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Periphery matters : a cultural biography of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

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Chapter Two /

Early Scenes of Peking Opera in Hong Kong

Mei Lanfang

Peking Opera was not well received by Hong Kong audiences until star performer Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961) made his first Hong Kong performance tour in 1922. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, Hong Kong was far away from the two traditional cores of Peking Opera, Beijing and Shanghai. Secondly, the local cultural scene was very much dominated by the local genre of Cantonese Opera and European art forms at the time, due to the colonial status of the city. According to Mei Shaowu, the eldest son of Mei Lanfang, the 1922 tour was indeed an experiment for Mei, to examine the reaction of audiences in the south to this “traditional theatrical genre from the north.”³⁰ Moreover, I argue that this historical tour also contributed to nation-building in an era when the Republic of China (ROC, established 1911) needed to build up its national identity.

Here the keyword is “nationalization”. In the present context, I use this term not in its conventional sense, but specifically to refer to the process that transformed Peking Opera’s status from a regional theatrical genre to a representative icon of the modern nation of China – both as Cultural China (*wenhua zhongguo* 文化中國) and as a political entity, meaning the Republic of China (ROC) from 1911 and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) from 1949. Nationalization in this sense is significant to the study of Peking Opera as a whole, as it contextualizes the superiority often ascribed to Peking Opera over other traditional Chinese theatrical genres in the twentieth century. It is also crucial to this research, as the existence of foreign audiences was a prerequisite of the nationalization agenda. It leads to the very beginning, the “birth”, of Peking Opera in Hong Kong. Therefore, I will start this chapter by discussing the rationale and theory of nationalizing Peking Opera, before I go into the story of Mei Lanfang and his tour to Hong Kong.

The notion of nationalization is not new. Joshua Goldstein first suggests the idea when he discusses Mei Lanfang’s first tour to the United States in 1930. He schematizes the idea in the following equation:

$$\text{Chinese National Culture} = \text{National Drama} = \text{Peking Opera} = \text{Mei Lanfang}^{31}$$

He uses this idea to argue that Mei’s tour to the U.S. was a product of a nation-building campaign by the ROC government. The whole itinerary of this tour – both the performances and social activities – was aimed at the ultimate goal of making Mei a “national star”. I note here that such a campaign had already taken place in Mei’s tour to Hong Kong in 1922; and I would like to take the idea one step back, adding that “Chinese National Identity = Chinese National Culture”, so as to present a more complete logical flow from the emergence of the

³⁰ Mei 2006: 14.

³¹ Goldstein 1999: 382.

nationalization ideology to the iconization of Mei. Two questions arise: Why and for whom did the nationalization ideology emerge in the Republican era? Did Peking Opera constitute a suitable vehicle for this ideology, and if so, why? In the following sections we will see how intellectuals and Peking Opera performers contributed to the process of nationalizing Peking Opera.

Mei Lanfang being the central figure of this chapter, I will examine his life story from his family background to his triumphant career in the 1920s. My choice does not follow the discourse that dominates Chinese-language scholarship, which focuses almost exclusively on the overwhelming artistic excellence demonstrated by Mei. Undoubtedly he was one of the top performers in his era, but from a sociological point of view his importance lies beyond the artistic aspect. His significance to the development of Peking Opera in the early twentieth century also lies in his involvement in the nationalization of Peking Opera. Together with the intellectual Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875-1962), he brought enormous changes to the artistic conventions of Peking Opera, and the genre gained in social status in China because of this. In this regard, I will show in this chapter how Mei contributed to the nationalization ideology with his innovation of Ancient Costume plays, and how he was constructed as a Chinese national icon through both on-stage and off-stage images during his 1922 Hong Kong tour.

2.1 The quest for “national drama” in the late 1910s

Nowadays Peking Opera is widely viewed as representative of Chinese theatrical culture. Foreigners who travel in China will often end up at a Peking Opera performance if they ask for some tips for enjoying traditional Chinese culture. Such alleged superiority of Peking Opera over its more than three hundred family members can even be seen on the international level. In 2010 Peking Opera was added to UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. And in the corresponding nomination document, a statement claiming Peking Opera’s significance as ICH reads: “Peking Opera is the most widespread and influential among over 300 opera forms in China. Hence it is also called the ‘National opera’.”³² Conventional discourse traces Peking Opera’s superior status back to the final decades of the nineteenth century, when the genre received exclusive imperial patronage from the Qing dynasty, especially from empress Cixi due to her personal liking for Peking Opera. However, scholarship has neglected a decisive moment in the May Fourth period in late 1910s to early 1920s, when Peking Opera was given the designation of “national drama” (*guoju* 國劇).

2.1.1 National Identity = National Culture: nationalism and the May Fourth Movement

The May Fourth discourse of the second and third decade of the twentieth century had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century. It was an era when Qing China was suffering from foreign incursions. A succession of military defeats led to capitulations and the infamous

³² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2010. “Nomination File number 00418 for Inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2010” in Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, fifth session. Nairobi, Kenya.

“unequal treaties” favoring the imperial powers. For instance the defeats in the First Opium War (1839-1842) and the Second Opium War (1856-1860) concluded respectively with the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing), the Treaty of Tientsin (Tianjin) and the Convention of Peking (Beijing). These treaties ceded Chinese territories to Russia, France, and the UK. The First Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) concluded with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, in which Japan was awarded Chinese land and an indemnity of 200 millions Kuping taels – about six times the annual Japanese revenue at the time. Moreover, the Xinchou Treaty between the Qing court and Eight-Nation Alliance, a joint force of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US that militarily intervened China in 1900 after the Boxer Rebellion, granted the Alliance rights of garrison in Chinese core territories, which further marked the fragmentation of the nation.

These military failures not only caused material devastation in China, but also resulted in cultural discrimination by the imperial powers. They related the lack of Chinese sovereignty to the inability of Chinese culture to uphold a rational, moral, and modern citizenship.³³ In addition, some scholars also suggest the internal disintegration of ethics within Chinese society as a reason for China’s military impotence. For example John Fitzgerald mentions in his book an age of “chaos” in the early Republic, because of the removal of Confucianism from the educational system and secular rituals.³⁴ In response to this twofold problem, a nationalist ideology began to emerge among Chinese intellectuals. The ideology later developed into the New Culture movement, which urged for a new China with new modes of morale. In Fitzgerald’s words, “as the awakening of the New Culture movement was an awakening from an outmoded ethical system, it entailed an awakening to a new one.”³⁵ The movement spread through new generations in society and reached its height in 1919. In that year, the Republican government failed in its fight for the recognition of China’s rights at the Treaty of Versailles Conference at the end of the First World War. This sparked the events on 4 May, in which students took to the streets to demonstrate in protest against foreign imperialism and voiced various demands towards what they saw as modernization in order to rescue China. The demonstrations and the broad cultural trends whose emergence it marked are commonly known as the May Fourth Movement. The term not only refers to the incident, but also the whole period when society was bubbling with new ideas towards Chinese modernity.

Two paradigms are relevant when we talk about Chinese modernity. These are significant in the development of traditional Chinese theatre in that period, as they led to different products. On the one hand, the classic May Fourth paradigm looks at Chinese modernity in binary terms. It sees the movement as a radical break with, or rejection of, Chinese traditions, and a turn to western culture – despite the original continuing opposition to Western and Japanese imperialism. Some even describe the paradigm as a formalistic one, in which all Western cultural imports were to be embraced and all Chinese traditions were to be

³³ Goldstein 1999: 408.

³⁴ Fitzgerald 1996: 70.

