The Emerging Role of the Director in Chinese Xiqu

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As with so many traditional performing arts, xiqu (the umbrella term encompassing the more than three hundred regional forms of Chinese opera) and particularly jingju (Beijing opera, the one nationally prominent form of xiqu) is perceived by its artists, scholars, and fans as being in a state of crisis. Owing to a complex web of factors, including interruption of traditional conduits of transmission during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and a massive increase of competing forms of entertainment (both foreign and domestic) beginning in 1976 with the policy of “Reform and Opening Up” (gaige kaifang), audiences for xiqu, at least in Beijing,\(^1\) are declining precipitously. At the same time, companies must rely increasingly on box office revenues to support their work (Wichmann-Walczak 2000: 96–98; “Renewed theatre shakes off old image” 2004: 1–3). Thus there has been a general call for innovation in all aspects of xiqu performance to lure back audiences.

Traditionally xiqu did not use a director, and one common tactic employed to facilitate innovation was to bring in directors trained in Western-style realistic spoken drama (huaju). By the early 1990s, this experiment was generally thought to have been a failure, because most huaju directors are simply not fluent in the complex performance language of xiqu, usually marginalizing it from its traditional centrality in the aesthetic event to mere decorative addition to the dramatic text (Wichmann 1990: 158–160). More recently, however, the practice has
reemerged in several high-profile productions. In *Zaixiang Liu Luoguo* (Prime Minister Hunchback; premiered in 1997, revived in 2000) award winning *xiqu*-trained director Shi Yukun was assisted by two *huaju* directors to stage this extravagant experiment in updating *jingju* for modern audiences (Jiang 2000: 9). In 2003, the National Peking Opera Theatre of China (Zhongguo Jingjuyuan) brought in leading *huaju* directors Lin Zhaohua for a *jingju* production of the ancient script *Zhang Xie zhuangyuan* (No. 1 Scholar Zhang Xie) (“Brushing the Dust off Old Script” 2003: 1–2) and Cao Qijing for a *jingju* adaptation of Puccini’s *Turandot*. *Xiqu*-trained company head Wu Jiang stated recently that he is not opposed to *huaju* directors working in *xiqu*. Citing *Turandot* as an example he explained that he himself maintained a level of artistic control sufficient to prevent many of the problems associated with *huaju* directors leading *xiqu* productions (Wu 2006). Though the production sparked controversy for its incorporation of nontraditional elements such as pop music and choreography drawn from Western ballet (“Peking ‘Popera’ Makes Waves” 2004), it continues in the company’s repertoire and represents an important adjustment in the pervasive creative authority previously wielded by *huaju* directors in such projects. Nonetheless, in response to the perception that the use of *huaju* directors for *xiqu* productions had been of mixed success, while at the same time accepting the importance of the directorial function to the creation of new *xiqu* plays, by the mid 1980s *xiqu* artists generally recognized the need to develop directors specifically trained for work in *xiqu* (A 1983: 449; Gao 1985: 2).

Throughout this article I am purposefully using the term “directorial function” rather loosely, because what that function is or should be in relation to *xiqu* artistic practice is still in flux. Particularly with regard to the discussion of pre-twentieth-century circumstances that follows, I am including a broad range of practices that *xiqu* scholars and artists have identified as precursors to modern conceptions of the director. This approach, while not marking clear boundaries for the functions of a *xiqu* director, does allow for useful exploration of the strategic gains that may have been made by associating particular activities of past *xiqu* creative practice with contemporary concepts of the director.

The goal of this article is to examine key phases in the historical development leading to current understandings of the role of the *xiqu* director. Important staging practices and productions are discussed with special emphasis placed on three artists. First is Li Zigui (1915–), who began studying and performing *xiqu* as a child and became a famous performer of martial male roles. Because of his thirty years of performance experience and more than fifty years of direct-
ing xiqu, Chinese Theatre Publishers asked to publish his collected writings on the art of xiqu performance and directing (Li 1992: 595–597). The firsthand experiences and other information recounted in these respected writings offer a wealth of information about the rise of the director in the first half of the twentieth century. Second is performer, director, playwright, and theorist Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1961). Working in both huaju and xiqu, he became China’s most prominent director in this early period. Third is A Jia (1907–1994), also a respected xiqu scholar, playwright, and performer, who became the most important of the post-1949 xiqu directors.

The narrative that follows is on the one hand a somewhat suspect evolutionary framing of an orthodox historical progression, one step leading inevitably to the next, and each step’s importance identified by looking back with an exclusionary agenda for nascent signs of current conditions and understandings (for informative questioning of the approach see Tillis 2004 and Canning 2005). Since to my knowledge nothing has yet been published in English on the rise of the director in Chinese xiqu, I believe the information contained here will be of interest. On the other hand, I also believe the narrative I construct is less orthodox than it might first appear, because it draws heavily on arguments by xiqu artists and scholars that actually serve a strategy of resistance in the post–Cultural Revolution circumstance of “xiqu-in-crisis.” These artists and scholars frame their arguments in ways that subvert the widely held perception that the directorial function is a wholly Western import. And since the perception that xiqu is in crisis at some level fosters underlying anxieties that xiqu is a “backward” and “outmoded” form, their search for signs of directorial function in pre-twentieth-century xiqu practice is a strategy of validation inverting the understanding “that the past authorizes, that history validates” (Canning 2005: 56). These artists are using the present in some sense to validate the past: xiqu is not backward because it has long incorporated elements of the directorial function so central to production processes of modern Western theatre. Conversely, their reliance on evidence of the centrality of the xiqu-proficient director to successfully innovative, landmark productions is shown to be contesting of rather than descriptive of current conditions when considered against strong evidence, such as the recent productions utilizing huaju-trained directors, that the “xiqu director” continues to occupy a decidedly less central position in the creative process as compared to his or her Chinese huaju or Anglo-European counterparts.² Nonetheless, the arguments on which I draw clearly rest on the underlying assumption that the xiqu directorial function, though as yet imprecisely defined, continues as a modernizing, progressive, positive, potent force
in *xiqu* development. I follow the trajectory of these arguments forward by discussing current *xiqu* director training methods and a recent award-winning production, *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Camel Xiangzi), lead by Shi Yukun, a *xiqu*-trained director.3

**Early Development**

Chinese scholar Gao Yu has done a painstaking search for evidence of an understanding of the directorial function, even though not so named, in scripts and performance records from the Tang dynasty (618–907) to the present (Gao 1985). Li Zigui finds evidence of a similar function in Yuan dynasty playwright Guan Hanqing’s (ca. 1230–1300) plays, asserting that his extensive practical experience, including performing in his own plays, was a key factor contributing to the success of those plays (1992: 5; see also Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 95).

Li also finds famous Ming dynasty playwright Tang Xianzu’s (1550–1616) critical writings about his own plays and those of his contemporaries to be good examples of the kind of script analysis required of the director; Tang discussed not only the gist but also the structure of play scripts, identifying their strengths and weaknesses in a way that Li asserted would inspire a director to do good work with them in rehearsal. Like Guan Hanqing, Tang had his own performance troupe and, in addition to performing, also guided rehearsals and crafted the musical structure of his plays (Li 1992: 5–6).

Li Zigui also offers interesting details about late nineteenth and early twentieth century *xiqu* staging practices that bear on the development of the *xiqu* director and that offer resistance to general perceptions of the directorial function as being a wholly foreign import. He notes that by the time *jingju* was becoming established as a nationally prominent form (during the second half of the nineteenth century), every performance had someone backstage organizing it. In the north this person was called the *cuan xi de* (one who collects or assembles the play). In southern China at this time, companies had literary managers (*wen guan shi de*) who handled the *cuan* function. For martial plays, there was also someone in charge of martial activities (*wu xing tou*) to organize the combat sequences (Li 1992: 11). Thus there were various people in charge of different aspects of organization and staging of traditional *xiqu* plays, but no one person yet filling the overall function we designate for the director today.

