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# National Pastime as Political Reform: Staging Peking Opera's New Tragic Heroines

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**Abstract** This study addresses interactions between the state and local actors in managing and shaping leisure in the early period of the Republic of China of the 1910s and 20s. It focuses on the Republican state's efforts to harness leisure to further its agenda of "civilizing" the population and its dependency on local elites to do so. In particular, the study points to the emergence of Peking Opera's new tragic heroines—performed by the four famous Republican-period female-impersonator or *dan* actors Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng—as an expression of this "civilizing" cultural policy. It argues that the new operas written by men-of-letters and performed by the top *dan* actors helped to transform a national pastime by featuring the female character on center stage and, through these new female characters, spread a new set of social values and relationships, with freedom in marriage a frequent theme. The most important contribution in terms of drama's "civilizing" mission can be observed, I suggest, in the roles played by these women in the nation's affairs. Seen in the context of Republican politics this new female character took on symbolic meaning. They can be read as standing for society or the people in that, although without political power, they nonetheless represent moral fortitude and embody new social values.

**Keywords** Chinese state and leisure policy, new operas, tragedy in Peking opera, female impersonators, Mei Lanfang

A modern state needed civilized pastimes that would also help civilize the populace. This notion was already accepted by the reform-minded members of China's cultural elite a decade before the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1912.<sup>1</sup> It came with two rather different components, one related to the image of a modern state whose institutions were to reflect its modern identity, the other to the idea that leisure was a sphere of people's lives in which old and unhealthy ideas, values, and forms of behavior might persist, but where new and healthy ones might also be tested and accepted.<sup>2</sup> Given the ever-present anomic aspects of leisure, and shifts in the definition of what was considered healthy, the public and collective nature of leisure for theater audiences made the stage a potentially strategic venue for the battle between the old and the new, because theater could help foster a new citizenry for the new nation state.

The government of the new Republic of China set up specialized ministries for culture and education, headed by people with an international outlook, who immediately set out to use the instruments of state power to foster innovation in these fields. As the Republic descended into warlord factionalism, resulting in a political divide between North and South, its capacity to effectively impose national cultural policies was severely limited. This changed only in 1928 after the Northern Expedition had empowered the nationalist Kuomintang Party to establish a central government in Nanjing.<sup>3</sup>

Yet it was precisely during the years between 1911 and 1927, when the central government was weakest and had virtually no control over large parts of the country, that theater in general, and Peking opera in particular, became an important and popular platform for promoting reformist ideas and ideals through artistic innovation while retaining a critical edge towards the real-life performance of Republican governance. The center of

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- 1 No Chinese term for civilized pastime existed at the time. The aim to propagate such a pastime follows from the widely shared aim of creating a civilized (*wenming*) society to which reforms of popular leisure activities, including the novel, songs, storytelling (*tanci*), and the performing arts, would contribute.
  - 2 This idea was expressed for example in the foreword to the 1919 publication of the widely distributed *Riyong baike quanshu* 日用百科全書 [Everyday cyclopedia] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1919): "The progress made in learning in our times and the creation of new ideals and new causes every day calls for our people as a collective to hurry forward along the path towards civilization." In particular in the sections on "play/sports" (*youle* 遊樂, 76–79) and on "Games" (*youxi* 遊戲, 1–67), leisure activities are divided into new and old. While still describing the old, this encyclopedia promotes new kinds of sports and games. The work went through many editions and in its thirteenth edition in 1925, the category "leisure" (*yule* 娛樂) appears. See Catherine Yeh, "Helping Our People to Jointly Hurry Along the Path to Civilization." *The Everyday Cyclopedias, Riyong baike quanshu* 日用百科全書, in *Chinese Encyclopaedias of New Global Knowledge (1870–1930). Changing Ways of Thought*, eds. Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova and Rudolf G. Wagner (Berlin: Springer, 2014), 367–397.
  - 3 On these efforts, see Zhou Huimei 周慧梅, *Minzhong jiaoyuguan yu Zhongguo shehui bianqian* 民眾教育館與中國社會變遷 [The Mass Education Office and social change in China] (Taipei: Xiuwei zixun keji gufen youxian gongsi, 2013), 54n19, 284–285, 355, 391.



Figure 1 (left): “Yang Kuei-fei, the Most Artful of China’s Four Greatest Beauties, as Portrayed by Mr. Mei.” The picture shows Mei Lanfang in the role of Yang Guifei in the new opera *The Unofficial Biography of Taizhen* (Yang Guifei) (*Taizhen waizhuan* 太真外傳), 1925–1926.

Figure 2 (right): Cheng Yanqiu as Zhang Huizhu 張慧珠 in *Huangshan lei* 荒山淚 [Barren hill]. Photograph, 1930.

this push was not Shanghai, which up to that time had been the engine of theater reform, but Beijing, where the theater’s artistic taste and political orientation had long been influenced by its close association with the Qing court. This situation was exacerbated by the lack of a newspaper press in the capital due to constant threats of persecution by the court. Making a bold break with the past and benefiting from the early Republican-era leeway in setting up newspapers, Peking opera became a national art form with a strong reform agenda in a period when the capital itself was losing its national political sway.

These agents of Peking opera reform were new and “female,” and they came to center stage from the margins. The figures dominating Peking opera had been the “senior males” (*laosheng* 老生), but they were now tainted by their former association with the court, its “feudal” values, and its traditional aesthetics. They had to cede place to young impersonators of female roles (*dan* 旦), but especially the budding new stars later known as the “four famous *dan*”: Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (艷秋 1904–1958), Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–1976), and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–1968) who was also known as Bai Mudan 白牡丹, or White Peony (Figs. 1–4).

The turning point for Peking opera reform came in 1916–1917 with the staging of *The Goddess Spreads Flowers* (*Tiannü sanhua* 天女散花), with the young Mei Lanfang in the “female” lead. This was the beginning of the *dan*



Figure 3 (left): Shang Xiaoyun in the role of Bojidi 鉢吉蒂 in *Modengga nü* 摩登伽女 [The Mātanga girl]. Photograph, 1925. In the plot, Bojidi, a low-caste girl, falls in love with Ānanda, one of the Buddha's senior disciples.

Figure 4 (right): Xun Huisheng in the role of the spider fairy Yuexian xiazi 月仙霞子在 the opera *Pan si dong* 盤絲洞 [Spider cave], 1923.

actors' rise to dominance in Peking opera and to national and even international stardom.<sup>4</sup> They were not performing in "old" plays, but in operas newly written for them—sometimes, like Shang Xiaoyun above, in modern costume. These new operas reflected a new aesthetics as well as the reformist ideas and ideals of the time. Their centering of female characters revolutionized the traditional role hierarchy on stage, and they departed from traditional theater aesthetics by establishing these heroines as tragic figures.<sup>5</sup> During the pivotal first fifteen years of the Republican period, these *dan* actors, with the help of cultural elites and support from powerful politicians, succeeded in guiding Peking opera to its highest artistic achievement and greatest social impact.

Studies of leisure and entertainment during the early Republican period have mostly addressed the efforts of local gentry to promote healthy pastimes and reform local theater. Little attention has been paid to the Republican state's agenda and its halting efforts in this domain on the one hand

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4 In 1916, operas with a *laosheng* in the lead still greatly outnumbered those with a *dan*. See Gu Shuguang 谷曙光, "Minguo wunian Beijing jutan yanchu zhuangkuang fenxi—yi 'yanchang ximu cishu diaochabiao' wei zhongxin" 民國五年北京劇壇演出狀況分析—以“演唱戲目次數調查表”為中心 [A study of the state of theater performances in 1916 Beijing—based on the *Table of the Number of Opera Performances*], *Xiqu yishu* 30, no. 1 (February 2009): 74.

5 As most traditional Peking Opera performances were performed to celebrate auspicious events such as birthdays, a tragic ending would have been unseemly.

and the societal forces pushing Peking opera reform on the other. While the former operated through regulations, promotions, and support of non-governmental organizations, and the latter through the networks supporting and guiding these young *dan* actors, the press, with its new role as a mediator between the world of theater and the public through advertisement, criticism, and debate, and the city as the particular environment to frame and sustain these reforms, were firmly embedded in transcultural exchanges ranging from political institutions of the nation state to the development of a modern citizenry to dance figures. This study will explore the tensions and fortuitous coincidences between these two agents—a weak state and strong social actors<sup>6</sup>—who played a critical role in bringing about Peking opera reform during the early Republican period. It will focus on the pivotal role of the *dan* actors in these developments. It argues that the weakness of the state institutions during these years prevented them from playing a defining role in Peking opera reform beyond being generally supportive. It was this combination of general support and specific weakness that created the environment for a most revolutionary reform of the cast, performance style, organization, and agenda of Peking opera. In a sense, the weak state left to society the responsibility to govern itself and engineer its own renewal. This was made possible by the widely shared understanding among the educated class of the close relationship between theater and social education, which had spread since the late Qing political reform debates. Responding to the continuing weakness and fragmentation of the Republican state, actors, playwrights, journalists, and supporters of the *dan* actors took it upon themselves to push for the country to join the civilized world. At least on stage, civilized values became the silent new normative value system, emblemized by the new female heroines.

## The state and the politicization of theater

With the founding of the Chinese Republic in 1912, reforming the traditional theater became a high priority. While there had been occasional efforts at theater reform during the previous ten to fifteen years, it now became an important topic in public discussion beyond theater circles, with reform-oriented new media, social elites, and government officials all getting involved. Almost from the beginning of the new Republic, members of the reformist elite as well as government officials (many of whom had been recruited from among the former) began publicly proclaiming that traditional Chinese leisure activities and entertainment, especially fiction and theater entertainment, were obstacles to a civilized China but had the still unexplored potential to become soft devices for the modern education of China's backward citizens. The Japanese Meiji modernization drive

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6 This formula alludes to the study of Julia Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Politics. State Building in Republican China, 1927-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), which deals with a similar constellation even after 1928.

offered the model to stabilize the foundations of the Republic through the formation of true citizens with patriotic commitment.<sup>7</sup>

With this purpose in mind, the new Ministry of Education under the reformer Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) set up a “Social Education Bureau.” Among its duties was to oversee opera reform so as to enhance its potential to spread new ideas among the lower classes.<sup>8</sup> In 1912, the Bureau founded the semi-governmental and semi-societal Popular Education Research Society, with many local branches, which quickly began to implement its agenda to educate the masses according to modern standards.<sup>9</sup> The tools of this Society were public lectures, the rewriting of old operas, and the creation of vernacular newspapers. As traditional theater was the primary form of popular entertainment during the late Qing and early Republican periods, this society was particularly active in adapting new stories to the traditional opera form. This included foreign stories such as the 1912 Sichuan Opera adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.<sup>10</sup> It also helped set up local opera reform societies.<sup>11</sup>

The Popular Education Research Society, however, soon faltered amidst internal strife among different political factions and parties. It was revived in 1915 through government efforts, financed and managed by the new Ministry of Culture. It now consisted of officials and members, appointed by the government, who represented a selection of active and known cultural figures. Three sub-offices were established to oversee and evaluate the content of fiction, operas, and public lectures, and to set up public libraries for the purpose of popular education.<sup>12</sup> The main task assigned to the Society was to promote “knowledge regarding hygiene, means of

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7 Wu Bochun 伍博純, the founder of the Popular Education Research Society (Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiuhui 通俗教育研究會), based his work on his Chinese translation of a Japanese work on popular education, *Nihon tsūzoku kyōiku kenkyūkai*, ed., *Tongsu jiaoyu shiye sheshifa* 通俗教育事業設法 [Methods for the development of popular education facilities], translated by Wu Da 伍達 (Shanghai: Tongsu jiaoyu yanjiu, 1912). See Shi Keyao 施克燻 and Li Kaiyi 李凱一, “Jianghu yu miaotang: Beiyang zhengfu shiqi shehui jiaoyu de lujing xuanze” 江湖與廟堂：北洋政府時期社會教育的路徑選擇 [The marshes and the court: selections on the path of social education during the Northern Government period], *Qinghua daxue jiaoyu yanjiu*, 33, no. 5 (October 2012): 105.

