approaching a work of art from an external position. A theatrical experience is physically all-engrossing. It is not only

an object for contemplation. More important, it is a situation the audience find themselves placed within. It is not merely a cerebral practice. Rather, the atmosphere and all the occurrences in the theatre are the whole of the material reality for the audience. Once the audience is engaged in a theatrical experience, their involvement consists of much more of a sensory response than it would with literature or visual arts. This is where a textual approach in drama studies falls short in dealing with the texture of a stage work.

The theatre being an aesthetic object of appreciation is also the material reality of its audience finding themselves immersed in it. The actual environment of the theatre is a result of the material advancement of the society, and also the physical embodiment of the institutional structure of the theatre industry. The physical shape of the theatre and the subjectivity of the audience are in a mutually constitutive relationship. One level of this *modus operandi* is the conditioning of the audience's consciousness in a given theatre environment. For example, in a classic 19th century European theatre, the physical setting of the theatre with its lengthy pathway from the lobby to the auditorium operates as a journey into another reality. It serves as a transition from daily life into another space. The seating in rows facing unidirectionally to the stage, the unfolding of the stage by the opening of curtains, the lighting design and the other methods of eliminating distraction further encourage a segregation of the theatre world from mundane realities. These devices also serve to enhance absorption into the scene on stage, hence manipulation of the audience, even before directorial planning can work to

communicate through to the audience. The physical configuration of the theatre can condition both the behavioural pattern and focus of attention of the audience. I will refer to this as the theatrical consciousness of the audience.

The second level of this *modus operandi* is the shaping of the theatre environment. Theatrical consciousness conditioned in accordance with a certain form requires the theatre to be built in a corresponding way. The theatrical habit often turns into a demand, or even pressure, on the architects. For example, an audience expecting a distraction-free viewing would be extremely annoyed if the auditorium were not built with good soundproofing design. The realisation of a realist drama production maximizes the effects of the proscenium arch stage with wings and borders to frame the illusory reality and make it convincing. It further reinforces the predominance of naturalism in mainstream theatres. Only with the requisite physical theatre environment can a certain theatrical consciousness be realised and nurtured.

These two elements of the *modus operandi* are intertwined into a continuous process. It is a case of chicken and egg and it is futile to attempt to decide which of the two is more powerful in determining the other. This is similar to the way Williams refutes the uni-directional idea of base determining superstructure as simplistic. It also needs to be borne in mind that this action does not exist in a vacuum. The way that people conceptualise the theatre building and their idea of theatre going are both part of the cultural life of the time. They are very much part of the ongoing

dialogue with the other trends of thought in the society in question. It is in this light that I will examine some changes in the physical and material set-up in the *xiqu* performance venues amidst China's urbanisation and modernisation.

***Jingju* as a product of metropolitanism**

The present study aims to be empirical. It can be valid as a model of socially critical theatre studies only when it deals with specific social reality rather than the idea of art and society in the abstract on the theoretical and discourse level. Since the social reality dealt with here is the rapid modernisation in metropolitan cities including Beijing and Shanghai, the *xiqu* practice put under examination should also be specified as the regional variation of the *xiqu* convention practiced in these cities, namely *jingju* (Beijing opera). This brings us to the concept that needs clarification before further analysis is possible. It is the idea of *difangxi*, literally regional variations of *xiqu*.

Xiqu is an umbrella name for a system of theatrical performance. Within this system, there are a great number of practices in the various geographical regions differing from one another in terms of their musical quality and degree of stylisation. Yet they all share the same fundamental theatrical conception.⁶⁰ It is generally believed that *xiqu* is a direct descendent of a mixture of folk story telling in the singing form, ritual and court dance, circus and acrobatic plays. All these were practiced in extensive geographical areas for either political or cultural reasons. The same elements of performance combined and interacted with the particular material conditions of the life of the various geographical regions, which resulted in the great heterogeneity of regional *xiqu*. They differ from one

⁶⁰ See Tao-ching Hsu, *The Conception of Chinese Theatre*. It presents the fundamentals of this theatrical system shared by almost all regional *xiqu* in an indiscriminative way.

another in a number of ways. A prominent difference is the pitch and style of the vocal quality. This is a direct result of the different musical qualities of the regional dialects including variations in intonation and points of vocal articulation. A related aspect is the selection and combination of musical instruments in the orchestra, which is influenced by the singing style, the regional folk musical instruments popular in those areas, and indeed the actual raw materials available for making musical instruments. The style and patterns of performers' physical movement is another major difference and equally affected by the various elements of life in those areas. For example, in Cantonese-speaking southern China, the subtropical climate forbids the use of heavy headdress. Performers enjoy more extensive and easy head movements. The result is a variety of regional *xiqu* displaying the ambience of their habitat. One apt comparison is probably regional cuisine that actualises the taste and flavour of those regions.

Evidence indicates that *xiqu* performances seen in various regions already showed formal differences as early as the Song Dynasty. In economically more developed areas with higher agricultural and handicraft productivity and trade such as Sichuan and Fujian, formal features of their local *xiqu* were more distinctive. I would suggest one important reason for this is that merchants, landowners and government officials were more willing to spend money on performances for private and communal entertainments. Performances were more frequent and players were better paid. It provided very good conditions for the art forms to stabilise and refine themselves into conventions.

Jingju distinguishes itself among its fellow regional counterparts by virtue of its technical sophistication. The technical requirements in *jingju* are extremely stabilised and systematised. A great deal of recording and research work on its patterns has been done by practitioners and scholars.⁶¹ In this way, it can be said to be representative of the artistic achievements of the *xiqu* theatrical system as a whole. In the 1920s, a group of intellectuals attempted to promote *jingju* as the national theatre form of China and therefore termed it the national drama.⁶² However, the above factors should not be magnified to justify a natural privileging of *jingju* over other regional *xiqu*. The artistic sophistication of *jingju* is in fact a result of its privileged economic and social condition of production. One danger of the magnification of the importance of *jingju* would be a blurring of artistic analysis with national sentiment. *Jingju* could easily be made to embody the politically symbolic importance of a historical and cultural idea of the capital, by extension the unified China. One could also lose sight of the fact that even the high artistic achievements of *jingju* are the result of its historic specificity. On the contrary, it is exactly this historic specificity of *jingju* that confers on it its significance in the development of modern *xiqu* practice. This will be delineated in detail in this Chapter.

⁶¹ The most authoritative works on the aesthetics and practices of *jingju* are the great body of writings by Qi Rushan, a man of letters working closely with Mei Lanfang in the 1920s and the 1930s.

⁶² Shanghai Book Store reprinted a series on the works of the May Fourth New Moon Poets. Among the series is *Guoju Yundong* [The National Opera Movement] originally edited by Yu Shangyuan in 1926 collecting a number of articles on *jingju*, advocated to be the national opera. These essays were written by the group of influential poets often referred to as the New Moon Poets.

The close relationship between professional *xiqu* and commerce goes back many centuries. Before the 11th century, it had already been common practice to have *xiqu* performance as collective entertainment among merchants, and also have it organised for clients and official connections. The intake players received from their merchant patrons represented a significant proportion of their income. It is not difficult to understand why more successful local merchants would give adequate financial support to the development of a more sophisticated regional convention. One example of this is *kunju*. *Kunju* is a regional *xiqu* which originated in 15th Century around the area of Kun Mountain in Jiangsu Province. Jiangsu and its neighbouring provinces specialised in the production of high quality silk from the 15th century onwards. Jade excavated in Kun Mountain was also renowned for its high quality. The wealth of Jiangsu merchants acted as very important financial support for the aesthetic achievements of *kunju*. Its mellow and refined music style and its neat and meticulous choreography were able to develop into a high degree of sophistication. Its popularity also spread as Jiangsu merchants brought *kunju* troupes to other provinces.⁶³

The promotion of regional *xiqu* in other provinces was brought about by two major processes. One way was being part of trade activities. Trade

⁶³ The Yuan Dynasty dramatist Zhong Sicheng (1275-1345) has completed a record of the lives and practices of 181 his contemporary *xiqu* practitioners. This book entitled *Lu gui bu* [*The Book of Ghosts*] throws lights upon the situation of *xiqu* practice in his time. Zhou Yude's *Zhongguo xiqu wenhua* [*Chinese Xiqu Culture*] (Beijing: China Friendship Publishing Co., 1996) includes a comprehensive section on the types and situations of Ming Dynasty *xiqu* practice.

unions of provincial merchants travelling to and staying in the major cities often paid performing troupes from their home provinces to travel to these cities and perform for their kinsmen. These performances served two purposes. The first was to consolidate their regional based community and to enhance trade protection and benefits within the community. The second purpose was to entertain their trade partners and government officials as a form of networking and facilitation for business. Therefore, big cities were the locations where regional forms encountered one other. The second way for regional forms to appear in other provinces was travelling with transferred officials. Since the 14th century, it was a common practice for government officials, like rich landowners, merchants and prominent members of the community, to keep *xiqu* players in their households for entertainment for family and guests. In cases of transfer to another province, the players traveled with the family of the officials and continued to play in their households. In time, their performances incorporated features of the regional *xiqu* of their new host province. At the same time they in turn exerted influence on the host form. This kind of interflow and fusion often resulted in interesting formal innovations. Also, the formation of *jingju* as a regional form was the result of such interflows.

In the second half of the 19th century, Beijing was the hub of urban activities of the country. Being the capital and the primate city, it was where Chinese merchants met and the location where foreign powers sought connection with the court. It was the city that first saw the negotiation of the different social forces on the way to modernisation. The *Qing* court was losing control of the way of life in the country. The

monolithic feudal model of the monarchy once adequate to rule over the relatively holistic pre-modern life supported by a natural economy became outdated. It was no longer compatible with the life of the urban wage labourers who see human capacity as increasingly diversified in a compartmentalised manner according to each of their function in the production line.⁶⁴ On the cultural front, the first encounter with modernity in Beijing caused the relatively simplistic monocentric top-down system to collapse. The first instance in the formation of *jingju*⁶⁵ was a direct result of urban concentration in and improved communication with the city of Beijing. This process will be delineated in the rest of this section.

Since the second half of the 16th century, the regional *xiqu guoyangqiang*⁶⁶ was gaining increasing popularity among the folks of Beijing. As Beijing grew in size and the trade became more diversified and frequent, the entertainment available in the city also grew in variety and sophistication. A number of regional *xiqu* troupes were brought in to

⁶⁴ The change in life involves a change in both material conditions and human subjectivity in relation to the former. A Marxist approach will be very useful in the analysis of these social relations. Such a study will be of a vast scope and belongs to the discipline of sociology. I do not intend to attempt it here but will examine in Chapter Four a number of phenomena relating to the correlation between the changes in material conditions and theatre consciousness in this period.

⁶⁵ The account I give of the formation and transformation of *jingju* in this chapter is historical. I do not deal with its artistic features in great detail in this context for two reasons. First, the main aim of this chapter is to give a macro view of the determining process between the art form and its society. The vastness of this task does not allow me to indulge in a description of the fascinating formal details. I would like to justify my choice by stating that my aim is to show the action in process of transformation, not the achievements. Second, the various regional forms concerned in the formation of *jingju* differ from one another mostly in terms of their music. It requires a highly expert study of the musical discipline to do justice to its complication. Therefore I have no intention of attempting it. In fact, a number of competent studies have been done on this. One very useful and authoritative reference is Yang Zhenqi, *Jingju yinyue zhizhi* [Knowledge on *Jingju* Music] (Beijing: China Drama Press, 1992).

⁶⁶ *Qiang* literally means style of music.

perform by trade guilds of provincial merchants residing and doing business in Beijing. Such diversity was however not encouraged by the ruling court, at least officially. The court still adhered to *kunju* as the official *xiqu*. It was referred to as *yabu*, the refined category, while all other regional forms were categorised as *huabu*, miscellaneous. Theoretically, *kunju* was encouraged to be played in court and among officials, but this rule was not always observed. One example was the Emperor Qianlong who conducted six visits to the South during his reign. In a number of provinces he was impressed by the regional *xiqu* performances organised by the local officials. On many occasions he brought regional players back to the capital city to play for him. The excitement of city life in the blooming capital of Beijing led to the demand for a more stimulating scenario of *xiqu* entertainment industry than the exclusive dominance of the refined *kunju*. The popularity of other regional forms was so overwhelming that some of them were soon accepted into the *yabu* and were performed frequently in court.⁶⁷

Jingju was basically the result of merging a number of regional forms played in Beijing. The first railway in China was built in 1876. Transportation and communication between the capital and other parts of China became if not easy, at least possible. The capital grew more accessible to the rest of the country and vice versa. More troupes found

⁶⁷ Again, numerous studies have done on the popularisation of regional forms in Beijing in this period. A concise and comprehensive account is Zhang Yanjin, *Zhongguo xiqu shi* [A History of Chinese Theatre] (Taipei: Wenjin Publishing Co., 1993), 314-320. The fact that it is the work of a Taiwan scholar enables a distance from the location of Beijing and manages to avoid a nationalistic overtone in the narration of the cultural development in the capital city.

themselves travelling from provinces to play in the capital. Apart from *kunju* and *guoyangqiang*, the merging also incorporated *qinqiang*, regional *xiqu* of the Qin region. It is also known as *bangzixi* as named according to the dominating use of the percussion *bangzi*; and *pihuangqiang*, the regional *xiqu* of Anhui Province in the south. *Qingqiang* was brought into Beijing by merchants of the Shaangxi Province at the latest in the 16th century.⁶⁸ On the other hand, *pihuangqiang* came into Beijing at a much later time. The first recorded *pihuangqiang* performance took place in 1790.⁶⁹ By the end of the 18th century, the trade guilds of Anhui merchants have become the most prestigious and powerful trade union in the country. On the occasion of the Emperor Qianlong's birthday, four *pihuangqiang* troupes from Anhui Province were employed to travel to Beijing to play in the grand celebration. There is no evidence available to show whether the initiative and sponsorship came from the court or the Anhui trade guilds. I contend that in either case, there existed a commercial agenda for the dominance of Anhui *xiqu* in such an important national event.⁷⁰

After the celebration, instead of returning to Anhui, many

⁶⁸ But *qinqiang* did not enjoy extensive popularity until the renowned *qinqiang* player Wei Changshen traveled to and performed in Beijing on three occasions between 1780 and 1800. Afterwards, it became one of the most popular regional *xiqu* played in the capital.

⁶⁹ It was a performance by the renowned *pihuang* player Gao Langting and his troupe Sanqingban. Yet it did not receive too much attention. Gao subsequently performed in Beijing twice. It was not until the third time that he was accepted and acclaimed by the Beijing audience.

⁷⁰ More details on the patronage of Anhui trade guilds for Anhui *xiqu* to be played in Beijing in that period can be found in Wang Xiaoyi, "Huiban yu huishang" [Anhui Troupes and Anhui Merchants], collected in Yan Changke and Huang Ke ed., *Huiban jinjing erbainian ji* [In Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of Anhui Troupes Coming into Beijing] (Beijing: Culture and Art Press, 1991), 53-69.

pihuangqiang players remained in Beijing. Some of them continued to perform *pihuangqiang* which became increasingly popular in the capital. Some others joined troupes of other regional forms including *kunju* and *guoyangqiang*. These troupes were therefore able to provide programmes consisting of more than one regional form. It was a mutually beneficial situation for both the troupes and the artists. The former enjoyed a higher competitive power with a wider and more diversified repertoire. This kind of arrangement was so extensively practiced that audiences came to expect a diverse repertoire. It became difficult for troupes performing only one single form to stay in business. On the part of the artists, employment opportunities were enhanced. Artistically, it was a most advantageous setting for exchange and osmosis between the regional forms to take place.

It was in the first half of the 19th century that *pihuangqiang* gradually replaced *guoyangqiang* and became the most popular regional *xiqu* performed in Beijing. But the influence of other regional *xiqu* was so deep-rooted that *pihuangqiang* at this time was very different from the prototype of the original *pihuangqiang* practiced in Anhui Province before it gained popularity in the capital. Around mid 19th century, a new generation of *pihuangqiang* players reached their prime. Although *pihuangqiang* remained at the heart of their music and performing convention, they were recognised and acclaimed by their audience for their successful merging of features of other regional *xiqu*. Since all these happened in Beijing and it was the urban concentration of the city that facilitated these merging and mutual influences, the new style was recognised as representative of the city of Beijing, thus referred to as

One example of the achievement of the new form of *jingju* is the work of Wang Yaoqing. Prompted by the increasing demand from the competitive market, he reformed the acting convention of the *dan* (female roles). The traditional sub-categorisation of *dan* roles was made according to the skills the players were trained in. Characterisation was formed to fit these sub-categories. *Qingyi* (female roles in blue dress) specialise in singing and are usually cast as aristocratic or virtuous ladies. Movement is not so important for a *qingyi*. *Daomadan* (female roles with sword and steed), on the contrary, specialise in movement and are usually cast in parts requiring highly acrobatic actions. *Huadan* (flowery female roles) are trained to make jokes and entertain with light-hearted mannerisms. They are usually cast as frivolous and flirty young girls. *Wudan* (martial art female roles) specialise in martial art and are often cast as female generals. This strict categorisation imposed limitations on the capacity of representation of types of female characters. By creating the new category *huasan* (female role in flowery dress), Wang Yaoqing incorporated the excellence in *qingyi* singing, *daomadan* movement and entertaining quality in *huadan*, so that the scope of representation of the female roles was enlarged and a more in-depth portrayal of a single female character was made possible.

But the more important reform was made by the *laosheng* (old male

⁷¹ A great number of works have been done on the formation of *jingju*. The details and theories put forward in these works on the whole agree with one another. A handy and often quoted reference is in Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama*, 157-183.

roles) player Tan Xinpei. The incorporation of other regional *xiqu* into *pihuangqiang* meant that a mixture of dialects was used in the texts. Tan settled this confusion by working out a phonetic system which he called *zhongzhouyun*, literally central China sounds. It is based on *putonghua* and the local dialect of Beijing, with the addition of certain phonemes existing in the dialects used in *pihuang*, *guoyangqiang*, *qinquang* and *kunju*. The vocal quality of the text has direct influence on the musical quality, and the musical quality is to a very large extent definitive of a regional *xiqu*. Therefore, Tan's contribution is central to the formation of *jingju* as a distinctive stable regional *xiqu*, and has shaped the direction of its subsequent development.

It was about the middle of the 19th century when *jingju* was recognised as a distinctive convention in its own right and was referred to by its present name to denote it as the local *xiqu* in the city of Beijing. Since this new *xiqu* was born and practiced first in Beijing, it was referred to as *jingju*, literally Beijing *xiqu*. Later on, especially after the War of the Boxer Uprising when north-south transportation was resumed, it was promoted in other urban cities and was especially popular in Shanghai, one of the earliest cities to witness modernisation since being opened up to foreign trade in 1843.

***Jingju* in teahouses and playhouses**

Jingju is a particularly interesting case in our study. Although it was the first regional *xiqu* form that was played in the modern theatre in the early 19th century, it originated in the indigenous performance venues of teahouses and playhouses.

Before the second half of the 19th century, the spatial relations between things and people inside performance venues remained the same although their architectural structure had become increasingly complicated. *Zhongguo Dabaike* [*The Chinese Great Encyclopedia*] concludes that the open and non-illusionistic stage was the basic configuration for eight hundred years until the arrival of modern theatres.⁷² Its prototype was *goulan*, literally demarcating fences, of the 11th century. A *goulan* is either an extensive area in the market square or a large building with a shell including not much more than a roof and four walls. There were clearly demarcated areas with fences to form designated performing areas for a variety of shows to take place simultaneously. Performances took place on a basically bare stage. Mobility of audience was maximal. The closest contemporary analogy is the haphazard reception mode of buskers' performance. In both cases, the performers played to a fleeting audience whose reception of the performance was sporadic and discrete. Seldom did they receive the whole performance. Their position of reception was unstable and their attention often wavered. It could be easily distracted by

⁷² *Zhongguo da baike: xiqu juan* [*The Chinese Great Encyclopedia: Xiqu*] (Beijing: The Chinese Great Encyclopaedia Press), 226. A detailed description of the changes of theatre architecture was given under the entry *xiqujuchang* [*xiqu theatre*].

the bustling surroundings and was almost certainly shared by other events taking place in the numerous adjacent performing areas. The content of such reception would have been a kaleidoscope of sensory and intellectual stimuli both within and outside the performance. Such reception was open and unpredictable. There was no possible boundary to delimit it. The performance text in its entirety as intended by the performers had little to do with the picture of reception in the audience's consciousness. For this reason, to control the audience's vision and perception would have been meaningless. The best one could do was to have the performing area always open on three sides to maximise exposure. Other performances on the street and in front of temples for ritualistic and community purposes adopted the same configuration. There was always a designated fenced area, or platform, to play in. Some of the structures were roofed, while others were open to the sky, but it did not alter the basic spatial relation between the playing and the viewing areas. The performing area was essentially open onto the street on three sides in order to play to non-committed spectators.⁷³

The architecture of *goulan* evolved along the path of improved solidity. However this kind of venue gradually lost its popularity from the 14th century onwards. Inns and teahouses offering better comfort became the new performance venues frequented by people from all walks of life. Not only were food and drinks served as performances took place, but feasts

⁷³ For more detailed description and pictorial reconstruction of *goulan* and teahouse discussed in later part of this section, see Gao Yihua, *Zhongguo xitai* [*The Chinese Drama Stage*] (Zhejiang: Zhejiang People's Press, 1996); and Liao Ben, *Zhongguo gudai juchang shi* [*A History of Ancient Chinese Theatre*] (Henan: Central China Classics Press, 1997).

were also available. Patrons went there not only for the performance, but also for social gatherings, business talks and other purposes. In function it was not unlike present-day golf course activities. By the 19th century, this kind of performance venues had almost completely replaced *goulan*. Inns and teahouses had become the standard performance venues while street and temple performances remained a feature of daily life in rural areas, as well as in cities featuring less famous troupes and players. However, from the 19th century onwards, no feasts were served in inns and teahouses during performance anymore. Only drinks and simple snacks were available. These venues were referred to as playhouses and teahouses. It was also the period when the conventions of *jingju* experienced the effects of formation and consolidation. Playhouses were therefore the main habitat of *jingju*. In 1816 there were 21 playhouses in the capital of Beijing. The number increased to 40 by the first decade of the following century.⁷⁴ By mid 19th century, many of these places were equipped with a fixed, purpose-built raised stage. The tradition of keeping a low fence or railing around the stage was retained for semiotic purposes and possibly also for security reasons. There were two pillars on the front corners of the stage which could block vision for some of the audience sitting at tables on the sides, the auditorium was much improved in terms of comfort and tables were put in rows with chairs on three sides. In some playhouses, rectangular tables were used with benches put on both sides perpendicular to the stage. Only tea, fruits, sweets and other snacks were served during the performance and at intermissions. Audience members were charged

⁷⁴ Figures provided in Wu Ganhao and Tan Zhixiang, *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiju wutai* [*The 20th Century Chinese Stage*] (Qingdao: Qingdao Press, 1992), 23.

according to the location of their seats. No additional charges were imposed for tea and snacks. The area in front of the stage enjoyed less privacy, and therefore cost less. Seats at the segregated area either on the side of the hall or in the upstairs galleries were more expensive. In this setting, privacy was privileged at the expense of better vision for the performance. Privileged seats were usually occupied by the rich and aristocratic who could afford to buy privacy as a symbol of social status. The programme was always billed beforehand. The audience entered and left at any time during the performance. Very often they only selected the pieces they wanted to see from the whole programme of the day, or evening, and turned up at the approximate time for those particular pieces. There were no strict house rules. The audience ate, drank, walked around and conversed at will. Although the architecture of playhouses and teahouses was much more advanced from the *goulan* days, conditions were improved for the reason of physical comfort of the audience, not for theatrical or dramatic reasons. There were no construction innovations for the sake of acoustics or vision. The whole place was generally lit up by lanterns in the evening, without any differentiation in brightness between the stage and the auditorium. It was in the 1880s that electric lighting was first used in some playhouses in Shanghai to offer more diverse and flexible lighting changes. Until then, the spatial relation between the players and the audience remained the same. The absence of other entertainment in the playhouse encouraged the focus on the *jingju* performance, but did not facilitate concentration of attention since other human senses were heavily engaged in other activities including eating, drinking, chatting and listening to other people talk. The reception of the

performance was still haphazard, sporadic, discrete and unstable on the whole and the audience's attention was still distracted.

***Yu Tong Chun* as written for the playhouse**

As was discussed in Chapter One, Raymond Williams sees the relation between art and society as a continuous process of mutual constitution. No instance of determination can be taken as ultimate. However, it is useful to focus on a moment in history like taking still photographs in order to examine the correlation of a certain cultural phenomenon and its context. This is the purpose of close textual analysis in this thesis. A piece of artwork is the instance where creativity reveals itself in its highest achievement under certain objective and subjective conditions. It embodies all the possibilities open to and impossibilities confronted by the creative exercise at that historical moment. The physical layout of the theatre building provides the parameters within which the creative exercise of theatre making is bounded. The architecture being the child of the ideological and material reality of its time means that the parameters it sets for theatre making are not purely physical. There is a full set of social implications present.

Yu Tang Chun is a traditional piece which is rather static but renowned for its musical achievement. It was written for and played in playhouses. It remains in the present repertoire commonly played by many companies but is not popular among younger audiences. One often finds amateur players who learn this piece as a singing piece, and those old connoisseurs among the audience who are very knowledgeable about *jingju* music, at performances of *Yu Tang Chun*.

The story of *Yu Tang Chun* was first told in the anthology of legends *Moral Stories for the World* [*Jing shi tong yan*]. It was adapted into *kunju* in the 16th century. But neither script nor score of this *kunju* version have survived today. A number of versions in the various regional *xiqu* were played in Beijing probably before the early 19th century. The *jingju* version we see today is known to be in the repertoire of the *dan* (female roles) reformer Wang Yaoqing from the late 19th century onwards, that is decades before the arrival of modern theatres. Wang taught his treatment of the piece to Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng, the four extremely popular *dan* players from the 1910s to the 1960s who almost dominated the scene completely. *Dan* acting hardly goes beyond the style of these four players right up to the present day. Therefore, the way we see the piece still adheres very much to Wang's treatment.

The story tells the tragic life of the prostitute Su San, renamed Yu Tang Chun, literally Spring in the Jade Chamber, by her lover Scholar Wang. Wang first came to the brothel with tremendous wealth and enjoyed all the luxury with Su that money could buy. Having spent all his money, he was thrown out by the pimp. Su vowed to stay faithful to him but was sold to be married as concubine to another man. Her husband's wife schemed to poison him and put the blame on Su. She was convicted by corrupt officials. It happened by chance that she managed to get a transfer to the capital city for appeal. There in court she was tried by three judges, and one of them turned out to be her lover Wang who had in the meantime been made high judge. At the end justice was done and the lovers were

reconciled.

The leading character is the prostitute Su San. There is little room in the story for martial arts or other action scenes. It is a piece dominated by the singing skills of *qingyi* (female roles in blue dress). Indeed the piece is so demanding on the player's singing technique that not much movement is required, nor is it possible to distract the player's attention from the singing. In times of extended arias, the character stays stationary and sings the whole aria without any blocking change at all. The music in the episodes *Qijie* [*Transfer under Guard*] and *Santang huishen* [*The Triumvirate of Judges*] is particularly accomplished. They were therefore the most frequently played episodes of the play in the days of Wang Yaoqing and subsequently Mei Lanfang, and remain so to this day. Indeed they were more commonly played as excerpted episodes to make up an evening's programme with other short episodes rather than as acts in the whole piece of *Yu Tang Chun*, since the continuity of the story of *Yu Tang Chun* is not as attractive as the display of the player's singing virtuosity.

Transfer under Guard describes Su San's journey to the capital city. There are only two players in the scene, Su San and the old guard who takes pity on her and treats her very well on the road. The scene is made up of arias of Su San telling her misfortune once again to the old guard as they proceed on their way. The stage is completely empty. Su San and the guard circle the stage to signify walking through towns and villages. Su is either wearing a pair of handcuffs which are so big that restrict movements

of her upper body, or chains restricting her hands. Therefore any drastic dramatic action involving body movements is impossible. The function of the old guard is providing short questions and exclamations as interpolated points to prompt Su San's arias. Her singing is the central attraction of the scene.

In comparison, *The Triumvirate of Judges* has a relatively more dramatic basic structure. It takes place at court when Su San and Scholar Wang recognise each other. Also present are the Judge Pan and Judge Liu. The lovers have to take care not to expose their relationship to them. Meanwhile, Su is made to recount her story, therefore speaking about their past with great embarrassment. Judge Pan and Judge Liu being much older and more experienced, are aware of the muted relationship. Like *Transfer under Guard*, this scene is also dominated by Su San's singing and the questions from the two judges serve the purpose of prompting her arias. However, the judges' deliberate questions and their knowingly teasing comments also interplay with the response of Scholar Wang. These interjections create comic relief that punctuates Su's emotive arias. There is not much stage business going on in what is basically a rather static scene. Apart from her entrance and exit, Su kneels with her back to the auditorium for the first 5 minutes, then turns around to face the audience for the rest of the approximately 40 minutes performance. This is all that is required in her blocking and movement. The three judges sit down stage at their desks for the best part of the episode with only one action of moving away from their seats each on one occasion. The major attraction is Su's singing.

The minimal movement setting is not unusual in pre-modern pieces. One significant factor was on-stage practicality. The playhouses were made of timber and therefore were of limited size. Some of the stages could be as small as 15 feet in both dimensions of width and depth. They could hardly accommodate large sets. The two characters moving around stage to signify progress with their journey in *Transfer under Guard* is enough to fill the stage. With four characters on stage in *The Triumvirate of Judges* and the desks the judges sit at, there is little space left for elaborate movement that would not over-crowd the stage.

In terms of dramatic structure, both *Transfer under Guard* and *The Triumvirate of Judges* are extremely slow moving. The arias simply retell Su's tragic story which the audience already know, either as enacted in preceding acts, or informed by previous viewing or other literary representations since it is a story widely known. There is no narrative significance in these scenes. Even the dramatic interplay between the three judges in *The Triumvirate of Judges* has nothing to do with the overall plot development. It is comic relief which is entirely contained in this single episode and can be enjoyed as instant entertainment in this act without any relevance to the main story line. It is there to enrich the episode as a self-contained scenario.

The singling out of the music and the singing technique in the appreciation of a piece is a feature in pre-modern *xiqu*. This however is hardly the case in subsequent pieces written for productions in the modern

theatre. The performance of a collection of episodes from different pieces to make up an evening's programme is a practice according to the same conception of theatre appreciation. As discussed earlier, reception in the playhouses belonged to a sporadic and fragmented type of theatre experience. There was no strict agenda on the audience's part to take in the whole performance as intended by the producer. The audience was not bothered about the sense of completeness of a play text. Most of the time, they were so familiar with the story that they were very happy to miss out on the narrationally necessary but technically less interesting parts. There can be two reasons for this as in the case of *Yu Tang Chun*. One is that many *xiqu* stories are taken from commonly-told and widely-known folk legends and myths. The other is that *xiqu* was the main source of civilian entertainment. The audience frequented the theatre so much that they already know the pieces fairly well. Often they took delight in both appreciating the accomplished and criticizing the less accomplished enactment of the pieces they knew very well.

Moreover, there was a tacit consent between both the production and the reception side that the four skills of singing, speech declamation, dramatic movements and martial arts did not have to gel together in all circumstances to boost the overall dramatic effect. On the one hand, it is perfectly acceptable for them to be enjoyed on the purely technical level. The dexterous performance of these skills did not have to be cumulative in effect to reach either dramatic or affective climax. On the other hand, the drama in traditional *xiqu* does not always lie in its intriguing stories. Very often, it is the characters' response to situation that is the focus of attention

and the dramatic highpoint. Well-executed singing, dancing, speech declaiming and acting techniques constitute the perfect carrier of the dramatic emotions. They can communicate even on a purely affective level without semantic and semiotic signification.

This reflected perfectly well the constraints of the basic stage of the playhouse. The small size and minimal facilities discouraged use of props and required the players to capture the audience's attention by simply projecting themselves in order to impress the audience with their accomplished skills. Second, the playhouse-goers came and went at any point of the performance that suited them. Also, their attention wandered in response to other business and distractions going on during the performance. It was crucially important to provide something ear-catching. It also had to be something they could easily pick up the thread of whenever their attention was back on the performance in between moments of wandering.

The conventions of reception and production always go hand in hand. The fact that the various elements of a piece can be isolated from the others for enjoyment is one side of the coin. The other side is the theatrical consciousness in the playhouses that was well adapted to cope with a number of unrelated activities and distractions. It is important to be borne in mind that no artistic convention exists in a vacuum. This example of traditional *xiqu* shows how a performance written to be performed in pre-modern playhouses was tailor-made for the theatrical consciousness that bears all the marks of the open and all-inclusive state of the mind of

the audience of the period. This kind of theatrical consciousness reveals the pre-modern human condition under which the human capacity was prepared to exercise itself in a non-fragmented form. Human consciousness was not trained to separate its various faculties as compartments to be exercised in the designated “relevant” situations as defined and categorised by the social order of industrial capitalism. Playhouse reception was a reflection of the life-style of a self-subsistent agricultural economy of pre-modern China. *Yu Tong Chun* was a remnant of this life-style. A comparison with the theatre consciousness in the following chapter will further illustrate this.

CHAPTER FOUR

Westernisation and *xiqu* reform

The adaptation of *jingju* into the architecture and institution of modern Western form was part of a process of Chinese modernisation modeled on the social system and ways of the West. Another example of Westernisation was the advocacy of science and democracy in the May Fourth Movement. The revision of the convention of *jingju* in the early period of modern China was hardly confined to a formal dimension. Indeed, there was a wholesale ideological change in the nature and function of the theatre in society. It resulted in the production of numerous politically progressive *jingju*, especially in modern theatre buildings, alongside many popular pieces aiming to provide commercial entertainment in both old-style playhouses and modern theatres. But when the progressive structure of feelings substantiating these works was frustrated by the failure of the 1911 Revolution in bringing about national rejuvenation, *jingju* set in modern theatres lapsed back into being a purely commercial entity. It provided entertainment with all the tricks and devices the modern theatre can provide; and the profession turned even more profit oriented in nature since business was increasingly dominated by the post-industrial capitalist forces in the new social order after the entrance of Western capitalism.

Modernisation of technology and trade in China was accompanied by ideological influence from the West. After the *Qing* Government adopted

Li Hong Zhang's policy of technological modernisation, young scholars were funded for overseas studies to learn Western science and technology. This received willing collaboration from the West. From the colonialist point of view, it was a necessary part of the project of colonisation to create a mentality among the colonised so that the colony would perpetuate itself in the way the coloniser wished. One of the important strategies of achieving this was to nurture a group of what Memmi called colonised gentlemen educated in the coloniser's way to be involved with the colonised government of the colony. This was a softer and slower yet more powerful means of colonisation for a more deep-rooted result. In 1909, the American Government started to fund Chinese students studying in the United States with the indemnity China was forced to pay her after the latter's defeat in the 1900 Boxer Rebellion against the Eight-power Allied Forces.⁷⁵ Britain, Japan and France very soon followed suit. Money was also put into building universities by the Americans to provide American education to serve the same end.

Modernisation in late 18th century China brought more than scientific and technological changes (as the *Qing* Government intended). Likewise, industrial capitalism (as the colonising countries attempted) was not the only aspect of a social system introduced into China. Liberalist ideas also made a deep impression on Chinese society and had a drastic impact on Chinese cultural and political life.

⁷⁵ The eight countries involved were Britain, the United States, Germany, France, tsarist Russia, Japan, Italy and Austria.

Mill's *On Liberty* first made Liberalism available to the Chinese reading public through a translation in 1898 by Yan Fu, one of China's earliest modern translators, after his study in England. A liberalist discourse in the Chinese language was opened up. No doubt there was already an intense desire for change in social and cultural structures including customs and criteria for accepted behaviour before Yan Fu's translation. The significance of his work was to articulate these sentiments in a vocabulary originating in and associated with Westernisation and therefore modernisation.⁷⁶ It gave a channel for the expression of discontent with the status quo, and for possible alternatives in the shape of Western liberalism. It advocated a way of life attempting to rectify the ills, yet living with rather than doing away with Western modern industrial capitalism. Western humanism in the tradition of Berkeley, Locke and Hume has gained great influence in Chinese society. Their emphasis on individual rights helped to challenge the existing religious and moralistic hegemony, and by implication and extension the monarchy. It is important to note that neither liberalism nor humanism was received in China in a vacuum. When a modern capitalist social order was replacing a pre-modern feudal one, social mobility changed and it was and had to be substantiated by a change of perception of the individual in relation to the society. In the Chinese feudal model, class and social status were defined by the person's relation to the monarchy, and his position in consolidating the monopoly of the monarchy and the aristocracy. This operated on a

⁷⁶ Modernisation in China was in the first place compelled by its dealings with the West and modeled on the West, and has been identified with Westernisation. This results in the construct of the unfortunate contrast of the image of the modern, advanced and implacable West, against the traditional, backward and defeated China.

hereditary basis since monarchy and aristocracy were basically perpetuated in the form of birthrights. However, in the new capitalist scenario, there was a relatively greater possibility of self-generating social mobility in the form of successful capital accumulation by individuals. The production potential of individuals usurped the place previously occupied by birth attributes in the definition of the individual's social status.

