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Theatricality and Cultural Critique in Chinese Cinema

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The various ways in which theatre and film interact generate diverse forms of theatricality in Chinese cinema: jingju films, narrative films containing traditional theatrical performances, and films incorporating modern performance types. The significance of theatre in Chinese cinema will be discussed with two questions in mind: (1) to what extent the aesthetics of traditional Chinese theatre cross over from stage to screen and (2) whether filmic representations of theatre generate a critical discourse vis-à-vis state ideology and cultural policies.

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This paper will look at the interplay between the theatrical¹ and the cinematic in Chinese film. In its fledgling stage, Chinese cinema was inseparable from traditional Chinese theatre. The earliest Chinese filmmakers and actors had been trained in various theatrical disciplines. Thus, for them, the transposition of theatrical performances from stage to screen was a natural cinematic practice. Some of the earliest motion pictures made in China were scenes from *jingju* and other regional theatrical styles. Ever since the Fengtai photo shop began filming Tan Xinpei's *jingju* performance in 1905, adapting traditional stage performance for the screen has been an important part of early experiments in Chinese filmmaking (see Figure 1).² In the 1930s and 1940s, catering to an urban audience already exposed to Hollywood melodramas and having easy access to live theatre, the film industry shifted its focus

to feature films, modeled primarily after modern, nonmusical drama. The deep-rooted notion of film as a foreign medium had made movies seem more appropriate than traditional theatre for conveying “realist” drama. This transition was reflected in the early struggles of *xiren dianying*, the theatrical film, as it faced the challenges from *wenren dianying*, the literary film.³

In terms of audience and reception, *wenren dianying*'s victory over *xiren dianying* could have resulted from the demands of a mostly urban and increasingly sophisticated film audience, as well as from the pressures imposed by the great quantity of imported Hollywood films. However, political factors outside the commercial world of the Shanghai movie industry also aggravated *xiren dianying*'s disadvantageous situation. Chinese theatrical films, while losing commercial ground to Hol-



FIGURE 1. The *jingju* actor Tang Xinpei performed in the first Chinese film, *Dingjunshan*, a Fengtai production in 1905. (Photo: China Film Archive)

lywood imports, were also criticized by the politically progressive Leftist intellectuals, who favored the “civilized dramas” (*wenmingxi*) spawned by the May Fourth “New Culture” Movement.⁴

From the standpoint of production, *xiren dianying*'s waning popularity may have been the result of a certain degree of intrinsic incompatibility between the age-old conventions of Chinese theatre and the production requirements of modern film. As Kristine Harris points out, there were many practical obstacles for a dramatist crossing over to the new medium of cinema, particularly when presenting traditional theatrical material. Some of the problems were technical, such as the limited space the camera allows for the performer, while other problems were aesthetic: “[The] translation of three-dimensional stylized stage space onto a new “realist” flat screen would have posed additional difficulties for any artist accustomed to the spatial conventions of China’s long screen-painting tradition—conventions radically different from the Renaissance principles of fixed point perspectives and foreshortening that had produced the camera lens” (Harris 1997: 60).

It seems that transposing Chinese theatre onto film, even if under favorable cultural, political, and commercial conditions, would still have had to overcome a host of aesthetic problems. Even though earlier attempts may have failed, the influence of *xiren dianying* persisted and penetrated into films that ostensibly disavowed their genetic ties with traditional Chinese theatre. Much of the aesthetic influence, which is manifested in the acting style, characterization, and plot development in many of the melodrama films of the 1930s and 1940s, continues to shape Chinese filmmaking generations later. According to Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, all Chinese films may be divided into two broad categories: the operatic mode and the realist mode. Films in the operatic mode, argue Berry and Farquhar, are profoundly influenced by the aesthetics of Chinese theatre, even when the film narrative makes no obvious reference to theatre (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 47–55).⁵ It is ironic that the aesthetic issues that *xiren dianying* failed to surmount seem to have become an endearing feature of Chinese cinema.

