NEGOTIATIONS OF CULTURAL AESTHETICS IN THE “REFORMS” OF MEI LANFANG AND THE “MEI PARTY” MEMBERS TO JINGJU IN CHINA’S EARLY REPUBLICAN ERA (1912-1937)

by Guanda Wu

China’s early Republican stage witnessed the rise of Mei Lanfang and his “reformed” jingju plays. Mei’s successful career in the early Republican era not only helped him to enjoy great popularity on the domestic stage, but also assisted traditional Chinese theatre in gaining a valuable confirmation from the West. Without a full awareness of the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese theatrical aesthetics, the “Mei Party” intellectuals allowed themselves to be appropriated by Western colonial aesthetics and the Western gaze. Their approach applied Western drama’s aesthetic principle to “reform” traditional jingju performance within China, while they plunged into a system of Orientalization that fit Western reception of traditional Asian art. In both cases, the traditional Chinese art’s enduring cultural identity was threatened by the Western cultural dominancy in a postcolonial context.
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Guanda Wu

Miami University

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Advisor ___________________________

(Dr. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong)

Reader ___________________________

(Dr. Andrew Gibb)

Reader ___________________________

(Dr. Paul K. Jackson, Jr.)

Reader ___________________________

(Dr. Liang Shi)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Historical Scenario and Research Methodologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Formation of Xiqu Theory of the “Mei Party” Members as Represented by Qi Rushan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei Lanfang, a New-style Male-Dan on China’s Republican Stage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An “Exotic Dance”: Mei Lanfang’s Presence in New York City</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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PREFACE

For more than seventy years after 1930, in the Western world, the name of traditional Chinese theatre has been connected with that of Mei Langfang (1894-1961), a renowned Chinese male-dan (a male actor who specialized in performing the female role on Chinese stage). The artistic cooperation between Mei Lanfang and a group of Mei’s intellectual and financial endorsers, which was later termed the “Mei Party”, promoted one of the most influential “reforms” in China’s early Republican era. Represented by Qi Rushan (1875-1962) and Feng Gengguang (1882-1966), two Western/Japanese-educated bourgeoisie intellectuals, the “Mei Party” members’ participation in theatre creation promoted Mei Lanfang from a lesser-known Beijing-based actor to the most internationally recognized star of Chinese jingju. For jingju (lit. theatre of capital), a Beijing-based theatrical genre of xiqu (traditional/classic Chinese theatre), the commercial success of Mei Lanfang in the early-Republican era accelerated its transition from a regional artistic form to a nationally prominent theatrical genre.

From the early 20th century to present, Mei Lanfang and his plays often attracted the attention of theatre historians and critics from the nation to the world. After the 1980s, theatre scholars (I would argue especially in the Western world) started to use critical approaches to examine the works of Mei Langfang and the “Mei Party” members from several aspects: Mei Lanfang’s biographical studies; Mei’s “reforms” to jingju’s conventions through perspectives such as theatre aesthetics and cultural studies; literary criticism of Mei’s play texts; comparative theatre studies among Mei Lanfang, Western dramatists, and other Asian performers; and Mei’s international communications (such as Mei’s influence on Brecht and Eisenstein, Stanislavsky’s influence on Mei, and so on).

1. The Scholarly Research in People’s Republic of China

Mei Lanfang studies in the early-People’s Republican era (1949-1976) constructed Mei as a model Maoist. Theatre scholars such as Huang Zoulin often labeled Mei Lanfang as a “People’s artist” and attempted to identify the Realistic attributes in Mei Lanfang’s jingju art (18). Huang considered Mei’s following of Stanislavsky’s approach was an ideal direction for
theatre reform. (18) In the Post-Mao era, Mei Lanfang studies in Chinese mainland gradually tore down such stereotypical research modes. The voices and aspects of Mei Lanfang studies in academia appeared diversified. However, few scholars attempted to examine Mei’s work through a critical perspective; even fewer works analyzed the formation of Qi’s aesthetic thought and Mei’s theatre art referring to China’s colonial context. William (Huizhu) Sun attempted to establish comparative studies in theatre aesthetics among Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Mei Lanfang, in order to identify the aesthetic differences and connections among the three dramatists and further attempt to clarify the fundamental aesthetic differences among the three theatrical forms. However, Sun’s argument suffers two crucial problems. First, his argument oversimplifies their theatrical ideals. In Sun’s 1982 article “Aesthetics of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Mei Lanfang,” he claims that the three theatrical ideals revealed by the great theatrical systems of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Mei Lanfang is the triumvirate of the real (zhen), the good (shan), and the beautiful (mei). (170) The questions are: can the word “beauty” simply summarize aesthetic pursuits of Chinese jingju? How is Sun’s term “beauty (mei)” different from the self-Orientalizing term “visual beautification (meishuhua)” used by Qi Rushan when Qi concluded the classic Chinese theatre’s artistic pursuit? Sun’s work, though is crucial for noticing the uniqueness of classical Chinese theatre, would be more valuable, if referring to the colonial influence on the formation of his “reformed” jingju art. Among the scholarships in Mei Lanfang studies, some scholars such as Wu Xiaoru have examined the reforms to jingju in the past century through a critical perspective. Wu’s article “A Discussion on Yibu Er Buhuanxing” points out that the negative consequences of jingju’s “reforms” in the past century. He argued “the wane of jingju results from a transplantation of many contents and forms which are against the principle of traditional Chinese art into jingju. The deed, under the slogans such as ‘reform’, ‘innovation’, or ‘catching up with the pace of the world’s trend’, actually undermines the characteristics of jingju” (23).

1 “Yibu Bu Huan Xing” (literally, moving steps but not change the form) was a proposal for reforming traditional Chinese theatre released by Mei Lanfang in the end of 1949 when he was interviewed by a journalist of Jinde Ribao (Progression Daily) in Tianjin. The proposal was considered as a very conservative one immediately causing a nationwide dispute. Soon, Mei publicly admitted his oversight and claimed the reforms to xiqu should not only move steps but also change the original form in order to follow the mainstream opinion advocated by the State Ministry of Culture in the spring of 1950.
Although Wu Xiaoru insightfully pinpoints the negative facet of the radical reforms to the traditional theatrical form, ironically, he treats Mei Lanfang’s reformed jingju as a final paradigm which he argues further reforms should follow (23). Other scholarship, such as Liang Yan’s study of Qi Rushan’s theatrical thoughts and Xu Chengbei’s work on Mei Lanfang’s jingju art and 20th century Chinese culture, trace both Qi and Mei’s biographical facts, however, they still overlook several crucial questions I asked before such as: to what extent Mei Lanfang’s art maintain the artistic pursuit of the traditional Chinese theatre? What were the fundamental aesthetic differences between traditional Chinese theatre and Western realistic ones?

2. Mei Lanfang Studies in English-Speaking World

The systematic study on Mei Lanfang’s jingju art in the English-speaking world started from the past generation scholars in Asian (intercultural) theatre such as Adolphe Clarence Scott and Tong Te-gong. The scholarly works created in the first wave of Mei Lanfang studies primarily focus on introducing this Chinese actor’s legendary life to English-language readers and do not pay any emphasis of identifying the aesthetic shift of jingju occurs in the socio-economic and cultural transformation in the 20th century China. The works sometimes reveal the authors’ essentialized understanding about Asian theatre and biased political viewpoints during the time of the Cold War (e.g., Tong fiercely attacked that Mei chose to maintain his career in mainland China after the Communist revolution in his work). The examples of such scholarship are Tong Te-Kong’s “Brief Biography of Mei Lanfang” published in 1952 and A.C. Scott’s book The Leader of Pear Garden emerged in 1959.

Through the 1980s to 1990s, historians such as Georges Banu and Mark Cosdon also focus on this Chinese artist. Their works primarily focus on Mei’s tours to the US and USSR. Heavily relying on Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang’s memoirs, Banu’s article “Mei Lanfang: A Case Against and a Model for Occidental Stage” (originally written in French in the early 1980s, translated into English in 1986) still does not deconstruct the stereotypical understanding about Mei Lanfang and jingju created by the past scholar in Asian theatre studies. He placed Mei Lanfang’s jingju performance into a position which is completely opposite to the European
theatre and therefore overlooked the deep influence of Western theatre on Mei Lanfang’s “reformed” jingju. Mark Cosdon’s 1995 article on Mei’s US tour is valuable but also problematic. Cosdon did a great job in collecting the reviews of American critics about Mei’s performances in New York city, however, the conclusion he draws suggests that Mei’s success resulted from the “authenticity” of Chinese theatre provided by Mei’s performance (186). Unfortunately, the author overlooks the significant role of Western colonial power which played in Mei’s US tour. This Western dominant power can be revealed by Mei and Qi’s strong inclination to satisfy the tastes of American audience throughout their touring performances.

The most valuable academic achievements on Mei Lanfang studies in English-speaking world emerged since the late-1990s. Scholars such as Tian Min, Joshua Goldstein, Rao Nancy Yunhwa, and Suk-Young Kim started to use critical approaches to interpret Mei Lanfang and his jingju performance. Tian Min’s critiques on Brecht’s (mis)interpretation to Mei Lanfang’s performance and Rao Nancy Yunhwa’s work on Mei Lanfang’s tour to US in 1930 discuss how the limitation of Western reception restricted the Western audience members from gaining an accurate understanding on Chinese performance. By examining the transformation of Mei’s photographic presentation throughout Mei’s lifetime, Suk-Young Kim discussed how (trans)nationalism and the male-dan’s gender identity were represented in photographic media (“ever-transforming mode”) and how the print capitalism emerged in China’s early-Republican era shifted the way of Chinese people consuming theatre art. The three authors’ works examined the historical shift on Chinese stages by referring to the rise of Western colonial power and capitalism in the early-Republican China. They tear down the past stereotype of Mei Lanfang studies which appears to treat Mei Lanfang simply as a successor of the traditional art.

Joshua Goldstein attained a recent achievement of Mei Lanfang studies in his book, *Drama Kings, players and publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937*. Goldstein reviewed the jingju’s shifts in terms of its genres, actors, aesthetic approaches, consumption, composition of audience, and company organization from late-Qing to the start of the second Sino-Japanese War. Goldstein placed jingju in the grand cultural landscape in the late-Qing and
the early Republican era to trace *jingju*’s transformation from a Beijing-based regional theatre to a national drama. Unlike other scholars’ works, he pointed to the hybrid nature in Mei Lanfang’s reformed *jingju*, especially the influence of “May Fourth”\(^2\) Realism. By examining Qi Rushan’s theory of national drama, he uncovers a subtle but crucial shift in priorities from the musical to the visual. Under the direction of Qi’s thought, Mei’s performance privileged the visual appearance over the aural presentation.

In the review of the past works on Mei Lanfang studies, I do see a great merit of the past scholar’s works, especially the collection of Mei’s biographical facts, Joshua Goldstein’s thorough examination of Realistic drama’s influence on Mei Lanfang’s reformed *jingju*, and a critical analysis of the influence of Western reception on presentation of Mei’s performance such as Rao Nancy Yunhwa’s work. However, in the meantime, rather than a perspective used by many general theatre historians, I feel an urgent need to examine Mei Lanfang’s artistic reformation through the perspective of theatre aesthetics. I urge myself to critically consider several fundamental issues which past scholars have not yet fully clarified: what was the aesthetic shift on Chinese *jingju* stage in the early-Republican era? What are the fundamental aesthetic differences between Chinese *jingju* and Western Realistic drama? Did the aesthetic approach of Western Realistic drama play a key role in shaping Mei’s “reformed” plays on the internal aesthetic structure? Did the gaze of both Westerners and Chinese Republican citizens promoted the construction of the “Fictions of the Feminine” on Chinese stage? And did Mei’s invitation to the gaze of Chinese Republican citizens reveal a fierce competition with Western-style/experimental dramas and a rise of profit-based capitalistic theatre market?

To end with the preface, I have to admit that the limitation of one source I used in this

\(^2\) The term “May Fourth” refers to China’s “May Fourth Movement” which was anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement. It started with demonstrations by college students in Beijing on May 4\(^{th}\), 1919, who were protesting the weak response of the Chinese government to the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty was believed to sacrifice China’s sovereignty in the Shandong province. In a broader sense, the term “May Fourth Movement” also refers to the period from 1915 to the early 1920s, which is also called the “New Culture Movement” or “May Fourth-New Culture Movement”. In the realm of culture, the movement radically questioned Chinese culture and value (which we now define as “traditional”) and advocated importing modern science and bourgeoisie democracy from the West in order to save the declining country.
thesis. My research in the first two sections of the chapter three heavily relies on Mei’s autobiography *Forty-Year Life on Stage* which was recorded by Xu Jichuan from the June of 1950 to the end of 1951. Although many historians including me believe the book provides a great deal of first-hand sources about Mei’s early life, it also should note that the revolutionary passion in the mind of this devout Maoist may shape his own reception about what happened in his early life.

In this thesis, I believe the perspective of theatre aesthetics would help us to understand how Mei Lanfang’s artistic “reform” to *jingju* on the internal level reveals an intention to imitate the Western Realistic drama (“mimicry”) and how Mei’s emphasis on the visual presentation attract the Western gaze but Orientalized Chinese theatre in a colonial context. These issues for the author reveal a higher degree of colonialization that occurred in the post-colonial China.
Chapter One:
Introduction to the Historical Scenario and Research Methodologies

1.1 Traditional Art in the Modern Era: Chinese Jingju, Mei Lanfang, and the “Mei Party” Members

In order to discuss what was at risk in Mei Lanfang’s artistic “reform” of jingju, I must first introduce xiqu’s artistic form in the pre-Republican era, the aesthetic system of traditional Chinese theatre, and the fundamental aesthetic differences between Western and Chinese theatre. After introducing traditional Chinese theatrical form, I will also describe China’s cultural landscape in the early-Republican era, Mei Lanfang, and his intellectual endorsers.

Today, theatre scholars use the term xiqu (literarily, “play/game-song”) to refer to traditional/classic theatrical Chinese form. However, it should be noted that the references of the term are extremely broad and ambiguous. The single term “xi” does not only refer to theatre art but designated “plays, games and acrobatics” in a broad sense. Therefore, the Chinese concept “xiqu” perhaps doesn’t precisely correspond with a “theatre” art in the Western sense. It is an ambiguous term referring to a kind of art which is constituted by song-based plays, games, and acrobatics. The reference of xiqu today broadly encompasses more than three hundred regional artistic forms throughout China. Although the number of regional forms is arguable, there is no doubt that xiqu is a well-diversified artistic form and enjoys great popularity throughout China. A great number of xiqu forms include genres such as kunqu which emerged early in around the late-14th century. While a number of xiqu forms were actually relatively new members to the large family of xiqu. Some were created in China’s Republican era (1912-1949), even after the founding of PRC in 1949, such as longjiangju (literarily, “theatre of the dragon river”). It should be noted that most xiqu genres are heavily region-based artistic forms. Only a few of them such as jingju and kunqu experienced a nationalized process which made the languages they use onstage accessible to audience members living in a geographically wider area.

While the origins of xiqu can be traced to a hundred years before the common of event, its form evolved from ancient Chinese culture through a couple of centuries to reach maturity. The first developed xiqu form, nanxi (literarily, “southern drama”) emerged in the early-12th century.
in southeastern China. Soon another form which was termed *zaju* (literally, “various plays”) appeared in northern China in around the 13th century. Although the two forms did express a certain differences in terms of textual structure and performance convention, both of them presented some common artistic characteristics: the performances is highly presentational and “essentially musical and choreographic in its basic structure” (Brandon and Banham 26); “Categorized archetypal character roles predominate, each having its particular formalized speech and movement together” (Brandon and Banham 26). Their textual/performance structure relied upon a strictly tonal-rhythmic format, which was strongly influenced by “the dual relationship between musical sound and the spoken word arising from the homonymic nature of the Chinese language” (Brandon and Banham 26). Metrical pattern and rhyme schemes were given priority by Chinese dramatists. The text creation process was clearly different from the Western mean of writing a drama. The playwrights did not “set words to music,” while they only sought appropriate words to “match the auditory permutations of lines and stanzas” (Brandon and Banham 26).

The earliest developed *xiqu* forms set up some fundamental artistic characteristics which are shared by the later genres of *xiqu*: the performance is fairly presentational; characters are categorized into similar “role type” (*hangdang*) that characters share according to gender, personality, profession, and age; the artistic form shows a strong emphasis of the artistic expression through the aural dimension. The pursuit of rhythm is so significant for this artistic form, which strictly shaped the performance structure and creation of text.

The “role type” system considerably contributed to the presentational performance of Chinese *xiqu*. Although various *xiqu* forms often have differences of role type assignments, the four basic role types shared by most *xiqu* genres are: “sheng” (or “mo” in *zaju*, standard male characters), *dan* (female characters), *jing* (painted-face male characters), and *chou* (who are usually male clowns). Beneath these four basic role types, there are always some subgenres which are assigned according to difference of age, personality, profession, and performance technique. For instance, there are five major subgenres of “*dan*” roles in *jingju*: older *dan*, *qingyi* (lit. “blue cloth”. A role type portrays young or mid-aged women, often of high intrinsic dignity and features by singing skill), *huadan* (“flower” *dan*. A role type portrays vivacious young women and features by acting skill), martial *dan*, and *huashan* (a role type portrays young or mid-aged women and combines performing skills of *qingyi* and *huadan*). Most *xiqu* performers
are trained to master the performing skills of only one particular subgenre of role type. As xiqu scholar Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak points out, the existence of role type system in xiqu “does not imply that actors perform stereotypes; however […] Role type specialization produces patterns (guılı) of performance technique rather than dramatic characters with stereotyped performances” (Wichmann, Listening to Theatre 7). On the level of aesthetics, the existence of a role type system reveals that Chinese xiqu is not interested in portraying distinct personalities as we often see in a Western drama but in making a particular effort to present conventionalized performance techniques. For xiqu’s audience, the artistic connotation conveyed by an actor’s vocal and physical performances perhaps is more important than the literary grace as often valued in a Western drama, which is revealed by intensive dramatic conflicts, complicated human nature, and integrated dramatic structure.

