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## ABSTRACT

Across the Strait: History, Performance and Gezaixi in China and Taiwan

Hsiao-mei Hsieh

This dissertation is a comparative study of *gezaixi* (Taiwanese opera) in China and Taiwan. It foregrounds the different, at times conflicting, performance styles and aesthetics of *gezaixi* on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, which is primarily the result of a long closure (1949-1987) imposed by the two regimes, and explores how the past is inscribed in performance today. The study examines particularly the subgenres of *gezaixi*: *xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) in the PRC and *opela* (a hybrid form engaging multicultural, especially Japanese, elements) in Taiwan. The two subgenres are both categorized apart from the “antique-costumed play,” but one performance style is highly polished and choreographed, while the other is mostly casual and improvised. I argue that the only similarity between *xiandaixi* and *opela* is that both are products of the response to modernity in the two regimes. The response of the PRC has been a top-down mobilization: Through collective experimentation and discussion by a selective group of cultural elites under the mandate of the state, *xiandaixi* gradually took its shape. In contrast, under the state policy of preserving “national essence,” *gezaixi* practitioners in Taiwan carried out their own experiments to cope with modernity; the unlicensed practice among the grass-roots thus produced *opela* and its negative association.

Part One argues that the Drama Reform Campaign (1949-1965) and the ensuing Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) played a pivotal role in shaping *gezaixi* in China. The PRC state

exercised its regulatory power by suppressing traditional plays, implementing a fully scripted system, institutionalizing the practitioners, and establishing authoritative "model plays" for all the theatres nationwide. Part Two examines *opela* and the various readings it has incurred in Taiwan over time. I argue that the hybrid style of *opela* today was born as a result of the Japanese assimilation project, and subsequently, during the post-war era, became a conscious practice for commercial competition and developed. Moreover, I demonstrate how the emergence of Taiwanese national consciousness in the post-martial law era shaped the citizens' views of "tradition."

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## Notes

1. In Chinese, the surname precedes the given name, though in the case of individuals living in the West this rule is not always followed. Throughout this dissertation, I employ the traditional Chinese convention.
2. I Romanize Chinese names and terms following the *Hanyu pinyin* system, except for certain established spellings such as Chiang Kai-shek and Taipei.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are my work.



## Abbreviation

GMD	<i>Guomindong</i> , the Nationalist Party
PRC	the People's Republic of China
ROC	the Republic of China (in Taiwan)

## Glossary

<i>Gezaixi</i>	Taiwanese opera
<i>Gulu</i>	The old-style play
<i>Opela</i>	A hybrid form of <i>gezaixi</i> that engages multicultural, especially Japanese, elements in its singing, and costumes
<i>Xiandaixi</i>	The contemporary play
<i>Xiangju</i>	A substitute term for <i>gezaixi</i> on the mainland, commonly used during the 1960s-1970s
<i>Xinju</i>	New Theatre; i.e. spoken drama
<i>Xiqu</i>	A general term for Chinese sung drama

## Table of Contents

Dissertation Abstract .....	3
Acknowledgements .....	5
Notes .....	8
Abbreviation and Glossary .....	9
Table of Contents .....	10
List of Figures .....	11
 Chapter One: Introduction .....	 13
 Part I: <i>Gezaixi</i> on the Mainland	
Chapter Two: Two Versions of <i>Shao Jianghai</i> : Politics of Theatre Historiography .....	71
Chapter Three: National Mobilization: The Contemporary Play in China .....	107
 Part II: <i>Gezaixi</i> in Taiwan	
Chapter Four: The Double Meanings of <i>Opela</i> .....	158
Chapter Five: From ‘Refined <i>Gezaixi</i> ’ to ‘ <i>Opela</i> ’: Discourses on <i>Gezaixi</i> in Search of a Taiwanese National Identity .....	202
Conclusion .....	234
Selected Bibliography .....	241

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Photo from <i>Dou'e Yuan</i> produced by Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe .....	14
Figure 2	Map of China and Taiwan .....	32
Figure 3	Outdoor <i>gezaixi</i> in China .....	35
Figure 4	Outdoor <i>gezaixi</i> in Taiwan .....	39
Figure 5	Outdoor <i>gezaixi</i> in Taiwan .....	39
Figure 6	A poster of Minghuayuan's <i>Buddha Jigong</i> .....	46
Figure 7	The final scene of Minghuayuan's <i>Lu Dongbin</i> .....	49
Figure 8	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	73
Figure 9	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	74
Figure 10	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	76
Figure 11	Final scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	77
Figure 12	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	88
Figure 13	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	89
Figure 14	A scene from <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	90
Figure 15	The last image of <i>Shao Jianghai</i> .....	91
Figure 16	The controversial dress .....	101
Figure 17	Revolutionary model ballet <i>The Red Detachment of Women</i> .....	141
Figure 18	Revolutionary model play <i>The Red Lantern</i> .....	145
Figure 19	Revolutionary model play <i>Ode to the Dragon River</i> .....	155
Figure 20	A scene from <i>Youth Dream</i> .....	162
Figure 21	A scene from <i>Youth Dream</i> .....	164

Figure 22	A scene from <i>Youth Dream</i> .....	165
Figure 23	The outdoor <i>gulu gezaixi</i> in contemporary Taiwan .....	171
Figure 24	The outdoor <i>gulu gezaixi</i> in contemporary Taiwan .....	171
Figure 25	Costumes of outdoor <i>opela</i> theatre .....	174
Figure 26	Costumes of outdoor <i>opela</i> theatre .....	175
Figure 27	The use of sunglasses in <i>gezaixi</i> .....	176
Figure 28	Natural acting style in <i>opela</i> .....	178
Figure 29	Japanese elements in the indoor <i>gezaixi</i> .....	188
Figure 30	Japanese elements in the indoor <i>gezaixi</i> .....	188
Figure 31	The use of mask in outdoor <i>opela</i> theatre .....	189
Figure 32	The use of mask in outdoor <i>opela</i> theatre .....	189
Figure 33	Political statements inserted in the outdoor <i>gezaixi</i> in the 1970s .....	193

## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### Across the Strait

In September of 2006, the Taipei Municipal Cultural Bureau hosted an event called “*Huaren* (ethnic Chinese) *Gezaixi* (Taiwanese opera) Festival,” inviting one *gezaixi* troupe from Xiamen, a city of Fujian province in southern China, two from Singapore, and several from Taipei. The ten-day festival consisted of both experimental and main-stage productions and a series of discussion and talkback sessions. Its objective was to exchange artistic experiences and enhance cultural understanding among Chinese-speaking cities.

The last day of the talkback focused on the production *Dou’e Yuan* (literally, the grievances of Dou’e, or, also known as *Snow in Summer*) by the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe. It is an adaptation based on a Chinese classic tragedy, created in the thirteenth century by the renowned playwright Guan<sup>1</sup> Hanqing. The original play centers on the corruption of bureaucrats and the injustice of society, casting the protagonist Dou’e as scapegoat and sentencing her to death. Before being executed, she cries out to Heaven as her witness to prove her innocence by fulfilling her three wishes: let her blood not spill on the ground but splash on the white cloth hung next to her, let snow fall right after her death even though it is summer, and let the county suffer from drought for three years. Facing the pressure of reworking a canonic masterpiece, Xiamen’s playwright Li Jianzhong here makes a brilliant intervention by highlighting the role of Dou’e’s father. Li calls our attention to the fact that the girl’s misery begins when her father, a widower, sells Dou’e to a woman so he can travel to the capital city for the imperial exam. Li

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<sup>1</sup> The surname goes first in Chinese although in the case of overseas Chinese the rule may not be followed. Throughout this dissertation, I apply the Chinese tradition to address a Chinese name.

thus brings to light the fact that the father, later an imperial officer who comes to investigate the case, is the one who can and should bring the misfortune to a close. Only when Dou'e truly forgives her father, only when the reconciliation between child and parent is reached, can the natural order be reestablished.

The musical composer weaves a tragic motif throughout the play. Transitions between Dou'e, Dou'e's ghost, and Dou'e at age seven are very smooth. There are only a few major characters in the play, but the director utilizes the rest of the ensemble and their silent presence and movements to create beautiful visual images and effects on stage, serving to comment on the events or intensifying the theatrical atmosphere. In the last scene, Dou'e finally embraces her father, and at the same time drops of rain pour from above the stage. Audiences were enthralled at this moment and applauded frantically.



Figure 1. Dou'e (played by Su Yanrong) as a wandering ghost. A scene from Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe's *Dou'e Yuan*. Photo provided by Su Yanrong.

A Taiwanese scholar initiated the talkback of *Doue Yaun*. She praised the originality of the adaptation, the proficiency of the actors, and the talent of the director. However, even with the superb production team and the overall strong production quality, she pointed out that the

production somehow failed to touch one's heart. She then sincerely raised two issues she considered problematic in almost all the productions of the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe. First, whereas the language engaged in *gezaixi* is Taiwanese (or, *Hoklo*), one of the southern Fujian dialects, the language was written and spoken in a way that seemed to cater to Mandarin-speaking audiences and had lost its regional and dialectical integrity. Second, the movement was excessively dance-like and codified, such that it almost appeared mechanical.

The speaker was a renowned and conscientious theater scholar. Taking up her comments, some Taiwanese scholars and senior performers jumped into the discussion, and the ensuing two hours became a session in which they tried to explain what was missing, or what it was that hindered their becoming emotionally involved. Some ascribed it to the decline of the role of the "clown," or to the reduction of earthly and quotidian elements in Xiamen *gezaixi*'s overall direction. Some ascribed it to the overly high-pitched singing, a technique different from what is used in Taiwan's *gezaixi*.

I did not agree: it had been an ingenious reworking and beautiful production and it deserved more positive feedback. In fact, the entire discussion centered mainly on one issue: difference and alienation. The heated talkback reminded me of the reviews a well-known Taiwanese Beijing opera troupe had received when they toured England for the first time in 1990 with their *The Kingdom of Desire*, an adaptation of *Macbeth*. As Catherine Diamond documents the response of the London critics, the arguments revolved around whether the troupe had performed tragedy, and the conclusion was that the production had not done so. The English critics found it unsatisfactory that *Kingdom* had reduced the power of tragedy (Diamond 1993, 240), and they found it difficult to appreciate the Beijing opera adaptation. Pantomimic exaggeration is one of the characteristics of the movement of Chinese sung drama (*xiqu*), yet the

English audience felt that it diminished the seriousness of the moment and made it almost farcical. While the music is the essence of the *xiqu* (sung drama) performance, the music alienated the British spectators, who did not comprehend the Chinese lyrics, and some even complained about the singing of Wei Haimin (Lady Macbeth), who was known for her voice in Taiwan, calling it unbearably piercing or comparing it to a meowing cat (Diamond 1993, 241-43). When the English audience tried to find the essence of Shakespeare in this production, they apparently encountered the essence of an unfamiliar genre.

The cultural clash in London resulted from different performance traditions and aesthetic perceptions, but ironically, just such a cultural clash took place during the talkback in Taipei as well. In the end, some people from the Xiamen company began to defend themselves, and in response to the criticism that their movements were too stylized and formalistic, one company member inverted the critique by implying that the physical training and technique of most Taiwanese *gezaixi* performers was weak. In the case of the English audience encountering the Beijing opera version of *Macbeth*, we can say that their failure to appreciate the performance mostly came from the cultural barrier. But in the Taipei case, the dispute emanated from two ethnically related groups about a type of performance that originated in Taiwan a little over a hundred years ago.

While I would rather consider what happened that morning a chance occurrence, one of my Chinese friends later told me indignantly that the whole thing was a conspiracy. “Those were harsh critiques because it’s a serious problem if *Dou’e Yuan*, a classic tragedy, is not touching... It is by no means a coincidence that these people spoke of the production (negatively) in such a harmonious tone.” He pointed out that two years earlier, the Cultural Bureau of Fujian Province had hosted a similar exchange event and invited performers and scholars from across Taiwan to



attend. The event included a contest for young *gezaixi* actors and actresses, and in the end, almost all the awards went to the Chinese performers, leaving only two Taiwanese on the “best ten” list. “They were humiliated and have held grudges until now, and that’s what this talkback is all about. To get even.” This was my friend’s conclusion. I was not present at the earlier event, but a Taiwanese newspaper at the time reporting on the event questioned the fact that the majority of the judges were Chinese and thus it was likely that they would apply their own standards when it came to grading (Ji 2004).<sup>2</sup>

I remain skeptical about my friend’s conspiracy theory. However, what had happened at the earlier event reflected the same issue: we inevitably judge the merits of a piece of artwork by our own values and habits. Satisfaction can never be found if we are constantly looking for “our” features in “their” performance. At issue is that the artistic values and the performance of *gezaixi* on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait have taken on very different paths since the day the two states parted in 1949. In this dissertation, entitled “Across the Strait: History, Performance and Gezaixi in China and Taiwan,” I foreground the different, sometimes even conflicting, performance style and aesthetics of *gezaixi* on both sides of the strait, which is primarily a result of a long closure (1949-1987) between the two regimes, and I explore how the past is inscribed and reflected in the performance today. I ask: what happened during the forty years of separation across the strait that made the performances so unrecognizable to one another? What are the historical events embodied in the performance of *gezaixi*, in both China and Taiwan? How, more broadly, have political ideology and social economy influenced cultural production?

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<sup>2</sup> According to the report, there were eleven committee members, including two from Beijing, two from Fuzhou (capital of Fujian province), two from Xiamen, two from Zhangzhou and three from Taiwan; that is, eight judges from the mainland versus three from Taiwan.

This study particularly examines the subgenres of *gezaixi*— *xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) in the PRC and *opela* (a hybrid form engaging multicultural, especially Japanese, elements) in Taiwan—since they best embody the different development paths the two polities have taken. They are both categorized apart from “antique-costumed play,” but their performance styles occupy two contrasting ends of a spectrum: One, highly polished and choreographed, remains imbued with the rigid atmosphere of the “Literary and Art Propaganda Group,” while the other, mostly casual and improvised, is commercial and mundane. I argue that the only similarity between *xiandaixi* and *opela* is that both are products of the response to modernity in the two regimes. In the face of invading foreign culture, both China and Taiwan began to contemplate how to reform traditional performing arts to better portray the thoughts and life of the people and reach a wider audience. Yet the response of the PRC has been a top-down mobilization: Through the constant collective explorations and discussions by a selective group of cultural elites under the mandate of the communist party, *xiandaixi* gradually took its shape. In contrast, under the ultimate state policy of preserving “tradition” and “national essence,” *gezaixi* practitioners in Taiwan carried out their own experiment to cope with modernity; the unlicensed practice among the grass-roots thus produced *opela* and its negative association, “*o-be-pe-pe-le*,” meaning to do perfunctorily.

My dissertation is divided into two parts: one on the current *xiandaixi* (contemporary play) and its historical development on the mainland, and the other on the performance of *opela* and the various readings it had incurred in Taiwan over time. In Part One, I argue that the Drama Reform Campaign (1949-1965) on the mainland and the ensuing Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) played a pivotal role in shaping the performance of *gezaixi*. I foreground China’s suppression of traditional plays in favor of contemporary plays, and its excessive dictates in

aesthetics in the name of drama reform. The state exercises its regulatory power by implementing a thoroughly scripted system, institutionalizing the practitioners, and establishing authoritative "model plays" for all the theatres nationwide. Further, the frequent and regular national competitions among public troupes have gradually shaped a certain performance aesthetic, mainly based on the taste of the judges, most of whom are affiliated with the capital. The Beijing taste therefore dominates and guides the theatre on the mainland. In order to win a national award, regional theatre companies have to conform to the mainstream aesthetics and inevitably lose their own local uniqueness. Thus, though boasting of three hundred theatrical genres, (distinguished from one another mainly by dialects and music), the performance style of these theatres appears almost identical.

In her insightful critique on Chinese nationalism, Rey Chow asserts that while "China and the West" is a familiar theme in Chinese studies, and the slogan "China Can Say No" emerged in 1996 in Beijing, Chinese intellectuals' continued resistance to and rejection of the West has been perpetuated as a "reactive position vis-à-vis the West" and become "a display of hysteria, a replication of an exhausted form of the Third-World nationalism." Chow challenges the unquestionably fixed Chineseness, eloquently arguing that the preoccupation with responding to the West has thus served as a convenient means of postponing and evading the much needed examination of China's own hegemony—its cultural centrism. China's cultural dominance, in relation to those whom it deems politically and culturally subordinate, such as Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, remains untouched and unchallenged. Chow suggests that Chinese intellectuals should abandon "the victimhood that make[s] it unnecessary to interrogate their own power and their complicity with a centrist regime that continues to dictate what it means to be 'Chinese' and to suppress or execute those who dare question its claims" (Chow 1997).

The idea that China is one monolithic culture is reflected in the field of theatre. China boasts over three hundred regional theatres, but hierarchy exists in the domain of theatre, as Beijing opera enjoys both the status of National opera and the advantage of using Mandarin, the official language in China. On the one hand, China celebrates the diversity of its theatres, as seen in the various types of theatres, but on the other hand, it does not embrace difference as the number seems to promise. China tends to dictate specific aesthetics and set up models for all the theatres to follow. The implementation of a scripted system, which began soon after the establishment of the PRC in the name of drama reform, shows the state's efforts to bring all the theatres nation-wide into strict control. The phenomena of "eight billion people seeing eight model plays" during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution was an extreme but apt example of the dictates of the state. Here I share affinity with Rustom Bharucha, who, by challenging multicultural discourses that uphold "a notion of cohesiveness," proposes the idea of the *intracultural* that "prioritizes the interactivity and translation of diverse cultures," calling attention to a critical examination of the differences in terms of class and "economic inequality" (Bharucha 2000, 9). I challenge the homogenous performance style among the numerous Chinese regional theatrical genres today, highlight the need public troupes feel to cater to mainstream aesthetics under the pressure of national contests, and draw attention to the limited artistic autonomy, especially for marginal theatres such as *gezaixi*. I thus call for a more tolerant and open cultural policy towards the development of sung drama on the mainland.

Similarly, for a long time in Taiwan, state's dictates also had set the course for the development of performing arts before the lift of martial law in 1987. The lift of the martial law allowed a more democratic political environment and thus enabled a more liberal and open cultural policy. Before 1987, the totalitarian rule of the GMD (Nationalist Party) ensured the

preservation of Chinese cultural forms at the expense of local Taiwanese artistic products, best represented by the GMD state's exclusive support of Beijing opera. After 1987, the Taiwanese intellectuals could safely advocate an agenda that reexamined not only the imbalanced political resources between the mainlanders and the Taiwanese natives, but also the unequal cultural attention the government had given between local and Chinese cultural forms. The change of political and cultural climates influenced and redefined what "tradition" meant for most citizens. Here I share the same view with Hobsbawm and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett that tradition is constitutive, even though it is often treated as ahistorical and timeless in order to embody certain fixed and unchanging value or to reinforce nationalism (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 76; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 4).

Part Two examines *opela* and its various meanings in Taiwan. I argue that the hybrid style of *opela* today was born as a result of the Japanese assimilation project, and then during the post-war era, the mixed form came to be a site for the practitioners to negotiate with modernity in the commercial theatre; thus *opela* became a conscious practice and developed fully as a sub-genre of *gezaixi*. While theatre scholars prior to the late 1990s tended to ignore the history embodied in the performance of *opela* and dismissed it as "slapdash and thus insignificant" (Zeng 1988, 67) and "slapdash and does not follow the norm" (Lin and Liu 1990, 119), I emphasize the colonial genealogy and explore the Japanese colonial legacy through the performance of *opela* today. The approach of valuing the mnemonic importance of that which is incorporated is thus crucial for my argument. Paul Connerton discusses two types of practice that transmit a society's memory—inscribing practices and incorporating practices—and he calls our attention to the latter, the less privileged forms that are passed on through bodies as opposed to written texts. Similarly, Diana Taylor proposes an epistemology that values both the scripted

archives and history and the embodied performance of memory. She theorizes performance as a "vital act of transfer" (Taylor 2003, 2) through which social experience, history, and memory, are communicated. She uses the term "repertoire" to refer to the "ephemeral, nonreproducible" knowledge, the embodied practice—i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, rituals, gestures— as opposed to the "archive" of supposedly enduring materials (19). The repertoire, she argues, allows scholars to trace traditions and influences (20). In today's *opela*, engagements of Japanese martial style, kimonos, songs, and character archetype are residues of the Japanese colonial assimilation project in Taiwan, and we certainly see "how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body" (Connerton 1989, 102). Susan Manning employs similar concepts to examine the evanescent dancing bodies by proposing that dancing bodies are framed by venue, publicity, program, presentation, casting choices, and choreographic structure, and "[a]lthough bodies in motion leave only traces, multiple frames track their presence" (Manning 2004, xix). My dissertation applies these "frames"—dramatic narrative, costuming, staging, etc.—to compare cross-strait *gezaixi* productions and track their historical development.

Moreover, I explore the changing aesthetic norms in Taiwan by discussing the double meanings of *opela*, and discuss how the GMD's "re-colonial" cultural policy during the martial law period (1945-1987) on promoting Chineseness, and the emergence of Taiwanese national consciousness shaped the citizens' views of "tradition." I focus on the constructive dimension of the orthodox, and find Michael Shapiro's proposal illuminating. Shapiro suggests we historicize the contemporary practices, to see how things have been made, and how things have come into discourse (Shapiro 1988). I investigate how the term *opela* came to acquire a negative meaning, and then at the turn of the new millennium it began to claim its original meaning, the Japanese inflected "opera," with the rise of Taiwanese consciousness.

Here I would like to emphasize that national consciousness is not nationalism, as Fanon clarifies, and national consciousness could be “the most elaborate form of culture,” “the only thing that will give us an international dimension...” (Fanon 1967, 199). While part of this study focuses on identity formation, Taiwanese consciousness, and their relations to the change of Taiwanese cultural discourses, I also attend to the capacity of nationalism to degenerate into “ultra-nationalism,” “chauvinism,” and “racism” (Fanon 1967, 125) in my observation and analysis of identity politics in both Taiwan and China.

Performance Studies provides a critical lens with which to read historical documents and see theatrical productions. It interrogates the transparency of modes of representation, (such as ethnographic writing, historiography, news reports and films), calling attention to the mediated nature of knowledge, and it foregrounds the systems of power invested in the production of “truth.” Starting from the mid-1980s, ethnographers called our attention to “writing, the making of texts” (Clifford 1986, 2), and the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts (Rosaldo 1989). As Michel Foucault states compellingly, “basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse (Foucault 1980, 93).

For this reason, Performance Studies seeks subversive “meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context”(Conquergood 2002, 146), asking scholars to move beyond the idea of text and textuality as the one and only mode of transmitting knowledge. By shifting focus “from text-centered analyses to the text-making process itself” (Johnson 2003, 12), and by introducing embodied practices as “a system of learning, storing and transmitting knowledge,” Performance Studies encourages us to “expand what we understand by

‘knowledge’” (Taylor 2003, 26). While *gezaixi* has remained a site for me to engage and digest cultural theories, these theories in turn allow me to make critical intervention in my process of finding meanings among the historic “archives” and performance “repertoires.”

Early scholarship on *gezaixi* is very limited due to the lack of official attention to the genre. Lu Sushang’s book *History of Taiwanese Cinema and Theatre*, published in 1961 in Taiwan, is the first related work on the subject. However, a considerable part of his writings have been criticized as derivative of a Chinese publication, “A Theatrical Genre of Both Fujian and Taiwan—Xiangju,” written by Chen Xiaogao and Gu Manzhuan and published in 1955 on the mainland. In the beginning of a chapter on the history of Taiwanese *gezaixi*, Lu states, “*gezaixi* is a kind of sung drama developed on the basis of folk songs and forms such as *jinge*, popular along the Xiang River of Zhangzhou [in southern China], *caicha* and *chegu*” (Lu, 233). Lu then spends subsequent paragraphs describing the historical relationship between *jinge* and *gezai* (or, *qizidiao*), the primary musical form of *gezaixi*. He states that *jinge*, originating in Zhangzhou on the mainland, is the source of *gezaixi*’s music, and thus “*jinge*-origin” laid the foundation for the research of later musicologists in Taiwan. Yet the theory of *jinge*-origin was challenged during the 1990s when the Taiwanese consciousness was burgeoning. Taiwanese scholar Wang Zhengyi, for instance, questioned its validity on the grounds that the term *jinge* had never been used on the island and that Lu’s argument was based solely on mainland scholars’ research, which might be inflected with political intention to reorient *gezaixi*’s origin (Wang 1988). Chinese scholar Liu Chunshu complicates this statement by arguing that in fact the term *jinge* was invented in 1953 on the mainland, but the substance has existed for centuries (Liu 1996). Regardless of the controversy, scholars on both sides of the strait cannot deny the fact that *gezaixi* originated and developed as a theatrical genre in Taiwan. Therefore, even though the book on the comparative



subject of cross-strait *gezaixi* was published in 2001 in Taiwan by Yang Fuling, major *gezaixi* scholarship on the mainland almost always has to discuss and compare the development of *gezaixi* in Taiwan along with that on the mainland (Chen and Zeng 1995; Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997).

Taiwanese Scholar Zeng Yongyi's *The Transformation and Development of Gezaixi* (1988) is the first book dedicated entirely to *gezaixi* in Taiwan. Zeng coins, defines and periodizes *gezaixi* as Old *Gezaixi*, Indoor *Gezaixi*, Film, Radio, and TV *Gezaixi*, and Outdoor *Gezaixi*, and this basic schema remains influential although not unquestioned. Basically, research on *gezaixi* has followed Zeng's naming and categorization. Yang Fuling's *A Comparative Study on Gezaixi in Taiwan and Fujian* (2001) was the first book published in Taiwan dealing with the comparative subject of cross-strait *gezaixi*. Yang spends the first two chapters introducing the origin and development of *gezaixi* in Taiwan, and its development in southern Fujian once it was brought over across the strait. She then compares the two parties' repertoire, music, director, stage design, current conditions and cultural exchanges successively in the next three chapters. The book, developed from the author's dissertation, synthesizes current *gezaixi* scholarship in Taiwan and China, and parallels historical events and materials during various periods on both sides. Overall, *gezaixi* scholarship, such as Yang's book, tends to narrate along a historical trajectory, and the works share similar views and arguments. These works provide valuable reference and a macro view of history, but usually offer generalized discussions. When comparing the differences in cross-strait performance styles, for instance, the disparity in actors' singing and movements are often mentioned, but with very little or simplified discussion. Yang's book attempts to compare cross-strait *gezaixi* in terms of its repertoire, music, director, stage design, and education, yet it presents mostly facts with little analysis, revealing the author's

efforts in archival research but weakness in terms of in-depth analysis and underlying augment.

The reason for the disparity in aesthetics remains unexplored in Yang's comparative project. My dissertation attempts to address the disparity by focusing on the sub-genre of cross-strait *gezaixi*: *xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) and *opela*. I begin my examination of each sub-genre with a consideration of a production in the particular style; that is, a contemporary play by China's Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe and an *opela* play by Taiwan's Chunmei Gezaixi Troupe. My intention is to provide a deeper and more specific comparison by use of these two case studies, and thus the structure of this dissertation and its analytic approach are very different from other *gezaixi*-focused publications.

Moreover, my study brings a new perspective to the field with its examination of cross-strait *gezaixi* from a "non-antique costumed play" point of view. *Xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) on the mainland seldom appears as an independent project in *gezaixi* publications. Since *xiandaixi* in the form of *gezaixi* is rarely treated as an individual subject, I turn to the history on contemporary sung drama for information, particularly Fu Jin's *A History of Chinese Drama: 1949-2000* (2002) and Gao Yilong and Li Xiao's *History of the Contemporary Play in Chinese Xiqu* (1999). Among the few *gezaixi*-related papers that treat *xiandaixi* as an individual subject, "The Contribution of Xiandaixi in Xiamen to the Arts of Gezaixi," written by Luo Shifang, Yan Zihe, and Dong Yaneng, states that the cross-strait "modern costumed play" (*shizhuanxi*) is the precursor of the *xiandaixi*, which emerged in Xiamen in the 1950s (Luo, Yan and Dong, 226). However, in my opinion, even though both the modern-costumed play and *xiandaixi* reflect the attempts of sung drama to adapt to the new circumstances, the two are radically different in essence. The modern-costumed play takes the form of stage-serial in narrative, and its acting and staging often resort to realism and special effects. Yet this commercial nature of the modern

costumed play is discarded in the theatre of *xiandaixi*, which strives to represent the lives of workers, peasants and soldiers under socialism. With the political philosophy, *xiandaixi* is also known as “the propaganda play” among the spectators and “the mission play” among the practitioners, and has very few well-accepted repertoire despite its considerable number of productions. On the other hand, *opela* in Taiwan today retains the commercial nature of the modern-costumed play. Basically, the modern-costumed play, *xiandaixi*, and *opela* are categorized apart from the “antique-costumed play” and reflect different responses and thoughts of the practitioners to modernity. Therefore, my dissertation focuses on the genres of the “non-antique-costumed play” in *gezaixi*, (that is, *xiandaixi* and *opela*) since they best embody the varied changes and growth on each side of the strait during the period of separation (1949-1987), that is, their different exploration of modernity and their strategies in coping with the changes of the time.

In addition, this study discusses the development of *gezaixi* in a larger context, that of the interaction between theatre and cross-strait political and cultural history. Chinese scholarship on theatre across the strait, especially that published prior to the mid-1980s in Taiwan and prior to the mid-1990s in China, avoided topics that were considered political. Qiu Kunliang’s *Research on Taiwanese Theater during the Japanese Governance (1895-1945): Old Drama and New Drama* (1992) is cutting-edge not only because it provides abundant historical materials on Taiwanese theatre during the Japanese colonial period, supplementing the dearth of the research on colonial theatre, but also because it contains between-the-lines critiques of the cultural policy of the Nationalist (GMD) regime. Su Shuobin’s M.A. thesis, “A Sociological Study on Post-war Gezaixi” (1992) foregrounds how the GMD suppressed *gezaixi* throughout its reign. Publications critical of the GMD’s Chinese-chauvinistic cultural policy surged at the start of the 1990s on the

island, suggesting that attentiveness to Taiwanese indigenous cultural expressions was on the rise. Belinda Chang's essay "A Theatre of Taiwaneseeness: Politics, Ideologies and Gezaixi" (1997) builds on this research and highlights this new trend of *gezaixi* becoming the embodiment of Taiwaneseeness and beginning to receive official attention. My discussion of how the development of *gezaixi* embodies the development of Taiwanese identity is indebted to this research. I also have found English-language publications on Taiwanese identity and its history tremendously helpful in shaping my view of this matter. (Detailed discussion of this literature follows in the section on Taiwanese identity). Moreover, I turn to Taiwanese literary works, such as Wu Zhouliu's novels, and theatre productions for further information and discussion.

In terms of theatre study on the mainland, Chen Gen, Zeng Xuewen and Yen Zihe's *History of Gezaixi* (1997) is a major reference for this dissertation. I am particularly indebted to mainland scholar Fu Jin's *The Modernity and Localization of Chinese Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2005). While most scholarship condemns the damages the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) did to Chinese theatre, it almost always celebrates the previous drama reform (*xigai*) implemented soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, affirming that the reformation effectively raised the artistic quality of sung drama and the performer's life. Yet Fu Jin challenges the censorship that accompanied the drama reformation and draws attention to the institutionalization of theatre implemented soon after the launch of the drama reform campaign. He questions and re-evaluates the drama reform and applies in his analysis a critical view different from most of his contemporaries on the mainland.

The research on sung drama in Taiwan has grown rapidly over the past decade. The growth in advanced education and the attention to indigenous culture have resulted in an

increasing number of graduate students delving into this field.<sup>3</sup> Overall, established scholars are inclined to provide macro analyses of *gezaixi*, whereas the graduate theses, especially those written after the later 1990s, tend to focus on specific subjects. Some of these theses have served as helpful sources for this project: for instance, theses on specific theatre companies such as Minghuayuan (Yang Yongqiao 2001) and Holo (Zheng Yifeng 1998), and on the performance style of outdoor *gezaixi* (Huang Yajong 1995 and Jiang Qiuhua 2000). My M.A. thesis of 2000 studies the sub-genre of *gezaixi*, *opela*, which was rarely discussed at that time, and attempts to redefine *opela* by examining the Japanese colonial influence and by collecting and analyzing its repertoire. The last two chapters of this dissertation reveal my long-term observation and reflection on this subject. I further examine the development of *opela* in the Taiwanese colonial and post-colonial condition, and I also discuss the degradation and reclaiming of *opela* in relation to the formation of Taiwanese identity.

English-language scholarship on Taiwanese sung drama is very limited but often brings fresh viewpoint to the field, broadening the vision of sung drama research. For example, Teri Silvio's Ph.D. dissertation, entitled "Drag Melodrama/Feminine Public Sphere/Folk Television : 'Local Opera' and Identity in Taiwan" (1998), is the first English-language doctoral project on the subject of *gezaixi*. Her dissertation focuses on two sub-genres of *gezaixi*—TV *gezaixi* and outdoor *opela*—and applies the approach of gender studies to analyze the gender performance and the participation of the fans (mostly working class women, according to the dissertation). Nancy A. Guy's *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* discusses the ups and downs of Peking

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<sup>3</sup> Graduate theses have contributed greatly to the research on *gezaixi* in Taiwan. Its scholarship varies from historical development (Chen Xiujuan 1987; Liu Nanfang 1988) and music and tunes (Chang Xuanwen 1973; Xu Lisha 1987), to social ideology (Su Shuobin 1992) and the management and structure of the troupe (Huang Xiujin 1987). More recent scholarship focuses on specific topics, such as the dynamics between audience and performers (Qiu Qiuhui 1997), the concept of the director (Liu Xincheng 1996), *gezaixi* cinema (Shi Rufang 1997), play scripts (Chen Junyu 1998), famous divas (Yang Fuling 1997; Li Yahui 1997), and gender crossing (Wu Mengfang 2002), to name a few.

opera in Taiwan. As a more developed and sophisticated theatrical genre, Peking opera (or, Beijing opera) influenced the artistic development of *gezaixi*. Moreover, due to the GMD government's cultural policy in the 1940s-1980s, Peking opera enjoyed exclusive official patronage, permitting little room for other local cultural forms such as *gezaixi*. However, the position of the two forms became reversed in the beginning of 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Nancy A. Guy's book is also an important reference for this dissertation on the relationship between the Taiwanese political environment and the performing arts.

Both the Chinese-language and English-language literature on sung drama rarely discuss Taiwanese theatre from the post-colonial perspective. Also, none of the sung drama scholarship has studied the topics of identity formation and nationalism in the context of cross-strait comparison. In addition to applying an analytic approach and structure different from Chinese-language *gezaixi* books, this dissertation will complement and complicate both Chinese-language and English-language sung drama literature with the themes of identity formation, nationalism, and Taiwanese colonial/ postcolonial conditions in relation to cross-strait dynamics.

### **Gezaixi: A Brief History**

Taiwan in 1600 had little or no permanent Chinese settlement, visited only by fishermen and pirates. It was inhabited largely by the "aborigines," descendants of settlers from the south (around the Malay Archipelago and Indonesia), whose livelihoods centered on hunting. Since the

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Guy also discusses the plight and conundrum Peking opera performers in Taiwan encounter in the face of a changing cultural and political environment, including the decrease of government patronage, the difficult competition with local theatrical forms, the drastic decline in audiences (in that most of the old generation have passed away while very few of the new generation find resonance in the genre), and the delayed and thus difficult attempt to localize the genre in order to connect to the society. Having been protected and controlled by the government, Peking opera in Taiwan has long been detached from the people and has found it hard to connect to the audiences after the government withholds its support. See also Peter Carroll's book review, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 1 (2008): 274-75.

Dutch East India Company established an entrepot on the island in 1624, the history of Taiwan as a Dutch colony had been a story of Dutch relations with the aborigines (Shepherd 1992, 27). In the course of the seventeenth century, maritime Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, English, and Dutch warriors and traders all sought to settle on the island and make it a commercial base. It was incorporated into the Qing Empire in 1683, and almost immediately ceased to be a center of multinational maritime trade (Wills 1999, 85).

During the seventeenth century, immigrants from the southeastern coast of China, mainly today's Fujian and Guangdong provinces, came to cultivate the farmland on the island and brought with them their customs, gods, and dramas. The earliest theatrical genre brought to Taiwan was *nanguanxi* (known as *liyuanxi* in China today), commonly praised for its gracefulness and tranquility. However, after a few decades, *beiguanxi* overtook *nanguan*'s popularity with its faster pace, heavier percussion, and more incorporation of martial scenes.

Theatre historians generally agreed that *gezaixi* originated in Yilan, the northeast county of Taiwan, in the beginning of the twentieth century. *Taiwan Riri Xinbao* documents the warm reception of *gezaixi* performing in the rural villages in 1905 (Lin and Cai 2004, 9). The word *gezaixi* (in Taiwanese, *gua-a-hi*) initially stemmed from a particular musical form called *gua-a* used for storytelling. All the performers were male at this time (though soon after it went onto the commercial stage female actors became dominant) and its physical movement was associated with the undulating hip and torso movements in *chegu*, a performance in religious procession.<sup>5</sup> Thus based on *gua-a*, it further absorbed local folk songs and other *xiqu* music, and developed signature tunes such as *qizi* (seven words) and weeping tunes.

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<sup>5</sup> Until today Yilan still preserves this primitive mode in its rural amateur *Gezaixi* performance, which explains why the Yilan-origin theory is widely accepted albeit controversial.

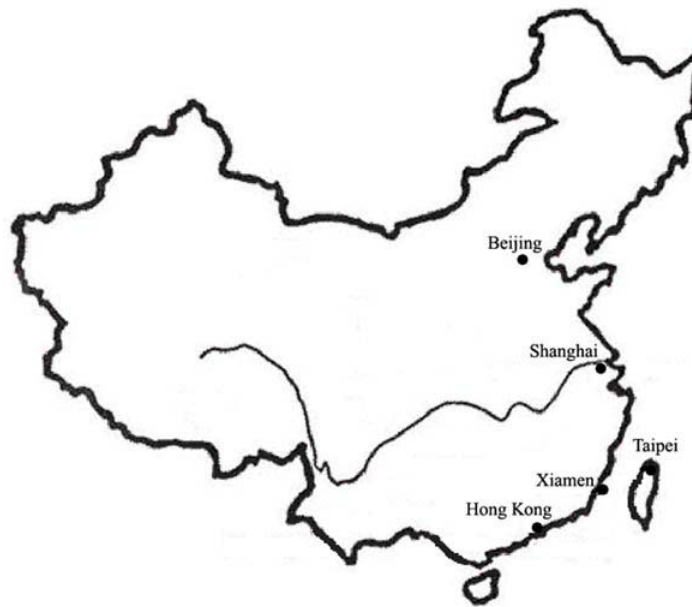


Figure 2. Map of China and Taiwan

Its march to the city and earliest appearance in the commercial theater was recorded in the *Taiwan Province Gazetteer*: “Around 1915, Gu Xianjung bought Danshui Theater House in Taipei from the Japanese and changed its name to Novel Theater House to serve as an entertaining organization for local people. The house manager, seeing the popularity of *gezaixi*, invested to organize ‘Xin Wu She Opera Troupe,’ and often scheduled *gezaixi* performances to profit from tickets” (Zeng 1988, 53-4). Thus, we know that at least by 1915, *gezaixi* had emerged as a full-fledged and promising commercial performance. At the time, *gezaixi* shared the performing space with other opera forms such as *nanguan* and *beiguan*, and it certainly utilized such opportunities to learn and adapt from these relatively more sophisticated forms in terms of acting and movement, costumes, characters, repertoire, and music.

Soon it took over their market in the theater. Compared to earlier operas that used dialects incomprehensible to most people, *gezaixi* employed a language used by the majority of the



population in Taiwan, a southern Fujian dialect with an accent mixed with those of Quanzhou and Zhangzhou, from which most immigrants had come. Its dialogue and lyrics were generally more colloquial, tinged with a sense of humor that spoke to ordinary people. Such accessibility thus enabled *gezaixi* to become the most popular entertainment in the early half of the twentieth century on the island.

Therefore, *gezaixi* was the only dramatic form purely and proudly “made in Taiwan,” distinguished from other *xiqu* performances that were brought to the island by its Chinese immigrants. Not long after *gezaixi* appeared on the commercial stage in Taiwan around 1915, it made its way across the Taiwan Strait to Xiamen, a city of China’s Fujian province. Initially, it was a self-entertainment practiced among Taiwanese communities in this region, but since the people here shared the same vernacular that was used in *gezaixi*, it gradually drew local audiences, especially after a Taiwanese *gezaixi* troupe toured Xiamen and swept theaters in 1926. The success enticed more Taiwanese troupes to travel across the strait, and some performers stayed to teach in the newly founded local troupes. In 1929, *gezaixi* began to spread from Xiamen to neighboring counties such as Quanzhou and Zhangzhou.

The outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937 slowed down the cross-strait interaction, because Taiwan was a Japanese colony, an outcome of China’s defeat in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895, and regarded as an enemy to China. Cultural exchange resumed with the end of the war in 1945, but it did not last long. With the civil war on the mainland between the Nationalists and the Communists, theatre was devastated. Further, dialogue was completely closed down in 1949 with the triumph of the Communist party and its establishment of a “New China,” while the Nationalist party (also known as *Guomindang*; GMD) retreated to Taiwan to build a “democratic China” across the Taiwan Strait.

Cross-strait communication remained impossible until 1987. In that year, martial law on Taiwan was lifted, and the non-governmental employees were allowed to visit their relatives on the mainland. When the two parties finally encountered each other after nearly forty years, they were dismayed to experience the huge differences in values and lifestyle. The performance of *gezaixi* was no exception: *gezaixi* on the mainland developed separately and had applied a different singing technique, rendering the voice more shrill and nasal. It also assumed the official name, *xiangju*.

Scholars in both Taiwan and China often remark, when comparing the orientation of *gezaixi* as it has developed in the two regions, that teamwork is the strength and major concern in China whereas personal charisma of the lead actors (especially the female actors who are typically cast in the role of male characters) is what draws the spectators in Taiwan. Moreover, *gezaixi* shows in China, produced both by public and private troupes, always employ side panels for subtitles, regardless of the scale of the production. A set script thus entailed a much more codified and stylized acting and movement since it allows actors more time for preparation and rehearsals; repeated performances in return polishes and regulated the movement and acting. In contrast, the use of subtitles in Taiwanese *gezaixi* occurs only in big-budget productions with a full-fledged script; in most other productions actor-singers improvise the lyrics and dialogue. The acting and movement in the improvised performances appeared casual and spontaneous. Whereas *gezaixi* music on the mainland has paid close attention to the creation and employment of meter variation of the signature tunes, *gezaixi* in Taiwan has sought to enrich the music by creating a multitude of short tunes and incorporating music from other art forms. Even when applying the same musical form, singers and musicians on the mainland tend to engage higher pitch and faster tempo, considered a way to enhance dramatic tension, while singers and

musicians in Taiwan like to take it slow in order to fully express the subtle emotions of the character.



Figure 3. A temple *gezaixi* performance on the mainland by a private troupe. Note the side panels for subtitles. Photo by author, Xiamen, 2006.

Beginning with the Opium War in 1840, China encountered repeated defeats in international wars. The crisis prompted Chinese intellectuals to reexamine their culture and contemplate ways to strengthen and save the nation. In his 1902 essay “On the Relationship Between Fiction and the Government of the People,” journalist Liang Qichao called for a reform in literature and highlighted the significance of fiction, connecting the reformation of mass culture to the project of national reformation and enlightenment. While fiction had been categorized as “low” literature in Chinese culture, Liang sought to heighten its position. Liang emphasized fiction’s “incredible influence over humanity,” arguing that words in fiction are colloquial and thus have a widespread power over people. Liang’s argument centered on written texts, but soon Chen Duxiu led the attention to sung drama, which, he argued, had strong influence on not only the upper and middle class but also the illiterate lower class. In around 1904, Chen Duxiu published an essay entitled “On *Xiqu*,” in which he stated that “opera house is a big school for everyone, where actors are the teachers” (Li 1992, 152-57). He argued that

everyone, male or female, loved to go to the theatre, and no one would not be affected by the play; some plays inspired the audiences' heroic spirits while some enticed people into lustful ideas. Stressing the accessibility and popularity of *xiqu* and its significant social influence across China, Chen advocated that Chinese theatre had to be reformed, to get rid of the clichés, the obscene section, and the superstitious narratives. Therefore, he called for the production of plays that could introduce social and international events and broaden people's view of the world so that people could truly understand the national crisis and devote themselves into national reconstruction (Li 1992, 152-57). These discourses reveal the anxiety of the intellectuals at the time, and their eagerness to reform the nation by reforming literary and art works. Theatre was thus endowed with the mission of enlightening the citizens and strengthening the nation. The purpose of drama resided in its function as a vehicle to reform the society. This attitude that regarded art as an instrument of social change underlay the development of Chinese theatre throughout the twentieth century (Fu 2005).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) basically had rendered drama subordinate to educational and political propaganda, as epitomized in Mao's famous talk in Yanan in 1942, recommending the cadres to "ensure that literature and art become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy" (McDougall 1980, 58). Unlike the GMD, the CCP had a clear policy on the performing arts: that they should assist in the process of educating the masses. Colin Mackerras thus suggests that performing arts played a role as one of the causes of the victory of the CCP over the civil war against the GMD (9).

Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the state began efforts to reform sung drama, aiming to purge all the "poisonous elements" in the old

plays while encouraging the production of new plays from socialist viewpoints. *Xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) emerged and was highly promoted under such circumstances because it was considered a better operatic form to portray the lives of workers, peasants, and soldiers in New China, as opposed to the traditional style of drama. *Xiandaixi* even became an exclusive performing art form during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, the system of theatre also underwent structural change, with all the troupes reorganized. The government gradually took over the entire sponsoring, administration and management of theatre. By 1960, there were ten state-sponsored *gezaixi* troupes in southeastern Fujian, essentially with each city and county assigned one public troupe of the genre. Admittedly, exempt from having to worry about their income, performers were able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the art itself and to hone their skills; however, under the strict totalitarian rule, performers also had to be observant to their “boss,” paying close attention to the changes of political climate and policy, and the likes and dislikes of the authorities.

After 1978, China began to open up to the world and reform its economy, and gradually the notion of privatization was introduced and practiced, and extended to the field of the performing arts. As China transformed from a planned economy to a socialist market economy (or, socialism with Chinese characteristics), theatre nationwide also underwent change: subsidies receded, public troupes merged, and private troupes surfaced. At present, there are eight state-sponsored *xiangju/ gezaixi* troupes, all located in southern Fujian province, and further merging among these troupes is in the process. Although the public troupes have been criticized as inefficient and have been forced to seek outside sources of income, such as from temple

performances<sup>6</sup>, they still rely heavily on official support. Public troupes present productions regularly for national competitions, and honors from these contests are important since they determine the promotion of particular troupes and individuals. Thus, official tastes continue to guide the productions of public troupes even today.

As for Taiwan, state patronage had gone exclusively to Beijing Opera through the early 1990s in order to enhance the nation's claims of legitimacy over China, albeit in exile (Guy 2005), leaving the rest of the theatrical forms to compete for financial support from non-governmental sources. There had thus existed, to a great extent, a free market competition within these genres. It was under such circumstances that *gezaixi* in Taiwan evolved and survived as the “fittest” genre, incorporating the strengths of other dramatic forms, inasmuch as the troupes of minority genres eventually disbanded and/or reassembled into *gezaixi* troupes. The transition allowed performers from minority genres to bring into *gezaixi* the training and features of their original genres, and to further enrich the performance of *gezaixi*. It is also under such circumstances that *gezaixi* in Taiwan is constantly in the making and often referred to as “hodge-podge.” With the shift of available resources, it evolved into sub-genres such as indoor *gezaixi*, film *gazaixi*, radio *gazaixi*, TV *gezaixi*, outdoor (temple) *gezaixi*, and mainstage *gezaixi*. Today, TV, outdoor, and mainstage *gezaixi* are the most common modes of *gezaixi* in Taiwan.

