THE AESTHETICS
OF
CHINESE CLASSICAL THEATRE
— A PERFORMER’S VIEW

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This thesis is based entirely upon my own research.

Yuen Ha TANG
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Since I first became their student in Shanghai in the 1980s, my teachers Yu Zhenfei and Zhang Meijuan (and others) inspired me with their passionate love for the theatre and their unceasing quest for artistic refinement. I am deeply grateful to them all for having passed on to me their rich store of artistry and wisdom. My parents, my sister and her family, have supported me warmly over the years. My mother initiated me in the love of the theatre, and my father urged me to pursue my dream and showed me the power of perseverance. My thanks also go to Geng Tianyuan, fellow artist over many years. His inspired guidance as a director has taught me a great deal. Zhang Peicai and Sun Youhao, outstanding musicians, offered their help in producing the video materials of percussive music. Qi Guhua, my teacher of calligraphy, enlightened me on this perennial and fascinating art.

The Hong Kong Arts Development Council has subsidized my company, Jingkun Theatre, since 1998. My assistant Lily Lau has provided much valuable help and my numerous friends and students have given me their constant loyalty and enthusiasm.

I am grateful to the ANU China Institute for underwriting two visits by the Jingkun Theatre to the Canberra campus, in 2007 and 2009.
ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I discuss the fundamental aesthetic philosophy underlying the traditions of Chinese Classical Theatre. I use the term “Chinese Classical Theatre” when referring particularly to Kunqu and Jingju (Peking Opera), since these two particular genres and their artistic values most clearly represent the characteristics of Chinese Traditional Theatre or Xiqu as a classical dramatic system. The term “Chinese Traditional Theatre” or Xiqu is used in a wider and more generic sense, to include all the many varieties of traditional and regional theatre.

In the first chapter, I look at the broad historical development of Xiqu, from its original sources to its supreme expression – Kunqu and Jingju. In the second, the focus is on the essence of Taoism, which is the starting point of Chinese traditional aesthetics. Taoism and Buddhism have given Chinese artists total freedom from all limitations; and have inspired them to seek a truth beyond appearance.

The third chapter concentrates on Confucianism, its contribution to ancient art education, and its influence on Xiqu stylization, in particular the art of different role-types and the function of percussive music.

The fundamental concept of general education and the method of Xiqu training will be explored in the fourth chapter. I examine the Keban 科班 – the old system according to which Xiqu actors were trained; and use video materials to illustrate the modern Chinese institutions for training in the Classical Theatre.

In the fifth and last chapter, through the analysis of two less than successful examples, I explore, at a deeper level, the core of Chinese traditional aesthetics and how that core can be lost or preserved in the process of reform.
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The Aesthetics of Chinese Classical Theatre — a performer’s view

Introduction

When I was a child in Hong Kong, my family lived in the vicinity of an amusement park, in which all popular entertainments gathered together and each one had its own venue for performance. Jingju (Peking Opera), for example, was held daily in one of the theatres. My mother, a great Jingju lover, took me there frequently.¹ As a young member of the audience, I enjoyed the atmosphere all around me. People were happy, and, especially, they were relaxed. Whenever there was a Mainland Jingju troupe visiting Hong Kong in a more formal theatre, which was quite rare at that time, my mother would never miss a single night. I thus had the chance to see some really amazing performances. Although I was not particularly attracted to the singing at such a young age, I remember that I was totally captivated by the beauty of the body movements, the breath-taking fighting scenes, and the overall energy of the performers on the stage. I can still vividly recall the moment when one of the greatest Painted Face actors of our time, Qiu Shengrong 裘盛戎, made his entrance on stage, to the accompaniment of some vigorous and thrilling percussive music….I was then 6 years old.² From then on, I knew that it was only by watching an actor’s “first entrance on stage” 出場, that one could almost immediately tell how good he was. My intimacy with Jingju was also due to the fact that from the time I was about two years old, my mother had a teacher (who was also a qinshi 琴師 – player of two-stringed fiddle jinghu 京胡) who came almost every day to our home to teach her singing. This exposure gave me a familiarity with the art without my even being aware of it. My mother used to complain that her voice was not powerful enough, and I childishly told her that I could perhaps help her out by adding mine on top. At the time I had absolutely no idea what these arias were all about, but I nevertheless could sing along with her without making

¹ My mother, Alvina Tsen Te-mei 岑德美 (1918-2001), was the youngest daughter of Cen Chunxuan 岑春煥, the Governor of the Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces in the Qing dynasty, and one of the favourite officials of the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧. She was the first female graduate of St. John’s University in Shanghai, graduating in 1938. Later on she went to America and obtained her MA degree in history at the University of California, Berkeley. Because of her family background and her overseas life experience, my mother had a very fine taste in both Chinese and Western arts. In this regard, both my elder sister (who is a ballet teacher) and I were deeply influenced by her.

² Qiu Shengrong (1915-1971) was the iconic figure of the Jingju Painted Face role. He was thin and small, but the impact he created and his energy made him look grand and big on stage. I write more about him (with visual materials) in chapter III.
any mistakes. Later on my mother sent me to receive basic training from various Jingju artists. This was from the first through to the fourth year of my primary school education. When I became a teenager, I started to learn Jingju singing with my mother’s teacher, seriously and properly.

During my childhood, my favorite “game” was to create stories in my mind and be utterly moved by them myself. When I acted out some part of what was in my imagination, I would either wear my mother’s morning gown (so that I could have two long sleeves), and do my hair up in the style of an ancient lady with all the beautiful flowers and accessories, which my mother bought for me; or I would use her long scarf as a cape, jumping from the sofa to the arm-chair, and up onto the coffee-table… (I found a “route” whereby I could move around the living room without laying a foot once on the floor); or I would lie on the narrow surface above the stove-heater in our living room, imagining that I was the heroine of some martial arts novel, passing a night out in the wilds….

Apart from the theatre, I was particularly drawn to calligraphy. I was so fascinated by Chinese characters that I would create some words of my own and ask the adults whether these words actually existed. Before I even started going to school, all the walls of our apartment were covered with my scribbles and inventions. And every day I managed to find a “new” space on the wall to continue my “work”. The whole thing ended when my mother finally decided to renovate our home, using some roughly textured wallpaper (on which I simply could not write). From childhood to adolescence, I was extremely athletic and had the character of a boy (I once swam across Hong Kong harbour at the age of thirteen, and I was the captain of the basketball team in my secondary school). The only time I would “slow down” was in the practice of calligraphy and painting, where I discovered an indescribable serenity and peace.

When I graduated from secondary school I was a bit confused, and not sure what direction to take in life. It was completely out of the question for me to become a Jingju actress (there was no Jingju company in Hong Kong at that time, and the Mainland was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution). So in the end in the mid-70s, I went to study piano performance in the Geneva Conservatory of Music. I had already been initiated into piano playing at the age of six or seven. In my final years in Geneva, I also took lessons with a retired Spanish diva, who, at the age of sixteen, had sung in the
Metropolitan Opera House under the baton of Toscanini. Upon finishing my studies in Europe I was able to give public recitals and play concertos. However, when I returned to Hong Kong, my heart did not feel settled. There was still some unfulfilled childhood yearning within me. Nothing seemed to offer me the thrill and pleasure that Chinese Classical Theatre had given me. No other art form was able to satisfy my wide-ranging affinity for literature, music, acting, dance-like movements, athletics, fine arts, and so on. I had both a wen 文 (calm and quiet) and a wu 武 (athletic and dynamic) side to my personality. All of these elements were united in Chinese Classical Theatre, in one holistic form. In other words, nothing suited my character better. Chinese Classical Theatre combined wen and wu. It made me feel more complete. It put me in such high spirits. So without hesitation, I jumped right back into the arms of Xiqu (Chinese Theatre), which had been so familiar to me and had given me so much joy since childhood.

In 1982, I gave a well received performance of The Legend of the White Snake《白蛇傳》(Jingju) in Hong Kong. The following year I was introduced by my partner in that performance, Mr. Cai Zhenren 蔡正仁 (who later became my fellow disciple), to his teacher, Maestro Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛 (1902-1993). Thus began my exploration of the fascinating art of Kunqu. I remember that in the very first lesson, Yu Lao 俞老 (the respectful way to address the Maestro) first explained to me, in a very explicit way, the relation between the music and the language tones; and then I started to learn, phrase by phrase, the arias and recitations in the extract Wandering the Garden and The Interrupted Dream from the classic Kunqu drama The Peony Pavilion《牡丹亭·遊園驚夢》. I was obliged to perform this extract only three weeks after my first lesson. It was rather a short time as I had to retain by memory the singing, the acting and the movements. Yet, I was full of confidence and anticipated the day of the performance with excitement. Yu Lao came to watch. He was pleased. And then, to my enormous surprise and delight, a few days later, I received a piece of calligraphy inscribed by the Master:

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Among the video clips accompanying this thesis, is a recording of my performance of the Yellow River Piano Concerto, given in the Hong Kong City Hall in 1979.
Yuen-ha came to Shanghai to learn Kunqu in June 1983. She had only 20 days to learn the singing and recitation and to rehearse the movements, before performing it on stage. Not only did she not make one single mistake, she succeeded in captivating the audience and transporting them, through her exquisite singing and graceful body movements, into a certain artistic world. It was truly a miracle. I now inscribe the text of the aria Zaoluopao, which she recently learned, and offer it to her as a gift. This is to express my joy and delight.

宛霞女弟於一九八三年來滬學曲。從學習唱唸和排練身段動作僅二十天即登台演出，不但絲毫不錯，而且能將細膎的唱腔和優美的舞姿，將台下觀眾誘入藝術境界中去，堪稱奇跡。今將其最近學就之牡丹亭游園中之皂羅袍一曲書贈，以表余之喜悅之心。

I was deeply moved. The Master’s encouragement was a great impetus for me in my continuing studies.

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4 My personal collection.
From that time onwards, Yu Lao taught me many more classical pieces of Kunqu. Like the ancient scholars who would read nothing but the words of the sages, I would listen to no Kunqu singing other than Yu Lao’s. I wanted to be totally absorbed in his most beautiful and authentic style. I used to have my lessons at Yu Lao’s home in the evening. In those days Chinese people went to bed rather early. Very often when the Master was teaching and talking with great enthusiasm and I was listening most attentively, other people in his apartment would begin to doze off.

Later Yulao and I were nicknamed The Night Shift 夜班黨. People were so amazed at the fact that we were always in such high spirits and never seemed to get tired even so late in the evening.

After two years of studying with the Maestro, I became his formal disciple in 1985. The initiation ceremony 拜師典禮 took place in Shanghai and the whole process was witnessed by many of the renowned Kunqu and Jingju artists at that time, including the wusheng master Li Huiliang 厲慧良, the top huadan Tong Zhiling 童芷玲, other teachers of Kunqu belonging to the “Chuan” generation 傳字輩老師, and other students of Yulao.

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5 My personal collection.
6 傳字輩 refers to the students of the Kunqu Chuanxi Society 崑曲傳習社, a training school / Keban founded in 1921 by Kunqu-lovers of Suzhou and Shanghai to preserve and hand down (chuan 傳) the threatened art of Kunqu. All the teachers of this Keban came from the Quanfu Ban 全福班, which was one of the four main troupes in Suzhou of the late Qing dynasty. Their students in turn were referred to by including the single character chuan in their name: e.g. Zhu Chuanming 朱傳茗 (dan role), Zheng Chuanjian 鄭傳鑑 (laosheng role).
During my long years of Xiqu training, I have had a number of wonderful teachers, who have instructed me in different repertoires and have enriched me in various areas of the art. Chen Zhengwei 陳正薇 and Du Jinfang 杜近芳, both disciples of the great Mei Lanfang, passed on to me their knowledge of Mei’s very last creation – *Mu Guiying Takes Command* 《穆桂英掛帥》, and the earlier *Farewell My Concubine* 《霸王別姬》 respectively. Cao Hewen 曹和雯, in *The Drunken Beauty* 《貴妃醉酒》 and *Silang Visits His Mother* 《四郎探母》, initiated me into the different ways of bearing oneself and moving on stage when wearing various costumes: how to walk, sit, or move one’s head. Yao Chuanxiang 姚傳薌 and Hua Wenyi 華文漪, taught me all the *Kunqu* pieces, while Chen Yongling 陳永玲 and Li Qiuping 李秋萍, taught me the art of the *huadan* 花旦 (young female role, more details in chapter III).

I am especially indebted to my beloved teacher Zhang Meijuan 張美娟, with whom I studied from 1986 to 1995 (the year she died); and from whom I learned so much about body movements (*shenduan* 身段) and martial skills. Zhang choreographed most of the scenes involving martial arts in my repertoire.

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7 My personal collection.
She coached me intensely for two years in the play entitled *The Story of the Iron Bow* 《鐵弓緣》. This is one of the most challenging items for the female role. I performed this play in Beijing in 1990 and won the Plum Blossom Award the following year. I became the first and only Hong Kong born artist to have received this highest honour for theatrical performers in the Mainland.

In the 1980s, I spent most of my time learning from masters and touring as guest artist with different Jingju troupes. Living standards in China at that time were quite low. For example, I lived in a small office room in the main building of the Xiqu School 戏校 or in similarly basic accommodation at the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe 上海京劇院, with no bathroom. I could only use a plastic basin and a towel to wash with. During winter, the only time I could “bathe” was right after the strenuous lesson with my teacher, Zhang Laoshi, because I would then be still sweating, and therefore could take off my clothes without shivering from the cold (heating is not provided to the regions south of the Yangtze River). In summer, on the other hand, the room was so hot that I sometimes had to get up at night and splash cold water on my body. This is Shanghai that I am talking about. One can imagine how it must have been when we went down to some smaller towns or villages to perform. We used to carry our own bedding and sleep backstage. I was privileged to be given a small room of my own most of the time, while others might have to share rooms or even share a “space” with twenty or more people. But it happened to me once that half of the windows of my room were broken. All I

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8 My personal collection.
could do was to patch them up with newspapers to “block” the fierce and icy wind. I was once woken up in the middle of the night by water pouring down from the ceiling because outside it was raining heavily. And, of course, most of the places had no flushing toilets. To minimize the number of times I had to go to the “washroom” (which was sometimes in the open air), I bought my own chamber-pot. I emptied it once a day. When I did so, I had to be fully “armed” (wearing glasses and using a towel to cover my nose and my mouth). However, despite all the hardship, those years were among the happiest times in my life.

From the 1990s onwards, I began to base myself in Hong Kong. With all I have learned, my practical experience and my personal artistic vision, I began to work in the following areas: putting on productions both of the traditional repertoire and of newly created plays, with the collaboration of major Jingju and Kunqu troupes from the Mainland;\(^9\) mounting educational programmes for schools and tertiary institutions (including lecture-demonstrations, workshops); training courses; and international cultural exchanges with France, England and Australia.

In 1997, on the occasion of Hong Kong’s reunification with China, I performed on two consecutive days (2\(^{\text{nd}}\) and 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) of July) as part of the celebrations. The Paris fashion house Hermès was our sole sponsor. On this occasion, I also initiated the practice of word-for-word Chinese-English surtitling for the entire performance. In the past the English words only gave the overall meaning. This approach is now widely adopted.

In 2007, the Jingkun Theatre, the organization I had founded earlier in 1986, was invited to represent Hong Kong and the genre “Peking Opera” in the 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) Festival of Traditional Chinese Opera in Paris. We won the Special Jury Prize and the Best Actor Award with our production *Black Dragon Residence* (烏龍院). This was a new version of an old play with the same title. In this performance, we kept all the traditional aesthetic principles. What we did was to explore on a more profound level the inner states of the protagonists, rewrite some of the dialogues, choose the artistic means accordingly, and give the whole piece a more fluent and intense stage rhythm. In other words, we wished to give new life to an old art while keeping its traditional essence. In

\(^9\) Examples of this are *The Lotus Lantern* (寶蓮燈), a play specially written for me, in which I played three roles: the fairy, the mother and the son; *The Great Belfry* (大鐘樓), an adaptation of Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*; and Louis Cha’s *The Romance of the Condor Lovers* (神雕俠侶).
the award presentation ceremony, the President of the Paris Jury referred to “the outstanding quality of the dramatic performance, which the jury found compelling and utterly ‘seductive’… and which represented the true tradition of Peking Opera … and a spirit of pure respect for that tradition.”

I was touched. I felt that my artistic intent was understood, my work was appreciated. I have always thought that Chinese Classical Theatre (its essential art, in addition to its spellbinding martial arts scenes) can and should be shared more extensively by the world. So much depends on how it is presented, on what you regard as its real essence. The success in this Paris Festival reconfirmed my belief.

From 2006 onwards, Jingkun Theatre visited London University, York University, the Centre for Performance Research in Aberystwyth (Wales), the Australian National University, Sydney University, and the Queensland Conservatorium. In these institutions we gave demonstration performances, conducted workshops and seminars. We were received most enthusiastically (see Appendix).

My unique learning experience in both Chinese and Western arts has helped me build an artistic bridge between China and the West. Being born and brought up in Hong Kong, having studied in Europe and the Mainland, I have had ample opportunities to expose myself to great performances and to different styles and art forms, both classical and avant-garde. I have come to see with ever greater conviction where the true spirit and the essence of my own culture lie. This conviction lies at the heart of this thesis.

After decades of immersing myself in the learning, teaching and practice of Xiqu, both in China and overseas, I see this as an opportunity to re-examine thoroughly, from a performer’s point of view, this wonderful theatrical art which embodies so many cultural and aesthetic values. And by doing so, I wish to pay tribute to all the teachers who have taught me and guided me so generously. It is also my genuine hope that one day, Chinese Classical Theatre will no longer be seen in the world as a thing of exotic beauty, but rather, as a holistic art through whose spirit and “language” we can glimpse the core of Chinese traditional culture.

In this thesis, I use the term “Chinese Classical Theatre” when referring particularly to Kunqu and Jingju, since these two particular genres and their artistic values most clearly represent the characteristics of Xiqu as a classical dramatic system. The term “Chinese
Traditional Theatre” or Xiqu, on the other hand, is used in a wider and more generic sense, to include all the many varieties of traditional and regional theatre.

In chapter I, I will look at the broad historical development of Xiqu, from its original sources to its supreme expression – Kunqu and Jingju. In chapter II, the focus will be on the essence of Taoism, which is the starting point of Chinese traditional aesthetics. Taoism and Buddhism have given Chinese artists total freedom from all limitations; and have inspired them to seek a truth beyond appearance.

Chapter III concentrates on Confucianism, its contribution to ancient art education, as well as its influence on Xiqu’s stylization, in particular the art of different role-types and the function of percussive music.

The fundamental concept of general education and the method of Xiqu training will be explored in chapter IV. We examine the Keban 科班 — the old system according to which Xiqu actors were trained; and video materials will illustrate the modern Chinese institutions for training in the Classical Theatre.

In chapter V, through the analysis of two less than successful examples, we will explore, at a deeper level, the real essence of Chinese traditional aesthetics and how that essence can be lost or preserved in the process of reform.
Appendix: Australian Tours, 2007 and 2009

“We wish to thank you and your visiting artists for a hugely successful fortnight of performances, workshops, lectures and seminars here at the ANU. Our students and staff have responded with enormous enthusiasm, and have benefited greatly from your stay on campus…”

— ANU, 2007

“Every aspect of the visit made a dynamic contribution to our teaching and research here at the China Centre, but more importantly it built another stage in the intercultural understanding between China and the English-speaking world.”

— ANU, 2009

“The public response was overwhelming… you gave us the confidence that traditional Chinese Opera is performed at a degree of perfection that impresses audiences of people from different cultural backgrounds.”

— Sydney University, 2009
Chapter I  A Brief Historical Survey of Xiqu

In this summary of the history of Xiqu, I wish to draw attention to those strands in the historical development of Chinese Traditional Theatre which contributed to the formation of the integrated and holistic art form that finally emerged.

I. Origins

The term Xiqu 戲曲 first appeared in Tao Zongyi’s famous work Records Compiled When Not Working on My Farm. It then only referred to the zaju 雜劇 of the Song dynasty, an embryonic form of theatre consisting of songs, dance and comic sketches. Much later, Wang Guowei, the renowned scholar and art critic of the late Qing dynasty and early Republic, standardized the notion of Xiqu by incorporating under the term the following separate theatrical phenomena:

- the nanxi 南戲 (Southern Drama) of the Song and Yuan dynasties;
- the zaju 雜劇 (Northern zaju Drama) of the Yuan and Ming;
- the chuanqi 傳奇 (further development of the Southern Drama) of the Ming and Qing;
- the Kunqu 崑曲, and the Jingju 京劇 (Peking Opera), which emerged only some two hundred years ago, as well as all other regional theatre genres difangxi 地方戲.

Xiqu in its contemporary sense represents a living and unique Chinese theatrical form which fuses music, poetry, singing, recitation, dancing, acrobatics and martial arts into one artistic whole. Xiqu is always contrasted with Western-style theatre 戲劇, and opera.

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1 Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1329-1410), author of Records Compiled When Not Working on My Farm《南村輟耕錄》, was a historian and man of letters of the Yuan / Ming dynasty. Tao used to write down notes on the leaves of the trees. Then he put them in a vessel and buried it under the tree without anybody knowing it. After a decade, there were altogether more than ten vessels stored in this way. Later his students rearranged the leaves and made them into a book consisting of 30 chapters. Nan Cun 南村 (or Mr. Nan Cun, or Mr. South Village) refers to the author, as this was the name of the place where Tao lived (see the Preface of the book).

2 Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) was a renowned scholar whose expertise included literature, aesthetics, history, philosophy, and archeology. His studies of early Chinese theatre, including Studies of Song and Yuan Drama (宋元戲曲考), can be found in vols. 15 and 16 of the reprint of his collected works, 王國維選書, edited by Wang Guohua 王國華 and Zhao Wanli 趙萬里 in 1940.
歌劇．It would never have attained such refinement and elaboration had it not undergone a long and complex development. Its early origins can be traced by examining respectively the three major sources: *gewu* (music, song and dance), *shuochang* (a form of storytelling with song), and *huajixi* (comic sketches). From these three elements *Xiqu* derived its form.

1. **Music, Song and Dance** 歌舞

As in most parts of the world, singing and dancing were first used in ancient China for religious purposes. Music was generally revered as part of ritual practice. It is also recorded in the *Analects* that Confucius attended with great respect the village ceremonies known as *xiangren nuo* 鄉人儺, held in his native home on New Year’s Eve to expel evil spirits and plagues.

> 鄉人儺，朝服而立於阼階。 —《論語·鄉黨》

When the villagers were going through their ceremonies to drive away pestilential influences, he put on his court robes and stood on the eastern steps.3

One of the representative works of the Chu poet Qu Yuan 屈原, the *Nine Songs* 九歌, most probably consists of lyrics for rituals offering sacrifices to gods.

> On a lucky day with an auspicious name
> Reverently we come to delight the Lord of High.
> We grasp the long sword’s haft of jade,
> And our girdle pendants clash and chime.
> From the god’s jeweled mat with treasures laden
> Take up the fragrant flower-offerings,
> The meats cooked in melilotus, served on orchid mats,
> And libations of cinnamon wine and pepper sauces!
> Flourish the drumsticks, beat the drums!
> The singing begins softly to a slow, solemn measure:
> Then, as pipes and zithers join in, the sound grows shriller.

3 James Legge’s translation in *Confucian Analects*, Book X, ch. X: 2, p. 233, in vol. 1 of *The Chinese Classics* (1861-1872). Legge himself commented that the ceremony was “little better than a play.”
Now the priestesses come, splendid in their gorgeous apparel,
And the hall is filled with a penetrating fragrance.
The five notes mingle in rich harmony;
And the god is merry and takes his pleasure.⁴

— *The Great Unity, God of the Eastern Sky*

吉日兮辰良，穆將愉兮上皇。撫長劍兮玉珥，璆鏘鳴兮琳琅。
瑶席兮玉瑱，盍將把兮瓊芳。蕙肴蒸兮蘭藉，奠桂酒兮椒漿。
揚枹兮拊鼓，疏緩節兮安歌，陳竽瑟兮浩倡。
靈偃蹇兮姣服，芳菲菲兮滿堂。五音紛兮繁會，君欣欣兮樂康。

— 《九歌·東皇太一》

Although the nature of this work remained controversial, the *Nine Songs* is usually considered to be a religious song and dance drama written for performance:

It appeared that the actors or dancers in these dramas were gorgeously dressed shamans; that musical accompaniment was provided by an orchestra of lithophones, musical bells, drums, and various kinds of wind and string instruments…⁵

Hawkes is probably also basing his analysis on the following passage from “The Lord of the East”, another of the *Nine Songs*:

Tighten the zither’s strings and smite them in unison!
Strike the bells until the bell-stand rocks!
Let the flutes sound! Blow the pan-pipes!
See the priestesses, how skilled and lovely,
Whirling and dipping like birds in flight,
Unfolding the words in time to the dancing,
Pitch and beat all in perfect accord!
The spirits, descending, darken the sun.⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 96
⁶ Ibid., p. 113.
In ancient China, unlike the rest of the world, music was treated largely in moral terms. “It was promoted as the most efficient means of transforming the people and the most accurate means of gauging the morality and morale of society.”

Hence, a complete system merging music with rites and ceremonies was established in the Zhou dynasty. This was termed *yayue* 雅樂, or Refined Music, which was to be used by the aristocracy on various occasions. This early conception of the significance of music is clearly stated in the *Book of Rites* 《禮記》, one of the classics of the Confucian school:

Music is the harmony of Heaven and Earth; rites constitute the graduation of Heaven and Earth. Through harmony all things are brought forth, through graduation all things are properly classified. …

When Rites and Music are manifest and perfect, Heaven and Earth will be regulated.

樂者，天地之和也；禮者，天地之序也。和故百物皆化；序所群物皆別。… 禮樂明備，天地官也。 — 《禮記・樂記》

In the early Commentary on the Image 《象傳》, appended to the ancient classic the *Book of Change or I Ching* 易經, for Hexagram 16, Elation 豫, we read:

The Ancient Kings made music
To revere Spiritual Power,
They offered splendour to the Supreme Deity,
They made Sacrifice to their Ancestors.

先王以作樂崇德，
殷薦之上帝，
以配祖考。

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…In one of his lectures from the 1920s, [the German translator Richard] Wilhelm writes lyrically of this Hexagram: “An Image unfolds of Earth, Heaven, and ultimate metaphysical energies, all connected through the spirit of Music… And this brings us to the holy dramatic performances where musical sounds and the dancers’ symbolic movements represented cosmic events: the dance of the stars.” This apprehends the cosmic law, it represents the Tao of the world and, therefore, the world’s mysteries. “Everyone who experiences these is pulled deeply toward the direction of eternity.” …In the simpler words of a commentary on The Book of the Huainan Master [《淮南子》], “Music is Life.”

Music was inseparable from rites, and it was very closely connected to daily life. In one of the other Confucian ritual classics, Rites and Ceremonies (《儀禮》), governmental and civil activities in the Zhou dynasty were recorded, in minute detail as to how they were actually conducted.

… if music is to be provided to greet foreign guests, the piece Sixia is to be played the moment the guests reach the court. The guest bows to give thanks for the wine offered, the host (Master of Ceremony) returns the bow and the music stops. When the host offers the wine to the Duke, Sixia should be played again as the Duke returns the bow while accepting the wine vessel. The Duke finishes drinking. The host goes up to take the empty wine vessel. Music stops when the host comes down. At this moment musicians go up to sing The Call of the Deer; they then come down to play The New Palace with guan (wind instruments); sheng (a reed pipe wind instrument) players join in and the music is to be played three times. Then singers, guan and sheng players perform together the Hometown Music (which includes three songs of Zhou and the south 〈周南〉: Guan Guan Go the Ospreys 〈關雎〉, The Fibre Plant spreads Far and Wide 〈葛藤〉, Mouse Ear 〈卷耳〉; and three songs from Zhao and the south 〈召南〉: The Magpie’s Nest 〈鵲巢〉, Gathering the Southern Wood 〈采蘩〉, and Gathering the Duckweed 〈采蘋〉.) If dances were to be provided then they should perform the Zhuo.

(chapter 6 – Banquet Rites)\(^9\)

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\(^10\) My translation. See also John Steele, tr., The I-Li or Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial (1917), p. 147.
Even in archery competition, a sport required of educated men at that time, music was used.

To the North the Duke is asked for permission to use music. The Duke agrees. …To the East orders are given to the Music Master: “The Duke commands to use music.” The Music Master replies: “Yes.” The Official in Charge of the Archery Competition then steps down; to the North he looks at the elder archer and announces: “The shots will not count unless they are in time with the rhythm of the music.”…The Music Master orders the musicians: “Play The Fox’s Head; each time the rhythm must be consistent.” The Musicians answer: “Yes”, without standing up. The Music Master goes back to his original position. The Fox’s Head is played to assist the archers.

(Chapter 7 – Royal Competition of Archery) 12

All the musical pieces mentioned above except for The Fox’s Head can be found in the Classic of Poetry, also known as the Book of Odes 詩經, an anthology of 305 poems

11 The Rites and Ceremonies (儀禮) (known simply as The Rites (禮) in the pre-Qin epoch, i.e. before 221 B.C.), the Rites of the Zhou Dynasty (周禮), and the Book of Rites (禮記) are the three Classics on ceremony and general propriety (ancient etiquette). The Rites was the earliest ritual classic, and was incomplete already in the time of Confucius; even more texts were lost after Qin Shi Huang had burned the books. Today’s version is merely a small part of the original work. It was recorded from the memory of Gao Tangsheng 高堂生, a scholar of the Former Han. See Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian - Memoirs of Scholars (史記・儒林列傳): “言《禮》自魯高堂生。…《禮》自魯後，其經不具，及至秦焚書，書散亡益多，於今獨有《士禮》，高堂生能言之。” See also Yang Tianyu, Rites and Ceremonies with Translation and Annotation (儀禮譯注) (2004), p. 165. The contents of the Hometown Music 鄉樂 are listed earlier in the same chapter, pp. 156-157.

12 My translation. See also Yang Tianyu, Rites and Ceremonies, p. 208, and Steele, pp. 183, 105.
edited by Confucius (according to tradition), regarded as the fountainhead of Chinese literature. In the *Great Preface* 大序 of this book we read:

Poetry is where the emotions lie. A feeling felt in the heart is called *zhì* (thinking, aspirations, ideals; commonly translated as intention); when it is expressed in words it is called *shì* (poetry). Feelings are stirred within and take form in words. When language is insufficient to convey our feelings, we express them in sighs; when sighs are insufficient, we sing; when singing is insufficient, we unwittingly dance with our hands waving and our feet bouncing.

詩者，志之所之也，在心為志，發言為詩。情動於衷而形於言，言之不足故嗟嘆之，嗟嘆之不足故永歌之，永歌之不足，不知手之舞之足之蹈之也。

Once again, music (sung poems), dance, and literature were interrelated and considered to be a vital means of expression. In fact, the term *yue* 樂 often implied a threefold relationship between music, poetry and dance. This may give us some insight into the way in which *Xiqu* later developed as a comprehensive art form integrating all three elements. Also, it is particularly interesting that in such remote antiquity the Chinese already consciously used rhythm (*jiē* 節) to regulate movements (as described in the archery competition). The highly developed utilization of percussion in *Xiqu*, which unifies the actions on stage while giving both artists and audience an inexplicable thrill, is in fact the continuation and elaboration of this thousand-year-long tradition.

In the Han dynasty, a clear distinction was made between *yayue* 雅樂 (Refined Music) and *sanyue* 散樂 (Diverse Music). While the former was limited to court ceremonies, the latter covered all forms of folk music, folk dance, and such things as acrobatics and martial arts. Probably because of its all-embracing nature, it was also termed *bāixì* 百戲 (Hundred Games).

Still another name for *sanyue* or *bāixì* was *jiaodixì* 角牴戲 (literally the Horn Butting Game, which actually existed prior to the name *bāixì*). In a generic sense it meant gathering all kinds of Games and having them compete with one another, whereas in its

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narrow sense it referred to one specific game of baixi — wrestling.\textsuperscript{15} There are written materials describing a further development of jiaodixi (in its narrow sense) in which the game acquired a story line. For instance, the piece entitled Mr. Huang of the Eastern Ocean 東海黃公, which was made into a popular play during the Han dynasty, tells of a certain Mr. Huang, “who in his youth was able to tame tigers and snakes by his magic. As he grew old, the effects of drinking too much wine reduced his magic to impotence. One day… a dangerous tiger appeared in his vicinity, so he set forth with a red turban round his head and a gold sword in his hand to try and deal with it. Alas, his spells were no longer effective, and the tiger devoured him.”\textsuperscript{16}

Obviously this was not a mere game anymore. The result was pre-arranged and the two opponents were actually “playing” two characters, with Mr. Huang having a specific costume and props and the person playing the tiger wearing an animal disguise. The “game” they once played had become an embryonic “play”. This simple story-performance has often been considered one of the earliest forerunners of Chinese traditional theatre, as it began to involve role-playing and the use of acrobatics and martial skills as a means of expression.

Following more or less the same creative concept as that found in Mr. Huang of the Eastern Ocean, a number of gewuxi 歌舞戲 flourished in the Tang dynasty. The Mask (Dai Mian 代面 or 大面) or The Melody of Prince Orchid Mound Going into Battle 兰陵王入阵曲, for example, was about a prince who, because of his rather fine and delicate features, wore a mask into battle to enhance his majesty and dignity. It was a song and dance performance involving “the martilling of troops” and “some form of combat”.\textsuperscript{17} The performer playing the prince was to wear “a purple costume, a golden

\textsuperscript{17} Dolby, p. 5. In p. 262, note 13, Dolby gives all the original sources for this.
belt, a mask, and to hold a whip”. It was at that time a very popular number as it was recorded that Li Longfan 李隆範 (the grandson of Empress Wu Zetian 武則天) performed this dance in a banquet in the palace hall known as the Ming Tang, for his grandmother when he was five years old.

Another piece I would like to mention is The Stepping and Singing Woman 踏搖 (or 謠 娘. This concerned a beautiful wife who used to express her grievances in song, and lament to her neighbours because her husband always came home drunk and beat her up. If The Mask remained a kind of song and dance performance without any strong evidence that the dancer was supposed to sing at the same time, The Stepping and Singing Woman provided proof that the performer began to incorporate movements while singing. In the Miscellaneous Notes on Musical Entertainments《樂府雜錄》 it says that the wife kept on shaking her body while venting; in the Record of the Court Entertainment Bureau《教坊記》 the performer was described as “singing while stepping” “且步且歌”, hence the title of the piece. In the early stage the female role was played by a man and the traces of the Horn Butting Game (jiaodixi) were predominant (the two characters would fight each other once they met on stage). Later on the female role was played by a woman and a third character was added to increase the comic effect. The performance became “not at all as it used to be” “全失舊旨”. The poet of the Tang dynasty, Chang Feiyue 常非月, described the new version as follows:

Lifting her hand to straighten her hair ornaments
Gracefully she turns around on the silken stage.
Horses surround the place of performance,
The audience is packed into a circle.

18 In this connection Wang Guowei quotes from the Miscellaneous Notes on Musical Entertainments《樂府雜錄》：”戲者衣紫，腰金，執鞭也。” See his Studies of Song and Yuan Drama, reprinted as 《宋元戲曲史》(2010), p. 7.
20 Miscellaneous Notes was written by Duan Anjie 段安節 (830-900), is the first comprehensive work about musical entertainments in Chinese history. It is limited mainly to the contemporary music of the Tang dynasty. See I.C., p. 965.
21 Record was a short work written by Cui Lingqin 崔令欽 (fl. 762) concerning the Bureau which was established by the Tang Emperor Xuan Zong 玄宗. See I.C., p. 268.
22 See Record. See Dolby, p. 262, note 16.
Her songs are to be echoed in chorus;\textsuperscript{23} 
With delicate voice she conveys her deep sentiments. 
How big our heart must be 
To hold compassion for the lady?\textsuperscript{24}

舉手整花钿，翻身舞锦筵。马围行处匝，人簇看场圆。
歌索齐声和，倩教细语传。不知心大小，容得许多憐。

The whole piece was now more lyrical and less violent. Not a word of the fight is to be found in the poem, and the fighting scene must have had so little importance that the poet did not even care to mention it. This particular number, although in a very primitive way, already attempted to mix together comic acting, singing, dance, dialogue, and wrestling. These elements later became the four major disciplines of Xiqu when it attained a sophisticated theatrical form:

- **chang** 唱 (singing)
- **nian** 唸 (dialogue / recitation)
- **zuo** 做 (acting and dance-like movements)
- **da** 打 (all sorts of martial arts skills)

### 2. Storytelling with Songs 說唱

#### a. *Daqu* 大曲  (Great Melody)

The Great Melody existed already in the Han dynasty. It became an elaborate and grandiose performance pattern in the Tang dynasty. It was a musical structure in three parts, each part containing several episodes 遍. The first part, involving only instrumental music, was a prelude in free tempo 散序; the second 中序 included only singing with orchestral accompaniment in 4/4 time, and proceeded at a rather slow tempo; the third 破 was purely music and dance in 2/4 time starting at medium speed, 

\textsuperscript{23} In the Record a refrain was sung from backstage (or by the audience) after each stanza: “行歌，每一叠，旁人齊聲音和之云：踏搖和來，踏搖娘和來。”

\textsuperscript{24} My translation.
gradually accelerating and ending in a very quick tempo. After the climax it sometimes resumed the slow and free tempo until the end of the performance. The different melodies of daqu have different titles, such as Liuyao daqu 《六么》大曲, Bomei daqu 《薄媚》大曲, Ganzhou daqu 《甘州》大曲, or Liangzhou daqu 《梁州》大曲.

In the Song dynasty, daqu developed into a form of storytelling, and its complete tripartite structure was no longer respected. People chose those episodes they thought could tell a story. The titles in the storytelling repertoire would be a combination of the story name and the name of the melody (or daqu) chosen, (e.g. Yingying Liuyao 《鶯鶯六么》, Zheng Meets the Dragon Girl Bomei 《鄭生遇龍女薄媚》).

Although the three different parts of daqu were merely variations of the tempo with the same melodies forever repeating, the daqu had nevertheless created a basic rhythmic structure, which can be seen in the sung sections of subsequent forms of Xiqu. For example, in the first scene of the famous Peking Opera The Captive General Visits His Mother 《四郎探母》 (a play which received the personal attention of no less a person than the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后, and which is an item in my own repertoire), the arias for the female role are structured as follows:

1) yaoban 搖板 (free tempo with regular clapper beats in the background);

2) manban 慢板 (slow passage in 4/4, usually with certain moments designed to get “bravos” from the audience), plus one phrase of yaoban to create a small climax;

3) three parts of liushui 流水 (literally a passage like “running water” in 1/4, to be sung very fluently but not too fast);

4) kuaiban 快板 (a passage in 1/4 in the tempo molto vivace);

5) a very intense duo 對唱 (the female sings alternately with the male role);

6) yaoban 搖板 (free tempo, allowing the artist to give a final personal touch).
Apart from their contribution to the rhythmic structure, some of daqu melodies were preserved and became the *qupai* 曲牌音樂 (set melodic patterns for singing or musical accompaniment to movements) of *Xiqu* and have been extensively used (e.g. *Basheng Ganzhou* [八聲甘州], *Liangzhou Diqi* [梁州第七]).

**b. Bianwen 變文 (Transformation Texts)**

To popularise Buddhist stories and sutras, the monks of the Tang dynasty turned oral preaching into a form of narrative art, known as *sujiang* 俗講. (as opposed to the *sengjiang* 僧講, which means preaching inside the temple for the monks.) They spoke and sang alternatively. Usually the narration was in prose, and the sung part was mainly written in verse with either five or seven words to the line. The texts of this special art form were referred to as Transformation Texts (*bianwen*).25 There is an account in *Miscellaneous Notes* of the monk Wenxu 文潊 who excelled in this art.

The monk Wenxu, who conducted the *sujiang* during the years of Changqing (821-824), was exceptionally good at chanting the sutras. His voice was so smooth and mellow that everybody listening to it was deeply touched.26

長慶中俗講僧文潊善吟經，其聲婉暢，感動裏人。

The monk also acquired a reputation for using the sutras as a pretext for spouting “lewd filth and vulgar smut, filling the monastery with doltish oafs and loose women.”27

The Court Entertainment Bureau made a song out of his performance, which was adopted by other entertainers.28 The melody *Wenxuzi* 文潊子, which carried the name of the monk-artist, could still be heard in the *zhugongdiao* ballad-dramas of the Song dynasty.

*Bianwen* (as an art form) was also used for telling secular stories. It actually became a very popular entertainment in the Tang dynasty. In the first two lines of his poem “The

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25 A thorough study of *bianwen* has been conducted by Victor Mair. See his work *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (1989).
26 My translation.
27 See Dolby, p. 12.
28 See Dolby, p. 263, note 53, for the source of this story, in Zhao Lin 趙粼, *Yin Hua Lu* 《因話錄》.
Lady of Mount Hua”《華山女》the great man of letters Han Yu 韓愈 describes an animated and bustling scene, while satirizing the corrupt practices of the Buddhist clergy.

Along the street everywhere Buddhist sutras were being chanted;
Bells and conches resounded throughout the temple.29

街東街西講佛經，撞鐘吹螺鬨宮庭。

Relevant pictures were sometimes hung up to enhance the storytelling. “At the top of the scroll we see the clouds of foreign lands” “畫卷開時塞外雲”, wrote Ji Shilao 吉師老, a Late Tang poet, in his work about watching a female storyteller from Sichuan perform the Wang Zhaojun Transformation Text《看蜀女轉昭君變》. This entertainment also reached the court. It was recorded in the Memoirs of Eunuch Gao that, when Tang Xuan Zong 唐玄宗 returned to Chang’an from Sichuan (after the Anshi rebellion), Eunuch Gao used to cheer him up by chanting bianwen, telling stories and discussing scriptures with him.30

Although there were many accounts of bianwen in history, it was only in 1900 that some of the manuscripts were accidentally found inside the Dunhuang Caves in Gansu.31

The literary style of bianwen had a great impact on script-writing of Xiqu in later ages. The alternating use of verse and prose occurs throughout, usually with arias in rhymed verse and dialogue in prose. The subsequent storytelling form of the Drum Ballad guzici 鼓子詞 (of the Song dynasty), for instance, was directly influenced by bianwen. The performer would first recite a passage, then sing a song, and so on and so forth, until the story came to a conclusion. The sung part was repetitive, as the same tune would be employed over and over again.

30 See Guo Shi 郭湜, Memoirs of Eunuch Gao《高力士外傳》“太上皇移仗西內安置…或講經、論議、轉變、說話，雖不近文律，終冀悅聖情。” Guo Shi and Eunuch Gao were both relegated to Wuzhou. This is a book written by Guo based on the oral account of Eunuch Gao. See the modern edition edited by Chen Chunheng 陳春恒, Memoirs of Eunuch Gao (1987), pp. 119-120.
c. Zhugongdiao 諸宮調 (Medley of Keys)

A breakthrough in music and singing took place when the genre known as zhugongdiao came into existence. Created by the storytelling artist Kong Sanchuan 孔三傳 of the Song dynasty, zhugongdiao literally means “multiple modes and keys”. Kong arranged all the folk tunes and songs since the Tang and categorized them into different keys (gongdiao). Zhugongdiao put emphasis on singing while inserting short passages of speech after each song. It was especially fit for recounting long stories because of the ample choice of tunes and tonalities. “In cases such as daqu, people borrowed existing melodies to sing stories; while the zhugongdiao was conceived specially for storytelling.”

The Western Chamber Zhugongdiao《西廂記諸宮調》by Dong Jieyuan 董解元 (fl. 1190-1208), regarded as the highest achievement of this art form, incorporated 14 keys, 191 song-sets and 2 independent songs. This is also the one and only piece of its kind which is still intact today. Zhugongdiao was the peak of the art of storytelling. As a matter of fact, it paved the way for the future development of Xiqu music and laid down a foundation for the beiqu (Northern qu) which was yet to come.

