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Audience Participation in Traditional Chinese Theatre

A Thesis Presented

by

Zifei Wu

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Traditional Chinese theatre is unique. Unlike its distinct stage elements with apparent Eastern features, the special role of audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre is less conspicuous and, to some, may seem disordered; however, underneath, the logic of audience participation suggests a theatrical communication and a performer-audience relationship that is completely different from the theatrical traditions of the Western world.

There is an explosion of interest in the role of the audience among twentieth and twenty-first century theatre practitioners in the Western world. To these experimental theatre artists, forming a non-traditional performer-audience relationship is often an approach to show their beliefs of the essential definition of theatre and performance, as well as their beliefs in theatre's potential to influence, impact and interact with the real world. Naturally some questions would rise when we make the comparison: what principles do the old instinctively developed traditions share with the relatively new and self-conscious experiments? What are the differences between them and what do they suggest to us about the future of audience participation and theatrical experience?

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Interests of the Audience's role	2
Traditional Chinese Theatre	8
Traditions of Participation	15
The Disorderly Theatre	15
Rules of Applauding	24
Expressions of Dissatisfaction	30
Other Approaches to Participation	38
Frames of Interaction	40
Audiences' Community	44
Holistic Theatre Experience	46
Aesthetic Identity	49
A Growing Possibility	52
Conclusion	55

List of Figures

Figure 1 Poster of Kunqu <i>Xixiang Ji</i>	13
Figure 2 Poster of Beijing Opera <i>Hongniang</i>	13
Figure 3 A Chinese theatre in 17th Century	16
Figure 4 Revolutionary model operas	17
Figure 5 Playbill of <i>Feng Huan Chao</i> , 1956	18
Figure 6 <i>Changban Po</i>	50
Figure 7 <i>Mudan Ting</i>	50

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Introduction

Traditional Chinese theatre is unique. The exaggerated costumes, magnificent music and abstract performance have never failed to attract the attention of the world. Less apparent to the world, beyond the performances on stage, is the unique role played by the audience in traditional Chinese theatre. It is no less important than the roles played by the actors on stage. Unlike its distinct Eastern stage elements, the seemingly disordered and inconspicuous role of audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre is more influential or meaningful than previously thought. In fact, underneath, there is a logic that suggests a theatrical communication and a performer-audience relationship that is completely different from the theatrical traditions of the Western world.

There is an explosion of interest in the role of the audience among twentieth and twenty-first century theatre practitioners in the Western world. Inviting the audience to be a part of the performance could be a technique to excite them and create an unconventional experience, or, perhaps, to discourage the audience from forming the illusion that they are peeking into someone's life through an invisible wall, reminding them of the real place they physically are and the real world that they actually live in. To modernist theatre artists, forming non-traditional performer-audience relationships may help show their beliefs of the essential definition of theatre and performance, as well as their beliefs in theatre's potential to influence, impact and interact with the real world.

On the one hand, allowing the audience to actively participate in the performance is a deep-rooted and well-developed tradition in Chinese theatre; on the other hand, contemporary theatres are searching for possibilities of a more vibrant theatre by giving attention and freedom

to the audience. Naturally, some questions will be raised when we make the comparison: what principles do the old instinctively developed traditions share with the relatively new and self-conscious experiments? What are the differences between them and what do they suggest to us about audience participation and the essence of theatre?

To study understand how the audience of traditional Chinese theatre participates in theatre, and how it differs from the concept of audience participation in Western theatre theory, one will need to study the exclusive aesthetic system of Chinese tradition. Nevertheless, the purpose of this thesis is not to discuss the similarity and difference of Eastern and Western theatres in cultural and historical aspects, but to illuminate the special methods of audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre. By analyzing the inner logic of the communication between audience and performer and how could it influence our understanding of audience participation in today's experimental theatre, we wish to further discuss a possibility of considering the theatre with the performance of the actor and the audience as an integrated whole to comprehend theatrical events in a broader sense.

From the times of ancient Greece, we never stopped asking ourselves "what is theatre and what should it be?" It is obvious that the answer to the question lies in the relationship between what is presented on stage and the audience, culture and historical period in which it takes place.

Interests of the Audience's Role

For centuries, when we think about "theatre" our mind automatically create an image with a stage and actors performing on it. We are not interested in the darkness surrounding it. However, in the twentieth-century, with advances in both art and society, theatre makers felt ob-

ligated to seek theatrical values beyond the traditional; and it became more difficult to ignore those who do nothing but sit quietly in front of or around the stage. In 1966, on the premiere of *Offending the Audience*, a play that was written by Austrian writer Peter Handke, the actors cried towards downstage: “You are the centre. You are the occasion. You are the reason why” (Handke 21).

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed theatre, as well as all artistic creation, was a form of imitation and a representation of nature. However, in the twentieth-century, stimulated by the great revolutions in science, technology and society studies, trends of abandoning the artistic illusionary reality and exploring the world beyond mendacious reproduction of nature, emerged in the world of art and theatre. The explorers in theatre and related art fields started to consider the reality of the actor performing to the audience as more important than the illusion of a real story that is happening in a fake setting, and their efforts indicated an obvious fact that we overlooked for centuries: those quiet ones that we call the audience are central to the definition of theatre. If we believe that the essential feature of a stage performance that could distinguish from other common performances is one created to be viewed, comprehended and appreciated by a group of people, then it is no wonder why Francisque Sarcey, a nineteenth-century French theatre critic, stated bluntly, “We cannot conceive of a play without an audience” (Sarcey 22). As illustrated by Peter Brook in the first line of *The Empty Space*, which is now considered as a significant text in theatre studies, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 7), the last thing that theatre would give up is sharing a four-dimensional space with live audience.

Modern theories of audience participation is rooted back to Bertolt Brecht, who might be the most influential dramatist in the modern history; his well-known proposition of *epic theatre*, which he described as, “The actor ... forced the spectator to look at the play’s situations from such an angle that they necessarily became subject to his criticism” (Brecht Willett 121). For this effect, the theatre needed, “a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural” (Brecht Willett 125). He called this the *alienation effect*. Brecht asked the actor to detach himself from the character and break the fourth wall to see the full view of the audience. In plenty of works by Brecht, he used plays within a play, and had actors play the part of the audience in order to encourage the real audience to form their own criticism. Antonin Artaud, a contemporary of Brecht, is also widely recognized as one of the major figures of twentieth-century theatre for the book, *The Theatre and Its Double*, in which he coined the term “theatre of cruelty”. He also claimed that we need to, “abolish the stage and auditorium” (Artaud 96) in order to create a theatre experience he wanted for the audience. He desired to have the audience sit in the middle of a large room, while watching the action around them, and therefore they would only have a partial view of the action. Later in the sixties, Polish theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski, the author of *Towards a Poor Theatre*, stated that his aim was to eliminate the division between actor and audience, creating a communion between the two, and in his work the audience was commonly placed on many sides of the action or in and amongst the action itself. Richard Schechner, the contemporary artist and performing theorist who is well known for his ideas of *environmental theatre*, has further explored the audience-performer relationship in the consideration of space. In his works, he utilized space and the audience in such ways as to bring

them in close contact with each other, and took the audience along into the action so that “things may happen to and with them as well as ‘in front’ of them” (Schechner 78).

Inspired by the theorists, the contemporary innovators of the theatre thirstily started to excavate the potentialities of the audience; instead of pretending that they do not exist, they turn the spotlight around and focus on them, ask for their opinions and allow them to explore the works as they desire. Inviting audience to be a part of the play could be a symbol of emancipating the masses and challenging the authority, an approach to maximize the fact that the performers and the spectators are sharing the same space at the same time, or an exploration of the potential possibilities of theatre by breaking the boundaries between different art forms. Artists in different time periods and art movements may have invited the audience to participate in their play differently according to their own theatre philosophy, however, the inconvenient truth is they made the theatre a place the audience could not only watch and listen in, but also participate as a part of. It is becoming more evident that in the circumstance of today’s technological explosion, it is becoming more and more difficult to entice people from their comfortable couches into a normally not-so-pleasant place to see live performances, and therefore, theatre needs to ceaselessly innovate in order to survive. If we believe that the future patrons want a commodity that not only satisfies them but also manifests who they are then the future audiences will seek for not merely visual and audio stimulation, but also unique experiences that they themselves serve as a creative initiative. Marketing is not the only reason that theatre has developed the trends of interacting with the audience. Theatre, from its infancy in the ancient Greece, is a place that re-creates and reforms the connection between people in the society and a place that people join together physically with their bodies and all their senses, which is growing rarer and rarer as the

technologies grow. As a result, it is natural for it to value positive interactions more than unidirectional expressions.

The vocabulary of theatre studies is increasing rapidly with the active innovations and experiments of theatrical practices. Words like “environmental theatre”, “forum theatre”, “immersive theatre”, “invisible theatre” and “one-on-one theatre” are invented to describe the eruptions of the new type of performances that do not meet traditional definitions of a theatre piece. Some of the concepts have overlapping areas, and sometimes it is hard to categorize a play into one type. We will use “contemporary interactive theatre”, which is a more general term, to refer to the theatre in which the audience is constantly invited to participate in the performance as a means to emphasize our focus. Several interactive theatre performances that we will use as examples are: *Fuerza Bruta* (2003) directed by Diqui James, *Sleep No More* (2011) by Maxine Doyle, *Speakeasy Dollhouse* (2011) by Cynthia von Buhler, *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812* (2012) by Rachel Chavkin, *The Library* (2013) by Fanny de Chaillé, *DAY! Night. fuck...*(2013) by William Burke and Emily Rea, *Then She Fell* (2012) and *The Grand Paradise* (2016) by Third Rail Projects. One thing that needs to be mentioned is, although the interactions I discuss mainly focuses on the audience’s participation with the performer and the responses of the performer, they are not the only occasions that the audience is treated as the collaborator of the pieces. For example, in environmental theatre, the audience is commonly placed within the setting of the play, sometimes they are asked to move around in the space; sometimes they simply sit in the world of the play like they would in a traditional theatre. Though not every audience member could have a chance to directly interact with the actors, the participation becomes a valuable part of the setting of the play. The audience could be an assigned character with certain objectives, or wear masks to act as the ghosts or spirits that flutter around, or behave like the oth-

er guests at the bar. Likewise, in one-on-one theatre, the audience does not necessarily participate in the actions with the actor, however, as one of the two people who make the performance happen, the audience is aware of his or her significance to the piece.

