ABSTRACT

MODERNITY AND HYBRIDITY: TIAN HAN’S XINGEJU CREATIONS AND THEATRE CRITICISM (1937-1958)

by Xiaoyan Deng

Tian Han (1898-1968) was a Japanese-educated Marxist playwright, screenwriter, literary critic, and the director of the Xiqu Improvement Bureau (1949-1966). Throughout his life, Tian was an enthusiastic promoter of xingeju—a supposedly “modern” xiqu form. Tian’s xingeju is a hybrid theatrical form that is greatly influenced by huaju (Chinese Western-style theatrical form) in form and inspired by Socialist Realism. Tian Han consciously and strategically appropriated conventions of xiqu, western theatrical form and the aesthetics of Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism to reshape xiqu and create the hybrid xiqu form—xingeju for satisfying the demand of the communist revolution and seeking for the supposed modernity of xiqu in order to get rid of its “feudal heritage” in a modern era.
MODERNITY AND HYBRIDITY: TIAN HAN’S XINGEJU CREATIONS AND THEATRE CRITICISM (1937-1958)

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INTRODUCTION

Tian Han (1898-1968), a Japanese-educated Chinese Communist playwright, filmmaker, and culture policy maker, is known for writing the lyrics of *March of the Volunteers*, the national anthem of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As the most prolific playwright in 20th century China, Tian Han produced sixty-three *huaju* (lit. “spoken drama,” Western-style speech-based drama) plays and twenty-seven *xiqu* (lit. “theatre [of] sung-verse,” indigenous Han Chinese theatre) plays, including what Tian Han identified as “*xingeju*” (“new operas”). In addition, Tian Han created twelve movie scripts, more than 1000 poems, and a substantial body of critical essays on drama, literature, and film. (Chen 2006: 155) Without disputes, Tian Han is one of the most crucial Chinese writers and critics in the 20th century. Although Tian Han enjoyed a renowned status in modern Chinese drama, literature, and film, both Tian himself and his works (especially his dramatic works) are less studied in English. This misfortune is reflected by the fact that to date there are only a few scholarly articles and one dissertation project in English1 that pay specific attention to Tian Han and his artistic creation. However, all of the English scholarship tends to pay more attention to Tian’s artistic engagement with film and *huaju* rather than *xiqu*. In China, a similar scholarly tendency can be found in the field of Tian Han studies as well. The great majority of scholarly works pay more attention to Tian Han’s creation of films and *huaju*. To date, no lengthy scholarly works pays specific attention to explore Tian Han’s creations of the wartime *xingeju*.

*Xingeju* is a hybrid theatrical form created by Tian Han during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). It borrows *huaju*’s dramaturgy and vernacular speeches as well as Soviet-inspired socialist realistic approach to reform traditional Chinese theatre. I argue that the importance of scholarly investigating these *xingeju* plays lies in its ability to opening up a theatrical space in which traditional Chinese aesthetic mode actively

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1 Luo Liang. “The Theatrics of Revolution: Tian Han (1898–1968) and the Cultural Politics of Performance in Modern China” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006).
interacts with Western, Japanese, and Soviet cultural influence. In this sense, a careful study of Tian Han’s xingeju may be able to attract more scholarly attention to the cultural dynamics and innovation within the creation of the 20th century Chinese drama. Therefore, I decided to choose Tian Han’s creation of the wartime xingeju as the topic of my MA thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the historical scenario and methodology. I will introduce China’s unique colonial condition, the historical context of theatre creation in early 20th century, and clarify a set of Chinese theatrical terms, like xiqu, huaju, jingju, and xingeju. I will contextualize Tian Han’s own transformation from a bourgeois writer to a communist artist in this chapter and discuss a new postcolonial theoretical mode that I believe is more productive for analyzing 20th century China.

In the second chapter, I will illustrate the historical background from which Tian Han introduced the concept of Socialist Realism to China. In addition, I will investigate Tian Han’s wartime xingeju plays, such as Fishermen’s Song of the Han River (jianghan yuge) and The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines (xin ernü yingxiong zhuan), during the era of the second Sino-Japanese War. The third chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the roles that Tian Han played as a critic of traditional xiqu and a culture policy maker from the 1930s to the 1950s. I will illustrate Tian Han’s own theoretical construction of “xingeju” through a close reading of Tian’s critical writings about Mei Lanfang (in the 1930s) and the Xiqu Reform Movement (in the 1950s).

This thesis argue that the Chinese appropriation of the Western, Japanese, Soviet aesthetic frameworks in dramatic creation is not simply an imitation of these foreign cultural modes. Instead, inspired by Sakai Naoki’s notion that the reception of modernity as a process of translation, my thesis demonstrates why the cultural translation itself is a process of both representation and misrepresentation, how the multicultural flows were integrated into an artistically innovative theatrical genre in China in the 20th century, and how Tian Han’s dramatic theories were invested with a potential of opening up a variety
of artistic possibilities in theatrical creation. Through my thesis, I would like to show that Tian Han’s artistic works are representative of cultural hybridity and diversity that are the defining features of Chinese modernity and postcolonial condition.

Since the year of 1840, China has been subject to colonial powers. In the first Opium War (1840-1841), the Qing empire was defeated by the British colonial power. As a result, the island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British and a couple of port cities, such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, were opened up for colonial trades. At the turn of the twentieth century, the colonial competition among major imperial powers, such as the British, French, German, Russian, and Japanese, became extremely intensified in the territory of China. In order to resist the colonial expansion, the Chinese started to initiate various resistant movements, like the Self-Strengthening Movement (zìqiáng yúndòng, a.k.a the Westernization Movement or yàngwú yúndòng), which aimed at actively appropriating Western modernity (science, technology, and constitutional monarchy) and apply it into the Chinese own nation building project. The strategy that “learning from the West in order to resist the West” was highlighted in the Chinese confrontation with the Western imperialist power. The two historical facts distinguish the colonial condition in China from that in African, American, and South Asian countries. First, there has never been a colonial regime with total authority that could influence the entire nation. Second, there has been always a space for the Chinese to actively (and often voluntarily) appropriate some aspects of modernity and employ them for the Chinese own benefits.

In fact, this kind of appropriation of Western-inspired modernity certainly was not only applied to the Chinese reconstruction of political and economic systems but also pervasive in the realm of artistic creation. Western-educated Chinese painters, like Xu Beihong (1895-1953), who is arguably the most well-known Chinese painter in the early 20th century, innovatively created a great number of hybrid paintings that later were regard as representative of modern Chinese paintings. On one hand, Xu’s Western-style oil paintings, such as, The Foolish Old Man Moved the Mountain (yúgōng yíshān, 1940)
often integrated the techniques and aesthetic approach of traditional Chinese painting. On the other hand, shapes and shadows rather than lines often constitute major components of Xu’s Chinese-style brush paintings. Xu’s artistic experiments successfully enrich both techniques and artistic styles of modern Chinese paintings in the early 20th century. His paintings helped the Chinese people living in the 20th century to construct their own cultural modernity. This cultural modernity manifests itself as both transcultural and uniquely Chinese.

In fact, the attempt to organically combine Chinese and Western cultural modes was not restricted in the realms of painting. The similar tendency could be observed in various artistic forms such as literature (such as the May Fourth vernacular novels) and music (such as the Western-inspired Chinese symphony). For all of these experimental artists, the traditional Chinese artistic form could not speak to the Chinese who were living in a new cultural context. Therefore, they all sought for a wholesome combination of traditional Chinese form and its Western counterpart, which might help the Chinese artists to open up a new territory for artistic exploration. This thesis attempts to investigate Tian Han’s creation of xingeju by referring to the Chinese own construction of theatrical modernity. Xingeju itself represents China’s new identity in a new cultural context, in which hybridity appeared to be a defining characteristic of the Chinese art in the process of cultural transformation.
Chapter One:
The Rise of *Huaju* and Socialist Realism and The Chinese Pursuit of Theatrical Modernity in the Early 20th Century

This chapter introduces China’s peculiar colonial condition and cultural Modernity in the early 20th century. In order to better understand the cultural significance of *xingeju* created by Tian Han (examined in section 2 of this chapter), one must understand how China’s postcolonial context was different from the colonial situation in Africa and other Asian countries. The conventional postcolonial theories that are often based upon the colonial histories in Africa and South Asian are less effective in interpreting the Chinese construction of modernity at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, I explore the theoretical modes provided by scholars of East Asia studies, like Leo Ou-fan Lee, Chen Xiaomei, and Naoki Sakai, to investigate Tian’s artistic creations. I argue that Lee, Chen, and Sakai’s theoretical frameworks help unpack the complexity of the colonial situation specifically in East Asia and illustrate the multi-cultural flows within Tian Han’s theatre theory and artistic practice. In the following two sections, I will introduce the historical context of theatrical creations at the turn of 20th century China. I will illustrate how Chinese artists introduced and appropriated the Western-style speech-based drama to construct their own theatrical modernity. In addition, I will trace how Socialist Realism became an orthodox approach of artistic creation for the Chinese left-wing artists since Tian Han’s introduction in 1934. I will argue that both the appropriation of *huaju* and the adoption of Socialist Realism provided Tian Han with an artistic foundation to create a hybrid theatrical form, namely *xingeju*.

1.1 Chinese Peculiar Colonial Condition and Chinese Cultural Modernity

The history of modern China is characterized by its turbulence. The First Sino-Japanese War accelerated the collapse of the Qing Empire during the period from
1894 to 1895. For the Qing Empire, the war was a complete failure. China’s loss includes not only its Beiyang Fleet, the country’s most modernized navy, but also its sovereignty in Taiwan, Korea, and the Liaodong Peninsula of Manchuria. Immediately after the war, Japan surpasses the Qing and becomes the super power in East Asia.

Edward Said’s celebrated work *Orientalism* in the late-1970s articulated a new critical approach to the complicated relationship between the West and its (historical) colonies. A myriad of scholars applied Edward Said’s theoretical framework to elaborate and interpret the Western imperialist images of the colonial others in Africa, Asia and other places. In the field of China studies, for example, this Saidian approach interpreted the Chinese filmmaking practices in the 1980s and the Western reception of these films. Inspired by the Saidian approach, Rey Chow employs the term “autoethnography” to the self-orientalizing intention within the works of the Chinese filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou. (Chow 1995: 180-1) The Chinese Self-Orientalism successfully attracted the Western gaze on the China-related films but unfortunately reinforced the images of “China” as a “primitive,” “feminine,” and “barbaric” nation in the Western reception. Although Said elaborates how the colonial/imperialist power has been involved in the formation of the Western knowledge of the East, unfortunately, his work does not seek to challenge the very distinction between the Occident and the Orient, which the conventional colonial discourse has been built upon. The imaginary binary in Said’s work seems to suggest an essential heterogeneity within each side of this dual construction, which I argue does not faithfully reflect the reality and complexity of the postcolonial condition in Africa, Asia, and other (historical) colonies of the West. As Ernst Gellner argues in his critique of Said’s work, the Saidian discourse neglects that “the industrial/agrarian and Western/Other distinctions cut across each other, and obscure each other’s outline.” (Gellner 1993: 4) In this sense, when assuming an essential (cultural and ethnic) boundary between the West and its colonial subjects, the Saidian critique of Orientalism itself is unfortunately trapped by the Orientalist logic.
My point of theoretical departure is a new postcolonial discourse that could more effectively and accurately investigate the colonial condition in the 20th century China. Two crucial facts demanded the urgency of employing a new postcolonial approach: first, an investigation of the actual dynamics within the cultural negotiation between the West and its colonial subjects becomes possible only after the assumed boundary between the two were torn down; second, the East Asian appropriation of Western colonial discourse as seen in modern and contemporary literary and theatrical creation is different (and much more complicated) than those suggested by non-eastern-Asian theories of imperialism and colonialism such as Fanon’s theory of anti-colonialism and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which are primarily based upon the colonial situations in Africa and the Middle East. A new theoretical frame needs to be established in the study of the postcolonial society in East Asia, simply because it is impossible to have a universal theory of postcolonialism which “can be globally inclusive and hence conclusive of local diversities and cultural specificities.” (Chen 1995: 13)

Two Chinese scholars Chen Xiaomei and Leo Ou-fan Lee provided convincing modes in their studies on modern and contemporary Chinese literature, theatre, and popular culture. Both of the authors argue that, the conventional Western postcolonial theories, which are mainly constructed based on the situations of former British and French colonies in Africa and India, should not be simply applied to interpret the colonial situation in East Asia. They therefore call for taking China’s peculiar colonial condition into theoretical considerations. As Leo Ou-fan argued, the mainstream Western theory of colonialism “assumes a colonial structure of power in which the colonizers have the ultimate authority over the colonized.” (Lee 1999: 308) The obvious obstacle of applying the conventional postcolonial discourse to a study based on East Asia is that, unlike Africa and India, the Western colonialism was not a total system governing the entire nations in East Asia. Take the history of modern China as example. Although China’s sovereignty has been threatened by the Western imperialist power since 1840, the nation
as a whole has never been militarily occupied by any foreign colonial authorities. In fact, in the realm of literature and arts, the obvious reason that makes the Chinese artists different from its Indian or African counterparts lies in the fact that in spite of their reading knowledge of foreign languages, the great majority of modern Chinese writers “did not use any foreign languages to write their work and continued to use the Chinese language as their only language.” (Lee 1999: 309) However, at the same time, I would like to add that the Chinese language which these modern Chinese use distinguishes itself from the classical Chinese literary language and appears to be strongly influenced by modern European languages. The term “semi-colonialization”—often used by the Chinese to describe the uniqueness of China’s colonial condition—implies that there was still a space allowing the Chinese to take on the Western civilization actively and strategically and suggests fertile dynamics within the cultural negotiation between China and the Western colonial power.