8 On the Social Education Bureau (Shehui jiaoyu si 社會教育司) see Shi Yantao 石彥陶, “Huang Xing yu guomin jiaoyu lantu” 黃興與民國教育藍圖 [Huang Xing and the blueprint for citizen education for the Republic], *Yiyang shizhuan xuebao* 11, no. 4 (1990): 70–71.

9 On the Popular Education Research Society see Shi Keyao and Li Kaiyi, “Jianghu yu miaotang,” 103–107.

10 Wang Di 王笛, “Chaguan, xiyuan yu tongsu jiaoyu: Wanqing Minguo shiqi Chengdu de yule yu xiuxian zhengzhi” 茶館、戲園與通俗教育：晚清民國時期成都的娛樂與休閒政治 [Teahouses, theaters, and popular education: Entertainment and leisure politics in late-Qing and Republican Chengdu], *Jindaishi yanjiu* 3 (2009): 77–94.

11 The Opera Reform Society (Xiqu gailiang she 戲曲改良社) in Tianjin is an example, see Shi Keyao and Li Kaiyi, “Jianghu yu miaotang,” 105–106.

12 Shi Keyao and Li Kaiyi, “Jianghu yu miaotang,” 104.

livelihood, public morals, and identification with the State.”<sup>13</sup> The office in charge of fiction attempted to influence social ideas and inject new values by monitoring popular novels of the time, offering rewards for those it deemed worthy and censoring those that did not fit the new standards. The office in charge of theater examined all current popular stage performances. According to its charter, the theater section of the organization was to:

One, investigate the status of traditional and new opera and to reform performance practices; two, investigate the status of sales of playbooks on the market and the task of collecting them; three, review plays and storytelling texts; four, select and translate [foreign] studies on theater; five, review moving pictures [film], slide-shows and recordings.<sup>14</sup>

This office further recommended that local governments should set up theater reform societies to collect popular stories, rewrite them into new plays or story-telling texts, and publish them as stories. Most importantly, the office stressed the need to write new operas that reflected the spirit of the time and could educate the common people. The Society received popular support. By 1918, as many as 232 such Societies were established throughout the country, the majority privately funded with only marginal government support.<sup>15</sup>

To place leisure and entertainment under the control of the Ministry of Education and then that of Culture marked a major departure from past practices of local and central governments, when leisure and entertainment had been under the jurisdiction of the Office for Public Safety.<sup>16</sup> The

13 “Zhuyi weisheng, mousheng, gongzhong daode, guojia guannian” 主意衛生，謀生，公眾道德，國家觀念, see Shi Keyao and Li Kaiyi, “Jianghu yu miaotang,” 105.

14 “Tongsu jiaoyuhui cheng” 通俗教育會程 (Program for the Social Education Bureau), Beiyang zhengfu jiaoyubu dangan 北洋政府教育部檔案 (Files of the Department of Education under the Beiyang government), in *Zhonghua mingguo shi dang'an huibian* 中華民國史檔案資料彙編 [Compilation of archival materials on the history of Republic of China] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), 3:102–103.

15 “Jiaoyubu gongbu quanguo gesheng tongsu jiaoyuhui gaikuang 教育部公布全國各省通俗會概況 [Announcement by the Ministry of Education on the general situation of the Popular Education Research Society on the provincial level]” [1918], in *Zhonghua mingguo shi dang'an huibian* 中華民國史檔案資料彙編 [Compilation of archival materials on the history of Republic of China] (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), 3:566–567.

16 During the late Qing, theater in Beijing came under the jurisdiction of the Beijing Outer City General Police Office (Jingshi waicheng xunjing zongting 京師外城巡警總廳), under the newly established Police Department (Xunjing bu 巡警部), under the Ministry of Civil Affairs (Minzheng bu 民政部). See Wu Xinmiao 吳新苗, “Qingmo Minchu beifang diqu xiqu gailiang huodong kaoshu (1) 清末民初北方地區戲曲活動考述 (一) [Research report on theater reform activities in northern China in the late Qing and early Republic periods],” *Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan xuebao* 32, no. 8 (August, 2011): 38; Wang Zhizhang 王芷章, *Zhongguo jingju biannian* 中國京劇編年 [Chronology of Chinese Peking opera] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju

Popular Education Research Society was now given the power to censor and promote plays according to their social morals.<sup>17</sup> Through these interventions, the government publicized its attitude and policies concerning theater. The institutional change reflected the Republican leaders' determination to use entertainment for the purpose of state building and thus in effect to politicize theater as well as theater reform.

This politicization allowed state leaders to influence theater reform and redefined the social position of the actor. During the three months when Sun Yat-sen was the first President of the Republic, he issued a number of reform laws. One of them abolished the caste system, which had defined actors as low caste and banned them, for example, from marrying daughters of respectable families. This opened the door for the theater reform efforts of Shanghai actors and even directly encouraged them. Sun saw theater reform as an urgent task. To elevate the status of actors, he personally responded to the call by Shanghai actors to create a union that would reflect their newly-gained social status, and delivered the opening address at their inaugural event.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, he gave the Shanghai actors who had joined the Republican revolution a banner inscribed with the words "The bell to wake up the world" (*Jing shi zhong* 警世鐘), to praise the importance of opera reform. This banner was proudly displayed at the *New Stage Theater* (*Xin wutai* 新舞台). As we shall see, the actual plays then staged went beyond this consensus by taking it upon themselves to engage audiences as a critical public forming judgments on the great issues of the time.

By linking the actors' new social position as dignified citizens of the land with Republican ideals, the new Republican government not only politicized the theater, it also gave the actors a role and a stake in the creation of a new social and political order. This link was made clear in a speech given by Huang Xing 黃興 (1874–1916), a major leader in the Republican Revolution, to the actors at the newly-established Beijing actors' self-administered *Society of Orthodox Music for Social Education* (*Zhengyue yuhua hui* 正樂育化會) in 1912.<sup>19</sup> This Society had replaced the traditional actors' guild, The Loyalty

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chubanshe, 2002), 809. See also Wang Fengxia 王鳳霞, "Wenmingxi yu xiandai zhengdang 文明戲與現代政黨 [The civilized plays and modern political factions]," *Shanghai xiju xueyuan xuebao*, 1 (2010): 29.

17 In fact, it was very difficult for the Society to implement its mandate and it still depended on the Office for Public Safety to do so. See Fu Jin 傅謹, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiju shi* 二十世紀中國戲劇史 [A history of twentieth-century Chinese theater] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2016), 145–150.

18 *Zhongguo jingju shi* 中國京劇史 [A history of Chinese Peking opera], eds. Beijing shi yishu yanjiusuo and Shanghai yishu yanjiusuo (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1999), 1:244.

19 This new society had been set up already in 1912. All three founders, Tian Jiyun, Yang Guiyun 楊桂雲 (–1914), and Yu Yuqin 余玉琴 (1867–1939), were *dan* actors. Officially registered in 1914 with the "senior male" actor Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) as president and Tian Jiyun as his deputy, it was engaged in securing the welfare of actors with funds coming from a charge of one copper coin per seat sold by the different troupes. It also engaged in charity performances for disaster relief in Hubei and other provinces. See Wang Dazheng 王大正, "Zhengyue



Temple (*Jingzhong miao* 精忠廟), established under the Qing. One of the founders of the new society, the *dan* actor Tian Jiyun 田際雲 (1864–1925), was extremely active in promoting new-style Peking opera that dealt with contemporary reform themes.<sup>20</sup> The task at hand, Huang declared, was to sweep away the undesirable social customs among the people that constituted “impediments” to the newly-founded Republic. Huang then called attention to the special powers of the actor. “For the task of changing old social customs, there is no force more qualified than the actor.”<sup>21</sup> The power to change people rested with the actors’ art—“music and song, which can move people at the deepest level [of their emotions].”

Contrasting China with the “civilized countries” (*wenming guo* 文明國) of the West, he also addressed the issue of the low social standing of actors in the past, which had prevented them from playing a positive role in matters of concern to the state. Because of the high standing and respect theater (as well as actors) enjoyed in the West, the plays were written by great writers, who also made use of the stage to educate people and change social customs. Theater, in short, was capable of “inspiring people’s hearts and bringing about social reform. Thus the countries in the West are able to move forward to acquire wealth and power.”

Huang ended his speech by linking the new social status of the actor to the duty that came with it: “Today, our Republic has been established, and all people in it are equal. The past discrimination of actors has been eradicated. You should emulate the examples set by Europe and America, use your advocacy powers to spread civilization in society, and usher in opera reform.”<sup>22</sup> His message was welcomed by the members of the *Society*, the reference to “orthodox music” in its name already indicating their desire to be recognized as offering civilized instead of lowly entertainment.

## The late Qing theater reform legacy: The role of government and actors

The notion that the uncivilized populace was holding Chinese society back, and that the emotional appeal of popular entertainment could be used as a most effective means to change this, go back to the court-sponsored Reform of Governance (*Xinzheng* 新政) policies between 1901 and 1911. Given a prevailing master narrative that emphasizes the radical break

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yuhua’ bainian yihua (shang) ‘正樂育化’百年遺話百年逸話(上) [Anecdotes of the one-hundred-year history of (*The Society of*) *Orthodox Music for Social Education*, pt. 1],” *Zhongguo jingju*, 7 (2012): 42–45.

20 On these efforts, see Wu Xinmiao, “Qingmo Minchu beifang diqu (1),” 37–39.

21 Huang Xing 黃興, “Zai Beijing Zhengyue yuhua hui huanyiing shang de yanjiang” 在北京正樂育化會歡迎上的演講 [Speech at the reception of the *Beijing Society of Orthodox Music for Social Education*], in *Huang Xing ji* 黃興集 [Collected works of Huang Xing], ed. Hunan sheng shehuikexueyuan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 276.

22 Huang Xing, *Huang Xing ji*, 276.

between Imperial China and the Republic, the high degree of continuity in the theater reform efforts between the Reform of Governance period and the early Republic needs to be better understood. This was not just a continuity in the agenda, but in many cases even in the actors. The main themes of the late Qing theater reform, namely patriotism, women's right to an education, and struggle against corruption all already engaged with global trends. The main change coming with the early Republic was an even stronger engagement with world trends.

Opera reform efforts during this period were mostly—and very consciously so—first staged in the treaty ports of Shanghai and Tianjin outside the reach of the court. These two treaty ports came with additional advantages. They had a public that was open to the new and had in many cases moved to these treaty ports for that reason. Of equal importance, these two cities were the places with the highest concentration of newspapers, newspaper writers, and newspaper readers in the country, which made for a good environment for advertisement, theater criticism, and public debate. The reason for this concentration was the same as for localizing theater reform efforts in these cities, namely to be able to operate beyond the purview of the Qing court.<sup>23</sup> Starting out from their secure place in the treaty ports, some of the troupes ventured inland, invited or protected by officials sympathetic to their efforts.

Available scholarship on late Qing opera reform efforts has made substantial contributions exploring the role of localities, above all Tianjin and Shanghai, of individual figures, of the Qing court during the Reform of Governance period, and of the interaction between reformers from the gentry and the state's agenda.<sup>24</sup> The crucial point of the direct involvement of the government and the independence of most of these local gentry actors from direct state interference, however, has not been addressed. It brings up a significant difference with the local actors discussed in the study by Tim Oakes in this volume, as they were ultimately under the direct control of the political center. The contested nature of leisure's time/space discussed in the "Theoretical Essay" concluding this volume includes the option of a silent agreement with one agent independently doing what the other would like to do but cannot.

