TEMPORALIZATION AND DIFFERENTIATION: THE FORMATION OF THE MODERN THEATER CONCEPTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

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Around the turn of the twentieth century, the performing arts started to garner unprecedented attention among China's intellectual elite. Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), for example, wrote in an article for the *Anhui Vernacular Newspaper* (*Anhui suhua bao*) in 1904:

> 依我說起來，戲館子是眾人的大學堂，戲子是眾人的大教師[...]。現在國勢危急，內地風氣，還是不開。[...]我看惟有戲曲改良，多唱些暗對時事開通風氣的新戲，無論高下三等人，看看都可以感動，便是聾子也看得見，瞎子也聽得見，這不是開通風氣第一方便的法門嗎？
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> In my opinion, the theater is a schoolhouse for the common masses, and the actors are the teachers. [...] At present, our country is in a critical situation, but peoples' minds have not been opened up yet. [...] As I see it, if only the theater were reformed, if we played more new pieces responding to current affairs and containing some fresh ideas, then people from all ranks of society would be moved; even the deaf could watch it and the blind listen to it. Would this not be the most effective way to open up people's minds?[1]

While the idea that the theater could be used to educate the masses was rather conventional, the ensuing debate on how theater should be used to *change society*, and how theater *itself needed to change* in order to achieve this, was something entirely new. In fact, the first half of the twentieth century saw a dramatic transformation of the whole semantic field related to the performing arts, resulting in new categories of theater and an aesthetic terminology that had not existed before but has since formed the basis of Chinese discourses on theater. Conceptual historians will note that, on the one hand, this process had much in common with the formation of many key modern social and political concepts, especially regarding *temporalization*. On the other hand, the time frame of this process and the transnational travels of concepts it involved differed markedly from the way key social and political concepts developed.

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1 Chen 1904. All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

The definition of temporalization as a basic characteristic of fundamental conceptual change in Germany during the threshold period of 1750–1850 goes back, of course, to Reinhart Koselleck.[2] In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, he described temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) as "the introduction of a temporal dimension into categories of meaning. Outmoded themes (*topoi*) now became emotively charged, infused with a sense of expectation they had not had before."[3] Without necessarily being aware of Koselleck, historians have identified a similar far-reaching process of semantic shift in China in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.[4] They have also pointed out the important role the temporal dimension played in that shift, for example the widespread acceptance of history as a universal and linear process infused with ideas of social Darwinism, and the emergence of new concepts, such as "progress."[5] Many concepts that had been tied to specific contexts and experiences were absorbed or superseded by more abstract collective singulars, which were able to incorporate new expectations about the future and could be easily integrated into ideologies and -isms of all kinds.[6] This is precisely what we can observe in the formation of the modern collective singular *xiju* ("theater") and its associated terms and categories. As will become clear throughout this article, the newly emerging concepts created a tension between an emphatically "modern" theater, defined by the perspective of historical progress, and theater defined by the perspective of "national" cultural history which required establishing an indigenous and continuous "tradition." This opened up new possible intellectual positions which ranged from conservative-defensive to progressive-offensive. Thus, temporalization turned "theater" into an essentially contested concept that figured prominently in political and artistic debates throughout the

2 Although Koselleck has focused on political and social concepts, researchers have shown that the formation of basic aesthetic concepts in Germany can also be traced back to Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*, see Barck 2010, vol. 1, VIIIf.: "Die meisten der ausgewählten ästhetischen Begriffe sind zwar solche der 'longue durée', die auf die antike und/oder mittelalterliche Tradition zurückgehen; sie unterliegen aber im 18. Jahrhundert in der Regel einem grundlegenden Bedeutungs- und Funktionswandel. Andere Begriffe (wie z.B. Autonomie, Genie, Geschmack, Originell/Originalität) formieren sich erst in der Epoche der Aufklärung, in der sich das moderne System der Künste neben der philosophischen Disziplin der Ästhetik und den Wissenschaften herausbildet."

3 Koselleck 2011, 11.

4 See, for example, Liu 1995 and Jin/Liu 2008. For an introduction to conceptual history dealing with China, see Vogelsang 2012b.

5 See, among others, Fröhlich/Schneider 2020; Kwong, 2011; Wang 2008.

6 Koselleck 2011, 12f.; for a good example in the Chinese context, cf. Vogelsang 2012a. For a conceptual history of Chinese -isms, see Spira 2015.

twentieth century.[7]

At the same time, the development of new categories and a specialized terminology indicate the *differentiation* of theater as a specific art form that follows its own internal logic, rather than simply being an instrument of politics or social reform. Thus, the manifold reflections on theater, formal experimentation, and creative endeavors we can observe in the first half of the twentieth century attest to the development of an increasingly complex and diverse society in a formative "age of openness."[8] The reversal and suppression of these dynamics of differentiation under the Maoist regime has sometimes led to extending an overemphasis on the political aspects of the theater discourse into the Republican era, while ignoring that, in fact, the years 1910-1940 witnessed the conceptualization and emancipation of the performing arts in China.

The Modern Chinese Performing Arts Terminology

It might seem perfectly normal that there is a more-or-less fixed technical vocabulary to talk and write about performing arts. However, despite the fact that theater has been active in China for a long time and that theater practitioners in premodern China talked about what they did, it was not before the modern era that theater really began to be differentiated as a form of art in its own right, with distinct practices, norms, and functions. Before that, there was no fixed term for the performing arts in general; nor, in contrast to literary criticism, was there a set of theoretical terms to describe and analyze it. We can observe the emergence of the performing arts as a particular communicative context in China mainly in the first half of the twentieth century, which is when it has found its discursive form in specialized publications,[9] its institutional form in theater companies, academies, and government offices, and its conceptual form in new generic and technical terms.

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7 The most infamous example would surely be the attack on the play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui baguan* 海瑞罢官) that stands at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, see Harding 1991, 127ff.

8 Cf. Dikötter 2008.

9 The Republican era saw a wide range of (often short-lived) theater journals and supplements. In addition to those mentioned throughout this article, further examples are *Xiju* 戲劇, published by Shanghai Zhonghua shuju from 1921 to 1922; *Xiza* 戲雜, published in Shanghai from 1922 to 1923; *Xiandai xiju* 現代戲劇, which only saw two issues published in Shanghai in 1929; *Xiju yu wenyi* 戲劇與文藝, published in Beiping from 1929 to 1930; *Xiju yuekan* 戲劇月刊, published in Shanghai from 1928 to 1932; and *Xiju shidai* 戲劇時代, which only released a few issues in Shanghai in 1937.

