POST-TIAN'ANMEN: A NEW ERA IN CHINESE THEATRE

EXPERIMENTATION DURING THE 1990s AT BEIJING'S CHINA NATIONAL EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE / CNET

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For my Mother

Sylvia Marie Sherman Entell
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ABSTRACT

The 1990s was a period of rapid transformation in China. Leaders Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji accelerated policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping, as China embraced “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” Far-reaching socio-economic and cultural change cut across every facet of Chinese society and had a tremendous impact on huaju ("spoken drama") and the State Theatre System. This study examines how and to what extent the conditions and challenges of the 1990s fostered a climate for experimentation and impacted the aesthetics of huaju.

The research first establishes a context for huaju—its evolution and ideological background over the last century proceeding to a more detailed view of the 1990s. This decade witnessed significant new phenomena: a rising entrepreneurial class, a vibrant alternate “gray” culture, the proliferation of “little theatres,” “free-lance” theatre artists, and the “independent theatre studios” of directors Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, and Mou Sen. Focusing on Beijing’s prestigious China National Experimental Theatre (CNET), the research provides a detailed analysis of the inner workings of the State Theatre System—the transition from “iron rice bowl” to “contract system,” new management, producing, and financing practices, and the endeavor to build an audience for huaju amid dwindling State subsidies.

The study characterizes the range of styles and genres at CNET during the 1990s: “main melody,” “personal realism,” “nationalization,” “foreign,” and “experimental / avant-garde” plays. Representative productions, embodying a variety of Western and indigenous Chinese performance styles, aesthetics, and techniques, are examined. The research highlights the experimental work of leading avant-garde directors, Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui, and presents an in-depth analysis of four CNET productions: Lin’s Go Man, Meng’s The Nun and the Monk and Gossip Street, and Tian Qinxin’s Fields of Life.
and Death. Following the production process—from conception; through rehearsal; to performance; and official, critical, and popular reception—the study explores directorial methods, acting techniques, director/actor/designer interactions, and current theatre practices as they impact dynamics of mise-en-scene. During the 1990s, the parameters of both form and content in huaju grew more complex, as experimental techniques, once the exclusive domain of the avant-garde, were increasingly appropriated by the mainstream.
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A magical flight through five centuries and thirty kilometers spans the ceremonial procession of the Ming Emperors (1368-1644) to the future competitions of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The “imperial axis” begins at Tiantan (the “Temple of Heaven”) and Qianmen, the “front gate” of the Royal complex. It continues across Mao’s vast Tian’anmen guangchang (“Gate of Heavenly Peace Square”), through Zijin cheng (the “Forbidden City”) and Gugong (“Palace Museum”), over the pavilions of Jingshan Park (“Coal Hill”), through the triumphal ancient fortress Deshengmen (“Virtue Victory Gate”), extending northward to the open fields of the Olympic Green construction site, and finally reaching the Shisan ling (“Ming Tombs”) beyond. Mid-way on this grand axis is one of the oldest surviving areas in the city: Di’anmen (“Earth Peace Gate”). The district is a labyrinth of hutong (narrow lanes) with black tile-roofed siheyuan (walled single-story courtyard houses), providing shelter from cold northerly winds and oriented towards a low winter sun--the prototype of northern Chinese settlement. The neighborhood is intersected by a bustling Main Street, Di’anmenwai Dajie, jam-packed with cars, buses and trucks, bicycles, horse-drawn carts and pedicabs, jaywalking pedestrians and school children wearing red “Young Pioneer” scarves and mandatory yellow safety baseball caps.

The amazing transformation China has been undergoing over the past two decades is striking even in this ordinary “traditional” Beijing district, without modern skyscrapers, hotels, or office buildings, which proliferate in the eastern part of the city. A tour of the neighborhood reveals a microcosm of China in transition and provides a useful context for this theatre study. On the northern end of Di’anmen Street stands the impressive Gulou (the old “Drum Tower”), dating from the 13th century and reconstructed in 1420 when the Ming Dynasty established its capital in Beijing. (In the early 1990s, Gulou was transformed into an Antique Market of privately-owned stalls.) Facing Gulou, a giant
billboard of a young man and woman against a backdrop of skyscrapers proclaims:

“Jiaqiang liudong renkou guanli, cujin shoudi jingji jianshe” (“Strengthen Floating Population Management, Improve the Capital’s Economic Construction”) referring to the huge influx of peasants into Beijing over the past decade.

Heading south down Di’annanwai, the accelerating clash of old and new is manifest in the unexpected juxtaposition of shops and restaurants lining the street, many with auspicious and engaging names as is the Chinese custom: Tian wai tian kaoya dian (“Heavens Beyond the Sky Roast Duck Restaurant”); Baiwei mianguan (“Hundred Flavor Noodle House”); and Fei chang huoguo (“Fat Intestines Hot Pot”). Interspersed between more traditional venues are icons of new China—joint-venture and commercial enterprises, including Nokia and Motorola cell-phone stores, CD / VCD / DVD and modern appliance shops. The Xiang tang hong fanguan (“Hunan Red Pond Restaurant”), Mao’s favorite hot and spicy respite, is opposite Hua tian kuai can (“Splendid Heavens Fast Food”). Ruicheng jia chang cai (“Lucky City Family Style Dishes”) is next door to the newly-opened Di’anmen ping’an yinxiang (“Safety Audio Video”) Equipment Store with their diannao cidian zhuanmai (“Special Sale on Computer Dictionaries”). Panshuai youxiji zhuan maidian (“General Pan’s Special Game Machine Shop”) has a huge assortment of video games, and the Ming you caidian bingxiang (“Famous Excellent Color TV’s, Refrigerators”) offers wide-screen TV’s and large-size refrigerators with automatic ice-makers. The new Zhongguo gongshang yinhang (“China Industrial Commercial Bank”) is adjacent to Jinzhen san ye gongxi facai (“Golden Treasure Umbrella Trade Congratulates Happiness, Prosperity, and Wealth”). The Di’anmen yaodian “medicine shop” now sells both Chinese and Western medicines. Guke zhishang wei zhong qiu li yong bu qu qiao, offering a variety of household wares, promises that “Customers Are the Highest, Low Prices Inside, Obtain Profits and Forever Not Get Tricked.” The Li ren zhi yi (“Beautiful People Produce Clothes”) displays trendy fashions, but a clothing store
down the street has a distinct marketing edge: In front of Jin da yang fangzhi ("Golden Wide Ocean Textiles"), a surrealistic image is created as a dozen life-sized blond Caucasian mannequins modeling elegant western evening dresses pose outside on the storefront steps, peering over a sea of bicycles parked in front. The Yinyue chengbao ("Music Castle") sells the latest videotapes and VCD's of foreign films. The Jinghua chaye ("Capital Splendid Tea Leaf"), an old-fashioned tea shop, is next door to Jiaxun tongxun ("Good Information Communications"), which sells cell phones, beepers, fax machines and has an expert Weixiu zhongxin ("Maintenance Repair Center"). Zhong ai yi sheng hun sha ying lou ("Long-lasting Love, One Life Marry, Dress Photo Building") offers the rental of western-style white organza wedding gowns for aide zhaopian ("love photos") as well as expert xinniang huazhuang ("bridal make-up"). On the sidewalk in front of the shop, an enterprising young man has opened his own Kuai xiche ("Very Fast Bicycle Repair") shop. Perhaps the city's oldest art and calligraphy store Dongfang shudian ("Eastern Book Shop") is adjacent to the new sparkling clean and spacious Zhuanjia yanguang ("Expert Eye Examinations") selling the latest designer eyeglasses with concomitant designer prices. If you're at all leery of the meat served at the Ma kai canting fengwei ("Horse Victory Flavor Restaurant"; actually Ma Kai is the name of the Chinese host), the Golden Arches of Mai dang lao ("Wheat Must Labor," "McDonald's") rise high above the street. Next door to the McDonald's joint-venture is the still-to-be renovated State-run Di'anmen baihuo dalou "Department Store" with its brightly-colored flags and large glass windows. A young entrepreneur sells a Beijing specialty, Bingtang hulu zhen haochi ("Really Delicious Ice Sugar Berries"), from his food cart near Colonel Sander's Ken de ji joint-venture ("Bite Virtuous Chicken," "Kentucky Fried Chicken"). On the eastside of the street, two stone lion sculptures grace the doorway of the Beijing Aolin shudian ("Olympic Bookstore"). This shop is a sign-post to turn east into the next lane, Mao'er Hutong ("Hat Alley"). You've gone one block too far if you reach the ancient
stone Houmen qiao. (A plaque marks the spot of the Forbidden City’s “Back Door Bridge,” dating from the Yuan Chao Dynasty, 1271-1368.)

As you turn into Mao’er Hutong, you’ll find the narrow lane crowded with cars, bicycles, and people all trying to squeeze through. The alley widens a bit into a street market with peddlers selling everything from cabbages to bananas and watermelons, plastic kitchen wares to hair ornaments and clothing, heaps of fresh ginger and garlic to live chickens and frogs. Two young women have set up a shoe repair table on the left in front of Yasi mei rongyuan (“Think Elegant and Beautiful Appearance”) Beauty Salon. Right next door at 45 Mao’er Hutong are the front iron gates of the State-run China National Experimental Theatre. The danwei Jiedao weiyuanhui (“work unit” “Neighborhood Committee”) in charge of surveillance is housed in the tiny shelter just inside the gate on the right. Adjoining the compound are Soviet-style six-story concrete residences. Through the gates and down the path, we approach the Theatre’s administration building and Xiao Juchang (“Little Theatre”). Here our adventure begins …

The circumstances of writing this study date from my first trip to China in 1987. This was during China’s “Anti-bourgeois Liberalization” campaign and the first student demonstrations in Shanghai, which would grow into the Pro-Democracy Movement. I was invited to co-direct a theatre production with Mrs. Lois Wheeler Snow, the wife of Edgar Snow, celebrated author of Red Star Over China. Collaborating with the artistic and technical staffs at the China National Experimental Theatre, Lois and I directed a Chinese-language production of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town. I remember my first arrival at the Beijing airport; a large delegation greeted us, including the Theatre’s president at that time, film actress Zheng Zhenyao, and Foreign Minister Huang Hua. The Hon. Huang Hua had been Edgar Snow’s interpreter many years ago when Snow interviewed Mao Zedong in Yan’an in 1936. Our host from the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries lifted our heavy suitcases from the baggage claim carousel. When I thanked him,
he answered in English: “I must do that. It’s my duty.” From his unexpected response, I wondered what it was going to be like directing a play in China—but that’s really the subject of a different book. At that time, I knew one word in Chinese: “Ni hao!” / “Hello!”

My interest in global theatre led me to the University of Hawai‘i to pursue a Ph.D. in Asian Theatre. After three years of Chinese language study, I spent the summers of 1992-94 at Beijing’s Language and Culture University and also lived in Beijing for five years (1995-2000) conducting research for this study. During this period, I was a visiting scholar at Beijing’s Central Drama Academy, one of two national “spoken drama” training academies in China. I also worked as a Professor of English Literature at Beijing’s Foreign Affairs College as a way to fund my field research. During a fascinating tenure at the Foreign Affairs College, I taught American and British dramatic literature to Chinese students with advanced English-language skills. Among other things, we read and performed Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*--to the surprise and delight of the rest of the English Department! I remember an early briefing session at the Foreign Affairs College when teachers were “advised” not to give our opinions in class discussions about the “three T’s,” i.e., “Taiwan, Tibet, and Tian’anmen Square.” I also remembered Arthur Miller’s words after his trip to China following the Cultural Revolution in 1978, words he attributed to former U.S. Treasury economist and long-time Beijing resident Frank Coe: “The visitor who stays a month writes a book, the one who stays three months does an article, and those who move in for years never write anything” (Miller and Morath 1979, 24). Miller would return to China in 1983 to direct *Death of a Salesman*, and indeed he wrote *Salesman in Beijing* about his experience. I hoped this was a positive omen for my own writing endeavor, even though a growing knowledge of China’s complexity would also present challenges as suggested by Miller above.

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China is a relatively homogeneous society. Despite the fact that there are 55 officially recognized “minority nationalities,” 92% of the people are “Han” Chinese. As a result of “Opening and Reform,” more than 200,000 expatriates (waiguoren, “foreigners,” lit. “outside country people”) were living and working in Beijing during the 1990s. However for the Chinese people, a sense of “otherness” remains strong. (This is a recurrent theme in Asian studies.) I was aware that an in-depth research project of this kind was possible due to “guanxi” (“connections”) developing with Beijing’s “spoken drama” theatres since 1987. Despite a long association with Chinese theatre artists and scholars, a blond, green-eyed American woman, in fact any “foreigner,” cannot help but “stand out.” As theatre artists confided: “fifteen, even ten, years earlier” I would “not have been allowed” to stay in China so long or to spend “so much time” with them. In the past, frequent contact with foreigners had made Chinese vulnerable to charges of leaking State secrets, even if the information in question seemed benign. I wondered how much this had really changed.

Understanding a culture is far different from learning a language. As in any new environment, it was necessary to learn how to work within the “System,” how to understand the hierarchy and numerous titles, how to negotiate, how to learn the customs, especially the ever-present “building and saving face.” Regardless of nationality, we all might prefer not to expose our “dirty laundry.” Yet challenges and technical problems, a too-quickly-approaching “opening night,” emotional creative personalities are within the very nature of our profession. While my Chinese language skills vastly improved over more than five years of research, there were ironic consequences. Language fluency paradoxically created problems, simultaneously opening and closing doors. Wo tingbudong (“I don’t understand”) was initially a convenient—and true—retort during conversations. As time went on, it became clear from my spoken Chinese that I did understand. Still, the Chinese theatre artists and I continued to joke with “tingbudong” as a
way to diffuse potentially difficult situations. I remember being quickly ushered out of a tech rehearsal during a horrendous argument about faulty lighting equipment. In another tech rehearsal amid a gush of leaking water, I heard someone say: “the foreigner shouldn’t be here.” One of the actors covered for me: “It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t understand”: “Ta tingbudong!”

One artist responded to my questions: “I won’t tell you; you can get information from someone else. Maybe some people won’t obey the theatre’s rules, but I will.” Shortly after my arrival, another artist had hesitated to answer questions: “Ask my Leader!” Two years later, this artist had become a close confidant. Overall I found the theatre artists most often welcoming and candid. Perhaps not surprisingly, financial figures were most difficult to assess (as accounting practices may be in the West). “Extra subsidies,” “awards,” and “bonuses,” were sometimes “included,” sometimes “not,” over-inflated and under-inflated. Several theatre artists, as well as university students, preferred to speak anonymously “off the record.” I have honored their requests, representing them in this study as “a theatre artist,” “an actor,” “a student.” I think the variety of written source materials and abundance of both formal and informal interviews, as well as my own observations, allowed me as far as practicable to corroborate data and ultimately form my own judgments.

International political events of the 1990s, a period of renewed nationalism in China and strained Sino-American relations, directly affected my work as I conducted research in Beijing. Encompassing a multitude of contradictions, from love and emulation to hatred and distrust, one theatre artist confided “the custom now is to laugh at foreigners, especially Americans.” Anti-American sentiment was particularly reflected over the decade in a series of publications: Zhongguo keyi shuo bu (China Can Say No), a national best-seller in China in 1996, and the sequels: Zhongguo weishenme shuo bu? (Why Should China Say No?), Zhongguo haishi neng shuo bu (China Can Still Say No), Zhongguo bujinjin shuo bu
(China Doesn’t Only Say No), Yaomohua Zhongguode beihou (Behind the Demonization of China), and Zhongguo budang “Bu Xiansheng” (China Won’t Become “Mr. No”). The above were accompanied by the U.S. publication The Coming Conflict With China (Bernstein and Munro, 1997).

Periods of high international tension always presented obstacles, posing challenges to personal security and access to information, as exemplified by the following: In June 1995, the U.S. sanctioned the Republic of China / Taiwan President Lee Tenghui (Li Denghui)’s visit to Cornell University, although Taiwan is a Republic no longer officially recognized by the U.S. This resulted in military escalation on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. In June 1996, the anniversary of the 1989 brutal suppression of the pro-democracy movement at Tian’anmen Square, the Chinese government rescinded permission for the actors to perform abroad at the International Summer Arts Festival in Munich (see chapter 4). In this instance, I confronted a locked door at rehearsal. An older theatre artist advised the others: “Don’t tell the foreign director (me!) that rehearsals have been cancelled.” Wouldn’t I notice this after observing rehearsals everyday for the past three weeks?! Later another artist confided the true series of events.

On 7 May 1999, NATO bombs hit the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese and injuring 21. The bombing sparked days of violent anti-American and anti-British protests. An angry mob of rock-throwing Chinese students converged on the American Embassy in Beijing, and personnel were reportedly on one-hour evacuation alert. In Chengdu, the American Consul-General and his family fled their burning Consulate. China broke off talks on joining the World Trade Organization and froze military exchanges and a human rights dialogue with the U.S. The American Embassy in Beijing sent urgent e-mails to all American citizens in the city warning us to “keep a low profile, stay close to home and vary our route if travel were absolutely necessary.” Classes at the Foreign Affairs College were cancelled, and several young American teachers resigned.
After two weeks I returned to the Theatre to continue my research. “Big character posters” (similar to those used to attack class enemies during the Cultural Revolution) were strewn across the Theatre’s outside cement walls: *Zui qianglie kangyi Meiguo weishoude bei yue hongzha wo zhu nan shiguan*! (“Most Strongly Protest the U.S.-led NATO Bombing of China’s Embassy in Yugoslavia!”) and *Zhongguo bukeqi, Zhonghua minzu bu keru*! (“The Chinese Nation Cannot Be Insulted!”). One artist took me aside: “We hate your country, but you’re still our friend.” In the Theatre’s “Production Office,” a photograph of a smiling President Clinton had been pinned to a dartboard, and the actors were vehemently throwing darts. A sign had been scribbled under the board: *Duoxing buyi bi zi bi!* (“If You Do Many Bad Things, You’ll Bring About Your Own Destruction!”). It was a difficult time for all of us.

Another incident involved the arrest of Song Yongyi, a U.S.-based Chinese scholar and librarian at Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College, in Beijing in August 1999. Although Chinese authorities had officially declared the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) a disaster, it remained a sensitive subject. Song’s Cultural Revolution research materials were available at Beijing’s Main Public Library, but he was imprisoned for six months, accused of leaking “State secrets” and jeopardizing State security through “the purchase and illegal provision of intelligence to foreigners” (“College Protests Chinese Imprisonment,” 12-29-99). While I knew that my American passport put me in a different category from Song Yongyi, I also wondered if theatre journals, scripts, playbills, rehearsal log-books, newspaper reviews, and photographs collected from a State Theatre might be construed as containing “State secrets”!

On 10 December 1999, scientist Wen Ho Lee (Li Wenhe) was arrested on charges of mishandling classified documents at the Los Alamos Nuclear Weapons Lab in New Mexico. Pleading not guilty to charges of endangering U.S. security, he was held without bail, shackled, and put in solitary confinement for nine months. While Taiwan-born Wen is
a U.S. citizen, the arrest caused a strong backlash in the Asian-American community
and raised suspicions of illicit connections to Mainland China’s nuclear missile program.
After Wen’s arrest, the Theatre’s Archives were closed to me, and I was handed a copy of
China’s “Archival Laws” to translate. Presumably, the Cultural Ministry was “revamping
guidelines” for a “complete re-organization of the Archives.” I was told that “strictly-
speaking” archival materials “were not to be given out even if they didn’t contain military
secrets.” Giving me certain materials was “against regulations.” But this “wasn’t directly
related to the recent spy incident, and we were still friends.” One artist explained: “They
may want to keep some information secret. Or there may be things they don’t want leaving
the country. This is not America; it’s China! … Yes, it’s because you’re a foreigner!” My
being barred from the Archives turned out to be temporary—after much “face giving,”
exchange of gifts, and discussion. Fortunately by that time, I had collected the bulk of
materials for this study.

Shortly before my departure, I was stopped by a theatre security guard as I was
photographing the theatre’s public “Political Board.” How to solve this one? Place the
guard in front of the Political Board: My “shuo qiezi” (“say eggplant,” equivalent to
“cheese”) forced him to smile! “Move a little to the right.” “Ok!” And I continued
snapping away! Of course I made mistakes. Remembering just one instance: I thanked one
of the theatre artists for his help by presenting him with a green American baseball cap. I
later learned that dai liu maozi (“to wear a green hat”) is slang for “cuckold husband.” As
he opened my gift, this older gentleman was taken aback, looked at me quizzically, and
began to laugh, realizing that I was unfamiliar with the slang expression. Behind the initial
nods and fixed smiles of the Chinese theatre artists, as well as my own, friendships …
slowly and carefully … began to form.

May 2002
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

HUAJU: TOOL OF PROPAGANDA / VEHICLE FOR EXPLORATION

Conception and Hypothesis:
This study is a descriptive analysis of experimentation in Chinese huaju ("spoken drama"), including production techniques and aesthetics, during the 1990s. This decade was a fascinating period of accelerated and far-reaching economic reforms, which initiated tremendous changes in all facets of society and culture. The question central to this study is: how and to what extent did the socio-economic challenges of the decade create a climate for experimentation and influence performance aesthetics in huaju? My intention is to document the trends and cutting-edge developments in huaju during the 1990s and establish a discourse with artists, scholars, and theatre-goers.

The study first provides a brief historical and ideological background of huaju from its origin in China through the 1980s. The socio-economic climate of the 1990s and the overall cultural milieu in Beijing are examined to trace their impact on the development of huaju. Particular attention is given to the environment for experimentation and the challenges and innovations in producing, financing, and management practices during the decade. Focussing on Beijing’s prestigious China National Experimental Theatre (Zhongyang shiyan huaju yuan) as representative of China’s State theatre system, I will characterize the overall styles and genres of huaju, ranging from mainstream to avant-garde.

The experimentation in huaju is particularly provocative from a directorial perspective. The study will examine the work of two of the most cutting-edge directors in Beijing: Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui. I will describe the range of their experimental work during the decade, focussing on CNET productions of Lin’s Go Man and Meng’s The Nun and the Monk. I will examine the dynamics of actual performance, including directorial approach, acting techniques, rehearsal process, design elements, and the
production mise-en-scene created. I will also look at two mainstream productions at the end of the 1990s, Meng's *Gossip Street* and *Fields of Life and Death*, directed by Tian Qinxin, who is relatively new to the Beijing *huaju* scene. This analysis will illustrate how experimental techniques were in fact appropriated by the mainstream, as stylistic and thematic boundaries changed during a decade of experimentation.

**Methodology:**

The field research for this study relied on observation of rehearsals and live performances, archival primary source materials, including rehearsal logs, directorial notes, theatre journals, newspaper articles, scripts, and playbills, as well as extensive interviews with Chinese theatre leaders, artists, and scholars. While theatre journals and newspapers are State-controlled, I found them actually combining the Communist Party-line with more independent ideas in terms of theatre. I personally conducted interviews and saw rehearsals and performances at all the major *huaju* theatres, as well as the Central Drama Academy, in Beijing. After careful consideration I decided to focus on the production work of the prestigious China National Experimental Theatre / CNET.¹ This is, in fact, the first comprehensive English-language study of *huaju* at a State Theatre in China during the 1990s. I was the first foreign research scholar invited to CNET with free access to rehearsals, performances, archival materials, and interviews. For the majority of productions, I had the opportunity to observe rehearsals in addition to seeing the live performance. I watched videotapes of those productions early in the decade, which I did not see first-hand. Aesthetics reflect the vibrant interplay between form and content, guiding our perception of a given performance. The selection process in writing this study was rigorous. I took great care in choosing to examine those productions which particularly exemplify specific stylistic and thematic elements. I have endeavored to develop an analysis with breadth as well as depth of data, and, as a result, examine over half of CNET's production work of the 1990s. My analysis is both “emic,” i.e., providing a vocabulary for
examining the phenomena from "inside" the culture itself, as well as "etic," i.e., viewed from my "outside" Western perspective. While I translated Chinese-language source materials myself and am responsible for the English-language translation of all materials used in this study, I am indebted especially to two native-speaking Chinese University students (who prefer to remain anonymous) for their invaluable assistance in this endeavor.

This study is not based primarily on library or archival research. I was observing production work during the 1990s as it was happening, i.e., as a "moving target." I had the unique opportunity to follow production practices completely for Go Man, The Nun and the Monk, Death Without Burial, and A Doll's House—from CNET's initial "meeting the creative team," through rehearsals, to the "leaders' run-through," to opening night, the run of the play, and culminating "discussion meeting." I served as CNET's dramaturge for two foreign plays, Death Without Burial and A Doll's House. While research for a study of this kind does not have the perspective of historical reflection, it does embody the immediacy, the spontaneity "of the moment," the excitement of what will unexpectedly unfold during an especially fast-changing period in Chinese history and consequent huaju development. I begin with the historical and ideological background of huaju.

**Huaju: Historical And Ideological Background**

**Origin – the 1980s:** Huaju ("spoken drama") was first brought to China from the West via Japan in the early twentieth century. As the story is told (Mackerras 1975, 117-118), in 1906, a group of Chinese students in Tokyo founded the "Spring Willow Society" (chunliushe) and in Chinese language performed The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven (Hei nu yu tian lu), based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. When the students, with their newly formed drama group, the "Spring Sun Society," (chunyangshe) restaged the production in 1907 in Shanghai, huaju was born in China.³

Exposing the scourge of slavery and implicitly advocating freedom for all the oppressed, The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven embodied a clear social and revolutionary
message. The production in Tokyo had angered the Chinese authorities, who used their influence to censor the performance. Noted Chinese playwright Tian Han described the original Tokyo performance as “specifically political activity,” which was seen as such by the young actors as well as the authorities. In 1927, Tian Han coined the term huaju (“spoken drama”) for this new Western-style theatre to distinguish it from Chinese indigenous theatre, xiqu (“sung drama”), calling huaju a “new sharp tool for the direct expression of political feelings.” Thus from its very inception, the conscious use of huaju for progressive political purposes was a salient feature. Huaju plays were called “Civilized New Plays” (wenming xinxī), further emphasizing both their Western connection and difference from indigenous xiqu (Mackerras 1975, 117-120; 1983, 145 – 179; Dolby, 2029). Scholar Yan Haiping (1992, 57-59) describes the first proponents of huaju as the educated elite, Chinese students privileged to be educated in the West and “extremely alienated from traditional Chinese culture.” The earliest “Spring Willow” and “Spring Sun” drama societies, as well as newly formed huaju groups which soon evolved, were all comprised primarily of urban intellectuals. The dominance of intellectuals in huaju, in fact, has been integral to the intimate relationship which has always existed between huaju and socio-political phenomena in China (Mackerras 1975, 117-120; 1983, 145-179).

Consequently, huaju has played a significant role during the innumerable upheavals and revolutions that China has experienced during the twentieth century. In turn, each complex social and political change in China has influenced huaju. These explosive periods include the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty (1911), the formation of the Republic of China (1912), the “May Fourth Movement” (1919 – 1937, wusi yundong), the “New Culture Movement” (1919 - 1930s, xin wenhua yundong), Chiang Kaishhek (Jiang Jieshi)’s rise to power (1926-28), Mao Zedong’s establishment of a Communist guerrilla base (1928), the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45), the Civil War (1946-49) between the Nationalists (guomindang) and the Communists (gongchandangren), Communist victory
(1949), the Korean Conflict (1950-53), the Great Leap Forward (1958, da yuejin), the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76, wuchan jieji wenhua da geming), Normalization with the West, and Reform and Opening (beginning in the late 1970s, gaige kaifang).  

Examining *huaju*’s connection with socio-political phenomena more closely, in its earliest days *huaju* embodied social commentary and was used primarily as a means to expose social ills. The intention of performance had evolved by the time of the “May Fourth Movement” when literature, including drama, came to be viewed not only as a tool to expose social ills, but also as a means to bring about change.  

During the Japanese Invasion (1937 - 45), both the Nationalists and the Communists used *huaju* as a tool of propaganda to arouse patriotism among the Chinese masses against a foreign invader. Tian Han, who joined the Communist Party (gongchandang, CCP) in 1932, referred to performance tours in the rural areas during this period, which included *huaju*, as “spreading seeds work”: “To spread propaganda against the enemy among the broad masses of people ... the most effective weapon is undoubtedly drama – all kinds, all varieties of drama” (Tian Han, Mackerras, ed. 1983, 152-153). During the Chinese Civil War (1946 - 49), *huaju* again became a vital means to reach the masses. The Communists used *huaju* to promote the revolutionary cause, to emphasize class struggle and illuminate the evils of Capitalism. *Huaju* performances, an integral part of the overall political and military strategy, urged the peasants to join the revolution, which ultimately led to the Communist victory.  

In 1942, Mao Zedong pronounced the CCP view of the arts in his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (*Zai Yan’an wenyi zuo tanhui shangde jianghua*):

> All culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake ... or art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause. They are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine (Mao 1965, vol. 3, 86; Mackerras 1975, 164).  

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According to Mao, art necessarily embodies political content and exists only to serve the larger revolutionary cause. Thus all art is propaganda. Additionally, while Mao doctrine also demands “unity of art and politics,” maintaining that “art lacking artistic quality has no force” (Mao, 90), the Communist Party, in fact, utilized huaju primarily as a tool of propaganda rather than an act of artistic creation (Mackerras 1975, 165 and 1983, 156-60).

The CCP embraced huaju as the form “most able to express the realistic struggle of life” (Tian Han, Mackerras 1975, 201). The predominant style of huaju has always been realism, a result of several contributing factors: huaju was first introduced to China via the West and influenced by realism in the West; huaju’s close connection to prevailing socio-political phenomena; and the Communist doctrine emphasizing that art must directly “serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers” (Mao, 81). During the 1950s, the Communists introduced Socialist or Revolutionary Realism (shehu/geming xianshi zhuyi), which had been created in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, calling it “the supreme methodology for literary and artistic creativity” (Feng and Zhou 1984, 440). Socialist or Revolutionary Realism, with realistic acting in the Stanislavski tradition, became huaju’s essential rule.

In May 1956, with the slogan “let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend” (baihua qifang, baijia zhengming), Mao called for wider freedom of criticism and expression, but this liberal phase lasted just a short time. In June 1957, the CCP reversed its policy of greater intellectual and artistic freedom, initiating the “Anti-Rightist Campaign.” By the late 1950s, a Sino-Soviet rift had begun, and in September 1960, the Soviet Union pulled all its experts out of China, including the Stanislavski acting and directing teachers at the two national drama academies (in Shanghai and Beijing). During the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), huaju artists, along with other intellectuals, were brutally attacked, and huaju became virtually non-existent during this period. In an effort to rid Chinese culture of anti-socialist “poisonous weeds” (du cao) the government limited performance to the “model revolutionary plays” (geming yangbanxi). As one
Chinese theatre artist describes, during the early 1960s, Soviet socialist realism was labeled reactionary. "Chairman Mao promoted 'model revolutionary plays' ... the combination of socialist / revolutionary realism (shehui/geming xianshi zhuyi) and revolutionary romanticism (geming langman zhuyi) (Xue Dianjie, 8-25-99)." In the continually shifting political environment, 1978 saw the advent of the "Democracy Wall Protests" demanding political and intellectual freedoms.

With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977 came the revival of huaju. As scholar Sun Huizhu points out, after the ten-year period of the Cultural Revolution and virtual disappearance of huaju plays and performances, huaju artists "felt an urgency to write and produce realistic plays" about China. However, in 1979 Sha Yexin's play If I Were Real (Jiaru wo shi zhende, modelled after Gogol's The Inspector General, which exposed the corruption of Communist Party officials), was banned. Chinese artists awakened to the realization that the authorities "wanted only a pseudo-realism that eulogized the regime" (Sun and Fei, Pavis 1996, 189).

Putting the above in perspective and looking at the overall political climate of the decade, the 1980s were characterized by alternating cycles of government crackdown and relaxation in control, as each small wave of openness was followed by a wave of repression. Deng Xiaoping's Selected Works (Wentunji), published in July 1983, helped revive Maoist doctrine:

We must continue and persist in the directions which Comrade Mao Zedong advocated [in the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art of May 1942] that literature and the arts should serve the broadest masses of the people and above all the workers, peasants and soldiers (Deng 1983, 181, 182; Mackerras, Tung and Mackerras 1987, 182).

Deng Xiaoping urged literature and art workers to "build a high-level socialist spiritual civilization as part of modernization," and Deng objected to works of art which gave "an unfavorable impression of the Party or the socialist system" (Deng 1983: 180, 346; Mackerras 1987, 181). 1983 introduced the campaign against "spiritual pollution"
(jingshen wuran) (anti-foreign influence in the arts), which was followed by a period of political relaxation; 1986 - 87 brought the “anti-bourgeois liberalization” (fan zichanjieji ziyohua) campaign, again followed by a period of less rigidity. During the periods of government crackdown against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalization,” ironically it was easier to present foreign plays directed by foreign artists. For example, Arthur Miller was invited to direct his Death of a Salesman in 1983 (the time of the “campaign against spiritual pollution”) at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. Lois Wheeler Snow and I were invited in 1987 (the time of the “anti-bourgeois liberalization” campaign) to direct a play—we chose Thornton Wilder’s Our Town—at Beijing’s China National Experimental Theatre.

During the decade, China embraced “Reform and Opening” (beginning in 1978), encouraging contact with the outside world and capitalist-style economic reforms. Deng Xiaoping reaffirmed Maoist slogans such as “let foreign things serve China” (yang wei Zhong yong) and “let ancient things serve modern” (gu wei jin yong) (Deng 1983; Mackerras 1987, 182). At this time, with the economic reforms, Party leaders felt a problem with commercialization in the arts already beginning to emerge. In 1983, Premier Zhao Ziyang observed: “Most intellectual and artistic products circulate in the form of commodities,” but that “shouldn’t lead to the decadent ideology of putting money above everything else” (“First Session of the Sixth National People’s Congress” 1983; Mackerras 1987, 183).

As part of China’s open-door policy, non-realistic Western theatre theories and techniques (including those of Brecht, Artaud, Dürenmatt, Grotowski, and Meyerhold) were introduced to China. In formulating their theories and techniques, Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski, and Brecht had, in fact, been inspired by their contact with Asian theatre forms. As Sun Huizhu explains, it was largely Brecht and other Western theatre artists’ interest in Chinese and Asian theatre that inspired many Chinese huaju artists to “look back
at their own legacies and explore the possibilities of integrating the more expressive style of xiqu into spoken drama" (Sun, Pavis 1996, 189). Noted huaju director Lin Zhaohua wrote:

We should … understand the legacy of our Chinese xiqu … Over the years haven’t we tried to find some other ‘advanced systems’? … My understanding of xiqu’s aesthetics is actually enhanced with my understanding and research on Western theatre. … We don’t have to be nervous at the suggestion of the words ‘modern school’ or become fussy about Chinese things being eroded by the ‘foreign.’ … Chinese artists should be free. We have quite a high reputation in the international community—the pity is that we look down on ourselves. … In recent years the huaju circle has begun to pay attention to xiqu aesthetics. This is a great advance. We can call it ‘searching for our roots.’ Indeed we should have treated xiqu as an advanced scientific system and studied it much earlier. Huaju was brought from the outside, and today we’re still following others. … Xiqu’s expression is much richer than Western theatre. … A limitless treasury is hidden in xiqu. … Practice tells me that the unique and rich artistic techniques and aesthetics of xiqu can change the limits of huaju. … Xiqu doesn’t exist on the ‘other mountains.’ It’s a treasure in our own house (Lin 1992, 286-290).

In April 1982, at the first Directors’ Conference held in Beijing, directors began to question the purpose and artistic identity of huaju, re-evaluating Mao’s “Talks” and the use of huaju solely as propaganda, as well as challenging socialist realism as the fundamental rule. With aesthetics as the primary concern and determined to experiment beyond the limits of socialist realism, a group of huaju directors began to explore non-illusionistic techniques, including those of xiqu and other indigenous Chinese performance, as well as Western post-realist forms—Symbolism, Absurdism, Expressionism, and Surrealism. Chinese theatre scholars and artists refer to the experimentation of these directors as “exploration theatre” (tansuo xiju). These productions were characterized by their use of non-illusionistic techniques, their theatricality and presentational style, non-realistic acting and staging, use of physicalization and stylization, and their synthesis of theatrical elements—speech, song, acting, music, dance, and mime—embodying a combination of Chinese and Western techniques.¹⁵ As Lin Zhaohua explains,

Gao Xingjian [the playwright of Absolute Signal, Bus Stop, and Wild Man which Lin directed] and I strongly feel how difficult it is to break out of our shackles. In the past huaju was poor not only in form but also in content. ‘Standardized theatre’ indeed exists in China. … Artistic creation should be
the development of the artist’s personality, and this depends on the artist’s individual feelings. ... Great theatre artists should have beliefs and the courage to create their own theatre rather than following others. ... Forcing a certain kind of creation will destroy talent and harm the development of national theatre. ... Although realism can live a long life, we don’t have to treat it as an artistic ‘State policy.’ Imagine if Chinese huaju only followed one tradition and one form—what a huge disaster that would be! (Lin 1989, 231).16

Yet the authorities had their own agenda for huaju. After Sha Yexin’s production of If I were Real was banned, playwrights and directors turned to non-realistic theatre forms (both Western and Chinese) for inspiration and also as a means to “express their feelings in an ambiguous way” in order to avoid censorship (Sun and Fei, Pavis 1996, 189). Even though experimentation during the 1980s concentrated primarily on form rather than content, within the volatile political climate of the decade it became problematic even to experiment with Western forms and styles. Director Lin Zhaohua’s Bus Stop, written by Gao Xingjian (a strong critique of the Cultural Revolution, about a group of people waiting for a bus which never arrives—the play has been compared to Beckett’s Waiting for Godot), and director Wang Gui’s WM, written by Wang Peigong (about a group of educated youth sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution), were both banned as embodying “spiritual pollution” and evidence of bourgeois decadence. As it became dangerous to overtly use Western models, Chinese playwrights and directors turned to xiqu and other indigenous theatre forms as sources for huaju experimentation. While it was safer to quote Chinese indigenous theatre as source material, Western anti-realism and Chinese indigenous forms are similar in their non-illusionistic presentation, styles, and techniques, and it finally becomes difficult to assign origin—an ambiguity which protected artists as they experimented. As Mackerras describes (1987, 330), Chinese theatre artists were “wrestling with the problem of how to effectively sinocize an initially foreign form.” Experimenting within the ever-changing, inevitably controlling government restraints, playwrights and directors pursued “exploration” and an attempt “to combine theatre techniques east and
west,” while Party leaders talked about the “nationalization-ism” (minzu hua zhuyi) of huaju (Zhang Jianzhong, 7-8-93).

Significantly, the exploration theatre productions of the 1980s introduced a variety and combination of non-illusionistic styles and techniques beyond the socialist-realist mode, giving a new meaning to huaju. Gao Xingjian coined the term “all capable current theatre” (quan neng de dangdai xiju) in opposition to the term huaju. He called his Wild Man a “modern polyphonic epic play” (duo shengbu xiandai shi shi ju, “multiple sound part modern epic play”). As Lin Zhaohua explains: “We didn’t want to call the play ‘huaju,’ for this would imply the usual predominance of the ‘spoken’ word. [After seeing Wild Man], some people asked: Is this huaju? I answered: ‘This is theatre (xiju)!’” (Lin 1989, 231).

“Exploration theatre,” in addition to expanding the parameters of huaju style and form, brought innovation to staging techniques and theatre venue. Lin Zhaohua is credited with introducing the “little theatre” (xiao juchang, also called hei xiazi or “black box” theatre) to China (Yang Zongjing, 12-17-97; Zhang Jianzhong, 1-21-98; Tong Daoming, 1992). In 1982, Lin’s Absolute Signal (examining the psychology of a young man who turns to crime) was performed in a “little theatre,” actually a meeting room (yan hui) on the third floor of Beijing People’s Art Theatre. In 1983, Lin’s Bus Stop was performed on a small arena stage (si mian guan zhong de xiao juchang, “on four sides,” “theatre in the round”), also at Beijing People’s Art Theatre. Before this time, Chinese theatres, all built following the Soviet model and commonly seating 1,200 – 1,500 audience members, were the standard for huaju performances.17

The “exploratory” productions of the 1980s, while contributing significantly to the development of huaju, stand out as exceptions. Mainstream (zhuliu) performances continued in the socialist-realist mode throughout the decade which would culminate in the
government's brutal suppression of the Democracy Movement in and around Tian'anmen Square on "June 4th," 1989 (liu si).18

The 1990s: Accelerating Reforms and Cultural Transformation: After the massacre at Tian'anmen Square, several Chinese theatre scholars predicted the "end of modern Chinese theatre" and grieved the advent of the "dark 1990s."19 Yet amid the socio-economic climate of the new decade, huaju continued to evolve, expanding on its legacy from the 1980s. The 1990s brought rapid acceleration of Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening," the enormous policy change which had been launched in 1978, encouraging increased contact with the outside world and capitalist-style economic reforms. China was being quickly transformed from a centrally-planned to a market economy, euphemistically referred to as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi).20

Everyone began following Deng Xiaoping's polemic, "to get rich is glorious!," by leaving behind the security of the "iron rice bowl" (tie fan wan), "jumping into the sea" (xia hai) of private business (an unprecedented phenomenon), and joining an emergent entrepreneurial class in a frenzy of money-making schemes. Within this environment, a vibrant alternate "gray culture" (huise wenhua) began to expand--defiantly separate from the "official" Party culture (guanfang wenhua), but not part of the illicit black market either. The rapidly changing socio-economic climate and diversifying cultural milieu precipitated exciting innovations and enormous challenges for huaju. In order to provide a meaningful context and describe huaju of the 1990s more fully, I will examine two interrelated areas which impacted the development of huaju: the socio-economic-political climate and the emergent "gray culture."

Socio-economic-political climate: The new decade began with compulsory study sessions, continuing ideological indoctrination, and strict censorship.21 In the aftermath of the "June Fourth" crackdown, a new wave toward nationalization in the arts was initiated.
In January 1990, Party leader Li Ruihuan declared:

The great Chinese nation can make still greater contributions to world culture. To this end, it is necessary that China generate good works of culture and art having Chinese characteristics. ... We do not require literature and art to be directly subordinate to political tasks. At the same time, this does not mean that literature and art can deviate from serving socialism. We should laud, by making the most of literature and art, all the heroic deeds of the Chinese people (Li Ruihuan, 1-10-90; Mackerras 1996, 79 – 81).

Amid the efforts by Party hard-liners to tighten control over culture, writer and Minister of Culture, Wang Meng, who had been labeled an exponent of “bourgeois liberalization,” was forced to resign his post.22 Following his resignation in 1990, the government initiated the “Main Melody” campaign (zhu xuanlu), requiring huaju, along with all the arts, to stress the goals and glories of socialism and the Communist Party. “Main melody,” implying the existence of both primary and secondary themes, embodied a double-sided rhetoric. The Maoist doctrine, “serve the people and serve socialism” (wei renmin juwu, wei shehui zhu yijuwu), was promulgated alongside the slogan “let 100 flowers bloom and 100 schools of thought contend” (baihua qifang, baijia zhengming). The “Main Melody” campaign’s slogan became “stress the main melody and adhere to diversity” (tuchu zhu xuanlu jianchi duoyangxing). President Jiang Zemin (1991) admonished artists:

Literary and art workers must use artistic creation to arouse people’s constructive enthusiasm, to purify their souls and take responsibility for opposing liberalism and achieving ‘peaceful evolution’ [from planned to market economy]. ... If only we have a sense of responsibility, a sense of mission, the road of literary and artistic creation is incomparably wide.

Under the “double-speak” illustrated above and the continually alternating cycles of openness and repression, Chinese artists have always practiced self-censorship. Artists judge the prevailing political climate themselves, deciding what might be permissible and above censure. During the “Main Melody” campaign, scholar Claire Conceison (1994, 190-212) notes that the clear boundaries delineated at this time paradoxically may have
actually allowed artists to more easily "stretch the limits" of censorship. The "main melody" play might serve as an "umbrella," permitting more experimental work to slip past the censors.

Deng Xiaoping's famous tour in early 1992 to the booming southern city of Shenzhen, the first "Special Economic Zone" (jingji tequ, more commonly called tequ or SEZ) and China's richest city (dubbed "sin city" / zui e zhicheng), instituted a new and accelerated wave of economic reforms. The Fourteenth Party Congress endorsed Deng's concept of a "socialist market economy" (shehui zhuyi shichang jingji), and, along with invigorating the economic reforms, came a quasi-loosening in government control. While the "Main Melody" campaign was thus officially ended in 1992, theatre artists continued to apply the term "main melody play" throughout the decade. In referring to "mainstream theatre" (zhuliu xiju) in 1998, one director corrected me: "In China, our 'mainstream theatre' is called 'main melody.'"

Throughout the decade, the government continued to exert control by initiating a variety of campaigns and crackdowns, as evidenced by the following examples: In the aftermath of "June Fourth," political dissidents were rounded up and given harsh prison terms. While the government adopted a more moderate approach toward political prisoners (boosting its bid, ultimately unsuccessful, to host the 2000 Olympic Games), dissidents Wang Dan and Wei Jingsheng were released in early 1993, only to soon be re-arrested. Authorities renewed their campaign for the "Construction of Spiritual Civilization" (Jingshen wenming jianshe) in 1996. (Western rock star Madonna's scheduled concert at Beijing's Workers' Stadium was cancelled at this time as well.) In March 1997, the "Three Stresses" (San Jiang) Campaign was launched, requiring Party members to improve in three areas, "righteousness, knowledge of Marxist canon and political correctness," and advance the construction of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" into the new century. The "Three Stresses" activities would serve to "enrich and develop"
“huaju’s role in the cause of socialism” (shehui zhiyue huaju shiye) (Office of the Party Committee, Experimental Theatre 97-2, 46). Jiang Zemin warned: “We absolutely cannot implement the West’s model of bourgeois democracy. If we do, chaos in China is inevitable” (Agence France-Press, April 10, 2000).

In June 1998, China refused an inquiry into the crackdown at Tian’anmen Square, and Chen Shizheng’s new adaptation of the Chinese opera Peony Pavilion (Mu dan ting), which was to be performed at New York’s Lincoln Center, was cancelled. Calling the performance “pornography” and “feudal trash,” the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Culture (Shanghai shi wenhuabu) refused to grant the cast permission to leave for the US (Faison, 6-27-98). In July 1999, Falungong was banned as a dangerous cult, and founder Li Hongzhi was accused of plotting to overthrow the Communist Party. The Falungong crackdown initiated another harsh propaganda campaign, including arrests, detention, and study sessions. In September 1999, thousands of “criminals” were arrested to safeguard social stability in preparation for China’s 50th anniversary celebration on October 1st (National Day, guoqing).

Western China scholars have written extensively about China’s unusual dynamic, combining an authoritarian political system, state-owned companies, and vibrant free enterprise. In fact, the acceleration in economic reforms after Deng’s “southern journey” set off an unparalleled consumer revolution, especially in China’s urban centers. As urban incomes increased significantly, consumerism began to replace Marxist doctrine as the paramount ideology. In illustration, the “3 big items” (san dajian) people wanted to buy had shifted from the watches, bicycles, and sewing machines of the 1970s to apartments, private cars, and cell phones for the richest entrepreneurial class (Yan Yunxiang, White 2000, 169-170). Satellite broadcasts and cable TV became available in many cities, although access to global news remained limited. While less than 1% of China’s population had access to the Internet during the mid-90s, this still amounted to over 16 million users. By
1995, the Public Security Bureau (PSB) had set up computer crime units to police the Internet and control user access (Li Cheng, 123). And director Meng Jinghui’s *Rhinoceros in Love* (1999) became the first *huaju* production to publish a web-page. Yet, of the 1.3 billion Chinese, there were still millions of people who had not gotten rich from the 1990s’ economic boom, including bureaucrats, factory workers, teachers, and retirees. The “floating population” (*liudong renkou*) of peasant workers drifting into the cities looking for work increased dramatically, and the gap between rich and poor was ever-widening. Sinologists have examined the underlying political and social tensions created by the economic boom, describing rampant corruption, unemployment, inflation, and rural instability as ever-escalating social problems.²⁶

In assessing the overall socio-economic-political climate, the decade invites a paradoxical analysis. Certainly a dichotomy existed between the economic and political realms. The old system of control had weakened in the areas of economics and lifestyle. Average citizens could go about their business with more individual (economic) freedoms than ever before, e.g., able, for the first time, to choose their own jobs and find their own apartments. Free *danwei* (“work unit”) housing and health benefits were to be phased out, as were subsidies to State Owned Enterprises. Everyone undoubtedly understood the basic boundaries: avoid overt political protest. Put your energy into making money and *qifei* (“take off and fly”). Leave the political ideology of socialism behind in favor of *baijin zhuyi* (“money worship-ism”). The term *xiang qian* [a] *kan* (“looking ahead”) became a favorite pun, since the phrase (pronounced the same, yet with a different Chinese written character for *qian* [b]) can be translated as “looking toward money.”

**An alternate “gray” culture:** In the cultural realm, the new wealth ignited a proliferation of karaoke bars, pubs, cafes, video arcades, nightclubs and discos with high-tech music and lighting, fast-food joints and high-priced restaurants, and well-stocked department stores and mini-malls. Audiences could see Hong Kong *gongfu* movies,
Taiwanese pop stars, and foreign films. Hundreds of thousands of computer users scrambled to register with the PSB for use of the trendy new cybernet cafes. An enormous boom in the construction and redecorating trades ensued, including the building of new small huaju theatres. For the first time, people had disposable income, to spend on luxuries and leisure activities, and more free time, as the work week was cut from six days to five.

The 1990s also witnessed an alternate “gray” (huise wenhua) or “underground” (dixia wenhua) culture, which began to proliferate alongside the State-sanctioned art venues. Western China scholars called it a virtual “revolution in culture,” a paradoxical inversion of the term “Cultural Revolution.” The avant-garde (xianfeng) scene in literature, fine art, music, dance, performance art, film, and huaju (which had begun in the 1980s) began to expand and flourish during the 1990s. An added bonus to unbridled, or at least less-stringently controlled, self-expression: the alternate cultural route could also prove profitable. Not surprisingly, the boundaries became blurred as the official and countercultures sometimes overlapped. The authorities even imitated the new form and style of the fringe creators. For example, TV became more than just a propaganda mouthpiece, as illustrated by the latest chatty news and “Oprah-wannabe” talk shows, dating games, and riotous Saturday night variety show of State-owned Hunan Satellite TV—ironically in Mao’s home province.

The new “gray” commercial and cultural activity was exemplified by a Mao pop-art rage, as well as commercial broadcasting, “alternate” publishing, and rock music. Mao memorabilia became valuable collectibles, as Mao Zedong was reincarnated in the work of avant-garde artists, such as Wang Guangyi’s paintings, blending coca-cola ads with Cultural Revolution posters, and Yu Youhan’s Warhol-like Mao paintings. Chinese began to use new terms, such as “non-mainstream” / “nonofficial” (feizhuliu), “alternate” (linglei), “avant-garde” (xianfeng), “underground” (dixia), “fringe” (bianyuan), and “counterculture” (fanwenhua), and to differentiate among “mass culture” (dazhong
wenhua or daliang wenhua), official “mainstream culture” (zhuliu wenhua), “local culture” (diyu wenhua), and “indigenous culture” (bentu wenhua). Sinologist Geremie Barmé recognizes counterculture or nonofficial culture covering a “complex skein of interrelated phenomena”:

Depending on the angle from which it is observed, … nonofficial culture can be spoken of as a parallel or even parasite culture. … It is neither [quite] nonofficial nor necessarily antiofficial. Much of it was and still is produced with state funding … or state involvement. It may not be directly sanctioned or beholden to the overculture, and [yet] it cannot simply be classified as oppositional. … There is … no adequate nomenclature to describe the disparate range of cultural material. … It has grown, metamorphosed, and developed within an avowedly socialist state whose gravitational pull is often all too irresistible and that has itself undergone an extraordinary transformation (Barme 1999, xiv-xv).

The 1990s’ counterculture seemed to be propelled by increasing consumerism and a feeling of social alienation, not by a particular ideology. Chinese began to give the pejorative term “liumang” (“hooligan,” “gangster,” “bum”) more “hipster” connotations, i.e., “an unemployed youth,” “alienated intellectual,” “frustrated artist or poet.” China scholar John Minford describes the evolution of a “strange new indigenous culture”:

_Liumang_ originally had a harsh connotation … [of] antisocial behavior, a category of crime. … The spectrum has its dark satanic end, its long middle band of relentless gray, and, shining at the other end, a patch of visionary light. It is an embryonic alternative culture, similar in certain striking ways to that of the 1960s in the U.S. and Europe (1985, in Barme 1999, 64).

Reflecting the socio-economic climate of the 1990s, a vibrant techno-vocabulary of new urban slang became an integral part of the _liumang_ culture, reminiscent of the “hippy culture” Minford alludes to above. This lexicon would cut across film, TV, and _huaju_ to reflect the young, affluent audiences. The Chinese language, with each basic character having four different sound tones, is particularly amenable to jokes, puns, and double entendres. During the 1990s, new phrases, distorting and parodying official slogans or indicative of the new techno climate, proliferated. The slang often alluded to corruption, an
elite minority, a poor majority. There are endless examples: liumang, as described above; pizi ("bum," "punk") which came to imply "intelligence" and "cunning," a "wheeler-dealer"; da kuanr ("big bucks"), and dahu ("big players" in the stock market); "not three nor four" (bu san bu si) referred to "entrepreneurs," a parody of the official "3's," "workers, peasants, and soldiers"; "worker, peasant, soldier" (gongnongbing) itself became a trendy way to say "money" (a picture of these three appears on the Chinese fifty yuan bill); even the sacred and venerable term tongzhi ("comrade") was appropriated, as the gay community in Beijing (following Hong Kong and Taiwan's example) began to use tongzhi to mean "homosexual." It became especially trendy to use English words: "hello," "money," "CD," "DVD," "MTV," "bye-bye," "OK," "DJ," "love." Best-selling Beijing writer Wang Shuo, with his slick liumang characters, popularized the sarcastic banter of Beijing slang. The new hip vocabulary also began to be used in huaju. In another realm of "gray culture," Chinese talked about alternate music (linglei yinyue). Cui Jian's seminal concert at the Beijing Workers' Stadium in May 1986 had marked the birth of rock'n roll in China (yaogun yinyue, "shaking and rolling music") as opposed to tongsu yinyue ("middle-of-the-road pop music"). Cui Jian's first and most famous album was called Nothing To My Name: Rock'n Roll on the New Long March (Yi wu suoyou: xin changzheng lushang de yaogun), alluding to the Long March of Mao and his followers (1934-36) to set up a Communist base in Yan'an. Cui Jian dressed in tattered army fatigues, with one trouser leg rolled up and a red scarf around his neck--reminiscent of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Party hard-liners had labelled rock'n roll "spiritual pollution," but attempts to stifle it just gave it more allure. (Deng Xiaoping had said "when one opens the window, it's natural that some flies will come in"; Schell 1994, 315). Cui Jian quickly became an icon of rebellion for a new generation, and rock music also became emblematic of avant-garde huaju of the 1990s.
Rock'n roll was soon joined by punk, reggae, jazz, new wave, heavy-metal, blues, and funk music. Towards the end of the 1990s, “rap” began to find an audience (“rap,” raoshe, “to let your tongue go” or pizi shuochang, “the talking and singing of hoodlums”; shuochang usually refers to traditional art combining speech and song). Beijing’s music scene encompassed a widespread and vibrant underground of clubs and bars, with groups such as Tang Chao (“Tang Dynasty”), Chaozai (“Overload”), Zi Yue (“Confucius Says”), and Yanjingshe (“the Cobras;” a double-entendre in English, “cobras” for the all-female band). In 1993 without official approval or financing, filmmaker Zhang Yuan made Beijing Bastards (Beijing zazhong), a semi-documentary about the underground music scene in Beijing (“sex, drugs, and rock’n roll”), starring Cui Jian (who was also Producer) and Dou Wei, the lead singer of Dreaming (Zuomeng). Not surprisingly, the film was banned in China.

In the “unofficial” modern dance arena, choreographer Wen Hui founded an independent company, the “Living Dance Studio” (Wudao shenghuo gongzuoshi) with underground filmmaker Wu Wenguang in 1994. Wen Hui’s 1999 Report on Giving Birth (shengyu baogao), a collaborative project with three female dancers and one male “born” into the performance through the folds of a raw cotton blanket, combined video, dance, drama, and music. Wu Wenguang video-taped the performance (following the dancers’ movements, even as they climbed onto the laps of nervously giggling audience members) and randomly pointed the camera into the audience, asking “How were you born?” Close-ups of four mothers, each describing the experience of giving birth, were projected periodically on a large screen at one end of the theatre. For this production, money was raised independently. Without approval from the authorities, performances were limited, and “officially” no tickets could be sold (Loewenberg, 1999; Pan, 1998).

The accelerated economic reforms of the 1990s had introduced the possibility of surviving “outside” the system, i.e., without an official danwei. Those with a danwei
expanded possibilities to explore personal projects outside their official duties. Areas opened up within the more privatized and diversified environment where artists, musicians, or entrepreneurs might circumvent government constraints. China’s culture appeared no longer to be evolving solely in response to Party dictates. In reality, “nonofficial” cultural activities were actually following Party mandates of a market-driven economy. Artists were clearly caught amid conflicting pressures of politics, economics, commercialization, and personal artistic vision.

The *huaju* scene in Beijing: China’s rapid socio-economic transformation, encompassing a burgeoning vibrant counterculture, presented enormous challenges for *huaju* and precipitated exciting innovations in several areas, including production methods and performance aesthetics. The 1990s introduced a brand-new phenomenon: the “Independent Studio” (duli gongzuoshi), which presented expanded opportunities for theatre artists. The State theatres also developed creative strategies in response to the new free-market economy, and a range of collaborative artistic, management, and financial production practices evolved. Even avant-garde theatre became a viable alternative for *huaju* audiences.

During the 1990s, theatre artists described a “crisis” (weiji) in *huaju*, including economic, aesthetic, social, and political dimensions. Yet the *huaju* scene in Beijing was actually more diverse than it had ever been. A “crisis in *huaju*” has been an ongoing lament since the early 1980s. While older theatre artists reminisced about the “glorious days” of *huaju* in the 1950s and 1960s, this notion is actually misleading. Theatres had full houses in the 1950s and 1960s because they were expected to give “public benefit performances” (gongyi yanchu). Government danwei were routinely given free blocks of tickets, a process called baochang (“contain / block the space”), as theatre was a required component of “spiritual education.” The practice of baochang, distributing free tickets, continued into the 1990s, even as the shangyan (shangye yanchu, “commercial...
performance”) was introduced. During the 1990s, terms expanded a bit. Tickets bought by individuals were called sanpiao (“scattered tickets”); reduced-price blocks of seats, which the theatres pushed other danwei to buy, continued to be called baochang. During the 1990s, theatre artists spoke of losing audiences to TV, film, and the new leisure venues: karaoke bars, nightclubs, discos, and video arcades. Dwindling audiences also resulted from a general loss of interest in ideology, a craving for entertainment rather than instruction (the use of huaju as a vehicle for ideology, of course, was well understood by the populace), as well as the theatres’ lack of skills necessary to compete in a market economy.

“June Fourth” had brought the 1980s’ “exploration” theatre to an abrupt halt. The gloomy period from 1990-92 produced primarily “main melody plays,” described by scholar Lin Kehuan (1993, 12) as “awkward microphones for ideology or sweet eulogies.” Critic Xiao Shu (1993, 11-12) thought: “How did the decline of huaju become so widely accepted and treated with such indifference? How long will this dying state of huaju last?” Yet during the tense period directly following “June Fourth,” several huaju directors, “discontented theatre professionals” (Lin Kehuan 1993, 1), were determined to continue exploration. As Xiao Shu (1993, 12) described, these “brave rebels and innovative explorers are trying to reconceptualize” contemporary theatre. They “can’t bear the boring rules, banal concepts, and unnatural acting. … They’re constantly questioning, indulging in their dreams.” Three key figures, directors Mou Sen, Lin Zhaohua, and Meng Jinghui, formed independent theatre studios to focus on experimental work.

**Independent Theatre Studios:** The new self-supporting, “independent theatre studios” were outside and co-existent with the State theatre system. Comprised of makeshift groups of artists from several different danwei, the productions expanded opportunities for “free-lance” (ziyou zhiyezhe) theatre artists. The first independent studios provided a vital means for experimentation and were “unofficial.” Performances most often were held in alternative underground spaces—classrooms, rehearsal halls, “the
theatre upstairs.” Productions had limited engagements, were given no publicity, and usually no tickets were sold. Word-of-mouth brought the audiences comprised primarily of theatre artists and scholars and their invited guests.

Mou Sen: In 1987, Mou Sen moved to Beijing from Tibet (where he had spent two years directing with the Tibet Theatre Company, Xizang xiju yuan), enrolled in the Chinese Language and Literature Department of Beijing’s Capital Normal University, and established the first independent theatre studio in China since the inception of Communist rule in 1949. Naming his Studio the Frog Experimental Theatre Troupe (Wa shiyan jutuan), Mou Sen’s first production was Ionesco’s Rhinoceros in 1987, followed by Stravinsky’s A Soldier’s Story and O’Neill’s Great God Brown. Mou Sen had no formal theatre training and preferred working with non-professional actors and artists from different disciplines.

In June 1993, Mou Sen’s newly-formed independent studio, Xiju Che Jian (“Theatre Garage”) performed A Discussion about Chinese Grammar on the Other Shore (Guanyu ‘bi’an’ de yici hanyu yufa taolun), a new play based on Gao Xingjian’s “theatre of the absurd” script Bi’an (“The Other Shore”), originally written in 1986. (Director Lin Zhaohua had rehearsed excerpts from the script at Beijing People’s Art Theatre in 1986, but a full production was never realized.) The script for Mou Sen’s Bi’an was newly adapted by poet Yu Jian to embody a grammatical discourse of the term “bi’an,” an expression which has a variety of symbolic meanings: “an ideal,” “nirvana,” “paradise.” Yu Jian’s deconstruction of the word “bi’an” (i.e., the composition of the Chinese characters, number of strokes, and tone) vocalized repeatedly throughout the play finally served to negate the word’s meaning, shifting the focus from language to action. Bi’an rehearsals included six months of strenuous physical exercises following the model of Grotowski. For energy and emotional release, the young actors, all acting students at the Beijing Film Academy (Beijing Dianying Xueyuan), loudly and in unison sang rock singer Zhang Chu’s
sardonic lyrics parodying Party slogans: “Socialism is good; socialism is good” (shehui zhuyi hao). Mou Sen’s Bi’an had no storyline, no characters, no stage set. The actors were continually in motion, loud and violent, embodying elements from both Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre” and Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty.” Lin Kehuan’s reactions to the performance in “a classroom in building #2” of Beijing’s Film Academy are particularly evocative:

As the audience entered, the actors, wearing black leotards, were sitting or lying on the floor, massaging each other and doing warm-up exercises. With no change in lighting or sound warning, the actors’ body exercises turned into a formal performance without the audience realizing it. This deliberately obscured any obvious demarcation between theatre and real life. The performers were all new faces, students from all over the country, with only a few months of training. ... The actors’ body movements were not the elegant or beautiful movements which audiences most often see, but rather movements that consumed an enormous amount of strength. The actors hung a thick rope and many thin plastic ropes diagonally from opposite corners of the classroom. The performers excitedly climbed from one end of the rope to the other. As the actors were tied to a chair or when their arms or legs were bound, you could see their flushed faces, swelling blood vessels, and protruding muscles. You could hear their panting, shouting, and screaming. You could smell the performers’ sweat. ... You could feel the fierce rolling, falling, fighting, and ranting. These weren’t artificial actions, but living fights of flesh and blood, embodying the rhythms of life with the rush of warm blood. ... This new adaptation of Bi’an created an alive and sharp contrast between the harshness of real life and ‘bi’an’ (an imaginary ‘ideal’) (Lin Kehuan 1993, 2).

Lin Kehuan’s visceral response reveals what was normally lacking in huaju.

Two additional productions directed by Mou Sen, again in collaboration with poet Yu Jian, are important as they reflect the experimentation of the period. In 1994, Mou Sen directed Things Related to Aids (Yu aizibing you guande), which was fortunate to receive funding from the Ford Foundation. With this project in mind, Mou Sen had traveled to China’s southwestern border to collect material on people suffering from Aids. (This was during the period when government authorities still denied the existence of Aids, except among ex-pats and returning overseas Chinese.) The actors wore chefs’ aprons and made traditional Chinese dumplings (jiaozi) on stage. While preparing the meal, the actors casually chatted, and one mentioned briefly that Aids had nothing to do with them. At the
same time, peasant workers were busy bricking up a wall. Modern dancer-choreographer Jin Xing (quite a controversial figure since her sex-change operation to become a woman in 1993) silently drifted on and offstage—embodying prejudices and questions surrounding Aids: Who gets Aids? What defines sexual identity? In fact, what defines a play? Things Related to Aids ended as the actors (chefs and peasant workers) shared the cooked dumplings with audience members. Again, there was no plot, no characters, in fact, no theatricality at all.

Mou Sen’s File Zero (Ling dang’an) began rehearsals in Beijing in February 1994 and was first performed in Belgium (commissioned by Brussel’s Kunsten Festival des Arts) in May 1994, with later performances in Europe, England, Japan, South America, Canada (Vancouver, Toronto and at Montreal’s Festival de Theatre des Ameriques in 1995), and the U.S. (at UCLA’s “Inroads Asia Conference” in 1997). Poet Yu Jian, whose poem provided a basis for the production, explains “using the format” of a dang’an (“personal file”): “Underlying your existence is a strange written form that you can’t confront, and yet it controls you. ... It’s a kind of ‘language violence’” (Yu Jian, Meng 2000, 338).36 Beginning with Yu Jian’s poem, the “non-actors,” video artists Wu Wenguang and Jiang Yue and modern dancer / choreographer Wen Hui, developed the piece through improvisation. File Zero combined three narratives: a taped voice reciting Yu Jian’s poem, relating the story of a man’s life, from birth, childhood, sexual awakening, maturity, and premature death; Wu Wenguang’s story about his father; and Jiang Yue recounting the story of his first love. The live narratives interrupted each other and the overlapping voices were, in turn, disjointed by intrusion of the voice on tape. The stage was littered with mechanical gadgets and welding equipment. While a grim bloody video of open-heart surgery on a young boy was shown, the actors welded steel rods, creating the gloomy and noisy environment of a factory. The play ended with a violent image of destruction as the actors hurled apples and tomatoes into a huge industrial fan, accompanied
by Wen Hui's terrified scream. *File Zero* raised a great deal of controversy abroad, as foreign audiences interpreted the production as an allegory of "June Fourth." While Mou Sen's *Bi'an* had three performances, *File Zero* had only one public rehearsal-performance in 1994 in the little theatre at Beijing's Film Academy. There were only seven audience members present, including CNET director Meng Jinghui.

**Lin Zhaohua:** Director Lin Zhaohua formed his "Theatre Performance Research Studio" (*Yanju Yanjiu Gongzuoshi*) in 1989. In addition to his own productions, the studio also provided a venue for new young directors. The creation of Lin's independent studio was significant, given his extraordinary reputation as a director and Vice President of the prestigious Beijing People's Art Theatre. With his productions of Gao Xingjian's *Absolute Signal (Juedui Xinhao)*, *Bus Stop (Che Zhan)*, and *Wild Man (Ye Ren)* during the 1980s, Lin had become a leading figure in the "exploration theatre" movement of that decade. In the early 1990s, Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui were just beginning their directing careers, and Lin Zhaohua had, in fact, been their mentor in experimental theatre. During the 1990s, Lin directed a substantial body of experimental work, produced both "inside" and "outside" official channels. Because of Lin Zhaohua's significance and influence as a true pioneer of avant-garde theatre, I will describe his experimental techniques in detail, focusing on selected productions, in a separate chapter of this study.

**Meng Jinghui:** In late 1992, students at Beijing's Central Drama Academy (*Zhongyang Xiju Xueyuan, Zhongxi* for short), with Meng Jinghui as their core figure, established the *Chuanbang Gongzuoshi* ("Secret Discovered / Accidental Exposure Studio") and created *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan* ("Longing for the Secular World, A Couple Goes Down the Mountain"). This production caused a sensation in Beijing in 1993. In terms of experimental work over the decade, Meng Jinghui was surprisingly prolific. His productions, like those of Lin Zhaohua, included performances both "inside" and "outside" official channels. In a separate chapter of this study, I will detail Meng's
experimental techniques, focussing on Si Fan and productions of his new “PlayPlay Studio.” I will also describe differences in style and intention among the three avant-garde directors: Lin, and, as Beijingers referred to them, the “two M’s,” Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui.

The Emerging Independent Theatre Community: In addition to directors Lin, Mou, and Meng, other independent artists included both student groups, as well as more commercial ventures. In 1992, a group of students and alumni from Zhongxi, organized as the Zhongxi Creative Group (Zhongxi chuangzuo jitü), staged an adaptation of Argentinian writer Manuel Puig’s play *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, a story about homosexuality and imprisonment. This production, directed by recent graduate Zhang Yang, was performed at the Film Academy’s little auditorium (*xiao litang*). (As a student, Meng Jinghui was also a member of the early Zhongxi Creative Group.) Lin Kehuan described a “complex multi-leveled structure,” the “intertwining of reality and imagination,” “subtle relationships” among the characters, feeling the characters’ “inner emotions,” and the “free transformation of time and space.” This was the first production in China to address homosexuality and also the first time theatre artists listed “free-lancer” (*ziyou zhiye*) as “profession” after their names in the Playbill (Lin Kehuan 1993, 12-13).

Over the decade, Beijing’s fringe theatre community became a tightly-knit group, and artists naturally collaborated on each others’ work. Mou Sen was a non-dancer in Wen Hui’s *100 Verbs*; Wen Hui’s partner, filmmaker Wu Wenguang, collaborated with Mou Sen on *File Zero* and made a documentary about the director’s work; Wen Hui played the female role in *File Zero*; Meng Jinghui acted in Mou Sen’s *Rhinoceros* and *Soldier’s Story*; Mou Sen was an actor in Lin Zhaohua’s *Hamlet*; stage designer Yi Liming designed sets for both Lin Zhaohua and Mou Sen. Some of the experimental theatre artists belonged to a *danwei*, some “moonlighted” outside their *danwei* as “free-lancers” *zouxue* (“going to the caves,” a figurative term originally used by rock-bands for “performing outside
Beijing"), and some were self-employed "individual [artist] entrepreneurs" (getihu), trained professionals, who had chosen after graduation not to work for a danwei attached to the Cultural Ministry.

As previously described, huaju performance has always been dominated by Realism (xianshi zhuyi). Common complaints of huaju experimentalists were what they characterized as the "hold and influence" of the Stanislavski system in China, and the "stilted style" of acting which they felt mainstream huaju offered. The only acting technique taught at the Drama Academies in Beijing and Shanghai continues to be Stanislavski. There is virtually no work in alternate methods, including improvisation. In addition, Russian teachers who taught at Beijing's Drama Academy focussed on Stanislavski's early theory, rather than his later, vital psycho-physical work. This accounts for experimental directors'--particularly Mou Sen's--preference for non-professionals.

Chinese artists and scholars refer to the 1980s' experimentation in opposition to realism as "exploration theatre" (tansuo xiju). During the 1990s, artists and scholars most often used the term "experimental" (shiyan) or "avant-garde" (xianfeng) to refer to productions which explored styles besides realism and illusionism (huanjue zhuyi). During the 1990s, in addition to "experimental theatre" (shiyan xiju) and "avant-garde theatre" (xianfeng xiju), artists used the terms "pioneering theatre" (qianwei xiju), "performance art" (xingwei yishu), "creative methods" (chuangzuo fangfa) of experimental theatre, "fringe theatre" (bianyuan xiju), and "underground theatre" (dixia xiju) with a variety of implications. Lin Kehuan wrote of "avant-garde" huaju referring to Lin Zhaohua's production of Go Man in 1996:

There are many people who can't understand the play. ... Recently ... many innovative productions have been presented, such as Hamlet, Emperor Romulus, The Balcony, I Love XXX, A Discussion about Chinese Grammar on the Other Shore (Bi'an), and File Zero. Audience response was quite similar. ... Avant-garde art is never glorified or widely accepted. ... The avant-garde is regarded as either political opposition or heresy of the arts, lying in the cracks of society, and on the fringes of culture. ... The adversity it faces gives it a special charm. It has not been institutionalized. It doesn't
have authoritarian, exclusive rules. ... It is filled with a pioneering spirit and unfailing vitality in its constant self-questioning (Lin, "Destiny," 11-30-96).

The independent studios of Mou Sen, Lin Zhaohua, and Meng Jinghui, whose productions Lin Kehuan mentions above, focussed on artistic exploration of nonrealist theatre forms, experimenting with theatrical concepts and staging techniques. At the same time, another type of independent studio, more commercial than experimental in intent, was launched to introduce a new genre of huaju, known as "underground realism" (dixia xianshi zhuyi) or "personal realism" (geren xianshi zhuyi). Shanghai playwright Zhang Xian, one of the form's pioneers (with the play The Wife Back From America / Meiguo laide qizi), is credited with coining the terms "personal realism" and "underground realism" to reflect the "more genuinely realistic style" in opposition to the official socialist or revolutionary realism. The terms "underground realism" and "personal realism," however, were never widely used by theatre artists (Sun Huiizhu 1997, 1). Calling the form "underground," in fact, appears to have been a bit self-serving; political (or artistic) dissent seemed not to have been a motivating factor here. This genre is exemplified in the work of the Firefox Theatre Troupe (Huoli Jutuan), an independent theatre studio founded by playwright Wu Yuzhong and his actress-partner Zheng Zheng, who both belong to the Beijing Children's Theatre. In 1993, Firefox Theatre presented their first production, Qinggan Caolian (Feelings at Drill or Emotional Exercises), directed by Sun Wenxue at China Youth Art Theatre's Little Theatre. The plot concerns a young couple caught in the surge of the market economy. The husband is preoccupied with work, and his wife has an affair. The couple argues about whether to get divorced and how this would affect their child. They wonder if their marriage can be saved, if making more money in private business will make them happier. As illustrated by Emotional Exercises, the basic tenets of "personal realism" were personal in content and intimate in scale. Productions typically had small casts (often one man and one woman), simple realistic sets consisting of ordinary
furniture (a table, chairs, a bed), and realistic acting. Most theatre-goers referred to these plays simply as “little theatre plays” (xiaochang xi), a phenomenon first introduced during the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, it seemed to become the “in” thing for young urban professionals to be part of the audience at “little theatres.” Theatre artists were divided in their reactions to “personal realism.” One side thought the genre reflected the relatively loose censorship of the period: in the past these plays, emphasizing the “dark side of society,” might have been banned. As scholar Sun Huizhu explains, “here were the feelings of ordinary Chinese dramatized for the first time” (Sun 1997, 1). Others found the plays merely “smart packaging” (baozhuang) by casting TV and film stars, playing pop music, and pandering to audience tastes. “Experimentalists” (those exploring a variety of styles) cringed at hearing the “personal” plays called “experimental,” as their form was still realism albeit on a smaller scale. The subjects were new, but the artistic form was old. This group called the “personal realism” plays glorified “TV soap operas,” which had been produced since the early 1980s in China. Audiences seemed to love the “little theatre plays,” and with very low budgets, the independent performance troupes such as Firefox Theatre could even make a profit.

Commercial larger-scale independent productions also proved profitable, especially with the management and marketing skills of “cultural companies” (wenhua gongsi, also called “performance companies” / yanchu gongsi or yanchu shang) which began to proliferate to sponsor productions. For example, a French-Chinese co-production of Jules Romaine’s Dr. Knock was performed at the Capital Theatre in 1998 starring Jiang Wen in his “return to the stage.” He is one of China’s most famous film stars and tickets sold out. In 1999, playwright Ah Ding, in collaboration with the Taiwanese Lai Shengchuan Performance Studio (the first co-production between Taiwan and the Mainland), rented Beijing’s large Chang’an Theatre and presented the comedy The Man With Two Wives (He yu tade liangge laopo), about a taxi driver who marries two women, hiding his bigamy
from them both. Tickets were expensive, selling from 40-280 RMB each. (In 1999, US $1= 8.276 yuan or RMB, Renminbi. The average person’s salary was 300-400 RMB per month.) To the audience’s delight, a central feature of both small and large-scale commercial productions was the use of the new vernacular, the trendy “hip” Beijing slang of urban life, the liumang language of business dealings and sexual exploits.

Another addition (since April 1999) to the Beijing huaju scene was the introduction of late night “underground” theatre. Late on Friday evenings, improvisational huaju skits were performed at Beijing’s punk rock “Busy Bee Bar” (Mang feng jiuba). The Busy Bee, which is reached by trekking up a steep flight of stairs over a shop in central Beijing at #208 Dongsi bei dajie (“North Dongsi Street”) catered mostly to a fringe-artist and student crowd, wanting to hear the latest punk and heavy-metal bands, watch MTV punk-rock videos, play darts, or buy cheap beer and snacks. (There is no “drinking age” in China.) On my visits, I found most patrons decked out in leather and metal, sporting spiked-mohawk haircuts in a variety of dayglow colors. On Busy Bee’s advertising poster, in psychedelic colors, proprietor Gao Yansong, a man in his twenties, had written:

**Friday: Experimental Little Theatre (shiyan xiao juchang)**

*We need music, painting, poetry, and experimental huaju! Come join us! We also have beer! Show how sharp you are! Dance with the Busy Bee!*

The performance I attended started at 10:15 pm (July 1999). Eight young actors, dressed in black T-shirts and jeans and white-face mime make-up, stood in a row shouting in unison in Chinese: “Not Flushing After Using the Toilet is a Good Thing!” One actor stepped forward and sat on an imaginary squat toilet, with one arm up being the flush. One by one, the actors came forward, mimed dropping their pants, and then “strained,” while the chorus of mimes provided vocal accompaniment: “Ploop! Phzzt!” Each new arrival reacted to the imaginary rising stench. One actor contemplated a society in which some people have 48-inch color TV’s, cable systems and DVD’s, but the neighborhood outhouse lacks running water. This skit was followed by “Seeing Someone Die and Refusing to Help is a Good
"Thing!" and a dozen short vignettes showing people beating their girlfriends, spitting at beggars, and other anti-social behavior. In the final skit, actors spun in circles around the room, confiding quietly to each audience member: "The end of the world is a good thing!"

These short vignettes were directed by Ms. Gao Shen, a graduate of Beijing’s Central Drama Academy (Zhongyang Xiju Xueyuan). Actor Deng Huiqing described (7-18-99): "we’re trying to give actors a chance for discovery. There’s no script, just a rough scenario, and actors improvise. Our shows are free, and no performance is repeated."

Another student group, including several foreigners (Danish and American), established “Double X Productions” in April 1999 and performed a variety of vignettes, with such titles as Closed Spaces, Nightmare, Puke, Sticky Liquid, Sanitary Science, and The Final Day of 2000 (Kravatavich, 1999; Loewenberg, 2000). Unlike the venue’s weekly rock concerts, which charged 50 RMB per person, student actors were not paid. Zhang Che, a stage design student and leader of “Double X Productions,” was “frustrated with the scarcity of innovation” and trying to find a niche outside “official” theatre. As he explained, ‘‘performance art’ (xingwei yishu) is the best word for what we do. I don’t want to define our work as huaju, because it needs freedom to move” (Zhang Che, 12-18-99). While the students’ improvisational skills were unpolished and the scatological references seemed childish, the young audience was delighted with the “forbidden fruit” of “experimental huaju,” describing the performances as “alternative,” “fringe theatre,” and “underground.” The rage and hostility underlying the humor and parody of the student skits were disconcerting and the most moving, lasting feature. While the Busy Bee Bar seemed off the beaten track, members of the PSB periodically showed up to inspect the premises and the late night huaju. The student voices are significant, as they comprise the next generation of theatre professionals in China.

**State Theatres:** We finally arrive at the bastion of theatre in Communist China: the State Theatres (guojia juyuan). In the past, the theatres (in fact, all were State theatres, either
at the national or provincial level) were completely subsidized by the government, which
gave directives and management as well as full financial support. With economic reforms
and restructuring, subsidies were being slashed (as with all state-owned-enterprises), and the
theatres were forced to become increasingly self-sufficient. Facing the rising cost of living
and inflation, theatre *danwei* members (administrators and artistic staffs) found their *danwei*
salaries far too meager. Artists began free-lancing outside: acting, directing, writing,
dubbing for TV and films. Some people left the theatre to go into private business (*xia hai*).
(Ironically, *xia hai* originally meant someone was turning away from another occupation to
take up theatre; Jiang, 74.) Amid the rapidly accelerating economic reforms of the 1990s,
individual artists (members of the *danwei*) could become rich, while the State theatres were
in financial crisis. A theatre adage often quoted was: “The more performances, the more
money we lose; the fewer performances, the less we lose; no performances at all bring good
profits” (Jiang, 1994, 72).

A variety of innovations were launched during the 1990s: the permanent
employment of the “iron rice bowl” (*tie fan wan*) was replaced by a “contract system”
(*pinrenzhi*) for all arts workers. The State Theatres found themselves competing in the
marketplace with the growing number of nongovernment-sponsored, independent
productions. Profit margins, box office revenues, investors, and operating budgets were
suddenly significant factors in production planning and realization. The term *shangyan*
(short for *shangye yanchu* / “commercial performance,” i.e., tickets are sold) began to be
used.49 Theatres were encouraged to augment dwindling State subsidies with “outside”
investment. Theatres planned “performance tours” (*liuxing yanchu*) in collaboration with
“cooperation partners” (*hezuo huoban*) and “performance companies” (*yanchu gongsi*).
A “producer system” (*zhizuoren xitong* or *zhizuo zhi*) and “management system” (*guanli
xitong*) were instituted. *Huaju* began to borrow terminology as well as production practices
from TV, which had developed in a commercial direction earlier than *huaju*. (These terms
and practices, borrowed from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, were introduced during the 1980s with the advent of TV commercial advertising.) For example, a *chupinren* ("production person," “executive producer”) is actually the one who comes up with the money for a project; a *zongfu zeren* ("chief take up responsibility person") decides how to spend the money. A *zhizuoren* ("producer") actually does all the busy work. An investor who gives funding is a *zanwu*; if he provides "goods," he is a *xiezhu* or *xieban*. A *zhuban* ("sponsor") is “*xu,*" i.e., he provides an “intangible” asset. The vocabulary is sensitive to Chinese culture and customs, especially that of “giving face.” As theatre artist Liu Tiegang describes,

> The *zhuban* is the governmental organization behind a cultural activity. ... If a production has many *zhuban* and *xieban*, the activity is related to bureaucracy. We must list all the bureaucratic organization names. That means different organizations supposedly support it, but many may not even know about it. ... There's a difference here between East and West and what we mean by these terms. In Taiwan a *chupinren* is actually the boss, the capitalist who gives money and wants to get his investment back. In China's mainland, the *chupinren* is often a government official and the money is government money, so it's really ridiculous to put the official's name as a *chupinren* (Liu Tiegang, 12-7-99).

Another artist confided that “before the theatre leader was always the 'chief planner' (*zong cehua*), but now he’s sometimes listed in the Playbill as 'executive producer' (*chupinren*); the terms are ambiguous.” This new lexicon reflected the complexities and nuances of the dual-track system (*shuang gui Zhi*) of Chinese market socialism (Fan and Grossman, 10).

State theatres were facing an audience bored with ideology and craving entertainment and stimulation. One director confided that “the audience isn’t interested in ‘Art.’ They’re fed up with plays that ‘convey artistic values.’” While the greater importance of the box office actually encouraged a varied repertoire, theatre leaders had to weigh artistic quality against commercial viability and “political correctness.” Under the guidance of the Cultural Ministry, the theatres developed a range of artistic, management, and financial strategies. Independent Studios collaborated with State Theatres on "partly
independent productions” (*ban dulide yanchu*). While not yet a formal term, this described a new arrangement of co-production with a State Theatre. In fact, artistic experimentation could also be encouraged under such an arrangement. I will examine co-production more closely when discussing specific directors in this study.

The earlier mentioned independent productions were, in fact, renting space for their performances from the State Theatres. During the 1990s, every State *huaju* theatre in Beijing had built its own “little theatre,” although larger theatres continued to be used as well. This sudden rise of the “little theatre” was called the “most fascinating moment” in *huaju* (Mo Fei, 5-5-95). After seeing Meng Jinghui’s *Si Fan* (a State theatre production described later in this study), one excited critic exclaimed: “*Si Fan* has made ‘little theatre’ a cultural ‘buzzword’” (*wenhua redian*) (Mo Fei, 5-5-95). While “little theatre” was undoubtedly a result of financial pressures (lower costs for “little theatre”) and dwindling audiences, there were also artistic considerations. As Lin Kehuan pointed out (1993, 12), “little theatre” was “in synch with the thoughts, values, and artistic tastes of society.” “Little theatres” were “crumbling the monopoly” of the “large theatres” (*da juchang*) (Mo Fei, 5-5-95), changing the pattern of *huaju* performance and the actor-audience relationship. As one critic explained, “actors communicate with us instead of trying to teach us” (Zhao Ningyu, 1996). Another thought the “‘little theatre’ stresses participation ... and has given *huaju* new energy” (Mo Fei, 5-5-95). “‘Little theatres’ are giving us a chance to know *huaju* again” (Zhao Ting, 5-13-96).

The newest directives from the Cultural Ministry required all “institutional danwei” (*shiye danwei*) (including theatres, schools, etc.) to accelerate in “developing towards the market” (*xiang shichang fazhan*). Theatres were to have permanent administrative staffs paid for by the State, but all performing artists were to become free-lancers (*ziyou zhiyezhe*) instead of “government workers” (*zhengfu gongzuoren*). Rather than belonging to a *danwei*, theatre artists would be managed by a “personnel agent organization” (*renshi daili*).
While “fixed subsidies” (guding touru) were to be decreased every year until the theatres were completely independent, “awards” (jiangli) and “creation subsidies” (chuangzuo buzhu) for specific projects were to be increased. Government plans also called for promoting “national culture” (minzu wenhua) and the “elegant arts” (gaoya yishu) (Yu Zheng, 3-2-00). As one artist described, “there will always be money from the government for certain types of plays, i.e., ‘main melody.’” Another artist confided: “the government will continue to support my theatre. Change won’t come quickly; things move slowly in China.” At the end of the decade, in the surge of the market economy, State theatres continued to struggle. One artist explained: “State theatres are seemingly prosperous, but two-thirds of the audience didn’t pay for tickets. The government gives out free tickets to create a false impression of prosperity.” Following the model in the West, huaju production during the 1990s was following market-driven practices more and more, with one continuing difference. As Sun Huizhu pointed out, “in the West, you have the critics, here we have the government censors” (Sun, 6-20-97).

Censorship: A national-level theatre in China has followed a traditional procedure to bring a performance to realization. A script must first pass through the theatre’s internal Party (dangwei) and Artistic Committees (yishu weiyuanhui). After a script successfully maneuvered these initial hurdles, the theatre submitted the script to the Cultural Ministry (wenhuabu) for approval—or in the case of a municipal theatre, such as the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, to the municipal government’s Department of Culture. Officials from the Cultural Ministry and Propaganda Department (xuanchuanbu) attended the play’s dress rehearsal (caipai) and gave theatre leaders notes for any “suggested” changes to obtain dress rehearsal approval. After the play opened, officials saw the actual performance and gave performance approval. During the 1990s as the political climate thawed, theatre leaders gained a bit more autonomy. The basic tenets did not change. As one theatre leader explained, “three forbidden” (san jin) existed: first, a play “could not challenge the
government—could not be anti-Communist, anti-Socialist, or anti-Chinese”; second, “no overt sexuality, nudity, or obscenity”; and third, “no excessive violence” (Zhao Youliang, 1-14-97). Designer Xue Dianjie described:

Formerly, if there were a bad play, it would be attacked by the people. Chairman Mao said we should ‘let 100 flowers bloom and 100 schools of thought contend,’ but if there were a ‘poisonous weed,’ everyone should attack it. Now people aren’t mobilized to attack ‘poisonous weeds.’ The government mainly engages in ‘guidance’: the government presents awards to people for plays they like. Another tool used by the government is public opinion, i.e., the press, mass media, and periodicals. Plays are classified into different groups: first, the group to be encouraged; second, the group to be allowed; and third is either porn (huangse, ‘yellow color’) or anti-government (Xue, 8-25-99).

I will look at play “content” in more detail in relation to specific productions later in this study.

As mentioned earlier in describing China’s recurring cycles of control and relaxation, theatre artists practice self-censorship. They understand the system’s parameters. A Chinese student felt “theatre artists are freer than other danwei workers, for example university students or government officials.” One theatre artist described how “people are clever and learn to maneuver within the system.” Director Lin Zhaohua describes the rules he and playwright Guo Shixing devised (1990): “Keep away from politics; be close to the people; don’t mind the abuse of some ‘experts’ and professors in theatre circles; do the theatre we want to do” (Lin, He Zongsi 1999, 309). As far as the required submission of scripts to government authorities is concerned, Lin cites the use of two script versions: the “inspection script” (shencha ben) and the “rehearsal script” (pailian ben) (Lin, He Zongsi 1999, 309). Describing the birth of his independent studio, Lin explains: “In my studio I have freedom. I’m not using State money, so the rules are different. I don’t have to go through endless committees. I make the decisions myself” (Lin, 10-17-97).
In 1997, the first law concerning commercial performance was formulated by the National People’s Congress (quanguo renmin daibiao dahui) based on a proposal submitted by the Cultural Ministry. The law required every performance troupe to have a performing license (yanchu zheng). Actually, as an administrative regulation (xingzheng tiaoli), the performing license has always been a requirement, but until 1997, there was no national law in place. According to “performance law” (yanchu fa) regulations, a theatre (juchang) (the physical space) also must have a performing license. If a juchang receives a performance troupe (i.e., the space is rented by a performance troupe), the troupe is required to show its license. A “non-commercial performance” (fei shangye yanchu), i.e., a performance for the public good (gongyi yanchu, “public benefit performance”) or a “teaching performance” (jiaoxue yanchu, actually a rehearsal with an audience present), does not need a performing license, but every commercial play must present the license. An independent group without a license can apply for a temporary one after Cultural Ministry officials conduct an audit (shenhe). Although regulations state that it takes a month to get a temporary license, in fact, it is “quite complicated” (one of the director’s words) for an independent group. A temporary license is good for one performance, and for each successive performance, the group would have to reapply. As one theatre artist described this process, “it’s hen mafan” (“lots of trouble,” a “real headache”). Instead of going to the Cultural Ministry to apply for a temporary license, a group can approach an organization which already has one, i.e., a State Theatre—and this is presumably less “troublesome” than dealing directly with the Cultural Ministry. In return for “use” of the performing license, the responsible theatre would provide “artistic supervision.” One theatre artist observes:

A group wants the prestige of a famous national theatre. Of course, this only affects commercial performance. If no tickets are sold, it’s just like a party (wanhui); you can do what you like; you don’t need the license.

Accepting payment for the performing license is not allowed, but as one artist explained, “some danwei do want money for use of their license, although that’s illegal according to
performance act regulations.” Complaining about problems with one co-production (“rent wasn’t paid,” “actors weren’t paid,” “problems with investors”), an artist confided that “contract regulations, laid down in the ‘economic contract act’ (jingji hetong fa) weren’t followed.” Negotiations were conducted through guanxi (“personal connections,” “relationships”). “This is a problem for China in transition.” While judicial reforms became a priority during the 1990s, China’s legal system was still developing (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, US Department of State, April 1998). China remains a society run by what the Chinese call renzhi (“rule by individuals”) rather than fazhi (“rule of law”). Guanxi and the houmen (“back door”) continue to be central and powerful realities. Within this climate, the State theatres were faced with enormous challenges: the need to find investors, deal with contracts, producers, and “performance companies.” The regulations account for experimental or alternative work often being presented as an “unofficial” production (i.e., with no publicity, no box office, and a limited number of performances for an invited “in-crowd” audience) to avoid getting a permit, which would involve censors scanning for inappropriate sexual or political content.