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23 On the role of the treaty port press in theater reform, see Catherine Yeh, "The Press and the Rise of Peking Opera Singer as National Star: The Case of *Theater Illustrated* (1912-17)," *East Asian History* 28 (2006): 53-86; "Creating Mass Entertainment: Media and the Rise of the Actor as Star during the Early Years of the Republican Period," *Intelligence* (Waseda University) 5 (2004): 25-33; "A Public Love affair or a Nasty Game?—The Chinese Tabloid Newspaper and the Rise of the Opera Singer as Star," *European Journal of Asian Studies* 3 (2003): 13-51; "Shanghai Leisure, Print Entertainment, and the Tabloids, *xiaobao*." In Rudolf G. Wagner (ed.), *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910*, 201-233 (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

24 For the case of *Yi su she* 易俗社 [Custom reform society] in Shanxi province as an example of such a private/official interaction, see Fu Jin, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiju shi*, 116-124.

One of the aims of the Reform of Governance had been “to enlighten the people” (*kai min zhi* 開民智). Following this agenda, reform-minded Qing officials lent their support to efforts in the treaty ports to write and stage new plays,<sup>25</sup> a connection documented in a fine study by Wu Xinmiao based on reports in the late Qing press.<sup>26</sup> Resembling those of the Republican period, semi-societal and semi-governmental theater reform societies were established in cities such as Tianjin, Canton, and even in far-away Chengdu, which was not a treaty port. The Tianjin Society to Transform Social Customs through Music (*Yi feng yue hui* 移風樂會), for example, was supported by the military leader Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916), who also gave the society its name.<sup>27</sup> Active only in the short period between 1906 and 1907, it staged many new operas with telling titles such as *Smashing Superstition*, *Regretting Past Mistakes*, *Sir Pan Throws Himself into the Sea* (a story based on the late Qing political activist, patriot, and martyr Chen Tianhua),<sup>28</sup> *The Foundation of a Strong People*, *Exemplary Heroes*, (a story about having martial spirit), or *A Story of Marriage to Wake up the World* (about the sad fate of women subjected to foot-binding).<sup>29</sup>

The Qing court played an active—if ambivalent—role, sometimes publicly rewarding local efforts at staging new plays that dealt with pressing social issues. After the huge stage success in Tianjin and Beijing of two new operas centered on the theme of promoting female education, *Biography of Ms. Huixing* (*Huixing nüshi zhuan* 惠興女士傳), and *A Patriotic Woman* (*Nüzi aiguo* 女子愛國), the Police Department honored the troupes performing these operas with silver plaques and awarded them the copyright to the plays.<sup>30</sup> Even the Empress Dowager became actively involved, inviting the troupe that performed *A Patriotic Woman* to perform in court. Between 1901 and 1908, newspapers regularly reported different government

25 Officials of the Qing court such as Wang Yinpei 王蔭培 were impressed with the Japanese development, and Wang emphasized in 1906 that the plays in Japan were written by men-of-letters, were vetted by the censors, were dominated by the virtues of “loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness,” *zhong, xiao, jie, yi* 忠孝節義, and were spoken drama rather than opera so that women and young people could understand. Quoted in Li Xiaoti 李孝悌, *Qingmo de xiaceng shehui qimeng yundong: 1901–1911* 清末的下層社會啓蒙運動:1901–1911 [The late Qing movement for the enlightenment of the lower classes: 1901–1911] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 184.

26 Wu Xinmiao, “Qingmo Minchu beifang diqu,” 38–40.

27 Shao Lulu 邵璐璐, “Xiqu gailiang yundong yu Qingmo Minchu de shehui bianqian—yi Tianjin wei zhongxin de kaocha 西區改良運動于清末民初的社會變遷—以天津為中心的考察 [The drama reform movement and social change during the late Qing and early Republic—a study with a focus on Tianjin],” *Fujian luntan, renwen shehuikexue ban* 3 (2010): 98.

28 *Pochu mixin* 破除迷信, *Hui qianfei*, 悔前非, *Pangong tou hai* 潘公投海, see “Xinxi chuxian 新戲出現 [New plays make their appearance],” *Dagong bao*, October 9, 1906, 4.

29 *Minqiang ji* 民強基, *Hao nan'er* 好男兒, *Xingshi yinyuan* 醒世姻緣, see “Guangdelou yanchang xinxi” 廣德樓演唱新戲 [New plays performed at the Guangdelou Theater], *Jinghua ribao*, no. 629, 1907, 3.

30 Wu Xinmiao, “Qingmo Minchu beifang diqu,” 38.

measures to encourage gentry and actor participation in writing and staging such new operas.<sup>31</sup>

The actors in their turn took the lead to develop what became known as “theater in modern dress” (*shizhuang xinxi* 時裝新戲). Centered in Shanghai and groups of Chinese students in Tokyo, this form was motivated primarily by ideological commitments critical of the Qing court. In Shanghai, for example, Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儂 (1858–1918) wrote *The Stele of the Believers* (*Dangren bei* 黨人碑), one of the earliest such operas in 1901, and played the lead. It had been written to commemorate and denounce the death of the six reformers executed by the Qing Court after the failed Hundred Days’ Reform of 1898. The opera *The Partition of Poland* (*Guazhong lanyin* 瓜種蘭因), also known as *The Tragedy of Poland’s Demise* (*Bolan wangguo can* 波蘭亡國慘), held up the fate of Poland as a warning to China.<sup>32</sup> Wang Xiaonong went on to create as many as forty new-style Peking opera plays as commentaries on contemporary political and social issues. Several actors who were to actively participate in the Republican revolution in Shanghai were promoting and staging new operas on reform themes on the Shanghai stage prior to the Revolution.<sup>33</sup>

Besides professional opera singers, amateur actors also played an important role in theater reform. Initiated by Chinese students in Japan, amateur spoken drama emerged at this period, with the *Spring Willow Society* (*Chunliu she* 春柳社, founded 1906) being the most famous. Among their performances was a dramatized spoken drama version of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as *A Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu* 黑奴籲天錄) in Tokyo in 1907. Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩 (1889–1962), who later would play an important role in Peking opera reform, was one of the actors in the show. More radical activists at the time went further in their use of theater, promoting not simply social reform but social revolution and Republican ideals. Wang Zhongsheng 王鐘聲 (1874?–1911), with his *Progress Troupe* (*Jinhua tuan* 進化團), was representative of this current.<sup>34</sup> In short, from the last decade of Qing rule to the beginning of the Republican

31 Wu Xinmiao, “Qingmo Minchu beifang diqu,” 38.

32 *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao* 中國現代戲劇史稿 [Draft history of modern Chinese theater], eds. Chen Baichen 陳白塵 and Dong Jian 董健 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1989), 39–40; Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 95–97; for a more detailed study of Wang Xiaonong’s efforts, see Zhang Kuo 張曠, *Wang Xiaonong jingju gailiang sixiang yanjiu* 王笑儂京劇改良思想研究 [A study of Wang Xiaonong’s thoughts on Peking opera reform] (MA diss., Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan, 2012). The partition of Poland has been the subject of a study and translation by Rebecca Karl, “Staging the World in Late-Qing China: Globe, Nation, and Race in a 1904 Beijing Opera,” *Identities* 6, no. 4 (2010): 551–606.

33 Among these were the prominent senior male (*laosheng*) actors Xia Yueshan 夏月珊 (1868–1924) and his brother Xia Yuerun 夏月潤 (1878–1931), as well as Pan Yuejiao 潘月焦, see *Zhongguo jingju shi*, 1:333–350.

34 See Liu Hecheng 柳和城, “‘Xinju taidou’ Wang Zhongsheng ‘新劇泰頭’ 王鐘聲 [Wang Zhongsheng, the ‘Leader of new drama],” *Dang’an yu shixue* 6 (2004): 16–18.

period, both society and forces in the government were actively involved in theater reform, although not always with the same goals in mind.

By the early Republican period, both public opinion supporting the need for opera reform and officially supported theater reform institutions were in place. During the first years of the Republican period, the discussion was not about whether or not theater needed reform, but rather whether the government should not altogether take over the task of organizing it.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the proactive theater reform efforts from the side of the Republican state proved ineffective. After 1913, most amateur theater troupes collapsed and modern costume opera stagnated. With the North/South political divide, there was no unified government structure to oversee reforms. This only changed after the establishment of the KMT government in Nanjing in 1927. Still, these government efforts, which were only fully revived on the Mainland after 1949 and culminated in the development of the model operas just before and during the Cultural Revolution, created the environment in which the most important new development in Peking opera—the rise of the female impersonators between 1911 and 1927, became possible.

The coming of the new Republic involved not just a political transfer of power, but the (still tenuous) establishment of new institutions along the standards of Japan and the West, together with new cultural values that were to be made visible in state, society, and family, as well as, and most important for our discussion, on the stage.

## Reshaping Peking opera for the new epoch: Cities, actors, writers, and power-holders

The biggest change brought by the Republican revolution for the stage was that Beijing rapidly rose to become the center of theater reform. The main reason for this was a public commitment by the authorities to free speech and theater reform combined with a reduction of the state's powers to enforce its agenda within China proper due to the political fragmentation of the early Republic. This led to a vast increase of the number of newspapers in the capital, which in turn offered space for the discussion of opera reform and the development of opera criticism. What had once been the privileged condition for change held by the treaty ports of Shanghai, Tianjin, and Canton, with their settlement governments and liberal regulation of the press and the theater, was now briefly characteristic of the cultural and political landscape of the nation's capital city. Peking opera's old links with the city through numerous troupes, training sites for actors, and elite patronage came to renewed bloom under these conditions.

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35 Shi Keyao and Li Kaiyi, "Jianghu yu miaotang," 103; Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770–1900* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Beijing became the city to which the educated reform elite congregated. The previously private patronage of *dan* actors by men of letters now translated into a public cooperation for the reform agenda through new plays and another innovation, theater criticism. As this connection was missing in the treaty ports, opera reforms there continued privileging the actors of senior male (*laosheng*) roles and lacked the input from high-status men of letters. In short, by the mid-1910s, the reform agenda was set in Beijing. The new media environment encouraged the entry into the fray of *dan* patrons with strong ties to early Republican governments. These men were willing to go public in Beijing and began to write new operas, which carried the new values and civilizational aspirations of the Republican era.

The particular interests and qualifications of Beijing audiences helped in this shift. Politics, politicians, and policies were for the time being common fare in the capital, so that theater audiences were sensitized to politics and their national importance. This secured local public attention for Peking opera reform. The new operas created by a collaboration between writers and actors were very much understood by the city's audiences in the political context of the time. Between 1913 and 1927–28 when the capital was moved to Nanjing, the large number of politicians and government officials congregating in Beijing also brought about a change in the balance between private and commercial theater performances. During these years, a *dan* actor's income from performing at private parties (*tanghui* 堂會) was four times what he earned in commercial theaters—that is, only one fifth of their total income came from public performances.<sup>36</sup> High officials as well as wealthy and powerful men were important patrons of the new operas.