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<sup>6</sup> As religious practices still prevail in southern Fujian, the market for performances in honor of gods is considerable. That is how most private *gezaixi* companies on the mainland made their living.



Figure 4. The religion-related outdoor *gezaixi* in Taiwan today. Photo by author, Taipei County, 2002.



Figure 5. Outdoor *gezaixi* in Taiwan. Photo by author, Taipei County, 2002.

*Gezaixi* incorporated the medium of television as soon as TV was introduced to Taiwan in 1962. In the beginning, the performances were different from theatre productions only in terms of being recorded and broadcast. But after the second TV company was founded in 1969 and competition grew, TV *gezaixi* turned into a form of musical drama serials, that is, melodramatic historical tales or swordsmen fantasies with actors singing *gezaixi* occasionally. It received consistently high viewer ratings especially during the 1970s. However, the increase of TV channels and program selections gradually impacted TV *gezaixi*. Still, TV *gezaixi*

maintained its popularity through the late 1980s, and helped nurture new generations of fans.

Furthermore, the realistic acting and makeup of TV *gezaixi* had significantly shaped the Taiwanese viewers' aesthetic perception and imagination, and influenced the performance of Taiwan's *gezaixi* in general.

Religious performance has been prevalent in Taiwan and sustains most of Taiwan's *xiqu* activities, including *beiguanxi*, puppetry and *gezaixi*. After *gezaixi* withdrew from the indoor commercial theatre in the late 1960s, it soon took over the outdoor market. Today outdoor religious theatre is mainly shared by *gezaixi*, puppetry, and film projection. Outdoor *gezaixi* in Taiwan is thus mostly religion-oriented and funded by temples, local guilds and individuals. It is usually staged in front of the temple to celebrate the god's birthday or to show the gratitude of the community or individuals. The entire "package" consists of a ritual play, an afternoon show and a nighttime show. It normally begins with the thirty-minute ritual play, followed by the two-hour day show, in which "*gulu*" (old-style) plays are staged, featuring historical or legendary tales. In the three-hour nightly show, however, *opela* is most common on stage. *Opela* had been a controversial term for a long time: It is a Japanese transliteration of "opera" yet had long been negatively associated with "*o-be-pe-pe-le*" (doing perfunctorily). It encompasses pop songs, Western musical instruments, Japanese samurai fighting, international costumes, and melodramatic stories. Outdoor religious performances sustain more than 100 *gezaixi* troupes, as well as 200 hand puppet companies. This mode of performance does have fans in certain areas, but in most cases it merely serves a ritual function. Generally speaking, outdoor performances have low budgets, rendering the overall production qualities unsatisfactory to many people. By comparison, mainstage *gezaixi* (sometimes referred to as "refined *gezaixi*") normally takes place at the National Theater or civic cultural centers and is usually subsidized by the government or



cultural foundations. By “mainstage” I mean performances in well-equipped spaces, with larger budgets and better facilities to incorporate more fully script, sound, light, stage, and costume design. Mainstage *gezaixi* thus has a “highbrow” implication, in contrast to the “lowbrow” outdoor temple theatre.

### **Staging the National/ Regional: *Gezaixi* in Beijing**

While comparing the historical development of *gezaixi* on both sides, nationalism and Taiwanese identity are the recurring themes throughout my dissertation. Many scholars have observed the trend that *gezaixi* in Taiwan is replacing Beijing opera as the National Drama. Belinda Chang, for instance, describes the elevation of *gezaixi* and shows how ideologies and politics such as native consciousness have worked together to turn it into an embodiment of Taiwanese history and tradition, which articulates the legitimacy of a Taiwanese nation (Chang 1997). Thus *gezaixi* serves as an ideal site to investigate cross-strait tension and interaction. As the intensive independence-reunion issue continues to dominate official cross-strait dialogue, *gezaixi* seems to bridge the two sides of the strait and alleviate the political tension on the surface. However, ironically, while *gezaixi* continues to assist the Taiwanese to construct and foster their own identity, China seeks to make use of *gezaixi* to stress the historical connection to, and thus political legitimacy over Taiwan. The following examination of the few *gezaixi* performances staged in Beijing in the post-war era helps to illuminate the cross-strait tension, and how both sides have used and interpreted this genre differently.

An understanding of *gezaixi* in relation to China would not be complete without a brief discussion of *xiqu*. Drama in Chinese conception has long been associated primarily with music and singing. The general term for classical Chinese drama *xiqu* literally means play (*xi*) and

melody (*qu*). Music generated from verse (mostly rhymed) in the play, and, in different regional dialects, with different tone and inflection, resulted in different songs and melodies. Consequently, regional operas (*difangxi*) have remained classified primarily by their music. As William Dolby points out, “after about 1500 the history of drama in China becomes a history of types of music rather than genres of play, or, more accurately perhaps, the music tends more wholly to characterize the genre” (Dolby 90).

The immense territory of China has resulted in a variety of dialects, which gave birth to approximately three hundred local dramatic modes (*juzhong*, literally, types of drama).<sup>7</sup> Overall, each province has several dominant genres on the basis of regional preferences, with state patronage distributed accordingly. The five decreed dominant dramas in Fujian province are *minju*, *puxianxi*, *liyuanxi*, *gaojiayi*, and *xiangju*. Sometimes, the place of origin can be discerned from the name of the genre. The term *minju*, for instance, literally means drama (*ju*) of *min*, the antique literary name of Fujian province. Likewise, *jinju*, *ganju*, *huju*, and so on, are named after the regions of origin and/or popularity: *jin* stands for Shanxi province, *gan* for Jiangxi province, and *hu* for Shanghai city. Dramas in China are thus closely linked to and associated with their locality.

Therefore, even for those genres whose names do not directly indicate locality, the association often exists. This is perhaps part of the reason why, as one of my Chinese informants astutely pointed out, the name of *gezaixi* had to be changed: *Gezaixi* had a strong implication of

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the genres boast an ancient history. For instance, *nanxi* (southern drama) became popular in the mid-thirteenth century and has been continued ever since; today's *liyuanxi* is a branch of *nanxi* and still prevails in Fujian province. Some genres came into being, developed and flourished based on regional dialects and musical forms, from the late-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. (For a history of pre-modern Chinese drama, see Zhang Gen and Guo Hancheng's *Zhongguo xiqu tong shi* [General History of Chinese Sung Drama]. Still other genres were products of the Great Leap Forward period (1957-62) when the PRC strongly advocated quantity in manufacturing and agricultural production, and thus growing figures became a national obsession. Needless to say, man-made genres, which simply appeared on political ground, soon vanished owing to lack of spectators' support. See Fu Jin's *Xin zhongguo xiqu shi: 1947-2000* [A History of Chinese Drama], 77-78.

Taiwan and thus incurred unpleasant sentiments in the communist authorities during the time when the Beijing regime sought to “liberate Taiwan” and the Taipei government strove to “recover the mainland.” The name was formally changed to *xiangju* in 1951 on the mainland (Yang 2001, 141). The changed name highlights the place Xiangcheng, an alternative (yet rarely known) name of Zhangzhou where many Taiwanese ancestors were from. Moreover, the pronunciation “*xiang*” is associated with “*gu-xiang*” in Mandarin, meaning hometown. The change of the name thus seems to signify and emphasize the “root” of *gezaixi*. Although both terms are used in China today and refer to the same theatrical genre, the previous dictate to change the name of *gezaixi* reveals the official efforts to re-orient the association of this genre from “drama of Taiwan” towards “drama of hometown (for Taiwan).”

The paradox of *gezaixi*’s position lies in the fact that on the one side of the Taiwan Strait, *gezaixi* is celebrated as “national,” yet on the other side of the strait, it is indeed very peripheral. Given the ongoing cross-strait tension over the issue of the independence of Taiwan, the staging of *gezaixi* in the PRC’s capital city is oftentimes not merely a cultural matter.

Beijing opera is the dominant drama throughout China. In Beijing, there are also some other popular regional operas, but *gezaixi* is certainly not one of them. The citizens in Beijing do not speak nor understand the language that is used in *gezaixi*, which is a southern dialect. In fact, they know very little about this genre. That is why there have not been many *gezaixi* performances staged in Beijing throughout history. Up until early 2007, there had been only five *gezaixi* performances that took place in Beijing<sup>8</sup>, which were all sponsored by the government,

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<sup>8</sup> For performance records, see Zhangzhou Cultural Bureau, *Zhangzhou wenhua zhi* [Cultural History of Zhangzhou] (Zhangzhou: Minnan ribao, 1999), 63-65, 128-44. Moreover, Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe was invited to perform in Beijing in October 2007, which made the sixth *gezaixi* performance in the capital city. I attended the performance in Beijing in 2007, but I do not intend to include this production in this paper. In my opinion, this particular production should also be addressed in terms of the narrative strategy of the play, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

mainly, the Chinese Ministry of Culture. Here I will look closely at *gezaixi* performances in Beijing and consider what it means for this genre to be staged in the capital of the PRC.

*Gezaixi* made its debut in Beijing in October 1979, when the People's Republic of China was rejoicing over its thirtieth anniversary. Representatives of Longhai, a county in the southeastern Fujian Province, were invited to perform a *gezaixi* play, *Shuan Jien Chun*, on this occasion. The play is based on a communist revolutionary story about a captain of a guerrilla squad.

The year 1979 had great political significance for both China and Taiwan. On the first day of that year, the United States broke its diplomatic ties with Taiwan and sealed its formal relations with China. On the same day, the PRC made it clear to the residents of Taiwan that international recognition had now turned to the Beijing regime. The PRC's Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress delivered a public speech to Taiwan on matters of reunion ("A Message to the Compatriots in Taiwan" 1979), replacing the approach of "librating Taiwan" with the idea of "one nation, two systems" (*yi guo liang zhi*) for the first time. The notion of "one nation, two systems" was developed further in the early 1980s, with the ultimate goal of unification, asserting that there is only one China, with the People's Republic the sole legitimate government, and, even though most of China would maintain a socialist system, Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong and Macau, could retain its capitalist system once it is returned to the mainland. Under such circumstances, it was hardly a coincidence that the Chinese authorities chose to stage *gezaixi* in its capital in this year for their National anniversary.

With more than three hundred dramatic genres in China, performing in Beijing meant a great deal to the *gezaixi* troupe and performers. It was a tremendous honor for them to be able to

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Moreover, with the increasingly intensive cross-cultural interactions, *gezaixi* performances in Beijing will only be more active.

appear in the cultural and political center of the nation. In the interview I had with the playwright Yao Xishan, he recalled vividly the day when they were on the train to Beijing after months of intensive rehearsals. The ensemble was still worried about the possibility that the trip might be canceled at the last moment. When finally the train began to move, every one of them jumped up and cheered, for the dream of going to the imperial city was coming true at last. (Interview, November 6, 2005). The jubilant response of the ensemble to the opportunity of performing in the capital city also revealed the peripheral position of *gezaixi* on the mainland.

Eleven years later, in 1990, *gezaixi* appeared on the stage of Beijing for the second time, brought by the Taiwanese Minghuayuan Gezaixi Troupe, one of the most commercially successful troupes on the island. It was the first time after cross-strait communication officially opened up in 1987 that a Taiwanese performance team had visited the mainland and performed. The occasion was the 1990 Olympic Council of Asia, which Beijing hosted and for which it organized a series of artistic programs. For the Taiwanese government, selecting a company from all the proficient candidates in the various fields of the performing arts to represent the regime was a complicated process. Certainly the emblematic meaning of *gezaixi* was part of the reason why Minghuayuan won the favor in the final decision. The decision seemed to suggest that *gezaixi* could best represent Taiwan and its culture especially when it was the first Taiwanese performing group to go to the mainland after a long separation.

In the Olympic Art Festival in Beijing, Minghuayuan staged the mythology play *Buddha Jigong*. Articles on Minghuayuan almost always noted this event. In these reports, the manager Chen Shengfu and lead actress Sun Cueifeng mentioned the difficulty they encountered when they tried to distribute the flyers and programs, which were regarded as inappropriate due to their use of the term “Republic of China.” The performances were well-received in spite of sensitive

political issue and the language barrier, because this was the first time in forty years that people on the mainland saw a theatrical performance from across the strait.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6. A poster of Minghuayuan's *Buddha Jigong* in the 1990s when the troupe toured Japan. Poster provided by Minghuayuan.

In the summer of 1996, the Ministry of Culture invited Fujian Longhai Xiangju Troupe to Beijing to perform *Qiaoxiang yishi* (literally, anecdotes of the hometown for overseas Chinese), written by Yao Xishan. The third appearance of *gezaixi* in the capital followed several significant events. In 1995, China launched a missile test over the Taiwan Strait to protest Taiwanese president Li Denghui's speech at Cornell University in the United States. The PRC had regarded Li Denghui as harboring pro-Taiwan independence sentiments, and the fact that the U.S. granted Li a visa exasperated the Beijing regime and was thus condemned as damaging the Sino-American relations. The Taiwan Strait crisis escalated over the next year, with China engaging in a series of military rehearsals over the strait immediately before the presidential election of Taiwan in March 1996. The military intimidation was a message from Beijing to warn the

<sup>9</sup> See for example Qiu Ting, *Minghuayuan: Taiwan xiju shijia* (Taipei: Dujia, 1995), and Zhang Qionghui, *Chen Shengfu yu Minhuayuan* (Taipei: Shenghuo meixue guan, 2003).

Taiwanese electorate not to vote for Li Denghui. Ironically, the PRC's aggressive attempt aroused resistance among the Taiwanese, and won Li landslide election victory. The showcase of *gezaixi* later in the summer could be interpreted as an educational opportunity for the citizens of the imperial city to have an idea of what the major sung drama over the Strait in Taiwan was like. It also could be seen as a gesture of tempering "justice" with mercy.

In 1997, the Taiwan Strait crisis seemed pacified, yet there was still no consensus on the issue of "One China" between both parties. With the Party leader Deng Xiaoping's death in February 1997 and the return of Hong Kong to China in July the same year, cross-strait relation dominated the political dialogue between the two sides. In the end of this year, Zhangpu County Xiangju Troupe was invited to perform *Baoyingji* [Rescuing the Baby] in Beijing. It was interesting to see two *gezaixi* plays appear consecutively in two years, a period of time charged with political tensions, especially when the last local Chinese *gezaixi* troupe invited to perform in Beijing was nearly twenty years earlier, in 1979.

In October 2005, China invited the Minghuayuan Gezaixi Troupe from Taiwan to perform in Beijing to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Taiwan's retrocession from the Japanese colonial rule. For the Beijing performance, Minghuayuan staged the mythological *Lu Dongbin*. Most audiences in Beijing do not speak the dialect used in *gezaixi*, but the staging choices made by the troupe demonstrated that they had taken language barriers into consideration. The show made early use of grand action, as a gigantic serpent appeared on stage and the hero Lu Dongbin dashed forward and wrestled with the creature. As soon as Lu unsheathed his Dragon Sword, laser lights flashed on, and the scene changed immediately as if mountains were startled at the strike. To successfully create such stunning effects, Minghuayuan brought a professional stage crew of more than ten from Taiwan. Plainly, the company had

sought to break the language obstacle by dazzling the Beijing audience with visual effects and sophisticated techniques in lighting and scene design.

Minghuayuan is a popular troupe in Taiwan. In fact, its success has rendered it one of the biggest icons of traditional Taiwanese culture. To many Taiwanese, it is synonymous with *gezaixi*.

<sup>10</sup> On October 27 and 28, 2005, I was in Beijing to see this production and to observe how it was received in a different context. Despite the troupe's production choices, the language barrier remained a problem for many. During the intermission, I mingled in the crowds to listen to audience members' conversations. General responses were: "*Ting budong* (incomprehensible to ears)" and "even though they had subtitles, it is a pain that my head had to turn back and forth (because subtitles were projected on two sides of the proscenium arch)."

Still, although approximately fifteen percent of the spectators left during the performance, the many spectators who stayed responded with generous cheers and applause. I talked with some of these audience members after the performance. Some of them were fans of the lead actress Sun Cueifeng, cast in the role of the male character Lu Dongbin, because she had played in several TV drama programs that were presented on the mainland. These fans came all the way from other districts, such as Jilin, which is more than a thousand kilometers away. Some were fans of *xiqu* (traditional sung drama) who came to see if there was anything they could learn from the production. But a majority of the audience came because they had received free tickets distributed at their workplaces.

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<sup>10</sup> The stage of Minghuayuan has even acquired political significance in Taiwan: at the premiere of *Lu Dongbin* in Taipei's National Theatre in 2003, President Chen Shuibian and the opposition party GMD chairman Lian Zhan went to see the play in succession. Lian alluded to the play and told the reporters afterwards that even though Lu Dongbin lost his Dragon Sword, he strived to overcome the difficulty with his own valor. Lian further indicated that he himself, lacking the ruling power and resources, was able to meet all the challenges with his strong willpower





Figure 7. The final scene of *Lu Dongbin*. Photo provided by Minghuayuan.

Commercial theatre has not yet matured in Beijing, let alone in the rest of the country. A Beijing reporter told me that people had not formed the habit of purchasing tickets for theatrical performances, except possibly for some internationally renowned production. The government is still the main sponsor of most in-house theatrical performances. Thus, the appearance of *gezaixi* in China's capital was largely symbolic. In fact, as I observed the entire event, I found it intriguing that there were opening speeches before the show, given by the Chinese leaders, who all cited *gezaixi* to highlight the cultural and historical link across the Taiwan Strait.

The event took place in commemoration of "Taiwan Retrocession Day." As debates of "reunion or independence" rage and become extremely sensitive in the cross-strait relation, "Retrocession Day" has received less and less attention in Taiwan, since the name suggests a bond, or even return, to China. Perhaps it is under such circumstances that the government of the PRC has increasingly celebrated this holiday, making sure that their counterpart across the strait does not forget about it.

In summary, the several entrances of *gezaixi* into Beijing paralleled events meaningful in the context of cross-strait interaction: the United States formally recognized the Beijing regime and its breaking of diplomatic relations with Taipei, the first Taiwanese performance group landing on the mainland after the end of a long closure, China's threatening military rehearsals attempting to influence the presidential election in Taiwan, Hong Kong's return to the PRC, and the sixtieth anniversary of Taiwan's retrocession from the Japanese rule. Moreover, Minghuayuan was selected by the Taiwanese government in 1990 to perform in Beijing because of the cultural representativeness of *gezaixi*, and again, for the same reason it was invited by the Chinese government to perform in its capital in 2005. However, just as the two parties hold different interpretations about the status quo and the One-China agenda, they also have different views about *gezaixi*. For the Taiwanese authorities, *gezaixi* serves as an embodiment of Taiwanese tradition, and thus asserts the legitimacy of a Taiwanese nation; for the Chinese authorities, *gezaixi*, thriving both on the island and in southern China, proves that the two sides have shared the same cultural root and kinship.

### **What's in a Name? *Wangguodiao* and Taiwanese Identity**

In this section, I will discuss another theme of this dissertation, the development of Taiwanese identity, by examining the plight cross-strait *gezaixi* experienced. Moreover, I would explore how the development of this performance tradition in the two nations was mediated by each regime's relationship to Japan.

Not long after *gezaixi* made its way across the Taiwan Strait, it prevailed in the southern Fujian province. It was so well received that local intellectuals began around 1931 to call for a ban on this "obscene" drama. With its coarse words, salacious body movements, and a story

frequently dealing with love affairs, the intellectuals claimed *gezaixi* would instigate the society, especially women and children, to commit immoral deeds (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 97-122).

However, what threatened the development of *gezaixi* on the mainland the most was not the condemnation local gentry made on the moral ground. The attempt to curb the genre never truly succeeded until the Chinese Nationalist party officially declared war against Japan in 1937.

Interesting, what most hindered the staging of the genre was not the accusation that it was “obscene drama,” but that it was referred to as “*wangguodiao*,” music from a dying country.

Regarding the ban on *gezaixi*, let us turn to a record in 1993:

Following the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war, Xiamen was occupied by the Japanese troops... In the meantime, the Nationalist Party in counties of southern Fujian deemed *gezaixi*, which was formed in Taiwan, as “*wangguodiao*” (dying-state music) and forbade its performance. To protect and sustain the art, many artists had to withdraw from the city to the village to perform. Performers such as Shao Jianghai and Lin Wenxiang drew the cream from “*jinge*,” used the tune “*zasuidiao*” as its foundation, incorporated *nanqu*, *nanci*, mountain folk songs, such as “*mengjiangnu changchun*,” “*ligaotang-diao*,” etc., and recreated a new set of music “*gailiang-diao*” (revised tune) to replace the previous Taiwanese *gezai* music. As it was put on stage, people at the time called it *gailiangxi* (revised play). In such an indigenous way, it eschewed the ban of the authorities, and spread widely to Zhangzhou, and the Xiang river basin of Longxi... (1993)

According to this record, after Xiamen was taken over by Japan, the Chinese Nationalist party regarded *gezaixi*, which was formed in Taiwan, as *wangguodiao*, and issued an edict to outlaw this genre. The ban forced *gezaixi* practitioners such as Shao Jianghai and Lin Wenxiang to revise its music so that the revised form could still pass the examination of the authorities and the performers could preserve their livelihoods. The revised music was known as *zasuidiao* (medley tune). On the subject of the origin of *zasuidiao*, literature on the mainland generally

adopts this view.<sup>11</sup> That is, the reinvention of *zasuidiao* is seen as a collective work, with Shao Jianghai's name as the one most often noted; and, the Nationalist party's ban on *gezaixi* on the grounds of *wangguodiao* is the reason behind the emergence, or the transformation, of *zasuidiao*.

However, I would like to challenge the chronological order between “the ban” and “the emergence of the revised *zasuidiao*” by bringing into light the ambivalent Taiwanese identity and the Chinese perception of the Taiwanese during the second Sino-Japanese war. Speculating as to whether the two really pose a cause and effect relation, I argue that the notion of “dying-state music—*wangguodiao*” played a far greater role in the emergence and prevalence of *zasuidiao* than the state regulated “ban.”

To understand the association of “dying-state music—*wangguodiao*” with *gezaixi*, we need to understand the music of *gezaixi*. The most common tune in *gezaixi* was *qizi-diao* (seven-word tune). Other than *qizi-diao*, *ku-diao* (weeping tunes) also figured significantly in the music of *gezaixi*, especially before the 1950s. Not only were weeping tunes used in the plays when characters lamented for their unfortunate life or mourned for the deceased, but weeping tunes were also widely applied in real life: When people suffered from misfortune or loss of family members, they sang weeping tunes to express their anguish and grief. In fact, weeping tunes are still used in many Taiwanese funerals today. Scholar Xu Lisha collects more than twenty weeping tunes, such as *daku*, *mengjiaku*, *tainanku*, *qiziku*, *yuheku*, *maiyaoku*, stating that most

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance in *Bainian kanke gezaixi*: “The Japanese soldiers occupied Xiamen in 1938. The civilians escaped and the theatre companies left the city for its surrounding rural villages in Tongan, Longhai, and Zhangzhou to perform. Yet the government of Nationalist party in Longxi issued an edict, accusing *gezaixi* as ‘the *wangguodiao* by the Taiwanese *wangguo-nu*,’ and forbade its performance. They humiliated and oppressed the *gezaixi* performers, and forced them to parade as criminals. They even arrested *Gezaixi* performers in the name of investigating spies. Many troupes were thus disbanded.... Performers, represented by the famous Shao Jianghai in southern Fujian, created new music, the ‘revised tune,’ which opened a window for the development of *gezaixi*.” Chen Gen and Zeng Xuewen, *Bainian kanke gezaixi* [One Hundred Years of Distress: Gezaixi] (Taipei: Youshi, 1995).

of these weeping tunes were created in Taiwan during the period of Japanese governance (Xu 1991, 29-32, 167). Although the use of the weeping tunes in *gezaixi* music today has significantly diminished, weeping tunes flourished during Japanese colonial rule and the first two decades after Taiwan's retrocession. Most scholars attribute the proliferation of weeping tunes to the fact that, by listening to and singing the weeping tunes, the Taiwanese were able to release their distressed and oppressed feelings under authoritarian rules of the "outsiders" (first the Japanese, and then the Chinese Nationalists).<sup>12</sup> However, as much as the people found resonance and solace in such music when it was brought to southeastern China, the doleful music probably sounded ominous to the ears of the Nationalist government, which was facing a tough war against Japan on the mainland and would have preferred a kind of music that could uplift the spirits of the civilians and soldiers. I would suggest also that what *gezaixi* and its music meant to the Chinese government then was the "loss" Taiwan symbolized: China was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese war in 1895, and accepted the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, by which it ceded Taiwan to Japan. Thus the weeping of *gezaixi* to some extent signified the mourning of the loss of Taiwan. The misery elicited from the Taiwanese weeping music reminded the Chinese authorities of the shame of the defeat and the very anxiety of "*wangguo*," that is, the declining of a country.

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<sup>12</sup> Weeping tunes had been popular up until the 1950s. In her doctoral dissertation, Teri Silvio points out that under the Nativist ideology, weeping tunes are constructed as the "expression of a particularly Taiwanese 'bitterness'." Processing arguments proposed by various scholars, she links the "bitterness" to three causes. First, it is the bitterness of the collective poverty in the post-war society. Second, it is the bitterness "of a people oppressed by a series of foreign rulers" such as the Japanese colonial power, and the authoritarian rule by the mainlander Nationalist party. Third, weeping tunes "proliferated at the demand of the female audience." On the third point, she cites Xu Lisha and argues that Taiwanese women were oppressed by both the Confucian ethics of the "three obediences and four virtues" and by local customs such as the selling of girls as servants or adopted-in daughters-in-law. Therefore, these female audiences found it easy to relate to the bitterness in *gezaixi*'s music. See Teri Jayne Silvio, "Drag Melodrama/Feminine Public Sphere/Folk Television : 'Local Opera' and Identity in Taiwan" ( Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago 1998), 132-35.

Further, the association of *wanguodiao* with *gezaixi* has a lot to do with the general sentiments the Chinese held towards Taiwan at the time, which was a Japanese colony. Japan's ambition towards China grew as it savored the sweetness of victory, and the bilateral relation had deteriorated and become more and more intense, which put Taiwan in an extremely awkward position between its colonizer and its motherland. Taiwanese writer Wu Zhuoliu's novel *Yaxiya de guer (Orphan of Asia)*, written at the end of World War II, presents a classic description of this awkwardness. The protagonist Hu Taiming, who is studying in Tokyo, attends a social gathering of Chinese students. Disregarding his friend Lan's earlier warning that he should conceal his Taiwanese identity, Hu Taiming candidly introduces himself as coming from Taiwan, and the reaction of the Chinese student changes at once from intimacy to contempt and disgust. The room is full of murmurs as the news ripple forth. "He might be a spy." Taiming cannot bear the heavy silence and must excuse himself. His friend Lan follows him and blames him: "Don't you know what Taiwanese have been doing in Amoy (Xiamen)? With Japan's backing?" (Wu 2006, 62)

There is another such anecdote in Wu Zhuoliu's memoir *the Fig Tree*, when the author describes an incident from his trip to China during the war. Having been a second-class citizen under Japanese colonial rule, he expects to find sweet freedom in his motherland. Yet he visits China at a time when it is deeply involved with the war against Japan, so whatever he encounters is mostly the pitiful state the war has brought to the country: ruins, beggars, whores. When he is at the train station, there is a huge crowd and long wait for the meticulous security check. As a Taiwanese, a Japanese national, he has a different passport, and therefore he goes through a different checkpoint without much inspection (Wu 2002, 116). Apparently, the Taiwanese were different from the Chinese on the mainland, receiving better treatment in such situation,

especially in the regions that were occupied by the Japanese. The fact that the Taiwanese were subjects to the Japanese empire put them in a superior position on the mainland where Japan stormed through with its more advanced military power.

Furthermore, the Taiwanese enjoyed extraterritoriality on the mainland at that time. Thus they were subject neither to Chinese laws nor courts. As a result, quite a few Taiwanese took advantage of such privileges and took up illegal trading in China. A Japanese consul appointed to Xiamen, Mr. Inoue, cites the statistics: “In this city about half of the opium traders are taken up by the Taiwanese citizens. The number of people whose livings depend on it is over 2000, which consists of one quarter of the total of the Taiwanese citizens who live here in Xiamen” (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 106).

Under such circumstances, when *gezai* was initially brought to southern Fujian, it was practiced only within the Taiwanese community and was resisted by the locals in Xiamen. *History of Gezai* records an interview with Mr. Chen Hoji, born in 1907, in which he says: “In my childhood there was a *gezai* house near the General’s Temple... The adults did not allow the kids to go there then because in *gezai* house they sang Taiwanese opera (Taiwan *xizai*), and they were all Taiwanese. Whenever it was a Japanese holiday, the *gezai* house would be very boisterous. When I was ten there was a time I wanted to go and see the scene. My father thrashed me, saying that it was a Japanese holiday, and what for was a Chinese doing there! So I remember it very well” (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 107).

Thus we can see that “*gezaidiao*- Taiwan- Japan” were imagined and associated metonymically on the mainland at that time. The Taiwanese identity was so ambivalent that both the Chinese authorities and the general public held reserved or even suspicious attitude towards the Taiwanese. Wu Zhuoliu’s semi-autobiographic story exemplifies this when the protagonist

Hu Taiming is viewed as a spy among the overseas Chinese students; Mr. Chen's reminiscence is an apt statement that the earlier Xiamenese associated "Taiwanese opera" (Taiwan *xizai*) with "the Japanese" and refused to accept it. Although *gezai* gradually convinced the locals with its linguistic and musical accessibility and won their hearts, the escalating tension between China and Japan prompted the association between "Taiwanese opera" and "Japan" in the consciousness and emotions of the public. When someone came up with the labeling term "*wangguodiao*," it would be immediately recognized, accepted, and widely circulated.

The Mandarin term "*wangguo-diao*" itself propagates a range of meanings. First of all, as "*wang*" denotes "extinct, dead, or dying," and "*guo*" denotes "country," "*wangguo-nu*" is a common mocking expression referring to those who have lost their country, and thus are no better than "*nu*," slaves. In this case, it was very easy for the Taiwanese to be identified as "*wangguo-nu*" since, in the eyes of their fellow Chinese, the Taiwanese had lost their official tie to the mainland and were ruled by the alien Japanese. Thus it seemed more than natural that as the situation turned hostile, the mocking of the Taiwanese as "*wangguo-nu*" would surge, and eventually the music of "*wangguo-nu*" would also be linked to them and known as "*wangguo-diao*."

Moreover, the naming of "*wangguo-diao*" in fact had certain anxiety hidden in it, as it can also be understood as "music of a dying country" or "music that can destroy the country." Confucianism has long regarded music not only as a means to regulate the state, but also as an index of a nation's condition. For instance, Confucius disliked the music of two states, Zheng and Wei, on the ground that they were excessive, and thus were the exact embodiment of a turbulent society. Similarly, two well-known lines from a ninth-century Chinese poem state:



“*Shangnu bu zhi wangguo hen, ge jiang you chang houtinghua.* (The girl singers are unaware of the bitter loss of the country, and across the river still singing the song Houtinghua.)” The poem has often been used to caution those who are not aware of the gravity of the national situation. Indeed, what lies behind the notion of “*wangguodiao*” is also the anxiety that if we are so insensitive as to continue playing the music from a land that once belonged to us but does not anymore, from the people who have now become subjects of our enemy, our mind may be consumed or contaminated, and eventually we may lose the war, and lose our country, as well.

It was such a sense of anxiety that made the Nationalist party, which was fighting a harsh battle against Japan, wonder to which side this genre showed its allegiance. Accordingly, the Nationalist party tried to mobilize the troupes as a force of wartime propaganda, and the community service center of the party organized the local troupes to enroll in one-week training programs (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 135-6). Yet the kind of “reformation” such short-termed courses attempted to achieve was essentially an ideological inspection, inculcation, and endorsement, to make sure that the troupes would not become the mouthpiece of the Japanese government.

Senior practitioner Yan Zihe, cited in a set of conference minutes, stated that the term “*gailiang xi*” (reformed drama), despite its prevalence in Chinese scholarship today, was in fact only briefly used by the authorities at that time. The actors and audiences of the time did not have the idea of this term “*gailiang xi*” nor the concept of a reformed drama. As for the banning of performances, most of the time it was the pretext local gangsters used to extort money from the troupes. Musician Yang Bingwei supported this assessment, stating that as he was in Zhangzhou at the time, his sense was that the ban was not severely executed there. Along this line, researcher Shen Jisheng asserted that although the notion of *gezaixi* as *wangguodiao* was

also brought up in Quanzhou, the regional authorities did so only to protect local genres such as *liyuanxi* and *gaojiayi* from the onslaught of *gezaixi* (Zeng 1997). To conclude, there is no doubt that *gezaixi* was labeled as *wangguodiao*, based on a range of rationales, from patriotic sentiments to local culture protectionism, yet the “ban” that was thus enforced was a more complex matter since each local administration treated it in a different way, and most of the time it was used as an excuse by native hooligans for extortion.

However, in Shao Jianghai’s brief autobiography, he talks about the ban several times. He says that after Xiamen was taken over by the Japanese, he drifted to other villages. “I often encountered the prohibition... in some places you could stealthily perform. Then I went back to the troupe Xinjinchuen to teach.” Then he recounted. “At age thirty or so, the thirteen counties along the coast forbade the performance, so I lost my job. Later I printed out some lyric booklets and went to the market to sing and sell them. At age thirty-one to thirty-two [around 1943], the reactionary party [by which he meant the Nationalist party] accused me of being a traitor and oppressed me. I dared not settle in any particular company and had to move from place to place” (Shao 1997, 69).

Shao wrote this autobiography in 1968, two years after the onset of the Cultural Revolution. My interpretation of this material is that since Shao was a renowned *gezaixi* performer, naturally he received more attention from the authorities, and hence more harassment as well. Moreover, the reason Shao Jianghai wrote this autobiography was to “report” his past to the communist administration. (Writing a report of self-assessment or self-criticism was very common then in the PRC.) Given the circumstances that the Communist party was in extremely antagonistic terms with the Nationalists (which then withdrew to Taiwan and claimed legitimacy over the mainland), it is very likely that Shao would overstate in his report the oppression he

received from the “reactionary party,” and would conflate, consciously or unconsciously, the extortion from local hooligans with the ban by the Nationalist government during the wartime. Likewise, even though Shao Jianghai, according to many other sources, “had quite a few disagreements with the New Literary and Artistic Workers” during the drama reform movement, and “had a very tough time during the Cultural Revolution,”<sup>13</sup> we could never read this side of his story between those lines in this report.

Now let us look at the time when the tune *zasuidiao* (medley music) emerged. Shao Jianghai began using this revised tune in his play *Zheng Yuanhe* during 1936 to 1937;<sup>14</sup> Xiamen was taken over by Japan in 1938, and the Nationalist party issued its edict in southern Fujian only afterwards.<sup>15</sup> According to this timeline, *zasuidiao* emerged prior to the time when the Nationalist party attempted to ban the genre, or to mobilize the troupes to play the reformed drama. Therefore, to address the cause of *zasuidiao*’s emergence more precisely, we should say that it was rather the notion of *wangguodiao* that pressured the performers to re-invent the genre and its music, as opposed to the state dictate or prohibition.

While most scholars today maintain that the state regulated ban on *gezaixi* had forced musicians, among whom Shao was the most famous, to come up with the new tune *zasuidiao*, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the emergence of *zasuidiao* occurred earlier than the outlaw of *gezaixi*, and therefore the chronology suggests that association of *wangguodiao* with *gezaixi* served a much more direct and effective force to catalyze the indigenization of *gezaixi* in southern Fujian. After all, the anti-Japanese agitation raged among Chinese long before the

<sup>13</sup> See the talks by Luo Shifang and Yang Lubing in the conference minutes mentioned earlier.

<sup>14</sup> See Zihé Yan’s speech in the minutes. For the timeline of Shao’s works, see the appendix “A Table of Shao Jianghai’s works.” *Yidai zongshi Shao Jianghai*, ed. Xiamen shi Taiwan yishu yangjiusuo (Beijing: Guangming ribao), 51-67.

<sup>15</sup> See Bingwei Yang’s speech in the conference minutes. Also, for a discussion of the ban in southern Fujian during 1937 to 1945, see Chen Geng, Zeng Xuwen and Yan Zihé, *Gezaixi shi* [History of Gezaixi] (Beijing: Guangming ribao, 1997), 133-37.

Chinese Nationalist party officially declared war against Japan in 1937. Under the guise of establishing a Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, Japan's aggression occurred frequently. Japan took control of Manchuria by the end of 1931, which further stirred the anti-Japanese (and sometimes anti-foreign) sentiment on the mainland. The economic boycott situation in Shanghai was so tense that the Municipal Council of Shanghai had to declare a state of emergency and deployed troops to defend the various foreign concessions comprising the International Settlement (Spence 1990, 393). Further, during the ensuing Sino-Japanese war, Japan ignited intense national hatred on the mainland, with its troops' ruthless killing and raping of Chinese civilians, represented particularly in the event in 1937 known as the Great Nanjing Massacre (*nanjing datusha*). An estimated 260,000-350,000 noncombatants died at the hands of Japanese soldiers in the city.<sup>16</sup> It was thus highly possible that the association of *wangguodiao* appeared before Xiamen fell into the hands of Japan. The loss of Xiamen in 1938 only brought to a peak such resentment among local people. Yet before Xiamen was taken over, the climate was already such that naturally the anger and bitterness towards the Japanese were projected and reoriented toward the Taiwanese, or toward Taiwanese culture. Seeing that their fellow Taiwanese enjoyed privileges in foreign concessions, and that some Taiwanese used Japan's power to bully locals, it is no wonder that the Chinese called them slaves without a country (*wangguo-nu*) and their music *wangguo-diao*.

With the prevailing notion of *wangguodiao*, *gezaixi* performers on the mainland had to separate themselves from the association. In order to clear themselves so as to gain more

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<sup>16</sup> On December 13, 1937, Nanking (Nanjing), the capital city of Nationalist China, fell to the Japanese, and Japanese soldiers began an orgy of cruelty that has few parallels. Thousands of young men were rounded up and herded to the outer areas of the city, where they were mowed down by machine guns, used for bayonet practice, or soaked with gasoline and burned alive. An estimated 20,000-80,000 women were raped. See Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 3-6.

recognition from local audiences, to protect themselves from the hooligans' constant threatening and extortion, and merely to survive and maintain a living, local performers embarked on and accelerated the "indigenization" of *gezaixi* on the mainland, seeking to distinguish themselves from the Taiwanese *gezaixi*. The act of reformation was a pronounced statement these local performers made in order to draw a clear line between *gezaixi* in the two regions. Consequently, the reformed genre showed up with a different look in its music and musical instruments: New musical forms were created locally and employed greatly, the *liujiaoxian* (hexagon string) replaced the *kezaixian* (coconut shell string), the *erxian* (two string) replaced the *daguangxian* (two-string instrument with a wide base), the *dongxiao* (a vertical flute) replaced the Taiwan flute, and the *sanxian* (three string) replaced the *yueqin* (moonshaped instrument).

So it is that we see Shao Jianghai begin to try the new tune *zasuidiao* in his play *Zheng Yuanhe* around 1936-1937, while the Nationalist party issued its edict in southern Fujian only after Xiamen was taken over by Japan in 1938. It is very likely that the notion of *gezaixi* as *wanguodiao* had surfaced with the escalating anti-Japanese feeling, which explains the initiation of *zasuidiao* since the performers at this time might have come to realize that *gezaixi* had to assume a different appearance to acquire legitimacy. Further, *zasuidiao* dominated the music of Shao's play *Liuyue Xue* (*Snow in June*) in 1939 (Lu 1997), which could be related to Japan's control of Xiamen in 1938 and the ensuing highlighted tension between the Chinese and Japanese (Taiwanese) in southern Fujian. Thus, it is clear that the creation and pervasiveness of *zasuidiao* did have a lot to do with the anti-Japanese (Taiwanese) sentiments. What is more important, the efforts that made these revisions possible was a bottom-up movement of genre localization, rather than a top-down enforced mobilization and reformation.

Therefore, the transformation of *gezaixi* initiated by local performers in southern Fujian province was primarily a flexible act made out of expediency in accordance with the time and conditions. By doing so, the performers could reduce the extortion from native ruffians, pass the examination of the authorities, and avoid the projection of the general resentment for the Japanese. The plight of the Taiwanese on the mainland validates this point, as exemplified in Wu Zhuoliu's novel *Taiwan Lianqiao*<sup>17</sup>:

The Taiwanese now are like parentless orphans. They are regarded as “aliens” by either the Chongqing government or the Japanese Wong government. Not only do these administrations mistrust the Taiwanese, they even view them as spies, which is a result of the Japanese mischief-making policy. That is, the Japanese governors use Taiwanese scoundrels, taking advantage of the extraterritorial privileges and jurisdiction, to commit illegal deeds on the mainland, such as smuggling, gambling, and opium house running.

Because of these crooks, people on the motherland have prejudice against Taiwanese, who become target of resentment. Under such circumstances, the Taiwanese have to hide their own identity... (Wu 1995, 106-7)

Consequently, the Taiwanese at the time “would never divulge their identity. They usually identify themselves as Fujianese or Cantonese whereas among the Taiwanese they use the code ‘yam guy’”(Wu 1995). (The shape of Taiwan is sometimes compared to that of a yam). As the Taiwanese on the mainland had to conceal their identity by assuming a local identity, so did *gezaixi* in China. Local performers made a few changes in the appearance of this genre—from music instruments to the music itself—so as to draw a line between themselves and the

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<sup>17</sup> Taiwan *lianqiao* is a kind of plant (Latin name: *Duranta repens* L.) usually planted in front of the yard as a fence. The plant is usually trimmed square; any branch that grows its own way would be cut off. The author uses the plant as a metaphor to refer to the fate of the Taiwanese under authoritarian rules of the Japanese and the GMD. The book *Taiwan Lianqiao* is the last work by Mr. Wu. It was written in 1975. *Orphan of Asia*, which he wrote in the end of World War II, mainly depicts various kinds of people under the Japanese rule and is also a critique of the colonial government. *Taiwan Lianqiao* is a continuation of *Orphan*. Its first half also describes the Taiwanese people under Japanese governance, while the second part records the time when Taiwan was retroceded to the Chinese Nationalist party, the 28 February Incident, and the role “*banshan* (people who are half mainlander and half native)” played in the Incident. The content was so politically sensitive at the time that Wu Zhuoliu wrote it in Japanese, and in his will, he stressed that the later half of the book could only be published ten to twenty years after his death.

infamous Taiwanese *gezaixi*, and to continue performing and preserve their livelihood. At the time when “*gezaidiao*- Taiwan- Japan” were imagined and associated metonymically and generated negative sentiments on the mainland, the creation and pervasiveness of *zasuidiao* was thus more of a conscious decision and action taken on the part of the local performers than a passive response to the authorities’ restrictions.

Yet the ambiguity of Taiwanese identity does not cease here. Dating back to the late-sixteenth century, when Taiwan served as the transshipment site for Spanish and Dutch traders, the “Taiwanese have existed as a hyphenated culture and people, living as Taiwanese-Chinese or Taiwanese-Japanese but never being fully Taiwanese” (Quintero 2000, 12). Japan’s defeat in World War II ended its control over Taiwan. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese identity struggle was not solved with the retreat of Japanese; indeed, it became even more complicated. The decolonization of Taiwan was abruptly executed by Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist (GMD) government, about whom most Taiwanese had little knowledge. Soon Mandarin Chinese became the standardized national language, a northern dialect that most Taiwanese had never spoken. At first, the Taiwanese welcomed enthusiastically the government from the mainland, but the rejoicing over liberation and the retrocession did not last long. The Taiwanese soon realized that the coming GMD government did not treat them as equal citizens. Although the Taiwanese were eager to participate in governing the island, they found themselves excluded because of their inability to communicate in Mandarin. Also, inequality between Taiwanese and Mainlanders in wages and political and economic opportunities caused great dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, the GMD was occupied with civil war against the communists on the mainland, and they viewed Taiwan as a source of resources for the battle, whereas the Taiwanese felt that the GMD should prioritize the island’s post-war reconstruction (Lai, Myers, and Wei 1991, 169). The misrule of

the GMD increased further the islanders' dissatisfaction. Confiscated Japanese assets ended up primarily in the pockets of GMD officers, convincing the Taiwanese of the corruption of the new regime. Economic crisis in Taiwan only aggravated the situation. Inflation, unemployment, and grain shortages all made local people resent the new government.

Escalating tensions between natives and Chinese mainlanders led to the incident of February 28, 1947, the incident of a cigarette vendor being beaten up by a mainlander officer inflaming anger in the crowd, and this led to mass violence in many cities. The intellectuals seized the chance to call for political reform and self-rule. The state, however, answered the political demands with force. The book *A Tragic Beginning* is one of the first attempts to study and uncover this history forbidden for over four decades in Taiwan, and it estimates that 8,000 people were killed in the incident, and half of the dead were members of the elites (Lai, Myers, and Wei 1991, 160). As Steven Phillips further indicates, the ensuing political persecution (known as the "White Terror") and severe restrictions on society accelerated the process of decolonization since "those who had invoked the memory of the Japanese era to justify political reform were either killed or cowed into silence" (Phillips 2003, 277).

As a result, the Nationalist government had no fear of being overthrown by the Taiwanese, even though the mainlanders constituted only 13% of the population. The oppression shaped Taiwanese reinterpretation of Japanese colonization "from a historical trauma to a nostalgic memory" (Quintero 2000, 20), and rendered Taiwanese attitude towards the "motherland" more and more ambiguous and reserved. What is more, the political persecution and discrimination of natives by mainlanders seeded the ethnic feuds that have caused disharmonies in society existing to this day.



It was not until the 1980s that the native Taiwanese could safely advocate a political agenda of their own. With a growing middle-class that pressured the state for democratic reform, the lift of martial law in 1987 accelerated the democratization of Taiwan and boosted the “Taiwanese consciousness” (*taiwan yishi*), meaning a sense of Taiwaneseeness, as opposed to Chineseness, inculcated by the Nationalist regime for decades. The year 2000 witnessed the peak of Taiwanese nationalism, with the shift in the ruling party for the first time on the island. Factors such as growing confidence in Taiwan’s economy, desire for self-determination, dissatisfaction with GMD governance, and discontent with the PRC’s military threats prompted the candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party Chen Shui-bian to win the presidential election. Being Taiwanese thus has two meanings: it first means Hoklo (*minnan*, southern Fujian) and Hakka speakers (originally from Guangdong province) whose ancestors came to Taiwan before 1895 as opposed to Mainlanders who came with the GMD government. Second, in contrast to the PRC, it means everyone on Taiwan, and this second meaning is growing in importance (Bosco 1994; Wachman 1994; Tsang and Tien 1999; Brown 2004).

## Methodology

I conducted research on Taiwan’s *gezaixi* scene from 1998 to 2000 for my master thesis, and again from 2000 to 2002, working as a research assistant on related projects. With my familiarity with *gezaixi* in Taiwan, the performance situation in China struck me as novel and worth exploring. I had read books on the cultural scene and development of *gezaixi* in China, but these could not fully satisfy me. And although some performance troupes came from China to Taiwan to stage each year, and I seldom missed these opportunities to witness then, the distance remained. There was a gap between the China I had imagined through what I had read,

seen, and been told, and the China I had never visited and experienced myself. This is why I launched my journey.

During my first visit in October, 2005, I stayed in the dormitory of Xiamen University, sharing a room with a PhD student whose project focused on Taiwanese modern theatre (also known as spoken drama, a product of Western cultural influence and a new concept introduced to China and Taiwan in the early twentieth century). The two of us had a great deal to discuss and share. At the end of the journey, I made the decision to return for a longer observation, in order to make Xiamen and the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe the main site of my research.