Audience participation as a theatrical technique is an idea that developed in the course of Western theatre history and was brought to our attention by today's thriving interactive theatres. Therefore, we will choose to use the contemporary Western interactive theatre as a reference when we discuss traditional Chinese audience's methods of participatory theatre performance. The interests in the audience's role among theatre studies and experiments have developed into a well-established field in theatre study by now. In *Theatre and Audience* (2009) Helen Freshwater sorted out a developmental skeleton of the trends in this field. Audience study was influenced by the principles of receptive aesthetics, such as reader response theories in literature, as well as the theatre practices and innovations, and consequently, it has grown with the apparent interdisciplinary features. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* by Susan Bennett was the first attempt to apply reader-response theories in literature to theatre studies; and the book became an essential reference in the field. In her monograph, she touched the basis of theatrical event and the relationship between production and reception. In addition to the literature concepts, she also applied notions from other fields such as spectatorship in film studies and cross-culture communication in sociology to describe the relationship between audience and performer. Jacques Rancière, a French philosopher with notable ideas of democracy and visual aesthetics, delivered his lecture *The Emancipated Spectator* in 2004 at the opening of the Fifth International Summer Academy of Arts in Frankfurt, and later published a book with the same name to further develop his idea. His belief in spectatorship as a bad thing could be read at several levels, as it originated from his earlier work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* on pedagogy and was brought

into the discussion of art and theatre to point out that presumption is essentially undemocratic. Whilst, some of the researchers are interested in applying the theories of psychology and cognitive sciences to the field of audience studies, for example, Herbert Blau's *The Audience* discusses audience participation based on repression in psychoanalytic theory. Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences* was aimed at introducing insights from neuroscience to examine the dynamics of conscious attention, empathy and memory in the audience. In *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Gareth White thought through the process and procedure of inviting the audience and multiple possible results of it from an aesthetics point of view. His studies gave us a valuable guide for understanding the aesthetic pursuits in different processes of inviting the audience to participate. We will keep coming back to these studies as we analyzing audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre. Through cross-culture comparison, we hope to obtain a better understanding in the traditional Chinese theatre as well as the universal principles of audience participation.

Traditional Chinese Theatre

Ancient Greek tragedy and comedy, Indian Sanskrit drama together with East Asian operas are recognized as the worlds' three oldest theatre forms. Formed around a thousand years ago, theatre in East Asian is in fact a much younger form of art than in ancient Greek and Indian, however, unlike some historical performances that could only be found in literary records, the old-style performing traditions that was inherited from the ancient time is still part of the modern life in East Asia today, and therefore, they are considered as invaluable living fossils of traditional performance. As the Western theatre has developed from frugality to extravagance, and, has been searching for breakthroughs in the opposite direction since the twentieth century, the

modern dramatists are interested in rediscovering the infancy of theatre. Besides studying from their predecessors in ancient Greece, they also have been hunting for inspiration from the East. For the Oriental scholars, the Westerners' understanding the exotic arts may largely be based on misreading and misinterpretation; but this didn't prevent them from creating remarkable works. Brecht's *alienation effect*, for instance, was largely influenced by traditional Chinese acting, and to practice his ideas, he incorporated Chinese elements in some of his masterpieces. *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1943) was set in southwest China, where Brecht has never been in his life, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1948), which is considered as an excellent example of epic theatre, was adapted from the 14th-century Chinese play *Huilan Ji (Circle of Chalk)* by Li Xingdao. Besides Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson and countless influential dramatists have been inspired by traditional Asian theatre. On the other hand, Tadashi Suzuki, a widely respected Japanese director, is famous for his contributions to introducing the acting principles of Kabuki theatre into the Western theatre. The "Suzuki Method", a set of actor training exercises that he generated from the Japanese performing traditions, is now widely used in theatre around the world. It is a fact that nowadays the cultural fusion is happening everywhere in the world, and cross-culture research has become a significant tool to understand the essentials of life that we share.

There are numerous discussions on what are the most significant features of traditional Chinese theatre that make it special, and from different aspects, we could come up with different answers. Performance style, musicality, techniques, and abstraction are some distinct characteristics. Often translated as "opera", these theatre types rely heavily on music with few exceptions. The highly technical performance skills are also remarkable, for, without years of special training, an actor could hardly perform a small piece. At the same time, its completed nonmaterial

representation system could be very impressive to the audience who is accustomed to presentational theatre. From a historical aspect, especially when comparing to the Western theatre history, Chinese theatre is a fairly late-maturing art form. At the time Chinese theatre started to form, Chinese literature, painting and music had already peaked and these matured art forms have heavily influenced the theatre arts. Analyzing the contents of traditional Chinese theatre, Professor Fu Jin believes its lyrical spirit, and that is one of the most accurate and compelling formulations of the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese theatre. In *Zhongguo Xiju Yishu Lun (Theories of Chinese Theatre Art)*, he states:

For typical western art theorists and theatre theorists, although theatre could and must use lyric and narrative methods at the same time, we still tend to regard it as a literary form that is more suitable for representation, and, in fact, narrative is the most common method that is used in theatrical literature... However, Chinese theatre is a kind of art that its lyric ability is stronger than the narrative ability, and it appreciates expressing the emotions of characters more than reappearing the object... Those famous masterpieces of classical Chinese theatres are all good at conveying the feelings. In a sense, this is the most important feature of Chinese Theatre, and the key to understanding the spirit of Chinese art. (Fu Jin 115)

While active audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre is a signature aspect, it is a road less travelled in traditional Chinese theatre studies. Despite the profound relationship of inheritance in Tang Poem, Song Poem Yuan Opera and today's traditional theatre, the studies in traditional Chinese theatre are normally done from the literary point of view. Aesthetic features and techniques of the performance are also discussed more than its singular theatricality. This thesis chooses to use the word "theatre" instead of "opera", though it is more commonly used when describing the traditional Chinese performances, to emphasize its theatricality. To understand audience participation, we need to defocus the attentions on the stage actions, and to be aware of everything that is happening around it. *Zhongguo Xiju Guanzhong Xue (Audience study*

of Chinese opera) by Liu Jinliang and Tan Jingbo is a groundbreaking book in describing and analyzing the aesthetic pursuits of traditional Chinese audiences. This 600 pages book illustrated the forming of the pursuit from the psychological, cultural, historical, philosophical, social, and religious points of view, and it is more similar to Chinese culture and history studies through the operas than Chinese culture and history studies. The audience in their study is treated as the subjects of the aesthetic process and the focus of the research was kept on the on-stage performance of Chinese opera. In the fifth chapter of the book, they briefly mentioned the communication between the performer and audience in the theatre, but a further discussion from the point of view of audience participation, and a comparison with the modern interactive theatre is needed.

This thesis chooses the word “theatre” over "opera" also because our discussions will not be limited to the singing pieces. We mainly focus on the talking comedies, storytelling arts, and traditional street performances. The concept of traditional Chinese theatre could be too extensive if we don't restrict the time periods, regional areas or social classes. To simplify the analysis, theatre theorists are predisposed to classify the theatres into a number of types, such as *Jingju* (Beijing Opera), *Kunqu* (Kun Opera), or *Yueju* (Yue Opera). The most obvious reason that traditional Chinese theatre developed into so many types derives from multiple Chinese dialects that are spoken in different regions. For instance, *Yueju* uses the dialect from the Yue area, Beijing Opera use the dialect from the Beijing area, etc. Additionally, some types of theatres are more popular in a certain time and some are more popular among a certain social class. On the other hand, because of the unity and continuity of Chinese culture and aesthetic tradition, it seems impractical to separate a part of it from the cohesive whole and discuss it without bringing the others into the conversation.

Take *Xixiang Ji* (*The Story of the Western Wing*), a classic Yuanzaju (Yuan Opera) play written in by Wang Shipu in the years of Yuanzhen or Dade (1295 - 1307) as an example. Yuanzaju is a northern theatre type that was popular in Yuan Dynasty (1271 -1368). Its original performing method is long lost in history, but *Kunqu*, a southern type of theatre that is still active today, stages the seven-hundred-years-old script after some adapting. Beijing Opera, the most popular northern theatre type today, also has a play of the same name that is still widely stages, and, doubtlessly, there are great similarities in the Beijing Opera version and the Yuan Opera version among script and performance. The plays mentioned were written in an elegant language and performed in a slower-paced graceful way that meets the aesthetical standards of upper-class audiences. Another play of the Beijing Opera telling the same story called *Hongniang* (*The Matchmaker*) is much more amusing and popular among the lower classes. The heroine of *Xixiang Ji* is a lady from a wealthy family, whereas, in *Hongniang*, it is her vivacious maid who plays the leading role instead of the graceful lady. Furthermore, *Hongniang* ends where the couple finally gets happily married and removes the original ending in *Xixiang Ji* in which they are forced to separate again. In this way, it makes the tragedy a comedy. As *Hongniang* has a greater influence on recent and regional theatre, especially in northern theatres, the play is a comedy either it is called, *Xixiang Ji* (figure 1) or *Hongniang* (figure 2). In fact, most of the traditional plays that we can see today have been adapted numerous times from one type of theatre to another. Of course, each adaption may differ depending on time periods, regional areas, social classes or other conditions, at the same time, their interaction gave birth to a mutual aesthetic understanding, and the connections and generalizations that they developed through time is a more striking feature of Chinese theatrical traditions. Accordingly, I prefer to consider traditional Chi-

nese theatre as an integrated unity instead of a collection of a variety of theatre when we discuss its aesthetic features and pursuits.



Left: Figure 1 Poster of Kunqu *Xixiang Ji* (Northern Kun Opera House, 2008)
The three characters on it are the lady, her maid and her lover.



Right: Figure 2 Poster of Beijing Opera *Hongniang* (Mei Lanfang Theatre, 2010)
In this version, seven famous actresses are playing the maid's character in different scenes;
so all the pictures on the poster are the same character.

Speaking of audience participation, it's more reasonable not to demarcate a clear boundary of theatre types that we are going to discuss. First, most of the audience tends to attend various theatre performances and they will bring their participation habits into the theatre. In addition, audiences need to appreciate their theatre experience as a whole to get the most enjoyment from it. Sometimes the plots of plays relate to each other because they originally are from one much

longer play; sometimes pieces from unrelated plays could be performed together so the audiences could enjoy the best parts of those plays in one night. The further explanation behind it is that unlike in Western theatre, the experience of the audience is not based on each play in the traditional Chinese theatre, but elementary theatre basics. There will be further discussion in the later parts of this thesis. Finally, how the audience performs in theatre usually follows some common routines that are not only related to theatrical traditions but also deeply rooted in the social culture, thus the study of these routines will have to consider the overall situation. Therefore, this thesis will mostly focus on the Beijing Opera and concentrate on the late Qing Dynasty (1860s) to nowadays, because the Beijing Opera is a most representative type of traditional Chinese theatre. The 1860s to 1940s is the time of the most recent boom period of traditional Chinese theatre which we could find rich materials to work with, the 1950s to 1970s is a special period in Chinese history that needs special discussion, and the 1980s to now is the reascent time for Chinese tradition. Other theatre types and time periods may be used to flesh out a map of audience participation in traditional Chinese theatre.