³⁵ *ibid.*

condemned.³⁶ In line with this paradigm, May Fourth radicals upheld Chinese “modern drama,” which was in the form of Western spoken drama. They rejected both traditional theatrical genres and the newly-emerged “hybrid” forms – popular theatrical hybrids, which mostly incorporated contemporary stories, costumes, and spoken dialogues in a Western dramatic style into traditional Chinese plays.³⁷ For example in *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (New Youth), the flagship May Fourth journal publication between 1915 and 1922, Qian Xuanton 錢玄同 criticized lovers of traditional Chinese theatre as having “the same psychology with the man who insists on acting like a slave and protecting old customs by maintaining a queue, or the despicable husband who refuses to see women as human beings and supports foot binding.”³⁸

On the other hand, especially since the 1980s and 1990s, other scholarship suggests an alternative paradigm, which de-centers the “new” and “western” as the core of Chinese modernity. Chow Kai-wing et. al. in their edited volume *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (2008) suggest an alternative angle to view May Fourth as “a multifaceted enterprise that transcended the polarity of tradition and the ‘new’.”³⁹ All individuals discussed in this volume tried to achieve the same goal as the “classic” radicals – to achieve Chinese modernity – but in ways that would incorporate Chinese with Western elements, the “old” and “new”. In the cultural scene, for example, Frederick Lau discusses how the musician Zheng Jinwen 鄭覲文 realized his vision of modernizing Chinese music, which mainly emphasized harmony in tune and timbre when playing as an ensemble. He did not abandon the Chinese tradition though. Instead he adopted the Western orchestration to the formation of Chinese music ensemble, and the standardization of western instruments to manufacture Chinese instruments.⁴⁰

2.1.2 National Culture = National Drama: The social function of drama

In line with the evolving May Fourth paradigm as a call for a hybrid culture of east and west, the term “national essence” (*guocui* 國粹) emerged. It referred to a set of cultural phenomena that were yet to be found, or to be constructed, but that could represent a modern nation with integrity.⁴¹ Here I am not suggesting that drama is the only form that was picked and promoted in the national discourse. For instance, there is rich scholarship about how “new literature” (*xinwenxue* 新文學) was advocated in that period. Also according to Goldstein, national drama was not the only object or concept “nationalized” during the time, but also the national flag (*guoqi* 國旗), the national language (*guoyu* 國語) and the national anthem

³⁶ Peng 1994.

³⁷ Examples included Wang Xiaonong’s 汪笑儂 reformed Peking Opera (Li 2010: 43), Spring Willow Society’s (*Chunliu She* 春柳社) “new drama” (*xinju* 新劇) and “Civilized Plays” (*wenmingxi* 文明戲). (Goldstein 2007: 100-101; Liu 2013)

³⁸ Qian 1918; Goldstein 2007: 134-135.

³⁹ Chow et. al. 2008: 4.

⁴⁰ Lau 2008.

⁴¹ Guy 2005: 45-46.

(*guoge* 國歌), for instance.⁴² Nevertheless, the circle of reformists had long seen drama as *the* medium for its power in conveying messages to a massive audience. Take Liang Qichao, a statesman-literatus who was one of the main advocates of the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898, as an example. He fled to Japan after the Reform initiative failed. During his exile, he established a periodical called *Qingyi Bao* 清議報 (The China Discussion), in which he published many articles reflecting his views on Chinese modernity. He asserted that fiction, poetry and drama had a role to play in transforming China, and advocated the reformation of fiction as an essential part in social reformation.⁴³ At the same time, Chen Qubing and Wang Xiaonong established *Ershi Shiji Dawutai* 二十世紀大舞台 (The Great Stage of the Twentieth Century), a magazine fully dedicated to articles about drama reform. In one of his articles, Chen commented on the power of drama to reach every class in the society, including the illiterates:

To our ethnic brothers we express this aim, to mount the stage and personally perform tragedy and joy, to loudly call out, to lay down a path through tears ... Stretching up to every scholar and the multitudes of businessmen; reaching down to women, children, and the illiterate masses.⁴⁴

But the faith of the reformist alone was not enough to transform drama as the model of a national cultural ideal. The attitude of the Republican government towards drama was decisive, as they had the power to control public dissemination of any cultural form. In this regard, I argue that the Republican government was in an ambiguous position valuing the social function of drama. On the one hand, they inherited the authoritarian hostility against traditional Chinese theatre, visible in the form of censorship. This dated back to the last years of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when the empire was devastated by rebellions, and the authorities prohibited certain plays for their provocative contents – usually content that hinted at rebellion. The situation became worse during the Qing dynasty, as the authorities became more sensitive to plays' contents and more active in prohibiting plays. And through the late eighteenth century to the Republican period, the scale of censorship expanded from political to social sensitivity. For example, banning by the state officials of plays that were claimed to have explicit sexual contents was common.

On the other hand, the Republican government saw drama as a powerful tool in education. In February 1912, a newspaper in Shanghai, *Shen Bao* 申報 (Shanghai News), published an official approval for the establishment of the Shanghai Actors' Association. In this approval, the newly formed Republican government addressed the social function of drama:

[They] have great reputations in the acting world, for years performing new plays which moved, society, affecting everyone and promoting the Republic in the people's hearts...[You must] consolidate the basis for the future of our nation's people...If some in the acting would sing lewd plays, you must find a way to stop it, make them change into those benefiting

⁴² Goldstein 1999: 381.

⁴³ Liang 2001: 758.

⁴⁴ Chen 1904. English translation by Goldstein (2007: 99)

society.⁴⁵

Another example of the state's support for traditional Chinese theatre came in 1930. In response to the intellectuals' continuing concerns with cultivating the "national essence," in that year the government announced funding for the establishment of a National Opera Music Institute, which included a Beijing branch of the training school called the National Drama Academy (NDA). This training school, according to Goldstein, was a success under state sponsorship and promotion.⁴⁶

In addition, the municipal administration of Guangzhou at that time also reflected the government's ambiguity in valuing social role of drama. In an official publication titled "Guangzhou shi Jiaoyuju Shiliu Nianfen Xingzheng Jingguo Gaifang" 廣州市教育局十六年份行政經過概況 (Educational Bureau of Guangzhou municipal Government: Sixteen Years of Works) in 1927, it states:

Drama is a powerful weapon for social education, but sometimes also goes out of control. So we must keep an eye on it. It is hard to make drama benefit the society, but at least we should prevent it from poisoning society and harming our young people.⁴⁷

In the eyes of the municipal government, drama was something that could be modified for the use of public moral education. This idea was further emphasized in 1929, when the newly established Committee for Drama Improvement (*Xiju Gaijin Weiyuanhui* 戲劇改進委員會) publicized the "Gailiang Xiju de Shida Yuanze" 改良戲劇的十大原則 (Ten Great Principles for Drama Improvement). In the document the Committee seemingly stressed only one point: all plays should be produced as a means of artistic education and be "scientific" (*kexue hua* 科學化), "public" (*minzhong hua* 民眾化) and "revolutionary" (*geming hua* 革命化). In other words, all plays should fit into the ideology of the Nationalist Party.

From the above examples, it is fair to say that the Nationalist government of the Republic of China valued drama mostly for its power to disseminate their political propaganda. Also in the first three decades of the twentieth century the state was far from stable, as it was disrupted by the 1911 revolution and later military conflicts between warlords. Therefore what the Republican Government could do for Chinese theatre in the May Fourth period was far less than what the Nationalist Government did in the 1930s – Mei Lanfang's tours to the U.S. in 1930 and the Soviet Union (1935), as well as Cheng Yanqiu's 程硯秋 European tour in 1931, for example, all received government support. In this context, the government's non-opposing attitude towards traditional Chinese theatre was essentially a "go" signal to the May Fourth intellectuals, for their idea to transform the art form into something more than merely an entertainment. They valued its ability to permeate society regardless of class,

⁴⁵ Art Research Institutes of Beijing and Shanghai 1990: 244. English translation by Goldstein (2007: 108).

