
CHINESE THEATER

From Its Origins to the Present Day

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK OUTLINES the major aspects of Chinese theater from its beginnings to the present. Although it is in no way intended to be difficult and will most certainly have failed if its readers find it esoteric, it does assume some knowledge of China's history and civilization. The chapters provide a historical survey of theater in traditional China as well as a topical discussion of developments in the twentieth century. The range of coverage varies enormously, in that the first chapter scans thousands of years from the dawn of Chinese history down to the thirteenth century, while the seventh focuses on a mere thirty-three years from the establishment of the People's Republic to 1982. The periods considered are not necessarily a unity in theatrical terms. The Han and Song dynasties are both treated in the first chapter and yet are vastly different from one another in many respects. The chapters on the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties specifically draw attention to differing schools or subperiods. Chapter VI, even more strikingly, charts a distinct movement, the Cultural Revolution, and the inevitable reaction to it.

Since theater is produced and maintained in popularity by the society it reflects, the chapters in this text try to identify both the artistic values intrinsic to a theatrical tradition and the social values or forces related to this tradition. Analysis of aesthetic qualities is thus usually combined with observation of social and political factors that have decisively influenced the development of Chinese theater. Chapter VI, for example, deals with the masses' relationship to the theater, linking the period of the Republic (1912-1949) and the war against Japan (1937-1945) with that of the People's Republic. Revolutionary theory on the arts, and revolutionary theater itself, were

born in the Republican years. Marx's concept that the new society is produced in the womb of the old makes good sense in this case, especially since the great significance of amateur theater in post-1949 China is based upon the institutionalization of practices that proved extremely effective during the war against Japan and the later civil war.

Two other topical chapters describe the performance techniques and training methods of the Beijing opera (chap. V) and the aesthetic principles and values of traditional theater performance in contemporary China (chap. VII). The author of the former deals with the Beijing opera "as it was staged before 1949," yet most of what he says about performance and the categories and skills of actors would in fact also hold true for traditional operas of the postliberation period. The latter describes the characteristic aesthetic patterns of traditional theater forms and addresses the difficulties posed by these patterns as practitioners attempt to adapt traditional artistry to the requirements of contemporary politics and audience preferences.

Some technical matters require comment. The first is that this book uses the *pinyin* system of romanization consistently throughout. Since the Chinese themselves began using this system in their foreign-language publications at the beginning of 1979, most books and journals in the West have adopted it, and there seems no point in adhering any longer to the Wade-Giles system.

All drama titles are given in English translation, but the romanized Chinese title is included also, the first time each is mentioned. Chinese terms are normally rendered into English, but some of them are untranslatable. A term such as *zaju* means literally "mixed dramas," which gives little idea of the word's true meaning. Good sense suggested it be left in the original.

It is my pleasure to thank all who have helped prepare this book, especially my fellow contributors.

CHAPTER VII

TRADITIONAL THEATER IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Elizabeth Wichmann

IT IS CLEAR from the preceding chapters that ideological and political concerns have affected theatrical development throughout Chinese history, becoming even more influential in the twentieth century. Since 1976, changes in official policy toward theater have led to a great increase in the range and variety of theatrical activity in China. Although spoken drama, sung drama, and dance-drama—forms based upon Western models and therefore new to this century—have returned to favor, this variety is provided primarily by a broad spectrum of increasingly active forms of traditional theater. These forms all share certain aesthetic principles and values which constitute their link to Chinese theatrical tradition but also limit their appeal to new audiences. In the present-day competition for audiences among various forms of entertainment, the development of traditional theater will depend upon the way in which its basic aesthetic features can be adapted to altered social conditions.

AESTHETIC FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY THEATER

Beijing opera, described in detail in chapter V, has been the nationally dominant form of theater in China for at least one hundred years. However, it is only one among more than 360 indigenous, or traditional, forms of Chinese theater currently being staged.¹ The majority of these forms are regional in nature, differing from one another in dialect, musical system and its adaptation to that dialect, musical accompaniment, play content, and numerous performance features including staging, acting, and movement practices. It is nonetheless possible to say that these forms are basically similar in certain major

ways, and immediately recognizable as quite distinct from the new, Western-influenced forms that developed in the twentieth century. Practitioners of these traditional theater forms invariably ascribe this readily perceivable distinction to three basic aesthetic principles shared by all traditional forms: synthesis, convention, and stylization.²

Song, music, dance and pantomime, story, and speech are all present in every traditional theater form; many make use of acrobatics to varying extents as well. The presence of these elements is not the primary characterizing feature, however. It is their synthesis (*zonghe xing*), rather than presentation in sequence, that is characteristic of traditional theater.

