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Traditional Chinese theatre

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Introduc tion

China’s theatre tradition is among the oldest and most varied in the world. Despite the proscrip -
tions of authorities, it has been tightly interwoven with society and enjoyed by people of all
classes. This chapter restricts itself to the Han people, who (according to the 2010 census) were
91.51 per cent of a total of nearly 1.4 billion people, with some particularly important minority
traditions covered separately.

Defi nition

Traditional Chinese theatre is termed xiqu in Chinese. Major features of xiqu items are a plot
and live actors impersonating particular personalities, with interrelationships between or among
the play’s characters. The bulk of the dialogue in xiqu is undertaken either through singing or
a conventionalized chanting, but comic characters often speak to the audience and a few items
depend mostly on mime, being almost completely soundless.

Because singing was so important for dialogue, the term xiqu is often translated as ‘opera.’
There is, of course, logic in the translation and it is used in particular contexts below, but as a
general term it gives a somewhat false impression, because the style of singing, the spectacle
and the staging in Chinese xiqu are so different from western opera. Despite a rich history in
China, certain types of performing arts are noted here only if they are part of xiqu, such as
dance or acrobatics.

A chronological survey

Ritual performances, possibly with actors and dancers wearing costumes and makeup, existed
from the earliest times. The courts of the pre-imperial period (that is, before the third century
BCE) included some known to employ jesters able to impersonate dignitaries. During the Han
dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), there was a kind of entertainment called ‘hundred games circus’
(baixi). Among its numerous performance forms were dances with simple stories and actors
impersonating people or animals.
Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–56), also called Minghuang, among the most prominent of rulers of the Tang dynasty (618–907), established a music school in a pear garden north of the main walled city of his capital Chang’ an (present-day Xi’an). It achieved enough fame that to this day actors are sometimes called ‘children of the Pear Garden’, even though it appears that his actual aim was more to teach Buddhist music than anything we might consider theatrical. The Tang dynasty spawned another antecedent to drama, called ‘adjutant plays’ (canjunxi). These were comic skits with very simple stories, dialogue, song, acting and the beginnings of role types that were to become extremely important in later Chinese theatre.

Song to Yuan dynasty: the rise of full-fledged drama

The Song dynasty (960–1279) saw the growth of a commercialized urban culture and a highly sophisticated array of literature and arts, including landscape painting. However, in 1126 the Jurchen people seized the Song capital and established a dynasty in the north called the Jin. The Song survived only in the south, meaning that China was divided. The Mongols, who arose to be the greatest power of the Eurasian continent in the thirteenth century, then conquered the Jin in 1234 and in 1279 reunited China under their own rule, their Yuan dynasty lasting until 1368.

The adjutant plays survived into the Song period, their role types and stories becoming more varied and complex, though skits and farces continued to predominate. More important, however, was the emergence of a form of theatre termed nanxi (‘southern drama’). The origins were in southeast China (Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province) in the years just before the Jurchen conquered the north, and the genre developed greatly in the following centuries.

There were over 100 of these southern dramas, but the complete texts of only very few survive, plus fragments of some others. The authors’ names are unknown, but they may have been amateur literary men who formed themselves into writing clubs. The nanxi had complex stories, with clear interrelationships among the characters, dialogue being through singing and stylized chanting, but musical accompaniment confined to percussion instruments. There were seven role types, the basis of almost all later Chinese theatrical genres. The dramatists adopted pre-existing tunes for the words they wrote, rather than setting words to music. This method was called ‘joined song system’ (lianquti), and remained predominant in south China for many centuries.

During the Yuan dynasty, another form of drama developed, this time in north China. It was called the zaju, or ‘variety drama’. From a literary point of view, many specialists regard these zaju and the century or so following 1260 as the ‘golden age’ of Chinese drama, one saying specifically that the 171 or so extant items ‘are the earliest surviving and most brilliant body of Chinese dramatic literature’ (Shih 1976: ix). In the course of time the variety drama spread to the south, replacing the ‘southern drama’ in audience affection.

The variety dramas were similar to the nanxi in following the lianquti method. However, the structure of these dramas was much stricter than the nanxi. The number of acts was more or less fixed at four, sometimes with a prologue and/or interlude (termed xiezi or ‘wedge’) added. Only one character, either the main male or the main female, could sing in each act and it was there that the emotional expression was at its highest point.

Though the status of the dramatist was not high, we can attribute specific authors to the main zaju items and even know something of their lives. The most famous and prolific is Guan Hanqing whose career, centred in Beijing, spanned the second half of the thirteenth century. Over sixty dramas are attributed to him, the most famous being Dou E yuan (Injustice to Dou E). Fifteen items survive in full and three in part. His younger contemporary Wang Shifu was...
the author of the much longer *Xixiang ji* (The Story of the West Wing), which one specialist typically describes as ‘the most famous Chinese play through the ages’ (Dolby 1976: 48).

The same authority has written of the Yuan drama overall: ‘For the first time in China we can unquestionably see that combination of acting, costume, stagecraft, and the complex inter-relation of characters in a detailed story that makes real drama’ (Dolby in Mackerras 1983: 57). What is striking is how this genre, designed for performance, entered the canon of Chinese written literature. Despite ‘the near-obsolescence of early operatic music’ by the seventeenth century (Sieber 2003: xv), many of the texts survived. They were adapted and readapted for later genres of theatre, and it is a process that continues to this day.

**The rise and flowering of the regional theatre in the Ming and Qing**

With the overthrow of the Mongols, China was again controlled by the Han people, in the spectacular and culturally sophisticated Ming dynasty (1368–1644). In the seventeenth century, the Manchus from northeast China were able to take over the whole country and establish the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty. They expanded China’s territory considerably, their political power and culture reaching an apogee in the eighteenth century under the Qianlong Emperor (reigned 1735–95).