⁴⁶ The establishment of NDA also leads to the discussion of the reform of Peking Opera in the Republican era. For details see Goldstein 2007: 231-235.

⁴⁷ Municipal Government of Guangzhou 1927.

gender, and education. It could certainly be a powerful weapon for spreading ideological propaganda of nationalism.

2.1.3 National Drama = Peking Opera: Qi Rushan's nationalization of Peking Opera

But why, then, was Peking Opera widely seen as superior to the other three hundred genres in traditional Chinese theatre? Nancy Guy in her book *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (2005) provides a possibility:

Four basic assumptions about Peking Opera took shape during the 1910s and 1920s: it was worthy of the foreign gaze; it was the equivalent of the high-art dramatic forms of Western European nations; it was quintessentially Chinese; and, as such, it could serve the function of building diplomatic ties.⁴⁸

The assumption of Peking Opera as a “high-art” theatrical genre is the first issue in doubt. Due to the Qing court patronage, Peking Opera had developed into a refined and highly formulated genre. Support was given, though it came together with a task to perfect the art as it was performed in front of the imperial family. Nevertheless, this is not enough to explain how Peking Opera was championed as “national drama.” An obvious competitor for the position was Kunqu Opera (*kunju* 崑劇). This had also long been recognized as a refined (*ya* 雅) genre since it became a major Chinese theatrical genre in the mid-late sixteenth century. It has been associated with the elite class and intellectuals, privileging it over the popular / secular (*su* 俗) genres at the time – including the ancestors of Peking Opera. Ironically, it was the strong elite association that prevented Kunqu Opera from winning commercial audiences, who were largely ordinary citizens without high education level. As a local theatrical genre in Suzhou, it had been quite popular in the seventeenth century. However, over the years it had become more rarefied, and it suffered greatly during the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864), though it remained popular as an amateur genre. The small support base, which was largely geographically confined to eastern China, hence became the greatest obstacle for Kunqu Opera to win the national title.

Conversely, though named after and developed to its mature form in the capital, Peking Opera is in fact a hybrid form of several regional genres. In her study, Li Ruru suggests six forms that influenced the birth of Peking Opera⁴⁹, arguing that “[Peking Opera] has evolved an exceptional ability to assimilate different styles of dialect, song, music and acting conventions.”⁵⁰ The composite nature of Peking Opera therefore gained itself a great potential for mass popularity across the nation, as most audiences with a range of different local cultures could still find something in Peking Opera that they were familiar with. Hence it also gained itself great potential to be the representative of the “national essence” in the

⁴⁸ Guy 2005: 47-48.

⁴⁹ They include *kunshan* mode (*kunshanqiang* 崑山腔), “gongs and drums” mode (*luogu qiang* 鑼鼓腔), “capital” mode (*jingqiang* 京腔), Anhui tunes (*huidiao* 徽調), Han tunes (*handiao* 漢調) and “plain” mode (*qingqiang* 清腔).

⁵⁰ Li 2010: 20.

realm of traditional Chinese theatre.

Compared to the “high-art” assumption, defining “Chinese-ness” in Peking Opera was yet a more important step for its encoding to a national status. As noted, the discourse of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth century was actually one with a blurred boundary between “traditional” and “modern” (“old” and “new” in other words), “Chinese” and “Western.” In the theatrical track of such discourse, experimental drama flourished. A blend of Chinese and Western theatrical genres, termed Civilized Plays (*wenmingxi* 文明戲),⁵¹ were considered inspirations for the new nationalism. Departing from this, I argue that there is a third way to view intellectuals’ pursuit of Chinese modernity at that time, in which it could be achieved by (re)defining their own, existing culture as on a par with, and comparable to, its Euro-American counterparts. Moreover, it had to be brought into the world, so as to show that Euro-American culture was not universal and to establish a Chinese identity on the international or global stage.

I further argue that Qi Rushan’s effort in theorizing his ideas about traditional Chinese theatre from the late 1910s onward should be understood this way. With a background of German and French studies, Qi paid several visits to Europe exploring Western theatrical genres. His engagement with European culture, mostly in France, had at first shaped his low appraisal of traditional Chinese theatre. Returning to Beijing in 1912, however, he was fascinated by Peking Opera’s popularity. He then began to study it and wrote articles about Peking Opera and comparative theatre.⁵² Apart from that, his collaboration with Mei Lanfang also made him a significant figure of Peking Opera in the twentieth century. Qi’s view towards the genre, which was also applicable to traditional Chinese theatre at large, was similar to the classical May Fourth discourse, in a sense that they both dichotomized “Chinese” and “Western”. However, in Qi’s theory such binarism led to the reaffirmation of Chinese culture instead of its condemnation. He started by differentiating the song-dance characteristic in Peking Opera from the spoken nature in Western theatre. For example, he often defined Peking Opera as a performing art of “story-telling with song and dance.” Derived from this, Qi established an artistic opposition between aestheticism and realism between Chinese and Western theatres. For example when he discussed the choreographed movements in Peking Opera, he wrote:

“Every movement in a performance has to be dance-like in nature. There is a saying that ‘Every sound should be a song, and there should be no movement that is not dance’. Therefore realistic [movements] should not be allowed...”⁵³

In the following quote he brought up the binarism more explicitly:

“[We] should never criticize national drama as if it were the same as viewing [Western] realistic dramas. It is because the good things in realistic drama are not applicable in national

⁵¹ For a detailed discussion of this theatrical genre in the early twentieth century, please see Liu Siyuan 2013.

⁵² Qi 1989: 96-100.

⁵³ Qi 1935: 4.

drama, and vice versa. Why is that? Because spoken drama is realistic in nature, so the more mimetic the better. National drama is originated from a song-dance tradition, which in every sense avoids being realistic. If there is something mimetic, it not only breaks the principles, but also appears to be strange and uncomfortable.”⁵⁴

Setting up his theoretical framework of aestheticism by forbidding any mimetic acts on stage, he continued formulating detailed practicalities for basically every performing aspect of Peking Opera. First is the aestheticism in voice. Qi divided all voice productions into four different registers: pure singing, articulated speeches, dialogues and emotional expressions (such as crying, laughing, anger, sadness, etc.). He emphasized the song-like nature of all registers of voice productions, in which performers have to consider tones and rhymes and synchronization with the music even in dialogues. Expressions were also highly formulated so as to highlight characters' emotions. For example, Qi formulated strict rules on how different role types laugh: determined and solemn for the senior male role, chaste and graceful for the female role, irregular and humorous for the clown role. Although all these laughing styles are disconnected from reality, they reflect a certain nature of life in an articulated form.

Following on the song-dance discourse, Qi focused on the dance-like nature of Peking Opera when he worked on the formularization of movements. He divided all movements into three types: those that reinforce speech, those that express inner emotions, and those that represent actions. He suggested that all movements should be choreographed. That is to say movements in Peking Opera functioned not only to tell stories, but also to signify different role types and specific characters in the performance. In line with this, Qi redefined the function of the Chinese stage as a platform for dance presentations rather than drama. By doing so he affirmed the stylization on stage, as for him all props are aids to the dance performance.