Many theatre artists felt that during the 1990s, censorship was actually at its lightest, explaining: “Virtually anyone can form a theatre troupe.” “Independent groups aren’t subject to approval in the same way State Theatres are.” Yet, while a majority of artists referred to this period as relaxed, the Chinese continued, in the words of one actor, to live “heavily,” “under heavy burdens” (zhong). Some artists described the “light censorship” as evidenced by the new subject matter of “personal realism.” Authorities were “open to expressions of personal feelings, even sexual feelings, as long as they didn’t challenge the government or become obscene” (Sun, 6-17-97). Other artists described the more “personal” problem plays as actually embodying government sanctioned social messages, i.e., even with financial prosperity, you must pay attention to family values and your responsibility to Chinese society.
Actress/director Shi Ke’s production of Arthur Kopit’s *Road to Nirvana* (*Nadangna de lingguang I “Madonna’s Sparks”*) is an eye-opening example. The translator Sun Huizhu (William Sun) thought *Road to Nirvana* (a vicious satire about greed, icon-worship, and a Hollywood producer ready to sell his testicles for a deal) would be popular in China: “that kind of deal is not inconceivable in China now” (Sun, 6-20-97). Shi Ke presented the play in Beijing in 1999 with the China Youth Art Theatre acting as the “home danwei,” i.e., providing the performance license. Shi Ke and her American partner blamed marketing (they “did not spend an adequate amount on publicity”) and the fact that they performed in a large theatre (which they could not fill) as reasons for the production’s lack of success. Other Chinese artists not connected with the project thought the audience “couldn’t relate to rich Hollywood producers wearing Hawaiian shirts and drinking wine around a swimming pool.” I thought it surprising that, considering the nature of the material, the play was approved. A Chinese friend explained: “the play is American and showed American ‘spiritual pollution,’ so it was easy to get the performance license.”

In late 1996, during the “construction of spiritual civilization” campaign (*jingshen wenming jianshe*), Meng Jinghui attempted an update of Lu Xun’s 1921 classic short story *Ah Q zhengzhuan* (*The True Story of Ah Q*), which he entitled *Ah Q tongzhi* (*Comrade Ah Q*). Meng’s version included three acts in which young Chinese from three different periods in modern Chinese history stage the Ah Q story. In the first act a theatre company performs Lu Xun’s work during the 1920s. The performance is cut off one-third of the way through and moves to a production of *Ah Q* forty years later, performed by deaf-mute workers in a prosthetic limb factory during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. The final third of the play is set in a 1990s psychiatric hospital where acting is used as a form of psychotherapy. The play ends in chaos, with patients all fighting to play the leading role of Ah Q. Straight remakes of the original *Ah Q* have been performed without incident, but the reincarnation of the petty thief and revolutionary poseur as a socialist comrade, in a
scathing critique exposing vanity and self-deception in contemporary China, apparently was a bit too irreverent for authorities. Theatre leaders had initially approved the play, but two weeks before opening (December 1996), Cultural Ministry officials "heard about the addition of the word 'comrade.'" Not liking the political implications, they immediately stopped rehearsals. As Meng explains,

The political atmosphere was very intense. They didn’t like the title changed to *Comrade Ah Q*. This touched the nerves of the Cultural Ministry. They suspected us of making fun. Also I added a rock’n roll band and set some of the play during the 1960s. The script didn’t pass. ... Maybe in two years, it will be possible to perform this play. ... Even if I’m able to get a lot of money from a Chinese or foreign company, the theatre must approve the script. ... I used to feel restrained, but I think it’s interesting to find my own way in restrictive circumstances, to direct a play and also keep myself from being hurt (5-29-98).

Despite the above, Meng asserts: "in China you don’t need complete freedom. What you need is wisdom and intelligence. I feel that I can do what I want now" (Meng, 5-29-98). Mostly because of its limited reach, the censors tend to leave experimental *huaju* directors to their own avant-garde devices. The freedom allowed to the theatre contrasts strikingly with the restrictions that have been imposed on film. In 1996, censors of China’s Film Bureau introduced stricter content regulations and rejected the majority of scripts surveyed in 1997. Meng describes that no one wants to see the “bad films” that get past the censors. “That gives theatre a chance to develop. As a propaganda machine, the theatre now ranks lower for the government than the movies. Just because right now, few people are paying attention to it, the theatre is becoming freer” (5-29-98).

This chapter has introduced the socio-economic climate, cultural milieu, variable censorship, and the overall *huaju* scene in Beijing during the 1990s. This includes new phenomena: “independent theatre studios,” “artist entrepreneurs,” “little theatre,” as well as challenges facing the venerable State Theatres. To provide a context for new production, management, and financial practices, and in turn, their impact on *huaju* aesthetics, the next chapter will examine the operations of CNET, as representative of the State theatre system.
CHAPTER 2

A STATE THEATRE: CHALLENGE AND TRANSFORMATION

CHINA NATIONAL EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE / CNET

Beijing’s four major huaju theatres provide a context for a detailed exploration of the China National Experimental Theatre. These include the Beijing People’s Art Theatre (Beijing renmin yishu juyuan or Renyi), the China Youth Art Theatre (Zhongguo qingnian yishu juyuan or Qingyi), the China Children’s Art Theatre (Zhongguo ertong yishu juyuan or Eryi), and the China National Experimental Theatre (Zhongyang shiyan huaju yuan; Shihua or Shiyan). (Chinese theatre artists use the above diminutives. Adopting acronyms, for example, BPAT, CYT, CCT, and CNET, is fairly new usage following Western style.)

The Beijing People’s Art Theatre operates directly under the Beijing Municipal Government Cultural Department (Beijing shi zhengfu wenhuabu), while the other three theatres are directly under the national Cultural Ministry (wenhuabu). This fact distinguishes the theatres’ direct source of supervision as well as funding. As one theatre leader explained, with fewer artists under the auspices of the Beijing Municipal Government, “every child can be well fed … so Renyi is larger and able to procure funding more easily.”

Distinguishing the theatres in terms of artistic work, Renyi primarily used a realistic style in acting and staging and specialized in Beijing life, especially Beijing history, stories and characters, with Beijing dialect and slang. Eryi focussed on children’s theatre presented by adult actors, and especially emphasized “body training” (xingti xunlian), with subject matter oriented towards young children (Wu, 12-20-97). Qingyi, originally under the leadership of the Communist Youth League, focussed on theatre particularly aimed at young adults. Shihua / CNET focussed (in the actors’ and directors’ words) on “experimental theatre” (shiyan xiju). (I will define terms and look at “experimental” more closely in the next chapter.) Upon their establishment after 1949, the work of the four theatres had been
clearly delineated in terms of style and content. However, as the theatres experimented with a more varied repertoire during the 1990s, their productions became much less distinct. As CNET Vice President Yang Zongjing pointed out, in analyzing one theatre, “you actually gain a perspective on the history and development of all China’s State theatres” (Yang, 6-30-99). The following provides the reader with “insider” knowledge of the “nuts and bolts” of a State theatre.

**Brief history of CNET:**

It is not surprising that CNET’s history reflects the history of modern China. CNET was originally part of Beijing’s Central Drama Academy (*Zhongyang xiju xueyuan* or *Zhongxi*, opened in 1950). In 1954, *Zhongxi* had established two special acting and directing training classes for advanced students, who were “already famous theatre artists in China.” Teachers for the advanced classes were Russian artists from the Moscow Art Theatre, who had studied with Stanislavski (Dolby 1976, 233). Before this, Chinese artists had “learned the Stanislavski System from books,” but with the establishment of these two classes, artists received “legitimate training from those who had studied directly with Stanislavski” (Yang, 6-30-99). After graduation, the students were to go back to theatres in their home provinces. Several well-known dramatists thought it would be better if the artists stayed and worked together in a new theatre in Beijing, as they now shared a common creative language and the same artistic goals (Yang, 6-30-99).

In the Spring of 1956, five renowned dramatists, Ouyang Yuqian, Sha Kefu, Li Bozhao, Sun Weishi, and Ouyang Shanzun, sent a proposal to the State Council (*guo wuyuan*) advocating the establishment of an “exemplary and experimental” national *huaju* theatre based on *Zhongxi*’s two training classes. With the approval of Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice Premier Chen Yi, CNET began operation on September 15th of that year. PLA Commander-in-Chief Zhu De, one of the four “patriarchs” of the PRC, inscribed the theatre’s name in his calligraphy. Actors wanted to be in both films and stage plays, and
from the very beginning, film actors were invited to join the training classes. At that time there were no TV plays and few films, and the experimental huaju theatre was conceived as “a rehearsal base” for stage as well as film actors (Zhou Enlai, Yu Lan 96/1, 24).

From 1956 – 1960, CNET was combined with the two academy classes. The first two productions in 1956, Goldoni’s Servant of Two Masters (Yi pu er zhu) and Gorky’s Petty Urban Bourgeoisie (Xiao shimin) were directed by the Russian directors and presented by the Zhongxi directing and performance classes. CNET and Zhongxi separated in 1960. As Yang explains, “Zhongxi wanted the artists to teach, but our major interest was in performing plays” (Yang, 5-26-99). Zhongxi’s first President in 1950, the famous dramatist Ouyang Yuqian (1889-1963), had studied in Tokyo and was one of the actors in Black Slaves’ Cry to Heaven (Dolby, 203). Often called the “father of huaju,” he was instrumental in bringing this production, the first huaju, to China in 1907. Ouyang Yuqian became CNET’s first President (yuanzhang) in 1956. His deputies were Ms. Sun Weishi and Shu Qiang, who were successively appointed chief directors (zong daoyan) of the Theatre. Sun Weishi had studied at the Moscow Theatre Academy in the late 1930s – early 1940s. After her parents were killed by the Nationalists, she became the unofficial adopted daughter of Zhou Enlai. She “committed suicide” in prison in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, persecuted by Lin Biao and the “Gang of Four” (actress Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife; Zhang Chunqiao; Yao Wenyuan; and Wang Hongwen). As CNET director Wu Xiaojiang explains, Sun Weishi and Shu Qiang had different ideas about theatre. Shu Qiang was more traditional and insisted on following the “rule of realism”: “Theatre must serve a political purpose. Directors must fully understand Marxism and Mao Zedong thought” (Liu Housheng, 1985: 10-17). After the Cultural Revolution “with Sun gone, Shu got the upper hand” and was chief director at CNET for the next ten years. Wu describes: “We co-directed a play, but fought with each other throughout rehearsal. After that he never wanted to be chief director again” (Wu, 12-20-97).
CNET received “close attention” from government leaders, “especially during its first ten years.” Premier Zhou Enlai in fact had a close relationship with all four major Beijing theatres. Older artists like to reminisce about Premier Zhou and Vice Premier Chen Yi “taking time out from their busy schedules” in the fall of 1958 to visit the Summer Palace (yihuyuan) with CNET’s staff to “discuss questions of artistic creation.”

Commemorating Zhou in April 1996, older CNET artists made a pilgrimage back to this very spot (Zhao and Yang, CNET, 5). According to Yang Zongjing, Zhou Enlai had been active as a child playing women’s roles in huaju at the all-boys’ Nankai Middle School (Nankai Zhongxue) in Tianjin. Yang recalled how Zhou saw almost all of CNET’s productions, and after every performance he would shake hands with the actors and stage workers, “speaking with everyone as an equal.” “He’d affectionately shake your hand and look straight into your eyes. Some stage workers were shy and would hide behind the curtain, but he’d chase after them to shake hands” (Yang, 6-30-99). Zhou Enlai also gave “valuable suggestions” to the actors. For his 1961 adaptation of Black Slaves’ Cry to Heaven (Hei nu yu tian lu), or Hatred of the Black Slaves (Hei nu hen) as they called the new adaptation (with Sun Weishi directing), Ouyang Yuqian had added an epilogue, in which the slaves rose up against their captivity and exploitation. “Premier Zhou told Ouyang Yuqian ‘we must treat this problem according to history. At that time in history, it would be impossible for black people to have this kind of awareness’” (Yang, 6-30-99). The epilogue in the adaptation (which included “marching music, the blare of sirens, and black men uniting and fighting together”) was cut, as Marxist philosophy required adherence to the scientific perspective of “historical materialism” (lishi weiwu zhuyi), i.e., keeping to the true history (Xia Junyin, 1996, 8).

Following the Soviet model, during the 1950s and 1960s, CNET had a tradition of “stressing the collective spirit.” A group of playwrights gathered together to create one script, and several directors collaborated to direct the play. Following the Russian “chief
director" (zong daoyan) system, the leading director would “improve on the other directors’ ideas” (Yang, 5-26-99). As Yang Zongjing explains, during the 1950s, all huaju theatres “wanted to progress in artistic terms”:

but … especially during the anti-Japanese War [1937], huaju served as a strong weapon against the Japanese. Huaju functioned as propaganda encouraging people to join the war effort. There was excitement and enthusiasm, but artistic quality wasn’t very high. During the 1950s, we hoped to improve huaju, but in China things often follow a circuitous route—by that I mean the Cultural Revolution. We were only able to devote ourselves to the cause of art beginning in 1978 (Yang, 6-30-99).

In February 1966, right before the start of the Cultural Revolution, the Cultural Ministry merged CNET and Qingyi (actually established in 1949, so older than CNET) into one theatre which kept the name Qingyi. The leader and chief director of the merged theatre was CNET’s Shu Qiang. As one theatre artist describes, “Mao wanted to strengthen government control of the theatre circles. One method was to combine the different theatres.” In 1973, three theatres (Eryi, Qingyi, and CNET) were “forced by the Cultural Ministry to unite,” and the new merged theatre was called the China Huaju Troupe (Zhongguo huaju tuan). At that time, the huaju troupe “existed but there were few artistic activities” (Xue Dianjie, 12-22-97). (Renyi, established in 1949, also as an extension of Zhongxi, was under the Beijing Municipal government and had remained separate.) My interviews with theatre artists revealed the depth of shared experiences and the constraints on huaju during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. As designer Xue Dianjie described, the Cultural Revolution started for the theatres in 1964, earlier than the rest of the country. Mao thought the performing troupes were comprised of “leftover aristocrats, children of families with money and power” who were “not serving the workers, soldiers, and peasants.” In early 1964, Xue was sent to the Anshan Steel Factory in NE China to work in the steel-mills. Other theatre artists were sent to Hebei Province to work with peasants in the fields (Xue Dianjie, 12-22-97). At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Xue returned to Beijing. When the merged China huaju theatre was established, artists were
asked to produce plays with revolutionary subject matter. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, the entire theatre was sent to the military and “came up with plays eulogizing the PLA”:

... stories about PLA heroes and Red Guards denouncing Capitalist-roaders. *Huaju* was performed during the Cultural Revolution, but this period was so politically oriented. No one considers that glorious ... so we deliberately omit this part of the theatre’s history. ... We’ve always had the tradition of using *huaju* as a political weapon. During every political campaign, *huaju* was used for propaganda. 1976 was a funny year; ... We came up with a play which conformed with the politics scolding Capitalist-roaders; then ... after the downfall of the Gang of Four, all plays were directed toward condemning the Gang of Four and eulogizing Zhou Enlai (Xue, 12-22-97).

Yang Zongjing recalled “we had to change our capitalist thinking.” “That was an order.” “Only when you changed your world view could you write good plays for workers, soldiers, and peasants” (Yang, 5-26-99). Theatre artist Xian Jihua described a year of “field exercise” (*shixi*) in 1965 to work in the rural areas, an experience “required for all college graduates.” When he returned to Beijing, he “encountered” the Cultural Revolution: “We were sent to be re-educated (*duanlian*, “exercise, toughen”) in the military department. We lived and worked together for three years. ... Our daily activities were first to work; second, to study; and third, if we had time, we could perform” (Xian, 1-25-00). In 1977-78, two years after the Cultural Revolution ended, during the process called “rectifying the wrong and returning to the right” (*bo luan fan zheng*, literally “to change disorder return order”), the separate theatres were re-established, and each “hoped to restore its individuality.” At that time, CNET was “humorously called the ‘big covered wagon’ (*da peng che*),” as the artists had only temporary wooden buildings for their rehearsal. “All the Comrades understood the Theatre’s purpose was to endure all kinds of hardships to achieve our shared ideals” (Xia Junyin, 8).

During the 1980s, “serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers” was expanded to include the broader masses, i.e., “to serve the people.” As Theatre leaders assert, CNET
carries out the principle of “serve the people and serve socialism” (wei renmin fuwu, wei shehui zhuyi fuwu; for short, the Chinese use erwei fangxiang, “the two ‘serves’” or shuang wei, “double ‘serve’”) and also maintains the basic practice of “letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend” (baihua qifang baijia zhengming or shuang bai, “double 100”). Since its inception, CNET has staged more than 100 productions, including “both modern and historical plays,” both “large and little theatre plays.” CNET artists have toured throughout China, and after “Reform and Opening” promoted cultural exchange, CNET visited and participated in theatre festivals in Europe and Asia. CNET has also invited theatre professionals from the former Soviet Union, Japan, Norway, and the U.S. to perform or direct at their theatre (Zhao and Yang, CNET, 5). In recent years, CNET has endeavored to “forge an artistic identity” by creating “its own personality ... its own unique artistic style ... by initiating the principles of experimentation and exploration” (Zhao Youliang, 6-22-98).

Policy / Organization / Structure:

CNET operates through a triumvirate leadership (sanren lingdao) assigned by the Cultural Ministry, and which, in this case, has been in office since 1990 (throughout the decade). Zhao Youliang, a celebrated stage, film and TV actor, is President (yuanzhang). Noted huaju director Yang Zongjing is Vice President (fu yuanzhang). Wang Zhengchun, previously a Party official in the Cultural Ministry’s Art Bureau is a Vice President and CNET’s Party Secretary (dangwei shuji) “in charge of Party affairs in the theatre.” While the President and Vice President are chosen by the Cultural Ministry, the Party Secretary usually is appointed by the Government Party Committee.

The “triumvirate” notwithstanding, the majority of theatre artists referred to Zhao and Yang as “the leaders.” Zhao Youliang and Yang Zongjing comprise a strong team with complementary personalities and skills. Yang fu yuanzhang (Vice President Yang or Yang daoyan, director Yang) is genteel, warm, amusing, urbane, calm, and diplomatic; Zhao
yuanzhang (President / Leader Zhao) is friendly, charismatic, emotional, humorous, excitable, passionate. The majority of CNET artists seem to like and respect the President and Vice President as leaders and fellow-artists. Several actors and directors described Zhao Youliang as "quite an enlightened leader":

He's open to new styles and new thinking. We're lucky to have him here. He encourages actors to practice and act more. I can talk to him about my artistic ideas and he listens. He always comes to the dressing room and we joke and laugh (Interview 5-24-98).

A very successful actor explained:

Other troupes wanted me to join, but I like this theatre the most. ... From an artistic perspective, I think CNET is the best ... because of the concept 'experimental.' Under this leadership [Zhao and Yang], we have a group of artists willing to explore and try new styles (11-17-97).

Apparently the Cultural Ministry also extols CNET's leaders, as both served throughout the 1990s. (In fact, the two leaders were reassigned for a third five-year term beginning in 2000.) During his tenure, President Zhao announced to the press:

We need to study 'building socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.' This is our intellectual weapon and the spiritual motivating force for the development of huaju. ... As leader of a professional troupe, I feel the pressure of how to develop huaju and make it prosper (Zhao, 1-16-98).

Clearly the theatre leaders now had the dual role of implementing governmental directives from above, while at the same time endeavoring to make CNET an artistically and commercially viable organization from within.

There is no question that CNET is a State theatre. On entering the Theatre's administration building, the "Voice of Truth' Public Announcement Board" ("Shihua zhisheng" gong gaolan), actually a large chalk-board, is prominently displayed and updated every month by the Party Secretary (see Appendix). CNET's top leaders are all Party members, but of CNET's total membership of 200, only about 50 are Party Members (Yang, 6-30-99). Mid-level officials, i.e., the heads of specific departments, are not required to join the Party. As director Yang asserts,
What matters is not whether you’re a Party member or not, but whether you’re competent in your job. Most actors aren’t Party members. In a huaju troupe that’s not a problem. Promotion relies on talent and ability. In the past, things were much stricter. . . . The Party exercises its leadership through its policies, so even if you’re not a Party member, if you do things according to the Party’s wishes, you can still be a leader (Yang, 6-30-99).

Leaders Zhao and Yang further elucidate on the role of political study for theatre members:

Nowadays we don’t particularly force people to receive political study (zhengzhi xuexi ke) at a fixed time. In the theatre, people are relatively mature. We don’t need to pull their ears and tell them what to do. Everyone has access to the central government’s major positions through newspapers and TV. As for political instruction, you can’t be anti-government. If you’re an artist in the first place, you should be patriotic and love the country. You can’t say you don’t agree with the constitution, with the laws set by the government. You cannot say so (Yang, 5-26-99).

In the past, President Zhao explained, “we had quite a lot of study, but now there’s very little. If there’s a big event like the 15th Party Congress, then there may be some study, but Chinese are used to that.” If there were more political study, “perhaps the actors wouldn’t like it, because it would interfere with their acting outside in TV plays” (Zhao, 6-22-98).

My interviews elicited varying comments about political study and Party membership. An administrator, who is not a Party member, described: “In fact we don’t have political study, just some meetings conveying the message of important government decisions” (6-25-99).

An actor in his twenties stated:

There’s no political study for me. . . . I’m just not interested. . . . Maybe some old actors, some Party members have study. . . . Things have changed. Money is power now. The Party’s not important. . . . Before you needed the Party for promotion, but not now. People used to be proud to be a Party member, but now they’re embarrassed by it (7-18-99).

A very successful actor in his mid-forties explained that he “was willing” to join the Party but later changed his mind. During the 1950s-60s, actors “had to join, because if you weren’t a Party member you’d get no privileges. But now there’s a lot of freedom, and I don’t feel any restrictions in terms of my own artistic work” (8-10-98). Another theatre artist also in his mid-forties was “thinking about whether to join”:

It’s easier now, because not many people want to join the Party. Theatre leaders want me to join, but it’s a personal, private decision. . . . If you’re a
government official and want to improve your position, you should join. You’d have more opportunities. But theatre isn’t the same as a government job even though the government supports us. ... University students have political study every week, but there’s no political study at art schools or the Drama Academy, and at the theatre only Party members have study. ... I do think Party members make more decisions. There are some things you don’t know about if you’re not a member. ... What do you get if you join? More work and meetings, not more money! (5-12-98)

Another mid-level artist, also not a Party member, disagreed with the above. He thought “both Party members and non-Party members were part of the decision-making process at the theatre.” He explained that if he joined the Party, “maybe it’d be easier to get promoted ... maybe not”:

... but I don’t want to be an official. ... I like theatre work. I don’t want to do administrative work, allocating housing, organizing meetings, hearing complaints. ... In a State-owned organization, you’re ‘serving the people.’ You can’t really do anything according to your own will (6-19-98).

Party work in a performing arts troupe “had changed dramatically” from past decades, as one actor explained:

The Party isn’t as important as it used to be. Party people don’t have anything important to do now. They don’t have power. They do nothing. Many artistic people aren’t interested in Party work. So if there’s a Party meeting, maybe just ten people will show up, and ... they go only to ‘give face’ to the Party Secretary (5-17-99).

In the past, the theatre paid attention to Party members:

They’d give you political guarantees and help financially, so you’d have better chances. But China has a different face now. ... Young actors have fewer restraints, so being a Party member isn’t important to them. They’re individually rather than collectively-oriented. They’re not very enthusiastic about the Party; and some even show contempt (6-8-99).

An older Party member, one of the department heads, summed up: “the education I received affected my thinking and world view. I work very hard for the theatre, but we Communists are used to making sacrifices” (9-18-99).

In terms of organization, CNET is comprised of nine departments. These include: the “President’s Office” (yuanzhang bangongshi), which assists in the two top leaders’ work; the “Performing Arts Center” (yanyi zhongxin) supervising actors and directors; the
“Performance Department” (yanchubu), the public liaison in charge of scheduling, tickets, and managing the “little theatre”; the “Stage Arts Center” (wumei zhongxin), including set, lighting, costume, make-up, sound designers and stage arts workers; the “Administrative Office” (xingzheng bangongshi); the “Planning and Financial” Office (jihua caiwu bangongshi); the “Party Branch Office” (dangwei bangongshi); and the “Personnel and Security Office” (renshi bao wei bangongshi). The “Play Creation Office” (jumu chuangzuo shi), which comprises both a library and archival office (ziliao shi), supervises playwrights, critics, a photographer, and script-reading team, and is also responsible for publicity, press releases, and editing CNET’s journal, Experimental Theatre (Shiyan xiju). The head (zhuren) of each department (hired by the President “who lays down his tasks”/renwu) has two assistants and a staff. The breakdown of CNET’s personnel, totaling 204 people, includes 111 actors, 4 directors, 7 playwrights, 35 stage arts workers (including 5 set and lighting designers), 5 critics, 31 administrative people, and 11 workers (drivers, cleaners, etc.) (Yang, figures as of March 3, 2000).^{13}

CNET operates under what is called the “leader responsibility system” (yuanzhang fu ze zhi; lingdao ganbu ziren zhi), i.e., President Zhao is responsible to the Cultural Ministry. Zhao Youliang’s contract with the Ministry has three stipulations: he must ensure that at least one newly-created play is produced each year (past productions become part of the theatre’s repertory and are repeated); there must be at least 150 performances each year (the number was raised in 1997 from 100 to the current 150); and the theatre must be over 45% self-sufficient. According to Vice President Yang, CNET was not able to consistently achieve the 45% self-sufficiency rate (the money the theatre needs to collect by itself). In order for Zhao Youliang to accomplish his three “tasks,” he relies on the principle of “leadership through collectivism” (jiti lingdao), also called “democratic centralization” (minzhu jizhongzhi). As Yang describes, “we exercise our leadership collectively, but of the three of us, President Zhao Youliang is the most important.”
“democratic centralization system” means that before the leaders make any decision, they call the nine mid-level department heads (zhong ceng ganbu) together to discuss the theatre’s affairs. The department heads “have the right” to voice their opinions. Yang explains: “we’ll let them have their say and then make our decision”:

Certainly there will be differences in opinion, so at that time, we should obey the principle, ‘the minority obeys the will of the majority’ (shaoshu fuchong duoshu xiang). ... If President Zhao and I don’t agree or we’re in the minority? ... Then we come to another principle, ‘the subordinate should obey the superior’ (xiaji fuchong shangji) (Yang, 2-22-00).

In defining the Party Secretary’s role, Yang Zongjing asserts: “Zhao Youliang and I decide on the scripts, but Party Secretary Wang Zhengchun can also give his opinion.” Party Secretary Wang “doesn’t participate in other specific creative links and is not involved in artistic decisions. The #1 person in the theatre is the President and not the Party Secretary. That’s a change from the past” (Yang, 9-14-99). After hearing the set Party phraseology above, I wondered: Dost thou protest too much?!

My interviews sought to further identify the decision-making process concerning productions, starting with criteria for script selection. CNET performs both foreign and Chinese plays, both ancient and modern subjects. Scripts are submitted by CNET’s own, as well as outside, playwrights. As Xian Jihua, the head of the Play Creation Office explained, since CNET is informal, scripts may be submitted to his department or directly to the theatre leaders.

CNET considers a play in terms of content. It must be healthy, positive, and instructive ... and the artistic level must be high. ... The play should also be entertaining so people want to see it. We have to think about economics now (Xian, 1-25-00).

Vice President Yang added that he “personally experienced different periods in Chinese history and is aware which plays should be presented.” During the Cultural Revolution, “politics were there,” and now during “Reform and Opening,” “politics are also there.”

Everyone is linked to politics; we can’t separate from politics. But we know what kind of politics can best mobilize peoples’ initiative in their daily lives. ... We no longer have the restraints we had before when we always thought
about whether we were making political mistakes or breaking from certain instructions from above. Now we have more freedom to do what we like. We have a greater ability to think independently (Yang, 5-26-99).

Party secretary Wang thought the theatre now had to think at the same time about economic profits and social impact. When there is a contradiction between the two, “we should submit to social needs, as our plays must have a positive social impact on the audience.” He also felt that “total political propaganda, like a sermon, isn’t suitable now. A script must be good in terms of its ideology as well as its artistic level. These must combine into a unity” (Wang, 7-14-99; “The Garden of the Party Committee,” 97/2, 4). Deng Xiaoping theory (Deng Xiaoping lilun) meets Mao doctrine (Mao Zedong sixiang) here! Producer Liu Tiegang added: “If the government is paying and doesn’t want to see any plays criticizing them or stirring up trouble (daoluan), that of course will influence which plays you do” (Liu, 4-28-98).

The theatre leaders had the ultimate responsibility for choosing scripts. Censorship was done at the theatre level. As leaders described, the Theatre “actually doesn’t have to submit scripts to the Cultural Ministry for approval. We already have the ‘performing license.’” The Theatre was submitting the scripts to get additional funding. CNET itself decided “whether a script could pass or not … judging its content, whether the audience will like it, and whether it’s suitable for our theatre.” The government “encourages and hopes you’ll do ‘main melody,’ but it doesn’t force you. There’s no rule, and if you don’t the government won’t criticize or even punish you.” Now the government advocates “main melody” (zhu xuanlu) plays, but also advocates “variety” (Yang 5-26-99). Playwright Guo Shixing (1-22-98) explained:

China has few good playwrights, because people see and experience so little. ... Now that China is open, hopefully the situation will change. ... I don’t feel any restrictions in what I write. Sometimes the government leads you to write certain things, but of course you can write what you want. ... The authorities give honors and prizes to the plays they like ... so in this way they can lead writers to write certain kinds of plays, such as ‘main melody.’
A theatre artist confided that in 1996-97 (the time of the “Spiritual Civilization” campaign), “the Cultural Ministry told leader Zhao not to produce so many experiments. CNET is a State Theatre, so it should present plays which help the government. Zhao should present more ‘main melody plays’ about modern society to help teach the people” (9-5-98).

In January, the theatre gives a performance plan (yanchujihua) for the year to the Cultural Ministry, submitting scripts as well as reports “describing how the theatre will treat the play and whether it’s a ‘key play’” (zhongdian jumu). The Cultural Ministry introduced the “key play” concept in the mid-1990s as a way to “spur the initiative” of theatre workers, although the specific term “key play” was first used in 1999. According to Yang Zongjing (9-14-99), a key play is one in which the theatre “involves the best workers and invests a lot of money. A ‘key play,’ usually a ‘main melody’ play, will get extra subsidy from the Cultural Ministry.” In the past, CNET first submitted their plan to the Cultural Ministry, and if the Ministry “thought the play could be ‘good,’’ they would provide funding. During the mid-1990s, the Ministry instituted changes: Beginning in 1996, the play had to be performed first, before the Cultural Ministry would give any money. The change occurred because theatres were receiving money from the Ministry and then failing to produce the play. With the change, CNET had to first “find the money” themselves (Yang, 3-3-2000). This practice continued until 1999 when the Cultural Ministry again changed its practice “to further enhance initiative” and further protect its investment. With the changes, CNET identifies which plays are “key plays” and then submits scripts and reports to the Cultural Ministry. If the Ministry decides to provide funding, their investment is given in two installments: 25%, when the Ministry approves the play as a “key play”; 75%, at the end of the performance run (Yang, 3-3-2000). In 2000, CNET is expected to move “even faster toward the market.” As Vice President Yang explained, “the Cultural Ministry is encouraging competition. The more you work, the more
money you’ll get. It’s not like before when we got a fixed amount from the State” (Yang, 3-3-2000).15

In terms of the director’s work, the theatre might assign a director a specific script or, as was often the case during the 1990s, the director will choose several plays and discuss his/her ideas with theatre leaders for their approval. With funding coming from foreign sources and directors organizing their own financing through Chinese or foreign sources for the first time, more options were open.16 For a “semi-independent” production, CNET provides artistic supervision and “guarantees quality and content” (acting as “gate-keeper” / baguan, “guarding the pass”), and sometimes the director is able to choose his own actors and designers. The one benefit for the theatre in providing the “performance license” for the semi-independent production is that these performances count toward the required 150 performances. When the theatre accomplishes this, they receive a much-needed extra subsidy of 225,000 RMB, another Ministry incentive in addition to the “key play.” Thus it is still profitable for CNET to give various work units free tickets in order to fill the house and complete the 150 performances per year. CNET encourages “semi-independent productions,” as they “require minimal or no monetary investment from the theatre” (Yang, 1-20-2000).17

As far as casting (queding yanyuan / yanchu zhenrong / “decide actor/performance formation” or fenpei juese / “assign roles”) is concerned, no auditions are held. A CNET resident director submits a proposal (after consulting with the actors first, especially leading actors), but the final decision is up to the theatre leadership. The committee is made up of the two leaders, the head of the Performing Arts Center and the director. As one director put it: “I have to compromise. I don’t always get the actors I want.” Li Fazeng, Acting Team head, knows which actors “haven’t fulfilled their contract” (described in the next section). The leaders will assign actors, especially for smaller roles, and designers. One actor (a TV/film star, but usually in minor huaju roles) complained, “the theatre can force
you to be in huaju. If you don’t agree, they can make your life miserable. You can’t refuse.” An outside director, not familiar with the actors, will be given a list of “suitable actors.” This results in a certain amount of type-casting, although the stronger and more committed actors are encouraged and given extra opportunities. “If an actor is not devoted to huaju, we won’t pay special attention to him” (Yang, 5-26-99).

Production follows a set format, both similar and dissimilar to Western theatre practice: an initial “team meeting” (jianzu), rehearsal (paixi, pailian), “run-throughs” (lianpai), and a “leaders’ run-through” (lingdao lianpai, also called yuan lingdao shencha, “theatre leaders examine”), which is required before a production opens. At the “leaders’ run-through,” leaders Zhao and Yang give very detailed artistic, as well as political, criticism, advice and suggestions to the actors, director and designers. All CNET artists are allowed to give their opinions (part of the “democratic centralization system”). One actor described “the difference” between artistic and political criticism: “We can freely discuss artistic ideas and are all basically equal here,” but with political criticism “it’s absolute that we respect the leaders” (6-18-98). Another artist felt the leaders “have the right to censor, because the actors, director, and designers are all subordinate to them. Fortunately our leaders are artists, an actor and a director” (6-20-98). The “leaders’ run-through” is followed by tech rehearsals (hecheng), dress rehearsal (caipai) (with an in-house audience, Cultural Ministry and Propaganda Department officials, and the theatre circle); and opening night (shou yan), attended by the press—officials may also be present. Since the rehearsal period is short (usually four, the longest might be six weeks’ duration), the first run (lun) is actually used for polishing. The first run usually consists of 30 performances, the minimum number required before a production can be considered for Cultural Ministry awards. Seminars variably called “criticism meetings” (jupinghui) or “discussion meetings” (zuo tanhui) are held following a production’s first run if particular interest has been generated among theatre artists, critics, and the public, attended by the creative team,
theatre leaders, scholars, and interested organizations, such as China’s Huaju Research Institute (Zhongguo huaju yanjiuhui) and the Chinese Theatre Artists’ Association (Zhongguo xijujia xiehui or Juxie).

All CNET personnel are divided into four ranks (with #1 being the highest), equated to teaching assistant, lecturer, assistant/associate professor, and full professor. (Since the State is paying the salary, a standard ranking system is necessary. Consistent with a university teaching ranking system, this also implies that the theatre workers are government workers, as well as intellectuals.) In addition to four ranks, within each rank, there are four to five sub-ranks. Promotions are based on artistic achievement, and salary raises are given by promotion through the ranks and also through overall national raises in salary. The first year for new graduates is a year of “fieldwork” (shixi) before rank 4. While advancement from the 4th through 3rd rank is an internal decision made by senior artists and theatre leaders, for higher ranks, CNET’s assessment committee recommends candidates to the “Ministry of Culture’s Judging Committee” (Wenhuabu de pingpan weiyuanhui). The procedure is complex and again “flexible.” Normally one-third of the candidates will fail in the assessment process, while two-thirds will succeed (Liu Tiegang, 10-10-97).

Retirement age is 55 for women and 60 for men (actors receive 90% of their salary as retirement pension), but this again is very flexible, i.e., older actors, directors, designers often continue working beyond retirement, with earnings in addition to their pension salary.

In December every year, each of the nine CNET departments conducts an “audit” (kaohe), in which all workers list their accomplishments for the theatre (“what he’s done in the previous year, what he thinks of his achievements, and how he assesses himself”). Personnel may be judged “excellent workers” (youxiu zhigong), “good / suitable workers” (lianghao zhigong), or “failed / unqualified workers” (bujige zhigong). Audits are then submitted to the theatre leaders, who make final assessments and decide on extra bonuses (jiangjin). In assessing bonuses, the theatre considers “quality” and “quantity”
of tasks, as well as "morals" (daode, pinde). As President Zhao explains (9-3-97), "We feel like parents in a big house. We have to take care of all our children." The leaders first ask if theatre regulations "have been obeyed," and then ask about the actor's "behavior in society ... whether he's a good citizen or not" (Yang, 2-22-00). If the actor does not fulfill his theatre obligations, the leaders may delay in signing his new contract. Leaders normally renew yearly contracts in January for those who successfully fulfilled their contracts the previous year, but for those who have not fulfilled their obligations, leaders "won't renew until March or April." The actors "will feel a 'spiritual' loss and 'lose face.'" If the actor is in a play the following year, CNET will withhold salary so the actor "can pay back what he owes." While money must be paid back within one year, as Director Yang described, "we're also flexible. We'll help him get a role, even if it's only as a 'crowd actor' (qunzhong yanyuan) or another job for a production" (Yang, 2-22-00). (The intricacies of contractual and compensatory arrangements are outlined in detail in the following section on "challenges and innovations."). Performing Arts Center head, Li Fazeng, explained: "You must finish the tasks for the theatre." He quoted a well-known Beijing expression, "san nian zao zhidao" ("three years earlier know"). "You know the rules beforehand, so there's no excuse for not following them." The actors are members of the danwei, "not free-lancers." A free-lancer "just needs to obey the laws," but a danwei member "must also obey the rules of the danwei. Most people now want to be members of the theatre danwei. If you make wonderful contributions, you'll receive more bonuses (jiangjin)" (Li Fazeng, 8-27-99). In 1999, the results of the audit were 28 people judged "excellent," 4 "failed," and everyone else was found "suitable." Bonuses ranged from 100-200 RMB up to 4,000 RMB, but again there seemed to be much flexibility here. Those who "failed" of course got no bonus, and in addition "if there's a chance for a raise, they'll lose that opportunity" (Yang, 2-22-00).
Superior actors may receive government awards (pingjiang) such as the “Plum Blossom Award” (Meihuajiang) or the “Golden Lion Prize” (Jinshijiang). The Cultural Ministry holds periodic festivals for which prizes are given, for example the “Chinese Little Theatre Festival” (Zhongguo xiao juchang xiju jie). President Zhao explained (1-8-97) that most Cultural Ministry Awards will go to “main melody” productions. CNET’s Japanese Soldiers and Fields of Life and Death, both “main melody” plays, received a multitude of awards (“excellent production,” “excellent playwright,” “excellent directors, designers, actors”) (Shi Yan, 10/99, 5). Various government organizations present awards (which include both honor and money): The Cultural Ministry sponsors the huabiaojiang (“ornamental column prize”) and the Department of Central Propaganda (Zhongyang xuanchuanbu) sponsors the “5-1” awards / project (wuge yigongcheng), encouraging every region in the country to produce one good novel, one good song, one good play, one good movie, and one good article every year (the “5”). As Yang Zongjing described, the economic benefit for award-winners really comes later when “TV and film producers come knocking on their doors to sign contracts” (Yang, 6-30-99).

Cultural Ministry officials conduct periodic inspections of the Theatre. For example, on February 17, 1998, the Cultural Ministry sent a four-person team to examine CNET’s work of 1997 and to see whether the theatre had accomplished the goals set by the Cultural Ministry. Theatre Party leaders gave a comprehensive report about Party discipline and education activities, whose major content was “pay attention to study, politics, and creating a positive atmosphere / virtue (jiang xuexi, jiang zhengzhi, jiang zhengqi), carry out spiritual construction … and basic production and management aimed at increasing the quality of plays, performances and profits.” CNET’s three new productions “surpassed the task measure by two,” and 155 performances “exceeded the task measure by five.” The rate of profits and self-sufficiency was deemed “almost half.” The tasks were either
accomplished or exceeded set goals, and “the inspection team enthusiastically acknowledged CNET’s achievements” (Xuan, 98/1, 30).

The above reinforces the view that CNET comprises, and is also part of, a rigid hierarchical structure. A central authority maintains ultimate control. However, there is pragmatic flexibility within the working relationships of the hierarchy. For example, as financial goals are met with less dependence on State subsidy, there is more autonomy in both the management of the theatre and for individual artists. Vice President Yang thought that in the past there were far too many official restraints, “especially in terms of subject matter.” The situation “will improve when artists and intellectuals are respected.” As he described, China is now in a “developmental phase” with “many different ways of thinking.” Some theatre artists focus on more creative work, while some think more commercially. “Just as in the field of music, there’s both classical and pop, … more traditional and avant-garde” (Yang, 5-26-99). The differing styles and genres of huaju will be described in the following chapter.

Challenges / Innovations:

Until 1990, CNET received full-subsidy from the Cultural Ministry, i.e., the Government paid for everything—all salaries, housing, medical expenses, theatre maintenance, etc. Before the 1990s, CNET totally depended on the State. “Whatever budget the theatre had, the State would give us.” Government directives for the 1990s (stipulating a core administrative staff for each theatre with all artists operating as “freelancers”) were not fully implemented during the decade. Throughout the 1990s, CNET continued to be home danwei for its artistic and administrative staffs. Government funding continued to pay for salaries, medical, housing, theatre maintenance (including cleaning and the planting of trees), in fact all operating expenses. The accelerating economic reforms called for the gradual but continual withdrawal of State subsidy, and, with increasing costs and inflation, the investment from the Cultural Ministry was worth less than before. The
basic funding from the Cultural Ministry was not allocated toward the cost of the 4 – 5 productions CNET presented each year. For each production, the theatre had to procure funding either as an extra subsidy from the Cultural Ministry or from an outside source. To supplement State funding, the theatre (under the guidance of the Cultural Ministry) developed creative, if somewhat complex, strategies.

Using a quota system, the government paid 4,500 RMB for each danwei member. At the end of 1999, CNET had a quota of 197 workers, and thus the basic amount received was about 900,000 RMB. (Cultural Ministry funding went directly to the theatre, and the leaders decided how to allocate the money “according to the rules set down by the Cultural Ministry.”) The Theatre itself had to support workers above the Ministry quota. As Zhang Wenchang, head of CNET’s Stage Arts Center, explains, a new phenomenon of the 1990s was the use of “temporary workers” (linshigong), peasants from Anhui province living in Beijing, “who weren’t registered but were allowed to work for CNET and other theatres and help to build sets” (9-23-99).21

Comparing budgets over the decade, in 1991 the basic subsidy (bokuan) from the Cultural Ministry was 1,540,000 RMB; the total amount for salaries was 500,000; and the total expenditure was 1,930,000 (400,000 short). In 1999, the Cultural Ministry contributed 2,230,000 RMB to pay for the basics (60% salaries, medical benefits, administrative expenses, not including extra subsidies for “key plays” and completion of 150 performances); the amount for salaries was 3,330,000 (presumably including the extra “creation subsidies,” etc.); and total expenditure was 5,990,000 (Yang, 3-3-2000). Thus while CNET’s total expenditure almost tripled over the decade (and the total salary amount increased almost seven-fold), the Cultural Ministry’s basic subsidy only increased by 44%. “So the burden on the theatre has gotten heavier and heavier.” In 1999, CNET was able to earn almost 2 million of the 5,990,000 yuan by itself. The actual amount given by the Cultural Ministry was difficult to determine because of so many extra government
allocations every year. Vice President Yang explained that, “as a general rule,” the Cultural Ministry could only cover half of the total expenditure, including the plays (Yang, 3-3-2000). Liu Tiegang, head of the Performance Department, commented:

The government money can’t cover our productions, so we sometimes submit a report to the Cultural Ministry saying we’re having difficulties, and we can get additional funds. On this point Westerners and Easterners are different. In China, there’s a lot of flexibility, unlike in the West where there are set and fixed rules. ... To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the PRC, we put on Japanese Soldiers I Have Known and Fields of Life and Death, and the Cultural Ministry gave us about 1 million RMB (Liu, 6-24-99).

The two productions above which received extra government subsidy were, not surprisingly, “main melody plays.” The artist’s impression of the West’s inflexibility and “set and fixed rules” is also noteworthy, as the remaining 760,000 RMB shortfall in 1999 would require “flexibility” and substantial extra government allocations in order to balance the figures.

While government subsidy will be increased slightly, CNET is expected to develop connections (guanxi) with enterprises as a way to get funding. Since CNET’s finance manager retired, President Zhao has been in charge of financing, and as one theatre artist put it: “it’s mafan!” (“troublesome”). As theatre leaders describe, before the 1990s, they never had to consider the box office or fund-raising at all. “It wasn’t our money we were spending, so we didn’t care. ... But now we can’t just sit and wait for customers to knock on our door” (Wang Zhengchun, 97/1, 44). As CNET was forced to “go to the marketplace” with the accelerated economic reforms, the Theatre had to ask new questions: “How can we solve the contradictions between the laws of theatre creativity and the laws of the market economy? ... between economic profits and the importance of the theatre’s social influence in our country?” (Zhou, 96/1, 73). Theatre leaders and managers were encouraged to use “scientific thinking” to transform the current management system “inefficient in time and money, ... into a dynamic and active one,” borrowing or loosely interpreting precepts from Western management science: “We must learn and employ the
‘scientific methods’ of a modern market economy, … financial analysis, … modern accounting and auditing practices … for advertising and publicity” (Zhou Ying, 97/1, 61). One theatre analyst stressed “getting rid of duplicated management, the single channel, closed and scattered management.” CNET “should rely on the power of the entire enterprise and gradually cooperate with the country’s unified and larger market.” Income must not only ensure survival but also support artistic expansion and production. Based on cooperative management and independent auditing, CNET “should adhere to the principles of voluntary participation, self-responsibility” by encouraging enterprises to sponsor cultural activities. “We must rely on ourselves to make a profit and invigorate ourselves” (Li Hongxi, 97/2, 40). Another analyst thought “we must use multi-dimensional thinking and coordinate” the different departments:

Theatre is a synthesis of different elements. … All actors should be equal. There should be no distinction between high and low, … only the distinction of contributions. We must weaken the concept of hierarchy … and offer the best conditions for artistic creation for every actor. There should be horizontal connections, … linkage and teamwork to encourage creativity and cohesion. We must get rid of redundancy and department management in isolation. Scientific management is profitable (Zhou, 97/2, 36).

One department manager described “a problem with the system in China.” He “appreciated” the government support, but found the bureaucracy “so complex.” Every year CNET “only recruits people and never gets anyone out, so the system is duplicated.” Although Zhao Youliang is the President, he “sometimes has a lesser say … because the physical assets of the theatre aren’t his. … The building isn’t his.” President Zhao “has actually stayed for a long time. He’s truly dedicated and not just thinking of his own personal interests” (6-24-99).

During the 1990s, CNET’s box office introduced a new glossy color ticket reflecting the “scientific methods of advertising and publicity” and new commercial printing capabilities. It replaced the old raffle-style ticket with a large format graphical tour de force. A background of 100 ancient characters of “xi” (“drama,” “play,” “show”)
(50 on each face) represented the ancient baixi ("100 entertainments," see chapter 5, note 21), complete with website for on-line booking, a map to and brief history of CNET, and quote from Stanislavski: “My young friends, bring beautiful thoughts and motives into the shrine of the arts. At the threshold, shake off the dirt and mud and trivial thoughts of life.”

Party Secretary Wang called for “civilized behavior in the theatre,” encouraging audience members to improve their “traditional ways of enjoying theatre”:

> We must think about keeping a calm and peaceful atmosphere in the theatre... no pagers or cell phones... no loud talking. The old habit of xiqu fans shouting ‘hao' at the actors bothers audience members with a higher level of education who want to quietly watch the play. We should think about the words on our ticket (Shi Yan [Wang Zhengchun], 97/2, 43).

In 1993, CNET opened its 200-seat “little theatre” (xiao juchang), the first separate “little theatre” in Beijing (i.e., not a classroom or meeting hall) (Wu Ning, 97/2, 44). Throughout the decade, when needed, CNET rented space at larger theatres and also rented its own little theatre out to other groups. Illustrating the new importance of the box office, a new sign—in hand-written traditional-style calligraphy—was posted in CNET’s Performance Department: “Shangye yanchu, gai bu zeng piao, mian kai zun kou!” (“Commercial performances do not give tickets as gifts, so don’t open your mouth! / Don’t ask for a free ticket!”) During the 1990s, CNET produced a majority of “semi-independent” productions, employing both “inside” and “outside” directors. These included Faust (1994), After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking for Me (1994), Intentional Injury (1995), Put Down Your Whip – Woyzeck (1995), Go Man (1996), A Doll’s House (1998), Rhinoceros in Love (1999) and Bootleg Faust (1999). Investment for the above productions came from a variety of sources, both Chinese and foreign. This will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

In June 1997, CNET “borrowed 300,000 yuan to shangyan” (“perform commercially”), taking 4 productions on a 15-day tour to Shanghai. The “commercial tour” included two “little theatre plays,” Intentional Injury and My Father, My Dad, and
two “large theatre plays,” *Vengeance on Zidu* and *Born at the Right Time*. This was CNET’s first experience planning and managing a tour—renting the theatres; transporting actors, personnel, sets and costumes; and handling publicity, boarding and actor-allowances. Producer Liu Tiegang explained: “*Huaju* isn’t prosperous, so a ‘cultural company’ wasn’t willing to be middle-man.” In order to save money, actors went to Shanghai in small groups by train (i.e., right before the show they were needed for opened). Altogether 78 people were involved, and 17 performances were planned. Yet there were 21 performances and tickets were sold out. Box office income earned was 250,000 yuan, but compared to the 300,000 loan, “this income wasn’t so magnificent” (Liu Tiegang, 10-10-97). CNET was willing to borrow money and undertake the “risky experiment” of a “commercial tour.” “We hope now that ‘middle companies’ will want to provide services for CNET’s next *shangyan* … and the next … and the next” (Cui and Wang, 97/2, 28). Liu Tiegang thought: *huaju* “won’t be a money-making industry” in the foreseeable future. The “box office brings in less than the theatre rental. Actors, directors, and designers make money, but CNET doesn’t make any money.” If anyone wants to invest in *huaju*, “it helps us, but it’s not a real investment where they can get their money back.” As Liu Tiegang describes, “the problem with State-Owned-Enterprises has troubled China for many years. There’s confusion because everybody is responsible, but in fact no one is responsible.” While CNET is owned by the State, the investment from the State is actually “quite small.” Staff initiative is not high because the salary is “so meager.” Artists do “only what the authorities assign.” Liu thought, “if the theatre developed along the American commercial cultural model, we’d have to change our legislation to give tax benefits. Then maybe theatres will rejuvenate” (Liu, 11-8-99).

Before the 1990s, the salary paid by the Cultural Ministry was considered the artist’s entire salary. In salary reconfigurations of the 1990s, a theatre artist’s salary (*gongzi*) consisted of both a fixed salary (*guding gongzi*) and a flexible salary (*linghuo*
The amount from the Cultural Ministry was now considered 60% of the artist’s salary. This basic 60% amount ranged from 240 RMB each month for an actor at the lowest rank four up to 800 - 1,000 - 1,200 for an actor at the highest rank one. (One theatre artist pointed out that the lowest theatre salaries usually went to the youngest actors, “but they’re the richest from TV and film work.” Older more experienced actors who got paid the most from the theatre were “often the poorest.”) The additional 40% salary also consisted of two parts: a “creation subsidy” (chuangzuo jintie) (plus an additional compensation for lunch during rehearsals) and a “performance subsidy” (yanchu jintie).

When actors began rehearsal, they received the additional “creation subsidy” (20%) in one payment for the 4 - 6 week rehearsal period, an amount determined by the specific role, i.e., leading role, major role, minor role, or crowd role. When CNET signed the contract with the actor, that meant “you’re ready to join the production and start rehearsal, so you’ll start getting the 80% amount: basic salary and ‘creation subsidy’” (Yang, 11-19-99). The “performance subsidy” was paid after the play opened and was calculated according to the number of performances (See “Pay Standard” in Appendix). The amounts listed in the “pay standard,” especially for the “creation subsidy” again were “very flexible,” and, if a production had outside investment, the pay could be considerably higher (Liu, 10-10-97).

CNET distinguished between “creative personnel” / “artistic professional personnel” (yishu zhuanye renyuan or yewu, “professionals”) (who were subject to the 60% basic salary plus “creation” and “performance” subsidies) and “administrative management personnel” (xingzheng guanli renyuan) who worked everyday and got 100% of their salary every month, as chances for outside work for the administrative personnel were more limited. The “administrative personnel” might also receive a “performance assistance subsidy” (yanchu fuzhu jintie) when there was a performance. One artist pointed out, “now we’re paid according to the work: ‘the more you work, the more you get paid’ (anlao fuchou, duolao duode)” (11-9-98). This new rule of course was the complete
antithesis of the old "iron rice bowl" (tie fan wan) system, where no matter how much or how little work you did, there was no difference in pay and also no incentive.

In October 1994, CNET instituted the "contract system" (pinrenzhi) "to mobilize initiative, develop artistic production, and promote the development and prosperity of huaju" (Shi Jian 1996, 70). (Other huaju theatres directly under the Cultural Ministry began the contract system in 1996.)25 Under the new system, the entire staff was under contract, as opposed to the "iron rice bowl" in order "to break the pattern where someone coming into the theatre could never leave and his job could never be changed." According to one administrator, the mobility of personnel became "almost like a miracle." Everyone "must follow regulations; we try to have clear punishments and rewards. Attitude, responsibility, and initiative have increased. We've even seen the pleasant phenomenon of actors scrambling to perform in huaju and asking to join the team." After one year of the "contract system," "artistic production is displaying a rare scene of prosperity. We've had 108 performances, almost double the number of last year" (Shi Jian 1996, 70). As an actor assessed,

There's a legacy of the big iron pot. If an actor doesn't get an outside contract and no director in the theatre casts him, the Leader, who's a very nice guy, will try to help him. Maybe the actor can take care of administration or backstage work, costumes, or scenery. We find something else for him to do ... so he still gets paid (4-15-98).

To fulfill his contract, an actor must participate in one huaju production per year (a director must direct one play per year), or alternately, he/she can do four months of TV/film work. For any work the artist performs outside CNET, he/she must pay a portion of his salary to CNET.26 The TV/film producer signed a contract with CNET, paying the theatre to "borrow" the actor, "since the actors belong to the danwei." This amount ranges from 400 - 800% of the actor's basic monthly (60%) CNET salary ("depending on how famous the actor is and how much the TV/ film producer needs that actor"). The percentage is not fixed. As a first rank actor explained,
If CNET wants an actor to act in huaju, and at the same time, a TV team wants him, the actor’s value may go up to 1500%! ... Usually for that particular month, TV will have to pay 800% of my 800-900 monthly theatre salary, so the TV pays the theatre 6-7,000 RMB per month for my involvement (9-5-98).

Of this figure, 70% goes to “huaju development” at CNET, and 30% is paid to the actor. (The percentage increases to 40% for the actor if the actor already has finished his task for the theatre by acting in one huaju or if it is the actor’s second TV/film contract in one year. A new contract must be signed for each TV / film project.) Department manager Li Fazeng described the 30% as “an incentive for the actors to sign the contract for the benefit of the theatre.” Without this incentive, the actors “could just go off to TV / film and do whatever they want. We can’t control the actor’s own contract with TV/film. We’re using this to control the actors … We’re not saying the money is all for CNET. 30% is for you, so our interests are the same. If you help CNET sign the contract with the TV/film producer, you’ll get a share” (8-27-99). Sometimes the actor will tell the theatre “don’t ruin my contract because of your high charges. Try to make the amount lower so I can be borrowed by this film director.” According to Li Fazeng, CNET was “willing to negotiate for mutual benefit.” The two contracts--one between CNET and the actor, and one between CNET and the TV/film producer--gave the actor two payments. In yet another “secret” verbal contract between the actor and TV/film producer (i.e., CNET did not know the amount), the actor received another payment, usually for a much higher amount than agreed upon in the TV/CNET contract. As Li Fazeng described (8-27-99), “the system’s complicated and problematic and has to change.”

While the huaju pay standard was raised over the past decade, theatre artists can make much more money outside the theatre. For example, for a TV series (each episode might take 3-4 days to shoot, 3-4 months on average, for 20 episodes), an actor gets paid from 2,000 - 10,000 RMB per episode. Mid-level actors in a major role receive the 10,000 amount X 20 (or 30 or 40) episodes for a TV play = 200,000 RMB. Film dubbing (peiyin)
pays the actor 500-800-1000 RMB per day for 15-20 days. Many actors are making over 200,000 RMB per year, an amount over 10 times or several ten times their income from huaju. It is not surprising that many of the actors own their own cars (only 1% of Chinese own private cars), apartments, etc. About half of CNET’s actors find it more lucrative not to perform in huaju at all and just pay CNET a percentage to fulfill their contract. At the same time, the artists complain about the “low-level, commercial aspect” of TV serials catering to the public. Playwright Guo Shixing commented:

It’s easy to write sly and glib TV scripts. TV is afraid of plays that are sensitive and deep. They’re worried that those can’t be broadcast. ... As far as the money, if you write a TV series script, you can buy a car; if you write a huaju play, you can buy two bicycles (1-22-98).

A successful huaju actor explained: The policy is that “if for whatever reason,” you have no stage performance with CNET for a year, and, at the same time, cannot bring the theatre four months income from TV, “then you’re virtually not a member of the theatre anymore.” You must perform in one play each year (in any role, not necessarily the leading role) or have four months of TV work. For this actor “it wasn’t difficult, but for some actors, it’s difficult to achieve.” Three actors dropped out in 1996. “I don’t know if they wanted to leave or were forced out; maybe a combination of both.” The theatre will “probably” develop new policies (8-15-99). According to one actor:

The policy is still one that’s feeding a bunch of unqualified artists, but at least it’s not the ‘iron rice bowl.’ Actors feel a sense of pressure. Some have changed from ‘actor’ to ‘record-keeper’ or work in the library, ... Some went into business, but they’re out of the theatre now. If you’re record-keeper or work in the library, you’re still in the theatre, but don’t fall under the ‘4-month’ arrangement anymore. ... If you leave the theatre, you have to give back the housing that was allocated to you. This is easier said than done, and usually involves litigation. Some people went abroad, and the theatre had to file lawsuits against them to get the housing back (11-8-98).

While many theatre artists found the new contract system workable, others were resentful about having to pay the danwei. As one actor explained, the percentage paid “was different every time.” It could be “5,000 or 10,000 RMB or even higher each month”:

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I must pay 8 times my monthly salary to the theatre each month [for 4 months] for TV or film work. . . Sometimes the theatre even wants more. . . Sometimes the actor pays the theatre directly, because TV doesn't want to pay and the theatre won't let you go. . . I just don't want CNET to ruin my chances for the TV job by asking for too much money (4-16-98).

As another actor described, “if TV won’t pay or if it’s too much money, you can sometimes say another actor replaced you . . . and you ‘didn’t take the job’” (4-18-98).

Most actors negotiate by themselves without agents. “We learn from each other what the going salaries are, but we don’t know the exact amount anyone else is getting. This is new, because everyone knows our theatre salaries” (4-18-98). “If you want to do artistic work, you act in theatre or film. You join a TV series if you want to make money” (4-16-98).

Not surprisingly, the most significant means for the theatre to earn income was the “renting” of their actors (yanyuan zujie), their “most valuable treasure.” CNET was known as the “theatre of stars” (mingxing juyuan, “bright star theatre”) with “more TV and film stars than any other theatre. Over 80 artists have won National Prizes.” Through CNET/TV/film contracts, the theatre earned about 1 million RMB, of which 700,000 went to CNET and 300,000 went to the actors (70% - 30%). As an additional means of bringing in income, CNET set up its own dubbing studio, produced TV commercials, ran a taxi company, a shoe store, and a restaurant. While members of the theatre danwei were not allowed to start a company, artists could take a temporary “leave of absence” from the danwei and go into private business for a specified time period, and a percentage of the business would go to CNET. In 1998, several artists from CNET’s Performing Arts Center (CNET itself did not invest, but was credited as chupinren, “executive producer”) co-produced a 20-episode TV series, the “first TV series illustrating the reform of court trials,” featuring “all the best actors in a national-level theatre” called High Court (Da fating). The Playbill for the new venture advertised: “production of TV and film, performance of stage plays, the renting of actors, and professional dubbing business” (High Court Playbill, 1998, 6).
In 1996, actors were given the option of leaving the danwei, but everyone chose to stay. Every year, graduates from Beijing’s Central Drama and Film Academies and Shanghai’s Drama Academy apply to join CNET. “Our capacity is limited. ... We can’t take them all” (Zhao, 4-22-98). One mid-level artist pointed out the medical benefits, “insider” prices on apartments, but “especially, there’s quite a bit of prestige in belonging to a national theatre” (6-19-98). Many theatre artists felt they would have fewer opportunities if they left. Designer Xue Dianjie explained (8-25-99): “Chinese people belong to a danwei. The danwei solves problems for you, such as housing. And after you die, the danwei will organize a funeral for you.” Director Wu Xiaojiang “didn’t want to get bogged down by all the details” of working as a free-lance director:

Maybe I could make more money, but I don’t want to have to search for good scripts, organize all the financing, round up actors, ... arrange all the personnel. What a big head-ache! I’d rather stay with the Theatre so I can concentrate on the directing, enjoy some respect in the Theatre, and get rid of all those hassles (12-20-97).

Besides the challenges and uncertainties theatre artists confront working “outside,” I also think there are other positive reasons here, rooted in community and sense of purpose. Whatever restraints the actors may or may not feel, depending on individual circumstances, CNET is their artistic home. (Actors often complained about the difficulties in negotiating with TV/film producers, mentioning “a lack of trust,” “unreliability,” “traditionally Chinese aren’t comfortable talking about money,” etc.) An artistic community exists here. Yet while jealousy and gossip are not exclusive to Chinese organizations, back-stabbing and in-fighting among factions do seem to be exacerbated within the confines and incestuous dependencies of the danwei, the dang’an system, and the inequities of “getting rich.”

Although the danwei certainly has more power and involvement in one’s private life than any employer in the West (permission for marriage, divorce, giving birth, artists must ask for permission to leave Beijing, etc., etc., etc.), things do seem to have eased up a bit over the past decade. Several actors married foreigners (i.e., non-Chinese) with no difficulty; many
actors/actresses bought apartments away from the danwei; and several are living with girlfriends and boyfriends unbeknownst to the danwei, etc. Money has made the difference.

President Zhao described the factors necessary for huaju to develop and prosper:
First, CNET “has a group of talented professional artists … and there are very few in the whole country.” Second, theatre leaders must be “professional artists and also have top management skills.” The third element was “providing a good artistic environment.” Zhao felt that CNET “had not yet reached this point,” but was trying to build a new large theatre, with modern equipment and improved working conditions. Fourth, Zhao wanted “better scripts and more experimental productions.” His last point concerned financing: “how to make enough money to produce our plays.”

We want to build a new theatre and department store combined. Hopefully, that will improve our financial situation. Our priority is to train our actors and present the best productions we can. … I’m satisfied with most of the actors, but not all of them. We can help them improve. … It’s not like TV or film. In huaju you can gradually improve. … Some young actors aren’t very experienced, but will mature if we give them more opportunities” (Zhao, 6-22-98).

Performance Department head, Liu Tiegang, remarked that “twenty years ago a ‘producer’ was unimaginable, but now we have producers.” As theatre artists, “we’re now allowed to have our own personality and individuality. Huaju is developing and moving forward” (Liu, 6-24-99).

This chapter has looked at CNET, as representative of the State theatre danwei system in China, including its history, policy, structure, and organization, challenges and innovations over the past decade. In terms of “developing and moving forward,” as Liu Tiegang suggests above, the most telling evidence is in the productions themselves. The next chapter will examine CNET’s production work during the 1990s.
CHAPTER 3
CNET PRODUCTIONS OF THE 1990s: STYLES AND GENRES

Not surprisingly, CNET’s productions during the 1990s were a reflection of the prevailing socio-political-economic climate. The early part of the decade brought politically correct, “tried and true” realistic productions, performed in large proscenium theatres. These included two foreign plays, J.B. Priestley’s British play *An Inspector Calls* (*Tanxhang laifang*) and the Korean *Hairless Dog* (*Meimao de gou*), Chinese comic mime sketches called *Today’s Interesting News* (*Jinri qu wen*), the Chinese play, *Zhou Enlai* (*Zhou jun Enlai*), as well as two traditional Chinese staples, *Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan*) and *Harbor Sun* (*Taiyang gangwan*).

The production of *The Nun and the Monk* (*Si Fan*) in 1993 reintroduced non-realistic techniques, building on CNET’s explorations with anti-realism during the 1980s. *Si Fan* was followed by a range of productions of both Chinese and foreign plays, embodying a variety of themes and styles. Expanded creative possibilities, both in terms of content and style, during the remainder of the decade, were largely a result of the accelerated economic restructuring, as well as the socio-political climate ensuing from Deng Xiaoping’s Southern tour in 1992. Chinese theatre artists grouped the productions into several different genres, according to thematic and/or stylistic elements. Even though a degree of subjectivity propelled how artists conceptualized and categorized productions, certain conventions can be seen to underlie their descriptions. Genres of Chinese *huaju* during the 1990s encompassed “main melody”; “personal”/“underground realism”/“socially popular plays”; “nationalization,” including Chinese mythological, historical, as well as contemporary plays; foreign scripts; and “experimental”/“avant-garde” plays.

These genres were not mutually exclusive and could occur in combination. A genre often implied a particular style; for example, the “main melody” play primarily used
realism, while “experimental” implied the use of a variety of styles. Over the decade, the terminology used by artists was also changing, as thematic and stylistic elements within genres continued to evolve and become more diverse. CNET’s productions came to embody a mixture and variety of styles, including realism, expressionism, absurdism, symbolism, deconstruction, and postmodernism. As genre classifications were consistently used by the Chinese theatre artists themselves, I think this terminology, rather than an imposed Western taxonomy, is a useful framework and appropriate means for examining the productions. (A comprehensive list of CNET’s productions during the 1990s may be found in the Appendix of this study.) The overall styles and genres represent the diversity of the period and also provide a context for the most cutting-edge work. Scholar Yan Haiping describes the “experimental modernism” of the 1980s shifting to “critical realism” in the 1990s (1998). The CNET theatre artists’ own classifications above are actually more pertinent to this discussion, as they are less polemic and encompass the greater stylistic diversity and complexity of the 1990s. To illustrate the range of experimentation and clarify definitions, selected productions will be examined, with particular emphasis on thematic and stylistic elements. While recognizing the playwright, I focus on production mise-en-scène from a directorial perspective rather than on the playscript. This analysis particularly reveals the symbiotic or dialectical relationship between form and content as embodied in mise-en-scène.

I. Main Melody (zhú xuánluó):

Chapter one introduced the “main melody” campaign as part of the government’s clampdown after “June Fourth.” While the term “main melody” (zhú xuánluó) was coined after 1989, this can actually be viewed as a new name for the propaganda play, always an integral part of huaju. Although the “main melody” campaign officially ended in 1992 with Deng’s Southern tour, theatre artists continued to use the term “main melody” throughout the decade to refer to “mainstream” (zhúlín) productions. During the early
1990s, the “main melody” play was rather narrowly defined; the term referred to a Chinese play praising the Party and socialism, and particularly glorifying a model individual. “Main melody” plays, performed in large proscenium theatres, were almost always realistic in style. The “main melody” play can be immediately traced to “news coverage theatre” (xinwen juyuan) of the 1960s, true events which “are very quickly represented in artistic form.” As CNET’s Vice President Yang explained,

> ‘News coverage plays’ (xinwenju) were performed enthusiastically ... although artistic level wasn’t very high. ... A good example is CNET’s 61 Class Brothers (Liushi yige jieji xiongdi) about an actual event that took place in Shanxi Province. 61 peasant workers were poisoned by their food. The Airforce immediately sent medical workers and medicine ... and all the peasants were saved. This was very moving and, most important, this event was true. This great deed was accomplished in just a few hours (Yang, 11-19-99).

The concept of “main melody” expanded over the course of the decade. While “main melody” initially meant to eulogize the Communist Party and Socialism, the term came to be used for a play illustrating the positive side of contemporary life and further expanded to include historical stories with positive current implications. CNET leaders elaborated: “a ‘main melody’ play should be instructive and deal with uplifting topics. It should inspire and educate people or praise the Party and socialism” (Zhao, 11-25-98).

> “Main melody’s subject should reflect the history, achievements, or culture of China ... and the nation’s struggle against imperialism. Healthy subjects are those that can push society forward” (Yang, 5-26-99).

> Main melody includes many types of plays. ... We can stage whatever is beneficial to society and to the development of our youth. ... For important events, such as the PRC’s 50th anniversary, art workers feel a responsibility to create a play in memory of this great event and to reflect our country’s development (Wang, 7-14-99).

Director Lin Zhaohua described “main melody” as “ordered from above” [the government], while “other plays can come from people’s hearts” (Lin, 8-19-99). A Chinese university student defined “main melody” as material which “educates the audience to uphold Socialist ideology and propaganda.” Director Wu Xiaojiang explained
that when “New China was founded in 1949, art had to serve workers, soldiers, and peasants.” Huaju needed themes and characters that “fought against some social phenomenon,” while “artistic level and entertainment function were always secondary.” “People became resentful and even hated huaju, because huaju was merely propaganda” (Wu, 12-20-97).² Two productions illustrate different structural approaches to the “main melody play”: Born at the Right Time has a realistic “well-made play” structure, while Japanese Soldiers I Have Known follows an episodic structure.

**Born at the Right Time (Sheng feng qi shi, 1997)**

The “main melody” production Born at the Right Time opened at the 1,000-seat China Children’s Theatre (Eryi) in April 1997. Based on Xiao Kefan’s novel The Last Worker (Zuihou yige gongren), the play reflects the subject of laid-off workers in State-owned enterprises, a concomitant problem of the 1990s’ economic restructuring.³ In the words of the press release (1997),

> CNET is presenting a new ‘main melody’ play close to our lives and synchronized with the pulse of the times. ... It depicts ‘hot topics’: the reform of State-owned enterprises, mergers, laid-off workers ... the conflicts in a factory ... and a common worker’s family. ... Their joys, sorrows, anger and struggles are boldly described using a realistic method in acting and stage design. The creative team ... focuses on creating the life and thoughts of ordinary people ... with real emotions in a real environment.

Evidenced by the onslaught of concurrent articles and editorials in the State press throughout the period, the production embodies orchestrated propaganda. For example, as Beijing’s English-language China Daily newspaper offered: “Cities work to find jobs for laid-offs” (Editorial, 6-10-98); “Laid-off women receive training” (Hu Qihua, 12-29-98); “Laid-offs start new careers” (Xia Gang, 12-11-97); and “Action required to tackle rising unemployment” (Zhao Shaoqin, 1-17-99). Born at the Right Time dealt with a sensitive question: “How to reorganize millions of workers who have lost their jobs in State-run factories?” One journalist responded: “The play provides answers. ... Seek new jobs and challenge the current commercial competition” (Editorial, 5-9-97).
Born at the Right Time concerns a State-operated electronics factory, which goes into partnership with a Japanese company. Cui Jianli, a Chinese worker, reluctantly assumes leadership of the new joint venture and is faced with the problem of laying-off 1,000 workers. The angry workers will be forced to fend for themselves. Cui Jianli first must fire his own sister, Cui Dahua, and this results in a painful family rift. After much difficulty, Cui Dahua goes into business for herself, setting up a private pickle cart, and as her business becomes profitable, she is able to help herself as well as her laid-off neighbors.

CNET called Born at the Right Time “an experiment in main melody,” a production which “tries to entertain … while retaining its educational value.” Playwright Shi Ling was introduced as co-writer of the hit TV series, Prime Minister Liu the Hunchback (Zaixiang Liu Luoguo) and lauded for his ability to “draw exciting characterizations and use witty language” (Press Release, 2-97). Wang Zunxi, a “first rank” director with the General PLA Huaju Troupe (Zongzheng huaju tuan), was the invited director. While dealing with serious issues, the play incorporated much humor. For example, new factory leader Cui Jianli, complaining about his difficult responsibilities, exclaims: “Hong Kong is returning to the Motherland, so where can I escape?!?” One of the workers, referring to his girlfriend, describes: “There’s no Cold War now, so our relationship is like U.S.-Sino relations. We have some relationship, but we’re not too close; we’re not married.” The audience relished these jokes, and there was much laughter throughout the performance.

Comments from the rehearsal log (chuangji, “creation record”) shed light on “main melody.” Vice President Yang described:

The Cultural Ministry wants us to reflect the new face of Reform. This play belongs to ‘main melody’ … because of its ideas and its guidance, a reflection of real life. … The script provides a good foundation. … This is a ‘key play’ … we’ve invested materials and personnel … and we’ll participate in the Cultural Ministry’s festival of “New Play Performances” (Xin jumu biaoyan) (Yang, 2-18-97, 2).
During rehearsal, the actors were aware of the play’s didactic aspects. Actress Li Yeping, playing sister Cui Dahua, observed: “most of my lines are just like a TV script. We should go deeper into character relationships. ... If we explain everything to the audience, it’s too boring” (3-3-97, 4). Zhao Liang, as factory leader Cui Jianli, noted: “we shouldn’t treat this production with the same methods as TV” (3-3-97, 4). Director Wang Zunxi advised his actors: “don’t interpret the lines just from the surface. ... This play is realistic but it shouldn’t be a simple social problem play. It’ll be interesting if we build detailed characters” (3-30-97, 32). At the “leaders’ run-through,” President Zhao commented:

> Our production is good compared to [other] current plays reflecting reform, but in terms of acting, it isn’t natural (ziran) enough. ... There shouldn’t be anything fake ... or it won’t touch the audience. ... Everyone must pay attention to creating a real environment (3-30-97, 31).

Zhao Youliang further explained (11-25-98): Plays dealing with this topic “usually portray the workers as miserable victims, but we made this play a comedy. We focus on a factory leader with flaws in his character. I think people will find this character believable.”

As indicated above, *Born at the Right Time* used realism in its acting and staging. The set comprised a multi-leveled unit in the style of selective realism. An effort had been made to make the acting “relaxed and natural.” The factory head was unlike “the usual image,” i.e., he was not the “hero,” and overall the characters were less “black and white” than usual “main melody” characters (Zhao, 3-30-97, 31). However, consistent with the genre, the largesse and ultimate lack of depth in character development—despite the leaders’ and director’s efforts—resulted in the production’s educational value remaining its strongest point. The humorous approach to a particularly socially relevant problem made *Born at the Right Time* a popular production. As Leader Zhao described,

> The audience liked this ... but they wouldn’t like plays where the characters just say things the officials say. ... The Chinese audience is very picky and critical. If they like it, they applaud; if not, they’ll even make cat-calls (Zhao, 11-25-98).
Japanese Soldiers I Have Known (Wo renshi de guizi bing, 1999)

The “main melody” play Japanese Soldiers I Have Known (Wo renshi de guizi bing) opened in April 1999 for the PRC’s 50th anniversary, again at Eryi’s large 1,000-seat theatre. Playwright Ouyang Yibing adapted the script (a “reportage play,” jishixing xiju) from the “reportage literature” (baogao wenxue) or “true recorded literature” (jishi wenxue) of the same name written by Fang Jun about his experiences as a student in Japan. Watching rehearsals, Fang Jun commented (3-30-99):

The actors must overcome psychological barriers, their memories and anger about the Japanese invasion. ... [Actor] Song Ge saw his grandfather savagely beaten and carried home, so it’s difficult for him to play an amiable old Japanese soldier. Feelings against the Japanese have been locked in place for 50 years. ... These are problems the director and actors face.

After directing Born at the Right Time, PLA director Wang Zunxi, “famous for directing plays about military life,” was again invited to direct Japanese Soldiers I Have Known. Director Wang describes his intention: “Why are we staging this work when the anti-Japanese War has been over for 50 years? It’s meaningful ... to remember our nation’s humiliation and never let this tragedy happen again” (“Playbill” 1997). This is a “true record of the Japanese soldiers’ reflections” about the war. “We want to know what they’re thinking, especially when the Japanese government is trying to cover up the facts” (Wang, Ye Jun 1999).

Japanese Soldiers I Have Known is comprised of a prologue (a vibrant street scene in modern day Japan), ten vignettes, and an epilogue. The plot concerns Wang Jun, a Chinese overseas student in present-day Japan, who meets five old Japanese soldiers. Four soldiers are repentant and want forgiveness for the atrocities they committed during the war, while one, denying the massacre, thinks the invasion of China was justified. On April 10, 1999, fifteen PLA generals were invited to the performance, and afterwards, they wrote:

Forces in Japan still attempt to distort history and beautify the invasion and war criminals. ... We hope [they] will listen to the Chinese people and repent for their atrocities. ... CNET performs this huaju for the PRC’s 50th anniversary. ... It is beneficial to the country. ... We should educate young
people to help them remember history and the nation’s humiliation, and ... work hard to revitalize the Chinese nation (Headquarters of the General Staff, PLA, 22).

Five retired CNET actors returned to the stage to play the five Japanese soldiers. The set, again in the style of selective realism, comprised various levels and moving panels to reflect both indoor and outdoor scenes, and was quite detailed (rice paper walls, a garage partially revealing a car’s chrome headlights, Japanese modern signage, including neon lights and billboards). The acting was realistic, and great care was taken by the actors to authenticate Japanese customs. Old newsreels and documentary slides were projected (across not only the backdrop, but the entire set). Two huge blow-ups of old black and white photographs were hung on either side of the proscenium with brutal images of Chinese civilians, often emphasized by red lighting. The photographs depicted bodies hanging from trees and decapitated corpses, including women and children, piled in heaps on the ground. Sounds of soldiers marching, singing, bombs exploding, planes flying overhead, sirens blaring, children screaming and crying, rain and thunder, automobiles, Chinese, Japanese, and Western music recurred throughout the production. (With three onstage and one hanging microphone, the acoustics were extremely loud.) The technical elements, set details, lighting, sound effects, film, slides, etc. indicate the sophistication of set design relative to experiments in playwriting, acting, and directing. Unlike playwrights and directors, designers have consistently been able to experiment and avoid censure (Cai, 7). For Japanese Soldiers I Have Known, the theatre was packed, with a large contingent of PLA soldiers seated at the back of the auditorium. A Chinese university student commented (12-8-99):

This is so dull. I grew up seeing plays and films like this. Children study this in history and visit museums. Schools and PLA units buy blocks of seats. ... It’s a good way for the work unit to show they’re contributing to spiritual education and construction. Students, workers, and soldiers are forced to see this. That’s why the theatre’s full.
Lei Kesheng, who played the apologetic Japanese soldier, old Kobayashi, on the phone with student Wang's father in Beijing, is a strong comic actor. His playing this scene for comedy (i.e., wearing his Japanese kimono and army cap, a ludicrous visual juxtaposition of civilian and army life, his saluting and bowing profusely, even though the old Chinese soldier on the other end of the phone cannot see him) saved the scene from overwhelming sentimentality. However, as the scene culminated with the student Wang and the old Japanese soldier hugging each other in forgiveness, a Chinese teenager seated near me actually guffawed. Others in the audience wildly applauded and cheered.

While music sometimes filled the blackouts between scenes, more often, the taped voice of the student, describing his thoughts and feelings, was heard. The playwright had added a bar-restaurant where student Wang worked, as well as a semi-love interest with the bar's owner (a woman estranged from her old soldier father, who is unable to face her because he raped a young Chinese girl long ago during the war). Within the episodic framework, each old soldier described his experiences to the Chinese student. Even with impressive audio-visual and set design elements, the performance continued primarily as "reportage literature" comprised of set "stage pictures." The production seemed contrived, particularly its final scene of hasty forgiveness. The soldiers, recounting their stories one after another, while horrific, also felt redundant, and the acting seemed stilted and unspontaneous.

Many Chinese theatre artists thought that the most effective element was the play's "attempt to view the War from the perspective of the old Japanese soldiers." Artists also criticized the production. As one actor recounted, "there just aren't enough twists and turns in the plot. Those characters just talk and talk. The main character Wang also just talks all the time. ... It doesn't matter. It's just political" (4-10-99). While theatre artists understood the qualities of "main melody" as evidenced above, the production raised controversy, as it confronted the delicate subject of Sino-Japanese relations. After Japanese
in Beijing complained to the Theatre, Cultural Ministry officials called for revisions. For example, the politically-sensitive line, "Is it that the Japanese don’t want to give reparations or that the Chinese don’t want to ask?," was cut. A Chinese university student observed: "In the wave of reforms, China isn’t pushing for reparations. We’re getting other things, i.e., money and investment, from the Japanese. You could call those reparations" (4-18-99). CNET planned to revise the production "to make the characters more believable, particularly the Chinese student Wang Jun." One theatre artist explained they were changing the script to make it "more friendly." Another artist confided: "President Zhao doesn’t like the production and called it too ‘main melody,’ only slogans."

As illustrated by *Born at the Right Time* and *Japanese Soldiers I Have Known*, the "main melody" play clearly followed a pattern in presenting topical issues, using a realistic style, both in acting and staging in a large proscenium theatre, and, above all, emphasizing its educational and propaganda value. Not surprisingly, both "key" "main melody" plays received extra subsidies from the Cultural Ministry. Neither production did well at the box office, and, predictably, blocks of seats were given to other "work units" to fill the house. A "main melody" which broke from this formulaic pattern in important ways, *Fields of Life and Death* (1999), will be examined in detail later in this study.

II. Personal / Underground Realism / Socially Popular Play (*geren / dixia xianshi zhuyi / shehui tongsu*)

Plays called “personal realism” (introduced in chapter 1) came to be known as "little theatre plays" (*xiao juchang xi*), "socially popular" plays, and "popular versions" (*tongsu ban*) of *huaju*. The genre gained popularity during the 1990s, as Beijing’s *huaju* troupes, in response to the socio-economic-political climate, built separate little theatres and engaged in commercial production for the first time. A journalist observed:

Recently, theatre circles have continued their discussions about the crisis in *huaju*. What should *huaju* rely on to draw audiences?—on brand-new theatre concepts, new styles, low-level satire or mockery? At the ‘Little Theatre Performance Festival’ in 1993, we discovered that *huaju* called ‘socially-popular,’ close to the times and real life and reflecting the variety
of life out on the streets, can touch contemporary Chinese people most deeply (Cong Rong, 1994).

The original venue for the “little theatre play” was, in fact, the “little theatre” or “black box” theatre (hei xiazi) (seating 180-300). The term “socially-popular” (shehui tongsu, lit. “society popular/common”) play might actually be most accurate and all-inclusive, as plays of this type came to be performed in both large and small theatres. “Socially popular” plays, so-called in response to their content and style, were realistic in acting technique, embraced current, relevant social, yet personal, topics, embodied the new trendy, slang vocabulary, and utilized simple sets. While staging was primarily realistic, i.e., using a proscenium acting area, directors also explored the actor-audience relationship with theatre-in-the-round and “direct communication” to create an intimacy between actors and audience. I selected two “socially-popular” plays of “personal realism” from CNET’s 1990s’ repertoire to illustrate the genre: After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking For Me and Intentional Injury.

After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking For Me (Lihunle jiū bie zai lai zhào wo, 1994)

After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking For Me, written by Fei Ming and directed by Wu Xiaojiang, played at the large China Children’s Art Theatre (Eryī) and Nationalities Cultural Palace (Minzungong) first in 1994. The performance had been planned for CNET’s own Little Theatre, as the director felt he would “be able to experiment more artistically” and the content was thought “more suitable for little theatre” (Wu, 11-27-97). However, with the casting of CNET TV stars, Jiang Shan, Shi Ke, and Jiang Wu, CNET and the producer Tan Lulu felt they could fill a larger theatre and quickly pay investors back. 9 While the production was “first conceived as an experiment, rather than a commercial performance, to test whether it could make money or not” (Tan Lulu, Gao Yang 1994, 37), one journalist (Zhao Gang, 11-18-94) reported: “After We’re Divorced has taken Beijing by storm. Passionate young people are scrambling for tickets. The drama
premiered last month selling out the first ten shows, and the next round is also selling to
capacity audiences.”

*After We’re Divorced* tells the story of a love triangle involving two sisters. The
older sister, Shi Hui, a career woman, divorces her husband, Li Haoming, whom she thought
“a good-for-nothing ... and woman-chaser.” The younger sister, Shi Hong, later helps Li
become a successful screenwriter, and this rekindles Shi Hui’s interest in her ex-husband.

But Li has fallen in love with Shi Hui’s younger sister. The upshot of the entangled affair
is that Shi Hui is found dead. Has she been murdered or did she commit suicide?

Everyone, from younger sister Shi Hong to the elevator operator, suddenly becomes a
suspect. The plot illustrates *huaju*’s appropriation of popular TV culture. One man in the
audience said he had seen the play three times, because he “could relate to the ex-
husband.” A divorced woman in the audience burst into tears because “she had seen
herself in Shi Hui” (Zhao Gang, 11-18-94). One journalist referred to the protagonist, ex-
husband Li Haoming, as an “anti-hero” (*fan yingxiong*), an idea not traditionally embodied
in *huaju*, but certainly part of Chinese 1990s’ culture:

> Now our country is undergoing a painful transition. The social, economic,
and cultural structure inevitably results in a lack of balance in psychology
and disequilibrium in our code of conduct. Some intellectuals are so
confused that they can’t find anything positive. As a result, a ‘counter-
culture’ (*fanwenhua*) psychology has been born. Li Haoming can be called
a typical counter-culture character rebelling against traditional attitudes and
spiritual values (Sun Lifeng, 1995).

*After We’re Divorced* was CNET’s first collaboration with an independent
producer, a phenomenon that began in Beijing during the early 1990s. The production was
previously mentioned in chapter 2 (note 16) as exemplifying co-producing difficulties
encountered in the rapidly changing climate of economic reform. While “main melody”
plays were assured of funding from the Cultural Ministry, the more commercial plays of
“personal realism” found outside investors and illustrate *huaju*’s new attempt to enter the
entertainment market by cooperating with private enterprises. Elucidating the genre, private
businesswoman Tan Lulu, who reportedly (Black, 1995) invested personal funds in excess of 150,000 RMB to produce *After Divorce*, comments:

Frankly, the production is not a high-class work of art and is full of aesthetic holes ... but the fact remains that many people are coming to see our play, and that’s just what we want. ... ‘Commercial’ is perhaps not a bad word, for we’re living in a commercial time and a commercial society. We’ll survive if we float downstream, but we may die if we go against the tide (in Zhao Gang, 11-18-94).

Appealing to a young, hip, relatively well-heeled audience, *Divorce* was witty, humorous, fast-paced, and incorporated current pop songs. The set consisted of simple furniture, and a curtain emblazoned with advertisements (*guanggaolian*) was cleverly used as a backdrop and to divide the space on the large proscenium stage.

Opinions were varied at the “discussion meeting” (*zuo tanhui* or “criticism meeting,” *jupinghui*) sponsored by the Cultural Ministry’s Art Bureau (*Wenhuabu de yishuju*): “Is *After Divorce*: Valuable or Lacking Content?” (*Chinese Theatre*, 1994, 38). Critics found the acting “natural and close to life” (Zhong Yibing, 10-25-94). “Jiang Wu’s ... acting is the proper kind of ‘non-acting’” (*fei biaoyan*) (Sun Lifeng, 3-11-95). *Divorce* was perceived as “embodying modern urban life,” as well as social criticism: “The questions raised ... are thought-provoking.” In the surge of the market-economy, “how do we treat life and love? Actor Ji Yuan as the policeman ... gives a well-intentioned criticism of the police. They don’t respect the truth and treat everyone as a suspect” (Zhou Lai, 10-25-94). As one critic explained,

With *huaju* not having a very good box office, this production should be congratulated. This shows that *huaju* does have an audience. The problem is only whether *huaju* can adapt itself to the changes and win over the audience. ... This is close to life and easy to understand. The playwright meaningfully both praises and criticizes this vivid group of young people (Zhong Yibing, 10-25-94).

Another critic was unable to find anything “significant or worthwhile”: “The success is merely in terms of its commercial operation, the publicity, and casting of famous stars. ...
Commercially it achieved enough, but artistically it should have dug deeper” (Guo Fuming, 10-25-94). Leader Zhao Youliang commented:

*After Divorce* was a commercial play and not very high in quality. It attracted a huge audience and made a lot of money, because it dealt with a hot topic. Chinese are facing a rising divorce rate, and families are being pulled apart. We chose this play only for commercial reasons. We just thought this production could make money (Zhao, 4-22-98).

Young patrons rushed to buy tickets, calling *After Divorce* the “hottest” production of 1994. As CNET and independent producer Tan Lulu fought over profits and ownership, Fei Ming’s script reportedly sold to TV for 240,000 RMB.

*Intentional Injury* (*Gu yi Shanghai, 1995*)

In *Intentional Injury*, performed in CNET’s Little Theatre, director Wu Xiaojiang built on his earlier experience directing *After Divorce*.*Intentional Injury*, written by Yang Qian (Mu Er is his penname), is a contemporary courtroom drama. The play explores several themes: the loss of values in modern society, money-worship, sexuality, sexual violence, and corruption. In the play, no one believes in good intentions, or that anyone would do something with altruistic motives. While basically serious, humor and slang (sometimes a bit sexually risqué) break the tension with frequent audience laughter.

The story concerns Gui Yazhi, the manager of a successful privately owned bookstore, who is in court accusing her assistant manager, Yu Chen, of stealing money and attacking her. Three years earlier, Gui Yazhi had accused her husband of embezzling US$100,000. Many suspect that the money was not wired abroad as decided by the Court, but is in Gui Yazhi’s possession. Amid the scandal and suspected incompetence of the Court in the earlier trial, veteran Judge Xu (lao Xu) lost his position and reputation. Participating in the new trial are the same personages from the previous trial. A variety of witnesses are questioned (a young female bookstore assistant, an unemployed artist, a plastic surgeon and acupuncturist), and the facts begin to emerge. Gui Yazhi and Yu Chen had been lovers. Yu Chen, portrayed as a “crazy man,” “an irrational misfit,” looks down
on money and is pursuing spiritual meaning in his life. He wants Gui Yazhi to donate her husband’s money to artistic causes. He claims to love Gui Yazhi and denies beating her. Testimony reveals tattoos on Gui Yazhi’s body (“little grapes and butterflies”), her obsession with acupuncture, her “masochistic tendencies.” Yu Chen’s attorney builds his case that Gui Yazhi inflicted the injuries on herself. The personal interrelationships of the principals in the case, as well as the lawyers, court officials, and prosecutors are cleverly woven into the plot. Finally the case ends in a mistrial, as the judges declare “Court adjourned indefinitely until complete evidence is available.”