Xiamen has been an important cross-strait portal over the past two centuries.<sup>18</sup> It is an island located in southern Fujian province, only 165 nautical miles away from the city of Gaoxiong in Taiwan. Xiamen is approximately 1,560 square kilometers in area and has approximately 2.2 million residents (as of 2005). In 1980, part of Xiamen was officially decreed a “special economic zone,” and in 1984 the economic zone was extended to the entire city. Since then, it has received significant investment from abroad, including from Taiwan. In fact, the Chinese government set aside exclusive areas in three of Xiamen’s districts for Taiwanese businessmen. By 1998, Taiwanese investment in Xiamen had reached 34.6 billion USD.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, economic growth brought improvements in infrastructure. In contrast to its counterpart Shenzhen, which is also one of the special economic zones but suffers from soaring crime rates, Xiamen is relatively secure. According to statistics released from China’s *Business*

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<sup>18</sup> According to official records of Fujian, the number of people entering and exiting Taiwan via Xiamen in 1918 was 5284 and 5584, and in 1925 the numbers were 6112 and 6374. Moreover, the number of Taiwanese who resided in Xiamen in 1925 was 6539, and the actual number might far exceeded this since it did not include those who did not formally register. Geng Chen, Zeng Xuewen, and Yan Zihe, *Gezaixi shi* [History of Gezaixi] (Beijing: Guangming ribao, 1997), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Information on Xiamen and its economy is based on official websites [www.Fujian-windows.com](http://www.Fujian-windows.com) and [www.huaxia.com](http://www.huaxia.com).

*Weekly* in early 2006, Xiamen was rated the second best city to live in China, while Shanghai and Beijing ranked number 7 and 15.

As a base of cross-strait economic interaction, Xiamen is thus an excellent site in which to examine cultural and political relations between Taiwan and China. Similarly, it is precisely because of its location that the position of the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe has grown considerably, having been assigned or invited to participate in cross-strait cultural activities in the past few years. It thus also was an ideal troupe on which to focus as my chief subject of observation.

On my following trips in 2006, I stayed in the neighborhood in which the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe and the staff dormitory were located. My ethnographic work tried to adopt method of what Dwight Conquergood has proposed “an ethnography of the ears and heart that reimagines participant-observation as coperformative witnessing” (Conquergood 2002, 149). I often went to their rehearsals and attended their performances in various venues. This active involvement in the troupe and close interaction with the performers opened up spaces for further conversation. Also, I was kindly introduced to practitioners in private troupes and practitioners in other cities, such as Zhangzhou and Quanzhou, which broadened my understanding of the theatre in southern Fujian. I met up with the troupe in Taipei in September, 2006, for the Ethnic Chinese Gezaixi Festival. After my return to Chicago, I tried not to miss their important events. My most recent trip took place in October of 2007, when I took the sleeper-train with the troupe to Beijing to perform.

The historical weight of cross-strait competition inevitably engenders a tense relation, which makes any comparative project complicated and sensitive, charged with political associations and interpretations. The fact that I am from Taiwan may afford me a position of critical distance when examining cultural development on the mainland, but it also brings with it

an inevitable emotional affinity to Taiwan. It is simply the case that I cannot be totally objective. However, I am aware of my potential bias and constantly reviewing myself, trying not to be locked in this particular position in my analysis.

## Structure

I have roughly sketched the key themes of this study: cross-strait relations, Chinese nationalism, and Taiwanese consciousness and identity, and I hope the readers can discern how they intersect in the following chapters.

Chapter Two, “Two Versions of *Shao Jianghai*: Politics of Theatre Historiography,” discusses a contemporary play, *Shao Jianghai*,<sup>2</sup> produced by the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe. Shao Jianghai (1914-1980), born in Xiamen, is widely considered to be an important figure in the development of *gezaixi*’s music. The play tells the story of the young Shao Jianghao, and how he created the influential tune *zasuidiao* during the second Sino-Japanese war. The play has undergone several modifications since its debut in 2003. The chapter focuses on the changes in its narrative from the 2002/3 version to the 2005 version. I investigate how the trajectory of *gezaixi*’s origin and its cross-strait dispersal had been cleverly re-delineated in the change of narrative. The chapter intends to examine the politics of *gezaixi* theatre historiography in the PRC at a time when the dispute over Taiwanese sovereignty dominates the cross-strait interactions.

*Xiandaixi*, such as *Shao Jianghai*, is a chief subgenre of Chinese *xiqu* (sung drama). It presents stories that take place in the contemporary period and had been a privileged form during the PRC’s *Xiqu* Reform Campaign (1949-1965) starting soon after the establishment of its regime. A well-known saying of Mao Zedong underlines the sentiment of demands for drama

reform: “History is created by people. However, on the stage of our old drama, people became dregs while the gentry and ladyship dominate the stage....” Old drama was criticized for its feudal and bourgeois elements, and was consequently under severe scrutiny. The contemporary play thus emerged to satisfy the need to depict and laud a new China. During the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, it became the only theatrical form active across China as *chuangtongxi* (the traditional play) was banned. While *gezaixi* scholarship condemns the damages the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has done to Chinese theatre, it almost always reveals a celebratory view on the previous drama reform movement. In Chapter 3, “National Mobilization: The Contemporary Play in China,” I problematize the period of the drama reform by arguing that the excessive dictates of the state, which later resulted in a nation-wide suppression of the traditional drama, already occurred in the beginning of this phase. I foreground the regulatory power of the state and its efforts to institutionalize theatre while historicizing the development of *xiandaixi*.

Scholars often refer to Taiwan’s situation under the Nationalist authoritarianism (1945-1987) as semi-colonization, emphasizing the totalitarian aspect which was not very different from the Japanese colonization (1895-1945), some thus proposes the term “post-colonial period” (post-1987) to refer to the democratic, post-martial law era (Chen 2002, 38). Adopting this periodization, my discussion on *opela* in relation to Taiwanese identity formation is divided in to two chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on *gezaixi* during Taiwan’s colonization and semi-colonization while Chapter 5 looks at Taiwan’s decolonization and democratization process and how it affects the discourse on *gezaixi* in the post-colonial period.

In Chapter 4, “The Double Meanings of *Opela*,” I discuss the double meanings of *opela*, that it is both the Japanese transliteration of “opera” and “*o-be-pe-pe-le*.” The Japanese pronunciation of the word leads us to examine the remnants of Japanese governance in the

performance of *gezaixi* today while the negative association “*o-be-pe-pe-le*” can be traced back to the earlier cultural policy in Taiwan after the Nationalists took over the island from Japan.

While Beijing opera enjoyed the status as National Opera in Taiwan during the Nationalist “re-colonial” reign, the “post-colonial”, post-martial law era saw a reversal of the position of *gezaixi* and Beijing opera. Chapter 5, “From ‘Refined *Gezaixi*’ to ‘*Opela*’: Discourses on *Gezaixi* in Search of a Taiwanese National Identity,” examines how and why the mainstream discourse on *gezaixi* has undergone a shift from the “refined and traditional” *gezaixi* to “local *opela*.” The dominant forms of *gezaixi* in the 1990s were the “refined *gezaixi*” practiced by Holo Gezaixi Troupe and the “traditional *gezaixi*” advocated by the Heritage Award winner Liao Qiongzhi. At this time, *opela* was dismissed from the mainstream discourse, yet at the start of the new millennium, *opela* became highly visible on official stage and in academic publication. I argue that on its way to becoming the legitimate Taiwanese cultural representative, *gezaixi* first went through an image-purging and self-healing process by advocating and practicing refined *gezaixi*. Further, the contested “Taiwanese/ Chinese” identity have compelled the Taiwanese to seek its distinct features and to look back to its long forbidden colonial memories. Thus, the hybrid *opela* was brought into focus at the turning of the century. This chapter discusses the development of the discourses on *gezaixi* and how it responds to and interacts with the changing Taiwanese consciousness and its identity.

## Chapter Two

### Two Versions of *Shao Jianghai*: Politics of Theatre Historiography

Unlike other traditional theatrical genres that were brought to the island by Chinese immigrants, *gezaixi* is purely and proudly “made in Taiwan.” With its popularity, *gezaixi* made its way across the Taiwan Strait to southeastern China in the late 1910s, and gradually drew local audiences. Today, there are eight state-sponsored *gezaixi* troupes in southeastern China. The “contemporary play” *Shao Jianghai*, produced by one of such troupes, Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe, has undergone several major modifications since its debut at the Twenty Second Fujian Provincial Theater Contest in 2002. The play tells the story of the early life of the *gezaixi* master Shao Jianghai (1914-1980), this young man’s passion for *gezaixi*, and how he created the new tune *zasuidiao*, which later on influenced the music of *gezaixi*, during the period of the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945). Shao Jianghai was born in Xiamen city of Fujian, and the music *zasuidiao* he helped to create in the mid-1930s has been influential to both *gezaixi* on the mainland and *gezaixi* in Taiwan not long after it was brought to the island in 1948. The play won several honors on the mainland following its debut, notably the Outstanding Play in the Twenty Second Fujian Provincial Theater Contest, the Outstanding Play in the Ninth Chinese Theater Festival, and the National Wenhua Award in 2007. Its playwright Zeng Xuewen received “the Chinese Theater Award: Cao Yu Literary Award” for the play in 2006. An examination of scripts and video recordings reveals the changes from one production to another. This chapter particularly focuses on the changes in its narrative from the 2002/3 version to the 2005 version. The two versions, with seemingly similar stories, convey drastically different messages. This chapter begins with descriptions of the two versions, and investigates what the process of the

revisions reveal, namely, how the trajectory of *gezaixi*'s origin and its cross-strait dispersal was re-delineated, from a Taiwanese origin to a mainland origin. I examine the politics of *gezaixi* theatre historiography in the PRC at a time when the dispute over Taiwanese sovereignty dominates the cross-strait interactions.

### **First Version (2002/3)**

*Shao Jianghai* has been staged on various occasions since its debut. Several adjustments were made each time in terms of scene sequence. For the convenience of the following discussion, what is called "the first version" in this chapter is primarily based on the playwright Zeng Xuewen's script, published in June 2002 in *Fujian Arts*<sup>20</sup>, supplemented by videos recorded in 2002 at the Twenty Second Fujian Provincial Theater Contest, and in July 2003.

Act One: With the mirthful opening music, stage subtitle shows "Time: 1930s. Place: A rural village in southern Fujian." A local religious procession appears on stage, creating a lively and festive atmosphere, and then switches to a wedding march. On this day, the protagonist Shao Jianghai is getting married. After the brief ceremony, the couple, who barely know each other, are left alone. Then the bride Yazhi expresses her hope that Shao Jianghai can stop performing and devote himself to farming from now on, while Shao insists that his life would be nothing without *gezaixi*.

Act Two: Shao Jianghai's disciple Chunhua enters singing. The clan master Qiye, an old and lecherous man, spots her and attempts to harass this beautiful girl. A young man, the intellectual Wang Shaoye sees this and immediately stops him. The old man leaves grudgingly.

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<sup>20</sup> This text is later seen in the journal *Juben* in September 2003. Except for some scene rearrangements, the entire narrative remains the same. Thus, the following summary is still based on the script of 2002.



Wang Shaoye has passionate ideas about how to strengthen the nation. He asks Chunhua to play *xinju* (new drama) with him to awaken the public. Chunhua, not knowing what *xinju* is, tries to understand this form in terms of *gezaixi*. Yet Shaoye regards *gezaixi* as “people-anesthetizing, society-ruining,” and “shallow and ignorant.” Their interaction shows that Shaoye holds great affection towards Chunhua. However, Shaoye’s father, Mayor Wang, enters, showing his contempt for performers, and asks Shaoye to distance himself from Chunhua.



Fig. 8. The wedding night from Act 1, *Shao Jianghai*. Photo by author, 2007.

Act Three: Shao Jianghai and some actors are rehearsing and talking while the character Yun Zhongqing, a Taiwanese actress, enters with a suitcase. Yun tells them that Xiamen has fallen into the hands of the Japanese, and thus she must try to get away from the city. The crowds, after hearing the news, indignantly sing out the statement: “Out, out, out! Damned Japanese! Let us get up and fight the Japanese!” Meanwhile, Yun Zhongqing and Shao Jianghai sorrowfully recall their first encounter, acting it out as they speak: Yun Zhongqing’s theatre company came from Taiwan to perform in Xiamen, and that was the first time Shao Jianghai, who was then fourteen years old, saw *gezaixi*. He was so attracted to the music and performance of this genre

that he implored Yun Zhongqing to tutor him on its music. He knelt down, calling her “*shifu* (teacher)!” Yun Zhongqing then gave the string instrument *daguangxian* to him as a gift. The scene then returns to the present and the two bid farewell to each other.

Mayor Wang enters, announcing that what the company sings is the “weeping and spirit-consuming” “*wangguo-diao*,” (literally, music from a perishing state, or, music that annihilates the state), and that “*gezaixi* came from Taiwan. It is the spirit-consuming music by those who are under the Japanese rule!” He further declares that performing *gezaixi* is prohibited in every village.

Act Four: Even though *gezaixi* is banned, the villagers still want to listen to its music. Under the request of four villagers, Shao and his disciple Chunhua begin singing *gezaixi* to entertain them. Unfortunately, the clan master Qiye catches them. Consequently, he confiscates Shao’s *daguangxian*, and, after humiliating Shao, the old man crushes the instrument. Shao’s wife Yazhi then takes this heartbroken man home.



Fig. 9. Yazhi, Shao, Qiye, and Chunhua in *Shao Jianghai*. Photo by author.

Act Five: Shao Jianghai and Yazhi enter with a plow. Shao Jianghai cannot forget about the loss of his *daguangxian*. Yazhi advises him to put *gezaixi* out of his mind and give himself to

cultivation. At this time Chunhua brings him a new *daguangxian*, which she bought secretly elsewhere. Mayor Wong enters, expressing his concerns over the fact that there is still secret *gezaixi* performance going on everywhere. Using Taiwanese actors such as Yun Zhongqing as hostages, the Mayor threatens Shao to cooperate with the authorities to enforce the policy, singing “the ban speaks the loudest when it is from the mouth of the master; you will tap at the gong and inform the public.” Then, the light turns to Shaoye, who chases Chunhua onto stage. The young man confesses his love, which Chunhua turns down because of the great difference in their social status.

Act Six: Villagers, holding incense sticks, enter in a slow and ritualistic movement. As the disheartened Shao Jianghai walks across lines of crowds to announce the ban, he seems to see Yun Zhongqing standing in front of him, reproaching him for mistreating *gezaixi*. Later on, Shao Jianghai finds out that Mayor Wong wants to match Chunhua with the old Qiye as his concubine. Furious, Shao Jianghai plays his instrument and sings the song of protest. The Mayor appears, accusing Shao of being a spy, and has him arrested.

Act Seven: Shao Jianghai, in prison, seems to contemplate something and jots it down. It turns out that he has been inspired to create a new tune, which he names *zasuidiao*. Yazhi comes to visit him, and he is touched to find out that his wife is in fact very supportive. Then Chunhua arrives, and Shao tells her that he has composed a play for her called *Snow in June*, in which he will use his newly created tune. “They say that Taiwanese *gezaixi* is *wanguodiao*. Let’s revise it then. We can use other tunes and other instruments to replace the Taiwanese parts. I am going to teach you the new tune *zasuidiao* to sing *Snow in June*.” Then Chunhua negotiates with the Mayor. She agrees to marry Qiye on the condition that they release Shao, and let her troupe

perform for three days. She emphasizes that she will not use *wangguodiao*; instead, she will use the new tune her teacher has created.



Fig. 10. Yun Zhongqing (left) asks Shao to teach her *zasuidiao* before she sets off to Taiwan. Photo taken and provided by Lin Heyi.

Act Eight: Chunhua, dressed in white, enters and sings lyrics from *Snow in June*, accusing Heaven of injustice. In the sorrowful movement that conjures the image of a dying swan, she takes out a pair of scissors and thrusts them into her throat. Shao dashes out to hold her, who confesses her affections for him before she dies. The Taiwanese actress Yun Zhongqing enters and sings: “Everyone knows the story on stage, but who pities the fate behind the scene...” Slowly Yun Zhongqing kneels down and asks Shao to teach her *zasuidiao*. Shao agrees generously and enthusiastically, singing: “Wholeheartedly I desire to spread the song a thousand leagues away.” At this time, two dozen lengths of red fabric drop slowly from above, each with a *daguangxian* attached to it. Actors dance onto stage and catch the instrument. They sit down and mime drawing the bow of the string instrument. Together they sing: “Wholeheartedly I desire to spread the song a thousand leagues away.” Finale music. Curtain down. The subtitle shows: “Shao Jianghai was born in Xiamen in 1914, and passed away in 1980. He is an artist widely

respected on both sides of the strait. The *zasuidiao* he created on the basis of southern Fujian folk songs has become one of the major tunes in *gezaixi* music. In 1948, *zasuidiao* was brought to Taiwan by a southern Fujian theatre company Dumaban, and thus the Taiwanese audiences call it *dumadiao*. Ever since then, *zasuidiao* has spread across the strait and to southeast Asia.”

The image of the *daguangxian* is manifest throughout the entire play. *Daguangxian*, literally big wide string, is a unique two-string instrument in *gezaixi* with a big and wide base. Simple and rustic, it is made of bamboo and delivers a low and sobbing sound. In this play, the *daguangxian* symbolizes the protagonist’s passion for this genre: From the moment the fourteen-year-old Shao Jianghai sees the performance by the Taiwanese *gezaixi* company and almost steals the *daguangxian* from them, he is destined to devote the rest of his life to its performing art. Shao makes his first entrance by singing and playing the *daguangxian*, which immediately creates in the audience’s mind an association between our hero and the image of this instrument. Even on his wedding night, he is meticulous about how and where to place the *daguangxian*. The musical instrument that lies amid the couple will prove to be both the source of their arguments and their means to understand each other.



Fig. 11. The final scene of *Shao Jianghai*. Photo by author.

Moreover, the playwright makes the *daguangxian* the embodiment of *gezaixi*. Accordingly, when it comes to the ban on performance, the playwright invents a very dramatic scene: the lustful “villain” Qiye throws the *daguangxian* at his feet and threatens to crush it. In order to save the instrument, Shao tragically swallows the humiliation of crouching beneath the old man, only to find out that it is an unfair trick. Nevertheless, the weak always have their tactics to get around the rules and restrictions imposed on them, and people still perform *gezaixi* clandestinely. Although the old instrument is smashed, there is always another one attainable through other means. Thus we see Chunhua buy Shao a new one from a remote village. Despite the circumstances, *gezaixi* survives in its own way at the grassroots level.

Visually, the director of the 2002/3 production magnifies the existence of the *daguangxian*; more than once he singles it out by putting it in the spotlight. In the last scene, the director uses multiple *daguangxian* attached to the end of lengths of red fabric. The use of red highlights Shao’s passion, which the playwright aims to portray. Above all, the *daguangxian* multiplies on stage: from the protagonist who plays the string instrument alone to the numerous nameless actors who appear and play the instruments simultaneously. This is accentuated by the subtitle: “Ever since then, *zasuidiao* has spread across the strait and to southeast Asia.” Thus the *daguangxian* becomes more than merely the emblem of *gezaixi*. It has come to represent “Chinese culture,” and the dispersion, continuance, and development of Chinese culture overseas.

The *daguangxian* also represents the cross-strait (China-Taiwan) connection and emotional attachment. It is this musical instrument that reunites Shao Jianghai and the Taiwanese actress Yun Zhongqing, and recalls how Shao plunged into *gezaixi* through the Taiwanese theater company. “In difficulties I often think of it. ‘Tis hard to forget that I traveled across the

strait to perform. Fans we all are and the instrument was a gift for thee. As strings and bow are tied, so is our friendship.” The pun on “*qin*” (musical instrument) and “*qing*” (love, affection, attachment, or relationship) has been common throughout Chinese literature. As the two are immersed in their past, they cannot help uttering the lines from the play *Shanbo Yingtai* (also known as *the Butterfly Lovers*); together they sing: “Remember the time when we pledged sibling-hood under the willow tree, yet now, the willow induces my grief as we have to part.” *Shanbo Yingtai* was one of the most frequently staged plays in the early phase of *gezaixi*. Here Shao Jianghai and Yun Zhongqing do not merely act out their memory of a past performance of *Shanbo Yingtai*, but they also express their own sadness through lyrics from the classic opera, as Yun Zhongqing plans to leave and go back to Taiwan. In the final scene, right before the descending of the numerous *daguangxian* attached to lengths of red fabric, the Taiwanese actress kneels down and asks Shao Jianghai to teach her *zasuidiao*. After Shao agrees, she sings: “The rock presses the grass yet the grass does not bend. The waves attempt to devour the rock but the rock remains firm. The *zasuidiao* circulates on both sides of the strait. Two *qin* strings link our *qing* together.” The relationship between Taiwan and China is thus tightly tied together thanks to *gezaixi*.

In this play, Yun Zhongqing represents Taiwanese performers who travel to the mainland and stay to teach and perform *gezaixi*. As a *gezaixi* diva, she dresses in fashion: sometimes in dress pants, sometimes in cheongsam. Although she appears in different costumes each time, there is one thing in her look that remains nearly constant: she almost always carries a suitcase with her. The suitcase implies the uncertain whereabouts of the Taiwanese performers, their being away from home, and their nomadic identity. When Yun Zhongqing makes her first entrance in Act three with a suitcase, she informs us that Japan has occupied Xiamen. She also

mentions that initially she came to the mainland to escape from Japanese rule, but now the Japanese have invaded Xiamen as well. “I left Taiwan to seek refuge, yet again the wolves drive me to the cliff.” Therefore the idea of returning to Taiwan occurs to her. At the end of the play when she enters, she also carries a suitcase, asks Shao Jianghai to teach her *zasuidiao*, then waves adieu and she sets out for Taiwan. Such an arrangement of the story ingeniously suggests the history that the new musical form *zasuidiao* was brought to Taiwan by a Chinese troupe after World War II, and shortly afterwards the music influenced *gezaixi* on the island.<sup>21</sup>

However, the relationship between China and Taiwan became complicated with the escalating tension between China and Japan. Thus, as we can see in this play, there is the ban on *gezaixi* and the notion of *wangguodiao*. Japan’s ambition towards China grew rapidly as it savored the sweetness of victory, and the bilateral relation had deteriorated and become intense, which put Taiwan in an extremely awkward position between its colonizer and its motherland. (I have discussed on how *gezaixi*-Taiwan-Japan was imagined metonymically on the mainland in the early 1930s, and how the music of *gezaixi* was associated and labeled as ominous *wangguodiao* in a section in the introductory chapter).

Accordingly, in this version of the play *Shao Jianghai*, there is an announcer with a gong, proclaiming: “Listen, the edict has it that *gezaixi* is too much noise and weepings. Its performance is immoral and detrimental to the society, and draws crowds that create trouble.

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<sup>21</sup> Liu Nanfang has detailed investigation regarding the spread and influence of *zasuidiao* in Taiwan. In summary, Dumaban was founded in 1940 on the mainland. After the war was over, the theatre company visited Taiwan in 1948. Originally, they planned to visit and tour island-wide for half a year. However, as the GMD lost the civil war on the mainland to the Communists and fled to Taiwan, cross-strait communication and traffic were closed down completely. The troupe had no choice but to stay on the island. To compete with the Taiwanese companies, they made several reformations in costumes and repertoire. One of their plays *Meng Lijun* became a hit and thus the music *zasuidiao*, which they brought with them from the mainland, garnered local attention. Many other troupes began to emulate the music from the troupe, and thus the tune was known as *dumadiao* in Taiwan and became one of the most commonly used tunes in Taiwanese *gezaixi*. Liu Nanfang, “*Dumaban laitai shimo* [The Whole Story of Dumaban's Visting Taiwan],” *Hanxue Yanjiou* 8.1 (1990).



From now on, every town and village is not allowed to have *gezaixi* performed. Whoever defies it will have severe consequences!” Mayor Wang affirms this and continues: “Not only does it create turbulence to the society, but it is also a *wangguo* music under the Japanese rule.” Thus begins the crisis of this play. What follows are conflicts such as Qiye’s destruction of the instrument, the Mayor forcing Shao Jianghai to help ban the genre, and the eventual move to resolve the story’s main conflict via Shao’s creation of *zasuidiao*.

Mayor Wang represents the general upper class of the society and their perception of *difangxi* (local drama) at the time. If we turn to newspapers from the 1920s to the early 1930s, both in Taiwan and on the mainland, we can see that *gezaixi* was notorious and under vehement attack by the upper classes. In Qiu Kunliang’s *Research on Taiwanese Theatre in Japanese Colonial Period*, he discusses one newspaper article in 1927 entitled “*Gezaixi weishenmo yaojin?* (Why Ban *Gezaixi*)” to analyze why in the eyes of the Taiwanese intellectuals of the time *gezaixi* was seen as some abhorrent monster that had to be stopped. In short, the reasons were: the performers had base and despicable personalities, the lyrics were erotic, the facial expressions in the performance were obscene, the players seduced the spectators and created family issues, etc. (Qiu 1992, 208-9). Similarly, the mainland-based *History of Gezaixi* cites several reports in the local newspaper *Xiamen ribao* in 1931 about the intellectuals’ appeal to ban this genre, which reflects similar views on *gezaixi* in southern China. These articles used descriptions such as “*gezaixi* is a kind of drama that entices lechery and robbery. It has direct and indirect detrimental impact on the social morals” and “the Taiwanese female troupes... are too sluttish... [Its stories] focus particularly on male-female seduction” (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 118-20). Basically these words reveal the upper class’s disdain for *gezaixi*’s “oversimplified” and “obscene” style of performance, and their worries that *gezaixi* would set up bad examples for the society. In this

play, both Shaoye and the mayor belong to the constituency that disapproves of *gezaixi*, although their reasons are rather sophisticated and ideological—and not completely due to class bias. In this version, the mayor stands in for all unreasonable authorities. He is in charge of passing down and executing orders from above, while at the same time, he articulates the contempt of the traditional upper class for the lower class people and culture. (Actors had long had a very low social status in China). In addition to political reasons, such as “*wangguo*,” the mayor’s condemnation for *gezaixi* is related to his awareness of the social hierarchy. It is not difficult to picture how astonished he would be at the discovery that his son has fallen in love with an actress.

Shaoye represents the passionate, educated youth of the time who eagerly seek to strengthen and save the Chinese nation. He wants to educate the people and change the society by means of drama. Therefore, he takes up Chunhua’s hand, inviting her to “go to the streets and stage a play to broadcast ideas of fighting Japan and saving the country.” However, in his mind the tool for reaching the ideal of education and nation-strengthening is “*xinju*” (new theatre, that is, Western style spoken drama, a novel form at the time), rather than the “people anesthetizing, society ruining,” “shallow and ignorant” *gezaixi*. His rationale, if understood in the context of Taiwan, has to do with the fact that the popularity of *gezaixi* had greatly frustrated the local intellectuals in the Japanese colonial period as they tried to promote *xinju* among the ordinary people. The intellectuals were eager to enlighten the people with *xinju*, but it had achieved limited effect. Seeing the outrageous rampancy of *gezaixi*, some intellectual *xinju* practitioners even considered the phenomenon as a conspiracy plotted by the Japanese government, deliberately promoting *gezaixi* to numb the Taiwanese society and to repress the growth of *xinju*. When the Taiwan *Minzhongdang* (Taiwan People’s Party) was founded in 1927, it included

“opposing *gezaixi*” in its platform. In 1930, when the party revised its platform, the central committee further listed it as the eighth entry of the social policy (Qiu 1992, 209). Scholar Xu Yaxiang, citing Chen Fangming, points to the fact that during the Japanese colonial period the intellectuals’ attack on local culture was primarily out of the fear that the “backward” local culture might turn into an obstruction for social change (Xu 2006, 29). Intellectuals on the mainland had the same concerns as they adapted to modernity. Following the May Fourth New Literary Movement initiated in the late 1910s, Chinese intellectuals questioned the tradition. The discourse then usually posited “tradition/ backward” and “modernity/ advanced” in a binary and antagonistic relationship. For the intellectuals who desired to push China on the track of modernization, *gezaixi*, as well as other regional theatres, signified the remnants of the old society that hampered the development of the nation.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to the Shao Jianghai, as a figure in history, what is known about him?

Shao Jianghai was born in 1914 in the neighborhood of Dawanggong in Xiamen city, Fujian province. He was the third child of eight in a poor family, which depended on the father’s job running a street seafood snack-bar. From early childhood, Jianghai had to help his family by taking odd jobs. In his free time, he hung out in the *gezaiguan* (*gezai* house) in his community, where he liked to sing *gezai* songs with the Taiwanese *shifu* (instructor), and later got to know Taiwanese performers such as Wen Hongtu and Yue Zhong’er. His techniques progressed rapidly under their instruction. At the age of seventeen or eighteen, he embarked on his career as a performer and toured from village to village in southern Fujian. The first play he directed in the

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<sup>22</sup> Teri Silvio offers another explanation regarding the intellectuals’ disapproval of *gezaixi* in the 1920s from a gendered viewpoint. She argues that *gezaixi* was deemed dangerous because it subverted the dichotomy between “inside/domestic” and “outside/public” space. The anti-*gezaixi* discourse linked women’s presence at *gezaixi* with “indecent behavior” and the corruption of “local custom,” revealing an anxiety of the intellectuals about the fact that *gezaixi* and *gezaixi* actors brought things which should be kept inside—women, sex—outside, into the view of the public. Silvio, “Drag Melodrama/Feminine Public Sphere/Folk Television : ‘Local Opera’ and Identity in Taiwan”, 41-43.

theatre company Baodechun received great responses from the viewers. At twenty-three, he married “into” a Zeng family in the Danzhai village of Longhai county, Fujian.

Soon after the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Xiamen was taken over by Japan. It was around this time that *gezaixi* was generally associated and labeled as “*wangguodiao*,” a dying-state music, or a kind of music that can annihilate a country. In the counties of southern Fujian that were not occupied by the Japanese, the Chinese Nationalist government issued an edict to ban this genre. Local *gezaixi* practitioners thus experienced great pressure from the official ban, the local hooligans’ blackmailing and the resistance of the people due to the negative association of *gezaixi* being a Taiwanese/Japanese form. Performers sought to rid this genre of the Taiwanese association by inventing a new dominant tune, *zasuidiao*. The creation of the music, though a collective work, is often attributed to Shao Jianghai.

It is generally agreed that Shao Jianghai’s contribution to *gezaixi* is both in its music and in scripts. In addition to his co-creation of the tune *zasuidiao*, which later was brought to Taiwan and became influential to *gezaixi* across the strait, he began a new chapter of *gezaixi*’s scripted plays. Earlier *gezaixi* had been ad-libbed on the basis of merely a scene outline. Shao Jianghai edited and rearranged many of the traditional plays and formalized the lyrics into written words. In 1939, he staged his first written script *Snow in June*, in which he began to employ a majority of the new music *zasuidiao*. Meanwhile, he went through dramatic ups and downs in his life. The Chinese Nationalist party accused him of being a Japanese spy during the Sino-Japanese war, yet when the war was over, the Nationalist party treated him as a communist suspect. When the People’s Republic of China was founded, he was rehabilitated and offered a teaching position in the Arts School in Zhangzhou. He was further invited in the National Arts Representative Meeting in 1960 and received by national leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. However, during

the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he was labeled as the “forefather of *xiangju* (*gezaixi*)” and struggled badly. He then was relocated to his wife’s hometown of Danzhai village to “receive the re-education from the poor peasants.” He was finally rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution was over, but soon thereafter, in 1980, he died (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 137-43; Chen 1997; Shao 1997).

From the fact that the playwright chooses the historical figure Shao Jianghai as his source to create the story, we can see his concerns for history. In the first version, such elements as the Taiwanese character Yun Zhongqing, the allusion to the classic play *Shanbo Yingtai*, and the accusation of *wangguodiao*, indicates how much the playwright was versed in *gezaixi* and its history. Indeed, the playwright Zeng Xuewen graduated from Xiamen Xiangju program at Fujian middle-high school of art, and thus had *gezaixi* performance experience in his early years. He later switched into the Xiamen Municipal Dramatic Playwriting Studio, which was soon changed into the Taiwanese Arts Research Studio in 1986, and then into the Taiwanese Arts Institute in 1992. In his early years, he was also known as a researcher. His books, co-authored with Chen Geng, *Bainian kanke gezaixi* [One Hundred Years of Distress: Gezaixi] and *Gezaixi shi* [History of Gezaixi] are important scholarship on *gezaixi* in China. With the playwright’s training, it is not difficult to understand how he was able to portray so effortlessly, through dialogue and characters, Shao’s historical plight. In the first version, history, or rather, approaching historical truth, is still a focal point for the playwright. Interestingly, this priority changes in the second version.

## **Second Version (2005)**

By second version of the play I mean the one performed by the Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe when they attended the Ninth Chinese Theatre Festival (*zhongguo xiju jie*) at the end of 2005, winning the Outstanding Play award. This version also won for its playwright the honor “the Chinese Theater Award: Cao Yu Literary Award” in 2006. The texts I use for the following analysis are the script the troupe used to rehearse during this time (with “revised in April 2005” marked on the last page), and the DVD the troupe produced later based on this script. When I embarked on my fieldwork in Xiamen in October 2005, I observed the rehearsals of Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe several times, and the *Shao Jianghai* they had been rehearsing at that time was the following version.

Act One: On front-center stage lays a *daguangxian*. The subtitle shows: “In 1938, the Japanese occupied Xiamen. *Gezaixi* performers left home one after another and escaped to the neighboring villages in southern Fujian. They guarded the precarious, last piece of the land.” The opening scene is solemn and quiet. Shao Jianghai and Chunhua are rehearsing the parting scene of the play *Shanbo Yingtai*. In the sorrowful offstage singing, they recall the words Shifu (instructor and mentor) told them before leaving for Taiwan to teach three years earlier. Shifu had handed down the *daguangxian* to them, asking them to “pass on *gezaixi*,” and asking Shao Jianghai to take care of his daughter Chunhua. The sorrow of *Shanbo Yingtai* reflects the mood of the two actors in reality, for on this day Shao Jianghai is marrying another woman. With the offstage singing “remembering the time when we pledged sibling-hood under the willow tree, yet now, the willow induces my grief as we have to part,” Chunhua gives her best wishes to Shao and leaves in tears.

Suddenly the stage brightens. Crowds for the wedding show up. They find the groom. Several girls cluster around the bride Yazhi and push her forward. There is a brief wedding ceremony and the crowds leave. The couple's conversation reveals their different expectations for a happy future. Shao Jianghai is still keen on his performing life whereas Yazhi hopes that he can settle down on the farm. In the meantime, Chunhua's singing voice is heard; the song divulges her affections for Shao. Shao Jianghai follows her voice and finds her. Chunhua says she wants to go to Taiwan to look for her father, so Shao gives the *daguangxian* to her, telling her to find Shifu with the sound of its music. In the meantime, the young intellectual Shaoye runs up to the stage, trying to catch Chunhua. His father, the Head Qiye, tries to stop him. Shaoye adores Chunhua and determines to pursue his dream girl regardless of his father's objection.

Act Two: Half a year later. While the performers are rehearsing and chatting, Chunhua enters, pale and haggard. She sings out her experience of the past half-year in Taiwan: The Taiwanese live miserably under the Japanese rule, and the Japanese enforce the Imperial Subject (*huangminhua*) Movement, forbidding the practice of traditional music and performances. Her father, trying to preserve the tradition and thus defying the Japanese, is shot and killed. Performers who listen to her story become agitated and indignant, and together they sing a song to assert their resolution to fight against Japan. At this moment, the Head Qiye appears with several guards, and stops the singing. Shao Jianghai's troupe is one of those that have run away from Xiamen after Japan assumed rule. Qiye forbids the troupe from singing *gezaixi* ever again on the ground that "Japanese soldiers stop your singing *gezaixi* in Xiamen, and you flee here to make such noise. Are you afraid the Japanese cannot hear you? ... Do you want to sing until this place also falls into Japan's hands?" Thus he orders the troupe to hand over their musical instruments.

Act Three: Shaoye confesses his love to Chunhua. She responds that it is impossible for them to be together and runs away. Shaoye chases her off. Yazhi and Shao Jianghai enter; she urges him to drop the idea of singing *gezaixi*. Four men carrying a goddess sedan enter. They try to entice Shao Jianghai to sing some *gezaixi* songs by singing badly. Shao cannot keep himself from correcting them by singing the songs properly. Unfortunately, Qiye shows up behind him and catches him on the spot. He confiscates Shao's *daguangxian*. Shao wants it back so badly that he is willing to take the insulting challenge of crawling between Qiye's legs. Nevertheless, Qiye does not keep his word, and instead he stomps on and breaks the instrument. Yazhi takes the devastated Shao home.



Fig. 12. Chunhua brings Shao the repaired *daguangxian*. Photo by author, 2007.

Act Four: Yazhi and Zhao Jianghai are cultivating in the field. Having lost his *daguangxian*, Shao is disheartened. Chunhua comes to show Shao the *daguangxian* she has repaired. Yazhi is displeased at Chunhua's encouraging Shao to continue playing *gezaixi*. Chunhua departs in discomfiture. Seeing the *daguangxian* Chunhua leaves on the ground, Shao tries to resist the temptation of picking it up and sings a monologue to express his inner struggle. When he finally picks it up and rejoices at the reunion, Qiye appears, handing Shao a gong. Qiye



uses Chunhua as a hostage and wants Shao to personally tell the public not to sing *gezaixi* anymore. Shao carries the gong reluctantly, with the unbearable thought that he is the one who must help ban the genre. He announces that tomorrow they will stage the last show in the temple festival. Then two guards approach Shao, saying, “the Japanese soldiers have arrived; they say *gezaixi* instigates the people to rebel,” and, “the Japanese soldiers ask Qiye to confiscate all the instruments.” They apologetically take away Shao’s *daguangxian*.

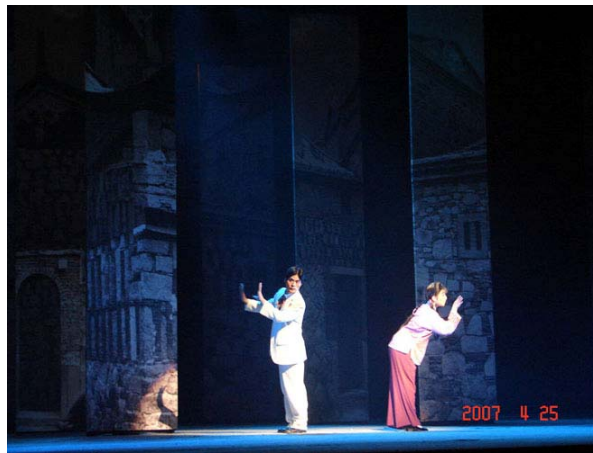


Fig. 13. Chunhua, accompanied by Shaoye, sneaks into the Japanese barracks to steal the *daguangxian*. Photo by author, 2007.

Act Five: Chunhua, singing as she enters, ventures in darkness, attempting to sneak into the Japanese barracks and steal the *daguangxian*. Shaoye, worried about her, follows her closely. The scene ends with Shaoye shouting “Japanese soldiers, stop!” and lights off simultaneously. Next, a group of performers enter solemnly with incense sticks in their hands. Shao Jianghai dashes forward and laments to the god of drama that he is incapable of protecting *daguangxian*, recalling all the happiness and fulfillment the *daguangxian* has brought to his life. He sings his determination: “In this last play today, even without instruments we will sing and make the song through Heaven.” He looks for Chunhua to start the play. She enters with messed hair and untidy

garments and hands Shao a *daguangxian*, asking him to start the performance at once. She then re-enters in the costumes of Dou'e, singing her grievance and asking Heave to bring her justice. In her wild dance, she takes out a pair of scissors and thrusts them into her throat. Shao Jianghai rushes out to catch her. Yazhi comes to explain why Chunhua has committed suicide: The Japanese soldiers had discovered and raped her while she was trying to retrieve the *daguangxian*, and they also had killed Shaoye. Chunhua lies in Shao's arms and confesses her love to him before she dies. Qiye, grief stricken, staggers onto the stage with a bloody suit in his hand. He shouts angrily: "Japanese soldiers, you assaulted our woman and killed my son. I am going to fight back!" At this, all the performers gather in groups, singing "let us play the music and roar; with our heads up and there we see our mountains and rivers." As in the first version, the ending is filled with red images. Shao Jinaghai declares: "I dedicate this life to the instrument, in bloody rain and bleak coldness. Wholeheartedly I desire to spread the song a thousand leagues away." Behind him twenty-four performers sit, their legs folded, playing the *daguangxian* that have descended on stage from large strips of red fabric.

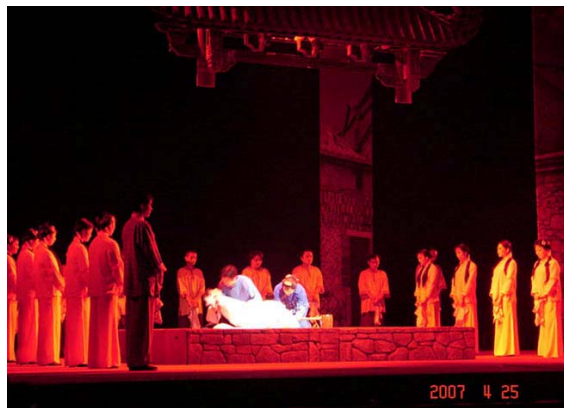


Fig. 14. The death of Chunhua. Photo by author.

Lights down, with a spotlight on the *daguangxian* at downstage center. The setting panels behind now serve as a projection board, with words streaming, one by one, “the *zasuidiao* Shao Jianghai created during the war against Japan was later known as *dumadiao* in Taiwan as it spread there. Shao Jianghai becomes a grassroots artist esteemed across the strait.”

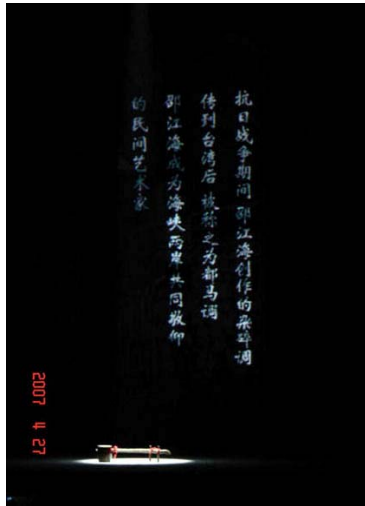


Fig. 15. The last image of the production.

Photo by author.

### Historical Representation, Female Body, National Imagination

In the second version, the playwright's attempt to condense the story is manifest. The number of acts is reduced from eight to five. The number of characters is reduced as well. The previous negative characters, Mayor and Qiye, are combined into a single character, who is both the head of the region and named Qiye, played by the actor who played Qiye in the first version. The storyline of the Taiwanese actress Yun Zhongqing is completely taken away. The relationship between Shao Jianghai and Chunhua has turned from master-disciple to school brother-sister. The director said, upon my inquiring, that he preferred the second version to the first because the trimmed story renders the *mise-en-scène* more clean and neat. However, if we disregard the aesthetic concerns for the time being, and read between the lines and investigate the

changes between the two versions, we notice that the revised play, with a seemingly similar story, in fact conveys quite a different philosophy.

First of all, the character Yun Zhongqing is erased in this version. In the first version, the playwright uses this Taiwanese performer, who travels back and forth between southern Fujian and Taiwan, to describe how *gezaixi* was brought to southern China across the strait, how it became rooted in southern Fujian, and how its re-creation was then brought back to Taiwan from the mainland. Yun Zhongqing may not have a big part in the first version, but her storyline, briefly but impressively, depicts the process by which *gezaixi* troupes on both sides learn from one another. Her storyline also demonstrates how art crosses and transcends boundaries, and how it continues to re-construct its shape.

However, in the second version, this character is replaced by an invisible “Shifu,” who never shows his face in the play. “Shifu” is Shao Jianghai’s instructor and Chunhua’s father; therefore the audiences would instantly identify Shifu as a native of southern Fujian on the mainland. The conversation exchanged between Chunhua and Shao Jianghai in act one tells us that Shifu left for Taiwan to “teach drama” three years ago. He gave them a *daguangxian* before his departure and asked them to try their best to pass down *gezaixi*.

This information is given through their dialogue, imbued with melancholy and sadness. On the surface, the memory of Shifu is evoked, inasmuch as he bridges Shao Jianghai and Chunhua, who have feelings for each other but ultimately do not get married. (Shao Jianghai, holding that he as a performer is of lower social status and little means, thinks Chunhua would be better off not marrying him, while he marries “into” a family with some land, the usual option for poor bachelors in the old days). Yet “facts” elicited about Shifu totally reorient the trajectory of *gezaixi*’s cross-strait flows in history. In the second version, the part in which the Taiwanese

performer Yun Zhongqing enlightens Shao Jianghai is removed, replaced by the memory that Shifu brings *gezaixi* from southern Fujian to Taiwan, and asks Shao, who stays on the mainland, to preserve and pass down this tradition.

In such a narration, *gezaixi* becomes a genre that originated in southern Fujian; this is presented as factual. While *daguangxian* still symbolizes Shao Jianghai's passion for *gezaixi*, this passion now has another level of meaning. Because Shifu has left the instrument behind, Shao has to guard it at all costs. When Chunhua tells Shao that she is going to Taiwan to look for her father, Shao gives her the *daguangxian*, explaining that "Shifu made this *daguangxian* with his own hands. He can recognize its sound even faraway." It seems that this invisible Shifu has become the father of *gezaixi*.

Thus the *daguangxian* also signifies the passing down of culture. In act two Chunhua shows up in ragged apparel, trembling and singing her experience of Taiwan over the past six months. "Japan implemented the Imperial Subject Movement, and took away my instruments. They forbade me to sing, forbade me to speak. They changed my ancestral temple and imprisoned me mentally. To save the heritage, afraid to lose the instrument, Father fought to grab the instrument. Yet who knows, he, he, he, lost his life at the Japanese gunshot." To preserve the "heritage," Shifu protects the *daguangxian* with his life, and this instrument, for which Shifu exchanges his life, passes down to the hands of Shao Jianghai. In the narration of the first two acts, the *daguangxian* is more than a unique musical instrument used in *gezaixi*, and does not just represent "*gezaixi*" itself. In the context of Japan's assimilation project in Taiwan, the Imperial Subject Movement, the instrument's symbolic meaning has extended to "Chinese culture," a national culture for which one is required to fight and die.

This level of meaning manifests itself as the story unfolds. In fact, conflicts in this version hinge on the *daguangxian*. The playwright titles the five acts: “reminiscence of the instrument,” “protecting the instrument,” “stamping the instrument,” “farewell to the instrument,” and “crying for the instrument.” At the end of act four, under the orders of the Japanese, the *daguangxian* is snatched away, and the dramatic conflict therefore centers on the matter of Chinese culture under the assault of Japanese imperialism. At the very beginning of act five, there is a transition scene in which Chunhua and Shaoye, through song and movement that elicit images of exploration in darkness and danger, venture into the enemy’s camp in pursuit of the *daguangxian*. In the final act, Chunhua commits suicide and Yazhi explains: “To get back the *daguangxian*, Japanese soldiers shot Shaoye, and molested Chunhua.”

Here, the conflict of this play has turned into a clash between nations. The “villains” in the previous version are the corrupted landlord Qiye and the unreasonable, powerful Mayor. In the second version, Qiye and the mayor are blended into one character, who serves as the agent of the authorities. However, there is ambiguity regarding whom Qiye shows his devotion to in the second version. Initially, Qiye stops the troupe from singing on the ground that “Japanese soldiers stop your singing *gezaxi* in Xiamen, and you flee here to make such noise. Are you afraid the Japanese cannot hear you? [...] Do you want to sing until this place is taken over as well?” It seems that at this point the village is still free from Japanese occupation and under the sovereignty of the Chinese Nationalist party, but in the end of act four, the Japanese seem to take over: “The Japanese soldiers have the order, asking Qiye to confiscate all the instruments.” When the *daguangxian* becomes the symbol of “Chinese culture,” it is very natural that those who snatch the instruments away should be the people’s enemies, the Japanese. And at this moment Qiye has formally become a lackey of the Japanese, for which he is punished severely in

the end—the Japanese kill his cherished son. As a result, he learns his lesson, realizes who the true enemy is, and joins the group of Shao Jianghai and the general public. They gather together in the end, singing out loud “with our heads up, there we see our mountains and rivers!” Together they represent the awakening power of a nation that cannot be underestimated.