Such formulations of a strict opposition between Western realism and Chinese aestheticism, in Goldstein's words, “provided the theoretical grounds for Qi's promotion of Peking Opera as the model for national drama.”⁵⁵ Here I am not suggesting that the aforementioned performance practices are new inventions, as it would be naive to ignore the fact that Peking Opera performers have been performing in such a way, or had included these elements in their performances, for decades. Instead, I am focusing on Qi's pioneer effort to theorize Peking Opera, and to select a limited number of features as representative of it. His theory and application were his reaction to the grand narrative of the May Fourth ideology. Guy's assumption and my argument draw additional evidence from the fact that Qi raised Peking Opera to an equivalent position with the highly theorized Western theatrical genres, thus enabling meaningful comparison.

Moreover, Qi's ambiguous application of the term “national drama” is noteworthy. On the one hand, he claimed that “national drama” referred to all traditional Chinese theatrical genres:

⁵⁴ Qi 1935a: 21.

⁵⁵ Goldstein 1999: 387.

“What I mean by ‘national drama’ is the drama *in* the nation, but not *of* the nation. It is the term used, for example, in ‘nationals’ or ‘national goods’, but not that in ‘national flag’ or ‘national anthem’...every time when I use the term ‘national drama’, I include [singing modes of] both *kun* 崑, *yi* 弋, *bangzi* 梆子 and *pihuang* 皮黃.”⁵⁶

On the other hand, this claim contradicted his many other writings, in which “national drama” was used exclusively to signify Peking Opera. For example when Zhang Daofan wrote the preface for Qi’s *Guoju Yishu Huikao* 國劇藝術彙考 (The Illustrated Catalogue of the Art of National Drama, 1962), he clarified the use of “national drama” in the book as referring to “drama of Beiping [Beijing]” (*pingju* 平劇)⁵⁷ and “drama of the capital” (*jingxi* 京戲), both the names of Peking Opera in different periods.⁵⁸

In sum, Qi reacted to the call for Chinese modernity by interpreting the binarism of “Chinese” and “Western” in a way that reaffirmed the value of Chinese culture. With his knowledge of theatre studies, he systematically theorized the aestheticism of Peking Opera, which for him can be represented as [a facet of] the national essence. Nevertheless, a well-constructed theory alone might not be able to achieve the goal of contributing to national identity building. A performer who could transform the theory into on-stage performances, a “performer of national essence”, was the key.

2.2 Peking Opera = Mei Lanfang: performing “national essence” on stage

As a world-renowned icon of Peking Opera, Mei Lanfang’s fame not only comes from his artistic mastery, but also from his contribution in consolidating Qi’s theory of aestheticism in Peking Opera and his frequent exposure on overseas stages. In this section I will look at his hugely successful career from the perspective of an icon-making campaign – one that made him both the most widely known Peking Opera performer world-wide and a role model of modern Chinese citizenship.

2.2.1 On Mei Lanfang

Mei was born in a family of Peking Opera performers and musicians. His grandfather, Mei Qiaoling 梅巧齡, was a female role performer and later the boss of the Four Delights Troupe (*Sixi Ban* 四喜班). His father, Mei Zhufen 梅竹芬, was also a renowned female role before his early death. In addition, his uncle, Mei Yutian 梅雨田, was a musician of the Chinese two-stringed fiddle (*huqin* 胡琴) who was famous for his work with Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培, a famous senior male role. With such a family background, Mei Lanfang was inevitably expected to succeed his family’s legacy. However, the story did not start in the way many people would think, that of a gifted kid showing his talent from the moment he started

⁵⁶ Qi 1954: 173.

⁵⁷ *Beiping* 北平 was the official name of Beijing after the capital had been moved to Nanjing in 1927. Here Zhang’s use of the name refers to 1928 when the Nationalist army occupied Beijing and renamed it to *Beiping*.

⁵⁸ Qi 1962: 2.

learning Peking Opera. Instead, according to Mei's grandmother, his acting talent was not even average when he was young:

When he was eight years old, we had hired the older brother of Zhu Suyun 朱素雲, a famous male role performer, to teach [Mei Lanfang]. At the time students always started with plays like *Twice Entering the Palace* (*Er Jingong* 二進宮) and *Wang Chun-e Educating Her Son* (*Sanniang Jiaozi* 三娘教子), whose singing phrases were easy to learn. However, he failed to learn just four simple, classic phrases even after quite a while. Seeing his slow progress, master Zhu thought it was hopeless for him to learn the art well, and said to him “the Master has not fed you with rice!”⁵⁹ and refused to teach him anymore.⁶⁰

After overcoming this unpromising start, Mei was finally accepted by Wu Lingxian 吳菱仙, a former performer from the Four Delights Troupe. But he was only an accompanying student to his brother-in-law's family, because the declining Mei family was hardly able even to hire him a teacher. The family's difficult situation also pressed an early financial responsibility on him, so he had to make his debut – when he was only eleven – in 1904. Three years after his debut, Mei joined the *Xiliancheng* 喜連成 troupe,⁶¹ where he began to develop as a mature performer. But he was not yet a renowned female role until his first tour to Shanghai in 1913.

During the 1910s Peking Opera in Shanghai had already established a rather self-contained operation system. The supply of performers, both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, was sufficient for the growing needs of local spectators. However, commercial tours of star performers from Beijing were still an attraction, and arranging such tours was a profitable means for the local troupes' shareholders. In 1913, Xu Shaoqing 許少卿 from the First Theatre of Peony and Fragrant Olive (*Dangui Diyi Tai* 丹桂第一臺) invited Mei Lanfang and Wang Fengqing 王鳳卿, a famous male role at the time. It was the first time Mei ever performed outside Beijing, and his performance received high acclaim by Shanghai audiences. As described by Mei, this tour was a crucial moment to him, which greatly influenced his future career. Yet, what happened after the tour is arguably the real “life-changer” – not only for him, but also for Peking Opera.⁶²

2.2.2 Mei's Peking Opera innovations in the 1910s

Mei's first encounter with Qi Rushan was unusual indeed. Soon after his return to Beijing from this Shanghai tour, Mei started receiving anonymous letters critically commenting on his

⁵⁹ This is a phrase used in the Peking Opera circles, meaning that one does not have the talent to learn the art at all.

⁶⁰ Mei & Xu 1987: 10.

⁶¹ I do not have an English translation for the *Xiliancheng* troupe as it was named after the three sons of the founder, Niu Zihou 牛子厚, whose given names are Xigui 喜貴, Liangui 連貴 and Chenggui 成貴. Literally *xi* means happiness, *lian* means connection or succession, and *cheng* means success or achievement (so “Enjoying Continued Success”).

⁶² For the Peking Opera scene in early twentieth century Shanghai and Mei's systematic use of new media, such as newspapers and fan photographs, see Yeh 2003.

performances. He reacted to these suggestions positively, and followed many of them in his later performances. This humble act by a top performer interested the anonymous letter-writer so much that he continued to write Mei personal comments. Finally after hundreds of mail exchanges, Mei arranged to meet this anonymous person, whose name was Qi Rushan. Soon after, they started on a partnership that would last from 1913 to 1933, which was the most productive and innovative period of Mei's career. During their partnership, two new types of plays stood out, namely the Modern Costume plays (*shizhuang xi* 時裝戲) and the Ancient Costume plays (*guzhuang xi* 古裝戲).