CNET’s little theatre ambiance invited the audience into the courtroom to sit as the jury, creating an interactive performance environment. “The performers want the audience, as members of our jury, to judge for themselves who’s telling the truth” (Press Release, 1995). In the little theatre seating 180-200, the audience was right in the midst of the court proceedings. The set was simple, comprised of several desks and chairs. Props were minimal: a belt, a rope, a broken wine bottle, a Dr.’s black bag, sunglasses, a bell. Newspaper articles about the previous scandalous trial adorned the walls. Guyi Shanghai used few light changes, no music, no sound effects, no scene changes. The audience surrounded the actors on three sides, as several rows of “jury” members were seated onstage. The judge and court-recorder were seated in the center of the house. The trial began authentically with the court recorder reading the current indictment:

Yu Chen, assistant manager of Guiya Bookstore is hereby charged with cruelly attacking the plaintiff, Ms. Gui Yazhi, … inflicting great physical harm and psychological injury (Mu Er, Guyi Shanghai, 1995).

The realistic environment was broken only by old Judge Xu’s prologue and epilogue recounting his downfall: “One day I took a furtive glance at a woman.” He lost his objectivity. That woman was Gui Yazhi in court. At the end, the actors repeated in unison “We all hate intentional injury” again and again (Women zeng hen guyi shanghai), calling to mind general inequities in society. After the mistrial, audience members were invited to
hand in their own verdicts to the Court. The plot and characters sound complex, and rather contrived, in the retelling. Yet the conflicting undercurrents were clear and powerful in performance. The courtroom drama was compelling, with twists and turns, trickery and manipulation, as the defense attorney and prosecutor questioned and cross-examined witnesses. One critic felt the play “dissected every character’s psychology ... and is great in terms of reasoning and deduction” (Cai Tiliang, 5-13-95). Another called "Guyi Shanghai" “a spiritual striptease” (Zhang Kangkang, 5-12-95).

Director Wu described his image for Intentional Injury as “a modern civilized hunting ground/jungle” (xiandai wenmingde doushouchang zhongde yichang weilie) (Wu, 12-20-97). He advised his actors (several were TV and film stars inexperienced in huaju):

‘Little theatre’ seems to be the trend of the future. ... It’s not easy to grasp the charm of ‘little theatre.’ ... The acting style should be natural and real. ... The little theatre doesn’t encompass a large psychological space. The big gesture onstage previously must become a small gesture.... The degree of acting shouldn’t be judged by the degree of movement. We must show something in the little theatre that can’t be shown in the large theatre (Rehearsal log, 2-20-95).

Wu explained, “we focussed on narration and simply ‘telling the story’” (shuoshu):

It’s similar to Chinese guyi forms (‘song arts’). The actors don’t re-enact the crime. The crime is presented only through speech. As each character gives his version of the crime, we try to stimulate the audience’s imagination and intellectually challenge them (Wu, 12-20-97).

After the “leaders’ run-through,” the majority of suggestions concerned “sharpening overall rhythm,” striving for “more natural dialogue,” “not settling on the superficial,” and “incorporating several exciting pauses” (Yang, log 3-24-95). Party Secretary Wang found fault: “The line about ‘making money by selling books about famous people, Mao Zedong and Stalin’ ... isn’t appropriate and should be cut” (Wang, log 3-24-95). Director Wu confided:

We didn’t cut those lines. They weren’t so bad. We also mentioned books about Roosevelt, Mussolini and Hitler, Gorbachev and Mrs. Thatcher, and even Iococca of General Motors [actually Chrysler]. ... Many junk books, illegal books from Hong Kong are published in underground printing factories here ... like the book about Mao and his ladies. ... In the latest performance, we even added Bill Gates’ name (Wu, 6-1-98).
The above sheds light on the comparatively relaxed political climate when the play first opened in 1995. The performance also embodies the prevailing legal reform. The “crime of intentional injury” (guyi shanghai zui) is, in fact, a Chinese legal term, yet the jurisprudence enacted in the play does not follow actual Chinese courtroom procedure. The “new debating style” of questioning and cross-examination by defense attorney and prosecutor was introduced during the 1990s as part of China’s legal reform (Press Release, 1995). However, a jury as in the production is not part of the Chinese court. *Intentional Injury* is called “a non-judicial practice” trial (fei sifa shijian), i.e., not following true, legal practice. With the playwright’s ambiguous disclaimer, both audience members and the production team were unclear about whether the enacted trial followed American procedure or recent Chinese legal reform. In any case, the main point was that the proceedings were considered new and trendy.11

*Intentional Injury* was CNET’s initial attempt utilizing an in-house producer (as opposed to the outside independent producer of *After We’re Divorced*). Given that CNET paid the salaries, and there was no outside theatre rent, the total investment of 45,000 – 70,000 RMB (figures varied) was sufficient to cover costs “which were much lower in 1995” (Liu Tiegang, 10-10-97).12 *Intentional Injury* was a huge success, and CNET’s little theatre almost always sold out, with standing room only.

While playwright Yang Qian described the characters as “ordinary people, maybe a bit strange, but not so unfamiliar” (Yang Qian, 1994), a university student found the characters “too bizarre” and the performance “just commercial … popular only because of its slightly risqué plot and language.” The audience was curious about the new debating courtroom style and delighted with the production’s breaking the 4th wall, providing direct communication with the actors. Direct audience-actor contact was unusual for “little theatre” productions of the 1990s, as the majority seemed to emulate TV with small-scale proscenium staging.
After introducing the first separate "little theatre" in Beijing, CNET was described as "having several advantages": "Among the famous theatre troupes, CNET has the only little theatre. ... CNET is the front-runner of little theatre in Beijing" (Shuang Qing, 4-2-95). *Guyi Shanghai* was described as "an innovative 'stage without a stage' (meiyou wutai de wutai). The trial really seems to be taking place. ... There's no sense of 'performing'" (Cai Tiliang, 5-10-95). Another critic thought: "It doesn't feel like you're watching a play at all. You feel like a member of the jury. You can ... write your verdict in the 'opinion book' or give it to the judge" (Qiang Gong, 8-19-95). A nostalgic remembrance of Beijing theatre-goers is the candlelight performance of *Intentional Injury* on April 14, 1995 during a power outage in the city.

100 people gathered in ... front of the little theatre. ... Everyone still hoped to see the play. ... The actors ... held candles. ... Luckily there was no curtain nor wooden floor, so it was safe. ... It was a ... passionate and intense performance. ... Many asked the actors to sign their playbills to remember the candlelight performance (Jin Gang, 4-20-95).

III. Nationalization (-ism) (minzuhua zhuyi)

Nationalization, a term used by Chinese officials, theatre artists, and scholars, was initially used to signify the sinocization of *huaju*, a foreign theatre form. The term continued to be used as an overall catch-all phrase to indicate the inclusion of specifically "Chinese" thematic or stylistic elements in *huaju*. Especially during the revived nationalism of the 1990s, the government encouraged the nationalization of *huaju*. The nationalization of *huaju* encompasses Chinese folklore, contemporary, historical, and mythological themes. During the 1990s, the genre used both realism and non-illusionistic styles, or a combination of both, and might incorporate elements from *xiqu* and other indigenous Chinese theatre into *huaju*.

*Vengeance on Zidu* (*Fa Zidu*, 1995)

*Vengeance on Zidu* (*Fa Zidu*), an example of nationalization, is an historical drama utilizing the non-realistic techniques of *xiqu*. The production opened in 1995 and was
brought back in 1996 and 1997 as part of CNET's repertory, playing at Beijing's large theatres, the China Children's Art Theatre (Eryi), Haidian Movie Theatre (Haidian ying juyuan), and the Cultural Palace of Nationalities (Minzugong). The Chinese audience is familiar with the story of Vengeance on Zidu. Based on historical events of the Warring States Period (circa 475-221 BC) from the Recorded History of the Various Kingdoms of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (Dong Zhou lie guo zhi), Vengeance on Zidu had previously been adapted into various styles of traditional Chinese opera (xiqu). The most famous is the jingju (Beijing opera) adaptation with its acrobatic fighting sequences. CNET's newly-created huaju took an innovative approach, transforming the tragic story of karma and retribution of the traditional operas into a comedy with black humor (heise yumo): As a play with black humor, this production "has a fundamental difference from traditional theatre (chuantong xiju). ... Intrigues inside the court, murder, love, and war--these subjects, considered the most serious and most noble in traditional plays, are satirized here" (Wang Zunxi, 3-96: 79). In CNET's Vengeance on Zidu, "a comedy in 5 acts," the king of the Zhou State, to cultivate good will, presents a beautiful woman named Ruyi as a gift to the king of the Zheng State. Before a successor to the throne has been named, the king of Zheng suddenly dies. The king's two sons, Zhuanggong and Zidu, and their two royal uncles, Kaoshu and Suying, fight among themselves to seize the throne and the beautiful Ruyi. Ruyi also joins in the plot in order to become the queen, playing up to each of the men who might be the next king. The five major characters come up with a variety of ridiculous schemes to achieve their objectives.

The new huaju, Vengeance on Zidu, was written by Yao Yuan, Wang Zunxi, and Jiang Xiaojin. Once again, Wang Zunxi, of the General PLA Huaju Troupe, credited as one of the playwrights for his script adaptations, was invited to direct. Director Wang describes Vengeance on Zidu as a "non-historical, historical play" (feilishi de lishiju).

... with satire and a fantastic style, it has a tragic subject but a comedic structure. ... Pain and happiness, cruelty and affection, absurdity and reality, frivolity and conspiracy are interwoven. When you ... want to burst out
laughing, suddenly you’ll realize that we’re in the same predicament as the characters. … The characters are vivid but symbolic. Rather than view them as historical figures, better to look at them as character personalities (Wang Zunxi, 9-95).

One journalist lamented: “The ‘historical play’ is no longer recognizable as the original historical event” (Yu Wentao, 9-25-95). Although the background of Vengeance on Zidu is historically true, the Zheng kingdom actually invaded the Xu kingdom, and the play’s characters, Zheng Zhuanggong, Zidu, Kaoshu, and Suying, are true historical figures, the play “intentionally disregards historical facts.” CNET’s Press Release attests: “The artists … boldly invent stories to create a huaju with a brand-new face and brand-new meaning. We’re trying to find a balance and harmony between art and commercialism to appeal to both the well-educated, interested in noble art (ya), and those interested in popular art (su).” Director Wang hoped “amid laughter [the audience] would learn something significant” (in Yu Wentao, 9-25-95): “Zidu sets the audience thinking about current social phenomena, … scrambling for fame and fortune, materialism, internal conflicts, the devaluation of personal dignity and virtue” (Press Release 1995). Calling Vengeance on Zidu “a non-realistic comedy with a traditional (chuantong) framework and embodying modern ideas,” director Wang describes (3-96: 80) the function of this tragic-comedy:

… to make the characters more exciting … to shake off empty preaching … to create and strengthen the comic situation… to create an alienation effect (jianli) through the comedy and break the distance between history and reality, conducive to the audience’s understanding and participation.

Vengeance on Zidu’s mise-en-scène was eclectic, a “piecing together” (pintie), combining different periods, materials, and styles “so the audience won’t be able to watch or judge this production in the way they’re used to.” Director Wang wanted Vengeance on Zidu to transcend the humor of the fashionable “short comic sketches” (xiaopin huajixi) especially popular on TV, and he was aware of the difficulties. For example, a toilet is used throughout the play as a motif for the throne. The director explained:

… the toilet isn’t just for fun; it becomes a tremendous ridiculing symbol to make fun of dirty political deals and immoral power struggles. Humor is a special attitude toward life, an aesthetic attitude that appears stupid but is in
fact intelligent. Humor is an expression of a profound ... understanding presented in a naive way. ... It can’t be separated from gimmicks and exaggeration, but true comedy reaches much deeper ... and this depends on the efforts of its creators (Wang Zunxi, 3-96: 82).

In the mise-en-scene, director Wang wanted the “strange, the weird” to “create a powerful effect and stress the conflict between history and non-history.” He asked the designer to follow the surprise of dadaism, imitating [Marcel] Duchamps (Duxiang) [actually Salvador Dali] “putting a mustache on the Mona Lisa to create a strong modern feeling and sense of mockery.” The set borrowed traditional elements from xiqu, basically a bare stage, with a combination of real and abstract objects, “a simple set leaving space for the audience’s imagination.” The set encompassed a silver mylar “cloud” suspended across the stage, as well as several large silver mylar pillows with a “royal” metal bed center stage. During the performance, the “cloud” transformed into a variety of abstract shapes. The mylar’s silver reflective surface emphasized the underlying conspiracies, deceptive allegiances, implied meanings, and multi-leveled images. Lighting in a variety of bright colors was projected on the monochromatic silver set. Music included Western and Chinese, classical and pop. Props were exaggerated and transformed. Costumes were chosen to reflect “strangeness,” the “non-real” (fei xieshi), with ornamentation, brightly colored solids (red, yellow, blue, and green, each with a symbolic meaning chosen to fit the personality of each character), “simple and flowing,” “neither ancient nor modern” in design, and included wild colorful hats. Make-up was also exaggerated, again using “weird and unreal colors.” Both costumes and make-up suggested a parody, a pop-art version of the traditional costumes and make-up of xiqu, and gave the characters a desired “cartoon appearance” (Wang Zunxi, 3-96: 79-84).

The acting style encompassed a wonderful physicalization: mime, acrobatics, exaggeration, stylization, song and dance, jingju movement and stylized voice, and movement of the “model revolutionary plays” (yangbanxi). While the huaju actors borrowed from xiqu, they were not trained in xiqu techniques, and the style was suggestive
of the stylized, conventional gestures of xiqu, rather than specific. Director Wang advised his actors: "Don’t feel constrained by the methods used in xiqu. Starting with the characters, just set your imaginations going" (log, 7-11-97).

Comic acting is most difficult. ... In addition to creating characters with unique personalities, the actors need vivid language skills, flexible body movement, improvisational skills, an accurate grasp of stage rhythm ... and synthesis of all these skills. The core of comedy is the actor’s talent. ... We need to follow ‘the sky’s the limit’ (wu fa wu tian, lit. ‘no law, no sky’) and have the courage to break established rules and surprise others. Feel crazy and intoxicated. ... In this production, my major work is to help liberate the actors’ creativity (Wang Zunxi, 3-96: 83).

The production achieved a unity with the incredible plot, the mixture of elements in the exaggerated dada/pop-art stage design, and slapstick, stylized acting. Vengeance on Zidu created a surrealist and tragic-comic style by juxtaposing anachronistic elements, the modern and the ancient, foreign and Chinese. For example: as the characters solemnly call to the old king’s ancestral ghosts, a flushing toilet is heard, and Prince Zhuanggong rushes out holding his pants; Kaoshu commands his troops to music from Tunnel Warfare (Didaozhan), a Chinese film popular in the 1950s-60s about Communist guerrilla soldiers fighting the Japanese. Everyone in the audience recognized the well-known music (played in the film as the Japanese soldiers enter a small village) and howled with laughter. As in xiqu, three soldiers, carrying spears and flags, represent the entire army; Zhuanggong chants traditional poems on the battlefield; royal uncle Kaoshu, with an arrow in his back, comes back to life to the music of Beethoven’s “Fifth”; Kaoshu dies with outstretched arms as Christ on the cross; Prince Zidu and lovely Ruyi dance a modern tango to the accompaniment of Blauen Donau; Zidu and Suying woo Ruyi with lines from Shakespeare; the king of Zheng sits on a gold flush toilet while he handles state affairs; the toilet bears a sign in English: “men’s or women’s”; Zhuanggong continually washes his hands after using the toilet (this is considered a Western obsession); royal warriors, Zidu, Zhuanggong, and Kaoshu, carry heart-shaped red balloons; Zhuanggong drinks erguotou (Chinese fire-water) on the battlefield; Zhuanggong entices Ruyi by dangling huge inflatable red lips;
murder and intrigue are treated like games, including the "switching the poisonous wine glass trick." While *Vengeance on Zidu* is set in ancient China, the language is modern slang, with puns and political jargon and innuendo. In the Shanghai tour performance, much to the audience's delight, Han Tongsheng, as Kaoshu urging his soldiers into battle, shouted in English, "Come on!" The life-style depicted is contemporary and even a bit risqué, illustrating CNET's intention to appeal to both the well-educated, those interested in "noble art" (ya,) and those interested in "popular art" (su) (Press Release, 1995).13

As introduced earlier in this study, *huaju* has always been connected with politics, used as a means of social criticism and a propaganda tool. Particularly, Chinese historical plays, removed from contemporary times and set "safely" in the past, have been an effective and potent means of criticizing the government. An allegorical/analogous interpretation of drama has a long tradition in China.14 The Communist Party is sensitive to underlying interpretations and has repeatedly banned plays judged subversive or embodying "spiritual pollution." Scholar Helmut Martin has written about the historical play used as a "coded comment" evaluating contemporary events," a "method of oblique hitting" (yingshe), which he calls "so common it might even be called the main tradition of the Chinese stage" (in Tung and Mackerras, 262). The example of analogous interpretation most often evidenced by scholars is the criticism of playwright Wu Han’s *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office* (*Hai Rui Baguan*, 1961) (as a reference to Peng Dehuai’s opposition to Mao’s policies) igniting the Cultural Revolution.15 Scholars Sun and Fei recognize three phases in the "treatment of historical material" in China: "authentic" history with the "primary aim of illustrating orthodox teaching"; a "not necessarily historically accurate story carrying some politically defiant message"; and a "deconstructive approach," mixing ancient and modern texts, both Chinese and foreign, "closely linked to the Western avant-garde where historical authenticity becomes completely irrelevant" (Sun and Fei 1992, 65-71).
Vengeance on Zidu exemplifies the use of the historical drama as political criticism. One journalist pointed out, “audiences have no difficulty associating the plot with phenomena existing in modern society” (Yu Wentao, 9-25-95). Originally produced in 1995 before Deng Xiaoping’s death, Vengeance on Zidu contains veiled references to Deng and what will happen to the Government leadership after he dies. When the play was again performed after Deng’s death, lines took on new significance. One of the characters complains: “because the king has died, there’s no entertainment these days.” This is actually what happened after Deng died (1904-1997). Only news or documentaries, no films or commercials, were allowed on TV. And no parties were supposed to be held during that time. President Zhao describes “taking a bit of a risk”:

... because the language has a political color suggesting the current political situation. ... In the mourning ceremony when the king dies, the line ‘without you, how could I have become so degenerate?’ easily reminds the audience of the corruption of some Party officials. The play, filled with these kinds of examples, was so well-received because audiences understood these things. ... When the play was performed in Shanghai, Shanghaiese thought CNET was very bold to dare to perform this. They were impressed with our determination and audacity. ... There was no difficulty in terms of censorship. China has a fairly open standard now. It’s ok as long as you don’t directly attack the Government, and as long as there’s no pornography, no nudity, no violence onstage. There was some risk with Zidu. Maybe officials would ask ‘What does this mean?’ (Zhao, 7-9-98).

Whether as veiled political criticism or as straight history, six thousand years provide ample material for the historical play. CNET (i.e., the Cultural Ministry) gave funding for the production. Silly and fun for the audience, Vengeance on Zidu became a big hit.16 Famous film star Li Yuanyuan, a CNET actress in her first huaju role, played the lovely Ruyi and undoubtedly was part of the appeal. Audiences loved the mixture of Western and Chinese, the actors’ physicality, the sexually risqué elements, the anachronisms, and political innuendo embodying this historical huaju.

IV. Foreign plays (waiguoxi)

An initially foreign form brought from the West via Japan, the first huaju performed in China were foreign plays. Like the Chinese historical play, the foreign play acquires
allegorical and metaphorical meanings and may become a convenient and safe vehicle for social and political criticism. Under the guise of the foreign play, distanced from the immediate cultural context, otherwise taboo subjects may be examined. Questionable content in a foreign play can be rationalized as reinforcing the official view of foreign “bourgeois spiritual pollution.” Both Chinese and Western scholars have written about the complexities of cross-cultural appropriation under discourses of “Orientalism” and “Occidentalism,” “Eurocentrism” and “Ethnocentrism.” Stereotypes, “the good, the bad, and the ugly,” blond wigs and beards accentuating the “foreign imperialists” on one side and “Charlie Chan” and the “Dragon Lady” exemplifying the “yellow peril” on the other side, are transpositions bordering on kitsch in both directions.  

In its early days, CNET followed the realistic conventions of Stanislavski in acting and staging. As described previously, during the exploration period of the 1980s, Chinese directors began to depart from this doctrinaire norm, using nonrealistic techniques (both Western and indigenous Chinese). Directors also began to experiment with non-realistic foreign scripts.

During the 1990s, as funding possibilities expanded for foreign investment and cultural exchange, there was a proliferation of productions of foreign plays. One journalist pointed out in April 1998 that while the number of plays performed and audience numbers were way up compared to the situation a few years earlier, most of these box office hits were foreign plays (Mu Qian, 4-16-98, 9). This may be indicative of an ever-unstable political climate, in which the foreign play is a safer vehicle than the Chinese one. There are other explanations: Some theatre artists complained about the dearth of good Chinese scripts due to the playwrights’ “lack of experience in the world” or the higher pay available for TV and film scripts (Guo, 1-19-2000). Others thought the increasing number of performances of classical foreign plays was not a worrying phenomenon. Scholar Tong Daoming thought it would be “abnormal if the national theatres of a country did not put on
Shakespeare and Chekhov” (in Mu Qian, 4-16-98, 9). Director Lin Zhaohua felt it “difficult for modern playwrights to surpass the classics” (Lin, 8-18-99).

Director Wu Xiaojiang pointed out two possible approaches to the foreign play: treating the play, in fact, as “foreign,” i.e., taking place in a foreign land with actors representing “foreigners”; or adapting the original as happening in China. As previously described, the Government promulgated a “slogan” during the 1950s and 1960s to “minzuhua (nationalize) Western huaju.” As director Wu explained, many theatre artists defined minzuhua as “using xiqu methods on the huaju stage”:

There has been subsequent development. ... We don’t have to use xiqu methods directly, but can use xiqu’s overall aesthetic principles ... to change something that comes from a foreign country into something the Chinese like and can easily accept. Huaju faces the problem that we have to use foreign plays. There aren’t enough Chinese-written plays. By using the aesthetic principles of xiqu, we should make the story closer to the Chinese people. I like to use a ‘short-cut’ and sinocize the play (Wu, 12-20-97).

As in the past, the majority of foreign plays produced in China during the 1990s had realistic scripts. Stylistically, Chinese directors approached the foreign script in a variety of ways: adhering realistically to the original text and style; an East-West fusion approach, combining realism with nonrealistic techniques from the West and from xiqu and other forms of Chinese indigenous theatre; and a deconstructive approach, using a variety of realistic and anti-realistic techniques. The deconstructive approach, which embodied the avant-garde (xianfeng) productions, will be discussed later in relation to the work of Directors Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui. CNET’s productions of Death Without Burial and A Doll’s House illustrate realistic and fusion approaches to a foreign play.

**Death Without Burial (Si wu zang shen zhi di, 1997)**

Sartre’s Death Without Burial (1945) (Si wu zang shen zhi di, translated by Shen Zhiming) opened in October 1997 for its debut in China at CNET’s Little Theatre. Director Zha Mingzhe describes his production image as “a group of people, amid a rain of blood and the stench of death, climbing a sheer precipice and jumping into a bottomless
abyss” (Zha, “Directorial Concept,” 1997). Death Without Burial presents human beings in extreme circumstances, attempting to give value to their lives as they are forced to choose between torture and death. The play explores the themes of human dignity, self-respect, individual freedom, and the responsibility of free choice. Following Sartre’s original plot, the story is set in Nazi-occupied France in 1944 on the eve of victory in WW II. Five French Resistance soldiers are captured by the French Militia Force, the puppet of the Nazis. The bonds of camaraderie, love and hate, life and death, heroism and cowardice, nobility and indecency are interwoven, as the prisoners await interrogation and torture and struggle with their captors and each other.

CNET’s production of Death Without Burial mixed realism with symbolism and expressionism. Stylistically, it primarily followed the classical Russian theatre with its heightened realism, high passion, use of symbol, dramatic lighting and music, and special effects. Director Zha did not want the actors to be “overly dramatic” and “too large for the small space.” Yet the heightened realism, at times approaching stylization, undoubtedly reflected director Zha’s four years of study at the National Theatre Arts Academy in Moscow.21 Yang Zongjing described the production as “embodying the more traditional legacy of huaju performance at CNET” (12-17-97). Director Zha called Death Without Burial a “combination of untraditional thinking with a traditional appearance,” a classical form “following the ‘3-1 rule’ (san yi lu, unity of time, place, action) with theatrical/dramatic effects” (in Yu Shaowen. 10-21-97). As Zha explained, Death Without Burial “obeys the rules of realism to create the illusion of life,” but “at specific points, consciously fouls against the rules.” A “short break of the rules” is used to “strengthen the effect.” These “‘intentional fouls’ are used to develop trust with the audience,” “create a sense of alienation (moshenghua, ‘to make strange’) and a clash between emotion and reason, and to emphasize the choices the characters must make.” The director wanted
direct communication to be achieved through “the intensity of the characters’ identities and not by jumping out of character” (Zha, “Directorial Concept”).

A Prologue and Epilogue were added “to make the play more dramatic.” In the Prologue, as the French Resistance fighters sing and dance (in the French Edith Piaf mode), bullets are fired from behind the audience, and soldiers rush onstage to capture them. The sudden shift in tone “compares their free, easy life to highlight their later torture and death” (Zha, 11-7-97). The actors break the “4th wall” at climactic moments and “real” time and space are elongated. When the youngest prisoner, Francois, realizes that his compatriots, fearful of betrayal, are going to kill him, he runs across the side wings of the theatre, down a ladder, and into the audience, screaming: “Help me! Don’t let them kill me!” Francois is strangled in the cell, as the unwitting guards below listen to a highly dramatic radio broadcast of Tosca. In the original script, these are two separate scenes, united here to great emotional effect. The music and lighting change to evoke a love scene between the two compatriots, Jean and Lucie, as the time and space of reality change to the time and space of their hearts. The scene, under warm red light, becomes romantic, soft and gentle. In the original script, this, in fact, was a quarrel rather than a love scene. Later the prisoners come into the audience and ask: “Are we doing the right thing? Should we give false information so we may live?” A deafening burst of thunder and lightning at this climactic moment brings to mind the classic use of thunder and lightning in Cao Yu’s Thunderstorm (Leiyu). At the end of the original script, the last Resistance fighters’ deaths are expressed by a burst of gunfire. But Zha sees them struggle to stand up in a hail of bullets. In the adaptation, as the prisoners paint a bloody “V” sign of Victory on the wall with their hands, they are gunned down, and the three Resistance Fighters, struggling to stand, are caught in a frozen tableau. As the house lights come up, three Militia soldiers are facing the audience with raised guns. The director added the audio and visual images (the blood effects, playing Tosca while Francois is strangled, painting the “V” sign, the frozen image
of the prisoners struggling to stand, sounds, lights, a music score underlying—and manipulating—different emotions) “to emphasize the theatrical elements” (Zha, 11-7-97).

Director Zha wanted the theatre space itself to be “an active character” in the play: “oppressive, isolated, cruel, and frightening” (Zha, “Directorial Concept”). Set designer Xue Dianjie contrasted the naturalism in the acting and realistic details (a table, chair, wine glasses, a silk French flag blowing freely in the wind) with expressionism in the set. He cleverly designed the set to fully use the existing architectural structure of CNET’s Little Theatre, including the wings and narrow cat-walks extending the length of the theatre, both interior and exterior spaces. Since the set was built to fit the space, Xue explained, “unfortunately we can never go on tour.” The multi-leveled set was very effective, creating a powerful mise-en-scene. The four acts alternate between the attic jail-cell and the interrogation room. A unit set allowed fluid changes within the small space. A single wall was raised and lowered, changing the perspective very quickly, to alternately reveal the attic jail above and interrogation room below. The audience saw only the attic cell or the interrogation room; they could not completely see both at once until the very end. The moveable wall, operated by remote control, was made of iron netting, so images behind it were visible to “add texture and layers to the scene” (Xue, 12-22-97). The materials, iron and steel, created a space which was “cold, stern and unfamiliar.” Steel-plank flooring and an iron cell door reverberated with the jarring and clanging sounds of the prisoners’ chains and handcuffs and the steel taps of the guards’ boots to create a foreboding and intimidating environment. The design team removed the theatre’s comfortable seats, replacing them with shabby benches to “unite the audience space and performance zones” and “so the audience can think about how to endure torture” (Xue Dianjie, 12). One critic commented: “The space is so tight in the Little Theatre. Everyone has to face the others—comrade or enemy. It feels like the environment is compressing people” (Jiao Er, 1998). Special effects included smoke, blood, and gunfire, in addition to the thunder and
lightning. Technical effects became quite adept. The actors, as well as the audience, could see out the Little Theatre’s windows: At the end, as rain beat against the windows and the roof of the theatre itself, the audience felt enveloped in the downpour. It seemed as if it had really started to rain outside.26

The story of five Partisans fighting the Vichy regime during WW II raises the issue of portraying foreigners and foreign political repression and authoritarianism. Apparently since these are foreigners, the subject is safe. Most of the lines reflecting Sartre’s existentialist ideas were cut, as theatre artists described, “for political reasons” and “to make the story simpler and easier for the audience to understand ... as more of an adventure story.” One theatre artist confided that the Head of the Military Training Academy saw this play “about revolutionaries” and was very impressed; He wanted to get tickets for all the Military Academy students. Officials from the Propaganda Department then came to see the play. They understood what this was about: the Resistance Movement, torture, the victory sign young people recognize from June 4th. CNET “never heard from the Military Academy again about getting tickets.”

Theatre artists and audience members alike were impressed that the characters were “human beings, not the usual one-dimensional heroes” (Mu Qian, 10-24-97, 6). “They were common people like us before they became heroes” (Zha, “Directorial Concept”). As the lighting designer, Xing Xin, pointed out, the actors “broke the traditional rule of positive and negative characters” (log, 9-26-97). The Militia guards, negative characters, were also varied, and their particular personalities often instigated short comic episodes. Conflicts between characters created rich and complex interpersonal relationships giving the characters a psychological dimension, rather than the simple, usual stereotype. During rehearsal, actors had attempted to achieve a depth of character and embody “contradictions between inner and outer ... and become multi-dimensional” (Zha, log, 9-8-97). Director Zha wanted the audience to “laugh while crying, and cry while laughing. The audience
should feel they want to laugh but can't.” However, audience members sometimes laughed
inappropriately—perhaps with an uncomfortable or embarrassed feeling when the actors’
reactions seemed overdone. One critic commented: “I can’t understand that, … in such a
frightening play, some audience members were laughing. This isn’t normal” (Jiao Er,
1998).

In terms of the portrayal of “foreign” characters, there were inconsistencies.
Several actors tried to “look French” through the use of make-up, hair-color, a curly black
wig for Sorbier to “look Jewish.” Others said: “we’re Chinese actors and not trying to
look French” (Backstage 6-26-97). Several incongruities slipped through—the young
“French” Francois, sporting colored hair and freckles, sat onstage, squatting Chinese
peasant-fashion; a “French” militiaman casually threw an exquisite bottle of “cognac”
across the stage. After the opening, I heard director Zha ask the French Cultural Attaché,
Jean-Louis Durand-Drouet: “Didn’t the actors look French?” Durand-Drouet thought
this question “very strange,” hesitated, then diplomatically responded that “the play is
universal and concerns all human beings.”

Death Without Burial raised much interest among Beijing theatre circles. One critic commented:

Little theatre huaju has recently become popular in our country. But we
can’t compare ours to little theatre in foreign countries. … Little theatre in
China isn’t anti-mainstream (fanzhuliú) or anti-system (jantizhi) in terms of
artistic style and methods. … The little theatre plays I’ve seen this year all
… represented the small worries of small people, … small love affairs, small
witticisms, small techniques and little tricks. All those plays lacked deep
meaning. But Death Without Burial’s effect is really deep. People face
torture and even death. … They’re confronted with unprecedented freedom
and must make their own choices. … Before death and torture, we snoop
into their hearts and magnify their terror and fears (Jiao Er, 1998).

Yet the same critic found the heightened realism extreme:

As with Death Without Burial, directors and actors should challenge the
great works. But restraint and moderation … are important. Holding the
final explosion and outbursts until the end … or not even exploding at all
would work better (Jiao Er, 1998).
Some theatre artists found it “problematic” to set the play in France, use Chinese “French sounding” names, French costumes, and “Chinese actors playing foreigners but thinking like Chinese.” “Most Chinese don’t understand Sartre’s existentialism and just respond to the similarities of the Chinese during WW II facing the Japanese.” Others found the “adventure story exciting,” the intensity and strong emotions of the actors very appealing, especially with “the majority of plays dealing with modern life and very soft subjects.” One theatre artist thought the actors “didn’t really act like French people or show French thinking.” “While the words are Chinese, the sentence structure is foreign.” Another thought “the audience prefers following the foreign in everything, including costumes, setting, music.” Director Wu Xiaojiang explained: “Recently things have changed. Now we don’t have to use hair color or big noses. Ten years ago, we had no choice but to do that.” Director Wu commented that he would have “set the play in Cultural Revolution China” (Wu, 11-27-97).

Overall the production was quite popular with critics, theatre artists, and general audiences alike. Critics called it “high-brow” (yangchun baixue; lit. “sunny spring white snow”). “While the play is very philosophical, it received much applause.” Everyone liked the “strong subject matter and excellent acting.” Death Without Burial was also praised as innovative. “CNET is becoming known for experimentation and ‘non-mainstream’ productions” (Xu Bing, 10-24-97). “CNET is establishing a new style and blazing its own path” (Tian Benxiang, 28). As one critic understood, this production “shows a way out for huaju to rediscover and reestablish its position in an era of social change” (Editorial Department, Xiju, #4, 1997).

A Doll’s House (Wan’ou zhijia, 1998)

CNET’s production of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House was a Chinese-Norwegian co-production, which combined realism with xiqu.28 Director Wu Xiaojiang adapted the script to “make the foreign classic fresh and relevant for a contemporary Chinese audience” and
“to suit indigenous conditions in China.” Wu assumed the Chinese audience, already familiar with the plot, “wanted to see a new interpretation.” Furthermore, “the Norwegians wouldn’t want a straight rendition of Ibsen.” Thus, a Sinocized version “would be acceptable to both Chinese and foreigners” (Wu, 6-1-98).29

CNET’s A Doll’s House took on a decidedly cross-cultural appearance. The production was unusual and innovative, because a foreign actress and Chinese actors shared the same stage. Norwegian actress Agnete Haaland played the defiant heroine Nora.30 The basic plot and character relationships of the play were unchanged, although the setting and theme were transformed. Director Wu transplanted the 1870s Norwegian story to an intercultural marriage in China in the 1930s, while “also injecting something of a contemporary context” (Wu, 3-13-98). Calling for individual freedom and self-respect, Ibsen’s A Doll’s House was considered revolutionary in its own time. The director chose to set the play in the 1930s, rather than contemporary times, “to avoid any political problems” (Wu, 6-1-98).31

The story unfolds: Nora, a young Norwegian woman, has married Han Ermao, a Chinese man who had been studying in the West.32 Together they moved to China, where Nora tried to adapt to her new environment by learning the customs, the language, Chinese cooking, and even how to perform jingju (Beijing Opera). An unexpected guest, Keluotai (Krogstad in Ibsen’s original), Han Ermao’s bank colleague, suddenly arrives. It seems several years ago without her husband’s knowledge, Nora had forged a document and borrowed a large sum of money from Keluotai in order to pull her husband through a critical illness.33 As the truth is revealed, Han Ermao cannot forgive Nora, accusing her of causing him to lose face by acting recklessly on her own. Despite her courageous act, Helmer regards Nora as a spoiled, playful child and is only concerned with his own reputation. Realizing she has always been treated as a plaything, a doll, rather than a mature, responsible human being, Nora declares her independence by leaving her husband and
children to go out into the world. Director Wu completely revised the last act, and, rather than focussing on women's equality and liberation, the conflict becomes a confrontation between Eastern and Western values and cultural misunderstandings.

*A Doll's House* was performed in CNET's Little Theatre. Independent designer Gu Ming's set, a traditional Chinese courtyard house (*siheyuan*) in Northern China, encompassed several performing zones: a sitting room, a garden (a real tree represented the garden), a corridor, a back gate. A large painting reflecting traditional Chinese customs—men playing chess, raising birds, watching a cockfight—hung on a side wall. The set of multi-performance zones was fairly large for CNET's Little Theatre, limiting the seats to just 160. With additional benches to accommodate more audience members (some people sat on the floor and in the aisles), those in front were literally onstage and only inches from the actors. There were many more foreigners in the audience than usual, especially Norwegian Embassy and business people. The production felt intimate and informal. The close proximity was innovative and exciting, and speaks well of the actors’ concentration skills. *Xiqu* was integrated into the plot to highlight the dramatic conflict. Zhang Juping, a trained *jingju* actress with the Chinese Song and Dance Theatre (*Zhongguo gewu juyuan*), and Rong Jun, a musician with the Beijing *Jingju* Company (*Beijing jingju yuan*), were invited to join the *huaaju* production. While acting and staging were primarily realistic, *A Doll's House* combined the *xieshi* ("concrete," "realistic") elements of the original play with the *xieyi* ("imaginary") aesthetic of *xiqu*.

Numerous examples illustrate the combination of East and West, *xiqu* and realism. Real furniture (a "newly built" classical Chinese couch, table, chairs, an "old" bronze stove) filled the living room. Red Chinese lanterns were hung in the courtyard near a traditional Chinese wooden gate. Props were a mixture of Chinese and Norwegian: a *maobi* (traditional writing brush), Chinese ghost money for the dead, a Chinese teapot, a Norwegian candelabra. Old family friend Lin Dan (Ibsen’s Linda) wore a *qipao*
(traditional Chinese dress) and served as an antithesis of the foreigner Nora. Nora and her husband sang a Norwegian folktune, and Nora wildly danced. To the audience’s delight, Nora also performed jingju in full costume (“Han bing yi ludi simian chu ge sheng,” “Han soldiers have arrived, and all around I hear their singing” from Farewell My Concubine, Bawang Bieji). Behind a scrim, a musician played erhu and guzheng (traditional Chinese musical instruments). Ruan Ke (Ibsen’s Dr. Rank), who is terminally ill, moved his soon-to-be empty chair in slow-motion across the stage to the plaintive song of the erhu. In her long monologue, as Nora anxiously wondered how Han Ermao would react to the fraudulent loan, jingju actress Zhang Juping silently performed a scene from Farewell My Concubine. The concubine Yuji’s dance synthesized with Nora’s words to physically embody the emotions in Nora’s heart. In the jingju, the concubine Yuji was ready to sacrifice herself and commit suicide as she bid her lover, General (Bawang) Xiang Yu, farewell. Nora’s torment seemed to ignite the appearance of Yuji, also a victim of male-dominated culture. The spiritual connection between Yuji and Nora was not lost on the Chinese audience very familiar with Farewell My Concubine.

In addition to borrowing specific xiqu techniques, an underlying xiqu aesthetic guided the production. Xiqu stylization transcends the logic of realism. As Agnete describes:

Nora would never walk outside carrying lit candles--the wind would blow them out. ... It’s illogical to take a suitcase without packing it first. ... Ibsen’s realism wouldn’t allow slowing down the rhythm and the symbolism of Dr. Rank’s empty chair. ... Here we’re more concerned with the beauty of Chinese theatre (Haaland, 4-10-98).

Director Wu hoped the rhythms of the final scene would imitate those of xiqu--with Nora using the running walk of xiqu, rhythmically quickening to the music of the erhu. “If we had accomplished this, the audience might be moved to tears” (Wu, 6-1-98):

At first Nora shouldn’t move too much; she should stand motionless ... to show she doesn’t want to leave. It’s not frenetic movement. ... What xiqu stresses is emotional reality instead of the reality of life (Wu, log, 3-9-98).
With limited xiqu training, this presented quite a challenge for Agnete.³⁴

The production was bilingual, an innovative approach in both stylistic and thematic terms. The language barrier initially presented a big challenge, given the short 5-week rehearsal period.³⁵ Cultural misunderstandings were underscored with actor Han Tongsheng, as Keluotai (Ibsen’s villain Krogstad), deliberately using a mixture of Chinese and poorly-pronounced English to great comic effect: “a very beautiful waiguode (foreign) woman!” This use of “Chinglish,” as well as Nora speaking Chinese (with a Norwegian accent) and performing xiqu, were greeted with much laughter and applause. Keluotai became a character unlike anyone Ibsen might have imagined. The play became a comic-tragedy as the audience delighted in the cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication.³⁶ Agnete initially was quite surprised as “Ibsen is turning into a comedy!” Later she “loved that! You can open peoples’ minds with laughter” (Haaland, 4-10-98).

Most significantly, CNET’s A Doll’s House illustrates the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation. Distinct and contrasting perceptions of East and West raise provocative issues regarding stereotypes, humor and irony, and shared and divergent customs. Nora and Han Ermao are portrayed as the naive foreign woman and chauvinistic Chinese man (shades of I Love Lucy and Ralph and Alice Kramden of the Honeymooners here!) Despite concerted efforts to the contrary—director Wu explained that Nora does not represent all foreign women, nor Han Ermao all Chinese men—the complexities of intercultural marriage are not fully shown. As director Wu describes, “foreigners are outspoken and express emotions more openly. Chinese feel that’s just silly.” Keluotai taunts Nora, “alternately scaring her and making fun of the foreigner” (Wu, rehearsal, 2-26-98). The Chinese audience found Keluotai’s “Chinglish” and “making fun” of Nora both hysterically funny; the foreign audience did not recognize the humor here. To emphasize mutual misconceptions of the “other,” director Wu rewrote most of Act 3, for example:
HELMER: Foreign women are like monsters. ... You have many shortcomings that foreigners have. You want to control what's happening in China. ... You're a foreigner. Your task is to perform as a lovely foreigner.

NORA: I'm not your ugly, uneducated Chinese wife. ... Does the philosophy of Confucius teach you Chinese to be such mediocre human beings? If that's true, I curse such a morality and such a culture!

Chinese audience members further interpreted: “there are different attitudes here toward money.” [Aren’t all foreigners wealthy?!] “Chinese don’t like to borrow. It’s not part of the culture.” “Until recently, there were no mechanisms for individuals to borrow money from a bank.” “Nora leaves home, but in 1930s China, only the husband could dump the wife, not vice versa.” “The problem is not the money. ... Nora borrowed the money on her own, and her husband lost face.” Many Chinese felt the play was critical of China and spoke the words a foreigner would say. Many in the foreign audience were impressed by the courage of the criticism voiced in Act 3, although the criticism is voiced by a foreigner. Many foreign audience members also found Nora the stereotypical foreign woman, “how a Chinese man sees a foreign woman thinking and acting.” Director Wu was concerned about the “joking anti-foreign attitude” in the production and asked me how foreigners would react (Wu, 3-11-98). Ironically, the situation in the play actually mirrored the real life situation of Agnete coming to China, studying Chinese language and customs to collaborate with CNET. Nora was the “foreign doll” both inside and outside rehearsal. Depending on their perspective, audience members found the production alternately anti-Chinese and anti-foreign. Cross-cultural adaptation certainly presents enormous challenges for all theatre artists to move beyond stereotypes and oversimplification and achieve real depth and insight.

In terms of funding, the 160,000 RMB investment for Death Without Burial had come completely from CNET (i.e., the Cultural Ministry). At that time, Beijing’s French Embassy was already involved with an independent production of Jules Romaine’s Dr. Knock and could not give additional funding for the Sartre play. In contrast, A Doll’s
*House* was a Norwegian co-production with the Norwegian National Cultural Development Bureau of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry investing 170,000 RMB. It is noteworthy that when CNET Production Manager Liu Tiegang (as *Doll's House* Producer) and Director Wu first procured sponsorship, they hoped to produce the play independently. The Norwegian Embassy would agree financial support only to a Government-sponsored theatre as a more stable investment. While free tickets were distributed, *A Doll's House* was also popular, and during the limited run (twelve performances, April 1-12, 1998), CNET’s Little Theatre was often packed. Overall, the spirit of the production was fun and entertaining, and, especially with a foreign actress sharing the stage with Chinese, intriguing to both Beijing’s Chinese and foreign communities. Both foreign plays, *Death Without Burial* and *A Doll's House*, attracted an unusual number of foreign audience members. I have described full houses for many of the productions examined so far, including the foreign plays. Yet audience attendance was also uneven, and free tickets were distributed to fill the house. After all expenses were paid, while CNET sometimes broke even, the theatre made no profit.

V. Experimental / Avant-garde (*shiyan / xianfeng*)

Experimentation is the logo of CNET. . . . During the 1990s, we are experimenting with different styles, no matter whether foreign or domestic (Zhao Youliang, 7-9-98).

Avant-garde theatre (*xianfeng xiju*), experimental theatre (*shiyan xiju*), pioneering theatre (*qianwei xiju*). What beautiful names! What a creative process worthy of pride! What an exciting true ideal! (Meng Jinghui, 381)

Throughout the 1990s, “experimental” (*shiyan*) was used broadly to describe productions which deviated from the norm of realism, and consequently “experimental” came to imply a variety and combination of styles, including realism and non-realistic techniques (both Western and indigenous Chinese), Theatre of the Absurd, expressionism, symbolism, as well as techniques of post-modernism and deconstruction. The term “experimental” (*shiyan*) elicits a variety of interpretations by Chinese theatre artists. China
National Experimental Theatre/CNET is a State Theatre. Using “experimental” in its name seems paradoxical. How to explain this? First of all is the historical significance of the word “experimental.”

CNET was initially viewed as an experimental laboratory of the Stanislavski System. As noted set designer, Xue Dianjie, recalls, during the 1950s, China was aligned with the Soviet Union. The Soviets believed the Stanislavski System was the most advanced in the world and wanted to promote this. The Soviets wanted a theatre in China, a “training ground,” which would “demonstrate and promote this style.” Because of this promotional experiment in China, the Theatre would be called the “experimental theatre” (Xue Dianjie, 12-22-97). Director Wu Xiaojiang provides two reasons for the “experimental” designation. First, when the troupe was attached to the Central Drama Academy, it served as “a venue for student and teacher field work, similar to a university laboratory.” Second, there was a slogan that “we must perform for the workers, peasants, and soldiers.” Since huaju was imported from the West, the “Government said we were going to ‘experiment’ to find a way to tune this foreign form to the needs of the masses” (Wu, 6-1-98). Party Secretary Wang Zhengchun adds: When CNET was first set up, the slogan was “to follow the Stanislavski System and combine it with the realities of China” (Wang, 7-14-99). As Xue Dianjie explains, initially “experimental wasn’t used to mean that huaju should challenge old or traditional styles.” Chinese theatre artists “all understood that it was an experiment in the Soviet System in China” (Xue, 12-22-97).

Vice President Yang Zongjing describes that from the 1950s – 1970s, “experimental” referred to “one big topic,” i.e., “combining Stanislavski’s concepts and indigenous xiqu”: “Huaju was imported from the West. We’ve had to carry out numerous experiments in order to Sinocize huaju. We wanted to create a theatre system ‘with Chinese characteristics’” (Yang, 12-17-97). The Sinocization of huaju calling for the integration of xiqu referred to xiqu aesthetics rather than the use of specific xiqu techniques.
"We wanted to combine the xieshi ("realism," lit. "write reality") of huaju with the xieyi ("imaginary," "express the inner world," lit. "write idea / meaning") of xiqu" (Yang, 12-17-97). Xue Dianjie explains that while "people talk about combining the xieshi of huaju with the xieyi of xiqu, the concept is very obscure":

Traditional aesthetics include xieyi and gongbi. Xieyi is free-hand brushwork with vivid expression and bold outline, Chinese brush painting. Gongbi ("craftsmanship brush") is traditional Chinese realistic painting with fine brushwork and close attention to detail. Gongbi is more xieshi ("realistic"), while xieyi leaves more to the imagination. Some theatre experts say xiqu is xieyi, but some things are shown in great detail in xiqu. ... Xiqu is not abstract; it's stylized. I don't really understand what xieyi is for huaju. When you directed Our Town, you had imaginary drinking glasses, imaginary food. This also is xieyi. So can we say xieyi is only Chinese? (Xue, 12-22-97)

As indicated above, terms may be confusing, but I think intention is clear. The most useful translations for the reader are xieyi as "imaginary" and xieshi as "realistic" (the traditional style of huaju).

As director Wu describes, "realism was the only form of huaju after Liberation. Things began to change during the 1980s with 'Reform and Opening,' as directors were able to break through the limits of realism and explore different styles" (Wu, 12-20-97). "Recently performances have become even more diverse, as our Theatre encourages us to use new creative methods" (Wu, 6-2000). As Party Secretary Wang explains: "Our understanding of the term 'experimental' is expanding, and our explorations into many subjects and styles are supported by the Cultural Ministry" (Wang, 7-14-99). "'100 flowers blooming' are very obvious in our theatre, because we perform plays of different styles" (Liu Tiegang, 6-24-99).

As indicated above, many theatre artists use "experimental" as a catch-all for "anything new." Xue Dianjie asserts a lack of consensus about "who or what" is actually "experimental":

There might be productions, like Lin Zhaohua's Go Man, which are generally considered experimental, but there are other plays which the older generation may think are doing new things, but young people may not think are experimental at all. It's very hard to define 'experimental' (12-22-97).
During the 1990s, CNET reiterated the “experimental guidelines” (shiyan fangzhen), which have existed since the theatre was first established (Yang, 11-19-99). How to reconcile a shifting conception of “experimental” in the Theatre’s name? Experimentation was “now to be conducted according to each artist’s unique creative personality.” As Yang describes “after inspection and assessment, each individual artist can carry out his/her own experimentation ... and in-depth exploration of the nationalization of huaju” (Yang Zongjing, 10-99: 6). Zhao Youliang still considers CNET a laboratory where creative artists can “find themselves at home [a safe place] to break through rigid sectarianism ... and develop their own artistic styles” (Zhao, 7-9-98). President Zhao explains:

CNET wants to introduce ideas and styles from the West which are new to China, but these should be acceptable to Chinese. ... In the West people talk about experimental referring to a play whose idea is anti-traditional and anti-society. But in China it’s impossible to be anti-traditional or anti-society. We can really only speak of ‘experimental’ in terms of style. ... We can’t reach the point that America has because we’re limited by our political situation. ... Theatre artists have different ideas about ‘experimental.’ As the Leader, I define ‘experimental’ as style. We try to introduce experimentation in style, pioneers, Theatre of the Absurd, black humor, etc. into China. We can’t change the content. If the content is against Socialism or Communism, we can’t do that (Zhao 6-22-98).38

Theatre leaders considered Vengeance on Zidu experimental, with its black humor from the Western tradition and its exaggerated Commedia performance style. Intentional Injury was experimental as it “relied solely on language and established a new relationship between the actors and audience,” with overlapping performance and audience zones. Death Without Burial was experimental, combining realism with expressionism and symbolism and breaking the “4th wall.” A Doll’s House was experimental, as the story was adapted to take place in China, incorporated xiqu elements, and featured Chinese actors and a Norwegian actress sharing the same stage and speaking both English and Chinese (Zhao, 11-8-99). “Little theatres” were described as “experimental.” CNET leaders also called the introduction of new producer and management systems “explorations that expand the experimental spirit to even more areas” (Yang, 10/99, 6).
Zhao understands that “in our situation, it’s impossible for every production to be a success. … We need to be prepared for failures.” CNET must “give opportunities” to all their actors, directors, and designers and “can’t just use the same top people all the time” (Zhao, 1-9-98). Zhang Jianzhong, a playwright at the China Youth Art Theatre described the “difference” between his theatre and CNET: “Some theatres were established as experimental places.” CNET focuses on experimentation and “is allowed to fail” (Zhang Jianzhong, 1-21-98; Shi Jian 1996, 70). In terms of funding, the Cultural Ministry “will not decide about a play on its style or whether it belongs to a certain school” (liupai). When the Cultural Ministry decides on a play, “it looks at the play’s content, whether it’s allowed or not” (Yang, 6-30-99). As designer Xue Dianjie described, in terms of content, “ultimately there is still censorship, but stylistically there are no limits.” The evolution of a true experimental theatre will be a “long process.” “In the beginning, modern ideas are not so welcome” (Xue, 8-25-99).

Theatre Leaders had their own Party-sanctioned ideas about “experimental theatre.” For most theatre artists, “experimental” became a generic term, referring to “styles new to the Chinese” (Zhao, 6-22-98), especially the addition of nonrealistic elements (whether foreign or Chinese) to huaju. The understanding of “experimental” was also changing over the decade—the emergence of “little theatres” during the 1990s was originally described as “experimental.” The theatre community also introduced the term “avant-garde” to characterize the work of specific directors, i.e., Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui, whose productions were viewed as “more cutting edge” and even “anti-theatre.”

Directors Lin and Meng actually used the terms “experimental” and “avant-garde” synonymously in describing new methods and ideas about acting and directing. Their understanding of “experimental” contrasted with the more inclusive interpretations. Meng and his classmates at the Central Drama Academy had begun using the term “experimental” at the end of the 1980s: to describe Mou Sen’s Rhinoceros in 1987, Lin
Zhaohua’s *Hamlet* in 1990, and Meng’s *Waiting for Godot* in 1991. “Experimental” in CNET’s name “didn’t mean experimental in a modern sense”; it just meant “performing for workers, soldiers, and peasants” (Meng, 1-9-96). Meng describes the “anti-government sentiments and anger at the beginning of the decade” (Meng, 5-29-98). As he asserts, “I actually created the term ‘experimental theatre’ (shiyanshuju) because I wanted to create something new.” Meng and his collaborators aspired to “reinvent huaju.” Their brand of reinvention is what, for lack of a better word (given its previous connotations of Stanislawski and realism, sinocization of huaju, and huaju’s propaganda use), they chose to call “experimental theatre” (shiyanshuju). Yet, at the same time, their use of the establishment term, “experimental,” provided legitimacy in an uncertain political environment. Meng describes “wanting to do something different” from the State-run theatres, the Drama Academy, and the Party propaganda “that’s encouraged by the Ministry of Culture. We wanted to create … a new kind of theatre to express ourselves in a way that truly belonged to us” (Meng, 1-9-96).

For Lin and Meng, “experimental” and “avant-garde” were at the fringe of huaju, anti-mainstream, negating existing definitions of theatre, and breaking through existing modes of performance. During the early 1990s, when people asked Meng for a precise definition of “experimental theatre,” the young director and then recent graduate of the Central Drama Academy would reply, “I don’t know!” But he certainly knew what it “was not!”: “Solemn theatre” (zhengtongshuju), stilted and complacently repetitive; “Old age theatre” (laonianshuju), void of talent and imagination; “Commercial theatre” (shangyeshuju), controlled by low brow aesthetics and box office; “Fake realistic theatre” (jiade xiannushuju), “not really close to Stanislavski’s soul” but with pretensions of truth; “Academic theatre” (xueyuanshuju), “not brave enough to launch a revolution against itself” and “shackled” with a “limited mind”; “TV plays theatre” (dianshiju), “superficial, imitative, and trivial”; “ Mediocre theatre” (pingyongshuju), denigrating
creativity and ambition; “Musical theatre” (yinyue xiju), satisfied with “happy dances,” “advanced technologies,” and “pretty sets and costumes,” but failing to “shake peoples’ souls”; “Sketch theatre” (xiaopin xiju), with “crudely sickening” and “exaggerated” depictions of life; “Mainstream theatre” (zhuliu xiju), with “outdated methods,” complacency, lethargy and sexual rigidity; These are “not experimental theatre” (Meng 2000, 347). “What we’re doing is whatever constitutes the opposite of non-experimental theatre! There’s a creative revolution underway, so we’re calling this period one of experimentation” (Meng, 7-15-99). Experimental theatre is “above all an ‘attitude’ and an uncompromising one at that” to get the audience to “dump” the artistic conventions “they’ve been saddled with or force-fed” (Meng, in Kuhn, 1-24-97). As playwright Liao Yimei, Meng Jinghui’s wife, elaborates,

At that time [1989], no one dared to use a word like ‘avant-garde.’ This was considered a ‘bad [dangerous] word.’ So we decided on a more moderate term, whose meaning isn’t exactly clear. Many older directors are now calling themselves ‘experimental’! Although the term was dangerous a decade ago, now it’s very fashionable [by virtue of its ambiguity] (5-10-98).

Assessing the Beijing huaju scene, Meng observes, “being in a little theatre doesn’t make a production experimental,” although the majority of experimental productions, in fact, are performed in little theatres. Lin Zhaohua explains that the audience for experimental theatre everywhere is “limited.” “Most huaju productions are old, for example, … A Doll’s House. In terms of artistic methods and ideas about acting and directing, there’s nothing new” (Lin, 8-18-99). Meng adds that “non-realism itself is not equal to experimental. A Doll’s House isn’t experimental” (Meng, 1-11-00). Meng finds “no special term for fusion theatre,” i.e., mixing Western and Chinese techniques: There are “too many plays” which combine Chinese and Western elements. The “combination of Eastern and Western cultures could be interesting, but that’s not necessarily experimental” (Meng 7-15-99). For Meng Jinghui, “experimental” is “something else”: 
'Experimental' or 'avant-garde' theatre is anti-realism in the first place. ... But it's angry, not satisfied with the status quo and fighting for reform.  
'Experimental' is anti-realism and angry. It must have both. ... 
'Experimental' has something behind the method. ... People like to talk about politics, but at the same time we're not allowed to. Anti-realism has a special political meaning in China, because since the 1950s, huaju has been guided by Stanislavski. The form is very old and traditional now. ... Artists should have a political mind. ... 'Experimental' is not just an aesthetic term. ... It can't exist just as an art experiment. It's always connected to the director's intention to change the System (Meng, 7-15-99). 

Meng Jinghui edited his Avant-garde Theatre Files (Xianfeng xiju dang'an) (January 2000) to "provide a record of the creative process of avant-garde and experimental (xianfeng shiyuan) huaju during the 1990s." He wanted to emphasize "the necessity and inevitability of experimentation and innovation in huaju development" (Meng 2000, 381). Meng includes a variety of student directors from his time at the Central Drama Academy, as well as Mou Sen and Lin Zhaohua as "experimental--avant-garde" directors. Yet in July 1999, Meng and director Lin Zhaohua were the "only two still doing experimental theatre" (Meng, 7-17-99; Lin, 8-18-99). Director Lin Zhaohua had already outlined a challenge for a new experimental huaju: 

It is only possible for a new kind of theatre to emerge when the methods of expression combine the real, the absurd, the philosophical, and the humorous. It requires the director to break down boundaries between the real (xieshi) and the imaginary (xieyi) and think about a new form of stage performance ... to lead the audience to a new era, from realism to the absurd, from the concrete to the abstract (Lin in Xu 1989, 235-6).

Lin Zhaohua had no need for "fashionable labels" and, in reference to his production of Go Man, pejoratively stated: "Never mind whether it's experimental or not. That's just the way I staged it" (Lin in Kuhn, 1-24-97). 

This section has considered divergent perceptions of "experimental" and "avant-garde." The terms may be ambiguous and contradictory in any context, but they are especially so in the shifting socio-economic-political milieu in which CNET operated. The power elite, theatre leaders, and individual directors may appear self-serving to varying degrees. The power elite establishes a system in which experimentation is simultaneously
encouraged and restrained within the boundaries of censorship, thus perpetuating a mindset based on political indoctrination and pragmatic value. State theatre leaders walk a tightrope between official policy and perceived innovation and creativity. The leaders conceptualize “experimental” with broad parameters as using a variety of styles beyond realism and, for the first time, looking at artistic and entertainment values in addition to traditional propaganda function. Certainly experimentation was intrinsic to CNET’s varied stylistic and thematic repertoire of the decade. This pluralistic view permitted a broad range of individuals to experiment, including those who had more exclusive perspectives and theories of “experimentation,” i.e., directors Lin and Meng. Although there was a lack of consensus about what defines “experimental,” there was consensus about Lin and Meng being at the cutting-edge of both experimental and avant-garde. From a directorial perspective, the most provocative CNET productions during the 1990s were those of directors Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui. What is avant-garde today may become mainstream tomorrow. Professor Shen Lin observed that today’s “experimental” may be tomorrow’s “old hat” (1-11-2000). The diffusion of “exploration” anti-realistic techniques of the 1980s within mainstream productions of the 1990s seems to confirm this observation. The work of Lin and Meng needs to be considered in more depth because of its potential impact on overall huaju experimentation throughout and beyond the 1990s.
CHAPTER 4
DIRECTOR LIN ZHAOHUA

Known both nationally and internationally, director Lin Zhaohua has been a leading figure in Chinese experimental huaju. Over a distinguished thirty-year career, he has directed an extraordinary body of work, including both Chinese and Western plays, covering a broad range of styles from naturalism to the avant-garde. Director Lin was first introduced in chapter 1 of this study as the Beijing doyen of the “exploration” theatre movement of the 1980s. Lin’s work continued to spark controversy in the avant-garde huaju scene during the 1990s. Lin is an enigmatic figure. He was Vice President of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre (Beijing Renyi), a bastion of Realism, particularly noted for its productions portraying the lives of Beijing residents and the history of Beijing. At the same time, Lin was Artistic Director of his own Theatre Performance Research Studio (Yanjuyanjui gongzuoshi). Chapter 1 introduced the independent studio (duli gongzuoshi) as a major post-Tian’anmen phenomenon and reflection of the changing socio-economic-political climate. The Lin Zhaohua Studio (Lin Zhaohua Gongzuoshi), as it is popularly known, was initially “informal, half-underground,” because, as Lin describes, “at that time [1989] an independent studio was prohibited” (Lin, 6-21-96). (As a result, Lin’s Studio was very loosely affiliated with the Huaju Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Art Research, Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan huaju yanjiu suo.) The Studio brought artists together from several different theatres, including professional directors, actors, stage designers, theatre critics, and literary scholars acting as consultants and dramaturges.

Lin Zhaohua was born in Tianjin in 1936. He graduated from the Acting Department (biaoyan xi) of Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama in 1961 and was assigned to the renowned Beijing People’s Art Theatre in 1978. In the intervening years after graduation, Lin was embroiled in the Cultural Revolution. With the end of the Cultural
Revolution and the reinstatement of *huaju* at Renyi, Lin began to steer his career toward directing, rather than acting. He served as Vice President of Renyi from 1984 until 1998. While officially retired as Vice President, Lin remains a major artistic voice at Renyi, continuing to serve as Chairman (zhuren) of Renyi’s Arts Committee (Yishu weiyuanhui), overseeing both play selection and directing.¹

Lin Zhaohua’s colleagues often, only half-jokingly, call him “da dao” (“honored director”). Actors seem eager to collaborate and characterize him as “very knowledgeable,” “kind-hearted,” “brave, courageous,” “easy-going,” “stubborn,” “doing his own thing,” “anti-tradition,” “turning *huaju* upside-down with new thinking and a new perspective.” Lin “didn’t turn to commercial theatre or TV and movies.” “He’s not a ‘vulgar artist’ (yongsu yiren) playing with techniques just to provoke the audience.” “He’s an artist with a conscience.” Lin is unassuming and even a bit reticent, unless the subject particularly excites him, such as the paradoxical absurdist plays of Friedrich Dürrenmatt or the unorthodox minimalist music of composer Philip Glass. Through his work, Lin has served as mentor and nurtured a new generation of experimental directors, including both Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui.

Lin Zhaohua has had quite a bit of international exposure. He was invited abroad for the first time in 1985, to England, Germany, and France. In 1987, Lin directed *Wild Man* in Hamburg; in 1990 and 1991, he attended the Avignon Theatre Festival in France; and in 1996 and 1999, conducted acting-directing workshops in Japan.² As a seminal figure in the “Exploration Theatre” movement of the 1980s, Lin had written his pivotal articles, “And Not Stones From The Other Mountains” (*bing fei ta shan shi*, 1986) and “Reclaiming the Wasteland” (*kenhuang*, 1989). During his first trip abroad in 1985, Lin discovered “there were very few magnificent plays in Europe.” He thought Chinese artists “weren’t inferior” to Western artists. “Our artists can have a dialogue with world art.” Lin believed the “future of theatre is in the East. We weren’t paying enough attention to
our own Chinese theatre traditions” (Lin, 6-14-96). Evidenced by Lin’s travels, and a much
stronger foreign presence in China since “Opening and Reform,” especially with the
accelerating reforms of the 1990s, Chinese huaju artists were no longer completely in
isolation. They were in fact influenced by what was happening abroad, and to some extent,
establishing a Chinese cultural presence abroad.

Lin Zhaohua’s work has been recognized by prominent contemporary Chinese
theatre scholars, including Lin Kehuan, Tong Daoming, and Yu Qiuyu. Lin Kehuan
describes Lin’s “break with traditions and conventions, improvising as he goes, bringing
the audience surprise after surprise and always subjecting the theatre world to one shock
after another” (Lin Kehuan 1992, 121). He further identifies Lin Zhaohua’s exploratory
work as “impossible to pigeonhole … most difficult to judge,” noting that when “attacks
and imitations” ensued after Absolute Signal and Bus Stop,

he unexpectedly directed a ‘rural customs comedy’ (nongcun fengsu xiju),
Weddings and Funerals (Hongbai xishi), that is most realistic. When some
people were glad to see Lin had ‘returned from his circuitous course,’ they
didn’t foresee that he would direct Wild Man (Ye Ren) and Schweike in the
2nd World War (Dierci shijie dazhan zhongde shuaike), which were even
more symbolic, abstract, and ‘distorted’ than Absolute Signal and Bus Stop.
… Lin Zhaohua believes in the ‘ideas of a free theatre’ (ziyou xiju guan). …
We see some common threads: a creative awareness that surpasses tradition
and a persistent pursuit for the currentness (dangdai xing) of huaju (Lin
Kehuan 1992, 121-122).4

Lin Zhaohua reflects upon this “circuitous course” and “crooked road”: Absolute Signal
and Bus Stop were “certainly unorthodox, and diverged” from Renyi’s tradition of realism:

And today I directed Weddings and Funerals, which is almost naturalism
(ziran zhuyi). … I’ve no idea what they’ll say after Wild Man. I’m afraid
that’s not only a ‘crooked road’ but even ‘off the cliff’ (Lin, Yu Qiuyu
1992, 52).

Critic Tong Daoming describes Lin Zhaohua’s “liberation of theatre ideas” (xiju sixiang
de jiefang) and his clear understanding of the limitless possibilities on the huaju stage.

Lin Zhaohua’s strange and mysterious imagination changes
‘impossibilities’ into ‘possibilities.’ … When the boldest jiadingxing (stage
“assumption,” “make-believe”) and the boldest naturalism (ziran zhuyi)
collide, the wonder of theatre is formed, and the imagination’s impossible
dream actually becomes a living reality onstage (Tong 1992, 72-73).
Scholar Yu Qiuyu points out that while Renyi had “legendary, marvelous decades of history of huaju,” in this milieu of “great success,” “new creation and breakthroughs were especially difficult.” In this group, the “existing tradition is indeed very attractive.” If someone wants “to create and make breakthroughs, it’s very easy for him to be criticized as a black sheep (bai jiazi, “damaged family son”) who’s going to destroy the priceless family treasures” (Yu 1992, 56). Yu Qiuyu recognizes “a kind of alienation (shuli) from the creative object” as one of Lin Zhaohua’s characteristics:

While he’s the conductor ... [Lin] also looks surprised at the natural flow of the performance. ... If we look at his plays, it’s quite difficult to find an exact Lin Zhaohua ... We see a fluid, changeable, sometimes obscure, but also very strong director. ... Adapting the form to each different situation describes the creative director who’s totally free. ... Lin’s superiority is that whatever artistic style he touches on, he presents it non-routinely. ... He awakens peoples’ eyes and ears. ... The point of exploration is that any one of the explorations should be deep and well-grounded so a really large artistic framework can be supported (Yu 1992, 49-59).

Yet Lin Zhaohua does not have an “antidote for any school.” Responding to questions about his diverse and contrasting conceptions, Lin says: “I can’t explain, but I know that intuition helps me. Each play has its own creative impulse. ... Every work created by an artist, in fact, should be a ‘nirvana’” (Lin, “Nirvana,” 292).

Experimental Productions of the 1990s:

Lin’s experimental productions of the 1990s include Orphan of China (1990), Hamlet (1990), Emperor Romulus (1992), Faust (1994), Go Man (1996), and Three Sisters - Waiting for Godot (1998). These productions, comprising Lin’s more avant-garde work, have all been produced by either his own Studio or in cooperation with CNET (i.e., external to Renyi, although Lin might rent one of Renyi’s theatres as a venue). Lin directed both Faust (1994) and Go Man (1996) as an “invited director” at CNET.

Lin continued the experimental techniques he had begun to explore during the 1980s with playwright Gao Xingjian’s Absolute Signal, Bus Stop, and Wild Man, and Liu Jinyun’s Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana. “Total theatre” (quan neng xiju, “all capable
theatre”), a concept which Lin developed with playwright Gao Xingjian, encompasses explorations of the theatre space; new staging techniques; new performance forms; an eclectic mix of realistic and anti-illusionistic techniques; the aesthetics of xiqu and other indigenous performance forms; anti-realistic Western techniques, expressionism, symbolism, and Theatre of the Absurd; non-naturalistic acting and staging; new dynamics in the actor-audience relationship; a synthesis of the real and abstract; going beyond the limits of real time and space. Lin also experimented with acting techniques, including body movement and voice work, freeing the actors’ memories and imaginations, and exploring the characters’ “psychological” space. The International Nobel Committee recognized the significance of Gao Xingjian’s work by awarding him the Prize for Literature in 2000. Lin’s directorial concept and realization of the plays were certainly equal contributors to their overwhelming success. In fact, the productions were true collaborative efforts between the playwright and director.

A defining characteristic of Lin’s work has been the close, personal, mentorial relationship he develops with a playwright--Gao Xingjian in the “exploration” 80s and Guo Shixing in the experimentation of the 90s. Gao acknowledges this “precious quality” of cooperation with unknown, younger playwrights: “Just mentioning Lin’s contribution to the prosperity of contemporary playwriting is remarkable enough let alone his other contributions” (Gao, Lin Kehuan 1992, 1-5). On a fundamental level, if he had not met Lin, Gao’s “artistic ideals would never have been realized”:

We immediately had a common language. ... We’re tired of endless hair-splitting discussions about whether we should learn from tradition or make reforms. What’s most important is for artists to do something fresh and new (Gao 1992, 1-5).

Gao Xingjian’s description of “theatre arts reformer” Lin Zhaohua’s working methods sheds light on how Lin’s approach deviated from traditional directing:

Lin often says his ideas don’t belong to ‘isms.’ He has his own remarkable ideas about art. ... Our discussions involve very little ideology. We seldom talk about such things as theme, character, plot, or conflict ... and leave headache causing literary analysis out of our discussions (Gao 1992, 1-5).
Gao goes on to explain a unique rehearsal process, which will continue to evolve in Lin’s productions of the 1990s. In his own “unique way,” Lin tries to make the best use of stage images (wutai xingxiang). He gets “very excited” on finding the right blocking or sound or setting, but he “doesn’t waste energy” on whether a line is missed or has a certain connotation. “Theatre doesn’t depend on words. Lin is very clear about that.” He mastered the plays with “his own creative talent and intuition, and his plan didn’t ripen” until he got to rehearsal:

It’s a miracle that Lin has no written directing plan. ... The play is already in his heart. ... When the team starts rehearsal, Lin usually lets the playwright talk for awhile, asks the actors to read the script once, and then everything’s settled. He lets actors get close to their characters gradually. ... He always thinks of ways to make rehearsal amusing. The work usually starts with dancing or some other recreational activity. ... The atmosphere gets established in the game-playing activities. ... Lin never explains the script to actors; he was once an actor and understands that plays are not made through explanations. It’s better to set up some jiadixing to lead the actors into the play. He never tries to show actors how to perform since this only leads to a lifeless performance. ... In his directing, I often saw startling sparks of inspiration. ... People misunderstand reform. ... Art is not simply playing with strange new techniques. ... Lin’s reform is fresh and stimulating, but at the same time quite natural (Gao 1992, 1-5).

As far as using xiqu elements in huaju, Gao notes that Lin was not the first. Renyi director Jiao Juyin experimented before but “did not escape the formulas of xiqu.” Lin “went further and was able to fuse the methods into huaju.” This is “a great achievement.”

People have been talking about nationalizing huaju “for years,” and there have been many discussions about the style of Renyi. Many think Lin’s artistic experiments are strange and unacceptable, but “actually it’s Lin who poured life into huaju” (Gao 1992, 1-5).

During the 1990s, Lin expanded his work of the 1980s by further exploring both deconstruction and postmodern techniques. Lin’s productions of three foreign plays, Hamlet, Emperor Romulus, and Faust, and the Chinese Go Man illustrate his experiments during the 1990s with fragmentation of text and shattering and reassembly of images and space-time relationships of deconstruction (jiegou) and the mixture of styles, eclecticism,
and fusion of postmodernism (hou xiandai zhuyi). As described earlier, “June Fourth” brought the “exploration” in huaju to an abrupt halt. 1990-92, in the aftermath of the crackdown, was an especially gloomy period for the State Theatre huaju repertoire. What is extraordinary about Lin’s avant-garde productions of Hamlet in 1990 and Emperor Romulus in 1992 is their daring and provocative subject matter and artistic form at a time when the bloodshed, tear gas, and martial law of “June Fourth” were still fresh in the memories of Beijingers. Hamlet, Emperor Romulus, and Faust precede and provide a foundation for Lin’s Go Man. This study will introduce these three productions of foreign plays, looking at both stylistic and thematic elements. I will then provide a detailed analysis of Go Man. I will examine the management and financial practices of all four productions and conclude with the challenges faced by experimental work through a brief description of Lin’s final avant-garde production of the decade, Three Sisters - Waiting for Godot.

Hamlet (Hamuleite, 1990)

In 1990, Lin’s Studio performed Hamlet in the Little Rehearsal Hall (xiao pai lian ting) at the Beijing Film Academy (Beijing Dianying Xueyuan). This was not a public show. There were only eight performances, and tickets were distributed free to people in the theatre circle. As Lin describes, “the performance took place shortly after ‘liu si’ (‘June 4’), and the Leaders thought there was something suspicious about it” (Lin, 6-14-96). By performing the play at the Beijing Film Academy and not selling tickets, the production was considered a “teaching performance” (jiaoxue yanchu), so obtaining a “performance license” was not an issue. At that time in personal correspondence, Lin wrote to me:

I think the world is in ‘deep shit.’ … I’ve deconstructed the script, and I emphasize Hamlet’s line, ‘At this confused and complicated time, unfortunately I must take responsibility and reconstruct order in the world.’ … I so strongly want to tell the audience about my new discoveries about the play (Lin, 6-16-91).

Rather than encumber the play with grand scenery and elaborate costuming (and also with only a 60,000 RMB budget), director Lin simplified the setting: “simplicity better expresses the Bard’s philosophy and insights.” A piece of white cotton cloth served as the
backdrop, and all the characters wore modern daily attire. The Danish Prince wore a plain, gray, woolen “Beijing winter” sweater. As Lin explains, “Hamlet is regarded as a God here [in China] ... but I wanted to make him accessible to everyone, not as a prince, but as a human being, an ordinary young man.”

Hamlet is one of us ... The thoughts torturing him might also torture us. The choices confronting him might also confront us. 'To be or not to be’ is a philosophical proposition. The choices may be profound or trivial, but you still must make a choice (Lin Zhaohua, personal correspondence, 7-18-90).

Today we face Hamlet the man, not the avenging Prince, not the hero of humanism. We face ourselves. ... To face ourselves is the most active, the most courageous, the most wonderful posture a human being can attain. Except for this we have nothing (“Director’s Words,” Meng 2000, 9).

In the wake of the horrors of Tian’anmen Square, Lin’s words became particularly poignant. Critic Lin Kehuan saw the production during its brief run and describes: “Lin restored Hamlet to our brother, ourselves, ... someone we might pass on the street, a criminal who’s guilty of murder and conspiracy,” or an “idiot who’s more ridiculous and solemn than a clown digging a grave.” Lin Kehuan felt the actors’ switching roles “continually and without transition” was the “most wonderful and significant” aspect of the production. Hamlet was played by three actors, who also shared the roles of King Claudius and the Lord Chamberlain Polonius. The famous “to be or not to be” monologue became “a metaphor” that an avenging prince, a usurper, and a vassal who helped a tyrant do evil “all must face.” Lin Kehuan found this metaphor embodying “the inevitable choices everyone must make.” “Beauty and ugliness, good and evil constantly change places and co-exist. Everyone is Hamlet” (Lin Kehuan 1993, 12).

The director incorporated stylized xiqu gestures and movement into the play. No stage props were used except for an armchair each for the King and Queen, and a shovel for each of the gravediggers. The simplicity of the set design forced the audience to focus on the actors. Instead of swords, the actors used electric fans, a ploy which Lin did not explain.
but left his audience to ponder. Meng Jinghui, at that time a directing student at the Drama Academy, recorded in his journal:

I rode the bicycle alone to the Film Academy’s Little Theatre.
Four lamps, light shining through the curtain, two work lights hanging up high.
Lights and shadows, murmurs and screams, electric fans spinning, grey cloth covering the floor. The audience is hushed. The sound of dripping water.
Hamlet quietly gazes at me. . . .
Beating on the whirring fans, the actors run crazily, slump, scream wildly, and savagely stare. . . . We hear Hamlet’s ‘poison give out your function.’ Suddenly the actors freeze. Water drips down from above the stage onto the greyish cloth on the floor. . . . The audience gasps . . . and holds its breath. There is only the sound of the dripping blood. . . . The cruel effect of the black and white culminates in the sound of dripping water (Meng 2000, 8).

As Lin Zhaohua wrote, “that kind of performance of Shakespeare had never been done before,” and the play was a great hit among theatre circles in Beijing (personal correspondence, 6-16-91). While aware of its political implications, the Press for the most part lauded Hamlet, careful to point out its setting in medieval Denmark:

Lin Zhaohua is to be congratulated for bringing an experimental Hamlet to the stage. . . . The audience can identify with Hamlet. . . . Lin sees Hamlet not as an irresolute character, but as a man brave enough to face his situation, as bleak as it may have been in medieval Denmark. . . . And in order to reflect that society, one which Hamlet describes as a prison, Lin uses several modern theatrical techniques (Mao Jingbo, 1-16-90).

Hamlet’s “prison in medieval Denmark” provides a safe vehicle for implicitly critical material and illustrates analogous interpretation, especially of an avant-garde production of a foreign script. Yet some critics found Lin’s deconstruction of the text (well-known in China) and the actors’ “moving in and out of major roles” throughout the play too “confusing” and requiring a “concerted effort on the part of the audience” as the cruel King became Hamlet and “back again” (Mao Jingbo, 1-16-90). In the tragic finale, Lin added his own twist, intentionally obscuring whether Hamlet murdered Claudius or Claudius murdered Hamlet. The Prince and the King battled to the death, beating on the dangerously spinning fans: one was killed, one begged forgiveness, and the identity of the dying man changed in a final dramatic riddle. As a result, Lin Kehuan describes, the revenge “became a kind of self-infliction, meaningless and absurd” (Lin Kehuan 1993,
12). In Meng Jinghui’s view, the production “hid the most profound wildness, sadness, glory, and humiliation of humankind” and was “the most emotional and soul-stirring work” (Meng 1996, 43).

After its premiere in Beijing, *Hamlet* was subsequently invited to the Theatre Arts Festival in Munich. As Lin Zhaohua explains, “it’s difficult for Chinese to get Government approval to go abroad, especially with a group of actors from different cities and ‘work units,’ so we weren’t able to go after all” (Lin, 10-17-97). It is not surprising, especially at that sensitive period of time, that *Hamlet*, “our brother, ourselves,” “an ordinary young man” would not be given a voice abroad. Finally in 1995, *Hamlet* was permitted a tour performance in Japan where the production was lauded and well-received.

*Emperor Romulus (Luomulusi dadi, 1992)*

In 1992, Lin presented *Emperor Romulus* based on Dürrenmatt’s *Romulus The Great (Romulus der Grosse)*, “the historical comedy without historical basis” (Dürrenmatt, 1964). The play, about an empire on the verge of extinction through the assault of barbarians, madness, and corruption, is loaded with allegorical significance. Lin’s *Emperor Romulus* was performed at Renyi’s large proscenium *Shoudu Juchang* (Capital Theatre), although Lin’s Studio produced the play independently.

*Romulus* was notable for its innovative combination of live actors and marionettes. The actors built a “stage on the stage,” and the entire space resembled a marionette theatre. Romulus Augustus, the last Emperor of the Roman Empire, sitting in his country villa in Campagnia, was represented by a huge puppet in the middle of the stage. Actors, in their roles as vassals, servants, and messengers, bowed and reported to the puppet Emperor Romulus. Scaffolding as in a construction site surrounded the central puppet figure of Romulus, and additional puppets hung from the scaffolding. Puppeteers, especially invited from the *Quanzhou Mu'ou Tuan* (“Quanzhou Puppet Troupe” in Fujian Province), stood high above the stage on the scaffolding and gave a live performance with their marionettes.
The actors, for the most part, sat onstage on two sides of the scaffolding and not only played characters in the play, but also dubbed the puppet voices (*peiyin*). The actors also helped the puppeteers guide the puppets or changed the settings. While each role was played by both puppet and actor, the puppets remained the main focus during the performance. Lin Kehuan elaborates:

People and puppets—no matter in politics, commercial activities, or in family affairs, idols are always more important than people. The production breaks all myths concerning the order of the world and all lies which are told about human nature. The actors and puppets vividly exhibit the absurdity inherent in the world and in human nature (Lin Kehuan, 1993, 13).

Meng Jinghui observed that Lin’s *Romulus* “fully illustrated theatre as a game.” Meng found the addition of new characters not in the original script, the “acting technique,” and the “combination and separation of actors and marionettes” gave an “excitement and relaxed, improvisational feel” to the performance. But Meng was not fully satisfied: the actor playing Emperor Romulus “changed three times, and the intention was too ambiguous.” The “relationship” between the marionettes and the real characters onstage “was not defined enough.” The actors’ “overly-cold observation didn’t fully achieve the potential of the original script” (Meng 2000, 356). Yet Lin chose to avoid overt didacticism. The actors’ “overly-cold observation” created a sense of estrangement for the audience and was actually Lin’s intent (Lin, 7-28-93). Regardless of sometimes obscure or ambiguous elements, Lin's combination of actors and marionettes, as well as his choice of material (the grotesque incongruities inherent in the script, the farcical elements against a background of warfare) were typically quite provocative. “Amazing. A world goes up in flames, and you make silly jokes.” Of course there seemed to be an implicit connection between the political conditions underlying the disintegration of the Roman Empire in Dürrenmatt’s absurd comic play and conjectures about the future of the current Chinese regime.
Faust (Fushide, 1994)

Goethe’s volcanic Doctor Faust arrived in Beijing in 1994, baring his soul in Mandarin to enter into a pact with the devil. Unexpectedly, God was portrayed as a man wearing a terry-cloth bathrobe and clutching a microphone. Mephistopheles was a woman speaking with the accent of a Beijing gangster (a liumang “hooligan” character). Faust began his journey into the wide world behind the wheel of a Beijing “Cherokee” Jeep. A rock’n roll band sang the tragic choruses. The stage set was straight out of German Expressionism or Grunge Industrialism: a moveable bridge made of welded steel girders occupied most of the stage. The back wall was bare brick. When the lines were spoken, however, anyone familiar with the play could not deny that this was the “real McCoy,” no matter how adapted for the occasion.

Lin’s production in April-May, 1994 was the first presentation of Faust in China. (It would later be followed by Meng Jinghui’s Bootleg Faust in 1999.) The script was newly translated and adapted by Ms. Li Jianming (of the Goethe Institute’s Art Research Huaju Division, Gede xueyuan yishu yanjiuyuan huajusuo), including both Parts I and II of Faust. Lin Zhaohua acted as chief director with Ren Ming as his assistant. Xue Dianjie, the distinguished CNET designer who had studied in Germany in the 1960s, joined the set design team of Wang Yin and Zeng Li from Lin’s independent Studio. Yi Liming, introduced previously in this study for his collaborations with Mou Sen, designed the lighting for Faust. (Yi Liming had earlier worked with Lin on both Hamlet and Emperor Romulus.) Lou Naiming, an accomplished actress and Director of the Chuangzong Huaju Troupe (Chuangzong Huaju Tuan), was invited to play the devil Mephistopheles. The other actors were all from CNET. Scholar Tong Daoming describes the director as “very daring” to give the role to an actress: “Ms. Lou Naiming plays the role as a man, so the devil in fact becomes neither a man nor a woman, yet at the same time both a man and a
woman. ... Sometimes she/he is a monster, sometimes a human being ... always embodying both good and evil” (Faust Symposium, 5-30-94).

While the basic elements of the original Faust remained, scenes were cut or simplified. Including Parts I and II, the production ran under three hours. Michael Kahn-Ackermann, President of the Goethe Institute Beijing announced that this would be the first time anywhere in the world that both parts of the play would be performed (in Zhao Gang, 5-30-94). Faust was presented in the “Experimental Little Theatre” (Shiyan xiao juchang) at Beijing’s Central Drama Academy. Lin used a variety of stylistic elements, ranging from rock’n roll to Chinese shadow puppets and Chinese gongs to make the play “more accessible to Chinese audiences” (Lin, 1-15-97). Kahn-Ackermann found the protagonist transformed into “a modern Faust, a Chinese Faust and a worldly Faust ... yet still loyal to the original work” (in Zhao Gang, 5-30-94). In order to open up the space as much as possible, the theatre’s fly space was completely exposed, extending from the theatre’s back brick wall out to the very front edges downstage. The constructivist set consisted of three moveable structures: two huge staircases with a long connecting bridge, all built of welded iron scaffolding and providing various acting levels. Designer Xue Dianjie explained:

The crane that supported the iron and steel structure was my idea. There were two rails—one on each side. The structure could slide ... up and down, backward into the stage and forward to the front of the stage ... and it could be stopped at various heights. There was no curtain. Everything was exposed, including the back wall and the cat-walks alongside. ... Along the back wall were screens for the projections. Materials were all iron, steel, and cloth. ... The car was actually constructed by the young designers. ... They rebuilt a whole used car. We wanted to give the actors the largest space ... to expand the stage as much as possible (Xue, 12-22-97).

The stage was essentially “open” and “naked,” resembling a factory with an enormous harmoniously running machine. Lighting, sound, and special effects (dry ice, smoke, fire, clouds, magic) created a changing and mysterious environment, encompassing heaven and hell, earth, the ancient and the modern, myth and reality, human beings and gods. The
elevator, an integral part of the multi-dimensional steel structure, was raised and lowered at opportune times. When elevated, the "sky-bridge" symbolized Paradise and the Emperor's throne. Gretchen rode the elevator up to Heaven. When lowered, the elevator transformed into the iron bars of a prison. With his remote control, Wagner's test-tube son operated a gigantic model dirigible/blimp, which floated above the heads of the audience (accompanied by the aircraft's zooming sounds) and sent Faust and Mephistopheles to ancient Greece. From the top of the stage, a four-meter tall sculpture of the Goddess of Beauty descended, and the actress Helen emerged. The ascending dirigible later guided Faust to Heaven.

Two actors played Faust, one as the young and one as the old, while a chorus of actors played the smaller roles. Lin wanted the acting to be "truthful but not realistic." He encouraged the actors to improvise and "speak directly to the audience" (Lin, 1-15-97). The acting was relaxed and natural, and overall the production had an improvisational quality. The actors experimented with vocal patterns, speaking in unison or counterpoint, combining poetry and prose. Body movement included acrobatics, mime, dance, and xiqu stylized movement. (In Faust's and Gretchen's love scene, the actors rolled around together across the stage floor.) Overall, the action was fast-paced and rhythmical. The five-member rock'n roll band (including key-board, drums, and guitars), Bao Jia Jie #43 ("#43 Baojia Street," the band's name, is the address of Beijing's Central Conservatory of Music), composed 40 original songs--one in English--for Faust, although in the end not all the songs were included. The Band played throughout the performance, especially during scene transitions.

Faust employed Chinese shadow puppet techniques (piying "leather shadow/image") in a unique way. The lights cast shadows (both diminutive and giant-size) of the actors and the steel-runged structure itself (especially the stair railings) across three large white screens. As designer Xue describes, Lin's idea to use shadow effects
was “very practical and easy ... and new in China. Not many people had used this
technique to show the ghostly or dream worlds.” By varying the distance between the actor
and the light source, larger or smaller images could be projected, with “several layers of
images ... giants and dwarfs all at the same time on the screens” (Xue, 12-22-97). One
critic commented:

The piying ('leather shadows') were used wonderfully. ... They expanded
the limited space onstage. ... As the shadows are enlarged or made smaller,
they create symbolic meanings. The shadows are both true (shi) and false
(xu) and represent both illusion and reality (Shen Huihui, Foreign Literature
Research Institute, China Academy of Social Sciences; Faust Symposium,
5-30-94).

The symbolic set elements--the car, dirigible, elevator, old electrical fans, bicycle tires, the
rock band, shadow puppets, the mysterious growing and shrinking shadows created by the
set elements themselves--all within the all-encompassing steel structure, gave the production
an elegant, alienated feel and created an eclectic, postmodern milieu. One critic pointed out
Faust’s deconstructionist mode: “The production shakes the audience. ... The play is
broken into pieces by the stage techniques, becoming fragments of different colors” (Yi Zi,
7-9-94).

CNET was thrilled with Lin Zhaohua’s “creative and innovative ideas breaking
from the norm,” calling the production “a grand contribution to revitalize Chinese theatre.
... Audiences are now freer and harder to please. Faust is fresh and limitless; we should be
confident” (Li Fazeng, Rehearsal Log, 5-16-94). The philosophical and political
implications of Faust (“only those who try their best to grab freedom and life each day can
really enjoy freedom and life”) were not lost on the participants. During the finale, Bao
Jia Jie #43 sang the conveniently enigmatic lyrics:

    What is destructible?
    is just a parable,
    What will fail inevitably?
    is undeclarable ... (Fushide music-score, 4-94).
As the play would be running during the Tian'anmen “June Fourth” anniversary, both CNET Acting Department Head, Li Fazeng, and director Lin admonished the actors:

... During the June 4th period, concentrate on the play. ... Perform faithfully and truthfully. Don't be distracted by any cat-calls / jeers (qihong) from the audience (Li Fazeng, Log, 5-16-94).

... Don't stir up trouble on June 4th. Don't talk too much in interviews. Be faithful to the original script (Lin, Log, 5-16-94).

Faust was lauded as “revealing profound content in a popular form” (Li Fazeng, Symposium, 5-30-94). The production was called “gaoya ping wei” (“high common taste”), appealing to both intellectuals and popular audiences (Kang Hongxing, Huaju Research Institute, Chinese Academy of Art Research, Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan, huaju yanjiu suo, Symposium, 5-30-94). Gu Xiang from the China Writers' Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui) exclaimed:

This production marks an important point in huaju history. ... Before I saw the performance, I wondered how it could be put on stage. The play is so grand, rich, and complicated. I couldn’t imagine that we could accomplish this. The play was so well-expressed ... and certainly had a great impact on the audience (Gu, Faust Symposium, 5-30-94).

Li Jianming (the translator and consultant from the Goethe Institute) was delighted with the production’s “Chinese characteristics” and found Faust and the devil Mephistopheles “combining yin and yang” (Li, Symposium, 5-30-94). Critic Tong Daoming praised Lin’s avant-garde production for “getting rid of stale, old forms,” noting the “rarity of such wonderful imagination on stage not just for fun, but also to bring more colors to the philosophical ideas in the play, which otherwise might have been heavy and dull” (Tong, Symposium, 5-30-94). Lin Zhaohua explained: “Frankly at the beginning, we were worried we'd have no audience, so we tried to imbue this great play with a feeling of live animation (huodong de lianhuanhua) to make it enjoyable and fun” (Symposium, 5-30-94).