3. Comic Sketch 滑稽戲

The Comic Sketch originated from the activities of the Jester (you 優), a figure dating back to the Zhou dynasty. The you, who were usually good at singing and dancing, were entertainers who specialized in making jokes, and would not be punished even if they said something wrong or out of place. They were very much like the court fools and king’s jesters of the West, as both had “the twofold duty of entertaining and of advising through the medium of humour.” Here are some examples.

Zhan was a dwarf jester-musician in the Qin dynasty. He was good at making jokes. His jokes were always full of wit and contained profound truths. One day it was raining when Qin Shi Huang [First Emperor of the short-lived Qin

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32 See Wang Guowei, Studies of Song and Yuan Drama, p. 34. “蓋大曲等先有曲而後人藉以詠事，此則制曲之始本為敘事而設。”
33 Grand Encyclopedia, p. 616. The whole work was translated into English by Chen Li-li, Master Tung's Western Chamber Romance (1976).
34 Dolby, p. 2.
dynasty] gave a banquet. His shield guards were all wet and chilly standing on the stairs outside the palace. Zhan felt pity for them and said:

“Want to take a rest?”

“Very much,” answered the guards.

“If I ever call you, answer me immediately,” said Zhan.

After a while, when all the guests proposed a toast to Qin Shi Huang and hailed him with the words “long live the Emperor”, Zhan approached the threshold and shouted:

“Guards!”

“Yes!” was the immediate answer.

“What’s so great about being tall like you? You end up standing outside in the rain. I may be short, but I can take a rest indoors.”

Qin Shi Huang then ordered the guard shift to be cut in half. From then on the shield guards took it in turns to take a shift. ③

Another account about the famous Jester Meng 優孟 can be dated some two hundred years before the Qin dynasty:

Sunshu Ao was the prime minister of Chu. He told his son before dying: after I die you will be poor. Go then to see Jester Meng and ask him for help. Things turned out just as Ao had predicted. One day when the son was carrying the firewood on his back, he bumped into Meng and told him the situation. Meng asked him not to go far away. After that time Meng dressed like Ao and tried to imitate his talking and behaviour. After one year or so even the people close to King Zhuang of Chu could not tell the difference. On the occasion of a banquet

Jester Meng came in and bowed to King Zhuang. The King was shocked. He thought Ao had come back to life and invited him to resume his office. “I will have to discuss it with my wife,” said Jester Meng, “and I will give you my reply in three days.” Three days passed, and King Zhuang asked Meng: “What did your wife say?” “My wife advised me never to be the prime minister of Chu,” replied the Jester resolutely. “Sunshu Ao was so loyal and honest, and he helped Chu to become a dominant nation. Now that he is dead, look how poor his son is; he has to sell firewood to earn a living. One had better commit suicide should one end up like Ao.” Meng then sang a song telling that it was no good either to be a farmer or an official. A farmer led a hard life; a corrupt official was not only a disgrace but could also get killed and have the whole family exterminated; while an official with clean hands lived in poverty. Having heard that, King Zhuang thanked the Jester and immediately summoned the son of Sunshu Ao and bestowed lands on him.36

楚相孫叔敖知其賢人也，善待之。病且死，屬其子曰：“我死，汝必貧困。若往見優孟，言我孫叔敖之子也。”居數年，其子窮困負薪，逢優孟，與言曰：“我，孫叔敖子也。父且死時，屬我貧困往見優孟。”優孟曰：“若無遠有所之。”即為孫叔敖衣冠，抵掌談語。歲餘，像孫叔敖，楚王及左右不能別也。莊王置酒，優孟前為壽。莊王大驚，以為孫叔敖復生也，欲以為相。優孟曰：“請歸與婦計之，三日而為相。”莊王許之。三日後，優孟復來。王曰：“婦言謂何？”孟曰：“婦言慎無為，楚相不足為也。如孫叔敖之為楚相，盡忠為廉以治楚，楚王得以霸。今死，其子無立錐之地，貧困負薪以自飲食。必如孫叔敖，不如自殺。”因歌曰：“山居耕田苦，難以得食。起而為吏，身貪鄙者餘財，不顧恥辱。身死家室富，又恐受賄枉法，為姦觸大罪，身死而家滅。貪吏安可為也！念為廉吏，奉法守職，竟死不敢為非。廉吏安可為也！楚相孫叔敖持廉至死，方今妻子窮困負薪而食，不足為也！”於是莊王謝優孟，乃召孫叔敖子，封之寢丘四百戶，以奉其祀。後十世不絕。

Jester Meng’s is the earliest record of somebody purposely imitating or impersonating somebody else. It is certainly an overstatement to claim this as the very beginning of Chinese drama. However, it did involve something similar to role playing. More

importantly, the activities of the you at court created a relaxed and humorous ambiance that pleased everybody: King Zhuang may have been shocked at the first sight of Meng’s presence as “Sushun Ao”, but he was glad to let the “play” continue and see what was coming next. This was a state in which one momentarily and deliberately stepped out from real life and entered into a seemingly theatrical state of being. This state released tension and caused many difficult problems to be sorted out easily. Some subsequent Emperors enormously enjoyed the theatrical mood and the company of their entertainers, who, in turn, were often granted exceptional privileges.

The Emperor Zhuangzong of the Later Tang dynasty 後唐莊宗 (885-926) was an amateur of the theatre. His name was Li Cunxun 李存勣 and he gave himself a stage name: Li Tianxia 李天下 (Li, the surname of Zhuangzong; also a homonym of 理, which could mean “to manage, to rule”; Tianxia, often means “the whole country” in Chinese).

One day when he was having fun and amusing himself playing with the you [professional entertainers], he suddenly shouted: “Li Tianxia, where is Li Tianxia?” Xinmo 新磨, one of the entertainers, hastily came forward and slapped the Emperor on his cheek. Zhuangzong was stunned; the guards were shocked, and the other you were terrified. They grasped Xinmo and questioned him: “How dare you slap the Emperor’s cheek?” Xinmo answered: “There is only one Li Tianxia [there is only one person who can rule the country (i.e. the Emperor himself)], who else was he calling!” The guards burst out laughing. The Emperor was so pleased that he granted precious gifts to Xinmo.37

What Xinmo did could have caused him an immediate penalty of death. However, with his witty answer and in the given context, the Emperor considered him a loyal person and willingly forgave his outrageous action.

The stage clown in Xiqu, a type of role which emerged much later, had more or less the same function as the You, making jokes in a play and laying bare some critical points with a simple remark 插科打諢. In fact, the clown also enjoyed some privileges in the old days within a theatre troupe. The reason was that in the Xiqu profession there used to be a custom of worshiping the Zushiye 祖師爺 (founding father and patron deity of the Chinese theatre). While some considered Tang Minghuan 唐明皇 to be the Zushiye, as he established the famous Liyuan 梨園 (Pear Orchard Conservatoire) for the training of hundreds of men and women entertainers; others reckoned it should be Li Tianxia. As the clown was associated in legend with both Emperors the clown role was therefore entitled to a series of very special privileges, such as:

- the clown used to be the first to burn incense when paying respect to the Zushiye.
- nobody could start putting on their (painted-face) make-up backstage before the clown did.
- the place of the drummer was holy (partly because the drummer is more or less like the conductor in an orchestra; partly because it used to be the seat of Tang Minghuang as he was an excellent drummer). No one could sit there, with the exception of the clown.  

Of course, as far as the Zushiye is concerned, Tang Minghuang is generally recognized because his contribution was far greater than that of Li Tianxia or any other figure. Today the term “Pear Orchard” 梨園 is actually used with direct reference to the profession of Xiqu.

During the Tang, the function of the you was reversed. Instead of advising the lords or rulers they were utilized by emperors to make fun of officials. Hence came the term canjunxi 參軍戲 (Adjutant play).

38 Dolby’s translation of the term, see p. 11.
40 There are three versions of the origin of canjunxi. One is based on a story in which a magistrate in the Han dynasty was found guilty of accepting bribes. The emperor pardoned him but had him dress in a white smock at every banquet to be mocked in public. Another version tells how an Adjutant misappropriated a huge quantity of government silk. A sarcastic skit was made out of it with the you, playing the Adjutant (canjun), being ridiculed by others. The third one states that the Emperor Tang Minghuang awarded the official title Canjun to the player Li Xianhe 李仙鶴 as he so excelled in this kind of comic acting. See Zhou Yibai, pp. 19-20.
*canjunxi* were skits played by *You* on satirical and comic themes (*you, paiyou* 俳優 or *changyou* 俳優 now became general terms referring to actors). In the beginning, these comic skits involved only two characters: the *canjun* 參軍 (the Adjutant) — the fool or the one being teased; and the *canggu* 蒼鶻 (the Grey Hawk) — the wise one or the one who teases. The sketches proceeded with dialogue and improvisation and always ended up with the fool being hit by the teaser: the hawk is able to attack all other birds. 41 The Adjutant play was very popular in the Tang dynasty. Even children were fond of it. In the long poem *A Portrait of My Son* 驕兒詩 written by the famous Late Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱, the poet describes how his son “sometimes imitated the Adjutant and subdued his voice to call the Grey Hawk.” 42  "忽復學參軍，按聲喚蒼鶻。” In later times the number of characters in the Adjutant play increased, female players joined in, and music and singing were involved. Evidence can be found in this poem about a singsong girl *吳姬十首*, written by Xue Neng 薛能 (d. 880):

It looked like snow that day  
With poplar blossoms floating every way;  
To the sound of wind and strings  
The ladies performed the Adjutant play.43

此日楊花初似雪，女兒絃管弄參軍。

In the *Stepping and Singing Woman* mentioned above, a third character was added to enhance the comic effect; and the *canjunxi*, the Adjutant play, gradually adapted its style by incorporating music and songs. These new developments revealed a tendency in the different forms of entertainment to borrow features from one another. One could see that Chinese theatrical art was heading towards a greater level of complexity.

II. **Goulan Washe  勾欄瓦舍 — the Emergence of Amusement Quarters**

Following the rapid development of handicraft production and commercial activities in the Song dynasty, the population in major cities increased greatly. Overnight markets,
wine-bars, tea-houses and restaurants flourished as a result of this prosperity. The amusement quarters, known as wazi 瓦子 (tiles), or washe 瓦舍 (tile booths), emerged to meet the great demand for entertainment. Wazi was actually a square, within which a number of performing areas, known as peng 棚 (awnings) or kanpeng 看棚 (watching awnings) were set up. Since these areas were most probably “fairly solid enclosures with a raised stage open on three sides hemmed in by a low railing or balustrade”, they were also named goulan 勾欄 (hook balustrades). The front part of the stage was the performance area; while the back part, called xifang 戏房, served as the make-up and resting room. The two sections were divided by wooden partitions 板壁, screens 屏風 or curtains 台帳. It was also very interesting that “the passage leading from the xifang to the entrance and exit of the front stage was called the ‘ghost passage’, as all the characters being played were people of the past.” “由戲房通向前台的上下場門，稱為‘鬼門道’。鬼者，言其所扮演者，皆是已往昔人。”

It is also recorded that amusement quarters were found in all the districts of Bianliang 汴梁 (the capital of the Northern Song dynasty). They were packed with people every day regardless of the seasons and the weather. The biggest amusement quarter, including more than fifty awnings, was capable of accommodating a few thousand spectators.

Different kinds of entertainment, such as storytelling, comic sketches, martial arts, acrobatics, puppetry, and an endless variety of others, took place daily in their respective awnings.

For a very long period of time, entertainments had been held mainly in royal courts, monasteries, temples and squares for various purposes and occasions. Although performance art could be seen very frequently, it was yet to have an impact of its own. It was only with the emergence of the goulan quarters that a breakthrough occurred:

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44 Dolby, p.17.
45 From Zhu Quan 朱權 Taihe Zhengyin Pu《太和正音譜》, quoted in Grand Encyclopedia, p. 91. Note that a book written by Zhong Sicheng 鍾嗣成 of the Yuan dynasty about the authors of Yuanqu 元曲 and their works was also named Records of The Ghosts《錄鬼簿》.
46 Dolby writes about this at some length in his second chapter.
performance art came to have something of “business” nature; and the *goulan* became a dazzling art “plaza”.47

The very existence of the amusement quarters gave birth to professional entertainers and writers, and this in turn accelerated the growth of theatrical art. The custom of assembling all entertainments in one single venue existed already in the Han dynasty (*Hundred Games 百戯*, see above). The further development of this long lasting tradition, which facilitated the merging and enhancement of different art forms, is regarded as one of the indispensable factors for the advent of Chinese traditional theatre.

### III. *Zaju 雜劇 / Jin Dynasty Yuanben 金院本*

Although people associate the word *zaju* with the Yuan dynasty, and although Yuan *zaju* is usually regarded as the first genuine form of Chinese Traditional Theatre, the term was actually employed already in the Song dynasty to refer to performances similar to the Adjutant plays. The *zaju* during the Northern Song was merely one of the many items included among the *Hundred Games*. That was probably the reason why the word *za* 雜, meaning mixed or miscellaneous, was used.48 The formula of the Song *zaju* was somewhat like a 3-course menu: a short passage of song and dance as the “entrée” (*yanduan艷段*), followed by the “main course” (*zheng zaju正雜劇*), which would be either a farcical sketch or a *daqu* telling a story in song; then a short comic entertainment (*zaban雜扮*, although sometimes this part was omitted) as the “dessert” to end the menu. *Zaju* in the Song dynasty involved up to five players, each one of whom had very specific duties. They were:

1) the *moni* 末泥 (the actor-director, head of the troupe);

2) the *yinxi* 引戲 (who was in charge of the practical details of a performance, who gave the introduction / explanation of the piece; and also played the female role: *zhuangdan* 裝旦);

3) the *fujing 副淨* (equivalent to the *Canjun*, the Adjutant or the fool);

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48 See Zhou Yibai, p. 34.
4) the fumo 副末 (equivalent to the canggu, the Grey Hawk or the teaser);

5) the zhuanggu 裝孤 (the official).

Given their fundamentally comical nature, the fool and the teaser remained the principal players in Song zaju.49 We should also note that the above division is rather functional and is quite different from the Hangdang 行當 system of roles that we will discuss in detail in chapter III.

The Jin dynasty yuanben 金院本 (the zaju performed in the North, literally “courtyard” scripts, so named after the places where the actors resided) and the Song dynasty zaju are one and the same in terms of performance mode. But in the Jin dynasty yuanben, the stories were seldom sung with daqu melodies because Northern people seemed to have a different taste in music. This played an important role in the formation of Northern qu, which later provided the musical dimension for the Yuan drama. Artistically the Jin yuanben advanced further as it tried to establish a connection between the opening section (the entrée) and the main play so that the former could be a sort of introduction to the latter. It also tried to combine two types of main play (the sketch type and the singing type) so that the performer could sing as the narrator and also as the character (in the first person). By then, the emergence of a mature theatrical form was not too far away.

IV. Beiqu 北曲 (Northern Qu) / Yuan Zaju 元雜劇

Beiqu (Northern qu) was the term used for the music in Yuan zaju. It was recorded as having 335 individual qupai 曲牌.50 Most of them came from sources such as daqu, zhugongdiao, guzici, etc., as well as folk songs from Central China and other Northern minorities. The term qu, meaning music or song, was then a new literary form similar to the lyric or Song dynasty ci 宋詞. Although ci and qu were both types of song and the method of composition was similar, filling in words to a certain metre or pai, Song dynasty lyrics were subject to very strict prosodic rules and syllable counts, whereas

49 See Grand Encyclopedia, p. 450; and Zhou Yibai, p. 48.
50 Qupai - each aria has a tune-name [e.g. Dianjiangchun （【點絳唇】，“Red Lips”), etc.], indicating which mode of music and metre is being used.
Yuan songs (including zaju and the individual songs known as sanqu 散曲) seemed to have more freedom and flexibility in this respect. Together with Tang verse and the Song dynasty lyric, the Yuan song became one of the three widely acknowledged milestones of Chinese poetry.

Yuan zaju emerged around the first half of the 13th century, during the Yuan or Mongol dynasty, and marked the beginning of a new era for Chinese traditional theatre. This was not only because of the achievement of the Northern qu, but also because a large number of literati contributed their talent to theatrical script-writing. Under the Mongol regime, for almost 80 years the Imperial Examination System, which had been the main avenue of advancement for Chinese scholars and the accepted path to a post in government service, was abolished. As a result, some scholars chose a life of rustic reclusion; others might reluctantly occupy trivial posts or even live in poverty. Many of them, however, “poured their genius and their frustration into the writing of qu songs and drama.” Among them were eminent playwrights such as Guan Hanqing (c.1240-c.1320), Wang Shifu 王實甫 (fl. late 13th century), and Ma Zhiyuan 马致遠 (c.1260-1325).

A performance of a Yuan zaju usually consisted of four main acts. However, it was not uncommon to add one short supplementary act to the structure. This portion, which carried the name xiezi 楔子 (wedge act), was placed most frequently at the beginning of the play. The zaju was still influenced by the zhugongdiao and the overall format of the story-telling tradition (shuochang), and only one person took a singing role, either as the principal male (zhengmo 正末) or as the principal female (zhengdan 正旦). The scripts of Yuan zaju were therefore identified as either moben 末本 or danben 旦本. As the one-singer rule was under no circumstances to be violated, the zhengmo or the zhengdan sometimes needed to play secondary roles as well in the same play, if a singing part had been assigned to these characters. The zhengmo and the zhengdan were not equivalent to the sheng and the dan of later times, in the sense that they might play any type of role so long as that role was the principal character of the drama; i.e. a zhengmo could play an old man, a young man or a character to be classified later in the painted face type; and a zhengdan could play a young girl, an old woman, etc. Apart from this

51 Dolby, p. 41.
categorization, there were minor male and female roles, called waimo 外末, chongmo 沖末, and waidan 外旦; as well as jing 淨 or fujing 副淨, and chadan 蹙旦, the male and female villains respectively.

As to the musical structure, each act of a Yuan zaju was composed to a set of qupai or song-metres belonging to the same tonality, and the lyrics within one set of qupai should be written to one and the same rhyme.

V. Nanqu 南曲 (Southern Qu) / Nanxi 南戲 (Southern Xi)

Nanqu (Southern qu) was the music used in Nanxi (Southern xi), a Xiqu form that flourished in the Southern part of China during the Northern Song and Yuan dynasties. Because it originated from the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang 浙江溫州, or from the nearby city of Yongjia 永嘉, according to some sources, it was also called Wenzhou zaju or Yongjia zaju. In fact, the terms nanxi, nanqu, and xiwen 戲文 were sometimes interchangeable.

Unlike Yuan zaju, which was viewed as orthodox and had a sound foundation in music and in literature, nanxi was deeply rooted in folk songs and dance and in the Song dynasty lyrics. Despite its popularity, nanxi (or nanqu) was at first considered to be inferior to beiqu. They were described in the Nanci Xulu by Xu Wei (1521-1593) as “ditties sung in village and alleys, which paid no attention to modes and keys, and had no rhythmic patterns…and were therefore seldom noticed by the scholar-gentry.”

“…村坊小曲而為之。本無宮調，亦罕節奏…故士大夫罕有留意者。”52

In the Yuan dynasty, a large number of Northern people moved down to the South, and so did the art of the North. Nanxi then had a chance to draw on the experience of zaju so as to perfect itself in terms of music, staging and script. The further advancement of nanxi attracted more and more intellectuals (including playwrights of Yuan zaju) to participate in its creation. However, Yuan zaju and nanxi pursued a quite different route in their development. While the former undoubtedly laid stress on the art of singing and indeed made a great contribution in this respect, the latter needed a longer time to refine

52 See Dolby in Colin Mackerras, ed., Chinese Theater from its Origins to the Present Day (1983), p. 33 for a longer extract from this work.
the various folk elements and blend them into one whole art form. At the same time, nanxi’s lack of “tradition” and its structure-free nature eventually led to some significant innovations, such as:

1) all the characters in a play could sing, and this could be done in the form of a solo, a duet, or several people singing in unison;

2) not only did nanqu come to adopt modes and tonalities in a later period, it also allowed different keys to appear in the same song-set.53

3) the creation of Nan Bei He Tao 南北合套 (incorporating both beiqu and nanqu in one song-set), by the Southern playwright Shen Hefu 沈和甫;

4) different styles of recitation - recitation inserted into singing parts; the creation of an intricate format combining singing with recitation written in prose or verse;

5) body movements and martial skills took up the function of reinforcing the character’s inner state rather than being merely some form of unconnected dance;

6) total freedom to change time and space on stage, which is manifested through symbolic movements of actors;

7) deliberate theatricality – with the actor constantly in and out of the character;

8) incorporating the chou 丑 type of role from folk entertainment.54

With the appearance of the five important works of nanxi: The Wooden Hairpin (《荊釵記》), The White Rabbit (《白兔記》), Praying under the Moon (《拜月記》), The Killing of the Dog (《殺狗記》) and The Story of the Lute (《琵琶記》), the foundations of Nanxi as the leading Chinese theatrical form had been laid. Nanxi henceforth took the name chuanqi 傳奇 (literally “telling a strange story”, a term first used of the short stories written in Classical Chinese during the Tang dynasty). Since that time, Yuan

53 Grand Encyclopedia, p. 264.
zaju, which was the first complete form of Chinese theatre, began to fade away after its century of glory.55

VI. Kunqu 崑曲

As nanxi spread across Southern China, its flexible nature allowed it to merge easily with different types of local music and dialects. In the early Ming dynasty, four popular local Styles 六四大聲腔, evolved out of the nanxi system, namely Yuyao 餘姚, Haiyan 海鹽, Yiyang 彥陽 and Kunshan (or Kun) 崑山. The Kunshan style was first developed by the musician Gu Jian 顧堅 of the late Yuan dynasty, a native of Kunshan, near the city of Suzhou. But it was only after the significant collaboration of two men, Wei Liangfu 魏良輔 (c.1489-1566) and Liang Chenyu 梁辰魚 (c.1520-c.1593), that this particular style was totally transformed and went on to take the leading role in Chinese theatre (in artistic terms, if not in popularity) for almost four centuries.

Wei was primarily an expert in the musical style of beiqu. Realizing that he could never outstrip his friend Wang Youshan 王友山 in this area he diverted his interest to nanqu. He gave his daughter in marriage to Zhang Yetang 張野塘, another beiqu specialist, and the two of them joined hands in the musical reform. After years of hard work and much effort, Wei turned the Kunshan musical style into a new style named shuimodiao 水磨調.56 His main achievements included:

1) establishing a harmony between the melody and the words - as Chinese words (zì) possess a musical quality (the 4 tones), the melodic line must not go against the tone or the audience would easily mistake one word for another.

2) bringing two entirely different styles, the beiqu (with its 7-note scale, and melodies containing many words and usually in quick tempo) and the nanqu (with its 5-note scale, usually in slow tempo containing fewer words), together

56 Shuimodiao 水磨調: The name came from the very last step of the process used to treat mahogany furniture. People use a herb called mùzei cao 木賊草 to rub the furniture so as to render its surface ultra-fine and smooth. This is called the process of shuimo 水磨, and it is a perfect analogy to the new singing style. This is a paraphrase of words from the Preface by the renowned critic Yu Pingbo 俞平伯 to Aria Scripts and Notations by Yu Zhenfei 《振飛曲譜》(1982): “其以‘水磨’名者，吳下紅木作打磨傢俱，工序頗繁，最後以木賊草蘸水而磨之，故極其細緻滑潤，俗曰水磨功夫，以作比喻，深得新腔唱法之要。”
into one standard singing system 融合南北聲腔. In other words, he treated beiqu with the musical rules of shuimodiao, and yet kept its original characteristics.

3) perfecting the instrumental accompaniment. Beiqu used plucked string instruments 弦索 to accompany the singing, whereas traditional nanqu used no accompaniment at all, or just some form of percussion to mark the beats. In order to harmonize the two styles without damaging their original qualities, Wei Liangfu let the drum player take charge of the tempo and introduced the use of the transverse flute, dizi 笛子, or vertical flute, xiao 箫, to accompany melodies. This helped to bring out the more lyrical and freer style of nanqu. At the same time, he kept some plucked string instruments (e.g. pipa, sanxian) to enrich the colour of the ensemble.57

Shuimodiao was later adopted in the play Washing Silk, Wanshaji 《浣紗記》, a work written by Liang Chenyu. This newly created melodic style, so elegant and refreshing, immediately gained the heart of the public and became even more popular in the days to come. As its influence extended, shuimodiao took the name Kunqu by which it continues to be known today.

Yuan zaju had owed its achievement to the participation of the literati in its creation. Kunqu, in a later period, attracted even more scholars to devote themselves to this art. The number of chuanqi plays written in the musical style of Kunqu increased rapidly during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. By the end of the Wanli period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty, Kunqu became popular all over the country and was also named guanqiang 官腔, or the official melodic style. It was much loved by both upper-class society and the ordinary people. There was a saying “家家收拾起，戶戶不提防” (every house and every family can sing the arias of Kunqu – shoushiqi 收拾起 and butifang 不提防 refer to the opening words of two arias) which reflected its great popularity. Another special event was the Mid-Autumn Festival singing contest. Each year on Tiger Hill 虎丘 in Suzhou there was a Kunqu gathering. People from Suzhou and other cities, men and women of different social rank, all came together for the joy

of singing. The large number of participants first sang in unison; then by elimination only a few dozen were left. The competition would go on until the winner was selected, who would then be asked to demonstrate his or her art in a solo performance. By then both the singer and the audience would have reached a state of total exhilaration. The great poet, essayist and playwright Li Yu 李漁 (1611- c.1679) described this in a much-quoted poem:

They sing so well, with such passion.
Every singer rivals the moon over Tiger Hill…

一讚一回好，一字一聲血。
幾令善歌人，唱殺虎丘月。

— 李漁《虎丘千人石上聽曲》

The extraordinary thing is that this Kunqu gathering 曲會 lasted from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

The rise of Kunqu also led to the decline of the Haiyan and Yuyao styles. Only the Yiyang could still compete with it thanks to its popularity among the masses. The overall artistic achievement of Kunqu (which will be further discussed in a while) was unprecedented in Xiqu history. A large number of remarkable chuanqi, such as The Palace of Eternal Life 《長生殿》 by Hong Sheng 洪昇, The Peony Pavilion 《牡丹亭》 by Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖, and The Jade Hairpin 《玉簪記》 by Gao Lian 高濂, have remained classics even to this day.

VII. Yiyang-qiang 弋陽腔

As mentioned, the Yiyang musical style (or qiang), which originated in Yiyang, Jiangxi, developed in parallel with Kunqu in the Ming dynasty. It was more an art of the masses, and was rather disdained by the scholar-gentry. Tang Xianzu described it as “singing measured by drum beats, noisy tunes.” 58 “其節以鼓，其調詠。” Li Tiaoyuan 李調元 (1734-1803), a scholar and drama critic of the Qing dynasty, wrote: “It never has any scores, is always accommodated to local tastes; one man sings and others echo

in chorus…”

Li Yu wrote: “I abhor tunes such as those of Yiyang and Siping. I run away the moment I hear them.”

“予生平最惡弋陽、四平等劇，見則趨而避之…”

Although *Yiyang-qiang* was looked down upon by the literati and was called “vulgar singing” as opposed to “refined music” which referred to *Kunqu*, its repertoire continued to expand and enjoyed great popular success. The reasons for its popularity were several:

1) its stories mostly came from folk legends, storytelling and unofficial histories, which were already very familiar to the audience; the language employed was much easier to understand;

2) its free structure, made up of *tuge* (singing with no accompaniment other than percussion) and *bangqiang* (voices, usually from backstage, singing out the final phrase(s) to strengthen the impact). This free structure allowed *Yiyang-qiang* to merge with any vernacular local singing style. As a result, it swept the country as low-brow theatre and gave birth to a large number of new regional genres.

One of *Yiyang-qiang*’s musical achievements, which greatly affected the future singing mode of *Xiqu*, was the creation of *gundiao* (the “roll”). When *Yiyang-qiang* adapted the scripts of *chuanqi*, either a whole independent passage of *gundiao* (called *chang’gun* 湛滾) was added, or phrases between the lines of the song-set were inserted (*jiagun* 加滾 or 夾滾). The main purpose of this was to use more explicit or more colloquial language to make “the meaning of the original wording clearer, and more lively and directly comprehensible to the audience.”

The form of *gundiao* was in regular verse with two phrases in parallel. The most basic pattern was two 7-word lines (5 or 4-word in some cases) in the tempo of 1/4. This quick tempo and speech-like melody, in contrast to *Kunqu*’s lyric 2/4 and 4/4, seemed much more suitable for the expression of passionate feelings and for building dramatic effects. This remarkable innovation (which bore strong traces of the “storytelling” form) not only

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60 My translation. Ibid.
broke the rigid rules of the *qupai* system and introduced new rhythmic elements to the sung part, it was indeed the forerunner of the *banshi* 板式 music system (which used phrases in parallel). It was a much freer style, leaving ample space and flexibility for the actor to fully express himself.

In terms of the total performance art, one of *Yiyang-qiang*’s merits was that it also brought the development of the martial element *wuxi* 武戲 to a new level. Martial arts and acrobatics, without any doubt, were elements which appealed greatly to the audience. In the early stage of *nanxi* and the Northern *zaju*, these martial elements existed, but they were not integrated into the drama, because both of them had a strongly independent system of their own. It was not easy to integrate them artistically. Yiyang-qiang did this in quite a primitive way, in order to please an audience keen to see rowdy and action-based performances. It has been recorded that real weapons were used in performances (directly borrowed from martial arts 武術), as well as some real acrobatics.

This innovation, however primitive it may have been, opened up a new horizon in the development of *Xiqu*. Even *Kunqu* took on this element and transformed it in accordance with its own style. This enriched the dramatic range of *Kunqu* (as for example in the scene “Escaping at Night” 《夜奔》 from the play *The Sword* 《寶劍記》, helping to create a more varied art-form that fused song and movement as a means of expression of the inner world. To this day martial arts and acrobatics are one of the four principal disciplines of the *Xiqu* actor.

**VIII. Further Development of *Kunqu***

*Washing Silk, Wanshaji* 《浣紗記》, and a large number of scripts that followed suit, impelled *Kunqu* to evolve from a pure singing style to an all-round theatrical form. During this evolution, however, the highly developed singing style had come to make the other elements seem rather deficient and immature. In order to strike a balance, further development in the areas of recitation and acting was urgently needed.

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Particularly in the cases of commercial performances, when the audience was the general public, not merely the educated elite (who might close their eyes, listen to the music and savour the literary qualities of the script), actors had to do whatever was necessary to improve the dramatic effect, including making amendments to the original work. The following passage, written by Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718), the author of *The Peach Blossom Fan* 《桃花扇》，reveals this phenomenon from a playwright’s point of view:

 Usually a long scene will consist of ten arias, a short scene of eight. Actors often reduce this and sing only five or six. Their choices often disregard the playwright’s hard work. Now I have written eight arias for long scenes and six or four for short scenes, because I don’t want any part of them to be deleted.

各本填詞，每一長折，例用十曲，短折例用八曲。優人刪繁就減，只歌五六曲，往往去留弗當，辜作者之苦心。今於長折，止填八曲，短折或六或四，不令再刪故也。

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In the old scripts, there was only a small amount of recitation. Actors on stage, of their own accord, increased this greatly. Their vulgarity and bad jokes often ruined the whole text. Now I provide my own lengthy and detailed passages of dialogue, and not one single word is to be added.64

舊本說白，止作三分，優人登場，自增七分；俗態惡謔，往往點金成鐵，為文筆之累。今說白詳備，不容再添一字。

It was indeed perfectly understandable that dramatists should find any alteration of their own work intolerable, especially in the case of inferior interventions such as those just described. But we also see that actors, in making their scripts more suitable for performance, had become so essential that even playwrights had to give in to them and make adjustments accordingly (as Kong himself did). On the other hand, if we consider it from a performer’s viewpoint, it was undeniable that many scripts, which did not take into account the actual dramatic impact on the stage, ended up looking more like

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64 My translation. Kong Shangren, Foreword 凡例 of *The Peach Blossom Fan* 《桃花扇》 (1959), pp. 11-12.
reading material 案頭文學. Actors were obliged to increase the dramatic momentum themselves, using their own experience in order to do so. Moreover, after playing a role many times, an actor would have his own understanding and feelings, with which he would want to enrich the characterization.

I am now going to cite two examples (giving comparisons of the original text with the performance version). Here we can clearly see the marvelous contributions of Kunqu performance artists, in respect of recitation, subtext, and acting.

1. Example I  (A passage from Washing Silk 《浣紗記》)

The Ming dynasty version:

**B** = Bo Pi 伯嚭 (a greedy official of the state of Wu)

**W** = Wen Zhong 文種 (an official adviser to the throne of the state Yue)

......

**B**: (Big laugh) You come so far away to extend your friendship and kindness, please stand.

(大笑科) 遠勞厚意，請起。

**W**: I dare not. The gifts are all outside the tent. Since there are so many people here, I shall first present to you one sample of each item. If you order me to, I shall then carry them inside. There are five thousand taels of gold, five thousand bolts of coloured satin, and ten pairs of white jade circlets.

不敢。禮物通在帳外，人夫頗多，每樣先進一件，倘蒙叱留，方敢載進。這樣黃金共五千兩；錦緞五千疋；白璧共十雙。

**B**: How can I accept so much? Boy, kill the lamb, warm the wine, invite Mr. Wen to be seated…

怎麼要許多？小廝殺起羊來，燙起酒來，留文老爹坐坐去…
And now the performing version from the Zhuibaiqiu 綴白裘 collection of the Qing dynasty:  

......

B: Mr. Wen, just now the guard only said that an envoy from the state of Yue wanted to see me. He didn’t even mention that it was you yourself. Please forgive me.

W: I will first present to you the list of gifts and the samples. All the gifts are outside the tent. Since there are so many people here, I shall first show you one sample of each item. I would only dare to carry them inside if you order me to do so. Five thousand taels of gold. Here is the sample.

B: But there are so many gifts. I can only take two taels.

W: You must accept them all.

B: If you insist, I’ll take them all. Tell them to kill a chicken and prepare the wine.

W: Coloured satin, five thousand bolts. Here is the sample.

65 Edited first by 玩花主人 (late 16th century, “The master who Enjoys the Flowers”, his real name is unknown), Zhuibaiqiu which was first published in 1767, is a collection of the finest excerpts from popular Xiqu scripts of the Ming and Qing periods. The excerpts selected, comprising both the arias and the dialogues, “were actual performance versions, which had been treated by professional artists.” (Hu Shi 胡適, Foreword to Zhuibaiqiu) Zhuibaiqiu was later expanded to twelve sections in altogether 48 juan by Qian Decang 錢德蒼 in the mid-Qianlong period. In 1931, at the instruction of Hu Shi, Ms. Wang Xieru 汪協如 prepared a new punctuated edition. This new edition was published in 1940. Zhuibaiqiu collected mostly Kunqu scripts, while also including some examples of regional genres.

66 The guard did say who it was. As a matter of fact, Bo Pi was very hostile towards Wen Zhong. But once he knows that Wen is there to offer gifts, he seems to restart the conversation all over again.
B: Excellent design! Five thousand bolts… I can only take two.

好花樣！五千端，只收這兩端罷。

W: You must accept them all.

一定要全收。

B: Well, bring them all. Tell them to kill a lamb.

如此，一發收了。吩咐宰羊。

W: Twenty pairs of white jade circlets.

白璧二十雙。

B: White jade is priceless. I’ll take them all. Kill a cow!....

白璧乃是無價之寶，一發收了。宰牛。……

It is obvious that the second version is much livelier and more audience-friendly. Through the three different levels of gift presentation, the image of Bo Pi as a greedy, hypocritical and snobbish official is much more successfully portrayed.

2. Example II  (A passage from The Jade Hairpin《玉簪記》)

The second example is from my own repertoire, the scene, Playing the Qin to flirt〈琴挑〉, from The Jade Hairpin by Gao Lian (1573-1620). The play is a love story between a young scholar and a beautiful nun.

The original text:

C = Chen Miaochang 陳妙常 (the nun)

P = Pan Bizheng 潘必正 (the scholar)

……

P: I only dabble in it. How dare I play in front of such an expert like you?

小生略知一二，只是弄斧班門，怎好出醜？

C: You are too humble. I insist that you play something.

好說。一定要請教。
P: In that case, please. 如此請。（They change seats.）

C: Please. 請。

P: (P plays the Qin and sings)（小生彈介）(text omitted)

C: This is the song “A bird takes wing”. You are a fine young man, why play this song which speaks of having no wife?
此乃雉朝飛也。君方盛年，何故彈此無妻之曲？

P: Indeed I have no wife. 小生實未有妻。

C: That’s none of my business. 這也不幹我事。

P: May I propose that you play a song in return?
敢求仙姑面教一曲，如何？

C: Your beautiful playing has refreshed my ears. Why let a beginner such as me spoil the ambiance?
既聽佳音，已清俗耳，何必初學，又亂芳聲？

......

Here is the modern performance version that I learned:

P: I only dabble in it. How dare I play in front of such an expert like you?
小生略知一二，只是班門弄斧，怎好出醜？

C: Don’t be so humble. I insist that you play something.
休得太謙，定要請教。

(The meaning is not changed, but the two 4-word phrases in Chinese “休得太謙，定要請教” are much more melodious and well-articulated than the bald original “好說，一定要請教”.)

P: In that case, please. 如此請。

C: Please. 請。
Pan and Chen rise from their chairs and exchange seats, in a ceremonious fashion. When Pan passes by Chen, he deliberately brushes against her shoulder. Pan plays the lute and sings the song. Chen watches him with admiration. When she recognizes what he is singing, she shyly turns her face to the other side. (These and the following stage directions are the ones I learned from my teachers – especially Yu Zhenfei – for modern performance. They have now become standard.)

C: (After a very short silence) Superb! 好!

She is lost in her own thoughts. It takes her a second to realize that the song has ended.

P: Not really... 出醜。

C: This is the song “The Bird Takes Wing”. You are a fine young man, why play a song which talks of having no wife?

此乃雉朝飛也。君方盛年，何故彈此無妻之曲？

P: (quickly seizes the opportunity) Indeed I have no wife. 小生實未有妻。

C: That’s none of my business! 這也不幹我事！

Realizing that she has made an indiscreet remark - why should a nun care about whether or not he has a wife - she reacts immediately. Hoping to cover her embarrassment, she once again turns away from him.

P: May I propose… 欲求仙姑…… (He stands up)

C: Ah?! 啊？！ (She stands up)

With this exclamation, she looks right into his eyes, implying “How dare you! I am a nun!” But deep in her heart, is the thought: “How wonderful if it were ever true!”

Pan uses his fan to close his mouth. He is a bit embarrassed, his eyes look down at the Qin. He smiles and responds, interrupting her exclamation...

P: Oh! May I propose… that you play a song in return?

哦！面教一曲如何？

Chen gradually resumes her calm, slightly regretting her over-reaction, but quite pleased with Pan’s witty response.
She slowly sits down while she speaks.

C: Your beautiful playing has refreshed my ears. Why let a beginner such as me spoil the ambiance?

既聽佳音，以清俗耳，何必初學，又亂芳聲？

......

When Chen agrees to play, they once again exchange seats. Pan wants to repeat his “trick” of brushing against her shoulder, but this time Chen successfully dodges him....

This almost keeps the original text intact, but just by adding body movements (exchanging seats) and inserting a crucial “Ah?!” to break the sentence in two, the whole passage becomes much more alive and interesting, and the characters are given flesh and blood. The scene acquires more tension and builds to a climax. The subtle feelings of the protagonists, probably not even “perceived” by their creator (the author), can only be felt and materialized by the performing artist. This is why we term the actor’s enhancement of the character (his understanding and his actual interpretation) a “second level of creation” 二度創作.

This is a Xiqu creative tradition that has continued to the present day. From the end of the Ming dynasty to the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods of the Qing dynasty, Kunqu underwent continuous polishing in every aspect. While scholar-authors laid down a very high literary starting point in their texts, the actors, in their turn, enriched the repertoire in terms of movements and gestures (shenduan 身段) and acting. The truly great masters engaged in the sort of subtle psychological subtext we have just observed in Yu Zhenfei’s interpretation of The Jade Hairpin. The Hangdang system itself became very detailed and sophisticated (this system will be described in detail with video illustrations in chapter III). Each type of role possessed a series of techniques and skills to depict different kinds of characters.

It was this overall evolution that enabled Kunqu ultimately to attain a unique and comprehensive performing style, and earned this sublime art form the stature and reputation of being The Mother of Xiqu 戲曲之母 and The Model of All Drama 百戲之師.
IX. The Rise of Luantan 乱彈 — the Burgeoning of Regional Genres

In the 18th century Xiqu entered an era marked by the rise of luantan 乱彈 (a collective term for all regional genres of drama). The bangzi 梆子 and the pihuang 皮黄 styles displaced Kunqu and eventually took the leading role.

From the late years of the Kangxi period (1661-1722) to the time of Qianlong (1735-1795) is often designated the golden age of the Qing dynasty. The overall prosperity of the nation generated a much greater demand for entertainment, which consequently led to a tremendous advancement in Xiqu. In the rural areas, there are records of villagers in different provinces watching performances during festive occasions and in their leisure time. “Fengjing County was situated at the junction of Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Here merchants gathered. The drama flourished especially during the time of the temple festivals when stages were erected, several troupes were invited, and performances went on all through the night.”67 “There were temporary stages for Xiqu performances in Sanshui County of Guangdong.”68 In short, Xiqu activities became a deeply ingrained part of rural life. In the cities, following the development of trading, chambers of commerce of different localities were established all over the country. Merchants often hired troupes from their own native places to perform and thus “facilitated the interchange and mobility of different forms of drama.”69

During the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, apart from the two main streams, Kunqu and Yiyang-qiang, there were numerous other regional forms that emerged. They were classified as X-qiang 腔, Y-diao 調, or Z-xi 戲. Some were named after their places of origin (e.g. Chu-diao 楚調, from Hubei, the area known in ancient times as Chu), others were named after a musical instrument (e.g. bangzi-qiang 梆子腔, from the wooden clapper used as accompaniment). Xiqu had reached an unprecedented stage of diversity.

By the middle of the Qianlong period, because of the rapid growth of the regional genres, Xiqu was officially divided into two sections, yabu 雅部 (the refined section)

and huabu 花部 (the flowery or miscellaneous section). While the former comprised only Kunqu, the paragon of artistic elaboration and high-brow culture, the latter included all other local forms, which were regarded as low-brow and unrefined. All the regional genres were collectively termed luantan 乱弹 or huabu luantan 花部乱弹.

Xiqu also benefited from the Qianlong Emperor’s fondness for art. During his six visits to the South from 1751 to 1784, Xiqu performances became the major part of the welcoming entertainments. “The salt-merchants of Yangzhou, as usual, prepared great shows from both huabu and yabu. Yabu means Kunshan-qiang, huabu includes Jing-qiang, Qin-qiang, Yiyang-qiang, bangzi-qiang, luoluo-qiang, erhuang-diao. These are collectively known as luantan.” As a result, rivalry between the regional genres and Kunqu continued for almost a hundred years. It was historically referred to as the Rivalry between the huabu and the yabu 花雅之爭.

X. The Rivalry between Huabu and Yabu 花雅之爭

1. The first competitor of Kunqu – Jing-qiang 京腔

The first regional genre to compete with Kunqu was Jing-qiang 京腔 (a derivation of Yiyang-qiang). As a matter of fact, Kunqu was already threatened during the early part of the Qianlong reign. The Beijing audience was more drawn to regional forms such as the Jing-qiang, and grew “tired of the tunes of the South. They scattered as soon as they heard Kunqu singing.” “厭聽吳騷, 歌聞崑曲, 輒哄然散去。” Jing-qiang was so popular that there were six great troupes that toured the Nine Gates (i.e. the whole city of Beijing).” “六大明班，九門輪轉。”

The government later “upgraded” Jing-qiang to be an “official” court 御用 art form. All the great entertainments at Court 宮廷大戲 were henceforth performed in both Kunqu

71 My translation. Zhang Shushi 張漱石, quoted in Zhang and Guo, History, vol. III, p. 11. Jing-qiang, gao-qiang 高腔, and Yi-qiang 弋腔 are one and the same. It was a derivation of Yiyang-qiang. In Beijing it was being called Jing-qiang.
and Jing-qiang styles. The latter, despite its sudden rise in “social status”, nonetheless lost its original drive and creative dynamic when it was cut off from its popular roots.