This individualism started to transform the nature of Chinese nationalism. The second half of the 19th century and the opening decade of the 20th century saw the emergence of ardent nationalism in China in response to continuous foreign imperialist aggression. The object of loyalty was no longer the monarch, but the idea of the Chinese nation. This nationalism was expressed in two directions. The direct response was promoting the national identity of China as an independent intact country. This could easily take the form of xenophobia which would be very understandable for a China under the yoke of foreign exploitation. What made things complicated, however, was that Western ways were at the same time recognised as the modern ways that could probably help to rejuvenate the country. Instead of outright xenophobia, there was a more complex and ambivalent emotion towards the West. Meanwhile, people's disappointment in the *Qing* court's inability to deal with the situation and the assertion of individual rights impacted upon each other. The combination of factors produced a revolutionary sentiment that aimed at overthrowing the *Qing* court and establishing a republic in accordance with the Western model, one that was considered a superior model. It was also believed to be more apt for dealing with China's predicament.

A great number of intellectuals sought to occupy themselves with political as well as cultural forums to advocate at first reform, and later revolution. Art, literature and other cultural activities served the function of ideological tools. The intention for revolution and the establishment of a republic did not simply entail a change in the power elite as it had occurred in the previous changing of dynasties. It was a change in the conception of government and state, and one that aspired to the Western idea of democracy for the people. It is for this reason that the idea of the masses was important for the pre-revolutionary intellectuals. It was for them philosophically essential to engage the masses in their totality, at least conceptually, in the political, cultural and ideological transformation towards a new modern China. *Xiqu* was spotted as a useful tool for the imagination and education/manipulation of the masses. It was in the *xiqu* performance venues where they could be found. It was the speeches and the arias that they listened to and found rapport in.

The majority of the population of China at the end of the 19th century was engaged in agricultural production in the pre-modern manual form. The majority of this agrarian population and the new urban manual labour force were illiterate. *Xiqu* occupied a special position in this context. It was the most popular form of entertainment in the country. It reached the heart of the illiterate population which was a no-go area for other literature and high arts. In Liang Qizhao's⁷⁷ famous article entitled "Lun xiaoshuo yu

⁷⁷ Liang Qizhao, 1873-1929. Liang was a prominent figure in the short-lived 1898 Constitutional Reform and Modernisation, and one of the most influential figures in

cunzhi di guanxi” [Popular Literature in Relation to the Masses] published in the first issue of the magazine *Xin Xiaoshuo* [New Novel] in 1902, his advocacy of the use of the vernacular novel and of *xiqu* to mobilise the masses gave unprecedented privilege to popular literature and theatre. He held that popular art and literature ‘wield incredible influence over the way of the world’ by exerting influence on people by four processes. First, they ‘influence people gradually and imperceptibly by what they constantly see and hear’. Second, they stay in the receptor’s minds until they have ‘become completely absorbed’. Third, they ‘provoke and shock’ by ‘taking over [the receptors’] body and mind in an instant’, and ‘develop unfamiliar feelings over which [the receptors] have no control’. Finally, they inspire their receptors to ‘identify with the central characters’ and be ‘lifted out of their own reality and become one of them’.⁷⁸

Liang’s article was radically influential at the time. In fact, as early as in the 15th century, the *xiqu* playwright and theorist Li Yu already declared that the most important thing in a *xiqu* text was simplicity of language since they were written for both ‘those who study books and those who don’t’. This observation of the heterogeneity and broadness of *xiqu* audienceship spanning the various social strata underlined Li’s requirements of *xiqu* script writing. In 1905, a newspaper article by Zhe Fu explicated the unique position of *xiqu* in reaching out to the masses in a

politics, culture and literature before and after the 1911 Revolution.

⁷⁸ Liang Qizhao, “Popular Literature in Relation to the Masses”, Faye Chunfang Fei trans., in Faye Chunfang Fei ed., *Chinese Theories of Theatre and Performance from Confucius to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 109-111.

context of widespread illiteracy,

... the [Chinese] language is difficult. Education is not well-developed. The underclass are mostly illiterate. One can hardly find one out of a thousand who manages to read the newspaper. Therefore, if one wants to create widespread influence and educate the masses, one has to turn to *xiqu* scripts.⁷⁹

Another important article was written by Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, in the penname of San Ai in 1904. The article was entitled “Lun *xiqu*” [On *Xiqu*] propagating a better use of the social function of *xiqu*. He maintained that since *xiqu* was what the masses were willing to see and listen to, therefore, ‘the theatre is a school and players are teachers for the masses’. Concerning the social status of *xiqu* players, he argued that one should be judged according to one’s moral life and behaviour, not on the basis of one’s profession. In this way, he encouraged *xiqu* players to produce plays to ‘educate’ the people instead of propagating superstitious or immoral ideas.⁸⁰

Public discussion of this kind successfully directed attention towards a socially and politically productive use of *xiqu*. There arose a self-aware endeavour to produce *xiqu* to express liberalist and nationalist views. This trend was celebrated as *xiqu* reform by both practitioners and intellectuals. *Jingju* occupied a central place in *xiqu* reform. One reason was that many

⁷⁹ Quoted in Wu and Tan, *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiqu wutai*, 28. My translation.

⁸⁰ San Ai, “Lun *xiqu*” [On *Xiqu*], *Suhuabao* [Popular magazine], 1904, no.11. Collected in A Ying ed., *Wanqing wenxue zongchao: xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiujuan* [Series on Late Qing Dynasty Literature: Novels and *Xiqu* Studies], Publishing details unspecified. My translation.

of the discussions about self-awareness in the elevation of *xiqu* as progressive art took place right in the heart of the modernised cities of Beijing and Shanghai. Both practitioners and audiences of *jingju* were dwellers in these modernised primate cities. They were those most sensitive to the prevailing ideological and cultural climate, be it the tide of liberalism, nationalism, patriotism or revolutionary sentiment. Their preoccupation with these issues prompted the demand for a *jingju* that was concerned with and shared this same mental state.

As regards script-writing, the *xiqu* researcher A Ying was able to collect information on about 150 scripts with social concerns.⁸¹ Many of them were written by literati in direct response to current political affairs. Famous examples are *The Story of an Opium Addict* by Gentlemen Lolo. It was about the 1840 Opium War and the damage smoking opium caused to people's lives. *The Experience of Being an Official* by Wang Xianqing was about patriotic sentiments. Since 1900, the number of scripts of reformed *xiqu* experienced a sharp increase as the revolutionary sentiments grew more urgent. The subject matter of the scripts also became increasingly pertinent to specific political or social events. Liang Qizhao's *The Dream of Ashes* was about the 1900 War against the Eight-Powers Allied Forces. Gentleman Nanquan's *The Spring for Overseas Chinese Labour* was about the treatment of the Chinese imported labour force in the United States. Foreign affairs also aroused the interest of writers. *Guillotine* was about the French Emperor Louis XVI. Another of Liang Qizhao's script entitled

⁸¹ A Ying, *Wanqing xiqu xiaoshuo mulu* [Catalogue on Late Qing Dynasty Xiqu and Novel]. Publishing details unspecified.

The Story of the New Rome was about the establishment of the Italian nation.

The majority of the writers of these reform scripts were highly educated intellectuals, or literati of the old school, who shared the patriotic vision in the social function of *jingju*. The language they used was often too difficult for the illiterate *xiqu*-going public. This is ironic since the basic objective of *xiqu* reform was to reach that same group of the masses. Moreover, the writers were seldom musically accomplished enough to take the musical practicalities into consideration in their writing. Nor were they adequately experienced in the actual stage production of *jingju*. The production values of these scripts were often low. Some of them were even impossible to produce. One obvious example was those with a Western story setting such as *Guillotine* and *The Story of the New Rome*. Not even basic stage logic including look and movement was taken into consideration. Therefore, many of these plays were never produced.

More successful practices of *xiqu* reform were conducted by a number of professional players. Unlike the intellectuals who were completely inexperienced in stage business, the professionals were able to adapt the new requirements of *xiqu* into workable ideas. Some of the experimentation with form to create a new expression satisfying the criteria of reform *jingju* successfully merged into the existing conventions. Some others did not integrate into the theatrical logic of *jingju*, and therefore did not establish themselves as assimilated elements in the convention.

In their book *Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Xiju Wutai* [20th Theatre Chinese Stage], Wu Ganhao and Tan Zhixiang have summarised the four major types of *jingju* in a modern setting. The most common one consisted of stories taken from current national affairs. Also popular were stories about events occurring in foreign countries played in Western costumes. A less common type was stories set in a modern period but played in late *Qing* period costumes which already resembled modern clothing. The last type was played in a mixture of ancient and modern costumes, sometimes even with a mythic look.⁸² Yet the first and the majority of these *jingju* in a modern setting were not produced in Beijing.

Xiqu reform took an interesting turn in Shanghai with the availability of modern theatre architecture. This external stimulus satisfied the internal need in the *xiqu* convention for new formal possibilities to express a contemporary structure of feelings. The concentration of foreign capital in Shanghai since it was opened up as an international trade port in 1843 and its relative isolation from the central *Qing* court as compared to Beijing combined to produce a very interesting scenario of rapid Westernisation. Shanghai soon became the city most receptive to foreign influence. By the beginning of the 20th century, western commodities, both commercial and cultural, were already rapidly becoming indispensable elements in the daily life in Shanghai. Meanwhile, the presence of the various imperialist powers in the city created a complicated situation. It was extremely important for the imperialist powers, and for the *Qing* court, to strike a

⁸² Wu Ganhao and Tan Zhixiang, 65.

balance between their respective shares of benefits and influence. It was a very delicate state of affairs to handle, it being much more difficult than elsewhere to apply high-handed political control on civilian activities. Moreover, the city's status as a port specialising in foreign trade prompted rapid and intense commercialisation. Market forces demanded a quick response to cultural trends. As a result, the first systematic attempt to pioneer production of *jingju* reform took place in Shanghai.

In 1904, the amateur-turned-professional player Wang Xiaonong produced the first *jingju* in a modern setting entitled *Gua zhong lantian* [*Melon Seeds Sown in Orchid Field*]. The plot concerned the war between Poland and Turkey. The theme was patriotism, a burning issue in China at the time. Dressing the players in modern costumes was a bold step to take because in *xiqu* acting, the traditional costumes and accessories in the fashion of stylised ancient clothing are seamlessly incorporated into the movements. For example, a general flicks the pair of long feathers on his helmet to express exploding anger. A maiden communicates her coyness by squeezing her handkerchief. These are central tools for characterisation and expression of emotions. A change in looks implies transformation in the players' movements and acting. The change in the costumes altered the geometry of the players' bodies, hence the rhythm in which they moved. The percussion session playing in tempo with their movements also had to be modified.⁸³ Doing away with costume with historical associations

⁸³ In *xiqu* acting, players time their movements with the music in the same way dancers time their movements with the score. The percussion session in a *xiqu* performance give the rhythm as the backbone of the whole performance.

without alternative artistic strategies to replace its function was inevitably detrimental to the artistic quality of the piece.⁸⁴ But it enlarged the scope of representation of *jingju* and enabled it to participate in political debate in the form of direct reflection.

The structure of scripts was also changed to convey the new patriotic message in the reformed *jingju* pieces. As a general rule, the distribution of sung and spoken parts in a given piece of *xiqu* is on the whole decided by the function of the lines. More lyrical and emotional passages are set to music to be sung while lines facilitating narrative flow are declaimed. Exceptions are when the functional lines need to be accented with a sense of rhythm to emphasise their urgency, or when they are recounting details already known to the audience. In such cases they are sung. The use of music and singing is to make those scenes more interesting and less repetitive. This is completely different in speech-dominated naturalistic drama. Theme speeches are always fluently delivered in the form of spoken soliloquies or dialogues. The realistic mode of speech often enjoys the advantage of communicating directly to the audience in a way they find easy to relate to. Some *jingju* in modern setting pieces also adopted this device. Speeches in the naturalistic mode were written into the script to be spoken, instead of declaimed in the usual musical and stylised modes. These speeches contained the core messages of the performance, which were often patriotic or revolutionary. This type of *jingju* was very popular

⁸⁴ This problem was better dealt with in the modern plays produced in the Cultural Revolution since an enormous pool of resources were made available to its research and experimentation under the guidelines of the Central Cultural Revolution Committee. This is discussed in greater details in Chapter 5.

in the 1900s particularly in Shanghai. It became so common that roles were revised to include new sub-categories of *hangdan* (types of role) such as *yanlun laosheng* (old male roles delivering speeches) and *yanlun xiaosheng* (young male roles delivering speeches). However, the non-stylised acting stood out as an alien part that did not merge into the overall stylised *xiqu* convention. This practice had faded out by the early 1910s.

Wang Xiaonong also joined forces with the revolutionist Chen Peiren to launch the first dedicated *xiqu* magazine, *Ershi shiji dawutai* [20th Century Grand Stage]. The magazine advocated *xiqu* reform as a way to propagate revolution. Its artistic and political credo was consistent, but it was soon banned by the authorities.

In 1908, another clique engaging in *jingju* reform was also formed in Shanghai. The *laosheng* (old male roles) player Pan Yueqiao, *wusheng* (martial male roles) player Xia Yuerun and his brother Xia Yueshan, with the support of the banker revolutionist Shen Manyun⁸⁵, succeeded in gathering capital to build the first dedicated modern theatre in the Western style for *jingju*, *Xin wutai*, The New Stage. It was intended as one of the new enterprising Chinese projects to challenge the domination of foreign capital ventures in Shanghai. The New Stage nurtured and expressed the spirit of modernisation infiltrating *xiqu* and other faculties of its contemporary Chinese life. In fact, many *jingju* professionals in Shanghai

⁸⁵ Shen Manyun at one time acted as executive member of the revolutionary body *Tongmenghui* established by Sun Yatsen.

were actively engaged in the revolutionary campaign against the *Qing* court and their *jingju* practices were underlined by revolutionary sentiments and functions. Many players were not only associated with revolutionary bodies and personnel, they participated in the actual revolutionary activities. Around the time of the 1911 Revolution, The New Stage was used as a venue for secret meetings chaired by Sun Yatsen himself. On these occasions, the Xia brothers acted as Sun's body guards. Pan Yueqiao fought in the forefront of the Shanghai battles in the Revolution. Their participation in the Revolution and in the *jingju* reform were derived from a common source of inspiration.

Although Beijing was facing the same process of modernisation as Shanghai, its status as the capital city gave it a different atmosphere. First, political control was tighter as it was where the monarchy was installed. Second, it had a longer history and a richer cultural heritage. The culture in Beijing placed more emphasis on the antiquity of Chinese civilisation and was less receptive to foreign influence as compared to other coastal or southern cities. Its *jingju* reform took a milder form. Apparent promotion of revolution and sweeping criticism of the political system as a whole was virtually impossible. The majority of the reform *jingju* pieces in Beijing concerned themselves with individual cases of social injustice. *Huixing nushi* [*Madam Huixing*] was probably one of the most political pieces. It was produced and played by the *dan* (female roles) player Tian Jiyun. It told the true story of Madam Huixing, the head-teacher of a girls' school in the city of Hangzhou. In her attempt to ensure the survival of the school, she was abused by corrupt officials and was eventually driven to suicide.

Tian's production served as a dedication to her and also a means to draw attention to such injustice. The income of 3600 taels of silver from the performance was donated to the development of the school in question in Hangzhou. But not even such a localised social comment could be tolerated in Beijing. Tian was convicted of insulting government officials and was jailed for three months.

Jingju reform was not only concerned with reforming the artistic convention of the form, it also took into consideration the way the *jingju* industry operated. The influence of liberalism and humanism on *jingju* was also expressed in the material conditions of its production. In Beijing, although it was impossible to make overt critical comment on the political situation or express revolutionary sentiments, a lot of effort was directed into reforming the industry itself. It included re-structuring of training organisations and troupes,⁸⁶ abolishing prostitution within the industry and the keeping of players as household entertainers, and lifting the ban on female players and spectators in accordance with the general trend of women's liberation.

⁸⁶ Change in *jingju* management is analysed in greater detail in the next section on "The new theatres in Shanghai" of this Chapter.

The new theatres in Shanghai

The first Western style theatre in China was built in 1874 in Shanghai by British expatriates for the use of their own amateur dramatic community. It had a proscenium arch stage and a three-tier auditorium. Its practice conformed to the convention of theatre-going in the Western tradition that we are familiar with today including house rules such as punctuality and designated seating. The expectations of audience concentration are completely different in this type of theatre from those of the traditional playhouse. The audience in this type of theatre are encouraged to focus their attention solely on the performance text. Distraction on other things is reduced to a minimum. This kind of setting enhances contact between the performance text and the receptors, and is more flattering to the performers. It also offers a bigger stage and more seats in the auditorium than the playhouses. Some *jingju* playhouses adopted certain similar structural devices in an attempt to boost the impact of the performance.

One of the modifications made was in the seating. The area right in front of the stage was priced in the modern setting as the most expensive part of the auditorium in many playhouses in Shanghai. It had previously been the cheap area catering to the general public instead of the aristocracy who occupied the more private and quieter areas on the outskirts of the seating areas. In many theatres in Shanghai, the direction of benches in front of the stage was moved from a perpendicular to a parallel position. The audience was orientated directly towards the stage to encourage

attention on the drama. Both these arrangements emphasised good vision on the performance as the most important aspect of theatre-going. Gas light lanterns were replaced by electric lighting. Footlights and face lights were widely employed, so that the actions on stage could be seen clearly. This had the effect of reducing the difficulty in viewing caused by distance. It manipulated perception and brought the drama and the players' performance closer to the audience. Meanwhile, the audience were still busily engaged with their other sensations stimulated by the scent of the tea, the taste of snacks, and the sound of the waiters and other spectators talking and moving around among the tables. But a re-focussing of attention had already taken place. The theatre consciousness of the audience was already being remapped.

The first Chinese theatre production in a Western theatre was put on in September 1907. The *wenmingxi* practitioner Wang Zhongshen put on a Chinese adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the dedicated British amateur dramatic theatre in Shanghai. *Wenmingxi*, literally civilised drama, was a term used to refer to the new dramatic form practiced in China in the mode of European Naturalism, as a differentiation from the traditional Chinese theatrical form of *xiqu*. In 1908, The New Stage, already introduced in the previous section of this Chapter, was the first modern theatre dedicated to *jingju* in Shanghai funded by Chinese capital as a venture to challenge the Western capital in the city. The new theatre was built of concrete rather than timber as traditional playhouses were. The traditional three-sided stage with two pillars at the two front corners gave way to a proscenium arch stage. However the one-sided front vision allowed by a proscenium

arch stage was supplemented by an apron jutting out in the middle. This constructed a more three-dimensional contact point between the acting area and the auditorium.⁸⁷ A revolving stage was installed. Japanese stage designers with experience of greater realism were employed to introduce elaborate stage designs. Seats were arranged in rows instead of around tables. The audience bought tickets with marked seating at the ticket desk. No tea or snack was served. Electric stage lighting was built in as part of the integral stage structure.⁸⁸

The New Stage operated on a basis similar to a repertoire theatre. It served as a performance venue but was also a company with regular artistic and administrative staff. The theatre specialised in *jingju* in modern setting with strong social and political overtones. Productions often performed there included the anti-opium piece *Heji yuanhun* [*Injustice upon the Black Ghost*] and *Huanhai chao* [*The Government Officials*]. The latter depicted the corrupt officials serving in the *Qing* court. *Bolan wangguo can* [*The Tragedy of the Subjugation of Poland*] and *Yuenan wangguo can* [*The Tragedy of the Subjugation of Vietnam*] were both allegories of the political danger China was facing.

The technical modernisation of The New Stage attracted a number of other playhouses in Shanghai to follow suit by renovating and decorating in accordance to this model. In other major cities, either new theatres of

⁸⁷ An analysis of this will be given in greater detail in the next section on “Incongruities in the transition to modernity” of this chapter.

⁸⁸ Liao Ben, 162-165.

this type were built, or playhouses were renovated to conform to a similar shape. However, the prevalence of conservative values and a cautious attitude due to acute political sensitivity in Beijing retarded this transformation of many performance venues in the capital city. For more than a decade, venues oscillated between the modern theatre mode and the setting of the traditional playhouse. It was not until in 1921 that a completely modernised theatre was finally built in Beijing. It operated as a theatre as well as a cinema. The same auditorium was used for film projection on certain evenings. The stage was a proscenium arch stage with front curtain, side curtains and backdrop. Lighting had to be completely artificial and totally controlled due to the need for complete darkness for screening of films. *Jingju* performances in it therefore also conformed to this totally artificial lighting. The floor of the auditorium tilted towards the front for optimal vision for all rows of seats. The audience bought tickets at the ticket booth and snacks at the snacks counter outside the auditorium. It was an entirely modernised theatre in the Western mode with all structural details harmonised accordingly.

The mode of reception in this kind of modernised theatre was diametrically different from that of the old playhouses. The removal of all other entertainment facilities and activities inside the auditorium demanded total concentration and attention from the spectators. It stripped the environment of all other sensational stimulation except that provided by the performance text. The whole performance piece was now presented as an entity isolated from any possible non-illusionistic interference. The bare sensual context the new theatre attempted to provide put the

performance out of any context. It stood as a self-subsistent text. The spectators were wrapped up in the world of the performance text.

The playhouse had been an environment in which the whole of the sensory map or consciousness of a spectator was fully engaged on many levels in a free and random fashion. The new theatre, however, conditioned the spectators to tune their audio-visual faculties to the exclusive wavelength of what is within the performance text. The employment of the selected sensation was more self-conscious and focused. This high degree of concentration was achieved at the expense of other sensations being suppressed. Thus the state of the spectator's consciousness was highly compartmentalised to receive the performance in isolation.

It is in this connection that Marx's shrewd analysis of the implications of division of labour on human nature is relevant to the present discussion. Instead of organising economic activities by and for each individual producing produce for his daily consumption in a self-subsistent mode, industrial capitalism maximises output by breaking down production procedures into small tasks, each performed by workers trained in and only in that particular task. The worker is familiar, and technically speaking, skilled, in that single operation in the whole production procedure, but is cut off from the bigger picture of the entire production process. His relation with the production process is merely that of wage labour. He sells his time and his labour as a commodity in the labour market, but is alienated from the final output of production, hence from the fruit of his

endeavour. Instead of exerting the whole of his human capacity in an integral way in producing and enjoying the produce he knows very well, he sells his labour as a commodity to produce things the totality of which he cannot grasp, and consumes commodities he buys from the market which he does not know. In this way, a wage labourer engages his human capacity in a compartmentalised way within the production procedure. There is the differentiation of work and play time. He sells his work time for its exchange value at a certain price (wage), so that he has money (consuming power) to spend after work. He can buy commodities and services produced by other workers who have sold their work time. This operates in a circle perpetuating itself.

Commercial theatre belongs to the realm of after-work playtime. It provides entertainment which is categorised as diametrically opposed to the idea of work in the world of industrial capitalism with its high degree of division of labour. It is believed that entertainment at leisure time is good for the next day's work since it provides relaxation and ultimately improves workers' productivity. Theatre activities are strictly contained within their completed form called performances, and the attendance, or consumption in other words, of these performances can be priced at a certain level. The modern theatre is a place at which a clear-cut boundary for after-work entertainment is created for pleasure to be bought and sold. The theatrical consciousness is arbitrated by this artificial environment. The audience are ushered into the auditorium, sitting in rows, exercising their designated audio-visual responses under conditioning. Connoisseurship is particularly important in this way since it conditions

the configuration of the audience's theatre consciousness. It trains a reception mode that looks for pleasure.

No doubt drama itself has always been potentially double-edged. It could simply provide entertainment for relaxation, so that the workers could be rested and perform well in their next day's work. Alternatively, the content of theatre could be progressive and critical. There is no lack of successful examples of these. Brecht has always been able to provide both instruction and entertainment in his works. However, one must acknowledge that in a capitalist society and with the theatre being one of the industries, it is much more difficult for the theatre to perform its critical function. The running of full-sized professional theatres and companies in a capitalist society is after all an industrial venture. It is never easy to bite the hand that feeds one. It would require a much more enlightened view on not only the arts, but also social criticism, as well as a supporting ideological and political infrastructure to allow the survival of a critical theatre. Such conditions were not present in Beijing and Shanghai in the early 20th century. Although *jingju* reform was socially engaged, it did not offer a critical perspective on the fundamental social structure, which was characterised by its transformation into industrial capitalism. Its critique was made on the feudal monarchy that was already out of date with the industrialised and capitalistic social structure. Those revolutionary pieces served as propaganda for the revolution in progress rather than critical analysis to guide and reflect on social changes. They did not offer any reflection of the new social order of industrial capitalism, which was in fact the concurrent reality that needed critical analysis.

Since *jingju* reform was very much a part of the social phenomenon leading up to the 1911 Revolution, its fate was inevitably tied with the fortune of the Revolution. Although it managed to get rid of the monarchy, the success of the Revolution was built on shaky ground. Many of the defecting military collaborators from the *Qing* court joined the revolution forces in order to advance self-interest rather than being motivated by democratic ideals. The prominent example was Yuan Shikai who became the President of the new Republic, and subsequently attempted to install himself as the new Emperor. Immediately after the Revolution, power was snatched by these military opportunists fighting against each other for greater benefits. The country was plunged into civil war between warlords. Many of the original revolutionists and those who had nurtured high hopes for the Revolution experienced frustration and disillusionment. Many of them were among the reform *jingju* practitioners. The progressive sentiments once substantiating the reform no longer existed. Formal innovations including modern setting and stage machinery to facilitate a more realistic portrayal of the contemporary social milieu were still there, but stripped of the revolutionary structure of feelings.

The greatest achievement of these reform *jingju* pieces was their reaction and interaction with the burning current issue of imperialism. It was an urgent and inevitable issue with which the audience, as members of the society in a collective form, could find rapport. The artists' honest concern with political issues was shared by many other people and formed a ready response in the minds of a huge number of audience members. Ironically the non-commercial intention was at the same time a favourable

commercial attraction. Interestingly, after the 1911 Revolution, the progressive patriotism in *jingju* subsided, but the popularity of *jingju* remained. This suggests that the connection of the two was accidental rather than essential. *Jingju* had after all to please the masses by showing them what they wanted to see. Commercial productions in expensive modern theatres meant that it had to please the masses and conform to prevailing ideologies. Especially in Shanghai, commercial interests immediately took over. The experimental theatrical devices were soon utilised as gimmicks in entertainment completely lacking in social concerns to cater for the commercial market.

As modernisation progressed in the *jingju* industry, compartmentalism of human consciousness in the theatre did not only take place in the *jingju* audience, it also happened to the theatre personnel as it did in all other industries brought about by an advanced division of labour in industrial capitalism. The early 20th century saw a structural change in the training institutes. The old method in traditional troupes was broad in terms of professional skills but narrow in other educational aspects. There was no structured syllabus. The young apprentices were required to perform basic technical training and learn pieces on a personal basis from masters. It amounted to learning by immersion and imitation. They were also required to perform other professionally related duties in the troupes and in teahouses. For example, some of them helped backstage on scenery and properties while others helped with front of house matters. They had a larger exposure to all aspects of *jingju* production. Although at some stage of their development, they had to specialise in a specific capacity, for

example, playing the *jinghu* in the orchestra or acting as *laosheng* (old male roles). But the less structured therefore more flexible early-stage training they received facilitated crossover in practice and provided more all-rounded professional knowledge. They lived with the troupes and shared chores. In many troupes, once children were admitted in for training, they were not allowed to make home visits for a number of years as specified in the contracts. Their experience with the troupes was not only a professional training, but also a way of life.

In 1918, Ouyang Yuqian⁸⁹ published an article entitled “My Views on Theatre Reform” in Japan advocating reform in *xiqu* training.⁹⁰ Although such advocacy of reform in training appeared as early as 1918, the first training institute similar to the structure of a modern school was not established until 1930.⁹¹ These new institutes adopted the structure of a school. The syllabus was divided into professional training and general education on culture. This conception of separate professional and life skills education was different from the integral model in the old training mode carried out in troupes. The professional capacity of trainers was more strictly categorised and the life style adhered to a general style of institutional life. In many of these schools, performance of tough chores by

⁸⁹ Ouyang was an active member of the *Chunliu she*, Spring Willow Society, that consisted of Chinese students producing modern drama in Japan in the first decade of the 20th Century. When he returned to Shanghai, he at first continued to promote *wenmingxi*, but later became a professional *jingju* player specialising in playing *dan* (female roles) with much artistic and commercial success.

⁹⁰ Quoted in *Sixty Years of Chinese Theatre*, 164.

⁹¹ The first *xiqu* training institute was *Zhongguo zhuan ye xiqu xunlian xuexiao* [China School of Professional *Xiqu* Training]. The dramatist Jiao Juyin was appointed the first principal.

trainees was banned. Their professional training was contained within learning sessions and designated practice hours. This school system attempted to offer a “normal” life for its trainees similar to that lived by other non-theatre people. This attempted to differentiate for them their “profession” and their “life”.

A higher degree of self-conscious professional training implies the development of more rigid classification of professional expertise. In the old troupe system, the members of the troupe had to take care of all aspects of productions, including tasks not requiring performance related knowledge such as hand-writing of programme bills in small troupes. Although there was a differentiation of workload according to seniority and popularity among players, the front and back stage tasks were generally shared among all personnel rather than assigned as specialised duties. All performance related tasks and work to sustain the troupe were treated as parts of an integral system. Troupe members had a more all-rounded involvement in the troupe. In the new theatre, division of labour was clear. Trained performers had nothing to do with front of house business. The persons at the ticket counter and snack kiosk, the usher and the calligrapher were trained to perform only one task in the theatre and had nothing to do with other aspects. The system functioned like a production line as typified by industrial capitalism. The involvement of the members in this system was limited. The outcome of their joint labour was alienated from them. Their relationship with the performance became much more distanced as compared to that in the old troupe system.

As for the audience, the *jingju*-going experience also became transformed from what it had been in the old-style playhouses. As they walked through from the entrance of the theatre to the auditorium, the patrons passed through a series of areas partitioned by their special functions. The spatial distribution of these functions corresponded to temporal compartments within which designated sensations of the theatregoers were conditioned to come into play. Their sensation of temperature was active at the lobby as the indoor microclimate was different from the open air in the street. Their taste and smell senses were activated at the snack kiosk. Their listening was partially activated as they approached the auditorium and overheard the tuning of musical instruments. But these were all inattentive reception and operated on the periphery of their consciousness since they knew those sounds and the other sensations did not constitute the central performance text and were not intended to receive any attention. Their listening, seeing and general decoding of signs were only active in a self-conscious way in the auditorium as familiar eyes and ears of this stylised form. The allowance of exercise of certain sensations in these segregated zones implies suppression of other sensations. Thus the theatrical consciousness in the reception of *jingju* in the new modern theatre can be seen as both an analogy and a metonym of compartmentalised human capacity as a result of the division of labour under industrial capitalism.

Incongruities in the transition to modernity

In *A Small History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin examined the changes in the conception of photography in relation to the advancement of photographic technology. For him, the reduction of exposure time on film was a major factor in deciding what photography captures of its objects. He singled out portraits taken in the early stage of photographic art as the ones with aura. This aura was the result of a positive expectation of the brave new world epitomised by people's excitement over the new technology of photography. This mentality combined with the long duration of exposure needed, resulting in a certain attentiveness on the part of the subjects of the portraits. At first these portraits were taken in quiet outdoor spots where uninterrupted focus was possible. Also, the venues were chosen to allow for the lengthy exposure time required by the slowness of the photographic plates of the time. Later on when indoor lighting was made easy and provided more flexible adjustment in terms of direction of light source and degree of brightness, portrait taking was moved into studios. Auxiliaries such as armrests to help long duration of posing were installed for the comfort of the portrait subjects. These auxiliaries became more elaborately decorative, at the same time they served a functional purpose for the need of long exposure in the very early period of photography. As photographic technology became more advanced and exposure time needed was much reduced, long duration of posing was unnecessary. At the same time, the aura of the modernity to come was dissipated when it really arrived and the result was not as glossy and romantic as had been anticipated. The dream-like quality inherent in

the waiting for the good to come was replaced by the speedy pace of modern life. The subjects' relation with the advanced technology of photography was altered. The reduced time for exposure made attentiveness in posing for the camera redundant. Photography no longer encapsulated their excitement over modernity. It simply represented just one of the speedy elements of modern life. However, the auxiliaries or props were still kept in the composition. They served as pure decoration and had become merely a part of the convention with no real purpose. They were remnants of the past. All they signified was photography's own history. This is a concrete example of the Raymond Williams model of remnants and emergents co-existing in the progression of material history.

The comparison between this phenomenon and the transition of *jingju* theatre from the traditional three-sided stage to the Western proscenium arch stage is useful. The similarity of the two cases is that the changes in the technical apparatuses were closely related to the changes in ideology, and also to what positions the arts occupied in contemporary quotidian lives. But there is one basic difference between the two cases. Benjamin was interested in the change in the conception of photographic art brought about by the immanent and continuous progression in photographic technology. As these elements were emerging and fading they went through a smooth process of continuum. With *jingju*, on the other hand, the introduction of modern theatre with a proscenium arch stage used for illusionistic representation functioned as an imported entity of foreign theatre. However much desired it was for *jingju* to conform to this new theatre signifying progression and modernisation, what in fact occurred

was a process of imposition of an alien form of containment onto a stable convention. Therefore, a number of features not native to the proscenium arch stage theatre, but closer to some structural characteristics of the old playhouses, were installed in the new theatres. This resulted in atypical modern theatres revealing the incongruities and negotiations between the two theatre conventions. These incongruities and negotiations are intrinsic to the process of influence and assimilation. But these incongruities cannot simply be explained by the model of evolution as it was in Benjamin's small history of the continuous development of photography. The auxiliaries Benjamin draws our attention to were very much dead components which served no operational function. On the other hand, what remained of the old playhouse in the modern theatres was retained as an integral part of the performance. These parts were very much alive and in operation in the performances. The most fundamental of these features was the stage apron protruding out in front of the proscenium arch. Although the proscenium arch frame was there, there were elements of the *jingju* convention that could not be effectively contained within the framework of illusory realism implied within the proscenium arch stage.

The proscenium arch theatre was the result of centuries of development of Western realism, not only in the theatre, but more generally in the idea of mimetic arts. Oscar Brockett has traced the evolution of theatre architecture in Europe.⁹² He has located the source of influence of the architecture of modern theatre in the works of Vitruvius

⁹² Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964).

and Filippo Brunelleschi. The former exerted his influence through his architectural treatise and the latter enabled the creation of visual illusion of dimension. At the beginning of the 15th century, Brunelleschi integrated previous knowledge on perspective and formalised it in a systematic way for its application to painting. It was soon applied to create visual illusion on a perspectival stage. Brockett gives a description of such a stage configuration recorded in Sebastiano Serlio's 1545 *Architettura*,

The stage floor is divided into two parts from front to back. The front is flat and is used for acting. The rear is sloped upward toward the back and is used principally for scenery. The floor is painted in squares, the lines of which diminish in size and converge toward the center of the back. The upward slope and the diminishing squares aid in the creation of perspective.

Houses constructed of canvas stretched over wooden frames are set up on both sides of the stage. The first two houses on either side are three-dimensional. Those farther back are painted on two-dimensional surfaces, and the stage is enclosed at the rear by a back cloth upon which is painted a perspectival scene. All of the scenery is constructed and painted to give the illusion of diminishing size and distance as it nears the back wall of the stage. To help in this illusion the tops of the flats are shaped to slope downward just as the floor slopes upward toward the back.⁹³

The first permanent proscenium arch stage was in the Teatro Farnese built in Parma in 1618. Brockett shrewdly dismisses the need to identify the origin of the proscenium arch but focuses the attention of analysis on its function,

⁹³ Brockett, 148.