Traditions of Participation

The Disorderly Theatre

If someone steps into a traditional Chinese theatre such as the Beijing Opera for the first time without any background knowledge, there would be a great chance that he or she may find what is happening there, either on stage or off stage, completely transcend his or her understanding. It is well known to the West that almost everything of traditional Chinese theatre, from performing styles to makeup, costumes and stage settings, is far from realism. Proof could be found in every single poetic line and dance movement. In addition to the actors' artistry, the performance of others would be no less confusing. There are people in uniforms, who are not a part of the plots, walking on and off stage and moving the furniture for the characters as they command and serve actors tea during the scene. And sometimes the audience may all start to cheer in the middle of a scene and the reason could be very unintelligible. Some audiences may close their eyes and keep bobbing their heads while some others may suddenly stand up and yell toward the stage. It seems not only the actors, but also the audience, staff members and even the hawkers who sell cigarettes and drinks act as if there were a play offstage. In both plays, the performers are communicating with secret codes that an outsider could hardly comprehend (figure 3).



Figure 3: A Chinese theatre in 17th Century
Unknown Author, *Chayuan Yanju Tu (A Performance in Chayuan)*, Qing Guanxu (1875-1908)
<http://www.xiexingcun.com/cihai/Q/Q0556.htm>

Audiences do many different activities off stage while an action scene is performed on stage. The words on the columns reads ‘Useless happiness for the greatest success; Fake predestination for the happiest marriage.’ It’s a riddle to which the answer is a theater, and the verse stands for a nihilistic philosophy.

After the 1950s, as the communistic moral concepts became the mainstream, the traditional theatrical habits were lashed. With the great enthusiasm for creating a new world, people only adhered to the arts that were “realistic” and “inspiring”. Therefore, the proscenium theatre was adopted in China; a new realistic performing style was created and some new theatrical habits were promoted (figure 4). People praised the new theatre where audiences sat orderly in their seats, passionately, but also politely, applauding at the end of each scene. They loved the new plays with complete and logical plots that expressed the reality of the world. Actors celebrated that the new age of art was coming. They claimed that the old days when actors were disrespect-

ed and the art was interrupted were finally over. They complained about the traditional theatre where audience was not appreciative of the integrity of the plays, believing that was uncivilized, rowdy, noisy and disorderly. Ironically, those complaints about the unendurable old theatre are now the first-hand records for those who are dedicated to bringing back the principle of the Chinese theatrical tradition.



Figure 4: Revolutionary model opera

Left: Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy, Shanghai Shanghai Peking Opera Theatre, 1958.

Right: The Legend of the Red Lantern, China National Peaking Opera Company, 1957.

The well-ordered theatres with political affiliation could still be seen today, especially in the performances for commemorations that were sponsored by state officials. However, in the commercial theatres and folk theatres, which are more and more active since the beginning of the twenty-first-century, audiences are regaining their tradition of liveliness. Although after being through the enormous trauma of the Great Cultural Revolution, the ecosystem of traditional theatres will never be the same. We can still find the remnants of old traditions in the contemporary performances of traditional Chinese theatre pieces, and get the sense of how they are returning to life. The criticism about the disorderliness of the traditional Chinese theatre in the 1950s is not the dominant point of view in the history of Chinese theatres, but it is an interesting aspect to

start our examination, as it implies some of the major principles of audience participation in the traditional times.

Figure 5 is an image of a playbill of *Feng Huan Chao* (*Return of the Phoenix*), led by Mei Lanfang in 1956. As an invaluable collection form a private collector, Beihe Jushi, it commemorates a fantastic play that he saw 60 years ago. Moreover, it provides some interesting details for us to study the variation of audience participation in 1950s, since in the box on the right, under the picture of Mei, is an announcement of some detailed requirements for the audience. Using unfriendly and homiletic languages, they were trying to persuade the audience to abandon the bad habits and “be a new person” as is the fashion of that time.



Figure 5: A playbill of *Feng Huan Chao*, Shanghai Renmin Da Wutai, 1956
Image by Beihe Jushi

The text in the box reads:

Some Requirements to the Audiences:

- 1. For the sake of the health of children, please do not bring small babies to the theatre. Children over 1.2 meters need to buy a full ticket.*
- 2. For the sake of public hygiene and clarity of the sound effects, please do not smoke nor eat food that needs to be skinned in the theatre. Please do not spill.*
- 3. To make sure everyone comprehends the theme of the play, please do not applaud inappropriately. Please keep quiet.*
- 4. Being punctual is necessary for seeing a play. Being late or leaving early will not only result in that you won't see the play but will also affect the others.*
- 5. Please keep order and line up when you purchase the tickets, enter the theatre and leave the theatre.*
- 6. Please protect the public facilities.*
- 7. If you have any well-meaning suggestions, we have a suggestion box that you could write your suggestions on a piece of paper and put it in.*
- 8. This playbill is to help the audience understand the plots and appraise the performance. Be economical when you take them. Please avoid wasteful behavior.*

For the audience today, the requirements are not unreasonable but the language of the announcement is somewhat unwelcoming. For the audiences then, these requirements are actually targeted to some specific theatrical behaviors that they were accustomed to before.

Babies were not banned in the theatre, for the theatre was then very noisy and one or two cries wouldn't be a problem. Eating while seeing a play was very common, especially eating sunflower seeds and peanuts. At the end of the night, the skins that were swept out of a theatre could make a small hill. Drinking tea during the performance was also very common previously, but it was not mentioned in the announcement. For one thing, the tea was served on the house

traditionally, and obviously the new theatres would not serve tea as before. For another, the tea table between the seats was taken away so there would not be a place for the teapots and cups. Perhaps taking a water bottle with you to drink tea from it was not considered improper. The third requirement is especially interesting and significant for us, for it implies that traditionally the audiences were not quiet, applauded inappropriately, and tend not to understand the theme of the play. The fourth and fifth requirement suggests that audience were not likely to stay for the whole performance. They would come and go at anytime they liked, and of course, they would not line up when leaving the theatre. The sixth and eighth promoted thrift, which was the major virtue at that time in general, not specifically related to theatre behaviors. The seventh one about the suggestion box seems encouraging for people to leave suggestions, however, it also insinuated: Firstly, do not leave non-well-meaning suggestions; Secondly, put your suggestions in the box; do not yell it directly to the stage.

The playbill announcement displayed a picture of utter chaos: A place with loud music where a stage is surrounded by seats and tea tables; people are moving around, some are leaving and some just coming in; some are eating snacks while some others are severing people tea; babies are crying and people are applauding, and the worst of all, the audience that doesn't care about the theme of the play is yelling their thoughts toward the stage.

Perhaps Hou Baolin, a master Xiansheng¹ performer, as well as a Beijing Opera performer, has portrayed the most vivid, detailed picture of the traditional theatre in his comedy *Guangong Zhan Qinqiong* (*Guangong Battle Qinqiong*). Whereas it was a polished humorous piece the play was based on facts to a large extent.

¹ A kind of comedic performance, which generally in the form of a dialogue between two performers

Today wherever I perform, the audiences are in good order, unlike the time when I was young. In the old days, the theatres were in a mess. Especially in the small theatres, the chaos was unbearable... Outside the theatre, ticket sellers needed to shout to attract customers, for they don't have any other promotion methods. "Come watch a show! Come watch a show! Beautiful actors, male and female! Singing plays! Action plays! Real action scenes with the real thing... Two dimes! Two dimes per person!" ... Inside the theatre was worse! Sometimes audiences could start a fight because of applause, only because they like different actors. There were people trying to find seats, trying to find each other, severing tea, selling snacks, selling fresh fruits, selling newspaper and playbills. The most annoying ones are those who throw hand towels... In the summer, the house severed clean wet towels for the audience to wipe sweat. It was nice but the ushers delivered the towels by throwing them to each other. That was very dazzling! Those actually are high technical jobs, as they never missed a catch. Sometimes they even do some fancy actions, like throw under the legs or catch from the back... The hawkers were also noisy. "Come with me! There are four seats!" "More tea here!" "Newspaper! Today's playbill!" "Hey! Aunty²! I'm here!" ... After seated, would the audiences just see the play? Of course not! They started to chat with each other while actors were performing on the stage. No one cared about the first scene anyway. "Aunty, how come you are here so late?" "I know. I got some stuff at home; otherwise, I will be here much earlier. The weather today is nice, I think... Whoops, is it raining?" "Hey! Upstairs! Your baby is pissing!" (Hou 373)

The traditional theatres were where Hou earned his living in his early life, and as a result, he was able to create this comedy piece with such detail. The theatre he described almost vanished from the 1950s to 1970s, however, more and more theatres now putt tea tables between seats; they also serve tea and snacks. Talking, applauding, cheering and yelling toward the stage has become very common in a lot of contemporary theatres. However, the towel-throwing stunt is hardly seen, as disposable wipes are offered instead. Generally speaking, the formerly-scraped custom of disorderliness is growing its market noticeably, especially among the market of young audiences. While some use the phrase "craze for traditional Chinese culture" to satirize the popularity of old traditions as no more than a new fashion, more believes the revival of the theatrical traditions is a result of the audiences' dissatisfaction with the monotonous.

² A common appellation for old ladies

Aside from the prejudices, “disorderliness” may suggest the wealth of the theatrical actions and the fact that audience’s “performance” is not just following any guidance, but serves as an initiative as the play goes on; “Rowdy” could be another description of the audience’s vividness and engagement. At peak times, the theatre will sell tickets for standing room only, until it is completely full, one could imagine the hustle and bustle with noise and excitement. “Disrespect” could be an expression of the casual relationship between the actors and audiences as they continually interact in a relaxing and informal way. “Interruption” implies that the communication across the edge of the stage is often about the actors and their acting instead of the characters and the plots. To someone who believes in the theatrical complacency, the communication will definitely be an interruption.

An interesting fact is that believers of the well-ordered theatre and those who are reviving the lively traditions sometimes become confrontational when they meet each other: The former like to consider themselves as moral authorities and criticize the latter as vulgar. They accuse that some theatres are taking corrupt customs as culture and ingratiating the audiences by offering them cheap entertainment. The latter, on the other hand, like to scoff at the attempt to educate audiences with moral stands, and point the finger at those who criticize them as vulgar and just pretending to be moral. While some believe in the tenet that all art forms are obligated to be more or less educational, some claim that the solo criterion for testing a play is to see if it is attractive to audiences³. The former have much more power in the television stations and big-budget productions, as a result, plenty of the plays with didactic tones are broadcasting to the mainstream, such as CCTV-11 (Traditional Chinese theatre channel of China Central Television). Besides, the uni-directional communication that comes from a lecture mode makes the

³ Transform from the well-known saying in China: “Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth”.

plays easier to be videotaped and broadcast. Meanwhile, the folk theatres that have a disadvantage in the smaller scale of productions achieve great success in attracting more people to the theatres. By creating lively interactions among the small intimate groups, they offer the audience an experience that they could never gain sitting in front of a television.