According to Li, another major step on the road to the modern concept of the *xiqu* director was the practice in *jingju* of performing *benxi* (original play), where major performers individually developed their own new plays. These were very much star vehicles highlighting the performer’s particular skills, but even these required someone to
cuan the production. This person was called the bao ben zi de (one who holds the script) or bao zong jiang de (one who holds the overall telling) or pai xi ren (the person who rehearses the play). Li offers Mei Lanfang’s famous play Bawang bie ji (Farewell, My Concubine) as a representative example of plays developed in this way. Li notes that over time, rules developed for the rehearsal of these new plays: the cuan xi de first got familiar with the script, next prepared an outline, then got all the actors together, and, according to the requirements of the script, told everyone when they entered, to what point on the stage, when to speak a particular line or do a particular movement. There were also some leading actors who were able to use these rules to oversee rehearsal themselves. Unfortunately, Li notes that as of the early 1990s there were very few xiqu artists left who were able to rehearse a whole play according to these rules (Li 1992: 11). Li’s narrative reframes a central issue: contemporary xiqu does not need directors because it is inherently flawed; rather, it needs directors to help reinvent a process now lost but through which some of the greatest plays in the traditional repertoire were created.

One main advantage of the cuan process is that a play can be ready for performance very quickly. But Zhu Wenxiang, former head of the National Xiqu Academy (Zhongguo Xiqu Xueyuan) and architect of its current four-year curriculum for xiqu directors, notes two important artistic limitations of “cuan-ing” a production. First, it allows for little innovation by performers to express a character’s individuality beyond established conventions for that role type. Second, there is little opportunity to develop interaction between performers (Zhu Wenxiang 1998). Zhu himself is not a performer, but he identifies an important issue in the creative potential produced by extended rehearsal that will be addressed further below.

Other details of the cuan process are contained in a fascinating passage of a doctoral dissertation written at Paris University in 1938 by Jiao Juyin (1907–1975), who would later become one of China’s leading huaju directors. Jiao studied European theatre in Paris for four years, after which he returned to China. In his dissertation Jinri zhi zhongguo xiju (Today’s Chinese Theatre), Jiao reviews the basic conventions of traditional xiqu staging, including extensive comparison to Western staging practices (Jiao 1986, 1: 131–200). He discusses xiqu performance elements in eight subparts: acting, role types, makeup, costumes, dance and song, speech, sets and props, and, lastly and most briefly, directing. He begins the discussion of directing by observing that after reading the previous sections, “one can understand the reason that the director has no place in xiqu” because performance elements are all “made absolutely uniform” (juedui hua yi) by traditional
convention (1: 199). Xiqu is a living, breathing, evolving art form, so Jiao’s assessment of the impact of conventions is plainly overstated. Nonetheless, this is strong evidence that in the 1930s, a director was considered unnecessary for the staging of traditional xiqu performances. Writing for a foreign audience unfamiliar with xiqu, Jiao frames the issue of the absence of a director in traditional xiqu not as a lack but as a surplus when compared to Western theatre: xiqu does not need directors because its rich complex of performance conventions has already ably handled the task.

Jiao argues that because a performer began studying a single role type from an early age, one could say the performer’s teachers served as director during this period of training. Since a professional performer at that time was expected to know more than one hundred plays “in the belly,” he would become so familiar with the performance conventions that he no longer needed a director. Jiao concludes, “The success of a performance is due completely to the performer’s personal effort and skill. As a result, credit goes to the actor’s industrious diligence during his period of artistic study and his own accumulated experience” (Jiao 1986, 1: 199–200). Jiao gives the following description of the rehearsal process in the 1930s:

In Shanghai, when a traditional program has no new plays, the leading performer takes the responsibility of giving all the performers their lines. As soon as they have memorized their lines, the lead performer calls everyone together at his home for general rehearsals. If they encounter a particularly difficult dance or other movement sequence, they might hold individual or small group rehearsal. The actors simply need to become somewhat familiar with their characters, and they will rarely make a mistake in performance. Because of the training they have undergone, they can all “raise hand toss foot” (ju shou tou zu) with high proficiency, and precisely coordinate the performance in tacit understanding with each other. As a result, when rehearsing, from the beginning they don’t sing because they have already memorized all the melodies thoroughly, just like an average person memorizing written characters. All that is required is the leading performer to tell them the main theme and overall plot, then based on their own understanding and experience they can perform the character. In this way, the leading performer under some types of circumstances temporarily becomes the equivalent of a director. (1: 200)

Jiao goes on to describe the responsibilities of the backstage manager, who necessarily supplemented the lead actor’s “directorial” responsibilities while he was onstage performing. Jiao asserts that the manager was required to be familiar with the plot and with the
sequence of all characters’ entrances and exits, and he often posted a schedule backstage listing the characters in every scene both for his own backup information and for actors to consult during performance. The manager was also often responsible for assigning the secondary performers, so he needed to have a thorough understanding of xiqu as well as a familiarity with the talents of available performers (Jiao 1986, 1:200). Jiao’s description is fascinating in that it was written for a European audience for whom the director was obviously expected to be part of any discussion of theatrical processes. Jiao’s discussion is particularly helpful here in that it emphasizes how the focus was on training first, then on performance, with little attention given to rehearsal.

The emphasis on performance over rehearsal had already been taken to a further extreme in the form of another interesting staging practice of the early 1900s. Called “curtain outline plays” (mubiaoxi), these performances did not have a set script. Often these productions were organized by the equivalent of a writer/director who gave the performers an outline of the plot, character description, timing of entrances and exits, and onstage action, but otherwise gave them free rein to improvise details in performance. The practice became very popular in both spoken drama and xiqu, and even the famous performers Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang created plays of this type (Li 1992: 12–13). Li Zigui performed in them as a teenager and gives this description of the process:

At this time we usually rehearsed in the morning, the “paixiren” [lit. “one who rehearsed the play”] told you the play’s plot, about the character you would play, the content of each scene, how you were to enter and exit; that night this play would be performed. During the performance you wrote your own lines, as the percussion sounded, you created the movement, with the sound of the huqin [leading stringed instrument of the jingju orchestra] you created the melody for your song. Performing this type of play, one can temper one’s ability to adapt on the spot and before an audience give an impromptu performance. Most of these “curtain outline plays” were modern dress, and were modern plays set in contemporary time, reflecting that time’s real society. Some of these plays became so successful they were written down afterward, and even performed by different companies; others had no life beyond the initial performance. (12–13)

Many of the huaju plays of this type were highly political, usually calling for “democratic revolution of the old type” (jiu minzhu zhuyi geming), though some later plays also advocated socialist policies. And some xiqu productions were also presented in this political vein. It is clear that the content of these modern “curtain outline plays” differed
substantially from plays in the traditional *xiqu* repertoire, which were based primarily on classical novels and other plots familiar to the audience. Being more plot-driven and set in contemporary times, this improvised staging practice seems an excellent exercise for both performers and directors hoping to innovate within the traditional *xiqu* form. Through such pressured work, writer/directors would be doing the equivalent of quick sketching exercises in a life drawing class, forced to make on-the-spot decisions and cut to the heart of the matter. Similarly, performers could hone their technique, apply that technique to contemporary situations, and perhaps also develop confidence in their own creative abilities. In contrast, young *xiqu* performers today are often criticized for deficiencies in all of these areas, a fact which may well have prompted Li’s choice to emphasize *mubiao* in his discussion. While clearly motivated by a nostalgic longing, Li’s description also emphasizes that there is not anything inherent to *xiqu* as a form supporting current perceptions that *xiqu* artists are so bound by convention they are unable to innovate successfully. *Xiqu* artists of this earlier period could create on the spot.

A related staging practice of this period involved a wildly successful serial performance structure, similar to a television soap opera, in which the narrative was stretched over many nights. Each night would end with a “cliff-hanger” to ensure return audiences. Called *liantai benxi* (joined stage original play), the practice in commercial/secular *xiqu* is thought to have begun in Beijing and Tianjin and was popular in the Qing dynasty court. Beijing and Tianjin performers brought the practice to Shanghai in the 1860s (*Zhongguo dabaike* 1983: 207). Some of these plays, especially in the early period, were of high artistic quality. The Shanghai Jingju Company revived a condensed version of one of the best of these, *Limao huan taizi* (The Foxcat Substituted for the Crown Prince), presenting the second part at the 1998–1999 National Jingju Festival (*Zhongguo Jingjujie*), where it won a second-tier prize (below the gold prize) with eight other entries as an “outstanding production” (Fang 1999: 8). Li Zigui notes that the original version of this play, first staged in 1911, as well as several similarly structured plays performed by Zhou Xinfang, had many artistically excellent sections (1992: 6).