The new order of things signaled by the rise of the *dan* actors, and the new social and aesthetic values embodied by their on-stage personas, challenged the authoritative role of the “senior male” characters and the viability of the value system represented through them in the Peking opera repertory, which had evolved under the continued patronage of the Qing imperial court. Their repertory had drawn largely on warrior stories in novels such as *Sanguo yanyi* (*Three Kingdoms*) and *Shuihu zhuan* (*Outlaws of the Marsh*), on stories of heroes and gods from the novel *Fengshen yanyi* (*Enfeoffment of the Gods*), and on the acrobatics of Monkey from the *Xiyou ji* (*Journey to the West*). These performances had enthralled the court as well as the common people (only men were allowed in Peking theaters up to 1900), because with their “heat and noise,” as Robert Weller so nicely translated *renao* 熱鬧, they seems to have suited the dominant taste of the city, and because the Emperors and later even the Empress Dowager found resonance with their own roles in the wise, powerful, and martial “senior male” figures. Reflecting the leading position of these figures on stage, the head of Peking opera actors' guild was always an actor playing a “senior

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36 Xie Bing 謝冰, “Ershi shiji chu Zhongguo xiqujie de bianqian 20 世紀初中國戲曲的變遷 [Transformations of Peking opera circles during the early years of the twentieth century],” *Zhongnan minzu daxue xuebao* 23, no. 3 (May 2005): 154.

male" role.<sup>37</sup> He was the face of Peking opera and the authority figure the Qing court dealt with.<sup>38</sup> The *dan* repertoire had remained undeveloped and reduced to supporting roles.

The new Republican order needed public champions to highlight its new values. The survival of Peking opera hinged, in part, on its ability to adapt to the requirements of the new era. To forge such a new direction leading Peking opera into the future, a figure was needed which was not associated with images of dynastic power and glory, but could be associated with the new Republican ideals.<sup>39</sup> This was a chance the *dan* actors sensed and seized. They were not alone in this endeavor, but were helped by men of letters who themselves were moving from a dynastic to a Republican role.

Late Qing and Republican-era politicians and cultural elites alike shared the notion that theater reform was a necessary part of modern nation building. The successful European and Japanese experiences all seemed to support this notion. Given the weak and divided state authority during the early Republican period, societal forces came to play a large share in local reform initiatives. Zhang Jian 張謇 (1853–1926), a successful businessman and reformer, is a prominent example. In his hometown of Nantong, he sponsored the building of a new theater with the programmatic name *Theater to Change Social Customs* (*Gengsu juchang* 更俗劇場), together with a modern theater training school for children and other experimental institutions.<sup>40</sup> Other examples of this societal activism included Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962) and Luo Yinggong 羅瘿公 (1872–1924), two men of letters who helped shape the new Peking opera art by writing new operas with *dan* actors in the lead. Qi Rushan was also an appointed member of the Education Research Society. These new operas, mostly written between 1916 and 1928 while Peking was the capital, led two of these *dan* actors, Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu, to national and international stardom.

Mei Lanfang was well-known during the 1910s for staging "new theater in modern costume," with plays that tackled the mistreatment of women

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37 Yan Quanyi already pointed to a shift in the aesthetic orientation of Peking opera between the 19th century, when the *laosheng* were defining its art, and the 20th century, when the art of the *dan* represented by Mei Lanfang reoriented the repertoire. He read this shift as one of general taste from the court-oriented martial spirit represented by the persona of the emperor to that of the common people of the Republican period. Yan Quanyi 顏全毅, *Qingdai jingju wenxue shi* 清代京劇文學史 [A literary history of Peking opera during the Qing] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2005), 278–288.

38 *Laosheng* actors were aware of this association with the Qing and some of them, such as Tan Xinpei, went to Shanghai after the Republican revolution fearing that their close ties to the Qing court, especially to the Empress Dowager, might bring them harm in Peking.

39 The counter-example is the flourishing late Qing courtesan entertainment. It was unable to overcome its association with the old world order and while its establishments continued to be frequented, they lost their prominent public role.

40 See *Zhang Jian yu Mei Lanfang* 張謇與梅蘭芳 [Zhang Jian and Mei Lanfang], ed. Nantong Bowuyuan 南通博物院 (Nantong: Zhonghua gongshang lianhe chubanshe, 1998).

and the fate of women in society.<sup>41</sup> These newly created operas took on contemporary social reform issues that had been discussed since the late Qing. Their link to Republican nation-building is obvious, as their heroines embodied new social values. These works showed the entire range of what might be defined as a “civilized pastime” at the time.<sup>42</sup> Between 1911 and 1928, Mei Lanfang performed around thirty new operas written for him by Qi Rushan and others. The most intense period of Mei’s new productions, however, was between April 1915 and September 1916, when he came out with no less than eleven new plays,<sup>43</sup> some of them using scenes from much longer, older *laosheng*-centered works.

The common theme reflected in all of them, whether newly written or based on existing librettos, was a social critique of traditional features of Chinese social order from the point of view of women. The heroines of these plays are rebellious characters who defy the powers-that-be and struggle to define their selfhood against the established order. Mei Lanfang’s acting focused on exploring this mindset. Sexual desire and looking for a partner to one’s liking are presented as women’s legitimate pursuits. Their frank articulation by women on stage represented the new spirit of the time. The focus of Mei’s new operas was to explore the heroine’s inner life and desires in a critique of traditional structures that left women without the power to define their social role and live out their emotions.

The goddess spreads flowers (*Tiannü sanhua* 天女散花, 1917) marked a fundamental change. It was an opera based on a scene in a Buddhist *sūtra*, for which Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang created an entirely new type of Peking opera performance that included Mei dancing, followed by multi-colored stage lights, elaborate stage props and, most importantly, a new performance aesthetics that was psychological in character and permeated by dance.<sup>44</sup> Mei Lanfang and his supporters created many historical

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41 Examples include *Niehai Bolan* 孽海波瀾 [Polish/great waves in the sea of retribution] and *Deng Xia gu* 鄧霞姑 [Miss Deng Xia], which deals with issues of freedom of marriage; *Yilü ma*—縷麻 [A thread of hemp], which addresses the tragic fate of women in arranged marriages.

42 These works also included new operas in traditional costume, such as *Laoyu yuanyang* 牢獄鴛鴦 [The imprisoned mandarin ducks]; recreated classical costume operas including *Chang’e ben yue* 嫦娥奔月 [Chang’e escapes to the moon], *Daiyu zang hua* 黛玉葬花 [Daiyu burying the fallen petals], *Qingwen si shan* 晴雯撕扇 [Qingwen tearing the fan]. The first of these was based on a Chinese legend and the other two on the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Finally, it included four Kunqu pieces, namely *Nigu si fan* 尼姑思凡 [A nun’s longing for worldly life], and *Nao xue* 鬧學 [School room] from the late Ming opera *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 [*Peony Pavilion*], *Jiaqi* 佳期 [The nuptials] and *Kao Hong* 拷紅 [Interrogating Hongnian] from the Yuan play *Xi xiang ji* 西廂記 [Romance of the Western Chamber], and *Fengzheng wu* 風箏誤 [The kite and the mistaken message], which was based on the opera of the same name by Li Yu 李漁 (1610–1680).

43 See Wang Changfa 王長發 and Liu Hua 劉華, *Mei Lanfang nianpu* 梅蘭芳年譜 [Mei Lanfang chronicle]. (Nanjing: Hehai daxue chubanshe, 1994), 60.

44 See Catherine V. Yeh, “Creating Indigenous Roots for Modern Dance in China: Dance and Transcultural Innovation in Peking Opera, 1910s–1920s” in *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, edited by Katherine Mezur and Emily Wilcox. (In press: Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2020).



and myth-based plays in the new vein.<sup>45</sup> In these plays, the central power-holders are emperors, kings, and generals, which intensified social critique and reflection through dialogue and confrontation between the powerholder and his subject. In a well-established routine that goes back many centuries, these plays opened an avenue for the indirect discussion of the present.

Luo Yinggong was crucial in promoting Cheng Yanqiu. From 1922, when Cheng Yanqiu was just eighteen years of age, until Luo's death in 1924, Luo wrote a total of twelve new operas for Cheng (seven in 1923 alone). After Luo's death, Cheng was helped by Jin Zhongsun 金仲孫 (1879–1944), one of Luo's close friends. Out of the ten or so new operas Jin wrote for Cheng, eight were written between 1925 and 1927, which gives a total of twenty new operas for Cheng between 1922 and 1928.<sup>46</sup> Continuing in Luo Yinggong's vein, Jin kept to the tragic but heroic female character in the lead. Set in the past and performed in traditional costume, most of his lead characters were close to power, emperors' consorts or the wives or daughters of high officials or men of letters. They were nonetheless victims of misfortune, injustice, and the corruption of power. Through these tragic characters, Cheng refined a subtle and introspective style that excelled in portraying the inner conflicts and emotional life of his heroines in their struggle against insurmountable adversity.

Shang Xiaoyun began performing new operas written for him only in 1923, when he was already twenty-three years old. He was primarily spurred on by the fierce competition coming from Mei Lanfang, but also by Cheng Yanqiu's stellar rise through his performance of new operas. The main writers for Shang Xiaoyun in these early years were Xun Shuchang 洵疏廠, of whom little is known, and Qingyi jushi 清逸居士 (or Aixin Jueluo Puxu 愛新覺羅 溥緒, of the Manchu imperial Aisin Gioro clan, 1882–1933). Shang Xiaoyun and Xun Huisheng are two *dan* actors who continued to perform new operas written for them after 1928 and well into the 1930s. After playing in ten newly written operas between 1923 and 1928, Shang continued in the female-centered new opera tradition created by Mei Lanfang, with three new operas written between 1929 and 1933. However,

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45 These included *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 [Hegemon King bids farewell to his concubine], *Xixue congkao* 10 (1926): 1–12; *Xishi* 西施 [The patriotic beauty Xishi], in *Xidian* 戲典 [Drama texts], Second Collection (Shanghai: Shanghai zhongyang shudian, 1937), 1–37, the song lyrics were already published as “Xishi juci 西施劇詞 [Xishi song lyrics],” in Zhuang Zhujiu 莊鑄九 et al., *Mei Lanfang* 梅蘭芳 (Shanghai: Private printing, 1926), 8–9; Hongxian dao he 紅線盜盒 [Hongxian steals the box], in Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan juben* 齊如山劇本 [Qi Rushan play texts], in *Qi Rushan wenji* 齊如山文集 [Collected writings of Qi Rushan], ed. Liang Yan 梁燕 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010), 13:150–160; *Guifei zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒 [Guifei intoxicated with wine], *Xixue congkao* 10 (1926): 1–18; *Zhen e ci hu* 貞娥刺虎 [Killing the Tiger General], in Wang Changfa and Liu Hua, *Mei Lanfang nianpu*, 111; and *Yuzhou Feng* 宇宙鋒 [The precious sword named Yuzhou Feng], *Xixue congkao* 7 (1926): 1–7.