The modern categories of the performing arts today are roughly as follows. The most general term is *xiju* 戲劇, which encompasses all the different forms of the performing arts, including theater, drama, dance, traditional Chinese performing arts, and so forth. Then there is the more specific *huaju* 話劇, which refers to text-centered drama that usually does not include singing or dancing and which was imported from the West in the early twentieth century; it is often translated as "spoken drama." Next, there is *xiqu* 戲曲, a term that comprises the whole variety of regional and historical forms of traditional Chinese performing arts, such as *jingju* 京劇 (in English best known as "Peking opera"), *kunqu* 昆曲, and many others. Apart from more specific terms, such as *geju* 歌劇 for (Western) opera and *yinyueju* 音樂劇 for musical theater, *huaju* and *xiqu* have emerged as the main categories in the modern performing arts in China.[10]

The terms *xi* 戲, *ju* 劇, and *qu* 曲 have a long history and were already used in early Chinese writings to refer to musical, ritual, entertaining, and other kinds of performance.[11] The combined words *xiju* and *xiqu* also predate the modern era, although only *xiqu* was exclusively related to theater; *xiju* could refer either to a "children's game" or some form of "live performance."[12] Since roughly the Ming dynasty, *xiju* could serve as a scholarly term denoting the song-and-dance performances that had developed since the Song period, although it was not used often. *Xiqu*, even less frequently used, could refer to the same kind of song-and-dance performances or, more specifically, to music and song in plays. In general, when Chinese referred to performing arts before the twentieth century, they most often used the names of particular forms, such as *chuanqi* 傳奇, *pihuang* 皮黃, and the like. It was not until the first two decades of the twentieth century that Chinese writers adopted the Japanese term *gikyoku* (written with the same Chinese characters as *xiqu*), denoting drama as a universal literary genre comprising both Chinese and Western plays (Chen Duxiu used it with this meaning in the article quoted in the very beginning).[13] For a time, *xiqu* was used in this very broad sense and interchangeably with *xiju*, while traditional Chinese performing arts were either named using specific terms (such as *jingju*), dismissed as "old theater" (*jiu ju* 舊劇), or, with reference to the European form, called "opera" (*geju*).[14] With the introduction and promotion of pure *huaju* (see

10 Li Yinan, in relation to her work on post-dramatic theater, has recently coined the new concept of *juchang*, but it is too early to judge if it will catch on: see Li 2020.

11 A standard dictionary like the *Hanyu da cidian* provides references for *xi* from the *Shiji* and for *qu* from the *Guoyu*, for example; *ju* seems to have come up only later, the earliest reference with theatrical meaning comes from a Tang poem.

12 Cf. Liu (forthcoming).

13 See Xia 2016, 60; Liu (forthcoming).

14 See Luo 2001; Liu (forthcoming); and Xia 2016.

below), on the one hand, and the positive reevaluation of Chinese "national theater," on the other, discussions in the late 1920s began to focus on characteristics distinguishing Chinese performing arts from Western forms. In the 1930s, it was no longer tenable to use a pejorative term like "old theater" or the Eurocentric "opera" for the increasingly complex conceptualization of indigenous forms of performance. Instead, it became more and more common to use *xiqu*, the meaning of which consequently narrowed down to "traditional Chinese theater." At the same time, leftist ideas of getting "closer to the masses," the new needs of political party building, and war propaganda boosted the interest in, and practical engagement with, concrete forms of local performing arts.[15] Regardless of their considerable diversity, these local forms were equally subsumed under *xiqu*, a term which now appeared far more frequently. The naming of the relevant theater institutions after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 cemented the terminological separation of *huaju* and *xiqu*, where the latter now stood firmly for all regional and historical forms of Chinese performing arts. *Xiju*, in turn, was left as the only collective term to refer to all possible forms of theater and drama.

Alongside these categories evolved a specialized terminology to describe the aesthetic properties and the particular practices of the different theater forms. Chinese theater theoreticians and practitioners, for example, now usually speak of *xiqu* as an "all-encompassing" (*zonghexing* 綜合性) art form which brings together "singing, speaking, acting, and beating" (*chang* 唱, *nian* 念, *zuo* 做, *da* 打) as performative elements; many emphasize music and dancing as its particularly distinguishing features. All elements, including the actors' movements, gestures, postures, costumes, role types, musical structures, and stage props, are said to be strongly "conventionalized" (*chengshihua* 程式化). These conventions are often understood as overcoming the realism (*xieshi* 寫實) of spoken drama because they are not simply imitating reality; instead, they have, over time, condensed and sublimated reality and thus turned it into art. *Xiqu* performances supposedly prefer "suggestive" minimalism (*xieyi* 寫意) to naturalism, and thus openly display their "hypothetical character" (*jiadingxing* 假定性), which requires the acceptance and understanding on the part of the audience. Deployed in the right way, *xiqu*'s minimalism is said to be able to create especially poetic and "detached" (*kongling* 空靈) images.[16]

Many of these terms are of rather recent origin and inspired by a look at Chinese theater from the outside. That is, they are, by and large, foreign and decidedly modern terms. *Jiadingxing*, for example, is a translation of the Russian term *uslovnost*, which was propagated by the Russian theater director Vsevolod E. Meyerhold (1874–1940) in the 1920s

15 See, for example, Judd 1985, especially 386ff., and DeMare 2015.

16 See, for example, the influential definition by Zhang 1983 in the *Encyclopedia of China*.

and introduced to China in the 1950s.[17] *Chengshihua* translates the English term *conventionalization*, which was first used in a Chinese essay published in 1926.[18] Even *xieyi* and *kongling*, although they form part of older aesthetic conceptions of Chinese painting and poetry, were first used in relation to theater in the early twentieth century and have changed their meaning since.[19] It is worth noting that many of the new theater terms came up comparably late. Conceptual historians working on China have pointed out that modern social and political concepts were mostly introduced in the period between the mid-nineteenth century and roughly 1915, followed by a period of adaptation and reconstruction.[20] The basic Chinese theater-related concepts were coined, however, in the 1920s and 1930s, and much specialized vocabulary was added only in the 1950s, in exchanges with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, while plenty of modern vocabulary came to China through Japan,[21] the Eastern neighbor's role with regard to theater terms was limited to helping the early reevaluation of drama as a proper literary genre, the concomitant redefinition of *xiqu*, and the introduction of "new" Western theater to Chinese students in the early twentieth century. As we will see throughout this article, a large part of the modern theater terminology instead emerged from direct interactions with the United States and Europe.

The "New Theater"

The idea that theater can "unsettle" or "move people," and therefore be used to influence the populace, is an old one. Already when the commercial revolution during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) created the conditions for the development of a broad popular culture, which produced China's first novels, such as *The Journey to the West*, the intellectual elite became aware of the power of theater. Li Yu (1610–1680), one of the most famous authors and playwrights of the seventeenth century, once wrote: "Drama (*chuanqi*) is different from [literary] essays. Since [literary] essays are written for the educated, it does not matter if they are profound and abstruse. Drama is written for the educated and the uneducated, including uneducated women and children; therefore, easy language, not

17 On *uslovnost* in the Soviet Union, see Rzhevsky 2009, 9f. On the history and meaning of the term in China, see Huang (forthcoming).
18 In Zhao 1926a and 1926b.
19 See Christ (forthcoming).
20 Jin/Liu 2008, 6ff.
21 See Liu 1995.

abstruse language, should be prized."[22] And: "In my opinion, there is no such thing as 'cold' [boring] drama or 'warm' [lively] drama; the only thing one should worry about is whether or not it appeals to human feelings."[23]

Those who are able to appeal to people's emotions might also be able to steer them in certain directions. What the educated elite in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant by that was steering the populace toward the moral values sanctioned by the Confucian orthodoxy. This, in turn, helped justify the elites' interest in what was mostly considered a lower art form. However, their interest was mainly limited to *kunqu*, a form created by, and played mainly for, the elites themselves, in contrast to the less refined regional performing art forms popular among the common folk.[24] It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the educated elite really tried to use folksier performing art forms to influence society. In the 1860s and 1870s, the philanthropist Yu Zhi (1809–1874) turned to popular forms to replace what he saw as their obscene and coarse contents with new narratives. His "benevolent plays" (*shan xi* 善戲) were supposed to rebuild and strengthen the proper social order, and to instill moral values in the uneducated masses. The objectives advanced by Yu's newly written plays included: "promoting filial piety" (*quan xiao* 勸孝); "promoting brotherly love" (*quan ti* 勸弟); "encouraging financial support of the military" (*quan zhu xiang* 勸助餉); "reprimanding the promotion of licentiousness" (*cheng hui yin* 懲誨淫); "reprimanding the drowning of baby girls" (*cheng ni nü* 懲溺女); and "encouraging setting animals free" (*quan fang sheng* 勸放生).[25] Although he set himself some seemingly modern and enlightened goals (such as the protection of girls and the strengthening of the state), his idea of bettering the populace was still strongly informed by traditional values and experiences (e.g., the Confucian value of brotherly love and the popular Buddhist practice of freeing animals). This contrasts strongly with the much more future-oriented theater reforms in the later nineteenth century.