As with the “curtain outline plays,” this serial play structure placed much more emphasis on plot than did plays in the traditional repertoire such that the audiences of these serial plays were presumed not to know what would happen next. Some of the plays incorporated political messages, but many were primarily aimed at entertainment. The bid for audiences led to increasingly fantastical and absurd plots and wild stage effects. Li attributes what he perceived of as a debase-
ment of popular tastes at least in part to the fact that by this time China had already declined to a quasi-colony. Nonetheless, Li concludes that even such artistically questionable works needed someone to bring all the elements together. He therefore views these serial plays as another important step in the development of the modern conception of the *xiqu* director (Li 1992: 12, see also Zhongguo dabaik 1983: 207). But again, Li’s formulation emphasizes that, in contrast to perceptions of current young performers, *xiqu* artists have previously been readily adaptable, able to create mechanisms for presenting unfamiliar stories in an engaging, intelligible, and commercially successful way.

**The First Acknowledged Xiqu Director**

Despite these extensive efforts to track evidence of the directorial function in premodern China, there is general agreement that Western theatrical concepts have had major influence in the conceptualization of a specifically *xiqu* directorial function. In the period before 1949, this influence was brought particularly through the input of Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1961), an important *huaju* and *xiqu* artist of this period. Born in Hunan Province, he was a theatre educator, theorist, playwright, and performer, and was probably the first person actually listed as a “director” in a *xiqu* performance program (Li 1992: 15). He had gone to Japan to study and was a member of the influential Spring Willow Society (Chun Liu She), a group of Chinese students who performed several realistic style productions in Tokyo (including an adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) that were so successful they inspired similar experiments in Shanghai. The society is credited with making the first major inroads of Western-style realism into the Chinese theatre world. Ouyang returned to China and in 1910 founded the New Drama Society (Xinju Tongzhihui) in Shanghai, which performed *huaju* plays. As a result, Ouyang is considered one of *huaju*’s most important founders. In 1916, he began creating and performing *jingju* works as well, eventually becoming such a famous performer of female roles that he was even compared to the legendary Mei Lanfang in the common saying “the south has Ouyang, the north has Mei” (*nan ou bei mei*). In the course of his career, he created and adapted more than sixty scripts for live performance and film, including more than thirty for *xiqu*, of which thirteen are extant. In the production of most of these scripts he both composed the singing and served as director (Zhongguo dabaik 1983: 268).

In 1921, he founded the Nantong Society for the Study of Acting (Nantong Linggong Xueshe), the goal of which was to establish a new type of *xiqu* school to train performers with a broader cultural
understanding in the hope that after they graduated they would be able to work to reform the traditional repertoire (Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 264–265). The impact of the impulse behind establishment of this school—that *xiqu* performers were somehow “culturally inadequate”—is quite complex. Certainly, many *xiqu* performers in pre-Communist China received no formal liberal education, and many were illiterate. Ouyang’s goal to ban corporal punishment and provide a basic liberal education to performers was criticized by his contemporaries for wasting students’ time on “nonessentials” (Yang 1968: 52). The approach, however, was vigorously adopted by the Communist government after 1949 (24–26). Today, students at *xiqu* schools study math, English, and a host of other subjects, making it virtually impossible for young performers to graduate with even twenty plays “in their bellies,” let alone the one hundred plays observed by Jiao Juyin as the norm in 1938 (Wichmann 1990: 163). This limited knowledge of the repertoire by today’s young performers is often cited as a major factor for both increasing the need for directors and increasing the scope of a *xiqu* director’s responsibilities to include many elements formerly handled by performers.

During the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945), Ouyang participated in the resistance movement, especially through the Shanghai Theatre Association to Save the Nation (Shanghai xijujie jiugying xiehui gejubu), which formed thirteen performance troupes to spread anti-Japanese and patriotic propaganda in Shanghai and the surrounding countryside (Mackerras 1983: 151–156). According to Li Zigui, *jingju* performers were frustrated by the limits of their traditional repertoire in addressing the critical issues of the day. They sought out Ouyang to help them create plays in support of the war effort. Ouyang wrote new *jingju* plays, adapted others, and brought new directorial methods to *jingju*. He also contributed to China’s political development, joining the Communist Party in 1955 and serving in numerous political and educational posts. He continued his artistic and scholarly contributions until his death in 1961 (Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 268). Li describes Ouyang’s impact on *jingju*:

In directing, he took every aspect—acting, singing, music, set design, etc.—under consideration, in order that the performance achieved a main theme. When he directed, he often composed the arias himself. The scene design was different than the painted backdrops of the Curtain Outline and Installment plays, there was great innovation. This type of play, produced through the work of a director—in every aspect working as we think of the director today—there was nothing
like it in jingju before, and I’m afraid it hasn’t been surpassed since. (Li 1992: 13)

Li’s description certainly idealizes both Ouyang’s artistic contributions and the circumstances of theatrical activity during the Anti-Japanese War. Two points are striking. First is the clear inconsistency between his earlier portrayal of xiqu artists as readily able to develop new plays and plots, along with his assertion in this section that jingju artists felt limited by the content of the traditional repertoire. Second is Li’s shift of focus to the single, heroic individual Ouyang. Portraying him as a living synthesis of huaju and xiqu worlds, equally respected and successful in both, Li gives him credit for single-handedly bringing xiqu into the modern (i.e., director-led) theatrical age. To paraphrase Canning’s analysis of Rosamond Gilder’s 1931 Enter the Actress, Li’s “history is written to support the vision of theatre that [he] wants for [his] own historical moment” (2005: 56). In Li’s vision famed huaju directors are willing to devote years to training so as to become fluent in xiqu’s demanding performance conventions. Moreover, in Li’s vision a single talented individual can overcome systemic obstacles to create numerous innovative xiqu productions that are both artistically successful and socially relevant. Each of these aspects contrasts sharply with post–Cultural Revolution circumstances.

The Xiqu Director after 1949

The career of A Jia (1907–1994; born Fu Lüheng) challenges Li’s claim that Ouyang’s preeminence remains unsurpassed. Born in the southeastern province of Jiangsu, A Jia was a director, playwright, and theatre theorist who devoted his impressive fifty-year career to the study and practice of xiqu. He joined Mao in Yan’an in 1938, entered the Communist Party in 1941, and served as director of the Yan’an Pingju (another name for jingju) Research Academy (Yan’an Pingju Yanjiuyuan), which was established in 1942. This institute is consistently cited in sources from mainland China as a major force in the development of modern xiqu, because it is where the first official attempts were made at reforming xiqu to conform to Maoist thought (Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 524). During this period, A Jia was involved in hundreds of productions and became one of the area’s most famous xiqu performers. He also wrote and directed many new plays, and adapted traditional plays to conform to Communist ideals (Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 1). He was a member of the 120th Fighting Pingju Society (120 shi Zhandou Pignedshe),11 which joined with another troupe after publication of Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and the Arts” to become the Yan’an Pingju Company (Yan’an Pingjuyuan). The
new plays produced in this period included many innovative elements. While they were written and directed by committee and all aspects of production underwent major scrutiny, A Jia is recognized as a major creative force from this period forward (Li 1992: 16, see also Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 1).

A Jia’s prominence was confirmed when he was asked to contribute the entry titled “Xiqu Director” for the officially sanctioned encyclopedia Zhongguo dabaike quanshi—xiqu, quy (Chinese Comprehensive Encyclopedia: Xiqu and Folk Vocal Arts, 1983) volume on xiqu published in 1983. His prominence is additionally established by the inclusion in the Zhongguo dabaike of an entry on his life and work (1983: 1). In his brief overview of the introduction of specialized directors in xiqu, A Jia takes a decidedly political focus. After noting that specialized directors did not arise earlier because under feudal rule stage artists were not given any importance, he states that xiqu companies began to use specialized directors after the Communist victory in 1949 (A 1983: 443). This widespread use of specialized directors parallels the post-1949 systematic organization of government supported xiqu troupes generally. Thus A Jia works carefully to distance his telling of the rise of the xiqu director from previous narratives by marking its key point of development by the massive wave of social reforms instituted after Communist victory rather than by the return of Chinese students from study abroad in the early 1900s. He describes the artistic system of xiqu directing established in this early period as imperfect, because much of what xiqu directors were studying was drawn from Western spoken drama theory, particularly that of Stanislavsky and later Brecht. He recognizes use of these foreign theories as important first steps but asserts that even more important was the “use of Marxist aesthetics and literary and artistic theory to point the way, exploring things that have rules in relation to our own ethnic literary and artistic theory, in continuous experimentation so as to establish our own directing science” (443).