The notion of “*wangguodiao*” is diluted in this version. Qiye’s disapproval of *gezaixi* in the beginning is based on the sentiment “Do you want to sing until this place is taken over as well?” which suggests the general argument against *wangguodiao*. Significantly, however, the term *wangguodiao* is not used, and thus the particular arguments regarding its deleterious effects are not mentioned explicitly. Consequently, in this version the logic behind the ban is vague and difficult to distinguish; the Japanese seem to become the ones ultimately responsible for the ban and the sole target of criticism.

What draws our attention in this version is that at the end of act four the confiscation of musical instruments by Japanese order echoes the second act when Chunhua comes back to the mainland and recounts to the villagers what she has witnessed in Taiwan of Japan’s Imperial Subject campaign. On the topic of Japan’s ban on traditional music practices in Taiwan, scholar Xu Yaxiang provides detailed analysis in “On Banning the Music.” He divides the “ban” into three phases based on the intensity of its implementation, that is, before the Marco Polo Bridge (*Lugouqiao*) Incident (1937), after the Incident, and after the founding of the Taiwanese Theatre Association (1942). First he stresses that even though generally people mark the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which ignited the second Sino-Japanese war, as the initial point of Japan’s onslaught of its intensified assimilation project in its colonies and thus the ban on traditional music practices in Taiwan, the truth is that in the year before the incident, various propositions already emerged urging the authorities to take an active role in either clamping down on

Taiwanese theatre or reducing the number of Taiwanese theatre performances. He further states that after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident the Japanese authorities advocated “custom-invigorating,” which coerced the people to “improve the ritual” and “break superstition.” As a result, outdoor theatre performances, which operated largely in accordance with religious occasions, disappeared rapidly. Also, the Japanese did consciously exert pressure on the indoor theater, hoping to “guide” Taiwanese troupes into performing a thoroughly Japanese style *xinju* (new drama). Finally, in 1942, Japan’s founding of the Taiwanese Theatre Association put into effect the comprehensive enforcement of its Imperial Subject Movement in the field of drama. The Association completely controlled the form and content of theatre performances, rendering *huangminju* (imperial subject drama) and *xinju* (new drama) the only forms of theatre entertainment throughout the island (Xu 2006).

As far as *gezaixi* on the mainland is concerned, historical materials on the trauma experienced by *gezaixi* in the southern Fujian area during the Sino-Japanese war focus mostly on the association of “*wangguodiao*” and the Chinese Nationalists’ ban on the genre, as discussed in the previous chapter. Very little is mentioned with respect to whether Xiamen, during the few years when it was occupied by Japan, faced the fate of Japan’s assimilation policy and thus “*jinguyue*,” the ban on traditional music practices that had happened in Taiwan. During the war, *gezaixi* in Xiamen was impacted primarily because of the shortage of performers (who either returned to Taiwan or left for surrounding districts in southern Fujian), and Japan’s imposition of blackouts in cities after 1941, which made it difficult to perform in the evenings. Yet before the



blackout was enforced, performers who stayed in Xiamen such as Sai Yuejin and Zi Dumei organized a theatre company named “Tongyishe” and performed for a living.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, *gezaixi* on the mainland during the wartime period suffered due to the negative connotations of “*wangguodiao*,” which are also the focus of the dramatic conflict in the first version of the play. However, in the second version the target of criticism turns from the Nationalist party’s ban to the Japanese suppression of theatrical activities. Chunhua’s recounting of the Imperial Subject movement in Taiwan in act two connects to the moment in the fourth act when the Japanese arrive in their village and order that musical instruments be confiscated, which creates the idea that *gezaixi* in southern Fujian was experiencing the same predicament as the “*jingyue*” on Taiwan. What Chunhua has seen of Taiwan’s imperialization is displaced onto this village in southern Fujian in the scene in which the Japanese confiscation order is enforced. The criticism in the second version thus turns its target from the ban enforced by the Chinese Nationalist party to the ban enforced by the Japanese. Paradoxically, the Japanese Imperial Subject Movement never took place in southern Fujian, yet through this juxtaposition in narration a history that never happened seems truly to exist in reality.

The actress Chunhua who adores and understands Shao Jianghai is a fictional character the playwright created to spice up the story.<sup>24</sup> In the play *Shao Jianghai*, the purpose of Chunhua’s existence is mainly to build up the dramatic effect, especially towards the end. The

<sup>23</sup> With regard to the activities of *gezaixi* during the wartime, see *Gezaixi shi*, 120-30. In addition, I interviewed a senior performer from Xiamen. She recalled that during the Sino-Japanese war, the Longshan Theatre in Xiamen “overflowed” with audiences. In her memory, on the day when the Japanese surrendered, Zhonghua Theatre had a performance. Personal interview, April 7, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> If we examine Shao’s portfolio, in reality he did create a play entitled *Snow in June*. The play indeed used *zasuidiao* as the main melody. *Snow in June*, edited by Shao Jianghai, combines the story of the traditional *gezaixi* play *Shixi ji*, and the story of *Dou’e yuen*. Shao’s *Snow in June* has a comic base, whereas the *Snow in June* in the play *Shao Jianghai* is tragic. For the entire play of Shao’s *Snow in June*, see Shao Jianghai, *Shao Jianghai gezaixi juban jingxuan* [A Collection of Shao Jianghai’s Gezaixi Plays], ed. Xiamen shi taiwan yishu yanjiusuo, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju, 2006), 12-126.

play within the play, *Snow in June*, in the last act is also the climax. The injustice Chunhua feels about life resonates with the grievance of the character Dou'e she plays. In the end, she kills herself on stage. Chunhua's blood parallels the accusation of Dou'e to Heaven before her execution.

In the first version, what Chunhua protests with her youthful body is first of all the oppression by the upper class as represented by Mayor Wang and Qiye. In addition, if we put this action in the context of the entire play, (that is, Shao Jianghai's inventing *zasuidiao* under the pressure of the ban, and the emphasis that the troupe would use the new music in *Snow in June*), it can also be interpreted as an objection on behalf of the oppressed people she represents against the ban and the accusation of "*wangguodiao*." The death of Chunhua, the perishing of this being who is as beautiful as a daffodil, highlights the tragedy of the ban. Art itself is beautiful and innocent, yet the accusation of "*wangguodiao*" can be destructive and damaging.

In the second version, due to the modification in narration, the major enemy becomes the Japanese, whereas Mayor/Qiye is merely the mouthpiece. To retrieve the *daguangxian*, Chunhua and Shaoye have to pay a dear price with their bodies: Shaoye is shot, and Chunhua is raped. Thus, what Chunhua protests with her blood in the final act is Japan's "intrusion" into China. Here, intrusion takes on a double meaning: it has both a personal physical sense and a territorial one.

The work of imagination that links female bodies to national space does not exist exclusively in China. In her article "Woman-body-nation-space," Radhika Mohanram, citing Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, suggests that the woman's body is like "maps of/within the nation in that it has triple functions: to encode boundaries, to reproduce sameness, and to reveal difference simultaneously" (Mohanram 1999: 61). Moreover, the author compellingly uses the

veiled Algerian woman as an apt example to contemplate the colonial relation between Algeria and France from a gendered viewpoint. The veiled woman embodies Algerian tradition, which differentiates itself from French culture. This female body also has become a battlefield for French and Algerian men. The French attempt to “liberate” Algerian women from the veil, and employ a binary argument (“veiled/ backward tradition” as opposed to “unveiled/ advanced modernity”) to support their liberation campaign. However, for the Algerian men, allowing one’s wife to unveil amounts to putting her on public exhibition and prostituting her. (Certainly this ideological debate does not grant the Algerian woman voice, nor does it result from her free choice.) Radhika Mohanram examines further the reason the French are eager to free the Algerian woman from the veil, arguing that it is driven by a demand for control. The veiled Algerian woman frustrates the colonizer because he can only *be seen* and not *see*; for French men in Algeria, “the trope of surveillance—to see and not to be seen” (Mohanram 1999: 64) gets reversed. Therefore, for Algerian men, the unveiling of Algerian women suggests the succumbing, or even, the inferiority, of Algerian men. Mohanram quotes Jenny Sharpe’s notion on concept-metaphor in imperialism to strengthen her argument: “ ‘Rape’ does not designate the penetration and control of a female colonial body, rather, it designates the emasculation of a male one.” Thus, “unveiling Algerian women was finally about French masculinity. Empire could function only through the emasculation of Algerian man. To a large extent resistance to unveiling must be read within the context of resistance to emasculation” (Mohanram 1999, 72-73). She further cites Frantz Fanon and points out that to unveil the Algerian woman is to lay bare, piece by piece, the flesh that has long been unknown and forbidden. The body of Algerian woman comes to symbolize the land of the colony. Thus metonymically, to unveil the woman is equivalent to disclosing the landscape of Algeria to the colonizers.

Strictly speaking, China did not undergo territorial colonization. However, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, China had suffered greatly from economic exploitation caused by the expansion of colonial powers. A series of defeats by Western powers and by Japan painfully devastated and dismantled the confidence Chinese had had for their culture and history. The cultural movement in the early twentieth century initiated by the Chinese intellectuals was a response to this crisis that they experienced because of colonialism.

Interestingly, two controversial events that happened in the early twenty-first century in the Chinese entertainment field both related to the idea of women's bodies and the empire. In 2001, Chinese actress Zhao Wei posed for a Chinese fashion magazine *L'Officiel*, and the dress she wore had a large pattern of a Japanese military flag. Although it is not unusual for international designers to apply iconic elements such as flags in their work— in this instance the dress had positive Chinese characters for “hygiene, peace, happiness, health,” on it— still this photo incurred fury and complaints on the mainland. Zhao was harshly condemned and boycotted in the press and on the Internet. Survivors of the Nanjing Massacre wrote a letter to her collectively, which was released in the newspapers. The general anger cooled down gradually after Zhao Wei's several attempts at public apology. Hubei Education Publisher even selected this event as a negative example for patriotism in its *Reading on Citizens' Moral Construction* for elementary and middle schools.<sup>25</sup> In this case, the garb is not perceived as an individual free choice, nor a fashion statement of the designer's whimsical wits; rather, because the military flag contains such a strong connotation of masculinity and incursion, when it covers a Chinese female body it inevitably evokes traumatic memories about the Japanese atrocity on

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<sup>25</sup> "Nanjing datusha xingcuenzhe lianming xiegei Zhao Wei de yifeng gongkai xin [A Letter to Zhao Wei by the Survivors of the Nanjing Massacre] ", *Sichuan Chengdu ribao*, December 6, 2001.. For various reports and opinions on this matter, see the *People's Daily* website and Sina website.  
<http://ent.people.com.cn/BIG5/other7010/index.html> ; <http://ent.sina.com.cn/zwjqz.html> °

Chinese land in the last century. In the book *the Rape of Nanking*, Iris Chang reminds us the ruthlessness of Japanese troops as they entered the city:

Chinese men were used for bayonet practice and in decapitation contests. An estimated 20,000-80,000 Chinese women were raped. Many soldiers went beyond rape to disembowel women, slice off their breasts, nail them alive to walls. Fathers were forced to rape their daughters, and sons their mothers, as other family members watched. Not only did live burials, castration, the carving of organs, and the roasting of people become routine, but more diabolical tortures were practiced, such as hanging people by their tongues on iron hooks or burying people to their waists and watching them get torn apart by German shepherds. (Chang 1997, 6)

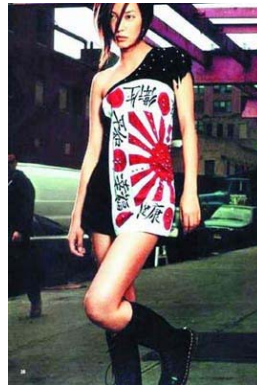


Fig. 16. Zhao Wei and the controversial dress.

The second episode was the uproar that the film *Memoirs of a Geisha* stirred on the mainland. Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi plays a Japanese woman having sex with a Japanese character (played by a Japanese man), which, in the eyes of many Chinese, renders herself a plaything of the Japanese. Such an action is unacceptable to many Chinese citizens. The main theme of online denouncements was the fact that “three Chinese women (Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li, Michelle Yeoh) lower themselves by playing prostitutes for the Japanese.”<sup>26</sup> What is hidden

<sup>26</sup> See comments in the forum on the internet.

[http://comment.news.163.com/news\\_guoji2\\_bbs/37VHJDQ60001121M.html](http://comment.news.163.com/news_guoji2_bbs/37VHJDQ60001121M.html) Sadly, the price Asian stars must pay

behind this logic is the issue of the “masculinity” of the empire, as suggested in Radhika Mohanram’s article. In the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Japanese men demonstrate and exercise their masculinity, and the Chinese actresses in the film are the passive recipients. The message was too much for many Chinese to tolerate, and the film was banned in China. The production team and investors who had cast the film were probably hoping to pave its way to the huge Chinese market (in addition to the European and North American market) with the celebrity of these female stars. But the depth of the national feud and the difficulty of healing a national trauma were things these Western investors had not perceived and could not foresee.

The cause of Chunhua’s death in the second version can be understood along the lines of this national sentiment. On the way to retrieving the *daguangxian*, Chunhua is sexually molested by the Japanese, for which she kills herself in protest. Her death unites everyone in the village. The underlying message in the last scene is that even though the territory of China (represented by Chunhua) is violated and encroached, Chinese culture (represented by the *daguangxian*) will still be passed on through these people who are determined and persistent. In such a dramatic deployment, the *daguangxian* becomes representative of authentic Chinese culture. It is because of this embodiment of Chinese culture in the narration that it “has to be” brought from southern China to Taiwan by the Chinese Shifu. It cannot be the other way around: It cannot be passed down to Shao Jianghai from Taiwanese performers, represented by Yun Chongqing. What guides the change of narration is perhaps a Chinese cultural chauvinism: Just like “all” Chinese culture, *gezaixi* has to be originated in China, and with China as the center and cradle, it spreads overseas to where other ethnic Chinese reside. The transmission of Chinese culture is a one-way flow. It

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to be recognized in the international mainstream entertainment industry is apparently not the focus nor concern of this censure. No one talks about the fact that Chinese actresses are a minority in Hollywood, and how much effort they have to make to obtain the opportunity to be cast and hence globally visible and recognized via the West.

can only go from the center to periphery; the reverse movement is inconceivable and unacceptable.

*Xiamen Daily* conducted an interview on January 10, 2007 with the deputy chief of Xiamen Cultural Bureau, Ms. Ye Zhihua, who is also a supervisor in dramatic literature for Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe. Regarding the frequent modifications of *Shao Jianghai*, she is very positive about the result of the changes. In her opinion, after the drastic modification, “the theme of the entire play ascends from grass roots level to national level, which is a great leap for the play” (Hai 2007). Thus, nationalism is prioritized in the second version. Historical truth fades out in the grand song of nationalism.

In the play *Shao Jianghai*, the playwright selects the time when Shao Jianghai was young and wild and free to tell his story. The focus of the first version is to portray Shao’s creation of the tune *zasuidiao* and its context, which includes the cross-strait, up-and-back flows of *gezaixi* and the pressure of the war. In the second version, the creation of *zasuidiao* is no longer the focal point. (In fact, the creation of the new music is barely mentioned in this version). Its theme instead concentrates on cultural heritage and national sentiments, which thus gives the spotlight entirely to the instrument *daguangxian*. Accordingly, a large part of the play is spent depicting Shao’s attachment and devotion to the *daguangxian*. In the second version, little is left for us to relate to the historical Shao Jianghai.

The question of how drama should deal with history has been a contentious issue on the mainland, how it should balance “reflecting reality” and “exercising poetic license.” Chinese scholar Fu Jin points out that today the requirement for history plays on the mainland prioritizes historicism. The idea originated from an argument stirred by Yang Shaoxuen’s plays in the 1950s, in which he applied the theory of class struggle to re-interpret the relationships of

characters in certain historical stories. Yet the fact is that all historical materials inevitably deviate from the historical truth to a certain extent. Therefore, in Fu's opinion, the historicity principal requiring that a history play "should not contradict the historical truth" and "should faithfully reflect the historical truth" has been a restriction for the dramatic creation in the subsequent decades (Fu 2004, 91-93). Perhaps it is because of this requirement that the "history play" is an independent genre, and constitutes one of "the three genres" along with the contemporary play and the traditional costume play on the mainland.

Shao Jianghai is a real character in contemporary theatre history. Yet, the play *Shao Jianghai*, inspired by the historical figure, draws only on a few ideas about him. As a "contemporary play," surely this play cannot be discussed as a "history play," nor can it be required to follow the historic truth step by step. What is problematic, however, is that for the members of the general public who are unfamiliar with the history of *gezaixi*, this play is their chief source of information on Shao Jianghai and his era. Thus, the situation of *gezaixi* in southern Fujian at the time and the trajectory of *gezaixi*'s dispersal re-delineated in the second version also become the source of history for audiences to imagine. Strictly speaking, this play cannot disassociate itself from history. In the modification of the second version, we see how history is appropriated, rewritten, and represented as an episteme, which the People's Republic of China is eager to advocate, disseminate and circulate at this stage.

## **Afterwords**

The first time I visited Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe, they were rehearsing *Shao Jianghai* to prepare for the contest being held in Ningpo in November 2005. The next year, when I visited the troupe again, they were also rehearsing this play as one of the programs they would stage in



Taiwan in September 2006. In the spring of 2007, I went to Xiamen, and again I saw the rehearsals of *Shao Jianghai*. The troupe was gearing up for the tenth “*wugeyi gongcheng jiang* (Five ‘A’ Construction Award),” a national “spiritual and civil construction” project organized by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the show was nominated in “*guojia wutai yishu jingpin gongcheng* (Fine Works of National Theatrical Art),” the highest honor in theatre nationwide, and was going to be evaluated in late summer of 2007. Everybody in the troupe was excited about this.

Although I have seen *Shao Jianghai* many times, each performance I saw during my visits had slight modifications. The story in 2007 attempts a compromise between the first and second versions discussed above. While glorifying Chinese nationalism, it also seeks to approach the accuracy of history. Qiye and the Mayor here are divided into two characters again. Qiye is lecherous and self-interested and so the Japanese are not the only villains in the play, which renders the dynamics of the play more diverse and rich than the oversimplified vice-virtue dualism, based essentially on nationality, of the second version. The scene in which Shao Jianghai creates *zasuidiao* in prison returns in this version. The reason he is put into jail is that Qiye is afraid that he himself will get into trouble if he allows Shao to keep singing *gezaixi*, which has nothing to do with the Japanese, as it does in the second version. In the latest version, Chunhua and Shaoye try to break away to pursue their own happiness in other places, but unfortunately they run into the Japanese soldiers in the woods and become victims. Thus the narration is less politically charged. However, the several changes in narration of *Shao Jianghai* from 2002 to 2005 are so intriguing that they are worth documenting as an event, to bear witness to how history can be appropriated and represented at a time when China is eager to assert its

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<sup>27</sup> The contest was initiated in 1992 and usually held annually. The five ‘A’ refers to “a good theatrical work, a good TV drama or film, a good book, and a good theoretical article (in social science).”

legitimacy over Taiwan and Taiwanese culture. The development of the play also reveals the tug-of-war between politics and art in China today.

Last but not least, I have to give emphasis to my personal respect for the playwright Zeng Xuewen and his contribution to traditional theatre. The two history books on *gezaixi* that he co-authored have always been important references for me. His play *Shao Jianghai* makes impressive achievements in language and characterization, and I am especially fascinated with how effortlessly he merges dramatic literature with theatre history. I tried to ask the playwright about his thoughts on these several modifications, but he did not comment on them. Nevertheless, I believe that the playwright must have received close attention from the upper supervisors, officials, and experts as he changed the narration of his original story so radically. Being a regional public troupe, participating in competitions tier by tier and getting awards one after another is a critical way to obtain financial resources and raise the position of the troupe. Frequently the allotment of the budget and the evaluation of the performances are in the control of the experts and leaders. The change of *Shao Jianghai* from the first version to the second also exposes the problem in the field of theatre on the mainland, especially acute when the content involves cross-strait interactions, the origin and representativeness of culture, and ideologies such as nationalism, and where is a great deal at stake for the playwright and his work, and the inevitable struggle and powerless compromise that come with it.

### Chapter Three

#### National Mobilization: The Contemporary Play in China

The previous chapter looks at *Shao Jianghai*, a *xiandaixi* (contemporary play) produced by Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe during 2002-2005, to illustrate how its shifting narrative strategy supports a China-centric interpretation of China-Taiwanese relations. In fact, the history of *xiandaixi* on the mainland had long been politically charged. Because this dissertation aims to address the difference of cross-strait *gezaixi* and turns to historical contexts for explanation, in this chapter I focus particularly on two movements that profoundly shaped all the sung drama on the mainland—the drama reform campaign (1949-1965) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)—and I use the contemporary play as a site to analyze the historical development in theatre. The chapter calls attention to the ways in which the Beijing regime mobilized and regulated theatre. I argue that institutionalization and script-centrism, starting from the launch of the drama reform campaign, are the primary forces that continue to shape the Chinese theatre even to this day. By implementing a scripted system and containing performers within the state apparatus, a single, specific aesthetic, which was molded by small cultural elites and mediated by the central government, was easy to disseminate, carry out and normalize. The enforcement of the model plays during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution shows the extremity of the establishment of an exclusive artistic form.

While most scholarship condemns the damages the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) did to Chinese theatre, it almost always celebrates the previous drama reform (*xigai*) implemented

soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China,<sup>28</sup> affirming that the reformation effectively uplifted the artistic quality of sung drama and the performer's life. The following discussion contains an extensive review of historical materials of the two movements and attempts to complicate current *gezaixi* historiography. In this chapter, I seek to reconsider the legacy of drama reform by arguing that the institutionalization of theatre and performers and the elevation and implementation of scripted performance, initiated at the outset of the drama reform, paved the way for the "one flower only" "disaster" in the ensuing Cultural Revolution. While affirming the efforts the two campaigns devoted to experimenting with a new theatrical expression, I challenge the top-down dictate of a single aesthetic standard that barely tolerates diversification, leaving little free artistic space for minority theatres on the mainland such as *gezaixi* and few options but to keep following the steps of dominant theatres.

Moreover, as one of the objectives and outcomes of the drama reform was to bring the theatre and performers into its efficient control, Chinese theatre was regulated first and foremost by the central government. As a result, nearly all regional theatres shared similar fate during these decades. Therefore, references and discussion will focus mainly on the development of the entire Chinese theatre, and will position performance events in Fujian province and *gezaixi*/*xiangju* in this context. I investigate how *gezaixi* as a regional genre responded to the time and managed to survive under the circumstances.

### **The Sung Drama (*Xiqu*) Reform Campaign**

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<sup>28</sup> Among the theatre research, mainland scholar Fu Jin raises a very different opinion. He meticulously examines various documents and questions the censorship that accompanied the drama reformation, and critically draws attention to the general mentality behind the drama reform that had instrumentalized Chinese theatre. His arguments deepen and complicate the research of contemporary Chinese theatre, and this chapter is indebted to his view.

History is made by the people, yet the old opera (and all the old literature and art, which are divorced from the people) presents the people as though they were dirt, and the stage is dominated by lords and ladies and their pampered sons and daughters. Now you have reversed this reversal of history and restored historical truth, and thus a new life is opening up for the old opera. That is why this merits congratulations.... The initiative you have taken marks an epoch-making beginning in the revolutionization of the old opera. I am very happy at the thought of this. I hope you will write more plays and give more performances, and so help make this practice a common one which will prevail throughout the country. (Mao 1944)

The passage above is from a letter written by Mao Zedong to the writer and director of the Yanan Peking Opera Theatre on January 9, 1944, after he saw the play *Driven to Join the Liangshan Mountain Rebels* (*Bishang liangshan*) performed by the troupe for the second time. Based on the classic novel *Shuihu zhuan*, *Driven to Join the Liangshan Mountain Rebels* inserts the philosophy of class struggle, and emphasizes the protagonist Lin Chong's gradual disillusionment with the corrupt government and his final realization that the only solution to the oppression is to overthrow the dominant class by uniting with the masses. The rewriting and rereading of the classic story accorded with the revolutionary ideology of the Chinese Communist Party at the time when it was fighting to overthrow and replace the Nationalist regime. Thus the play won great approval from Mao, whose comments hinged on the concepts and function of the play. That is, drama serves to expose reality, debunk class exploitation imposed on ordinary people, laud the resistance taken by the oppressed, and celebrate the people's final victory. Mao's letter did not pertain to *Driven to Join the Liangshan Mountain Rebels* alone; it exerted great influence on the reformation of drama and theatrical production during the next three decades (Gao and Li 1999, 101; Fu 2002, 13).

This letter was not Mao's first foray into the politics of cultural production. Mao had revealed similar opinions regarding literature and art before. In his famous "Talks at the Conference on Literature and Art in Yanan" in May 1942, Mao made it very clear that "our meeting today is to ensure that literature and art become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy, and help the people achieve solidarity in their struggle against the enemy" (McDougall 1980). The Communist Party viewed literary and art work as a vehicle to assist its revolution. In the *Talks*, Mao also argued that art for art's sake does not exist in reality since all literature and art belongs to a definite class and party. While the literature and art served the landlord class during the feudal era, Mao stated that the literature and art of the ruling class in the past, the old forms of the bourgeoisie, could be reconstructed and filled with new content, so that they become revolutionary and serve the workers, peasants and soldiers (65, 75). Under such a guideline, drama is regarded as an important propaganda tool instead of an entertainment industry.

Mao's *Talks* continued to guide the art and literary fields during the next three decades. The editorial "Carry Out the Reformation of the Old Drama Step by Step" (*Yo jihua yo buzou di jinxing jiuju gaige kongzuo*) issued on November 23, 1948, states "old drama, like other old departments in culture and education, is a vital means of class struggle which had been used by the old, reactionary, and oppressive class to beguile and suppress the laboring masses. We do not need to deceive and exploit the laboring masses. Instead, we should help and encourage the masses to counter and annihilate such deception and oppression. Therefore we need to reform the old drama." The editorial also pointed out that old drama should not be staged without regulation, spreading poisonous thoughts among the masses. Accordingly, "the first step to reform the old

drama should be to censor the old repertoire”(Gao and Li 1999, 6-7; Fu 2002, 9). This editorial on drama reform also established a direction for the national drama policy after the Communist Party officially built up its regime in 1949.

In November 1949, the Ministry of Culture set up the “*Xiqu* Reformation Bureau” as the institution that took charge of drama reformation nationwide, and in July 1950, the Ministry of Culture also invited renowned practitioners and writers in theatre and literary art to organize the “*Xiqu* Reformation Committee” as the counseling institute for the campaign. The committee was in charge of censoring the plays. Thus was launched the Drama Reform Campaign that lasted over a decade. On May 5, 1951, the State Council issued the “Instructions Regarding *Xiqu* Reformation,” abbreviated and known as the “55 Instructions,” which served as the ultimate guidelines of drama reform nationwide (Gao and Li 1999, 127). Later in the same year the slogan “let a hundred flowers bloom; remove the old so as to bring forth the new”<sup>29</sup> became the keynote for the reformation. In response to the decree, Fujian province founded the Bureau of Cultural Affairs in 1952, and then in January 1953, a provincial *xiqu* reform committee was founded as the organization that supervised the campaign (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 180). *History of Gezaixi* discusses the development of *gezaixi* in southern Fujian during the period of drama reform in terms of the three objectives of the movement: change of plays, change of personnel, and change of the system, which I apply to structure the following discussion.

#### A. Inscribing State Ideology: Change of Plays

According to the “55 Instructions,” the reformation of drama should focus on “censoring the most widespread old repertoire,” and amending the inappropriate content and performance.

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<sup>29</sup> It was originally an epigraph Mao wrote for the newly founded Chinese *Xiqu* Research Institute in April 1951, and then became a keynote for the *xiqu* reform movement.

From 1950 to 1952, the Ministry of Culture banned twenty-six traditional plays throughout the country on the grounds that these plays advocated horrifying homicide, supernatural superstition, and pornography.<sup>30</sup> As a result, each regional government banned several plays on its own based on a similar rationale. In the meantime, all the local educational and cultural organizations tightened their regulation, purging the language on stage that they deemed vulgar and rectifying the stories that either contained feudal and anti-patriotic thoughts or denigrated the working class.

With regard to the standard of censorship, in July 1949, the Drama Reformation Committee declared, along with issuing the first list of forbidden plays (see footnote 32), that plays with the following content had to be either revised or restricted: 1. content that advocate feudal and slavish ethics; 2. content that advocate lewdness and homicide; 3. language and movement that denigrate and humiliate the working class. Even with the aforementioned basic principles, there existed great room for individual interpretation. For instance, there was only a fine line between superstition and mythology, and between love affair and obscene lust. It all depended on how the censor viewed the play. Therefore, the Drama Reformation Committee cautioned the censors to be attentive so as to be able to “discern between superstition and mythology” and to “discern between love affair and obscene lust” (1984, 19-20).

From 1955 to 1960, the cultural departments began a top-down task of unearthing and preserving traditional repertoires. Fujian province achieved substantial results during this time, transcribing approximately 16,500 plays and preserving countless manuscripts. Overall, local governments spared no efforts in discovering and preserving traditional repertoires during this

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<sup>30</sup> A look at the first list, with twelve plays banned, gives us some idea about the initial criteria. They are: *Family's Blood*, *Mayi Saves His Master*, *Punishments in Hell*, *Haihui Temple*, *A Ghost's Lawsuit*, *Two Nails on the Skull*, *Judge Bao Visiting Hades*, *Guanyin Becomes Bhuda*, *Miracle by Guangong*, *The Barbarian Country*, *Iron Rooster* (a play featuring martial arts with real swords on stage), and *Ghost Vengeance*.



time (Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui 1993, 15-16). Even though the preservation of traditional repertoires was carried out aggressively and attained considerable results, ironically, in many places “there were no plays for performers.” This was mainly due to the strict censorship that was enforced at the same time. Plays were rated as “allowed,” “unacceptable,” and “allowed with moderate modification” in each region. However, those that were categorized as “allowed with moderate modification” would simply be halted on the ground that they had not been revised yet. Although in the “55 Instructions” the Ministry of Culture attempted to confine the forbidden repertoire within the twenty-six plays the central government had formally issued, local governments interpreted the twenty-six forbidden plays (and what these plays stood for) in their own way, and applied the rationale to prohibit regional plays. In the regions that took a more radical stance towards the censorship such as the Northeast, efforts to weed out the poisonous elements of the traditional theatre were such that only a few traditional plays were allowed to perform under the censorship. Further, a document in Guangxi province in 1953 shows that many official units then attempted to get involved in the regulation, including not only the cultural and educational department, but also the police, industry and commerce department, tax bureau, and labor union. With the censorship replete with contradictions and confusion, numerous traditional plays were suspended. With troupes lacking sufficient talent in writing and music composing, which was often the case, it was natural that they could not create enough qualified scripts within a short time to meet the requirement of the policy. The repertoire in the 1950s thus became “barren and monotonous”(Fu 2005, 216),<sup>31</sup> with troupes staging the few approved plays and plays with correct ideology.

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<sup>31</sup> Fu Jin has a very detailed and eloquent discussion regarding the restrictions on traditional *xiqu* on the mainland in “On Banning Drama over the Past Five Decades.” Fu Jin, *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiju de xiandai xing yu bentu hua* [The Modernity and Localization of the Chinese Theatre in the Twentieth Century] (Taipei: Guojia, 2005).

Because most regional governments tended to apply the censorship measures strictly, in the end of 1952, an editorial appeared on *People's Daily* entitled "Correctly Treat the *Xiqu* Heritage of the Nation" (*Zhengchuedi dueidai zuguo de xiqu yiji*)," criticizing the rudeness and disrespect most cadres held towards drama reformation.

They did not appreciate the grass-roots characteristics and realistic spirit in national sung drama at all. On the contrary, they claimed that the plays were feudal as an overriding pretext to disallow everything... The fact that these cadres banned plays randomly and with all sorts of excuses made it difficult for the performers to maintain a living, and caused dissatisfaction among the masses... What is worse, they [censors] treated the historical tales and folk legends lightly, and arbitrarily altered the stories that had long been widespread.<sup>32</sup> (Fu 2005, 214)

One month after the editorial published in *People's Daily*, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice to local cultural organizations, emphasizing that "currently in many places traditional plays have been randomly banned or altered, which seriously violates the policy of drama reformation and needs to be redressed... Not until the central cultural ministry approves the prohibition by local government can any organization ban the performance at its own will" (1984, 41-42).

Fu Jin offers a very insightful explanation as he examines the history of censorship during this period of time. He first points out that arbitrary banning on plays was rampant; yet the attempts to loosen the regulation, even when the attempts came from the top, could hardly be realized. The crucial reason lay in the fact that "most of the restrictions on traditional repertoire could easily seek ideological support from the mainstream voices, but it was difficult to obtain equally powerful theoretical groundwork to reverse the restrictions" (241). Indeed, the notion that old drama was problematic and thus required reconstruction set the tone for the entire Drama Reform Campaign: Old drama reflected the corrupt culture of the landlord class and superstitious

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<sup>32</sup> For example, the idea of class struggle was applied to rewrite famous mythology and historic tales.

and feudal thoughts; it had to be reformed in order to become a powerful mental weapon that could truly represent New China. Such was the message underlying the drama policies in the 1950s, which provided the most direct guidance for local governments in their enforcement.

At this point we can see the contradiction/paradox in the drama reform task. On the one hand, local governments put in efforts to save and transcribe traditional plays. On the other hand, these plays collected throughout the country did not get promoted, but instead ended up on the shelves after their transcription. Consequently the significance of transcribing traditional plays lay in faithful documentation and preservation, rather than in reviving these plays for performance. The reason many places suffered from a shortage of repertoire was that numerous traditional plays constantly encountered regulation. These plays were interpreted as feudal, aristocratic, bourgeois, superstitious, against the masses, and so on, and thus could not be staged. This also explains why later all the traditional plays were prohibited on a national scale, as the central policy took an extreme leftist turn. The censorship in the drama reform process during the 1950s foreshadowed the total suppression of traditional drama during the ten-year Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966.

In the drama reform movement, the government also encouraged the creation of new plays in a new perspective (the new history play) or in a new form (the contemporary play). Thus occurred the term and the genre “newly written history play” (*xinbian lishiju*), which re-narrates stories common in traditional plays from a contemporary angle and re-interprets tales familiar to the populace from a “politically correct” viewpoint.<sup>33</sup> “Newly written history play” therefore

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<sup>33</sup> The creation of newly written history plays can be traced to the 1940s when Yenan Peking Opera Theatre rewrote and reinterpreted parts of the classic tale *Shuihu zhuan* into *Driven to Join the Liangshan Mountain Rebels*. After Mao Zedong’s high approval, the play was circulated widely and performed throughout China along with the launch of the drama reformation campaign. In the 1960s Zhang Gen proposed a broader term “newly written pre-modern

distinguishes itself from “traditional play” (*chuantong xi*). In addition to the new history play, *xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) was the genre that the government promoted most strongly because it was considered the best instrument to portray people’s lives in New China and extol socialist construction. In May 1960, vice minister of culture Qi Yanming proposed “*san bingju* (three equal boosts)” as the direction for theatre development, that is, actively developing and staging three genres: contemporary play, traditional play and newly written history play (Gao and Li 1999, 200).

*Gezaixi* in southern Fujian began to try out the form of contemporary play in the initial stage of the Drama Reformation. For instance, Zhangzhou Experimental Xiangju Troupe created *Tears of Taiwanese People* (*Taimin lei*) in 1951, based on the tragic political February 28 Incident that took place in Taiwan in 1947. The play tells the story of a cigarette hawker beaten to death by soldiers. The inappropriate response of the Nationalist government to black market commerce triggered strong dissatisfactions from the people and caused a protest island-wide, which was then brutally suppressed by the Nationalists. However, in this play the Nationalist Party soldiers who bullied the cigarette hawker and caused the February 28 Incident in Taiwanese history are turned into American soldiers. The rewriting was undoubtedly related to the anti-American sentiment of the time, when the entire country was mobilized to support the Korean War. At a staging of the play in a rural village of Shaoan County, the peasants’ patriotic passions were so inflamed that they generously donated money to support the government’s military expenses for the war against the United States in North Korea.<sup>34</sup>

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play” (*xinbian gudaixi*) to replace “newly written history play.” Despite my inclination to Mr. Zhang’s proposal, this dissertation uses the term “newly written history play” owing to its wider usage in archives and discussions.

<sup>34</sup> For the story and the staging of the play, see Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo xiqu zhi: Fujian juan* [History of Chinese Xiqu: Fujian Volume] (Beijing: wenhua yishu, 1993), 166.

Taking an overview of the theatre policy over the seventeen years from the founding of the PRC state to the opening of the Cultural Revolution, it is not difficult to perceive that the Party kept adjusting its principles on the development of drama: Initially traditional plays were held to be as important as contemporary plays, yet as the campaign proceeded, contemporary plays received more and more official attention. And the truth was that the room for the traditional play became smaller and smaller after 1958.<sup>35</sup>

In 1958, the ripple effect of the “Great Leap Forward,” which strove to utilize the labor potential of the massive population by sponsoring populist measures to enhance grain and steel production, touched the realm of drama. The creation of contemporary plays thus reached its peak. Just as all the citizens across China were mobilized to participate in the manufacturing of steel, an “Everyone Partakes” movement in theatre soon arose on a national scale, encouraging everyone in the theatre to take part in producing plays. The stories created during this time were largely on the subject of “lauding the Great Leap Forward, and recalling the revolutionary history”(Fu 2005, 87). On June 13, 1958, the Ministry of Culture held a month-long seminar on how traditional opera could represent modern life, in which the officials and practitioners saw a series of contemporary play productions and discussed aesthetic matters in terms of the creation and performance of the contemporary play. In the forum, “prioritize the creation of the contemporary play” was conceived as the guideline for *xiqu* (sung drama) development, and so was the slogan “*xiqu* great leap forward.” Countless *xiangju/gezaixi* plays were produced during this time, as a response to the Great Leap Forward movement and to the concluding speech in the

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<sup>35</sup> As the drama movement developed, people had to resort to the thoughts of Mao Zedong to defend for the traditional play. For instance, Zhou Yang raised the concept of “walking on two legs” in 1958, referring to a policy that valued both the contemporary play and the traditional play. He argued that Chinese theatre should be able to represent modern life as well as build on the tradition, and that favoring either one of them was not an option. In a drama forum in November 1959, Xia Yan affirmed the policy of “walking on two legs,” but he had to put the emphasis on promoting the creation of contemporary plays. Gao Yilong and Li Xiao, *Zhongguo xiqu xiandai shi* [History of the Contemporary Play in Chinese Xiqu] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua 1999), 195, 99.

forum made by the vice minister of culture Liu Zhiming: “Let us pump up our energy, break the myth, and fight hard for three years to achieve the objective that the proportion of contemporary plays in the repertoire of most genres and theatre companies reaches 20% to 50%” (Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui 1999, 1453-54). Typical plays of this time were, for example, *Heroes on Wu Island* (*Wuyu yixuong zhuan*) produced by Longhai County Xiangju Troupe in 1958, a spy story of how the Communists outwitted the Nationalists, and *The Rise of Yu Tribe* (*Yuzu fanshen ji*) produced by Hua’an County Xiangju Troupe in 1959, a story about how the People’s Government emancipated the minority. During this time when the national literary and art policy promoted strongly the massive creation of contemporary plays, it was very common for each theatre company to churn out plays in order to meet the optimistic production target. A saying in the field of theatre in Hubei province satirized this phenomenon, noting that the plays at this time were “written hastily, performed hurriedly, discarded instantly, and forgotten by the audience immediately”(Fu 2002, 66).

In the beginning of 1963, Shanghai city committee secretary Ke Qingshi created the slogan “Write on the Thirteen Years,” asking the literary and art practitioners to build on the subject of the socialist revolution and construction since the establishment of New China, that is, encouraging the creation of art that lauded people’s lives under the rule of socialism over the previous thirteen years (1949-1962) (Yu and An 2005, 294). As a result, the production of contemporary plays received high attention. Under the banner of “Write on the Thirteen Years” came a *xiangju* production *Laud to the Green Water* (*Bishuei zan*). Tang Yinkuang drew on the news and wrote *Laud to the Green Water* in the summer of 1963. The story recounts how the Longhai County authorities successfully redirect the water to resolve the drought, a crisis is miraculously turned into a harvest, and all communes enthusiastically and gratefully contribute

“patriotic grains” to the government. Longhai District Xiangju Troupe staged this play and won acclaim in The East Contemporary Play Festival in 1965.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the puppet theatre companies in southern Fujian also responded to this trend. Zhangzhou Puppet Troupe toured to Beijing in June 1966, and one of its contemporary plays *All Ethnic People Praise Chairman Mao* (*Gezu rinmin kesong maozhuxi*) drew the attention of *People’s Daily*, with a reviewing report entitled “Heroes from Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Dominate the Realm of Puppetry”(Zhangzhou Cultural Bureau 1999, 22). A detailed account of the development of the contemporary play will follow later in this chapter.

#### B. Nationalizing the Theatre and Scripting the Play: Change of the System

Before the launch of the drama reform, the owner of a theatre company took control of distributing the revenue of the troupe. The wages of the leading actors were significantly higher than those of the ordinary performers, an arrangement that apparently contradicted the anti-exploitation values of the socialist administration. Accordingly, as in the countryside landlords were condemned and lands re-distributed, the system and resources of theatre companies also went through redistribution.

With the intervention of local cultural organizations, the previously private theatre companies were gradually remodeled and pushed into communal companies co-run by the performers. In some districts a public-aided system was introduced; that is, local cultural and educational departments supervised and came to take over the management of private troupes. Thus the following record is seen in *History of Xiqu*: “In 1952, [*gezaixi* troupe Fujinchun] participated in the second provincial workshop on the theatre in Quanzhou and embarked on its

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<sup>36</sup> The play *Bishui zan* was later adapted into a spoken drama *Longjiang song* by Fujian Spoken Drama Troupe. The play then drew Moa’s wife Jiang Qin’s attention and she gave instructions to have it adapted into Beijing opera *Longjiang song*. See Chen, Zeng, and Yan, *Gezaixi shi* [History of Gezaixi], 182-83.

democratic reformation. The owner Zhu Weichang then gave all the costumes and props to the government to establish the public troupe”(Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui 1993, 485). Once they realized the policy of the new regime, almost all owners “voluntarily” handed over the property and management of the theatre company. By 1956, all the communal troupes had officially become state-run, and basically each city and county now had a troupe of its own. There were ten state-sponsored *xiangju* troupes in southern Fujian by 1960.<sup>37</sup>

The essential idea of the change of system in theatre companies was to gradually push the individual-run troupe into being state-run, and to contain both the troupe and performers within a national institution. As the government was in charge of all the expenses, the performers became civil employees, whose living was secured and social status raised, and thereby could concentrate on crafting their art. On the flip side, the production was therefore brought under tighter official supervision and regulation. Often these troupes had to dance to the policy, which diminished considerably the room for freedom of creation.

Political intervention also transformed performance practices. In addition to nationalizing all the troupes and opera houses across the country, the state further introduced a series of practices to “purge the stage,” (an attempt influenced by Western realism), such as concealing the run crew’s change of scene settings, stopping “*yinchang*” (actors’ drinking water on stage during performance), and forbidding vendors to sell food in the house. Moreover, the “55 Instructions” pointed out that “*jingli ke*,” which “seriously violated human rights and the welfare of performers” should be abandoned. *Jingli ke* was similar to today’s agent system, undertaking the recruitment of performers and search of performance opportunities, and was criticized as

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<sup>37</sup> The ten state-sponsored *xiangju* troupes were: Longxi District, Zhangzhou City, Xiamen City, Nanjing County, Tongan County, Nanan County, Longhai County, Zhangpu County, Hua’an County, and Changtai County Xiangju Troupe. Ibid., 185.



exploiting performers. The abolishment of *jingli ke* signified that the new government's literary and art policy did not approve of the commercial dimension of theatre (Fu 2002, 9).

Moreover, one of the objectives of drama reform was to facilitate the establishment of a scripted system. Before, *gezaixi*, along with most regional operas, was produced in the form of “*mubiaoxi*” (literally, scene-list play), in which only an outline of the play and scene descriptions were provided. Actors improvised their dialogue and lyrics on the basis of the storyline and the characters to which they were assigned. Improvisation trained the actor to be flexible, spontaneous and interactive with the audience and surroundings, and to a great extent honed the actor's craft and contributed vitality to the theatre. The down side, however, was that performance quality varied significantly depending on individual talent. Thus the reform task aimed to replace the scene-list with finalized scripts. Through performers' oral transmission, intellectuals transcribed and revised plays that for years had been passed along orally. The scripted system guaranteed the basic quality of a performance, and, more importantly, now that there were written texts to track, it made the state regulation of plays easier to implement.

By the 1960s the scripted system had been deployed substantially across China, as evidenced in a notice issued by the Ministry of Culture in May 1961, requiring an “extensive use of subtitle projection.” The notice states: “In recent years opera troupes in many places began to employ projection of subtitles to help spectators understand lyrics and plot, which was widely embraced by the audience”(1984, 101). The Ministry of Culture further expressed the hope to extend subtitle projection to all repertoires throughout China in this notice. In addition to lyrics, the Ministry of Culture asked troupes to try to include the spoken lines in the projection as the troupe toured to places where different dialects dominated. The regulation of plays thus extended from lyrics to dialogue. Judging from this notice, it is clear that the transformation from scene-

list plays to finalized scripts pushed by the drama reform movement was effectively achieved by the beginning of the 1960s.

At a political level, an extensive use of set scripts and subtitles ensures the transparency of performance. It ensures the government's ability to monitor and control both the performers and audiences. Improvisation promises an autonomous space for the actor to insert his ideas and allows the actor to comment on social events, while a scripted dialogue deprives the actor of such a subversive opportunity. The regulatory power of the texts also enables certain political propaganda to disseminate efficiently. With the wider use of subtitle projection, the task of finalizing and scripting the play was thoroughly implemented. Today, all *gezaixi* performances on the mainland are scripted and accompanied by subtitles, including outdoor religious shows produced by private theatre companies.

Meanwhile, the profession “director” was separated and became an independent artistic activity, which changed the way of traditional Chinese theatre production, which for centuries had centered on actors. While the concept that the director oversees the mounting of a play was a Western import,<sup>38</sup> *xiqu* in the past focused on the performance of actors. In the era of commercial theatre, a “star system,” which highlighted one or two leading actors in the company, ran the course of management. Box office and the performance quality hinged on the star's technique, style and charisma. As a result, the director played a relatively insignificant role in the production. Personnel such as instructors, senior actors, or the one who orally gave the scene list shared the responsibilities of giving directions.

Not long after the establishment of the PRC, the head of the drama reform bureau, Tian Han, asserted in a 1950 seminar “How to Set up a New Director System” that “in *xiqu* of the old

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<sup>38</sup> The Chinese dramatic theory in the early twentieth century largely borrowed from Russia Constantin Stanislavski's acting and directing method.

times we went to see the actor instead of the play, from now on we will make people see the play instead of the actor.... We will make people admire not just one single outstanding individual but the ensemble, not just actors' acting but the whole production... In order to attain this goal, it is necessary to launch a director system" (Yu and An 2005). In December 1952, the Ministry of Culture issued a notification throughout China that "*xiqu* troupes should establish the director system to ensure the improvement and enhancement of its performing art and music" (1984, 40).