In her examination of the cultural and political communication between China and Western colonial and imperial power, Chen Xiaomei uses the term “Occidentalism” to suggest that the Chinese often strategically employ the Western civilization and its representation for the Chinese own benefits. By the term “strategically,” Chen means that the Chinese writers and artists often do not intend to simply represent the Western cultural codes but appropriate Western civilization and make the appropriation to serve their own needs. This strategic practice echoes Tian Han’s artistic creations that I discuss in the thesis. Tian’s appropriation of Western cultural codes (e.g. the form of “spoken drama” and the theory of Social Realism) should not be understood as a mimesis of Western drama and literary theory but a strategic appropriation that serves for the Chinese own benefits in the war against the Japanese. This strategic assimilation of Western culture, as Lee noticed, “was crucial to their own quest for modernity—a quest conducted with full confidence in their identity for modernity—a quest conducted with full confidence in their identity as Chinese nationalists.” (Lee 1999: 309)
Lee’s observation of Chinese nationalists’ quest for modernity echoes Naoki Sakai’s argument that the modernization is a process in reference to the idea of translation. In an essay entitled “‘You Asians: On the Historical Role of the West and Asian Binary,” Sakai encourages his readers to reconsider the conventional belief that modernity is the consequence of imitating the West, which unconsciously places the West in centre while the rest of the world in margin. In fact, modernity takes place everywhere in the world, which “cannot confined to be one race, religion, tradition, or nation, as it always happens as translation.” (Sakai 2006: 175) Thus, modernity should be understood as a consequence of multicultural interaction and communication. Through the interaction, modernity, for different nations, is both something both transcultural and culturally specific. In Sakai’s theoretical frame, the action of “translation” allows the original culture and the target culture to share and something new and creative has always been produced in the process of translation. (Sakai 2006: 175) In this sense, translation is always a (mis)representation and appropriation of the original culture, and it “offers a space where the appropriateness and validity of translation is constantly discussed and disputed.” (Sakai 2006: 175)

By borrowing Naoki Sakai’s insight of modernization as translation, I argue that it is more accurate for us to understand the modern Chinese intellectuals’ quest for modernity as a process of translation rather than imitation. The Chinese intellectuals never take the Western-inspired modernity as a whole. “Translation” provides a space for them to shape the original culture and create something new in order to satisfy the Chinese own urgent needs. One fine example of this is Lin Shu’s translation of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Though he knew no foreign language, in 1901, Lin Shu finished his translation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin from English into classical/literary Chinese\(^2\) under the dictation of his close friend Wang Shoucang. In the process of

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\(^2\) The written language before the May Fourth Movement, called classical Chinese or literary Chinese, is based on the grammar and vocabulary of ancient Chinese since Han dynasty. It is different from colloquial Chinese. During the May Fourth Movement, this kind of written language was thought to be too conservative and outdated related to Confucianism and incompatible with the promotion of the
translation, Lin Shu made some adaptations. For example, in the original novel, Mrs Stowe paid great attention to the subthemes, like the humanism of and the possibility of redemption provided by Christianity. The major character Uncle Tom is depicted as a pious Christian slave and the story ends with the emancipation of slaves. Nevertheless, in Lin Shu’s translation version, the themes related to religion were abandoned. More importantly, in the end, Uncle Tom fulfills self-independence through killing the slave-dealer and fleeing for his life. In the preface of Lin’s translation, he stated that “[the white] American treats the Chinese workers so cruelly as to stop them from coming. As a result, the yellow people are probably treated even worse than the blacks.” He warned the people who seemed to “favor the white race” that it is an “erroneous illusion that Westerners are generous with vassals.” (Lin [1901] 1993: 77-8) Lin also clearly stated that “In this book the miseries of black slaves are depicted in detail. This is not because I am especially versed in depicting sadness; I am merely transcribing what is contained in the original work. And the prospect of the imminent demise of the yellow race has made me feel even sadder.” (Lin [1901] 1993: 78) By referring to the notes of Lin Shu, it is clear that the Chinese adaptation of the American abolitionist drama was a strategic appropriation of Western anti-colonial text. Through the process, the Western text was intentionally (mis-)interpreted for fulfilling the Chinese own benefits. This translation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin was later adapted into drama and staged in Tokyo first in 1907 by a group of Japanese-educated Chinese students from the Spring Willow Society (elaborated in section 2). In the very first huaju production, the Chinese adaptors intentionally related the oppression of African American slaves with the exploited Chinese immigrants in the United States, and further associated the Chinese American to the oppressed Chinese residents in their home country. Therefore, by pointing out the shared oppressed status
between African American and the Chinese citizens under the colonial rule, the American abolitionist’s thought in Stowe’s play is transformed into a general call for resistance to colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, I would like to argue that the Chinese adaption of The Uncle Tom’s Cabin should not be understood as a mimesis of Western dramatic mode but rather a process of “translation” in Naoki Sakai’s term. “Translation” allows the original culture and the target culture to share and interact. “The translated text (or culture)” could not be a replica of the original, but a creation always containing something new and innovative. (Sakai 2006: 175) Furthermore, when the Japanese-educated Chinese intellectuals such as Ouyang Yuqian (director of Society of Spring and Willow that later staged the Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Tokyo, Japan and Shanghai, China) thought that the indigenous Chinese theatrical genre was incapable of promoting the revolutionary thought and modern scientific/moral value. However, it is more important to emphasize that such an eagerness of borrowing the Western cultural modes should not be understood as the colonized subject’s imitation of European culture in order to refill their lost indigenous identity as the Western postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon witnessed in Africa and the Caribbean Islands.

Tian Han, a Japanese-educated left-wing intellectual, is certainly one of key figures in the process of China’s quest for modernity. Tian’s traditional Chinese drama is characteristic of Western dramaturgy and Socialist Realistic style. With understanding of Tian Han’s identity as a cultural “translator” through Sakai’s theoretical framework, his application and appropriation of the Western dramaturgy should not be considered as a passive mimesis of the colonial cultural codes but a “strategic appropriation” and a process of “translation,” in which the source culture and the target culture are mutually communicated and something aesthetically innovative has been created. In this sense, Tian’s theatrical works are aesthetically different from either the classical Chinese theatrical form or the Western realism-based one. On the one hand, Tian’s works maintain the fundamental characteristics of traditional Chinese theatre in their overall theatrical
appearances, such as the usage of singing and dance as expressive means and the usage of performance convention in their theatrical presentation. On the other hand, both Western dramaturgy and the Socialist Realistic approach enable Tian’s plays to more efficiently promote their message of anti-colonialism/imperialism. The well-knit plot and intense conflicts, as one often sees in Western realistic dramas, help Tian’s dramatic work to create a different pace and rhythm from that of traditional Chinese theatre. The Socialist Realist approach seeks to uncover the will and power of the common people as a driving force in historical transitions, which becomes particularly useful for uplifting the people’s morale in wartime. Therefore, different from other xiqu productions (such as Mei Lanfang’s “ancient costume new dramas”) in the early 20th century, Tian’s xingeju productions maintain xiqu’s close ties to the indigenous people (especially the lower class) but at the same time the appropriation of Western dramatic aesthetics enables Tian’s dramas to provide his audience members with more intense dramatic presentation through a new (Socialist Realist) aesthetic approach.

As Liu Siyuan notes in his article Tian Han, Western Theatre, and Japan, the conventional Western intercultural theatre theories proposed by scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Patrice Pavis, Antony Tatlow, Rustom Bharucha, Jacqueline Lo, and Helen Gilbert, which all elaborate the intercultural theatrical exchange as “a two-way flow,” have failed to interpret the way how the Chinese had appropriated the Western theatrical conventions in the early 20th century. (Liu 2005: 106) In fact, some non-Western countries such as Japan and the Soviet Union have played crucial roles in the process of China’s modernization, serving as mediation between the target culture and the source culture. Therefore, the importance of examining Tian Han’s theatrical creations lies in the fact that Tian’s works perhaps best exemplify the products of the multicultural exchange in the early 20th century China. A new theoretical mode in terms of theatrical exchange is demanded to unpack the complexity and dynamics within the multicultural flows (the West, Japan, the Soviet Union, and China) expressed through Tian Han’s dramatic works.
The Western (colonial) impact on the Chinese subjects should be not simply be understood as a process that “the West provides, the Chinese accepts.” In fact, the Chinese adoption of Western cultural codes was a strategic appropriation. For the Chinese artists such as Tian Han, they did not attempt to passively adopt Western (or Soviet or Japanese) civilization as a whole but strategically employ Western (or Soviet or Japanese) elements to construct the Chinese own theatrical modernity through the multi-cultural flows. As a hybrid theatrical genre, Tian’s works have presented a considerable space for theatrical innovation in modern China. Tian Han’s strategic use of Western theatrical convention is an intriguing case to examine how the Western-influenced modern Chinese theatre played a crucial role in resisting colonialism and seeking for a Chinese nationalist identity. Therefore, Tian Han’s career as a playwright and theatre critic certainly deserves more scholarly attention due to the potential of obtaining a new theoretical mode of intercultural exchange of theatrical art.

1.2 Huaju, Xiqu, Tian Han and His Xingeju

Before our journey to trace Tian Han’s xiqu/xingeju creations in the 1930s, it is necessary to introduce the theatre creation within the cultural background in the early 20th century China. By understanding why the Chinese construction of dramatic modernity is so different from the conventional discourse that assumes modernization as a completely passive process of Westernization, we can eventually understand why Tian Han’s theatrical experiments are so crucial and inspiring in China’s early 20th century cultural context. Therefore, I will introduce the process of Japanese-educated Chinese students’ creation and introduction of Chinese westernized theatrical form--huaju to Chinese theatre stage in the early 20th century. Simultaneously, I will present Tian Han’s own experience of encountering with Western theatre in Japan that has significant influence on his later creations of xingeju.
Since the late-Qing period, Chinese students flocked to Japan with their ambitions of learning Western science, technology, and military training from this most modernized Asian country. However, many of the students were not only merely attracted by Japan’s technical advances, but also interested in the Japanese appropriation of Western cultural modes.

In the year 1907, a half decade before Tian Han’s first trip to Japan, a group of Chinese students was actively engaged in theatre creation in Tokyo. Directed by Ouyang Yuqian, a Chinese student in the School of Business at Meiji University, a Chinese amateur theatre group—the well-known Society of Spring and Willow (chun liu she) was formed. The group members of Society of Spring and Willow were obsessed with the onnagata performances (onnagata is a term refers to male actors specializing in performing female roles in kabuki theatre) of the Japan’s early modern theatre, shimpa (literally, “the new style/school”). Shimpa was a Westernized from of kabuki theatre that started in the 1880s in Japan. By the beginning of the 20th century, shimpa has achieved its popularity in Tokyo and formed its unique performance conventions that combining the Western melodramatic convention (e.g. realistic setting) and Japanese aesthetic tradition (e.g. female impersonation, singing and dance as primary means of expression). (Liu 2009: 36)

In 1907, the Society of Spring and Willow premiered A Black Slave’s Cry to Heaven (heinu yu tai lu), an adaptation of Harriet B. Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Tokyo. Although the production maintained the traditional Chinese theatre’s use of men impersonating female characters, it distinguished itself from traditional Chinese theatre— in various ways. Before comparing the differences between traditional Chinese theatre and huaju, I would like to clarify what traditional Chinese theatre is and what are the fundamental characteristics concisely here (I will elaborate this term in section 2 of chapter 2.) Traditional Chinese theatre (also called xiqu) refers to the traditional/classic Chinese theatrical form with singing and dancing as primary means of expression. Within
this theatrical system, generally, in addition to the assigned libretto, even the spoken part sounds melodious, because the performers don’t speak in the way of vernacular speech used in daily life but read the spoken words like poems with cadence. This is similar in terms of dance. Traditional Chinese theatre symbolizes and stylizes the actions and movements. Therefore, each categorized character role has specific formalized movements that look like dance. Coming back the differences, I want to point out that the Society of Spring and Willow’s adaption of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* adopted vernacular speech rather than singing and dance as the main expressive means. In addition, inspired by *shimpa*, it abandoned traditional Chinese setting that often only feature a few tables and chairs and employed Western-style realistic scenery. Only a few months later, the Society moved to Shanghai and performed the same production. The performance of this western-style theatrical form in Shanghai represented the birth of Chinese *huaju*.

The birth of *huaju* marked a turning point of Chinese theatre. This process of active appropriation of Western drama was not only restricted in the field of *huaju*. With the emergence of *huaju* in 1907, *xiqu* actively competed with the Western-imports on Chinese stage throughout the early 20th century.

With the introduction of Western-style realistic drama, the competition between *xiqu* and *huaju* triggered rich dynamics and active communication in theatrical creation. Represented by Tian Han’s creations of *xinggeju*, *xiqu* artists also sought for a hybrid and modern form of traditional Chinese drama that could speak to their contemporary Chinese audiences. In the following part of this chapter, I will introduce the creation and reception of *xiqu* in the early 20th century, Tian Han, and his transformation from a bourgeois writer of *huaju* to a promoter of *xinggeju*.