Their controversies about performer-audience relationship are essentially about the function of the theatre, and how the function is implemented. Is the theatre merely a place that people come to see a play, like a theme park that people come to to enjoy themselves? Do the pre-rehearsed plays, the trained performers, and the lit stage dominant elements of the theatre or do they dance together with other elements of the theatre? Theatre performance refers to the rehearsed actions that the audience is supposed to observe in order to get educated, or to the prepared performers and the audience who collaborate to accomplish the theatre performance in a broader sense? Is it what happens on stage that signifies performance or is it the audience's experience that is the center of the theatre?

If we look into the history of Chinese theatre, we find that the stage-demonstrated theatre is a fairly new innovation. It originated from entertainments in social places, Chinese theatres, despite its great influence on society, always considers itself as a faithful servant of their "parents we rely on for a living"⁴, Being the bottom of the society for a long time, the traditional performers treasure their modesty as a respectful ritual even in nowadays lots of them are considered as celebrities. With an acceptance of the audiences-centralized tradition of Chinese theatre, we might gain a further understanding of the confusion and disorderliness of it.

⁴ A popular expression of compliments to the audiences among the theatre performers; parents is a metaphor to show respect.

Rules of Applauding

Despite the disorderly elements of the traditional Chinese theatre, the experts regard traditional theatre as a highly disciplined art form. There are unbreakable rules about the performance on stage, and there are great deals of rules about the off-stage performance as well. The audience's first impression on a traditional Chinese theatre may be its disorderliness, however, if they remain observant a little longer, it won't be hard for them to find that, though it seems complex, everyone in the theatre collaborate with a tacit mutual understanding. As many people know, every simple action on stage exquisitely follows some rules in traditional Chinese theatre. The audience's actions function exactly the same. Same as the on-stage performance, the minimal movements may have plenty of implicit meanings. Since the rules that traditional audiences followed are not as clear as the requirements on the playbill in 1959, it may take someone a great effort to understand them.

Compared to interactive theatres where the boundary between the stage and the audience could be blurred, the methods for the traditional Chinese audiences to participate in the plays are not innovative. As the actors hardly come off-stage and the audience barely climbs on the stage, the communications between them rely on applauding, hooting, yelling, and laughing. In addition to making loud sounds, the audience could also express their opinion by not paying attention to the plays, talking to each other, humming with actors, being late, leaving early, and etc. The methods are not complex by themselves, however with various possible changes, they could express a lot more. There are conventional reactions for some theatrical occasions, and based on that, audiences could be very creative and brisk, and together with the performance on stage, a conversation with rich content could be made.

Applauding and cheering are commonly found in many kinds of theatre, and this is not an exception in traditional Chinese theatres. “Hao”, meaning “good” in Chinese, is the used to express commendation. The process is called “Jiao Hao (cry out Hao)” in the theatre business. Generally speaking, in the theatres that the Western audiences are familiar with, the audience normally cheers at the end of a play or a scene, and cheering in the middle of a scene may be considered as an interruption and impolite. However, in traditional Chinese theatre, Hao is yelled towards the stage all the time. In fact, besides showing satisfaction, the connotation of cheering Hao could be very abundant based on the timing.

Pengtou Hao (the very first Hao) is a welcome that the audience gives to the actors when they first appear on the stage. As a rule, only the famous actors get Pengtou Hao, and that is why many actors cherish their memory of the first time they got one. Out of politeness, normally the audience will give the lead actors a Pengtou Hao no matter how they are famous, however, if the Pengtou Hao is just in a sense of encouragement, it won't be as heated. Of course, the more famous the actor, the more enthusiastic the audiences will be. Another important rule is the timing when an audience gives the actor a Pengtou Hao. When the important roles appear on stage for the first time, they frequently use a set of movements called “Liangxiang (show the appearance)”. Basically, it is a set of movements the timing when their faces hiding behind of the long sleeve, or not facing the audience and stepping to center stage, then release the sleeves or turn around to face the audience in a beautiful position that accord with the character's status. The best timing for Pengtou Hao is the right after his or her Liangxiang. Normally, the actors will stop for a while for the applause, especially when the actors know he or she will defiantly get a Pengtou Hao. In other cases when the actor sings or speak before appearing on stage, the best timing for

Pengtou Hao will be right after the first three words, or after the first line, depending on the meter of the music.

In addition to the general rules, in the special occasions, the Pengtou Hao could be creatively awarded. In 1983, a performance with five famous successors of Chen Yanqiu was held to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of Chen. Five actresses all played the same character in a same play, and each present different scenes. The most influential actress, Xin Yanqiu, was 73 years old at the time and was not able to perform a long piece; thereby, she played only the last ten-minutes-scene of the night. The scene normally wouldn't be considered as a very important one and the character wouldn't have a Liangxiang at the beginning as it's not her first time appearing on stage. However, for the audience, it was important to cheer for Xin, not only because of her fame but also for the fact that as she got older it would only be more and more unusual to see her live performance. As we could see from the videotape of that performance, before she entered the stage, one of the supporting actors took a long pause to take a deep look at the audiences before the line "Mrs. Xue, would you please come?" Some of the audience immediately understood what the long pause meant and broke out into fanatical applause. Xin stepped onto the stage and the audience applauded longer before her first line. Occasionally, a famous actor may play a less important role to let a younger actor (probably his or her apprentice) have a chance to lead. In this case, he or she is likely to get a more enthusiastic Pengtou Hao than normally he/she leads. On one hand, it could be because the audiences commend the virtue of helping the young actors; on the other hand, the audiences like to send out the message that they understand who actually is the master actor.

The Pengtong Hao at the very beginning is not to reward the performance, but to show respect and welcome to the actors. The other "Hao" that happens in the middle of a scene are

generally called Jiao Hao. It is harder to catch the right moment for Jiao Hao as the play goes, and therefore, it could be a change for the experienced audiences to show the depth of their knowledge in theatre. A good Jiao Hao should follow an outstanding performance, which could be an enjoyable song, a difficult stunt, a brilliant line, or a fabulous instrumental music performance. Meanwhile, a perfect Jiao Hao should not be intrusive, and especially should not cover the actors' voice. Sometimes actors intentionally leave a space for Jiao Hao after a highly skillful performance, and for the entry-level audiences, figure out where are the places that the actors ask for Jiao Hao is the first step of understanding the rule of Jiao Hao. The most common places that actors demand Jiao Hao are at the beginning and end of a song, or after a set of dance or stunt actions. For instance, there would be a short pause after the first line of a song if the line is high-pitched or used an advanced techniques, the band plays a Guomen (a kind of one phrase interlude) while actors freeze. Apparently, this is a gap especially designed for the audience to Jiao Hao. In the action scenes, since the sound won't be as important as in dialogue scenes, the timing of Jiao Hao could be more flexible. Besides, after a set of actions when the actors make a pose, the audience could applaud at any time they want. However, with an understanding of what are the fancy looking skills that not truly high-technique, and what are masterly skills that could only be acquired through intensive training, the audiences tends to save their greatest passion for the highest proficiencies. Learning when to Jiao Hao for the band could be more difficult than for the actors as there won't be an obvious point of time that one could tell when the band is performing a highly skillful performance. Generally speaking, people applaud for the beautiful solo performance of the leading instrument. Some of the famous melodies in Beijing Opera, like *Yeshenchen*, always gain a "Hao" at a certain point where the difficulties of the playing skills are evidently recognizable. Beyond these, audiences need to determine how to find the best time to

Jiao Hao for the musicians without interrupting the play through his or her understanding of the music. In the 1930s, when many audiences were semi-professional players themselves, Jiao Hao for the band was much more common than now. Fairly experienced audiences today could find it is difficult to understand why some audience Jiao Hao for the band in the videos or the tapes from that time if they don't play any of the instruments themselves.

Understanding where audiences normally Jiao Hao is barely the first step of being an expert audience. As simple as it seems to be, Jiao Hao is an art. The voice should be sonorous and pleasant to hear, the timing should be accurate and blend in the rhythm of the play, and it should fit excellently with other theatre elements. Based on the plays, moods, occasions, and surroundings, the rules of Jiao Hao could be plenty. For instance, in the Kunqu play *Dayu Zanghua* (*The Flowers' Funeral*), regardless of how great the performance is, it becomes impertinent to Jiao Hao when the beautiful young lady buries the flowers to symbolize her short life. It is one of the most classic scenes with a taste of a dolorous lyric poetry that any disturbances will destroy the tragic atmosphere. Sometimes, the audience also Jiao Hao for some human sympathies in addition to performance skills, such as audiences of the 1920s who always cheered when Mei Langfang and his real life lover Meng Xiaodong played lovers in a play; or the audience today likes to laugh and Jiao Hao when Wang Yuepo speaks sarcastically to the big brother of character, and stress the name "big brother", since they know that his real-life big brother is sitting in the back of the stage. In the 1990s, Li Huiliang and Zhang Shilin, two famous Wusheng actors who hadn't performed together for a long time, met in a joint performance, the audience Jiao Hao for a long time for the reunion of two master actors. Although not very common, sometimes audiences Jiao Hao because of the plots as well, especially when the plots somehow imply current events, like,

during the time of Anti-Japanese War, plots of winning a war were very likely to get audiences to Jiao Hao for a long time.

If the audience remains silent when it is expected to Jiao Hao, or, conversely, Jiao Hao at an unexpected time, performers will pressure until they understand the reason for the abnormality. The first time performing for the well-disciplined communist army at 1949, Li Shaochun was shocked by the silent audiences and felt awfully nervous. As an established master actor, that was so unusual for him that he kept questioning himself whether he did anything wrong, until they gave him passionate applause at the end of the play. In 1912, when Mei Lanfang and Tan Xinpei played *Fenhe Wan* (*Fen River Bend*) together, Mei took Qi Rushan's advice of adding a set of new actions between Tan's lines. Some audience noticed the changes and start to Jiao Hao. Tan faced the opposite direction when he heard this and got very confused. To see Mei's action, he had to add a temporary action that allowed him to look back. Although Yu Shuyan told his apprentice Li Shaochun that actors with pride should never ingratiate themselves with the audiences for them to Jiao Hao, we could see how much the audience's performance would affect the performers.