Regardless of its origin, however, the proscenium arch serves two basic functions. First, if perspective is to be effective there must be some means of restricting the view of the audience ... The proscenium frames the picture and focuses audience attention upon it. Second, if scenery is to be shifted (and by the 17th century there was a growing demand for more spectacle), some framework to hide the machinery and the offstage space is desirable. The proscenium helps to maintain the magic of the theatre by concealing the mechanics by which that magic is created ... The new picture frame stage was unlike any which had preceded it, for it attempted to create the illusion of a single place in its entirety.⁹⁴

In order to facilitate this illusory way of seeing for the audience, stage machinery, lighting and other stage devices including trap doors became increasingly complicated and sophisticated. The elongated U-shaped auditorium consisting of boxes and rows of seats in the galleries also acquired its structure in the Italian Renaissance. This type of theatre became the prototype of European theatre in the centuries to come. Its potential for mimicking the appearance of life was fully exploited in 19th century Naturalism. It was a superb tool to recreate a slice of life to be put under 'scientific' scrutiny on stage according to the theory of Emile Zola and practices of Ibsen, Chekhov and other naturalists.

This tendency for mimetic realism was hardly shared by Chinese arts. One obvious example is that the idea of creating a three-dimensional perspective on a two dimensional canvas was never explored in Chinese painting. Naturalist realism was definitely outside of the vocabulary of

⁹⁴ Brockett, 149–150.

traditional Chinese theatre. Before the 20th century, *xiqu* was the only theatrical convention in China. Although there are scholars who endeavoured to prove the presence of Sanskrit theatre in China dating back to the 8th century⁹⁵, no adequate evidence has been found to verify any significant practice in central China, or consequential influence on Chinese theatre.⁹⁶ Naturalism was first to make an impact on Chinese theatre via Japan. In the second half of the 19th century, Western theatre became very influential in Japan. What was called the New Theatre was drama in the European convention through the medium of the Japanese language.⁹⁷ Under its influence, a group of Chinese students in Japan established their own amateur drama group *Chunliu she*, Spring Willow Society in 1906. In February 1907, they put on their first production, an adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux camélias* in Tokyo; and their second, an adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in July. The first drama society of the kind in China was established in Shanghai in 1906 when the Spring Willow Society member Wang Zhongsheng⁹⁸ returned from Japan in 1906. In 1908, he organised a tour to Beijing and

⁹⁵ Xu Dishan and Zheng Zhenduo were two prominent scholars attempting to find links between Sanskrit and Chinese theatres. See Xu Dishan, "Fanju tili ji qi zai hanju shang di diandian didi" [The Sanskrit Theatre Convention and a Few Points on its Relationship with the Chinese Theatre], *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* [Fictions Monthly], vol.17. (Beijing: publisher and year unspecified). Zheng Zhenduo, *Zhongguo wenxue shi* [A History of Chinese Literature] (1932, publisher unspecified).

⁹⁶ This theory of Sanskrit theatre on the Chinese theatre is generally rejected by most scholars. One example is Tao-ching Hsu, 370-372.

⁹⁷ For details see Wang Aihua, "Woguo wenming xinxi dui riben xiju di jiejian" [What our national wenmingxi has borrowed from Japanese theatre], *Wenxue pinglun* [Literary Criticism], 1994, no.4, 126-127, (Beijing: Wenxue pinglun chubanshe).

⁹⁸ Wang Zhongsheng became heavily involved with the 1911 Revolution. He acted as Chief of Staff in the revolutionary army. He was arrested for execution by the *Qing* court in 1911 in the Tianjin battle.

Tianjin. Later on in the same decade, more members of Spring Willow Society returned to China. They reorganised the Society and carried out their activities in major Chinese cities. Under the strong influence of Ibsen and other socially committed naturalistic dramatists, the Chinese dramatists also produced works with liberalist and nationalistic concerns, expressing the revolutionary structure of feelings prevailing before the 1911 Revolution.

In order to differentiate this new dramatic form to Chinese theatregoers from *xiqu*, it was commonly referred to as *wenmingxi*.⁹⁹ It confronted *xiqu* with a convention operating according to a wholly different set of theatrical concepts and logic. The direct reference to real life in Naturalist realism prompts quick comprehension and response from the audience. This simple process of referentiality worked particularly well in social and political drama since it enabled direct social reflection in the theatre.

Xiqu, on the other hand, works in a less direct way. Its referentiality is less straightforward. First, *xiqu* pieces are usually set in ancient China. Its relevance to its contemporary life is either through enactment of universally accepted values such as piety and benevolence, or by

⁹⁹ Like *xiqu* reform, the rise of *wenmingxi* was closely associated with the 1911 Revolution. The post-revolution disillusionment was experienced in *wenmingxi* as in *xiqu* reform. The quality of *wenmingxi* pieces deteriorated greatly after 1911. The Spring Willow Society disintegrated in 1916. It wasn't until 1919 during the May Fourth Movement when another group of May Fourth writers started to write and produce drama in the naturalistic convention that works of high quality appeared again. In order to differentiate their own works from the degraded *wenmingxi*, the May Fourth group gave them the new generic term *huaju*, meaning speech drama, also to distinguish it from sung *xiqu*. Interestingly, the term *huaju* is in use in the present, not only to differentiate itself from *xiqu*, but also from other types of theatre including performance arts that are not text-based.

insinuation of reference to current affairs by telling ancient stories. Its stylised representation, in terms of both stage design and acting, requires decoding before recognition. This process of decoding is aesthetic as well as cognitive. The message is mediated by a set of experiential and phenomenological performance elements. For an era that eagerly urged drastic social action, it was difficult to have the patience to be content with the more oblique and stylised conventions of *xiqu*. Therefore, in order to catch up with this cultural demand, many naturalist devices were adopted in *xiqu*, mostly in *jingju* productions. They included elaborate sets and modern settings with modern costumes. A proscenium arch stage in the modern theatre buildings offered a bigger acting area than that available in teahouses or other traditional venues. The spatial hindrance in the use of properties was eliminated. The availability of stage machinery was able to facilitate quick changes of sets. Slides of landscapes and even films of scenery were widely employed in place of the traditional embroidered and patterned backdrops without concrete reference. All these changes accumulated into a form of realism that *jingju*, and indeed *xiqu*, had never attempted before.

However, all these innovations hardly flattered the players' accomplishment in the four fundamental skills of singing, speech declamation, movements and acrobatics. The high degree of stylisation in these skills is not compatible with life-like illusion. Moreover, the consistency in attention span required for believing in theatre illusion contrasted strongly with the sporadic and fragmented reception in traditional playhouse performance. This latter kind of reception does not

depend on the integration of the various elements within the drama inside the proscenium. On the contrary, maximum physical exposure of the player to the audience enhances projection. A proscenium arch stage that contains everything within the interior of the stage box does not provide the best physical environment. In addition, unlike naturalistic dramatic acting which assumes the imaginary fourth wall, *xiqu* scripts are written with soliloquies, interjections and arias addressed directly to the audience. The containment of all dramatic action inside a proscenium arch stage does not support this kind of direct dramatic interaction. The new desire for a higher degree of realism in the modern European mode was there, yet the *jingju* convention in its many facets could not be contained in the same illusionistic vehicle. The incongruous appendages, such as the non-illusionistic communication with the audience and the dominance of technical skills, had to be accommodated in the apron that figuratively jutted out in front of the proscenium arch. Whatever the illusionistic proscenium framework could not contain had to be performed on the apron.

The proscenium is the central feature of illusory realism. The whole technical apparatus of the theatre is geared towards the idea of theatre illusion. Laura Mulvey has singled out the contrast in brightness between the stage and auditorium as an important condition under which a certain spectacle relationship between the subjects seeing and the objects seen was established. In her influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", she examines this relationship in the context of film viewing, but I find her model also apt for describing viewing in the theatre since the

contrast in lighting between the seeing and the seen also applies in the modern illusionistic theatre.

Mulvey describes cinema viewing as a fundamentally voyeuristic relationship:

What is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown. But the mass of mainstream film, and the conventions within which it has consciously evolved, portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover, the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative convention give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world.¹⁰⁰

This observation on the relationship between the stage and the auditorium is also applicable to the proscenium arch fourth wall theatre. In the naturalistic convention, the actors are presumed to be acting “naturally” as if the audience is not present. The dark auditorium often adopted in modern theatre promotes audience concentration on the stage and reduces distraction, but also establishes a voyeuristic relationship. For the sake of my argument here, the psychoanalytic undertone of Mulvey’s observation can be left aside. It can be assessed on a purely technical level. The voyeuristic setting is essential in maintaining the logic of naturalistic

¹⁰⁰ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1989), 17.

acting. The actors are not supposed to be putting on an act, but are acting “naturally” as in everyday life so as to represent life in reality.

Although *jingju* in the modern new theatres aspired to approximate more closely to life, the high degree of stylisation and dominance of technical appreciation in theatrical convention itself resists the mimicking of life in a naturalistic manner. Therefore, the voyeuristic relationship so logical to the naturalistic theatre is not a necessary part of the *jingju* theatre, despite its ready utilisation of modern stage machinery. Moreover, the audience being so familiar with the pieces were not bothered about seeing the entire performance and had kept to the habit of coming and going at will between episodes. The theatre could hardly attempt to change this habit because too strict control in such matters could turn away audiences. There was therefore a practical reason to leave some lights on auditorium traffic without too frequent lighting changes at intervals. This is a convention that is still practiced in *xiqu* performance nowadays. In my experience, auditorium lighting is seldom turned down to less than 40% of full brightness. All these factors contributed to a unique performing environment for *xiqu*, resulting from the interaction between the realist drama and the *xiqu* traditions.

Mei Lanfang's exploration of the possibilities in the modern theatre

The modern theatre had the capacity to accommodate, therefore at the same time demanded, a *jingju* that was conceived differently from the practice of its playhouse tenants. One seduction was the availability of modern stage machinery that could create dramatic effects that had not been possible before. Another reason for change was the sheer size of the stage and the auditorium. The increased size of the theatre allowed a different spatial relation between the stage and the auditorium. Many attempts were made in *jingju* to adapt to the modern theatres. Among the numerous pioneers who sought to stage *jingju* in modern theatres, Mei Lanfang stood out as the most notable. He managed to envisage how the modern stage could enhance what was already inherent in *jingju* acting instead of replacing it. Nevertheless it did not prove easy. His numerous works created in the 1910s and the 1920s were the most representative of the progression he made in his artistic exploration in the modern theatre. His works in this period show a progression in his knowledge about the possibilities facilitated by the modern theatre. His experimentation became bolder, more sophisticated, and was indeed more successful.

In his autobiography *Forty Years' Life on Stage*, Mei Lanfang recounts in detail his work in the theatre from the 1910s onwards. The focus of his works from the middle of the 1910s onwards is on the numerous innovations he attempted. According to him, there was a deliberate attempt to extend his repertoire in two directions, one in writing new plays, the other including more *kunju* pieces. The desire to put on more *kunju*

performances came out of his admiration for the regional form, which he therefore wanted to promote. The reason for writing new pieces arose from his observation of the changes in audience expectations. In fact he had been shrewd in detecting changing demands from the audience and in meeting them even in the early period of his career. But that is not to say that the traditional *kunju* and his new plays necessarily went in two opposite directions. As a matter of fact, the more complicated co-ordination of singing, dancing and dramatic expression of *kunju* was very apt for the post-May Fourth audience who now demanded a more integrated dramatic form than the old-fashioned singing-dominated *jingju* popular in the 19th century. Mei made the following observation:

Before I was aged 18 [1891], I mainly performed pieces lead by *qingyi* (female roles in blue dress specialising in singing skills).¹⁰¹

After the 1911 Revolution for the first time I felt that this type of plays focusing on the singing of *qingyi* could no longer satisfy the audience. Therefore I also learned a few pieces that require a lot of body movements, facial expressions and martial arts ... in order to extend my repertoire.¹⁰²

Mei Lanfang's new plays at the end of the 1910s and beginning of the 1920s fell into two categories. One was *jingju* in modern settings and played in modern costumes. They have to be read within the scope of *jingju* reform.¹⁰³ At first, he included a couple of *jingju* in modern settings

¹⁰¹ Quoted in China Arts Research Institute Xiqu School ed., *Mei Lanfang* (Beijing: Book Catalogue and Historical Document Press, 1985), 29. My translation.

¹⁰² Quoted in *Mei Lanfang*, 34. My translation.

¹⁰³ Discussed in the first section of this Chapter on "Westernisation and *xiqu* reform".

and modern costumes also played by other players in his repertoire. Then he started to have a number of new modern *jingju* pieces written for his own performance. But these works were not of high accomplishment although they represented an interesting and worthwhile attempt. He stopped playing them altogether after a few years. The second category was of new plays written from historical stories or legends set in ancient times. They were referred to by the audience, the press and also by himself as “*guzhuang xinxi*”, [new plays in ancient costume]. These were the more successful of the two categories. Indeed it was this group of works that pushed his popularity to its peak.

The first of this group of works was written in 1915. It was written and directed as a group effort by his circle of close friends and advisors who were either literati of the old school or intellectuals returned from overseas studies. By the early 1920s, they had produced eleven plays of this type. The most obvious and very possibly the first feature noted by his audience of these plays is their look. All the hair and costumes of the leading *dan* (female roles) of these eleven plays, naturally played by Mei, were adapted from ancient paintings and sculptures. The gear worn by Mei in these pieces deviated from what was conventional for the day. This was a bold step to take since there are rules on stage gear. They are rigidly fixed for each character type to follow. Plays newly written also conform to these rules. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this Chapter, since all the elements in the gear such as the shape and length of the sleeves constitute acting aids, any changes in the costumes necessarily corresponded to flexible treatment in the acting. Hence the seemingly superficial issue of

appearance touched the very fundamentals of the acting convention.

Innovations in many different aspects are abundant in these eleven pieces. On the whole, Mei was looking for a more spectacular *jingju* that could fill the bigger stage of the modern theatre that was just reaching China at exactly this period. The changed spatial relationships in the theatre required a different conception of the theatricality of his *jingju*. It is in this light I am reading the group of Mei's works commonly referred to as "new plays in ancient costumes". The main concern of this discussion is the innovations in their staging, as the theatre transformed itself with its architecture. My suggestion is that these plays were written with the configuration being borne in mind of the theatres in which they were going to be produced. In fact, when Mei talked about the creation of these plays, he paid special attention to describing the details of the inside of the theatres. In this section, two of the eleven plays are discussed in detail to illustrate how they were written and staged to conform to the parameters set by physical conditions of the theatre.

Tiannu sanhua [*A Fairy Scatters Flowers*] was premiered on 1st December 1917 at Jixiang Playhouse in Beijing. It was the third of the eleven plays and took eight months of preparation. The plot is thin and there is no significant narrative: the Buddha learns about the illness of Monk Weimo and sends the Fairy to scatter flowers in his residence. There are altogether four short scenes. The story line about the Buddha and the Monk fulfils the functional purpose of providing a background for the dance. The division of scenes serves as breaks for the Fairy to go off stage

for the change of costumes. The most important scenes are *Yunlu* [*The Cloud Road*] and *Sanhua* [*Scattering Flowers*]. They are basically solo dances by the Fairy. In *Scattering Flowers*, there is a flower maid holding a basket of flowers for the Fairy, but performing no significant narrative nor any aesthetic function.

Jixiang Playhouse was one of the old style playhouses for *jingju* production. Both its architectural and institutional structures are representative of the old system. Mei gave a very detailed description of Jixiang Playhouse when he was talking about the preparation of *A Fairy Scatters Flowers*. Since I aim to illustrate that the conception of the piece was tailored for the configuration of the venue, I will quote his description of the theatre in detail:

There were three playhouses in Dong'an market. They were Dangui Playhouse, China Playhouse and Jixiang Playhouse. There were three major fire incidents in Dong'an market before 1921. The first two theatres were destroyed. Jixiang Playhouse was lucky enough not only to survive, but thrive ...

... This place [Jixiang Playhouse] was built at a later time among the old style playhouses. Therefore everything operated in the old way, except that there were no pillars at the front corners of the stage. There was no blocking of the sightlines.

All the old-style playhouses shared a very similar scale. They were usually constituted of a shed-like structure with a canopy. The whole thing was either a square or a rectangle. Towers with balconies were built on the three sides. Boxes, tables and seats were installed on the balconies. To take Jixiang Playhouse for example, the towers on the two sides were separated into a few boxes. Each box was separated

from the next by panels. It looked like a big house, except that the front was open. In front of the boxes there was a passageway running all the way like a corridor. But it wasn't there for the audience to walk through. It was there so that tea and fruits skins couldn't be thrown down from the balconies to cause trouble down in the courtyard ...

The inner side of the passageway was the fence. It was installed with a piece of board on its top like a table for the audience to rest their tea and snacks on. Inside the fence were desks and stools, able to accommodate a few dozen people. Most of the audience who enjoyed traditional pieces preferred boxes on the south tower. They were the best seats in terms of vision and distance. The north tower and front tower were not as good. There were also seats on both sides of the stage. The seats were almost behind the acting area, closest to the stage but only with a view of the back of the performers. Yet the audience who concentrated on the singing loved these seats ... There were three tiers in the front tower [in Jixiang Playhouse] ...

Old style playhouses normally had canopies. There was a courtyard [in the middle] for gathering the sounds ... All the acting in traditional *xiqu* was created on the square stage. Therefore, all the entrances and exits, and all other actions were contained for consistency on stage. Jixiang Playhouse has retained the merit of the old style square stage, but without the disadvantage of the pillars. The orchestra was moved to a small platform extending out from the side of the stage ...

When I played *A Fairy Scatters Flowers*, the stage was already equipped with electric lights but not stage lighting. At the front of the stage, there were two rows of electric lights, one on the ceiling and the other on the floor. There were also a few others on the ceiling. Therefore it was hardly bright enough. Every evening, two big gas lights were lit on each side of the stage for the last piece of the evening's programme ... They [the gas lights] were hired by the theatre from electric shops.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Mei Lanfang, Xu Jizhuan transcribed, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian* [Forty Years' of Life on Stage] (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 1981), vol.3, 63-4. My translation.

The absence of dramatic elements in this piece was justified by the reception mode of the old-style playhouse. Mei pitched at the audience's consciousness which did not look for a cohesive structure. Once again, Mei's depiction of Jixiang Playhouse displays a condition of reception which was not exactly orderly and was hardly conducive to promoting concentration. The fleeting and distracted consciousness did not look for a good story. It sought aesthetic pleasure offered by the highly acclaimed accomplishment in the singing and dancing of master Mei Lanfang. Therefore, the piece aimed at pleasing the audience with technical excellence and very direct sensual (in this case visual and audio) excitement. It could be appreciated as a complete work, or it could be taken in as fragments of enjoyable moments. Correspondingly, a lot of Mei's attention was placed on the choreography and the music.

The arrangement of singing and dancing in this play is very innovative. Like the other ten "new plays in ancient costumes", *A Fairy* reaches its climax in a long scene of elaborate simultaneous singing and dancing. This was a traditional feature of *kunju* but rare in the case of *jingju* before Mei. Traditionally, in *jingju* the starring singing role of *dan* such as in *Yu Tang Chun* demands high concentration on the singing, therefore discourages distraction by movements with a high degree of difficulty. *Kunju*, on the contrary, emphasises careful choreography of all movements and expressions of the body in order to coincide with the melodic and literary qualities of the arias. Mei's showcase of the combination of singing and dancing in these pieces is definitely informed by his enthusiasm for *kunju* in the same period, as he has acknowledged in

his autobiography.¹⁰⁵

In his commentary on the production of *A Fairy*, he has discussed the difference between setting dance to *jingju* music and to *kunju* music:

The dance in the scene *The Cloud Road* is set to *pihuang* [a *jingju* music pattern] music. ...[There are changes between different tempos.]¹⁰⁶ The singing in this scene does not require a lot of decorative qualities. But the execution has to be accurate and agile in order to give a feeling of sedateness to the Fairy.

The movement [dance] in *Scattering Flowers* is set to *kunju* music...

Because of the different tempi of the two types of music, there are distinctive differences in the treatment of the dance in the two scenes.

When the body movements and dance are set to *pihuang* music, the two can be choreographed to fit the meaning of the words in the arias. The difficulty, however, is at interludes of music. It is specially difficult when it is an interlude for a slow piece of music. It takes up more time. One has to think about something to fill that time. When it comes to “two-six” and “fast beat” [both are names of rhythm pattern in *jingju* music], it gradually gets faster and it becomes easier to dance to.

It is not the case for *kunju* music. There is an inbuilt emphasis to accommodate dance. Therefore it is easier to set movements to it. When I devised choreography to these two *kunju* melodies [in the scene *Scattering Flowers*], I found it much more suitable [for dance] than *pihuang* music.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in *Mei Lanfang*, 45. My translation.

¹⁰⁶ In the original passage, he listed the names of the various tempos used in this scene.

¹⁰⁷ Mei, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian*, vol.3, 61. My translation.

The choreography was done by Mei himself. According to him, he took references from paintings and descriptions of traditional dances dating back centuries. At the same time, he took moves and steps from other martial roles. The ribbon dance in *The Fairy* was inspired by paintings of the mythical figure of the flower-scattering fairy in the grottos in the city of Dunhuang along the Silk Road. This is also the case in the choreography for the other ten “new plays in ancient costumes”. They are all adapted from traditional works of dance, paintings, and *xiqu*. For example, the hoe dance in *Chang’e benyue* [*Chang’e Running for the Moon*] was adapted from the spear work in a traditional martial *jingju* extract.

The dramatic elements are, on the contrary, much stronger in the later piece *Loshen* [*The Nymph of the Lo River*], which is also a “new play in ancient costumes”. It was inspired by a lyric poem of the 1st century. The poet Cao Zhi, who was the younger brother of the king, was on the way back to the province where he was stationed after visiting his brother the king in the capital city. When he came near the River Lo, the Nymph of the River paid him a visit. The Nymph was in fact the spirit of the king’s concubine, with whom the poet was in love, but who had unfortunately committed suicide to avoid slander. The poem was an ode to her beauty and their tragic unconsummated love. The *jingju* adaptation started with the Nymph deciding to pay Cao Zhi a visit. She went to the inn but he was already asleep. She therefore spoke to him in his dream and asked him to go to the Riverside to meet her the next day. At the Riverside she revealed to him her identity. She led him to the middle of the river where she

performed for him a dance with her fairy maids. Then she told him it would be the last time they would meet and the two exchanged tokens before their sorrowful parting.

The piece was premiered on 21st November 1923 at the Zhenguang Theatre in Beijing. It was then alternated at the Zhenguang Theatre and the Kaiming Theatre. Both were purpose-built as modern theatres that were used as venues for both stage productions and film viewing. Again, Mei described the Zhenguaong Theatre in great detail,

It was 1921. We were rehearsing in the daytime at Jixiang Playhouse in Dong'an Market. Everytime we passed by Donghuamen Road, we saw this growing theatre construction right opposite Dongxing Building. It was a Western architectural design from top to bottom ... This Zhenguaong Theatre was the first [in Beijing] to be designated "theatre" instead of playhouse or teahouse. Its management was also of the modern persuasion ... It had hired a few staff. There were two people on alternate shifts at the ticket counter. Two were at the entrance and exit to check people's tickets. Customers must get a ticket to enter. They found their seats as designated on the tickets. There were no waiters to find them seats. Neither was there anyone to sell snacks or serve them with handkerchiefs. There was no one walking around in the auditorium. They had to go to the tuck shop for tea. The Zhenguang Theatre also showed films ...¹⁰⁸

In the new theatre, distraction was reduced to the minimum. The more orderly seating arrangement encouraged punctual attendance, or it would have been difficult to get through people sitting in the same row. The audience consciousness was more controlled. It became easier to

¹⁰⁸ Mei, vol.3, 214-5. My translation.

predict its capacity of containment. On the other hand, it required a higher degree of cohesion in the performance text to sustain such concentration. The dramatic plot became more important. Although the climax was still the singing and dance in the last scene *Heshanghui* [*Meeting at the River*], it was much more integrated into the overall dramatic development. Unlike the dance in *A Fairy* that is expected to be enjoyed purely on the technical level, the dance in *Meeting at the River* is there firstly to convey the quality of heavenly serenity and earthly beauty of the Nymph, hence performing the function of characterisation. Secondly the dance was performed to entertain Cao Zhi. At the end of the dance, she exclaimed that Cao was looking on with utter amazement. The line was sung in a sorrowful mood since his amazement was basically the result of the difference in their situations (a mortal and a nymph) and the impossibility of their union. The dance was thus underlined by the tragic drama of the story. The technical elements of the dance were much more tied-in to the dramatic whole.

The stage design of these two plays also reveals a trend for development towards a higher degree of complication facilitated by the machinery, or the sheer size, of the modern theatre. The case of *A Fairy* is particularly telling of how the stage design was conceived according to the physical possibility of the kind of stage a piece is to be played on. In Mei's original production of the last scene of *A Fairy*, entitled *The Cloud Road*, the stage was divided into two parts. The down stage area was occupied by Monk Weimo and his followers who the Fairy was going to scatter flowers upon. The whole of the upstage area was covered with a platform made up of

sixteen tables. Since the stage of Jixiang Playhouse conformed to the old style and was small and configured as a square, the sixteen tables easily covered all the corners and accounted for half the size of the whole square stage. The back of the stage was decorated with painted cloud pieces. The front of the platform was also covered with them, thus concealing part of the Fairy's leg. The whole of the dance of the Fairy was performed on the platform and gave the feeling of dancing on clouds. Mei observed that it was an effective design but needed modification in alternative theatres, as was the case when his son Mei Baojiu performed the same piece in the grand modern national theatre in the late 1950s:

[On the old small square stage of the Jixiang Playhouse,] the sixteen tables covered half of the stage from the back. The cloud piece made up a coherent visual image running from high to low. It achieved a visual harmony from the audience point of view. Two years ago Baojiu did the piece in the People's Theatre for the first time. They also put sixteen tables there with cloud pieces in the front. I took a look from the balcony. It looked not in the slightest like clouds in the sky. Instead, it was like having a large piece of tofu on the stage. So I said to the property men that it would not do unless the back of the stage was entirely covered with tables and the cloud had to touch the wings. Some of them who had been around said that that would take at least sixty or even seventy tables yet I used to have only sixteen for my own performance. They also said that on smaller stages I used only ten or even nine for some occasions. I said, "But don't forget that sixteen were for the stage in the Jixiang Theatre. This is The People's Theatre. They are not the same." Yao Yufu¹⁰⁹ also agreed with me.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ A veteran *dan* player who has been playing with Mei since the 1910s.

¹¹⁰ Mei, vol.3, 64. My translation.

This small detail that appears unimportant to practitioners of the modern theatre is of paramount significance to the *xiqu* industry. All the numbers and positions of properties and scenery pieces are fixed and exact. Flexibility is not easily applied unless with very clear purpose and strong confidence in doing anything that deviates from traditional and habitual practices. Mei's decision of making changes demonstrates both clear aesthetic purpose and confidence in his own creativity.

The small stage of the Jixiang Playhouse was comparatively easy to fill. The difficulty of applying machinery also meant that the focus of both the drama and the spectacle had to be on the performers. The skills of the performers had to be self-subsistent without the help of stage tricks. Stage design and properties served merely as subsidiary items, or simply decoration. The performers had to be able to perform their pieces on any stage including in temple or street performance, or simply on a rug for private occasions. All the dramatic situations had to be suggested through their acting. Therefore, the fundamental principle of *xiqu* acting was to emphasise the response of the character under certain physical or dramatic situations, instead of describing or reconstructing the situations. The characters' response is something conveyed by the performers' bodies. As long as the performers were there, it was possible to perform the traditional piece since the bodies of the performers already conveyed the dramatic elements. It relied on the performers' virtuosity rather than the theatre. *Xiqu* traditionally was basically a performer's theatre.

However, with all the convenience of the modern theatre, the reliance

on the performers gradually diminished. It was almost impossible to resist the temptation of the mechanical magic achieved by modern stage devices. From another point of view, it was only natural for the audience of the modern theatre to expect full use of the modern machinery. There was a greater need for theatre spectacles to engage the audience's full attention on the performance text. This was the situation under which Mei's *The Nymph of the Lo River* was conceived.

The climax of the piece lies in the last scene *Meeting in the River*. The Nymph leads Cao Zhi to the heavenly territory in the middle of the river. A three-tier platform was built on the stage running from stage right to stage left. The Nymph and her fairy maids performed their dance on these tiers. The grandeur of this scene was a landmark in the stage design of *xiqu*. In his biography of Mei, Liu Yanjun has recorded the production in detail:

The singing and dancing of the last scene created a substantial image of the Nymph Cao Zhi wrote about in his Ode. The scene was outstanding in its stage design of an overwhelming lyricism, in the use of imaginative lighting, in Mei's dance in heavenly-looking costumes, and in his highly accomplished singing. It would not be an overstatement to laud it as a successful combination of Chinese and western aesthetics ...

The grandeur of this scene was unprecedented. The stage was built on three levels ... When the curtain was opened, the beauty was sitting at the peak of the hill [The platforms were painted as hills.] with two fairies on either side. Behind them in the middle stood a fairy boy holding up a red umbrella. Two other boys were there holding embroidered fans with long handles. On either side there were four more boys holding up colourful flags. Whenever the Nymph finished a verse in the arias, all the fans and flags were tilted to one side with

light changes. The direction they tilted towards harmonised with the Nymph's movements. Then the Nymph got up and walked down to the lower levels.¹¹¹

The rest of the dance was choreographed around the three levels. It was indeed the first time an attempt was made to create an aesthetic effect with a vertically stratified stage. While it is true that there were stages in the palaces of the *Qing* court that were made up of three storeys signifying heaven, earth and hell, they were similar to European scriptural plays in the 13th to the 16th centuries. Both expressed their view of the structure of the universe rather than for aesthetic reasons. The platform in *Scattering Flowers* corresponded to an aesthetic consideration rather than a theological belief. However, it was there for a narrative reason and was external to the dance while the vertical stratification was a central element in the structure of the dance in *Meeting in the River*. The choreography was as much built around the stage as the stage was built around the choreography. There was a much closer relationship between the performance and its venue. The performance therefore became less self-subsistent and more dependent on the stage devices.

Another aspect of stage devices Mei explored in these plays was lighting. In the Jixiang Playhouse production of *A Fairy Scatters Flowers*, he was already aware of the manipulation of stage lights and the effects of lighting on the overall visual effects. In the scenes *The Cloud Road* and *Scattering Flowers*, he made sure the costumes were of pale colours since

¹¹¹ Liu Yanjun, *Mei Lanfang Zhuan [A Biography of Mei Lanfang]* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 1996), 152. My translation.

coloured lights were used to give the feeling of heavenly magnificence. If the costumes were in a bright colour, they might clash with the lighting.¹¹²

In his analysis of Mei's stage design, Gong Hede has made this observation:

The earliest use of electric lights in *xiqu* performance was in the first place to serve the purpose of providing lighting for better vision. Secondly it was to enhance the stage presence of star players. All the lights at the front of the stage were lit up at their entrance in order to catch the audience's attention. Mei Lanfang's use of lighting was more advanced than that of his contemporaries. He used lighting not to enhance the personality of the stars, but for the purpose of characterisation like the effect of a close-up, and also for the promotion of dramatic atmosphere. In 1915 he used a white following spot on the fairy Chang'e in *Chang'e Running for the Moon*. It was the first time a following spot was used in *xiqu* performance. Later on in *A Fairy Scatters Flowers*, he used "colourful lighting" to create a mythical atmosphere in the scenes *The Cloud Road* and *Scattering Flowers*. In *Farewell to the Lady*, ... in order to convey the sorrowful atmosphere under the moonlight and at the mood of the Chu region folk songs in the camp, the overall lighting on stage was tuned down. Only a few blue lights were left on Lady Yu. All these examples tell one thing: in his newly written plays, Mei was not satisfied with using lighting for the mere purpose of providing light for better vision. He used it for the purpose of characterisation and dramatic expression.¹¹³

The use of stage machinery and lighting effects was efficient in creating dramatic atmosphere. But they could both easily draw attention to the situation the characters were in, rather than the response of the

¹¹² Mei Lanfang, vol.3, 49.

¹¹³ Gong Hede, "Mei Lanfang yu wutai meishu" [Mei Lanfang and Stage Design], in China Mei Lanfang Research Institute, Mei Lanfang Museum ed., *Mei Lanfang Yanjiu Lunji* [An Anthology of Research on Mei Lanfang] (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 1990), 222-3. My translation.

characters to the situations. The acting logic of *xiqu* has traditionally emphasised the latter. Such a change of focus could distract the audience's attention from the players' rendition of the characters' emotions to the dramatic situation itself. Mei Lanfang was aware of this distinction. Therefore in both *Scattering Flowers* and *Meeting on the River*, he made sure elaborate stage devices were only used to accentuate his dance. He included the lighting and the sets within the structure of the choreography so that the stage spectacles became part of his performance, not a distraction from it.

Yet he also flirted with illusionistic realism. The last of the "new plays in historical costumes" entitled *Jun Xiren* [*The Handsome Xiren*] was his only play with an illusionistic setting. The story was taken from two chapters in *Dream of the Red Mansion* [*Hongloumeng*]. It tells the event of Jiao Baoyu's chambermaids competing for his affection. The whole story takes place within a few hours in the same evening inside the two chambers of his bedroom. The stage was built with an elaborately realistic scenery of the two chambers. Mei justified the use of realistic scenery with reference to the unity of time and place in the plot. Therefore, following this line of argument, there would be problems for other pieces set in a greater magnitude of time and place to adopt this kind of heavy and complicated scenery with concrete reference which is difficult to change. The logic he adopted was a thematic one. However, there is a formal, indeed a more significant reason. There was an incongruity between the stylised acting and the illusory scenery. Those of the audience whose minds were tuned into a more imaginative and sublimated mode for the

stylised acting, would find the illusionistic scenery redundant. Those tuned into the illusionistic elements would find the stylisation vague and feel it distracting and hard work to have to decode. There was an internal incompatibility in the style within the piece.

Mei's experiment with illusionistic staging stopped there. Not only did he not attempt another illusionistic stage design after *The Handsome Xiren*, very soon after its première he played the piece less and less frequently and it finally disappeared from his repertoire altogether. Mei's use of the modern stage facilities was on the whole more thoughtful than that of many of his contemporaries who adopted complicated stage tricks simply as gimmicks to attract an audience. The new resources Mei found in the modern theatre were used to enrich what was already there in *jingju*, not to replace it. On many occasions he used the image of "keeping the shape intact while moving forward" to substantiate his idea of the refinement of the *jingju* form. Attempts to adapt *xiqu* in the modern theatre have been numerous since Mei's time. The more successful ones are those, like many of Mei's experiments, that manage to enrich the acting and staging convention of *xiqu*, not to replace some of its essential features with the novel excitement of stage machinery.

CHAPTER FIVE

The thorough adaptation of *xiqu* in the early Communist era

China's modernisation necessarily followed a Western mode since it was launched in the first place as a conscious attempt to imitate the political, economic and military strength of the West. Its source and model was industrial capitalism, as originated in the West. Its aim was to strengthen China so as to resist Western imperialist domination. It is what Robert Bellah aptly described as an 'anti-West Westernisation'.¹¹⁴ It took place on a continual basis until the Second World War threw the whole world into chaos. The prevailing world order was shattered during the Second World War. Within China, the broadly liberalist social structure substantiated by the more fundamental order of industrial capitalism which China copied from the West experienced a halt in the post Second World War years. For almost three decades after the War, China's politics took a turn towards at first the Soviet, then a Maoist form of Communism. The result was a radically different set of social relations among the various sectors of the society.

For one thing, the political other of this new China took on a class identity. The struggle for national autonomy was still important, yet was being taken over by a class struggle on an international level. China's political identity since the 1949 Revolution has been constructed through the model of Communism versus Capitalism, in place of the pre-Second

¹¹⁴ Robert Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 250.

World War model of China (semi-colony) versus the West (imperial masters). The Communist ideal of the *Internationale* was intended to supersede the national ideal of sovereignty and national autonomy. The cultural emphasis of China was not placed on Chineseness, rather, it was placed on proletarian utopia.

What has remained unchanged is the antagonism towards the idea of traditional Chinese culture. Before 1949, traditional practices were regarded as backward, non-scientific and pre-modern with a judgmental overtone. They were regarded as something impeding modernisation and progress. In the early Communist era, criticism of traditional social structure focused on its being feudal and class-based, thus impeding equality and democracy. In the new social system, art and culture were there to serve some other purposes very different from commercial entertainment. In many capitalist countries, the latter was increasingly becoming the main tendency, although there have always been sporadic attempts to go against the grain. In these cases, theatre was given the responsibility of political education inherited from a variety of Leftist traditions including Stalinist Social Realism, Brecht's didactic drama and early China's socially engaged speech drama. Some of them are lauded with universal acclaim, even canonised as modern classics as in the case of Brecht. Some others are criticised for their political incorrectness in the globalised theatrical and academic industries dominated by Euro-American liberal values.

