

**Post-Cold War Experimental Theatre of China:
Staging Globalisation and Its Resistance**

Zheyu Wei

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis is a study of Chinese experimental theatre from the year 1990 to the year 2014, to examine the involvement of Chinese theatre in the process of globalisation – the increasingly intensified relationship between places that are far away from one another but that are connected by the movement of flows on a global scale and the consciousness of the world as a whole. The central argument of this thesis is that Chinese post-Cold War experimental theatre has been greatly influenced by the trend of globalisation. This dissertation discusses the work of a number of representative figures in the “Little Theatre Movement” in mainland China since the 1980s, e.g. Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, Zhang Xian, etc., whose theatrical experiments have had a strong impact on the development of contemporary Chinese theatre, and inspired a younger generation of theatre practitioners. Through both close reading of literary and visual texts, and the inspection of secondary texts such as interviews and commentaries, an overview of performances mirroring the age-old Chinese culture’s struggle under the unprecedented modernising and globalising pressure in the post-Cold War period will be provided. Case studies of experimental theatre performances are classified into three thematic dimensions which respectively signify the political, economic and social/cultural tension between China and globalisation. Each of the three approaches warrants its own chapter. Chapter One focuses on political theatre, in which the oppression of ideologies and clash of civilisations are explicitly portrayed. Chapter Two covers plays that concern changes in society resulting from the economic reform since 1990. In Chapter Three, plays concerning conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures are examined to explore how Chineseness is constructed in relation to the imagination of globalisation.

In this research, analysis will touch upon two levels of the interaction between Chinese theatre and the process of globalisation. The first level is a close examination of the “economic base” of Chinese experimental theatre, which since 1990 has undergone a major transformation from being government-supported to being market-supported or semi-market-supported. The second level is how the dramatists, aware of their new roles

in the globalised theatre industry, actively engaged in rising consumerism to present their experiences and imagination on the contemporary Chinese stage. To evaluate and critique experimental theatre within the condition of globalisation, Gerard Delanty's idea of critical cosmopolitanism concerned with "the identification of moments of self-transformation in contexts in which there is an expansion in reflexive capacities and ultimately in those situations in which something undergoes normative transformation from the encounter with the Other" will be a tool of assessment in this thesis. The self-reflexivity embedded in cosmopolitanism can build a neutral ground for ethical judgements. The analysis of Chinese experimental theatre yields a better understanding as to the development of Chinese theatre in the last twenty-five years or so. More importantly, the analysis illustrates theatre's opportunities to bring about dialogues, reforms, and reconciliations, and to pursue the ethics of openness and equity in globalisation – the ethics of cosmopolitanism.

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Notes on Translation and Names

Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are mine. Non-English terminologies and titles are translated into English in square brackets.

Chinese names follow their native convention, with family name first, followed by given name. The only exception is when a person has customarily chosen to put his or her given name before his or her family name, such as Leo Ou-fan Lee and Daphne P. Lei.

The *pinyin* system is adopted for the names of people from modern mainland China as well as historical Chinese figures, while the names of people from Taiwan follow their own Romanisation system largely defined by Wade-Giles.

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Introduction

[W]e came to the conclusion that integration into the global economy is a historical trend. To grow its economy, China must have the courage to swim in the vast ocean of the global market. If one is always afraid of bracing the storm and exploring the new world, he will sooner or later get drowned in the ocean.

– President Xi Jinping’s speech at World Economic Forum Annual Meeting (2017)¹

What’s the matter? It’s only China, coming towards you at five hundred miles an hour.

– Lucy Kirkwood, *Chimerica* (2013)²

This thesis is a study of Chinese experimental theatre from the year 1990 to the year 2014, to examine the involvement of Chinese theatre in the process of globalisation – the increasingly intensified relationship between places that are far away from one another but that are connected by the movement of flows on a global scale and the consciousness of the world as a whole. As the title implies, the end of the Cold War, signified by the dissolving of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, marked the start of a new age in human history and left a great impact on Chinese society and indeed most international societies. Although since 1979 China adopted “Reform and Opening-up” policy, theatre in China since the end of the Cold War has undergone some more significant changes informed by this immense social shift, generating new styles, new production models, as well as the potential to introduce social reforms. Among all of the various forms of theatre in China, experimental theatre is the quickest to grasp the social changes and (re)present them to audiences, as by its definition experimental theatre challenges the norms and conventions of the existing theatre. A study of experimental theatre not only enables a thorough examination of Chinese society in the age of

¹ “President Xi’s Speech to Davos in Full,” accessed January 23, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>.

² Lucy Kirkwood, *Chimerica* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013), 17.

globalisation from many innovative and interesting points of view, but also reflects on how we are affected by globalisation, and renews our understanding of globalisation.

The central argument of this thesis is that Chinese post-Cold War experimental theatre has been greatly influenced by the trend of globalisation – politically, economically and culturally. An analysis of Chinese experimental theatre from the theoretical perspective of globalisation studies is significant in two ways. Compared to the term “post-1989,” “post-Tian’anmen”³ or “post-socialist,”⁴ I propose the use of “post-Cold War” in order to highlight the integration of global economy and international communities as the context of Chinese experimental theatre since the 1990s. On the one hand, such a study will yield a better understanding as to the development of Chinese theatre in the last twenty-five years or so. More importantly, it will illustrate theatre’s opportunities to bring about dialogues, reforms and reconciliations and to pursue the ethics of openness and equity in globalisation – to put it more specifically, the ethics of cosmopolitanism.

The most significant change occurring on Chinese theatre stages since the 1990s is the marketisation of theatre productions. As part of the economic reform, since the late 1980s many theatre companies have shifted from being government-supported to being market-dependent, and from common ownership and collective ownership to mixed ownership and private ownership.⁵ Many new theatre companies were set up with the support of the government in order to create more jobs and boost the economy. Chinese audiences were presented with a new rendition of theatre – one more diverse in aesthetics,

³ Bettina S. Entell, “Post-Tian’anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre/CNET” (PhD. diss., University of Hawai’i, 2002).

⁴ Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 208; Donghui He, “Cultural Critique and Avant-Garde Theatre in Post-Socialist China: Meng Jinghui’s ‘I Love Therefore I Am,’” *China Information*, no. 1 (2015): 60-88; Jing Nie. “Staging Spatial Conflicts and Affect in Emotional Postsocialism: Meng Jinghui’s Theater.” *The China Review*, no. 1 (2011): 89-112.

⁵ Most of the theatre companies today (including spoken drama and traditional theatre) were established by the government in the 1950s as part of the newly founded People’s Republic of China government’s cultural policy. Consequently, they have been owned by the state or the collective (large state-owned companies or industrial departments, local communities, etc.). The economic reform of theatre industry will be discussed in Chapter Two.

political agendas and the actor-spectator relationships. Since the 1990s the market for performing arts has grown dramatically, which has been noticed by the Chinese central government who eventually declared promoting and developing the “cultural industry,” the term first coined by German theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, as a “basic state strategy”⁶ in 2009.⁷ According to the Ministry of Culture of China, in 2014 there were over three times more registered performing arts troupes in China than had existed 15 years previously in 1990 (8,769 and 2,805 troupes, respectively). Contributing to this sharp rise in official performance troupes was the enormous increase of the number of non-traditional/*xiqu* theatre (including spoken drama, children’s theatre, opera, puppetry, etc.) troupes, from 90 in 1990 to 807 in 2014.⁸ The number of spectators for performing arts reached 989.3 million in 2014, with a total income of 7.57 billion yuan (approximately one billion euros), offering jobs for 262,900 employees,⁹ while in 1990 there was only a total income of 278 million yuan, 510.1 million spectators, and 167,300 people who were working in performing arts companies.¹⁰

The substantial growth of the theatre market is not at all surprising because this phenomenon reflects the rapid development of the Chinese economy. The Chinese

⁶ Other “basic state strategies” include birth control, sexual equality, “Reform and Opening-up,” protecting the environment, etc. Although there is no official definition of “basic state strategy,” generally speaking “basic state strategies” are the most significant plans and guidelines of policy-making of the Chinese government that have been stated in laws, government and party reports.

⁷ In 2003, Ministry of Culture of China announced “Several Opinions on Supporting and Facilitating the Development of Cultural Industry” (*guanyu zhichi he cujin wenhuachanye fazhan de ruogan yijian*); in General Secretary Hu Jintao’s report in the 17th National Congress of Communist Party of China in 2007, he mentioned the Party will “devote great efforts to development cultural industry” and in 2009, the Chinese State Council announced “Plans on Reinvigoration of the Cultural Industry” (*wenhuachanye zhenxing guihua*), which marks the turning point when China started to treat the development of cultural industry as a national strategy.

⁸ Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo wenhua wenwu tongji nianjian: 2015* [Statistical Yearbook of Culture and Cultural Relics of China: 2015] (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2015), 178, 216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰ Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo wenhua wenwu shiye tongji nianjian: 1996* [Statistical Yearbook of the Public Institutions of Culture and Cultural Relics of China: 1996] (Beijing: Wenhua bu jihua caiwusi, 1996), 249–50.

government began carrying out its “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1979,¹¹ and the transformation from a planned economy to a market economy,¹² as well as political reforms, revitalised Chinese society. Supported by its large population, which helps the government to build a competitive labour-intensive industry, China joined and thrived in the global market. With an average increasing rate of approximately 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) over three decades, today’s Chinese socialist market economy has become the world’s second largest economy by nominal GDP, and the world’s largest economy by purchasing power parity (PPP), according to the International Monetary Fund’s estimate in 2014.¹³ Along with the tremendous economic growth comes the process of large-scale urbanisation, resulting in the emergence of a huge middle class with a population of at least 100 million.¹⁴ As the middle class had extra money to spend for entertainment, the theatre market was provided with an increasing number of consumers. Furthermore, the middle-class audiences were better educated and exposed to globalised popular culture, which to a great extent redefines the politics and aesthetics of contemporary theatre, and affects both “mainstream” – big, commercial productions

¹¹ “Reform and Opening-up” (*gaige kaifang*) is the systematic reform in economy and politics introduced by the Communist Party of China since the third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee in 1978. As mentioned earlier, now it remains a “basic state strategy” for the Chinese government.

¹² “Planned economy” (*jihua jingji*) is a type of economy in which the government is responsible for allocating resources. This type of allocation mechanism is first practiced by the USSR in the 1910s, and when the P.R.C. was founded the Chinese central government applied the Soviet model to its economic strategy. The planned economy successfully helped China build its heavy industry in the 1950s and 1960s at a fast speed, but it also had its shortcomings, such as insufficient resource distribution and an inability to stimulate the initiative of the workforce. Contrary to a planned economy, a market economy (*shichang jingji*) relies chiefly on market forces to allocate goods and resources and to determine prices. One of the major aims of economy reform in China since the late 1970s has been to transform the planned economy to a market economy (while the state retains control of some “lifeline” industries).

¹³ See the data “World Economic Outlook Database” of International Monetary Fund (“Report for Selected Countries and Subjects,” accessed March 19, 2017, [http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/02/weodata/weorept.aspx?pr.x=76&pr.y=14&sy=1990&ey=2021&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=924%2C111&s=NGDPD%2CPPPGDP&grp=0&a=.](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/02/weodata/weorept.aspx?pr.x=76&pr.y=14&sy=1990&ey=2021&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=924%2C111&s=NGDPD%2CPPPGDP&grp=0&a=.”))

¹⁴ See Credit Suisse Research Institute, “Global Wealth in 2015: Underlying Trends Remain Positive - Credit Suisse,” accessed December 2, 2016, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/us/en/about-us/research/research-institute/news-and-videos/articles/news-and-expertise/2015/10/en/global-wealth-in-2015-underlying-trends-remain-positive.html>; Gan Li, “Zhongguo zhongchanjieji renshu yijing chaoguo liangyi [Population of the Middle Class in China Have Surpassed 200,000],” accessed December 2, 2016, <http://business.sohu.com/20151117/n426657041.shtml>.

in major theatre companies – and “marginal” – experimental theatre and performance arts – styles of theatre.

This being said, when considering Chinese theatre, participation in the process of globalisation means far more than the marketisation and intergration with the global economy of the theatre industry. Globalisation engenders intensified worldwide social relations and an ever-growing exchange and interference between “the local” and “the global,” so that “local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”¹⁵ Therefore, Chinese theatre is involved in global politics: on the one hand it is affected by the interaction between Chinese society and other societies, and on the other hand, it provides commentary and provokes discussion on public issues, such as global capitalism’s impact on Chinese society, and equality between different cultures. Theatre as live performance, as Jill Dolan puts it, “provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world.”¹⁶ It has always been political in the sense that it is a social gathering, and a public sphere can be generated within it. Chinese theatre is no exception; as a matter of fact, many plays have been used as powerful tools for political propaganda, and many played an important part in social reforms in the twentieth century (such as land reforms to redistribute agricultural land to rural population, and introducing new marriage laws). Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, for instance, left a profound impact on the New Culture Movement in China in the 1910s and 1920s,¹⁷ and has been used for advocating women’s rights. As increasing international cultural exchange continues to bring Chinese society a broader cultural horizon and new lifestyles, Chinese theatre today more frequently entangles itself with

¹⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 64.

¹⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁷ New Culture Movement (*xinwenhua yundong*) was launched by Chinese intellectuals in order to reform the country’s culture, liberate the society and emancipate the individual. With “Democracy” (*minzu*) and “Science” (*kexue*) as its key catchwords, the movement is one of the major modernisation movements of China in the twentieth century. Many writers took part, among them Hu Shi, who also translated *A Doll’s House* (with Luo Jialun) and published the article “Ibsenism: My View of Life” (*Yibushengzhuyi: wo de renshengguan*) in 1918 to promote liberal values.

issues of significance to the world and humanity as a whole, such as social justice, human rights, and even climate change. On the other hand, Chinese theatre has to reexamine and redefine itself in the context of globalisation. Questions of cultural identity, Chineseness, and the legacy of tradition and history have been raised through the cultural exchange in globalisation such as touring in international theatre festivals, and founding the National Theatre Company of China.

Based on the fact that Chinese society has a much closer relationship to the rest of the world than ever, my research aims to examine how Chinese theatre, under the banner of “experimental” and “avant-garde,” has engaged with the trend of globalisation over the past two decades from circa 1990 up to 2014, observing how capitalist culture floods the landscape of contemporary Chinese theatre and how the cross-cultural exchange in the globalised discourse affected contemporary theatre theory and practice. The new socio-historical context calls for a retrospective analysis of Chinese theatrical culture and a new understanding of “Chineseness” in relation to globalisation. This dissertation addresses and aims to answer the following questions: How do globalisation and the introduction of capitalism affect both the theory and practice of post-Cold War Chinese theatre? How is globalisation imagined, experienced, and questioned on the stage, and how is it received? In the period since 1990, can the theatre experiments avoid total compliance with the hegemony and homogeneity of globalisation and narrow-minded sectarianism that opposes all changes and innovations so as to generate new meanings? Does experimental theatre practice in China provide a new understanding of Chinese cultural identity in the context of globalisation?

Theatre is a lens through which one can observe how a society reacts when confronted with globalisation, the process that creates and fosters tremendous homogenising pressure on a global scale. The activity of theatre records and tracks the development of a society, especially when said society encounters a powerful foreign culture and is forced to make changes (for instance, we can look at the emergence of Japanese “new drama” [*shingeki*] in the twentieth century to examine how Japanese society experienced westernisation, and we can also look at the staging of Shakespeare in the British Raj to examine colonialism in India). It may also give a sense of how people

from different cultures have achieved co-existence when they meet each other in a specific society and hint at how they can better coexist in the future. It is because theatre is itself an experiment of coexistence, where “new forms of social coexistence may be tried out, or they simply emerge.”¹⁸ When theatre happens, something new and different is presented in a relatively confined space, by one group of people to another, and the latter are granted the opportunity to accept, respond, communicate, question, contemplate, and/or criticise. As Erika Fischer-Lichte writes, the cultural production in contemporary theatre is, not just “an aesthetic indicator of a potential social change in the existing culture,” but also “the place of execution and instrument of such cultural change.”¹⁹ Hence, this dissertation focuses on such types of “experiments of coexistence,” examining how these experiments are performed in both the literary and metaphorical sense, whether they are able to offer an inspiring picture of a cosmopolitan future of openness and equity, and what lessons they can teach us.

The end of History? Or the start of a new era?

Before properly delving into these questions above, the historical context must be established. The end of the Cold War did not come overnight. Rather, especially in Chinese society, the “ending” of the Cold War was a process of struggles, conflicts, violence, and reconciliation, which lasted for over two years (1989-1991). During this period, a wave of revolutions bent on toppling socialist regimes on a global scale first arose in China. The June-Fourth Movement (*liusi yundong*, or “’89 Students Movement”) broke out in April of 1989 when college students in Beijing demonstrated on streets and occupied Tian’anmen Square, demanding the government tackle corruption and embrace Western liberal values. The movement was tolerated by the government at the beginning,

¹⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking ‘Intercultural Theatre’: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, and Saskya Iris Jain (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 11.

¹⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre : A European Perspective* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 157.

and was supported by citizens from all over the country, but later as the conflict between protesters and the authorities became fiercer, the government decided to put an end to the demonstration by force.²⁰ The protest ended on the June 4, 1989, but left a profound impact on Chinese society. A number of arrests of student leaders and the students' supporters were made, and many of them were sentenced to imprisonment or forced into exile. The pro-democracy leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) was changed to a politically conservative but pragmatic one, which carried on the "Reform and Opening-up" policy.²¹ The government also launched a major media campaign criticising the "bourgeois liberalisation" (*zichanjieji ziyouhua*) ideology which was thought to have sparked the protest, and the party returned to a conservative attitude towards political reforms, and re-established firm control over the press, publishing, and mass media, etc. When the USSR dissolved in December of 1991, ironically, China, where the series of global revolutions against communist rule started, still stood as a socialist country under the CPC's strengthened control. While the collapse of socialist regimes of many countries following the fall of the USSR can be viewed as a sort of domino effect, interestingly, the first block of the dominoes – the socialist regime of China – did not fall.

When the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama delivered his famous speech "End of History?" in 1989, he was observing the grave economic and political crisis that the Communist bloc was facing, and he was optimistic about the "unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism,"²² eventually leading to "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form

²⁰ At the dawn of 4th of June, 1989, the students were driven out from Tian'anmen Square, and the Chinese government was accused of causing the death of a number of students and civilians by using the military to enforce martial law, while the exact death toll is still unclear.

²¹ Jiang Zemin replaced Zhao Ziyang as the CPC general secretary and the latter, who sympathised with the student protestors during the movement, was ousted by the party leadership and had to live his life under house arrest.

²² Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3.

of human government.”²³ It is true that, as Fukuyama observes, “the unfolding of modern natural science has had a uniform effect on all societies that have experienced it,”²⁴ and, from a Marxist point of view, it is clear that the development of productive forces has driven every nation-state to modernise itself in order to not be excluded from the global market or to suffer military disadvantages which could threaten its sovereignty. However, Fukuyama’s claim that “[t]he triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident”²⁵ is dubious. It is because 1) as many critics have pointed out, even within the so-called “Western World,” diverse forms of so-called “liberalism” have been developed based on various social-cultural contexts – the North American, the German, the Nordic and the Japanese “liberalisms” are very different from each other, and 2) there are still nations such as China, being a radical exception to Fukuyama’s argument, which have been trying to resist liberalisation forces produced in the West while enjoying significant economic and social development.

Fukuyama applies Hegel’s philosophical idea of a “struggle for recognition” to his analysis of the contemporary world, asserting that man’s longing for dignity and respect drives historical processes, and that the longing has now been satisfied through the universal and reciprocal recognition found in current liberalism. Therefore he argues that we have witnessed “the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.”²⁶ Communism, as one of the two major challenges to liberalism,²⁷ according to Fukuyama, is already dead as an ideological force, for history has seen the fall of the Berlin Wall and the economic “liberalising” reform in China.

It is true that the further China goes down the route of modernisation and globalisation, the more it feels the urgent need to establish a reliable discourse of its

²³ Ibid., 4.

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), xiv.

²⁵ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The other challenge is fascism, according to Fukuyama, which was militarily defeated long ago.

nationality in which the authority and legitimacy of its mode of development – developing capitalism within the socialist regime – is defined and assured, both within the country and within a global context. As a state with growing hard and soft power, China has been playing an increasingly important role on the global stage, economically (such as joining World Trade Organisation in 2001, participating in world bail-out programmes in the face of the global financial crisis of 2008, etc.), politically (such as getting involved in the global Anti-Terrorism War initiated by the United States in 2001, organising the “Six-party Talk”²⁸ over the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2003, sending troops overseas for various United Nations’ peacekeeping projects since 1992 and tracking and striking pirates down in Somalia since 2008, etc.), and culturally (such as setting up Confucius Institutes all over the world since 2003, promoting Chinese culture via holding international events such as the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, and the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, etc.). Yet there is no sign that China is completely following Western liberalism economically, politically, or culturally. Since the foundation of the socialist regime, China has been focusing on itself, developing into a nation with its own economic, political, and cultural features – a phenomenon emphasised and supported by the government when, in the 1990s, they wrote into the Constitution that China is a regime of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi*, as theorised by Deng Xiaoping), building “socialist market economy” and promoting “socialist spiritual civilisation” within the nation.²⁹

In this case, the reality of China, along with many other challenges which the West is faced with, contradicts the “End of History” claim and denies a singular, general and complete answer to the question of human society’s development: if the world in which we are living is enduring a process of “globalisation,” there is no evidence that a uniform path of development and a universal end-goal or destination of globalisation can be

²⁸ The six parties are North Korea, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and the US.

²⁹ See The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed January 27, 2017, http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm.

concluded. Neither is the postmodern assertion, that “we are all on the move”³⁰ in this age of globalisation at all substantiated. The barriers between cultures have by no means been broken down, nor have all cultural differences been deconstructed. On the contrary, in the face of globalisation, various societies have attempted to construct a kind of narrative of alternative modernities in which their own cultural identity are constantly being modified and redefined, and thus strengthened.

Yet such attempts will be fruitless if a society tries to re-establish an identity only through nationalist sentiment, because nation-states can never be self-sustaining, especially in the age of globalisation. Today, with the global economic and cultural exchange, and the increased movement of people growing continuously, it is no longer possible to construct a national identity exclusive of foreignness. What is more, exclusive nationalism is problematic because it makes the individual subject to an overpowering collective. The call by the authorities to ask people to devote themselves in the cause of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” in order to realise a “Chinese Dream” (*Zhongguo meng*, invented in 2013 as the government’s slogan to unite Chinese people) is not capable of mobilising the whole nation because it fails to connect the well-being of an individual with that of the collective. Nationalism in China has become an oppressive discourse in which any defect or setback within the society will be concealed as merely being a “Chinese characteristic” and therefore beyond criticism. Furthermore, nationalism easily overlooks equality and mutual respect between and within societies. Regional separatism and ethnic minority issues have been troubling China for a long time, only to be intensified by the government’s effort of promoting Chinese nationalism, which often equates “Chinese” (*Zhonghua*) with “Han” (*Han*, the majority ethnic group of the Chinese population) and ignores the needs of minorities. Several cases of radical violent conflicts in China in recent years³¹ have reminded us that although there is little chance for a military conflict between major world powers, it does not mean that the

³⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 78.

³¹ The car suicide attack in Tian’anmen Square on 28 October 2013, and the deadly knife attack in Kunming railway station on 1 March 2014, both carried out by extreme Islamic separatists, are typical examples.

world is free from violence. Considering this in the context of today's world, with global challenges such as terrorism and immigrant crises, it is clearly that a nation can no longer be separated from the rest of the globe, and that failure to deal with conflicts between different groups of people may be much more costly than expected.

Consequently, many Chinese people in the last decade of the twentieth century did not feel that the End of History hypothesis applied to their society and lifestyle, but could still sense that something old was gone, and something new was approaching. At this time, the Chinese government also recognised what Deng Xiaoping asserts: that peace and development have become the theme of this age, and this is of great significance to the globe.³² This "Post-New Era"³³ marks a shift of Chinese society's focus from socialist-capitalist military and ideology confrontation towards economic and social development. Yet new problems have emerged, concerning oppression at the hands of global capital as well as the nationalist narrative. People have been experiencing the introduction of Western capitalism in many aspects of their society. Those who were slow to adapt to this situation suffered, for the business world does not show mercy for the disadvantaged, and the belief in either globalisation or nationalism would not provide aid and consolation in difficult situations.

A study of theatre in the China of this period can be informative and illuminating in the sense that how arts and the artistic public sphere responds to the emergence of the new epoch is examined. As a means of leisure activity and cultural consumption by people, theatre is both an economic and an ideological practice, reflecting aesthetic interest and values of the members of a society, and mirroring the society's political ecology. In an Althusserian sense, theatre often serves as a society's reproduction of relations of production, by *interpellating* the individual spectators as subjects (consumers). But theatre in many cases is by no means where creativity is confined and

³² Yu Yuanpei, ed., *Deng Xiaoping lilun cidian* [Deng Xiaoping Theory Dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2004), 384–86, 527.

³³ Post-New Era (*hou xin shiqi*), is what some Chinese historians call the period from 1989 to "the present" (scholars stopped using the term at the beginning of the new century so the term covers approximately ten to fifteen years), while "New Era" (*xin shiqi*) is the post-Mao period from the reform in the late 1970s to 1989.

subjectivity is turned passive; on the contrary theatre often gives birth to radical revolts and inspiring innovations. As a means of exchange of cultures and ideas between performers and spectators, and as a cultural practice in which tradition and modernity are examined, narrated and corporeally presented, theatre is a platform where encounters of different (sometimes even contradicting or conflicting) cultures happen, where rehearsals and experiments of intercultural interactions can be conducted, and where efforts to construct a (new) cultural identity in response to alien cultures are made.

This point is particularly evident in the Chinese context because spoken drama, the westernised theatrical form in China, is a product of this encounter of cultures (this point shall be expanded upon later in this chapter), and meaningful discoveries can be made through the analysis of the dynamics present in this intercultural performance. It is clear that a look at contemporary Chinese theatre will increase understanding of Chinese society's interaction with globalisation because 1) a sociological study of contemporary theatre reveals the process of urbanisation of a society, the stratification of social groups and the logic of cultural (re)production, which are closely connected to the impact that globalisation leaves, and 2) theatre performances today often open up an intercultural conversation, which either interrogates China's role in globalisation or experiments with new dynamics between China and the rest of the world.

Conceptualising globalisation

The purpose of this study is to gain insights to globalisation which stem from theatre performances and create potentialities of actions to resist homogeneity produced by globalisation. But first of all, what is globalisation, and how can one analyse it? As sociologist Armand Mattelart writes, globalisation is “one of those tricky words, one of those instrumental notions that, under the effect of market logics and without citizens being aware of it, have been naturalized to the point of becoming indispensable for establishing communication between people of difficult cultures.”³⁴ It is a social

³⁴ Armand Mattelart, *Networking the World, 1794-2000* (Minneapolis and London: University of

phenomenon that has aroused academic attention from many disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, media studies, science, technology, ecology, and many others.

The literary theorist Fredric Jameson describes the term globalisation as a “modern or postmodern version of the proverbial elephant,” depicted by blind observers in diverse ways; yet the elephant does exist.³⁵ Yet, it is more than a constructed concept; it is an idea that can be empirically proven in the contemporary world. Sociologist Mauro F. Guillen defines globalisation as “a process leading to greater interdependence and mutual awareness (reflexivity) among economic, political, and social units in the world, and among actors in general.” By citing convincing data signifying the magnificently growing development of technology, increasing capital flows, long-distance and cross-cultural communication, international travels and immigration, Guillen asserts that globalisation is undeniably occurring right here and now.³⁶

In his book *Theatre & Globalization*, theatre theorist Dan Rebellato identifies five types of the tensions within globalisation: 1) human global consciousness, the gradual awareness of worldwide relationships; 2) the global culture, the interconnection or even homogenisation of world cultures; 3) the conflict between nations, the “Clash of Civilisations” that worries theorists such as Samuel Huntington; 4) the international politics, the increasing international collaboration between organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, etc. and 5) the global economy, which is the sheer circulation of capital on the planet.³⁷ What is shown by Rebellato’s classifications of these tensions is that the term globalisation has contested meanings and is hard to pin down as a concrete concept.

Minnesota Press, 2000), 97.

³⁵ Fredric James, “Preface,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), xi.

³⁶ Mauro F. Guillen, “Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble?,” in *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*, ed. George Ritzer and Zeynep Atalay. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 5–9.

³⁷ Dan Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4–8.

Globalisation has become a way in which we perceive and describe human society today. Nowadays, multi-national corporations enter the markets of most countries and regions, extracting raw material from various sources and manufacturing products to be transported to various destinations; therefore, a financial crisis in any local economy leaves a great impact on the global market. Human rights, global warming, and serious pandemics such as HIV and Ebola have all become “global issues” under the spotlight of a mass media that pervades all cultures, while international organisations such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Police Organisation, and the World Health Organisation are playing increasingly larger and more important roles in dealing with such global issues. It is evidence of the fact that globalisation has entered the fabric of most societies, and there is an urgent need to confront and discuss the concept of globalisation in terms of its progress, means of functioning, and actual impact.

Theorists such as Anthony Giddens see globalisation as a new phase of history that radicalises or culminates modernity. In his book *The Consequences of Modernity* Giddens writes that the world has reached a historical point where the value of modernity is reconsidered on a global scale while “remnants of tradition and providential outlooks are cleared away,”³⁸ but “[w]e have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalization.”³⁹ To him, the gradual decline of Western hegemony is the result of the vast global spread of Western or, in other words, modern, institutions, for, in the process of globalisation, both the West and the rest of the world have been structured by the four institutional forces of modernity: capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and military power.⁴⁰ Thus the world has become united by globalisation, which is the radical form of Westernisation and modernisation.

³⁸ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 51.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 52.

For Giddens, “modernity is inherently globalizing,”⁴¹ and globalisation leads to a modernity shared by all communities of the world. This idea is best and primarily exemplified in the “world-system” theory originally formulated by the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, a theory that can be seen as a precursor to globalisation theory. In his 1974 book *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, Wallerstein proposes that human society as a whole be viewed as systems on a global scale based and dependant on the world-wide expansion of capitalism. According to Wallerstein, analysis based on nation-states is not sufficient nor efficient enough to gain an understanding of history and political-economic development of the world, and thus he introduces “world systems” to indicate that “we are dealing with a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systematic rules.”⁴² Thereby the world is divided into layers for different purposes of production, and the core logic in the world-system paradigm is the capitalist operation. What is implied in this perspective is that as long as the capital flows spread, the progress of capitalist expansion and globalisation will continue.

But even if the case is – as Giddens and Wallerstein believe – that globalisation equals the spread of, in their proposed cases, Western modernity, globalisation does not necessarily result in convergence of the West with the rest of the world. Some scholars of globalisation studies have voiced concerns that globalisation will inevitably lead to “Americanisation” or even “McDonaldisation,” meaning that it will reproduce and result in hardly anything apart from exploitation and consumption.⁴³ However, when considering globalisation, the agency of the local cannot be underestimated. Globalisation enhances cultural exchange and affects both ends of the interaction. As

⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴² Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 17.

⁴³ See George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation Thesis: Explorations and Extensions* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998).

sociologist Ulf Hannerz points out, “The world system, rather than creating massive cultural homogeneity on a global scale, is replacing one diversity with another; and the new diversity is based relatively more on interrelations and less on autonomy.”⁴⁴

Sociologist Roland Robertson also refers to globalisation as both “the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole,”⁴⁵ and he addresses the dynamic of globalisation as a “twofold process involving the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism.”⁴⁶ He further introduces the concept of “glocalization,” by which he means that globalisation’s influence has to be manifested in the forms of the local, since locality and community has expanded throughout the world, thus the local has been globalised, and vice versa.⁴⁷ In this way, the “universalism” in globalisation cannot be understood as merely a formative power with a unifying standard, but also something fluid and relative to the particular.

As Fredric Jameson writes, globalisation generally functions through a binary relation, and “such relationships (between a state claiming universality [...] and another claiming local particularity; or between particulars, or between universals) are necessarily symbolic ones.”⁴⁸ In other words, these symbolic relationships are based on social-political reality, yet the struggle and the conflicts within globalisation have to define themselves against their respective binary others.⁴⁹ Moreover, even nationalism and patriotism, which often seem to be at odds with the force of the the-West-and-the-

⁴⁴ Ulf Hannerz, “The World in Creolisation,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57, no. 4 (October 1, 1987): 555.

⁴⁵ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁷ Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*, ed. George Ritzer and Zeynep Atalay (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 334–43.

⁴⁸ Jameson, “Preface,” xii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

rest convergence of globalisation, are also by-products of globalisation. After all, the concept of nation-states and sovereignty stemmed from international social-political, economic and cultural exchange. Moreover, many nation-states were established in the twentieth century, a time which was informed by a radical expansion of Western capitalist modernity – colonialism and imperialism – as well as the resistance against it. In this sense, it can be said that globalisation has, to a great extent, formed the world which we inhabit today.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes in his 1996 book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* that media and migration are late twentieth-century modernity's "two major, and interconnected, diacritics,"⁵⁰ and he highlights the importance of imagination, a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity. Inspired by the study of "imagined communities" by Benedict Anderson, Appadurai argues that, in the post-electronic world today, imagination plays a newly significant role. There are three reasons for this: firstly, imagination has become "a part of the quotidian mental work of ordinary people in many societies" and "entered the logic of ordinary life from which it had largely been successfully sequestered."⁵¹ Secondly, imagination is different from "fantasy," which in the eyes of Frankfurt School scholars is only subject to the forces of commoditisation and industrial capitalism. On the contrary, imagination today, as "a staging ground for action, and not only for escape,"⁵² provokes the agency of the recipient of mass media. Thirdly, imagination in Appadurai's analysis, as a property of collectives (rather than a faculty of the gifted individual), is able to make possible a "community of sentiment" where solidarity is generated.⁵³ Appadurai points out that if

⁵⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

globalisation is creating a “global culture” via mass media, the consumption of it by no means results in homogeneity, but rather “resistant, selectivity, and in general, *agency*.”⁵⁴

Appadurai’s idea of imagination as well as Robertson’s notion of “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” may inform and enhance an overall understanding of theatre in the context of globalisation. Theatre, as a work of fiction or, at least a performance/acting, relies on the imagination of the spectator in various ways, such as depending on a “suspension of disbelief” to communicate through its symbolic system (the naturalist fourth wall, for instance). In this sense, theatre can be viewed as a frontline and laboratory where the flows of globalisation interact and transform one another and hypothetical situations that globalization could lead to that have not yet come to pass are experienced. The analysis of theatre through the theoretical perspective of globalisation will be able to illuminate our understanding of the world today.

For clarity, this research employs sociologist George Ritzer’s definition of the term “globalisation,” which is as follows:

Globalization is a transplanetary *process* or set of *processes* involving, increasing *liquidity* and the growing multidirectional *flows* of people, objects, places, and information as well as the *structures* they encounter and create that are *barriers* to, or *expedite*, those flows.⁵⁵

Yet in the research, the focus is the (theatrical) imagination of globalisation, because globalisation itself is hard to measure and describe in a specific manner, as discussed earlier.

As sociologist Gerald Delanty argues, “The normative significance of globalization rather consists of a different kind of reality beyond the condition of globalization as such and necessitates a new kind of imagination, which can be called the cosmopolitan imagination.”⁵⁶ In the critique of globalisation, the studies of cosmopolitanism provide

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁵ George Ritzer, *Globalization: The Essentials* (Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2.

⁵⁶ Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

us a model to evaluate cultural activities while evading both cultural-relativism and Eurocentrism. The origin of the idea of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Diogenes, the Greek philosopher who founded the Cynic School and declared himself as *a-polis, a-oikos* and *kospolite* (without a city, homeless and a citizen of the universe). Stoics School inherited this idea and advocated the brotherhood of humanity.⁵⁷ Immanuel Kant, in his 1784 article “Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*) developed from his thinking of practical reason the idea of cosmopolitanism and offers nine propositions to enable imagining of “a universal cosmopolitan condition, as the womb in which all original predispositions of the human species will be developed.”⁵⁸ Cosmopolitanism can be generally defined as what Delanty writes:

In the broadest sense possible, cosmopolitanism is about the extension of the moral and political horizons of people, societies, organizations and institutions. It implies an attitude of openness as opposed to closure....Cosmopolitanism is therefore a condition that is more likely than not to be exemplified in opposition to prevailing conditions and thus signaling in some sense the exploration of alternatives to the status quo.⁵⁹

As Delanty notes, cosmopolitanism refers to a condition in which “while diversity is preserved, there is also a degree of unity between the elements but without a dominant culture taking over.”⁶⁰ By this definition, cosmopolitanism is designed to transcend the dilemma between universalism and particularism. In this sense, cosmopolitanism can be used to assess particular actions that take place in the context of globalisation, for, just

⁵⁷ See David Inglis, “Alternative Histories of Cosmopolitanism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 13.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim,” in *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, trans. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 20–21.

⁵⁹ Gerard Delanty, “Introduction: The Emerging Field of Cosmopolitanism Studies,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

as sociologist Piet Strydom puts it, “to understand cosmopolitanism is tantamount to understanding globalisation from the inside.”⁶¹

To sociologists Gavin Kendall, Ian Woodward and Zlatko Skrbiš, cosmopolitanism offers a moral code in the context of globalisation:

Cosmopolitanism is not simply an attitude, but is a moral and ethical form; in particular, it is a form of moral self-understanding characteristic of modernity, and given decisive impetus by the ways in which globalization foregrounds global exchange relationships. In turn, its development gives increasing impetus to globalization and all manner of thinking beyond the local. Cosmopolitanism, then, is the moral or ethical component of these global exchange relationships.⁶²

Cosmopolitanism thereby is “a new type of social solidarity; one where strangers are recognized and incorporated, where one’s own assumptions and stories are comparable to all others, and where a variety of dimensions of social statuses are opened up, instead of closed off.”⁶³ In the same vein, Delanty develops the idea of “fusion of horizon” (*Horizontverschmelzung*), an idea discussed by Gadamer and Habermas, and proposes the theory of “critical cosmopolitanism,” which is concerned with “the identification of moments of self-transformation in contexts in which there is an expansion in reflexive capacities and ultimately in those situations in which something undergoes normative transformation from the encounter with the Other.”⁶⁴

It is from this perspective of “critical cosmopolitanism” that encourages “fusion of horizon” that this research will engage with theatre performances in relation to globalisation, to examine their “reflexive capacities” and the “normative transformation” that they may enable. Again, if globalisation creates the flows and consciousness that cause people to realise that they have to improve their means for coexistence, theatre as

⁶¹ Piet Strydom, “Modernity and Cosmopolitanism: From a Critical Social Theory Perspective,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 31.

⁶² Gavin Kendall et al., *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism: Globalization, Identity, Culture and Government* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 80–81.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁴ Gerard Delanty, “The Idea of Critical Cosmopolitanism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 45.

an “experiment of coexistence,” as argued earlier, will be of great value. Above all, globalisation is a point of departure rather than a finish line for the self, for the encounter in the increasing global flows will bring forth possibilities for transformation and development of the self.

Interculturalism: theatre and performance in the age of globalisation

Thanks to the increasing exchange of information and human bodies via media and migration, most of the social activities in different regions and communities today have become inevitably “intercultural.” Theatre is not immune to this trend of intercultural exchange. When two different cultures – especially one from the East and one from the West – meet each other in theatre, different traditions, ideologies, beliefs, etc., tangle on the same stage. This increasing interaction of different cultures in theatre caused scholars to join in discussions of “intercultural theatre/performance,” which have become increasingly prominent in this age of globalisation. The use of “interculturalism” as part of theatre terminology was first initiated by Richard Schechner in his introduction to the special issue of *The Drama Review* called “Intercultural Performance” in 1982. Schechner advocates interculturalism as “both an experiment and a return to tradition, even ancient, values,”⁶⁵ and he continued to use it in the analyses of his own and his contemporaries’ theatre practice. But, as Schechner says, this pursuit of foreign performance culture in order to inspire one’s own theatre practice has been implicit in experimental art for a long time and interculturalism is “a predictable, even inevitable, outcome of the avant-garde, its natural heir.”⁶⁶ Theatre has always played an active part in intercultural exchange and production. Avant-garde dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski drew inspiration from Eastern art forms to innovate

⁶⁵ Richard Schechner, “Intercultural Performance: ‘An Introduction,’” *TDR* 26, no. 2 (July 1, 1982): 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

their own theatre theory and practice. Later, from the 1970s onwards intercultural performances have become a popular cultural phenomenon, with a number of intercultural theatre productions by Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine and Eugenio Barba in Europe, Richard Schechner and Robert Wilson in the United States, and Suzuki Tadashi and Ong Keng Sen in Asia gaining worldwide attention, enjoying considerable box office successes as well as critical acclaim.

Interculturalism is “a sharing and mutual borrowing of the manifestation of one theatre practice by another,”⁶⁷ or more generally, “the meeting in the moment of performance of two or more cultural traditions,”⁶⁸ but one of the reasons why it has become popular is that “it purloins the surfaces of other cultures in order to attain the greatest market share, by reaching out for the largest common denominator of mythologized cultural icons.”⁶⁹ Interculturalism today has its roots in orientalism, an ideological practice “obsessed with both realism and a fascination of the unknown, the tribal, non-Christian, and seemingly unregulated societies at the far side of the Mediterranean.”⁷⁰ Schechner is optimistic that interculturalism will bring “a world of colliding cultures no longer dominated by Europeans and Americans, and no longer dominable by anyone”⁷¹ in which people will be able to “choose cultures the way many of us now choose food to eat.”⁷² But we must be aware of the threat of “cultural imperialism” underlying intercultural performances labelled as “pluralism” and “postmodernism,” as has been criticised by Daryl Chin, in which “[i]nstead of

⁶⁷ Brian Singleton, “Interculturalism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 289–90.

⁶⁸ Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins, *Women’s Intercultural Performance* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7.

⁶⁹ Singleton, “Interculturalism,” 291.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Richard Schechner, *Performative Circumstances, from the Avant Garde to Ramlila* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), 120–21.

⁷² Richard Schechner, *The End of Humanism : Writings on Performance* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 125.

recognizing the status of ‘the other’ as an equal, there is the undermining of ‘the other’ by a declared indifference to distinction, while attempting to maintain the same balance of power.”⁷³

There exists a danger in intercultural performances, especially Western productions, where the native narrative is ignorantly deprived of its original meaning and brutally exploited for the benefit of commercial industry. Rustom Bharucha’s observation of intercultural performances reveals “how meanings mutate and metabolize in the course of their transportation, translation, and specific uses in other cultures,”⁷⁴ and his study of Indian cases offers models to identify the influence of power structure in which globalisation, i.e. the West in his context, dominates, and reminds us that “[t]here are lessons in humility to be learned from being ‘left out,’ and perhaps they need to be extended beyond the practice of theatre into the actual vulnerabilities of engaging with the Other [...] with whom one can dialogically redefine the world.”⁷⁵

Bharucha’s critique of interculturalism is inspired by postcolonialism, the critique of the construction of ideology and the exploitation of culture which a study of theatre and globalisation should not overlook. With his well-known 1978 book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said’s theories of Orientalism have sparked heated discussions concerning post-colonial issues, critiquing the Western spectacle through which “the West” observes “the East” as an ideological “Other” and portrays the East for its own ends. As Said points out, the study of Orientalism emphasises how the construction of ideas invades our epistemology, for “Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”⁷⁶ Centring the relationship

⁷³ Daryl Chin, “Interculturalism, Postmodernism, Pluralism,” *Performing Arts Journal* 11/12, (1989), 165.

⁷⁴ Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press. 2000), 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003), 13.

between “Self” and “Other,” “East” and “West,” “similarity” and “diversity,” postcolonial scholars continue to question the possibility of cross-cultural conversation, cautioning against imperialism and hegemony. On the other hand, Third World scholars have pointed out the danger of a “self-othering” tendency when one from the East observes his or her own culture using the lens provided by the West.

Some Chinese scholars have engaged in the conversation on cultural self-identification in the Chinese discourse. Theatre scholar Chen Xiaomei, in her 1995 book *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* introduces the term “Occidentalism” as “a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self – appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others.”⁷⁷ Literary theorist Ming Dong Gu analyses the trend that he terms as Sinologism, which is “a theory of knowledge production about China, guided by Western-centric ideology, epistemology, and Western perspectives, and immensely complicated by the responses of the Chinese and non-Western people.”⁷⁸ Gu emphasises that Sinologism is a bilateral construction by both Chinese and Westerners, to indicate in many cases of cultural productions in China, the epistemology is affected by both China and the West.

Wang Ning agrees with Chen that in some sense “[Occidentalism] lends support to our struggle against Western cultural hegemony,”⁷⁹ but “meanwhile, we must confront the fact that, in the current age characterized by cultural pluralism and different forces coexisting with and complementing each other, cultural relativism has once again attracted people’s attention.” In this sense it is advocated that “[n]o one culture can replace another even if it were extremely powerful,”⁸⁰ or as Chen Xiaomei points out,

⁷⁷ Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 4–5.

⁷⁸ Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 6.

⁷⁹ “Orientalism versus Occidentalism?,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (February 1, 1997): 63.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

“[n]either the East nor the West is—or should be—fundamentally privileged over its Other.”⁸¹ It is proposed that dialogue should be made between Self and Other, and as Chen says, “that criticism is best served not by separating dichotomies such as Orient/Occident, Self/Other, traditionalism/modernism, and male/female, but by engaging these binary oppositions in a constant and continuing dialogue without ever claiming one version of ‘truth’ at the expense of celebrating the diversities of all ‘truths.’”⁸² Chen, Wang and Gu all agree on Said’s powerful assertion that both the “East” and the “West” are ideological constructs, and this study acknowledges this argument. Yet at some point in my analysis the terms the “East” and the “West” will still be used (critically, in quotation marks), for the sake of convenience, and for the reason that imagination evokes agency and thus is worthy of examining from its own perspective, as has been discussed earlier.

Just as Fischer-Lichte indicates, three notions are interwoven in the studies of contemporary theatre: interculturalism, globalisation, and postcolonialism,⁸³ and it is always useful to acknowledge the other approaches when using a single approach. Intercultural performances in East Asia have complex dynamics through which cultures, epistemologies, and capital function. Bharucha and Chin’s warnings against cultural imperialism in theatre are better showcased in theatre scholar Daphne P. Lei’s study of Robert Wilson’s productions in Taiwan. Lei coined the term HIT (hegemonic intercultural theatre) for this sort of performance, to describe “a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labor, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions,”⁸⁴ and in HIT “[m]oney silences self-criticism and critical intervention, both

⁸¹ Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 57.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸³ Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking ‘Intercultural Theatre’: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 4–9.

⁸⁴ Daphne P. Lei, “Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson’s HIT Productions in Taiwan,” *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 4 (2011): 571.

because a ‘happy ending’ in the form of intercultural marriage means less humiliation for the East and HIT is often viewed as theatrical novelty, or even as universal modernity.”⁸⁵ Such theatre performances ignore the cultural complexity in the indigenous context and interrupt the cultural flows within the performance, aspects which should benefit the productions and, foremost, to the indigenous people and their culture. Therefore, if we pursue a study of interculturalism in the theatre, as Bharucha argues, we need to “contextualize our research within the inner necessities of our history.”⁸⁶

Theatre scholar Patrice Pavis in 1992 proposed the first model for intercultural research, in which the foreign culture, the source culture passes through a mill-like mechanism of anthropological, socio-cultural or artistic modification, to be codified and solidified, in order to be received and accepted by the target culture and observer.⁸⁷ This “hourglass model,” as Pavis points out, presents two risks: it blends the source culture and destroys its every specificity or it “indiscriminately absorb[s] the initial substance without reshaping it through the series of filters or leaving any trace of the original matter.”⁸⁸ But what is most problematic in this model is that it “assumes a one-way cultural flow based on a hierarchy of privilege,”⁸⁹ so that it “cannot account for alternative and more collaborative forms of intercultural exchange.”⁹⁰ To critique and improve his model, Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert look at this hourglass through the lens of postcolonial theory to “expos[e] and redress unequal power relationships between

⁸⁵ Ibid., 573.

⁸⁶ Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 40.

⁸⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 4–5.

⁸⁹ Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, “Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis,” *TDR* 46, no. 3 (2002): 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 41.

cultures,”⁹¹ and put forward a horizontal model, in which “[b]oth partners are considered cultural sources and the target culture is positioned along the continuum between them.”⁹² In this way, an *organic hybridity* is created, which help intercultural theatre potentially function as a site where this intersecting of cultures is both reflected and critiqued.⁹³

As Erika Fischer-Lichte points out, the critique of interculturalism “is to be found not so much in the productions themselves as in the context that brought them forth – that is, postcolonialism,”⁹⁴ because intercultural performances involve hegemonic interest and aspiration. Fischer-Lichte summarises case studies of intercultural performances in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism* and offers her notion of “interweaving performance cultures,” in replacement of “interculturalism” or “intercultural performance.” According to Fischer-Lichte, in this notion cultures are no longer treated as a solid entity and labelled as “West” or “the rest,” and they are interwoven in nature in performances. Furthermore, when analysing interweaving performance cultures, no one is entitled to be the authority in possession or interpretation of a work; “processes of interweaving performance cultures can and quite often do provide an experimental framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies by realizing an aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society.”⁹⁵ In this sense, theatre and performance, “as sites of in-betweenness, are able to constitute fundamentally other, unprecedented realities—realities of the future, where the state of being in-between describes the 'normal' experience of the citizens of this world.”⁹⁶ Whether Fischer-Lichte’s hope is realisable or not, we cannot deny the potential of theatre to connect

⁹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁴ Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking ‘Intercultural Theatre’: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 4.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 12.

societies with a promising future, for theatre has been and will continue to be at the frontline of conflicts and confrontations of globalisation.

Intercultural acting/performance is deeply embedded in theatre today, and through theories of interculturalism we will gain a better insight into the complexity of contemporary theatre. Just as theatre scholar Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento maintains,

[I]t is also important to keep in mind that even in the most traditional, realist theatre, the actor's work is by definition that of embodying on the stage experiences foreign to her [or him]—this is equally true for the most explicit incorporation of foreign techniques as much as when her task is to perform the experiences of a fictional character while playing up 'naturalness.'⁹⁷

Theatre today, because of the increasing cultural exchanges fuelled by globalisation, inevitably embeds a certain degree of foreignness. Therefore, any study of theatre/performance in the context of globalisation must acknowledge the perspective of interculturalism, and, in return, the theoretical perspectives of interculturalism will inform an examination of how different cultures coexist and interact with one another in a performance. Interculturalism is of great value to this study in particular, because firstly, as will be discussed in the next section, Chinese spoken drama is the product of globalisation, and obviously, the perspective of interculturalism can offer us a methodology to analyse the many cultural traditions (Western drama, Japanese *shigeki*, Chinese traditional *xiqu*, Russian Stanislavsky School actor training, etc.) that influenced and contributed to shaping this art form; secondly, interculturalism can also be used in analysing how experimental theatre innovates the conventional styles of acting, scenography, narration, etc., by putting different performance cultures together.

Understanding China and Chinese theatre today: responding to and renewing globalisation

⁹⁷ Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 6.

If one examines the definition of globalisation given by Ritzer, that globalisation refers to the increasing fluidity and flows on a planetary level, it is difficult to mark a start of “the age of globalisation” or draw the boundary between what in life is globalised and what is not. There are different opinions among scholars who argue globalisation started with the expansion of European capitalism in the sixteenth century, or between 1875 and 1925 with the “time-zoning of the world and the establishment of the international dateline,”⁹⁸ or the breaking down of *Pax Americana* – the concept of relative international peace overseen by the US – in the 1970s, etc. In its extreme sense, the migration of our Homo sapiens ancestors from Africa can be seen as a global flow (if we believe in evolution). But what is key to the concept of globalisation in the context of today, is, what Appadurai stresses, the imagination. It is the imagination of a global community comprised of all different societies and cultures that energises our action in the discourse of globalisation. We travel, migrate, exile, trade, communicate, translate, learn, discuss things, etc. in the imagined global community of sentiment, and imagine the consequences of our actions in a global scale. This is what is new and unique about this current “age of globalisation.”

According to Guillen, the term “globalisation” was “first used around 1960 in its world-wide sense as opposed to the older meanings of the global as something spherical, total, or universal.”⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the imagined image of a global community implies a sense of progression of human history, a re-arrangement of time and space, as well as the trend of unification of human society. These concepts are all derived from modernity – the rupture between the present and the past, between the new and the old. Hence, when discussing China in relation to globalisation, one must track and examine China’s long-time struggle against global modernity. As the encounter of the Other has always been substantial to the forming and renewing of the Self, the interaction with the West, both directly and indirectly, plays a major part in the transformation of China from an empire into a modern nation-state. Although the development of the relationship between China

⁹⁸ Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, 179.

⁹⁹ Guillen, “Is Globalization Civilizing, Destructive or Feeble?,” 5.

and the West is much more complicated than the “shock-reaction” or “impact-response” model proposed by sinologist John K. Fairbank in his study of modern Chinese history,¹⁰⁰ it cannot be denied that the series of struggles for independence and social development in China can all, to a certain degree, relate to resistance to imperialism and capitalist dominance.

The First Opium War (1839-1842) between China and Britain was the first fierce conflict between China and the West, and it is commonly regarded as the beginning of the modern history of China. Since then, there have been many wars lost against imperial powers, as well as the unequal treaties and compensation payments that have been forced on China. The struggle shocked Chinese people, and from the humiliating reality grew an awareness of the global community and the urgent call for a cultural and historical modernisation. According to literary theorist Leo Ou-fan Lee, the end of the nineteenth century saw a historical epoch, when Chinese intellectuals started to recognise a new, progressive view of history. Among those intellectuals were Yan Fu, a renowned translator, and Kang Youwei, as well as Liang Qichao, who tried to reform Confucianism and later led the “Hundred Days Reform.”¹⁰¹ Yan translated T. H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* (among his other numerous important translations), and advocated his understanding of Social Darwinism. Kang wrote his *Book of Great Harmony* (or *Book of Great Unity*, in Chinese *Datong shu*) and started to spread his idea of the world and a blueprint for the harmonious future.¹⁰² Their new view of history drastically contradicted the traditional cyclical view shaped by the alternation of “Five Elements” (*wuxing*) and the Confucian notion of dynastic cycles.¹⁰³ It was these progressive thoughts that

¹⁰⁰ See Ssu-yü Teng and John King Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979).

¹⁰¹ “Hundred Days Reform” (*bairi weixin*) was the political and cultural reform movement initiated by Emperor Guangxu and his pro-reform supporters in 1898. The reform failed only after lasting one hundred and three days since its launch, when Empress Dowager Cixi and her conservative allies led a *coup d’état* and put Guangxu under house arrest.