These two innovations were arguably a reflection of the negotiation of Chinese modernity at that time, that between the mainstream discourse and Qi's interpretation. On the one hand, the Modern Costume plays followed the ideology presented by hybrid dramas. Towards the end of his 1913 Shanghai tour, Mei paid several visits to local performances and for the first time encountered what he called the "new dramas" (*xinxi* 新戲) – which indeed was Civilized Plays (see section 2.1.3) – that presented modern stories in the style of Peking Opera. He was inspired and began his production of Modern Costume plays after returning to Beijing.⁶³ Similar to the hybrid dramas, many technical aspects were modernized in Modern Costume plays. Firstly, as the name suggested, performers wore modern costumes. More frequent changing was also seen, such as a realistic depiction of characters' status through plot development. Secondly, stories were taken from contemporary events. For example, the first Modern Costume play, *Waves on the Sea of Sin* (*Niehai Bolan* 孽海波瀾), was based on a local story in Beijing about a trial of a procurer. Thirdly, performing conventions were greatly renewed. Traditional formulaic movements were abandoned, and replaced by everyday gestures. Singing passages and acrobatics were also reduced and partly replaced by more realistic presentations. Through the Modern Costume plays, Mei somewhat echoed the mainstream May Fourth ideology to convey messages of modernity by means of Peking Opera. This obviously opposed Qi's perspective on Peking Opera, though Qi actually helped writing several play scripts of this kind.

On the other hand, Qi continued to work on his theory of Peking Opera. By combining aestheticism with the notion of femininity, Qi managed to bring his theory into practice through the creation of Ancient Costume plays. But before I discuss the plays, an explanation of the traditionality of femininity in Chinese theatre must be in place, so as to justify the coherent traditionalist logic in Qi's theorization of Peking Opera.

Gender has long been an important part of the visual dimensions of traditional Chinese theatre. As Li Siu-leung states in *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (2003), "The history of Chinese [Opera] can, among many possible characterizations, be instructively described as a series of narrative fragments of 'gender trouble'."⁶⁴ While Li's description of gender issues as "trouble" is somewhat rhetorical in nature, scholars have in fact frequently observed "trouble" in the history of traditional Chinese theatre, starting from the time of the emergence of the fundamental concept of "drama", meaning the portrayal of male and female characters

⁶³ Mei & Xu 1987: 186-187.

⁶⁴ Li 2003: 1.

by male and female performers respectively. The histories of male and female cross-dressing also date back to Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-24 C.E.) and the eighth century respectively.⁶⁵ Other historic episodes about sexuality in Chinese theatre since then include the abundant presence of female performers in the Yuan dynasty; the ban on female performers on public stages, and on mixing male and female performers on the same stage, in the Ming and Qing dynasties; as well as the rise of female impersonators, such as Mei Lanfang, from the late imperial period to mid-twentieth century. A closer look at these episodes always leads to one overarching observation, namely that femininity is often the oppressed in the gender relations. As Li and other gender theorists on traditional Chinese theatre argue, femininity has often been put in a subordinate position in a dominant male narrative of traditional Chinese theatre, from both the literal and performative perspectives, within a larger framework of Confucian, patriarchal Chinese society.⁶⁶ Therefore, from a gender point of view, upholding femininity as the strategy to elevate a theatrical genre also shows Qi's and Mei's progressive resistance to traditional gender values – which, in its turn, contradicts Qi's traditionalist view toward modernization.

Going back to the Ancient Costume plays, the notions of aestheticism and traditional Chinese femininity were materialized through Mei's visual images on stage. Every single artistic device was aimed at enhancing the femininity of the character as well as the actor. Firstly, stories were taken from Chinese folktales, historical stories and literature, in which the main characters were depicted as moral and pure feminine figures. For example, *Chang E Escapes to the Moon* (*Chang E Benyue* 嫦娥奔月) depicts the immortal fairy Chang E, and *Daiyu Buries Fallen Petals* (*Daiyu Zanghua* 黛玉葬花) depicts the tender but fragile Lin Daiyu from the Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou Meng* 紅樓夢). Secondly, according to the commentary of Mei himself, costumes and hairstyles were inspired by ancient paintings. Every little detail was designed to amplify the femininity of the performer's physicality and to enhance femininity when the performer was performing movements and dance sequences. For example, Mei recalled a thorough design process for his costume in *Chang E*, in which even the color of a small piece of accessory was carefully chosen to highlight the beauty of Chang E.⁶⁷ Thirdly, performing conventions remained mostly traditional, despite the greatly prolonged dancing sequences that maximized the visual impact of femininity in the plays. In Goldstein's view, Ancient Costume plays created inception to "the mythic idealizations of feminine purity and beauty."⁶⁸

It is noteworthy that Mei's success lay not only in his ability to cross gender boundaries, but also his ability to shed the negative sexual image associated with cross-dressing in traditional Chinese theatre. His awareness of these matters is clear in Mei's discussion of his performance in *The Favorite Concubine Becomes Intoxicated* (*Guifei Zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒):

⁶⁵ Ibid. 32-33; Tseng 1976: 41.

⁶⁶ Li 2003.

⁶⁷ Mei & Xu 1987: 282-283.

⁶⁸ Goldstein 1999: 394.

“The portrayal of drunken Concubine Yang was overdone by some performers, who made it pornographic. It should be a great dance scene that reflects the internal emotion of a woman who is suppressed by court politics, but their acting made it ‘yellow’ [pornographic].”⁶⁹

This statement on the traditional performance practice of male impersonators should also be understood in relation to the long history of their involvement in male prostitution. From the Ming and Qing dynasties to the early Republican era, the male dominance of both performing and spectating circles was closely associated with the practice of homosexuality.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the theater seems to have attracted homosexuals in east and west alike. Thus Peking Opera performers had long been pejoratively classified as a “mean profession” (*jianye* 賤業). It was only in the early Republican era that performers gained a better social status, although they were still not considered as “regular” people.⁷¹ Association with immorality would have been devastating to the iconization of Mei. Therefore, his awareness of the need – and, perhaps, his professional desire – to avoid pornographic imagination by spectators, at the same time as maximizing his feminine images on stage, was crucial to his career. Meanwhile, this is also significant to the genre at large. By “purifying” performers’ image on stage, the status of the theatre was raised to that of an art and, by the same token, that of performers was raised from participants in a “mean profession” to artists. On the practical side, the purification of Peking Opera performers also involved hiding the intimate aspects of the relationships of Mei, who was the face of the genre, and his long-time patrons.

In sum, Mei’s effort in presenting a splendid and pure femininity on stage, which was freed from all associations with homosexuality, was essential to the legitimacy of Qi’s theory of Peking Opera, as Mei’s cross-dressing embodied Qi’s theory of aestheticism, which was to abolish all aspects suggesting realism. Such portrayal of complete womanhood on-stage by a man was logically parallel to the perfection of aestheticism that distinguished traditional Chinese theatre from its Western counterpart. In other words, Mei and Qi redefined cross-dressing in Peking Opera as a virtuous artistic expression in Chinese culture. As delicately summarized by Goldstein, “on the stage, the ideally virtuous and beautiful woman was, necessarily, a man.”⁷² This echoes Guy’s abovementioned assumptions about Peking Opera, for it was “both supremely Chinese and consummately exportable.” Indeed, the recorded product of Peking Opera should not only be “supremely Chinese” but also “consummately exportable,” if Peking Opera was at the end a solution to the cultural discrimination by the Western world. But then arose the next question for Mei and Qi about Peking Opera’s exportation: Where should we test the product?

2.3 The first encounter: Mei’s 1922 tour to Hong Kong

Mei Lanfang’s well-established on-stage identity as the “performer of national essence,” with

⁶⁹ Mei & Xu 1987: 230.

⁷⁰ See Duchesne 1994, Wu 2004 and Goldman 2012 for more about sexuality in the theatre circle in late imperial China.