It is clear, however, that such Marxist-infused experimentation had already begun years before 1949. Theatre in China became a highly politicized force during the Anti-Japanese War and continued as such through the subsequent civil war period. Its potential to reach the mostly illiterate masses in the countryside was exploited by both the Communists and the Nationalists. The Communists adapted the local yangge (“rice planting song”) folk dance form to a highly successful agit-prop structure, including such plays as Xiong mei kai huang (Brother and Sister Reclaim the Wasteland) (Mackerras 1983: 154–155). The performers adapted these short scripts for specific audiences by first learning and then incorporating local dialects and folk music
forms into the performance (Wang 1979: 36–37). The yangge form reached its zenith with the production of the first full-length play, Baimao nü (The White-Haired Girl), which was created in 1944 at the Yan’an Pingju Research Academy. Mao himself attended the official premiere and the production was so successful that it played for thirty performances (43). In keeping with the practice during this period of producing plays by committee, no one was designated as “director” of the production. One of the playwrights described the rehearsal process: “During rehearsals the libretto was revised by the performers and producer, and many experts and students offered good advice. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that many of the country folk, as well as our school messengers and cooks, came eagerly to watch rehearsals and offered excellent suggestions, even on very minor points” (Ho 1954: ix). Ho himself came from a peasant family and, consistent with the political pressures of the time, emphasized the contributions of workers to the success of the production. Nonetheless, surely A Jia, in his leadership role within the Pingju Research Academy, would at least have been one of the “experts offering good advice.” It seems clear that this intense focus on delivering a message, political or otherwise, was a factor contributing to the increasing importance of the directorial function in the development of new xiqu plays. Whether done by a committee or an individual director, the rigorous scrutiny to ensure that all aspects of a production are in fact serving the desired message or interpretation was key to the rise of the director in the West as well (see, e.g., Braun 1982: 7). Xiqu’s function as a major instrument of propaganda only intensified after the Communist victory in 1949.

In March 1949, seven months before the official Communist victory, the Bureau on Xiqu Reform was organized within the fledgling Ministry of Culture (Zhongguo Wenhuabu Xiqu Gaijinju). One division of the Bureau was charged with revising traditional plays and creating new ones to meet Communist ideological requirements. A Jia was appointed head of the Research Committee of the Bureau’s Artistic Division (Yishu Yanjushi Zhuren), a second division that focused on reform of staging techniques (Zhongguo dabaike 1983: 1; Yang 1968: 23). In July 1950, along with Mei Lanfang, Ouyang Yuqian, Jiao Juyin, and other preeminent theatre artists, A Jia was appointed by the central government as a member of the influential Xiqu Reform Committee (Xiqu Gaijin Weiyuanhui). The main responsibilities of the committee were to examine new and revised scripts produced by the bureau and to advise the Ministry of Culture on policies and plans for xiqu reform (Yang 1968: 27–28). A year later, based in large part on the work of the committee, the central government issued a directive
stating that “the main functions of drama are to promote patriotism among the people and encourage heroism in revolutionary struggle.” The directive included a call for revision or elimination of “harmful” performance elements and plays such as those including ghosts or “cruel, horrifying, licentious, subservient or other out-of-date elements” and for “competition and interchange” among various types of regional xiqu forms (Wang 1979: 53; see also Mei 1952: 21–24).12

During October and November 1952 a major xiqu festival was held in Beijing at which almost one hundred plays were performed. The participating productions involved over 1,600 performers and represented twenty-three different regional forms (Yang 1968: 36–36; Dolby 1976: 234).13 According to Li Zigui, all the participating productions employed directors. For example, a production in a xiqu form from south central China was directed by Ouyang Yuqian, while Li himself directed a new jingju version of Baishe zhuan (White Snake). Many traditional plays were presented that had been substantially reworked. Li quotes the representative of the south central China district, Cui Wei, as saying that all of their participating plays had been completely reworked. According to Li, Cui offered the following interesting observation about their rehearsals:

Reform is not only a script issue—of course the script is the play’s foundation—but the performers’ technique is even more important. Even with an excellent script, if the actor performs badly or strays from the original intent of the script, it will be impossible to reach a “true” result. This is especially true of xiqu where the script is often very simple, while the actor’s performance is much more complex. . . . [A]nd there are some plays whose problems are not evident in the script, but become evident in performance. This time, we went through extensive rehearsals to achieve reform, which also produced some conflict because the actors were not used to rehearsal. The older generation was used to “see on stage” (taishang jian). Rehearsal was called “zuan-guo” (study the pot); it was not seen as honorable. But with this rehearsal we were required to persevere. And everyone discovered how good a time rehearsal can be, it allows you to reach from the central idea to resolve problems. (Li 1992: 18)

Li Zigui also notes that many educated intellectuals had been involved in these productions both as directors and playwrights, and the festival was generally considered a great success (Li 1992: 18). But the initial excitement faded as few successful plays were produced in the festival’s wake. In fact, apparently the opposite was true since plays that had received the government’s seal of approval at the 1952 festi-
val dominated stages around the country (Yang 1968: 43–44). This trend was facilitated by the official release of an anthology of approved plays from the festival, published to provide references for the revision and creation of plays (Wang 1979: 58). After the festival, in December 1952, the Ministry of Culture issued a directive that all xiqu companies would be required to establish a system for using directors in order “to raise the artistic level of performance and music” (quoted in Li Zigui 1992: 20). Li concludes that in the decades since this directive, every company of every xiqu form has adopted the systematic use of directors when producing new plays or substantially re-working traditional ones (Li 1992: 20). In my own experience attending scores of xiqu performances this pattern holds true: directors are usually listed in the programs for new and substantially revised plays but are rarely listed in programs for the staging of traditional plays.

In order to help establish this system of xiqu directing, in 1954 A Jia began two years of study at the Central Drama Academy (Zhongyang Xiju Xueyuan) in their Director Cadre Training Course (Daoyan Ganbu Xunlianban). Under the direction of Soviet experts, the participants researched Stanislavsky’s system of performance through both classroom study and practical onstage experimentation (Wang 1998: 24). He continued his study despite being appointed general director of the National Jingju Company in 1955. During this period, xiqu itself came under attack from those influenced by Stanislavsky’s work as interpreted through strict Soviet ideas of socialist realism. Soviet artists were expected to present “truthful, historically concrete representations of reality in its revolutionary development” (Brockett 1991: 193, quoting a 1934 Union of Soviet Writers proclamation). Works judged not to meet this standard were rejected as “empty formalism.” Being branded with this label in Stalinist Russia in 1940 had cost the great Russian director Meyerhold his life (197).

In 1957, in response to similarly anti-formalist pressures in China, A Jia published his famous article “Truth in Life and Truth in Xiqu Performance,” in which he criticized indiscriminate application of Stanislavskian principles to xiqu and defended xiqu’s conventions as an artistically and politically viable alternative method of truthfully representing real life on stage (Liu 1988). Continuing his investigation of how to represent modern life through xiqu conventions, in 1958 A Jia wrote and codirected a jingju adaptation of the yangge play The White-Haired Girl, mentioned above, for the National Jingju Company (Zhongguo Jingjuyuan). Though not completely satisfied with the results, A Jia worked to integrate selective elements of his huaju study, finding movement consistent with both modern life and xiqu artistic principles in the staging of the production (Wang 1998: 24–25).
A subsequent major step in the development of the modern xiqu director came in the years leading into and including the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). It was in this period that the full force of central governmental control of content and form asserted itself, primarily in the person of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. At her urging, the National Jingju Company decided to rework the play Hong deng ji (The Red Lantern) from a Shanghai regional opera form. A Jia served as head writer and director of the project. After the premiere, Jiang Qing called A Jia, company officials, and leading performers to a meeting where she accused them of ruining the play. Among her many complaints, she disapproved of not giving sufficient prominence to Li Yuho (the character she viewed as the proletarian hero), of cutting a scene from the original in which Li Yuho showed his resourcefulness, and of choosing a melody for a particular section that was not forceful enough for the revolutionary female character involved. Jiang Qing ordered revisions. Given Jiang’s position as Mao’s wife, those working on the project did not dare disregard her comments. On the other hand, they had major disagreements with several of her criticisms. They decided to incorporate some of the revisions, but ignore others. A Jia worked intensively on rewrites, then the revisions were rehearsed. Jiang Qing was invited for a second viewing. After the performance, she reprimanded the group angrily for not redressing all of her criticisms. After many more revisions, the play was eventually deemed satisfactory, was presented at the first national festival of modern xiqu plays, held in 1964, and was put forth as a model for development of future plays (Xu 1990: 64–76; see also Revolutionary Committee 1968: 39–40).