When zaju was declining and finally extinct by 16th century, various local xiqu forms appeared and gradually a genre termed kunqu (literarily, “the song from the city kunshan”) predominated Chinese stage from the 16th to the mid-18th century. Kunqu basically inherited the textual/performance structure of nanxi but it gradually was refined by intellectual elites as an “elegant art.” “The language of the libretti was classical, with many unexplained literary allusions” (Brandon and Banham 30). The music rhythm and stage movement tended to be extremely slow in order to satisfy the intellectual elites’ aesthetic predilection. Because its language and performance style isolated itself from the masses, in the fierce competition of xiqu genres in Beijing in the early-19th century, kunqu, as a theatre of the educated, gradually lost its dominancy to other xiqu genres which were regarded by intellectuals as “huabu” (literally, “dramas of chaos”) in a contrast to kunqu, “an elegant one”.

It should be noted that, for an originally regionalized theatrical form in ancient China, gaining popularity is always connected with process of nationalization. This is the exact case occurred in jingju. In 1790, the Four Great Anhui Theatre Companies (sida huiban) introduced pihuang theatre to Beijing audience in order to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Emperor Qianlong. The name “pihuang” which refers to this new genre of theatre actually combines two popular music styles, xipi and erhuang, both were from the geographically central regions of China. In the competition with other theatrical forms in Beijing, pihuang artists greatly promoted the theatre and formed its distinct style and characteristics of performance by the mid-19th century. When pihuang companies from Beijing travelled to Shanghai in the late-19th century,
the audiences in Shanghai found the pihuang performances from Beijing were considerably different from the pihuang theatres from of geographically central provinces such as Anhui and then they started to use the name “jingju” or “jingxi” (literarily, “capital drama/theatre”) to refer to the distinct pihuang performances from Beijing. It represents that one new genre of theatre – “jingju”³ was formally recognized by Chinese audience (This xiqu genre is also often recognized as “Beijing/Peking opera” in the English-speaking world). By the late-19th century, jingju spread the country and gained great popularity in several China’s most urban cities, such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Hankou, and became one of the most prominent national forms of xiqu.

The early decades of 20th century of China which encompasses the late-Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and the beginning of Republican era might be considered the most conflicted time in the history of xiqu. When the country confronted tremendous socio-economic change, the cultural collision between the West and the East deeply shaped Chinese intellectual’s reception of traditional Chinese culture. The reception of traditional Chinese theatre, which was primarily represented by jingju, emerged in a clear contradiction among Chinese people. On one hand, for jingju’s audience members, jingju seemed to be in its heyday. It enjoyed great popularity by the Royal family and countless low-status urban citizens. Numerous greatest actors, such as Tang Xinpei and Yang Xiaolou, emerged during this period and promoted its performing techniques to achieve unprecedented prosperity as well. However, on the other hand, in the accounts of many Chinese intellectuals who thought seeing xiqu was disgrace, this most popular theatre was considered as a “cancer” of feudalistic culture, and therefore it should be reformed.

Chinese intellectuals had not ever expressed such strong discontent with traditional Chinese theatre until the 1910s. Chen Duxiu established Youth Magazine (which name was changed to New Youth after the second issue) in 1915. His magazine called for a radical cultural movement against Confucian culture and a reconstruction of Chinese literary forms. Through Ibsen’s realistic plays which were intensively introduced by New Youth in 1918, Western drama and its revolutionary thoughts deeply influenced the minds of Chinese intellectuals. Therefore,

³ In Taiwan, the same theatrical form is referred to as “guoju” (national drama), “pingju”/“pingxi” (literarily, “Beiping theatre/drama”), because Taiwan’s KMT (Kuomintang, literarily Nationalist Party) government refuses to recognize Beijing as the capital of China. Beiping was the name of Beijing from 1928 to 1949.
they consciously paid attention to the “reform” of their own theatre art. Their attack of jingju and its artists resulted from the comparison among jingju, the Western-style spoken drama (which imported to China in 1907), and the past recognized Chinese theatre kunqu. Based upon the comparison, the well-educated elites attacked jingju plays and performances for several reasons: Jingju artists were poorly educated; the lyrics of jingju plays were often thought of as lacking literary grace, especially in the case that the artists pursued rhythms and tones of sentences and words at expenses of grammar and logic; the performance creation process of jingju seemed too “arbitrary” and improvised without a serious and systematic organization, especially compared to a Western rehearsal process; the themes of jingju plays were believed to be less creative, the great majority of them was restricted in very limited well-known folklores, historical stories, and classic literary texts. Without a serious consideration of the fundamental aesthetic differences among these genres, Chinese intellectuals’ attack of jingju unconsciously revealed that they regarded Western Realistic drama and the “elegant” Chinese drama as models. Their standpoints revealed that they regarded literary grace and thematic connotation over performance virtuosity, Western director-centered creation system over Chinese actor-centered one, and the pursuit for dramatic structure over an emphasis of vocal rhythm.

In fact, Chinese intellectual elites did not only attack the art itself. Throughout the history of xiqu, the life style of theatre artists often became intellectual’s targets of criticism as well. Xiqu actors in China historically remained a low social status and theatre was considered as a mean profession (jianye). Before 1911 when China’s Republic revolution occurred, theatre was a family-based profession. People who were born in family of theatre were strictly prohibited from working in other professions, and it was also a disgrace for an average citizen to join theatre creation and performance. Actresses were not allowed to perform on Chinese stage from the early Qing period to the founding of the Republic of China, because the Manchu rulers regarded the females on stage as immoral (It should be noted the Manchu emperors’ prohibition might be less effective in some rural regions). Instead, male actors replaced their female counterparts to portray female characters on Chinese stage. Chinese audiences refer to these male actors who
specialize in performing female role types “male-dan” in order to distinguish actresses who play female characters. Historically, the emergence of “male-dan” intended to end xiqu performer’s connection with prostitution. However, in the late-Qing period, gaining assistance from financial supporters often was a shortcut for a young male-dan actor to get fame on jingju stage. The partnership between male-dan actors and their supporters often bore sexual overtones. Therefore, “tangzi”, the place where male-dan actors were trained, often became institutions where allowed young male actors to engage in prostitution.

Therefore, the voices advocating reform for traditional Chinese theatre appeared at the intersection between two centuries and finally highlighted the transition to China’s early Republican era. Early in the very beginning of 20th century, this reforming trend could be firstly seen in Wang Xiaonong and Feng Zihe’s new jingju production on Shanghai’s stage. Wang was a previously Manchu official who dropped his official post due to a discontent with the decline of the country (The imperial China lost its political and cultural dominancy in East Asia). Wang’s new-style plays emphasized refining jingju’s literary text and publicizing patriotism in order to lead the masses. While, Feng’s plays such as Rose Flower (or the Flower of Rose Village) revealed a humanist concern for actors’ low social status. Starting from the mid-1910s, Ouyang Yuqian joined jingju reform in Shanghai. The pioneer artist of huaju (literally, “spoken drama”, the Chinese name of the western style drama) adapted some well-known Chinese literary stories, such as tales of A Dream of Red Mansions, in order to import the thought of the Western Romanticism to the Chinese stage. However, Wang’s artistic effort was ended by his early death in 1918, while Ouyang's jingju work suspended by the shift of his personal interest to huaju. During the early three decades of 20th century, perhaps the most influential reform on jingju stage was contributed by Mei Lanfang and his “Mei Party” members.

Mei Lanfang was born in Beijing and raised in a family of jingju artists who originally were from the region of Taizhou in Jiangsu province. His grandfather Mei Qiaoling was one of the most successful male-dan actor in the period of Tong-Guang (around 1861-1908). His uncle, Mei Yutian, a renowned jingju musician, adopted Lanfang after the early death of Lanfang’s
father. Mei Lanfang started learning Peking Opera at eight years of age, however, he wasn’t favored by his first tutor, Zhu Xiaoxia, the elder brother of a renowned young-sheng actor Zhu Suyun. The tutor complained Mei was a slow learner and thought his eyes were always too dull to perform. After being rejected by Master Zhu, Mei was introduced to his second tutor Wu Lingxian, a qingyi actor at his fifties. Wu started training Mei as a qingyi and systematically instructed him in traditional plays. Around 1906, Mei, as a fledging actor, started to regularly perform for college students at jingshi daxue tang (the precursor of Beijing University). There Mei gradually obtaining attention from college students such as Feng Gengguang and Wu Zhenxiu who were willing to “instruct” this young actor to perform some “anti-feudalistic” plays (Mei and Xu, Forty-year Life, 135). During the course of working with Mei Lanfang, a special group of intellectuals gradually formed surrounding Mei since 1906. This group, which was later termed the “Mei Party” by the public, consisted of a large portion of Western/Japanese-educated intellectuals such as Feng Gengguang and Qi Rushan who continuously offered Mei Lanfang financial support, artistic direction, and cultural education in his life. I will evaluate the start of the cooperation of Mei and the “Mei Party” members under the cultural circumstance from 1906 to the 1910s when these leading Chinese intellectuals lost their cultural confidence. Intellectuals such as Feng Gengguang and Qi Rushan held a considerably different attitude towards jingju from other “May Fourth” intellectuals who advocated abrogating the genre. By examining the artistic approach of the “Mei Party” members, it appears that their reception of theatre art and notion of an actor’s life shared a considerably agreement with the “May Fourth” intellectuals in many aspects: they advocated Western Realistic drama as an ideal mode to reform Chinese jingju, at least in Qi and Feng’s early lives; they disregarded xiqu’s enduring pursuit for vocal rhythm expressed by the performance virtuosity, instead they emphasized the construction of thematic connotation, personalities of characters, literary grace, and dramatic structure and conflict; they radically criticized male-dan actor’s connection with prostitution and attempted to “normalize” their private life according to Western sexual normativity.

Among a number of the “Mei Party” members, Feng Gengguang and Qi Rushan stood
out in Mei’s early artistic life. Feng Gengguang, a Japanese-educated Cantonese plutocrat served as high ranking military officer for both Qing and Republican administrations and was appointed as the chief executor of Bank of China twice in 1918 and 1926 respectively. Feng met the younger actor when Mei performed for the students and faculty at Jingshi Daxuetang (literally, “the great school of Beijing”, the precursor of Beijing University) at his age of twelve. Feng provided financially support to the fledging male-dan actor through Mei’s early life and educated him in the “modern” thought.

Qi Rushan was born and raised in a well-educated intellectual family. He was trained as translator of German and French at Jingshi Tongwen Guan (National Institute of Foreign language Studies) in his early life. It should be noted the institute which was found in 1862 during the “Westernization Movement” aimed at cultivating translators and diplomats for the country. Its founding was one of severed representative events in which the isolated China started to contact the rest of the world. While studying at Jingshi Tongwen Guan, Qi attended teahouse⁴ in Beijing regularly with free tickets from his classmate. After graduation from the institute, he went to Europe for further education and gradually became a businessman who traveled between China and Europe. According to Qi, the most intensive experience of seeing Western dramas was obtained in the years around 1911 when he was in Paris. As a manager of a Tofu company there, Qi was always able to get free or discounted ticket to all kinds of theatres which were willing to attract foreign audience members (Qi, “Recollections” 69). Based upon a strong interest and a relatively rich experience of appreciating the Western drama and opera in Europe, he went back to China after the republican revolution in 1911 and soon was appointed as a professor of drama at Peking University and Peking Women’s College of Arts and Science (even though it appears that Qi did not obtain any systematic training in either Chinese or Western theatre). Around 1911, Mei attended Qi’s public theatre lectures about Western drama and was strongly influenced by Qi’s criticism of traditional theatre. After first seeing Mei’s performance in 1912, Qi gradually became Mei’s artistic advisor and helped to adapt and create

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⁴ Teahouse was one of the major institutes for xiqu performance in late-Qing China.
most productions in Mei’s early life.

Under the direction of the “Mei Party,” Mei Lanfang, a male-dan actor of jingju, personally experienced several crucial transitions: from a specialist of qingyi to an artist who was competent for all kinds of dan-roles; from a new idol famous for his excellent singing skill; to a “more female than female man” recognized by expressive countenance and shenduan (attractive body gestures); from a performer of a formalistic art to a reformer consciously pursued Realism; and eventually from a low-class actor to an internationally recognized star. In the course of these events, the rise of Mei Lanfang greatly changed the reception and conventions of jingju. These endeavors not only obtained Chinese leading intellectuals’ recognition of traditional Chinese theatre art, but also fulfill their ambitions of reconstructing the national theatre form.

In this thesis, I’m going to briefly trace the artistic cooperation between Mei Lanfang and “Mei Party” members, especially Qi Rushan and Feng Gengguang, from around 1912 to the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. I would like to borrow the thoughts of Postcolonialism, traditional Chinese aesthetics, and theories of performativity to reexamine: how Chinese theatre’s enduring aesthetic identity was shaped by implementing a strategy that imitated Western ideas and aesthetics; how a self-Orientalizing thought was seen in Qi’s theory of national drama and fulfilled in Mei’s US tour; and how Mei’s gender performance both onstage and offstage helped him to construct a new-style xiqu actor (“a man more female than a woman” onstage and a “civil” and “modern” male-dan actor offstage). My examination focuses on several representative instances: “Mei Party” members’ instruction to Mei Lanfang on the plays such as Fen River Bay and Beauty Defies Tyranny, Western style drama’s influence on Mei during his Shanghai tour, and Mei’s cooperation with foreign audience members both in the domestic context and the overseas, especially in his US tour in 1930.

1.2 “Mimicry”, “Self-Orientalization”, and China’s Colonial Context

Due to the loss of the First Opium War during the 1840’s, China’s door was forced to
open for British colonizers. The country entered a new stage, a semi-colonial and semi-feudalistic (Banzhimin Banfengjian) period\(^5\) that suffered invasions from foreign imperialists, conflicts of regional fragmentation, severe economic upheaval, and numerous political revolts. Beginning in the 1840s, the intellectuals of the empire continually offered their proposals for saving the country. The proposals were implemented from the so-called “Westernization Movement” (yangwu yundong) in the 1860s which emphasized studying the Western technologies and constructing modern industries and moved toward a deep reform of political, economic, and educational systems in order to establish a Western style-constitutional monarchical regime. For Chinese people, an ironical but perhaps the only realistic strategy of survival was learning from the Westerners in order to resist attacks from the Westerners.

Chinese intellectuals radically questioned traditional Chinese culture in the 1910s, and they also applied their new ways of thinking to re-consider the destiny of traditional Chinese theatre. When the declining empire was finally overthrown in 1911 by bourgeois revolutionists who dreamed of establishing a Western-style republican regime, Chinese art’s cultural and aesthetic identity was soon attacked in the new socio-economic context. A group of new-style Chinese intellectuals\(^6\) (e.g. founders of Chinese Nationalist Party\(^7\) and Chinese “May Fourth” intellectual elite) rapidly dominated the discourse. Clearly different from traditional Chinese Confucian scholars, they advocated importing modern science and bourgeois democracy in order to deconstruct the dominant ideology of the feudalistic China. During the “May Fourth New Culture Movement” in the 1910s, the revolutionary thought spread into the realm of culture. However, I would argue that the nature of “May Fourth reforms” to traditional Chinese culture were different from Chinese strategies in realms of science, economy, and politics, which aimed

\(^5\) From the perspective of Chinese Marxists, the year of 1840 was one of the significant turning points in Chinese history. The self-isolated empire started to confront foreign colonizers as it gradually entered its modern time.

\(^6\) It should be noted that a great portion of those are Western/Japanese educated.

\(^7\) The Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, abbreviated KMT) was found by the Chinese bourgeois politicians Song Jiaoren and Sun Yat-sen in 1912 shortly after the China’s Republican Revolution (Xinhai Geming).
at learning from the Westerners in order to resist the colonial power and preserve the integrity of Chinese sovereignty and territory. Often without a serious consideration of some fundamental differences between the Western culture and the Chinese native one, “May Fourth” cultural elite’s desire of using the Western approach to “reform” traditional Chinese things led to a “mimicry” of colonial culture. The overall enduring traditional Chinese culture, language, and art were at risk of being deconstructed by the leading Chinese radical proposal of reformation. In the eyes of the “May Fourth” intellectuals, not only should traditional Chinese theatre be abrogated\(^8\) the language, traditional literature, and various forms of traditional art should be either “modernized” or “abandoned” in the new socio-economic context. I would argue that the proposal to “modernization” was to a considerable degree a Westernization process. Take “May Fourth” intellectual’s proposal of reforming the written language as example. The Western/Japanese educated intellectuals such as Liu Bannong, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi advocated using Latin letters to replace traditional Chinese characters (“hanzi ladinghua”, lit. Latinize Chinese characters) because they believed that Chinese hieroglyphic characters were less intelligent than Western written language and the proposal was an effective strategy to deconstruct traditional Chinese culture. Today, their radical proposal to “reform” Chinese written language has been partially fulfilled by the births of the simplified style of Chinese characters and the “pinyin” (lit. “spelling sound”) system (a romanization system for Chinese language). If the creations of the simplified style of Chinese characters and the “pinyin” system partially resulted from an imitation to Western/European-style language, I would argue that Mei’s reformed jingju plays on the internal level was produced as a result of an mimicry of the Western Realistic drama under the same turbulent cultural circumstances. However, more complicadly, Chinese intellectual’s compromise to Western colonial power in the process of reforming Mei Lanfang’s jingju performance was not only seen in on the internal level as they reformed this art according to a mimicry of Western dramaturgy, but also on the external level they reshaped it

\(^8\) “May Fourth” intellectuals’ proposal of abrogating traditional Chinese theatre appeared in 1918. Represented by Fu Sinian, Hushi, and Liu Bannong, Chinese intellectuals attacked traditional Chinese theatre because they believed that xiqu is a “cancer” of Chinese feudalistic culture and lacks of literary grace. Their essays can be seen in the no.5 of the volume V of the magazine New Youth.
through a visual dimension to appeal the Westerner’s gaze. The later strategy also recalls the postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s observation that people of the Third World may “self-Orientalize” themselves to fit the constructed image of the “Orient” by the Western dominant discourse. In his powerful scholarship Orientalism, the Palestinian-American scholar insightfully argue that the so-called “Orient” in the Western reception does not really correspond to reality but is an constructed idea which serves for Westerners to identify themselves from those “non-Westerners” (Said 4-6). Unfortunately, by compromising to the colonial power, the colonized always risks “transforming” themselves to cater the image and doctrines of the dominant culture (Said 325).

Postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon examine the phenomenon of “mimicry” in their own research. For Franz Fanon, the exertion of colonial power on the colonized through mimicry causes the colonized people, as an inferior subject, to become detached from their autonomous cultural identity: a new cultural identification is gained that takes on Western ideals—or what Fanon has called “white masks” in his well-known book Black Skin, White Masks. In a later work, The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon relates the “nauseating mimicry” to the rise of national bourgeoisie in underdeveloped colonized nations. For Fanon, this national bourgeoisie educated by the West passionately imitates their European colonizers. He believes this national bourgeoisie is not a genuine middle class, but instead a derivative replica of European society (Fanon, the Wretched of the Earth 119). To a certain degree, “Mei Party” members who strived for “saving” native theatrical forms in a new socio-economic circumstance were different from those of Fanon’s middle class whom attempted to duplicate colonizer’s cultural modes in his home country. The “mimicry” of Caribbean African diaspora whom lost their original cultural language, religion, and culture was different from the “mimicry” of Western aesthetics by “Mei Party” members, which was an active strategy for survival and competition. However, not much different from the national bourgeoisie in colonized Caribbean and African regions, “Mei Party” members’ strong obsession for Western drama mirrored a predicament of the colonized country in that the native intellectual elites lost cultural confidence
and ironically confirmed a notion of colonialism that Western cultural codes were more “modern” or “advanced” than the original native ones.

“Mei Party” members’ strategy to imitate Western theatre aesthetics was both conscious and unconscious, both active and passive. They could have made an alternative choice (e.g. promote the art by keeping the integrity of its cultural and aesthetic identity) but instead they chose to imitate the Western one, which they believed was an ideal strategy of survival and competition. The unconscious facet reveals that, under a colonial context, although other choices technically were available, Chinese intellectuals such as “Mei Party” members were not able to make other choices other than the “mimicry” when they needed recognition from the leading Chinese intellectuals and the West to regain their cultural confidence. They were not able to seriously consider some aesthetic differences between Western and Chinese theatres. Instead, they regarded the Western one as a “universal” approach which could be applied to all kinds of theatrical forms.

It should be noted that Fanon’s theory of “mimicry” that I use is completely different from the same term Homi Bhabha uses through the perspective of post-structuralism. Homi Bhabha also emphasizes this point in his book *The Location of Culture*: The “mimicry” he observed in India is different from what Fanon witnessed in Caribbean region and Algeria: one actively uses “mimicry” as the “cunning” strategy of “camouflage” to offer a resistance without being noticed. The other passively imitates the Westernte’s cultural modes to create a derivative copy of the Western culture in the colonized region (126).

Although colonial China had a clear difference from the Caribbean and African cases of Fanon, it is necessary here to borrow their theoretical frames to examine the effect of “mimicry” as the response of the colonized to colonial domination. I’d like to apply Fanon and Said’s theoretical insights to this Chinese case by asking following questions: what were the roles of the “Mei Party” members in the intercultural communication between the West and the colonial China? How and why was Mei able to gain a great cultural and commercial success by presenting an Asian art which was bound within cultural limits? What was at risk for this
traditional Chinese theatre when its artists like Mei and Qi started to imitate the colonizer’s cultural modes?

1.3 Stylized Performance, Gaze Theory, and “Gender Acts”

In this section, following Judith Butler’s thoughts about gender performance, Katherine Mezur’s research on onnagata cross-gender performance in Japanese kabuki, and Laura Mulvey’s gaze theory, I attempt to establish a theoretical frame work to clarify several questions: how do jingju’s performance conventions help Chinese actors, especially male-dan actors, to create gender/cross-gender performance in jingju? How did Mei Lanfang’s artistic transition from a qingyi specialist to a promoter of huanshan reinforce constructions of femininity on Chinese stage? Why was Mei’s reformed performance able to be well received by Republican audience members and help him to gained fame as a man “who is more female than a woman”?

In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler insightfully clarifies how the performative nature of gender works:

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140)

American kabuki scholar Katherine Mezur applied Butler’s theory further in her research in the cross-gender performance in Kabuki. She argues that the highly-stylized gender performance derived from the daily life could be exactly applied to interpret what is going on in theatre arts. What onnagata (female impersonation in Kabuki role types) do onstage is a series of stylized gender performance what she calls “gender acts.” Mezur “defines ‘gender acts’ as those actions performed by the material bodies of performers for the purposes of producing gender (in the case of onnagata, onnagata female-likeness) in the space and time of kabuki performance” (35). […]
Stylized gender acts, within a system of aesthetics, are subject to continuous revision and innovation by individual performers, resulting in what, in feminist theory, would be called multiple Fictions of the Feminine” (Mezur 34).

I would argue the “gender acts” as seen in onnagata performance could be also applied to interpret what male-dan actors do on Chinese stage. The cross-gender performance in classic Chinese theatre is a series of highly-stylized citation and recitation of daily gender performance. With regard to means of the “stylization” in terms of gender performance, it is necessary to introduce one crucial aesthetic concepts of traditional Chinese theatre, “convention” (chengshi). In a broader sense, “convention” in Chinese theatre not only refers to the way of acting, but also can been seen in other aspects, such as form of play text, assignment of role type, music, make-up, and costuming (Zhang, Encyclopedia 3). In a narrower sense, “convention” in the highly stylized acting mainly refers to a series of artistically refined “signifiers” and conventional signs which are specific practices and only make sense to audience members in the historically formed system of recognition between the “signifier” and the “signified.” The conventions in terms of gender performance in acting derive from daily gender performance (gestures, postures, speech tempo and rhythm, costuming, and etc.) but have been refined in theatre art in order to fulfill the aesthetic pursuits such as rhythm or signifying role type.

It is important to note that in Chinese jingju acting the actor trains to master conventions of a certain (gender) role type to construct his/her character in play. Based upon the conventions of a certain role type, an actor of jingju does not impersonate a particular character in a particular play. Instead, he/she seeks to portray a kind of characters who has collective characteristics in terms of gender presentation and personality similar to this character. These collective characteristics of gender presentation onstage well echo the constructed “femininity” or “masculinity” in daily gender performance. This is the reason why in the history of Chinese jingju teenager cross-gender performers (tong ling) are able to enjoy great popularity in the profession. An actress who perhaps was only a teenager could well play a senior male character; in an amateur performance, it is quiet common to see that a five-year old girl vividly playing an
older-sheng character who is at his eighties. For a five-year old girl, it would be nearly impossible to ask such a young girl to fully realize the psychological change of such an old man. However, due to the existence of a role type system and its performance conventions, it allows actors to construct gender by displaying a series of exemplified citation of gender performance in daily life. The technique-based gender construction on the Chinese jingju stage reveals that the nature of gender is highly performative and stylized. Actors of different sexes are able to perform the other sex and sexuality well stage, as a result of well-utilized stylized gender conventions.

However, historically, in jingju performances, Chinese artists developed the stylized gender conventions through both the vocal and visual dimensions. Moreover, for jingji, a performance which was historically dominated by the male role types, especially older-sheng, these mid-age or older male characters onstage didn’t necessarily have a sexual attraction to the dominant male audience members in the late-Qing period. However, in the early-Republican era, with the decline of the Manchu royal family and the shutdown of tangzi, the commercial performances held in regular playhouses gradually became the major source of jingju actor’s income. Jingju performance became greatly market-based and therefore the competition among the theatre stars became more competitive. The print industry and the influence of Western-style dramas promoted a crucial shift of the Republican audiences’ taste to theatre performance. Xiqu companies had to offer something new to survive in the competitive theatre market, in order to attract the theatergoers who were no longer content with the singing virtuosity of the old-sheng. Therefore, the female role types, especially huashan, soon dominated the Republican stage, due to a particular emphasis of constructing an attractive appearance.

As theatre scholar Suk-Young Kim introduced in her work about the photographic transformations of Mei Lanfang throughout Mei’s life, the rise of print capitalism and journalism in urban China in the early twentieth-century greatly promoted theatre stars such as Mei Lanfang throughout the publishing market (Kim 39). The increasing publish industry assisted Mei as the first mass-media star of China who easily got a wider recognition throughout the country’s urban regions, compared to the actors such as Tang Xinpei “whose career pre-dated the age of print
capitalism in China’’(Kim 39).

The emergence of Western-style realism-based drama in China’s urban cities, especially Shanghai, deeply shifted the taste of the Republican audiences. Their new taste promoted the construction of spectacles in their native theatrical form. Therefore, a good physical appearance became the significant requirement for male-dan actors, even for a qingyi actor who originally more concentrated on singing.

Mei’s transition from a traditional qingyi actor to a promoter of a new female role type huashan did not simply represent the up and down of two different female role types on jingju stage, but also reveal a promotion force driven by the crucial socio-economical shift. It was his work on visualizing “the Fictions of the Feminine” on jingju stage that helped him compete over his many excellent contemporary actors. Then, he gained popularity in his US tour, and therefore achieve a great commercial success. When the magazine Drama Monthly held an essay competition scoring and ranking most excellent dan actors in the lat-1920s, Mei was the clear winner. However, in this competition, compared to Cheng Yanqiu, Mei’s singing skill was not regarded particularly prominent; he could also not compete with Xun Huisheng and Shang Xiaoyun in terms of martial arts and acrobatics. But Mei won the competition because he was unarguably the best regarding facial appearance, body postures, and “overall beauty” (Goldstein, Drama Kings 246). After they came back to China, Qi collected American comments on Mei’s art, nearly all focused on praising Mei’s attractive appearance, various facial expressions, and magnificent body gestures. However, there were few American audience comments on the singing virtuosity of Mei Lanfang (Qi, US Notes 64).

From the perspective of the gaze theory, critical theorist Laura Mulvey argues that the spectacle of the female body attracts the male gaze in mainstream cinemas:

Ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its (sexual) fantasy onto the female figure [...] Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pinups to striptease [...] she hold the look, plays to and signifies
male desire. (Mulvey 203)

The female characters in narrative cinema are purposely designed as passive objects of desire for the male’s consumption. Throughout the process of “gazing,” the male audience member successfully obtains his voyeuristic pleasure. The huashan role type promoted by Mei Lanfang, actually has visualized “the fictions of the feminine” which are constructed by male’s voyeuristic desire and therefore created the sexual spectacle on jingju stage. The rise of huashan represented a formation of a new convention of (gender) performance. Throughout Mei’s life, rather than promoting jingju through an aural dimension, Mei paid particular attention to stress on the importance of facial expression (biaoqing) and body gestures (shenduan) in female impersonation in jingju. The emphasis of facial expression and body gestures did help Mei to create a means of female impersonation, in order to visualize “the fictions of the feminine” on jingju stage. For over two decades after 1911, Mei’s newly created performance techniques such as various hand gestures and eye expressions highlighted in his female impersonation. Mei’s new way of impersonating female characters at a considerable degree invited gaze on his feminine body onstage. In early Republican era, Mei emerged not only as a great jingju artist but also a national icon for satisfying the male’s heterosexual fantasy, which I would like to discuss in the chapter three of this thesis.

In the following chapters, I will focus on examining how Mei Lanfang’s gender performance reinforce Butler’s thought that gender is a constructed concept; how did Mei’s newly created performance techniques of huashan invite male gaze from Republican audiences and produce (visualize) gender on theatre stage; how did Mei’s gender performance onstage negotiate with the reception of Republican audience members; and how did Mei’s feminine body onstage produce the fantasy of Orientalism before the international audience members.
Chapter Two:
The Formation of *Xiqu* Theory of the “Mei Party” Members as Represented by Qi Rushan

Among the “Mei Party” members, Qi Rushan’s contribution to Mei Lanfang’s artistic creations of *jingju* during China’s Republican era was particularly outstanding. Mei Shaowu, Mei Lanfang’s son and a well-known theatre critic, once summarized Qi’s significance to Mei Lanfang’s *jingju* transition: “if there was no Qi Rushan, it would have not been Mei Lanfang”. (Mei Shaowu, *Mei Lanfang 2*) In this chapter, by tracing the formation of Qi Rushan’s *xiqu* theory, I argue that the Western cultural/economic modes (i.e. theatrical aesthetic principle of Western Realistic drama and the rise of print capitalism) played a significant role on shaping Qi Rushan’s theoretical approach. Qi was like many Chinese bourgeoisie intellectuals who were agents that transplanted the Western colonial cultural modes to the colonized. Qi’s transition from a negativist of traditional Chinese theatre to a reformer of *xiqu* echoed the “mimicry” process which Franz Fanon recorded in his *The Wretched of the Earth*. According to Fanon, the national bourgeoisie/European-educated intellectuals in Algeria passionately imitated their European colonizers due to their strong obsessions to the colonizer’s cultural modes (Fanon 119). By analyzing Qi’s early approach of reforming Mei’s *Fen River Bay* (*Fen He Wan*), it provides a fine example for understanding how Chinese *jingju*’s performance conventions have been shaped by Western principles of Realistic drama.

In a process of constructing “modern nationhood” in the early-Republican era, the Chinese intellectuals such as Qi Rushan were devoted to promoting *jingju* as a national drama which could represent the nation’s theatrical arts. The construction of Qi’s well-known theory of national drama (*guoju*) attempts to uncover the consistent and fundamental aesthetic pursuits of traditional Chinese theatre by studying various distinct genres of Chinese theatre. Unfortunately, by evaluating Qi’s theory, it provides another opportunity to uncover how Qi’s bias as an intellectual elite informed the formation of his theoretical approach and how Chinese *jingju* on
the external appearance has been shaped by the rise of capitalism and Westerner’s reception to an “Oriental art.”

2.1. From a Negativist of National Theatre to a Reformer of Xiqu.

In this section, I’d like to discuss the unique identity and function of the bourgeoisie/European-educated Chinese intellectuals such as Qi Rushan in the process of colonization. The national bourgeoisie/European-educated intellectuals hold a unique identity that they are absolutely insiders of the colonized country but also capable of communicating with their colonial outsiders often due to their language abilities to access to the colonizer’s culture. The unique identity of bourgeoisie/European-educated intellectuals makes them serve a key role in a process of colonialization. In this particular case, the bourgeoisies intellectual’s biased receptions to the native theatrical language of jingju played a key role in transforming jingju from a “low” art in their eyes to a “high”/”elegant” form in order to fit their reception about what a desired “national drama” should be.

As I introduced in the first chapter, Qi began his association with theatre in his very early life. When Qi Rushan studied German and French at Jingshi Tong Wen Guan (National Institute of Foreign language Studies) in the late-1890s, he often got the opportunity to appreciate the performances of most excellent jingju actors in Beijing. During this period, he started to closely contact the circle of jingju and perhaps brood his early thoughts about traditional Chinese theatre (Qi, “Recollections” 81-3). According to Qi, in the early 1900s, the audience in Beijing playhouses did not consist of only domestic audience members (82). In northern China, the Boxer Uprising, an anti-imperialism and anti-Christian moment, was just quenched by the armed forces from eight Western countries which were sent to China to protect foreigners. Although Western missionaries regarded attending Chinese theatre as a disgrace, however, for their recently landed soldiers, jingju, a purely exotic art, did appeal to them. Qi Rushan personally experienced a change of composition of theatre audience in Beijing. According to Qi, he once
saw several German soldiers in a playhouse that were obsessed by a male-dan performance and asked to see this beautiful “lady” in greenroom. The whole company was scared. The male-dan actor sheltered himself in a bathroom and dared not to meet these “foreign devils.” After Qi explained that lady onstage was actually played by a male, these German solders still didn’t believe him. Until Qi introduced the player to shake hands with each soldier, the misunderstanding was finally solved (Qi 82-3). By taking advantage of this chance, Qi gradually started to know a number of actors and was often awarded free tickets by these bosses of theatre companies. Since then, once there was some misunderstanding that occurred between foreigners and Chinese people in playhouses, bosses of theatre companies often invited Qi to help to solve the problems (Qi 83).

By tracing the audience members’ reception of intercultural theatre performances, British theatre theorist Susan Bennett witnesses: “both an audience’s reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (performance) itself are bound within cultural limits” (101). The cultural limits are always key factors which interplay between culture and performance and finally influenced the reception of audience members. In this particular case, the reactions of these German soldiers to the Chinese performance revealed the cultural misunderstandings which resulted from the language barrier and unfamiliarity with Chinese performance conventions. Their interests in seeing the Chinese male-dan actor ironically revealed the Westerner’s obsession to the Oriental femininity what Said discussed in his Orientalism. It also metaphorically explains why male-dan rather than any other male role types could ensure the great success of Chinese jingju performance in the Western world. Their heterosexual male lust was not merely revealed by their gazes of voyeurism on the fictional feminine body onstage, but also could be seen by their sexual obsession to the “actress” offstage. As postcolonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiong’o notes, economic and political control from colonizers “can never be complete or effective without mental control” (442). “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (442). For Thiong’o, imposing a foreign language to the young generation of the colonized (often the brightest kids in the country) and suppressing their native languages is
always a colonial strategy to fulfill such mental control (442-4). During the changing course in Chinese playhouses, by taking advantage of the foreign language skill, the Chinese intellectuals like Qi Rushan emerged as not only language but also cultural interpreters for Westerners. Western cultural misunderstandings had to be solved via a work of translation by an interpreter like Qi Rushan who was a live product of the colonial strategy. Therefore, a question emerges: how well can the cultural interpreter’s work reveal the reality of the colonized side, when considering the biased attitude Qi had toward the native theatrical form?