⁷¹ Goldstein 1999: 400.

⁷² Goldstein 2007: 251.

his innovation of Ancient Costume plays, should be encouraging to the grand plan of iconizing him. However, according to Qi, he and Mei in fact initially hesitated about promoting Peking Opera outside the Chinese mainland. According to Qi, neither western missionaries nor foreign officials working in China at that time had written about traditional Chinese theatre. They simply did not go to teahouses, which were the major venues of Peking Opera performances at the time, because going there was considered a low-class act due to what they saw as the venues' poor conditions and spectators' rude behavior. Since their writings were the main source for the West to learn about China, it is not surprising that Westerners had almost no knowledge about Peking Opera. Thus, Mei and his team were unsure about how foreign audiences would respond to the genre.⁷³ Nevertheless, he was given some encouragement from his several performances before foreign spectators. In 1915 Mei performed before Paul Reinsch, the then American ambassador, in Beijing, and his performance was acclaimed. In 1919 Mei was invited to tour Japan. The tour had an enormous impact on local communities as well as Japanese theatrical circles. Box office results were great for all of his performances at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo. Many Kabuki performers were also attracted by Mei's fabulous skills, so much so that some even tried to adapt Mei's dance movements into their own Kabuki performances. These experiences of success likely convinced Qi and Mei that Peking Opera could be appreciated outside China and might also be a useful means of cultural diplomacy.⁷⁴

On top of that, the frequent performances before diplomatic personnel in Beijing during those years also started to gain Mei a reputation among Western cultural circles. According to A.C. Scott, the Americans had already planned to arrange for Mei to tour the United States, which finally happened in 1930. But before that it was the British and the Chinese community in Hong Kong who had made some arrangements. They proposed to invite Mei for a tour and for him to perform before Edward VIII, the then Prince of Wales and future King of England, during his tour of the "Far East" in 1922.⁷⁵ However, the original plan did not work out in the end. After all arrangements had been made, a massive strike of Chinese seamen, which later on spread to other groups of workers, broke out in January 1922. Signs that the strike might last indefinitely (although it ended in March) left the Hong Kong organizer no choice but to cancel the tour. The entertainment for Prince Edward was replaced by a famous local Cantonese Opera troupe, which performed before him in April.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, and fortunately, the story did not end there. After the cancellation of the original plan, some local theatre lovers in the business community were still motivated in bringing Mei to Hong Kong. With the prominent support of General Tang Yiu-kwong 鄧瑤光 and of John Grose (the former a retired Commissioner of Police in Guangdong province, and the latter a European who had received most of his education in Hong Kong), a group of members from the Chamber of Commerce formed the United Music Society (*Tongle Hui* 同

⁷³ Qi 1962: 132-134.

⁷⁴ *ibid.* 138.

⁷⁵ Scott 1959: 91.

⁷⁶ *ibid.* 92.

樂會). On behalf of the society, they offered another invitation to Mei, and the Society's members agreed to contribute financially.

As Mei Shaowu recalled, Mei accepted the invitation immediately, because he hoped to make this tour an opportunity to examine the degree to which audiences in southern China would accept the “traditional northern Peking Opera”.⁷⁷ Here I argue that the notion of “traditional northern” is questionable, if we still remember the long efforts by May Fourth ideologists – particularly Qi Rushan – in nationalizing Peking Opera. Also, the cultural distance between Beijing and Hong Kong at that time was far beyond a “north-south” relationship within a single country:

“Although physically a part of China, Hong Kong was a foreign country in every sense of the word to a northerner like Mei. His own countrymen there were Cantonese who spoke a different language and lived in ways that marked them apart.”⁷⁸

In addition to the differences in language and living style, I should also stress the cultural difference between these two places, where the theatrical spectrum of Hong Kong at that time was composed by those demographically bounded genres (e.g. Cantonese Opera and Chaozhou Opera) and “imported” cultures of Western opera and spoken dramas due to its colonial background. Therefore, I argue that this tour was also an attempt for Mei and his team to try out the “national drama” agenda, and to build up Mei's iconic status, in a place with relatively large foreign presence.

2.3.1 Mei Lanfang on stage: a fabulous impersonator of femininity

On 15 October 1922, Mei arrived in Hong Kong with his newly formed Society for Continuing Chinese Culture (*Chenghua She* 承華社) to prepare for his performances. His first Hong Kong appearance was a big event. Promotional materials, highlighting not only his artistic mastery but also his international reputation, were advertised in *Huazi Ribao* 華字日報 (The Chinese Mail), one of the major local newspapers at that time, a week before the tour:

“Feng Hejian 馮河澗 once hosted foreign ambassadors in his house for a performance by Mei. The ambassadors were impressed by Mei's performance and all wished him to perform in their own countries so as to share the enjoyment with their people. Later an American businessman in Beijing offered Mei 300,000 U.S. dollars for a tour to New York, but Mei declined with the excuse of long overseas travel. Since then Mei's reputation has grown within and outside China.”⁷⁹

Mei himself was also impressed by the impact he had made. For example upon his arrival, he wrote a letter to a friend in Shanghai:

⁷⁷ Mei 2006: 14.

⁷⁸ Scott 1959: 94.

⁷⁹ Chinese Mail, 9 October 1922.

When I sailed into the harbor [of Hong Kong], more than a hundred men and women from the upper echelons escorted me with boats. There were also uncountable numbers of people waiting on the pier...The United Music Society had sold the tickets in advance at the price of ten dollars, and had received an extremely enthusiastic response. Reports were also made of ticket “scalpers” selling tickets for double their original value.⁸⁰

The brisk sale of tickets, although some of it was through scalping activities, was indeed proof of Mei’s popularity. Also, the original ten-day engagement was extended to about a month from 20 October to 22 November, due to the feverish responses of the community.⁸¹

As discussed in the previous section, one crucial prerequisite to the iconization of Mei was his effort in presenting splendid and pure femininity on stage. In this tour, Mei and his team tried to achieve this by a carefully designed daily performing programme. During the tour of almost a month, he performed mainly Ancient Costume plays. He even re-staged a few of them that feature dance sequences over verbal deliveries, such as *The Heavenly Fairy Scattering Flowers* (*Tiannü Sanhua* 天女散花) and *Chang E Escapes to the Moon*, to maximize the impact of femininity shown in Peking Opera to spectators.

This strategy seemed to be successful if we look at the media coverage. Two columns were run in the Chinese Mail dedicated to Mei’s tour, namely “Taiping Juchang Ji” 太平劇場記 (News from the Tai Ping Theatre)⁸² and “Mei Xun” 梅訊 (Mei’s News), and praises of his “beauty” became the constant subject of these columns. *Daguang Bao* 大光報 (The Great Light Post) also joined in the compliments, praising “Mei’s beauty as comparable to a fairy, and his voice as sweet and adorable as warbler.”⁸³ In short, Mei’s mastery as a female role was fully displayed on Hong Kong stage, through his fabulous impersonation skills.

2.3.2 Mei Lanfang off stage: a modern man, a Chinese elite person

The month-long tour drew people’s attention to Mei’s on-stage beauty. Moreover, his off-stage image as a modern, moral man was equally important for the iconization campaign. At this point the media again made a great contribution in shaping Mei’s off-stage image. As noted, the beauty of Mei on stage had been recognized by local critics. At the same time Mei was depicted by every means in other media descriptions as a highly moral male person. This was indeed a conscious image management by Mei’s team, to shield him from the long-standing, negative perception of Peking Opera performers. As a matter of fact, the perception of traditional Chinese theatre performers in the south was no better, as Cantonese Opera performers were also seen as a “mean profession” and were often condemned as

⁸⁰ Mei 2006: 15-16.