Li Ruru has researched the influence of Communist officials (including Jiang Qing) on the development of another modern play, Shen yizi (Interrogating the Chair, sometimes also translated as Investigation of a Chair) in Shanghai in 1963–1964, discovering evidence of similarly intense involvement by Jiang Qing in production revisions (Li 2002: 5). Li Ruru also describes an important tactic in developing modern xiqu plays that continues today. Unhappy with earlier versions of the script and performance, Jiang Qing ordered that a spoken drama director be brought in to work on this Shanghai production. Following Mao’s directives in his 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and the Arts,” this director’s concept focused on the following theme: “We must never forget the class struggle, and should always be on guard against the restoration of class enemies” (Li 2002: 7). The primacy of political considerations during this period is evidenced by the director’s assertion that “[t]he first criterion to judge a play is to look at its ideological content and its truthfulness to real life. This means that the political criterion is the first priority. Having given
this aspect all due attention, and having gripped the essential ideological issues, the Leader [Jiang Qing] pointed out the principles of how to revise the play. Following these ideas, we revised the play to a large extent” (Li 2002: 7). Li Ruru also notes the militaristic roots of realistic spoken drama in China as a favored form for the expression of radical ideas by young Chinese intellectuals. She argues that a huaju director of this era would be better prepared than artists trained in xiqu to use theatre as a tool of propaganda (7), though the previous discussion of Yan’an Pingju Academy and other pre-1949 activities suggests that many xiqu artists also had extensive experience creating propagandistic theatre productions.

The political focus and party control intensified profoundly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) as every aspect of xiqu artists’ creative work was called into question and pressed into political service via creation of the “model” Revolutionary Beijing operas. The extent of this control is clearly shown in the following description of work on one of the model play, Shajiabang (a place name), by the “Shachiapang [Shajiabang] Revolutionary Fighting Regiment of the No. 1 Peking Opera [Jingju] Company of Peking,” written in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Mao’s talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. The unnamed authors accused “counter-revolutionary revisionist” elements of having “contrived a series of despicable double dealing tricks to resist Chairman Mao’s instructions and sabotage the transformation of Peking opera [jingju].” The authors also emphasize the influence of Mao’s wife: “Comrade Chiang Ching [Jiang Qing] boldly carried out reforms to cater to the needs of the revolutionary political content, making it possible for Peking opera [jingju] to depict more and more characters of different types. Thus the schemes of the handful of counter-revolutionary revisionists to use the conventional forms to destroy operas on revolutionary contemporary themes were smashed” (51–52).

A Jia and countless other xiqu artists who advocated the artistic value of traditional performance techniques, like the techniques themselves, were branded counterrevolutionary and banished from the stage. Many of these artists were imprisoned, or sent to the countryside for reeducation, or hauled periodically before the masses for public criticism, or worse.

With the death of Mao in 1976 and subsequent fall of the Gang of Four, there followed a period of backlash during which the model xiqu plays were banned. Many had believed the earlier propaganda that Jiang Qing deserved primary credit for development of the model plays. In addition, the model plays became tainted by their association with the traumatic societal upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. A Jia
himself testified against Jiang Qing at her trial and was rehabilitated and returned to a leadership position at the National Jingju Company as the confusion of the Cultural Revolution began to resolve. But popular suspicion against the model xiqu plays continued. A Jia came forward as a major proponent of the overall artistic merit of many model plays, particularly those presented at the 1964 festival. Writing in 1981, he contended that The Red Lantern and other model plays had been the product of long and rigorous experimentation by numerous xiqu artists and that Jiang Qing had wrongfully usurped credit for the work of others (A 1990: 298). Deeply concerned for the future of jingju, he skillfully equated the suspect model plays with other accepted modern plays such as those developing out of the post–Cultural Revolution “literature of bruises” artistic movement. A Jia argued:

I strongly believe jingju must be able to represent modern life well, this can’t be determined by anyone’s willpower. Rather jingju’s ability to represent modern life will be decided by its own rules of development, by the rich performance techniques that it possesses. The difficulties are many, the situation requires people to act. We cannot let it “rise on its own, only to perish on its own” (zisheng zimie). . . . Following the development of history and way of life, xiqu performing art cannot not change. Through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, xiqu has never ceased changing. . . . Xiqu cannot separate itself from its audience, and as a result, it cannot separate itself from real life. If it departs from life, it is no longer a theatre form for audiences, instead it becomes a museum piece. (298–299)

A Jia’s writings bracket this tumultuous period with carefully reasoned arguments against wildly opposite extremes. In 1957, in his “Truth in Life and Truth in Xiqu Performance,” he defended xiqu’s performance conventions against those who would reform it out of existence. That essay constituted the first “thorough, systematic analysis of the characteristics of xiqu as an artistic medium, and of the unique way in which it portrays life” (Liu 1988: 112). In 1981, he argued passionately against throwing the baby out with the bath water. He urged those who wanted to preserve xiqu out of existence to reexamine the important advances that had been made during work on the model plays toward an artistically viable modern xiqu.

A Jia explored this fruitful territory between tradition and innovation in his own creative work, and his 1983 Zhongguo dabaike encyclopedia entry on xiqu directing gives important insight into his working process. According to A Jia, a key responsibility of the xiqu director is to help the actor understand that creating a character in xiqu is a process of “learning from experience” (tiyan). Tiyan is the Chinese
term adopted to describe a key Stanislavskian principle, as it has been received in China, of putting oneself in the character’s position so as to experience that emotional life. The term is often juxtaposed against (and valorized over) the term tixian, commonly used to describe xiqu’s stylized method of expression (Wichmann 1990: 165). In his essay for the encyclopedia, A Jia attempts to broaden and deepen the concept of tiyan in a way that fuses these previously oppositional concepts into a symbiotic whole. A Jia’s concept of tiyan as it relates to the work of the xiqu director is quite complex. It involves the actor’s own individual experience of xiqu training as well as his or her general life experience, the experience of generations of xiqu artists who have honed xiqu conventions over the centuries, and the process of experimentation with the actor in rehearsal to find the most effective portrayal for a given moment onstage. A Jia notes that a xiqu actor is not “a blank piece of white paper on which the director can spontaneously draw at will.” Rather, the actor comes with his or her own complete set of conventional techniques (A 1983: 444). He explains:

The xiqu director must explore many possibilities, freely take preexisting conventional materials and revise them until they are shattered to pieces—referring to the requirements of the character and to this preexisting material, little by little carve out the character, start to turn it into a flesh and blood expression for the stage. Xiqu tiyan is not the same as huaju tiyan; xiqu’s psychological technique and huaju’s also are not the same. Xiqu’s psychological technique must work hand in hand with conventional technique. A xiqu actor’s psychological tiyan requires him to take rigorously trained song and stage conventional material and his own entire psychological process and join them together, before he can freely dive into tiyan regarding the character. This experimentation and expression cannot be separated. . . . Xiqu’s tiyan, although it must draw from real life, must not come directly from real life, instead it must accompany its older conventional techniques to “re-tiyan” (zai tiyan) the character’s life. This re-tiyan is critically important. Conventions that don’t undergo tiyan can only be ossified shells; tiyan that does not bring convention with it is neither the concept nor the technique of xiqu. A xiqu director has a duty to understand: one must first temper good formal technique, only then can one freely and fully use psychological technique; one must first give the performance a distinct physical form, only then can one begin to have xiqu stage expression. . . . To make formal movement and psychological movement become a natural, organic xiqu performance, this is the natural result of taking life as the foundation and xiqu-huale (xiqu huale) it. The xiqu director has a duty to understand: a xiqu actor must master this type of organic naturalness onstage, but his feeling simply cannot be that of “performing con-
ventions,” instead [the feeling] must be revealed through the action. For a xiqu actor to master this type of emotional form, the emotional logic (qinggan de luoji) simply must be used as the starting point when the characterization is being created. (445)

In directing the early model play The Red Lantern, A Jia had worked for this melding of form and content where xiqu technique becomes the organic expression of the psychological and emotional world of the character. In a volume of essays by and about A Jia, the actress playing The Red Lantern’s revolutionary grandmother described the rehearsal process for a scene where her adopted son, Li Yuho, is about to be led off to interrogation and probable execution. At first, the actress says, she had a fairly superficial understanding of the character’s emotions as being solely tragic, and she expressed these emotions with an ineffective use of xiqu conventions. She reported that gradually A Jia helped her to a deeper understanding of the character’s complex emotions, which moved through a transient sadness to an ardent revolutionary strength. The actress developed a successful portrayal that expressed these different layers of emotion. Her description of the resulting performance is an interesting synthesis of clear emotional motivation expressed through detailed physicality in precise coordination with the percussion:

As a result [of this new understanding], my performance was changed: the terrible surprise makes Grandmother Li at first feel as though her entire body has no strength. Her hand braced on the table for support she takes two halting steps, on the last beat of the percussion pattern “kuang cai, kuang cai, kuang cai cai cai . . . . . . .