For the case of China, a voluminous opus of didactic dramatic works

was completed in the decades since the Communist take-over. Many critics might well criticise them for being crude and one-dimensional, yet such a criticism is an oversimplification of the kind of poetics these critics were trying to develop in according with the communist ideals. Mao Zedong's significant 1942 "*Yan'an wenyi jiangzhu tanhua*" [Talks on Literature and Art] delivered at the revolution base of Yan'an laid down the direction of cultural production the Party was to follow in the decades to come. He started his speech with an affirmation on the revolutionary function of literature and the arts:

Our aim is to ensure that revolutionary literature and art follow the correct path of development and provide better help to other revolutionary work in facilitating the overthrow of our national enemy and the accomplishment of the task of national liberation.¹¹⁵

Like its Soviet counterpart, the Chinese model of socialist cultural production carried the grand purpose of communist revolution. Art and literature should narrate stories in a way so that events were put into the perspective of the progression of history towards utopia. The works should be easy to comprehend since they were supposed to be created for the masses rather than the literary elite. Throughout the decades, the strategies of representation set down by the official line changed according to the social climate of the country, but these basic premises have endured.

Jingju with its status of national opera and bearing the signified of

¹¹⁵ Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, collected and translated in Kirk A. Denton ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 458.

traditional national culture was an ambivalent entity for the communist authority. On the one hand, it was closely associated with many practices of the class-segregated society of pre-Communist China. On the other, its popularity meant that there was hardly any other art form that could reach a masses as widely as it did. It was a potentially extremely effective ideological tool to propagate communist values. In the initial decade of the People's Republic, the authority opted for the practical folk values of *jingju*. It allowed *jingju* to be free of its yoke of being a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. This symbolic value was played down while its actual and current popularity with the masses was played up. In the 1950s, *jingju* received a great deal of support and encouragement. Government resources were put into its development. Academies were established for formal training. Performing companies became state-owned. Production costs and ticket sales ceased to influence the conditions for artistic refinement and experiment . On the other hand, personnel from the literature and speech drama circles were arranged to participate in *xiqu* productions in order to bring it beyond the limitation of populist entertainment. Artists were treated with professional and social respect. They performed in a variety of venues both urban and rural, as well as in social service capacity. Their work was required to merge into social life in ways other than consumer entertainment. On the whole, the best works of *xiqu* in the 1950s took the direction of enriching the convention of *xiqu* with the technical advancement available in the modern theatre. Some of them explored the representation of modern life, therefore in a modern setting including costumes. They frequently involved adaptation of the conventional theatrical vocabulary to a modern idiom. These were indeed

a continuation of the effort made in the pre-Second World War years¹¹⁶, and with the advantage of saving the burden of commercial considerations. Therefore, the 1950s was in fact the golden era of modern *xiqu*. Many of the masterpieces we see nowadays are works composed in that decade.

¹¹⁶ Details of these adaptations have been discussed in Part One of this thesis.

***Jingju* as “revolutionary model plays” during the Cultural Revolution**

Jingju after the Second World War completely moved into the modern theatre context. One reason was that virtually all the old timber playhouses in the war zones including the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai and many others had been completely destroyed. New capital injected into the rebuilding of the cities would hardly be invested in something that was too old-fashioned to be popular, and not quite archaic enough to become an exotic attraction for local and overseas tourists. Therefore, new theatres were built in the modern mode. *Jingju* was expected to be produced in modern theatres. The modern theatre institution became the norm for the production of *jingju*.

The generation of *jingju* players after Mei Lanfang and his contemporaries were brought up in the modern theatre institution. Technically, the theatricality of *jingju* for them was in tune with the physical environment of the modern theatre. The artistic excellence that was pursued in *jingju* was something necessarily contained in and facilitated by the modern theatre. Thematically, the heavy involvement of the Communist Government in the promotion of *xiqu* encouraged artists to infuse their works with a revolutionary spirit that had improved their professional and daily lives as compared to the old days under the rule of the corrupt National Party Government. Later on in the 1960s, this voluntary devotion coincided with an official doctrine of “*geming jingju*” [revolutionary *jingju*] in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Jiang Qing, Mao Zedong’s wife since the 1930s, recognised *jingju*, endowed with its

high artistic value and vast popularity among the working class, as an effective propaganda tool. From 1964 onwards, she personally took charge of the production of a few *jingju* in a modern setting and a revolutionary content and took it on as an important political project. The only *jingju* acceptable during the Cultural Revolution consisted of those pieces propagating revolutionary messages, while the majority of traditional pieces were dismissed as relics of the feudal time. The result was a group of works referred to at the time as “model plays”. The ones among them that achieved the highest artistic achievements were the *jingju* productions of *Hongdengji* [*The Red Lantern*], *Baimaonu* [*The White-haired Girl*] and *Zhiqu weihushan* [*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*].

Ironically, thanks to the fundamentalist revolutionary attitude of the Cultural Revolution, it became relatively easy for *jingju* to go beyond the boundaries set down in its own convention. Many bold experimental attempts were carried out in these *jingju* pieces. Their overall “revolutionary romantic” style including colourful elaboration of Communist heroism was effective in both articulating and constructing the structure of feelings of its time. The revolutionary transformation of the form of *jingju* was part of the general revolutionary mindset. As a result, this group of works were less obsessed with adhering to the convention as a pre-modern national tradition, and were more flexible, and indeed creative, in the employment of modern theatre facilities. The result is less exotic, but much more theatrical within the framework of the modern theatre.

Yet the recuperation of the *jingju* into the discourse of the Cultural Revolution was not without ideological struggles. After all, *jingju* was a product deeply associated with the social structure of pre-Revolutionary China, and the Cultural Revolution emphasised a wholesale revision of Chinese culture and the total involvement of the masses in the movement in all aspects of their lives. The irony is that it was in the context of such a sinister political campaign that the rhetoric of emphasising culture had considerable substance. It is a rare case that any national government recognises the importance of culture and understands the concept of cultural practice not in terms of “Cultural” achievements manifesting themselves in showcases of specific elite activities such as high arts (including ballet and opera) and scholarship. Cultural production should be understood as part of a “general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development applied and effectively transferred to the works and practices which represent and sustain it.”¹¹⁷ Instead, “culture” in the Cultural Revolution took a wider definition to refer to the ways of life shared in a certain society. It included the views and values that substantiate the consensus on those ways of life. The close association of *jingju* to the old way of life became a particularly sensitive issue.

But once again, the practical advantage of its popularity prevailed. In the end the authority reinstated the strategy of writing *xiqu* in a modern setting to achieve their own ends, such as revolutionists before 1911 had done during the *xiqu* reform. On the one hand, this practice was fully

¹¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), p.91. My distinction of the two definition of culture follows the definition Williams gives in this book. It also coincides with the definition of “culture” adopted by the UNESCO.

justified in the Communist tradition by the precedent of using regional *xiqu* to advocate Communism amongst the Shaangxi Province inhabitants by the Party in their Yan'an days (1930s and 1940s). On the other hand, they conveniently split *xiqu* into the two parts of form and content. New and progressive content was to be written into the old form and performed in modern theatres. It also conveniently communicated the desirable symbol of the Communist Party bringing old China into its modernised phase. The elements associated with feudalism were to be denounced and eradicated. In the early days of the Cultural Revolution, *jingju* artists were gathered at the Temple of Heaven to be insulted by Red Guards with much of their confiscated gear set on fire. But many of them were recruited into the production team of the *jingju* pieces in a modern setting which were not only blessed, but indeed commissioned by the Cultural Revolution Central Committee. Eight productions were completed by the collective effort of a great number of top artists who had been transferred from their original opera companies. They managed to wittily retain many of the essential features of *jingju* while replacing many signifiers of antiquity with those of modernity. For example, in fighting scenes, rifles were used in place of spears to perform the acrobatic patterns. Overcoats were worn to provide the same volume of the hero's body in place of the cape in historical costumes. The appearance was different but the new items functioned as acting tools as effectively as the old gear. The same emotive effects were achieved in the acting with these new tools. The Cultural Revolution Central Committee was so pleased with them that they were lauded as "model plays" to provide examples for future works.

The Red Lantern is one most adapted to the modern theatre among the eight “model plays”. It distinguishes itself from the seven other model plays by its use of the strikingly consistent imagery of the colour red. The overall dramatic effect of the play is driven not only by the plot, but also by the affective dimension created by the use of the image of red through lighting and stage design. It tells the story of a foster family whose blood relatives died in the 1923 nation-wide railway strike suppressed by the National Party Government. The plot starts eighteen years afterwards when the three survivors of the victimised families disguise themselves as an ordinary worker family and continue to work secretly with the Communist Party during the Japanese occupation. They use a red lantern as their secret sign to identify themselves to the Communists, so that they can pass on military messages to the Communist 8th Route Army to fight the Sino-Japanese War. The grandmother and father of the family are arrested and murdered by the Japanese army upon betrayal by a fellow member of the Party. The young girl is deliberately set free so that the Japanese army can follow her to track down the guerilla fighters. The play ends with her sneaking out of her home, which is surrounded by Japanese soldiers, with the red lantern and running to the mountains where the Eighth Route Army is stationed. She delivers them the message her foster father failed to get through before his arrest.

The design of the play is very much influenced by modern drama. The size of the modern theatre stage and auditorium intended for the production of this scale and the comparatively great distance between the stage and the auditorium does not favour an empty stage such as in the old

playhouses. The stage shows the interior of a hut open on the side to the auditorium and the adjacent exterior to it. The interior of the hut is equipped with basic furniture to suit the poor economic situation of the family. It fills the stage to a certain extent without being stacked with too many realistic properties to crowd it. Realistic stage make-up was used in place of the stylised one in conventional practice. Acting remains in the mode of stylised dance-like elaborate movements with moments of *liangxiang*, or figuration¹¹⁸. On the whole, it tends towards a more realistic mode than traditional pieces. This is definitely due to the influence of modern drama which was still in the 1960s deemed to be a more modern (i.e. Western) form than *jingju*. However, the clever substitution of new costumes and acting tools works just as well as do their more traditional counterparts. More important, the relationship between music, look and movement remains the same as in traditional pieces. The essential form of the convention stays the same. It indeed reminds one of Mei Lanfang's earlier articulated aspiration of "moving forward while keeping the shape intact" in the transformation of the *jingju* convention. Although it took time for both players and audience to adapt to the new look, the acting convention was very much kept in tune with audience expectations.

Neither modern design nor naturalistic acting was new to *jingju*. Both had been experimented with in the early 20th century *jingju* reform. What

¹¹⁸ That refers to the moment of freezing after drastic acrobatic actions, intense emotions or completion of group movements ending in certain geometric composition of blocking. It is also the moment that captured Brecht's attention in the formulation of his theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*. The sudden halt involves a change in tempo. Brecht took it to be room for moralistic reflection while it is originally built in for aesthetic reasons in *xiqu* convention.

brought *The Red Lantern* further away from the playhouse convention and further towards modern theatre was the central use of the imagery of the colour red. The spirit of the Chinese Communist Party it signifies was the main object of glorification of the piece. This symbolism took a prominent place in the composition of the play. The young girl who represents the hope of future generations following the heroic Communist path wore either a red top or red pants in all the scenes. All scenes emphasizing the warm human relations and bravery of the Communist family were lit up by red lights of varying nuance and degrees of intensity. Red follow spots were also used to enhance the effect of *liangxiang*, or figuration, at heroic moments. The different shades of red light cast on different materials on stage gave a varied texture and intensity. The accumulation of the lighting on stage engulfed the audience in an overwhelming and atmospheric wash of the colour red. The affective quality of the piece that controlled the overall dramatic effect was principally regulated in an effective manner by the manipulation of the lighting. This is very different from traditional pieces such as *Yu Tong Chun* in which the emotive dimension was communicated solely through the acting techniques including singing and movement of the players.

The Red Lantern is an example of *jingju*, the central structure of which is not composed according to considerations of the lead performer's skills, which was the case in traditional practice. The main imagery of the colour red does not depend on the actors' performance. It was created by the lighting and stage design, something extrinsic to the performing convention of *jingju*. However, this development did not come as a shock

to *jingju*. Since it had been moved into the modern theatre decades earlier, it was meaningless to differentiate the acting convention from its physical parameter. Therefore, the performing convention can no longer be separated from the overall modern theatre convention. What was once extrinsic to *jingju* is now intrinsic in it. As with any theatrical piece, more contemporary *jingju* has had to be conceived with the consideration of venue in mind in order to achieve the intended theatrical communication and accompanying semiotic framework.

Xiqu in the commercial theatre industry

In hindsight, it is not difficult to see that the Cultural Revolution was China's last and most radical attempt in search of a revolutionary social order. The end of the Cultural Revolution was marked by Deng Xiaoping's restoration to power and his economic reform. By the 1980s, it revealed every trace of a market economy characterised by private ownership speculative investment, all aimed at capital accumulation. China no longer positioned herself outside the world order as determined by capital relations. Akbar Abbas, commenting on the situations of China and Hong Kong, provides a shrewd insight into the understanding of the relationship between China and the rest of the capitalist world,

The historical ironies will only become more accentuated as China continues on its reformist course, as it looks likely to do, making the formula of "one country, two systems" so much more easy to dismantle: what we will find will not be two systems (socialist, capitalist) but one system at different stages of development – a difference in times and speeds.¹¹⁹

The withdrawal of state subsidy for the theatres in China started in the late 1980s and was implemented on a wholesale scale in the 1990s. Market forces became the only criterion and opportunity for development of the theatrical art. Theatre companies have to find money to fund themselves. *Huaju* [speech drama] companies usually enjoy higher flexibility in management and in the services they provide. They can offer training and

¹¹⁹ Akbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997) 6.

production services for other entertainments, television and film productions. Therefore, survival and development are easier for them. *Xiqu* companies, however, must retain a high number of members since there are more professional departments requiring profound expertise and knowledge involved. At the same time, the highly specialised training of the personnel implies less flexible services that performers can render besides *xiqu* productions. Therefore, some companies have sought commercial sponsorship while others develop other lines of business including restaurants, guest houses or even driving schools within the management of the theatre companies.

The rebound from model plays in the post-Cultural Revolution years, acting together with the wave of Westernisation in the new market economy environment, has pushed *jingju* and its other regional counterparts to a low point. Anything associated with or used by the Cultural Revolution authority is now condemned as reactionary. Anything to do with traditional Chinese culture is considered dated. *Jingju* has not been able to attract new young audiences. Nowadays, most performances seen are re-enactment of popular pieces written in the 1920s, 1930s and the 1950s. They are performed as connoisseur pieces, and often as representative of traditional Chinese culture. Since most of these pieces were long ago performed in the modern theatres in the Westernised cities of Beijing and Shanghai either in their premiere production or soon afterwards, all the adjustments and adaptation to the modern theatre have already been done and incorporated. Performances today are often simply repeats of the old experiments. Although the accomplishment of the

performers and the high quality of the music and writing constitute high performance value, present productions hardly stretch the possibility of the convention or the pieces themselves.

New pieces written from the 1980s onwards are also entirely conceived for the modern theatre. With almost a century of experience, hardly any difficulty is encountered in production in the modern theatres. One of the most noted recent examples of such a production was the 1997 work of *Tongrentang*, by the Beijing Opera Theatre commissioned by Tongrentang, the leading herbal medicine manufacturer and retailer in Beijing. This piece was commissioned to celebrate the anniversary of the shop. The show enjoyed a second run within months of the first round of performances, and later toured in Hong Kong. The story was set in 1900 against the background of the siege of Beijing by the Eight-Power Allied Forces. Tongrentang was devastated after the battles. All the herbs were destroyed. The widow of Tongrentang took over control and succeeded in the struggle to revive the business. Her management method were at odds with the old, conservative manager, who eventually however was won over to her side. In the process they were continually harassed by corrupt officials. The widow was even jailed before the more positive finale culminating in her release and regaining control of the shop.

The production contributed nothing new to the contemporary *jingju* audience for whom it is the norm to see *xiqu* performance in a modern theatre. The performance starts with a crowd scene with an aria sung behind the scene about the glorious long history of 230 years of the shop's

existence, and another aria about the suffering of the Beijing citizens during the war with the Eight Powers. On stage there is a crowd miming the actions of running away from the foreign armies, among whom is a man killing a foreign soldier to save a girl whom the latter was attempting to ravish. The couple are later revealed to be workers in Tongrentang and the widow owner of the shop is put in jail for protecting the man who killed the soldier. This is of great narrative significance and the whole event is narrated in a crowd dance with an overtone of balletic style. It is not unusual in the early revolutionary dance drama of the 1920s to the 1950s to combine the styles of *xiqu*, folk dance and the ballet. The background is a slide projection showing a real street scene of Beijing with a shadow of flame superimposed on it by the use of lighting. This spectacular beginning creates an impressive visual impact for the opening. But it is soon superseded by an emphasis on the players' singing and acting, more akin to the old structure of *xiqu* before the reliance on modern theatrical facilities was developed. In fact, apart from a few scenes with spectacular background, the whole piece can be produced on a minimal stage without much adaptation to the stage business.

Yet this is not to say that there is no use of the devices of the modern theatre in *Tongrentang*. In the re-run of the production in Beijing, there is a scene using fake snow. Another scene makes use of a transparent screen in front of a shuffling crowd to create a silhouette. Neither works particularly well. This has nothing to do with any incongruity between realistic stage business and stylised acting. Having moved into the modern theatre for almost a century and been injected with similar modern tools in many

previous productions, *jingju* has become very accommodating to them. The fact is, however, that both fake snow and silhouette are so often used that they have become stage cliches. It is hardly likely for them to stir up any remarkable emotional intensity.

Another innovation attempted in *Tongrentang* is characterisation. The leading character of the widow who is the head of the family is played by a *laodan* (old female roles) player. *Laodan* is the only female role that does not sing in *falsetto*. Its range is relatively narrow and its accompanying music is less complicated. It is traditionally for the casting of supporting roles. Certainly there have been a number of popular *laodan* arias, especially in the eight model plays in which people from all walks of life have to be portrayed to be equally important. The most noted one is Grandmother in *The Red Lantern*. But *laodan* have never been cast in the leading role. No doubt it is a good thing to experiment with characterisation, but it has to be supported by a development of the music for *laodan*. Without such support, the relatively less well-developed music for *laodan* cannot convey the psychological and affective complications a leading character should be able to convey. Simply adopting it without extending its musical possibility, while giving up the use of the more sophisticated musical category of *qingyi* (female roles in blue dress) and *laosheng* (old male roles), is not giving adequate thought to the musical composition. The full potential of *jingju* music is not realised. It is hardly a wise artistic decision.

The significance of this piece, however, lies in the story line. The

heroine is the owner of a herb shop. It is run in the form of private ownership. From the 1940s to the 1970s, such shop-owners would have been branded as petit bourgeois. The production portrays the widow shop-owner as a benevolent employer and as patriotic in the way that she recognises the importance of national solidarity against imperialist aggressors. This is thus a liberal humanist stance. It is hardly progressive from a more dogmatic socialist perspective, but is perfectly in line with the new capitalist social values in China in the 1990s, which has been referred to as “socialism with Chinese characteristics” by the Chinese Communist Party.

Meanwhile, an even more interesting phenomenon has emerged in some commercial cities including Beijing and Shanghai. A few playhouses have been rebuilt on the old sites in the city of Beijing. Both the interior and the exterior of these buildings are designed in exact imitation of the old playhouses. Stages of the old type have been installed, and performances are put on every night. Tables and benches are placed for the audience’s convenience and tea and snacks are served in order to recreate the old conditions of *jingju* viewing. However, the focus of these venues is rather similar to that of a live museum experience. Visitors go there for the historic experience of a playhouse, not to see the performance. As a matter of fact, theatre companies send very junior players or even learners to perform in those venues treating them as a training ground rather than taking such productions seriously as proper performance. The whole event can hardly be analysed in terms of theatrical experience. Instead, it can be taken as a general form of cultural entertainment of the same category as a

museum visit. The *xiqu* convention has completely adapted to the modern theatres.

CHAPTER SIX

Xiqu films as a genre of *xiqu*

About the same time as the modern theatre was introduced into China at the turn of the 20th century, the moving picture also found its way to China. The earliest Chinese moving pictures were *xiqu* extracts. I maintain that if looked at from the perspective of the *xiqu* convention, these early *xiqu* films can be best seen as a genre of *xiqu*, instead of a genre of film in general. One can emphasise them as productions of *xiqu* on films, rather than movie production (as an art form) with *xiqu* as their content. One reason is that since the first Chinese movies of primitive productions of extracts of *xiqu* performance, *xiqu* films have developed into a popular entertainment and represented a considerable proportion of Chinese film productions. But the success of the earliest movies indeed preyed on the overwhelming popularity of *jingju* and the star system of the industry. Their appearance on *xiqu* extracts on film prompted the fans to frequent the cinema as well as the theatre to enjoy performances by their favourite stars. The commercial attraction lay more with the performance of the stars and the performance text than the many visual effects the new form of the movie would offer. The early *xiqu* films were therefore made with a clear directorial credo to carefully adhere to the artistic and technical convention of *xiqu*. These early *xiqu* films are therefore read, in the context of this thesis and of *xiqu* studies, as a branch of *xiqu* production.

Almost all *xiqu* films made in the 20th century were originally stage

productions, with the exceptions of a few dozen or so Hong Kong produced *Huangmeixi* films made by the film giants, Shaw Brothers Limited.¹²⁰ Very often in contemporary film studies when the stage version and the film version of a text, or the two media in general without reference to specific case studies, are put under comparative scrutiny, the focus is placed on the means and tools of representation possible in the two media. Such an approach emphasizes the technical aspects of the communicative mechanism. Indeed, the comparison between these two media was taken as a vantage point for early film theorists to articulate the nature of the film medium. However, the concern of this thesis is to develop a materialist approach to the *xiqu* viewing experience. It needs to take into account the reception consciousness of *xiqu* that is more inclusive of other sensory perceptions. Therefore, a more complex model of comparison than the exclusively production intention oriented technical analysis is needed. The works of the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg that attempt to enrich the comparison between the theatre and the screen are useful in the context of this study. Münsterberg introduces a psychological dimension that foregrounds the working of the audience's mind in the viewing of theatrical and filmic works. For him, any work of art creates an aesthetic cosmos within which elements work side by side according to a consensual logic. The reception of this work requires the receptor to tune into this wave-length,

Our aesthetic discussion showed us that it is the aim of art to isolate a significant part of our experience in such a way that it is separate

¹²⁰ This group of films are dealt with in Chapter Eight in detail.

from our practical life and is in complete agreement within itself. Our aesthetic satisfaction results from this inner agreement and harmony, but in order that we may feel such agreement of the parts we must enter with our own impulses into the will of every element, into the meaning of every line and colour and form, every word and tone and note. Only if everything is full of such inner movement can we really enjoy the harmonious cooperation of the parts. The means of the various arts, we saw, are the forms and methods by which this aim is fulfilled. They must be different for every material. Moreover the same material may allow very different methods of isolation and elimination of the insignificant and reinforcement of that which contributes to the harmony.¹²¹

Münsterberg places equal stress on the materials of the medium and the action on the reception end. Susan Sontag reinforces an emphasis on the latter in very plain terms,

Much may be made of the fact that, in its concrete existence, cinema is an object (a product, even) while theatre is a performance. Is this so important? In a way, no. Whether objects (like films or paintings) or performances (like music or theatre), all art is first a mental act, a fact of consciousness. The object aspect of film, the performance aspect of theatre are merely means – means to the experience, which is not only “of” but “through” the film and the theatre-event. Each subject of an aesthetic experience shapes it to his own measure.¹²²

Sontag’s approach is not to be confined to the practical use of the medium in artistic criticism. The definition and categorisation of art works according to medium is not the only criterion. The experience of the

¹²¹ Hugo Münsterberg, “The Means of the Photoplay”, from Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen ed., *The Film: A Psychological Study*, extracted in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introduction Readings* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 331.

¹²² Susan Sontag, “Film and Theatre”, collected in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introduction Readings*, 348.

performance text is not only determined by the means the text employs. It is 'first a mental act, a fact of consciousness'. The corollary of this problem in the present study of *xiqu* is whether the audience takes the experience as viewing a film like any other, or specifically a *xiqu* film. The answer concerning the early *xiqu* film tends towards the latter. This theory is on the one hand supported by the expectation of their contemporary audience, the main theatre going experience of whom was *xiqu* viewing. On the other hand, the fact that the lack of camera direction at first, and subsequent dominance of *xiqu* convention in these films, provokes a reception consciousness that calls up the knowledge and experience of *xiqu* viewing on the part of the viewers. The following sections in this and subsequent Chapters will examine this phenomenon in greater detail.

Introduction of the movie into China

In Europe, the birthplace of the movie, the latter was developed out of the tradition of photography. This was the case both in terms of technology and aesthetics. Both photography and early movies fell within the realm of the visual arts. Photography was viewed as a development of realism after painting, and the movie after photography. The movies were therefore also named the moving pictures and the photoplays. It is justified to trace this whole trend of pursuing life-like realistic representation in the visual arts back to the development of the knowledge of perspective in the Italian Renaissance. However, this evolution of visual realism has never been an issue in China. On the one hand, Chinese visual art does not pursue the idea of perspective or realism. On the other, both photography and the movie were introduced into China as Western technological gadgets. They did not carry in China the ideological significance of the correlation between scientific progress and the development of realism as they did in the West.

Although photography was already introduced into China in the late *Qing* Dynasty, it was mainly enjoyed at the imperial court and among the very wealthy families in the capital cities. It was not easily available to the general public, therefore lacked the base for its popularity to grow. Moreover, the photographic technology was too advanced for the majority of Chinese, who did not have a lot of experience of Western technology, to handle. When the young scholars sent abroad to study returned to China, it was already very late in the 19th century. By that time the movie has

already been introduced in their motherland. Those who could master the technology of photography also found filming manageable.¹²³ Although the technological kinship was obvious for their production, their social functions were very different. The engagement with the movie was limited to the reception side. Since its first showing in China, it was already endowed with a very high commercial value, which at this juncture was impossible for photography. It soon developed into a cheap alternative to going to the theatre. On the other hand, photography remained a more personal pursuit of the “westernised” class of the society. They made photographs as part of their artistic and leisure lives. The function and consumption patterns of photography and the movie have always been very different.

The earliest record of movie viewing in China was a French strip shown on the 11th August 1896 in an entertainment house named Xu Garden in Shanghai. It only took just more than a year since the Lumière brothers conducted their 1895 first public showing of movies in Paris for the new invention to make its appearance in China. Around the same time, the Chinese students of the prestigious missionary school St. John’s College in Shanghai were staging school plays of Western drama. It was also around the same time that British expatriates were active in the production of amateur dramatic performances in the modern Lanxin Theatre purposely built for a dramatic pasttime. One of China’s film makers in the 1920s Zheng Zhengqiu is indeed acknowledged to have

¹²³ For example, Yan Qingtai, the first film maker in China in 1905, was owner of a photographic studio in Beijing.

frequented the Lanxin Theatre.¹²⁴ It should be justifiable to speculate that there must have been other film makers who also had their first experience of Western drama through very similar channels.

The first movie viewed in China in 1896 was shown as part of a variety entertainment showcase consisting of other spectacles including magic, fireworks and folk performances. This was a typical context for many French film strips of simple narrative to be shown. In 1897, American productions also found their way to the Chinese market. What was shown in these strips were simple narratives showing short episodes such as a boy has stepped off the hose again getting drenched with a jet of water, or the starting of an automobile or a train. These were incidents of contemporary daily European life that bore an original importance different to those for the European viewers. For the latter, recording events in motion was a new sensational experience. However, for the Chinese audience, they were little stories that told them about novelties from the brave new Western world. This was the very first time that the West, that had for decades by then been the cause of financial and political inferiority felt by the Chinese, became accessible to the majority of the Chinese population. To witness the West in the cinema auditorium and to acquire knowledge of the West through the films was a significant collective experience of the Chinese people in the cinema in this period. These short narratives could almost be considered as equivalent to mini dramas for them.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Ge Yihong ed., *Zhongguo huaju tongshi* [*A History of Chinese Speech Drama*] (Beijing: Culture and Art Press, 1990), 7.

No cultural production is without a context. Likewise, no reception of texts is without a context. The earliest reception consciousness of the cinema in China is definitely not an innocent *tabula rasa* to be written on. The initial context of reception depends on a great number of factors including the original content of the audience's subjectivity as it is up to the point before the viewing, and many other necessary and accidental elements in the process of viewing. This brings us to the issue of specificity of the composition of each viewer's consciousness. The atmosphere of privacy in the dark auditorium that encourages concealment of the audience's identity, and the mass scale of spectatorship of the film industry together makes it very difficult to assume an ideal, if not standard, spectator. The composition of the film market is cross-cultural. It also spans across different social classes. The vast mixture in the dark auditorium creates the scenario of an anonymous faceless audience.

Judith Mayne has tried not to open, but to dissolve, this deadlock,

I am not so naïve as to think that these real viewers are available to the researcher in any unmediated way, but I do not find it particularly useful to insist ... that the category of a "real person" (or viewer) is purely a discursive one. Yet while I think it crucial to acknowledge that real people do not exist outside the category of theory, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that those real people are always the function of my or my culture's notion of what a real person is ... However crucial it was to contemporary film studies to distinguish between the "subject" and the "viewer", and however much film theorists have stressed that the cinematic subject is not identical to the film viewer, the two categories are not and have not been so easily

separable.¹²⁵

Her strategy is to play up the interpellated nature of individual subjectivity. She foregrounds the ideological nature of the subject. As a result, the process of interaction between the viewed and the viewer, instead of the actual content of the subjectivity, is emphasised. The theoretical complication arisen out of the non-reducible human capacity when the viewer is taken as “real person” is suppressed.

Indeed, one might even argue that the investigation of the formation of subjectivity in theatre and cultural studies does not concern the specific personality development of individuals. That is the job of the psychoanalysts. A theoretical inquiry bearing relevance to the general phenomenon should be aimed at the shared elements in a social experience by the majority of individuals. It is based on this the idea of a Chinese viewing position of early *xiqu* films is possible.

The cinema was introduced into China as an imported entity from the West. Since the movie was not the natural child of Chinese cultural and scientific development, plenty of mix and match was needed, and indeed done, in the attempt of making the film its own. The fact that the first Chinese made films being *xiqu* extracts revealed the psychological interaction between the Chinese psyche and the cinema. The motivation of Fengtai Photographic Studio, producer of the first Chinese film, in making films was to offset the monopoly of the Chinese market by the French and

¹²⁵ Judith Mayne, *Cinema Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), 18.

American films. However commercial Fengtai's intention was, it went in accordance with the campaign of "Chinese consuming Chinese goods" [*zhongguoren yung guohuo*], a patriotic campaign in the early decades of the 20th century in the consumer market in support of national industries as a strategy to redress China's trade deficit.

The availability of cinematic technology to Fengtai allowed the use of a new means of telling stories. The next question was what stories to tell and in what manners the stories were to be told. The spontaneous solution was to resort to *jingju*. *Xiqu* was still the most familiar form of story-telling among the mass audience. Attraction to the market was surely a major consideration. But it also showed that the strategy employed was recuperation. The powerful new technology of the cinema was treated as a novel vessel into which familiar local content was injected. Naturally, the content cannot stay unchanged in the new containment. The shape and the flavour of the texts are bound to alter in the new container.

The first silent *xiqu* films

The potential of the cinema to provide mass entertainment, even at its early stage in China at the turn of the 20th century, was an obvious business attraction. Ren Qingtai, the owner of the Fengtai Photographic Studio in Beijing, was determined to claim a share in the moving picture markets. Before his productions, imported films were the sole supplier. The earliest Chinese films made by Fengtai were ventured purely as a commercial project. Ren's first production was an episode of *jingju* in 1905. It was an episode of the piece *Ding junshan* [*Pacifying Jun Mountain*] played by Tan Xinpei, the most popular *wusheng* (martial male roles) artist at the time. In the same year, Tan made another episode from the full-length piece *Changban po* [*At Slope Changban*]. In the subsequent three years, Ren went on to make a further six episodes of *jingju*¹²⁶, all as part of the new commercial venture of his Fengtai Photographic Studio. Needless to say, these films were silent black-and-white movies. They were shown in Beijing at the Grand Auditorium, a viewing house also owned by Ren, and the Dongan Viewing House. Copies were also made for viewing houses in other provinces including Jiangxu in the east and the Fujian in the south.¹²⁷ There is no record available regarding the architecture or layout of the viewing houses. But it is known that the first Chinese cultural event to take place in a modern theatre was Wang Zhongshen's Chinese adaptation of

¹²⁶ These are the earliest movie productions in China. They are the 1906 productions of *Golden Panther* played by Yu Zhenting, *Mount Qingshe* by Yu Jusheng and Zhu Wenying, and *At Yanyang Teahouse* by Yu Jusheng; 1907 productions of *At Beach Baishui* by Yu Zhenting, and *Victory at Closing the Gate* by Xu Deying; 1908 production of *Weaving Cotton* by Xiao Magu.

¹²⁷ Record is quoted in Cheng Jihua ed., *Zhongguo Dianying Fazhan Shi* [*The History of Chinese Cinema Development*] vol.1, publisher and date unspecified.

Uncle Tom's Cabin in September 1907 in the British amateur dramatic theatre in Shanghai; and the first completely modernised theatre was not built in Beijing until 1921. The latter operated as both a theatre and a cinema. Therefore, the viewing houses that showed Ren's *jingju* films were likely to be very similar to old-style playhouses. In 1909, Ren's Fengtai Photographic Studio was burnt down. He went bankrupt, and thus his project of *jingju* film production terminated. In the subsequent short period, there was no production of Chinese films at all.

It is easy to romanticise this early venture to shoot *jingju* on film as an artistic experiment. The true attraction, however, was the huge audience base of *jingju* that could feed in to boost the film spectatorship. The choice of having *jingju* film was also made on grounds of convenience. The Fengtai Photographic Studio had stills and promotional photographs taken of many top star *jingju* players at the time. The personal relation between Ren and these players facilitated an easy beginning for his new project. The involvement of Tan Xinpei was also calculated to achieve a star quality for ticket sales purpose. In fact it was reported that Tan was invited to be involved in this project as a celebration of his 60th Birthday. He did not charge any fee for his performance since it was a new venture and guaranteed no profit. On the contrary, he considered it a prestigious thing to do. He might have had in mind the advantage that it would promote his own popularity.

These films were the first made in China. Neither technology nor skill was sophisticated. Tan Xinpei's first film, *Pacifying Mount Jun* is

described thus:

Later on the film was shown in the Grand Auditorium. The shape of the player was very clear. Everybody could tell it was Tan Xinpei. But as soon as he started the martial movement with the broadsword, all one could see was the broadsword moving. The figure was nowhere to be seen. There is this other section when the only thing caught by the camera was his boot and the gown above it. The upper body couldn't be seen at all.¹²⁸

One can imagine the difficulties in the making of this first piece of Chinese film. Shooting took place in the garden of the Fengtai Photographic Studio with daylight as the only lighting. A white cloth was used as background. One single camera was placed directly in front of Tan's performing area. One single long shot was taken for the whole reel of film. The cutting seams were simply places where a reel of film ran out and was replaced by the next fresh one. There was a percussion section on hand although it was a silent film. It was there so that Tan could play to the authentic rhythm of the piece as he did on stage. There was no adaptation of the piece in any way. In spite of its low filmic quality according to today's standard, the film attracted a big audience both in Beijing and the southern provinces where it was shown. There were two reasons for that. First, the audience of this new form of entertainment of a Western origin hardly knew what was to be expected when it was adapted into their own culture. They were not demanding, and were therefore easy to please. The sheer idea of the film's novelty was able to guarantee a handsome ticket

¹²⁸ Li Xuyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo Wusheng Diayin Shi [A History of the Chinese Silent Cinema]* (Beijing: China Film Press, 1996), 15.

sale. Second, the fame of Tan Xinpei was still at its peak. He had made audio recordings with Pathé in the past. Many among his listeners living outside the major northern cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Nanjing appreciated his singing without having seen his performance. The film provided an excellent opportunity for them to find out about this famous *jingju* star.

There is no record of the half dozen *xiqu* films subsequently made by Ren Qingtai showing any aesthetic development. Indeed most Chinese film historians speculate that the audience soon lost interest in his *xiqu* films. One can speculate that the reason for this loss of interest was due to a subsidence of the sense of novelty without any compensation in the artistic domain. Therefore after 1909, speech drama, newsreels and documentaries took over as the staple diet of Chinese films.