2. The second competitor of Kunqu – Qin-qiang 秦腔

This was a “branch” of the bangzi or Clapper style, a genre which had spread throughout the country by the Qianlong period. In 1779 (the 44th year of Qianlong), Wei Changsheng 魏長生, a remarkable Qin-qiang artist who specialized in playing cross-dressing female roles 男旦, entered Beijing and caused a sensation in the capital. By then “nobody cared about the ‘Six Great Jing-qiang Troupes’ anymore” 六大班 無人過問, not to mention the Kunqu which was already struggling to survive. 73

Around the year 1782, Qin-qiang plays were altogether banned by the government, on the grounds that they included indecent material. Wei subsequently left Beijing but continued to perform in Southern China with great success.

XI. The Birth of Jingju

In 1790, the Three Celebrations 三慶徽班, a troupe organized and sponsored by Anhui merchants, entered Beijing as one of the major entertainments for Qianlong’s 80th birthday. It was a variety troupe, performing not only in the style of Anhui (the er-huang 二黃), but all sorts of popular tunes and Kunqu as well. Its assortment of styles and repertoire quickly won over the audience of the capital. The leading artist, Gao Langting 高朗亭, was described in the following words: “Even without singing, his imitation of a woman’s bearing - every twinkle and smile, every bodily movement – was unbelievably exquisite, the ultimate art.” 74 Many of the Qin-qiang actors, who were on the one

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74 My translation. From Xiaotiedi Daoren (The Master of the Little Steel Flute) 小鐵篴道人, Flowers of the Present Day《目下看花記》, p. 14A, in Historical Materials, vol. 1. 化境 is a traditional expression in Chinese aesthetics to denote the “ultimate” state of artistic perfection. Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 uses it in his essay on the translator Lin Qin’nan (Lin Shu), 林紳的翻譯, when he describes the best translations as belonging to this state of “transmutation”, where they read as though they are original works of literature, but are nonetheless “faithful” to their original text. See Jiuwen sipian 舊文四篇 (1979), p. 63, and the translation by George Kao in Renditions vol. 5, p. 9.
hand being held back by the government, and on the other hand were not able to compete with this new company, eventually joined the Anhui Troupe 徽秦合流.

By the 1810s, three other Anhui Troupes, the Four Delights 四喜, the Spring Stage 春台, the Gentle Spring 和春, arrived in Beijing one after another.⁷⁵ Each troupe had a particular area in which it excelled: the full-length repertoire of the Three Celebrations 三慶曰軸子, the Kunqu of the Four Delights 四喜曰曲子, the martial skills of the Gentle Spring 和春曰把子, and the child performers of the Spring Stage 春台曰孩子.⁷⁶ As a result, the Four Great Anhui Troupes 四大徽班 dominated the Beijing theatrical world, and nurtured the rise and development of Jingju.

In 1828, the Han-diao 漢調 (formerly known as Chu-diao 楚調) of Hubei was introduced to Beijing. This was another indispensable factor for the emergence of Jingju. During the years 1828 to 1832, actors from Hubei arrived in Beijing one after the other. Yu Sansheng 余三勝, Wang Honggui 王洪貴, and Li Liu 李六 were among the most eminent. It was then difficult to set up an independent company and compete with the Anhui Troupes, which were still in their heyday. Like the actors of Qin-qiang before them, these newcomers performed with the Anhui Troupes 搭班. Their expertise, the xipi 西皮 style, as well as their repertoire, were a great contribution to the Anhui Troupes. The merger of the Hubei xipi and Anhui er-huang 徽漢合流 consequently gave birth to the “pihuang system” (or pihuang-qiang 皮黃腔), which later became the major singing style of Jingju.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ These terms are all as translated by Dolby, p. 164.
⁷⁷ Colin Mackerras, Chinese Drama - A historical Survey (1990), p. 60.
Musical styles

Now let us have a brief look at the musical styles so far incorporated into the Anhui Troupes.

1. **Qin-qiang 秦腔 (a branch of bangzi 梆子)**

   *Qin-qiang* originated in the north-western provinces of Shaanxi and Gansu. Bold and unconstrained, sonorous and passionate, this musical style embodied the characteristics and inner qualities of the people of Northwest China. It is recorded that when the 17th-century rebel General Li Zicheng “was offered the great beauty Chen Yuanyuan, he was so excited and happy that he asked her to sing for him. She sang a *Kunqu* aria. Li frowned and said: ‘How come such a beauty sings something so unbearable?’ He then ordered the ladies in his harem to sing the West Tune 西調 (another term for *Qin-qiang*) and to accompany themselves with plucked stringed instruments. Li clapped his hands in time with the melody. The music was so passionate and thrilling, it went straight to the heart.”

   …進圓圓。自成驚且喜，遂命歌，奏吳歈。自成蹙額曰：“何貌甚佳，而音殊不可耐也!”即命群姬唱西調，操阮箏、琥珀，己拍掌以和之。繁音激楚，熱耳酸心…

   In order to fit the style, *Qin-qiang* did not use the *sheng* 笙 (a reed pipe wind instrument) and flute. Its major accompaniment was the *huqin* 胡琴, or two-stringed fiddle, which was supported by the round plucked instrument the *yueqin* 月琴. The *huqin* and *yueqin* remain the two most essential musical instruments in today’s Peking Opera or *Jingju*.

2. **Xipi 西皮**

   The *xipi* style did not in fact originate in Hubei. It was a musical style based on *Qin-qiang*, which had been modified and developed in Hubei. As the Hubei dialect used to call lyrics (or songs) *pi* 皮, *xipi* means tunes coming from the West (or Northwest).

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These were the songs Li Zicheng wanted to hear (the xi-diao, or the West Tune). Although xipi ended up being a quite different style from Qin-qiang, it nevertheless kept its high-pitched and passionate quality.

3.  **Er-huang 二黃**

The origin of er-huang is controversial. There are two major accounts. One is that the er-huang style was a further development of the siping-diao 四平調. Siping-diao was a derivation of Yiyang-qiang, integrated with Anhui folk tunes. However, it abandoned the basic structure of Yiyang-qiang (the tuge 徒歌 and bangqiang 幫腔, see above) and used musical instruments to accompany singing.

Another account is that er-huang originated from the county Yihuang 宜黃 of Jiangxi province, as Yihuang had a regional style, named Yihuang-qiang 宜黃腔, which was very similar to the er-huang (some also said that in southern dialects, 二 and 宜 sound the same, hence 宜黃 was mistakenly written as 二黃). Here I would like to add one very interesting remark: according to recent research, Tang Xianzu's great plays (including The Peony Pavilion) were not written according to the prosodic rules of Kunqu, but rather, to those of Yihuang-qiang, a fusion of a Yiyang deviation 弋陽土腔 and the Haiyan style 海鹽腔, which was then very popular around Tang’s native town. That was probably why Tang had once been bitterly criticized for not abiding by the rules of Kunqu, and for that matter, we have the so-called “fight between Tang and Shen” 湯沈之爭.

4.  **Kunqu 崑曲**

I have already dealt at some length with the musical style of Kunqu.

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80 Although Tang Xianzu (1550-1616) and Shen Jing 沈璟 (1553-1610) were both outstanding playwrights in the Ming, the two held diametrically opposite ideas about creation. The former was a true free spirit and “his intricate style was often a manifestation of the subtlety and minuteness of his thought.” (Dolby, pp. 92-93) The latter, on the other hand, was considered “a leading dramatic and musical theorist.” (Dolby, p. 99) Shen accused Tang of failing to match his prosody with the music and took the liberty of revising Tang’s masterpiece, *The Peony Pavilion*. Tang criticized Shen for making a big fuss over small things while totally neglecting the overall artistic impact of a work of art. Infuriated at Shen’s action and criticisms, Tang struck back: “To hell with it if this should crack everybody’s voice!” 正不妨拗折天下人嗓子” (See Zheng Peikai, p. 241.)
To sum up, the co-existing styles of Hui-diao 徽調, Han-diao 漢調, bangzi 梆子 and Kunqu in the Anhui troupes laid down a solid foundation for the advent of Jingju. The strength of Jingju lay in its “comprehensiveness and ability to utilize heterogeneous styles of music and acting.”\(^8^1\) It eventually became the most popular genre of Xiqu because it had indeed integrated the essence of the yabu 雅部 (the refined section) and the cream of the huabu 花部 (the flowery section). However, if we count from 1790 (the year where the first Anhui troupe entered Beijing for the celebration of Qianlong’s 80\(^{th}\) birthday), it was still about 50 years before Jingju was truly established as an independent form.\(^8^2\)

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\(^8^1\) Dolby, p. 168.

\(^8^2\) See Beijing Arts Research Centre and Shanghai Arts Research Centre, eds., History of Peking Opera《中國京劇史》(1999), vol. I, p. 76.
XII. Three Maestros of Laosheng 老生三傑

During this transition period, one of the major changes in theatre trends was that the fashion for dan roles yielded considerably to the laosheng type. There were three eminent laosheng actors 老生三傑 or 三鼎甲, who, by their artistry and innovations, accelerated the rise of Jingju. They were Cheng Changgeng 程長庚 (1811-1880) from Anhui, Yu Sansheng 余三勝 (1802-1866) from Hubei, and Zhang Erkui 張二奎 (1814-1860) from Beijing.

Cheng Changgeng was the Head and the leading laosheng of the Three Celebrations Troupe, who excelled in both pihuang and Kunqu. It was reckoned that his voice could “soar through the clouds and split rocks, its reverberations trailing deliciously round the rafters.” “穿雲裂石、餘音繞樑。” 83 He was also known for his exceptional clarity in singing and recitation. “The enunciation of Cheng was based on Kunqu, and yet he kept the authentic style of Hui-diao.” “程氏唱腔的咬字發音，是以崑曲為其基礎，同時也是徽調的正宗。” 84

Yu Sansheng was an actor of Han-diao, leading artist of the Spring Stage Troupe. He was apt at creating new tunes. His greatest contribution was to enhance significantly the melodic side of laosheng singing, which used to be “bellowing like thunder” 喊似雷 (loud but plain and blunt). 85 Yu’s singing style was celebrated for the use of decorative flourishes and turns 花腔. As an actor of Han-diao, his enunciation was based mainly on the Hubei dialect.

In contrast to Yu, Zhang Erkui was famous for his powerful and resounding voice and straightforward singing style, in which every word was delivered firmly and fully. As he was a Peking man, Peking (or Beijing, as it has to be written nowadays) pronunciation was naturally employed in his performance.

This competition of different styles actually propelled the artistic development of Jingju. Yet this period was still regarded as a transition because all the actors were still singing in their own native dialects. The “language” of Jingju was yet to be standardized.

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83 Wu Tao 吳燾, Memories of the Pear Orchard《梨園舊話》, quoted and translated by Dolby, p. 170.
84 Zhou Yibai, p. 231.
85 Yang Jingting 楊靜亭, Dumen Zayong《都門雜詠》 as quoted and translated by Dolby, p. 169.
XIII. Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847 - 1917) and the Standardization of Language

A *laosheng* Maestro of the next generation, Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培, helped to accomplish the “mission”.

Also known as “Little Skylark” (小叫天, a stage name derived from his father’s: “Skylark Tan” 譚叫天), Xinpei started his career as a *laosheng*. When his voice broke, he performed as a *wusheng* and toured with the “congee troupes” 粥班 in the countryside near Beijing.\(^{86}\) Although he led a poor life during this period, Tan took the opportunity to sharpen his performance skills thoroughly. He even at one time worked as a bodyguard, from which one could imagine how high his standard of *kungfu* and fighting ability was. When he returned to Beijing, he entered the Three Celebrations Troupe. He was much appreciated by Cheng Changgeng, and Cheng adopted Tan as his godson. When Tan’s voice recovered, he once again concentrated on the art of *laosheng*. After absorbing the qualities of all his predecessors, he developed his own singing and acting style — the Tan Style 譚派. Together with another two artists (Sun Juxian 孫菊仙 and Wang Guifen 汪桂芬), they were known as the Three New *laosheng* Maistros 老生新三傑.

By the late 19\(^{th}\) century and the time of the Emperor Guangxu 光緒, because of the Empress Dowager Cixi’s fondness for Jingju, the Court started to engage famous actors to perform in the Palace. Tan was naturally among these privileged artists who bore the title: “in the service of the Inner Court” 內廷供奉. From 1900 onward, Tan was so popular that he was called “The King of the *Xiqu* World” 伶界大王.\(^{87}\) When the Allied Force attacked Beijing and Tianjin, a poem read: “Who cares about the fate of the nation! The whole city competes to talk of Skylark.” “國家興亡誰管得，滿城爭說叫天兒。”\(^{88}\) Recordings of Tan can still be found today. In 1997, I played a recording of his singing voice to start off a concert, which featured the development of different Jingju singing styles over the past century.\(^{89}\) The whole Tan family is extremely loyal to

\(^{86}\) Translated by Dolby as “porridge troupes”. It was so called “because of the meagre returns they obtained” - p. 171.

\(^{87}\) See *Grand Encyclopedia*, p. 382.

\(^{88}\) Translated by Dolby, p. 171.

\(^{89}\) Concert of Beijing Opera – from “Imperial Court Performance” to “Modern Play” 京劇音樂會 — 從“內廷供奉”到“現代戲”, held on 3 and 4 May 1977 in Hong Kong.
their art. Tan’s son, grandson, great grandson (still alive) were all laosheng actors. Even the fifth and sixth generations are still pursuing the same profession.

Besides being a superstar, Tan Xinpei’s greatest contribution was to standardize the language of Jingju, by adopting the pronunciation of Central China (Zhongyuan yinyun 中原音韻) and the tones of Hubei dialect 湖廣音.

Let me give a short explanation of this:

The Zhongyuan Yinyun 《中原音韻》 is a rhyme book written by Zhou Deqing 周德清 (c.1270-after 1324). Based on the pronunciation of Dadu 大都 (Capital of the Yuan dynasty, today’s Beijing), Zhou set clear-cut standards as to pronunciation, tones and rhymes. This was a manual written specially for the singing of beiqu (Northern songs). It later became the foundation for the development of qu-rhymes in the Ming and the Qing, as well as an important document for Putonghua research.

Hubei Tones: Hubei dialect is very melodic. The range of tones is wide. When a Hubei man talks, you will hear a lot of “ups and downs” in his speech. It is therefore ideal for stage performance.

This fusion (Zhongyuan pronunciation + Hubei tones) actually marked the historical evolution of Peking Opera. In order to be better understood by a Beijing audience, Han-diao actors had all along been trying to alter their pronunciation. As a result, a particular, most beautiful, expressive, and musical stage language was generated. It is termed yunbai 韻白 (as opposed to jingbai 京白), and it is still being used to this day. Apart from the main feature just cited, there are a few special words in yunbai, which also carry the trace of the merger of the two languages, such as 街 (street): pronounced jie in Beijing and gai in Hubei, and ji-ai in Jingju; 主 (main, host, lord): pronounced zhu in Beijing and jü in Hubei, hence zhü in Jingju. These pronunciations are purely for stage use, they do not exist in any of the spoken Chinese dialects.

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90 Dolby translates it as Sound and Rhymes of the Central Plains.
92 See Grand Encyclopedia, p. 608.
93 Jingbai: language of Beijing. It is basically the same as Putonghua, only more colloquial and with a strong accent of the Beijing people. Compared to yunbai, jingbai is more rhythmic and vivacious.
XIV. Wang Yaoqing 王瑤卿 (1881 - 1954), Innovator of Dan (Female) Roles

Another name we ought to mention is Wang Yaoqing 王瑤卿. Nicknamed “the All-Knowing” 通天教主, Wang was the only one at that time who could rival Tan in his contribution to Jingju. In fact, both Tan and Wang were famous as “Emperor Tang and King Wu of The Pear Orchard” 梨園湯武.94

In the early stages of Jingju, there was a rigid boundary between the two sub-divisions of the dan type: huadan 花旦 (vivacious young female roles or shrewd and lustful female roles, in which acting and recitation were the major artistic means) and qingyi 青衣 (mature, dignified, respectable female roles, the only requirement being good singing skills). “The facial expressions (of the qingyi) were often as cold as ice 冷若冰霜. When a qingyi entered the scene the actor must adopt the gesture of ‘holding the tummy’ 抱肚子身段 — with one hand dropping down, another placed on the tummy, steadily moving forward without tilting the body…When this type of role appeared on stage, the only demand of the audience was the quality of singing; they wouldn’t pay attention to movements or expressions… At that time when people went to the theatre, they went ‘to listen to a show’ 聽戲. If you were to say that you were going to watch a show 看戲, people would laugh at you as inexperienced.”95

But Wang Yaoqing “the All-Knowing” saw a serious flaw in this performing concept. So he endeavored to break the barrier between different sub-types and to utilize every means available to portray the character. In other words, he combined qingyi and huadan by adding refined acting skills (even martial arts, which had been confined to the daomadan 刀馬旦 role), into roles which had once required nothing but a good voice and quality of singing. His innovation opened up a whole new path for the art of dan, and enabled this role-type to have a development and importance parallel to that of the laosheng, which had been dominant for a while.

Wang ceased performing on stage at the age of forty-six, and after that devoted himself entirely to education. He was a remarkable teacher. He died in the middle of the 20th

94 Tang refers to Emperor Tang of Shang 商湯; Wu means King Wu of Zhou 周武王. They were both eminent Ancient Kings. Pear Orchard is an allegory of the Xiqu world. So the whole phrase means the two Kings of the Xiqu world.
century at the age of seventy-three, and almost all the celebrated dan players of the first half of the century (some of whom are still alive today) were once his students, including the Four Great Masters of Dan 四大名旦 – Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳, Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋, Xun Huisheng 荀慧生, and Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲. Wang was especially good at exploring his students’ abilities and strengths and teaching them accordingly. The most outstanding example of this was Cheng Yanqiu. Cheng was ten years younger than Mei Lanfang, and was first introduced to study with Mei at the age of fifteen. By then he had already acquired a solid basic training from another teacher and had started performing. Mei was very fond of this humble and hardworking young man and did take time to instruct him. However, Mei was then in his prime as an actor and could not spare much time with his student. Furthermore, given Cheng’s vocal condition (he never fully recovered after his voice broke) and his own artistic inclination, he was certainly not the perfect successor to Mei’s grand and resplendent style.

Cheng was later brought to Wang Yaoqing. After a period of observation, Wang was impressed by Cheng’s diligence and decency as a person, and wanted to make something out of him. Most people saw no future in Cheng, but Wang said to him: “Your voice is peculiar. If you imitate somebody else and follow the main stream, you’ll ‘starve’. If you walk your own path, you’ll have ‘rice to eat’.”96 From then on, Wang assisted Cheng in establishing his own special way of singing, breathing and articulation. In the early stages, Cheng’s newly created repertoire was composed and directed by Wang. Later, when Cheng was able to do this himself, he would still ask Wang to revise his work and to add his final touch. Today, the Cheng Style 程派 remains a unique lineage of the dan role, on a par with the great Mei Style 梅派.

Without Wang Yaoqing’s special artistic perception 慧眼 and support, the Cheng Style might not have had a chance to come into existence.

XV. Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894 - 1961)
— the great Master of Jingju, the bridge between East and West

In China, even if one has never seen a Jingju performance, one is sure to have heard of Mei Lanfang. Born into a family of Jingju artists (his grandfather and father were both dan actors; his uncle was “Little Skylark” Tan Xinpei’s principle accompanist on the jinghu). Mei started learning the art at the age of eight. His first performed when he was eleven years old, and became extremely popular in Shanghai in 1913, after which he enjoyed tremendous success for the remainder of his life. He was superb in all aspects: he had a sublime stage presence, an impressive physique, a superb singing voice, refined acting and exquisite bodily movements. He carried out artistic reforms in every area, including musical instrumentation, make-up and hair-dress. He continued Wang Yaoqing’s tradition, and carried it a step further. In Mei’s own words: “I sought advice from him [Wang], and fulfilled his unfinished work by following in his steps”.97 He created quite a number of new plays, and gave refreshing new interpretations to the traditional ones; he even made attempts at staging contemporary stories, in which actors wore modern costume 時裝 戲. In short, he gave the dan role a completely new look and elevated it to unprecedented artistic heights. In addition to all this, Mei was the very first to bring Jingju and Kunqu to the world, and won high acclaim by so doing.

In 1919, Mei Lanfang visited Japan, performing in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe. “This was recorded as the first time a Jingju actor ever set foot on the stage of a foreign country.”98 (This claim has been challenged by some) A Peking newspaper reported that “Japanese artists were keen to imitate Mei’s movements and postures. They called it the Mei Dance 梅舞”.99 In 1924, Mei revisited Japan and achieved even greater success.

In February 1930, Mei appeared on the Broadway stage. He was the first Xiqu actor to perform in the United States. He was then thirty-six years old. He had worked hard for almost eight years to prepare for this tour. But just before his departure, America was plunged into the Great Depression. Many advised him to cancel the trip — no more than three performances in New York could be expected, with nothing better than a

99 Ibid.
half-filled auditorium. After careful consideration, Mei decided to carry on as planned. He led a cast and crew of twenty-four, using the 150,000 yuan he had raised himself. The show was unbelievably successful. After the third evening’s performance, tickets for the following fortnight were completely sold out. As a result his performance was extended to three more weeks. After this, Mei’s company also toured other cities including Seattle, New York, Chicago, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Diego and Honolulu. In half a year, they presented seventy-two performances, from both the Jingju and Kunqu repertoires.

Here are some extracts from the reviews, showing how Mei Lanfang’s art was seen in the eyes of western critics:

It is styled, conventionalized and as old as the hills. But it is as beautiful as an old Chinese vase and tapestry. If you can purge yourself of the sophisticoric illusion that it is funny, merely because it is different, you can begin to appreciate something of exquisite loveliness in pantomime and costume, and you may feel vaguely in contact, not with the sensation of the moment, but with the strange ripeness of centuries.


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An actor, singer and dancer combined, and combined so that you never see the boundary between these arts, which as a matter of fact in Chinese theatre are indissolubly one. When you see him on stage you find yourself in some timeless region as lovely and harmonious as an old fairy story.

– Robert Littell (New York World, 17 February 1930)\textsuperscript{102}

His voice, for all its falsetto strangeness, is of exceptional beauty.

– John Martin (The New York Times 23 February 1930)\textsuperscript{103}

His make-up, that overlay of carmines and darker tones, is the most beautiful I have ever seen in a theatre…. The famous hands are curiously like those in Botticelli, Simone Martini and other painters of the 15th century…. incredible, trained in the convention and dance of the Chinese actor’s art.

– Stark Young (The New Republic 5 March 1930)\textsuperscript{104}

Pic. 6\textsuperscript{105}  Beautiful face and hand of Mei Lanfang

Mei Lanfang possesses amazingly expressive eyes and a mobile face that registers with the utmost sensitivity each passing emotion.

– John Mason Brown (The New York Evening Post 17 February 1930)\textsuperscript{106}

Mei was even more cordially received in art circles. He became friends with film celebrities, such as Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks. The academic world also showed great interest in his performances. Receptions or forums were held in Columbia University, Chicago University, San Francisco University and Hawaii University. The University of Southern California and Pomona College both conferred on him Honorary Doctorates of Literature.

Mei Lanfang’s influence continued to expand when he toured the USSR in 1935.

\begin{enumerate}
\item[102] Mei Shaowu, “Mei Lanfang as seen by his foreign audiences and critics”, in Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang, p. 57.
\item[103] Ibid., p. 53.
\item[104] Ibid.
\item[105] Private Album, p. 2.
\item[106] Mei Shaowu, “Mei Lanfang as seen by his foreign audiences and critics”, in Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang, p. 53.
\end{enumerate}
Stanislavsky, the great Russian master of the theatre, described Mei’s acting as “free movement guided by the laws of the art” – an insight much appreciated by Mei himself.\(^{107}\) Another master, Bertolt Brecht, then living in exile, saw Mei’s performance and subsequently mentioned this experience several times in his theoretical works. In an article entitled The Alienation Effect on the Chinese Stage (Verfremdungseffekte auf der Chinesischen Bühne), “he pointed out enthusiastically that what he had been groping for in vain for years had been raised to a very high artistic level by Mei Lanfang.”\(^{108}\) It is now generally believed that the Brechtian dramatic system shows the influence of Chinese Xiqu.

Today the Stanislavskian system, the Brechtian system and the Mei system are sometimes lauded as the three most important drama systems of the world, but it should be pointed out that “Mei system” is merely a term of convenience. It refers, in reality, not only to the accomplishment and artistic vision of a single person, but to the overall aesthetic conception engendered from a unique cultural and philosophical background; and to the entire performance system, which took hundreds of years to attain maturity. The greatness of Mei Lanfang, to be exact, lies in the fact that he brought all the features of this art form to perfection. His performance, therefore, reflected most splendidly and genuinely the true spirit of Chinese traditional art.

XVI. The Great Masters of Jingju

Mei Lanfang’s extraordinary contributions, together with the artistic contributions of many other masters in various types of roles, have greatly enriched and perfected the form of Jingju. Below is a table showing some of these other great masters and their respective roles.

An asterisk * signifies artists who were my teachers.

Artists with the symbol # will feature in the video extracts in chapter III.

The two artists with the symbol ^ are those with whom I had the privilege to perform.

\(^{107}\) Mei Shaowu, “Mei Lanfang as seen by his foreign audiences and critics”, in Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang, p. 62.

\(^{108}\) Huang Zuolin, “Mei Lanfang, Stanislavsky, and Brecht – a study in contrasts”, in Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang, p. 21.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of role</th>
<th>Name of artist</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Laosheng</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>老生</td>
<td>Yu Shuyang 余叔岩</td>
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<td>Zhou Xinfang 周信芳 #</td>
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<td>Ma Lianliang 马連良 #</td>
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<td>Li Shaochun 李少春 #</td>
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<td><strong>Qinyi and Huadan:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>青衣 / 花旦</td>
<td>Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋</td>
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<td>Xun Huisheng 荀慧生</td>
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<td>Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲</td>
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<td>Zhang Junqiu 張君秋</td>
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<td><strong>Wusheng</strong></td>
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<td>武生</td>
<td>Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓</td>
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<td>Li Huiliang 厲慧良 #</td>
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<td><strong>Jing</strong></td>
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<td>Jin Shaoshan 金少山</td>
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<td>Hao Shouchen 郝壽臣</td>
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<td>Qiu Shengrong 裘盛戎 #</td>
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<td>Yuan Shihai 袁世海 #^</td>
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<td><strong>Xiaosheng</strong></td>
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<td>小生</td>
<td>Cheng Jixian 程繼先</td>
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<td>Jiang Miaoxiang 姜妙香</td>
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<td>Ye Shenglan 葉盛蘭 #</td>
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<td>Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛 *#</td>
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<td><strong>Chou</strong></td>
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<td>丑</td>
<td>Xiao Changhua 蕭長華 #</td>
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<td>Zhang Chunhua 張春華 #</td>
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<td>Sun Zhengyang 孫正陽 #^</td>
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<td><strong>Wudan</strong></td>
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<td>Song Dezhu 宋德珠</td>
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<td>Li Jinhong 李金鴻</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Zhang Meijuan 張美娟 *#</td>
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Chapter II  The Tao of Chinese Aesthetics

In order to understand an art truly and thoroughly, one must look into the cultural and philosophical background from which it was generated. In this chapter, I will examine the fundamental principles of the ancient Chinese philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism. For I believe the evolution of Chinese traditional theatre, like the evolution of Chinese painting, poetry, the practice of Tai Chi, and traditional Chinese medicine, is deeply rooted in these perennial philosophies of life. It is a reflection of them. Only by finding out the connection between Xiqu and the unique Chinese perspective on the universe and life itself, can we discover the underlying aesthetic values and the real essence of this art form.

Before embarking on this interesting exploration, let us first consider the popular etymology of the word Xiqu.¹

The term Xiqu, 戲曲 (戲 could also be written as 戲) consists of two Chinese characters:

- 戯 xi — the right hand side, 戈, means a kind of ancient weapon; while 虛 on the left indicates “empty” or “not real”.

- 曲 qu — music and songs.

There is some speculation that in its earliest form the character xi referred to soldiers in combat. “Weapon” can be said to represent conflict or contradiction, which is after all one of the fundamental concepts of “theatre”, and thus the term Xiqu can be said to illustrate perfectly the nature of Chinese Classical Theatre: with music and singing, stories are told in an “empty”, “unreal” or symbolic way.

Perhaps the foremost quality that sets Chinese Classical Theatre apart, is that it never tries to create an illusion of life (as does Western theatre), or indeed any sort of “reality”. In this respect it is similar to Chinese painting: the faithful reproduction of the outer appearance (the form 象) of an object, however perfect a representation it might be, has never been the ultimate aim of Chinese painters. This non-realistic tendency is shared by all Chinese traditional art forms. What, then, is it that is being sought beyond the physical truth? What is genuinely considered extraordinary and sublime in the world of

¹ This etymology is not based on any actual ancient forms of the character.
Chinese art and literature? The answer to this question will be found, above all, in the classics of Taoism. In fact, the great Master Laozi 老子 can be viewed as the starting point of Chinese Aesthetics. The concepts first elucidated by Laozi, such as Tao 道, qi 氣, xiang 象, you 有, wu 無, shi 實, miao 妙, xujing 虛靜, ziran 自然 (these terms will be explained when they re-appear in the following passages), had an immeasurable impact on the formation of Chinese traditional aesthetics.2

I. What is Tao?

In the Daodejing 道德經, also known as the book of Laozi, the Tao 道 is described as follows:

There was something complete and nebulous
Which existed before Heaven and Earth,
Silent, invisible,
Unchanging, standing as One,
Unceasing, ever-revolving,
Able to be the Mother of the world.
I do not know its name and call it Tao…3

有物混成，先天地生。寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天下母。吾不知其名，字之曰“道”…（chapter 25）

That which you look at but cannot see
Is called the Invisible.
That which you listen to but cannot hear
Is called the Inaudible.
That which you grasp but cannot hold
Is called the unfathomable.

None of these three can be inquired after,
Hence they blend into one.

Above no light can make it lighter,
Beneath no darkness can make it darker.

Unceasingly it continues
But it is impossible to define.
Again it returns to nothingness.

Thus it is described as the form of the formless,
The image of the imageless.
Hence it is called the Evasive.\footnote{Based on Chang, Creativity, p. 31.}

視之不見名曰夷; 聽之不聞名曰希; 搏之不得名曰微。
此三者不可致詰，故混而為一。其上不皦，其下不昧。
繩繩不可名，復歸於無物。
是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂恍惚。 \hfill (chapter 14)

From the Tao, the One is created;
From the One, Two;
From the Two, Three;
From the Three, the Ten Thousand Things.\footnote{Based on Chang, Creativity, p. 56.}

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。 \hfill (chapter 42)

Here the “One” refers to the qi 氣; from the One is generated the Yin and the Yang (the Two); the interfusion of Yin and Yang creates a balance, a harmony (the Three) — it is through this process that all things are created.

According to the Chinese perspective on the universe, the Tao is the source of all things. It is life itself. The Tao is eternity: it has no beginning and no end; it is ever-existing and ever-lasting. It is difficult to define the Tao not only because it is “formless” and “imageless”, but also because there is nothing that is not the Tao. The Tao is All That Is, and All That Is Not. It comprises the visible and the invisible; the audible and the inaudible; the tangible and the intangible.
When we reflect life through literature and art, it should therefore be, and inevitably will be, a reflection of the Tao. However, in the words of Professor Ye Lang 葉朗 of Peking University:

Merely showing the “form” 象 is not a full reflection of the Tao, because “form” has limitations, while the Tao incorporates both “Being” (你有) and “Non-being” (無), with no name, no limitation, and no definition.”

但是單有“象”並不能充份體現“道”，因為“象”是有限的，而“道”不僅是“有”，而且是“無”(無名，無限性，無規定性)。

This so-called wu, or Non-being, or Tao, is only a figure of speech. It is opposed to everything that takes form. It has indeed not the slightest meaning of wu 無 in its literal sense (nothing, or not existing). On the contrary, this wu is all-inclusive and omnipresent; it gives birth to all Beings, you 有. In truth, wu is the greatest Being.

This explains to some extent why Chinese theatre and Chinese painting never really care to reproduce things in a realistic way, for this would confine the artist and the whole artistic process to a specific time and space (the issue of time and space shifting in Xiqu will be further discussed in detail). To manifest the Tao, especially its aspect of wu (the source of all creation; total freedom from all limitations), has always been of the highest value in Chinese Aesthetics, and the ultimate desire of all great artists.

Now the question is how to approach the Tao? Or how to be aware of the existence of wu, which seems so unfathomable?

Before going any further let us learn more about our universe and where we find ourselves in it by examining the very title of the early classic the I Ching (Yijing) 《易經》.

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There are three layers of meanings of the word yi, sometimes known as the Three Principles of yi “三易” 原则:

- The Principle of the Ever-Changing, bianyi 變易 — this applies to the realm of the Relative. In this dimension where time and space exist (as opposed to the realm of the Absolute where there is only Now and Here), everything is changing; no man, not one thing, not one situation is identical with what it was a nanosecond ago. Nothing here is unchanged and everlasting. The Buddhist calls it “Transiency” 無常. This is the dimension of physicality. This is where we are (physically).

- The Principle of the Unchanging, buyi 不易 — While everything is constantly moving and changing at an incredible speed, there is, however, one thing that is eternal and unchanging; and from this all things are engendered. This Principle applies to the realm of the Absolute. We may also call it the Tao, the One.

- The Principle of Simplicity and Ease, jianyi 簡易 — everything has its own reason to be. If we cannot explain a thing it is because the underlying reason is beyond our knowledge. Once we are able to embrace the Absolute Truth (the law of the universe), everything becomes simple and easy even though at first it appeared to be extremely intricate and inexplicable.  

So what we actually want to explore is this:

- Given where we are (a world of relativity), how do we get in touch with the Absolute realm, or the Tao, which sometimes seems not at all apparent?
- Through what means might we get to know not only conceptually but experientially that we are One with the universe, One with the Tao?

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7 See Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 (1918-2012), Miscellaneous Treatise on the I Ching 《易經雜說》(2006), pp. 4-6. See also the comments of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200) in I Ching with Annotation by Zheng Kangcheng 《周易鄭康成注》(1983 reprint), p. 25B: “易一名而含三義，變易一也，簡易二也，不易三也。”
II. The Way to the Tao

Let us read a parable written by the Taoist Master Zhuangzi:

The Yellow Emperor traveled to the north of the Red Water, ascended to the height of Mount Kunlun, and having looked towards the south, was returning home, when he lost his black pearl [implying the Tao]. He employed Mr. Clever to search for it, but he could not find it. He employed Mr. Clear-Sighted to search for it, but he could not find it. He employed Mr. Eloquent to search for it, but he could not find it. He then employed Mr. Nothing, who found it. At which the Yellow Emperor said: “How strange that it was Mr. Nothing who was able to find it!”

“Clever”, “Clear-Sighted” and “Eloquent” here are metaphors referring to reason, the human senses and language; whereas Xiangwan 象罔 (“Nothing”), a name coined by Zhuangzi, implies an indistinct and ineffable state of being. Xiang 象 literally means “form”; Wang 罔 means “no, without”; so the two-syllable expression Xiangwang implies “with no form”. If the meaning is extended a little it could also imply “with no expectation” or “with no anticipation of a specific outcome”. In other words, understanding the Tao has nothing to do with the mind, nor with the senses. “It is only by completely setting aside our rational intellect and excluding conscious supposition that it [the Tao] can be reached.”

A similar perception can be found in one of the best-known Buddhist scriptures, the Heart Sutra 《心經》.

Form is no different from emptiness (Sunyata) and emptiness is no different from form;

Emptiness is form, form is emptiness, …

All things are marked with emptiness;

Emptiness can be neither created nor annihilated;

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8 Adapted from the translation of Legge.
9 Chang, Creativity, p. 42.
It is neither impure nor pure; it neither increases nor decreases. Therefore, in emptiness there is no form nor reception, nor perception, nor impulse, nor consciousness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables or objects of mind; no sight-organ element, and so forth, until we come to: no mind-consciousness element…

色不異空，空不異色；色即是空，空即是色。…
是諸法空相，不生不滅，不垢不淨，不增不減。
是故空中無色，無受想行識；無眼耳鼻舌身意，無色聲香味觸法；
無眼界，乃至無意識界…

To my understanding, “emptiness” here is an expression interchangeable with the Tao. They both refer to the primordial source which creates all things, which includes both the physical and the metaphysical.

However involved and abstruse these Taoist and Buddhist passages appear, I believe they are in effect talking about the two seemingly contradictory and yet unified dimensions — the realm of the Absolute and the realm of the Relative, which we have been discussing earlier.

In the physical world (the realm of the Relative) that we live in, based on our empirical knowledge, we draw innumerable distinctions that make for a dualistic view of the universe: long and short, past and present, right and wrong, and countless others. Yet, in the very first chapter of the Daodejing Laozi said: “That which can be described and explained is not the unchanging and everlasting Tao.”11 “道可道非常道” Zhuangzi also stated: “Not to determine ‘this’ and ‘that’ is the very essence of the Tao.”12 “彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞。” (Chapter II) Language cannot but be relative (the moment you utter the word “good”, “bad” is implied; the moment you even think of “up” you simultaneously call forth the existence of “down”), and the Tao can never be found by means of this tool. That is why Zhuangzi sighed: “Where can I find a man who has

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10 Based on the translation of Edward Conze.
11 My translation.
12 Based on Chang, Creativity, p. 36.
forgotten words so I can have a word with him?”

(Chapter XXVI)

The six senses, or Six Roots 六根 in Buddhist terms (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) are also merely tools helping us to gain a cognition of our world. From the information collected by our eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, we put all the data concerning forms, sounds, smells, tastes and bodily sensations into the “computer”, which is our mind, and store them for future use. This Mind, based on the past data collected, will then form ideas and create new thoughts accordingly. Then again, given the dimension that we are in, everything we see, hear and feel is relative. The data gathered are all from a very limited perspective; our cognition and awareness can hardly go beyond the limitations of time and space. In a way, the more earthly knowledge is acquired, the farther we are from the Tao. All these thoughts and ideas which are constantly entered into and retrieved from our “computer” are indeed, in Buddhist terms, illusions 妄想. They have nothing to do with the Ultimate Truth, the Tao. Therefore Laozi said:

To gain knowledge is daily increase:
To attain Tao is daily loss.
One loses again and again, till one reaches Non-Action.
Once one arrives at Non-Action,
There is nothing of which one is incapable.  

為學日益，為道日損。損之又損，以至於無為。無為而無不為。
(chapter 48)

We now have a clearer picture as to why the Taoists and Buddhists keep on reminding us not to rely on the Mind, on language, and the human senses.

To lose 損 is to get rid of all worldly bondage, to step out from the illusions created by the ego-self (out of limited awareness) and to return to one’s true identity (to who we really are). The Taoist calls this ziran 自然 (Self-so-ness), and wuwei 無為 (Non-Action); the Buddhist calls it zixing 自性 (real-self), and foxing 佛性 (Buddha Nature).

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13 My translation.
14 My translation.
When Hui Neng 惠能, the Sixth Patriarch 六祖 of the Zen school of Buddhism 禪宗, attained enlightenment, he declared:

I did not expect that my real-self is by its nature complete and without need.
I did not expect that my real-self could generate all things.\(^{15}\)

何期自性本自具足。
何期自性能生萬法。 — 《六祖壇經·行由品第一》

In other (Laozi’s) words:

Once one arrives at Non-Action,
There is nothing of which one is incapable.

無為而無不為。

The term “Non-Action” 無為 needs some further explanation. “Non-Action” is sometimes mistakenly understood to mean “doing nothing”. It really points to a state of total ease and freedom, in which no intentional effort (again, coming from the mind) is needed.

There is another story told by Zhuangzi:

Qing, the wood engraver, carved a bell-stand. Everybody who saw it was stunned as if it were the work of the supernatural. The Duke of Lu asked him: “What kind of skills do you possess?” “I am but an ordinary artisan. How can I possess any extraordinary skills!” replied Qing. “There is one thing though: if I am about to work, I will not venture to waste any of my energy, and I feel the necessity to fast so as to quiet my mind. In so doing for three days, I will not think about any celebration, reward, rank, or emolument; in so doing for five days, I do not care about praise or criticism, fine skills or poor skills; at the end of seven days, I even forget all about myself — my four limbs and my whole person. By this time the thought of your Grace's court passes away, and I am in total concentration and free from any disturbance. Then I will go into the forest. I look at the natural shapes of the trees, and pick the one which already embodies the perfect form. It is as though a completed bell-stand emerges

\(^{15}\) My translation. See Hui Neng, Ding Fubao 鄭福寶 ed., The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch with Annotation, 《六祖壇經箋註》 (reprint 1979), p. 14A.
before my eyes. Then all I do is just give it a few touches. If I don’t find such a piece I just don’t do it. This is merging myself with Nature. And that is the reason why they all thought this work was done by the Divine.”

梓慶削木為鐻，鐻成，見者驚猶鬼神。魯侯見而問焉，曰：“子何術以為焉？”對曰：“臣工人，何術之有？然，有一焉。臣將為鐻，未嘗敢以耗氣也，必齋以靜心。齋三日，而不敢懷慶賞爵祿；齋五日，不敢懷非譽巧拙；齋七日，輒然忘吾有四枝形體也。當是時也，無公朝，其巧專而外骨消。然後入山林，觀天性，形軀至矣，然後成見鐻，然後加手焉；不然則已。則以天合天，器之所以疑神者，其是與!” — 〈達生〉

This parable talks about “fasting” in order to quiet the mind. This notion has more to do with a re-connecting with the Oneness of the Tao rather than the following of a certain vegetarian diet. Zhuangzi created a conversation between Confucius and his student, Yan Hui, to illustrate the real meaning of “fasting”.

Yan Hui said: “I can go no farther; please tell me the method.”
Confucius replied: “Fast, and I will tell you. …”
Hui said: “My family is poor. We have had no wine or meat for months already; — can this be regarded as fasting?” The reply was, “That is the fasting appropriate to sacrifice. It is not the fasting of the mind.” “May I enquire what that fasting of the mind is?” said Hui, and Confucius answered, “Concentrate. Don’t listen with your ears but listen with your mind; don’t listen with your mind but listen with your qi. Listening stops with the ears; the mind stops with what it can recognize. Only the qi is empty and totally receptive; that is where Tao is found. This emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”

顏回曰：“吾無以進矣，敢問其方。”仲尼曰：“齋，吾將語若!” …
顏回曰：“回之家貧，唯不飲酒、不茹葷者數月矣。如此，則可以為齋乎？”曰：“是祭祀之齋，非心齋也。”回曰：“敢問心齋。”仲尼曰：“若一志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心，無聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。” — 〈人間世〉

16 My translation. Cf. translation of Legge.
17 My translation, based on Wang Rongpei, Burton Watson and Legge.
Not to listen with the ears means to be free from the distraction of the senses and to transcend the outer appearances of things. “Don’t listen with the mind”, because the mind is constantly in the process of analyzing and verifying (recognizing) worldly data. To listen with the qi is to listen with the soul (the part of our being which is always aware of its unity with the universe), to go deep within. It is the only way to attain the Absolute Reality of the Tao. Through “loss” (“To attain Tao is daily loss”) we begin to enter the realm of emptiness and Non-Action 無為. “When a state of perfect quiescence is achieved all the signs of action of the outside world and one’s own will cease and every trace and mark of limitations and conditions will vanish. No thought will disturb. One becomes aware of a Heavenly radiance within.” 18 This is exactly what Qing the wood engraver achieved when he created his masterpiece. And this is the way to Tao; or if we wish, this is the way back Home to one’s real self.