With the introduction of *huaju* to China via Japan, the Chinese intellectual discourse started to examine their native theatrical genre through a comparative study between Chinese and Western theatrical forms. In the well-known 1918 drama reform issue of *New Youth*, a magazine that called for a complete turnover of traditional Chinese
culture, the May Fourth radicals such as Hu Shi and Zhou Zuoren wrote to advocate abolishing the native theatrical form--*xiqu*. They contended that the cross-gender casting adopted by *xiqu* worked against the "modern" biological division of gender; the erotic relationship between boy actors of *xiqu* and their male patrons was accused of being aberrant from the "civilized" Western heterosexual norm; in addition, *xiqu*’s overemphasis on singing, dancing and acrobatics restricts a dramatic art’s "literary quality." (Hu 1918: 308-321; Zhou 1918: 526-527)

In addition, the Chinese intellectuals and artists named the Western genre “xinju” (lit., “new theatre,” a.k.a., *wenmingxi*, lit. “civilized drama,” an early form of *huaju*), accordingly they started to call the traditional genre “jiuxi” (lit., “old drama”). The new rhetoric suggests that they saw the Western genre would eventually replace the Chinese one. The May Fourth radicals’ renaming of the two different theatrical forms echoes Johannes Fabian’s apt phrase, the idea of modernity as modernization turns relation of space----relation between cultures----into relation of time. Johannes Fabian argues that “the relations between the West and its Other . . . were conceived not only as difference, but as distance in space and Time.” (Fabian 1983: 144) This “denial of coevalness” between colonizers and colonized has played a key role in the justification of Western colonialism. Different cultures and people at various regions in the world have been placed by Western imperialists in a stream of evolution. In the evolutionary line of Time, the West and its cultural codes represent the “new” and “modern.” Non-Western cultures are deemed as “outdated” and “primitive,” therefore, they are expected to imitate and catch up with the Western norms.

Since the 1910s, the Chinese artists started to reform *xiqu* in various ways. The early republican stage witnessed various forms of “new” theatres, which included: *guzhuang xinxi* (lit., “ancient costume new play”) and *shizhuang xinxi* (lit., “contemporary costume new play”), both were innovative genres created by traditional theatre performers such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu. The various “new” theatres
generally applied Western dramaturgy into the Chinese works but maintained singing and
dancing as major means of expression. Compared to Tian Han’s xinggeju, the reformed
xiqu plays such as Mei Lanfang’s “ancient costume new dramas” generally depicted lives
of the upper class or stories of seductive goddesses. Therefore, Mei’s “reformed” dramas
were often criticized for satisfying the tastes of urbanbourgeoisies.

In such social and artistic context in which nearly all Chinese artists were
searching for “new modes” to construct China’s own theatrical modernity, Tian Han, a
Japanese-educated artist, emerged in the republican theatre circle with a substantive
number of plays in the realm of both huaju and xiqu. Tian Han was born in the Changsha
county of Hunan, a southern province, in 1898. In 1912, he was admitted by the
Changsha Normal School in the city of Changsha, a new style public school founded by
Xu Teli, an advocate of modern education and a mentor of young Mao Zedong in
Changsha.

In 1916, after graduating from the school, Tian Han went to Tokyo for the first
time. In Taisho Japan, a country where had been immersed with the Western civilization
for about a half of a century since the Meiji Restoration, Tian had contact with Western
and Soviet literary and artistic works. He intentionally kept himself from the traditional
forms such as kabuki and its modernized form shimpa (lit. “new school/style”) that was
believed to have too strong association with the past. (Tian [1916] 1992: 26)

Tian Han noted in his essay “I got contact with Western realistic plays via
Japan.” (Tian [1916] 1992: 26) At that time, he “disliked kabuki and shimpa and spent
almost all my time on plays of translation and newly created productions.” (Tian [1916]
1992: 26) He was initially obsessed with Japanese shingeki, literally, “new theatre,” a
new theatrical genre that emerged in the early 20th century. Shingeki artists aimed at
creating a theatrical form that was centered upon dialogue and realist action. (Kano 2001:
12) In addition, the training and employment of female actors to replace female
impersonators was also part of the shingeki artists’ agenda. (Kano 2001: 72) Tian Han
actively attended *shingeki* performances, such as Ibsen’s *Doll House* and Hauptmann’s *Die Versunkene Glocke*, most of which were directed by Hougetsu Shimamura and starred Matsui Sumako. (Tian [1916] 1992: 26) In 1920, Tian Han met Guo Moruo, another Japanese-educated Chinese artist in Kyushu. Tian told Guo that “he wants to be a dramatist and critic in the future. He planned to introduce Maeterlinck and Oscar Wilde to Chinese reader and prepared to translate *The Blue Bird* and *Salome* into Chinese.” (Tian [1920] 1992: 41)

In the early 1920s Tian emerged as one of the most prolific playwrights of *huaju* and translators in the Chinese circle of theatre. In October of 1920, Tian Han, who was then still in Japan, wrote *Violin and Rose*, a four-act romantic tragedy of *huaju*. The play was published by a Shanghai-based magazine *Youth China* (*shaonian zhongguo*) in the same year. The play is Tian Han’s first adult work which tells a story of a young female actor’s sacrifice for her beloved. In the play, “violin” was used to represent “genuine art,” which fascinated the fiancé of the female actor who was in poverty but planned to study in Paris to become a professional violinist. “Rose” represented “real” love that which was destroyed by the arranged marriage and polygamy. In the play, the female protagonist Liu Cui chose to marry a rich man as his concubine in order to earn a sum of money to support her fiancé Qin Xinfang to study abroad. At that moment, Tian Han, like many of young Chinese bourgeoisie writers, saw the material poverty of the country as obstacles that often prevented the intelligent Chinese young people’s beautiful wishes in terms of career from being fulfilled. Tian identified his play as a Neo-Romantic art, a genre that somehow combines Romantism and Realism. Tian spoke of his idea of Neo-Romantism in his 1919 essay *Meiyu* (*Rain*). In the essay, he praised the creativity of Romantic art and reforming power of Realism and saw a perfect combination of the two as the best way of artistic creation. (Tian [1919] 1992: 33) Beginning with *Violin and Rose*, Tian wrote extensively in the early 1920s. By 1922, he finished his translations of Wilde’s *Salome* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* as well as writings of a couple of *huaju*
plays such as *A Night in Café* (*kafeidian zhiye*), a play telling a story of a female student in poverty who was abandoned by a rich male she met in a Café.

In 1922, Tian went back to China. At that moment, *xinju* declined because the genre lacked sufficient support from average urban citizens. However, represented by *Jingju*, the “old theatre” enjoyed great popularity in urban cities such as Shanghai in the 1920s. In a letter to Zong Baihua, his close friend in Japan, Tian argued that there were some merits of the old theatre, such as, its close tie with the lower class. In the letter, he expressed his desire to create an experimental “Chinese operatic theatre” for the first time. (Tian [1923] 1992: 64) Tian’s desire to reform the traditional operatic form rather than abolishing it distinguishes himself from many May Fourth radicals in the early 1920s. Tian rejected the May Fourth radicals’ proposal of absorbing Western modernity as a whole. Instead, he sought for a hybrid form that could take advantage of Western-style drama but at the same time maintain the merits of traditional Chinese theatre. The hybridity within the proposed theatrical form not only reflected the actual multicultural influences in the theatrical creations of 20th century China, but also revealed the defining feature of China’s modernity.

Throughout the 1920s, while holding several teaching posts in universities in Shanghai and extensively writing and translating *huaju* plays, Tian was also formulating his agenda of reforming the traditional operatic form. On November 8th, 1928, Tian published an essay entitled “the First Voice of New National Drama Movement.” Tian argued that “it is not fair to identify the opera as ‘old theatre’ while *huaju* as ‘new theatre’, because not only opera but also *huaju* have old and new forms.” Moreover, Tian argued that “we did not want to betray our ancestors, [but] we think if we want to become respectful children of our ancestors, we should absorb the creativity of our ancestors but not just imitate them to satisfy the lower tastes of the society.” (Tian [1927] 1992: 112) He advocated:

We should sing an opera, which has rich value in music and thought, especially
should become something shared by all citizens rather than a product only satisfying the needs of a particular class. Music and theatre have solid tradition in our nation, the [contemporary] traditional opera either have lost their lives or have been on a skew direction, therefore, we should build a new national drama.

(Tian [1927] 1992: 112)

In the letter, Tian Han noted the significance of maintaining music as an organic element of the proposed new dramatic form. For Tian Han, in the Chinese sung-drama (xiqu), music plays a distinct role in bridging Chinese audiences and theatrical art. In another 1928 essay published right after the opening performance of the South China Dramatic Society, Tian asserted a theatrical genre he wanted to create that he identified as “xingeju.” (Tian [1928] 1992: 115) In the two 1928 essays, Tian Han clearly disagreed with xiqu’s identification with “old theatre.” In the 1920s, Tian Han was among the first to express the dissatisfaction with the association between traditional Chinese theatre and so-called “old theatre,” because this connection between traditional Chinese theatre and “old theatre” as I mentioned in the early portion of this chapter implied an underlying assumption of the May Fourth radicals that the indigenous theatre should be eventually replaced by the Western-style drama. In this sense, unlike many of the May Fourth radicals, Tian Han rejected a complete disjunction with traditional Chinese culture and proposed to search for a possibility of combining the traditional operatic form with Western dramaturgy and revolutionary thought. Tian was fascinated with the potentiality of creating a hybrid theatrical form, which could speak to the Chinese in modern era.

From 1929 to 1945, Tian created a total of thirteen xiqu plays, which were identified as “xingeju” by Tian Han himself. Represented by Fishermen’s Song of the Han River (jianghan yuge), the Legends of New Heroes and Heroines (xinernu yingxiongzhuan), and the Battle at the Tu Bridge (tu qiao zhi zhan), Tian Han provides a crucial model for experimenting with a hybrid form, namely combining the Chinese operatic form, huaju’s dramaturgy with the aesthetic approach of Socialist Realism. The
application of Soviet-inspired approach of socialist realism represents Tian Han’s transition from a bourgeois writer of Neo-romanticism to a promoter of Marxist literary theory.

In order to understand Tian Han’s agenda of xingeju, it is important to note the close connection between the popularity of the socialist thought and artistic creation within the Chinese leftwing discourse since the 1920s. In the next section, I’m going to trace Tian Han’s transition from a bourgeois intellectual to a Marxist writer. I will trace the questions such as how to represent the “people” and how to serve the interests of the “people” became major concerns of Tian Han’s artistic creation and how both Soviet Realist approach and Chinese communist own artistic approach informed Tian Han’s creations of xingeju from the 1930s to the 1940s.

1.3 Socialist Realism and Chinese Communist Artistic Approach

As stated before, Tian Han went to Japan for the first time in 1916. Like many of his peers, Tian Han was obsessed with various popular social thoughts from Europe and believed that the European thoughts for social reform could serve as remedy to save China from imperialist invasion. The logic that “employing the West to resist the West” was highlighted in the minds of the Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century.

In 1917 in Tokyo, he joined the Cosmo Club, an organization that was found by progressive Japanese students and promoted the thought of anti-imperialism and anarchism. (Tian 1992: 28) In his later essay “How I Walked on the Party’s Road of Literary Creation”, Tian confessed that, in the late-1910s, he was attracted by the various European artistic thoughts emerged after the World War I. He identified many of these thoughts (such as anarchism and symbolism) as “anti-realistic,” which had “negative influence” on him at that moment (Tian [1918] 1992: 29), because these social/artistic thoughts were considered as essentially bourgeois and alienated themselves from the
interests of average workers and peasants. In the year around 1919, Tian Han started his transition from a liberal bourgeois intellectual (an anarchist) to a proletariat writer. His transition was marked by his consistent concern for the “issue of the people.” The phrase “the issues of the people” that I use here refers to a series of questions dealing with relationship between literature/theatre creation and “the people” that proletariat artists ask.

Since the late-1910s, with the extensive introduction of the Soviet literary works, the early seeds of Chinese left-wing literature and art emerged. After the establishment of the Communist Party of China in 1921, the communist artists started to consciously experiment with literature and art of proletariat with a deep concern for “the issues of the people.” These questions that the artists often asked included: How should “the people” be “properly” represented in literature/theatre? What kind of literature/theatre should be created for “the people?” How can literature and theatre serve the interest of “the people?” And how can artists learn from “the people?” The deep concern about “the people” could be identified from Tian Han’s criticism of literature and theatre since the late 1910s and became more and more overt after his conversion of Marxism.

From late 1910s to the 1920s, Tian Han wrote extensively to call for an attention to the miserable lives of various oppressed social groups, such as, female workers and urban proletariats. On Nov. 15th 1919, Tian Han published a short essay on women’s rights. In the essay, he objected the conventional discourse that constructed the image of women as a homogeneous collective and proposed to examine the women’s movements (furen yundong) through the perspective of social class. He argued that different women’s movements belong to different social classes, such as, monarchs, the aristocratic class, the middle class, and the working class. He believed that the real reform should occur within the fourth class, namely “the women workers’ movement.” (Tian [1919] 1992: 35) The essay reflects that Tian’s interest in pure literature shifted to the relationship between art and society in the year around 1919. (Tian [1919] 1992: 36) He noted this point in a
1919 essay entitled “Poet and the Labor Issue”. He argued that: “the first step of being a poet is being a human and the first step of being a human is, I would say, work.” The artist expressed great sympathy towards workers — workers who were oppressed worldwide should unite and prepare the war of class.” He started to believe socialism is a way to solve contradiction between capitalists and the exploited. (Tian [1919] 1992: 36)

In the late-1910s and the early 1920s before Tian officially became a Communist artist, Tian’s sympathy towards women (especially the working class) and the proletariat and the condemnation of capitalism could be identified in a number of Tian’s essays. In a 1920 essay entitled by “After Having the Apple from the Tree of Knowledge,” Tian praised Eve for bravely eating the apple. (Tian [1920] 1992: 44) By eating the apple, Tian argued that “Eve is gaining happiness and knowledge and breaking the Law made between God and her husband” and “the bravery and disbelief as seen in Eve’s behavior are basis of freedom and evolution.” (Tian [1920] 1992: 44) From the perspective of a materialist, Tian rationalized the oppression of women, recognized the value of gender equality and women’s self-liberation from the familial and religious bonds. By arguing the working-class women should learn from Eve, Tian used Marxist theory to analyze the lives of female workers — “capitalists were gaining surplus values by taking advantage of these women who were exploited most and making them as permanent slaves.” (Tian [1920] 1992: 44)