The late 1950s and the early 1960s witnessed a revived interest in film adaptations of theatrical performance, culminating in the overwhelming triumph of modernized *jingju* films during the Cultural Revolution. Two styles of *jingju* films were being produced in this period: the straightforward “stage documentary” style and the innovative adaptation style. Paul Clark maintains that the conflicts between Chinese theatrical conventions and the film medium prevented success in adapting the popular heritage of Chinese theatre to film. From his description of one such adaptation, the problem seems to be mainly

aesthetic: “The Changchun Studio’s adaptation of the Henan provincial opera (*yuju*) *Hua Mulan* (1956) tried to combine traditional stage techniques with what one disgruntled reviewer called ‘some expert’s so-called modern methods of artistic portrayal.’ Apparently audiences laughed at the film because, although real settings and props were used (including a weaving loom), one character rode a horse in normal stage style, that is, minus horse” (Clark 1987: 68–9). Clark observes that this type of innovative adaptation involves mixing the two semiotic systems: the largely indexical and symbolic system in Chinese theatre and the iconic system that fits in the filmic mimesis. When realistic settings and props were used with indexical signs and symbolic props, the ultimate effect could be confusing, especially to a traditional audience. While it was perfectly acceptable for a character to ride a stick representing a horse on a conventional stage, it would look ridiculous to use one for an on-location film shoot. On the other hand, straightforward “stage documentaries” are not without their problems. According to Clark, the ultimate challenge lies in “preserving the strengths and peculiarities of an opera performance while shaping a film” (Clark 1987: 69). This, again, is an aesthetic issue. Although it was believed that the emphasis on realism in film and the centrality of artifice in theatre could be mutually complementary, how to reconcile the inherent contradiction between realism and artifice remained problematic.

No satisfactory solutions had been found before drastically modernized revolutionary *jingju* (*yangbanxi*) replaced the traditional repertoire in the mid 1960s. Interestingly enough, it is this heavy-handedly altered and standardized form of traditional theatre that succeeded in reaching a mass audience. It seems that, in order to achieve popularity on the national level and on a mass scale, regionally derived theatrical forms have to betray their own artistic roots by aligning themselves with both ideological power and the modern medium of dissemination—film.⁶

While the filming of theatrical performances in early Chinese cinema may indicate an innocent fascination with both traditional art forms and the modern medium, the filming of revolutionary *jingju* performances during the Cultural Revolution suggests a very different picture. One cannot ignore the obvious ideological forces behind this type of film production. But to ascribe the success of revolutionary *jingju* films to political enforcement alone seems unsatisfactory. Political propaganda could take a variety of forms, but why did the ideology of the Cultural Revolution give rise to this particular type of cultural product? And why did the modernized *jingju* film correspond so well with the art policies of that period?

Apart from political factors, certain cultural and aesthetic char-

acters of the *jingju* film may have contributed to its ascension during the Cultural Revolution. By then, *jingju* had already been identified as *guoju* (national theatre), and therefore lent itself easily to the role of shaping a new national identity under the Communist regime. The theatrical form allows the portrayal of larger-than-life heroes in order to exercise the maximum amount of ideological impact. The realist speaking drama (*huaju*) could hardly convey the same degree of revolutionary fervor. Furthermore, revolutionary *jingju*'s capacity for emotional and ideological sway is magnified and maximized through the modern film medium. The conflict between filmic realism and theatrical artifice seems to have been resolved under the banner of "revolutionary romanticism." What seemed to be an old aesthetic problem has now become an advantage in the context of this particular cultural production.

Traditional Theatre: Its Glamor and Fate

Xie Jin's 1964 film *Two Stage Sisters* (*Wutai jiemei*) is a perfect visual analogue of the interwoven theatre/film history I have outlined so far. Although coming out of the *wenren dianying* tradition and filmed with a script, *Two Stage Sisters* bears profound marks of the Chinese theatrical tradition, partly because of the director's early training in traditional theatre.

Two Stage Sisters is a film about theatre. The entire film revolves around the theatre and uses the stage to underscore the changes that occurred in China between 1935 and 1950. Theatrical performances, and the theatre itself, undergo a series of transformations during that period. By following the lives of two Shaoxing theatre (*yueju*) performers, we see a traditional troupe performing in the rural market place, commercial performances at a Shanghai opera house, a socially conscious adaptation of Lu Xun's *The New Year's Sacrifice*, and, finally, a *yueju* version of *The White-Haired Girl* that strictly accorded Mao's Yan'an cultural policy.

However, *Two Stage Sisters* transcends the insular world of Shaoxing theatre to make far-reaching statements about Chinese society at large. Traditional *yueju* serves as a metaphor for a traditional China trying to cope with events of historical, political, and cultural import. The theatre troupe's trajectory from the "feudal" countryside to the Shanghai entertainment arena, and finally to a stage politicized with revolutionary causes, functions as a microcosm of the struggles of the Chinese nation.