Reactions to the first ever use of rock music in huaju were mixed. One critic reflected:

The first time I watched Faust, I couldn’t accept the rock music. ... But the second time I began to like the band. ... The strong beat is exhilarating ... even annoying ... and makes the audience restless and agitated, ... feelings which are closely connected to Faust’s inner struggle. So the use of rock
music isn’t just to show a modern expression and attract the audience. Of course it has another aim: to make the production more exciting. The use of the rock band is quite pioneering and also has sophisticated taste. At the same time it tries to be as popular as possible to get closer to ordinary people (Kang Hongxing, Symposium, 5-30-94).

Another critic found the rock music “too noisy. Productions need to be quiet so people can think” (Shen Huihui, Symposium, 5-30-94). Audience members also attacked Faust as “mere formalism,” stressing form over content (formalism / xingshi zhuyi), calling it a “vaudeville” act (zashua) relying on gimmicks and technical effects and, at the same time, paradoxically as “rough and simple.” Scholar Fei Chunfang [Faye Fei] described Lin’s Faust as “containing everything but the kitchen sink” (Fei, 7-16-96). Privately, CNET President Zhao Youliang “wasn’t satisfied” and thought the form “too colorful.” He found the “exaggerated form … the airplane, the car, the rock-band … were rather superficial and obliterated the deeper philosophical meaning.” There were “too many styles,” and it was “too confusing” (Zhao, 7-9-98). Faust made quite an impression on Meng Jinghui, who felt that “politics were behind” the outward experimental methods, “especially the intellectuals’ pursuit of beauty.” Even though “it’s a German story, it touches on the problems Chinese intellectuals face” (Meng, 5-29-98).

In Lin’s production, Faust remained an enigma, a man obsessed, willing to sell his soul to buy a measure of forbidden knowledge and the power that goes with it. As one Chinese audience member observed, “to see Faust behind the wheel of a jeep is to come face to face with the temptations of our own day and age. For us power is not only knowledge, it’s also technology, property, and mobility” (Wen Wen, 7-94). These comments illustrate the audience’s empathy for Lin’s Faust, in many ways mirroring the prevalent socio-economic climate and new values of technology, property, and mobility in China’s surging market economy of the 1990s. In the wake of “June 4th,” Hamlet and Romulus had also engendered empathy from their somewhat limited audiences. By 1994 the mood of Beijingers had shifted from the post-traumatic stress of Tian’anmen to more
materialistic preoccupations. The abstract staging of all three productions provided a point of departure for a more ambitious set of experiments in Go Man. Lin would take new risks and aim at a more complex post-modernist ideology. There would be strong and mixed reactions among his peers and the public alike.

**Go Man / Chess Man (Qi Ren, 1996)**

Go Man director Lin Zhaohua and playwright Guo Shixing are both significant figures in Chinese huaju. Lin’s production of Go Man in 1996 ignited a huge controversy within Beijing huaju circles, which encompassed not only the director and playwright, but also theatre leaders, critics, as well as audience members, both Chinese and foreign. The director and playwright had completely divergent conceptions for the play. The production elicited extreme opinions, both positive and negative, ranging from the “most exciting and innovative” to “unacceptable” and “impossible to understand.” Go Man, arguably the most provocative avant-garde production staged during the 1990s, is worthy of critical examination. This section will explore the creative process of Go Man, focussing on conception / intention, script / storyline, directorial concept, rehearsal process / acting techniques, mise-en-scene / aesthetics / form and content, as well as reactions from the general public and the theatre circle.

**Conception / Intention:** Before joining CNET as a resident playwright in 1994, playwright Guo Shixing (born in 1952 and fifty now) had worked for fifteen years as a journalist and the theatre critic for Beijing Wanbao (Beijing Evening News). Go Man is part of Guo’s Idle People Trilogy (Xianren sanbuqu, “leisure / idle people / loafers three part song”), which also includes Bird Man (Niao Ren, 1993) and Fish Man (Yu Ren, 1997). The productions of all three plays in the Trilogy were directed by Lin Zhaohua. Bird Man and Fish Man were both Renyi productions, while Go Man was produced by CNET.
As Guo Shixing describes, "life itself is like a game of weiqi" (Guo, 1-22-98). In *Go Man*, the playwright questions the meaning of life. Over the ages, brilliant minds have endeavored to unravel the mysteries of weiqi. Holding unfathomable secrets, the game can vary in hundreds of ways. *Weiqi*, in fact, has been a significant part of Guo’s heritage, dating from his Ming Dynasty ancestor, Bai Linggong, and his grandfather Guo Xuchu and great uncle Guo Tisheng, who were “among the best players” in the nation:

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, I was 13 years old ... I thought my future was gloomy and always hoped to leave the “Great Northern Wilderness” (*bei da huang*). I heard about the National *Weiqi* Training Team and thought maybe *weiqi* could be my way out. I began to study intensely, but the best time to start is at nine and I was already nineteen. ... I studied *weiqi* diagrams every day for about a year and quickly reached the level of my grandfather’s 4th son, but I could never improve beyond that (Guo, He Zongsi 1999, 353, 355).

Guo Shixing richly describes the gestation of his play:

My best *weiqi* friend, Mr. Xie Xiaoran, had nearly 100 partners. You had to make an appointment before you could have a game with him. ... Even the *Paichusuo* (Public Security Branch) noticed, ... I could see though that he was still very lonely. ... To ensure a win, he’d call the rules himself ... and force you to let him place two pieces first. While you felt proud of yourself, you suffered during the game. He was extremely humorous while playing *Go*; it was his whole life. This old man didn’t have many days left. ... He’d put the pieces aside and talk about life. He could see through people, and you’d feel embarrassed when he grasped the loopholes in your speech. He and his *weiqi* friends in his shabby room were where my *Go Man* originated (Guo, He 1999, 359-360).

As we saw earlier with the directing-playwriting collaboration of Lin Zhaohua and Gao Xingjian, Guo Shixing also credits Lin Zhaohua as his inspiration for playwriting:

It was Lin Zhao [hua] who finally attracted me to the road of *huaju* creation. I often went to his small room on the 3rd floor of Renyi and talked with him. ... Don’t look down on this shabby room. The directorial concepts for *Absolute Signal*, *Wild Man*, and *Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana* were born here. ... Scripts were scattered all over his desk. He wasn’t good at talking, but he was able to make people relax. He asked me to write a script. As long as I could write one, he could direct it (Guo, He 1999, 356).

Lin describes his “colleague and close friend” Xiao Guo (Lin, He 1999, 310):

... Artistic sparks fly when Xiao Guo and I talk about theatre. ... How did Xiao Guo begin to write plays? ... [I told him] ‘Never write a play according to the experts’ rules! Write what you’re familiar with. ... As long as you
have good material, even if you have only scores of sections, I can piece them together’ (Lin, He 1999, 311).

Lin writes about his rapport with playwrights Gao Xingjian in the 1980s (Absolute Signal, Bus Stop, Wild Man) and Guo Shixing in the 1990s (Bird Man, Go Man, Fish Man) in analogous terms:

How did the Idle People Trilogy get out of its cage? The experience was the same as my collaboration with Gao Xingjian. …

[On] Gao Xingjian: … I liked Bus Stop. … The day after I read the script, I gave it to the Theatre Leadership … and expressed my hope to direct this play. … Result: the Leadership … suggested we ‘first rehearse a play more easily accepted by the audience.’

[On] Guo Shixing: … He started to write Fish Man in 1989. In 1990, I personally gave the script to the Party (dangwei) and Artistic Committees (yishu weiyuanhui). … The first time Xiao Guo read the script to the artists in the ‘Artistic Palace’ (yishu diantang), he was somewhat anxious … but the script wasn’t turned down. … Many people said they didn’t understand the play—‘Was there a big green fish or not?’ And it was ‘too gloomy that two people died because of fishing.’ … Result: the Leadership carefully told Xiao Guo: ‘You’d better write several realistic plays first.’

The maiden works of both playwrights failed, but we didn’t lose heart. … We tried to avoid the distraction of all non-artistic factors and pull it through with those ignorant experts and officials. … We had our shencha (“inspection version”) and pailian ben (“rehearsal version”). The Authorities couldn’t remember what was added and what was deleted.

Lin continues his Gao/Guo analogy, citing political constraints on realizing playwrights’ works:

1982. Gao Xingjian’s Absolute Signal: traditional characters and story, something new in the methods of expression. After several discussions … it managed to pull through. …

1992. Guo Shixing’s Bird Man didn’t pass smoothly at the meetings. … If this play failed, people would all be worried! It coincided with Renyi’s 40th Anniversary. … In the end, Liu Jinyun, who had just begun to preside over Renyi’s work, said: ‘don’t think about it too much; just do it!’ (huochuqule). … I never thought the people standing in line to buy tickets would reach all the way to Baofang Lane (hutong). …

Gao Xingjian’s Bus Stop in 1983 coincided with the ‘Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign’ (qingchu jingshen wuran). The Department of Propaganda ‘mobilized a criticism’ (zuzhi pipan). The play was banned (jinyan). I was told to write a self-criticism (ziwo jiancha / ziwo piping), but I didn’t write it. The play was very good.
Guo Shixing’s *Go Man* in 1995 also stirred up a lot of criticism. ‘Can this be called theatre?!’ ‘Lin Zhaohua you should stop!’ ... *Fish Man* opened in 1997. There were still some people saying ‘I don’t understand!’ ... Even now these two talented playwrights are despised by some authorities and professors in theatre circles, who warn us against going in the wrong direction. It seems they’re the ‘saviours’ of theatre, and without them China’s theatre history would end! (Lin, He 1999, 312-315).21

Theatre scholar, Lin Kehuan, who would act as literary consultant for *Go Man*, noted the unusual philosophical strength of the script

... differing from previous plays. A *weiqi* master asks himself why he has devoted his entire life to the game. The question is a philosophical one. ... If you ask me what comedy (*xiju*), tragedy (*beiju*), or tragi-comedy (*beixiju*) is, I wouldn’t know how to answer. We’d better leave this question to the audience and to people who like playing *weiqi*. ... It’s so rare for Chinese drama to achieve this sophistication (Lin Kehuan, Log, 12-25-95).

Examining the playwright’s intention, *Go Man* follows the *san yi lu siduqiang* (“3 unities and 4 walls”), referring to the three neo-classical unities of time, place, and action and the proscenium stage. Guo Shixing considered this play his “return to tradition, written for a large theatre using the methods of Ibsen” (Guo, He 1999, 359). Noting the popularity of comedies and the dearth of tragedies, Guo “calmly sat down” to write his “serious feelings about life” (Guo, Log, 12-25-95). The Head of CNET’s Acting Department commented: “We have an excellent script, director, and designers, and should treat this play as one of the highest quality” (Li Fazeng, Log, 12-25-95). At the initial “team meeting,” no one was yet aware that *Go Man* would spark a huge controversy. As one critic would ask, “just how much liberty does a director have when adapting a script?” (Mao Jingbo, 1-24-97).

**The Script / Storyline:** *Go Man* is a tragedy written in four acts in the style of selective realism. In the stage description, Guo illustrates his realistic, yet lyrical, approach:

The set is a combination of real and imaginary objects. The door, window, bed, desk, chairs, *weiqi* board and stone pieces, and the stove in the *Go Master*’s house are real objects, but the walls are imaginary. ... Pay careful attention to the lighting ... which needs to support the Ghost, an important character. The lighting itself becomes a character here. ... Si Hui’s house contains more real objects, but the books may be over-sized to give the impression that they take up the space of people. Only among the pile of books can Si Hui appear especially lonely and alone.
Act 1 should emphasize the wind.
Act 2 should emphasize the snow, which falls heavily at the end.
Act 3 should emphasize the moonlight.
Act 4 should emphasize the bright sky, sapphire blue, and the night, which seems never-ending (Guo, *Qi Ren, Xin Juben*, “New Scripts” (1), 1996: 6).

Guo describes his characters (*renwu*), whose names all have particular metaphorical meanings in terms of *weiqi*:

He Yunqing (“cloud clear”): 60 years old, the *weiqi* master. ... an urbane old man, tall and thin, with light skin and long, limber fingers, which can almost talk.

Si Hui (“wisdom/devoted woman”): 51 years old, Si Yan’s mother. ... elegant, yet self-pitying, needy, and melancholy.

Si Yan (“flame, fire”): 20 years old, unemployed youth (*wu ye qingnian*) ... a “crazy man” (*fengzi*), suffering from anxiety. He’s actually a “knowledgeable crazy man” (*wenfengzi*), who doesn’t always appear crazy.

Huang Yuanyuan (“elegant / high-level woman”): 19 years old, a tour-guide, very sexy with especially long and beautiful legs, embodies youth and vigor.

Long Zi (“the deaf”): 62 years old, a Doctor. ... sometimes really can’t hear, sometimes pretends not to hear.

Hu Tietou (“iron head”): 59 years old, a writer.

Gui Toudao (“ghost head knife”): 59 years old, a senior engineer.

Shuang Feiyian (“pair flying swallows”): 60 years old, a biologist.

Yizi Bushe (“one *weiqi* piece not willing to give up”): 56 years old, an entrepreneur.

You Hun (“wandering ghost”): Si Yan’s father. ... a crucial character, is performed by a beam of light.


*Go Man* tells the story of a man’s lifelong obsession with *weiqi*. He Yunqing is a *weiqi* master, who has not left his room in thirty years. He has devoted his entire life to the game. On his 60th birthday, he suddenly begins to question the meaning of playing *weiqi*.

Can there be any joy in life beyond the *weiqi* board? He begins to dream about his lost love, Si Hui, who left him 30 years earlier. He Yunqing’s three friends arrive to celebrate his birthday and play their usual game of *weiqi*. But He Yunqing insults his *weiqi* partners, rudely pointing out their inadequacies in the game. He unexpectedly announces that he’s giving up *Go* forever, and, in a fit of rage, smashes his *weiqi* board to “escape from the cold world of black and white stones.” His *weiqi* friends angrily storm out. As He Yunqing is about to abandon the game forever, a once-in-a-lifetime prodigy appears—Si Yan, the son of
the woman he once loved. The doctor reports that Si Hui has brought her son to his office, but He Yunqing is distracted, lost in his thoughts, dreaming about Si Hui. A young Si Hui appears; the doctor does not react; she is He Yunqing’s illusion. The doctor continues: The boy is ill. He’s hyperactive and incommunicative; “his brain is too active.” The boy is a *weiqi* prodigy even though he has played the game only in his mind, because his mother has forbidden him to play. The doctor believes that He Yunqing is the only one who can cure Si Yan, and begs him to play a *weiqi* match with the boy. He Yunqing reluctantly agrees to see Si Yan.

The scene shifts to Si Yan’s room. Yuanyuan, a young tour-guide, arrives to visit Si Yan, who is busy reading. The young boy’s strange behavior and total inability to communicate are apparent. The scene returns to He Yunqing’s room, as his three friends arrive and the doctor enters with Si Yan. A lively discussion of *weiqi* ensues. It is clear that the boy has an innate understanding of the intricacies of the game, which the four friends cannot even fathom. Intrigued, He Yunqing finally agrees to a *weiqi* match with the boy. The next scene finds He Yunqing, deep in thought, sitting alone at a small table drinking wine. A second empty wineglass is by his side. He Yunqing chants poetry in a melancholy voice, raises a solo toast: *gan bei!* (“dry glass”), and laments about his life: “I have nothing. *Weiqi* is nothing. It doesn’t matter if I live or die.” He speaks to the young boy, Si Yan, who of course is not there: “Most people will never understand *weiqi* in their lifetime, but you understood in just one day. ... I want to teach you all I know. I’m on my knees begging you!” He smashes the cup opposite, and, after a long pause, a bright light shines from offstage and a voice is heard. It is the “wandering ghost” of Si Hui’s husband and Si Yan’s father. He Yunqing fears the ghost has come to take his life, but the ghost has arrived at Si Hui’s request. Apologizing for taking Si Hui away from He Yunqing thirty years ago, the ghost now wants to learn to play *weiqi*. He Yunqing describes the intricate strategies of the game. Finally the ghost reveals the true motive for his visit; he
wants to save his son: “Leave *weiqi* to forlorn and lonely ghosts. People who are alive should be able to enjoy life. *Weiqi* will take your soul and kill you.” The ghost disappears; He Yunqing is drunk and falls asleep on the table. Someone is ringing the bell, and he staggers to open the door. It is Yuanyuan, the young tour-guide, with a message from Si Yan. His mother has forbidden him to come. She is furious because Si Yan has been playing *weiqi* alone in his room and has become more obsessed than even He Yunqing. He Yunqing and Yuanyuan begin drinking and talking, and the scene ends with the two intertwined. The next morning, Si Hui arrives quite embarrassed to see that Yuanyuan, her son’s “girlfriend,” has spent the night at He Yunqing’s. It is the first time in thirty years that Si Hui and He Yunqing have seen each other. After Yuanyuan leaves, Si Hui begs He Yunqing to release her son, but He Yunqing believes “Si Yan is the son of *weiqi*. ... He’s a genius, the reincarnation of my life. ... When a person decides to quit after playing *weiqi* for 50 years, can you imagine the pain he’ll endure?” But at that moment, Si Yan arrived. Just like his name, he is “fire” (*yan*). He Yunqing decides: “I’ll defeat him in a final ‘life and death’ match and then neither of us will ever play again!”

He Yunqing and his friends prepare for the sacred match. “All 360 *weiqi* pieces have been washed in stream water from the Western Hills. ... The black pieces are as translucent as black jade ... and the white pieces are as white and noble as clouds in the sky.” Si Hui and her son arrive. Amid the differing winning strategies provided by He Yunqing’s *weiqi* cohorts, the game progresses with mounting tension. The squawking of wild geese interrupts the game, and Yuanyuan, the young tour-guide, rushes in: “You men are dead! ... The geese will quickly fly away. You’ll miss them if you don’t look now!” He Yunqing joins Yuanyuan to watch the geese. Yuanyuan is leaving for the Tropics and has come to say goodbye. The game continues with such brutal competition that one friend faints and must be revived by the doctor. Young Si Yan becomes frantic: “Do you know what losing this game means? I’ll never be able to play *weiqi* again!” Si Yan finally loses,
and, in despair, commits suicide. In the final scene, Si Yan’s restless soul comes looking for the old man to re-play the match. The young boy’s game did not “die”; only his body has died. He Yunqing and Si Yan set up the board to reproduce the “deadly” match, and the re-play continues until the old weiqi master wins once again. Si Yan explains: “I’ve died (wo sile) … and finally I’m going to a free world where I can play weiqi.” As the old man sits alone at his weiqi table, the boy disappears.

Directorial Concept: Lin respected Guo Shixing’s original script, explaining that in the past, playwrights could “never think of constructing such a play … with direct feelings about life.” He called Go Man “a precious, spontaneous reflection of the playwright’s independent and individual personality.” At the same time, Lin thought: “We don’t really have to care what style (fengge) or school (liupai) the script belongs to” (Log, 12-25-95).

Lin shared his ideas about the sequencing or non-sequencing of scenes:

… No matter how we treat it, the script will be powerful. The play is about the meaning and understanding of life, … which everyone experiences. … Some parts of the play may be exactly the same as arranged in the script, but it’s quite possible that we may start from the middle, instead of the very beginning (Log, 12-28-95).

Lin believes adaptation “can go as far as the director’s imagination, even if no trace of the original script remains” (Lin, 10-17-97). Lin has said:

If a director doesn’t take risks, how can he find new dimensions? Artistic creation is always searching, discovering, … surpassing. … A magnificent performance should be like a fireworks display. … As a director, I think the most important thing is to capture the writer’s … feelings and interpret my understanding of the playwright with a unique stage image (Lin, Xu 1989, 231).

In pursuit of this image, Lin “doesn’t care about ‘isms’ or ‘counter-isms.’” He “just wants to use the most appropriate means” to express what he finds in the script. “Chinese theatre is so heavy and dull. We should look for something new instead of stubbornly clinging to old habits. To repeat is just to go backwards” (Lin, 10-17-97). While Guo’s play is based on realism, Lin chose not to go in that direction. According to the director, the purpose of most realistic plays is just “to serve contemporary people” (wei dangdai ren
About his approach to Go Man, Lin explains: "The old weiqi master questions the meaning of life. ... I couldn’t express this in a realistic way in a traditional courtyard with the Go man and his old lover by the stove drinking tea" (Log, 12-25-95).

Lin describes his impetus as xiqu, rather than Western theatre: "I know xiqu is Chinese, huaju is Western. I don’t want to use more Western forms." A Chinese director “can put foreign ideas into a play and certainly attract an audience, but that’s not really directing.” The actors in Go Man will be “in a ‘free performing state’ (ziyou biaoyan zhuangtai). That’s the best state of xiqu.” Lin thinks the work of Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Artaud, and Grotowski “is remarkable, but xiqu is even richer.” “New ideas appeared in the West that huaju is no longer just an art of language, but this idea is included in xiqu.” Xiqu is “total theatre” (quan neng xiju, “all capable theatre”), synthesizing song, speech, acting, and martial arts (chang, nian, zuo, du). Xiqu actors can freely show subjective as well as objective feelings. Instead of “I am” (wo jiushì) the character, the xiqu actor has the objective attitude of self-examination, a “jumping in and out” process (tiaojin tiaochu) “to communicate with the audience.” On xiqu’s bare stage, time and space are transformed and realized freely and naturally through the actor’s performance (jing sui ren sheng, “scene follows peoples’ birth/appearance”). Actors “can turn a limited space into a limitless one” (Lin, 8-19-98). As Lin describes, xiqu establishes a “wonderful ‘mutual understanding’ (moqì) with its audience.” The audience becomes “liberated.” Through jiadingxing (“make believe”), xiqu “creates a wide space to show ‘reality’” (zhenshi) ... and “gives the audience wings, so the reality comes alive in the audience’s imagination” (Lin, Lin Kehuan 1992, 290).

Lin thought about Go Man “for several months,” discussing the implications with designer Yi Liming:

We talked about life--from non-being to being to non-being. ... Life grows out of nothing and returns to nothing. I wanted the set to reflect this--first to have an empty space, then to build something, which finally collapses in the end (Lin, 10-17-97).
Lin and Yi Liming wanted a completely bare stage at the outset: “the audience would hear sounds, lights would come up, and there would be nothing onstage.” During the course of the play, the actors would build the set, consisting completely of iron and steel. The process would be “from nothing to something and back again to nothing.” In the end, this was too problematic, as ropes and pulleys and large pieces of metal equipment had to be prepared offstage and set up in advance along the edges of the space. Lin hoped the walls of the set could resemble a traditional Chinese wire egg-basket, expanding and collapsing with a smooth, fluid movement, but again this proved too problematic (Lin, 8-19-98). Lin had “no idea” if his concept would succeed, as he had never directed a play “in this particular way before” (Lin, 10-17-97).

Rehearsal process / Acting techniques: The rehearsal period of six weeks fit CNET’s usual rehearsal schedule of five–six weeks, although the time was short for the experimentation Lin Zhaohua envisioned. The role of the Go master, He Yunqing, and the women’s roles, Yuanyuan and Si Hui, were double-cast, presumably to give more actors an opportunity to work with the director. The double-casting would of course add to rehearsal time. The ten roles were expanded to include an ensemble of twenty actors to play bit characters, which Lin Zhaohua added to the play. Director Lin describes his rehearsal as “an exploration.” At the initial meeting, Lin told the actors:

Besides language and theatre techniques which already exist, we need to find new methods, … Tasks, actions, language, character: there will be something new. I don’t know what the new things will be yet, … We need to experiment, … We don’t need anything ‘theatrical.’ ‘Dramatic acting’ won’t be necessary (Log, 12-25-95).

Scholar Tong Daoming has described the earlier acting experiments Lin began to explore during the 1980s (in Absolute Signal, Bus Stop, Wild Man, and Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana) with actor-audience stage communication/exchange (wutai jiaoliu), as well as, what Lin calls, “soul energy exchange” (xinling nengliang jiaoliu), in which the actor faces the audience and seems to have no expression, but “deep inside his heart” he is gathering.
his energy. With no outward expression, the energy appears “deeper and more concrete,” and the actor can “achieve an impact” (Tong, Lin Kehuan 1992, 65). In *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana*, Lin borrowed *xiqü* elements in the manipulation of the stage space, but rather than “mechanically copy” *xiqü*, he wanted to combine this aesthetic with *huaju* techniques. Lin Kehuan has described Lin’s most important achievement as his “bold attempt to directly show psychological images onstage.” In the past, memories, imagination, and dreams appeared as scenes, which the characters had actually experienced, either in flashbacks (*daoxu*) or interjected narrations (*chaxu*) in a separate scene or separate performance zone. In contrast, Lin Zhaohua explored psychological images “through a ‘multiple process of acting’ (*biaoyan de duochongxing*) … with allusions/implications rather than just outward expression.” Lin is able to “change the externalization of inner feelings into symbols.” In exploring new “performance arts” (*biaoyan yishu*), he also experimented with “non-harmonious dialogue” (*bu hexie de duihua*) (Lin Kehuan 1992, 121-122).

Building on these earlier experiments, Lin asked his creative team in *Go Man* to follow an artistic principle, which he called “acting without acting” (*wubiaoyan de biaoyan*). This encompassed “technique without technique” (*wujiqiao de jiqiao*), “movement without movement” (*wudongzuo de dongzuo*), and “communication without communication” (*wujiailiu de jiaoliu*), in order to achieve an “order out of disorder” (*wuxuzhong de youxu*) (Lin, Log, 1-13-96). In describing his “technique without technique,” Lin Zhaohua called for a “totally free and natural acting style.” He hoped to achieve the spontaneity, the “enjoyable and fun feeling of children’s drawings in a comic book.” Lin did not want his actors to “experience” the characters (*tiyan*) as Stanislavski’s realism called for, but rather to have the “examining attitude” (*shenshi taidu*), the “calm and objective” “jumping in and out (*tiaojin tiaochu*) of *xiqü* or Brecht” (Lin, 6-21-96).

During rehearsal, Lin explained:

It’s easy for Chinese actors to handle a realistic performance, overdo it, and give the feeling of wooden puppets. ... Bring some reform to the acting. Prevent the audience from finding any traces of acting at all (Log, 2-11-96).
The actors experimented with stream-of-consciousness as a technique to emphasize "psychological movement," rather than external characterization, and, at the same time, to stress physicality as opposed to language (Log, 1-13-96). As the director suggested: "don't 'recite' the lines; speak as you do in daily life ... Treat the experience on stage as if for the 'first time.' ... The language of actions should be stronger than the language of words" (Log, 1-15-96). Describing his concept of "movement without movement," Lin explained: "draw from your inner feelings ... but don't 'become' an old man. Start from yourself; just act as you are. ... Keep the exterior aspects of characterization in your heart" (Log, 1-15-96).

Lin Zhaohua's idea of "communication without communication" was perhaps most difficult for the actors to grasp. Lin Kehuan explained two possibilities: actors' lines and body movement could be synchronized or in counterpoint (Log, 12-25-95). While the director required psychological movement (inner action), he wanted the actors to treat this in a new way. Lin experimented with what he called a "dual structural" approach (shuangchong jiegoude) in which the actor's language and actions are not synchronized (Lin, 8-23-99). As the director explained, in most instances, the actions are not relevant to the lines at all. The actor's thoughts "just go their own way" with a stream-of-consciousness effect. His goal was to help the actor "achieve a free performing state, a totally natural style of acting." The director understood the challenge when words and actions "are not coordinated." He asked his actors to experiment with the lines as they built the set and "to allow the audience to listen and watch." In Lin Zhaohua's view, the process of constructing the set embodied the actors' exploration of the play:

Lines will come from every corner of the theatre. ... It's a kind of communication without communication. ... Just say your lines and do your own work. That's enough. You need to have a special kind of communication instead of face-to-face communication (Log, 1-18-96).
For Lin, the idea of “communication without communication” was related to the “difficulties of contemporary people ... who feel a sense of estrangement.” In such an environment, people “say this, but do that.” Guo Shixing’s play itself “allows us to explore the conflict between language and action” (Log, 1-16-96). While lines and movement would not necessarily be in synch, there might be convergence and divergence within a scene. When old Go man He Yunqing drinks wine with the ghost, for example, Lin commented (Log, 1-8-96):

Don’t recite as if it’s Shakespeare! ... This isn’t simply a conversation between He Yunqing and the ghost. Rather it’s in He’s imagination. ... The lines sometimes collide and sometimes go their own way. Confront each other; try to find some points for collision. This is better than just a simple conversation between the two. ... I hope to achieve the feeling that you seem to be chatting while recalling your own life.

Through bipolar oppositions of collision and divergence, Lin hoped a set of sensory experiences operating on several levels would be conveyed. He continually encouraged his actors to experiment and improvise, even during actual performances. As an ongoing challenge to realism, Lin told the actors (Log, 1-17-96):

You can change the lines. If you want to ‘get crazy’ onstage, just do it! ... You don’t have to use the original lines. ... You can just simply chatter away. ... The doctor can try chatting with someone in the audience. ... Ask yourself, am I really deaf here or just pretending to be?

The director also planned for “some more realistic sections,” for example, the weiqi match itself and several of the characters’ conversations, yet he also hoped for “unexpected surprises” as the actors confronted each other during the course of the play. In a more realistic mode, Lin asked the actors to find a plausible rhythm as He Yunqing impatiently waited for the young boy to arrive to play Go: “The old man decided never to play again ... but as they converse, he discovers the boy’s a genius. The old man hesitates, then begins to become enthralled with weiqi again. Enjoy this slowly bit by bit” (Log, 1-10-96).

As Lin was experimenting, he often got new ideas, and his requirements continually changed and evolved. He himself at times seemed unclear about what he was trying to
achieve. Some actors (especially Han Tongsheng as the doctor and Xia Lixin as Yuanyuan) thrived in this uncertain, improvisational environment. Others found Lin’s guidelines contradictory and could not follow his instructions. As actor Han Tongsheng described: With Lin’s “anti-theatre,” the director “doesn’t put too much emphasis on whether the audience understands or not.” Lin only pays attention to “what he himself wants to express.” Actors also may not understand “the different aspects of the whole, but the director doesn’t think that’s a problem.” Of all the directors he has worked with, Han thought that Lin Zhaohua gave the actor “the least specific demands, ... allowing plenty of freedom, so it’s actually quite difficult, and actors need to be clever” (Han, 11-30-97).

From Han Tongsheng’s comments, it was apparently unusual for a director to expect his actors to continually explore new techniques. Lin Zhaohua also was clearly concerned more with process and experimentation than pleasing the audience.

At CNET’s “leaders’ run-through,” reactions were for the most part negative. President Zhao was “intrigued” by the overall acting style, but thought the innovations “entirely inappropriate” for Guo Shixing’s script. The iron platforms “made too much noise,” and sometimes the actors “couldn’t even be heard.” Zhao Youliang thought the style of actress Yuan Hua (as Si Hui) “wasn’t harmonious” with the others. She was “too emotional and melodramatic” (Zhao, 2-11-96). Vice President Yang “couldn’t accept the production at all.” While he agreed that there could be a variety of treatments for a script, he “didn’t know how to judge this kind of approach” (Yang, 2-11-96). Yang “just thought Lin had gone too far”: The script is “realistic, almost poetic and very philosophical.” Lin’s style “seemed rather arbitrary and forced” on the play. A play must be “made understandable for today’s audience, not the audience of tomorrow. ... I may be able to accept Faust, but I can’t accept Go Man” (Yang, 12-17-97). Party Secretary Wang thought the actors “achieved the goal of destruction and completely ruined a good play” (Wang, 2-11-96). Acting Department Head Li Fazeng admonished the actors:
No matter how you want to handle the lines, the audience must be able to hear you. Otherwise why did they come? ... There are no costumes or make-up, but you should have the feelings of the characters when you perform. Your lines should embody the characters' feelings. ... That's not difficult for you; perhaps the director didn't let you do that (Li, 2-10-96).

Playwright Guo Shuxing was disappointed. This was not at all what he had imagined, although he thought the production still contained the basic seeds of his play (Guo, 1-22-98). He reflected on the contradiction between the deep cultural roots of weiqi and Lin's avant-garde interpretation. The director "broke my dream of returning [to a realistic form] by using a combination of post-modernism and performance art." He agreed that Lin direct "in that way," because there had never been a production like that in China before (Guo, 1-22-98).

After hearing the leaders' comments, Lin Zhaohua met with his actors and continued to encourage them to achieve a "free, natural state" by following the precepts of "technique without technique," "movement without movement," and "communication without communication." "We don't need any performing elements at all." Referring to the leaders' reservations about symbolic and thematic images in his conception (outlined in detail in the following section, "Mise-en-Scene / Aesthetics / Form & Content"), Lin went on to explain:

The leaders had many questions. ... 'Releasing birds; setting a fire'; finally people may ask 'what else are you going to do?' Or they may say 'bullshit (goupî), can you call this a performance?' 'It looks like a work team onstage!' But I don't care what they say (Log, 2-11-96).

Lin's response to skepticism about his concept of "order out of disorder," also provides insight into his philosophy:

From nothing, to coming into being, to falling apart--this is the process of life. ... Go Man has its own understanding of the process and, in fact, reverses it. Usually the foundation is built first, then walls, and finally the roof. But you first raised the roof, then set up doors, then built walls. I think the incongruity of this symbol is clear. ... 'Why do we have the fire brigade and popcorn?' 'What do the balloons signify?' 'There's no overt connection with the script.' ... These embody the conception. The fire fighters, for example, stage fire drills, but they don't come when there's actually a fire (Log, 2-11-96).
Lin acknowledged that some people thought *Go Man* was “imaginative, but too profound.” Some things “aren’t described so explicitly, and the audience may not understand some hidden [subtle] things” (Lin, 2-11-96). He thought the actors were “pretty good now” (“not too bad,” *bucuo*), and the production was “enjoyable and refreshing,” but it would require “some time” for the audience to adapt. *Go Man* is multi-focussed (*fensan*) and divides the audience’s attention. “People don’t know what to concentrate on … but the more they watch, the more enjoyable it will be” (Lin, 2-11-96). Production consultant Lin Kehuan described his impressions: The “absurd” *Go Man* “deliberately eliminates all traces of the characters’ personalities and emotions, adopting a plotless and impersonal narrative approach and turning the acting into a kind of performance art” (Lin Kehuan, 2-22-97). Several CNET theatre artists criticized leading actor Zhao Liang (the old *weiqi* master), who became totally perplexed: “What kind of play is this?” “Who on earth are you?” “There’s no main thread.” “You have no personality.” “You did a terrible job.” “What are you busy doing?” “You’d better continue looking for the character’s personality, because you couldn’t find it.” Zhao Liang thought: “this is so difficult, and I don’t have confidence now” (Log, 2-11-96). During rehearsal break, he complained to me: “*Go Man* is a Western production!” With a Chinese playwright, director, actors, and performance in Beijing, his words, embodying the “stereotype about Chinese theatre” with realistic story, characters, and dialogue (Lin, 10-17-97), sounded quite ironic! Lin Zhaohua responded that “the avant-garde doesn’t follow any established school.” He thought it “rather sad when even professionals haven’t had a breakthrough” in their ideas, and sometimes “don’t even try to understand.” The traditional force “is still too persistent. … I think the play is quite explicit” (Log, 2-11-96). Meeting with his actors the day before dress rehearsal, Lin commented that everyone was asking about the meaning, but “our play has no special ‘meaning.’ It’s just about the natural process of life” (Log, 2-23-96).
Mise-en-Scene / Aesthetics / Form & Content: Go Man was performed in Renyi’s Little Theatre (seating 200-250), located behind their larger Capital Theatre (Shoudu juchang). While not directly using xiqu’s form (the actors used no stylized movement or xiqu vocal technique here), as he described, Lin employed Chinese aesthetic principles (Zhongguo meixue yuanze) and explored the actor-audience relationship in an effort to create the direct and vibrant exchange of xiqu (Lin, 6-21-96). Lin had originally intended to use the thrust stage of xiqu. While the realized production had “stage” and “audience” zones, the performers continually broke the “4th wall,” with activity in every corner of the theatre.

The mise-en-scene created by Go Man was provocative and dynamic. The stage area, comprised of steel-covered platforms, resembled enormous pieces of a puzzle. Ropes and iron pulleys were in each corner of the stage, and the space was strewn with wire netting, over-sized metal “books,” a steel drill-sander, a small metal table and several stools, an iron “tree” with white balloon leaves, a weiqi board and stones, two metal wine cups, and the old Go master’s fan, emblazoned with the enigmatic character wu (“nothing,” “nil”). With the house lights fully up and the stage in darkness, He Yunqing and the doctor entered and began to adjust the wire netting and examine the ropes and pulleys at the edges of the space. Reacting to the harsh sounds of the actors’ stomping and pounding on the metal platforms, audience members covered their ears. The noise often drowned out the lines, and the audience was not aware that the play had already begun.

There was suddenly a commotion outside at the main entrance of the theatre. Two officials barged in, disrupting the activity onstage, inspected the fire extinguisher against the upstage wall, and examined the steel items strewn around the theatre: “This is not up to fire code! Who’s the director?! Where’s the maintenance manager?” Lin Zhaohua came out from among the audience, while the theatre manager arrived from the front of the lobby. Spectators were clearly perplexed as the officials berated the director and maintenance
manager. There was uneasy shuffling and murmuring in the audience: “Uh oh! Trouble! They’re threatening to cancel the performance!” “Is this real?! Is it part of the play?!” As the fire officials left, the situation finally calmed down. The audience loudly applauded, and the activity onstage continued.

Although *Go Man*’s storyline was basically linear, the scene shifted fluidly in time and space, from the *Go* master’s house, to Si Yan’s room in Si Hui’s house, to back lanes of the city, from indoors to outdoors, from the external to the internal, from “real” space to “psychological” space, from a “real” scene to the illusions of an old man, who has not left his room in thirty years, imagining his past lover and the ghost’s visit. There was no curtain, and scene transitions were most often supported by lighting changes (including black-outs) and sound effects. With the industrial, metallic sounds of the steel wire-netting and iron platforms continually reverberating through the space, the constructivist set began to acquire a separate life of its own, becoming another character in the play. Whether or not the director was drawing a connection between *Go Man* and his previously produced *Bird Man*, Lin turned the entire stage into what resembled a huge iron birdcage. Besides serving as a practical consideration for the fire (which would come later), the image of the iron cage had clear implications. The actors, one in each corner of the theatre, pulled on rope pulleys and lifted an enormous iron “roof” into place and raised the walls, entrapping the *Go* master inside. The actors, in fact, played a dual role—as characters in the play and as workers constructing the gigantic birdcage. While speaking their lines, the actors continued to carry out the tasks assigned by the director. The iron cage became a kinetic sculpture, clanking and clanging, as the *Go* men continually fixed wire netting, examined ropes and pulleys, and adjusted doors and chain-link walls. The actors felt as if they were “competing with the set” and complained about “being workers, not actors!” (Backstage, 2-12-96). In fact this image was emphasized as the actors wore workers’ blue coats and “over-sleeves,” with a brown worker’s coat and overalls for the old *Go* man. Lin had
asked his actors to experiment “just babbling” to the audience. The Go men complained about the “construction work” and asked spectators to move their legs and belongings away from the pulleys and ropes. Balloon “leaves” on an iron tree, inhaling and exhaling as they inflated and deflated, initially acted as an emotional gauge for the old Go man’s feelings. The leaves eventually became an invisible, omnipotent presence, sometimes ominous, sometimes ironic, over the entire scene. The leaves actually incarnated an old Chinese saying, with intriguing implications: “tie shu kaihua” (when “an iron tree blooms,” it will be a miracle).

Lin enriched the whole by adding a variety of bit characters and scenes, which took place in all areas of the theatre—these were not in the original script. At unexpected moments throughout the play, a team of firemen would rush in, dragging giant hoses and fire extinguishers, practicing fire drills, while a fire marshal, yelling loudly and officiously blowing his whistle, clocked their exercises. A barber entered striking a huantou, a steel percussion instrument used by Beijing street barbers to attract customers. The barber set up her wagon, sharpened her scissors, and arranged her shaving supplies. As He Yunqing sat in the small chair attached to the wagon, the barber covered him with a protective gown and cut his hair. She lathered shaving cream over his face and gave him a shave. A policeman motioned for the barber to “move along.” A street peddler lit a gas fire and shook his metal can of popcorn over the open fire. The popcorn would suddenly burst, with kernels shooting and spilling, flying all over the stage, showering the audience and invading their space. The doctor munched on kernels of popcorn. Yuanyuan, the young tour-guide, arrived from the theatre’s entrance through the audience to visit Si Yan. Later, a young girl waving a red flag in the air (sign of a tour-guide in China), followed by three blind tourists tapping their bamboo canes, encircled the stage and, with a light tap-tapping of their sticks, exited through the audience. A lone musician stood playing lively trill notes on his flute (later added for the Hong Kong tour). These were all typical Beijing characters. As Lin
Zhaohua described, “that’s life; that’s how people make a living” (Lin, 6-21-96). The coming and going of the peripheral characters, with their personal business and paraphernalia, added an immediacy and spontaneity to the action.

Both live and taped sound effects became an integral part of the performance. These included both urban and rural sounds, some pleasant, some jarring: the industrial, metallic sounds of the set itself, cars, buzzers and horns, a car alarm, a train, trucks rumbling along, planes zooming overhead, fire-drill whistles, doorbells ringing, the sounds of a football game and cheering crowd, Christmas carols, police sirens, crowds of people yelling, warning announcements blaring from loud speakers: “Be careful! Cars are backing out!” Country sounds included squawking geese, birds and crickets, the “r-r-r-b-i-t” of frogs, and a bubbling creek. In the darkness of a black-out, a male voice echoed through the theatre, describing the essence of weiqi: balance, yin and yang. And during the performance, we could hear the virtual buzzing and ringing of audience beepers and cell phones. Yuanyuan angrily picked up the iron drill and began sanding the tree, iron against iron, emitting harsh grating sounds and causing sparks to fly. Si Yan kicked the “books” made of steel, sending metallic echoes through the theatre. Each of He Yunqing’s weiqi friends stood guard at his own door, and, as the doors opened, bells rang out one after the other. One bell loudly played Christmas carols: “Jingle Bells,” “Santa Claus is Coming to Town,” “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” (all sung in English). Another bell gave out the chirping and whistling sound of birdcalls. Another emitted a perky female voice: “Ni hao! Qing kai men!” (“Hello! Please open the door!”). When the “wandering ghost” arrived, the whooshing sound of gas was heard as the balloon leaves on the iron tree filled with air. In front of the hazy light, the silhouette of a man could barely be seen, causing us to wonder, along with He Yunqing: “Is this a drunken illusion?” The leaves expanded and contracted throughout the scene. The old chess master addressed the audience, the balloons on the tree, and the empty chair opposite him as he conversed with the ghost.
The production had a variety of tones, alternating from gloomy, mundane, ironic, and humorous. The effect of the overlapping lines of the old Go man and the doctor were often quite funny. The doctor heard, but did not hear. His “huh?” and “uh?” added a rhythm to the scene, and it became quite clear when he really could not hear and when he was pretending. In front of the chain-link house at a small table, just inches away from the front audience seats, He Yunqing and Si Yan faced each other over the weiqi board. The Go men watched from inside the house, their faces in fragments and hazy behind the wire netting, the mounting tension punctuated by the two-tonal blare of a police siren. When Si Yan (or his ghost?) returned to re-play the “deadly” match, the young boy and the old Go master sat at the table over the weiqi board. The re-play continued until the old man’s final win.

Suddenly the table ignited in flames. As the fire burned and Si Yan disappeared, the metal walls and doors suddenly collapsed in a resounding and thunderous crash. The old man sat alone at his table as the fire continued to burn and the lights faded. In the darkness, we heard a forlorn whistle and a train running along the tracks far into the distance, followed by the sounds of chirping and wings fluttering as live birds (sparrows and doves) flew through the theatre, and the house lights came up. (While Lin Zhaohua originally wanted 200 birds, 20–30 birds were actually released; later their number dwindled to 10, as it became “expensive to restock birds everyday.”) Also in early rehearsals, the requiem music of “Church Madrigals” was played as the audience exited the theatre, creating a feeling of resurrection. Lin hoped the madrigals would “spiritually lift” the audience, but he quickly cut the music as “too melodramatic, too sentimental”) (Lin, 6-21-96).

The overall scene of Go Man was multi-faceted, comprising three separate yet interwoven parts: the story of the weiqi master, his Go friends, his old lover, and her son; an array of short vignettes about daily urban life; and a group of technicians skillfully assembling a huge metal wire cage, which explodes into pieces at the end. The addition of the characters from everyday life, combined with the Go man’s story and the construction.
of the iron cage, gave the total scene a shifting reality. Boundaries became fluid and undefined, the real and abstract weaving in and out, as the Go men's doors continually opened and closed, and visions of a young love and mysterious ghost were visible and then quickly vanished. The performance achieved the multi-faceted, filmic montage effect of zooming in and out, as the focus shifted and the audience observed the seemingly disconnected fragments from different perspectives. Beneath the absurd exterior, these disparate images converged, emphasizing functional connections within modern Chinese society and creating the vibrant, holistic rhythms of urban life. According to Lin Zhaohua, after seeing Go Man in Beijing, the Italian filmmaker, Bernardo Bertolucci, exclaimed: “This is exactly what I want to do in film!” (Lin, 8-19-99)

The production was plagued by technical problems: the timing of the popcorn explosions was inconsistent, and it was difficult to control the gas inflating and deflating the balloon leaves. In early performances, fire also burned along the bottom edges of the wire-net walls of the house. The director and designer had envisioned the fire engulfing all four sides of the house and, on reaching the top, causing the walls and roof to collapse, but the real fire marshals thought it too dangerous and would not allow it. While these problems were never quite resolved, the intentions were clear and nevertheless forceful. The burning flames, the sudden flight of birds, the sound of popcorn exploding--the unexpected and strange juxtaposition of visual and aural images--created the chaotic, restless world of a tragic-comic nightmare. The strong sensory stimulation and collage of scenes, with no connection or focus, blurred the distinction between the stage and life, leading the audience away from their conventional mode of viewing theatre, i.e., empathizing with characters and story. Instead, the audience paid attention to the act of constructing the metal wire house, trying to understand the possible symbolic implications of the giant cage, which eventually collapses into itself. The director had no intention of allowing the audience to get emotionally involved with the characters. Spectators were unable to empathize, as the
fragmentary structure and acting techniques ("character without character," wurenwu de renwu and "personality without personality," wuxingge de xingge) alternately drew them in and provoked them, creating Lin's desired Brechtian effect of estrangement (jianli) (Lin, 6-21-96). Each image, in fact, invoked a variety of interpretations, with social, political, and economic implications. Go Man's diverse and overlapping sound effects became a parody of the noisy construction going on all over Beijing at the time, in preparation for the next National Day celebration in October. People often joked that Beijing was "one huge construction site!" and complained continuously about the dust and noise. I asked several spectators about the allegorical implications of the group of tourists "blindly" following the tour guide. They responded: "the blind have a purity since they're shielded from the ugliness in life. No, I don't think there's a political inference here--that would be much too obvious!" "Yes, street peddlers, including barbers and popcorn-sellers, are ubiquitous in Beijing, but only a few have a proper hukou ("resident permit"). They're sent back to the countryside if the police catch them." These street peddlers embodied the growing social problem of unemployment, with peasants rallying to Beijing to find work. After seeing Go Man, an American friend commented: The large pieces of scrap metal scattered like shrapnel around the set (in fact outside around the entire theatre) "made me think of a post-apocalyptic wasteland."

Reaction: Given his reputation for innovation, Lin's productions always caused a stir. When Go Man opened, reactions ranged from complete support and excitement to skepticism and searing criticism. There was disagreement within professional and press circles, as well as among ordinary audience members. The production was called audacious and totally unconventional. One critic wondered: "Is Go Man selling gimmicks or blazing new trails?" (Zheng Shi, 3-15-96). Another critic thought Go Man "one of the best productions in Chinese theatre. Lin Zhaohua has set off fireworks again!" (Wen Diya, 2-
“It’s opened up a whole new kind of *huaju* creation. It’s changed the way the audience sees theatre” (Han Tianyong, 3-27-96).

We soon realize the firefighters are part of the play, and immediately have a new understanding of the director’s intentions about the theatre space. A football match, carhorns, whistles—what does it all mean? … *Everything* is onstage. … It doesn’t need to be explained with words. The subject is realistic but the form is not. Realistic and experimental alternate and sometimes even contradict each other (Zheng Shi, 3-15-96).

Some critics, not used to ambiguity, still found the production intriguing. As one described, “*huaju* has cultivated only one kind of relationship where the play gives all the answers” (Wang Xiaoli, 3-12-96). “This isn’t the usual performance where the actors weep loudly and spout a few proverbs to get our attention. … Though everything seems strange, there are many things to think about” (Man Yan, 2-97). “When the wire netting surrounds the old *Go* man, I think it’s symbolic. It’s not just confining his physical body” (Zheng Shi, 3-1-96). Playwright Guo Shixing had introduced the “caged bird” comparison earlier in his 1993 *Bird Man*. The primarily intellectual urban audience well understood the analogy between Chinese intellectuals and “caged birds.” For example, sinologist Ross Terrill tells of a young man from Beijing who studied in Australia. The student described life in China as being “like birds in a cage. We can fly, but there are limits on all sides. It’s not the same as being trussed up and unable to fly. Nor is it like being outside the cage” (Terrill 1992, 173).

Yet traditionalists found *Go Man* illogical, confrontational and “totally unacceptable.” Lin was attacked for deliberately ignoring the script and creating “just a dazzling vocabulary” and “surface hullaballoo” (Man, 2-97).

*Go Man* has a lot of surprises, but we can’t enjoy it or take part. Do they want to turn us off? … *Go Man* shocked us … but they paid attention to the form and ignored the content. What was on stage said ‘too much.’ Even if a production is experimental, isn’t there an equal relationship between the audience and the actors? … If they cared about that, why does the play keep talking as if no one’s there? (Ying Bao, 3-15-96)
One critic protested, "Go Man is a strange man" (playing on the fact that "qi" can mean "Go" [a] or "strange" [b], depending on the Chinese character used). This critic also accused Go Man of "aggravating the situation of dwindling audiences" (Ma Yuping, 2-2-96). Some spectators were impressed with the set and physical staging, but found the words and feelings unclear. One fan told Lin Zhaohua: "There's nothing wrong with experimenting, but you can't go too far and leave your audience behind." There were a variety of complaints. Baffled by the onslaught of visual and aural images, one woman covered her ears and exclaimed: "I'm exhausted! I don't understand! This is terrible! It's so noisy! I like to relax at the theatre! These actors mumble and talk with their backs to us!" Another thought: "There are no distinct characters or plot. ... What's the meaning of the popcorn, the firemen, the barber, the fire, the birds?" (Wang Xiaoli, 3-12-96). Another was "so surprised" when he heard that "the written play actually has a classical structure in the style of Ibsen" (Hua Wen, 10-26-96). Several audience members questioned the creators on the spot and asked CNET leaders not to produce this kind of "emperor's new clothes" ever again (Chang Ben, 11-15-96). To the usual attacks of "formalism," Lin Zhaohua retorted: "If there's something beneath the surface level, and you don't see it, that's ok" (Lin, 8-19-99). Audience perception was an individual matter. Playwright Guo Shixing described "director-driven huaju" (daoyanxing huaju) where a play is only "cooking ingredients" for the director. Guo also thought that "no matter what the result, we should applaud Lin Zhaohua's exploring spirit and courage" (Guo, 1-22-98).

It was reported that one evening, in the middle of the performance, a drunk suddenly stood up from his seat and, holding a bottle of erguotou (Beijing local firewater) in one hand and waving wildly and drunkenly with the other, shouted: "It's the creation of heaven and earth. This show is [hiccup] unprecedented!" The actors said privately "Go Man can even shock an abnormal man!" Yet what is perceived as experimental can become transformed over time. As scholar Lin Kehuan explained (6-25-96):
It’s the right and fate of experimental theatre to be enigmatic. Artistic experimentation can only offer a new perspective and new possibilities. Not to be understood now doesn’t mean not to be understood forever; not being understood doesn’t mean it has no value. I only worry that experimental theatre might abuse its power and lead to a dead-end of self-indulgence.

Another critic advised, this is just like “the first person who ate crab.” You need a “new perspective and courage” when you watch Go Man. The “reserved Chinese are curious” about the play but hesitate to come to any conclusions. Go Man is “completely unorthodox. We need to look at something familiar from a different angle to discover something new” (Man Yan, 2-26-96).30 Zhang Jianzhong, a playwright with Qingyi, discovered an “epiphany” at the end of Go Man:

Everything is destroyed; everything collapses. The old man is free from his obsession; the young man is liberated. The birds represent freedom; the train means the beginning of a new life. It’s ambiguous, but I think it’s about achieving balance in your life (Zhang, 1-21-98).

Playwright Guo Shixing described the essence of his play as the “contradiction between the soul and the body, the rational and the emotional.” In fact, he felt that Go Man was about “balance, yin and yang, and our natural instincts.” As he explained:

Children have this instinct, but as they join society, their innocence is lost. ... I’m a pessimist. I don’t see a very bright future. ... The script is about the significance of life, but I feel that in Lin’s production, there’s no significance of life, ... I knew about the wire netting, and I disagreed. Steel is a symbol of modern industry ... icy, cold, and lifeless (Guo, 1-22-98).31

Perhaps in combining the playwright’s “cooking ingredients” in a “director-driven huaju,” Lin’s production actually came closer to Guo’s essence than he realized.

Looking at later performances and international reception, Go Man was invited to the Hong Kong International Arts Festival in February 1997 (CNET’s first tour to Hong Kong). All three performances at the 400-seat Hong Kong Cultural Center Theatre were sold-out. After opening night, theatre critics held a special symposium, and 100 audience members stayed late into the night to join in the discussion (Lei Chuan, 50). As CNET President Zhao Youliang explained, Hong Kong audiences are “more exposed to Western art and diversified stage works. They’re more used to the avant-garde” (Zhao, 6-22-98).
In June 1999, Lin was invited to direct the play in Japan with actors from the National Theatre of Japan. He thought the new production was “smoother and more successful.” The performance was also in a little theatre, but “the audience was bigger; the box office better.” As Lin described, he was still “unable to realize his dream of fire all around engulfing the entire space.” As in Beijing, only the weiqi board could go up in flames. In Beijing, the birds flew out after the performance and “were free to be birds.” The Japanese production could not include birds at the finale, as birds are protected in Japan. “Anyway, we couldn’t find people selling those kinds of birds” as they do in China. Overall, Lin thought the Japanese performance was superior, because the actors were clearer about the concept. Most importantly, after the experience in Beijing, “perhaps my own ideas were clearer, and I was better at articulating them, as I had already seen the result” (Lin, 8-18-99).

The Director of the Munich Arts Festival, who saw Go Man in Beijing, invited the production to Munich for the International Summer Arts Festival in June 1996. After the Beijing performance, he was ecstatic and commented:

The play took me by storm. It’s wonderful! ... I can’t understand Chinese, but I feel I understood the plot. The actors’ great performance must be due to a terrific script! The structure of the play is so clear. The set design and staging are original. The set, lighting, sound effects—they take on symbolic significance, especially the fire and final destruction. I also liked Lin’s Faust, but I think this is even better. I hope Go Man can come to our theatre (2-15-96).

However, CNET President Zhao “wasn’t satisfied” with Go Man and explained:

This wasn’t a good try ... but the Germans had invited Lin to do an avant-garde play. I acknowledged the production, because the Germans like it and invited us to perform at the Arts Festival. ... The script shouldn’t have been directed this way. Lin eliminated all the good elements in the original script. ... Chinese people like to watch a play with a story, a beginning, a climax, and an ending ... and characters. Their thinking is quite traditional. But Lin’s Go Man didn’t have a story or characters, and Chinese people didn’t like it. The script itself is excellent and I plan to produce it again in the future with a different director using a realistic style. ... I should say it’s outstanding for Lin at his age to produce such an avant-garde play, but we can’t produce plays like this very often. If we did, we’d have no audience at all. It would only be useful for theatre experts ... and foreigners (6-22-98).
Zhao Youliang’s comments above raise intriguing issues about presenting a play which is enthusiastically welcomed abroad, while State Theatre leaders find it “unacceptable” for the majority of Chinese audience members.

Three CNET productions, Lin Zhaohua’s *Faust* and *Go Man* and Meng Jinghui’s *Si Fan*, were invited to participate in the Chinese Arts Festival in Munich in 1996, but “for political reasons, the trip never happened” (Zhao Youliang, 7-9-98). The Festival was to begin in early June, close to the “June 4th” anniversary. With Chinese dissidents planning to use the Arts Festival as a forum, the Chinese Government “in protest cancelled the trip,” rescinding permission for the actors to travel abroad. As Lin Zhaohua put it: “All the sets, equipment, and props were shipped and made it to Munich, but we didn’t! We’re even in the festival brochure!” (Lin, 6-21-96)³²

**Management and Financial Practices:**

While Renyi’s State Theatre budget paid for productions Lin directed in his capacity as Vice President and head of Renyi’s Arts Committee, Lin did the fundraising himself for his independent Studio productions, and theatre artists from different “work units” got together to rehearse in their spare time. The budgets were fairly low--60,000 RMB for *Hamlet* and 90,000 RMB for *Emperor Romulus*. Lin Zhaohua’s *Faust* was produced thanks to the joint efforts of CNET, the Goethe Institute Beijing Branch (*Gede xueyuan Beijing fen yuan*), and the *Huaju* Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Art Research (*Zhongguo yishu yanjiuyuan huaju yanjiu suo*), Lin’s Studio affiliate. Lin had initially been invited by the Academy of Art Research to direct several scenes from *Faust* for the occasion of a lecture on Goethe at the Goethe Institute Beijing. This initial experiment was so successful that the Goethe Institute agreed to contribute approximately 150,000 RMB toward a public performance. CNET contributed a matching amount, resulting in a 300,000 RMB total budget, at that time the highest investment ever for *huaju*.³³ As Lin Zhaohua describes, CNET President Zhao “agreed immediately” to support the production:
Frankly I thought the play was too difficult. No one had performed *Faust* in China before. ... CNET’s guiding principle is to experiment, and leaders Zhao and Yang thought it worthwhile even if CNET wouldn’t make any money. ... In the current situation with dwindling audiences, we were able to attempt such a massive play with the support of so many Units ... and the audience seems to like it. As a theatre professional, I'm happy and comforted (Lin, *Faust* Symposium, 5-30-94).

During a limited two-week run at the Central Drama Academy Theatre, *Faust*’s audience was comprised primarily of theatre artists, scholars, critics, and students. It was never approached as or considered a commercial production. Tickets were sold for 20 RMB each. As Zhao Youliang explained, this was a “relatively cheap” ticket price, but with only fifteen performances, “there weren’t enough audience members. It’s difficult to sell tickets for the Drama Academy, but we had to use the Academy’s large, deep stage, because the set was so complicated” (Zhao, 1-14-97).

*Go Man* opened CNET’s 40th anniversary season in February 1996. While Lin Zhaohua had raised the initial amount of 150,000 RMB for the production himself, *Go Man* was actually co-produced by the *Long zhi sheng wenhua yishu gongsi* (“Voice of the Dragon Cultural Arts Company”) (which gave the 150,000 to CNET) and CNET, whose own investment of 150,000 made for a total budget of 300,000 RMB. This was Guo Shixing’s first play produced by CNET since he joined the Theatre as a resident playwright in 1994. As a resident playwright, CNET had first refusal of the script. Guo requested that Lin direct the new play, CNET agreed, and Lin became the “invited director” (or “outside director,” *waibu daoyan*) for *Go Man*. Yi Liming, the resident *Renyi* designer who often collaborated with Lin Zhaohua (*Hamlet, Emperor Romulus, Faust*), served as set and lighting designer for *Go Man*. CNET was excited about Guo’s new script. The preconception was that *Go Man* would be more like the realism and symbolism (*xiangzheng*) of *Bird Man* than the expressionism and post-modernism of *Faust*. *Go Man* had two rounds of over 40 performances in *Renyi*’s Little Theatre, and the 50 yuan ticket set a record price (at that time) for huaju. As Lin explained, while the press reported that
“tickets were selling well and 100 people lined up for tickets every day,” *Go Man* “is successful, not in terms of box office income, but in its exploration and innovation” (6-21-96).

**Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot (San Zi Mei – Dengdai Geduo, 1998)**

The decade ended for Lin Zhaohua’s avant-garde productions on a rather sour note with his Independent Studio’s *Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot* in 1998. Lin combined the two classic works, Chekhov’s realistic *The Three Sisters* (1900) with Beckett’s Theatre of the Absurd *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Lin describes *Three Sisters* as “an old photo … with faded characters and scenery.” Only the three sisters themselves remain “sculpted on a lonely island longing for a destination in their dreams.” Half a century later, “on the Continent far away from Moscow, in a desolate Parisian desert, Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting for Godot.” The Russian three sisters and the two French vagabonds “are all waiting and meet each other at this moment in Beijing” (“Director’s Words,” “Playbill,” March 1998). Without changing a line of the two plays, Lin deconstructed and reassembled the plays “to create an atmosphere of waiting and longing” to “explore the theme of human beings waiting throughout history” (Lin, 8-19-99). Scholar Martin Esslin once observed “waiting” as an “essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition.” In the act of waiting “we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form … and are confronted with the action of time itself” (Esslin, 1969, 29). Echoing Esslin’s words, Lin reflected: “People say love is the everlasting theme, but for me the theme of waiting is most significant” (Lin, 8-19-99). Lin had earlier described Gao Xingjian’s *Bus Stop* as “a philosophical and dialectical” play,

based on the absurd, but revealing great reality. Hope … waiting … disappointment … hope again … waiting again … disappointment again. … Humankind’s pursuit of the meaning of life is universal. Our tragedy is the numbness we feel and our inertia/inability to do anything about it (Lin, Xu 1989, 234-35).
Lin rediscovered the same stimulus for his *Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot* (Lin, 8-19-99).

Lin’s frequent collaborator, Yi Liming, again designed the set and lighting, which included a reflecting pond filled with water, along the entire width of the stage at Renyi’s large Capital Theatre. Lin asked his actors to follow acting techniques he had begun to explore in *Go Man* and embellishing these minimalist techniques with “personality of non-personality” (*wuxingge de xingge*) and “excitement of non-excitement” (*wujiqing de jiqing*) (Lin, 8-19-99), but *Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot* was very low-key, serene and quiet—without the exciting physical staging or sensational surprises of *Go Man*.

Lin and Yi Liming had borrowed 360,000 yuan to produce the play themselves, but the production was “a financial disaster.” The investors thought the large proscenium space at the Capital Theatre would ensure faster repayment, “but this wasn’t the result.”

While Lin was “personally pleased” with *Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot*, he was surprised at the generally negative reactions: “The box office was terrible” (Lin, 8-19-99). While literary and art circles were supportive, Lin was again criticized by many “theatre experts”: “Why did you combine these two plays?” Perhaps *Beijing Scene* said it best: “Nobody comes, nobody goes, nothing happens, it’s terrible! Or perhaps not. ... Lin Zhaohua directs an innovative combination of *Three Sisters* and *Waiting for Godot*” (“Theatre Scene,” 5-1-98). Lin explained:

Chinese audiences like a commercial realistic play with a good storyline. ... I don’t care if this was avant-garde or not. I just directed it in my own way. ... If I mainly thought about getting an audience, ... I’d never direct a play like *Three Sisters—Waiting for Godot* (Lin, 8-19-99).

Lin “faced the fact that only several ten’s of people” came to see the play: “I couldn’t bear it.” Certainly he hoped the audience would be larger, but commercial aspects were furthest from his mind:

Friends ask: ‘What should theatre be like?’ ‘How to attract an audience?’ ... I want to progress and develop. I’m afraid I may lose some audience members, but how many people can do things as Chairman Mao put it: ‘Dare to have the flesh torn from your body and pull the Emperor down from his horse’ (*shede yishen gua gan ba huangdi la xia ma*). In artistic
creation, you must ‘pull the Emperor off his horse’ (Lin, Wu Wenguang 2000, 337).

Lin thought theatre in the 1990s “on the surface” seemed quite active, “but in fact there weren’t many good productions.” *Huaju* was “regressing” compared to the 1980s when directors were “excited and pouring artistic vitality” into *huaju*. Now these “are lacking.” Lin referred to a current “restlessness/impulsiveness” (*fuzao*) in society. He thought it “impossible and unnecessary” to influence politics or even to influence the theatre circle:

The logic is simple. ... If more people do theatre, there will be more plays. There aren’t so many people now pursuing theatre, so the result is ‘you stupid one! (*shadan*) Why do you spend so much money doing that?!’ ... When I see little theatre productions done according to commercial operations, whether the box office will be good or bad, ... I feel they lack a spirit, ... the spirit of theatre (Lin, Wu 2000, 336-7).

Perhaps, as Meng Jinghui offered, *Three Sisters* would have had an audience “if they’d used the Little Theatre. The majority of experimental plays just can’t fill a large theatre” (Meng, 11-2-98). In the future, Lin decided, if a play “seems promising, I’ll present it in a large theatre, if not, then a little theatre, which doesn’t entail so much risk” (Lin, Wu 2000, 335). While *Three Sisters-Waiting for Godot* was a resounding flop, Lin’s courage, talent, and continuing efforts in *huaju* experimentation were not daunted. He was already planning his Studio’s next project, Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, for which he was contemplating his emblematic incorporation of *xiqu* aesthetics—a production Beijing awaited with anticipation.39

Lin Zhaohua’s claims to not care about official approval, audience comprehension, or commercial success (Kuhn, 1-24-97) raise intriguing questions. Does the iron rice bowl perpetuate a disregard for theatre economics? Perhaps not disregard, but a non-familiarity steeped in the contradictory *weltanschauung* of “market socialism.” Isn’t financial struggle a defining condition for “non-mainstream” artists everywhere? Is the dilemma of “selling out” versus maintaining artistic integrity unique to *huaju*? Are these two extremes the only creative possibilities? The question here is more complex and subtle, i.e., how wide
a range of artistic experimentation will "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" tolerate? Can experimental avant-garde huaju be commercially viable and find an audience amidst Beijing's ubiquitous Sports Bars, giant TV screens, films, DVD players, karaoke bars, discos and video arcades? An alternate experimental approach was advocated by director Meng Jinghui, who embarked on a populist, avant-garde huaju, appealing to young, trendy, and prosperous audiences. The following chapter will introduce director Meng Jinghui's work of the 1990s.
CHAPTER 5
DIRECTOR MENG JINGHUI

Director Lin Zhaohua referred to Meng Jinghui as “the most active experimental director of the 1990s” (Lin, 8-23-99). Unlike his mentor Lin, Meng Jinghui is part of the younger generation that came of age after the Cultural Revolution. Meng was born in Beijing in 1966 and is in his mid-thirties now. He studied Chinese Literature for four years and earned a B.A. at Beijing’s Capital Normal University (Shoudu Shifan Daxue, Capital Teachers’ University) in 1986. After graduation, Meng taught for two years at a Middle School in Beijing. Meng was first introduced to huaju through his association with classmate Mou Sen, leader of the experimental theatre movement at Beijing’s Capital Normal University. Mou Sen would become one of the early “movers and shakers” of the avant-garde during the 1990s (see chapter 1). Meng became an actor in director Mou Sen’s Frog Experimental Theatre Troupe formed in 1989. Members were dubbed the “theatre crazies” (xiju fengzi) for their commitment, enthusiasm, and creativity in efforts to revitalize huaju (Xiao Shu, 15). Subsequently, Meng studied for three years (1988-91) in the Directing Department at Beijing’s prestigious Central Drama Academy (Zhongyang Xiju Xueyuan) and earned an M.A. in 1991.

In the fall of 1989 during the stifling political climate of the post-Tian’anmen crackdown, Drama Academy students formed a number of independent “creation groups” (chuangzuo jidi). By early 1991 (January 11-27), the student “Experimental Performance Season” (Shiyan yanchu ji), held in the basement and the small auditorium (xiao litang) on the 4th floor of the Drama Academy, was playing to packed audiences. Meng Jinghui was a vital part of this outpouring of pent-up creative energy during the early part of the decade immediately following “June 4th.” Theatre critic Xiao Shu describes the student productions of the “Experimental Performance Season” as independent beacons of
creativity and innovation, with “no ostentatious sets or costumes, no sophisticated lighting or technical effects, no publicity--only confidence and fantasy, passion and courage, commitment and hard work.” Xiao calls it a performance season “unforgettable to theatre dreamers” (Xiao, 12-13).

Indicative of the student experimentation, in his production of Ionesco’s Theatre of the Absurd play *The Bald Soprano*, Meng “tried to avoid old, tired clichés” and seek momentary pleasure and “feelings of sensory cruelty” (ganjue shangde canku). “We wanted to provoke the audience by invading their space ... and confronting the way they usually watch huaju” (Meng 2000, 356-8). As Xiao Shu recollects, *The Bald Soprano* had a “great impact” on the senses:

One actor, as leader of the firefighters, wore a toxic-proof gas-mask. Later he jumped out the window singing [Western] opera (geju). All the characters looked wild and crazy and acted like fanatics obsessed with sex. After the line “that bald soprano,” the actors kicked all the chairs onstage upside down and stood motionless in a line staring at the audience. The pause lasted for 3 minutes, as the bright glare of the lights hurt the audience’s eyes. The performance finally ended with the music of Wagner. Left on stage were only crumpled and torn book pages. The production had a strange magnified perspective. It reached a climax with audience laughter and then silence (Xiao, 15).

After the Experimental Student Performance Season, Meng’s 1991 graduate thesis project, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, was invited to the “Chinese Avant-garde Arts Exhibition” in Berlin (March 1993) as a representative work of Chinese avant-garde theatre. In fact, Meng Jinghui has had quite a bit of foreign exposure. Over the decade he travelled to Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Holland, Belgium, Germany, France, and Italy.

Meng Jinghui is enthusiastic, extroverted and friendly, humorous and confident. The first student group he helped organize in 1989 was called the “Wild Swan Goose Creative Troupe” (*Honghu chuango zuo jituan*) with the hope of working on independent film, TV, and theatre projects “using new creative methods and team work” and also “emphasizing commercial value and commercial benefits” (Meng 2000, 7). In 1992, he established the Chuanbang (a Beijing slang expression for “you’re busted/you’re
caught”) Studio with Drama Academy students “devoted to the creation of experimental theatre and performance” (Meng, 7-28-93). Meng was unemployed for a year after graduation in 1991. An administrator at China Youth Art Theatre confided “off the record” that his theatre “made a big mistake in not accepting Meng Jinghui.” Meng was “finally recruited by CNET,” and in 1992, Meng joined the Troupe as a resident director (Xiao Shu, 14). Although a CNET director, Meng continued to collaborate with the members of his Chuanbang Studio. Meng’s newest collaborative group, organized during the mid-1990s, is the PlayPlay Studio—using the English name (PlayPlay huaju gongzuoshi).

Meng was quite prolific in his production work over the past decade, with the majority of projects organized by the director himself. Meng’s professional directing credits during the 1990s include Longing for the Secular World (Si Fan, 1993 and 1998 revival); The Balcony (Yangkai, 1993); I Love XXX (Wo Ai Cha-Cha-Cha, 1994), Put Down Your Whip – Woyzeck (Fangxia nide bianzi – Woyicaike, 1995); Love Ants (Aiqing Mayi, 1997); Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiaojie, 1998); Accidental Death of an Anarchist (Yige wuzhengfu zhuyizhe de yiwai siwang, 1998); Rhinoceros in Love (Lian’ai de xiniu, 1999); and Bootleg Faust (Daoban Fushide, 1999).

The theatre circle recognizes Meng Jinghui’s work as “avant-garde.” Meng experiments with anti-realistic techniques in terms of acting and staging. His productions are characterized by their theatricality, a fusion of Western and indigenous Chinese theatre forms, techniques of postmodernism and deconstruction. Meng juxtaposes disparate styles, periods, and cultures, including classical references, current events, and popular culture—TV, films, Beijing slang, rock music and song. Recurrent elements comprise a synthesis of mime, dance, poetry, prose, speech and song; a chorus of actors playing multiple roles; a vignette/episodic structure with choral interludes; sound and movement rhythm games; vocal “sound parts” and gibberish; improvisation and spontaneity; multi-media and technical
special effects; a rock band. While exploring larger social issues and politically sensitive subjects, Meng treats them lightly with humor. His productions are almost always comedies infused with playful, animated energy, cajoling and provoking the audience.

Meng’s first professional production, *Si Fan*, over the course of several runs and adaptations, was performed more than any other CNET huaju of the 1990s. Spanning the entire decade, *Si Fan* also is the production which garnered the most attention for Meng Jinghui. The production clearly illustrates Meng’s experimental techniques and provided the seeds for Meng’s later work, which will be traced through this chapter. *Si Fan* was vital to Meng’s evolution and to the avant-garde movement of the 1990s. Part I of this chapter will provide an in-depth examination of *Si Fan*: its conception and production history; the initial student performance; *Si Fan* at CNET; the performance text; directorial concept; rehearsal process / acting techniques; mise-en-scène / aesthetics / form and content; as well as reactions. Part II will trace the evolution from *Si Fan* through a selection of Meng’s subsequent productions, demonstrating his signature avant-garde style and his innovative management and financial practices within the socio-economic context of the decade.


*Si Fan* began as a collaborative student production of the Chuanbang Studio and had one performance at Beijing’s Central Drama Academy in 1992. In early 1993, *Si Fan*, adapted and directed by Meng Jinghui with a professional cast, was performed at CNET. As part of CNET’s repertoire, *Si Fan* had subsequent runs from 1994 – 1996. Meng Jinghui directed a revival of *Si Fan* in 1998 with a new cast, new set, and new staging. *Si Fan* is credited as the first popular production performed in a professional Little Theatre in Beijing during the 1990s, initiating the popular wave of Little Theatre which developed over the decade.

Conception and Production History / 1992 Student Production: *Si Fan*’s origins can be traced to an Austrian student studying *kunqu* at Beijing’s Drama Academy (Meng,
The student’s innovative idea juxtaposed two storytelling forms: a Kunshan opera, *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan* ("Longing for the Secular World - A Couple Goes Down The Mountain"), written anonymously during the late Ming Dynasty, with Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, written during the Italian Renaissance. The students found the overt and bawdy sexual content of *Decameron* especially new, risqué, and controversial. Criticizing the feudalism of the Middle Ages, *Decameron*’s “100 Tales” acclaim humanism, ridicule contemporary religion, and depict young people in love and yearning for freedom. These same themes embody the Kunshan opera. One critic characterized the students’ *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan* as incarnating “a new spirit based on its old meaning” (Ai Ruo, 71). As playwright Guo Shixing describes, during the Ming Dynasty, China was “shackled by philosophies stressing rationality over emotion.” An antithesis to the spiritual oppression of the period, *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan* “alluded indirectly to sex ... and freedom” (Guo, 11-21-93).

The collaborative student team included Meng Jinghui (a recent 1991 graduate), as “advisor” (zhidao), and Qi Li, a sophomore majoring in stage painting and design, as “planner” (ce hua) and set designer (wumei sheji). The student actors were all sophomores majoring in acting or stage design. The performance, put together quickly in twelve days, comprised three acts: acts 1 and 3 were from the kunqu, *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan*, and act 2 from a story in *Decameron*. Lines and lyrics of the nun in the original kunqu were reassigned to a young monk or a Chorus of actors. Meng Jinghui describes the impetus for the 1992 student performance:

Today is the ‘Festival of Snow.’ We’re all ‘going down the mountain’! ... Everlasting stories ... and songs from the past ... resound in our ears. We can feel their ghosts by our side. ... We never imagined that this theme, a script, and several gentle song verses, combined within the time of drinking a pot of tea, would evolve and provide such a wide space for us to freely fly. ... The obscure Buddhist incantations ... continually disturbed us. ... We finally lost our confusion and were able to think carefully about the smiling faces of the leading roles. ... We ... are sitting face to face with those undying souls and listening to their strange and intimate tales. ... We turn on the light to highlight the faces of those legends. ... There’s heavy snow today. Let’s ‘go down the mountain’! (Meng 2000, 57)
The Drama Academy performance took place on December 7, 1992, coinciding with the Chinese rural lunar festival, *jieri da xue* ("festival of heavy snow"). As Meng Jinghui describes, the production poster resembled a large lunar calendar, and the performance was actually intended as a celebration to teach urban Chinese about the traditional lunar festival. *Si Fan* had just one performance at the Academy’s Black Box Theatre (*Hei xiazì*), but caused great excitement. The tiny theatre at the Drama Academy was “crowded with more than 100 people” (Zhang Tianwei, 2-18-93). While Meng’s following description gleefully exaggerates a bit, there is no denying the production’s great impact: “Although the Theatre could only seat 100, more than 300 people showed up, including reporters, people from the theatre circle, students, and teachers. ... A guard needed to keep order” (Meng, 7-28-93). In an effort to relate to the lunar festival, the students wanted the audience to watch CCTV’s “Weather Report,” broadcast at 7:30 pm right after Beijing’s “Evening News.” For two minutes, the actors and audience watched the actual TV “Weather Report” together. The sky had been overcast for the previous three days, and everyone was hoping for snow. Indeed, the forecast was for snow. When the “Weather Report” ended, *Si Fan* began. The Academy had provided the students with basic lighting equipment. The set included a leather couch, two TV sets, and a utility cart, which the students had wheeled in from a nearby construction site and painted red. The stage floor was covered with sand. (In fact, after the performance, the students had to pay a fine for damaging the stage.)

Meng Jinghui describes an “eerie fog” covering Beijing immediately following the performance and an incident which became “life-changing” for him:

> The sky was so foggy that you couldn’t see at all. When Qi Li saw the fog, he burst into tears, thinking this was an omen from the gods. ... Twelve days later, he committed suicide. I was shocked and sad. ... I couldn’t face this reality. ... *Si Fan* was a success. ... I had a sense that Qi Li’s soul was with me, and that after the work was complete, his soul went away. Maybe it was a coincidence, but it also made me think somehow about interaction with the gods. ... The performance on December 7th will influence my life forever (Meng, 7-28-93).
Later audiences of Si Fan would remain unaware of the tragedy surrounding the original performance and the demons plaguing young Qi Li, Si Fan’s earliest planner and designer.9 The student Si Fan “Playbill” lists a collaborative “creative team” (chuangzuo jiti) without crediting a director or playwright. When the script was later published, Meng Jinghui was cited as “adapter” (gaibian zhibi). There had been no script per se, but rather a “performance text.” The Si Fan student collaboration was couched in the enthusiasm, arrogance, fears, doubts, and innocence of youth. The students were, in a very real sense, isolated from the (secular) world as they were given the luxury of theatre training at Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama. Meng Jinghui’s enthusiasm is contagious:

> The stage is a fantastic place where many possibilities exist. Sometimes people do nothing with this, but sometimes they become completely intoxicated. . . . To the creators and participants, Si Fan is an opportunity and a challenge. During the process, we meet the challenge with humor, smiles, endurance, and innocent eyes (Si Fan “Directorial Concept,” 1993).

Production at CNET: President Zhao Youliang was instrumental in bringing the production “with minor changes” to CNET in early 1993 (Meng, 7-28-93). The Chuanbang Studio students, comprising the collaborative team of Si Fan, had raised the money themselves for the 1992 student performance. As Lin Kehuan describes, “it was difficult to get a performing license under the name of Chuanbang Theatre Troupe, and the group could only carry out public performances under the name of CNET” (Lin Kehuan 1993, 12). The first public performance of Si Fan in February 1993 was the inaugural production in the newly built Xiao Juchang (“Little Theatre”), which CNET had initially intended to use as a rehearsal hall. CNET President Zhao Youliang recognized Si Fan’s innovative style and its potential as a creative vehicle for young actors, which were both lacking in the earlier work of the decade. Departing from realistic standards presented an element of risk, but also perhaps a profit at the box office as the production budget was the scant amount of 7,000 yuan. Leader Zhao undoubtedly was also impressed with Meng’s invitation to Berlin to present his Waiting for Godot. In the rapidly changing socio-
economic climate of 1992, Si Fan—with its commercial potential—would prove to be the perfect vehicle to launch CNET's new Little Theatre. The Academy production was recast with CNET actors and restaged with a newly created stage design. As the student performance had been too short for a professional engagement, Meng included an additional Decameron story, giving the performance a running time of 75 minutes. CNET billed Si Fan as “a bold experiment in performance art (xingwei yishu) combining East and West” with “fresh theatrical concepts … a different style from conventional theatre”:

Si Fan bravely examines human nature and sensuality, … the vitality, naughtiness, and striking passion of youth … giving full play to the actors’ performance … and inventiveness on stage. … It’s humorous, fun, delightful … a brand new experience (Guang Nan, Si Fan “Press Release,” 1993).

In 1998 CNET again recast and restaged Si Fan. The budget was increased from the original 7,000 to a little over 10,000 yuan—still a minuscule amount. As Meng Jinghui explains, “Si Fan is a very easy play to do—very cheap to produce. The set is simple and it doesn’t require many actors. If the Leaders ask me to direct the play again, then I must.” Restaging Si Fan in 1998 was not Meng’s first choice, but he set about his task with enthusiasm to make the production “all new” (Meng, 5-29-98). The setting and costumes, as well as the performance text, were adapted for the 1998 revival. Meng invited an “outside” set designer, Jiao Yingqi, who had his own “Arts Design Center” (Yishu Sheji Zhongxin) in Beijing, but was not a professional stage designer. CNET paid Jiao the very basic salary of 400 yuan to design the set for Si Fan. While the director and artist had not collaborated before, Meng was “impressed with Jiao’s artwork and hoped he would bring new insights” to the production (Meng, 5-29-98). Meng wanted the stage decorated completely in red silk fabric, a “sensuous color” embodying the theme of Si Fan, rather than the later agreed upon white padding and clear plastic wall-covering. But if that happened, the budget would “certainly go up, and the Theatre didn’t have much money to give.” Si Fan had been performed “so many times … the Theatre just wanted to keep it going, rather than give it special attention” (Meng, 5-29-98). Designer Jiao Yingqi initially
suggested a different color—red, yellow, blue, pink—for each act as a strong visual statement. The designer then came up with the idea of using white padded cloth, *dilunbu* ("washable / polyester fiber cloth"), as the set material. The white fiber padding would create a feeling of snow and serve as a remembrance of the original student "Snow Festival" performance (Meng, 5-29-98). The combination of the common and traditional white fiber padding with clear plastic wall-covering and techno-lighting actually became an intriguing addition to the revised *Si Fan 98*, as the set poignantly embodied a confrontation of China’s past, present, and future.12

**Performance Text / Storyline:** The title for the professional production at CNET was shortened from the full title, *Si Fan Shuang Xia Shan*, to simply *Si Fan*. The characters include a young nun, Se Kong ("sexual desire – empty/void") a young monk, Ben Wu ("from the beginning – emptiness"), and a 5-member Chorus or Acting Ensemble (*zhongren*, "everybody," “a group of people”). The production is comprised of 4 acts (as opposed to the 3-act student performance). Acts 1 and 4 tell the story of the young nun, Se Kong, who is tired of her lonely and monotonous life and runs away from her convent. In parallel, the young monk, Ben Wu, escapes from his monastery. The two meet and fall in love, eventually fleeing down the mountain together to get married. Acts 2 and 3 include two stories from Boccaccio. Act 2 is a tale about an Innkeeper and his family, and a young man, Piuqiao, who cleverly finds a way to spend the night with the Innkeeper’s daughter, Nikeluosha. Act 3 (added for the CNET performance) concerns the King and Queen of Lombardy and an Imperial horse trainer in love with the Queen. With an amazing likeness to the King, the horse trainer pretends to be the King and devises an ingenious plan to realize his passion.

**Directorial Concept:** At the Drama Academy, Meng had directed foreign Absurdist plays. *Si Fan* was the "first Chinese play" he directed. After *Si Fan*, a play “created by Chinese and belonging to Chinese, I knew I could direct a Chinese play” (Meng, 7-28-
Actually, Meng explains that he feels “more influenced by Western theatre than Chinese.” At the first *Si Fan* rehearsal, Meng showed videotapes of foreign productions, including Peter Brook’s *Marat Sade*, the dance theatre of Pina Bausch, and scenes from Ariane Mnouchkin’s “Theatre du Soleil” to “familiarize the actors with the techniques and physicality of these Western artists” (Meng, 5-29-98).

By juxtaposing the *kunqu* and *Decameron*, two storytelling forms sharing similar themes, Meng hoped “to create a unique atmosphere and strong impact onstage.” *Si Fan* “is not made up of independent parts. These are not separate stories to me” (Meng, 7-28-93). The link between the different acts is emphasized as the actors playing the nun and monk also play characters in the secular stories. Meng hoped the Buddhist chants—performed live, as well as on audio tape between acts—would “connect and unify” the *kunqu* and *Decameron* “to create a tragi-comedy (beixiju) about secular love.” As he describes, the contrast of the sexual freedom of the young Italian couples “emphasizes the loneliness and isolation” of the nun and monk. “Audiences thought the middle acts embodied the dreams and longings of the nun and monk.” Meng hoped the humor and sexual “forbidden fruit” of the Italian stories would become “less crude, more subtle” combined with the *kunqu* in the newly created *Si Fan* (Meng, 7-28-93). The juxtaposition of the *Decameron* stories with *kunqu* creates a strong dialectic. Playwright Liao Yimei (who married Meng Jinghui in 1998) pointed out that if there had been “no exaggerated Italian comic performance, no thrill at the courageous foreign love stories, there would have been no sympathy for the nun.” People “wouldn’t have laughed and excitedly applauded” when the nun and monk “finally got together” (Liao Yimei, *Chinese Theatre*, #4/93).

Meng describes the performance style as “not following one fixed pattern.” Through a series of “game like” improvisations,

the setting continually changes, and the actors switch back and forth, creating a feeling of estrangement (*jianli* = “separate – distance,” the Brechtian term). The actors’ passion and emotions, combined with their objective observation, work together to expand the theatrical space to the maximum and create an atmosphere.
which ... draws the audience in, while at the same time, intensifies the audience's objective thoughts and feelings (Si Fan Performance Text).

Meng hoped to fully develop the *wutai jiaodingxing* ("stage assumption," the theatre's "magic if") "in pursuit of the lyrical, hyperbole, and metaphor":

*Si Fan* strives for: energetic reflection, a subtle, delicate performance, to create scenery pleasing to both the eyes and the mind, to combine humor, total abandon, spontaneity, and mockery, to be a game aimed at the bold wisdom of adults, to be the most honest, genuine pursuit of the beauty of human nature ("Directorial Concept," 1993).

Adapting the stage design of the student performance for the initial professional CNET production in 1993, Meng describes the "purity and innocence" of the newly created white set and "sexual images of live fish and phallic-shaped water pipes" (Meng, 7-28-93):

The set is abstract. Like a soft sculpture, an outline of distant mountains drawn on white cloth hangs against a black wall. In the middle of the stage, a single lamp hangs from the ceiling. On the side of the stage lies a long, snake-shaped waterpipe and a live carp swimming in a water basin (Si Fan Performance Text).

Recounting the excitement of the 1993 performance, Meng jokingly explains: "We had real fish, who also acted by waving their fins!" (Meng, 7-28-93). Modern, casual clothing (T-shirts and flowered trousers in 1993) were chosen for the actors "to unify the different acts" and "create a non-specific time accessible to a modern audience" (Meng, 7-28-93).

Meng hoped *Si Fan*’s exploration of new stage techniques would "ultimately open the potentially huge market for *huaju*" (in Zhang Tianwei, 2-18-93). As Meng describes,

The stage can be a miraculous place. ... *Si Fan* belongs to experimental theatre, and restaging the play at CNET presents a new challenge. ... We must re-evaluate ourselves and rebel from ourselves (2-18-93).

Rehearsal process / Acting techniques: The CNET performance of *Si Fan* in 1993 had seventeen days for rehearsal—as opposed to the normal five to six weeks. Time for *Si Fan* rehearsal was limited, as Meng was busy preparing to bring *Waiting for Godot* to Berlin. The restaged *Si Fan* 98 also had a short rehearsal period. The actors watched the video of *Si Fan* 93 to learn basic blocking and memorized lines before rehearsals began. To make *Si Fan* 98 current, the creative team adapted lines and worked out new stage business
and blocking. The actors wanted to bring their individual talents to the new production, rather than just rehash *Si Fan* 93. Describing his rehearsal method, Meng explains: “I describe the ‘artistic impulse’ (*yishu chongdong*) and expect the actors to come up with their own ideas according to this impulse” (Meng, 7-15-99). Meng began each rehearsal with a theatre game. This particular game called “ling ling qi” (“double 0 – 7”) is played with the actors (and director and any rehearsal observers) standing in a circle. One person is “it” and, standing in the middle, points at each individual around the circle, calling “0 - 0 - 7.” When “7” is called, the people on either side of “7” must raise their hands above their heads. If they miss their cue, they “lose” and must stand in the center of the circle, where they are kicked in the *derrière*—i.e., literally “kicked” out of the game. This rehearsal exercise helped foster relaxation and concentration and created an ensemble feeling among the cast. This also introduced physicalization, which would be a particular focus for the actors.

Rehearsals emphasized both physical and vocal technique. A specific challenge included the ensemble work of the choral actors and their relationship to the nun and the monk— as the Chorus worked out vocal sound effects and echoes of the nun’s and monk’s lines. Describing their vital, yet symbiotic role, Meng told the Chorus: “Don’t compete with the leading roles of the nun and monk. … Yet the sounds of the Chorus actually create the Springtime scenery, embodying the nun’s and monk’s yearnings” (*Si Fan* Log). The two narrators’ dual roles as performer and commentator and link with the story’s characters presented another challenge: “The narrators must act and react; you’re equal to the other actors” (*Si Fan* Log). The narrators focussed on story-telling techniques, developing variety and clarity, creating smooth transitions from narration to action. Meng paid close attention to both overall and internal rhythms in order to achieve the “slow and solemn” movement of acts 1 and 4 and the “noisy rambunctious style” of acts 2 and 3 (Meng, 7-15-99). The actors experimented with suggestive *xiqu* stylization for the temple scenes and an
exaggerated, farcical Commedia dell’ Arte style for the Boccaccio stories. The actors continually refined the internal rhythm and timing of specific “bits.” Meng pushed the actors to achieve clarity with vocal and physical variety. While body movement and facial expressions were exaggerated, Meng advised: “Don’t always overdo; withhold a bit or there will be no emphasis” (Si Fan Log). Meng also encouraged improvisation to bring a playful quality and spontaneity to the performance.

At the “Leaders run-through,” Theatre leaders shared their reactions (Si Fan Log, February 3 –19, 1993). Although CNET did not keep a Log for the 98 revival, after observing rehearsals in 1998, I found many of the comments in the “93 Log” pertinent to the new production. Leaders’ reactions were similar, and the challenges and problems of Si Fan 93 persisted in Si Fan 98. President Zhao thought Si Fan “embodies the experimental and breaks down many barriers” but the actors “aren’t relaxed enough.” The rhythm of acts 1 and 4 needs to be faster, and “characterizations” (zaoxing, “character image”) in act 1 seem redundant in act 4. Si Fan “is a good beginning with not only characterization but also plot. ... I’m very excited!” He also found Si Fan “new in concept and the subject of young peoples’ sexual urges an unusual topic for China” (Zhao, 4-22-98). Yang Zongjing observed that experimental theatre in China is “still in an exploratory (tansuo) phase. We must be imaginative.” He thought Si Fan “has a sense of the current times, and the audience can understand our exploration, ... but new measures may be needed to evaluate this kind of exploration.” He agreed with Zhao Youliang: “I like the play ... and appreciate the fruit of your experimentation!” Party Secretary Wang cautioned that little theatre “needs a feeling of truth,” and the emotions of the nun and monk need to be “more subtle.” While the relationship between the narration and the performing “needs to be obvious, don’t make it too simple and monotonous” (2-13-93). Actor-administrator Zhou Yuyuan invoked the obligatory “patriarch and comrade-in-arms” assessment:

This team can be summarized in Mao Zedong’s words as ‘unified, serious, lively, and keyed-up.’ The stage departments have been supportive, and the actors have
given their best. Every actor was offered a TV or film contract, but everyone stayed to rehearse ... and this should be praised (2-13-93).