If we consider it from the audience's point of view, Jiao Hao is also a part of the performance. Audiences in the same theatre build a temporary community that functions like a hierarchy in society. The more knowledge about theatre one has, the higher level s/he gains. Although it would not give any practical benefit to the audience, they would receive more respect, and more influence on the others. People are likely to follow them when they applaud; if they shake their head, others will tend to wonder if the performers have made any mistake; and the actors will cherish their opinion more than the others'. While the new audience tries to learn about the rules of how to Jiao Hao, the most experienced audiences like to show off their knowledge by

refusing to join the ordinary audiences to Jiao Hao for the apparent flaunts of performing techniques. Instead, they try to find the detail-oriented beauty that others would neglect easily, seeking for the tiny improvements that the performers recently made and applaud when others are puzzled. The biggest honor for them is to win a smile from the actors and surprising other audiences at the same time. After a tour in Hong Kong, Qiu Shengrong, a famous Beijing Opera actor, claimed that the audiences in Hong Kong “sure know a lot” (Zhao 165) because they Jiao Hao for some special details he put into the play.

“Dilettante watches the scene of bustle, adept guards the entrance” is a common phrase in China, which means the experts see the nature of things while the laymen can only see the superficial phenomena. The audience likes to prove that they are not laymen that just applaud for the obvious skills, but experts who actually understand the actor’s intention. From this point of view, we could understand the principles of audience performance. They cheer “Hao” at the exact right time for the actors they like, not only to show their support, but also to win the attention, respect, and admiration of others around, including the audience and the performers.

Expressions of Dissatisfaction

Audiences of traditional Chinese theatre could also be brutally harsh and ruthless. They may hoot towards the actors, or laugh while there is absolutely no comedy going on, or if they think the actors are not performing the play in the “right way.” It is called “Jiao Daohao (Anti-applaud)” in the theatre business. Although it is not conventional to do so these days, back before the 1950s, directly conveying one’s dissatisfaction was not considered as rude behavior, but an act of urging the actors to provide a better performance. The most remonstrative way to express

one's discontent of the play is to cry out "Tong!" loudly and leave the theatre immediately. Sometimes, a Tong would lead more than a few audience members to leave together. "Tong", the word that mimetic the sound of something heavy dropping hard on the floor, could convey an enormous sense of disparagement. Yelling Tong to the stage could tell the performers that you are offended by their performance. Besides Tong, making any other unfriendly noise would be considered as Jiao Daohao. If we say Jiao Hao is an approach that audiences of traditional Chinese theatre use to show their respect for the performers and to gain respect from the others, then Jiao Daohao could be an approach of being critical for the same reason. The audience members who dare to Jiao Daohao normally are well-experienced and are completely sure that the poor performance; otherwise, they would be scorned by the other audiences members.

A well-known story that was used to prove Mei Lanfang's modesty is an incident during Mei's first tour in Shanghai in 1913; Mei was not absolutely confident about the tour, as Shanghai's audiences were known for being harsh to actors from Beijing at that time. As expected, while everyone else was cheering, a male audience member in his mid-sixty's shook his head and said: "not good, not good at all." His phrase shocked the audience and Mei himself. After the show, Mei found him immediately; so anxious that he did not take a minute to remove his make-up. After Mei's insistent questions, the male audience member finally pointed out that Mei made a mistake in one of the steps. When Mei imitated the action of the descending the steps, he took eight steps descending the steps the traditional seven. Hearing this, Mei nodded swiftly and put his hands together in salute and gratitude.⁵ By today's standards, the old audience member who hooted for Mei might be too unkind and perhaps attempted to show off his knowledge. However, Mei himself stated that such a patron would be helpful for him to improve his acting skills.

⁵ A formal way to show respect and application in Chinese tradition

Though today's audience is much kinder than before, there are still some people who are hard to please. Wang Yuepo, a young contemporary Pinshu⁶ actor honestly admitted during an interview that he dislikes difficult audience members. He described them as "sitting in a corner with a distrustful look on their faces", "who will never laugh at your jokes; but whenever you make a mistake, they sneer." "I cannot do anything about them, but not to look in that direction." (Wu 2) In addition, some more argumentative statements like "We don't tell you how to do your job, so stop telling us how to do ours" could be found on the internet. Apparently, the young actors are less hesitant to show their true feeling about the capricious audiences, though they claim they welcome any audience as long as they pay for the tickets.

My only experience of Jiao Daohao is in 2012 when I went to see an adapted version of the Beijing Opera *Zhaoshi Guer* (*Zhao's Orphan*) in Wuhan, led by a young actress Wang Peiyu. Toward the end, she made some major changes in a classic piece that made some of the old audience very unhappy. A man in his late seventies sitting not far from me was particularly angry about these changes. He started to talk to the audiences around him in a low voice, and when he did not get the answer he wanted, he began to talk in a louder voice. "What is this?" he asked in a strong Wuhan accent. "Is this Beijing Opera or not?" People started to look at him awkwardly but no one answered. Then he stopped talking. It was when I thought the interlude was over, he took out his cell phone, started to play the original version of this piece from it, and hummed along with it. For the giant theatre, the speaker on his phone wasn't loud enough for everyone to hear clearly what he was playing, but the sound was distracting enough. I could feel that most of the audience was trying their best to ignore him, but some were gloating. Finally, the actress

⁶ A Chinese folk theatre type that mainly formed as one-man storytelling.

stopped, looking in his direction saying, “I can’t perform like this.” Soon everyone else on stage stopped performing as well. At this moment, the audience suddenly broke out an enormous applause, which lasted for at least two minutes. They cheered “Hao”, “Great adaption”, “Love the play” over and over again with their applause. This apparently wasn’t a place that audiences usually Jiao Hao, so the applause here was the audience’s declaration that “we are with you” covering the embarrassing silence. For a while, the actress wanted to say something but held it back. After thanking the audience by joining her hands, she made eye contact with her fellow actors and band, and resumed the piece shortly before where they stopped; at the same time, the angry old man stood up and left the theatre.

It was a unique experience for me, and also an unusual event that happened in contemporary theatre. On this particular occasion, different factors came together. The performance took place in one of the biggest theatres in Wuhan, where is a typical modern Western-style theatre. The young actress was born after the Cultural Revolution, but most of the audience were senior citizens. I could assume that the man who intentionally disturbed the play was familiar with the traditional theatrical culture before its reform in the 1950, based on his age and his behavior. However, the use of cell phone is doubtlessly innovative. If using a cell phone to *Jiao Daohao* was to make use of the new technology in traditional context, then the applauding the other audience to cover the embarrassment utilized traditional methods to serve a modern moral philosophy. Encouragement, defense, comfort; the messages that the audience sent out was to compliment her for her courage. The changes that she made were controversial and were hardly considered as a great success, but most audiences won’t take that as an excuse for the rude behavior. Furthermore, other people simply felt that the man was embarrassing to Wuhan audiences as a whole. The performance was the Wuhan stop of a national tour. It could be assumed that the per-

formers were also evaluating the local audiences while touring the whole country. For that reason, not only the actors were performing for the audience, the audience was also performing for the actors. Demonstrating clearly that the man is by himself, they were attempting to clear the name of “Wuhan’s audiences.” “What if he won’t come to Wuhan anymore?” I overheard someone said worriedly to her friend on my way out of the theatre.

Besides Jiao Daohao, another conduct that is used to state one’s attitude is for audience to arrive late. Nowadays, because going to see plays is much more expensive than before, people tend not to waste any of their ticket value. However, before television and movies gained the popularity, theatres were the most common places for people of all classes to spend their evenings. As the size of the audience was large, the price of every single ticket wasn’t very high, even for common workers, it was very normal to go to the theatre after the curtain time.

Perhaps “coming late” is not an accurate description of this kind of conduct, since “being on time” is not a clear concept in traditional Chinese theatre. For the Western audience, a night of theatre experience normally means seeing one complete play for approximately 2 to 3 hours, but it has a totally different connotation for the traditional Chinese audiences. In traditional Chinese theatre, sometimes only one complete play is performed, but what is more likely to happen is a collection of scenes from unrelated plays is performed in one show. You could see either five parts from five different plays, or some selected scenes from one tremendously long play, or several discrete pieces and one short complete play in one performance. The performances at that time were much longer than today. In major cities like Beijing or Shanghai where the performances take place, the shows usually start every day from the afternoon and run until after midnight. The afternoon shows are more likely to attract the female audience and the late night shows are more for male audience, but there is no set rule. For the rural areas where there aren’t

regular performances, people invite theatre troupes to play on holidays or when there are local celebrations, like the founding of a new local school. Instead of selling tickets, local communities would raise funds to support the event and welcome everyone to come. Thus, this kind of performances always takes place outdoors where there is enough space to hold all the residents of the town. As a routine, the troupes would play performances successively for three days and nights without repetition. Regardless of whether it is in the major cities or in the small towns, the performances are too long to stay from the beginning to the end. Naturally, the actors would also take turns to rest, and the audience chooses to come to the theatre depending on what play they would like to see the most. Like in a theme park, your ticket pays for entrances, so you can stay as long as you desire. Of course, one could choose to come early in the morning; but if someone just want to see the fireworks, coming to Disneyland at 8 pm wouldn't be considered late.

Leaving early has a similar connotation as arriving late. Although Jiao Daohao, and then leaving the theatre is a sharp criticism, most of the departures are quiet and peaceful; some even are out of kindness. Occasionally, the actors would give some hint and the women audiences, especially the unmarried young girl should leave the theatre in time for the sex-related jokes. As a rule, the performers would not make dirty jokes in front of female audiences. If the girls don't get the hint, some impatient men in the audience would voluntarily offer some help, like coughing, winking, saying something suggestive. The famous author, Lin Haiyin has described an embarrassing story in her memoirs that has been collected in *Lin Haiyin Wenji* (1997). Once she walked into an unfamiliar theatre with her sister by accident and the actors changed their acting style as soon as they saw the girls. The disappointed male audiences kept sending them hints, but they missed them all. After a while, someone next to them asked "Don't you ladies want to see the fun across the street?" and they finally understood what they meant and ran out of the theatre.

Obviously, this is an outdated rule. Nowadays, if the actors made some dirty jokes on stage, the female audience would laugh as loud as the males.

The audience could also be physically present but mentally absent. Since the audience's area in traditional Chinese theatres was neither dark nor quite, talking to each other about the unrelated topics was common. . This often happened before the show, or during the interludes that are put on to give the main actors some time to rest, for intermissions are not common in traditional Chinese theatre. Today, instead of talking, audiences tend to fill the time by checking their cell phones, or using the restrooms. As Chinese theatres have a great flexibility in scene arrangement with its non-binding order of the plot, the theatres would arrange the scenes in an order that seems most attractive to the audience. To young actors who haven't achieved fame yet, being a supporting actor and performing between the major scenes is a common experience. On the one hand, it could be very disappointing to see the audiences take your performing as a bathroom break; on the other hand, performing in front of audiences gathered by a more influential performers could be a short-cut to gain appreciation and fame of their own.