¹⁰² Although Kang’s full text had not been published until 1927 – eight years after his death, he started writing the book in 1884 and talked about his ideas in public speeches and lectures.

¹⁰³ Leo Ou-fan Lee, “In Search of Modernity Some Reflections on a New Mode of Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Chinese History and Literature,” in *Ideas across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard

prompted Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the nationalist revolution aiming at overthrowing the Manchurian rule, to propose the “Three Principles of the People” (*minzu* – nationalism, *minquan* – democracy, *minsheng* – people’s livelihood). Adapting them to the Chinese context, Sun asserts his ideal of the global community as “Great Harmony” (*datong*) and its moral principle as “the world is for all” (*tianxia weigong*).¹⁰⁴

In response to the threat of imperial powers, Chinese people realised the need to modernise their society. The first attempt at reform was the “Self-Strengthening Movement” (*yangwu yundong*) from the 1860s to the 1890s, initiated by high-ranking officers of the Qing government, to pursue technology especially military advancement without overthrowing the rule of the Qing Dynasty. The attempt failed, and revolts such as the Taiping Rebellion and reforms such as the “Hundred Days Reform” occurred at the same time, inspired and influenced by Western political, economic and religious pressure. Then the twentieth century witnessed the founding of the Republic of China (1912) and then the People’s Republic of China (1949), and reform movements such as the New Culture Movement (*xinwenhua yundong*, 1910s to 1920s), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and “Reform and Opening-up” (1979-). The imperial reign that had lasted for two thousand years in China ended, and a new modernised nation-state was built according to models of Western political systems – political parties were founded, and attempts, such as the New Culture Movement and the Cultural Revolution, were made to reform the Chinese tradition and culture. All these essential sociocultural movements and transformations in China can all be seen as struggles to establish a social-political and cultural identity for China in relation to the global context – whether the context is Western political interference, interaction with Western ideologies, or international politico-economic exchange. As literary theorist Yang Chunshi points out, Chinese modernity comes from the West,¹⁰⁵ but because the West was the oppressor and

University Press, 1990), 111–14.

¹⁰⁴ “Great Harmony” and “the world is for all” are both Confucian ideas found in *The Book of Rites (Liji)*.

¹⁰⁵ It is noteworthy that a number of early modern thoughts and terminologies were introduced to China via Japan, which initiated a larger scale of Westernisation ahead of China.

the invader, Chinese people are constantly confronted with a dilemma when they engage in the process of modernisation: they have to learn from the West in order to realise modernity, while at the same time resisting the West in order to build an independent, modern nation-state.¹⁰⁶

This contradiction remains in today's China with the rise of new, critical challenges. Nationalism, once the tool for Chinese people to oppose Eurocentric modernity, became problematic after the state's power was seized by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and nationalism had to fit in the post-independent context. The rash and destructive endeavour of the Cultural Revolution tried to combine nationalism with revolution – an editorial comment asserted in *People's Daily* on November 6, 1967 that “the centre of world revolution has moved to China,”¹⁰⁷ but it inevitably failed. The reason for the failure was that the Cultural Revolution ignored people's material needs and brutally repressed the individualist interest as being “anti-revolutionary,” among many other reasons. To save society from complete social and cultural chaos, the government had to introduce reforms, and, in 1979, initiated by CPC leader Deng Xiaoping, the “Reform and Opening-up” policy was adopted. Notably, it is in this “New Era” in the 1980s that the use of “globalisation” (*quanqiuhua*) first appeared in the media, due to the increasing cultural exchange between China and the rest of the World.¹⁰⁸ The emergence of this notion signifies the changing attitude toward the East-West relationship in the post-Mao era – from class conflict and nationalist struggle, to economic cooperation and cultural integrity.

¹⁰⁶ Yang Chunshi, *Xiandaixing yu Zhongguo wenxue sichao* [Modernity and Trends of Literary Thoughts in China] (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2009), 5.

¹⁰⁷ The article, entitled “Advance along the Way which the October Socialist Revolution Has Paved” (*Yanzhe shiyue shehuizhuyi geming kaipi de daolu qianjin*), was published in memory of the fiftieth anniversary of Russian socialist revolution in 1916.

¹⁰⁸ In this period several journal articles which mentioned the notion of “globalisation” were published. Those articles include papers written by former diplomats and translations of foreign scholars' research, such as Xiang Huan, “The South-North Problem: The Current Situation, the Crux, and the Outlook,” *Shijie jingji* [World Economics], no. 5 (1983): 35–39; Scott E. Pardee, “Jinrong shichang de quanqiuhua [Globalization of Financial Markets],” trans. Zuo Mingzhao, *Guowai shehui kexue* [Social Sciences Abroad], no. 10 (1988): 43–44; Li Pengcheng, “Shilun xiandaihua zuowei yige shehui fazhanguocheng de lishi shizhi ji tedian [Modernisation, a Process of Social Development as a Historical Fact and Its Characters],” *Zhexue yanjiu* [Philosophical Research], no. 11 (1985): 12–18, 23.

However, as literary theorist Liu Kang observes, the ideological crisis, in which the socialist belief was challenged by Western liberalism, became more serious after the Cultural Revolution due to “the widening rift between the revolutionary hegemony and economic development that was apparently impeded by the Cultural Revolution itself.”¹⁰⁹ The crisis was not solved by Deng’s reform because he simply abandoned Mao Zedong’s revolutionary ideals, and, as a result, “contrary to the hope that rapid economic development would reinvigorate socialism as the core of the revolutionary hegemony, socialist ideals and Marxism have fallen victim to economic reform.”¹¹⁰ Since the carrying out of the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the Chinese people have been exposed to an immense number of Western cultural images via the mass media. As those images, which mostly portray the lifestyle and ideologies of the developed capitalist world, came in a torrential flow into the country, intellectuals started to re-examine and re-evaluate their own cultural identity. During this period, a number of new art forms including poems, novels and drama, were produced, revealing the direct influence of modernism of western origin and the Chinese artists’ eagerness to explore new means to express themselves and depict their lives.

However, this trend of liberal thoughts was halted several times by the authorities through the “Cleansing the Spiritual Pollution” (*qingchu jingshen wuran*) and the “Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation” (*fan zibenzhuyi ziyouhua*) movements in the mid-1980s, and the trend finally came to a stop when the central government strengthened censorship in publishing, performances and other cultural activities, as a fierce reaction to the Western “peaceful evolution” strategy which was thought to be the cause of the collapse of the Communist World in the early 1990s. Consequently, having witnessed the drastic social change in the former communist allies, as well as the failure of the June-Fourth Movement that ended in turmoil and bloodshed, many Chinese intellectuals began the last decade of the twentieth century in a state of anxiety, self-doubt and depression. In

¹⁰⁹ Kang Liu, “Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 171.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the meantime, the “Post-New Era” (i.e. the 1990s, see footnote 33) witnessed the rise of consumerism, the commercialisation of cultural production, and the expansion of the mass media and popular culture. These changes are deeply connected to globalisation; the powerful Other – not only the West, but also the image of a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-polar world – continuously enters Chinese people’s daily discourse. The globalising of daily life involves various dimensions, from the forming of a global market to the importing of foreign cultural icons such as the McDonald’s American-style fast-food and the singer Michael Jackson’s pop music and dances. Therefore, not only images of the Foreign appear in the artists’ works; the artistic practices such as running theatre companies and marketing performances have also become engaged in the vast capital market.

To Giddens, globalisation brings us significant changes and new things of overlapping trends: firstly, the world-wide communication revolution, secondly, the arrival of the “weightless economy” (such as the global financial market and information technology industry), thirdly, a post-1989 world, and fourthly, transformation of everyday life, such as gender equality.¹¹¹ As was argued earlier, Chinese theatre in this post-Cold War world has been directly confronted by market economy, drastically influenced by foreign theatre (the interaction has been much more complex than what a model of West-East two-way dynamics can describe) and presented within the context of global electronic media. Thus, this research focuses on westernised theatre in Chinese theatre in the current post-Cold War era, for Chinese theatre has entered a new phase and is worthy of a close examination through the lens of globalisation to understand the intensified relationship between Chinese theatre and the world.

The term “theatre” in this study mainly refers to spoken drama (*huaju*), or other theatre performances that are based on the Western notion of drama in the context of the Chinese mainland (thus excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan). Therefore, realist drama, as well as post-dramatic theatre (physical theatre, devised theatre and site-specific

¹¹¹ Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton, “Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton in Conversation,” in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens (London: Vintage, 2001), 1–2.

theatre, etc.) will be discussed in this study, whereas traditional theatre/*xiqu* (whether performances of classic plays or adaptations of foreign stories) is not included. Here, it is important to note that spoken drama is a term coined by Chinese practitioners in the early twentieth century to differentiate Western forms of theatre from indigenous Chinese traditional forms (*xiqu*), such as Beijing Opera. In 1928, Hong Shen, the influential dramatist and director,¹¹² in a meeting of dramatists, suggested naming the new form of theatre spoken drama (*huaju*), in order to highlight the role of “speaking” (*hua*) and literariness rather than singing or dancing in this theatrical form, and published an article “Discussion from China’s New Theatre to Spoken Drama” (*Cong Zhongguo de xinxi shuodao huaju*) to advocate his proposition in the following year.¹¹³ Marked by the 1907 production of *Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu*, adapted from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) by a group of Chinese students in Tokyo as its start,¹¹⁴ Chinese spoken drama in its early stage of practice very often emphasised theatre as a means of political propaganda for social reform. Since then, the divide between *huaju/xiju* (spoken drama) and *xiqu* (traditional theatre/opera) remains in the field of theatre studies and the curriculum in drama schools and theatre departments in mainland China, in spite of the fact that there have been constant exchanges between these divisions. As theatre scholar Siyuan Liu writes, “while most non-Western modern theatres did indeed result from the indigenous countries’ interaction with Euro-American

¹¹² Hong studied in Harvard University under George Baker as one of the “Baker’s Dozen.” See Hongchu Fu, “Hong Shen,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*, ed. Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 624.

¹¹³ See Hong Shen, “Cong Zhongguo de xinxi shuodao huaju [Discussion from China’s New Theatre to Spoken Drama],” in *Hong shen yanjiu zhuanji* [Collections of Hong Shen Studies], ed. Sun Qingwen (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1986), 165–78. Though the term spoken drama was not first coined by Hong, it was he who made a distinction between this art form and other cultural hybrid theatre forms and offers his systematic view of what spoken drama should be like. Also see Zhou Yunlong, *Chengshu Zhongguo: xiju yanyi yu kuawenhua chongfang* [Narrating China: Deducting Theatre and Revisiting Interculturalism] (Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2012), 191–94.

¹¹⁴ Before *Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven*, there were student productions of English drama as well as plays of “current affairs” written by students in church school in Shanghai; intellectuals such as Liang Qichao also wrote reformist *chuanqi* (a form of traditional theatre) scripts including *Dream Destroyed by Disasters* (*Jiehui meng*, 1902) and *New Rome* (*Xin luoma*, 1902). But mature acting styles were not fully developed in those productions. See Chen Baichen and Dong Jian, eds., *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao* [A Draft History of Modern Chinese Theatre] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1996), 35–40.

powers, often as a result or in the shadow of global colonialism, these speech-based theatres frequently exhibit uniquely hybrid features reflective of indigenous performance even though they are often assumed to be based on the same modern dramaturgical, performance, and production principles.”¹¹⁵ Above all, by birth and by definition, spoken drama, and Chinese contemporary theatre, is a product of globalisation, and falls into the category of “interculturalism” or in Fischer-Lichte’s sense, “interweaving performance cultures.”

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, both the content and form of theatre was strictly restricted by authorities, guided by Mao Zedong’s party-literature idealism, within the realm of “socialist realism.”¹¹⁶ First proposed as the doctrine for literary composition by the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934,¹¹⁷ socialist realism in a Leninist approach suggests that literature should portray the typical proletarian life in a realistic and partisan way: “Socialist Realism demands from the author a true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover this true and historically concrete artistic depiction of reality must be combined with the task of educating the workers in the spirit of Communism.”¹¹⁸ Soon after the creation of this proposal, socialist realism was introduced to the scholars in the CPC and Mao, in his famous 1942 speech at the Yan’an Forum of Literature and Art, started to implement this doctrine as the guideline for the CPC’s cultural policy. By highlighting *peopleness* (that literature should serve the majority of the people), *classness* (that literature should represent the interest of the proletariat) and *partyness* (that literature should promote the

¹¹⁵ Siyuan Liu, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2. This 2013 book of Liu provides a study of how different (Western, Japanese, Chinese) theatre traditions interweave in “civilized drama” (*wenmingxi*), which was popular in China in the 1910s and greatly influenced *huaju*.

¹¹⁶ See Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum of Literature and Art,” in *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Tsetung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1971), 250–86.

¹¹⁷ The doctrine was applied to other forms of arts including music, architecture, painting, etc.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave and Macmillan, 1973), 88.

Party's socialist belief),¹¹⁹ the aim of socialist realism was to propagate socialist revolution and social reform, but it “did not actually convey truthful accounts of reality but rather utopian projections of ideal social conditions.”¹²⁰ What is worse, its endorsement by the state jeopardised the freedom of artistic creation. Not until the 1980s, thanks to the Reform, did discussion and criticism of the dogma of “socialist realism” enter the public sphere in China.¹²¹

“Model theatre” (*yangbanxi*) was the production of politicised theatre in the Cultural Revolution. Exemplified by *Shajiabang* (1964), *The Red Lantern* (*Hongdeng ji*, 1964) and a few other “red classics,” the style of model theatre was without doubt beautiful and poetic, integrating the essence of traditional opera singing and dancing with modern realist storylines, *mise en scène*, costumes and music. Yet, most of its contents were vacuous clichés promoting class-struggle propaganda, compelled by dogmatic principles such as the formula of “three prominences” (*san tuchu*) – give prominence to positive characters among all characters, give prominence to the main heroic characters among positive characters; and give prominence to the main heroic character among other heroic characters¹²² – which stifled artistic creativity. To make the situation worse, other plays were heavily criticised by a number of scholars defending the principles of “socialist realism” in the media and for at least one decade audiences had very few chances to see a theatre production in a form other than the model theatre. When the over-politicisation of art continued, it not only resulted in a decline in art quality, but also

¹¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis on the development of the idea of Soviet socialist realism see James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory*.

¹²⁰ Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2013), 13.

¹²¹ For how the Chinese received socialist realism and applied it to the world of literature and art, see Wang Jiezhong, “Shehuizhuyi xianshizhuyi zai Zhongguo de lilun xingcheng [The Travel of the Theory of Socialist Realism in China],” *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Nanjing Normal University School of Chinese Language and Culture], no. 1 (2012): 143–55.

¹²² See Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 106. The principle was first proposed in Yu Huiyong, “Rang wenyi wutai yongyuan chegnwei xuanchuan Mao Zedong sixiang de zhendi [Let the Stage of Literature and Arts Become the Battlefield of Promoting Mao Zedong Thought Forever],” *Wenhui bao* [Wenhui Daily], May 23, 1968.

eventually faced the limits of politicisation to suit the needs of the audiences. In the early 1980s, Chinese dramatists found themselves in a crisis of rapidly declining audience numbers. The situation forced theatre practitioners to turn to Western theatre – which they had previously refused or had been prohibited to touch – seeking inspiration and enlightenment in order to facilitate new performances to restore artistic vitality. Thus the “Little Theatre Movement” was launched, followed by the commercialisation of theatre.

Considering the socio-political and cultural-historical context in which Chinese theatre developed, it is obvious that a number of elements need to be taken into account when studying post-Cold War theatre in China. Firstly, the tradition of theatre (*xiqu*) and theatre appreciation in Chinese culture, which varies in different regions and among different social communities, complicates the analysis of Chinese theatre performances. Secondly, the legacy of Leftist revolutionary ideology, which promotes the belief that the arts shall serve politics, still influences state censorship and media today. Thirdly, the tension between the global and the local, is not merely a product of an “imagined community” by a Eurocentric modernity in Benedict Anderson’s sense,¹²³ but also has its roots in the old “Sinocentric” instincts in Chinese culture.¹²⁴ Fourthly, the market economy has left a strong impact on theatre, including the artistic creation and the practice of producing theatre. Fifthly, the condition of a globalised lifestyle is emerging in China, informed by electronic mass media and the global flow of people. These threads of different subcultures within the Chinese theatre culture “interweave” and help to produce performances on Chinese theatre stages. Considering these concerns, thus begins this dissertation and exploration of contemporary experimental Chinese theatre.

¹²³ According to Anderson, nationality and nationalism are “cultural artefacts” and the creation of these artefacts is a “spontaneous distillation of a complex ‘crossing’ of discrete historical forces” (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 4.) and nation is an “imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (ibid., 6.). The idea of nation as sovereign was derived from the Enlightenment and Revolution (ibid., 7.).

¹²⁴ As what the name of the country, “middle/central kingdom” (*Zhongguo*) indicates, in Chinese culture it was believed for over two thousand years that China is the geographical and cultural centre of the world.

Defining and conducting the experimental: “little theatre,” big theatre and beyond

The “Little Theatre Movement” has taken a leading role in the artistic and structural transformation of theatre in China since the 1980s. The movement is an attempt by Chinese dramatists in the last two decades of twentieth century, initiated in the face of the “theatre crisis,” which theatre scholar and director Huang Zuolin in 1989 described as “the more shows [to put on], the more money being lost; the less shows, the less loss; no shows, no loss.”¹²⁵ For example, a report on spoken drama performances in Northeast China (which used to have a welcoming attitude towards theatre) showed theatre was losing its popularity: “Obviously since 1981 there has been a shift... and the tendency is a decrease every year [of performances in Liaoning People’s Art Theatre]. Number of performances in 1984 was only 30% of the same period in 1980.”¹²⁶

This crisis, reflected by the sharp drop in ticket sales, clearly showed that in the 1980s many audiences started to lose interest in the dramatic styles ossified by ideological control – the lifeless uniformity of “socialist realism” – over art.¹²⁷ Therefore, dramatists began to experiment with new means of dramatic expression in order to portray society from their own points of view, as well as to attract audiences. Promoting experimental theatre, the beginning of the movement was marked by the “little theatre” production *Alarm Signal* (*Juedui xinhao*, written by Gao Xingjian and directed by Lin

¹²⁵ Huang Zuolin, “Xu [Preface],” in *Xiaojuchang xiju yanjiu* [Studies on Little Theatre], ed. Nanjing shi wenhuaju yishu yanjiusuo and Nanjing shi huajutuan (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1991), 1.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Tao Qingmei, *Dangdai xiaojuchang sanshinian (1982-2012)* [A Thirty-Year Review of Experimental Theatre in China: 1982-2012] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), 16.

¹²⁷ There are many factors that caused this crisis, including the popularisation of film and television, and the lack of plays which were able to relate to Chinese society from new perspectives and to generate new meanings, etc. For more discussion on the “theatre crisis” in see Chen Baichen, “Cong huaju wei ji tandao tade chulu [From ‘Spoken Drama Crisis’ to Its Way Out],” *Wenyi zhengming* [Debates of Liberal Arts], no. 1 (1986): 12–25; Song Baozhen, “‘Wei ji’ yu ‘zhuang ji’ zhong de xiju siban: gaige kaifang 30 nian xiju lilun yu piping qiantan [Dialectics of Crisis and Turning Point: Discussion of Theatre Theories and Criticism over 30 Years of ‘Reform and Opening-Up’],” *Zhongguo xiju* [Chinese Theatre], no. 3 (2009): 4–8; Huang Hao and Zhao Guang, “Zhongguo huaju: zai zaoyao de mengyan li [Spoken Drama in China: Struggling in the Nightmare of a Premature Death],” *Xiju wenxue* [Dramatic Literature], no. 6 (1990): 20–23.

Zhaohua) in a dining hall of Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1982. The first wave of the movement in the 1980s was termed "explorative theatre" (*tansuo xiju*, signified by the publication of *Collected Plays of Explorative Theatre [Tansuo xiju ji]* in 1986 and the follow-up academic discussion) by scholars in order to highlight the dramatists' experimentation of new narrative styles, new actor-spectator relationships and new aesthetics of *mise en scène* in the movement, which was greatly influenced by Western post-war theatre.¹²⁸ It reached its first epoch in the "First Little Theatre Festival" in Nanjing in April of 1989, in which sixteen plays were presented by nine theatre troupes from all over China. But soon the movement lost its strength in the stiff political climate which followed the end of the June-Fourth Movement in 1989, and the "Little Theatre Festival" was not able to establish a fixed routine to until the twenty-first century.¹²⁹

As stated earlier, the start of the 1990s marked the emergence of a new socio-historical context for Chinese theatre. There was severe censorship of theatre productions, which prohibited the discussion of sensitive political issues; meanwhile, the government also decided to focus their efforts on economic development rather than launching new debates on legitimacies of ideologies. Since the Cold War had ended with the collapse of the Communist bloc, there was little ground to win debates concerning capitalist and liberal-democratic Western powers. Later, when the torch of the "Little Theatre Movement" had been passed to dramatists of the younger generation such as Mou Sen, Meng Jinghui and Tian Qinxin (while older dramatists such as Lin Zhaohua, Zha

¹²⁸ For further discussion on *tansuo xiju* see Hu Xingliang, "Lun xinshiqi tansuo xiju [On Explorative Theatre in the New Era]," *Yishu baijia* [A Hundred Schools in Arts], no. 2 (1996): 21–28; Hu Xingliang, "Xinshiqi 'xijuguan' lunzheng de fansi yu pipan [Reflection and Critique on the 'Dramatic View' Debates in the New Era]," *Xueshu yuekan* [Academics Monthly] 41, no. 2 (2009): 102–8; Ning Dianbi, "Xinshiqi tansuo xiju de xijuguan [Dramatic View of Explorative Theatre in the New Era]," *Shehuikexue jikan* [Social Sciences Journal], no. 6 (2001): 147–53. In addition to academic conversation, a collection of plays including Gao Xingjian's works, was also published (Benshe [the Press], ed., *Tansuo xiju ji* [Collected Plays of Explorative Theatre] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1986)).

¹²⁹ Since 1989 a few little/experimental theatre festivals and showcases have taken place, including "Chinese Experimental Theatre Showcase and International Symposium" (*Zhongguo xiaojuchang xiju zhanyan ji guoji yantaohui*) in Beijing in 1993, "International Experimental Theatre Showcase and Symposium" (*Guoji xiaojuchang xiju zhanyan ji xueshu yantaohui*) in Shanghai in 1998, "International Experimental Theatre Showcase and Symposium" in Guangzhou in 2000, "Little Theatre Season" (*xiaojuchang yanchuji*) during "China Theatre Festival" (2001-2004) in Beijing. In 2005 "Youth Theatre" Season was set up in the annually-held "Golden Hedgehog University Students' Drama Festival" in Beijing, and a few years later transformed into the Beijing Fringe Festival (2012-).

Mingzhe and Wang Xiaoying are still active and interactive with the younger ones), who continued to advocate and practice experimental theatre, they cunningly took advantage of the situation and laid the foundation for the phenomenal growth of the Chinese theatre market that followed.

Experimental theatre is a broad term which does not yet have a clear definition, and by being “experimental,” it sometimes prevents itself from being clearly defined. Very broadly, it is a “[t]ype of theatre that attempts to introduce new methods of presentation in style of acting, staging or design.”¹³⁰ Moreover, it is even more difficult to define “experimental theatre” in contemporary China, for this term, since it was adopted in the Chinese context, has become intertwined with two other terms: “little theatre,” and avant-garde theatre. Experimental theatre is often confused with the other two and is generally used as a synonym of the other two. Additionally, in many instances, interestingly, experimental theatre (*shiyān xīju*) is used as the English translation for “little theatre” (*xiao juchang*) in Chinese, or *vice versa*.¹³¹ This may be because “little theatre” might be a more neutral term for exerting more attraction to audiences, and it implicates the subtle differences between the use of the notion of experimental theatre in China¹³² and in the West. As theatre scholar Wu Baohe clarifies, though experimentation can be seen as one of the characteristics of “little theatre” in China, one should not equate the two terms. Experimental theatre has to be an endeavour based on the artist’s theoretical ground.¹³³ Wu makes an excellent point, but to further his argument that experimental

¹³⁰ Colin Winslow, *The Oberon Glossary of Theatrical Terms* (London: Oberon Books, 2011), 60.

¹³¹ For instance, Tao Qingmei’s book on the history of experimental theatre in China, is entitled *A Thirty-Year Review of Experimental Theatre in China*, which is actually “*Thirty Years of Contemporary Little Theatre*” if translated literally. Examples can also be found in the official translation of the title of “little theatre festivals” previously mentioned in the footnotes.

¹³² The case in Taiwan is similar. In the 1980s a few theatre troupes led by dramatists such as Chin Shih-Chieh and Hugh Kuo-Hsiu Lee initiated a “little theatre” movement to explore artistic innovation and new production modes in theatre. The socio-historical context is to some degree similar to that of the mainland: 1) the trend of liberalization was growing in the 1980s which led to the lifting of the martial law (1949-1987), 2) fuelled by the industrial reform Taiwan saw an economic boom in the 1980s.

¹³³ Wu Baohe, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaojuchang xīju* [A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre] (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe), 26–28.

theatre “has to be somewhat destructive of the existing theatre modes,”¹³⁴ one can find some little-theatre plays that challenged the existing production modes and offered a fresh experience for the spectator, though they do not have an avant-garde artistic approach, need to be included in this study. Examples will be given in Chapter Two of the thesis.

The tradition of experimental theatre in Europe can be traced back to the founding of Théâtre Libre, by French dramatist André Antoine in 1887, which is also commonly seen as the start of modern Western theatre. Antoine’s purpose was to realise proper development of dramatic art by embracing realism and naturalism through the works of Zola, Ibsen, etc., which were, at the time, rejected by mainstream “big” theatres. The spirit of experimentation was carried on in many other areas of the world, such as England where J. T. Grein founded the Independent Theatre Society, Germany where Otto Brahm supervised *Die Freie Bühne*, and Ireland where the Abbey Theatre was created by W. B. Yeats and his colleagues, to pursue not only artistic achievement but also national identity. In the early twentieth century, Chinese pioneers in theatre conducted experimental practice too, and holding the belief that theatre can push through social reforms, they combined traditional theatre with Western drama, and brought theatre to peasants in the country, etc. But contemporary experimental theatre since the 1980s has distinctive features: it rose with the founding of the modern market economy in China, which has existed for centuries for their Western counterparts, and many of its practitioners were not only faced with censorship, but became institutionalised by mainstream theatre right from the beginning (otherwise, they would not have the resources, such as performance permits, salaries for the actors, etc., to conduct their experiments). In this sense, experimental theatre in China is not anti-commercial nor anti-mainstream in the first place, as is usually the case in the West.

Considering the above assertions, the term “Little Theatre Movement” is problematic. The “Little Theatre Movement” was particularly used to refer to the Off-Broadway Movement in the US, which started in the 1950s when theatres with seating

¹³⁴ Ibid., 27.

capacities between 100 and 500 were built to put on experimental non-mainstream or anti-mainstream performances. Though as Wu Baohe has argued, a number of plays in the Chinese “Little Theatre Movement” were a practice of “experimental theatre,”¹³⁵ this “movement” is by no means a promotion of “non-commercial theatre” as it was in Europe, America, or Japan. On the contrary, this movement has become a kind of experiment in commercialisation for many dramatists. Moreover, this movement lacks a united manifestation,¹³⁶ which makes it hardly a real “movement” towards any particular direction. Nonetheless, it is widely sensed that there has been a significant change in contemporary Chinese theatre, and the term “Little Theatre Movement” has been widely used in academia, among theatre practitioners, and in promotional advertising, and this study will continue to use this term when referring to a series of Chinese theatre practices (plays, directorial techniques and theatremaking and producing methods) that in general challenged the existing dominant aesthetics, political agenda, or mode of production since the 1980s.¹³⁷

Compared to the state-commissioned or policy-led mainstream theatre – especially the “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü*) spoken drama,¹³⁸ which served as propaganda for

¹³⁵ Wu, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaojuchang xiju* [A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre], 22.

¹³⁶ Meng Jinghui and his fellow dramatists made a series of artistic assertions in his 2000 edited book *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-garde Theatre], but was not widely responded to.

¹³⁷ As Ferrari notes, the drive of Chinese theatre experimentalism in the 1980s is not a group manifestation, and she argues that it is problematic to call it a “movement” since it is too reminiscent of the mass political movements in China (*Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 12-13). Claire Conceison also considers the term “movement” inappropriate (“Focus on Gao Xingjian: Review Article.” *The China Quarterly* 167, no. 3 (2001): 749). Yet in this research term the “Little Theatre Movement” is still used (within quotation marks), because there was somehow a clear context (the “Reform and Opening-up” and the “theatre crisis”) and a target of reform (“socialist realism”), as will be elaborated throughout the thesis. In addition, the term the “Little Theatre Movement” has been widely used among Chinese theatre scholars, for instance see Ding Luonan, “‘Hou xinshiqi’ he xiaojuchang xiju [Post-New Era and Little Theatre],” *Xiju yishu* [Dramatic Arts], no. 1 (1999): 8-17; Li Zhenlin and Chen Xuemin, “Chulun xiaojuchang huaju [Discussion on the Little Theatre],” *Shanghai xiju* [Shanghai Theatre], no. 12 (1996): 15-17; Tian Benxiang, “Jinshinianlai de Zhongguo xiaojuchang xiju yundong [Little Theatre Movement in China in the Recent Decade],” *Guangdong Yishu* [Guangdong Arts], no. 6 (2000): 20–23; Xu Yan and Zhang Xiangdong, “Xiaojuchang: huaju zhongxing de qiji [Little Theatre: The Opportunity of Rejuvenation of Huaju],” *Xiju wenxue* [Dramatic Literature], no. 8 (1995): 34-37; Wu Baohe, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaojuchang xiju* [A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre], 2, 17; Wu Ge, “Zhongguo xiaojuchang xiju de liangci langchao [Two Waves of Chinese Little Theatre],” in *Xiaojuchang xiju yanjiu* [Studies on Little Theatre], ed. Nanjing shi wenhua ju yishu yanjiusuo and Nanjing shi huaju tuan (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1991), 16-28.

¹³⁸ “Stress the main melody, persist in variation” (*tuchu zhuxuanlü, jianchi duoyanghua*) was first

socialism – and the entertainment-oriented commercial theatre, experimental theatre often originates from the artistic instinct or conscious pursuit of a certain kind of aesthetics. Being “experimental” indicates the artist’s wish for change as well as an open attitude two-way communication – a situation they hope to create as “the result of the experiment” rather than one-way expression. In addition, as experimental theatre is often staged in small theatre spaces, it grants the performance more “equality of communication,” as Meng Jinghui puts it.¹³⁹ The intimacy of smaller theatre spaces creates more opportunity to exchange emotion and ideas between the spectator and the actor, just as what *Those Left Behind* attempted to do, as outlined in Chapter Two. Also, “experiments can be rough, and are allowed to fail,”¹⁴⁰ in which more possibilities and potentials are created and thus “new forms of social coexistence may be tried out, or they simply emerge.”¹⁴¹

Meng Jinghui and Shen Lin in 1996 and 1997 wrote a series of short “cross-talk” (*shuanghuang*, or “dual narratives”) essays to discuss the concepts and ideals of experimental theatre. In the essays Meng argues that the “fake realism” has resulted in the “bad habits of realism,”¹⁴² which “ignored the actual reality of the society, put its vague focus on trivial theatrical conflicts and mediocre dramatic plots, devoted major

proposed as a guideline for the film industry by the director of National Bureau of Film, Teng Jinxian in a 1987 conference. The notion was then applied to other areas of the arts. In 1994, the General Secretary of CPC Jiang Zemin proposed in a speech to “carry forward the main melody, encourage variation” (*hongyang zhuxuanli, tichang duoyanghua*) in the “National Conference of Propaganda and Thoughts Work.” What “the main melody” means is ambiguous, but it generally relates to Mao Zedong’s slogan “serve the people, serve socialism” in his speech at the Yan’an Forum of Literature and Art in 1942. For a more detailed analysis of “main melody” drama, see Claire A. Conceison, “The Main Melody Campaign in Chinese Spoken Drama,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 11 no. 2 (1994): 190–212.

¹³⁹ Meng Jinghui and Zhang Fu, “Zan hai fulan buqilai ma? [Can’t We Just Corrupt?],” in *Meng Jinghui xianfeng xiju dang’an* [Meng Jinghui’s Archive of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2010), 262.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Fischer-Lichte, “Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking ‘Intercultural Theatre’: Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism,” 11.

¹⁴² Shen Lin and Meng Jinghui, “Shen Lin yu Meng Jinghui de ‘xiju shuanghuang’ [‘Cross-Talk about Theatre’ by Shen Lin and Meng Jinghui],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang’an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoji chubanshe, 2000), 362.

efforts in examining trifles and turned a blind eye to the disastrous human life.”¹⁴³ Shen writes, “[p]erhaps what the so-called experimental theatre means is to defy the existing definition of theatre, and to break through the existing modes of performance.”¹⁴⁴ Lin Zhaohua, in a 2009 interview, also recalls and questions the credibility of the principles of “socialist realism” because they cannot possibly be applied to all the diverse forms of theatre, “[Chinese theatre in the 1980s] was restricted in a kind of uniformity. Why did we only have one way of writing plays, only one style of directing and only one way of acting?”¹⁴⁵ Clearly the dominant principles of the “socialist realism” in Chinese theatre were the targets of the reform of the “Little Theatre Movement” and as it is the product of said movement, a target of the reform of experimental theatre as well. Diversity of aesthetics and freedom of artistic expression are the major goals for the reform. Today, looking at the recent history of Chinese theatre in retrospect, we can say the movement succeeded in pushing Chinese theatre much closer to these goals, even though there is still a long way for us to go in order to fully achieve them.

As experimental theatre has been the pioneer of introducing foreign theatre culture to the public so that the coexistence of Chineseness and foreignness is tested, experimental theatre takes an important and active role in the interplay between China and globalisation and leaves its impact on the dialogue with which China and the world have been engaged for a long time. In this study, experimental theatre is not strictly always a “little theatre” production. The following three levels of reality are categorised, in order to analyse different types of interaction between post-Cold War Chinese experimental theatre and the process of globalisation:

- 1) Theories of modern and postmodern theatre have been introduced as information exchange between China and the rest of the World increases, influencing new styles of theatre and creating new political standpoints;
- 2) Market economy is established and is challenging the society with a profit/value-oriented system, and theatre is forced to face the challenge;

¹⁴³ Ibid., 363.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 365.

¹⁴⁵ In “Renwu: Meng Jinghui (shang) [People: Meng Jinghui, Part 1],” *CCTV 10*, April 16, 2009.

- 3) The emerging globalised culture and ideology urges the Chinese people to reconsider their own cultural identity in the context of globalisation.

All of these realities are closely related to the impact of globalisation, and works of experimental theatre try to respond to them from different angles. The classification of the three levels are also partially inspired by Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of global cultural flows to explore the disjunctures between the globalised world of today and of the past in his book *Modernity at Large*. These five dimensions are: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*.¹⁴⁶ The first level mentioned above represents the *ideoscapes*, or in Appadurai's words, the concatenations of image, which "often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it," of a globalised China.¹⁴⁷ The second level, represents the *financescapes*, where "the disposition of a global capital is now a more mysterious, rapid, and difficult landscape to follow than ever before, as currency markets, national stock exchanges, and commodity speculations move megamonies through national turnstiles at blinding speed, with vast, absolute implications for small differences in percentage points and time units."¹⁴⁸ And the third level, represents a complex mixture of *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, and *technoscapes*, where groups and individuals, modern technologies, information and images move at high speed across previously impervious boundaries and constitute an essential feature of the world.

As Erika Fisher-Lichte precisely points out,

The adoption of the foreign is sparked off by a problem which has arisen in the own theatre (and in extreme cases in the own culture). This problem cannot be solved within the scope of the traditional or existing theatrical forms. The recourse to foreign theatre forms serves above all, therefore, the function of changing the own

¹⁴⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 33–37.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

underlying theatre forms in such a way that they are then able to solve the indigenous problem.¹⁴⁹

Introducing foreign theatrical forms and content always first serves the purpose for renewing the indigenous theatre: to challenge what has been established and (try to) present a new way, just as Brian Singleton puts it, as “the pursuit of otherness for the investigation of self.”¹⁵⁰ If theatre in China today is inevitably intercultural, it is not because of “primarily interest in the foreign, the foreign theatre forms or foreign culture from which it derives,” but rather “a wholly specific situation within the own culture, or wholly specific problem originating in the own theatre.”¹⁵¹ Experimental theatre, in the form of intercultural theatre, appropriates foreign theatre traditions and makes sense out of these traditions for indigenous audiences. As Schechner says, “the introduction of Western techniques, and the attempt to combine these techniques with indigenous theatre forms” in spoken drama both aimed to “to find out what it was that they found of value in Western societies; that is what they could use in their struggle for independence against Western national domination.”¹⁵² Nowadays, whether consciously or unconsciously, experimental theatre still serves a similar purpose to what Schechner describes: to struggle against Western dominated globalisation and to establish cultural identities for Chinese individuals rather than a cultural identity for the whole Chinese populace.

Staging globalisation and its resistance: toward the politics of critical cosmopolitanism in theatre

¹⁴⁹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Staging the Foreign as Cultural Transformation,” in *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Josephine Riley, and Michael Gissenwehler (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1990), 283.

¹⁵⁰ Brian Singleton, “Introduction: The Pursuit of Otherness for the Investigation of Self,” *Theatre Research International* 22, no. 2 (1997): 93.

¹⁵¹ Fischer-Lichte, “Staging the Foreign as Cultural Transformation,” 283.

¹⁵² Richard Schechner, “Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice: Richard Schechner Interviewed by Patrice Pavis,” in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 43.

This dissertation discusses the work of several representative figures in the “Little Theatre Movement” in mainland China since the 1980s, e.g. Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, Mou Sen, Zhang Xian, etc., whose theatrical experiments have had a strong impact on the development of contemporary Chinese theatre, and inspired the younger generation of theatre practitioners who are active on today’s stage. Through both close reading of literary and visual texts and inspecting secondary texts such as interviews and commentaries, an overview of the performances mirroring the age-old Chinese culture’s struggle under the unprecedented modernizing and globalising pressure in the post-Cold War period is provided. Case studies of experimental theatre performances are classified into three thematic dimensions which respectively signify the political, economic, and social/cultural tensions between China – or more precisely, Chineseness – and globalisation. There are three sets of social changes that energise the dynamics within the three realms:

- 1) the legacy of anti-imperialist revolution, nationalism and modernity challenged by new ideologies;
- 2) marketisation, urbanisation and industrialisation in the context of economic reform;
- 3) globalised lifestyle and another investigation of the cultural identity of “Chineseness.”

Each of the three approaches warrants its own chapter. Chapter One focuses on political theatre, in which the oppression of ideologies (but not necessarily from the West) and clash of civilisations (in radical cases, “the clash of China and America”) are explicitly portrayed. The nature of the socialist regime, which is based on the belief in class struggle and global revolution and founded on armed struggle, created the tendency to politicise every aspect of cultural life. Hence the principles of “socialist realism” were introduced in the pre-reform times, in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the CPC government and motivate Chinese people to build the new nation, and the principles continued to prevail in the 1980s. However, the abuse of these principles became oppressive, when artists whose works did not represent the theme of class struggle or did not agree with the classic Marxist beliefs were criticised or even persecuted. Just as in the early twentieth century,

the idea of revolution in post-Cold War Chinese theatre at times allied itself with nationalism in order to oppose imperialist dominance, and sometimes with cosmopolitanism in order to oppose local oppression. As we shall see from the case studies, globalisation turns out to be a double-edged sword: globalisation can unite, awaken, and liberate people because globalisation offers opportunities to break the boundaries of place, class and culture, etc., while at other times it may also disorient and oppress people because globalisation creates pressure to force everyone to conform with only one rule – Capitalism for example. Playwright Huang Jisu and experimental theatre director Meng Jinghui’s adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1998) is a perfect example of this point.

Chapter Two covers plays that concern changes in society resulting from the economic reform since 1990. Industrialisation is a necessity for a country’s modernisation, and huge quantities of labour are needed for this process. During the last three decades, numerous Chinese peasants have moved to the cities to work in factories and service industries for very low salaries. Meanwhile, elites have moved abroad to seek and take advantage of better opportunities in education, business and social welfare. The “Reform and Opening-up” challenges people’s old values as well as how theatre had been produced and marketed. Plays such as Yue Meiqin’s *Those Left Behind* (1991) and Grass Stage Theatre Company’s *World Factory* (2014) give us an insight into how people from various backgrounds struggle to better their lives, how economic reform is changing society, and how these changes brought about by the reform are also bringing about new social problems such as the growing wealth gap between the rich and the poor and the poor living conditions of migrant workers.

In Chapter Three, plays concerning conflicts between China and hegemonic global cultures are examined. Culture brought by globalised mass media helps in awakening individualism that encourages individual pursuit of knowledge and entertainment. But the globalisation of Western culture has made it so dominant and powerful that for Chinese society to embrace Western culture blindly will threaten indigenous traditions of cultural significance, and to adopt Eurocentric epistemology in cultural practice will interrupt communication that could have eliminated prejudices and misunderstandings.

Experimental plays studied in this chapter, such as Guo Shixing's *Birdmen* (1993), try to dismantle the obstacles found in cultural exchanges in performances and explore cultural identities of individuals in the post-Cold War era. And plays such as the Niao Collective's *Tongue's Memory of Home* (2005) and Theatre Santuoqi's *Aquatic* (2012) are examined to explore how Chineseness is constructed in relation to the imagination of globalisation (in Appadurai's sense).

As Ding Luonan observes, two new characteristics of "Post-New Era" drama in China should be mentioned:

Firstly, classical and modern foreign theatrical works were reinterpreted in the form of 'little theatre'; secondly, planning, sponsorship, promotion and ticket sales were incorporated in the process of experimental theatre production, so the production is no longer mere artistic *creation*.¹⁵³

These two characteristics, one referring to thematic and the other a technical aspect of theatrical practice, clearly mark the transformation of Chinese spoken drama from its obsession with "socialist realism" in the pre-reform era to a new stage under the force of globalisation. In this research, analysis will touch two levels of the interaction between Chinese theatre and the process of globalisation.

The first level is a close examination of the "economic base" of post-Cold War theatre in China, which underwent a major transformation from being government-supported to being market or semi-market-supported. Although today the government still spends a large sum of money to support local theatre troupes and uses awards and funding of various levels (given by the Ministry of Culture, the Publicity Department of the CPC, etc.) to encourage artists to produce works considered "high-quality" (which is also the case in many Western countries even though the standard of "high quality" may be different), many productions have been under the pressure of marketisation and therefore the use of theatre for political propaganda is not prioritised. This explains the success of *Those Left Behind*, *The Wife from America* and *The Lover* (the adaptation) in the early 1990s and the influence of their successes on later plays. At the same time, it is

¹⁵³ Ding Luonan, "'Hou xinshiqi' he xiaojuchang xiju [Post-New Era and Little Theatre]," 8.

also important to be aware of some theatre practices that were sponsored by international foundations – another type of globalisation and intercultural exchange. It cannot be said that these theatre works are totally “free” because they also need to adopt some strategies to win some international attention – which may also be problematic under scrutiny.

The second level is how the dramatists, being aware of their new roles in the globalised market of theatre, actively engaged in rising consumerism to present their experience and imagination on the contemporary Chinese stage. They either have turned to portraying ordinary people’s “trivial problems” in daily life instead of continuing the grand and victorious narrative of the state, or have explored ways to make marginalized individuals’ voices heard in the theatrical space. By highlighting the personal experience of individuals in theatre, individualism is used against collectivism, and cosmopolitanism against insularism, in order to break free from the oppressive discourse of dogmatic “socialist realism.” Adaptation, parody, pastiche and allegory frequently appear in these theatrical works, in order to depict the unspeakable endeavour of an obsolete culture (and its people) to catch the ever-speeding express train of globalisation; experiments are performed to combine styles of different theatre traditions, and the experiments transform the performing space to challenge spectator-audience relations and the understanding of theatre itself, in order to represent the world impacted by globalisation.

To evaluate and critique experimental theatre in the condition of globalisation, the idea of critical cosmopolitanism proposed by Delanty will be a tool of assessment in this study. Although there are issues regarding Delanty’s assertion that cosmopolitanism today is used in a “post-Western” register and located purely in the interface of the local and the global¹⁵⁴ (as stated earlier, the nation-state – based on and functioning according to Western ideas – is still so overwhelmingly powerful that the function of cosmopolitan beliefs is often disrupted by nationalism or particularism), I argue that the self-reflexivity embedded in cosmopolitanism can build a neutral ground for ethical judgements. It is important to note that all civilisations and cultures have developed their own thinking on

¹⁵⁴ Delanty, “The Idea of Critical Cosmopolitanism,” 41; Gerard Delanty, “The Making of a Post-Western Europe: A Civilizational Analysis,” *Thesis Eleven* 72, no. 1 (2003): 8–25.

cosmopolitanism, as the spirit of openness and self-adjustment via encounters with the Other is always crucial to the survival of a society. As China has been a multi-ethnic civilisation for millennia, the thinking on cosmopolitanism has a long tradition and has left a great impact.¹⁵⁵ Thinkers in ancient China have proposed cosmopolitan beliefs, such as Mo Di's "Universal Love" (*jian'ai*) and Mencius's "Great Unity" (*datong*); political activists in the modern era, such as Kang Youwei and Sun Yat-sen as mentioned earlier, also used cosmopolitanism to promote reform and revolution. Furthermore, Marx in "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" declares that the proletariat has been "stripped [...] of every trace of national character"¹⁵⁶ so a universal class across national borders is formed; in this sense a communist party is always a cosmopolitan party, and it is based on this belief that the CPC construct the grand narrative of how it led the socialist revolution and won the legitimacy of ruling China over the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang). The traditional idea of *tianxia* (all under Heaven) according to Zhao Tingyang, offers a different world view from the Eurocentric one, and can contribute to building a cosmopolitan world order.¹⁵⁷ All these points detailed above show that cosmopolitanism is part of the Chinese national character and cultural legacy and hence they validate a cosmopolitan critique of cultural practice in China.

Although the research subjects are divided into three seemingly parallel groups, the three dimensions (politics, economy, and culture) are without doubt deeply interrelated and interdependent. For instance, a play criticising Westernisation and domination of global capital may have to comply with the rules of capitalist operations, and in this case the politics and the economy interweave: today one can be amazed at the speed at which

¹⁵⁵ For instance, in the Qing Dynasty the cosmopolitan ideology was used to ease conflicts between Manchu, Chinese (Han), Mongolian, Tibetan and Islamic peoples. For more discussion on Qing cosmopolitanism and a case study on the eighteenth-century Mongolian intellectual and promoter of cosmopolitanism, Injannashi, see Johan Elverskog, "China and the New Cosmopolitanism," *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 233 (2013), http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp233_china_cosmopolitanism.pdf.

¹⁵⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers, 2007), 20.

¹⁵⁷ See Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* [The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institution] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2011).

the market is commodifying and fetishising the avant-garde, simply if it sells. For another example, a play about conflicts between Eastern and Western traditional customs may be accompanied by a nationalist sentiment at the time of its production, and in this case the discussion of culture is involved in the politics. Therefore, all three dimensions of performance will be discussed in the context of one particular production, if necessary. Above all, these three labels are not indicators of the subject or theme of all the works explored; they merely act as points of departure to enter the context of the plays, while the order of this analysis also shows some traces of the shifting thematic spotlight of theatre over the past twenty-five years or so.

To be clear, the approach of the study is to look at the political rather than the aesthetic aspect of theatre, or, to be more precise, to answer Walter Benjamin's call of "politicising art."¹⁵⁸ The focus is on how people conduct experiments in theatre and try to settle conflicts provoked or intensified by globalisation; by examining how experiments have been performed, a discussion is developed, exploring whether the cosmopolitan spirit of openness and self-renewal is made possible in the theatre. This thesis provides a political reading of the performance to reveal the tension between different ideologies and cultures, and to highlight their potential to deal with conflicts and propose solutions. After all, as Augusto Boal asserts:

[A]ll theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them.

Those who try to separate theater from politics try to lead us into error – and this is a political attitude.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Michael William et al. (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 42.

¹⁵⁹ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A., Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000), ix.

CHAPTER ONE

“I Will Be with Them”: Political Theatre and the Proletarian Revolution in the Age of Globalisation

The kind people, the contemptible people, the submissive people, the feeble people of this world,

Don't forget that hegemony and suppression have not been wiped out.

The kind people, the contemptible people, the submissive people, the feeble people of this world,

Use your knives and swords to strike the injustice in the world!

– Huang Jisu's adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1998)¹⁶⁰

The beginning of the 1990s saw Chinese society suffering from unrest and anxiety. The democratic June-Fourth Movement in 1989, in which over one million people took part, ended in martial law in Beijing. Zhao Ziyang, the reformist General Secretary of the Communist Party was forced to resign, and later placed under house arrest for the rest of his life, while student leaders and pro-liberal intellectuals active in the movement were thrown in jail or forced into exile. Ironically, though this movement triggered a chain reaction in which a number of socialist governments, including that of the USSR, were overthrown by their people, the movement did not result in a change of regime in China. Having witnessed the domino effect of the collapse of socialism in Europe, conservatism in China refused to let its socialist regime fall. This conservative reality left China in the middle of a paradox. The Communist Party of China (CPC) claimed orthodoxy in the proletarian revolution (as “the centre of world revolution”), and in both the anti-imperialist struggle against the capitalist West and the dispute between China and the socialist USSR.¹⁶¹ At this point the legitimacy of the CPC government was

¹⁶⁰ Huang Jisu, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Zuojia chubanshe, 2000), 267.

¹⁶¹ The political relationship between China and the USSR deteriorated in the 1960s, due to the divergence of national interests (including territorial disputes) and different interpretations of Marxist-Leninism. The conflicts between the two socialist countries remained for decades and many of the issues

challenged as it failed to respond in time to the cosmopolitan demands of the protestors, such as the crackdown of corruption, the protection of human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, etc. Yet in the meantime, after witnessing so many devastating political movements in recent history, Chinese people tended to show little objection to the claim of the authorities in the media; “the overriding need is for stability.”¹⁶² In other words, achieving social changes solely through political movements proved less feasible than the activists expected, and therefore new ways of addressing social issues needed to be explored.

Chinese people were nevertheless victimised in the aftermath of the movement. Because of the authorities’ iron-hand approach so as to end the disturbance of 1989, the national image of China was severely damaged, foreign investment and tourism dropped considerably, and several Western countries led by the US and the European Union imposed sanctions and arms embargoes against China. This also aroused antagonism among Chinese people towards the West in spite of the favourable impression the West had left on Chinese people during the 1980s through mass culture and imported goods. The failed bid in 1993 for the 2000 Summer Olympics and the joining of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1994 were considered to be caused by the manipulation of hostile Western powers, which ignited nationalist enthusiasm throughout the last decade of the twentieth century.¹⁶³ As a result, leftism in post-Cold War China was entrapped in a state of schizophrenia. On the one hand, it attempted to reclaim validity by overstating the status of China as “the last hope of socialism” in the new phase of globalisation, and being persecuted by Western imperialist powers, so as to make a

were not resolved until the late 1980s or even the dissolving of the USSR.

¹⁶² See excerpts from Deng Xiaoping’s talk with the US President George Bush: Xiaoping Deng, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping. Volume III (1982-1992)*, trans. the Bureau for the Compilation and Translation of Works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 277.

¹⁶³ See Claire Claire A. Conceison, *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 24-28, for more details of the anti-Americanism in the 1990s; also see Entell, “Post-Tian’anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre/CNET,” xix–xxi., for her experience as a theatre researcher and US citizen living in Beijing during this period of anti-American sentiment.

cosmopolitan claim to link itself to the context of globalisation. On the other hand, leftism in China faced internal challenges to address issues of exploitation and oppression, such as whether and how to justify the market economy and private ownership of business (i.e. exploitation of the working class) promoted by the state policy of “Reform and Opening-up” in terms of Marxist doctrine, and whether to align itself with nationalism or cosmopolitanism in response to complex controversial conflicts such as the Tian’anmen Square Protest. The struggle of the Left made a strong impact on theatre, since Chinese theatre practitioners had been greatly influenced by leftist ideologies since the creation of spoken drama, as mentioned in the Introduction.

Regardless of whether it would like to remain on the left, or reverse to the right, the Chinese government made up its mind to play a more important role in influencing public life. As was mentioned in the Introduction, after the turmoil of the Tian’anmen Square protest had ceased in 1989, the Chinese government took actions to strengthen control over dissenting ideologies. The protest in Tian’anmen Square was officially declared to be a “counter-revolutionary rebellion” which aimed to “overthrow the Communist Party and demolish the socialist system.”¹⁶⁴ Many sympathisers of the student protestors, whether they were CPC members, government officers, soldiers/policemen, or ordinary citizens, faced the punishment of being laid off, removed from office, or severe charges for “providing aid to counterrevolutionary movement,” such as imprisonment. Censorship on publication, media, and cultural activities was tightened, and theatre was among the most heavily affected areas. Because of his open criticism of the Chinese government, Gao Xingjian, one of the leading figures of the experimental theatre movement in the 1980s, went into exile in France in 1989. Since then (especially when his play *Escape* premiered in 1990 at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm and was set against the background of Tian’anmen Square protest) his works were banned in mainland China. Gao’s exile was without a doubt the most substantial loss to Chinese theatre at the beginning of the post-Cold War era.

¹⁶⁴ Deng, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping. Volume III (1982-1992)*, 294–95.

The censorship was not limited to the plays that directly addressed the political issues. For instance, Meng Jinghui, an active experimental dramatist in the 1990s, and one of the central figures in this chapter, was a graduate student (M.F.A. in directing) at the Central Academy of Dramatic Arts in Beijing in December 1989. Meng Jinghui was rehearsing *Waiting for Godot* (*Dengdai geduo*), paying special respect to the playwright Samuel Beckett, who passed away in the same year. The performance was to be staged in front of a gigantic pile of coal on the square of the school, but he was told that the performance had been cancelled for unspecified reasons. Besides censoring the “improper” plays, the government also made great efforts to promote “main melody” spoken drama. This time, “socialist realism” was no longer a must for “main melody” theatre, and a certain degree of (aesthetic) experimentation was allowed. In other words, theatre with explicit political messages was not banned, but constantly tamed according to the dominant ideology. In this context the theatre stage became an arena for competing ideologies – not necessarily between the Left (socialist) and the Right (liberal), but more possibly between the official ideology and its schizophrenic doubles. Moreover, social issues of oppression and class struggle in China were brought up in the new dimension of globalisation, and urged dramatists to become engaged in relevant discussions through theatre.