After graduation from the institute, he went to Europe for further education and gradually became a businessman who traveled between China and Europe. According to Qi, the most intensive experience of seeing Western drama was obtained in the years around 1911 when he was in Paris. As a manager of his brother’s Tofu company there, Qi was often able to attend many theaters which were willing to offer free or discount tickets to foreign diplomats (Qi, “Recollections” 69). Based upon a strong interest and a relatively rich experience of appreciating the Western drama and opera in Europe, he went back to China after the republican revolution in 1911 and soon was appointed as a professor of drama at Peking University and Peking Women’s College of Arts and Science in around 1912 (even though it appears that Qi did not obtain any systematic training in either Chinese or Western theatre). According to Qi, in this tour to Paris in 1911, his experience of appreciating Western dramas there totally changed his reception of traditional Chinese theatre. He was obsessed by Western dramas and gradually initiated a great interest in studying and teaching theatre. Shortly after 1913, Qi produced his first scholarship about theatre. In the book titled Shuoxi (literary, “talking about theatre”), based on his reception of Western drama, Qi generally held an opinion that totally negated traditional Chinese theatre. After two years when he went back from Europe, he refused to attend to playhouses and because he believed everything in Chinese theatre was too simple (Qi 84). In Qi’s later Recollections, he recalled this great shift in his own reception of traditional Chinese theatre when he returned to China after his third tour to Europe:

(I) used to like the national theatre; however, after seeing theatres in European
countries and doing some research on *huaju* (the Chinese name of the Western-style drama), my brain has been westernized a little; when I returned and saw the national theatres, I felt dissatisfied and believed it was not worth seeing; I therefore often debated with my old friends and believed their opinions were not reasonable. (83)

I advocate analyzing Qi’s great change of reception of traditional Chinese theatre under China’s colonial circumstance. When the “Westernization Movement” beginning in 1860s failed, many Chinese intellectuals started to realize that they could not save the giant country from a decline by only importing Western technology and constructing modern industries. By the very beginning of the 1900s, a call for a deeper reform of political, economic, and educational systems appears in the circle of Chinese intellectuals. Although an overthrow of the feudalistic empire partially fulfilled the dream of revolutionists, the new Republic which was formed in 1912 could not change China’s declining trend. After 1912, Chinese intellectual’s concern gradually shifted to the spiritual basis of Chinese people — the traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism and its cultural products. The radical attack to traditional Chinese culture finally initiated a cultural movement which aimed at totally overthrowing traditional Chinese culture in “May Fourth” era (1915-early 1920s). Qi’s negation to *xiqu* in 1912 shared little difference with the later leading intellectuals during the “May Fourth” era, it unfortunately revealed that the Western cultural codes had an irresistible lure to some of the Western/Japanese-educated Chinese intellectuals. Their obsession to the Western cultural modes perfectly echoed what Fanon witnessed in the African that the new-born national bourgeoisie passionately imitates their European colonizers (Fanon, *the Wretched of the Earth* 119).

Although some of those Chinese intellectuals’ political and educational agenda such as promoting the thought of democracy and importing modern science had great progressive meanings, however, their radical proposals of overthrowing traditional Chinese culture put Chinese people at risk of disassociating from their indigenous cultural identity and becoming purely colonized beings.

In the early 1910s, in Beijing, the circle of *jingju* actors was also filled with revolutionary
passion. *Jingju* actors who advocated promoting theatre reform established a new organization of professional actors, *zhengyu yuhua hui* (literarily, “Music Rectification and Education Society”). The new society replacing the original union of actors *jingzhong miao* (literarily, “the temple of loyalty”) aimed at producing positive and “healthy” artistic productions in order to educate Chinese audience living in a new social context. Qi Rushan was often invited to give lectures to these actors. For instance, at the first anniversary of the society, Qi was invited to give a speech on drama reform. According to Qi, in the lecture, he used about three hours to reproach Chinese theatre before *jingju* actors and compliment Western drama as a perfect mode, because compared to Western drama everything in Chinese *xiqu* was too simple. (102) In one of those lectures, a young actor was impressed by the lecturer’s “insightful” thoughts about drama reform and a broad understanding about Western drama. At that moment, Qi probably could not imagine that he would devote most of his rest life to work with this actor and their artistic cooperation shaped the art of *jingju* in the following century to a considerable degree.

Qi Rushan did not maintain his totally negative attitude for long, until one day a colleague invited Qi to see an emerging star’s performance. At the beginning, the actor’s performance didn’t shift Qi’s thought about traditional theatre. Qi admitted that the actor was a good-looking, had an appealing singing skill, and most importantly a talent in performing *jingju*. However, his acting skill though was believed to be excellent by most audience members, from Qi’s perspective, it still suffered some problems. After one night Qi saw the actor performing in a traditional play *Fen River Bay (Fen He Wan)*, Qi could not help to write to this actor, in order to correct one crucial “drawback” in his performance. In the letter, Qi believes the traditional performing conventions of *qingyi* worked against the logic of daily reality and were therefore not “reasonable.” Qi therefore advised this actor to deliver both an emotional and physical responses to “her husband” in reaction to his singing throughout the whole scene (Qi 104). Out of Qi’s expectation, after a couple of days when Qi saw the actor’s performing this play again, the actor “corrected” his way of acting and completely followed Qi’s suggestions (Qi 106-7). The actor’s humbleness really impressed Qi Rushan and therefore ignited Qi’s strong interest in directing the
actor’s performance. In around 1912, Qi started to regularly attend the actor’s performance and corresponded with each other for a few years but they had actually never met each other in person until the spring of 1914.

What was the reason caused Qi hesitated to meet this male-dan actor? And what were the reasons that caused Qi to oscillate about whether he should directly participate theatre creation especially when he was fully aware that directing a play couldn’t work by only sending letters? In Qi’s writing, he gave us some hints:

At that moment, many people admired him [the actor], while some others were so jealous [about him]. Many people said something bad about him, I really wanted to figure out whether it was true […] there was a couple of people who met him a few years earlier than I knew him. Most of them were decent persons, while one or two of them seemingly had some immoral desires, but [their relations were] definitely not revealed to the public. (107)

The writing above which Qi made in his later life indirectly revealed Qi’s concern at the moment when he was hesitating whether he should fully engage in theatre creation with the male-dan actor, Mei Lanfang. So-called “something bad” indirectly revealed some suspicions in the public about the relations between Mei Lanfang and some his financial endorsers. Qi’s suspicions were finally resolved by his personal visits to Mei’s house. In these visits, Mei Lanfang apparently well performed himself as a normative heterosexual male and his family as a normative family. According to Qi, in his several visits to Mei’s house, he had a great impression about Mei and his family: “Mei acted as a self-respecting person. His wife and other women in his family looked duteous and seldom went to the outside…It was no different from a well-educated family. Those old friends [who were suspected having an immoral relation with Mei] seldom went to his house […] since then I’ve decided to help him” (107).

As I introduced in the chapter one, historically, the emergence of “male-dan” did not end xiqu performer’s connection with prostitution. In the late-Qing period, gaining assistance from financial supporters often was a shortcut for a young male-dan actor to get fame on jingju stage.
The partnership between male-dan actors and their supporters often bore sexual overtones. Therefore, “tangzi,” the place where male-dan actors were trained, often became institutions that allowed young male actors to engage in prostitution.

I suggest evaluating the socio-cultural shift of male-dan performers’ private lives in the Republican era through two different perspectives. On one hand, the closure of “tangzi” in the Republican China did attempt to prevent young male-actors from being sexually victimized and therefore was progressively meaningful. On the other hand, it should be noted the Magnification of immoral image of male-dan performers in the Republican China at least partially resulted from an import of Western standard about the sexual normativity of theatre actors. The gender performance of male-dan actors offstage became normalized in cooperation with the new bourgeois intellectuals who regarded homosexual overtones as extremely disgraceful. Qi’s confirmation to Mei’s sexual normativity is a fine example.

By briefly tracing Qi’s transition from a negativist of traditional Chinese theatre to a reformer of xiqu, I suggest that we should be aware that the unique identity and function of national bourgeoisie intellectuals in the cultural colonialization process. The obsession of the new-born Chinese bourgeoisie intellectuals to the Western cultural modes was one of the major reasons for them to engage in reforming their native art. The Western Realistic drama had an unresisting gravitation to many of Western/Japanese-educated scholars. Therefore, the “mimicry” of the colonizer could not be prevented from being occurred in the circle of theatre. This mimicry was not only restricted on stage but also certainly affect on the private life realm of male-dan actors in the early-Republican era. Although Qi’s later “reformed” jingju productions revealed his courage to tear down a series of “norms” constructed by Chinese feudal order, the moral pressure from the middle-class intellectual ironically built up another series of “norms” in order to restrict Chinese male-dan’s sexual “aberrance”. The “civil” and “modern” Western criteria used to regulate an actor’s sexuality actually revealed a deep shift of Chinese notion about male-dan actor’s sexual norm. With the engagement of the new-born national bourgeoisie, traditional Chinese drama was at risk of becoming a derivative replica of European ones and its
male-dan’s gender performance also appeared to be judged and restricted by a Western standard that what a sexually normative actor should be.

2.2 Realistic Approach and Western Drama’s Influence

By examining Mei Lanfang’s “reformed” jingju performance in early Republican era, it reveals a consistent emphasis on facial expression (biaoqing) and body gesture (shenduan) in Qi Rushan’s theoretical approach. In this section, I use Qi’s direction to Mei’s Fen River Bay and Waves on the Sea (Niehai Bolan) as examples to analyze the influence of Western Realistic drama on Chinese jingju acting. The usage of facial expression to reveal the character’s psychological changes in Fen River Bay and the construction of the “fourth wall” in Waves on the Sea are imitations of conventions from Western Realistic drama. Both cases deconstructed Chinese jingju’s performance conventions which emphasized displaying actor’s singing virtuosity. Without a serious examination of the fundamental aesthetic differences between Western and Chinese ones, Qi’s approach actually undermined the distinct conventions of Chinese xiqu functioning characters in a theatrical world.

As I introduced in the previous section of this chapter, after seeing Mei playing Fen River Bay in around 1912, Qi was discontented with the conventional acting way of the dan role who expressed indifference in a crucial scene of the play. In the letter to Mei, Qi explained:

Last night I saw Fen River Bay. It was well done, all shenduan⁹ performances were beautiful, especially the part of entering the cave-house… However, there was one drawback in your performance…Seeing a man who resembles your eighteen-year absent husband, though you do not believe, it is unreasonable to feel indifference when he describes his family background…Even though all actors follow this way to perform, you should not follow this, because it is against the principle of theatre…Liu Yingchun is a lead role in this play, and the scene is also a key act of the whole play. Whether you would recognize him as your husband is all depended by your

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⁹ Shenduan acting refers to the performance of body gesture in Chinese xiqu. In a broad sense, it also includes dance-performances.
lines on this point. Can you pay no attention to perform these lines, cannot you? How can you feel indifference when he describes the departure of this couple? Therefore at this point the dan role must act out facial expression. (Qi 103)

_Fen River Bay_ tells a story about a family finally re-united after an eighteen-year separation. The scene Qi Rushan mentioned narrates how the husband Xue Rengui finally arrives to the cave-house where his wife Liu Yingchun lives, but suspects she has had an affair when he notices a man’s shoe is under her bed. The suspicion is finally resolved by learning that the shoe belongs to their son who was born after the husband left. Qi believes the traditional performing conventions of _qingyi_ worked against the “principle of theatre” and were therefore not “reasonable.” He advised Mei to deliver a series of emotional and physical responses to “her husband” in reaction to his singing. Qi suggested the female role should act out her responses when the _sheng_ role begins to describe his family background, nod her head when the husband tells he is homeless, express sadness when the male character criticizes his father-in law’s cruelty, and finally cry out when the husband describes their departure (Qi 103-5).

I would argue Qi Rushan’s so-called “principle of theatre” was learned from his experience of appreciating European Realistic dramas. Realistic drama emphasized emotional and physical interaction between actors because of the strong relationship between the acting skills that reinforce the narrative’s cause and effect structure. Clearly, the causal relation is not only seen in the performing logic of an actor but also shapes the textual/performance structure in Western Realistic drama, which all serve to provide a faithful representation of daily reality to its audience members. Without serious consideration, Qi Rushan believed the causal relation is a “reasonable” and all-purpose formula which could be applied to “reform” the acting in traditional Chinese theatre. Qi’s instruction to Mei Lanfang in _Fen River Bay_ is actually a conscious “mimicry” of the colonizer’s culture that aimed to imitate the Western theatre principles in order to rescue the native one. However, would _jingju_ performance benefit from the “imitation” of this convention for Western Realistic drama? In fact, it is not rare that on the

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10 Around 1911, Qi intensively contacted Western Realistic dramas in Europe and _huaju_, the Western-style Realism-based Chinese dramas.
jingju stage to see when one actor displaying his/her skills and the other actors just “take a rest,” not delivering any emotional/physical responses to the one who is performing. Why does jingju’s logic then seem to be “unreasonable”? How does this “unreasonable” logic shape jingju’s performance conventions among actors, the relationship between actors and audiences, and its performance structure? Jingju’s convention of “taking turns” to display the virtuosity of actors is constructed on its predominance of the actor, more specifically, a predominance of the actor’s technique-based performance. On the contrary, the triumph of Realistic Western drama, not only requires motivation and believability, but also depends on the integrity of both the dramatic and theatrical structure which governed by the logic of the cause and effect within narrative of fictional world. Compared to Western Realistic drama, jingju is often performed based upon “unreasonable” logic that serves for Chinese conventions: actors commonly just perform several excerpts that featured highlights from many different plays. The highlight piece is referred as “Opera Highlight” (zhezixi) which strongly featured an actors’ virtuosity. On the jingju stage, it is entirely possible that an “Opera Highlight” appears without a complete narrative structure and consistent motivation of characters and the performances directly show its audience members the climax in order to display an actor’s virtuosity.

The “unreasonable” logic is also represented by jingju’s arrangement of time and space. On Chinese stage, running two large circles can represent that the character is marching hundreds of miles and passing numerous days and nights. Therefore, on the jingju stage, an “unreasonable” logic actually reveals that its priority is the display of actors’ virtuosity. Fen River Bay is a classic “civil play” of Chinese jingju. So-called “civil plays” refer to the Chinese plays which were mainly featured singing skills (Mackerras 2). The cast of Fen River Bay mainly consists of two role types, older-sheng and qingyi, which also primarily featured singing skill. The scene of “the gate of cave-house” (“yaomen”) is one of the highlights which featured the magnificent singing skill of two lead actors. Xipi-style music, which features a hurried rhythm, dominates the whole scene which reveals the mixed (complaining) emotional reaction between both sides. Qi’s instruction that he asked Mei to offer a response to her husband matched the
basic acting principle of Realistic drama that everything that occurred in the play must be based upon a “reasonable” logic (the effect of cause and effect). However, in this particular scene where audience members expected to appreciate the actor’s singing skill such instruction is problematic. Mei’s “reasonable” response might distract the Chinese audience’s focus from the singing of the older-sheng actor, the valued feature in a “civil” play. This was exactly the puzzle of Tan Xinpei, the most renowned older-sheng (laosheng) actor in the very beginning of the 20th century. When Tan performed Fen River Bay with Mei after Mei accepted Qi’s suggestion, he complained: “when I was singing a few lyrics in the scene of the gate of cave-house, I felt that I had not yet reached to the excellent parts but I heard the audience’s applause. I finally noticed the reason was that Lanfang was performing body gestures.” (Qi 106) In a colonial context, Qi was obsessed by the Western Realistic drama and did not notice there were two different aesthetic principals beneath the Western and Chinese theatres, but regarded the Western approach as “advanced” and “universal” one which was able to “reform” the native theatre.

However, the traditional plays of jingju such as Fen River Bay could not satisfy the tastes of both those bourgeoisie intellectuals such as Qi Rushan and the new generation of theatre audience members. The early-Republican stage featured a various so-called xinxi (literally, “new plays”). If Mei’s later international recognition constructed him as an icon of classic Chinese art, on the contrary, on domestic stage, the name of Mei Lanfang was nearly always connected with his experimental plays. The rise of Mei’s newly created plays deeply revealed this socio-economic and cultural shift occurred in the early-Republican era: in a fierce competition with the Western-style counterpart-huaju and its various derivatives. The traditional jingju performer had to follow the Western fashions of costuming, setting, and lighting in order to survive in an increasingly capitalistic theatre market. The rise of the print culture promoted by the spread of newspaper commercials and theatre posters in the early-Republican era made the external appearance of jingju actors become unprecedentedly important. The revolutionary thoughts also promoted the thematic change on Chinese stage-- the traditional plays portraying the chastity of Confucian women were gradually replaced by either romantic story which reveals
marriage freedom and women’s rights or contemporary plays that criticizes the current events and pursued social justice.

These laboratory works were generally categorized into two basic genres: contemporary-costume new plays (shizhuang xinxi) and ancient-costume new plays (guzhuang xinxi). Both genres of the new plays had a recognizable connection with the Western-style drama, especially the former one. The “contemporary-costume new plays” usually combined the jingju movement, singing, and speeches with fashionable costumes, contemporary scenarios, modern sets, and props such as sewing machines. The plays were extremely reformist and realistic in terms of dramatic structure and external appearance. Deeply influenced by Western realistic plays, many of their stories derived from contemporary social events and revealed social conflicts such as arranged marriage and social oppression of women. Created and directed by Qi Rushan, Mei’s contemporary-costume new plays include Waves on the Sea (Nie hai bolan), a play against the sex trade, Miss Deng Xia (Deng Xia Gu), a drama constructing a heroine who revealing a family intrigue and gaining love by her free will, A Tread of Hemp (yi lu ma), a drama narrating a revolt of a young miss to arranged marriage.