Viewing a *xiqu* on film

One thing all *xiqu* players need to learn as part of their training is to be conscious of the overall shape their bodies manifest on stage at every moment of the performance. This is expressed metaphorically among the professionals in terms of possessing an imaginary “third eye” which is positioned somewhere above the back of one’s head. This “third eye” functions as a reminder to the players to be highly aware and in control of the visual effects they are creating on the stage. As in many other stylised forms of theatres, the shape and movement of the performers’ bodies in *xiqu* are used as the main communicative and aesthetic tools.

The use of mirrors in training, practice and rehearsals was the only way to see one’s own performance until the 20th century. The mirror image was unable to provide a holistic view since the vision was confined to a frontal view and was limited to the player himself by the direction he faces. The recording of Tan Xinpei’s performance on film, although imperfectly filmed, was the first time a performer was able to see his own performance in its complete form. The possibility of repeated viewing has the function similar to a magnification so that minute details can be noticed. Although there is no solid evidence that Tan’s subsequent performance was influenced by his experience of film making, one could justly speculate that seeing his performance *in toto* on film for the first time must have helped him obtain a better idea of the look he created on stage.

The first films of Tan’s performance were shot with basic technology

and minimal skills. They could hardly be appreciated in terms of camera work. The single camera was stationed in front of the performer, and the films represented nothing more than attempts to record Tan's performance on film. Similar things were done in the West when the film makers were looking for different ways to use the new technology. Documentation of stage productions of Shakespeare started as early as 1899. A clip lasting for about one minute of *King John* starring Sir Herbert Beerbohm-Tree is still available in archives today. Both Shakespeare and the movie were such profitable business that in a few years' time, sophisticated adaptations of Shakespeare with thoughtful and witty camera work were already in production. However, the first serious adaptation of stage play into film was not made until 1905 when *Faust* was played on film. The 1907 Italian production of Mario Casarini's *Otello* is an early example of Shakespeare on film. The American film company Biograph made *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1908 with W. D. Griffith as the director. The most successful maker of Shakespeare on film was Vitagraph who made *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard III*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* in 1908, *King Lear* in 1909, *Twelfth Night* in 1910 and *As You Like It* in 1912. One of the first prestigious performances of stage player acting on a film was Sarah Bernhardt in her famous *La Reine Elisabeth* in 1912. Before that, she had filmed the duel scene from *Hamlet* as early as 1905.

However much early *xiqu* films tried to duplicate the viewing experience of a live performance, there are fundamental differences in the nature of the two that is impossible to pass unnoticed by the viewers. The

most obvious difference is that in a live performance, there is the possibility of interaction between the performers and the audience. Simultaneous exchange of affects and emotions acts as mutual enhancement of the shared experience. Each performance is a unique non-repeatable enactment. The contact between the viewer and the viewed text is personal and direct. Noël Carroll established his ontology of film by drawing a comparison between a film and a performance. One thing he points out is that a film is generated by a 'template', while a performance is generated by an 'interpretation'¹²⁹.

Also, the frontal seating arrangement and the need for a dark auditorium promotes a sense of privacy.¹³⁰ Not only is interflow between the viewer and the viewed absolutely impossible, exchange among the individual members of the audience is also inhibited. Any attention paid to other spectators is often regarded as an offensive and unwelcome intrusion of other people's personal space. Theatre-going, on the other hand, is a social event in all aspects. The lobby is always a place for an exchange of views on the performance or simply a social gathering at intermission time, before and after the performance. The cheering and boos from the auditorium, which are not only directed at the performers, but also seek agreement from other members of the audience, are also very much part of the *xiqu* convention. The communication between the stage and the

¹²⁹ Noël Carroll, "Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image", in Cynthia A. Freeland and Thoma E. Warterberg ed., *Philosophy and Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 68-85.

¹³⁰ An examination of the cinema apparatus in relation to *xiqu* film viewing is conducted in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

auditorium, and among the members of the audience is much more vocal and articulate than many other forms of live theatres, let alone the cinema that promotes a sense of isolated privacy in viewing. The kinetic flow of energy is much more vibrant and alive in the theatre. No doubt both audience in the cinema and the theatre share the experience of the same performance texts in case of filmic record of a stage performance, yet the former promotes a sense of privacy in the viewing while the latter promotes a sense of sociality.

A more definitive difference between the stage experience and a film experience is constituted by the fundamental difference in the physical properties of the two media. What one sees on a film is not “real”, but an optical illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional flat screen. In her study on the respective media of theatre and film, Susan Sontag describes this as a ‘theatrical frontality’ which involves ‘the unmoving camera reproducing the situation of the spectator of a play fixed in his seat’.¹³¹ However there is a basic difference between the real “theatrical frontality” and the imitated “frontality” on film. The respective sense of space created in the three-dimensional theatre and the two-dimensional film are different from one another. The objects and space between them in a film, although all in the most correct perspective possible since it is a filmed reproduction of reality, looks compressed without a real volume and an actual and physical spatial relation between them. With all the capacity and familiarity of the human optical faculty in dealing with

¹³¹ Susan Sontag, 340.

three-dimensional optical illusion created on the two-dimensional plane, the human eye certainly comprehends the spatial relationship represented. Yet to comprehend something is to understand it, not to experience it. There is a fundamental phenomenological difference there that cannot be eradicated.

The representation of a space outside the cinema on film also creates a sense of spatial ambiguity for its viewer. It is what Noël Carroll calls a ‘disembodied viewpoint in the cinema’,

The space between the great wall on Skull Island [in *King Kong*] as it appears on the screen and my body is disconnectedness; the space of the wall, though visually available through the film, is disconnected phenomenologically from the space I live in.

Francis Sparshoff calls this feature of viewing cinema alienated vision. Ordinarily our sense of where we are depends on our sense of balance and our kinesthetic feelings. What we see is integrated with these cues to yield a sense of where we are situated. But if what we see on the cinema screen is a “view”, then it is a disembodied view. I see a visual array, but I have no sense of where the portrayed space really is in relation to my body...what I do see are representations, or, better yet, displays – displays whose virtual spaces are detached from the space of my experience.¹³²

In a naturalistic narrative drama, what one sees on stage is an attempt to represent a reality outside the theatre. In a *xiqu* performance, there is a

¹³² Noël Carroll, “Towards an Ontology of the Moving Image”, 71.

less concrete “realistic” situation being referred to outside the performance text. For one reason, the stylisation of the text discourages attempts looking for real-life equivalence. But whatever the reference of a stage performance is, there is a sense of spatial unity, to follow Carroll’s line of argument, inside the theatre. What the audience sees is there in the theatre in its complete presence. In the viewing of a filmed image, the dark auditorium that suppresses the present and immediate context discourages an awareness of the viewed object existing in another time and space. The absorption into the scenario transports the cinema audience to an imagined time and space, a “there and then”. It creates a consciousness of dual level: an imaginary existence somewhere sometime, and an existence of the bodily experience of the physical environment of the cinema. The latter is being suppressed by the darkness and subdued atmosphere of the setting of the cinema so as to exploit the former to the full.

The temporal quality within a film text is also distinctive from that of a performance taking place in real time. Although there was no editing in Tan’s short films, there are still seams created by the lapse in time needed for the changing of film scroll during shooting. The reels were then spliced together to create continuity. One can very well imagine the skill and technology available in performing this connection of film was rather limited at the time. Successive ellipses created jerking effects in the sense of time and disrupted the temporal continuity intended.

Another equally important aspect of the difference between the

reception consciousness of *xiqu* in theatre and on film is created by the relationship between the audience and the performer. By this I do not mean the dramatic interaction on stage and in the auditorium as a dramatic device. I am referring to a more fundamental aspect of the theatre experience. The presence of the performer on film is an ambiguous, indeed non-physical, presence. Andre Bazin has given a description of the specific form of “presence” of actors on film,

Can the photographic image, especially the cinematographic image, be likened to other images and in common with them be regarded as having an existence distinct from the object? Presence, naturally, is defined in terms of time and space. “To be in the presence of someone” is to recognise him as existing contemporaneously with us and to note that he comes within the actual range of our senses – in the case of cinema of our sight and in radio of our hearing ... In no sense is it [actor on film] the image of an object or person, more correctly, it is its tracing ... The photograph proceeds by means of the lens to the taking of a varitable luminous impression in light – to a mold. As such it carries with it more than mere resemblance, namely a kind of identity – the card we call by that name being only conceivable in an age of photography. But photography is a feeble technique in the sense that its instantaneity compels it to capture time only piecemeal. The cinema does something strangely paradoxical. It makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object.¹³³

The player’s image on film, according to Bazin, is much more than an imitation. It also carries all the identity of the real person. The impact exerted on the auditorium, aesthetic, emotional or sensational, caused by

¹³³ André Bazin, “Theatre and Cinema”, from *What is Cinema*, extracted in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introduction Readings* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 357.

the actor's appearance, behaviour and actions are also felt in real terms.

Another film theorist Anne Friedberg pushes Bazin's point further and maps this discussion onto the issue of realism. She does this by recuperating the cinematic art within the tradition of the visual arts and the endeavour of the latter in pursuing representational realism through the centuries since the Renaissance,

The virtual gaze has a history rooted in all forms of visual representation (back to cave painting), but produced most dramatically by photography. The cinema developed as an apparatus that combined the mobile with the virtual. Hence, cinematic spectatorship changed, in unprecedented ways, concepts of the present and the real.¹³⁴

What she propounds here is an ultimate realism in the cinema. The photographic reproduction of life is accepted not only as images of, but as real life itself. Actions and events in the film are accepted not only in real terms but also in the actual time of viewing to take on an eternal present tense. Human perception is confused by the human creation of optical illusion. It refrains from differentiating between the image and the real. Within the cinematic experience that privileges the visual sensation, the distinction between the virtual and the real is broken down.

However, there is a paradox lying deep in this kind of presence. The very appearance of the actor on screen is to acknowledge and solve the

¹³⁴ Anne Freidberg, "Cinema and the Postmodern Condition", in Linda Williams ed., *Viewing Positions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 60.

unavailability of him in reality. So, the “presence” of the actor on screen actuates the recognition of his absence. In Tan’s short extracts on film, this paradox is more obvious than in narrative films we have today since the early films of Tan’s performance were made as silent black-and-white movies. The etiolation of life and deprivation of sound in the “reality” in these films, combined with the compressed sense of space and the disruption in temporal continuity, all work in the opposite direction to the pretended presence of Tan Xinpei to his viewers. His image was a kind of surrogate presence of him and reminder of his absence at the same time.

Tan was shrewd to spot the potential of the cinema in promoting his works to an even larger audience who could not otherwise be physically approached. This might have been a lesson that was learned from the making of records, with Pathé being a major player in the field. Recording effectively enlarged the catchment area of the players’ market and increased their financial gains considerably. The movie was an obvious next step to take. But of course in the early period of movies, *xiqu* films were silent and in black-and-white, so that films could not have replaced the stage performance of the particular piece. These films were meant to serve as visual stimulation and pictorial records of the players’ performance. Their function was to impress the audience and potential fans. They also acted as extension of their performance which, unlike the actual performance occasions, were repeatable and accessible for the fans who could not have attended the actual occasions. As a result, the camera functioned mainly to preserve the form and flavour of their performance. The language of *xiqu* inevitably took precedence over filmic language,

which would not have been difficult since at this period the infant camera was yet to find and establish its own poetics.

The celluloid and the vinyl reproductions retain the human image could and make it available to those who do not share the presence of the person on record. With the advancement in transportation and communication, the limitation of distance and time became less of an obstacle in daily life. Audiences in the southern cities and the provincial areas gained better knowledge of the fashionable *jingju* as performed by prestigious players from the capital city of Beijing and the primate city of Shanghai. The desire for their performance was created by the new technological condition that could make its fulfillment possible. The demand that modern technology created was only to be answered by modern technology itself.

At the time of these early silent *xiqu* films, the movie was still a new entity to audiences. There was no cinematic or aesthetic expectation in their reception. The characteristic features of the medium were yet to be discovered by its Chinese viewers. The films attempted to carry Tan's performance as transparent containers. In later feature films, the intention is different. The story is supposed to correspond to reality. The reference of the film is the real world. The documentation of a performance such as Tan's was completely different. The content of the film is already a second level of reality. It is a representation of reality on stage in a specific event of production. The Fengtai *xiqu* films are an even more extreme case. The reference of the film is to no actual event. It is not even a proper

production event. The actual event of the performance in reality is blurred by a background of white cloth and conveys a non-specific time and place. What is foregrounded is Tan's performance itself, taken out of any context whatsoever. The reference of the films is the actual performance text. This was why any editing and camera work was not only unavailable, but indeed neither necessary nor desirable. The reception consciousness of the viewers of these films was still theatrical rather than cinematic. There was, in all probability no cinematic desire among the target audience in the auditorium that needed to be satisfied by more advanced cinematic treatment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Cinema Spectatorship for *xiqu* films

As a novel form of entertainment and a vehicle that provided a large variety of content showing unfamiliar things from the brave new Euro-American world, cinema gradually became a very popular form of entertainment in the Chinese cities of the 1920s. The commercial success of movie shows encouraged investment. The early simple viewing houses of the 1910s were gradually replaced by purpose-built cinemas. Unlike the physical dimensions of theatres which vary tremendously from one another, all cinema buildings are very similar. Theatrical conventions have evolved in very culturally specific contexts around the world. The theatre buildings have been designed accordingly. The cinema, however, came into being in an era of imperialism and globalisation. Films have also been made for mass consumption. The more extended the outlet, the bigger the commercial profits will be. The film and its apparatus of projection were exported all over the world as a whole package. The cinema is therefore non-culture specific. If anything, it epitomises the homogeneity of the globalising 20th century cultural landscape.

The conditions of film viewing inside these cinemas are identical. The vision on the screen resulting from the projection of lights from the projection room is enhanced by the dark auditorium. The seats are arranged in rows in parallel to the screen creating a frontal full view of the picture frame. The rows of seats are put on steps slightly raised as they are

placed further away from the screen. This is to avoid blocking of vision by the people sitting in front. This uniform specific viewing condition of films has allowed cinema studies to develop a methodology to investigate the reception consciousness in general. The numerous approaches taken along this direction are referred to as the apparatus theories. They distinguish themselves from textual analysis that places its focus on individual film texts in the production of meaning. Apparatus theories, on the other hand, examine the psychological impacts the operation of the mechanical apparatus of the cinema makes on its viewers. They attempt to arrive at theories that explain what exactly goes on in the process of viewing. They are concerned with the communication *process* between a film text and its viewer. They are more ambitious than textual analysis in the way that they aim at putting under scrutiny the whole reception consciousness, something that is more fundamental in the cinematic experience.

Apparatus theories look at the process of film viewing in the cinema as a set of mechanisms which evoke psychological reactions from the viewers. The apparatus includes the auditorium as set in relation to the screen, the position the viewer finds himself in and the subsequent relationship he has with the viewed object, that is, the reality created by the optical illusion of the film. Judith Mayne has summarised the shared premises of apparatus theories:

Virtually all theorists of the apparatus assume a monolithic quality to the cinema, that is, the cinema works to acculturate individuals to structures of fantasy, desire, dream, and pleasure that are fully of a piece of dominant ideology.

This monolithic quality of the cinema is double-edged, referring simultaneously to large structures of the cinematic experience, at least insofar as mainstream film is concerned, as well as to the need to redefine those large structures so as to assume their continuing relevance ... In other words, then, theories of the apparatus are concerned to demonstrate how the large structures of the cinema operate.¹³⁵

Mayne cites the works of Metz, Baudry and Mulvey as the most important propagation of apparatus theories. Each of them suggests possibilities of the way the cinema apparatus works on its viewers' psyche:

For Baudry, the cinema creates a regressive state in the spectator, a return to the sensations of infantile wholeness, and for Metz, the regressive state encourages the possibilities to reactivate the "imaginary signifier", that is, a host of traumas associated with the development of subjectivity – voyeurism, the primal scene. For Mulvey, the mainstream cinema is made to the measure of male desire, and the various devices central to the classical Hollywood cinema all serve to facilitate the identification of the male spectator with his like, the male protagonist on screen.¹³⁶

Apparatus theories hypothesize the relationship between the spectator and the film as that between a subject and object of gaze. They stress that cinematic experience is primarily visual. A psychoanalytic twist is very often given to this theory of the cinematic gaze as exemplified by the work of Mulvey. The contrast between the darkness of the viewing auditorium and the corresponding brightness of the screen objects exposed to the

¹³⁵ Mayne, 18.

¹³⁶ Mayne, 18.

viewers' gaze, promotes a sense of voyeurism. The cinema viewer as the voyeur enjoys an absolute and unchallenged privacy. This is of course facilitated by the unanimated nature of the "reality" created by the filmic optical illusion, and the convention of realism in narrative cinema. The object of the gaze is totally non-threatening in this respect and is unable to defy the gaze. The darkness of the cinema provides a psychological shield to facilitate the illusion of voyeurism. This condition allows the image-object on screen to speak directly to the repressed part of the viewers' psyche. This mode of communication takes place side by side with the more rational reception in the form of comprehension of the plot which can be understood by textual analysis. All three propositions of the way the cinema apparatus works put forward by Baudry, Metz and Mulvey are concerned with the part the cinema plays in the formation of subjectivity for its viewer. They differ from each other not because they suggest different models of mechanisms at work in the cinema. Instead, they focus on different aspects of the viewers' subjectivity, and the formation of this subjectivity in relation to the cinema apparatus. Therefore, they are in no way mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they represent alternative perspectives on the same issue of the cinema's power as an Althusseurian ideological apparatus in the process of subject interpellation. Apparatus theories believe themselves to be revealing the way the design of the cinematic mechanism answers primary human desires, the way it interpolates the viewers' subjectivities on the various level of consciousness.

All apparatus theories draw on the Lacanian correlation of the gaze of

the mirror stage and the infantile entry into the symbolic order. If we accept that this psychological hypothesis is universally applicable, the voyeuristic impulse in the cinema should also be applied to Chinese spectators. In terms of the visual relationship between the auditorium and the viewed image, what is stated about the cinematic apparatus by the apparatus theorists is largely applicable in the analysis of Chinese spectators. It is justifiable to assume that in the dark environment of viewing houses and early cinema in the Chinese cities, the same dynamics of subject interpellation took place between the screen image and the audience, although the content of this subjectivity may have been different. These differences are in turn constituted by prevailing social, cultural and national realities. I have already specified the collective experience of early movie viewing in China in Chapter Six as the first visual knowledge of the powerful West, and as a part of the modernisation that China was desperate to imitate. In this Chapter, the main aspect of the Chinese cinema spectatorship in concern is the difference between this voyeuristic mode of reception of *xiqu* film and the theatre consciousness in the reception of a stage performance of *xiqu*.

It is tempting to conduct a comparison between the reception conditions of the cinema and the traditional *xiqu* playhouses because a great many interesting contrastive responses by the respective audiences would be discerned. Yet that would be misleading. One must bear in mind that by the 1920s when the cinematic entertainment became popular, the traditional playhouses were gradually being replaced by modern theatres of Western architecture. The proscenium arch stage equipped with all

kinds of devices including electrical lighting, together with the arrangement of seating in rows with house rules expected to be followed by the audience, had already tuned the audience into a different reception mode from that in the traditional playhouse. Indeed, the physical setting of the auditorium of these modern theatres was rather similar to that of the cinema. One of the main differences lay with the degree of privacy in the cinema environment and in the modern theatre. Although the modern theatre was no longer a place for other activities including social and business discussion during the performance as had been often the case in the traditional playhouse, theatre-going was still very much a social event. The lobby of the theatre was a place to meet up and to be met before and after performance, as well as during intermission. The auditorium was not in absolute darkness. The audience could see each other. On the other hand, movie going was cheaper. The performance was mechanical and much more regular. Therefore it was a much more casual activity. It was common for individuals to go to the cinema on their own whim. The complete darkness of the auditorium promoted a sense of privacy during viewing. The relationship between the screen image and the viewer could be more personal. On the whole, it promoted an illusion that the experience of the players' performance was more private and personal. In the theatre where viewing a performance was more of a social event, the viewers were aware that they were sharing their favourite players' performance with all other audience members at the same time.

It is already established in our discussion so far that early *xiqu* films endeavoured to reproduce the same appearance of *xiqu* and their

production was very much dictated by the performance convention of *xiqu*. Nevertheless, as concluded in Chapter Six, *xiqu* films only acted as a kind of surrogate to compensate for the absence of the performance text in live. They neither replaced stage performance nor became mere documentaries of the stage event since the film text did not refer to any actual performance event in theatres. As film was gradually finding its own characteristics in presentation and representation, *xiqu* filmmakers in the 1920s attempted to combine the poetics of *xiqu* and film in their subsequent productions. The following sections of this Chapter will examine some land-marking productions in this period.

Development of film language in *xiqu* films after the First World War

During the First World War, the film industry in Europe, like all other industries, was deeply affected by the wartime economy. The drop in productivity brought about a shift in the market share of the movie industry on an international level. As regards the film market in China, American movies replaced French productions in terms of popularity and became the biggest supplier in China. The Great War retarded supply of European films to China between 1914 and 1916. This situation was resolved with the introduction of American-produced films imported in large quantity from 1916 onwards. Two film studios were established in the 1910s. Asia Minor Film Studio [*Yaxiya*] was owned by foreign capital and was very commercial in nature. By contrast, the Film Studio of the Commercial Press¹³⁷ focused on productions of higher cultural values. The majority of their films were newsreels and documentaries for social and educational purposes, before their first *xiqu* film was attempted in 1920.

The first *xiqu* film the Commercial Press made was in 1920. It was an episode from *Xixiangji* [*Romance of the West Chamber*] starring Mei Lanfang. Although it was the Press's first attempt at *xiqu* films, the

¹³⁷ The Commercial Press was established as a publishing house of books in 1897 in Shanghai of exclusively Chinese capital by Chinese businessmen including Xia Cuifang and Zhang Yuanzhi. The Press is still running up to today and has become a major book publisher and seller in Hong Kong. Its mission was to promote high quality publications to raise the standard of popular cultural activities in a commercially viable manner. The mission of its Film Studio was to "resist imported films of immoral content in order to promote popular education; and to export high quality films in order to promote the positive side of Chinese culture and keep Chinese abroad informed of what is going on at home." Quoted in Xu Daoming, Sha Yipeng, *Zhongguo dianying jianshi* [*A Brief History of Chinese Cinema*] (Beijing: China Youth Press, 1990), 39.

production benefited enormously from its Studio's substantial experience in the making of newsreels and documentaries. The artistic capacity of film-making of the Press indeed represented some of the most sophisticated and advanced knowledge of filmmaking in China of that period. Another piece filmed in the same period was *Chunxiang Naoxue* [*Chunxiang Stirring up a Fuss in the School Room*]. The production details recounted by Mei Lanfang of this piece show that a great deal of thought was put into these early Commercial Press short *xiqu* films:

From then on, I did filming in the day and played on stage in the evening. It was May when shooting started. It took place in a big glass structure in the photography section of the Commercial Press on Baoshan Road in Shanghai. The structure was not small at all. It was also well equipped. It was a silent film. There was no official director. The cameraman designated an area of action for actors. The acting details were left to us to design ...

The appearance of Chunxiang [played by Mei] was introduced with a close-up. I covered my face with a fan. The camera pulled back as I lowered the fan to show my face ...¹³⁸

This is the first record of camera-work treatment in a *xiqu* film.¹³⁹ The use of film language was not meant to intrude, but to enhance the performance of the player. If the camera was to be engaged in a capacity to

¹³⁸ Mei Lanfang, *Wo di dianying shenghuo* [*My Life with the Cinema*] (Beijing: China Film Press, 1984), 5-6. My translation.

¹³⁹ None of these early episodes are available for viewing today. According to Mei, the original reels were destroyed during the Second World War. No other copies were known to have been preserved. Nevertheless, they have been put on a list compiled in 2000 of the most important 100 Chinese films to be released on VCD by a production company in China. I have tried to make contact with the company yet neither their release nor their availability have been confirmed.

provide a more interesting perspective than a static frontal view, more interaction between the communication modes of the two media would be needed. That also means more technical concerns to be resolved. In the making of the film *A Fairy Scatter Flowers*, Mei recorded how he had to adjust his movement pattern and blocking to make the filming technically viable:

[As I was dancing], I had to sing the tone at the same time in order to grasp the rhythm because *jingju* acting is timed to its music. Therefore it was quite tough. Moreover, a film is two-dimensional. One cannot do all the gestures in exactly the same position as one would do on stage. Although we had already held a few discussions beforehand, problems arose during shooting. I either moved out of focus or got outside the camera frame altogether. When the cameraman said, 'This is not good enough', I could only do it all over again.¹⁴⁰

There was no director to be responsible for the decision-making in the shooting. The design of the camera work and division of shots were done by the cameraman after careful consultation with Mei. On the whole it followed the principle of keeping intact the blocking and movement patterns as played on stage. The use of long and medium shots and close-ups was applied to emphasize certain details in the acting. The editing was done to help audiences appreciate the subtle details and to accentuate the dramatic effects. On the whole the continuity of the blocking and movement patterns were treated as the most important factor. There were places where adaptations were done to reinforce the story flow in the film. Mei recorded that sometimes events implied off-stage were

¹⁴⁰ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 11. My translation.

acted out for the film. Since the added sequences were also acted out in the acting convention of *xiqu*, they merge perfectly well with the other scenes originally present in the stage version. All adaptations for the film were conceived and executed within the boundary of the *xiqu* convention. The prominent position *xiqu* personnel occupied in the production procedures of *xiqu* films in this period ensured that the performing convention of *xiqu* took precedence in the film. The film version was used as a medium to serve the performance text.

An interesting comparison can be made between this film and the dance episode in *Shangyuan furen* [*Lady Shangyuan*] starring Mei and made by a visiting American crew in 1923. The episode was treated as a documentary of exotic culture for the American audience. The crew had no previous knowledge of *xiqu*. Neither the design of the camera work nor the shot breakdown were done in accordance with the movement and blocking patterns of the piece. The flow of movement was destroyed. Some of the patterns were even cut short before they were completed. The results aroused discontent among the *xiqu* personnel. However, this short extract was filmed for release in America as part of a newsreel. Mei Lanfang and his fellow performers had no say in the production process.

In 1924, Mei made five more *jingju* episodes on film. They were the feather dance in *Sishi* [*Sishi the Beauty*], the sword dance in *Bawang bieji* [*Farewell to the Concubine*], the tassel-wand dance in *Shangyuan furen* [*Lady Shangyuan*], the highly dance-like movement pattern of “walking on the edge” [*zoubian*] in *Mulan congju* [*Mulan Joining the Army*] and the

short dramatic episode *Daiyu zanghua* [*Daiyu Burying Petals*]. The first four were dance episodes. The focus was on preserving the blocking and movement patterns in their complete form on film. *Daiyu Burying Petals*, on the other hand, consists of more dramatic elements. It was the most interesting in terms of cinematic treatment, and therefore calls for more analytical attention.

The stage version of this *jingju* piece was first written for and performed by Mei Lanfang, then filmed by the pioneering film studio Minxin Film Company in 1924. Minxin was first founded in Hong Kong by the extremely talented film producer-director-actor Li Minwei. He started his early film-making activities in Hong Kong. Like many of his fellow cultural workers in the period, he was a member of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary body. Because of his high profile revolutionary association and political engagement, his filmmaking activities were curbed by the high-handed intervention of the colonial Hong Kong Government. He moved Minxin to Shanghai in the mid 1920s. Minxin productions in Shanghai continued to be socially engaged and artistically experimental. Unlike the purely commercial motive of the early *jingju* films of Fengtai Photographic Studio, Li's collaboration with Mei Lanfang was initiated by an enthusiasm for aesthetic experiment on the part of the two artists rather than for commercial profit. In fact Mei did not charge any artist fee.

The main body of this piece is adapted from an extract taken from Chapter Twenty-seven of *Honglouloumeng* [*Dream of the Red Mansion*]. Circumstances occur so that the main heroine Lin Daiyu is under the

misapprehension that she has been slighted by the chambermaids of her lover Jia Baoyu. This insult combines with her hypersensitive nature to plunge her into depression. She feels a sense of empathy with the flowers that have fallen from the branches in the wind. She compares herself with the beautiful but weightless flowers that are helplessly swept around in the breeze. She takes pity on these fallen flowers on the ground and buries them in the soil to avoid them being spoilt by mud and dirt.

Li Minwei was one of the most accomplished pioneers of the Chinese cinema. However, cinematic technique was still in its early stage and no complicated camera or editing work was involved in this particular piece. There was no complicated change of camera angles. Most of the variation came from the alternation between long shots, medium shots and close-ups within a single sequence of movement. Just as in his collaboration with other directors without expert knowledge of *jingju*, Mei Lanfang was heavily involved in the design of the camera work. Most of his advice in this regard was accepted and followed by the director Li.

Shooting of the film took place in a mansion house in Beijing. It had once been owned by a Manchurian Prince of the *Qing* court. The location was Mei Lanfang's choice. According to him, the reason for this choice was not in order to create a mechanical reproduction of a realistic garden on the screen. Rather, it was chosen because there were a great deal of similarities between the style of the grand garden in this mansion house and the Garden of Spectacles [*daguanyuan*] in the original novel of *Dream*

of the Red Mansion.¹⁴¹ To reproduce the ambience of the Garden of Spectacles would be highly desirable since its enclosed fairy-tale environment was central in the construction of the fairy-tale like story. He was trying to draw a differentiation between a representational and a presentational use of realistic scenery. But I do not find this distinction significant in this case since whatever the motive was, the realistic scenery has broken the enclosed stylised setting of the *xiqu* convention. This was the second time realistic scenery was used in a *xiqu* film, the first one being an earlier Mei Lanfang film of *Chunxiang naoxue* [*Chunxiang Stirring up a scene in the Study Room*] from the full-length work of *Peony Pavilion* [*Mudanting*] in Shanghai in 1920. In both cases, the entire narrative takes place in the garden. There is no need for the flexibility afforded by the minimal setting of the traditional *xiqu* stage suggesting non-specific locations.

It is interesting to compare the use of realistic background of these two films to *Mulan Joining the Army*, an earlier collaboration of Mei with The Commercial Press. The main action of *Mulan* is the movement sequence technically termed “walking on the edge” that is used to suggest the action of travelling a long distance. In *Mulan*, the heroine performs this sequence with a horsewhip to suggest the long harsh journey she undertakes on horseback in her army days. The shooting took place in a studio with a backdrop painted with scenery of the wilderness and a soldiers’ tent. With the tent’s omnipresence on a certain spot in the background, the whole acting space seems to be confined to a fixed

¹⁴¹ Mei Lanfang, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 18.

location. However, what the dance suggests is a long journey in the wilderness spanning a vastly extended distance. Mei was bothered by the contradiction between the dramatic action and the background.¹⁴² His instinct was right in detecting the discrepancy of set and action, and the contradiction in narrative logic.

Both a realistic garden and an over-decorated backdrop can be read as a lack of confidence by the producer in a non-realistic picture composition for a film. The abundance of documentary films both imported and locally produced by the Commercial Press fully revealed the potential of the cinema to show to its audience a much richer and more complicated *mise-en-scène*. Its direct and easy reference with reality also lured filmmakers and the audience to pursue a high degree of realism. *Xiqu* audiences with some experience of the cinema started to expect it. With the inherent potential of presenting life with many minute and intricate details on film, it was reasonable for *xiqu* film to respond to the pressure of a higher degree of naturalistic realism. With this, the audience are tuned into a different mode of viewing *xiqu* films from that of seeing a stage performance.

The complication of sets and scenery in *xiqu* films should not be looked at as an isolated phenomenon. In fact, *huaju* being heavily influenced by naturalistic realism had become increasingly fashionable and influential in China since the 1910s. The Chinese audience was more and more used to the reproduction of life-like scenery in the process of telling

¹⁴² Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 18.

stories. As examined in Part One of this thesis, the use of realistic scenery in stage *xiqu* production was both an attempt to bring *xiqu* closer to life and a commercial gimmick aimed at spectacle. The phenomenon of realistic scenery in *xiqu* films has therefore to be understood within the context of this general inclination for naturalistic realism.

One of Mei Lanfang's adaptations of another extract from *Dream of the Red Mansion* was set in the naturalistic box set of Jia Baoyu's bedchamber. However, stage realism and cinematic realism still differ from each other. However realistic the stage set might look, stage realism is after all a constructed set. It is highly controlled and artificial. On the other hand, when a film is made on location rather than in a constructed scene in a studio, the content of this "reality" is much less controlled. There is always an element of unexpectedness, or even risk, within the picture frame. Accidental elements can easily seep into the picture frame without being noticed at the time of shooting. But when they are spotted at the time of viewing, they bring unexpected effects to the viewing experience that might reveal something about the production itself. One example of this is the experience recounted by Mei during the making of *Chunxiang Stirring up a Scene in the Study Room* in Shanghai in 1920:

The studio got permission to take these few shots in the private Song Garden. The garden itself is built in the style of Chinese architecture. It bears the appearance of an ancestral hall. I remember walking out of the study as Chunxiang gets her permission to be excused and noticing the door being unusually high. It did not really go [with the Chinese architecture]. The extensive lawn in front of the garden was also unusual for a Chinese garden. On the other side of the garden

wall was a residence built in Western architectural style. Someone leaned his head out of the window and watched us film. Somebody said at the time, “This is an extraordinary merging of the ancient and the modern, of the Chinese and the foreign.”¹⁴³

In the completely controlled and constructed environment of the studio, it was possible to construct a totally self-enclosed context without any reference beyond the *xiqu* text. As mentioned before, with adequate lighting facilities, it was indeed unnecessary to set a scene in a realistic location. The very act of outdoor garden shooting for a garden scene betrays the underlying urge for naturalistic realism of both Western narrative cinema and *huaju* (speech drama). One should bear in mind the association of both *huaju* and the cinema to modernisation in China in the early 20th century. This urge in *xiqu* film for naturalistic realism is therefore also an urge for joining in modernisation. Once *xiqu* was lured out of its protected environment of the enclosed stylised setting and the constructed scenery in the studio, it found it impossible to ward off accidental elements from the modern world, such as the high door, the extensive lawn, the Western architectural style next door. These results in a feeling that the living reality is barging into the illusion of the ancient world. Once modernity has found its way into China, China has lost control over what to take in and what to keep out. The parallelism between the two situations, namely the seeping in of modern entities into *xiqu* produced in the modern cinematic form and the larger scenario of China in the face of modernization, is no coincidence. The former is a metonym of the latter. *Xiqu* and *xiqu* film productions were deep in China's

¹⁴³ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 6-7. My translation.

transformation into the modern. This scene was the best crystallization of this instance. The camera captures objects in the picture frame which were not seen at the time of shooting. The camera gaze was focused on the constructed ancient but was unable to exclude all traces of the modern, since the latter had already become a ubiquitous fact of life. But they were only noticed afterwards. Walter Benjamin called this effect the optical unconscious. It is very much a central feature of the photographic, hence cinematic, gaze. Witnessing such an incongruity on screen in turn reminded its contemporary viewer of the social transformation they were experiencing.

Daiyu Burying Petals was made as a silent black-and-white movie. One of its selling points was the attraction of the original novel *Dream of the Red Mansion*. The other was the quality of its music and the literary value of the arias and speeches which were taken directly out from the original novel text. The singing and speech declamation were very popular among Mei's fans. The lyrics convey the sorrowful atmosphere of Daiyu's self-pity through her lamentation for the fallen flowers. It would have seemed a pity to sacrifice them in the film. The lyrics are therefore inserted in the form of subtitles. It was the only way to preserve them in the silent production. However, the loss of the musical dimension necessarily curtails the poetic and emotive quality. Mei consequently elaborates his facial expression for the screen in order to compensate in terms of affective intensity the loss of singing and speech declamation:

... the expression of emotions on stage in this piece relies heavily on

singing and speech declamation. There are no extravagant facial expressions ... When it comes to a silent movie ... What does one do to express these? One can only rely on those slow gestures and facial expressions with intense concentration ... One needs to analyse and regulate the rhythm of internal emotions in our daily life. For example, there was this moment when Daiyu is lost in thought as she sees the ground being covered with fallen petals. There was also this moment when she holds back her tears after listening to some arias in *Peony Pavilion*. If I had played it [for the screen] in the same rhythm I did on stage, the audience would have missed the moment. It would have passed before it registered in their mind ... The very subtle facial expressions and gestures in *Daiyu Burying Flowers* takes regulation of rhythm and intensification on the part of the player by exercising his initiative and creativity.¹⁴⁴

In Mei's earlier performance in the film *Chunxiang Stirring up a Scene in the Study Room*, a similar problem was encountered. The text was important in the narrative but could not be included in a silent film. Mei's solution was to elaborate his facial expressions in order to put the meaning across.¹⁴⁵ The elaboration of facial expression is only available to the medium of cinema. The problem posed by this medium was answered by a possibility only available in the medium itself. This was the way the use of cinematic language was gradually explored and refined. Moreover, the possibility of close-up draws the player much closer to the audience. This intimacy creates an illusion of confidence which in turn fits into a more private mode of reception in the cinema with the auditorium plunged in darkness. This sense of confidence is not created merely through the audience's ability to see the facial expressions clearly, since the elaborate

¹⁴⁴ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 21-22. My translation.