In 1993, Party Secretary Wang noted the “relative inexperience” with the “little theatre form” in China (2-13-93); his comment actually highlights the subsequent experimentation in huaju production over a five-year period, as by 1998 every huaju theatre in Beijing had its own little theatre.

Mise-en-Scene / Aesthetics / Form & Content: Si Fan 98 was performed in CNET’s Little Theatre. Soft white fiber padding covered the proscenium’s three walls and stage floor. The walls were also covered with clear plastic sheeting, creating a cloud-like appearance and eerie modern-techno look. White pillows and plastic pipes were strewn about the stage, and several soft white sculptures were hanging on the walls. One form was phallic-shaped but also resembled a large Buddhist prayer-wheel. The set designer reported that the soft sculptures were actually “not meant to be Buddhist symbols or overtly realistic at all.” The shapes came about through “purely aesthetic decisions” (Jiao Yingqi, 4-19-98). The upstage door, an office chair, a large plastic bowl, and plastic piping were all covered in red or blue silk. (The tank of live fish from the 1993 production was cut.) In addition to stage lights, several clusters of bare multi-colored (red, yellow, and blue) light bulbs hung down from above the stage to give changing color to the white set. Costumes were contemporary and utilitarian--work boots, unisex beige trousers, white T-shirts emblazoned with red flowers.17

The actors’ stylized movement and voice in the kunqu scenes contrasted sharply with an exaggerated comic pantomime style of Commedia dell’Arte in the Decameron stories. The stylization of xiqu is the frame of reference for the Chinese audience. Scholar A.C. Scott’s description will acquaint the reader with the original kunqu:

*Si Fan* ... is a lyrical episode containing great delicacy of movement and singing. There is only a single character, a young nun, who is onstage the entire time. It is quite impossible to give a true idea of a play like this in words ... a kind of poem that depends as much on its graceful and subtle gestures as on its song. The two are combined and coordinated to an exquisite degree. The musical accompaniment is a flute whose plaintive tone is appropriate ... for the wistful and lonely quality of this
piece. ... [The little nun] bewails her lot at being confined to such a sterile life and tells how she longs for normal human pleasures and companionship. Finally she is resolved to cast aside the vestments of a nun and escape to the outer world. ... She carries a long white horse hair switch, mounted on a wooden handle. ... This switch is used to great effect in the posturing and dancing which is so much a part of this play (Scott 1958, 53).

The *huaju* actors in *Si Fan* did not have training in the exquisite physical movement and vocal techniques of *kunqu* alluded to in Scott's description above. *Si Fan*’s stylized movement and voice in the *kunqu* scenes comprised suggestive, rather than specific, *xiqu* techniques. Meng Jinghui had “never studied *xiqu* ... We didn’t know about *kunqu*. In fact, we knew very little about traditional Chinese theatre” (Meng, 7-28-93). As Meng explains,

*Si Fan* is adapted from *kunqu*, ... Our method is to use the clumsiness of *huaju* to win over/challenge the dexterity and skillfulness of *xiqu*. We add the *Decameron* stories to stretch our imaginations and allow our thoughts to flow as they please. We are pursuing the pleasure of freeing our souls, indulging ourselves in the ecstasy of eating the forbidden apple (“Directorial Concept,” 1993).

Yet at the same time, Meng described using “some skills from *xiqu*,” for example, “eye spirit” (*yanshen*, directing the gaze to draw the audience’s attention) (Meng, 5-29-98). Although neither the director nor the actors had any special *xiqu* knowledge or training, *Si Fan* used several *xiqu* conventions: for example, in the Innkeeper tale, two young men mimed riding their horses in a circle to show they were travelling a great distance; the nun and monk flirted with each other using “round” movements. During the Innkeeper story, as Nikeluoshua and Pinuqiao expressed their love, the actors irreverently imitated the stylized heroic *liangxiang* tableau of *xiqu* (“showing the presence,” “striking a pose,” to reveal the character’s state of mind). Laughing and applauding, even young members of the audience recognized the *liangxiang* of *xiqu*. As the Boccaccio stories culminated with the heroes “freezing” in place, silently laughing at each other with exaggerated grins on their faces, the “fixed frame” (*dingge*) may be considered a technique comparable to *liangxiang*. (The *xiqu* convention, *liangxiang*, ranges from subtle movements into a pose by a single character, to dynamic martial movements into a tableau by a group of characters. The
ligaixiang in Si Fan particularly echoed the striking “revolutionary” “poses” of yangbanxi, embodying the actors’ intention to make fun of the “model revolutionary plays.”

In the Innkeeper tale, the actors’ fumbled in the dark on a fully illuminated stage. Although this story was taken from the Decameron, for the Chinese audience it suggested perhaps the most well-known xiqu, The Crossroads, where two actors fight each other in a “breathless struggle in the dark,” again on a fully lit stage. A.C. Scott acquaints the reader with another xiqu tour de force (1958, 76-77):

This piece is simply an occasion for two acrobatic fighting actors to show off their technique in all its brilliance. The antics of the men feigning to be groping their way about in the dark, banging into each other, missing each other’s punches, blows, and swordcuts by a hair’s breadth, jumping, leaping, somersaulting, and diving on a stage containing nothing but a table and chair, is a most convincing piece of mime and burlesque which never fails to leave the audience gasping for breath.

Again from A. C. Scott’s description, differences in huaju and xiqu training were evident in the performance of the huaju actors in Si Fan, a factor I will look at in the next section, “Reaction.”

Si Fan was characterized by an overall theatricality and presentational style. The actors, performing on a bare stage, mimed all the actions. Time and space were freely transformed through the actor’s performance: from a convent and monastery, to the countryside, an ancient Temple, “down the mountain” at a wedding celebration, scenes both in China and abroad (the “foreign” stories of Decameron). Si Fan used minimal props: a water basin, pillows, two scarves, a glass bottle, pages of Scripture, mirrors, apples, the narrators’ books as they “read” the ancient stories. This was the art of the actor. The chorus beautifully and solemnly sang “Nanwu ami tuofo” (a Buddhist chant, Indian Sanskrit words: “May Buddha Bring Peace,” “Long Live Buddha”), while one actor beat a muyu (“wooden fish,” a traditional Chinese percussion instrument) with a small wooden stick. The Buddhist chants, both live and on audio tape, and the beating of the muyu comprised the music.
Si Fan shared xiqu’s synthesis of theatrical elements (song, speech, acting, and martial arts; *chang, nian, zuo, da*), including dance and mime, poetry and prose, narration and dialogue, speech and song, stylization in movement and voice. Traditionally, *xiqu* was performed on a thrust stage surrounded by the audience on three sides, creating an intimacy between actor and audience. While *Si Fan 98* was performed on a raised proscenium stage, the actors continually broke the “4th wall.” Encouraging audience participation, *Si Fan* created the direct actor-audience communication characteristic of presentational theatre forms, including *xiqu*.

In CNET’s Little Theatre, the furthest audience seat is only ten meters from the stage. As spatial and psychological distance between the actors and audience are shortened, communication becomes more direct. The young monk mimed filling a basin of water (actually the basin was filled with popcorn), which he threw out into the audience, provoking shrieks and excitement as audience members were showered with popcorn. As the nun imagined the pleasures of the secular world, she included the audience: “couples in fine clothes happily drinking wine”; destroying the Buddhist Scriptures, the actors hurled torn pages into the audience; sitting onstage and telling the “Innkeeper” tale, the narrator was both “inside” and “outside” the story; recounting the “King /Queen / Groom” story, the narrator sat on a ladder at audience level and was also both “inside” and “out”; the nun whispered to the audience “not to reveal her secrets.”

In the final act, the nun and monk played a flirtatious “cat and mouse” game. Se Kong coyly remarked to Ben Wu: “You’re forgetting all Buddha’s Commandments,” and, after Ben Wu called Buddhist Scripture “all a big lie,” Se Kong set up a riddle:

A monk can’t have hair;  
A nun shouldn’t forget the five Commandments;  
Becoming a family isn’t possible;  
A pun for you to figure out.

The audience and Ben Wu unraveled the pun together, an acronym: “a monk and nun become a couple!” The Chorus encircled the nun and monk, enticing them with bright red
apples. The stage was bathed in red light, the wedding color, and to the sound of Buddhist chants and exploding firecrackers, the actors threw apples out into the audience. The spectators all reached out to catch one. There was direct actor-audience contact here. 21

Si Fan’s 5-actor chorus resembled both the bangqiang (“helping chorus”) of xiqu as well as a Greek chorus. Si Fan’s chorus acted as bystanders, commentators, also participants, instigators, confidantes, witnesses, conspirators, and even final judges of the action. They were apologists and defenders of traditional morals, but at the same time, teased and jeered at the defenders. Echoing the lines of the nun and monk, in unison or in counterpoint, the chorus provided Si Fan with an overall rhythmic structure. Vocal sound effects made by the chorus established or changed the environment and helped create the shifting realities of time and space: Buddhist chants in the convent and monastery; barking dogs as the monk escaped; the chirping of birds, the sound of crickets and bees, roosters, ducks, cows, lambs and goats, as the monk ran further away into the countryside: “down the mountain”; the joyous wedding. The chorus members played a variety of roles: in act 1, they were relatively passive, providing vocal accompaniment and creating the environment, or they served as “living” props, “living” scenery—fellow monks, whose shoes the young monk can clean; solemn Buddhist statues, which the nun can mock. In acts 2 and 3, the chorus members became narrators or played Boccaccio characters, providing their own vocal sound effects: the clatter of horses’ hooves, knocking on the door, the sounds of eating and drinking. In act 4, the chorus became an even more active participant. They spurred the nun and monk on in their yearning for escape, played matchmakers luring the young couple with apples, and ultimately judged the events. The changing role of the chorus, from passive to more active, from creating the background to impacting the action, also served as a psychological gauge for the audience. The chorus represented the audience and, at the same time, their voices spoke for the nun and the monk.
Si Fan became a strong training vehicle as new young actors were cast for each subsequent run. The actors, who had originated the roles in 1993, were either “too old or too busy” with TV and film roles in 1998. The seven Si Fan 98 actors were all recent graduates of the Beijing and Shanghai Drama Academies who had joined CNET. This was in fact the first stage role for five of the actors. As Leader Zhao Youliang explained, “Si Fan is a good opportunity for young actors ... to learn to relax and act naturally on stage” (Zhao, 7-9-98).

The audience laughed throughout the performance. The humor in Si Fan had several sources. Si Fan included rather sophomoric and farcical bathroom humor as well as sexual jokes. (For example, Pinuqiao’s friend, Adeliannuo, doesn’t quite make it to the toilet and soils his pants; the Innkeeper, half-asleep, strokes Pinuqiao and, feeling no breasts, quickly realizes this is not his wife.) Yet the humor comprised more than the above; the audience was also intrigued and amused by the imaginative and innovative non-naturalistic acting techniques, voice and movement games, the use of current slang and references to pop culture, film and TV. There were genuinely funny “bits”: the sound effects of nature made by the chorus; a mosquito sequence mocking Buddhist ritual as the monk buries a dead mosquito and prays for its lost soul. This was playful fun.

In the Innkeeper tale, the “good and honest” host, played by Ren Chengwei, primped and flexed his muscles in body-building poses. The actor moved beautifully and comically. The innkeeper’s wife repeated “Wo da!” (“I’ll beat you up”), and this phrase, originally from a Chinese computer game, became the wife’s refrain; she also played with the rhythms of Chinese language by repeating the phrase “nemme le ... zenme le?!” (“what’s happening?!”) throughout the play. The baby’s cries and movements (made by an adult actor) always got a huge laugh. When the two guests joined the family for dinner at the inn, the actors sat in a line across the stage. With rhythmic vocal sounds and movements, they mimed drinking and eating, chewing, swallowing, slurping, sipping. The
actors slept standing up holding their pillows behind their heads as if they were lying in bed. The actors played a “musical chairs” sequence of beds. The laughter and audience enjoyment as the young couple, Piuqiao and Nikeluosha, imitated the stylized heroic tableau of *xiqu* have been mentioned. The narrator covered the two lovers with a banner, which read: “631 words are deleted here!” As the wife mistakenly crawled into bed with her guest, Adeliannuo, the actors sang “heiyo yieryo, hei ei hei yieryo,” words from a Shandong folk tune and also the theme song of the popular TV mini-series *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu zhuan)*. The Narrator again hid Adeliannuo and the wife with a scroll, which read: “2 words are omitted here!” Adeliannuo, very annoyed, popped his head out from behind the banner: “How come you delete the words every time you come to the sexy parts?!”

For Boccaccio’s King/Queen/Groom story, each of the three characters was played simultaneously by two actors on opposite sides of the stage. Actors repeated lines in unison or alternated lines as they acted out the story. Actions were sometimes identical, sometimes distinct; the two Grooms spoke in unison or counterpoint; the two Kings finished each other’s sentences, as one gave the last word for the other. When the King was with the Queen (actually two Kings and two Queens!), they rhythmically swayed their knees and hips, exclaiming: “*tian tian gen wo lian, shijian wo bu xian*” (“everyday practice with me; my time is not limited”), a jingle from a popular TV program about bodybuilding and sung by Ms. Ma Hua, a very famous plump TV hostess. Everyone in the audience recognized this. When the Groom was with the Queen (actually two Grooms and two Queens!), they changed the earlier lines to “*tian tian gen wo lian, shijian wo you xian*” or “everyday practice with me; my time IS limited!” Again the narrator held a banner: “361 words are deleted here!” The banners covering the love scenes acted as clocks ticking, time passing. This was the third banner, and the audience joyfully anticipated the joke. When the King realized he’d been duped, the two Grooms popped out from the
upstage door, and one teased the other: you ren ceng yanr (popular Beijing slang, “someone got away with something for free!”) (Meng, 5-29-98).\textsuperscript{22} The King cleverly shored up his courage using the Communist slogan, zaijie zaili! (lit. “again lift again persist,” “persevere,” “don’t get too proud of yourself”).

The use of props was often humorous. The scarves, in different contexts, became a comic motif of the play: first worn by the nun and the monk in act 1, the scarves were later worn by the Kings; the Grooms used the scarves as towels after they “showered” to rid themselves of the smell of horse dung. They then donned the scarves as disguises as they went to the Queen’s bedroom. In act 4, the nun and monk left in different directions, and the monk turned to look back. The chorus used mirrors to get the nun’s attention, and reflected the lights as if the mirrors were the monk’s flashing eyes following the nun. Mime also often involved comical “bits”: the King’s servants sat in a row and took their “beating hearts” out of their chests. The King felt each pulse as he tried to find the scoundrel who had sneaked into the Queen’s bedroom. Sitting in the middle of the row, the Groom held his wildly beating heart in his hands, and the King easily found him. When Ben Wu searched for Se Kong in act 4, one of the Buddhist statues mimed cartoon-fashion plucking out the monk’s eyes and throwing them, like Cupid’s arrow, in the nun’s direction so the monk will see her. Se Kong and Ben Wu realized they have both escaped from their Temples, Xian Tao An and Bi Tao Si, playing with the double-entendre of the Chinese language.\textsuperscript{23} When the King cut the scoundrel’s hair so he would easily recognize him the next morning, the actors made the sound of cutting scissors, “kotcha, kotcha!” The two Grooms, immediately understanding the King’s plan, cut a handful of hair from each servant’s head and silently laughed, repeating “kotcha, kotcha!”; as the final act began with Se Kong’s lament that her Master “had cut all her hair,” the chorus imitated the sound of the scissors of the previous act: “kotcha, kotcha!” Again the audience delightfully anticipated the joke.
While *Si Fan*’s *kunqu* acts mocked Buddhist ritual, the “foreign” stories (which clearly had Italian place and character names) gave the actors freedom to experiment with their inherent sexuality. *Si Fan* ridiculed Confucian values without actually including anything too “improper.” When the narrator covered the actors during the love scenes with the banners reading “x number of words are deleted here,” Meng Jinghui was having fun with the Chinese practice of censorship. In classical erotic texts, censorship was carried out by blackening any words considered obscene. *Si Fan*’s “Playbill” parodied this by including a graphic of tiny blackened boxes. Meng’s self-censorship mimicked Jia Pingwa, a best selling author who mocked Chinese censorship in his novels by blackening out words and thus titillating his readers more.24

**Reaction:** *Si Fan* was especially popular among university students, and tickets routinely sold out. To meet audience demand, the Little Theatre’s 180 seats were often increased to 220 (Liu Tiegang, 5-19-96). While *Si Fan* was classified as *huaju*, Meng Jinghui also called the play “performance art” (*xingwei yishu*), an experiment in “conceptual art” (*guannian yishu*), and a “happening” (using the English word) as fresh categories to give *huaju* a new connotation and emphasize *Si Fan*’s break with tradition (Meng, 5-29-98). After *Si Fan*, Meng earned a reputation for directing “unique experimental plays” and, with his increasing popularity, he was called the “black sheep” (*hei ma*, lit. “black horse”) by the established theatre circle (Press Release, 1994).

Critics and audience members almost unanimously praised *Si Fan*. Guo Shixing (*Go Man* playwright), at this time still a journalist at *Beijing Evening News*, called the *kunqu* and *Decameron* “a creative combination … a great step forward … witty and humorous … fully expanding the theatre’s *jiadingxing*” (Guo, 11-21-93). Critic Lin Kehuan called it “theatre of the absurd … a sarcastic parody … without any kind of preaching” (Lin Kehuan 1993, 12). China Youth Art Theatre playwright Zhang Jianzhong found *Si Fan* “very courageous in style and content, … an attempt to unify ideas from the East and
West” (Zhang, 7-8-93). In 1996, a middle-aged actor at CNET explained: “young people like to break through tradition. Meng isn’t afraid to direct Si Fan.” Critics noted the novelty of the “Little Theatre” setting, first introduced at CNET and soon to be copied by other Beijing theatres: “We’re surprised huaju can be performed this way. Today people go to the theatre to communicate with the characters in an equal, close, and friendly atmosphere. ‘Little Theatre’ stresses active participation” (Mo Fei, 5-5-95).

“Communication is more direct. Meng even hoped someone would ‘stand up and shout at the actors’” (“How to Appreciate Little Theatre,” 2-24-95). With a Chinese-language pun, one critic found Si Fan “out of the ordinary;” a simple love story becomes a rich and multi-layered experience ... awakening our imaginations” (Xiao Yi, 8-3-94). Seeing Si Fan on tour in Shanghai, one veteran huaju artist lamented the crisis in Shanghai huaju:

The director calls it a game, but it’s created in a serious way. It’s light, but its thoughts are deep. ... Change means breaking the rules, and Si Fan breaks many rules. ... Si Fan’s young creators have open minds. ... After seeing Si Fan, Shanghai theatre circles can see the shortcomings of our huaju (Xu Xuemei, 16).

Another critic praised Meng’s ingenuity in emphasizing the “game-like atmosphere” and handing out bottles of mineral water during a hot summer performance. “After every scene, the actors would drink their fill, just like football players at the World Cup” (Zhu Lixuan, 9-3-94). At the Valentine’s Day 1995 performance, the actors distributed chocolate candy kisses, and the audience could “talk to the actors and take photos together” (Dong Fang, 2-17-95). Scholar Zhou Ming (editor of Juben, “Scripts,” the journal of the Chinese Theatre Artists’ Association, Zhongguo xijujia xiehui) pointed out the significance of Si Fan as an “early step towards the creation of a new kind of National Theatre.” Yet at the same time, he felt Si Fan was superficial, noting that

... combining ancient stories from East and West, Si Fan is new, lively, and witty. Its teasing is exciting ... but a play which raises questions without going deep enough will inevitably disappoint the audience. ... Si Fan ... shows that both indigenous and outside traditions should nourish artists (Zhou, 11-29-96).
Zhou Ming’s comments above invite a comparison of Si Fan to both “indigenous” xiqu as well as “outside” Western traditions.

Comparing Si Fan to the artistry of xiqu (for example, Scott’s descriptions cited earlier of the original kunqu and The Crossroads), I wondered how extraordinary Si Fan would have been if the huaju actors had the acrobatic agility and the physical and vocal training of xiqu actors. Lacking the skills and deftness of xiqu actors, the antics “in the dark” at the Inn in Si Fan seemed comparatively lukewarm. The huaju audience at Si Fan did not seem to mind. While a huaju audience usually applauds Western-style, the Si Fan audience responded in traditional xiqu fashion, i.e., by enthusiastically shouting “hao, hao!” (“bravo!”).

Every culture has its own indigenous story-telling traditions. For Si Fan, Meng Jinghui describes incorporating performance techniques from mime, dance, baixi, quyi, xiangsheng, yuanqu, and xiqu. The Si Fan actors experimented with improvisation and a variety of physical and vocal techniques (Meng, 7-15-99). In Si Fan, “a game for adults,” the actors played an assortment of different roles in acting out the various tales. Si Fan suggests the improvisational style of Italian Commedia dell’Arte as well as more recent Western forms of story-telling, theatre games, and improvisations, especially those devised by American theatre artists during the 1960s-70s to innovate techniques of acting and staging for non-realistic material. For example, director Joseph Chaikin described his intention to “redefine the limits of the stage experience or unfix them”; to create “an enjoyment of technique, pure virtuosity on the part of the actors” (in Schechner 1966, 9); to increase the actor’s ability to create an environment, build physical and vocal skills and non-psychological characterization; to establish rapport between actors on a non-verbal level; to search for a “communal dynamic” in ensemble-playing (in Pasolli 1970, 6-7, 23, 31).

In a similar way, Si Fan endeavored “to redefine the limits of the stage experience or unfix them,” breaking down barriers between actors and audience, developing techniques.
of non-naturalistic acting. Yet Drama Academy training in China includes “very little work in improvisation” (Meng, 7-15-99). While several theatre artists described “body sculpture exercises” at Beijing’s Drama Academy, huaju actors usually lack training in the techniques of non-naturalistic acting. Meng’s use of the “double 0-7” game in rehearsal and as a performance warm-up was innovative; yet the same game was played continuously, indicative of the general lack of knowledge among huaju actors of theatre games and improvisational techniques. The Si Fan creators had limited access to the wealth of improvisational material or experience available in the West. As a result, in my view Si Fan did not approach the dazzling brilliance and spontaneity, the compelling and enchanting theatre “magic” of such American masters of improvisation as the theatre artists of Second City and the Open Theatre.

Thus even with different dialogue and movement, Si Fan’s acts 1 and 4 seemed somewhat repetitious. While some audience members enjoyed the adolescent behavior, others felt it “boring and sophomoric.” The actors’ “telegraphing,” i.e., “telling” before “showing,” became a bit simplistic and redundant. While the chorus served as an orchestra with vocal sound rhythms in unison or counterpoint, the actors were not always listening to each other. Often their sounds—the barking dogs, chirping birds, goats, lambs, horses, etc.—were exactly the same, rather than creating an aural harmony. With more experience with sound and movement exercises as well as improvisational techniques, more could have been done here. I have pointed out the huaju actors’ lack of experience and ability both in xiqu and in Western techniques of improvisation—skills which could have added to the depth and richness of Si Fan. Yet despite these limitations of current huaju training, Si Fan was still imaginative and innovative. There is no denying the production’s creativity and humor and impact on the audience. Reaching easily across cultural barriers, it was a joy for both Chinese and Western audience members.
In terms of awards and foreign exposure, *Si Fan* was “praised by foreign theatre experts” at Beijing’s “1993 International Theatre Symposium” (*Guoji xiju yantaohui*) (Guang Nan, Press Release, 1993). *Si Fan* also won awards for “Best Production,” “Best Directing,” and “Best Acting” at the “1993 China Small Theatre Exhibition” (*Zhongguo xiao juchang zhanyan*). With its strong physicality, emphasis on mime, and use of vocal sound effects, *Si Fan* presents no language barriers, and it was a huge hit at the Alice Theatre Festival in Tokyo in September 1994. As part of CNET’s repertory, performances were repeated in 1994 - 1996. The May 1996 performance preceded *Si Fan*’s invitation (along with Lin Zhaohua’s *Faust* and *Go Man*) to attend the ill-fated Chinese Avant-garde Theatre Festival in Munich.\(^{29}\) *Si Fan* had already had seven successful runs and nearly eighty performances before the 1998 revival, making it the “longest running play in CNET’s history” (Guang Nan, *Si Fan* “Press Release,” 1998; Meng, 5-29-98).\(^{30}\)

*Si Fan* was a huge hit when it first opened in 1993 and its popularity continued through 1996. When I saw performances in 1993 and 1995, the audience laughed at every comic bit and wildly cheered after every vignette. A theatre artist explained: “*huaju* like this had never been seen before.” By 1998, theatre circles were calling *Si Fan* “a Chinese experimental *huaju classic*” (Guang Nan, 4-16-98)—actually an oxymoron! Yet reception was mixed for the 1998 restaging. Some audience members considered the play’s criticism of Buddhism (*ripping up pages of Scripture and violating monastic orders*) “still quite serious”; others disliked the sexual content. Still others viewed *Si Fan* experimental “more in form than content.” One theatre artist called *Si Fan* “just a simple children’s play … so kids like it.” *Si Fan* 98—competing in a larger entertainment market-place—seemed slow and monotonous to a young crowd newly hooked up to the internet and used to the brisk rhythm of computer games and MTV’s fast pace. The ringing of beepers and cell phones became an on-going problem throughout the performance. One critic pointed out the strength and weakness of the 1998 production, describing *Si Fan* as “presenting a new
theatrical language, with new concepts and structure, subverting and deconstructing the single-direction narrative” of conventional theatre: “Playfulness, boldness, and energy still flow in every direction. These haven’t faded.” Yet he also found Si Fan “characteristic of a specific time. … Years have passed, and even Meng Jinghui hasn’t had a production which has achieved a breakthrough over Si Fan in terms of style” (A Yuan, 4-28-98). The 1998 ticket price was 40 yuan, with a special 20 yuan discounted student ticket, but performances were no longer sold out. Blocks of tickets were promoted for high school and university students. At one performance, as act 4 was underway and the nun and monk were playing their “cat and mouse” game, I overheard one young man urge the actors to “hurry up and let’s get it going already!” (“kuai yidiar … zoubao!”) In response to my questions about Si Fan’s mixed response from audiences in 1998, Meng explained:

Five years ago the idea of the pursuit of freedom was completely new, and people had very particular feelings about this theme. So Si Fan became a great hit. … Si Fan isn’t well connected to the current times. That’s why it’s not very successful now. … People have changed. … In 1989, the time of June 4th, young people felt a responsibility to change society. I was just graduating from the Drama Academy and I thought of myself as an angry young man. With Si Fan, I thought I finally had an opportunity to express my ideas about freedom and self-respect. Since then, I’ve become a famous … experimental director. Under such circumstances, people will surely change. … Nowadays, people are only concerned about making money. Money is the #1 priority. … I listened to Cui Jian’s new tape. We’re the same age, and he expresses many ideas and feelings I share. He asks: ‘with no new ideas and no new forms now, what am I supposed to do?’ The things I objected to in the past have become meaningless today. Si Fan can’t really express the questions I’m asking now. I really want to direct something new (Meng, 5-29-98).32

Combining East and West, Si Fan experimented with non-illusionistic acting techniques by drawing on a variety of performing traditions. The predominance of the actor, stylization, fluidity of time and space in staging, direct actor-audience communication--these are elements shared by Chinese and Western non-realistic theatre forms. Meng’s humor and mocking tone, in Brechtian terms, created estrangement aimed ultimately at the objectivity of the audience. As Meng Jinghui embarked on his next projects, Si Fan’s non-naturalistic techniques--his eclectic mix of styles and cultures, improvisation, vignette
structure, his chorus, sound and movement rhythm games, the actors’ changing characterizations—would become the trademarks of his signature avant-garde style.

**Part II: Seeds of Si Fan**

Over the decade, acclaimed director Meng Jinghui expanded upon the artistic techniques he first developed in *Si Fan*. Meng’s experimentation was manifest in both form and content. I have selected particularly salient productions, which trace the evolutionary seeds of *Si Fan*. These productions reflect the body of Meng’s work and best illustrate his signature avant-garde style, innovative management and financial practices, and bring his treatment of controversial subject matter into sharp focus.³³ Meng developed a loyal patron and audience base for his work within the context of economic reforms at a State Theatre. Representative productions, which will be examined here are Meng’s *I Love XXX*, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Rhinoceros in Love*, and *Bootleg Faust.*

**I Love XXX (Wo Ai Cha-Cha-Cha, 1994)**

Meng Jinghui produced *I Love XXX* in 1994 outside official channels and calls it an “underground” independent production. CNET did not approve the script (Meng, 5-29-98). *I Love XXX* had six performances in the small warehouse theatre behind Renyi, which the press called “anti-theatre” (*fan xiju*) (Guo Fumin, 6-95). The production was enigmatic and controversial—with no plot, no characters, no dialogue. To briefly introduce the mise-en-scene: the performance zone was essentially bare, with several chairs and TV sets strewn about the space. An initial black-out lasted for several minutes with only the static sounds and strange blue light cast by the TV sets breaking the silence. Faceless cardboard cut-outs of “audience members” were seated in the front rows. Historical newsreel footage projected images of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai visiting Russia and Mao Zedong greeting hysterical Red Guards in Tian’anmen Square during the Cultural Revolution. The TV sets showed foreign couples in romantic embraces kissing. The group of eight actors all wore
white doctor and nurses’ uniforms, which they ripped off “Superman style” to reveal casual street clothes underneath—as a tape of the Beatles song “Revolution” blared through the space. John Lennon sang “You say you want a revolution. Well, we all want to change the world, but if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain’t gonna make it with anyone anyhow,” and the actors danced and rocked disco-fashion to the beat. For two hours the cast repeated only the words “I Love ...” against a bewildering array of disparate visual images and sound effects. “I Love,” often in highly-charged combinations, was voiced ad infinitum by solo actors, choral actors—in unison, in counterpoint, an endless repetition of words. Sometimes one actor shouted into a megaphone, while others silently mouthed the words. “I love the people” ... “I love my teachers” ... “I love my comrades” ... “I love the collective” ... “I love manners” ... “I love study” ... “I love science” ... “I love labour” ... “I love Chinese law” ... “I love my forefathers” ... “I love you” ... “I love your nose” ... “I love your breasts” ... “I love your tongue” ... “I love your pubic hair” ... “I love your words” ... “I love your language” ... “I love your soul” ... “I love Marilyn Monroe” ... “I love the Kennedy brothers” ... “I love you” ... etc., etc., etc.

The collection of vignettes included a scene where the actors hummed the old English folk-song “Greensleeves” to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar. In another vignette, the actors played leap-frog jumping over each others’ backs. Flashlights were frantically waved, threatening in the darkness. Sounds and movements alternated in extremes: whistling and silence; slow motion and fast motion; gentle touching and fighting; screaming, shouting, whispering and silence; hands motioning in sign language. The actors engaged in activities seemingly from daily life: a man brushed his teeth; a couple huddled together under a blanket on the floor; a man continually pressed his remote control changing TV channels; a woman typed and then ripped the seemingly mistake-laden pages out of her typewriter; a man dribbled a basketball; carrying her suitcase and purse, a woman
continually and briskly exited and re-entered; a man repeatedly put his jacket on and then
took it off. The actors replayed the vignettes again and again and again as if this were a
videotape in fast-forward, play, rewind, fast-forward. All the activities were accompanied by
a total lack of emotion. Advertisements wailed on the TV; a TV channel switch brought into
focus a battalion of Chinese soldiers clicking their boots and marching in formation. When
the play ended, the audience exited to music of Wagner booming harshly from
loudspeakers. While seemingly confused and disconnected, the images and words of I
Love XXX were all related to China’s history, China’s opening to the West, traditional vs.
modern values, socio-economic change, and perhaps an endeavor on the part of the actors to
connect with each other, to the audience, to the world. It is not surprising that the
production was organized, funded, and performed outside official channels. The
monotonous repetition of “I love” clearly began to mimic political slogans. The
production embodied scathing parody, sarcasm, and contradictions. Yet overall I Love XXX
lacked Meng’s usual frivolity and humor. Images were starkly—rather than lightly—
replayed. This is arguably Meng’s most absurdist work.34

Accidental Death of an Anarchist (Yige wuzhengfu zhuyizhe de yiwai siwang, 1998)

With its politically-sensitive subject matter, Meng Jinghui’s production of the Italian
play Accidental Death of an Anarchist is significant to Chinese huaju. The production
generated considerable debate in the media and among Beijing art and cultural circles. One
critic called Meng’s Accidental Death “the most controversial and audience-pleasing
production of the last decade” (Barden, 1999). A protest against social injustice, elite
privilege, police brutality, and official corruption, Morte accidentale di un anarchico is a
political parody, written in 1970 by Nobel laureate Dario Fo (1926-).35 Fo’s anti-
establishment approach magically blends politics and the Italian tradition of the giullare or
roving street player. Fo and his wife, actress Franca Rame, performed together often in
theatres as well as Italy’s public squares. Meng explained (11-2-98): “there’s something
rough but vital in Fo’s work.” Meng was invited to Italy in 1999 and met Dario Fo in Milan: “Fo urged me to think about why I direct plays. He watched our videotape and liked the production. He believes that theatre must express the eternal pursuit of justice” (in Mu Qian, 11-3-98). Meng’s production of *Accidental Death* was the Chinese debut of Dario Fo’s work, which is still unfamiliar to the majority of Chinese audiences.

Fo’s black comedy reenacts the true story of the 1968 bombing of a train station in Milan. A political leftist was arrested on suspicion of planting the bombs and subsequently died in police custody. The death was ruled a suicide. Fo investigated the case and concluded that the prisoner had been beaten to death by the police. The wrongful death was then covered up at the highest levels of government. While Dario Fo staged the play as a mock trial of Italy’s own corrupt political system, the play is universal and has become a classic of protest theatre internationally. In Meng’s Chinese version, an Italian police chief and his officers kill an anarchist during an interrogation. The prisoner is bound in a sack and brutally beaten by three policemen who are trying to get him to confess. The police panic when they realize the prisoner is dead, and no confession will be forthcoming. To cover up their crime, the police throw the body out a window and declare the death a suicide. The police chief finds a “madman” prisoner to help them concoct a plausible explanation for the anarchist’s “suicide.” The madman cleverly tricks the policemen, and the true circumstances of the anarchist’s death are finally exposed. In Fo’s original, the plot actually unfolds in reverse chronology. The prisoner is dead at the beginning, and the interrogation and subsequent murder are slowly revealed.

Meng found Fo’s play an “effective vehicle” for exploring social issues “particularly relevant to China. … Hopefully some hidden aspects of society will be illuminated” (in Beijing Scene, 11-6-98). Through the interaction of the madman and the police officers, a variety of stories are told which expose social problems in 1990s China, an era of accelerated economic reform: the rising crime rate, official corruption, the intricate and
complex connection between money (qian) and power (quan). In Accidental Death a “powerful sword is hidden in the laughter” (Meng, “Playbill,” 1998). The play is about “human dignity and respect.” Meng believes audiences want to be “provoked, forced to question, and shown that art still matters” (in Bonney, 46). With strong comedy, Meng hoped “to remind the audience that we still have the right to laughter,” but while laughing, people will be “aching deep inside their souls.” “After the laughter, I want people to think” (Meng, 7-15-99). Meng’s production retained only the barest plot framework of Fo’s original. CNET leader Zhao Youliang reported that in fact “90% of Fo’s play is lost” in this adaptation. He wondered “if there was really anything left at all from the original” (Zhao, 11-25-98). Meng admitted to making vast changes to the original script: “the director is really the author of a performance.” Like director Lin Zhaohua, Meng believes he has the freedom to fully interpret a script using his own individual style. Meng explained that his actors continually improvised, creating new variations (Meng, 11-2-98). The farcical slapstick style and mime were certainly inherent to the original Commedia dell’Arte improvisational spirit of Dario Fo and Franca Rame’s performance.

Meng modernized and localized the play, satirizing almost every aspect of contemporary Chinese society. To communicate the play’s populist spirit to the Chinese audience, Meng added numerous elements: Beijing street slang, Chinese folklore, local Beijing stories, chanted Chinese folk rhymes, original rock songs, references to Chinese pop culture, a song from the soundtrack of the cult film Pulp Fiction, a spoof on Jiang Qing’s model xiqu plays of the Cultural Revolution, Tianjin kuaiban (“quick board,” clapper rhythms), both realistic acting and stylization, slow and fast-motion movement. The police chief, policemen, and mad prisoner played their roles with the bungling slapstick antics and frenetic energy of the “Keystone Cops.” Two clowns A and B--one was played by Meng Jinghui himself--provided narration and song interludes. In one scene the action shifted to a traditional Beijing teahouse when the madman confused the story with his
own delusions. The four Italians—the madman and the three policemen—entered Lao She’s teahouse. The police chief became the teahouse owner; the police officers became waiters; the madman became an old “mandarin official” during the Qing dynasty and then a government official during the Nationalist Period under the Guomindang. Meng parodied Lao She’s venerated classic *Teahouse* “as a salute to the Beijing People’s Art Theatre” (Meng, in Mu Qian, 11-3-98). Lyrics from often-censored rock’n roll rebel Cui Jian’s latest album, *The Power of the Powerless* (released in 1998 right before *Anarchist* opened), were chanted like slogans each time the madman and the policemen enacted a possible explanation for the anarchist’s death: “The situation is too complicated; reality is too brutal.” Delighted with Cui Jian’s expressions of alienation, the young audience shouted, laughed, and applauded each time these lyrics were repeated. One critic found the production “reminiscent of the heady days of the late 1980s,” but thought it “unlikely” that the 1998 Chinese audience would demonstrate in the streets: “after all the audience has their mobile phones to chat with each other when the alienation becomes unbearable” (*Beijing Scene*, 11-6-98).

*Accidental Death* was performed in the 1,000 seat China Children’s Art Theatre (*Eryi*), with a second run at the larger Haidian Theatre (*Haidian juyuan*) in Beijing’s University district. Yet Meng’s informal and playful techniques, including narration and live songs, gave an intimate “little theatre” feeling to the audience. The set included a sparse corrugated metal backdrop, a line drawing on a large white cloth of a laughing Dario Fo, several chairs, and a table. A motorcycle (reminiscent of Lin Zhaohua’s car on the set in *Faust*), its metal proud and gleaming under the lights, sat perched on its kick-stand on a wooden ramp. The production began with a reflexive Brechtian prologue. Meng and several of his actors drew figures of the play’s characters on a chalkboard introducing the play and Dario Fo’s background. The virtues and shortcomings of the “good guy” and “bad guy” personalities (a “good cop-bad cop” analogy) were carefully delineated as
Meng drew a large foreboding “X” on the unsavory characters. The audience was not quite aware that the play had begun since the drawing was initiated as the audience entered the theatre. The prelude ended with a humorous Chinese folk rhyme. Meng himself played acoustic guitar and sang during interludes to the play’s action, incorporating his episodic structure. A short black and white film was projected introducing Dario Fo and Franca Rae and featuring one of their street performances. This was accompanied by a song about Fo written by singer Zhang Guangtian. One critic called this production “almost a dialogue between Meng and Fo” (Mu, 11-3-98).

A Western critic in Beijing pointed out that “the freedom allowed the production was surprising.” Meng commented: “no one got in the way.” It was not censored and “we even added lots of material … poking fun at elements of Chinese society that everyone agrees should be ridiculed” (in Barden, 1999). As Meng described, the audience “seemed happy” with the production; “nobody was too critical.” Dario Fo is a leftist and a Nobel laureate, “so he’s politically and artistically untouchable. He’s got everything covered, both bourgeois and proletariat credentials! It was as if we had a huge Dario Fo flag shielding and protecting us” (Meng, 7-15-99). Yet the lenient attitude undoubtedly resulted because the play was recognized as “foreign.” The actors were seen as “Italian” policemen, clad in “foreign police” uniforms and not Chinese. The madman wore black and white striped jail-house pajamas—a Western convention. When I asked about the political nature of the play, Meng joked: “That’s not a problem. Even if the theme is very anti-government, if it’s a foreign play, it’s OK to perform it in China. This is an Italian play!” (Meng, 7-15-99).

Audiences were excited about the production, although several critics found Meng’s “very loose” adaptation problematic: “this play has been turned into a Sinocized absurd comedy … but people want to know what the original unfamiliar foreign play is like.” “Meng changed the play to an extreme. … We never learn about the cleverness of Nobel laureate Dario Fo. … Imagine if foreigners adapted Thunderstorm!” (Su, 11-12-98).
Other critics were more enthusiastic, crediting Meng’s ability to captivate his audience:

“We overlook the ambiguous plot and are totally immersed in the surprises. During the performance there is endless laughter and applause. ... Accidental Death opens a brand new world. Meng is really ‘bad/ruthless!’” (Lu Yan, 10-29-98). Drama professor Chen Hui found Accidental Death “the most thought-provoking play I’ve seen in years. There should be no taboos.” Xie Meng, a young graphic designer, thought the play “really exciting, the punk rock of drama. The actors express exactly what they’re feeling” (Beijing Scene, 11-6-98).

**Rhinoceros in Love (Lian’ai de Xiniu, 1999)**

Significantly Rhinoceros in Love is a Chinese avant-garde play specifically written for director Meng Jinghui. This was the first huaju written by Liao Yimei, a TV and film screenwriter (and also Meng Jinghui’s wife). In Rhinoceros in Love, Ma Lu, a rhinoceros keeper at the zoo, falls in love with his neighbor, a young woman named Mingming, and begins a protracted campaign to win her heart. But it seems nothing can change Mingming’s indifference, not even Ma Lu’s unexpected lottery winnings. While the play is about unrequited love, it also embodies larger social issues and current values in Chinese society. Liao Yimei characterizes the overall milieu in song lyrics, which sound a bit like Madonna’s “Material Girl”: “It’s an age of material ... emotional ... information overload. It’s an age to keep your feet on the ground, make wise choices. ... Too many things to do, things to learn, sounds to hear, needs to satisfy” (“Material Age,” Rhinoceros in Love, 1999). Meng describes the metaphor of the rhinoceros, an animal on the verge of extinction, “a little stupid and very stubborn” (in Wang Jiangyue, 6-14-99). While the “fashion in society is rationality and practicality,” Ma Lu is too obstinate to give up his love. As Liao Yimei describes, some would consider this man a “fool.” “Nowadays, people are really practical and smart.” They know how to find “a secure position” in society, where they “can’t get hurt too badly or be ridiculed, and can easily avoid conflict”
But Liao believes in her protagonist: "One should persevere in the pursuit of one's ideals and dreams, just as in love." Ma Lu is "unusual," "really a rhinoceros in the crowd," but "if we were all afraid of ridicule, there would be no progress in society. ... Without persistence or stubbornness, there can be no new creation ... no unexpected new beginning for you" (Liao, "Playbill," 1999).

*Rhinoceros in Love* illustrates Meng's characteristic vignette structure and his ubiquitous use of a chorus. The continuing story of Ma Lu and Mingming was interrupted by choral interludes as actors played a variety of roles—all related to current Beijing city life. Meng again included a synthesis of elements: music, dance, mime, poetry and prose, song and speech. The production embodied Meng's eclectic mix of elements, including his signature voice and movement rhythm games. The performance was made up of three components: the love story between Ma Lu and Mingming, vignettes performed by a chorus of actors, and the music and songs. Playwright Liao Yimei introduced the "background" chorus episodes "both to connect the main story and illustrate society." *Rhino* is a *yinyue huaju* ("musical huaju"), as music is an integral part of the performance, expressing emotions, telling the story, and connecting the different vignettes (Liao, in Lu Yan, 12-22-99). Well-known musicians Zhang Guangtian, the musical director, and Yu Yiran composed eleven new songs specifically for this production. Liao Yimei wrote the lyrics; Yu Yiran played keyboard, while actor Guo Tao accompanied himself on guitar. *Rhinoceros in Love* opened with a lone actress singing Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender" *a cappella*—in English—immediately telling the audience that this will be a love story.

In terms of staging, a small stage platform with microphones and two guitars sat onstage (a stage on the stage) and a sound mixer was set in one corner. The set combined realistic elements—a bed, a chair—with surrealistic ones. An iron-framed bed was placed inexplicably next to a painting of a huge eyeball (reminiscent of surrealist painter Rene Magritte's "Eye in the Clouds") which dominated the scene. The "eyeball" painting was
framed by what looked like a gigantic modern rendition of a Chinese moon gate. A prop in one corner of the stage, an over-sized abstract clock (suggesting Salvador Dali’s “Drooping Watch”) served as a card table during the play.

A noisy first scene set up the background of the play. A group of young urbanites was busy building a millennium clock to welcome the new century, and a lottery drawing was in preparation. Performers chanted: “this is a rational and practical age.” The second scene was actually a flashback: Ma Lu stubbornly will not give up, especially when Mingming sleeps with him one night after her boyfriend mistreats her. To prevent her from going abroad after the boyfriend who discarded her, Ma Lu kidnapped Mingming, professing his love while blindfolding her and tying her to a chair. Ma Lu was “so unwise that he devoted everything to his lover instead of protecting himself” (Liao, “Playbill,” 1999). He introduced his rhinoceros Tula, his “best and last companion.” (Tula was a huge amorphous shape made of plastic sheeting.) Finally in total despair, he gave Mingming the “last thing” he could give her: “Tula’s heart ... and my soul and myself.” Killing the rhinoceros, Ma Lu dedicated Tula’s heart to Mingming. The police arrived and Ma Lu was ordered to release his hostage immediately. Oblivious to his surroundings, Ma Lu just held Mingming tightly. Mingming stood transfixed, and her eyes looked far away.

In contrast to the tragic unrequited love story, the comic “bits” of the chorus were fun and innovative. For example: parodying the gimmicks of the market-place, in one vignette, a smooth, quick-talking toothbrush salesman Yashua (“toothbrush”) tried to interest Ma Lu and his friends in his “free super give-away.” “If you buy one toothbrush you get two free”; but Ma Lu and his friends “only want the two free ones!” and brutalized the salesman, reducing him to tears. “Toothbrush” was invited to play cards and was actually a very slick player—a card shark winning all Ma Lu’s money. “Toothbrush” was “only pretending to be silly ... trying to protect himself”--a lesson about succeeding in society (scene 2, 281). Pretense, deceit, “playing it smart,” are apparently the name of
the game. Fast-paced movement and sound rhythm games included a sequence where the
eight chorus members were commuters jostled on their way to work. “Riding” the bus, the
actors mimed gripping bus handles in the air. Indicative of the trendy language and subject
matter, one of the actors talked about weige (“viagra”). Another chorus vignette was a
“love training lesson” in which people were taught how to cheat and discard their lovers. A
“love professor” lectured on the ten methods “to dump your lover.” The actors created
several “wise” endings for Ma Lu’s thwarted love affair and acted them out in popular TV
fashion, satirizing the cliché endings of current soap operas. In another vignette, looking
forward to the birth of the “child of the new century,” the actors played with photos of
famous individuals— including Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, Picasso, and Lu Xun. Along with
the humorous, trendy interludes, vignettes encompassed relevant and newsworthy
information for a modern Beijing audience on the eve of the new millennium. For example,
a group of young people debated and voted, shouting out in random order, the 100 most
significant news events of the 20th century. One critic pointed out that the background
stories were so enjoyable that audiences became distracted from the main love affair.
Another critic could only remember the “clever techniques and beautiful songs.” A tragic
love story “was submerged in laughter.” While the crowd was greatly entertained, “I
wished the background parts could be better related to the love story” (Ye Jun, 6-11-99).

Yet the dual structure of main story and choral interludes was actually the strength
of the production, as it provided a larger social context and kept the play from becoming
sentimental and childishly self-absorbed. Without the chorus vignettes, Rhino in Love
would have been a maudlin love story. Another critic described Rhino as “breaking
through formalized acting (chengshihuade biaoyan) and going directly to peoples’ hearts
... a huaju ‘in synch’ (hepai) with young peoples’ aesthetic ideas” (Ouyang, 9-1-99).
Another thought Rhino “made people feel a kind of happiness and freedom” (Wang, 6-14-99).
Meng explained that with Rhino, he again wanted “to provoke” his audience: “When
people laugh, they’ll be shaken up and realize that *huaju* can be performed like this” (in Man Yan, 6-4-99).

**Bootleg Faust (Daoban Fushide, 1999)**

*Bootleg Faust* was Meng Jinghui’s final production of the 1990s, carrying CNET into the new millennium—the first run was December 5, 1999-January 7, 2000. Lin Zhaohua’s *Faust*, introduced in the previous chapter, was produced by CNET earlier in the decade. Lin used experimental techniques to reinvent Goethe’s fantastical exploration of the human psyche—a mix of Chinese and Western theatre elements combined in a theatricalist, anti-realistic approach. Although Lin made significant cuts, he followed the original script in linear fashion to include both Parts I and II. Meng’s production was a comic adaptation of Goethe’s classic. Meng used his distinct eclectic mix of theatrical elements and completely deconstructed the original *Faust.* In his usual fashion, Meng set *Faust* in modern-day China, weaving current events and trends into the play with hilarious effects, as evidenced by the audience’s response. “Faust is not a foreigner to me. Everyone here is Faust” (Meng in *Beijing Scene*, 12-17-99). Meng again describes his aim “to educate young people on the defects of modern society.” He maintains that China is “racing ahead thoughtlessly.” Chinese youth are “blindly pursuing the new to satiate their desires and curiosity, but ending up merely confused” (in Jiang Xueqin, 6-1-00). The production comprised Meng’s by now familiar vignette structure, as Faust confronted the conflicts and contradictions of modern China. *Bootleg Faust* exposed the issues facing China’s youth: tradition vs. modernization, jarring conflicts between China and the West. Meng transported the audience through a bizarre dream-like world of pleasure and pain as Faust explored the meaning of life: “meet the devil, travel through time and space. Experience the adventures of a Chinese intellectual in modern and imaginary worlds” *(Beijing Scene, 12-10-99)*. *Bootleg Faust* included Meng’s ever-present rock-music. Beijing punk rocker He Yong, a fringe rock’n roll legend, served as Musical Director and
played keyboard. Yu Jiangying composed the songs. Music included rap, French ballads, techno-pop tunes, rock'n roll, as well as sound effects. He Yong's musical interludes were exciting, sudden bursts of energy throughout the performance.46

The idea for a new Faust adaptation originated at a reception at Beijing's Goethe Academy. The Academy President hoped to sponsor a performance of Faust in 1999 for the 250th anniversary of Goethe's birth. Meng promised to do this and elicited Professor Shen Lin's help. Dr. Shen, Head of the Theatre Arts Research Institute at Beijing's Drama Academy (Zhongyang xiju xueyuan xiju yishu yanjiusuo), adapted the script. Daoban ("bootleg," "pirated," "illegal") is quite a trendy term and especially emblematic of China in the 1990s. The title Bootleg Faust suggests the ubiquitous counterfeit products, especially "daoban CDs" and "daoban VCDs," a phenomenon which escalated in the economic climate of the decade.47 Shen Lin describes "the essence" of the piracy as "a mission to decode Goethe for the modern Chinese audience and create a new code of our own" (Shen, 1999).48 After he gave Meng Jinghui his script adaptation and rehearsals began, Shen Lin was quite surprised to discover that Meng was "pirating the pirated Faust!" ("Playwright's Words," 1999). Musical director punk rocker He Yong facetiously explained, "it's everyone's responsibility to curb piracy!" (He, 1999). Bootleg Faust may be called a truly collaborative effort between the director, playwright, and actors.

He Yong captures the playful and rebellious intentions of Bootleg's creators:

We can't get rid of art. ... When it brings us endless orgasms, we feel the world is at our feet. ... An excellent work of art doesn't have any direct value to peoples' lives. Between the existence and value of art there's always an irreconcilable contradiction. Then what do we get from it? In a realistic sense, we get nothing. But we enjoy it. We're like drug addicts and we're always seeking highs ... We're hedonists in the brand new century. ... If you want to enjoy yourself ... if you want to degrade yourself ... if you need an orgasm, come and see our production! ... I say 'Who is free?' ("Musical Director's Words," "Playbill," 1999).

While the above quote was a terrific publicity ploy, it also stands out as total anathema to the traditional propagandist Party Line of "art to serve the workers, soldiers, and peasants."

CNET's last huaju of the century embodied enormous changes!
Bootleg Faust was performed in the Little Theatre behind Beijing People’s Art Theatre. The “stage” was a ground-level brick floor featuring three simple wooden tables. The theatre was filled with piles of white sand from the performance zone to the audience seats. Meng had ordered the delivery of 15 truckloads of sand--much to everyone’s surprise (although a déjà vu for the original student creators of Si Fan). The stark space functioned, among other things, as the ascetic scholar’s cell, a bar, a Cabinet Ministers’ meeting hall, a model’s catwalk, and the planet Mars. The actors’ innovative use of the space in the small theatre created an intimacy between actors and audience, as the devil Mephistopheles first appeared hanging from the ceiling, crawling among the lighting fixtures up above. The performance began with He Yong’s loud and rhythmical drumming. A revised prologue was added in response to the constant and annoying ringing of cell-phones: the chorus of actors began to tell the story of Faust. Meng Jinghui stood in the center of the group while his beeper loudly buzzed. All the actors scolded Meng, and one actress admonished: “please turn off your beeper!” Meng exited and the play began again. Rather cleverly, the actors made their point about turning off beepers and cell-phones! (This sequence mirrored Lin’s role in “breaking the 4th wall” in Go Man.)

As in Goethe’s original, the lofty scholar Faust sold his soul to the devil in exchange for omniscience. In this instance, the devil Mephistopheles resembled a wild-eyed punk rocker with blonde-orange day-glow colored hair, a devil/angel and seductive clown. Beijing Scene reported: “the word is out that Hell has never been so much fun” (12-17-99). Goethe’s characters, Wagner, Gretchen, and Helen, were vaguely recognizable. As was Meng’s custom, in addition to the leading roles, a chorus of actors--altogether 20--played a variety of different characters including a bar hostess, gravediggers, the Goddess of Love Aphrodite, CNN TV anchors, TASS news correspondents, Cabinet Ministers, a Prime Minister, and the U.S. President. Meng cast six models with no acting experience at all to compete in a beauty pageant and act as Faust’s admirers.
The Chinese creators saw Faust as symbolizing the four pursuits of the intellectual: love, beauty, knowledge, and achievement. Embracing these themes, Shen Lin’s script was comprised of a prologue and four scenes. The dialogue included passages from classical Chinese poetry, references to characters in Chinese history and literature, contemporary slang, jokes, puns, a parody of Greek mythology, and a spoof of Chinese TV soap operas. The opening “Prologue: Life in the Study” was a very free adaptation of Goethe’s original. The other sections had “little to do with Goethe’s script” (Shen, 6-7-00). Through the exaggerated use of classical language, literary and historical allusions, and stereotypes of the conventional Chinese scholar, the language, at first majestic and elegant, quickly became acerbic social criticism, particularly of intellectuals. Faust appeared as a TV talk show host and TV news anchor in a parody of omniscient State-controlled media. In Faust’s “seduction of Gretchen scene,” the young lovers walk home from a bar playfully incorporating a “contact exercise” (jiechu lianxi). The two have to keep a point of physical contact between their bodies. Faust and Gretchen mischievously repeated the same line ten times: “I don’t want you to walk me home” and flirtatiously stepped on each other’s shoes. After Gretchen unwittingly killed her mother and brother, she became hysterical, and Faust threw an entire bucket of water on her to numb her panic. This scene was followed by the comic antics of two clowns—one is Gretchen’s brother—digging their own graves in the sand. The fashion models became a pom-pom waving squad of NBA cheerleaders as Faust judged the first beauty contest in history. Faust presented a golden apple to Aphrodite and won Helen’s love, “the most beautiful woman in the world.”

In the play’s most controversial scene, Faust and Professor Wagner appear as “foreign experts” at a Cabinet Meeting in an unnamed Country mired in internal and external chaos (Bootleg Faust, sc. 3, 17-19). This scene illustrates the play’s thinly veiled criticism: the Premier announces that the Country’s economy is at risk of collapse. The Minister of Public Security reports bandits and thieves everywhere. The Finance Minister
reports that officials will soon empty the national coffers. The Cultural Minister reports that people have lost their integrity, and the Minister of Propaganda finds the Country moving toward total degradation. The Minister of Education reports that the best youth are all going abroad. The Minister of Censorship reports that corrupt officials are embezzling money. The Minister of Commerce reports the manufacture of fake medicine, fake cigarettes, fake wine, and even "fake singing performances" (i.e., famous stars lip-synching). Police and bandits are working together, and the theft-proof iron doors on peoples' homes have become thicker and thicker. The Country seems a prison. Wagner proposes solving the problems by "rebuilding" the Nation's character:

Your Country is poor and weak because the people are ignorant, timid, disunited, dirty, impulsive, frenetic, arrogant, war-like, numb, cruel, and mean. If you want to save the situation from collapse, you must completely change the peoples' character. ... The times call for a modern character. ... The traditional character needs to be identified. What are its shortcomings? ... How can you build a modern character? (sc. 3, 17-19)

Faust proposes "a more expedient method": "a group of people who aren't selfish or corrupt. ... A person who's not a person! ... A Robot!" An actor plays the part of the robot as the scene continues. The robot (jigiren, "machine man") is toiling and spreading seeds in the field: "Serve your countrymen! ... Serve the village!" The residents throw stones at the robot. The robot is directing traffic: "Serve your countrymen!" The residents spit on the robot. The robot bravely catches a criminal: "Serve your countrymen!" The residents fiercely beat the robot. Soon many robots are helping the dying and wounded seemingly during a battle: "Serve your countrymen! "Serve the people!" As the robots busily work, they gradually win the peoples’ admiration:

Robots don't need a drop of water. ... Their mouths are so sweet. ... 'Serve your countrymen.' ... This young robot has a great body! I heard that he's called 'Very Hard'! ... He's much better than Faust. ... The robot should be made a 'model citizen' (mofan gongmin). Elect him to the National Congress! (Guomin dahui) ... He's so clean! He should be the Industry and Commerce Bureau Head of our district! 'Very Hard' should be the Head of the Court. ... He should be manager of a private enterprise. ... He should be in the Cabinet! He should be Prime Minister! We want 'Very Hard' to be Prime Minister! (sc. 3, 17-19)
Faust proudly asserts: “I’ve accomplished something here. ... The dawn of civilization has shined on this land.” But Faust is in for a big surprise. The Minister of Public Security charges him with “three serious crimes”: “confusing peoples’ minds, conspiring to overthrow the Cabinet, and profaning God’s name.” “Here’s the arrest warrant. You have the right to remain silent but all you say ... may be used as evidence in Court.” The Minister of Propaganda accuses Faust of “blatantly leading a personality cult!” While the people are shouting “long live the robot” and not “long live Faust,” the Minister of Impeachment calls Faust “the father of the robot” and demands: “Confess and you won’t be beaten!” The Minister of Culture charges Faust with “trying to seize the leadership of the Cabinet through a robot” and with “spurring on the mob and destroying public order.” Faust explains that he was “invited to formulate measures to stop corruption and improve efficiency,” but the Minister of Finance retorts: “If water’s too clear, there will be no fish. You’re depriving corrupt people of their right to subsistence. ... Corruption is evidence of human nature. When God created people, He created people like this. You dared to build a robot--Is that showing off in God’s face?” The Minister of Public Security screams: “Throw Faust out and have him beheaded!” and all the Cabinet Members shout: “You’ve confessed. There’s no need for a trial!” Faust can only call to Mephistopheles: “Save me!” (sc. 3, 17-19)

The scene’s satiric tone and the analogy between the unnamed Country and China were blatantly clear. The Cabinet Meeting reached a climax as Faust climbed up on the table and led the Cabinet Ministers in an elaborate and nonsensical gibberish sound and movement game--representative of Meng Jinghui’s style. The actors jumped up and down with wild yet rhythmic body movements, all repeating the words “shangxia qiusuo” (“search up and down”) (referring to omniscient surveillance). Critic Li Jian found this game “the most wonderful part of the play” (12-25-99).
Faust next became the first astronaut to land on Mars, and, floating in a “strange gravity” walk, he mimicked Neal Armstrong’s moon-landing: “One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” A “CNN announcer” reported this groundbreaking news: the joke here is that ordinary Chinese citizens are denied access to CNN. Faust looked back at the earth with all its beautiful colors. He was extremely happy and at peace. Faust was dying, and his first love Gretchen returned to save his soul. The play unexpectedly ended solemnly. Faust fell to the floor as white sand cascaded down from the ceiling above ultimately drowning him. Li thought the release of the sand “represented the great attraction and secret of freedom inspiring us to go forward” (12-25-99). There were clever and playful moments throughout the play, and the audience laughed continuously. The sand raining down on Faust was an arresting final visual image, and the theatre at last became quiet.

With Bootleg Faust, Meng cultivated his reputation as the “bad boy of Beijing theatre”: “I’m a rebel, and I like it!” (Beijing Scene, 12-17-99). One critic called Meng the “haute hooligan taking on Goethe.” Meng has “struck a blow to critics who scoff … at his sardonic ‘pisstakes’ on life in modernizing Beijing.” Meng “dissed the thespian elite and held high the banner of ‘hooligan culture’” (Beijing Scene, 12-17-99). As with Rhino, even after the Premiere, Meng and his cast continued to make changes: “We’re improvising; the music’s different everyday; we’re changing things all the time” (Meng, 1-11-00). One reviewer found Bootleg Faust “continuing the theatre craze begun with Rhino in Love” (Lu Yan, 12-22-99). Critics pointed to Meng’s “now-notorious discordant directorial style.” Meng’s comic adaptation of Goethe’s classic has Chinese audiences “eagerly lining up to go to hell” (Beijing Scene, 12-17-99). Critics described the rise of “the Meng Jinghui phenomenon.” Meng’s plays “have even become a ‘brand-name.’ … People are calling this ‘Meng Theatre’ (Mengshi xiju). Meng has become the star” (Lu Yan, 12-22-99). Bootleg Faust is “visually-stimulating high-energy entertainment … an
hilarious satire of Chinese pop culture,” with “powerful acting, sharply-honed comedy, and tight choreography.” *Bootleg Faust* is a work whose “appeal and relevance are universal” (*Beijing Scene*, 12-17-99).

*Bootleg Faust* stirred much excitement in the Capital—as well as controversy. While the majority of theatre-goers were excited to see a new Meng production, *Bootleg* also elicited scathing criticism. One critic commented that Meng “stays true” to his trademark style, “skillfully wielding a hyperactive phalanx of lights, sound, movement, and language only to distract the audience from the minimalist action, plot, and character development” (*Beijing Scene*, 12-17-99). Another critic observed: *Bootleg Faust* has “no new ideas; it’s banal and empty and doesn’t achieve a revolutionary piracy.” The audience sees Meng’s “fixed model again.” His productions “are becoming more and more superficial,” relying on “meaningless jokes … and merely pandering to the audience,” with the comic antics of the chorus as “the highlight” of the production. Several years ago this kind of comic acting was “a new post-modern artistic method.” Now it’s become “over-used and too much like those comic sketches at evening soirees” (Dai Fang 12-10-99). Another reviewer (not brave enough to sign his review?) was equally critical: Meng “tries to save the day by using a group of fashion models. … This is lively but irrelevant.” Shen Lin’s script “is wonderful,” but Meng only uses “the parts he thinks will achieve the best theatrical effects.” Meng employs “excellent actors and carefully creates piles of rubbish. He’s lucky to have producers who know their business” ("Meng Pieces Together Small Skits," 12-17-99). Critic Li Jian pointed out that Meng Jinghui’s “brand-name” had become “a double-edged sword.” People now want to see Meng’s “set ways.” Meng is “unconsciously driven” by his audience and “ironically actually ‘serving the people’” (*wei renmin fuwu*). This critic observed signs that “Meng Jinghui’s style is even spreading!” as other directors began following his techniques. While Meng’s “avant-garde spirit is defined by the media as non-mainstream” (*linglei*, lit. “another
kind”), Meng is “choosing that his plays become part of popular consumerist culture” (Li, 12-25-99). Li found Bootleg Faust lacking philosophical dimension:

> With piracy you can use lightness to handle the great weight of Faust . . . but Goethe’s Faust examined all the important human issues, . . . the contradictions between the body and soul. . . . Faust ‘s questions need to be addressed. . . . Here Faust seems to be an idiot. His problems seem funny and shallow, and he can only make us laugh. Why does Meng make a superficial try to deal with important issues? Is he compromising or does he lack the ability? There aren’t many chances to use Faust to talk about Chinese events. . . . This should have been a valuable opportunity (12-25-99).

Li was also aware of the difficulties in building an audience for huaju: “Maybe Meng’s strategy is correct.” First we need “to excite the audience enough to come. After we survive we can talk about development. . . . Meng straddles the wall, advances, and actually survives.” Now Meng’s name “guarantees box office profits. . . . In appearance he still retains the name of ‘avant-garde’” (12-25-99). Another critic had fun with astronaut Faust’s line “one small step” with a paraphrase: “while the audience laughs, Meng’s Bootleg Faust is only a small step in the process of experimentation” (Man Yan, 12-6-99). “We’ve seen this style before; people who expect a lot from Meng are disappointed” (Jia Wei, 12-8-99). Critics also thought that Bootleg Faust, performed in the Little Theatre behind Renyi, was “competing and playing a game with” Lin Zhaohua’s new version of Teahouse being performed at the same time in Renyi’s large Capital Theatre (Beijing Scene, 12-17-99).55 Critic Dai Fang ended on a sour and pessimistic note, finding that the “challenges” presented by Meng “by the end of the 90s had become merely a complicity with a small select audience.” “Apart from traditional huaju . . . what’s been added” during the 1990s is “only a new kind of ‘traditional’ huaju--with more form than content. ‘Meng theatre’ has been continually repeated and simulated by other young people. Thus huaju passed through the 90s” (12-10-99). In the very criticism above, the reviewers attest to the incredible influence Meng Jinghui has had over huaju during the past decade. One critic found Meng’s experimental techniques even “altering the nation’s theatre landscape” (Jiang Xueqin, 6-1-00).
Meng responded to his critics: “I’m not in a hurry to break from this style. ... My style will develop as I advance.” He thought audience participation “most important”: “If the audience isn’t moved, all our efforts are in vain.” The production is “not yet crazy and exciting enough. We’re ready to make revisions to make it even better” (in Jia Wei, 12-8-99). Meng does not consider “artistic innovation” an end in itself, but “a means to educate China’s youth to think about their fast-track life” (in Jiang, 6-1-00). While it is difficult to judge motives, this sounds ironically like the Party line of “educational value.” Meng explained that although he is a “potent critic of Chinese society,” government censors “largely turn a blind eye” to his work. Meng was having great fun with his interviewer as he related: “the government has always left me alone ... because they haven’t figured out how powerful plays are” (in Jiang, 6-1-00).

Management and Financial Practices:

Meng Jinghui began his directing career in the early 1990s right after Tian’anmen Square when Chinese huaju faced enormous difficulties, and few new plays were being produced. As Meng describes, his style “totally contradicts the academy training” which focuses on the Stanislavski System. Initially actors “didn’t want to be in my productions for fear of ruining their careers.” “They’re lured by the money in TV and films.” Over the decade, Meng found that actors discovered “experimental plays can be very attractive, and now we’ve got the best actors in huaju” (Meng, 7-15-99).

Meng Jinghui has cultivated a new audience made up primarily of young people. He has also nurtured a creative team of actors, writers, producers, stage designers, and music composers, who comprise the core of his PlayPlay Studio. This group of artists drawn from different Beijing theatres, as well as several free-lancers (with no home danwei), formed the core of Meng’s productions throughout the 1990s. This core became well-known to the young avant-garde audience: Guo Tao, CNET actor and TV-film star (in Zhang Yimou’s To Live, Huozhe) starred in the original Si Fan and played the leading role,
Ma Lu, in *Rhinoceros in Love*. TV star Wu Yue, a recent graduate of the Shanghai Drama Academy, played Mingming in *Rhino*. Undoubtedly both actors were a draw for the audience. Chen Jianbin, a Renyi actor, appeared as the madman in *Accidental Death* and also played Faust in *Bootleg Faust*. TV-film actress Mei Ting played Faust’s lover Gretchen. Zhou Xun, a teacher at Beijing’s Drama Academy, played a clown-narrator in *Accidental Death* and the devil Mephistopheles in *Bootleg Faust*. Ren Chengwei, a CNET actor, played a variety of roles in the *Si Fan 98* chorus and the Police Chief in *Accidental Death*. Chorus actors, including Zhao Huanyu, Li Naiwen, Li Mei, and Yang Ting, became quite adept at Meng’s signature choral interludes and sound and movement “gibberish” games. Zhang Guangtian composed the music for *Accidental Death* and wrote lyrics with Liao Yimei, who later wrote *Rhinoceros In Love*. PlayPlay Studio had its own production, marketing, and publicity teams, including Yuan Hong, Zhao Hai, Guo Fumin, Hang Cheng, Guo Zhuoyi, and Wang Xiaoli. As the above illustrates, Meng Jinghui in essence put together his own semi-independent repertory group. Meng calls himself a “lazy director.” He gives a general framework but expects the actors, as well as the design and publicity teams, to create on their own. As the actors attest, “we must work hard with such a director” (*Bootleg Faust* Website). This sounds similar to the comments actors made when describing their working relationship with Lin Zhaohua.

The Meng productions introduced above were all “semi-independent productions” (*ban dulide yanchu*) between Meng’s PlayPlay Studio and CNET--with the exception of *I Love XXX* produced outside official channels. The “semi-independent” relationship, a phenomenon of the 1990s, meant CNET was the official *danwei*, but the director raised outside funding himself. As VP Yang explained, CNET “passed the scripts and gave artistic supervision.” The State Theatres essentially operate as repertory companies. Actors have the opportunity to play a variety of roles if cast by theatre leaders and directors. With a semi-independent production, the director is able “to evade the restraints of the
system.” As Meng explains, “If I direct a play at CNET, I must work with certain individuals whether I want to or not” (Meng, 5-29-98). The “semi-independent” production gave the director a much greater role in decision-making. If Meng obtained funding himself, he could freely organize artistic and management teams. He had complete autonomy in casting—often working with actors outside of CNET or even non-actors. Meng could decide on the theatre venue and work with outside producers, designers, and musicians. Theatre artists often called Meng’s work “CNET in name only.” One disgruntled middle-aged CNET artist complained that the Theatre Leaders were giving Meng “too much freedom and were too permissive with him” (4-30-98). Actually the semi-independent relationship had its advantages all around: the director used CNET’s “performance license,” while CNET applied the performances of Meng’s productions towards the total 150 required each year by the Cultural Ministry, thereby qualifying for the much-needed Cultural Ministry subsidy. As VP Yang commented, “without any monetary investment from CNET, we can still produce new avant-garde plays” (Yang, 1-20-2000).

To more clearly illustrate budgetary, management, and financial practices, I have grouped this information together in this section. What is significant about the following budgets and numerical figures is that this is a brand-new phenomenon of the 1990s. Management techniques, publicity, fund-raising, and profit margins were never a consideration before the 1990s, as all funding came from the Cultural Ministry.

*I Love XXX* was co-written by Meng Jinghui, Shi Hang, Wang Xiaoli, and Huang Jingang, artists from various Beijing theatre companies and produced loosely under the aegis of Beijing’s Central Drama Academy. The eight actors came primarily from *Zhongxi* and CNET. Wang Xiaoli, producer and co-writer, was able to procure 60,000 RMB from a Chinese company for the production. Zhao Hai, the designer, is a *Zhongxi* graduate, who works independently and has no *danwei*. Without the backing of CNET, a prestigious
professional *huaju* theatre, and little publicity, the production had a very short run, primarily for invited guests in the theatre circle.

For *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Meng again put together a creative team from a variety of theatres as well as free-lancers. While CNET leaders Zhao Youliang and Yang Zongjing were honored as “Chief Artistic Producer” (*yishu zongjian*) and “Supervising Producer” (*jianzhi*), Meng had his own production, marketing, publicity, and design teams from his PlayPlay Studio. As evidence of their diligence (and connections!), the management team was able to procure funding, services, and products outside of CNET from a variety of Chinese and joint venture companies. Stirring controversy in the Press with its political subject matter and with Meng’s growing reputation, *Accidental Death* did reasonably well at the box office with “a successful [initial] six-week run” (Bonney, 46).

The budget for *Accidental Death* was 420,000 yuan, considerably higher than performances in the little theatre. This amount reflected the more expensive production costs and field rent for the larger China Children’s Art Theatre and university district Haidian Theatre. Reports were conflicting as to whether the production lost money or broke even at the box office. While there was much discussion about enthusiastic audiences, there was no mention at all of box office profits. At any rate, tickets sold for 40-100 yuan, consistent with the rise in ticket price over the decade, and the large Children’s Art Theatre was completely sold-out every time I saw the production.

Meng and his collaborators again procured funding themselves for the PlayPlay - CNET co-production, *Rhinoceros In Love*. This time, a little theatre, the 300-seat thrust stage at China Youth Art Theatre’s black-box was deemed especially appropriate. Citing the new market research, Meng explained that, for a large theatre with higher field rent, he might need 40 performances to break even, while in the little theatre, he might only need 30 performances. Ticket prices would also “be adjusted accordingly” (Meng, 7-15-99). While the majority of funding for *Rhino* came from outside, CNET contributed 50,000
RMB for field rent and lighting and sound equipment “to help out” (Yang, 2-22-2000).

This production illustrates new terms used for the innovative financial practices of the 1990s. The “main sponsors” (zhuban) were “host danwei” (zhuban danwei) CNET and the companies which gave the most money. A variety of companies were xieban (“sponsors,” “supporters”) providing products and services—indicative of the intensive marketing effort which went into this production.59 Rhino’s budget was 280,000 yuan, a considerable amount for the little theatre (Meng, 7-15-99). Publicity and marketing endeavors paid off, and Rhino made money at the box office. The Press reported that Rhino “broke Qingyi’s Little Theatre box office record” with the “unbelievable amount of 90,000 yuan” earned from the first 8 performances, “the usual income from 20-30 performances” (Ouyang, 9-1-99). After its first run, Rhino was quickly brought back by popular demand. Ticket prices were higher than usual for the Little Theatre: 30 special VIP tickets were reserved at 100 yuan each, and 300 “regular” tickets at 50 yuan. The production sold out, and audience members stood in the aisles. After 40 performances, the press reported a box office record of 400,000 yuan (Hang, 11-19-99). Young people were “huaju’s target audience.” According to a survey of those queuing up to buy tickets, 80% were young people and 25% were students (Ouyang, 9-1-99).

For Bootleg Faust, the zhuban danwei (“sponsoring work unit”) besides CNET was Beijing’s Goethe Academy. As with Lin Zhaohua’s Faust, the Goethe Academy would provide funding only under an umbrella organization, i.e., a State Theatre, rather than to individual artists. Bootleg Faust’s management and design teams included the PlayPlay collaborators who had produced Rhinoceros in Love: Ge Dali, Hang Cheng, Yuan Hong, and Zhao Hai (who has worked with Meng since I Love XXX in 1994). The management team was again able to acquire products and services from a variety of Chinese companies. Following the successful strategy of Rhino, Meng hoped his Bootleg Faust team “would understand the pulse of the market more.” As he described, the success of Rhino laid a
solid foundation for “a series of future theatre marketing explorations” (*Bootleg Faust* Website).

PlayPlay Studio designed Websites for both *Rhino* and *Bootleg Faust* with production photos, commentary, and play excerpts. For *Rhino*, a contest sponsored by a local radio program, *Jingcheng renjia* (“Capital City Family”) had invited the audience to share their feelings about the play and “e-mail the cast and tell us about your own love stories.” *Bootleg Faust* had a “telephone consultation hotline” (*dianhua zixun rexian*). One critic commented that society is getting “more and more connected to the internet”: “*huaju* is only one choice of entertainment, but it fulfills the most attractive aspect of our spiritual needs--face to face human communication” (Yuan, 12-4-99). Expanding on his *Si Fan* and *Accidental Death* “Audience Surveys,” Meng organized a discussion meeting after every performance of *Rhino* and *Bootleg Faust* to give audience members a chance to share their ideas. Reacting to audience feedback, the creative team continued to make revisions, and large chunks of dialogue and comic “bits” were reworked almost daily. Meng commented that “Mao said to reach the people!” (1-11-2000).

Meng continued his endeavors to develop the audience for *huaju*. A strong effort was made to connect with local media, including cultural and arts newspapers and journals as well as TV and Radio. A marketing director was a vital part of the creative team. Tickets were sold through the Websites and at universities and colleges, theatres and shopping centers all over town. *Bootleg* tickets were 50-80 yuan, with a one-time 25 yuan student matinee. This provided a wide-range of ticket prices. PlayPlay’s marketing and publicity strategies again paid off. *Bootleg Faust* in the Little Theatre behind Beijing People’s Art Theatre--like *Rhino*--played to standing-room only crowds and made a profit at the box office. Again, similar to *Rhino*, the Press reported more than 10,000 yuan profit everyday of *Bootleg Faust*’s initial 30-day run (Lu Yan, 12-22-99). *Rhino* and *Bootleg* were called the “two wonders of two Little Theatre box offices in Beijing” (Lu Yan, 12-22-99).
With the financial success of *Rhinoceros in Love* and *Bootleg Faust*, Meng gained confidence, and theatre circles became “optimistic about the future market for *huaju*” (Hang, 11-19-99). Through his efforts, Meng has made a huge impact on young audiences and earned an enthusiastic following. “People see hope for *huaju* right before the dawn of the new century” (Lu Yan, 12-22-99). At the end of the decade, Meng was already preparing to take *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, *Rhinoceros in Love*, and *Bootleg Faust* on the road for a tour of Chinese cities. He was also planning to direct a new production of Mayakovsky’s satirical play *The Bedbugs (Chouchong)* in Beijing.62
CHAPTER 6

EXPERIMENTAL / MAINSTREAM: CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

Two CNET productions are particularly cogent examples of the changing face of *huaju* at the end of the 1990s. These are both Chinese-written plays: *Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiaojie)* and *Fields of Life and Death (Sheng Si Chang)*. Both productions, belonging to Beijing mainstream theatre, combined realism with experimental non-illusionistic techniques. CNET’s *Gossip Street*, directed by Meng Jinghui in 1998, was controversial in terms of both content and style, although it primarily used mainstream realism. As described previously, social commentary/criticism in the style of realism has been a defining characteristic of *huaju* since its inception. Significantly, *Gossip Street* presented overtly controversial material in addition to the implicit criticism often part of nationalization, foreign and avant-garde productions. *Gossip Street* is a noteworthy case study, as this is the one Meng production belonging to “mainstream” theatre, rather than the “avant-garde.” In contrast, CNET’s *Fields of Life and Death*, directed by Ms. Tian Qinxin in 1999, was experimental in style, with primarily realistic acting, and presented propagandist content. *Fields of Life and Death*, a “main melody” play, employed experimental *huaju* techniques. At the same time, the production had elements in common with the Cultural Revolution’s *yangbanxi* (“model revolutionary plays”) and might paradoxically be called an “experimental revolutionary contemporary play” (*shiyan geming xiandaixi*)—nomenclature virtually unthinkable a decade ago—at least in *huaju.* *Fields of Life and Death* may represent the ideal post-Tian’anmen “main melody play,” i.e., the possibility, in fact the necessity and attraction, of combining experimental non-illusionistic techniques with propagandist content, in order to find an audience. This chapter will examine *Gossip Street* and *Fields of Life and Death* in terms of their production style and content. I will discuss conception / intention; performance text / storyline; directorial
concept; rehearsal process / acting techniques; mise-en-scene / aesthetics / form and content; reactions from the audience, critics, and the theatre circle; as well as management / financial practices. *Fields of Life and Death* will introduce a director we have not yet encountered, Ms. Tian Qinxin. From previous chapters, the reader is already familiar with *Gossip Street*’s director Meng Jinghui.

**Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiaojie, 1998)**

Conception / Intention: *Gossip Street* was written by playwright Guo Shixing and first performed in 1998. This was resident playwright Guo Shixing’s second CNET-produced play. Like his *Go Man* (directed by Lin Zhaohua in 1996), *Gossip Street* embodied a problematic yet intriguing rehearsal process, contentious subject matter, and colliding playwright / leader / director artistic intentions. *Gossip Street* is an example of Nationalization with a contemporary rather than an historical context. Thematically, *Gossip Street* explores the role of “gossip / rumor” in human relations with the “idiot sauvant” as the voice of reason. The content of the play is actualized in convoluted linguistic games.

Guo Shixing describes his fourth play *Gossip Street* as “different from his ‘Idle People Trilogy’” (*Xianren sanbuqu*). The characters in *Gossip Street* are “ordinary people ... without any special hobby ... who just spread gossip.” Guo wondered:

> But how much ‘tension’ could there be with just rumors onstage? The audience would lose interest after thirty minutes. There needed to be something in addition to gossip. I thought of folklore and tongue twisters, which transform people into symbols and often embody wicked ridicule (He, ed., 361).

Many of the traditional tongue twisters, puns and word games are ill-intended, but also humorous and skillful. Starting with folklore and language games with their underlying implication of gossip, Guo “wanted people to think about the bad phenomena in society.” As he explained, addressing the weaknesses in society directly “wouldn’t be artistic or theatrical” (1-19-00). “The entire play incarnates the process of language, as words are

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dismantled and dispelled. ... Language is made into a kind of art” (Guo, “Playbill”).

When a rumor is presented onstage, “its evil glamour is manifested” (Guo in He, ed., 361). Guo characterizes the language in *Gossip Street* as “a kind of ‘rock’n roll.’” As he explains, “I use the term ‘rock’n roll,’ because the play is intended to overthrow tradition.” In China’s traditional art of folklore and tongue twisters, he finds “a mystical rhythm that is like rock’n roll” (1-19-00). “Rebellion and anger are part of the play’s ‘rock’n roll’”--perhaps a better term might be “hip hop.”

For non-Chinese to fully understand the ramifications, some explanation is necessary here. “Gossip” has a particularly dangerous connotation in China. During the Cultural Revolution, rumors often precipitated brutal consequences, resulting in imprisonment or death. As Guo explained, Chinese “li” (“rituals,” “etiquette”) have existed throughout Chinese history. Originally emperors and officials followed these rituals, which were then extended to the general populace as common people were forced to comply. Over generations, ordinary people came to consider this “proper behavior” increasingly negative and hypocritical. Since the May 4th Movement in 1919, a revolutionary group has fought against the Confucian-Mencian School (*Kong Meng zhidaodao*) which is built on “li.” This revolutionary movement continued through the Cultural Revolution under the premise of “criticism” (*piiping*) and “self-criticism” (*ziwo piping*), escalating into insults and unrestricted attacks. The gossip and libel, completely destroying reputations, were impossible to repudiate through any sort of legal action (Guo, 1-19-00). While Guo used the past tense in our discussion, this situation still persists. As Guo illustrated (1-19-00),

Tina, I may write a big character poster (*dazibao*) against you. I can use my imagination and make up your crime. I can say that you’re a spy sent to China by the CIA. Though this can never be investigated or proven, others will have the feeling that you’re a spy. Suddenly you’ll find that people never accept your interviews, and they’re kind of wary of you. This is the function of gossip.
Guo thought this destructive behavior continued because "gossipers have never been punished." He described the "methods of the Communist Party ... practiced against those they wanted to criticize." These are the "four bigs" (sida): "big character posters" (dazibao), "big debates" (dabianlun), "big criticisms" (dapipan) and "big connections" (da chuanlian). Now the "four bigs" have been "repudiated by law, an advance made by China in terms of protecting human rights." But "gossip can never be banned. It's engrained in the Nation's consciousness." Guo cynically attributes "gossip" to "unfair competition in Chinese society," an outcome of the corruption and inequalities, which he thinks are part of the System (1-19-00). As he explains:

As a playwright, I don't simply want to educate and entertain. I also want the audience to feel the pain. I'm interested in humankind's universal weaknesses. I'm against the utilitarian way of writing a play against a certain policy or regulation. Those plays end their lives as soon as the policy or regulation expires. ... I can't do what politicians are supposed to do; I should do what the artist can, i.e., deeply explore humankind's evil and kindness and criticize the nation's weaknesses by means of a play rather than a revolution (1-19-00).

In answer to further questions about the play's overt social criticism and political implications, Guo responded:

You may say the play is very critical of Chinese society and politically sensitive, but ... no one has raised any questions. [The government] is relaxed now. Nobody had written a script about this before and so I wrote this play. ... A conscience must exist in every society. People understand that their living conditions aren't very good. They wonder why we treat each other badly. A young Chinese man, who studied in the U.S., told me that when he saw the play, he cried inside. ... This behavior was part of the Cultural Revolution, but I'm afraid it's also happening now. ... Many of China's problems weren't brought about by 'Reform and Opening,' but in fact were revealed by the reform and opening. They're engrained in Chinese society (1-19-00).

Theatre Leaders were eager to produce the play. As Guo's resident danwei, CNET got first approval of the script. Gossip Street was promoted as "a large-scale contemporary huaju":

... a lively comedy with the strong flavor of folk art, an absurd fable ... directed by Meng Jinghui, who is well-known for his innovative style and experimental ideas. ... Gossip Street helps the audience confront their own restless confusion about materialism and spiritual loss (Guang, "Press Release").
CNET again stressed the appeal to both “refined and popular” tastes and the play’s “very strong entertainment element” (Guang, “Press Release”). President Zhao Youliang thought that the script was “especially well-written, with charming and vivid language. We should admit that many Chinese have the bad habit of gossiping behind peoples’ backs.” Zhao hoped to “teach people to learn to say something good instead of gossiping.” While the subject is realistic, the story is told through the folklore and folk music of Beijing (Zhao, 11-25-98). Although an educational value is inherent to Zhao Youliang’s description, CNET artists, including playwright Guo and director Meng, called Gossip Street an example of “nationalization” rather than “main melody.” Using the narrow definition, Guo explained: “This is not ‘main melody,’ because this play criticizes Chinese peoples’ weaknesses. ‘Main melody’ plays are used chiefly to eulogize” (1-19-00). Xian Jihua, Head of CNET’s Play Creation Center, commented: Gossip Street shows “some peoples’ confusion in modern society. ... Now we must consider a play’s social effect as well as its economic effect in terms of the box office.” A play “should be attractive” to the audience. “Since ‘main melody’ means content that is healthy, positive, instructive, encouraging, and makes people feel good ... Gossip Street is not really ‘main melody,’ but it can be classified into the ‘diversity’ group” (duoyanghua). It’s permitted because “we should advocate ‘main melody’ and at the same time promote ‘diversity’” (1-25-00). As previously described, “main melody” answers the need to “serve the people”; “diversity” encompasses the idea of letting “one-hundred flowers bloom.” CNET Party Secretary Wang’s comments convey the mind-set of “main melody” (7-14-99):

‘Xiao hou shou qi di’ [“after laughing receive instruction”]. Gossip always damages relationships and harmony in society. This play is good because after laughing, the audience can learn through the clever use of language. ... From a wide perspective, this is ‘main melody’ because it’s conducive to people, to society.

Performance Text / Storyline: Gossip Street, written in a realistic, yet lyrical, style, takes place in the hutong (“lanes,” “alleys”) and siheyuan (“a compound with houses
around a courtyard,” “quadrangle”) of an old Beijing neighborhood. Guo Shixing gives a
detailed description of the setting: “an ordinary street in the North” called Huaihuajie
(“Chinese Scholar Tree Flower Street”). The joke here is that the title of the play
(Huaihua yitiaojie [a]) and the name of the street (Huaihua [b]) are similar in sound,
although their written characters and tones are different. Guo describes the old courtyard
as well as rows of newly-built high-rises with flower-boxes on the balconies. The trees are
stripped of all their leaves, and white plastic bags, blown by the wind, hang on the trees. A
telephone booth on the street corner has a sign that reads: “domestic and international long­
distance telephone” (Guo, Gossip Street, 1998). In fact, this is a picture of China in
transition. Demolition of Beijing’s old hutong and siheyuan and construction of high­rises
were a daily reality.

We meet the residents of an old Beijing neighborhood. Grizzled Beard (Huabai
Huzi) sits in his telephone booth reading a newspaper. A street cleaner sweeps the dirt into
a sewage hole. Neighborhood children recite nursery rhymes and get into mischief by
sneaking behind the telephone booth and using the area as a toilet. Two outsiders meet
unexpectedly on Huaihua Street: Er Cong (lit. “Sharp Ears”), a young woman with a tape­
recorder, is collecting folklore (minyao). The pun here is that yao can mean both
“folklore” and “gossip.” Mu Ming (lit. “Bright Eyes”), a young man carrying
binoculars, appreciates the beauty of Chinese scholar tree flowers. A “mysterious man”
(shenmi ren) enters the scene, asking about the two outsiders. Er Cong and Mu Ming want
to stay several days, and Grizzled Beard sends them to Auntie Zheng (Zheng Da Ma), a
widow living alone in a large courtyard house with many vacant rooms. Amidst a climate of
rumor and suspicion, the two strangers must show their ID cards before Auntie Zheng will
let them temporarily move into her house. A little boy and girl sing children’s songs,
cursing and taunting Auntie Zheng. Through their nonsense rhymes, they are spreading
rumors about the old woman and insulting Er Cong and Mu Ming. Everyone is afraid of
gossip and suspicious of the neighbors. A language game ensues, as the residents and
Grizzled Beard compete with each other reciting folk rhymes. Er Cong is eager to record
the curses and insults, the folk songs and stories. As ambulance sirens are heard, several
doctors in white coats enter. The mysterious man is a mental patient who escaped from the
hospital--after stealing a doctor's cell-phone, which will enable him to call Grizzled Beard’s
phone booth and ask questions about the two strangers. The doctors describe the man as
extremely dangerous and warn the residents to be careful. The madman wants to protect all
ancient buildings and the old hutong. As he sees it, some residents would sacrifice these for
short-term benefits. Living in high-rises rather than courtyard homes, they would have their
own kitchens and toilets. They could close their doors and not hear the neighborhood
gossip anymore. The mysterious man suspects that Er Cong and Mu Ming are from a
construction company planning to tear down this ancient hutong dating from the Ming
dynasty. He beats Mu Ming in an effort to find out when the old street will be demolished,
but Mu Ming is actually an unemployed youth just waiting to be assigned a job (daiye).
Grizzled Beard and the other residents decide to lure the mysterious man out of hiding.
One of the residents and the madman compete in reciting language rhymes. Er Cong
becomes mesmerized, thinking the mysterious man is Grizzled Beard, an expert in Chinese
folklore. We hear more rumors: Auntie Zheng and Grizzled Beard were once in love, but
Grizzled Beard’s family was so poor that Auntie Zheng’s father would not allow the
marriage. Grizzled Beard seduced many women when he was younger, his wife died, his
son ran off illegally to France, and his daughter-in-law is paralyzed. The doctors suddenly
arrive to search Auntie Zheng’s house for the escaped mental patient. Neighbors crowd
into the courtyard, blaming Auntie Zheng: she should never have welcomed strangers; her
guests should have registered with the police for a linshi hukou ("temporary residence
permit"). The crowd shouts and laughs at old Auntie Zheng. She married a rich man
instead of Grizzled Beard. Her landlord family’s big house and all their belongings were
confiscated, and her husband committed suicide by hanging himself. There are rumors that Auntie Zheng had an affair with the Head of the Housing Regulation Office in order to get her house back after the Cultural Revolution. As the neighbors search for the escaped mental patient in Auntie Zheng’s courtyard, he absconds over the roof.