III. The State of Oneness or “Heaven and Man as One” 天人合一 — the key to Chinese traditional aesthetics

1. Separation between subject and object vs “Heaven and Man as One”

In the beginning of this chapter we mentioned that in the fundamentally realistic tradition of Western art, a faithful reproduction of the outer appearance of any chosen object is of major concern. Conversely, Chinese painting and theatre choose to express things in a symbolic way, which means that the (“realistic”) physical truth is deliberately avoided. If we are to explore this issue in more depth, we will find that these two artistic main streams (realism and symbolism) are indeed rooted in two different thinking modes. These can be defined as: “Separation between Subject and Object” 主客二分 and “Heaven and Man as One” 天人合一.

In the Western perspective on life and art, there is generally a very clear distinction between the subject and the object, the self and the non-self. In Ye Lang’s words, “the I is separated from the Whole; the subject and the object are seen as two [independent and opposite] entities. The subject [the self] therefore tries to perceive and depict the

18 Chang, Creativity, pp. 48-49.
object (the object could also be the self) in an objective way.”19 (my italics) This method of observation results in creating an external and dualistic relation between the artist and the outer world, the creator and the created, which are characteristic of the realistic approach in Western art and theatre. Life-like paintings and sculptures, and the “Three Unities” of dramatic theatre are some of its manifestations. This thinking mode is primarily based on the desire to know the world (its structure, its order, and so on) through man’s rational nature and intellection.

All Chinese ancient philosophies, on the other hand, embrace the concept of “Heaven and Man as One”, where no separation is found between the inner world and the outer world.

He who knows his own nature, he knows Heaven.20 — Mengzi (chapter 13)

知其性，則知天矣。 —《孟子·盡心上》

Zhuangzi puts it differently:

The universe and I were born together, all things and I are One.21 (chapter II)

天地與我並生，而萬物與我為一。 —《齊物論》

Seng Can 僧煥, the third Patriarch of the Zen school, proclaimed:

All is one and one is all.

一即一切，一切即一。22

We will now go further to explore the concept of Oneness and see what it really means in a practical sense.

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20 My translation.
21 My translation.
2. Relation between the inner world and the outer world

a. There is no such thing as objective reality; we give life and meaning to the outer world.

There is a very famous statement of Liu Zongyuan’s 柳宗元, the great poet and man of letters of the Tang dynasty:

Beauty does not exist in itself; it takes shape in the eyes of the beholder.23

夫美不自美，因人而彰。

What he meant is that no beauty can exist independently as an isolated object, which has nothing to do with the beholder. Beauty can only be when “it is being ‘discovered’, ‘awakened’, or ‘lit up’.”24

People sometimes argue that, even before you look at it, a mountain is already a mountain. So is a flower, or a river, and so on. The existence of a thing does not depend on whether it is being noticed or not. They confuse the notion of wuse 物色 (an object in its purely physical sense) and that of yixiang 意象 (an image created through the interplay between the outer world and the inner world of the beholder). When the Chinese talk about “beauty”, it is always the beauty of yixiang 意象 that is referred to. This is a very crucial point in Chinese traditional aesthetics. A thing in its scientific and practical sense can very well exist on its own, but beauty does not lie therein. Beauty lies in the vivid and ever-changing yixiang 意象 created by the beholder, which is derived from a “subjective interfusion with the objective reality of things.”25

For a better understanding, let us look at some poems treating the same theme: the moon.

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24 My translation. Ye Lang, Foundations of Aesthetics, p. 44.
25 Chang, Creativity, p. 170.
When the moon’s at the tip of the willow,  
I know I’ll meet my lady there  
after dusk.\textsuperscript{26}

— Ouyang Xiu (The 15\textsuperscript{th} night of Lunar New Year)

月上柳梢頭，人約黃昏後。 — 歐陽修《生查子•元夕》

Before my bed shines the light of the moon.  
I wonder, is it frost upon the floor?  
I lift my head, and gaze at the bright moon.  
I lower my head, and long for home.\textsuperscript{27}

— Li Bai (Quiet Night Thoughts)

床前明月光，疑是地上霜。舉頭望明月，低頭思故郷。 — 李白《靜夜思》

I resent you for \textit{not} being like the moon  
seen from the tower by the river,  
For not following me everywhere,  
South, North, East, West –  
Everywhere;  
For not being with me always and never leaving me.

I resent you for being \textit{so like} the moon  
seen from the tower by the river,  
For waxing and waning,  
Waxing and waning.  
When will we two be together again?\textsuperscript{28}

— Lü Benzhong (1084-1145) (The Moon Seen from the Tower by the River)

恨君不似江樓月，南北東西，南北東西，只有相隨無別離。  
恨君卻似江樓月，暫滿還虧，暫滿還虧，待得團圓是幾時？ — 呂本中《採桑子•江樓月》

\textsuperscript{26} My translation. See \textit{Complete Lyrics of the Song Dynasty} \textit{全宋詞} (1965), vol. I, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{27} My translation. See the slightly different version in \textit{Complete Poems of the Tang Dynasty} \textit{全唐詩}, juan 165, p. 1709.
\textsuperscript{28} My translation. See \textit{Complete Lyrics of the Song Dynasty}, vol. II, p. 935.
With the same unchanged object / *wu* 物 or *wuse* 物色 (the moon), we have three entirely different sets of Image or *yixiang* 意象: Ouyang Xiu sees a happy moon as he anticipates a rendezvous with his beloved; Li Bai’s moon is cold and lonely and causes him to feel homesick (he is also probably rather drunk as usual!). The moon of Lü Benzhong is even more intriguing — within a short space of time, it represents two diametrically opposite feelings, following the change in the lover’s state of mind. These examples bring us the following insight: no object, no natural scene, no circumstance has any intrinsic meaning of its own. There is no such thing as an *objective* reality (a reality that is identical to or that brings out the same truth for any beholder). We are the ones who give life and meaning to the outer world.

b. **The outer world is the mirror of our mind** 心賴外物以顯現

The Patriarch Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 of the Zen school once said:

> Seeing any form is seeing the mind.
> The mind is not mind in itself; it exists through form.29

> 凡所見色，皆是見心。心不自心，因色故有。

An emotion remains on a conceptual level within the mind until it is fully experienced. The outer world serves as a vehicle to call it forth. In Chinese poetry or any other form of artistic creation, inspiration may seem to cause a certain emotion to flow within you. But in fact it is something *already inside you* which is being called forth. These feelings instantly project back onto the object. The resulting work of art, in turn, becomes the crystallization of the poet’s inner world.

> Withered vine,
> Ancient tree,
> Twilight crow;
> Little bridge,
> Running stream,

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Homestead.
Old road,
West wind,
Lean horse,
Sun setting in the west;
Broken-hearted man at the world’s end.30
— Ma Zhiyuan (Autumn Thoughts)

枯藤老樹昏鴉，小橋流水人家。
古道西風瘦馬，夕陽西下，斷腸人在天涯。 — 馬致遠《天淨沙·秋思》

This poem is like a Chinese painting. It consists of nothing more than a series of images. Together these images evoke a bleak and desolate autumn scene. Without a single explicit word of sadness or homesickness, the melancholy of a broken-hearted traveler is fully revealed.

The first line in the Chinese, “Withered vine, Ancient tree, Twilight crow”, depicts a sad and lifeless environment, which mirrors the poet’s mood. The next line, “Little bridge, Running stream, Homestead”, brings with it the human warmth of a home. However, it also reinforces the loneliness of the traveler, for he is still on an “Old road” with his “Lean horse” in the “West wind”. The sun is setting after travelling through the sky all day. But the poet is still “at the world’s end”. When will his time come to return home?

This is a perfect example to illustrate how the poet projects his feelings to colour external objects so that his inner world is simultaneously reflected. In Chinese Traditional Aesthetics, subject and object are always mutually identified in this way.

“That” comes from “this”, “this” is derived from “that”; “that” and “this” give rise to each other.31 — Zhuangzi (chapter II)

彼出於是，是亦因彼。彼是方生之說也。 — 《莊子·齊物論》

This is the very essence of “Heaven and Man as One” as applied to artistic creation and appreciation.

30 Adapted from the translation by Chang, Creativity, pp. 179-180.
So we can conclude as follows:

In Chinese Traditional Aesthetics, beauty is not perceived as something static, concrete and externally independent, something found outside of the self. Beauty lies in the image, or yixian 意象, which is created through spontaneous communication and interaction between the exterior world and the interior world of the beholder 情景交融. In other words, we manifest our inner life (情 — joy, sorrow, anger, melancholy), by allowing it to resonate and fuse with a certain aspect of the external world 景. Even as the outer world is given inner life, the inner world is at the same time illuminated objectively. The artist gives meaning to the object; the object beckons to the artist’s inner world. Beauty is a process of becoming. Poetry is about capturing the inner emotional truth of an instant.

IV. The Stage as Pavilion: an empty space

In traditional Chinese architecture, the “pavilion” 亭 is one of the most characteristic units. With a pointed roof, a few columns, and a completely empty space inside it, this architectural form is found on every mountain and in every designed garden 园林. The interesting thing, however, is that people do not come to a pavilion for its own aesthetic or artistic value. They do so because in this empty little space they can admire the surroundings in a quiet and leisurely manner. The special location and the structure of the pavilion (the columns, for example, serve somehow as a picture frame) provide endless possibilities for the contemplation of the wonder of Nature.

Looking up I can behold the greatness of the universe; looking down I see the abundance of all things. My eyes and spirit journey around with no limitations. It is an utmost pleasure to see and to hear. A true joy indeed.32

— Wang Xizhi (Preface to the Anthology of Lanting Pavilion)

仰觀宇宙之大，俯察品類之盛。所以遊目騁懷，足以極視聽之娛，信可樂也。

— 王義之《蘭亭集序》

32 My translation. See also Minford and Lau, Anthology, p. 480, for the translation by H. C. Chang, and for the Chinese text, the companion volume, p. 182.
Waterside veranda vies with flowery arbour;  
Autumn moon and spring breeze, each vaunts its charm.  
Only here in this pavilion empty of all things,  
Can I sit and contemplate the entirety of the Universe.33  

— Su Shi (Hanxu Pavilion)

水軒花榭兩爭妍, 秋月春風各自偏。  
惟有此亭無一物, 坐觀萬景得天全。  

— 蘇軾《涵虛亭》

The true value of a pavilion, therefore, is that it allows us to call forth and appreciate any chosen part of Nature. In other words, it brings the infinite into a finite place.34

In Chinese Classical Theatre the stage has exactly the same function as a pavilion. Instead of showing off its glamour and sophistication, that is, instead of having all sorts of realistic and extraordinary settings, it completely annuls its particularity as a stage. It is nothing but a bare space, “empty of all things”, from which anything can emerge, from which the entirety of the universe can be contemplated. Similarly, the basic props, “one table and two chairs” — 一桌兩椅 — as they are commonly referred to, have no specific meaning either. They can be literally table and chairs, or a bed, or a mountain, or any number of other things. In short, they are whatever the actors and audience say and think they are. This neutral and indefinite nature of the stage creates no restrictions or limitations whatsoever. On the contrary, its emptiness enables us to embrace every imaginable scene, to conjure up endless varieties of beauty. Changes in time and space are as free (and take place as swiftly) as the speed of our thoughts. The only difference is that the beauty of life and Nature is not placed directly in front of us (as it would be if we were looking out from a pavilion). It is made manifest through the performance of the actors and musicians. (This will be further illustrated in chapter III “Confucianism and Stylization”)

34 See Ye Lang, Bamboos in the Heart, p. 60.
Chapter III Confucianism and Stylization

The philosophical system which has had the most influence on Chinese society, is without a single doubt Confucianism.

If Taoism represents imagination and total freedom, Confucianism embodies the most down to earth attitude and possesses the means to deal with secular and practical issues.

It has been said that Confucianism is the “main body of Xiqu” while Taoism and Buddhism are “the two wings”.\(^1\) The content (the storyline) of Chinese Traditional Theatre is often a reflection of Confucian ethical principles, whereas the form of Xiqu (e.g. symbolic acting, freedom from time and space) comes from the Taoist and Buddhist perspective on life and the universe. Confucian thoughts are indeed to be found in most of the scripts of Xiqu, since Confucianism played the leading role in China ever since the Han dynasty, and its many teachings have come to shape the essence of the Chinese character and consciousness. This is widely recognized. But less widely recognized is the contribution of Confucian self-cultivation to the arts and artistic education in general, and its profound influence on the stylization 程式性 of Xiqu.

Later I wish to concentrate on this particular point and to give further illustrations of the major aspects of stylization with the help of audio-visual materials. It will, however, be helpful first to review briefly the historical background and the core of Confucian thought, as this may enable us to understand the issue at a deeper level.

During the time of Confucius (551-479 B.C.), in the final stage of the Spring and Autumn period 春秋 (770-476 B.C.), the central power of the Zhou dynasty fell steadily into decay as powerful regional rulers continued to fight for political and military hegemony by annexing the small states. Warfare intensified in the subsequent Warring States period 戰國 (475-221 B.C.), until the authoritarian Qin 秦 unified the entire country.\(^2\) These five centuries were a period of increasing chaos. People forgot about “love” and “righteousness” and were driven by self-interest; the observance of the

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\(^2\) The dates of the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period are based on *The Chart of Chinese Past Dynasties* 《中華歷代世系表》 (1987).
traditional value of propriety *li* 礼 was lost and the system of music *yue* 楽 collapsed 礼壞樂崩.\(^3\) This resulted in severe social disorder and a decline of civilization.

What, then, was the remedy for this decadence? According to Confucius, the only way to save the world is through the quality of *ren* 仁; and the only way to carry out *ren* is to revive the system of *li* 礼 and *yue* 楽.

Let us clarify these notions one by one.

**Ren** 仁 (translated in various ways, as benevolence, love, fellow-feeling, perfect virtue)

Fan Chi asked about *ren*. The Master replied: “It is to love men.”

樊遲問仁。子曰：“愛人。”

Yan Yuan asked about *ren*. The Master replied: “To subdue one's self and return to propriety (*li*), is *ren*. If we can all subdue ourselves and return to propriety, the whole world will return to *ren*. The practice of *ren* comes from a man himself; how could it come from others?”

Yan Yuan said, “I beg to ask for the details.”

The Master replied, “Behold not what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety.”\(^4\)

— *Analects* (chapter 12)

顔淵問仁。子曰：“克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。為仁由己，而由人乎哉？”

顏淵曰：“請問其目。”

子曰：“非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。”

— 《論語·顏淵》

\(^3\) This expression first occurred in the *Hanshu - Annals of Emperor Wu*《漢書·武帝紀》.

\(^4\) Adapted from the translation of Legge.
*Li* (propriety, rites, ritual)

*Li* is a ranking system and social order.

Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about the art of governing. Confucius replied, “When the ruler is a ruler, and the minister a minister; when the father is a father, and the son a son.”

— *Analects* (chapter 12)

齊景公問政於孔子。 "孔子對曰：君君，臣臣，父父，子子。"

— 《論語·顏淵》

In other words, there should be a very clear standard of conduct, a clear *definition of roles*, in every type of interpersonal relation. Hence, Confucius considered it of the utmost importance “to use the proper or appropriate name” “必也正名乎”.

Each category or name is supposed to possess certain qualities, to enjoy certain rights as well as to carry out certain specific duties and responsibilities.

If the name is inappropriate, one cannot speak well; if one cannot speak well, affairs cannot be accomplished. When affairs cannot be accomplished, propriety and music do not flourish. When propriety and music do not flourish, punishments will not be well judged. When punishments are not well judged, the people will not know how to move hand or foot.

— *Analects* (chapter 13)

名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。

— 《論語·子路》

When a person is clear about his position in the family and society, he will then have clear principles as to how to behave in all sorts of activities and ceremonies, as well as in different interpersonal relationships.

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5 Adapted from the translation of Legge.
6 Adapted from Legge.
**Yue 劇（music, often including poetry and dance)**

To ensure harmony and happiness in a hierarchical society, and to cultivate and educate people so that the quality of ren can be generated from within, the best method is through yue (music, which is the same character as “happiness”; both were anciently pronounced in a similar fashion nglok).⁷

Let me cite a few examples to illustrate how education through yue (music, poetry, and dance) was undertaken in Zhou times.

Regarding the education provided to the crown prince and the aristocracy, the subjects taught are to be arranged according to the seasons. Teach the Warrior Dance in Spring and Summer; the Civil Dance in Autumn and Winter.⁸

— *Book of Rites* (chapter 8)

凡學世子及學士，必時。春夏學干戈，秋冬學羽龠。

—《禮記·文王世子》

At the age of 13, study music, recite the Book of Songs and learn the Civil Dance Shuo. At 15, learn the Warrior Dance Xiang, study archery and charioteering. One begins to learn about li only when reaching the age of 20 after the adult capping ceremony; one can then wear fur and silk; one can dance the Great Dance Daxia.⁹

— *Book of Rites* (chapter 12)

十有三年，學樂，誦詩，舞勺。成童舞象，學射御。二十而冠，始學禮，可以衣裘帛，舞大夏。

—《禮記·內則》

It is clear that education through yue was a preparation for li and a cultivation of one’s inner qualities. It was very carefully designed. In this system of education “dance” played an extremely important role. A close connection was thus established between

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outer gestures and inner self-cultivation. Stylized body movements were in fact required of every educated man.

**Civil Dance and Warrior Dance** (The Concepts of *Wen* and *Wu*)

Now let us have a closer look at what was meant by the Civil Dance and the Warrior Dance.

There were Six Great Dances 六大舞 or 六樂 in the early Zhou dynasty. In each one praise was sung to a particular Ancestor and Ancient King:

- **Yunmen** 雲門 — Yellow Emperor 黃帝
- **Dazhang** 大章 — Yao 尧
- **Dashao** 大韶 — Shun 舜
- **Daxia** 大夏 — Yu 禹
- **Dahu** 大濩 — Emperor Tang of Shang 商湯
- **Dawu** 大武 — King Wu of Zhou 周武王

Among these six dances the *Dahu* and *Dawu* were placed under *Wuwu* 武舞 (Warrior Dance) as Emperor Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou conquered by war and power; the four other dances were considered to be *Wenwu* 文舞 (Civil Dance) as the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, and Yu came to rule by virtue of their ability and moral integrity.\(^\text{10}\)

Apart from the Six Great Dances, the Six Little Dances 六小舞 were also to be taught (usually to younger students). They were the Five-Silk-Stripe Dance 帯舞, the Plume Dance 羽舞, the Feather Dance 皇舞, the Ox Tail Dance 旄舞, the Shield and Halberd Dance 干舞, and the Human Dance 人舞 (without props).\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) Yuan He 袁和, *Dance and Traditional Culture* 《舞蹈與傳統文化》 (2011), pp. 48-49.

We can tell from the dance titles and the props being used that these dances were equally divided between the Civil and Warrior Dance categories.

The Civil Dance: the Plume Dance 羽舞
The dancer is holding long plumes in his right hand and a short flute yue 箫 in his left. Both props signified goodness and harmony.

Pic. 7

The Warrior Dance: the Shield and Halberd Dance 幹舞
The dancer is holding a shield in his left hand and a weapon in his right.

Pic. 8

As early as three thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Chinese people believed that a perfect man should possess both the qualities of wen 文 and wu 武.

Wen generally refers to qualities such as being decorous, composed, scholarly, graceful and gentle in manner; wu, on the other hand, relates often to dignity and majesty, power and grandeur, as well as the mastery of martial skills.

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12 Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 (1536-1610 or 1611?), Notation of the Six Little Dances 《六代小舞譜》 in Theory of Tone-system 《樂律全書》juan 37, 38, p. 400 (Qinding Siku quanshu《欽定四庫全書》reprint of 1987). Zhu Zaiyu was a descendent of Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, the founder of the Ming dynasty. His achievements covered many areas, including mathematics, the calendar, musicology, and dance. According to some authorities, he was the inventor of the Twelve-tone Equal Temperament.

To possess both the qualities of *wen* and *wu* is an achievement of one’s inner self-cultivation. But one should also be able to demonstrate these inner qualities through refined and stylized body movements. That was the point of learning different kinds of dance.

This basic concept of education in ancient times subsequently had a deep influence on the training of *Xiqu* artists. In Chinese Classical Theatre every type of role always has two sub-divisions: the *wen* and the *wu*. The highest compliment one can pay to an artist is to describe him or her as *Wen Wu Shuangquan* (excelling in both Civil and Warrior roles).

**Rhythm**

In the first, historical chapter of this thesis, we mentioned that music was indispensable in all sorts of Chinese ceremonies and activities. Even in archery competitions, “the shots will not count unless they are in time with the rhythm of the music.”\(^{14}\) In Zhou times, part of musical (*yue*) education consisted in learning to act according to a certain melody and rhythm. The feudal Lord was no exception.

> Teach [the Lord] to act ceremoniously in accordance with the music: to follow the tempo of *Sixia* [a poem in the *Book of Songs*] while walking; to follow the tempo of *Caiji* [also in the Book of Songs] while hastening forward. The same applies in charioteering. When turning around and taking a bow, follow the rhythm of the bell and the drum.\(^ {15}\)

— *Rites of the Zhou Dynasty* (chapter 3: 22)

> 教樂儀，行以肆夏，趨以采薺，車亦如之。環拜，以鐘鼓為節。

— 《周禮·春官·樂師》

Given the main purpose of *li* and *yue*, which was to create an orderly and harmonious society and environment, attaching great importance to “rhythm” could well be seen as a crystallization of this underlying intent. Not only can rhythm unify actions, it can even produce an inner joy while doing so, generating harmony and happiness within an

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\(^{14}\) See chapter I for this reference. See Yang Tianyu, *Rites and Ceremonies*, p. 208.

\(^{15}\) My translation. See Yang Tianyu, *Rites of the Zhou Dynasty*, p. 333.
orderly context. It is as Confucius put it: “To act and to give and receive pleasure from what you do is music.”

This admirable perception of the Chinese ancestors and its practice (always acting in accordance with rhythmic patterns) ultimately developed into one of the most distinguishing features of Xiqu: the utilization of percussive music throughout the whole performance. The percussion ensemble is essential to the very existence of Xiqu. The multi-functional and magical effects of percussive music will be demonstrated a little later.

Now we are going to illustrate, with some concrete examples, how this all becomes a part of the stylization of Kunqu and Jingju. If we consider that Taoism and Buddhism provided all the “Non-being” 無 aspects of Xiqu (such as the empty stage, the free shifting of time and space), we can now see how the influence of Confucianism actually gave this art its “body” or “substance” (in addition to its “content”), its “Being” 有.

**Different Aspects of Stylization**

Stylization 程式性 is ever-present on the Xiqu stage. Without it, nothing can be expressed — from make-up to costume; from the tiniest step, the slightest gesture of the hand, to the most breathtaking fighting scenes. We will however concentrate on two major aspects, which most directly influence the creation of character, and which indeed distinguish Xiqu from all other theatrical forms. They are:

**I. the different types of role**

**II. the utilization of percussive music**

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I. Types of Role  *Hangdang* 行當

The great esteem Confucius had for hierarchy and social structure is reflected in the categorization of characters in Chinese Classical Theatre into different role-types. Under each type there are further sub-divisions.

Any personage throughout the history of China, emperor, princess, general, scholar, outlaw, celestial being or beggar, can find a place in the *Hangdang* 行當 role system. This system is based on the following factors:

- gender, age, facial or bodily features (natural attributes)
- status, occupation, social rank (social attributes)
- character and temperament, special gifts, manner and bearing, moral standards (inner qualities)

In the following illustrations I will mainly discuss the *Hangdang* system of *Jingju*, while including one or two examples of *Kunqu* in certain categories. Although *Jingju* is a relatively “young” genre in Chinese Traditional Theatre, it has nevertheless absorbed all the merits of its predecessors and thus raised the *Hangdang* system to a new level. The features of each type of role (especially the development of different singing styles and techniques) are clearer and more prominent, and can therefore serve as better examples.

Here are the four major types of role in detail:

1. *Sheng* 生 (Male type)
2. *Dan* 旦 (Female type)
3. *Jing* 淨 (Painted Face)
4. *Chou* 丑 (Clown)

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In each type of role there are further sub-divisions, reflecting the distinction between the Wen (Civil) and the Wu (Warrior); between Old and Young.\textsuperscript{18}

Earlier we learned that in the Zhou dynasty inner qualities were demonstrated and cultivated through refined and stylized body movements. Now we can see how this evolved in Chinese Classical Theatre, and how generations of performers brought every possible means (including singing, recitation, acting, body movements, martial skills, make-up, costume) into play to achieve a successful characterization.

In the following I will first give the overall picture of each type of role, then go into a more detailed description with the help of video materials. All my examples are carefully selected. They are all played by great masters and renowned artists. My aim is to show not only the outer appearance and skill involved in each type of role, but how these extraordinary means could be utilized in the hands of a refined artist. That is, how the artist gives life to the character by adopting the concept and techniques of Hangdang.

1. **Sheng 生**

*Sheng* refers to Male characters. It can be further divided into:

1.1 *Laosheng* 老生 (old male characters)

1.2 *Xiaosheng* 小生 (young male characters)

1.3 *Wusheng* 武生 (warrior type)

1.1 **Laosheng** 老生

*Laosheng* refers to male characters in general, from middle-aged to elderly, mostly wearing beards.

\textsuperscript{18} However, not every single role-type subdivision in *Jingju* is included here. Some which are less important or too specific, such as *wawasheng* 娃娃生 (child’s role), *poladan* 潴辣旦 (open and straightforward female characters, skilled in martial arts, often using male movements) and *cishadan* 刺殺旦 (mainly referring to certain female characters who end up killing people or being killed), are deliberately omitted.
a) *Changgong Laosheng* 唱功老生 — old male characters specializing in singing

**Video 1:** *Wu Zixu* 伍子胥
Role: Wu Zixu 伍子胥
(played by Zhang Ke 张克)

This is a very famous item in the *changgong laosheng* repertoire. Wu Zixu’s father and brother were killed by the King of Chu. He escapes to the frontier only to find that his own portrait as the most wanted is posted all around. A kind hermit sympathizes with Zixu and hides him in his house. Seven days passed, Zixu still does not know how to get out of the Chu State. In a sleepless night, he sings out all his sorrow, frustrations and worries. Out of extreme anxiety, his hair and beard turn completely white the next day. This play requires the actor to have a beautiful and wide-ranging voice, clear articulation and sophisticated vocal techniques 字正腔圆. We also see in the extract that the colour of Wu Zixu’s beard changes from black, grey, to white.

**Video 2:** *Borrowing the East Wind* 《借東風》
Role: Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮
(played by Ma Lianliang 马连良)\(^{19}\)

This is a film made in 1949, featuring the *laosheng* master Ma Lianliang in his signature role, Zhu Geliang. Compared to the conventional *laosheng* singing style, Ma Lianliang’s style is more relaxed and elegant. He also exhibits the general characteristics of the singing type *laosheng*: composed and dignified, acting in an unhurried manner.

\(^{19}\) Ma Lianliang (1901-1966) was one of the most influential *laosheng* players of our time. His natural and elegant style paved a new way for *laosheng* singing and acting. Although born with a slight lisp, this seeming defect became a special charm in his singing and recitation. Ma Lianliang and Zhou Xinfang, another *laosheng* Maestro, were often mentioned together as *The Southern Qilin and The Northern Horse* 南麒北馬 (The surname “Ma” also means “horse” in Chinese; as for Qilin, see below.)
b) **Zuogong Laosheng 做功老生** — old male characters specializing in acting

In this type of role it is not required to have an impeccable voice. Emphasis will be put on intensely dramatic acting, recitation, and dance-like movements *Shenduan* 身段.

**Video 3: Xu Ce Hastening to the Palace 《徐策跑城》**

Role: Xu Ce 徐策

(played by Zhou Xinfang 周信芳) ²⁰

This performance is a masterpiece of Zhou Xinfang, the most extraordinary “acting laosheng” of the present era, who, as a matter of fact, broke the convention that a principal laosheng player must possess an impeccable voice. Zhou Xinfang’s style is extremely personal and difficult to imitate. All the intense and exaggerated body movements look perfect on him but may look pretentious or awkward on somebody else. Zhou not only opened up a new horizon for laosheng players, his art also became a rich source of inspiration for actors of other role-types. Great masters of Painted Face, such as Qiu Shengrong and Yuan Shihai, were deeply influenced by Zhou. (more about Qiu Shengrong and Yuan Shihai in the *jing* section)

The highlight of this excerpt is when Xu Ce, the old official, rushes to the Palace in order to plead with the emperor to redress the wrongs done to a family.

In this extract we can appreciate the sharpness of Zhou’s acting, as well as his rhythmic and flawless body movements, synchronizing perfectly with the music and the percussion. We can also see how skillful he is at using his beard and costume to reinforce the characterization (everything he wears, the beard, the long sleeves, seem to be a part of his own body). And yet in all his gestures he is never just showing off his skills, but rather, creating a most appropriate externalization of the character’s

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²⁰ Zhou (1895-1975) was also known as the Qilin Kid 麒麟童. When he performed at the age of seven, he was called the Qilin Tong 七齡童 (the Seven-year-old Kid). Some years later, in the posters his name was mistakenly written as Qilin Tong the Qilin or Unicorn Kid 麒麟童. Ever afterwards Zhou happily adopted it as his stage name. That is why when people refer to his art they call it the Qi Style instead of the Zhou Style. Zhou had six children with his second wife, a Western-educated celebrated Shanghai beauty 名媛 with whom he eloped before they were officially married. Their third daughter, Tsai Chin (her way of spelling her name Caiqin 周采芹), was the first Chinese student in the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. In the late 1950s, she was offered the title role of *The World of Suzie Wong* in the West End; she also played the title role in Henry Ong's one-woman drama, *Madame Mao's Memories*, and her best known work was the role of Auntie Lindo in the film *The Joy Luck Club*. Tsai Chin’s younger brother, Michael Chow, is the co-founder and owner of the Mr. Chow restaurant chain.
inner feelings.

This is a superb example of fine choreography and a proper use of techniques.

**Video 4**: *Black Dragon Residence*《烏龍院}
Role: Song Jiang 宋江
(played by Geng Tianyuan 耿天元)\(^{21}\)

Song Jiang has lost his letter from the leader of the Mount Liang 梁山 outlaws, which could bring him the death penalty if somebody found it and reported it. He tries very hard to recall what he did in the morning before leaving the house. When he is sure that the letter has been dropped outside and is now most probably in the hands of his mistress Yan Xijiao, he uses the technique of “water sleeves” 水袖 (long white sleeves extending from the costume) to show his feelings of panic.

c) **Wen-wu Laosheng** 文武老生 – old male characters excelling in both singing and martial skills

This is a very demanding type of role. A *wen-wu laosheng* mainly portrays generals or heroes of the “greenwood”.

**Video 5**: *A Fisherman Kills a Family*《打漁殺家}
Role: Xiao En 蕭恩
(played by Yu Kuizhi 于魁智)

The main character in Video 5 is one of the heroes of Mount Liang, who lives with his daughter in seclusion under the name of Xiao En. He is an expert in martial arts, and is strong and fit despite his old age.

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\(^{21}\) Geng Tianyuan is the stage director and actor of my company, the Jingkun Theatre. His father Geng Qingwu 耿慶武 was a famous teacher in the National School for Chinese Traditional Theatre. *Black Dragon Residence* is a play which he rearranged (from the traditional piece with the same title) and directed, and which won the Special Jury Prize at the 3rd Festival of Traditional Chinese Opera in Paris (2007); he himself won the Best Actor Award. *Black Dragon Residence* (the traditional version) was one of Zhou Xinfang’s representative works.

\(^{22}\) For the script of this play, see Arlington and Acton, pp. 101-117.
Video 6: Wild Boar Forest 《野猪林》
Role: Lin Chong 林沖
(played by Li Shaochun 李少春)²³

Lin Chong is one of the best-known characters in the novel Water Margin 水滸傳. He is an eminent military official, who takes charge of the training of the imperial troop 禁軍教頭. Being of high official rank, and married to a beautiful wife, he has an air of dignity and pride. Although in a wen-style costume (with long sleeves), his movements (his style of walking, the way he swings his “water sleeves” 抖袖, and manipulates the fan), as well as the use of eye expressions, show that he possesses wu inner qualities to the full.

Videos 7, 8: Wild Boar Forest 《野猪林》
Role: Lin Chong 林沖
(played by Li Shaochun 李少春)

Wild Boar Forest is one of the representative works of Li Shaochun. Today there is still no actor who can surpass him in terms of the overall characterization of Lin Chong in this particularly demanding repertoire. Master Li gives us here an ultimate example of the wen-wu laosheng. He has an excellent mastery in all aspects: singing, recitation, acting and martial skills. Lin Chong has no beard and his martial skills are by no means any easier than a regular wusheng type. And yet Lin Chong in Wild Boar Forest is still categorized as a wen-wu laosheng because it makes such high demands on the performer’s interpretive ability and singing skill.

²³ Li Shaochun (1919-1975) was an exceptional artist who indisputably reached the top of both the wen and the wu styles. Having never attended the Keban, Li received strict training at home from teachers engaged by his father, who was also a famous Jingju actor. Li had the honour to perform as the male principal with Mei Lanfang at the age of fifteen, and became a star in Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai before the age of twenty. Based on the version of wusheng Maestro Yang Xiaolou 杨小楼, Li created a new Wild Boar Forest as we see in the extracts, of which he was the script-writer (touched up by Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹, China’s renowned Jingju script-writer), the stage director, as well as the composer and choreographer for all that concerned the character of Lin Chong. Li Shaochun’s two sons are both actors specializing in laosheng role. The elder one resides in Beijing while the younger one resides in Taiwan.
d) Hongsheng 红生 — the role of Guan Yu 關羽

Video 9: The Defeat of Guan Yu 《走麥城》
Role: Guan Yu 關羽
(played by Li Yusheng 李玉聲)

Hongsheng (also known as hongjing 红淨, if played by a Painted Face actor) is a very special type. It refers specifically to the role of Guan Yu. It is so named because the actor’s face is painted all red (hong 紅). Guan Yu’s acting is unique. Contrary to all other characters, he seldom opens wide his eyes. He does so only in some of the “freeze” postures liangxiang 亮相; or when he is about to kill. However, this “rule” has been modified along with time and it is not as rigid as it used to be. The greatest difficulty in playing Guan Yu is to demonstrate aptly his inner and outer qualities, as every Chinese audience already has an image in mind as to how he should be or look like. The actor should maintain all the way a majestic, dignified and imposing bearing.

Guan Yu is considered as a half-God in Chinese culture. It has been recorded that “the actor who plays the role of Guan Yu and that of other deities is required to clean himself up.” Once he has put on the red face, the actor should stop talking and laughing, and other people backstage also have to treat the actor / character with respect. Guan Yu was praised as “the man with a beautiful beard” 美髯公. In order to increase the length, the weight, and the luminosity, Guan Yu’s beard is exceptionally made of human hair.

1.2. Xiaosheng 小生

Xiaosheng refers to young male characters. It is further divided into wen xiaosheng and wu xiaosheng.

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24 Born in the 1940s, Li Yusheng is one of the most distinguished wusheng artists of our time. His father, Li Hongchun 李洪春, was a great Master of hongsheng (who was reputed as the “living Guan Yu”). Today Li Yusheng’s interpretation of Guan Yu is also second to none.

25 Some include Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (the first Emperor of the Song dynasty) in this category as he also has a red painted face.

The xiaosheng is a leading role in Kunqu, whereas in Jingju, there are comparatively fewer items in which the xiaosheng features as the most important character. In the wen xiaosheng category, I will therefore exceptionally use examples taken from Kunqu, played respectively by Maestro Yu Zhenfei and his disciple Yue Meiti, as Yu’s style remains the supreme exponent of the wen xiaosheng. From their acting and bearing, one can see all the grace and qualities required by this role-type.

The singing and speaking voice of a xiaosheng is unusual, combining as it does the use of a man’s real voice and the falsetto of the dan role. Maestro Yu was most famous for his seamless transition from one to another.

a) Wen Xiaosheng 文小生

- Jinsheng 巾生 — gentle and cultivated young male character wearing a scholar hat

Video 10: Seen over the Wall from Horse-back
《牆頭馬上》27 (Kunqu)
Role: Pei Shaojun 裴少俊
(played by Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛)

The young scholar Pei Shaojun passes by the Lee Garden 李氏園 on horse-back. He is about to meet the most beautiful girl who happens to be just visible over the top of the wall. It is to be noted that in the film, Maestro Yu in fact has already descended from the horse and the lyrics have also been altered accordingly (“descend from my horse” instead of “on my horse back…”). In the stage version, Pei Shaojun is holding a horse-whip when he encounters the lady, while in the film Maestro Yu is holding a fan. I suppose it is because holding a horse-whip to represent riding on a horse is highly symbolic, which is however not fully compatible with the style of the film. That is the reason for the change.

27 This played is an adaptation of the Yuan zaju of the same title by Bai Pu 白朴.
Video 11: *The Jade Hairpin* (玉簪記) *(Kunqu)*

Role: Pan Bizheng 潘必正

(played by Yue Meiti 岳美缇)

This is from the scene “Playing the Qin to flirt”, which we have already mentioned in chapter I. Yue Meiti is a female disciple of Yu Zhenfei, and she is today’s foremost performer of the *Kunqu jinsheng* 巾生.

・*Shamaosheng* 紗帽生 — young male character wearing an official hat

Video 12: *A Miraculous Double Reunion* (奇雙會)

Role: Li Baotong 李保童

(played by Zhou Xuefeng 周雪峰)

When a scholar passes the Imperial Examination and becomes an official, he wears a different kind of costume and hat. He will then have a more dignified bearing.

・*Qiongsheng* 窮生 — a scholar who is (temporarily) down and out

The *qiongsheng* always wears a patched robe, which is ironically named *fuguiyi* 富貴衣 (fortune robe), implying that he will eventually become rich and successful. Although in distress, a *qiongsheng* always has a residual pride and the bearing of a scholar. Deep down, he thinks of himself as being a person out of the ordinary.

Video 13: *The Beggar’s Daughter Jin Yunu* (金玉奴) 28

Role: Mo Ji 莫稽

(played by Geng Tianyuan 耿天元)

This play is also called *Douzhi Ji* (豆汁記) or *Punish the Heartless* (棒打薄情郎). Mo Ji marries Jin Yunu who has saved his life. But once he passes the Imperial Examination and becomes an official, he tries to kill her because her identity as a beggar’s daughter may disgrace him... This piece was one of Yu Zhenfei’s representative items in his *Jingju* repertoire. The video extract features the performance by the Jingkun Theatre in 2009, in a version re-arranged by Geng Tianyuan.

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28 This play is also called *Douzhi Ji* (豆汁記) or *Punish the Heartless* (棒打薄情郎). Mo Ji marries Jin Yunu who has saved his life. But once he passes the Imperial Examination and becomes an official, he tries to kill her because her identity as a beggar’s daughter may disgrace him... This piece was one of Yu Zhenfei’s representative items in his *Jingju* repertoire. The video extract features the performance by the Jingkun Theatre in 2009, in a version re-arranged by Geng Tianyuan.
Mo Ji has fainted from coldness and hunger outside the house of Jin Yunu. Jin asked him to come inside and feeds him some kind of porridge 豆汁. The way Mo Ji eats the porridge shows that he has been starving for days.

b) Wu Xiaosheng 武小生

The wu xiaosheng is also known as zhiweisheng 稚尾生 because he sometimes wears a pair of pheasant plumes on his headdress.

This type of role usually depicts a young general or a young man with heroic bearing.

The actor should not only meet the requirements of the xiaosheng role but should also possess a certain standard of martial skills.

Videos 14, 15: The Gathering of Heroes

Role: Zhou Yu 周瑜

(played by Ye Shenglan 葉盛蘭)

“Laughing” is a technique frequently used by xiaosheng. This video extract shows three dimensions of laughter (three different tonalities):

Text:

Zhou Yu: Oh! Jiang Gan 蔣幹 is crossing the river?

Voice: Yes.

Zhou Yu:(first laughter) Haha, (this is a good chance)

(second) Haha, (an idea pops up in his mind)

(third) Ah.. Hahaha….(imagines with delight the outcome of his plan)

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29 This is a film made in 1957. It gathered together the most eminent performers of the time: Ma Lianliang as Zhuge Liang, Ye Shenglan as Zhou Yu, Yuan Shihai as Cao Cao, Qiu Shengrong as Huang Gai, Xiao Zhanghua as Jiang Gan, Tan Fuying (grandson of Tan Xinpei) as Lu Su (the artists will be mentioned again in the following texts). It has been said that the film itself was genuinely a Gathering of Heroes, both on stage and off stage. This film was directed by my cousin, Cen Fan 岑範.

30 Ye Shenglan was the son of Ye Chunshan, the person in charge of the most renowned traditional Jingju training school - the Fuliancheng Keban (more about Ye Chunshang and the Fuliancheng Keban in chapter IV). He studied under Cheng Jixian 程繼先, who was also the Jingju Teacher of Yu Zhenfei. Ye Shenglan was the leading figure of the xiaosheng role-type, and was exceptionally good at playing the roles with heroic bearing, such as Zhou Yu.
The Sword Dance of Zhou Yu is sometimes included in this play (see video 15). It is included only when Zhou Yu is played by an actor who possesses appropriate martial skills, and he must also be a renowned artist, or else the audience will feel that its time is being wasted.

1.3 Wusheng 武生

Wusheng refers to all warrior type male characters.

a) Duanda Wusheng 短打武生 — wusheng wearing short clothes

Video 16: Shi Xiu Investigates the Village 《石秀探莊》
Role: Shi Xiu 石秀
(played by Zhou Long 周龍)

Video 17: The Crossroads 《三岔口》
Role: Ren Tanghui 任堂惠
(played by Zhang Yunxi 張雲溪)

Both characters in these two plays possess great prowess. Shi Xiu is an outlaw hero 綠林英雄 while Ren Tanghui is a frontier general. This type of role requires neatness and agility in all actions, as well as excellent waist and leg skills.

b) Changkao Wusheng 長靠武生 — wusheng wearing armour

Video 18: Overturning the Chariots 《挑滑車》
Role: Gao Chong 高寵
(played by Yu Dalu 俞大陸)
The kao 靠 (the costume that the actor is wearing), together with the kaoqi 靠旗 (the four flags or pennants attached to his back), represent armour. This heavy costume, however, should never become a burden to a changkao wusheng; but rather, should serve as a tool to reinforce his majestic quality and heroism. For example, for a skillful changkao wusheng a speedy turn is enhanced by the four flags.

**Video 19 : Overturning the Chariots 《挑滑車》**

Role: Gao Chong 高寵  
(played by Gao Mukun 高牧坤)

In this example, we see a typical and fabulously impressive cadenza passage of a changkao wusheng. It requires great physical strength, precision, and speed. When turning around 轉身 he must do so in a way that his weapon will not hit the flags; and when he does the twisting turn 翻身 (towards the end of the cadenza), we can see once again that the turn is enhanced by the four flags.

2. **Dan 旦**

*Dan* refers to all Female characters. It can be further divided into:

2.1 *Qingyi* 青衣 (decorous, mature female characters)

2.2 *Huadan* 花旦 (lively and vivacious young girls; or shrewd and dissolute female characters)

2.3 *Guimendan* 閨門旦 (literally, lady in the boudoir)

2.4 *Daomadan* 刀馬旦 (female warriors with long weapons and a horse)

2.5 *Wudan* 武旦 (female warriors)

2.6 *Laodan* 老旦 (old female characters)

2.7 *Caidan* 彩旦 (comic, humorous female characters)
2.1 *Qingyi* 青衣 — young or middle aged woman of rather mature and dignified character

In the traditional repertoire, many of the female roles who are either poor, or miserable, would wear a long black dress (*qingyi* 青衣). This kind of role usually puts the stress on singing. Later *qingyi* became a technical term for a female role-type excelling in singing and *yunbai* 韻白. 31

**Video 20: Beauty Defies Tyranny**

Role: Zhao Yanrong 趙艷容
(played by Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳)

This is one of the representative works of Mei Lanfang. It is about “a sycophant court minister’s beautiful daughter who feigns insanity to avoid falling into the hands of the emperor.” 32

In this extract we can hear the Maestro’s exquisite recitation: the *yunbai*. One may also pay attention to his “famous hands which are curiously like those in Botticelli, Simone Martini and other painters of the 15th century…” (see chapter I)

**Video 21: Scholar as Matchmaker**

Role: Princess Chai 柴郡主
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

*Scholar as Matchmaker* illustrates the style of the *qingyi* genius Zhang Junqiu 張君秋 (1920-1997). Zhang was once disciple of Wang Yaoqing and Mei Lanfang. He later developed his own style, which was considered to be the milestone of *qingyi* singing, both in terms of vocal technique and aria composition (Zhang personally composed all his arias). Some have praised Zhang’s singing as the coloratura of Peking Opera.