During this period the xiqu developed into over 300 different styles of regional theatre. Most of them began as small-scale folk theatre in the countryside, but quite a few developed into larger-scale urban genres that became well known throughout China. They differ in their dialect, music, instrumentation and in other ways, but the stories tend to be very similar, and there is some consistency also in their acting styles and costuming. They proliferated into different regions in various ways, among the most important being the absorption of elements of the art of one area into that of another through the agency of wandering acting troupes. Apart from the *kunqu*, to be considered later, most of the regional styles, and certainly all the small-scale ones, were mass theatre, despised by the elite.

Although the ‘southern drama’ declined greatly during the Yuan, it was reinvented in changed form during the Ming, certainly by the sixteenth century and probably earlier. A group of styles beginning in Yiyang, Jiangxi Province, resembled the southern drama in many ways, including in being accompanied only by percussion instruments. These styles became very widespread in the south and even spread to Beijing in the north.

Meanwhile, in the sixteenth century we find in north China a new array of theatre styles collectively known as *bangzi qiang* (usually translated ‘clapper operas’). Actually, the *bangzi* is a hardwood percussion instrument, struck with a stick. It is not really ‘clapped’. Yet the translation has become widespread enough to be accepted and the use of the instrument to mark accented beats is universal in clapper opera styles. Another extremely important characteristic of the clapper opera was that it followed the musical system known as *banqiangti* (literally ‘accented-beat tune system’). This was the opposite of the lianquti familiar in the south and in the Yuan zaju. Whereas the lianquti used pre-existing tunes and rhythm for newly written lyrics, the banqiangti did the opposite; in other words, tunes were specially written for pre-existing words. This made it possible to change the rhythm and metre frequently within the same act, enabling a wider range of emotional expression.

**Kunqu**

The most famous of forms evolving during the Ming is the kunqu, individual items usually known in their own time as *chuanqi* or ‘marvel tales’. This originated in the sixteenth century in Kunshan, very near Shanghai, mainly through the work of Wei Liangfu and his approximate
contemporary Liang Chenyu (1520–94), who fashioned earlier southern dramas and the folk music of their region into a new, integrated form of drama. It follows the lianquti system, and the music is soft and gentle, with the orchestration dominated by the side-blown flute (dizi), while the rhythm is mainly in four-four time. Unlike any of the other genres of the post-Yuan era, it was an elite theatre that spawned a significant written literature.

The greatest and most famous dramatist of the Ming dynasty was Tang Xianzu (1550–1616), from Jiangxi Province. Because of his distinction and because he was contemporary with his English counterpart (he died in the same year), Tang Xianzu is often described as ‘China’s Shakespeare’. His surviving works are mostly based on dreams, the most important being the love story Mudan ting (Peony Pavilion), completed in 1598 (Figure 2.1). Tang was caught up in an early controversy in the history of kunqu. One school believed drama should be based

Figure 2.1 A scene from Peony Pavilion.
(Photo by Colin Mackerras)
on reason (li), restraint and the promotion of public morality. Tang represented the opposing school, which thought the basis of drama should be feeling (qing), with the focus on human passion and spontaneity.

A good representative of Qing dramatists was Hong Sheng (1645–1704), from Zhejiang, best known for his drama *Changsheng dian* (The Palace of Eternal Youth), which was completed in 1688. The only one of Hong’s eleven dramas to survive, it deals with the Tang Emperor Xuanzong, mentioned above, and his love for his favourite concubine Yang Guifei. Unfortunately, Hong was banished from Beijing and the item banned in 1689 due to its performance within two months of an empress’s death, thus breaking an official taboo. Despite this, it has remained among the most popular of Chinese dramas.

A contemporary of Hong Sheng’s was Kong Shangren (1648–1718), who was a descendant of Confucius. He is best known for his *Taohua shan* (Peach Blossom Fan) of 1699, a long item that tells a love story against the background of the defeat of the Ming by the Manchus. It is unusual in that it dramatizes events within living memory and Kong even seems to mourn the defeated Ming, for all its corruption, even though he tries to be fair to the Manchus, who were after all in power when he wrote. Though the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661–1722) was initially very favourable to Kong, after the play’s composition he cooled towards the dramatist, who was dismissed in 1700.

In sharp contrast to the Yuan zaju, operas in the kunqu style usually had many acts. *Peony Pavilion*, for instance, is immensely long, having fifty-five scenes in its full form. There are records of plays lasting three days and three nights. So it became customary for individual scenes or groups of scenes to be played separately from the full drama. This had become nearly universal practice by the end of the Ming.

Kunqu probably reached its apogee with Tang Xianzu and declined thereafter. Although there were some good items produced during the Qing, the genre never regained the inventiveness that had earlier characterized it. The Taiping Rebellion, which ravaged China and especially the south from 1850 to 1866, produced a devastating effect on this elite theatre and kunqu was approaching extinction by the time the Qing fell.

The Yuan drama ‘favored female players and female cross-dressing’ (Li 2003: 40). Mixed-gender troupes were common. There is evidence even of troupes functioning as family businesses, with the wife and daughters-in-law of the troupe leader involved in acting or other functions. Also, the material on actresses in the Yuan praises them both for their skills on the stage and attractiveness as courtesans.

However, from the Ming dynasty on, single-gender troupes were the norm, with all-male troupes much commoner than all-female. Confucian ideology demanded the public separation of the sexes and was very restrictive of any behaviour that authorities thought could lead to sexual immorality. Although the practice of foot-binding for women predated the Ming, it appears to have taken stricter hold at that time, making it very difficult for women to go on the stage as performers. Mixed troupes became rare, with most actresses being prostitutes, the exceptions being girls in private mansions trained in theatre.