Grandmother Li uses both hands on the table to lift her body upright. Her gaze encouraging Li Yuho: go, go and battle the enemy, I too will continue the fight! This kind of feeling for the character was exactly right. (Gao 1992: 290–291)

This actress also describes how A Jia gave actors significant creative freedom. She noted that while his own choices of technique were excellent, he also gave actors free reign fully to explore and design movement on their own (292). Through his process of xiqu tiyan, A Jia’s work on The Red Lantern remains a widely recognized high point in the history of xiqu directing.

A Jia’s theoretical writings also include important analysis of xiqu audience engagement framed in relation to Stanislavskian and Brechtian theories of audience reception. Distinguishing xiqu’s direct performer-audience interaction from fourth-wall realism, A Jia asserts that in xiqu “when an audience watches a play, there is both intellec-
tual judgment and emotional response—and there is also appreciation of beauty. This is the method of communication between xiqu and the audience” (quoted in Liu 1988: 128). In his encyclopedia article on xiqu directing A Jia argues that because a xiqu actor in creating a role works both from experiencing the character’s emotional life (tiyan) and toward exhibiting his or her own performance skill (tixian), this twofold transformation naturally produces a kind of “distancing” process (“jianli” de guocheng [quotation marks are A Jia’s]). Audience appreciation of both the character’s situation and the performer’s skill likewise naturally produces a level of distancing. Rather than contesting Brecht’s formulation of distancing in relation to xiqu, as numerous scholars since have done (e.g., Tian forthcoming; Martin 1999), A Jia carefully reframes the concept in terms consistent with traditional xiqu aesthetics, thereby allowing him to identify it as a process already naturally at play in the traditional xiqu creative process, even if not so previously named.15 Describing xiqu as demanding a high level of synthesis between internal/emotional and external/formal approaches to performance, A Jia continues the strategy of using the present to validate the past—traditional xiqu already incorporated key elements of modern Western performance theory and actually transcended their oppositional limitations. By also asserting that the xiqu director should systematically clarify these theoretical issues in working with xiqu performers, he raises the status of the xiqu directorial function by positioning it at the convergence of conventional xiqu practice and seminal Western performance theory (A 1983: 447).16

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, political pressures on the arts began to ease, and at this point they have lessened considerably. However, both scripts and production elements are subject to scrutiny of varying intensity and direction depending on the shifting of political winds. Government control continues to exert itself through both overt censorship of scripts and the more subtle but highly effective incentive of the elaborate system of prizes that dominate (some would say stifle) the national artistic scene.17 But irrespective of governmental constraints, the question of how to develop popular and artistically successful innovations that both preserve the essence of the traditional form and are attractive to contemporary audiences remains one of the biggest challenges facing xiqu artists today.

The major institutionalized attempt to meet this challenge is at the National Xiqu Academy (Zhongguo Xiqu Xueyuan) in Beijing, which is one of only two college-level institutions for xiqu performance training and which has the leading permanent, formal training program for xiqu directors in mainland China.18 The academy’s directing
program was founded in 1978 and incorporates many techniques identified as ideal by the achievements of Ouyang Yuqian and A Jia. Students study xiqu directing history and theory, including the work of A Jia, Ouyang Yuqian, and Lizigui. They also receive extensive training in xiqu performance conventions as well as Stanislavsky-inspired techniques for developing emotionally truthful characters.

Over the course of the 1998–1999 academic year I interviewed members of the academy’s directing department faculty and observed directing department classes and student performance projects. All of the faculty members I interviewed gave the same formulation of the xiqu director’s place in the creative process. Unlike in the time of Mei Lanfang, when xiqu was centered around the extraordinary skill of individual performers, directing teachers at the academy asserted that the form is now (or is in the process of becoming) performance centered, with the director leading the artistic input of all the artists involved in a production. The formulation preserves xiqu’s privileging of performance text over literary text. On the other hand, the distinction between the traditional performer-centered system and the developing performance-centered one seems to do mostly with aspects of performance that are “outside” the play—performance choices made primarily to elicit applause for the performer’s skill rather than portray the emotional life of the character. The formula is succinctly expressed in Chinese as “director led, performance centered” (zai dao-yan zhidao xia, yi biaoyan wei zhongxin).

In order to achieve this balance, the directing teachers consistently stressed two major elements required for a successful xiqu director. First was sufficient understanding and competency in the complex system of xiqu performance conventions. Such competency was generally perceived as having both a creative component—allowing the director to find appropriate conventional expressions for the particular dramatic situation at hand—as well as a remedial component—being sufficiently skilled in performance methods that the director could model for a performer who had yet to meet the director’s requests for a particular moment of conventional expression. The second element they saw as required for an effective xiqu director was a high level of analytical ability and creative capacity, enabling the director to move from the literary text to an acceptably xiqu performance text. This element likewise had both remedial and creative components. The ideal xiqu director would be one who could recognize faults in the script, many of which are written by scholars who are not sufficiently well versed in specific demands of xiqu performance. According to the former head of the academy and leading architect of the current
four-year directing program, Zhu Wenxiang, xiqu scripts are often too long, too dense, and do not leave enough room to exploit the full expressive power of xiqu’s performance language. A xiqu director must be prepared to deal with this problem by understanding dramatic structures and performance conventions well enough to make appropriate cuts and additions, to reorder scenes, and to make changes in wording that is difficult to sing or speak according to xiqu’s patterns of vocal stylization. The creative component of this analytical element involves deep analysis of the script to produce a directorial concept (daoyan gousi), and thorough understanding of the characters and dramatic situation to make artistically exciting choices from existing performance conventions, as well as innovating new performance elements when appropriate (Zhu 1998).

Academy directing faculty emphasis on remedial aspects of the xiqu directorial function positions the specifically xiqu-trained director on a trajectory of increasing importance. The declining skill level of new xiqu performers is a generally accepted trend that most assume will only intensify. Furthermore, in this formulation of the xiqu directorial function both its remedial and creative aspects are tied inextricably to deep working knowledge of xiqu performance conventions, thus describing a field of activity in which a purely huaju-trained director cannot effectively participate.

From my observations of classes and performances of student projects I found practical application of these lofty training goals to be decidedly mixed, owing in large part to the fact that the academy was experimenting with admitting students to the xiqu directing program who had little or no previous training in xiqu performance. Zhu Wenxia and several of the directing professors argued that students from regular high schools were better equipped to handle directorial analysis and attempt innovation since they had received more intellectually rigorous academic training than their counterparts at xiqu schools, and that their presence in the program might help raise the analytical level of their xiqu-trained classmates (Zhu 1998). This view is a troubling manifestation of the previously discussed prejudice against xiqu performers as uncultured and uneducated. On the other hand, it is probably also a fairly accurate assessment perpetuated by existing institutional deficiencies, as evidenced by the fact that another reason given by Zhu for accepting students without xiqu training was the very practical one that not enough students from middle school– and high school–level xiqu training institutions were passing the required academy entrance exams. Zhu also acknowledged that many of the students without xiqu training were bringing badly needed tuition dollars
to the institution. Even the proponents of admitting students without *xi* quil training conceded that these students relied heavily on the expertise of their *xi* quil-trained classmates in *xi* quil performance projects, and the experiment was ultimately deemed a failure. Meanwhile, China’s economic boom has resulted in vastly improved financial circumstances at the academy, and the directing program has expanded considerably. Students without *xi* quil training continue to be admitted but are steered to the recently established film and television directing program. Currently all students in the *xi* quil directing program have previous training in *xi* quil performance, and for these students the program’s demanding curriculum seems appropriately structured and its training goals attainable. But none of the directing faculty mentioned is, nor am I, aware of a major, successfully innovative production headed by an academy four-year directing program graduate.