In this extract Princess Cha sings of her deep love for Yang Liulang.

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31 See chapter I for this term.
2.2 Huadan 花旦 — lively and vivacious young girl / shrewd and dissolute woman

The huadan must act in a compelling and captivating manner. This type of role usually expresses itself through extensive recitation in jingbai 京白. Compared to the qingyi, the huadan’s singing is probably less powerful (not as demanding in terms of volume) but more agile.

Video 22: The Story of The Iron Bow《鐵弓緣》
Role: Chen Xiuying 陳秀英
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

This is an illustration of the huadan’s (young girl) acting and recitation. The young lady Chen Xiuying rarely sees a decent person coming to the teahouse. She is now trying every trick to have her mother go away so that she can spend some time with the young man.

Video 23: The Cuiping Mountain《翠屛山》
Role: Pan Qiaoyun 潘巧雲
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

This extract illustrates another aspect of huadan: wicked, shrewd and dissolute. The character Pan Qiaoyun, one of the three female characters being killed in the novel Water Margin (the other two are Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮 and Yan Xijiao 閻惜姣), is often played by highly mature artists with a certain degree of fame, for people want to see how the actress portrays the character much more than they want to see the play itself. This type of role is unlikely to be taught in a Xiqu school, as it is more like a kind of free acting without many pre-arranged movements. Another point to mark is that, in this case, the actress is wearing a type of shoe imitating bound feet. The technical term is

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33 Peking dialect: this is the same as Putonghua but with more colloquial expressions and a stronger local accent. See also chapter I.
34 The Story of the Iron Bow was the play with which I won the Plum Blossom Award in 1991. It is a very challenging repertoire piece for the principal actress because she first acts as a huadan, then as a wu xiaosheng (as she disguises herself as a young man to find her husband), and finally, as a wusheng wearing armour kao (as she takes command in a mountain lair and fights the enemies).
For the performer, it is like being on demi-point throughout the whole performance. Some techniques of caiqiao are shown in this extract.

2.3 Guimendan — beautiful young lady in the boudoir

Video 24: *Union in the Shades* from *The Peony Pavilion* 《牡丹亭·幽媾》

Role: Du Liniang 杜麗娘

(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

The guimendan in Jingju is in fact regarded as a sub-division of the huadan category. It refers to young pretty girls from a humble family 小家碧玉. I would however like to single it out and use a Kunqu example instead because I consider this role-type (in Kunqu) to have embraced all the qualities necessary for portraying an ancient Chinese beauty. A guimendan is literally “an unmarried lady in her boudoir”. As opposed to Jingju, this role-type in Kunqu depicts beautiful, talented and well educated young ladies 大家闔秀, such as Du Liniang 杜麗娘 of *The Peony Pavilion*, Chen Miaochang 陳妙常 of *The Jade Hairpin*. As a matter of fact, the guimendan in Kunqu also includes other appealing female characters (who are no longer in the “boudoir”), such as Lady Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 of *Palace of Eternal Life*, and the famous courtesans Li Xiangjun 李香君 of *The Peach Blossom Fan*.

The guimendan always has graceful and elaborated body movements, which are most often executed together with the singing.

In this extract, we can have a glimpse of the overall bearing and allure of the guimendan. Du Liniang comes to meet the scholar and “to fulfill the dream she once dreamed.” 35

The long pink turban indicates that she is now a ghost.

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2.4 Daomadan 刀馬旦

Video 25 : Muke Mountain Lair 《穆柯寨》
Role : Mu Guiying 穆桂英
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

The daomadan mostly portrays a heroine, such as a female general, or a leader of a mountain lair 山寨. This type of role requires the actress to be an all round artist (singing, recitation and martial skills), with a good command of kao gong 靠功 (the techniques required when wearing armour, kao) and bazi-gong 把子功 (skills in using weapons – there will be more description of this in chapter IV, and a full discussion of the play in chapter V).

This extract illustrates specially the skill of yuanchang gong 圓場功 when wearing the kao – the four flags have to remain as motionless as possible when the actor moves forward 跑 圓場.

2.5 Wudan 武旦

The wudan portrays characters with great prowess, quite often legendary figures. In addition to all the requirements of the wu division, “Kicking Spears” dachushou 打出手 is an exclusive skill of this type of role (involving the throwing, catching and kicking of weapons).

The following examples are from The Fire Phoenix, a creation of my teacher Zhang Meijuan.

Video 26, 27, 28 : The Fire Phoenix 《火鳳凰》
Role : White Egret 白鷺
(played by Zhang Meijuan 張美娟)

Zhang Meijuan (1929-1995) belonged to the first generation of female wudan players, and was undoubtedly the most outstanding. Zhang involved herself extensively in artistic creation. Most of the items rearranged or created by her became part of the wudan compulsory repertoire. Her extraordinary enhancement of the art and her
In Video 26, we see Zhang’s magnificent manipulation of her two spears;

In Video 27, A dangzi 襲子 (a fighting scene which involves three or more people) which ends with a few examples of “Kicking Spears”;

In Video 28, we see a section of the “Kicking Spears”, which illustrates the seamless collaboration between White Egret and the other actors on stage. It also illustrates Zhang’s exceptional speed and precision.

**Video 29 : The Story of The Iron Bow**

《鐵弓緣》
Role : Chen Xiuying 陳秀英
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)

This play was mentioned earlier in the huadan section. As stated in footnote 34, Chen Xiuying now disguises herself as a young man and wears the full armour kao. In this final part of the play, I incorporated the technique of kaoqi chushou 靠旗出手. Together with my teacher Zhang Meijuan, we created an extremely difficult set of movements, in which the spear makes a turn and bounces off the left kaoqi, then bounces to the right kaoqi and makes another turn, and finally with a twisted back kick 拐踢, it is returned to the sender.

techniques (such as the elaboration of the technique of dachushou) paved the way for the younger generations of this role-type. In the 1950s, when Zhang was only in her 20s, she was hand-picked by Premier Zhou Enlai for many cultural visits overseas (other artists such as Yu Zhenfei, Zhou Xinfang, Li Shaochun and Yuan Shihai also took part in these visits). It was recorded that, in nearly 300 performances abroad, there was not one single mistake 失手 in the most challenging scene of dachushou. During the Cultural Revolution, even Jiang Qing was amazed at Zhang’s artistry and perfection in body movements. She wanted her to train potential performers for “the revolutionary modern play” 革命現代戲. Under this intense political pressure, Zhang became the Head of the training class, which was historically known as “The fifth of July Jingju Training Class” 五七京劇訓練班. The difficulty of the job was described by Zhang when she later became my teacher, in the following words: “You have to pass on the art and the skills without showing the tiniest trace of the tradition...” And the irony was that this mission could only be accomplished by someone who possessed the most profound and thorough knowledge of the tradition.
2.6 *Laodan* 老旦 — old female characters

**Video 30**: *Li Kui Visits His Mother*《李逵探母》

Role: Mother Li 李母
(played by Zhao Baoxiu 趙葆秀)

**Video 31**: *Women Warriors of the Yang Family*《楊門女將》

Role: She Taijun 佘太君
(played by Wang Jinghua 王晶華)

The *laodan* usually lays stress on singing and recitation. The first example portrays a blind old lady living in poverty, while the second is the famous She Taijun, who takes command of the troops at the age of one hundred. The former is weak and doddering, and the latter is full of confidence and vitality.

2.7 *Caidan* 彩旦 — comic, humorous female characters

**Video 32**: *Picking up A Jade Bracelet*《拾玉鐲》

Role: Matchmaker Liu 劉媒婆
(played by Sun Zhengyang 孫正陽)

This type of role depicts a humorous elderly woman, well experienced in life, who can see right through a young girl’s mind. The *caidan* is often played by actors specializing in the *chou* role-type 丑行.

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37 This is a film made in 1960. All the characters were played by outstanding young artists, who were graduates from the National School for Chinese Traditional Theatre 中国戲曲學校. The actress Wang Jinghua, in the role of the hundred-year-old She Taijun, was then only 21 years old.
3. Jing 淨

Also known as hualian 花臉 (Painted Face). Its unique and extremely imaginative make-up style 臉譜 often serves as the icon of Jingju.

Jing refers to a special type of Male character, straightforward, unsophisticated, and uninhibited. Actors of the jing type are required to have a round, rich and powerful voice; a robust and heavily-built appearance. Although not every jing actor is born tall and big, the make-up and the costume (including special under-costume to broaden and heighten the shoulders), together with the acting and exaggerated movements, can always create the illusion of a strong and sturdy man.

The jing type further divides into:

3.1 Tongchui Hualian 銅錘花臉 (Bronze Hammer Painted Face)

3.2 Jiazi Hualian 架子花臉 (Posture Painted Face)

3.3 Wu Hualian 武花臉 (Martial Painted Face)

3.1 Tongchui Hualian 銅錘花臉 (Bronze Hammer Painted Face) — this type of role specializes in singing

Video 33 : Defending the Nation 《大保國》

Role : Xu Yanzhao 徐延昭
(played by Meng Guanglu 孟廣祿)

The character Xu Yanzhao is an elderly high-ranking official. Marked by his loyalty and righteousness, he had a bronze hammer (representing power and authority) bestowed on him by the previous emperor.

This role requires a beautiful voice and excellent singing technique. Xu Yanzhao holds the bronze hammer (tongchui) throughout and sings during the whole performance, and tongchui hualian 銅錘花臉 (Bronze Hammer Painted Face) has later become a formal
term, referring to the *wen* type of painted face who specializes in singing. The make-up shows the features of an old man: the drooping of the lines of the eye and the absence of any clear shape in the eyebrows (other than two round dots).

**Video 34: Judge Bao Executes the Emperor’s Son-in-law 《鍘美案》**

Role: Judge Bao Zheng 包拯
(played by Qiu Shengrong 裘盛戎)\(^{38}\)

This is a film made in 1964, with the iconic figure of *tongchui hualian*, Qiu Shengrong, playing the role of Bao Zheng.

Bao Zheng is the symbol of justice, who stands by his principles and never yields to pressure from powerful people; who will always right wrongs for the people. Bao Zheng was a true historical figure of the Northern Song dynasty. He was so deeply loved that he became a legend. It is said that he was a reincarnation of a star, the *wenquxing* 文曲星. On stage, the major colour of his face make-up design is black, representing the qualities of “justice and sternness”. The “moon” on his forehead symbolizes his special power to try cases in the Nether World. During the daytime he judges in the human Yang world; at night he judges in the Yin underworld 日斷陽 夜斷陰. There are quite a large number of Bao Zheng plays 包公戲 in the repertoire and many wonderful arias created for this character. In fact, the term *heitou* 黑頭 (Black Head – referring to the make-up) is another synonym of the role-type, *wen* (Civil) *jing*.

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\(^{38}\) Qiu Shengrong was the symbol of the Bronze Hammer Painted Face. He was the very first actor who gave me a thrill with his *jingju* singing. While the old singing style paid most attention to the power of the voice, Qiu created a new path by laying stress on expressiveness and rhythmic control. The exceptional roundness and resonance of his voice, together with his creative and exquisite interpretation, made him the iconic figure of this role-type. Although he was once criticized as being a “sissy” Painted Face 妹妹花臉, his style soon swept all over the country. There is a saying among *jingju* performers and aficionados: “Nine out of ten Painted Face actors follow the Qiu style” 十淨九裘.
**Video 35 : Executing Xiongxin 《斬雄信》 or 《鎖五龍》**

Role : Shan Xiongxin 單雄信
(played by Meng Guanglu 孟廣祿)

This character is a general of the period between the Sui and the Tang. Captured and on his way to the execution ground, he shows an extreme boldness and courage in the face of death. The red beard and blue (or green) face are usually worn by characters of a firm, unyielding and explosive personality.

**3.2 Jiazi Hualian 架子花臉 (Posture Painted Face)**

— this type of role puts particular emphasis on acting, body movements and recitation. The singing is relatively less demanding.

*(Jiazi 架子 refers to gongjia 功架 — stylized, including dance-like, body movements)*

**Video 36 : Wild Boar Forest 《野豬林》**

Role : Lu Zhishen 魯智深
(played by Yuan Shihai 袁世海)

Lu Zhishen is the famous monk in the novel *Water Margin*, who is extremely blunt and direct, loyal to friends and outraged whenever injustice is done to someone. He kills the butcher nicknamed Zhen Guanxi with three punches “三拳打死‘鎮關西’” for his unfair treatment of a young girl and her father. In order to flee the court’s pursuit Lu becomes a monk, who nonetheless does not abstain from drinking, eating meat, and killing villains. Lu Zhishen’s eyebrows imitate the shape of a mantis, signifying boldness and a constant willingness to fight. The circle in the middle of his forehead is called the Light of Buddha 佛光, indicating his wisdom (also conveying the fact that Lu is a monk).

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39 The finest Posture Painted Face of our time. There is a lot more about Yuan in chapter IV.
Video 37 : *Wild Boar Forest* 《野豬林》

Role : Lu Zhishen 魯智深
(played by Yuan Shihai 袁世海)

Lin Chong 林沖
(played by Li Shaochun 李少春)

In video 37, I deliberately include Lin Chong because the characteristics of the Posture Painted Face will then become even more prominent. The is an outstanding performance by Li Shaochun and Yuan Shihai, who, by using the techniques of their own role-type, portrayed the characters of Lin Chong and Lu Zhishen just as described in the novel.

Lin Chong and Lu Zhishen, both have heard about each other and admire each other for a long time. When they finally meet by chance, they express with great delight their admiration for the other. From their way of talking, their facial / eye expressions and body language, the differences between these two roles / characters are very clearly demonstrated. Lin Chong (the wen-wu laosheng) is handsome and dignified, always having the bearing of an eminent military official; while Lu Zhishen (Posture Painted Face) is most straight forward and unconstrained, a complete free soul.

Video 38 : *The Gathering of Heroes* 《群英會》

Role : Cao Cao 曹操
(played by Yuan Shihai 袁世海)

Cao Cao was a historical figure, a politician, military strategist and poet. However, as a result of the indelible influence of the novel *The Three Kingdoms* 三國演義, Cao Cao appears on stage as a crooked, treacherous and suspicious character. His face make-up is less exaggerated, with only the facial lines marked out. According to traditional physiognomy, the two deep facial lines coming down from either corner of the nose法令紋 denote power and high position. The knitted brows portray a person who is forever scheming against somebody else. The whole white face most often represents a
treacherous court official. The opaque effect, which is obtained by putting on powder (in cake form) mixed with water 水粉, is different from all other painted faces which use oily make-up 油彩 which creates a shiny effect under the light.

Cao Cao is given a letter, which was stolen by his counselor, Jiang Gan, during his visit to Zhou Yu. This letter is written by Cao Cao’s two most crucial marine generals, who express their intent of surrender to the East Kingdom of Wu 東吳. Outraged by their treason, Cao Cao orders them to be executed. All of a sudden, Cao Cao realizes that this must be a set-up, but by then he already lost his right-hand men.

3.3 Wu Hualian 武花臉 (Martial Painted Face) — mainly specializing in martial skills

Video 39: White Water Beach 《白水瀾》
Role: Green-faced Tiger 青面虎 (played by Wu Yueze 吳越澤)

This type of role solely specializes in fighting and tumbling 摔跌, usually in a supporting role. Often he is at first rather impressive, but in the end defeated.

Video 40: The Capture of Gao Deng 《拿高登》 or 《艷陽樓》
Role: Gao Deng 高登 (played by Li Huiliang 厲慧良)

This example is from an exceptional item in the repertoire. Not only is the wu hualian a leading role, it requires the actor to be an all-round artist who excels in martial skills,

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40 An arrogant and yet true Maestro of the wusheng type, Li Huiliang regarded nobody as his equal except Li Shaochun. Li Huiliang was put in jail for more than 14 years (from 1964-1979). In order to keep his body in shape, he requested to do heavy labour work. “As I do my job, I deliberately turned my manual labour into an artistic practice, something dance-like!” “我幹活，有意識地‘前弓後箭’，我把勞動藝術化，舞蹈化了！” See Wei Zichen 魏子晨 and Li Chang 厲暢, Biography of Li Huiliang 厲慧良傳 (1997), p. 157.
acting and stylized movements. This is an extremely challenging piece. It is sometimes played by actors specializing in wusheng type of role (as in this case).

Gao Deng is a playboy and a bully. The flower (behind the character’s left ear) is usually worn by “River and Lake” heroes or anti-heroes 江湖豪傑, who are played by the Painted Face type (if the role is played by a wusheng type, the flower will then be replaced by a fluffy ball). The huge fan goes with the entire image and reinforces the character’s tyrannous manner.

**Video 41 : The Capture of Gao Deng 《拿高登》**

Role : Gao Deng 高登
(played by Li Huiliang 厉慧良)

Gao Deng is holding a horse-whip, signifying that he is riding a horse. The whole set of movements illustrates, on the one hand, the domineering air of the character; and on the other hand, the actor’s absolute mastery of the skills, as well as his clear but hidden “cues” to the percussive ensemble. Through the speed, the pause, and the intensity of his movements, the actor is asking from the ensemble different degrees of musical dynamic, volume and tempo. In the connoisseur’s eyes, Maestro Li is making full use of the percussive ensemble to highlight his skill and the personality of the character.

**Video 42 : The Capture of Gao Deng 《拿高登》**

Role : Gao Deng 高登
(played by Li Huiliang 厉慧良)

Gao Deng is drunk after capturing a young woman on the street and ready to have a good time. There is a fight with the people who try to rescue the girl. The emphasis is on yunwei 韻味 (subtle expression of mood and character) and gongjia 功架 (stylized movements) rather than on speed. When Gao Deng exits the scene, Maestro Li Huiliang demonstrates perfectly the extreme arrogance of a drunk despot.
4. Chou 丑

The chou, usually marked by a dab of white on the face, depicts either a person of ugly appearance, or someone from a lower class, or a character full of wit and humour, or a contemptible and mean individual. The chou is the major element adding the comic effect in a piece. It is further divided into wen and wu.

4.1 Wen Chou — this role places particular stress on humorous acting, as well as clear and fluent recitation.

The wen chou sings in a funny way (if he sings at all), sometimes deliberately out of tune. The wen chou has quite a number of sub-divisions:

a) Chayi Chou 茶衣丑 — chou wearing tea clothes

Tea clothes refers to short clothes worn by the working class, which include an upper robe, trousers, and most often an additional small apron.

The chayi chou portrays a person from the grassroots, such as a tea-house waiter, a woodcutter, and so on.

Video 43: Street Parade《遊街》

Role: Wu Dalang 武大郎
(played by Liu Guihua 劉桂華)

Wu Dalang is the elder brother of Wu Song, the hero in Water Margin who killed a tiger bare-handed. He is a vendor of pancakes, honest but gutless. In contrast to his tall, strong brother, Dalang was born short and small. The actor playing this role must excel in the so called “short man skill” 矮子功 — in order to portray a dwarf, he must constantly walk with both legs squatting down.
b) *Fangjin Chou* 方巾丑 — *chou* wearing a square hat

The *fangjin chou* usually depicts a pedantic scholar, a court clerk 書吏, or a counselor 謀士 in feudal society.

**Video 44 : The Gathering of Heroes 《群英會》**

Role : Jiang Gan 蔣幹  
(played by Xiao Changhua 蕭長華)

This character has a very high self-esteem. However, he is always being outsmarted by others. This extract is about Jiang Gan stealing the forged letter of surrender. It echoes Video 14 (an idea pops up in Zhou Yu’s mind) and Video 38 (Cao Cao falls for Zhou Yu’s trick and orders to execute his two generals).

c) *Bangchui-jin Chou* 棒槌巾丑 — *chou* wearing a hat with two protruding “ears”

The *bangchui-jin chou* most successfully creates characters such as the second generation of a high ranking official or a wealthy family; a playboy-bully type, often a curse in the neighborhood.

**Video 45 : Wild Boar Forest 《野豬林》**

Role : Gao the Junior 高衙內  
(played by Sun Shengwu 孫盛武)

This character is extremely frivolous and shows no respect for anything.

d) *Paodai Chou* 袍帶丑 — *chou* wearing a robe and a belt

(also known as the guan chou 官丑 — *chou* who plays an official)

**Video 46 : Chuncao Breaks into the Court 《春草闖堂》**

Role : Hu Jin 胡進  
(played by Chen Guosen 陳國森)
A clown official always wears a shortened official robe (one can see clearly his two feet) to enhance the comic effect. In this extract, the official Hu Jin lets the young lady Chuncao take the sedan chair 轿子, while he himself has to walk on his two legs and follow her uphill…and downhill… A series of wen chou techniques are used here to depict the ascending and descending of the slope.

e) Lao Chou — chou of old age

The lao chou refers to an elderly person, usually with a kind heart.

Video 47: 《蘇三起解》
.Role: Chong Gongdao 崇公道
.(played by Bai Qilin 白其林)

Honest, kindhearted, he speaks in a very clear and articulated way. These are the characteristics of this role-type.

4.2 Wu Chou — also known as kaikou tiao 開口跳 (one who “talks and jumps”),

The wu chou specializes in martial skills, somersaults, and acting. The recitation has to be particularly sharp and clear, movements neat and speedy. The wu chou usually depicts River-and-Lake characters 江湖豪俠 with extreme martial prowess and agility.

Video 48: The Crossroads 《三岔口》
.Role: Liu Lihua 劉利華
.(played by Zhang Chunhua 張春華)

Video 49: Shi Qian stealing the armour 《時遷盜甲》
.Role: Shi Qian 時遷
.(played by Zhang Chunhua 張春華)
Both excerpts here are played by the magnificent chou master Zhang Chunhua, who exhibits every quality required by this role-type. The Crossroads in Video 48 is an item most frequently performed overseas. The excerpt in Video 49 demands a high degree of “light kungfu” 輕功 from the performer. The moment Shi Qian steals the armour he almost reaches the roof of the theatre. I specially choose this recording to show the agility of Maestro Zhang, even at the age of sixty-four!

**Video 50 : Stopping the Horse《擋馬》**

Role : Jiao Guangpu 焦光普
(played by Sun Zhengyang 孫正陽)

This is an item created by my teacher Zhang Meijuan and her junior disciple 師弟 Sun Zhengyang, who excels in both the roles of wen and wu chou. They created a whole set of fighting by making use of the chair prop in an innovative manner. In this extract, the techniques and the swiftness and agility of a wu chou are fully exposed.

*Stopping the Horse* has now become a classic item for students of these two roles.

**Conclusion**

The role system of Hangdang is the result of the long accumulation of the Xiqu artistic heritage over many generations. Each role-type subdivision possesses a whole set of artistic means fit for the depiction of a certain kind of character. In other words, the Hangdang system has fully and ingeniously dealt with the aspect of “form” 形 in Xiqu. It is an artistic summation, exaggeration and amplification of inner and outer qualities of all sorts of characters. Hence, by fulfilling the requirement (mastering the technique) of a certain role-type, one can practically play any kind of personage. A child can portray a middle-aged Emperor, for instance, which is far beyond his own life experience; a fifty-year-old actress can still assume the role of a teenage girl. Similarly, it is not uncommon in Xiqu that men play women roles and vice versa. Of course, how to give life (the aspect of “spirit” 神) to the character and make it utterly convincing and appealing to the audience, will depend subsequently on the actor’s inner cultivation and
his own physical ability. But the *Hangdang* system has nevertheless provided him with every possible external element for characterization.

So we can conclude as follows: *Hangdang* is a highly evolved art which transcends the physical distinctions of gender and age. The *Hangdang* system permeates every aspect of the performance art of Classical Theatre. It is the very foundation of that art.

II. Percussive Music 打擊樂

Confucius said: “Propriety is reason (li); music is measure (jie). A True Gentleman does not move without reason, he does nothing without measure.”

— *Book of Rites: Zhongni at Home at Ease*

子曰： “禮也者，理也，樂也者，節也。君子無理不動，無節不作。”

— 《禮記·仲尼燕居》

This teaching of Confucius, although meant here in a general sense, could very well be used to explain one of the unique features of *Xiqu*: that every movement has a purpose (a reason), and that all movements are executed within musical (rhythmic) measures.

Percussive music features in *Xiqu* not only as a certain musical colouring or sonority, occasionally enhancing the play. It has a far more meaningful function. It runs throughout the entire performance, it is a frame weaving all the parts together and giving them an organic structure. In other words, it serves to integrate all the various components - acting, music and singing, dance and stylized movement, and martial arts. It integrates them rhythmically into one artistic whole. This outstanding characteristic differentiates *Xiqu* from other composite art forms, such as, for example, the Broadway Musical, which also incorporates many disciplines (singing, dance, acrobatics, and so forth) but not as integrated elements in an artistic whole. The continuous utilization of percussive music is indeed one of the crucial elements that allows *Xiqu* to stand apart from formal realism. Everything expressed on stage is

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brought together by exaggerated and intensified musical rhythms. This is something far beyond the pace of real life.

From the point of view of the actor, without the support of Rhythmic Patterns 鼓敲點, no movement on stage is possible. It would be like asking him to sail a boat on dry land. The “musical measure”, therefore, never “restricts” him in any sense. It offers him a free and yet ordered space. It provides a vehicle on which he can rely, from the most subtle externalization of his thoughts, to the most spellbinding cadenza.

The percussive ensemble, also known as wuchang 武場 (as opposed to the wenchang 文場, which refers to the string and wood instruments) is formed basically by four musicians:

1) The gushi 鼓師 — the leader, who plays the ban 板 (Clapper), and the gu 鼓 (Drum - also called danpi gu 單皮鼓, the Single-skin Drum, made of a heavy wooden hoop, over which thick pigskin is stretched). The two Drum Sticks 鼓楗子, the length of chopsticks, serve to produce all sorts of Rhythmic Patterns, and to give instructions to the other members of the percussive ensemble.

2) The player of the daluo 大鑼 (Big Gong) — this instrument gives emphasis on strong beats.

3) The player of the naobo 鍘鈸 (Cymbals)—these are often used to mark the syncopations.

4) The player of the xiaoluo 小鑼 (Small Gong) — this instrument is often used on both strong beats and upbeats, or serves as the transition in between.

The size of the percussive ensemble can be expanded by adding more instruments, such as the da tanggu 大堂鼓 (Big Tang-drum), the xiao tanggu 小堂鼓 (Small Tang-drum), the da shailuo 大篩鑼, the shuibo 水鈸, the danao 大铙 and others. These can serve to increase the majestic feel and grandeur of the musical accompaniment. Or the ensemble can be reduced by using only the small gong, to create a peaceful and quiet ambiance, as in most of the Kunqu excerpts in the wen or refined style.
There are around fifty to sixty most frequently used Rhythmic Patterns in Jingju and Kunqu. Each Rhythmic Pattern is given a name. The choice of Pattern depends on the “opening” given by the gushi (Leader). Once the Rhythmic Pattern gets started, whether it should go faster / slower, stronger / weaker, longer / shorter, or make a transition to another Pattern, all of this is determined by the Leader’s intensity of playing, his expressions, body language, and gestures. The following Video extracts show the formation of a percussive ensemble, the sound of the instruments, as well as the way the musicians collaborate in producing the Rhythmic Patterns.

**Video 51 : Formation of a percussive ensemble**

Leader (Single-skin Drum, Clapper) : Zhang Peicai 張培才
Big Gong : Sun Youhao 孫尤豪
Cymbals : Ni Qiang 倪強
Small Gong : Gao Liang 高亮
Small Tang-drum : Yue Zhiyuan 岳志遠

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43 Liu Jidian, p. 18.
Video 52: Combination of Rhythmic Patterns I

“Battlefield” zhanchang【戰場】
“Pigan” 【劈桿】
“Nine-and-a-Half-Hammers” jiuchuiban【九錘半】
“Horse Leg” matui【馬腿】
“Swimming Fish” shuidiyu【水底魚】
“Wrap Up” zhutou【住頭】

Video 53: Combination of Rhythmic Patterns II

“Trill and One Stroke” sibian yiluo【撕邊一鑼】
“Tough Hammers” yingchui【硬錘】
“Four Door jing” simenjing【四門靜】

The functions of percussive music in Xiqu are diversified. They include: controlling the overall rhythm and pace of the play, highlighting the entrance of the principals, starting and ending an aria, building up or heightening an atmosphere, accompanying Movement-sets 身段組合, and giving greater impetus to the actor. It helps to reveal an environment. Last but not least, it helps to accentuate and externalize the character’s inner world.

Let us now look at some concrete examples.
1. Building up / heightening an atmosphere

a) Starting a war

In ancient times, drums and metal objects were sounded 金鼓齊鳴 to intensify the fighting atmosphere in the battlefield. On the Xiqu stage, similarly, we start with a strong trill from the Tang-drum 堂鼓, followed by other metallic percussive instruments, to illustrate the confronting dynamic of both parties and to announce the beginning of a fighting scene.

**Video 54 : Overturning the Chariots 《挑滑車》**

Role: Wuzhu 兀朮

Yue Fei 岳飛

**Text:**

Wuzhu : You, fellow named Yue, I meant well, and you don’t want to listen. So don’t blame me for being rude!

First we hear very clearly the trill of the Tang-drum and the sound of other metallic instruments, then the loud cries of the soldiers. The war has begun.

b) Highlighting a fighting scene

**Video 55 : Overturning the Chariots 《挑滑車》**

Role: Gao Chong 高寵

(Played by Ma Yuzhang 馬玉璋)

If the previous example represents a “wide-shot” of the battlefield (the overall atmosphere), this one offers a “close-up” of an actual fight. In this furious, storm-like fighting scene, the percussive ensemble uses only four Rhythmic Patterns (“Single Stroke” danji【單擊】, “Four Strokes” sijitou【四擊頭】，“Whirlwind” jijifeng}
【急急風】，“Riot of Hammers” luanchui【亂鎚】). The magnificent effect is obtained not by a great variety of Rhythmic Patterns, but by the seamless collaboration between actors and musicians, when the timing is perfect, exactly as the heart (of performers and audience alike) anticipates.

One more remark: when Hei Fengli 黑風利 (the character with the pair of hammers) is defeated in this scene, the percussive ensemble plays the Rhythmic Pattern “Riot of Hammers” luanchui【亂鎚】 to emphasize the fact that he has lost and is struggling to get back into the fight. The attention is therefore diverted (by the percussive music) to the loser. There are two purposes of this arrangement. The obvious one is to relieve temporarily the extreme tension until the next round; the underlying one is to allow the principal actor to take a short break (while the attention is not drawn to him) before he enters into the most energy-consuming climactic cadenza passage and exit: qiang-xiachang 槍下場.

**Video 56 : Overturning the Chariots《挑滑車》**

Now in Video 56 we will take another look at the same scene, with the soundtrack of the ensemble in a separate screen to see how the percussive music synchronizes with the actors.

2. **Indicating an environment / circumstance**

One of the functions of percussive music is to simulate the sounds of Nature, such as wind, snow, rain, and water. As this is an abstract and symbolic simulation (as a matter of fact, they sound very much alike - they vary only in speed and timbre), it only makes sense in conjunction with the acting of the performer.
Usually the character will first mention where he is (e.g. on the riverside), or how the weather is (e.g. a rainy day or a windy night). Then from his acting, his body movements and the percussive hints, the audience will easily make the association.

a) Rain

**Video 57:** *The Legend of the White Snake* 《白蛇傳》  
Role: Xu Xian 許仙  
(played by Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁)

**Text:**

Xu Xian: ... Just now the weather was fine, how come suddenly the clouds are so dense and dark, and it rains. Fortunately I have my umbrella.

b) By the lake side / Embarking on the boat

**Video 58:** *The Legend of the White Snake* 《白蛇傳》  
Role: Bai Suzhen 白素貞  
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)  
Xu Xian 許仙  
(played by Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁)  
Xiao Qing 小青  
(played by Fu Zhenghong 傅正紅)  
Boatman 艄翁  
(played by Liu Yilong 劉異龍)

When White Snake and Xiao Qing embark on the boat, the percussive ensemble occasionally simulates the water sound, reminding the audience that the story is taking place by the lake side (or on the boat). It also adds a certain “poetic mood” to the beautiful background music, as the audience will then associate with a misty and romantic ambiance by the West Lake.

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44 Cai Zhengren, my long-term partner since 1982, was also a student of Yu Zhenfei. He is now regarded as one of China’s leading performers of *Kunqu xiaosheng* roles.
c) Fire

**Video 59 : The Wild Boar Forest 《野豬林》**

Role : Lin Chong 林沖  
(played by Li Shaochun 李少春)

**Text:**

Lin Chong : The granary is on fire! Let me go and have a look.

d) Wind and snow

**Video 60 : The Wild Boar Forest 《野豬林》**

Role : Lin Chong 林沖  
(played by Li Shaochun 李少春)

Lin Chong mentioned the environment in his aria, which is omitted here.

e) Water fighting scene

**Video 61 : The Legend of the White Snake 《白蛇傳》**

Role : Qielan 伽藍  
(played by Zhang Liming 張立明)

The Crab 蟹將  
(played by Xu Changsheng 徐長勝)

The Shrimp 蝦將  
(played by Yuan Xueling 袁學芹)

In video 61, from *The Legend of the White Snake*, there is a big fighting scene between celestial warriors and water goblins. Bai Suzhen (the white snake) wants to flood the Jinshan Temple to rescue her husband. However, the big flag (representing water itself) is now in the hands of the celestial warrior Qielan, meaning that the celestial warrior, in return, uses the water to fight back against the goblins. The percussive sound “Pong!
“Pong!”, like angry waves splashing on the shore, and the stunning skills of the actors, bring the scene to an even higher climax. In this case, many percussive instruments were added to the ensemble to enhance the effect: Big Cymbals 大鏘, a Big Shuai-gong 大篩鑼 (used to clear the way for a character’s entrance) or a Big Pian-gong 大片鑼 (usually used to imitate the sound of water), a Little Tang-drum 小堂鼓 and Big Tang-drum 大堂鼓.

f) Water goblins being defeated

Video 62: The Legend of the White Snake《白蛇傳》

In video 62, Bai Suzhen, because of her pregnancy, is finally defeated. The water (represented by small water flags) subsides. The percussion ensemble produces a much more subtle sound, similar to that of the receding tide, marking her defeat.

g) Musician producing the sound of Nature

Video 63: The Legend of the White Snake《白蛇傳》

In this extract, we will take another look at the two previous examples, with the soundtrack of the ensemble in a separate screen to show how the musicians produce the sound of Nature.
3. Externalizing inner feelings and thoughts

Every emotion is expressed through measures. The very simple Rhythmic Pattern: “da da… yi dei” (*da* = the sound of the Drum Stick; *yi* = the sound of the Clapper, or a pause; *dei* = the sound of the Small Gong), has no specific meaning on its own, so it can be used to convey different states of mind according to the performer’s acting.

Here are some further examples from *The Legend of the White Snake*.

The storyline: The monk Fahai tells Xu Xian that he has married a monster. Xu does not believe him. Fahai then instructs him to persuade his wife Bai Suzhen to drink the *Xionghuang* wine on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, which turns her back into her snake form.

a) Xu Xian’s states of mind

**Video 64: The Legend of the White Snake《白蛇傳》**

Role: Xu Xian 許仙

(played by Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁)

Fa Hai 法海

(played by Zhang Baozhi 張寶志)

Text:

Xu Xian: Where is the monster?

Fahai: Right next to you.

[X Xu Xian makes two symmetric turns.

The Rhythmic Pattern: “*da da… yi dei*”, twice in quick tempo, coordinates with the actor’s turns, as well as emphasizing his sudden fear after hearing what Fahai has said.

[ He then looks to his left, and his right, and at himself, making sure that there is truly nothing evil beside him.

The same Rhythmic Pattern “*da da… yi dei*”, this time in a much slower tempo, externalizes his emotion and extends the process of his thinking (which, in real life, may
have taken only two seconds) – as he reassures himself that “there is nothing strange on my left, nor on my right”; and finally, “I am still OK”.

Xu Xian: There is none. 無有啊。

b) Revealing two similar inner states, both using the same Rhythmic Pattern.

Video 65: The Legend of the White Snake 《白蛇傳》

Role: Bai Suzhen 白素貞
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)
Xu Xian 許仙
(played by Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁)
Xiao Qing 小青
(played by Qiu Xiujuan 邱秀娟)

Text:

Xu Xian: They all want me to make a toast with the Xionghuang wine to my beloved wife on their behalf. Let me make a toast first.

[ Bai and Xiao Qing are startled when they hear the word “Xionghuang wine”. They share the same Rhythmic Pattern “da! (pause) dei” although Xiao Qing’s reaction is greater (because her powers are lesser) while Bai’s is more subtle (as she cannot overreact in front of her husband).

c) Revealing two different inner states, both using the same Rhythmic Pattern

Video 66: The Legend of the White Snake 《白蛇傳》

Role: Bai Suzhen 白素貞
(played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)
Xu Xian 許仙
(played by Cai Zhengren 蔡正仁)
Xu looks at Bai, and finds that she is perfectly normal. How could she be a snake? He bursts into laughter.

Bai thinks to herself: Why is he looking at me like that? Is there anything wrong with me? What is the matter?

Here the inner thoughts of Xu and Bai are hinted at by the same Rhythmic Pattern “da da…da da! (pause) dei”.

d) Lin Chong’s inner thoughts

Video 67: Wild Boar Forest 《野豬林》
Role: Lin Chong 林沖
played by Li Shaochun 李少春)

Lin Chong 林沖 has never been to this place. He quietly observes his surroundings.

The percussion also shows a quiet and peaceful mood.

He suddenly has a strange feeling. But he tries to control himself and stays calm.

The percussion speeds up, then slows down, indicating the emergence of that feeling and the controlling of his emotion.

Text:

Lin Chong: Look here, the hall is so quiet, the ambiance so tense and severe. What place could this be?

The tempo of the percussion (the trill) accelerates, expressing a higher and higher degree of anxiety (although he still tries to appear calm); this also foreshadows that something ominous is going to happen. The percussion suddenly ends with a very sharp, short decisive crash (played simultaneously by the entire ensemble), confirming that he is truly in danger.

He is shocked to see the plaque “White Tiger Hall” 白－虎－節堂 (two beats on the drum and once again a sharp, short decisive crash stress these four words), and realizes that he has entered the forbidden area.
Before Lin Chong resumes the recitation, the ensemble plays a quick Pattern called **Jiaotou 】（“Crying Out”), indicating in advance that the character is in an agitated state.

Lin Chong: Wait a minute! (Jiaotou Pattern ends) “White Tiger Hall” is where they secretly discuss the military situation. How can I intrude into such an important place with no reason? I’d better get out of here!

Even before the end of the last phrase the percussive ensemble gives a musical cue for the strings to join in and lead into the singing passage. The pressing speed shows that Lin Chong is in great haste.

Lin Chong: (sings)

I must hurry away….

**Conclusion**

After centuries of development, Kunqu and Jingju percussive music has attained a very sophisticated level, both in terms of quality of sound, and expressivity. From the above examples we see that none of the artistic means (acting, body movements, singing, recitation, martial skills) could be executed without the participation of the percussive ensemble. It commences 開導 an action, and regulates 調節 it during its course, collaborating with and highlighting whatever the actor is expressing on stage. Conversely, none of the Rhythmic Patterns has any specific meaning. Although some of them have a certain emotional colour, such as the “Riot of Hammers” **luanchui 】 (which usually expresses a feeling of defeat and mental confusion), the meaning becomes concrete only when it is matched (used together) with the acting of the performer.
Chapter IV  Traditional Education and Training for the Classical Theatre

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the training method used for Chinese Classical Theatre, drawing on my own experience as well as that of other performers. In order to have a better understanding, I will first look at Chinese traditional education in a general sense.

I. Traditional Education

Whereas in today’s worldwide educational system each subject is an independent branch of study, traditionally the Chinese adopted a holistic approach to teaching. This Chinese traditional approach required children first to inherit their cultural legacy in its holistic entirety, through learning by heart a multitude of Classics, exemplary writings and poems. This is also in contrast with the modern emphasis on encouraging free creativity and critical thinking at a very early stage. In the traditional Chinese conception these only come much later.

In the old days, children’s education began with the Three Word Classic《三字經》, the Hundred Surnames《百家姓》 and the Thousand Word Text《千字文》, often abbreviated as the Three-Hundred-Thousand "三百千". Apart from the Hundred Surnames, which incorporates more than 500 major Chinese surnames, the two other primers cover knowledge of literature, history, geography, music, natural science, mythology, and some other areas; they lay down moral and ethical principles, and tell stories which provide the young with role models. The common characteristic of these texts is that they are all compositions in rhyme, with either three or four words per phrase. Children can therefore easily memorize them. As a result, not only did they gain

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1 The origin of the Thousand Word Text is said to be as follows: in order for his sons to practice calligraphy, Liang Wudi 梁武帝 (464-549), the Emperor Wu of the Southern Liang dynasty, ordered his minister Yin Tieshi 殷鐵石 to select one thousand unrepeated characters written by the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 and make them into rubbings. When the job was done, however, each character was on a separate piece of paper with no interrelated meanings at all. The Emperor then summoned another minister Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 and said: “You have the talent, please make it into a rhyming text for me.” Xingsi accomplished the task in one night, during which his hair turned white, and he was granted rich rewards. This is recorded by Li Zhuo 李綽 (Tang dynasty), in his collection Shangshu gushi 尚書故實, p. 21B, in Siku quanshu 四庫全書 (1987), vol. 862, p. 479. “其始乃梁武教諸王書，令殷鐵石於大王書中拓一千字不重者，每字片紙，雜碎無序。武帝召興嗣，謂曰：‘卿有才思，為我韻之。’興嗣一夕編録進上，鬢髮皆白，而賞賜甚厚。” In addition to the value of the content, which was amazingly grouped together, the Thousand Word Text later served as the ideal material for children to learn Chinese characters, as well as being a model of calligraphy (because not one word is repeated). Great calligraphers used it as a basic exemplary text and re-wrote it in different styles.
knowledge from these materials, they also became accustomed (quite unconsciously) to the rhythms of the Chinese language, while reciting these texts by heart. There are other children’s textbooks, such as the Fine Text to Broaden One’s Horizons《增廣賢文》and The Children’s Precious Grove《幼學瓊林》, written in rhythmical parallel prose (a widely respected literary style). The former is a collection of proverbs about life, and the latter mainly explains Chinese customs as well as the origin and meaning of many Chinese idioms and expressions. The contents covered in these two books were so broad that it was once said (in rhyme): “After reading the Fine Text one can speak; after reading the Precious Grove one can go out into the world.” “讀了《增廣》會說話，讀了《幼學》走天下。”

It is obvious that children at a young age are quite unlikely to comprehend the profound meaning of works such as these. However, intellectual understanding is not necessarily of major importance at this stage. Every piece of classical Chinese is in effect a combination of two parts: ciqing 辭情 (the content), and shengqing 聲情 (the melodic and rhythmic elements). Ciqing and shengqing do not always have equal importance. In fact, they seldom do. Which part becomes more important depends on the form we are dealing with. In poetry, for example, the shengqing or music often prevails. “It is not absolutely necessary to understand poetry. The beauty of its words, rhymes and rhythm talks directly to the soul.” “詩不一定要求懂。詩的詞藻和韻律美直接訴諸人的靈魂。” 2 Hence, through extensive recitation by heart, the wisdom and knowledge, the fine taste and aesthetic sensibility of former generations were well stored in the child’s memory. It is like planting a seed in the child’s heart. When the time comes, that is, when the child grows older, all these things will suddenly make sense and become clear. In other words, a child is being cultivated and equipped with potential knowledge long before he or she is even aware of it. When that awareness comes, then everything is already there.

