UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Sound of Ghosts: Ghost Opera, Reformed Drama and the Staging of a New China, 1949-1979

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requireents for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Margaret C. Greene

Committee in charge:

Professor Joseph W. Esherick, Co-Chair
Professor Paul G. Pickowicz, Co-Chair
Professor Nancy Guy
Professor Ari Larissa Heinrich
Professor Weijing Lu

2013

The Dissertation of Margaret C. Greene is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for the publication on microfilm and electronically:

_____

_____

_____

_____
Co-Chair

_____
Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013

DEDICATION

Over the course of my studies, I have benefited from the wisdom and advice of many people. My advisors, Paul Pickowicz and Joseph Esherick, deserve the lion's share of credit for herding me along the path from freaked out first year grad student to reasonably competent PhD candidate. They have been patient with my many missteps along the way, and I will always be grateful for the excellent training, advice, and support I have received from them along the way.

One of the treasures of the UCSD Modern Chinese History program is Dr. Ye Wa, who goes above and beyond in helping us sort through historical documents. She first pointed out *Li Huiniang* to me, and everything flowed from that critical moment. Her generosity in sharing her time and knowledge has been unmatched, and I will sorely miss her keen insights and good humor.

My graduate experience would not have been the same without my classmates. From seminar to trips to Stanford to putting our feet up at parties, they have provided good advice, good commentary, and great support. The earliest portion of this work benefitted enormously from the feedback I received from Emily Baum, David Chang Cheng, Jenny Huangfu, Justin Jacobs, Judd Kinzley, and Jomo Smith. Amy O'Keefe has always been a beam of sunny optimism, and her generosity in opening her busy home to me will always be appreciated. Among the broader graduate student community, I have had many people whose friendship has helped keep me on track and provided an intellectual outlet outside of the bounds of the seminar room. I will always cherish time spent with Stephen Mandiberg, William Huber, Brent Haas, and many others, and look forward to continuing our conversations in coming years.

From the wider community at UCSD, I have had the distinct pleasure of learning from some of the best and brightest in many fields. Stefan Tanaka has always been a source of support, both emotional and intellectual, and without his sage advice, I probably would not have made it this far. Ari Heinrich has always been generous in sharing time and expertise, as have Suzanne Cahill, Nancy Guy, Todd Henry, Sarah Schneewind, and Lu Weijing.

This research was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship. In Shanghai, the staff and faculty at East China Normal University were instrumental in allowing me to conduct my research; a conversation I had with Professor Jiang Jin proved the turning point in how I approached this topic. Also in Shanghai, Dr. Gao Jun of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences has been a good friend and wonderful help in securing sources and access to special archives.

Amanda Shuman, PhD candidate in modern Chinese history at UC Santa Cruz, has been the best graduate school friend I could have asked for. Without her, I would have been unable to complete this work; she has read every draft of every chapter, offering opinions, corrections, and advice. We have spent many hours chatting on Skype, sweltering in Shanghai, and walking through Berlin's beautiful Tiergarten, talking about our work, history, and life. She has always been able to tease out the bigger picture from my confused ramblings. Her good humor and encouragement have gotten me over some big hurdles.

Simon Carless has been loving and supprotive throughout this process, even when I have been a complete wreck. He's kept our home on a relatively even keel, even while I was manically writing and editing, and deserves more than a few lines. My canine companions have likewise been great sources of joy, keeping my feet warm during late nights and provided excuses to leave the house on occasion.

Professor Sue Fernsebner has been an amazing mentor from my undergraduate days on. She has never steered me wrong, and I am so very appreciative of all the time she has spent on me, and the friendship that has developed over the years. My mum, Renee Hylton, has been a wellspring of intellectual, emotional, and financial support. I wouldn't be the historian I am today were it not for her influence on a number of levels.

This work – my graduate career in general – would not have been possible without the help of so many people, and they deserve more than a sentence or two. I am humbled by and grateful for their support.