Song in performance is inextricable from its musical accompaniment and from the choreographed movement of the singer; pantomime is interwoven on the stage with percussion accompaniment, as is speech. While the story may be told aurally in some passages and visually in others, if the focus at a given moment is aural, as on a singer relating a sad separation from a loved one, that song is performed within the complementary visual fabric presented by the unceasing, gentle synchronized movements of eyes, hands, torso, feet, and often the body through space. And if the focus is visual, as upon a brave warrior ascending a steep mountain, that pantomime is within a texture of percussive sound provided by the orchestra. The same sort of percussive sound, but with different applications, forms a similar aural punctuation to speech; and the speech is performed within a visual fabric of movement punctuation as well. Extended speech or song without choreographed movement or accompanying sound rarely occur in traditional theater, nor does extended movement, dance, or pantomime without musical or percussive accompaniment.

The term convention (*chengshi xing*) refers to practices that have a specific meaning ascribed by tradition, and hence serve to signal that meaning to the audience. Traditional theater forms utilize a great many conventions, some of which are immediately understandable to an uninitiated audience, while others require preknowledge for comprehension.

Movement conventions most frequently fall in the former category, especially pantomimic actions such as opening and closing of doors and windows, mounting and descending stairs, tending fowl, sewing, and movement over rough terrain and in conditions of darkness,

heat, cold, rain, and wind—these actions are directly communicative and require no informed expertise on the part of the spectator. Other movement conventions are more formal, such as the act of walking in a large circle, which connotes travelling a great distance, and the straightening of costume and headdress parts upon entrance to signal the presence of an important character who is about to speak. The conventional movements of certain costume parts, such as water sleeves and pheasant feathers, may also have either dramatic or formal meanings.

The simple staging of traditional theater achieves its highly plastic nature through the use of conventions. The table and chairs, through their placement and use, serve as conventions for a city wall, a mountain, a bed, a throne, or simply a table and one or two chairs. Conventional use of stage properties frequently signals the presence and use of larger objects not visually present on the stage; a whip signals the presence of a horse, an oar that of a boat, and large blue banners swung in wide arcs close to the stage floor that of rushing water.

Perhaps the single most important convention is that of role types, which serve as both a convention in themselves and as a focus for headdress, costume, and makeup conventions. The role types of Beijing opera are fairly representative of those of traditional theater as a whole, though some theater forms may blend role types, or feature certain ones more predominantly than others. Each of the four principal role types, and even more specifically their numerous subcategories, are indicative of a particular age, sex, and social status or class. The conventional use of design and color in the headdresses, costumes, and makeups of each role type serves to directly state these characteristics. The makeup conventions for *jing*, or painted face roles, are even more specific, signalling the personality and temperament of the wearer as well.

Stylization (*xiangzheng shoufa*) is probably the aesthetic principle closest to the heart of traditional theater. It refers to the divergence between the behaviors of daily life and their presentation on the stage—the nonrealistic representation of those behaviors in performance, within a particular style. All forms of traditional Chinese theater are stylized. However, whereas conventions are for the most part shared among all the forms, having the same meanings in each, it is primarily through differences in the manner of stylization that the various forms of traditional theater can be distinguished from one another.

Both physical and vocal aspects of traditional theater performance

are stylized, and it is within the various role types and their subcategories that the specific stylizations occur. Physical stylization tends to be fairly similar for each role type throughout traditional theater forms, and hence more indicative of a particular role type than of a particular form of theater. The distinctive Beijing opera walking styles of the *dan* and *sheng*, described in chapter V, are readily recognizable in other traditional forms, as are the stylized hand and eye movements of the *huadan*. While some regional forms do not include certain role types—the *jing* being the type most frequently excluded—the posture, walk, and gesture style of every role type included in each form can definitely be recognized as belonging to that role type, throughout the various forms of traditional theater. Vocal stylization, however, is in many instances markedly different from one theater form to another, being simultaneously indicative of a particular role type and of the particular form of theater. In Beijing opera the young female speaks and sings in a clear, piercing falsetto, produced in the forehead and front of the face. Other forms utilize quite different vocal range and production for young female roles, including extremely high natural register production, midrange chest-supported nasal production, and a type of vocal production nearly resembling the yodel, in which the performer must have a very wide vocal range. Through their combined imagery, the vocal and physical stylizations of each role type convey the primarily Confucian values and resulting behavior patterns traditionally deemed appropriate by society for each type of role thus portrayed.

Musical stylization is even more important than vocal stylization in distinguishing among the forms of traditional theater. It occurs within two basic patterns. Beijing opera's *pihuang* style, with its characteristic accompanying musical instruments, two predominant modes, prescribed metrical arrangements, and characteristic melodic patterns is an excellent example of the major pattern for theater music in contemporary China. The music of many traditional theater forms is devised according to this pattern, each utilizing a particular musical style and its accompanying instruments, associated modes, and metrical arrangements, and having its own unique characteristic melodic patterns produced by the combination of that musical style and the dialect used by that form. Some traditional theater forms use the older pattern characteristic of *kunqu*, in which entire tunes within specific modes predate given plays, for which lyrics are then composed. But whichever pattern is used, the musical style of each form,

when coupled with its dialect, produces a musical stylization unique to that form.³