It is the same with the acquisition of technical skills. Students learning calligraphy have to primarily copy model examples: lintie 臨帖, which means slowly, carefully and meticulously imitating every stroke of the great calligraphers (this practice is similar to

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reciting poems). The process of copying *lìntie* 萬帖 allows the beauty of the strokes to “talk directly to the soul”. Children generally start with Regular Script *zhèngkǎi* 正楷, or *kaishu* 楷書, the basic style showing clearly the structure of Chinese characters; then they move on to the freer styles such as Running Script *xíngshū* 行書 and Grass Script *cāoshū* 草書. When they reach a more advanced stage (or a deeper understanding), then they are no longer merely reproducing the “form” of the characters, but rather sensing, feeling and imitating the Master’s inner state or energy (or rhythm) while he was writing. They are becoming One with the characters being written, and with the master who first produced them. I personally derive great joy from practising calligraphy. I have found that it has a lot in common with the learning of *Xīqu*. In this kind of practice, even when you are still technically immature, you have something extraordinary to lean on. You are not being asked to be creative before the time is right. All you have to do is to learn honestly and humbly from your predecessors. Again, when the time comes, i.e. when you have accumulated enough experience and skills, then you will find that the brush just automatically follows your heart without any conscious effort. As the *I Ching* puts it under the First Hexagram, Qian 乾, it is like a Dragon finally taking off into the heavens:

**Yang in Fifth Place**

The Dragon flies in Heaven 飛龍在天

The French commentator François Jullien writes: Here the Yang which has been slowly accumulating is suddenly transformed; it attains perfect freedom of movement (*aisance*). The soaring flight is free progress, effortless and unhampered. Steadfastness has become spontaneity. One day it just happens. The transition to Sagehood is like the passage from Apprentice to Master, for aspiring musician, painter, or calligrapher. All the toil of practice is suddenly transformed into an astonishing facility. At this juncture the Sage simply takes off (“leaps”). He follows the Tao as naturally and instinctively as if it were an Edict of Heaven. The Ruler, too, thanks to Inner Strength patiently accumulated, at this juncture no longer needs to exert himself in order to be obeyed. The Inner Strength operates of itself, it emanates effortlessly (it is, after all, *mana*) from his Spiritual Ascendance.

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There is a story concerning Yu Zhenfei and his father — how the Maestro learned to sing Kunqu. This is a story known to every disciple of the Maestro, and is recorded in The Biography of Yu Zhenfei. It illustrates perfectly the power of gradual influence on a child, and shows another aspect of the way in which skill can be “absorbed” at an early age, through a process of virtual osmosis.

Yu Zhenfei’s father, Yu Sulu, was an eminent Kunqu vocal artist, who was himself taught by one of the students or by a student of a student of Ye Tang, and was himself lauded as the Kunqu Sage of Southern China.

Yu’s mother died of tuberculosis when he was three years old. Although the elder sisters offered to take care of the little brother, Yu’s father, at the age of nearly sixty, insisted on personally looking after his one and only son.

However, it was not easy to take up the responsibility of both a father and a mother.

The old Mr. Yu found that his three-year-old child was still manageable during daytime, as he could frolic around and have fun on his own. It was at bedtime that he felt completely helpless in calming his son’s crying. Having no way out he said to little Zhenfei: “Don’t cry, don’t cry, I’ll sing you a song.” The aria he sang was “The Red Embroidered Shoes” from The Yellow Millet Dream, by the great dramatist Tang Xianzu of the Ming dynasty. Strange as it might seem, the moment the young boy heard this melody, he stopped crying. Sometimes he fell sound asleep even before the song was over. This “lullaby” was sung every single night for three whole years, and it worked every single time.

When Zhenfei was six years old, one day while playing in the courtyard he heard his father teaching the same aria to a student. After many repetitions, the student still couldn’t get it right. Old Mr. Yu put down his flute, without saying a word. Little Zhenfei thought to himself: “But I know this one!” So he entered

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Ye Tang was a Kunqu composer of the Late Qing dynasty. His singing style was deemed to be the model for Kunqu in the Republic period. His greatest contribution was the work, Nashuying Theatrical Music Scores, in which he composed or rearranged the melodic lines of Tang Xianzu’s four masterpieces so as to fit the Kunqu prosodic rules, while keeping the text intact. It is to be noted that people had all the time been altering the text of Tang Xianzu’s work, which was originally written in Yihuang-qiang, in order to match the Kunqu rules. See above, chapter I. Nashuying Theatrical Music Scores also included some other items in the Kunqu, zaju, and zhugongdiao repertoire.
the main hall and said: “You didn’t get it right. Listen to me!” Yu Sulu was a humble gentleman and could not tolerate anyone bragging and boasting. He pulled a long face and lectured his son: “When have you ever learned to sing? Small kids should not talk big. Go out and play.” Feeling wronged, little Zhenfei insisted on singing: “But I really do know how to sing! You play the flute, and I’ll sing!”

With little confidence, Yu Sulu picked up his flute. After the whole song was done, the father was totally amazed that his son had managed to sing it through without making a single mistake. At that time, little Zhenfei did not even know a single word of that aria! From then on, Yu Sulu determined to teach his son Kunqu singing seriously and properly.5

We can say by way of summary:

- Chinese traditional education at its best pays great attention to exerting a gradual and uplifting influence on students. It is about cultivating sensibility, teaching and learning experientially rather than conceptually. Children learn writing skills through reciting by heart rather than by analyzing the use of words, and the structure. As a popular saying puts it, “Once you can recite by heart the Three Hundred Tang Poems, even if you don’t know how to compose poetry, you can always steal.” “熟讀唐詩三百首，不會吟詩也會偷。” This learning method is in line with the fundamental concept “Heaven and Man as One”, as the subject (the person who learns) and the object (the thing to be learned) do not have a dualistic relation. Traditionally Chinese never try to “study” something from a distance (from an observer’s point of view), but rather, they try to be one with it, or just to be it.

- In the Chinese traditional way of education, the cultural legacy is greatly emphasized and appreciated. It must be properly passed down to the next generation. Creativity and critical thinking only come into play when one is totally aware of, and able to master, the traditional skills and knowledge of past masters. Only then will creativity become meaningful and substantial. In other words, there is a very clear standard of aesthetics embodied in Chinese literature.

and traditional art. Significant creation is never something done out of the blue by a “genius”, who just tries to be different from others. The emergence of a new personal style, whether it be in calligraphy or some other traditional art form, requires a uniqueness backed up by a very solid foundation. Innovation can never be isolated from inheritance.

II. Training for Chinese Classical Theatre

There is an old saying: “Three years is long enough to produce a top scholar, but even ten years may not be enough to produce a good theatrical performer (Jingju actor).” “三年出個狀元，十年出不了個好唱戲的。” Although this may not be the absolute truth, it nevertheless reflects a reality, that Chinese Classical Theatre is a highly demanding art form, which requires the performer to possess a wide range of qualities: a fine voice, a body with great flexibility and excellent coordination, sensitivity to music and rhythm, and a richness of facial expression. All of these are necessary to portray a character on stage. Since this involves an extensive process of multi-disciplinary learning, the duration of training for a Kunqu / Jingju actor or actress is relatively long – about seven to ten years. This was the time demanded by the traditional schools, Keban 科班, of the old days, as well as the most renowned post-1949 professional institution – the National School for Chinese Traditional Theatre 中國戲曲學校 in the fifties and sixties. (This institution is now known as the National Academy for Chinese Theatre Arts 中國戲曲學院. Following its academic upgrading, the educational system was accordingly altered from eight years to a six year period of secondary education followed by a four year degree course, if the student wanted to pursue tertiary studies.) Students enter the institution at around twelve years old. In the old Keban system, children might be admitted at a much younger age.
1. A Glimpse into the Keban

*Keban* refers to the old-system according to which *Xiqu* actors were trained. It was either run by renowned artists, as with the *Sizhentang Keban* 四箴堂科班 of Cheng Changgeng 程長庚 (a first generation *Jingju* actor, see above chapter I) or was established via private sponsorship, as was the case with the *Fuliancheng Keban* 福連成科班, which was first sponsored by the Niu family 牛家 then transferred to the Shen family 沈家, but was all along run by Ye Chunshan 葉春善 (1875-1935).

Teachers in a *Keban* were generally eminent artists with ample stage experience. Students also had innumerable opportunities to put into practice what they learned, as the *Keban* was above all a place where students learned and performed simultaneously. This was because the private funding was often limited and not guaranteed, and the “school” might at any time be obliged to close down. So the only way to keep it going was to put on performances. This was certainly a great advantage for the learning process. As a matter of fact, the *Keban* has fostered a great number of outstanding performers of Chinese Classical Theatre over the past hundred years and more.

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6 The expression was originally used to describe the classical education system or *keju* 科舉 leading to the public examinations, on which the old Chinese civil service was based.

7 *Sizhen(tang)* 四箴 was Cheng Changgeng’s *Tang Ming* 室名 (the name of his “hall” or *Tang* 室). *Tang* 室 originally referred to the “main hall” of a residence, to which the owner often gave a special and meaningful name. From the Song dynasty onward, scholars sometimes used a *Tang Ming* as a pseudonym 別號. The programmes for Cheng’s performances were “often marked *Sizhentang* instead of his name.” "戲單常不題名而標‘四箴堂’." See Grand Encyclopedia, p. 37.

8 Ye Chunshan was born into a *Xiqu* artist’s family. He graduated from the *Xiaorongchun Keban* 小榮椿科班, where he was a fellow disciple with (among others) Yang Xiaolou 楊小樓 (the great master of the *wusheng* 武生 role), and Cheng Jixian 程繼先 (the great master of the *xiaosheng* 小生 role, and *Jingju* teacher of Yu Zhenfei 俞振飛). Specializing in *laosheng* 老生 roles, Ye also possessed a vast knowledge of all other types of role. As an all-rounder in the profession, Ye was chosen to be the person in charge of the *Fuliancheng Keban*, a position he completely devoted himself to for half of his life.

9 *History of Peking Opera* 《中國京劇史》, vol. II, Photo Section, p. 18.
The life and training in a Keban was extremely tough. Students were mostly from poor families or from the second generation of Xiqu performers. Some children ran away from a Keban because they were unable to endure the hardship; while others, because of their passion for the theatre, were thrilled to be accepted as students.

Let us now look at some concrete examples, taken from the most acclaimed Jingju Keban, the Fuliancheng, under the following headings:

a. procedures of admission and standard form of contract

b. daily activities of the students

c. vivid description of corporal punishment

d. “Art through Beating” 打戲

e. teaching policies

a. Procedures and Contract

There were no special times for recruitment. However, it was necessary to have an introduction from someone reliable 介绍人, who would act as the guarantor 中保人 if the child was eventually accepted. Such a person should be someone who was very well acquainted with the sponsor 東家, the Head, or the staff of the Keban. The age of admission to the Fuliancheng was over six and under ten. Children from Pear Orchard or Liyuan 梨園 families, who already had some training and knew some of the repertoire, could be recruited over age.10 The oldest students in the Fuliancheng were around twelve to thirteen.

Usually the potential student was first recommended to the Head of the Keban 班主 by the “introducer”, then a date would be fixed for the Head to see him and his parent (he might also be accompanied by the “introducer”). The initial factors to be considered were the child’s features, body shape and health. Then a test would follow to check his voice, articulation, and the flexibility of his legs and waist. If everything seemed fine, he

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10 The term Liyuan (Pear Orchard) refers to the whole profession of Xiqu. It originates from Tang Minghuang’s royal “academy” and troupe for music and dance. (See chapter I)
would generally be taken in. But the child could only become a “formal” student after three to six months, when he was finally proven to be suitable for the profession. By then, a contract would be signed by both parent and guarantor:

I, XXX, the undersigned, hereby entrust XXX, age XX, to XXX as his disciple. He of his own free will wishes to learn the art of theatre and make a living out of it. It is stipulated that the whole course of training will last seven years. All income generated within this period belongs to the Keban. During the training years, the Keban will be responsible for food, accommodation, clothing and footwear. The student is prohibited from going home unless for exceptional reasons. The student is not permitted to leave the school, and if he does, this will be the responsibility of the guarantor. Cases of natural disaster or illness shall be regarded as acts of Fate. If the student runs away, he will be sought by both parties. It is a matter of good conscience, after the whole course of training is completed, how the student expresses his gratitude. Verbal statements are not considered sufficient. This written document serves as proof.

XXX, Responsible Person, (and his fingerprint)

XXX, the Guarantor, (and his fingerprint)

Year / Month / Date

立關書人 XXX，今將 XXX，年 XX 歲，志願投於 XXX 名下為徒，習學梨園生計，言名七年為滿，凡於限期內所得銀錢，俱歸社中收入，在科期間，一切食宿衣履由科班負擔，無故禁止回家，不准中途退學，否則由中保人承管。倘有天災疾病，各由天命，如遇私逃等情，須兩家尋找。年滿謝師，但憑天良。空口無憑，立字為證。

立關書人 XXX 畫押

中保人 XXX 畫押

年月日吉立
b. Daily Activities

• Morning class
Students get up at 6 a.m. (except for those who have performed until very late the night before). At 6:30, everybody participates in basic skills practice (tanzi gong - see below for a detailed description of this). The class is supervised by two Martial Arts or wugong teachers. At 8 a.m., students specializing in civil roles stop body training. They will then go on with learning the repertoire or practising singing. All practices finish at 11 a.m. Lunch starts at 11:30.

• Heading backstage
Those who perform, queue up, with the short ones in the front and tall ones at the back. After the teacher takes the roll call, he then leads the whole troupe to the theatre. Students going to the theatre must all wear the same outfit: skullcap, blue gown topped with a black mandarin jacket, blue socks and black boots for spring and autumn; straw hat and pale blue long robe for summer. In case of rain everyone is provided with an umbrella and rain boots. During winter, all students wear a leather hat or cotton cap, a blue cotton-padded gown and black cotton-padded mandarin jacket. Those who don’t perform (usually first year students) stay at home and continue to practice.

• Performance
The performance starts around 12:30 p.m. Backstage, everyone makes himself up according to his own role. The show lasts until approximately 6 p.m.

• Returning home
All the children queue up as before and return to the Keban. (Sometimes they are divided into two groups. The first group departs around 4 p.m. and the second stays until the end of the show.) After the number of children has been counted, the troupe is dismissed and everybody gets some rest before having dinner.

• Night class
After dinner, wuxi (repertoire with martial arts / somersaults) and wenxi (repertoire with the emphasis on singing / acting) students rehearse separately with their teachers until bed time.
• Bed time
Around 10 p.m. everybody goes to bed. The dormitory used to contain a single long bed 通鋪, and each long bed could accommodate a large number of children. When later on the student dormitory proper was built, every student had his own iron bed with a wooden plank 木板鐵床. The lights are left on all the time and students are watched over during the whole night.\textsuperscript{12}

c. Severe Corporal Punishment

The following passage is from the memoirs of Yuan Shihai 賣世海, a disciple of the Fuliancheng, who later became the greatest Posture Painted Face 架子花臉 of our time (see chapter III).

I myself had the privilege of playing with him twice in the late 1980s in the famous piece Farewell My Concubine 《霸王別姬》: once in Beijing, in a charity performance for the Foundation for the Welfare of Chinese Theatre 中國戲劇福利基金會, and once in Dalian during the Chinese Arts Festival 中國藝術節 — The Summer in Dalian 大連之夏.


\textsuperscript{13} My personal collection.
On stage Maestro Yuan’s every tiniest movement captured the eyes of the audience; off stage he was so full of wit and had a wonderful sense of humour. When he was a child, his greatest desire was to enter a *Keban* and become a *Jingju* actor. Here is how he recalled his first experience of corporal punishment at the *Fuliancheng*:

It was an old rule over the years in the *Fuliancheng* to “seal the chests” and settle accounts at the end of the year. [During that period] we just practised every day and rehearsed. There were no more shows. This was the time when teachers settled accounts with students. Those who had done well were rewarded — with an increase in their pocket money — whereas those who had made mistakes were beaten.

……

“Where’s Da Bai 大白? Come here!” The Master finally broke the suffocating silence.

All of a sudden, everything stopped, all eyes focused on the covered courtyard, known as the *zaopeng* 罩棚. There was complete silence. A few seconds later, Li Shengguo 李盛國, the *shixiong* 師兄 (senior apprentice), stepped in front of the Master, trembling with fear. He answered in a low voice: “Shifu!”

Da Bai was his “little name” 小名. There was a habit in the *Keban*: no matter how old you were, even though you were the oldest *shixiong* of a particular period, and thirty years old or more, teachers would still call you by your “little name”. A *shixiong* did likewise to his *shidi* 師弟 (junior apprentice), to show

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14 See Ye Longzhang, p. 39. “Students are given one copper coin 大銅子 per day, which is enough to buy a sesame seed cake 餑餑 and a fried dough stick 油條. It is called pastry money 餑餑錢, or small pocket money 小份錢.”

15 See Yuan Shihai 李世芳 (oral account), Yuan Jing 李世芳, ed., *The Boundless World of Art* 《藝海無涯》 (1985), p. 44. “The central courtyard was very large, and this was where we did all our training. There were large round wooden pillars surrounding the courtyard, reaching above the level of the roof, and on these was a cover, with windows to let in air and light… This was called the *zaopeng*.”

16 *Shifu* 師傅 is a rather old fashioned way to address one’s teacher. I remember that I called all my *Xiqu* teachers *Shifu* when I was a child. Nowadays we usually use the more common term “Laoshi” 老師. However, *Shifu* carries more of the nuance of the traditional concept of a Master: “A teacher for one day, is a father for life.” 故一日為師,終身為父.” Hence, in Chinese characters we sometimes even write 師父 (父 means father) instead of 師傅, which literally reflects the close relation as well as the awe and respect felt by a student towards his or her teacher.

17 In a *Keban*, students of about the same age who were admitted within approximately the same period were given a word in common to form part of their stage names, e.g. Yuan Shihai 李世海, Li Shifang 李世芳, Ai Shiju 艾世菊, all had the word *shi* 世 in their names. They belonged to the same *ke* 科 (same period of time, or class, as in the American expression the Class of 1939). In the history of the *Fuliancheng*, there were altogether seven of these *ke*, using the words *yi* 益, *lian* 綿, *fu* 肥, *sheng* 盛, *shi* 世, *yuan* 元, and *yao* 餑. Altogether this represents a long history of forty-four years.
the intimacy between them. The Master went on to severely scold him by enumerating his wrong-doings. I didn’t really understand what was going on, as I had only joined a short while before. Later I heard that he had broken some of the rules of the Keban. After being spanked once, he had done it again. That’s why the Master was so furious.

“Get the bench!” the Master suddenly cried out. I was startled. By this time people from inside the building were gathered in the zhaopeng.

“Shifu, forgive me this time! Shifu, I’ll never do it again!”

*Tong*

Da Bai knelt down, and began begging, with his head knocking the ground and his hands clasped together in front of him.

The Shifu pulled a long face, without saying a word. Da Bai knew that he stood no chance of escaping punishment. Still begging, he stood up fearfully, went to get the bench (which served three purposes: eating, sleeping and bending over when being beaten) from the Southern House and placed it in the middle of the zhaopeng.

“Shifu! I beg you to let me off a few! I’ll never do it again! Shifu…”

He finally wiped his tears away with his hand, pulled down his pants, walked reluctantly to the bench and bent over. His *shixiong* Hao Xilun 郝喜倫 unhooked the bamboo plank from the nail placed on the wall outside the Buddha shrine. ‘So that’s what it’s used for!’ I thought to myself. I had never realized before that it was kept there for the exclusive purpose of beating students.

“Ten to begin with!”

*Shixiong* Hao Xilun raised the bamboo plank and began to beat Da Bai. Usually we say *beat the buttocks* 打屁股, but actually the place being beaten is the middle part of the thighs. This is because if the buttocks are hurt one cannot sit, but if the beating is on the middle of the thighs, not only can one sit on a chair with the edge of the buttocks, but also, when the wound becomes a scab, one can move without great hindrance while practicing. His first blow was slightly to the left, the second to the right, then the third in the middle. which had
already turned purple and red. If the bamboo were to be lifted again [for the fourth time], then there would be blood. The Keban practiced a system of “Art through Beating” 打戲. You were beaten as part of the learning process, and every time you broke the rules you were also punished. So they really are experts in the field of beating!

……After ten blows, the Shifu said:

“Another twenty blows” He was getting into more and more of a rage.

“Shifu! A little… less…I beg…you, plea…”

Da Bai was screaming and begging for mercy. In the end the Shifu let him off five of the twenty. Altogether it came to twenty-five blows. From the day I was born I had never witnessed such a scene. Before I entered a Keban I’d heard quite a lot about the beating and “holding the bench”, but even in my dreams I could never have imagined that it could be so frightening. 19

d. “Art through Beating” 打戲

While severe corporal punishment seemed to be reserved for gross misconduct, the occasional beating was a routine experience in a Keban. The general concept was that beating turned one into a useful person 不打不成材. It brought out one’s true potential. (Cf. ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child.’)

Beating could also serve the purpose of correcting a mistake in the execution of a movement, or of enhancing the speed of an action. For instance, when a student was practising the hutiao 虎跳 (cartwheels), the teacher always gave the “second leg” a hit so as to prevent the student’s natural tendency to be loose and lazy. In order to avoid the hit or at least make it less painful, the student would exert himself to the utmost and try to do the movement as rapidly and as neatly as possible.

18 Here is another quotation from Xiao Changhua (Xu Jichuan, vol. 1, p. 65.): “Among the students, one of the senior members of the class was assigned the title Chief Beater 掌刑大師兄. The title alone makes one realize how often the beatings took place. At that time there was a saying: ‘Art comes from beating’ 戲是打出來的.”

19 My translation. Yuan Shihai, pp. 53-56.
Here is another passage from the memoirs of Yuan Shihai, from which we can get a glimpse of a student practising, as well as of the mental states of the young students in the class.

*Shixiong* Hao Xilun came towards me and asked: “What do you know? Do you know how to do a *nading* 手頂 (handstand)?”

“Yes.”

“Just follow the others. Don’t let your legs down until I finish counting to one hundred!”

Following his order we all put our hands on the floor and legs up against the wall, one right next to the other. We practiced handstands against the Eastern Wall.

“Pia! Pia! One!”

“Pia! Pia! Two!”

“Pia! Pia! Three!”

*Shixiong* Hao Xilun sat in the chair drinking tea, smoking, and tapping the table with a length of rattan. He always tapped twice for each count. When I was learning the *nading* with my teacher Xu Deyi 許德義 I only had to hold the handstand for fifty counts. It didn’t feel too hard. The first fifty counts were very quickly over. My arms felt a bit sore 发酸. I lifted them up alternately, and swung my wrists about to try and relax a bit. Seventy counts passed. I was sweating. My arms began to feel numb. I bit my lip tightly and held on to the position.

“Pia! Pia! Seventy-nine!”

“Pia! Pia! Fifty!”

“Pia! Pia! Fifty-one!”

Oh! What’s the matter? It was so hard to get up to eighty, how come it had dropped back to fifty? Of course I knew later that this was a common practice 家常便飯.
Sweat dripped onto the floor from my face, my arms were numb and trembling, my waist shaking. I slid my legs up and down on the wall to take the load off my arms, but it made me even more exhausted.

“Pia! Pia! Seventy-one! … Seventy-two!”

“Putong!” Someone’s leg dropped heavily on the floor. “Pia! Pia!” was the sound as shixiong Hao Xilun used the rattan to hit him on the buttock.

“Ouch! Ouch!”

“Get back up!” shixiong Hao Xilun cried sternly. However, some students were prepared to get beaten just in order to rest for a few seconds.

“Ninety-two! …” Everybody’s sweat was dripping onto the floor, in a series of little “puddles.” My arms didn’t seem to exist anymore. I just saw them there, trembling more than ever.

“Almost there, almost there, I don’t want to be the one to fall down and get beaten.” I was puffing and blowing like a bellows, I wanted to cry, but tried my best not to.

Under the zhaopeng the sound of panting and sobbing grew louder and louder.

Shixiong: “Quiet! Quiet! The more you pant the more you tire yourself. This is for your own good. You think you can learn anything without suffering? Without a good handstand, without power in your waist, and strength in your arms, how can you ever go on to do somersaults? Any more of that noise and I’ll start counting again from the beginning…”

“Putong! Putong!” At that very moment, even before the shixiong had finished his sentence, somebody’s arms gave way and his body crashed into the person next to him. All the ones next to him collapsed. Naturally some students seized this opportunity to take a break. I was lucky enough to be one of them. The ones who had been pushed down by others were safe and sound, but the first one to fall inevitably received a few blows of the rattan.

In a Keban, it was a common thing for students to be beaten. “Beating makes one a useful person.” This is the principle of Heaven and Earth. That’s why teachers always held a rattan or a flat length of bamboo in their hand. If
someone were sluggish, or too slow in learning, or not doing things the way they had been taught then the teacher just gave him a few blows. This was called daxi 打戲 (Art through Beating).”

e. The Teaching Policies of the Fuliancheng

In the primary stage of the Fuliancheng, Ye Chunshan already declared: “We establish the Keban not for fame or money, but for the sole purpose of educating and cultivating the new generations of the Pear Orchard, Liyuan 梨園, so that the profession can be everlasting.”

Based on this principle, Ye had very clear policies as to how to run the school.

• Everybody on an equal basis 一視同仁

First of all, he insisted that every student should be treated alike. No privilege should be given and no discrimination should be made. He was therefore very careful in accepting the children of famous artists, partly because they might have been spoiled, and also because it might create difficulties and complications for the teachers to discipline them in cases of wrong doing. Ye also refused to allow his own children to enter the Fuliancheng for fear that they might be getting special treatment and privilege. It was only when the other Keban to which they had originally been sent were closed down that his children were finally accepted into their father’s own school.

• To teach according to ability and character 因材施教

When a student was first admitted, the primary task was to learn basic skills. During this period, he was carefully observed by the Head and the teachers both in class and out of class. In order to assign him to a certain type of role later, his general features, flexibility, voice quality, even his spontaneous little gestures and movements, his hobbies, character and temperament, were all taken into account.

It was most important to enter into a type of role which fitted one’s personality and physique. If, after some time, the first choice did not seem appropriate, teachers with

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insight could often perceive the student’s potential in another area and recommend him to try another role-type. Once the student got on the right track, he could often transform himself from an ordinary actor to an outstanding artist. Yuan Shihai was first trained in the role of laosheng in the Fuliancheng. It was Xiao Changhua who saw the jiazi hualian 架子花臉 quality in him just by catching a glimpse of him as he did a “freeze”, liangxiang 亮相. He then advised him to change role. Ye Chunshan’s son, Ye Shengzhang 葉盛章, started with the wusheng type. However, he was short and not sufficiently good looking. After his father discussed the matter with the teachers, he took on the chou role. As a result, he became the Maestro of this type.

The Keban was indeed run like a big family. The Head and the teachers were like parents. They considered it their responsibility to see to it that their “children” eventually attained a certain level of achievement. Hence, even the most untalented, who could neither perform nor teach, or someone who could no longer sing after his voice “broke” 倒蒼, would be sent to learn some other skills. Such a person might become a member of the musical ensemble or one of the backstage crew (e.g. make-up artist, dresser, and so on.)

In short, everybody was guaranteed at least to be able to earn a living.

• Strictness in teaching

Although performing was a daily routine and a means of living, Ye and all the teachers were most conscientious and meticulous about the quality of their repertoire. This was precisely the reason why so many Jingju Masters and excellent artists were generated from the Fuliancheng. Every piece in the repertoire was rehearsed for ten or more days, even as long as a whole month. Some pieces involving difficult martial arts scenes or scenes with many participants 群打武戲 could take up to two months for practice and rehearsal. When the play was ready, it had to go through the personal inspection of Ye Chunshan, Xiao Changhua (Head of Teaching), and the various teachers in charge. It was through several rounds of rehearsals and inspections that a piece could finally arrive at a satisfactory level. It was only when no mistake could be found in the

22 See Yuan Shihai, p. 60. Liangxiang 亮相 is a momentary “freeze” with complete concentration 全神凝聚, usually after a series of movements, or when the character enters or exits the scene.
performance of both the principal and the supporting actors that the piece was allowed to be put on stage.

As can be seen from the above, in the old days, to become an actor of Jingju one had to undergo an extremely tough training, so tough that it might seem inhumane and cruel to our eyes today. However, it was precisely this hardship that shaped the actor into a tough fearless artist. In the words of Xun Huisheng 荀慧生, one of the Four Great Dan Masters 四大名旦:

So I came to realize this truth: that whenever one encounters difficulty or danger, one must never allow oneself to be defeated, one must never retreat. Be resolute, and no obstacle is insurmountable! Through hard work and perseverance you can eventually master any skill, no matter how complicated or difficult it may be. This important insight has guided me in my studies, in my career and in my daily life, to this day.23

由此，我悟出一個道理：當人遇到艱難困苦甚至危險的時候，是絕對不能低頭退讓的，只要把心一橫，就沒有過不去的“火焰山”！任何複雜的、尖端的技術技能，只要你能刻苦，肯鑽研，就總有掌握它的一天。這個重要的啓示，我一直把它應用到我的學習、業務、生活諸方面去，直到今日。

Gai Jiaotian 盖叫天, the wusheng Master, is reported as having described it somewhat differently:

On the one hand he had to recognize that the strict and relentless training of the Kaban had provided him with a solid foundation; on the other hand, it was unbearably bitter for him to look back on those days and recall the intense pain and the constant beatings he had suffered. And yet it was precisely the hardship that had enabled him to become the fully-fledged artist that he later was, to form his personality, to be a person for whom nothing in the world was impossible. This was because from his earliest childhood, he had always worked things out, he had created the “possible” out of the “impossible”.24

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2. The Modern School for Xiqu 戲曲學校

The School for Xiqu 戲曲學校 (abbreviated as 戲校 Xixiao) is the modern institution for Xiqu education and training. These exist in several provinces and cities. After 1949, and the establishment of the People’s Republic, the Xixiao has taken the place of the Keban and has since changed the entire system and purpose of schooling. First of all, corporal punishment was abolished. Instead of depending on private financial resources, all Xixiao are run by the government. Students no longer have to earn money for the organization, but once admitted enjoy everything free (board, clothing and footwear for practice, use of props and costumes, medical care, and so). The Xixiao has also incorporated other subjects such as Chinese, mathematics, history, geometry, natural science, music, physical education into its curriculum. In other words, it is the equivalent of a primary / secondary school while at the same time putting stress on professional training. I should add that this refers to the recent past: in the past few decades there have undoubtedly been further changes.

Although there are fundamental differences between the old and the new systems, the Xixiao has nonetheless inherited the valuable experience of the Keban in terms of fostering Xiqu talents. We can see a particularly clear lineage between the Fuliancheng and the National School for Chinese Traditional Theatre in Beijing. Not only did they share a considerable number of teachers, but more importantly, the latter has carried forward and enhanced the method of training of the old Keban.

Let us now examine the actual training process of the National School (now Academy) for Chinese Traditional Theatre 中國戲曲學校 (學院)
Prior to any other learning, all students must first undergo basic training for legs, waist, and handstands. This preparatory stage is indispensable for the building of physical fitness, muscle strength, agility, speed and endurance. During the process, students also learn (quite unconsciously) to adjust their breathing 調息 so that it will be co-ordinated with all the movements. When the qi is held in the diaphragm (dantian) 氣沉丹田, the breathing will become even, smooth, and almost imperceptible. That is why we seldom see an actor panting for breath even after an intense fighting or climactic “cadenza” passage.

We now take a look at the teaching of fundamental skills, as conducted in the modern institutions.

No matter which Hangdang (types of role, see chapter III) one later belongs to, all students begin with classes in Basic Training, jiben-gong 基本功. These comprise:

a. Leg-training  

\textit{Video 68} : Leg Skills

In order to produce exquisite movements, suppleness of the legs is a prerequisite. But being supple does not mean being weak. The first thing for a Kunqu / Jingju student to tackle, therefore, is to work on both the flexibility and the strength of the legs. For the first three months (approximately) of the tui-gong class, teachers will concentrate on this.

Students begin by putting their leg up on a barre and stretching 壓腿 in different directions (to the front 正壓 / crosswise 斜壓 / to one side 旁壓). They press their body down, ideally with the forehead touching the toes while keeping the leg and the upper body totally straight. The foot must be flexed upwards 勾腳面 so that the tendon can be extended to the maximum. The whole body then acquires a greater readiness 團緊 for
any movement. After about ten minutes or so, the student will put down his or her leg and kick it in various directions (front / side / cross) 悠腿 so as to relax the muscles.

When both legs are done, teachers will summon the students to the centre, where they queue up, and practise (following the teacher’s rhythmic calls 口令) the five major kicking exercises, namely the front kick 正腿, the cross kick 斜腿 or 十字腿, the side kick 旁腿, the open (towards the outside) circular kick 蹿腿, the closed (towards the inside) circular kick 蓋腿. These serve to develop muscle strength and speed. The arms have their own positions, and must remain unaffected during the kicking exercises.

To improve the flexibility of a student, he or she may also be asked to lie down, then one teacher will hold his / her leg on the floor, while another teacher presses his / her other leg as far upward as possible 搬腿. Similar stretching can also be done with the student standing against the wall.

Following the progress of the students, the time for basic leg training will be shortened. More complicated items, always concentrating on leg-skills (or leg and waist), will gradually be introduced to the class. These include various movements, such as:

Video 69 : zanzi 鞫子 (sequence of flexible movements)

Video 70 : shuanyao 涮腰 (twirling-waist)

Video 71 : jiaozhu 攪柱 (swirling-legs)

Video 72 : fanshen 翻身 (twisting turn, like a hawk 鴞子)

Video 73 : feijiao 飛腳 (jump with circle kick)

Video 74 : xuanzi 旋子 (whirl)

Video 75 : saotangtui 掃堂腿 + xuanzi 旋子 (sweeping-leg + whirl)

Video 76 : feijiao 飛腳 + piantui 蹿腿 + xuanzi 旋子 (jump with circle kick + circular kick + whirl)
All these are “components”, or parts of the “vocabulary”, to be used later in choreographed combinations *shenduan zuhe* 身段組合, or *Enchaînements* to use Ballet terminology.

*Yuanchang* 圆場, the act of “running” on stage (or more accurately, “moving forward rapidly”, as it is also used when the actor is symbolically in a boat or on a horse), is another fundamental skill taught to beginners. With both knees naturally and slightly bent, the student steps forward moving from heel (again, the foot flexed) to toes. The upper body must remain stable (unshaken) no matter how fast the two feet alternate. The skill of *yuanchang* 圆場 is so important that, without a good mastery of it, one can hardly “move” on stage.

**Video 77 : yuanchang 圆場**

b. **Carpet training  tanzi-gong 毯子功**

**Video 78**

This is a class for all sorts of somersaults 翻筋斗, leaps 腾空 and falling 跌撲 techniques. As this involves more dangerous movements, which must be done on a carpet or a soft mattress to ensure the safety of students, it is named *tanzi-gong* (carpet training).

This class concentrates on developing strength and impetus 爆发力 while putting great stress on the upper body. Students begin by doing handstands 拿頂 to build up the muscles and control of both arms. This practice also allows them to gain a clear concept of directions when their body is upside down. The practitioners first keep their body straight, then, after holding the position for a while, they repeat it with the waist curved 塌腰.

To enhance the suppleness of the waist, there are exercises such as:
xiaoyao 下腰: bending the upper body backward until the hands touch the ground, or even better, with one’s hands holding one’s ankles.

tanyao 弹腰: bending backward as much as possible but without the hands touching the ground, then flexing the waist with the aim to increase strength and muscle control.

gangyao 杠腰: the teacher balances the student with his / her waist on his lap. He first gently rocks the student’s body from side to side like a seesaw, then presses both sides downward simultaneously until the hands (ideally) touch the feet. During the whole course the student must remain totally relaxed and let the body drop naturally without any resistance. When it is done, the student will bend forward, squat down, and the teacher will then slap 拍打 the student’s waist to let the body regain a normal feel.

Having acquired the basic skills of the upper body, students are introduced to different kinds of somersault. In this training the assistance and protection of the teachers are crucial and indispensable.

c. Training with Weapons  bazi-gong 把子功

Video 79

Bazi is a general term for all stage “weapons”. While they originated from Martial Arts wushu 武術, many of the “fighting sequences” 套路 as well as their focus are modified to suit the art of theatrical performance. In other words, the actual use of wushu (in the sense of actual fighting and defending) has been greatly reduced. Movements are “beautified” and become more dance-like so as to fit the new purpose. However, the different ways of holding and manipulating the weapons 器械持法 / 用法 are directly inherited from wushu. For example, the posture of holding a sword 劍 is different from that of holding a “cutlass” 單刀. Even the posture of the other hand (the hand without the weapon) should be altered accordingly, i.e. when you hold a sword with one hand
your other hand should take the form of jianzhi 劍指 (with the index and third finger pointing out and the three other fingers touching each other); when you hold a cutlass your other hand should take the form of an open palm 掌, and so on. Apart from teaching specific knowledge regarding different weapons as well as the fundamental fighting sequences, teachers will pay much attention to students’ co-ordination of the upper and the lower body while using a weapon or weapons (co-ordination and correlation between arms / hands, eyes / head, midriff and feet, including the manner of stepping 手眼身法步). In addition, they pay attention to the agility, the speed and the rhythm of fighting; and especially the inner spirit and the outer appearance of the Wu style. These are the main focuses of teaching.

d. Training of Body Shape and Posture 形體訓練

Video 80

While other types of training lay stress on building strength, flexibility, agility and muscle control, this type emphasizes such things as basic steps, postures, arm movements, different hand gestures, and the use of “water sleeves” 水袖 (long white sleeves extending from the costume). As always, the co-ordination of every part of the body and the fluency of movement are of extreme importance.

This is a training course designed for beginners. Before learning any of the traditional repertoire, one must first know how to sit, stand, walk and move. As a matter of fact, students are required even in daily life to sit in a manner as stable and majestic 穩定 as a temple bell; to stand as straight and upright 挺拔 as a pine tree; and to walk as smoothly 順暢 as a gust of wind 坐如鐘，站如松，走如風. All of this is quite in line with the ancient educational principles of the Zhou dynasty: one’s inner qualities must be reflected through one’s outer appearance. (see chapter III)
3. Special features of Xiqu teaching

a. Passing on the art and skills through the “traditional repertoire” 以戲帶功

Once the body is ready, the training continues through the process of learning an extensive number of items in the traditional repertoire. There are several reasons for this teaching process.

First, as is the case with general education, the artistic legacy is most highly valued. We can use the term “traditional repertoire” 傳統戲, in its generic sense of the overall heritage of Xiqu. We can also use “traditional repertoire” to refer to a series of outstanding classic excerpts, in which the artistic standards (set by former great artists) have reached an exemplary level. This can refer to several or all of the following disciplines: singing, recitation, acting and movement or shenduan, and martial arts. These classic excerpts become the models for training. There are also in the “traditional repertoire” some exceptional creations and special skills that are worth passing on to the next generation. The “traditional repertoire” must consist, above all, of works that are literally, aesthetically or ethically most appealing to a Chinese audience, or else it would not have survived for such a long time. This, in turn, has provided a long lasting opportunity for actors of different generations to make their contributions and render the works even more refined and elaborate. “Traditional repertoire” is therefore, on the one hand, the artistic accumulation of past generations, and on the other hand, a treasure-house of materials which can be still further enhanced by living artists. Very often, we judge how much basic knowledge an actor possesses and how solid his foundation is, by seeing how much of the “traditional repertoire” he has learned and performed. An actor who is well versed in the “traditional repertoire” is like a writer who has read thousands of books. It will be to his great advantage as an actor, or indeed later on if he wants to become a director or playwright.

Second, and this is common to all Chinese arts, it is not the independent perfection of appearance that is sought but always the unity of spirit and form 形神兼備. That was why, as previously mentioned in this chapter, Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 assigned Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 to arrange Wang Xizhi’s thousand words into a rhyming text. Magnificent as Maestro Wang’s calligraphy was, it still seemed to be lacking something
if it was just a series of isolated characters without interrelated meanings. When those meanings were given, the outer beauty was immediately supported by an inner strength. In Xiqu training, similarly, everything is to be taught within a context. Young students first gain from the teacher the perfect outer appearance of a character (including the gestures, movements, and facial expressions), even though at this stage, like children reciting poems, they may not even be able to relate their own emotions to their actions. However, they are given every “tool” for a successful characterization. When they become more experienced in life and in art, they will enhance the whole creative process by incorporating their personal feelings, sensibility, and technical strengths.

Third, it is practically impossible to teach anything outside the consideration of role-type. There is no abstract way of acting in Chinese Classical Theatre. We cannot conduct a workshop, and, say, try to explore the facial expressions and bodily movements of fear and anger. It just does not work that way, because all stylization carries the features of a certain type of role. No matter how green or advanced you are as a student, you always learn the art through repertoire. It depends then on the teacher to choose the right one that suits your level.

Fourth, through the repertoire, we actually learn how to handle different costumes, shoes, and headdress. This is something unique to Chinese Classical Theatre. In ancient China there was a strict clothing etiquette which varied according to rank, class and circumstances, and the very concept was brought forward to the stage. All costumes in Kunqu and Jingju are classified into five major categories, regardless of the time period (different dynasties) and seasons. They are mang 鳳 (ceremonial robe, worn by royalty and high ranking officials), kao 靠 (armour, worn by generals when going to battle), pi 袍 (household wear of a wealthy family), xuezi 褶子 (casual wear), and yi 衣 (all other types of clothing and costume accessories fall into this category). Since these costumes are different in shape, texture, weight, and length, it requires training and

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practice to learn how to wear them well, and how to use them (and the accessories which go with them) to enhance the portrayal of characters. There is generally an “order” in which such things should be taught, so that the student can progress step by step through increasing difficulties and not be overwhelmed by them.

Let us now have a closer look at this use of the repertoire in training, with specific regard to costume. In wusheng training, for example, the teacher will usually start with:

- *Shi Xiu Investigates the Village* 《石秀探莊》 (*Kunqu*)  Role: Shi Xiu 《石秀》

The actor wears a set of *guayiku* 𠡠衣裤 — a black tightly fitting upper garment and trousers, with rows of buttons in the front and on the sleeves, and a silk rope binding across the chest. A belt with long tassels, termed *dadai* 大带, hangs right in the middle from the waistline to the instep. Although it is a decorative element, like many of the accessories in theatre costumes, the belt also serves the purpose of characterization.

There is a technique called kicking the tasseled belt - *tidadai* 踢大带, kicking it to the hand or up onto the shoulder. This is used to enhance the character’s heroic bearing often before a “freeze” 亮相, or to externalize a state of mind, such as determination, or a readiness to take an action, etc. So through this item in the traditional repertoire the student will at the same time learn how to handle the *dadai*, a very basic technique of the wusheng with regard to his costume. The headdress he wears is a soft hexagonal soft hat (*luomao* 羅帽) inside a round straw hat (*caomaoquan* 草帽圈); Shi Xiu disguised himself as a woodman in order to investigate the geographic situation of Zhujiazhuang 祝家莊, a village built like a labyrinth. The hat is made of soft material, and the actor’s footwear is a pair of ankle-length boots with flat soles (*baodi* 薄底 or *kuaijue* 快靴).

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26 My personal collection.
This kind of costume is worn by characters who are not military but who excel in martial skills. It is relatively simple and rather tight to the body. The only accessory is the *dadai*. The student only has to deal with this. Moreover, a tight costume shows every part of the body clearly, so that no physical mistakes or bad habits can be concealed by the actor’s clothes.

- *The Centipede Mountain* 《蜈蚣嶺》 (*Kunqu*)  Role: Wu Song 武松

A long sleeveless monk’s habit is now added on top of the *guayiku*. On the left side a “waist sword” 腰刀 is hung on a thin rope covered by the tasseled belt *dadai*. The actor holds a “duster” and wears a long wig of human hair down to his waist (both the duster and the long hair hanging down signify that Wu Song is disguised as an itinerant monk, 行腳僧. The whole appearance 扮相 of this character is rather burdensome to the performer. He must be aware that, while he is executing every movement correctly and beautifully, the long hair, the duster, the tasseled belt, and the waist sword will not obstruct each other in any way. The difficulty is therefore one level higher than the previous excerpt.

Pic. 12  Pei Yanling as Wu Song.