In fact, long before the Ministry of Culture's formal notification on establishing the director system, many provinces had already discerned the trend of drama reform and set up a director system. The system pushed the actor-centered traditional theatre into a total and comprehensive theatre that incorporated all artistic specialties, such as acting, writing, music design, and scenic and lighting design, which were coordinated by the director. Fujian province made impressive accomplishments in this respect. In the East *Xiqu* Festival in 1954, four plays produced by Fujian representatives won director awards: *Chensan Wunian* of *liyuanxi*, *Lianyin* and *Yuchuan huazhu* of *min* opera, and *Sanjia fu* of *xiangju/gezaixi* (Yu and An 2005, 132). The influence remains to this day as the public *gezaixi* troupes on the mainland boast of a production system that values collaboration of the production team and the ensemble rather than featuring a particular actor-singer in the company.<sup>39</sup>

### C. Institutionalization: Change of Personnel

Change of personnel meant educating the performers of traditional theatre companies.

Soon after the establishment of the new regime, local cultural units launched short-term

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<sup>39</sup> While several senior performers (i.e. performers born before 1940) on the mainland today complained about the change, lamenting the decline in audience and holding that the charisma of leading actor-singers is what draws most spectators into theatre, almost all performers, especially those of younger generation, seem to embrace the system without a question, and seem to be proud of the "high art" direction the system has entailed.

workshops to enlist performers to study cultural information and help them “enhance thoughts” and “enhance political awareness” so that the performers could appreciate the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao Zedong. The workshops aimed to alleviate the doubts and resistance “old performers” might hold towards the change of society, and to remodel them into fine troops capable of fulfilling the task of publicizing policy and educating the masses(Fu 2002, 4). Many performers genuinely came to feel the rise of their social status and were grateful for the opportunity to become an active part of socialist reformation in the new society. In this “study” process, Fujian province enlisted over 2,400 performers to learn the ongoing drama reform policy in the early 1950s (Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui 1993, 454).

Change of personnel also involved reshuffling of the personnel. The government appointed a cluster of “new literary and art practitioners” to supervise the reform tasks in repertoire and system, and to contain the troupes as a national institution. In the early 1950s, the so-called “new literary and art practitioners,” as opposed to “old performers” (original practitioners in the troupes), were mostly those who participated in the civil war against the Nationalists as the communist revolutionary art work group. These people had higher “political sense” than old performers, and some received Western arts education. After the communists took power, they were installed in various theatre units to facilitate the reform task. These new literary and art practitioners did not necessarily understand the regional theatre to which they were assigned, but they were the primary force that pushed the reformation of local sung drama. They ensured that the thoughts and lives of old performers could catch up with the new society, and they initiated a refreshing chapter for traditional troupes in many respects. For example, they finalized and scripted originally orally-transmitted plays and helped create new plays, and it was they who introduced the concept of “director” into traditional Chinese theatre, driving the actor-

centered theatre into a comprehensive artistic practice that covered and integrated various specialties such as script, music, scene and lighting.

These new literary and art practitioners further drove the transformation of *gezaixi* music in southern Fujian. Traditional *gezaixi* musicians had learned and played the music in an orally transmitted method. Before the reformation, the orchestra of *gezaixi*, like that of most traditional theatre, accompanied the improvisational singing and thus rendered its performance spontaneous and imbued with personal style. As the plays began to be scripted, the new music practitioners also began to notate singing and instrumental music, which had long been orally transmitted. As the concepts of notation and score were introduced into the orchestra of traditional theatre, the traditional musicians had to learn to notate and read the score. Furthermore, these new music practitioners who had received Western music training also brought in the concept of “music design.” Generally the musical approach during the scene-list play period was that selection of tunes was decided on the spot based on performers’ experience, mutual understanding between musicians and actors, and the responses from audiences. With the emergence of finalized scripts came the design of atmosphere music and motif music. New music practitioners also introduced the Western method of composition and initiated the reformation in meter and melody variation.

Also at this time, the new music practitioners began to design *changqiang* (singing rendition) for actors. Before the launch of drama reformation, music creation of sung drama relied greatly on the actor-singer, whose vocal nuances in inflection, tone, and rhythm contributed to the birth of *liupai* (schools of singing style). Yet with the proceeding of drama reform that featured specialization, *changqiang* became less a creation of the actor-singers. The job gradually shifted to the music designer, as demonstrated in records from this time: “Mr. Lin Jingquan, who used to study in Fujian Junior College of Music, designed for the renowned

actress Ye Gueilian of Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe the *changqiang* in the playlet *Yuezhou Tanfang* and *Liulin Subin*”(Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 187-88). This change became increasingly significant during the Cultural Revolution and has carried through to this day, as seen in public *gezaixi* troupes in southern Fujian. In fact, young *gezaixi* performers on the mainland are often criticized as incapable of creating their own singing style, as they rely too much on music design and merely sing from the scores.

If these alien art practitioners brought fundamental transformation for *xiqu*, the institutionalization of its education system further shaped the sung drama practitioners in the years to come because the state had taken control of training theatre performers. The traditional *gezaixi* education system was similar to an apprentice system. The training took place in the theatre company; upon joining the troupe, inexperienced actors were normally on a three-year-and-four-month contract that required physical and vocal training in residence as well as taking parts as minor characters as a means to gain performance experience. In the drama reform movement, a Western education system was introduced and sponsored by the state. The first actor training program that aimed to cultivate *xiangju* performers in southern Fujian appeared in Xiamen in 1957. The program was later merged into a four-year program of traditional theatre at Xiamen Academy of Arts in 1958. In addition to *xiqu* acting and drama theory, the program also offered courses such as language, history and politics. Soon afterwards, Zhangzhou Academy of Arts was founded in 1958 in Zhangzhou and offered both a two-year program and a three-year program. These schools developed and prepared students for *xiangju* in acting, music, playwriting, and scenic design, and students were typically assigned to serve in public troupes upon graduation.

As the system and personnel, troupes and performers were gradually contained into a tight structure that operated and circled around national will, state policy was therefore much easier to be carried out. For example in 1957, the central administration attempted to curtail the rampant censorship across China and proposed a more liberal policy. Yet soon afterwards, seven nationally renowned actors in sung drama, headed by Mei Lanfang, collectively submitted an article to *Xijubao* (*Drama Tribune*) to support the previous regulation policy, asserting “no bad plays,” and “where there is poisonous weed, a struggle is necessary.” Public opinion soon formed as newspapers across the country then began to publish statements by famed local performers that clarified their “anti-bad-play” stance. As a response, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice requesting that every local cultural unit gather the troupes to discuss the statement proposed by these celebrated performers. Thus the official intention of lifting the censorship was a brief gesture, and strict regulation of the repertoire continued. While many performers became national officers and were even elected into the National People’s Congress, the ultimate power organ in China, (as the seven performers who initiated the submission to *Xijubao* were delegates of the People’s Congress), “as far as these performers who had been conditioned by the institution were concerned, only when they succumbed to the ideological demand of the institution could they get the greatest possible reward from the society” (Fu 2005, 244-5).

### **Modern-Costumed Play and The Contemporary Play**

The attempt to represent contemporary life in the form of *xiqu* occurred as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, but at the time the performance genre had another name—“modern-costumed play” (*shizhang xi*). Beijing opera master Mei Lanfang tried out several

modern-costumed plays when he was young, from 1913 to 1916 (Gao and Li 1999, 36-39).

Born and raised in Beijing, the cradle of Beijing opera, Mei developed his ideas about experimenting with Beijing opera in the form of the modern-costumed play under the influence of vanguard thought in Shanghai, where he toured to perform. According to Mei, in the performance of modern-costumed play, dance-like movements were largely replaced by realistic gestures, singing was reduced while more speech was added, and costumes and props were made realistic. Mei gave up such experiments several years later because he felt that realistic movements in modern-costumed play were incompatible with the stylized performance techniques of Beijing opera (Tian 1998, 91).

Compared to the historic and rigid Beijing-style Beijing opera (*jingpai jingju*), Shanghai-style Beijing opera (*haipai jingju*) boasted of its valor in experimentation and its thirst for novelty, and reflected well the taste of its citizens. Since the settlement of foreign concessions in the mid-nineteenth century, Shanghai had become a city in which the latest Eastern and Western cultures converged and contested with one another, and where literary and artistic thoughts were liberal and active.

Under the influence of spoken drama,<sup>40</sup> Beijing opera in Shanghai began its attempt to experiment with modern costumes in the early twentieth century. One example was the Beijing opera *New Camellias of the Twentieth Century* (*Ershi shiji xin chahua*), which premiered in 1909. It was adapted by Feng Zihe from the Chinese spoken drama *The Lady of the Camellias*, based on Alexander Dumas' *La Dame aux Camilias*. The play localized the French story and gave it a happy ending. It was well received and became a hit, which prompted other theatre companies to

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<sup>40</sup> *Xiqu* (sung drama) and spoken drama interacted and mutually influenced each other at the time. In its initial stage, spoken drama borrowed music and acting techniques from Beijing opera while Beijing opera in the style of modern costumes often turned to spoken drama for stories.



follow its example. Later the play was developed into a stage serial. The modern-costumed plays of Shanghai's Beijing opera took the form of stage serials, following its commercialization in the 1920s. The most famous modern-costumed play at this time was *Executing Yan Ruisheng* (*Qiangbi Yan Ruisheng*). Yan Ruisheng is an employee of a foreign company and has acquired such bad habits as drinking, gambling and whoring, which leads him into financial difficulty. To clear his debts, he murders the famed courtesan Wang Lianxiang for her money and leaves town. He is finally arrested and executed. The play drew on sensational headline news in 1920, featuring the scandalous murder of a social celebrity in Shanghai. The production also engaged varied scene settings, such as a brothel, church, train station, court, and execution field, and employed an actual horse and car on stage. The changing spectacles rendered the play visually appealing, and the colorful story lent the play additional appeal, with a conventional stock of narrative plots to build up to the climax, such as the appearance of specters, entrusting secrets to a person in his dream, the vengeance of the ghost, etc. The play was thus a tremendous success following its premier in the end of 1920. Other theatres jumped on the bandwagon, and it remained a regular and popular play even in the 1930s (Gao and Li 1999). This play was introduced in the *gezaixi* theatre in Taiwan in the early twentieth century, suggesting the influence of Shanghai style Beijing opera on *gezaixi*.

In contrast to Beijing opera, emerging regional operas in the early twentieth century, such as *yueju* (Zhejiang opera), *huju* (Shanghai opera), and *pingju* (a form of Hebei opera), had relatively greater room for exploration within the modern-costumed play because they were younger and carried less historical and artistic baggage. The famous *pingju* play *Yangsanie Files a Lawsuit* (*Yangsanie gaozhuang*), written by Cheng Zhaocai in 1919, and the *yueju* play *Jianglaowu's Suicide for Love* (*Jianglaowu xunqingji*) in 1940, both derived from local news of

the time. The modern-costumed play was especially the strength of *huju* (Shanghai opera).

From its beginning, *huju* has focused on mirroring contemporary life, featuring “western suit and cheongsam play” (*xizhang qipao xi*) that depicted lives of the bourgeoisie in the city (Gao and Li 1999).<sup>41</sup> The modern-costumed play emerging from the 1910s across China drew primarily on local news, spoken drama, novels, and films popular at the time. The melodramatic stories appealed to the citizens, and thus the genre “modern-costumed play” had developed as a popular trend by the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Nonetheless, the term “modern-costumed play” is no longer used in traditional Chinese theatre today and has been replaced by the term “contemporary play” (*xiandai xi*). Although both sought to adapt to new circumstances, the two terms conveyed very different concepts. Modern-costumed play was a voluntary exploration, initiated by the troupes in some cities, on how traditional theatre could represent the contemporary lifestyle since the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911. It was usually staged in commercial theatres for ticket revenue, so its materials and performance had to take the audience’s preference into consideration. Furthermore, although in the later stage of modern-costumed play some intellectuals joined the production teams as writer-directors, as seen in several companies of *yueju* and *huju*, the participation of intellectuals occurred only as a result of the invitation or recruitment by the manager-performer of the troupe. Thus the manager and performers still held great power over decision-making in the production. By contrast, *xiandaixi* (the contemporary play) arose under the intervention and support of the Chinese Communist Party, applying clear political theories as its ultimate guideline. With the mobilization and coordination of the state, rules and ways to practice

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<sup>41</sup> Its representative plays were *The Suicide of Ruan Lingyu* (*Ruan Lingyu zisha*) in the 1930s, an adaptation of the suicide case of a diva, and *The Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*), an adaptation from Lu Xun’s famous novel. *Huju* also turned to the American films for ideas, such as *Waterloo Bridge* and *Gone with the Wind*.

*xiandaixi* were established through one conference after another. Through competitions in national and regional theatre festivals, models were selected, set up, and circulated.

Demonstrating state ideology was always the top priority, even though some plays also drew on local news. As the central government appointed new literary and art practitioners and cadres to work with opera troupes, performers, though still part of the creative body, came to accept and complete the task passively without much power over the direction of the troupe. Therefore, the style and concept of the modern-costumed play and *xiandaixi* developed very differently.

The genre of *xiandaixi* originated before the Chinese Communists officially established their regime. Under the advocacy of Mao Zedong and the Party, the People's Theatre (*minzhong jutuan*) was established in Yanan in July 1938, when the Party was engaging in underground political activities in the Northwest. The People's Theatre endeavored to remodel the traditional art form, which had been familiar to and popular among the masses, into an ideological weapon that could exert its grass-roots influence to change the public. Stories of fighting against Japan and liberating China from the Nationalists were incorporated in local sung dramas so as to rally the people to join the resistance movement. The *xiandai xi* representative of this time was *Blood-Tear Grudge* (*Xielei chou*), written by Ma Jianling in 1943 in the form of the regional opera *qinqiang*, which was popular among the northern Shaangxi residents. The story contrasts the treatment received by residents from the Nationalist district and the Communist district. It tells of how the Wang family, having suffered miserably under the Nationalist rule, escapes to the Communist district, where they discover a bright future. Many communist military troupes adopted a similar approach to propaganda, that is, making use of well-accepted regional operas and incorporating political elements such as anti-Japanese and anti-Nationalist ideas to stage the plays in rural villages (Gao and Li 1999, 81-95, 103-17).

During their experiment with *xiandaixi* at this stage, the Chinese Communist Party cadres came to realize the power regional opera had over the masses, as it was the most accessible form of theatre to the workers, peasants and soldiers. Therefore, after the communists officially gained power over the Chinese mainland, a major objective became determining how to modify regional theatre to make it more capable of embodying contemporary life and disseminating state ideology.

Soon after the PRC was founded, every region embarked on the sung drama reform project. In addition to censoring old repertoires and modifying traditional plays, another main focus of the task was to develop a new genre that could represent contemporary life. Overall, from the establishment of New China to the launch of Great Leap Forward (1949-1957), copious *xiandaixi* plays were created nationwide in response to the policy, but the few that passed the test of time and have remained to this day dealt primarily with the subject of female marriage rights, with stories questioning match-making or criticizing the marriage-as-trading system in the feudal era. These plays were produced primarily to facilitate the publicity of “marital law” of the time, and they undeniably helped to educate society and elevate the position of women (Yu and An 2005, 95-105).<sup>42</sup>

While the Great Leap Forward extended to the domain of drama, the slogan “Greatly Write on the Thirteen Years” was advocated, and in March 1958, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice indicating that “right now, there are magnificent phenomena of great leap forward in production across the country... The art field needs to mirror the reality of this great era, and has to catch up with the time” (1984, 84). It also stated that “currently we are desperately in need of

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<sup>42</sup> The plays are, for instance, *pingju*’s *Liu Qiao’er*, *Little Son-in-Law* (*Xiao nuxu*), *huju*’s *The Coin* (*Luohan qian*), *meihuju*’s *Liang Qiuyen*, and *luju*’s *The Remarriage of Li’ersao* (*Li’ersao gaijia*).

artistic works that reflect the great changes of our country over the recent ten years, and laud the heroic deeds of the great socialist constructors” (84).<sup>43</sup> Local cultural units thus mobilized performing art groups to produce *xiandaixi*, and toured to the mountains, countryside, factories, and military bases to perform. The creation of *xiandaixi* reached its peak at this time.<sup>44</sup>

Generally speaking, the literary and art policy of the state gradually took a more strict and leftist turn after the Great Leap Forward in 1958. Even though from time to time discussions were brought up regarding “walking on two legs,” a principle that valued both the traditional plays and *xiandaixi*, and “three equal boosts,” proposed to develop equally the traditional plays, newly written history plays, and *xiandaixi*, in reality the efforts at developing sung drama were focused largely on *xiandaixi*. The situation manifested itself in the exuberant responses across China to the mayor of Shanghai Ke Qingshi’s proposal “Write on the Thirteen Years” in the beginning of 1963, a call for artistic endeavors to portray people’s lives over the thirteen years since China was “liberated.”

The instruction Mao Zedong gave regarding issues of art and literature on December 12, 1963, further inhibited the development of traditional plays, and pushed the content of *xiandaixi* in a direction that emphasized socialist ideology. Mao stated:

Problems abound in all forms of art such as the drama, ballads, music, the fine arts, the dance, the cinema, poetry and literature; the people engaged in them are numerous;

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<sup>43</sup> In the notice, a list of suggestions for creation was given: “[for instance], on the subject of socialist industrialization, agricultural collaboration, handcraft collaboration, socialist reformation of the capitalist industry and commerce, agricultural accomplishments, national cohesion, economic development, national defense development, development of scientific and cultural education, supporting North Korean and countering America, struggles in all political movements, new social ethics, and so on.” See “A Notice by the Ministry of Cultural on Greatly Promoting Artistic Creation” Zhongguo yishu yanjiu yuan, *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* [A Collection of Official Documents on Drama] (Changchun [s.n.], 1984), 84-85.

<sup>44</sup> The climate was such that seven opera troupes in Nanjing city claimed to have created 1,073 *xiandaixi* plays within half a year. Among the seven troupes, the entire 63 staff members of Nanjing Yueju Company, from the head to the cook, were reported to have worked together and created 285 and adapted 121 *xiandaixi* plays. Yu Cong and An Kui, *Zhongguo dangdai xiqu shi* [History of Contemporary Chinese Xiqu] (Beijing: Xueyuan 2005), 285.

and in many departments very little has been achieved so far in socialist transformation. The 'dead' still dominate in many departments. What has been achieved in the cinema, new poetry, folk songs, the fine arts and the novel should not be underestimated, but there, too, there are quite a few problems. As for such departments as the drama, the problems are even more serious. The social and economic base has changed, but the arts as part of the superstructure, which serve this base, still remain a serious problem. Hence we should proceed with investigation and study and attend to this matter in earnest. Isn't it absurd that many Communists are enthusiastic about promoting feudal and capitalist art, but not socialist art?<sup>45</sup>

On June 27, 1964, Mao Zedong gave another instruction, criticizing literary and artistic associations and publications: "In the last fifteen years these associations and most of their publications (it is said that a few are good) and by and large the people in them (that is, not everybody) have not carried out the policies of the Party. They have acted as high and mighty bureaucrats, have not gone to the workers, peasants and soldiers and have not reflected the socialist revolution and socialist construction."<sup>46</sup> After this critical instruction, a political purge was initiated in the realm of art. Many high-ranking leaders of culture-related departments were removed from their posts. A political power struggle began to spread out across the cultural field.

Moreover, the Beijing Opera Xiandaixi Festival held in Beijing from June 5 to July 31, 1964, served as a guiding indicator for the development of drama across the country. The performance festival was large in scale: 19 provinces and administrative units were involved, with 29 troupes performing and additional 30 troupes attending, and with 35 plays staged. The plays were either military plays that portrayed the revolutionary history of the People's Liberation Army's fight against the Japanese and Nationalists, or on the subject of socialist construction and class struggle. For instance, the play *Never Forget* (*Qianwan buyao wangji*), adapted from spoken drama, apparently echoed Mao Zedong's call "never forget about class

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<sup>45</sup> The English text is found in Martin Ebon, *Five Chinese Communist Plays* (New York John Day Co., 1975), ix-x.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

struggle” in the Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee. In addition, plays adapted from novels, spoken drama, film scripts and from other traditional genres of sung drama appeared in great proportion.<sup>47</sup> Some were even selected, processed, and became the revolutionary model plays, which would be widely circulated throughout China during the ensuing Cultural Revolution.

In this event, Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng, later known as two of the “Gang of Four” who dominated politics during the Cultural Revolution, came to the fore. Mao’s wife Jiang Qing assumed the role as the pioneer of the Beijing opera revolution and began to make public speeches about the significance of revolutionizing Beijing opera (Wang 1997, 178). From that point forward, Jiang Qing took control of *xiandaixi* and she embarked on a process of constructing and fostering model plays.

The national Beijing opera *xiandaixi* festival in 1964 accelerated further the creation and production of *xiandaixi* in China. Large-scale *xiandaixi* festivals took place across the country. The Northeast, East, North, Mid-South, Northwest held regional theatre festivals from May to August 1965, and as a result the writing and performing of *xiandaixi* reached a new height. Producing shows to be staged in the festival led to a peculiar practice in the mounting of *xiandaixi*: the chief contributed ideas, the masses contributed life experience, and the writer contributed craft (Fu 2002, 111).

As the creation of *xiandaixi* was increasingly charged with political significance, the authorities in some places even issued orders to stop the performance of its counterpart, the traditional play, as exemplified in Shaangxi and Shangxi provinces, where traditional plays were

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<sup>47</sup> For example, the famous *The Red Lantern* was originally in the form of *huju* (Shanghai opera), and the Beijing opera adaptation emerged in this festival.

banned in 1964. The situation of the traditional play in Fujian province was relatively better: the traditional repertoire still dominated the theatre in 1964, although the performance of *xiandaixi* increased significantly compared to the previous years. Also, the audience was not used to seeing the performance of *xiandaixi*. These factors explain why the theatre market declined in Jinjiang district of Fujian after 1964, with over half of the 29 troupes in the district experiencing a decline in revenue (Fu 2002, 111-13).

On the whole, Chinese sung drama after 1958 proceeded under the banner “situate *xiandaixi* at the center, and rally the work of sung drama for a great leap forward.” The subject matter essentially focused on lauding the socialist construction and recalling the revolutionary history, highlighting the ideology of class struggle. The “model plays” that dominated the ensuing Cultural Revolution (1966-76) were basically an extension and extreme of this national *xiandaixi*-producing trend begun in 1958.

### **The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**

Under the banner of “Greatly Write on the Thirteen Years,” the trend of producing *xiandaixi* was initiated in 1958 and was backed up by the state. Meanwhile, newly written history plays proliferated during the late 1950s and early 1960s, posing a counterbalance to the creation of *xiandaixi*. The competition between *xiandaixi* and the traditional play (including newly written history plays) on stage was initially an artistic debate about two aesthetic directions in the drama reform process. But by the 1960s, the aesthetic debate revealed itself to embody a struggle between two political lines. Among the newly written history plays created between 1958 and 1962, the most influential was Wu Han’s *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* (*Hairui*



*baguan*) (Wang 1997, 175). Unfortunately, the play and its author in the end came to be a scapegoat in the ensuing political thunderstorm.

Wu Han's play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* was completed in 1961. The story was set in 1569-70, when Hai Rui was appointed to Jiangnan as an inspector. In that office, he exposed the corrupt deeds of the aristocrats and made them return stolen farmland to the people. His outspokenness upset the emperor and ultimately he was dismissed and forced to leave politics. Mao had openly commended this righteous historical character, encouraging communist cadres to learn from Hai Rui to speak up and hold to the truth courageously. As a response, the vice mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, who was also a respected historian, wrote several articles about this historical figure after 1959, extolling his fearless and truthful personality. Wu Han then accepted a request to write a play for Beijing's Beijing Opera Troupe based on Hai Rui's story (Beijing shi yishu yanjiusuo 2005, 1895-1901).

While *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* was well received following its debut, many people also saw it as a political allegory. Mao's economic plan the Great Leap Forward attempted to utilize the massive labor in China to accelerate military industrialization. As a result, agricultural collectives were established across the country and people were rallied to produce steel. However, due to a lack of technology and skill, the steel produced was mostly low quality, and thus not only did the Great Leap Forward fail to reach its projected goal, it further caused a recession. Despite the progressive harvests the Party's propaganda machine announced, many places suffered from famine. In the Eighth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee, held at Lushan in August 1959, Marshal Peng Dehuai, the Minister of Defense, expressed his views in an extremely lengthy memorandum, in which he attacked the Party's political and economic policies. Peng was soon condemned for factional activity and as being a right-wing opportunist.

At the end of September of that year the Party announced the replacement of Peng by Lin Biao (Charles 1966).

The play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* extolled the daring spirit required to interrogate and counter the ultimate authority. It opened in Beijing in 1961, during the depth of the economic depression, when many people were hungry and dissatisfied. The staging of *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* in such a political climate made many wonder and begin to associate the historical characters with the contemporary ones. On November 10, 1965, Yao Wenyan, with the endorsement of Mao's wife Jiang Qing, published a critique on *Wenhuibao* in Shanghai entitled "On the Newly Written History Play *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*." This event in the field of drama was generally regarded as the prologue of the Cultural Revolution.

As scholar Wang Xinmin has noted, the popularity of the opera *Hai Rui* at the time, "if linked to the dissatisfaction people inside and outside the Party held towards the dismissal of Peng Dehuai and the sentiment to wish for his rehabilitation, would inevitably be interpreted by Mao as a demonstration of ideological struggle. Therefore he changed his attitude towards this play and finally said things like 'the core of *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* is "dismissal" and Peng Dehuai is Hai Rui'"(Wang 1997, 172).

Accordingly, Jiang Qing and Yao Wenyan interpreted *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* as a piece of work intended to justify Peng Dehuai's case; that is, the emperor and Hai Rui in the play were seen as alluding to Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai. The publication of Yao Wenyan's article on *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* soon stirred up a political turmoil. The article was not merely a drama critique. Yao Wenyan attacked Wu Han and labeled his play a poisonous weed, contending that Wu twisted historical facts in order to satirize the contemporary situation, and

fabricated “counterfeit Hai Rui” to “redress injustice” for imperialism and landlord class. *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* was not the first play in China that applied Hai Rui’s story as the subject, yet this version in particular triggered extensive debate. The key reason this play became a target was its author Wu Han’s status as vice-mayor of Beijing and his influence over academia. Afterwards, Wu Han and his family were persecuted. Many people in academia, politics, literature and the arts got involved and came under attack (Xi and Jin 1996, 63-67). A political turmoil began to engulf the entire nation.<sup>48</sup>

In the Eleventh Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee held in August 1966, the Party passed “Decision by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” abbreviated as “the sixteen memos,” and thus launched the Cultural Revolution. In this meeting, Lin Biao replaced Liu Shaoqi, originally ranked the second in the Party, and was presented as the deputy of Mao Zedong.<sup>49</sup> Just a few months before the formal announcement of Lin Biao’s position as Mao’s successor, a memo endorsed by him entitled “Summary of the Forum on the Work in Literature and Art in the Armed Forces with which Comrade Lin Biao Entrusted Comrade Jiang Qing” was circulated in the Party. The “Summary” asserted sharply that “we have been under the dictatorship of a black anti-Party and anti-socialist

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<sup>48</sup> Another play that received severe criticism at this time was Tian Han’s *Xie Yaohuang*. The play tells the story of the female inspector Xie Yaohuang who comes to Jiangnan to investigate a case. She discovers that the corrupt local aristocrats occupy and confiscate people’s farmlands and tools. As she attempts to restore justice for the people, she is set up by the aristocrats and finally tortured to death. The plot of *Xie Yaohuang* was associated with the reality of the day, in which communes were established, farmlands taken into state control, and agricultural tools collected as raw material for manufacturing steel. Glorifying historical officials such as Hai Rui and Xie Yaohuang to some extent had revealed, or was considered to have revealed, the author’s dissenting opinion about the present economic policy. In Yao Wenyuan’s critique, the author repeatedly brought up the issue of farmland: “To request for returning the farmlands is to sabotage the commune system, and attempt to revive the evil rule of the landlords and wealthy peasants.” Just as with *The Dismissal of Hai Rui*, *Xie Yaohuang* was attacked as a “poisonous weed,” and its author Tian Han (1898-1968), the lyric composer of the Chinese anthem, spoken drama and sung drama playwright, died in prison in 1968. Wang Xinmin, *Zhongguo dang dai xi ju shi gang* [History of Contemporary Chinese Theatre] (Beijing shehui kexue 1997), 150. For the play *Xie Yaohuang*, see Tian Han, *Tian Han xiqu xuan* [A Collection of Tian Han’s Xiqu Plays], vol. 2 (Changsha: Hunan renmin 1980).

<sup>49</sup> In the following years Liu Shaoqi, who was the chairman of the People’s Republic of China from 1959 to 1968, became the number one enemy of the people in China, condemned as a capitalist authority, a spy and a traitor.

line which is diametrically opposed to Chairman Mao's thought.”<sup>50</sup> And this black line, according to the text, was a combination of bourgeois and revisionist ideas on literature and art, and must be eliminated. Further, in the “Summary” Jiang Qing praised highly the rise of Beijing operas on contemporary themes since the National Beijing Opera *Xiandaixi* Festival in 1964, arguing that the revolutionary Beijing opera, armed with Mao Zedong's thoughts, had been revolutionized in both ideology and in form, and had initiated a revolutionary change in literary and art circles. The text thereby suggested that other art forms should follow the example of revolutionary Beijing opera.

In the “Summary” Jiang Qing expressed her great interest in and recognition of the revolutionary contemporary Beijing opera, and mentioned several times the importance of “doing well in the production of good models.” With the issuing of the “Summary,” Jiang Qing rose to power in the political arena, and was appointed deputy director of the Cultural Revolution squad. In her early years, Jiang Qing was a spoken drama actor and also performed in Beijing opera, before she became the last wife of Mao Zedong. The Cultural Revolution now became her new stage, where she exercised her talent and experience from her previous acting career and took the lead in the development and promotion of “revolutionary model plays.” Although most of the selected revolutionary model plays were created before Jiang Qing intervened, she was greatly involved with revising and establishing the model plays, and undeniably her individual artistic concept and aesthetic preference left a profound imprint on the model plays that have been familiar to most Chinese.

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<sup>50</sup> For the English translated text, see Ebon, *Five Chinese Communist Plays*, 7-21. For the original Chinese text, see Zhongguo yishu yanjiu yuan, *Xiju gongzuo wenxian ziliao huibian* [A Collection of Official Documents on Drama], 159-71.

In the “Proletarian Cultural Revolution Meeting of the Literary and Art Circles in the Capital” held by the Cultural Revolution Squad on November 28 1966, the director of the squad Kang Sheng pronounced eight pieces of artistic works “revolutionary model plays”—Beijing opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *the Red Lantern*, *On the Docks*, *Shajiabang*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, the ballet *the White-Hair Girl*, *The Red Detachment of Women*, and the symphony *Shajiabang*—and the eight troupes which performed these eight pieces “model troupes.” This was the official identification of “model plays”(Wang 1997, 219).



Fig. 17. The model ballet *the Red Detachment of Women*.

Meanwhile, the influential communist periodical *Red Banner* published an editorial under the title “Hail to the Great Victory of Beijing Opera Revolution,” strongly advocating model Beijing operas, and emphasizing that model Beijing operas could also serve as outstanding models for every field of the Cultural Revolution (Beijing shi yishu yanjiusuo 2005, 1924).<sup>51</sup> An editorial of *People’s Daily* on June 18, 1967, revealed a similar view, calling to “promote model plays throughout the country.” In the years that followed, Chinese theatre moved into an era of

<sup>51</sup> In addition to the eight model plays announced in 1966, “model plays” later also included Beijing opera plays such as *Ode to the Dragon River*, and *Azalea Mountain*.

model plays. During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, all the traditional plays and new history plays were labeled as “*feng zi xiu*” (feudal, capitalist and revisionist) and not allowed to be staged. All regional dramatic genres had to perform model plays precisely as the Beijing model operas did, maintaining the text, movement, directions, scenic setting, and so on. Model plays in the form of Beijing opera overwhelmingly took over all theatre across China. Translated (adapted) versions of model plays appeared in regional operas and films, and resulted in a phenomenon in which “eight billion people saw [only] eight plays.”

The Cultural Revolution engulfed the entire country, including Fujian province. According to the regional history of southern Fujian, as the military intervention paralyzed the function of all the local cultural organizations in mid 1967, all regional opera performances in Fujian were put to an end. In 1968, numerous performers were under examination and interrogation as a result of “cleansing the class ranks” in the cultural domain in Zhangzhou. In 1970, under the order of the Revolution Committee of Fujian, troupes were disbanded and a majority of performers were dismissed whereas 71 “Cultural and Artistic Propaganda Teams on Mao Zedong Thoughts” were established among the 67 counties and cities of the province. Each propaganda team was staffed with 30 members, recruiting members from the disbanded troupes such as Beijing opera troupes, puppet troupes, and local opera troupes. (Zhangzhou Cultural Bureau 1999, 23-24; Zhongguo xiqu zhi bianji weiyuanhui 1993, 454). But even before this, many opera troupes had already been disbanded. For example in early 1966, Xiamen Xiangju/Gezaixi Troupe had been downsized and had to lay off a number of actors while those who stayed were sent to the countryside to participate in the project of promoting socialism in

rural villages. In 1969, the troupe was completely disbanded,<sup>52</sup> and the few performers who were recruited into the propaganda team performed the model dance and model Beijing opera pieces. Moreover, under the banners of “sweep all the ox ghosts and snake spirits,” “thoroughly smash the cultural black line,” “break the four olds”<sup>53</sup> etc., some performers were under attack and a great number of scripts, scores, costumes, and props were burned or destroyed during this time.

In early 1971, two articles were published in *People's Daily* about spreading revolutionary model plays. The cultural group of the State Council soon mapped out a series of specific actions to spread model plays throughout the country. As a response, revolutionary model play classes arose across China, and some places even sent practitioners to Beijing and Shanghai to learn model plays (2005, 1948-49). In southern Fujian, model play classes were held in May 1971 in the Longxi area. In May 1974, a regional model play festival took place in Zhangzhou, with regional dramatic genres *xiangju*, *chaoju*, and puppetry performing seven model plays (Zhangzhou Cultural Bureau 1999, 24-26). The trend of “learning to sing model plays and swearing to be revolutionary” prevailed throughout China.

With Jiang Qing's intervention and guidance, the model plays system had developed its own theories and would tolerate no challenges. The most classic theory was known as “three highlights” (*santuchu*), constructed by Yu Huiyong on behalf of Jiang Qing in 1968 (Dai 1995). “Three highlights” became the major principle in building up characters for model plays, instructing troupes to “highlight the positive characters among all the characters, highlight the main heroic characters among the positive characters, and highlight the most important central

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<sup>52</sup> Xiamen Xiangju Troupe resumed in March 1977.

<sup>53</sup> “Ox ghosts and snake spirits” was a derogatory title to label those who were considered anti-party and anti-socialist. “Four olds” referred to old thoughts, old culture, old customs, and old habits.

figure among the main heroic characters.” Therefore, the writer was supposed to dedicate most of the play to depicting and glorifying the central heroic character. To portray the essential heroic character, the writer was required to show the hero’s flawless “lofty, grand, and perfect” image, and any negative description or ways of performance were not allowed. This ideal hero should be presented with the most handsome movements, the most beautiful music, the best language, the most noticeable spot on stage, and the most outstanding lights and costumes, whenever and wherever the hero was on stage. The application of the “three highlights” theory rendered the characterization flat, formulaic and stereotypical. And because Zhang Chunqiao, one of the Gang of Four, once emphasized not writing about the hero’s family relationships, all the heroes in model plays appeared single, without any trace of romantic potential, dedicating all passion to the revolution selflessly.<sup>54</sup>

A new vocabulary of movements and gestures was created in the form of stylized dance to better represent contemporary themes in traditional theatre. Yet the most significant change that model plays made over Chinese sung drama was in its music. Music had long posed a problem in the process of exploring the potentials for *xiandaixi*. In the beginning of the drama reform movement, the Ministry of Culture expressed the awareness that experiments in performing contemporary themes in the form of Beijing opera were constrained by the music and thus not very successful. The Beijing opera master Mei Lanfang once also addressed this issue based on his own experience, noting that as the physical movement of sung drama shared an intimate relationship with its music, the music problem was essential but had never been

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<sup>54</sup> For example in *The Red Lantern*, the three “generations” of the hero’s family were in fact not biologically related; rather, the family was built on the love shared among the proletarian as the poor sympathized with and supported one another. Also, the hero had to come from the class of the poor peasants or workers. Class background became a decisive factor to distinguish between heroes and villains in the model plays.



properly resolved when it came to treating contemporary subjects in sung drama (Gao and Li 1999, 41).



Fig. 18. Revolutionary model play *The Red Lantern*

Although attempts to experiment with the music of *xiandaixi* had been made sporadically since the launch of the drama reform, the substantial breakthrough in music arose during the Cultural Revolution. During this period, the Central Cultural Revolution Squad gathered music experts trained in Chinese and Western music and requested that they devote their artistic endeavors exclusively to designing the music for the eight model plays. The changes were evident. Colin Mackerras compares the pre- and post-Cultural Revolution versions of *The Red Lantern*, based on gramophone recordings issued in 1965 and 1970, and is impressed with the difference in the music, noting in particular: “The orchestra contains both western and Chinese musical instruments in which the former generally dominate although the classical gongs and cymbals are still much in evidence” (Mackerras 1973, 486). Indeed, the most commonly discussed musical features of model plays are the expanded orchestra, the introduction of Western instruments such as piano and cello, the use of Western composition technique, the

creation of motif music for the main characters, and an excessively complex and ornamented quality. Moreover, to correspond with the “three highlights” theory, music design tended to have the hero reach higher pitches to accentuate the protagonist’s emotions, and as a result, high pitch overflowed throughout the play.

The incorporation of Western musical instruments in the traditional Chinese theatre emerged in the revised model plays. There had been a recurring fight in music circles about local music vis-à-vis Western music since the late 1950s. In such debates, the national and local instruments often became synonymous with the proletarian class, whereas the western instruments were regarded as the emblem of the bourgeois. Western cultural products remained controversial in China. Nevertheless, Jiang Qing’s “Summary” seemed to provide a chance for the development of Western art in China. She contended that foreign classical art forms such as ballet and the symphony could be remolded to serve the proletarian. Thus, among the eight selected revolutionary model plays there were pieces in the form of ballet and symphony. Western instruments participated further in the music accompaniment of model plays. *The Red Lantern* performed in July 1968 featured piano accompaniment. The play was performed in celebration of the forty-seventh anniversary of the Communist Party, with Mao in attendance. *The Red Lantern* with piano accompaniment was reported in a review, which attributed the success to Jiang Qing’s personal guidance and care, and then stated that the trial successfully made foreign elements serve China and opened a new road for Western musical instruments and symphonies and for musical accompaniments in Chinese operas (Ebon 1975, 213-18).

Here again we see the paradox of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, many traditional arts and values were ruthlessly destroyed under the slogan of “smash the four olds” and Western culture was also attacked for its association with the

bourgeois and capitalism. However, at the same time traditional art forms were relied on heavily as an indispensable vehicle to spread socialist thoughts. Similarly, the use of piano was recognized only when it was related to socialist themes. The value of art could not be recognized independently. The traditional arts and Western arts that were accepted at this time were able to survive and develop mainly due to their instrumental function as a political weapon.

### **Where Have All *The Butterfly Lovers* Gone? The Aftermath**

During my fieldwork research in southern Fujian from 2005 to 2007, I inquired particularly about the play *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Shanbo Yingtai*) as I noticed that the play is not listed on most troupes' repertoire, private and public troupes alike. Some performers attributed this to the fact that the play's small cast renders it less robust and thus not an ideal performance choice, while others had no explanation. *The Butterfly Lovers* was the first *gezaixi* play I learned, and I have seen this play performed several times in Taiwan. I wondered why *The Butterfly Lovers*, considered one of the four classics of *gezaixi*, is now so silent in China? As I delved into the archives of the history of contemporary Chinese theatre and came across the "First National Sung Drama Festival," I began to uncover the answer to my question.

The Chinese Ministry of Culture hosted the First National *Xiqu* Festival in 1952, which lasted from October 6 to November 14. The joint performance was a significant event for theatre in China because this was the first time the central government had held a performance event on a national scale. There were 37 troupes participating in the festival, with 23 regional dramatic genres involved. Although the event did not include all the theatre genres, it included many large regional genres from most provinces, and thus drew wide attention from the cultural field across

China. The month-long festival presented 82 plays, among which 63 were traditional plays, 11 were new history plays, and 8 were plays with contemporary themes. Performances were judged and awards were given at the end of the festival. The first national joint performance event had a profound impact on Chinese theatre. In the years that followed, several regions and provinces began to host such festivals as a way to display local artistic achievements to promote regional theatre activities. The practice continues to this day (Fu 2002, 32-34).

The first theatre festival contributed further to the emergence of a few canonic plays, and a national penchant for adapting these plays for local theatre. In this festival, *yueju*'s (Zhejiang opera) *The Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*) won the best play and best performance awards in this event.<sup>55</sup> The tale of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai had been popular across China for centuries, existing in a multitude of forms, such as storytelling and drama, and assuming various appearances according to local customs and preference. However, since the *yueju* version won critical acclaim and official attention at the national festival, local troupes thus deemed the *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers* as a model, and began to "translate" it for their own theatre to replace the original local versions. At a time when staging traditional plays was often considered problematic, taking a script that was endorsed by the central government was undoubtedly the safest and easiest solution. Consequently, the *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers* was adopted widely in other theatres.<sup>56</sup> There was a saying in the 1950s among the spectators: "You don't have to read the newspapers [to find out what's playing. It's the] love story of Liang and Zhu, and the legend of White Snake". (*Fankai baozhi buyong kan, Liangzhu*

<sup>55</sup> The *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers* was adapted from an oral text of *The Tragedy of Liang and Zhu* (*Liangzhu aishi*) verbally given by the *yueju* performer Yuen Xueifeng, and re-written by Xun Jin.

<sup>56</sup> The influence of *yueju*'s *Butterfly Lovers* also extended overseas. A Hong Kong film *Liang Shanbao yu Zhu Yingtai*, adapted the *yueju* version into the form of *huangmei-diao* (a regional opera in Anhui but popular nationwide) in 1962. Soon after its release, the film became a hit in overseas Chinese regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

*Yiyuan Baizhe zhuan*). The saying satirized the shortage of repertoire at the time, and also revealed how widespread the performances of *The Butterfly Lovers* were.

The earliest appearance of the tale of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai was recorded in Zhang Du's *Xuanshi zhi*, written in the ninth century in the Tang dynasty.<sup>57</sup> The story developed further in the Ming and Qing dynasties and proliferated in ballads, plays, and storytelling. *The Butterfly Lovers* that is known to most people today, though with nuanced variations, is about a girl Zhu Yingtai who disguises her gender in order to study at boys' boarding school in the city Hangzhou. Her affections towards her classmate Liang Shanbo grow over the three years of coursework. At her departure, she tries to reveal her secret to Shanbo. After discovering that Yingtai is in fact a girl, Shanbo is overwhelmed with joy and hurries to the Zhu family to propose, only to discover that she has been betrothed to the rich Ma Jun by her parents, despite her objections. Shanbo is so devastated that he goes home ill and then dies. On the way to the Ma household on the wedding day, the bridal sedan passes the cemetery. Yingtai insists on getting off the sedan to pay homage to Shanbo, and then, after grieving, she commits suicide at his grave. Reunion comes after death, where the two souls finally turn into a couple of butterflies and fly happily away.

In Taiwan, *Shanbo Yingtai* was one of the most staged plays on the island, and has been described as “the Bible of *gezaxi*” (Lu 1961, 233). It was a play embraced by audiences. It has also been celebrated as a challenge to actor-singers.<sup>58</sup> As one of the plays that surfaced in

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<sup>57</sup> In the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, the story emerged in theatre, with the title recorded in, for instance, Zhong Sicheng's *Lugueibu*. See *Liang Zhu gushi shuo chang hebian* [A Collection of Liang Zhu Stories], ed. Xingqiaozhuren (Taipei: Guting, 1975), 1; *Liang Zhu xiju ji cun* [A Collection of Liang Zhu Plays], ed. Qian Nanyang (Shanghai: Shanghai gudian wenxue 1956).

<sup>58</sup> During the Japanese colonial period, the famous Taiwanese diva Hudou Baogui was known for playing three successive roles in *Shanbo Yingtai*. In the first half she played the character of Shanbo, followed by Shanbo's mother after his death in the scene “Mother Liang Laments Her Son,” and finally she played Yingtai in the scene

*gezaixi*'s initial stage, it developed along with the development of *gezaixi* in Taiwan.

Although *gezaixi* in Taiwan has by and large run on a scene-list (script-less) system, this play, given its long staging history, had yielded manuscripts in quite a few troupes, usually recorded based on senior performers' oral transmission. Yilan County Cultural Center had a collection of seven of such manuscripts, written from the 1930s to 1950s, and published them in 1997.<sup>59</sup>

The outline of the story basically follows the structure of the Chinese storytelling of *The Butterfly Lovers*, yet the arrangement of certain details signals different local preferences. The biggest difference is the timing of when Yingtai tries to reveal her female identity to Shanbo, a scene that is also one of the climaxes of the play. In the *yueju* version, it occurs at the sad departing moment when Yingtai is going home. As Shanbo walks her off, Yingtai, who does not want this separation to be forever, hints as to her identity and her affection for him, but Shanbo fails to understand. However, the *gezaixi* version moves the occasion ahead to "a visit to the garden." After three years' company, the two visit a garden during spring break. The beauty and liveliness of spring prompts Yingtai's desire to tease and flirt with the fine lad next to her. She uses surrounding elements such as flowers and birds to suggest her identity and their relationship, hoping Shanbo will understand. When finally Yingtai confesses, the early *gezaixi* texts show that

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"Yingtai Grieves at the Grave." As all these scenes required a great deal of singing, Hudou Baogui found great opportunity to wield her vocal technique and talent. Personal Interview with Houdou Baogui's sister Zheng Feng (1915-), 9 September 2002 in Gaoxiong, Taiwan.

<sup>59</sup> An overview and comparison of the seven versions shows the primary scenes of *The Butterfly Lovers* in early *gezaixi*. They are: Yingtai goes to school, a visit to the garden, Yinxin (the name of Yingtai's maid) asks Yingtai to leave for home, Yingtai pines for love, on Shanbo's way to the Zhu's, meeting in the chamber, Shanbo pines for love, the parrot brings the letter, Shanbo passes away, Shijiou (Shanbo's page) reports the death, Ma Jun comes for the bride, Yingtai grieves at the grave, Ma Jun goes to Hades to claim Yingtai, the three are resurrected. For the seven versions of the play, see *Gezaixi sida chu yi: Shanbo Yingtai*, ed. Zheng Yingzhu (Yilan: Yilan xianli wenhuazhongxin, 1997). The emergence of the resurrection section can be traced to the Ming dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> century). Most of the storytelling scripts in the Qing dynasty demonstrate the plots in the netherworld, about how the underworld god judges this three-way relationship, and how they return to life and the lovers reunite. These additional plots are also recorded in the *gezaixi* ballad scripts during the Japanese colonial period. Thus we can say that the outline of the story in Taiwan, even the part about the afterlife, is basically the same as the Chinese counterpart.

Shanbo, expressing amazement and disbelief, requests a sexual relationship. But the development of their mutual desire is soon interrupted by the maid Yinxin, who shows up to inform Yingtai of her mother's order that she should leave school for home immediately.