¹⁴⁵ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 6.

make-up of *xiqu* can often achieve on stage. Instead, it is created by the variation of long and close shots, the alternation of a more objective view including more of the objective reality, and the emphasis on the subjective feelings of the character in close-ups. This example indicates that the unavailability of the old ways of signification stimulated exploration of new ways according to the authenticating conventions of the new container, in this case, the cinema.

The production of *xiqu* films was becoming more popular since the 1920s. Apart from Mei Lanfang's performances on celluloid, the Commercial Press also attempted to film Zhou Xinfang, the most popular *laosheng* (old male roles) player in Shanghai in his *Pipaji* [*Story of the Pipa*] as the first full-length *xiqu* on film. But shooting stopped after two episodes were finished for reasons unknown to the present research.

China Film Production Share Holding Company Limited [*Zhongguo yingpian zhizuo gufen youxian gongshi*] was another major *xiqu* film producer. It was established in 1919 as a commercial venture and backed by private capital. Most of the productions were short martial pieces. The actors were mostly recruited from the Nantong *Xiqu* Professional Training School [*Nantong linggong xuexiao*]. However, their performance was simply shot on film without much cinematic treatment or consideration of the blending of stage and cinematic language. The excitement afforded by the martial art performance nevertheless made the films popular in Shanghai and other southern provinces, where performances by *jingju* masters were not frequent.

Talkies and colour films of *xiqu*

The Vitagraph production of *Don Juan* was made in 1926. Its movie was accompanied by a sounded record on disc to co-ordinate with the film. Six months later, it was shown in *Zhongyang daxiyuan* [Central Grand Cinema] in Shanghai. The Cinema also housed an exhibition of projector and amplifiers at the same time to magnify the event. In 1927, the first talkie *The Jazz Singer* was shown. The popularity of the talkies prompted cinemas to improve their sound facilities in order to out-compete each other. The absence of production of talkies in the Chinese film industry meant that the market was once again monopolised by imported films. It was not until 1930 that the first Chinese talkies were made. The two talkies made in this year were both dramas.¹⁴⁶

It is generally held that the first *xiqu* talkie was made in 1933 entitled *Silang tanmu* [*Yang Silang Visiting His Mother*] by the Shanghai Film Production Company. However, early in 1930, Mei Lanfang already made a short clip of his performance accompanied by a soundtrack, although in New York during a tour and produced by the American company, Paramount. It was shown back in the cinemas in China even before he returned from his tour later on in the same year. It made him the first Chinese actor speaking, or singing, in the Chinese language to be seen on screen in China.

¹⁴⁶ The first talkie *Genu Hongmudan* [*The Songster Red Peony*] was produced by Mingxing Film Production Company. The script writer was Hong Shen, who later became one of the most important left-wing writers. It was directed by Zhang Shichuan, a director of speech drama and film; and starred Hu Die. In the same year, Youlian Film Production Company made a second talkie entitled *Yu Meiren* [*The Beautiful Lady Yu*].

In 1930, Mei Lanfang took his troupe on their first tour to the United States. His performance created a sensation in the cities he toured. He was lauded by theatre critics and visited by theatre and film celebrities including Stark Young, Charlie Chaplin and the Fairbanks. His performance in New York started on 27th February of that year. Paramount sent a crew to shoot some clips on the 5th March as newsreels. Shooting took place in the theatre after the show. The episode chosen was *Ci hu* [*Stabbing the Tiger*], a piece premiered in the United States which had never been performed in China before the troupe left on this tour. Again, Mei recorded the details of the shooting:

After the audience left, the film crew set up the lighting, camera and sound equipment they had brought. I did not redo my make-up. I just required a little freshening-up. It was already after two in the morning when we started shooting. The first shot was Ms Yang Siu explaining the story in English. Ms Yang lived in New York. We employed her as MC after we arrived ... Then the camera panned onto me. It was a medium shot on my upper body. I sang two lines ... with the microphone hanging down from above. The next was a long shot capturing the whole of the stage [with actions by other characters]. Then the camera panned back on to Liu Lianrong and myself ... My gesture of emptying the drink was followed by another gesture of vomiting. At this point, the shot was me alone. Then, I exclaimed “ah” and sang ... This clip finished at the sound of the percussion.¹⁴⁷

This clip runs for a few minutes. Mei was subsequently informed that it was shown back in China later in the same year, that is 1930, as newsreels before the film programme proper. According to him, there were

¹⁴⁷ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 28. My translation.

two main attractions of this clip. The first was its being the first time a Chinese actor appeared in a talkie. Another attraction was that the episode *Stabbing the Tiger* was a new work premiered on the tour and had never been seen in China before this clip was shown in the cinema. Many of his fans rushed to see it, as they would to his newly written works on stage. But since it was filmed as a news clip by a crew without any previous experience and knowledge of *xiqu*, one could imagine that its documentary function would prevail over its artistic value. The aesthetic quality of *xiqu* convention on film was not expected to be the major consideration. It served as a record of the event.

The 1930s saw a boom in both the *jingju* and film industries. *Jingju* stars including Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu and many others continued to develop their skills and extend the scope of representation of the form. Moving into modern theatres and imitating the capitalist system of theatre industries worldwide helped *jingju* to adapt to the modern commercial urban society. On the other hand, the greater availability of American-produced films and shooting equipment also boosted film-making. Shanghai was split by foreign powers and later on isolated by the Japanese military occupation. The urgent political situation created a sense of progressive nationalism in this highly developed commercial city. There was a boom in the production of socially engaged films. The concentration of progressive film-makers in Shanghai created a golden period of Shanghai cinema. By 1937 when China declared war on Japan, both *jingju* and film productions had developed a high degree of sophistication.

During the War, many cultural workers moved either west or south from the front-line of eastern China. The scarcity of resources curbed production of both films and *jingju*. In the *jingju* industry especially, most of the stars stopped acting altogether or even declared retirement so as to avoid entertaining Japanese military personnel. Mei Lanfang being a *dan* player yet sporting a moustache in his wartime residence in Hong Kong was exemplary of this spirit of resistance. The repression of creativity during the traumatic period of national crisis triggered an optimistic and prolific release in the years that immediately followed the victory. Artists and film-makers lost no time in resuming their creative activities with whatever resources they could muster. The most important *jingju* film made after the post-war years and before the establishment of the People's Republic was the prestigious and artistically acclaimed production of Mei Lanfang's *Shengsi hen* [*The Sorrow in Life and in Death*] directed by Fei Mu.

Fei and Mei had already met in the war years during their residence in Hong Kong. Post-war China was taking a long time to rise from the ruins of the war. Anything that involved capital investment was difficult. Mei's first stage appearance after the war in Shanghai in 1945 was facilitated by Fei's organisational help. A subsequent *jingju* film project was initiated by Fei in 1946. The choice of *The Sorrow* was suggested by Mei and agreed by Fei. It was an allegory written in the early stage of Japanese aggression to encourage patriotic defense. The story was about a couple in captivity as slaves in the enemy's camp. The wife Han Yunian helped her husband to escape. He joined their kinsmen's army and recaptured the land. But when

he managed to find his wife again, she was already very sick. He was just in time to see her again before she died. Revisiting this nationalistic text can be read as an act of healing in the aftermath of such a profound national trauma. This appearance on the cinema screen was the first time Mei reached a mass audience after almost a decade of absence from the stage. His obvious increase in weight and size did not deter the audience. Instead, it created a rapport with the audience by embodying the collective experience of the tragic change of national and personal life during the eight bloody years of war.

Being the first Chinese colour film, *The Sorrow* carries tremendous artistic and historic importance. However, according to Mei's recollection, the colour effect was not satisfactory since the quality of the film used was inferior. Upon his inquiry into the reasons for this, Fei explained that the conditions of use for the franchised Technicolour were extremely harsh. There was a constraint on their budget which only allowed them to use the cheaper 16mm Ansco Colour.¹⁴⁸ Another technical problem encountered was the faulty synchronisation between the sound track and the speed of the film in one of the scenes caused by unstable pressure in the electricity supply. The motor of the camera and the sound recorder as a result were operating at different speeds. This had to be later remedied by meticulous editing in the stage of post-production.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 77.

¹⁴⁹ Mei, *Wo di dianying shenghuo*, 77-78.

Although the film encountered many difficulties in its technical aspects, the blending of *xiqu* aesthetics into the film medium was lauded as a great success by both *xiqu* and film critics both at the time and up until the present day. Before *The Sorrow*, Fei had already directed a number of black and white films of *xiqu*.¹⁵⁰ Fei and Mei spent much time together before shooting on the discussion of matters including scenery, acting and blocking. Some relatively realistic-looking scenery and properties were employed. But this was hardly anything new since *xiqu* on stage had already moved towards a higher degree of realism with the availability of mechanical devices on the proscenium arch stage. Yet the acting in the film remained traditional on the whole and followed the blocking, gesture and movement patterns in the stage version of the piece. Some alterations were introduced to suit the requirements of the *mise-en-scène* on film. Mei's involvement in this process was vital. He was able to feed in expertise on the *jingju* conventions. Therefore, these changes were designed from within the boundary of the *jingju* conventions without letting the technicality of film shooting dictate the aesthetic. At the same time, the camera movement was creatively manipulated to add an extra dimension of emotional intensity to the scenario. The film medium excelled at adapting and altering certain elements in the *xiqu* conventions in order to accentuate the dramatic effect *xiqu* could achieve under these new conditions of production and reception.

Fei Mu was one of the few directors who theorised with great clarity

¹⁵⁰ One of the more successful and famous examples is *Zhan jingtang* [*Killing the Wife*] with Zhou Xinfang in the leading role.

his practical experimentation. For him, the focus of direction lies in the merging of the artistic effect brought about by the movement and blocking patterns of *jingju* and the cinematic *mise-en-scène*. In the programme note of *The Sorrow*, he states what he considers to be the most important principles of making *jingju* films:

1. There should be alterations made in the process of adaptation.
 2. One has to follow the conventions of *jingju*.
 3. Miming without props in *jingju* acting should be avoided on screen.
 4. *Jingju* is a highly stylised form. It operates through the use of symbols. One should seek to convey authentic emotions through the adoption of such highly symbolic stage business on screen.
- Therefore, one should find a new expression that could strike a balance between stylisation and realism.¹⁵¹

Unlike his predecessors who privileged *jingju* language over film language, Fei Mu attempted to find a new style so that the two enhance one another. The mechanical aspect in adaptation such as cutting and editing of the length of music and movement pattern had already been much explored in earlier *xiqu* films. What he explored was the more central issues of poetic and aesthetic values. He tried to find a way to capture on film the geometrics of *jingju* blocking and movements. In other words, he sought to accentuate with cinematic *mise-en-scène* the aesthetic quality created by the spatial relationship of animated and unanimated objects on the stage of *jingju*. What he aspired to was akin to the ultimate quality of Baudelaire's concept of *le beau*, not of a *jingju* or the movie, but

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Tian Han, "Ping Zhan jingtang" [A Comment on Killing the Wife], collected in *Fei Mu: dianying shiren* [*Fei Mu: the Poet of the Cinema*], Wong Oi-ling ed., (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Criticism Association, 1998), 263-270. My translation.

of a new genre of *xiqu* films that combine the semiotics of the respective media.

In his examination of Fei Mu's films, Tian Han notices two stylistic elements which are consistent in Fei's *xiqu* films and other narrative films. One is the manipulation of 'yundong' [movements], the other the creation of 'kongqi' [ambience]. 'Movement' refers to the co-ordination between the movements of the actors and the movement of the camera. 'Ambience' refers to the general atmosphere created by the spatial relationship of things in the picture frame. It involves a harmony of outlines, lighting and duration of positioning. Both point to the picture composition of a shot and the *mise-en-scène* with a temporal dimension.

By the time Fei and Mei made *The Sorrow*, they had both been informed by previous experience of making a number of *xiqu* films before the War. Fei himself had also grasped the speedy development of cinematic technique in the first forty years of film making in China. As a result they were both much bolder in their adaptation of the stage piece for the screen. The original twenty-two scenes were re-arranged into nine, not only through cutting, but also with alterations of details and additional scenes especially written in to enhance the continuity to suit a screen narrative. Some scenes were set with painted scenery at the back, others with an addition of simple stage items. The question of scenery and properties was treated with a great degree of flexibility. It depended on the requirements of the plot at specific points, and more important, the spatial relationship between the movement of the players' bodies and the items in

question. In these scenes, the visual effects created by picture composition were treated as of equal importance to the staging conventions of *jingju*.

The scene *Yesu* [*Reflection in the Night*] is a very good example of this. The scene is dominated by the heroine Han Yunian singing while weaving cloth. She exclaims in the arias about her harsh life as a slave held captive by the enemy. The stage version is set with a single chair and a very small handloom. The handloom was simply there to suggest the situation. It is more an integral part of the scenery than a property. In the film, it was replaced by a much bigger handloom placed in a central location of the hut Han lives in. Instead of miming the action of weaving as it is done on stage, Mei designed a different blocking pattern involving moving around the loom with expressive gestures while singing. The interaction of his movement and gestures with the loom was enhanced by the movement of the camera with appropriate pans and tilts, as well as zooms in and out to capture the geometric composition created by the spatial relationship of his body with the loom. In this way, a very fluid binary-level spatial composition is created. On one level it was the relationship between Mei's body and the loom, on a second level it was the interaction between the filmed object (Mei plus the loom as one unit) and the movement of the camera itself. Not only does it capture a rich visual experience that gratifies both *xiqu* and film viewing, but it also creates a definitive visual poetic incorporating the aesthetics of both *xiqu* and film.

***Xiqu* films in new China**

After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, film production gradually became state-owned. In order for the new authority to assert itself as a progressive government of and for the people, *xiqu* was given support in its development without the pressure of commercial consideration. The cinema was also a medium which was expected to serve this form of folk art. A generous amount of money was injected into production of *xiqu* films. The financial and moral support produced a number of high quality *xiqu* on films. Moreover, this was not only a privilege given to *jingju*, the many forms of regional *xiqu* were also able to join the rank. These works continued to explore the dramatic possibility of *xiqu* on film upon the foundation laid by Fei Mu. More successful examples are the 1954 production of the Shanghai *yueju* film of *Liang Shanbo yu Zu Yingtai* [*The Butterfly Lovers*], the 1962 Shanghai *yueju* film of *Hongloumeng* [*Dream of the Red Mansion*] and the 1956 *jingju* film of *Huangshan lei* [*Tears at the Barren Hill*].

The last *jingju* film on the above list is a 1956 adaptation of Cheng Yanqiu's 1930 stage production of the same title. Cheng was a male player acting in *dan* [female] roles in *jingju* around the same time as Mei Lanfang. Although Mei has enjoyed much greater posthumous fame, Cheng was of equal rank with him in terms of both artistic achievement and popularity at the time. The original stage production of *Tears at the Barren Hill* was produced at the time as insinuation of corruption in the National Party Government. It tells the story of Zhang Huizhu's family. In order to pay

heavy taxes, Zhang's husband and father-in-law go up to the mountain to collect herbs for sale. Unfortunately they are killed by tigers. Meanwhile Zhang's only son is recruited into the army by force although he is too young for it. In her grief Zhang's mother-in-law falls ill and dies. The tax collectors keep coming back for further tax payments. Unable to bear the tragic situation, Zhang hallucinates and sees her dead family. She runs to the mountain and commits suicide in utter desperation. By the 1950s *xiqu* film makers were already very comfortable about cutting and adding scenes to promote narrative continuity and smooth transition between scenes. The script of *Tears* was treated in the same manner. But the aim of adaptation was merely technical. The theme and focus remain the same as the stage version.

The director of the film was Wu Zuguang, one of the prominent left-wing film directors of the Chinese cinema. The choice of the play was artistic as well as political. The criticism on the corrupt National Party Government was supposed to encourage identification with the new Communist Government. Within the larger picture of the boom in *jingju* production in the 1950s under the Government's encouragement, earlier works which were socially engaged were revived. *Tears* was one of them. Heavy government support and subsidies which relieved *xiqu* films of too much consideration of commercial factors allowed more room for genuine aesthetic exploration into the combination of the *xiqu* and cinematic conventions.

The film tries to retain a taste of stage performance in a number of

ways. First, in most scenes, especially in the opening of the first few scenes, the picture frame is delineated by a pair of green curtains. It creates a view similar to that of a proscenium arch in the theatre. Second, in most scenes, the camera is placed right in front of the set to create a full frontal view as seen from the auditorium. Third, the picture does not attempt to create a sense of illusory depth as if in a realistic setting. A large piece of painted scenery is used in each scene as would be the case in the theatre. The feeling of depth created is similar to the depth of a stage. Even outdoor scenes were set with painted backdrops of scenery. What is created is a sense of finite depth such as on stage rather than the infinite depth of an outdoor environment. Moreover, exits and entrances of characters are included in the scenes. As if coming on and off through the side wings of the stage, actors enter and exit from the two sides of the picture frame. It is treated as *mise-en-scène* within a take rather than being subjected to the usual editing in narrative cinema, in which characters are always found at the middle of the scenario right in the very beginning of a scene.

Unlike classic Hollywood narrative cinema in which the flow of narrative is facilitated by events and scenarios, the development of the dramatic intensity in *Tears* follows closely the state of mind of the main character Zhang Huizhu. This is done by means of the cinematographic design that puts her centre stage all the time. The design of the cinematography is structured to highlight the skill of the star player Cheng Yanqiu, rather than to decorate the dramatic development of the plot. All shots are designed with him as the focus. The position of other characters

and properties in the picture frame are determined in terms of their relationship with him. Empty shots are kept to a minimum of under twenty in the whole film, each of very short duration of under ten seconds. Most of them are shots of the painted scenery at the back showing the barren mountain outside the window of her hut. They are included less for their own sake but rather to emphasise the desperate poverty she was feeling. This is indeed in tune with the convention of *xiqu* in which the dramatic flow is generated by the emotional states as a consequence of the actions of the protagonists. It is due to this element that the skills of the players are highly significant as they provide both spectacle and accentuated dramatic moments. This emphasis on the player is often achieved in *Tears* through positioning the camera in the right place. For example, in scenes in which the main protagonist Zhang Huizhu appears with the other four members of her family and in which she does not occupy the most central position in the grouping, the camera would be placed not in a frontal position but at an angle so as to keep Zhang in the central position from the audience's perspective.

The manipulation of camera work and editing is kept to a minimum in this film. When an extended aria is sung or when emotive movements are made, the camera is kept completely static for a few minutes. These static moments often run successively with only slight panning in between. Yet the aim of these slight camera movements is not to create cinematic technique, but to keep the figure in the centre of the picture as the player makes slight steps to the left and right, or forward and back. Sometimes but not often, the static long shots are interrupted by zooming in and out to

create full figure view or close-up. This is determined according to whether his facial expressions or his gestures are more expressive. These are again done to enhance appreciation of the player's performance. Most of the shots are taken in his full-sized or three-quarter figure. The minimal background stage set stresses the geometric shape created by his body in the acting space. The visual effect is highly pleasing.

Cinematic language is used in this way, almost like a cursor on the performance, to direct viewers' eyes and to guide their attention to the focus of the performer's technique. It can also create images and symbols through the manipulation of viewing perspectives in order to create the kind of lyricism which cannot be conveyed on stage. There are two places where overhead shots are used, both to intensify the geometric sense created by the *yuanchang* [running-in-the-round] movement pattern of the actor. When a character runs in the round in a scene, it usually denotes travelling a long distance. The more rounds he runs, the longer the distance he is supposed to have travelled. In many later *xiqu* films, running-in-the-round is often superimposed on a background of scenery in montage. Technically, it requires heavy editing and laboratory technique. As far as reception is concerned, it diverts viewers' attention from the player's performance to the frequently fancy background. What the director Wu Zuguang has done in *Tears* is to shoot running-in-the-round from an overhead viewpoint. The downside is that it takes away the signifying function of the pattern. An audience with no previous knowledge of the convention would not be able to associate it with travelling but would simply view it as a geometric manoeuvre on the part

of the characters. The advantage is that it succeeds in stressing the aesthetic quality of the blocking. The quality of the spectacle of this blocking pattern is laid in the full view to the camera. It is particularly effective when the run involves co-ordination of running-in-the-round by a whole crowd, or highly skillful movement during the run by the star player, as the two cases in *Tears* illustrate.

What is successful about cinematography in this film is not only that it has been subsumed under the conventions of *jingju*. In its subtle way, very powerful visual images are also created through intelligent camera-work. These images are skilfully incorporated in the film without being so prominent as to intrude into the conventions of *jingju* acting. One example is the characterisation of the corrupt official. He is a minor character with only a couple of short appearances. His first appearance is set in the courtroom, just as it is in the stage version. The background of the scenery is dominated by a painting of a tiger head of enormous size. There is a long take on him directly from the front against the tiger backdrop. The camera being placed right in front of its objects minimises the illusion of depth. The head of the official is juxtaposed with the tiger head that is now still behind him but occupying a much more prominent visual position. The implied comparison between a corrupt court and a fierce tiger can be easily inferred.

Like *Sorrow*, *Tears* manages to merge the conventions of *xiqu* with cinematic language. Neither of the films attempt to make *xiqu* more realistic than it is on stage. With the heavy involvement of the star players

in the production consultation, both directors place the focus of the film on the players' performance. This is very much in tune with production conventions of *xiqu*. The results are two cinematic representations of, not the stories, nor the stage performance of the works, but the performance of the players and the convention itself. In this way, the cinema as container of the performance does not change the essence of the form. Rather it adds a new aesthetic dimension of cinematic images to it. *Sorrow* and *Tears* were the pinnacle of the harmonious blend of the two conventions. However, the prominence of the *xiqu* convention in *xiqu* films lasted as long as the cinema was still struggling to find its own distinct language and form of narrative convention, and as long as *xiqu* was still captivating to both the audience and the filmmakers. After about 50 years of film making in China and the world in general, film language was developed to such an advanced stage that it started to overwhelm and over-shadow the conventions of *xiqu*, which by that stage was losing its popularity to the many other forms of popular entertainment. The signification system of *xiqu* started to become subservient to the powerful narrative system of the film.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Xiqu films in pre-War Hong Kong

Some post-War productions of *xiqu* film did continue along the path of attempting to combine the aesthetics of the *xiqu* convention with film language, with the former as the focus of artistic attention after Fei Mu's examples. However, as the cinema was developing into a highly sophisticated art with powerful narratorial and representational techniques, it became increasingly difficult for the *xiqu* aesthetic convention to dominate in the overall structure of a *xiqu* film. The audience had also become more experienced in film viewing and expected more complicated manipulation of the cinematic techniques. Meanwhile, the advancement of the electronic media was taking away the monopoly *xiqu* once had in popular entertainment. All these factors put the convention of *xiqu* in a less privileged position in a *xiqu* film. It was only in mainland China where *xiqu* films were still structurally dominated by the performing convention of *xiqu*. The main reason was that the credo of using film to promote and preserve *xiqu* as a folk art was still adhered to in the pre-Cultural Revolution years under Government guidelines. The institution of a state-owned film industry allowed some room for *xiqu* filmmakers to continue in this direction without the consideration of appealing to market forces. The positive result of Government support was the production of a number of successful *xiqu* films in the 1950s. However, after all, *xiqu* was already losing many of its supporters to films, especially story films with faster narrative pace. It was impossible for *xiqu* films, however well made,

to create either a sensational audience response or a far-reaching and significant artistic influence.

It was in the British colony of Hong Kong that *xiqu* film experienced its last boom. The decade was the 1950s, immediately after the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the closure of the border separating the two territories.

The regional form of *xiqu* practiced in Hong Kong is known as Guangdong *yueju*.¹⁵² It is played in Cantonese, a dialect spoken in the cities of Hong Kong, Guangzhou (the primate city of the Guangdong province) and a few neighbouring towns. It is also the main dialect spoken in Chinese communities abroad since the majority of the early 20th century emigrants were from these southern coastal areas. According to a survey done by the Hong Kong film historian Yu Muyun, the first Guangdong *yueju* on film was a silent movie made in Hong Kong in 1913. Between 1913 and 1986, 963 Guangdong *yueju* films were made in Hong Kong. It is the regional *xiqu* that has been filmed most. In the 1930s, 91 out of the total of 378 Cantonese films were *yueju* films. The most productive year in this decade was 1939. 33 were made. In the 1940s, 160 out of the total production of Cantonese films were Guangdong *yueju*. The most productive year in this decade was after the War in 1949 when 58 were made. The prime time of Guangdong *yueju* films was the 1950s. Out of the

¹⁵² One of the regional forms practiced in the Shanghai area is also called *yueju*. It should be noted that the two words areonyms. They share the same phoneme "yue" without having anything semantically in common. In order to differentiate the two, I suggest the clarification "Shanghai" and "Guangdong" should precede the term.

total production of 1519 Cantonese films, 515 were Guangdong *yueju*. 1958 was the most productive year and 81 were made in this single year. The ratio dropped in the 1960s. Out of the total number of 1548 Cantonese films, only 193 were Guangdong *yueju* films. The most productive year was 1962 with 49 productions. In 1969, not a single Guangdong *yueju* film was made.¹⁵³ The unique prolific situation of Guangdong *yueju* films can be revealed when the figure is compared to that of other regional *xiqu*. The second most prolific regional *xiqu* on film is *jingju*. Between 1946 and 1968, there were less than 30 productions.¹⁵⁴

The first talkie in Cantonese was made in 1933, three years after the first Chinese talkie *The Songster Red Peony* was made in Beijing. The 1933 Cantonese talkie was a Guangdong *yueju* film. It starred the *yueju sheng* (male roles)¹⁵⁵ player Xue Jiaoxian in *Bai Jinglong*. It was a success and broke the ticket record in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou (where Cantonese is spoken as the local dialect) at the time. The presence of dialectal variants in talkies prompted a trend towards heterogeneity in the Chinese cinema. Hong Kong films in the dialect of Cantonese were restricted to catering for a local audience. Unlike Mandarin (later called

¹⁵³ Yu Muyun, "Xianggang yueju fazhan shihua" [Some Details on the History of the Development of Hong Kong *Yueju*] in *A Retrospective on Cantonese Xiqu Films* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council for Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1987), 18-21.

¹⁵⁴ Yu Muyun, "The Contribution of *Yueju* Films to the Preservation of *Yueju*" in Lin Nien-tung, Tony Raynes and Roger Garcia ed., *Hong Kong Cinema Survey 1946-1968* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council for the Hong Kong International Film Festival), 68.

¹⁵⁵ The category of professional roles is less detailed in Guangdong *yueju* than in *jingju*. *Sheng* (male roles) is a more inclusive category of male characters who can be both martial literary, older and younger.

Putonghua in the Mainland after 1949) which enjoys the status of a national *lingua franca* and is supposed to be understood all around China, Cantonese was understood only by its local residents. This highly localised feature of the Hong Kong cinema in Cantonese has geared it to develop in accordance with the phenomena of urbanisation and Westernisation, following the characteristics of the region.

Yu Muyun divided Guangdong *yueju* films into six categories: 1. documentary of *yueju* performances as played on stage; 2. adaptation of *yueju* pieces into films following the basics of stage convention with some manipulation of shots by the camera; 3. drama with *yueju* arias in either ancient or modern settings; 4. *yueju* stories adapted into drama and played in either ancient or modern settings (this type was most popular before the War when almost 100 were made); 5. episodes taken from the same piece of *yueju* making up a consistent film narrative; 7. episodes from different pieces to constitute a *yueju* film showcase.¹⁵⁶

Unlike most drama productions, films nearly always incur high production costs. The need for immense capital investment means that the cinema has to attract a mass audience to break even. Therefore, market forces represents more of a determining factor in deciding the type of films to be made than it would be for stage performance. Gimmicks and stock jokes that could squeeze easy laughs from the audience were standard features in the early Guangdong *yueju* films. One of the cliché jokes that were regularly made concerned the incompatibility of the advanced

¹⁵⁶ Yu, "Xianggang *yueju* fazhan shihua", 18.

cinematic technology with the subject matter of ancient stories. One can speculate that the emphasis on this incompatibility implied a very high self-awareness of the cultural difference on the part of the film-makers and players. The different modes and procedures of performing on stage and in front of the camera must have been quite a shock to the first Guangdong *yueju* players acting for the movies. This resulted in the playing up of the split levels of reality. One example was the 1934 film [*An Erotic History in Palace Xuan*] in which Xue Jiaoxian dressed up in what was supposed to be ancient Western costume and spoke a few lines of broken English to get a good laugh from the audience. The idea of the West, ancient or contemporary, and the English language bore clear association in the minds of audience and film producers alike with the advanced technology and modernity which were the essence of the photographic medium of the movie. The self-awareness of this *xiqu* film is evident.

All in all, the 1930s and early 40s were the initial stage of Guangdong *yueju* film production. The form still had to absorb the shock brought about by the new technology of film-making. The Hong Kong film industry also had to confront itself with the linguistic reality of being in a dialect after the talkies were established. This reality implied a shrinking market that was confined to the southern cities with Cantonese as the dialect. The imperative for commercial success to ensure survival of production companies became even more acute. Pre-War film producers had no choice but to pitch at the most populist style and details in order to attract a mass working-class audience, who were themselves struggling to maintain their livelihood with little money to spare for entertainment. As a

result, these pre-War Guangdong *yueju* films were loaded with lightweight trivialities and populist sentimentality. Sophisticated productions with profound artistic values were extremely rare.

***Xiqu* films in post-War Hong Kong**

Hong Kong experienced a new social and cultural scenario after the War. The civil war in China and the subsequent changeover to Communist rule altered the political, economical and cultural landscape of the region and the world. Hong Kong being the gateway between China and the West was a hypersensitive location. No aspect of life in Hong Kong was left untouched by these changes. The colonial Hong Kong Government saw the macro-political importance of this political and military strategic location. To control the nationalist sentiment that necessarily existed in the colony became an even more burning issue for the colonial Government.

Hong Kong was under British rule from 1841 until the twilight years of the 20th century. Hong Kong and other areas in China basically shared the same cultural system with variations in terms of regional practices. Before the 19th century, the cultural divergence between what is now Hong Kong and the rest of China was merely a matter of regional differences between provinces and areas. The opening up of Chinese ports subjected a number of coastal cities including Hong Kong to very strong Western influence. The British colonisation in 1841 reinforced Westernisation and resulted in Hong Kong culture differing more drastically from the rest of China, especially after the establishment of communist rule. Like all colonised subjects, the psyche of the indigenous population in Hong Kong was hardly flattered. Nor was their Chinese identity nurtured. The animosity between the locals and their colonisers was acute in the early stage of colonisation. One strategy the colonial Government adopted to

neutralise the nationalist sentiments was the promotion of Western education and culture. It was only in the 1970s and the 1980s when the Labour Governor M'Clellan carried out a mass scale infrastructure development and social welfare scheme with an enormous injection of capital, probably with the awareness of the likelihood of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, that the local resentment towards the British administration was mitigated to a considerable extent.

Another social force at work in the shaping of cultural life in Hong Kong was the urge for improvement in people's living standard. The recovery of the post-War economy relied heavily on manufacturing industries. What was required was relentless dedication and long working hours on the part of the working population in order to out-compete other Asian manufacturers that also offered labour and land at very competitive prices. This to a very large extent determined the work, leisure and consumption patterns of the mass population of Hong Kong. The colonial Government was keen on and very successful in promoting a sense of pride in the people's work ethic. The construction of the mentality of "being practical" was an efficient and effective method of diluting the national sentiments of the colonised living at the gateway of China. On the whole, ideological control was managed with a relatively soft hand apart from a few incidents of civic discontent which were quickly suppressed and kept quiet. The myth of capitalist progress the Hong Kong Government created and lionised worked together with an understated cultural policy that did not offer support to any development of local culture. It left anything ethnic to the prevailing market forces. Under this

condition, Guangdong *yueju* continued what was already a common practice before the War and found its way to financial success through the cinema.

The commercial success of Guangdong *yueju* films in Hong Kong expressed a structure of feelings of the colonised. In *xiqu* that depicted an ancient China in ancient settings they caught a glimpse of their collective pre-colonised past. This urge for the national past was unique in the colony of Hong Kong and was not shared by other Chinese territories. The desire for ancient China was produced by the crisis of their Chinese identity at threat. Chapter Two has already discussed the way Nietzsche investigates how entities related to the past are frequently employed to resolve a present crisis in the national identity. For him, monuments and museums are items to help imagining a grand national past in order to empower (in some cases invalidate) the present. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's study of the idea of a national past in colonies and ex-colonies is an even clearer illustration of the case of *xiqu* on film in Hong Kong. Hobsbawm explicates that very often a "past" bearing certain features is constructed to form a narrative of national continuity after decolonisation.¹⁵⁷ Terence Ranger follows this line of argument in his study of colonial rule in Africa. He observed that a national past in these African countries is usually accompanied by a playing-up at the ideological level of its cultural tradition fossilised at a certain remote point in history as if it has not been

¹⁵⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions", in *The Invention of Tradition*, E. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 1-14.

touched by the changes of life through the ages.¹⁵⁸ Edward Said qualifies this “constant tradition” as a ‘privileged past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives’.¹⁵⁹ This constructed past functions at the same time as a sanctuary from the unsatisfactory present and a channel to express the repressed nationalism in the colonial present. The hope for its assertion lies in the continuation of the national character, imagined or real. Such a continuation cannot be supported by the colonial social system. Therefore, it finds outlets in the realm of folk art, or transformed into a market force which is both protected and exploited by commercial ventures.

Guangdong *yueju* has been a major form of entertainment for the Chinese, mainly Cantonese population in Hong Kong until the 1970s. Canto pop and Hollywood movies became more appealing to the first generation of a truly bilingual population who have reached their early twenties with considerable spending power. But until then, the majority of the Hong Kong Chinese population had suffered socially and professionally, hence financially, because they had not managed the colonial language of English. They asserted their Chinese identity in the realm of popular entertainment through Guangdong *yueju* films. These films became the site where their repressed discontent was released under the disguise of trivial entertainment. The popularity of *xiqu* in the regional form of Guangdong *yueju* (played in the dialect of Cantonese) should be

¹⁵⁸ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa”, in *Invention*, 247.

¹⁵⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), 16.

read as a subtle form of resistance. Unlike *xiqu* practitioners in China who have been seeking to represent modern life to bring *xiqu* closer to life, modern plays have never caught on in Hong Kong. Most of the stories were an ancient setting and with romantic themes. The spectacle of the ancient look and the attraction of love stories worked both commercially and politically. *Xiqu* being locked in ancient times with soft concerns could hardly be threatening to the colonial rule. The popularity of stage productions of Guangdong *yueju* prompted production of Guangdong *yueju* on film as a more profitable business and also a more affordable pastime that attracted particularly the mass population of the working-class in Hong Kong. According to Li Tie, one of most accomplished director of Guangdong *yueju* films in the 1950s and the 1960s, the average price for a stage Guangdong *yueju* ticket was HK\$10-25. One for a Guangdong *yueju* film in the cinema was HK\$1.75-2.40.¹⁶⁰

There is a more specific reason for the timing of the boom of Guangdong *yueju* films in the 1950s. The 1949 founding of the People's Republic caused a great number of Mainlanders from all walks of life to flee into Hong Kong. Within the four days after the proclamation, that is from 10th to 14th October 1949, hundreds of thousands of people arrived in Hong Kong from Guangzhou by through-train. In the years 1949-1959, the population of Hong Kong increased by 40%.¹⁶¹ It was a very harsh

¹⁶⁰ "Xiqu yu dianying: Li Tie hua dangnian" [*Xiqu and Film: Li Tie on Days in the Past*], in *A Retrospective on Cantonese Xiqu Films*, writer and editor unspecified (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council for the Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1987), 68-69.

¹⁶¹ The last Hong Kong-Guangzhou through-train departed Guangzhou at 2 o'clock in the

situation as the existing social infrastructure was inadequate to cope with this sudden sharp increase in population. Living standards and the quality of life of society as a whole suffered. The newcomers were inevitably the worst cared for. Many of them were left in poverty in squatter areas. The present unsatisfactory added to the pain of leaving their homeland. The idea and the reality of living under colonial rule rubbed salt into the wound. The escape into *xiqu* as the emblem of national culture satisfied the longing for a close bond to the motherland. Many of them mastered the Cantonese dialect very soon. Guangdong *yueju* on film became a much cheaper alternative to attending stage productions, and thus cinema offered a more practical alternative that they could frequent much more.