In the late 1880s, inspired by performances in the foreign concessions, the first Chinese theater troupes, attired in modern, Western clothing, began to perform Peking op-

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22 Li 1933, 25f.: 傳奇不比文章；文章做與讀書人看，故不怪其深；戲文做與讀書人與不讀書人同看，又與不讀書之婦人小兒同看，故貴賤不貴深. Translation taken from Chang 1992, 172.

23 Li 1977, 172-173: 予謂傳奇無冷熱，只怕不合人情. Translation taken from Chang 1992, 173.

24 On *kunqu*, see Hu 1983. In fact, the most famous play texts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have more often been read as literature than performed on a stage: cf. Rolston 2021, 212.

25 See Kwok 2017, especially pp. 366–369.

eras with plots related to contemporary affairs.[26] As it became clear that the Qing dynasty was too weak to resist the imperialist encroachments of the Western nations and Japan, plays were written and performed to support the 1898 reforms; other social and political issues followed soon.[27] The initial manifesto of China's first theater magazine *The Twentieth-Century Stage* (*Ershi shiji da wutai*), published in Shanghai in 1904, called for the performing of "heroic" and "cheerful" plays in order to topple the "slave dynasty" of the Manchus and to ring the "bell of freedom."[28] Significantly, much like Chen Duxiu in the article cited in the opening paragraphs, the manifesto also talked about what was necessary to create a better "future" for the Chinese people. Theater was no longer to be used to teach people the moral values of the past, but rather to rally the nation to transform its present and forge a different future.

Clearly, times had changed so much that they required something "new," and this is also reflected in the names given to performances that critically dealt with the present in the 1900s and 1910s: "new theater on contemporary events" (*shishi xin xi* 時事新戲)—this is the term evoked by Chen Duxiu in the opening quote to this article—"new theater in modern clothing" (*shizhuang xin xi* 時裝新戲), "civilized new theater" (*wenming xin xi* 文明新戲), or "reformed new theater" (*gailiang xin xi* 改良新戲).[29] The qualifier "new" was especially relevant, as it created a separation from the "old" theater. This led to reflections on how "old" Chinese operas were to be "reformed" and adapted to the "new" times. However, reform and adaptation were not limited to filling old forms with new content: the growing cohorts of Chinese students who went to study in Japan were also bringing back new forms of stage performance they had encountered abroad.

The Introduction of Western-Style Drama and the New Culture Movement

Like many other literary forms and theories, Western drama reached China mainly via Japan. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese students came into contact with European drama in Tokyo, and in 1906 founded their own acting troupe, the Spring Willow Society (*Chunliu she* 春柳社). They debuted in 1907 with a performance of *Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu* 黑奴吁天祿), an adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This production is generally considered the beginning of modern Chinese theater because of its nationalist message; its predominant reliance on speech, rather than song

26 Liu 2013, 33ff.
27 Goldstein 2007, 89ff.
28 Ya 1904. For a partial translation, see Fei 1999, 112f.
29 Goldstein 2007, 89ff.

and dance; its five-act structure; its complete script, rather than scenarios and improvisation; the use of ensemble acting; as well as the use of (semi-)realistic costumes, set design, and makeup.[30]

To say that the Chinese students encountered "Western drama" in Japan, however, would be an oversimplification. In fact, some Japanese intellectuals promoted a completely Westernized form of drama they simply called "new theater" (*shingeki* 新劇), and which exercised a certain influence on the Chinese. But even more successful, and at least as influential as *shingeki* at the time the Spring Willow Society was founded, was a hybrid form of *kabuki* (traditional Japanese theater) and Western-style drama called "new school drama" (*shinpa* 新派). The "new theater" which the Spring Willow Society and several other troupes introduced to China (or rather, to Shanghai and the surrounding regions) similarly mixed elements of traditional Chinese and Western performing arts, and created a hybrid form that became known in the 1910s as "civilized theater" (*wenming xi* 文明戲).[31]

Great hopes were attached to the "new theater." Young intellectuals such as Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Fu Sinian (1896–1950), disappointed by the failure of the young republic in the wake of the 1911 Revolution and by China's persistent backwardness, argued that not only the monarchy but rather the "feudal" culture of the old society as a whole were to blame for the nation's problems. They wanted to abolish the old culture and replace it with a modern one through their New Culture Movement (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動). Traditional performing arts were considered to be a part of the old culture and were rejected in content and form as "circus" (*baxi* 把戲), as too far removed from the realities of contemporary life and incapable of contributing to social reform. Fu Sinian, for example, notes in New Culture Movement's mouthpiece *New Youth*:

> 真正的戲劇純是人生動作和精神表象，（Representation of human action and spirit）不是各種把戲的集合品。可憐中國戲劇界，自從宋朝到了現在，經七八百年的進化，還沒有真正戲劇，還把那"百衲體"的把戲，當做戲劇正宗！
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> Real theater simply is a *representation of human action and spirit*, and not a collection of all kinds of circus tricks. Unfortunately, the Chinese theater world has, in the seven

30 Cf. Liu 2013, 48f.

31 On the history of *wenming xi* and the Japanese influences, see Liu 2013. Liu points out that there were earlier Western-style performances by Chinese students in Christian and then Chinese schools in Shanghai, and that the returnees from Japan joined hands with some of these Shanghai student dramatists to create the hybrid *wenmingxi*.

> or eight hundred years from the Song dynasty until now, not produced any real theater and still takes that circus-like patchwork as its model.[32]

In Fu's eyes, the old theater's singing and dancing, costumes and make-up, fixed role-types and acting styles, and its strange artificial language had become an elaborate distraction from the true conditions of society, which were in urgent need of change and modernization. As had become common, Fu presupposed an evolutionary model of theater history that would advance to ever better forms.[33] Chinese theater, in his opinion, had stopped developing many centuries earlier, and had thus become helplessly backward and unable to contribute to society in any positive way. Only an entirely "new" theater could help China: "In order to fully awaken the Chinese, we have to rely on the power of theater. Hence, we must overthrow the old theater and create a new one. In other words, we must overthrow the educational institutions of the old society and create a daring vanguard for the new society."[34]

The future to be created was not unknown. In the eyes of Chinese intellectuals in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Western experience of development could serve as a guide for the modernization of China.[35] To quote from an essay by Hu Shi in the same journal:

> 最近六十年來，歐洲的散文戲本，千變萬化，遠勝古代，體裁也更發達了，最重要的，如"問題戲"，專研究社會的種種重要問題；"寄託戲"(Symbolic Drama)專以美術的手腔，作的"意在言外"的戲本；"心理戲"，專描寫種種複雜的心境，作極精密的解剖；"諷刺戲"，用嬉笑怒罵的文章，達憤世救世的苦心 [...] 以上所說，大旨只在約略表示西洋文學方法的完備，因爲西洋文學真有許多給我們作模範的好處，所以我說：我們如果真要研究文學的方法，不可不趕緊翻譯西洋的文學名著，做我們的模範。
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> Over the past sixty years, European prose and drama have constantly developed and far surpassed ancient times. Genres have also diversified. The most important are the following: "problem drama," specialized in investigating all kinds of important problems in society; "symbolic drama," whose plays create "meaning beyond words" by aesthetic means; "psychological drama," specialized in describing and precisely analyzing all kinds