“Yingtai grieves at the grave” is also a great feature of *gezaixi*. While the *yueju* version does not devote much time to the mourning of Yingtai for Shanbo, in *gezaixi* Yingtai's lament builds on *gezaixi*'s multitude of weeping tunes and in several places continues for twenty-four stanzas, with each one in a different tune. (The earlier *gezaixi* ran in the format of a five-day or ten-day stage serial so there was plenty of time for singers to utilize). The manuscripts of the 1940s-1950s illustrate the flexibility and variety of the lament, spanning from four stanzas, eight stanzas, and twelve stanzas to twenty-four stanzas, depending on the actor-singer's vocal strength and the degree of the spectators' enthusiasm.

When *gezaixi* was brought to southern Fujian, this “Bible” certainly went along across the strait. According to the senior performers in southern Fujian whom I interviewed, there were manuscripts, albeit only a few, for them to learn *gezaixi* such as *Shanbo Yingtai* and *Chensan Wunian*. (These were also two of the four old classics of *gezaixi* plays in Taiwan). One performer, Ms. Ji, told me that in the 1940s, before the drama reform had been implemented, the *Shanbo Yingtai* that her troupe (the predecessor of today's Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe) performed ran in the form of a stage serial and it included the plotline about Ma Jun's dispute about his marriage in front of the underworld god. In 1952 “the first sung drama workshop” took place in response to the drama reform movement in southern Fujian, and thereafter the scene-list play was replaced by the scripted system and most of the scripted plays were taken from other regional genres and translated into *gezaixi*, including *Shanbo Yingtai*. *Yueju*'s version dominated *gezaixi* theatre,

because the original *gezaixi* text was considered to contain too many feudal elements and thus was too controversial to be staged.

Another *gezaixi* performer, Ms. Xie, also said that after the launch of the drama reformation, the original *Shanbo Yingtai* was restricted, and thus substituted by the *yueju* version. The debut of the translated (adapted) version took place in around 1953. Compared to the original version which featured a detailed and descriptive story presented as a stage serial running over several days, the *yueju* version was presented in a single performance, and the story ended with the couple transforming into butterflies. The translated version ran for three months and drew swarms of spectators, though many of them expressed deep nostalgia and fondness for the descriptive “dishes in the banquet,”<sup>60</sup> and “twenty-four laments” in the original *gezaixi* version. In the end, the troupe had to add “six laments” as a response to the spectators’ constant requests.

On August 27, 1963, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice to “request all troupes to cooperate with the present class struggle and socialist education movement and endeavor to stage plays with anti-feudal, anti-superstitious, and anti-arranged marriage themes,” in which it strongly recommended the contemporary play such as *Liang Qiuyan*, and the revised traditional play *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. The issuance of the notice accelerated the creation of plays on the subject of freedom to choose one’s spouse, and it further fortified the position and influence of the *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers*.

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<sup>60</sup> In the old *gezaixi* version of *Shanbo Yingtai*, before the scene “meeting in the chamber” there is usually a scene “the servant shops for the banquet for Shanbo,” and before the couple’s bitter-sweet reunion in the chamber, there is “dishes in the banquet.” “Dishes in the banquet” gives each course an enthusiastic description and can continue for as many as sixteen courses. The abundant description of the food reveals what the ordinary people deemed and imagined as delicacies in the old days. In the southern Fujian, the presentation of food usually continued to the twelfth course.



“The Bible of *gezaixi*” began to vanish in southern Fujian after the 1950s. Aspects of the play that were imbued with local features were gone, such as “the presentation of dishes” which reflected the imagination and values of the ordinary people and the “twenty-four laments,” which incorporated *gezaixi*’s weeping tunes, and were replaced by the exquisite and refined *yueju* version. During the drama reform movement, many commonly accepted plays that reflected the citizens’ inclinations were marked as either low-class or backward and feudal. The definition of “artistic” was held in the hands of the few cultural authorities, who imposed their own aesthetic by greatly acclaiming and promoting the plays that conformed to their own tastes. Although it is true that the drama reform movement had effectively facilitated the overall quality of theatre across China, unfortunately, the theatre was reformed and molded on **only one standard**, the standard of the elites and the authorities, whereas other aesthetics were denied. One of the dangers of the proliferation of the model plays during the Cultural Revolution resided in the fact that an unchallengeable supremacy in performing arts was established, with no other options permitted and no power to say “no” available to the majority of spectators and regional theatres. Indeed, this rationale can be traced back to even before the launch of the Cultural Revolution. In the first national theatre festival in 1952, the judges had begun to designate models for all the theatre in China and encouraged the regional theatre to adopt specific plays. As the state tempered regulation and censorship with acclaims and awards, small regional theatre could rarely conquer the power of the norm and develop independently. Thus we see the *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers* taking over the stage of *gezaixi*. Such an imposition of central power on local theatre became more extreme during the Cultural Revolution as the model plays were promoted exclusively.

Local traditional plays returned to the theatre as the Cultural Revolution came to an end. In 1978, Chen Degen revised *The Butterfly Lovers* based on three sources: Shao Jianghai's script, the Taiwanese *gezaixi* version, and the *yueju* version. The play was performed by Zhangzhou Xiangju Troupe and ran for 300 performances. To some degree, the overwhelming popularity was an emotional rebound against the long-held suppression. Once the ban on traditional plays was lifted, people's demands, which had been repressed for at least a decade, soon erupted. The drama reform movement and the Cultural Revolution seemed to create a rupture, impacting not only the repertoire and the performance style, but the spectators as well. The Chinese theatre had ignored the needs of the spectators for too long and found it hard to catch up with the spectators' changes and connect to the public. The prosperity did not last long; the theatre market slumped in just a few years. *The Butterfly Lovers*, in either the *yueju* version or the *gezaixi* version, gradually faded away in *gezaixi* theatre on the mainland.

"Transplanting repertoire," as it is literally called (*yizhi jumu*) meaning adapting a play into another theatrical genre, could certainly enrich the receiving party's repertoire and performance. However, a compulsory transplantation, a forced replacement of the original play, could do immeasurable harm to the indigenous theatre. In the process of transplantation, *gezaixi* in southern Fujian, as a minority in the context of Chinese mainland, most often could only be a passive recipient, receiving the influence of dominant theatrical genres such as Beijing opera and *yueju*. An incident documented in *History of Gezaixi* illustrates this situation. "After the contemporary *gezaixi* play *Laud to the Green Water* (*Bishuei zan*) was selected and adapted into model Beijing opera *Ode to the Dragon River* (*Longjiang song*), *Laud to the Green Water* was denied. Instead, it was required to be changed into *Ode to the Dragon River* and everything copied from the Beijing opera version, following its every single lyric and every movement"

(Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 193). Although *gezaixi* in southern Fujian came up with the contemporary play *Laud to the Green Water* and won critical acclaim, in the end the troupe still had no choice but to transplant the Beijing opera version *Ode to the Dragon River* to their theatre. Further, because no alteration to the libretto was permitted, the southern Fujian dialect was often forced into the speech pattern of Mandarin (the language in Beijing opera), losing the features of local language. A *xiandaixi* created and produced by Longhai County Propaganda Team entitled *Fishermen's Song on the East Sea (Donghai yuge)* in 1972 even attempted to perform *xiangju/gezaixi* in Mandarin (Chen, Zeng, and Yan 1997, 192).



Fig. 19. *Ode to the Dragon River*.

Thus the circumstances of *gezaixi* on the mainland gave rise to a process whereby a minority theatre has both been assimilated and resisted the assimilation. Following the launch of the drama reform movement, a tug-of-war between small theatre and dominant theatre had been going on, as seen in the development of *gezaixi*. The state regulated the development of regional theatres via the control of resources and policy, while regional theatres attempted to struggle and resist. In the process, regional theatres sometimes had to twist themselves to conform to the will of the state, such as by singing *xiangju* in Mandarin, and at times they strove for the maximum

degree of autonomy within the small wriggle room available to them, such as by adding *gezaixi*'s "six laments" in the *yueju* version of *The Butterfly Lovers* in response to the spectators' requests.

Overall, the impact drama reform and the Cultural Revolution had on regional theatre practices like *gezaixi* on the Chinese mainland can be described through three terms: fixedness, specialization, and standardization.

Fixedness manifested itself in the scripted system, notated music, and choreographed performance. The implementation in the 1960s of the scripted system and the subsequent request from the Ministry of Culture to project subtitles during performance brought the lyrics and spoken dialogue under the discipline of written text and pushed the play towards a more literary direction. Also, in terms of music, the introduction of the concept of composition moved the music of Chinese sung drama from a free-style, improvised accompaniment to a musical performance following scores. Notation made a more complex music design possible. In terms of movement, many physical movements were incorporated and choreographed along with the fixedness of script and music. While a set text (in terms of script, blocking, movement, music, etc.) may guarantee a basic level of quality for a performance as it allows performers more time to rehearse, an exclusively script-centric cultural policy leaves relatively little room for performers to explore their own individual talents and styles.

The second biggest change in *gezaixi* theatre in China after the two major cultural campaigns was specialization. As the concept of specialization was introduced and practiced in the production of traditional Chinese theatre, the director became the one who coordinated and took charge of the artistic vision and rendering of the play, and the music designer coordinated

the musical style of a play. Musicians' and actors-singers' artistic creation thus diminished, and the performer's individual style was watered down. As a result of specialization, a production now featured collaboration of the production team and the ensemble, rather than one or two stars in the company.

The third impact was standardization. Following the national joint sung drama performance in 1952, the state and local governments began to host similar theatre festivals regularly, all in the format of competition. Through the repetitive evaluation and awards, an aesthetic standard of "being artistic" was constructed, exemplified, replicated, and circulated over and over again. (And such evaluation had often been tied to political ideology). Accordingly, mainstream artistic values and standards were established and stabilized. The fact that troupes and theatre education were contained inside the state apparatus further made aesthetic norms easier to implement. Under such standardization, big regional theatre genres, with their profound historic ground, could stand against the mainstream and even became the mainstream. In contrast, small regional genres faced the crisis of being marginalized under the force of mainstream aesthetics. An apt example is that during the drama reform and the Cultural Revolution, *gezaixi* on the mainland became the recipient of repertoires and performance style from other theatrical genres. Even with the plays of which *gezaixi* boasted, troupes could do nothing but passively replace indigenous work with versions from other theatres. And it certainly could not export its culture. The play *Laud to the Green Water*, originally created by a *xiangju* troupe, eventually lost its legitimacy to the later version of its Beijing opera counterpart *Ode to the Dragon River*. Thus, the question of how to resist the assimilating force of mainstream aesthetics and retain its own distinctiveness was an issue for small regional theatre like *gezaixi*, and it continues to be a challenge even today.

## Chapter Four

### The Double Meanings of Opela

The previous chapter examined the history of *xiandaixi* on the mainland; performance modes such as *xiandaixi*, which bring contemporary themes into traditional theatre, have been practiced in Taiwan for decades as well. However, local Taiwanese drama that attempts to incorporate contemporary elements has been called “*opela*.” Unlike *xiandaixi*, which quickly gained financial support of and cultural promotion by the new PRC state, *opela* remained strictly a grass roots phenomenon and had neither the attention of the authorities nor the participation of intellectuals in Taiwan. Consequently, the style of *opela* has an entirely different appearance than that of *xiandaixi*. The two also enjoy vastly different social positions in their respective societies: *xiandaixi*, known as “the propaganda play” among the spectators and “the mission play” among the practitioners, has been the main direction for drama development on the mainland while *opela*, perceived and described as “perfunctory,” had been “outlawed” from the mainstream discourse on *gezaixi*. However, *opela* was most popular on outdoor *gezaixi* stages as an evening performance in Taiwan, whereas in the afternoon the troupes stage *guluxi* (old-style plays), featuring historical period plays or legendary tales with traditional costumes and forms of music. In this chapter I foreground *opela*’s original meaning, that is, as the Japanese transliteration of the word “opera,” and I examine the colonial influence, the legacy of Japan’s assimilation project, sedimented in the performance of *opela* today. I then explore why the negative meaning—“*o-be-pe-pe-le*” (doing perfunctorily) came to dominate the definition of *opela* and why the original meaning (“opera”) vanished from most people’s memory. I argue that the change is due to the Nationalists’ long term cultural policy that heightened Chinese “national

essence” during the semi-colonial, martial law period (1945-1987) at the expense of local cultural form. As a result, “vernacular drama” such as *gezaixi* had long been considered inferior and low-class. *Gezaixi*’s old-style plays (*guluxi*) could pass as the mainstream cultural production with its proximity to Beijing opera, the National opera in Taiwan, while *opela*, with its performance style deviated from this norm, gradually obtained the negative association.

*Opela* combines narratives of martial arts fantasy and soap opera, featuring themes of love and vengeance. Its costumes, music, and movement embrace a mixture of intercultural and pop culture elements. It is thus not uncommon to see a character wearing a kimono or cowboy suit and singing a mid-twentieth century song in a seventeenth century setting. In Taiwan, Beijing opera had been strongly promoted as “National Opera” by the Nationalists (GMD), whereas vernacular drama such as *gezaixi* had been marginalized as “local” and “primitive,” condemned as an entertainment associated with the uncultivated lower class. Thus Beijing-opera style was constructed as the norm for traditional performances in Taiwan. The unbridled presentation of *opela* challenged this norm, which had emphasized the “purity of tradition,” especially during the martial law era (1945-1987), and therefore most people had associated and defined *opela* as “*o-be-pe-pe-le*” (in Taiwanese, “doing in a perfunctory way”), without knowing or acknowledging that originally it was the transliteration of the Japanese pronunciation of the word “opera.” Indeed, the first history of *gezaixi* was not published until 1988 in Taiwan, and it devoted only a few sentences to *opela*, which is described as “flippant and perfunctory.” Due to this marginal position and the colloquial use of the term, relevant materials and research on *opela* are very limited, and its history has remained blurry.

I will begin this discussion with an example of this genre, an *opela* production of *Youth Dream* (*Qingchun meimeng*), which premiered in 2005 by the Taiwanese *gezaixi* company

Chunmei Troupe. *Youth Dream* tells the story of Chang Weixian (1905-1977), who pioneered the Taiwanese new theatre (*xinju*, i.e. spoken drama modeled on the Western theatre, which was considered a novel form in the early twentieth century) during the Japanese colonial rule. The subject is very similar to Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe's production *Shao Jianghai*, which treats the *gezaixi* master in southern China, yet the strategies of storytelling and the styles of staging differ significantly. The discussion of this play aims to show the way in which it contrasts with *Shao Jianghai* on the mainland, in order to demonstrate the different narrative strategies used on the two sides of the strait in treating a similar topic. This chapter will then examine *gezaixi*'s development and *opela*'s history in Taiwan.

### **Youth Dream**

Based in Gaoxiong, Chunmei Opera Troupe is a professional theatre company that normally performs for temple events in southern Taiwan. Company owner Guo Chunmei, born in 1964, had performed in her parents' *gezaixi* troupe since childhood. She was recruited for TV *gezaixi* serials in approximately 1984, cross-dressing as the male lead. In 2000, she founded Chunmei Opera Troupe in her hometown Gaoxiong, and it soon became one of the selected performing arts teams subsidized by the government (Lin and Cai 2004, 302). The troupe has actively invited various playwrights, directors and composers to design for their main stage productions. *Youth Dream*, which premiered in the summer of 2005, describes the aspirations and endeavors of the new theatre practitioner Zhang Weixian in his youth. The theme and setting of the play are very different from those of the usual *gezaixi* repertoire in Taiwan. Bringing the performance elements of *opela* into full play, the staging of the new subject was made charming and effective.



Act1 Time: 1924; Place: Taipei

Scene1: On their way to the temple festival, Zhang Weixian and his houseboy A-Shun meet Zhang's friend Wang Jingchuan. With a play script in his hand, Wang tells Zhang that he has acquired a copy of Hu Shi's adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* from Shanghai, and that their "Xingguang Drama Research Club" should begin to rehearse it. Zhang and Wang explain to A-shun that the drama they hope to promote is "a new theatre that can present the current times; therefore the costumes are all contemporary... No more out-dated thoughts; it features modern fashion." During this conversation, they spot a *beiguanxi*, a traditional form of Taiwanese theatre, and Zhang begins to criticize the philosophy of old sung drama. Meanwhile, the female protagonist Mitsuko enters in Western dress. Activities at the Taiwanese festival fascinate her. Zhang is attracted to Mitsuko at first sight and he wants to get to know her. An idea occurs to the houseboy A-shun and he begins to advertise the drama club's new play, which draws the attention of the crowd, including Mitsuko. Zhang Weixian therefore gets the chance to talk to her and invites her to attend their rehearsal in the park at her convenience.

Scene2: Jinhua, Zhang Weixian's fiancé, sets out to buy some fabric to make garments for her beloved, but she encounters a thief. Jinhau and A-shun run off after the thief. Zhang Weixian and Mitsuko enter, discussing the play he has just rehearsed. Zhang acts out a part of the play, which is about the hero adoring a woman passionately and seeking the freedom to choose his spouse despite the difference in their social statuses. They each begin to sing out their own secrets aside. Each has affections for the other: Mitsuko, with a fiancé, is the daughter of a high-ranking Japanese official, and Zhang has a marriage arranged by his parents waiting for him. The would-be lovers feel the sweetness of love and bitterness of the situation. Mitsuko, seeing

that Zhang is passionate about new theatre, suggests that he should go to Tokyo to study drama. She then gives him a harmonica as a gift. They sing and dance to the music.



Fig. 20. Zhang Weixian and Mitsuko, in love, dance a Waltz.  
Photo provided by the troupe.

Jinhua and A-shun enter, chasing the thief. Several Japanese officers make to take the thief to the police station. The thief begs for mercy. Knowing that the Japanese law has been so stern in Taiwan that the thief will have his hand chopped off, Zhang wants to let the thief go and finally gets into a fight with the police. A brief choreographed fighting scene follows, until Mitsuko intervenes. Upon seeing Mitsuko, the Japanese officers leave grudgingly.

Scene 3: Wang Jingchuan enters, saying that Zhang Weixian, due to his involvement with the “Black Wandering Souls’ League” which criticizes the Japanese authorities, is on the wanted list. He is going to urge Zhang to leave for Japan to avoid the tension.

Several police officers come to the Zhang family with an order to look for Weixian. Zhang’s parents bribe the officers away, saying that the Zhang Weixian on the list is not the same person as their son. Zhang Weixian enters. His mother asks him to learn how to run a

business, yet Weixian makes it clear that his interest is not in commerce but in theatre. His father is infuriated, saying that doing theatre is good for nothing, while Weixian retorts that it is an art form. His mother thinks that marriage may settle him down, yet Weixian declines to marry Jinhua, for whom he has no feelings. He then begins to talk about the importance of selecting one's mate independently, which puzzles and worries his parents, who see Weixian as constantly making trouble. Zhang's mother is afraid that Weixian will get himself into trouble sooner or later, so she convinces her husband to let him go to Japan.

Curtain. Transition music. On the curtain is projected historical photos of Zhang Weixian with his friends in the Black Wandering Souls' League, and photos of his performance during his study in Japan.

Act 2 Time: 1928; Place: Tokyo

Scene 1: A-shun sings a rap about his novel experiences in Tokyo. He exits, looking for his master Zhang Weixian. Suzuki, Mitsuko's Japanese friend in Tokyo, shows Weixian around the Tsukiji theatre and is impressed by Weixian, for he is the first Taiwanese student admitted to the Tsukiji Theatre. Suzuki leaves Weixian with a group of students.

A director enters, teaching the actors stage movements. Then, the director begins to rehearse Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. This section ends comically, with A-shun playing tricks on the director. Suzuki enters with a suitcase, singing to the audience that he is transferring to Taiwan, and hopes to marry Mitsuko as soon as possible. Seeing Suzuki off, Weixian (still not knowing that Suzuki is Mitsuko's fiancé) begins to think of the spring in Taiwan as he is now amid the snow of Tokyo in March. He also longs for Mitsuko and plays the harmonica she gave him. Mitsuko appears down stage left, with her father's harsh voice coming from offstage and asking

her to marry Suzuki. The lovelorn couple seem to see each other and begin to waltz together in their imaginary world.

Scene2: Zhang Weixian, in Tokyo, witnesses a protest held by several Japanese asking the government to return their land. He gets involved in the protest and fights with the Japanese officers. Wounded and lying in the snow, he questions the ambitious Japanese imperial project, which victimizes people of other countries as well as of its own. In his unconscious state, he seems to hear his mother and lover call to him.

Blackout. During the transition music, the backdrop shows historical photos of Zhang Weixian and his friends, who also believed in proletarian ideas, and photos showing him with his friends in the Minfeng Drama Club after his return to Taiwan from Japan.



Fig. 21. Zhang gets involved in a conflict with the Japanese officers.  
Photo provided by the troupe.

Act3 Time: 1931; Place: Taipei

Scene 1: Zhang's mother, Jinhua, and some relatives wait for Weixian to return. A-shun shows up alone, carrying pieces of luggage. He explains that Weixian has gone to visit Mitsuko.

Scene 2: Weixian looks for Mitsuko, only to find himself at the wedding of Mitsuko and Suzuki. Astonished, he tries to hold in his distress and accepts Suzuki's invitation to sing a Japanese song for them. Zhang's friend Wang Jingchuan and A-shun come for Weixian, who gives his best wishes to Mitsuko and returns the harmonica to her. After his exit, Suzuki seems lost in thought.

Scene 3: A-shun tells the audience that tonight there is a New Theatre Festival. Weixian's Minfeng Troupe is going to stage a show and it is the only production performed in Taiwanese rather than Japanese. Mitsuko enters, congratulating Weixian on realizing his ideals. Weixian asks Mitsuko why she has been so cruel to him, but she replies that she could not convince her parents to accept their relationship. The couple sing a sad love song. Jinhua enters, showing gratitude that Mitsuko has been so concerned with Weixian, but asking her to let go. The three begin a trio, singing about how the past is like wandering clouds and vanishing smoke.



Fig. 22. Zhang Weixian at Mitsuko's wedding. Photo provided by the troupe.

Wang Jingchuan enters, announcing that the show is about to begin. Suzuki shows up and he and Mitsuko sit as spectators. Weixian performs in *The Groom*, in which the groom is about

to elope with his lover to escape the marriage his parents have arranged for him. Failing to stop them, the groom's mother blesses the couple in the end. In the curtain call, a group of Japanese police officers enter, claiming that the play is disqualified from the contest since its script was not submitted for inspection. A conflict is about to take place, which is then intermediated by Suzuki. However, after the officers leave, Suzuki asks Zhang to participate in the propaganda activities of the Imperial Subject Drama organized by the Japanese government. Zhang refuses to perform for political propaganda. The scene ends with Suzuki threatening Zhang.

Scene 4: In the military music and drumming, several Japanese police officers enter, exclaiming slogans such as "Conquer the Southern Ocean," "March toward Manchuria," and "Allegiance to the Emperor." Zhang Weixian, his family and friends enter. Wang Jingchuan urges Zhang to leave for Shanghai by ship to avoid being caught and sent to the battlefield in Southeast Asia to fight for the Japanese empire. The two lament that the new theatre is just about to blossom and yet the war occurs. Weixian takes his younger brother with him on board the ship and bids farewell to everyone. In the meantime, Mitsuko shows up at the dock. The two wave goodbye to each other and to their youth.

The scene ends with offstage singing of "wild youth" and the tableau of farewell. At the very end, the historical photos of Zhang Weixian appear on the curtain-screen, with captions stating: "It was a time of idealism." Then the lead actor Guo Chunmei poses down stage right while the other side of the curtain-screen shows the historical photo of Zhang in his youth, with the caption: "With the play we pay our tribute to Mr. Zhang Weixian."

Zhang Weixian (1905-1977), sometimes referred to as "the forerunner of Taiwanese new theatre," founded "Xingguang Drama Research Club" in 1924 with Chen Qizhen and Wang

Jingchuan. The drama club was disbanded in 1928 because some members were involved in the anti-government “Wandering Souls’ League” and were thus outlawed. Later, Zhang went to Tokyo to study drama in the Tsukiji Theatre, where Japan’s new theatre movement originated. He returned to Taiwan and founded Minfeng Troupe in 1930 and organized workshops to train Taiwanese intellectuals. He went to Japan again to study stage movement in 1932. In 1933 Minfeng Troupe staged Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People* in Yongle Theatre in Taipei and won critical acclaim. Zhang was not able to fulfill his ambitions, however, by developing his talents in theatre after the war, due in part to the Nationalists changing the official language from Taiwanese to Mandarin, which few Taiwanese intellectuals were able to speak. He tried to invest in the film industry but was not successful. He died in 1977 (*Taiwan lishi cidian* 2004, 748-49).

While both plays focus on an historical personage, the narrative strategies and ways of expression of Taiwan’s *Youth Dream* and China’s *Shao Jianghai* differ significantly. In China’s *Shao Jianghai*, we see a polished artistic rendering and a condensed narrative that highlights the main hero. This aesthetic resonated with the “three highlights” artistic theory in the model play era, in which the writer is required to dedicate most of the play to depicting and glorifying the central hero, whose image should be flawless and lofty. In comparison, Taiwan’s *Youth Dream* introduces much more information and additional characters. In terms of the plot, *Shao Jianghai* uses the string instrument as the underlying image and focuses the narrative on Shao’s passion for *gezaixi*. The story strives for simplicity and hinges on conflicts caused by the musical instrument. By contrast, Taiwan’s *Youth Dream* attempts to address deeper conflicts and present more complex messages. The story is divided into three acts and each represents a different phase of Zhang’s youth: his passion for theatre and ideal for the society before going to Japan; his study of the new theatre in Japan; and his return to Taiwan to fulfill his dream. The

playwright also tries to introduce the social background in each stage of his youth so that we see Zhang involved in the social movement but unable to gain the understanding of his parents; we see Japanese officials such as Suzuki attempt to mobilize the new theatre to disseminate the Japanese imperial project; and we see the arranged marriages of the time and those who wanted to fight for freedom of love.

Freedom of love is one of the themes of the play, and it was also the subject the new theatre practitioners in the early twentieth century often chose to educate the public, advocating breaking with social class and fighting for love. On stage, the “plays within a play” Zhang Weixian performs, such as *A Doll’s House* and *The Groom*, are about female liberation and independence of love. Backstage Zhang Weixian gets caught in the same situation. His beloved Mitsuko is the daughter of a Japanese official. They face a similar dilemma in their relationship, and both have marriages that have been arranged by their parents. No matter how frequently Zhang acts out and advocates the idea of freedom of love in the play, paradoxically he can never realize this ideal in reality. After a few years of solitude and pining for love, when he finally completes his study and returns home, what awaits him is the wedding of his beloved to someone else.

The production uses a number of historical photos of Zhang Weixian in the beginning and end of the play and during transitions. These photos frame the entire play, creating a historical mood and evoking the period for the spectators, as well as reminding them that the play portrays an actual figure from history. The intention to pay homage to the master is manifest especially in the very end, as the lead actor Guo Chunmei appears and poses on one side of the stage in the spotlight, while on the other side Zhang Weixian’s photo is projected. The choices in narration demonstrate fully the different styles and artistic paths of *gezaixi* on the two sides of



the strait. While the torments of love run through the whole of *Youth Dream*, in *Shao Jianghai* love is depicted with only a few strokes. *Shao Jianghai*, with a strong anti-colonial message, emphasizes the grand narrative of the love for the nation, whereas *Youth Dream* foregrounds the story of the lovelorn couple and brings in Taiwan's colonial context.

*Gezaixi* on the mainland has had the long-term intervention and financial support from the PRC as part of its project to preserve a "pure" artistic form while at the same time asserting the state's ideology in the narrative. Professional talents were recruited and employed in every technical aspect of *Shao Jianghai*, rendering the entire work stylish, unified, polished and neat. *Gezaixi* in Taiwan, on the other hand, had long been ignored and left alone by the authorities, and its survival to this day is primarily due to its commercial viability. In Taiwan, stories in *gezaixi* usually feature a lovelorn couple, which manifests especially in the narrative of *opela*. Further, an appealing *gezaixi* performance in Taiwan requires not only beautiful voices and stage presence on the part of the main actors, but also the amusing performance of a jovial clown. In the case of *Youth Dream*, the playwright chose to use a storyline familiar to the spectators, centering on the romance of the male and female protagonists and weaving in the comic relief of the clown A-shun. Yet the play is more than merely a romance: applying the melodramatic structure, the playwright developed a more profound theme, introducing both the new theatre pioneer and Taiwan's colonial history.

*Youth Dream* is different from typical *opela*, which has been criticized for its random and spontaneous mixture of various alien elements. (Even with the story set in the pre-modern society, typical *opela* uses modern music and costumes, which often appears illogical to most spectators). Yet *Youth Dream* is set in Taiwan during the Japanese governance, when the new culture and the old overlapped and collided, and it talks about the "new theatre," a new form of

performance and a vanguard figure. In this context, the use of pop music, Japanese songs, kimonos, Western dress, and other foreign elements are reasonable choices for staging the story. What makes this production stand out from other *opela* performances is perhaps the participation of the intellectuals in its production.

*Youth Dream* has two playwrights: Wu Xiuying and Mufei. Ms. Wu is an elementary school teacher, who had written several plays previously, all on figures of Taiwanese history such as the courtesan Zhou A-chun in Taipei and the Taiwanese communist party founder Xie Xuehong. Her co-playwright Mufei is a *gezaixi* fan and often posts reviews and performance information on the *gezaixi* websites (Ji 2005). The participation of Wu Xiuying and Mufei exemplifies a recent trend in the *gezaixi* productions: playwrights who come from various backgrounds to contribute new ideas to *gezaixi*.

It was only after the year 2000, with a proliferation of discourse on *opela* and the first entrance of an *opela* production in a government-sponsored *gezaixi* festival in 2001, that Taiwanese intellectuals began to treat the performance of *opela* as legitimate material for creation and consciously play with its hybrid elements. (The rise of *opela*'s position in Taiwanese society will be discussed in the next chapter). Before the turn of the century, the status of *opela* in the realm of Taiwanese theatre and academia had been very low.

As a sub-genre of *gezaixi*, *opela* has been practiced for decades although it had long been neglected by academia. In today's most common venue for *gezaixi*, the street/ temple performance, professional troupes generally stage "gulu" (old-style) play in the afternoon, featuring military history plays modeled on Beijing opera, traditional costumes, traditional musical instruments, and more codified movements, whereas in the evening *opela* is staged, featuring swordsmen romance, natural stage movements, a fusion of multi-ethnic music, and

sporadic use of Japanese and Western costumes. *Gulu* play, due to its similarity to Beijing opera, has been valorized as “authentic,” whereas *opela*, with its hybrid nature, has been blamed for causing *gezaixi*’s “lowbrow” image. However, *opela* seems a more popular form compared to *gulu*, attracting more spectators, mostly comprised of working-class women.



Fig. 23 (right) and Fig 24 (above)

The outdoor *gulu gezaixi* in contemporary Taiwan.

Photo by author, Taipei, 1998.

The term *opela* is applied very broadly. When people say “I saw an *opela* today,” it is used as a noun, a form of theatre; but when people say, “the play is very ‘*opela*,’” the term serves as an adjective to describe and discuss the style of a show. Exactly what comprises the *opela* form? Before I proceed to the discussion of *opela*’s development, in the following section I will introduce this genre and its performance style in terms of its story, music, costumes, and acting.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> This part of discussion is translated and developed from my previous work, Hsieh Hsiaomei, “Opela ji qi lishi yuanyiu [Opela and Its Historical Development],” *Zhongwai wenxue* 31, no. 1 (June 2002).

## What is *opela*?

### Story

While *gulu* plays stage Chinese historical tales or mythology, imbued with the ethics of loyalty to the emperor or familial responsibilities, the melodramatic *opela* usually tells swordsman romance, celebrating individual love and seeks to evoke tearful laughter and joyful sorrow from the audience. Temporally and spatially, *opela* has no specific historical and geographic basis; more often than not, the plays are vaguely set in the broad Song, Ming or Qing dynasty in China.

Many outdoor *opela* stories today are based on the stage serials from the in-house commercial theatre period of the 1940s-1960s, when a story could go as long as ten days, which then led to a common narrative structure in which the story spanned three generations (Qiu 1999, 14). Today, the temple invites a theatre company to perform for two to three days on average, and as a result, the *opela* stories we see today are condensed into a structure of two generations, with emphasis on the second one. The feud of the first generation becomes the conflict and suspense of the play: the second-generation orphan grows up, uncovering the truth of his parentage, and embarks on the avenging action; the male and female protagonists fall in love, only to discover that their parents are enemies; the long lost and wandering siblings fight with each other without knowing their kinship; children torture their biological parents, ignorant of the truth of their birth. Overall, love, vengeance and family bonds are the main themes of *opela*. While the example I give in the beginning of this chapter, *Youth Dream*, is largely an exception in terms of story, (resulting from participating by academics), the production certainly inherits and engages a number of *opela*'s performance features in music, costumes, and acting.

### Music

The music of *gezaixi* takes the form of a medley, centered on its main musical form, *qizidiao* (seven-word tune) and *dumadiao* (known as *zasuidiao* on the mainland). *Gezaixi* also borrows music from other traditional theatres such as Beijing opera, *nanguan* and *beiguan*. Also, during the golden era of radio *gezaixi* (1946-1965) and TV *gezaixi* (1962-1985), a multitude of short tunes were created. Still, however eclectic it is, the music of old-style *gezaixi* remains in the category of traditional sung drama. The music of *opela*, however, goes beyond this boundary, incorporating Western music, Japanese songs, contemporary Mandarin and Taiwanese pop songs, etc. The musical instruments extend from traditional gongs and drums, *erhu* (two-string bow), *sanxian* (two-string pluck), and *suona* (trumpet), to jazz drums, electric guitar, saxophone, and electronic piano. In some of the *opela* shows, the incidental music for the Chinese wedding ceremony is Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," while for a romantic scene we sometimes hear an electronic piano playing "Moon River" in the background. In a scene of *The Bandit Black Eagle* I saw in July 2001, in which the male protagonist was handcuffed and sent for execution, the troupe chose to play "Chains of Fate" as the background music, a theme song of a popular Taiwanese TV drama at the time, eliciting the tragic atmosphere based on the audiences' familiarity with the TV drama.

The use of the non-*xiqu* music is most common when the actor makes his entrance or exit. For instance, the *xiaoshen* (male lead) enters, singing a Taiwanese pop song of the 1960s, "Poor Guy, Rich Guy," and then addresses the spectators, saying that he was born in a poor family; *shen* and *dan* (male and female characters) enter hand in hand, singing "Fall in Love at First Sight," and then begin a conversation indicating that they have spent some pleasant time together; the *xiaodan* (female lead), after being molested, sadly sings a folk song, "flower in the rainy night, devastated by the storm, falls on the ground..." and exits. The timing of the non-*xiqu*

music is very similar to that of the recitative poems in traditional drama. In traditional theatre, when a character enters, he or she chants verse to reveal the character's social status, express his psychological state, or explain what has happened previously. Likewise, before exiting, the character recites a poem as a comment on or summary of the scene. The non-*xiqu* music in *opela* serves this same function as the recitative poems in traditional theatre, indeed, replacing the entrance and exit verse.

### Costumes



Fig. 25. Costumes of outdoor *opela* theatre.

Photo by author, Taipei, 1999.

*Opela* strives for a flamboyant and pompous visual effect, particularly in its costumes. The costumes of *opela* highlight the broad and straight shoulder line and favor bright colors, embellished with furs, feathers, glittering stones and spangles. The wardrobe of *opela* ranges from extravagant versions of traditional style to tuxedo, cowboy wear and boots, kimono, and puffed dress, and a mixture of styles in one play is common. In fact, as a proverb in Taiwanese opera states, “rather wear it wrong than worn (meaning worn-out looking or plain);” the pursuit of visual pleasure outweighs the logic of unity of time and place in this theatre. The male and female protagonists may wear several different costumes within a short period of dramatic time;

by the same token, all the characters in a particular scene may appear in the same or similar color without any reason. Certainly, the “illogical” visual juxtaposition can be controversial, especially for those who are accustomed to and demand a realistic approach. Yet I argue that in *opela* theater, costume is a means of enhancing the dynamic relationship between viewers and performers. To many viewers, whether or not the costumes are “appropriate” is not as important as whether they are delightful to the eyes. Accordingly, costume in *opela* often functions as “display,” which also can indicate actors’ popularity since the lead actors’ luxurious costumes are often gifts from individual fans. The popularity of the actor is revealed in the constant change of splendid costumes and the admiring responses of the fans.



Fig. 26. Costumes of *opela* theatre. The male and female protagonists dress as a pair. Photo by author, Taipei, 2001.

In addition, the use of costume can be understood in a symbolic sense. Costumes in *opela* theatre often reflect the dramatic mood. An apt example is the common scene in which male and female protagonists indulge themselves in the joy of love. In a scene such as this they are usually dressed as a pair, in the same color, fabric and design. Sometimes even their attendants dress themselves accordingly, rendering the whole picture harmonious. The coupling of costumes in

this case embodies the inner state of the joyful couple and has very little to do with the time and place in the story.



Fig. 27. The use of sunglasses in *gezaixi* to signify concealing of identity is seen in a photo taken around 1966 during the indoor theatre period. Photo provided by Zheng Jinfeng.

*Opela*'s costume has developed a unique semiotic vocabulary—turbans, sunglasses, *katana* (single-edged Japanese sword), etc.. A turban is used to indicate the wearer's foreign identity. In the story of *opela*, foreigners are usually Tibetans and Mongolians, that is, ethnically non-Han people.<sup>62</sup> Typically, the costumes make no attempt at historical accuracy; rather, turbans are used to indicate exoticism. Similarly, the use of sunglasses is a simplified extension of the use of mask, and it is used frequently since the story of *opela* usually involves the concealing of identity. The conflict in many of the plays comes from the double identities of main characters, who mask themselves to exercise justice or commit a crime. The choice of whether to use a mask or sunglasses is the actor's, though sunglasses are more common since they are more convenient to wear and less expensive. While some scholars have criticized the

<sup>62</sup> There are very few *opela* plays today that treat Japanese characters although kimonos are common on stage for the ethnically Han characters.



emergence of modern accoutrements in a traditional theater as a desperate means to cater to the public and a signal of the decadence of tradition, the appearance of sunglasses as early as the 1960s, as shown in a photo taken in around 1966 in the golden era of *gezaixi* (see figure 27), suggests that this code has its own “tradition.”

Another interesting code of *opela* is the samurai fighting scene. Most *opela* stories include several fights, especially in the end, when a final clash occurs between good and evil. In the final duel, characters almost always enter in kimono and with Japanese swords in hand, regardless of the story’s period and place (which is usually set in China). Its appearance in *opela* is so common that in 1999, when I asked performers what *opela* meant, some of them simply referred to it as “*chambara*,” a Japanese term originally describing the sound of clashing weapons and then extending to signify a duel. Hence, the metonymic way in which the Japanese fighting “*chambara*” comes to stand for *opela* manifests the significance of the samurai scene. The Japanese elements in *opela* today, such as kimonos, *katana*, samurai duels, and even the way of understanding and explaining this genre (in a Japanese phrase “*chambara*”), suggest the Japanese colonial influence on *gezaixi*, which I will discuss in the following section.

### **Acting**

The acting of *opela* deviates from traditional performance conventions; not only is the enunciation and usage of words more colloquial, but the body movement is also more “natural.” A number of mainland scholars have tried to theorize the acting of Chinese sung drama, employing the term “*chengshi*” (literally, formula or program) to explain many stock gestures and movements which have been developed, polished, sublimated, and accumulated over the centuries. Physical movements such as opening and closing doors, going upstairs and downstairs, and riding a boat or a horse, appear codified, precise and “programmed” in traditional Chinese

theatre. Generations of artists derived movements from daily life and refined and condensed them into specific stylized and dance-like movements. *Chengshi* equips actors with the means to create imaginary surroundings on a sparse stage and to express emotions gracefully. A good actor is physically disciplined by *chengshi* but at the same time knows how to wield *chengshi*. The performance of *opela*, however, is not regulated by *chengshi*. Although the actors' bodies still reveal their internalized physical training in Chinese musical theatre, their movements are more natural than codified. This change in acting style in *opela* is related to actors' exposure to new modes of performance.



Fig. 28 Two clowns in *opela* theatre. *Opela* features natural movements and gestures.  
Photo by author, Taipei, 1999.

Varied acting experiences have given *gezaixi* actors access to a more naturalistic and elastic acting style. During the Japanese Imperial Subject Movement in colonial Taiwan (1936/37- 1945) (detailed discussion follows later in this chapter), many performers were forced to give up traditional theatre and switch to the New Theatre (*xinju*; in Japanese, *shigeki*). After Taiwan's retrocession, these performers, having experienced the different acting style in the spoken drama, returned to Taiwanese opera and brought the new acting technique to *gezaixi*. These new experiences and ideas influenced the original performing methods. In fact, during the commercial theatre period after Taiwan's retrocession, it was quite common for *gezaixi* troupes

to stage *xinju*. Troupes usually stayed and performed in a house for ten days and staged one to two stage serials. (Stage serials came in two “formats”: five-day serials and ten-day serials). When they encountered an additional day (for example the thirty-first of certain months), *gezaixi* troupes usually chose to stage *xinju* on the extra eleventh day, in which the *xiaosheng* (male lead) would be touted as “cross-dressing” as a female character to promote ticket sales. (Although the male protagonist in *gezaixi* was/is almost always played by a female, the fact that the male lead on this day was cast in a female role posed great attraction and a source of amusement for the fans who were familiar with the male lead’s masculine performance). Furthermore, TV and cinema acting also influenced the acting of *opela*, since the career paths of many *gezaixi* actors included work in TV, film, and theatre, and, needless to say, they borrowed the acting technique from one mode and applied it to the other. As performer Cai mentioned, the acting of TV Taiwanese opera, owing to the frequent use of close-ups, foregrounds the character’s subtle psychological state, and, therefore, eye movement and facial expression are crucial. For this reason, when she performs in *opela*, she brings in the naturalistic acting to build the persona (Interview, November 28, 1999).

### **The Double Meanings of *Opela***

The hybrid style of *opela* was regarded as “eccentric” at a time when Beijing opera was the national opera in Taiwan, and Beijing opera style (and hence Beijing opera style *gezaixi*—*gulu*) was the aesthetic norm. *Opela* was thus criticized for its impure form and for betraying the “tradition” of *gezaixi*. Paradoxically, the history of *gezaixi* has been a process of incorporating music, movement, costumes, repertoires, stage craft, and so on, from other performing arts. Throughout its one-hundred-year history, it continuously absorbed the most fashionable elements

and has generated diverse modes of sub-genres such as film, radio, and TV *gezaixi*. The idea of “authenticity” is paradoxical even if we consider the history of Chinese sung drama. At the time of its emergence (1775-1850), Beijing opera was categorized as “*huabu*” (disordered group), stirring heated debates among the intellectuals, most of whom favored “*yabu*” (elegant group) *kun* opera. Yet today Beijing opera symbolizes authentic Chinese culture on the mainland and overseas.

*Opela*’s unbridled and impure performance style had been criticized as the corruption of Taiwanese culture. As I began my fieldwork in Taipei in the autumn of 1998 for my M.A. project, observing performances of twenty six outdoor *gezaixi* troupes and interviewing the actors and musicians, most performers defined *opela* as “*o-be-pe-pe-le*,” which in Taiwanese means “doing in a careless and perfunctory way.” Perhaps one out of twenty told me that it was the Japanese pronunciation of the word “opera.” Some even expressed their reluctance and shame in performing it and that they performed it only to earn a living. Scholarly publications during the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected this negative view, dismissing *opela* as being “slapdash and thus insignificant”(Zeng 1988, 67) and “slapdash and does not follow the norm” (Lin and Liu 1990, 119). Therefore, it is worth exploring the process by which the term *opela* changed from a neutral signifier to one with a derogatory connotation.

Scholar Chen Fangming proposes the term “re-colonization” to discuss Taiwanese literary history during the period from Taiwan’s retrocession to the ending of the martial law (1945-1987) on the grounds that the GMD, which took over Taiwan from Japan after World War II, did not treat the Taiwanese as equal citizens and thus were regarded bitterly by the natives as latecomers and outsiders, and that the GMD’s language and cultural policies and authoritarian governance were analogous to those in the Japanese colonial era. The notion of “re-colonization”

speaks to the difficulty local Taiwanese writers faced at the time, and connects the experience to the preceding Japanese colonial experience on the island (Chen 2002, 38). Interestingly, the double meanings of *opela* coincide with Taiwan's experiences of "colonization" and "re-colonization." This section discusses the historical development of *opela*. I argue that the performance style of *opela* today was seeded as a result of the Japanese assimilation project and then sprouted and fully developed as a sub-genre of *gezaixi* during the post-war commercial theatre period. With *gezaixi*'s decline in indoor theatre, practitioners retreated to the outdoor venue and brought *opela*'s repertoire and performance style from the indoor theatre to the outdoor. Yet during the pre-martial law era when "Chineseness" was prioritized, *opela*'s hybrid performance style seriously deviated from the "tradition" the GMD regime constructed and promoted, and thus it gradually generated a negative association among the populace.

### **"Opera": Remnants of a Colonial Past**

Taiwan's Japanese colonial history can be understood as comprising four phases: annexation and armed resistance (1895-1897); colonial reform and Taiwanese accommodation (1898-1915); colonial governance and peacetime experiences (1915- 1936); the wartime period (1937-1945)(Lamley 1999). In the initial stage, Japan put most of its effort into pacifying the Taiwanese and imposing measures designed for their benefits. Nonetheless, assimilation (*doka*) remained a fundamental imperial philosophy and was often a declared policy of the Japanese government. Assimilation implied that the Japanese were the bearers of a superior culture and that the Taiwanese were expected to give up not only many of their customs but, ultimately, their

Chinese heritage as well. The term also promised an impartiality and equal favor for all Japanese subjects.

For the Japanese, education was a major instrument to attain the goal of assimilation of the Taiwanese. Japan's education policy in Taiwan resulted in considerable achievements, which concentrated on elementary education; advanced schooling was not encouraged except for training teachers and medical doctors. Patricia Tsurumi's research shows the emergence of Japanese-educated generations of Taiwanese by the 1920s, when the school-aged Taiwanese population in the Japanese common schools had jumped to 25 percent, and the popularity of the Chinese schools had declined markedly. Classical Chinese studies became an optional subject in 1922. Further, denied access to the colony's all-Japanese middle schools, wealthy Taiwanese continued to send their children to study in the ruling country (Tsurumi 1979).

While *doka* was a vague plan the Japanese projected, *komika* (imperialization) aimed for the complete Japanization of the colonial population and consisted of a succession of specific practices implemented after the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, including a national language movement (which required the Taiwanese to speak Japanese), a name-changing program (which encouraged the Taiwanese to adopt Japanese surnames), and volunteers system (which mobilized male subjects to fight for the Japanese empire). In his book *Becoming Japanese*, Leo Ching argues that although Japanese imperialism followed the example of France's colonial assimilation policy, what differentiated Japanese imperialism from the Western model is that Japan's empire was Asia, and was thus circumscribed within the singularity of a cultural and racial sameness. The Japanese discourse of racial and cultural affinity was thus applied to legitimize its colonial rule on the one hand, and to differentiate from Western imperialism on the other (Ching 2001, 24, 26).

Still, to claim legitimacy over a colonized people who seemed to share a racial and cultural affinity, Japanese military advantages and modern status had been translated to support its discourse of ethnic superiority. The Japanese ideology of “*doka*” and “*komika*” seemingly promised equality and fraternity, but in fact it only served to conceal the inequality between “natural” and “naturalized” Japanese. The imperial subjects were expected to fulfill the obligations as good citizens—to die for the nation and the emperor—but their rights as citizens, and their accesses to higher economic and political positions were ultimately denied. The Taiwanese *komin* literature at this time reveals the intellectuals’ struggle over colonial identity, and illustrates the state of the colonized as “incomplete” Japanese citizens. The anxiety and desire that “one cannot not be Japanese” permeated at this time (Ching 2001, 132).