**The Pihuang system**

In the eighteenth century, as kunqu declined, the growth of the regional theatre gathered momentum. For the popular theatre the main development was the combination of two styles, erhuang and xipi, collectively termed *pihuang*. Erhuang, of southern derivation, came dominantly to express grief, remembrance and lyricism, while xipi, which came from the north, was reserved more to show joy or vehemence. Belonging to the ‘accented-beat tune system’, a major feature
of pihuang dramas was that musical accompaniment was dominated by a two-string fiddle called huqin, with a clapper termed ban beating out the rhythm.

Dramas belonging to a pihuang genre came to be found all over China. In the south the most famous genre was the Cantonese opera (yueju), which by the 1730s was known in a popular form probably fairly similar to the items still performed in Guangdong, Guangxi and Hong Kong. There were also major pihuang genres in Hubei, Hunan, Yunnan and other southern provinces. Meanwhile in north China, the most important of the pihuang genres, namely the jingju, often translated as Peking Opera, established itself in the capital towards the end of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth seeing major development there. Rather than great dramatists, its main creators were troupes and actors. Among the former, the Four Great Anhui Troupes (Sida huiban) were pre-eminent. The actor of mature male roles Cheng Changgeng is sometimes called ‘the father of Peking Opera’ for his leadership in integrating and developing the various musical and acting components that have come to make up the Peking Opera. Jingju became strong and popular enough that in the twentieth century it was on occasion even termed guoju or national theatre, since some xiqu enthusiasts regarded it as equivalent to a form of theatre that could represent not only Beijing, but all China (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 A scene from jingju Da bao guo (Defending the State), showing the royal palace. (Photo by Alexandra Bonds)

The beginnings of reform: late Qing and the Republic

Intensified Chinese reaction to increasing western influence, even dominance, in the late decades of the nineteenth century contributed to a revolutionary process in China. Specific events included the Boxer Uprising of 1900 and the 1911 Revolution that saw the fall of the Qing monarchy. The date of student demonstrations in Beijing on 4 May 1919 has given its name to a thrust towards modernization called the May Fourth Movement. From the point of view of this chapter,
it is most important for its cultural component and its effects on impulses often called the New Culture Movement.

For theatre, this period was most significant for the 1907 birth of the new form called huaju (spoken drama), and for China’s first proscenium-arch theatre in 1908, both considered in more detail elsewhere. The idea of using drama as a propaganda weapon for reform and against the monarchy started to take root. In Beijing, the destruction of the main theatres resulting from the Boxer Uprising necessitated a new system of presenting jingju to the public, which wanted new styles, content and even modes of presentation.

The great star Tan Xinpei (1847–1917), who was actually a student of Cheng Chenggang’s, was the leading actor of the time. In many ways highly traditionalist, he took no interest in the revolution and performed for high officials and even royalty, being the favourite actor of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908). On the other hand, he founded his own school of acting and, most important of all, was the star of China’s first-ever motion picture, *Dingjun shan* (Mt Dingjun), made in 1905 from the jingju of the same name. Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), considered in much more detail elsewhere, had already begun his highly reformist xiqu career by 1919.

He and three other male dan dominate the history of jingju during the Republican period. These were Cheng Yanqiu (1904–58), Shang Xiaoyun (1900–76) and Xun Huisheng (1900–68), and with Mei Lanfang they are known as the ‘four great famous male dan’ (*sida mingdan*). Their careers and contribution to the reform of theatre in China are considered elsewhere.

Outside Beijing, the Cantonese opera (yueju) developed during these decades in ways rather special for the traditional Chinese theatre. Through its popularity in the commercialized British colony of Hong Kong, it adopted western influence, such as the addition of instruments like the saxophone, guitar and violin. Above all other forms of xiqu it spread overseas to Southeast Asia, North America and elsewhere, because the areas of its greatest popularity in China itself were also the main source of the Chinese diaspora at the time.

New xiqu styles continued to evolve. The most famous was the Shaoxing Opera (*yueju* in Chinese, but with a different first character from the homophone that means Cantonese opera). Arising from a small-scale folk form, accompanied only by a clapper, in Zhejiang Province’s Shaoxing area in the late Qing, it was introduced into Shanghai in 1916 and there added stringed and other musical instruments to the accompaniment and more complexities to the makeup and performance. The feature for which it became most famous, namely all-female troupes, followed later, but the introduction into Shanghai signalled the transition to urban theatre.

Other than those involved in theatre reform (see Chinese section in Chapter 22), the most important new genre of xiqu in the twentieth century was the ‘newly written historical drama’ (*xinbian lishi ju*). Using themes from the imperial past and music in the style of the xiqu, known script-writers and composers designed these dramas to fill an afternoon or evening. Not episodic like the traditional items, newly written historical dramas followed the modern form of rising to a climax with a *denouement*. Newly written items can belong to any of the regional styles.

**The People’s Republic of China**

Although originating in the Republican period, the ‘newly written historical dramas’ reached their height under the People’s Republic after 1949. Early items were deliberately highly politicized to take account of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) line. A very good example is the jingju *Yangmen nüjiang* (Women Generals of the Yang Family), a 1960 work set in the eleventh century and showing women contributing patriotically to the nation, even as military leaders. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the form was banned and replaced by Jiang
Qing’s model dramas (*yangbanxi*), which are considered in more detail separately. In the 1980s, however, they revived strongly, with many very good items produced. An author notable for his work in the *chuanju* (Sichuan opera) is Wei Minglun (b. 1940), whose newly written historical drama *Bashan xiucai* (*The Scholar of Bashan*, 1983) brought him national fame.