Although absence is not a direct communication with the performers like Jiao Hao or Jiao Dohao, it could absolutely have the greatest influence on the performance. Compared to Western audiences, traditional Chinese audiences take more initiative in choosing what to see, and it results in a great competition among performers; plays that attract bigger audience gives direct feedback to them. For the audiences who wished to gain more respect and authority in their own community, the special theatrical custom also provided a great chance for them to show off their knowledge. Xi Nizi (the sticky fans) is a nickname for those who are in the theatre all the time. They are regarded as loafers, who, while perhaps knowledgeable about the theatre, are hardly respectable. To avoid becoming a Xi Nizi, one needs to carefully choose the plays to see. If you

make wrong choices, you might be regarded as a Bangcui (wooden clubs) who knows little about the theatrical culture, and remains at the lowest level of the audience society. The respectful veteran audience is called Hangjia (insiders), and one of their specialties is to find the perfect times to come to the theatre. Though casts and plays titles are announced in advance, there are not time schedules for the audiences' reference. In addition, to advice on what parts of the performance would be worth seeing, the Hangjia could also tell the timing of his/her favorite scenes from their experience. In other words, from the moment when the an audience enters a theatre, his or her role-playing game starts; intentionally or unintentionally, everyone is playing the role of a Bangcui, a Hangjia, a Xi Nizi, etc. As the play onstage goes on, the offstage-play also continues according to its own script.

Other Approaches to Participation

In summary, the audience's performances commonly include Jiao Hao, Jiao Daohao, and being absent. Following the rules or breaking them, one could send out different messages to other theatre members and initiate a rich-content conversation. Other than that, there also are less systematic and more improvisational approaches to the communication between the two sides of the edge of the stage, such as humming with the song, talking directly to the performers, or answering their questions.

Humming with the songs is not common in traditional Chinese theatre. In pop music concerts, it is common that some fans hum along with the singer or sometimes there could be choruses sung by the audience. The traditional Chinese theatre fans' adoration of the actors and musicians is no less than the pop music fans' worship of the stars, almost everything that fans do in

pop music concerts, like singing with actors, screaming and calling for encore, can be witnessed in the traditional Chinese theatre.

Needless to say, an audience needs to know the songs well enough to hum along with the actor, showing their knowledge of the plays. While the regular audience usually hum the songs, the Hangjia hum the accompaniment and rhythm. Moreover, some audiences like to close their eyes to concentrate on listening, and carefully keep humming, nodding and beating the rhythm on their laps as if they have been drinking; if they find a brilliant point that they need to Jiao Hao, they will immediately “wake up” and shout out a brief but loud “Hao!”

Talking directly to the stage is a more arbitrary behavior. Instead of following any rule, the audience needs to master when and what to say through experience. Some of the talking could be extensions of Jiao Hao or Jiao Daohao, like pointing out the mistakes when there are accidents on stage. In the story of Mei Lanfang that we discussed earlier, an audience member said “Not good at all” without explaining the reason. However, sometimes, the audiences tend to be more specific and say “Wrong boots!” In some extreme cases, the audiences intentionally stop the performance harangues that are not acceptable for the pace of the play should not be interrupted. The point needs to be made in short and clear sentences, and some humor will also be helpful to gain others attention. Asking questions of the audience is quite exceptional in the relatively mature theatre types like Kuqu or Beijing Opera, however, some rural theatre types like Erren Zhuan that mostly take place in the fields utilize throwing out questions to engage audiences. Sometimes the actors even pretend to be a little deaf and ask the same question more than once to build up an enthusiastic atmosphere. The most frequently asked questions are as simple as “I think she has to sing, do you think so?” Yelling the “Yes!” together, the audience delivers their passion to each other and give the outdoor theatre a centripetal power.

Some performers have their own rules for the audience as well. One of the founders of Beijing Opera Cheng Changgeng has special rules that forbid the audiences Jiao Hao for his play. His well-known legend says that he once stopped performing while playing for the emperor of China and told him not to Jiao Hao. Whether this legend is true or not is hard to verify, but it is a known fact that he persisted in his rule of “No Jiao Hao”. Today, the special rules for participating in some performances of some famous actors feel more like some secret signals among their fans club. Every time when Kang Wansheng play *Tan Yinshan (Visit the Underworld)*, after his line “*Call Wang Chao and Ma Han*”, the audience always answers “Here!” all together, as if they are his servant who he is calling to visit the underworld with him. Deyun She, a folk Xiangsheng group that is incredibly popular now has plenty of obscure rules of participation that only their fans know, and most of them are generated from their historical accounts and real-life stories. These small tricks make the fans feel much closer to their favorite group of performers. Deyun She claimed that they are a very traditional group that is devoted to restoring the theatrical traditions that has vanished since the 1950s; though, its participatory approaches are actually new and experimental, its process followed the long-standing traditional principles. The audiences and the performers worked together to build up a new system of their own audience participation and have kept patching and strengthening it during the past 20 years. In fact, while most participation in traditional Chinese theatre follows some customary rules of the theatre culture, audiences and performers can also be creative and make their own new rules. The current customary rules were also born under such conditions and are accepted by most of the audience and performers. After repeated patching and enforcement, traditions finally shaped them to what we see today.

Frames of Interaction

The uncertainty of theatre is always an exciting and fearful topic to discuss. We want each performance to be unique no matter how much the performers have rehearsed. Otherwise, we will lose the lively soul of the theatre and produce what Peter Brook called the “deadly theatre”. However, we also cannot afford to let the performance be so out of control; we cherish the magical moments when something we never expected unveils its beauty in front of us. At the same time, we are afraid of the disastrous accidents which force the performers into a state that s/he does not know what to do. We rehearse to settle the technical details of the performances and ask the unprepared audience to participate to break what has been finalized. However, we also try to presuppose and lead their actions in interactive theatres to decrease operational difficulties. In fact, emancipating the audience and maintaining control is in a contradictory relationship, and the practice of audience participation has been wavering between the pursuit of infinite possibilities and curbed enthusiasm.

In *Audience Participation in Theatre*, Gareth White adopted the terminology of *Frame Analysis* from a social study in order to analyze the participatory behavior of the audience in interactive theatres. *Frame Analysis* was originally purposed by Erving Goffman to describe our functional understanding of interactions in everyday life and how people understand situations and activities in social science. Antony Jackson borrowed the method for a discussion of interactive strategies in theatre education. When Goffman uses “frame” to discuss social behaviors, he indicates that a frame is a network of shared assumptions about what an interaction means for its participants, and what is appropriate behaviors at these interactions. Gareth White started his discussion about audience participation from the frames study and analyzed what happened in the

audience physically and mentally during the process of the actors inviting them to interact, and audiences accepting or rejecting the invitations.

Consciously or subconsciously, the interactive plays have set preconditions to guide the audience's behavior in order to give them hints about what are the appropriate reactions. We could roughly classify the audience's participatory actions in interactive theatre into: displayed actions, collaborative actions and private actions, according to who is observing. Displayed actions usually happen when an audience is chosen by the actors and asked to do something, sometimes on stage, sometimes in their seats. Commonly other audiences start to look at him or her and, therefore, made him or her a temporary improvisational actor who collaborates with the rehearsed actors to perform for the others. Acting in front a group of people could be very uncomfortable and embarrassing for many, especially when we are unprepared, so the actors always tell the audience exactly what to do to make the process easier. A typical scene in this situation is in magic shows; magicians ask someone from the audiences to help. To avoid nervousness and embarrassment, the performers make the duty as easy as possible for the volunteers with an encouraging smile, and ask the audience to cheer for the brave volunteers. Similar methods are used in interactive theatres because the actors know that it is cruel to drag attention to some audience members but don't tell them what to do. However, sometimes more experimental theaters could deliberately create the uncomfortable feelings, which is the artist's intention. Like in *DAY! Night. fuck...*(2013), a Target Margin Theater Lab piece by William Burke and Emily Rea, an actor goes into the audience, makes some of them squat by their seats and leaves them there, as a result, that audience feels more and more uncomfortable as time goes on, but it is hard for them to decide when to sit back on their seats. Collaborative actions refer to the actions of the audience in one-on-one performances, in which the audience is also the actor and the actor is also the audience.

In this condition, although there are no others, the audience is well aware that the actor is looking back. Out of politeness and to avoid embarrassment, most of the audience would do what they are asked. They may say no to something that is too uncomfortable, but they hardly do anything more aggressive. Private actions are the actions that are part of the performance but are not for anyone to see. For instance, walking from one place to another in an immersive theatre. The audience feels less restricted and pressured since they are only responsible for their own viewing experience and are not shared by anyone else; however, there still are certain rules to follow. Normally, the theater will set up the rules in advance, and there will be staff members in the theatre to make sure the audience follows them. In *Sleep No More* (2012), a famous immersive performance adapted from *Macbeth*, the audience enters a lobby before entering an elevator, which takes them to where the performance takes place, and in the lobby they meet some performers that are not part of the main plots. In the lobby and in the elevator, the performers give the audience instructions about what will happen, and ask them to put on masks and tell what they can and can not do. In *The Grand Paradise* (2016) by Third Rail Projects, the audience is asked to see a “pre-flight safety video” in a small room before entering the performance space, in which the “flight attendants” emphasize that closed doors should not be opened by anyone but the actors. During the performance, as far as I have observed, if the audiences tries to open or peek through a closed door or curtain, there will always be someone to stop them.

In all the cases, we see the inequality between the innocent audience and well-prepared actors and staff members; we see the actors set up a *frame* for the audience to behave in a specific manner, for it is far away from democratic beliefs. We see that the audience is passive, timid and restless in learning and following the instructions. However, in our earlier discussions about traditional Chinese theatre, we could hardly see such inequity between the audience and per-

former; we found the audience confident, self-directed, and comfortable. They are so relaxed and sometime they appear to be rude. There are historical reasons for Chinese theaters to be this way. In *Audience Study of Chinese Opera*, Liu Jinliang and Tan Jingbo point out that Chinese theatre has a tradition of respecting the audience (Liu Tan 11). They describe the social and culture grounds of the tradition: the artist used to be the lowest class in society who lacks decent education; and the audience, on the contrary, commonly were upper class intellectuals who were knowledgeable about art, music and history. In fact, it used to be a popular and delightful recreation for intellectuals to financially support a troupe and teach them to produce the plays they wrote. People thought the ways actors earned their living was basically the same as begging for money, and what's more, people used to believe that there is a relationship between acting and prostitution. With these ideas deeply rooted in their minds, the theatre artists could not consider themselves as authorities. Therefore, they were incredibly humble when presenting their works, just like students handing a test paper to the teacher. Nevertheless, as the theater matures, performers develop their art and professionalism, and the best performers are adored as celebrities who maintain close contacts with the highest-class people. As a result, the performers are the *lowest and highest* class of society at the same time. They are disrespected and adored by the audience at the same time, and they please and educate the audiences in their performance at the same time. In other words, if the traditional Chinese theatre is a class, then the actor is both teacher and student, and so is the audience.