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27 My personal collection.
• Escaping in the Night 《夜奔》 (Kunqu)  Role: Lin Chong 林沖

The actor is now wearing a long “arrow” garment, down to his ankles called jianyi 箭衣. His headdress is a type of fancy helmet called daoyingkui 倒缨盔, and is made of hard material, which naturally increases the weight on the performer’s head. The sword hanging on his left-hand side has a very long tassel, which can very easily become entangled with the dadai.

This excerpt places equal stress on singing, recitation, acting, and movements. Besides meeting the requirements of each discipline, the performer must make sure that every accessory is in place after each set of movement (of course this is all part of the teaching process). In addition, it is much more demanding in terms of characterization given the complexity of Lin Chong’s emotions and state of mind. Lin is a loyal and upright military official. He is framed, kills his enemies and escapes to the outlaw base on Mount Liang.

• A single Arrow’s Revenge 《一箭仇》 (Jingju)  Role: Shi Wengong 史文恭

The main robe is still an “arrow garment” jianyi with a tasseled belt dadai. A waist-length beard is added, and a pair of boots with 2-3 inches high soles, known as “thick soles” houdi 厚底, which undoubtedly somewhat increases the actor’s difficulty of movement. The beard moves with the body, and sometimes if insufficient attention is paid, it may obscure the eyes or become entangled with the weapon.

28 My personal collection.
29 Ibid.
The “thick soles” houdi incline a little downwards at the back. Two lengths of string hold the boots in place. Many wusheng students, when practicing, deliberately do not use the string and try to “hold” the boots in place without any attachment. So once they use the string on stage, they will feel extremely at ease, almost as if they are floating.

Shi Wengong’s headdress zhajin 扎巾 has a soft part and a hard part adorned with fluffy balls. As the top is hard and heavier than the bottom part, the actors must be very careful when moving his head, or the whole thing will easily fall down. “Dropping the headdress” tiantou 摺頭 is considered to be a great disgrace in a Xiqu performance.

In the second part of this piece, this headdress is taken away and the actor’s long hair shuaifa 甩髮 is exposed, signifying the character is defeated. The student then has the chance to learn the techniques relating to the shuaifa 甩髮, generally used by male characters when defeated, or encountering great disaster and misfortune. (see chapter III, video 7, for the use of shuaifa)
At the end of this item in the repertoire, the actor, still wearing his “thick soles”, should do a series of “whirls” (xuanzi 旋子, see above), usually no less than eight, while keeping his beard, his long hair and his tasseled belt dadai exactly in place.

- **Overturing the Chariots 《挑滑車》 (Kunqu)**  
  Role: Gao Chong 高寵

  This piece requires first of all physical strength, as the costume and headdress (entirely made of hard material) are heavy and the boots have “thick soles”. When the actor makes a quick, low turn fanshen 翻身, for instance, he has to utilize the four flags in his back to manifest the speed of his movement. When he moves forward rapidly, executing the movement known as yuanchang 圓場, the four flags have to remain motionless (ideally). (see chapter III under daomadan)

  The overall gesture and movements when wearing armour kao are much grander and broader than when wearing other tight costumes. The actor must also learn to avoid hitting his kaoqi 靠旗 (flags) when manipulating a weapon. (see chapter III)

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33 My personal collection.
34 Ibid.
From the above examples, we can see that a logical sequence of repertoire learning with consideration given to costume is absolutely necessary. This is something unique in Xiqu training, and it is a valuable teaching experience passed down from former generations. For the actor, reaching a state of being totally at ease with his costume (whatever category the costume belongs to) requires a great deal of arduous practice and proper training.

b. Oral transmission: kouchuan xinshou 口傳心授

*Kouchuan xinshou* 口傳心授, means to pass on an art in person, from teacher to student, orally and physically. This is a process of giving and receiving through the “heart” 心授. It is the traditional method of teaching and learning the art of Xiqu. As a matter of fact, it is the method of teaching and learning all Chinese traditional arts.

This special term first appeared in relation to calligraphy: “The only way to learn calligraphy is through the way of kouchuan xinshou, or the essence could never be known.”

35 學書之法，非口傳心授，不得其精。”

There is an interesting passage revealing the same truth in the Book of Master Zhuangzi:

Duke Huan, seated above in his hall, was (once) reading a book, and the wheelwright Bian was making a wheel below it. Laying aside his hammer and chisel, Bian went up the steps, and said, “I venture to ask your Grace what words you are reading?”

The duke said, “The words of the sages.”

“Are those sages alive?” Bian continued.

“They are dead,” was the reply.

“Then,” said the other, “what you, my Ruler, are reading are only the dregs and sediments of those old men.”

The duke said, “How should you, a wheelwright, have anything to say about the book which I am reading? If you can explain yourself, very well; if you cannot, you shall, die!”

The wheelwright said, “Your servant will look at the thing from the point of view of his own art. In making a wheel, if I cut slowly, the spokes will be loose and the wheel is not solid. If I work quickly, the spokes will be tight and will not fit. If I cut neither too slowly nor too quickly, I do well with my hands and feel it in my heart. I cannot put it into words, but there is indeed some know-how in it. I cannot teach the knack to my son, nor can my son learn it from me. Thus it is that I am in my seventieth year, and am (still) making wheels in my old age. But these ancients, and what it was not possible for them to convey, are dead and gone: so then what you, my Ruler, are reading is but their dregs and sediments!”

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桓公讀書於堂上，輪扁斲輪於堂下，釋椎鑿而上，問桓公曰：“問公之所讀者何言邪？”公曰：“聖人之言也。”曰：“聖人在乎？”公曰：“已死矣。”曰：“然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫！”桓公曰：“寡人讀書，輪人安得議乎！有說則可，無說則死。”輪扁曰：“臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫。” — 《莊子·天道》

This little story lays stress on one point: art cannot be passed on through books or the mind; the “real thing”, the essence, can only be grasped by the heart.

When learning stage movements shenduan, for example, the teacher will keep on demonstrating until the student can (first) remember the sequence, the choreography luzi 路子. Then he will ask the student to repeat the movements bit by bit until every tiniest movement looks satisfactory. In the event of any imperfection, or incorrect dynamics, the teacher will again show the student the right way to do it instead of just verbally pointing out his faults. Or, he will correct the student’s posture and movement by physically adjusting his body, so that the student can feel the difference (in his own

36 Translation based on Legge and Wang Rongpei.
body) and thus “save” the “information” in his muscle memory. Another crucial thing is that the teacher will always sing out the Rhythmic Patterns along with every movement. Part of the reason for this is to let the student familiarize himself with the Rhythmic Patterns prior to the actual rehearsal with the musical ensemble. But more importantly, through the teacher’s vocal rendering of the tone and rhythm of the musical instruments, he can most precisely convey the mood, the energy, and the spirit required of the movement. In other words, this is one of the most effective ways of teaching the student both the spirit and the form of his art.

In a Xiqu training classroom, we seldom hear oral questioning. What the student does is to try his best to catch the energy, the dynamics and the momentum of the movement from start to finish, as shown by the teacher. Careful observation, continuous practice, and the teacher’s unflagging patience in correcting faults – these are the essential elements in Xiqu training. It is for this reason that nothing else (no recordings, no videos) can ever replace the role of a Xiqu teacher and his personal relationship with the student. This relationship, as of master and disciple, is at the heart of the whole process. It is based on the student’s absolute trust in his master, and the master’s parental love for his disciple. It is a relationship that goes beyond the art of the theatre, and is to do with life itself. Many of the greatest masters of the art of Xiqu performance, such as Maestro Yu Zhenfei, were also inspirational teachers, not only of their art, but of the art of living.
Chapter V  

_Xiqu "Reform", and Further Exploration of Chinese Traditional Aesthetics_

In this chapter, I want to tackle the issue of the so-called “reform” 改革 and “revitalization” 振興 of Chinese Traditional Theatre as I have witnessed it in recent decades. I will talk about the different means, employed mostly in Mainland China, to “rescue” or “enrich” the art form. Two particular stage productions with visual materials will be cited. These examples, although both on the less successful side, will in turn give us a chance to reflect on what exactly is the true essence of the aesthetics of Chinese Traditional Theatre, and how that essence can be lost or preserved in the process of “reform”.

**A Period of Confusion**

In the early stage of China’s political reform policy 開放政策, the influx of various forms of entertainment from abroad seriously challenged the dominating position of _Xiqu_ as an art form. People’s curiosity towards the dazzling outside world greatly lessened their interest in their own culture. In the eighties of the last century, when I was studying in Shanghai with Maestro Yu Zhenfei and others, I witnessed with my own eyes a series of measures which emerged at that time in the hope of rescuing and rejuvenating this old art. They included: adding western musical instruments to expand the size of the Chinese traditional ensemble, inserting simple western harmonies into the musical composition, using sophisticated lighting and stage settings, and other similar modifications. However, the results were seldom satisfactory. I personally attended a _Xiqu_ concert in Shanghai in 1986, where a western symphony orchestra was used together with the traditional _Kunqu / Jingju_ ensemble. Not only was the latter barely audible, there were moments when the two conductors (of the orchestra and of the ensemble) “disagreed” with each other and one musical group was actually a bar behind the other. On the same occasion, even a jazz drum and electronic organ were used to accompany the elegant genre of Shanghai Opera _Yueju_ 越劇 (also known as Shaoxing Opera). The sound of these instruments clashed with the mood of the music, and totally disturbed the free and easy style of _Yueju_ singing. In some ways, what they were doing
could not even compare to what had been attempted in the earlier “Revolutionary Operas” 樣板戲, which at least gathered together the finest artists and musicians of the time and made use of their genuine expertise.

In recent years, there has been an on-going trend to engage spoken drama directors 話劇導演 to direct the Xiqu repertoire. The original idea probably arose out of the following concerns:

• that Xiqu is declining because it is out of date and beyond the understanding of the younger generation;
• that stylization itself has become stereotyped and lifeless and new elements must be injected.

The argument was that we need drama directors (who are more intellectual and supposed to be more up-to-date) to see the whole thing from a “new perspective”. Instead of appreciating the artistry and skills of the performers, we should introduce new elements so as to transform this traditional art into something more appealing to a young audience. But in practice, it was not as simple and easy as this. The following example (witnessed in 1974 by a fellow artist, Geng Tianyuan) reveals one of the crucial problems:

(In a preliminary rehearsal, the director is trying to give the Act a “structure”…)

(D = director; A = Actor)

D: Now, enter as specified in the script. 按劇本規定情景上。

A: But how am I supposed to do that? 我怎麼上？

D: Just come on stage, in the mood specified by the script! 按劇本規定的情緒上啊！

A: But how? 怎麼上啊？

D: What do you mean how? Just walk on with your own two legs! 怎麼怎麼上？兩條腿走上來啊！
The atmosphere grew tense, and the director began to think that this actor was being deliberately difficult. The leader of the musical ensemble approached him and whispered:

“Director, I think what he meant was, what rhythm should he adopt when he comes on stage?” He then suggested a percussive Rhythmic Pattern 輪鼓點 to the actor. In no time, the actor entered, in the mood “specified by the script”, with no difficulty at all.

D：That’s it! That’s exactly what I meant!

The director finally got what he wanted, though he may not have realized why and how the problem was so suddenly solved.

Most drama directors do not truly understand the importance and the indispensable function of the percussion ensemble. They themselves are incapable of utilizing percussive patterns to enhance acting, and externalize inner emotions. Similar problems also occurred in other areas. In Xiqu every single idea, whether it is something as simple as coming on stage, or something more complex such as the revelation of inner thoughts, can only be expressed through proper stylization.

Because of their ignorance of the fundamentals of Xiqu, drama directors were often unable to handle basic issues independently. A post, termed Technical Director 技術導演, was therefore created to make up this deficiency. The Technical Director(s) (it could be a person or a whole team) were in charge of all matters regarding technical Xiqu skills, i.e. the use of stylization 程式的運用. This referred to such things as choreography of fighting scenes 武打設計 and movement-sets 身段組合, and the choice of appropriate Rhythmic Patterns for acting and movements, in consultation with the Leader of the Ensemble. In other words, the drama director was to give the principal ideas, and the Technical Director provided him / her with all the means with which to realize those ideas on stage.
It was a potentially feasible method of collaboration. And yet it was rarely successful. The fatal weakness, in my opinion, lay in the fact that the whole production team, including the official “leader” 領導, the director, and the stage designer, had only a smattering of knowledge concerning Chinese Classical Theatre. Also, the drama directors brought in to “rejuvenate” Xiqu, were placed in a supreme and dominant position. Instead of carrying out a careful study of the aesthetic principles of Xiqu before getting involved, most of them simply imposed their own “creative” ideas on a production, which, unfortunately, did no more than reflect their own inadequacy and superficiality in the understanding of the art form as a whole.

Example 1: *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699) 《1699·桃花扇》
(a programme of Hong Kong Arts Festival, 2007)

In order to create a contrast with the simplicity of the conventional Xiqu stage, one of the most distinctive features of the productions directed by drama directors has been to put great stress on stage design, to the extent that the whole production becomes an exposition of the artistic concepts of the Director and Stage Designer, rather than an exquisite performance by the actors.

Here is the stage setting of the 2007 production of *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699).

The general concept is to create a traditional Chinese open stage 三面觀眾 within a western stage frame. The two side-corridors 左右迴廊 and the chairs in Ming style serve as a “waiting area” 候場區 for the performers and stage-hands (jianchang 檢場).

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creating another two sides of the audience.  

The “wall” on the three sides recreates a huge painting named “The Prosperous Southern Capital” 南都繁會圖.  

The whole structure suggests a museum, the designer regarding Kunqu as an art exhibit in a museum, as was indeed stated by the designer Xiao Lihe.

In addition, a huge movable frame, another open stage within a stage, serves to “guide” and “confine” the audience’s attention, or to indicate another time and space in relation to what is happening in the general time and space of the greater stage outside it.

1. Three-dimensional Stage Setting

When I was watching this performance in 2007, my very first impression was that the setting overwhelmed the entire stage and that the actors became much “smaller” than usual. The depth of the stage, which was now outlined in three dimensions, significantly distanced the performers from the audience. Although every element remained typically Chinese (the chairs, the painting, the make-up and costumes), the overall effect was strongly discordant and redundant. It was as if a western neck-tie (the stage setting) had been added onto a traditional Chinese robe (the Kunqu performance). Even though the tie was elaborately designed in a typically Chinese style, the two things were nevertheless incompatible. The audience at that performance could simply not derive

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2 *Jianchang* (literally, inspectors of the stage) are the backstage crew, in charge of setting tables and chairs [there are a number of ways to set the table(s) and chair(s) in order to indicate different environments], carrying in and out the props, and so on, during the performance. In the old days, even the *jianchang* had opportunities to display their special skills. An example of this is The Drop 下高, when the actor needed to climb up to the height of three tables and somersault down. A skillful *jianchang* could singlehandedly pile up the three tables and guarantee the actor’s safety. Another example is The Corpse 殭屍, when the actor leant backward, before hitting the ground, suddenly straightening up and tightening the waist, head up, before finally hitting the ground on his back. As this was going on, the *jianchang* would throw out three round cushions, one next to the other, beneath the actor’s body, just in time to “catch” the falling “corpse”. Nowadays the *jianchang* who used to be visible on stage 明場, and their special skills, are largely a thing of the past. The change of scenes is done behind a big curtain, which is opened and closed as needed in the middle of the stage 二道幕 and the *jianchang* have been replaced by ordinary stage-hands.

3 This painting reflects the hustle and bustle of Nanjing in the Ming dynasty. It was as famous as the Song-dynasty “Riverside Scene during the Qingming Festival” 清明上河圖.

4 Xiao Lihe, p. 87. “設計概念：古典空間與博物館式的觀賞行為相結合。”
the same excitement and pleasure in this “structured” context as they would have done with an ordinary, traditional plain stage. This awkward sense of discomfort, if we look into it deeply, arose from the juxtaposition of the three-dimensional quality of the stage setting (which was heavily emphasized) and the abstract and stylized movements of Kunqu itself. The three-dimensional effect created a realistic distance between things, automatically engendering a dualistic perception of subject and object, of the person contemplating and the thing being contemplated. The effect was similar to the process of appreciation that takes place within a museum. This was something the designer had consciously sought, and successfully achieved. But the more successful this special effect, the more it actually denied the audience the authentic joy and pleasure so prized in Xiqu appreciation. This “innovative” and “creative” idea was in fact in direct contradiction with the traditional aesthetics of Kunqu and damaged the very feeling of Oneness, the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity 情景合一, which lies at the core of Chinese Classical Theatre – and indeed at the core of all traditional Chinese art and philosophy. This fusion is something I have spelt out in detail in Chapter II of this thesis. As a result, the audience that night was brought to a place of constant conflict. On the one hand, the stylized means of Kunqu urged them to form their own imaginative associations; on the other hand, the imagination was never able to fly high enough as it was continually being “confined” and “dictated to” by the overall stage frame and the frame within a frame. It was as though the audience was being invited to journey freely into the heavens, and yet at the same time something kept pulling them down and reminding them that they had to stay on earth.

2. “Alienation Effect”

The Director used the two corridors as a “waiting area” to echo the designer’s multi-functional stage plan. All the actors in this area were also “viewers” (of the show and the historical events taking place). But once they entered the main stage they instantly
became characters in the story. Apparently this was conceived of as a kind of *jeu*, an intentional and playful application of the stylized and non-realistic stage conventions of *Xiqu*, whereby the boundaries were subtly eroded between actor and character, audience and performer. These old conventions intrigued western dramatists, and in the early 20th century Brecht and others partly derived from them their concept of the “alienation effect”. But in *Xiqu*, this so called “effect” is not something deliberately fabricated. It is a phenomenon that occurs effortlessly at the very moment when the actor steps onto the stage. It involves the spontaneous interaction between the artist and the audience. It is part of *Xiqu*, it is *Xiqu* itself.

Audiences of *Kunqu* and *Jingju* interact with the actor instinctively. They sometimes regard the actor as the “person” he is in “real” life. For example, the “greeting bravo” 碰頭好 for a celebrated actor is a compliment to the artist himself.\(^5\) It has nothing to do with the role he is playing or is about to play. At the same time, after a sad and touching aria, tears stream down the spectator’s face, because he so thoroughly sympathizes with the character in the play 劇中人. When a hero dies in a fight, the applause is not for the storyline but for the exquisite manner of his “dying” (the technique and artistry of the performer). This is in the nature of the spontaneous interaction.

As we said in chapter II, Chinese Classical Theatre never aims to create an illusion of life. It is doing something quite different. The symbolism, the stylization, the elaborate make-up and many other elements inform the audience bluntly and openly that the actors are acting. The actor therefore has absolute freedom to “shift” in and out of character. This “shift”, however, is never a total change. The actor never becomes plain Mr. Li or Mr. Zhang. The actor / character spectrum is a continuous one. The “shifts” take place between different points along this spectrum. But the outer appearance (the artistic requirements of that specific type of role) and the inner essence 氣質 of the character being played are never abandoned. The actor is sometimes completely “in character” 投入角色. Or he can talk directly to the audience as an actor, while always remaining to a certain extent “in character”. Or, when he performs something of great difficulty, such as Kicking Spears 打出手, or The Drop 下高, he can (and must)

\(^5\) The “greeting bravo” 碰頭好 is the term for the applause and shouts of “Bravo!” when famous artists first come on stage.
temporarily be *almost* (but never altogether) “out of character”. He must remain calm and totally concentrated and detached so that the difficult task can be beautifully accomplished. At that very moment, he is essentially a conscientious technical performer, and yet he still retains, in his outer appearance, the stylized elements of his character and role. The audience, meanwhile, is effortlessly “shifting” from watching and following the events and emotions of the drama and its characters, to an equally effortless enjoyment of the sheer technical virtuosity of the performer. Once the action is complete (and the audience has expressed its appreciation with vigorous applause and loud cries of delight – *Hao!* 好! Bravo!), then they can all (actor and audience) return to the drama itself. They “shift” again along the spectrum. This is the genuine “alienation effect” of Chinese Classical Theatre, not the contrived “scenario” invented by today’s directors and designers!

This constant shifting “in and out” is part of the traditional Chinese stage culture. It is a natural, spontaneous co-creation between performer and audience. It is not something conceptual or analytical. “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao itself.”⁶ “道可道非常道” If someone tries to extract this essence from the whole like some concrete and independent element, and then tries to exhibit it as a dramatic device, it is no different from attempting to expose the acupuncture Meridians or passages of energy within a human body by means of a clinical autopsy on a corpse. Not only will it end in failure, it will merely demonstrate the ignorance or arrogance of the persons concerned.

3. **Waiting Area ON STAGE**

The stage is a sacred space. To a *Xiqu* actor, it is like another time zone. Once he steps into it, he instantaneously enters into a state of being, in which he is the total embodiment of the character, while staying remarkably lucid as to the utilization of all technical means. This extraordinary selflessness 忘我 and self-awareness, achieved by highly intense concentration, is similar to a meditative state or trance in which the whole body and mind seems to be in another time and space.

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⁶ *Laozi*, chapter I. Translated by Chang Chung-yuan.
Fang Rongxiang 方榮翔, the renowned Painted Face artist I once had the honour to play with (also in *Farewell My Concubine*), gave a performance in the 1980s not long after having undergone a bypass operation. A team of physicians was at the theatre to ensure his health. Before he came on stage, the medical equipment showed that his heart beat was around 96 to 104. Once he had made himself ready (mentally and physically) in the wings (which might only take a split-second), had entered onto the scene to an energetic percussive rhythm and had started singing, he immediately resumed a very stable physical condition and his heart beat miraculously dropped down to 60-70. (This was witnessed by the stage director of my company, Geng Tianyuan, son-in-law of Mr. Fang.)

I will give a second example from my own personal experience. In *Kunqu* and *Jingju* stage make-up, a head-band 勒頭帶 is used to lift up the eyes and eyebrows so that the face looks more beautiful and the facial expressions are more distinct. However, this process can cause great pain if the head-band, together with other head-wrappings (e.g. the long, wide moistened silk head-band and the black head-covering 水紗 、網子), are not correctly placed. I myself experienced this several times. My head-band had not been properly “tied”, i.e. it had been tightened on my head in such a way as to cause me intense headache and / or nausea. But I still could not have it removed during my performance. All I could hope for, at that moment, was to go back as quickly as possible on stage, because in that sacred space I knew that the pain and unbearable discomfort would immediately vanish. And it did.

The *Xiqu* stage is such a sacred space and it has this trance-like effect. For this to be the case, the actor must experience absolutely no disturbance whatsoever while he is performing. Everybody who has the privilege to be on stage is there for one purpose and one purpose alone — to contribute his or her part to the performance. No person, nothing, not even the tiniest of props, is ever allowed to appear if it is unrelated to the artistic goal of the play or the characters. Everything is dedicated and consecrated to that goal.

We learn to recognize and revere the holiness and supremacy of the stage from the very beginning of our training. Even the slightest slackness is a blasphemy to this holy space and to the character being played.
The wusheng Master Gai Jiaotian 盖叫天 once performed the piece The Lion Tavern 狮子楼 in Shanghai. In order to avoid hurting another actor who was being too slow to react, he dodged (making a sudden turn) as he jumped down from a height of more than twenty feet, and as a consequence broke his leg. The broken bone pierced his boot, and could be seen from the outside. Despite this severe injury, the only thought that entered his head was: “No, I’m on stage, I’m playing Wu Song 武松. I can’t lie down and disgrace the character.” So he stood up on his other leg, maintaining a heroic posture until the curtain came down.

The story continued: after a long period of healing, the doctor came to remove the plaster. Gai was anxiously anticipating a good result. To his utter astonishment, the bone had been incorrectly set. He had become a cripple!

“What can we do?” Gai asked the doctor.

“Nothing.” The doctor shook his head. “Unless we break the leg and set it all over again.”

“Fine. Do it for me now!” Gai Jiaotian hit his leg furiously on the bedpost. The bone, which had just started to grow together, was now broken once more. Shocked by Gai’s unbelievable courage and determination, the doctor sneaked away.

Gai’s leg was finally cured by another doctor, but since he had been lying in bed for more than a year, his whole body was as if paralyzed, and he was incapable of any movement.

“I want to go back on stage. I want to act again!” He was almost fifty years old, and one can imagine how hard it must have been for him to reactivate his entire body, let alone revive all his theatrical skills. Out of great perseverance and tremendous love for his art, after two years of recuperation and strenuous practice, the Maestro once again stood on stage. His opening night performance was … The Lion Tavern!

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7 His is a rather arrogant name. If we remember that the stage name of Tan Xinpei (see chapter I) was Little Skylark (Xiao Jiaotian 小叫天), Gai Jiaotian 盖叫天 means literally to “outshine Skylark”.

8 See Gai Jiaotian 盖叫天 (oral account), He Man 何慢 and Gong Yijiang 龔義江, eds., My Many Years on the Stage 《粉墨春秋》 (1958), pp. 325-329.
Such is the pride and dedication of a Xiqu artist. Their art and their reverence for the holy space of the stage are as important as their own life, perhaps even more so. In this space, they can shine and enter into a state of artistic ecstasy.

In the modern production of The Peach Blossom Fan (1699), however, the sacredness of the stage and the dignity of the actor were totally destroyed.

When the actor is on stage as a “viewer”, who has nothing to do with the play, he becomes just a backdrop 佈景板. How then is he to behave? Is he supposed to be consciously present as the character? No, because he is not “in the character” at that moment. Yet, he is still on stage and has the appearance of the character, so he is inevitably “present”. There must be a “presence”. As a Kunqu actor, he should at least sit in a proper manner 坐有坐相. (As a matter of fact, once in costume, the Xiqu actor will seldom sit down even backstage for fear of ruffling his robe, which will just have been ironed.) In other words, the performer as “viewer” is in an awkward position, where no behaviour seems appropriate. This has a very disturbing effect on both the audience and the actors performing. It also exerts an extremely negative influence on young performers, who are somehow “forced” (as “viewers”) to loosen up and not be fully concentrated and “present” on stage, which is something that never should happen to a Xiqu actor.

On the practical side, this “viewing” arrangement deprives the actor of the opportunity to recharge himself. He cannot drink water, cannot be in a relaxed position, take off his hat or headdress and head-band for a short rest (in Xiqu this is only possible for a male role), or even cough to clear his throat. The principal characters in the production, such as Li Xiangjun 李香君 and Hou Fangyu 侯方域, on the other hand, are placed on stage too early, as idle figures (“viewers”). They have no time and space for inner preparation (this is supposed to be done backstage), and therefore cannot sparkle at the very moment they come on stage.

The strange and misguided idea behind all of this was to try to explode a myth, as if one were prying into a dressing room when the people inside it are not fully dressed. It was a complete waste of energy, most disrespectful to the performers, and totally against the true principles of traditional Chinese performing arts.
4. Black Flooring

The term “red carpet” 紅氍毹, which often appears in Chinese poetry, refers to the space within which the performance takes place. In other words, the carpet was so indispensable to Xiqu that it became a synonym for “the stage”.

In today’s Jingju and Kunqu performances, we generally use a light green or light grey carpet. It is less conspicuous, and more neutral. It is there to guarantee the actor’s safety, and is barely noticeable. In Chinese Classical Theatre, “the environment is made material by the actor” 環境帶在演員身上. A stage which does not have any particular quality actually facilitates the free shift of time and space. The change of “scenery” can happen instantaneously because the audience’s mind is not pre-set and retained by any particular environment.

Video 83

In this 2007 production, black flooring was used in the place of the carpet. It was made of a reflective material, which was supposed to produce an illusion of reflected water. As a matter of fact, it did create a special effect, especially in the first scene, which took place by the Huai River 淮河. However, it produced two major inconveniences:

• The water reflection was so real that it was almost hard to remove it from the audience’s mind. This reflection might have seemed creative and poetic when the drama was actually taking place on the riverside. But this mirror effect on stage did not disappear when the “scene” changed. A confusion was therefore generated with regard to “space”.

• The slippery flooring created a major difficulty for the execution of different techniques, from the yuanchang 圓場 (walking or running on stage), to fighting scenes and other displays of martial skill. There were safety issues. Overall the standard of performance was certainly affected in a negative way. And most of
all, it placed a heavy psychological burden on the actors, even for the simple act of walking.

5. The Use of the Water Flag

There are two kinds of stage flags in Chinese Classical Theatre.

One is the symbolic representation of a concrete object, such as the chariot flag 車旗. A chariot is represented by a charioteer 車夫 holding a pair of flags. On the outward part of each flag is drawn a wheel. The concept is similar to riding a horse and rowing a boat on stage. With these we simply keep the most typical element: the horsewhip and the oar, so that we can have a far greater degree of freedom as to the use of space and movement. To ride on a chariot is to stay in between the flags (in front of the charioteer). The actor can thus lead the way in whichever direction he wants and as quickly as he desires, all depending on the speed of his yuanchang 圓場.

Other flags represent natural phenomena: fire 火旗, water 水旗, and wind 風旗. If an actor is holding a water flag (a square flag of approximately 80cm), it means that he is the water itself. The bigger the flag, the greater the waves. The flags of powerful natural phenomena appear only in legendary stories, because an ordinary human being does not have the power to harness or control the forces of Nature. The flags are held either by celestial warriors 天兵天將 or by goblins 妖怪. Let us revisit the video example in chapter III.

**Video 84**

The goblins try to flood the Jinshan Temple, but the celestial warrior, Qielan, has greater power. So he takes the big flag (representing great waves), using the flood provoked by the goblins and turning it back to fight against them. That is why we see shrimps and crabs jumping around in the water.
This is the artistic implication and the conventional use of water flag. There is an unspoken agreement between performers and audience, and this has its artistic and symbolic means of expression.

**Video 85**

In the 2007 production of *The Peach Blossom Fan*, by contrast, the courtesans are holding a new-fangled water flag, with an additional design of an oar, and this is given the name *chuanqi* 船旗, boat flag.\(^9\) Apparently the director wants them to be seen as if they are on a boat in an unconventional way. This new flag (the *chuanqi*) is a combination of the two fundamentally different concepts mentioned above: 1. the symbolic representation of a concrete object (the oar); 2. the materialization of a natural element (the water flag). The symbolism becomes confused. To a connoisseur’s eyes, the water-symbol is dominant: no matter how elegantly these courtesans move, they are not human beings travelling in a boat, but more like fairies floating around on the water. The oar pattern on the water flag, instead of symbolizing a boat, looks more like an actual oar dropped into the water. But the most awkward thing is that even this “innovative” usage of props is not consistent. When the male characters enter the scene, they suddenly go back to the old convention: they jump down onto the imaginary boat, represented by a boatman holding an oar, and thus creating a kind of indescribable discomfort and confusion in the audience.

As far as the choreography is concerned, the ladies first line up in a straight line, giving the impression that they are all in one huge boat. And yet the changing choreographic formations (patterns) – with the ladies pairing up, and different small groups going off in different directions, some exiting the stage, and so forth – entirely destroy the shape of the vehicle and leave the audience wondering if each one of the girls is actually on her own individual boat. In the Chinese Classical Theatre the audience is constantly left

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\(^9\) Tian Qinxin 田沁鑫, “The Director’s Words” (導演的話) in *The Peach Blossom Fan* • 1699 — the Peak of Chinese Chuanqi (2007), p. 59
to form associations according to “hints” given by the performers. But here the inconsistency in the use of symbolic means has an unsettling effect on the audience. Question marks keep popping up in their mind during the whole performance.

6. The Placement of the Music Ensemble

As mentioned in chapter III, percussive music is the backbone of Chinese Traditional Theatre. It runs through the whole performance, weaving together all the parts and structuring the evolution of the drama by means of Rhythmic Patterns. In the old days famous actors always employed their private gushi (leader of the percussion ensemble) and leading accompanists. Especially in Jingju, famous actors all had their own qinshi – player of the two-stringed fiddle jinghu or huqin.

The relation between the actor and the gushi or flautist is like the relation of fish to water. One of the highest forms of enjoyment for a Xiqu audience is to see and hear the seamless collaboration between actor and musicians.

In a performance, the leader of the percussion ensemble, gushi, must stare at the actor in order to synchronize with all his movements. The leading instrumentalist (in the case of Kunqu, the flautist), must also be able to watch the singer closely so that he can feel (in advance) his breaths and pauses. These two persons act in fact as the bridge between the actor and the rest of the musicians. They lead respectively the percussive section and the string and woodwind section while they themselves follow the impulse of the actor. A first-rate percussion leader can in some way have a “leading” and “fuelling” effect even on the actor. He can to a certain extent facilitate the actor’s process. In the 1980s, I was privileged to have the opportunity to work with Mr. Zhang Xinhai (the gushi of the laosheng Maestro Zhou Xinfang). In the battle scenes of The Legend of the White Snake, I felt as if I was being carried forward in every movement. The expressive and grandiose Rhythmic Patterns had a cooling effect when I was kicking the spears; while in the energetic cadenza, his handling of rhythm at certain crucial moments helped to speed me up in a very subtle way. All this was done with great musical sensitivity, based on the gushi’s familiarity with the movement-sets, and using a series of subtle, hardly perceptible artistic hints passed between musician...
and actor. However, none of this is possible if the leader does not have a clear sight of the actor.

**Video 86**

In this production of *Peach Blossom Fan*, the Music Ensemble was placed in the back corridor behind the huge painting. There were times when the back of the movable frame scrolled down, representing a backdrop, that blocked half the view of the stage. Instead of keeping a close watch on the performer, the collaboration had to take place through half guesswork. What a Xiqu actor dislikes the most, something that immediately generates a feeling of frustration, is when the musical ensemble is consistently a little bit behind. The fact that the ensemble was placed in such a remote area produced exactly this effect, especially in the martial arts scenes. This was a shame; it may not have been the fault of the musicians at all, but simply the result of a foolish disposition on stage, done for the sole purpose of realising of some fancy idea.

7. **The Huge Movable Frame**

Earlier we mentioned that in *Kunqu* and *Jingju*, “the environment is made material by the actor”. Xiqu performers indicate the existence of a door by means of nothing more than a gesture (the gesture of opening or shutting a door). In other words, they do not “define” a space by concrete means, as this would not fit in with the overall system of symbolism and stylization. Similarly, if they want to attract the audience’s attention, they do so through a series of artistically well conceived elements. These derive from the script, the musical arrangement, the choreography (individual body movements and staging) and the use of Rhythmic Patterns. Of course, the acting of the performers (in a broad sense, referring to all the disciplines) is absolutely crucial, as it is by their performance that all these elements are brought together into one artistic whole. Later we will see an example, an extract from the *Kunqu* masterpiece *The Jade Hairpin*, which serves as a wonderful illustration of what we are talking about here.
In *Xiqu* performance, the audience’s attention should never be “guided” or “directed” by something other than the art of the performer, especially when this “something” is a huge frame being pushed back and forth by four men across the stage!

Among the considerable number of attempts to “reform” Chinese Classical Theatre, few have achieved a satisfactory result. One of the reasons is that undue attention was drawn to outer and superficial elements, while the core value of the art form was totally neglected. Moreover, each element of the performance was considered individually, in isolation from the art of the performer, which is the core of *Xiqu*.

In this connection, it is a good time to re-examine and further explore the essence (the predominant aesthetic principles) of Chinese Classical Theatre, indeed of all Chinese literature and art.

### The Flow of Life 生命的律動

There are certain expressions, which are used when the Chinese truly appreciate a Chinese painting, a piece of calligraphy, or the performance of a great actor. They say that the work is “alive with dynamic resonance” *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動, that it “transmits spirit” *chuanshen* 傳神, or is full of “spiritual resonance” *shenyun* 神韻.\(^\text{10}\)

If we look deeply into the key words, *qi* 氣, *yun* 韻, and *shen* 神, although they may seem esoteric and inexplicable, they are in fact all related to movement, motion; something that can only be captured, experienced and expressed in the moment of now. In other words, the essence (predominant feature) of all Chinese traditional arts is that

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\(^{10}\) The term *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動 first appeared in Xie He’s 謝赫 *Assessment of Ancient Paintings* 《古畫品錄》 (1959 reprint). It refers to one of his six principles of portrait painting. Xie He was a painter and art critic in the Southern Qi dynasty 南齊 (479-502).
they are constantly demonstrating, through the art forms and the whole artistic and creative process, the movement and the rhythm of life itself. 一種生機、生命力.

The special characteristic [of Chinese painting] is the living movement of its dynamic resonance (qiyun shengdong). This is predominant. Every other thing gives way to this movement. One can say that without this movement there is no Chinese Traditional Theatre; without this movement there is no Chinese painting. 11

[中國畫] 的特點就是氣韻生動。站在最高位，一切服從動，可以說，沒有動就沒有中國戲，沒有動就沒有中國畫。——宗白華

Hence, the value of a piece of art is judged not by its exterior and static beauty, but by whether or not, its spiritual rhythm 神韻 is sublimely and ingeniously revealed. 12 That is why in Chinese Traditional art appreciation, one seldom praises a poem or a painting by saying: “How beautiful it is” 美極了; but instead one says, “It is a wonder beyond description” 妙不可言. 13 The word miao 妙, which occurs as early as the Taoist classic of Laozi, the Daodejing 道德經, comprises the meanings of ingenious, wondrous, intriguing, exquisite, and beyond expectations. It is uttered when the flow of life is made visible and tangible by the artist (through form and colour, or words and rhymes), and is deeply felt by the beholder.

The character miao 妙 appears in the very first chapter of Laozi in the following context:

Therefore, often without intention I see the wonder of Tao. Often with intention I see its manifestations. Its wonder and its manifestations are one and the same. Since their emergence, they have been called by different names. Their identity is called the mystery. From mystery to further mystery:

The entry of all wonders! 14

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12 Chang Chung-yuan translated shenyun as “spiritual rhythm”. (Chang, Creativity, p. 171.)
13 Ye Lang, Bamboos in the Heart, p. 58.
14 Adapted from the translation of Chang Chung-yuan in Tao: A New Way of Thinking (1977).
故常無，欲以觀其妙；
常有，欲以觀其徼。
此兩者同出，而異名。
同謂之玄，玄之又玄，眾妙之門。

Chinese art, therefore, is closely related to the movement or momentum of life (and the universe). In calligraphy when we talk about the use of the brush we call it the movement of the brush *yunbi* 運筆 or *xingbi* 行筆; in *Xiqu* singing we say *yunqi* 運氣 (movement of the breath), *xingqiang* 行腔 (movement, or artistic treatment of a melody, in terms of tempo, timbre, contrast, breathing, and so on). Both words *yun* 運 and *xing* 行 denote a process, an act in motion.

In the yogic practice of Tai Chi the body is a “small cosmos”; in calligraphy the hand is a “small cosmos”. Indeed, the act of producing a piece of calligraphy is like the movement of the cosmos itself. The very process of writing with a brush, ink and water, does not allow the slightest hesitation or intellectual reflection (although, in some cases, the calligrapher may have had a prior artistic conception with regard to the overall arrangement). Otherwise it will become a “failed stroke”敗筆. It is a natural and direct flow from the heart, through the hand, to the paper. It is about the feeling captured in the moment of the Here and the Now, and the state of being one with the brush. In the case of writing a long piece in the style of Running Script *xingshu* 行書 or Grass Script *caoshu* 草書, the structure of the whole piece (we term it *hangqi* 行氣 – the interrelation between words / lines and the overall presentation of the whole piece) is often considered more important than the beauty of every single character. Sometimes a word, if seen individually, may look awkward or even ugly; but it may be the perfect shape in that particular placement. So once again we are talking about rhythm, about freedom within harmony. The creative process of calligraphy is an act of the present moment, a process which is constantly and instantaneously adapting, adjusting and balancing itself, like the transformations of the cosmos.
In this video-recording, made in 2013, I combine Kunqu-style singing with calligraphy of the text of the Heart Sutra 《心經》.

**Video 88**

There is yet another nuance of the term *qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動. It is associated with a person’s spirit, bearing and allure.

*Qi* is the vitality of the human body, which is directly connected to a man’s personality, temperament and spirit. Without *qi*, there certainly cannot be *yun*.

“氣”是人體的生命力，與人的氣質、個性、精神直接相聯，沒有“氣”當然不會有“韻”。

*Yun* is a kind of beauty directly related to a person’s talent, wisdom, and bearing. It can only be felt and is difficult to express.

“韻”是一種和每一人物特有的才情、智慧、風度直接相聯，可意會而難於言傳之美。

As an aesthetic criterion, *qiyun* refers to the unification of both of its component elements: on the one hand, the momentum of life energy which is connected to a person’s temperament and personality; and on the other hand the resonant beauty of the talent, wisdom and spirit of that individual.15

“氣韻”作爲一個美學範疇，就是與人的個性、氣質相關的生命律動和個體的才情、智慧、精神的美的兩者的統一。

In Chinese Classical Theatre, anything that impedes, disrupts, stagnates, or constrains the flow of life energy (*qi*) will immediately convey a feeling of discord and frustration to the audience. Heavy settings with three-dimensional concepts do just this. Anything

that does not involve the proper techniques, through which the bearing and manner
才情、風度 of the character / actor can resonate – yun, cannot be highly valued, indeed
will be disdained, by the connoisseur.

The following example is by way of contrast. It illustrates perfectly the clever use of
Xiqu’s artistic means. Through the performers’ body movements we see the momentum
of life (the river, the boat). More importantly and interestingly, the movements of the
waves are entirely related to the emotional states of the two protagonists. Quite literally
*Heaven and Man are one.*

While the qi (the stage simulation of water – the momentum of life / of emotional states)
is being revealed, the resonance yun (the actor’s singing, acting, and elaborated body
movements) is also fully displayed.

In this case, a bare stage (the Non-Being or Nothingness, wu 無) is indispensable, as it
provides infinite possibilities for choreography. Heavy stage settings merely get in the
way.
The Autumn River — an extract of The Jade Hairpin (Kunqu)

《玉簪記·秋江》

Storyline: Pan Bizheng is in love with Chen Miaochang, a beautiful young nun he has met at his aunt’s Taoist nunnery. Their relationship is soon detected by his aunt. In order to protect the reputation of the nunnery, she urges her nephew to attend the imperial examination and sees to it that he leaves immediately for the capital Lin’an.

Unable to say goodbye to Pan properly under the eyes of others, Miaochang hurries to the riverside regardless of the consequences. She hires a small boat to catch up with Pan. They pour their hearts out and exchange betrothal gifts before bidding a tearful farewell.

Video 89

Role : Pan Bizheng 潘必正 (played by Yue Meiti 岳美缇)
Chen Miaochang 陳妙常 (played by Tang Yuen Ha 鄧宛霞)
Jing’an 靜安 (played by Cheng Zhixiong 成志雄)

Text : M = Chen Miaochang, P = Pan Bizheng,
J = Jing’an (page-boy), BM = boatman, BW = boatwoman

BW : Sister, don’t be sad. I’ll sing you a song.
小師太，您別傷心，我給您唱支山歌聽。

M : I don’t want to listen. Hurry up with your rowing.
我不要聽，你快些搖啊！

BW : All right. 是啦。

M : …Pan’s boat is just in front of us. Hurry up and catch up with him!
啊船家，那前面就是潘郎的船兒，快快趕上前去！

BW : Yes. 是。
M: Hurry up…hurry up…hurry up! 快著些 … 快著些 … 快著些！

......

P: What are you doing?! 你，你做什麼呀？！

J: No, Sister Chen’s boat is heading towards us. 
不是喲，陳姑隻小船追上來哉。

P: Ah? Sister Chen is here? 啊? 陳姑來了?

J: Sister Chen’s boat is heading towards us. 陳姑隻小船追上來哉。

P: Quick, hurry up, sail towards her boat!
快，快，快將船兒迎了上去！

J: Old man… 老伯伯…

P: Idiot! Steer the boat in that direction!
哎呀，蠢才！快快將船兒轉了過去啊！

[ From the body movements of the three characters, we picture that the waves are big. ]
[ The big waves are in keeping with the character’s emotional state - Pan’s heart is now torn with anxiety. ]

J: Turn around! 掉個頭！

BM: Ah? What did you say? 啊？說什麼吶？

J: Turn around! Catch up with that boat! 掉個頭，追上去呀！

[ J shouts to the boatman, which reinforces the effect of being in the middle of strong wind and big waves (one cannot hear very clearly); ]
[ BM puts his hand near his ear — the old man has difficulty hearing — which makes the audience even more anxious. ]

BM: We are turning around… 掉頭嘅 …

......
M: My dear! 潘郎！

P: Miaochang! 妙常！

[The choreography creates a sense of tension and spacious dynamics by making full use of the empty stage. The percussive music helps to establish an agitated atmosphere.]