I would like to take Mei’s first contemporary-costume new plays Waves on the Sea (Nie hai bolan) as an example to discuss how a mimicry process was fulfilled in contemporary-costume new plays from the internal theme to the external presentation and further to the relationship between audience members and performers. When talking about why he began to be interested in such genre of plays, Mei Lanfang explained:

After I came back from Shanghai in 1913, [I] had a little new understanding [about drama creation]. I feel the old plays which we always all drive from the ancient history, although having some instrumental meanings, however, if directly using current events and create new plays, would the audience members feel more approachable? The reception might be more welcome than old plays. This new thought dominated my brain for half a year [after I came back]. (Forty-Year Life 211)

Mei’s 1913 trip to Shanghai employed a great historical importance of shaping this young actor’s
reception to theatre art. The various new plays dominated the theatre stage in 1913. According to Mei, he was greatly impressed by two genres of new plays in his tour performance; both of them were highly influenced by Western Realistic drama. The new dramas operated by Xia brothers (Xia Yueshan and Xia Yueshan) remained jingju orchestra but used modern costume and makeup and the plots of the plays also derived from the contemporary events. The other one, which was later labeled by the term “huaju”, was purely Western Realistic style and played by Ouyang Yuqian’s Spring and Willow Society (chunliu she), which consisted of Japanese-educated students. (186) In this tour, Mei was aware that, compared to the ancient story reflected traditional jingju plays, the contemporary social problems revealed by these hybridized dramas seemed to be more attractive to the Republican audience members in Shanghai. Therefore, in this first contemporary-costume new play Waves on the Sea (Nie hai bolan), Mei and Qi paid particular attention to imitate the Shanghai theatre’s contemporary themes in order to dramatize the social conflicts often revealed by Realistic-style dramas:

The content of the play [Waves on the Sea] is meaningful…most people believe that it reveals the reality of society that the abducted women suffer great misfortune and the traders in humans are evil, [it therefore] should perform these things out, in order to warn people to be aware that. (Mei and Xu 212)

The imitation was clearly not only restricted in thematic realm but also could be in shift of performance style. Mei recalled when he performed this play:

Every movement is totally realistic. Those traditional acting ways [of dan role] such as shaking the sleeves and combing the hair were all abandoned […] those old plays were not allowed the audience to be unresponsive during the performance. However, in these contemporary-costume new plays, we always had silent audience, because they had less singing but more dialogues. ‘Less singing more dialogues’ is my principle of creating contemporary-costume plays. (Mei and Xu 213)

In the traditional performance of Chinese jingju, audience members are always active participators. Actors onstage always required applauses from audience to inspire in order to well
display their performance virtuosities. However, in this particular genre of new plays, the conventional relationship between audience members and performers was totally overthrown. Mei noticed that “there was completely silent in audience” when he was performing. More interestingly, when he performed the final scene of the great union of the father and daughter, he recalled many ladies were wiping their tears in the audience (Mei and Xu 214) I would argue that “the fourth wall” of Western Realistic drama was constructed in Mei’s play *Waves on the Sea*. And the active and directive interaction between audience and performers in traditional Chinese theatre was replaced by a Western one that requires the audience enjoys the fiction as if they were witnessing a real event. In order to prevent “the fourth wall” from being broken, actors must portray this fiction in an extremely realistic way and therefore applause from audience members became not only unnecessary and but also at risk of interrupting actors’ realistic portrait.

By briefly discussing Mei’s *Waves on the Sea*, how the mimicry process was fulfilled in contemporary-costume new plays from the internal theme to the external presentation and further to the relationship between audience members and performers. These “contemporary-costume new plays” are beyond the boundary of traditional Chinese theatre and this genre of theatre became extinct soon after Mei’s engagement by the early 1920s. Therefore, I will not provide a more detailed analysis in this thesis. However, Qi and Mei’s cooperation on “contemporary-costume new plays” certainly revealed a strong influence of the Western aesthetic approach in early-Republican era and some of the Western theatrical thoughts actually deeply shaped their creation of “ancient-costume new plays,” a clearly more influential genre of *jingju*, which I would like to focus on in the following chapter.

2.3. The Limits of Qi Rushan’s Theory of National Drama (*Guaju*)

To begin with this section, I want to once again emphasis the distinct relationship between intellectuals and theatre artists in the creation of *jingju* plays. The creation of some
ancient genres of xiqu such as zaju and kunqu did heavily rely on scholar’s contribution. However, for huabu theatres which include pihuang, as I introduced in the chapter one, they historically were regarded as “low” arts and the creations of these genres of theatre had little engagement from literary scholars. From the 18th century to early 20th century, the stories dramatized in a large number of these huabu theatres were directly adapted from myths, folktales, historical/literary stories, and past xiqu plays. Chinese jingju for a long time had no exact equivalent of professional playwright as we see in its contemporary Western dramas.

For intellectuals, a clear schism in attitudes towards xiqu appeared during the period of the “May Fourth.” When the emerging May Fourth intellectuals gained momentum in new cultural context, the other group of literati formed due to the worries of xiqu’s decline as well. The group consisted of both the old-style scholars (such as Luo Yingong) and the Western/Japanese-educated intellectuals (such as Qi Rushan) who were mostly fans of xiqu and hoped to promote xiqu by a series of reforms. They invested their intelligence and money in the play creation and adaptation for fledging male-dan actors, in order to construct modernity on Chinese stage and reform the traditional way of jingju performance.

During the early-Republican era, Qi Rushan personally experienced a great change of reception of traditional Chinese theatre, from a negativist of xiqu to an industrious supporter of xiqu. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the shift of attitude toward xiqu led Qi Rushan to accomplish a series of scholarly researches in the history of traditional Chinese theatre and finally he formed his theory of “guoju” (literarily, National Drama). Instead of using the term “old drama” (jiuxi) to refer to xiqu, the birth of the term “guoju” featured a process of nationalization occurred in early-Republican era. It emerged with a series of terms which echoed modern China’s national consciousness such as guoqing (national flag), guohua (national

11 The reference of the term “guoju” (literarily, National Drama) is historically different among its users living in different periods of modern and contemporary China. It historically was constructed by at least three references: in mainland China’s Republican Era (1911-1949), the term primarily was used to refer to “traditional Chinese theatre” in a broad sense; in contemporary China, it more often refers to the most nationally representative genre of traditional Chinese theatre (e.g. jingju is the current guoju while kunqu is the previous one); after PRC was established in mainland China, in Taiwan, the term is used to specifically refer to jingju. In Qi’s writing, he usually used the term guoju in a broad sense to refer to “traditional Chinese theatre”.

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painting), and guosong (national anthem).

According to Qi Rushan, the expression of national drama is highlighted by song and dance. His well-known theory of national drama can be summarized into a slogan: “No sound that is not song, no movement that is not dance” (“Wusheng buge, Wudong buwu”) (Qi 95). His theory does note the difference of appearance between Western (Realistic) drama and the Chinese one. Moreover, contrary to the beliefs of most his contemporaries, Qi does uncover that the crucial difference between Chinese and Western drama was not simply that Chinese was musical and Western spoken (Goldstein, Drama Kings 153), but the latter one is “realistic,” while the former is “visually beautiful” (meishuhua) (Goldstein 153). On one hand, Qi’s aesthetic approach is crucial for identifying the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western drama. On the other hand, the theory appeared problematic by using the term “visual beauty” (meishuhua) to summarize the fundamental aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese theatre.

First of all, when Qi analyzed the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese theatre, it appeared that he placed kunqu over other genres of theatre and therefore overlooked the crucial differences of the acting principle and aesthetic pursuits among different genres of traditional Chinese theatre, especially the distinctions between kunqu and jingju. In Qi’s writing, he defines the aesthetic pursuit of traditional Chinese theatre as follows:

Ancient drama is derived from ancient dance, each movement must be choreographed [lit. dancified, wudaohua]…In dance the posture must be beautiful in every way; for ancient, modern, Chinese and foreign dance this is always true, examples are not needed. Because every bit must be beautiful, every bit of realism must be removed from every movement, it must be aestheticized. The only important aim of old Chinese drama is summed up in the word mei [beauty]. No matter if it is speaking, emitting a sound, movement, costume, and so on, nothing can depart from the word mei. (Qi, Introduction to National Drama: 29; Goldstein, Drama Kings 153)
By studying the paintings of postures in *kunqu* performances, Qi claimed that “beauty” or so-called “visual beauty” (*meishuhua*) is “the only important aim of old Chinese drama.” However, his claim is weakly supported by the facts of the history of Chinese drama. As I introduced in the first chapter, during the development of *kunqu*, its language turned to be extremely classical, often with many unexplained literary allusions. Its music rhythm and stage movement tended to be extremely slow in order to satisfy the intellectual elites’ aesthetic predilection (Brandon and Banham 30). *Pihuang* which emerged in Beijing in 1790 eventually gained favor from the masses and formed the most nationally prominent theatrical form-- *jingju*. It was the most refined theatre form in the eyes of Chinese intellectual elites that lost its dominancy and was at risk of being extinct in a competition with those theatres were thought by scholars such as Fu Sinian as “low” arts worked totally against the aesthetic and instrumental principles. The triumph of *jingju* uncovers a fact that the over-refined artistic form only satisfied the taste of a few intellectual elites and was eventually abandoned by the masses. Qi’s obsession to *kunqu* unconsciously revealed his prejudice as intellectual elite.

Second, Qi’s theory simplified the expressive means of traditional Chinese theatre into two forms: song (aural) and dance (visual). When dealing with the relation between song and dance, Qi showed particular interest in dance rather than song: an interest which was fully revealed by Qi’s creation and adaptation for Mei’s performance. Through the 1910s to the 1930s, nearly all of Mei’s important plays were always highlighted by magnificent dance pieces, such as the “Feather Dance” in *Xishi*, the “Dance of Cups and Plates” in *Aunt Ma Celebrating the Birthday* (*Magu xianshou*), The Dance of Sword in *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*), and The Flower Dance in *The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers* (*Tiannü sanhua*). And these dance-featured plays also became the most frequent pieces which were purposely emphasized in his oversea tours.

From Qi Rushan’s perspective, the art of dance served to recover the formalistic nature of Chinese drama. The emphasis of dance may be partially grounded in Qi’s misreading of the history of Chinese drama and his negligence of the differences between *jingju* and the past
genres of traditional Chinese theatre: “National drama emphasizes dance over song…There are more than seventy or eighty different melody systems throughout China…but the system of movements is wholly unified” (Qi, National Drama in Past Fifty Years 63). “Ancient drama is derived from ancient dance, each movement must be choreographed.” (Qi 29; Goldstein 153) In fact, this so-called “unified system of movement” is also not well supported by facts of the history of Chinese theatre. Even if we concede to the existence of such a system, it still could not support the idea that dance predominates over song because dance is more unified than song. It is true that dance is always one of the organic parts of xiqu performance, especially Chinese ancient criteria to kunju acting often had particular attention to shenduan acting (if I could interpret Qi’s concept of “dance” in a broader sense). However, it should be noted that, although Chinese theatre is often regarded as a “total theatre” which combines singing (chang), speech (nian), dance-acting (zuo), and “da” (encompassing martial arts and acrobatics), the aural dimension in traditional Chinese theatre, at least in jingju, is fundamentally important to the identity of this theatrical form (Wichmann, Listening to Theater 2).

For me, Qi’s emphasis of dance perhaps was not only grounded in Qi’s misreading of the history of Chinese drama. I suggest examining the formation of Qi Rushan’s theatre theory by considering several cultural and economic shifts of theatre creation and reception in the early-Republican China: the rise of the print capitalism, the popularity of the Western-style dramas and its derivatives, and Qi’s potential inclination to attract foreign audience members. The significant role of the print capitalism played in promoting theatre actors which I would like to give a more detailed analysis in the following chapter. In the fierce commercial competition with the Western-style dramas and its various derivatives, traditional Chinese theatres were unquestionably at risk of losing many of Republican audience members who were eager to seek novelty in consumption of cultural products. A theoretical warrant established by Qi Rushan unconsciously catered this trend of consumption by reforming traditional Chinese theatre through the visual dimension. In order to obtain both commercial success and value confirmation, Qi’s theoretical emphasis on dance also ensured the accessibility for the foreign audience.
member and provided a warrant for creating a spectacle on Chinese stage through the visual dimension, which would be discussed further in the fourth chapter.

Why is the aural dimension of jingju so fundamental for identifying this genre rather than the visual expression? This fundamental characteristic has been supported by several facts of jingju and the history of traditional Chinese theatre:

First, although various genres of traditional Chinese theatre have certain differences in terms of text structure, assignment of role type, and other aspects, it is based upon a musical system rather than other organizing principles. This musical system fundamentally distinguishes the basic categories of traditional Chinese theatre: Zaju, Nanxi, Yiyangqiang, and the “Regional theatres” (difangxi). The text structure and even the word choice in a Chinese play is usually shaped by the structure of music system and the pursuit for musical rhythm and melody: as we know, in zaju and kunju, writing the text of plays was rather a process of composing lyrics based upon musical patterns; in jingju, it is also common to see that its lyrics pursue musical rhythm and the convenience of singing at the cost of grammar and literary grace. The facts all indicate xiqu’s emphasis on expression through the aural dimension. Second, for jingju, role types which are mainly featured by singing skill such as older-sheng and qingyi dominated the Chinese stage from its origin to the early decades in the 20th century. The dominance of older-sheng and qingyi was not only revealed by a majority of jingju plays led by these two role types, but also mirrored the great contribution of older-sheng actors to the formation of the particular genre of theatre. It was during the period of the Former Three Masters (qian sanjie)12 that jingju as an independent genre of theatre was greatly promoted and finally established as a distinct genre of xiqu. The popularity of Tan Xinpei, another older-sheng actor that standardized the accent of singing and speech of jingju that encouraged the art spread to other parts of the nation. It is a fundamental significance of aural expression in jingju that causes audience members in China usually say that they go to “listen to” theatre instead of “watching” or “seeing” theatre.

By examining the formation of Qi Rushan’s theory, it appears a series of problems for

12 Three older-sheng actors, Cheng Changgeng, Zhang Erkui, and Yu Sansheng, who were active in the mid-19th century.
further consideration. On one hand, Qi’s theatrical practice unconsciously imitated the Western theatrical approach which was thought as a universal one to “reform” the conventional way of jingju acting, without a serious consideration of crucial aesthetic difference between the two genres of theatre. Either Qi’s reformed or newly created jingju plays such as Fen River Bay or Weaves on the Sea ironically featured a clear imitation of Western Realistic dramaturgy. Both cases deconstructed Chinese jingju’s performance convention which emphasized demonstrating actor’s virtuosities. One the other hand, Qi constructed a clear problematic aesthetic binary between Western and Chinese theatre and then established a theoretical frame for “reforming” this Chinese song-drama according to his intellectual taste. The spectacle created by Qi’s “reformed” plays did work to satisfy the tastes of both domestic and foreign audience in a new socio-economical context. However, in a word, his theoretical approaches actually undermined the distinct way that Chinese xiqu is human beings functioned in a theatrical world.
Chapter Three:
Mei Lanfang, a New-style Male-Dan on China’s Republican Stage

In this chapter, I’m going to trace Mei Lanfang’s rise as a new-style male-dan performer in the Republican stage by analyzing three instances of Mei Lanfang’s “reformed” performances. I would like to discuss the distinct traits of Mei’s performance during this artistic transition as resulting from working with the “Mei Party” members, the socio-economic factors that shaped his artistic choices, and what was at stake in Mei’s “reformed” jingju performances. I would argue that, by saying farewell to the chaste Confucian women on Chinese stage, Mei’s construction of “the Fictions of the Feminine” helped him to invite the gaze from the Republican audience members, gain popularity in his US tour, and therefore achieve a great commercial success in a new socio-economical context.

3.1 Shanghai’s New Dramas and Huashan

In this section, I would like to place my focus on the intriguing relationship between Mei Lanfang and the city Shanghai. My questions are: why did Mei particularly favor the city Shanghai throughout the Republican era? What was the “new taste” of the audience members in Shanghai? Why did Mei’s several touring performances to Shanghai, especially the first trip made in 1913, considerably change his future career and contribute to his evolving aesthetic? What did a series of “new dramas” produced by the highly capitalistic market give the young actor in the early-Republican era?

In 1933, when Mei Lanfang finally decided to move his whole family from Beijing to Shanghai for promoting his career, Mei had a conversation with his disappointed advisor Qi Rushan. In this talk, Qi harshly criticized Mei’s decision:

Once you move to Shanghai, you artistic growth will not simply stop but even regress. First, most Shanghai actors know little about traditional
conventions…Second, although you are several times stronger than me in presenting artistic virtuosity, you would not be able to compete with me when talking about an accurate understanding of jingju. (Qi, “Recollections” 26)

Apparently, there is a fundamental disagreement about the artistic value of theatres in Shanghai in the early-Republican era between Qi and Mei. From Qi Rushan’s perspective, he could not understand why Mei had made such a decision: first of all, Beijing historically was the birthplace and unquestionably the centre of the art jingju; second, although jingju performances gained momentum in Shanghai since the late-19th century and a number of local actors emerged with a considerable number of new plays. Shanghai-style (haipai) jingju was historically infamous for overusing novelty on stage in order to attract audience members often at cost of the fundamental artistic pursuit of jingju. For example, the term “machine-operated stage scenery” (jiguan bujing) often was used by its contemporary audience and critics to describe the scenery onstage in Shanghai-style jingju productions. When performing supernatural plays, the scenery “might appear to burst into flame and blaze into ruins before the eyes of audience” (Wichmann-Walzcak, “Reform” at Shanghai 99); third, the military conflict occurred in the early 1932 in Shanghai placed this city in the battlefront against the Japanese army. Moreover, Mei’s moving also would be at risk of ending the twenty-year consistent cooperation in Beijing between Qi and Mei.