32 Fu 1918, 324.

33 Cf. Goldstein 2007, 145ff.

34 Fu 1918, 330: 使得中國人有貫徹的覺悟，總要借重戲劇的力量；所以舊戲不能不推翻，新戲不能不創造。換一句話說來，舊社會的教育機關不能不推翻，新社會的急先鋒不能不創造。

35 Fröhlich 2020, esp. 139f.

> of complicated mental states; "satirical drama," which uses mockery and scolding to express the bitter feeling of hatred toward the world and the desire to save it. [...] This is just to roughly express the perfection of Western literary methods. Since Western literature has many features we can learn, I say: if we really want to study literary methods, we must as soon as possible translate Western literary masterpieces which can serve us as models.[36]

Modernization meant, first of all, catching up with those regions at the forefront of world history and implementing their achievements to boost progress in China. The adaptation of Western drama, therefore, was not to be understood as a simple imitation of the West, but as a way to expose the fundamental ills of the "old" Chinese society and to kickstart the process of modernization. Western drama seemed to be the most advanced form in the sense that it could effectively reflect the realities of contemporary society, and thereby help to change it and propel it into a better future. In 1918, *New Youth* devoted an entire issue, which included the quotes above, to "theater reform" (*xiju gailiang* 戲劇改良), as well as another special issue on the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. In his contribution to the latter, Hu Shi proposed "Ibsenism" as a cure for the problems of the old society. While the traditional performing art forms were severely criticized, the "new theater"—which meant exclusively "Western theater" (*xiyang de xiju*)—was introduced as a tool for shaping enlightened citizens, modernizing Chinese society, and catching up with the West in terms of progress: "Ibsen described the conditions in the familial society and thereby moved people; he made everyone aware how dark and corrupt the familial society really was and that it had to be reformed and completely changed—this is Ibsenism."[37] A key term for the *New Youth* authors was "realism" (*xieshi zhuyi* 寫實主義). Whatever was to be presented on the stage, it should represent current society as it really was, and thereby unleash the potential for criticism and change: "Life's greatest afflictions have their roots in the unwillingness to confront the reality of the world with open eyes."[38]

Although one could try to discern a certain continuity between Yu Zhi and Hu Shi, since both wanted to tackle social problems and improve the order of state and society, the differences in their language and concepts make quite clear that they belonged to entirely different worlds. Yu Zhi still moved within the conceptual framework of the

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36 Hu 1918a, 304f.

37 Hu 1918b, 502: 易卜生把家庭社會的實在情形都寫了出來叫人看了動心，叫人看了覺得我們的家庭社會原來是如此黑暗腐敗，叫人看了覺得家庭社會真正不得不維新革命—這就是易卜生主義。

38 Ibid., 490: 人生的大病根在於不肯睜開眼睛來看世間的真實現狀。

traditional order, in which "gentlemen" (*junzi*) governed and guided the populace (*min*) according to the eternal norms laid down by the ancients.[39] Hu Shi, in contrast, viewed the world in entirely modern terms, many of them adapted from Western discourses. One of the brand-new concepts he and his colleagues from *New Youth* used was *shehui* 社會 ("society"). They understood *shehui*, on the one hand, to mean a modern community of free individuals and enlightened citizens, which was still an ideal because "[China's] old society in fact is only a crowd; it cannot be considered a real society."[40] On the other hand, Hu used the term to refer to the corrupt ties which bound together the present "society of robbers and whores."[41] He precisely identified the traditional, segmented family structures as one of the key problems preventing China from developing into a modern society and nation. Fu Sinian fully agreed with this assessment, and likewise demanded a new kind of theater that would be able to instigate social progress: "The viciousness and brutality of the old society must no longer be concealed. The old theater is a reflection of this old society, so it is clear that we now need a theater that creates a new society and not one that preserves the old."[42]

As a result, projects of reform in the late 1910s and 1920s mainly concentrated on Western-style drama, while earlier reforms of the traditional theater had been all but abandoned. The ideological separation between "old" and "new" theater was cemented by the 1920s coinage of the term *huaju* ("spoken drama" or "spoken play") to denote the latter form of theater. The usual "creation myth" credits the term to Hong Shen (1894–1955), who had studied theater at Harvard and is said to have been China's first professional stage director.[43] Hong advocated the purity of the new form and attempted to canonize *huaju* as part of the new literature that had emerged from the New Culture Movement. When he edited the drama anthology for *A Compendium of New Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi* 中國新文學大系), published in 1935, he opened the volume with Hu Shi's 1919 play *The Great Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi* 終身大事). And in his introduction, he drew a strict distinction between the Western-style drama,

39 See, for example, the foreword to the collection of his plays in Yu 1881 (accessed digitally via Sōkōdō bunko 雙紅堂文庫, URL: http://shanben.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/, visited on 06/20/2022).

40 Fu 1918, 330: 舊社會的狀況，只是群衆，不算社會; on the conceptual history of *shehui* see Vogelsang 2012a.

41 Hu 1918b, 490: 男盜女娼的社會.

42 Fu 1918, 330: 舊社會的窮凶極惡，更是無可諱言，舊戲是舊社會的照相，也不消說，當今之時，總要有創造新社會的戲劇不當保持舊社會創造的戲劇。

43 Cf. Liu 2013, 8. Liu shows that the term had already been in use, and points to the ideological reasons of attributing it to Hong.

which had supposedly emerged from the New Culture Movement, and everything that came before it: "The traditional old theater, the reformed old theater, and the civilized theater—these three forms were the 'residues' of Chinese theater at the time of the New Culture Movement in 1917."[44] Not even the "new" drama, imported from Japan by students eager for reform, and which had developed into the so-called "civilized theater", lived up to Hong's standard. It still contained too many elements of the "old" forms and too many ideas of the "old" society to be considered the kind of theater that could create progress.

In addition to their inability to drive modernization, the earlier theatrical experiments fell short of "serious" theater in the eyes of many intellectuals because of their increasingly commercial character. Hybrid forms, such as the "civilized theater," had to compete with traditional theater hugely popular in the urban entertainment market, and they tried to attract audiences with new light effects, modern stage props and costumes, spectacular stunts, and an emerging star cult. This reveals a different aspect of temporalization: the changes in Chinese society and economy also changed the consumption habits of patrons and audiences—which now, by the way, included an increasing number of women. At least urban theatergoers were no longer content with seeing the same plays over and over again. They continually demanded "new" plays and they wanted to be surprised and excited. Actors, therefore, had to go with the times and continually develop new skills, which fueled further experiments and innovations. As would happen again in the 1980s, in the early twentieth century an emerging market economy was as much a driver of innovation and reform as were the ideas and intentions of theater makers.[45]

A New Theater Tradition for the Nation

While Western-style realist drama seemed to provide a perfect format for staging social reform ideals and the hopes for a better future, the New Culture proponent's strong preference for all things foreign could not go unchallenged. The opposition was not due to the stubborn persistence of traditional Chinese culture, but rather stemmed from another phenomenon that was impossible to separate from the new understanding of history in China since the late nineteenth century. The same argument used to justify the superiority of Western theater also implied a new historic subject—the nation. Individuals,

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44 Hong 1935, 15: 傳統的舊戲，改良的舊戲，文明戲——這三樣是民六新文化運動時中國的戲劇底"遺產"。

45 Cf. Joshua Goldstein's discussion of the commercialization and an increasing focus on "newness" in Peking opera: Goldstein 2007, 43ff. and 90ff.

empires, and dynasties no longer determined the course of history, but the life-or-death competition among the world's nation-states.