The scene shifts to Grizzled Beard’s one room. Even though his paralyzed daughter-in-law Niuzi (“girl”) cannot walk, Grizzled Beard has bought her a pair of new shoes so the neighbors will not look down on them. Since his son ran off to France three years earlier, Grizzled Beard has been taking care of Niuzi. The neighbors gossip that Grizzled Beard is involved in an incestuous affair with his daughter-in-law, and they go to his room to taunt her. The mysterious man arrives to save Niuzi, and, through a miraculous turn of events, the madman and young girl are able to escape. The scene returns to Auntie Zheng’s courtyard. Mu Ming erases all the folklore Er Cong has collected on her tape recorder. This street, famous for its Chinese scholar tree flowers, has not seen a single flower for years because of the pollution of gossip. Mu Ming blames the folksongs for emitting poisonous gases and “eroding everything.” Er Cong and Mu Ming quarrel. Mu Ming’s binoculars are ruined; Er Cong’s tapes are destroyed. Auntie Zheng is also upset. She does not want to live as a lonely old woman, criticized and bullied by her neighbors. She believes that kindness can still exist: “if the Chinese scholar tree flowers are in your heart, you don’t need to see them.” Grizzled Beard’s sad voice is heard calling for Niuzi to put on her new shoes. The little boy and girl are singing rhymes. The madman and Niuzi appear on the roof, and the residents try to lure them down: “We won’t hurt you. Believe in the masses!” The residents want Grizzled Beard to defeat the madman with folklore, but the old man cannot think of anything. “Distract them and we’ll catch them! Get a rope, get a ladder!” Er Cong recites the names of the maze of hutong, which actually tells the mysterious man and Niuzi the escape route. Ironically plastic garbage bags rain down on the stage. Mu Ming looks up and sees the trees are finally “in bloom”: “How beautiful!”
**Directorial Concept:** When CNET asked Meng Jinghui to direct *Gossip Street*, he was initially quite enthusiastic about the project. Meng liked the script and "wanted to show the power, even the physical power, of language" (7-15-99). Meng wanted to follow a style suggestive of Brecht, while, as he described, playwright Guo wanted realism. Meng refers to "popular 'vulgar realism,'" a derogatory term directed against traditional realism, the Stanislavski approach of experiencing the character, "I am the character," a method which Meng feels limits the actor's imagination (7-15-99). Meng prefers the model of anti-realists Meyerhold, Artaud, and Grotowski. He also admires the Brechtian concept of "estrangement," so the audience "will be forced to think" (6-17-98). The director wanted the rock band *Hua shi xiao yuedui* ("Little Chinese Lion Band") to play throughout the performance "to stress a sort of 'musical alienation' in the style of Brecht" and to create a "change of pace to help the audience relax between acts" (7-15-99). Meng intended to follow what had by then become his signature, avant-garde style by using a chorus, physicalization, sound and movement rhythm games, gibberish, current slang, rock or pop music, an overall theatricality. He thought the script "very clever," but also "common and popular," appealing to an unsophisticated audience. He hoped "to achieve a great elegance despite the 'realistic vulgarity'" ("Rehearsal Log," 7-23-98).

**Rehearsal process / Acting techniques:** The creative team had a total of five weeks, CNET's usual rehearsal period. Yet time was short for the singing and dancing rehearsals Meng wanted to incorporate. As rehearsals began, Meng told his actors: The production "should have its own unique style." The play relies on language. "You might say 'this is real huaju,' but it's also different" from the usual play: "We can't understand this play with our former way of thinking. This is better than the 'realistic plays' done by Beijing Renyi. Through the songs and folklore, we must think more deeply ... to correctly grasp the style" (Log, 7-23-98). In his usual way before formal rehearsals began, Meng showed his actors videotapes of foreign productions, emphasizing physicality and ensemble (see
chapter 5). Meng encouraged actors to “come early to rehearsal and stretch out a bit. ... You’ll have more energy” (8-3-98). Physical and vocal warm-ups were not the usual practice in *huaju*. Meng also wanted the actors to improvise, “to get into the play through a sense of ease and relaxation.” He did not want “the kind of acting found in the theatre academy,” presumably stiff and formal “Acting.” “No one should have traditional thinking as to their lines. The lines should be as in real life” (7-28-98). Musician Zhang Guangtian, who had previously collaborated with Meng on *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and who would later work with Meng on *Rhino in Love*, composed an entire music score for *Gossip Street*. Zhang led the “crowd actors” in song and dance rehearsals, encouraging them “not to go to extremes or it will be false. Body movement should grow out of the voice. ... The singing is Brechtian ... with a stony face” (8-15-98).10

Guo Shixing often attended rehearsals, giving suggestions and notes to the actors. Meng had difficulties with this, as he was used to working improvisationally and anti-realistically. The following rehearsal comments are telling: actress Li Yeping (Auntie Zheng) sensed “something inside the script. ... The usual rendering won’t be enough. We must try to grasp the characters’ internal thoughts” (7-23-98). Playwright Guo advised “creating characters through their different psychologies ... especially here where everyone is snooping on everyone else. There’s a strong psychological basis. It’s not simply reciting lines” (7-23-98). Meng thought “the acting should be specific and delicate, but another kind of acting would be ‘collective.’” He made cuts in the script, reassigned lines, and adapted lines to incorporate group recitation. Meng drew an intriguing analogy: “Similar to *Dongfanghong* (‘The East is Red,’ a well-known Maoist theme song performed by the masses during the Cultural Revolution), twenty additional people will come to sing with us” (7-23-98). Meng tried to get at deeper underlying meanings: “The mysterious man often speaks out some philosophy. You’ve got excitement, anger, fear. ... There are many aspects, and you should try to find even more” (8-12-98). He continually
encouraged his actors to “get away from their usual style.” Yet the actors were confused. Xu Wei (Mu Ming) felt “I have nothing to do onstage.” Liu Peiqi (Grizzled Beard) thought “we must have a plot; then the audience will pay attention to the characters’ fates” (8-10-98). Actress Tao Hong (Er Cong) complained:

"Everyone’s acting style is different, and I can’t find a suitable style. What on earth the actor is hasn’t been decided yet! And all the time I just passively take the impact from other characters. ... I’ve tried different ways: acting the character as an angel, an extremely talkative person, and a wild person, ... but whatever I do, the lines and movements don’t correspond (8-20-98).

Xu Wei made a request: “Director, you have to decide for us. Then we’ll perform well.” Li Yeping: “We all need to follow the same method. ... Director, you’d better tell us now. Are we red or green? How are we supposed to act? Time is very limited.” Musician Zhang Guangtian thought the actors “should enter a state of creating, not a state of ‘Acting.’” Meng responded: “Li Yeping, you act as if you’re just closely following some specific rules. You’re not very free” (8-21-98).

CNET leaders came to “examine and watch” (shen kan) after just ten days of rehearsal. VP Yang liked the chorus and how they used the language, especially the street-peddlers’ Beijing dialect and slang, but he could not hear the lines clearly. President Zhao Youliang advised: “if the language doesn’t work, the play fails.” He thought the play was intriguing, but “the form of performance is wrong”; the singing and dance movements are “strange and inappropriate.” “Don’t just pay attention to form. You must understand the content of the lines” (“Leaders’ Examine,” 8-5-98). Meng assessed:

“The most important thing is that the leaders affirm our performance style. It’s very new. In a short time, we rehearsed and came to this point ... but we still have some problems concerning the combination of choral singing and the play. Some actors seem as if they don’t know why they’re onstage. ... The leaders recognized our problems right away. ... If we rehearse well, we’ll receive good audiences. I think we’ve chosen the right direction (8-26-98).

Guo Shixing (interrupting Meng above) added: “The actors need to understand some of the lines more thoroughly.” Director Meng responded: “We have a good understanding of
the script now, but we’re not so sure about the song verses. … Let’s hold on.” He thought it “impossible” to change the general style now: “Actually this play is avant-garde. If there weren’t any avant-garde things, it wouldn’t be interesting at all. It’d just be ordinary” (8/27-28/98). The director and actors held another discussion. Differences in acting style were apparent: Niu Piao (Madman) told Liu Peiqi (Grizzled Beard): “Your yongxian (shortened form of yongsu xianshi zhuyi, “vulgar/common realism”) is inhibiting other actors.” Liu Peiqi to Niu Piao: “Your character is quite good now, but you’re too shallow. Go a bit deeper. You can try some realistic things. You can’t throw them all away and confuse all our colleagues. The play is supposed to be seen by an audience.” Liu Peiqi to Meng: “You must first of all decide about the ‘vulgar realism’ things. Now the play virtually has no characters. Then what is it that you want to show?” (9-1-98). This question was left unanswered, as Meng responded: There are “no serious problems,” but some parts “aren’t connected well. We still need to rehearse.” Now “we don’t have music or lights, but the basic form is most important. Get your energy up. There’s not much more time” (9-3-98). CNET leaders came to observe again for the last time before the opening. Criticisms were quite harsh. Leader Zhao Youliang commented:

We’ve rehearsed a long time and it’s been difficult. … Some actors just do their own acting; there’s no cooperation and too many pauses. The music’s no good. It’s too strange. This isn’t a musical, and we don’t need the band. We can’t hear the actors’ lines clearly. You need to clean this up. … The actors do a terrible job, and some actually haven’t got any feeling at all. I should point out that you’ve worked very hard and often overtime, but the singing’s no good. … An actor laughed onstage; that’s not allowed. The production makes us uncomfortable (9-6-98).

Meng defended his ideas: This is the “first time we’ve put everything together.” This is a “concept. … It’s about combining music and script. … I’m not sure whether this play can be good without music.” He also agreed with the leader’s ideas that “some of the music should be cut. … It’s a problem of wanting different styles” (9-6-98). VP Yang found the
play “more common” now. It “reminded” him of a “small acrobatic troupe with a lot of awkwardness” onstage:

The music’s so confusing. Some singing can be kept, for example, the singing between acts, but the actors must sing clearly. You must promise that you can do a good job in just a few days. You must decide for yourself whether you’ll keep the music … how much to keep, and how to use it (9-6-98).

Playwright Guo Shixing disagreed with Meng and the Leaders:

This is just too contradictory. Group recitation gives more force to the original lines, and the audience will get the wrong idea. The singing’s no good. My play has been damaged. When you argue against this play’s ‘vulgar realism,’ you can also argue that the music is ‘vulgar realism.’ Now the play reminds me of a dance out in the open fields (9-6-98).

Zhou Yuyuan, CNET actor and administrator, told Meng: “We can let you have a musical next year or the following year.” These actors “don’t have the qualifications” for a musical. “This wasn’t moving at all. It felt too weird. Some actors need to rehearse more. … Sometimes there are just too many people onstage. There should be fewer” (9-6-98).

Leader Zhao ended the discussion: “It will be fine if we have singing only at the beginning and end. That’s enough. … There must be some memorable parts in the play” (9-6-98).

Zhao gave the actors and technical crew detailed notes and specific criticisms. Meng Jinghui kept only the opening and closing songs and cut all the songs in the middle. The pop-rock band played during the first run of the play, but was cancelled for the second run.

The leaders had also been very critical of Lin Zhaohua’s Go Man, as previously described, but Lin, an older and more experienced director, was more able to hold his own. Gossip Street first opened before Meng’s box office hits, Rhino in Love and Bootleg Faust. While some theatre artists continued to criticize Meng’s experimental work, his incredibly successful box office by the end of the decade brought much added respect. From the above, it is clear why Meng Jinghui preferred to direct “semi-independent” productions with greater autonomy and collaboration with artists familiar with his rehearsal style.
Mise-en-scene / Aesthetics / Form & Content: *Gossip Street* was performed in the 900-1000 seat proscenium China Children’s Art Theatre. While Guo Shixing’s set descriptions in his script are very realistic, the production simultaneously employed both realism and anti-realism in every aspect: the set, acting, music, costumes. In performance, *Gossip Street*, combining reality and illusion, was lively, puzzling, and provocative. CNET set designer Yan Long came up with the idea of using a raked stage of tiled rooftops to create a style combining realistic and stylized efforts. The effect was as if audience members, like neighborhood busybodies, were peeking into the courtyard. A trapdoor in the roof allowed a snoopy neighbor to unexpectedly pop out. The raked rooftops took up the entire width of the stage, embodying the omniscient Neighborhood Committee’s constant surveillance. A multi-colored sky with white clouds was painted on a huge backdrop cloth. This was not the sky we usually see. Rather it suggested a Monet painting with its transient abstract impression, at the same time both real and false. Thus social criticism, dysfunctional communication, and illusionistic imagery were implicit in the scenography itself.

Grizzled Beard’s telephone booth was strategically placed at the entrance to the compound. All Beijing compounds have an entry booth—often with uniformed guards checking on the comings and goings of residents. Grizzled Beard is a member of the “Neighborhood Committee” (*Jiedao weiyuanhui*, “street road committee”), a grassroots government organization, with the overt purpose of helping security agencies “safeguard” the community. The Committee is comprised of retired residents, often *xiaojiao* (“small feet,” referring to old women with bound feet) wearing armbands to show their authority.11 Besides the booth and tiled rooftops, the stage was empty and defined by the actors. Stagehands moved a table and stools to the flat downstage area in front of the raked roof for interior scenes, i.e., Auntie Zheng’s courtyard and Grizzled Beard’s room. Realistic props—a tape recorder, binoculars, a teapot and cups, Chinese cakes—were the common
accoutrements of daily life colliding with the exaggerated rooftop with its oversized tiles occupying the better part of the stage. A huge black shadow cast by the telephone booth on the backdrop resembled a prison watch-tower, creating an ominous atmosphere. The madman’s giant shadow was also cast against the backdrop, sometimes evoking a monster. Climbing a ladder, the mysterious man had access to the top of the telephone booth, and his jumping up to this position added another visual level, symbolically placing him outside yet “above” the other characters. Chinese scholar trees were not represented at all. The trees existed in the actors’ and audience’s imaginations, as the actors “saw” the bare trees over the audience’s heads in the auditorium. Costumes were a combination of traditional, stylized, and contemporary.¹²

Gossip Street is based largely on the folk customs and local dialect of Beijingers, who have accumulated a great deal of shulaibao, a kind of rhythmic storytelling to clapper accompaniment, and qiaopihua, a kind of witty remark using humorous metaphor. Together these comprise a distinct form of traditional storytelling. As playwright Guo describes: “Gossip Street is very much realistic, but delivers something absurd under the cover of ordinary life” (Mu Qian, 8-4-98). The script is composed almost entirely of language games based on the ambiguities and double-entendre of Chinese phonetics. Language games include folklore and folk customs, Beijing slang, colloquial expressions, tongue twisters, slips of the tongue, doggerel, idioms, folksongs, wisecracks, riddles, jokes and puns, insults, slogans, Tang dynasty poetry, proverbs, children’s rhymes, gibberish of nonsense words, limericks, folk legends, references to philosophy, mythology, and history, and bandit jargon or code words which gang members or Communist “bandits” might have used 50 years ago. Words are sometimes employed just for their cadence, but most often there are deeper meanings underneath, with the language working on several levels.¹³

The neighborhood residents become Meng’s chorus. While the acting is primarily realistic, it includes exaggerated realism, suggestive xiqu physical stylization, as well as
abstract vocal and movement patterns and nonsense rhymes. The residents play Meng’s sound and movement games, “gossiping” with rhythmic vocal patterns comprised of gibberish sounds and accompanied by abstract gestures. When the madman punches Grizzled Beard, his punch is stylized. The acting of the little boy and girl is always stylized and they always speak in rhyme. The children play sound and movement games with exaggerated gestures to the rhythm of their recitation, insulting and taunting the neighbors, spreading gossip with underlying jokes and puns. At one point, the children walk with plastic bags tied onto their feet, making strange gibberish sounds. They carry over-sized toy plastic water pistols (“super soakers”) chasing and spraying the mysterious man. When the little boy and girl compete with each other, answering Grizzled Beard’s rhymes with their own, it is as if the children are learning and practicing the required social skills. Curses and taunts often contain blatant sexual slurs. Humor often grows out of the linguistic games, the audience’s recognition of double-entendres and mispronunciation of tongue twisters. Grizzled Beard, the expert in folklore and language games, also competes with his neighbors and the mysterious man by reciting xiehouyu (lit. “rest/relax after language”). Xiehouyu, a complex language game, embody jokes, curses, puns and insults, hyperbole, metaphor and simile. Xiehouyu is a set form, a two-part allegorical saying, somewhat similar to riddles, limericks, “knock-knock” jokes and even “hip-hop.” The first part describes a specific situation, and the second part contains the punch line. Qiaopihua (lit. “witty, naughty words,” “wise-cracks”) are usually jokes, curses and insults. While the humor is often at the level of “bathroom humor,” some rhymes are more sophisticated. Examples of qiaopihua are the traditional “Wu Dalang” sayings which always end with “xiaozt” (“little one”/“little man,” with the negative connotation of “little twit,” “little nerd”). Grizzled Beard boasts that no one can compete with him. He knows “1,000 Wu Dalang’s.” The neighborhood residents play a most impressive sound and movement game as they chant slogans attacking Auntie Zheng. The words themselves
are deconstructed into pure sound with abstract gestures to the rhythmic beating of the *muyu* ("wooden fish"), a percussion instrument introduced earlier as used in *Si Fan*. The vocal patterns included melody, bass, and rhythm sections. Even with the actors' abstract sounds, nonsense syllables and gestures, the audience recognized these as Cultural Revolution slogans. In the telephone booth, Grizzled Beard and the mysterious man play *shuanghuang* (lit. "couple/two reed musical instrument"), a traditional Chinese storytelling form much like a two-person comic show. One person, hiding behind the other, speaks or sings, while the person in front just moves his mouth and does the acting. Grizzled Beard hides on the floor behind the mysterious man and tells a story about "18 worries" (*shiba chou*), actually a well-known tongue twister in rhyme, which he delivers at breakneck speed to the audience's delight. The mysterious man stands in front moving his lips and gesturing with his hands. Grizzled Beard says, "I'm talking nonsense. I have nothing to do in my spare time, so I exercise my tongue."

Meng Jinghui tried to follow a Brechtian model for the acting as well as the music. The singing of Meng’s chorus of 12-15 neighborhood residents at the beginning and end of the play in fact had a Brechtian quality with the actors commenting on the action. During blackouts, we heard drumbeats, arbitrary notes on the keyboard, piano, Western violins, traditional Chinese folk music, patriotic songs, pop songs, and voices reciting rhymes and gibberish. Yet the blackouts between scenes in *Gossip Street* seemed too long; there was not enough happening to warrant such long pauses. During rhyme sequences, the actors’ movement was often exaggerated, sometimes with keyboard music as background. The chorus often moved and spoke in unison. Music and singing most resembled pop, as the sound lacked the angst of rock’n roll. Given the objections to the music and singing, Meng undoubtedly had a difficult time arriving at an acceptable solution.

Language games are intrinsic to the aesthetics of *Gossip Street*. As the neighborhood residents attack each other with words, playwright Guo Shixing enmeshes his
characters in yet another complex game after weiqi in *Go Man*. The observer wonders: Are there rules? What are the strategies of the game? Who is “winning”? Who is “losing”? How are elements cross-cultural and/or culturally specific? The nuances and complex interplay of these games provide a wit that cuts directly to the bone. The gossip contained in these games is subject to critical examination, providing insights into communication and its control within Chinese society. Semiotologist Colin Cherry examines human communication and characterizes language as “primarily a social affair.” Human language—and thus games based on human language—are both ever-changing: “Language and other social activities are mutually related; the interests and needs of the day force changes upon the language, and, in turn, the language is dominant over our thoughts. We think and see the world as our language conditions us to do” (Cherry, 32).

We can consider the distinction of *langue* ("a language") and *parole* ("speech") as it relates to language games. Roland Barthes recalls the dichotomy of language/speech as introduced by the French linguist Sausurre. The nature of language appears to be a “multiform and heterogeneous whole.” However, the dichotomy allows extracting from this whole 1) *langue*, a systematic set of social conventions necessary for communication, “indifferent to the material of the signals which compose it,” and 2) *parole*, which is restricted to the purely individual parts of language—phonetics and rules for combining signs (Barthes, 13). Gossip within Chinese culture functions on the *langue* level, as a pillar of social institutions and collective values. It also functions on the *parole* level, allowing modification and recombination as it passes from individual to successive individual. The dialectic of gossip is actualized through the language games.29 We can look at how language games—not in isolation (*parole*), but in the context of political and social life (*langue*) and the cultural tendency to communicate through gossip—form a totality for implicit, rather than explicit social criticism. Rampant gossip also erodes trust in social institutions. As one director explained, “there are no secrets in China.”
Gossip Street’s criticism, especially of the Cultural Revolution, was not unusual or unprecedented—although presenting it onstage as the object of ridicule within the context of folklore, puns, and tongue twisters was quite innovative. The language games often ridicule and criticize social phenomena in contemporary China, including the police, the PLA, official corruption, fake products, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes, a loss of morals in society. The madman jokes about opening a tourist resort showing performances of kidnapping and murder, ridiculing a social climate where people will do anything to make money. The language works on two levels. Derision and strong social criticism, often subtle and well-hidden, underlie the talking at cross-purposes of Grizzled Beard and the madman.

Misunderstanding each other from the very beginning, Grizzled Beard and the madman do not communicate at all. Grizzled Beard thinks the madman is asking him about folklore, while the madman thinks they are carrying on a normal conversation. The madman does not realize at first that he is in a complex rhyming language game. Grizzled Beard is playing word games, reciting folk rhymes and songs, and talking nonsense, finishing the madman’s sentences with rhymes and double-entendres, but the mysterious man does not get it. The jokes are often at the madman’s expense. The little boy often chimes in with another song, rhyming his last word with Grizzled Beard’s. The little girl joins in matching her rhyme to the little boy’s. The madman does not understand and thinks they are all talking nonsense. Yet the mysterious man, always looking for clues to solve crimes, is facetiously said to be suffering from “Holmes’ Syndrome,” a strange illness named for detective Sherlock Holmes. As Grizzled Beard incorporates phrases to rhyme with the madman’s, the words also work on another level. In addition to being rhyming words in the context they are used, they have underlying meanings. For example, both Grizzled Beard and the madman recite rhymes about the “big shell hats with two-pointed ends” (da ke mao liang tou jian), referring to the hats worn by court officials and PLA soldiers,
ridiculing police corruption and bribes to law enforcement agencies. Grizzled Beard incorporates *Chai bai dang* ("pull down white party"), a gang of swindlers active in Old Shanghai before 1949, and *che kou bu dui* ("leaving traces, skidmarks," i.e., "crime clues") into his rhymes referring to police corruption. In criticizing the current corruption, Grizzled Beard and the mysterious man also recite folk rhymes using gang code words from the past. One of my university students explained: "every Chinese knows about the corruption. The playwright doesn’t have to specifically mention it. The meaning is quite clear."

Societal misfits are principal characters both in Guo’s *Go Man* and *Gossip Street*: the young prodigy who cannot communicate, because he thinks too much; the madman who wants to blow up the Great Wall, who escapes from the mental hospital and who wants to save Niuzi. Like *Go Man*'s young boy, *Gossip Street*'s madman is germane to both the content and structure of the play. As Guo Shixing describes, "perhaps the madman is the only sane one ... and society is crazy" (Guo, 1-19-00). The madman can say and do what the ordinary residents of Chinese Scholar Tree Flower Street can never do. In fact, he is a hero—or perhaps better-stated "an anti-hero." Er Cong does not think the mysterious man is a madman at all: "what he says is quite reasonable." And the madman sings the patriotic "Song of the Guerrillas" fighting against the Japanese (1937-45).²² Guo’s madman is an "idiot savant," a madman as the most rational member of society and the only one able to speak the truth. This is a recurrent theme in *huaju* (as well as Western drama).²³

Both cross-cultural and culturally-specific elements exist in any art-form. Because it relies so much on language, *Gossip Street* especially lends itself to asking the question: "what transcends culture?" As so many of the words are trendy puns, current Beijing slang and clever double-entendres toying with meaning, rhythm and sound, it is difficult for the non-native speaker of Chinese to catch all the language nuances. As a non-native speaker, I sometimes felt just like the mysterious man—missing the joke. It was helpful to
consult with native speakers as well as the playwright about intention, subtleties and underlying meanings. Some jokes transcend culture; some do not. The more overt criticism, such as the overall climate of suspicion and gossip and the Cultural Revolution sequence and slogans--while assuming a basic understanding of Chinese history and customs--transcend culture and are relatively easy to comprehend purely from the visual. For example, the neighbors peeking over the courtyard roof and attacking Auntie Zheng with their rhythmic vocal-movement games evoke a mob mentality for any culture. Another example: plastic bags were increasingly used throughout the play. At the end, plastic bags raining down on the stage embodied the figurative “old baggage we carry.” The audience loved this, as these flimsy clear plastic bags, flying all over and littering Beijing, had just recently been outlawed in an effort to clean up the city for the 50th Anniversary celebration. Before the ban, these bags could be seen everywhere hanging in trees, in front of foreign five-star hotels as well as ordinary citizen compounds.

The madman and Niuzi on the rooftop realize the most poignant image in the production. Grizzled Beard’s daughter-in-law Niuzi is helpless; her devastation after her husband ran away has resulted in complete paralysis. She incongruously sits in a wheelchair dressed as a bride in a frilly lace white wedding gown with the brand-new Nike sport shoes from Grizzled Beard on her feet. (In the script Niuzi is also paralyzed, but she remains in bed. There is no wheelchair or wedding gown.) The wedding gown and wheelchair are exciting visual additions which become quite symbolic.24 Niuzi is in a paralyzed position, restricted and unhappy. She wants to escape and start a new life, but can do nothing until the madman arrives to help her. The madman lifts Niuzi from her wheelchair and carries her up to the rooftops. She is afraid and cannot move. He leads her in an elaborate voice-movement game, and she imitates his nonsense words and abstract hand gestures, touching eyes, eyebrows, forehead, lips, nose, ears, in a variation of the game “Simon Says.” The residents cannot believe what is happening. The rhythm builds until
Niuzi is finally able to stand on her own. Leaving her new shoes behind, she quickly runs
downstage across the rooftops. This is the most magical moment in the play. To the blare
of ambulance sirens, the madman and Niuzi escape over the roof. She calls out to the
neighbors: “Why are you so interested in other peoples’ business? Can’t anyone be
different from you?” While some of Niuzi’s lines were cut for the production, the
implication was quite clear. The neighbors run onto the roof, hiding under and carrying
large umbrellas. Trying to prevent the madman and Niuzi from escaping, one resident
shouts: “We must grasp the direction of our struggle. Catch them!” This is Communist
phraseology referring to “class struggle.” The madman responds: “There’s no hatred
between us. What possible benefit can you get by catching us?” The resident answers: “It
doesn’t matter. ... As long as you don’t benefit, we’ll do it.” These are Guo’s lines
embodifying the total irrationality of it all. The final scene is similar to the first as the street
cleaner arrives to sweep the dirt down the sewage drain. This circular structure emphasizes
a never-ending repetition—the events on Huaihua Street being reenacted again and again all
over China. As the actors sing the final song in unison, their rhythm gets faster and faster.

Reaction: Gossip Street had over fifty performances in the China Children’s Art
Theatre. The ticket price of 40 – 100 yuan reflects the fame of both playwright Guo and
director Meng. Actors, as well as designers and technical crew, were all CNET resident
artists. Celebrated actors included award winners Luo Peiqi (as Grizzled Beard) and Tao
Hong (as Er Cong).25 Gossip Street elicited differing opinions from theatre artists, critics,
and the public. While Meng accused playwright Guo of using “popular vulgar realism” in
his script, Guo called Meng’s performance style “vulgar romanticism”: “Meng didn’t
really rehearse the play. Actors just acted freely and he combined their different acting”
(Guo, 1-19-00). While the script is quite realistic, Guo thought the set was “actually better
and simpler” than what he had imagined. He had his own ideas about the style he
envisioned: “it’s difficult to label in terms of ‘isms,’ ... a kind of Theatre of the Absurd ...
and also like a fairy tale. Some characters would be like cartoon characters.” He thought “there was something realistic inside” the play, but “it would be impossible to completely use realism. … Traditional methods aren’t suitable for some subjects” (in He, 361-362).

Guo considered *Gossip Street* unlike a *Renyi* play “even though it’s about Beijingers and uses Beijing dialect: *Renyi* plays … focus on mutual help between neighbors. It’s all positive.” Most audiences “like *Renyi’s* ‘false realism.’ … How do you describe a picture under a magnifying lens? Is it real or not? ‘Real’ realism would startle the masses” (Guo, 1-19-00). He also thought that Meng’s style could not weaken the power of his play’s inherent black humor: The words “seem like firecrackers, and the spit of language scatters all over peoples’ hearts. The theatrical effect is wonderful. If it weren’t for the music, the explosive effect would be even stronger. … This makes me hope I’ll direct my own plays someday” (in He, 361).

Meng Jinghui characterized the production as “not too good. … The older actors wouldn’t cooperate”: In the final outcome, the audience “saw the many contradictions between my ideas and the playwright’s.” At first Meng thought his “ideas failed,” but during later performances, he felt that his concept “wasn’t completely wrong.” Perhaps his changes had been “too extreme”: “This may be a combination of *Renyi’s* traditional style and my avant-garde style, but I think I was defeated by *Renyi’s* style.” A director “must be able to coordinate content and form, and I didn’t do a very good job here. I encountered so many problems.” If the play had been done his “own way,” Meng thought “it would have been very unusual and sparked a huge controversy.” If it had been done totally according to the playwright’s ideas, it would have been “a typical *Renyi* play.” The final outcome was “a combination of our two views … so maybe it’s actually quite interesting” (7-15-99). The Cultural Ministry was “very interested in the play and found it a new kind of *huaju*” (Wang Zhengchun, 7-14-99). VP Yang assessed: *Gossip Street* is the first play to combine folklore and oral traditions of China. “It’s very funny … but I
think it was difficult for the audience to understand what the play was trying to say” (6-30-99). Producer Liu Tiegang found the script “very unclear, you might say too implicit. ... Characterization and plot aren’t very strong, and the director added too many characters.” The playwright and director disagreed about style, because the style seemed to overwhelm the content (6-24-99). Xian Jihua, Head of CNET’s Play Creation Department found the acting “quite suggestive” of real life and “interesting and fresh”: “The most striking characteristic is that the lines have so much meaning. The audience finds the language appealing and it causes them to think” (1-25-00). Party Secretary Wang lauded the instructional value of the play, but also thought “the subject wasn’t very important” because it “doesn’t cover revolutions, historical events, Party ‘organization drives,’ or the peoples’ struggles against imperialism.” Wang explained that people like a clear beginning, development, climax, ending, strong characters and clear character relationships. “That’s the usual way. This play changes all that, and uncertainties arise” (7-14-99).

Audiences were very enthusiastic and laughed throughout the performance. They loved the folklore and tongue twisters. They were familiar with the jokes, puns, slang, and double entendres. Reactions from theatre critics were mixed. One critic found that “without a suspenseful plot, and not simply some fabrication of ‘talking,’ the play seems weak.” Every character “can cleverly recite rhymes and philosophy, joking and criticizing the current situation and politics, ... but in theatre, language must be combined into a comprehensive creative product.” In Gossip Street, the “strength of the language is too much” (Cai, 11-12-98). Another critic reacted to the innovations: ten years ago, “old-fashioned solemn reciting of lines still dominated” the huaju stage. At that time “Meng Jinghui was into the earliest experimental theatre in China, and now he’s achieved a great record for himself.” Gossip Street “has unusual techniques”: folk-ballads, tongue twisters, xiqu, a band and group acting that overshadow the main actors. “But these techniques still make some old actors uncomfortable. Meng just wants to provoke the
Another critic attributed the “abundance of wise-cracks and witty words to the cultural poverty since the Cultural Revolution,” pointing to the proliferation of “Demon’s Dictionaries” (mogui cidian) during the 1990s. He found a deeper meaning inside: While laughing at Gossip Street, “you gradually feel bitterness. The situation isn’t harmonious, and the stage is filled with a collective restlessness.” Without gossip, “what’s left in our lives is just uninteresting prosperity. When can we be sure that we can put up with a life without Chinese scholar tree flowers?” In addition to laughter, “we hear audience applause, but I think the applause is louder than the laughter. This play has something in it besides fun and humor” (Huang, 10-12-98). The critic of the Sanlian Life Weekly News (Sanlian shenghuo zhousan bao) sided with the director describing the script as “superficial cheerfulness on top of barren, empty content. When a gifted person [Meng] works with a talentless one, the result is ridiculous” (Bonney and Wu, 46-49). The English-language Beijing Scene critic commented: “The way Beijing cabbies swear, this could describe almost any street in the capital. However this comedy drama is not about taxi-drivers: it follows a young couple who help ... doctors look for a mental patient” (9-25-98).

Perhaps understandably, the critics do not mention Gossip Street’s controversial content. As expected, most theatre artists skirted around this issue. Xian Jihua, head of CNET’s Play Creation Department, commented that “it’s not bad to criticize society.” The point is “however you criticize, you can’t oppose the ‘four cardinal rules’” (sige jianchi, lit. “four adhering to’s”), i.e., adhering to the leadership of the Communist Party; the road of Socialism; the People’s Democratic Dictatorship; and Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory (1-25-00). While social criticism is allowed, I thought that several of the images (especially the madman on the rooftop coaxing the young paralyzed daughter-in-law to “escape from all this” and her line, “Can’t anyone be different from you?”) were
particularly courageous and sensitive. When I commented that *Gossip Street* seemed so political, VP Yang responded:

I don’t agree. The playwright’s idea was not to be intentionally political, although some of the lines can be said to be sensitive. ... For example, ‘a group of people fighting with each other is just a quarrel, but people all over the country fighting is a revolution.’ ... This was not a problem, because this idea was conveyed in a humorous and witty form. ... Yes, I think the audience understood the sensitivity because everyone was laughing (11-19-99).

When I asked if the Cultural Ministry thought the sensitive lines problematic, VP Yang thought that “at the present time, nothing like that will happen.” CNET leaders “were not worried about sensitive lines and allowed this performance” (11-19-99). Yang thought “the Cultural Ministry is also changing.” Different officials have different tastes. “Of course the very basic things can’t be changed, for example, always encouraging ‘main melody.’” Yet the leaders “didn’t think the Cultural Ministry would appreciate *Gossip Street* and didn’t submit it as a ‘key play’ for the year.” Later, after Cultural Minister Sun Jiazheng saw *Gossip Street* on TV, he “praised the production and asked why they didn’t know about it. So we got a new message from this” (Yang, 2-22-00). One of my Chinese university students explained:

While theatre artists are becoming more and more open, students and government workers are very controlled now. ... There’s a tacit understanding that theatre artists and the Press won’t discuss content in a certain way. Artistically things are freer. As far as content, you can put something in it but you can’t talk about it. ... Of course the audience understood! (10-16-99)

The student described feeling “uncomfortable talking about political things.” Everyone is “supposed to be in consensus and united under the leadership of the Party.” Talking with anyone “about political things can get you in trouble, but especially with a foreigner, it’s even more serious. You’re supposed to talk only about good things and not about critical things.” He thought that *Gossip Street* would have been banned during the 1980s like *Bus Stop*, “because it’s not about anything. It’s just about confusion and questioning in Society, and people don’t have a purpose.” Deng Xiaoping Theory of “‘Building
Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ says everyone should have a purpose. In this play, people selfishly care only about themselves. They harm others even if they don’t benefit. The play’s very critical.” It gives “a real picture of China, the loss of faith and morals. Meng didn’t want to say this; he assumes you understand” (10-16-99). Another student offered her ideas: Everyone understands that the play “works on different levels, but there’s no point in talking about it. … What can we do?” But this is “a spiritual victory on the part of intellectuals.” They give you the words and “test whether you see it or not. The Authorities pass it. This has been the game played between the government and intellectuals throughout history” (10-19-99). This is similar to the tour guide leading blind tourists—“people following blindly”—in Go Man, which director Lin Zhaohua defended: “I didn’t think of that.” My student laughed at this story: “This is a test for you. He’s the winner; either he wins in deceiving you or he wins your sympathy” (10-16-99).

While I found Gossip Street pessimistic under all the laughter, Er Cong and Mu Ming actually persist in the pursuit of their ideals. Borrowing an applicable phrase from Colin Mackerras (which he used in referring to a different play): “This is more interesting as a socio-political document than an artistic experience” (Mackerras 1981, 123). After the first run Leader Zhao Youliang commented:

Tickets sold well even in the large theatre. … Ordinary people could understand and laughed a lot. … Guo’s script has deep and ambiguous meanings … so people liked this. … While the script is excellent, Meng directed this play in his own style, which didn’t conform to the original script. We respect the creation of the director … but we also gave him advice and suggestions during rehearsals. … Even though Meng Jinhui isn’t perfect, I think his spirit and enthusiasm should be respected and encouraged (11-25-98).

Management and Financial Practices: CNET faced financial difficulties in getting the funding together to begin rehearsals for Gossip Street. While CNET actually paid for the production, there was a rather roundabout method involved. Xian Jihua, Head of CNET’s Play Creation Department, described the situation for huaju as Gossip Street began rehearsals (“Onstage and Offstage,” 1998):
Now we need a huge budget. ... For each performance we need at least 4,000 yuan for field rent. For the Capital Theatre we need 6,000 Y. The expensive Capital Mansion Shopping Center requires 16,000 Y. At Chang’an’s Big Theatre we need 20,000 Y for rent for each performance. It’s amazing!

CNET did not have its own large theatre. It had its Little Theatre with just over 200 seats. To save money, CNET’s leaders decided that Gossip Street would be performed in its own Little Theatre. But the production team thought “there were so many characters and the scenery should be magnificent” and proposed that the play be put on in a larger theatre. The leadership “appreciated the artists’ creative ideals” and agreed, even though this would add substantially to the budget. CNET had financial problems. “Where was the money to come from?” The playwright, director, and designer got together and “produced the money out of their own savings to get the ball rolling and solve the immediate problem.

Theatre leaders were very moved, but, at the same time, they were anxious” (Xian, “Onstage and Offstage,” 1998). Actually Meng Jinghui and Yan Long each put in 50,000, Guo Shixing put in 100,000, and a friend of Guo’s put in another 100,000 to obtain the total 300,000 yuan necessary. Later through the efforts of Guo Shixing, a Chinese company, Beijing Guwan Cheng (“Beijing Curio City”), the largest antique art dealer in Asia, was willing to lend CNET 300,000 yuan, and this money could be returned to the theatre artists. Guo described getting paid back the original amount, but added: “We received no profits and no tax benefit. ... Maybe these sorts of things will happen in China in the future” (Guo, 1-19-00). CNET was later able to pay the Company back. “In appreciation” to Beijing Curio City, CNET put their Company advertising in the “Playbill.” As Xian Jihua explained: “You can see how difficult it is to rehearse a play; it’s more difficult than writing a play.” Even an excellent script “may be shelved because of no money. If you want your script to get onstage, you’d better have sponsorship or you have to produce the money yourself” (Xian, “Onstage and Offstage,” 1998).
The budget for rehearsals had finally been borrowed, and the creative team was ready to cast the play. As Xian further described, “now it’s also difficult to get a great team of actors together.” TV plays and films are “all after the so-called ‘star effect’” (mingxing xiaoying), inviting big stars to join their productions.

*Huaju* is in a very difficult position, and we’re barely surviving. If we have 2 or 3 big stars, there will be a larger audience, which will increase box office profits. CNET is called the ‘Theatre of Stars’ with many great actors. Supposedly it isn’t difficult to cast actors for this play. The problem is that when actors have some fame, they go to movies and TV. They want to enlarge their artistic scope, but it’s obvious that they also do this to increase their income and improve their living standard. Many actors are now busy shooting movies or are ready to sign contracts to act in TV plays (Xian, “Onstage and Offstage,” 1998).

The cast of 19 actors plus technical people, totaling 45, was the largest creative team at CNET in the past ten years, and certainly the largest cast that Meng had directed. With more lucrative opportunities available outside the *danwei*, it was difficult to get such a large cast together. VP Yang reported that CNET had to use the box office income to pay the theatre rent and performance subsidies (*Log*, 7-22-98). CNET assigned Liu Tiegang, Head of the Performance Department, as in-house Producer to take care of all the logistics. In addition to his regular duties, Liu Tiegang organized rehearsals, performances and ticket sales. This became problematic as Meng Jinghui had become accustomed to leading his own semi-independent team and making most of his own decisions. In 1998, costs to produce a play were roughly 300,000 *yuan* before a production entered the theatre. This included expenses for the script, director, actors, set designer, other administrative staff, posters and publicity. Another 300,000 *yuan* was needed to cover expenses after a production moved into the theatre. If a play had more than thirty performances, the total budget needed would be about 600,000 *yuan*. In June 1998, the rent for the Children’s Art Theatre was 4-4,500 each night (Liu Tiegang, 6-24-99). (In CNET’s own Little Theatre, costs were 200,000 before entering the theatre and another 200,000 after, totaling 400,000 *yuan.*) Every time I saw *Gossip Street*, the theatre was full and tickets were quite difficult to
get. While the Press reported that the production had “gotten the best box office ever” at China Children’s Art Theatre (Yang Zi, 10-9-98), after all expenses, CNET made no profit. Producer Liu explained:

Theatre leaders expect the box office to make up for the field rent, labor costs, and performance subsidies. Rent plus labor costs require almost 10,000 each night, so actually we’re losing money. Every time we put on a production we lose money. The money has to come from renting out our actors to other work units … or from the 200,000 yuan reward subsidy we get from the Cultural Ministry if we accomplish 150 performances for the year (6-24-99).

When the situation was difficult, Liu added: “Our accountant always has some money to give … or maybe we can make a special request to the Cultural Ministry” (6-24-99). The transition from full State support to financial independence was going to be challenging.

**Fields of Life and Death (Sheng Si Chang, 1999)**

**Director’s background:** Ms. Tian Qinxin has an unusual background for *huaju*, as her original home *danwei* was the Beijing Jingju Theatre (*Beijing jingju yuan*). After the successful run of *Fields of Life and Death*, she was invited to join CNET as a resident director. This is noteworthy, as in previous decades the division between *huaju* and *xiqu* theatre artists was clearly distinct. Tian Qinxin studied *jingju* performance at the National Xiqu Academy (*Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan*) for seven years as a child, from the age of twelve until she was nineteen. For five years (1988-1993) she worked as a professional actress at the Beijing Jingju Theatre. As Tian describes, she “had difficulties as a *xiqu* actress … my voice was too weak” (8-19-99). In 1993, she enrolled at Beijing’s Central Drama Academy to study *huaju* and graduated from the Department of Directing in 1995. Tian had an opportunity to do a year of fieldwork after graduation and traveled to Shenzhen, the first “Special Economic Zone” in Southern China, to work in an advertising agency. As she elaborates, “I wanted to learn the most current and effective advertising methods, which could later be applied to theatre” (8-19-99). Tian then returned to the Beijing Jingju
Theatre as a director, but "was no longer a xiqu actress." She served as assistant director for the jingju production, Beautiful Plum's Fragrant Melody (Meihua xiangyun). After her stint as assistant director, Tian felt that "although jingju has a wonderful history, I'm too young to do that job well" (8-19-99). By that time Tian had crossed over to huaju. Tian Qinxin gained the attention of Beijing theatre circles with two huaju productions she organized independently: Cutting the Wrists (Duan wan, 1997) and Peach Blossoms in the Station (Yizhan taohua, 1998). Both were historical dramas combining techniques from the East and West--xiqu and modern dance. Cutting the Wrists was the larger and more celebrated production, starring the infamous avant-garde modern dancer/choreographer Jin Xing. By casting the controversial dancer--especially in the leading role--director Tian was positioning herself with Beijing's avant-gardists.

In her early thirties, Tian Qinxin is a contemporary of Meng Jinghui. She is bright, articulate, entrepreneurial, the antithesis of the worker of the past who was assigned a danwei and joined the ranks of lifetime "iron rice bowl" workers. Her self-reliance is indicative of the huaju director of the 1990s. Like fellow directors Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui, Tian has had the opportunity for foreign exposure through her travels to Korea with the Chinese Artists’ Delegation, to Japan to participate in the Tokyo Youth Art Festival, and to the UK to take part in the London International Arts Festival. Tian initiated the Fields of Life and Death production herself and "pitched" her idea to CNET leaders. At that time, her home danwei was still the Beijing Jingju Theatre.

Conception / Intention: Playwright/director Tian Qinxin adapted her performance text of Fields of Life and Death from Xiao Hong’s original novel of the same title. Ms. Xiao Hong (1911–1942) published her debut novel Fields of Life and Death to critical acclaim in 1935 at the age of twenty-four. The novel depicts the lives of a group of peasants in Northeast China and their attitudes toward life and death preceding and during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945). Her novel deplores feudalism as well as imperialist
aggression. Xiao Hong was sympathetic to the oppressive “ignorant and numb lives” of the peasants. As a result of their hardships and struggle to survive, the peasants “have become callous toward pain.” Their behavior toward each other is as cruel as the outside exploitation they are forced to endure. Xiao Hong chose “to write for the ignorance of the masses.” The coming of the Japanese interrupts the balance and stability of the peasants’ lives. They rebel only when their cycle of “life, aging, disease, and death” is disrupted. And so begins the very initial phase of their “awakening” (*Life and Death “Playbill”*). In a preface to the novel, China’s celebrated 20th century author Lu Xun (1881-1936) applauded the young writer’s talent: “The Northern peasants’ strong will to live and struggle in the face of death are powerful subjects in the writer’s hands. Her detailed observation and unconventional writing skills … add much delicacy and freshness to it” (in “Playbill”). The book’s publication created a sensation in Shanghai literary circles. With Lu Xun’s blessing, *Life and Death* quickly became a best-seller, firmly establishing Xiao Hong’s position in modern Chinese literary history.30

When Tian approached the Theatre with her proposal, CNET leaders were enthusiastic. This would be the first adaptation of Xiao Hong’s work. The leaders recognized the strength of the original material and Tian’s skill as a director from her previous experimental *huaju* productions, *Cutting the Wrists* and *Peach Blossoms in the Station*. *Life and Death* would also be the first “rural play” (*nongcunxi*, “peasant play”; *xiangtuxi*, “village earth play”) presented by CNET in ten years. CNET leaders also realized the production would be particularly appropriate for the upcoming 50th Anniversary of the Peoples’ Republic of China in 1999 (Yang, 6-30-99).31 As VP Yang explained, Tian’s directing style of *minzuhua* is not found among the Theatre’s directors, and CNET thought Tian Qinxin an exciting addition to their roster. Young directors are more enthusiastic about reinterpreting classic foreign plays or doing avant-garde work. Tian is
Performance Text / Storyline: As Tian Qinxin explains, Xiao Hong's descriptive narrative prose, loose structure, and generality of character "provided a lot of room for the huaju adaptation" (in Jia Wei, 5-14-99). Rearranging the plot and changing character relationships, Tian Qinxin adapted the original novel into a performance text comprised of a prologue and six episodes. The production tells the story of a group of peasants in Northeast China during the 1930s. Director Tian used the entanglements of a love-hate relationship between the Zhao San and Er Liban peasant families as a thread among three inter-connected conflicts--those between two peasant families, the peasants and the landlord, and the Chinese peasants and Japanese invaders. The story takes place about the time of the "September 18th Incident" (Jiuyiba shibian) in 1931, which marked the entry of the Japanese into northeastern China.32 The place is a remote village in a suburb of Harbin in Heilongjiang Province in northeast China, an area formerly known as Manchuria.

The plot concerns Er Liban's son, Cheng Ye, who is in love with Zhao San's daughter, Jin Zhi. Jin Zhi is pregnant, and Cheng Ye wants to marry her. All the villagers despise Er Liban, because his wife Ma Po was pregnant before their marriage. Cheng Ye and Jin Zhi are repeating his history. When Er Liban proposes the marriage, Zhao San refuses to consent. The young couple runs away from the village. The peasants discover that landlord Er Ye will increase the rent. They cannot endure another rent increase and encourage Zhao San, the boldest among them, to kill the landlord. Zhao San is imprisoned after he mistakenly kills a thief. When he discovers that Er Ye is still alive, Zhao San fearfully begs for mercy. The peasant rebellion has ended in failure. Distraught over her husband's imprisonment and her daughter's running from the village, Wang Po loses all hope and tries to kill herself. Paradoxically it is landlord Er Ye who bails Zhao San out of jail, since he will need his help with the spring planting. Wang Po is revived as she is
forced to spit up the poison she swallowed in her suicide attempt. Japanese soldiers enter
the village. Thinking the presence of the soldiers will give him status in front of Zhao San
and the other villagers, Er Liban welcomes the “friendly” soldiers into his home. The
soldiers eat and drink everything the poor peasant offers, and afterwards they thank Er
Liban for his hospitality by raping and murdering his wife. Landlord Er Ye, the first in the
village to rise up against the Japanese, is also killed. Cheng Ye, on the run with Jin Zhi, is
arrested to be inducted into the Chinese Nationalist Army. Jin Zhi returns to her parents’
home and gives birth to a little girl. Zhao San is furious, as his unmarried daughter has
caued him to “lose face” in the village. Zhao San kills the tiny infant, another mouth to
feed and proof of his disgrace. Cheng Ye deserts the army and joins the “bandits” (huzi
lit. “beards,” the slang term for “bandits,” as the Communists were called by the
Guomindang/Nationalists and the Japanese). Cheng Ye returns to the village to warn the
peasants, but no one grasps the import of the threat of the Japanese soldiers. The villagers
do not understand that Manchuria is part of China. One peasant naively asks: “Our village
is called China?” Only his own father and Zhao San will listen to Cheng Ye, but even they
do not believe him. As Jin Zhi returns home one day, a Japanese soldier attacks her.
Hearing her screams, Cheng Ye becomes enraged and quickly cuts the soldier’s throat.
Zhao San helps Cheng Ye escape, while his wife and daughter quickly bury the slain
soldier’s body. When the Japanese discover that one of their soldiers has been killed, they
enter the village to arrest the bandit. The villagers are interrogated, but no one will betray
Cheng Ye. The soldiers begin to kill the villagers one by one. Finally awakened to the
danger, all the villagers rise up against the Japanese (Fields of Life and Death, 1999).

Directorial Concept: Director Tian Qinxin describes adapting the novel, because “I
have something in my heart to say.” She was especially moved by the
“numbness/apathy” of the peasants’ lives, “a condition of neither love nor hate” and
limited to the Buddhist karma of “life, aging, disease, and death” (sheng lao bing si). Tian
thought that Xiao Hong wrote about the intrinsic nature of the Chinese nation. “This
attitude of numbness occurs even in modern society where ...

we live complacently in fixed circles. We engage in political struggles and
business prosperity only to amuse ourselves and don’t think about making real
progress. We think our fate is decided by the heavens. ... When National Unity
really needs us, we demonstrate a collective fatigue. ... We lack consensus and
true humanitarian care. ... Xiao Hong gives us this modern thinking. Thus the
idea to adapt *Fields of Life and Death* was born (“Directorial Analysis”).

Directing for the first time at CNET, Tian understood that China’s National Theatres
“represent the mainstream” (*zhuliu*) and that the performance of *Life and Death* at CNET
“must be up to the standards of a National Theatre” (8-19-99). Tian’s words manifest
“main melody” elements as she elucidates the theme (“Directorial Analysis”):

Chinese people have been more devoted to superstitions of an after-life than to
the real world. ‘Life is just natural and death not so serious.’ We don’t value
humankind’s freedom or rights. These ideas about life and death created many
disasters and have been a burden for the nation for thousands of years. ... In
*Life and Death*, we emphasize our country’s determination and vitality. ... The
play calls on the nation to stand up, recognize its plagues and cure our ills, ... tap into our advantages and advance into the new century.

The propagandist intention is evident, and Tian was aware that this was not to be an avant­
garde production. Yet stylistically Tian endeavored to explore her “own individual style ... to break through *huaju*’s fixed framework and engage in modern thinking.” *Life and
Death* “is ‘main melody.’ We regret the weaknesses in our country and want to improve
... but the production also has something different” (Tian, 8-19-99). In *Life and Death*,
Tian combined a variety of styles, including both Western and indigenous Chinese
elements. These included realism, stylization, expressionism, exaggeration, symbolism,
filmic techniques, *xiqu* aesthetics and techniques, shadow puppetry and Chinese rural-
folklore style. Tian is an American film enthusiast and “wanted to follow American film
structure to create a montage effect.” She called her production “a rural epic using the
varied vocabularies of the novel, theatre, and film, and combining both *xieshi* (“realism,” lit.
“write reality”) and *xieyi*” (the “imaginary,” “express the inner world,” lit. “write idea /
meaning”) (8-19-99). Tian attempted a “new exploration to liberate the actors’ ideas [minds] and bodies.” She wanted to create dichotomies of opposites: excitement to show numbness, understanding to show ignorance, brutality to show human nature, cruelty to show kindness, insult to show dignity, oppression to show rebellion, tragedy and comedy, the comparison of life and death (“Directorial Analysis”). She described herself as “lacking the ability to direct foreign plays” and is committed to Chinese huaju. This is noteworthy, as Tian is a young director. She grew up watching huaju and does not consider the form itself “foreign” (Tian, 8-19-99).

Rehearsal process / Acting techniques: Veteran actor Han Tongsheng, who played Zhao San, describes the two-month rehearsal period of Fields of Life and Death as “the longest huaju rehearsal” he has encountered (8-4-99).35 As Tian relates: “I’m a young woman, and the actors didn’t know about my directing skills. … They gradually began to trust me” (8-19-99). The actors were impressed with the script and the director’s background. As Han explained, “the staging felt fresh” and “the characterization of peasants was new” for them (8-4-99).36 Tian advised her actors to ignore the gap between urban and rural Chinese, which during the 1990s had become even greater with economic development: “China is a vast agricultural country. We’re all peasants or come from peasants … so it’s not condescending to act as a peasant” (8-19-99).37 Focussing on the actors’ physicality, she put forward a “new proposition” of “powerful movement” (zitai kuangre) to create a “body language in motion” (yundongde zhiti yuyan) and “beauty of image/form” (xingxiang meili). Tian encouraged an “unadorned, simple” style of “rough, bold, and dynamic” postures based on truth to make the acting “more powerful, sharp and lively.” The goal was to have the greatest impact on the audience (“Directorial Analysis”). Han called this “a unique requirement, as no other director had ever asked the actors to do this.” He described conducting “exploration and experimentation … combining naturalism and expressionism with this new acting proposition as a guideline.” The actors
were required to be “extremely active” for the entire two hours and fifteen minutes running-time of the play (Han, 8-4-99). Elaborating on the director’s proposition, Han characterized “wild postures” as having “both a psychological dimension and external appearance” (50-51):

The lack of internal content will give the outer form no substance. ... The premise of ‘violent, wild postures’ asks the actor to externalize the character’s complex inner feelings, to extend and magnify the true feelings inside. ... The style is strong and lively. ... ‘Wild postures’ require the actor to be concentrated and extremely excited but he must also be ‘real.’ In this intense state, the actor must strictly control the *du* [“degree of intensity”] of his acting. The *du* can’t be insufficient, but if there’s too much *du*, the reality will be lost.

The intense body movement challenged the actors, and the creative team was especially enthusiastic. Ren Chengwei, who played Cheng Ye, wrote in his journal: “I didn’t want the director to tell me exactly what to do or to give me examples. ... She gave me room to create ... and I always performed a scene many different ways to give her several options” (Ren, 55). Han Tongsheng described the acting in terms of Chinese *qigong* (“air/breath energy/force”). The term *qichang* (“breath space”) refers to “the space inside the body where you utilize the breath.” The actors tried “to make the theatre itself into this space.”

The actors considered themselves *fagongzhe* (“ones giving out energy”), giving breath to others to heal disease. Audience members were treated as *shougongzhe* (“ones receiving energy”), receiving breath from another person to be cured of illness. The director “wanted the *qigong* image to help us create the strongest impact possible” (Han, 8-4-99).

Illustrating the bold physicalization, Cheng Ye throws his lover Jin Zhi over his shoulder carrying her on his back as they run away. Cheng Ye bites Jin Zhi’s breasts and buries his head under her blouse. Cheng Ye carries his father to Zhao San’s house to force him to propose the marriage. Er Liban affectionately carries his wife Ma Po on his back. Ma Po throws herself on Er Liban to stop him from hitting her son. The peasants chase each other around the stage, spanking each other’s backsides. The audience laughed, enjoying this comic folk style called *zhubajie beixifu* (lit. “piggy Bajie carries his wife,” 260.
borrowed from a character in the novel *Journey to the West*; Ping Pan, 119). When director Tian asked Zhao San to climb onto his wife Wang Po’s back, actress Zhao Juanjuan was “not very strong and felt unable to do that.” Tian told Zhao “if you can think of a better movement, you can do it your own way.” The actress finally began a regimen of daily exercise to build up strength (Zhao Juanjuan, 52). After the initial run, the creative team was faced with tragedy when Zhao Juanjuan, who had created the role of Wang Po, died unexpectedly from cancer. Zhang Ying, who played the repentant Japanese soldier’s wife in *Japanese Soldiers I Have Known*, consequently took over the role. It is noteworthy that CNET encouraged Zhang Ying’s individual interpretation, which was a bit different from Zhao Juanjuan’s, “as long as it didn’t depart from the director’s overall concept” (Yang, 3-3-00).  

**Mise-en-scene / Aesthetics / Form & Content:** Like *Gossip Street, Fields of Life and Death* was performed in the large (900-1,000 seat) proscenium China Children’s Art Theatre. The mise-en-scene followed a *xiqu* aesthetic, which is not surprising, given the director’s background. *Life and Death* clearly shares with *xiqu* its stylized staging conventions and theatricality and transcends realistic conceptions of acting and scenery. *Xiqu* is the art of the performer. *Xiqu*’s aesthetic features include synthesis (*zonghe xing*), convention (*chengshi xing*), stylization (*xiangzheng shoufa*), beauty (*mei*), and roundness (*yuanxing*) (Wichmann, Mackerras 1983, 185). Traditionally performed on a bare stage (perhaps with a table and two chairs), time and space are freely transformed by the actors.  

Director Tian describes *xiqu* as her impetus for *Life and Death*, and she incorporates many *xiqu* elements into the play. *Life and Death* was performed on a bare open stage with only several wooden platforms. There were few set pieces: a platform to serve as the “jail,” a small table and chair for landlord Er Ye. *Xiqu*-style stage-hands came onstage to adjust the set pieces. Props were minimal: wood kindling, pumpkins, a pipe for Wang Po to smoke, a jug of wine, a knife, a candle, a letter, ropes, scythes and guns.
Costumes were realistic: shabby, dark earthy colors and cloth shoes worn by 1930s' peasants in Northern China (not the “beautiful” costumes of xiqu). Music and sound effects were on audio tape, including xiqu and folk music (gu, erhu, guanzi and suona, musical instruments of xiqu); folk-singing; and National, heroic music and drums “to help the audience feel the Nation’s strength” (“Directorial Analysis”). Sound effects included a baby’s cries, a river, crickets, gunshots, the blare of army trucks, clucking chickens and barking dogs as the Japanese soldiers arrived, and the bleating of Er Liban’s pet goat, Lao Kunr (“Old Sleepy”).

As in xiqu, time and place were freely transformed by the actors: the village fields, inside and outside the homes of peasants Zhao San and Er Liban, a cave where Cheng Ye and Jin Zhi can hide, a jail, a graveyard, landlord Er Ye’s house, the past and the present, imagination and memory. The most important element here was the actor, “given the greatest freedom to create the reality of the present and memories of the past” (Han, 8-4-99). Director Tian described xiqu’s “eye spirit” (yanshen) to her actors: “You control when the audience looks at your eyes, your feet, your whole body” (8-19-99). In addition to an overall aesthetic, Life and Death sometimes incorporated specific xiqu techniques. Stage movement was primarily in circular patterns. Actors followed the xiqu convention of walking in a large circle to connote travelling a great distance. Fight scenes used the stylized methods of xiqu. In their “love scene,” Zhao San and Wang Po encircled the stage with xiqu’s paoyuanchang (“running with small steps,” lit. “running the round field”). Xiqu’s huqin music was added here, and the audience laughed joyfully recognizing the convention. Zhao San and Cheng Ye talked and ran around the stage paoyuanchang, again to great comic effect as Cheng Ye followed a bit too closely on Zhao San’s heels.

Stage designer Xue Dianjie found that the actors “needed only an empty performance zone. ... It was like xiqu.” As he describes, “although the beats of xiqu musical instruments are not always heard, they are in fact there” (8-25-99). Designer Xue
concentrated primarily on the backdrop and stage floor (Xue, 62). The backdrop, a relief sculpture with depth and texture, depicted stone walls, small earthen peasant huts, tombstones and fields, suggesting a remote village in northeastern China. The sculptural backdrop was designed to objectify the peasants’ living conditions, a feeling of stability and even stagnation, as life in the remote village never changed. The golden-brown color of the backdrop represented the “yellow earth” of China. Xue used a raked stage. This allowed the audience to clearly see, as if from above, the positions, combination and arrangement of the actors, often squatting peasant-fashion on the floor and “even the expressions in the actors’ eyes” (Xue, 62). The audience could also see into two traps--one upstage, one downstage--where Cheng Ye and Jin Zhi hide, and where the villagers prepare a grave for Wang Po. With the raked stage and traps, the actors could fully use the breadth and depth of the stage.43

While the acting in Life and Death was primarily realistic, plot-structure was non-linear, and many anti-realistic techniques were employed. As director Tian describes, dao xu ("flashbacks," lit. “upside down narration”), chaxu ("inserted narratives," “narration interspersed with flashbacks”), and shanhui (memory sequences, lit. “flashback/return”) were used to elongate time and “to connect the different facets of the story” (8-19-99).44 Tian felt these techniques actually reflected the psychology of the peasants who always looked back feeling repentant and ashamed (Tian in Ye Jun, 6-18-99). Imagination and memories interrupted and collided with scenes happening in the present. As time and space were disrupted, different events were shown in juxtaposition or simultaneously on stage. Director Tian also introduced a reversal of “cause and effect” (yinguo), an antithesis of suspense, as the outcome of an event appeared first, and the event was elaborated later. Using stream of consciousness, the actors often shared thoughts and feelings in monologues directly with the audience. During transitions, music and lighting helped to define the changing mood, the fluid time and space. Area lighting, blackouts, spotlights, and

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follow-spots were used. When the villagers finally united against the Japanese, the stage was fully lit. Each episode culminated in a tableau (Tian used “dingge,” the film term for “fixed frame” or “close-up”). These dynamic tableaux were similar to the liangxiang poses of xiqu (“showing the presence” to reveal the character’s state of mind). The village-chorus, sometimes with stylized movement, commented dryly on the action and served as a psychological gauge for the audience. After a scene of pain, the village men loudly chanted a burial song as if they were telling a joke: “life, aging, disease, and death ... no matter. ... That’s the way it is,” the theme song written especially for this production. The village-chorus resembled the bangqiang (“helping chorus”) of some forms of xiqu, as the villagers helped create the environment and were an integral part of the performance.

The following sections more closely examine Life and Death’s eclectic mix of Chinese and Western techniques, non-linear structure, and use of montage. A prologue immediately sets the tone and style of “intense postures” and “language of image”: As the wind howls and snow falls, a chorus of four village men gathers around a fire to keep warm. The stage is dark except for the fire’s burning embers. A village woman is giving birth outdoors in the desolate winter in northeastern China. The woman is afraid, but the men are unmoved by her pain and they discuss the weather. They equate childbirth with farm animals bearing their young. The four village men raise the pregnant woman high into the air spreading her legs apart, creating a powerful and sensuous expressionistic image. The young peasant girl, Jin Zhi, then appears; pregnant and clutching her abdomen, she vomits violently. In the next scene, “life” (Jin Zhi’s pregnancy) is immediately juxtaposed with “death,” as Zhao San mistakenly kills the thief instead of landlord Er Ye. The murder is acted out behind a paper scrim using a traditional Chinese shadow puppet technique, with the actors as shadow puppets fighting in silhouette. Blood splashes onto the screen just before the bloodied thief falls through tearing the paper. Zhao San comes out from behind the scrim with a bloody scythe in hand; he staggers and falls to the ground. He imagines
landlord Er Ye, and we see Er Ye briefly appear before vanishing again. As Zhao San is arrested, he is literally raised up into the air as he sits on the steel frame of the puppet scrim. The shadow puppet effect, the bloodied thief falling through the scrim, and Zhao San raised into the air on his way to jail are powerful images. A scene in Zhao San’s imagination is acted out as he remembers the villagers urging him to kill Er Ye and then begging for mercy when they discover Er Ye is still alive. A spotlight clarifies that the scene is taking place in Zhao San’s mind—he reaches out looking straight ahead, rather than at landlord Er Ye, who stands slightly upstage.

Illustrating the violent juxtaposition of images and reversal of cause and effect, Cheng Ye beats his father and runs away with Jin Zhi, but the audience does not yet know why. The marriage proposal and ensuing feud between the two families is later acted out as Er Liban’s memory. The memory is interrupted as his wife Ma Po runs onstage with news that Zhao San has been arrested. Er Liban suspects that Zhao San’s arrest is a result of the thwarted marriage proposal, and he takes Ma Po to escape into the woods. In the darkness and confusion, Japanese soldiers arrive in the village, waving their flashlights in the night. Following Er Liban’s thoughts, time and place suddenly change to the Japanese soldiers in his home—actors mime eating and drinking, although utensils are real. When the Japanese interpreter falls asleep after dinner, Er Liban thinks again of the marriage proposal. At this moment Ma Po is being raped offstage by two Japanese soldiers. She fearfully runs onstage for Er Liban’s help—“two people screwed me”—and is immediately shot. Er Liban does not chase after the enemy, but ignorantly slaps his wife instead; she cannot feel this, as she has already suffered and is dead. The rhythm of shots fired, to gasps from the audience, to complete silence in the theatre, is quite arresting. Although the rape is offstage, the scene is a horrible and moving one. During the blackout, a lighted laughing pumpkin moves slowly across the stage. Death has appeared again and “is laughing and sighing for the suffering, ignorant people in this populous nation” (“Directorial Analysis”).

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One of the strongest moments created by montage occurs as two scenes are performed simultaneously. Zhao San is in prison, i.e., lying on the “jail platform” upstage, and desperately lamenting his fate. In Zhao San’s memory, we see the village meeting, which took place before the murder. The sound of jangling coins abruptly changes the scene, and Er Ye appears to bail Zhao San out of jail. Simultaneously downstage, Zhao San’s wife Wang Po is choosing to die. Zhao San and Wang Po, each in a different time and space, talk to the audience; their lines overlap and intersect. Zhao San thinks about his future life, while Wang Po thinks about her immediate death. While Zhao San happily sings a folk melody knowing he will soon be released, Wang Po is crying and then swallowing poison.

Tian Qinxin’s use of filmic montage and the interplay of memory, “real time,” and imagination continue as Jin Zhi and Cheng Ye quarrel, huddled in a cold storage pit in a farmer’s field on another part of the stage. Jin Zhi sees her mother in a dream and wants to return home—in “real time” her mother tried to commit suicide in the previous scene. The locale abruptly switches to the village women gossiping about Jin Zhi and criticizing Cheng Ye. Wang Po overhears the gossip and calls out to her daughter. After a blackout, the lights come up on the villagers preparing for Wang Po’s burial. The focus harshly changes back again to the young couple, as the Army arrives to arrest Cheng Ye and force him to enlist. Funeral music is heard as the scene shifts back again to Wang Po’s burial. Zhao San is on the opposite side of the stage kowtowing to Er Ye, thanking him for bailing him out of jail. Accepting Er Ye’s liquor, Zhao San becomes dizzy and drunk. Arriving back at the village, Zhao San thinks Wang Po is sleeping. When he discovers that his wife is dead, there is a flashback in Zhao San’s mind to a happier time. As the scene shifts to his memory, the light highlights Wang Po, bravely presenting her husband with an old rifle and encouraging him to kill Er Ye. She is quite excited, and Zhao San likes her attitude. Strong and happy, Zhao San brags about his future murderous feat. He proudly marches to a
luogu ("gong and drum") percussion pattern of xiqu. This is a metaphorical lovemaking scene and very sexy. Zhao San chases Wang Po around the stage; she teases him; they spank each other’s bottoms; the rhythm becomes faster and faster and finally reaches a crescendo. Zhao San jumps on his wife’s back, and the scene culminates in a tableau of strength and exhilaration. The light slowly fades, and the healthy Wang Po disappears from Zhao San’s memory. He is frightened as the lights return to illuminate the full stage and he is brought back to the present.

Landlord Er Ye’s death again creates a cruel and ironic juxtaposition, as two contradictory scenes are simultaneously performed. “Inside” and “outside” the landlord’s courtyard are created by the actors. “Within” the jiadingxing ("imaginary," “make believe”) courtyard, the scythes which Er Ye’s guards carry are no match for the Japanese guns. (Three soldiers represent the Japanese army.) When Er Ye is killed, peasant Er Liban is “outside” the courtyard and hears the shots. He thinks the sounds are firecrackers in celebration and envies the happiness and comfort of the wealthy landlord. The scene shifts again to Jin Zhi, who is enduring the pain of childbirth. Zhao San and Er Liban are “outside” the courtyard wall, complaining about life’s unfairness and chasing and swearing at each other. As if crazed, Zhao San throws the new-born baby (actually swaddling clothes) offstage—onto the ground, onto the rocks, into the fields. We hear the baby’s cries, then abrupt silence. The audience is shocked, as the village-chorus sings “life, aging, disease, death,” and laughing pumpkins float across the stage in the ensuing darkness.

Life and Death combined a variety of theatrical elements (story, acting, dialogue, monologue, mime, song, and combat), yet its goal was not xiqu’s synthesis of chang, nian, zuo, da (“song, speech, acting, combat”). Rather than integrating the various elements, Life and Death emphasized contradictions to create dynamic juxtapositions. With the continually shifting time and place creating a montage effect, designer Xue thought that the
adaptation was actually a film script (Xue, 8-25-99). *Life and Death* combined tragedy and scenes of comic relief, and the tragic sequences became stronger with the contrast. Tian describes humor as an inherent part of the peasants’ nature, “an attitude of humor in adversity and so they survive under extraordinarily difficult circumstances” (“Directorial Analysis”). The cruel, ironic image of the laughing pumpkins, the chorus dryly chanting the theme song with their matter-of-fact attitude in response to death and suffering, the episodic structure with each scene ending in dingge—these are similar to Brechtian techniques to create estrangement.

While director Tian also mentioned Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” and Meyerhold’s “Biomechanics” as inspirations for the powerful physicality in *Life and Death*, her description of the actors’ “beauty of form” sounds like xiqu. Actor Han Tongsheng thought *Life and Death*’s unique acting proposition had the “added positive result of making the production very pleasing to the eyes.” The actors present “ignorant poor peasants. Costumes and make-up are ugly, but when the audience sees our ‘beauty of form,’ they think our peasants are worth appreciating” (Han, 8-4-99). “Beauty” is an aesthetic of xiqu. Scholar Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak described the influence of traditional xiqu aesthetics on huaju, particularly “beauty as a primary aesthetic value” (Wichmann, Mackerras 1983, 192). This can be seen particularly in director Tian’s feelings about the childbirth scenes. She wanted the audience “to understand the women’s pain,” but did not want these scenes to be “ugly or unpleasant.” Jin Zhi gives birth lying on her back on the floor with her legs spread apart, raised and held by ropes hanging from above. The image is unexpected and powerful. The ropes were Tian’s invention “to make the childbirth scenes more beautiful” (Tian, 8-19-99).

Examining content more closely, Tian Qinxin introduced many Chinese rural customs. For example, the village women loudly wailing for Wang Po is a custom unique to northeastern China (Yan Liu, 6-11-99). The peasants are also very superstitious. Wang
Po is seemingly dead with wide-open eyes, and the villagers wrap her in a mat to prepare her for burial. Guttural sounds are heard coming from inside the burial mat, and Wang Po’s body “jumps.” The peasants are afraid of her ghost and press on Wang Po’s abdomen with a long stick to stop her “jumping body” (tiaoshi). They don’t expect her to come back to life, but she surprises them. As the stick causes her to sit up and vomit the poison, Wang Po’s life is saved. While the “stick sequence” and “jumping body” are in the original novel, the director also adapted Chinese rural customs “for a modern audience.”

In Xiao Hong’s novel, mourning peasants hang white paper lanterns. “To appeal to young Chinese,” Tian changed the traditional white lanterns to pumpkin lanterns “similar to American Halloween pumpkins” (Tian, 8-19-99). The “mourning” pumpkins’ laughing faces “add irony to the cruelty of living and dying. ‘Life and death’ play a good joke on the peasants” (“Directorial Analysis”).

As expected, there are differences in a Chinese and foreign cultural understanding. For example, when Cheng Ye returns to warn the villagers of the approaching Japanese, he swings onstage hanging on a rope as Tarzan in the jungle swinging in on vines. This was later cut “because the rhythm was too slow” (Tian, 8-19-99). I found the Tarzan movement cliché and humorous rather than heroic. As Tian explained, in the yangbanxi, Azalea Mountain (Dujuan shan), a character also traveled through the trees swinging on vines. The movement itself is not amusing to the Chinese and does not suggest Tarzan. Actually, even without the overt image of swinging vines, Cheng Ye’s return to the village embodied the hero arriving in the nick of time “to save the day.” Director Tian was quite surprised to hear my reaction and explanation of Tarzan.

While Life and Death endeavored to be “less maudlin than usual” (Tian, 8-19-99), the music, emotionally leading the audience, was heavy-handed and manipulative. The final scene seemed to belong to another play, as the finale became nationalistic, patriotic, and tearfully sentimental: when no one will betray Cheng Ye and divulge who murdered one of
their men, the soldiers begin shooting. Jin Zhi is killed rushing over to help her father. The villagers finally raise their heads and stand up to fight. (Although leading characters have died, in xiqu terms this is a tuanyuan, “round round” ending. There is rectification as the peasants rise up to protect their homeland and combat the foreign invaders.) A large Japanese flag falls down onto the stage. Zhao San climbs out from under the flag accompanied by traditional heroic music and drums: “Young men, you must save the country! ... Destroy the Japanese flag! When I’m dead and buried, put a Chinese flag on my grave! ... I was born Chinese! When I die and I’m a ghost, I’ll be a Chinese ghost! I don’t want to be a slave without a country!” Every villager carries a smiling pumpkin, as they stamp on the Japanese flag and bravely march off to face death. The painted relief backdrop is bathed in red light, as the sound of heroic and sorrowful music fills the theatre. The backdrop splits apart revealing a green field of corn and blue sky. As designer Xue describes, “seemingly forever solid, the land finally explodes” (Xue, 62). Zhao San hands Er Liban a pumpkin. Wiping his tears and saying farewell to his old pet goat, Er Liban is the last to join the anti-Japanese fighters: “Old Sleepy, I’m going to my death!” In the final image, with backs to the audience as they march upstage, the villagers all raise their pumpkins high in the air. In the blackout, the wide eyes and smiles on the pumpkin lanterns glow in the darkness.

Designer Xue Dianjie described Life and Death as an example of the nationalization of huaju, a continuation of earlier explorations incorporating xiqu elements into huaju (8-25-99). While promoted as “brand new” (“Press Release”), Fields of Life and Death actually built on techniques used previously, especially by “exploration theatre” of the 1980s (see chapter 1). Two significant “exploratory” productions of particular interest here are “rural plays”: Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana (Gouerye niepan), directed by Lin Zhaohua in 1986 (mentioned previously in relation to Gossip Street), and Stories of Mulberry Village (Sangshuping jishi), directed by Xu Xiaozhong in 1988, and performed
on a raked revolving stage. These productions used a variety of styles, realism and Chinese and Western anti-realistic techniques, and combined thematic elements (i.e., sociopolitical criticism based on realism) and artistic experimentation. Both won popular as well as critical acclaim, pleasing socialist realists and experimentalists alike. Audiences understood their underlying call for social and political reform. Fields of Life and Death shares with Nirvana and Mulberry Village its theatricality and eclectic mix of styles: realism and Western and Chinese non-illusionistic elements, especially a similar use of flashbacks, stream of consciousness, montage. Yet a difference is significant: the earlier productions bravely culminated in open-ended final scenes, which presented an uncertain future rather than providing answers. Life and Death, while seemingly critical of the nation’s “intrinsic shortcomings,” had a pat, uplifting conclusion, indicative of the Chinese ‘main melody’ play, and presumably in the Government’s view more palatable to the masses.

Reaction: Two productions about the Japanese invasion, Japanese Soldiers I Have Known followed by Fields of Life and Death, were prepared for the 50th Anniversary of the People’s Republic of China. CNET treated both as “main melody” “key” productions assigning their “best creative personnel” (Yang, 1-20-00). Both were performed in Beijing’s 900-1000 seat China Children’s Art Theatre. Yet an important stylistic difference existed: Japanese Soldiers embodying realism was, as set designer Xue Dianjie described, “not very popular with audiences” (Xue, 8-25-99). Life and Death, combining realism with experimental techniques, received a more positive reaction.

Life and Death illustrates how the concept of “main melody” changed over the decade. This production was not “main melody” in the strictest sense, i.e., it did not praise the Communist Party or glorify Party heroes. The scope of “main melody,” originally used for teachings of the Communist Party, had expanded by the end of the 1990s. The government made everything “active, positive, guiding people forward ‘main melody.’ The kind of play to encourage is ‘main melody’” (Xue, 8-25-99). CNET characterized Life and
Death as “main melody”: The country is “strong because we have experienced outrageous hardships, ... grand and invincible, because we are perseverant and tolerant.” The nation has experienced “numbness, ignorance, joy, yearning, struggle, and conflict. ... We must cultivate our country’s dignity. ... National unity supports our common future” (“Playbill,” 1999). Zhang Wenchang, the Head of CNET’s Stage Arts Center explained: “you could call Life and Death a combination of ‘main melody’ and ‘experimental,’ but we think it’s ‘experimental.’ ... From the directing to the acting, the play is unlike real life” (9-23-99). In CNET’s mission statement, in fact, the leaders set out their goal: “in rehearsing ‘main melody’ plays, we should be bold in our experimentation” (Shi Jian 1996, 70). One of my university students pointed out that “if Life and Death were promoted as ‘main melody,’ it would lose all audience appeal.” The student thought Life and Death “main melody” because of its topic, but added, “most ‘main melody’ plays are not this good!” (8-15-99).

This is exciting water. Theatre artists and audiences can interpret the production in different ways, both as ‘main melody’ and modern experimentation. This can serve both ends and satisfy both groups. ... Life and Death shows that ‘main melody’ doesn’t have to be dull and boring. If CNET calls it ‘main melody,’ no one in the government would object. The government will welcome it.

The Cultural Ministry sponsored an “Assessment Exhibition Performance of Excellent Plays” (Youxiu jumu pingbi zhanyan) for China’s 50th Anniversary. Both Japanese Soldiers and Life and Death received awards for “Excellent Play,” “Excellent Playwright,” “Excellent Director,” “Excellent Set Designer,” as well as “Special Acting Awards” for the leading actors (Shi Yan, 10/99, 5). My student described Government awards in general as “having a bad taste. ... Theatre and films which have won awards won’t have a large audience unless work units are given block tickets.” Life and Death was further honored by the Government, as the only huaju invited by the Arts Bureau directly under the Cultural Ministry to participate in the Shanghai International Cultural Arts Festival (Shanghai guoji wenhua yishujie) in November 1999. Tickets (at 30-150 yuan
each) were reportedly sold out for the two performances (Xu Jin, 11-4-99). CNET
President Zhao pointed out that Government awards lend prestige to the theatre as “doing
an excellent job in upholding spiritual education … but these awards have usually been
based on realistic topics and theme plays. Their style is realism. Life and Death was an
exception” (4-22-98).

Reactions were mixed among theatre artists. Actor Han Tongsheng praised Life and
Death: “the bad nature of peasants is also within us. … Mainstream theatre should bring
enlightenment and touch our souls. There are very few plays like this” (in Yan Liu, 59).
Life and Death “made exciting explorations, especially in terms of stage design and
characterizations and shows that ‘main melody’ and ‘experimental’ can co-exist. … We
didn’t call it a ‘main melody’ play, but the Government recognized it as such.” Minister of
Culture Sun Jiazheng thought Life and Death was excellent in terms of script, acting and
directing. “He thought the production was flawless. I think that’s overly praising it, but it
shows that the State recognizes our production” (Han, 8-4-99). Another CNET theatre
artist liked the powerful physical movement but “disliked the stylization,” finding it “too
much like yangbanxi.” The actors were “too controlled by this performance style. They
were like the director’s dolls onstage.” Another artist thought “it was too simplistic and
ultimately embodied too many slogans.” As Tian describes, during rehearsal Leader Zhao
Youliang’s “work style was different.” Providing more supervision than usual, Leaders
Zhao and Yang “treated Life and Death as their new-born baby” (Tian, 8-19-99). The
Leaders gave detailed criticisms to the actors and the design staff throughout the run.56
While Zhao Youliang “loved the production,” he also felt the peasants were “over-
simplified” and hoped the actors would be “more true to life” (“Leaders’ run-through,”
5-31-99).

The audience was extremely enthusiastic, wildly cheering, applauding, and shouting
“hao, hao” (bravo!) as they would if watching xiqu. In fact the audience passionately
cheered during the “freeze” after every vignette—as if reacting to xiqu’s liangxiang. Tian had worked out a detailed curtain call. To the beat of majestic music, the actors all in character stepped up to the edge of the stage. This elicited a standing ovation. The Press was also very positive. Noted critic Lin Kehuan found the non-linear structure quite unusual and Xue Dianjie’s stage design unique. “The acting style suggested a folk painting. ... The audience’s thoughts and feelings are provoked.” Lin described the Prologue as a “ritual,” “the plain movements achieving an historical significance ... beyond the specific process of childbirth.” He found each vignette “a creation of the ceremonies of life and death.” In its treatment of the peasants, Lin thought “this is not simple praise nor criticism. ... The complexity of human nature and complexity of the modern artist’s aesthetic experience are shown.” He found the last scene “exciting but very abrupt” and not compatible with the overall style and “cool artistic attitude” of the playwright-director (Lin 1999, 63-64, 75). Literary experts held a Symposium to discuss Life and Death with CNET theatre artists. Comments were varied: Xiao Yun thought that neither Xiao Hong nor Lu Xun ever imagined that Life and Death could be adapted into huaju. She found this “a miracle.” Professor Qian Liqun “was quite moved, even shocked ... and felt the beauty of the play.” This play “draws on avant-garde theatre but is also different from those plays which copy foreign things. ... For years, I’ve longed to see such a play.” Writer Chen Jiangong described that her daughter “with avant-garde ideas even wanted to see the play a second time.” Editor Wang Hui thought: “In the past, huaju relied too much on foreign scripts. Modernism contributed a lot to form, but now theatre has exhausted it. Current experimentation is either commercialization or just playing with form. ... This play can encourage a dialogue and is not propaganda.” Yet Ji Hongzhen felt the “voice of ‘main melody’ was too strong. Life and Death fits in with the nationalistic trend of the 1990s, and that’s the problem.” Wu Fuhui also thought the National language in the latter part of the play “flies high” and weakens the earlier part (“Symposium,” 7-1-274.
Other critics exclaimed: “Applause and laughter never end. We don’t want to leave the theatre even when the play is over. It’s beyond our expectations” (Lu Yan, 11-5-99); *Life and Death* is “unique in combining National and international characteristics. Both elegant and popular tastes are satisfied” (Xu Jin, 11-4-99); “I haven’t seen such a moving play in a long time. It reminded me of Zhang Yimou’s film *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gaoliang). … The peasants’ indifference to life and death is frightening. … Our hearts are shaken” (Man Yan, 6-12-99). One critic found the play particularly philosophical: “People die to save their country during a foreign invasion. … What kind of life and death is meaningful during peace? People are tempted now by power and money. Our complacency is just like those peasants sixty years ago” (Jia Wei, 6-14-99). The play “shows the power and glamour” of theatre. “It’s shocking and provocative. … The transformations of time and space create several dimensions. A deep eastern dialectical philosophy is behind the excitement and impulsive action” (Xiao, 6-25-99). Other critics thought: the topic is “very serious, but the peasants also have their own unique humor and the play’s very funny” (He Lulu, 6-5-99); *Life and Death* “cleverly uses a technique of story-telling with a very modern sense” (Zeng, 55-56). According to actor Han Tongsheng, several critics thought the actors “over-acted” and that the peasants would not have acted so nobly. As he explained, “we should have shown just the very earliest stage of the peasants’ awakening.” The peasants are not aware of the Japanese invasion or that they should rise up against the Japanese. All they understand is that an outside force is breaking the former order of their lives (8-4-99).

Despite praise from the Press, theatre leaders, and artists, director Tian assessed:

I don’t think the audience understands this style. We have to admit that we failed. … Actually young people understood and thought it was quite good; they grew up watching American movies. The Chinese audience is used to seeing ‘cause and effect’ and a linear structure. Middle-aged and older people were very critical (8-19-99).
Originally there were three scenes of childbirth occurring simultaneously, but two had to be cut “because the production was too long.” Tian also had to cut two memory sequences, where she further experimented with “time”--rather than starting at the beginning, the memories started in the middle and returned back to the beginning: “The audience just couldn’t accept these. … It will be a long process before the audience adapts to new explorations in huaju” (Tian, 8-19-99). Han Tongsheng thought that while some audience members felt scenes were not clear, “people will gradually get accustomed to these stage techniques. … We have to cultivate our audience” (Han, 8-4-99). The English-language Beijing Scene critic also found the sequence of events sometimes “confused by flashback scenes indicated only with the use of different lighting” (Xishe, 7-9-99). I did not find this a problem. I thought the non-linear structure added depth and was actually the production’s strength. A straight-line narrative is the dull and usual alternative.

The actors and director apparently tried to give the characters some individuality, rather than embodying the usual stereotypes. Zhao San had contradictions, switching between coward and hero. He is both strong and weak. “I hope audiences see themselves in the characters. … We’re sympathetic, but also harshly criticize the peasants. We share their prejudices and fear of ‘losing face’” (Han, 8-4-99). Humor most often grew out of the characterizations. The actors playing the Japanese soldiers in fact spoke Japanese, and the Chinese audience found the undoubtedly strangely-accented Japanese quite hilarious. Han Tongsheng (Zhao San) has wonderful comic timing. His antics and line deliveries often elicited audience laughter. Wang Po, Zhao San’s wife, has a fiery disposition and is the most rebellious among the peasants. Er Liban is typically humble, but the actor Ni Dahong created a cleverly symbolic physical disfigurement for his character. While Er Liban was originally written to walk with a limp, Ni Dahong inventively changed this into bowed legs. As the actor describes, “Er Liban wasn’t born that way. He was twisted to walk bow-legged and bent over, weighed down by life’s hardships and the vicious ridicule
and abuse” of the villagers (in Yan Liu, 59-60). In the end, the peasant characters still seem contrived. Whenever a Japanese soldier is killed, the audience applauds and cheers. “Good guys and bad guys” are here. It is very simplistic. Chinese peasants are loveable; but the Japanese are all evil.

The actors’ physicality gave the production a dynamic and compelling energy. The movement is bawdy, gutsy, even sexual. Of course it is melodramatic—I was horrified by Ma Po’s rape and murder and the peasants’ ignorant reactions; characters who have become loveable are killed; the peasants cruelly kicking poor Er Liban into a ditch, because they think he will bring them bad luck, is pitiful; Er Liban’s conversations with his goat “Old Sleepy” are milked for all they’re worth. Yet I found Life and Death sentimentally appealing—even as I knew I was being manipulated. That is what sentimentality is all about—Chinese theatre artists certainly do not have a monopoly on this. When I saw Life and Death for the first time with an audience (as opposed to the rehearsal), I was the only non-Chinese in the theatre. A large contingent of PLA soldiers was seated at the rear of the auditorium. During the exuberant shouts of the final scene (“Destroy the Japanese flag! When I’m dead and buried, put a Chinese flag on my grave! ... I was born Chinese!”), everyone in the theatre, especially the soldiers seated behind me, loudly cheered. Critics had written: “Where will our Nation’s united force come from? Must we wait for foreign devils to come?” (Man Yan, 6-12-99); “the absence of a foreign invasion now doesn’t mean there’s no potential threat” (Jia Wei, 6-14-99); “our university students are protesting NATO’s bombing of our Embassy in Yugoslavia, so now we feel even more deeply the painful process several decades ago when the Chinese nation awakened from its ignorance” (He Lulu, 6-5-99). VP Yang commented: “When I saw the play, I felt suffocated. Our entire history is a history of oppression, especially with the recent U.S. bombing of our Embassy. Now it’s very meaningful for us to dissect a northeastern village” (“Leaders’ run-through”). In fact, NATO forces had bombed the Chinese
Embassy in Belgrade just before Life and Death opened, and anti-American sentiment was very high. As audience members glared at me, I could not help shivering and shrinking down in my seat. I was thankful for the subsequent blackout on stage. Life and Death reminded me how powerful an emotional tool the theatre can be.

Management and Financial Practices: Examining the production realization of Life and Death, director Tian explains: “CNET first decided to perform the play; the Cultural Ministry approved and produced the money” (8-19-99). CNET, i.e., the Cultural Ministry, invested one million yuan for two productions: 450,000 yuan was earmarked for Japanese Soldiers and 550,000 yuan was for Life and Death. Illustrating management techniques described earlier, CNET President Zhao Youliang was credited as “executive producer” (chupinren) and VP Yang Zongjing as “artistic supervisor” (yishu zongjian)—even though funding came from the Cultural Ministry. To work on logistics with director Tian, CNET assigned Li Dong, a young man with TV advertising, marketing, and publicity experience, to serve as in-house “producer” (zhizuoren). Of course, as part of the State Theatre system and with Government funding, the in-house producer “had no financial responsibility at all” (Li, 10-28-99). Although all members of CNET’s Stage Arts Center helped to build the raked stage and backdrop, the pumpkin lanterns and corn plants were contracted out to temporary workers (linshigong), peasants from Anhui Province who lived in Beijing and worked temporarily for CNET and other theatres. While these 20-25 workers were not “registered” in Beijing, they were able to work for the theatres. This was a new phenomenon brought about by China’s “reform and opening” (see chapter 2). CNET also initiated an innovative plan for Life and Death to get additional sponsorship. According to VP Yang, these ideas were first used in China in the area of sports advertising. This sounds familiar to Westerners, but is significant as a new phenomenon for China’s State Theatres, lacking State funding and endeavoring to find investors on their own.
The 40 yuan ticket price was less than tickets for productions deemed more profitable. Although funding came from the Cultural Ministry and CNET did not have to pay attention to box office profits, the Theatre planned for box office receipts to pay the theatre rental and the creative team’s performance subsidies (Yang, 11-19-99). *Life and Death* had an initial run of 30 performances in June-July 1999, and another 7 Beijing performances were added in October in preparation for the Shanghai tour. Life and Death was not considered commercial, and, as expected, made no profit at the box office. The Theatre was not full every night even though Government agencies and writers’ associations were given free tickets. CNET producer Li Dong explained: “While this is not commercial … people realize it has a very high artistic level. It’s about a very serious historical subject. In today’s society, it just isn’t well suited to the tastes of the average audience” (10-28-99). Xue Dianjie described: now there are many performances and people have “lots of choices.” Beijing is also a large city with traffic problems, and people “would rather stay home and watch TV than go to the theatre.” The atmosphere for huaju is “not very good. Maybe this month we have a play … but we don’t have a fixed audience. We really don’t have a fixed performance plan for the entire year” (8-25-99).