The CCP has normally patronized traditional theatre enthusiastically, setting up troupes belonging to the regional styles. However, during the Cultural Revolution, all traditional themes were banned, causing an interruption in the popular memory. When the tradition was revived in the late 1970s, young people found the old dramas unfamiliar, tedious and lacking in action. Tastes are also changing rapidly as China modernizes, making people more interested in the present and in western patterns than in history, even that of quite recent times. The result has been a great decline in the popularity of traditional theatre among young people, with troupes finding it very difficult to make ends meet.

The twenty-first century has seen a few attempts to revive traditional Chinese operas. UNESCO has supported kunqu, jingju and Cantonese opera, while relevant professional troupes have done their best to introduce these traditional arts to students, especially those at university. Meanwhile, traditional theatre items have become a part of the tourist experience, which lends an important commercial incentive to the survival of this spectacular art.

**Ideology of theatre: purpose, censorship**

Though theatre originates in ritual and to some extent retains its role in religious ceremonies, the weight of opinion among thinkers in imperial China was to welcome theatre ‘as an important participant in and contributor to a well-ordered society’ (Fei 1999: x). Some societies have regarded the whole notion of artificially representing a make-believe world as inappropriate or even immoral. However, the Chinese love to watch representations of life as a form of entertainment or relaxation. They regard theatre as a way to be amused and to dream of good things, such as love and prosperity; they can be taken out of their daily humdrum existence though watching stage performances.

**A way to spread a message**

There have also been other purposes in theatre, such as promoting good morals among the people. Some Confucianists and dramatists specifically regarded theatre as a way of instilling Confucian moral virtues into audiences. Early-Ming laws specifically promoted values such as filial piety, obedience to the state and women’s chastity. The Qing emperors went even further than the Ming in their advocacy of Confucian moral values, including through theatre, perhaps because as Manchus they wanted to show loyalty to what had originally been, and remained in essence, a Han ethical system.

A related purpose was to teach people about their own history. Since Chinese plays are set in China, and a great many take episodes from history, they can promote a particular view of the events they are representing on stage. Over the centuries certain characters have established their reputations as benign, heroic, tyrannical or evil. For ordinary people, who were usually illiterate, the theatre was an excellent way of learning about their own history, appreciating its importance, and imbiding the values that theatrical representations of historical figures inevitably impart.

The idea of using drama to promote one’s own regime is not new to the modern era. Early in the Qing dynasty, the Manchu emperors organized troupes of entertainers to perform in the Beijing area to try to persuade ordinary people of the advantages of their rule. The Qianlong Emperor, one of whose main characteristics was that he ‘loved theatre, music, and grand
celebrations’ (Elliott 2009: 167), wanted to use the theatre to glorify his empire, and especially his own achievements, to his own people and to foreign delegations.

In 1902 the great reformist thinker Liang Qichao (1873–1929) proposed that reviving the nation necessitated reform of drama and the novel. His reason was that these art forms wielded immense influence over the minds, hearts and character of ordinary people. Liang’s argument was an early attempt to politicize drama in a way that has the feeling of the modern era, and it was to become central to the twentieth century.

The specifically religious purpose of drama is probably weaker in China than in several other civilizations. Yet it is worth mentioning that temples were traditionally the sites of theatrical performance, many having inbuilt stages. The content was sometimes religious, such as plays that featured the way the virtuous Mulian saved his mother from hell, but it was no problem to perform entirely secular operas in temples or on temple stages.

Probably no group has done more to use theatre to push a political line than the CCP. They did this extensively for patriotic purposes during the War Against Japan (1937–45) and again during the People’s Republic. This phenomenon reached its height during the Cultural Revolution, which saw the official adoption of a theory based on class struggle that advocated theatre directly propagating CCP ideology (see more detail in Chapter 22).

Censorship

Despite a generally non-condemnatory attitude towards theatrical performances, Chinese history shows no lack of attempts on the part of authorities to censor the theatre. Rural popular folk shows were often rather raunchy and authorities often left them alone, preferring to turn a blind eye rather than meddling, given how common and popular these performances were. However, if any member of the official classes attended he was likely to make sure that there was no going outside the bounds of propriety. Also, urban performances were somewhat easier to censor than rural, simply because official control was tighter in the cities than in the countryside. The Sichuanese actor Wei Changsheng (1744–1802), whose entry into Beijing in 1779 created such an impact, was actually forced to leave the capital because authorities regarded his acting as infringing the rules of sexual propriety.

During both the Ming and Qing, edicts were issued against the novel Shuihu zhuan (Water Margin) and dramas based on it because they were about rebels against authority. Qianlong began a literary inquisition of books in 1772 and in the late 1770s set up a commission that, despite his love of theatre, extended it to drama. His edict of December 1780 stated: ‘It has now occurred to me that the scripts of drama are not necessarily without seditious passages. For example, stories based on events during the late Ming and the early Qing must have borne some reference to the current dynasty’ (cited in Ye 2012: 183). Though he noted the Suzhou and Yangzhou area of Jiangsu Province as an area where such dramas would be concentrated – one thinks of Peach Blossom Fan as a famous example of what he had in mind – the inquisition was to be national. It involved banning particular dramas and expurgating seditious and offensive passages from others.