Finally, the overall aesthetic aim of all traditional theater forms is rooted in stylization. Traditional theater in contemporary China is a performer-oriented theater; the script serves primarily as a vehicle for performance. Every major performer in each performance must present a constant stream of expression; all internal aspects of the character being portrayed must be made external. Generally speaking, speech furthers the plot, while movement elaborates upon it and song deepens it by expressing emotion. A case can be made for the social origins of this phenomenon; Chinese society is basically one in which direct expressions of emotion are frowned upon. Speech is used in the theater for interaction, much as it is in daily life, although stylistically in a somewhat different manner, while movement and song are used to express subjective experience and inner feelings to the audience. The strength of the performance is therefore in music and movement; while a Western-style spoken drama may use ten thousand words in its script, the longest traditional plays contain only half that number, and most average about twenty-five hundred words.⁴ The combined aim of the physical, vocal, and musical stylizations of traditional theater is to convey the essence and spirit of life, rather than to present its realistic likeness.

In post-1976 China, all traditional theater forms pursue this aim, utilizing playscripts that fall within three basic categories.⁵ The first type, called "traditional plays" (*chuantong xi*), are plays that were already in performance before 1949 and were therefore usually devised or written without the intention of conveying particular ideological viewpoints. Some of them have been altered somewhat to remove or replace objectionable attitudes and situations, particularly those with erotic content, and are therefore termed "revised traditional plays."⁶ All such plays fully utilize and in fact exemplify the aesthetic principles and performance techniques of traditional theater.

The second category is called "newly written historical plays" (*xin biande lishi ju*). The term "historical" is used loosely here—while some of these plays do concern historical figures, many have mythological heroes such as the Monkey King Sun Wukong and the legendary Judge Bao. These plays are written to consciously embody ideological viewpoints and attitudes and are distinguishable from traditional playscripts on that basis. While none were produced between 1966 and 1976, they are currently the major focus for contemporary play-

wrights. In terms of performance, the important characteristic of newly written historical plays is that they are set in the past and can therefore use the entire body of traditional performance techniques, including the costumes and stage properties and the full repertoire of conventional and stylized movement which they facilitate. To an audience unfamiliar with the texts of traditional plays, newly written historical plays and traditional plays therefore appear essentially identical in performance.

The third category of plays is made up of those termed "contemporary plays" (*xiandai xi*). Like newly written historical plays, contemporary plays consciously embody ideological viewpoints. However, their plots, themes, and characters are all of the twentieth century. The performance of contemporary plays cannot therefore rely entirely upon traditional aesthetic principles and performance techniques. Much of the traditional conventional and stylized movement is simply not practicable without the traditional costumes and stage properties; such movement problems are compounded by the addition of realistic scenery, since conventionalized movements intended to convey the physical environment on a bare stage become superfluous. Perhaps even more fundamental is the problem presented by role types; developed to portray Confucian values and their resulting behavior patterns at different levels of social status, the role types are often inappropriate for the portrayal of postliberation characters. The performance of contemporary plays therefore requires the creative development of new performance techniques. Though there were of course ideological reasons for there being so few model revolutionary contemporary Beijing operas developed during the Cultural Revolution, these performance considerations were certainly a major contributing factor as well. And while a number of contemporary plays were written to criticize the Gang of Four between 1977 and 1979, many more newly written historical plays have been composed since 1976 than have contemporary plays. However, cultural officials continue to express a need for and to give respect to plays written to express contemporary themes in a modern setting.⁷

The range of stylization in traditional theater forms combined with the very different subject matter of the three types of plays performed in traditional theater means that many specific aesthetic values are particular to just one form or type of play. However, three fundamental aesthetic values shared by all forms and plays of traditional theater are evident.

The first concerns posture and movement, both of various parts of

the body in isolation, and of the entire body in or through space. Straight lines and angles are to be avoided; the aesthetic aim is the presentation of a three-dimensional network of circles, arcs, and curved lines.

In stasis, this means for instance that an outstretched arm will be held in an extended curve unbroken at either the shoulder or elbow by angles. In movement, this aesthetic applies to action as small as the gaze of an eye, and as large as the blocking of principal characters. In many role types, the actor's eyes are used to focus the attention of the audience, to lead it with the movement of a gaze. In such an instance, if the performer intends to indicate an object on the ground, the gaze of his or her eyes will begin away from the object, sweep up first, and then curve down to rest on the object. Conversely, if the gaze is to end in an indication of something above eye level, it will travel down as it moves toward that object, and then sweep up to light upon it. This same use of the arc is made in pointing gestures, which first curve away from the direction in which the hand will ultimately point; a pointing directly in front of the body will begin with a sweep into the body before curving out, a pointing to the left will begin with a sweep to the right, and vice versa. In movement through space, the performer similarly avoids straight lines and angles. A move from downstage center facing out to an upstage center chair is therefore made by circling to either the left or the right while gradually turning to face upstage, moving diagonally to the side of the chair, and then circling again in the opposite direction to return to the front face position, this time directly in front of the chair. The resulting s-shaped curve has been compared to the movement of a marionette puppet, necessary in order to keep the puppet's strings from entangling, and hypotheses have been drawn on this basis concerning the origins of theater movement in puppet theater.⁸ Whatever the causal relationship, such curved movement patterns are a basic aesthetic of traditional theater.