The wartime *komin* literature reflected the condition of the Taiwanese intellectuals who had received Japanese education and who were subjected to assimilation. Some members of the young Taiwanese generation, eager to be acknowledged and accepted as legitimate subjects of the Japanese empire, continued to struggle with the ethnic conflicts of their identities. Meanwhile, the Japanese constantly promoted the idea of “purity of blood” as a means to differentiate the colonizers and the colonized. Faye Yuan Kleeman calls attention to the notion of “blood” by analyzing two novels, Zhou Jinpo’s *Volunteer Soldier* and Chen Huoquan’s *Michi*, in which both authors attribute the plight of their identities to the issue of “blood/race.” Even with similar skin color and even with fluent Japanese, the inherent Taiwanese blood was regarded as different from that of the Japanese, and thus one could never become one hundred percent Japanese. How, then, could those who strove for imperial recognition solve this problem? After contemplation, Chen Houquan provided the way to redemption for the colonized in his novel: exchange blood for blood; shed your blood for the empire (Kleeman 2003). The rationale corresponded to the

Japanese colonial project of mobilizing the young subjects to fight for the empire, enlisting the colonized youth in the army as “volunteer soldiers.” This was the ultimate goal of *komika* (imperial subject movement): through the inculcation of *komika*, the colonized were turned into loyal subjects who not only lived as Japanese but, most importantly, died as Japanese. Ironically, the rights of the colonized as legitimate Japanese subjects were granted only after they were willing to shed blood for the empire and die for the empire on the battlefield.

After the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japan began to mobilize its colonized subjects for the imperial project, and the Imperial Subject Movement was one of the important means of mobilization. The movement aimed to thoroughly assimilate its subjects in the colonies to better serve the empire. In order to obtain the goal of “forging the imperial subjects” and “promulgating the Empire,” the Japanese authorities founded the Imperial Subject Central Entertainment Committee in 1941, actively encouraging the youth on the island to participate in theatre performance and hosting various seminars on *shigeki* (the new drama) (Shi 2001, 102-03). The policy seriously affected Taiwanese theater. It prohibited any performance associated with Chinese culture. The use of traditional Chinese musical instruments and music were forbidden and the staging of the performance required permission from the authorities. To pass the censors, Taiwanese troupes had to “reform” to perform either the new drama or Japanese style “imperial subject drama.” As a result, traditional performers either switched into other businesses or turned to playing the approved form, and the number of *gezaixi* troupes, which had grown into over 200, was suddenly decreased to 30 (Lu 1961, 323). Traditional theatres such as puppetry, shadow plays, *gezaixi*, and *beiguanxi* all experienced the same restrictions. In his memoir, puppet master Li Tianlu noted that during the imperial subject movement they had to perform “reformed” plays or “imperial subject plays,” in which they



“dressed the puppets in Japanese clothing and spoke Japanese. The Chinese orchestra accompaniments were replaced by phonographed Western music. The puppets carried samurai swords and fought on stage...” They also staged stories adapted from the Japanese films such as *Kuramatengu*, and *Mitokoumon* (Li and Zeng 1991, 97, 95). The founding of the Taiwanese Theatre Association under the guidance of the Imperial Subject Bureau in 1942 further controlled and policed the theatre throughout the island, inspecting troupes, censoring plays, and arranging the venues, thus suppressing the development of traditional Taiwanese theatre (Xu 2006, 262-63).

It was in such straitened circumstances that a new form of *gezai*, sometimes also known as “reformed drama,” surfaced in Taiwan. Reformed drama was an amalgam of the new theatre, which was highly advocated by the government, and traditional theatre, which was familiar to the populace. Its emergence not only met the ruler’s regulations but also satisfied the people’s emotional demands. Stories in the reformed theatre usually retained the original Chinese narratives while the names and the clothing of the characters assumed those of the Japanese.<sup>63</sup> Since the singing of *gezai* music was forbidden, as was the use of traditional musical accompaniment, performers had to turn to singing Japanese songs and playing Western trumpet and saxophone.

Nevertheless, this “reformed theatre” was mostly an expedient compromise to the rules. Once the Japanese police were out of sight, the forbidden traditional music would again be boisterously played and sung until the police showed up again. An inside joke, “beating up the

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<sup>63</sup> A record illustrates the phenomenon of the reformed drama. “Though claiming ‘New Drama,’ ‘Opera,’ ‘Imperial Drama’ etc. to deceive the inspector, they simply changed the name of the reign [of the story] into company, the title of the emperor into chairman, and the title of the prime minister into general manager, and put on a modern outfit.... Oddly, such drama performed by Taiwanese opera troupes was well-received among lowbrow people, and they were much more active than the pure spoken drama troupes.... The main reason was that it was closer to the original Taiwanese opera. Radically speaking, it retained the opium-like charms of the old drama.” Lu Sushang, *Taiwan dianying xiju shi* [History of Taiwanese Cinema and Theatre] (Taipei: Yinhua 1961), 323-33.

Japanese woman,” referred to the tactic of the Taiwanese performers at this time. More than one performers told me this anecdote: “There was one time they staged the history play *Replacing the Baby Prince with a Leopard Cat*, and it was the scene where the maid was interrogated about the prince’s whereabouts and going to be beaten to death. All of a sudden, someone shouted, ‘Hurry up. Here comes the Japanese cop!’ They swiftly put on kimono and continued the scene, and it turned out to be beating up the Japanese woman...” (Interview, November 28, 1999).

In this anecdote, although staging the native form of drama was forbidden during the wartime Japanese governance, the performers still managed to switch swiftly between the approved form and the forbidden form, secretly challenging the colonial authority. The way the disenfranchised *gezaixi* performers transformed the restrictions imposed upon them into something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind accords with Michel de Certeau’s notion of “tactics,” which refers to the “art of the weak,” a maneuver “within the enemy’s field of vision” as opposed to the top-down “strategies” (de Certeau 1984, 37). Once the Japanese police showed up, the Taiwanese performer speedily put on a kimono, and turned the scene from a Chinese historical context, in which the maid was about to be beaten to death, into a Japanese context. The scene ironically became a mocking of the Japanese, and the anecdote was immediately circulated in the field. Although the colonized can only correspond to and work within the imposed system, they use the restrictions to re-create something different from what the colonizer has aimed for, gaining pleasure in getting around the constraining rules. This ambivalent reinvention can be understood as a form of resistance, and is analogous to the post-colonial notion of “colonial mimicry,” “that is almost the same, but not quite.” (Bhabha 1994, 80). The kimono version of *Replacing the Baby Prince with a Leopard Cat* demonstrates the

colonized's capability to imitate and recreate, and this sort of ambiguous replication suggests that the colonized are capable of disrupting the authority of the colonizer, thereby posing a threat to the colonizer, performing a mimicry that is, as Bhabha asserts, "a form of resemblance," and "represents an ironic compromise" (86, 90).

Experiences such as these explain the Taiwanese performers' subsequent flexibility and responsiveness when they came to terms with various performance genres and media. The "tactic" the native performers came up with during the imperial subject movement unexpectedly "provided an opportunity for [the practitioners] to cope with the restrictions imposed by the Japanese and, at the same time, led them to realize the possibility of a new form and content" (Wang 1988, 231). This multicultural juxtaposition in the performance did not disappear from Taiwanese opera with the retreat of the Japanese administration after World War II. Instead, the mixed form inspired Taiwanese traditional theatre practitioners, who began to think of the use of foreign elements as a practice of modernity. Thus the mixed performance style continued to develop in traditional theatre. After the war, *gezaixi* in Taiwan experienced a prosperous commercial period and experienced a boom for over two decades. During this golden era, the nighttime shows of *gezaixi* intentionally adopted Japanese elements such as costumes, music, and fighting art from the popular Japanese films. Soon afterwards, cowboy costumes, pistols and duels inspired by Hollywood movies were also introduced to *gezaixi*. Popular music was blended in, with a mixture of Western and Chinese accompanying musical instruments.

As performer Liao Qiongzhi recalled: "After the Japanese films landed in Taiwan, the [Taiwanese opera] stage director turned to the Japanese films for a different martial art inspiration. He would borrow the Japanese martial art and insert it into a Chinese story, or sometimes the setting of the play was in Japan" (Ji 1999, 88). This was also the case with the

popular *Sakura War* during the in-house commercial theatre period. In the story, the Chinese warriors attack the Sakura (cherry blossom) Kingdom, that is, Japan, and encounter three Japanese princesses on the battlefield and fall in love with them. The princesses make their first entrance by wearing beautiful kimonos and singing a Japanese song together. The scene successfully creates an exotic and impressive spectacle, and the play became a tremendous success. (Interview, November 14, 1999). The previous objectionable “reformation” under the Japanese regulation thus became a way of packaging in the subsequent commercial theater period.



Fig. 29 (left) and Fig. 30 (right). Photos of in-house *gezaixi* in the 1960s. Photos provided by Xiao Mao. Note in figure 29 Xiao Mao wears a “turban” as she plays a prince from a foreign country. In figure 30 the two fighters wear kimonos while the crowd wears Chinese costumes.

The influence of Japanese culture on *gezaixi* is also reflected in the titles and stories of *opela*. It is said that the widely performed *Longxia hetoujin* (*Dragon Warrior, the Black Headdress*), created during the in-house commercial period and passed on to this day, was adapted from the Japanese novel *Kuramatengu*. The namesake character is a legendary figure

common in Japanese tales and drama who masks himself to exercise justice for the common people. His story was once adapted into a series of films and released in Taiwan (Liu 1973, 257). Titles in the *gezaixi* repertoire such as *Jinyin tiangou* (gold-silver tiangou) and *Yinmian xiaotiangou* (silver-faced little tiangou), staged by the famous Taiwanese in-house troupe Gongshe in the 1950s, and *Matiangou*, widely staged in today's outdoor *gezaixi* theatre, illustrate the inspiration of this Japanese legendary figure. As “*tiangou*” (*tengu* in Japanese) indicates “a peculiar figure wearing a sharp-nosed mask” in Japanese culture, today's *opela* plays that are associated with “*tiangou*” usually have their heroes appear in masks. Indeed, the use of masks in these plays suggests a genealogy that connects Taiwan's performing art today to its colonial past.



Fig. 31 (left) and Fig. 32 (right)  
The use of mask in outdoor *opela*  
theatre. Fig. 31 was taken around  
1978 and provided by Cai Meizhu.  
Note the mask and pistol at the male  
lead's waist in Fig. 32. Photo by  
author, Taipei, 1999.

Furthermore, several successful Taiwanese troupes turned to the Japanese troupes for models of administration and management. The Gongshe Girls Opera Troupe, which dominated Taiwan's commercial theatre during the 1950s-1960s, shows remarkable similarity to Japan's Takarazuka Revue in management. Founded in 1913 by Kobayashi Ichizo (1873-1957),

the Hankyu railroad and department store tycoon, Takarazuka recruited unmarried young women and was known as an all-female revue in Japan. Soon after its establishment, Takarazuka became a hit, drawing numerous middle-class Japanese female spectators. As a result, various all-girl revues emerged in Japan soon afterwards. In order to change the negative social association of actresses at the time, Kobayashi emphasized the disciplined life and image of his performers. In 1919, Kobayashi established the forerunner of the present-day Takarazuka Music Academy, in which its actors received two years of training in music, dance and Western and Japanese theatrical arts. The establishment of the school also seemed to be an attempt to reassure parents that their daughters were under the constant supervision of Academy officials and to project a well-educated and well-behaved image of the performers to the society. At present, the troupe has five units: Flower, Moon, Snow, Star, and Sky (Robertson 1998, 4-9).

Takarazuka Revue was operated and managed with a patriarchal ethos: Kobayashi centered himself as the parent of the troupe and encouraged the members to address to him as father. Likewise, Taiwan's Gongleshe Girls Opera Troupe also employed a patriarchal management; the female actors, who were sold or contracted to the troupe at a very young age, addressed the owner Chen Chengsan as "father." Gongleshe began to recruit girls exclusively after around 1952 to avoid complicated male-female relationships in the troupe and to ensure the discipline of the actors. Chen Chengsan also revealed several times his aspirations for the troupe to become like Japan's Takarazuka or Shochiku Revue, boasting of their well-trained ensemble, luxurious costumes, and magnificent spectacle. Chen's innovative attempt to found a *gezaixi* vocational high school was also driven by the successful example of Japan's Takarazuka. (Further discussion regarding Chen Chengsan and his Gongleshe follows in the next section).

### “O-be-pe-pe-le”

Precisely when the term “*opela*” emerged to refer to the sub-genre of traditional Taiwanese theatre is unclear, but another term with similar meaning “*bianti*” (changed form) appeared in the early 1950s. *Bianti* refers to the transformed *gezaixi*, including *opela* and *jinguangxi* (flashy drama, which emphasizes special stage effects and change of spectacles). According to one performer, Ms. Wang, *gezaixi* had already begun incorporating Taiwanese pop songs such as *Nandu Yequ* in the performance when she was around fifteen, in 1950, and the *opela* with which she was familiar emerged no later than when she was seventeen or eighteen. Ms. Wang’s recollection coincides with an advertisement I found in the *Zhonghua Daily* from June 21, 1951, in which the troupe Tainan Weiwunshe claimed that all their plays are “new-style *bianti* drama.”

The emergence of the term “*opela*” is closely related to the new theatre. According to the *gezaixi* diva Liao Qiongzhi, “*opela*” was initially used to refer to the new theatre, which revived and flourished after Taiwan’s retrocession. New theatre incorporated contemporary songs into spoken drama, and thus some people applied the Japanese term “opera” to this performance genre. With the increasing use of pop melodies, *gezaixi* was sometimes associated with new theatre, and the term “opera” was passed on to *gezaixi* that made use of contemporary songs (Huang 1995, 10-11). “Opera” in Japanese was a localized concept, signifying more than the Western opera imported to Japan in 1903. Opera in Japan developed into vaudeville-style opera, known as Asakusa opera, and the all-girls’ musical, “maiden opera,” represented by Takarazuka. After retrocession, vaudeville became a popular entertainment in Taiwan and shared the same theatre with *gezaixi*; some big *gezaixi* company owners also ran vaudeville troupes. In fact, *gezaixi* companies began to define and refer to the troupe as “*geju tuan*” (opera troupe). As in the

indoor theatre, troupes staged both a daytime show and an evening show each day, a pattern adopted by today's outdoor theatre, and it seemed natural that the term "opera" would be applied to the nightly vaudeville style show so as to distinguish it from the afternoon martial and historical *gulu* play.

It was the older generation, who had received Japanese education in Taiwan, that pronounced "opera" as "opela." However, as the years have passed and with a new generation who did not speak Japanese, this layer of meaning gradually has vanished from most people's memory. Instead, "*o-be-pe-pe-le*" became the dominant definition for *opela*. The reason behind this change of association and conception has a lot to do with the GMD's cultural policy and state ideology, which had regulated Taiwan during the martial law era (1945-1987). The Taiwanese experienced a semi-colonization: Although they had previously received a thorough and successful Japanese education, the Taiwanese found their voices lost again unless they began learning Mandarin, which became the "national language." They also encountered the disparity in the distribution of economic and political resources between the natives and the mainlanders. The fact that native Taiwanese spoke Japanese was dismissed as slavish, and their inability to speak Mandarin was used as a pretext to disqualify them from official posts in favor of the mainlanders. Fluency in Mandarin became a mark of superiority (Su 1992, 49).

In fact, the experience of the cultural circle during this time was strikingly similar to their experience during the Japanese governance. Puppet master Li notes in his memoir:

Like the Japanese government, the GMD government required us to perform twenty minutes of propaganda prior to each show; otherwise the performance would not be allowed to proceed. During the Japanese era, we were forced to promulgate the glory of Japanese empire and emperor. After the retrocession, we turned to propagating the greatness of the GMD government, and criticizing how corrupt the



Communist regime was, and how miserable the people were on the mainland. Except for the difference in the titles of the plays, I cannot see the difference between the two. Sometimes I even got confused.... (Li and Zeng 1991, 145-46).

The Taiwanese literary field in the 1950s echoed the state ideology of the time, producing an abundance of combat and anti-communist literature. The submission guidelines of Zhonghua Literary and Art Scholarship Committee (*zhonghua wenyi jiangxuejin weiyuanhui*), founded in 1950, illustrate this climate, asserting that the work should “promulgate national consciousness and contain anti-communist thoughts” (Huang 1992, 164). The state control was such that mainlanders writers who held a strong allegiance towards the Nationalists, such as Lin Haiyin, had to advocate “pure literature,” in an attempt to defend a certain degree of autonomy and be excused from the political mobilization (Chang 2004). Meanwhile, “Chineseness” was greatly advocated, rendering native cultural form an insignificant and marginalized practice. “Recover the mainland” became a slogan on the island, and songs such as “I love China” became familiar to everyone. Students had to learn extensive Chinese history and geography at the expense of education about Taiwan. Policies such as restrictions on vernacular TV and radio programs, and prohibitions on speaking dialects, labeled Taiwanese local languages and culture backward and indecent (Chang 1997, 116).



Fig. 33 The end of a show in a local theatre contest in the late 1970s Taiwan. Performers hold up flags and slogans with “Unify China with the Three Principles.” Photo provided by Wu Yuzhen.

In this political and cultural climate, Beijing opera enjoyed the status of “national opera” and almost exclusive state patronage. Zhou Hui-ling examines the notion of “national opera” (*guoju*) and attributes the onset of the idea of “*guoju*” to Qi Rushan during the Nationalist Republican era on the mainland. Mr. Qi began to help the Beijing opera master Mei Langfang to create new repertoires in the 1920s, and he developed the idea of a national opera, attempting to affirm and solidify a Chinese cultural identity at a time when most Chinese suffered from feelings of cultural inferiority. Qi also arranged Mei Langfang’s tour abroad in the 1930s, which successfully drew international attention at the time. (To a certain extent, Mei’s performance stimulated Brecht’s theatrical theory of the “alienation effect”). The international recognition reinforced the confidence of the Chinese in their culture, which had eroded as a result of a series of humiliating international defeats and treaties (Zhou 1995). Consequently, Beijing opera today is still held as the legitimate representative of Chinese culture among the Chinese both on the mainland and overseas.

When the GMD lost the civil war on the mainland and retreated to Taiwan in 1949, several Beijing opera performers returned with the troops and continued to provide entertainment for officers and soldiers. After the air force founded Dapeng National Opera Troupe in 1950 on the island, the Ministry of Defense began to sponsor Beijing opera. With the disbanding of the only full-time private Beijing opera troupe, the Gu Troupe, in 1953, the Ministry of Defense took over the development of Beijing opera, founding two more military troupes and schools to ensure the continuity of the performing arts of Beijing opera (Su 2003). The audiences of Beijing opera at the time were largely mainlander officers and enlisted men. In the 1950s, hoping to replicate Mei Lanfang’s success abroad, both the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the

Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan dispatched Beijing opera troupes to tour Western countries in order to assert their roles as the true carriers of China's heritage. The fact that the two regimes were in direct competition for diplomatic recognition is exemplified in a report in Taiwan, celebrating that the Portuguese government had invited the ROC troupe, while it previously had denied entry to a similar group from the PRC (Guy 2005, 55).

Beijing opera in Taiwan prided itself in preserving the tradition and cultural essence, and this became more acute after 1966 when the PRC launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and began to question and demolish the "four olds." Later in the same year the ROC on Taiwan initiated "the Chinese Cultural Renaissance" to counter the Cultural Revolution on the mainland, with "reviving the National Opera" singled out specifically as an anti-communist weapon. For the Nationalist regime, maintaining Beijing opera in its absolutely "traditional" form distinguished the regime from the Communists and symbolized that it had inherited the authentic Chinese culture and thus validated its legitimacy over the mainland. In 1968, the private-run Fuxing Theatre School faced fiscal difficulties and was set to close, when the Ministry of Education stepped in and assumed control of it in the name of preserving tradition. In actuality, the Beijing opera under the patronage and management of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Education was so "protected" that it had alienated itself from the contemporary life, losing its viability, failing to adapt to the times, and unable to resonate with the Taiwanese. "Preserving tradition" tended to become a moral issue and "a pretext of the [Beijing opera practitioners'] incapability and unwillingness to create something new"(Zhou 1995, 58).

Under the state regulation of repertoire and the supervision of the Ministry of Defense, Beijing opera performances in Taiwan staged during the martial law era were typically plays such as *Tiandan fuguo* (*Tiandan Recovers the Nation*) and *Guangwu zhongxing* (*Guangwu's*

*Restoration*), reiterating the state ideology of regaining China. As Nancy A. Guy argues, the GMD government's agenda of preserving Chinese cultural heritage had rendered Taiwan's Beijing opera tradition essentially "frozen in a pre-1949 state," in terms of repertoire, performance style, and musical notation and transmission. At a time when Beijing opera on the mainland was receiving active experimentation, and being revolutionized into model plays, "pre-1949-style Peking opera thus became a symbol whose meaning was charged with the emotions tied to the loss of the homeland and the continued resistance against the enemy" (Guy 2005, 108).

Because "Chineseness" was officially heightened in Taiwan, intellectuals tended to ignore *gezaixi* despite its vitality in Taiwanese society. However, an entrepreneur, Chen Chengsan (1917-1992), entered the *gezaixi* field and led his troupe Gongleshe to initiate a number of innovations in *gezaixi*, inspiring his contemporaries. The successes and failures of Gongleshe also encapsulate, in a way, the course of *gezaixi* in the decades that followed.

Gongleshe was the first *gezaixi* troupe that employed scripted plays in Taiwan. Up until the 1950s, *gezaixi* performance ran on a scene-list system, in which the outline of the story was orally given, while the dialogue and lyrics were improvised by actors. (This was originally because many performers prior to the 1950s were illiterate). Consequently, the talent of the actors entirely determined the quality of a show. In around 1952-1953 Gongleshe's pillar Jinyuji took off to start her own troupe and took with her several main actors. This crisis led the owner Chen Chengsan to resort to scripted plays to ensure the basic quality of performances. He hired Chen Shoujing, with impressively handsome payment, to tailor-make scripts for the troupe, and he rewarded the actors for memorizing the libretti. Gongleshe's first scripted play *Honglou canmeng* was a hit, and its success facilitated Gongleshe's shift to scripted plays thereafter.

Chen Chengsan also invested in the film industry. While the first local attempt by Duma Troupe to produce a Taiwanese language movie in 1955 failed because of the use of 16 mm films, the event prompted Chen to turn to the market of cinema. In the same year, he produced a *gezaixi* film *Xue Pingquei and Wang Baochuan* with the cast of Gongleshe, which yielded an impressive return. Gongleshe's great success in cinema drove the fashion of shooting Taiwanese language films. Chen Chengsan invested in over ten films before he put an end to his cinema business in 1964. Further, the dubbing used in the film production inspired Chen Chengsan to make use of dubbing in stage production. He selected a few vocally talented singer-actors and recorded their performances in advance while in actual performances the young actors lip-synced to the libretto. Dubbing performances greatly reduced the cost of production, as the orchestra was no longer necessary, and the cost of training, as the selection of actors was not dependent on vocal abilities. The business of Gongleshe thus expanded considerably, with as many as six branch troupes founded at its peak.

The success of his entertainment business prompted Chen Chengsan to seek a more effective and sustainable way to run his company. He planned to found a *gezaixi* vocational high school, recruiting unmarried girls with middle school education. He bought a large (3,305 square-meter) plot of land in Taizhong to establish his school. Prior to this, there had been no official educational institution for native Taiwanese theatres. The first theatre school in Taiwan, Dapeng Theatre School, was founded in 1955 by the government, and it and the subsequently founded Fuxing (1957) Luguang (1963) and Haiguang (1964) theatre schools focused exclusively on the training of Beijing opera actors and musicians. While Chen Chengsan's theatre school would have elevated the quality of *gezaixi* performers and the social perception of the genre, his application was ultimately rejected by the Ministry of Education on the grounds

that the scope of the school was insufficient. In the end, the school could open only as a training school, in 1966, and could not offer the students an officially recognized degree. The recruitment did not go well and the school closed after three years (Qiu 2001, 100-07).

Compared to the wholehearted support the authorities gave to Beijing opera education, the establishment of a *gezaixi* school received very lukewarm, even oppressive, treatment from the state.

In Chen Chengsan's view, the reason that *gezaixi* theatre was in decline was primarily because of the lack of good scripts and good actors. The founding of his school aimed to address the problems by connecting the theatre education to the management of his troupe. He stated in a press conference that Gongshe would pay NT 50,000 dollars, a huge sum at the time, for each new script and NT 20,000 for a director for the production. Also, by offering an accredited educational degree, the school hoped to improve greatly the image of *gezaixi* performers, thus drawing more talent to this industry. But his ideal of founding an experimental troupe, with the collaboration of good writers, directors, and highly educated female actors, failed. Further, the rise of electronic media in the 1960s seriously impacted the theatre, and the legendary "Gongshe era" in Taiwanese theatre history came to an end in the mid-1970s.

Official intervention could be seen in the "Local Theatre Contest," an annual island-wide event for *gezaixi* and puppet theatre. For decades the judging committee had consisted primarily of GMD officials, who did not understand Taiwanese dialects or the performance styles of these genres. Consequently, the judges applied the performance style of Beijing opera as a standard, and the evaluation was also based on the ideology of the play. As Beijing opera in Taiwan was made to preserve the "tradition" in its pre-1949 style, "tradition" became a moral issue as well as an aesthetic norm in the society. The changes *gezaixi* practitioners had made over time,

especially encapsulated in *opela*, challenged and destabilized this norm. *Opela*, the radical subgenre of *gezaixi*, became marginalized and condemned for corrupting the image of *gezaixi*.

In the cultural climate in which Chineseness was prioritized and privileged, both the performers and the spectators inevitably internalized such a cultural hierarchy, which then shaped their aesthetic perceptions. Beijing opera, with state patronage and endorsement, had been affirmed as part of a historic and aristocratic culture, while *gezaixi*, as well as many “vernacular” performing arts on the island, survived mainly in the form of low-budget productions with unsatisfactory audio and visual qualities. Thus an ideal model for “traditional” arts was constructed and fortified according to the image of Beijing opera, the orthodox cultural form. The Chinese-chauvinist inculcation was so successful that many *gezaixi* performers felt disrespected for their occupation and suffered from inferiority. It was no wonder, then, that they discriminated against *opela*, as it carried a stigma for many performers. Among the 26 troupes in Taipei that I observed in 1998-1999, two refused to stage *opela* in their nightly show, and the members and managers were very proud of their persistence in playing the *gulu xi* (old-style play) despite the trend. The traditional, old-style *gulu xi* retained more features of the superior Beijing opera. By performing Beijing opera imitations, Taiwanese opera players subconsciously ascend from their disenfranchised and marginalized position to a position of “legitimacy.” The linking of *opela* to “o-be-pe-pe-le” echoes Lakoff and Johnson: “the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.... Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3).

With soaring Taiwanese native awareness in the post-martial law era (1987-present), the legitimacy of Beijing opera in Taiwan came under challenge. As the social and cultural climate gradually turned to “Taiwaneseness,” the indigenous *gezaixi* came to represent authentic

Taiwanese culture and came to the forefront. (The following chapter discusses in detail the change of discourse on *gezaixi* in relation to the change of Taiwanese national identity).

Increasing numbers of intellectuals plunged into the production of *gezaixi* and began to work with the practitioners. As the historical significance of *opela* began to be recognized, along with many of Taiwan's long suppressed, long forgotten memories, the performance style of *opela* also became a source of inspiration for artists, exemplified by Chunmei Troupe's *Youth Dream* in 2005, discussed in the beginning of this chapter. The appearance of this work suggests not only that the meaning of *opela* has been reconsidered and accepted, but also that its heritage has begun to be assessed and reworked.

The participation of the intellectuals in *gezaixi* has updated the performance of *opela* in some respects. While its performance style is more compatible with contemporary stories, it has primarily been used to present ancient subjects, basically because of the lack of new writers in the production of *gezaixi*. The "storyteller" who orally gives the outline of the play to actor-singers is versed in mythology and historical tales and is comfortable with the plot convention of traditional plays. Thus the storyteller copies the plot conventions from traditional plays to the story of *opela*, which leads to scenes of bizarre juxtaposition such as a sixteenth-century Chinese swordsman showing up in Japanese kimono and singing an early-twentieth-century pop melody. However, while fighting in kimono or singing in Western dress may appear odd and over the top when the story is set in the Ming dynasty, the same deployment becomes a conscious artistic choice once the story is set in Taiwan during the Japanese governance, perfectly matching the society of the time which was under multicultural influence. The collaboration of the intellectuals and *gezaixi* practitioners gave birth to plays such as *Youth Dream*, which utilizes the strength of *opela*'s performance vocabulary and packages *opela*'s style with a proper setting.



Taiwan's *opela* is similar in a way to the commercial "modern-costumed play" (*shizhuangxi*) of early-twentieth-century China, a style the governments across the strait treated and responded to differently. The modern-costumed play, with its appetite for spectacle and sensational story, was regarded by the PRC as a rotten taste of the bourgeoisie and capitalists, and thus was replaced with *xiandaixi*, which was constructed as a powerful weapon to present lives of the workers, peasants, and soldiers of New China and to disseminate the ideology of class struggle and proletarian rule. Yet the tradition of modern-costumed play found its counterpart across the strait in Taiwan. The incorporation of modern elements in traditional theatre has been practiced at the grassroots level because the GMD seemed too preoccupied with the preservation of tradition to consider the urgency of adapting to the time. For decades, *gezaixi* performers attempted to come to terms with modernity by constantly adjusting their performances in *opela*. While the traditional *guluxi* staged in the afternoon displayed the performers' practice of and commitment to tradition, *opela* staged in the evening was an experimental theatre, where they could add contemporary elements in music, acting, costumes, and language, to determine what worked best by observing the spectators' responses. Most of these experiments might appear crude, yet the experiences the grass-roots practitioners accumulated through the practice of *opela* became nutrients for future artists to draw on. Thus when future traditional theatre practitioners encounter projects such as *Youth Dream* that treat contemporary themes, they will know where to turn. They can easily find, say, a jazzy style of music composition, more natural stage gestures and movements, and a variety of costumes in *opela*. Most importantly, future *xiqu* practitioners can find in *opela* a way to connect to the spectators even when they take an experimental path.

## Chapter Five

### From “Refined *Gezaixi*” to “*Opela*”:

#### Discourses on *Gezaixi* in Search of a Taiwanese Identity

When that subject, through its derogatory remarks or representations, works to “censor” another subject, that form of censorship is regarded as “silencing.” In that form, the citizen addressed by such speech is effectively deprived of the power to respond, deauthorized by the derogatory speech act by which that citizen is ostensibly addressed. (Butler 137)

At the start of the Millennium, Taiwanese pop stars Sisters of Shu’s (SOS) jeered at the movie production of Pili Budaixi (a puppetry company that owns a TV channel and produces Taiwanese puppetry serials featuring animation-inspired martial fantasy). “We really hate puppet shows. I don’t care if it’s the essence of our native heritage or whatever; we just hate it anyway.” Soon after this remark, young puppet fans’ harsh criticism spread out from internet to print media. The offended fans even organized a protest at Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to condemn the sisters’ prejudice against Taiwanese puppetry. The whole incident finally came to an end by SOS’s public apology in tears.

Both *Budaixi* and *gezaixi* were the most popular entertainment on the island in the first half of the twentieth century. *Budaixi*, like *gezaixi*, has come to be appreciated as representative of Taiwanese local culture.<sup>64</sup> While Pili’s success in renovating the traditional form and capturing contemporary audiences has rendered it an icon of indigenous Taiwanese culture, the incident revealed two intertwining views of local cultural products in contemporary Taiwan. On the one hand, SOS’s disdainful attitude towards *budaixi* perhaps revealed the internalization of

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<sup>64</sup> During the 1970s, the Nationalist government, alarmed at the popularity of this distinctly Taiwanese cultural product, banned *budaixi* TV programs (and later set restricted hours for its broadcast). TV *budaixi* producers were later “encouraged” to dub their productions into Mandarin. These Mandarin programs, however, received bad ratings because most viewers were not used to *budaixi* characters speaking in another tongue and felt Mandarin *budaixi* somehow lost the “flavor” of *budaixi*.

the long-term state inculcation of Chinese-chauvinism; on the other hand, the young fans' critical responses testify to the power of the emerging force that celebrates local Taiwanese cultural production.

Similarly, the derogatory “*o-be-pe-pe-le*” had defined *opela* for decades in Taiwan as a result of Nationalists' efforts to devalue and suppress Taiwanese cultural products. Yet Taiwan's democratization ultimately produced an environment in which uniquely local forms of cultural expression are sought after. *Opela* has begun to gain public attention on the island. For example, its appearance in the outdoor *gezaixi* festival in 2001, sponsored by the National Center for Traditional Arts, marked the first entrance of *opela* on an official state-supported stage. This chapter examines how and why the mainstream discourse on *gezaixi* has undergone a shift from the “refined and traditional” *gezaixi* to “local *opela*” beginning in the 1990s. The dominant forms of *gezaixi* in the 1990s were the “refined (*jingzhi*) *gezaixi*” practiced by Holo (*helou*) Gezaixi Troupe and the “traditional *gezaixi*” advocated by the Heritage Award winner Liao Qiongzhi. At this time, *opela* was excluded from the mainstream discourse, yet at the start of the new millennium, *opela* became highly visible on the official stage as well as in academic publications. I argue that on its way to becoming the legitimate Taiwanese cultural representative, *gezaixi* first went through an image-purging and self-healing process by advocating and practicing its idealization, the refined *gezaixi*. Further, the question of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity has compelled the Taiwanese to turn to its indigenous features and its long forbidden/forgotten colonial memories. Thus, the hybrid *opela* came under the spotlight at the turn of the century. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the shift of aesthetic norms, manifested in different historical stages of *gezaixi*, parallels the making of Taiwanese identity.

My stance on identity is that its development is based on common social experience and thus is constantly in the making; identity is fluid rather than static.<sup>65</sup> However, I want to stress that the formation and the existence of the so-called “Taiwanese consciousness” should not be conflated with the pro-independence political stance. That is, people in Taiwan may have various views on the independence/unity issue, which do not hinder the formation of their identity as Taiwanese; indeed, those who favor unification with China most often also possess a distinctively Taiwanese consciousness.

In 1982, the Minghuayuan Gezaixi Troupe placed first in Taiwan’s Regional Theatre Contest with its original script and novel visual effects. The result, however, was contested publicly by other troupes. Both the artistic values of Minghuayuan’s performance and the qualification of the judges were questioned (Yang 2001, 2). At a time when “pure Chinese” forms of cultural expression were valued, the performance style of Minghuayuan, known for its penchant for spectacles and special stage effects, was sometimes criticized as “*opela*” and “flashy,” in other words, not authentic enough to represent “tradition.”

What exactly does tradition mean? As elsewhere, people in Taiwan would like to believe that it is something constant and consistent. Yet scholars have come to agree that tradition and history are often invented to construct nationalist sentiments and national identity. Today, “*opela*” has gradually rid itself of its negative association and ascended onto the official stage

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<sup>65</sup>. This understanding of identity is especially indebted to Melissa Brown, who examines the changing identity of the Taiwanese plain aborigines by looking at the only marker that distinguished them from the Han people—foot-binding. As records show that Taiwanese plain aborigines were assimilated with the Han people by the 1860s, the difference between the Han and the Aborigines was almost invisible except for one—foot-binding of the Han women. The Japanese banned foot-binding in 1915 on the island and thus removed the last marker between the two ethnic groups, which enabled the Aborigines to pass as Han. Melissa J Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

while “Minghuayuan” for many young people is synonymous with *gezaixi*.<sup>66</sup> What is “authenticity” and what and who defines the “tradition”? The idea of “tradition” has been paradoxical in Taiwan. During the martial law era, the GMD (Nationalists) succeeded in constructing a tradition modeled on the five-thousand-year Chinese culture, and in the case of operatic form, a frozen pre-1949 style was set up as the aesthetic norm. Even though *opela* was a popular form in the commercial theatre of the 1950s, the legitimacy of its claim to tradition was denied because its performance style did not conform to the Beijing opera standard. (Similarly, TV *gezaixi*, although popular in the 1960s and 1970s, constantly stirred debates as to whether or not it was legitimately *gezaixi*, with some people questioning its authenticity on the grounds that its movements were too natural and that it did not include enough singing). For a long time, the widely-accepted authentic form of *gezaixi* was *guluxi* (old-style play) due to its relative resemblance to Beijing opera. The GMD’s efforts to preserve/freeze tradition in the ancient form led many people, especially the young generation, to regard tradition as something respectable, archaic, but outdated and boring. The competition with Western and Japanese pop culture further worsened the situation for traditional cultural forms.<sup>67</sup> In the post-martial-law era, however, the meaning of tradition has been re-considered and redefined. People began to adopt a more liberal and open view in evaluating cultural productions and to acknowledge previously discredited forms such as TV *gezaixi* and *opela*. While in the martial law era, popular *gezaixi* styles/forms

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<sup>66</sup> Minghuayuan’s participation in the 1990 Asia Olympic Arts Festival in Beijing made it the first troupe to land on mainland China among all the Taiwanese performing arts teams. In the following years, the troupe entered the international stage, touring in such countries as France and Japan. Minhuayuan’s performances always have the power to attract swarms of audiences. For example, one of their outdoor productions *Legend of White Snake (Baishe zhuan)*, using water from fire trucks to create the magic effect in “Flooding Mt. Jin,” was reported to have drawn over 10,000 spectators in Taoyuan in June 2008. Pan Xinzhong, “Minghuayuan beishe zhuan mohuan Taoyuan [Minghuayuan’s Legend of White Snake Mesmerizes Taoyuan],” *Lianhebao* (Taipei), June 9, 2008, sec. A9.

<sup>67</sup> *Gezaixi* also faces the crisis of declining audiences, even though it is a relatively active traditional art form. That is why the success of certain traditional arts troupes, such as Minghuayuan and the puppet company Pili, are significant. Their brilliant methods of administration and publicity and originality in production thus have engendered quite a few discussions and publications.

were dismissed from the realm of tradition and authenticity, the post-martial-law era saw their inclusion in “tradition.” Tradition became a more diverse notion, with increasing emphasis on indigenusness.

Yet the change in aesthetic perception did not happen overnight. Thus despite Minghuayuan’s growing reputation, popularity, and originality in narrative and staging, the aesthetic norm of the traditional Taiwanese theatre in the 1990s, as scholar Wang Anqi points out, was the “traditional *gezaixi*,” represented by the Heritage Award winner Liao Qiongzhi and her Heritage Troupe (Wang 1996). Scholar Teri J. Silvio also notes that the modes of *gezaixi* that received the most governmental patronage during this time were: 1. “*bendi* (local) *gezaixi*” in Yilan that retains the primitive mode of *gezaixi*’s performance, 2. “traditional *gezaixi*” characterized by the Heritage Troupe, and 3. “refined *gezaixi*” embodied by the Holo Gezaixi Company (Silvio 2005). Because official patronage to theatre often goes hand in hand with academic production in Taiwan, with scholars often taking the role of arts critics and having a say in cultural funding decisions, governmental patronage to a great extent indicates mainstream artistic discourse of the time.

Indeed, as an amateur performer in the university *gezaixi* club from 1992 to 1996, my sense was that the prevailing mode of *gezaixi* was Holo’s “refined *gezaixi*” and the “traditional *gezaixi*” which Ms. Liao endeavored to promote. In particular, Holo Gezaixi Troupe’s debut *The Wronged Verdict* (*Qupan ji*) in 1990 refreshed the *gezaixi* field with its graceful style, polished language, and cleverly woven plot, boosting the hopes and spirits of numerous *gezaixi* fans and practitioners. At the time, *gezaixi* was at the start of its attempt to rise from the bottom in terms of social esteem, and *opela* was considered too insignificant to bother with.

Scholar Liao Xianhao in an article on nationalism states with lucidity that “identity” in a broad sense is a discursive construction, and “national identity” of the modern nation-state, a historical product of the late-nineteenth century, is even more so. Liao therefore calls for a historicized discussion on the matter of national identity: “In Taiwan the amount of contemporary fiction that treats identity is not small, most of which cannot avoid the issue of nation-state. Yet the examination of the discourse on nation-state for a long time has been scant.... Basically critics (of both the left wing and right wing) rarely discuss this matter... A *historicized examination* regarding the discourse on nation-state is close to none” (Liao 2000, 318, 27-28). Liao’s article was written between 1999 and 2000. Although in the following years several Taiwanese literary critics and scholars have actually begun pursuing this research, drawing on literary and cinematic works to historicize the discourse on nation-state, this research is still an unexplored field in the scholarship of Taiwanese theatre, and is thus worth investigating. Moreover, as discourse is not a neutral mode of communication, “an alternative approach to discourse, one that stresses its constitutive rather than its communicative dimension, alerts us the process wherein things come into speech” (Shapiro 1988, 12). This chapter therefore draws widely on documents and performance works to demonstrate the process of how these discourses have been constructed and have thus shaped people’s perceptions on tradition and aesthetics.

## **Background**

Taiwan’s international status worsened with its withdrawal from the UN in 1971. The crisis impacted Taiwan’s literary and artistic fields. While Taiwanese literature in the 1960s was strongly influenced by Western modernist literature, linguistically and stylistically in particular,

intellectuals in the 1970s began to turn to their own cultural heritage.<sup>68</sup> The Nativist literary movement thus arose in the 1970s, criticizing the Modernists as producing elite literature and calling for attention to the land and the people. As a response, intellectuals began to pay attention to traditional Taiwanese theatrical practices. *Journal of Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore* (*Minsu quyi*), for instance, was organized and published its first issue in 1980. Performing arts companies, such as the Cloud Gates Dance Theatre and Langling Theatre Company, turned to the traditional arts for inspiration (Qiu 1997, 206-07; Wang 1996, 96-97).

In traditional theatre, the most representative troupe at this time was the Beijing opera company Yayin xiaoji, founded in the late 1970s. As the intellectuals of the 1970s began to question their values, which had long been shaped by Western culture and capitalism, the newly formed Nativist movement advocated a culture free from Western influence and rooted in native soil. Taiwanese nationalism at the time was prompted by a sense of national crisis, that the Republic of China (Taiwan) had lost to the PRC in the competition for diplomatic recognition, and that Taiwan had been ousted from the international community. Taiwan's soaring native awareness at this stage was still centered on Chinese cultural heritage. In the realm of traditional theatre, this sentiment was first embodied by Beijing opera practitioners, as seen in Yayin's efforts to renovate Beijing opera and connect Beijing opera to contemporary society. Its productions were received warmly by intellectuals, and its call for "modernizing the national

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<sup>68</sup> The Modernist literary movement in the 1960s is considered to have brought a literary renaissance to Taiwan, refreshing the cultural scene at the time when the Nationalist government strongly promoted anti-communist literature. Yet some also criticize the modernists' exclusive application of Western modernism to literary techniques, questioning their unreserved confidence in modernization. Engaging Western literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, modernists experiment with written techniques and at the same time challenge traditional values in their works. Scholars have often attributed such unusually strong Western literary influence on these writers to the inaccessibility of the literary heritage of their immediate predecessors. The GMD's banning of works by most pre-1949 New Literature writers (with leftist inclination) created a vacuum that forced them to turn to foreign sources for inspiration. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, *Modernism and the Nativist Resistance: Contemporary Chinese Fiction from Taiwan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).



opera” found resonance with some students. At a time when Beijing opera in Taiwan struggled to find its audiences, Yayin’s efforts in modernizing Beijing opera, connected to the patriotic sentiments of the time, ignited some young people’s passions to explore and embrace this tradition (Wang 1996, 97).

As the elite in the realm of traditional theatre, Beijing opera was naturally the first to sense the change in the cultural climate and to respond. Beijing opera had been constructed as an aristocratic cultural form through state policies, following the Nationalist (GMD) government’s retreat to Taiwan. As discussed in the previous chapter, the exclusive state patronage of Beijing opera was part of the GMD’s strategy for the governing of Taiwan: Beijing opera was deployed to represent a culture superior to Taiwanese local culture and thus asserted the GMD’s legitimacy over the island. Moreover, establishing Beijing opera as the National Opera also strengthened the Nationalist party’s self-representation as safeguarding Chinese culture, and thus the party maintained its rights to Chinese cultural heritage and legitimacy over the mainland. The state’s exclusive support of Beijing opera led to the marginalization of Taiwanese cultural products as “vernacular” and folk cultures (Su 1992; Zhou 1995; Chang 1997; Guy 2005).

Even though the Nativist movement in the 1970s led Taiwanese intellectuals to turn from the Western cultural influence to their own roots, the public attention during this period was focused on Beijing opera. The rise of *gezaixi* did not occur until the lift of martial law in 1987. In this year, the government opened its doors to the mainland and gradually allowed the Taiwanese to visit China. With the increasing cross-strait cultural exchanges, prominent Chinese Beijing opera troupes were invited to perform on the island. Their superior skills threatened the Taiwanese Beijing opera troupes, and, coming from regions closer to the origin of the theatrical genre and with direct contact with Beijing opera masters, their performances appeared more

authentic and authoritative to most Taiwanese spectators (and even to Taiwanese practitioners)(Chang 1997, 127),<sup>69</sup> and thus undermined the legitimacy of Beijing opera in Taiwan.

### **On the Way to Legitimacy: The Importance of Being “Refined”**

In 1987, the nearly forty years of cross-strait separation was over, and trips to the mainland became popular for business, tourism, and religious pilgrimage. The increasingly frequent contacts across the Taiwan Strait led the Taiwanese to realize their differences in values and lifestyle, and to experience the gap between the imagined Chinese mainland and the one in reality. The sense of Taiwanese identity has metamorphosed twice in the twentieth century, and ironically, both changes resulted not from the “separation” but from the “contact” of the two sides (Bosco 1994, 392). The first contact took place with Taiwan’s retrocession from Japan to the Chinese Nationalists, when the GMD officials’ mistreatment of the Taiwanese and their unfair distribution of resources resulted in a rift between the “natives” and the “mainlanders” on the island. The second contact began after the lift of the ban on visits to China in 1987, when more and more Taiwanese personally experienced the differences of the two polities and became disillusioned with their imagined motherland. Consequently, a sense of Taiwanese consciousness emerged and was steadily reinforced. While the first Taiwanese national awareness was a kind of ethnic sentiment that excluded the latecomer “mainlanders,” the second Taiwanese nationalism was an emotionally charged response that surged within the people born and raised on the island called Taiwan, as opposed to “China.”

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<sup>69</sup> Also, Nancy A. Guy in her *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* notes the helplessness and anxiety Taiwanese Beijing opera performers felt, being cut off from the native place of the art and unable to learn from the masters of Beijing opera.

The Taiwanese language (basically, a southern Fujian dialect) began to receive attention. Competence in both Mandarin and Taiwanese became advantageous and even required in business and politics. Local Taiwanese culture, such as *gezaixi* and palm puppetry (*budaixi*), moved from the cultural periphery to the center. Starting in 1991, legislators began to question the correctness of the term “National Opera” as dissatisfied voices grew stronger among the people, protesting the disparity in treatment between Beijing opera and local theatres such as *gezaixi*. As the former military troupes were being downsized and merged, the first public *gezaixi* company—Lanyang Gezaixi Troupe, sponsored by Yilan County, was founded in 1992. *Gezaixi* was finally brought into the educational system as Fuxing Theatre School initiated a *gezaixi* program in 1994.