At the end of the decade, Tian Qinxin was formulating future projects. As previously mentioned, she would co-direct a newly-written jingju, *Prime Minister Liu the Hunchback* (*Zaixiang Liu Luoguo*) with Lin Zhaohua and celebrated jingju director Shi Yukun. Tian was also planning to direct an as yet untitled huaju based on an ancient Chinese story for CNET. Building on her earlier *Cutting the Wrists*, still another project “in the works” was an independent production called *Cutting the Sleeves* (*Duan xiu*), which Tian hoped to direct in Hong Kong.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

"To get rich is glorious!,” the polemic of Deng Xiaoping’s historic “Southern Tour,” became the resounding anthem of the 1990s. China’s rapid and unprecedented socio-economic transformation precipitated enormous challenges for huaju as it struggled to survive amid the encompassing swirl of the decade’s events. In my original hypothesis, I asked: “how and to what extent did the socio-economic-political climate of the 1990s impact the development of huaju?” I addressed this question by examining the aesthetics of huaju performance, as innovative management, producing, and financial practices were implemented and an environment for experimentation was created. During the 1990s, new phenomena emerged: independent theatre groups and the proliferation of “little theatres.” The data suggests that huaju was more diverse, and experimentation more widespread than it had ever been. Even “avant-garde” theatre became a viable alternative for audiences, as a new market-driven huaju changed the parameters of mainstream theatre. In this concluding chapter, I summarize the outcomes of this study, looking at the socio-economic-political climate, the huaju scene in Beijing, and styles and genres at the prestigious CNET, which provide a context for CNET’s most cutting-edge work. It is my contention that the boundaries between avant-garde, experimental, and mainstream have, in fact, become less distinct. I consider how two mainstream productions at the end of the decade embraced experimentation in style and/or content and new parameters of “mainstream.” Finally I look beyond the decade, as huaju of the 1990s came to a culmination and entered the new millennium.

Summary:

Socio-economic-political climate: The 1990s’ acceleration of “Reform and Opening” encouraged both capitalist-style economic reforms and increased contact with the
outside world. China was being quickly transformed from a centrally-planned to a market economy, euphemistically called “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” As it was now possible to leave the “iron rice bowl” and “jump into the sea” of private business, an entrepreneurial class was quickly emerging. The political climate continued in recurring cycles of repression and relaxation, as the government initiated a variety of campaigns and crackdowns. China had the remarkable co-existence of an authoritarian political system, state-owned companies, as well as vibrant free enterprise. A dichotomy existed between the economic and political realms, as the old system of control weakened in the areas of economics and lifestyle. Everyone understood the basic boundaries: avoid overt political protest and put your energy into making money. In response to accelerated “Reform and Opening,” the 1990s also witnessed an alternate “gray” or “underground” culture, which proliferated alongside the State-sanctioned art venues. The avant-garde scene in literature, fine art, music, dance, performance art, film, and huaju began to expand and flourish. An added bonus to less tightly-controlled self-expression: the alternate cultural route could often prove quite profitable. Boundaries became blurred as the official and countercultures sometimes overlapped. The new “gray” cultural activity was exemplified by a Mao pop-art rage, “alternate” publishing, rock music, disco clubs, karaoke bars, pubs, cafes, video arcades, and underground and unofficial film, dance, and huaju. A trendy vocabulary of urban liumang (“hooligan”) slang, distorting and parodying official slogans and indicative of the new techno climate, became an integral part of the “gray” culture. Economic reforms had introduced the possibility of surviving “outside” the system, i.e., without a danwei. Those with a danwei found expanded possibilities to pursue personal projects outside their official duties. Areas opened up within the more privatized and diversified environment where government constraints might be circumvented. China’s culture appeared no longer to be the exclusive domain of the CCP. In reality, “nonofficial” cultural activities were actually following Party mandates of a market-driven economy. Artists inevitably were
caught amid competing agendas of politics, economics, commercialization, and personal artistic vision.

The huaju scene: The 1990s introduced a brand-new phenomenon: the “independent theatre studio,” as three key figures--directors Mou Sen, Lin Zhaohua, and Meng Jinghui--formed independent studios to focus on experimental work. The new self-supporting studios were both “outside” and co-existent with the State theatre system. The first independent studios provided a vital means for experimentation and were “unofficial.” Productions had limited engagements, were given no publicity, and “officially” no tickets were sold. The 1990s also introduced the first “free-lance” theatre artists. While some “moonlighted” outside their danwei, others were self-employed “individual artist entrepreneurs.” Chinese theatre artists began to use the terms “non-mainstream,” “nonofficial,” “experimental,” “avant-garde,” “pioneering theatre,” “performance art,” “fringe” and “underground” theatre with a variety of implications. Another type of independent theatre studio introduced during the decade was more commercial than experimental in intent. Both smaller and larger-scale commercial independent productions often proved profitable, especially with the management and marketing skills of “cultural companies” which began to proliferate and sponsor productions. While tickets were relatively expensive, selling from 40-280 RMB each, these productions often sold out. A central feature, especially of the more commercial productions, was the use of the new vernacular, the latest “hip” liumang slang of urban life. Beijing even had “Late Night Theatre,” improvisational, experimental little theatre, often with controversial content, performed by students at the heavy-metal punk-rock “Busy Bee Bar.”

Within this climate, the Government subsidized the State Theatres, providing directives, management, as well as financial support. During the 1990s, subsidies were being slashed (as with all State-owned enterprises), and the theatres were forced to become increasingly self-sufficient. Facing the rising cost of living and inflation, theatre danwei
members found their salaries far too meager, and artists began free-lancing outside: acting, directing, writing, dubbing for TV and films. Some left the theatre to go into private business. Individual artists became rich, while the State theatres were in financial crisis. A variety of innovations were launched during the 1990s: the “iron rice bowl” of permanent employment was replaced by a “contract system” for all arts workers. Profit margins, box office revenues, investors, and operating budgets were suddenly significant factors in production planning and realization. State theatre artists began to use the term *shangyan* (“commercial performance”), emphasizing that tickets were to be sold. Producer and management systems were instituted exposing the paradoxically double system of State Theatres searching for private investment.

During the 1990s, every State *huaju* theatre in Beijing built its own “little theatre,” indicative of financial pressures (lower costs for “little theatre”), the dwindling number of audience members, as well as artistic considerations. “Little theatre” was “in synch” with the thoughts, values, and artistic tastes of society, crumbling the monopoly of the “large theatres,” changing the pattern of *huaju* performance and the actor-audience relationship. State Theatres were facing an audience disinterested in ideology and craving entertainment and stimulation. The importance of the box office during the 1990s actually encouraged a varied repertoire, as theatre leaders for the first time had to balance artistic quality with commercial viability and “political correctness.” *Huaju* production at the State theatres began to encompass a range of artistic, management, and financial practices. The first “law” concerning commercial performance was formulated, strictly requiring every troupe to have a “performing license,” and independent studios collaborated with State Theatres on “semi-independent productions” to access the required license. The Cultural Ministry’s newest directives during the 1990s--not yet implemented by the end of the decade--called for permanent administrative staffs paid for by the State, with performing artists operating as free-lancers instead of “government workers.” Rather than belonging
to a *danwei*, theatre artists would be managed by “personnel agent organizations.” While “fixed subsidies” from the Cultural Ministry were to be decreased every year until the theatres were completely independent, awards and subsidies for specific projects were to be increased. As one artist described, “there will always be money from the government for certain types of plays, i.e., ‘main melody.’” The State Theatres followed traditional procedures to bring a performance to realization under the watchful eyes of internal Committees before submitting “production plans” to officials from the Cultural Ministry and the Propaganda Department. During the 1990s, this process saw a number of changes, as theatre leaders gained a bit more autonomy. The basic tenets did not change as far as the “three forbiddens.” A play could not explicitly challenge the government, or be anti-Communist, anti-Socialist, or anti-Chinese; it could not have overt sexuality, nudity, or obscenity; and it could not portray excessive violence. During the 1990s, primarily due to its more limited audience, the censors tended to allow more freedom to *huaju* in striking contrast to the restrictions imposed on other forms of mass media.

**CNET:** This study focused on the prestigious China National Experimental Theatre, as representative of China’s State theatre *danwei* system, including CNET’s history; policy, structure and organization; and challenges and innovations over the past decade. During the 1990s, CNET continued to carry out the CCP principles of “main melody” and “diversity,” i.e., “serve the people and serve socialism” and also “let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend.” CNET also endeavored to forge its own personality, its “own unique style” by redefining its “principle of experimentation.” From the majority of accounts from theatre artists, Party membership became less important than in the past. In the new economic climate, promotion relied more on talent and ability than Party affiliation. Theatre artists held a variety of opinions ranging from contempt for the Party—“money is power now”—to those who felt that Party members still had a greater role in decision-making. CNET operated under the “leader responsibility system,” i.e.,
President Zhao was responsible to the Cultural Ministry to produce one new play each year, present 150 performances annually, and be over 45% self-sufficient. Yet during the decade, CNET was not able to consistently achieve the self-sufficiency target. The Theatre leaders, who were ultimately accountable to the Cultural Ministry, made decisions from script selection to production. In “a change from the past,” CNET’s “#1 person” was the President and not the Party Secretary (Yang, 9-14-99).

For the first time, CNET had to consider the box office, although profits were to take a back seat to positive social impact. Censorship was essentially done at the theatre level. CNET no longer had to submit scripts to the Cultural Ministry for approval, as they already had the “performing license.” They were submitting scripts in order to get additional funding, following the “key play” initiative of the Cultural Ministry, i.e., “main melody” plays received extra subsidy. With more funding coming from foreign sources, and directors organizing financing themselves through Chinese enterprises and/or foreign sources, more options were open than ever before. For a “semi-independent” production, the director was often able to choose his own actors and designers, while CNET provided artistic supervision and “guaranteed quality and content.” Employing both “inside” and “outside” directors, CNET encouraged “semi-independent productions,” as these required minimal or no monetary investment from the Theatre at all. Artistic experimentation could also be encouraged under such an arrangement. CNET benefited, since providing the “performance license” for the semi-independent production allowed these performances to count toward the 150 required for the much-needed extra subsidy from the Cultural Ministry. Thus despite the new emphasis on box office, it was still profitable for CNET to give other work units free tickets in order to fill the house. CNET continued to assign directors to specific scripts or, as was often the case during the 1990s, the director chose several plays and discussed his/her ideas with CNET leaders for their approval. As government directives stipulating a core administrative staff and free-lance artists were not
yet implemented, CNET continued to be home danwei for its artistic and administrative staffs. Government funding continued to pay for salaries, medical, housing, and all operating expenses, although with increasing costs and inflation, the value of the State subsidy accordingly decreased. To supplement State funding and under the guidance of the Cultural Ministry, CNET developed creative, if somewhat complex, strategies.

CNET was the first huaju theatre to initiate the “contract system” with its entire staff under contract, as opposed to the old “iron rice bowl” system of living and working in the same danwei from cradle to grave. Salaries were reconfigured to include a “fixed salary” and a “flexible salary,” a “creation subsidy” and a “performance subsidy.” As CNET was forced to “go to the marketplace” and consider the box office and fund-raising for the first time, leaders were confronted with transforming their grossly inefficient staffing model into a dynamic and active one by borrowing the scientific management methods of a market economy: financial analysis, accounting and auditing practices, and modern methods for advertising and publicity. During the 1990s, CNET endeavored unsuccessfully to procure the funding and license to build a new large theatre with modern equipment and improved working conditions. CNET had opened its 200-seat “Little Theatre,” the first separate “little theatre” in Beijing, in 1993. CNET rented its own little theatre to other groups and rented space at larger theatres for itself when needed. Yet even with innovative management techniques, it seemed impossible for huaju at the State Theatre to become profitable. While individual actors, directors, and designers earned enough to buy automobiles and flats, CNET itself made no profit, and at the end of the decade, CNET continued its financial struggle.

**Styles and genres:** The dynamic context surrounding the State theatre contributed to the evolution and diversification of stylistic and thematic elements within huaju genres of the 1990s—classifications used by theatre artists, critics, and audience members alike. These included “main melody,” “personal realism,” “nationalization,” “foreign,” and
"experimental / avant-garde" plays. This study overviewed more than half of the productions from CNET's 1990s' repertoire, which were selected to exemplify each genre. While identifying parameters began to overlap and become less defined over the decade, we can summarize the prevalent thematic and stylistic characteristics of the genres of the 1990s:

"Main melody" was a new name for the propaganda play, traditionally an integral part of huaju. In the early 1990s, "main melody" was rather narrowly defined as a play praising the Party and Socialism and glorifying a model individual. Usage expanded over the decade to include contemporary plays illustrating the positive side of life and historical stories with copacetic current implications and uplifting topics, meant to inspire and educate. This genre is exemplified by Born at the Right Time, reflecting the subject of laid-off workers in State-owned enterprises, and Japanese Soldiers I Have Known, about Japanese war-time atrocities. The "main melody" productions clearly followed a pattern in presenting topical issues using realism in acting and staging and were performed in large proscenium theatres. Regardless of a sometimes humorous approach, attempt at less-stereotypical characters, or impressive audio-visual and set design elements, the productions emphasized educational and propaganda values. "Key plays" predictably received extra subsidy from the Cultural Ministry, and, as expected, did not make profits at the box office.

Plays called "personal realism" came to be known as "socially popular" and "little theatre" plays. While the original venue was the "little theatre," plays of this type came to be performed in both large and small theatres. After We're Divorced, Don't Come Looking For Me and the contemporary courtroom drama Intentional Injury are representative of this genre. After We're Divorced was CNET's first collaboration with an outside independent producer, a phenomenon that began in Beijing during the early 1990s. While funding for "main melody" plays came from the Cultural Ministry, the more commercial "personal realism" plays found investment from private enterprises. The "socially popular" plays were realistic in acting technique, embraced current, relevant social
and personal topics, embodied the new trendy slang vocabulary, and utilized simple sets. While staging was primarily realistic, emulating TV with small-scale prosenium staging, directors also explored the actor-audience relationship by breaking the “4th wall” to create intimacy and direct communication. Subject matter reflected the preoccupations of the new entrepreneurial class: how to treat life and love in the surge of the new market economy.

“Nationalization,” used initially to signify the sinocization of the foreign theatre form huaju, continued to be used in this way and also as an overall “catch-all” phrase to indicate the inclusion of specifically “Chinese” thematic or stylistic elements. During the 1990s, the Government continued to encourage the nationalization of huaju as part of a broader revival of nationalism. This genre encompassed Chinese folklore; contemporary, historical, and mythological themes; and used realism or non-illusionistic styles or a combination of both. Vengeance on Zidu took an innovative approach by transforming a tragic xiqu story of karma and retribution into a “black comedy.” Zidu’s mise-en-scene was eclectic, combining different periods and styles: an incredible plot, a dada/pop-art stage design, exaggerated Commedia dell’Arte-style acting, slapstick, suggestive movement of xiqu and “model revolutionary theatre,” stylized voice, mime, acrobatics, song and dance. Zidu juxtaposed anachronistic elements, the modern and the ancient, foreign and Chinese. While set in ancient China, the language was modern slang, with puns, political jargon and innuendo, illustrating the historical play set “safely” in the past, with politically-suggestive language and plot.

The “foreign” play, like the Chinese historical play (part of “nationalization”), retains allegorical and metaphorical meanings and may serve as a convenient and safe vehicle for social and political criticism. Directors treated the foreign play, in fact, as “foreign” in setting and character or as sinocized (“nationalized”) adaptations. The majority of foreign plays produced during the 1990s were based on realistic scripts, with interpretations ranging from realistic replications, to East-West fusion, to deconstructive
juxtapositions of realistic and anti-realistic techniques. Sartre’s Death Without Burial mixed the heightened realism of classical Russian theatre with symbolism and expressionism. The actors broke the “4th wall” at climactic moments, elongating time and transforming space. A sinocized version of A Doll’s House transplanted the 1870s’ Norwegian original to an intercultural marriage in China during the 1930s and combined realism with xiqu. Rather than women’s liberation and equality, the conflict became a confrontation between Eastern and Western values and cultural misunderstandings. While performed in CNET’s Little Theatre with proscenium staging, the extremely close proximity of the performing and audience zones created intimacy and direct communication.

Expanded funding possibilities for foreign investment and cultural exchange generated a proliferation of productions of foreign plays. While Death Without Burial did not apply for foreign funding (the French Embassy had already arranged funding the same year for Jules Romaine’s Dr. Knock), A Doll’s House was a Norwegian co-production with funding from the Norwegian Cultural Development Bureau. The directors were appealing to both foreign and Chinese audiences, and this certainly influenced aesthetic decisions. Death Without Burial and A Doll’s House attracted an unusual number of foreigners, but overall audience attendance was uneven. Similar to all the above representative productions, after all expenses were paid, it was difficult to make a profit. While financing and box office profits are not the most critical factors in artistic creation, they are perhaps vital to continuing experimentation in huaju. Although not fully implemented by the end of the 1990s, huaju was following the mechanisms of Western non-profit theatres for funding and sponsorship. As theatre artists described, perhaps these methods, including tax incentives, would be fully adopted in the future.

This study explored multiple and divergent perceptions of “experimental” huaju, including both broadly and narrowly defined concepts—from historical meanings, describing an experimental laboratory of the Stanislavski System, the sinocization of a
foreign form for the needs of the Chinese masses, to the use of “anti-Stanislavski,” i.e., anti-realistic elements. During the 1990s, the “experimental guidelines” of the China National Experimental Theatre embodied a shifting conception of “experimental.” Experimentation was to be conducted according to each artist’s unique creative personality. Theatre leaders had their own Party-sanctioned ideas about “experimental theatre.” Since the leaders thought it impossible to be “anti-society,” they talked about “experimental” in terms of style rather than content. Ultimately there was still censorship in terms of explicit content, but stylistically there were “no limits.” This was a far cry from the 1980s, when experimenting with foreign forms, let alone content, might be labeled “spiritual pollution.”

CNET leaders defined “experimental” with broad parameters, as using a variety of styles beyond realism, a new actor-audience relationship, and, for the first time, looking at artistic and entertainment values in addition to traditional propaganda function. The emergence of “little theatres” during the 1990s was initially described as “experimental,” as were new producer and management systems. The general understanding of “experimental” was also changing over the decade. The diffusion of “exploration” anti-realistic techniques of the 1980s within mainstream productions of the 1990s confirms this. Artists endeavored to experiment across the board within each genre—to greater and lesser degrees of success. The leadership simultaneously encouraged and controlled this experimentation, permitting creativity and innovation, primarily stylistically, while maintaining the traditional Party-line orientation. This populist view did permit a broad range of individuals to experiment, including those who had more exclusive perspectives and theories of experimentation, i.e., directors Lin Zhaohua and Meng Jinghui, who did not regard any of the above attempts as “experimental.” The theatre community introduced the term “avant-garde” to characterize the work of these directors, viewed as more “cutting edge” and even “anti-theatre.”

Directors Lin and Meng used the terms “experimental” and “avant-garde” interchangeably to characterize new methods and ideas about acting and directing. Lin
described leading the audience to a “new era,” from realism to the absurd, from the concrete to the abstract. For Lin and Meng, “experimental” and “avant-garde” were anti-mainstream, the fringe of huaju, negating the existing definition of theatre, breaking through existing modes of performance, thus connecting avant-garde work to the alternate “gray culture.” Meng and his collaborators aspired to “reinvent huaju,” but at the beginning of the 1990s, no one dared to use the word “avant-garde,” and the establishment term “experimental” provided legitimacy in an uncertain political climate. Meng considered “experimental” or “avant-garde” any method which was anti-realism and anti-Stanislavski. Yet for Meng, “experimental” was not just an aesthetic term. Non-realism itself did not equal “experimental.” Meng’s added dimension for “experimental theatre” was anger. “Experimental” theatre was both anti-realism and angry. For Meng, “experimental” had something “behind the method” and was always connected to the idea of reform and wanting to change the system.

Cutting-edge directors / Avant-garde techniques: Here I will recapitulate “experimental” as a genre in a more restrictive and selective image: experimental as equated with the avant-garde where the most innovative and visionary forms of huaju were produced: the realm of cutting-edge directors Lin Zhaohua, Meng Jinghui, and Mou Sen.

Lin Zhaohua: This study previously introduced Lin’s deconstructions of Hamlet, with its political implications presenting an “ordinary human being” caught within the prison of “Denmark,” and Emperor Romulus, combining live actors and marionettes. In both productions, actors continually changed roles, creating new perspectives and a shifting “reality.” Lin’s Faust encompassed a variety of stylistic and symbolic set elements, ranging from a rock band to Chinese shadow puppets and gongs, a constructivist set, a devil played by an actress as a Beijing liumang “hooligan,” a car, a dirigible, an elevator. Actors were encouraged to improvise and experiment with vocal patterns, speaking in unison or counterpoint, combining poetry and prose. Action was fast-paced and rhythmical, including
acrobatics, mime, dance, and suggestive stylized xiqu. Lin’s Go Man embodied a provocative juxtaposition of visual and aural images, filmic montage, a vibrant actor-audience exchange. Lin explored a totally free and natural acting style “without any performing elements at all” and a “dual-structural” method with stream of consciousness and non-synchronization of action and language to convey a set of sensory experiences and bi-polar oppositions, operating on several levels. Actors played characters in the play as well as workers constructing a giant steel chain-link house. Reality and the “play” became obscured as actors continually broke the “4th wall,” and seemingly irrelevant “bit” characters wandered into view. While Go Man was basically linear, the scene shifted fluidly in time and space, from the external to the internal, from “real” space to “psychological” space, to the “abstract” space of illusion and dreams. Lin used a variety of techniques, which he had begun to explore in the 1980s: an eclectic mix of realism and anti-realism; the aesthetics of xiqu and other indigenous performance forms; anti-realistic Western techniques, expressionism, symbolism, Theatre of the Absurd, Brechtian estrangement; non-naturalistic acting and staging; new dynamics in the actor-audience relationship; a synthesis of the real and abstract; theatricality; an “all-capable theatre.” During the 1990s, Lin expanded on his work by further exploring deconstruction and postmodern techniques, the fragmentation of text, montage, and shattering and reassembly of images and space-time relationships, a mixture of styles, eclecticism, and fusion.

Meng Jinghui: This study examined The Nun and the Monk / Si Fan and later representative productions to illustrate Meng’s signature avant-garde style. Like Lin Zhaohua, Meng experimented with anti-realism by drawing on a variety of performing traditions. Si Fan combined East and West, as it juxtaposed kunqu with sexually-risque stories from Boccaccio’s Decameron. Actors used suggestive xiqu stylization, as well as an exaggerated Commedia dell’Arte style. Si Fan embodied a game encouraging audience participation. Narrators experimented with story-telling techniques, and a chorus provided
vocal sound effects to help create shifting realities of time and space. Meng’s production of the foreign play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, allowed him to deal with its politically-sensitive subject matter: social injustice, elite privilege, police brutality, and official corruption. *Rhinoceros In Love*, the story of a zookeeper coping with unrequited love, similarly explored social issues in contemporary China. *Bootleg Faust* was a comic adaptation of Goethe’s classic, using a mix of theatrical elements to completely deconstruct the original text, as Faust confronted the current conflicts and contradictions of modern China. Under its comic veneer, *Bootleg Faust* became an acerbic criticism of Chinese society. Like Lin, Meng believes in a director-centered *huaju*, free to follow his imagination rather than adhering faithfully to the original script. Even if performed in a larger theatre, Meng’s informal, playful tone and simple sets promote an intimate “little theatre” feeling. Meng’s style is characterized by theatricality, non-naturalistic techniques, a fusion of Western and indigenous Chinese theatre forms, techniques of postmodernism and deconstruction. He juxtaposes disparate styles, periods, and cultures, realism and stylization, a synthesis of theatrical elements—acting, mime, dance, music, martial arts, poetry and prose, speech and song, narration and dialogue, a rock band. While this sounds like Lin, there are also differences here: Modernizing and localizing the foreign play to satirize contemporary Chinese society, Meng’s eclectic mix includes classical references, literary and historical allusions, and, at the same time, borrows from popular culture: TV, films, the latest Beijing slang, current events, jokes and puns, and pop music and song. Actors might incorporate folk rhymes, Cui Jian rock songs, slogans, a spoof on Chinese soap operas or “Model Revolutionary Plays,” Tianjin clapper rhythms, and film clips. Characteristic “Meng style” also includes clown-narrators; a chorus of actors playing multiple roles; a vignette/episodic structure with comic choral interludes; improvisation and spontaneity; a farcical slapstick style; sound and movement rhythm games; vocal “sound parts” and gibberish; multi-media and technical special effects. While Meng describes “anger” as a
vital component of “experimental / avant-garde” theatre, his indignation and intentions to change the system are concealed behind a mask of theatricality. Although he explores larger social issues and politically sensitive subjects, Meng’s productions are almost always comedies infused with animated playful energy and a mocking tone, teasing and provoking the audience.

**Mou Sen**: Unlike Lin and Meng, Mou Sen was not affiliated with a State theatre, and his productions were fully independent. Yet looking at Mou Sen’s work provides insight into Lin and Meng. Cross-influences evident among the three directors are pertinent here. Over the decade, Mou Sen’s independent “Theatre Garage” performed a variety of significant avant-garde plays. His techniques were illustrated in *Bi’an: A Discussion about Chinese Grammar on the Other Shore, Things Related to Aids*, and *File Zero*. For *Bi’an*, Mou Sen conducted a six-month rehearsal period of strenuous physical exercises following Grotowski’s model. Mou’s productions had no storyline, no characters, no set, and either embodied a most theatrical approach or lacked theatricality altogether. He created harsh juxtapositions and enigmatic images: Actors were often continually in motion, loud and violent, embodying elements from both Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre” and Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty.”

**Lin, Meng, Mou / Comparison**: During the 1990s, Lin Zhaohua and, as Beijingers referred to them, the “two M’s,” Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui, were the most provocative huaju directors in Beijing, stirring the most excitement and raising the most controversy. A comparison of the three directors reveals both common threads and significant differences. Lin was mentor to both younger directors. Mou and Meng were students in Beijing during the “exploratory” huaju period of the 1980s and the Democracy movement in 1989, phenomena which impacted their growth as young directors. Meng was a member of Mou Sen’s early “Frog Experimental Theatre” during the late 1980s. Mou Sen subsequently was an actor in Lin’s *Hamlet* in 1990. The work of the three directors includes recurrent
self-referential images and symbols aimed at the avant-garde cognoscenti. Mou’s
*Rhinoceros* was resurrected in Meng’s *Rhinoceros in Love*. The whirring fans of Lin’s
*Hamlet* were brought back to life as a huge industrial fan in Mou’s *File Zero*, and used
again by Lin himself in *Faust*. Lin’s philosophical comic gravediggers in *Hamlet* were
reincarnated as Meng’s clown-gravediggers shovelling sand in *Bootleg Faust*. Go Man’s
“exploding” popcorn later showered the audience in *Si Fan 98*. Lin’s Beijing jeep
transporting Faust to ancient Greece found life again as a motorcycle in Meng’s *Accidental
Death of an Anarchist*. Actors in *Accidental Death* performed a spoof of Lin’s production
of Lao She’s *Teahouse*. Rock’n roll in *huaju* introduced in Lin’s *Faust* became an integral
part of Meng’s work. The mechanical gadgets, steel rods and metal plates, welding and
sanding equipment creating sparks in *File Zero* were seen again in Lin’s *Go Man*. In his
*Avant-garde Theatre Files*, Meng employed the “personal file” format of Mou’s *File
Zero*. In complicity with audiences, the three directors, good friends and cohorts,
continually played a game of subtle and minute connections.

Lin Zhaohua created a broad body of work, encompassing a variety of styles
ranging from naturalism to the avant-garde. Critics were most frustrated trying to pin him
down as a realist or an avant-gardist, as he shifted his approach for each production. Lin’s
most frequent collaborator, the innovative stage designer Yi Liming, accounts for the
dominant part that stage design played in Lin’s productions. While Yi Liming also worked
with Mou Sen, Mou’s most frequent collaborators included poet Yu Jian, video artists Wu
Wenguang and Jiang Yue, and modern dancers/choreographers Wen Hui and Jin Xing.
Meng’s work also comprised a collaborative process, with his wife, playwright Liao Yimei,
and rock musicians Zhang Guangtian and He Yong. Significantly, all three directors
experimented with form as well as content; all were multi-layered; all were political; all
tacitly denied any political intentions, referring rather to “artistic considerations.” At the
same time, with their experience outside China, all were aware of the foreigner’s piquant
interest in political protest in Chinese theatre. The directors used many of the same anti-realistic techniques: Brechtian alienation, deconstruction, postmodernism, direct communication/collision with their audiences, the creation of provocative action, images, and symbols. Yet their styles and intentions evolved in different ways. Not overtly political, Lin Zhaohua created symbols and images which were often labelled as “too abstract,” “perplexing,” even “esoteric,” especially in his *Go Man* and *Three Sisters – Waiting for Godot*. Lin’s work had an intuitive feel and embraced multi-layered enigmatic motifs comprising universal truths about the human condition. I found his work both stimulating and unsettling. While Meng’s subjects might be controversial and politically apparent, he preferred a flashy, more theatrical and comic, even farcical, approach. His comedies lacked the angst and pain, often vital to Mou Sen’s work. With more disturbing and politically-charged images, Mou’s productions were often antithetical to “entertainment.” Meng preferred a less confrontational approach. A theatre artist confided that after seeing Mou Sen’s *Aids*, Meng remarked: “Mou Sen’s dumplings are a little too spicy for my taste.”

In 1995, the same year *Aids* was performed, Meng’s *Si Fan* was performed again, and, not surprisingly, was much more successful with audiences, who preferred a more comic, less abstract approach.

**Convergence: Mainstream / Experimental / Avant-garde:** Something contradictory to the broader conception of “experimental” was happening in the avant-garde work of Lin, Meng, and Mou. Yet their work was impacting the mainstream, i.e., as *huaju* adapted to market conditions, the mainstream began appropriating experimental/avant-garde motifs and techniques. To clarify the extent and nature of this impact, both in form and content—the co-option of “experimental” by the mainstream—I selected two salient examples of this phenomenon: one from the “main melody” genre, the other from “nationalization.” Both were Chinese-written plays at the end of the decade and clearly called “mainstream” by artists, critics, and audiences alike. *Gossip Street*, Guo Shixing’s
black comedy, embodied experimentation both in style and content. The play explored the destructive role of “gossip / rumor,” a theme actualized through the comic use of linguistic games based on the ambiguities and double-entendre of Chinese phonetics. The complex language games ridiculed and criticized social phenomena in contemporary China: the police, the PLA, official corruption, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes, a loss of morals in society. *Gossip Street* embodied the omniscient and constant surveillance in exaggerated rooftop tiles engulfing the entire stage. A crowd of nosy neighbors berated an old widow in a scene reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. A madman served as the voice of reason, the only one able to speak the truth. He helped a paralyzed young girl escape from the clutches of the “neighborhood committee,” the visual manifestation of social constraint. While Meng hoped for a more Brechtian, rather than realistic style, the final production combined “vulgar realism” with anti-realistic techniques in acting and staging. Meng incorporated his signature avant-garde style, i.e., a chorus, group recitation, abstract sound and movement rhythm games, nonsense rhymes, a band, pop music and song. Acting, primarily realistic, also included exaggeration, stylization, *xiqu* techniques, and the two-person comic act of Chinese *shuanghuang*. Meng’s adaptation added to the scathing social criticism inherent to the script: the crowd chanted slogans using Meng’s gibberish and rhythmic movements, but their insults were ever so clear. The criticism, especially of the Cultural Revolution, was not unusual or unprecedented, yet presenting it as the object of ridicule within the context of folklore, puns, and tongue twisters was quite innovative on playwright Guo’s part.

*Fields of Life and Death*, an “experimental revolutionary contemporary play,” also broke from the formulaic “main melody” pattern. Director Tian Qinxin used an experimental style with primarily realistic acting to present propagandist content, undoubtedly an effort to attract an audience to the “main melody” play. In *Life and Death*, the story of peasants in northeastern China preceding and during the Anti-Japanese War, director Tian combined a variety of styles, both Western and indigenous Chinese. These
included realism, stylization, expressionism, exaggeration, symbolism, filmic montage, xiqu techniques, and Chinese shadow puppetry. Director Tian looked toward both Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty” and Meyerhold’s “Biomechanics” for inspiration for the powerful athleticism in Life and Death. Her guidelines were “lively, violent, and wild body postures,” “beauty of form,” and “a body language in motion” to “liberate” the actors’ minds and bodies. The mise-en-scene followed xiqu aesthetics and, at times, specific xiqu performance techniques were used. Actors performed on a bare raked stage, with several wooden platforms and minimal props. Time and space were freely transformed by the actors to include the past and present, the imagination and memory. While acting was primarily realistic, plot-structure was non-linear, and anti-realistic techniques were employed: flashbacks, inserted narration, memory sequences, a reversal of “cause and effect,” fluid time and space, stream of consciousness, monologue, direct address to the audience. Life and Death combined story, acting, dialogue, monologue, mime, song, and combat, but its goal was not xiqu’s synthesis of theatrical elements. Tian emphasized contradictions rather than integration. Imagination and memory interrupted and collided with scenes happening in the present, and, as time and space were disrupted, events were shown simultaneously or in dynamic juxtaposition. An episodic structure with each scene culminating in dynamic tableaux, similar to “Model Revolutionary Plays,” cruel ironic images of laughing pumpkins, a village chorus matter-of-factly chanting in the face of death and suffering--these resemble Brechtian techniques to create estrangement. Yet the final scene seemed to belong to a different play, as the finale became nationalistic, patriotic, and tearfully sentimental.

An eclectic mix of styles and techniques is clearly evident in Gossip Street and Life and Death. Both productions were performed in the large proscenium China Children’s Art Theatre. While CNET produced Gossip Street, the Cultural Ministry contributed a substantial amount for the “main melody” play. Gossip Street often played to full houses
due to the reputations of both Meng and Guo, but again attendance was uneven. *Life and Death*, while experimental in style, was still perceived by audiences as “main melody.” The production did relatively well, as it clearly embodied the ultra-nationalism of the decade, but blocks of tickets were given to other “work units” to fill the house. When all was said and done, after expenses, neither production made a profit—although reportedly each “broke even.”

Throughout the 1990s, “experimental” was used most often to describe productions deviating from the norm of realism. Over the decade as illustrated, CNET’s directors built upon a variety and mix of styles in acting and mise-en-scene, including realism and anti-realistic techniques, both Western and indigenous Chinese. The range of techniques utilized in the “mainstream” and the “avant-garde” appear similar; yet there are significant distinctions. “Experimental” and “avant-garde” were not rigid classifications, but rather had nebulous boundaries, which were changing over the decade. CNET’s use of the term “experimental” certainly served as a “catch-all” phrase and smart marketing device. Experimental techniques were used in the mainstream to make productions commercially viable. “Experimental” is actually a larger set with the “avant-garde,” the cutting-edge, within it and in fact leading it. Given semantic differences as well as subjectivity in making judgments, Chinese artists overall distinguished between “experimental” and “avant-garde,” recognizing the work of directors Lin, Mou, and Meng as “avant-garde.” Clarifying distinctive elements of “experimental” and “avant-garde” is in order here. “Experimental,” i.e., “diversity,” a broader term than “avant-garde,” encouraging box office profits, actually embodied the Party-line, Deng Xiaoping’s “to be rich is glorious,” the challenge presented by the power-elite within permitted boundaries. If one stepped beyond those boundaries, it might be impossible to produce any work at all. Judgment of directorial intention, either to “make waves,” “upset the system,” or sustain the status quo, depends of course on the individual; a Westerner will have a different
perspective from CNET leaders and the Cultural Ministry. Chinese theatre artists may have different perspectives from each other. In my view, the “avant-garde” clearly comprised more controversial and groundbreaking work than the so-called “experimental.” The most cutting-edge productions had an underlying intention to impact the system and operated on several levels—both in terms of aesthetics and content. The distinction of “experimental” and “avant-garde” was both a matter of degree and intention. Avant-garde work comprised a comprehensive multitude of techniques as opposed to singular isolated applications. The avant-garde was generally more introspective, examining previously taboo sexual, psychological, and political themes. The avant-garde was not just superficial in the application of innovation, the application of non-realism.

The management and funding arrangements of directors Lin, Mou, and Meng raise the dilemma of working “inside” and “outside” the system and are pertinent here to further examine the impact of the avant-garde on the mainstream. During the 1990s, Lin Zhaohua directed both “inside” and “outside” official channels. While Lin and Meng both had self-supporting theatre studios, they were essentially directing “inside” the system by collaborating on work with a State Theatre. Mou Sen did not share this “luxury.” Lin was an invited “outside director” for CNET’s Faust and Go Man. Meng’s productions were also both “inside” and “outside” official channels. His enigmatic I Love XXX was organized, funded, and performed independently, as CNET withheld script-approval. This production embodied parody and sarcasm, as the actors repeated “I love ...” against a confusing array of disparate visual images and sound effects. I Love XXX was enigmatic, but lacked Meng’s usual overwhelming frivolity and humor. With no plot, no characters, and no set, this was perhaps closest to Mou Sen’s work. Meng continued with politically sensitive topics—for example, the parody of official corruption in Accidental Death—although he kept theatrical and comic elements at the forefront, thereby gaining CNET approval. As Meng explained, “I have to protect myself. I
can’t ruin my chances for directing in the future” (7-15-99). With the exceptions of *I Love XXX*, produced outside official channels, and *Gossip Street*, fully produced by CNET, Meng directed “semi-independent” productions between his PlayPlay Studio and CNET. CNET was the “official” *danwei*, and the director raised the funding himself. CNET “passed” the scripts and gave “artistic supervision,” and Meng had a greater role in decision-making. He organized his own artistic and management teams, chose the theatre venue, and had complete autonomy in casting—often working with actors outside of CNET or even non-actors. While Lin Zhaohua most often worked with professional actors, Meng worked with young professionals, fringe musicians, as well as non-actors.² Meng made exceptions, especially in the case of TV and film stars, whose involvement added box office appeal. Mou Sen preferred to work with non-professionals and fringe artists, who were perhaps most receptive to innovative ideas.

The CNET-collaborative productions of Lin and Meng were performed in both large and small theatres. Mou Sen’s “Theatre Garage” was completely self-supporting, and funding came primarily from foreign sources.³ Mou had no *danwei*, and his “unofficial” performances most often were held in alternative spaces (classrooms, rehearsal halls) with limited engagements, no publicity, and “officially” no box office. Word-of-mouth brought a small and elite audience of theatre artists, students, and invited guests. For example, there were three *Bi’ian* performances and one *File Zero* public rehearsal in the small classroom-theatre at Beijing’s Film Academy. *File Zero* was first performed in Belgium—commissioned by Brussel’s Kunsten Festival des Arts—and then toured Europe, Japan, South America, and Canada, with an enthusiastic audience abroad. While Mou Sen was arguably the most controversial, his work was also largely inaccessible to ordinary Chinese.⁴ As Meng explained (in Xie Xizhang, 347-55),

People at foreign theatre festivals … are excited by my work, but I’m skeptical. Do I first need to comply with the foreigner’s aesthetics? … It’s meaningless to get awards at foreign festivals and produce plays only for foreigners, with nobody seeing our plays at home. … Before I was willing to
follow this trend or direct plays which nobody could understand. I was happy when I saw that the audience was totally confused. ... I don't think foreigners can totally understand us. I prefer to communicate with Chinese.

While Lin, Mou, and Meng shared the intention of provoking their audiences, their perspectives differed. Mou's *Aids* and *File Zero* presented blatantly controversial material. Lin was often quoted as not caring if his audience understood his work or not and seemed resigned to the small audience interested in the avant-garde. After a distinguished thirty-year directing career, he also did not care what critics wrote. Meng, on the other hand, attempted to resolve conflicts regarding "making art" and building an audience. Meng endeavored to cultivate a new audience of young people. "Before I thought that I was the greatest. I didn't care whether the audience understood or not": Now, in contrast, I want to communicate with more people. ... I can't be as stubborn or free as before. You must be acceptable to others aesthetically. ... Plays won't have an audience if you're too avant-garde. Now I feel my 'avant-garde-ism' shows just through my communication with more people. ... Now there are really only small audiences. ... Some day 'experimental' theatre will become mainstream, and then 300,000 or a million people will come. ... Theatre is an art form that the audience must understand and feel drawn into. ... We must stay close to the audience and never drive ourselves into an ivory tower (in Xie Xizhang, 347-55).

To develop this larger audience, Meng's PlayPlay Studio designed websites, opened a telephone consultation hotline, released a 4-set VCD, handed out "Audience Surveys," organized discussion meetings, developed marketing and publicity strategies, connecting with local media, arts newspapers and journals, as well as TV and Radio.

Scholar Lin Kehuan had defined the Chinese "avant-garde" as "never widely accepted, ... regarded as either political opposition or heresy ... lying in the cracks of society and on the fringes of culture ... far from the mainstream" (11-30-96). Yet followers began to copy Meng's techniques, which had become the trademark of his signature avant-garde style. "Meng style" was described by the media as "non-mainstream." Meng Jinghui's *Rhinoceros In Love*, breaking box office records at Qingyi's Little Theatre, and *Bootleg Faust*, playing to standing-room only crowds in the Little Theatre behind Beijing
People's Art Theatre, “semi-independent” productions with larger investments and lower overhead, were reportedly the only CNET productions to make a profit at the box office. With the financial success of *Rhino* and *Bootleg Faust*, theatre circles became optimistic about the future market for *huaju*. Some critics thought Meng “a victim of his own success” and began to call the work “commercial” and refer to Meng’s “smart publicity strategies.” Lin Kehuan had predicted that the avant-garde would be imitated and assimilated into popular culture. The “danger mainly comes from within the avant-garde itself, the temptation of commercial success or pandering to popular trends” (11-30-96).

Playwright Guo Shixing also thought the “biggest problem” was theatre artists “trying to cater more and more” to the public. “Thinking the audience is a god is a commercial thing. ... Artists can’t understand that the god will use his cell phone and sleep and eat during a performance” (1-19-00). While denying a “sell-out” (“I have nothing to do with commercial things”; in Li Ying, 6-11-99), Meng proclaimed, “experimental theatre doesn’t exclude business benefits and also means good box office. I don’t agree that *huaju* can’t be prosperous. ... In all the places in Europe and Asia I’ve been, I think the situation for theatre in Beijing is the best” (7-15-99). Meng revealed (in Yang Zi, 10-9-98):

> I tried my best with *Rhino* to follow ‘commercial operations.’ ... Some people say this isn’t ‘experimental.’ I think that’s because more people understand the play. People think that ‘experimental’ is oriented only towards a limited audience, but that’s not so. ‘Experimental’ isn’t about the audience being large or small. ... One point about experimental theatre is its greater and greater individuality. ... Everyone [should] have his own idea of exploration. ... Actually the bigger the ‘mainstream,’ the richer the ‘fringe.’ ... If ‘mainstream theatre’ were really strong, it’d be easy to experiment. If there were a clear circle drawn, I could clearly explore beyond that circle.

At the end of the decade, “mainstream” needed to be redefined. Chinese critics recognized that “there’s no everlasting ‘mainstream’ or ‘fringe.’ Aesthetics must develop with the times.” This same critic advised: “creativity is now the audience’s foremost demand. Experimental and avant-garde *huaju* are welcomed by the market and suited to the times. Can anyone say this direction isn’t today’s ‘mainstream’?” (Ouyang, 9-1-99).
Whereas the 1980s ended with the suppression of the Democracy Movement in Tian’anmen Square, the 1990s culminated with the fireworks of the PRC’s 50th Anniversary in a newly renovated Square. Although there were temporary setbacks, doomsday predictions foreseeing the death of *huaju* at the end of the 1980s did not materialize. The exceptional experiments of the 1980s’ “exploration theatre” became even more pervasive and taken for granted in the greater diversity of the 1990s, as the monopoly of realism gave way to a competitive market-place. *Huaju* had become more pluralistic and less doctrinaire. Yet some things have not changed. The CCP continues to constrain mass media, ultimately making final judgments, including what is acceptable in *huaju*.

This study has examined CNET, a *huaju* theatre with “experimental” guidelines, but directors, at CNET and elsewhere, continue to duplicate old productions. The old style of exaggerated realism, with overwrought gestures and declamatory voices, dull and static didacticism, stereotypical characters, dogma, and sentimentality, certainly persists. In terms of the original hypothesis of this study, the socio-economic-political challenges of the decade certainly impacted the aesthetics of performance in *huaju*, creating a climate for experimentation. Significantly, the “non-mainstream” approach is no longer just the exception. Yet a look at the cultural news and *huaju* listings in Beijing newspapers reveals the paucity of more cutting-edge work. While the beginning to the end of the decade presents a contrast in the development of *huaju*, there are obstacles still to overcome.

**The 1990s “are a wrap”: Entering the new millennium:** As I write this study, new information has come to light. In September 2001, CNET and *Qingyi* (China Youth Art Theatre) were combined as the China National *Huaju* Theatre (*Zhongguo guojia huaju yuan*) with CNET’s Zhao Youliang as interim President (Wu Xiaojiang, e-mail, 8-15-01). Mergers before and during the Cultural Revolution were forced for ideological reasons, i.e., to strengthen government control over the theatres. This latest merger was initiated presumably for financial reasons. CNET as an individual artistic entity has thus ceased to

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exist—at least for the near future—perhaps giving even greater import to its production record of the 1990s.

As my fieldwork in Beijing came to a conclusion, I asked several theatre artists about their aspirations. Meng Jinghui described his “dream” of directing one play after another: “I want to direct six plays this year, next year, and the following year. . . . The biggest challenge is having the perfect combination of time, place, money, opportunity, and good actors.” He also dreamed of building his “own theatre like Meyerhold. It’s impossible in China right now, but maybe in the future it can happen” (5-29-98). Lin Zhaohua explained that “it takes a lot of effort” to get the necessary funding, but if he “can get the money together,” he will start rehearsals for his next production. “It’s freer now, and I can do what I want” (9-19-99). But he “won’t follow old methods. Cloning is meaningless, just a dead-end road” (in Ouyang, 9-1-99). Veteran huaju actor Han Tongsheng described his dreams of wanting “a sense of artistic accomplishment” and the opportunity to act in a musical and famous foreign classics, Shakespeare and Moliere (11-30-97). Another huaju actor in his twenties, an up-and-coming film-star, was deciding whether to sign on with a Hong Kong agent. His trepidation was that he might be typecast for Gongfu roles. He also “didn’t trust” that the agent had his “best interests at heart.”

Director Wu Xiaojiang reflected:

Chinese hide or bury their dreams. . . . But . . . I’d like to rehearse plays where I can choose the subject matter and have a lot of money to produce the plays. . . . I hope I have a chance to direct Shakespeare. . . . I just want to find good scripts and good actors. I want to discover the right style for huaju. I haven’t found the right style yet, and I don’t think anyone else has found this either. The style would be unique to huaju, . . . acceptable to the people in terms of content and social meaning, but also which transcends current times. I hope one day to rehearse such a play. That’s why I continue my work, or else I might have given up long ago. . . . Huaju has been divided into several categories, but the existing categories don’t say everything about huaju. . . . Huaju can’t be replaced. What it shows can’t be shown through other kinds of art. Huaju doesn’t have a big audience, but it still exists. There must be some reason for its survival. . . . I’ve thought about why a production succeeds. I don’t know whether there can be an ideal production. I’m searching for it. If I can do something better or different, something unique, I’ll be happy. . . . Even when I see avant-garde plays, I don’t think they’re so great. I wish I had some norms to judge a play. . . . I’m not a
master and I can’t create new styles. I just hope I find a script I like and direct it perfectly. The story will strike people’s hearts. If I can ever do that, I’ll fulfill my dream (12-20-97).

The above aspirations are shared by theatre artists all over the world. Striving to be unique is really the goal for all of us.

From the vantage point of the early 2000s, it is possible to reflect upon the 1990s as a discrete period for huaju. This interval spanned the repression following “June Fourth,” which ended the “exploratory” period of the 1980s, and the emergence of a multifaceted, diverse, market-driven “experimental” huaju of the 1990s, amid ongoing and far-reaching events in the socio-economic-political environment: the consolidation of power for Jiang Zemin, China’s prolonged ascendancy to the WTO (which officially welcomed China in November 2001), the CCP gala celebration for the 50th anniversary of the PRC on the dawn of the new millennium, and the failed 2000 bid and ultimate success in securing the 2008 Olympics, which will expand international engagement even further.

Following Jiang Zemin’s “3 Represents” (Sänge daibiao) theory, in 2001 the CCP would end its dependence on the traditional pillars of support, the “workers, peasants, and soldiers,” through a controversial decision inviting entrepreneurs and other “advanced elements” into the 80-year old Party structure (“China Briefing,” 12-13-01). The 1990s also paved the way for fourth-generation leader, Hu Jintao, the favorite to succeed Jiang Zemin as Party General Secretary at the 16th Chinese Communist Party Congress coming up in November 2002. The country’s top leaders--Jiang, Premier Zhu Rongji and National People’s Congress head Li Peng--are due to step down. Hu Jintao is expected to continue in the direction of expanded reform, especially in the economic arena. China observers think political reform, although not Western-style democracy, could take place under the next, i.e., the fifth-generation leadership. Chinese society and politics may become even more pluralistic, and the new classes of businessmen, professionals, and intellectuals may gain a much bigger say in policymaking under the helm of the fifth generation, which will
assume power at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (Lam, 12-3-01). Yet as of this writing, political analysts are pointing to Jiang’s reluctance to relinquish the power he has held since the 1989 crackdown, opening the possibility of intergenerational rifts between Party factions.8

At the end of the decade, Chinese theatre artists were excitedly talking about the “resurgence of huaju.” I think that much of the success emanated from feelings of complicity between the primarily young urban intellectual audiences and the directors concerning underlying political meanings, the “fun” or “unexpected,” in their productions. Lin thought the “explorations” of the 1980s were more impressive. “Nothing in 1990s huaju stands out” (9-19-99). Yet during the 1980s, Chinese directors were first introduced to Western theatre techniques, as Meng describes “new methods and a new attitude” (in Xie, 347-55). The “first time” is usually remembered as significant. What was considered “brand new” during the 1980s was now acceptable and, in fact, part of 1990s’ “mainstream.” What is crucial is if and how directors will build upon the work of the 1990s into the next decade and beyond. The idea of “mainstream” has splintered, and huaju has undergone changes reflecting those in society. Yet it is difficult to unravel the complexities of China and predict the future. There is consensus among veteran China analysts—including Spence, Schell, Barmé, Kristof, Chinoy—that “experts,” both within and outside China, have often “missed the boat” in foreseeing what might happen next. That the market-driven environment of the 1990s has brought about much greater diversity in artistic achievement in huaju, both stylistically and thematically, is an encouraging sign. Hopefully huaju directors will be able to continue in this direction. Using an expression, which I often explained to Chinese theatre artists, “let’s all keep our fingers crossed”!
APPENDIX A

“PAY STANDARD FOR CREATION, PRODUCTION, & PERFORMANCE”
(Chuangzuo, zhizuo, yanchu jintie biaozhun 创作, 制作, 演出津贴标准)

February 1997 - February 1998 [Amounts in RMB]

The salaries (gongzi 工资) of the professional artists (zhuanye jishu renyuan 专业技术人员), which are not fixed, are defined and determined by their creating, producing, and performing dramas. The allowance (jintie 津贴) for creating will be given after the rehearsal [period] has ended. The production allowance will be given according to the actual number of days spent working. The performance allowance will be given according to the actual number of public performances (gongyan 公演). The performance allowance will be given at different intervals [according to the actual number of public performances (yanchu changci 演出场次). [In-house performance / neibu yanchu 内部演出 is considered rehearsal.] The following is the standard for plays which the theatre invested in and produced. If the theatre has not invested in the play, please use the following standard as a reference.

1. Allowance for Creation (chuangzuo jintie 创作津贴):
   [Is] according to the scale and the artistic quality of the play together with the tasks (renwu 任务) that the professional artists have undertaken and how they have completed them. [Accordingly], they will be classified into three ranks (dangci 档次). In these three ranks there may also be sub-ranks if necessary.

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<th>6000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Playwright (bianju 编剧)</td>
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<td>Director (daoyan 导演)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage Designer (wutai meishu 舞台美术)</td>
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<td>2600</td>
<td>3600</td>
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<td>Lighting Designer (dengguang sheji 灯光设计)</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costume (fuzhuang 服装), Make-up (huazhuang 化妆), Special Effects (xiaoguo 效果), Assistant Director (fudaoyan 副导演), Log-Keeper (changji 场记)</td>
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<td>Technical Manager (jishu guanli 技术管理)</td>
<td>1200</td>
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<td>1800</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Leading Actor (lingxian zhuoyan 领衔主演)</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>2600</td>
<td>3600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leading Actor (zhuoyan 主演)</td>
<td>1600</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>2600</td>
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2. Allowance for Production (zhizuō 制作) of Stage Design (wumei 舞美):
The allowance for the people involved will be calculated according to the actual number of working days. For each working day, the pay is:

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<td>70</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Allowance for Performance (yanchu 演出):
First Leading Actor (lingxian zhuyan 领衔主演): 70 90 110
Leading Actor (zhuyan 主演): 60 80 100
Sub (2nd) Leading Actor (cizhuyan 次主演): 50 70 90
Actors (yanyuan 演员): 40 60 80
Asst. to the Performers (yanchu fuzhu renyuan 演出辅助人员): 30 50 70

Notes:
1. For the first performance run (lun 轮), the allowance (jintie 津贴) will be classified as the first [lowest] rank allowance. In the second round, people should get the second rank allowance, and in the third round, people should get the third [highest] rank allowance. After three rounds of performance, there are other rewards (jiangli 奖励).
2. In case it is necessary for two or more people to take the same job (for ex., two 1st leading actors), they should be classified as different ranks on which their allowances are based. [The more important person would be at the higher rank and get more money.]
3. This standard will be valid from February 1997 until February 1998.

China National Experimental Theatre
(Zhongyang shiyan huaju yuan 中央实验话剧院)
Courtesy and copyright, CNET, 1999
APPENDIX B

THE "VOICE OF TRUTH" PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT BOARD
("SHIHUA ZHISHENG" Gong gaolan 实话之声 公告栏), June 1999, Issue #78.

To build Socialism with Chinese characteristics, follow Deng Xiaoping Theory.

Work hard and the outcome will be pleasing.

After watching the rehearsal: Fields of Life and Death is a huaju adapted from the novel of the same name by Xiao Hong. It's one of the important plays by CNET to welcome the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the PRC. From the "Forming of the Team" on April 7th through rehearsal on May 31, the creation of Fields of Life and Death has gained a surprisingly pleasing outcome through nearly two months of hard work by the staff and actors on the Team. The Theatre leaders and some comrades of the Theatre went to see the production. After they watched it, they were very excited and praised it highly. While faithful to the original work, this production manages to provide new meaning and new impressions in terms of theme and artistic performance. Through its particular social environment and specific interpersonal relationships, this production reflects the history of our Nation to survive, to develop, to stand up and struggle. It gives people much room to think.

The Team is fully aware of the heavy responsibility. This is a difficult attempt to re-perform a famous work. It is also a gift for China’s 50th birthday. Therefore they gave it all their passion and energy, broke all the traditional rules, worked additional shifts, and continued working hard and overcoming difficulties. They were not intimidated by the hot weather or fatigue. Step by step, they worked toward the same goal and marched toward their objectives.

Today the preparation work of the Team is basically done. They're awaiting public performances at the China Children’s Art Theatre starting June 12th. We hope that the Team will work harder, make their wonderful play even more wonderful, and present it in front of the public with the highest taste and most excellent quality!

It is already a prosperous time for everything. All hands are watering this artistic flower.

Hold High the Great Flag of Deng Xiaoping Theory Without Wavering.

Do Your Job Well and Preserve the Stability of Society.

The Setting Sun is Red (xiyang hong 夕阳红).

Recent activities of old cadre members:

1. The old cadre Party Committee of CNET had a meeting for Party Members on May 6th to discuss the prospects of Jiang Zhaoliang joining the Party. Comrade Jiang Zhaoliang is sick but he is not intimidated by his illness. He asks for political progress, and he continues his writing work to contribute to society. People present at the meeting gave him affirmative
comments and warm encouragement. His Party membership was passed unanimously and very soon his qualifications will be submitted to the higher-level Party Committee for authorization.

2. The old cadre members had a meeting on May 12th and angrily protested US-led NATO atrociously bombing the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. They were against the atrocious behavior and firmly support the serious declaration of our Government. The old comrades showed that we must make our great socialist country richer and more powerful. We should strengthen the mentality of national defense and protect the sovereignty of our nation and preserve world peace!

3. On May 5th, the Retired Personnel Service Center (li tuixiu renyuan fuwu zhongxin 退休人员服务中心) held a meeting at the Central Negotiation Hotel (Zhongxie Binguan 中协宾馆). It was a seminar on theories of the elderly to celebrate the international Senior Citizens’ Year. Old CNET cadre member, Comrade Zhang Jiying, wrote an article entitled “How the elderly should change their concepts in order to adapt to the new trends in the market economy,” and this article won third prize.

Honor Bulletin (guangrong bang 光荣榜):

In the evaluation by the Cultural Ministry General Office Official Business Affairs Dept. (Wenhuabu bangongting 文化部办公厅), CNET has reached a standard in the evaluation of archive work. In this evaluation, Meng Ruiying and Shu Xiaoqiang were praised for their obvious achievements, and the Theatre will also give them awards.

The Party Construction Garden (dang jian yuandi 党建园地):

1. The Party Committee of CNET held a Party member cadre meeting on May 20th. They made the best use of time and concentrated their energy to relearn the speech made by President Jiang Zemin at the Conference welcoming the work staff from the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. At the same time, the meeting conveyed the notice from the Organization Department on the role played by Chinese Communist Party members and by Party organizations in the work units in preserving social stability. They also conveyed the notice on departments of organizations at different levels carefully learning and implementing the spirit of the General Office of the Central Party Committee as well as the General Office of the State Council. Another notice conveyed was from the State Defense Department on seriously and carefully learning and implementing the important speech made by Comrade Jiang Zemin at the Conference welcoming the staff from the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. Other important notices included the speech made by the Vice Minister of the Cultural Ministry, Ai Qingchun; the Conference for the Cultural Ministry Party Committee and the Discipline Committee; the notice on carefully learning and constantly strengthening political work; and the notice on carefully implementing the spirit from the Central Government and further working on stabilizing society.

People present at the meeting warmly discussed how to do one’s job well and how to preserve social stability; the result of the meeting was good.
In honor of the 80th Anniversary of the May 4th Movement and to actively advocate the spirit of being patriotic, seeking advancement, science and democracy, [issues] which were raised during the May 4th Movement, the Communist Youth League of our Theatre organized League members to go to Tianjin to visit the Tianjin Battle Museum as well as the Tianjin Seaport Embankment on May 11th. When facing the relics left by the martyrs, some Comrades looked at them very carefully and felt reluctant to leave. This activity coincided with the atrocity by US-led NATO which bombed our Embassy in Yugoslavia on May 7th. Therefore this activity has a more patriotic educational meaning. It enabled the young people to look back at history and more clearly realize the sacrifices and devotion by the old generation of revolutionaries to the prosperity of our nation today. They had a clear picture of domestic and international situations, thus strengthening confidence to reinvigorate China.

Party Committee, CNET
Courtesy and copyright, CNET, 1999
APPENDIX C

“EXCERPTS” FROM THE “ARCHIVAL LAW”
(“bufen” “dang’an fa” 部分档案法)

... Approved by Administrative Departments, profiteering is inhibited. Selling or giving information to foreigners is prohibited.

When it comes to donating archives to the State, the archives should give rewards (jiangli 奖励) for the donation.

Section 17: State-owned archival materials are not allowed to be sold. When State Owned Enterprises or Institutions’ assets are transferred, the means of transferring relevant archives should be decided by the National Archives Administration Management Department (Guojia dang’an xingzheng guanli bumen 国家档案行政管理部门).

Exchange, giving away, and selling of archival materials should be carried out according to State regulations.

Section 18: State-owned archives and copies of archival materials as formulated by Section 16 of the present Act stipulates two kinds of archives [in section 16] which cannot be carried out of the Country privately.

Article 4. Use and publication of archival material:

Section 19: Archives kept by State Archives generally speaking should be open to the public 30 years after the archives are filed with the State Archives. Archives concerning economic, scientific, technological, and cultural matters can be open to the public in a period of less than 30 years. Archives concerning National Security or crucial interests and other archives which are not suitable to being open to the public within a period of 30 years can have more than 30 years before they are open to the public. Specific deadlines should be decided by the National Archives Administration Management Department. The decisions shall be submitted to the State Council (Guowu yuan 国务院) to be approved and carried out.

The archives (dang’an guan 档案馆) should put up notices at regular intervals about archives which are open to the public, facilitate the use of the archives, and streamline the procedures to get access to the archives. Nationals/citizens (gongmin 公民) and organizations of the PRC with the right of authorization can make use of the archives that are open to the public.

Section 20: Governmental organs, groups, enterprises, institutions and other organizations and citizens can make use of the archives that are not open to the public yet, or the archives that are kept by relevant governmental organizations, groups, enterprises, institutions and other organizations, according to the needs of economic construction, national defense, teaching and scientific research and other work, and in accordance with relevant regulations.
Methods of the use of archives that are not open to the public are decided upon by the National Archive Administration Management Departments and relevant competent departments.

Section 21: Organizations and individuals who transfer, donate, and deposit their archives in the archive office have precedence of the use of their archives. They can also put forward opinions concerning limitations of the use of parts of the archives which are not suitable and restricted to the public. The dang'an guan shall safeguard their legal rights.

Section 22: State-owned archives shall be open to the public under the authorization of the State Archives (Guojia dang'an guan) or relevant governmental organs (jiguan机关).

Organizations and citizens cannot open archives that are not allowed to be open to the public by the dang'an guan or relevant government organs.

Collectively-owned (jiti suoyoude集体所有的) or privately-owned (geren suoyoude个人所有的) archives can be open to the public according to the will of the owner of the archives. However, the opening of the archives must be in agreement with relevant state regulations and cannot harm national security and interests and cannot infringe on other peoples’ legal rights and interests.

Section 23: Archival offices of all kinds and at all levels shall have research personnel who shall strengthen the research and sorting of the archives and organize and edit the archive materials that are to be published in different circles for different readerships.

Article 5. Legal Liabilities:

Section 24: Those who have any one of the following behaviors shall receive administrative punishment under the decision of above-county level (xianji yishang县级以上), the Peoples' Government Archives Administrative Management Department (Renmin zhengfu dang'an xingzheng guanli bumen人民政府档案行政部门), and relevant competent departments. If it is serious enough to constitute a crime, criminal liabilities should follow according to the law.

1. Destroying and loss of State-owned archives.

2. Providing, copying, publishing, and destroying State-owned archives of one's own accord.

3. Editing and fabricating archives.

4. Selling or transferring archives of one’s own accord in violation of sections 16 and 17 of the present Act.

5. Profiteering by selling archives and selling or giving away archives to foreigners.

6. Not filing archives according to regulations or not transferring archives according to deadlines in violation of sections 10 and 11 of the present Act.
7. Not taking measures to safeguard archives knowing that the archives are in danger so that the archives are damaged.

8. Archives are damaged due to archive personnel neglecting their jobs.

In the use of archives preserved in archival offices, unlawful behavior in violation of the previous 1, 2, and 3 should get warnings from above-county level (xianji yishang) Peoples’ Government Archives Administrative Management Departments and fines may also be implemented. If archival materials are damaged, compensation (peichang 赔偿) shall be imposed.

If an enterprise, institution, organization, or individual has unlawful behavior in violation of the previous 4 and 5, above-county level Peoples’ Government Archives Administrative Management Departments can give warnings and impose fines. If unlawful profits are made, the profits shall be confiscated. The archives that are sold or given away can be commandeered (zhenggou 征购) in pursuance of section 16 of the present Act.

Section 25: If attempts are made to transfer the archives or their copies out of the country which are prohibited to be out of the country, the Customs Office shall confiscate them and impose fines. The confiscated archives or their copies shall be transferred to the Archives Administration Management Department. If the behavior constitutes a crime, criminal liabilities shall follow according to the law.

Article 6. Appendum to Section 26:

Methods of implementing the present Act are decided upon by National Archives Administration Management Departments. Decision(s) shall be submitted to the State Council and be approved and carried out.

Section 27: The present Act is in force from January 1, 1988.

From the National Peoples’ Congress (quanguo renda 全国人大), 1999.
APPENDIX D

CHINA NATIONAL EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE / CNET
PRODUCTIONS OF THE 1990s

An Inspector Calls (Tanzhang laifang) 探长来访
Dir: Yang Zongjing
March 1990

Today's Interesting News (Jinri qu wen) 今日趣闻
(2nd episode “mini comedy” / dierji “weixing xiju”)
Dir: Zhantai Renhui (Invited)
April 1991

Zhou En Lai (Zhou Jun Enlai) 周君恩来
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
June 1991

Hairless Dog (Meimao de gou) 没毛的狗
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
January 1992

Peach Blossom Fan (Taohua shan) 桃花扇
Dir: Yang Zongjing
March 1992

Harbor Sun (Taiyang gangwan) 太阳港湾
Dir: Xiong Yuanwei (Invited)
December 1992

Longing for the Secular World / The Nun and the Monk (Si Fan) 思凡
Dir: Meng Jinghui
February 1993

The Stubborn Old Man / The Boor (Lao wangu) 老顽固
Dir: Chen Yong (Invited)
September 1993

The Balcony (Yangtai) 阳台
Dir: Meng Jinghui
September 1993

Crazy New Year Train (Fengkuang guonian che) 疯狂过年车
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
October 1993
Faust (Fushide) 浮士德
Dir: Lin Zhaohua and Ren Ming (Invited)
May 1994

After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking For Me (Lihunle jiu bie zai lai zhao wo) 离婚了就别再来找我
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
October 1994

Intentional Injury (Guyi shanghai) 故意伤害
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
March 1995

Zhuangzi Tests His Wife (Zhuang zhou shi qi) 庄周试妻 in English language
Dir: Li Luoyi (Invited)
April 1995

Put Down Your Whip - Woyzeck (Fangxia nide bianzi – Woyicaike) 放下你的鞭子－沃伊采克
Dir: Meng Jinghui and German Dir: Anqi Bude
June 1995

Vengeance on Zidu (Fa Zidu) 伐子都
Dir: Wang Zunxi (Invited)
September 1995

Go Man (Qi Ren) 棋人
Dir: Lin Zhaohua (Invited)
February 1996

Enemy of the People (Renmin gongdi) 人民公敌
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
August 1996

My Father, My Dad (Wo ba an die) 我爸俺爹
Dir: Li Mengnan
June 1996

Born at the Right Time (Sheng feng qi shi) 生逢其时
Dir: Wang Zunxi (Invited)
April 1997

Death Without Burial (Si wu zang shen zhi di) 死无葬身之地
Dir: Zha Mingzhe
November 1997
A Doll's House (Wan'ou zhi jia) 玩偶之家
Dir: Wu Xiaojiang
April 1998

Longing for the Secular World / The Nun and the Monk (Si Fan) 思凡
Dir: Meng Jinghui
May 1998 Revival

Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiao jie) 坏话一条街
Dir: Meng Jinghui
September 1998

Accidental Death of an Anarchist (Yige wuzhengfu zhuyizhe de yiwai siwang) 一个无政府主义者的意外死亡
Dir: Meng Jinghui
October, November 1998

Japanese Soldiers I Have Known (Wo renshi de guizi bing) 我认识的鬼子兵
Dir: Wang Zunxi (Invited)
April 1999

Fields of Life and Death (Sheng si chang) 生死场
Dir: Tian Qinxin
June 1999

Rhinoceros in Love (Lian'ai de xiniu) 恋爱的犀牛
Dir: Meng Jinghui
July 1999

Bootleg Faust (Daoban Fushide) 盗版浮士德
Dir: Meng Jinghui
December 1999
APPENDIX E.
PHOTOGRAPHS: FOUR CNET PRODUCTIONS

Figure 1. Old Go master He Yunqing (Zhao Liang) in Go Man / Chess Man (Qi Ren), CNET 1996; playwright: Guo Shixing, director: Lin Zhaohua, set designer: Yi Liming (Photo: B. Entell).

Figure 2. Si Yan (Jia Hongseng) and Go master He Yunqing (Zhao Liang) play a final deadly Go match in Go Man / Chess Man (Qi Ren), CNET 1996; playwright: Guo Shixing, director: Lin Zhaohua, set designer: Yi Liming (Photo: B. Entell).
Figure 3. The little monk Ben Wu (Sun Qiang), the little nun Se Kong (Zhu Yuanyuan), and the chorus in *Longing for the Secular World / The Nun and the Monk (Si Fan)*, CNET 1998; stage adaptation: Meng Jinghui, director: Meng Jinghui, set designer: Jiao Yingqi (Photo: B. Entell).

Figure 4. The actors are “asleep in their beds” in the Innkeeper tale in *Longing for the Secular World / The Nun and the Monk (Si Fan)*, CNET 1998; stage adaptation: Meng Jinghui, director: Meng Jinghui, set designer: Jiao Yingqi (Photo: B. Entell).
Figure 5. Er Cong (Tao Hong), the little girl (Ding Fan), and little boy (Wang Qi) play a game under the watchful eye of Grizzled Beard (Liu Peiqi) in Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiaojie), CNET 1998; playwright: Guo Shixing, director: Meng Jinghui, set designer: Yan Long (Photo: B. Entell).

Figure 6. Daughter-in-law (Niu Yinhong) and the madman (Niu Piao) escape over the roof in Gossip Street (Huaihua yitiaojie), CNET 1998; playwright: Guo Shixing, director: Meng Jinghui, set designer: Yan Long (Photo: B. Entell).
Figure 7. Jin Zhi (Li Lin) gives birth in *Fields of Life and Death (Sheng Si Chang)*, CNET 1999; playwright: Tian Qinxin, director: Tian Qinxin, set designer: Xue Dianjie (Photo: B. Entell).

Figure 8. Jin Zhi (Li Lin) is killed; as the backdrop splits apart behind them, the villagers are determined to fight the Japanese in *Fields of Life and Death (Sheng Si Chang)*, CNET 1999; playwright: Tian Qinxin, director: Tian Qinxin, set designer: Xue Dianjie (Photo: B. Entell).
NOTES

PREFACE:

1 In this study, I am using hanyu pinyin romanization, a phonetic transcription of Chinese written characters. The corresponding Chinese characters are included in a “Glossary” at the end of this document.

2 See bibliographic entries: Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qian Jian, et al., China Can Say No (Zhongguo keyi shuo bu), 1996; Peng Qian, Yang Mingjie, Xu Deren, Why Should China Say No? (Zhongguo weishenme shuo bu?), 1996; Song Qiang, et al., China Can Still Say No (Zhongguo haishi neng shuo bu), 1996; Jia Qingsuo, China Doesn’t Only Say No (Zhongguo bujinjin shuo bu), 1996; Liu Xiguang and Liu Kang, Behind the Demonization of China (Yaomohua Zhongguode beihou), 1997; and Shen Jiru, China Won’t Become Mr. No (Zhongguo budang “Bu Xiansheng”), 1998.

3 At least some of the demonstrations were orchestrated. Unless sanctioned or organized by the government, it is unlawful to demonstrate. In this case, one of my students at the Foreign Affairs College confided that the government was bussing the student “demonstrators” to Beijing’s American Embassy. Attendance was required. The student could not contain her excitement, as it was her turn to “carry the largest anti-American placard!” Ironically, many of these same student demonstrators were waiting for their MCAT and LSAT results for admittance to U.S. graduate schools and would later be returning to the same American Embassy to apply for visas.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1 I conducted interviews and saw performances at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre (Beijing Renmin Yishu Juyuan), The China Youth Art Theatre (Zhongguo Qingnian Yishu Juyuan), The China Children’s Art Theatre (Zhongguo Ertong Yishu Juyuan), the Beijing Children’s Theatre (Beijing Ertong Juyuan), Beijing’s Central Drama Academy (Zhongyang Xiju Xueyuan), as well as independent productions, in addition to those at the China National Experimental Theatre / CNET (Zhongyang Shiyan Huaju Yuan).

2 I first encountered the terms “emic” and “etic” in James R. Brandon’s “Asian Theatre Field Research” seminar at the University of Hawai’i. I later discovered that linguist Kenneth L. Pike coined the words “emic” and “etic” in 1954, from the linguistic terms “phonetic” and “phonemic.” They first appeared in his Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior. “Emic” refers to the “insider’s” or “native’s” interpretation of his/her customs/beliefs—what things mean to the members of a society. “Etic” refers to the external researcher’s interpretation of the same customs/beliefs—what things mean from an analytical, anthropological perspective. This distinction found application far beyond its original use in Pike’s work, as anthropologists took both emic and etic interpretations into account when analyzing human society. For more information on different theoretical perspectives in “emic-etic” interpretation, see Kenneth L. Pike, Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior, 1967; Marvin Harris, Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture, 1979, The Nature of Cultural Things, 1964, and The Rise of Anthropological Theory, 1968; and Thomas N.
Prior to 1907, *huaju* in China consisted solely of student scenes performed at Christian missionary schools (Mackerras 1975, 117). Dolby (1976, 202) describes Shanghai as a "nursery for Western-style plays and experiments in drama," as a number of colleges and societies, including missionary colleges, made bold ventures in this direction beginning in 1889.

Li Ruru (1995, 77) quotes a description, written by theatre artist Xu Banmei in 1957, of a later performance of *The Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven* at the then new Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai.

For more detailed information on these historical movements, see Schell and Esherick, 1972; Jonathan Spence, 1990; and Fox Butterfield, 1982, rev. 1990.

The "May Fourth Movement" of 1919, which condemned the betrayal of Chinese interests at the Conference of Versailles, when China was forced to accept Japan's "21 Demands," began as a student demonstration at Beijing University and grew into a major social, political, and literary movement. See Dolby 1976, 204-207.

Mackerras points out that while *huaju* playwrights have always primarily drawn their material from major trends and events of the time, themes have also always been flexible, including the historical, social, and mythological (Mackerras 1975, 120). Also see Yan Haiping, 1992.

Realism, while predominant, was not *huaju*'s only style. Playwrights were influenced not only by Ibsen, but also by Chekhov and O'Neill, and thus also experimented with symbolism and expressionism. Examples of non-realism include Tian Han's *Zhao the King of Hell* (*Zhao Yanwang*, 1922), which Dolby (1976, 206) describes as based on the formula of O'Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*; Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*, 1933), which primarily used realism in the Ibsen mode to expose social ills and criticize the Old Society, but also used symbolism; and Lao She’s *Teahouse* (*Cha Guar*, 1957), which was also primarily realistic, but utilized a non-realistic element, the "clapper ballad" (*kuaiban*). See Mackerras 1983, 149-50.

For a more detailed discussion of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and "model revolutionary plays," see Dolby (1976, 250-257); Mackerras (1975, 204-10; 1981, 22-37; 1983, 166-173); Howard (1978, 45-57 and 80-120); Miller and Morath, 1979; Judd (Tung and Mackerras, eds. 1987: 94-118); and Spence (1990, 602-609).

*I If I Were Real* was inspired by a widely-publicized scandal in Shanghai, which involved an "educated youth" impersonating the son of Li Da, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army. Local officials gave the impersonator special treatment, while demanding favors in return. The protagonist as an "educated youth" anti-hero was unusual.

I first became aware of the 1980s' alternating cycles of repression and relaxation in China from Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak's lecture and seminar courses in Chinese theatre at the University of Hawai‘i.
Nixon’s historic visit in 1972 was followed by Normalization with the West in 1979.

For example, while Brecht had already formulated his ideas concerning “alienation,” his first use of the term *verfremdung* (“to make strange”) came after he saw a performance by the great *xiqū* actor, Mei Lanfang, in Moscow in 1935. Brecht did not see a full *xiqū* performance at that time; Mei wore a business suit and performed in a drawing room. See Brecht’s “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (John Willett, trans. 1964).

Exploration theatre productions of the 1980s in Beijing include: director Lin Zhaohua’s *Absolute Signal* (Juedui Xinhao, sometimes translated into English as *Alarm Signal*), *Bus Stop* (Che Zhan), *Wild Man* (Ye Ren), and Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana (*Gouerye Niepan*); director Xu Xiaozhong’s *Stories of Mulberry Village* (San Shu Ping Jishi); director Wang Xiaoying’s *Rubik’s Cube* (Mo Fang); director Wang Gui’s *WM*; director Chen Yong’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Gao Jia Suo Hui La J); directors Tian Chengren and Wu Xiaojiang’s *Investigation of Fifteen Divorce Cases* (Shiwu Zhuang Liun An de Diaocha Pouxi); and directors Tian Chengren and Wu Xiaojiang’s *A Dead Person’s Visit to the Living* (Yige Sizhe Dui Shengzhe de Fangwen). For more detailed information and English translations of scripts, see Yan Haiping, *Theatre and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama*; Yu Shiaoling, *Chinese Drama After the Cultural Revolution*; Ping Pan, “Triumphant Dancing in Chains: Two Productions of *Huaju* Plays in the Late 1980s”; William Sun and Faye C. Fei, “Stories of Mulberry Village and the End of Modern Chinese Theatre”; Bruno Roubicek, translator, “Gao Xingjian: Wild Man: A Contemporary Chinese Spoken Drama”; Hu Xuehua’s “Exploration Theatre in Chinese *Huaju* of the 1980s”; and Mackerras, 1990: 182-183.

Gao Xingjian was a resident playwright at Beijing People’s Art Theatre. He emigrated to France in 1989. Gao was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2000. After the publication of his most overtly political play, *Fugitives*, a love story set against the background of “June Fourth,” all his works were banned in China.

Following early 20th century “little theatre” movements in the West, “little theatre” was first introduced into China during the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s. The movement subsided during struggles between the CCP and *Guomindang*, but was resurrected during the 1980s. The little theatre movement of the post-Mao era began with Lin Zhaohua’s production of *Absolute Signal* in 1982. Scholar Tong Daoming describes the first time he saw *Absolute Signal*. Hu Weimin (director with the Shanghai Youth Art Theatre, *Shanghai qingnian yishu yuan*) sat beside him: Hu Weimin “praised the production highly” and found the little theatre had “the kind of excitement that the large theatre could never achieve.” “Enlightened by Lin Zhaohua’s creation,” Hu Weimin returned to Shanghai and later in 1982 directed the first little theatre in Shanghai, *Mother’s Song* (*Muqin de ge*) (Tong, Lin Kehuan 1992, 61-74). Little theatre became popular and began to flourish during the 1990s.

Chinese custom commemorates significant events by the dates they occur. Months are called by numerical names, i.e., 6 = June. “6-4” (*liu si*) or “June Fourth” refers to the Tian’ananmen Square Massacre, which began on June 4, 1989. For detailed impressions of the Tian’anmen Massacre, see Kristof and WuDunn, *China Wakes*; Chinoy, *China Live*; Spence, *The Search for Modern China*; Schell and Shambaugh, *The China Reader*; Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing*; Miles, *The Legacy of Tian’anmen: China in


“Market Socialism” eventually became a reality, following Deng Xiaoping’s first advocating the return to private farming in 1962. Deng stated what has since become a celebrated adage (often misquoted): “It doesn’t matter if it’s a yellow cat or a black cat; as long as it catches mice, it’s a good cat” (Wulun shi huang mao haishi hei mao, zhiyao hui zhuo laoshu jiushi hao mao). Deng attributed this Sichuan proverb to his Comrade, General Liu Bocheng, who used it when referring to the struggle with the Nationalists (Deng, “Restore Agricultural Production,” July 7, 1962). During the 1990s, the official press warned (ironically and horribly) against “love capitalism disease” (aizibing [a]). In addition to having a negative political connotation, aizibing [b] is a homonym for “aids.” Both are puns on aizhibing, which means “love sick.” (I use [a], [b], etc. as a citation convention in the text and “Glossary” to distinguish among hanyu pinyin words which are similar in sound, yet different in written form and meaning.)

Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei (1991) describes the repression, “spiritual turmoil,” “hopelessness and paranoia” felt among the general theatrical community in Beijing during the summer of 1990.

Wang’s resignation set off a scandal involving his libel suit against a Party-controlled journal for its assault on his story “Thin Porridge,” which had been published in the magazine, Chinese Writer, in February 1989. Wang’s story was attacked for “satirizing and criticizing the Chinese Communist system under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership” and hinting that Deng should retire. See Orville Schell 1994, 265-275.

This was a return to the “hundred flowers, hundred schools” ideology of May 1956, which had in turn been followed by the anti-rightist campaign in 1957, denouncing as “capitalist roaders” (zouzipai) the very people from whom the authorities had elicited criticism.

Deng’s tour was referred to as his xun, short for xuncha, “to go on a tour of inspection,” words normally used to describe a journey by the emperor.

Falungong, also known as Falong Dafa, is a spiritual movement, which combines meditation and breathing exercises with doctrine rooted in Buddhist and Taoist teachings.

See Schell, Miles, Chinoy, Kristof and WuDunn, and Fan and Grossman.

Since the early 1990s, China has imported 10 films for major release every year, invariably Hollywood blockbusters. The all-time favorite American film was Titanic starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Seminars were held in 1998 to discuss the film’s
“thoughts and values” and “derive guidance and meaning” (“Titanic,” Fazhi Wencui Bao / Law Literature News, 6-1-98).

28 See Huot, China's New Cultural Scene; Zha, China Pop; Barme, In The Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture; Schell, Discos and Democracy; and Schell and Shambaugh, The China Reader, for an in-depth look at the cultural scene in China during the 1990s.


30 For an example of the “darkest” (angry and xenophobic) side of the spectrum, see Sang Ye’s interview with a young cyber-entrepreneur, one of the “computer bugs” (diannao chong) pirating computer software in Beijing (Sang Ye, Schell 1999, 292-3).


32 Wang Shuo’s most well-known works include--with co-writer Feng Xiaogang--the TV soaps Stories of the Editorial Board (Bianjibu de gushi) and Beijinger in New York (Beijingren zai Niuyue). Wang’s works were banned in 1996-97 with the resurgent “Anti-Spiritual Pollution” campaign.

33 Cui Jian had been invited to take part in the “100 Pop Stars” music competition. Little did the officials realize what they were unleashing. Throughout the 1990s Cui Jian was intermittently banned from playing concerts in Beijing, but he often showed up at private parties or, unannounced, to play at bars off the beaten track.

34 The idea of “comp” tickets has a long history in China. From its earliest days, the Communist Party had provided free weiwen yanchu (“comfort and visit performances”), referring to artistic troupes in the military performing in rural areas.

35 Artists had actually begun to work “free-lance” during the 1980s. For example, playwright Wang Peigong and director Wang Gui had drawn artists together from several different work units for WM.

36 In China, everyone has a dang’an, or “personal file/dossier,” which is kept by their danwei. The dang’an, listing family history, activities, achievements, “mistakes,” etc., follows them throughout their lives. Those holding an individual’s dang’an also wield power over him by controlling his access to a passport. To apply to local police for a passport, individuals must present a letter of invitation from someone abroad and a political evaluation from the organization controlling their dang’an. Organizations routinely withhold political evaluation letters from employees who do not “toe the line,” politically or otherwise. If they do agree to issue the evaluation, they may demand that employees sign a statement giving up certain benefits first, including housing, pension, and job. Word is that by 2005 certain residents will be able to procure a passport simply by presenting their identity cards, but it is unclear how this will be implemented.
As Yu Jian’s poem describes, in the totalitarian State, when files are destroyed or lost, people cease to exist and become “file zero.”


38 For example, Li Jianming’s Three Women (Sange nüren, 1996). This production, with time and place overlapping and narratives weaving in and out, used at least fifty pairs of shoes as props to embody the stories of three women in Beijing.

39 The terms feizaojü, lit. “soap play” and its shortened form zaojü are used in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Mainland Chinese call “soap operas” dianshiju (“TV drama”), lianxuju (“serial drama”), or qingjing xiju (“melodrama”).

40 Like many Chinese words, shangyan can be used as a noun, a verb, and an adjective. Theatre artists talked about going “to shangyan”; a production can also be described as “shangyan.”


42 In December 1999, one of my university students described this as a “very restricted” and “very controlled” time, with an abundance of slogans about “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalization” being promulgated at his university.

43 Before 1997, State Theatre performing licenses were granted by the Cultural Ministry, which could do so through directive or administrative regulations; but it did not have the power to formulate laws. The National People’s Congress, a legislative body, sets laws.

44 Sun Huizhu had planned to direct the play himself in Shanghai in 1996, but the production was never realized. Officials found the play “unsuitable,” and while they would not ban it, they would allow no publicity.

45 Shades of Marat Sade; Meng Jinghui told me that he likes to show a videotape of Marat Sade to his actors before rehearsals begin (6-17-98). The classic dramatization of Ah Q, as Mackerras describes (1990, 187), presents revolutionary heroes, such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, and Sun Yatsen (Sun Zhongshan).

46 Geremie Barme raises several intriguing issues in In the Red, 1999. See his chapter on “Packaged Dissent” (179-200) and his “Formulas for Success” for the production of marketable alternative cultural material. For example, in describing underground filmmaker Zhang Yuan’s Beijing Bastards: “The final step in the formula was crucial. Once the film was made, all that Zhang needed in order to secure [international] success was an official ban. And lo and behold! ... The authorities came through. ... Overnight a cinematic nonevent was turned into a mini cause celebre” (194-98).

47 The State Administration of Radio, Film, and TV strengthened regulations concerning the production of TV plays. Those lacking certificates would not be permitted. The production and broadcasting of TV shows was to be more strictly controlled. One significant change was that 62.3 percent of TV production companies applying for
permission in 1999 were private, exceeding State-owned companies for the first time (China Daily, Beijing, 5-14-99).

CHAPTER 2: A STATE THEATRE: CHALLENGE & TRANSFORMATION

Beijing has many additional performing troupes, not directly under the Ministry of Culture, which operate under their specific ministries, for example, the Coal Ministry Cultural Troupe Huaju Company (Meitan bu wengong tuan huaju tuan); the State General Workers’ Union Cultural Troupe Huaju Company (Quan zong wengong tuan huaju tuan); the Railway Cultural Troupe Huaju Company (Tielu wengong tuan huaju tuan); the General Political Department Huaju Troupe (Zongzhengzhibu huaju tuan); and the PLA Airforce Political Department Cultural Troupe Huaju Company (Zhongguo renmin jiefang jun kongjun zhengzhibu wengong tuan huaju tuan). These troupes have a “specific” audience: huaju in the military troupes mainly consists of subjects concerning military life; huaju in the Coal Ministry troupe reflects the lives of workers in the coal mines, etc. The four major theatres above have a very broad, public audience.

The other three “patriarchs” are Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Liu Shaoqi. Labelled a “capitalist-roader” (zouzipai), Zhu De died during the Cultural Revolution. His reputation rehabilitated, his portrait is on the 100 RMB note. It was considered a great honor for a famous individual to write the name of an organization in his own distinct cursive characters as Zhu De did for CNET.

See Miller and Morath, 1979, 16-22.

After 1949, the Nankai Middle School became co-ed.

As Yang Zongjing describes (12-17-97), in the 1950s when the theatres were learning from Stanislavski, the director was the center and had ultimate control. “Now our directors are less authoritarian, more democratic, more open to the actors’ ideas. They can absorb the ideas of others and peoples’ talents can be tapped.” Although the “chief director” system is no longer used, a production may have a director (daoyan) and an “assistant director” (fu daoyan or zhuli daoyan).

Several huaju troupes did not have their own theatre, so there has been a tradition in Beijing of plays moving around to different theatres in the city (with the exception of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, which has always had its own “home” theatre). Also, as most people depended on bicycles or public transport, it was easier for them to see a play in a theatre near their home (buses stopped running by 9:30 pm). During the 1990s, the situation changed, as troupes built their own little theatres, and many huaju patrons, especially the young entrepreneurs, began to buy their own cars.

Zhao Youliang is a 1966 graduate of the Shanghai Drama Academy (Shanghai xiju xueyuan). He is a “First National Rank Actor” (Guojia yiji yanyuan) and won the “Academy Award of the China Film Acting Academy” (Zhongguo dianying biaoyan xuehui de xuehui jiang). From 1986-90, before taking up his duties at CNET, Zhao was President of Eryi (Zhao, CNET, 6). Zhao was recognized as a “model worker / citizen” (mofan gongren / gongmin), a “national advanced cultural worker” (quanguo wenhua xianjin gongzuozhe) in February 2000. Zhao has had the opportunity to travel abroad
Yang Zongjing graduated from the Shanghai Drama Academy in 1956, the same year CNET was established. He was part of CNET’s initial staff. Yang is a “First National Rank Director” (Guojia yiji daoyan) and won the “Directing Award of the Second Chinese Huaju Golden Lion Award” (Dierjie Zhongguo huaju jin shi jiang daoyan jiang) (Zhao, CNET, 7).

Wang Zhengchun graduated from Heilongjiang University’s (Heilongjiang daxue) Chinese Department (Zhongwen xl) in 1965. He has worked at China’s Opera and Dance Theatre (Zhongguo geju wujuyuan), the Theatre Office of the Ministry of Culture’s Department of Art (Wenhua bu de yishuju xiju chu), and was assigned to CNET in 1990. He is Vice Party Secretary (Dangweifushuji) and Secretary of the Party’s Disciplinary Committee (Jilu weiyuanhui) at CNET. As part of his Party work, Wang is one of the editors of CNET’s journal, Experimental Theatre (Shiyan xiju) (Zhao, CNET, 7).

CNET hoped to build two new theatres, one seating 6-800 and one seating 2-300. As part of his negotiations to continue as CNET’s President in 2000, Zhao Youliang held out for a guarantee from the Cultural Ministry for the new theatres to be built within three years (Yang, 2-22-00). Zhao felt that CNET could only make a profit if they had their own large theatre, because theatre rents were “always going up.” In 1998, rental costs were 6,000 RMB per day for the China Children’s Art Theatre and 8,000 per day for Renyi’s Capital Theatre. Setting up the stage was also expensive, according to Zhao, costing 18,000 RMB per day, i.e., 54,000 RMB for a three-day set-up (Zhao, 11-25-98). As of March 2000, the theatre president was still being “appointed” rather than “hired” by the Cultural Ministry. This is expected to change in the future, possibly “in the next 2-3 years” (Yang, 3-3-00).

Every danwei has a “public announcement board.” My university student confided: “Cultural Ministry officials come to check that Party propaganda is properly being done. No one really looks at the ‘board’ as everyone already knows the Party ‘slogans’ (kouhao or biaoyu) on it.”

Qingyi’s current President, Lin Kehuan, was not a Party member. While in the past, all theatre leaders had to be Party members, apparently this is not a requisite now (Yang, 6-30-99).

Qingyi and Eryi are about the same in size; Renyi is larger and has about 300 danwei members. Renyi also has the largest total operating budget of 7 million RMB, which covers all operating expenses as well as productions (Lin Zhaohua, 8-19-99).

For example, Beijing Grandpa (Beijing Daye) was written by Zhong Jianyi, one of CNET’s playwrights. CNET leaders felt that Renyi “would do a better job” with it. Renyi wanted the script, so they gave the script to them. “Every theatre has its own strengths and weaknesses. It can’t do every production well” (Yang, 11-19-99).

The amount of money needed to mount a production rose higher steadily over the decade. By 1999, CNET needed roughly a 600,000 RMB investment for a production in a large theatre and 400,000 for a production in its own Little Theatre.
This also brought difficulties. *After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking For Me* (1995) was CNET’s first privately financed play. After the play’s initial run, CNET and independent outside producer, Tan Lulu, “had a contractual dispute.” The two leading actresses, Shi Ke (who would later direct and star in the co-production *Road to Nirvana*, introduced in chapter 1) and Jiang Shan had both left Beijing “without permission” to work in TV and did not return to Beijing in time for the 2nd run performance. To avoid confrontation with CNET, the two actresses admitted themselves into the hospital “saying they were ill.” When the actresses failed to appear, CNET and ticket buyers were furious. As TV and print news organizations focussed on the incident, the actresses were caught in the cross-fire and vilified by a national media frenzy. The incident included a “Cultural Revolution-style political campaign against the actresses, including ‘big character posters’ (*dazibao*) and criticism meetings.” One critic described CNET’s “notoriety over the ‘ba yan’ (‘quitting the performance’) scandal.” For being “disrespectful to the audience and quitting the performance,” both actresses were “expelled” from CNET by the Cultural Ministry (interviews with theatre artists, 12-99).