In the late-1920s, Tian read about the Socialist theory of literature and art extensively. While holding several teaching posts in Shanghai and Changsha, he also actively gave presentations on proletariat literature/art and its theory to students in colleges and high schools and called for the creation of proletariat literature and art. (Tian [1928] 1992: 105) In a lecture entitled “Theatre and the People” at the Nanjing Women’s High School, he indicated that “real theatre belongs to the people, however, contemporary dramas are controlled in the hands of capitalists. We should fight with the capitalists and return theatre to the people.” (Tian [1929] 1992: 118) In this period, he
founded the South China Dramatic Society (*nanguoshe*) that as he noted in the essay “After the Opening of the Society”, aimed to create dramas for “the people and by the people.” (Tian [1929] 1992: 114) In 1930, he joined the Association for China’s Leftwing Writers as a standing member that was an organization of artists formed primarily by communists who worked underground, since the Communist Party had been oppressed by the bourgeois Nationalist government after the year of 1927. In 1931, Tian became the director of the Theatre Branch of the Association. The underground connection between the association for leftwing artists and the Soviet regime enabled Tian to get the first-hand knowledge about proletarian art movement in the Soviet Union. In March 1930, Tian Han published a short essay entitled *Bourgeois Realism and Proletarian Realism* that indicated Tian started to distinguish a Proletarian-based style from the conventional bourgeois realism. In this period, he noted that the great “contribution” of the Soviet film artists. In the Soviet propaganda films such *Battleship Potemkin* (1924); he saw how these great Soviet artists transformed film as a bourgeois art in the pre-Soviet era into an artistic form of workers and peasants. A large number of average Russian citizens were employed as performers in the creation of *Battleship Potemkin*, a film commemorating the 1905 revolution. In the film, the oppressed workers and soldiers united and revolted against the Czarist regime. Tian Han was extremely enthusiastic to see workers and peasants become “educators,” “promoters,” and “organizers” in artistic creations in the Soviet and believed the Chinese should follow the Soviet framework. (Tian [1930] 1992: 152)

With becoming an official member of the Communist Party in 1932, Tian actively engaged in introducing the Soviet artistic achievement to China. In the 1934 essay entitled “Why Soviet Union Invited Mei Lanfang to Perform,” after ridiculing Mei Lanfang, a female impersonator of *jingju* as the representative figure of China’s “feudal past,” Tian Han passionately introduced a “scientific” approach to the Chinese readers, namely the Socialist Realism. By calling Socialist Realism as a “more up-to-date and
more powerful approach,” he generally saw there were a couple of crucial aesthetic advantages within the approach. Although I will discuss this essay in some detail in the chapter two of this thesis, it is still important to introduce some key features which Tian saw in this new approach: first, the socialist realism distinguishes itself from the bourgeois realism by adopting an optimistic attitude. Compared to works of bourgeois realism which often portrayed the sordid side of their society, the socialist artists positively painted the socialist country with hope and passion; second, workers and peasants become the main characters on stage and in literary texts; third, artists become no longer observers or critics of a society, but they devote themselves to the socialist construction and become constructors of building up a socialist country.

This approach deeply informed the artistic creations of China’s leftwing intellectuals since Tian’s official introduction. The influence of Socialist Realism was not only restricted in the field of theatre but also had strong impact on the creation of film and literature. The 1930s was the golden era of the Chinese leftwing filmmaking. Leftwing films such as *Children of Trouble Time* (*fengyun ernü*, 1935, directed by Xu Xingzhi, the film scenario was written by Tian Han and Xia Yan) and *The Street Angel* (*malu tianshi*, 1937, directed by Yuan Muzhi) distinguished themselves from bourgeois films which treated filmic art as primarily an entertainment. The leftwing films depicted the lives of lower urban citizens and exposed the imperialist oppression of the Chinese people through the perspective of Socialist Realism. Since the early 1940s, communist writers, like Zhao Shuli, Sun Li, and Ting Ling, started to adopt the approach of Socialist Realism in the creation of left-wing novels. Zhao’s *The Marriage of Xiao Erhei* (*xiao’erhei jiehun*), a Socialist realist novel advocating the freedom in marital choice, depicts how the peasants living in the communist regime abandon arranged marriages and pursue “free love” in rural China.

Parallel to the extensive creations of Socialist Realist artistic works, the status of Socialist Realism was also confirmed by Mao Zedong as the official approach of the
Chinese communists’ artistic creation in his talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Arts 1942. In the influential lectures with the communist artists in Yan’an, the headquarter of the Communist Party of China from 1935 to 1948, Mao claimed that communist artists should maintain the standpoints of their own people, “namely the masses of the people.” and “it means that the ideas and feelings of our artists and writers should be fused with those of the broad masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers.” (Fei 1999: 130) “The audiences for our arts and literature” argued Mao, “is made up of workers, peasants, soldiers, and their cadres.” (Fei 1999: 131) With an overt influence of the Soviet aesthetics, Mao privileged the political criterion over the artistic criterion in creations of literature and arts. Mao advocated:

All classes in all class societies place the political criterion first and artistic criterion second. The bourgeoisie always rejects proletarian artistic and literary works, no matter how great their artistic attainment. As for proletariat, they must treat the arts and literature of the past according to their attitude toward the people and whether they are progressive in the light of history. (Fei 1999: 137)

For the communist artists, if an artistic work is thought to belong to either the feudal or the bourgeoisie, “the better such a work is artistically, the greater the harm it will do to the people.” (Fei 1999: 137) A traditional art like xiqu, though it was thought to have some artistic merits, generally was born and produced in the feudal past. Therefore, it must be reformed through the new socialist rubric. The urgent need is to identify the historical (negative) attitude towards the people within the old art and overthrow it with a positive attitude toward the workers and peasants who are thought to be the “real masters and promoters of history.” (Fei 1999: 142) Mao’s talk reflects an overt influence of Socialist Realism on his thought about literature and arts. Mao’s talk echoes many aspects of Tian Han’s concerns about the relationship between literature/art and the interests of the people as I demonstrated in the previous part of this section. These shared opinions between Tian and Mao are reflected by the concerns, such as, how to use literature and art
to serve the task of revolution (see the quotations of Tian’s 1934 essay “Why Soviet Union Invited Mei Lanfang to Perform” in the chapter two of this thesis); how can literature and theatre serve the interest of “the people” (for Mao, “the people” specifically refer to “workers, peasants, soldiers, and their cadres”; how should “the people” be “properly” represented in literature/theatre, and what is a correct relationship between artists and “the people.” By pointing out the great similarities between Tian’s early essays on literature and arts and Mao’s influential talk in 1942, we could understand the crucial role that Tian Han played in the formation of the Communist Party’s artistic approach. It was Tian Han’s innovative work that helped opening up a new territory for the communist creations of theatre, literature, and film since the mid-1930s. The significance of Tian’s artistic approach lies in a potentiality of opening up a new theoretical space in which the multi-cultural flows in the semi-colonial China could interact with each other. Tian Han’s works (both critical essays and artistic creations) helped the Chinese with searching for a new artistic form that could effectively resist the imperialist invasion and construct its unique modernity.
Chapter Two:

Tian Han as a Wartime Playwright of Xingeju

This chapter will focus on Tian Han’s two xingeju creations: *Fisheremen’s Song of Han River* and *The New Story of the Heroic Sons and Daughters*. I will introduce Tian Han’s introduction and interpretation of Socialist Realism in the 1930s in the first section. In the next section, I will demonstrate how the system of xiqu works. Building on the introduction of Socialist Realism and traditional xiqu, I will pay close examination and analysis on the two xingeju plays. By comparing and contrasting the hybrid form xingeju and traditional xiqu, I want to explore how Tian Han applied the aesthetics of Socialist Realism and Western drama to create this hybrid theatrical form for the purpose of uplifting people’s morale to fight against Japanese’s invasion in the second Sino-Japanese war (1938-1945). And I want to examine how Tian’s works perhaps best exemplify the products of the multicultural exchange and illustrate the complicated impacts of multicultural flows on the 20th century Chinese theatre.

2.1 Tian Han’s Introduction of Socialist Realism

The turbulence of the first decades of the 20th century China greatly stimulated the dynamics of the international exchange in terms of socialist thoughts. Bourgeois liberalism and anarchism all had their fanatical supporters. Communists, of course, due to their sympathy for the lower classes and their utopian proposal of the social salvation, greatly attracted a great number of young Chinese intellectuals to devote themselves to the realization of the great utopian project. In 1921, the Communist Party of China was established in Shanghai. The city of Shanghai played a crucial role in the early phase of the Chinese communist movement and in shaping Tian Han’s own transformation from a bourgeoisie writer to a communist artist. In the early 20th century, Shanghai was the city where both foreign-invested factories and Chinese-owned industrial plants congregated.
The growing industrial construction in the coastal city attracted a significant number of peasants-turned workers. The congregation of the Chinese proletariats in Shanghai provides the communists with an opportunity to spread their revolutionary thought. Tian Han spent most of his time in Shanghai in the 1920s and early 1930s. In the year of 1930, he joined the Left-wing Writers’ League in Shanghai, an organization of progressive artists, which aimed at using literature and arts to enlighten the populace under the directorship of the Communist Party. In 1932, Tian joined the Communist Party and became one of the major leaders of the Left-wing Writers’ League. Since the 1930s, Tian Han appeared to be a writer and critic, who often consciously applied the literary theories of Marxism to his artistic creations and literary (and dramatic) criticism. In the early 1930s, Tian’s active engagement with the Marxist artistic movement was highlighted by his introduction of Socialist Realism, an aesthetic and ideological concept of artistic creation invented and promoted by the Soviet Union.

Tian Han’s introduction of the approach of Socialist Realism resulted from two well-known incidents in the theatrical communication between China and the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In 1931, Cheng Yanqiu (1904-1958), a male-dan actor (a male performer specializes in portraying female characters), visited the Soviet Union during his tour to Europe, and in 1935, Cheng’s master and rival Mei Lanfang (1894-1961) toured the Soviet Union with his own company. When examining the two incidents, theatre historians both in China and in the West paid great attention to uncovering how Mei and Cheng’s performances inspired the Western theatre giants, such as, Brecht, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Gordon Craig, but often overlooked the Chinese Left-wing artists’ strong attack on the two performers before and after their tours in China.

For Left-wing artists like Tian Han, the two performers presented a “feudal throwback” before the Soviet audiences in the most socially progressive country. In the year of 1934, Tian Han published two lengthy essays entitled “The Critique on Chinese Old Drama and Mei Lanfang” and “Why Did the Soviet Union Invite Mei Lanfang to
Perform?” to criticize Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu as well as traditional Chinese theatre in general. In this chapter, I want to use these two 1934 texts to contextualize the historical background of the introduction of Socialist Realism. In the chapter three of this thesis, I will detail Tian Han’s dissatisfaction with traditional Chinese theatre through a close reading of the two critical texts. In these two essays, Tian Han argued that the artistry of traditional Chinese theatre was essentially “feudal” and traditional Chinese acting should not be identified as an art of symbolism. (Tian [1934] 2000: 4-20) In the latter essay, Tian predicted that artists in the Soviet Union would not be interested in the symbolic means of traditional Chinese theatre, because there is an essential difference between traditional Chinese arts and Western arts of symbolism. Tian believed the former only focuses the form, but the latter, argued Tian Han, also paid great attention to its content. (Tian [1934] 2000: 21-3) He suggested that Mei’s tour would be more beneficial for Chinese artists, if they can take advantage of this opportunity to witness the theatrical achievements in the Soviet Union, because he believed that xiqu could be improved by referring to the Soviet experience:

Everyone knows, in the Soviet Union seventeen years after the revolution, not only spoken drama achieved something great, but opera has as well. Therefore, for promoters of “new theatre,” a more up-to-date and more powerful approach needs to be introduced in order to further criticize China’s old-style opera [xiqu]. (Tian [1934] 2000: 19)

For Tian Han, the “more up-to-date and more powerful approach” is Socialist Realism. In the essay, he introduced the aesthetic pursuit of Socialist Realism to Chinese theatre artists in some detail:

The current ‘Socialist Realism’ combines new Romanticism and new Realism developed after the October Revolution, which satisfies the demand for the construction of great Socialism, makes [the new Romanticism and new Realism] more systematic and efficient. In the meantime, [Socialist Realism] makes art
and reality closely connected, and makes theatre artists become direct participants of the socialist construction. Socialist Realism, in general […] is becoming a healthy trend in literature creation. It is essentially different from the bourgeois realism, the latter only passively revealing social crimes and drawbacks, while the former adopting a more active and positive attitude. In their eyes, the problems experienced in the Soviet Union are the ones which can be solved through the great Socialist construction; therefore, their attitude is not pessimistic but optimistic. […] It works strongly against bourgeois romance. They [socialist artists] do not avoid reality but avoid inane imagination. They depict more scientific, realizable, and proletarian dream. (Tian [1934] 2000: 31-2)

For Tian Han, the realism represented by works of bourgeois writers such as Henrik Ibsen and George Barnard Shaw only provides reflections of the seamy side of the world of capitalism, but fails to offer an effective proposal to alter the status quo. Socialism was understood as a “scientific” and “realizable” agenda for social reform and the Socialist-inspired literary approach was thought to contain the same attributes. As modern Chinese literature scholar Wang Hui noted, a comprehensive scientism (weikexuezhu, lit. “science-centrism”) dominated the thought of Chinese intellectuals and artists in the early 20th century. Science was understood as something that not only could but also should be introduced to guide every aspect of life. At the same time, everything including the creation of literature and arts is expected to adopt a supposed “scientific” approach. (Wang 1995: 1-68)

For Tian Han, Socialist Realism is not only characterized by its optimistic attitude but only by the characters it portrays. Tian went on in his essay:

[Socialist Realist work] deals with different characters. Take theatre as an example: kings, aristocrats, bourgeoisie, intellectuals believing individualism are active on the stages in countries of capitalism; while, on the Soviet stage, new
characters appear: workers who break up the chain of exploitation, peasants, and revolutionary intellectuals. They are not a kind of moralists, not complete deconstructors, but constructors and creators in a socialist society […] These characters transforms theatre arts in the Soviet Union from bourgeois theatre to an unprecedentedly theatre! In the meantime, [it] provides the people who are seeking liberation all over the world with new kind of theatres! (Tian [1934] 2000: 31-2)

It should be noted that there is no evidence showing that Tian had reading proficiency in Russian, though he was fluent in Japanese and English. Further, he had never been to the Soviet Union. Tian’s essays demonstrate that he acquired some of his knowledge of Socialist Realism from Japanese left-wing writer Okazawa Hidetora’s essays on Soviet literature and theatre. In addition, some writings of Lunacharsky (which have been translated into Chinese) and an American communist writer Joseph Freeman’s book *Voices of October* (1930) also provided Tian Han with some information about Soviet literature and theatre before 1930. However, given that the term “Socialist Realism” was not widely publicized in the Soviet Union until 1932, and the concept did not become a doctrine until the First Soviet Writer’s Congress took place in Moscow in August 1934, Tian’s essay published in November 1934 was quite up-to-date and well-informed. This suggests that as a leader of the Chinese Left-wing Writers’ League Tian probably had some unknown ties with Soviet Union artists in the early 1930s.