This chapter focuses on “political plays,” which present the *ideoscapes*, or in Appadurai’s words, the concatenations of image, “often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and counterideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it,” of a globalised China.¹⁶⁵ These plays explicitly portray the oppression of ideologies (but not necessarily from the West) or clash of civilisations (in radical cases, “the clash of China and America”). Politicisation of theatre can be seen as the inertia of political movements in the previous period (notably the Cultural Revolution), when theatre as an art form was treated mostly as a means of political propaganda for the proletarian revolution according to Leninist teaching, while

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 35.

experiencing “unprecedented restriction of artistic independence and value.”¹⁶⁶ However this does not make political theatre less interesting. On the contrary, through the different works from different periods of time we can observe not only how political debates interweave with people’s everyday discourse, but also how the legacy of revolution builds its alliance with nationalism – to oppose imperialist dominance, or with cosmopolitanism – to oppose local oppression.

Longing for Worldly Pleasures: an intercultural “theatre of the oppressed”

Due to the social turbulence and political censorship, as well as the expansion of other media such as film and television, the liveliness of Chinese theatre reached a low point in the first few years of the 1990s. Many of the plays put on the major stages in Beijing were revivals, and “little theatre” productions did not reach a wide range of audiences. Nonetheless, there are a few interesting “little theatre” productions of Western drama. In 1989, Lin Zhaohua directed *Hamlet (Hamuleite)* in a rehearsal room in the Beijing People’s Art Theatre (BPAT) for only three performances, and in 1990 the play were put on in a studio in the Beijing Film Academy. As director, Lin deconstructed and reorganised the text, and let the actors exchange roles and say each other’s lines in the play. Instead of creating a conventional *mise en scène* with ancient castles and grand thrones, the stage set, designed by Yi Liming, was made up of a gigantic grey curtain, miscellaneous broken machine parts, an old barber’s chair, a number of electric fans, and more. Lin’s understanding of “everyone is Hamlet” in a postmodern condition was foregrounded in the production, as he wrote in the performance programme:

Hamlet is one man among us. We may walk past him on the street every day. Those thoughts that torment him also torment us every day. The choices that he faces are also faced by us every day. To be or not to be is a philosophical problem, but it is

¹⁶⁶ Fu Jin, *Ershi shiji Zhongguo xiju de xiandaixing yu bentuhua* [Modernity and Localisation of Chinese Theatre in the 20th Century] (Taipei: Guojia chubanshe, 2005), 39.

also everything in particular in our daily life. Or it is not. You have to choose. [...] Now, we want to let him return to us, as our brother and as ourselves.

We face Hamlet today, not as a prince who seeks vengeance, nor as a humanist hero, but as [an image of] ourselves. To face oneself is the most active, courageous and heroic attitude that a modern man can adopt. Apart from this [attitude], we have nothing. [...] I mean it: we have no choice but face ourselves.¹⁶⁷

Through the interchanging identities and subjectivities between Hamlet and other characters, Lin tried to portray a situation of (post) modernity in which everyone is granted agency as well as scepticism. Because of Lin's ingenious interpretation of Shakespeare's play and his audacious style of directing, the production was considered by Yi Liming as a signal implicating the shift of focus of the "Little Theatre Movement":

Since 1990 experimental theatre moved toward the direction of "director's theatre," i.e. the director's creative style becomes the focus of the performance, so that there is a total shift in the idea of making theatre; literature is no longer the basis of theatre performance, and the director's work in the ultimate objective of the performance, [which led to the fact that] a lot of theatre productions showed inspiring imagination and creative artistic expression, and contributed a great deal to the development of "little theatre" performance.¹⁶⁸

Lin's success encouraged and inspired other dramatists, and further set an example of how a "little theatre" production could progress and enter the mainstream. In 1992, Lin, Ren Ming, and Meng Yan collaborated and directed *Romulus the Great (Luomulusi dadi)* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt at BPAT. In addition to exploring his technique of creating interchanging roles and the style of *mise en scène* of "bleakness and desolation"¹⁶⁹ signifying a post-industrial world, Lin also put puppetry (in collaboration with the Marionette Theatre of Quanzhou) in his characterisation of the last emperor of the

¹⁶⁷ Lin Zhaohua, "Daoyan de hua [Director's Note]," in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 9.

¹⁶⁸ Yi Liming, "Shiyan xiaojuchang yanchu [Experimental Little Theatre Performance]," in *Xinshiqi wentan fengyunlu* [Records of Literary Circles of the New Era], ed. Yang Zhijin and Liu Xinfeng (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 1999), 158. For more discussion on the production, see Li Ruru, *Shashibiya: Staging Shakespeare in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 83-99.

¹⁶⁹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 57.

Western Roman Empire. In 1994, he restaged *Hamlet* in BPAT, which resulted in another critically acclaimed production.¹⁷⁰

Lin's *Hamlet* and *Romulus the Great* revealed the undercurrents that were flowing beneath the calm surface of Chinese theatre at the beginning of the 1990s. Although the political influence from the West seemed to have failed to make a change to government, Western culture was still able to leave a great impact on the Chinese people. During this period, a number of productions of (mostly post-war) Western theatre were staged. Two years after his 1989 performance was cancelled, Meng managed to stage *Waiting for Godot* with most of the original cast in the Central Academy of Drama. The students of the Central Academy of Drama played an important role in staging Western avant-garde theatre in this period, and they put on plays including *The Dumb Waiter* (*Songcai shengjiangji*, 1990, directed by Meng Jinghui) and *Landscape* (*Fengjing*, 1991, directed by Cai Jun and Zhang Xiaoling) by Harold Pinter, and *The Bald Soprano* (*Tutou genü*, 1991, directed by Meng Jinghui) by Eugène Ionesco, *Giallo e nero* (*Huang yu hei*, 1991, directed by Zhang Yang) by the Italian futurist Remo Chiti, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (*Zhizhunü zhi wen*, 1992, directed by Dong Haoyu) by the Argentine writer Manuel Puig.

Despite the fact that the majority of the plays mentioned above were performed at college campuses, they illustrated the young practitioners' growing interest in new forms of theatre. Among those enthusiastic practitioners were two key figures of the experimental theatre movement of the 1990s: Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui. Coming from similar educational backgrounds – both of them took a Bachelor's degree in literature – Mou and Meng began their career in theatre by staging Western historical avant-garde plays. Mou directed his first play, a student production of *The Classroom Assignments* (*Ketang zuoye*, in German: *Der Klassenaufsatz*), written by German writer and diplomat Erwin Wickert, when Mou was an undergraduate student at Beijing Normal University in 1984. In 1985, Mou directed another student production, *An Irkutsk Story* by the USSR playwright Aleksei Arbuzov, after completing fieldwork in several state-owned theatre

¹⁷⁰ Also see Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 54-63, for more analysis of Lin's *Hamlet* and *Romulus the Great*.

companies in western China, and completed a report, “A Survey of Current Conditions of the Institutional System of Spoken Drama Theatre in North-western and South-western Regions” (*Xibei xi'nan huaju tizhi xianzhuang diaocha*). In 1987, Mou left his job in Tibet Theatre Troupe after two years of work, and returned to Beijing in pursuit of his theatrical dreams in the capital.

Mou started his Frog Experimental Drama Troupe (*Wa shiyan jutuan*)¹⁷¹ in 1987 with the production of *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, and Meng, who had just graduated from Beijing Teacher's College, took the leading role in the production. Meng continued to work with Mou on C. F. Ramuz and Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* (*Shibing de gushi*, in French: *L'Histoire du soldat*, 1988) and Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (*Dashen bulang*, 1989), before starting his own directing career with a number of Western avant-garde classics, including *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Bald Soprano*, and *Waiting for Godot*, as mentioned earlier. With the concerted efforts of dramatists such as Mou and Meng, putting on Western avant-garde classics (absurdist, futurist, surrealist, etc.) became prevalent and influential during this time. Meng observed:

On any of the evenings of middle or late 1991, if you walked into the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, you would definitely be able to see an *unusual* performance. It was as if a festival was going on every day. A dozen fervent dramatists formed creative teams, and with self-confidence, rhapsodic imagination, offense, passion, as well as patience, perseverance, rationality and self-devotion, we made ourselves and our audiences intoxicated and awed. Obviously, these performances did not have glamorous sets, or perfect acoustic conditions; three of them were performed in basements [...].¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ The word “frog” 蛙 has two implications: firstly, it sounds like the word “dig” 挖 which means “to dig [for treasures]” and “to pave [the way].” Secondly in Chinese it also sounds like the exclamation word “wa” 哇, which implicates novelty and innovation, signifying the avant-garde disposition of the troupe's aesthetics. See Mou's interview in Jin Xiaofeng, *Xiaofeng diushoujuan: xunwen dangdai 26 wei xianfeng renwu* [Games Started by Xiaofeng: A Search and Interview of 26 Contemporary Avant-Garde Figures] (Linyi: Shangdong huabao chubanshe, 2003), 392.

¹⁷² Meng Jinghui, “Shiyan xiju he women de xuanze [Experimental Theatre and Our Choice],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 358. [My emphasis.]

What made Meng believe that these performances were “unusual” are the stark differences in style from the mainstream that these plays presented. Inspired by the Western avant-garde artists and theatre masters who boldly challenged the convention and the borders of art, Meng and other Chinese experimental theatre directors endeavoured to use techniques and styles that were different from the conventional aesthetics in the mainstream at that time. They put their own interpretation into the plays that they directed and created new themes for them. For example, in Meng’s *Waiting for Godot* in 1991, Beckett’s empty *mise en scène* (nothing except for a country road, a tree and a mound) was replaced by a set (designed by Liu Jing) consisting of a black piano, a white bicycle, two big windows, a cloth painted with part of Sandro Botticelli’s “Primavera,” as well as the tree hanging from an electric ceiling fan, against the newly-painted white background of the wall. Furthermore, the director put the spectators on the stage, and let the actors perform in the auditorium; at the end of the play Vladimir broke all of the windowpanes with a black umbrella. Rather than the Beckettian idea of “nothing happens, twice,” Meng’s interpretation of “the gentleness of fear, the sharpness of ambiguity,”¹⁷³ and “a kind of helpless, passive resistance”¹⁷⁴ is emphasised.

For this reason, young dramatists regarded staging Western historical avant-garde theatre as an assertive and symbolic move to break away from the convention of “socialist realism,” and to begin a new chapter in Chinese theatre. On the performance programme of Frog Experimental Drama Troupe’s *The Great God Brown* in January 1989, Mou wrote:

Dear audience, please remember tonight, 28th January, 1989, this ordinary evening. On this evening, when you are sitting here and seeing our premiere of *The Great God Brown*, on another stage in the capital, the veteran artists in Beijing People's Art Theatre are putting on the last performance [of the season] of *Teahouse*.¹⁷⁵ This

¹⁷³ Meng, “Shiyan xiju he women de xuanze [Experimental Theatre and Our Choice],” 359.

¹⁷⁴ Meng Jinghui, “Guanyu shiyan xiju de duihua [Conversation on Experimental Theatre],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 347.

¹⁷⁵ *Teahouse* (1957) written by Lao She is considered as part of the canon of spoken drama, which is seen as a representative work of “socialist realism” and a classic in BPAT’s repertoire. Set in a teahouse in Beijing, the play tells the story of how lower-class people suffered for decades under the oppression of

generation of veteran artists created a glamorous epoch for theatre. However, life is in the eternal cycle of life and death; *Teahouse* has buried an old age, and *The Great God Brown* is bearing a great dream—change and substitution are unavoidable. [...] We believe that when the first dawn of the twenty-first century breaks, there will be another fascinating age full of new stars. We have always craved this new age, and we are devoting ourselves entirely to [fulfilling] this craving.¹⁷⁶

Before long, both Mou and Meng started to explore their own aesthetics and political standpoints, offering important direction for works such as the former's *A Chinese Grammatical Discussion of the Other Shore* (*Guanyu bi'an de Hanyu yufa taolun*, 1993), *File Zero* (*Ling dang'an*, 1994), *Things Related to AIDS* (*Yu Aizi youguan*, 1994), *Red Herring* (*Hong feiyu*, 1995), and the latter's *Longing for World Pleasures* (*Si fan*, 1992), and *I Love XXX* (*Wo ai XXX*, 1994). Theatre critics thus nicknamed the early 1990s “the era of double-M.” The experimentation of Mou and Meng's interpretation and direction revealed a shift in their focus from literary interpretation to methodologies of representation, which foregrounded the director's role in the production through the use of stylisation.

Stylisation of theatre performances helped the theatre directors to express their own feeling and explore their own personalities, such as to how to “face ourselves,” as Lin Zhaohua advocated in the programme of his production *Hamlet*. In Meng's words:

We don't use the old ways, which leads to individuation in our own creative processes. This is no longer presenting just a new form on the stage, but a radical individuality in our [artistic] creation, which is linked to the aesthetics of theatre and what every one of us pursues.¹⁷⁷

In their exploration of individuality, Mou and Meng's works attempted to build a closer connection between theatre and the reality of contemporary Chinese society. By

the Qing Dynasty, Japanese occupation and the KMT government, and reveals the playwright's wish for a new China.

¹⁷⁶ Mou Sen, “Wa shiyan jutuan zhi guanzhong [Wa Experimental Theatre Troupe's Note to the Audiences],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 3.

¹⁷⁷ Meng, “Guanyu shiyan xiju de duihua [Conversation on Experimental Theatre],” 351.

introducing new directorial methods inspired by Western theatre, Mou and Meng, as representative examples of the young generation of experimental dramatists, brought new energy to Chinese theatre.

Longing for Worldly Pleasures (Si fan) was a typical and influential case in this period of experimental exploration.¹⁷⁸ This was Meng Jinghui's first conscious attempt to construct his own style which "forged a new path in Meng's creative journey,"¹⁷⁹ after he finished directing Western absurdist classics *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Waiting for Godot* and an environmental play, *Night Zoo (Shenye dongwuyuan*, written by Cai Shangjun) as a graduate student of directing in the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. *Longing for Worldly Pleasure* premiered in 1992 in the Black Box Theatre in the Central Academy of Drama, and a year later, Meng revived the play with a different cast, as his debut in the Central Experimental Theatre as an emerging director. The work was considered to be one of Meng's most important plays, and "the play secretly changed the fate of a number of people."¹⁸⁰ Among those who were involved in the play, many later became celebrated actors or enthusiastic theatre practitioners. Meanwhile, the scenographer Qi Li, who also devised a series of Happenings including "Longing for Worldly Pleasures/Two Descend the Mountain Together: 07/12/1992 the Day of Heavy Snow," mysteriously chose to end his life only one week after the 1992 production.¹⁸¹

The play is a collage of three ancient literary texts: the *kunqu*¹⁸² opera script "Longing for Worldly Pleasures/Two Descend the Mountain Together" (*Si fan/Shuang*

¹⁷⁸ The play in this research is studied based on the script published in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], 58-87, and the DVD collection published by Meng Jinghui Studio ("Si fan [Longing for Worldly Pleasures]," in *Meng Jinghui de xiju* [Meng Jinghui's Theatre], directed by Meng Jinghui (1993; Beijing: Jiuzhou yinxiang chuban gongsi, 2008), DVD).

¹⁷⁹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 165.

¹⁸⁰ See Shi Hang's memoir, Shi Hang, "Mingju de er'nü men [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces]," in *Duku 0601* [Warehouse of Reading 0601], ed. Zhang Lixian (Beijing: Tongxin chubanshe, 2006), 272.

¹⁸¹ The Day of Heavy Snow (*daxue*, one day among 6-8 December of Western Gregorian calendar every year) is one of the twenty-four solar terms of Chinese traditional calendar. To Qi, it indicates the agricultural activities according to the change of weather and signifies the connection between man and nature. See *ibid.*, 272-74.

¹⁸² *Kunqu*, or *kunju*/Kun Opera, is a style of traditional Chinese theatre originated in Kunshan area in

xiashan), which was written during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) by an anonymous author, and two novellas taken from *The Decameron* (1353) by Giovanni Boccaccio. The idea of putting on “Longing for Worldly Pleasures” came from an impulse that Meng and his friends had when they were expressing their discontent over a production of the play by an Austrian theatre company.¹⁸³ They were amazed by how resourceful the text could be in the process of their artistic creation. As was written in the programme of the 1992 production:

The laughing and cursing of the little nun and monk instantly cast away all of our doubts, though none of us would have expected that such a short piece of traditional theatre, the entire singing and performing of which can be enjoyed over a pot of tea, could have expanded its capacity so vastly that we had excessive free space for our bold venture.¹⁸⁴

By inserting Boccaccio’s novellas into the *kunqu* text, more focused theatrical tension was created, making the performance brisker and more effective, which will be elaborated later.

The *kunqu* text of “Longing for Worldly Pleasures/Two Descends the Mountain Together” (“Worldly Pleasures” hereafter) is found in the scripts of two classical “excerpt plays” (*zhezi xi*)¹⁸⁵ from the full-length *kunqu* play *Stories from the Sea of Sin* (*Niehai ji*), although part of the complete script was lost. According to Cai Dunyong, the origin of “Worldly Pleasures” as a play dates back to the Yuan Dynasty and many different

Eastern China. It once dominated Chinese theatre from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

¹⁸³ See Jiang Yan, “Si fan: yiqun ren de qingchun huiyi [Longing for Worldly Pleasure: Memory of Youth for a Group of People],” *Beijing News*, 2007, http://www.china.com.cn/culture/zhuanti/huaju/2007-04/20/content_8144981.htm.

¹⁸⁴ See Meng Jinghui, ed., “Programme of Longing for Worldly Pleasures,” in *Xianfeng xiju dang’an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 57.

¹⁸⁵ An “excerpt play,” or *zhezi xi*, is a performance which has only one or a few scenes selected from a complete play of traditional Chinese theatre, and the scenes selected are usually the most interesting, and focus on the impressive skills of the actor. Many of traditional Chinese plays such as *kunqu* and Beijing Opera are considerably long. For example, it would take three days to perform a complete play of Hong Sheng’s *The Palace of Eternal Life* (*Changsheng dian*). Therefore, many traditional Chinese theatre performances today are “excerpt plays” rather than full plays. See Gu Lingsen, “Zhezi xi [Excerpt Play],” ed. Wu Xinlei, Yu Weimin, and Gu Lingsen, *Zhongguo kunju dacidian* [Dictionary of Chinese Kun Opera] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2002).

indigenous traditional theatre forms (*difangxi*) have adapted the play.¹⁸⁶ The storyline of “Worldly Pleasures,” is comparably simple: a young Buddhist nun called Sekong, who was raised in the Immortal Peach Nunnery and has lived there for a long time, feels lonesome and depressed due to the seclusion called for by her religious doctrine. Sekong meets Benwu, a young monk from the Green Peach Temple¹⁸⁷ who is equally frustrated, and the two decide to escape from their monasteries and start a new life together. The story shows the clashes between personal desires and traditional moral teachings that look down upon sexuality.

The play is divided into two parts and interrupted by two adapted novellas, both of a similar theme, taken from *The Decameron*. The first novella tells the story of a Florentine aristocrat named Pinuccio who falls in love with a girl named Niccolosa. In order to spend a night with Niccolosa, the daughter of an innkeeper, Pinuccio manages to stay in the inn as a traveller and sneaks into Niccolosa’s bed with the help of his friend Adriano. By coincidence, Adriano and the innkeeper’s wife awaken, and in the dark they go to the wrong bed; as the comedy of errors continues, Adriano and the innkeeper’s wife end up sleeping together, and Pinuccio, who has just returned from Niccolosa, sleeps with the innkeeper. When Pinuccio talks to the innkeeper, whom he takes as Adriano, his indecent acts are immediately revealed. However in the chaos, the innkeeper’s wife creeps into Niccolosa’s bed, and insists that she has spent the night with her daughter, so as to conceal her affair with Adriano. Adriano also cunningly claims that Pinuccio was sleepwalking, and the two friends are able to deceive the innkeeper and thus evade punishment.

The second novella is an equally hilarious comedy about a horse keeper’s escapade to disguise himself as the King of Lombardy to visit the Queen in her chamber. The horse

¹⁸⁶ Cai Dunyong, “Kunju Si fan liubian de qishi [Reflection on Transmutation of the Kunju Play Si Fan],” *Yishu baijia* [A Hundred Schools in Arts], no. 3 (1991): 95–98. Moreover, as Mei Lanfang notes, “Worldly Pleasures” has some unique singing and narrating styles that differ from classic *kunqu*. See Mei Lanfang, Xu Jichuan, and Xu Yuanlai, *Wutai shenghuo sishinian* [Fourty Years on the Stage] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1987), 339.

¹⁸⁷ The names of the nunnery (*Xiantao an*) and the temple (*Bitao si*) has the same Chinese character *tao* 桃 (peach), which is a word game as the character sounds the same as the character *tao* 逃 (to escape).

keeper's scheme is revealed when after he leaves the Queen, the real king comes to his wife and hears the Queen's remark of his "revisiting." Though the King decides not to publicise this scandal, he slips into the stable where all of his servants sleep and identifies the culprit by the latter's rapid heartbeat. The King stealthily cuts off a lock of the horsekeeper's hair, and plans to punish him the following day. But the horse keeper cleverly cuts off some hair of all the other servants secretly, and thus manages to escape the King's wrath.

While these two cultural and historical originary texts are not directly relevant in terms of style or dramatic conflict, they are connected through the clashes between the secular and the sacred worlds that they implicate. Conventionally "World Pleasures" belongs to a genre of traditional theatre known as "Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell" (*Mulian jiumu xi*), and is performed as a "morality play" (*quanshan xi*) in order to promote Buddhist teachings.¹⁸⁸ But as Beijing Opera master Mei Langfang puts it, "World Pleasures," through its comparably straightforward story and easily-understood diction, reveals the cruelty of some parents who ignore the happiness of their children and force them to convert to Buddhism and live as monks/nuns, and the play shows "the spirit of activism of resistance [against oppression] and the power within its text [to inspire people]."¹⁸⁹ As Michelle DiBello notes, Meng Jinghui is able to link the texts based on the mutual "dynamic tension between the sacred and the profane."¹⁹⁰ While "Worldly Pleasures" focuses on the hesitation of Sekong and Benwu, who ponder the possible curses that might befall them if they betray their religious creed, the *Decameron* novellas show how the rules can be broken, and how the act of breaking them so as to achieve happiness will not be punished. Through the comic stories from *The Decameron*,

¹⁸⁸ The nun's name Sekong 色空 ("form is emptiness") and the monk's name Benwu 本无 ("origin is nothingness") have shown very clear implication that the "worldly pleasures" they pursue are meaningless, according to Buddhist beliefs.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Michelle DiBello, "Longing for Worldly Pleasures: An Example of the Sacred vs. the Profane in Contemporary Chinese Drama," *CHINOPERL* 19, no. 1 (1996): 67.

the concern over moral responsibility or karma is cast away, and the pursuit of happiness, as a basic human right, is rationalised.

In adapting and merging the classical texts, Meng tried to deploy his experimental methods in order to breathe new life into the ancient characters. His dominant method is an intercultural blending of classical Chinese theatre aesthetics and modern, Western-style acting, with a pre-modern carnival spirit and a postmodern attitude. There are seven performers who enact the stories, and the performers are not placed within a conventional stage setting. They wear gender-neutral costumes (thick, white T-shirts, and cotton trousers with a traditional Chinese design of red and green flowers), and the stage design is abstract with limited props – a chair, a withered tree branch, a water hose, some white pillows, etc. The actors' roles in the play are constantly shifting; in the second *Decameron* story, the King, the Queen, and the horse keeper are each played by two performers, rendering the scene more entertaining when the audience can see the characters' inner conflict physically embodied by two performers. There is also the role of "narrator," who provides brief descriptions of the stories' settings. However, different performers play the narrator in each story, and the narrator also often takes part in the enactment of the stories. According to Meng's stage directions:

The form of the performance is constructed with rather distinct indeterminacy, staging process and improvisation, and it drifts in the in-between space between *playful suppositionality* and *rational alienation effect*;¹⁹¹ there is a intermingling of the *passionate engagement* and *calm observation*, and the theatricality expands to its largest capacity within an atmosphere both inducing [the spectator] and enhancing [the effect].¹⁹²

Here Meng aligns himself with Bertolt Brecht, who calls for "a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical

¹⁹¹ I referred to Ferrari's translation of Meng's several terms, see Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 172. Here "playful suppositionality," or *youxishide xu'nihua*, refers to "to playfully mime a scene," and "rational alienation effect," or *lizhi de jianli xiaoguo*, refers to "to consciously estrange the spectator."

¹⁹² [My emphasis] Meng Jinghui, "Si fan [Longing for Worldly Pleasures]," in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoji chubanshe, 2000), 58.

field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”¹⁹³ Meng adopts Brecht’s dialectical approach, in which he pays equal attention to approaching the feelings of the spectator, while also respecting the critical position of the spectator.

What is more, Meng also holds a strongly critical attitude towards “deadly theatre” on contemporary Chinese stages, as Peter Brook, in his famous book *The Empty Space* attributes to the contemporary condition of Western theatre.¹⁹⁴ In his article, “Experimental Theatre and Our Choice” (*Shiyan xiju he wo men de xuanze*), Meng boldly asserts:

Around us, on the stages in Beijing, most of the theatre performed is intoxicating the audience with mediocre viewpoints, phony voices, pretentious acting and boring preaching; they are deluding the audience with seemingly innovative techniques, so-called breakthroughs that are not surprising at all, and obscene and gaudy smiles; they are constantly lowering the audience’s aesthetic level with stubborn deadliness, scheming calculation and dull solemnity.¹⁹⁵

Brook’s account of Western theatre is thus borrowed by Meng to pave the way for his own experimental practice in the Chinese context.

Meng also adopts Brook’s view on “rough theatre,” turning his attention to grassroots performing arts, and trying to use them to bring more liveliness to the play. In an interview, when Meng was asked how he uses “folk singing” (*shuochang*, a traditional folk art style in Northern China, in which the performer tells a story in an operatic and comic way with the help of simple instruments) in a “pop” style, Meng answered that he is very fond of “folk” (*minjian*, which implicates contemporary and non-political forms) as opposed to “national” (*minzu*, which implicates traditional forms and sometimes bears the political consciousness of a West-East dichotomy) elements, and he finds that the

¹⁹³ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 190.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 31–48.

¹⁹⁵ Meng, “Shiyan xiju he wo men de xuanze [Experimental Theatre and Our Choice],” 360.

“folk” has a quality of universality and modernity, which “can be put to use right away.”¹⁹⁶ Utilising this point of view, in the play Meng puts together different acting styles of pantomime, *commedia dell’arte*, traditional Chinese *shuochang*, and more. The *suppositionality* (*jiading xing*) and *suggestiveness* (*xieyi xing*) of aesthetics in classical Chinese theatre, as first theorised by Zhang Houzai¹⁹⁷ are combined with Western comic forms such as mimes to magnify the hilarity of the performance.

For example, the sound of the annoying insects and the barking dogs in the temple are all impersonated by the “ensemble performers,” or the “chorus,” to reflect the frustration of the monk, while sleeping is embodied by performers standing, holding pillows beside their heads, and making snoring sounds; the fast heartbeat of the horse keeper is embodied by the performers rapidly clenching their fists, and horse riding is enacted by the performers using suggestive gestures of holding the whip and halter and



Figure 1. *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* (1993). Photo: Li Yan. Courtesy of Meng Jinghui Studio

¹⁹⁶ Meng, “Guanyu shiyan xiju de duihua [Conversation on Experimental Theatre],” 355.

¹⁹⁷ Zhang Houzai, “Wo de Zhongguo jiuxi guan [My Idea on Old Chinese Theatre],” in *Jingju congtan bainian lu* [Essays on Beijing Opera for a Century], ed. Weng Sizai (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 35–39.

making the sound of a horse neighing. Meanwhile, non-illusionist, solemn scenes such as the exaggerated movement of the monk and the nun's bodies when they are reciting Buddhist scriptures, the Buddhist gods impersonated by the performers, and the sound of Buddhist chanting and *muyu* (an instrument used in Buddhist ceremonies) contributes to the presentation of the agony of the monk and the nun as they attempt to suppress of their desires.

In the anti-illusionist theatrical aesthetics of *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, a sardonic parody of conventional (socialist) realist theatre and the grand narrative that is behind it is generated. For example, in the *Decameron* novella, Pinuccio and Niccolosa strike a (semi) balletic pose inspired by iconic scenes in “model theatre” such as *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun*) (Figure 1). As Rossella Ferrari points out, this pastiche image “underscore[s] a sardonic attitude toward the prescriptive puritanism of the socialist period.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, it visualises the contradiction in the political theatre under the control of “socialist realism” and “revolutionary heroism” (*geming yigxiongzhuayi*), which is also a guideline for literary works and romanticises the revolutionary character, depriving him or her of personality and flaws. In *The Red Detachment of Women*, the female body is radicalised as a weapon for the revolution in the historical context, but is then packed and commoditised as a spectacle in the dance theatre performance.¹⁹⁹ On the contrary, in *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, the desire-driven bodies of the young man and woman in the Middle Ages is characterised as obscene and vulgar, although they transcend their own imagery to challenge the institutionalised and systemised oppressive religious doctrine. Thus the intercultural encounter of contrasting images from different theatre traditions and historical contexts

¹⁹⁸ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 171.

¹⁹⁹ Just as Zhang Xian comments in the recorded interview projected as part of the performance of *Red* (*Hong*, premiered in 2015) by Living Dance Studio (*Shenghuo wudao gongzuoshi*), on the one hand the female bodies in *The Red Detachment of Women* are meant to be sexless (the only male protagonist Hong Changqing has to die in a battle to secure the purity/virginity of the female bodies), while on the other hand the play, through its *mise en scène* (especially the tight and short pants of the dancers), actually provided an erotic spectacle for the audience during the era of Mao. For more on the discussion of the classic “red” spectacle (and a famous oil-painting inspired by the model play), see Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, 35–38.

ridicules the sexuality and physicality that conform to the hegemonic ideology, and reverses the dynamics in the play through mockery of the sublime. “Model theatre” is no longer treated as “model,” but rather as the opposite, as the target of revolt.

Longing for Worldly Pleasures adopts the “rough theatrical” style, in which as Peter Brook advocates improvisation and liveliness of theatre are emphasised and the essential spirit of the popular theatre (closeness to the people) is highlighted:

[t]he popular theatre, free of unity of style, actually speaks a very sophisticated and stylish language: a popular audience usually has no difficulty in accepting inconsistencies of accent and dress, or in darting between mime and dialogue, realism and suggestion. They follow the line of story, unaware in fact that somewhere there is a set of standards which are being broken.²⁰⁰

The play ridicules the social taboos of sexuality. When in the *Decameron* stories the narrator is about to mention sexual intercourse, the chorus appears and holds a banner bearing the inscription “xxx words are cut here” to block the view of the spectator. In doing this, the play mocks the censorship in literature and the arts, which is very commonly found in not only contemporary literature and media, but also in the contemporary publication of ancient texts and classical novels. As Ferrari points out, the sexual politics reflected by the monk and the nun’s suffering from asceticism apply to Ming dynasty’s Confucianism, the Catholic institutions in Boccaccio’s times, and the current regime of the CPC.²⁰¹ The “ensemble performers,” acting as a “chorus,” vocal accompaniments (*bangqiang* in Chinese traditional theatre), and characters in the play serve as narrators, commentators, participants, and even props and settings. As the story develops, the chorus join the performance more and more actively, signifying the spectator’s involvement in the story as well. As Liao Yimei writes, the play creates an innovated Brechtian effect, in which the spectator is led by the performers to approach the story with sincere feeling while also retaining a critical viewpoint.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*, 80.

²⁰¹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 170.

²⁰² Liao Yimei, “Lingren ermuyixin de shiyan xiju [A Refreshing Piece of Work of Experimental

In this sense, as Lin Haibo writes, Meng's *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* is able to rebel against both the conventional aesthetics and the socio-cultural institutions.²⁰³ The illusionism of "socialist realism" is shattered, and oppressive ideologies behind it are challenged. In this respect, the *Decameron* stories play a crucial role. As Meng describes, the contrast of the sexual freedom of the young Italian couples "emphasizes the loneliness and isolation" of the nun and monk: "Audiences thought the middle acts embodied the dreams and longings of the nun and monk."²⁰⁴ As Liao comments:

If it had not been for the glittering lighting, the extravagant acting style of *commedia dell'arte*, the excitement over romantic stories of brave and bright lovers from foreign countries and the heartfelt happiness brought by the laughter [when watching the *Decameron* stories], there would not be [the audience's] profound concern with the fate of the young nun, nor the audience's joyful smile or applause with sincere feelings when they learned that "the monk and the nun become a couple."²⁰⁵

In this way, the *Decameron* stories serve not just as a strategic enhancement of *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* in order to affect the spectator, but also as a structural component that contributes to the theme of the play. Hence we can understand what Meng means by saying, "to me they are not three different stories; they are one. *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* is a tragicomedy, one about love in the world."²⁰⁶ The texts work together to voice a humanist call that criticises and protests against the oppression by the authorities over the common people. As Guo Jingru and Gao Mobo point out, the central concern of love stories such as "Worldly Pleasures" is not "the glorification of love itself but the struggle of the lovers against the traditional [*lixue*, a Confucian school originated from

Theatre]," *Zhongguo xiju* [Chinese Theatre], no. 4 (1993): 41.

²⁰³ Lin Haibo, *90 niandai Zhongguo xijun yanjiu* [A Study of Chinese Theatre in the 90s] (Beijing: Beijing guangbo dianshi daxue chubanshe, 2003), 201.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in Entell, "Post-Tian'anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing's China National Experimental Theatre/CNET," 179.

²⁰⁵ Liao, "Lingren ermuyixin de shiyan xiju [A Refreshing Piece of Work of Experimental Theatre]," 41.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*.

the Song Dynasty] moral code.”²⁰⁷ It begs the question, “as a living teenage girl who has normal desires, should the sixteen-year-old nun live a normal life and have her own love?”²⁰⁸ By reclaiming sexuality and the agency to mock and act against the inhumane regulations imposed by the authorities, the individual is able to regain the activeness to lead his or her own life and to “love” in Meng’s sense.

As Ferrari notes, *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, along with *Put Down Your Whip/Woyzeck* (1995), which was a collaborative work by Meng and German director Antje Budde, “bear[s] conspicuous traces of the legacy of China’s ‘explorative’ theatre of the 80s.”²⁰⁹ In addition, the play:

highlights a search for synthesis—of cultures and performance traditions—that seems to stem directly from Huang [Zuolin]’s seminal experiments with classical *xieyi* [suggestiveness] aesthetics and engages techniques of polyphony, multivocality and language games that echo aspects of Gao [Xingjian]’s dramaturgy. The acting, as well, displays multi-character and role-switching methods that rest in between Brechtian estrangement and Gao’s notions of the actor’s neutrality and tripartition.²¹⁰

By forging the alliance of “the oppressed” with intercultural directorial methodologies, *Longing for the Worldly Pleasures* is able to create an appropriated “Joker system,” as proposed by Augusto Boal.²¹¹ By 1) actor-character separation (wherein performers reduce the characters to “social masks” in the story-telling to reveal its mechanism), 2) role switching (to present a “collective” interpretation), 3) stylistic eclecticism (that involves different acting styles to alienate the conventional hegemonic aesthetics of

²⁰⁷ Jingrui Guo and Mobo Gao, “Moral Conflicts Reflected in the Love Stories of Jingju,” *Asian Studies Review* 25, no. 4 (2001): 516.

²⁰⁸ Cai, “Kunju Si fan liubian de qishi [Reflection on Transmutation of the Kunju Play Si fan],” 98.

²⁰⁹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 165.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Maria-Odilia Leal-McBride, Charles A. Leal McBride, and Emily Fryer, London (Pluto Press, 2008), 144–48.

theatrical representation) this system disrupts the deep-rooted theatre conventions which “persisted as mechanical, aesthetic limitations on creative freedom.”²¹²

The play ends with a scene in which each performer has an apple in his or her hand and starts to eat it – a symbolic scene signifying the biblical image of the “forbidden fruit,” while the monk and nun are covered by a large red sheet which signifies their marriage.²¹³ The valiant leap into the marriage – though how the monk and the nun escape and how they will make a living are not mentioned at all – signifies the dramatists’ enthusiastic will to challenge the rigid theatre conventions and the conservative socio-political context. The play succeeded in drawing attention to the use of folk art forms (both indigenous and foreign) with innovative and appropriated Western methodologies. Through intercultural pastiche, images of different temporal and spatial contexts – ancient China, Medieval Italy as well as their intentional references to contemporary Chinese society – are compressed into the picture of one merging global human community. In this picture people across geographical boundaries share the same feelings of joy and sorrow, and suffer from the same kind of oppression and puritanism. The comic style of the two novellas and happy ending of the Chinese story signify the victory of the oppressed over the oppressor, and thus encourage the spectator to revolt against oppression. The play was critically acclaimed, in addition to winning the award for “best performance” and “best director” in the “Chinese Experimental Theatre Showcase and International Symposium” in 1993 in Beijing.

This success encouraged Meng to continue his exploration in the use of collage, especially in the 1995 play *Put Down Your Whip/Woyzeck (Fangxia nide bianzi/woyicaike)*, a collaborative work with German director Antje Budde. Taking a dramaturgical approach similar to *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, this play pieces together a famous anti-oppression Chinese street theatre *Put Down Your Whip* in the

²¹² Ibid., 144.

²¹³ In the 1992 Black Box Theatre production, firecrackers were set off outside the theatre, which created an “immersive theatrical” experience for the spectator to celebrate the marriage of the monk and the nun according to the Chinese tradition. See Shi, “Mingju de er’nu men: Dong mianhua hutong 39 hao [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces: 39 East Mianhua Alley],” 272.

Anti-Japanese War period,²¹⁴ and German playwright Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck*. The play aims to address, in Budde's words, "the mechanisms of social violence and de-solidarisation present in societies on a symbolic level."²¹⁵ However, *Put Down Your Whip/Woyzeck* had to compromise, and was revised to become part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), according to the suggestions of the Culture Ministry. This reflects the decline of the pursuit of individualist spirit as revolt against oppression as is presented in *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*, and reveals the ubiquitous pressure of the dominant ideologies' to which the individual is constantly subjected. Eventually, the political position of individualism was replaced by a reunion of the individual and the collective as well as a more self-centred subjectivity, as is best shown in Meng's adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist: staging capitalisation on a capitalised stage

As time went by, Meng Jinghui gained popularity among young audiences with his depiction of the confusion, anxiety, and passion of youth through the use of typical postmodern methods: collage and montage, parody of classics and socialist realist spoken drama, and innovative appropriation of traditional theatre acting styles, which he developed during his career in the Central Experimental Theatre. With his "little theatre" experiments and commercialised productions, notably *Rhinoceros in Love* (*Lian'ai de*

²¹⁴ *Put Down Your Whip* (*Fangxia nide bianzi*) was a one-act play written by dramatist Tian Han in 1928, adapted from an episode from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. In 1931, dramatist Chen Liting rewrote the play and turned it into an anti-invasion political play: it tells the story of a man and his daughter who have fled the Japanese occupation of Northeast China and now perform in the streets in an inland city of China. The daughter is too hungry to sing and the father wants to whip her, when someone from the audience shouts, "put down your whip!" The play advocates for the struggle against Japanese invasion and was frequently staged on the streets in order to mobilise as many people as possible. For more discussion on how the play as well as other political "street theatre" in the wartime in the 1930s and 1940s in China, see Xiaobing Tang, "Street Theater and Subject Formation in Wartime China: Toward a New Form of Public Art," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 18 (2016): 22–50.

²¹⁵ Quoted in Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 183.

xi'niu, 1999) that has been staged over one thousand times in China over a mere 13 years (let alone the countless unauthorised performances by student theatre groups in various universities),²¹⁶ Meng entered the hall of fame of contemporary Chinese theatre and also enjoyed enormous economic success. What marks Meng Jinghui's transformation from "little theatre" experiments to large-scale commercial (in many cases "bigger theatres") productions is the sold-out play prior to *Rhinoceros in Love*, an adaptation of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (*Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang*, by Huang Jisu). Though there is considerable doubt regarding Meng's turning from non-profit avant-garde to commercial theatre, he exemplified many contemporary Chinese theatre practitioners: starting from little/experimental theatre (especially within their universities), engaging with the exploration of new theatrical forms, and eventually turning to the market in order to survive financially.²¹⁷ When Meng finished his early experimental works (*I Love XXX* [*Wo ai XXX*] and *Comrade Ah Q* [*A Q tongzhi*]) in the mid-1990s, he began to reconsider his artistic approach and viewpoint as a theatre practitioner. "After [*I Love XXX*] I directed *Love Ants*," he recalls, "but at that time I did not really know what I wanted to do. I did not know whether I should come into close contact with my audience or whether I should deliberately distance myself from them, and let them follow me."²¹⁸

Then Meng found his praxis in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.²¹⁹ Through working with theatre scholar and playwright Huang Jisu and music composer Zhang

²¹⁶ *Rhinoceros in Love* is one of college students' favourite and most performed plays in China during the recent decade; I witnessed one official and two student productions of the play during my undergraduate years in Sun Yat-sen University (2006-2010) in Guangdong Province and took part in one of the latter. The reason for the popularity of Meng, arguably, can be related to the immense growth of number of university students in mainland China in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the exchange of pirate video CDs (thanks to the development of media technology) of a number of his plays.

²¹⁷ Other representative examples are Tian Qinxin, Shao Zehui, Zhao Miao and Huang Ying.

²¹⁸ Quoted in Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 223.

²¹⁹ The play in this research is studied based on the script published in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], 236-75, and the DVD collection published by Meng Jinghui Studio ("Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist]," in *Meng Jinghui de xiju* [Meng Jinghui's Theatre], directed by Meng Jinghui (1998; Beijing: Jiuzhou yinxiang chuban gongsi, 2008), DVD).

Guangtian, both of whom also exhibited leftist tendencies,²²⁰ Meng laid the theoretical foundation for his works' intimacy with the audience – more interaction, more playfulness, and more localised characteristics – by introducing the idea of “affinity with the people” or *peopleness* (*renminxing*) into his practice. This work is “a turning point in his poetics and directorial method, especially with regard to his increasingly accepting attitude toward popular audience and market mechanisms.”²²¹ Meng accepted the idea of Fo, “a guy who becomes more radical the older he gets, a clear-cut and firm leftist” according to the script of his adapted version,²²² and advocated his understanding of the avant-garde that combines experiment with “the people” (*renmin*). As a result, this adaptation was a huge success in 1998, and was invited to the Big Torino Festival in Italy in 2000 (Meng personally met Fo there, and received favourable comments from the latter).²²³ The adaptation was restaged in 2010, became part of the repertoire of Meng Jinghui Workshop (Meng's own theatre company), and began touring around the Chinese mainland.

The original text of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* that Meng and his collaborators worked on is the most internationally recognised play by Dario Fo, an Italian dramatist and political campaigner, and recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize in Literature. It is a farce based on the real-life events surrounding Italian railroad worker and anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who fell to his death from the fourth floor window of a Milan police station in 1969. He was accused of bombing a bank (the Piazza Fontana bombing) but was later cleared of the charge. Fo reacted to the news very quickly, and

²²⁰ In response to the hostility from the West (sanctions since 1989, the 1996 “Taiwan Strait Crisis,” etc.), there was an anti-American trend along with the rise of nationalist sentiment in China in the late 1990s, which was ignited by the publication of the book *China Can Say No* (*Zhongguo keyi shuo bu*, 1996). Influenced by the trend and later participated in the debate among intellectuals, Huang Jisu and Zhang Guangtian also became representative figures of the so-called “new leftists.” They also co-authored an “epic theatre” play *Che Guevara* (which will be discussed later in this chapter), and Huang contributed chapters in *Unhappy China* (*Zhongguo bugaoxing*, 2009), which can be seen as a sequence of *China Can Say No*.

²²¹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 226.

²²² Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 238.

²²³ See Entell, “Post-Tian’anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre/CNET,” 200.

with the help of his friends who worked as reporters and lawyers, he investigated the incident and put on the play in 1970. In the play Fo created a character, “the Maniac,” who with his talented acting skills and genius trickery makes a fool of the policemen involved in the incident, and finally reveals that the policemen murdered the anarchist. The play openly criticised the corrupt nature of the Italian government, and reflects Fo’s critique of social injustice as well as the conspiracy between power and media. It was incredibly successful in Italy, and was later translated into many languages and was performed in a number of countries worldwide.

While Fo’s original play is set in capitalist Italy, its Chinese adapters deliberately removed the performance from its social and historical context. The characters, such as Inspector Bertozzo, Inspector Pissani, etc., have no names, and are simply called Police Chief, Policemen A and B, and Policewoman. Conducting a Brechtian “alienation” methodology, this Chinese adaptation uses actors/actresses as a chorus to introduce the plot, characters, and the playwright Fo to the audience, as well as to provide commentary with song and poem. In the prologue, after a brief introduction to the story, the chorus chants a jocular and vulgar patter about Fo, which was adapted from a common song among Beijing children, reminding the audience that the play is both entertaining them and also trying to alienate them as conscious critical observers in Brecht’s terms. The first scene opens with the three policemen “accidentally” beating the man whom they are interrogating – the anarchist – to death. The stage setting, the costume, and the lines with local cultural references show the audience the story of a localised Italy:

Policeman B: Damn! The more I think of it, the angrier I get! Murder, arson, rape, robbery, drug-dealing, prostitution, I allow you to do any of these—except anarchii...ism... Those goddamn ideologies! Who are you targeting, huh? (*To Police Chief.*) Chief, should they take over, we would be the first to be fired! What can a fired policeman do for a living? You can’t beat a panda; you can’t beat a tiger; you can’t beat a black swan...

[...]

Policeman Chief: Those who have longer legs by all means get rich first! (*Beats the anarchist.*)

Policeman B: Those who have shorter legs rumble and tumble to get rid of poverty! (*Beats the anarchist.*)²²⁴

²²⁴ Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 239–40. The

The dialogue vividly illustrates the tension and violence in the interrogation room, while the social and historical references and the Beijing dialect that is used blur the locality of it. The crimes listed by Policeman B seem typically to belong to the “corrupt capitalist West,” according to the stereotype in Chinese political propaganda, although these crimes were not reported to emerge until the carrying out of the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in 1979. Moreover, the “get rich first” lines are explicitly drawn from Deng Xiaoping’s most famous words about the economic reforms: “let some people get rich first” (*rang yibufen ren xian fu qilai*), at the same time as the comparison between the people who have become rich and those who have not depicts the social inequality experienced by the reformed China.

Thus the play addresses the injustice that existed in both Meng Jinghui’s China as well as in Dario Fo’s Italy. The hegemony of money and power, decadence of the privileged class, and the suffering of the unprivileged class are the targets of the criticism. In the play, the Maniac, appointed by the Police Chief as director in order to work out a fictional explanation of the anarchist’s “accidental death,” instead tempts the policemen to comment on the problems that they have seen in society:

Maniac: (*Sincerely.*) Bravo, well said. Say, if you were the sons of Rockefeller or Bill Gates, wouldn’t it be fabulous!

Police Chief: Non-sense. There is no way we can decide that kind of thing.

Maniac: Here, (*Pointing at the stage.*) I am in charge. You are all their sons.

All: So what?

Maniac: How are you living your life now?

Police Chief: Now I can barely feed myself.

Maniac: In the future you will have to lose weight.

Policeman B: I can't even afford a wedding.

Maniac: In the future you will have kidney problems.

Policeman A: I don't have a place to voice my opinion.

Maniac: In the future you will buy the entire TV channel.

Policeman B: I don't have a place to protest against the injustice.

Maniac: In the future you will have police cars clearing the roads for you.

Policeman A: I have always been living in a hut. I've never seen what a villa looks

translation of the play given in this section is mine with reference to the DVD collection published by Meng Jinghui Studio, which provides English subtitles (“Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist].”).

like.

Maniac: In the future you will be exhausted, bored, madly fed up with living in villas; you can't even stand one night more in a villa and begin to wonder "how does it feel like living in a hut? I'd love to try..."

[...] ²²⁵

The depiction of social problems has no specific spatial or temporal indication, which applies to both 1968 Italy and 1998 China (and even, to a large extent, to China in the new century when it was restaged). Rather, it is justifiable to say that the depicted capitalist Italy perfectly suits the imagination of the Chinese audience, and even reflects their fear of a downward social spiral to corruption in the name of "Reform and Opening-up."

The parallel between the dark sides of Italy and what China perhaps would become, is clearly drawn when, in an episode of the play, *Teahouse* is hilariously parodied:

Policeman B: (*To Police Chief.*) Enters an anarchist!

Police Chief: Alas, here comes *Wuye*! ²²⁶

Maniac: Who are you?

Police Chief: *Xiaowang* ²²⁷ at your service.

Maniac: Ah. (*The two salute one another in a conventional Qing-style manner.*)

[...]

Police Chief: *Wuye*, we wish to consult you about the bombing at the bank—you know, the casualty figures reached over seventy!

Maniac: How many?

Police Chief: Over seventy!

Maniac: Miserable! At some day I will reclaim this police bureau; and all my lands at the country and my property in the town, which I will sell for lire, in order to purchase a great, great Anarchism, to aid all the poor in the world! What you mentioned, the bombing, has nothing to do with me. ²²⁸

²²⁵ Ibid., 254.

²²⁶ In Beijing dialects a person of high social status will be called *ye* (master, a respectful elder), associated with their surname. So *Wuye* here is short for *Wuzhengfuzhuyizhe Ye* and indicates "Lord Anarchist" or "Sir Anarchist."

²²⁷ *Xiaowang* here may be a random name (*xiao* is a humble way to address one's surname), or may also sarcastically refer to the male protagonist Wang Lifa in *Teahouse*.

²²⁸ Huang, "Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist]," 251–52.

Putting the plots and languages from *Teahouse* into *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* creates the anachronism that produces amusing effects and enables spontaneous comparisons. Audiences familiar with Chinese spoken drama cannot help re-historicising Fo's Italian story into an indigenous Beijing form. They know that *Teahouse* portrays the magnificent social change that a Beijing teahouse has been through in forty years of the "pre-liberated" China, and the original scene here is just how the late-Qing people react to the siege of Beijing by the imperialist Eight-Nation Alliance at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the parody in Meng's play implies how today's China is similarly experiencing Capitalism, or the transfer from a "planned economy" to a market economy, a Chinese audience can also realise in the last sentence of Maniac how similar the claim of this anarchist is to that of the (Chinese) Communist Party. If the late-Qing industry reforms led by landlords and governors inevitably failed because of the premature political climate, the powerful conservatism, and threatening the interest of the ruling class, as well as the interference by imperialist powers, the play asks, "how about today's reform?" The manifested aim to "aid all the poor in the world" is no longer reassuring to the audience holding – or having not lost all hope of – a Communist belief, for the reason that it is uttered by the Maniac being interrogated by police officers, and that there is a Brechtian ending to all this fuss: the real anarchist who holds this belief has been killed by the police, who are now busy making up theories to conceal their crime.

Yet in this re-appropriation, the over-generalisation in its portrayal is also disclosed. The much criticised "West and the rest" binary in postcolonial studies is not shunned but rather magnified to make it as "America and the rest." The characterisation of Italy is greatly Americanised: social problems such as drugs, the growing wealth gap, rising crime rate and money-oriented morality have more of an American face than an Italian one; cultural icons, such as Bill Gates and Rockefeller, or music from the films *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Pulp Fiction* have distinctive American characteristics too. In this way, drawing intentional comparisons between the Italian and Chinese contexts indicates that "the rest," including capitalist Italy, are all victims of Americanisation.

When discussing how to make up stories of the “accidental death,” the Maniac proposes the “use of drugs” as a theory:

Police Chief: Never thought you artists use them.

Maniac: Nowadays arts all rely on marijuana and heroin.

(Policeman A takes out several bags of heroin.)

Police Chief: Good minds think alike! Catch! *(He tosses one to Maniac.)*

Maniac: I got it!

Police Chief: Got it by just looking at it? Got it why he jumped?

Maniac: Not even took me a wink! Drugs are the reason good enough.

All: Yeah, that bastard used drugs!

Maniac: Screw afforestation, eco-protection, health promotion, late-marriage devotion;²²⁹ all we need is marijuana plantation! *(Policeman B injects heroin into Maniac’s arm.)* Ouch, I declare: one plus one equals nine!

(Music [from Pulp Fiction]. Maniac falls, and hits the others with bricks in his hands. The three policemen each use a dose of drugs.)

Police Chief: I declare: the world Americanised, America modernised, Europe unified, all have me centralised!

Policeman A: I declare: Once-upon-a-time-up-to-now-telling-right-from-wrong

Supreme Court’s Attorney General declares as follows: launch the Patriot Missile!

[...] ²³⁰

The drugs, as an enchanting product of Capitalist corruption, signify the invasion of globalised capital into ordinary people’s minds. Using references to drugs, a critical symbol of Western intervention in Chinese modern history,²³¹ this scene clearly depicts the fear about an imagined, terrifying future where irrationality (all-money-oriented value) takes over and the resistance instinct of Chinese people is completely lost.

Following this scene, the chorus tells of the tragedy that happened to Fo’s wife, Franca Rame, who was kidnapped and raped by a gang of neo-fascists in 1973. The chorus comments:

²²⁹ This refers to the birth-control policy of China that encourages couples to get married late (females over 23 years old and males over 25).

²³⁰ Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 265–66.

²³¹ The first Opium War in 1840 marks China’s downfall as a major power of the world and the beginning of modern Chinese history, as mentioned in the Introduction.

In the industrialised modern Milan:
 Fo's beautiful wife was kidnapped,
 Fo's beautiful wife was raped...
 Shall we carry knives with us on the streets of Milan?
 Shall we carry knives with us on the streets of Milan with palm trees?
 Shall we carry knives with us on streets of the sunny, blue-sky Milan?
 Shall we carry knives with us in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s Milan?
 Shall we carry knives with us in Milan in the twenty-first century?
 The kind people, the contemptible people, the submissive people, the feeble people
 of this world,
 Don't forget to carry knives to defend yourselves on the streets of Milan.
 The kind people, the contemptible people, the submissive people, the feeble people
 of this world,
 Don't forget that hegemony and suppression have not been wiped out.
 The kind people, the contemptible people, the submissive people, the feeble people
 of this world,
 Use your knives and swords to strike the injustice in the world!²³²

Nothing is more powerful and clear-cut than this “all the oppressed, unite!” manifesto of the Left-wing ideology, which strikes an emotional nationalist chord with elite audiences. As the “last fort of socialism,” here China is pictured as a tragic hero, which encourages the audiences, who have been raised and educated in a socialist and nationalist context, to intentionally construct a psychological barrier against the powerful West.