46 See Hu Jinzhao 胡金兆, *Cheng Yanqiu* 程硯秋 (Changsha: Hunan wenyi chubanshe, 1987), 39–56, 58–66.

because Shang excelled in martial roles and had a passionate and quick temper, his heroines were all martial in spirit and unyielding in nature. Through his new plays, Sheng established the role of the rebellious heroine as his special calling.<sup>47</sup>

Born in the same year as Shang Xiaoyun, Xun Huishang performed in the same troupe with him at one point, and the two remained close throughout their lives. Xun's first encounter with new opera was rather unique. In 1911, Wang Zhongsheng, of the *Progress Troupe* mentioned above, invited him to join his troupe, which was at the time performing in Tianjin. The first opera in which Xun performed with this troupe was the 1907 spoken drama adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After a first visit to Shanghai in 1919, Xun settled in this city for four more years until 1924, putting on eight new operas with the help of different writers. Starting in 1925, he began performing in new works written for him by Chen Moxiang 陳墨香 (1884–1942). By 1928, they had produced nine such works. Unlike the three other *dan* actors, who had been trained in the morally upright female role, *qingyi* 青衣, Xun was trained in the sexy *dan* variant, *huadan* 花旦. Yet the new operas allowed him to develop as broad a range of techniques for character portrayal as the other *dan* did in their specialty. His characters mainly belonged to the lower ranks of society, daughters of common folk, maids, servants, or courtesans. They are decent, upright, and true to their feelings. In comparison, the men to whom they have devoted their love are heartless, selfish, and even evil.<sup>48</sup>

Early Republican members of the elite such as Feng Youwei 馮幼偉 (1880–1966), the head of the Central Bank, and Li Shikan 李釋戡 (1888–1961), Yuan Shikai's chief military officer, offered political backing, protection, and support to the budding *dan* actors. These were men of consequence in the early Republican period, and they already had been involved in the late Qing reform drive. Although their attitudes concerning the politicization of theater as a tool to educate the people varied, they were committed to the Republican state's modernization project and were personally involved in reforming Peking opera. Due to their traditional cultural and personal ties to the *dan* actors and in view of the virtually untapped artistic potential of the *dan* role, these men of letters focused their theater reform efforts on this figure. The *dan* actors enjoyed unprecedented political, financial, and intellectual support and protection during the early Republican period, a support that was exclusive to them and virtually inaccessible to actors of other roles.<sup>49</sup>

47 See Li Lingling 李伶伶, *Shang Xiaoyun quanzhuan* 尚小雲全傳 [Complete biography of Shang Xiaoyun] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2009).

48 Li Lingling 李伶伶, *Xun Huisheng quanzhuan* 荀慧生全傳 [A complete biography of Xun Huisheng] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2010).

49 For a discussion on the historical ties between *dan* actors and literati, see Ye Kaidi 葉凱蒂 (Catherine V. Yeh), "Cong hu hua ren dao zhiyin: Qingmo Minchu Beijing wenren de wenhua huodong yu danjiao de mingxing hua 從護花人到知音: 清末民初北京文人的文化活動與旦角的明星化 [From 'protector of the flower' to cultural adviser: The rise of Peking opera singer to national stardom and the transformation of the patronage culture in Beijing (1890s–1920s)]," in *Beijing*:

The support from powerful men with a literati background enjoyed by the *dan* actors was also very public. Throughout the early Republican period, many such men of letters moved from private writings about the *dan* they supported and admired to writing for the newspapers. They published poems of praise but also began focusing their comments on the stage performance and the relative artistic merits of the different *dan* actors in an early form of Chinese theater criticism.<sup>50</sup> As Xun Huisheng later recalled, “new” being the fashion of the time, there was a huge demand for new operas from theater critics<sup>51</sup> as well as the general public.<sup>52</sup> Theater criticisms published in the newspapers secured public attention for these performances. As women had become part of opera audiences since the Allied invasion against the Boxers in 1900, audience sensibilities had greatly changed and the four top *dan* actors competed to put on new plays to satisfy them, at times even using the same basic story with different interpretations and emphasis.<sup>53</sup>

The rise of the *dan* and their new female heroines reflected the spirit and the needs of the time in yet another sense. Women’s issues such as female education, abolishing footbinding, and preparing women for vocations outside of the home had already been among the major late Qing reform items, as the position of women in society had become the marker in international discussions of whether or not a society was to be considered civilized.<sup>54</sup> The inclusion of a new role for women into the “standard of civilization” was widely supported by reformers in the transition period from the late Qing to the Republic. Giving a voice to the powerless became one of the main driving forces in the development of new Peking operas with female impersonators in the lead. In the stage confrontation between the powerless but virtuous female figure and the corrupt state representative, the men of letters who wrote these new pieces also idealized their own new situation.

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*Dushi xiangxiang yu wenhua jiyi* 北京：都市想像與文化記憶 [Beijing: Urban culture and historical memory], eds. Chen Pingyuan 陳平原 and Wang Dewei 王德威, 121–135 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2005).

- 50 Kiyasarin V. Ie キヤサリV. イエ (Catherine V. Yeh), “Taishū goraku no sōsei - 1910-nendai minkoku shoki ni okeru medeia to sutā haiyū no taitō” 大衆娛樂の創生-1910年代民国初期におけるメディアとスター俳優の台頭 [Creating mass entertainment: Media and the rise of the actor as star during the early years of the Republican period], translated by Shimizu Ryōtarō 清水亮太郎, *Intelligence* (Waseda University), 5 (2005): 25–33.
- 51 Li Ying 李瑩, “Qingmo xiqu gailiang yundong zhong de xin juben yanjiu 清末戲曲改良運動中的新劇本研究 [Study on the new opera texts produced in the late Qing theater reform movement]” (MA diss., Tianjin shifan daxue, 2012), 14.
- 52 Li Lingling, *Xun Huisheng quanzhuan*, 339.
- 53 Tan Zhixiang 譚志湘, *Xun Huisheng zhuan* 荀慧生傳 [Biography of Xun Huisheng] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 201–203.
- 54 See Rudolf Wagner, “Women in Shenbaoguan publications 1872–1890,” in *Different Worlds of Discourse. Transformations of Gender and Genre in Late Qing and Early Republican China*, eds. Nanxiu Qian, Grace S. Fong, and Richard J. Smith, 253–255 (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

## Representing the new order: The *dan*-centered new operas

Of the ninety-seven new operas written between 1911 and 1928, only three were written for *laosheng* in the lead; the remaining ninety-four were for *dan*. Of these, seventy-seven were written for and performed by the four leading *dan* actors, with the remaining seventeen works assigned to others, including seven written and performed by Ouyang Yuqian alone.<sup>55</sup> Performing new operas was the foundation of these four actors' stardom, with each developing his own brand or school of acting.

With these new works, the *dan* role moved to center-stage in Peking opera. The shift to the dominant female role was revolutionary. These new operas covered a broad range of styles, including plays staged in modern and historical costumes as well as plays based on myth or *Kunqu* (Southern Opera). The leading characters included consorts of kings and emperors, legendary beauties, daughters of commoners, fairies, maids, and female knights-errant, portraying strong-willed, morally upright, but powerless heroines confronting powerful male figures. Common also to these new operas was the theme of the lone female heroine fighting injustices inflicted upon her and her family by brutal and corrupt power holders. In this confrontation, the female figures, although without power, represent moral courage and fight injustice and oppression by strategy, which mostly entails sacrificing their own life in order to be victorious in a development that might be characterized as the coming of tragedy to the Peking opera repertoire. The new *dan* operas confront the traditional and familiar ideal of the virtuous female who obeys orders from the male authorities, and bring forth a new type of female character, who adheres to her own "modern" will and inner values while challenging authority figures representing the old system. The careers of the four *dan* actors bear out these common features.

Other elements were shared by the new works written for these actors. Their stories are mostly set in the past with the powerholder being either the emperor himself or corrupt officials representing him. Through the just struggle of the idealized female character, the traditional authority figure is shown in a negative light, the legitimacy of his power is called into question, and the audience is prompted to identify with the female figure.

This is a new type of female figure on stage, as it contrasts with the normative female values of "three obediences and four virtues."<sup>56</sup> She now stands for the spirit of the new order—the right to self-determination

55 These numbers are based in part on the list of new operas given in *Zhongguo jingju shi*, 2:53–59, supplemented from the biographies of the four leading *dan* actors written by Li Lingling, *Xun Huisheng quanzhuan*, *Shang Xiaoyun quanzhuan*, *Mei Lanfang quanzhuan* 梅蘭芳全傳 [Complete biography of Mei Lanfang] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2001), and *Cheng Yanqiu quanzhuan* 程硯秋全傳 [Complete biography of Cheng Yanqiu] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2007).

56 "San cong si de" 三從四德, obedience to the father as daughter, the husband as wife, the sons as widow, wifely virtue, speech, manner, and work.

(*zizhuquan* 自主權)—and evokes the image of the once powerless people rising against unjust authorities. The plays show the process of her self-realization through the expression of her will, ambition, or purpose (*zhi* 志), in place of the normative love (*qing* 情) assigned to the *dan* role. The struggle is an old one—fighting against unjust power—but in these Republican operas the agent is new, a woman with an individual will. This in itself is a challenge to the patriarchal social order. This challenge is brought forth through the agency of the female figure fighting for autonomy and selfhood. Her values might not be so different from the traditional Confucian values, but now they are hers and as an expression of her self-determination they re-emerge as internal values in tune with those of the citizens of civilized nations. In a sense, the traditional values were used to justify her rebellion and her claim to female agency that signals the modern.

These women are not granted a utopian environment or a happy end on stage. On the contrary, the entire action is focused on the conflict between their self-realization agenda and the tradition-bound social forces they confront. Having a woman with the symbolic attribute of “weakness” bring forth this challenge foreshadows the result. She cannot win, but she will not retreat. As these heroines will not return to their traditional women’s roles, their fate is at best an unresolved continuation of their free roaming, at worst a tragic death.

These dark and often tragic endings mark a fundamental shift in the aesthetics of Peking opera. This genre had originally been developed for birthday and holidays celebrations at the Qing court. From there it had entered urban entertainment. In both arenas, the dominant aesthetics pointed towards a happy end. Aesthetically, the new tragic plots were a reflection of the operas’ social ideas. The form carried its message. The rise of tragedy itself was part of the nation-building agenda, as tragedy was regarded as a sign of a “civilized” and “cultured” nation, a discussion that had already started during the late Qing period.<sup>57</sup> These dark and tragic ends thus also catered to an educated elite that appreciated tragedies not just as a reflection of the conflicts of the times, but also as a sign of China’s emerging modernity according to their notion of Western drama with its background in the Greek tradition.

Together with the development of these new plot features came the creation of a new type role for female impersonators, the “flower gown” (*huashan* 花衫). This role is a combination of the upright female *qingyi*, the sexy/coquettish *huadan*, and the martial *wudan* 武旦 or *diaomadan* 刀馬旦,

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57 For a study on the historical Chinese discussion on tragedies, see Natascha Gentz, “Fate, Freedom, and Will in European and Chinese Discourses on Chinese Tragedies,” in *Reading the Signs: Philology, History, Prognostication. Festschrift for Michael Lackner*, eds. Iwo Amelung and Joachim Kurtz, 571–592 (Munich: iudicium, 2018); see also Liu Dong 劉東, *Beiju de wenhua jixi. Cong gudai Xila dao xianzai Zhongguo* 悲劇的文化解析.從古代希臘到現在中國 [A cultural analysis of tragedy, from ancient Greece to modern China] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2017).

*dan* roles that enabled the actor to represent complex non-linear modern female characters.<sup>58</sup> The creation of this type made it possible to introduce dance in Peking opera, which highlights the aesthetic transformation of Peking opera as a performing art.<sup>59</sup>

The new operas thus opened an artistic space for these *dan* actors to explore acting techniques that probed the psychology of the new heroines and responded to the contemporary political situation by creating characters and dilemmas that resonated with contemporary social agendas and concerns. The new operas, some of which became signature pieces associated with a particular *dan* actor, played a decisive role in reshaping the Peking opera repertoire and the public image and stage persona of the female impersonator. As the new operas often took materials from existing works, their transformation of the originally supporting female character into the main character enabled actors to directly confront the familiar traditional image of the female. This was in direct contrast to the affirmative tone in traditional operas concerning social roles. Through their plots, characters, and struggles, they were able to embody new social values without open confrontation. This, together with artistic innovations like including music, made these new plays hugely popular with urban audiences in Republican times, as shown in the box office receipts of the commercial theaters and the public acclaim for the four great *dan*.