Aside from the complex historical and cultural causes, I am more interested in how Chinese theatre makes it possible for the audience to feel free and comfortable while maintaining the internal order in the theatre. When people step into a theatre space and consider themselves as audience, they have formed a “theatrical frame” under the fame of our cultural and social norms,

and when the actors and theatre staffs use their language, voice, body, and the surrounding environments to set up the rules of this particular performance, they form another *frame* within the theatrical frame that we could call a “performance frame.” I want to stress that these are two completely different process and two completely different frames. Traditional Chinese theatre dose not have specific performance frames for each play, but it has a complete and detailed theatrical frame that all the plays share.

A theatrical frame is based on the common understanding of theatres in the society, and it is a set of concepts and perspectives that the theatregoers hold. A performance frame is set at the individual performance and can include plenty of fictional premises. In our society, the theatre is a place that people go and see performance. We expect the audience to be there on time, follow the instructions, be quiet—unless they are told not to do so, applaud at the end if they want, not to eat or drink, not to use their cell phones, not to use flashes or take pictures. These concepts and regularities that make our theatrical frame are the basis of all the behaviors in theatre, including the participatory actions, and those are not considered as part of the play. In our discussion earlier, we see the creators of the interactive theatres put a lot of effort on setting their performance frames so the audience knows what to do, but in traditional Chinese theatre, the audiences seems to know what to do before they step into the theatre. Their actions are following what we call the theatrical frame, which is set by the rules of theatre in general. The audience and professionals throughout history have worked together to develop the frames and therefore, just like cultural customs, it becomes a complex system.

Audiences’ Community

Following, I am going to introduce three major methods of traditional Chinese theatre to form a theatrical frame for the audience. Audiences of traditional Chinese theatre are considered as a subculture community that has momentous interaction with the world outside the theatre but relatively independent from the regional and period culture. That is to say, being a qualified audience is a much more complex process than buying a ticket and sitting in a seat. New audiences need to learn from the more experienced ones either through observation or by formally engaging someone as a teacher. The teacher would lead the new audience go through an educational progression, and teach the customary participation methods and give knowledge to appreciate the performing techniques. The education would never end since there are always more details to know. Although it may cost new audience more effort to walk into the theatre, participating and being accepted by a culture group is a delightful effort; and while the new audience gains more and more experience and knowledge, they could feel the privilege of decoding the performance and find the beauty that hides under the abstract symbols. In other words, no one in the cast or crew needs to tell the audience what to do, as learning what to do in the theatre is a self-educating process for the audience. The knowledge of how to play the role of an audience is passed down among the audience community.

The audience community has their own organizations called Piaofang (house for Piaoyou) and its members called Piaoyou (friends of box office). While Ximi (theatre fan) is a general name for people who like theatre, Piaoyou is a special appellation for the senior audience who are extremely familiar with theatre that can be regard as semi-professional performers. Piaofang refers to the place where Piaoyou hold their regular activities, and latter it signifies the name of their organization. The influential societies started from some senior audience members that got together in teahouses or public parks to talk about theatre, criticize the plays, and teach them-

selves some pieces; Gradually, they became very organized groups. Especially in the big cities, Piaofang are powerful societies that actively hold regular meetings and special events for the members to exchange their knowledge and opinions about theatre. Though professional performers rarely become members of any Piaofang, there is no doubt that they are inextricably linked to the influential ones. As a result, their meticulous observation facilitate detail-oriented performance styles. Not all the members in Piaofang are expert Piaoyou; on the contrary, the young and new audiences are especially welcomed in Piaofang because the senior members enjoy sharing their knowledge with the young members. In this sense, Piaofang are not only social places for senior audience but also schools for newcomers that make the audience's self-education possible.

Holistic Theatre Experience

Unlike Western audience's theatre experience, the basic units of Chinese theatre are not plays. As I have pointed out in the former chapter, acts and scenes that belong to one play could be performed separately, and similar to that, pieces from non-related plots could be performed together. Chinese theatre plays could easily be break into Zhe, a theatrical term that could be literally translated as "chapter". A Zhe could be roughly regarded as an act but it has more independence and completeness by itself. Some plays were hardly performed in full-length because only several Zhe of them are sufficiently well known, and the rest may be unpopular or even lost to history. When arranging the Zhe, their source is not very important, instead, the kind of characters that are leading the play, the most important performing techniques that the play requires and who the most successful performers are, need to be considered carefully. The Zhe from non-related plays could closely resemble each other; for example, *Wujia Po (Hill Wujia)*, a Zhe from

Honhzuo Lie Ma (The Furious Red Horse) and *Fenhe Wan (Fen River Bend)*, a Zhe from *Zhedong Quanzhuan (The Expedition to the East)* and *Sangyuan Hui (Meeting in Mulberry Garden)* a one-Zhe-play have similar plots and performing styles. All the main plots are about reunions of long-lost husbands and wives, and all the wives suffered poverty while the husbands achieved great career successes while they were apart. Although the characters are from different backgrounds and the Zhe have different functions in the play, people tend to consider them as three related Zhe and study them together as “the three reunions.”

Instead of plays, Zhe is the basic unit for the theatres to arrange performances, however, it is not the basic unit of traditional Chinese theatre experience. The plots, characters, metaphors don't complete themselves in one Zhe, so in order to understand one Zhe, one needs to have the knowledge from the outside and even from other plays. If one takes a glimpse at a stage performance, he will notice the complex system of symbols that make the performance far from realistic. One of the most well-known examples is the meaning of facial painting. Thanks to a pop song, most of the young Chinese, whether they are into the traditional theatre or not, could recite: “red means loyalty; white means duplicity; black means braveness; yellow means testiness”. Characters with facial painting belong to one of the categories of roles named the Jing. The full categories of roles are Sheng, Dan, Jing and Chou and the distinctions among them are by gender, age, personality and social status. Sheng is the positive male role; Dan is the positive female role, Jing is a supporting male role with a striking character and Chou is a clown or a negative character. Beside the Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Chou roles, there are subdivisions of Lao (old), Xiao (young), Wen (civil), Wu (military), Changgong (singing specialty) and Zuogong (acrobatics specialty). So, a Lao Sheng is a positive old male character, and a Wu Dan is a female warrior. The actors usually mainly study the acting style of one or two types and each type requires dif-

ferent acting techniques that included Chang, Nian, Zuo, Da (singing, dialogue, acting and acrobatics). Different types of characters, which have different appearances, could help the experienced audience immediately understand whom the characters are when they appear on stage. Categorizing the characters weakens the richness of the small differences between characters, but releases the pressure of long hard explanations and reduces the cost of creating new plays.

Likewise, the stage settings of traditional Chinese theatre are simple and abstract, a table and two chairs are commonly used, and the combinations of tables and chairs could represent almost everything. By changing their position, the setting could change from a meeting room to a bedroom, from inside a camp, to a setting on a hill. There are two doors on the back of the stage and actors always come out from the stage right door and go offstage through the other one. The doors on the stage are never used as doors in the scene, so if there is a door in the scene, the actors imitate the body movements of opening a door or use a chair to block the invisible door and move the chair to open the door. There is no explanation where the plays take place or what the chairs and tables stand for. New audiences need to gradually learn through extensive theatre experience or obtain the knowledge from the audience communities, like Piaofang. Here, I used the metaphor of theme parks to point out the fact that audiences have options choosing what play, or which part of the play, to see; moreover, the exploration process in the cultural circumstance of theatre would be similar to touring in a theme park: the explorers may have a map, a guide, or just lead by intuition; they could wander around and browse everything, or sit down at one place and enjoy the view; they could go by themselves, but it could be more interesting to have company. The audience accepts the abstract representation in the play and enjoys exploring it and passing the knowledge to new audiences.

Aesthetic Identity

The unrealistic performances in traditional Chinese theatre probably originated from simple symbols; for example: a General climbs on a table with chairs on either side to give commands to his army (figure 6) on a small hill. Or a young lady taking off her scarf to uncover her exquisite headwear could mean she is doing her hair and makeup (figure 7); These traditions originally began to avoid the technical difficulties like building a hill or doing makeup on stage. However, for a hundred-year-old art form, lack of technique cannot explain the complex system of its symbols. Perhaps these abstract expressions were simply low-cost substitutes for real life. However, in the process of development, the abstraction was not abandoned but refined and systematized; this probably is one of the most unique parts of Chinese theatre. Like audiences in other nations, Chinese audiences could not tolerate perfunctory performances. Unlike actors in the West, instead of refining the performance to be closer to the reality, actors put their creativity in polishing the abstractions.

How to stage a battle scene is a relevant example of abstract theatre making. Even in movie productions today, battle scenes are the costly and time-consuming parts; one can imagine the difficulty for small country troupes to convince the audience that what they are looking at is a war among big armies. Furthermore, horses are very commonly needed in battles, but having a real horse on stage is rarely possible. There could be thousands of possible solutions for the problem, like the ancient Greeks set the scene in a rear area and used a messenger to bring the message of the battle. The solution that traditional Chinese theatres adopted was more abstract than Greek theatre. A decorated stick as the customary rule could represent a horsewhip, and different positions of holding the horsewhip could represent either holding or riding a horse. Through various dance movements with the horsewhip, actors can express complex fighting

moves. Since the horse is neither visible nor mentioned in the script, there is a danger that the new audience may misinterpret. Like the Russian journalist from the nineteenth-century who wrote in his comments “Chinese actors... rode sticks as if it’s a horse”, obviously got confused the concept of horsewhip with a horse.