In a 2010 interview during the re-staging of his *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Meng Jinghui reasserted his political praxis of his theatre practice: “I should serve the people. [half-jokingly] Chairman Mao and I both think, that the ‘people’ we mention are not the ‘mass’; people are the ones who have imagination and creativity. I shall serve those people.”²³³ Meng's depiction of the police and the Maniac in the play represents the stereotype in Mao's belief that “the humble is the cleverest; the noble is the most stupid.”²³⁴ When discussing how to conceal the brutal beating that causes the death of

²³² Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 267.

²³³ Meng Jinghui, “Yang Lan yiduiyi [Yang Lan One on One],” interviewed with Yang Lan. Dragon Television, April 10, 2010.

²³⁴ Mao Zedong, “Beijianzhe zui congming, gaoguzhe zui yuchun [the Humble Is the Cleverest; the Noble Is the Most Stupid],” accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.yhcnw.net/famine/Documents/mzdwg/d070097.html>.

the anarchist, the policemen cannot come up with any excuse but can only repeat nonsense, “[r]emember, to the police, evidence is – evidence, evidence, and evidence,”²³⁵ as well as their illiteracy by misspelling “fear” in their explanation of the anarchist’s “death out of fear.”²³⁶ On the other hand, the Maniac, as the director of the play-within-the-play, is represented as a proletarian hero who is both physically and mentally repressed by the state apparatus, finally gains full control of the story-making, and is able to provoke even the policemen’s will to rebel against the existing injustice. Hence it is even more interesting to take a closer look at the *Teahouse* parody: the canonisation of this 1957 piece by Lao She, as stated above, is the work of the power of speech by the authority, i.e. the CPC government. Meng, adopting Peter Brook’s ideas, considers this kind of canonised Beijing People’s Art Theatre (BPAT)’s style as “deadly theatre,” for it fails to generate new meanings and function as social commentary. Nevertheless, this monopoly of official ideology is not targeted in the play; instead, the intention of this parody is still to characterise the invasion of foreign powers (capital in particular) that are trying to overthrow the country’s socialist regime.

The blurred ending makes the play’s motive even more ambiguous. When asked by the policemen to comment on their pathetic situation, the Maniac gives a very general answer:

Maniac: Of course we can’t blame you for that [being the scapegoat for killing the anarchist]. [...] It is you who do the dirty work, but it is them who did the aiding and abetting!

Policemen: Who?

Maniac: (*Comes closer to the audience.*) From a historical perspective, Shandingdong Man²³⁷; from a closer look, your family; from a materialist perspective, the eclipse of the sun and the moon; from an idealist perspective, the Confucius and the Legalist schools; from a dialectic perspective, the victims; in plain language: A-L-L T-H-E O-T-H-E-R-S!

²³⁵ Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 241.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Shandingdong Man was a late Homo sapiens of the late Paleolithic Age, excavated in Fangshan County, Beijing.

[*The end.*]²³⁸

It is important to remember that “the Other” as a post-colonial concept was not fully recognised at the time of the production. Moreover, the Chinese colloquial word *bieren* (“someone else”) that is translated as “the other” here is different from the academic term *tazhe* (“the Other”). Therefore, this “all the others” accusation, as fierce as it may seem, on the contrary points to no particular targets, and actually dissolves the critical attitude towards those attacked earlier in the play.

What is worth noticing is that both the opening and the ending of the original adaptation of Huang Jisu was cut in the performance. In Huang’s original text entitled “Death of the Anarchist Is Accidental; Death of the Leftist Artist Is Intentional” (*Wuzhengfuzhuyizhe shu yiwai Siwang, zuopai yishujia shu yizhong siwang*), there are two “narrators” (*shuoshu ren*) who tell jokes and provide commentary:

Narrator B: (*Pats Narrator A’s chest.*) Who are you representing tonight?

Narrator A: Some comedian in some Italian theatre, whose name is Dario Fo. (*Points at Narrator B’s pot belly.*) And you?

Narrator B: Host of the stage of the world, general producer of the series of history, (*As if stepping into the character.*) boss of that Da-whatever.

[...]

Narrator A: In this case, the differences between you and me are like between black and white, fire and water!

Narrator B: Differences between the poor and the rich may be, but not between the artist and his boss.

Narrator A: Dario Fo is not an artist like what you said.

Narrator B: Whatever! Socialism in his mind, revolution in his eyes, posters for the lefties, squabbles with the Yankees.²³⁹

The narrators serve as “Joker” in Boal’s sense to alienate the audience from the illusion of the plot, and to voice the concern of the author: by receiving the Nobel Prize, Dario Fo seems to have compromised with the authorities of Capitalism, and thus the power of

²³⁸ Huang, “Yige wuzhengfuzhuyizhe de yiwai siwang [Accidental Death of an Anarchist],” 273–74.

²³⁹ Huang Jisu, “Wuzhengfuzhuyizhe shu yiwai siwang, zuopai yishujia shu yizhong siwang [Death of the Anarchist Is Accidental; Death of the Leftist Artist Is Intentional],” in *Wutai 2000* [Stage 2000], ed. Shen Lin (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 59–60.

criticism that his plays deliver on Capitalism will be restrained within the control of authorities. Deleting such texts (there is also a scene in which “Dario Fo” is ridiculed and abused by the chorus), the play falls into the same trap as the author Huang worries about: radicalism is tamed and rebellion is peacefully resolved.

Nonetheless, this confusing declaration at the end of the performance reflects the dilemma which Chinese artists in the 1990s met with when they were trying to comment on social problems: despite the fact that the “Reform and Opening-up” policy made them to better see the world, discovering underlying or potential problems of their own society, they either could not voice direct criticism against the official line because of the intense political pressure since the Tian’anmen Square protest in 1989, or they blamed the incoming Western culture and ideology as the source of the newly-discovered problems. Meng’s version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* takes both approaches. Notwithstanding the fact that the ambiguous ending can be understood as an intentional strategy to avoid prosecution of political censorship, the play has its own interpretation of the relation between Capitalism and Chinese society. On the one hand, the play draws the audience’s attention to the truth that people from both the East and the West have been suffering from oppression. On the other hand, the metaphor in the reappropriation implies that the police, or the dark force behind the police, is driven and controlled by the “corrupt capitalism” that possesses the power and the money, rather than the totalitarian dictatorship. When he reflects on his success, Meng admits:

I was very surprised too! No one got in the way. It was not only not censored, but we added lots of material [including references to the lyrics of often-censored rock and roll star Cui Jian, Lao She’s venerated theater classic *Tea House*, and parody of “model operas.”] It was a satire about human dignity, and made fun of elements in our society that many Chinese feel need to be poked fun at. So, no one said anything. Everyone was very happy with it. Also, Dario Fo is a leftist and a Nobel Prize winner. So he’s politically and artistically untouchable. He’s got it all: credentials from the bourgeoisie and the proletariat! It’s like we had a big Dario Fo flag shielding and protecting our activity.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Quoted in Christopher Barden, “Experimental Drama Comes of Age: Meng Jinghui’s New Production Plays to Packed Houses,” *Beijing Scene*, accessed February 18, 2017, <http://www.beijingscene.com/V051017/feature/feature.htm>.

Fo's identity as a Leftist – a “political correct” (in the Chinese sense) dramatist as well as the endorsement by the Nobel Prize protected the play from being censored. Yet as Tao observes, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* serves as a theoretical base for his transformation from a non-commercial or anti-mainstream artist to one who engages with the market.²⁴¹ In his leftist work, Meng rediscovered the word *renmin* from the deconstructed Grand Narrative, and used it as his praxis to locate, brand, and to sell his works. He said in a 2005 interview:

Later I started to realise we are not joking when we say the slogan “serve the people.” We can use this slogan in various discourses. There are two senses in my use of this sentence: a Leftist one, which I found in Dario Fo's view on life and art when I was doing *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*; and a Mayakovsky one I sensed when I did *The Bedbug*. When I touched his work, my understanding towards political choices got more tolerant, and I felt if based on an understanding of human nature the political choices of people become even more complex and more meaningful.²⁴²

This understanding of *peopleness* (*renminxing*) in actuality contradicts the official ideology of revolution. Although he tried to idealise his sense of “the people” and make it distinguishable from “the mass” (*qunzhong*),²⁴³ “the people” in Meng's sense remains a mask of “mass,” or even “citizens,” or “consumers.” Because of this ignorance of Fo's direct and radical portrayal of political injustice, and the focus on “political correctness,” Meng's adaptation was dismissed by Lü Tongliu, Fo's official Chinese translator, as being not what he had translated.²⁴⁴ An Italian reporter also complained that Meng's

²⁴¹ Tao, *Dangdai xiaojuchang sanshinian (1982-2012)* [A Thirty-Year Review of Experimental Theatre in China: 1982-2012], 57.

²⁴² Tao Qingmei [Tao Zi, pseud.], “Wo buneng tingzhi bianhua [I Shall Not Stop Changing],” *Jintian* [Today] 71, no. 4 (2005), <http://www.jintian.net/405/13.1.html>.

²⁴³ Meng Jinghui, “Meng Jinghui rushi shuo [What Meng Jinghui Says Is This],” in *Chujing: Zhongguo dangdai yishu tanhualu* [Plight: Records of Conversations of Contemporary Chinese Art], ed. Shu Yang, Hu Ze, and Lü Xiaogang (Beijing: Jincheng chubanshe, 2002), 143–44.

²⁴⁴ Lü Tongliu, “Lü Tongliu: zai Yidali wenxue de shijie [Lü Tongliu: In the World of Italian Literature],” accessed May 25, 2017, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/RS/804927.htm>. Also see Lü's accounts in an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, quoted in Rossella Ferrari, “Anarchy in the PRC: Meng Jinghui and His Adaptation of Dario Fo's ‘Accidental Death of an Anarchist,’” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17, no. 2 (2005): 2.

changes did not preserve enough of Fo's features and critical spirit, saying, "the Italian clothes were rinsed by the Yangtze River."²⁴⁵

In her book *Occidentalism*, Chen Xiaomei observes, "[t]hroughout Chinese history, literary and political texts have often been composed by the intelligentsia as deliberate endeavors of anti-official discourse."²⁴⁶ At many times, the Chinese intelligentsia construct the West as "a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western others."²⁴⁷ The official conception of the West, which consistently clings to hegemony and capitalism, is frequently used to solidify the leadership of the government. In the play it is evident that the artists have been aware of the fact that the national pride of the common people and the legitimacy of the "revolutionary" authority are strengthened with the official use of evil and cruel imagery of the West. This is exactly where Meng's version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* engages with the conversation, by commenting on social issues, and intertwining with different contradicting ideologies so as to provide a new portrayal of the capitalist West.

Meng Jinghui made his name as an avant-garde practitioner, and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is where he found his alliance with Left-wing ideology. Yet when the nationalist sentiment (antagonism towards the US) declined with China's success of joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), bidding for the 2008 Olympics, critical aspects of his works seemed to be at a loss. Since *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* was restaged in 2010, the central point of its avant-garde nature – the anti-Capitalist political agenda – of the play has been overshadowed by the highlighted "Meng's style" as a selling point, or the description of the 1998 version as a "miracle of little theatre [market success] in the 1990s." When Meng, "[o]nce the enfant terrible of the Beijing theatre

²⁴⁵ Adriana Polveroni, "L'anarchico' Di Fo Amato Dai Cinesi [Fo's 'Anarchist' Loved by the Chinese]," *La Repubblica*, 2000, <http://www.repubblica.it/online/spettacoli/dariofo/dariofo/dariofo.html>.

²⁴⁶ Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 691.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 688.

scene” became “one of the chief representatives of the established, or canonized, avant-garde,”²⁴⁸ it signified Meng’s experimental theatre practice’s morphing into what Ferrari terms as “pop avant-garde”:

Meng’s theatre articulates the pop sign *aesthetically*, through its trademark games of lowly-cum-lofty references, generative contaminations and hybrid adaptations; *thematically*, in its ubiquitous parodies of popular fashions and mass crazes; and *culturally*, in terms of approaches to spectatorship and the social sphere, which are founded on reciprocity and communication as much as on equally fundamental notions of playfulness, enjoyment and “delight.”²⁴⁹

Though this transition by no means implies that Meng has capitulated to either the mainstream (on the contrary as Ferrari argues Meng takes advantage of the situation and “has forced the mainstream to adapt and change”),²⁵⁰ it is still wise not to neglect the omnipresent corrosive power of consumerism, especially in the reproduction of cultural commodities. The fetishisation of “avant-garde” signifiers in Meng’s practice reflects how post-Cold War theatre (especially spoken drama) in China, which underwent a major transformation from state-support to market-support operation mode,²⁵¹ tends to appeal to young audiences by building a new brand of ideas distinguished from mainstream ideology. But here Meng’s brand also reveals its limitations: if it sells as a brand, and appeals to the audience’s imagination and expectations of purchase, how can it criticise capitalism while adopting marketing methods of capitalism, especially when the audiences it addresses are also deeply involved in the circulation of capitalism?

In her critique of Chinese avant-garde theatre, theatre scholar Change Hee Jae warns against “the trap of positivity” (*kending de xianjing*) in contemporary criticism, which Change believes has confusingly added all positive values – the image of a rebel, an

²⁴⁸ Rossella Ferrari, “Notes on the (Pop) Avant-Garde in China,” *Theatre Times*, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://thetheatretimes.com/notes-pop-avant-garde-china/>.

²⁴⁹ Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 18.

²⁵⁰ Ferrari, “Notes on the (Pop) Avant-Garde in China.”

²⁵¹ This transformation will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

experimentalist, a commercially-successful/main-stream/classic product, and an example of the competitiveness of the nation's cultural power – to the sole signifier “avant-garde.”²⁵² Therefore, it is important to examine how experimental theatre challenges convention and how it is affected by the mainstream ideology and the dominant socio-culture at the same time. Meng Jinghui's re-appropriation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* borrows the form of Dario Fo's masterpiece and pictures China at the turn of the new millennium, undergoing large-scale capitalisation. Meng takes advantages of Italian *commedia dell'arte*, postmodern staging, and Chinese traditional grassroots art forms, and gives the avant-garde work in China a refreshing new look by localising and popularising the elitist concept so that it is accessible and enjoyable to ordinary spectators. In attempting to stay critical of the social transformation to consumerism, the play complies with marketing strategies by using the label “avant-garde” as an advertising gimmick. The consumerisation of avant-garde symbols, which is often seen in Meng's later works, tries to construct an egalitarian subculture among his middle-class audiences, however as seen in its over-generalisation, to a great extent it dissolves the critical agency of the individual spectator.

Contradiction, controversy, and conspiracy in the “new leftist” theatre

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, many Chinese dramatists, who had been suffering from a violent social reality and feeling greatly frustrated and shaken, began to produce works to express emotional reactions to the repression they had experienced. This trend in spoken drama soon grew unsatisfied with mere nostalgia for the specific “hopeful and more open early years of the People's Republic,” but it continued to address social inequality and government bureaucracy through critical

²⁵² Change Hee Jae, “Zhongguo dalu xianfeng xiju xianfengxing zhi bianqian yanjiu [A Study of the Transmutation of Avant-Gardism of Avant-Garde Theatre in Mainland China]” (PhD diss., Nanjing University, 2015), 6.

lenses of Western theories newly introduced to the intelligentsia.²⁵³ It became part of the “new Enlightenment” (*xin qimeng*) movement among the intellectuals in the 1980s, which was an attempt to restore the humanistic values inherited from the New Cultural Movement in the first half of the twentieth century, and by reflecting on the past (assessing the cause of the tragic Cultural Revolution), to explore new ways for the future (addressing the future direction in the “New Era”). It is in the context of this movement that “explorative theatre” in spoken drama began to develop, as a response to 1) the “theatre crisis,” due to the great damage to the theatre market by the previous social turmoil; and 2) stifled artistic forms constrained by the dominance of “socialist realism.” By appropriating aesthetics of traditional Chinese theatre such as *suppositionality*, and by absorbing Western modernist theatre theories such as Brecht’s epic theatre, it generally reached its goal of finding for new ways of artistic expression in order to represent and reflect the changing reality.²⁵⁴

Since the late 1980s, dramatists such as Mou, Meng, and Lin attempted to push forward the experiments of their predecessors by radicalising stylisation as a challenge to “socialist realism,” and by merging theatre forms from different cultures. *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* was a product of their experiments in the discourse of “New Enlightenment,” and the play both presented a distinctively new aesthetic informed by Chinese and Western theatre traditions, and also tried to revive the spirit of humanism promoted in the New Culture Movement as a critical perspective on the current social reality. These two attempts worked in mutual facilitation, in which the ossified aesthetics of “socialist realism” was seen as the symbolic form of the social backwardness caused by the ideas of Ultraleftism (*jizuo*, which does not tolerate diversity or individualism) in the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, the oppressive ideologies of feudalistic asceticism depicted by both the *kunqu* script and Boccaccio, because of their “reactionary” character,

²⁵³ Haiping Yan, *Theatre and Society: Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama* (Abingdon, New York and London: Routledge, 2015), x–xi.

²⁵⁴ Kang Hongxing, “Woguo jiushiniandai de shiyan xiju yu xiju shiyan [Experimental Theatre and Theatrical Experiment in the Nineties in Our Country],” *Xiju wenxue* [Dramatic Literature], no. 8 (1999): 29–30.

were put into the category of backwardness associated with the extreme tyranny in the Cultural Revolution, and also interlocked with Ultraleftism.

The idea of revolution, also known as “saving the nation from extinction” (*jiuwang*), a class struggle on the individual level, and resistance to imperialism on the community level, used to work hand-in-hand with the idea of enlightenment (*qimeng*) in the period of the New Culture Movement. But according to Li Zehou, as Chinese society was placed in more serious social situations in wartime (the anti-Japanese war and the civil war), gradually the efforts of enlightenment were overwhelmed by those of the nationalist revolution, thus leaving the task of enlightenment unfinished and enabling feudalist values to prevail under the “masks of socialism.”²⁵⁵ Though Li’s argument is problematic in constructing the dichotomy of revolution versus enlightenment, he is right to point out the underlying contradiction between the ideology of revolution of the collective left by the previous historical period and the reviving enlightenment movement of the individual in the new era. As the Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee²⁵⁶ asserted, “the devastating mass class struggle has in general ended,”²⁵⁷ and “the focus of the party’s work should be shifted to the development of socialist modernisation.”²⁵⁸ Since the CPC government introduced the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the dominance of “revolution” in the public sphere gave way to that of “reform.” Likewise, in the “New Enlightenment” movement, Maoist socialism was regarded as a form of feudalism, and “reform” and “modernisation”

²⁵⁵ Li Zehou, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshilun* [A History of Modern Chinese Thought] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1987), 27–41.

²⁵⁶ The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh CPC Central Committee in 1978 marked the transfer of the party’s leadership to reformists (Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, etc.), and it is commonly seen as a watershed in the twentieth-century Chinese history which marked the beginning of the policy “Reform and Opening-up.”

²⁵⁷ Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Sanzhong quanhui yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* [Selected Articles of Significance Since the Third Plenary Session] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2000), 4.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

replaced “revolution” as the solution of social problems, as “new leftist” theorist Wang Hui notes:

It is the New Enlightenment movement’s strategy to view Maoist socialism as a historical legacy of feudalism. Furthermore, the movement identifies itself with social movements against the tyranny of religion and feudal aristocracy initiated by European bourgeoisie. Concealed in this self-identification is the common goal and view of history shared by humanism as a modernisation ideology and Marxism as a modernisation ideology: the faith in progress [in history], the promise of modernisation, the historic mission of nationalism, the outlook of Great Harmony [*datong*] of freedom and equality, and especially the modern viewpoint of relating the meaning of the movement’s endeavour to the present as a historic moment that leads to the future outlook.²⁵⁹

The narrative in the “New Enlightenment” movement strategically discarded the concept of revolution as a remnant of feudalism, and tried to reinterpret Marxist theories to legitimise humanism that has its origin in Capitalism.²⁶⁰ *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* is in this sense an attempt to promote humanist belief in freedom and equality within the context of socialism, while avoiding addressing the contradiction of understanding revolution. The marriage of the monk and the nun in the play can be read as the liberation of human nature, whereas it remains unclear what exactly repressed human nature in the first place.

However, the temporary alliance of humanist value and the suspended (dis)belief in revolution formed in the works of experimental theatre is very fragile, and its effect is dubious, since revolution is always the key concept in the dominant ideology in Chinese society. This is exemplified by the production of *Put Down Your Whip/Woyzeck*, in which the artistic experiment of the directors Meng and Budde was intercepted by the official discourse, especially through the demands by the Ministry of Culture. According to Budde, this intercultural and intertextual collage of the Chinese street theatre of resistance, and the German revolutionary Büchner’s drama had the potential to “reflect

²⁵⁹ Wang Hui, *Sihuo chongwen* [Dead Fire Reheated] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 370.

²⁶⁰ Zhao Mu, “*Hougeming*”: *Zuowei yizhong leixing xushi* [“Post-Revolution”: As a Category of Narratology] (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2012), 11.

upon social violence and infringement of human rights, [...] to tackle social issues in contemporary China” as well as to address “the mechanisms of social violence and de-solidarisation present in societies on a symbolic level.”²⁶¹ Under the pressure of the Ministry of Culture, in order to promote the fiftieth anniversary of the Anti-Japanese War, a number of propagandistic passages and anti-fascist slogans that Budde had previously deleted from the original script were restored by Meng, along with “a general optimistic summary at the end, which, of course, completely contradicted what was to come next, which “could no longer flexibly respond to the present,” and therefore “damaged the dramaturgical concept and its inner logic irreversibly.”²⁶²

Moreover, the end of the Cold War brought up great challenges to the narratives of revolution, which could not be dealt with by simply avoiding the relevant concepts or merely by using new forms of theatre to camouflage the problems of Ultraleftism. In *Wind, Rain and Pavel Korchagin (Fengyu Bao'er Kechajin)*, which was staged in China Children's Art Theatre in Beijing in early 1998, this controversy was revealed. The play is an adaptation of the Russian novel *How the Steel Was Tempered (Gangtie shi zenyang liancheng de, 1936)* by Nikolai Ostrovsky, and was written by Diao Yinan and directed by Cai Shangjun. Employing multi-media methods and non-illusionist aesthetics in the chorus with a Brechtian alienation effect, the play tries to portray the forlornness, helplessness, and anguish of Pavel, the protagonist, through his encounters with unrequited love and harsh reality.²⁶³ Though as a story of the famous revolutionary character- the novel was extremely popular in the 1950s and 1960s in China- the play attempts to give the revolutionary a humanist face, and delivers no judgement of the violence that the context of Russian revolution would imply. According to the playwright Diao, the play tries not to foreground the ideal of revolution, but to examine the suffering

²⁶¹ Quoted in Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theater in Contemporary China*, 183.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶³ See Diao Yinan, “Fengyu biao'er kechajin [Wind, Rain and Pavel Korchagin],” in *Xianfeng xiju dang'an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], ed. Meng Jinghui (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2000), 187–235.

of human beings from a nihilistic point of view.²⁶⁴ Still, a controversial political stance was embedded in this canonised narrative of revolution. The endeavour of Pavel, who was a Ukrainian citizen in the revolutionary period, was aimed at the founding and development of the USSR. Yet the dissolution of the USSR and the independence of Ukraine showed the failure of the USSR's Leftist ideal to unite its multi-ethnic community or offer a cosmopolitan social environment. Therefore the celebration of Pavel's commitment to the Soviet Union's annexation of Ukraine in a post-Cold War context has become controversial.

Though the case of both the USSR and China in terms of the construction of national identity is arguably different, what is reflected in *Wind, Rain and Pavel Korchagin* is the contested image of revolution in the new phase of history. Moreover, the "Reform and Opening-up" policy has brought Chinese society into this new phase in the context of a globalised market economy and consumerism. The central problem that Meng's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* deals with is the incompatibility of the concept of revolution within the context of globalisation. Apart from the stylish comic acting and the hilarious and sardonic language, the most distinctive and significant feature of Dario Fo's original work as a political play is its timeliness: it was written within one year after the death of Pinelli in 1969, and thus was able to comment on the current moment, and provoke awareness and debates over such issues. When the play is commercialised and commoditised all over the world, its critique on the systematic social injustice is disrupted by the disconnection between its subject and the spectator through the act of customer consumption. This is a bigger and more controversial problem for reproducing such political plays, in addition to what concerns the playwright Huang Jisu, who views Fo's accepting the Nobel Prize as giving in to the Capitalist institutional order.

When the work duplicates itself as part of the process of a globalised cultural industry, what is lost is not only the Benjaminian halo of the original work, but also the critical agency of the spectator enabled by the work's reference to a socio-cultural-

²⁶⁴ Wang Zheng, "Yizhe, Diao Yinan [Diao Yinan the Hermit]," *Beijing qingnian zhouban* [Beijing Youth Weekly], November 20, 2014, 8.

specific and politico-economic-specific reality. Therefore any adaptation or appropriation of political theatre such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* has to reconnect the work and the spectator through the careful localising of the work, acknowledging possible disputes over the meaning of metaphor, analogy, and symbols generated by the localising process. Meng's version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* tried to merge the different realities of Italy and China, but was faced with the difficulty of addressing a more complex globalised social condition of contemporary China within the old-style narrative with the implausible conception of revolution and nationalism as well as the confusion between the two. If we can interpret Meng's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* from the perspective of observing the rising crisis for Chinese political theatre in the context of consumerism in the 1990s – that the co-existence of popular entertainment and radical political stance is becoming impossible, then we also have to acknowledge the growing gap between the official ideology and the social reality of China.

The approach of the combination of nationalist consciousness and anti-capitalist ideology shown in Meng's work was constantly explored by writers such as Huang Jisu and Zhang Guangtian, in problematic plays such as *Che Guevara (Qie Gewala, 2000)*, and *We Are Marching on the Grand Road (Women zouzai dalushang, 2006)*. As a leftist praxis, the writers of *Che Guevara*, including Huang and Zhang, asserted that it was a “collective creation.” The play was directed by Zhang, who had worked closely as a music composer with Meng Jinghui. Staging the controversial figure of Guevara, the Argentine Marxist revolutionary, the play aims at promoting “the eternal modernity” of Guevara as “the disciple and martyr for the cause of Justice for Humanity.”²⁶⁵ Claiming itself as “modern epic theatre,” the writers of the play reject naturalist characterisation, intentionally creating the characters as symbols of thoughts, and using poetic monologues and dialogues as a commentary of Guevara's story and current affairs. By putting the characters into binary categories of “protagonists” and “antagonists” (*zheng*

²⁶⁵ Huang Jisu, “Guanyu Qie Gewala chuanguo yanchu de yixie qingkuang [Notes on the Creation and Performance of *Che Guevara*],” *Wenyi lilun yu piping* [Literary Theories and Criticism], no. 5 (2000): 66.

and *fan*), the play attempts to take a clear position in the confrontation between socialism and capitalism, and adopt the leftist political idea of theatre, that art should serve the people – “literature and arts are not [reflecting politically-neutral] ‘subjectivities,’ but tools to build human life [...] Literature and arts should be helpful to build a noble human life and a healthy society.”²⁶⁶ However, as Yan Jun asserts, “by offering mundane references to the present and launching a feign attack on the hegemony of popular culture, money and mass media, a new hegemony led by [idealist] morality and emotion is created.”²⁶⁷ The play not only ends up projecting a false image of capitalism/imperialism, but also inherits the legacy of the oppressive Ultraleftism. On the one hand, with similar ideologies to Huang’s adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, in *Che Guevara* the blame is squarely attributed to the corrupt capitalist West for the social injustice and inequality in the contemporary world, and a revolution against Capitalism is advocated. On the other hand, the cruelty of revolution is ignored, and the complexity and controversy of current affairs is simplified and romanticised. For instance, the images of the UN’s bombing of Iraq in 1998, and NATO’s bombing of the former Yugoslav Federation in 1999 were juxtaposed with images of a post-industrial globalised Western lifestyle.²⁶⁸ This indicates a controversial attitude that differentiates the acts of violence committed by the West (including the UN, “being rigged by the West”) and the revolutionary Third World. In his notes on the play, Huang acknowledges some of the accusations of the play’s prejudice, but gives an ambivalent response:

There were some audiences who wanted to detach Guevara’s pursuit of justice from his specific choice of the route [of socialism], so as to make him a pure chivalrous fighter [*daxia*]: he should of course unite the people to attack the evilness of capitalism, but when there are flaws in socialism, he should as well turn back and

²⁶⁶ Huang Jisu, “Jige jiben wenti - Qie Gewala chuanguo yumo [Several Basic Questions - Additional Notes on the Creation of *Che Guevara*],” *Wenyi lilun yu piping* [Literary Theories and Criticism], no. 3 (2001): 65.

²⁶⁷ Yan Jun, “Geming huaju de beilun: kan Qie Gewala [The Paradox of Revolutionary Spoken Drama: A Reading of *Che Guevara*],” in *Boximiya Zhongguo* [Bohemian China], ed. Chen Guanzhong, Liao Weitang, and Yan Jun (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 170.

²⁶⁸ Huang Jisu, “Qie Gewala [Che Gevera],” *Zuopin yu zhengming* [Compositions and Debates], no. 6 (2000): 35.

strike as hard. An audience member who works in the Work Bank said, “I agree that *Granma*²⁶⁹ should sail to ‘where mothers in the former Yugoslav Federation weep and where the Battleaxe Missiles fly,’ but why should not she sail to where starvation happens in the North Korea, where massacres take place by the Khmer Rouge, and where Stalin carries out his Great Purge?” I admit that this understanding is reasonable and profound, but while it seemingly confronts the reality of the society it fails to face directly the essential distinction between socialism and capitalism.²⁷⁰

Though Huang does not say what exactly he thinks the distinction is, his article indicates that it is whether to pursue justice (as in socialism) or promote exploitation (as in capitalism), or “whether the cause of pursuing equity and the Great Harmony (*datong*) was possible and plausible.”²⁷¹

Because of its direct reference to the fate and future of Chinese society, the play stimulated heated discussion and conflicting opinions. Some critics praised it as signifying “Justice has awoken, the spirit and will of revolution have returned to the people, and the legacy of Chinese leftist literature and arts has rejuvenated from despair through the pen, the voice and the image of the Chinese youths.”²⁷² On the contrary, other critics warned against the play’s tendency of idealising and romanticising the slogan “continue the revolution” by arousing people’s hatred towards existing social problems while overlooking the devastating damage that idealist revolutions, which often rely on violence, have once done to the society.²⁷³ There are also critics who discussed the social significance of the rise of “new leftist” literature and thinking,²⁷⁴ and how the reception

²⁶⁹ *Granma* was the yacht which carried Fidel and Raúl Castro, Che Guevara and other revolutionaries from Mexico to Cuba in 1956 in order to start a revolution and overthrow the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The boat is the central imagery of the play.

²⁷⁰ Huang, “Guanyu Qie Gewala chuanguo yanchu de yixie qingkuang [Notes on the Creation and Performance of *Che Guevara*],” 71.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁷² Ya Zi, “Ping Qie Gewala [A Critical Commentary on *Che Guevara*],” *Zuopin yu zhengming* [Compositions and Debates], no. 9 (2000): 51.

²⁷³ Ding Fan et al., “Qie Gewala: lixiang, geming, xiju ji qita [*Che Guevara*: Idealism, Revolution, Theatre and Other Related Issues],” *Zhongguo wenxue yanjiu* [Research of Chinese Literature] 65, no. 2 (2002): 3–5.

²⁷⁴ Duan Xi and Yang Chunmei, “Geminglixiang de chongfang – yi Qie Gewala weili luelun dangdai ‘xinzuo yi wenxue’ sichao [The Revisit of Revolutionary Idealism – a Brief Discussion on Today’s ‘New

of the historical figure Che Guevara reflects the social changes in China (as was done by Huang himself).²⁷⁵ The debates drew public attention, and the 2000 production became commercially successful, playing to over 10,000 spectators with an average 120% attendance over the thirty-seven total performances (extra seats were allocated due to the high demand).

As Conceison observes,

The significance of the creation, production, and reception processes of *Che Guevara* in the late 1990s through the turn of the millennium in terms of our assessment of Occidentalism in Chinese theatre production lies [...] in its self-reflexive investigation of the hypocrisy with which the ardently committed New Left (and, by extension, the nouveaux riches and the post-Cultural Revolution generation as a whole) simultaneously invites and vilifies the neo-imperialist practices of the Occident, specifically the United States.²⁷⁶

The play reflected people's concern for social injustice and inequality in a globalised society confronted with conflicting ideologies, and in this sense the play should be taken seriously, as it created a public sphere for discussions of issues of public interest.²⁷⁷

Unfortunately the crucial problems in *Che Guevara* were not overcome in the following "new leftist theatre." The same criticism applies to *We Are Marching on the Grand Road* from 2006, a play written by Huang and directed by Wang Huanqing. With

Leftist literature' Thoughts with *Che Guevara* as an Example], *Wenxuejie (Lilun ban)* [Literature (Theory Edition)], no. 5 (2012): 60–61; Xiao Gongqin, "Xin zuopai yu dangdai Zhongguo zhishifenzi de sixiang fenhua [New Leftists and the Split Among China's Intellegentsia Today]," *Modern China Studies*, no. 1 (2002): 82–105, <http://www.modernchinastudies.org/cn/issues/past-issues/76-mcs-2002-issue-1/1219-2012-01-06-08-38-50.html>.

²⁷⁵ He Jixian, "Qie Gewala: zai lishi de 'zhongjie' chu kaiqi lishi [*Che Guevara*: Start History Where History 'Ends']," *Wenyi lilun yu piping* [Literary Theories and Criticism], no. 5 (2007): 30–36; Huang Jisu, "Gewala chongfan Zhongguo – cong yichu xi de jiaodu kan [The Return of Guevara to China – from the Perspective of a Play]," *Lading meizhou yanjiu* [Journal of Latin American Studies] 30, no. 4 (2008): 21–22.

²⁷⁶ Conceison, *Significant Other: Staging the American in China*, 185.

²⁷⁷ For more discussions and public debates over the play, see Zhan Ying et al., "Guanzhong zhi Qie Gewala juzu de xin (zhaiyao) [Audiences' Letters to the Creative Team of *Che Guevara* (Excerpts)]," *Zhongguo xiju* [Chinese Theatre], no. 3 (2001): 20–21; Duan and Yang, "Geming lixiang de chongfang – yi Qie Gewala weili luelun dangdai 'xinzuoyi wenxue' sichao [The Revisit of Revolutionary Idealism – a Brief Discussion on Today's 'New Leftist literature' Thoughts with *Che Guevara* as an Example]."

the subheading of “A Survey of Social Psyche over the Past Three Decades,” the play presents a fragmentary narration of Chinese history over the past three decades, but still ends up with a not only confusing, but also anti-modern view of contemporary China. In the seventh act, an insular anti-reform statement is made:

The predatory way [of development] was established in 1980 and since then it expanded [and led Chinese society] into the world of predators through full-scale marketisation and privatisation. At this time the sounds of savaging and blood-sucking the weak, and the images of cruelty and misery overwhelm China.²⁷⁸

It completely denies the development of Chinese society since the Reform, and attempts to arouse populist fanaticism among the audience. As Hu Xingliang points out, the “new leftist” plays such as *Che Guevara* seem to present a postmodern point of view, but they actually reveal the tendency of “anti-modernity” through their “pre-modern” ways of imagining ideas of “class struggle,” “idealism,” and “revolution.”²⁷⁹ As critic Zhou Tuo puts it, the play shows little more than “complaints of resentment of the rich, anti-market and anti-liberal sentiment” from an “Ultraleftist populist” perspective.²⁸⁰ Such leftist practice encountered its own limits because it failed to provide an updated understanding of the globalisation process taking place in China.

The inclination of marrying Marxism and nationalism in the “new leftist” plays becomes a (non-governmental) practice of the official ideology of developing “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in order to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*Zhonghuaminzu de weida fuxing*) and to realise the “Chinese Dream” (*Zhongguo meng*). As Hobsbawm writes, nationalism used to work with leftism in the twentieth century in the struggle of independence for many nations, who, by labelling

²⁷⁸ Huang Jisu, “Women zouzai dalushang [We Are Marching on the Grand Road],” accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.zbgwx.com/a/20111217/4559.html>.

²⁷⁹ Hu Xingliang, “20 shiji 90 niandai Zhongguo houxiandai xiju zhi pipan [A Critique of Postmodern Theatre in China in the 1990s],” *Xueshu yuekan* [Academics Monthly] 38, no. 8 (2006): 109.

²⁸⁰ Zhou Tuo, “Huang Jisu, buyao jiduan! - you *Women zouzai dalu shang xiangdao de* [Huang Jisu, Don’t Go to the Extreme! - Thoughts after Watching We Are Marching on the Grand Road],” *Yishu pinglun* [Arts Criticism], no. 1 (2007): 37.

themselves “colonies” of imperialism gained legitimacy for revolution.²⁸¹ But when the revolution ended, and new revolutions (democratic movements) were rendered illegal in post-Cold War China, the concept of revolution was distorted by the interruption of the authorities, who wanted to transplant it to the national identity forged in the context of globalisation. China was implanted into the global economy and thus the logic of anti-imperialism in the nationalism-leftism marriage was constantly and profoundly challenged. *We Are Marching on the Grand Road* and a number of Zhang Guangtian’s plays that explore the possibility of connecting traditional Chinese philosophy and Marxism, such as *Confucius the Saint* (*Shengren Kongzi*, 2002) and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong loumeng*, 2007), did not receive as much public attention or critical acclaim as *Che Guevara*. Part of the reason may be that these “new leftist” plays failed to provide a convincing argument of globalisation’s challenge to nationalism.

Ironically, a number of the performances of Zhang’s *Confucius the Saint* (in collaboration with Guangzhou Spoken Drama Theatre Troupe in 2002) was censored and cancelled, due to its direct commentary on controversial political issues. Apparently the authorities consider not only liberal thoughts, but also radical leftist ideas as “harmful” to society. These thoughts and ideas are all subject to interference by the dominant ideology in order to prevent “disturbance.” The theatrical public sphere is always being censored by different social forces, of which China is not a unique case. As Chen Xiaomei points out,

realistically speaking, an openly anti-official drama has never been a possibility in the tightly controlled society of modern China. [...] Only by meeting these contrary demands—demands that comprise the essential features of post-Cultural-Revolutionary theater—can drama in China become a public event. In order to survive in these circumstances, the best instances of post-Maoist Chinese theater almost always negotiate within a limited cultural space in a borderland between official and anti-official discourses. Since no play can become a public event without having passed a censor, a successful post-Maoist drama usually operates within an official framework. Alternatively, to gain quick acceptance for public performance, it exhibits concern with a “social problem” that the authorities wish to address. As

²⁸¹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780 : Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 149–50.

already indicated, the play must simultaneously engage the often antiofficial interest of its anticipated audiences. This border crossing between official and antiofficial discourses reenacts the peculiar cultural condition of Chinese intellectuals, whose straitened social and political circumstances are reflected in their playwriting.²⁸²

Significantly different from fiction and poetry, drama “has always had to please both the guardians of the official ideology and the members of its audiences who, unlike the censors who control what they see, are often attracted to the unfamiliar and the unofficial.”²⁸³ The constant conflict and tension between the official ideology, the consumerist desire and the discontent for the social reality shape the development of post-Cold War Chinese theatre, urging us to contemplate the influence of globalisation on local communities.

Coda: globalisation’s challenge to performing the post-revolution condition

In his or her letter to the editor, an audience member under the pseudonym of *Guolai Ren* (meaning “someone who has gone through things”) writes:

Do we really need this spectre revolutionary [Guevara] to occupy the stage of our spoken drama today? We are at the start of a new century; everything is brand new, and History also offers the Chinese people a new mission. Here I would like to ask—is this mission guerrilla wars and bush fighting at all? [...] To be honest, I have been through the sixties myself; I had the experience of worshiping the World Revolution. However, as history progresses, the initial mission for us is to build our economy, so that we can join “the World” [the World Trade Organisation] as soon as possible. Any thought that slavishly cherishes the past is a bad idea. How can we ignore the trend of [the development of] the World, the realistic principles, the mission of History, and what people wish for?²⁸⁴

²⁸² Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, 161.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Guolai ren, “Xuanya lema ba, Gewala men! [Halt, Guevaras!],” *Zuopin yu zhengming* [Compositions and Debates], no. 6 (2000): 48.

As this audience member maintains, disturbance and revolution, which the play is advocating, are controversial. As Chinese society entered the post-Cold War era, it also faced the dilemma of authoritarianism.²⁸⁵ Winning the debate between conflicting ideologies is not as important as developing the economy, as only by providing a better livelihood can the government earn support from its people. As a developing country with a large population, China needs as much economic growth as possible. Therefore, since the 1990s the Chinese government has devoted major efforts to economic reform and industrialisation. However, in order to prevent “unnecessary” debates that may distract people and cause turbulence,²⁸⁶ the government also strengthened its control over the media and the arts, and as a result, freedom of speech and artistic expression were severely damaged.

It is in the post-revolution condition, or what literary scholar Sheldon H. Lu terms as “post-socialism,” which indicates “a cultural logic in accordance with which artists, filmmakers, and writers negotiate the residual socialist past and the emergent capitalist present to concoct new imaginaries of a transitional society,”²⁸⁷ that the “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü*, see footnote No. 148) spoken drama was promoted by the authorities that wished to unite the society with a dominant ideology. However, the problems of social injustice and inequality are not solved, but only suspended in the authoritarianist approach. This leads to the conundrum in which the problems not only persist – for example, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened – but also become more and more difficult to address, as 1) many artists, such as Huang and Zhang analysed in the

²⁸⁵ According to the historian Xiao Gongqin, Deng Xiaoping’s key strategy in his leadership of the reform consists of two points: 1) “the authority of the CPC should never be challenged,” 2) the CPC should by all means carry out the reform of the market economy, so that the people can live better lives and the conflicts between different social classes can be eased. Xiao uses the term “neo-authoritarianism” to describe the strategy of administration of Deng and the following CPC leadership (especially Xi’s). See Xiao Gongqin, “Guanyu xinqunweizhuyi tizhi yu guojia zhili wenti de ruogan wenti [Thoughts on the System of Neo-Authoritarianism and the Administration of the Country],” *Huazhong keji daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Edition of Social Sciences)] 28, no. 3 (2014): 4–6.

²⁸⁶ Deng Xiaoping commented retrospectively in a 1992 speech, “[i]t was my idea to discourage contention, so as to have more time for action.” (Xiaoping Deng, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan, disan juan* [Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume 3 (1982-1992)] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 362.)

²⁸⁷ Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, 208.

previous section, could hardly go beyond the Leninist idea of arts and enthusiasm of nationalist/anti-West movements in their portrayal of a post-revolution China, and 2) the censorship of the authorities blocked the exchange of ideas from both the Left and the Right. Authoritarianism goes against the cosmopolitan spirit, which aims to build a society in which “while diversity is preserved, there is also a degree of unity between the elements but without a dominant culture taking over.”²⁸⁸ As a result, the dilemma of authoritarianism threatens the environment of artistic creation as well as the ecology of the society as a whole. It is due to the flaws of authoritarianism that the official slogan of a “harmonious society,”²⁸⁹ which aims to promote a tolerant social environment for different classes and to redress inequalities, degenerated into an oppressive discourse in which diversity gave way to dominance and “harmony” became “monotone.”²⁹⁰

Moreover, plays such as *Che Guevara* and *We Are Marching on the Grand Road* try to reconstruct a grand narrative of revolution, which distorts and oppresses the individualist spirits that are put forward in experimental theatre movement by plays such as *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*. If we see *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* as promoting openness and tolerance towards dissenting ideologies, and respect for the individual, the attitude toward the individual in Huang and Meng’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is comparably ambivalent: although the authorities are mocked (by fusing the imageries of the capitalist West and China) so that the oppressed are praised and sympathised, by equating globalisation with Americanisation, and equating the Reform with giving in to capitalist domination, the critical agency of the individual (to resist hegemony and

²⁸⁸ Gerard Delanty, “Introduction: The Emerging Field of Cosmopolitanism Studies,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 7.

²⁸⁹ A slogan and a state strategic goal for future development proposed by the Communist Party of China since 2004, to advocate a society enjoying more united spirit, more equality and more diversity. See “Zhonggongzhongyang guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexieshehui de ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding [Decision by the Central CPC Committee to Build the Socialist Harmonious Society],” 2006, accessed December 2, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-10/18/content_5218639.htm.

²⁹⁰ “Harmony” has remained a key catchword in the CPC propaganda, such as in the “Core Socialist Values” (*Shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*, first advocated in 2013, see “Graphic: China’s Core Socialist Values,” accessed 24 October, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/90785/8494839.html>). Yet in protest of the authoritarian power of the state, Chinese internet users created the satirical slang “to be harmonised” (*bei hexie*), which actually means “to be censored.”

homogeneity) is ignored. To make it worse, the “new leftist” plays attempt to bring back the “revolutionary heroism,” which used to go hand in hand with “socialist realism” before the Reform to create an oppressive discourse for the arts. In these plays, violence (through advocating class struggle and proletarian revolution) is worshipped and the individual is once again subject to the great cause of the World Revolution. Marxism, which should have offered a base to form global alliances to energise the individual to pursue personal freedom is instead used in the “new leftist” plays to suppress freedom.

Ironically, theatre produced in post-Cold War China is inevitably entangled in the context of marketisation. For *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, it is hard to justify its turning Fo into a symbol of anti-capitalist fighter over its criticism of Fo accepting the Nobel Prize as a symbol of being subject to Capitalism. *Che Guevara* also joins the global trend of commoditising this historical figure into a popular cultural icon, and by purchasing the ticket and watching the performance, the spectator consumes the fake experience of revolution without taking any productive action. Furthermore, the leftist practices failed to answer the question about how they could have addressed class struggle in an exclusive elitist position: “the ticket price [for *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*] was as high as two hundred yuan each—which is so different from Dario Fo’s claim of ‘perform for the people and speak for the people—how many working class people in China can afford to watch your play?’”²⁹¹ The spirit of *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* and the failure of “new leftism” urges us to look for a better understanding of how theatre works in the new historical phase, and to explore how theatre can relate to the people across various classes with an open and compassionate attitude.

²⁹¹ Liao Weitang, “Xiangshenghua he jidianhua de xianfeng xiju [Xiangsheng-nification and Ritualisation of Avant-Garde Theatre],” in *Boximiya Zhongguo* [Bohemian China], ed. Chen Guanzhong, Liao Weitang, and Yan Jun (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 95.

Chapter Two

“You Are a Spare Part”: Experiencing Global Flows and “Reform and Opening-up”

The nature of the consumer is the greed for more, for cheaper products, for making less effort, for delicious food! [...] Once you have the human nature [of the consumer] that I offered you, you will no longer need any other type of human nature. You will only want what is faster, better, prettier, more convenient, more high profile, cheaper! Isn't this the democracy and freedom that you should pursue?

— Grass Stage's *World Factory* (2014)²⁹²

If we are to view globalisation as what Goerge Ritzer described as “[t]ransplanetary process(es) involving increasing liquidity and growing multi-directional flows as well as the structures they encounter and create,”²⁹³ we need to examine the impact such liquidity and flows are having on the social landscape. As the Chinese government carries on the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the structural economic reform that Chinese society is undergoing creates both new opportunities and new challenges. Chinese society gradually embraces the global market, and the flows of capital, people, and information grow significantly, thus asking people to adapt to the globalised world. The reform changes people's livelihood and lifestyles, and challenges old values. Due to the fact that theatre is directly connected to the dominant economic form and people's habits of consumption, the reform also changes the way in which theatre operates. This chapter discusses several plays that concern the changes in Chinese society during the economic reform since 1990, and examines how such changes affect people's lives.

Industrialisation is necessary for the modernisation of a country, and industrialisation and urbanisation are the major strategies employed by the Chinese

²⁹² Unpublished video recording of the 2014 production at Shenzhen OCT Contemporary Art Terminal provided by Grass Stage (“Shijie gongchang [World Factory],” directed by Zhao Chuan (2014; Grass Stage), MP4 video).

²⁹³ Ritzer, *Globalization: The Essentials*, 2.

government for economic reform. Besides the great amount of capital investment and the support of local policies, huge quantities of free moving labour are needed for the process. As a result, the global flows in the modernisation process of Chinese society mobilise many aspects of the society and changes its look, including how people work, live, and look at themselves. During the last three decades, numerous people in rural areas moved to cities to work in factories and the service industry, usually on very low salaries. At the same time, a great number of people moved abroad for better opportunities for education, business, work, or social welfare. Similarly, others (including Chinese descendants who were born abroad) moved back to China, seeking opportunities there as well. As the classic Marxist theory states, once the economic base has shifted, the organisation of labour has to change according to the new means of production. In the meantime, people bearing different ideas are put in a space under new circumstances to form new social groups, generating new environments which demand cosmopolitanism. Though the point of view adopted in this chapter's analysis is mainly the *financescape* of globalisation as defined by Arjun Appadurai, it is also intertwined with the dimensions of *ethnoscape*, *mediascape*, and *ideoscape* in the case studies provided. The plays discussed in this chapter provide insight into how economic reform is changing Chinese society, considering the struggle to adapt to the new circumstances of life, and how the changes effected by the reform bring about new social problems.

Those Left Behind and the experimental soap opera: the rising middle-class and theatre's reconciliation with liquid modern life

As was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, in the wake of social turbulence at the end of the Cold War (1989-1991), the Chinese theatre industry experienced a period of decline. However, economic reform was nonetheless still taking place, and the economic growth, though greatly affected (GDP growth rate dropped to 4.2% in 1989 and 3.9% in 1990, before rising back to 9.3% in 1991),²⁹⁴ showed that Chinese people's

²⁹⁴ See the data from the official website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China ("Guojia Shuju

lives were improving overall. This implies that economically, the need for theatre as a means of entertainment was increasing. Theatre soon responded to the growing market. As theatre critic Lin Kehuan points out, “partly because of the economic pressure, partly because of the driving force created by social life and trends in culture, playwriting for theatre quickly developed the flavour of being urban and popular [entertainment].”²⁹⁵

As Lin insists, urban popular culture had once been a crucial part of Chinese culture. *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*, which dates back to as early as the eleventh century B.C.E.) has shown the richness of culture in ancient Chinese cities, and has left a great impact on the Chinese poetry tradition. The rich urban culture has produced numerous novels as well as plays of traditional theatre, and inspired great theatre masters such as Guan Hanqing (1240?-1320?) and Tang Xianzu (1550-1616).²⁹⁶ Lin writes,

over the last five decades, the socialist regime tried to gain control of everything, and divided people into two categories, “friends” and “foes.” The civic stratum was either submerged, or hid itself within social life; no urban popular culture is evident. However, more than a decade of economic reform has created hundreds of thousands of self-employed workers, and countless private-owned companies and *nouveau riches*. Citizens, who are no longer worrying about obtaining food and clothing, start to demand a culture that suits their spiritual needs. [...] As the market economy slowly develops, and the civil society grows, urban popular culture as a culture for pastime and entertainment gradually breaks free from the complete control of politics, and shows a different consciousness and taste from the mainstream.²⁹⁷

Though it can be argued that popular culture (whether in the Chinese context or not) cannot break entirely free from the control of politics, there is little doubt that a middle-class stratum has risen, and that their demand of culture is also rapidly growing. This has created a great opportunity for the development of theatre.

[Data of the Nation],” accessed February 6, 2017, <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01>.)

²⁹⁵ Lin Kehuan, *Xiaofeishidai de xiju* [Theater in Consumer Society] (Taipei: Shulin chuban youxiangongsi, 2007), 51.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Those Left Behind (*Liushou nüshi*, literal translation: “the lady who was left behind”)²⁹⁸ was the vanguard of the trend of “civic turn” in theatre.²⁹⁹ Written by Yue Meiqin and directed by Yu Luosheng, the play premiered at Shanghai People’s Art Theatre in 1991. Set in Shanghai, an eastern coastal city in China, and one of the major gateways for immigration, *Those Left Behind* focuses on the marital problems faced by many immigrant families. The play’s plot is straightforward: Naichuan, a woman in her thirties, lives alone in Shanghai while her husband studies in the United States. Two years of separation has put their marriage in great danger. Torn apart by traditional moral values and the responsibility of taking care of her sick father in Shanghai, as well as her loneliness due to living apart from her husband, Naichuan struggles to salvage her marriage. On hearing the news that her husband is having an affair with an immigrant businesswoman, Naichuan breaks down, and later has an affair with another man who was similarly “left behind.” The play ends when Naichuan reveals to her lover that she is pregnant as she leaves Shanghai for a reunion with her husband, leaving the audience to ponder the fate of Naichuan’s future life and baby.

The play deals with the themes of migration and studying abroad, both common phenomena since the adoption of the “Reform and Opening-up” policy in Chinese society, especially in the increasingly international city of Shanghai. For example, from 1989 to 1991 there were over 3,100 applications to study abroad with personal funding.³⁰⁰ As Naichuan says, “nowadays people from the countryside are busy with moving to the city, and people from the city are busy moving abroad.”³⁰¹ Many couples or families are forced to live separately in different countries (or even different continents) because

²⁹⁸ The play was later in the same year adapted to a film under the same Chinese title, which has an English title as “Those Left Behind.” Therefore in this study the play’s title is translated as such.

²⁹⁹ The play in this research is studied based on the published script (Yue Meiqin, “Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” *Juben* [Playscripts], no. 3 (1994): 15-27) and the unpublished video of the 1991 production at Shanghai People’s Art Theatre, provided by Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (“Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” directed by Yu Luosheng (1991; SDAC), MP4 video).

³⁰⁰ Gao Yu, “Liushou nüshi yuanhe hongdong Shanghai [Why Liushou Nüshi Caused a Sensation in Shanghai],” *Zhongguo funü* [Chinese Women], no. 4 (1992): 31.

³⁰¹ Yue, “Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” 18.

some members are abroad working or studying. The characters in the play, not only Naichuan, the lady “left behind,” but also her husband and other people living overseas for education or business purposes, have to deal with loneliness. The suffering that ordinary people endure during the social transformation are so precisely captured in the play that “the lady left behind” became a heated topic in the public sphere in Shanghai. This asks the audience to consider the question that Lin raises, “does it indicate that we enjoy more tolerance and diversity in the contemporary urban civilisation, or does it mean that the play touches some deep-rooted painful experience of today’s Chinese people?”³⁰²

Both of the arguments are true. When Chinese society began to “open up,” people were offered more options for their lives. More opportunities for better livelihoods emerged, and more decisions were needed to be made. Thus, people became more aware of different lifestyles that a person can choose from without being judged according to dogmatic dominating values, whether traditional Confucian teachings or modern communist faith. The play addresses the huge wealth gap between China and the West. As Naichuan responds to her father, who criticises people who go abroad solely to make money, “making money isn’t bad at all. [...] The world can only make progress if people move forward.”³⁰³ Naichuan also reads a passage from a magazine that a Chinese student who is studying abroad wrote:

I raised my head, and saw the light purple fog veiling the Atlantic Ocean. On the other side of the ocean, London, Paris, Oslo, and Brussels have entered midnight. Behind my back, the sun set over the shoulder of the mountain, while the dawn breaks silently in Tokyo and Sydney – in these cities, my fellow countrymen who have crossed the border of our nation, are striking the iron gate of the world with their own flesh and blood!³⁰⁴

³⁰² Lin, *Xiaofei shidai de xiju* [Theater in the Consumer Society], 51.