As social commentary and cultural critique, the position of *Two Stage Sisters* remains ambiguous. The film chronicles the implementation of a cultural policy in which it also participates. The Cultural Rev-

olution's appropriation of theatre via film to create a powerful form of political propaganda is reenacted in the film itself. The film ends on an apparently prosocialist note, as one of the stage sisters, now a Communist cadre, performs a type of *yueju* that is highly ideological and strays considerably from its artistic origins. The endorsement of the official line toward the end significantly undercuts the film's power as an independent critical voice.

The outward compromise notwithstanding, the film is a rich, multilayered text that has prevented itself from falling squarely into the official propagandist scheme. Owing to the director's training in a variety of theatrical disciplines, the film's aesthetics are drawn from a rich reservoir of Chinese folk theatres, the May Fourth Movement, Hollywood melodrama, Soviet realism, and, ironically, Mao's revolutionary romanticism.⁷ Severely criticized by Party officials for displaying "petit bourgeois sentiments" and portraying "middle characters," *Two Stage Sisters* was obviously not revolutionary enough. The film, made in 1964, was not allowed official release until after the Cultural Revolution.

Xie Jin's use of traditional theatre as a vehicle for cultural criticism continues to haunt Chinese filmmakers of the subsequent generations. Chinese theatrical and folk performances find frequent representations in contemporary films, most notably in the works of the "Fifth Generation" directors. In these films, mostly produced in the decade from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, the world of theatre is frequently employed to parallel the social and political upheavals of twentieth-century China, and the artistic tradition identified with the Chinese nation. However, to what extent traditional theatre can represent the Chinese nation and what this type of discourse ultimately achieves remain a highly contested subject.

In Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (*Huozhe*, 1994), the narrative follows the life of Fugui, a dilettante shadow puppeteer, through a succession of social and political changes. While still a member of the gentry in the 1940s, Fugui gambles his life away while dabbling in the art of puppetry. While the life he leads in the beginning is dissolute and decadent, only at this stage is his art a purely aesthetic interest. After losing his sheltered, aristocratic life due to war and unrest, Fugui makes his new living as a performer in his shadow puppet troupe; his art now begins to serve an economic function. As the film progresses, the ancient art of puppetry continues to serve new purposes. Fugui survives capture by the Nationalist Army by performing for them, and later entertains his fellow villagers in support of the political causes of the Cultural Revolution.

It is suggested in the film that, in order to survive, art has to betray its aesthetic origins and adapt itself to different economic and

political conditions. Art is prostitution, as Baudelaire so irreverently claimed. By prostitution, the artist proudly makes public what is supposedly private—body, desire, fantasy, or artistic creation.⁸ But *To Live* seems to portray a different prostitution, the kind that encourages the preservation of a traditional art form (the shadow puppet) by prostituting it for survival. Indeed, “to live” means an endless stream of compromise and surrender. The miraculous preservation of the puppets at the end of the film cannot be embraced without a sense of irony—the artist, so bent on survival and preservation, ends up with the mere artifacts of an art form that is no longer alive.

In Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*, 1993), the “state of the art” is dramatized through the tension between Juxian, a reformed prostitute, and Dieyi, a beautiful and narcissistic *jingju* artist. Caught in between Juxian’s unrelenting reality and Dieyi’s ephemeral beauty is Xiaolou, another *jingju* performer who is ready to compromise his art for the sake of survival. While Juxian urges Xiaolou to comply with the reigning ideology of each successive decade to survive in the real world, Dieyi continually reminds him of his obligation to his artistic commitment. This conflict reaches its climax during the Cultural Revolution, when the three characters are forced to kneel in front of an angry mob, both Xiaolou and Dieyi in makeup, for the ultimate denunciation of art. The moment of betrayal leads to the immediate tragedy of Juxian’s suicide, foreshadowing the final scene where Dieyi kills himself while rehearsing his role as the loyal concubine.