Therefore, what was the magic of the city Shanghai that attracted this widely recognized Beijing actor to stay? In Mei’s early artistic life, why was this city so important for Mei Lanfang to (re)shape his reception of theatre art and understanding about jingju?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to trace Mei’s several direct contacts with Shanghai, especially his first visit to Shanghai in 1913. This tour was so important for Mei Lanfang as an emerging actor to gain national attention. Before this tour to Shanghai, although the nineteen-year old actor had performed in several theatre companies in Beijing, the characters which he performed were generally non-lead roles. In this tour, for the first time, he left Beijing to another Chinese city and was offered a position as the second star (erpai) in a theatre company. In Shanghai, the most commercially developed city in the early-Republican China, by working
with Wang Fengqing, an older-sheng actor and the lead role of Wang’s own company, Mei achieved a great commercial success and rapidly emerged before the public. In Mei’s autobiography *Forty-Year Life on Stage*, he recalled this tour performance in detail and entitled this chapter by “A Significant (Turning) Point” (Yige zhongyao de guangjian). The exaggerated theatre commercials in newspaper, the “modernized” theatre stage, and the Western-style dramas in Shanghai all attracted the young actor’s attention. After performing a couple of days, Mei gained an opportunity to perform the last formal piece of theatre on a program (yataixi) before the audiences. According to Mei, in Shanghai, so-called “the last formal play” is considered as the most important play on the program and the highlight of the whole night’s performance (Mei and Xu 135). A particular play usually is led by the most important star of a company. In order to ensure the commercial success of his debut as the lead star of the company, Mei paid particular attention to select a “proper” play for attracting the potential audience members. At this moment, Feng Gengguang and Li Shikan came down to Shanghai to see Mei’s performances. Under the direction of his advisors, Mei did a careful research on Shanghai audience’s taste:

The audience’s reflection revealed that two-act Ni Hongguan was most welcome. It was easy to tell from the audience’s reception that (they) could not be satisfied by the qingyi plays such as ‘Luo Huayuan,’ ‘Three Beats (san jizhang),’ ‘Meeting of the Mother and the Daughter (mu niu hui),’ (which) focusing on singing with old music and old tones. They preferred to see the ones which focus on both singing and acting, moreover, having some new and active performance skills... I was trained as a qingyi, though could sing a great number of plays, most of them were qingyi plays which only require you to hold your belly and sing out. (Mei and Xu, *Forty-Years Life* 135)

Therefore, the interesting questions are: what was the taste of the Shanghai audiences? why was it so different from the one of the audiences in Beijing? Why many well-received qingyi plays in Beijing could not satisfy the audience members here who wished to see more spectacular performances? According to Mei Lanfang, the formation of the audience’s taste connected with the popularity of various “new dramas” (xinxì) in Shanghai in the early-Republican era (186). As
Mei recalled, there were a total of three types of new dramas at that time competing with each other in Shanghai and greatly attracting the masses: the first type featured by colorful lights on stage, which attracted the audience searching for novelty; the second type of new dramas operated by Xia brothers (Xia Yuerun and Xia Yueshan) remained jingju orchestra but used modern costume and makeup and the plots of the plays also derived from the contemporary events; the third one purely consisted of the Western-style dramas and played by Ouyang Yuqian’s Spring and Willow Society (chunliu she) (Mei and Xu 186). This theatre organization formed in Japan and mainly consisted of Japanese-educated Chinese students. In 1907, they adapted and performed Mrs. Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Tokyo, which represented the birth of Chinese huaju. In Shanghai, they were performing plays such as the adaptation version of Alexandre Dumas, fils’s The Lady of the Camellias and newly created Chinese Realistic drama Lady Chen Er (chen er nainai) (Mei and Xu 186). From Mei’s own perspective, the third type of new drama was most meaningful. “The themes of the plots were certainly meaningful; the way they staged them were also realistic. After seeing them, I was very impressed. Soon, after I returned back to Beijing, I started to rehearse this kind of plays [contemporary costume new plays]” (Mei and Xu 187).

By examining the influence of the various “new dramas” on jingju performances in Shanghai in the early-Republican Shanghai, theatre scholar Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak identifies the strong connection among Shanghai-style jingju performances, the increasing market-driven theatre management, and the Western-style dramas:

During that period [from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries], Shanghai was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, and haipai [lit. the Shanghai-style] developed as market-driven performing art in competition and interplay with other regional forms of xiqu and international influences…. Haipai also pioneered ‘reformed jingju,’ jingju plays produced under the influence of playwriting and acting techniques from huaju, literally ‘spoken drama,’ the Western-inspired, realism-based Chinese theatre from that began developing in the early 20th century.
Equally important, *haipai* was characterized by the extensive acceptance of material from other sources…. Production techniques were adopted from other arts, including modern technology. (Wichmann-Walczak, “Reform” at Shanghai 98-9)

In the China’s frontier of encountering Western culture, influenced by the Western-style dramas and theatre technology, the performances featured their “extensive acceptance of material forms”, such as Western-style lighting, costuming, and scenery design. The theatrical performances tended to be highly spectacular to attract the audience seeking for novelty. For young Mei Lanfang, Shanghai’s *jingju* performances appeared so different and attractive in many aspects such as the commercial promotion, company organization, and the physical stage and scenography. According to Mei, once the theatre managers in Shanghai invited stars from Beijing to perform, the commercials would spread in newspapers and the posters would be posted at every corner of streets. “The names of new stars on newspapers usually were scarly large” (Mei and Xu 143). The posters also emphasized individual stars rather than companies. The words used to describe the actors were also extremely exaggerated and using the phrases such as “the No. one in the world” or “the best in the globe” to attract the audience members (Mei and Xu 143).

When theatre scholar Kim Suk-Young examines Mei’s photographic transformation throughout Mei’s artistic life, Kim notices that the significant role of the print capitalism played in promoting theatre actors. “The printing industry and journalism boomed in early twentieth-century urban China” and the increasing literacy rate made it possible to disseminate theatre stars such as Mei Lanfang throughout the publishing market (Kim 39). The widespread publishing industry assisted Mei as the first mass-media star of China to easily gain a wider recognition, compared to the actors such as Tang Xinpei “whose career pre-dated the age of print capitalism in China” (Kim 39). Mei’s first contact with print capitalism in Shanghai promoted his connection with it. Soon, the more developed technology of photography made Mei’s image both offstage and onstage possible to spread the media. However, when print industry spread through urban China in the early twentieth century, Mei’s onstage image was consumed by the
masses as a product of print consumerism. Mei Lanfang’s seductive onstage photo image was constructed as highly spectacular one that Kim called “the imperial concubine” (37). This highly spectacular image was not only seen in photographic images, but also deeply influenced Mei’s actual theatrical performance which I want to discuss further in this section.

When Mei and his advisors clearly noticed the fashion of Shanghai theatre, suggested by Feng Gengguang and Li Shikan, Mei decided to perform some plays which featured attractive “facial expressions” and “body gestures” for his yataixi performance. After a serious consideration, they decided to perform a martial art play titled Fortress of Mu (Mukezhai) (Mei and Xu 135).

The traditional play Fortress of Mu derived from a series of the folktales about the Yang’s Generals (yangjiajiang). The play narrated the story: Yang’s armies go to the female general Mu Guiying’s fortress to borrow her magic weapon in order to dismiss the poison gas from the northern emery of the Song Empire. Mu initially refuses to lend her treasure, and she holds captive the son of Yang’s lead general, Yang Zongbao. Finally Mu falls in love with her captive. The short piece of theatre traditionally featured the female general Mu Guiying’s excellent martial skills. However, Mei and the “Mei Party” members had a slightly different interpretation from the previous performances. According to Mei and his advisors, the key aspects of performing this particular play are not only the character’s martial skills, but also a vivid portrait of the female character’s facial expression, especially the emotion showing in Mu’s eyes (yanshen). For Mei, facial expression is so important because he believed that the female character actually pretended to be a brave general but actually is a very shy and naive young girl who longs for love (Mei and Xu 136-7). Therefore, various expressions in her eyes would help to portray her complicated personality. The emphasis on various expressions of the character’s eyes is one of artistic achievements Mei was most proud of in his artistic life. Around forty years later when Mei recalled his experience of playing Fortress of Mu in Shanghai in 1913, Mei expressed his distinct way of portraying such kind of characters in his Shanghai trip:

Honestly, my technique at that time was far from mature, wasn’t it? My capital when
I was young was my healthy body, facial appearance, voice, passion, and earnestness. On the aspect of acting, [the acting performance were] just unserious pointing and pricking without characteristics. However, on the aspect of facial expression, I can understand it since I was young. Whenever I performed plays, I always like studying the personalities and identities of characters, and try my best to act them out. This is my personal preference on this aspect. (Mei and Xu 132)

Based upon his interpretation on the character’s personality, Mei promoted the character’s facial expressions and “reformed” the relatively simple acting performance of Mu (which was believed to be just “unserious pointing and pricking”). Therefore, Mei’s portraying of acting and facial expression opened a space for him to promote “the new Fiction of the Feminine” on Republican stage.

In fact, as the author has already discussed in the previous chapter, Chinese jingju was historically an art where singing dominated over the expression through the visual dimension. And, therefore, the experienced theatre audience members usually goes to ‘listen to a theatre’” (ting xi) rather than “see one”. The boundary between qingyi and other dan role types were very distinct. Mei Lanfang once clearly addressed this point:

Before we started to learn theatre, the boundary between qingyi and huadan is extremely strict…Qingyi specializes in singing and has no strict requirement on body gesture and facial expression which looks cold like ice and snow…at that moment, audience members went to theatre, it was called ‘listening to theatre’ (ting xi), if someone said ‘go to see a theatre’, people would mock he is a layman. Some audience members, when performing the portion basically expresses singing skill, usually closed eyes, clapped the tempo, and enjoy every tone and every word…the way of performing qingyi remained for very long time. (Mei and Xu, Forty-Years Life 28)

After contacting “new dramas” in Shanghai and accepting the suggestions from the “Mei Party” members, Mei believed that conventional performing way of qingyi was merely “holding belly and singing with old music and tunes” (Mei and Xu 135). “The qingyi represents the serious,
obedient character…In their sedate and steady walk, no swaying is allowed.” (Mei and Xu 32). The conventional qingyi performance effectively constructed a fictional image of an ideal woman on Chinese stage. In the feudalistic China, the “sedate and steady walk” without swaying revealed the daily performance of what an obedient/chaste woman should be in the minds of the male audience. As historian Joshua Goldstein argues, qingyi is a role type which aims at portraying a virtuous woman and therefore she is supposed to avoid the gaze of theatergoers. (Goldstein, Drama Kings 123). Due to an emphasis of singing artistry, I would argue further that the conventional qingyi performance could certainly satisfy the experienced audience members who enjoyed the singing with their closed eyes, but could by no means satisfy a new-style Shanghai audience who expected to see novelty in the early-Republican era. By saying farewell to the typical Confucian woman, new stereotypes of the ideal woman were being constructed in the early-Republican China. The new stereotypes mainly included two types of female characters: one featured by Ibsen’s modern woman who seeks for marriage and individual freedom as often being seen in the early huaju productions such as Lady Chen Er; other featured the goodness and heroines who represent kindness and often save the declining country from the fall. Both of the two types featured by attractive looks and reflected the male’s desires.

Since the early 1910s, Mei started to fully engage in promoting a new role type huashan, which aimed at combining various skills of different dan role types. This new role type soon dominated Mei’s ancient-style costume new plays (guzhuang xinxi). The rise of huashan partially resulted from Qi Rushan’s theatrical approach as I discussed in the previous chapter. By tracing Mei’s contact with the early-Republican audience members in Shanghai, it appeared that the artistic transition from qingyi to huashan also strongly connected with the rise of capitalism which caused jingju to engage in a fierce competition with a series of hybridized theatrical forms. Under the new economic circumstance, the indigenous art and its actors had to find a new way to please the audience members in the early-Republican who wished to see novelty in this native theatre as they saw in those “new dramas.” The artistic pursuit of the traditional Chinese theatre was transforming itself to please the bourgeois audience members in order to survive in a highly
commercialized theatre market in the postcolonial China.

3.2 Mei Lanfang and His Ancient Costume Play *Beauty Defies Tyranny*

After tracing the economic motives that promoted Mei Lanfang in transforming from *qingyi* to *huashan*, in this section, I would like to now discuss the way Mei promoted the artistic transformation by imitating Western Realistic acting approach. By focusing on Mei and “Mei Party” members’ adaptation of a traditional Chinese Play *Beauty Defies Tyranny* (*yuzhou feng*) in the Republican era, I’m interested in tracing how facial expressions were emphasized in Mei’s acting since they were implementing a strategy of “mimicry” of Western Realistic/Naturalistic theatre aesthetics.

Based upon the historical scenario in Qin Dynasty (221 BCE-207 BCE), the traditional play *Beauty Defies Tyranny* portrays a fictional female character Zhao Yanrong’s courage and wisdom for justice under the pressure from her tyrannical father Zhao Gao and a fatuous emperor. It was a lesser-known play because it wasn’t well received by Chinese audiences. In Mei’s memoir, he recalled the reception of this play in his early life: “whenever I performed it, the reception was always not that good as I hoped. During my first tour to Shanghai [in 1913], I only performed it twice in totally forty-five days. To examine a play whether audiences like it or not, one should count its frequency of being staged” (Mei and Xu, *Forty-Year Life* 148). However, as Mei claimed, it was his favorite play, the one that he spent the most effort on in his life (Mei and Xu 148, 150). Therefore, what was the reason that this lesser-known and often coldly received play became Mei’s favorite one? In Mei’s memoir, he gave us some hints:

I was encouraged by my old friend Mr. Feng (Feng Youwei). He praised the play most. [He] believes that during over two thousand years feudalistic period, if there really was a woman [like her] – “neither riches nor honors could corrupt her and neither threats nor forces could subdue her” (*fugu buneng yin, weiwu buneng qu*) — it was a great miracle, wasn’t it? Miss Zhao is completely fictional character, it
cannot trace the source of the whole story ... However, … if there was really a woman like Miss Zhao, it could reveal the cruel oppression to the female in ancient aristocratic family; it would be more powerful than a similar story happened in a poor family. (Mei and Xu 148)

Encouraged by Feng, the lesser-known play revealed severe social problems and gradually drew Mei’s attention and stood out from the more traditional plays of the qingyi role type which praised women’s chastity and promoted the morality of Confucianism. The theme of play revealed a revolutionary thought: Ms. Zhao could not bear mistreatment from her corrupted father (a powerful and imperious official of the country), and she finally leads a revolution of peasants to overthrow her father’s administration. Working with Qi Rushan, they adapted the production and created a complete scenario based upon a lesser-known text for the play. 

Traditionally, the play was only staged as two short pieces of highlights. It dramatized social conflicts in the corrupted feudalistic/patriarchal family and highlighted Ms. Zhao’s courage for social justice (Qi, “Recollections” 119; Mei 148-52).

The process of adaptation started from the 1910s through the 1930s, and continued until the late-life of Mei. The process not only included completing the play’s plot, but also, more importantly, the influence of realistic Western acting approaches to Mei’s creation of a character instead of a role type:

In early days… it was completely a play based upon the singing skill. There were very simple and dry body gestures and facial expressions without changes… Why did facial expression employ so significant role in this play? Please think about this: we performed characters on the stage in the play, we are already ‘fake’. The character in this play pretends to be a mad person. If we realize she is not really mad, it would be completely depended on her facial expressions… At this point actors should fully realize the characters. First forgetting yourself as an actor, and become the same as

13 As I introduced in the previous portion of this thesis, the creation of jingju plays is a highly collaborative and improvisational process. Texts for performance are not always with complete narrative structures as we see in the traditional performance of Beauty Defies Tyranny and many other cases.
the character in the play, therefore you could perform the role profoundly and vividly.

(Mei and Xu 149-55)

In this statement from Mei’s 1951 memoir, Mei recalled his laboratory work of performing Beauty Defies Tyranny beginning from 1913 through the 1930s to its revival on Chinese stage after World War II. It reveals the deep influence of Western Naturalistic/Realistic acting approaches on Mei’s understanding of jingju acting. According to him, the function of facial expression is for delivering a character’s emotional changes. The actor should forget himself as a performer but believe he is “the same as the character” in order to “perform the role profoundly.” This idea is typical of Stanislavsky’s acting approach, which believes the distinction between actor and character should disappear for audience. Such an approach is fundamentally different from the acting approach of jingju performance where jingju actors use conventions of a certain role type to construct characters as I discussed in the previous section.

Since around 1907, Realistic theatre, the first genre of Western-style drama imported to China, spread to Chinese new stages and throughout circles of Western/Japanese educated students. From the adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin performed by Ouyang Yuqian’s Spring and Willow Society (chunliu she) in 1907 in Tokyo to the creation of Caoyu’s Leiyu (Thunderstorm) in the early 1930s, the Western-realism-based theatrical genre widely spread in the Republican China. In the competition with the native theatrical form, the exotic one gradually became one of the two most significant Chinese theatre forms. Throughout the early-Republican era, Mei and “Mei Party” members started to intensively confront Western-style drama in China and their overseas tours. For instance, in Mei’s first tour to Shanghai in 1913, he saw “the first French realistic play” Alexandre Dumas, fils’s The Lady of the Camellias played by Spring and Willow Society (Mei and Xu 186); during Mei’s first two tours in Japan in 1919 and 1924, Mei was impressed by Shinpa and Shingeki plays there, both had a direct connection with Western-style Realistic drama (Yoshida 93). Early in 1924, when Yu Shangyuan studied Western drama in United States, he started to introduce Stanislavsky’s acting theory to China14. Zhang Pengchun15

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14 Yu Shangyuan’s anthology of theatre reviews, published in 1924, started to introduce Western drama theory to China. Yu served as counselor in Mei’s US tour in 1930. He joined Mei’s first tour to USSR in 1935.
(1892-1957), one of the close friends of Mei and Qi, also fully engaged in promoting Stanislavsky’s acting approach to the Chinese circle of theatre. In order to clarify the different aesthetic pursuits between Western Realistic/Naturalistic drama and Chinese jingju, it is crucial to address the aesthetic aims of Realism/Naturalism and Stanislavsky’s acting approach here as compared to jingju.

Alexandre Dumas fils argued that theatre is a reflection of truth in life. For Dumas fils, the work of artists is for organizing customs, manners, and social conventions, what he called “the second kind of truth”, for constructing “the first truth” which is the “absolute truth” in life (Dumas fils 720). As a dramatist of Naturalism, Emile Zola in his 1880 essay *Naturalism on the Stage* argued that naturalistic art should faithfully illustrate “nature, beings, and things” (Zola 701). A dramatist has an obligation for searching for “impersonal” truth, to observe and record with the same detachment as scientists and “compliers” of human data (Zola 702). A scientific representation of the physical world which Realistic/Naturalistic art pursued is clearly different from a refined and exaggerated life which jingju aims at presenting. Artists of Realism believe truth can be attained and revealed through their direct impersonal observations. On the contrary, jingju artists believe that, rather than the realistic appearance, the symbolic conventions and presentations perhaps best could represent the world.