The number of Guangdong *yueju* productions on film boomed especially in the second half of the 1950s. According to Li Tie, the reason was commercial. There were four cinema chains in Hong Kong playing Cantonese films and there were 22 slots in each cinema in a year. Cinemas were keen to secure a supply of films. Guangdong *yueju* on film was the ideal source. The pieces filmed were works already produced on stage. Even on film, the convention of Guangdong *yueju* allowed the alternative of minimal setting and properties to tell a story. Blocking and acting could

afternoon of 14th October 1949. It was not until 1979 that the through-train was in operation again. The National Party Army withdrew from Guangzhou at 3 on 14th October 1949. At midnight, the last ferry from Guangzhou to Hong Kong departed. The PLA captured Guangzhou on the 15th. In the six months afterwards, many people took the train to Shenzhen and walked through the Lohu Bridge into Hong Kong, which was the last pass-way left between China and Hong Kong before China forbade free entry and exit on 1st May 1950. The last person who went through to Hong Kong departed Shenzhen and entered into Hong Kong at 6 o'clock on 30th April 1950. Figures quoted in Wu Hao, "Love and Hate for China: On Exile arts and cinema in Hong Kong", in *The China Factor in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Urban Council for the Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1990), 21-30.

be done on the whole as on stage. Minimal directorial work was needed. The players had their own costumes. Hair and make-up was also conventionalized. No design was needed. Not even new costumes were needed. A film director who could deal with the camera work and a crew experienced in making Guangdong *yueju* films could ensure an acceptable standard of product. Production costs could be as low as HK\$60,000. As regard to ticket sales, star players guaranteed a good box-office from their fans.¹⁶² It was good business.

¹⁶² “Xiqu yu dianying”, 68-69.

Realism of *xiqu* and realism of the film

Rapid advancement in technology, capitalisation and commercialism have changed lives in the westernised city of Hong Kong drastically in the short period immediately after the War. The highly modernised way of life was both constitutive of and informed by the urban sensitivity dominated by fast moving and fragmented sensations. The film which is basically structured by sequences of discrete images became the more effective medium to articulate the contemporary structure of feelings. With the highly sophisticated and very specific narratorial and poetic language of the film, the *xiqu* convention in *xiqu* films became diluted. *Xiqu* films produced in the 1950s in Hong Kong were made according to the requirements of a story film akin to Hollywood narrative cinema, and to appeal to a market that was attuned to the reception of the latter.

One obvious feature of this group of *xiqu* films is the predominance of the plot. As mentioned in earlier Chapters, traditional *xiqu* places its focus on the reaction when the protagonists find themselves in certain dramatic situations. These Guangdong *yueju* films, on the other hand, placed heavy stress on the development of fast-moving plots with intrigues and drastic dramatic conflicts. The more subtle depiction of the protagonists' psychological states was only present in some arias. It is more apt to describe them as story films with *xiqu* elements.

There is a more fundamental difference between the aesthetics of *xiqu* and that of the narrative cinema. The two basically work in two different

modes of realism together. I suggest that the Guangdong *yueju* films have shifted from the realism of *xiqu* to the realism of narrative cinema. They have ceased to be a genre of *xiqu* and become a genre of the cinema. I will argue this by clarifying what is meant by the different modes of realism in *xiqu* and in films. I will start with an investigation of the realism afforded by the film in general. The present study is well aware that film theories available to us are inevitably either Eurocentric in nature, or are formulated mainly in the first instance for the study of Hollywood classic narrative cinema. However, many of their basic principles, especially in regard to the mechanical operation of the cinema apparatus, are found applicable to the general physical setting of the cinema in other cultures. They are to a large extent useful to my analysis of *xiqu* films. Some might find it unsatisfactory that the study of *xiqu* film has to embark on film theories which are acknowledged to be Eurocentric or Hollywood-oriented. But since there are no other established theoretical alternatives available, I must be content with the limitation of the present tools. This necessary inadequacy in the present study is only part of the methodological poverty in the academic discourse in dealing with non-Anglo-American cultures. However, if this study itself may be taken as a social praxis, it might be able to be viewed as an emergent voice that is striving to articulate the need for a poetics that is self-substantiating without standing for “the *other* poetics”. Nevertheless, such a project would necessarily be of much longer term and larger scope than the present study affords. Therefore, in the present context, mainstream spectatorship theories will serve as our point of departure.

One corollary of apparatus theories is the highly representational nature of Western cinema. This is a point put forward by a number of critics. Being representational entails signification in which the image stands for a reality. In the cinema, the images do not only stand for, but also substitute the reality projected on screen. At the same time, the set-up of the cinema apparatus encourages absorption in the screen reality and identification with characters and events. The event dominant format of Western classic movies has encouraged a reception consciousness that largely follows the development of plot. The dramatic relief, and also catharsis, is sought at the development and final resolution of the plot strands. This type of viewing relies largely on the visual reception of images that feeds information for the cerebral process of comprehension.

In the last decade, there has been growing discontent with the limitation of the cinematic gaze theory. The theory is found to be inadequate in dealing with especially experimental cinema with its heavy stress on the power of the cinematic image itself as a tool to articulate the subconscious and the non-verbal. Some of these experimental films are made to emphasise cinematography as a branch of the visual arts. Some are acts of rebellion against the dominance of the commodified Hollywood narrative cinema. One very well developed branch of spectatorship study as an alternative to cinematic gaze theory adopts a phenomenological approach. It does not question the validity of apparatus theories. Rather, it questions whether they have taken into consideration the whole of the cinematic experience. The question they ask is whether the visual is the only aspect in the cinematic experience. A number of critics adopting the

phenomenological approach to cinematic experience attempt to extend the scope of the experience beyond the visual faculty. Jonathan Crary deconstructs the idea of the dominance of the gaze in human experience by elaborating how the system of the five senses has been understood in science. He uses this trait as the theoretical basis for arguing for a carnal density in cinematic experience. He points out that in the 1820s, the concept of the separation of the senses gained credibility with the substantiation of the distinction of the sensory nerves and the motor nerves, and the isolation of five dedicated categories of sensory nerves for the five senses. But the subsequent scientific claims of the unreliability of the absolute separation of the five categories of sensory nerves mean that sensory nerves can be “tricked” by uncorrelating stimuli. In other words, the “wrong” categories of sensation can be triggered through certain manipulations of sensory stimuli. This is the basis for synaesthesia. It is also the basis on which Crary claims that through the visual, other sensations in the viewers are stimulated during a cinematic experience. The real viewing consciousness is a more total and absorbing aesthetic experience than an uninvolved onlooker would ever feel.¹⁶³ This leads straight on to an emphasis on a more holistic sensational experience of the visual image provided by the film. A filmic experience becomes an “expression of experience by experience”. What the visual image represents is a carnal experience of the physical reality being filmed. The viewer being absorbed in these images in turn experiences this second-hand experience with a carnal density. For example, a street scene

¹⁶³ Jonathan Crary, “Modernising Vision”, in *Viewing Positions*, 23-35.

depicted in the film arouses more than the visual and the audible responses in an audience. If a street café is seen, the audience very possibly recalls the smell of coffee and the taste of pastries in their experience of sitting at a street café. The texture of the experience and the formation of the complete cinematic consciousness are indeed much more carnal in nature and therefore more holistic as a human experience. The gaze is only a starting point. The consequence extends far beyond the visual sensation.

Vivian Sobchacks has developed a phenomenological theory of cinema spectatorship along this direction:

Thus, the film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visually, audibly, and haptically. The film experience not only represents and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker by means of the modes and structures of direct and reflective experience, but also presents the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive experience as the film.¹⁶⁴

Sobchacks' phenomenological approach aims to show that to confine reception consciousness in the cinema within the realm of visual sensibility is a limited aesthetic. Certainly, the visual predominance in spectatorship theories has been reinforced by the historical context of the development of cinema studies. Film analysis is conducted with specific film texts as target. The theories derived from the experience of analysis inevitably inclined towards the need for the reading of the actual texts. As

¹⁶⁴ Vivian Sobchack, "Phenomenology and the Film Experience", *Viewing Positions*, 41.

a matter of fact, classic Hollywood narrative cinema has been the most influential and prolific genre of Western cinema. Its mode of narrative is in turn heavily influenced by late 19th and early 20th century stage Naturalism since it was the most dominant, thus most easily available, form of narrative realism, in the early informing period of the cinematic convention. The belief in scientific imitation of the appearance of the slice of life is highly representational in nature. The adherence to the rationale of this form of realism prompts the viewers to adopt a more cerebral than sensual approach, at least on the conscious level. The gaze for gathering of information in the representative mode and the gaze for interpellation of subjectivity are commingled to form the predominance of the visual faculty in spectatorship theories. By the same token of contextualisation, the recent trend toward a phenomenological approach has to be understood together with the larger tendency in the study of subjectivity in foregrounding other sensations to strike a balance with the rational capacity. It is hard not to read it within the discursive attempt of postmodernism by Foucault and advocates of body politics in the practice and studies of the numerous forms of arts and literature including the works by Judith Butler and Gill Dolan. Phenomenological studies stress cinematic experience as a direct sensual experience between the audience and the film image on a here and now basis, alongside the already-accepted approach of recognising the cerebral process of following the plot and an emotive process of identification.

Although phenomenological critics try to argue for a presentational rather than a representational nature for the cinema, that does not change

the fact that the image of films is born out of some reality beyond the physical containment of the film, and which is *real out there*. The images cannot stand on their own without referring to the reality of the first order that exists in real terms somewhere else.

This brings the comparison with *xiqu* to an interesting point. The signification system of *xiqu* works by a system commonly referred to as a simulation of reality [*xuni*]. The *xiqu* stage does not seek to present the details of a physical reality, but resorts to creating an ambience of the physical situation the characters find themselves in. A few onstage properties suggest situations under which actions take place. For example, a garden table and a stool are adequate to signify the location of an elegant garden in a mansion. A mirror frame on a table and a pair of bed-curtains hanging down signify a bedroom. A fisherman performing a rowing action with a rod in hand suggests the travelling on a boat along a river winding through some beautiful mountains. Background and scenery are altogether unnecessary. The *xiqu* stage alludes to rather than shows a reality. The relationship between the scenario on stage and real-life reality is a kind of suggestion, not replacement. This convention is in tune with the long history of *xiqu* being a form of folk performance in the *goulan* and in the street. It has developed for itself a system of signification which is highly communicative on a minimal stage so as to make street performances and traveling easy. A *xiqu* audience is very well tuned into this kind of creative reception. They are familiar with the *xiqu* signs, so their deciphering of events functions accordingly. Many critics laud *xiqu* for this convenient and efficient system of signification. It is supposed to leave the audience

ample room to exercise their imagination to complete the picture of the physical situation of the scenes. However, this is only a theoretical truth. In the real process of viewing a *xiqu* performance, the concentration of the audience is on the story, and more important, the skills of the players. To understand the situation of the character being in the garden or rowing in a boat is a cerebral process of rational comprehension. The speed and fluency of the performance inhibits the mental construction of a “real” garden or a “real” river. That would take the audience’s concentration away from the performers’ execution of their skills. It is very important because over the centuries, the budgetary need for minimal stage sets was compensated by the highly accomplished skills of the players. The emphasis on the players’ performance makes it a very flexible and accommodating form to the actual conditions of performance. The players’ skills have developed into such levels of sophistication that they are the focus of appreciation in the viewing of a performance. Once the audience has tuned into the convention and become able to decode the signs, all the singing, speech declamation, gestures and movements, and acrobatics are related less to any symbolic meaning than to the actual experiential aesthetics. In comparison, the experience of a narrative film pretends to be an experience in the “reality” portrayed in the film, while the experience of a *xiqu* film is an experience in the performance itself. The intensity of excitement in the viewing of a *xiqu* fluctuates according not to the shape of the dramatic plot, but to the level of artistic accomplishment displayed by the performer. Once the audience is accustomed to the signification of *xiqu*, they are content with the look of the minimal stage. The aesthetic quality is produced by the colours, the shapes, the contours and the sounds on stage

as it is. This quality is not appreciated in relation to some hypothetical mental pictures inspired to be constructed by these stage elements. The audience remain in their seats, rather than being mentally transported somewhere else. In fact, it is the specificity of the sensuous quality aroused in the audience by the stage presentation *as it is* that constitutes the aesthetics of *xiqu* as a unique form of theatre. It arrives at the audience's consciousness as a plastic and artificial reality. It communicates in a direct and immediate manner. It has no reality of the first order to refer to. The colours, the shapes, the contours and the sounds make up a reality of the first order. The audience of a *xiqu* performance is aesthetically gratified on a basis of here and now. To borrow Baudelaire's term, *le beau* is the ultimate object of desire in a *xiqu* performance. And this "*beau*" is an entity existing inside the theatre *here and now*.

This feature is retained in early *xiqu* films. These films do not point to any reality outside the film text itself. It does not attempt to stand for any other physical location. The earliest *xiqu* films of short extracts played by Tan Xinpei were shot in the garden of the Fengtai Photographical Studio with a white backdrop as background. There is no reference to any specific location, not even the suggestion of a theatre or a stage. Some of the 1920s *xiqu* films of Mei Lanfang's works were shot in gardens and studios. Even in these cases, the choices of location were made according to the ambience of the piece rather than serving as realistic and concrete location of dramatic events. On the reception side, when the audience was confronted with these early *xiqu* films, the same mode of comprehension for the simulated reality on stage was activated. The experience of *xiqu*

reception is retrieved. Indeed, in the early days of Chinese cinema, *xiqu* was still the most predominant form of dramatic entertainment. The reception mode of *xiqu* was still the most spontaneous one to the majority of the mass audience. There was no need for a *xiqu* film to represent a concrete reality outside the film text such as a location of action. The adoption of a *xiqu* reception mode for early *xiqu* films can also explain why there was not even a need to create an illusion of the theatre stage. The minimal stage of *xiqu* means that it can take place in any kind of space. Not even a stage is a prerequisite. The existence of street, temple and private performance also means that the relationship between a *xiqu* performance and a stage is not absolutely necessary. Indeed, the stage is more an institution for the consumption of *xiqu* for commercial productions. The text of a *xiqu* film is therefore much more self-contained and self-subsistent than classic Hollywood narrative cinema.

Filmic reality constructed through montage and modern human subjectivity

A countless number of theories have attempted to arrive at an ontology of the film medium. There have hardly been any among them that could go beyond the investigation of editing. The fundamental of the moving picture is that it is made up of discrete images on individual picture frames in succession. Editing is the creative logic that organises and assigns meanings to these basic building blocks. Among the early film theorists, Hugo Münsterberg has given one of the most influential definitions of the type of reality constructed by the film, which he calls the 'photoplay'. He ascribes what he finds the biggest difference between the stage dramatic and the filmic dramatic to the creative logic unbounded by any physical law of nature on film. Although he did not apply the actual terms, it was in fact the result of editing that he was referring to. According to him, the film gives us a perspective of reality that appeals directly to the imagination and more important, the impressionistic human consciousness:

We recognise there that the photoplay, incomparable in this respect with the drama, gave us a view of dramatic events which was completely shaped by the inner movements of the mind. To be sure, the events in the photoplay happen in the real space with its depth. But the spectator feels that they are not presented in the three dimensions of the outer world, that they are flat pictures which only the mind molds into plastic things. Again the events are seen in continuous movement; and yet the pictures break up the movement into a rapid succession of instantaneous impressions. We do not see the objective reality, but a project of our own mind which binds the pictures together. But much stronger differences came to light when

we turned to the processes of attention, of memory, of imagination, of suggestion, of division of interest and of emotion. The attention turns to detailed points in the outer world and ignores everything else: the photoplay is doing exactly this when in the close-up a detail is enlarged and everything else disappears.¹⁶⁵

This version of reality can only be represented when the physical law of nature is ignored. To use his own phrases, the film is 'lifted above the world of space and time and causality and freed from its bounds'¹⁶⁶ and tells its stories 'by overcoming the outer world'¹⁶⁷:

The photoplay shows us a significant conflict of human actions in moving pictures, which, freed from the physical forms of space, time, and causality, are adjusted to the free play of our mental experiences and which reach complete isolation from the practical world through the perfect unity of plot and pictorial appearance.¹⁶⁸

Since a stage performance takes place in the real term as true physical reality, no doubt it follows all the laws and rules of the physical world:

... the theatre is bound not only by space and time. Whatever it shows is controlled by the same laws of causality which govern nature. This involves a complete continuity of the physical events: no cause without following effect, no effect without proceeding cause.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Hugo Münsterberg, from *The Film: A Psychological Study – The Means of the Photoplay*, extracted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 332.

¹⁶⁶ Münsterberg, 337.

¹⁶⁷ Münsterberg, 332.

¹⁶⁸ Münstersberg, 339.

¹⁶⁹ Münstersberg, 336.

But the photoplay sacrifices not only the space values of the real theatre; it disregards no less its order of time. The theatre presents its plot in the time order of reality. It may interrupt the continuous flow of time without neglecting the conditions of the dramatic art.¹⁷⁰

The discontinuity of time and space in a film as the definitive difference between the film and the stage is taken up by many critics. One example is Erwin Panofsky. His discussion of the filmic fragmentation of space is of particular interest. He approaches it from an angle that bears resemblance to a phenomenological approach. His focus is placed on what happens to the audience's consciousness during their viewing of a film and a stage production:

In a theatre, space is static, that is, the space represented on the stage, as well as the spatial relation of the beholder to the spectacle, is unalterably fixed. The spectator cannot leave his seat, and the setting of the stage cannot change, during one act (except for such incidentals as rising moons or gathering clouds and such illegitimate reborrowings from the film as turning wings or gliding backdrops). But, in return for this restriction, the theatre has the advantage that time, the medium of emotion and thought conveyable by speech, is free and independent of anything that may happen in visible space. Hamlet may deliver his famous soliloquy lying on a couch in the middle distance, doing nothing and only dimly discernible to the spectator and listener, and yet by his mere words enthrall him with an interest in the emotional action. With the movie the situation is reversed. Here, too, the spectator occupies a fixed seat, but only physically, not as the subject of an aesthetic experience. Aesthetically, he is in permanent motion as his eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera, which permanently shifts itself with the lens of the camera, which constantly shifts in distance and direction. And as movable as the spectator is, equally movable, for the same reason, the

¹⁷⁰ Münsterberg, 335.

space presented to him.¹⁷¹

Susan Sontag takes up Münsterberg's argument and hammers the point home that it is the technical convention of editing of the film that gives rise to the possibility of this mode of realism:

Movies are images (usually photographs) that move, to be sure. But the distinctive unit of films is not the image but the principle of connection between the images, the relation of a "shot" to the one that preceded it and the one that comes after. There is no peculiarly "cinematic" as opposed to "theatrical" mode of linking images.¹⁷²

But one thing distinguishes Sontag's approach to the film from other film critics. She does not aim at investigating the technical possibilities of the two media for the sake of technicality. Instead, she arrives at a more fundamental differentiation in the viewing consciousness of the two media. She does it through adopting a post-structuralist stance which is consistent in her other works. She maintains that the individual image, or sign, does not produce meaning by any stable correspondence to the referent. Instead, it is the inter-sign flow and exchange of images in a sequence that makes up the logic and meaning of a film. The film thus possesses the potential to de-center the central mechanism of production of meaning from the images to the strategies of the arrangement of them, i.e., editing. This strategy is not available to the theatre. She calls this an 'irreducible

¹⁷¹ Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures", collected in *Film and Criticism*, 218.

¹⁷² Susan Sontag, "Film and Theatre", collected in *Film and Criticism*, 344.

distinction between theatre and cinema'¹⁷³. In practical terms, this freedom allows film to 'accomplish a transformation of ordinary reality' and to 'fabricate "visions" to show us a radically altered world'¹⁷⁴. One might like to draw a distinction with expressionistic theatre which also produces alternative visions of the world. If we follow Sontag's line of argument, the difference is easy to delineate. The site of the production of meaning in expressionistic theatre is the images constructed on stage. They are more stable and specific. Expressionistic theatre is modernist in nature. On the other hand, the power to assign meaning in a film is shifted from the images themselves to the hands that manipulate them, namely through editing. The images are subjected to countless possibilities of conditions under which they are shown. The production of meaning is a much more pluralistic process than in the theatre. It is post-modern in nature.

What this new medium and new strategy in production of meaning articulates is a new mode of sensitivity, a new structure of feelings. This new structure of feelings belongs to the modern, or postmodern, urban. The montage speaks to a human subjectivity forming and informed by the urban eye that catches only glimpses of the fast-flowing metropolitan life. This view was first postulated by Walter Benjamin's parallel studies of Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur* and cinema. For him, the perspective offered by the discontinuity of the camera eye coincides with the fragmented sequence of the city the *flâneur* sees in a necessarily distracted

¹⁷³ Sontag, 346.

¹⁷⁴ Sontag, 347.

attention in the environment of a modern city. More important, this view of discontinuity presented to the viewers reinforces the formation of such a way of seeing, that constitutes the quintessential Benjaminian modern subject:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling ...

With the close-ups, space expands; with slow motions, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals new formation of the subject.¹⁷⁵

The cinematic discontinuity is both arbitrary and necessary. First, montage has been a major technique built into and solidly established in the convention of film aesthetics. The cutting of shots and editing of sequence presents the narration as collage of images appearing in sequence, even with certain narratorial or aesthetic logic. Second, the projection of film involves showing of pieces of positives one after another. The continuity of movements is but an optical illusion created by the speed of connection of a certain number of frames in a second. This sense of disjuncture becomes inherent in the construction of reality for the cinema viewer. For Benjamin, both fragmentation of vision and the optical unconscious exemplify the loss of experience in a modern city which has

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 236.

over-developed and in which life in such an exploded material reality has outgrown the grip of the human consciousness. Benjamin and his followers conclude that the cinema speaks the sensibility of the modern urban subject. The form of the cinema coincides with the way its audience see the world.

In terms of *xiqu* films, one can easily decipher the reason why this fragmented subjectivity was first articulated in those made in the highly urbanised and commercialised metropolitan city of Hong Kong rather than those made in China. Under British colonial rule, there was no clear cultural policy for the development of a healthy local culture. As a result, everything was left to the prevailing market forces. Manufacturing, services and monetary industries developed at phenomenal speed. The pace of both material and cultural consumption followed suit. And the colonised mentality facilitated easy reception of Western fashion. All these elements paved the way for Hollywood culture to sweep the territory and induce imitation of its narrative convention. While in China, there was a strong patriotic sentiment before the Sino-Japanese War and an intense atmosphere of communist reform after the establishment of the People's Republic privileging folk culture. Both prevented *xiqu* films in China from departing too far from the performance convention of the national theatre.

In the 1950s Hollywood movies experienced another boom. Musicals and large-scale epics nurtured a generation of spectators who now demanded much higher artistic value from films even if just for the sake of entertainment. Guangdong *yueju* films in Hong Kong found themselves

confronted with the danger of becoming artistically dated. Fortunately, the demand for Guangdong *yueju* to improve itself was aptly met by the availability of personnel. The industry reinvigorated itself by engaging the pool of artists and film workers who arrived from the Mainland in 1949 and 1950. The vast popularity of Guangdong *yueju* on film made further capital investment possible. It brought enormous advantage to the industry as a whole. Therefore, the second half of the decade saw the pinnacle of Guangdong *yueju* films. Thoughtful cinematic language was used to retell stories written in *yueju* scripts. A number of high-quality films were made. The peak of achievement was the group of works made by the co-operation of the Guangdong *yueju* composer-cum-scriptwriter Tang Disheng, film directors Li Tie and Ti Chenfeng, and the *sheng* (male roles) and *dan* (female roles) players Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin. The first colour *yueju* film was also made in this period. The 1956 production of *Chang'e benyue* [*Chang'e Flying to the Moon*] was partly in colour, while *Guanggong yuexia shi Diaochan* [*General Guan Talks to Diao Chan under the Moon*] was fully so.

The Purple Jade Hairpin

Zhicaiji [*The Purple Jade Hairpin*] is one of the most significant Hong Kong productions of Guangdong *yueju* film in terms of popularity and artistic entertainment. It demonstrates many narratorial features influenced by Hollywood feature films. In fact it is very representative of the group of *xiqu* films examined in this Chapter that are more representative of a genre of film rather than of *xiqu*.

Hairpin, made in 1959, is one of the most important works of the Guangdong *yueju* superstars Yam Kim-fai and Pai Suet-sin. Although it was adapted from the stage version of the same piece, the film has actually done more in promoting the stage piece. This is the direct result of the mass commercial nature of the cinema industry. The involvement of *xiqu* stars in the film industry combined well with the dominance of individual accomplishments of the players and resulted in a successful exploitation of the star system.

Although the time lapse in the production of *Purple Jade Hairpin* and *Tears on the Barren Mountain* is hardly phenomenal, the artistic directions of the two display significant differences. It shows how much the directions in *xiqu* films taken in the colonised city of Hong Kong and in the capital city of the new China deviated from one another. *Tears* adheres on the whole to the convention of *jingju*. Cinematic images are additions without intervening in the overall theatrical flow of the original piece as played on stage. There are two aspects to this theatrical flow. One is the

focus on the emotive presentation by the player's acting of the character's situation. The other is the division of scenes structured by the movement pattern and arias. All cinematic and visual elements including sets and other technical faculties are subsumed under this theatrical flow. In comparison, *Hairpin* demonstrates a very different gravitation.

The acting style in *Hairpin* follows the acting convention of Guangdong *yueju*. The actors' mannerisms are stylised, although often the movements are casual. But that had already become acceptable for many regional *xiqu* pieces by the 1950s even on stage. The musical score sets the basic pace and tempo of the whole piece. Percussion music remains a central ingredient, timing the movements of the actors in many dramatic scenes. But one major change is that the focus of narrative in *Hairpin* is on the development of the plot and the dramatic conflicts of events, rather than on the protagonists' responses to events and situations. The story begins with the first meeting of the lovers, the scholar Li Yi and Huo Xiaoyu, which quickly develops into a loving marriage. The narrative moves fast and soon reaches the dramatic complication. The admiration for Li on the part of the prime minister's daughter drives her father to use his power to place Li in the first place in the Imperial Examination. But Li's attachment to Huo provokes his anger. He abuses his power again and sends Li on a journey to the border with the army on official affairs. During his three years' absence, Huo is plunged into deep despair and falls ill. When Li is finally called back to the city, he becomes practically imprisoned in the Prime Minister's mansion. Although the Prime Minister uses all the strategies available to try to persuade him to marry his own

daughter, Li does not consent. Without knowing all these events, Huo mistakes Li's stay at the mansion as a decision to abandon her. The dramatic twist comes when Huo meets an imperial Prince in a temple. With his help, Li manages to escape from his imprisonment in the mansion and returns home to see Huo. But he is quickly re-captured by the Prime Minister's guards. Again, with the help of the Prince, Huo barges into the Prime Minister's mansion to claim her rightful place as Scholar Li's wife. The Prince once again appears to convict the Prime Minister on charges of abuse of power and the couple are reunited.

One conventional way of dealing with a complicated plot in *xiqu* is to keep parts of it as off-scene action, only revealing events to the audience through recounting by certain characters. Thus stage business can be kept uncomplicated and accommodated to a minimal stage; and the focus remains on the responses of the protagonists to events and situations often conveyed by affective singing and acting. A similar treatment is found in the ancient Greek and French neo-classical theatres. However, the script of *Hairpin* is very different. All dramatic actions are staged. The speed of narrative flow is maintained by a dominance of dialogue. The number of arias is relatively small compared to an average traditional script. Arias are sung in *Hairpin* mainly at lyrical moments when emotions are heightened. The script is structured in a similar way to a western musical film.

The more significant difference between *Hairpin* and early *xiqu* films lies in the mode of realism it conforms to. As elucidated previously, a *xiqu* performance does not seek to represent a reality of the first order beyond

the performance text itself. The performance text is already good in itself as an immediate reality communicating with and communicated directly to the audience in the auditorium. Early *xiqu* films conform to this conception of realism. However, a film itself possesses no 3-dimensional carnal reality. It is by its very nature representational, if it is to convey any images other than light and sound.

Hairpin is furnished with all the realistic setting, which would be deemed not only unnecessary, but also obstructive for a stage performance. What it seeks to do is to create a cinematic representation of a story set in the context of ancient China. Elaborate sets are constructed for both streets and indoor scenes. Many items are clustered into the picture in order to construct an illusory reality of historical China. Apart from the purple jade hairpin that serves as a token of commitment of the couple's love, all the other items of set and properties are dramatically unnecessary. The actors do not interact with these items. They neither facilitate nor hinder acting or narrative flow. They are simply there to fill the picture in order to create a representational context. The comparison between a bare interior in *Tears* and an elaborately decorated one in *Hairpin* is a good demonstration of the difference between a presentational and a representational approach. The elaborate sets in *Hairpin* are not merely for reason of spectacle. They try to create the realistic look of ancient China and provide a convincing background to the story. The reference of the film text is a reality of the first order located somewhere in ancient China. In a performance text of traditional *xiqu*, or an early *xiqu* film, the reference is the performance of the player. But the film text of *Hairpin* is not self-subsistent. It has to be

justified by a (false) reality located somewhere in ancient China.

Since the reference of the film text is no longer the performance itself, but the story supposed to have occurred somewhere sometime, the players' performance gives way to the dramatic development as the most important structuring element of the film. Division of scenes and shots are no longer determined by the completion of movement patterns as was the case in earlier *xiqu* films of Tan Xinpei, Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu. Camera work is much more complicated in *Hairpin*. The hero and heroine are often depicted in three-quarter size and placed in the middle of the picture. Close-ups are frequent. In fact montage in the Eisensteinian sense is the main vehicle for creating dramatic intensity in this film. One example is the murder scene of the old scholar Cui who refuses to perform the role of matchmaker for the Prime Minister's daughter. The montage sequence is made up of three close-ups. The first one is a low-angle shot of the prime minister's face in rage, cutting into a high-angle close-up of a rod hitting on the stomach of Cui who is understood to have fallen on the floor. This is then followed by another close-up of Cui's face in agony. The event and its affective dimension is communicated through use of cinematic language rather than relying on the acting convention of *xiqu*. Likewise, a number of the heroine Huo Xiaoyu's soliloquies are shot as close-ups accompanied by her whispering in a low voice. This kind of delivery would have been lost in the *xiqu* theatre altogether. There are many moments when shots viewed from a subjective angle are adopted. They add an extra dimension to the characterisation. With the flexibility offered by cinematic language, the film has the choice of more subtle treatment of

these quieter moments in the narrative. Nevertheless such a cinematographic design relies heavily on the convention of Hollywood narrative cinema. The manipulation of the camera displays representational features established by early narrative film giants such as Griffith and later on Welles. The overall aesthetic principle follows that of the cinema rather than Guangdong *yueju*. Moreover, since the flow of the narrative is largely structured through montage, cutting in and out of different perspectives, the continuous mode of viewing in a traditional stage production of *xiqu*, which earlier *xiqu* films endeavoured to preserve, is destroyed. The reception is guided through fragmented moments of spectacles. The production follows the convention of the cinema more than that of *xiqu*. More important, the audience consciousness is tuned into a representational cinematic experience rather than a theatre experience of a presentational stage production. It is at this point that *xiqu* films ceased to be a genre of *xiqu*.

The film is framed in the beginning and the end by shots of the opening and closing of a pair of stage curtains. The opening shot is a long take of the stage showing a pair of closed curtains with list of production credits superimposed on the curtain. The end of the list is followed by the curtain slowly opening, revealing a moving picture showing a street scene. The scene gradually extends to the side of the picture frame. The curtain and the allusion to the stage go out of sight. Having started with a brief reference to the stage conventions of a presentational mode, the work then assumes the representational mode of narrative cinema.

This results in a distinctive combination of aesthetics that speaks

exclusively to a Hong Kong audience already tuned into both the realistic representation of Hollywood narrative cinema and the self-reflexive sensibility of this stylised theatre. Such a synthesis is in fact familiar to a colonised audience that is thoroughly Westernised in its daily life whereas at the same time living a repressed memory of the pre-colonised national culture. The structure of feelings revealed in this film is the intricate psychology behind the practice of national art in the hostile environment of colonisation. The repressed nationalistic sensitivity is channeled through the commercial institution of the film industry. It is on the one hand commodified by the film industry and exploited commercially. On the other hand, its expression is protected and legitimised by its commercial potential. The interplay between all these social forces is crystallised in the particular form of these Guangdong *yueju* films.

***Huangmeidiao* films in Hong Kong in the 1950s**

The 1949 and 1950 influx of Mainlanders into Hong Kong right after the establishment of the People's Republic did not only increase the size of population of the territory, it also altered its composition. The refugees came from different provinces and spoke a variety of different dialects. They adopted different regional customs and were attuned to different forms of regional *xiqu*. The audience of these regional *xiqu* brought with them a taste for *xiqu* music styles other than Cantonese tunes. For example, the Shanghai immigrants brought with them a demand for Shanghai *yueju* and *huangmeidiao*. Not only did they bring records with them, the market responded quickly by supplying them with northern *xiqu* records locally. When the British recording company *Pathé* gradually moved its business from Shanghai to Hong Kong and finally registered itself there in 1953¹⁷⁶, it was the main recorder of *xiqu* music in China. They absorbed composers and musicians from the north. Among them were northern *xiqu* musicians. Their works and styles enriched the Cantonese music scene tremendously while at the same time making competition tough. The more complicated music of northern operas, especially *jingju* music, was adopted in some Guangdong *yueju* films. In some cases, Cantonese lyrics were written into them. In others, original *jingju* arias were sung as an almost exotic attraction to the local Cantonese market. The accommodating Guangdong

¹⁷⁶ *Pathé* first established itself in Shanghai. It was taken over by the Japanese for a period of time in the 1940s. It moved to Hong Kong after the establishment of the People's Republic making Mandarin (Putonghua) songs. It ceased recording of Mandarin songs in 1976 and was renamed EMI. It transformed itself into a thoroughly local recording company leading in the making of Canto pop.

yueju music operating basically on principles designed to please the commercial market further enlarged its repertoire by including tunes from other regional *xiqu*, and from Mandarin and even Western pop songs. However, most of these mixtures were done whimsically without in-depth consideration with respect to musical and artistic suitability. Therefore not many of them were successfully assimilated into the Guangdong *yueju* convention. On the contrary, they often featured as one-off experiments or even non-serious gimmicks to swell the audience numbers at short notice.

Upon the establishment of the People's Republic, many businesses founded on Mainland private capital or foreign investment in China withdrew to Hong Kong either in the form of cash investment, or moved the whole business to Hong Kong altogether. *Pathé* is only one example. Another example is the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Cooperation.¹⁷⁷ The injection of northern capital altered the configuration of the share of the business market and also of economic power. Since The Shaw Brothers Limited moved to Hong Kong from eastern China, they developed into the biggest film producer and cinema group in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷⁸ The Shaw Brothers, together with the Cathay Cinema Group

¹⁷⁷ The Cooperation once changed its name into Hong Kong Bank but in the 1990s re-employed its original name in the short form HSBC, probably to facilitate business with China upon the latter's entry into the global market economy.

¹⁷⁸ The Shaw Brothers also succeeded in bidding for the first wireless television franchise in Hong Kong. There is only one other wireless television license. This other channel has unfortunately never taken off in terms of reception ratio. The Shaw Brothers were practically monopolising television entertainment until the 1990s when satellite and cable TV entered the region. Since television has been the major form of entertainment in the city since the 1960s, The Shaw Brothers' control of the television industry means that they have been the major entertainment provider. There is a powerful presence of The Shaw Brothers in the shaping of mass culture in Hong Kong.

backed by Taiwanese capital, promoted Mandarin films instead of Cantonese ones. In order to encourage Mandarin film production, both The Shaw Brothers and Cathay discriminated against Cantonese films in their scheduling. It became extremely difficult for a Cantonese film to get a slot for showing in cinemas. To commission a Cantonese film production was definitely out of the question.¹⁷⁹ One reason for this would be the profit motive. The Shaw Brothers aimed at exporting films to the Greater China areas after the supply of films from the Mainland was affected from 1949 onwards. Mandarin was definitely the *lingua franca* for Chinese films for the greater overseas Chinese market. The Mainland film industry after turning state-owned transformed itself into a more ideologically correct than commercially pleasing practice. The production of Mandarin films in Hong Kong was a shrewd business move to fill the gap in market supply. Another reason could well be cultural and political. One speculation is that northern immigrants with economic power might have had the agenda of injecting elements of central Chinese culture into Hong Kong in order to exert more influence in the cultural, economic, and also the political realm. The three would reinforce each other to achieve the end result of generating even greater power and wealth.