Currently, a more common path to prominence as a *xi* quil director is similar to A Jia’s, in which the artist begins training as a performer then later turns to directing. An important recent example of successfully innovative work by a director following a similar professional path was evident in the award-winning *jingju* adaptation of Lao She’s famous novel *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Camel Xiangzi, also translated as the Rickshaw Boy), directed by Shi Yukun. Shi’s primary training is in *xi* quil but he also studied *huaju* directing theory and practice at the Shanghai Drama Academy and has worked in television and film. Adapted by playwright Zhong Wenyi and produced by the Jiangsu Province Jingju Company (Jiangsu Sheng Jingjuyuan), the production was awarded a gold prize at the Second National Jingju Festival (Di’erjie Zhongguo Jingjujie) held in Bejing in December 1998–January 1999.

*Xi* quil plays are commonly divided into three categories: traditional, newly written historical, and modern. Set in Beijing in the 1920s and using costumes representative of that period, *Camel Xiangzi* is considered a “modern” play. The model plays of the Cultural Revolution, while outmoded in terms of their strident political content and enduring a long period of disfavor through the 1980s (Wichmann 1990: 149–150), still exert strong influence in terms of the artistic solutions they incorporated in “modernizing” the traditional performance language. Many of the melodies and orchestral arrangements in the *jingju Camel Xiangzi* were strongly influenced by the model play *Dujuanshan* (Azalea Mountain). The production was criticized, however, for its failure to include enough singing, particularly for lacking any distinctly memorable new arias (Chang 1999; Chen 1999), deficiencies not exhibited by the model plays. On the other hand, the model plays
are generally considered as having failed to develop a movement vocabulary comparable in richness to the traditional repertoire. The jingju Camel Xiangzi was highly praised for its innovations in this regard (Yi 1999: 5). According to director Shi Yukun, the psychological depth of the characters in Camel Xiangzi required much more attention to emotionally truthful portrayals than had been the case for the model plays and so in rehearsal he worked especially hard with the actors to understand internal aspects of the characters before attempting to find external expression through conventionalized movement (Shi 1999; see Fig. 1).

In an interview, veteran leading actress Huang Xiaoci described the rehearsal process that produced such successful, innovative performances. Saying she had never experienced such rehearsal conditions before, she explained that the director demanded uncharacteristic discipline. All performers were present during rehearsals and no one arrived late or left early. When an actor was not being used, he or she would sit to the side studying lines or Lao She’s novel. Even during seated rehearsals the director required actors to read their lines with feeling and to sing in full voice. And after the actors began to

![Figure 1. Luotuo Xiangzi performers Chen Lincang (left) and Huang Xiaoci (right). Postures of both performers draw more from realistic style expression of the individual characters portrayed than from conventional postures appropriate to traditional xiqu role types. (Photo: Megan Evans)](image-url)
work on their feet, they still continuously referred to the novel. She herself read the novel six times, taking copious notes, and described it as the wellspring of her characterization. The reverence with which all involved in the production held Lao She and his novel is not surprising given that a major impetus for this project was the upcoming national celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Lao She’s birth (Shi 1999). Numerous successful stage, film, and television adaptations preceded this jingju version. Shi required the cast to study a video recording of the huaju production as well as the feature film adaptation, which Huang stated also contributed positively to her performance (Hui 1999: 8–9). Interestingly, no technique directors were used on the production to assist with developing the movement. Rather, the gifted leading performers exploited their own extraordinary technique to externalize in very effective ways the inner lives of Lao She’s complex characters, offering an important contemporary realization of A Jia’s theory of xiqu tiyan, discussed above. The production was also particularly praised for limiting exhibitions of xiqu performance skills to those appropriate to the characters and necessary to the story (Chen 1999; Luo 1999), meeting the Xiqu Academy formulation previously discussed that xiqu is/should be “director led, performance centered” (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Luotuo Xiangzi performer Huang Xiaoci (center in dress) adopts a pose from male role movement vocabulary of traditional xiqu to express the central female character’s vehement rejection of her father’s orders. The abstracted setting, representative of Beijing city walls, tilted at a 45-degree angle to convey the imminent decay of pre-Communist Chinese society, was designed by Huang Haiwei. (Photo: Megan Evans)
Typical of xiqu-trained directors working in xiqu, Shi Yukun did not have the same level of control over this production that a Western director, or a Chinese director working in huaju, or even a Chinese huaju director working on a xiqu production, might have. Shi did not choose the project or designers, nor did he have significant input on script revisions or casting of the actors. The production was previewed by cultural officials and subsequently critiqued by formal committees of xiqu experts, resulting in several substantial changes. No “Notes from the Director” appeared in the production program. Furthermore, at least some indication of relative status in the politics of the creative process can be gleaned from the speaking order at a panel discussion by the Camel Xiangzi creative team. First, two Jiangsu Province Office of Culture officials spoke, next came the administrative head of the Jiangsu Jingju Company, followed by the playwright, the composer, the two leading actors, and finally the director (Hui 1999: 8). Nonetheless, both the composer and actress Huang Xiaoci credited Shi with sparking innovative work that resulted in a production that was both popularly successful and accepted by the experts as sufficiently jingju in quality. From my own study of the production, I believe he shaped the individual components with great precision into a very satisfying whole. The production has been taken into the Jiangsu Province Jingju Company’s repertoire and has toured extensively throughout China.

The role of the xiqu director is still very much in flux. Evidence of directorial function in xiqu’s historical development is used to resist perceptions of that function as a comparatively recent, wholly foreign import, while the expected presence of a director in the creative process of a new xiqu play is exploited as a marker of xiqu’s artistic development. At the training level, as evidenced by concerns raised by Xiqu Academy directing faculty, there is a strong focus currently on the importance of the director’s remedial function because of a prevailing concern that the technical and creative abilities of xiqu performers are on the decline. Thus, whereas in the 1930s Jiao Juyin explained the lack of a director in xiqu in terms of xiqu’s artistic surpluses in comparison to huaju, current perceptions of xiqu as being in crisis produce definitions of the xiqu directorial function that are articulated in terms of contemporary xiqu’s perceived artistic deficiencies. When the performers, playwright, and composer are clearly proficient, such as was the case in Camel Xiangzi, the xiqu directorial function may be articulated in creatively secondary terms of sparking and shaping the primary creation of the other artists. Yet every new or substantially revised xiqu production has one or more directors working as part of the production team. The specific functions of that director will
depend on a complex intersection of resources and demands, including the extent of the director’s xiqu training; the demands of the literary play text (which establishes foundational elements of character and plot); the set of specific performance skills offered by the performers, composers, and designers involved in the production; political hierarchies of the producing theatre company; and, finally and in many ways most importantly, the conventional performance language as it has been honed over generations by master performers.20 This last element constitutes a kind of paradigmatic performance text against which xiqu experts and fans will directly gauge the success of any new production, yet it is these same conventions that A Jia argued xiqu directors must “revise until they are shattered to pieces” in order to achieve successful xiqu innovation (A 1983: 445). This paradox suggests why successful innovation in xiqu as been so difficult as well as why debate continues over the most effective methods to train and work as a xiqu director.

NOTES

1. The situation in Shanghai at the end of the twentieth century was reportedly much more encouraging. See Wichmann-Walczak 2000.

2. Additional evidence can be found in the fact that a directing department at the National Xiqu Academy was not established until 1978, and only after ten years of operating a more ad hoc certificate program did the department institute a permanent, formal, four-year training program that awards an academic degree (Zhu 1998). As another example, a 1995 three-volume publication aimed at giving younger audiences a general introduction to jingju does not address directors (Tianjin jiaoyu chubanshe 1995).

3. While I believe my focus on Li Zigui, Ouyang Yuqian, and A Jia is readily justified by their prominent contributions to xiqu development, the contemporary example of Camel Xiangzi was chosen in large part because it was the most important new production during my fieldwork in 1998–1999. Camel Xiangzi is an excitingly innovative production worthy of study in this context, but the work of other xiqu-trained directors, notably Ma Ke of the Shanghai Jingju Company (Shanghai Jingjuyuan), would have served as equally effective examples. This article is concerned primarily with the development of xiqu in China for Chinese audiences. Chinese theatre artists working primarily outside of China, such as Chen Shizheng, director of the controversial Lincoln Center Peony Pavilion, are therefore not addressed.