⁸¹ See Chinese Mail, 20 November 1922. Performances on the last two days were “benefit plays” (*yiwu xi* 義務戲). Mei agreed to perform free of charge, in order to raise funds for victims of a typhoon disaster in the Chaozhou area in Guangdong. (*Chinese Mail*, 24 October 1922)

⁸² Tai Ping Theatre (*Taiping Xiyuan* 太平戲院) was a modern theatre fitted out for traditional Chinese theatre performances. Most of Mei’s performances during this tour were staged in this theatre.

⁸³ Mei 2006: 26.

low-caste people. Some were also found to be in the network of local gangs. A glance of such negative associations can be seen in a letter which was published in local press in the same October that Mei was about to arrive. Here Mei was also mentioned, and was portrayed somewhat differently from his “low-caste” colleagues:

“A gratifying point is that the warm reception [for Mei] shows a tendency, although slight, to give a performer his due. The attitude of southern Chinese towards performers is entirely mistaken and inconsistent and should be reformed. Performers are prone to be regarded as the scum of society and not in their true light as the benefactors of mankind ... in the attitude towards the stage, Canton [Guangzhou] should follow Peking [Beijing]...as we see, [Mei’s] behavior is dignified and correct. Moreover he has made it explicit that it will be inconvenient for him to attend entertainments given in his honor in brothels in West Point, a statement the utterance of which by a Chinese, presupposes some moral courage.”⁸⁴

I would say that this letter clearly had as its aim to emphasize Mei’s morality as a modern Chinese citizen by setting off his awareness against negative associations of performers’ images.

In addition, Mei’s heterosexual masculinity was also cautiously emphasized when he was engaged in social interaction. For example, in a pre-tour promotion in the *Chinese Mail*, a picture of Mei was published. Instead of a more logical choice of Mei in his female impersonator outlook, a picture of a young man in a cozy black tux was published.⁸⁵ Heterosexual maleness was also stressed in reporting Mei’s social activities, in contrast with his feminine image in performance reviews. It suggests an intention of Mei’s management team to shape public reception of Mei, through mass media, as a fashionable, modern man of high moral standards. Such reframing of Mei’s identity, from a low-class Peking Opera performer to a virtuous artist and moral man, was decisive in recoding Peking Opera as a “national high art,” and also Mei himself as a member of the “social elite” working in this art.

Moreover to be a “social elite”, the diplomatic obligations of Mei with the British Colonial government during the tour further elevated him to a cultural ambassador representing the nation of China. Such diplomatic arrangements were first initiated by the British Minister to China, Beilby Francis Alston, who sent a letter to Sir Reginald Edward Stubbs, the Hong Kong Governor at the time. In the letter, Alston asked Stubbs for an arrangement of convenience for Mei for the reason that “he had been doing well in enhancing the relationship between China and the United Kingdom.”⁸⁶ Accordingly, the Colonial government gave Mei a VIP-standard reception during his stay. Upon arrival, he was taken to pay his respects at Government House and received by the Governor. He had a police escort wherever he went. Various groups from the social upper class, including the British American Tobacco Company, gave banquets in his honor.⁸⁷ He was also granted privileges for his performances by the government. For example, the performance time was extended an extra

⁸⁴ Scott 1959: 93.

⁸⁵ *Chinese Mail*, 16 October 1922.

⁸⁶ Mei 2006: 14.

⁸⁷ *Chinese Mail*, 16 and 25 October 1922; Scott 1959: 96.

thirty minutes beyond midnight, the statutory stop time for local theatrical performances. Also Mei's performances were the first in Hong Kong for which permission was granted for the Tai Ping Theatre to sell standing tickets.⁸⁸ Moreover, Mei was received by Stubbs in a formal meeting on 17 October, and the presence of the Governor in two of Mei's performances was recorded.⁸⁹

Arrided! *Arrided!!*

MEI LAN FANG

The World Renowned Chinese Artist

With his troupe of Pekinese actors
will perform at the

Tai Ping Theatre,
WEST POINT.

GRAND OPENING NIGHT

Friday, 20th October, 1922,
7.30 P. M.

BOOK NOW AT

Tai Ping Theatre

壬戌年 八月二十五日

港香同樂會謹啓

(身) (化) (仙) (天)

梅蘭芳



像行裝化方蘭梅

劇界大王梅蘭芳。學同著名文武藝員。現已由滬來港。依期開演。此次文武名角。計有一百三十餘員。老生如郭仲衡、沈華軒、張春彥、武旦如朱桂芳、花旦如姚玉英、諸如香、小生如姜妙香、小武如朱湘泉等。均京滬班最著名。早已膾炙人口。郭仲衡則有古大臣風度。為譚天後起之第一人。沈張則善演鬧戲。能令觀者神往古人。武旦一角。最難其選。十年前九陣風最負盛名。惜韶華易老。今非昔比。現以朱桂芳為後起之秀。京滬武角信無出其右者。姚玉英為梅郎首徒。與諸如香俱屬一時翹楚。姜妙香風雅翩翩。每與梅郎拍演。觀者嘆為雙絕。朱湘泉為桂芳兄弟。聲靈並而有之。不愧難兄難弟。餘角則各擅所長。恕未詳畧。本會此次組織。首重社會習慣。每慮南北方言。或有誤會。故逐場所擇劇本。除梅郎當劇外。尤注重調度。及打武。以便觀者易於領會。各員武藝絕倫。矯捷善變。不獨令觀者怡情悅目。尤足喚起國人尚武精神。劇之移人。信哉。若論其主體。固屬出類拔萃。論其劇本。信亦出色當行。粵諺有云。牡丹雖好。仍要葉扶持。誠是也。今本會所售優等座券。計將滿額。而購者尚紛至沓來。深慮見遺。有辜雅意。(特在太平戲院於廿五日再將院內散廂貴妃床特等位椅位提前發售)以供取求。盛會不常。佳期難再。敬告諸君。勿失交臂。

Figure 2.1. Advertisement for Mei Lanfang's 1922 Hong Kong tour. From the leftmost column: general information about the première on 20 October; an introduction of Mei and other performers of the troupe; and a portrait of Mei in his ancient costume outlook.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Mei 2006: 24-25.

⁸⁹ ibid. 16-17.

⁹⁰ Mei Lanfang Memorial Museum 2001: 24.