A second aesthetic value concerns both movement and vocal production. Whether in dance, pantomime, acrobatics, song, or speech, the actor's performance must at all times appear effortless. Any hint of strain at hitting a high note, performing a complex series of somersaults and flips, or speaking an extended declamatory passage without apparent pause for breath is perceived as indicating that the performer's command of technique is insufficient. The appearance of strain or effort is uncomfortable for the audience and undercuts the

aim of conveying the spirit and essence of life in performance. The rigorous training program described in chapter V remains critical to the development of stage artistry, for only such a program can bring about the control needed for apparently effortless performance of the physically strenuous and complex techniques of traditional theater.

The final fundamental aesthetic of traditional theater applies to all aspects of performance—everything on the stage, everything within the world of the play, must above all be beautiful. In terms of costume, this means that a beggar in a traditional or newly revised historical play will be dressed in a black silk robe covered with multicolored silk patches, rather than in actually dirty or tattered clothes. And in a contemporary play, the clothes of the poorest peasant are clean and neatly patched, while a soldier just in from days on maneuvers will at most be marked by a few strategically placed tears and conventionally suggested blood stains on an otherwise crisp and clean uniform. In terms of acting style, the absolute requirement for beauty means that the actress portraying a young woman who has just received heartbreaking news will on no account cry real tears, for the accompanying red eyes and runny nose are considered anything but beautiful. The act of crying will instead be presented in a stylized fashion, and if the actress is good, will be quite moving. In training schools and rehearsal halls, the criticism heard with much the greatest frequency, directed at speech, song, movement, and acting style alike, is that the particular sound or action being performed is incorrect because it is not beautiful. And the highest praise which can be given a performance is to say that it is beautiful.

Because they are all based upon these aesthetic principles and values, traditional theater forms are both fundamentally similar to one another and quite distinct from the newer forms of the twentieth century. The spoken drama (*huaju*), sung drama (*geju*), and dance-drama (*wuju*) of the twentieth century are based to varying extents upon the aesthetics of several Western models, and are therefore immediately distinguishable from the traditional forms. But since the Western forms of theater that serve as models are quite different from one another, twentieth-century forms are not usually viewed in China as being a discrete category in themselves. In fact, whereas the traditional forms are collectively referred to in contemporary China by the generic term *xiqu*, twentieth-century forms as a group are generally referred to only by the broad term *xiju*, or theater, a concept which naturally includes traditional forms as well. It is the extent to which

aesthetic principles and values of the traditional theater are present in each of the newer twentieth-century forms, and the way in which they are blended with the aesthetics of the Western models, that most illuminates both the individual and Chinese natures of each of these newer forms.

Spoken drama is the most thoroughly Western-based form. As such, it utilizes certain aesthetics of Western realistic theater, including the demands for realism in the portrayal of its characters and in its staging techniques, as well as for an emphasis upon well-made plots in its scripts. Since it is further in nature from traditional theater, containing neither song nor dancelike movement, it reflects the least influence of the aesthetic principles and values of traditional theater; there is essentially no synthesis in the manner of traditional theater, and very little convention and stylization. To say there is no such influence, however, is to deny the sinicization of the Western models in their adaptation to Chinese content and to deny the force of those traditional aesthetic principles and values within the broad range of Chinese theatrical activity. Spoken drama, like traditional drama, holds beauty as a primary aesthetic value. In the creation of beauty within the context of spoken drama, conventions and stylizations have been adopted for the portrayal of actions and situations which, if performed thoroughly realistically, would jar with that aesthetic. Stylized conventional gestures of pain, anger, sadness, and heroism in the face of physical adversity may trouble the Western viewer when seen in the performance of Western-style spoken drama, but they are well within the Chinese theatrical tradition.

Sung drama and dance-drama present more obvious blends of Chinese and Western forms, techniques, and aesthetics. In the former, Western opera influence may be seen, as well as the influences of both traditional Chinese theater and folk music. In the latter, elements of Western ballet and modern dance blend with Chinese folk dance and traditional theater movement. In both, Western realistic staging techniques are combined with conventional staging elements of the traditional theater. The basic aesthetic values of apparent effortlessness and beauty are evident throughout.