This is not a surprising view in the era of imperialism; however, military incursions by Western powers were not solely responsible for making the idea of the "nation" plausible. The increasing complexity and heterogeneity of Chinese society was strongly noted by contemporaries and constantly deplored as "disintegration" (see Fu's lament on the "Chinese crowd" above) and the emergence of irreconcilable differences.[46] Just when the traditional order and moral values lost their plausibility, the "Chinese nation" appeared as something all Chinese had in common and could participate in in the same way. It could unite and hold together a society that otherwise seemed doomed to ever greater fragmentation. Thus, there was a need not only for new citizens and new culture, but also for a distinctly Chinese culture. No matter how a Chinese nation was to be defined – politically, culturally, or even racially – all roads had to, inevitably, lead right back to it: the state had to become a nation-state, history had to become national history, universities began to teach "national studies" (*guoxue* 國學),[47] art academies taught "national painting" (*guohua* 國畫),[48] and, in the late 1920s, some Chinese intellectuals began to call for a "national theater" (*guoju* 國劇).

These intellectuals, however, were not simple traditionalists. Those existed, too; and, parallel to the condemnations of the "old" theater by the New Culture Movement iconoclasts, they voiced their distaste for the new hybrid theater forms. Peking opera enthusiasts in the 1920s generally cursed "neither-horse-nor-donkey" plays as bastardizations and called for safeguarding the Chinese tradition and its particular spirit against eradication by foreign intrusions.[49] However, the changing contexts and the harsh critiques by the modernizers had made it impossible to simply carry on the "old" ways. As Thomas Fröhlich has aptly put it: "The Chinese transition to the linear view entailed a new concept of history that, similar to its Western equivalents, was predicated upon the notion of the past as a singular, historically concluded stage. The past now acquired new meaning and new functions with respect to orientation in the present."[50] This is precisely what happened to the "old" theater: it had to be understood and described in new terms, so that it could find its place in the "new" present. A key factor in this process was the rejection of "old" culture by the New Culture Movement intellectuals, which provoked

46 Cf. Vogelsang 2012a, 160.
47 On the history and development of *guoxue*, see Makeham 2011 and the other articles in the special feature of *China Perspectives* 2011/1.
48 On *guohua*, see Noth 2022.
49 Cf. Goldstein 2007, 135.
50 Fröhlich 2020, 5.

reflections on what really constituted "old" theater. Or, to put it differently, defenders of the traditional performing arts had to answer very new, urgent questions: if "new" theater was the realist *huaju* from the West, what would be its "Chinese" counterpart? Was there one particular form among the many different "old" theater forms that embodied the tradition especially well? Or did they all have something in common that made them Chinese in some special way? What exactly constituted the "Chineseness" of traditional theater?

In the late 1920s, Zhao Taimou (1889–1968), Yu Shangyuan (1897–1970), and others who had studied in the United States returned to China and founded the "National Theater Movement" (*Guoju yundong* 國劇運動).[51] The foreign experience had given them an outsider's perspective on China, so it was almost natural that they saw it as one nation among many. Additionally, they had mainly studied literature and theater abroad and thus had become familiar with the strong role these disciplines could play in the formation of national identities. It was also no coincidence that they were former adherents of the New Culture Movement. This made them familiar not only with the critiques of traditional theater, but also gave them a thorough understanding of what was necessary to reinvent Chinese traditions in a new era.

Yu Shangyuan, for example, born in 1897 in Hubei Province, first studied Western literature at Peking University and then majored in theatrical literature and art at Columbia University. In the US, he read authors who had tried to establish the Irish National Theater around the turn of the century in order to revive Irish culture and awaken an Irish national spirit under the conditions of colonization. At the same time, Yu became familiar with the fascination Europeans and Americans developed for traditional Asian performing arts, as these seemed to offer ways to overcome the naturalism of the nineteenth century and, particularly, to break down the "fourth wall." So, while Yu, influenced by the general opinion among his youthful Chinese peers, had arrived in the US with a complete disdain for "old" theater, he came back with a sense of pride in the Chinese tradition and the desire to create a Chinese national theater that would embody the best elements of tradition and carry them into a bright future. The "national theater" he wanted to create—clearly a concept of expectation (*Erwartungsbegriff*), rather than one describing something already in existence—was supposed to concern itself with Chinese subjects, instead of translating foreign plays, and use Chinese artistic forms instead of foreign ones.[52]

Yu Shangyuan and his colleague Zhao Taimou failed in their practical attempt to cre-

51 On *guoju yundong*, see Liu 2016.
52 Ibid., 7ff.

ate a national theater after their return to China in 1925. They left the theater department they had established at the National Arts School after only one year, while their weekly theater supplement to the widely read Beijing newspaper *Morning Post* saw no more than a few editions in 1926.[53] Nevertheless, they had a significant impact over the long term thanks to the way they addressed the issue of the specificity of "old" theater. As short-lived as it was, their theater supplement carried articles in which they introduced at least two terms that gave new and important meaning to the concept of "traditional Chinese theater."

The first of these terms was *chengshihua*, introduced by Zhao Taimou in an article entitled "National Theater" (*Guoju*) in 1926. It was as much an attack on Western-style spoken drama as it was a positive re-evaluation of traditional Chinese performing arts.[54] Zhao leveled his criticism particularly against the temporal dimensions of meaning, which had been essential for the New Culture Movement's attack on the "old" theater. On the one hand, he put the evolutionary view of theater in doubt. Instead of a progressive development, in which better forms of performing art always superseded older ones, Zhao presented theater (in accordance with his American teacher, Brander Matthews) as a "synthetic art" (*zonghe de yishu*) that combined literature with performance, music, and other elements. Accordingly, different performing art forms were nothing but a diversification that resulted from the emphasis on different elements: Western "spoken drama" foregrounded the literary element, that is, the script, while a stronger emphasis on the musical element resulted in the creation of "opera" (*geju*). Thus no form was superior to any other; and neither were traditional Chinese performing arts necessarily inferior to modern Western ones. On the other hand, Zhao's experiences in the United States allowed him to deny that Ibsen-style realist theater was considered avant-garde in the West. On the contrary, he argued, Western artists were desperate to overcome realism—and even looking toward the artistic traditions of the East for help! He agreed with Hu Shi that realism's strength was to be close to life. However, it missed any sublimation of daily conventions into artistic forms, and therefore could not be art at all. Traditional Chinese performing arts, in contrast, had, in the course of their history, developed highly artistic forms, which, as long as they did not fall into pure formalism, had greater expressive power than a simple imitation of life.