In the early decades of the 20th century, on the European continent, the influence of Realism gradually shifted from emphasizing the aesthetic aims and the dramatic structure of a text to shaping the methods of acting on theatre stage. Stanislavsky started to draw attention from the rest of the world, which had deeply shaped acting approaches in the world. In regard to the importance of “psychological inner drives” (mind, will and feeling) for an actor’s impersonation, Stanislavsky explains in *An Actor’s Work*:

> Each of you, one way or another, would try to get into the brain, the heart, the wants

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15 Zhang was one of founding fathers of Chinese huaju. Early in the late 1910s, Zhang started to introduce and direct Realistic productions of Gogol, Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw in Nankai School in Tianjin. Zhang served as a counselor for Mei, participating in both Mei’s US and USSR tours. He started to introduce Stanislavsky’s theory to China in the early 1930s. Zhang had a BA from Clark University, MA and Ed. D from Columbia University.
of the role, to stimulate you own emotion memory, create representation, a personal appraisal of the life of the character, to excite your will-feeling. You would reach into the heart of the role with the feelers of your own heart, striving towards it with your own psychological inner drives. (Stanislavsky 283)

Stanislavsky believes actors should be skilled observers of reality and are able to represent characters through inner lives. A crucial technique for actors is to emotionally identify themselves with the characters they impersonate in order to minimize psychological distances between actors and characters. His acting principle moves the pursuit of Realistic/Naturalistic drama in a new depth: from a precise representation of the physical reality to a faithful portrait of the character’s inner psychological world.

During the intensive confrontation of Chinese intellectuals and theatre actors with Western Realistic/Naturalistic drama, Mei’s theatrical thought was deeply influenced by Western Realistic drama. One obvious influence of Western-style drama on Mei’s art could be seen in his experiments of “Contemporary Costume New Plays” (shizhuang xinxi) as I discussed in the previous chapter. Mei’s confidence in using Realistic acting approaches to “reform” Chinese jingju seemed to be confirmed in his direct meeting with Stanislavsky in the Soviet Union in 1935. Mei unreservedly admitted his appreciation to Stanislavsky that “he insisted on Realistic acting throughout life and rejected the formalism which betrays life” (Mei, “Memorizing Stanislavsky” 342). Mei also recognized Stanislavsky’s influence on him: “His (Stanislavsky’s) enlightenment and encouragement were deeply stamped on my mind. After I came back, I’m always thinking about his creation in art and his assiduous attitude towards art” (Mei 342). Mei’s 1956 essay How I Play in My Two Favorite Operas apparently reveals Stanislavsky’s “deeply stamped” influence on his acting approach, when Mei summarized how he played the queen in The Drunken Beauty (guifei zuijiu):

The actor must keep in mind that here is a noble lady of the count getting drunk and forgetting herself in her loneliness and grief, not a woman of loose conduct behaving wildly after drinking. Only by interpreting it this way can one convey the spirit and
produce a beautiful drama. (Mei, “Reflection” 33)

Mei’s “reform” to the traditional play *Beauty Defies Tyranny* uncovered their mimicry to Western Realistic drama in new depths. By tracing the “reform” of Mei Lanfang and “Mei Party” members to *Beauty Defies Tyranny*, these questions emerge: is Stanislavsky’s acting approach a universal one which should apply to all kinds of theatrical performance, especially *jingju* which traditionally uses the convention of role type to construct characters? Why couldn’t Mei’s “reformed” *Beauty Defies Tyranny* be well received by Chinese audiences? And why did Mei sometimes have to restore the traditional performing method that only featured several highlights instead of a complete play (Mei and Xu, *Forty-Year Life* 150)? The restored performance conventions shows the significance of Chinese principles of performance structure, which often works against the forced imposition of foreign theatrical elements.

Role type acts an intermediary working between actors and characters in *jingju* performances. The existence of the role type system opens a space for actors to display their virtuosity-based performance convention of a certain role type. It is fundamentally different from the performance way of Western Realistic drama which requires the psychological distance between actors and characters become minimized. The integrated dramatic plot and the delayed disclosure of character’s personalities are often redundant for a Chinese performer-centered theatrical form like *jingju*. This is because everything in Chinese performance has been set up for letting audience members concentrate on appreciating the performer’s virtuosity. For example, the role types always work as shortcuts for audience members to obtain an immediate understanding about the personalities of its characters. In a word, Mei Lanfang’s imitation of Stanislavsky’s acting approach reveals the mimicry of Western dominant cultural mode undermines Chinese performance’s internal principle of performance structure.

3.3 China’s Most Beautiful “Woman”: Mei’s Gender Performance Onstage

In this section, I will use Mei Lanfang’s adapted performance of the traditional play *The
*Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* (*Ni Hong Guan*) as an example to discuss how Mei constructed female impersonation onstage and what I called “the process of visualizing femininity” in order to invite the gaze of voyeurism.

In Qi Rushan’s memoir, he once shared his experiences of appreciating dramas in Paris in the early 1910s. The experience in Europe formed Qi Rushan’s problematic reception of theatre: European dramas are graceful while traditional Chinese ones are “filthy.” The problematic reception initiated his strong desire of reforming Chinese theatres into “graceful” ones:

I went to Europe several times … the mythological plays there were all very rehearsed and graceful. After coming back to see our plays, [I] can say there was no mythological plays but plays of ghosts and demons … they had no graceful meaning. It should be noted: the myth plays are not superstitious but contain the instrumental power for the society. [I] also saw the Western romantic plays, though talking about erotic things, were still very graceful and not filthy at all. After seeing Chinese romantic plays, no one qualified for being called a “romantic” play. All of them were filthy. (Qi, “Recollections” 98)

According to Qi, traditional Chinese plays were filthy in a comparison to Western dramas which he saw in Europe. The strong discontent with Chinese drama caused him start to engage in creating “ancient-costume new plays” and adapting traditional plays for Mei Lanfang, in order to create some “graceful” plays for Chinese audience (Qi 98-9). Although we do not know exactly what Qi means by the term “filthy,” the traditional Chinese plays did often contain something which could be interpreted as “low-browsed” ones. The language used by the composers of *xiqu* lyrics was often tasteless. And they indeed sometimes used inelegant jokes to tease audience members, which often conveyed sexual allusions. A great number of *jingju* plays reveal the romance between poor scholars and prostitutes, which may be also thought by Qi Rushan as “filthy” theme. However, potential cultural and language barrier most likely also shaped Qi’s reception to Western drama. Were the Western romantic dramas or mythological plays purely graceful without any inelegant connotation? Modern Western dramas often reveal the seamy side...
of human nature which was highlighted after the Industrial Revolution. The themes of the plays also often reveal the life of prostitute, the spread of venereal diseases, and the immoral relationship among family members. Are these plays “filthy” or not? Most importantly, under Qi Rushan’s direction, did the audience members of Mei Lanfang’s “reformed” jingju plays perceive Mei female impersonation as purely “graceful” performances without any sexual allusions? In the 1930s, one Republican theatre critic gave us some hints to clarify why Mei Lanfang could achieve a great commercial success:

In general, whether an actor’s appearance is good or bad depends half on nature and half on skill. Even if your talents at makeup and costuming are superb, if [an actor] is born with a face beyond help, even after being made up, he is still ugly. In the past, people were not so attentive to dan actors’ looks. In terms of appearance, famous dan like Chen Delin and Tian Cuifeng simply could not help how awful they were. If they were around today, no matter how great they were as singers, they would never be popular. (Jiazi, “The Makeup of Dan Role” 19, Goldstein, Drama Kings 247)

In another review article titled “What Mei Lanfang Tells Us about Changes in Audience Psychology” published in 1928, another critic Huo Gong noticed the style change of male-dan performances between Mei Lanfang and his past generation. He explained why Mei Lanfang could gain popularity on the Republican stage: “what can all [Mei’s] these tricks attract big audiences and excite people? Naturally, because they are overwhelming and carry a little sexy flavor.” (Huo Gong, “The Psychology of the Audience” Goldstein, Drama Kings 249)

The first review identified a significant change of Chinese audience’s reception to the male-dan performance of jingju before and during the early-Republican era. That was: for a dan player, if he did not have a seductive appearance onstage before the Republican era, he still would be able to gain his popularity due to his excellence in singing. However, during the Republican era, with the rise of the new-style male-dan performers such as Mei Lanfang, an attractive onstage appearance became the most important qualification for a dan actor, even if for an actor who plays a qingyi. The second critic went further and explicitly uncovers the nature of
the Republican *dan* actor’s “tricks” to appeal to the audience members with the sexual allusions. Once again, I want to emphasize the two significant roles— the print capitalism and the construction of the “gaze”— in promoting the crucial change of female impersonation on Chinese stage: an emphasis of singing virtuosity had been replaced by a stress on facial expression, body gestures, modern costuming, and makeup. Through the process what I called constructing “the fictions of the feminine,” the attractive appearances of female impersonators on print media and stage certainly open more potential for inviting the gaze from the public and therefore potentially ensured the commercial success in a more competitive theatre market in the early-Republican era.

As theatre scholar Tian Min points out, in traditional Chinese “appreciation of female impersonation was based just as much on the actor’s sexual dynamics as on his artistic quality” (“Greek Tragedy in Hebei Bangzi” 82). Historically, women were cast out of Chinese stage in the early 18th century certainly because revealing women’s (sexual) beauty onstage was regarded as immoral. Although it is so true that Chinese female impersonation did historically connect with eroticism at varying degrees, for female impersonators, the requirements for good looks and artistic (and sexual appealing) techniques were really varying among different female role types before the Republican era. Mei’s “reformed” *jingju* plays did improve the literary grace of Chinese plays through language; however, Mei’s female impersonation was not able to disconnect his character with eroticism. From the viewpoint of the theatre critic Huogong who witnessed the style shifts between the two generations, Mei’s female impersonation actually reinforced the potential sexual allusion.

I propose to use the term “visualizing femininity” to interpret the strategy of how Mei’s onstage gender performance reinforced the feminine sexual beauty on his male body and therefore successfully attracted the male gaze from the public. Mei’s construction of “the fictions of the feminine” fulfilled through almost every visual aspects such as makeup, costuming, most importantly, body gestures (*shenduan*), and facial expression. Mei’s well portrait of the implicit sexual fantasies was recorded by one of his contemporary critics Miu Gong, when Mei played
one of his most popular play *The Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* in 1928:

Each scene clearly presents [Xin Wenli’s wife, Ni Dong Fang-the female lead] as dignified and solemn. But as soon as she sees Wang Bodang, her feminine beauty began to stir. Finally, it overcomes her chastity. Only Mei can perform such subtleties to capture their deepest essence. After seeing Wang Bodang, [Dong Fang’s] countenance abruptly changes …. She repeatedly thinks to kill herself with a spear, yet keeps hesitating. At this moment, the two concepts of chastity and carnal lust do battle in her breast. Mei performs such moment of faltering with consummate skills.

(Miu “Zhongyuan guan Mei”; Goldstein 250)

The *Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* narrated a romantic story that a widow named Ni Dongfang falls in love with her military opponent Wang Bodang whose side killed Dongfang’s husband Xin Wenli in the battlefield. The play is one of most well-received plays in Mei’s career. Early in 1913 when Mei performed in Shanghai for the first time, Mei started to realize that the audiences in Shanghai always had a particular interest in seeing the Mei-played The *Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* (Mei and Xu, *Forty-Year Life* 135). By the late-1920s, Mei and Qi Rushan had paid a great effort in adapting this traditional play. Jingju artist and educator Xie Shoushan recalled the style shift led by Mei Lanfang’s “reform”:

Dongfang in the original two-act performance of *Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* kept singing throughout the play. The current one, Dong Fang leads the first act, while the servant girl leads the second one. This fashion of performance was led by Wanhua [Mei Lanfang]. The reason why [Mei did] such change is that his personality does not fit Dong Fang very well. (Mei and Xu 110)

In this “reformed” version, Mei played both Dong Fang in the first act as a martial *dan* then performed the servant girl of Dong Fang in the second act as *huashan*. The performance convention was shifted in order to fit the actor’s personality. I would argue that Mei made the dramaturgical change in the “reformed” version of *The Mountain Pass of Ni Hong* according to Western dramaturgical principle of casting rather than traditional Chinese performance
convention. The lead role-driven convention is particularly important due to Chinese theatre’s emphasis of coherency of actor’s presentation of their virtuosities. Chinese do not pay particular attention to testify whether an actor’s own personality fits for a particular character or not, at least not at a degree what Western directors often do, once again, because the traditional Chinese one really does not emphasize minimizing the psychological space between actors and characters. By restricting Dong Fang’s singing virtuosity and implicitly remitting the martial dan’s masculine presentation of martial art in the original performance, the “reformed” version allowed the lovely servant girl to successfully transform the play into a romantic tone.

The critic Miu Gong’s review of The Mountain Pass of Ni Hong once again shows that the female character constructed by Mei Lanfang did not always gracefully reveal a purely sincere love as Qi wished. The change of the female character’s countenance played a key role of conveying the “carnal lust” which invited gaze from the audience members and further ensured the commercial attraction in this particular performance. By examining two theatre reviews from Mei’s contemporary critics, it appears that “a little sexy flavor” created by Mei’s construction of “the fictions of the feminine” did help Mei to invite the gaze of voyeurism from the audience members. When a seductive appearance became the most important criteria for a dan-actor on the Republican stage, it proved that Qi Rushan’s jingju was not really interested in disconnecting female impersonation with sexual allusion as he self-claimed.

I would argue that the socio-economic dynamics in Republican era played a key role in forming Mei’s distinct style of female impersonation. The past jingju performance could not satisfy the new audiences any longer, whose reception had been shaped by Western culture and theatre technology and its products in urban China. The spread of Ibsen’s style modern drama and Hollywood films had constructed the new ideal female icons in China’s urban frontier city like Shanghai. The popularity of print industry and journalism promoted a requirement of a good appearance for a female impersonator. The wave of constructing modern nationhood determined that Chinese artists had to bid farewell the past performance which were regarded as “low-browed” and did not represent the “civil” and “modern” nation in the eyes of the
Republican elites. Mei Lanfang’s “reforms” to jingju art performance revealed Chinese intellectual’s cultural ambition and diffidence on the same time in the turbulent colonial context. If Mei’s dominancy on domestic stage still could not fully terminate the leading Chinese intellectual’s attacks to the native artistic form, a value confirmation from the West would surely become an accredited certificate for its artists and intellectual supporters to promote the reformed jingju as the qualified “national drama”.
Chapter Four:
An “Exotic Dance”: Mei Lanfang’s Presence in New York City

In this chapter, I would like to focus on Mei’s touring performances on Broadway in 1930. As one of Chinese theatre’s most influential intercultural communications in the past century, Mei Lanfang’s touring performances in the US successfully attracted attention from the West to this originally lesser-known theatrical performance. My questions are: what were the reasons that caused Mei and the “Mei Party” members to have had a consistent interest in performing this unique Chinese theatrical art to the rest of the world? How were Mei’s jingju performances staged before the Western audiences? What was at risk for traditional Chinese theatre when Western critic used the term “exotic dance” to describe Mei’s performances?

To begin the chapter, I want to share a quotation from Qi Rushan’s memoir when he recalled how the Western perception to Chinese theatre played a key role in initiating their desire of creating ancient-costume new plays in the mid-1910s:

Euro-American people didn’t go to see Chinese drama – in the Qing period, Westerners almost felt shameful if attending Chinese theater – I think it was a misfortune. In the fourth year of the Republican era [1915], I and Mei created a play titled by Chang’e Flying to the Moon (chang’e bengyue). The first half of the play still used the old formula, [while] the second half utilized extremely clean and magnificent scenery, invented ancient-style costume, and was added several dancing gestures referring to the ancient dances. Mei performed these dancing gestures beautifully, after the performances, gained praises from the media. One friend Wu Zhenxiu told me that “[We] have had a play for foreigners since now!” (Qi, US Tour 5)

The association for US-educated Chinese students soon invited Mei to play this Chang’e piece to the US Minister to China, Paul Reinsch and other foreign audience members. According to Qi, the performance was well received, and it was the first time that a Western celebrity saw a
Inspired by the success, Qi and Mei soon created several plays such as *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*), *The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers* (*Tiannü sanhua*), and *Mrs. Shangyuan* (*Shangyuan furen*), and inserted various dancing pieces into those plays. According to Qi Rushan, those plays were always warmly received by the Western celebrities, such as the French Governor of Vietnam, the US Governor of Philippines, and Sweden Crown Prince Gustavus Adolrhs. “Whenever Mei performed, Euro-American guests must come to see them” (5-6). Early in 1915, a strong desire to attract Westerners to see traditional Chinese theatre and gained recognition from them formed in the minds of the “Mei Party” members. For the “Mei Party” members, most of whom were the West/Japan-educated, it was a misfortune for Westerners that they did not attend traditional Chinese drama. Therefore, by referring to “ancient dances” and “ancient-style” costume, they started to create a kind of “Chinese” drama and that eventually earned the foreign audience’s applause. Traditional Chinese theatre’s intercultural communication perhaps was implemented by a modeling process from this beginning stage. The modeling process is that Chinese artists find out what the taste of Western audience members is and then create a kind of “Chinese” plays to fit their perceptions.