While there are obvious similarities between *To Live* and *Farewell My Concubine*, Chen Kaige’s treatment of traditional theatre seems to be at once more idealistic and more radical. When both directors are confronted with the inevitable choice of sacrificing art, Zhang chooses “to live” while Chen says “farewell.” In spite of the seemingly subversive power of *Farewell My Concubine*, the film was officially released in China two years after its production.⁹ In the political atmosphere of the mid 1990s, criticizing the Cultural Revolution had become permissible, even fashionable. The release of the film in mainland China signaled a certain degree of “political tolerance,” but more importantly, the film’s international success coincided with a rising sentiment of new nationalism in China.¹⁰ Actively seeking greater visibility in the international arena, the Chinese government now began to cautiously woo and win over its internationally successful, albeit politically suspect, cultural luminaries.¹¹

Thus, cinematic representations of traditional Chinese theatre became entangled with a complex web of power relations both at home and abroad. On the one hand, the cultural critique, couched in theatrical symbols of “the Chinese nation,” could be easily appropriated by

the government to serve the rhetoric of cultural nationalism. Outside China, on the other hand, the Fifth Generation filmmakers' exploitation of the visuality of Chinese theatre is criticized as a self-subjugation to the cultural undertow of orientalism. The visually spectacular *Farewell My Concubine*, according to critics such as Wendy Larson, exhibits a tendency to feminize the Chinese nation through *jingju* in order to satisfy Western male fantasies (Larson 1997: 331–346).¹² To some extent, such critical views betray the critics' own preoccupation with orientalism and gender politics. But, how Chinese films fare internationally often does influence the way they are received at home. Domestic responses to internationally acclaimed Chinese films such as *To Live* and *Farewell My Concubine* have generally been a mixture of pride and feelings of insecurity, precisely based on similar perceptions of orientalism and exoticism. Some Chinese critics are especially uncomfortable with the portrayal of homosexuality in *Farewell My Concubine* (Jun 1994: 24; Shu 1994: 64–66), a sentiment that seems to confirm Larson's criticism of Chen Kaige's "feminization."

However, critical debates from the standpoint of China-West cultural relations, often emotionally charged, can distract from the real import of these films in their primary, Chinese context. What seems to be left out of the discussion is the question, how relevant and effective are the films as critiques of Chinese political culture? Even on this front, much Fifth Generation work is faulted, perhaps unfairly, for its reluctance to engage with the here-and-now before it, too, becomes history (Cai 1998: 64–65). When traditional theatre is used to weave allegories about the cultural past, the critical edge of the film is perceived to be suspended in a safe historical distance without reaching the core issues of contemporary Chinese society.¹³

Rock and Pop: New Possibilities for Cultural Critique?

In spite of its rich history in Chinese cinema, traditional Chinese theatre has now become such a loaded cinematic trope that, as a critical discourse, it seems to have reached an impasse, unable to further navigate the murky waters of its many cultural implications. Yet against all odds, the interaction between theatre and cinema continues to regenerate and revive through the incorporation of modern, nontraditional theatrical and performance forms, as seen in the works of a new wave of Chinese filmmakers often dubbed the "Sixth Generation."

In Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing zazhong*, 1993), the director employs rock 'n' roll in a similar fashion as earlier directors employed traditional theatre in their films. "China's first rock 'n' roll movie . . . banned by the Chinese authorities" (Donald 1998: 94), *Beijing Bastards* documents Cui Jian's rock concerts in juxtaposition with

the daily existence of a group of counterculture youth. By changing the focus of theatricality from the country to the city, from the traditional to the modern, and from the feminine to the masculine, the film seems to be promising an alternative critical discourse. While Fifth Generation films identify the theatrical stage with the Chinese nation and use the vicissitudes of traditional art as a metaphor for the fate of twentieth-century China, *Beijing Bastards* uses rock 'n' roll to make a critical statement outside, or even counter to, the Chinese tradition. Instead of employing cultural symbols, metaphors, and political innuendos, the film confronts the Party-state in a more direct manner and asserts a more rigorous criticism of the ruling ideology.

Often praised as radical and innovative, *Beijing Bastards's* somewhat aggressive critical stance is, according to Stephanie Donald, undermined by a lack of sensitivity to gender issues. Analyzing the film from the perspective of a marginalized female character, Donald demonstrates "how the hegemony of a certain concept of statehood and modernity can be replicated in gender relations even among the very groups that feel themselves excluded from the organizing principles of their political environment" (Donald 1998: 93).