However, Tian’s understanding of his contemporary Soviet theatre was imperfect, perhaps due to the paucity of sources available to him. Tian Han’s own imagination of socialist artistic works perhaps shaped his interpretation of Soviet theatre and literature. For example, Tian Han believed the Soviet artists’ contributions in theatrical arts are only centered upon the realist dramas, simply ignoring the non-realist trend within the Soviet dramatic creations represented by artists such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Tian Han did not believe that symbolic theatre arts were popular in the Soviet
Union. He insisted that such a claim was only a rumor, because he believed that symbolism is considered as a trend of formalism that is regarded as essentially a bourgeois aesthetic concept. (Tian [1918] 1992: 21) Tian Han’s interpretation of the reason why Mei Lanfang was invited to the Soviet Union is also problematic. He argued that it is not because Soviet artists were interested in learning from traditional Chinese theatre, but because Soviet artists attempted to scientifically examine what kind of artistic works exist in those feudal and capitalist countries. After learning about the status quo in foreign countries, they could better publicize the proletarian art to the rest of the world. (Tian [1919] 1992: 32)

Despite the misunderstanding mentioned above, Tian’s interpretation of Socialist Realism did precisely reveal several distinct characteristics of this aesthetic concept: 1) although it is claimed to be a “scientific” and materialist approach, Socialist Realism encouraged artists to adopt an optimistic attitude in their utopian portrait of what a Socialist country is (what needs to added is that it adopts a critical attitude towards the pre-Soviet era); 2) The artistic works pay great attention to depicting common people (workers and peasants) as heroic creators of socialist construction; 3) artists are no longer allowed to witness the society where they live as outsiders, instead, they are asked to directly contribute to the social construction by using their works to recognize the status quo with little critique.

2.2 How the System of Traditional Xiqu Works

In order to better understand in what ways Tian Han’s xingeju is different from both xiqu and huaju and constructed to be a hybrid theatrical form, it is necessary to clarify the fundamental characteristics of xiqu and how the system of xiqu works.

The term “xiqu” is a newly coined standard term that refers to traditional/classic theatrical Chinese form. The earliest xiqu form reached its maturity at the turn of the 13th
century and since then, *xiqu* was the only theatrical genre that monopolized the Chinese stage. The Chinese concept of “*xi*” is broadly and ambiguously defined. It is perhaps not an exact equivalent of the Western concept of a “theatrical/dramatic” art. It is unique Chinese artistic genre integrating song-based plays, dancing, games, martial arts, and acrobatics. Today, the art of *xiqu* broadly encompasses more than three hundred regional artistic forms throughout the country. Most *xiqu* genres are heavily region-based and dialect-oriented artistic form, although some genres such as *kunqu* (lit., “theatre of kunshan,” a.k.a., “Kun Opera”) and *jingju* (lit., “theatre of capital,” a.k.a., “Beijing/Peking Opera”) have went through a process of nationalization and enjoyed popularity nationwide. Although different *xiqu* forms have a certain differences in terms of textual structure and performance convention, they appear to share some common artistic features.

First, *xiqu* performances are highly presentational in general and “essentially musical and choreographic in its basic structure.” (Brandon 1993: 26) According to the occupation, age, sex and so on, the characters in *xiqu* performances are categorized into four basic archetypal character roles and each one with several sub-genres of roles. And “Categorized archetypal character roles predominate, each having its particular formalized speech and movement together.” (Brandon 1993: 26) As Qi Rushan, a renowned *xiqu* scholar, noted in a *xiqu* performance, there is “no sound that is not song, no movement that is not dance” (“*Wusheng buge, Wudong buwu*”). (Qi 1962: 18) Second, relating to this singing and dance centered performing skills, *xiqu*’s textual/performance structure relied upon a “strictly tonal-rhythmic format,” which was influenced by “the dual relationship between musical sound and the spoken word arising from the homonymic nature of the Chinese language.” (Brandon 1993: 26) The lyrics and speeches are often composed according to strict metrical pattern. Writing a *xiqu* play was rather a process of composing lyrics based upon musical patterns. Even for the speeches, the performers are expected to speak high and low to create a certain rhythms that are
different from vernacular speeches. In terms of dancing, there still is a set of formalized movements and actions for each categorized character role. On the one hand, these formalized movements and actions symbolize many daily movements, like opening up or closing a door, walking and so on; on the other hand, they function as expressions of characters’ feelings and emotions. Basically, for most of the classic plays of xiqu, both the lyrics and speeches were composed in classic literary Chinese. The metrical pattern and rhyme schemes were privileged in the creation of xiqu plays. Both lyrics and speeches in traditional xiqu’s texts are carefully rhymed. With the refinement through several generations of literati, both xiqu’s music rhythm and stage movement (such as dancing and body gestures) appeared to be extremely slow in order to please the literati’s own aesthetic predilection. In fact, in the history of xiqu, the literati’s refinement of xiqu’s text and performance created obstacles for general public to approach the art of xiqu. Some xiqu plays are infamous for their obscure style and appeared to be incomprehensible to the masses.

Third, closely examining the remaining plays of xiqu, it is easy to recognize that traditional xiqu plays basically derive from myths, folktales, historical/literary stories, which in general pay more attention to depicting the stories of the supernatural, imperial families, aristocrats, and Confucian scholars rather than the ones of common people. Because the great majority of xiqu plays were created or adapted by ancient literati, their taste and intellectual interests greatly shaped the thematic realm of classical xiqu. This trend did not alter even in the early 20th century when xiqu artists such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu decided to reform the classical repertories. In Mei’s and Cheng’s “reformed” xiqu plays such as Farewell My Concubine (bawang bieji), The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers (tiannü sanhua), and Aunt Ma Celebrating the Birthday (maguxianshou), the stories of the supernatural (such as seductive goddess) and imperial families still dominated their “reformed” repertories. Correspondently, the main characters dominating xiqu stage usually cover: king, queen, aristocrat, princess, and
intellectual. Therefore, the language and performance style of classical xiqu plays were often criticized for isolating themselves from the masses.

In summary, xiqu is a traditional Chinese theatrical form that is centered on the performing techniques of actors’ skills, like singing and dance. The lyrics and speeches are often composed according to strict metrical patterns, which help xiqu to create poetic emotions. In the last section, I will compare and contrast Tian Han’s two xingeju creations with both huaju and xiqu and explore how Tian Han strategically appropriated the techniques of Western drama and Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism approach to reform xiqu and create this hybrid and modern theatrical genre for the purpose of anti-colonialism and national liberation.

2.3 Hybridity and Multicultural Flows: The Wartime Xingeju Fishermen’s Song of Han River and The New Story of the Heroic Sons and Daughters

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the civil conflicts between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (kuomintang, KMT) ceased and the two parties cooperated for resisting the Japanese invasion. In 1938 during the era of the cooperation between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party, Tian Han was invited to join the Third Section (literary propaganda) of the Political Department of the Nationalist Party, which was under the directorship of Guo Moruo (1892-1978), another Japanese-educated communist playwright. In August 1938, under the direction of the Military Affairs Commission, Guo and Tian launched a central propaganda effort that the thirteen theater troupes from Shanghai were reorganized into ten Anti-Japanese Drama Companies (kangdi yanjudui). These troupes moved to China’s inner land and continued the task of spreading news and educating the masses about the war. The Nationalist Party general Chen Cheng, the director of the Political Department, once recognized the great contribution of these anti-war troupes: “these ten drama
companies are tantamount to ten divisions of armies.” (Huang 1994: 51)

In the summer of 1938, Tian Han created the *xiqu* play *Fishermen Save the Country* (*yufu jiuguo*) in Wuhan for uplifting the people’s morale in the defense battle in Wuhan area. The play was premiered by students who attended Tian’s lecture on war and theatre in Wuhan in 1938 right before the city was fully occupied by the Japanese army. According to Tian Han, the production was “a great success” and “the reception of the production was very encouraging.” (Tian [1938] 1981: 54) In 1939, in Guilin, a city in Southern China, Tian Han developed *Fishermen Save the Country* into a full length play entitled *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River* (*jianghan yuge*). The developed play was premiered by the local *Pingju* (another name of *jingju*) Propaganda Troupe at the Guilin Golden City Theater in July, 1939. The production was “a great success” then. A critic, who signed as “Ci Heng,” praised the production for “encouraging everyone no matter he/she is young or old to serve the country” on the *Rescue Daily*. (Tian [1939] 1992: 285)

In October 1939, Tian traveled with the theatre troupe to the city of Heng Yang and performed *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River* at a small theatre festival at Chengzhang Middle School. The production was “well received” there as well. (Tian [1939] 1992: 286)

Tian Han sets *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River* in the Southern Song dynasty (the mid-13th century) and uses the well-known military conflicts between the Song (a Chinese/Han-dominated regime) and the Jin (a Manchu-dominated regime) as historical background. For the ethnic Chinese, the war against the regime of Jin was a complete failure. As a result, the Song Empire lost all its territory in Northern China and had to move its capital in the South. However, in the play, Chinese military failure in the 13th century completely disappears and instead Tian Han fictionalized a victory of the Chinese people in the area of Wuhan.

The play begins with a scene in which a Manchu army is about to attack the city of Han Yang (this is part of today’s Wuhan). An old Chinese fisherman named Ruan
Fucheng and his daughter Chunhua notices the Jin’s prepared assault and go to send an alert message to the Chinese officials who are in charge of the defense battle. The mayor of Han Yang notes that the old fisherman was a loyal soldier who served in one of the previous wars against the Manchu invasion and thus invited him to assist the battle of defense. The Manchu army’s first attack caused the Chinese severe casualties but fishermen living in the area of the Han River save a great number of injured Chinese soldiers and generals. The Chinese mayor notice the potential contribution of these common fishermen and ask them to further contribute to the battle of defense. With the assistance from a patriotic teacher, Zhao Guan and a blacksmith Xu Zhou, Ruan organize a group of Song’s common residents of various occupations (including fishermen, peasants, and blacksmiths) for resisting the Manchu invasion. Female fishermen of different ages also join the self-defense group. In Manchu army’s second assault, the united Chinese residents successfully defeat the invasion of the Manchu army.

Tian’s *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River* distinguishes itself from traditional *xiqu* plays and popular realistic *huaju* in several ways:

First, in *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River*, Tian Han courageously experimented with new means of expression. As stated in section 2 of this chapter, singing and dance are the two primary means of expression with the system of *xiqu* performance, and therefore, composing a traditional *xiqu* play is significantly different from writing a realistic drama.

For the artistic creation *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River*, Tian appropriated *huaju*’s dramaturgy and its expressive means. Tian generally employed less singing and dance in his *xingeju*. Rather than rhymed speeches that were often used in classical dramas, Tian employed vernacular speeches instead. In a performance of classical Chinese theatre, an actor is expected by audience to use corresponding body gestures or movements to respond a piece of rhymed singing or speech that he or she is performing. In other words, an actor’s body movements and his singing (or speeches) must always
follow the same rhythmic pattern. However, the employment of vernacular speeches (which is the major expressive means of huaju) helps xingeju breaking away from this requirement. Since the colloquial speeches of xingeju pay little attention to maintaining certain musical rhythm, a xingeju actor’s body is liberated from the requirement of delivering rhythmic body movements. Thus, xingeju’s actors could promote its dramatic action in a faster pace. Fishermen’s Song of the Han River consists of a total of thirty six scenes. In thirty five scenes out of the thirty six, there are more speeches than lyrics (the only exception is the final/the thirty-sixth scene). Some scenes (such as the thirteenth, fifteenth, twenty-sixth, twenty-seventh, twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, thirty, thirty-first, and thirty-fifth scenes) are written by only vernacular speeches but no singing and dancing at all. By calling for a rejection to an overuse of singing, dancing, acrobatics and martial arts, Tian Han attempted to employ the main expressive means of huaju, namely vernacular speeches and realistic actions, to reform traditional Chinese theatre. These colloquial speeches, unlike the lyrics of traditional Chinese theatre, are not confined by rhyming. The combination of singing with extensive colloquial speeches provided xiqu with a new form which could alter traditional xiqu’s preoccupation with rhythmic singing and dancing. Thus, the employment of colloquial speeches not only enables xiqu to broaden its thematic matters but also helps traditional Chinese drama to create a faster pace and realistic actions. This faster pace and realistic action, as Tian Han noted in 1946, helped xiqu to create a high degree of realistic tension and caused the xingeju audience become more emotionally engaged with the theatrical presentation. (Tian [1946] 2000: 50) The realistic tension, I argue, helps xingeju to effectively deliver war plays such as Fishermen’s Song of the Han River.