J: Be careful, you’ll turn into a big dumpling if you fall down.

當心啊！跌下去要變大湯糰的！

[This joke from the chou gives the audience a temporary feeling of relief. It lightens what is otherwise a section full of tension and agitation.]

Video 90

M & P: I am afraid to look at that lonely boat… 怕向那孤蓬看也…

[This is the principal aria of this act. Miaochang and Pan pour their hearts out through expressive singing and elaborate body movements on the boat.]

……

[After exchanging betrothal gifts, it is time to part.]

P: Miaochang, I have to leave. 妙常，小生要拜別了。

The setting sun and the road ahead urge me to continue this belated journey.

夕陽古道催行晚

How much sorrow and bitterness there is in this moment of departure.

千愁萬恨別離間

[Miaochang returns to her own boat.]

[The sound of the stone chime qing磬 urges them to say good bye.]

Each of us will stand alone under the morning cloud and in the evening rain.

暮雨朝雲兩下單
Now the water subsides. Having utterly expressed their love for each other and exchanged betrothal gifts, the young couple now feel reassured.

Each boat makes a turn (this is a change to another scenic environment); the actors move in uniform steps (always simulating the flow of the river).

Pan gradually goes afar...and disappears. Miaochang makes a small turn (another change of environment). She waves her hand to say good bye to Pan who is now far away.

With the fusion of delicate shenduan, expressive music and the indispensable enhancement of the percussion, the whole scene ends in a mood of desolation and poetic melancholy.

The above extract gives us a vivid example of the quality of the “living movement of dynamic resonance”, qiyun shengdong, as seen in Chinese Classical Theatre. Each time I play this passage on stage, or simply review my recordings, I am so easily moved. I am touched by the sadness of parting, and am amazed as to how Kunqu can so ingeniously and beautifully create the mood and ambiance, the inner “world”意境, and express the intense feelings of the characters.

Example 2 : Mu Guiying 《穆桂英》

(a programme of the Hong Kong New Vision Arts Festival 新視野藝術節 2006)

This is a totally different production, in terms of the theme chosen, the standard of the performers, as well as the director’s familiarity with Xiqu. If The Peach Blossom Fan aims at incorporating some “creative” ideas while basically keeping the original script, form and appearance of Xiqu (although the new ideas end up being rather incompatible with the tradition), Mu Guiying is a total “breaking” of all “rules” and conventions (in costume, music, the use of movements and stylization). It is a production which has deliberately overthrown the very artistic and aesthetic principles of Xiqu, together with the core of Chinese traditional spiritual values.
In contrast to *The Peach Blossom Fan*, in which all the actors and actresses were extremely young and green, every performer in *Mu Guiying* was well trained and experienced. Some were even at the top of the *Jingju* profession. Similarly, “the director himself is no stranger to tradition. The son of a distinguished Sichuan opera performer, the Chengdu born Li Liuyi described his earliest training as strictly traditional, discovering Western spoken drama only after entering Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama, where he began studying the two traditions concurrently.”

**About Mu Guiying and Other Characters**

*Mu Guiying* 穆桂英, the title role of this drama, was one of the best known heroines for a Chinese audience. The male characters in the play, Yang Jiye 楊繼業, Yang Yanzhao 楊延昭, and Yang Zongbao 楊宗保, came from three generations of the Yang family. *Mu Guiying* and her husband Yang Zongbao were fictional characters; but Yang Jiye (historically known as Yang Ye 楊業) and Yang Yanzhao were both prominent frontier generals against the Liao-Khitan enemies during the Northern Song dynasty. The story of *The Generals of the Yang Family* 楊家將 was a widely adopted topic in folklore and in *Xiqu*. The feats of the Yang Family were dramatically expanded in order to express popular love and reverence for these heroic figures who risked their lives to defend their country. The valiant Yang Family warriors, and in particular the Women Warriors of the Yang Family 楊門女將 (an artistic creation), stood for exceptional prowess, heroism, and patriotism. During times of war and critical moments in Chinese history, it was precisely this spirit of selflessness and this determination to safeguard the homeland, which inspired and united the nation.

Among the heroines, *Mu Guiying* and *She Taijun* 佘太君 (another person mentioned in the play) were the two most fascinating and outstanding. They were both symbols of wisdom and bravery.

*She Taijun*, the wife of Yang Jiye, appears in many *Xiqu* genres as the hundred-year-old leader of the twelve widows of the Yang Family in their fight against the barbarian

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Xixia invasion 《十二寡婦征西》. In the Jingju version, it is named *Women Warriors of the Yang Family* 《楊門女將》.

Mu Guiying is She Taijun’s grand daughter-in-law. She was originally the daughter of Mu Hongju, the chief of the Muke Mountain Lair 穆柯寨. At that time the Liao enemies had created the most intricate battle formation called Heaven’s Gate 天門陣, and had challenged the Song army to a battle. Their complex tactics were conceived according to the law of the traditional Chinese Five Elements 五行 and the Eight Trigrams 八卦, and the key weapon (the handle of an axe) needed to break through or smash this formation had to be made of a special wood called Dragon Wood 降龍木.

Yang Zongbao came to ask for this particular kind of wood which only Mu Guiying possessed. But he was defeated and captured by Mu Guiying, whose Mountain Lair was by now not on friendly terms with the Yang camp. However, attracted by this handsome young gentleman, Mu Guiying agreed to hand over the Dragon Wood on condition that Yang would marry her. Meanwhile, Yang Yanzhao, father of Zongbao, disguised himself and came to rescue his son. He defeated the chief of the Muke Mountain Lair in combat. But Mu Guiying, thinking that someone had come to assault the mountain, and not knowing that he was in fact her father-in-law, fought Yanzhao so that he fell from his horse. This is the famous Jingju double bill entitled *Muke Mountain Lair and Mu the Chief* 《穆柯寨、穆天王》. Both are items in my repertoire. In these plays Mu Guiying is depicted as a youthful, witty and invincible young woman. This is what the play is all about, her characterisation, not the somewhat complicated plot.

When Yang Yanzhao went back to his camp, he ordered his son to be executed for having violated military law by going in quest of the Dragon Wood without permission, and for subsequently marrying a woman from the opposing side. At this very moment Mu Guiying arrived with the Dragon Wood together with five hundred soldiers and army provisions for the Song camp. Her contributions and her commitment to fight against the Liao enemies eventually saved Zongbao’s life. Mu Guiying, now Chief Commander of the Yang army, leads the troops into battle and is victorious. This is another play called *Mu Guiying wins the battle against the Heaven’s Gate Formation* 《穆桂英大破天門陣》.
The “Creative” New Interpretation of Mu Guiying

This was a play on a popular theme (one which embodied many Chinese spiritual values), interpreted by highly acclaimed artists. But the director “warned” us in the programme: “The Mu Guiying you see here is not what you have previously seen in the classics, in history or in folklore. Far from it...” So I was aware that this was going to be something completely “new”, and that I had better just treat it as a piece of experimental theatre. And yet the director continued: “We have a genuine concern for the future of Chinese opera, and because of that we need to create.”\(^\text{17}\) Since he expressed this “genuine concern”, I feel I must now say a few words regarding this kind of “creativity”, which, as a matter of fact, represents another trend in the whole field of Xiqu “reform”.

It amounts to using a number of disparate conventional Xiqu elements – mainly the techniques of Xiqu performers – to express something utterly unconventional. The advantage of this approach, for experimental theatre, is that Xiqu performers are already extremely well-trained; every sound and movement they produce is stylized, and thus can provide the performance with spectacular audio and visual effects. The physical ability of the performer, the plasticity 可塑性 of his body, is infinitely exploited. But the underlying tradition, without which the performers could never have been so magnificently trained in the first place, as well as all of its aesthetic principles, from which all technical means are generated, are held in total contempt.

In the words of the director: “Traditionally, Peking Opera actors are disciples… Learning comes strictly through imitation of the teacher. My productions, however, involve much more creativity. Actors must find most of the way on their own.”\(^\text{18}\) Smith’s programme note adds: “In contrast to Peking Opera’s officially sanctioned model, where ornamented falsetto and stylized movements often seem like museum exhibitions on stage, Li has injected a few well-digested Western theatrical concepts.”\(^\text{19}\)

Now, let us first take a look at the incoherent way in which they utilize the fundamental artistic elements in this production, from a connoisseur’s perspective, and see if there is really much in the way of constructive novelty in this experiment or “essay”.

\(^{17}\) Li Liuyi, “Before the Curtain Rises on the Hong Kong Production”, in the programme for Mu Guiying (New Vision Arts Festival 2006), p. 5.

\(^{18}\) Smith, p. 13 of the programme (quoting Li Liuyi).

\(^{19}\) Smith, p. 13.
The Incoherent Use of Artistic Elements

In Xiqu, as in Ballet, all movement-sets are made up of basic stylized items. These items are just like words in the vocabulary of an essay. Whether you can write a convincing essay depends on your choice of words and the coherence and fluency of your writing. But in this dramatic performance, the elements, the “words” and “expressions”, are used arbitrarily and incoherently. It may seem innovative of the director to write an unreadable essay. But in the eyes of a person familiar with the real “language”, in other words in the eyes of a true connoisseur, this “essay” is a mockery of the Jingju art form.

There are altogether three types of movement involved in this discussion, which I will illustrate with video recordings from the promotional material made for this production:

1. Arbitrary use of basic stylized items

   a) Walking with the legs lifted to a considerable height

   Video 91

   This strenuously controlled skill usually shows the character’s heroic bearing as well as the actor’s leg flexibility when he is wearing heavy and bulky armour (the kao). If he is wearing something much lighter, e.g. a costume in Civil style, he never does this. It would not only be incompatible with the role and the costume, it would also be a senseless waste of energy. Traditionally, this technique (even in its proper usage), is not to be repeated continuously. This would be seen as unnecessary showmanship. To emphasize these steps excessively and with affected seriousness makes the whole thing look pretentious and pointless, and the actors look rather like puppets. The audience will mutter to themselves “Okay, he’s got good legs. But what’s he doing, what does it all mean?!”
b) Repetition of the most fundamental arm movement — yunshou 雲手

Video 92

Yunshou is the ABC of body movement, through which a Xiqu student learns about the coordination of the whole body (arms, hands, waist, head, eyes, and so on). It can also be a transition from one movement to another. In this video, the two male characters keep on repeating this basic item with no specific aim. It is as if one were to repeat the word “man” in a random fashion, spelling it out: M-A-N, M-A-N … instead of using the word to construct a meaningful phrase. As a result, the two actors become no more than some sort of moving “backdrop”.

c) Waving the beard upwards with swirling water sleeves

Video 93

This is a basic movement employed solely to express anxiety or panic. Again, just to employ this movement (which has a clear meaning in its own right) without any particular purpose or connection to what is happening on stage turns the actors into a mere mobile decoration.

2. Movement-sets 身段套路 borrowed from the existing repertoire

In this production, there are passages inserted to show off certain techniques of the performers. These aim at creating a climax. However, even these are nothing new.
In video 94, we see the standard choreography of a general preparing himself mentally and readying his stage armour (the kao) for the battlefield. This is known as qiba 起霸 — a typical and indispensable movement-set required of the “wusheng in armour” 長靠武生.

**Video 95**

Here is a passage of “beard skill”. This is the most distinctive technique of the Jingju opera *Cleansing Fu Mountain* 《洗浮山》. *Cleansing Fu Mountain* is one of the signature items in the repertoire of this particular actor, and I suppose this is why this passage was inserted.

I recall that none of these passages created the desired effect at the performance. There was no artistic development leading to the logical use of a certain technique, and as a result what the audience saw was just that — a pure exposition of skills. This was despite the fact that both performers were themselves outstanding exponents of the wusheng role.

3. **Stage actions which involve no technique whatsoever and thereby break the aesthetic principles of Xiqu**

**Video 96**

An example of this is the way the performer deliberately removes beard, shoes, and robe, disconnecting them from his body. In traditional theatre, these “accessories” are considered to be an extension of the body, a part of the total means of expression. Other meaningless actions include repeatedly dropping the robe on the floor, throwing shoes away, or three actors alternately sitting down and then standing up.
In the process of true Xiqu creation, everything extracted from real life has to be transcended, sublimated into a stylized dance-like movement before it can appear on stage. In this respect, the director did contribute something “new”, in that he inserted “new” movements, which were devoid of meaning, and had neither beauty nor a genuine technical basis.

There are more examples that I considered to be absurd. But such instances of naivety or absurdity are precisely what the director deemed most “innovative” and “revolutionary”.

So I shall sum things up as follows:

Every performer in this production was well-trained and experienced. Some were even at the top of the Jingju profession. All the movements, from the simple yunshou to the most demanding and difficult passages, were done almost without fault. But unfortunately, this technical perfection did not exhilarate the audience as it would have done in a proper Jingju performance, nor did the performers experience the pleasure they once used to have when executing a movement or singing an aria. The main reason for this failure was that the unity of form and spirit, which is the core of Xiqu, had been totally and deliberately destroyed. Every element on stage (the props, the costumes, and especially the performer and all the artistic means at the performer’s disposal), in this so-called East-meets-West theatre, had become nothing more than an isolated “object” to be used or contemplated. Nothing had (or needed to have) any relation to anything else. This breaking of the fundamental aesthetic principle of Xiqu (according to which everything is fused together in one artistic whole) eventually held the performers up to ridicule. The Xiqu artist, who, by the very nature of the art form, was originally the master and the soul of the performance, had become a mere pawn to be “moved” back and forth at the director’s will. He contributed his expertise (something he had acquired through years of hard work) in all honesty. But it was no more than some sort of audio or visual effect. As a result, the more conscientiously and impeccably they performed, the more I felt sorry for them.

Sophisticated stylization in an irrelevant context generally leads to two outcomes:

- deliberately being sarcastic and funny.
- making a fool of both audience and artists, as in this production of Mu Guiying.
It is sad to see an art, which has attained its ultimate expression after centuries of artistic accumulation, treated in such an arrogant and primitive manner, in the name of Xiqu “reform”. I recall that when I was asked to give my comments on the show, as an advisor on Xiqu to the Hong Kong government, I wrote the following: “Watching the performance was like seeing someone deliberately breaking a highly valuable porcelain vase into pieces, then picking up the debris, piecing it together, and framing it in an apparently ‘modern’ picture frame. It was telling you that this was a new way to appreciate an old art…”

Mu Guiying — The “Modern” Version, five further examples

Storyline:

“The night before she embarks on her famous military campaign, Mu Guiying takes a bath, prays at the hall of worship, shows respect to her ancestors and talks to the three men from three generations of her husband’s family, who are in fact souls of the departed… All the dialogue here is in fact Mu’s monologue. A woman’s psychology in the night before she sets out onto the battlefield…”

1. Mu Guiying’s state of mind before the battle

Video 97

Text: MGY = Mu Guiying, YJY = Yang Jiye

MGY: Miserable…(echoed by the male characters) 苦啊

Male: On an expedition… 征戰起…

MGY: I’m afraid … (echoed by the male characters) 怕、怕、怕…

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20 Based on Yoko Tamura: “The Enigma of Mu’s Red Robe”, p. 8 of the programme. The translation of the dialogue has also been modified from that on the video.
Male (inaudible): A lonely soul... 孤魂 …

MGY: Miserable… (echoed by the male characters) 慘、慘、慘 …

......

MGY: Guiying is afraid, Guiying is very tired… 桂英好怕，桂英好累 …

......

MGY: Cruel-hearted men, … 狠心的男人，好狠心的男人。

......

MGY: You were heroic all of your lives, leaving a dark world to your widows.

英雄風光，前生後世。留給女人一片漆黑。

......

What’s the use of saving a country that does not have heroes?
無有英雄的國我救它何用？

What’s the use of going to a home where I cannot find my husband?
無有男人的家我回去作甚？

Women should go with their husbands. Women should not be heroines.
女人就該隨男人而去，女人就不能成爲英雄。

YJY: When women shed their blood, it stains the battlefield, they are destroyed by Heaven and Earth.

女人血，染疆場，天誅地滅！

2. Yang Jiye’s distress (She Taijun as described by Yang Jiye)

This, like the previous extract, is also a picture of mental distress, expressing a state of mind full of fear, loneliness, anger and resentment.

Video 98
Text:

YJY: …and my pitiful wife who is a hundred years old.

還有我那可憐的百歲老妻，

Though she is already a hundred, she must take command and go on an expedition.

百歲之軀，還要掛帥出征，

Eating the wind, sleeping in the dew, drifting from place to place.

風餐露宿，顛沛流離。

Who knows how many young men will be killed by her.

不知又有多少年輕的壯士，又要死在她的刀下。

She is a hundred years old, a very old woman.

百歲了啊，百歲的老婦人，

She must fight desperately.

還要殺 … 殺 … 殺！！

3. Mu Guiying puts on her Armour

Mu Guiying readies herself for battle. She puts on her armour and sings:

Video 99

MGY: (sings)

If I do not take command, who else can?

If I do not lead the troops, who else will?

我不掛帥誰掛帥？

我不領兵誰領兵？

These two heroic sentences, directly taken from Mei Lanfang’s main aria in *Mu Guiying Takes Command*, are sung in this production with a facial expression of gloom and doubt.
4. Mu Guiying’s declaration

**MGY:** (sings)

Women are not afraid of death,
If only we can rouse the people.
Heroes who die for their country will live forever,
With independent spirits and free souls.

女人何懼生死境，只要催醒萬眾民。
保家衛國為長生，獨立精神自由魂。

5. Mu Guiying’s Cadenza

Mu Guiying eventually sets out for the battlefield, but the stage is dimly lit. The cadenza passage (*daoxiachang* 刀下場), which normally should be highlighted and receive enthusiastic applause, is done almost in the dark! I understand this to be a representation of the heroine’s doubts and reluctance. She does not know why she is going to the battlefield. It just seems that she has "no alternative", since she has always been viewed as “an image representative of the ‘patriotic heroine’ ".*

This is a total subversion of the original image of Mu Guiying. From having been a wise and brave heroine, she is now turned into an egocentric and miserable woman who reluctantly takes on the burden of patriotism. It is rather ironic that in this production, on the one hand, she claims to want to “rouse the people” and longs for “independent

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*Yoko Tamura, on p. 8 of the programme.*
spirits and free souls”; and yet on the other hand, her very state of being is dragging everyone down to an abyss of fear and stress. Her large heart becomes a narrow mind. She has already lost her own spiritual freedom.

I do not know why a Mu Guiying such as this was ever created. It is like creating a Judge Bao包公, the personification of outrage at corruption, into a corrupt official who yields to pressure; or a Jeanne d’Arc who instead of leading her nation in opposition to the aggressive British troops is just a selfish, cowardly and fearful woman. As a matter of fact, we are informed in the programme that “Mu Guiying is the first of my Trilogy of Heroines in War. I hope you will have the opportunity to see the other two, Hua Mulan and Liang Hongyu, to complete the experience.” In order to be different and unconventional, the images of the heroines have been distorted, the virtue and sublime qualities they represent are doubted, if not denounced. Their spirit is questioned. It may be fashionable to analyze traditional Chinese women from a “modern” or “post-modern” point of view, but it is hard to accept a production which, in the name of “reform” and “creativity”, deliberately overthrows the artistic and aesthetic principles of Xiqu, and at the same time negates the embodiment of certain Chinese traditional spiritual values.

If I were ever asked to perform this sort of item, I would decline it without the slightest hesitation. For not only would I derive no pleasure whatsoever in the whole performing process, I would feel immediately degraded both as an artist and as a person.

Mei Lanfang

The great Master Mei Lanfang once expressed his fondness for Mu Guiying: “I am very fond of this character, I continue to perform this double bill [Muke Mountain Lair and Mu the Chief], and so I have very deep feelings for her.” Mei gave this character new life in his very last creation, Mu Guiying Takes Command《穆桂英掛帥》. In this play

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22 Li Liuyi, p. 5. Hua Mulan 花木蘭 is a widely known legendary figure who disguises herself as a man and takes her father’s place in the army. She is a symbol of filial piety and bravery. The Verse (Ballad) of Mulan《木蘭辭》 has always been incorporated in Primary school textbooks. Liang Hongyu 梁紅玉 was a historical heroine in wars fighting against the Jin troops.

Mei incorporated a number of significant breakthroughs for the *qingyi* 青衣 type of role, and most successfully portrayed the inner world of a middle-aged heroine (by this stage Mu Guiying is nearly fifty years old). This is a Mu Guiying who is mature, and has been through many vicissitudes of life. Through a whole series of unusual movement-sets we see how Mu Guiying overcomes her resentments and worries and once again takes up the Commander’s Seal after twenty years of retirement.

**Mei Lanfang’s creation — *Mu Guiying Takes Command***

To have an even better understanding of the protagonist and of the cultural resonance this character embodies, and to observe how a *Jingju* master conceived the role artistically, we will now examine the core passage of Mei Lanfang’s *Mu Guiying Takes Command*.

I was very fortunate to have learned this play from Mei Lanfang’s disciple Chen Zengwei 陳正薇. A filmed extract of my performance given in Beijing in 1988 is provided by way of illustration. I will also explain the “subtext” of all the movements.

**“Holding the Commander’s Seal” from *Mu Guiying Takes Command***

《穆桂英掛帥・捧印》

**Storyline:**

Disappointed by the reliance of the Song Emperor on his treacherous ministers, She Taijun and Mu Guiying have both retired from the world. Twenty years later, the Xixia barbarians attack the border. The country is in danger. But nobody is able to lead the troops. The Court holds a martial arts competition and whoever wins will assume command. Sent by She Taijun to inquire about the situation in the capital, Mu Guiying’s two children, Jinhua 金花 and Wenguang 文廣, win the competition and are given the Commander’s Seal. In view of their young age, the Emperor appoints their mother Chief Commander instead. However, when the two children bring the Seal home, Guiying refuses the mission because of her years of disappointment at the Court. She Taijun urges her to put the national cause before personal emotions.
Guiying: (sighs) Taijun!

(sings)
It is not that I am indifferent when my country is in danger.
The Commander’s Seal reminds me so much of the past.
The Yang family risked their lives for their country,
They returned victorious and yet others were highly rewarded,
While we only added new tombs.
In peace all flocked to the Palace;
In war the Commander’s Seal was sent to the door of the Yang family.
The Emperor has always favoured and trusted traitors,
For years my heart has been chilled with disappointment.
I vow not to go out to battle for the Emperor;
So just ask him to pick another to assume command.

唉，太君啊！
非是我臨國難袖手不問，見帥印又勾起多少前情。
楊家將捨身忘家把社稷定，凱歌還人受恩寵我添新墳。
慶昇平朝堂內群小並進，烽煙起卻又把元帥印送到楊門。
宋王爺平日權寵信奸佞，桂英我多年來早已寒心。
誓不為宋天子領兵上陣，今日裡掛帥出征叫他另選能人。

Taijun: (sings)
My grand daughter-in-law is indignant at the Court;
The Emperor is the one to blame for not heeding loyal counsel.
The foreign intruders cause turmoil at the frontier.
Relief troops are as urgently needed as men to put out a fire;
To fight for the country needs no reward.
We just wish our people to live in peace.

孫媳婦對朝廷心懷怨恨，只怪那宋天子忠奸不分。
番王造反犯邊境，救兵救火古來云。
退敵不用加恩寵，但願那黎民百姓得安寧。

Guiying: Taijun, I am almost half a century old, I am not what I used to be.
Moreover, all the generals are now dead. We had better report back to the Court, and ask them to choose someone else.
啊太君，桂英年將半百，非比當年，況那三軍上將俱已凋零，
還是回奏朝廷，另選旁人為是。

Taijun:  (sings)
Indeed the generals are all dead,
But Jinhua and Wenguang are grown-ups now.
How can you say you are old when you are only fifty?
I still feel young and I am over ninety.
Come on, hurry up, give orders to your troops—

三軍上將雖喪盡，金花文廣也長成了人。
你年將半百怎言老，老身我九旬已過不減青春。
來來來快與我傳將令—

Guiying: Taijun, please please think it over!
啊太君，你你你還要三思！

Taijun:  (sings)
Why do you insist on declining?
Very well, if you won’t take command, I will...

為甚麼三番兩次不出兵。
罷！你不掛帥我掛帥…

[ She Taijun takes the Seal. In agitation, she staggers forward and coughs...]

[ Guiying takes the Seal from her hands.]

Guiying:  (sings)
Taijun’s loyalty and ardour have touched me.
老太君一片忠誠感人心。

Guiying: Taijun, please don’t be upset. I shall obey.
太君不必如此，孫媳遵命就是。

Taijun : So… you...will take command? 哦！你…掛帥？

Guiying: I will take command. 挂帥！

Taijun : You will go into battle? 出征？
Guiying: I’ll go into battle. 出征！

Taijun: Hahaha... You are a good daughter-in-law of the Yang family. Then go quickly and put on your martial attire. I shall personally play the drum and assemble the soldiers for you.

這是我楊家的好媳婦！如此快去後面更換戎裝，老身與你聚將催鼓。

[Guiying sees Taijun on her way. The latter leaves happily.]

Video 102: Mu Guiying Takes Command
Role: Mu Guiying
(played by Tang Yuen Ha)

Guiying: (sings her main aria)

Our whole family has heard the report from the frontier and their spirits are stirred;
To serve my country, I shall once again go out to battle.
But for twenty years I have abandoned my armour and forsaken the battlefield.

一家人聞邊報雄心振奮，穆桂英為報國再度出征。
二十年拋甲胄未臨戰陣——

[A long movement-set follows, revealing Mu Guiying’s state of mind:]

(Here there is an innovative use of stylized movement by Mei Lanfang: “In order to illustrate the thinking process of a warrior and simulate the battlefield, here I borrowed the steps of the daomadan 刀馬旦 role-type. And yet, at the same time it had to be compatible with my costume [Mei was wearing the qingyi 青衣 costume]. This is a new experiment.”)

(The movement-set is accompanied by an innovative use of percussive music, explained by Mei Lanfang: “The way to execute the Rhythmic Pattern ‘Nine-and-a-half Hammers’

24 Mei Lanfang, p. 85. "因表現武將的思考與戰場的情況，故借用了刀馬旦的步法，又不能與服裝產生不協調的感覺，是一種新的探索與嘗試。"
jiuchuiban【九錘半】is sometimes to let the Gong sound very strongly while at other times deliberately suppressing the sound. This reflects the general’s attempts to estimate the enemy’s situation and the manner in which he makes his plans before he goes out to battle. The high and low volumes of the Gong express the ups and downs of the thinking. It is very seldom used in the Civil Style repertoire. This is the first time it has ever been used for the qingyi role-type.”

[ She looks at herself, feeling uncertain; she ponders the whole matter...

[ She recalls what it was like on the battlefield, thinking to herself, accompanying her thoughts with movements: “But I am no longer a young person, can I still fight as I once used to? ... I am not so sure....”

[ Once again she estimates the situation...

[ On the battlefield, in the midst of fierce fighting, when I have to confront the vast force of the enemy, all I will have is my two teenage children, I will be practically alone without any substantial assistance. Am I still capable of going out to battle?! No, no...What should I do?...

[ Mu Guiying once again looks at herself. Suddenly she realizes that, at this critical moment, she must be courageous, thinking to herself: “How can I let all these gloomy thoughts take hold of me?”

Ai! 哎!

[ Swinging her “water sleeves” in an emphatic movement, she expresses her decision to rid herself of all selfish concerns and personal considerations.

[ When she turns around her face is radiant with confidence and determination.

Do I not have a heart for my country and my people?
難道說我無有為國為民一片忠心?

[ Drums and horns are heard from outside.

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25 Mei Lanfang, “【九錘半】的打法, 鐘聲有時強烈, 有時陰沉, 一般是在將領們出戰以前, 個人在估計敵情, 作各種打算時用的, 鐘聲有強有弱, 是為了表達思潮的起落, 文戲裡向來少用, 青衣採用則更是初次嘗試。”
Mu leans forward, rises up again, steps back, goes straight up to the “stage entrance” 上場門. This series of movements (from the angle of the body to the inner feeling) simulate the Movement of someone wearing armour, implying that Mu Guiying is now mentally ready to fight.

“She turns around, and changes her facial expression to express a determination, as if she is once more back in the days when she was invincible and triumphantly won the battle against the Heaven’s Gate Formation.”

Horses neigh. The atmosphere heightens, the excitement mounts.

Suddenly I hear the drums and the horns blowing.
How it reminds me of my days of glory against the Heaven’s Gate Formation,
At that time on my horse I was majestic and dignified,
The blood of the enemy was spattered on my skirt.
I shall carry out my duty as long as I live.
How can I abandon even one inch of my land.
The intruders will certainly be defeated,
My sword can ward off a million soldiers.
If I do not take command, who else can?
If I do not lead the troops, who else will?
Attendants, quickly prepare my martial attire.

猛聽得金鼓響畫角聲震，喚起我破天門壯志凌雲。
想當年桃花馬上威風凜凜，敵血飛濺石榴裙。
有生之日責當盡，寸土怎能夠屬於他人。
番王小丑何足論，我一劍能擋百萬兵。
我不掛帥誰掛帥，我不領兵誰領兵！
叫侍兒快與我把戎裝端整，

She gently weighs the Seal, which carries the destiny of her country and people.

A swing of the “water sleeve” shows her resolution and determination.

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Holding the Commander’s Seal, heading for the drill ground,
I shall direct the troops.
抱帥印到校場指揮三軍。

[ A movement-set slightly borrowing the feel of a wusheng: a final freeze-posture with the vigorous Rhythmic Pattern “Four Strokes” sijitou 四擊頭 ].

[ The horns are blowing, the horses are neighing. Everyone is in a fighting spirit, just waiting for Mu Guiying to assume command.

[ She looks at the Commander’s Seal with emotion. She nods her head, thinking: “Yes, we have been parted for twenty years, you and I! Now you are once again in my hands. Let’s go fighting together as we always did..."

[ Raising the Seal, she turns around, and begins to make her exit (yuanchang 圓場). As she reaches the “stage exit”, she transfers the seal to her left hand, pauses for a short moment, and then exits.

Creativity and True Reform

This was a Jingju creation which had been through very careful artistic calculation and consideration. Everything was done in great respect of the traditional aesthetics. Creativity and uniqueness were supported by a sound foundation. This major scene from Mu Guiying Takes Command is a very challenging one, because there is only one person on stage for a lot of the time. Yet it provides every possible expressive opportunity (aria-arrangement, creatively original movement-sets, the innovative use of percussive music; as well as the underlying theme) for the performer. Through a step-by-step development the whole scene leads very naturally to a perfect and inspirational end. Whenever I performed this piece I derived pleasure on both levels: the sheer excitement of execution (the excitement and enjoyment a Xiqu performer has when a passage is artistically and technically well conceived), and the inner joy generated from an uplifting emotion.
This is a true enhancement of the art of Xiqu. This is the true way to reform, even if it is not openly described as such. With the artistic and innovative input of a great master like Mei Lanfang, the overall repertoire for Jingju has been enriched and expanded.
Conclusion

As we have explained at some length in previous chapters, Chinese traditional aesthetics is all about the formation of yixiang 意象, of images created through the interplay between the outer world and the inner world of the beholder. “Beauty lies in the vivid and ever-changing yixiang created by the beholder, which are derived from a ‘subjective interfusion with the objective reality of things.’” (Chapter II) Hence, the yixiang is not, and can never be, something existing or static. Beauty emerges only in the very process of creation. We can also say that, given this creative process, Chinese art and literature is a “human art of Being” “以人為本”的藝術. The artist’s perspective, awareness, and taste of life 情趣、品味 determine how he sees the world (“There is no such thing as an objective reality. We are the ones who give life and meaning to the outer world.” — chapter II)

So painting is something that comes straight from the heart.1 — Shi Tao

夫畫者，從於心者也。 — 石濤 (畫語錄‧一畫章第一)

Language is the sound of the heart; calligraphy is the painting of the heart. From the sound and the painting we can distinguish a gentleman from “small man.”2 — Yang Xiong

言，心聲也；書，心畫也。聲，畫形，君子小人見矣。

— 揚雄 (法言‧問神)

This explains why Chinese artistic and literary creation and appreciation accord so much esteem to the yijing 意境, the poetic and metaphysical mood or ambiance created in an art work, and the jingjie 境界 — the spiritual “world” of the artist, which is automatically reflected in his work. Let me further explain the relation between these two concepts.

In Chinese art appreciation we often hear people say: “This poem has a very fine *yijing*”
“這首詩的意境很好”; or just simply: “This is a work with a great deal of *yijing*”
“這個作品很有意境”. Thereby they imply that this art work, apart from the beautiful imagery or *yixiang* 意象 (which is fundamental to Chinese traditional aesthetics), conveys something more than that, something far beyond it. It somehow evokes a transcendental feeling, which leads to a reflection on, or a sudden enlightenment about, the universe and life itself. This is the underlying meaning of “a work with *yijing*”. And this *yijing* could never be achieved had the creators not entered a “world” *jingjie* 境界, had not reached a certain spiritual awareness. It is very important to note that the “world” *jingjie* 境界 I refer to is not a conceptual idea, or a religious or philosophical belief, but above all an ontological experience (an in-depth feeling generated from within).

For instance, we describe Du Fu’s 杜甫 poetry as “*chenyu*” 沉鬱, which is an emotional experience of sadness and indignation, a deep feeling about life’s hardship and great compassion towards the sufferings of others.

The din of wagons! Whinnying horses!
Each marcher at his waist has bow and quiver;
Old people, children, wives, running alongside,
Who cannot see, for dust, bridge over river:
They clutch clothes, stamp their feet, bar the way weeping,
Weeping their voices rise to darkening Heaven;...

However, “if one does not have the most genuine compassion for mankind 仁心, the most profound love for life, and the deepest experience and reflection on life and history, one will never attain such a spiritual ‘world’ 境界.”

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Li Bai’s poetry, on the other hand, is deemed to be the high point of the style known as the “rhapsodic” piaoyi 飄逸.

The flying streams plunge down from three thousand feet, like the galaxy descending from the Ninth Heaven.⁵

飛流直下三千尺，疑是銀河落九天。

Full of soaring inspiration, heroic thoughts can soar; we want to climb the heavens to embrace the shining moon.⁶

俱懷逸興壯思飛，欲上青天攬明月。

These are typical phrases created by Li Bai. They reflect most ingeniously the essence of Taoist thoughts —

So do I enjoy myself between heaven and earth, feeling totally at ease and content.⁷ (Zhuangzi, chapter XXVIII)

逍遙于天地之間而心意自得 — 〈讓王〉

Let the heart wander, riding on things.⁸ (Zhuangzi, chapter IV)

且夫乘物以遊心 — 〈人間世〉

To be carefree and unconstrained, to be totally emancipated from the world and its illusions, to experience the great joy and desire of union with Nature: this state of being is neither understandable nor attainable for “those whose intuition has not reached the highest level”.⁹

Between the Zen Master Chonghui 崇惠 and his disciple there was a famous conversation.

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⁶ Adapted from the translation by Elling Eide, in Minford and Lau, Anthology, p. 736.
⁷ Adapted from Legge’s translation.
⁸ My translation.
⁹ Chang, Creativity, p. 170.
Disciple: “What is the spiritual ‘world’ (jingjie) of the Here and Now of a man of Zen?”

Master: “The unlimited sky of eternity; the wind and the moon of an instant.”

門徒： “如何是禪人當下境界？”

禪師： “萬古長空，一朝風月。”

That means the only way to perceive and comprehend stillness and “emptiness” (the primordial source of all of life, Non-being 無) is through its vivid and ever-changing manifestations (the Being 有). “Changes are the manifestations of the changeless, which is boundless in space and endless in time, the primordial source of all potentialities in all things.”

Any one of the manifestations, especially that of Nature (the wind and the moon of an instant) can lead us to Ultimate Truth (the unlimited sky of eternity). To create a scene of utter quietude and serenity, which inspires an awareness of the inexpressible Ultimate, is the mode known as “empty and alive” kongling 空靈. “To be in quiescence is to see Being-in-itself.” (Laozi, chapter 16)

Wang Wei’s 王維 poem Birdsong by the Stream 《鳥鳴澗》 is an eminent example of this quality of kongling:

Men are quiet, the cinnamon blossoms fall.
The night is still, in the Spring mountain void.
Out comes the moon, startling the mountain birds;
Snatches of birdsong, above the Spring stream.

人閒桂花落, 夜靜春山空。
月出驚山鳥, 時鳴春澗中。

These magnificent poets created respectively a specific kind of poetic and metaphysical mood or ambiance yijing 意境. Chenyu 沉鬱 embodies the compassionate “humanity”

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11 Chang, Creativity, p. 205.
12 Based on Chang in Creativity, p. 126.
13 My translation, freely adapted from Chang in Creativity, pp. 176-177.
ren 仁 of Confucianism, the “rhpsodic” piaoyi 飄逸 expresses the wild imagination of Taoism (joy and freedom to be One with all of life), while the exquisitely “alive and empty” kongling 空靈 reflects the universe in its purest form.14 These “ambient moods” or yijing are very much prized in Chinese traditional aesthetics, because they transcend the ego, they call forth the spirit inside us and to different ways, give us a sense of joy and contentment and bring us back to our true self. In Professor Ye Lang’s words, the yijing “is a crystallization of the Tao.”15 As I have already stated in chapter II, “to manifest the Tao, especially its aspect of wu (the source of all creation; total freedom from all limitations), has always been of the highest value in Chinese aesthetics, and the ultimate desire of all great artists.”

Now we can see more clearly why Chinese traditional aesthetics is so inextricably bound up with spirituality.

In Chinese aesthetics, if we reach the highest “world” or “realm” of shan (virtue, goodness), we have also reached, in the most fundamental and broadest sense, the “realm” of beauty.16

在中國美學中, 達到了善的最高境界, 也就是在最根本和最廣大的意義上達到了美的境界。

If we want to talk about Chinese art but refuse to look into the Taoist mystic state of being, it is as if we research a building but are only willing to wander around the entrance, refusing to go inside, let alone study its original blueprint.17

假定談中國藝術而拒絕玄的心靈狀態, 那等於研究一座建築物而只肯在建築物的大門口徘徊, 再不肯進到門內, 更不肯探討原來的設計圖案一樣。

Chinese culture and China’s ancient philosophies, at the most profound level, are all about how to be, or how to be Human in a broad sense. “From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person to be the root of

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14 Detailed descriptions of these three styles can be found in Ye Lang’s Foundations of Aesthetics.
15 Ye Lang, Bamboos in the heart, p. 55. “‘意境’的‘意’不是一般的‘意’，而是‘道’的體現。”
everything.” “自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本。” 18 Even Taoism, which talks all the time about Heaven, Earth, and Nature, simply does so to set up a role model for Man. “Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Tao. The Tao takes its law from self-so-ness.” “人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。” 19 To put it another way, Man should act as Heaven and Earth (with unconditional love and total acceptance), and finally return to the state of his natural self. For once we resume our true identity (or Buddha Nature), we are entirely set free, and we are truly back Home.

Chinese traditional aesthetics, at the highest level, deals with an aesthetic experience similar to the spiritual experience of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. “We come close to experiencing aesthetically what the Taoist hopes to experience spiritually.”20

This is the first meaning of the phrase 以人為本, of Chinese art as a “human art of Being”.

With specific reference to Chinese Classical theatre, there is another meaning of the phrase, which is: “To gather a hundred skills in one person” 集百藝於一身.

The historical development of theatrical art, which was to assemble all entertainments in one single venue and thus to facilitate the merging of different artistic means, turned Xiqu into an art of extraordinary versatility. The desire and constant attempt to go beyond actual form, time and space (fundamentally seeking to reveal the Non-being side of the Tao), determined the symbolic nature of Xiqu. Symbolism inevitably leads to stylization, just as a realistic approach confines the artist and the audience to a specific time and space. The art of Hangdang 行當 (the types of role), and the four major disciplines (of singing, recitation, acting / body movement, and martial arts 唱唸做打), do indeed demand that the performer be a singer, an actor, and a dancer.

Xiqu has sometimes been praised as “three-dimensional poetry”, as “painting in motion” 立體的詩，流動的畫. The Xiqu performer, amazingly enough, is at the same time the poet and the poem; the painter and the painting. If we compare the empty stage with the

18 Based on Legge’s translation. The Great Learning in The Book of Rites.
19 Laozi, chapter 25, translation based on Legge.
20 Chang, Creativity, p. 55.
Zen Master’s “unlimited sky of eternity” 萬古長空, then the Xiqu performer is the endless variations of “wind and moon” 一朝風月, operating within the rules of cosmic law (like the equally endless variations of the percussive music that accompany his performance).

The great painter Qi Baishi 齊白石 once said: “The marvel of Chinese painting lies between resemblance and non-resemblance.”21 “作畫妙在似與不似之間” The deliberate theatricality of Xiqu, which is reflected through stylization (symbolic acting, percussive music, make-up, costume), has developed this ambivalent aesthetic principle to the greatest extent in stage form. In this performance art, the actor is always both the focus and the medium of all expressions.

This is the second level of the meaning of the phrase “the human art of Being” 以人為本.

Every literary style or art form, as with all of life, will pass through its cycles of prosperity and decline. After the Golden Age of Tang poetry, when nobody could surpass Li Bai and Du Fu, the Song dynasty Lyric or ci emerged. This is a natural process. One may also see this as a natural process of transformation.

Following the rapid change of Chinese society and ever-growing exchanges between China and the West, there has been a huge transformation in art appreciation and artistic activity. As a result, Xiqu, especially Kunqu and Jingju, which once prevailed in China, no longer occupy the predominant position they once had in the art world. However, this does not in any way lessen their artistic value. Kunqu and Jingju, like Classical Music, have already reached their peak and have left us a tremendous legacy. We will certainly not hasten to “reform” Baroque music simply because it attracts a smaller audience than pop music. Instead we should preserve the music (the scores) and the proper interpretation and style of that particular epoch. In the case of Xiqu, we must pass down the extensive and precious “traditional repertoire” and the magnificent interpretations of the great performers, such as Maestro Mei Lanfang and Maestro Yu Zhenfei; and most importantly of all, we must preserve the fundamental aesthetic principles according to which all the great creations of Xiqu have come into being. As a

matter of fact, Xiqu reform has been happening all along. Great artists, such as Mei Lanfang, Yu Zhenfei, Zhou Xinfang, Qiu Shengrong, Yuan Shihai, Li Shaochun, Zhang Meijuan, have all surpassed their predecessors and have brought the art of Xiqu to an unprecedented level, both artistically and technically. In a normal and healthy environment, art evolves naturally and quietly, without a great fanfare. If reform once becomes a slogan, or if the young people of today show little interest in traditional art and literature, then the problem probably lies more in society than in the art form itself. Instead of rushing into altering the “appearance” of an old art and assuming that this may appeal to the new audience, we should perhaps pose the question: what is it that has caused the younger generation to be so alienated from the unique beauty of their own culture?

In the words of Maestro Yu Zhenfei, “In studying any art, one has to go through a process of virtual osmosis. This process is a total environment, a whole way of life. It is the key with which one enters the palace of art.”

All forms can be and will be changed one day or another, but the spirit is eternal. Chinese art and literature, at the deepest level, enable one to achieve a state of Oneness, to enter a realm of total bliss and sheer joy, to glimpse the original truth of all existence. This is “what Chinese traditional aesthetics means by truth (zhēn 真) and self-so-ness (ziran 自然). It is an ever-evolving state of bliss, a world full of wonder and marvel. It is the spiritual home of man.”

This sense of Oneness is an inexhaustible source, and nourished by it human creativity will then “be supported by all the vitality of the universe.” It knows no boundary of time and space, and through it we can reach into the remotest past, and travel to the furthest shore, to create the most wondrous and contemporary works of art.

This is the true Chinese tradition, this is the real freedom, this is the philosophy, the aesthetics, the art that should be preserved and shared with the world.

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Note:
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