PATTERNS AND PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPMENT

The strength and ubiquity of traditional theater aesthetics, substantially affecting even the Western-based forms of Chinese theater, are

perhaps the reason that creation, in the Western sense of bringing into existence something that is more or less totally new, is not a major attribute of Chinese theater. The conscious creation of new forms of theater determined to break completely with the past, such as the romantic, realistic, expressionist, impressionist, and surrealist movements of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western theater, do not have Chinese parallels. Though the early history of spoken drama in China resembles somewhat the beginnings of its Western counterparts, it differs in a crucial aspect: the theater form being supported was an imported, already proven Western one rather than a new indigenous development. Creativity in Chinese theater has consisted rather in making creative changes and developments in and among already existing forms of theatrical expression.

Creativity within a traditional theater form is perhaps best exemplified in this century by the work of Mei Lanfang. Originally performing in *qingyi* roles, he later combined the techniques of *qingyi*, *huadan*, and *wudan* in various ways to produce young female characters overwhelming in both their theatricality and subtlety, featured in plays that gave the performer the opportunity to demonstrate his superlative command of acrobatic, song, speech, movement, and acting techniques. For these plays he commissioned scripts that are of exceptional literary quality for Beijing operas, as this form is not noted for its emphasis upon text, and developed new costumes and dances based upon historical models. On his death he left Beijing opera more highly developed and regarded than he found it, and in the course of his career he raised the stature of young female roles in that form to the importance of those of mature men.⁹

Such creative development and assimilation has in the past given rise to new forms of traditional theater as well. Wei Liangfu's work in developing Kunshan music, incorporating his knowledge of both northern and southern theatrical music, gave rise to the music of *kunqu*, which became the dominant national theatrical form and held that position for three hundred years, as described in chapter III. The creative combination of techniques from several regional traditional theater forms gave rise to *kunqu*'s successor, Beijing opera, as documented in chapter IV.

The "model revolutionary contemporary Beijing opera" plays of the Cultural Revolution are the most recent example of creative experiment in traditional Chinese theater. While strictly speaking they are a new type of play rather than a new form of theater, their perfor-

mance is appreciably different from that of traditional Beijing opera plays, using as they do a creative combination of Western staging techniques and orchestration, traditional musical style, traditional and spoken drama movement and speech, as well as musical and movement elements from regional traditional theater forms and folk performances.

It is clear from essays in the official press during the period 1978-1982 that the present official aims regarding theater are to preserve traditional forms, primarily in the production of traditional plays, and to creatively develop these forms in the production of newly written historical plays and contemporary plays. Forms that made their appearance in twentieth-century China are also given encouragement to develop creatively.¹⁰

Preservation is of course of critical importance. Traditional theater forms constitute a major portion of China's traditional cultural heritage. Additionally, creative development based upon these traditional forms absolutely requires their healthy survival. However, preservation alone would very likely result in museum piece theater, certainly a much lesser achievement than the continued existence of a living, developing body of national theater forms.¹¹

While it is possible that superlative actors will arise, capable of creatively expanding the techniques of traditional theater forms in the manner of Mei Lanfang's contribution to Beijing opera, it is unrealistic to rely upon such a chance development. This is especially true in contemporary China; practice and training have had only five years of relative normality after the extended break caused by the Cultural Revolution, and practice and training are critical for the development of the technical expertise such a performer would require to contribute substantially in this manner. Furthermore, the type of theatrical production developed in the Cultural Revolution, with its emphasis on committee work and revision rather than on individual contribution, is still the primary working method, further reducing the likelihood of individual performers singlehandedly bringing about substantial artistic changes. It is much more likely for development within existing forms, as well as the development of new forms, to occur as a result of creative borrowing between forms and assimilation of folk and Western techniques.

The enormous range of theatrical forms and techniques in contemporary China, coupled with the variety of Western dramatic and theatrical elements becoming increasingly familiar in China, present a

rich field for creative borrowing and assimilation. A literally innumerable array of musical, acting, movement and dance, and staging possibilities present themselves.

While the most ambitious and far-reaching example of this sort of creative development to date remains the model revolutionary contemporary plays of the Cultural Revolution, other examples are already evident. The dance-drama *Tales of the Silk Road* (*Silu hua-yu*), discussed in chapter VI, is a good case in point. The drama combines Chinese and Western musical instruments and styles for accompaniment; blends ballet, modern, and folk dance movements, as well as movements created from postures in Tang dynasty murals in its dances; and has costumes based on those murals and modified by folk costumes and contemporary Chinese moral and aesthetic values concerning dress. In doing so, a production of great popularity was created, which has been in continuous performance in a number of Chinese cities since 1979. Furthermore, aspects of creative assimilation in this production have already found their way into other, traditional theater forms.

In a 1980-1981 production of the newly written historical play *Wang Xifeng Disrupts Ningguo Prefecture* (*Wang Xifeng danao Ningguofu*), performed by the Jiangsu Provincial Beijing opera troupe, a costume based upon those created for *Tales of the Silk Road* was designed for one of the principal female opponents of the main character (see plate 40). New movement patterns in the style of traditional Beijing opera movement were developed to use that costume to full advantage in the Beijing opera form.¹²

Other developments include the many scenic devices of spoken drama that have been adapted for use in traditional theater, primarily in the production of newly written historical plays, although they do occur at times in traditional play productions as well. Lighting and sound effects, multiple-set realistic scenery, rear projections, and special effects such as smoke and flash pots, are among them (see plates 41-43). Such developments, however, do not generally concern actual performance technique.