In addition, in the creation of traditional xiqu such as jingju, one theatre troupe generally only featured one “opera” star. The stars were responsible for selecting repertories, creating new productions, and organizing rehearsals. In other words, xiqu creation was centered upon the effort of theatre stars. However, Tian Han’s xingeju
completely abandoned this star-centered mode of creation. In Tian’s own preface to the text of *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River*, Tian unreservedly recognized that production was “a collective work.” (Tian [1939] 1981: 54) Although there are few sources available to show exactly how the production was created during the wartime, it is clear that no star performers featured in the creation process and all of the performers were young actors who attended Tian’s lecture on theatre at the *pingju* Propaganda Troupe in Guilin. (Tian [1939] 1981: 54)

Tian once contended that “acrobatics and martial arts should be diminished to prevent audiences from being detached from the overall dramatic action.” (Tian [1946] 2000: 64) He explained why he rejected an excessive employment of *xiiqu’s* stylized performance techniques and there should be more balanced compositions of singing and colloquial speech in *xingeju* as following. (Tian [1946] 2000: 64) Traditional Chinese theatre is centered upon singing, dancing, acrobatics, and martial arts. On the Chinese stage, *xiiqu* actors are expected to present spectacular vocal and physical techniques as such singing, dancing, and martial arts. Although speeches also are employed to promote dramatic action, they were also carefully rhymed and adopted literati’s tone. Conventionally, the theatricality created through the actor’s singing and body movements is regarded as one of the most attractive parts in *xiiqu* performances. However, the overemphasis of singing, dancing, and martial arts often becomes an obstacle for Chinese artists to promote a *xiiqu’s* dramatic action. What one can often see on the Chinese stage is that an actor spends several minutes in delivering only a few words in order to make sure that every word was correctly and nicely articulated. As a result, *xiiqu’s* audiences could be simply obsessed with the art’s elegant aural and visual forms but fail to recognize a production’s intellectual profundity.

In his two 1946 essays, Tian Han specifically discussed the reason why his *xingeju* experimented with a new form. In these essays entitled “The Way to Popularize Theatre” and “Discussion with Mr. Qi Rushan about New Pingju,” Tian Han summarized
the experiences in his xingeju and argued to promote several artistic principles for future creations: First, he argued that more attention should be paid to reforming xiqu’s content in order to “satisfy the demands of contemporary political tasks.” (Tian [1946] 2000: 50)

With regards to the content, he echoed Mao’s thought that “the old dramas in the past only praise kings and aristocrats, but overlook the people.” (Tian [1946] 2000: 64)

Therefore, he encouraged that writers of xingeju should maintain their standpoints of the people in order to praise heroes among the people. (Tian [1946] 2000: 64) In fact, Tian’s effort in maintaining the standpoints of the people in theatrical art is not only manifested by xingeju’s rejection of lead characters, but also reflected by the way xingeju was created.

Second, different from the majority of the classical xiqu plays, Fishermen’s Song of the Han River aimed at praising common people’s courage during wartime. According to Tian Han, the plot of Fisherman’s Song of Han River derived from a short story from Han Yang County Annual that recorded a number of local fishermen in the Han River area who united together to defeat an armed robbery. For Tian Han, “such a story is best satisfied with their needs,” since the story shows the power of the common people. (Tian [1950] 1992: 526) Therefore, he decided to adapt this story into a xiqu play. Throughout the play, the common people’s potency of shaping the development of history is intentionally emphasized. For example, in the first scene of the play, the Manchu general Pu Lu He complains “since our country started to attack Song, it is always easy to deal with Song’s generals; [however,] it is very difficult to deal with Song’s common people who are always troublemakers.” (Tian 1981: 249) When Ruan Chunhua, the daughter of the old fisherman Ruan Fucheng, discovers the betrayal of Wang Youcai, a Chinese collaborator of the Manchu army, she argues that “although I’m only a daughter of a fisherman […] I know that every Chinese should love his country, should defend for his country. You are Chinese, standing on your motherland, consuming rice of your homeland. Why are you betraying your ancestors?” (Tian 1981: 277) The ideology of
Socialist Realism emphasizes the point that common people are able to shape history and contribute to the formation of history.

For the purpose of praising the common people, the play arguably has no lead characters and all of the fishermen emerged as a heroic collective. By using the victimized Song in the 13th century to represent the invaded China in the 1930s, the play praises the heroic deeds of the Song’s fishermen in the resistance to the Jin Empire and therefore attempts to uplift the Chinese people’s morale in the war against the Japanese.

In this play, there is an apparent application of the Soviet-inspired Socialist Realistic approach to xiqu in terms of the concern of the people. However, Tian Han’s appropriation of Socialist Realism is not only reflected by its recognition of the role that common people play in the formation of history, but also revealed by the optimistic attitude toward the war. In this sense, I believe that Tian Han’s new xiqu is different from the Ibsen-stream bourgeois realist dramas which were popular in China in the 1920s and 1930s in significant ways. The bourgeois domestic tragedies, such as Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu*) and *The Sunrise* (*Richu*) and Tian Han’s earlier plays *Violin and Rose* (*Fan eling yu qiangwei*), attempted to portray the bitterness within romance, the dark side of human nature, and the corruption of bourgeois society in an overtly tragic and depressive tone. However, by borrowing the Soviet aesthetic approach, Tian Han’s xingeju abandoned the tragic tone within the bourgeois realist tragedies and paid great attention to constructing heroic images of common people in an optimistic tone. For example, Yuan Fucheng spoke out almost every scene he appeared, “As long as all the Chinese people unite together to fight against the Jin army, there is no doubt that victory belongs to us!”

While completing *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River* in 1939, Tian Han created another full-length xingeju entitled *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines* (*xin’ernu yingxiongzhuan*) in Guilin. On May 20th 1939, the play was also premiered by the local Pingju Propaganda Troupe (it was the play’s only known performance).
In *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines*, once again, ancient Chinese history becomes the storehouse for Tian Han to select sources for theatre creation. Set in the mid-Ming dynasty (the mid-16\(^{th}\) century), the play praises the Chinese peasants’ resistance against the Japanese pirates in China’s eastern coastal areas. The play starts with a scene in which a loyal Chinese general Zhang Jing is preparing for the battle of defense against the pirates. In next scenes, Zhang’s army successfully besieged the pirates in their first military confrontation. However, the corrupted Ming’s minister Yan Song and his son Yan Shifan (both of them are real historical figures) asks Zhang Jing to withdraw his army because the Japanese pirates manage to bribe them. Yan Song disbanded Zhang Jing’s army, since the upright general refused to withdraw his military force. Yan Song sends Zhang Jiang to prison, while Zhang Jing’s daughter Zhang Huilan manages to flee to a coastal village in the Southeastern China. There Huilan meets various righteous people who feel sympathy to her family’s misery. These people include Shen Huoduan (a young fellow whose father is jailed by Yan Song as well), Zhang Huannan, a prison guard, Zhang Zhifang, a brave rebel, Sister Ye and her father, two fishermen who sojourned in Japan for years. These common people organize a self-defense group and practice martial arts regularly. In the final scenes, a suspect who turns out to be a Japanese pirate is seized by the Chinese villagers. This incident attracts a great number of pirates approaching. At the point of danger, the general Qi Jiguang’s army arrives and the Chinese villagers work with Qi’s army successfully to defeat the pirates’ assault. At the same time, a messenger coming from the court notifies Guilan that the emperor has released her father and the corrupt minister, Yan Song, has been punished.

The Chinese residents and rebels in the Eastern coastal area are portrayed as uprising peasants with bravery and intelligence that represents the common people’s courage and wisdom. By using the victimized Chinese cities and villages in the 16\(^{th}\) century to symbolize the invaded China in the 1930s, the play attempts to use the Chinese
victory over the Japanese in the 16th century to uplift the Chinese people’s morale in the present war against the Japanese. *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines* maintains many of the defining characteristics of *xingeju*: the Ming court’s high-ranking officials are criticized for their cowardice and the common people of Ming are depicted as brave and intelligent heroes and heroines. Although there are few sources available to show how the production was created and performed in Guilin in 1939, it is clear that no *xiqu* star was involved in the creation process and all actors are student actors from Tian Han’s local *Pingju* Propaganda Troupe. (Tian [1939] 1992: 285)

In addition, singing and dancing are minimized in the textual arrangement, while realistic actions and speeches (of *huaju*) are extensively employed. *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines* consists of a total of fifty-two scenes (there are twelve scenes in the first episode, seven scenes in the middle episode, and thirty three in the final episode). Like the scenes of *Fishermen’s Song of the Han River*, the great majority of the scenes of *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines* employ more speech than lyrics. In addition, a total thirteen scenes (they are the second, third, fifth, eleventh scenes in the first episode, and the fourth, seventh, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, fourteenth, seventeenth, twenty-sixth, thirtieth, and thirty-second scenes in the third episode) employ no singing and dancing at all but are written only by speeches. Neither lyrics nor speeches are rhymed but vernacular. However, I would argue that what is most innovative in this play was how history becomes a source serving the present political demands. In the same vein, both the socialist realist artists in the Soviet and the communist artists during the wartime were preoccupied with how to transform literature and arts into an effective apparatus helping the ongoing revolution.

The primary concern of the communist artists during the Second Sino-Japanese War was how to use art and literature to serve the demands of the present war. Tian Han’s strategy of employing ancient history to serve the political needs of the present deeply influenced the Communist guiding policy in terms of the creation of literature and
arts. In the spring of 1942, Mao Zedong with a number of communist artists in Yan’an, delivered their manifesto for arts and literature in wartime. Mao argues that the task of the left-wing artists in wartime is:

To fit arts and literature properly into the whole revolutionary machine as one of its component parts, to make them powerful weapons for uniting and educating people and for attacking and annihilating the enemy and to help the people to fight the enemy with one heart and one mind. (Mao 1942: 129)

In Mao’s short letter (dated on Nov. 21st 1944) to Guo Moruo, who was Tian Han’s close colleague under the Literary Propaganda Section of the Political Department of the Nationalist Party, Mao argues that historical plays in wartime should “make the past serve the present.” (Mao 1983: 241-2) For Chinese left-wing artists in the wartime, the creation of art and literature becomes a political task for “serving the present.” Therefore, the past is less important or useful unless it could be proven to be or adapted as a source of fiction making for the current war. The authenticity of the history is less important if the adaptation of the history could be fitted “into the whole revolutionary machine.” I argue that Tian Han’s version of myth making best exemplifies the communist notion of shaping history to satisfy the current needs. By placing the two opponents (the Chinese and the Japanese) of the war into a binary in terms of “the justice/civilized vis-à-vis the unjust/barbarian,” Tian Han’s play successfully uses the memory of the past to stimulate the Chinese morale in the present war.

Tian’s strategy of constructing enemies echoes what Edith Hall has found in the classical Greek tragedies. In Inventing the Barbarian, Edith Hall reveals how the ancient Greek poets conceptualized the “barbarians” as the negative embodiment of Athenian civic ideals. Inspired by Hall’s work, I would like to argue that massacre, bellicosity, enslavement, greed, aggression, excesses, and wickedness are all images by which Tian Han’s play defined the image of the Japanese imperialist armies as “dehumanized” and “aggressive” beings, which naturally forms the constant threat to the people who are
“peaceful”, “humane”, and “innocent”. However, I also want to emphasize that there is a fundamental difference between Tian Han’s strategy of portraying enemies and the ancient Greek’s way of constructing “barbarians”. One is an efficient strategy of using history as source to uplift the victims’ morale of resistance. The other is a way of constructing “barbarian” to justify its colonial desire.

In the second scene of *The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines*, the Japanese pirate leader gives an opening speech and proudly admits his role as an “invader” with assistance of several Chinese collaborators. (Tian 1981: 354) The beginning speech of the Japanese pirate leader constructs himself as a dehumanized character. His speech forms a clear contrast to the one of Zhang Jing, a Chinese patriotic official, in which Zhang expresses great sympathy for the common Chinese people living in the wartime. (Tian 1981: 363) By so doing, Tian Han strategically uses the ongoing war of the 20th century to shape the historical narration in his play about the 16th century China. For example, the Japanese pirate leader states that “I brought my fellows from the thirty-six islands [from Japan] and invaded China from He Bei and Shan Dong in the north to the Suzhou, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Canton in the South.” (Tian 1981: 354) The experience of invasion (from the north to the south) the Japanese pirate articulates does not reflect anything happened in the 16th century but exactly echoes the Japanese invasion in the World War Two.

The image of Japan does not show up in the play directly, but is mirrored through the voices of the Japanese pirates and the Chinese who once sojourn in Japan. In scene of the Sister Ye, a Chinese fisherwoman who once lived in Japan, meeting with Zhang Huilan, the daughter of Zhang Jing, to condemn the betrayals of some Chinese corrupted officials, Ye argued that “I and my father lived in Japan like cows and horses for many years” until she finally received her mother’s letter from China. (Tian 1981:431) She prays everyday in Japan toward the direction of the motherland until she sees the beautiful rivers and mountains of China again. (Tian 1981: 432) The narration of the
Sister Ye’s life story once again sharply contrasts China (the “motherland”) to Japan where the Chinese are treated as cows and horses.

I argue that the wartime Chinese playwrights such as Tian Han have sought for a strategic way to blend history and fiction in their artistic works. By reconstructing the historical images of China and Japan, the new xiqu like The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines was written and staged for inspiring Chinese patriotism and morale during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The historical Japan was constructed as an aggressive invader which metaphorically represents the Japanese in the 20th century. The historical China and the Chinese are constructed as weak victims of aggression which, of course, represent the Chinese who were defending for integrity of their country. Inspired by Socialist Realism, Tian Han’s theatrical creation was preoccupied with the political impulse that a theatrical art could achieve. Tian Han’s socialist realist plays of xiqu rejected the tragic tone within the bourgeois realist tragedies and experimented this hybrid genre with constructing heroic images of common people in an optimistic tone. Inspired by huaju, the combination of singing with extensive colloquial speeches in Tian Han’s plays created a new form which could enable xiqu to break away from the rhythmic constraints. The colloquial speeches enabled xiqu to broaden its thematic matters and helped the new theatre with keeping modern audiences emotionally engaged. In this sense, Tian’s works perhaps best exemplify the products of the multicultural exchange and illustrate the complicated impacts of multicultural flows on the 20th century Chinese theatre.