Zhao referred to this creation of artistic conventions in traditional Chinese theater as *chengshihua*, a translation of the English word "conventionalization." He borrowed this

53 Ibid., 3.
54 Zhao 1926b, 6.

term from *The Principles of Playmaking* by Brander Matthews,[55] who, in turn, had pioneered theater studies as an independent discipline in the US. By *chengshi*, "conventions," Zhao, in the most general sense, referred to fixed forms that have evolved over a long period of time and eventually become generally accepted. They could then be taken for granted. For further explanation, Zhao drew an analogy with the Chinese written characters: once their forms were fixed, they could be varied and thus elevated to art—-in this case, calligraphy. *Chengshi* thus were a precondition for all forms of art and the artist's fundamental tool. The performing arts also needed conventions, that is, readily accepted symbolic action that would allow to shift focus to more meaningful elements. Zhao argued that the conventions of Western theater had remained very close to reality and had not been elevated to art. Traditional Eastern theater, instead, was not only "conventionalized," but also "symbolized" (*xiangzheng hua*). It had elevated conventions into "pure art." However, Zhao did not mean this in an exclusively positive sense, because "pure art" also meant that there was a certain rigidity and distance from reality. Traditional Chinese theater had cared too much about the aesthetic form and thus lost its connection to life, so much so that it was in danger of "dying"; it had become mere "form," but lacked in "spirit." Therefore, "old theater" was in urgent need of content reform.

Also in 1926, Yu Shangyuan introduced a second term—*xieyi*—which was to become important later on.[56] Very much in the same vein as Zhao Taimou, Yu argued that "pure art" (*chuncui de yishu*) was not necessarily about the close imitation of real life, but rather about getting the "form" (*xingxiang*) and "spirit" (*jingshen*) of things. Referring to a trope known from Chinese painting, he called the former, realist or naturalist art, *xieshi* (lit. writing reality), and the latter, non-realist art, *xieyi* (lit. writing meaning or ideas). Also similar to Zhao, he maintained: "For the West and the East as a whole, it seems that the one emphasizes *xieshi* and the other *xieyi*."[57] The value of China's "old theater" lay precisely in the fact that it had developed many kinds of "symbols" for the stage—such as using a whip to symbolize a horse ride—and thus allowed any gesture to be "transformed into art" (*yishuhua*).

The "transformation into art" was also vital for the relationship between the actors and the audience: both were aware that the staged action was not "real," but the actor nonetheless did his best to engage the audience, to "touch and move" it. In contrast to Fu

55 Matthews 1919.

56 Yu 1926. Hu 2022, 155 claims that actually Feng Shuluan 馮叔鸞 had used the term before Yu, but concedes that the National Theater Movement was the decisive influence on later usages by Huang Zuolin and others.

57 Yu 1926, 3: 就西洋和東方全體而論，又彷佛一個是重寫實，一個是重寫意。

Sinian's temporal diagnosis that Chinese theater was stuck in a primitive stage of development and had long been overtaken by Western drama, and different from Zhao Taimou's stress on diversification instead of progress, Yu told the story of a problematic evolution, at the heart of which was the self-conception of the actor and his relation to the audience. In both the West (here he referred more specifically to Ancient Greece) and China, he located the origin of theater in religious ceremonies and rituals. The people engaged in singing, dancing, and performing on such occasions were not conceiving of themselves as actors, and all present equally did not see them as somebody else than they usually were. In the "later theater of Shakespeare, Molière, [...] and Tan Xinpei [a famous *jingju* actor, 1847–1917]," actors perceived themselves as performers in a play, but they did not fully immerse themselves in the role, because the brightly lit theater houses brought them constantly in communication with the audience, in fact making actor and audience "one body." When the acting in Western theater was supposed to become more "realist," however, a "fourth wall" was erected between actors and audience, which henceforth disrupted the artistic communication between them. The most "advanced Western theater artists" already had invested a lot of effort into breaking down this wall, and Chinese artists would have to go "around the same circle" if they followed the fashion of realism.[58]

Even though Yu argued that music, song, and dance formed an inseparable unit in the art of theater, he emphasized the role of dance, especially against the focus on song which, he lamented, had dominated the theater scene for the past ten years. Dance was the "historical basis of theater," and theater first and foremost was an art that had to be "shown" to people.[59] The stress on the visual aspect was also obvious in his discussion of stage design, costumes, and masks. He reasoned that calligraphy and painting were the most advanced arts in China and thereby also justified the application of the concept of *xieyi* to theater.

The "national theater" that Zhao, Yu, and their colleagues called for was to be distinct from both China's "old theater" and Western "spoken drama." In fact, so-called "civilized theater," which mixed elements of "spoken drama" with conventions of traditional Chinese theater, ticked many of their boxes. They criticized it nonetheless, though not for its

58 Ibid., 4: 及至後來的莎士比亞，莫利哀，· · · 譚鑫培，都是老老寫實在做演員，決不是在做劇中人；因爲在一叢燭光之下，台上台下能夠互相看見。彼時演員與觀衆，彼此聯爲一體，沒有隔膜。自從舞臺變到寫實以後，名為打破了第四堵牆，其實在演員與觀眾之間，反添了一堵更利害的牆。對於再行打破這個真的第四堵牆，進步的西洋戲劇藝術家已經做過很多的實驗，得過相當的成功。我們與其是順著寫實的歧途去兜圈子 · · ·

59 Ibid.: 戲劇的基本是舞蹈。

hybrid character, but for its low artistic standards and ruthless commercialization. The National Theater Movement insisted on creating a theater of high artistic standards. Even though the movement failed to garner momentum in its time, the concepts of *xieyi* and *chengshi* were picked up in later discussions. In 1962, the prominent Shanghai director Huang Zuolin (1906–1994) reintroduced the concept of *xieyi* and made sure it became indissociable from the definition of traditional Chinese performing arts.[60] Moreover, he associated it with an artist who had already been of crucial importance for the discussions in the 1920s and 1930s. This artist was, of course, Mei Lanfang.

Aestheticization and the National Theater: Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan

The fact that Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) is a household name around the world attests to the immense popularity and fame he garnered in the last century. Born into a theatrical family—his grandfather was a popular *jingju* actor and managed one of the most important troupes in Beijing—he was trained to perform female role types from an early age. In his late teens, he was well known for his outstanding performances in the capital, but his rise to stardom and even global fame was only made possible by the rapidly changing times. He benefitted from the fact that both the modern entertainment industry, emerging mainly in the international city of Shanghai, and the new media world of daily press, magazines, and pictorials was interested in promoting "stars."[61] Mei aroused further attention by his openness to innovation and change. Having attended "new theater" productions (mentioned above) in Beijing and Shanghai, he began to engage in "new theater in modern clothing" and staged a number of plays on contemporary social subjects in the late 1910s. Even though he stopped performing these plays after some years, because he felt their realism contradicted the basic essence of his craft, they were a roaring success and made him a national sensation. This was only surpassed by the success of his international tours to Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union, where he impressed foreign directors like Bertolt Brecht and Vsevolod Meyerhold.[62]

All this was made possible by the support of Qi Rushan (1877–1962), who acted as advisor, playwright, director, and manager to Mei. Qi's initial course of education destined him for the civil service in imperial China, but he then switched to the study of foreign languages and trained as a German and French translator. He made several trips

60 Huang 1962.

61 Goldstein 2007, 129f.

62 On Mei Lanfang, his global role, and the media in general, see Tian 2012; Yeh 2016; Goldstein 2007, 116ff.

to Europe and became fascinated with the theater and opera he saw in Paris. Being familiar with both the classical Chinese education and the more cosmopolitan culture of Republican times, he was perfectly suited to assist in transforming *jingju* from a folksy, rustic theater into a more sophisticated performing art that could find a place in the newly developing urban leisure cultures. Mei Lanfang's national and international success, reinforced by extensive publications on the theory and practice of *jingju* and other traditional performance art forms, helped to establish him as an authority on traditional theater.[63]

Qi in many ways echoed the positions of the National Theater Movement: its emphasis on artistic creation as opposed to a primitive naturalism; Zhao Taimou's emphasis on "conventions"; and Yu Shangyuan's attention to dance as a basic element of theater. He did not, however, see the creation of "national theater" as a future project but held that such theater already existed in the form of *jingju*. That he indeed succeeded in establishing *jingju* as the prime national performing art—and Mei Lanfang as its foremost representative—was due to a clever double strategy in his arguments regarding the temporality of Chinese theater. On the one hand, he developed a descriptive and theoretical framework for the "national theater" that had an almost timeless philosophical quality. On the other hand, he tried to present this framework as the result of a long, uninterrupted historical evolution, anchoring it deeply in Chinese history and intellectual tradition. In other words, Qi Rushan crafted yet another narrative of the evolution of the Chinese performing arts, one which had a decidedly positive turn.