Substantial creative development within traditional theater forms, with the major exception of the model revolutionary contemporary Beijing operas, remains scarce. The scarcity of contemporary plays is partly the result of the performance difficulties they pose for practitioners of traditional theater, as discussed above. Throughout the various forms and play types of traditional theater, it is due largely to

the problem of authenticity and to the question of subject matter in scripts.

Each of the more than 360 forms of traditional theater is well defined, having its own characteristic musical style and method of stylization. Especially in light of the emphasis upon preservation of traditional theater forms, extensive creative development particularly in performance technique presents a critical problem; it runs the risk of exceeding the parameters of the particular form. To do so would be to lose the authenticity, the characteristic "flavor" of that form. Experiments in utilizing techniques from other traditional theater forms and from folk forms may be criticized as diluting the purity and integrity of the original form, as blurring those distinctions between it and the others that give it its uniqueness. Experiments in incorporating elements from the more Westernized twentieth-century forms may provoke the criticism that the resulting performance is merely spoken drama with singing tacked on; that the original form has lost an appreciable portion of its Chinese character—an extremely sensitive issue.¹³

The second primary difficulty involved in creatively developing theater forms is the question of subject matter and resulting scripts. Plots, themes, and characters are of the utmost relevance to the creative development of performance techniques, since the script provides the vehicle for performance. At the same time, it is the script that allows for the projection of value systems through images, a conscious and major concern of the Chinese authorities. It is not currently possible to produce a script solely from performance considerations; the ideological content remains of considerable importance. However, particularly in the area of contemporary plays, the specifically desired ideological content and the manner in which it is to be presented are uncertain. In terms of their scripts, contemporary plays during the Cultural Revolution and until the fall of the Gang of Four were used exclusively as ideological vehicles; the value system they projected was the highly and purely political one of those leftists in power at the time. The slow process of disengaging the category, "contemporary play," from the personal politics of Jiang Qing and her comrades, as well as from its definition as a literary form synonymous with pure propaganda, is still underway. Until this process is completed, the question of subject matter for contemporary plays will remain highly problematic, as to a lesser degree will that for newly written historical plays. Only the traditional plays are essentially free from the current

problem presented by the relationship of politics to dramatic content, since they originated before the conscious inclusion of specific ideological content in playscripts. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of traditional theater productions currently use traditional playscripts, and that far fewer contemporary plays are being written and staged than are newly written historical plays.¹⁴

In addition to these uniquely Chinese problems, the influences of a more general problem facing world theater as a whole are also being felt in China; stage art is increasingly in competition with film and television for its audiences. In China, a major reason for this dichotomy and resulting competition is the difference between the overall nature of contemporary life and that of the period during which the traditional theater forms originally developed.

Qing dynasty China was a thoroughly rural and nonindustrial society, experiencing appreciable Western cultural influence only during its waning years. Contemporary China, on the other hand, while still having a population based primarily in the countryside, is marked by industrializing cities as well as a growth of industry in rural areas, by the current campaign for the Four Modernizations, and by increasing Western cultural influence on many fronts. The "speed of life" in contemporary China is considerably faster than it was when the traditional theater forms now extant arose.

Theater is by definition a reflection of life. It is produced and maintained in popularity by the society that it reflects. The performance-oriented theater forms developed to convey the essence of life in Qing dynasty society, with their lack of emphasis upon plot and extensive use of convention and stylization, are less action- and speech-oriented, more leisurely, and more indirect than is contemporary life. Television and film, much more realistic forms which are action- and speech-oriented, simply reflect contemporary life more accurately and immediately. In the case of foreign imports, they give their Chinese audiences a chance to see what life in other cultures and societies is like.¹⁵

Spoken drama is the theater form which at present most readily competes with the screen arts. Like them, it is basically realistic and oriented toward plot. Unlike the traditional theater forms, it can respond quickly to changes in ideological criteria for content—in fact, often more quickly than can film and television produced in China. It is therefore capable of being the newest performance art, in terms of both form and content, playing in a given town at a given time. And

"new" is a critical drawing factor for an audience deprived of variety for more than ten years.

Sung dramas and dance-dramas are also relatively Western, and therefore realistic, in Chinese terms. At the same time, they contain elements of performance deemed inseparable from theater in China for centuries, elements that spoken drama lacks—music and choreographed movement. Their combination of these new and old elements currently draws for them a sizeable audience.