Left: Figure 6 *Changban Po (Mound Changban)*, Yongjin Beijing Opera Troupe, 2010



Right: Figure 7 *Mudan Ting (The Peony Pavilion)*, Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre, 2004

Once a tradition is formed, performers work to enrich numerous details within the structure of the aesthetic standers and respect them as rules. In the example of horsewhips, not only do the color and shape have invariable meanings, but also the movements are exquisite. Actions such as mounting and dismounting a horse, riding a rushing horse, or taming a boggled horse all need to follow some detailed and stylized procedure that is almost like small dance pieces rather than imitations of daily life. Qiba, a set of actions that could be appreciated as a solo dance with percussion, refers to the process of a General putting up the armor and preparing for battle. One of the misleading points of it is that he characters always come up stage fully dressed before Qiba, although many of its movements stand for putting invisible clothes on. As a part of the plot, every movement of Qiba has a fixed meaning, such as tying up the armor piece on his or her chest or putting on a pair of fighting boots. Though the routine of Qiba could be used in all kinds

of different plays, it should be able to denote various emotional states. Mu Guiying's Qiba in *Tianmen Zhen (Battle Tianmen)* is powerful and inspiring, as she feels confident about that her troupe would win the upcoming fight; Xiang Yu's Qiba in *Bawang bie ji (Farewell My Concubine)* was so arrogant that people could sense that the battle would end up a tragedy; on the other hand, Yang Jiye's Qiba in *Li Ling Bei (Tombstone of Li Ling)* is solemn and stirring as he had the courage to face everything that would happen, knowing his chance of coming back alive was little. Though almost identical actions, the best performers could express various mixed emotions, and provide poetic beauty with the smallest details. Apparently, it has also raised the requirements of the performer's skills as well as the audience's appreciation level.

It seems to be irrational for the performers to make a great effort to code their performance only to protect the audience from understanding its meaning, nevertheless, it is the fact that in traditional Chinese theatre audiences never get tired of such complexity. Its reason is not that Chinese audiences are puzzle-lovers, but that they actually are the people who created, and are creating, the complex tradition with the performers. A performing habit, which might be originated from the lack of technical advancement, became a standard through a long-term progress of communication between performer and audience. Once a figure started to be widely accepted by the audience, or once a tradition is formed, performers tend not to break it; however, their interest in innovation won't vanish, as the demand for novelty in the theatre is universal. Thus, they are inclined to enrich the details inside the given structure and improve the existing tradition. As the stage performance goes further and further away from realism, the inner logic of it becomes more and more complex and difficult to comprehend. Consequently, a learning process becomes necessary for the new audiences to understand the aesthetic traditions, and therefore, communications outside the theatre becomes habitual among the audience. The experienced

audiences share their knowledge with the student audiences and suggest that they observe the performances carefully and repeatedly as a practice of what they have learned. As the audiences group developed into being more organized, a relatively stable and self-governing society outside the theatre began to form. For the performers, because their responsibility of attracting the new audience more or less transitioned to the audience community, their primary concerns of a play are not about the overall impressions that the play provides. They don't assume that they are facing someone that is unfamiliar to the field or expect something new; instead, they know their audiences have some basic knowledge of the theatre culture. So, when they produce new plays, they always start with something that is widely accepted. The methods for the audience to understand the plots and characters based on the existing knowledge simplified the producing difficulties in setting up the premises so that they could make efforts on polishing the details that are hardly noticeable for the outsiders. Therefore, we could say that the traditional Chinese plays do not exist in isolation but are generated from the knowledge base that the performers and audiences shares. Without the confirmation from the audience, a symbol can never be regarded as a tradition; likewise, without the direction from the audience, a new symbol will never be born.

A Growing Possibility

There is an interesting fact that, in this day and age, we could find the evidence of the distinct occurrences of traditional Chinese theatre in contemporary experimental interactive theatre. We can see there is a tendency that audiences and the artists collaborate on forming the aesthetic pursuits that are not limited by the boundary of individual plays, and at the same time, the audiences are more and more aware of their roles in the theatre as well as the theatre's role in their lives.

Among all the options that our modern society offers, the theatre has its oblivious imperfections in creating a joyful experience. The audiences have to leave their home, go somewhere unfamiliar; sit on normally uncomfortable seats for hours, and pay for tickets that usually are expensive. Compare to the incredible illusions that the newborn technologies can create, it seems that the thousand-year-old form of art sometimes has to admit it has its disadvantage on entertaining people. The result of the imperfections can cause fewer people to come to the theatre, but there was the big panic that theatre could lose all the audience because of movies, TV shows or video games for decades, theatre today are still very much alive. In fact, in our word that is filled with digital lights and sounds, today's audiences are more aware of the reason why they choose to go to a theatre than the audiences at any other time in history. In other words, the audience is becoming a group of people who identify themselves as theatregoers.

There is a popular prediction that with the help of the Internet, our social life will be largely based on shared interests. If we believe that, then we could easily imagine that the audience members will soon find each other and form their own community like traditional Chinese audiences did. Maybe their community won't be as organized and stable as the traditional Chinese ones that we discussed, but it may be as influential. Now, we could easily find, join, and start discussions on theatre in the popular social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, and I can see the possibilities that this kind of discussion has more and more power on the general aesthetic pursuits of theater in the future. Professional theater artists may participate in the discussions and treat this process as a part of their work as well as the performance itself. Maybe in the future, the new concepts like "alienation affect" or "immersive theatre" can be raised through the discussions among the theatregoers and artists instead of just the professionals. Like the audience community in traditional Chinese theatre, the online or offline community of audience and thea-

theatre artists can also become the place where new audiences gain their knowledge about theatre, therefore, they can participate in a play with more confidence and self-direction. With the help of more influential communities outside the theatre where they can get insightful knowledge, the audience can have the power to actively choose how they want to compose their theatrical experience with different plays, like in traditional Chinese theatre, in order to have a holistic experience. This is a growing possibility for the theatre artists and the audience to form a conversation system that is completely different from the traditional one-way communication.

Conclusion

Inviting the audience to participate with performers is adventurous, as Goffman stated: “The prospect of audience participation make people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed,” whilst, it offers excitements that nothing could compare to. It is a basic principle that the performers rehearse again and again to make sure that a play runs smoothly and no unexpected accident happens, nevertheless, it seems the use of audience participation is conversely pursuing the opposites. What makes these dangerous behaviors valuable and what could the traditional Chinese theatre suggest about it?

The discussions on audience participation constantly involve arguments about authority and democracy. For a lot of artists, the intention of inviting the audience to be a part of the play is to give them the freedom to make their own decision and create their own experience, however, in interactive theatres today, the authority almost never truthfully shifts from the actor to the audience. The actions of the audience are often pre-designed. Although they are given the initiative to act on their own during the performance, the creators of performance has preset the frame, make the rules, and use plenty of methods to lead their action. To avoid the risk of being embarrassed, the audience tends to be very polite and follow the instructions. There are rules of interaction in traditional Chinese theatre as well, but they are not made by the creators of any performance individually, instead, the audience community and performers work together to set up a frame for theatrical behaviors. Thus, the performers are not the absolute authorities of the plays, they do not need to educate the audiences about what they should and should not do.

There are tacit structures among the audiences in traditional Chinese theater; for example, those who appears to be more knowledgeable about the theatre have more impact than the rest,

however, the authority of the theatre is shifting at all times. Unquestionably, more often than not the performers are leading the audiences in the interactions, as we described earlier, they could Yao Hao, flaunt their skills and build or break the audiences' expectations, and normally the performers' actions are the triggers of the audiences' reaction, but anyone in the audience can jump out and try to lead the conversation. They can give positive or negative reviews or pass some specific information and their leadership can be approved or refused by the others and new leaders may emerge and replace the old ones. If we compare the leadership in the theatre to the leadership in the political world, the active audiences are like revolutionary leaders, who may not have noble blood but volunteer to speak for the people. They may be soon replaced but leave their colorful legends.

One of the most significant reasons that Chinese theatre can create such special experience is that its basic unit is not independent plays. Because our modern theatres are habituated to assume that audiences should not have any knowledge about the play, or assume the theatre should not require their audience to have any knowledge except for common sense, they need to be the educators who urgently impart all the knowledge to the audience in very short amount of time. The Chinese theatres are not based on the self-completed plays, but the elements of an aesthetic system, like "Sheng, Dan, Jin, Chou" and "chang, nian, zuo, da", the terms that have particular meanings in theatre field. Although the professional actors regularly know about the aesthetic system more than normal people, it is highly possible that the audience is not less expert than the professionals. Only when the audience's knowledge, taste and desires are recognized and respected, the communication in the theatre between the performer and the audience can be established equally and in sophisticated manner. If we do not want the audience to feel awkward-

ly nervous like an innocent child in an unfamiliar environment, then we need to give up our superiority and think about what they already know.

Another privilege that actors have when interacting with the audiences is they are not bound by the cultural manners. The frame of our general social culture is not as much in force to the actors as to the audience since in the theatrical frame actors are not necessary representing themselves. The actors could be rude, neurotic or wacky and the audience would believe that it is part of their acting. However if the audience acts rude there will not be a fake identity to save them from blame. In traditional Chinese theater, it is clear that some of the actions are part of the theatrical interaction, which means the performers are responsible for their own actions, and some are part of the performance that they represent the characters. If the actor is not acting in the same frame of behavior with the audience, then it will be challenging for the interactions between them to form any expressive communication.

The tradition of considering theatre as political events originates from ancient Greece where all the citizens were gathered for Tragedy competitions. In the thousand-year-long Chinese tradition, theatre along with all lyric literature, music and arts are believed to be recreation, unlike the philosophical classics and the official history records, and are considered to be worthless in political practices. The righteousness of traditional Chinese society believes in orders and etiquettes, and despises human desire, but the spirit of traditional Chinese arts is always pursuing release and freedom, as they are the getaways for the repressive souls. Therefore unlike the systematized and autocratic normalcy of the traditional Chinese political lives, the appearance of traditional Chinese theatre is disorderly, de-centered and lively. Democracy is a foreign term and never had active political appeal until the late nineteen century in Chinese history, so it is a diffi-

cult to judge if the audience participation in Chinese theatre is democratic, yet its antiauthoritarian features are obvious.

Besides the distinguishable differences that we found in audience participation between traditional Chinese theatre and contemporary interactive theatre, we also can see some interesting tendencies that there could be some similar features of the two in the future. The interactive theatres today are developing its aesthetic pursuits that are more complex and multifaceted than the traditional or entertaining performances, and this results in a higher requirement of their audience. The choice of going to an interactive theatre itself could state an aesthetic self-identification and this is similar to one of the major aspect of traditional Chinese theatre. We think there is a possibility that in the future, with the help of growing Internet, that theatregoers with similar interest could form their own communities like traditional Chinese theatre audiences, together with the professional theatre artists. As traditional Chinese theatre suggests, these communities could be a place the audiences share their knowledge and thoughts, and, therefore, break the authority of the performers when participating a play. The communities could offer audiences opportunities to participate in the theatrical culture outside the theatre, and contribute in developing a culturally-wise understanding of audience participation that includes a more systematic shared theatrical frame.

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