## Centering the female character: Republican ideals, power-holders, and the people

In her study of the rise of leisure in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, Nicole Samuel has suggested that leisure has the potential to act as a social force that can bring about new ways of thinking and instigate social change; it is, she writes, the "origin of many transformations of social processes and produces new values."<sup>60</sup> As the rise of the *dan*, together with its soft-power spreading of new social messages, appears to have resonated with early Republican audiences, we ask what was the aesthetic and social coding of this female-centered new opera that

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58 In the history of Peking opera, Wang Yaoqing 王瑤卿 was credited with experimenting with this new role. However, when we examine his acting style, the existing plays restricted his experimentation. For a detailed study on the huashan role, see Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 123–129.

59 For a discussion on dance entering Peking opera see, Catherine Yeh, "Experimenting with Dance Drama: Peking Opera Modernity, Kabuki Theater Reform and the Denishawn's Tour of the Far East," *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1, no. 2 (2016): 28–37.

60 Nicole Samuel, "The Prehistory and History of Leisure Research in France," in *Leisure Research in Europe: Methods and Traditions*, edited by H. Mommaas, H. van der Poel, P. Bramhan, and I.P. Henry, 12 (Wallingford, UK: CAB International, 1996).

connected with contemporary audiences? How might this figure be read within the social and cultural context of the time?

Two aspects of this new female figure in Peking opera suggest strong correlations within well-established narrative traditions. The first is the historical context in which this figure emerged, which might be characterized as a time of national crisis and dynastic renewal/regime change. The second is the tragic nature of her story in the context of this national crisis. As Wai-yee Li has shown in great detail, women as literary figures with a literary voice (with male voices appropriating female diction and female voices appropriating male diction) had become a well-established literary trope by the Qing period. Writers used it to articulate issues involving the nation, to deal with national trauma, and to reestablish a sense of cultural identity.<sup>61</sup> Yu Huai's 余懷 (1616–1696) *Banqiao zaji* 板橋雜記 (Miscellaneous records of the plank bridge, 1697), consolidated this tradition.<sup>62</sup> Written during the early years of the Manchu conquest of the Ming Empire, it deals with the theme of the fallen dynasty through the stories of the great courtesans of the late Ming. The nostalgia/lamentation for these past beauties has been read as a lament for the fallen dynasty.<sup>63</sup> There is thus a long and well-developed tradition of reading the fate of female figures during times of national crisis and transition as a representation of the moral fortitude of the nation or of society coupled with powerlessness. To understand the potential power of this new female heroine that came to dominate the Peking opera stage, I will analyze the new *dan* operas within this cultural tradition.

The female figure at the center of the new plays, who confronts men of power, wealth, and prestige, as I stated earlier, was not a new motif on stage, but the ideological framework of this confrontation, as well as the tragic ending for the heroine, were. The relationship between these new female characters and their male counterparts now has a public rather than private character, because the male characters inevitably come with the accouterments of state power. The *dan* roles are thus cast for a particular critique of and/or a dialogue with the state, in particular with the rulers

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61 Wai-yee Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).

62 Wai-yee Li, *Women and National Trauma in Late Imperial Chinese Literature*, 295–307; see also Patricia Sieber's comments on the fascination felt by seventeenth-century literati, both before and after the fall of the Ming, in her "Getting at It in a Single Genuine Invocation: Tang Anthologies, Buddhist Rhetorical Practices, and Jin Shengtan's (1608–1661) Conception of Poetry," *Monumenta Serica* 49 (2001): 33–56.

63 Ye Kaidi 葉凱蒂 (Catherine V. Yeh), "Wenhua jiyi de fudan – Wan Qing Shanghai wenren dui wan Ming lixiang de jian'gou" 文化記憶的負擔—晚清上海文人對晚明理想的建構 [The burden of cultural memory—The construction of the late Ming ideal by late Qing Shanghai men-of-letters], in *Wan Ming yu wan Qing: Lishi chuancheng yu wenhua chuangxin* 晚明與晚清：歷史的傳承與文化創新 [The late Ming and the late Qing: Historical dynamics and cultural innovation], edited by Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, Wang Dewei (David Wang) 王德威, and Shang Wei 商偉 (Wuhan: Hubei xiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 53–63.

of the state. This constellation lends itself to a symbolic reading. Given the association of female characters in traditional Peking opera as the subordinate figure rather than a holder of power, and the clear identification of their counterparts as mostly men representing state authority, the conflict between the two in the plays would suggest that the *dan* represent “society” or “the common people.”

However, while Peking opera’s new dramas take up and use female figures of older plays, the discussion this time is not about the past but about the future of the nation; they help articulate anxieties and hopes for the new Republic. When analyzing these new plays, we must also take into account the Republican revolution whose new social and political structures made possible a power shift in the hierarchy of actors as well as the ascendancy of a female-centered repertory and with it the rise of the *dan*. The new ideals represented in the new female characters accorded with a state agenda of “healthy entertainment.” When we read these new performances as a form of dialogue involving male writers, *dan* actors, theatergoers, and the powerful officials who patronized these *dan*, what does this new female figure tell us about early Republican ideal pastimes, political alliances and dilemmas, social critiques, and the outlook for the nation’s future?

As most of the *dan* actor’s new dramas were set in the historical past, the most immediate surface meaning would read the plays as a critique of the old régime and a social system which the new Republic fought to overthrow. In this layer of reading, the young heroine not only represents the common people but the spirit and ideals of the Republic, including the new officials themselves. The tragic ending of the heroines, however, opened the window for a twofold reading: it could point at the overwhelming repressiveness of the old system, and the impossibility of the heroine’s returning to the fold as she pursues self-realization, and at the same time could reflect the still unfulfilled aspirations of the people at present. Both readings could accommodate the prevalent notion that made the existence of tragedies on stage the marker of “civilized” theater.<sup>64</sup> Thus the new drama can also be understood as a new aesthetic embodiment of the social, a new world outlook.

The link between the creation of new operas and the Republican state was more than a mere reflection of the new ideas of the modern state in the plays. According to Qi Rushan, the themes for some of the new plays he created for Mei Lanfang had actually been suggested by the Ministry of Education. He mentions *Mulan congjun* 木蘭從軍 (Mulan, the disguised warrior maiden, 1912), *Xishi* 西施 (The patriotic beauty Xishi, 1923), *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒 (The precious sword named Yuzhou Feng, 1919), and *Qie fu*

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64 The argument is made explicitly by Jiang Guanyun (1866–1929), one of Liang Qichao’s collaborators, see [Jiang] Guanyun [蔣]觀雲, “Zhongguo zhi yanjujie 中國之演劇界 [China’s stage performance circles],” *Xinmin congbao*, 17 (1905): 95–98.



*qiu Zhao* 窃符救趙 (Stealing the *fu* to save the kingdom of Zhao, 1910s?).<sup>65</sup> Starting in 1911, he wrote, the Ministry wanted new operas to be created that reflected “international understanding” and new plays were created by actors and their supporters to reflect the needs and demands of the state. Thus, the state’s direct involvement in the creation of new plays strengthens the case for understanding these new plays as a form of dialogue between the state, the stage, and the audience.

To explore the potential of this social, aesthetic, and political reading of the new plays and decode the social message they carry, I will analyze in detail some of the most popular plays, which served as signature pieces for the lead *dan* actors. These plays were all written between 1911 and 1927.

### Rebellious female figures assure their support for the young republic while fighting despotic rulers: *The Precious Sword Named Yuzhou Feng*

Starting in 1919, Qi Rushan began to rewrite a scene from a rarely performed old drama, *The Precious Sword Named Yuzhou Feng*. This play originally had a male lead. Set during the reign of the Second (and last) Emperor of the Qin dynasty (ruled 210–207 BCE), it tells of a conflict between two important court ministers, Zhao Gao and Kuang Hong, who were related through the marriage of their children. However, Kuang Hong criticized Zhao Gao’s autocratic ways. In revenge, Zhao Gao stole a precious sword named Yuzhou Feng from Kuang, used it in an attempt to assassinate the Second Emperor, and then blamed the attempt on Kuang. The Second Emperor ordered Kuang’s entire family to be killed, but Kuang’s son Fu managed to escape. The main focus of the play revolves around this political struggle. Finally, the truth is revealed, Kuang Hong is saved, and Zhao Gao punished.

The new opera is based on a scene from this opera. It begins when Zhao Yanrong, who is Kuang Fu’s wife and Zhao Gao’s daughter, returns home to the Zhao estate after the calamity that has befallen the Kuang family. She hates her father for his treachery in falsely accusing Kuang, and at the same time hates the Second Emperor for his dissolute lifestyle and lack of governing principles. When visiting the Zhao residence, the Second Emperor is struck by Yanrong’s beauty and asks Zhao to let him have Zhao Yanrong as consort. Calculating that this will open his way to the highest military position in the land, Zhao agrees, delighted. In self-defense, Zhao Yanrong accepts her deaf-mute maid’s suggestion and pretends to have lost her wits. This disguise of madness gives Yanrong the opening to voice her real opinions about the depraved nature of the two central power holders, cursing her father as well as the emperor, quite

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65 Qi Rushan, *Qi Rushan huiyilu*, 121–22.

apart from giving Mei Lanfang the stage for a stunning performance of feigned madness.

The open criticism of a foolish, ignorant, and corrupt emperor is a well-established trope in Chinese theater, but to articulate such criticism was the role of loyal (male) ministers. Here, this role is given to a young woman. Going a step further, Zhao Yanrong also denounces her father. This plot device of pretended madness offers the play and its protagonist a unique opportunity to stage an open and direct political critique. When her father tries to force her to accept the marriage proposal, Yanrong cozies up to her father and suggests that the two of them should be husband and wife, implying that the demands of the emperor and her father are equally outrageous and morally corrupt. Further pressed by her father, Zhao Yanrong takes action by pulling at the patriarch's beard (Fig. 5). When Yanrong is brought to the court, she does not kneel down. "When you are in front of the emperor, why are you not down on your knees?" the emperor asks her. "Why, you are not on your knees!" she answers. When he laughs and pronounces her mad, she also laughs. "Why are you laughing at me?" "I laugh at you being a stupid ruler who lacks the *dao* of good governance 無道昏君 [. . .] I believe that this world belongs to everyone, not to you alone. As I see it, this land of yours will not last long."<sup>66</sup> Although the confrontation with the emperor is the most dramatic part of the play, the scene between the daughter and father is far more subversive. It challenges the very core of Chinese social hierarchy and authority structure.

Through a woman's "mad" words, which the audience knows to be her real opinion as well as the truth, society expresses its Republican claim that the state is not the property of the power-holder but of everybody, and that a power-holder who behaves as if it was his property, is "stupid and lacking in the *dao* of good governance." The denunciations of the emperor and the father can be understood as targeting warlord rule while asserting the rights of the people under Republican ideals. The most provocative aspect of this newly written play is again the agency exerted by the heroine. Although the confrontation obviously challenges the old social order, it goes further by showing a woman rebelling against that order in a way that does not show rigorous adherence to civilized internal values in a corrupt world. It exhibits a female self-identity that dares to confront the prevailing order without showing any of the formal markers of civilized ideals or Confucian norms of womanly behavior, although ultimately Zhao Yanrong is driven by a patriotic devotion to the state's welfare and her own commitment to her husband. Fighting the Emperor as the representative of feudal rule can be read as a direct justification of the Republican revolution in 1911.

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66 "我笑你無道昏君[... ]我想這天下乃人人之天下,並非你一人之天下。我看你這江山未必能長久了。"



Figure 5: Mei Lanfang as Zhao Yanrong in *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒 [The precious sword named Yuzhou Feng]. Photograph, 1950s.