It is, then, traditional theater that faces the most immediate competitive threat from the screen arts. Contemporary plays are at present problematic. Traditional and newly written historical plays are unavoidably "old," are too thoroughly grounded in a past society to apply directly to the needs of the present day. Some forms of regional traditional theater, such as *yueju* of Zhejiang province, *pingju* of the northeast, and *huju* of Shanghai fare a bit better in this respect than do major national traditional forms such as Beijing opera and *kunqu*. Due primarily to the liveliness of regional dialect in their speech, they are closer to the lives of their audiences than are the national forms; they contain specific characteristics of their regions and are therefore more congruent with the tastes of audiences in their regions. None has as yet, however, risen to prominence outside of its own region. Whether or not any of them will be able to do so is in question; the very reasons for their regional popularity make them somewhat removed from the broad national audience.¹⁶ In most forms of traditional theater, including the major national forms, experiments with realistic sets and scenic effects for newly written historical plays, and occasionally even for traditional plays, have perhaps temporarily lured audiences through their novel use of technology and their "realism." However, practitioners, officials, and audiences have already begun to question this practice, since it necessitates a warping of aesthetic principles and values.¹⁷

Though attendance remains high at traditional theater performances, theater officials see this as a relatively short-range phenomenon. They view it as being due primarily to the curiosity appeal of the old society and traditional performance techniques seen in the production of traditional and newly written historical plays, no matter what staging techniques are used, after the ten year hiatus produced by the Cultural Revolution. Since 1979, there has been a steady decrease in the length of time a traditional or newly written historical play can run and command sufficiently large attendance to make it worthwhile. Also, audience composition has been changing during

the same period. While in 1978, various age groups were generally represented in audiences in the same proportions as in the society at large, spectators over the age of forty-five have since come increasingly to dominate audience membership.¹⁸ The general decline in attendance at these plays and the mounting loss of younger members of the audience may stem from the distance between the type of Chinese society reflected by the traditional theater and the contemporary population, especially those too young to have acquired serious tastes for traditional theater prior to the Cultural Revolution. While no statistics are available to demonstrate that people who fail to attend traditional theater performances are in fact viewing twentieth-century forms or screen arts instead, there are some indications that this is in fact the case. Perhaps most telling is the marked preference among traditional theater performers under forty-five years of age for spoken drama, films, and television as recreational viewing on their nights off.¹⁹

Such a preference for more contemporary forms of performance should not be taken to signal a lack of interest on the part of these younger performers in their own performing art, however. This same group of performers also overwhelmingly indicated interest in and a desire to do further work with contemporary plays in their own traditional theater forms. Such a desire may in part be predicated on the personal, emotional investments made by these people in the model revolutionary contemporary plays of the Cultural Revolution—their elders were much less involved with these plays. However, there is a large element of practicality in such a view, as shown by the ongoing official support for contemporary plays. Dealing as they do with twentieth-century people and events and using a potentially much broader range of performance techniques, contemporary plays stand a much better chance of competing successfully with twentieth-century forms and the screen arts for audiences.

Contemporary plays offer the opportunity for the presentation of contemporary characters in plots and on themes directly applicable to the needs of the present day. Simultaneously, they present abundant possibilities for the blending of new, more realistic and action-oriented aesthetics and techniques with the centuries-old aesthetic principles, values, performance elements, and resulting techniques of traditional Chinese theater. While the creative and ideological problems presented by contemporary plays are undeniably formidable, they are probably the main hope for a living theater based in the indigenous Chinese theatrical tradition.

NOTES

1. The figure is from an interview with provincial-level theater officials in Jiangsu Province, October 28, 1980.

2. Most of the data and opinion in this chapter are based upon two years of field research in China, primarily in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, but also in Beijing, Shanghai, and Lanzhou, Gansu Province, from August 1979 to August 1981. Only where data are specific to one interview or observation situation, rather than drawn from the notes and tapes of the total research period, is it noted below.

3. For a more detailed English language analysis of traditional Chinese theater music in the twentieth century, see Rulan Chao Pian, "Aria Structural Patterns in the Peking Opera," in J. I. Crump and William P. Malm, eds., *Chinese and Japanese Music-Dramas* (The University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies No. 19, Ann Arbor, 1975), pp. 65-98.

4. The figures are from lectures given to students majoring in traditional play directing at the Jiangsu Provincial Traditional Theater School in the spring of 1980.

5. While the three categories of plays have been recognized as such since the establishment of the Drama Reform Committee in July of 1950, the current policy of "san zhe bing ju," or "simultaneously develop the three," is associated with Zhou Enlai's policies of the 1950s and early 1960s regarding theatrical development. For a fairly comprehensive history of theater in China since 1949 as viewed from the current perspective of cultural officials, see "Zai Zhongguo xijujia xiehui disanci huiyan daibiao dahui shang, Zhao Xun tongzhi zuo ju xie gongzuo baogao," *Renmin xiju* 12 (1979):8-16.

6. Mei Lanfang, "Zhongguo xiqu yishu de xin fangxiang," *Wenyi bao* 16 (1952):10-14. An abbreviated version is also available in English as "Old Art with a New Future," *China Reconstructs* 4 (September-October, 1952):21-24.