³⁰³ Yue, “Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” 18.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

What is remarkable in this speech is not just its vision of the globe – a unifying world wherein all peoples are connected, but also the global flow of modernisation which the Chinese people are making great efforts to join. Moreover, the speech signifies a turning point from the old discourse of Chinese modernity (liberation and independence of the nation-state) towards a humanist valorisation of individuals in global modernisation: a recognition of the efforts by ordinary people, such as this anonymous student, to pursue a change, striving to bridge the divide between China and the rest of the world so as to build a better future for his homeland.

Meanwhile, the play also illustrates the pain of social transformation, which Chinese society was then enduring. “Reform and Opening-up” brought Chinese society into the discourse of globalisation. This new discourse challenges the existing discourse of proletarian revolution which dominated China for several decades. From a post-modern point of view, modernisation needs to continue, but the new discourse no longer bears the grand narrative of achieving the liberation of mankind. On the contrary, the new discourse indicates the improvement of an individual’s life. In this sense, the play foregrounds the emergence of individualism, as modern Western culture influences Chinese society through globalisation. As sociologist Ulrich Beck observes:

The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time. It is the fundamental cause behind changes in the family and the global gender revolution in relation to work and politics. Any attempt to create a new sense of social cohesion has to start from the recognition that individualism, diversity and skepticism are written into Western culture.³⁰⁵

This idea of individualism imported from the West left a significant impact on Chinese society. As the reform continued, Chinese people began to experience what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called “liquid modernity,” in which people move from “Joshua discourse” (order is the rule) to “Genesis discourse” (disorder is the rule) and everything

³⁰⁵ Ulrich Beck, “Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualism, Globalisation and Politics,” in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (London: Vintage, 2001), 165.

can no longer be seen from a teleological view.³⁰⁶ As Bauman observes, “Under the new circumstances, the odds are that most of human life and most of human lives will be spent agonizing about the choice of goals, rather than finding the means to the ends which do not call for reflection.”³⁰⁷ It is also worth noting that even in the passionate speech of the anonymous student, the purpose of the “people striking the iron gate of the world” becomes ambiguous. We might ask, what is the iron gate blocking Chinese people from? Rather than liberation and modernisation of the nation, as Naichuan and her father believe revolutionary figures such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Lu Xun and the founding members of the Communist Party of China, (as well as Naichuan’s own grandfather, a physician trained in the UK who returned to China to work as a doctor) were striving for, it is with the forever incomplete modernisation itself that people have become obsessed.

As Bauman writes, two features cause liquid modernity to be novel and different:

The first is the gradual collapse and swift decline of early modern illusion: of the belief that there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable telos of historical change, a state of perfection [...]; of completing mastery over the future – so complete that it puts paid to all contingency, contention, ambivalence and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings. [...] The second seminal change is the deregulation and privatization of the modernizing tasks and duties. What used to be considered a job to be performed by human reason seen as the collective endowment and property of the human species has been fragmented (‘individualized’), assigned to individual guts and stamina, and left to individuals’ management and individually administered resources.³⁰⁸

In the “liquid modern” Chinese situation, the great course of communist belief is suspended, the people’s modernising tasks are privatised, thus causing both to disintegrate. Migration is not new to the Chinese people; Naichuan’s generation experienced *chadui* (“join the production brigade”) or *zhibian* (“assist the frontier”) movements during the Cultural Revolution, in which millions of young people, organised by the central government, moved to work in the countryside. What is different about the

³⁰⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 54–55.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

situation in *Those Left Behind* is that people no longer have the sense of “serving a great and clear purpose” when they either migrate and work in a new place, or endure the pain of being “left behind.” People such as Naichuan and her husband are relieved from the burden of subjecting themselves to the ideology of the class struggle and revolution for the sake of all mankind, but they have not yet discovered the purpose of their individualised modernisation projects.

Furthermore, China is facing a more hybrid situation than how Bauman describes late capitalism in the West. This is because the modernisation process in China involves so many different areas and communities. That is to say, not only “solid” and “liquid” modernity, but also powerful “premodern” traditions co-exist in Chinese society. The boundaries of traditional moral values still exist, confusing Naichuan when in a letter her husband, Chen Kai, tells her, “Being alone, you must be very lonely [...] you might as well get a boyfriend, as long as you don’t devote your true feeling to it.”³⁰⁹ The play also portrays Lili, a friend of Naichuan, who divorces her husband (who lives abroad) and marries a Belgian businessman merely for money and foreign residency. New phenomena such as international marriages and “contract lovers” (Naichuan and Zidong, the male protagonist who is “a man left behind,” agree to have an intimate relationship until either of them end their left-behind life to reunite with his or her spouse) challenge the traditional morals and lifestyles that Chinese society is accustomed to, and demands that people are aware of and address the issue.

Those Left Behind enjoyed huge commercial success, playing to record breaking full houses for twenty nights (since the early 1980s, Chinese theatre began to suffer from poor ticket sales), and was performed in total over three hundred times in Shanghai. The play stand out as a characteristic example of theatre practice in China in the early 1990s, and its success inspired practitioners to produce more plays. Three aspects make the play remarkable. Based on these three aspects, *Those Left Behind* can be defined as an example of experimental theatre that concerns globalisation and its local consequences.

³⁰⁹ Yue, “Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” 19.

Firstly new styles of scenography are experimented with in *Those Left Behind*. Although the practice of Vsevolod Meyerhold, as well as some concepts of Antonin Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” and Jerzy Grotowski’s “poor theatre” had been introduced to theatre scholars³¹⁰ during the “explorative theatre” movement in the 1980s, there were few attempts to experiment with the space of the theatre. *Those Left Behind* was among the first plays in the 1990s that challenged the actor-spectator relationship by trying to transform the theatre space into a bar (Figure 2). When the audience members entered the auditorium, “suddenly they had a surprise– there was no stage in the theatre, and no curtain.”³¹¹ By creating a more intimate relationship between the actor and the audience



Figure 2. *Those Left Behind* (1991). Screenshot from recorded video, courtesy of SDAC

³¹⁰ In 1957 an article written by USSR scholars on Meyerhold was translated and published in Aleksei Dikiy et al., *Lun daoyan gousi* [On Director’s Design] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1957). However, little discussion about Meyerhold was triggered; not until the 1980s did scholars began to talk about this Russian director. Similarly, articles on Artaud and Grotowski were both introduced to Chinese theatre circles in the early 1980s.

³¹¹ Gao, “Liushou nüshi yuanhe hongdong Shanghai [Why Liushou Nüshi Caused a Sensation in Shanghai],” 30.

members, the play shares some of the goals that Richard Schechner advocated for environmental theatre: “all the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience”³¹² and “the theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in ‘found space.’”³¹³ As theatre critic Li Guanding notes, the whole theatre space became the stage, and he, as an audience member, became a character in the play. Li even wanted to comfort Naichuan by saying to her, “don’t be sad, everything will be all right.”³¹⁴ In this way the (historical) Western avant-garde found its way onto the contemporary Chinese stage,³¹⁵ and following *Those Left Behind*, the concepts of “saloon theatre” (*xiju shalong*) and “café theatre” (*kafei xiju*) became increasingly popular among practitioners and audiences, inspiring a number of experimental theatre works.

In the opening of the play, while the audience sits at the tables and are served drinks, the actor who plays Lili, the friend of Naichuan and the owner of the bar, enters and talks to the audience:

Dear friends, ladies and gentlemen: good evening! Welcome to our theatre saloon. Tonight we can listen to the music, chat with our friends, enjoy the drinks, have a dance, and appreciate a piece of life experience as food for thought. At the end we can talk freely about topics of our common concern. And we will try our best to provide best service to everyone here. So, let’s spend a wonderful evening together.³¹⁶

³¹² Richard Schechner, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre,” *TDR* 12, no. 3 (1968): 48.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

³¹⁴ Ye Zhiliang, *20 shiji mo zhongguo xiju sichao liubian yu quanshi* [The Transmutation of Trends of Thought in Chinese Theatre at the End of 20th Century and Its Interpretation] (Taipei: Xiuwei zixun, 2015), 279–80.

³¹⁵ Schechner himself visited Shanghai Theatre Academy in 1989 and used his environmental theatre methodology in a performance called *The Sun Is Going to Rise above the Mountains* (*Mingri jiuyao chushan*, written by Sun Huizhu). But due to the limited time and resources as well as the outbreak of the Tian’anmen Square protest, the show did not come to public attention. See Sun Huizhu, *Xiju de jiegou: xushixing jiegou he juchangxing jiegou* [The Structure of Theatre: Narrative Structure and Theatrical Structure] (Taipei: Shulin chuban youxiangongsi, 1993), 212–14.

³¹⁶ Yue, “Liushou nüshi [Those Left Behind],” 15.

The atmosphere that the theatre-maker tries to create is an ideal Habermasian public sphere, where citizens come together and discuss public issues by using rationality.³¹⁷ It is also important to note that the (Western) lifestyle of enjoying a glass of wine and dancing at a bar is made available *again* in Shanghai thanks to the reform policy that opened China up to the global culture. This time, the bar culture was not a culture imposed by Western colonialists as it was in the early twentieth century, during the Republic of China era, but simply a de-colonialised means of entertainment for modern, urban citizens. In addition to the fashionable scenography and costumes of *Those Left Behind*, there is also a singer who performs the then famous pop song “I Want a Home” (*Woxiang You Ge Jia*) during the performance interval. With its taste of urban popularism, *Those Left Behind* tries to respond to the rising middle class, and develops a new kind of aesthetics. The aesthetics soon developed into “white-collar theatre” (*bailing xiju*), the representative figures of which are Nick Rongjun Yu and He Nian at Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, which will be discussed in the next section of the chapter.

The aesthetic taste was not new *per se* to Chinese society, as Lin has previously pointed out. In both ancient dynasties and the early twentieth century the urban popular culture was very lively. When the city of Shanghai was occupied by foreign settlement districts, or even by Japanese troops, theatre contributed greatly to the richness of the city’s urban culture. However, since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, theatre has ceased to be a means of entertainment for city audiences. *Those Left Behind* illustrates that city audiences began to reclaim the right of an individual to choose his or her own means of entertainment. It is the conscious aesthetic experiment of changing the perspective by which we look at a globalised China that makes the play new and different from other works. For example, the perspective of the collectivist dogmatic proletariat, changed to that of the individualised humanistic middle-class citizen. Inspired by *Those Left Behind*, in 1992 Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe staged a “little theatre” production: Harold Pinter’s *The Lover* (*Qingren*). Interestingly, the seriousness of Pinter’s “comedy

³¹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974): 49.

of menace” was eclipsed by the obscenity implicated by the suggestive title and scenography, which included pink-coloured lighting, drum-beating as an indication of sexual intercourse, a bed scene, and an evening dress that exposed the actress’ neck and the back. Such features drew attention from international media, and contributed to the play’s great commercial success.³¹⁸

For this reason, after watching *Those Left Behind* in the 1993 “Chinese Experimental Theatre Showcase and International Symposium” in Beijing, some visiting foreign theatre critics commented that it was merely a kind of “popular theatre” or even “serious soap opera.” However, as Tian Benxiang argues, it was experimental theatre in a Chinese context.³¹⁹ *Those Left Behind* is experimental theatre on a special level: the commercialisation experiment of Chinese theatre. Its commercial success marked the beginning of the revival of Chinese theatre in the 1990s. Following *Those Left Behind*, a series of plays focused on the stories of new immigrants, such as *The Wife from America* (*Meiguo laide qizi*, adapted by Zhang Xian from Tang Min’s novel under the same title, directed by Chen Mingzheng, 1993) and *The Telephone Calls Across the Atlantic Ocean* (*Daxiyang dianhua*, written by Wang Jianping and directed by Yuan Guoying, 1993), have enjoyed great box-office success. *Those Left Behind* was even adapted into an award-winning film, signifying the beginning of an industrialised entertainment age in China.

As Change observes, in the Chinese context of the 1990s, commercialisation contributed to experimental theatre’s struggle against hegemony and homogeneity of the state:

The terror left by the year 1989 and the prevalence of mass culture led to the halt of critical language [in theatre]. [...] As a result, the dynamics in which the state and

³¹⁸ Its box office sales reached over 100,000 yuan with a production cost of merely 6,000 yuan. It was also the first time (since the reform) the producer tried to promote the play through media (newspaper, press conferences, etc.) without the help/filter of theatre critics. See Wu Baohe, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaojuchang xiju* [A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre], 50.

³¹⁹ In Tian’s article he argues that in the Chinese context “little theatre” is a broadened concept of experimental theatre, and that *Those Left Behind* is no doubt the product of the “Little Theatre Movement.” See Tian Benxiang, “Jinshinianlai de Zhongguo xiaojuchang xiju yundong [Little Theatre Movement in China in the Recent Decade],” *Guangdong yishu* [Guangdong Arts], no. 6 (2000): 22–23.

the local society [*minjian*] compete arose. Market capitalism was the archenemy of Western avant-garde arts, but in the dynamics of “the state versus the local” in Chinese context, it [market capitalism] became the symbol of the power of the local society, and thus became the coordinator for the avant-garde.³²⁰

Something significant was taking place during this “civic turn” of theatre: the emergence of independent producers. In 1989, the first independent theatre group “Star 89 Theatre (*Xing 89 Jushe*),” affiliated with Shanghai People’s Art Theatre,³²¹ was founded in Shanghai, producing two shows and marking the new-born system of theatremaking in China. Before long, more independent producers began to make new plays for the growing theatre markets in Shanghai, Beijing, and many other Chinese cities. *The Wife from America* witnessed the first case of “independent funding and independent theatremaking” in mainland China.³²² At the same time, the trend of commercial theatre also rose in Beijing, with Meng Jinghui’s “Accidental Exposure Theatre” (*Chuanbang jushe*, which produced *Longing For Worldly Pleasures* in 1993 and *I Love XXX* in 1994 in the Central Experimental Theatre), Zheng Zheng’s “Firefox Theatre” (*Huohuli jushe*), and Su Lei’s Saturday Theatre Workshop (*Xingqiliu xiju gongzuoshi*) gaining popularity. In a 1993 interview, Su Lei commented:

In order to create works that the audiences will love, it is impossible to exclude commercial elements. Hardly any of those plays that depended on funding from the state was profitable. What I want to do now is not just prevent the loss, but make money out of a play. I definitely will give it a go.³²³

³²⁰ Change, “Zhongguo dalu xianfeng xiju xianfengxing zhi bianqian yanjiu [A Study of the Transmutation of Avant-Gardism of Avant-Garde Theatre in Mainland China],” 111.

³²¹ Here “independent producer” means that the producer is charge of raising funds, choosing the script, hiring the director, casting actors, etc. yet all “independent” theatre groups need to be affiliated to a theatre company or organization that have the certificate for public performance. For more details of the mechanism in which the “independent” and the state work, see Entell, “Post-Tian’anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre/CNET,” 27–36.

³²² Wang Yin and Yin Luobi, “Guojia xiju zhongde geren fanxiju – fang Zhang Xian [The Individual’s Counter-Theatre in the Discourse of Nationalised Theatre: An Interview with Zhang Xian],” *Jintian* [Today] 71, no. 4 (2005), <http://www.jintian.net/405/14.html>.

³²³ Wang Pengbo, “‘Chuanbang’ xingqiliu, ‘Wa’ ming Huohuli - Beijing huaju xing ‘jieshe’ [‘Accidental Exposure’ Saturday, ‘Frog’ Firefox - the Trend of Forming Societies of Spoken Drama in Beijing],” *Xiju dianying bao* [Theatre and Film], October 17, 1993.

Zhang Xian, the writer-dramatist and producer involved in *The Wife from America*, the film adaptation of *Those Left Behind*, and *The Margin Upstairs* (*Loushang de Majin*, 1994),³²⁴ in a 2005 interview further put forward his manifesto on theatremaking, titled, “Twenty Dos and Don’ts” (*ershige yao he ershige buyao*):

Do it for the drama market, not for a whole market. Be in the city, not in the countryside. Be in the present, not the past. Be realist, not expressionist. Be individualised, not communal. Present new identity/occupation/character, not old identity/occupation/character. Be indigenous, not nationalised. Be popular, not exclusive. Be vulgar, not eloquent. Be fashionable, not eternal. Involve fewer characters, not more characters. Have the characters in the storyline all the time, no interruption or intermissions. Have a linear narrative, no flashbacks. Perform at a fast pace, not a slow pace. Indoor scene, not outdoors. One scene for the whole play, no change of scenes. Low budget, not high budget. Sell tickets, not distribute them for free. High ticket prices, not low prices. Stage it in “little theatres” for more shows, not in big theatres for fewer shows.³²⁵

Clearly there is an ironic tone in the manifesto. In fact Zhang admits, “[t]he first day I came up with the ‘twenty Dos and Don’ts’ I started to wish for its end.”³²⁶ He sees the manifesto as a way of actively engaging in popular theatre/popular culture and by doing this to change it. Yet the rising middle-class taste and a trend of industrialised theatre production, as the local resistance to “socialist realist” and collectivist theatre, is evident. As theatre critic Zhang Xian³²⁷ writes, “Arguably, the emergence of independent producers of experimental theatre augurs the essential ideological fission of ‘Chinese society of market economy’ under the impact of the change of economic base. It is an indication that theatre is able to come into being with the least political interference, and

³²⁴ Directed by Yu Lihang and starring famous actor Wang Zhiwen, *The Margin Upstairs* became a sensation in Shanghai in 1994.

³²⁵ Wang and Yin, “Guojia xiju zhongde geren fanxiju – fang Zhang Xian [The Individual’s Counter-Theatre in the Discourse of Nationalised Theatre: An Interview with Zhang Xian].”

³²⁶ Ibid. For more discussion on Zhang, see my third section of Chapter Three.

³²⁷ Please note that here I refer to the critic Zhang Xiān 张先 rather than the dramatist Zhang Xiàn 张献 mentioned above.

that diversity of ideologies is possible.”³²⁸ In this sense, aided by globalisation and social reform, *Those Left Behind* marked the start of a new era for experimental theatre in China.

Das Kapital and “white-collar theatre”: theatre at the crossroads of consumerism

As some surveys indicate, independent theatre productions made up approximately half of the theatre market since the mid-1990s.³²⁹ However, as Liu Yanjun points out, the history of independent producers in Chinese theatre dates back to the period of the Republic of China (1912-1949), when agents were involved in the marketing of traditional theatre.³³⁰ Yet since the founding of the P.R.C. and the “socialist transformation,”³³¹ private ownership of theatre troupes and theatre spaces has been transformed into state and collective ownership. In the “planned economy,” the production of arts was part of a “ration system” in which the consumption of theatre arts relied on tickets being allotted to the public and the collective (institutions, factory workers, etc.). Sometimes these tickets were even free of charge, so that the seeking of investment and profits was not the priority for theatre-makers. Moreover, the administrative structure of theatre companies was built using the same model as that of government bodies, and the companies lacked experience of marketing, as there had been

³²⁸ Zhang Xian [Xiān], “Pingjing zhongde zhendang – 1998 xiaojuchang xiju huigu [The Shock in the Silence: A Retrospective of Little Theatre in 1998],” *Zhongguo xiju* [Chinese Theatre], no. 1 (1999): 27.

³²⁹ See the rough estimates of theatre markets in 1997, 2005 and 2007 in Haibo Lu, “21 shiji Zhongguo huaju shichanghua qushi tanwei [A Research on the Trend of Marketisation of Chinese Theatre in the 21st Century],” *Xiju wenxue* [Dramatic Literature], no. 8 (1998): 10; Tao, *Dangdai xiaojuchang sanshinian (1982-2012)* [A Thirty-Year Review of Experimental Theatre in China: 1982-2012], 84.

³³⁰ Liu Yanjun, *Zhongguo huaju xianchang: 2001-2012* [Live Theatre in China: 2001-2012] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2013), 228.

³³¹ The “socialist transformation” (*shehuizhuyi gaizao*) movement (1953-1956), led by the CPC government, aimed at turning the system of ownership of a) agriculture, b) industry and commerce and c) handicraft in China from capitalism to socialism, i.e. all the production of the society becomes owned by the state or the collective (local community or big state-owned company). See Xue Muqiao et al., *Zhongguo guominjingji de shehuizhuyi gaizao* [Socialist Transformation of National Economy of China] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1978).

little need for it. When Chinese society started to embrace the market economy, such means of production of the arts faced a great crisis. As Liu notes:

Management on the non-commercial basis made the theatre companies feel less need to innovate themselves in order to adapt to the market and the taste of the audience. Hence the decay of diverse schools for many traditional theatres, the brain drain, and the decrease of competitiveness of theatre in the market of arts.³³²

This is the essential problem for the “theatre crisis” in China since the early 1980s.

The reform of theatre companies’ management in China started in the year 1985, when the State Council and Ministry of Culture began to adopt a series of policies, including simplifying the institutional structure and promoting a contracting system³³³ in theatre companies. The aim was to relieve the government of the burden of covering the increasing expenses of theatre companies.³³⁴ The theatre companies needed to care more about the profits, and the profits would be enjoyed by the artists, encouraging the companies’ adaptation to the needs of the market.³³⁵ Such innovative reform policies of the theatre industry stimulated artistic creativity as well as the theatre market. Thanks to

³³² Liu, *Zhongguo huaju xianchang: 2001-2012* [Live Theatre in China: 2001-2012], 229.

³³³ Contracting system, or *chengbaozhi*, is a common methodology used in the Chinese economic reform, in which certain groups of individuals sign the contract to take over the management of the company, or the field of crop as well as the responsibility for the profits or losses for a period of time, while the ownership of the company/field (most of the time belonging to the state or the collective) does not have to change.

³³⁴ It is important to point out that governmental funding for state-owned theatre also increased since the 1980s. But the attendance rates and sales of state-supported theatres are not growing as fast as the privately owned theatre companies. In fact the latter make the greatest contribution to the development of the theatre market for the last two decades, while the former rely more and more heavily on governmental support. See Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo wenhua wenwu tongji nianjian: 2015* [Statistical Yearbook of Culture and Cultural Relics of China: 2015], 177–86, 192–93. Having said that, it is also important to note that privately owned theatre accepts all kinds of funding as well, including that from the government.

³³⁵ For an overview of the institutional reform of theatre in China, see Yang Xiong, “Yishu biaoyan tuanti tizhi gaige licheng ji zhanwang (shang) [Overview and Outlook of Institutional Reform of Performing Arts Groups, Part 1],” *Zhongguo wenhua bao* [China Culture Daily], June 17, 2003; Yang Xiong, “Yishu biaoyan tuanti tizhi gaige licheng ji zhanwang (xia) [Overview and Outlook of Institutional Reform of Performing Arts Groups, Part 2],” *Zhongguo wenhua bao* [China Culture Daily], June 21, 2003. Entell also offers a detailed account of the financial and production innovations introduced in the Central Experimental Theatre in the 1990s. See Entell, “Post-Tian’anmen: A New Era in Chinese Theatre: Experimentations during the 1990s at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre/CNET,” 61–73.

the reform, independent producers and independent (non-state-owned) theatre troupes also emerged, and experimental theatre directors such as Meng Jinghui, Lin Zhaohua and Tian Qinxin, while affiliated to the state-owned theatre companies, founded their own “workshops” (*gongzuoshi*, private organisations of their own) to manage new productions. In general, the reformed theatre companies and the newly-born independent theatre groups created a rising and promising theatre ecology beginning in the early 1990s.

All these theatre companies produced a number of profitable and critically acclaimed plays, such as *Emotional Practice* (*Qinggan caolian*, by Firefox Theatre in Beijing, 1993), *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Rhinoceros in Love* (1998) in Beijing, and *The Wife from America*, *The Margin Upstairs* (both produced by Modern People’s Theatre [*Xiandai ren jushe*]) in Shanghai. In spite of this, the “money problem” never ceased to bother theatre-makers; as Meng Jinghui recalls, the 1990s was not an easy time for theatre:

Now I’m wondering, why was I so busy all the time looking for money, in 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997? All those years I was looking for money, in order to make my own plays.³³⁶

If we take into account the expansion of mass media as part of the development of Chinese society in the 1990s, it is not surprising that the theatre market was greatly impacted.³³⁷ It was not until the early 2000s that the “money problem” began to ease, as people gradually began to recognise the value of live performance as a proper, affordable form of entertainment, a unique experience which, in Peggy Phelan’s words, “cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations.”³³⁸

³³⁶ Tao, “Wo buneng tingzhi bianhua [I Shall Not Stop Changing].”

³³⁷ As early as 1984, a survey-based report indicated the negative correlation between the spread of television and theatre ticket sales in Shanghai. See Song Jintian et al., “Shanghai qunzhong wenhuashenghuo zhuangkuang diaocha [A Survey of the Cultural Life of the People in Shanghai],” *Xiju yishu* [Dramatic Arts], no. 4 (1984): 33–40.

³³⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993),

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, a great number of new theatre companies such as Xixiaotang Theatre, Leizile Theatre, and Kaixin Mahua Theatre, became active and commercially successful. New experimental theatre spaces were also built, including the Little Theatre of Beijing People's Art Theatre (1995-2009), Beijing North Theatre (*Beibingmasi juchang*, 2003-2005), Penghao Theatre (2008-), Fengchao Theatre (2008-), Star Theatre (*Fanxing xijucun*, 2009-) in Beijing, Zhenhan Café Theatre (2000-2003), Down Stream Garage (2004-2013), and Ke Centre for the Contemporary Arts (2007-) in Shanghai.³³⁹ Theatre-makers were increasingly enjoying the profits resulting from their works, and artists became increasingly optimistic. When Hard Han Café Theatre (*Zhenhan kafei juchang*)³⁴⁰ was founded in 2000, Zhang Xian, as its artistic director, wrote:

Hard Han Café Theatre is just the first among the hundreds of new theatre spaces in thirty years from now. At that time, the younger generation of theatregoers may hear their parents saying, “there used to be a café theatre, and we also often went to the theatre when we were young...”³⁴¹

Zhang's words were posted on the theatre's display window, exemplifying his belief that the theatre industry was going to take off. Meng, who became one of the most

146.

³³⁹ There are a number of researchers who have talked about the reform of theatre management and running of experimental theatre spaces, such as, Tao, *Dangdai xiaojuchang sanshinian (1982-2012)* [A Thirty-Year Review of Experimental Theatre in China: 1982-2012], 64–72, 94–105; Wu, *Zhongguo dangdai xiaojuchang xiju* [A Chinese Contemporary Little Theatre], 99–105; Ding Sheng, “Cong lixiang zouxiang xianshi: Shanghai minjian juchang shiwnian [From Idealism to Reality: Fifteen Years of Shanghai's Non-Governmental Theatre],” *Shanghai xiju* [Shanghai Theatre], no. 2 (2016): 8–11; Ding Sheng, “Beijing feiyinglixing minjian juchang yanjiu: yi Penghao juchang weili [A Study of Non-Profit Non-Governmental Theatre in Beijing: Taking Penghao Theatre as an Example],” *Xiju yishu* [Dramatic Arts], no. 3 (2012): 106–12.

³⁴⁰ Like bars and nightclubs, cafés were brought back to Shanghai citizens only after the reform. Theatres (for drama) in China did not have bars in most cases, and that was one of the reasons for Wang Jingguo to build a new privately owned theatre space when he returned from New York as a successful designer. Hard Han Café Theatre was designed in an American bar style, allowing the audiences to enjoy alcohol and coffee while watching a play.

³⁴¹ Quoted in Ding, “Cong lixiang zouxiang xianshi: Shanghai minjian juchang shiwnian [From Idealism to Reality: Fifteen Years of Shanghai's Non-Governmental Theatre],” 8.

commercially successful directors, also joked heartily about it in a 2003 interview, saying, “who says theatre isn’t profitable? I would give him a thousand bucks.”³⁴²

Shanghai, as one of the most developed and globalised cities in China, was the first to witness the reform and commercialisation of theatre. As a result of the reform policy, in 1995 Shanghai People’s Art Theatre and Shanghai Youth Drama Troupe merged into the state-owned Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (SDAC), marking the start of full-scale commercialisation of the theatre industry in Shanghai. Since then, SDAC has devoted itself to the goal of simultaneously achieving artistic and commercial success by introducing producer systems, project management, and the reform of actor recruitment.³⁴³ Today SDAC is one of the most profitable theatre companies in China, with three theatre spaces, hundreds of performances, and box office sales worth of over 30 million yuan each year.³⁴⁴

The most representative theatre-makers from SDAC are arguably the playwright Nick Rongjun Yu (Yu Rongjun) and director He Nian. Since 2000 Yu has made his name as a prolific writer of over 50 plays, a number of which have been staged internationally, such as *Last Winter* (*Qunian dongtian*, 2000), *WWW.COM* (2000),³⁴⁵ *The Asylum Next to Heaven* (*Tiantang gebi shi fengrenyuan*, 2001), *Perfume* (*Xiangshui*, 2003), *Cry to Heaven* (*Yu tian*, 2007), and *The Crowd* (*Wuhe zhizhong*, 2015). Nicknamed “box office honey,” as an antonym of “box office poison,” He directed some of the most profitable plays in SDAC, such as *Anecdotes of the Gongfu World* (*Wulin waizhuan*, 2007), *The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron* (*Lu ding ji*, 2008), and *The Spoiled Queen* (*Sajiao nüwang*, 2011). SDAC’s plays explore middle class taste, such as in *Those Left Behind*

³⁴² Jin, *Xiaofeng diushoujuan: xunwen dangdai 26 wei xianfeng renwu* [Games Started by Xiaofeng: A Search and Interview of 26 Contemporary Avant-Garde Figures], 171.

³⁴³ See the interview of Yang Shaolin, president of SDAC, in Chen Luanluan, “Yang Shaolin: ‘Shanghai moshi’ de dizaozhe [Yang Shaolin: Maker of ‘Shanghai Mode’],” accessed November 18, 2016, <http://yule.sohu.com/20110601/n308314386.shtml>.

³⁴⁴ “Buzhi qingchun, yiyu qinghuai – Shanghai huaju yishu zhongxin yinglai chuangli 20 zhounian [Youth and Dream: 20th Anniversary of the Founding of Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre],” accessed November 18, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-04/07/c_1114892807.htm.

³⁴⁵ *WWW.COM* was a collaborative production by SDAC and Modern People’s Theatre.

and *The Margin Upstairs* (discussed in the previous section), which are sometimes labelled white-collar theatre, appealing to urban professionals as target audience. Their works pay great attention to the fast-changing, modern urban life, capturing it with vivid dramatic descriptions and quick, sharp responses, covering topics such as technology-mediated human relationships (*WWW.COM*, directed by Yin Zhusheng), Foucauldian disciplined modern life (*Next to the Heaven Lies the Asylum*, dir. Yin Zhusheng), alienated office work (*Dog's Face [Renmugoyang]*, 2004, written by Yu and directed by He), and the comedic fable of revolt against corrupt politics (*The Deer and the Cauldron*, adapted by Ning Caishen from the popular *gongfu* novel by Jin Yong). These productions, although many are low comedies, are produced in the context of rapid economic growth and increasingly intense pressures of work and mortgages, burdens placed on the urban middle class, to consciously and unconsciously challenge “capitalist hierarchical monetary power” through what Ma Haili considers to be the Bakhtinian subversive power of laughter.³⁴⁶

Das Kapital (Ziben lun), a collaborative work between Yu and He, is a play that best showcases their comedic style and observation of the theatre-world in relation to the discourse of globalised Shanghai.³⁴⁷ Written by Yu and directed by He, *Das Kapital* premiered at SDAC in 2010 and has been restaged several times since then. The make-up of collaborators (Yu and He, as well as the general producer Yang Shaolin, general manager of SDAC), after the ten-year rapid growth of box office sales since the start of the new millennium, enables us to read the play as a retrospective work. In this sense, *Das Kapital* summarises the artistic achievement of SDAC since the reform, and presents SDAC's own reflection as well as self-critique. Focusing on an artist seeking financial support for his new play, but eventually trapped within the “capitalist game,” the play discusses how the look of theatre has changed since the reform, and reflects on how

³⁴⁶ Ma Haili, “Survival through Laughter: A Fun Gongfu: The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron,” in *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Li Ruru (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 147.

³⁴⁷ The play in this research is studied based on the published script and the unpublished video of the 2011 production at SDAC, provided by SDAC (“Ziben lun [Das Kapital],” directed by He Nian (2011; SDAC), DVD).

normal Chinese people are striving to make a living in a globalised society with which no one is familiar.

The play opens with a scene in an “experimental” post-dramatic style, which became common on the Chinese theatre stage during the “Little Theatre Movement”.³⁴⁸ an ensemble of actors, as “chorus,” use physical theatre and a long parallel narrative to comment on “money”:

[...] Money is high rank; money is power; money is the brother; money is ecstasy; money is GBP; money is EUR; money is USD; money is RMB; money is the tool; money is currency; money is precious metal; money is notes; money is stocks; money is financial derivatives; money is hedge funds; money is fortune; money is capital; money is convenience; money is obstacles; money is luxuries; money is temptation and greed; money is nobility; money can also make one humble [...]³⁴⁹

When the long narrative comes close to its end, an “unexpected accident” happens. The leading actor leaves the spotlight centre of the stage, re-enters from the side to interrupt the performance, persuades the other actors to exit the stage, and directly addresses the audience. The talk in the 2011 production, given by Wang Yong, who replaces the original casting of the star actor Xu Zheng³⁵⁰ in the leading role, is an interesting one:

[*To the actors on the stage.*] I’m sorry, dear colleagues, I would like to pause our performance for a minute. [...] Stage manager, could we please have lights on the auditorium? Thank you... [*To the audiences.*] Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Wang Yong, the leading actor of *Das Kapital* in this round of performances. Why did I put stress on “this round”? Because in the previous rounds it was Xu Zheng – some of you may know this. Before this round started, our manager had a talk with me. He said, now our theatre troupe is transforming from a “public institution” to a “business corporation”³⁵¹; therefore *Das Kapital*, as our first

³⁴⁸ Such style was first and famously adopted by Meng Jinghui’s *I Love XXX* (1993), which was greatly influenced by Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience*. This will be discussed later in Chapter Three.

³⁴⁹ Nick Rongjun Yu, *Yu Rongjun wutaiju zuopin xuan (shang)* [Nick Rongjun Yu Theatre Works (Part 1)] (Shanghai: Shanghai jinxiu wenzhang chubanshe, 2011), 4–5.

³⁵⁰ Xu Zheng is not only famous as a star actor from SDAC, but also very active in cinema and television.

³⁵¹ This transformation, or *shizhuanqi* in Chinese, is a major methodology by the Chinese government in the reform of the “public institutions” (*shiyedanyuan*) in the cultural sector.

attempt of commercial operation, must be “huge.” I asked, if it’s going to be a “huge” commercial operation, why not cast Xu Zheng? [...] The manager said, it is because I had worked as the choreographer and assistant director of the play, and most importantly, I was the better choice for this role. I was flattered. But when I came to the rehearsal, it was totally different from what I expected. We used to have over forty actors for the play; now we only have less than twenty. We used to have a spectacular musical-style opening of forty actors, choreographed by myself. Now what was that, seriously? A poetry recital? [...] Has anyone seen a major theatre production without a set? Now I realised the so-called “commercial operation” was just trying to make as much as money by cutting costs. [...] ³⁵²

When he talks about the “corporatisation,” Wang is referring to November 2009, when SDAC and five other public institutions related to performing arts in Shanghai finally completed the process of corporatisation, and the SMEG Performing Arts Group (SPAG) was founded as their mother company. ³⁵³ This meant that SDAC, as a business corporation, could enjoy the unprecedented freedom and burden of “independent production.” When the theatre company works in the way of a modern corporation, the major problem of capitalism is revealed: the owner of the business tries to exploit as much surplus value from the workers – the actors of the play – and make as much profit as possible by every possible means, for instance cutting the cost of scenography, and making exaggerated promotions. This reflects the concern that the theatre-maker has for the process of commercialisation, which might put the quality of arts at risk.

Ironically, Wang’s solution is not to reconsider the relationship between arts and the market. Believing that the problem is insufficient funds, he begins to ask for donations from the audience members instead, in order to make the production more influential. He mentions the production mode of the celebrated musical, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*. Five hundred investors put a considerable amount of money into the original *Cats*

³⁵² “Ziben lun [Das Kapital],” DVD. As many interesting modifications were made in the 2011 production, in this study I focus on this production rather than the original 2010 one, while the latter has its script published in 2011.

³⁵³ Jin Ying, “Shanghai wenguang yanyi (jituan) youxiangongsi jiepaichengli [Shanghai SMEG Performing Arts Group Ltd. Founded],” *Wenxue bao* [Literature Daily], November 4, 2009. A number of other performing arts institutions also completed corporatisation since then and became subsidiaries of SPAG since then.

production in 1981, and since then those “angels” have seen returns of 200% each year.³⁵⁴ Wang then raises money to fund the production, and an audience member (a clerk working at the bank, who is played by an actor) comes onto the stage to suggest that he should look for venture capital and angels. Wang accepts the suggestion, and asks the audience to see a section of the “future production” expected when SDAC has all the necessary funding. What the audience sees next is a typical Broadway musical style singing-dancing performance, with seemingly familiar scenography that reminds one of “mega musicals” such as *Les Misérables* and *Billy Elliot*.

Wang then starts his adventure of the “capital game”: persuading his superiors to approve this investment project, talking to big investors Wang Shiyi and Zhao Shanshui (mocking the magnates Wang Jianlin and Pan Shiyi, and the millionaire-comedian Zhao Benshan) pleading for investments, dealing with the actors dissatisfied with the new labour relationship, and drawing blueprints for the new estates project as derivatives from the massive investment. Wang himself turns into a business owner, developing the characteristic merciless and greedy personalities of a “bad capitalist.” Before long he is overwhelmed by the snowball effects of the investment that seems to provide more money than he can handle. He becomes disoriented in the breathtaking capital game, and forgets what he wanted in the first place: merely the financial support to finish a decent artistic work in theatre. Moreover, the audience members are also involved in the characterisation of the all-consuming capitalist world. After Xu announces that the new company that has been receiving all kinds of investments has been listed on NASDAQ, an actor turns to the audience, saying:

Ladies and gentlemen, dear fellow shareholders, good evening! I am Peter Wang from Standard & Poor’s Financial Services. Invited by President Xu Zheng [Wang Yong in the 2011 production] of “Shangshanxiashui Zounanchuangbei Xiangjiaopi Zhengkua Eshili” Limited Liability Company, our company is going to have an evaluation of the performing arts! First of all I want to tell you, *it is very hard to draw a conclusion* on whether a performance is good or bad according to a certain standard; secondly, I want to tell you that based on our company’s research and analysis of performing arts industry, *we have reached a conclusion*. The only

³⁵⁴ “Ziben lun [Das Kapital],” DVD.

feasible evaluation standard of performing arts is: how many decibels the audience members' applause is!³⁵⁵

The actor goes on to tell the audiences that the louder their applause, the higher the rating the company will receive. Now that everyone is a shareholder of the company, he and the ensemble actors encourage all the audience members to clap as hard as possible, chanting, "if you want to make money clap your hands."³⁵⁶ The greed in human nature, provoked by capitalism that has lost control, is well captured. The participation of the audience in this scene highlights every member of society's role in the capitalisation process, and criticises the damage that capitalisation has done to the production of the arts.

In this sense, the play is the playwright's meditation on how capitalisation and globalisation affect art. As one of the most successful playwrights in China today, winning awards and making money with his writing, in the play Yu reveals his self-doubt and conventional moral standards, although he himself benefits from the capitalisation of theatre. He writes in the afterword of the play:

From [the time of] the original script to the performance today, we move closer and closer to the audience, and we move closer and closer to reality. Sometimes it is hard to tell the fictional from the real. The reason why we are joking on SDAC, apart from making fun of ourselves, is that we are familiar with the situation in SDAC [so we can talk about and criticise it with clarity]. I hope that our audiences will not consider it as self-pitying, because such things are happening in real life. How arts shall exist in the age of Capital is a question that confuses many people. At many times, faced with the Capital and [our] inner desires, arts and idealism are worth nothing.³⁵⁷

The fact that the general producer of the play was Yang Shaolin, the general manager of SDAC, and the leader figure in the SDAC reform throughout the past the decade, also contributes to the interpretation of the play as a self-reflective piece. Yang is also

³⁵⁵ Yu, *Yu Rongjun wutaiju zuopin xuan (shang)* [Nick Rongjun Yu Theatre Works (Part 1)], 68. My emphasis.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

portrayed as a character in the play, Manager Yang (*Yang Zong*), who at first opposes Wang's fund-raising project fiercely, then later changes his mind when Wang is able to gather 10 million yuan for the production. However, at the end of the play Manager Yang laments on the closing of SDAC, which needs to be torn down in order to construct a modern building complex as part of the investment plan.

Considering that Chinese people are threatened by consumerism, *Das Kapital* illustrates the vain attempt of ordinary people to escape the inescapable trend of the commercial in a global market. Subprime mortgage, venture capital, financial predators and many other vocabulary words of the money market's jargon frequently appear in the play. In addition, there are a few playful scenes which use the fictional investment in SDAC as an example to explain how the snowball effect of global investment came into being, and how it led to the global financial crisis of 2008. Just as Yu writes about the creation of the play, "*Das Kapital* [Karl Marx's book] is the foundation, financial tsunami is the inducement, and real life is what it talks about."³⁵⁸ Those who are aware of the fact that SDAC actually rents some of its estates (some levels of the Drama Building on Anfu Road, Shanghai) to support itself may find the veiled sarcasm of Yu more vivid. After the character Wang Yong thanks Manager Yang and declares that the stage of SDAC is too small for him as he wants to play a bigger role on the "stage of the world," the play ends with a carnivalesque musical scene, in which the ensemble sing passionately, "Who? Who? Who... is controlling me? Who? Who? Who... I can't help myself."³⁵⁹ Everyone is hijacked and bound to the rampaging global capitalisation process that has become out of control. Implicating a cure for the problem, Yu resorts to the Marxist rationale: besides calling for the artist to resist consumerism for the sake of the arts, "The Internationale," the communist anthem, is sung by the actors during the curtain call. As an artist's protest against global capitalism, a stoical, self-disciplined attitude towards consumerism is called for, and the left-wing ideology of class struggle is advocated.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

Yet this approach reveals the crucial problem of the play. The idealist wish in the play does not offer any reliable solution for the dilemma the artist is confronted with in reality. As theatre critic Fengzi criticises, Marx’s masterpiece of economics only serves as a gimmick for the play, “no topics worthy of further discussion are provided,”³⁶⁰ and it only asks people to resist greed— on an unreliable basis— by simply asking one to stop desiring.³⁶¹ What is more, apart from the song “The Internationale,” sung at the end as a leftist manifesto, the play fails to build a solid connection between Marx’s thoughts and the fate of theatre today. While it shows the dilemma of artists who are caught in the consumer society, it is not able to enlighten us to better understand the relationship between capitalism and today’s China, nor does it show us a way to revolt against money-oriented ideology and the hegemony of global capital.

In an interview the author conducted in 2014, Yu admits that the majority of theatre audiences in SDAC are inevitably from the middle class, or “those with spare time and spare money,” and to him theatre is about finding connections to the audience:

[based on the fact that the majority of the social strata that our audiences are from would not change] a question arises for us: what exactly is the relationship between us [the theatre-maker] and the audience. To me it is sometimes like a war between me and the audience; sometimes we are moving towards the same direction; sometimes they are leading me; sometimes I am leading them. But the most important is to know what you are doing. [...] After all, theatre is about finding resonance in people, and it is our decision to choose which people to look for resonance.³⁶²

Yet this also shows the limits of *Das Kapital*, which is restrained to a narrow-minded, middle-class point of view. In this respect, *Das Kapital*, despite the fact that its aesthetics are strongly influenced by previous works of Chinese experimental theatre, is not experimental theatre *per se* in the sense of its aesthetics. But as a self-reflective work it

³⁶⁰ Sun Xiaoxing, ed., *Zai juchang – duli xiju de chengshi ditu* [Re-Theatre: City Maps of Independent Theatre] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2012), 122.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁶² Interview with the author, July 3, 2014.

rather examines the threat that all theatre, especially experimental theatre, faces in China in the age of global capitalism. This is signified by the scene changes from the “post-dramatic” experimental aesthetics to that of the style and production mode of global musical hits, or the “McTheatrical” in Dan Rebellato’s terms,³⁶³ parodying *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *Billy Elliot*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, etc.

Theatre seems to inevitably follow the path of commercialisation in the environment of consumerism. In 2011 the first venture investment in the theatre industry in China was put to Xixiaotang Theatre Company, a privately owned theatre company in Beijing (also well-known for its white-collar comedy), who then planned to open a chain of 100 theatre spaces all over China within three years, with 200 million yuan of venture capital.³⁶⁴ Confused and disappointed, theatre artists such as Yu and He, who benefited from the rise of “white-collar theatre,” or the middle-class-taste theatre, have been trying to find a new path by which theatre can develop. However, as the character Wang in *Das Kapital* becomes obsessed with chasing profits and is unable to provide an alternative way for SDAC to deal with consumerism, the elitist attitude adopted in the play seems neither convincing nor helpful. Its criticism towards consumer behaviour in order to realise an autonomy of the arts only confuses the audience with the opaque division between “pure art” and “cheap entertainment.”

Moreover, *Das Kapital* overlooks the more serious damage of Chinese society caused by global capitalism, which is more than just the consumerist production of theatre. As Bauman observed in 2011, “China is currently preoccupied with the challenges and tasks of the ‘primitive accumulation of capital,’ known to generate an enormous volume of social dislocations, turbulence and discontent—as well as to result

³⁶³ Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization*, 40.

³⁶⁴ Zheng Jie, “Jingcheng huajujie yinglai fengtou ‘diyidan’ [First Case of Venture Investment in Theatre of the Capital City of Beijing],” *Beijing shangbao* [Beijing Business Today], March 28, 2011. This goal is far from being achieved, up to February 2017. Yet venture capital started flowing into the theatre industry from 2011. Kaixin Mahua Theatre, one of the most successful privately owned “little theatre” companies, with the investment was also able to adapt one of its works into the film *Goodbye Mr. Loser* in 2015 that grossed well over 1.4 billion yuan (“Xia Luo te fannao [*Goodbye Mr. Loser*],” accessed October 19, 2017, <http://movie.mtime.com/218763/>).

in extreme social polarization.”³⁶⁵ Shanghai, as a leading international financial centre, is taking advantage of globalisation. Since the financial market of Shanghai was much less affected than that of South-eastern Asian countries, to the middle-class audience of SDAC, the global financial crisis is an interesting topic to discuss over coffee, rather than something that damages their livelihood. What both the audience and the creators of *Das Kapital* are oblivious to (at least in the play), is the great number of small factories in the eastern coast of China that were shut down in the wake of the global financial crisis, and the numerous workers who were laid off. In this sense, a more thorough look at globalisation, especially its local and translocal consequences, is urgently needed.

World Factory and the touring Grass Stage: staging the site-specific dilemma of glocalisation

If the singing of “The Internationale” in *Das Kapital* shows the limitation of theatre’s capability of reflecting global capitalism on a self-restrained basis, it also yearns for a critique of globalisation in which theatre that marks itself as a cultural and economic practice needs to be considered. Such a critique asks us to develop a perspective from which not only the local consequences of globalisation are observed, but also from which the global-local dialectics can be examined, the perspective from which not only the easily visible life of the urban middle class is viewed, but also the underlying capitalist mechanism is revisited, as society becomes increasingly globalised. From this point of view a new understanding of theatre in a rapidly modernising China can be reached.

In his book *Hypermodern Times* (2005), French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky proposes a new condition of contemporary society: “[a] second modernity, deregulated and globalized,”³⁶⁶ which “has no opposite, and is absolutely modern, resting essentially on three axiomatic elements constitutive of modernity itself: the market, technocratic

³⁶⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, “Foreword to the 2012 Edition: Liquid Modernity Revisited,” in *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), xii.

³⁶⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 31.

efficiency and the individual.”³⁶⁷ According to Lipovetsky, this hypermodern time is “the time of consummate modernity,” characterised by the dominance of hypercapitalism hand in hand with hyperindividualism, and “in every domain there is a certain excessiveness, one that oversteps all limits, like an excrescence.”³⁶⁸ Although Lipovetsky’s observation is based on France, or more generally, European societies, one may wonder 1) if this applies to other parts of the world as well, and 2) in what manner the hypermodern society is related to the world. If it is “a certain excessiveness” that fuels hypermodernity, does it mean that as long as modernization progresses, every society is moving towards hypermodernity?

I ask this question with the image of Chinese society in my mind. With an average annual increasing rate of approximately 9% over the last thirty-five years, thanks to its economic reform policy, today China’s “socialist market economy” has become the world’s second largest economy. Such rapid economic growth, especially the development of the secondary sector of industry, has turned China first into a world factory,³⁶⁹ and now gradually into a world consumer. In the meantime, the middle class, the main force of modernity, grew drastically. Having surpassed its American counterpart in number in 2002 (99.1 million versus 78.2 million), the middle class in China counted 109 million adults in 2015,³⁷⁰ meaning that the society’s encounter and reconciliation with liquid modernity, as discussed earlier in the chapter, is expanding massively. In this sense, Chinese society is approaching a modernity of “excessiveness,” in Lipovetsky’s sense, or “overabundance,” in Marc Augé’s sense,³⁷¹ where people face

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 31–32.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 32.

³⁶⁹ The manufacturing sector made the greatest contribution to this fast growth, and in 2010, China became the world’s largest manufacturing nation, overtaking the United States who has held the position for over one hundred years. See statistics from United Nations, quoted in an article by David Sims, “China Widens Lead as World’s Largest Manufacturer,” accessed December 2, 2016. <http://news.thomasnet.com/imt/2013/03/14/china-widens-lead-as-worlds-largest-manufacturer>.

³⁷⁰ Here a “middle class” adult in China is defined to be one with wealth of over USD 28,000. See Credit Suisse Research Institute, “Global Wealth in 2015: Underlying Trends Remain Positive - Credit Suisse.”

³⁷¹ Marc. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe

the intense, daily need to deal with mass production and the consumption of symbols. Yet is there actually a global trend of social motion towards the advanced modernity of overabundance, and if so, what is the cost of it in terms of social equality and people's well-being? If we examine the massive changes to people's daily lives, as well as the imbalance of development between regions, and the suffering of the underprivileged class in today's China, we will see that the new modernity is always a hybrid of globalised "second modernity" and "first modernity" as well as pre-modern tradition: on the one hand, the middle class in China begins to experience hypermodernity, on the other hand, the modernity that Chinese society faces is far from consummate. The middle class is not yet the majority of the population,³⁷² which implies that modernisation and social development still have a long way to go.

Based in Shanghai, the theatre troupe Grass Stage (*Caotaiban*) attempts to address existing social issues and to set up debate forums through the creation of public spheres, often in non-theatre spaces, through performance. Named after *caotaiban*—what people call the small theatre troupes that travel in rural areas and perform traditional operas, Grass Stage tries to bridge the gap between the elite and the grassroots, professionalism and amateurism, theatre space and ordinary people, performance and daily life. Grass Stage was founded by writer and director Zhao Chuan when Zhao and some of his friends finished a workshop performance at Asia Madang Festival in Kwangju, South Korea in 2005. This performance, called *38th Parallel Still Play (Sanbaxian youxi)*,³⁷³ an attempt to depict a post-conflict traumatic life in fragmentary narrative and physical theatre, marked the start of the theatre troupe's pursuit of bringing politics and daily life in theatre

(London and New York: Verso, 1995), 26–29.

³⁷² The middle class's share of the total population is merely 10.7% according to Credit Suisse, or 20.1% according to China Household Finance Survey by Southwestern University of Finance and Economics in 2015 (Gan, "Zhongguo zhongchanjieji renshu yijing chaoguo liangyi [Population of the Middle Class in China Have Surpassed 200,000].")

³⁷³ Here the 38th Parallel (*sanba xian*) refers to the military boarder between North and South Korea, according to the ceasefire agreement signed by North and South Korea, China and the UN alliance in 1953.

together. Zhao clarifies the source of influence for his practice in a 2005 essay, quoting Brazilian theatre avant-garde practitioner Augusto Boal:

Boal agrees with Brecht that the world has to be changed and we should let the spectator think in the theatre. But Boal pushes forward this idea. He says, “[t]he spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!”³⁷⁴

Zhao also made references to “people’s theatre,” the political theatre movement in Asia such as the educational theatre in the Philippines, works of practitioners such as Chung Chiao in Taiwan, and the East Asian People’s Theatre Network.³⁷⁵ By reviewing the leftist approaches of theatre, and analysing the gap between their ideas and the reality in today’s China, Zhao proposes his “crude and direct”³⁷⁶ approach to access reality through theatre:

Imagine a theatre [...] Firstly, it obviously does not originate from a formalist need to reform art, but rather aims at contemplating a kind of understanding of the relationship between theatre and man. Social life is what concerns such theatre, the way of concerning is not done by representation, but by infiltration and interference on a more realistic level, just like questioning, or even interrogating. [...] This kind of theatre, in certain ways, approaches the truth about itself, the personal and the communal reality, and the way of interrogating is by theatre (drama).³⁷⁷

Boal and other leftist theatre movements’ pursuit of changing the world through theatre inspired Zhao and set an example of radical political theatre on a popular platform for him. Grass Stage’s productions mostly focus on “the underdog,” the underprivileged, oppressed, neglected people: the disabled (*Lu Xun*, 2008, and *Little Society* [*Xiao shehui*],

³⁷⁴ Zhao Chuan, “Biwen juchang [Interrogating Theatre],” *Dushu* [Reading], no. 4 (2006): 65. Boal’s words here are quoted from Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A., Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 135.

³⁷⁵ Zhuang Jiayun, “Minjian juchang de caotai jingshen [The Grass-Stage Spirit of the Non-Governmental Theatre],” *Nanfengchuang* [The Window with South Winds], July 2013, <http://www.nfcmag.com/article/4169.html>.