Staging its cultural subversion with a certain bohemian elitism, *Beijing Bastards* still relies on a more or less confined artistic space to convey social reality. Mi Jiashan's *The Troubleshooters* (Wanzhu, 1988) also waging a cultural battle through theatricality, participates in the critique of political culture on a more popular basis. Eschewing the highly performative operas, puppets, and rock 'n' roll, the film focuses on the theatricality of the everyday, from social "happenings" to life in the streets. In the film, three self-styled "troubleshooters" set up a "3T" company to offer unsolicited help for those in distress, thus staging a simulacrum of a problem-ridden postsocialist China. The 3T Literature Award Ceremony blurs the line between reality and fantasy. With stand-ins for famous writers and government officials, the highly theatrical ceremony acts out "a lie that tells a truth about a less truthful reality" (Yau 1993: 100). The fashion show sequence—featuring popular models, bodybuilders, revolutionary *jingju* characters, and familiar political icons appearing in new costumes—creates a hyped performativity that is both entertaining and unnerving (Yau 1993: 104).

But, the theatricality of *The Troubleshooters* extends beyond the 3T Literature Award Ceremony and the fashion-show sequence. With a mission to alleviate depression, solve problems and resolve conflicts for the common people, the 3T company operates as a theatrical entity in a politicized and commercialized urban space. Working as real-life surrogates, the three troubleshooters busily identify and tackle a plethora of new and old problems that are supposed to be taken care of by

the Party. Produced in 1988, *The Troubleshooters* pointed out new directions for cultural criticism that were cut short a year later. The film, still appearing daring and playful today, made uncanny predictions about its own fate: political power armed with commercialism, the chief target of the film's critique, has eventually overpowered that critical voice in the decade to follow.

Yet it is too soon to pronounce the demise of the theatrical film as a critical discourse. While it might be true that the Fifth Generation now seems content with displaying the visual glamour of Chinese culture, the more iconoclastic Sixth Generation has forged a new form of theatricality that is firmly anchored in China's present situation.¹⁴ Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000) charts the transformation of the state-run Peasant Culture Group in a small city into the privatized and reinvented All-Star Rock 'n' Breakdance Electronic Band, during a decade of intense socioeconomic reform and dislocation from the 1980s to the 1990s. With a nod to the Fifth Generation's epic cinematic take on theatricality, *Platform* offers a sweeping critique of the late twentieth-century Chinese political economy and its impact on popular culture and personal freedom. Jia Zhangke's interest in theatricality resurfaces in *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004), a portrayal of life within a kitschy theme park outside Beijing filled with shrunken replicas of world-famous landmarks. Often interpreted as a critique of globalization, *The World* is the first Jia Zhangke film to receive government approval and official release in China.¹⁵ In the film, the lives of the theme park performers and their performances merge into one, as they both inhabit that world and depend upon it for their livelihood. For these performers, whose lives are trapped in an artificial world, theatrical acts become mundane experiences, whereas daily life begins to take on theatrical qualities (see Figure 2). The film seems to suggest that life in contemporary China *is* theatrical, even without stage and props. Thus, Jia Zhangke has both inherited the hyperrealism of *The Troubleshooters* and advanced the critical discourse embedded in the theatricality of the everyday.

After *Beijing Bastards*, Zhang Yuan has slowly emerged from the "underground" to the mainstream, but his work continues to display an engaged, and deepening, fascination with the critical potential of theatricality. In *East Palace West Palace* (*Donggong xigong*, 1997), recurring *jingju* scenes are juxtaposed with an all-night interrogation of a homosexual by the policeman who has arrested him. Eschewing grand gestures of national allegories, the theatrical flashbacks provide an intimate subtext to the gay man's personal narrative of identity, memory, and fantasy. Still labeled as an "underground" film, *East Palace West Palace* has not been officially released in China.



FIGURE 2. For the faux-ethnic dancers in *The World*, the line between theatricality and daily life becomes blurry. (Photo: Courtesy of Jia Zhangke)

In 2002, Zhang Yuan's filming of *Jiang Jie*, a revolutionary *jingju* marked a most intriguing move in the career of a major Sixth Generation director. Zhang Yuan reportedly decided to make the film after watching a live performance of the revolutionary *jingju* and falling under its spell. The titular heroine, Jiang Jie, is one of the widely celebrated revolutionary figures whose life inspired both a revolutionary *jingju* in 1964 and a film titled *Liehuo zhong yongsheng* (*Red Crag*, directed by Shui Hua, 1965). Although the 1964 version of *Jiang Jie* did not make its way into the standard *yangbanxi* repertoire during the Cultural Revolution because of the intricacies of shifting ideology, it did in its time serve as the model for other revolutionary *jingju* films, such as *Zhiqiu Weihushan* (*Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, directed by Xie Tieli, 1970) and *Hongdeng ji* (*Red Lantern*, directed by Cheng Yin, 1970). Therefore, Zhang Yuan's decision to restage and refilm *Jiang Jie* is open to multiple interpretations. Some might call it a "sell-out," as Zhang Yuan has publicly announced that the film is a tribute to the heroism and personal sacrifice that he finds so moving in Chinese revolutionary history. However, the somewhat ambiguous and marginal status of *Jiang Jie* within the genre of revolutionary *jingju* does point to a more nuanced political position Zhang Yuan could be adopting. Against the background of a postsocialist, market-driven China, where even rela-