7. Numerous examples of official support and encouragement of contemporary plays have been published since 1976. A representative piece is: Huo Dashou, "Ji-cheng gexin, wenbu qianjin—quan guo xiqu jumu gongzuo zuotanhui ceji," *Renmin xiju* 9 (1980):3-7. More recent expression can be seen in: "Wenhua bu zai Ning zhaokai xiqu xiandai xi zuotanhui—ba jutuan chengli xiqu xiandai xi yanjiu hui," *Renmin xiju* 1 (1981):57.

8. See Sun Kaidi, *Kuilei xi kaoyuan* (Shangza, Shanghai, 1952), for a well-supported thesis aiming to prove that puppetry was the origin of theater in China, and that theater therefore imitates the techniques of puppetry. See Sun Rongbai, *Jingju changshi jianghua* (Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, Beijing, 1959), p. 7, for a description of s-shaped movement patterns in Beijing opera.

9. For more information on Mei Lanfang in English, see A. C. Scott, *Mei Lanfang, Leader of the Pear Garden* (Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 1959); Wu Zuguang, Huang Zuolin, and Mei Shaowu, *Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang* (New World Press, Beijing, 1981); and William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (Paul Elek, London, 1976). In Chinese, see Mei Lanfang, *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian* (Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, Beijing, 1980); and Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan quanji* (Qi Rushan xiansheng yizhu bianyan weiyuanhui, Taipei, 1964).

10. One of the most comprehensive analyses to date on the considerations involved in preserving and creatively developing traditional theater is: Liu Housheng, "Xiqu

bixu yongyuan tui chen chu xin," *Renmin xiju* 4 (1979):5-9. A shorter analysis from the same year by Zhu Hong is in *Guangming ribao*, October 16, 1979, p. 3. Throughout the year 1980, *Renmin xiju* carried at least one article per month on this topic, listed in each index under the section heading, "Tui chen chu xin," or "Weed Through the Old to Bring Forth the New." Representative articles on the development of spoken drama include those by Li Moran in *Guangming ribao*, June 11, 1979, p. 3, and Ding Haiping in *Guangming ribao*, June 2, 1980, p. 3.

11. A representative statement of support for the preservation of traditional Beijing opera plays, and a study of the problems involved in such preservation, can be found in: "Jingju yishu de jicheng, gexin yu fazhan—Shanghai jingju yishu gongzuozhe zuotanhui jiyao," *Renmin xiju* 11 (1979):23-27, 37.

12. Between the November 1980 and January 1981 runs of this production, comments by participant performers, officials, and members of the audience led to further adaptation in both the costume itself and the movements of the performer who wore it.

13. Practitioners frequently discuss such criticisms, and the problems posed by them, in working meetings. Mention of these criticisms and resulting problems can also be found in the official press, e.g.: "Jingju xiang he chu qu—jingju yishu zuotanhui fayan zhaiyao," *Renmin xiju* 1 (1980):2-13.

14. For an analysis of the considerations involved in creatively developing the literature of Beijing opera, see: Wang Zengqi, "Cong xiju wenxue de jiaodu kan jingju de weiji," *Renmin xiju* 10 (1980):22-24.

15. The issue of theater and its relationship to contemporary life is probably the major one being discussed by practitioners of traditional theater forms, especially Beijing opera and *kunqu*, at the present time. Representative publications on this topic include: "Jingju guanzhong ping jingju—jingju guanzhong daibiao zuotanhui fayan zhaiyao," *Renmin xiju* 2 (1980):2-6; Zhang Junqiu, et al., "Jingju yanyuan da jingju guanzhong," *Renmin xiju* 3 (1980):25-32; and Tong Zhiling, "Wei jingju zhengqu gengduo de guanzhong," *Renmin xiju* 6 (1980):4-6.

16. The possibility of major national forms assimilating characteristics of regional forms is a real one, however. For discussion of the relationship of regional traditional forms to major national ones, see *Renmin xiju* 11 (1979):23-27, 37; and 10 (1980):22-24.

17. Reflections in the official press of the controversy over scenery in traditional theater can be found in: Luan Guanhua, "Xiqu bujing chuangzuo de jicheng yu gexin," *Renmin xiju* 10 (1979):40-41; "Ben kan duzhe dui jingju wenti de yixie yijian—duzhe lai xin zongshu," *Renmin xiju* 5 (1980):42-44; and Luan Guanhua, "Jie hou fuxing de jingxiang—guangan 'Shoudu wutai meishu sheji zhanlan,'" *Renmin xiju* 1 (1981):33-34.

18. The critical problem of attendance at traditional theater performance, particularly in the case of Beijing opera, is a major topic of discussion among practitioners and officials. It is also featured in the official press: see *Renmin xiju* 1 (1980):2-13; 2 (1980):2-6; 3 (1980):25-32; and 6 (1980):4-6.

19. This tendency is not shared by performers over forty-five, who overwhelmingly indicated their preference for viewing their own or other forms of traditional theater when time permits.