The boom in Hong Kong cinema in the 1950s created a space for both Cantonese and Mandarin films. The lack of personnel in production of northern *xiqu* left the Guangdong *yueju* film sector intact for a while. In the sector of drama, Mandarin story films with experienced and accomplished crew and actors from the north and Taiwan presented

¹⁷⁹ Yu, "Xianggang yueju fazhan shihua", 18-21.

themselves as a direct threat to Cantonese story films. Although Guangdong *yueju* films were extremely popular in the 1950s, the difficulty in finding schedule slots and a lack of investment from large production companies and cinema groups affected production drastically. In spite of the endeavour and success in producing high-quality Guangdong *yueju* film by many accomplished practitioners including the film director Li Tie and Guangdong *yueju* star players Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin, the Guangdong *yueju* film industry was forced into rapid decline in the 1960s. Yam Kim-fai and Pak Suet-sin also announced retirement at this twilight moment of the industry.

Another regional *xiqu* made on film in Hong Kong was *chaoju*, the regional *xiqu* of the region Chaozhou in Guangdong province. The Chaozhou community has always comprised a large proportion of the population of Hong Kong. They form close communities that still adhere to their own customs at home including cooking Chaozhou food and speaking the Chaozhou dialect. Like the Fukienese, the Chaozhou immigrants also make up a large part of the population in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia including Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Therefore, making *chaoju* on film for the local Hong Kong and Southeast Asia communities was also a profitable business. From the end of the 1950s until the beginning of the 1960s, over 200 *chaoju* films were made in Hong Kong. But most of them were exported to Southeast Asia.¹⁸⁰ Their impact on local film consumption was minimal.

¹⁸⁰ Paul Fomoroff, *Tushuo sianggan dianyin shi [A Pictorial History of the Hong Kong Cinema]* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Ltd. Co., 1997), 145.

Thanks to the availability of subtitling, Mandarin films were quickly accepted in Hong Kong in spite of the linguistic barrier. It proved a cheap and practical way of enlarging the cinema audience base across culture and language. In 1954, a Shanghai *yueju* film of *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* [*The Butterfly Lovers*] was shown in Hong Kong starring the *prima donna* of the regional form, Yuan Xuefen. It was very well received by the audience. Subsequently, six Shanghai *yueju* films were made in Hong Kong up until the end of the 1960s. They appealed to the considerable number of immigrants from Shanghai and to many of the local Cantonese audience who could enjoy them with the help of the subtitles. But it was *huangmeidiao* films that hammered the final nail in the coffin of Guangdong *yueju* films. *Huangmeidiao*, literally “yellow-plum tunes”, originates in the Anhui Province. It was gradually developed out of the regional folksongs of the area. The form was more or less stabilised in the 18th century. It has a similar length of history as *jingju*. By the 20th century, it began to gain popularity in some southern cities including Shanghai. In 1955, the *huangmeidiao* film *Tianxianpei* [*The Heavenly Match*] produced by the Shanghai Film Studio was shown in Hong Kong. It was made by Shanghai Film Studio, adapted from the stage version by Sang Hu and directed by Shi Hui. It was a love story with a mythical theme. Special cinematic effects were applied to enhance the mythical flavour. *The Heavenly Match* was extremely well received by the Hong Kong audience. In fact, the high quality of the film showed up the poor quality of the majority of the local Guangdong *yueju* films of Hong Kong made on a small budget and within an extremely short period of time, such as two to

three weeks. Other *huangmeidiao* films were subsequently released in Hong Kong. The Shaw Brothers Studio was the first to attempt *huangmeidiao* films in Hong Kong. Its 1958 production of *Diao Chan* [*Diao Chan the Beauty*] was followed by a number of equally popular films. The vacuum in the market due to the reduction in the number of Guangdong *yueju* films in Hong Kong in the 1960s was filled by the spectacular productions of The Shaw Brothers *huangmeidiao* films. These aroused such an intense interest among the Hong Kong audience that *huangmeidiao* films as a type became the new favourite among the *xiqu* film audience.

The most popular and influential productions of *huangmeidiao* films made in Hong Kong were the 1963 productions of *Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai* [*The Butterfly Lovers*], *Youlong xi feng* [*The Dragon and the Phoenix at Play*] and *Hongloumeng* [*Dream of the Red Mansion*]. *The Butterfly Lovers* demonstrates the highly filmic accomplishment they all share. It tells the story of star-crossed lovers Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. The heroine Zhu dresses up as a man to attend the academy for three years. During this period she has met and fallen in love with her fellow scholar Liang. Liang has no idea she is a woman until she has returned home in response to her parents' request. Before she leaves for home, Zhu promises marriage to Liang with her sister, by whom she actually means herself. When Liang finds out the truth, he is overjoyed and hurries to visit the Zhu family. However, Zhu's father has already arranged a marriage for her into a rich and powerful family. Liang is unable to cope with the blow and falls ill. He dies before Zhu's wedding and leaves her

his handkerchief as a love token. Unable to do anything about this turn of events, Zhu therefore agrees to board her marriage sedan on her wedding day in exchange for her parents' consent for her to take a detour to visit Liang's grave first. When the sedan arrives at the grave, a hurricane passes through. The grave breaks open and Zhu jumps into it. When the witnesses pull out what seems to be the remains of Liang's handkerchief and Zhu's dress from the ruins, the two pieces of cloth transform into butterflies and fly away together.

The Shaw Brothers *huangmeidiao* deviates very far from the prototype of the regional form of *xiqu*. *Huangmeidiao* originated in County *huangmei* in the Province of Anhui. In The Shaw Brothers productions, the original form was so adapted that the versions formed almost a separate branch of *huangmeidiao*. Although the tunes and composition of music more or less followed the original form, the singing and orchestra are very much altered. The music is changed drastically; in the first place, these films are made in Mandarin, or called *Putonghua* in the People's Republic, rather than the local dialect used in the region where *huangmeidiao* originated. The change of dialect means that singers' articulation point in their vocal cords and inside the mouth cavity have changed. Moreover, the cast consisted of popular film stars and singers. None of them were trained in *huangmeidiao* singing. The actress Ning Bo who played Liang Shanbo sings in the style of *nanqu* (southern theatre, another regional form close to *huangmeidiao*). The actress Le Ti who played Zhu Yingtai is not a singer at all. The singing is performed by the popular song singer Jing Ting. Jing Ting sings the arias in the style of popular songs, only with more elaborate

dramatic emotions that are allowed more freedom of expression in aria singing than normally in pop songs. Not even the instrumental section remains authentic. A whole Western string section was written into the musical arrangement. The lower range instruments ground the whole music score to a much lower register than the traditional orchestra. The overall effect conveyed by the string section is a feeling of lush and grandiose sentiment which is akin to the type of score often found in Hollywood epics. This sense of romantic grandiosity is also reinforced by the use of wide screen as in Hollywood epics. The composition and structure of music more or less adheres to *huangmeidiao* music, but the execution and arrangement does not follow the convention at all. Likewise, the use of non-*xiqu* actors in the film means that the focus of the film is no longer placed on *xiqu* performance but on the film text as a cinematic piece. The costumes and make-up do not correspond to anything in the *xiqu* convention and there is a clear dominance of close-up shots rather than three-quarter figure as in *Tears*. The former emphasises the visual pleasure of gazing at film stars. The latter tends to facilitate greater appreciation of their performance.

The Butterfly Lovers is directed by Li Hanxiang, a film director who later made his name in the making of martial art films and films with elaborate ancient Chinese scenarios depicting court affairs. Most of the production personnel including King Hu, the renowned martial art film director, are film-makers with some knowledge of *xiqu*. This composition of the production team already determined that films would be made along the convention of the cinema rather than that of *xiqu*. The structure of the

film including division of scenes and shots has no correlation with any stage version of the story of *The Butterfly Lovers*. The emphasis of the narrative is on the actual action involved in events rather than on the characters' state of emotions, as is the case in a traditional *xiqu*. The emphasis in the film script is therefore predominantly on what happens rather than on characters' reactions to the events.

By the end of the 1950s, with the injection of capital investment in the Hong Kong film industry from a great number of businesses that had fled China, Hong Kong had caught up with the most advanced cinematic technology of Hollywood. Wide screen and technicolour had become regular features in Hong Kong films. The growing sophistication in the cinematic lexicon necessarily meant that the artistic focus in the making of *xiqu* films shifted further towards the cinematic. *The Butterfly Lovers* consciously partakes of this trend toward realistic spectacle. The sets and picture composition are done extravagantly. No painted scenery has been used throughout. Everything in the sets is built specially for studio use. Some outdoor country scenes are really shot outdoors in woods. Street and crowd scenes are also shot with elaborate detail. All these deviate considerably from the stage convention of *xiqu* which suggests scenarios delineating token stage objects rather than showing them realistically. In one scene depicting the academy, almost a hundred extras are arranged sitting together in tidy rows reciting classics to create a pleasing cinematographic effect of scholastic discipline.

The elements of cinematic convention are without doubt paramount in

this text. However, there are moments when the elements of the *xiqu* convention are merged into the main flow of cinematic narrative in an extremely intelligent manner. They succeed in adding an affective dimension to the film which is seldom found in Hollywood narrative films. For example, more than three quarters of the film is underlaid by the music score, alternatively as accompaniment to arias and background music. Big extracts of arias are inserted in the emotionally heightened scenes, including the romantically comic episode in which Liang sees Zhu off from the academy continuously dropping hints as to her real gender which are not picked up by Liang. Another one is the last meeting of the lovers in the Zhu mansion when the two swear an oath to stay together in death if they cannot be together in life. This treatment milks both the suggestive power of background music and the stylisation of *xiqu* acting to great effect. Both give greater room for extravagant expression on the part of the actors than is normally possible in the acting style of naturalistic realism dominating narrative cinema. This extra emotive dimension has added greatly to the overall dramatic value of the film.

Yet not all employment of *xiqu* elements works in this film. One major failure is the way the actors try to imitate dance-like *xiqu* movements in scenes with arias. Neither Ning Bo nor Le Ti is trained in *xiqu* acting. The bits and pieces of *xiqu* movements they attempt only show up their inadequacy in this area. The problem is especially acute for Le Ti simply because movements for female players are more dance-like and demanding. In a number of instances, her movements indeed look awkward. However, this poses more an aesthetic problem than a market

problem, since the low quality of imitation *xiqu* movement is much less obvious to the untrained eyes of non-*xiqu* aficionados, and these untrained eyes in fact are the ones comprising the vast majority of the cinema audience.

Needless to say, the alterations were hardly included for artistic reasons. They were there to make *huangmeidiao* an easier spectacle for as extensive an audience as possible in the greater Chinese community. None of these changes contributes anything to the *huangmeidiao* convention. Many of the elements in the original form that are unfamiliar to the audience with no previous experience of the form are omitted. If the cinemagoers were to be confronted with any authentic performance, the expectation of habitually easy reception and instant gratification would be greatly frustrated. The shock of the unfamiliar easily becomes a source of irritation. Therefore these films do not even help to promote the regional form. In fact, it was the glamour of the stars and the emphasis on film language rather than on *xiqu* accomplishment that earned this group of *huangmeidiao* films a huge commercial success. Judging from the standard of *xiqu per se*, they were artistically poor. Yet they are highly accomplished as films. In any case the promotion of *huangmeidiao* hardly seems to be one of the considerations in the objectives of any of these high-cost Shaw productions. The last *huangmeidiao* film made was *Sanxiao yinyuan* [*The Match of Three Smiles*] in 1969. *Kungfu* movies had by this period eclipsed the popularity of *xiqu* as the charisma of Bruce Lee swept through the local and overseas Chinese communities. Much of the capital of The Shaw Brothers was accordingly diverted to the production

of *kungfu* films.

CHAPTER NINE

Xiqu reception as a public space

It has been shown in previous chapters how in the onset of modernity in the Chinese communities, the changes in material life affect the conditions of *xiqu* performance, which in turn inform the development of the theatrical convention. If artistic practice is to be seen as a social praxis, no analysis can end here. Raymond Williams has again and again reminded us that determination of the superstructure by the base is but one point in the analysis of the social process. The reality of constant and continuous mutual constitution of art and society means that the articulation of a certain structure of feelings in a piece of work is not a mere passive reflection of reality. For one thing, rather like language which does not simply speak but shapes the world, a work of art informs the way we see the world. It organises the feelings of daily life into a palpable structure for cognition and recognition; during creation on the part of the artists, and reception for the audience.

What makes art a powerful social tool is that the act of cognition and recognition it provokes is not only a matter on the discursive level. A work of art does not only appeal to the rational faculty of reasoning, but it touches its audience through the very carnal experience of the sensuous faculties. It appeals to the various sensations and impinges on the various surfaces of the human consciousness, either at its centre or on the peripheries. This makes art a particularly powerful social tool. The reality

it shapes for its audience bears all the carnal densities and is phenomenologically *real* in a bodily sense. It condenses, summarises and structures the feelings evoked by a certain material reality into pieces of works to be savoured and contemplated.

Miriam Hansen identifies the cinema as an important public space. She refers to the early and late cinema as ‘moments in which the public sphere has opened up to more diverse forms of social experience’.¹⁸¹ This claim can be understood on two levels. On the first level, the filmic images and their speed and fluency, once again in Hugo Münsterberg’s words, ‘lifted [a film] above the world of space and time and causality’ and ‘freed [it] from [the] bounds [of the laws of the natural world]’.¹⁸² No form of art does better than the film in articulating the almost excessive heterogeneity that is characteristic of our age. This includes the tremendously diverse forms of life led by the many strata and fragments of society, and the very many perspectives adopted to comprehend them. On the second level, which is also the point that Hansen emphasises, the wide audience base of the cinema creates an inclusive field in which cognitive and ideological events can take place. The diversification of the context of reception of a film (produced by the history of the individuals and the society as a whole) creates a potentially complicated and composite site at which different ideological forces negotiate with each other in striving for the power of interpretation. In this way, Hansen has opened up the way to think of the

¹⁸¹ Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere” in *Viewing Positions*, 134-152.

¹⁸² Münsterberg, 337.

cinema not only as an object of consumption in the entertainment industry, but more important, as a productive public space in which social formation is actively taking place.

This theory of the public space created in the cinema can very well be applied to the reception of other cultural products. After all, society is much more complicated and the composition of the audience community of any particular work of art can no longer be bounded by the classic distinction of class and gender. With the advance of information technology, the promotion and reception of a piece of work can extend across national and cultural boundaries, constrained neither by physical nor cultural distance. The scope of its spectatorship is getting more and more unpredictable. As a result, the reception of any cultural product necessarily creates a complicated composite site with different social forces negotiating with one another. Although *xiqu* stands as an ethnically specific form of theatre, with the promotion of the numerous institutions including international theatre festivals, theatre studies in academia and training institutes, cultural tourism and the mass media, the audience of *xiqu* is hardly confined within the Chinese communities. On the other hand, the composition of the Chinese communities is becoming more diverse and complicated, although the growing similarities of the lives in the metropolitan cities of Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore and even Soho right in the heart of Central London masks the different ways people simultaneously enjoy and suffer the effects of globalised modern life.

Even more diverse are their attitudes towards Chinese cultural entities

which necessarily affects their reception of *xiqu*. The cultural nostalgia of the first-generation Chinese diaspora is in constant negotiation with the hope to merge into their host society, for their descendants if not for themselves. The second and third generation of overseas Chinese feel at the same time a sense of affinity with and alienation from Chinese culture. And this relationship often oscillates according to their experience with the countries and cultures they live in. One might imagine that there might be a more solid relationship in the lives of Hong Kong and Taiwan residents with mainstream Chinese culture. But this is far from true. In fact, the feelings and attitudes of the population of these territories towards Chinese culture are constantly experiencing drastic changes under different circumstances, for example before and after the Cultural Revolution, the June Fourth Massacre and decolonisation of Hong Kong and Macau. Even within the vast sovereignty of the People's Republic, people of the different provinces and generations with different political experiences relate to traditional Chinese culture with a wide variety of emotions running the gamut from kinship love, admiration, patriotism to resentment, resistance and spiteful dismissal.

Yet such a diversity of experiences and perspectives co-existing at the same site and negotiating with one another is a central feature of contemporary life. A new scenario has already unfolded since the dawn of modernity in China when modern theatre architecture and the cinema first found its way into China. When China rejoined the world market after Nixon's visit, she found herself struggling in the ever more powerful and devouring gyre of the capitalist social process. *Xiqu* as both activity of

cultural production and the theatre industry is at the same time constituent and recipient of the numerous social forces interplaying with one another nationally and internationally. To examine *xiqu* as a social praxis in our contemporary period and in the foreseeable future, one needs a comprehension of its social context in this period from a macro perspective.

***Xiqu* in the age of post-modernity**

Fredrick Jameson has drawn a comprehensive picture of the scenario of the relationship between culture and this corresponding phase of capitalism since the 1970s in his book *Postmodernism, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. He started with Ernest Mandel's description of this phase of capitalism as a period of "late capitalism" Mandel periodises the development of capitalism in three phases:

The fundamental revolutions in power technology – the technology of the production of motive machines by machines – thus appears as the determinant moment in revolutions of technology as a whole. Machine production of steam-driven motors since 1848; machine production of electric and combustion motors since the 90s of the 19th century; machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses since the 40s of the 20th century – these are the three general revolutions in technology engendered by the capitalist mode of production since the "original industrial revolution of the later 18th century."¹⁸³

The advance of technology after the two World Wars has been boosting production in developed countries at a rate of almost geometric progression. Meanwhile, the legacy of earlier centuries of colonisation has assumed much more subtle forms of economic and cultural imperialism dominated by the USA and the Nato countries. In such a scenario, uneven distribution of resources, and thus wealth, continue to aggregate on a global scale. Material production has changed not only its method as

¹⁸³ Quoted in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 35-36.

technology develops, but also its nature. The rapid expansion in “service industries”, especially in the developed countries, is a significant marker in these changes. The proliferation of administration and information services as a branch of material production engages substantial resources and methods which differ from those involved in the production of tangible commodities. It implies a new mode of production involving new production relations between its participants. This has to be coordinated with and regulated by new sets of social relations and social order. Jameson describes the configuration of this new society as such:

... the arrival and inauguration of a whole new type of society, most famously baptised “postindustrial society (Daniel Bell) but often also designated consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech, and the like. Such theories have the obvious ideological mission of demonstrating, to their own relief, that the new social formation in question no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism, namely the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle.¹⁸⁴

He describes this period as the Third Machine Age.¹⁸⁵ He goes on to explain Mandel’s observation in the vocabulary of Marxist analysis in his own articulation of the latter’s periodisation for the development of capitalism:

This periodisation underscores the general thesis of Mandel’s book *Late Capitalism*; namely that there have been three fundamental moments in capitalism, each one marking a dialectical expansion over

¹⁸⁴ Jameson, 3.

¹⁸⁵ Jameson, 36.

the previous stage. These are *market capitalism, the monopoly stage* or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital.¹⁸⁶

... the economist Ernest Mandel, whose book *Late Capitalism* sets out not merely to anatomise the historic originality of the new society (which he sees as a third stage or moment in the evolution of capital), but also to demonstrate that it is, if anything, a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it.¹⁸⁷

The insistence on the chronological development of capitalism, and the periodisation of it is of paramount importance in Jameson's model of globalisation of capitalism. In this way he is able to find empathy in Mandel's model of evolution in capitalism. This view of the progression of capitalism is also what makes his explication of modern culture more useful to the present study than many other models provided by other scholars. He emphasises the uneven distribution of capital, hence wealth, among the different regions in the world market and attributes this uneven development to the rate and speed of capital accumulation in the various countries. The reason for this uneven rate and speed is, without saying, manifold and varies from one nation to another. Having foregrounded this heterogeneity, he sees the term "postindustrial" as a wrong one, since not all countries and communities have entered into a "postindustrial" phase although they are all engaged in the scenario of late capitalism. Once a country is engaged in the global market and interacting with the developed countries, it is inevitably caught up in the operation of late capitalism. But

¹⁸⁶ Jameson, 36.

¹⁸⁷ Jameson, 3.

the role that country plays in this operation can be very varied. Also, the periodisation of capitalism provides a basis for a periodisation of culture, namely modern and postmodern in accordance with an earlier and a later phase of advanced capitalism. Such a stance is essential for Jameson since he goes on to make the hypothesis that the outcome of this latest production relation resulted in a fragmentation of human subjectivity which has characterised cultural production in the postmodern era.

Jameson's model allows room for variation and specificity in the analysis of cultural phenomena of communities outside the developed Western countries. On the one hand, it makes postmodern culture a critical concept useful for the analysis of "other cultures". Many of these nations have not entered the phase of the post-industrial as a whole, but have made available a more consumerist lifestyle under the conditions of postmodernity, at least to some sectors of their population. On the other hand, it complicated the concept of postmodernity. In Jameson's model, it is no longer a monolithic and homogenous phenomenon of fragmented subjectivity (Foucault), triumph of the appearance and the simulacra (Baudrillard) and flattening of the dimension of distance and depth (Virilio). On the contrary, it is opened up as a field in which all nations arriving at different stages of capitalist development are engaged in economic interactions. The compulsive invention of material novelties in the more developed nations spills over to the others. The application and employment of these entities in the less developed countries in return also changes the material and cultural landscape of the first world. Examples are abundant. It was not the employment of the English language in the

ex-colonies, but the adoption of the operation of the Euro-American publishing industries in these countries, that requires the category of English literature to be re-defined. The use of the computer and internet in many of the developing countries changes the pattern of international trade. Therefore, the process of exchange of the postmodern conditions is a constant and complicated process of global imperialism speaking and the empire speaking back. If we take into consideration these realities, postmodernity is thus a field of global economic and cultural interaction among nations at different stages of capitalist development. It is a harsh reality of profound weight and depth.

The above provides a basic premise to understand the milieu of *xiqu* production in the post Cultural Revolution era. China is one of the developing countries which, as indicated above, has not fully entered the phase of the post-industrial, but has found itself playing in the global scenario of late capitalism. Deng Xiaoping's economic reform not only allowed, but also encouraged private ventures and enterprises. Many in the cities now find themselves attracted to and able to afford the technologically advanced lifestyle enjoyed by their counterpart city-dwellers in the developed countries. This wealth under postmodern conditions, however, co-exists with the much less wealthy urban poor and the vast rural areas in the country in which daily life is experienced in an essentially pre-modern mode. This highly complicated scenario of plurality of life-style is a very important feature of China's postmodernity.

In the Chinese cities, now *xiqu* finds itself a player in a cultural

scenario that is typically postmodern. Many boundaries previously demarcating limits of possibilities in life and attitudes towards them have been broken down. The improvement in manufacturing technologies enables consumption at a much higher rate and larger scale. The rapid development of transportation and communication allows easy export and import of goods both tangible and intangible. Consumption of commodities is no longer restricted by their geographical or seasonal availability. Telecommunications and the internet facilitate instant transmission of messages and images. The human sensitivity towards distance and time necessarily changes according to their experience of them. Various theorists have investigated different aspects of life under postmodern conditions. Human consciousness under these conditions, or the post-modern structure of feelings, to reiterate Raymond Williams' model, substantiates a procreation of groundbreaking artistic and literary styles. On the critical front, there has also been a proliferation of critical theories aiming to transcend conventional boundaries of knowledge and to arrive at alternative epistemological perspectives, often for the sake of liberating previously repressed subjective desires and needs. The ubiquitous appearance of cultural works of this category is termed postmodernism. Jameson sees this phenomenon of postmodernism not as an accidental invention of artistic and literary style, rather, it is the cultural logic of late capitalism. The proliferation of creative and critical works emphasising local logic at the expense of teleological values is a psychological response to life under the conditions of postmodernity, which is in fact the material realisation of late capitalism. Jameson uses Williams' material model of social formation and transformation in

explaining the nature of postmodernism:

... (it is) essential to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different yet subordinate features.¹⁸⁸

The postmodern is, however, the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses – what Raymond Williams has usefully termed “residual” and “emergent” forms of cultural production – must make their way.¹⁸⁹

Under the postmodern scenario of explosion in forms and methods, *xiqu* does not stay unchanged. A great variety of approaches to *xiqu* productions can still be found. Performance of old pieces as they have always been played are still seen. Meanwhile there are also many cultural productions of other artistic forms and conventions making allusion to and association with *xiqu*. In China and Hong Kong, a number of *xiqu* companies are still maintained, almost all with substantial government grants, at full scale supported by professional personnel taking care of the various production aspects. It is still possible to put on traditional works and create new pieces following the *xiqu* theatrical convention in the strict sense. However, the high cost in staging traditional pieces with the large number of personnel involved means that the company has to ensure good ticket sales, in order to prove the existence of a public need and justify government support. The safest way is to restrict their repertoire to the handful of famous pieces including the *Mudan ting* [*Peony Pavilion*] and

¹⁸⁸ Jameson, 4.

¹⁸⁹ Jameson, 6.

Bawang bie ji [*Farewell to the Concubine*] which could attract the casual or first time theatre-goers as well as connoisseurs. By the same token, new pieces are risky to produce, therefore rare in number. Even when new works are written, they are often calculated to appeal to the popular taste, hence often artistically lacking in edge.

Alongside these productions are collaborations between *xiqu* players and theatre practitioners of other conventions attempting to create works with theatrical features of the *xiqu* convention. Works of this type are more experimental in their forms. Often they have deviated such a long way from the essential features of the *xiqu* convention that they can hardly be categorised as *xiqu* at all. Certainly this is a positive rather than a negative thing since it inspires many interesting examples of experimentation, but the resulting works seldom contribute anything that can flow back and settle into the *xiqu* convention to benefit its development. Further along the continuum are numerous experimental drama productions claiming to have adopted elements of the *xiqu* convention to enhance a sense of theatricality in their works. The most famous examples of this kind are the early works of the recent Nobel Prize winning dramatist Gao Xingjian. But more often than not what they refer to as “elements of the *xiqu* convention” are not at all distinguishable from the shared theatrical assumptions of many other forms of non-naturalist realism. Among these are the adoption of a minimal style, emphasis on body language and non-verbal codes, and also the use of music and rhythm as a central device in setting the pace and rhythm of the piece. The reference to *xiqu* as claimed by many dramatists represents little more than a conceptual anchorage for a non-naturalist

realist thinking.

However, in the face of the keen competition of other forms of stage and electronic arts and entertainment, *xiqu* is much less popular than it was in the first half of the 20th century. Whether it is played straight as the traditional repertoire was or merged with other theatrical forms in the guise of experimental theatre, it no longer arouses sensational responses from the audience. It remains most notable as allusions or references to traditional practice of Chinese culture in works of art and literature. Since the 1980s many intellectuals and artists in Mainland China have been seeking to revive the traditional *Han* culture as an alternative to the Maoist ideologies that have proved to be utterly bankrupt after the collapse of the Cultural Revolution. This reaction resulted in the massive Movement in Search of Cultural Roots tapping into the various branches of pre-modern Chinese sources for materials for literary and artistic creation. The tendency has been boosted from the outside as China gradually exerted itself as an emerging political power in the world in the 1980s with the resultant international interest in its culture. Chinese cinema was responsive to all these factors and effective in making use of *xiqu* to create striking and powerful visual images in the construction of what Fredrick Jameson calls their 'national allegories'. This dynamic is particularly obvious in the group of root-searching directors commonly referred to the "fifth generation" of Chinese film directors including Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou.

Chen Kaige's debut film *Huangtudi* [*Yellow Earth*] already made use

of folk songs and dance of western China, a non-*Han* region which appeals even to the majority of *Han* Chinese as exotic, to create stunning cultural images. His later international commercial success *Bawang bie ji* [*Farewell to the Concubine*] made with Hong Kong capital further exploited to the full the exoticism of *xiqu* with male players in female roles. The film focuses on and romanticises the homosexual relationship of two *jingju* stars. It simplifies both the psychology of cross-gender acting and homosexuality and depicts the latter as a perversion brought about by a confusion of gender in cross-gender acting. Worse still, it is taken in the film as a synecdoche of the destructive power of the traditional Chinese culture which distorts human nature; just as *xiqu* can stand for traditional Chinese culture. Such an association is convincingly established in the film by highly accomplished directorial skills making use of breathtaking cinematography and the glamour of the most sought-after film stars in the person of Leslie Cheung and Gong Li.

Meanwhile there are also much more subtle explorations in the depiction of *xiqu* players in other films. Some of them investigate the relationship between the players' own life and their lives on stage. The discrepancy between their humble lives and glamorous stage presence is a common theme. One example is the well-made documentary drama *Ren, gui, qing* [*Human, Ghost and Love*] on the life of Pei Yanling, the Hebei (province) *bangzi xiqu* female player of *wusheng* (martial male roles) renowned for her performance as the ghost-god Zhong Kui. In either case, *xiqu* extracts are extravagantly interspersed in these films. They are treated as exotic elements by the camera.

In these works, *xiqu* becomes an issue, a theme or even a cultural symbol with all the associations with a culture the content of which is essentialised in these works. The reference to *xiqu* in this kind of context ascribes to it a fixed meaning. It is flattened out to provide the surface that gives a colourful appearance to an exotic culture, rather than being taken as an active cultural practice that keeps on creating meaning in the social process. *Xiqu* in these films is no more than a quote, an allusion, in more cases a symbol, or even an image. It is intended to embody certain fixed meanings to be recycled, rather than to generate new meanings as cultural production can and ought to essay.

One might ask why *xiqu* has lost its vitality for generating new meanings. One of the factors is that the inevitable process of pluralism in the theatre and in the field of cultural entertainment, which is in itself a good thing, has only in the 20th century filtered through to the Chinese communities. *Xiqu* finds itself at a disadvantage in competing with other dramatic forms on stage or with the photographic and electronic media of film, television, VCR and the recent DVD, which are much more convenient to access and to view, if not necessarily to produce. *Xiqu* productions involve high cost and tremendous expertise, and the latter is also required on the reception end if one is to comprehend the highly stylised and codified signification system. Thus it has lost its predominance in the landscape of the Chinese popular culture.

The other equally determining reason is the ethnic nature of the form. The *xiqu* convention is bounded up to such a great extent in ethnic details

that it can no longer express the highly globalised structure of feelings of contemporary life. What it articulates is rather a desire for an enclosed space in which life is not threatened by the complicated external politics surrounding the WTO, the IMF and all the factors that explode life. One can interpret this position as a xenophobic urge. But more importantly there is a morbid fear of losing one's identity in the increasingly Americanised world, and this identity must be strategically based on national specificity if it is to effectively preserve a distance between oneself and the all-consuming American culture. The Chinese in the early 20th century sought to eliminate the distance between *xiqu* and life to make it a socially and culturally productive art by setting it in the modern period. What our contemporaries at the end of the 20th century and the start of the new millennium are doing in order to make *xiqu* useful goes in the opposite direction to their predecessors. They now emphasise the difference between *xiqu* and real life by foregrounding its historic elements in order to allow the presence of the cultural past in the present. What *xiqu* expresses today is not a solid reality, but a desire for a cultural autonomy which is lacking in the globalised/Americanised world. *Xiqu* sings the beautifully sad epitaph of the cultural life of a non-Euro-American place which was once autonomous. It swings its formal ritual dance to mourn the inescapable loss of autonomy in the material life of a community. Nevertheless, the reality of globalisation cannot be resisted, nor is there any strategy of effective resistance in the prevailing political, economical and cultural reality. There is no other way out for China, just as there is none for the rest of the Third World, but to join the globalised market imitating the social and economic models of the West. The system is

inherited from early imperialist capitalism and necessarily privileges what is called the First World which is already running right at the tip-top of this system. Staying out of it is impossible. There is the threat of being penalised as Cuba is. There is no other way of playing the game. The Third World have found themselves in a double bind: chasing after globalisation and at the same time resenting it. The psychology is further complicated by the fact that it is only natural to be guided by the hedonistic urge to enjoy the economic and technological convenience globalisation affords, even if it is at the expense of the more autonomous traditional lifestyles. The latter have become impractical and non-profitable. The yearning for the autonomous past remains nothing but a romantic chimera. The lack of autonomy cannot be resolved. The articulation of the desire for it is no more than a self-indulgent whine repeating itself albeit without incentive to change the situation. Stifled by this cultural deadlock and weighed down with all the associations of the traditional culture, it would seem that no fresh meaning can be generated by *xiqu*.

The ways forward

It is so far established that one main factor that has locked *xiqu* in a non-productive position is its association, perhaps excessive and over-emphasised, with traditional Chinese culture. For *xiqu* to revive its vitality as an active form of cultural production, it must function once again as a form of theatre, rather than a cultural symbol.

Even if one rejects Adorno's differentiation between high and low art, one can hardly disregard the need to draw a distinction between critical art and entertainment as commercial commodities. Theatre nowadays functions in both ways. Needless to say, there are a great many works spread across the spectrum between these two ends. It is only too easy for academics and intellectuals to despise commercial productions and stand firm in a die-hard purist stance in order to safeguard the ethical dimension of cultural production. This position, though theoretically sound, is in practical terms untenable. Unlike theorists who are dealing with ideas and concepts on a discursive level, theatre producers have to cope with the realities of the need for commercial success in order not to excel, but merely to survive. On the other hand, state support is now no more than a myth since the conditions for subsidy are as harsh as the commercial market. It is only possible in the main for artists who are already enjoying a certain degree of success and recognition to receive subsidy, the amount of which is very limited. Anyone with any experience of applying for support from arts councils must have been tremendously irritated, if not put off, by the column requesting information on the size of audience

expected and the attendance for previous productions by the same company or artist. It is hardly a sign of paranoia to conclude that there is an institutionalised mechanism to make it difficult, if not impossible, for any production on the cutting edge of invention that necessarily attracts only a small percentage of the public initially. Any production of theatre work incurs considerable cost. To produce something critical and to bite the hand that feeds one in the form of the establishment is a strategy only available to someone who is enjoying public recognition, therefore enjoying a certain bargaining power when dealing with those who are in control of social resources.

For *xiqu* and other forms of art to remain on the cutting edge, they might need to be at least two-faced, if not multi-faceted. One strand is the staging of commercial shows to appeal to the public for its bread and butter and to popularise itself with the public. The other strand is to conduct a more serious critical pursuit. For both a commercial and a fringe audience, *xiqu* desperately needs to be popularised again. It will have to be understood by a much larger clientele than the faithful connoisseur. This is the only way for *xiqu* to regain its vitality as a social praxis instead of being fossilised as an artifact of cultural heritage that is only good in its mummified form in the museum. With the right infrastructure for promotion and packaging, it should not be difficult for *xiqu* to survive as commercial theatre. Its spectacular nature and the highly accomplished skills of its players never fail to amaze its audience from any culture. There is an intrinsic charm in *xiqu*, as in other great artistic conventions in the world, that impresses the audience in the aesthetic faculty and stamps

itself upon their consciousness. But it must play on the spectacle for easy appreciation. Therefore its repertoire must consist of grand plays with elaborate scenes, beautiful music and accomplished dance and acrobatic skills. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with entertainment. West End Musicals serve as very good models for its development in this direction.

But it is not the end for progressive art. Once *xiqu* is popularised again, the audience will be more receptive to its codification system and training will be more widely available. Those who seek to use it to express more immediate feelings will find it more accessible for themselves as well as for their audience. *Xiqu* pieces with more cutting-edge production values will always stay at the fringe, so that such pieces will cost less to produce and be more flexible and adaptable to production conditions. Yet this scenario is nothing new or particular to *xiqu*. It is generally the case for any avant-garde and critical art form. It is also highly possible that such a group of *xiqu* productions on the fringe would be most artistically experimental. They would be challenged by the need to explore new expressions for the current structure of feelings. Thus the atmosphere on the fringe scene would prove to be most tolerant, accommodating and encouraging for trial and experimentation. It would be the site where formal breakthrough is most likely to emerge.

There is nothing wrong with entertainment. At least it brings people into the theatre. It familiarises the public with theatrical communication and prepare them for reception of more critical works. Moreover, being entertaining does not necessarily imply conservatism. Brecht's didactic

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plays seek to be entertaining and instructive at the same time. The relationship between the above two directions does not need to be antagonistic. For one thing, commercial popularisation would necessarily inject new interest from the public and a heightened refinement in performing skills into the form. These would prove invaluable capital for the convention of *xiqu* and its potential for survival and development.

More important, it serves little purpose simply to dismiss commercial shows and withdraw from such an important site of social action with such a large base of public participation. There is indeed nothing to prevent companies and artists from doing both commercial and experimental performance. One might even express the idealistic hope that in time, critical elements can seep into commercial shows and bring a harder edge to spectacle-oriented productions. Such an approach could both appeal to a large crowd, and at the same time make critical art popular. In this way, *xiqu*, and indeed theatre and other artistic productions in general, would play a much more pro-active role in social process through more assertive participation in the formation of culture. This would open up the way for arts and literature to engage in direct social participation and intervention, and perhaps play their part in the realisation of a more genuine democratic process.

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