Censorship continued and to some extent worsened during the twentieth century. The People’s Republic’s Ministry of Culture banned items it believed unpatriotic, lewd, or in other ways ‘unhealthy’. During the Cultural Revolution censorship was probably worse than at any other time in Chinese theatre history. Not only were traditional items banned, but only a small number of models were allowed performance. Although censorship eased enormously during the reform period since the late 1970s, it continues to affect ‘newly written historical dramas’, with authors careful not to overstep a line that is occasionally quite unclear.
The content of traditional Chinese theatre

The main distinction in the content of traditional Chinese theatre is that between wen (civil) and wu (military), not between tragedy and comedy. ‘Civil’ items are about domestic matters, family life, marriage and love affairs. ‘Military’ items are about battles and wars, and include a great deal of fighting, represented by actions such as complex gymnastics and skilful catching of spears. Women are much better represented in the civil items, but there are several famous female military heroes.

With the exception of plays on strongly Buddhist themes, virtually all pre-twentieth-century operas were set in China in the remote or fairly distant past. A great many deal with historical figures and there is some connection with reality. Among many examples, I cite only two. In Peach Blossom Fan, events in many of the scenes are specifically dated (1643 to 1645). The love affair between the Tang Emperor Xuanzong and his concubine Yang Guifei that is the focus of Hong Shen’s The Palace of Eternal Youth actually took place.

In general, the Chinese prefer a happy ending. Light folk plays may emphasize problems in relations between men and women, but overall they are light-hearted and comic, and end happily. Of course, there are items with sad endings, but tragedy in the sense of the hero struggling unsuccessfully with a fatal flaw is not a feature of the Chinese tradition. Bad or negative characters will likely get their just deserts in the end in the form of punishment.

Storytelling is a very ancient art in China. It is the basis of many dramas and novels, the latter themselves being a major source for regional operas and the sophisticated genres such as jingju. An interesting point to follow from this is that the novels and the plays based on them tend to be episodic. Each chapter can be made into a short play, lasting less than an hour. The characterization of each figure is stark and simple, lacking complexity, and does not develop much. What tends to be lacking in the stories of Chinese traditional dramas is the tightly structured story rising to a climax and ending with a denouement.

Many early ‘southern operas’ of the Song were love stories or involved issues relating to marriage. The oldest extant drama script in Chinese literature is Zhang Xie zhuangyuan (Top Graduate Zhang Xie), perhaps from the early thirteenth century. It tells of a scholar with a poor wife; he comes top in the official examinations and is offered the prime minister’s daughter in marriage. He accepts her, disowning his previous wife. However, his new wife dies of grief, the previous wife comes to court and exposes her husband’s inhumane treatment of her, but this does not prevent reconciliation between them and a happy ending. The theme of the man who deserts his wife for one of a higher social status after doing well in the examinations is a typical one in traditional Chinese theatre. There are of course variants on the theme, with the wronged wife sometimes seeing her husband taken to law and punished.

The Yuan zaju are various in their content. Love interest, featuring virtuous women, courtesans or even nuns, is a very common theme. Wang Shifu’s The Story of the West Wing is a typical love story with an ultimately happy ending, although with many vicissitudes along the way. Guan Hanqing’s Injustice to Dou E is an example of a noble and self-sacrificing woman who, to save her mother-in-law from torture, confesses to a crime she never committed, is executed and then posthumously cleared through the occurrence of unnatural phenomena, including a midsummer snow-fall. Although the heroine dies unfairly, heaven can restore the balance of justice.

Part of the story is a court case. Courtroom dramas are common in Yuan zaju and in later theatre. An especially popular figure is Judge Bao. Actually, Bao Zheng (999–1062) was a real historical figure, and became lionized in Yuan and other dramas and in tradition as an icon of justice. He is presented as benevolent as well as just, and as detective as well as judge, always able to solve the cases he confronts.
Many Yuan dramas are about high politics and warfare, featuring items definitely belonging in the ‘military’ category. The warrior-heroes of the Three Kingdoms period of the third century are the protagonists of many Yuan dramas, as well as later plays. They became the source of the novel *Sanguo yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms), which was itself to be a major source of plays of all genres.

Kunqu, like preceding genres originating in the south, tend to feature ‘civil’ drama over ‘military’. Tang Xianzu’s 1598 drama *Peony Pavilion* was mentioned above as an outstanding example of Ming dynasty drama. It illustrates very well the theme of love and the happy ending. Its main proponent is Du Liniang, the daughter of a stern Confucian bureaucrat. She falls in love in a dream, dies of love, but comes back to life through the courage and devotion of her lover; in the end he tops the official examinations and they marry.

In *The Palace of Eternal Youth* the Emperor Xuanzong’s beloved Yang Guifei is blamed for the outbreak of a major rebellion in 755. When they flee towards Sichuan, the troops demand her death, and the emperor commands her to commit suicide. Although the ending is happy, with the lovers reunited in the moon, this drama is one of the items that have tended strongly to put a Confucian interpretation on these unhappy events, colouring Chinese views of them throughout the ages.

On the other hand, the love affair in Kong Shangren’s *Peach Blossom Fan* ends sadly: after many vicissitudes the lovers are finally reunited, only to be told that the circumstances of the world in the early Qing dictate that they should separate, which they obediently do. This ending perhaps reflects Kong’s support for the ‘reason (*li*)’ school of thought in theatre, as against that expressing ‘feeling (*qing*)’, as discussed above.

Kunqu dramas are very long, and though the great majority of scenes are ‘civil’, there are a few ‘military’ ones. The converse is true of pihuang and clapper operas, which tended much more to the ‘military’ than did the kunqu and other southern dramas. In addition, they broke down the long novels and earlier dramas into much shorter episodes that could be presented individually to audiences, most of whom were illiterate. Characterization is stark, and excitement is more evident than tenderness.