VP Yang explained that CNET encouraged semi-independent productions, because, without any investment from the theatre, the plays “still get performed. This itself is a merit. We reward them by not claiming any of the profits they may make” (1-20-00).

For the Leaders’ audits, the Cultural Ministry conducts a secret ballot among theatre personnel, who judge the theatre leaders “excellent, good, or fail.” Yang and Zhao were voted “excellent leaders three times in a row” (Yang, 1-20-00).

The *huabiaojiang* (“ornamental column prize”) has historical significance. The ornamental columns refer to the columns in Tian’anmen Square. Traditionally, Chinese intellectuals posted their criticisms on the columns.

Medical insurance was being reformed, but throughout the 1990s, this was still covered by the State for the theatres. With housing reform, theatre personnel now had to pay a deposit to rent apartments, although many actors bought their apartments from the *danwei*. Housing reform was still undergoing change.

There were twenty temporary workers who helped build the sets. They also worked with the CNET set group to build sets for TV variety performances at CCTV and BTV. CNET provided dormitory housing and paid each worker 50-70 RMB per day. Normally, without Beijing “registration” (*hukou*), the workers would not be allowed to stay in Beijing.

For example, in 1999, to pay for a workshop where sets could be built, the Cultural Ministry gave an additional 1 million RMB; to pay for extra medical expenses for three people who were hospitalized, the Theatre received another 500,000; CNET needed computers to update the office, and the Cultural Ministry bought 5 computer systems.

In comparison, *Renyi* built their little theatre in 1995. CNET’s little theatre has a modern lighting control system, a computerized Leiko system, but was actually originally built to be used as a rehearsal hall.

By the end of the decade, as playwright Guo Shixing explained, in addition to his basic salary, CNET paid him 14,000 *yuan* for each script he wrote (Guo, 1-19-00).
Xiqu artists experimented with a contract system for a short period of time during the mid-1980s. See Wichmann 1990, 146-178. Mackerras also describes the contract system in xiqu, which was initiated earlier than huaju. The First Troupe of the Beijing Opera Theatre (Beijing jingju yuan yituan), led by famous actress Zhao Yanxia, took the lead in introducing the new system. She allocated 70% of the normal salary to each troupe member and put the rest in a public accumulation fund. Allocation depended on the artist’s contribution rather than his/her salary, providing a much greater incentive to performers. Rather than the “iron rice bowl,” troupe members who did little or no work were likely to lose their jobs. Instead of government decision over who joined which troupe, theatre companies and artists were to make their own hiring arrangements under the contract system (Mackerras 1990, 203-205).

The actor could also get credit for participating in work for the Cultural Ministry or “some other relevant social activity, for example performances organized by the government for the border and backward areas” (Shi Jian, 96/11, 70). A retired actor was not under contract. He received his full pension and did not have to pay CNET a percentage of his income from any CNET or outside work.

As mentioned in chapter 1, in 1999, US $1 = 8.276 yuan or RMB, Renminbi. The average person’s salary was 300-400 RMB per month. According to the Washington Times (Didi Tang, 9-25-00), in 1999, the average urban per capita annual income was US $720 (6,280 yuan), and the average rural per capita annual income was US $365 (3,020 yuan). The Singapore News Yahoo (1-2-02) reported average per capita annual income of rural families in China as about US $265 (2,200 yuan). Despite discrepancies in reported amounts, the most successful actors were certainly making much more than the general population.

Deng Xiaoping had warned of the advent of the “red-eyed disease” (jealousy) as an inevitable by-product of economic reforms.

CHAPTER 3: CNET PRODUCTIONS OF THE 1990s: STYLES & GENRES

“News coverage plays” can be traced to “living newspaper” (huobaoju) theatre before 1949 (similar to the “living newspapers” during the American economic depression of the 1930s; see Brockett 1992, 209-210). For a fascinating description, see Edgar Snow’s chapter on “Red Theatre” in Red Star Over China, 119-125. Also see Mackerras (1983, 148) for more information about the “reportage play.”

Director Wu told an amusing anecdote: “Many Chinese are still resentful towards huaju. Recently when people saw some of the new plays, they were surprised that huaju could be so good. Here’s an example of how people hated huaju: When Drama Academy professor Xu Xiaofeng was travelling on the train, he heard the people sitting next to him say that ‘their supervisor’s so hypocritical, he talks as if he were acting in huaju!’” (12-20-97).

The play was first called The Last Factory Head (Zuihou yige changzhang) and then If You’re Alive, You Must Depend on Yourself (Huoze deikao ziji), before settling on its final title, Born at the Right Time (Sheng/eng qi shi). CNET’s English title in the “Playbill” was “Live in the Right Time.”

Hong Kong became part of Mainland China in July 1997.
5 Wo renshi de guizi bing translates literally as "Devil Soldiers I Have Known." The term "devil soldiers" is used to refer to foreigners, in this case, the Japanese. Thus the English translation here is Japanese Soldiers I Have Known. By 1998, a book based on the "reportage" had already won the 11th China Book Award (Dishiyi jie Zhongguo tushujiang), Excellent Book Publishing Bureau Award (Xinwen chuban shu nian youxiu tushujiang), and the Chinese Broadcasting Art Government Award (Zhongguo guangbo wenyi zhengfujiang).

6 Wang Zunxi, with the PLA Huaju Drama Troupe, graduated from the Directing Department of Shanghai’s Academy of Drama in 1966 and is a classmate of CNET President Zhao Youliang. Wang Zunxi was often invited to direct CNET’s “main melody plays” during the 1990s. According to several CNET theatre artists, resident directors were not “required” to direct “main melody” plays, but rather were encouraged to “develop their own projects” and “present their ideas to the theatre leadership.”

7 The Chinese attest that 300,000 Chinese were killed in the Nanjing Massacre in 1937. As a Chinese university student explained, “for the Chinese, this was an horrific incident which stands as the culmination of half a century of Japanese imperialism.”

8 CNET planned to rehearse a “version B” of the play, i.e., cast new actors. The five old Japanese soldiers were performed by actors “all aged 65-70.” It was “quite difficult for them to act in the play.” Yang Zongjing described difficulties in recasting and rehearsing the play. “Thus we have to cancel it or put it off. When we have more time, we can rehearse it again” (Yang, 9-14-99). Several theatre artists confided that the play was just “not popular” and “wasn’t welcomed by the audience.”

9 Jiang Wu is the brother of China's hottest film star, Jiang Wen. Actress Jiang Shan played wife Shi Hong. The actress had starred in the TV series, Guo ba yin (Have Extreme Fun), adapted from the popular novel Have Fun and Then Die by best-selling author Wang Shuo, introduced in chapter 1. As one critic reacted to After We’re Divorced, Don’t Come Looking for Me, “Shi Hong seemed just like her character in Guo ba yin” (Wen Dayong, 10-25-94).

10 To generate interest among university students, after its initial month-long run in CNET’s Little Theatre, Intentional Injury was presented at little theatres at Beijing University (Beida) and People’s University (Renda). This was not usual CNET practice. After Intentional Injury opened, journalists almost always mentioned that Caine Mutiny, an American courtroom drama, directed by Charlton Heston, had been performed previously at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre.

11 Guyi Shanghai, while set in a Chinese courtroom, actually combines elements from both the American/British “common law tradition” and the European/Chinese “civil law system.” Chinese trial procedure actually includes a panel of judges (faguan) called the “heads of adjudication” (shenpanzhang) and two “lay assessors” (peishenyuan). There is no jury of peers in China. The two lay assessors are lay people from the community’s Party organization. In China, a verdict is reached by the panel of judges and the two lay-assessors (or a larger panel of judges without lay assessors). Since there is no jury in Chinese law, having the audience act as the jury in Guyi Shanghai is more an attempt at audience participation than following courtroom procedure. While in Guyi Shanghai, legal terms are used (“direct examination,” “cross-examination,”
“trial in absentia,” “objection,” “over-ruled”), their use does not truly follow either American or Chinese civil or criminal procedure. China is continuing to undergo legal reform (Wendy Locks, American attorney in Beijing working with US/China legal exchanges; 8-18-98, 3-5-2000).

12 CNET Producer Liu Tiegang and director Wu raised the money themselves from several Chinese companies. Intentional Injury’s major investor was the Yantong Communications Technology Company (Yantong tongxun jishu gongsi), owned by a friend in Hebei province. The Beijing Wenlan Clothing Co., Ltd. (Beijing wenlan zhiyi youxian gongsi) provided costumes, and Beijing’s Yuanyi Printing Co. (Beijing yuanyi yinshua youxian gongsi) printed programs at cost.

13 Over several runs, the humor became broader and more risqué. In the revised 1997 production, at Ruyi’s entrance, she appears to be topless, but this turns out to be the heads of two servants kneeling down in front of her and wearing flesh-colored hats resembling two breasts. While this seemed rather sophomoric to me, the audience wildly laughed and applauded. Wondering how a Western audience might react to this, I thought of the British Benny Hill with his whoopee cushions and life-size inflatable dolls—not so very different! Sexism was undoubtedly a reality during the “Warring States Period” of the play and continues to be so now. The play treats war ludicrously and culminates in a trite ridiculous finale: after the battle, the new king of the Zheng State presents Ruyi’s sister as a gift to the king of Zhou. The two sisters, in fact, “women,” are blamed for instigating the battle. Zidu, with its slapstick humor, can be viewed as actually criticizing sexist attitudes. While the production might also elicit the opposite interpretation, no audience members appeared offended.


16 While I often describe a production as a “big hit,” everything is relative. Audiences for huaju continued to be small throughout the 1990s. While several actors were enthusiastic about their roles, others confided: “This is so boring! We can’t stand doing this. We just want to get back to TV.”


18 See Dorfles, Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste.

19 For instance, Xu Xiaozhong (head of Beijing’s Central Drama Academy) directed Ibsen’s Peer Gynt in 1983 blending Western and Chinese traditions.

20 Sartre’s Mort Sans Sèpulture has been translated into English as The Victors (Abel, 1949). The play has been translated into Chinese as Meiyou Mudi de Sizhe (No Place in the Burial Ground) as well as Si Wu Zang Shen Zhi Di (Death Without Burial). See Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80), “Forgers of Myths” (Gilder 1946, 781-785) for more information about original intention and “modern myth” in Sartre’s “theatre of
situation.” Director Zha Mingzhe described the only Sartre produced previously in China as *Dirty Hands (Les Mains Sales)*, directed by Hu Weimin at the Shanghai Youth Art Theatre in 1980. As this play depicted murder in the French Communist Party, the production stirred political controversy and was harshly criticized for its “negative portrayal” of Communists and for promoting “nihilistic existentialism” (Fei and Sun 1994, 133).

Zha Mingzhe earned his Doctorate at the National Theatre Arts Academy in 1995. As an American theatre artist accustomed to a more subtle approach, I found the heightened realism, often stylization, of *Death Without Burial* both entrancing and distracting, very powerful and “hokey” at the same time.

Cao Yu’s classical play *Thunderstorm (Leiyu)*, written in 1934, was performed at the Beijing People’s Art Theatre in 1954 directed by Xia Chun. This play features the complex relationships among the members and servants of a large prominent family and the disintegration of the family amid the corruption of old China.

Chinese audience members are familiar with the “V” victory sign from “June 4th.” Director Zha explained that his intention was not to evoke “June 4th.” The “victory sign” was also popular during WW II (Zha, 11-7-97). While the “victory sign” was originally indicated by “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony” (“fifth”, i.e., “V”), this music was not played during the performance.

Xue Dianjie studied stage design in East Germany from 1956-62.

The more comfortable seats were brought back for subsequent runs as the benches proved too uncomfortable for the audience.

Violence was both direct and indirect. Only the second interrogation of Resistance Fighters Sorbier and Henri were presented directly before the audience. Several torture scenes and Lucie’s rape took place behind closed doors, while the audience heard the screams. As Canoris was tortured in a back room, blood slowly dripped out across the floor, and audience members gasped in horror. This was a strong use of dramatic irony, as the other prisoners, upstairs in their attic cell, were not aware of the dripping blood. We saw the after-effects of the torture: Lucie returned to the cell, her dress torn and bloodied, after the rape.


Agnete Haaland, an actress with Norway’s Bergen National Theatre, had seen CNET director Wu Xiaojiang’s production of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* in Oslo when it participated in the International Ibsen Festival in 1996. Both Agnete and CNET hoped to collaborate with each other, and plans came to fruition with *A Doll’s House*. Agnete’s mother, Anne Gullestad, Artistic Director of Norway’s Bergen National
Theatre and host of the 1996 International Ibsen Festival, served as Artistic Advisor for *A Doll's House*. CNET first sent two Chinese scripts to Agnete, which she found "totally inappropriate." The first script was "completely about sex, almost pornographic, and very superficial; the Chinese think Westerners are obsessed with sex" (Høiland, 4-10-98). Agnete and the Norwegian Ambassador came up with the idea of *A Doll's House*, and CNET agreed. Agnete's husband Erling Borgen was TV correspondent with the Norwegian National Broadcasting Company in Beijing 1996-98, so she was living in Beijing at this time. Tragically, Agnete's mother died of cancer on April 1st, the opening night of *A Doll's House*. CNET respectfully fashioned their Conference Room into a *lingtang* ("mourning hall") and shrine in her memory, which included photographs, candles, and burning incense.

29 *A Doll's House* is perhaps the most well-known foreign play in China. Written in 1879, the play stirred world-wide controversy, and its heroine, Nora, came to represent the emancipation of modern women. The play was first performed in China at the Spring Willow Theatre (*Chunliujuchang*) in Shanghai in 1914 just before the May 4th Movement (1917-25) as a vehicle of the enlightenment of the period (Xie Yanchen, 4-2-98). The two productions which created the biggest stir were presented in 1935 in Shanghai and 1956 in Beijing. The most infamous Nora was played in 1935 by Jiang Qing (using her stage name, Lan Ping). Jiang Qing would later become Mao Zedong's wife, a leader of the Cultural Revolution, and member of the "Gang of Four." During the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing imprisoned her co-stars, famous actors Zhao Dan, who had played Helmer, and Jing Shan, who had played Krogstad. A 1956 production of *Nora* (as *A Doll's House* was called) at Beijing's China Youth Art Theatre is also noteworthy. Norwegian director Gerda Ring, who had directed the acclaimed version of *A Doll's House* in Copenhagen in 1955, acted as co-director with Chinese director Wu Xue. Nora was played by actress Ji Shuping, and Lu Xun wrote his famous essay, "After Nora Leaves, What Will She Do?" (Xian Jihua, 1998). The Norwegian Embassy found that in *Nora* the emphasis on Ibsen as a social reformer had been toned down. In 1978-80, *A Doll's House* in a Norwegian dubbed version was shown on Chinese Television. See Eide, 1987 and 1995.

30 The first time a foreigner acted with CNET actors was in director Meng Jinghui's *Put Down Your Whip - Woyzeck* when the German co-director also appeared in the play. While acting with foreign actors was unusual, CNET actors have worked with foreign directors. For example, as mentioned previously, Mrs. Lois Wheeler Snow and I co-directed a production of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* at CNET in 1987.

31 Director Wu Xiaojiang's earlier production of *Enemy of the People* (1996), a play which deals with the "most sensitive issues of the Communist era," i.e., corrupt officials, intolerance, tyranny of the majority, mob rule, pollution, propaganda-filled newspapers, and lack of public morality, was thematically more controversial than *A Doll's House* (Mufson, 9-3-96).

32 The characters' names were changed to reflect Chinese-sounding names: Nora became "Nala." Ibsen's Helmer became "Han Ermao." Krogstad, particularly difficult to say in Chinese, was changed to "Keluotai."

33 According to Chinese custom, a debt must be paid back before Spring Festival (*Chunjie*, the Chinese Lunar New Year) or it is a "write-off."
Differences in Chinese and foreign acting styles became a hot topic, eliciting mixed reactions. Some Chinese critics found Agnete’s acting “more natural and expressive” than the “more exaggerated” style of the Chinese actors (CCTV, 4-98). Others felt Agnete was “overdoing it a bit” (Zhao Youliang, 3-29-98). One actor thought “foreign actors seem to treat things with a relaxed style. Chinese people live in a rigid way.” And Agnete was surprised to discover the Chinese actors had learned lines before rehearsals began, rather than waiting to connect the lines with blocking (Haaland, 4-10-98). In my view, all the actors were sometimes exaggerating and sometimes “more natural.”

Nora spoke her lines primarily in English (actually her native language is Norwegian), while the rest of the cast responded in Chinese. Over the rehearsal process and run of the play, Nora used more and more Chinese, and the Chinese actors began to use bits of English. As I followed rehearsals, I also served as both dramaturge and English-language coach. My salary was 400 RMB (about US$50), the same amount paid to the jingju actress and musician recruited to join the production.

Nora’s English lines were initially projected in Chinese subtitles above the stage (a practice borrowed from xiqu) until the equipment broke. The subtitles were really unnecessary, as the gist of Nora’s lines was easily repeated by other characters for the Chinese audience’s benefit. For those who understood both English and Chinese, of course the repetition of lines became tedious. While the Chinese audience might not understand Nora’s long speeches, they could understand the meaning and development of the plot through the actions. Anyway, the audience was comprised primarily of young intellectual Chinese who were studying English, now a compulsory course in middle school and university.

Director Huang Zuolin used the term xieyi in relation to his 1987 production of China Dream (Zhongguo Meng) in Shanghai. Huang formulated his xieyi theory during the 1960s as a way to challenge the dominance of the Stanislavski system. Huang considered China Dream “the best experiment to date in xieyi” (Huang, 7-15-87). See my paper “China Dream: A Chinese Spoken Drama.”

“Theatre of the Absurd” is known as huangdan xiju in China. However, the term huangdan is also used in a more general way to mean “fantastic,” “incredible,” “absurd.”

CHAPTER 4: DIRECTOR LIN ZHAOHUA

1 Renowned playwright Cao Yu was President of Renyi until his death in 1997. Liu Jinyun (playwright of Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana) continued as Head after Cao Yu’s death. When Lin retired in 1998, director Ren Ming replaced him as Vice President. Sixty is the official retirement age for men, and fifty-five for women, although theatre artists often continue to work beyond retirement age.

2 There is a system of government reviews before a State-owned Theatre is allowed to go abroad. Lin has gone abroad through non-governmental arrangements, people-to-people guanxi, not under the name of the Theatre (Han Tongsheng, 11-30-97).

3 Noted drama critic Lin Kehuan is the President of the China National Youth Art Theatre (Qingyi). Tong Daoming is a scholar and critic with the Foreign Literature Research
In this study, I am not looking at productions directed by Lin Zhaohua for Renyi. Lin’s production work at Renyi was quite considerable, and during the 1900s included: Red River Valley (Hong Hegu) with director Li Liuyi; Antiques (Guwan) with Ren Ming; Bird Man (Niao Ren); Fish Man (Yu Ren); Ruan Lingyu (a famous Shanghai actress during the late 1920s-30s, who committed suicide); and a new production of Teahouse (Cha Guar). Of these, Red River Valley, Antiques, Ruan Lingyu, and Teahouse were more realistic; Bird Man and Fish Man (while still realistic) were more in the vein of the works examined here. See notes 19 and 25 for more information on Bird Man and Fish Man.

Jiao Juyin was a co-founder of the China Xiqu Training Academy as well as the Beijing People’s Art Theatre. As a director at Renyi during the 1950s and 60s, he was one of the earliest to combine xiqu elements with huaju, especially in terms of flexible time and space (Yu 1992, 58). For example, Jiao’s production of Guo Moruo’s Hu Fu (Tiger SeaT) had no stage set, and actors carried flags to help create locale and atmosphere. The actors also walked to the beat of xiqu musical instruments (Xue, 8-25-99). Jiao Juyin was also the original director of Teahouse. Teahouse, written by Lao She (1899-1966) in 1957, was first staged in 1958 at Renyi and ran for a record 383 performances before 1992 (China Daily, 11-8-99). Teahouse is set in a typical old Beijing teahouse where people from all walks of life gather. By portraying the rise and decline of the teahouse and the plights and successes of an array of characters, the play offers a cross-sectional view of Chinese society during the period between 1898, at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), to 1948, the eve of the fall of the Guomindang. Then came the Cultural Revolution, and Jiao Juyin’s explorations with xiqu techniques in huaju were interrupted (Xue, 8-25-99).

The concept of “deconstruction” is from the West. Jiegou [a] means “construction”; with a different written character (and tone) for “jie,” jiegou [b] means “deconstruction.” The “jie” of “deconstruction” is the “jie” of jiefang (“liberation”). This illustrates the complexities of Chinese for the non-native speaker. I thank scholar Lin Weiyu for her very clear explanation.

Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1602), based on a medieval Danish story, tells how Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, tries to avenge his father’s murder, but how his own complex character prevents him from doing so. In his attempt, Hamlet kills the King, his uncle Claudius, and in the end is himself poisoned.

Romulus Augustus is Emperor of the Western Roman Empire. Zeno is Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. This is Zeno’s line to Romulus, who cares more about tending to his chickens than saving the Roman Empire from destruction. The full quotation is: “Amazing. A world goes up in flames and you make silly jokes. Everyday thousands of human beings are dying and here you muddle along. What does chicken feed have to do with the approach of the Barbarians?” (Dürrenmatt, Romulus the Great, Nellhaus, trans. 1964, act 1: 62).
The first Chinese translation of *Faust* was by noted dramatist Guo Moruo. Goethe's *Faust* Part I, published in 1808, the story of the learned Doctor Faust's bargain with the Devil Mephistopheles and the seduction of the innocent Gretchen, has been echoed in novels, movies, puppet shows, and several operas. *Faust* Part II, written in Goethe's old age and published shortly after his death in 1832, is more abstract and disjunctive—Faust travels from the Court of Emperor Maximilian to the shores of classical antiquity. Part II is seldom staged. Lin's *Faust* raised controversy before rehearsals even began. Director Xu Xiaozhong, President of Beijing's Central Drama Academy, had wanted to direct *Faust*. Lin's "beating him to the punch" caused ill feelings to resonate through Beijing theatre circles.

Ms. Lou Naiming was also American director George White's collaborator (the "Chinese director") of "Music Man" (1987), reportedly the first Western musical performed in China.

See Anne Midgette's article about German director Peter Stein's production of the complete uncut *Faust* Parts I and II. Stein called his *Faust*, which opened July 22 for Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany, the "first unedited" staging of the work. This production lasted 22 hours and was performed on six consecutive nights (Midgette, 8-6-00). *Faust Version 3.0* by Alex Olle and Carlos Pedrissa's *La Fura dels Baus* (The Ferret from the Baus), an experimental theatre company from Barcelona, may also be of interest to the reader. This multi-media techno-computer-age production of *Faust* was staged at the New York State Theatre as part of Lincoln Center's Festival in 1998.

Lin's wife, He Bingzhu, Vice President of Zhongxi, was instrumental in clearing the way for *Faust* to be performed in the Academy's theatre. The comments of *Cultural Report* (Wenhuibao) critic Kang Sifu reflect the socio-economic scene at the time. Kang laments: "We can't expect the performance space to be a holy palace, but at least it shouldn't be a marketplace. ... Zhongxi's basement has become a restaurant, which faces the stairs to the stage, so the walls are covered with grease and smoke. Just looking at it made me feel sick. ... Don't let the market economy drive us into such an awful situation." Entering the theatre, the critic was appalled to discover videogame and billiard rooms, a bar and food-stalls. A fist-fight broke out among theatre patrons arguing over seats; the rubber covering the stage floor was "torn and filthy"; and dust fell from the ceiling as old Faust was speaking. "The environment is really very bad. ... Let's not make people feel that huaju is too poor to even survive" (Kang, Symposium, 5-30-94). These comments bring to mind Party Secretary Wang Zhengchun's article, *Civilized Behavior in the Theatre*, cited in chapter 2, page 65. As a sign of better times and evidence of rapid economic change, at the end of the decade, Zhongxi was able to build a brand new theatre with the help of Hong Kong investment.

Ni Dahong, the old Faust, played Dr. Rank in *A Doll's House*; Han Tongsheng, the young Faust, played Keluotai (Krogstad) in *A Doll's House*, the defense lawyer in *Intentional Injury*, Kaoshu in *Vengeance on Zidu*, and Jean, Leader of the Resistance Movement, in *Death Without Burial*.

Lin Zhaohua reported that the rock band "received only basic expenses." For half a month's work, the band was paid "less than 10,000 RMB," the amount "each band member would usually earn for one performance" (Faust Symposium, 5-30-94).

17 For the Hong Kong tour ("Hong Kong Arts Festival Program," 2-97), Qi Ren was translated into English as Chess Man. Qi Ren actually refers to weiqi (lit. "encircle/besiege chess"), an ancient game (called "Go" in Japan and North America) which originated in China and is played with black and white stones on a board checkered by 19 vertical lines and 19 horizontal lines to make 361 intersections. The Chinese game similar to Western chess is another game called xiangqi. My discussion with playwright Guo Shixing (1-22-98) revealed that Go Man is the preferred title. Alternate English titles include Go Man/Men, Go Master, and Chess Man/Men, Chess Master; Chinese language does not distinguish between the singular and plural. I prefer Go Man, as the singular ("Man" as opposed to "Men") gives the title the more universal connotation of "Everyman."

18 Guo Shixing's pen-name is Shan Haike ("mountain ocean guest/traveller"), derived from the idiom "shannan haibei" ("south of the mountains and north of the seas" or "far and wide," "all over the land") and shan hai jing ("mountain ocean mantra"), an expression originating in Chinese mythology (Guo Shixing, 1-22-98).

19 Guo’s Idle People Trilogy includes Bird Man (Niao Ren), Go Man (Qi Ren) and Fish Man (Yu Ren) plays about the traditional leisurely pastimes of ordinary Beijingers, i.e., raising and training birds, playing weiqi (Go), and breeding goldfish. Before writing these plays, Guo himself had been an avid fisherman, bird-raiser, and Go player. All three plays were directed by Lin Zhaohua. Bird Man and Fish Man were both Renyi productions, while Go Man was produced by CNET. Bird Man, written in 1991, was produced first (in 1993). Guo had actually written Fish Man first (during the 1989 democracy demonstrations in Tian'anmen Square), but with indirect references to “June 4th,” the play had a difficult time getting past the censors at Renyi and was produced as the last play of the Trilogy in 1997. Go Man, written in 1994, was performed in 1996 (Guo Shixing, 1-22-98 and "Wode xiezuo daolu" / "The Creative Path of My Writing," He Zongsi, ed.: 353-362). While the productions of Bird Man and Fish Man were both primarily realistic, they also embodied the complex dynamic of Guo’s plays: a mix of controversial political allegory, the “fantastical,” and symbolism, as well as a critical examination of nationalism and cross-cultural conflicts. For more information, especially about Bird Man, see Conceison 1998, 87-101 and Diss. Cornell University, 2000.

20 As Guo Shixing does above, close friends often call Lin Zhaohua "Lin Zhao" rather than the more usual "Zhaohua," as the lilting tone of "Lin Zhao" in Chinese is especially pleasing to the ear. "Xiao" ("little, younger") is an affectionate familiar way to address a family member or close friend. "Lao" ("old") is used in a similar way.

21 Lin Zhaohua wrote the article from which this excerpt is taken on December 29, 1998. It was published in Gossip Street: Guo Shixing Play Anthology in May 1999. Apparently Lin felt no political risk with publication of his article even though he is being quite facetious.

22 A metaphorical reference, "qi jiu he kai, ba jiu yan lai" (lit. "seven nine rivers run, eight nine geese come," an old Chinese proverb, i.e., "July 9th, ice has melted and rivers run; August 9th the geese come," on their way North), to the continuous cycle of life.
23 Theatre artists use the term xianchang ("present site," "on the site") to imply an improvisational spontaneous quality of an event taking place at the moment rather than being "acted" or "re-enacted." This also implies the antithesis of the "old method of actors reciting as if they were giving a speech with gestures and full of emotion" (Yu Jian in Wu Wenguang, 338-40).

24 The imposing Capital Theatre has served as host venue for everything from model revolutionary operas during the Cultural Revolution to acclaimed contemporary dramas including Cao Yu's Thunderstorm and Lao She's Teahouse. Entering the Theatre's main gate and heading around back to the black box theatre gives the feeling of entering a side quadrangle of a traditional Beijing courtyard house (siheyuan). The smaller theatre's atmosphere is distinctly informal. There is no "stage," so the venue can easily accommodate various staging arrangements. While Go Man was being performed in the Little Theatre, A Good Man: Ren Wu was being staged in the main Capital Theatre. It tells the story of a model Party worker ("advanced worker," xianjin gongzuozhe), and State workers were required to attend as part of the ongoing "Spiritual Civilization Campaign" in Beijing. A joke among avant-garde theatre fans in directing friends to Go Man was: "Don't go through the wrong door; the good play is not the one about the 'good man'" ("Creative Crucible," Beijing Scene, April 5-11, 1996).

25 While Bird Man was staged realistically in Renyi's large Capital Theatre with the action taking place as if in a Beijing park, Guo Shixing had originally intended staging the play in a small theatre and transforming the entire playing area into a bird cage. He wanted the actors to construct a "giant bird cage" to encircle the performance zone as the human beings caught inside resisted being trapped as "caged birds" (Guo Shixing, 1-22-98). In Lin Zhaohua's production, the ending was quite controversial. One of the characters opened all the birdcages; but after being caged for so long, the birds did not know how to or perhaps were too afraid to fly away. This clearly suggested China's being a "closed" nation for so long, as well as the effects of political repression. When I asked Guo Shixing about the above, he quite skillfully avoided my political rendering, although he admitted that the play could be interpreted "in different ways" (Guo, 1-22-98).

26 The actors' dagua or "unlined coats" were traditionally worn by academics and also (unexpectedly) by traditional "cross-talk" actors.

27 These "singing" doorbells are sold in the marketplace. Christmas carols are played all year-round in department stores and elevators as "muzak" with no religious connotation. Christmas itself has become a popular commercial holiday in Beijing.

28 The live birds were reminiscent of the live birds chirping and singing onstage in Bird Man.

29 The "Church Madrigals" were from the German Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz' "O Bon Jesu, Filii Mariae" conducted by Sir John Eliot Gardiner (Monteverdi Choir, English Baroque Soloists, Deutsche Grammophon, Hamburg, 1990).

30 "The first person who ate crab was very courageous" is a popular saying by Lu Xun.

31 Guo's description sounds similar to Rousseau's "Primitive Child Theory" and Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience."
Among the prominent Chinese dissidents to appear were Chinese-American Harry Wu, labor activist Han Dongfang, and Wei Shanshan, sister of jailed dissident Wei Jingsheng. Munich cancelled the June Arts Festival (June 10-19th), but said “the human rights forum will take place as planned” (“China Culture Shock,” Far Eastern Economic Review, 6-6-96).

In sponsoring events, the Goethe Institute Beijing needs an umbrella organization, i.e., it will give funding to a State Theatre (CNET), rather than an independent production as a more stable, and legal, investment.

As mentioned previously, Guo's *Bird Man* was produced by Renyi in their large Capital Theatre, before Guo joined CNET. *Fish Man* would also later be performed at the Capital Theatre as a Renyi production.

After the initial run at Renyi's Little Theatre, CNET leaders had planned to move the production to the larger Eryi (Ertong juchang, Children's Theatre). The move to Eryi was cancelled, as CNET was not sure they could fill the larger, more expensive theatre. 50 yuan soon became the standard ticket price. Ticket prices continued increasing throughout the decade, sometimes to 100-200 yuan, very expensive for the average Beijinger.

Ren Ming had directed *Waiting for Godot* in Renyi's Little Theatre earlier in 1998.

Lin had committed to paying the higher rent of 10,000 yuan per night for the larger theatre. Renyi's Little Theatre would have required only a 2,000 per night rental fee. (Of course, Lin only needed to pay rent for his independent productions, not for Renyi-produced plays.) The production ended up losing money, and Lin was able to pay the actors only 50% of their agreed-upon salaries “because they're my friends.” “At least the theatre rent was paid” (Lin, 8-19-99).

While the “official” version referred to the “inability to continue due to water leaking from the reflecting pond and damaging the stage,” the actual reason for the early closing was the lack of audience.

Lin’s deconstruction of *Richard III* opened at the Capital Theatre in February 2001. This was again a co-production between Lin’s Studio and CNET, with the actors all from CNET. The designer was Yi Liming. Richard III was played by Ma Shuliang, who earlier played landlord Er Ye in *Fields of Life and Death*, which will be examined later in this study. *Richard III* was invited to the Berlin Arts Festival in September 2001. In 2002, Lin is planning to direct Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, which chronicles the life of the powerful warrior Caius Marcius Coriolanus.

CHAPTER 5: DIRECTOR MENG JINGHUI

Meng appeared in Mou Sen’s productions of Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* in 1987 (as the wild rhinoceros Jean) and *Story of a Soldier* in 1988 (as lecturer-teacher-clown) (Xiao, 11-16).

Productions included Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*, directed by Meng; Pinter’s *Landscape*; Huang yu hei (*Yellow and Black*, an original “futuristic theatre play”); and
Feimao tuihuo wu chu cang shen (As Fast as Lightning or No Place to Hide, an original one-act), directed by fellow students (Xiao Shu, 11-16). Later in 1991, Pinter’s Silence, directed by students Cai Jun and Zhang Xiaoling, and Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, directed by Meng, were also performed in the Drama Academy’s small auditorium. In 1992, Argentinian writer Manuel Puig’s Kiss of the Spider Woman, directed by recent graduate Zhang Yang, was performed in the little auditorium at the Film Academy (see chapter 1). With just two professional huaju training academies in China, the Shanghai Academy of Drama and Beijing’s Central Drama Academy, student productions attract more attention than might ordinarily be expected.

3 The pause was reminiscent of John Cage’s minimalist composition “4 Minutes and 33 Seconds,” performed in New York’s Catskill Mountains. The Cage musicians held their instruments in silence while the audience was left listening to the rich surrounding sounds of nature. Presumably, the “silence” here ironically had the sounds of urban Beijing as background.

4 The title of this play, Si Fan, has been translated into English as Longing for the Secular World; Seeking Worldly Pleasures; and simply The Nun and the Monk, referring to its two main characters.

5 As previously described, a little theatre was actually first used in 1982 by Lin Zhaohua for his production of Absolute Signal. However, the “little theatre” was really just a small hall, not a proper theatre. Although I did not see the 1992 student Si Fan, I did see the production at CNET in 1993 and again in 1995 and 1996. For the 98 revival, I had the opportunity to follow rehearsals as well as the performance.

6 Kunqu (“kun song”), a style of xiqu, is the opera of Kunshan in Jiangsu Province, which developed during the Ming Dynasty. Kunqu is characterized by a highly literary form with classical language of great beauty. A genteel form with romantic themes and soft melodious music, kunqu became the prerogative of the connoisseur and intellectual. Its plays grew to enormous lengths, and its musical style and singing were characterized by a great deal of elaborate ornamentation. Its principle instrument was the flute, rather than the stringed instruments characteristic of jingju (Beijing Opera) giving a plaintive quality to the plays (Scott 1958, 4; Mackerras 1975, 17-19).

7 Boccaccio’s (1313 –1375) masterpiece Decameron was written 1349-51. Themes and motifs include love, deception, sex, the plague, religion and the clergy. Characters include historical figures, saints, biblical and mythological figures.

8 Western film-goers reacted in a similar way to the Italian film, Boccaccio 70 (Italy, 1962, directors Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini, and Luchino Visconti). This film included three bawdy, comic stories inspired by the Decameron satirizing sexual morality. Each vignette pertained to ironically-twisted sexual politics in middle class life. The film starred actresses Sophia Loren and Romy Schneider.

9 A commemorative exhibition of paintings left behind by Qi Li was held in 1993, shortly after the professional performance of Si Fan opened at CNET (Meng 2000, 89).

10 These figures include performance subsidies, but not CNET artists’ basic salaries, which are paid by the Cultural Ministry (see chapter 2). There was never any additional outside field rent to pay, as the performance venue was always CNET’s own Little Theatre. Meng Jinghui refers to the Academy performance as the “Heavy Snow Si...
“Fan” or Si Fan Version 1 (Si Fan diyiban) and the 1993 CNET production as Version 2 (Si Fan dierban). As further adaptations were made, the 1998 CNET performance became Version 3 (Si Fan disanban). The CNET Si Fan Playbills for the 1993 and 1998 performances included a disclaimer: “This performance has nothing to do with the ‘Heavy Snow Production’ of 1992” (Meng 2000, 377).

11 This utilitarian material is an updated version of the traditional cotton cloth used by Chinese peasants to line jackets, coats, and blankets and is very inexpensive and popular throughout China.

12 Later at the tech rehearsal, Meng decided to change the lighting to incorporate all the colors originally envisioned. The tech crew was re-hanging lights two hours before opening. The chaos and ensuing adrenaline-rush and excitement were so universal that I felt right at home! In the end, Meng thought there was “just too much color and too many light changes. It could have been even simpler and better, with just all white light” (5-29-98).

13 As a student, Meng directed Pinter’s The Dumb Waiter, Ionesco’s Bald Soprano, and Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. While Si Fan combines kunqu and the Italian Boccaccio stories, Meng considers the fusion a newly-created Chinese play.

14 Meng Jinghui has what he calls “the largest videotape collection in Beijing,” including audio and video materials from “everywhere in the world”—China, Japan, France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, the U.S.A. (Meng, Wang Jiangyue 6-14-99).

15 In China, “0-0-7,” “double 0-7.” has no association with James Bond.

16 In Thornton Wilder’s Our Town, which I directed at CNET in 1987, all the sound effects were created vocally by a 4-actor chorus. Meng told me that, as a student, he had seen this production, and “the sound effects chorus made a strong impression” on him (7-28-93). Creating vocal sound effects is also a technique used by Chinese xiangsheng (“comic dialogue,” “crosstalk”) performers. In WM (1985), the actors vocally made sound effects of the wind, etc. Meng’s inspiration for Si Fan’s sound chorus may have been a combination of elements.

17 The nun wore a brightly-colored top, and the monk was in flowered pants, so both stood out from the chorus. For more flexible movement, the nun and monk wore the soft cloth slippers of xiqu. Only the nun and monk wore make-up, although all the actors—both men and women—sported modish hairstyles, wild pig-tails and braids with bits of blue, green, or red hair-color added.

18 San Cha Kou, short for “san cha lukou,” “a fork in the road,” “junction of three roads,” has been translated as The Crossroads (Mackerras 1997, 50) and as Where Three Roads Meet (A.C. Scott 1958, 76-77). The Western theatre/film buff may be familiar with Peter Shaffer’s comic play Black Comedy/White Lies (1965, 1967, 1976, 1993); Terence Young’s film, the horror/thriller Wait Until Dark (1967, with Audrey Hepburn playing a blind woman); and George Lucas’ The Star Wars Prequel Episode I “The Phantom Menace” (1999) with its “laser/lightsaber battle” between the Jedi and the Sith—which all used a similar vehicle of “light-dark” reversal.
19  *Si Fan* 1993 was performed in CNET’s Little Theatre on a thrust stage and also utilized the Theatre’s wings and cat-walks as acting areas. The narrator told the King/Queen/Groom story, as he sat on the upper level.

20 The joke here is that *shuangguanhua* = “pun,” but *shuang* alone = “two,” “a pair,” “a couple”:

* Sengjie nan ba toufa yang (“Monk difficult to hair grow”).
* Nigu wujie bu kewang (“Nun five commandments not forget”).
* Cheng jia li ye meiyou fen (“Becoming a family not possible”).
* Shuangguanhua ni qu xiang (“A pun for you to figure out”). An acronym, taking the first word from each line = *Seng Ni Cheng Shuang* = “Monk and Nun become a couple.”

21 The actors originally worked out an elaborate curtain call with individual actors each performing a comic “bit.” This was cut before the opening (Meng felt it “too busy”) in favor of throwing apples, the “fruit of temptation,” into the audience.

22 lit. “someone rubs/smears smoke”; “ceng” implies “for free” and “taking advantage of.”

23 *Xian Tao An* (“celestial peach convent”) and *Bi Tao Si* (“green peach monastery”) are a play on words. With the same pronunciation, but different written characters, *Xian Tao An* means “first escape,” and *Bi Tao Si* means “must escape.” The audience laughed, enjoying the word-play.

24 Jia Pingwa’s 1993 novel *The Abandoned Capital*, “a salacious sex story,” initiated a huge controversy in Chinese literary circles. As Barme describes, “scandal mixed with envy” when a bidding war among publishers ensued, and it was leaked to the media that Beijing Publishing House had paid Jia one million yuan for the rights to the book (Barme 1999, 181-185). Meng did not want *Si Fan* to be “vulgar.” There were several productions of Pinter’s *The Lover* in Shanghai in 1993. As Meng describes, one production was “not too vulgar,” as the audience “couldn’t clearly see the lovers caressing behind glass”; but while the sex was presented from “a high angle, not in a crude way, the promise of sex scenes was a huge draw for the audience” (Meng, 7-28-93).

25 A pun on different meanings of the same character “fan”: “*Si Fan Bu Fan*” (“*Si Fan* is out of the Ordinary”).

26 *Baixi*, “100 entertainments,” “100 games,” refers to “a type of spectacle similar to a circus, circa 3rd c. B.C. – 14th c. A.D., considered an important antecedent of Chinese drama,” composed of a variety of acts, including tightrope-walking, pole-climbing, sword-swallowing, fire-eating, combat, equestrian acts, tumbling, dances, and skits (Trapido 1985: 55-56; Dolby 1976: 3, 15-16); *quyi*, “song skill/art” refers to Chinese folk art forms including ballad singing, story-telling, comic dialogues, clapper talk, and *xiangsheng*, “comic cross-talk dialogue”; *yuanqu*, “Yuan song,” refers to a type of verse popular in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), including *zaju* (poetic drama set to music, usually consisting of 4 acts, with one character having the singing role in each act) and *sanqu* (a type of verse with tonal patterns modelled on tunes drawn from folk music); *xiqu* is indigenous “sung drama” and includes *kunqu*.
American masters of improvisation include Nola Chilton, Viola Spolin, and Paul Sills of Second City, and Michael Chekhov, Joseph Chaikin, Peter Feldman, Jean-Claude Van Itallie, and Megan Terry of the Open Theatre. Theatre games and improvisation are particular interests of mine. For example, games include: "the orchestra," "the chord," "physical adjustment," "sphere of air," "radiating energy," "body molding," "walking in space," "touching the air"—the list is endless. My personal favorite is the Open Theatre’s "jamming the sea," an exercise which requires actors to make sounds in counterpoint or support using parts of the body rather than the voice. American acting students are familiar with these sound/movement exercises. Si Fan’s combination of different characters, times, and places from the kunqu to the Decameron stories suggests the Open Theatre’s essential exercise, "transformation," an improvisation in which the established realities or "given circumstances" (the Stanislavski Method phrase) (character, situation, time, objectives) of a scene change several times during the course of the action. For more information, see Pasolli, 1970; Schechner, 1966; Terry, 1966; and Spolin, 1970.

While Western "harmony" is outside xiqu musical/aural tradition, it is taught at the conservatories of music in China and is certainly part of contemporary Chinese music. Yet despite the prevalence of Western-style music, "harmony" apparently is not part of the training of huaju actors.

The Festival was cancelled after the Chinese government refused the actors permission to go abroad in response to "June 4th" activities scheduled to take place at the Festival (See chapter 4).

Lao She’s Cha Guar (Teahouse) performed by Beijing People’s Art Theatre repeatedly since 1958, except for a 10-year hiatus during the Cultural Revolution, is possibly the longest running huaju of all.

From 1993–96, CNET’s usual ticket price was 30 yuan. After 1996, the price went up to 50 yuan. The ticket price for more commercial performances at other theatres was 50 or 100 yuan or more.

Cui Jian was China’s first rock star; his concerts were banned in Beijing, but he continued to play at unannounced venues late at night. See chapter 1.

While all Meng’s productions presented subject matter controversial in varying degrees, only one production was banned—Comrade Ah Q, rehearsed during an especially politically-sensitive period, the “Construction of Spiritual Civilization” campaign in late 1996–early 1997 (see chapter 1).

During the 1990s, one other Meng production did not pass CNET’s official script approval. This was Love Ants (Aiqing Mayi, 1997), which was also produced outside official channels through a loose association with the Drama Academy.

Fo was the play’s director as well as its leading actor. Dario Fo is perhaps Italy’s most provocative dramatist: a comedian, satirist, critic, playwright, actor, director, designer, choreographer, and, perhaps above all, the quintessential clown. In 1997, Dario Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and honored as “emulating the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden” (“Nobel Prize Internet Archive” Website, 8-30-01). Fo was invited to the debut in Beijing, but the reason he did not attend is unclear. The press reported that Fo’s health
did not allow him to make the trip (Mu Qian, 11-3-98). Meng told me that “Fo didn’t come, because he had no time” (Meng, 11-2-98). Fo may have had problems obtaining a visa for China, but this is unsubstantiated.

Actually reports differ as to whether the bombing concerned the train station or Milan’s Bank of Agriculture and Commerce.

Fo’s Accidental Death was translated into Chinese by Lu Tongliu, President of the National Italian Association. Huang Jisu, playwright and frequent Meng collaborator, further adapted the play, “interpreting it from a Chinese perspective” (“Italian Drama,” 12-1-98).

The “Keystone Cops,” featured in Max Sennett’s silent films of the 1920s, personified slapstick humor based on a gentle ridicule of authority and the total ineptness and confusion of the police, incorporating Chaplinesque movement, high-speed chases, and consummate mime.

Teahouse (Cha Guar, 1957), Lao She’s seminal work, covers four decades of life in a Beijing teahouse. See chapter 1, note 9; and chapter 4, note 6.

Meng drew several cartoons which he published with the script adaptation in his Avant-garde Theatre Files. These leave no doubt as to his irreverent intentions. One cartoon depicts a “bank teller” at his computer desk. Behind protective bars and dressed in convict stripes, the teller resembles a jailed convict. Parodying the name of the Chinese bank, the cartoon caption jokingly announces “the Chinese Anarchists’ Industry and Commerce Bank: You’re welcome to use the ‘anarchists’ credit card.” In another cartoon, an arrow points to a panda as the “anarchist.” The tearful panda is handcuffed to jail-bars. A disembodied hand is “giving the finger” to the “anarchist” label. The Anarchist creative team had intended to distribute the “banker cartoon” before every performance, but this did not happen (Meng 2000, 236). The “panda cartoon” was originally material for the “Playbill,” but also was not included (Meng 2000, 261). A revival of Anarchist was performed in 2000, which one critic found “a refreshingly healthy sign” for China’s art and culture scene, especially in the wake of crackdowns by the Party on police corruption as well as corruption in its own ranks (Chan, 2001).

Liao Yimei and Meng Jinghui married in 1998. The influence of Mou Sen’s experimental production of Ionesco’s Rhinoceros (Xiniu) in 1987 (Meng Jinghui played the lead) is implicit in Liao Yimei’s choice of title, Rhinoceros in Love (Lian’ai de Xiniu). The rhinoceros is on the verge of extinction because in Chinese traditional medicine, rhinoceros horn is considered an aphrodisiac and therefore very valuable.

“Musical theatre,” based on a Japanese model, is now a popular course taught at Beijing’s Drama Academy.

This is reminiscent of Paul Simon’s song “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover”: “Slip out the back, Jack; make a new plan, Stan; don’t need to be coy, Roy.” The point here is not that Meng is derivative, but that he is appealing to a specific young audience, who might otherwise be going to rock concerts or movies. The love professor’s ten methods were:

1. Criticize people who have the same shortcomings he [your lover] has.
2. Interrupt midway while he’s talking and begin a new topic.
3. When he’s tired, ask him to make love.
4. Laugh when there’s nothing to laugh about.
5. Talk about subjects he knows nothing about.
6. Deny him the right to touch your body between your abdomen and your thighs.
7. Make him do something he can’t do.
8. When he approaches, don’t look at him.
9. Repeatedly talk about his shortcomings and bad habits and conclude that they’re incurable.

This list of events seemed tailor-made for a foreign audience. I wondered why the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Communist Revolution, the Cultural Revolution, the arrest of the “Gang of Four,” Deng Xiaoping’s rise, etc. were not included:

1903: the first flight of the Wright Brothers.
1920: women win the right to vote.
1945: secret about the Nazi concentration camps disclosed to the world.
1914: the first World War breaks out in Europe.
1929: economic crisis hits the world.
1928: medical circle discovers penicillin.
1953: structure of DNA is discovered.
1939: Germany invades Poland, starting World War II.
1917: Russia’s Communist Revolution.
1957: the first man-made satellite is launched by the Soviet Union.
1945: the first atom bomb is dropped by the US on Hiroshima, Japan.
1905: Einstein presents his theory of relativity.
1960: the US allows contraceptives to be sold in the market.
1997: British scientists successfully clones a sheep.
1968: “May Storm” (*Wuyue fengbao*) breaks out in France.
1999: Kosovo Crisis ... (Liao Yimei, *Rhinoceros in Love*, sc. 12, 301).

Meng’s original titles were *Faustmachine* (*Fushide jiqi*) following the model of Heiner Mueller’s *Hamletmachine*—a deconstruction of *Hamlet*—and *A Contemporary Faust* (*Dangdai Fushide*) before settling on *Bootleg Faust* (*Bootleg Faust Website*, 1999).

Lyrics from Yu Jiangying’s “Kuaigan” (“climax”) indicate yearnings, confusion, and change: “Ideals ... One day the world will not be the same. ... Stars may not be stars and won’t appear or disappear with the moon. ... Women will change into men; men will change into women. ... All life will be born out of thin air. Water, roses, desks, nothingness ... will gel in the imagination. Cast off reality. ... One day good and evil will be confused. ... Here will not be here; there may be here. ... All living things will fly. People will give and take love as pleasure. ... From now on, confusion will last forever.”

During this period, the sale of fake products became rampant, including fake medicines, cigarettes, electrical components, etc. Even the State-owned department stores were part of the problem, and they offered to refund three times the price of any product they sold which was found to be counterfeit. One young “entrepreneur” started a business purposely buying fake products and returning them for triple the price he paid. His business was quite profitable until authorities caught up with him.
the fake “Sony” headsets I bought at the Dian’anmen Department Store, around the
corner from CNET.

48 The original plan was to invite four experts from different artistic fields—a modern
dancer, a poet, a photographer, and a puppetry master—and call the play Four Kinds of
Feelings After Reading Faust. The four artists would choose the part of Faust which
moved them the most and demonstrate this through their art. Shen Lin called his final
script Dr. Faust’s Human Comedy (Fushide boshi de renjian xiju), which became
Bootleg Faust for the CNET production.

49 The five stars on the Chinese flag stand for the worker, peasant, soldier, intellectual, and
the biggest star represents the CCP. The “intellectual” has had a special meaning in
China. The intellectual was the one to fear; the one to attack during the Cultural
Revolution; not one of the “workers, soldiers, or peasants”; the one sent to the
countryside to be “reeducated.” Shen Lin’s scenes included Yinzi: shuzhai shenghuo
(Prologue: Life in the Study); Hongchen gungun dianshi xuezhe (Rolling Red Dust: the
TV Scholar); Fuhua shijie: meide lifazhe (An Ostentatious World: the Beauty Pageant
Judge); Jian gong li ye: shiqian chong’er (Building a Career: Indulged Son of the
Times); and Yishan tianhai: deng yue yingxiong (Moving the Mountain and Filling the
Sea: A Hero Lands on the Moon). In episode 5, “move the mountain” comes from an
ancient Chinese legend: a man named Yu Gong lived at the foot of a mountain. The
mountain was so high that the sun couldn’t shine on the man’s house. He decided that
he and his family would move the mountain with only their bare hands. A neighbor
thought this was impossible. Yu insisted that the generations of people are endless.
Since human effort is everlasting, it will be possible to move the mountain. The old
man’s sincerity and diligence impressed the Heavenly Emperor and He moved the
mountain. “Fill the sea” also comes from an ancient Chinese legend: One of the
Emperor’s daughters drowned as she was bathing in the sea. Her ghost became a bird.
Everyday the bird would carry small stones and twigs and throw them into the sea,
hoping to fill the sea and avenge the young girl’s death. Both the above fables
encourage determination, persistence, and hard work. The above is certainly in the
Chinese audience’s frame of reference.

50 As Shen explained, “of the 2,425 Chinese characters making up Bootleg Faust, only
100 are from Goethe’s original” (Shen, script “foreword,” 1999).

51 This of course is from American law (the requirement that police read criminal suspects
their “Miranda rights”) shown on Chinese TV.

52 This was the time of the crackdown against Falungong members.

53 Although CNN is out of bounds to ordinary Chinese, the teachers at the Foreign Affairs
College had access through special “bootlegged” wiring! This is not unusual in China.

54 On December 31st, a special Bootleg Faust performance for New Year’s Eve of the new
millennium was held for 280 yuan per ticket: including music, food, drinks, a make-up
session with the cast and crew, and a viewing of ten short Western theatre documentary
films. For this event, the play started at 10:30 pm so that Faust would be landing on
Mars in the new century. A special secret “theatre ceremony” (xiju yishi) was
announced in the press (Hang, 11-19-99). Meng hoped to initiate a “great movement
of theatre people jumping into the new century” (Bootleg Faust Website). To give an
idea of the competition in Beijing nightlife: the advertisement in Beijing Scene for the

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Bootleg Faust New Year’s Eve Party was underneath an advertisement for four punk bands “riding the wave of their debut albums,” including “Brain Failure,” the “Anarchy Jerks,” “Reflector,” and “69,” who were performing at the CD Café for 80 yuan for a “special New Year’s Eve celebration.” On Christmas Eve December 24th, the Get Lucky Bar held a “rock and alternative fest” featuring a variety of rock bands for 20 yuan entrance and 50 yuan including a raffle. The Club Vogue was holding a “Glamour Christmas fashion show” costing 100 yuan per ticket with “DJs Johnny and Bill playing house music” and the “Fashion Police” awarding prizes to the best-dressed guests. The above events were aimed at Meng’s audience of primarily Chinese “YUP’s”—“Young urban professionals.” Meng was trying to make huaju a viable recreational alternative. Famous punk rocker He Yong, Bootleg Faust’s Musical Director and keyboard-player, could certainly compete with the above-mentioned musicians—even at 200 yuan more per ticket! (“Picks! Picks! Picks!” Beijing Scene, 12-24-99).

55 Lin hoped to direct “a brand-new Teahouse that broke away from the old path.” Lin’s production had a new stage set designed by his frequent collaborator Yi Liming. Lin basically followed the original script, and the production was seen by many as “nostalgic” and “retaining the Beijing characteristics of Renyi.” One critic noted that around 7 pm, the people in the courtyard in front of Renyi could be divided into two different audiences: “mostly middle-aged and old people go to the Big Theatre, while young people go to the Little Theatre. Some people came to see Bootleg Faust, but since tickets were sold out, they bought tickets for Teahouse, … The busiest people in the courtyard were the ticket scalpers” (He Lulu, 12-7-99). Lao She’s play is a masterpiece of realism and despite the above critic’s words, Teahouse has a loyal audience and is popular in its own right. There was no problem selling tickets to Teahouse. The production was reported to have earned “more than a half-million dollars” for Renyi, a lot of money for a theatre that was on the verge of bankruptcy in 1994 (Melvin, 2001).

56 At one Bootleg Faust performance I witnessed, Chen Jianbin as Faust caught his sweater on one of the rough wooden tables. The audience laughed as he tried to free his arm. Chen broke character and laughed with the audience to their absolute delight. Chen then bowed his head, got into character again, and immediately continued with full emotions. While I initially found this quite jarring, it underscored the fact that direct actor-audience communication, a xiqu aesthetic, was primary here—not Stanislavski’s “I am the character” of realism. For example, Brecht assessed after seeing the great xiqu actor Mei Lanfang’s performance: “The Chinese performer is in no trance. He won’t have to ‘come round.’ After an interruption he will go on with his exposition from that point. We are not disturbing him at the ‘mystic moment of creation.’ When he steps on the stage before us the process of creation is already over” (Willett, trans. and ed. 1966, 91-96).

57 Wu Yue had rocketed to overnight success in the 1997 TV series A Time of Peace and was also starring in Heaven Earth Love Destiny, a series airing on TV at the same time Rhino was performed. Wu Yue had already earned more money in TV and film than a lifetime in theatre could give. Wu Yue had replaced actress Mei Ting, who could not get out of a film contract, indicative of the new climate of competition for huaju actors, as well as the realization that TV and film stars were a good way to draw an audience for huaju. Mei Ting herself had replaced actress Li Lingling due to Li’s own prior TV commitment. Mei Ting also had originally played the lead in Rhino in Love, but had been replaced due to another prior film contract. Right after Bootleg Faust opened, a
news article reported that Mei Ting had won a lawsuit against Hope magazine, a trendy Guangdong publication. The Beijing Chaoyang District Court had ruled that Hope magazine had violated Mei Ting’s “right of portrait” by printing her picture without her consent. Mei Ting was awarded 4,000 yuan (US$482) and a written apology in the magazine. The Court ruled against her accusation that the magazine violated her “right of reputation.” The award was far below Mei Ting’s initial demand of 80,000 yuan (US$9,639) which included 30,000 yuan (US$3,614) “for psychological damage” (Shao Zongwei, 12-9-99). This is noteworthy, as it is again indicative of the times. This lawsuit, coming out right after Bootleg Faust opened, undoubtedly was great publicity.

58 While the “performance work unit” was CNET, “joint executive producers” providing funding included: the Sunny Northern Capital Group Advertising Co., Ltd. (Xindu beifang guanggao youxian gongsi); the Sunny Northern Capital Group Cultural Development Co., Ltd. (Xindu beifang wenhua fazhan youxian gongsi); the Samsung Anycall Mobile Phone Co. (Sanxing anycall yidong dianhua); and the Beijing Subway Through Success Advertising Co. (Beijing ditie tongcheng guanggao gongsi).

59 These included the joint-venture company, RC Refrigeration Engineering Technologies (Beijing) Co., Ltd. Italian RC Group (Aerxi zhileng gongcheng jishu Beijing youxian gongsyi Yidali RC jitian), which had given generous funding to Meng’s Accidental Death of an Anarchist the year before; Beijing One World Department Store (Beijing shi du baihuo dalou); and Beijing 100 Diligent People Fashion Co., Ltd. (Beijing bai shi qin fazhuang fushi youxian gongsi).

60 While this was common for big commercial productions, such as Jiang Wen’s Dr. Knock (see chapter 1), these were unusual moves for huaju at a State Theatre. Although Rhino was deemed “semi-independent,” CNET, a State Theatre, was nominally, albeit “officially,” the host danwei.

61 Qingyi’s Black Box for Rhino and Renyi’s Little Theatre for Bootleg Faust.

62 Meng’s The Bedbugs opened on December 12, 2000, and the first run continued through January 20, 2001. In 2002, Meng directed his first feature film, Flying Like a Chicken Feather (Xiang jimao yiyang fei).

CHAPTER 6: MAINSTREAM / EXPERIMENTAL: CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

1 Gossip Street is the only one of his productions that Meng did not include in Avant-garde Theatre Files (2000).

2 Some theatre scholars find yangbanxi (“model revolutionary plays”) an entirely new theatre form, while others consider yangbanxi creative experimentation in xiqu, i.e., “a new type of play” within the xiqu form. See Elizabeth Wichmann, in Mackerras, ed. 1983: 193-4. Colin Mackerras describes the yangbanxi Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy as “exciting and fast-moving. ... There is certainly dramatic tension. ... On the other hand, it lacks love interest of any kind, tragedy, or real humor. Yang’s character [the hero] is too contrived to be convincing. There is hardly a line in the opera without conscious ideological content: politics carried to the final degree” (Mackerras 1983, 172). Life and Death is huaju; yangbanxi is xiqu. Yet briefly comparing the two productions, “love interests” and humor are an integral part of Life and Death.
Movements are often bawdy and sexual. The characters are not the heroic characters of yangbanxi, and the political ideology in Life and Death is not introduced until the final scene.

Beijing’s English-language publications, China Daily, Beijing Scene, and Beijing Monthly, variably called the production Gossip Street, Rumor Street, Malicious Talk Street, Vicious Talk Street, and A Street Filled With Vicious Talk.

Guo’s “Trilogy” includes Bird Man, Go Man, and Fish Man, all directed by Lin Zhaohua and introduced previously in this study. See chapter 4, notes 19 and 25.

During the Cultural Revolution, “big connections” (da chuanlian) meant that “Red Guards” (hongweibing) could travel on trains and buses for free, especially to go to Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square to see Mao. For more information about the Cultural Revolution and the “four bigs,” see Barbara Barnouin, 1993; Lowell Dittmer, 1981; Feng Chi-tsai, 1996; Lee Hong Yong, 1978; Song Yongyi and Sun Dajin, 1998; Anne F. Thurston, 1988; and Yan Jiaqi, 1990.

Chinese has four different sound tones, and each character ends in a vowel sound (the only final consonant sounds are “n” and “g,” and “r” in Beijing dialect). Words are also often repeated twice. Chinese is especially playful in its expression. The repetition of phrases and vowel sounds gives the language, in prose as well as in poetry, an intrinsic meter and rhythm and produces an endless array of double-entendres and word puns. See any Chinese-English dictionary; Wang, 1994; and Zhou and Wang, 1995.

Densely populated hutong and the siheyuan of Beijing are ideal environments for the collection and transmission of gossip.

In longer form, yaoyan is used for “gossip”; minyao and geyao for “songs and folklore.” The Beijing People’s Daily called on cadres to pay more attention to minyao, “pithy remarks, sometimes in the form of rhyming couplets and little ditties circulated among the people as a form of political commentary.” Many of these witty sayings were targeted at corrupt officials, “who would have been nabbed much earlier if authorities had paid more attention to minyao” (Lam, CNN.com/World, 4-2-02).

The State issues everyone an ID card (shenfenzheng), which also authorizes the hukou (lit. “household mouth”), i.e., the required residence permit. An individual must have either a resident or temporary resident permit to legally work within a municipality.

As mentioned previously in relation to Si Fan in chapter 5, singing in Western harmony is not part of the huaju actors’ training. I remember that during Our Town rehearsals in 1987, the actors did not understand Western harmony. Since then, with more exposure to Western music, harmonizing has become more common, although the majority of huaju actors still cannot do this. Actors most often engage in group singing in unison.

Universities, Institutes, Organizations, and of course Embassies, all have police guards at their damen (“big / main gate”). Ordinary compounds usually have members of the “Neighborhood Committee.”

Er Cong, Mu Ming and Auntie Zheng wore modern clothing. The children wore stylized traditional costumes, but the little girl’s spiky braids stuck straight up punk-rock fashion. Grizzled Beard’s beard was overtly fake, with strings attaching it around
his ears. The madman changed into Grizzled Beard’s jacket and also put Grizzled Beard’s beard on his own face. When Er Cong was confused about the madman’s identity, Grizzled Beard explained: “My beard is also fake,” xiqu style, i.e., the “real” Grizzled Beard also has a “fake” beard. The neighbors wore black trousers and white shirts, a collective uniform, especially effective when they peeked into the courtyard or ganged up on Auntie Zheng.

13 The play is particularly difficult to translate. While it is relatively easy to discover the puns and double-entendres, it is much more difficult to deal with rhyme and cadence. For an English translation, the challenge is to retain the meaning, while changing the words so that the original rhymes are also retained.

14 The children taunt Grizzled Beard: “Old man, old man. Plays with a fireball. The fireball burns his butt. He applies balmy oil.” This has rhythm and, in the Chinese, rhyme, “lao tou, qiu, you” (“old man, lit. ‘old head/chief’; ball; oil”).

15 One of the residents, a typical Beijing character riding a tricycle, recites a difficult tongue twister about “an older sister named ‘pink woman’ and a younger sister named ‘woman pink’” (Du gu niang ming jiao fen hong nu, Er gu niang ming jiao nu fen hong) to great audience applause. (The color pink connotes sex and romance; “pink woman” can refer to a prostitute.) Er Cong hugs Auntie Zheng’s legs to stop her from finding the mysterious man and recites a tongue twister about “Cui Cutui (“Chinese surname thick legs”) who lives in front of the mountain” and “Cui Tuicu who lives in back of the mountain.” The two “compare their legs, to see whether Cui Cutui’s legs are thicker than Cui Tuicu’s or Cui Tuicu’s legs are thicker than Cui Cutui’s.” The Chinese is difficult to say. A neighbor recites another tongue twister: “The pig eats my shit; my pig eats shit” (zhu chi wo shi; wo chi zhu shi). When the madman quickly repeats the words, he accidentally says: “The pig eats my shit; I eat pig shit” (zhu chi wo shi; wo chi zhu shi). The madman’s mistake elicited hilarious audience laughter. This is “Peter piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” taken one step further.

16 These are also somewhat similar to American “ugly jokes”: “You’re so stupid that you couldn’t find your way out of a paper bag”; “You’re so stupid that you couldn’t even find a paper bag”; “You’re so ugly / smart / tall / short / hungry,” etc. Like xiehouyu, these could go on indefinitely in a game of “one-ups-manship,” depending on the participants’ inventiveness. For more details and examples of xiehouyu, “enigmatic folk similes,” see John Rohsenow (1991).

17 Wu Dalang, a character in the famous ancient Chinese novel Heroes of the Marsh (Shuihu zhuan), is a short ugly hen-pecked husband with a very pretty wife. He is cuckold and finally killed by his unfaithful wife and her lover. Examples of Wu Dalang sayings: “You remind me of Wu Dalang on an exercise bar; you can’t reach up or down, little man”; “You remind me of Wu Dalang flying a kite; you can’t put your hands up very high, little man”; “You remind me of Wu Dalang’s son; you’re a turtle’s egg, little man” (Wang ba dan, “turtle’s egg,” lit. “king 8 egg,” is a traditional curse. Since turtles can be impregnated by more than 1 turtle, turtles don’t know who their father is. This also implies that the mother is sleazy, insulting the person, mother, and father all at once!) The neighbors use qiaopihua slang to make insulting jokes about the “shit bug,” dung beetle (shikelang): “The shit bug knocks at your door,” i.e., “your house stinks” and “you remind me of a shit bug roaming around the garden,” i.e., “you’re an insect who doesn’t belong here.”

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“Old woman Zheng is not allowed ...”; “A person surnamed Zheng is not allowed as one person to live ...”; “Surnamed Zheng is not allowed by herself to occupy 8 rooms!”

Changes were continually being made. *Gossip Street* originally had an intermission, during which audience members were leaving. The director was able to get the performance down to a two-hour running time, and the intermission was cut.

Roland Barthes goes on to explain that *langue* is “at the same time a social institution and set of values like a game with its own rules” learned from the socio-cultural environment. *Langue* is a system of contractual values allowing communication to take place, resisting modifications by individuals. On the other hand, *parole* is primarily an individual’s selection process. It is made up of combinations, using the codes of language that support expression of personal thought (discourse) and psycho-physical mechanisms which enable exteriorizing these combinations. The combining and recurrence of signs within discourse is an individual activity. It is through a dialectic uniting these two terms that they achieve full definition, e.g., *langue* is at the same time the product and the instrument of *parole* (Barthes, 14-15). For more detailed study, see Barthes, 1967; Cherry, 1966; and Ogden and Richards, 1923.

Colin Mackerras (1990: 172, 180) describes that exposition of the evils of the Cultural Revolution was a popular theme in *huaju* during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These plays corresponded to “wound literature” (*shanghen wenxue*), which flourished during that period, focusing on the Cultural Revolution’s harmful effects. In June 1981, the CCP formally repudiated Mao’s Cultural Revolution, while simultaneously reaffirming Mao’s reputation and contribution as a “great proletarian revolutionary.” Yet while the Cultural Revolution was formally negated, American-based Chinese scholar Song Yongyi, a librarian at Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College, was arrested in December 1999 and imprisoned for six months presumably for “stealing State secrets” while doing research about the Cultural Revolution in Beijing’s Main Library (Shenon, 1-30-00).

“We are the flying soldiers undaunted by high mountains or deep waters. The camps of the comrades are everywhere in the luxurious woods. Many good brothers are in the high mountains.”

It is useful to consider another “mad” character in a significant production directed by Guo’s frequent collaborator, Lin Zhaohua. Lin described the character of peasant Chen Hexiang in his 1986 production of *Gouerye Niepan* (*Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana*, written by Jin Yun). *Second Uncle Doggie* vacillates between sanity and madness. The audience is never quite sure of his mental state. Is he genuinely troubled or is this a tactical move? The character’s madness allows him to express many truths, which he could never do if he were sane. Lin Zhaohua explained: “What sort of impression should Gouerye’s personality give people? ... If the audience leaves the theatre asking the question: ‘Who is crazy?,’ the play will be successful. I didn’t exaggerate Gouerye’s madness. What’s really interesting and what can make people think is that what a madman says is true. ... This is a play emphasizing reason. I don’t want the actors to act as their characters simply through their experience. If the actors’ performance can grasp an attitude of examination that goes beyond the characters, they can communicate with the audience through reason.” Lin Zhaohua asked his actors to have an “examining attitude” rather than “experiencing” (*tiyan*) their characters, i.e., to follow the attitude of Brecht—as well as *xiqu*—rather than Stanislavski. Lin wanted his
audience to wonder: “Who really is the madman?” The peasant embodied both satirical humor and rationality. As Lin described, “through Uncle Doggie’s psychology and personality ... rather than an [individual] peasant’s tragedy, the end of an era is seen” (Lin Zhaohua, “Nirvana,” Lin Kehuan, ed. 1992: 291-2).

24 Similarly, in Wu Xiaojiang’s earlier (1996) East-West fusion production of Ibsen’s Enemy of the People, citizens were confined to wheelchairs, which became a symbol of their narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy.

25 Liu Peiqi won “Best Male Actor” in the “Ornamental Column Awards” (Huabiaojiang) in 1997 for his portrayal of a colleague of Lei Feng, arguably the most famous young soldier who “served the people” in the movie The Days without Lei Feng (Likai Lei Feng de rizi). Tao Hong won the Huabiao Award right after graduating from Zhongxi. She played the blind athlete Ding Lihua in the film Black Eyes (Hei yanjing). Beijing Renyi, Qingyi, and CNET all wanted her to join, but CNET succeeded in recruiting Tao Hong (Xian, “On and Offstage,” 1998). Niu Piao (the “mysterious man”), quite a tall actor, played “God” in Lin Zhaohua’s Faust.

26 “Demon’s Dictionaries” list the latest slang, “swear words,” and political jokes.

27 Sheng Si Chang (lit. “Life Death Scenes”) has been translated into English as Scenes of Life and Death. “Chang” is a “measure word” which implies “chang mian” or a “scene in a drama.” “Chang” is composed of the radical “tu” (“soil,” “earth”). “Chang” and the noun “changzi” mean “a place where people gather.” While “scenes” is certainly a correct translation for “chang,” I think the more figurative “fields” is more suitable. “Fields” conjures up images of China’s laboring peasants—in fact the subject of this play, therefore: Fields of Life and Death.

28 According to Tian, there are six troupes under the leadership of the Beijing Jingju Theatre, comprising the “largest theatre in the world with over 1,000 artists” (8-19-99). Apparently it was not too difficult for a Beijing resident to change danwei, as obtaining a “resident permit” was not an issue. As Li Dong, Life and Death producer, described, “I can transfer jobs if the former danwei is willing to let me go and the receiving danwei is willing to take me” (10-28-99). As Liu Tiegang assessed Tian’s case, the Jingju Theatre “was more than willing” to let her go, “because the Jingju Company is poor, and it means one less mouth to feed” (6-24-99).

29 As mentioned in chapter 1, Jin Xing is the controversial avant-garde dancer who underwent a sex-change operation in 1995 to become a woman. She has been described as the “most provocative, if not most recognized, dancer in China.” Jin Xing began her career as a child in the field of “national” (minzu) dance and later switched to modern dance. At the time of Cutting the Wrists, Jin Xing was Head of her own Beijing City Modern Dance Troupe (Beijingshi xiandai wu tuan), which she has since disbanded (He Sheng, 16).

30 Xiao Hong’s works are part of the leftist “New Cultural Movement” (Xinwenhua yundong) of the May 4th period (see chapter 1). Her works include the novels Xiao cheng sanyue (A Small Town in the Month of March), Ma bo le (Horse Talent-scout), Bei Zhongguo (Northern China), and Hulan he zhuo (Tales of Hulan River), as well as essays and poetry. Xiao Hong had an unusual life. She was born Chang Naiying in 1911 into a declining landlord family in Hulan County, Heilongjiang Province. She ran away from home at the age of twenty to avoid an arranged marriage. Xiao Hong had
complex emotional attachments with fellow writers Xiao Jun, Duanmu Hongliang, and Luo Binji. In Shanghai she became friends with Lu Xun, the distinguished writer of the leftist literary world. *Fields of Life and Death* was published with Lu Xun’s help. (Xiao Hong published a remembrance of Lu Xun, *Huiyi Lu Xun Xiansheng* in 1940.) *Fields of Life and Death* was an instant success and had a strong impact on leftist literary circles and urban readers. It was one of the first novels to reflect peasant life under Japanese rule. After a life of hardships and emotional set-backs, Xiao Hong died from illness in Hong Kong in 1942 at the age of 31. While her life was said to be quite “miserable,” Xiao Hong’s emotional life was deemed “bold and pioneering.” Her literary works are called “unique” with their “new content and writing style, her intuition and acumen” (CNET “Press Release,” 1999; “Xiao Hong” Website: http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/xiao.htm, 2001).

31 As Tian relates, Lu Xun criticized the Guomindang government and praised Xiao Hong’s work. “With Lu Xun’s adulation, the government, i.e., the Department of Propaganda of the Communist Party, likes it too. ... Unlike the Propaganda Department, the Cultural Ministry pays attention to art” and praises the spirit of the work for contributing to China’s culture (Tian, 8-19-99). The English-language *Beijing Scene* critic pointed out that “good Communist cultural workers could not fail to be impressed by a story about suffering under the dual yoke of evil feudalists and imperialists, but Xiao Hong’s acute observations ... endeared the novel to many readers of different political colors” (Xishe, 7-9-99).

32 This precedes the famous “Lugou Bridge Incident” (*Lugou qiao shibian*) on July 7, 1937, which marked Beijing’s occupation by Japanese soldiers and the beginning of the full-scale Japanese attack on China. Lugou Bridge is on the outskirts of Beijing (Mackerras 1983, 151).

33 One of my university students pointed out that at this time, the Communists actually were not this far North.

34 Much was made of the fact that author Xiao Hong and adapter/director Tian Qinxin were both young women. “Across a 60-year time tunnel, two women of similar age have something in common in their hearts” (“Press Release,” 1999). Xiao Hong wrote the novel at 24 and died at the age of 31; Tian Qinxin was 31 when she wrote and directed the play.

35 *Huaju* productions usually rehearse for 4-5 weeks and use the first run for polishing.

36 *Meihua* ("Plum Blossom") award-winning actor Han Tongsheng played the leading role, Zhao San; TV/film star Li Lin (who had won the Golden Eagle Award / jinyingjiang in her first *huaju* role after graduating from the Film Academy) played the village girl Jin Zhi; Ni Dahong played peasant Er Liban; Ren Chengwei played his son Cheng Ye; Wang Po, Zhao San’s wife, was played by Zhao Juanjuan. All were CNET actors very familiar to audiences. Han Tongsheng had played leading roles in *Death Without Burial, A Doll’s House, Intentional Injury,* and *Vengeance on Zidu;* Ni Dahong had played Helmer in *A Doll’s House;* Ren Chengwei had appeared in *Si Fan* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist.* “Outside” artists included the music composer Jiang Jinghong, from the *Xiqu* Department at the National Music Academy (*Zhongguo yinyue xueyuan*). Jiang Jinghong is also a jazz musician and plays keyboards with the Tianchang Music Band (*Tianchang yuedui*). He had worked with Tian Qinxin
previously on Cutting the Wrists. Jiang Lijun, a free-lancer who writes rock’n roll songs, wrote the lyrics for “Sheng lao bing si” (“life, aging, disease, and death”).

37 Actually there is a huge rift between Chinese urban and rural dwellers. Beijingers call country people tubaozi (country bumpkin; lit. “earth dumpling”), a derogatory term.

38 Reacting to the intense body movement, Han, a seemingly strong actor, fainted twice during rehearsal. As he explains, “I’ve most recently been in TV plays and films, so I’m not so accustomed to this kind of intense movement” (Han, 8-4-99). All the actors suffered from scraped knees and elbows.

39 The Government outlawed the practice of Falungong, which is related to qigong, in July 1999. Life and Death first opened in June 1999. The theatre artists’ thinking of the performance in terms of qigong was a rather provocative image for them.

40 Actress Zhao Juanjuan was tall and majestic. Her Wang Po was elegant and strong. She and Zhao San created a wonderful sexual energy. Zhang Ying is shorter in stature than Zhao Juanjuan. Her Wang Po still had strength, but was more emotional and softer. For example, Zhao Juanjuan quickly and decisively swallowed the poison. Zhang Ying took more time with this; first she was afraid, then she became determined.


42 Xue Dianjie, previously introduced for his work on Death Without Burial, is one of the most famous set designers in China. After graduating from the art high-school affiliated with the Lu Xun Art Academy in NE China, Xue was chosen to study in East Germany for seven years (1956 – 1962). On his return to China, Xue was assigned to CNET. Xue served as Chairman of the Chinese Stage Art Design Association (Zhongguo wutai meishu xuehui) for many years. Although he retired in 1997, directors continue to ask to work with him because of his expertise in stage arts.

43 Relief sculptures also decorated each side of the proscenium. Chinese characters—one in negative cut (yinke), one in positive cut (yangke)—of the title Sheng Si Chang and the name of the original author Xiao Hong incorporated a documentary feel. There was also originally a third pit which was cut for technical reasons. As Xue explained, this pit was the “10,000 man pit” (wan ren keng). During the War, the Japanese killed and buried 10,000 people in a single grave (Xue, Experimental Theatre, 10-99: 62). Even without the third pit, the Chinese audience recognized the significance of the pits.

44 VP Yang described the “delicate difference” between daoxu and shanhui (“flashback”). In daoxu, the timespan between the present and memory might be quite long; the time difference may be much shorter in shanhui (11-19-99).

45 Japanese soldiers came to the village three times. Each time, a placard was hung announcing “Japanese soldiers come to the village.” This was so obvious that the placards seemed simplistic and unnecessary. The director was either following a traditional style or trying to add a documentary quality.

46 The actors used several variations for this line, sanitizing the language when Cultural Ministry or Department of Propaganda officials were in the audience.
47 The actors used a rural dialect. Examples are the use of ge ("brother," "husband"), die ("father"), and niang ("mother"); Zhao San and Er Liban call their wives liao po ("wife," "old lady"); Wang Po always calls her husband ta die ("her father") referring to Zhao San as the father of her daughter. She never calls Zhao San by name; she never calls him "husband." Ma Po calls her husband guaizi ("cripple") referring to his bowed legs. This reflects her ignorance, as she and Er Liban do not usually behave cruelly to each other.

48 Red lanterns are carried to celebrate a happy event, such as marriage, birth, the Chinese Spring Festival. For example, Wang Po wears a red jacket when she happily thinks the landlord is dead. Landlord Er Ye, still alive, does not understand: "Why is this woman wearing red?!," i.e., "What is she celebrating?!" (Sheng Si Chang, 1999).

49 For a more detailed description of Azalea Mountain, which concerns the peasants on Azalea Mountain joining the Communist revolution, see Mackerras 1975, 209-10.

50 The Japanese flag has a red sun on it. The Chinese peasants call it a "black sun" (hei rihou) equating it with evil.

51 The green corn plants were actually real. Songs from this period refer to "guerrillas in green tents," i.e., guerrilla soldiers sleeping in the cornfields. The vast expanse of green fields appears as in a well-known anti-Japanese song of the time. "Green tents" in the song refer to sorghum fields typical in northeastern China: "The leaves of gaoliang ("sorghum") are green again. The Japanese arrived on the 18th of September. Guerrilla soldiers heroically fight in green fields" (Xue, Experimental Theatre, 10-99: 62).

52 For example, flashbacks were used in Absolute Signal and Wild Man; Wild Man also had a non-linear, episodic structure. For information about the use of flashbacks and dream sequences during the late 1970s, see Mackerras (1981, 120-25).

53 For more detailed commentary on Mulberry Village and Second Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana, see Hu Xuehua, 2000; Ping Pan, 1999; Chen, Yang, Zhu, and Sun, trans., 1994; Fei and Sun, 1994; Xu Xiaozhong, Fei, trans., 1994; and Mackerras, 1990.

54 A comparison of two scenes is enlightening: in one of the most powerful vignettes in Mulberry Village, the villagers must sacrifice their only farm ox for a banquet at district commune headquarters. Reminiscent of the traditional Chinese lion folkdance, two actors performed as the old ox; the front actor wore an ox mask with folk art decoration. As the ox was killed, the actors, combining mime and stylized slow-motion movement, rolled on the stage shrieking in pain. Sorrowful folk music and red flashing lights theatrically highlighted the panic and horror of the villagers and the ox. Directly afterwards, the village chorus sang the theme song, creating estrangement to the brutality of the scene. An animal was similarly important in Life and Death, although presentation was different. Whereas the ox in Mulberry Village had form, albeit unrealistic, the goat in Life and Death exists only as a fantasy. Throughout Life and Death, peasant Er Liban seeks solace by confiding his misery to his only friend, his beloved pet goat. The goat’s bleating on audio-tape resounds through the theatre. While “Old Sleepy” is completely illusory, his presence becomes very real to the audience—as it is to Er Liban.
Later during the post-Tian'anmen purge after June 1989, *Mulberry Village* was criticized by Party hard-liners because of its negative depiction of life during the Cultural Revolution.

In making modifications, CNET leaders and the *Life and Death* creative team conferred with "literary and theatre experts" (Yang, 11-19-99). This actually follows traditional Chinese *dingxing* ("determine/set the form"), which was used for "model revolutionary plays." *Dingxing* is a process in which revisions are made based on the criticisms and suggestions of theatre experts in order to win Government approval. *Dingxing* is followed particularly for "main melody" plays, which involve Cultural Ministry funding.

Participants included Xiao Yun, Secretary-General of the Beijing Writers' Association (*Beijing zuojia xiehui*) and the daughter of writer Xiao Jun, Xiao Hong's lover; Qian Liqun, a famous scholar of modern Chinese literature at Beijing University; Chen Jiangong, a well-known author and Secretary of the Research Institute of the Chinese Writers' Association (*Zhongguo zuojia xiehui yanjiuyuan*); Wang Hui, Head Editor of the journal *Dushu* (*Reading*); Ji Hongzhen, Research Fellow at the China Writers' Association; and Wu Fuhui, Vice Head of the Chinese Modern Literature Museum (*Zhongguo xiandai wenxue guan*).

Li Dong's father, Li Fazeng, was Head of CNET's Acting Department. Li Dong was invited to join CNET in 1998; his previous *danwei* was the Beijing Film Studio (*Beijing dianying zhipianchang*). Li Dong had co-produced CNET's 1998 TV series *High Court* (*Dafating*). *Life and Death* was the first CNET production to have an "in-house producer," whose sole job was to take care of all logistics. During the 1990s, CNET had first worked with an "outside" producer; then Liu Tiegang had served as producer in addition to his job as Head of CNET's Performance Department. As VP Yang describes, it was inefficient with different departments responsible for different tasks. For *Life and Death*, one person was responsible for planning, publicity, management, box office, and selling tickets. "Everyone listened to producer Li Dong, because they knew he was assigned this job and carrying out the wishes of President Zhao" (11-19-99).

The "plan for sponsorship" included a 400,000 yuan sponsorship which gave: 1) The right to name the performance. The title "can take the form of ‘Night of X’"; 2) A banner announcing "X wishes success" outside the theatre; 3) The company name on the theatre's photo board, and "X wishes success" displayed onstage; 4) The company advertisement in the Playbill; 5) Posters displaying the company name; 6) 4 block bookings (*baochang*); 7) The theatre’s cooperation with public relations; 8) Invitation to the symposium and publicity in newspapers and TV; and 9) "Thanks to the company" when *Life and Death* is shown on CCTV. A 200,000 yuan sponsorship gave: 1) 2 block bookings; 2) The theatre’s cooperation with public relations; 3) Banners announcing "X wishes success"; 4) The company advertisement in the Playbill; 5) "Thanks to the company" in the poster; and 6) "Thanks to the company" when *Life and Death* is shown on CCTV. 100,000 yuan sponsorship offered the same as 200,000 less 1 block booking and the CCTV commercial ("50th Anniversary Materials," *Life and Death*, 1999).

Two quite different CNET productions were running at the same time: *Rhino in Love*, at the Youth Art Theatre's Little Theatre, and *Life and Death* at the larger China Children's Art Theatre.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

1 As mentioned previously, in 1979 right after the Cultural Revolution, Sha Yexin’s play If I Were Real (modeled after Gogol's The Inspector General), which exposed the corruption of Communist Party officials, was banned. Illustrating how times have changed, on April 13, 2000, Gogol’s The Inspector General opened at the China Youth Art Theatre, directed by Chen Yuye. One artist described: “This play has significance today, satirizing the flaws in modern society and reflecting the country’s efforts to fight corruption” ("Resurgent Theatre Looks at Future," 8-8-01).

2 Although not always, for example, video artist Wu Wenguang was an actor in Lin’s Three Sisters – Waiting for Godot. Competing with TV and film for actors, Lin sometimes found it necessary to recruit non-actors.

3 I have previously described the difficulties surrounding a foreign organization providing money directly to an individual enterprise rather than a government-sanctioned organization. While Mou Sen had an agent in Hong Kong, the channel of funding distribution is unclear. Although Mou Sen had little opportunity to stage his plays in China, he was able to raise enough foreign funding to present Confiding (Qingshu) in 1997 in the large theatre at Chang’an (Chang’an daxiyuan). Meng explained that Mou Sen had wanted to serve as chief director and assemble writers and directors to create ten plays “so they would have an impact on society and people would pay attention.” Mou Sen was not able to do this. “In the end, he inevitably failed” (Meng, Xie Xizhang 2000, 347-355).

4 At the end of the decade, I received disturbing news: Mou Sen had disappeared. Several theatre artists confided that Mou “had mental problems.” Although arrest in China for subversive activity is often explained as “suffering from mental problems,” I have not been able to corroborate this report.

5 Western China analysts describe Beijing as a “seeming oasis of openness and reform” as the Country embraces Capitalism. But “underneath the surface lurks the omnipresent and omnipotent Communist Party.” They describe it being ever easier to overlook the existence of another China: “the secrecy-prone Communist Party-dominated world of political and social controls, over-reactions to perceived threats to Party power and mass internal campaigns.” The Party is modernizing, training its officials in market economics and encouraging a more cosmopolitan sensibility, but “what has not changed is that it is still the most powerful force in China today.” Its “tentacles reach everywhere--into offices, local and foreign enterprises, and every citizen's life.” Party Committees generally don’t make the day-to-day decisions, but they do make the major decisions. Their core functions are to handle political education, budgets, and personnel matters, portfolios the Party sees as “dangerous in anyone else’s hands” (Lawrence and Murphy, 12-13-01).

6 The Shanghai People’s Art Theatre and Shanghai Youth Art Theatre were merged earlier (in 1995) to form the Shanghai Huaju Art Center (Shanghai huaju yishu zhongxin). In December 2001, a Film Art Center opened as part of the new China National Huaju Theatre in Beijing. Interim President Zhao Youliang planned to build the China National Huaju Theatre into a “world first-class” theatre. All staff would be employed under a contract system and paid according to work performance. “Theatre
creation, personnel management, and stage performance would be market-oriented” (Zhao in People’s Daily, 12-27-01). Artists from China Youth Art Theatre are now using CNET’s administrative offices, and CNET’s Little Theatre is being used as a rehearsal hall (the original intention for this space). A new theatre at Dongdan Plaza will open soon (Wu Xiaojiang, 3-21-02).

7 This was a reversal of earlier policy, where PLA members reportedly had been forced to sell their shares in private enterprises (Hajari, 8-3-98, 27; and Johnson, 7-30-98, 1). Jiang Zemin had been developing his pivotal “3 Represents” (Sange daibiao) theory, the centerpiece of his “July 1, 2001” speech for the CCP’s 80th Anniversary, since the late 1990s, attempting to recast the image of the Party to “represent the development needs of advanced productive forces in China, ... the forward direction of advanced culture in China, ... and the fundamental interests of the broadest masses of people in China” (Jiang, 7-1-01)—i.e., to retain power, the CCP must try to represent all that is advanced, including the growing number of Chinese engaged in the non-public sector economy (entrepreneurs, business owners, and the “nouveau-riche”) not just “workers, soldiers, and peasants.” “Hard-liners” see this as a betrayal of classic Marxist and Mao doctrine about class struggle and the supremacy of the proletariat. For more information, see Cheng, “Webfiles: The Ideology of 21st Century China?,” 11-28-01; Fewsmith, “Rethinking the Role of the CCP: Explicating Jiang Zemin’s Party Anniversary Speech,” 12-01; Lam, “Jiang Prepares for Political Showdown,” 5-14-02; Lin Shi-Chin, “China: The Transformation of the Party,” Spring 2002; Liu, “China Is Not Red Anymore,” 3-21-02; Marquand, “China’s Orderly Shift in Leaders is Getting Messy,” 7-17-02; and Oster, “Jiang’s Biggest Gamble,” 10-19-01.

8 See Lam, “Jiang Prepares For Political Showdown,” 5-14-02; “Jiang Struggles With ‘Conspirators,’” 7-29-02; and “Jiang’s Staying Power Threatens Reform,” 7-30-02; and Marquand, “China’s Orderly Shift in Leaders is Getting Messy,” 7-17-02.
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Si Fan diyiban
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si mian guan zhongde xiao juchang
Si wu zang shen zhi di
Si Yan
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siduqiang
sige jianchi
siheyuan
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Song Yongyi
su
Sun Jiazheng
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ta die
ta tingbudong
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Tang
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tansuo xiju
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Tao Hong
Taohua Shan
Tian Chengren
Tian Han
Tian Qinxin
tian tian gen wo lian, shijian wo bu xian
tian tian gen wo tian, shijian wo you xian
Tian wai tian kaoya dian
Tian'anmen guangchang
Tianchang yuedui
Tianjin
Tiantan
tiaojin tiaochu
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tie fan wan
tie shu kaihua
Tielu wengong tuan huaju tuan
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xu (intangible)
Xu (surname)
Xu Banmei
Xu Wei
Xu Xiaofeng
Xu Xiaozhong
xuanchuanbu
Xue Dianjie
xueyuanshi xiju
xuncha

Y
ya
yan
yan hui
Yan Long
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yanchu fa
yanchu fuzhu jintie
yanchu gongsi
yanchu jihua
yanchu jintie
yanchu shang
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yanchu zhenrong
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yang
Yang Qian
Yang Ting
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Ye Ren
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Yi pu er zhu
Yi wu suoyou: xin changzheng lushang de yaogun
Yige Sizhe Dui Shengzhe de Fangwen
Yige wuzhengfu zhuyizhe de yiwei siwang
Yiheyuan
yin
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Yinzi: shuzhai shenghuo
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Zheng Da Ma
Zheng Zheng
Zheng Zhenyao
zhengfu gongzuoren
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Zhong ai yi sheng hun sha ying lou
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主旋律
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主流
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总导演
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zongfu zeren
zonghe xing
Zongzheng huaju tuan
Zongzhengzhibu huaju tuan
zouxue
zouzipai
zui e zhicheng
Zui qianglie kangyi Meiguo weishoude
bei yue hongzha wo zhu nan shiguan
Zuihou yige changzhang
Zuihou yige gongren
zuo tanhui
Zuomeng
zuzhi pipan

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II. Chinese language sources;
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