³⁷⁶ Zhao, “Biwen juchang [Interrogating Theatre],” 70.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

2009-2011), the homeless and refugees (*Little Society*), and migrant workers (*World Factory* [*Shijie gongchang*], 2014).³⁷⁸ By combining physical theatre, post dramatic text, documentary theatre, multimedia installation, and spectator-performer interaction, Grass Stage confronts the audience with the terrifying fact that the magnificent advancement of China's industrialisation and urbanisation is achieved at the great expense of those “invisible people.”

In his practice Zhao adopts Boal's concept of turning the spectator into a “spectator” by “invas[ing] the stage”³⁷⁹, and bringing amateur performers into the creative process of theatre pieces. Most of the actors and actresses come from different social backgrounds, and the theatre troupe operates in a non-profit and non-professional way. The troupe makes deliberate reference to how theatre is perceived by the spectators: in *Little Society* (Volume I & II, 2009-2010) a pre-show announcement is made as such: “feel free to take photos ... during the performance please feel free to use any kind of mobile device and talk quietly or loudly with the outside world. In our social theatre, we encourage close contact with social life.”³⁸⁰ The announcement draws self-reference to the immobility and passiveness of spectatorship, and alienates the spectator from the consumerist behaviour of watching theatre. By actively engaging with the relationship between theatre and life, Grass Stage attempts to follow Brecht's advocacy to bring the spectator out of the illusion of bourgeois theatre and to reestablish their agency in order to act. The post-show talk is particularly essential, and is as important as, if not more important than, the performance itself, according to Zhao.³⁸¹ The discussion, which he calls “post-show theatre” (*yanhou juchang*), has become an indispensable part of the

³⁷⁸ For a study of *The Little Society*, see Pu Bo and Yang Zi, “Constructing the Alternative: Grass Stage and *The Little Society*,” in *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Li Ruru (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 203-14.

³⁷⁹ Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, xx.

³⁸⁰ Grass Stage, “Xiao shehui [Little Society],” unpublished documentary, 2012.

³⁸¹ Zhao Chuan, interview with the author, Shanghai, July 9, 2014.

performance routine and creates a platform for exchanging ideas among the spectators and the theatre-makers.

Such kinds of platforms are extremely valuable to today's China, due to the fact that there are very few and limited public spaces for Chinese people to address social issues. Chinese people rarely express their ideas about social issues in public. Therefore, the performance creates the opportunity for conversation about social issues in the public sphere created by theatre, and around topics brought up by theatre. In addition, Grass Stage also tours around several cities in China, and performs in various spaces, many of which are not conventional theatre spaces. Since Grass Stage makes only not-for-profit theatre, and the cost of production is covered mainly by donations from the audiences, the troupe usually uses free performing spaces provided by its local curator, collaborator, or host. This results in new meanings being contextualised by the changing and sometimes unpredictable performance spaces. One example is *World Factory* (2014), which takes advantage of its site-specificity to expose the contradiction found in "hypermodernising" China.

World Factory conveys a simple message: please do not forget the numerous Chinese migrant workers, who support the incredible economic growth. As the data of the National Bureau of Statistics of China shows, in 2015 there were 168.84 million migrant workers in the whole nation who moved from rural areas to cities to work.³⁸² Due to the undeveloped social condition of rural areas,³⁸³ the cost of migrant labour is considerably low. The state and local government's emphasis on industrialisation and urbanisation widens the development gap between the rural and urban areas, thus luring

³⁸² "2015 nian quanguo nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao [Annual Survey on Peasant-Workers in China: 2015]," 2016, accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201504/t20150429_797821.html. The word 'migrant' here indicates that the workers have traveled to another municipal or provincial areas, and this figure excludes those who are from rural areas and work in the nearest town or city.

³⁸³ The ratio of the incomes of urban and rural residents have been standing high for decades and reached its peak in 2009 at 3.33:1, according to a report from National Bureau of Statistics of China, Cao Guangsi and Zhang Qiliang, "2015.05: woguo chengxiang jumin shouru chaju bianhua de xinshijiao [May 2015: New Perspective on the Changes of Income Gap Between Urban and Rural Areas in China]," 2015, accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjzs/tjsj/tjcb/dysj/201505/t20150528_1111158.html.

(or forcing) a great number of people from rural areas to leave their homelands and move to cities for jobs with better salaries. Taking advantage of the low cost and large quantity of migrant labour, made-in-China products are very competitive in the global market and manufacturing industry, contributing a great deal to the soaring increase of the Chinese economy.

What is more, the living and mental health conditions of the numerous migrant workers are dreadful, which has sadly resulted in a series of tragedies. On 23 January 2010, at the Foxconn City industrial park in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, Ma Xiangqian, a nineteen-year-old migrant worker from Henan Province, committed suicide by jumping off his dormitory building. While people were still wondering about the cause of Ma's death, in the following four months, 13 more workers were reported to have attempted suicide at the same industrial park, resulting in ten dead and three injured,³⁸⁴ which became a radical and deadly protest against the suffering of the migrant workers. According to a report of joint-research conducted by universities from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, workers at the Foxconn industrial park were:

- 1) Forced to work overtime.
- 2) Not paid properly according to the Labour Law.
- 3) Exposed to danger of injury or contamination in the working environment.
- 4) Not paid properly for the compensation in case of injury.³⁸⁵

These conditions are extremely difficult for workers to cope with, and they reflect the distressing working conditions of migrant workers all over China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, migrant workers in China are rather young, with an overall average age of 38.6,³⁸⁶ and many are not properly educated or professionally trained.

³⁸⁴ Since then there have even been several more suicide cases among the Foxconn workers.

³⁸⁵ Mainland-Hong Kong-Taiwan Universities Foxconn Investigation Team, “‘Liang’an sandi’ gaoxiao fushikang diaoyan zongbaogao [General Report on the Mainland-Hong Kong-Taiwan Universities Foxconn Investigation],” 2010, accessed December 2, 2016. <http://mfiles.sohu.com/it/foxconn.doc>.

³⁸⁶ The average age has been even younger, being 34 in 2008, according to “2011 nian quanguo nongmingong jiance diaocha baogao [Annual Survey on Peasant-Workers in China: 2011],” 2012, accessed December 2, 2016, http://www.stats.gov.cn/ztjc/ztfx/fxbg/201204/t20120427_16154.html. This means that the population of migrant workers are growing older gradually.

Over 80% of the migrant workers work more than 44 hours a week, while only 36.2% of the workers have signed legal contracts with their employers, and only one fifth have insurance for injury, medical care, social welfare, and unemployment.³⁸⁷ Because more than 90% of the migrant workers are living far away from their families,³⁸⁸ they are forced to face these challenges and deal with all of the pressure on their own without support mechanisms.

Yet what is most troubling about these tragic incidents is that they happened at Foxconn – the world’s number one original equipment manufacturer (OEM), which produces electronics for global corporations such as Apple and Dell. Given that Foxconn is supposed to have the most efficient production and management worldwide, even more compromised living and working conditions for migrant workers can be expected to prevail at other less-developed companies. A series of tragic incidents such as the Foxconn suicides show that much improvement has to be made—for the sake of the workers who sacrificed a great deal to build the economy, as well as for the sustainable development of Chinese society as a whole. Such issues have drawn the attention of intellectuals and artists such as Grass Stage.

In Shanghai in 2010, Zhao met Zoë Svendsen, a theatre-maker and researcher from the English theatre company METIS, and a collaborative relationship between Grass Stage and METIS was established, with the aim that each company would produce one play under the same title of *World Factory*, exploring the global manufacturing industry through the lens of nineteenth-century Manchester and contemporary China. Supported by the English Arts Council, the Royal National Theatre, and Cambridge University, Zhao visited England in 2012 and 2013 for his research on the working class of England in the nineteenth century. Zhao and other members of Grass Stage also conducted research in various areas in China, such as Shenzhen and Beijing. In June 2014, *World Factory* premiered in Xi’an, and since then has toured a number of cities in China. Working together with members of Grass Stage who have various social backgrounds

³⁸⁷ “Annual Survey on Peasant-workers in China: 2015.”

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

(company employees, freelance writers and artists, designers, etc.), Zhao in *World Factory* tries to offer a pastiche of the performers' personal responses to the big issues of industrialisation, urbanisation, and migrant labour in China. The play also screens documentary clips made by Zhao and his collaborators, showing interviews with factory workers, company employers, and economic experts, as well as literature, photos, and video documents from the archives. *World Factory* interrogates how the Chinese lower class suffers while the upper class enjoys the fruit of industrialisation and urbanisation, and considers how China should learn from its predecessors – highly industrialised countries such as the UK – to redress the inequality in social, and especially economic, development.

The performance of *World Factory* is highly charged with intense energy. Many vivid pictures are created through the physical movements of the actors in a series of scenes, contributing to the dramatic tension that challenges the slogan of the “harmonious society” of developing China. It opens with two performers playing an “interviewer” and an “expert.” In an exaggerated grotesque acting style (the “interviewer” wears a *commedia dell'arte* style half mask and a wig) an interview takes place. In the interview the performers discuss the possible reasons for the suicides at Foxconn, and the cause and impact of the smog pollution that has become a major problem in many Chinese cities. They carry blue paper dolls in their hands, which symbolise labour workers, and these form a central image in several scenes throughout the performance; they are tied onto strings, manipulated as puppets by the performers, and ridiculed, their heads are cut off, implying the loss of their lives. In a similar symbolic style, the smog pollution is embodied by performers holding and waving a massive white curtain, the figure of a “left-behind” child³⁸⁹ is characterised by a performer marching aimlessly on the stage chanting the song, “March of Chinese People’s Liberation Army,” and the dull and repetitive labour work is enacted by a group of performers. In this way, topics of grave social problems are directly posed in front of the spectators, confronting them in a

³⁸⁹ Since many peasants move to the city to work, their old parents and young children are left behind in the country with nobody taking care of them, which has become a major issue for the rural areas in China nowadays.

demanding atmosphere. Many of the topics come from the personal experiences of the performers' own lives. For instance, the performer Wu Jiamin, who plays the "left-behind" child, used to be a "left-behind" child himself. This provides the piece with a more sincere perspective, bringing the theatre and the spectator closer.

The scenography of the performance makes a stark contrast to the Chinese commercial theatre. The cheap hand-made props such as political slogan posters and blue paper figures signifying the dispensable labourers, the symbolic physical embodiment of mechanised repeated work in the assembly line, and the movement of the untrained performers offers an alternative style of representation in theatre. The aesthetics of *World Factory*, by showing the performers' movement which has not been refined to performing patterns of certain "schools of acting," alienates the spectator from theatre entertainment. The video projection, juxtaposing images of British workers in the nineteenth-century (especially the prints portraying Peterloo Massacre in Manchester)³⁹⁰ and Chinese workers (especially in a scene depicting a female "model worker" Huang Baomei, played as the title role by herself in a 1958 Chinese film), add a historical dimension to the contextualisation of Chinese industrialisation by drawing a comparison between of the status of workers both past and the present, in the West and in China.

Moreover, the radically changing content and performing space of *World Factory* makes the play not only unique every time it is performed, but also self-reflective, providing an interesting point of view of migrant labour and industrialisation. Since the members of Grass Stage often work part-time, they are not always able to be in every touring performance, although touring, or "field manoeuvres" (*lalian*) – the term for military camp and field training which Grass Stage adopts – is a crucial part of the troupe's agenda. As a result, some of Grass Stage's works are constructed via a means which Zhao calls "blocks" (*da jimū*): each performer has his or her own role and plot to be pieced together with others' to complete the whole work, while any one of the performers is replaceable or dispensable if he or she cannot make it to a certain

³⁹⁰ On August 16, 1819, a clash between cavalry and the protestors, who gathered at St. Peter's Field, Manchester to demand the reform of parliamentary representation, led to the death of 15 people and the injury of hundreds.

performance. The theatre's involuntary mimic of a manufacturing assembly line echoes within its fragmentary narrative, which reflects the complicated reality and sheds light upon reading the making of theatre as both a cultural practice and as an industrialised process of production.

The performing spaces, which vary a great deal from conventional theatre, range from black box studios, to a former cinema, the corner of a cafe and many other non-theatre spaces, are located in all kinds of communities, such as a modern art gallery in a central urban area, an institute of fine arts, a central business district, and the suburban area populated by migrant workers. Therefore, the performance engages spectators from very different social strata, some of whom have never entered a conventional theatre to see a play. In this sense, Grass Stage invades the margin of the community and creates site-specific theatre in what Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera call empty space:

places to which no meaning is ascribed. [...] They are not prohibited places, but empty spaces, inaccessible because of their invisibility.³⁹¹

The Shanghai performance in July 2014, which I attended, was on the second floor of an exotic Western-style building in the former foreign settlement district of Shanghai. However, when they passed the tidy entrance of the building, the dark passageway with exposed pipelines of water and electricity cables on the wall, and the backdoor and edge of kitchen of a restaurant, spectators discovered that the space for performance is actually in a shabby corner of the building of less than one hundred square meters (Figure 3.). The experience of going from the beautiful modern city scenery, witnessing the mechanism of the production of the city (water, electricity, food serving and waste disposal) and entering an empty space inside the city and watching the performance becomes in itself a highly symbolic act which implements the theme of *World Factory*. The experience questions how theatre is produced in a particular space, how theatre is often disguised as an apolitical practice regardless of class and culture, and how spectatorship is confined and restricted.

³⁹¹ Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera, "The Anthropology of Empty Spaces," *Qualitative Sociology* 22, no. 1 (1999): 43.



Figure 3. *World Factory* (2014). Photo: Xu Menglu. Courtesy of Grass Stage

As Zhuang Jiayun points out, Grass Stage's focus is using non-governmental theatre to interrogate the habit of consumption of the spectators the unhealthy ecology of theatre in today's China, and to bridge the disjuncture between reality, history and representation, building a way of "simultaneous thinking" over the reality by the performers and the spectators.³⁹² Grass Stage aims to challenge the norm of going to and watching theatre, which is very much constrained as a consumption of production, especially as a habit for the middle class. In an interview in 2014, Zhao asserted that his first goal is to make sure "whether the things [theatre] you make can 'land on the ground,' whether they can be 'with the audience'"³⁹³. Zhao said:

Our [Chinese] theatre today is built based on our understanding of Westernised theatre, and we are replicating this Westernised theatre. [...] [A]s a matter of fact theatre is irrelevant to most of the people in this age that we live in. Either community performance or our touring (*lalian*) can only meet very limited audiences.

³⁹² Zhuang, "Minjian juchang de caotai jingshen [The Grass-Stage Spirit of the Non-Governmental Theatre]."

³⁹³ Zhao Chuan, "Rang shenghuo zhong you juchang [Let There Be Theatre in Life]," Interview by Xu Menglu and Liu Xinling, *Xiju yu yingshi pinglun* [Stage and Screen Review] 2 (2014): 81.

But it is an experiment, in which we explore how theatre will land on our life, and how theatre can relate to these people, and we don't necessarily have to indiscriminately adopt the form of Westernised theatre. [We want to explore h]ow theatre can literally exist in our life.³⁹⁴

Zhao also frankly admits that the example of Grass Stage is rather “exceptional.”³⁹⁵ It is reasonable to doubt if there can be more “Grass Stages” in today's China, since the theatre troupe has been relying solely on audience donation in Shanghai, the wealthiest city in China, whilst its marginal status has scarcely improved in recent years. One can admire the achievement and hard work of Grass Stage over the decade, but one can also question why no other troupes like Grass Stage have been created. Is it possible that Grass Stage has become a bourgeois utopia full of anarchist illusion, and that the donors (mostly from Shanghai) are deceived by a fantasy in which by donating money, social problems can be dealt with?

Zhao continues to express his discontent at the consumer-oriented theatre which is not able to address any issue in the reality of today's world:

When we tour and perform in many communities, we meet a lot of spectators, who would never in their lifetime purchase a ticket and go to a theatre. But your [our] theatre can actually reach them, and they definitely have the ability to talk about it. [...] Now we take too much for granted that anyone has to buy a ticket to watch a play, as if a theatre can no longer survive if it doesn't sell tickets. This is against our original intention. People do theatre in order that we can gather, that we can share our experience and emotion in life with one another, and that we can discuss another possibility other than the way of life we live now [...] ³⁹⁶

Zhao suggests an “alternative” theatre which is against consumerism. It is based on an idealist belief that theatre can be separated from consumerism. *World Factory* acknowledges the dubious creditability of this belief: it ends with Wang Yifei, one of the performers, reading his article, “The End of World Factory or Labour-intensive Factory,” and proposing an economy more sustainable and more caring for the labourers, while

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

clown figures appear onstage and mock the idealist proposal. *World Factory* thus leaves the spectators with a question: if the phenomenon of “world factory” is a syndrome of capitalist globalisation, is it possible to resist the trend of globalisation and evade the cost of the less developed areas and social class?

Thus, the next task for Grass Stage is to explore what to do next, once we have acknowledged these serious social problems. The spectators are invited to participate in the performance in various ways. In *World Factory*, volunteer audience members are invited to join the game of “skipping,” where they compete with each other to earn more money according to how fast they can skip (their “labour” is extremely cheap: one cent RMB per skip). Many spectators join the discussion in the post-show talk, and some offer suggestions for solving some of the problems addressed in *World Factory*. In the Lanzhou performance in June 2014, one of the audience members even came onstage and asked for a guitar, and sang a song he wrote about workers. If we treat the theatre space which Grass Stage creates as a Habermasian public sphere which holds communal discussion for citizens to “express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest,”³⁹⁷ we have to examine whether it has been effective for the participants to interfere with the reality, or whether it is marginalised by global capitalism and has become merely an enclosed utopian platform for escape. The key question is: how do we go beyond narcissist self-reference and repetition and make actual changes?

According to Lipovetsky, narcissist self-reference has been embedded in contemporary society; the point is not to move away from it, but rather to apply it to the right place to enable actual changes.³⁹⁸ The practice of Grass Stage presents us with a way to diversify the act of watching theatre, and opens platforms to reflect on the macro mechanism of the social system in which we live. Therefore, through theatre we can locate some of the social problems and create a public forum for discussion. However, this only marks the start of the preparation of the possible reform or revolution. As Boal

³⁹⁷ Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” 49.

³⁹⁸ Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 215–17.

writes, “the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is a rehearsal for the revolution. The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action.”³⁹⁹ In this sense, *World Factory* is public discussion of great value, and hopefully, a rehearsal for social reform for Chinese society, which is undergoing massive development, and witnessing tragedies such as the suicides at Foxconn. The experience of creating a public forum and actively engaging with reality is of profound significance not merely for theatre, but for everyone who cares about the fate of society.

The case of Grass Stage can shed some light upon the concept of “glocalization” introduced by Roland Robertson to transcend the debate between globalisation and localisation. Robertson maintains that globalisation does not necessarily lead to homogeneity; on the contrary, as Robertson writes, “globalization – in the broadest sense, the compression of the world – has involved and increasingly involves the creation of the incorporation of locality, processes which themselves largely shape, in turn, the compression of the world as a whole.”⁴⁰⁰ That is to say, “homogenization went hand in hand with heterogenization.”⁴⁰¹ I would like to apply Robertson’s conception to the globalised “second modernity” in order to discuss how it is adapted into local politics and trapped within modernity’s internal contradiction. Grass Stage, in this sense, is an example of what I call glocalised resistance. In *World Factory*, the simple truth of hypermodernity that the middle class is experiencing is voiced:

The hands of Americans replaced those of Englishmen; the hands of Japanese replaced those of Americans; the hands of Taiwanese replaced those of Japanese; now the hands of Mainlanders replaced those of Taiwanese; the hands of people from countryside replaced those of urban people; [...] the hands of young females replaced those of males...⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, 98.

⁴⁰⁰ Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” 340.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁴⁰² “Shijie gongchang [World Factory].”

The lesson of Grass Stage is that within hypermodernity, if it represents a neo-liberal future for modernity, resides an internal conflict between the privileged and the underprivileged, the visible and the invisible. The dilemma of social development at the expense of the neglected people is not found just in China, but also in every modern society. This point is supported by the current refugee crisis in Europe, as well as rising conservatism on a global scale. As Robertson writes, “the issue of the form of globalisation is related to the ideologically laden notion of world order.”⁴⁰³ Far from going beyond the political as Lipovetsky sees it, the new modernity is still deeply rooted in political contradictions. Furthermore, as modernization continues, the local has to develop awareness of the global, so that its instinctive resistance against hegemony can be empowered by its conscious political course. In this way the empty spaces and invisible people can be energized and motivated.

Coda: locating the particular problem in the global flows

As the reform opens up the Chinese socialist market economy to the global market, Chinese society is also tightly integrated with the world. Fuelled by business and mass media, flows of people, materials, capital, and information travel more and more freely and frequently across the physical borders in China. Thus a postmodern sensation of “being on the move” or being “rootless” is created, and challenges the traditional Chinese lifestyle and moral values. Thanks to the reform, in the 1980s travelling and migrating (within the country and abroad) became an available option *again* (since the central government adopted the *hukou* system in 1958 to restrain the flows of population within the country) for ordinary people who want to pursue a better life. *Those Left Behind* is among the several literary works that first recognised the new way of life of living abroad, and captured the feeling of loneliness inherent to that way of life. As time went on, people became more and more aware of the changes that have taken place, and the experience of traveling across national borders became more approachable and imaginable to the

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 340.

general public. In 1994, the TV series *Beijinger in New York* (*Beijingren zai Niuyue*), adapted from Glen Cao's 1991 novel under the same title, became a sensation all over the country. The TV series tells the story of a Chinese immigrant family in the US, and the famous line, "I am neither a Chinese, nor an American," presents the audience with a sense of in-betweenness created by the global flows.

Behind the flows of traveling people lie the driving forces of money. Capitalism offers efficient modern technology to enhance production in all areas of society, and by doing this people's livelihoods can be improved. However, introducing capitalist mechanisms into the socialist Chinese context not only creates confusing controversy in ideologies, but also demands a series of social changes. For instance, how the CPC's leadership, workers' unions, and the individual's freedom to choose his way of life work in the new context all need to be reconsidered. Two of the plays discussed in this chapter, *Das Kapital* and *World Factory*, approach the issue from different perspectives, although both plays represent the uncontrollable capitalist expansion in Chinese society and question the artist's agency in resisting the inhumane downside of it.

It is by no means a coincidence that the three plays chosen in the analysis have been staged in Shanghai. Shanghai is the frontline of the capitalisation of China, and a major gateway of cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world. Many social changes first occurred in Shanghai, and then extended to the rest of the country. As one of the five ports opened for foreign trade as a result of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1843,⁴⁰⁴ the city of Shanghai from the start was defined by openness. The semi-colonial city of Shanghai thus became a cosmopolitan city. Furthermore, frequent cultural exchange gave birth to various new ideas under influences from all over the globe. For example, the first congress of the CPC was held in Shanghai in June 1921. From this point of view, it makes even more sense that both Nick Rongjun Yu and Zhao Chuan have turned to leftist (communist) ideology in addressing the problem of capitalism.

⁴⁰⁴ Signed as a peace treaty to end the First Opium War, the Treaty of Nanjing is the first unequal treaty (for the Britain offered no obligations in return) imposed on the Qing government of China.

Moreover, all global effects have local consequences. In this sense we can better understand how experimental plays such as *Those Left Behind* and *World Factory* work as either immersive or site-specific performances. Set in a bar and a living room, and having the spectator sit close so as to peep at the life of the characters, *Those Left Behind* presents us with the rise of the middle class, and a Habermasian public sphere filled with new consciousness and lifestyles. The ideology of the middle class becomes gradually conservative, as is shown in *Das Kapital*. *World Factory*, on the other hand, through the use of the “empty spaces” of the city, exposes the problem of the decreasing social mobility which will lead to class solidification. In short, the more we seem to be “on the move,” the more some members of us are “left behind.” The more universal the global flows become, the more severely particular groups of people suffer. The more the nation, the society, and the city wants to transcend its pre-modern traditional form, the more specific communities, individuals, and localities emerge to defy this transcendence.

Speaking of site-specific performance in China, *World Factory* is overshadowed by “Hangzhou: A Living Poem” (*Zui yi shi Hangzhou*), the magnificent opening gala performance at the world Group of 20 Summit in September 2016 in the city of Hangzhou (Figure 4). The performance, set in the well-known scenic spot the West Lake (*Xihu*), and directed by Zhang Yimou, who also directed the opening ceremony performance of the Beijing Olympics, presents to the spectator a fusion of traditional Chinese folk art,



Figure 4. “Hangzhou: A Living Poem” (2016). Photo: Ge Jihong

opera-style singing, ballet, and symphony orchestra with high technology scenography. According to Zhang, the slogan of the performance, which was “elements of West Lake, characteristics of Hangzhou, charm of Jiangnan, magnificence of China and Cosmopolitanism of the world,”⁴⁰⁵ signifies the great efforts of China who, as a returning power to the world, attempts to play an active part in globalisation and, by integrating the local to the global, to challenge the current world power structure and benefit both the nation-state (as a still functioning and potent entity) as well as its people.⁴⁰⁶ Yet it is the works such as those of Grass Stage, in particular their “field manoeuvres,” that remind us of the other face of globalisation. By either recovering the deprived meaning in “empty spaces,” or revealing the hidden meaning of the existing theatrical spaces, Grass Stage constantly generates a public sphere, which enables the spectator to re-examine the consequences of glocalisation. Globalisation changes the local space as well as the people who are mobilised to live or work in that space. But apart from the optimism that Robertson or Lipovetsky see in contemporary reality, there is another radical political dimension to it, i.e. a brutal, ever-expanding capitalist exploitation and its resistance: the corresponding local call for global revolt against oppression.

⁴⁰⁵ Xi Jinyan and Shi Jiaxiu, “G20 fenghui jiang xian shuishang yanchu ‘zui yi shi hangzhou,’ Zhang Yimou zhidao [G20 Summit Gala Performance on Water ‘Hangzhou: A Living Poem,’ Directed By Zhang Yimou],” accessed December 2, 2016, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2016/09-03/7992957.shtml>.

⁴⁰⁶ In fact since 2003, with the aid of large investment and the support of local governments, Zhang has worked with a number of scenic spots all over China (including West Lake) and produced a series of site-specific performances under the title “Impression” (*yinxiang*), such as “Impression West Lake” (*Yinxiang Xihu*, Hangzhou), “Impression Liu Sanjie” (*Yinxiang liu sanjie*, Guilin), “Impression Lijiang” (*Yinxiang Lijiang*, Lijiang). In 2013 Zhang’s company in collaboration with Malaysian company PTS Properties launched “Impression Melaka,” which is expected to be staged in early 2018 and has evolved into a one-billion-euro multinational real estate project (“Impression Melaka, Impression City, Impression Theatre,” accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.impression-melaka.com/impression-city/introduction/>; “Introduction | Impression Melaka,” accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.impression-melaka.com/about-us/introduction/>). Those performances aroused great controversies: on the one hand the ongoing shows have promoted tourism and created jobs in the local area, but on the other hand critics argue that they have commodified the indigenous culture and destroyed the natural scenery. For a brief critique on Zhang’s “Impression” series, see Change, “Zhongguo dalu xianfeng xiju xianfengxing zhi bianqian yanjiu [A Study of the Transmutation of Avant-Gardism of Avant-Garde Theatre in Mainland China],” 94–96.

Chapter Three

“We Live in a Global Village Now”: Pervading Global Culture and Performing Chineseness

GRANDMASTER [...] Now hear ye, barbarian emissary. Return to your tribe and report to your chief. Tell him that the affairs of our Central Plain do not require the attention of outsiders. If you should return to award another such Birdman Medal, it will be on pain of being turned into a stuffed specimen!

CHARLIE [the UN Inspector] What does he mean?

[LUO whispers to him.]

We live in a global village now!

— Guo Shixing's *Birdmen* (1993)⁴⁰⁷

Since the 1980s, thanks to the “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the cultural ties between China and the West have become much closer. Western industrial and cultural products started to prevail in the increasingly consumer-oriented culture in China. For example, although approximately two hundred foreign films were translated (and mostly dubbed) during the Cultural Revolution, they were exclusively for “internal reference” (*neibu cankao*)⁴⁰⁸ for limited audiences from a privileged class, and it is in the 1980s when a

⁴⁰⁷ Guo Shixing, “Birdmen,” in *An Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama*, trans. Martha P.Y. Cheung and Jane C.C. Lai (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 349–50.

⁴⁰⁸ “Films only for internal reference” (*neibu cankao yingpian*, or *neican pian* for short) in the Cultural Revolution are the foreign films translated and screened exclusively for privileged audiences such as high-ranking officials and their families, with the approval of the authorities (sometimes under direct orders by Jiang Qing). Those films were produced in various places including the USSR, Japan, the US, the former Yugoslav Federation, etc., and the themes of the films ranged from war and politics to love and daily entertainment, such as *The Kamikaze Special Attack Corps* (*Aa Tokubetsu Kōgekитай*, 1960), *Patton* (1970), *Kampf um Rom I* (1968), *Waterloo Bridge* (1940), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1961), *The Dove* (1974), etc. The translation and dubbing of films occurred in secret, and before the screening, audiences were warned that they should watch the film with a critical attitude. Although those “films only for internal reference” could only be enjoyed by the privileged class of people (on some occasions ordinary people also got the opportunities to see them), they broadened the horizon of the audiences who live in an unenlightened social environment. The films to a certain degree enable cultural exchange between China and the world, and left some impact on the cultural life of society. For example, they influenced a number of filmmakers including those who worked on the film adaptations of model theatre. See Ding Shanshan, “‘Neican pian’ de fangying jiqi dui xin Zhongguo dianying de yingxiang [The Screening of ‘Films for Internal References’ and Its Influence on Films in the New China],” *Wenyi yanjiu* [Literature and Arts Studies], no. 8 (2016): 103–14; Dai Jinhua, Wang Yan, and Zhao Yaru, “Jiyi de

number of foreign films became available for public screening. Foreign music gained popularity in the 1980s as well: in the late 1970s a number of Taiwan folk songs (especially *xiaoyuan minyao*, or the “school folk songs,” which were greatly influenced by Western folk music) were first introduced to Chinese audiences, and in the early 1980s several rock bands were formed in Beijing. In the same period pop music from Hong Kong also became influential with the help of the imported TV series produced by Hong Kong TV channels (such as Asian Television Limited and Television Broadcast Limited). Since then, Western style music was received by more and more ordinary people. In addition the fresh new Western popular culture inspired a wide range of artists to work together. For instance, in the 2014 interview the dramatist Diao Yinan recalled that he and his fellow students (including Meng Jinghui, Cai Shangjun, Shi Runjiu, etc.) at the Central Academy of Drama used to listen to a lot of Western rock-and-roll music such as the songs of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.⁴⁰⁹ Moreover, Zhang Chu, who later became a famous rock-and-roll musician in the 1990s, was among this group of young artists and involved in the production of a few plays including Meng’s *Waiting for Godot*.⁴¹⁰ The 1980s was the decade when Western avant-garde arts became fashionable: the “’85 New Trends” (*Bawu xinchao*) Movement, initiated by the circles of fine arts, introduced Dadaism, surrealism, and many other modern and postmodern artistic concepts to the public, which left a great impact on many Chinese artists from various backgrounds. As theatre critic Shui Jing describes the lively cultural atmosphere in the 1980s:

With the help of tape recorder, pop songs such as those of Teresa Teng [a famous

shenhua - bashiniandai yu huaijiu (shang) [Mythology of the Memory: Translated Films and Nostalgia in the Eighties (Part 1)],” *Zhonghua dushu bao* [China Reading Weekly], September 12, 2015, http://epaper.gmw.cn/zhdsb/html/2015-09/02/nw.D110000zhdsb_20150902_1-17.htm; Dai Jinhua, Wang Yan, and Zhao Yaru, “Zouxiang tongzhihua de shijie shiye - bashiniandai yu huaijiu (xia) [Toward a Homogeneous Vision of the World: Translated Films and Nostalgia in the Eighties (Part 2)],” *Zhonghua dushu bao* [China Reading Weekly], October 21, 2015, http://epaper.gmw.cn/zhdsb/html/2015-10/21/nw.D110000zhdsb_20151021_1-17.htm.

⁴⁰⁹ Wang, “Yinzhe, Diao Yinan [Diao Yinan the Hermit],” 8.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.; Shi, “Mingju de er’nu men: Dong mianhua hutong 39 hao [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces: 39 East Mianhua Alley],” 270.

pop singer from Taiwan] became popular among common people. New trends of thinking inspired new writings. At the end of the Cultural Revolution and the dawn of the Reform, the “Star Painting Exhibition” [*Xingxing huazhan*] was the first to break through censorship in literature and arts which was prevalent from 1949-1979. [...] The first “body art exhibition” and performance art, etc., also entered the public sphere.

The atmosphere in Beijing at that time was like – a small group of people would be squatting on the sidewalk of a street, eating watermelons and discussing poetry at the same time. Many people were reading *Jean-Christophe*. The thick volumes of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* became a best-seller and were put on the shelves of those who did not specialise in philosophy. Classic books on theatre, *The Empty Space* and *Towards a Poor Theatre*, were also translated. The most significant impact of the thinking in the 1980s on many people was that they learned to use their own intuitions to feel, to understand people, things and the world, and to think, understand and act as an individual [...].⁴¹¹

Without doubt, it was the cultural elites who took a leading role in this increasing cultural exchange between China and the rest of the world, but their influence extended to many aspects of the general public. The loosened censorship in publications offered more opportunities for Chinese intellectuals to read books written by Western authors and engage in conversations on Western ideas. Generally, in the 1980s, there was a “translation fever” and a “culture fever” among intellectuals in China, who became obsessed with reading, translating and debating Western theories of humanities and social sciences. As Zhang Xudong summarises,

Whereas [in the 1980s] in the humanities "liberalization" seemed to be the goal sought by both the elite intelligentsia and the new public, in social sciences, especially in economics and politics, the prevalent melody was neo-authoritarianism, a wishful reformulating of the political experience of Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan [...]. In the same cultural forum one heard things from worlds apart: [traditionalist philosophers, such as Liang Shuming, remained influential and some of them strived to transform Confucianism in the modern context,] yet for the younger-generation philosophers who obtained their working language from Heidegger or Habermas, Confucian China was as dead as ancient Egypt, its tomb sealed and its elegy sung. For them, the ontological base of Chinese culture had long since been shifted into a hermeneutic "unfolding," in which the past is suspended in our ourderstanding of the common world of the modern where the historicity of a

⁴¹¹ Shui Jing, “Beijing shiyan xiju [Experimental Theatre in Beijing],” in *Zhongguo shiyan xiju* [Experimental Drama of China], ed. Zhang Zhongnian (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2009), 19.

new collective experience is to be argued.⁴¹²

This fervour of studying the West and conducting a comparison between China and the West reached a milestone in the television documentary *River Elegy (He Shang)*, written by Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang and released on China Central Television (CCTV) in 1988. In Su's words, this documentary "instead of complying with the old value and old mode [of narrative] of travel shows which have been worshiping the land of the country, the history and the ancestor, attempts to re-examine the old Yellow River civilisation of Chinese Nation and its fate today."⁴¹³ By dividing human civilisations into two "major categories" — "inland civilisation" and "ocean civilisation,"⁴¹⁴ *River Elegy* links isolation and conservative history to Chinese culture, thus criticising the Chinese "Yellow Civilisation" which is characterised by a lack of motivation for innovation and promoting the Western "Blue Civilisation" which is branded as "open and free" and a symbol of social advancement. It openly asserts,

This yellow-coloured land cannot teach us what the real spirit of science is.
This raging Yellow River cannot teach us what the idea of Democracy is.
By this yellow-coloured land and this Yellow River we can no longer feed and raise the ever-growing population, nor can we breed new culture. They no longer have the nutrition and energy as they used to do.⁴¹⁵

River Elegy sparked off a large number of debates on how we should understand and value Chinese culture as well as how China should react to the influx of Western culture.

⁴¹² Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms : Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 6–7.

⁴¹³ Su Xiaokang, "Huhuan quan minzu fanxing yishi - dianshi xilie pian He shang gouxiang qiantan [A Call for Reflection of the Whole Nation – A Few Thoughts on the Creation of the Television Series He Shang]," in *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy], ed. Bashu shushe (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1989), 291.

⁴¹⁴ Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, "He shang jieshuoci (jielu) [Scripts of River Elegy (Excerpts)]," in *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1989), 275.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 281. Su Xiaokang denied the accusation and said that there was no connection between him and Zhao, see Mou-wah Yim, "Gaobie Zhongguo ershi nian - zhuanfang zuojia Su Xiaokang xiansheng [Twenty Years Away from China: Interview with the Writer Su Xiaokang]," *Kaifang zazhi* [Open Magazine], September 25, 2009, http://www.open.com.hk/old_version/0906p56.html.

However, when the Tian'anmen Square protest tragically ended in martial law and bloodshed in June 1989, the outcry of liberalism initiated by "cultural fever" also ended. Moreover, the liberal trend was considered a threat to the socialist regime, and *River Elegy* was criticised as "representative work of propaganda for capitalist liberalisation"⁴¹⁶ and was related to the manipulation of the former reformist CPC Secretary General Zhao Ziyang.⁴¹⁷ The authorities led a full-scale critique of *River Elegy* in late 1989 and 1990,⁴¹⁸ as a typical negative example of blindly advocating "total Westernisation."

River Elegy asks the question, "when facing the great risks in the Reform, what kind of courage, insight and self-reflective spirit shall we prepare?"⁴¹⁹ It addresses directly the intelligentsia in China and calls for a more audacious reform, especially in the political sphere. When examined today (especially from a post-colonialist point of view), *River Elegy* is admittedly an easy target of criticism. It over-generalises and essentialises "China" and "the West" as two solid and concrete entities with absolute contrasting differences, thus ignoring the fact that this binary was originally constructed for colonial purposes, and also ignoring the fact that the lens through which one looks at them has been to a great extent influenced by the West. It also follows the logic of a unidirectional development for human society, taking for granted that the Western way is the only path by which a society should develop. Nevertheless, the television series voiced the dissatisfaction of people with the existing conservatism in China as well as the problems occurred during the reform (rampant inflation, corruption, etc.), and their wish for social change. Furthermore, it was impossible to isolate China and block the West in any social

⁴¹⁶ Bashu shushe, ed., *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1989), 304.

⁴¹⁷ "Renmin ribao bianzhe'an [Notes of the Editor of People's Daily]," in *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1989), 1.

⁴¹⁸ See Hua Yan, ed., *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1989); Bashu shushe, ed., *He shang pipan* [Critiques of River Elegy]; Li Fengxiang, ed., *He shang baimiu* [A Hundred Mistakes in River Elegy] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1990).

⁴¹⁹ Su, "Huhuan quan minzu fanxing yishi – dianshi xilie pian He shang gouxiang qiantan [A Call for Reflection of the Whole Nation – A Few Thoughts on the Creation of the Television Series He Shang]," 294.

discourse any more. As has been mentioned in the Introduction, Western influences have been fully embedded in all kinds of material and spiritual products, and through international trade they have been imported constantly into Chinese society, because economic reform was implemented, and the market economy was growing drastically. Therefore, understanding and evaluating the West remains a major target for intellectuals at this stage.

In a theatrical context, dramatists have also been faced with intense conflicts and controversial censorship regarding this subject since the 1980s. Gao Xingjian, who has made a name for his experiments of putting Western modernist elements in his plays—with *Alarm Signal* (1982), *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan*, 1983) and *Wild Man* (*Yeren*, 1985) being representative examples—was also confronted by strong accusations of bringing nihilism and scepticism into literary discourse.⁴²⁰ Sha Yexin, who was a playwright at Shanghai People's Art Theatre and became its director in 1985 (and resigned in 1993), was criticised for mocking the bureaucracy and corruption in the CPC government in his *If I Were for Real* (*Jiaru wo shi zhende*, 1979, inspired by Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*) and profanity in his characterisation of Marx in *Secret History of Marx* (*Makesi mishi*, 1983). In the "Little Theatre Festival" in Nanjing in 1989, plays which were greatly influenced by Western modernist literature and avant-garde theatre such as Zhang Xian's *The Owl in the Room* (*Wuli de maotouying*) also ignited fierce disputes.⁴²¹ In short, plays that were strongly influenced by the West were controversial and attracted considerable criticism because they contradicted the dominant principle of "socialist realism." In a similar way to other intellectuals, dramatists carefully explored the way of understanding and representing Self and Other in the post-Cold War discourse: they are not satisfied with "socialist realism" as the only correct aesthetics for theatre, but found great difficulty in choosing other Western styles or creating new styles of their own.

⁴²⁰ See Zhongguo xiju chubanshe bianjibu, ed., *You zhengyi de huaju juben xuanji (er)* [A Collection of Controversial Plays, Vol. 2] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1986).

⁴²¹ The spectators were asked to put on the masks and capes that had been prepared before entering the theatre space. Some audience members were even asked to play "owls," to "fly onto the stage and attack the actor." Also see Wang and Yin, "Guojia xiju zhongde geren fanxiju – fang Zhang Xian [The Individual's Counter-Theatre in the Discourse of Nationalised Theatre: An Interview with Zhang Xian]."

Under such circumstances, experimental theatre in China set off on a journey in search of a satisfying portrayal of Self against the backdrop of a globalised world. In this chapter, I will analyse several performances of theatrical works created during the last two decades, in order to reflect on Chinese culture, the people who bear this culture, and the relationship between them and the estranged globalised world. Adopting Appadurai's methodologies and terms in his critique of globalisation, I will examine how the changing *ethnoscapes* (the complexity of Chineseness) and *technoscapes* as well as *mediascapes* (the mediation of modern technology such as digital communication) in globalised Chinese society are revealed in those performances, while at the same time keeping the analysis informed by the performances' socio-historical context (i.e. the *ideoscapes* and *financescapes*, such as how the plays delivered some political message about the West and how they were funded). In doing so, I will discuss whether these performances would be able to shed light upon the connection between China and globalisation.

Birdmen: performing and understanding Chineseness between Orientalism and Occidentalism

One of the key questions for post-Cold War Chinese theatre is: how shall China evaluate and represent the West? On the one hand, dramatists felt they lagged behind the modernist and post-modernist movement in the West, and were fascinated by the works of numerous post-war Western playwrights: they were eager to learn new methodologies, techniques and styles as much as possible. However, on the other hand, they also felt the insufficiency of Western ways of thinking in relation to depicting and assessing a particular Chinese situation. Even if *River Elegy* is right about everything concerning the advantages that the Western "blue" civilisation is enjoying over the Chinese "yellow" civilisation, is it possible and feasible for the Chinese to simply get rid of their own tradition and pick up Western tools to pave a new way? In other words, will the Western way work in the Chinese case?

Telling an “absurdist” story with “realist detailed characterisation”⁴²² about bird-fanciers in contemporary Beijing, *Birdmen* attempts to explore the complex issue of gazing at and interpreting traditional Chinese culture.⁴²³ Written by Guo Shixing and directed by Lin Zhaohua, the play premiered at Beijing People’s Art Theatre in 1993. A number of talented theatrical actors and actresses in China – Lin Liankun, Tan Zongyao, Pu Cunxin, Liang Guanhua, Xu Fan, He Bing, to name just a few – were gathered for the production, and the play turned out to be a roaring success, with over a hundred performances in the Chinese mainland and fifteen performances in Taiwan, which set a record among all Beijing People’s Art Theatre (BPAT) productions in the 1990s. The play was restaged in 2009 by BPAT as part of “Classic Repertoire Season,” and also received box office success and critical acclaim. It was the second play of Guo’s “idlers” trilogy (“*Xianren sanbuqu*”),⁴²⁴ but it was the first play – of all of his works – staged.

Guo’s focus is on how the ancient Chinese tradition is faced with the challenge of Western perspectives, as he explained his motive of writing the play in a 1994 radio interview:

The fact is China is facing up to the introduction of a great deal of Western ideas. It's a good thing compared to our ignorance before. However, when a different culture enters a country from outside, it may have conflicts with the local culture. It takes time for two different cultures to exist peacefully in one place.⁴²⁵

Indeed, in *Birdmen* Guo puts two different cultures – Chinese culture (or more specifically, Beijing folk culture) and Western culture – in one place and examines how

⁴²² Wang Fei, “Guo Shixing Niaoren huangdan yijiu [Guo Shixing’s *Birdmen* as Absurd as It Used to Be],” *Beijing Star Daily*, July 16, 2009, accessed February 18, 2017. <http://www.cxdrs.com/readPaper.do?id=6AE249B3A26CA3B45D615AA652EF81105BE802E20A5F81A3DB0AB86B4E012CEC689C6CCD938CE4B1CC9B8C21C279E6BF>.

⁴²³ The play in this research is studied based on the script published (in the original Chinese script and the English translation), and the video of the 1993 production at BPAT (“Niaoren [*Birdmen*],” accessed October 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxkZi2PgOkM>).

⁴²⁴ The other two plays are *Fish Men* (*Yuren*, written in 1989 and premiered in 1997) and *Chessmen* (*Qiren*, written in 1994 and premiered in 1995).

⁴²⁵ Quoted in Claire A. Conceison, “The Occidental Other on the Chinese Stage: Cultural Cross-Examination in Guo Shixing’s *Bird Men*,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 15, no. 1 (1998): 88.

they interact. The play conducts an “experiment of cultural coexistence” and discusses the feasibility of the spirit of cosmopolitanism in the cross-cultural context.

As theatre critic Lin Kehuan notes, *Birdmen* “opposes the dramaturgy of well-made plays [...] and adopts structures of Zen paradoxes to easily deliver the story with a realist opening to the fable kingdom.”⁴²⁶ The story of *Birdmen* takes place at the scene of a park in Beijing, where people who keep birds as pets, as well as those people who do “birds business” (such as bird breeders and vendors of bird cages and bird food) get together. The bird-fanciers in the park are observed by an outsider Paul Ding, a psychiatrist who has received his training abroad and come back to China wishing to help his countrymen with his knowledge. Ding turns the park into a “Birdmen Mental Rehabilitation Centre,” and performs Freudian psychoanalysis on the bird-fanciers. The “Birdmen Centre” also receives two other observers: the ornithologist Dr Chen who is searching for a rare species of bird from Shanxi Province, and Charlie the observer from the International Council for Bird Preservation. The play explores the gaze at one another among different cultures in a confined space. The stage direction of the setting shows the playwright’s intention to create a symbolic realm as the spectators enter the theatre:

*[... As the audience enter the auditorium, they see workmen putting the finishing touches to a huge bird cage, large enough to encase the acting area and the surrounding auditorium seating.]*⁴²⁷

Clearly Guo wants the scenography to set up in the theatrical space the dynamics of the gaze, which not only highlights that the different characters in the story are watching each other, but also indicates a reflection on the nature of theatre performances. The play thus becomes an allegory, in which the spectator is invited to examine the behaviour of watching and interpretation in real social life.⁴²⁸ The audiences may be amazed by the

⁴²⁶ Lin, *Xiaofei shidai de xiju* [Theater in the Consumer Society], 120.

⁴²⁷ Guo, “Birdmen,” 299.

⁴²⁸ The play was initially written for a small theatre space (as a “little theatre” production), but ends up in a production on the main stage of Beijing Capital Theatre. The setting of a gigantic bird cage was not realized.

jargon and conventions of bird-keeping discussed in the opening of the play, but they are soon aware of the disrupting presence of Paul Ding, who stands at the edge of the stage and peeps at the actors at the centre of the stage. Ding's suit and isolated position differs from the other bird-fanciers, and his gaze at the "birdmen" alienates the audience from the naturalist representation of a common Beijinger's leisure activities. Ding reveals his identity as a psychoanalyst educated in the United States, and his careful observation of the birdmen from the perspective of his profession: "[t]hese birdmen feel only for the birds, they have little feeling for human beings."⁴²⁹ Ding confidently claims, "I've come back from America with all that I've learnt to save the countless sufferers of mental problems in China."⁴³⁰

When analysing the "primitive" images in contemporary Chinese films, Rey Chow writes that "[a]lthough they undoubtedly expose the fine turns of the European 'gaze,' the arguments that set up 'West' and 'East' in terms of spectator and exhibit inevitably dwarf the fact that 'the East,' too, is a spectator who is equally caught up in the dialectic of seeing."⁴³¹ This two-way dynamic is highlighted in *Birdmen*, in which the experience of watching and being watched is precisely depicted. Without doubt, the gaze reflects the power relation within the cross-cultural engagement, where a privileged modern technological West is trying to define, assess and manipulate a disadvantaged traditional "natural" East. Yet this dynamic is made much more complex, because Ding, as an ABC (America-born Chinese) has internalised Western values and methodologies, and has internalised the East-West conflict. Ding's hypothesis that China is less developed due to its tradition of "mental problems" echoes with the low self-esteem of Chinese "yellow civilisation" and the craving for Western "blue civilisation" in *River Elegy*, and it is problematic in the first place. Ding confesses his obsession with psychoanalysis: "[w]hen

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 305.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 12.

you have finished one person, you want to know about another,”⁴³² which is like hegemonic Western modernity’s endless hermeneutic impulse (building a modern “scientific method” as the only measure to assess every aspect of the world). In critiquing it I would like to mention Edward Said’s seminal theory of Orientalism, which is

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* of [...] a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” cannot do or understand as “we” do).⁴³³

By giving detailed portrayals of the birdmen’s behaviour through the eyes of Ding, as well as presenting Dr Chen and Charlie’s simple-minded derogatory comments, the symbolism of cross-cultural conflict is explicitly revealed. This symbolises the pressure imposed by the uneven exchange of all the “power political” as Said notes (Ding’s Birdmen Mental Rehabilitation Centre is built by Foreign funding with compliance and full support from the local government), “power intellectual” (the observation and preservation of birds is based on Dr Chen’s narrow-minded ornithological knowledge regardless of the value of people; the study of birdmen is based on Ding’s dogmatic Freudian psychoanalysis), “power cultural” (the bird-keeping culture is examined according to a pragmatic standard implying a superior Western culture over its Eastern

⁴³² Guo, “Birdmen,” 323.

⁴³³ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

counterpart), and “power moral” (Charlie, signifying a “universal” moral model, can legitimately inspect and discipline any Other cultures).

As Lin Kehuan comments on Guo’s “idlers” trilogy, “[w]hether the *way of birds*, *way of fish* and *way of chess*, directly related to the rise and decline of the civil society, are a noble elegant lifestyle or a decadent corrupt habit, Guo Shixing never reveals his judgement of right or wrong and yes or no; he hides his uneasy feelings towards the [Chinese] folklore and even the nation’s *zeitgeist* and lets the readers and spectators to draw to their own the conclusion.”⁴³⁴ We should be aware of what birdmen imply about their social status: they are jobless people, but from completely different social classes in different historical contexts. In the old days, especially during the Qing Dynasty, bird-fanciers were mostly the Bannermen (the privileged Manchu families who were raised and supported by the royal court). Yet nowadays, as in *Birdmen*, bird-fanciers come from a mixed but much humbler social background: they are laid-off workers (Fats in *Birdmen*), retired cadres (Zhu and Sun), and dismissed traditional opera actors (Grandmaster), etc. The time period has changed and the bird-keeping culture has been passed from generation to generation, but bird-fanciers, among many other Chinese people bearing all kinds of traditions, have not adapted to the new environment—or to put it more precisely, the new power structure invades Chinese society and leaves no room for traditions which do not fit its modern logic, as shown in the dispute between Charlie the UN observer and Fats the birdman:

CHARLIE [*amazed*] All day? Doesn’t he [Grandmaster] do anything else? Doesn’t he work for a living?

FATS You don’t understand. If he didn’t have his perch to hold on to, what would he live for?

CHARLIE I mean, if he doesn’t work, what does he live on?

FATS Does it matter what a man lives on? It’s the bird that matters. You’ve got to treat it properly. Besides his work is special, he can go to work with his birds.

CHARLIE He works in a zoo?

GRANDMASTER Better than that. In an opera troupe.

ZHANG Our grandmaster teaches. Does nothing else.

CHARLIE Does he put on performance?

⁴³⁴ Lin, *Xiaofei shidai de xiju* [Theater in the Consumer Society], 120.

GRANDMASTER I don't, and nobody else does.

CHARLIE What do you mean?

FATS Nowadays, if you put on a performance, you lose money. You put on more performance, you lose more money; you on none, you save money.⁴³⁵

Guo in his essay “Birds and I” talks about how obsessed Qing people, including government officials, in Beijing were with bird-keeping,⁴³⁶ and says that *Birdmen* was inspired by the legend of the famous Beijing Opera actor Jin Shaoshan, who is said to have learned singing skills from the bird *hongzi*.⁴³⁷ As a matter of fact, according to Confucian ethics that emphasise the individual's responsibility for the nation, entertainment (including bird-keeping and theatre)⁴³⁸ is always looked down upon because they distract people's attention from serving society. Although the development of the entertainment industry in traditional Chinese society frequently challenged Confucian ethics, intellectuals tend to relate the prosperity of the entertainment industry to the decay of the *zeitgeist* of the nation. As Guo writes, “the saying ‘each person has a bird, and the whole nation is in ecstasy,’ is seen as a sort of omen of the forgetting [fall, sic] of the nation.”⁴³⁹ Fuelled by the tradition-modernity debates over the East-West conflicts, this critical attitude is strengthened. Traditional lifestyles such as bird-keeping and Beijing Opera (for instance, the Dowager Empress Cixi's fascination for Beijing Opera) are considered as signifiers of the complacency and backwardness of Chinese culture, and therefore should be disposed of. The conversation between Charlie, Fatso and Grandmaster shows that because of the influx of Western modern culture, traditional indigenous culture faces great perils.

⁴³⁵ Guo, “Birdmen,” 309. The translation is slightly revised by the author according to the performance video.

⁴³⁶ Guo Shixing, “Wo he niao [Birds and I],” *Caixin zhoukan* [Caixin Weekly], January 16, 2015, 84.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴³⁸ Actors and musicians, along with beggars, prostitutes, witch doctors, etc., are considered as “the lowest class” (*xia jiuliu*).

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

Dr Chen and Ding are two diametrically opposed examples of the obsession with interpreting and reshaping China from an unexamined Westernised point of view. When arguing over the treatment of Mao, a newcomer to the centre carrying a *maji* (a Category One protected bird), Ding claims, “[t]he most precious creatures in the country should be human beings! If it can make a person whole, what is the sacrifice of one bird?”⁴⁴⁰ Chen simply replies, “[i]f these precious creatures are extinct, there will be no more. But human beings ... there are plenty!”⁴⁴¹ Yet sarcastically, Chen kills the *maji* and turns it into a stuffed carcass in order to let the *maji* species “stay in our country forever” and will “tell posterity that, once upon a time, we had this beautiful living creature in our land.”⁴⁴² Both Ding and Chen confidently believe that what they do is rightful for the sake of the nation, but they merely practise the same logic of Orientalism, which is to construct the image of China as sick, weak, passive and disadvantaged and in need of salvation from the powerful West, and therefore they fail to apply their knowledge to the Chinese context.