The records suggest that items performed in Beijing in the late eighteenth century had mainly female protagonists, belonging to the ‘civil’ category. However, during the nineteenth century, the Four Great Anhui Companies and stars such as Cheng Changgeng changed the emphasis strongly towards heroic drama and items in which war dominated. Though the content of the developed jingju included stories from earlier kunqu dramas, its most important source was novels, among which the main one was *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The main interest is not love but loyalty versus treachery, courage versus cowardice, strategy versus deception, and overcoming tyranny. According to one specialist (Guo 2006: 135–67), Judge Bao dramas had come to represent a thirst for increased equality before the law (Figure 2.3). By the nature of its themes, jingju became much more male-centred, with the ‘military’ dramas predominating.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the content of traditional Chinese theatre has shown some continuity but much change. Almost all items, including those newly written, continue to be set in China in a past age. However, although purely aesthetic items exist, theatre is incomparably more likely to promote a conscious social or political theme than it used to do.

Mei Lanfang exemplifies both patterns. *Guifei zuiji* (The Drunken Beauty), which is about the misery of Yang Guifei when stood down for a banquet by Emperor Tang Minghuang, shows brilliant choreography in feigning drunkenness, while *Niehai bolan* (Waves in a Sea of Sin) is much more direct in denouncing the evils of prostitution and the low status of women and pushing for reform.
Figure 2.3 Judge Bao from jingju Da longpao (The Beating of the Dragon Robe).
(Photo by Alexandra Bonds)
In the People’s Republic, many items revised traditional items and stories to give them a more politically correct slant. A good example is the jingju and love story *Baishe zhuan* (The White Snake) about a snake who turns into a beautiful woman and marries a scholar. The monk who tries to destroy their happiness is portrayed as evil, while the snake is characterized as loving and virtuous.

Quite new themes are also very common, especially those written in the 1980s and since, but still tend strongly to illustrate a political or social theme. One extraordinary example is *Pan Jinlian*, a Sichuan opera by Wei Minglun, about the woman Pan Jinlian who kills her husband. The item takes the form of a law case with people from around the world giving their testimony on Pan’s actions. It was highly controversial in placing the blame not so much on Pan herself but on the patriarchal system that oppressed women.

Several other items extolled famous Chinese of the past in political ways. A good illustration is Guo Qihong’s *Sima Qian*, about the famous historian of that name of the first and second centuries BCE who compiled the first of China’s standard histories, the *Shiji* (Records of the Historian). This item, a jingju, shows how Sima Qian suffered castration for supporting the cause of a defeated general, but overcame all difficulties to write what many consider the greatest of all Chinese traditional histories. Another excellent newly written item is *Cao Cao yu Yang Xiu* (Cao Cao and Yang Xiu), a Shanghai work dating from 1988, which dealt with an incident in the life of the tyrant Cao Cao (155–220) and represented the relations of political masters with intellectuals. This item became politically sensitive, because many saw a representation of Mao Zedong in the characterization of Cao Cao.

**Performance**

We turn next to some of the main conventions of the Chinese theatre, which are similar to the genres in showing great diversity, richness and inventiveness. They indicate a synthetic approach to theatre, combining song, musical accompaniment, dance, gesture and mime, with strong emphasis on makeup and costume. The important aspects of music and costume are separately considered and omitted here.

The stage on which the performance takes place is square and faces the audience on three sides. It is fairly bare, with a carpet and usually a table and two chairs of traditional style. There is a curtain at the back, but not at the front. Actors enter on stage right and exit on the left. However, the modern ‘newly arranged historical dramas’ of the People’s Republic depart radically from traditional patterns, with complex scenery typically projected on the stage, properties often extensive, and a curtain at the front.

**Role types**

The use of role types in China dates back to the Tang dynasty. Both the nanxi and the Yuan zaju had role types that are different but essentially similar to all later genres of Chinese theatre. There are developments and changes in the Ming dynasty kunqu and in the various regional forms.

In jingju there are four main role types. These are male (*sheng*), female (*dan*), painted face (*jing*) and clown (*chou*). These categories indicate type of voice as well as acting techniques and the character of the person represented. Sheng are close to life, but jing are larger than life.

Each of the four role types is divided into subcategories, and these can be immensely complex. *Laosheng* (literally ‘old male characters’) are mature men, such as statesmen, *wusheng* (‘military male characters’) are the male warriors, while *xiaosheng* (young men), who sing falsetto, are
figures such as scholar lovers. Among women, the *qingyi* (literally ‘black clothing’) are the demure and dignified women, *huadan* (*flower dan*) are more light-hearted and often flirts, *laodan* are the matriarchs, while *undan* are the female warriors. On the whole, masks are quite rare in Chinese theatre, with the tradition requiring patterns and colour in the painting of the face of *jing* to represent character. There is often a judgement implied, with *sheng* and *dan* usually positive characters and bad or evil ones generally confined to the *jing* or *chou* categories (Figure 2.4).

Because from the Ming dynasty onwards public acting troupes were either overwhelmingly male or female, almost all the former, the boy or man who performed female roles became a major phenomenon in the traditional Chinese theatre. By no means exclusive to China, it is found in many parts of the world, usually associated with social taboos against the appearance of women on the stage. In China, these male female impersonators were called *nandan* (literally ‘male dan’) and became an important part of the history of acting in China. One of the most important actors in China’s theatrical history was Wei Changsheng whose first appearance in Beijing in 1779 made the city the most important in China’s theatre for the first time in centuries and marked an early stage in *jingju*’s development. Even more important was Mei Lanfang, the most distinguished and famous actor in all China’s theatre history. Under the People’s Republic, the training of *nandan* has been discouraged, because authorities believe women should play female roles. A few *nandan* still perform, but the number has become vanishingly small.