Inspired by Tian Han’s creation of xingeju in 1939, communist artists in Yan’an, then the headquarter of the Communist Party, also adopted this Socialist Realistic point of view and develop common people’s contribution to the development of Chinese history in the early 1940s. In Yan’an, the communist artists consistently created several reformed xiqu plays such as Fleeing to the Mount Liang (bishang liangshan, 1941) and Three Battles at the Village of the Zhu’s (sanda zhujiazhuang, 1941), all of which were categorized into the genre of xingeju by the communist artists. After he saw Socialist
Realism-inspired xiqu play *Fleeing to the Mount Liang* (*bishang liangshan*), written collectively by the Yan’an *Pingju* Research Institute) in the city of Yan’an, Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese communist revolution, once again remarked the role that common people play in the formation of history. In a brief letter to the creation team of *Fleeing to the Mount Liang*, Mao praised the communist artists’ crucial effort in transforming xiqu’s characters from the upper class to common people:

> History is created by the people, but on the stage of the old theater (in the literature and arts that have been separated from the people) the people have been turned into the dregs of society, while the Masters, Madames, and Young Masters, and Young Misses have dominated the stage. This reversal of history has now been reversed by you; you have restored history to its true face, and you have given the old traditional theater a new beginning. (Mao 1944, Fei 1999: 142)

By examining Tian Han’s introduction of the approach of Socialist Realism and his creation of the wartime xingeju plays, we could discover that multicultural flows have contributed to the emergence of modernized xiqu form xingeju. The employment of Socialist Realism helped Tian Han to explore the influential role of the people, which was downplayed in traditional Chinese drama. The use of vernacular speeches and realistic action helped Tian Han to create a faster pace and realistic action to represent the theme of war. By rejecting an overuse of singing and dancing, Tian Han did not attempt to deny xiqu’s primary means of expression (as we can see in the next chapter). What he was really longing for was a possibility of diversifying the means of expression in order to enrich traditional Chinese drama in modern era.
Chapter Three:
Tian Han as a Xiqu Critic and Cultural Policy Maker

In this chapter, I will illustrate the roles that Tian Han played as both a xiqu critic from mid-1930s to the 1940s and a cultural policy maker in the early years of the People’s Republic of China. In the first section of the chapter, I want to illustrate the role that Tian Han played as a theatre critic in reforming traditional Chinese theatre since the mid-1930s. The section will detail Tian Han’s dissatisfaction with the reforming practice of xiqu stars such as Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu. For Tian Han, the essential problem within Mei’s performances lies in the fact that Mei’s plays were still designed by the bourgeois intellectuals and built upon the tastes of the urban bourgeois and the feudal diehards but failed to take the interests of the general public into account in his artistic creation. In this sense, Tian Han’s role as a critic was parallel to his position as the creator of xingeju. In both positions, he was preoccupied with the questions such as how to transform xiqu into an art of the people and how to represent the oppressed masses in theatrical art. His dissatisfaction with the status quo generated his ambition of creating a new xiqu form. In the second section, the thesis will discuss how Tian Han as the cultural policy maker defended the artistic value of xiqu after the founding of the People’s Republic. Different from his role as a playwright, Tian Han’s position as a cultural policy maker not only facilitated the development of xingeju in a new cultural context but also prevented a great number of valuable traditional xiqu plays from being banned. Tian’s cultural policy reflected his complete rejection of the total Westernization of traditional Chinese drama and what he was really longing for was a hybrid theatrical form that could speak to Chinese audience in a modern era.

3.1 Tian Han’s Negation of the “Old Drama” --Tian Han’s Criticism of Mei Lanfang

In the early Republican era, xiqu stage was dominated by jingju performers such
as Mei Lanfang, who created new performance styles and repertories under the direction of a number of Western/Japanese-educated intellectuals. Tian Han’s initial intention to create a new operatic mode for Chinese audience resulted from his strong dissatisfaction with the creations of traditional Chinese theatre by the popular *jingju* stars such Mei Lanfang and Cheng Yanqiu. Starting from the mid-1930s, Tian Han provided several detailed examinations of Mei and Cheng’s *jingju* performances from the perspective of Marxist literary theory.

In 1934, Tian Han consistently published two critical essays to examine Mei Lanfang’s future tour to the Soviet Union in *the China Daily* (*zhonghua ribao*), a Shanghai-based newspaper. As I mentioned in previous chapters, for the first time, Socialist Realism was introduced to Chinese readers by Tian Han in these two essays. Yet, in these the two articles, Tian also addresses the urgent demands of creating a new theatrical mode by attacking Mei’s *jingju* plays. In the essay entitled “The Chinese Old Drama and the Criticism of Mei Lanfang,” Tian started with a detailed analysis of Mei Lanfang’s “ancient costume new dramas” and argued that “Mei Lanfang is firmly controlled by China’s feudal power and becomes their perfect tool.” (Tian [1934] 2000: 12) In the essay, Tian cited theatre critic Huang Su’s critique of Mei’s “new costume ancient dramas”:

The characters of all of these dramas, like Xi Shi in the state Wu’s Palace, Yu Ji in the state Chu’s Palace, the Lady Shang Yuan in the Han’s Palace, the Goddess Luo in the Wei’s Palace, Tai Zhen of the Tang’s Palace, Chang’e of the Moon Palace, Ma Gu of the Heaven Palace, Lin Daiyu, Xi Ren and Qing Wen of the Grand View Garden, are beauties of the imperial families. The characters which Mei Lanfang impersonates must be beautiful ladies. The places, where these beautiful women live in, must be the kings’ palaces. The reputations of the beauties are promoted by the glory of the imperial families. (Tian [1934] 2000: 13)
In the early Republican era, under the direction of intellectuals such as Qi Rushan, Mei Lanfang greatly reformed the performance style and created a substantial number of new repertories of traditional Chinese theatre. “Ancient costume new dramas” (guzhuang xinxi) best exemplified Mei’s reform in this period. Represented by *Farewell My Concubine* (*bawang bieji*), *The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers* (*tiannü sanhua*), and *Mrs. Shangyuan* (*shangyuan furen*), the “ancient costume new dramas” are generally adapted from ancient Chinese folklores and stories from classical Chinese literary works and featured by spectacular dance performances and elaborate costuming. The plays are centered upon Mei Lanfang’s impersonations of a variety of historical/mythological female beauties such as Xi Shi, Yu Ji, the Goddess Luo, and Chang’e. As theatre scholar Joshua Goldstein points out, Mei’s ancient costume new dramas “were aimed at resuscitating ancient models of Chinese beauty.” (Goldstein 2007: 123) The plays “were explicitly packaged as authentic revivals of ancient Chinese aesthetic traditions.” (Goldstein 2007: 123) Goldstein identifies Mei’s “ancient costume new dramas” as part of what he calls “an invented tradition,” within which the classical Chinese literature and folklores have been fantasized and become the sources for the 20th century appropriation.

For Tian, he identifies Mei Lanfang’s own social class before examining his performances. He argues:

Mei Lanfang was born in a traditional family of the “Pear Garden” [an alias referring to the profession of theatre acting], which is deeply immersed with the feudal culture […] he eventually becomes a “heavenly maiden” who scatters feudal thoughts. Therefore, he got reputation from “decent celebrities” and degraded petty bourgeois, however, for the revolutionary intellectuals, his name has become an object of criticism. (Tian [1934] 2000: 19)

In the eyes of Tian Han, “what Mei Lanfang impersonates are all beauties who live in emperors’ palaces, Mei acts as a living tool, which spreads feudal thought in the arena
where class struggle is intense.” (Tian [1934] 2000: 13)

For Tian Han, the fundamental problem of Mei Lanfang’s theatre creations lied in his belief that Mei’s jingju reform doesn’t distinguish itself from the feudal model of xiqu creation. Mei’s contemporary jingju productions were still dedicated to depicting emperors and feudal lords while neglected the importance of maintaining the standpoint of the people. (Tian [1946] 2000: 64) In this sense, Mei’s “ancient costume new dramas” were only attractive to “old feudal diehards” (fengjian yilao) and urban petty bourgeoisies. For Tian Han, Mei Lanfang’s xiqu creations privileged spectacle over literary value, favored sensational pleasure over revolutionary thought. As a result, theatre’s role as an educational apparatus and a potential vehicle for social reform was neglected; Mei’s performances became purely entertainment and Mei Lanfang himself became a puppet of the reactionary feudal force.

When rejecting Mei Lanfang’s mode of theatre creation, Tian Han consistently articulates an urgent demand of reforming xiqu in the Republican era. In Tian’s mind, the historical trajectory of traditional Chinese theatre is bound to the historical transformation of modern China. Just like revolution has been treated as most effective remedy of saving the falling country, reform was also thought as most efficient strategy to save the indigenous theatrical genre from the fierce competition with its Western-inspired counterparts. As Tian notes, “whether you like it [theatre reform] or not, just like China must be reformed […] old drama must be reformed.” (Tian [1946] 2000: 55) Theatre reform, for Tian Han, is an unavoidable trend for theatre participants.

In 1946, Tian Han published another essay entitled “Reading Qi Rushan’s Suggestions on Pingju Reform”. In the essay, Tian provided his comprehensive suggestions on jingju reform by criticizing the popular jingju performances. Tian argued that one fundamental problem of the contemporary jingju productions is that xiqu artists privileged xiqu’s form over its content. As a result, performers (especially stars) have been privileged over theatrical art itself, since a production’s success is
merely determined by actors’ performance virtuosity. Tian’s point suggested an overt objection to the popularity of Republican jingju stars such as Mei Lanfang. Tian Han used analogy of bottle and wine to discuss the relationship between form and content. (Tian [1946] 2000: 56) Tian believed that Mei’s reform only polishes the “bottle” but still keeps the “old wine”. Tian argues that demand of xiqu reform requires the bottle of xiqu to be filled with “new wine,” namely new content and thought. (Tian [1946] 2000: 56) However, Tian Han added, if the wine becomes new, the bottle also can be adjusted in order to make them as an organic whole. Compared to Mei’s reform that primarily focuses on polishing xiqu’s performance technique, Tian Han’s proposed reform is more thorough. As reflected in his xingeju productions, Tian Han’s reform engages both form and structure. In terms of content, Tian’s xingeju absorbs the viewpoint of Socialist Realism and shapes the characters which traditional xiqu depicts. On the aspect of form, Tian’s rejects to the overuse of singing, dancing, acrobatics, and martial arts, breaks away from traditional xiqu’s metrical constraints and rhyme schemes, and extensively employs huaju’s expressive means, namely vernacular speeches, to create a faster pace and realistic action.

Theatre scholar Li Wei argues that on the Republican stage, there are two distinct modes of theatre creation: one could be called “the Mei Lanfang pattern” (Mei Lanfang moshi) and the other could be identified as “the Tian Han pattern” (Tian Han moshi). (Li 2005: 95) Li argued that the two artists held two essentially different notions of theatre creation and the two patterns fiercely competed with each other in the Republican era: the former focuses on the importance of maintaining and developing xiqu’s performance technique, the latter employs new forms to spread anti-feudal and anti-imperialist thoughts. (Li 2005: 95) Li argued that, by referring to China’s colonial context, the “Mei Lanfang pattern” appeared to be conservative and lacked of socially progressive values for general public. On the contrary, in the specific cultural context, the “Tian Han pattern” seemed to be more socially progressive and
followed China’s trajectory towards modernity. (Li 2005: 95-6) And, in fact, it was “the Tian Han pattern” that was eventually adopted by the communist artists in the Yan’an era (1934-1948) and after the founding of the People’s Republic. Thus, “the Tian Han pattern” was more influential in constructing Chinese own theatrical modernity. (Li 2005: 95-6)

The fundamental difference between the two patterns lied in the fact that Mei Lanfang and Tian Han essentially took different attitudes toward Western theatrical influences. Mei Lanfang and his intellectual endorsers were preoccupied with the notion of creating a “national drama,” which aimed at maintaining and developing distinct Chinese aesthetic characteristics through refining xiqu’s performance techniques. Mei and his intellectual advisors’ agenda of reforming xiqu was restricted by its overt bourgeois taste. On the contrary, Tian Han as a theatre critic was obsessed with developing theatre’s role as an educational/revolutionary apparatus. He was interested in developing theatre’s role in mobilizing masses. He kept a critical perspective to examine traditional Chinese theatre and took a pragmatic stance towards the Western theatrical impact. He actively sought for artistic merits from both the Chinese and Western (or Soviet) sources and used them organically in his theatrical experiments. Theatre critic Tian Han’s negation of xiqu was parallel to the role that Tian Han played as a practitioner of xingeju. It was his dissatisfaction with his contemporary xiqu performance generated Tian’s intention of creating a new xiqu mode.