### A heroine makes history: *The Story of Hongfu*

Among Cheng Yanqiu's plays, *The Story of Hongfu*,<sup>67</sup> *The Tang Emperor's Consort Meifei*,<sup>68</sup> and *Wenji's Return to China*<sup>69</sup> have been regarded as his early signature pieces. *The Story of Hongfu* was written for Cheng by Luo Yinggong in 1923 in part as a response to Mei Lanfang's *Hongxian Steals the Seal of Power* (Fig. 6). Hongfu, a dancing girl in the service of the Prime Minister during the last year of Sui dynasty (581–618), falls in love with a visitor, Li Jing 李靖, who is known to history as one of the most capable military commanders of the time ("Prince Li," 571–649 CE). She elopes with him to join the rebellion which eventually establishes the Tang dynasty in 618 CE.

The opera is based on the Tang-period fantastic story of the *chuanqi* type by Du Guangting, *Biography of the Bearded Sojourner*.<sup>70</sup> In the original story, the main character is neither Hongfu nor Li Jing, but an outlaw rebel with the sobriquet "the bearded sojourner." He befriends the two and upon recognizing the outstanding character of Hongfu and the potential greatness of Li Jing, he gives up his ambition of himself becoming China's new

67 *Hongfu zhuan* 紅拂傳, (1923) in *Xidian* 戲典, Collection 11 (Shanghai: Shanghai Zhongyang shudian ), 1948. *Cheng Yanqiu yanchu juben xuanji* 程硯秋演出劇本選集 [Selection of plays performed by Cheng Yanqiu], ed. Zhongguo xiqu yanjiuyuan (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1958), 1–38.

68 *Meifei* 梅妃, (1925) in *Cheng Yanqiu yanchu juben xuanji*, 213–248.

69 *Wenji gui Han* 文姬歸漢, (1926), see Hu Jinzhao, *Cheng Yanqiu*, 61.

70 Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933), *Qiuran ke zhuan* 虬髯客傳, in *Tangren xiaoshuo* 唐人小說 [Tang stories], edited by Wang Pijiang 汪辟疆 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 178–184.



Figure 6: Cheng Yanqiu in the role of Hongfu. Photograph, 1923.

ruler and leaves them his amassed wealth to aid their own endeavor. Like in most Tang tales, the original story is about the extraordinary actions of these three knights-errant at a time of national upheaval, with the mysterious bearded man as the main driving force. While the new opera kept the plot of the story largely intact, Hongfu was made into the lead character, and her actions drive the drama. Moving away from the story's focus on the three outlaws, the opera focuses on the central theme: in a time of national crisis, truly extraordinary action is needed for the nation's survival, and it is for the people to recognize the heroes of their time and aid them in restoring justice and peace to the land. As it is the heroine who recognizes the hero, the agency of the play resides with her.

The context echoes that of the end of Qing China and the struggle for the Republic. The opera opens with the country in crisis due to the Sui ruler's descent into debauchery and subsequent neglect of government; there are uprisings throughout the country, with outlaws roaming the lands and heroes vying to control the future of China. Li Jing, a young man famous for his skills as a medical doctor, is restless and in search of a just and rightful cause to which to devote himself when, during a visit to the prime minister, he by chance meets Hongfu. The opera opens with his assessment of the state of the country and his own desire to participate in shaping its future:

I see confusion arising in the four seas, and the central plain (China)  
in uproar/I was born with extraordinary talent and I have great  
ambitions/This Emperor of Sui has lost the way of good govern-  
ance, leaving the people angry and in hope for better times/This

is why all around there are violent uprisings and in many places kings have been proclaimed/I am a great hero with great talent and broad knowledge/I ought to achieve great deeds and have my name spread throughout the four seas.<sup>71</sup>

These opening lines echo the common adage that heroes are made by times of crisis. They furthermore lay the moral foundation for the righteous cause of the outlaws.

Hongfu is the daughter of a well-to-do family that has fallen into ruin. Gifted in literary matters and an outstanding sword maiden, she comes on stage lamenting her fate as a bond-servant in the Prime Minister's residence. Restless like Li Jing in these times of national upheaval, she loathes her captivity and yearns to put her lofty ideals into action. When she meets Li Jing, she instantly recognizes him as a hero who will play an important part in their time and decides to align herself with him.<sup>72</sup>

That very night, she escapes from the Prime Minister's residence dressed up as a military official after having stolen the office pass that allows her to get out, and heads for Li Jing's lodging. In the meantime, Li Jing has been thinking about this girl he saw at the Prime Minister's and is overjoyed to discover Hongfu when the visiting "military official" lifts her hood. He exclaims that he has finally found "the one who recognizes me" (*zhiyin* 知音). Their union is thus based on their equal status and on recognition of each other's value.

The rest of the story unfolds when the "bearded sojourner" by chance meets Hongfu. He is struck by her beauty and her unusually straightforward character, while Hongfu also quickly recognizes that he is someone of consequence. She quickly establishes a friendship with him through a knight-errant ritual and also helps Li Jing to win the bearded sojourner's trust. The opera ends with the bearded man leaving them his wealth and wishing them success in their quest for the establishment of a new order for China.

The opera echoes a well-established literary trope of the beauty who recognizes the hero who will make a difference in the affairs of the nation. However, it also transforms the trope. Hongfu is not a mere beauty but herself a knight-errant with vision and the courage to take action to insure her own future as well as that of the country. It is she who brings the two other heroes together, and this inadvertently provides the financial base for their later bid for power. In this opera, the female character—as in *Hegemon King*—is actively involved in national affairs and her action highlights female agency in pursuing free love. Seen in the context of the early Republican political setting, the character of Hongfu—like that of

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71 “看四海亂紛紛中原動蕩，天生我奇才士立志非常；那隋帝無道君萬民怨望，因此上起刀兵到處稱王。我本是大英雄才高識廣，必須要立奇功四海名揚，” *Cheng Yanqiu yanchu juben xuanji*, 3.

72 *Cheng Yanqiu yanchu juben xuanji*, 12.

Lady Yu—can again be read as standing for the people. The future of the Republic depends on the people having a martial spirit, being able to find the right leaders and supporting them in the struggle to establish a unified new China against the warlords. This image of Hongfu joining the fight is more forceful than of Lady Yu's sacrifice, as Hongfu plays a decidedly more active role in defining and deciding China's future.

The message of this play is uplifting. With the heroine (representing the common people) supporting the hero, a unity is achieved that will secure the fate of the nation. At the same time, by shifting the story to center on Hongfu, the play also stresses that a truly new beginning hinges on the active involvement of society as a whole.

### A woman going to battle: Shang Xiaoyun's *Qin Liangyu*

*Qin Liangyu* 秦良玉 (1924), which became Shang Xiaoyun's signature piece (Fig. 7), was the first play to be written for him by Puxu 溥緒, the playwright of the former Qing imperial clan.<sup>73</sup> It is based on the eighteenth-century fantastic play of the *chuanqi* type, *The Tale of the Flower-Patterned Shrine*.<sup>74</sup> Set during the last years of the Ming dynasty, when the Chongzhen Emperor (r. 1627–1644) was faced with government failures, rampant official corruption, factional fighting, peasant uprisings from inside the country, and the external threat of a Manchu invasion from the North, the opera centers on the female general Qin Liangyu. The emperor asks her to quell a rebellion in her home province of Sichuan, a fine allusion to the dispersal of government control in Republican China among regional warlords. For her service to the empire in the past and in recognition of her present assignment, the Emperor rewards her with a famous Sichuan-woven red silk warrior robe that is embroidered with the imperial dragon motif. He sings her praises while lamenting that because the male generals are too frightened to fight, he must now rely on a woman warrior. With her superior martial skills and her intelligence, as well as her experience as a military leader, Qin leads her army to victory, and decapitates the enemy general on stage.

The challenge, however, comes after her victory when an official sent by the emperor with the rewards for her and her army tries to sexually assault her. Shocked, insulted, enraged, and hurt to the core, she angrily confronts the man: "What do you think you are doing! I now have to cut off my arm to maintain my chastity" since that arm had been touched by the official. When her female attendants stop her from harming herself, she instead curses the official and in a dramatic gesture cuts off the sleeve of the robe given to her by the emperor, singing:

73 Li Lingling, *Shang Xiaoyun quanzhuan*, 157.

74 Deng Tao 鄧濤 and Liu Liwen 劉立文, *Zhongguo gudai xiju wenxueshi* 中國古代戲劇文學史 [History of premodern Chinese drama literature] (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 1994), 163.



Figure 7: Shang Xiaoyun in the role of Qin Liangyu. Photograph, 1924.

Although I have fought many wars on the battlefield, I am after all still not dead yet; how dare you be so insulting to me? Here I am fighting for the dynasty, and I would not dare to harm my body, but this robe I cannot keep intact; what a pity that this robe which was given to me by the emperor is now ruined by you!<sup>75</sup>

As she cuts off the sleeve, she slices through the dragon pattern, signaling a violent break with the state.

The play ends with Qin Liangyu lamenting being a woman warrior. Since her loyalty to the emperor and her female chastity and virtue seem incompatible with the behavior of corrupt officials who represent the emperor, she decides to take her women warriors and return home. In the context of the time when it was written and performed, the cutting of the sleeve with the dragon emblem symbolized the heroine's (common people's) disillusionment with the state. This is verbalized in the outcry of one of her generals—why should they fight for a dynasty that used such

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75 The best historical edition of *Qin Liangyu* 秦良玉 is the manuscript held by Zhao Tongshan 趙桐珊, a close associate of Shang Xiaoyun. This early version was published in *Jingju huibian* [Beijing Opera (play text) Compilation] 京劇匯編, ed. Beijingshi xiqu biandao weiyuanhui 北京市戲曲編導委員會 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1957) 23:105. See Nie Shuping 聶樹平 and Tao Yongli 陶永莉, "Fushi xiangzheng lilun shiye xia de beijing Qin Liangyu —Zhao zangben Qin Liangyu jingju juben nüxingzhuyi yanjiu 服飾象徵理論視野下的悲情秦良玉—趙藏本《秦良玉》京劇劇本的女性主義研究 [The tragedy of Qin Liangyu seen from the perspective of clothing symbol theory—A feminist understanding of the Zhao [Tongshan] manuscript of Peking opera Jin Liangyu]," *Chongqing Jiaoyu Xueyuan xuebao* 23. 1 (2010): 109–112.

corrupt officials? Qin tries to evade the question and answers that if the state appears in the shape of corrupt officials, the only thing that remains is to go home, so that at least one can hold on to one's own integrity.

Written and performed in 1924, this opera registers society's fatigue and disillusionment with the incessant infighting among the warlords and the rampant corruption and abuses of state power. The woman warrior, representing the people, works to establish and secure a new society and is deeply insulted and demoralized by corrupt power-holders who put their own crude interests before the good of the country, and thus squander the trust of the people. The opera shows the high devotion shown by the people to fight the enemies of the state (=Republic)—only to be let down and robbed of the fruit of their victory and their trust in the political process. Yet Qin Liangyu does not denounce the legitimacy of the state, in this case the ideals of the new Republic. While she turns away from the state, she does not turn against it, which leaves room for reconciliation.