4. These first two designations probably relate to a common practice of the time: to protect the secrecy of scripts from competing xiqu troupes, each actor was given only his own lines. The bao benzi de would quite literally be the holder of the only complete copy of the script (Zhu 1998).
5. A key convention of *xiqu* is the complex system of role type divisions. A performer specializes in a particular role type, which determines fundamentals about movement vocabulary and vocal technique. In *jingju* (Beijing opera), the four basic role types are *sheng* (male), *dan* (female), *hualian* (painted face—brash, larger-than-life, often generals or supernatural beings), and *chou* (smaller-than-life, usually comic). Further subdivisions exist based on age of the character and nature of the play (civil plays emphasize song and speech, whereas martial plays emphasize combat and acrobatics).

6. Major elements of Jiao Juyin’s directing philosophy, including “nationalizing” *huaju* by incorporating *xiqu* performance techniques, are available in English translation (Su et al. 2003).

7. With the exception of a few all-female regional *xiqu* forms, most professional *xiqu* performers in this period were male.

8. This quote is my translation of a passage from a Chinese language collection of Jiao Juyin’s writings. Since no translator is given, and since presumably Jiao’s dissertation was submitted in French, he either wrote originally in Chinese or translated his original French to Chinese. Jiao died during the Cultural Revolution and so could not have been involved in preparation of this 1986 publication.

9. A similar serial structure was already well established in ritual opera by the late 1500s (Guo 2005: 108).

10. Owing to what the *dabaike* describes as “conservative forces,” Ouyang left the society in 1922. The school operated for seven years before closing because of financial difficulties and trained ninety students, sixty of whom finished the program.

11. These “fighting” performance troupes really did fight alongside regular soldiers, entertaining them when a lull in combat allowed (Wang 1979: 35).

12. According to one government-sanctioned source, the number of regional forms proliferated during the early years of Communist China such that their number expanded from approximately 100 to more than 368 forms by 1959. The number of *xiqu* troupes nationwide also exploded, from more than one thousand to more than three thousand (*Zhongguo dabaike* 1983: 505). These statistics are suspect given the revisionist impulse of official historical accounts to give credit for positive trends to post-1949 forces. It is highly possible that many more regional forms existed earlier but did not receive official recognition until after Communist victory. The growth of new regional *xiqu* forms has a much longer and more complex history than these statistics would indicate (see, e.g., Mackerras 1971). On the other hand, post-1949 governmental economic support for local forms and productions certainly promoted their development and proliferation.

13. Dolby notes that the sheer variety of regional forms came as a revelation to Beijing-based theatre experts, and led to the establishment of a research group focused on regional forms (Dolby 1976: 234).

14. These quotes were found by Li Ruru in the archives of the Shang-
hai Jingju Company. The first is from a manuscript authored by the director called “Director’s Interpretation.” The second quote is from a manuscript dated that same year and titled “What I Learned from Directing Interrogating the Chair.”

15. Min Tian’s important investigation of Brecht’s influence in China questions the accuracy of A Jia’s formulation of distancing in traditional xiqu, but acknowledges its influence (Tian forthcoming).


17. In a mailed survey I conducted in 1999 of members of the Chinese Association of Xiqu Directors (Zhongguo Xiqu Daoyan Xuehui) I asked respondents to identify major problems facing contemporary xiqu and discuss possible remedies. Five of the thirty-two respondents perceived a disparity between tastes and standards of audiences and those of experts and award judges. One respondent explicitly blamed theatre companies for creating productions with the goal of pleasing the experts rather than their audiences.

18. In 2002 the Shanghai Theatre Academy (Shanghai Xiju Xueyuan) merged with the School of Performing Arts of the Shanghai Teacher’s University, the Shanghai Traditional Opera School, and the Shanghai Dance School to become the second mainland institution offering college-level xiqu training, including xiqu directing.

19. For its first ten years, the directing program was less formalized, lasting only twelve to eighteen months and serving primarily older professional performers and directors in their thirties and forties who sought to raise their artistic level as well as their status within the bureaucracy of their own performance troupes. They often had little formal schooling and received a certificate of study rather than a formal degree upon completion of the program. In 1988 a formal four-year program leading to a bachelor’s degree in xiqu directing was established. Professional performers and directors still study at the academy for a year or two in various certificate programs, but this is a fairly ad hoc process. In addition, there are graduate students in directing who pursue a two- to three-year course of study that is focused more on theory than practice, though there are also a few students planning to pursue careers as professional directors and a number who also assisted in teaching the undergraduate directing students. The graduate study of directing is highly individualized based on the student’s background and research interests, and most graduate students are required to complete research and write a thesis (Zhu 1998).

20. The actual weight given to the goal of preserving tradition varies between companies and specific projects. For example, the Shanghai Jingju Company places much more emphasis on innovation, while the Jiangsu Province Jingju Company has emphasized preservation (Wichmann-Walczak 2005), yet the Jiangsu production of Camel Xiangzi was extremely innovative.
GLOSSARY

120 shi Zhandou Pingjushe
一二〇師戰斗平劇社
A Jia 阿甲
Baimao nü 百毛女
Baisha zhuan 白蛇傳
bao 抱
bao ben si de 抱本子的
bao zong jiang de 抱總講的
Bawang bie ji 霸王別姬
benxi 本戲
chou 丑
Chun Liu She 春柳社
cuan xi de 擔戲的
dan 旦
Daoyan Ganbu Xunlianban 導演
乾部訓練班
daoyan gousi 導演卯思
Di’erjie Zhongguo Jingjujie 第二屆中國京劇藝術節
Dujuanshan 杜鵑山
Fu Luheng 杜律衡
gaige kaijiang 改革開放
Gao Yu 高宇
Guan Hanqing 閆漢卿
Hongdeng ji 紅燈記
Huaqi 話劇
Hualian 花臉
hualin 胡琴
jianli de guocheng 開闢的過程
Jiang Qing 江青
Jiangsu sheng jingju yuan 江蘇省
劇院
Jiao Juyin 賈菊 İzmir
jingju 京劇
Jinri shi zhongguo xiju 今日之中國
戲劇
jju minzhu zhuyi geming 舊民主主
義革命
ju shou tou zu 舉手投足
juedui hua yi 絕對化一
Lao She 老舍
Li Zigu 李紫貴
liantai benxi 連台本戲
Limao huan taizi 猴貓換太子
Luotuo Xiangzi 骆驼祥子
Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳
mu biao xi 幕表戲
nan ou bei mei 南歐北梅
Nantong Linggong Xueshe 南通
伶工學社
Ouyang Yuqian 歐陽予倩
pai xi ren 排戲人
qinggan de luoji 情感的遲輯
Shejiaibang 沙家浜
Shanghai Xiju Jiuwan Xiehui 上海戲劇界救亡協會
歌劇部
Shanghai xiju xueyuan 上海戲劇
學院
Shen yizi 審音子
sheng 生
Shi Yukun 石玉昆
Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖
tixian 體現
tiyan 體驗
wen guan shi de 文官的
wu xing tou 武行頭
Xinju Tongzhiqui 新劇同志會
Xiong mei kai huang 兄妹開荒
xiqu 戲曲
Xiqu Gaijin Weiyanhuil 戲曲改進
委員會
xiqu huale 戲曲化了
Yan’an pingju Yanjiuyuan 延安平
劇研究院
Yan’an Pingju Jiaoyuan 延安平劇院
yangge 科歌
Yishchucu Yanjiushi Zhuren 藝術
處研究室主任
zai daoyan zhidaoxia, yi biaoyan wei zhongxin 在導演指導下，以
表演為中心
zaitian 再體驗
Zaixiang Liu Luoguo 美相劉曜鍋
Zhang Xie zhuangyan 張壯元
Zhong Wenyi 种文衣
Zhongguo dabahe quanshu: xiqu quyi 中國大百科全書：戲曲卷
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Shi Yukun. 1999. First-level director, Jiangsu Province Jingju Company, Nanjing. Interview with author about his training, and artistic goals, and working methods as director of Camel Xiangzi. Beijing, 5 February.


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