Forging such a narrative was not an easy task. When Qi delved into writings on theater from the recent and more distant past, he discovered, much to his chagrin, that there was not much "theory" to be found in those texts.[64] Even when he included much more miscellaneous sources, it was hard to reconstruct a pre-existing theory. His solution was to place the origins of theater in ancient song-and-dance performances (*gewu* 歌舞) and to connect references to such performances in classical writings to the present-day practice of *jingju*.[65] In an essay first published in 1932, he wrote that Chinese theater originated in song and dance performed on the occasion of public celebrations, as could be gleaned from the Chinese Classics, some of which even predated the Zhou dynasty (which dated back to 1050 BCE).[66] Song and dance continued to flourish throughout the early imperial period (Qi specifically mentioned the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties, roughly 200

63 The writings on theater fill six of the eight volumes of his *Collected Writings* as published in 1935, see Qi 1935. I mainly referred to a selection of his theater essays in Qi 2015.

64 Wu 2017, 30.

65 Ibid., 28ff.

66 Qi 1932, here quoted from the reprint in Qi 2015, 55–61. Qi turned this essay also into the first chapter of his book *Guoju shenduan pu* 國劇身段譜 (Beijing: Beiping guoju xuehui,

BCE to 600 CE), which supposedly was proven by the descriptions he found in rhapsodic poems (*fu*) of that era.[67] Thanks to the foreign influences and the support of the central court, song-and-dance performance attained its most splendid form during the Sui and Tang dynasties (roughly 600 to 900 CE). This was the era in which Qi Rushan located the historical beginnings of "theater" (*xiju*). Theater, however, "could not have emerged abruptly in the Tang dynasty. Rather, it had evolved gradually over time out of dances of antiquity."[68] In Qi's presentation, there was no categorical difference between ancient song-and-dance performances and the more recent theater; they were connected in an evolution from simple to more complex forms. To be more precise, the forms of singing, dancing, and acting, starting from the Tang dynasty, were increasingly regulated ("conventionalized," as Zhao Taimou would have said), in order to refine them to ever greater levels of beauty and thereby capture their emotional and conceptual essence. Qi described this process using the term "aestheticization" (*meishuhua* 美術化).[69]

Putting the "beautiful/aesthetic" (*mei*) at the center allowed Qi to define an artistic essence of "Chinese theater" without having to settle on a specific aspect or form, but also without being completely arbitrary. As long as modern elements served aesthetic ends, Qi did not object to employing new stage designs, lighting techniques, stage props, and the like. He even welcomed them, when they boosted the success of Mei Lanfang's performances. The same was true for new content: it was no problem to create plots about contemporary figures and events, as long as such content was aesthetically refined and kept true to the essence of *jingju*. The definition of an "aesthetic" essence also gave Qi's concept of "national theater" (*guoju*) great flexibility: sometimes he used the term interchangeably with *jingju*, but often he understood it to include all kinds of regional and historic performing arts of China. The process of progressive "aestheticization" was the thread that connected ancient Chinese culture with its latest, most refined expressions, so these expressions could have a timeless quality and represent an evolutionary peak at the same time.

Moreover, the emphasis on the "aesthetic" allowed Qi to shift the terms of the debate away from the New Culture Movement. Similar to the arguments on "conventionalization" and *xieyi*, he held that the crucial difference between Chinese and Western drama was not that the former was musical and the latter spoken, that one involved dance and

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1935).

67 On *fu*, see Kern 2010, 88f.

68 Qi 2015, 55f.: 因戏剧虽然是始自唐朝之梨园，但亦绝非是由唐朝骤然发生的。当然是由古代之舞一朝一代的嬗变而来的。

69 See, for example, Qi 1937, reprinted in Qi 2015, 62–70.

the other acting, but rather that Western drama was "realistic" while Chinese theater was "aesthetic."[70] In a lecture published in 1937, he described the evolution of theater as progressing from simple songs to singing in different roles, to adding movement, to acting simple comical roles. These initial developments were followed by primitive plays of simple imitation or "realism" (*xieshi*), but China's national theater had long left this period behind and entered the period of "aestheticization," in which there was "no movement that is not dance, no sound that is not music."[71] Music and dance in Chinese performing arts were not useless accessories of a corrupt tradition or backward "circus" elements, as Fu Sinian had decried on the pages of *New Youth*, but highly artistic forms of expression that represented the pinnacle of a long development.

Although Qi quoted widely from the Confucian Classics, he was as little interested in the moral betterment, which Confucians traditionally viewed as the function of culture, as *New Youth* authors. Instead, his reading of the Classics framed song and dance as aesthetic devices that served to express a character's emotions and to arouse the audience's emotions.[72] Viewed from this perspective, the Chinese national theater was not inferior to that of other nations, but even superior. Western spoken drama was still stuck in the primitive period of "realism," while other performing arts, such as Western opera or Japanese traditional theater, had song and dance, although none achieved a harmonious combination of the two: "As for the theater of Japan and the theater of the West, they either have dance without song or song without dance. Only Chinese theater performs song and dance simultaneously."[73]

Qi could defend his vision of "national theater" with more force than the National Theater Movement, because he successfully put it into practice with Mei Lanfang. With regard to the temporal dimension, Qi and Mei's so-called "new plays in ancient costumes" (*guzhuang xin xi* 古裝新戲), which they started creating in the mid-1910s, are especially interesting. Based on old folktales, often related to popular festivals, and an aesthetics borrowed, among others, from Tang-dynasty Buddhist paintings, these plays were presented as resurrecting Chinese tradition. In fact, however, they presented an imaginary

70 Cf. Goldstein 2007, 153.

71 Qi 1937, here quoted from Qi 2015, 65: 无声不哥，无动不舞. In contrast to Qi 1932, here Qi claimed that song evolved earlier than dance, and that the two were combined only later, although he did not offer any specific time periods, so he may have referred to a prehistoric era. In any case, such uncorroborated claims show that Qi's historical narratives were strategic rather than scientific.

72 Cf. Wu 2017, 38.

73 Quoted from Wu 2017, 44: 東西洋之劇, 均有舞無歌, 或有歌無舞中國劇則同時歌與舞並作。

Chinese antiquity in an innovative form of performance. Qi and Mei departed from the usual *jingju* conventions by focusing on a single, principal actor, who was undoubtedly the star of the performance. Furthermore, they introduced long solo dance sequences, for which Mei created a new female role type that combined the attributes of different customary role types, namely the respectable woman's elegant aloofness with the flirtatious vivacity of the younger girl.[74] He wore opulent but comparably light and flowing fantasy costumes, which allowed the audience to appreciate his every body movement and posture, while being bathed in colorful light. Just as Yu Shangyuan would demand from his (imagined) "national theater," Mei's performances succeeded in creating a strong visual impact, which could even overcome the traditional *jingju* emphasis on musicality.[75] This was the living embodiment of "aestheticization" Qi could point to, connecting the historical depth of Chinese tradition with contemporary artistic creation. Mei also performed the "new plays in ancient costumes" with great success on his tours to Japan and the United States, which contributed to making him an icon of China's "national theater" both at home and abroad. The "new plays in ancient costumes" were a perfect example for how "traditional Chinese theater" was defined through abstract principles, such as "aestheticization," which allowed for its modernization and assimilation to new contexts.