Comic figures are generally clowns (*chou*) but the converse does not hold, since not all *chou* are comic. It is lack of dignity that characterizes them. They talk directly to the audience. Most clown characters are male, but a few are female. In the early mentions of the *chou* in the Song dynasty ‘southern drama’, the *chou* was characterized by a face daubed with black powder. However, in many recent styles the clown is immediately recognizable through the white patch on and around the nose.

For audiences used to divisions such as soprano, tenor, baritone, contralto and bass, these Chinese role types are very striking. Of course the *dan* sings falsetto, whether the artist is a man or a woman, but there is no real equivalent to categories such as tenor or bass. Indeed, one feature of Chinese musical theatre is the lack of the really deep voice.

The social context

It is obvious from the use of performances in rituals in ancient China that theatre has, from earliest times, been tightly interwoven with society. In the spring, a drama could mark making entreaties to the gods for a good harvest and in the autumn was a good way of giving thanks. Festivals were occasions for theatre performances, which could express joy or whatever emotions the particular festival required. This interrelationship between theatre and society applied to all levels of society, from imperial courts to commoners.

Beginning at the top of society we find that, though emperors and the aristocracy might be quite censorious about the theatre of the common people, they were frequently enthusiasts themselves. The court of the Mongol Yuan dynasty patronized drama as well as the composition of *zaju*. In 1390, the Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (the Hongwu Emperor, reigned 1368–98) set up a eunuch agency to organize court theatre. It played both the Yuan *zaju* and southern drama, and, from the sixteenth century on, *kunqu* as well.

Court theatre reached its height during the Qing. Kangxi set up a special agency, initially for his personal entertainment, but it was greatly expanded under Qianlong. The actors were eunuchs of the court, but until 1827, some were brought from the south to perform and teach. In 1860, the Xianfeng Emperor had actors brought from the city of Beijing in celebration of
Figure 2.4 The character Liu Jinding from Zhulin ji (The Ruse of the Bamboo Forest), a jingju wudan (female warrior).

(Photograph by Alexandra Bonds)
his thirtieth birthday, but only temporarily. However, when in 1884 the Empress Dowager Cixi brought actors to court as part of her own fiftieth birthday celebrations, they were at the head of a stream that persisted until virtually the end of the dynasty. Her favourite actor was Tan Xinpei, who frequently performed at court.

The great majority of court performances in the early days were kunqu. The actors that came to court in honour of Xianfeng’s thirtieth birthday were jingju artists, as were those the Empress Dowager introduced from 1884 on. However, it was quite unprecedented for the court to favour an entertainment associated with the common people of the city. What this implies is that the patronage of the late Qing court contributed to the rise of the Peking Opera, which means that the court could take some credit for this development, which was so important for Chinese theatre.

Although the Qing emperors had drama performed at court for their personal entertainment, they also used it for ritual purposes, especially Qianlong. Among the various types of ritual that could occasion drama performances were the ‘auspicious rites’ (jili), the ‘martial rites’ (junli) and ‘protocol rites’ (binli). One writer (Ye 2012: 2) states that ‘Qianlong provided a complete set of ritual dramas, in fact a complete set of palace rituals, for succeeding emperors to follow’. Another type of occasion that could be honoured by a drama performance was the visit of a foreign dignitary. A well-known specific example was the 1793 embassy of the British Lord George Macartney (1737–1806). Though he did not like them much, he and his embassy were treated to some spectacular drama performances, including in the emperor’s summer residence in Jehol.

Moving down the social ladder, we find that theatre performances also took place in the mansions of the rich. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many members of the educated or social elite had specially trained private troupes and would put on performances for personal enjoyment or to entertain friends. A man from an elite class who invited friends to dinner might seat them on three sides of a square space within which actors could perform. It was normally kunqu that received favour at such private performances. However, in nineteenth-century Beijing the elite often preferred jingju and could hire special small theatres where there were provisions for tea and food appropriate to a party.

In the major teahouse theatres of Qing dynasty Beijing, the audience was stratified into rich and poor, but there were at least some from the educated elite. Both in Beijing and in other parts of the country, the common people usually got their theatrical entertainment through open-air temple or market-square performances. These featured regional theatre styles that were definitely popular theatre, and despised by the educated elite. If educated men attended such performances along with the people, as occasionally happened, they could expect criticism from their social equals.

Another area exemplifying social restrictiveness was that women were barred from public performances. Numerous government edicts warned that for men and women to mix together at theatre performances was a prescription for moral disaster and sexual licence. These prohibitions appear to have been less rigidly enforced in the south than the north, but applied everywhere.

The twentieth century saw the breaking down of the rules preventing the elite from watching performances together with the common people and against audiences with both women and men. Private performances in mansions sank in number along with the decline of the kunqu. The May Fourth Movement accelerated the social change that allowed women access to theatre, but the process had begun before then. In Beijing, females at first sat in separate parts of the theatre, but from 1924 together with males.
The actor

All through Chinese history, the performing profession was a disreputable one holding a low social status. Confucius is said to have demanded capital punishment for a group of jesters, singers and dwarfs on the grounds that they were commoners who beguiled their lords. Still, there were variations according to period in the extent to which actors were held in contempt by society.

A comparatively good period for actors was the Yuan dynasty, when performing families attracted some admiration. The situation worsened when the Ming dynasty came to power and puritanical Confucianism tightened its grip over society and family life. Actors were accused of beguiling decent people by presenting unreal images and of sexual immorality through association with prostitution, either male or female. Another reason for their low social image was that wandering troupes were quite common, especially at times when festivals required the services of actors in the countryside, and people of no fixed address could not count on any legal protection or social respect.