tively recent history is falling outside the public horizon, Zhang Yuan's effort to revive the revolutionary *jingju* becomes relevant as a reminder, if not a critique, of the endemic apathy and obliviousness of history in Chinese society today.

Conclusion

Through various manifestations of theatricality in Chinese cinema, theatre has been used to represent and question concepts of Chinese culture and the Chinese nation. And because of traditional theatre's potential for building narratives of national identity and for simultaneously critiquing those narratives, various cultural and political forces will continue to vie for their claim on the symbolic and allegorical power embedded in the theatrical world. Meanwhile, the younger generation of Chinese filmmakers, such as Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke, has been actively exploring new forms of theatricality by utilizing nontraditional performance types and by expanding and redefining the notion of theatricality altogether. Such experimentation and expansion have led to the reinvigoration of the theatrical film as a sustained critical discourse. However, like the Fifth Generation pioneers, Sixth Generation directors face the same challenges from a global cultural environment dictated by political and economic power. In this sense, filmmakers dedicated to their art, in a manner that mirrors the artists and performers in their films, are forever confronted with the quandary of remaining true to their artistic visions—visions that are inherently at odds with a world full of disappointments and compromises.¹⁶

NOTES

1. In the context of this discussion, "theatre" is understood as an umbrella term to cover a broad array of performance types, from traditional theatre to rock 'n' roll, from shadow puppets to fashion shows. Even though "performance," not "theatre," might be the more inclusive term to encompass the spectrum of theatrical forms under discussion here, I choose to stay with "theatre" to convey the sense that it is not only the act of performing, but also the physical theatre—performers, props, stage—that is important in generating theatricality and cultural critique in Chinese films. Thus, the term "theatricality" is used in its broadest sense to denote all that is related to theatre.

I wish to thank the anonymous readers of my paper for the Association of Asian Performance Emerging Scholars Panel (2007) as their comments and critique helped me clarify this point and other aspects of my argument.

2. An early Chinese term for film, *yingxi* (shadow play), suggests how intimately bound film and theatre once were in the eyes of Chinese filmmakers. For a detailed discussion of the term, see Cui 2003: 4–9.

3. The term *wenren* traditionally refers to literary men of the scholar-official or the literati class during the dynastic period. However, during the Republican period, *wenren* also included literary men, scholars, and intellectuals influenced by the progressive thought of the May Fourth Movement. In the context of this discussion, *wenren* is used in contrast with *xiren* (thespians) to categorize filmmakers who were not trained in traditional theatre and who had no obvious theatrical influence in their filmmaking.

4. Qu Qiubai, head of the Chinese Communist Party from 1928 to 1929, declared war on the “reactionary” arts, including big shows (*daxi*), shadow play/films (*yingxi*), slapstick shows (*mutourenxi*), and Suzhou opera (*tanhuang*), among other popular folk arts (Harris 1997: 56).

5. I thank Prof. Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak for pointing out that opera, with its European roots and colonial connotations, is not an adequate translation of the Chinese word *ju*. It is advised that, instead of translating *jingju* as “Beijing opera,” the direct transliteration of the term should be used. Hence, *jingju* and *yueju* are used throughout this paper, instead of Beijing opera and Shaoxing opera. However, while quoting authors, I leave the terms as they appear in the original text. Hence, the “operatic mode.”

6. It must be noted that *jingju*’s ascension as a national theatrical form (*guoju*) began long before the days of *yangbanxi*. In the early twentieth century, *jingju* master Mei Lanfang and advocate Qi Rushan played instrumental roles in *jingju*’s rising popularity and elevated status (Goldstein 1999: 377–387). This explains why *jingju*, already recognized as a national art form, had an advantage over other regional theatres as the model for the modernized revolutionary theatre of the Cultural Revolution.