What is problematic, about Ding and Chen’s worship of the West and their application of the Western standards to Chinese society without questioning the feasibility, is that they promote an equation of “power equals truth.” This equation is a circular argument because once the West has been defined as superior and “ultimate,” there is no room to question the power structure, just as Ding admits to Chen, “you can’t analyse yourself.”⁴⁴³ Meanwhile, the criticism voiced in the play towards the problematic ideology is no more than a knee-jerk reaction of anti-imperialism and conservatism, charged with self-pity. Fats gets over excited whenever he hears people say “that America is no good, and the Chinese there all want to come back”;⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁰ Guo, “Birdmen,” 335.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 327.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 315.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 327.

Grandmaster hesitates when telling bird-keeping conventions to Charlie because they may be “professional secrets” and Zhang reassures him saying that foreigners “won’t know what to do with the information”⁴⁴⁵ and the birds in foreign countries cannot be trained as well. The image of the West pictured by characters in the play falls into the category of “Occidentalism” which Chen Xiaomei theorised. The West, whether portrayed as good or evil, only serves the purpose of justifying the characters’ own actions in the Chinese context, as on the one hand “the ‘pure Chinese’ self-understanding advocated by such belated figures had already been historically ‘contaminated’ and even constructed by cultural and cross-cultural appropriations.”⁴⁴⁶ On the other hand, the discourse of imagining the West has been intermingled with Western constructions of China as “a result of constantly revising and manipulating imperialistically imposed Western theories and practices.”⁴⁴⁷ In this sense, understanding “Chineseness” becomes more complicated, and breaking free of self-centred ideological construction becomes harder.

The conflicting methodologies between China and the West are well presented in the metatheatrical scene in Act 3, in which the birdmen, led by Grandmaster and given consent by Ding, set up a Beijing Opera court scene to perform a “Chinese psychoanalysis” on Ding, Chen and Charlie (Figure 5). Playing as the role of Judge Bao (a classic character in Beijing Opera), Grandmaster blends fictional plots with real life references, and manages to force the “truth” out of Ding and others: having been beaten (this is pretend) as punishment, Ding admits that he is a voyeur and fails to respond to Grandmaster’s challenge to the inconsistency in his analysis.⁴⁴⁸ With the help of metatheatrical effects in the court room scene which clearly shows the spectator that “this is a play being put on on the stage,” the playwright blurs the boundary between the

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 310.

⁴⁴⁶ Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 4.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴⁸ Guo, “Birdmen,” 343–47.



Figure 5. *Birdmen* (1993). <http://ent.sina.com.cn/j/2009-10-17/17422734655.shtml>

fictional and the real in this scene, which deliberately makes it unclear whether the “truth” has been revealed, whether it is all acted out, or both. For example, when this scene finishes and Grandmaster asks Ding’s permission for him to leave the stage to get changed, the audience should realise that the power relationship in this symbolic setting has not altered. However, as Ding declares that it has been a very successful treatment, one would doubt whether the scene is like day-dreaming and acting out plays, and question how dependable a judgement can be in a complex discourse of interacting and interpenetrating Orientalism and Occidentalism.

In his book *Modernity and Self-identity*, Giddens writes,

In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity : Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5.

As Zhang Qi writes, the lifestyles of Guo's "idlers" are a kind of resistance to the ruptures of time and space that modernisation, urbanisation and globalisation create. The new social-historical context estranges the individual as his or her experience from the past fails to work. By deliberately living in the illusion of the old time and space and ritualising the traditional hobbies, Guo's "idlers" try to dispel the anxiety of alienation, in order for static self-identification in the fast-changing and disorienting times.⁴⁵⁰ However, by building the dichotomy of the traditional and the modern, these "idlers" go from one extreme to the other and become alienated in the ritualisation of the traditional culture (so that the traditional culture becomes unchallengeable and unchangeable), or in Tian Benxiang's words, they go "from 'cultural narcissism' to 'cultural suicide.'"⁴⁵¹

In his essay "My Journey of Writing" Guo writes that the book *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (by Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, Erich Fromm and Richard De Martino, 1960) greatly inspired his understanding of the East-West conflict and relation. Suzuki's insightful comparative study between Eastern and Western philosophies made him realise "the mutual enlightenment of wisdom among paradox, *Lao-Zhuang* [Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, the two founders of Taoism] and Zen, [so that] I suddenly gained a new insight into postmodern theatre since absurdism."⁴⁵² Guo discovered the theatricality in the clashes of civilisations in a mundane urban daily life, and turned it into *Birdmen*, a modern fable full of paradoxes. As the opaque metatheatrical "court scene" indicates, Guo in the play chooses not to reach an absolute judgement as to whether the way of the East has prevailed over the way of the West, or the other way around. The play simply presents an allegory of the conundrum of coexistence and mutual understanding between China and the West. Therefore, a serious problem exposed in *Birdmen* is that there is an

⁴⁵⁰ Zhang Qi, "Shenghuo yishi yu ziworentong – dui Guo Shixing 'xianren' xingxiang de jiedu [Rituals of Life and Self-Identity: An Interpretation of Guo Shixing's Characterisation of 'Idlers']," *Beijing shehui kexue* [Beijing Social Sciences], no. 4 (2003): 97–98.

⁴⁵¹ Tian Benxiang, "Guo Shixing juzuo duanxiang [A Few Thoughts on Guo Shixing's Plays]," in *Huaihua yitiao jie - Guo Shixing juzuo ji* [Slander Street: Selected Plays of Guo Shixing] (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, 1999), 323.

⁴⁵² Guo Shixing, "Wode xiezuo daolu [My Journey of Writing]," in *Huaihua yitiao jie - Guo Shixing juzuo ji* [Slander Street: Selected Plays of Guo Shixing] (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, 1999), 357.

urgent need for an effective and reliable theoretical framework to examine and evaluate the Chinese tradition and culture. The spirit of critical thinking is at peril, as is shown in the highly symbolic ending of the play, when Sun decides to give up keeping birds and opens all his cages only to find that the birds do not fly away. I am not fully convinced by Claire Conceison's political interpretation that the ending alludes to "the plight of writers and other Chinese intellectuals who endure drastic phases of political censure and repression at the hands of their government and then are too afraid or spiritually empty to produce original creative thought when the control is lifted" or "reflecting the impotence of China as a nation (or a people) in the aftermath of its phases of colonization or self-imposed isolation."⁴⁵³ But it is true that "metaphorical connection of the Chinese citizen to a caged bird and of bird training to Chinese culture is almost unavoidable."⁴⁵⁴ The ending reminds the audience of Shakespeare's famous metaphorical question, "What have you, my good friends, deserved at the hands of fortune that she sends you to prison hither?" (*Hamlet* 2.2.259-260) and asks the audience to consider how to break free from the traps of "othering" and "self-othering" in the cross-cultural context today. Crucial and challenging questions are raised by Guo in *Birdmen*: how shall we understand Chineseness in a globalised context, and what shall we do to evaluate and adjust the interaction between Chineseness and globalisation, in order for a more prosperous and tolerant future?

I Love XXX: the search for Self in globalised China

While *Birdmen* shows Guo's generation's deep concern for a fading old tradition and laments this, there are also theatre performances celebrating a rising new culture. As a representative work of Chinese experimental theatre in the early 1990s, *I Love XXX* was the attempt of a group of young dramatists to redefine their identity in the new stage of

⁴⁵³ Conceison, "The Occidental Other on the Chinese Stage: Cultural Cross-Examination in Guo Shixing's *Bird Men*," 93–94.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

Chinese modernisation, using anti-dramatic performance in order to explore alternative ways to portray life experience in their much more globalised society.⁴⁵⁵ This groundbreaking piece of work demonstrates a fresh style of theatrical narrative to an audience who were used to the “socialist realist” productions of “mainstream” theatre (with styles and techniques of realists such as Ibsen and Stanislavsky), and shows a welcoming attitude towards the process of globalisation. In this section I will illustrate how the play depicts the role of China, and especially, the role of the young generation of Chinese people in the current globalisation process, and asserts the subjectivity that young people have been enjoying so much more than the elder generation would ever have done, while in the meantime it follows the problematic logic of East-West dichotomy and overlooks the potential tension between the global and the local.

Premiered in November 1994 in Beijing, co-authored by Meng Jinghui, Huang Jingang, Wang Xiaoli and Shi Hang, and directed by Meng Jinghui, *I Love XXX* is a distinctive piece of experimental theatre in the 1990s. Its production was once planned for public performance, but the Central Experimental Theatre (the institution where the director Meng was working), decided to make it a “performance for internal audience” and as a result the play was staged in a rehearsal room of the National Acrobatic Troupe for six nights. While it had a limited number of spectators because of many restrictions,⁴⁵⁶ the play aroused great debates about its dramaturgy and performing style, and had a strong impact on the director’s later works. The play, like many of Meng’s early works, was greatly influenced by Western historical avant-garde arts, as he recalls in the 2010 interview:

⁴⁵⁵ The play in this research is studied based on the script published (in the original Chinese script and the English translation), and the DVD collection published by Meng Jinghui Studio (“Wo ai XXX [I Love XXX],” in *Meng Jinghui de xiju* [Meng Jinghui’s Theatre], directed by Meng Jinghui (1994; Beijing: Jiuzhou yinxiang chubanshe, 2008), DVD).

⁴⁵⁶ In May 1995 the performance of *I Love XXX* in Haidian Theatre was cancelled. Later in the same year Meng and several of his actors were invited to the Alice Festival in Tokyo, where they performed a revised abridged version of the play. Because they put on the performance in Japan without the approval of the board of management of the Central Experimental Theatre, Meng had to submit a report of self-criticism when they returned. See *Xianfeng xiju dang’an* [Archives of Avant-Garde Theatre], 113-14.

In China, most plays have action, plot, and character, and our play did not—no ending, not even a clear process. At least there should be a story—our play was the first play that was anti-plot (*fan qingjie*). It was also the first time that multimedia was used in a Chinese play. Dadaism is an obvious influence in the play and on its creative method, which was very loose and informal—we sat around writing down what we loved, like a Dadaist word game—and we were passionate and not thinking about consequences.⁴⁵⁷

The audacious experimentation of the play shows the writers' clear anti-establishment attitude towards the conventional theatrical aesthetics. In the introduction to the VCD⁴⁵⁸ of his selected works published in 2001, Meng describes the play as “consisting of theatre-makers' feelings of sorrow and helplessness during the low tide of the year 1994 and 1995, and pushing a stubborn madness to the extreme; it is a carefree and playful piece of work.” As Meng's favourite piece of work of his own,⁴⁵⁹ the play was not restaged until 2013, as a commercial production. It becomes part of Meng Jinghui Studio's repertoire and frequently tours in mainland China.

The play was revolutionary in many aspects when it was put on stage: it presents avant-garde forms of postdramatic theatre such as poetic theatre, epic theatre, physical theatre, multimedia theatre, which were rarely known by the audience at that time, and addresses issues which are seldom under spotlight in theatre. Directly drawing from the avant-garde Austrian playwright Peter Handke, the play takes the form of Handke's 1966 work *Offending the Audience*, and excludes conventional dramatic characterisation and plot-making. There are no characters in the play and nearly all the lines are uttered by a group of eight performers starting from the clause “I love.” According to Shi Hang, the writers of the play planned to write a decent love story together, but they found that there was no story that could be truly trusted; as a result, they turned the play into a wilful

⁴⁵⁷ Quoted in Claire A. Concession, “China's Experimental Mainstream: The Badass Theatre of Meng Jinghui,” *TDR* 58, no. 1 (2014): 68.

⁴⁵⁸ Also known as Video CD or compact disc, VCD was the most popular format of video in circulation during the 1990s in China.

⁴⁵⁹ Wang Run, “‘Meng Jinghui xianfeng xiju zuopin’; VCD taozhuang remai [VCD Sets of ‘Avant-Garde Plays of Meng Jinghui’; Selling Fast],” accessed March 6, 2017, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/h/30036.html>.

confession of “love.”⁴⁶⁰ As the title implies,⁴⁶¹ the play appears to be the declaration of a list of objects that the narrator(s) – “I” love, and in doing so, questions many concepts and sentiments which have been taken for granted, and the way people deal with the things which they claim to “love.” The play is organized into four parts: 1) “The Less Said the Better,” 2) “Subtitles,” 3) “Better Said than Sung,” and 4) “No Sooner Said than Done,” and each part emphasises different stages of self-identification in modernity, which I will examine one by one.

The play opens in a blackout, with the performers repeatedly reading a parody of the first few sentences of the *Genesis*:

I love light
I love and so there was light⁴⁶²
I love you
I love and so there was you
I love myself
I love and so there was me

I love the year 1900
I love the ringing in of the new year 1900
I love the beautiful new century that began in the year 1990
I love the year 1900 this carefree society, this liberating society, this gleeful society, this complacent society of 1900.⁴⁶³

Whilst it is true that the twentieth century saw the greatest advancement of technology, the first half of the century was not particularly “happy” for most Chinese people: as many audience members would remember from their history lessons in high school, the

⁴⁶⁰ Shi, “Mingju de er’ nü men: Dong mianhua hutong 39 hao [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces: 39 East Mianhua Alley],” 276.

⁴⁶¹ The title is translated into English in a literary sense. The connotation of “XXX” (*chachacha* ×××) is negative (as the cross means “error”) and sometimes suggests sexual behaviour, but generally it means “so and so” or “whatever/whoever” in order to omit the names of the subject/object in an informal written text.

⁴⁶² Tense or subject-verb agreement is not reflected in the form of verbs in Chinese language, and Claire Conceison’s translation of the script, which is quoted in my thesis, does not switch the word “love” to “loved” or any other variations of the verb, for the sake of uniformity.

⁴⁶³ Meng Jinghui et al., “I Love XXX,” in *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Modern Asian Plays*, ed. Siyuan Liu and Kevin J. Jr Wetmore (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 218.

year 1900 was not at all a “happy” one. At that time, China was struggling painfully under the suppression and exploitation of Western (and Western-influenced Japanese) imperialist powers: the year of 1900 witnessed the rise of the Boxer Rebellion, the Hailanpao Massacre committed by the Russian Empire, the Eight-Nation Alliance’s invasion of China and the unequal treaties that followed, and all these events all resulted in the great suffering of the Chinese people. However, many cultural references relating to historical events mark this opening as a recognition of humanity as a whole in the twentieth century. The mimicry of the *Genesis*, the use of the Christian calendar (it needs to be mentioned that mainland China did not officially adopt the Christian calendar until 1949), and especially the positive description of society as being “carefree,” “liberating,” “gleeful” and “complacent” show the audience an imagined community in which all human beings are energised and mobilised by modernity. From this progressive point of view, the suffering of the particular group of people (Chinese nation) becomes part of the world modernisation project, and thus the endurance of the suffering is necessary for the goal of happiness in a global scale.

The performers go on to assert the list of deceased “masters” admired in the twentieth century:

I love that those masters died, all those great masters died, each and every one of those great masters died at the beginning of the beautiful new century in 1900
I love that German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche died
I love that French writer Émile Zola died
I love that Russian playwright Anton Chekhov died
I love that Czech composer Antonin Dvorak died
I love that American writers Mark Twain, O. Henry and Jack London died
I love that Russian literary giant Leo Tolstoy died
I love that Russian socialist theorist Georgi Plekhanov died
I love that French painter Paul Gauguin died
[...] ⁴⁶⁴

This list was juxtaposed with the names of “stars” in various fields in the century:

I love that those great masters died, all those great masters died, each and every one of those great masters died, and that those stars were born, all those stars were born, each and every one of those stars were born
I love that this is an age when great masters die and stars are born

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 219.

I love the stars born in 1900
 I love American film actors William Clark Gable and Gary Cooper were born
 I love that British novelist star Graham Greene was born
 I love that French philosopher star Jean-Paul Sartre was born
 I love that American athlete Jesse Owens was born
 I love that Brazilian soccer player Pelé was born
 I love that French dramatist Samuel Beckett was born
 I love that British film actor Lawrence Olivier was born
 I love that Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci was born
 I love that Chinese Emperor Aisin-Gioro Puyi was born
 [...] ⁴⁶⁵

Although there seems to be an optimistic attitude toward the “new” century, the play does not completely omit the unhappiness which Chinese people were experiencing. In addition to the above reference to Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, the first part ends with a reading of the top ten news stories in 1900, which includes the opening of the World’s Fair, the construction of the Transit Tunnel in New York, the prohibition of hazing freshmen at colleges in Ohio, the Parisian police’s accidental shooting demonstrators to death, the invention of X-ray treatment for cows to increase milk production, etc.⁴⁶⁶ Further, the unhappiness of the third story about the Boxer Rebellion and the Eight-Nation Allied Forces appears to be a small proportion of the narration, and thus hardly changes the overall playful and cheerful atmosphere. As Shi Hang notes,

We found that the twentieth century was a truly magnificent century. Great masters died, and the stars were born. Those things that should have happened never happened, and those that shouldn’t have happened, all did happen. We would like to pay special tribute to *Chronicle of the 20th century* [*Ershi shiji dabolan*, written by Clifton Daniel, translated by Ding Zuxin and Wang Shangsheng] translated and published by Jilin People’s Publishing House [Jilin renmin chubanshe], in which we found so much inspiration and fun. Beside [the story about] a historical great strike, there was a news story telling us, “a good-looking man was shot dead at a metro station entrance in New York.” Such juxtaposition, which drove one schizophrenic, let us see the essence of History. We eventually understood that the reason why we looked into history was that we were searching for confirmation of our innocence. And what came next is to give birth to ourselves, safe and sound.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 220–21.

⁴⁶⁷ Shi, “Mingju de er’ nü men: Dong mianhua hutong 39 hao [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces: 39

While the play presents this typical imagery of a time-space compression (or “the compression of the world and the intensification consciousness of the world as a whole,” in Robertson’s words)⁴⁶⁸ of globalisation, the idea of “innocence” and “birth” that Shi Hang puts forward is highly symbolic. It suggests a farewell to the chaotic and depressing times that the Chinese nation has endured, and encourages people to move beyond pain and suffering to welcome a harmonious and hopeful future. In this sense, the narration of the twentieth century is set from a planetary perspective. This perspective at that time was uncommon in Chinese theatre, which had been mainly exploring political themes based on nationalism or localisation: for example, class-struggle, fight for national independence, and conflict between the two opposing ideological camps on the same subject.

If the optimistic attitude in the first part toward human progress seems to be in favour of the grand narrative of a merging and modernising world full of hope, the second part entitled “Subtitles” answers with a touch of some of the darker side of the century. Whilst the performers stand in a line, humming the traditional English folk song “Greensleeves,” the following lines are projected onto a large screen onstage:

I love that all this happened
I love that all this never happened
I love that those absurd realities didn’t happen
I love that those evil realities didn’t happen
I love that those absurd predictions didn’t happen
I love that those evil realities didn’t happen
I love that World War I didn’t happen
I love that World War II didn’t happen
I love that World War III didn’t happen
I love that World War X didn’t happen
I love that the assassination of the Archduke didn’t happen
I love that the abuse of prisoners of war didn’t happen
I love that Halley’s Comet blazing towards earth didn’t happen

East Mianhua Alley],” 276.

⁴⁶⁸ Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, 8.

I love that ten million people dying of war and twenty million people dying of influenza didn't happen
I love that Junkers dropping bombs and the formula for the atom bomb didn't happen
I love that the invention of radium, the invention of Hollywood, the invention of anarchy, the invention of government, the invention of multiple governments didn't happen
I love that the era of utilizing poison gas didn't happen
I love that the era of scientific assembly line didn't happen
I love that the revelries of Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, and Auschwitz didn't happen
[...]⁴⁶⁹

It should be noted that most of the incidents mentioned did actually happen, which is contrary to the text. Meanwhile the clause “I love” exerts an alienating effect: on the one hand it shows how history frequently contradicts the good will of people, and on the other hand it implicates how many ridiculous, cruel or horrible crimes have been committed in the name of “love”: whether these crimes stem from nationalist sentiment, religious frenzy, or a simple-minded understanding of morality.

In the third part, entitled “Better Said than Sung,” more localised references are presented. The performers read the text firstly as if they are in a classroom being led by a teacher (played by one performer); then the paradigm of following the “teacher” is constantly and randomly disrupted by one of the performers.

I love the fatherland⁴⁷⁰
I love the People
I love the teachers
I love the classmates
I love the collective
I love honor
I love civilization
I love good manners
I love studying
I love labouring
I love science
I love public property

⁴⁶⁹ Meng et al., “I Love XXX,” 221–22.

⁴⁷⁰ [Original notes: ... in Meng's 1994 production] the lines are repeated (beginning with ‘I love the fatherland’) up until ‘I love exercise’ (with the lines regarding principles, discipline, morality and hygiene being negated in repetition – for example, ‘I love morality / I love immorality’) [...].

I love “the Four Modernisations”⁴⁷¹
I love being a successor
I love politics
I love principles
[...]
I love politics
I love discipline
I love organizations
I love principles
I love order
I love morality
I love cleanliness
I love hygiene
I love field trips
I love dictation
I love school duty
[...]⁴⁷²

Louis Althusser theorised what he called “ideological state apparatuses,” which are institutions such as churches, schools, media, and so on, and they function mainly by ideology to secure the reproduction of relations of production, which is the root of oppressive power structures in society.⁴⁷³ These texts directly mimic a scene in an ordinary Chinese primary school classroom, where language and ideology are simultaneously implanted in children’s minds by the ideological state apparatus, as described by Althusser. In the play, the disruption of the classroom order by performers who state, “I love non-disciplines,” “immorality,” etc., signifies an awareness of possible problems in ideological propaganda and a tolerance of “political incorrectness” (in the Chinese context, which means being doubtful about unwavering patriotism and about complete support for the government). The courage of challenging and mocking the authorities is highlighted in the following texts, in which the word “collective dance” (an

⁴⁷¹ The Four Modernisations were goals first set forth by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1963, and enacted by Deng Xiaoping from 1978, to strengthen the fields of 1) agriculture, 2) industry, 3) national defence, and 4) science and technology in China.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 225.

⁴⁷³ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Monthly Review Press, 1972), 141–48.

after school activity that most primary school students used to take part in) is inserted into different classic texts (by Confucius, Lu Xun, Zhu Ziqing, etc.) and popular catchwords at that time. The travesties of the lofty texts create a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque atmosphere as there is a “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions,”⁴⁷⁴ and as “[l]aughter degrades and materializes,”⁴⁷⁵ the spectators through laughter can challenge the norms and power structures reflected in the performance so as to re-examine the oppressive practice in the ideological state apparatus around them. Just as Kwok-kan Tam writes, the play “creates a strong ironic effect which trivializes and negates what is meant to be great in revolution.”⁴⁷⁶ Through the mockery of the sublime, a call for diversity, in which the individual is allowed to differ from the collective, is voiced.

The play goes on to probe into personal feelings of love, passion and desire:

I love that right after that, there was us and when there was us, then there was love
I love that right after that, there was love, and then there was I love, then came I love
you, I love you
I love your body
I love your body electric
I love your body electric and electric poetry
I love that you irrepressibly attract my body electric
I love that it's always low tide receiving the climax of high tide's stimulation, always
high tide receiving low tide's stimulation of love's body
I love that it's always bright trembling love serum
I love that it's always sweet, gentle, milky-ecstasy love serum.⁴⁷⁷

The readers today have to imagine the impact that the text left on the audience of the time, because the description and expression of sexual desire, and (later in the performance) the names of sexual organs and implication of sexual behaviours, had been

⁴⁷⁴ Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁷⁶ Kwok-kan Tam, *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002), 208.

⁴⁷⁷ Meng et al., “I Love XXX,” 229–30.

a taboo for a long time in conservative Chinese society.⁴⁷⁸ By trespassing over the border and thus entering the “indecent” sphere of public activity, the play further challenges the control of the strict confinement of theatrical discourse, and tries to establish a refreshing context wherein people are free to express any personal feeling instead of only repeating empty slogans of political propaganda. Aided by its multi-medial scenography, the play displays “the hesitant and paradoxically suppressed ego that is found within the intertwined subconsciousness and unconsciousness of the contemporary Chinese audience.”⁴⁷⁹

If the first part establishes the socio-historical context of the twentieth century represented in the play, the second part offers a background story of the represented, and the third part introduces “I” as a free and independent spirit to experience what is happening, then the last part (“No Sooner Said than Done”) highlights the interaction between “me” and “others.” Displaying immense imageries of diverse social roles which people are playing on the modernised stage of China, the text makes efforts to construct a discourse where audience members from different backgrounds are able to locate themselves in a rapidly changing society which has undergone the detailed division of labour, or other ways of industrialisation:

I love all of you who have enough
I love the quick wit from Jiangnan who has had enough
I love the father of folk songs from Xibei who has had enough
I love the prophet of the literary world who has had enough
I love the scientific pioneer who has had enough
I love the movie stars who have had enough
I love the white collar beauty who has had enough
I love the workday lunch that has had enough
I love the campus ballad that has had enough
I love the CCTV Chinese New Year Celebration broadcast that has had enough
I love the television serials that have had enough

⁴⁷⁸ Premarital sexual relationship, and even intimacy among a group of people, could be accused of “hooliganism” (*liumang zui*) and could result in severe punishment (including death penalty), according to the Chinese Criminal Law (1979-1997). During the Anti-Crime Campaign (*Yanda*, 1983-1987), for example, a number of people were sentenced to death for having too many sexual partners, even though the sexual activities were all undertaken by consenting adults.

⁴⁷⁹ Cai Shenshen, “Meng Jinghui and His Contemporary Avant-Garde Drama,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 87.

I love the qigong master who has had enough
I love the ideal husband who has had enough
[...]
I love those who overeat who have had enough
I love those who overdo it who had enough
I love that we haven't even started yet and we've had enough
I love that we don't plan to stop yet and we've had enough⁴⁸⁰

By announcing that all kinds of people have “had enough,” the play ridicules the lives of Chinese people “tainted” by modernised production modes and lifestyles. The play closes soon after this scene, in a narration of how the audience would feel towards the performance, and then repeats the first scene. And by seeing the world as a whole and Chinese people as “fellow-citizens” in the collective of humanity, the play acclaims that China has become an inseparable and indispensable part of the “Global Village,” and in this way turns globalisation into a conceptual utopia where crimes of violence are forgiven, sins of colonialism and capitalism are purified, trauma cured and good human nature preserved.

Asserting the implicit idealist slogan “I love; therefore I exist,” *I Love XXX* portrays the younger generation’s vigorous attempt to feel the world as a whole yet, more importantly, signifies the ideological shift from collectivism to individualism in the aesthetics of the Chinese “Little Theatre Movement” since the 1980s. When talking about the intention of writing *I Love XXX*, Meng noted in a 1995 interview:

I Love XXX was written by several friends and me together. In *I Love XXX*, an ardent love for the enthusiasm in the 1960s is interwoven. It was a great age, the time when I was born; the whole world was in a passionate frenzy, and I very much admire it.⁴⁸¹

In spite of including so many cultural references from the 1990s in the play, Meng finds the connection between himself and the world much stronger at the time of the 1960s, when the Cultural Revolution was happening in China, and radical social movements in

⁴⁸⁰ Meng et al., “I Love XXX,” 237–38.

⁴⁸¹ Meng Jinghui, “Ni bupa tingdian, ni ye bupa hei’an,” Interview by Xu Xiaoyu, in *Meng Jinghui Xianfeng xiju dang’an* (Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2010), 116.

Europe as well as in the United States echoed with it. It is apparent that he was talking about nationalist pride, collectivism, subversive and destructive energy, instead of poverty, personality cult and turmoil China was suffering from when he calls for a “passionate frenzy.” However, the individual subjectivity constructed in the text, which strived to break free from the oppressive collectivism in the dominant culture, is basically confined within the course of Westernisation, as part of a global modernisation project. Although in *I Love XXX* “the absurdities that occurred in post-Mao China [...] have shattered all beliefs in a totalizing reason,”⁴⁸² the play paradoxically offers a new totalising project. The new portrayal of the world in *I Love XXX* is an imaginary global community dominated by hegemonic powers and their values, which “impos[e] Western (or male, or white, or heterosexual, etc.) attitudes on everyone else,”⁴⁸³ as criticised by Dan Rebellato. Here a significant shortcoming of the play is revealed: in its portrayal of globalisation, places other than China and the West are wiped out from the map. A harmonious future where no conflict occurs between the West and the rest is imagined. In *I Love XXX*, we can also see that although the performers seem to be voicing their own affections, they, as the chorus or ensemble, end up behaving in a uniform way. In this sense, the “passionate frenzy” that Meng proposes is an assertion of universalism, which shows us only one homogeneous direction of (Western) modernity.

The anti-dramatic experiment in *I Love XXX* offers a pastiche of typical or even stereotypical Western cultural images (such as celebrities and pop icons as well as significant historical events) together with Chinese cultural images to show sketches of the life people live in a cross-cultural context in the twentieth century. Despite its flaws, *I Love XXX* is a powerful play which manifests the artists’ bravery to challenge convention and the consciousness to reflect on one’s own life. As Meng commented on the re-staging of the play in 2013,

⁴⁸² Tam, *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian*, 211.

⁴⁸³ Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization*, 67.

If one were to say we were the angry generation then, then I hope young people today are the brave generation. Turning anger into a kind of reflection on the times is perhaps the first step towards bravery.⁴⁸⁴

Nowadays young people are not angry anymore, because they do not care about the era; but I think that facing [the era] with bravery is our first step, which is also what I want to express by restaging the play: young people should bravely express themselves, rather than be simply angry.⁴⁸⁵

Meng's remarks are reminiscent of John Osborne and the "angry young men" of post-War British theatre, and beneath the anger we can find the artists' exploration of new aesthetics in theatre as well as their strong senses of responsibility towards society. While deconstructing the grand narrative, the play at the same time aims at unifying Self and Other and reaching consensus across generations. Probing into avant-garde techniques to represent life experience in the fast-changing China, Meng in the play tries to picture the complexity and the liveliness that human society has today. In short, the play shows a welcoming attitude to globalisation, since it has been inferred that the Chinese people have been suffering too much from self-seclusion from the outside world and that their ideas and way of life have ossified, whilst at the same time, the search for identity in the play is incomplete because of its underlying "West-and-the-rest" binary and failure of staying critical to the already deconstructed grand narrative of globalisation. The play is an intellectual celebration of cosmopolitanism, merging China into the world as a whole, yet that quest is incomplete because it triggers questions of universalism but avoids facing them directly.

Tongue's Memory of Home and Aquatic: two approaches in experiencing globalisation through culturally hybrid bodies

⁴⁸⁴ He Lulu, "Meng Jinghui 20 nian hou chongpai Wo ai XXX: yichang yuyan de kuanghuan [Meng Jinghui Restages I Love XXX Twenty Years Later]," accessed March 10, 2017, <http://yule.sohu.com/20130422/n373510287.shtml>. I referred to Clair Conceison's translation ("China's Experimental Mainstream: The Badass Theatre of Meng Jinghui," 71).

⁴⁸⁵ Ying Ni, "Meng Jinghui 20 nian hou chongpai Wo ai XXX fennu bian yonggan [Meng Jinghui Restages I Love XXX 20 Years after Its Premiere and the Anger Turns into Courage]," accessed March 10, 2017, <http://www.chinanews.com/cul/2013/04-18/4743931.shtml>.

An important approach of Meng's directing is highlighting the physicality of the actor and ingeniously using it as a tool to question ideologies through carnivalesque scenes where profane physicalities challenge authoritative morals and beliefs. As he comments on his creation of *Longing for World Pleasures*, "[t]he most significant thing [with *Longing for Worldly Pleasures*] was that I wanted to put something of my own in. And use physical theatre. And juxtapose serious and bawdy material. This was significant for me in 1993."⁴⁸⁶ And Meng continued using this approach in his later works such as *I Love XXX*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, and *Two Dogs' Opinions on Life* (*Liangzhi gou de shenghuo yijian*, 2007). Meng's approach reflects on the shifting focus of many Chinese dramatists, who, influenced by post-war or postmodern Western theatre, became increasingly interested in the relationship between reality, theatre and the actor's body. Guo's *Bird Men* aims for a reassessment of traditional cultural practices in the new socio-historical context, and signifies the powerful Western Other's invasion of ordinary indigenous life and the difficulties of mutual understanding and tolerance. But Chinese people need to bravely face the challenges brought by the encounter of cultures rather than avoid them, since the cultural exchange between Self and Other is increasingly inevitable.

I Love XXX shows an optimistic attitude towards a globalised China, which wishes for a society enjoying more freedom, openness, happiness, vigour and development. Based on the understanding of the inevitability and potential of globalisation, a number of dramatists attempted to respond to the questions of how the globalised life affects us, especially our body, and what kind of new body is born out of the global intercultural exchange. In this section I will look at two performances of physical theatre, and examine the attempts of contemporary theatre-makers to explore the Chineseness that is rooted within and expressed through the body. These two performances deal respectively with the two poles of Chineseness: modernity and tradition. However these two poles are inevitably connected because they are just two sides of the same coin, and their influences are interwoven and presented on the same body of the performer.

⁴⁸⁶ Quoted in Conceison, "China's Experimental Mainstream: The Badass Theatre of Meng Jinghui," 71.

Since the chaos of the Cultural Revolution has shattered the illusion of the omniscient and omnipotent state government, and since economic reform permits private ownership of business, individualism as a by-product of social change rises and challenges the state ideology of collectivism. On the other hand, however, the transfer of regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989-1991 was considered evidence of Western intervention and domination, and the political pressure from the West since the Tian'anmen Square protest is still stimulating the nerve of nationalism. *Tongue's Memory of Home (Shetou dui jiayuan de jiyi)* is a work of dance theatre exploring renewed identity in the new historical context, and trying to "speak with the body that the individual has reclaimed from the collective."⁴⁸⁷ It is a performance by Zuhe Niao, or the Niao Collective, a Shanghai-based physical theatre company led by playwright, director and performance artist Zhang Xian. With *The Owl in the Room* (1989), *Fashion Street (Shizhuang jie)*, 1989) and other experimental plays (as was discussed in Chapter Two) Zhang made a name for himself as a cutting-edge dramatist. But unlike Meng, Zhang remained an independent artist and conducted his theatrical experiments without relying on the state-owned theatres. In his plays of the 1990s Zhang gradually revealed his interrogation of the nature of theatrical language. In *Crowded (Yongji)*, 1998) one character (played by a spoken drama actor) sits and keeps talking while the other character (played by a dancer) stands and keeps silent, and the one who talks is not able to control the silent one and breaks down eventually. In *Mother Tongue (Muyu)*, 1998), actors write down fragmentary words such as "revolution," "police station," "socialism," "democracy," etc., and start to read them, but their voices turn into different languages and finally into vowels and noises. As Zhang says, these two plays were his farewell to spoken drama,⁴⁸⁸ as he found the literature-based theatre problematic:

⁴⁸⁷ "[Shanghai] Haishang juchang houxiandai biaoyanyishu ji di'er lun jiang yu shengdan kaimu [Shanghai: Performance Season 2 of Fringe Hi Theatre Festival Opens at Christmas]," accessed March 10, 2017, <http://club.baobao.sohu.com/tv/thread/!2dd55c0c5774e73d>.

⁴⁸⁸ Xian Zhang, Xiao Ke, and Zihan, *Zenyang chuangzao ziji: Zhongguo duli wudao juchang fangtanlu 01* [How to Create Oneself: Interviews on Chinese Independent Dance Theatre, Vol.1], self-published, 2016, 33.

[What is the problem with literature-based theatre?] It is too complicated to summarise and put into a few words. The problem is due to the crisis of global “modernity,” and [we didn’t realise it just because] the crisis arose in China a few years later [than in the Western world]. It is not only the problem of the system of censorship of textual materials, but also the problem of language and text themselves, a.k.a. “crisis of representation.” Things expressed through speech are first of all generalised, simplified and bound to a low[brow] context, they are restrained within a specific society and time. Secondly, they are limited – philosophy and humanities have presented much more (in quantity) and more profound ideas [than the things expressed through speech have], and reality as well as media technology has offered us a much more complex life [than what spoken drama can depict].

[... In the contemporary cyber age] ‘knowledge’ that relies on texts will gradually give way to ‘skill’ that is not mediated by language and text, and the hegemony of political, legal and moral systems that are based on language and text will be undermined greatly. That is to say, the culture of a ‘mediated society’ is decaying, and the culture of ‘direct society’ is rising.⁴⁸⁹

Therefore Zhang directed his focus on physicality and started to work with professional dancers instead of spoken drama actors, in order to “return to the indeterminacy of existence, and reconstruct sensation and experience on the phenomenological level.”⁴⁹⁰

After Zhang spent a few years traveling and living abroad as artist in residence in New York (2000), Singapore (2001-2002), Iowa (2004) and wrote several closet plays (*chouti juben*),⁴⁹¹ *Tongue’s Memory of Home* premiered at Dashanzi Independent Art Festival in Beijing in 2005, and invited to Julidans Festival in Amsterdam and the Zürcher Theater Spektakel in Zurich in 2006, winning the Zürcher Kantonalbank Prize at the latter.⁴⁹² As Zhang’s first work of physical theatre in collaboration with professional dancers, the play interrogates the tongue and the body, two different

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 11-13.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁹¹ Zhang also took an active part in the independent theatre activities in Shanghai, such as founding Zhenhan Café Theatre (2000-2003), Down Stream Garage (2004-2013), as their artistic director. Zhang later became the main organiser of the non-governmental annual Shanghai Fringe Festival (2005-2009).

⁴⁹² The play in this research is studied based on the unpublished video of the 2006 production at the Zürcher Theater Spektakel provided by Zhang Xian (“Shetou dui jiayuan de jiyi [Tongue’s Memory of Home],” directed by Zhang Xian (2006; The Niao Collective), DVD.)

instruments of man's mental and spiritual expression, about their role in the post-Cold War Chinese identity, as,

The era that has just passed has left only hollow echoes of the voice of revolution in people's memory, while the tongue, as an instrument by which collectivism speaks, has been gradually forgotten. But the body belongs to the individual, and it remembers the mysterious desire of the organ.⁴⁹³

The name of the theatre company implies their experimental elements of artistic collaboration, parody, satire, carnival and devising theatre. This is evident with the character “嫵” (Niao), which means “to tease, to flirt with, to harass” in Chinese. It is a pictographic character showing two male bodies (男) sandwiching a female body (女).⁴⁹⁴ In the Niao Collective's works, the director, the dancers, visual and audio artists work closely together to combine contemporary dance, physical theatre, and performance art with installation, visual and audio art, to create multimedia and multi-layered performances.

In *Tongue's Memory of Home* the body and the tongue are played with by the dancers, and also affected and controlled by the installation, projection and a soundscape that permeates the whole performance. It is a typical example of “total theatre,” which endeavours to “appeal to all senses, thereby creating the impression of totality and a wealth of meaning that overwhelms the audience.”⁴⁹⁵ This is created as an attempt to evoke the spectator's feeling of immersion, which can be seen as a metaphor of how ordinary people's private lives have been intruded on and disciplined by the outside world, especially by political discourse. In an interview during the Niao Collective's visit to Julidans Festival in 2008 with their new work *The Left Cheek*, the director Zhang Xian

⁴⁹³ “[Shanghai] Haishang juchang houxiandai biaoanyishu ji di'er lun jiang yu shengdan kaimu [Shanghai: Performance Season 2 of Fringe Hi Theatre Festival Opens at Christmas].”

⁴⁹⁴ *Niao* 嫵 here also has a vulgar connotation because it sounds exactly the same as *niao* 鸟 (penis, “dick”) in colloquial Chinese.

⁴⁹⁵ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 406.

explained his motive in creating the pieces about certain parts of the body (“tongue,” “left cheek,” etc.) and the relationship between the works and politics:

The Niao Collective’s works usually involve a particular part of the body. This is how we build the specific relationship between the work and the body. [...] In our cultural tradition, generally we don’t pay enough attention to the body. We don’t talk about the body of an individual, especially the body of an individual in particular. [...] When one realises that he or she is an individual and decides to take action independently, it means politics. In this sense if you ask if our works are political, yes, they are, inevitably.⁴⁹⁶

According to Althusser, an ideological state apparatus (schools, media, church, etc.) *interpellates* the individual as subject in order to maintain the order of a society and to secure the reproduction of relations of production.⁴⁹⁷ Therefore an individual’s personal life is often connected to the operation of the social power structure through the interference of ideologies. When the vacuum of inability of self-identification emerges in the dominant ideology, this also affects the individual and leaves room in the discourse of everyday life for controversy, confusion and conflicts to appear. Zhang Xian sharply perceives this change in today’s China (as communism failed to convince people while capitalism seems dubious as well), asserting that “politics is relevant to the individual [...] and] our life has been politicised because it has been overrun by politics, and the non-political part of it has been forced to become political.”⁴⁹⁸ Bearing the motive “to explore the movement generated by the body in an illegitimate context,”⁴⁹⁹ *Tongue’s Memory of Home* tries to show the inevitability of escaping from the influence of the ideological state apparatus in the contemporary China.

Tongue’s Memory of Home estranges the audience from the formality of their daily life, which they have probably seldom felt uncomfortable about before. The dancers are

⁴⁹⁶ “Julidans Zuhe Niao,” accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZgv2EYUd1A>.

⁴⁹⁷ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 141–58.

⁴⁹⁸ “Julidans Zuhe Niao.”

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

dressed in a Chinese tunic suit — the suits were designed by the revolutionary and founding father of the Republic of China Sun Yat-sen, based on Japanese school uniforms and named after him, with a strong political implication.⁵⁰⁰ These suits and the movement of the dancers reminds the audience of “Radio Exercises” (*guangbo ticao*) – the calisthenics which primary and middle school students perform during morning class break as a mandatory exercise. The dance foregrounds the uniformity embedded in the (educational) ideological state apparatus in people’s daily lives, and the metaphor of ideological control becomes more obvious when the dancers take photos of each other facing the front, left and right, as if they were suspects.

Just as Althusser writes, “*ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”⁵⁰¹ Having one’s “formal” photo taken to fit in a certificate, a (criminal) file and so on, interpellates the individual by categorising him or her according to the “function” as a concrete subject. And when the dancers undress themselves and move in their underwear, their bodies are also relieved from the pressure of uniformity: the movement becomes frenetic with intense emotion. By exposing the operation of power on people’s bodies, Zhang tries to realise his ideal of a new sense of “civic theatre” (*shimin xiju*): “through [the portrayal of] the sensation, physicality and sexuality in our everyday life and the [pursuit of] freedom to control oneself, we reclaim life and reclaim theatre: that is civic theatre.”⁵⁰²

The visual and audio spectacle adds to the feeling of immersiveness created in the piece. In the opening, smog-like images are projected on the screen in the background and an audio recording of *Xinwen lianbo*, a daily news programme produced by Chinese Central Television, is played mixed with slow and serene music, suggesting a dreamland

⁵⁰⁰ The suit is called “Zhongshan suit” (*Zhongshan zhuang*) in Chinese, and it is said that its design has some political implications, such as the four pockets representing the Four Virtues (Propriety, Justice, Honesty and Shame), and the five front buttons representing the five major ethnic groups in China, etc.. The suit was popular during the second half of the twentieth century and is still worn by Chinese leaders to attend certain national events.

⁵⁰¹ Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, 173.

⁵⁰² Change Hee Jae and Jiang Lu, “Xianfeng xiju, shimin xiju yu shehui juchang - xijuren Zhang Xian fangtan jilu [Avant-Garde Theatre, Civic Theatre and Social Theatre: Interview with dramatist Zhang Xian],” *Xiju yu yingshi pinglun* [Stage and Screen Reviews] 8 (2015): 67.

atmosphere. The content of the news broadcast can be vaguely recognised—President Hu Jintao, the then head of the state and leader of CPC, is giving a talk on strengthening the development of national defence—and the solemnness of the voice of the news anchor contributes to the tense atmosphere. In the screen projection some games played by children are featured, offering a nostalgic look at the life (of people who grew up in the city) that has just gone by. Several poems written in the 1980s by the “marginal” poets Wang Yin, Lu Yimin, Zhang Zhen, etc., are projected on the screen as well, such as Wang Yin’s “It Must Be Repetition, It Must Be Grief,” which illuminates outright the essential image of “the tongue” in the piece:

Those souls that permit me to speak
The summers that let me be hurt
Those sad cries that approve of revivification
Do not let the tongue recover its memory
The world dances wildly on the other shore
I'll get used to watching raindrops on the window glass
Watching my own tongue
Vacillation excites me no end⁵⁰³

To Zhang, in the contemporary world “the fragmentation of time and space creates multiple possibilities for people’s direct interaction” and “allegorical and representational theatre and literature are falling apart.”⁵⁰⁴ Therefore, physicality is foregrounded and the tongue becomes a connecting point between representation (in crisis, as postmodernists believe) and presentation (as performativity). The actors “have identity and agency of their own, and do not play roles anymore”;⁵⁰⁵ instead, the actors – dancers in *Tongue’s Memory of Home* – present their own bodies and stories to the spectator. At the end of the performance, photos of the dancers in their childhood as well as excerpts of their diaries are projected on the screen, which by presenting tangible

⁵⁰³ The translation on the projection is revised by the author according to the video (“Shetou dui jiayuan de yiji [Tongue’s Memory of Home]”).

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

experience of the actor brings the spectator and the actor closer, or in Zhang's words, "[the play] is no longer a work based on abstract movement, but something that depends on *sensibilities* [*ganshouxing*], which makes the spectator ponder, imagine, be obsessed with the performer in front of him."⁵⁰⁶

Above all, "the tongue" plays a central part in *Tongue's Memory of Home*. As "the fifth limb," the tongue can taste, feel and touch things to lead the body to move, but it suffers from spasm, suffocation and paralysis. In the first half of the piece when the dancers are in Chinese tunic suits and performing uniform movements, they are mute or only making noises of breathing, hissing and wheezing: the tongue is restricted; later when the dancers take off their clothes, they seem to gain the ability to hum, sing, and eventually speak, but for most of the time they only mumble or repeat mainstream propaganda slogans which make no sense in the context. In one scene a female dancer, with her upper half dressed in tunic suit and her lower half naked, constantly puts a dirt-like substance from an urn for burning incense in her mouth, while the other dancers surround her and keep interrogating her by asking "then what?" With her mouth full she repeats political slogans such as "consolidate the great progress," "seize a new victory," "foment the Proletarian Cultural Revolution" and so on. Unsatisfied with the outcome of the conversation, the dancers who are pushing and dragging one another, try to dip their faces in a washbasin containing soil and water. This frenzied scene, charged with emotional intensity, depicts the inability to voice oneself or even to find the voice of oneself in a society bearing conflicting powerful ideologies.

Home is to the tongue what utopia is to an individual in *Tongue's Memory of Home*. The movements are initiated by the tongue, both symbolically and physically, and the body embarks on an unrequited quest for the imagined "home," where happy memories of childhood are well kept and severe restrictions are removed. However such home never exists, as a land where a man can be totally free from any oppression and ideological control never exists. To Zhang, being Chinese in today's China means that

⁵⁰⁶ Zhang, Xiao Ke, and Zihan, *Zenyang chuangzao ziji: Zhongguo duli wudao juchang fangtanlu 01* [How to Create Oneself: Interviews on Chinese Independent Dance Theatre, Vol.1], 71.

one has to bear (and bear with) the legacy of the revolution, acknowledge the social change that globalisation has brought about, and confront the reality in which opposing ideologies clash head-on, disrupting the once-stable power structure and leaving people's political and cultural beliefs in a jumble.

The experience of living in today's China not only involves acknowledging this change, but also asks people to read their tradition in a new way. When new forms of theatre emerge on the Chinese stage, practitioners become interested in telling "Chinese stories" using these new forms. *Aquatic (Shuisheng)* is such an attempt by Theatre Santuoqi, a Beijing-based physical theatre company. *Aquatic* premiered in 2012 at the Festival d'Avignon, and toured around China later that year.⁵⁰⁷ It combines physical theatre, mime and clowning as well as masks and costumes inspired by the ancient Chinese Nuo ritual, in order to present a new version of a story originated from the old culture.

Aquatic tells a story adapted from an episode in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai zhiyi)*, which was written by the celebrated Qing writer Pu Songling (1640-1715) and first published in the eighteenth century: a "water ghost" named Liulang, has to find another drowning man in a remote river to be his replacement, so that he can return to the circulation of reincarnation. He meets an old fisherman one day, but instead of finding ways to drown the fisherman, Liulang makes friends with him. The two friends often drink together and have fun, and the fisherman manages to calm down Liulang when the latter loses his senses and tries to kill passers-by in the river because of his bestial instinct. However, the river is also haunted by a gang of evil ghosts, who torture Liulang for not carrying out his mission of drowning more innocents. In order to free Liulang from the torturing, the fisherman sets himself on fire and drives the evil spirits away, but only to drown himself in the river. Thus Liulang is saved and can go to his next life, while the fisherman turns into a new "water ghost," only to continue the tragic cycle of murder and sacrifice. In the end, the god Zhong Kui appears and banishes all the

⁵⁰⁷ The play in this research is studied based on the video of the 2012 production ("Shuisheng [Aquatic]," directed by Zhao Miao (2012; Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2012), DVD).



Figure 6. *Aquatic* (2012). Photo: Li Yan. Courtesy of Theatre Santuoqi

evil ghosts and liberates the spirit of the fisherman.

In *Aquatic* there are several interesting changes in the plot from Pu Songling's original version. In Pu's story, there are no evil spirits who force Liulang to kill people, and Liulang does not deliberately lure people into the water, nor does he try to kill anyone. Instead, it is the traditional Chinese idea of destiny and karma that is behind the storyline. Liulang is simply waiting for the next victim to drown him or herself, who will be sent somehow by his or her own fate. When the victim, a woman, eventually comes, Liulang changes his mind and saves the woman out of sympathy, because he finds that she has a baby in her arms. For this, Liulang receives no punishment except that he has to wait for the next victim. However, the Emperor of Heaven notices the kindness of Liulang, and decides to make him a Lord of Land (*tudi gong*, a minor god who takes care of agriculture and weather in a certain district). The fisherman is also rewarded for being kind to Liulang.

By comparison, we can see that *Aquatic* gets rid of the idea of karma from its original version, but in order to push the story forward, the director has to add the characters of the evil ghosts. By doing so *Aquatic* becomes a story of conflict between

good and evil and limits the space where the story happens to the scene of the river side, which is more dramatic and suitable for theatrical performance. In the meantime one needs to be aware that this act of adaptation replaces the Chinese logic of the narrative with a Western one; in this case the “form” (physical theatre) determines the “content” (the story), notwithstanding the Nuo elements involved.

Interestingly, the director Zhao Miao was born to a family of traditional opera practitioners but instead became a modern (Westernised) theatre artist. In 2002, Zhao, who was a student at the Central Academy of Drama, saw *3 Dark Tales* by Theatre O, a British theatre company visiting Beijing. Greatly impressed by the play which highlighted physical theatre (movements and gestures that can tell better than words), Zhao soon became obsessed with this unfamiliar form of theatre. “I was not shocked; I literally broke down,” Zhao recalls in an interview in 2013, “how could this be? It can depict every human emotion without using a single word. [...] *3 Dark Tales* marked an essential shift in the focus of Theatre Santuoqi—we are going to make physical theatre.”⁵⁰⁸ Zhao soon participated in the workshop of Joseph Alford, the director of *3 Dark Tales* and learned about Alford’s training, which was received in L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Since then Zhao began to study extensively physical theatre, especially the method of Lecoq, and started to create his own works of this genre. Santuoqi’s first piece of physical theatre, *6: 3*, was created in 2003, followed by two sequels in 2005 and 2007; more works subsequently appeared, including *The Rhapsodies of the Unloved Talents* (*Daren wei ai kuangxiangqu*, 2008), *Romeo and Juliet: 2008* (*Luomi’ou yu zhuliye: 2008*, 2008), *The Curious Elevator* (*Guima dianti*, 2010), and *Nine Moments* (*Jiuzhong shike*, 2011), which were all to some degree copying and imitating the style, narrative and theme of *3 Dark Tales*.

What makes *Aquatic* differ from Santuoqi’s previous works is its theme, style and design which emphasises “tradition.” This shifted focus can also be seen in *Thor of Common Man* (*Shuleigong*, 2013), and it is gradually becoming Santuoqi’s brand and

⁵⁰⁸ See “2013-10-20 xingguang dajuyuan shuleigong [20 November 2013: Star Cinema Shuleigong],” accessed March 11, 2017, <http://v.ifeng.com/history/wenhuashidian/201310/01756601-2ed7-4395-ae41-1900a878c2d1.shtml>.

character. Zhao says that he finds Chinese traditional culture a huge resourceful mine of inspiration and when he came back from France, he added a number of “Chinese” courses, such as folk dances, traditional opera, Tai Chi and Wing Chun kung fu, into the training of his actors.⁵⁰⁹ The experience of attending international festivals made him realise the love of his own culture, “because this is where you are different from others.”⁵¹⁰ He asserts:

When giving performances abroad we are not telling [the foreigners] that we are different from you in everything; instead we are using different ways to express the common feelings of human beings. Only in this way can own culture “travel.”⁵¹¹

The Chinese cultural signifiers in *Aquatic* are nonetheless modernised, mediated and intermingled. The masks and costumes worn in *Aquatic* were designed based on masks used in Nuo, an ancient rite of exorcism which can still be found in remote areas in south-western China, in order to convey the Taoist idea of yin-yang, but one can find traces of influences from Japanese Noh theatre⁵¹² and *commedia dell’arte*. The movement is mixed with mime, clowning, contemporary dance, Chinese traditional opera and folk dance. The music in *Aquatic* contains *paigu* (a set of seven drums originated from drums in the Central Plain of China), *pintan* (a narrative musical performance popular in Jiangnan region) as well as a Western orchestra and piano. Moreover, art forms such as the folk dance (or *minzu wu*, “Chinese dance”) and *paigu* have only a history of less than sixty years, and are formed and institutionalised under the impact of their Western counterparts (ballet and drums used in orchestras). Since the creation of *Aquatic* and *Thor of Common Man*, Santuoqi continues to explore the fusion of Western and Chinese

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ “Zhao Miao de Faguo xing: na shi yichang gen xiju youguan de kuanghuan [Zhao Miao’s Journey to France: A Carnival about Theatre],” accessed March 11, 2017, <http://yule.sohu.com/20140116/n393624303.shtml>.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² As a matter of fact Noh theatre itself is deeply influenced by Nuo. See Min Tian, “Chinese Nuo and Japanese Noh: Nuo’s Role in the Origination and Formation of Noh,” *Comparative Drama* 37, no. 3–4 (2003): 343–60.

symbols and elements in its physical theatre works. In its 2016 collaborative work *Luocha Land* (*Luocha* is derived from the Sanskrit *Rākṣasa*, which refers to “devils” in Indian mythology) with the National Theatre of China, another story (adapted by Huang Weiruo) from Pu’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* is presented with creative use of Nuo masks, traditional shadow puppet theatre (*piying xi*) and traditional folk dance.