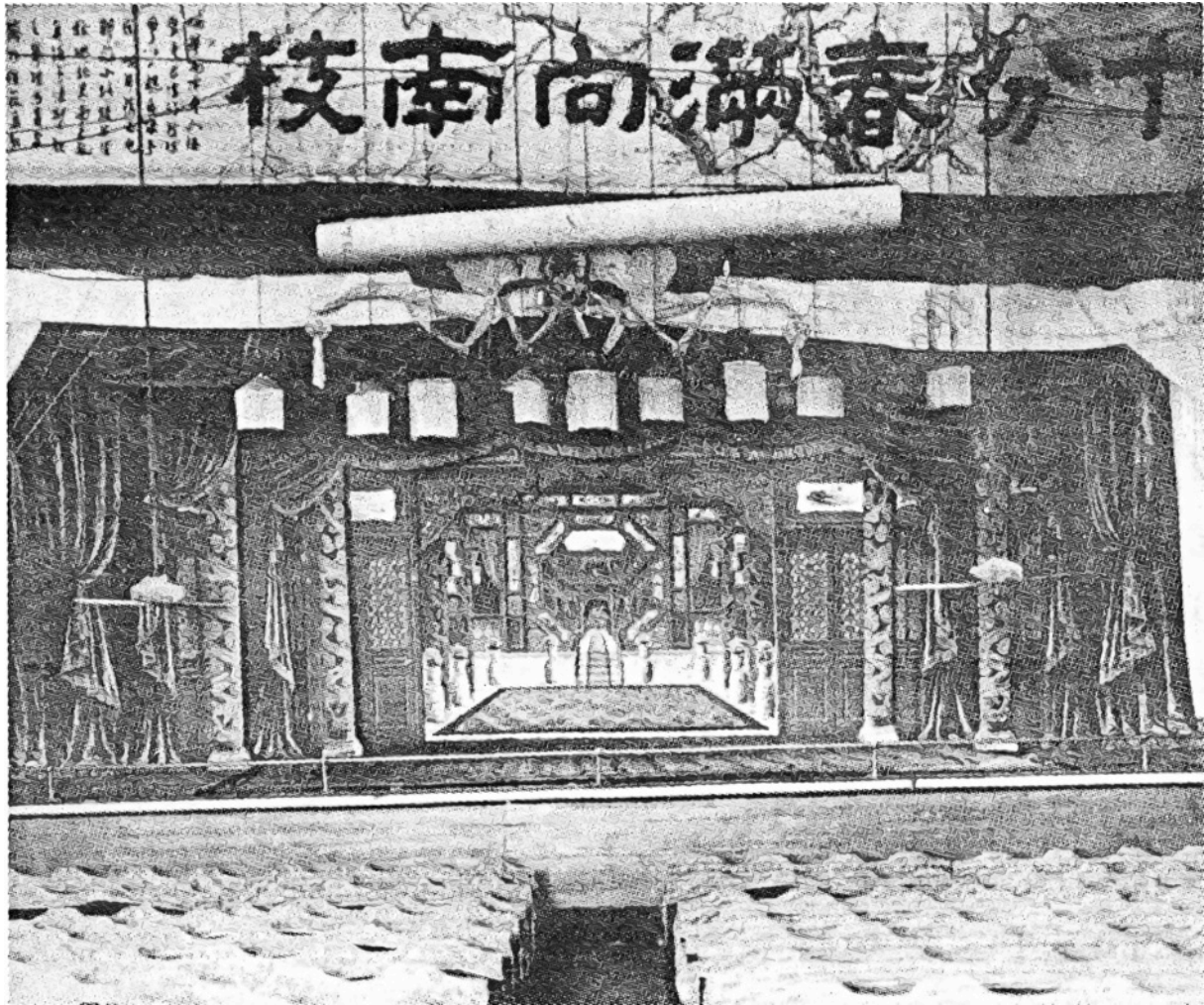


Figure 2.2. The stage of Tai Ping Theatre.⁹¹

2.4 Conclusion

From the formal receptions by the British Colonial Government in Mei's 1922 Hong Kong Tour to worldwide recognition nowadays as a Chinese cultural icon, the story of nationalizing Peking Opera and iconizing Mei Lanfang seems to have a triumphant ending. But let's not forget the "equation" at the beginning of this chapter: it is not a simple "National Identity = Mei Lanfang." On the contrary, the whole narrative involves (re)definition, theorization and reformulation of Peking Opera at every step. This begins from the imperialism of the Western powers in the late nineteenth century. Chinese intellectuals responded to this with the May Fourth ideology of iconoclastic, cultural modernity that ironically upheld western values as the ideal. In the realm of theatre, which was particularly valued as one of the most suitable media for mass dissemination of nationalist ideology among a broader spectrum of various cultural forms, genres that were based on western models obviously gained momentum. But at the same time theorists of traditional theatre, particularly Qi Rushan, went on a rather different and radical way that valued the traditional as a road to modernization. Subsequently,

⁹¹ *ibid.* 28.

Peking Opera was singled out within more than three hundreds genres of traditional theatre, because of its refined and hybrid attributes that fit well into the “high art” and “popularity” criterion for what was promoted as “national drama.” Qi further refined the genre, filtered out the homosexual practice associated with it, and repackaged it with a new set of values, namely “aestheticism” and “femininity”, so that it was artistically on a par with Western theatrical forms. Then Mei Lanfang was tailor-made as the master of such definitions – a performer of “national essence.”

Mei was ready, and so was the whole package of nationalized Peking Opera. It was time to test it out. Mei played his role well not only as a Peking Opera performer, but also as a model of the morally sound and modernized Chinese citizen. Also Mei did not do this singlehandedly: this was a collective construction of a performer’s iconic status, which included efforts by intellectuals and the media, and indirect support by the Nationalist government. For Mei himself, he could focus on what he was good at – performing, both on stage and off stage.

Mei’s 1922 Hong Kong tour also left a unique track in the history of Peking Opera outside the Chinese mainland, displaying a dynamics of exoticism on the one hand, and familiarity on the other. Due to the cultural difference between Beijing and Hong Kong, the northern genre of Peking Opera generated a degree of exoticism among local spectators. At the same time, Peking Opera was not completely alien to the majority of local Chinese audiences, especially as their familiar local genre of Cantonese opera was in many aspects similar to Peking Opera. The said dynamic of exoticism and familiarity created an interesting, distant-yet-close relation between Peking Opera and local society. As such, it marks an epilogue to this story: Peking Opera has since become part and parcel of Hong Kong’s cultural spectrum.

In later chapters, I will also show how this dynamic was interpreted and manipulated, in the form of varied Peking Opera products, by different social agents as a means to negotiate their interests.

2.5 Epilogue: Mei Lanfang after 1922

After this historical 1922 tour, Mei performed in Hong Kong again in 1928, 1931 and 1938. After his performance obligations in 1938, he did not return to his base in Shanghai (which had been occupied by the Japanese for several months by then) but stayed in Hong Kong. He returned to Shanghai in 1942, when Hong Kong fell also to the Japanese. He lived in Shanghai for seven years, and moved to Beijing in 1949. He remained based in Beijing until his death in 1961.

Since the beginning of his career in 1913 Mei basically did not stop performing at all, except in late 1937 in Shanghai and in late 1941 in Hong Kong, as he refused the requests by the Japanese to give performances. He travelled frequently within China, and undertook many performing tours outside the country. In addition to Hong Kong, he brought Peking Opera to Japan (1919, 1924, 1956), the United States (1930), and Europe (1935, the Soviet Union). All of these tours received high acclaim from foreign spectators, including professional dramatists. According to Colin Mackerras, this frequent international exposure “enhanced his

international prestige, making him the most popular and famous actor of Peking Opera not merely in China itself but all over the world.”⁹² Moreover, the international recognition of Peking Opera, especially by specialists in theatre, also enhanced its widely perceived superior status over other regional genres in China. No other traditional Chinese theatrical genres could compare to Peking Opera in terms of national and international reputation, except, perhaps, for Cantonese Opera, which drew on many overseas Cantonese communities all over the world.

This is a salient point for various groups of people. For the Chinese nationalists, it was their dream come true in terms of international recognition. For the Peking Opera circles, it was the achievement of their goal of creating a “national drama.” And for performers of other regional genres, it was a new source of inspiration. In Bourdieu’s well-known terminology, Peking Opera became a source for regional genres to acquire cultural capital, at a time when they needed this to survive in their respective worlds. In the next chapter, I will give an example of such dynamics between Peking Opera and regional genres. We shall see how, and why, Cantonese Opera adopted artistic devices from Peking Opera in Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁹² Mackerras 1975: 60.