7. For an analysis of the aesthetic components of *Two Stage Sisters*, see Marchetti 1997: 59–80.

8. For an etymological decoding of the word “prostitution,” see Zhang 1999: 161.

9. Apparently, *To Live* is still under some official proscription in China, as the film is still unavailable (as of March 2007) in the stores, except in pirated format. In contrast with their generally favorable treatment of *Farewell My Concubine*, Chinese critics have been curiously silent on *To Live*. Perhaps Zhang Yimou’s take on twentieth-century Chinese history appears too raw and realistic compared with Chen Kaige’s more romanticized version in *Farewell My Concubine*. It is ironic that whether or not a film is banned in China seems to be the ultimate indicator of its critical relevance.

10. For a discussion of new nationalism from the perspective of Chinese filmmaking, see Cui 2003: 74–78.

11. In 2002, Zhang Yimou’s high-profile film, *Hero (Yingxiong)*, was premiered in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing before its release on the international market. The martial-arts epic on the unification of China under the first emperor Qin Shihuang is touted as Zhang’s answer to Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) in a bid to assert Chinese cultural authority in the global marketplace of media production and consumption. Impressive in visuality but paltry in characterization, the film has been

criticized as “too nationalistically Chinese” (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 73). This rivalry of Zhang and Lee indicates that, as Chinese-language film enters the era of transnational cinema, the symbolic uses of theatricality have also become currencies in global circulation. Chinese settings, costumes, and even the genre of theatrical film itself have become contested items for claiming cultural authenticity.

12. Indeed, much recent work by now established directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige seems to validate such criticisms. Big-budget productions relying heavily on international financing and global markets, films such as Chen’s *Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005) and Zhang’s *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jin dai huangjinjia*, 2006) are carefully produced and packaged to court both the Chinese censorship bureau and the international box office. It should not be surprising that, in these films, a slick, overproduced theatricality has blunted much of the independent spirit and critical thrust found in earlier Fifth Generation films. Chinese critics are generally disappointed with the move toward commercialism on the part of film auteurs such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou (Xu 2006: 12–15).

13. In an interview, Jia Zhangke, the noted Sixth Generation filmmaker, is quoted as saying: “In the 80s, the fifth generation filmmakers were real heroes: they managed to break Chinese cinema out of its closed little mould and try something new. But they’ve changed a lot: in their current films, you’re no longer seeing the experience of life in China . . .” See Kevin Lee’s profile of Jia Zhangke in *Senses of Cinema* (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/jia.html>).

14. The Fifth Generation has by no means stopped exploring theatricality in their filmmaking. Chen Kaige is currently making a much-anticipated biopic of the great *jingju* master Mei Lanfang. In *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (*Qianli zou dangqi*, 2006), Zhang Yimou again engages a theatrical form, a shamanistic song-and-dance originated from Yunnan province. While the groups are named to indicate a generational divide, the Fifth Generation and the Sixth Generation are now making films contemporaneously. But, due to differences in personal background, thematic interest, and artistic style, the Fifth Generation is generally more history-oriented in its themes, whereas the Sixth Generation tends to have more contemporary concerns.

15. All Jia Zhangke’s films prior to *The World*, including *Platform*, are banned in the PRC, but are readily available on the black market in pirated VCD form. In an interview with Stephen Teo, Jia Zhangke expressed “conflicting emotions” over his dilemma: “My film is being pirated on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is one method of getting my film shown. I feel embarrassed and helpless” (http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke_interview.html).

16. The present discussion of theatricality and cultural critique in Chinese film is largely limited to the works of Mainland Chinese filmmakers. However, diverse representations of theatricality have emerged in films made in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora. For example, Hong Kong directors Stanley Kwan and Shu Kei, in their films *Rouge* (1987) and *Hu*

Du Men (1996), respectively, have used Cantonese theatre to reflect on Hong Kong identity on the eve of Hong Kong's return to China. In his play *Peach Blossom Land* (1986), which was made into a film in 1992, Taiwanese director Stan Lai used "two plays on one stage" to comment on the cultural-political relations across the Taiwan Strait. There has been much sharing of interest in theatricality among Chinese-language communities. A revised version of Stan Lai's *Peach Blossom Land* has been recently revived in Beijing and Shanghai with great success. Chen Kaige's 1994 film, *Farewell My Concubine*, is based on a novel by Hong Kong writer Lillian Lee, whereas Hong Kong director Ann Hui's *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2007), another film featuring *jingju* performance, is scripted by the Mainland writer Li Qiang.

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