Yet *gezaixi*’s major venue at this time moved from the in-house commercial theatre to the outdoor religious festival as cinema and TV took over the entertainment industry. However, the low-budget productions, the varying performance qualities, and the unrestrained performance style of the outdoor theatre reinforced people’s conception of *gezaixi* as lowbrow. Many *gezaixi* fans shared the same mixed feelings of Ms. Chi, who began watching *gezaixi* by going with her father to temple shows when she was a child. A magazine report covered her views:

Like many lovers of Taiwanese opera, her fondness for the drama was intermingled with the taste of candied plums from the temple-gate marketplace. [...] It is this nostalgia that causes Chi to bring out a chair and watch every time she hears the gongs and drums announcing a performance, even after moving to Taipei. But then you sit there from eight until ten, and what do you get? There is more pop music being sung than traditional Taiwanese songs. The *xiaoshen* (male lead) comes out wearing shades. The *caidan* (female comic role) is—as seems to always be the case these days—wearing a negligee of the most eye-catching variety.... This type of perfunctory and adulterated performance naturally does not satisfy Chi Yueh-oh, who explains her attendance with the old proverb: “The child may have scabies on its head, but it is your child after all.” (Cai 1997)

The interview was conducted in 1997, and it reflected many people's opinion of *gezaixi*. At the time, the ideal and authentic form for traditional sung drama was certainly not the style of *opela*, but the style of Beijing opera, which had long been held up and inculcated by the GMD as aristocratic and sophisticated. The "low-class" association that Taiwanese education had long inflicted upon "vernacular culture," reinforced by the mostly low-quality street performances, was best reflected in the explanation of *opela* as "*o-be-pe-pe-le*." Up until the 1990s, *opela*, the sub-genre of *gezaixi*, was commonly practiced in the nighttime outdoor theatre, yet its authenticity was denied. Instead, it signaled something embarrassing for many *gezaixi* performers, scholars, and passersby.

Under such circumstances, to reclaim *gezaixi* into the "tradition," and to make *gezaixi* an art form that could represent the nation, it seemed necessary to cleanse its performance and its image. A call for refining and traditionalizing *gezaixi* therefore emerged, as is epitomized by scholar Zeng Yongyi's statement:

The so-called "refined [*jingzhi*] *gezaixi*" manifests the traditional beauty of the sophisticated *gezaixi*, blending in contemporary artistic thoughts and techniques. It adjusts to the modern theatre, and at the same time complements it. It is a local theatre that can brighten the Taiwanese people. This Taiwanese "local theatre" will represent Taiwan, serving as our cultural export. It can stand tall side by side with other global theatres.... (Zeng 1993)

Zeng further illustrates six requirements of the refined opera: a profound theme, an intense plot arrangement, great stage design, witty dialogue, variety of music, and expertise of the performers. The idea of refining mass culture arose in the 1980s when Taiwan's economy prospered rapidly. The first chair of the Council for Cultural Affairs Chen Qilu (term of office

1981-1988) stated his attitudes towards culture: “Culture should be protected and exist in our daily life. We should popularize high culture, and refine mass culture. Only in doing so can we promote and glorify our traditional culture”(Su 2003, 164-65). Scholar Zeng Yongyi further advocated the ideal of refinement and combined it with *gezaixi*. In response, the term “refined *gezaixi*” was widely used by various *gezaixi* troupes as a catchphrase.

The idea of refined Taiwanese opera was perfectly adopted, practiced, and promoted by Holo Gezaixi Troupe, founded by Liu Zhongyuan in 1990. Scholar Zeng Yongyi once endorsed the troupe by proclaiming, “The ‘refined *gezaixi*’ that highlights the beauty of traditional theatre is a slogan I proposed, which Mr. Liu responds to enthusiastically and endeavors to carry out” (Zeng 1993). Liu Zhongyuan’s proposal of the *gezaixi* production *The Wronged Verdict* to the National Theatre in 1990 was considered the launch of the Holo Gezaixi Troupe. From 1991, when Holo staged *The Wronged Verdict* as its debut production in the National Theatre, until 1997, Holo ran one to two new productions each year, such as *The Swan Feast (Tian’e yan)* and *The Butcher Official (Shazhu zhuangyuan)* in 1992, and *The Emperor, the Intellect and the Beggar (Huangdi xiucai qishi)* in 1993. All the main stage productions of the Holo Troupe were subsidized by the government and private foundations (Zheng 1998, 8-10). By comparison, the income of most Taiwanese professional *gezaixi* troupes at the time came largely from contracts with local temples and guilds, usually with budgets of less than NT 30,000 dollars (USD 1,000) per day (and with which each troupe supporting its 20 performers). The performances of these troupes usually had to take into consideration the preferences of the patrons. In Holo’s case, however, its production budget was ample and it enjoyed substantial artistic autonomy. Holo’s ability to attract considerable funding owed to the rise of Taiwanese local awareness, as well as to the career background of the producer-manager Liu Zhongyuan.

As electronic media were introduced to Taiwan, *gezaixi* began to assume the forms of and developed into genres such as radio *gezaixi*, film *gezaixi*, and TV *gezaixi*. Mr. Liu began his career as a commercial salesman at the Minben Radio Broadcast Station, in charge of administrating and broadcasting numerous *gezaixi* programs. Later in 1966 he became involved in television production, and in the 1970s, he was a shareholder of the Taiwan TV Union Gezaixi Troupe, an influential company that consistently garnered impressive viewers' ratings.<sup>70</sup> Mr. Liu began to produce *gezaixi* programs for the China Television Company in 1989 (Zheng 1998, 6). With years of experience in producing radio and TV *gezaixi*, he has developed a wide personal network. This is why at the founding of Holo, he was able to recruit celebrated *gezaixi* divas such as Tang Meiyun, Xu Yafen, Wang Jinying, and Xiaomi.

In addition to the manager's rich administrative experience and well-connected public relations, Holo's success in claiming refined *gezaixi* is built on the state-constructed image of the "correct tradition." Holo also drew on the achievements of Yayin, the experimental Beijing opera company in the late 1970s, which had renovated and modernized Beijing opera. Yayin had taken the initiative in staging performances of the traditional theatre in a modern venue, from the old "National Soldiers' Culture and Activity Center" to the modern "Sun Yetsen Memorial Hall," and it was also the first company to introduce talents from spoken drama to design the sets, lighting, sound, and program, as well as the first to introduce a large orchestra in the production of sung drama. Yayin also sought to re-write traditional stories from a contemporary angle, reducing the moral preaching common in sung drama and complicating the characters. Scholar Wang Anqi notes Holo's inclination toward becoming "Beijing opera-ized" in its process of

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<sup>70</sup> The troupe recruited almost all the most celebrated performers at that time, with Yang Lihua, Ye Qing, Liu Qing, and Xiao Mingming as four major *xiaoshen* (male lead). The programs they produced were so popular that its viewers rating remained a record in Taiwanese TV history. See Zeng Yongyi, *Taiwan gezaixi de fazhan yu bianqian* [The Development of Taiwan's Gezaixi] (Taipei: Lianjing, 1988), 80-81..

refinement: “As far as the direction [of Holo] is concerned, we can see the influence of Beijing opera’s modernization on the local theatre” (Wang 1996, 111). Indeed, as the elite in the field of performing arts and a genre long supported by the government, the artistic achievements of Beijing opera inevitably became models other theatre genres aspired to emulate.

### **The Means of Refinement**

As the development of local Taiwanese consciousness grew, *gezaixi*, long defined as a “regional theatre,” eventually ascended to the stage of the national performing venue in 1981, with *Fishergirl*, featuring TV *gezaixi* superstar Yang Lihua, making its entrance at the Sun Yetsen Memorial Hall in Taipei, followed by the Minghuayuan Troupe’s *Buddha Jigong* (*Jigon huofu*) in 1983. In 1991 the Holo Gezaixi Company entered the National Theatre, where it soon became a regular fixture on the Theatre’s annual programs (Cai 2005, 3-42). As Holo was performing in the beginning of the 1990s, what most resonated with spectators was the contemporary ideas and satiric mode of its playscripts. Indeed, what distinguishes Holo from other *gezaixi* main-stage pioneers is its “literary quality,” as scholar Lin Heyi notes (Lin 2003, 240).

During the period when Holo was beginning to perform, the environment for traditional playwriting in Taiwan had not matured. Beijing opera in Taiwan, for instance, had been burdened with the mission of preserving Chinese national essence, and thus it had to undergo script censorship, which discouraged any innovations in plot and concept. *Gezaixi*, however, had faced the problem of the shortage of literary talent until the mid-1980s. The official neglect was something of a blessing in disguise, for it allowed *gezaixi* to be more autonomous in the totalitarian environment and rendered it more sensitive to the market and to the spectators’

preferences. Nevertheless, the down side was that most *gezaixi* plays remained at the level of melodrama and with a scene-list format. Indeed, to this day Taiwanese outdoor *gezaixi* troupes run on a script-free, improvisational system, which trains the actor to be intuitive, responsive, and flexible, but which does not provide the opportunity for the actor to receive the discipline of scripts. Also, a well-written script can contain more complex twists and turns of plot than a scene-list show. By contrast, traditional theatre on the mainland had been pushed into a scripted system starting in 1949, and the cultural climate encouraged the creation of new plays. Many Chinese government-run troupes have house playwrights. Playwriting talent has thus been fostered consistently in China (Xie 1995).

In this situation, Holo's strategy for refining *gezaixi* was to pluck fruit from the playwrights across the strait. Holo's productions from 1991 to 1997, including *The Wronged Verdict*, *The Swan Feast*, *The Butcher Official*, *The Phoenix's Egg*, *The Imperial Plague*, *The Lost and Found Imperial Hat*, *The Imperial Inspector*, *Fate is Not Determined by Heaven*, *Buying a Father*, and *Verse of Autumn Wind*, were all plays written by Chinese playwrights. Some of these were adaptations of renowned award-winning plays on the mainland; others were requested by and written specifically for Holo. For example, Holo commissioned the Fujian opera (*minju*) playwright Chen Daogwei to write a *gezaixi* play based on Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's (1809-1852) *The Inspector-General*.

Most of the plays were read as social satire, with scenes of the courtroom of imperial magistrates. The troupe's successful debut, *The Wronged Verdict*, became a model for subsequent productions. Written by Chen Daogwei, the story describes a young man Liu who has been supported by his father-in-law and has recently become an official by earning the top score on the imperial exam. However, on his way home, the new official is stopped by a fisherman



who appeals a case to him. The offender turns out to be his brother-in-law, the only son of his benefactor. As he investigates the crime, he learns that his brother-in-law had stolen the fisherman's wife and killed her mother. Struggling between the law and family bonds, Liu has the fisherman's wife returned, covers up the murder, and punishes his brother-in-law by merely having him beaten. Ironically, his brother-in-law pushes him into the river to cover up his crime. But Liu is rescued and turns to his benefactor Yan, who as a principled minister, presides at a trial and sentences his only son to death (Cai 1997).

Most of the plays that Holo has produced are a variation on this motif. The critical approach to courtroom politics and humanities, and the fast, clear-cut dramatic pace of the mainland drama appeared novel and cutting-edge to the Taiwanese spectators who had been familiar with the traditional narratives. (Traditional plays, for instance, usually have dualistic character depiction, but here the hero Liu is not a clear-cut positive character because he tries to cover up for his in-law's crime with the privilege and authority of his post). At the time when cross-strait communication was not as common as today, these stories offered new insights and subject matters. Moreover, Holo selected its scripts with great care. Except for *The Imperial Plague*, all the selected plays are from the regional operas in Fujian province, the place from which most of the ancestors of the Taiwanese people had come. Thus, the geographic, linguistic, and cultural affinity rendered the adaptation of these plays accessible to the Taiwanese spectators. Meanwhile, Holo adeptly blended in Taiwanese slang and proverbs to better situate the plays in a Taiwanese context. In fact, most audiences assumed that the plays were originally written by Holo to allude to and critique certain politicians and political events in contemporary Taiwan.

The meticulous attention the troupe paid to singing and movement also gave many spectators the impression that Holo's *gezaixi* was equivalent to "the Taiwanese version of

Beijing opera” (Cai 1997). On the one hand, the various career paths of Holo’s cast members had brought a vibrant Taiwanese flavor to the Chinese plays.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, the bodies of Holo’s actors demonstrated the “refinement” by striving for a more regulated and codified movement. The Beijing opera’s inclination in its performance was most likely influenced by Holo’s directors, such as Yan Xunwei, who started as a Beijing opera actor, and Zhang Jian, a ballet dancer from the mainland. This perhaps can explain the increasing precision in physical movement in Holo’s later productions. Certainly, the training background of the actors also played a part in the execution of the physically demanding performances. The *laoshen* (old male) actors Lu Fulu and Chen Shenglin, for instance, received physical instruction in their childhood from Beijing opera performers, and the male lead Tang Meiyun also took her training from Beijing opera actors.

As *gezaixi* was continuing on its way to becoming the legitimate representative of Taiwanese culture, its most common form—the low-budget outdoor theatre, or, street performance—still confirmed people’s long-held associations of *gezaixi* as lowbrow entertainment. Holo’s timely emergence and its efforts to refine *gezaixi* successfully reshaped its image. A young *gezaixi* and *kun* opera practitioner told me how much she was moved the first time she saw Holo’s *The Wronged Verdict*. “I had been in a state of excitement for the following two weeks. I even had difficulty falling asleep at night. It was a regaining of confidence. I was finally assured that the thing I loved was not vulgar. It could be presented in such a graceful way” (Hsieh 2002).

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<sup>71</sup> For instance, Wang Jinying was active in the realm of radio *gezaixi* in her early years, and Xiaomi was the pillar of the famous musical-dance troupe Yixia. Tang Meiyun was a famous *xiaosheng* (male lead) in Taipei’s outdoor theatre, and she also participated in the production of TV *gezaixi*.

Although becoming refined is an inevitable direction for a young theatrical genre such as *gezaixi* as it matures, Holo's rise and the response it received among the people, if read in the political context, can be interpreted as a counterbalance exerted by Taiwanese traditional theatre against the long-standing Chinese chauvinist cultural policy. The Chinese chauvinist policy as reflected in theatre was to elevate Beijing opera and depreciate the vernacular Taiwanese modes of performances. Holo elevated *gezaixi* by means of refinement: It embodied *what was considered elegant* in its performance to show that artistically *gezaixi* could achieve the same level of quality as Beijing opera and could absolutely represent Taiwan. It is paradoxical, however, that Holo's approach to improving the image of *gezaixi* and removing the shadow of Chinese chauvinism was to emulate the performance of Beijing opera and to build on the original plays of Chinese writers. Holo's development also led many people to find its performance style increasingly resembling Beijing opera.

With its "Taiwanese version of Beijing opera," Holo led the Taiwanese people to experience a purging of negative images and a recovery of dignity. By constantly emulating the standards of Beijing opera, and repeatedly practicing and approximating this idealization, the Taiwanese seemed to take part in the healing and recuperation of confidence as they simultaneously witnessed the refinement of *gezaixi*. Through the "almost the same but not quite" simulation of Beijing opera, Holo's performances first displayed and confirmed *gezaixi*'s standing as its equal, and then further replaced Beijing opera. This strategy of Holo in fact acknowledged the perceived supremacy of Beijing opera and attempted to operate within this power structure and reverse the hierarchy, which seemed necessary under the circumstances.

### **Another Voice on the Refined**

As the refined *gezaixi* gradually reconstructed the people's confidence in and conception of *gezaixi*, another voice surfaced at the turn of the century in Taiwan, questioning: Has the refined *gezaixi* turned into the elite's theatre?

Holo's *Verse of Autumn Wind* in 1999 exemplified the extremity of the refined project. The Chinese award-winning play in 1985, written by Zhou Changfu, tells of the historical event “the Voodoo Trouble” in the Han Dynasty of Emperor Wu (156-87 B.C.). The emperor’s superstition regarding witchcraft in his later years brought tragedy to the royal family, as rumors and misunderstanding blinded his judgment and he sentenced the prince, his own son, to death. The play’s grand stage design and magnificent costumes effectively created the feel of the imperial court, and the actors’ movements were particularly codified and stylized. In addition, the lyrics possessed such literary complexity (sometimes in antique form with literary allusions) that the spectators had to rely heavily on the subtitles presented on side screens in order to keep up with the story. Scholar Lin Heyi expressed her concerns in her review: “We could not but wonder if such refinement was too ‘Big China-centered.’ Except for the music, where have the characteristics of *gezaixi* gone in this play?”<sup>72</sup> She then posed a question:

Compared to the historic and sophisticated theatrical genres such as *kun* opera and *liyuan* opera, what is the advantage of *gezaixi*? It should be a kind of vitality that is intimate to us, a unique Taiwanese aesthetics, linguistic wit and humorous philosophy of life. In the middle of the performance, the subtitle projectors were temporarily out of order, and the audiences were suddenly lost. Aren’t we seeing a show in our mother tongue? Indeed we gained a refined *gezaixi*, but at what cost? What is left for us if *gezaixi* is detached from the public? (Lin 1999)

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<sup>72</sup> Original text: “...不禁令人疑惑，這款精緻化，會不會太‘大中原’了一點？去除了唱腔，歌仔戲的影子何在？”

These questions revealed a sense of the “anxiety of influence” of some Taiwanese intellectuals. While some celebrated the “Beijing opera-ized” (*jingju hua*) *gezaixi* as becoming more sophisticated, others articulated concerns about this trend. “Beijing opera-ized” is the term common in the Taiwanese artistic field, but it is neither used nor discussed on the mainland. The proliferation of the term in Taiwan revealed some intellectuals’ anxiety about *gezaixi*’s becoming like Beijing opera. It signifies a loss of Taiwan’s own indigenous uniqueness and, more significantly, a subordinate cultural relation to mainland Chinese culture. As the political and literary fields embarked on a process of “de-Sinification” (*qu zhongguo hua*), we see similar responses in the cultural field.

The emergence of such ideas at this time was not by chance. The lifting of martial law and the ban on visits to the mainland in 1987 was a turning point in Taiwanese national awareness, bonding the people on the island together and facilitating the growing of a consciousness different from “being Chinese,” and this awareness was heated up in 1996 when the Taiwanese became able to vote for their president directly for the first time in their history. The presidential election gave the people a sense of empowerment, and the democratic experience served to further distinguish the people on the island from the people on the mainland. Thus the term “New Taiwanese” emerged as an inclusive identity to cover all the people on the island.<sup>73</sup> The “New Taiwanese” awareness soared to its peak in 2000, as the ruling Nationalist party was brought down for the first time, with the native-born Chen Shuibian from the Democratic Progressive Party winning the presidential election. With burgeoning Taiwanese

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<sup>73</sup> For the discussion on Taiwanese identity, see Joseph Bosco, “The Emergence of a Taiwanese Popular Culture,” in *The Other Taiwan: 1945 to the Present*, ed. Murray A Rubinstein (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), Alan Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities*.

nationalism, *gezaixi*, the only “made in Taiwan” theatrical genre, came under the spotlight, and some people began to consider its indigenous characteristics and advantages.

Moreover, in the age of globalization, many countries faced the crisis of cultural homogenization, experiencing particularly the anxiety of being Americanized, and endeavored to look for and magnify their unique local features. As Taiwan is confronted with the impacts of Western and Japanese cultures in the process of self-exploration and indigenization, it suffers, as Appadurai puts it, an “alternative fear[s] to Americanization,” namely, an anxiety about Chinesization. For a small polity like Taiwan, “there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of larger scale, especially those that are nearby” (Appadurai 1996, 32). The identity of Taiwan is therefore torn between not only “the West” and “the Tradition,” but also “China” and “Taiwan.” Consequently, there began a search for the authentic Taiwanese characteristics distinct from mainland Chinese influence. As a result, the recent artistic trend has turned to the indigenous qualities of Taiwanese culture. The *Citong Reblossoming*, performed by the Chen Meiyun Gezaixi Troupe at the National Theatre in February 2000, exemplifies this enthusiasm for seeking a distinct Taiwanese culture. The play was written by a young Taiwanese writer Yang Xinzhi. Adapted from the adventure story “Gan Guobao Came to Taiwan,” the play tells of the cultural clash between the Taiwanese aborigines and the Chinese Han people who took the risk of crossing the dangerous strait to cultivate the farmland on the island. From the matriarchal viewpoint of the Taiwanese plain aborigines, the play questions both the Han cultural chauvinism and male chauvinism. The production made significant use of aboriginal costumes, ritualistic dance, and music, with an attempt to dig out and centralize the invisible aboriginal heritage of many Taiwanese. It was a play “in memory of ‘the other half’ ancestor of the Taiwanese” (Lin 2000).

The fashion spurred the Holo Gezaixi Company to begin to stage original plays written by Taiwanese playwrights, as well as plays based on local Taiwanese stories. The 1999 production *Playing the Legend* written by Huang Yingxiong was Holo's first attempt to stage a local Taiwanese playwright's work. The play consisted of two folk tales, inserted contemporary ideas such as environmental protection, and applied methods of children's theatre to reach a younger generation. The play *Taiwan, My Mother* in 2000 was based on Li Qiao's novel *The Wintry Night Trilogy*, adapted by Huang Yingxiong and Chen Yongming. In 2001, Yu Yuankeng's *Flower in the Paradise*, inspired by the tragic romance of *Romeo and Juliet*, tells of a love story resulting from the feud between two clans of earlier Chinese immigrants in Taiwan (Lin 2003, 240). Among these productions, Holo made its political stance most explicitly in *Taiwan, My Mother*. The play reduced the ethnic tensions between the Hoklo and Hakka in the original story, and concentrated on the trial Nature inflicted upon these early explorers of Taiwan. Yet Holo's adaptation was highly charged with political ideology. Lyrics and dialogue with such slogans as "we want to be Taiwanese" and "Taiwanese stand up" recurred throughout the play (Ji 2000; Liu 2000). The overt political statement was welcomed and cheered by some spectators, while others responded unpleasantly and walked out of performances. The production opened in March 2000 at the National Theatre, a time when the Taiwanese-centered consciousness had reached its climax. Later in the same year, the Taiwanese people's confidence in their economic power, and their dissatisfaction with the military blackmailing of the PRC, prompted most of them to vote for a different ruling party, one that held a pro-independence inclination. The production corresponded to the social sentiments; its premiere coincided with the peak moment of the development of Taiwanese nationalism.

### **After the Millennium: The Rise of *Opela***

Along with the call for distinct Taiwanese cultural features came the drastic change of *opela*'s situation at the start of a new millennium. Scholar Zeng Yongyi, in his *The Development and Change of Gezaixi*, published in 1988, defined *opela* in a sentence: "*opela* means *hu-lai-yi-chi* (perfuctory), and thus we can see that it is not valued." The book has been an authoritative publication in *gezaixi* scholarship, and Mr. Zeng's description faithfully documented the common view of *opela* prior to the 1990s. Indeed, literature concerning *opela* was scant before 2000, and the very limited documents mostly contained negative expressions. Teri J. Silvio's doctoral dissertation in 1998 was one of the earliest writings to discuss *opela* in a neutral way. Nevertheless, since it focused primarily on gender performance and spectatorship, and was written in the English, the publication did not garner the attention it deserved in the field.

The first person to attempt an examination of *opela* as a performance genre in an objective manner was writer-scholar Liu Nanfang. She intended to re-position *opela* in The Cultural Meanings and Outlook of Traditional Theatric Arts Conference in May 1998, emphasizing that *opela* was a product of practitioners rather than that of literary intellectuals. She argued that although its form and concept were neither as polished nor profound as the newly-written history plays on the mainland, the merits of *opela* resided in its intimate relation with the audiences (Liu 1998, 42). Later, Scholar Qiu Kunliang, speaking at the Traditional Arts Conference in 1999, linked the developmental trajectory of *opela* to the golden era of Taiwanese *gezaixi*, that is, to the period of postwar in-house commercial theatre (1949-1960s). Qiu resorted to its connection to the golden era of *gezaixi* to counter the prevailing negative perception of *opela* and call for a judgment-free examination of the genre.



We should treat *opela* as one of the directions of traditional *gezaixi*, unless we are to deny the *gezaixi* of the in-house stage. “*Opela*” is equivalent to its original meaning “opera,” which is a performance style instead of a synonym of absurdity and monkey tricks. *Opela* consists of Chinese and foreign performance elements, absorbing nutrients from the new drama, musical, cinema, and Western music. It develops a performance network that crosses the border of traditional theatre. We can evaluate its theatrical effects in terms of scripts, performers, and stage effects, but it is unnecessary to deny it as a performance genre on moral grounds or in the name of tradition. (Qiu 1999, 20-21)

Further, Scholar Lin Heyi attempted to trace the development of *opela* to the colonial legacy of the Imperial Subject Movement in her project report “The Administration and Performance Activities of Outdoor *Gezaixi* Troupes in Taipei” (Lin 1999b, 26). In my M.A. thesis, “Research on the *Opela* Plays of Outdoor *Gezaixi* in Taipei,” I adopted this view and elaborated the argument by discussing the colonial remnants in the performance and plays of *opela* today (Hsieh 2000).

*Opela* had been active in the nighttime shows of outdoor *gezaixi*, but its existence was dismissed and unrecognized by academia. The first high-profile *opela*-related production did not emerge in the traditional theatre but came from the spoken drama; the Golden Bough Theatre’s *Bai Xiaolan, the Taiwanese Heroin*, premiered in 1996 and was touted as drawing on the performance elements of *opela*. However, it was not until 2001 that *opela* made its first entrance on the official stage as a subgenre of *gezaixi*. In the Joint Performances of *Gezaixi* in 2001, sponsored by the National Center for Traditional Arts, Chunmei Gezaixi Troupe staged an *opela* play *The Bandit Black Eagle* (*feizei heiying*). The event demonstrated that *opela*’s legitimacy as a form of performance had gained governmental endorsement. The Heritage Award winner Liao Qiongzhi and her Heritage Gezaixi Troupe soon followed by staging the *opela* play *Missing Homeland*. The Heritage Troupe, known for its endeavors to promote the *gezaixi* tradition, began

to stage *opela*. This act signified that *opela* was finally embraced and acknowledged as part of *gezaixi*'s tradition. Within a few years, *opela* changed from undesirable to desirable; the term seemed to become a hot topic. In newspapers in the following years, many theatre productions were touted as "*opela*." For example, titles such as "Xiuqin Gezaixi Troupe Stages Authentic Opela" (*Xiuqin gezaixi tuan ban yan zheng opela xi*) (Ji 2003) and "Chen Meiyun's *Lujiacun*: with Opela Flavor" (*Chen meiyun lujiacun: opela kouwei*) (Ji 2003) emerged in the newspapers. A search for the term "*opela*" from the database of United Daily News yields 32 entries from 1951 to 2000, in contrast to 110 entries from 2000 to 2005.<sup>74</sup>

The reason behind this change can be attributed first to the two sides of "hybridity." The hybrid nature of *opela* was the chief reason that it had been considered intolerably rebellious and unruly. During the period of Japanese rule, the government promoted the new theatre and later forbade any performances associated with traditional Chinese music during the Imperial Subject Movement. The predecessor of *opela*, that is, reformed *gezaixi*, emerged under these circumstances. Scholar Qiu Kunliang examines the interaction and competition between the new theatre and *gezaixi* during the Japanese era, and he argues that the line between the new theatre and reformed *gezaixi* was blurry since the two genres shared the same stage and thus constantly influenced each other. The new theatre was therefore divided into two schools and known as the "pure cotton" and the "fiber" (Qiu 2001, 137). The reformed *gezaixi* resembled the new theatre supported by the Japanese, in which the actors wore Western suits or kimonos, and sang pop songs to the accompaniment of Western musical instruments. The major difference was that the stories of the reformed *gezaixi* were based on plays of traditional theatre. As the new cloth still contained the old pattern, the reformed *gezaixi* was thus called "fiber," signifying mixed, impure,

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<sup>74</sup> The earliest record is seen in 1993 in the literary section. It appears in a dialogue of a play *Ximayi* by Chen Yuhui: "Now no one cares about *gezaixi*. You see, on the street it's either *opela* or the porno show."

and thus inferior. During the Japanese era, as the new theatre was the norm, naturally the performance of the reformed *gezaixi* was viewed as a hybrid and could by no means be compared to the new theatre.

With the change of the regime, the norms of “purity” in performance were redirected from the new theatre to Beijing opera. The *gulu* (traditional style) plays of *gezaixi* managed to approximate the ideal aesthetic standards and could pass with its resemblance to Beijing opera. Yet the costumes, music, and acting in *opela* were a collage of various cultural influences, deviating from the standard of a pure performance tradition. This awkward and ambiguous nature led *opela* to be dismissed from the *gezaixi* discourses for decades.

In accord with the Taiwanese people’s changing perception of their own identity, the emphasis on “one hundred percent purity” in aesthetics changed and engendered a different reading. After the lift of martial law, the growing freedom of speech produced a multitude of voices and enabled access to a wealth of information. The Taiwanese came to realize that the island had been under the influence and cultivation of such powers as the aborigines, pirates of the Ming dynasty, Han immigrants, the Dutch, the Spanish, the Qing court, and the Japanese empire, and they thus came to acknowledge and embrace the hybridity of their identity. The book *Call Me Taike*, published in the end of 2005, attempted to put together voices from various classes speaking on the emerging term “*taike*” (Taiwaner). The previously derogatory term “*taike*,” meaning tacky, began to be consciously reworked to signify something local, vibrant and worthy of pride, countering the elitism (Wanglu yu shu 2005). Although no consensus was reached about its definition, the different perspectives indicate the ability of the Taiwanese to reinvent their cultures through imitation and internalization. Similarly, in the field of performing arts some began to propose openness and tolerance in their appeal for *opela*. Scholar Teri Silvio

observes: “Recently some theatre researchers began to view *opela* as an authentic form of *gezaixi*.... In this new discourse, the ‘hybridity’ of *opela* provides an opportunity to re-affirm the Taiwanese culture, which is tolerant instead of being exclusive” (Silvio 2005, 11).

Another reason for the rise of *opela* is that its performance brings the colonial past to the present. The presence in *opela* of the samurai duel, kimono costumes, Japanese songs, the plot of masking and the title of plays as “*tiangou/ tengu*” indicates a period of Taiwan’s history that was governed and culturally influenced by the Japanese. The anecdote of “beating up the Japanese woman” as mentioned in the previous chapter demonstrates the censorship Taiwanese performers experienced and responded to during the Japanese governance. The experience aptly explains the resilience of the Taiwanese performers and their flexibility in switching among various theatrical forms even in succeeding years. The reformed *gezaixi*, emerging originally in response to the restrictions of the Japanese cultural policy remained on the island after the Japanese withdrew, and it became a site that allowed the performers to test the traditional form and adjust to modernity independently and continuously. The grassroots’ raw practices led to a negative perception of *opela*, yet today people have come to acquire a different view of the genre. The colonial remnants embodied in the performance of *opela* invoke a chapter of Taiwanese history that for many years had purposely been buried.

Many historians call attention to the collective amnesia the Taiwanese have experienced about their own history under the Nationalist totalitarian rule before the lift of martial law. Steven Philips discusses the encounter between the Taiwanese and the Nationalists after the end of World War II and the role memory played in this encounter. After the retrocession, Taiwanese elites relied on the memory of the Japanese rule to evaluate the Nationalists, which often entailed dissatisfaction towards the new regime, while at the same time they applied a similar pattern in

petitioning for expanding self-government without resorting to independence. The dissatisfaction with the misrule by the Nationalists reached to such a point that the elites thought they finally had a legitimate opportunity to demand political reform and autonomy, as epitomized in the Incident of February 28, 1947. However, the state answered the demands with relentless force and began severe restrictions on the society. Those who had invoked the memory of the Japanese era to justify political reform were killed or silenced during the ensuing White Terror (Phillips 2003). The 50 years of Japanese rule became a taboo subject in Taiwan thereafter, and, if ever mentioned, was merely dismissed as “the remaining poison of the Japanese imperialism.” The state apparatus thus systematically deprived the Taiwanese citizens, especially those who were born after the War, of their memory.

With the lift of martial law and the acceleration of democratization, the long-buried history was finally revealed and addressed in Taiwan. Moreover, the increasingly heightened Taiwanese consciousness rendered the Japanese colonial history and its legacy a significant marker to differentiate the Taiwanese from the Chinese. Taiwan’s colonial experience now facilitates the ongoing definition of a Taiwanese identity. Therefore, endeavors have been made to dig out, retrieve, reconstruct and reclaim the lost memories. In the field of Taiwanese literature, in the same way that the Nativist literary movement in the 1970s called for a kind of literary writing that was rooted in tradition and free from the influence of Western imperialism, the “Localist literature” today emphasizes the integrity and locality of Taiwanese literature. The Localist literary movement seeks to liberate Taiwanese literature from the subordinate and peripheral position, especially in relation to Chinese literature. The “tradition” to which the local literary movement turns is no longer confined to the Chinese tradition; it includes a multitude of experiences, such as the aboriginal writing, colonial Japanese writing, female writing, overseas

and immigrant writing, and queer writing (Chang 2004). Thus over the past few years we have seen heated debate involving the selection of “canonic literature” in Taiwan, as well as the reexamination of the place of colonial Japanese literature.

Likewise, the *opela* phenomenon in the new century is a response within the realm of the performing arts to the trend of reconstructing Taiwanese history. The residue of the Japanese administration in the performance of *opela* today reveals the imprint of the colonial history. Paul Connerton in *How Societies Remember* discusses two types of practice that transmit a society’s memory: inscribing practices and incorporating practices, and he calls our attention to the latter, the less privileged form that is passed on through bodies as opposed to written texts. Although incorporating practices are largely traceless, it would be misleading, he argues, to underestimate the mnemonic importance of what is incorporated. Applying Connerton’s argument to the case of *opela*’s formation and transmission in Taiwan, we certainly see “how well the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body” (Connerton 1989, 102), as we find in *opela* today engagements of Japanese martial style, kimonos, songs, and character archetype (such as the masked *tianguo*).

What is fascinating in *opela* is that it bears testimony to the Japanese colonial influence in Taiwan. Even with the long-term state suppression of memory, the memory of the colonial experience was unconsciously acted out, relived, and passed on, as Connerton asserts that images of the past are conveyed and sustained by performances and that performative memory is bodily. Although most *gezaixi* performers were unable to recall and recognize the origin of their practice of *opela*, as seen in their inability to identify *opela* as the Japanese transliteration of “opera,” the performers relived the past in the present through the acting out of, for instance, the samurai duel. It is precisely this role of historical witness that drove *opela* to the fore at the turn of the twenty-

first century. As the identity of “Taiwanese-Chinese” is constantly in a dialectical relationship in Taiwan today, the Japanese colonial history gradually gains attention, and the historical traces etched in *opela* have finally been recognized, highlighted, and brought into the mainstream discourse.

In the previous chapter I discussed the different valences of the term *opela*. When understood as a Japanese transliteration of “opera” it testifies to a colonial past and leads us to uncover its history. When understood as “*o-be-pe-pe-le*” it testifies to the “semi-colonization” of the Nationalist administration. In a state ideology that propagated Chineseness, Beijing opera was promoted to endorse the legitimacy of the Nationalist regime over the mainland and the island, whereas the vernacular theatres were not only marginalized but also had to approximate Beijing opera so as not to be criticized as betraying the tradition. Deviating from the norms in respects such as music and costumes, *opela* gradually assumed the negative association “*o-be-pe-pe-le*.”

The power of naming, as described by Judith Butler, is illuminating here: “Power works through dissimulation: it comes to appear as something other than itself, indeed, it comes to appear as a name” (Butler 1997, 36). She argues that oppressive language is violence, and the utterance performs the act; “speech does not *reflect* a relation of social domination; speech *enacts* domination, becoming the vehicle through which that social structure is reinstated” (18). Power thus lurks in language. Derogatory speech keeps reproducing itself through repetition and circulation of words, and in return reconsolidates the hierarchy; speech becomes “the site for the mechanical... reproduction of power” (19). By the end of the 1990s, “*opela* as *o-be-pe-pe-le*” seemed to describe the unbridled and unruly sub-genre of *gezaixi*. However, what resided within

the disgraceful utterance was the cultural hierarchy reinforced by long-term state policy. The naming of *opela* illustrates how much the Taiwanese citizens (performers, spectators, and scholars) internalized this artistic hierarchy.

During 1998 to 1999 when I was conducting fieldwork on *opela*, most *gezaixi* practitioners simply informed me that *opela* was *o-be-pe-pe-le*, a standard answer that one could easily find in the general social perception and the limited *gezaixi* publications of the time. Perhaps, in some cases, it was a tactic for the practitioners to give me, the nosy researcher, a safe answer, a dominant explanation to this matter, so that I would go away. Dwight Conquergood is sensitive to the power relations and the reluctance of the subordinate classes to reveal the truths in ethnographic work, and he points to this “mimicry of textualism”: “By mimicking the reifying textualism of dominant knowledge regimes, subordinate people can deflect its invasive power” (Conquergood 2002, 150).

With *gezaixi* and *opela* moving from the periphery to the center, I began to hear some performers, who previously had disapproved of *opela*, talking about what the “authentic” *opela* is supposed to be. I could not help feeling amused and amazed at how great the change in the cultural environment had been in less than a decade. The recent attempt to showcase *opela* and the debate on its authenticity implies an attempt to value tradition for its own sake and treat it in an ahistorical manner, “as if [it] contained within [itself] from [its] moment of origin, some fixed and unchanging meaning or value” (Kirshenblatt- Gimblett 76). Or, as Hobsbawm has eloquently stated, such an invention of tradition “is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past”(4). The shifting of aesthetic norms shows how the making of identities affects the construction of the past, a past from which we consciously select some elements and narratives and repress others.



Furthermore, as China's economy has grown rapidly during this period and increasing numbers of Taiwanese invest or work on the mainland, Taiwan increasingly depends on China for its market and labors. Taiwan's national identity is thus adjusting constantly, especially in relation to China's growing economic power. The direction that the mainstream discourse on traditional theatre in Taiwan will take over the next ten years is a matter that deserves ongoing observation and contemplation.

## Conclusion

Theatre was the main entertainment for the Taiwanese until the early 1960s, and the most dominant form at the time was *gezaixi*. Because of its intimate connection to the people, the theatrical form came to appear to many people as a metaphor: its ups and downs embodied the fate of the Taiwanese in the twentieth century. The mixed form of *gezaixi* during the colonial Imperial Subject Movement, the “reformed opera,” reflected the ambivalence of the Taiwanese identity. While Japanese assimilation (most forcefully through education) succeeded in fostering a generation of Taiwanese who spoke both Japanese and Taiwanese, most Taiwanese held emotional affiliation with their motherland. Reformed opera assumed the look of the approved form (i.e. kimono or Western suits and Western musical instruments) but the story remained based on the Chinese repertoire. Across the strait, the ambiguity of the Taiwanese identity incurred negative views of *gezaixi* among the Chinese at this time, who despised the invasion of the Japanese and thus questioned the allegiance of the Taiwanese, the Japanese subjects. *Gezaixi* on the mainland was forced to embark on a project of reformation, initiated by local practitioners, to free itself from the negative image of *wangguodiao* (music from a dying state, or, music that annihilates the state). Just as the Taiwanese on the mainland during the war had to assume another identity, claiming that they were from Fujian or Guangdong province, so did *gezaixi* on the mainland. Thus we see that *gezaixi* on both sides of the Taiwan Strait underwent difficulties and changes during the war.

In the postwar era, the efforts of the new regime, the Guomindang (GMD), to claim legitimacy over the mainland by prioritizing “Chineseness” resulted in the suppression and degradation of local cultural forms. Just as in the social sphere where mainlanders occupied most

of the official posts, in the cultural sphere Beijing opera enjoyed exclusive governmental patronage. Across the strait, *gezaixi* assumed a different name, *xiangju*, arguably because the original name had too much association with Taiwan, where the major enemy of the communist regime, the GMD, resided.

At the end of the twentieth century, the surging Taiwanese consciousness boosted *gezaixi*'s social status. With the Taiwanese eager to pronounce their uniqueness, *gezaixi* became an emblem of Taiwanese culture. Across the strait, *gezaixi* began to receive more and more official resources during this period. The PRC intended to contain this "theatre of Taiwaneseeness," emphasizing the mainland roots of *gezaixi* in rhetoric and historiography. Here we have an example of the political "One China, Two Interpretations"<sup>75</sup> in the cultural sphere.

Confronted with popular culture, traditional theatre (*xiqu*) is a minority in contemporary China and Taiwan. In the present, *gezaixi* in both regions is mainly sustained by religious activities. In these performances, we see how the past is inscribed. In Taiwan, *gezaixi*'s scene-list system and repertoire (both *gulu* and *opela*) of outdoor theatre are adopted from the previous indoor theatre phase. Most *gezaixi* performances improvise based on a scene-list. This improvised practice is called "*huoxi*" (live play), as opposed to the scripted "*sixi*" (dead play). The naming demonstrates that the Taiwanese practitioners have privileged the skill of improvisation, whereas the set script is the only option on the mainland. All *xiqu* performances today in the PRC are scripted, a legacy of the drama reform movement. Moreover, in the orchestra of religious *gezaixi* theatre, the use of cello is common among troupes on the mainland, a result of the Cultural Revolution during which Western classical musical instruments such as

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<sup>75</sup> The PRC's interpretation equates China with the PRC while Taiwan interprets its being a Chinese nation as the ROC in Taiwan. Taiwan's interpretation seeks to gain political autonomy and maintain the status quo while avoiding military tension caused by overtly declaring independence.

the cello and piano were introduced to traditional theatre. Yet the favored Western instruments for *gezaixi* in Taiwan are jazz drums, electronic piano, trumpets, and saxophones, often creating a jazzy atmosphere for the nightly *opela*. This is the legacy of the indoor commercial theatre, where performers, inspired by the mixed “reformed opera” practiced in the previous regime, consciously experimented with Western musical instruments to attract audiences.

While outdoor religious theatre is the most viable form for cross-strait *gezaixi*, it did not receive the respect it deserved from the society. On the island, outdoor theatre was once called “*yetai*” (literally, wild stage; *ye* means unruly, raw, or wild). It was only recently, at approximately the same time that *opela* was formally recognized, that intellectuals began to call it by the name the practitioners did, *waitai* (outdoor). And, with growing attention to the Taiwanese local activities, the government began to organize and sponsor outdoor theatre festivals, selecting troupes to perform at the temple square. On the mainland, religious theatre is by and large the market of private theatre companies, which are referred to as “amateur” (*yeyu*) troupes, as opposed to “professional” (*zhuanye*) public troupes. The naming itself suggests a hierarchy between the public and the private companies. Even though the public troupes faced the pressure of merging and downsizing during this period, and slowly turned to religious performance opportunities, main-stage productions are the major arena for public troupes on the mainland.

It is in the main-stage production that we easily discern the differences in cross-strait *gezaixi* performances: one party strives for a form of purity, and the other celebrates diversification.

On the mainland, the slogan of “let a hundred flowers bloom” resulted in the emergence and flourishing of theatrical genres, (and a few genres were invented during the late 1950s and early 1960s by local governments). Today China boasts of three hundred theatrical genres, and by “letting a hundred flowers bloom,” the government ensures all genres are protected from extinction, and more importantly, intact and free from influences of other musical genres. State policy aims to maintain the quantity of theatrical genres and to make sure that minority cultures do not become extinct, thus there is much emphasis on preserving the features of the many theatrical genres throughout the country.<sup>76</sup> Since music defines the sung drama, cross-genre fusion of music is therefore discouraged lest it lead to the assimilation of non-standard or minority genres into the dominant one. While cross-reference and fusion are usually the forces that produce a new musical genre, or that nurture and stimulate the existent one, this “natural selection” process is now denied, or taken over, by the PRC government. Music composers, unable to draw inspirations from other regional operas, devote their creative energy to meter and tune variations. Nevertheless, although a strict boundary keeps different genres from one another in terms of music, performance style does not necessarily comply with such rules. Directors and designers of stage, costumes, and lighting often work for various troupes in different regions. (For instance, Xiamen’s *Shao Jianghai* is directed by Han Jianying, a *pingju* actor-director from Beijing. He also directed several regional operas across China). Naturally aesthetic ideas flow from one genre to another. Still, aesthetics have developed homogeneously because of the administration of public troupes. The production of public troupes almost always bears the mission of competition: to win and shine on the national stage. The judges select the winners (in acting, production, design), who establish aesthetic standards for the rest of the

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<sup>76</sup> Also, the PRC asserts that it is a multi-cultural country. Therefore, having regional theatres preserved works to this advantage.

troupes and practitioners to emulate. With half the judges affiliated with the capital city, Beijing taste has inevitably dominated the aesthetics. Thus artistic standards are articulated through each competition and keep circulating and reproducing among troupes through regular competitions. As a result, the performance styles of various genres (except for certain genres that have historic performance requirements such as *liyuanxi*) appears almost identical on the mainland.

In Taiwan, *gezaixi* has been independent of official support. There is only one public troupe across the island, supported by Yilan county. In early 2007, some legislators proposed the idea of establishing a national *gezaixi* troupe and incurred objections among practitioners. The incident showed the resistance and concerns of the performers regarding institutionalization and their wish to leave the market open without too much state intervention. *Gezaixi*'s main-stage productions today, although receiving financial support from the government or/and private foundations, still have to rely on ticket sales. Thus only the troupes and stars that have the box office appeal can afford to put up main-stage productions. With artistic autonomy and revenue concerns, *gezaixi* in Taiwan has sought to remain relevant to contemporary life, incorporating whatever it deems advantageous to its performance (developing into subgenres such as TV *gezaixi*, for instance), and celebrates diversification.

In 1995, Taipei held a cross-strait *gezaixi* exchange event, which yielded a collaborated performance, *Liwa zhuan*. Most of the production team and performers were Taiwanese, but the music composer Chen Bin was from the mainland, and he engaged meter variations of *dumadiao* in the music, which was novel and delightful to the Taiwanese audiences. Soon many *gezaixi* troupes began to incorporate meter variations in their productions. The next year, the Taiwanese troupe Minghuayuan invited mainland composer Jiang Songming to stay with the troupe and

compose and conduct music for their annual main-stage production. Mainland *gezaixi* stimulated Taiwanese *gezaixi*'s music, inspiring Taiwanese musicians to explore meter variations and engage symphony-style composition.

However, as the Taiwanese *gezaixi* practitioners draw ideas from their counterpart, *gezaixi* on the mainland (particularly the public troupe) does not seem to be influenced by the cross-strait cultural exchanges. For example, Minghuayuan's two productions in southern Fujian in 2004 were embraced and hailed by thousands of local spectators but criticized (privately) by the practitioners of public troupes as "low artistic quality." "We don't use spectacles now." "We discarded spectacles during the drama reformation." The fact that performers on the mainland regarded the use of spectacles as an indicator of a lowbrow performance reflected their aesthetics, which have been shaped and institutionalized since the launch of drama reform. The use of spectacles was widely practiced on the mainland during the prosperous commercial theatre period in the 1920s. However, with the establishment of the PRC in 1949, commercial theatre came under attack, and many of its practices were dismissed.<sup>77</sup> Taiwanese *gezaixi* in the 1920s borrowed extensively from Shanghai-style Beijing opera in its martial repertoire, martial skills, and spectacles, and these influences have continued to develop to this day on the island.

Thus we see public troupes in the PRC are still conservative and tightly regulated by the state. Producing "pure art" (as the performers of public troupes have put it) is not an issue, as we are certainly delighted to see the graceful rendition of Xiamen Gezaixi Troupe's production *Shao Jianghai*. But it should be one of the artistic directions instead of the only artistic direction. A theatre without concerns for audiences only accelerates its decline, and poses a problem in the

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<sup>77</sup> For instance, in the first National Xiqu Festival a production of *yueju* (Cantonese opera) was openly and severely criticized as "turning arts into commercial object," "craving for novelty and catering to the backward taste of the citizens," and "showing off with flashy and inappropriate costumes" Fu Jin, *Xin zhongguo xiju shi, 1949-2000* [A History of Chinese Drama: 1949-2000] (Changsha Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2002), 38.

future once the government stops its patronage, a problem which has happened to Beijing opera in Taiwan. The idea of “let a hundred flowers bloom” should not be confined within numbers of genres, but instead should extend to allowing multiple and hybrid forms and styles to develop. Only a liberal and tolerant cultural policy can promise an environment in which a variety of flowers truly bloom and flourish.



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