## The sacrifice of a great hero

The tension between the Republican ideals, the different political and military factions, and society was further played out in Xun Huisheng's 1925 opera *The Great Valiant Heroes*,<sup>76</sup> which was based on an older play that was taught to him by the famous *dan* actor Hou Junshan, who specialized in clapper opera (*bangzi xi*). It became one of the signature pieces of Xun Huisheng, who continued to rewrite it as he performed it, well into the 1960s (Figs. 8a and 8b).<sup>77</sup> In terms of operatic genre, it is a comedy. The story involves the corrupt official Shi Shilong and his rakish son, who tries to force a beautiful young woman, Chen Yueying, into marriage. When she refuses, Shi tries to seize her but he is fought off by Yueying and her mother, both of whom are skilled in martial arts. They are also helped by a young man. Yueying falls for and marries this upright and worthy youth, with his superb martial skills. The rake's father thereupon banishes this young man and his old father to a distant border region. The young man's name signals a critique of the powers-that-be: he is called Kuang Zhong 匡忠, meaning "loyal without requite" (I read *kuang* as *wang* 枉, meaning "in vain"). Disguised as men, Yueying and her mother fight their way through to find Kuang Zhong, and in the end the couple is united.

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76 *Daying jielie* 大英傑烈, alternative title *Datie gong yuan* 大鐵弓緣 [Fate (determined) by the great iron bow], *Xikao* 15 (1925). A version that has been altered after 1949 is included in Xun Huisheng 荀慧生, *Xun Huisheng yanchu juban xuan* 荀慧生演出劇本選 [Works performed by Xu Huisheng, a selection] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982), 1–64.

77 Li Lingling, *Xun Huisheng quanzhuan*, 104–109.





Figure 8a (left): Xun Huisheng in the role of Chen Xiuying 陳秀英 in *Daying jielie* 大英傑烈 [Great valiant heroes]. Photograph, 1925.

Figure 8b (right): Xun Huisheng in the role of Chen Xiuying 陳秀英 in *Daying jielie* 大英傑烈 [Great valiant heroes]. Photograph, 1925.

The opera is a comedy that makes full use of mistaken identities as the two women at times are dressed in men's clothing. The theme of self-determination and fighting against unjust officials is at the center of the drama. Again, like Zhao Yanrong, Hongfu, or Qin Liangyu, the heroine here plays an active role in determining her own future, and in so doing, she defines her relationship to the power-holder. Although in this opera, a man committed to justice comes to the aid of the heroine, the message of the play is still rather stark. Corrupt officials are in control of large parts of the country, and upright youths, whose loyalty to the state is disregarded, only find peace in far-off lands. Read in the context of the early Republic, the hope for the realization of Republican ideals and the unity of the country lies in young people's willingness to fight for it.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The use of leisure and entertainment to spread new social values and create public opinions was first advocated in late Qing reform debates. Theater, together with fiction and popular songs, had already then been considered to be one of the main "soft" means to create public understanding of the

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<sup>78</sup> In the 1958 edition of the play, the young woman, there called Chen Xiuying, kills Shi's son while defending herself against yet another attack; in the final battle at the end of the play she also kills the father.

big issues facing the country. In Meiji Japan, the state authorities set up the Imperial Theater to infuse the public with Western notions of modernity and civilized cultural values. In China, the center was too fragmented until the late 1920s to play a similar role and theater reform was largely left to reform-minded elite members. They brought Peking Opera up to the present by recasting its focus to deal with the actual struggles for the identity of the new nation state, of its political and cultural elite as well as of its people. The theater became the platform on which new ideas, ideals, and aspirations as well as old frustrations appeared translated into fictional characters and plot constellations in performances with many layers of meaning and attraction. Civilized social values moved center stage in the figure of the *dan*. Through her, the voice of society/the people was articulated, but her fate also reflects the strength of the forces she confronted.

On the state side, the early Republican efforts to bring about a theater reform that would help civilize and educate the people was ineffective since the political state itself was barely surviving. While setting up its own institutional framework, the state side was most effective by supporting decentralized social organizations that were active in the reform of popular customs and entertainment in ways actually approved by the government. Through its efforts to politicize the stage and by offering actors a role in the process, the Republic contributed to setting the course for Peking opera reform. All the new operas performed by the *dan* offered the public "healthy" entertainment through dramatic stories, artistic innovations, and dazzling newly costumes while dealing with the social and political issues of the time.

As revolutionary as these reforms were, there was no public outcry. The confrontations in these performances with the old flaws of the present order were subversive and symbolical rather than upfront and polemical. They came in concrete situations that were laden with emotions, were performed with sublime artistry, and were never crude advocacy. The main players on stage were a man of power and a woman of uprightness. This constellation offered a concrete form to discuss state/society interactions during these challenging times.

The new operas written by men-of-letters and performed by the top *dan* actors helped transform a national pastime by featuring the female character on center stage and spreading through this character a new set of social values and relationships, freedom in marriage being one of the frequent themes. However, the most important contribution in terms of drama's "civilizing" mission was in the roles played by women in the nation's affairs. Seen in the context of Republican politics, they took on symbolic meaning with the female heroine in her combination of weakness in power and strength in values standing for society or the people.

The new operas with their *dan* actors in the lead helped push Peking opera reform by centering on female roles with rich symbolic meaning. The modernity of this new female character is highlighted by the absence of a male character in equal stature as in traditional *Kunqu* opera. She



Figure 9: Mei Lanfang as Hongniang (left), Cheng Yanqiu as Cui Yingying (middle) and Shang Xiaoyun as Zhang Sheng (right) in *The Western Chamber*, a traditional Kunqu opera. Photograph, 1930s.

stands alone and fights for love and moral principle. The competition with the traditional male centered Peking operas was played out quite openly with most of the new plays written for *dan* leads. This was not only simply because there originally had been so few Peking opera plays with female leads, but because there was a new environment with which Peking opera had to engage. By articulating and taking on issues resonating with the experiences of contemporary audiences and offering society a stage presence through the female leads, the new plays became relevant for their time. Perhaps not surprisingly, theatergoers responded enthusiastically.

The rise of the *dan* was directly linked to the new plays and the drama created by the competition between them, and later performing together. (Fig. 9) Their success was in large part reflected at the box office and in the frequent and lucrative private performances for wealthy patrons. The fact that women began to enter the theater in cities other than the treaty ports also contributed to the *dan's* success. Women responded to the story of the female heroines on stage and were a major force in transforming audience responses.

The main protagonists are in a tense relation, which unfolds through the plot. The man of power shows neglect (*Drunken Beauty*), callousness and ruthlessness (*Yuzhou Feng*), or male chauvinism (*Qin Liangyu*) etc. towards the female lead. Some of the plays were based on myths; *Goddess Spreads Flowers* still shows an early stage of this symbolic encounter. The Goddess is only sending down the flowers which will show the difference between a man who has a stultified bureaucratic understanding of the new

faith (*Sāriputra*) and those really engaged in “saving all sentient beings” as the Republic was supposed to do (Maitreya and the other bodhisattvas), but she is not yet society directly and emotionally engaged. Only with the plays *The Goddess of the River Luo* (*Luoshen* 洛神), *Xishi* (*Xishi* 西施) and the *Beauty in the Fish Net* (*Lian jin feng* 廉錦楓) these two principal forces confronted each other fully formed. As these plays are repeating the same constellation, they engage in a discussion with each other.

Taking a stand at center stage came with a price. These women might gain their point, but the roles and the actual power associated with them are irreversible because those of state and society are. These women remain symbolically “weak,” never gain state power and mostly end tragically. This end is also inevitable for the emancipated female figure—she cannot go “back.” However, her uprightness will constantly challenge the powers-that-be and gain the empathy of audiences, because they find their concerns and viewpoint articulated on stage by these stunningly beautiful performers of women, while the male counterparts with all their power are helpless at best and villains at worst.

The advantage of recasting old plays to have *dan* actors in the lead was that these plays already had been engaging with the state and its authority. The new plays did not invent this focus, but they could very economically shift the dynamics and the valuation by changing the lead. In most cases, the state is represented by a court official with negative characteristics while the representative of the powerless common people on stage is always morally superior. The ideal of a just society lives in the heroines’ belief in that ideal. She struggles for it, aware of the potentially dire consequences. These heroines stand both as the reminder to the young Republic of its responsibility to live up to its own ideals and as an affirmation of society’s commitment to these ideals and its willingness to struggle for the Republic’s survival even as it is aware that it lacks the hard power to force the issue.

Among the different literary arts, theater has been one of the most sensitive means to register the pulse of the nation in times of peace as well as of national crisis. Being a highly public form of art, and a space where literati and popular culture come together, theater, more than any other art form, has a close relationship with politics, ideology, and social values. As an artistic form experienced as a collective event, it cuts across class and even gender barriers. Through the development from ritual performance to popular drama, it has also become an established space of coded and sometimes esoteric communication between state and society. Through the new opera, one might say that society talked back to the state, and reaffirmed its own moral superiority. The low opinion the early reformers and then the Republican state held of society as being in need of a thorough reeducation is soundly rebuffed in these new works. According to this reading, the uncivilized element in Chinese society is the corrupt state rather than the people.

After 1927 came a drop in new plays. Most of the *dan* actors appear to have gone back to singing the seemingly feminine characters from the “traditional” repertoire. However, as there were very few traditional operas written for *dan* as lead, most *dan* operas were new, even those taken from traditional opera and enlarged into stand-alone works. The audience, furthermore, knew the original operas, thus any rewrite became all the more visible and provocative in terms of its social and even political message concerning the relationship between society and the state. Knowing the long version of the opera served as a context to understand the storyline and significance of the few acts chosen as the bases for the new works.

In a “silent” manner without manifesto or declaration, Peking opera helped transform twentieth century leisure culture by establishing the female character with her rich symbolic load at the center of the Chinese stage. The new works helped sever the ties to the old social order where men of state power had been dominating the action in the world as well as on stage. The image of the female on center stage was emotionally charged: although without power, she stands tall because of the steadfastness in her sense of justice and moral convictions. Republican audiences loved this figure in part because it was relevant for their own understanding of the times they lived in and the role they themselves were playing. The self-assertive female figure represented by the *dan* became the moral compass of Chinese society during the first half of the twentieth century.

## Figures

- Fig. 1: *Mei Lanfang; Foremost Actor of China*, edited by Liang She-Ch'ien (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1929), 6.
- Fig. 2: *Jingju dashi Cheng Yanqiu* 京劇大師程硯秋 [Orig. Engl. title *Peking Opera Master Cheng Yanqiu*], edited by Wang Wenzhang 王文章 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2003), 20.
- Fig. 3: *Jingju dashi Shang Xiaoyun* 京劇大師尚小雲 [The master of Peking opera Shang Xiaoyun], edited by Yang Zhong 楊忠 and Zhang Weipin 張偉品 (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2003), 1.
- Fig. 4: *Xun Huisheng* 荀慧生 [Xun Huisheng], edited by Wang Jiayi 王家熙 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe and Beijing meishu sheying chubanshe, 2007), 125.
- Fig. 5: William Dolby, *A History of Chinese Drama* (London: Elek, 1976).
- Fig. 6: *Jingju dashi Cheng Yanqiu* 京劇大師程硯秋 [Orig. English title: *Peking Opera Master Cheng Yanqiu*], edited by Wang Wenzhang 王文章 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2003), 83.
- Fig. 7: *Jingju dashi Shang Xiaoyun* 京劇大師尚小雲 [The master of Peking opera Shang Xiaoyun], edited by Yang Zhong 楊忠 and Zhang Weipin 張偉品 (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2003), 8.
- Fig. 8 a: *Xun Huisheng* 荀慧生 [Xun Huisheng]. Edited by Wang Jiayi 王家熙 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, and Beijing meishu sheying chubanshe, 2007), 115.

Fig. 8 b: He Baotang 和寶堂, *Huashuo jingju* 話說京劇 [Illustrated introduction to Peking opera] rev. version (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 73.

Fig. 9: *Mei Lanfang, Daxing hua zhuan* 梅蘭芳, 大型畫傳 [Mei Lanfang, A pictorial biography], edited by Mei Shaowu 梅紹武 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1997), 99.

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