The point here is not that *Aquatic* under scrutiny is presenting an “inauthentic” Chinese culture with *anatomism*,⁵¹³ for it is always impossible to generalise a single concrete “Chineseness” in any form; on the contrary, Santuoqi excels among its contemporary theatre companies for combining different cultural performance traditions and telling an intriguing and moving story that are understandable to spectators from different cultural backgrounds. While it is interesting and illuminating to watch the “interweaving performance cultures” (in Fischer-Lichte’s sense) generated and developed in the bodies of the performers, one needs to be aware that the more an experience claims to be “Chinese,” the more it turns out to be intercultural, intracultural (in Rustom Bharucha’s sense) and global.

The clash between the legacy of revolution and the instinctive desire of “freedom” seems to be the core of the body’s experience represented in *Tongue’s Memory of Home*, but the experience is distinctive because this unique experience reminds the spectator from any cultural background of the conflict between the individual and the collective in any society. Furthermore, this Chinese experience is deeply rooted in the context of globalisation: the Chinese revolution and the struggle for liberation are without doubt civilisation’s reaction to imperialism. As Rey Chow notes, “[a]gainst the systematic exclusiveness of many hegemonic Western practices, the ethnic supplement occurs first and foremost as a struggle for access to representation while at the same time contesting the conventional simplicity and stereotyping of ethnic subjects as such.”⁵¹⁴ The

⁵¹³ Pu Songling’s original story of Liulang takes place in Shandong Province, which is hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres away from where either *paigu* or *pintan* originated.

⁵¹⁴ Rey Chow, “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem,” in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, ed. Rey Chow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 4.

enlightenment of individualism brought about in the revolution lingered, and ignited the conflict when it met a new challenge of western ideologies which can be well represented in *River Elegy*. On the other hand, *Aquatic* adopts the form of physical theatre, and in so doing the storytelling is restrained to a narrative other than the original version. Hence the ontology and epistemology of the performed “source culture” has altered, while the visual appeal of “Chineseness” remains to fulfil the cultural logic of touring Asian performance, just as Alexa C. Y. Huang observes in Chinese adaptation of Shakespeare.⁵¹⁵

What is also noticeable in these two totally different pieces of physical theatre is that both of them have travelled to international theatre/art/dance festivals⁵¹⁶ and then returned to China for their major stages. Such cases are becoming more and more common among contemporary theatre works. Since more and more Chinese audiences have recognised and become familiar with international festivals (they have more opportunities to hear about them via the media or may be able to attend festivals themselves as tourists) – labelling a performance “prize winner” or “critically acclaimed” in international festivals is a smart promotional strategy for the production, especially when it is a “marginal” art form such as physical theatre. When canonised by the European Viewer, the performances gain more authority as a “quality-guaranteed” product for circulation and gain more strength in appealing to the “globalised” taste of the Chinese spectator, and therefore they may have a greater tendency to succeed in their home country.

However this form of production also entails the risk of losing the ability to “think outside the box.” In order to stay conscious as serious artists, theatre-makers need to be critical of the Eurocentrism in some judging systems in international festivals, and be

⁵¹⁵ Alexa Cheng-Yuan Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 168.

⁵¹⁶ *Tongue's Memory of Home* also went to festivals in Berlin, Hong Kong, Salzburg (Austria), Rome and Singapore, apart from Julidans Festival, Zurcher Theater Spektakel and several international festivals in Beijing and Shanghai. Theatre Santuoqi also have been invited to London, Paris, Leeds, Taipei, Hong Kong and Macau, in addition to the Festival d'Avignon and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Theatre Santuoqi also signed a contract with Théâtre de l'étincelle in Avignon and made it their “base in Europe.”

aware of the danger of commodification and fetishisation of cultures and traditions. There are several cases in China, in which some recent theatre performances were targeting international festivals and ignoring the art form's (especially traditional theatre's) basic rules, blended with incomplete fragments of traditional and Western forms without careful consideration and sufficient practice. Those pieces were usually failures in the domestic market and were criticised for losing the "essence" of the original forms, and they set a bad example of gaining "quick fame" and making "quick money" by just focusing on ingratiating oneself with the Eurocentric exoticism-seeking spectator, because in some of these cases the government or institutional funding plays an unfavourable role: it grants the work financial support, as long as it wins an "international award," regardless of how it is received in its home country.

Coda: mapping the identity within the ambiguous *Chineseness*

Together, *Birdmen*, *I Love XXX*, *Tongue's Memory of Home* and *Aquatic*, as a series of performances of "Chineseness," finds echoes in Lehmann's notion of "postdramatic theatre" in the post-war Western world:

Many traits of theatre practice that are called postmodern – from the seeming to the real randomness of means and quoted forms, to the unabashed use and combination of heterogeneous styles, from a 'theatre of images' to mixed media, multimedia and performance – by no means demonstrate a renunciation of modernity on principle.⁵¹⁷

The trace of Western influences is reflected in the series of four plays discussed in this chapter: from absurdist theatre and symbolism in *Birdmen*, post-modern language games in *I Love XXX*, to physical theatre and contemporary dance in *Tongue's Memory of Home* and *Aquatic*; from pastiche of spoken drama and traditional opera (in *Birdmen*), to intercultural and multi-media performances (in the other three plays). As the communication and exchange between China and the West becomes more frequent, more

⁵¹⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 26.

and more new Western art forms become known to Chinese theatre practitioners. And at the same time, traditional art forms are being increasingly discovered, because Chinese society is also developing and will eventually have the time and money to look at its own tradition in order to preserve it. Therefore, one can find that contemporary Chinese theatre becomes progressively diverse in form, and more often becomes engaged with intercultural exchanges through touring of productions, travelling to international festivals, training in international schools, exchange in academia, etc. The essential question is, therefore: do we now have ways to portray a changing and innovating China, or do we merely have changing and innovating ways to portray the same stereotyped image of China?

There can be no direct answer to this question. On the one hand, as I have discussed, there is no concrete singular “Chineseness” in any sense that can be used as an absolute measure of quality of a performance, and the politics involved in staging Chineseness often makes the case even more complicated. As He Chengzhou notes, Chineseness is characterized by its ambiguities: firstly, Chineseness emerges as a cultural supplement to Western hegemony but eventually challenges the stereotypical representation of China. Secondly, Chineseness is a fluid concept that moves between the centre and the periphery, and claiming Chineseness can be an apt choice and a strategic move for acquiring resources and power. Thirdly, Chineseness can be both local and global, and the global needs to be localised to sell, while the local needs to be globalised to be heard. Lastly, the representation of Chineseness may on the one hand be affected by globalisation, independent of national ideology, but on the other hand, it may attract strong support from government, both institutionally and economically.⁵¹⁸ In *Birdmen* Chineseness is represented by *the way of birds* as well as Beijing opera, as a stubborn lifestyle belonging to an ancient civilization that is reluctant to change. In *I Love XXX*, Chineseness is the constant exchange between China and the West together with the open optimistic attitude towards a global culture. In *Tongue’s Memory of Home* Chineseness is the inability to

⁵¹⁸ Chengzhou He, “The Ambiguities of Chineseness and the Dispute Over the ‘Homecoming’ of Turandot,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 49, no. 4 (2012): 548–49.

speak as individuals and the confusion caused by contradicting ideologies, while in *Aquatic* Chineseness is the mediated signifier in an intercultural storytelling. All these different forms of ‘Chineseness’ are different dimensions of a local-global interaction, and they are all true depending on what temporal, spatial and cultural context in which the interaction is taking place.

However, one can never separate “form” from “content,” and new forms always generate new meanings. Whether it is absurdist portrayal of both Chinese and Western culture in *Birdmen*, parody or embodiment of grand narratives and the individual’s resistance in *I Love XXX* and *Tongue’s Memory of Home*, or the physical theatre of traditional Chinese stories, they all open up new ways for the spectator to examine the China-world relationship. Yet one should notice that theatrical works, just like any other cultural products, need to comply with certain rules (market mechanisms as well as “international mainstream” aesthetic tastes) to be circulated, so that they make themselves widely heard. And in this sense the performances risk being manipulated by the processes of globalisation. When Rebellato delivers a Marxist criticism of theatre works that both incorporate and interrogate globalisation’s process, he points out that,

The stance of these artists is, perhaps deliberately, ambiguous. By foregrounding and aestheticizing these global processes, they seem to be rendering them critically visible and interrogating them, but they may also simply be reproducing globalisation's power, yielding to the awesome might of global capital. The performances exist on the edge between resistance and acceptance of the new global world.⁵¹⁹

Apparently there is no turning back to the practice of “localisation” which Rebellato criticises, i.e. emphasizing, or even restraining practice in local community and site-specific performance, in theatre as means of resistance to globalisation, for localisation hardly serves as anything more than insularity and cultural relativism. On the contrary, a local theatre should always take an active part in cross-cultural exchanges and voice its own opinions.

⁵¹⁹ Rebellato, *Theatre and Globalization*, 30.

In order to change the rules of the game, one has to learn to play the game well and manage to be the rule-maker – or at least one of several rule-makers. Only in this way can we expect Chinese theatre to have a say in forging a new China-World relationship in the context of theatre globalisation. In adopting Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, Rebellato introduces the idea of cosmopolitanism in theatre practice, which he defines as “a belief that all human beings, regardless of their differences, are members of a single community and all worthy of equal moral regard.”⁵²⁰ Although his distinction between cosmopolitanism and universalism (which tends to impose Western, male, white, heterosexual, etc. attitudes on everyone), is to some degree vague, his emphasis on cosmopolitanism as a “counter-tradition” against globalisation sets out in pursuit of an interconnectedness and sense of equality in human beings through theatre and performance. This is one of the ultimate goals of post-Cold War Chinese experimental theatre: to tell a unique Chinese story, and let it make sense in the global context.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 60.

Conclusion

When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky.

— Confucius, *The Book of Rites (Liji)*⁵²¹

- 1) Abolishing national boundaries and uniting the World.
- 2) Abolishing class boundaries and equalizing [all] people.
- 3) Abolishing racial boundaries and amalgamating the races.
- 4) Abolishing sex boundaries and preserving independence.
- 5) Abolishing family boundaries and becoming “Heaven’s people.”
- 6) Abolishing livelihood boundaries and making occupations public.
- 7) Abolishing administrative boundaries and governing with complete peace-and-equality.
- 8) Abolishing boundaries of kind, and loving all living [things].
- 9) Abolishing boundaries of suffering and attaining utmost happiness.

— Kang Youwei, *the Book of Great Unity (Datong Shu, 1913)*⁵²²

Peace would then reign over the world,
The same warmth and cold throughout the globe.

— Mao Zedong, “Kunlun: to the Tune of *Nien Nu Chiao*” (1935)⁵²³

The intention of this study has been to look at how globalisation – the increasingly tangible and intangible flows within the whole of human society on a global scale – is affecting Chinese theatre, i.e. how globalisation changes the way theatre is produced, mediated and consumed as a cultural practice, and created, communicated and appreciated as a live performance. Chinese experimental theatre, which originated from the “Little Theatre Movement” (roughly from the 1980s to the early 2000s), was a product of increasing communication and connection between China and the other parts

⁵²¹ The text here is translated by James Legge. See “Li Ki Book VII,” accessed March 21, 2017, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cfu/liki/liki07.htm>.

⁵²² Kang Youwei, *Datong shu* [the Book of Great Unity], ed. Kuang Bolin (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1994), 66–67. The translation here is Laurence G. Thompson’s, see Yu-wei K’ang, *Ta T’ung Shu: The One-World Philosophy of K’ang Yu-Wei*, trans. Laurence G. Thompson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958), 5.

⁵²³ Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong shici xuan, yinghan duizhao* [Selected Poems of Mao Zedong, Chinese-English], trans. Xu Yuanhong (Beijing: Zhongyi chubanshe, 1993), 42.

of the world. The Chinese government's "Reform and Opening-up" policy since the late 1970s has allowed Chinese people to gain a significant amount of new knowledge about the world (such as Western twentieth-century philosophy, capitalist management techniques, etc.), and has exposed them to a plethora of diverse cultures and lifestyles.

This reform re-energised Chinese society from its relative creative stagnation during the Cultural Revolution and created magnificent economic growth. Consequently, the middle class and its individualism rose remarkably, and people have enjoyed ever increasing freedom in choosing their own way of life, which has led to a "structural transformation" of Chinese society. This "structural transformation," caused by the emergence of the middle class, is similar to Habermas's description of the changes of German society during the rise of capitalism in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in regard to how people exchange ideas and form public opinions.⁵²⁴ Just as Habermas observes, "[w]ith the growth of a market economy arose the sphere of the 'social,' which broke the fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested with state authority (*obrigkeitlich*)."⁵²⁵

However, in the meantime, another historical process is taking place, which is what Habermas calls "refeudalisation" – "[i]n the measure that it is shaped by public relations, the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features."⁵²⁶ As concentration of capital intensifies, the state intervenes in the private domain ("to adopt interests of civil society as its own"), and boundaries between the state and the civil society blur again.⁵²⁷ Consumer-oriented mass media replaces rational-critical debates in the public sphere and

⁵²⁴ Arguably, in the times of the Republic of China (1921-1941) or even earlier in late the Qing Dynasty, as capitalism developed, there was a population of middle class in big cities in China, who also had to a certain degree an autonomous public sphere. But generally speaking the middle class at that time was much less influential compared to nowadays, and the growth of the middle class was stunted by wars and revolutions (such as the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese civil war in the 1930s and 1940s).

⁵²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 141.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 141–42.

“critical publicity is supplanted by manipulated publicity.”⁵²⁸ The two processes are compressed within the same time and space in the post-Cold War Chinese society, creating a complicated socio-historical context in which China interacts with the world and reforms itself.

Informed by the Other, Chinese society started to reflect on itself and change itself in order to adapt to the new environment of globalisation. Likewise, several Chinese theatre practitioners, unsatisfied with the existing ossified forms of theatre, introduced theatre styles from other cultures – especially from the post-war West – and tried to create new aesthetics and methodologies to reflect on and critique Chinese society in this age of reform. Experimental theatre aims at challenging the dominant style of theatre, especially the dogma of “socialist realism” which emphasises that the arts’ role is to portray and promote class struggle in a realistic way from a proletarian point of view. However, different dramatists, based on their own political and aesthetic standpoints, accordingly have conducted different experiments in reforming Chinese theatre.

Because the end of the Cold War has enabled massive world-wide economic growth and urbanisation, and more political, economic and cultural interaction between China and the world, while strict censorship of the media in China remains (if not has been tightened), the practice and development of experimental theatre became more complicated. Conflicting ideologies and contradictory concepts of experimentalism are embedded in these theatre practices, which not only reflects the complexity of post-Cold War Chinese society and how different ideologies contradict each other, but also reveals how social issues can be approached through theatre and how ethical questions can be explored in the theatrical public sphere. For example, the “new leftist” theatre – of which Huang Jisu and Zhang Guangtian are most representative figures – addressed the social injustice and inequality that became more and more severe due to the growing gap between the rich and the poor, and called for a re-examination of Marxist beliefs and ideology. To the “new leftists,” globalisation on the one hand fuelled the Capitalist West’s exploitation of the East, but on the other hand created the platform for global

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 178.

resistance against oppression. With methodologies influenced by Western theatre such as epic theatre (Zhang's *Che Guevara* and Huang's *We Are Marching on the Grand Road*), pantomimes and *commedia dell'arte* (in Huang's adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*), and intercultural blending of folk arts (in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*), the "new leftist" theatre put forward the significance of pursuing the goal of socialism to achieve "common prosperity" (*gongtong fuyu*) as stated in the Constitution of the CPC.⁵²⁹

The "new leftist" theatre tried to inherit the legacy of the CPC's political theatre agenda, which had contributed a great deal to mobilising Chinese society in the struggles for national independence (for example, by promoting the anti-Japanese war), in constructing a new relationship of production (promoting the call for abandoning feudalism and building state-owned industry) and introducing other social reforms (promoting gender equality, collectivism, etc.). Yet, this "new leftist" approach has hardly presented any "new" understanding of the world to the audience, contrary to what dramatists such as Huang and Zhang had claimed. The class struggle and the evils of the Capitalist West which have been passed to Chinese society are still the key ideas in the "new leftist" plays. The persistent use of these politically inspired themes ignores the fact that China and the West are now interrelated and impossible to separate from one another, and as a result the West is taking the blame for causing all the social problems in China.

The "new leftists" often overlook the development of Chinese society stemming from the reform, and sometimes even conceal the fact that some of the social problems are not caused but on the contrary revealed by China's interaction with the West. Furthermore, plays such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* had to become part of the cultural industry to be circulated, and they have done so, thus making them subject to local rules for circulation. According to Shi Hang, the ironic metatheatrical opening of Huang's adaptation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, in which a capitalist

⁵²⁹ "Full Text of Constitution of Communist Party of China (2)," accessed March 13, 2017, <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/206972/206981/8188087.html>.

businessman has bought the theatre and invited Dario Fo to perform his play, was changed to the actual ambiguous opening due to concerns about censorship.⁵³⁰

It is clear that one must be careful when reading into politics in theatre, to determine whether new oppressive discourses arise in the practice of “the political theatre.” Zhao Chuan from Grass Stage, among many other dramatists, also addresses the issue of social inequality, but instead of advocating for a class struggle or proletarian revolution, he focuses on the individual performer’s understanding and personal experience of the globalisation process, based on fieldwork research on this issue. In doing so, Grass Stage avoids creating new grand and oppressive narratives and tries to create a theatrical public sphere for discussion among audiences across different social strata. On the other hand, Nick Rongjun Yu and He Nian, create in *Das Kapital* a self-reflective story about the reform and marketisation of state-owned SDAC’s theatre productions in order to highlight the dilemma of artists who are caught in the trend of global capitalism and are forced to choose between “art” and “profit” with no apparent middle ground or option.

Generally, the process of globalisation has resulted in the rise of consumerism in Chinese society thus forcing artists to realise and acknowledge the dual nature of arts as a) products of cultural industry and b) creative works of talent that have the potential to enable people to think, communicate and act. In this context of a globalised China, dramatists began their introspection and self-critique so as to explore new possibilities of theatrical aesthetics and politics through which new understandings about the world could be attained and new ways of dealing with social problems experimented.

The particular focus of this dissertation is on how the imagination of globalisation works in theatre: how theatre, as a work of imagination, whether based on reality or not, presents to the spectator a new world view or raises new ethical questions under the impact of the current social context of globalisation since 1990. The end of the Cold War led to Fukuyama’s narrative of “The End of History,” which created a picture of a unified, conflict-free, homogeneous world. Despite its tendency to paint the whole world “liberal”

⁵³⁰ Shi, “Mingju de er’nu men: dong mianhua hutong 39 hao [Children of the Theatre Masterpieces: 39 East Mianhua Alley],” 279–80.

regardless of all the challenges created by interaction between different religions and cultures, the image of “the End of History” shows a prosperous and harmonious future for all human beings. Such an optimistic attitude towards the prevalence of global modernity is shared by a number of experimental theatre works created in the early 1990s. While it shows us that unhappiness also exists in the new globalised lifestyle, *Those Left Behind* praises people’s spirit to pursue their own happiness and personal goals. *I Love XXX* attempts to mark a new era for Chinese people by waving goodbye to all the bitter past and saying hello to the future global culture through the experimental word game of repeating the line “I love ...” thousands of times. But as time went by, the shortcomings of globalisation were revealed by current events such as the mistreatment of workers in the sweatshops in various locations in China, and with these revelations, more discontent and criticisms were voiced. Some plays such as the “new leftist” theatre and *World Factory*, while acknowledging the intensified relationship between China and the rest of the world as well as the nascence of the world system of exploitation, remain strong critics of globalisation, trying to heighten people’s awareness of it and calling for resistance against oppression.

Moreover, the imagination in theatre is neither passive nor deceptive like illusion, but at many times actively provokes the spectator’s agency. The interweaving performance cultures in *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* create associations in which the “dark ages” of Medieval Europe and feudalist China are analogised to the oppressive collectivism of pre-reform China. The corrupt capitalist Italy is sarcastically portrayed as an omen of a corrupt post-socialist China, and even a corrupt capitalist world. These imagined associations expose to the audience existing problems in current society and, through laughter, the oppressive power relations in reality are subverted. Guo Shixing and Lin Zhaohua in *Birdmen* imagine an absurdist scenario where Chinese tradition is studied as a mental illness by the West while the Chinese make little or no effort to, in turn, understand the West. The problematic tendency of self-othering and other-objectification in cross-cultural contexts is highlighted, and the audience is confronted with the paradox of Chinese society entangled in cross-cultural misunderstanding and misrepresentation and are asked to

consider how to overcome these difficulties to achieve mutual understanding between the East and the West.

The Niao Collective's *Tongue's Memory of Home* enters a more metaphysical level of local-global dynamics, in which language loses its ability of signification and representation, the bodies embedded with overlapping layers of culture and politics having to strive for meaning making at a phenomenological level. This offers the spectator a new point of view, or, rather, a new position of imagination, from which the relationship between Chineseness and globalisation in today's mediated culture can be interrogated and a cognitive power, which aims to address the problem of Language (Logocentrism as is critiqued by Jacques Derrida) and Representation (or more precisely, text-based theatre as is challenged by devised theatre), can be explored.

This dissertation attempts to answer questions such as “what globalisation means to China and Chinese theatre” and “what Chinese experimental theatre tells us about globalisation and its consequences.” The short answer is, the increasing global flows and emerging global structures have resulted in new (theatrical) imaginations about human society and new negotiations of Chinese cultural identity in the local-global dynamics. However, this is far from a “conclusion” which one can draw about the relationship between theatre and globalisation. Globalisation is not merely a historical development that once involved the whole of human society, and it is also an accelerating process happening in the here and now. Furthermore, a global backlash against globalisation has been growing in recent times, causing social disturbance and violence, as well as strong opposition among different communities and social groups, a shift to the political and nationalist Right.

A post-globalised world?

The era in which we live is in the grip of great contradictions. On the one hand, global economic growth has freed a large proportion of the global population from poverty, and a number of developing countries, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, or the “BRICS,” are gaining more and more economic power, and, as a result, more and

more political power. On the other hand, as Manuel Castells points out, economic globalisation has, in fact, aggravated the polarisation between social strata and between different regions.⁵³¹ We are witnessing an increasing number of cases of inequality as to wealth distribution, cultural diversity and so on, and the consequences of such disparity, such as the “Clashes of Civilisations” put forward by Samuel Huntington. Catastrophes that have left a global impact, such as the 9/11 attack in 2001 and the 2008 global financial crisis, have led scholars to discuss the ideas of “sinking globalization,”⁵³² “the end of globalism,”⁵³³ and that “[t]he ‘age of globalization’ is unexpectedly over.”⁵³⁴ These critiques of globalisation, while not dismissing its importance in the contemporary epoch, question its limits and try to draw people’s attention to the ruptures between the global and the local as well as the things that resist globalisation. However, according to sociologists David Held and Anthony G. McGrew, “the world is witnessing the demise of globalization as social ontology, explanans [i.e. explanation for what is happening to the world] and social imaginary.”⁵³⁵ But in the meantime, “[t]here is little evidence to suggest that those domestic and transnational social forces upon which the advance of economic globalization is contingent have lost their ardour for it”⁵³⁶ – globalisation, in its multiple forms, remains socially and institutionally entrenched.

Perhaps the most ironic contradiction can be found in the current political climate of early 2017. President Donald Trump, the new leader of the world’s largest economy, vowed to quit the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiate the North American

⁵³¹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, Volume 1* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 234–36.

⁵³² Niall Ferguson, “Sinking Globalization,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2005): 64–77.

⁵³³ John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism: And the Reinvention of the World* (Toronto: Penguin, 2009).

⁵³⁴ Justin Rosenberg, “Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem,” *International Politics* 42, no. 1 (2005): 2.

⁵³⁵ David Held and Anthony G. McGrew, “Introduction: Globalization at Risk?,” in *Globalization Theory: Approaches and Controversies*, ed. David Held and Anthony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 3.

⁵³⁶ Held and McGrew, “Introduction: Globalization at Risk?,” 4.

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as he claimed that the US had been or would be taken advantage of through these international trade agreements. On the contrary, President Xi Jinping, leader of the world's second biggest economy (and a socialist market economy), defended economic globalisation against protectionism in his speech at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017:

[M]any of the problems troubling the world are not caused by economic globalization. [...] The international financial crisis [...] is not an inevitable outcome of economic globalization; rather, it is the consequence of [the] excessive chase [pursuit] of profit by financial capital and the grave failure of financial regulation. Just blaming economic globalization for the world's problems is inconsistent with reality, and it will not help solve the problems. [...] Whether you like it or not, the global economy is the big ocean that you cannot escape from. Any attempt to cut off the flow of capital, technologies, products, industries and people between economies, and channel the waters in the ocean back into isolated lakes and creeks is simply not possible. Indeed, it runs counter to the historical trend.⁵³⁷

Considering the incredible development thanks to its position and role in the global economy, it is not surprising to find that the leadership of socialist China is in favour of globalisation. But the changes in the world, including the rise of conservatism in the US as well as in major European countries, have showed us a crucial signal that the problems of globalisation need to be dealt with. After all, globalisation is an activity that involves all human communities on the planet; it is impossible to separate one country from another, and all parties must work together to face the challenges of globalisation.

Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election is a stern warning to the privileged liberal intellectuals, who overlooked the interest of a great number of working class people who had been harmed by globalisation. Wishing to "make America great again," the voters for Trump made their voices heard clearly: the current system has failed to improve their livelihood. It turned out that the phenomenon, "[t]he hands of Japanese replaced those of Americans; the hands of Taiwanese replaced those of Japanese; now the hands of Mainlanders replaced those of Taiwanese [...]" as criticised in *World Factory*, has negatively affected not only on the Chinese side but also on the

⁵³⁷ "President Xi's Speech to Davos in Full."

American side. The globalisation of the manufacturing industry creates new opportunities in developing countries and regions, but, as a result, in developed countries the working class people are negatively affected and ignored – they lose their jobs and have few opportunities to work in other industries. What is worse, as it is the nature of capitalism to pursue lower costs and higher interests, without proper regulations and planning, factories will move to poorer places, where workers will do the same labour for less pay, which will continue the vicious circle and create more, similar problems. Therefore, in order to attend to the interests of more people, a more just and sustainable system of globalisation, which better practices the spirits of cosmopolitanism, is urgently needed.

In this light, we can better understand the paradoxical remarks about “an independent, self-governing, Global Britain,” given by Theresa May in her Brexit speech in January 2017. In this speech, in which the phrase “global Britain” was mentioned ten times, the British prime minister accused the EU – especially the Single Market – of not paying enough respect to local interests, declaring that Britain wants control of its own laws and international trade deals. In the meantime, May claims that her administration will devote major efforts in “not merely forming a new partnership with Europe, but building a stronger, fairer, more Global Britain too.”⁵³⁸ To May, the current framework of the EU implements the freedom and harms the interest of the UK. In other words, in the EU, a more cosmopolitan framework that unites the global, the regional, the local and the individual interest is needed.

How can cosmopolitanism respond to its challenges?

Britain’s decision to leave the European Union is a major setback for the project of cosmopolitanism, and although pro-liberal leaders have been elected in the Netherlands and France in the 2017 elections, it is clear that the EU is facing serious challenges and

⁵³⁸ “Theresa May’s Brexit Speech in Full: Prime Minister Outlines Her 12 Objectives for Negotiations,” accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/full-text-theresa-may-brexit-speech-global-britain-eu-european-union-latest-a7531361.html>.

needs reforms so as to keep itself from dissolving. The EU model, which Habermas once imagined as a framework for developing a postnational “world society,”⁵³⁹ failed due to disagreements and colliding interests between member states, fuelled by the immigrant crisis that has existed since 2015. Habermas’s blueprint for a “cosmopolitan democracy” and “global governance” developed from the practice of the EU is now contradicted by signs of implosion of the latter, which is having problems in addressing issues such as migration between Eastern and Western Europe and immigration from outside Europe especially the Middle East, monetary policy, and multiculturalism. Cosmopolitanism faces dire challenges in this post-globalisation world.

Nonetheless, in this time of change new possibilities are revealed. We are forced to think about new models for global development to meet the challenges, and more diverse and once-marginalised parties need to be active in these new models. For this reason, the “the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (Belt and Road) Initiative was proposed by the leadership of China in 2013. Advocating the Silk Road Spirit of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit,” this action plan, aided by Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, also initiated by China), aims to develop the economy of countries along the Belt and the Road, so as to “promote the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development. It is a great undertaking that will benefit people around the world.”⁵⁴⁰ This initiative triggered heated discussions over building new international cooperative relationships that move beyond the order of capitalist world systems.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 88–112.

⁵⁴⁰ “Full Text: Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative,” accessed March 15, 2017, http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

⁵⁴¹ Chen Xuefei, “Zhongguo ying jianli wenming daoxiang de shijie zhixuguan [China Should Build a View of Civilisation-Oriented World Order],” *Tansuo yu zhengming* [Exploration and Debates], no. 4 (2014): 41–44; Jin Ling, “‘Yidai yilu’: Zhongguo de Maxie’er jihua? [The ‘New Silk Road’ Initiative: China’s Marshall Plan?],” *Guoji wenti yanjiu* [China International Studies] 50, no. 1 (2015): 88–99; Du Debin and Ma Yahua, “‘Yidai yilu’: Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing de diyuan da zhanlue [‘Belt and Road’: The Great One Belt and One Road: The Grand Geo-Strategy of China’s Rise],” *Dili yanjiu*

In this context, a leading role for China to “guide the international community to jointly build a more just and reasonable new world order” and “guide the international community to jointly maintain international security” was proposed by President Xi.⁵⁴² To historian Wang Wenqi, the initiative has the potential to practice a Chinese version of cosmopolitanism, the view of “all under the heaven” (*tianxia*), which is a legacy of a traditional Confucian moral based on the common good of all human beings.⁵⁴³ Hence the revised vision of *tianxia* has been proposed by scholars as a guideline for the “Belt and Road” plan and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁵⁴⁴ Whether this goal of building a cosmopolitan world order is realisable, or whether the initiative will turn out to be a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan (which eventually failed) remains to be seen, but it is clear that it is a time to change and reform the world order created by the previous influence of globalisation.

If nationalism is the product of imagination through the rise of print capitalism as Benedict Anderson asserts, and, likewise, if globalisation is the product of imagination through the rise of electronic media as Arjun Appadurai implies, the challenge for the cosmopolitan imagination is the rise of a post-truth society, in which the globalised mass media fails to convey coherent, meaningful messages to us. The bombardment of immersive information in daily life disorients, slows, misleads and deprives people of the ability to make responsible decisions or take conscious action. The cases of Wikileaks

[Geographic Research] 34, no. 6 (2015): 1005–14.

⁵⁴² “Xi Jinping zhuchi zhaokai guojia anquan gongzuo zuotanhui [Xi Jinping Hosts National Security Seminar],” *Xinhua wang* [Xinhuanet], accessed March 16, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/17/c_1120486809.htm.

⁵⁴³ Wang Wenqi, “Wang Wenqi: ‘Yidai yilu’ yu Zhongguo de tianxia guan [Wang Wenqi: ‘Belt and Road’ and the Chinese View of Tianxia],” accessed March 15, 2017, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2015-05/2998611.html>.

⁵⁴⁴ You Shujun, “Qingdai ‘tianxia Zhixu guan’ de jianli, jiegou jiqi zhuanhua [The Construction, Deconstruction and Transmutation of the ‘All-Under-Heaven World Order’ of Qing Dynasty],” *Wenhua zongheng* [Cultural Review], no. 6 (2016): 72–81; Liu Qing, “Chongjian quanqiu xiangxiang: cong ‘tianxi’ lixiang zouxiang xinshijiezhuyi [Reconstructing the Imagination of the Globe: From the Ideal of ‘All-under-Heaven’ to New-Cosmopolitanism],” accessed March 16, 2017, <http://cnpolitics.org/2016/02/new-cosmopolitanism/>; Wang, “Wang Wenqi: ‘Yidai yilu’ yu Zhongguo de tianxia guan [Wang Wenqi: ‘Belt and Road’ and the Chinese View of Tianxia].”

and Edward Snowden, as well as the Great Firewall of China,⁵⁴⁵ show us that no one is safe from the threats of global surveillance or “digital totalitarianism.” Therefore, if cosmopolitanism signifies an attitude of openness, “extension of the moral and political horizons of people, societies, organizations and institutions,”⁵⁴⁶ it is crucial to examine how imagination in this post-truth world can turn into action. Highlighting the spirit of openness and extension of cultural horizons, Guo’s *Birdmen*, although it tells a story of miscommunication and misunderstanding between China and the West, shows a good example for the Gadamerian “fusion of visions,” in which Guo tries to find the connection between Zen Buddhist and postmodernist ideas of paradox. Similarly, Meng’s *Longing for Worldly Pleasures* and *I Love XXX* shows the artist’s attempt to break free from cultural stereotypes and restraints of grand narratives of the sublime, as well as the wish to eventually move from forming a new world view to pursuing a new more cosmopolitan world order.

Also in the light of seeking agency in the post-truth society we can better assess the increasingly frequent use of multi-media sets in Chinese experimental theatre. *I Love XXX* was one of the first theatre productions in China to use video projection. In 2006, Meng directed another audacious play, *Flowers in the Mirror, Moon on the Water* (*Jinghua shuiyue*, based on two poems by the contemporary poet Xi Chuan). Meng worked with his multi-disciplinary creative team and offered the spectator a plotless intermedial theatre to explore “new dramatic vocabulary” or even “a [new] dramatic style” in China,⁵⁴⁷ and the play met mixed responses in China while enjoyed much more

⁵⁴⁵ The Great Firewall is the technological action of the Chinese government to block domestically the use of a number of abroad-based websites that are considered having anti-Chinese contents without monitoring, and it also censors certain keywords (such as the “Tian’anmen Square protest” and even the names of some former party leaders) in local websites and search engines. Affected websites include Youtube, Google, Facebook, Vimeo, Twitter, among many others. Google China, because of their decision not to filter keywords under the instructions of the Chinese government, moved their search platform to Hong Kong in 2010. Since 2014 access to most Google services are fully blocked in mainland China.

⁵⁴⁶ Delanty, “Introduction: The Emerging Field of Cosmopolitanism Studies,” 2.

⁵⁴⁷ Chen Jie, “Director Pushes Boundaries of Modern Arts,” *China Daily*, accessed May 29, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2006-05/18/content_593647.htm.

favourable reactions abroad (Mexico, France, Germany).⁵⁴⁸ While as Ferrari writes, in the early postmillennial period a “more mature, diversified, cosmopolitan, and savvy environment,” which enabled theatre-makers “to confront new trends and demands without much need to resort to the antagonistic rhetoric of times past,” in Chinese society emerged,⁵⁴⁹ it becomes increasingly important to interrogate the politics of media in post-globalised technocratic China. Both performances of Grass Stage’s *World Factory* and the Niao Collective’s *Tongue’s Memory of Home* highlight the presence of media and how politics – all forms of propaganda and distracting information – has hijacked the transmission and reception of media in our life. Whilst major efforts are devoted to presenting the body of the actor as a direct, un-mediated and self-conscious agent to the spectator, the spectacle of video projection and the soundscape of a mixture of live and recorded sound, as well as other scenographic elements, turn the attempts self-contradictory.

The young theatre director Wang Chong, whose works are not included in this study but are indeed noteworthy, also to a great extent interrogates our relation to media through the audacious use of live camera feed projection in theatre, especially in his series of directorial works *Thunderstorm 2.0 (Leiyu 2.0)*, *Ghosts 2.0*, *Chairs 2.0*, etc. in the recent few years. His direction of the play *Lu Xun (Da xiansheng)*, written by Li Jing), which premiered at the National Theatre of China in 2016 and features the near-death illusions experienced by Lu Xun (one of the greatest modern Chinese writer) before he passes away. The play not only puts in the actors in contemporary costumes and creatively uses puppets and other installations, but also uses live video projection to examine the protagonist’s position in both the historical and contemporary socio-political context. More plays of this intermedial theatre, clearly influenced by Western theatre,⁵⁵⁰ can be

⁵⁴⁸ For a more detailed analysis on the play and how it reflects on Chinese experimental theatre-makers’ new aesthetic approaches in the new millennium, see Rossella Ferrari, “Performing Poetry on the Intermedial Stage: Flowers in the Mirror, Moon on the Water, and Beijing Avant-Garde Theatre in the New Millennium,” in *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Li Ruru (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 123–40.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁵⁰ Wang Chong himself spoke highly of the English director Katie Mitchell, who shows a distinctive style with the use of video projection in her works such as *Waves* (2006) and *The Forbidden Zone*

expected on the Chinese stages of the future. Only through continuing to question the post-truth society as the works of Zhao Chuan, Zhang Xian and Wang Chong do, can we expect to find a way through and a point of departure for the practice of the cosmopolitan ideal in the new epoch.

Still, “fusing the visions” in order to attain understanding of each other’s culture, as proposed by Delanty as the practice of critical cosmopolitanism, can be difficult. The fierce debates over the exhibition of *Exhibit B* in London’s Barbican Centre in September 2014 reflected how different points of view on the same matter can result in complicated disputes. The live art installation, created by white South African artist Brett Bailey, aimed to replicate “human zoos” in Western countries during colonial times (the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century) as well as the mistreatment of ethnic minorities today, in order to confront the spectator with the cruelty of colonialism. However, the exhibition itself received heavy criticism for its “explicit racism.” Over 22,500 people signed a change.org petition to boycott the exhibition and over 200 protesters rallied and blockaded the entrance of the Barbican Centre on the opening night of the five-day run, which forced the Barbican to cancel the rest of the exhibition “because of the extreme nature of the protest and the serious threat to the safety of performers, audiences and staff.”⁵⁵¹ What is noteworthy regarding this debate is the different perspectives that the two sides were holding – they both seemed convinced but were unable to convince each other. The creator and his collaborators of African descent believed that the exhibition was, in the words of Stella Odunlami, one of the artists who volunteered to participate, “a damning critique of the horrors of the systematic dehumanisation of a people that occurred throughout the era of the European empires” while honouring the ancestors of black people and “restoring humanity to the faceless, acknowledging the centuries of atrocities upon which Europe is built.”⁵⁵² But to critics,

(2014).

⁵⁵¹ “Barbican Criticises Protesters Who Forced Exhibit B Cancellation,” *Guardian*, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/sep/24/barbican-criticise-protesters-who-forced-exhibit-b-cancellation>.

⁵⁵² “Is Art Installation Exhibit B Racist?,” *Guardian*, accessed March 17, 2017,

the black bodies in *Exhibit B*, voiceless and passive, were objectified for the privileged white cultural consumption, or even an “orientalist white guilt/power masturbation,”⁵⁵³ while the black people who live today did not have a say. This debate is reminiscent of theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous essay on the question “can the subaltern speak?”⁵⁵⁴ and urges consideration about how power works in the representation of the subaltern and the limits of representation. Questions thus need to be asked: who has the authority to interpret representation and who has the right to correct the misrepresentation, or, correct the misinterpretation of the representation? In a word, in the complex socio-political context, it demands a great deal of effort to negotiate differences and achieve mutual understanding between different people, communities, and cultures.

What to experiment with and how to experiment?

It is almost certain that theatre can and will play a larger part in negotiating differences and looking for consensus in Chinese society in the future. The debates and discussions sparked by the performances such as *Che Guevara*, *We Are Marching on the Grand Road* and *World Factory* were valuable in the sense that people from different socio-cultural backgrounds had the opportunity to exchange ideas in a space and situation that encouraged open-minded attitudes and mutual respect. For this reason, it makes sense that experimental theatre, while challenging the existing conventions of theatre, exposes more directly the political position or situation of the artist.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/27/is-art-installation-exhibit-b-racist>.

⁵⁵³ Akala, “The Human Zoo and the Masturbation of White Guilt,” *The Huffington Post*, accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/akala/barbican-centre_b_5809508.html.

⁵⁵⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? : Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Moreover, as Meng points out, “experimental theatre” in the 1990s meant to be more radical than “explorative theatre” in the 1980s,⁵⁵⁵ or in his words, to be “a rebel of the epoch.”⁵⁵⁶ As theatre scholar Zhang Xiaoping points out,

The consciousness of Chinese “avant-garde” mainly originated from a dubious attitude toward the society [rather than theatre itself]. It is the changes in the outside world that stimulated the intellectuals’ spirits of scepticism and critical thinking. And it is under such influence of the society that the intellectuals, without too much careful examination, borrowed a certain kind of Western modern thinking and applied it [to their works].⁵⁵⁷

With a definite attitude to pursue “the right to differ,”⁵⁵⁸ post-Cold War experimental theatre broke with mainstream theatre, searching for independence and liberation. It was for this goal that Mou Sen started his theatre experiments, and examined them “in the system of world theatre,” in order to “pave the way for certain possibilities in certain areas of theatre today.”⁵⁵⁹ It was also for this goal Zhang Xian proposed his principles of “twenty Dos and Don’ts” for “little theatre” productions to “vaporise mass culture” from civic theatre so as to conduct his more radical experiment of individualised (as opposed to “nationalised”) theatre. To the self-acclaimed “world citizen” Zhang, the goal for his experiments is to reveal the performativity of hegemonic nationalism’s control of the individual and to eventually subvert the hegemony, so that one day local communities will be free from the control of the state.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁵ In *ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ Meng Jinghui and Wei Lixin, “Meng Jinghui: duizhe xiongxian juxu xiangqian [Meng Jinghui: March on Against All Odds],” in *Zuoxi: xijuren shuo* [Making Theatre: What the Dramatists Say], ed. Wei Lixin (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2003), 79.

⁵⁵⁷ Zhang Xiaoping, “Lun xinshiqi yilai de Zhongguo xianfeng xiju [Avant-Garde Theatre since the ‘New Era’]” (PhD diss., Fudan University, 2007), 30.

⁵⁵⁸ “Renwu: Meng Jinghui (shang) [People: Meng Jinghui, Part 1].”

⁵⁵⁹ Jin, *Xiaofeng diushoujuan: xunwen dangdai 26 wei xianfeng renwu* [Games Started by Xiaofeng: A Search and Interview of 26 Contemporary Avant-Garde Figures], 396.

⁵⁶⁰ Wang and Yin, “Guojia xiju zhongde geren fanxiju – fang Zhang Xian [The Individual’s Counter-Theatre in the Discourse of Nationalised Theatre: An Interview with Zhang Xian].”

Zhang's revolt against nationalism shows the conflicts between particularism and universalism. In these conflicts, globalisation plays the role of catalyst to enhance the interaction between the "particular" and the "universal," and eventually leads to the transformation of the two. In the age of globalisation in which the world is increasingly imagined as a universal whole place for all, nation-states on the contrary strive to strengthen the nationalist imagination to prevent its society from atomisation and falling apart. Following the example of the Western counterparts, especially England, Germany as well as Ireland, China's government set out to build a national theatre in the new century. In December 2001, the National Theatre Company of China (NTCC) was founded, with the merger of the Central Experimental Theatre (CET) and the China National Youth Theatre (CNYT). The merging of CET and CNYT into NTCC was symbolic in the sense that the experiment is always under the pressure of being domesticated, objectified and hijacked by a constructed "national character."⁵⁶¹ The evidence for this pressure can be found in the list of 2017 "key funded projects" (*gundong zizhu xiangmu*) of the China National Arts Fund, in which the ten major theatre productions, with a total funding of 16.8 million yuan, or 2.24 million euros, are mainly either regional traditional theatre (including *jinju Yu Chenglong*, *xiju Sansan*, *xiangju The Moon Made of Rice* [*Yueliang baba*], etc.)⁵⁶² or Chinese dance theatre (*minzu wuju*).⁵⁶³ The three non-traditional theatre projects (including spoken drama *Beijing Fayuan Temple* [*Beijing fayuansi*] directed by Tian Qinxin, opera *Sparkles of Fire* [*Xingxing zhihuo*], and "inter-discipline collaboration" performance "Songs of Xibaipo – Our Seas Turn into Mulberry Fields" [*Xibaipo zuge – renjian zhengdao shi cangsang*])

⁵⁶¹ In 2014 NTCC announced its guidelines for artistic creation as "to be original Chinese, to be world-class in quality, and to experiment and explore."

⁵⁶² *Jinju*, *xiju*, and *xiangju* are all "regional traditional theatre" (*difang xi*), which originated in Shanxi, Wuxi and Hunan respectively. "Yu Chenglong" and "Sansan" are the names of the title roles of the first two plays.

⁵⁶³ "Guojia yishu jijin gongbu 2017 niandu gundong zanzhu xiangmu, 10 tai daixing jumu zizhu zong'e 1680 wan yuan [CNAF 'Key Funded Projects' 2017 Announced, 10 Major Plays Were Funded in Total 16.8 Million Yuan]," accessed May 11, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/2017-04/14/c_129536790.htm; "Guojia yishu jijin 2017 niandu gundong zizhu xiangmu mingdan gongshi [Pressing Notice of the 2017 'Key Funded Projects' of China National Arts Fund]," accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.cnaf.cn/gjysjjw/jjdtai/201704/41c013d4fde34f1db5b7350307d5143e.shtml>.

all have the theme of “Chinese revolution” or “anti-Imperialist struggle.”⁵⁶⁴ Although it is understandable that the Chinese central government gives priority to supporting traditional theatre and thematically pro-government plays (as to serve its agenda of propagating nationalism and patriotism) and although it is unfair to dismiss the artistic creativity and exploration in these state-funded productions, it is noteworthy that more “closedness” than “openness” is revealed in these projects. There are two reasons: firstly, the aesthetic conventions of the traditional theatre schools do not seem to be challenged in these productions. Secondly, the theme of “class struggle” or “revolution” hardly provides new ways of thinking about Chinese society in the contemporary world of globalisation. Facing this “nationalising pressure” (as has been criticised by Zhang Xian and discussed in Chapter Three), as well as the pressure of the Capital (be it global and private capital or state capital), the experimental theatre artists need to be more careful and self-conscious in dealing with particularism (Chineseness as well as regional, indigenous, ethnic cultures) and universalism (arts as independent, universal, accessible-to-all creation for its own sake) in their works.

What happens next?⁵⁶⁵

As mentioned in the Introduction, this study aims not to write a history of experimental theatre in China since 1990, but rather to identify some of the traces in the development of contemporary Chinese theatre (and this is why the plays in each chapter are discussed

⁵⁶⁴ “Guojia yishu jijin 2017 niandu gundong zizhu xiangmu pingshen baogao [2017 China National Arts Fund ‘Key Funded Projects’ Assessment Report],” accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.cnaf.cn/gjysjjw/jjdtai/201704/3f4051468a6041909e77300de48555e0.shtml>.

⁵⁶⁵ The title of this final section is inspired by the 2017 programme, “What Happens Next Is This...,” as the start of the work of the two new Directors of the Abbey Theatre, Neil Murray and Graham McLaren. The 2016 Abbey Theatre Programme “Waking the Nation” in commemoration of the centenary of the Easter Rising, revealed the existing gender inequality in not only the theatre industry but also many aspects in Irish society. Subsequently the “Waking the Feminists” campaign was launched, in which a great number of activists took part in demanding gender equality. Murray and McLaren, who had both worked in the National Theatre of Scotland before coming to the Abbey, at their appointment in July 2015 expressed their belief in “an international perspective” “to build an organisation that challenges assumptions around the words ‘national,’ ‘theatre’ and ‘Ireland’ and deliver a truly exciting, successful and sustainable Abbey Theatre.” (“Future Directors of the Abbey Theatre Appointed” (Abbey Theatre), accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/new-directors-of-the-abbey-theatre-appointed/>.)

in chronological order). The perspective of globalisation was used as an attempt to overcome the limits of interculturalism (or the postcolonial binary of “orientalism” versus “occidentalism”) as a theoretical approach to analyse Chinese spoken drama and other related theatrical forms. Although “the convention of spoken drama itself is a trace of Western hegemony,”⁵⁶⁶ Chinese experimental theatre, especially nowadays, is much more than the East-West dichotomy and impact-response model that intercultural theories usually imply. While the West remains the most significant Other to Chinese society, globalisation studies have enlightened this study to think beyond the structures of previous research. As China is becoming more globalised and even trying to “guide” some trends of globalisation, Chinese theatre needs to be analysed from the view of globalisation, so as to examine how “local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”⁵⁶⁷ And critical cosmopolitanism, as a moral code for globalisation proposed by Gerald Delanty, can be used to assess the “self-transformation in contexts in which there is an expansion in reflexive capacities and ultimately in those situations in which something undergoes normative transformation from the encounter with the Other”⁵⁶⁸ in theatre.

Still, due to the limited time for research and capacity and scope of this dissertation, there are a number of areas about Chinese theatre that could not be covered but are well worth and will be topics of exploration in the future. A number of directors, such as Tian Qinxin, Li Liuyi, Tian Gebing, Shao Zehui, Huang Ying, Wang Chong, Kang He, Li Jianjun, Ren Mingyang, Gu Lei and Cai Yiyun, who have been active on Chinese stages especially during this new century, have developed their own distinctive styles as experimental dramatists. For instance, Tian Qinxin, one of the most important contemporary female directors with her representative works including *The Field of Life and Death* (*Shengsi chang*, 1999, adapted from Xiao Hong’s novel) and *Storm*

⁵⁶⁶ Conceison, “The Occidental Other on the Chinese Stage: Cultural Cross-Examination in Guo Shixing’s *Bird Men*,” 98.

⁵⁶⁷ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 64.

⁵⁶⁸ Delanty, “The Idea of Critical Cosmopolitanism,” 45.

(*Kuangbiao*, 2001, written by herself), has been exploring the aesthetic combination of spoken drama and Chinese traditional theatre. Among his many interesting creations, Huang experimented with an idea of a “new national opera” (*xin guoju*), by employing the Suzuki Tadashi method and traditional Chinese theatrical aesthetics in his plays. Wang, as stated earlier, has interrogated the role of media in post-truth China, while dramatists such as Tian Gebing and Li have focused on the legacy of revolution and social conflicts in Chinese society.

Furthermore, follow-up studies should try to break the barriers between spoken drama (*huaju*) and traditional theatre (*xiqu*). The term spoken drama was coined to differentiate Western dialogue-oriented theatre from Chinese song/dance theatre, but the divide is not the reason to exclude certain plays in a study of theatre. As more and more international collaborative works between practitioners of spoken drama, traditional theatre and other forms of arts, such as dance, puppetry, visual arts, installation and performance art, emerge, it also becomes impossible to separate theatre works according to the genres to which they belong.

In 1980 the Hong Kong-based experimental theatre company Zuni Icosahedron, led by theatre director Danny Yung, launched the ambitious trans-Chinese project “Journey to the East” (*Zhongguo lücheng*, and over the last three decades a number of theatre-makers from mainland China (including Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, Zhang Xian), Hong Kong and Taiwan participated in the project, “to explore the capabilities of performance to establish alternative intellectual borders and new conceptual bridges for aesthetic and critical production, and thereby voice the new transnational discourses and global demands of the Greater Chinese cultural field at the turn of the millennium.”⁵⁶⁹ In 2010, commissioned by the Japan Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, Yung devised a series of performances with traditional theatre actors from Tokyo and Nanjing on the theme “toki” (*zhuhuan*, a rare bird from China, also found in Japan), and the performances were staged

⁵⁶⁹ Rossella Ferrari, “Journey(s) to the East – Travels, Trajectories, and Transnational Chinese Theatre(s),” *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 352. Ferrari in this article offers an overview of the politics and aesthetics involved in the project as well as how its model influenced several similar translocal projects in East Asia, yet more detailed analysis of specific performances can be expected.

over six thousand times during the Expo, with a total four million spectators. In 2012, Zuni Icosahedron, in collaboration with Jiangsu Province Kun Opera Theatre, initiated “Toki Experimental Project – Preservation and Development of the Traditional Performing Arts” (*Zhuhuan jihua*, which evolved into Toki International Arts Festival [2013-2015]), which aimed to bring together artists from different regions of Asia, including Nanjing, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, Bangkok, Bali, etc., and explore the collaboration between different performance traditions.

In 2016, artist Mou Changfei initiated the non-profit “Village Theatre Festival” in his hometown – Moujiayuan Village, Weifang, Shandong Province, and so far there have been three seasons of the festival. A number of theatre troupes (which specialised in a variety of theatrical forms including physical theatre, contemporary dance, clowning, ballet as well as traditional theatre and text-based drama) came to the remote village in North China, lived in the villagers’ houses, gave workshops and collaborated in performances with the villagers (Figure 7). Although it is impossible for a study to describe the theatre of all places in China, it is still problematic to take theatre from Beijing and Shanghai and claim them as representative of the cultural diversity of all of China. Projects such as Toki Project and the “Village Theatre Festival” can shed light



Figure 7. “Deserted: the Nameless on the Earth” (*Wu: ji dadi shang de wumingzhe*) performed by Zhijue Theatre at the “Village Theatre Festival 2016 (Autumn).”

<https://kknews.cc/culture/mgggyop.html>

upon how to cross boundaries of cultures, space and social strata in performances in China, and they deserve much more critical attention.

Although the experimental theatre practitioners in the 1990s such as Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, Zhang Xian and Tian Qinxin no longer use the term “experimental theatre” to describe their current works, it is clear that they have never ceased to challenge existing conventions of theatre with the aim to create new aesthetics. Moreover, the spirit of the experimental has been passed to the directors of the younger generation. The “Village Theatre Festival” is reminiscent of the experiments led by the US-trained dramatist Xiong Foxi and his collaborators, who spent over five years (1932-1937) in rural North China, writing and staging new plays with local peasants, and finally published the influential report *Experiment of Popularisation of Drama (Xiju dazhonghua zhi shiyan)*.⁵⁷⁰ Wang Chong and Ren Mingyang named their own theatre companies – Wang’s TheatreRe (*Xinchuan shiyan jutuan*) and Ren’s RMY Theatre Company (*Ren Mingyang shiyan jutuan*) – using the term “experimental theatre” (*shiyan jutuan*) in Chinese. More importantly, dramatists have been carrying on their own experiments in theatre and many interesting new plays have come into being. As the process of globalisation continues, more frequent and in-depth cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world will occur. As a result, more exciting experimental theatre and the self-transformation of Chinese society can be expected.

⁵⁷⁰ See Xiong Foxi, “Xiju dazhonghua zhi shiyan [Experiment of Popularisation of Drama],” in *Xiong Foxi xiju wenji (xiace)* [Collected Articles of Xiong Foxi, Vol. 2], ed. Benshu bianweihui [the editing committee] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 675–803.

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