However, the nineteenth century saw the rise of major theatre families in Beijing, with sons inheriting their father’s skills. Some of the most important stars of the time came from these theatre families. The nineteenth century was the age when stars like Cheng Changgeng graced the Beijing stage. This could only exercise a benign effect on the status of the actor in general. The reforms of the late Qing and succeeding period also helped to give the actor a small modicum of respect, especially in the cities.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, though contempt for the performing profession is not quite dead, the social status of actors has risen greatly. Stars like Mei Lanfang greatly intensified the process already begun with Cheng Changgeng. The People’s Republic made a point of patronizing actors and actresses, making their profession one important to national politics and society. Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu were even chosen as members of the National People’s Congress.

Entry into the acting profession; training

Ways of entry to the kunqu acting profession have varied with time. In imperial times, court eunuchs were designated for training in the official theatre bureau. Private householders could hire teachers to train their house-slaves or do so themselves. A major factor in the growth of jingju in the nineteenth century was a kind of slave system that saw the purchase of boys from their fathers on contract in several southern provinces to be taken north to Beijing and trained as actors. It is important to note that, however cruel the contract system, the boys never suffered castration, a practice restricted among actors to those at court.

Jingju troupes had training schools attached to them, the function of which was to provide future actors and teach the boys from the south, with the masters teaching individual disciples the complex singing, musical and acting arts. The early twentieth century saw the establishment of several private training schools for actors, the most important being the Xiliancheng in 1904, renamed Fuliancheng in 1912. Discipline was very rigid and included severe beatings among punishments. However, the general life conditions were probably somewhat better in the training schools of the twentieth century than in the previous system. The main method of training remained imitation of the teacher and learning his instructions by heart.

Under the People’s Republic a formal system of training schools for traditional theatre actors has been established. Although schools of this kind were not unprecedented, it was the first time that a consolidated system existed for the training of actors and artists. These schools maintain
strict standards of performance, but also ensure general knowledge so that actors are no longer illiterate. Entry is open both to boys and girls, and competition is keen.

Summary and conclusion

From the above, the following appear to be the main characteristics of Chinese traditional theatre.

The classifications normal for traditional Chinese theatre are quite different from those of western opera. For instance, content is divided into wen (civil) and wu (military), not tragedy and comedy, with ‘civil’ items putting the focus on love, marriage and domestic affairs, and the ‘military’ ones on war and heroism. The stories come from old novels, dramas and long poems.

The types of character are divided into sheng (male), dan (female), jing (painted face) and chou (clown), not tenor, soprano, baritone and bass. Each of these is subdivided into various categories. Gestures, actions, makeup and costumes are complex. They follow the conventions of the particular type of character and stress the aesthetic, making no attempt to be realistic.

The oldest form for which there is a substantial surviving corpus of works is the zaju (variety drama) of the period running from about 1260 to 1360. There is no surviving music for this form, but it has definitely entered the Chinese literary canon. Another type of theatre to become recognized in the literary canon is kunqu, a highly elite genre dating from the sixteenth century. Both variety drama and kunqu have spawned some very famous dramatists, the best known for the former being Guan Hanqing (flourished second half of the thirteenth century) and for the latter Tang Xianzu. Among specific items, the most famous variety drama is probably Wang Shifu’s The Story of the West Wing, which dates probably from around the turn of the fourteenth century; among kunqu, Peony Pavilion by Tang Xianzu is pre-eminent.

The types of popular (non-elite) traditional Chinese theatre are numerous and tend strongly to the locally based. Among these the most important and famous is the jingju, which evolved from the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century. One feature of these regional operas is that they are rather low in social status. They are known not through their dramatists or musical composers but through the famous actors who performed them and the troupes to which they belonged. Before the modern era, probably the most famous of Chinese actors was Cheng Changgeng, a performer of old male roles, who is sometimes called ‘the father of the Peking Opera’ for his work in developing the acting styles and in moulding the various theatrical arts into an integrated whole. In the modern era the most distinguished of all jingju actors, and the most famous domestically and internationally of all Chinese performers of any period, was Mei Lanfang, a performer of female impersonator roles.

Chinese ideologies were quite open to drama, raising no objection to people enjoying themselves at theatrical performances. On the other hand, various regimes attempted to use the theatre for political or moral purposes. Some tried to promote their own rule through the theatre. In particular, censorship has been very common throughout the ages. Authorities often kept an eye out for performances they believed subversive politically or offensive from a moral point of view.

This emphasizes the tight connection between society and theatre. Authorities believed that performances could influence the people’s views and behaviour. The popular theatre was also a regular companion for festivals and festivities, and for thanking the gods. It played a significant role in the lives of the people and was the main way they learnt about their own history.

Actors were on the whole a very low group within society. Yet many were also real artists and made major contribution to Chinese culture. Among actors a distinctive group was the males who mastered the art of playing the roles of women. Although this cross-gender performance
became associated with homosexuality and was a factor making for the low status of the acting profession within society, it also gave rise to a highly aesthetic art that not only became one of the most famous aspects of the Chinese theatre but also spawned the greatest and most famous of all Chinese actors of any period: Mei Lanfang.

And finally Chinese traditional theatre is noted for the degree to which it integrates the arts. The good actor needs not only to be able to sing and act properly, but to look the part and to have good command over other arts such as costuming, makeup and gesture. This integration is not necessarily a given in the history of opera. For instance, in the operas of Richard Wagner (1813–83), the demands on the singers are such that during some eras artists have not necessarily looked fully suitable for the role they are singing. At the end of Götterdämmerung (The Twilight of the Gods), the last of his great cycle Der Ring des Niebelungen (The Ring of the Niebelung), the lead soprano Brünnhilde sings music of extreme beauty, grandeur and depth. But some Brünnhildes able to meet the musical demands have been too overweight or not beautiful enough to look ideal for the part. Although acceptable in Wagner, this would not be possible in the Chinese traditional theatre.

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