It is worth mentioning that Qi and Mei's form of collaboration was also unprecedented in the history of *jingju*. They were bound neither by traditional patronage nor the master–disciple relationship. Instead, Qi Rushan developed the theoretical principles that could both guide and justify Mei's innovations; he created plays that made full use of Mei's talents; he connected him to global trends in the performing arts, and, thanks to the international tours he organized, presented Mei Lanfang as the foremost Chinese performer, trying to win him recognition as a leading member of world theater.[76] In many ways, Qi's role was akin to the modern functions of manager, stage director, and dramatic advisor. Although the role of stage director was foreign to traditional Chinese performing arts and, in the form known from newly introduced spoken drama, could not be readily transferred into that context, it proved useful to have someone help the performer to navigate the increasingly complex landscape of theatrical forms and techniques and their

74 Cf. Goldstein 2007, 123ff.

75 On the strong reactions to, and the influence of, Mei Lanfang's innovations, see ibid., 126ff.

76 Cf. Yeh 2016. Yeh shows that Mei's art was not only interwoven with the developments in performing arts in the French capital via Qi Rushan's Parisian experiences. Mei himself found inspiration also in reformers of traditional theater he met on his trip to Japan in 1919, and in the pioneers of modern American dance who toured Asia in 1925. Also see Goldstein's comments on the "tactical Orientalism" Qi and Mei employed on their US tour in Goldstein 2007, 265ff.

complicated relationship to the past, present, and future.[77]

Qi and Mei's innovations were, however, motivated not merely by artistic vision or intellectual debate, but also by a conscious choice to distinguish their product in an increasingly competitive entertainment market. They had to cater to an audience that changed rapidly after the 1911 Revolution. Women were now allowed to visit theaters and formed a new customer base.[78] To the expanding urban populations of Beijing and Shanghai, Qi and Mei offered performances that both connected with a customary form of entertainment and could, at the same time, be conceived of as "modern" and "civilized" cultural activity.

Conclusion

The National Theater Movement and Qi Rushan were two key factors in the reinvention of *the* traditional Chinese theater as an alternative to modern Western drama or *huaju*. The word that was finally adopted to designate this reinvention was *xiqu*. The conceptual dichotomy of *xiqu* versus *huaju* would not have emerged without the wider changes in the temporal dimensions of meaning. Around the turn of the twentieth century, it was the present—"current affairs"—that seemed to make reform and adaptation of the theater necessary in order to elicit the support of the populace. The resulting demarcation between "old" and "new" theater, in conjunction with new ideas on social progress, led to the New Culture Movement's propagation of Western drama as the most modern form of performing arts. The Movement's "new" theater was supposed to assist in creating a (better) Chinese society and in raising China to a new stage of civilizational development. Meanwhile, the changing social landscape put theater makers under fierce commercial pressure. The cultural market in China's modernizing cities rewarded novelty and thus instigated creative innovation in both old and new forms of performing arts, as well as their hybridization.

A modern Chinese nation, however, also needed a tradition in all relevant cultural sectors, which sparked the reinvention of "old" theater as China's "national theater." In temporal terms, this meant that "the Chinese" had to define a legacy that reached far back into the past and which one could claim enjoyed a certain continuity in the present. At the same time, after the horrors of the First World War, the West had lost some of its shine in the eyes of many Chinese, who began to look to traditional Chinese culture for posi-

77 On the history and problems of directing in traditional Chinese performing arts, see Evans 2007.

78 On the gender implications of the new female audience, see Goldstein 2007, 237ff.

tive elements able to overcome the perceived ills of Western modernity. The seemingly inevitable progression towards a Westernized future could now be challenged by evoking philosophical and aesthetic values of the Chinese past, which could, in turn, pave the way toward a different, and better, future.[79] As we have seen with Mei Lanfang and Qi Rushan, cultural tradition was not only employed to foster national pride, but equally served to reposition China on the ladder of civilizational development and to create innovative forms of performance. Thus, one could argue that the dichotomous conceptualization of theater in twentieth-century China exhibited the two-pronged approach necessary for synchronization with the global present: the "national theater" had to carry on past traditions even as it harnessed the past in the service of progressive innovation, in order to situate the nation at the forefront of modernity.

The conceptual dichotomy of *xiqu* and *huaju* created a productive tension that led to the almost constant renegotiation of their meaning. Compared to older terms that merely designated concrete forms of performance, the collective singulars *xiju*, *xiqu*, and *huaju* were a lot more abstract and complex, which made them susceptible to divergent interpretations and controversies. Debates on the relationship between *xiqu* and *huaju*, as well as between *xiqu* and other forms of performing arts, took place not only in the first half of the twentieth century, but also continued throughout the 1950s, under the influence of new Soviet theories and terminology, and intensified in the 1980s, when theater makers once again confronted new theatrical forms and theories from Western countries. The 1980s saw the return to stage of all kinds of hybrid forms; conceptually, however, the separation between *xiqu* and *huaju* persisted. Directors, who, due to temporal and conceptual complexity, took the leading role in Chinese performing arts, were happy to take advantage of the tension between *xiqu* and *huaju* to carve out free artistic space under different (but almost always difficult) political circumstances.

From the perspective of social history, the emergence of complex theater categories and a distinct terminology indicates a strong tendency toward a functional differentiation of society. As we have seen with Chen Duxiu, who wanted to use theater to enlighten and mobilize the masses, parts of the new discourse on theater around the turn of the century were highly politicized. However, the same period also saw serious scholarly attempts to understand the history of theater in China[80] and to reevaluate it as a literary

79 On such "cultural conservatism," see Fung 2010, 61ff.; on page 21f., he summarizes: "modern Chinese conservatism was a force to be reckoned with, one that served the purposes of modernization. [...] It arose as a reaction to the horrors of World War I, to Enlightenment modernism and to New Culture/May Fourth radicalism."

80 This aspect is outside the scope of this article; on the rise of modern Chinese drama studies

art form in its own right. And even though the debates provoked by the New Culture Movement in the late 1910s continued to carry strong political overtones, they also contained serious arguments about the artistic properties of different theater forms. In other words, in the 1920s at the latest we begin to observe the emergence of a discourse that cared primarily about the workings of theater as a distinct art form and less about its political function. The differentiation of theater as a separate art form also became manifest in the increasing number of discursive participants who were directly involved in theater creation or who specialized in theater in one way or another, as opposed to generalist intellectuals who dominated the New Culture Movement discourse. This is not to say that such discussants necessarily ignored the political relevance of their arguments, but their primary focus was on theater as art and not on its political function. The dynamics of differentiation, however, were considerably weakened by the intense political struggles of the late 1930s and came almost completely to a halt, or were even reversed, during the wars of the 1940s. There was some space for artistic debate after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, before politics turned to suppress all differentiating tendencies again from the late 1950s through the 1970s. Yet, the return, during the new "age of openness" of the 1980s, of many concepts coined in the 1920s and 1930s, proved their persistent value for artistic development and debate and signaled a return of the earlier dynamics of social differentiation.

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with Wang Guowei in the early 1910s, see He 2007.

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