By briefly tracing Mei’s US tour in 1930, I would argue that the highly spectacular jingju performance was designed and presented before American audience members by this modeling process, which reflected a failed intercultural negotiation with an imperialistic power. In 1921 when the “Mei Party” members began to plan this tour, a series of important questions for them were all unclear, such as “which role types should be featured?” “Which country should they choose?” and “which play should they perform?” (Qi, “Recollections” 133) For Mei Lanfang, his decision to visit the USA was not his personal choice, but a well-schemed diplomatic event designed by the intellectuals. According to Qi, there was a debate among their counselors about which country Mei’s troupe should visit:

Most Chinese people advocated visiting Paris. They thought, for an artistic group, if you could achieve success in Paris, you certainly would be successful wherever you want to go afterwards. Later, when asking foreigners, they said that it was the situation before
World War One…After the war, the trend of world totally changes. For an artistic group, if you could gain popularity on Broadway in New York City, it would be no problem for you to go anywhere in the world afterwards. (Qi, “Recollections” 135)

Clearly, the potential economic capacity and the power of cultural influence were seriously considered when they made their decision about which country should be chosen to perform. An intention to gain the commercial success and cultural recognition was apparent throughout Mei’s preparation stage. Which kind of role type can best express art of jingju? Should a male-dan (a female role-type played by a male actor) be a signifier of jingju in contemporary context, or should it be the older-sheng and martial-sheng which were recognized by most Chinese people at that time? For this significant issue, Qi Rushan explained his thought:

Just considering which role can attract foreigners, dan is still much better than older-sheng or martial-sheng. Take older sheng as example…the cotton yarn hat, the huge beard, the python coat, and the jade belt, from Chinese perspective, are very glorious and honorable, but for Westerners, all of them seem extremely ridiculous. Why do the wings of the hat shake ceaselessly? Why is the jade belt made by a large wood ring which we think it is a belt but it is actually much larger than our waistline? (Qi, “Recollections” 142-5)

According to Qi’s logic, male-dan has more similarities with Western drama (such as male actors also played female roles in Shakespeare’s time; dan’s costumes were more understandable by the Westerner, and so on) (Qi 144-5). He therefore advocated choosing dan over sheng. However, though they still could not answer the question “what is Chinese theatre?” Qi and his colleagues were going to create a kind of “Chinese theatre” which can satisfy the tastes of the Westerners. No matter that the older sheng’s jade belt or martial sheng’s flags were all the native and traditional properties that actually became the objects that Mr. Qi scoffed. He was always worried that there were some “weird things” remaining from jingju that would scare the civilized and naïve Western audiences. Thinking over Mr. Qi’s claims, his logic was not different from “May Fourth” intellectuals over a decade ago: all of Chinese theatre’s differences from the
Western drama should be abrogated or at least should be covered by fig leaves preventing the Western friends being scared.

Even though they had bent over backwards to please the Western audience, Mei’s debut in Washington still received very cold reception. Due to the unfamiliarity of Chinese theatre, many American spectators exited before the ending (Scott 108). This predicament forced Mei’s company to reselect and adapt their plays, and shorten the time of each performance to fit Western audience’s convention (compared with usual six to eight hour jingju performance, Mei’s performance in USA was shortened to two hours) (Qi, US Tour 57). Zhang Pengchun, a Yale-educated scholar, suggested that, an attractive female Chinese student give a brief introduction to jingju at the beginning of each show. After her introduction, she always cunningly reminded the American audience “Chinese jingju is the essence of classic theatre, and only the smartest and well-educated persons can appreciate the art. It can never be understood by silly men who cannot stay here long” (Qi, US Tour 59; Tong, Mei Lanfang 116). These words satisfied vanity of upper and middle class audience, but meanwhile reflected that even those “adapted” jingju plays were still very difficult for American people to appreciate.

In fact, in order to attract American attention, Qi didn’t only debate with Chinese jingju fans to obtain support for Mei Lanfang’s male-dan performance but also carefully prepared the program for the oversea performance. Throughout the 1920s, nearly all of Mei’s important plays were always highlighted by magnificent dance pieces, such as the “Feather Dance” in Xishi, the “Dance of Cups and Plates” in Aunt Ma Celebrating the Birthday (Magu xianshou), “The Dance of the Sword” in Farewell My Concubine (Bawang bieji), and “The Flower Dance” in The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers (Tiannü sanhua). And these danceFeatured plays became the most frequent pieces which were purposely emphasized in his oversea tours. In Qi Rushan’s writings about Mei’s performance to the US, he noted the process of selecting programs with Zhang Pengchun:

Mr. Zhang said: ‘The play Killing the Tiger General (Cihu) must be performed, because it not only portrays the rising and decline of Ming dynasty, but also the facial
expressions of Zhen E (the lead female role) are various. Even for people who are not familiar with the language, they still could understand it.’ I totally agreed with his words, and soon adapted *Killing the Tiger General*. He also said: ‘…Could we select Mei’s dance pieces out and independently stage them? If so a few minutes dance could let audience be energetic and the show become more active.’ I therefore re-organized all kinds of dance and made a list (Qi, *US Tour* 29-30).

On the list, there were totally ten pieces of dance created and adapted by Qi Rushan (Qi 30). These dance pieces were played in every later performance in the US and finally ensured his success. In the US, the program of Mei’s troupe’s performance consisted of four pieces of play per night, which usually includes two regular opera excerpts (*zhezixi*) led by Mei (either traditional plays or ancient-costume new ones), one dance piece, and one play featured by martial arts performed by non-lead roles in the troupe. The regular opera excerpts which were performed on Broadway only included four newly adapted plays, which were *Killing the Tiger General, Fen River Bay, The Drunken Queen*, and *Farewell My Concubine*. Qi Rushan himself also unreservedly admitted, the parts which could earn the stormiest applause from American audience were always Mei’s dance pieces and the plays such as *Killing the Tiger General* which vividly portray the beauty and wisdom of young girls (Qi 149). In Mei’s US tour, American audiences were attracted by the magnificent visual appearance. Some New York critics such as John Martin even described Chinese drama as an “exotic dance” and Mei as a “Chinese dancer”. (Martin 119) In a review which is titled by “The Dance: An Exotic Art,” Martin described how important the magnificent visual expressions maintained the interests of American audience in Mei’s presentation: “If the music is strange, it is inclined to grate on unaccustomed ears, at least the dancing, the acrobatics, the gestures (in spite of its stylization) awake at once understanding and an admiration that is little short of amazement” (Martin 119). After they came back to China when Qi collected American comments on Mei’s art, nearly all focused on praising Mei’s attractive appearance, various facial expressions, and magnificent body gestures. However, there were few American audience comments on the singing virtuosity of Mei Lanfang (Qi, *US Tour*
Chinese American historian Tong Te-Kong narrated the great success Mei achieved in his opening performance at the Forty-ninth Street Theatre on Broadway on February 17th, 1930:

The light of the theatre became dark, with a burst of pleasant Oriental orchestral music, the curtain opened. Behind it appeared a glorious Chinese embroidered curtain…the audience applauded; because they knew that Columbus’s searching for such kind of luxury goods caused the discovery of America…

The plot developed, the audiences became more focused…Everyone seemingly followed Marco Polo to visit Peking. They all seemingly had midsummer night’s dreams. (Tong, Mei Lanfang 117-8)

If we just evaluate the show based upon its effect of performance, Mei was absolutely successful. However, the play Mei performed here was not that *Fen River Ray (Fen He Wan)* which is familiar and favored by Chinese people, but *A Suspicious Shoe* adapted by Qi Rushan. Mei successfully brought the Western audience to Marco Polo’s China instead of the real one. The Venetian adventurer’s unreliable book, *The Travels*, established a stereotype in terms of writing “the East” which implicitly disclosed the “East” was discovered by the West and was framed and consumed by the Western discourse. Mei’s performance did not reject but reinforced the Westerners’ constructive imagination of “the Oriental” by highlighting the fancy xiang embroidered silks and the pleasant orchestral music. Several review of American critics further reflected this fantasy when they were appreciating this “Oriental art.” On New York Times, theatre critic Herbert Matthews wrote:

The theatre is taken more seriously in China it is in the Occident. It is a cherished tradition, a definite part of social life. A millennium ago the ancestors of the present Chinese watched *the same plays* Mei gives today, with the actors observing *the same conventions* and wearing *the same costumes*. (120)

J. Brooks Atkinson further added “…most of which (fables) come out of the repertory of Chinese plays from many dynasties and as far back as 255 B.C.…Nothing that even the extremes of
stylization in our own experimental theatres have accomplished prepares us for the utter remoteness—again, the pure art—of Chinese drama” (109). In the eyes of both theatre critics, the repertoire, costumes, performance conventions of the Chinese theatre played by Mei Lanfang, though had experienced thousands years time, still remained the same almost without any changes. Everything on Mei’s stages was completely primitive, remote, and historically fixed, which well matched their notion about what an “authentic” or “pure” Chinese art should be. Their fantasies well reflected that constructed “Chineseness” was all about the Westerners’ perceptions: the lengthy history, the mysterious culture, and the seductive women.

I would argue that, in a failed negotiation with the Western power, an art from the colonized was only able to be appreciated within the Westerner’s own cognitive and aesthetic system. Otherwise, we probably would not see such kind of advice often given by average American audience members to Mei Lanfang:

I have seen your performance several times, but I didn’t see your hands until today’s Revolt Of The Fishing Folk (Da Yu Sha Jia). I have never seen such beautiful hands before! Though you have a pair of such wonderful hands, why do you always cover them by sleeves? I advise you to wear a short-sleeve coat next time, so you can keep your hands out, and let us see them. (Qi, US Tour 147)

Another lady who had seen Drunk Queen asked:
‘The emperor made an appointment with you. You have cleaned the room, prepared dishes and wine, but he didn’t come. You were very sad, weren’t you?... But I think you can send someone to invite him. He must come, because he loves you very much.’ Another lady who saw Revolt of The Fishing Folks came to the green room after the show. She asks: ‘it is a pity that the young girl gets into big trouble and flees. Where does she flee to? I want to know that very much.’ After knowing that girl finally made very good life, the lady was satisfied. (Qi, US Tour 147)

The questions of American spectators were quite understandable. Though Mei’s plays have been adapted into forms which could be more legible by the Western audiences, the great difference
between the Eastern and Western dramas was still an obstacle for appreciate the overall aesthetic aspects like experienced Chinese audience members would. Nearly all plays Mei performed here were “opera excerpts” of jingju which have dominated Chinese stage since late-Qing. So called “opera excerpts” were originally some pieces of complete plays, and then were selected out and presented independently due to excellent singing, dance or martial arts. The simple and inconsistent plots of opera excerpts were clearly different from the Western drama’s cause and effect structure. The use of singing and dance to express the nature of characters and promote the development of story is even different from the Western theatre conventions. American experiences of appreciating the Western drama caused them mainly focused on the visual appearance and very simple plots rather than what many scholars believed (including myself) the most significant part of jingju —art of the singing. We had to calmly examine the Westerner’s rave reviews for “Chinese theatre”, because what they appreciated in this account was not the traditional plays like Fen River Bay which were familiar to Chinese people, but a series of A Suspicious Shoe which were firstly adapted by the director and then misinterpreted by the Western audience.

Critical theorist Susan Bennett argues that: “both an audience’s reaction to a text (or performance) and the text (performance) itself are bound within cultural limits” (101). The cultural limits always shape the interactive relationship between culture and performance and finally influenced the reception of audience members. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert discuss this issue further in an intercultural theatrical performance, a non-Western form of theatre frequently fails in its negotiation with the imperialistic power and tends to cater to the culturally restricted reception of Western audience members: “Performance are often highly spectacular with emphasis placed on the aesthetic and formal qualities of the mise-en-scène” (Lo and Gilbert 39). And such performance only could be interpreted within the logic of the Western system of aestheticism (Lo and Gilbert 39). Qi Rushan was fully aware of the culturally restricted reception of Western audience members. His inclination to create a highly spectacular mise-en-scène appeared when Qi started to select the program for Mei’s US tour:
The research of native theatre scholars mainly focuses on the skill of singing, however, it is not the strength of national drama. Different nations have different ways to sing [...] when foreigners go to listen to the singing of Chinese theatre for the first time, most of them believe it is the roaring of animals [...] what are the most noticeable differences between Chinese theatre and Western one? In general, they are the (picturized) composition and acting movement (Qi, *US Tour* 67).

This overemphasis on the visual of Mei’s program was realized by one American critic who was familiar with the Oriental art. In a panel commenting on Mei’s performance, Stark Young frankly pinpointed that Mei’s selection of plays reflected an inclination to satisfy the tastes of American audience members (Qi 108). As Lo and Gilbert insightfully pinpoint, the historically based inequity between the West and “the Orient” may inform the presence of a “non-Western” theatre form in the West and position it as a production for the dominant culture’s consumption (Lo and Gilbert 39). This is one concern of Said’s that the colonized “transforms” itself to cater to the image and doctrines of Orientalism, the constructed “Other” in colonial discourse (Said 325).

I suggest examining Mei’s US tour referring to a crucial colonial context: since May Fourth era (1915-early 1920s), some May Fourth intellectuals started to advocate abrogating traditional Chinese theatre in order to promote Western Realistic drama in China. The desire to gain value confirmation for *xiqu* from the West simultaneously (early on 1921) emerged in the mind of intellectuals like “Mei Party” members who hoped to preserved *xiqu* by “reforming” it in the new cultural context. A potential confirmation of value from the West for *xiqu* was not only to spread its international recognition, but also, more importantly, to possibly gain permission for *xiqu*’s existence from some native intellectual elites and compete with its newborn Western-style counterpart (*huaju*, literarily, “spoken drama”) in China. Therefore, due to a strong desire for achieving success in the US, the adjustment to Chinese *jingju* based on the tastes of potential American audiences became an ironic choice in Mei’s US tour. As historian Joshua Goldstein points out, the overall tour in the United States appeared as “tactical
Orientalism” (Goldstein, *Mei Lanfang and Nationalization* 409). Mei Lanfang’s Chinese jingju was shaped for matching potential American audience’s imagination of “Oriental art”. Nancy Yunhwa Rao compares Mei Lanfang’s performances to the phenomena of “chinoiserie” and argues that Mei’s performances echoed the polished, remote, delicate, and placid “Chineseness” in the Western dominant discourse (Rao 144). Rather than the traditional aural means, the emphasis of expression through visual dimensions (dance, facial expression, and body gesture) obviously helped its Western audience members avoid potential barriers to appreciation. Rather than the performance of older-sheng or martial-sheng, male-dan’s female appearance itself reinforced the “feminized” stereotype of “the Orient”. American critics’ compliments of Mei’s attractive body movements and facial expressions unconsciously revealed the Western gaze to the Mei’s feminized Oriental body onstage. Mei’s US tour ensured the palatability of the performance to Western audience members; however, at the same time, Qi and Mei catered to a colonial system which invited Chinese performance into a system as a feminized role.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) It should be noted that Mei’s gender performances both onstage and offstage were crucial for promoting Chinese jingju to the US society. Joshua Goldstein discussed Mei’s gender performances in his article “Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of the Peking Opera, 1912-1930”. Onstage, Mei’s female-like body attracted the gazes from American audience members. On the contrary, Mei emerged as a “modern” international citizen and a “civil” male artist offstage. The offstage image purposely distinguished Mei from past male-dan actors who engaged in commercialized homosexual affairs and successfully convinced American audiences that the cross-gender performance in China is purely conventional which does not relate to anything disgraceful from the Western perspective.
Conclusion

From 1912 to the 1930s, Chinese jingju experienced a crucial transition which was not simply reflected by the up and down of two role types: male-dan represented by Mei Lanfang gradually earned international reputation and replaced the older-sheng in dominating the Chinese stage. Mei’s artistic practice revealed a shift in theatre aesthetics, and jingju’s performance started to be shaped by the Western theoretical thought in this new cultural context. Under the direction of “Mei Party” members, Mei’s “reformed” jingju performance emphasized an actor’s emotional and physical interactions with each other based upon the logic of cause and effect, rather than traditional way of jingju performance that actors “take turns” to display their virtuosity; with regards to the shift of artistic expression of dan-performance, Mei paid a great attention to develop this art through visual dimension rather than the conventional aural one, which could be seen in his adaptation of Mu Family’s Fortress; in regard to the way of constructing characters, Mei’s laboratory works such as Beauty Defies Tyranny borrowed Stanislavsky’s acting approach which believed that actors should minimize the psychological distance between actors and characters in order to seamlessly impersonate their characters, which is fundamentally different from the traditional jingju performing methods that actors constructed characters by presenting refined and exemplified conventions of a certain role type. When Chinese intellectuals like “Mei Party members” adopted a strategy of “mimicry” to “reform” their native art, it discloses a fact that they regarded the Western one as an “advanced” theatrical form over the native without seriously considering the fundamental difference between the Western and Chinese aesthetic aims and the ways of presentation. When the “hybrid” theatre was presented before American audiences, Mei’s attractive performance of dance pieces and facial expression unfortunately reinforced that stereotype of the “feminized Orient” in Western discourse.

After nearly a century, traditional Chinese theatre has been “reformed” at varying degrees by some Chinese intellectuals’ ambitions of constructing “modernized” xiqu in order to compete with its Western-style counterpart. Mei and “Mei Party” members’ work is certainly one of the
beginning steps. Other series of cultural reform followed the May Fourth era, for example, “the Xiqu Reform Movement” (xigai yundong) in the 1950s and the creation of Model Drama (yangbanxi) during the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The “modernized” jingju has been invited into proscenium theaters, rehearsed by the director-centered system, (re)written with more complete plots, and sung with microphones. The traditional Chinese theatre has benefited from its interaction with Western civilization. For example, today’s actors of xiqu are enjoying great social respect, which is in contrast to their last generations who were believed them to be in a mean profession (jianye). However, as Edward Said worried, for the Third World, their intelligentsia’s obsession to “modernize” in the realm of culture may be simply a process of imitation of the West (“Westernization”) (Said 325). An interaction with Western drama would be more beneficial for jingju, a traditional art in a (historically) colonized country, after a serious consideration of the fundamental differences between the aesthetic aims and principles between Chinese and Western theatres. Otherwise, the traditional Chinese art’s fundamental principles are threatened in the process of “mimicry” or “Orientalization”. The original well-diversified presentation of theatre art worldwide may become homogenized or Orientalized and finally an Asian theatre like xiqu would perhaps become victimized in such confrontations with Western colonial power.
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