3.2 Towards a Reformed Xiqu: Tian Han’s Xiqu Criticism During the Theatre Reform Movement (xigai yundong)

This section aims at discussing Tian Han’s role as a cultural policy maker and a theoretical constructor of xingeju in the early stage (1949-1954) of the Seventeen Years (1949-1966). I identify the era between 1949 and 1954 was crucial for examining Tian
Han’s theoretical constructions of “xingeju,” because, as the director of the Xiqu Improvement Bureau (xiqu gaijinju), a central organization for xiqu reform under the directorship of the Ministry of Culture, Tian Han produced a substantial number of essays discussing the direction of xiqu reform and proposing criteria of revising xiqu’s traditional repertoires and evaluating new xiqu productions. In this era, Tian Han expressed a seemingly different attitude toward traditional Chinese theatre. When the great majority of xiqu plays were in danger of being banned, Tian rejected the strict censorship and emphasized xiqu’s great potential of contributing itself to the ongoing revolution. While writing against a complete Westernization of traditional Chinese theatre, Tian Han revealed a clear picture of his ideal xiqu form. Xingeju should be a theatrical genre that could take advantage of both the Chinese and Western theatrical sources. It is different from many of the traditional Chinese theatre that only serves the interests of feudal aristocrats and urban bourgeois. However, it is also not a complete appropriation of Western realistic drama that completely abandons xiqu’s expressive forms. It is essentially a hybrid theatre and a modernized version of xiqu, which could effectively communicate with xiqu’s modern audiences.

In 1949, the communist bureaucrats and artists launched a nation-wide xiqu reform movement (xigai yundong). As the slogan of the movement—“reform repertoire, reform people, reform system” suggests, the xiqu reform movement was a comprehensive reform aiming at shifting the conventional mode of xiqu through revising its repertoires, transforming actors into the servants of the ongoing revolutionary project, and abolishing the star-centered mode of theatre creations. In fact, a few years before the founding of PRC, so-called “theatre reforms” took place in a variety of communist-ruled regions in the North and the Northwest. The earliest root of the reform could be traced back in early 1948. An editorial entitled “We Must Methodically and Systematically Reform Old Theatre” was published on the People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of China in 1948. In this editorial, traditional Chinese theatre was identified as “a
weapon of the old ruling class” and the anonymous author of the editorial claimed that the vast majority of its repertoire “was filled with feudal content which has not been necessarily reformed.” (Liu 2010: 389)

The author divided all xiqu plays into three categories: those that were “beneficial,” “harmless,” and “evil”. (Liu 2010: 389) The category of “the beneficial” includes plays that “resist feudal oppression and corrupt officials…, praise national integrity…, uncover the internal conflict of the ruling class…, combat local tyrants…, as well as those plays that oppose familial oppression and praise marital freedom.” (Liu 2010: 390) On the contrary, the category of the “evil” includes all plays that “advocate feudal oppression and slave mentality…radical disloyalty…superstition…these plays should be banned or permitted for performance only after significant changes or alterations in critical sections.” (Liu 2010: 390) Right after the release of the editorial, a number of local xiqu reform committees formed for “studying and examining local plays.” (Liu 2010: 390) According to Liu Siyuan, the approach, namely of dividing xiqu repertories into three categories, produced extremely negative consequences for local theatre performances and creations. For example, in southern part of Hebei province in around 1949, out of a list of 162 plays from three major local genres, forty-one were “temporarily permitted,” ninety-six needed revisions, and twenty-five were banned. (Liu 2010: 390-1) The widespread prohibitions often resulted in “repertoire famines,” which directly harms xiqu actors’ living conditions. (Liu 2010: 404)

After the establishment of the Xiqu Improvement Bureau (xiqu gaijinju) in 1949, Tian Han, who primarily lived in the KMT-controlled area before 1949, was appointed as the director of the Bureau. From November 1949 to April 1950, Tian Han wrote three open letters to Zhou Yang, then the deputy minister of the propaganda department of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and expressed his strong disagreement with dividing all xiqu repertories into three categories and coming up a specific list of banned plays. Tian argues that rather than providing a list of prohibited plays, xiqu reformers should propose
a specific criterion of evaluating old repertories. (Tian [1949] 2000: 99) For Tian Han, the three principles of “new democratic dramas” should be “nationalist, scientific, and democratic.” (Tian [1949] 2000: 99) The three principles should be also used to evaluate content of any xinggeju plays. (Tian [1949] 2000: 99) With the criteria of the three principles, Tian Han’s rejection to the three-category distinction “carried great weight and prevented the state from implementing a broad list of censored plays.” (Liu 2010: 391)

In July 1950 when the first meeting of the Xiqu Improvement Committee opened, only a total of twelve plays were officially banned in the name of the committee. Unlike many of communist artists who identified xiqu primarily as “a weapon of the old ruling class,” Tian Han saw xiqu as an artistic form still could be able to represent the nation’s unique cultural heritage and the interest of the common people in a new cultural context. Tian Han argued:

Some people considered old drama as something serving emperors, aristocrats, gangsters, and landlords, rejected it completely, and advocated a complete Europeanization, which is exactly desired by US imperialists’ bourgeois cosmopolitanism. They wanted to seize our nation’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and force us to surrender spiritually to the US imperialists […] You should] know that the feudal time did not only have emperors, aristocrats, gangsters, and landlords, but also working people. (Tian [1951] 2000: 183)

Tian Han identifies his agenda of xiqu reform as essentially “nationalist”. Tian Han’s treatment of ideal xiqu form as a nationalist art was consistent from the Second Sino-Japanese War to the Seventeen Years (1949-1965). For Tian Han, the nationalist criterion is reflected by two aspects: first, as I demonstrated in the chapter two of this thesis, Tian Han was preoccupied with xingeju’s potential of uplifting the Chinese morale in his wartime plays such as Fishermen’s Song of the Han River and The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines. Second, xiqu, as a distinct Chinese theatrical art, owns its potential of representing the nation, therefore it should not be reformed towards complete
Westernization.

For the “democratic” criterion, the issue of xiqu should be examined through a dialectical way: one the one hand, Tian admitted that “xiqu had been strongly influenced by feudalism” and it was also used an entertainment tool of urban bourgeois; on the other hand, within xiqu, you also could hear “pulsation of the people.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 114)

By using the phrase “pulsation of the people,” Tian Han means that the theatre audience still could perceives “the will of the people” and “the virtue of the common people” in a majority of xiqu plays. However, the misfortune for Tian Han lies in the fact that “the will of the people” in xiqu plays was often under the disguise of the supernatural. In his third open letter to Zhou Yang, Tian argued that, according to a survey he conducted, out of over nine hundred jingju plays, 109 plays were dealing with the stories of ghost, gods, and other supernatural phenomena. (Tian [1950] 2000: 114) Tian cited Yang Xuanquan, the deputy minister of the cultural ministry, to explain why these ghost plays were harmful: “The old notion of the cause-and-effect relationship exists in almost every play.”

“The old notion of cause-and-effect relationship” refers to the Chinese moral belief that “the good should be rewarded, but the evil should be punished”. On the Chinese stage, no evil characters could be prevented from punishment. If human kind could not offer the punishment, traditional Chinese plays often employed supernatural power to present the moral justification. For example, in the classical Chinese play The Injustice Done to Tou Ngo, Tou Ngo, the female protagonist, is executed by a corrupted official’s miscarriage. The moral justification is done only after Tou Ngo’s ghost notifies her father (then an officer in the capital) of her tragedy. In classical Chinese drama, the use of the supernatural was extremely pervasive and the fate of each character was destined to the will of god.

Influenced by the Soviet social realist approach and its practice of theatre reform, Tian Han asked the Chinese to borrow the Soviet experience in reforming their classical repertoire and adopt the Soviet attitude to the “feudal” notion of “destiny”. “The old
dramas’ notion that destiny determines everything should be altered by the Socialist belief that the power of the people determines everything.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 129) In order to know the people’s noble quality and contribution, Tian Han argues that, “Soviet dramatists paid attention to studying the development of social struggle and the ancient people’s attitude to their society and nature” in European dramatic canons. (Tian [1950] 2000: 129) In addition, he argued that Soviet writers like Ilya Ehrenburg3 provide the Chinese more current evidence to show that the traitor of the people shall be certainly punished. He cites Ehrenburg’s speech (which was delivered in the Conference For World Peace on March 17th, 1950 in Stockholm) that “A defendant said in the Nuremberg Military Tribunal that they never expected to end in ignominious fiascos […] the crimes of them [fascists] shall certainly be punished, the revenge of the outraged people cannot be avoided.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 132) For Tian Han, the feudal notion that everything is determined by the supernatural power within classical Chinese dramas should be altered by that notion that everything is determined by the people—“if you did wrongful deeds to the people or betrayed the people, you must eventually get punished by the people.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 131-2) This Soviet-inspired logic is called the “dialectic cause-and-effect relationship” by Tian Han. He argues, “according to French Naturalists, crimes often would not be punished, however, we [as socialist realistic dramatists] should endorse this new dialectic logic of the cause-and-effect.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 131-2) I argue that this “new dialectic logic of the cause-and-effect” is evident in Tian Han’s creation of xingeju plays. In both Fishermen’s Song of the Han River and The Legends of New Heroes and Heroines, the oppressed Chinese residents eventually achieve victories over the corrupted officials and invaders. Different from traditional Chinese plays in which moral justifications are done with the assistance of the supernatural power; xingeju explicitly recognized the people’s own effort in shaping human history.

The rejection to the supernatural is essential to Tian’s construction of xingeju,

3 Ilya Ehrenburg (1891-1967) was a renowned Soviet journalist and writer. The title of his 1954 novella Thaw was often used to identify the early phase of the Post-Stalinist era.
which represents the “scientific” aspect of his theory. For Tian Han, the supposed “scientific” aspect ensured a sense of objectivity which refers to the universal truth about human world. “Everything is determined by the people” is one of the universal truths for Marxist artists like Tian Han. However, from the perspective of the communist theatre reformers such as Tian Han, the “truth” is blurred on ancient stage because the creators of these dramas were misguided by feudal influence, which is essentially anti-scientific to Marxists. Marxist artist’s very obligation is to uncover “the truth.” (Tian [1950] 2000: 131-2) Once again, I would like to remind of Wang Hui’s note on how comprehensive scientism (weikexuezhuyi, lit. “science-centrism”) played an influential role in shaping the thought of Chinese intellectuals and artists in the post May Fourth era. Everything including the creation of literature and arts is expected to adopt a supposed “scientific” approach. (Wang 1995: 1-68)

The three principles, namely of “nationalist, scientific, democratic (for the people),” constitutes the core of Tian Han’s notion in terms of theatre criticism. By rejecting the supernatural and establishing the people as the promoter of human history, Tian Han’s theatre criticism carried great weight in the period in the early phase of the People’s Republic.
Conclusion

In the later phase of the Seventeen Years (1949-1965), Tian was still active in the circle of theatre. In 1954, Tian Han quitted his position in the Theatre Reform Bureau and became the editor of *Theatre Newspaper (xijubao)*. In 1955, he was appointed as the director of the China Theatre Press. During the era between 1955 and 1964, he was still known as a productive poet and a renowned social activist. At the same time, he also worked on revising several pre-PRC plays such as *The White Snake* and *Xie Yaohuan* (both of the two became popular plays on the *xiqu* stage after 1978). In 1965, at the eve of the Cultural Revolution, like many other intellectuals, he was sent to one labor camp in the suburb of Beijing and was asked to “receive reeducation from peasants and workers.” In August 1966, the Great Cultural Revolution broke out. Under Mao’s direction, radical leftist students left schools and universities and organized different Red Guard groups throughout the nation. They accused the Chinese culture of being immersed with feudal and bourgeois thoughts and therefore the proposed Cultural Revolution aimed at a complete overthrow of traditional Chinese culture. In Dec. 1966, Tian was sent to prison and convicted of being a “spy” and “traitor,” because his early life in the KMT-controlled area was regarded as suspicious towards the Red Guards. In Dec. 1968, Tian died in prison at the age of seventy.

During the Cultural Revolution, Tian Han’s name was completely erased from public media. The “revolutionary model dramas”, which were created directly under the supervision of Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, monopolized the Chinese stage during the period from 1966 to 1976. After the Cultural Revolution, although the absurd verdict on Tian Han was reversed, Tian Han’s dramatic works appeared to be forgotten in the 1980s. The reason why Tian Han’s dramatic works were rarely performed was perhaps because both general audiences and theatre scholars were attracted by a variety of experimental works of both *huaju* and *xiqu* such as Gao Xingjian’s theatres of “the absurd”. The name of Tian Han has reappeared in public media since the late-1990s. He was first remembered by the
people of his hometown Changsha. In 1999, a theater (the Grand Tian Han Theater) and a square were built in the name of Tian Han in order to memorize this great artist. In the year of 2000, *The Complete Works of Tian Han*, which consists of 20 volumes, was released. Since the beginning of the 21st century, his legacy on theatre creation has become increasingly transparent on the Chinese stage. His *xiqu* plays such as *The White Snake* and *Xie Yaohuan* have been revived and frequently staged in China by leading Chinese *xiqu* companies. In the year of 2010, the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Hawai‘i staged an English-version of *The White Snake*, which representing the growing intentional attention to this crucial Chinese dramatist.

In this thesis, by discussing Tian Han’s two wartime *xingeju* and the role that he played as a *xiqu* critic and cultural policy maker, I wish that my thesis could generate more scholarly attention to not only the crucial role that Tian Han played in the formation of modern Chinese *xiqu* and but also the wartime *xingeju* plays which had received little scholarly consideration. The so-called “Tian Han pattern” is essentially a mode that actively seeks for artistic merits from both the Chinese and Western (and Soviet) sources and uses them organically in his theatrical experiments. Tian Han’s innovative reform of *xiqu* distinguishes him from the reforming path which popular *xiqu* stars such as Mei Lanfang adopted. Inspired by Socialist Realism, Tian’s plays are preoccupied with the questions such as how to reflect the interests of the people in the reformed classical drama and how to make artists as direct servants of the oppressed lower class. Inspired by Western-style realistic drama, Tian Han rejected the overuse of singing, dancing, and acrobatics and developed *xingeju* through a balanced combination of all kinds of expressive means. Tian Han’s strategy of reforming *xiqu*’s content and form has played an influential role in the formation of modernized *xiqu* plays.
Works Cited


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