EPIGRAPH

One experiences an eternal yet banal sensation in the archive: one feels *other* hands, the touch of hands across a century.

Edvard Radzinsky

向之所欣，俛仰之間，已為陳迹，猶不能不以之興懷；况修短隨化，終期于盡。

王羲之

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.
Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

T.S. Eliot

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Chinese Communist Party – CCP

General Administration of Press and Publication – GAPP

Guomindang - GMD

People's Republic of China – PRC

Shanghai Municipal Archives – SMA

State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television – SARFT

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

VITA

2006	Bachelor of Arts, University of Mary Washington
2006-2007	International Chinese Language Program
2007	Reader, Department of History University of California, San Diego
2008-2010	Teaching Assistant, Department of History University of California, San Diego
2010	Master of Arts, University of California, San Diego
2010-2011	Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grantee
2012	Associate Instructor, Department of History University of California, San Diego
2013	Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

PUBLICATIONS

"A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of Vengeance: Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang*, and the Politics of Drama, 1959-1979," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24.1 (Spring 2012): 149-199.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History (Modern China)

Studies in Modern Japanese History
Professor Stefan Tanaka

Studies in Chinese Literature and Cultural Studies
Professor Ari Larissa Heinrich

Studies in Premodern Chinese History
Professors Sarah Schneewind, Suzanne Cahill, and Lu Weijing

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Sound of Ghosts: Ghost Opera, Reformed Drama and the Staging of a New China, 1949-1979

by

Margaret Caroline Greene

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Joseph Esherick, Co-Chair
Professor Paul Pickowicz, Co-Chair

This dissertation is concerned with the reform and preservation of traditional drama, particularly those with supernatural subjects, in the People's Republic of China, largely as seen through intellectual debates of the 1950s and 1960s. I argue that between 1949 and 1963, the maintenance and reform of traditional opera was a key part of the Chinese Communist Party's policies toward cultural production. In contrast to narratives

that characterize the socialist period primarily as one of cultural destruction, I assert that classical culture, as viewed through discussions on traditional opera, was treasured, promoted and protected by senior intellectuals. The first chapter follows the early efforts aimed at regulating traditional drama between 1949 and 1952. Specifically, it considers the decision of the Ministry of Culture to ban twenty-six plays and the impact the bans had on traditional repertoire and performances. Chapter two considers the fallout that stemmed from the early bans, as well as Ma Jianling's "ghostless ghost play" and the horrified reactions of intellectuals to his adaptation. The negative reaction of intellectuals forces us to reconsider preconceived notions of how Marxist intellectuals treated traditional culture. Chapter three places the production and reception of Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* at its center. The play has generally been understood in the context of the Great Leap Forward; I argue we need to see it in the broader context of debates over ghost opera throughout the socialist period. Chapter four looks at the last open debate on ghost opera in 1963, the year that also saw ghosts banned from Chinese stages entirely. I argue that ghost opera is a barometer for the increasing radicalization of society, but that despite the leftward turn of politics, many people were not necessarily willing participants in the changes that were to sweep the country. Chapter five considers the role of ghost opera and traditional drama in the Cultural Revolution. I discuss two radical drama festivals and show that the cultural sphere was rather reticent to begin incorporating radical changes, until absolutely forced to in 1965. Finally, in the conclusion I briefly discuss the post-1976 story of Meng Chao and *Li Huiniang* and trace connections to cultural production as it exists today.

Introduction: Demons and Wonders

Around 1378, the writer Qu You (1347-1433) – his dreams of a glittering official career in ruins due to the chaos and upheaval of the Yuan-Ming transition – finally completed work on his collection of short stories called *New Tales Told by Lamplight* [Jiandeng xinhua].[1] This was an attempt at reviving the tradition of "tales of the strange," and Qu's stories would provide source material and inspiration for countless generations of Chinese writers. One story, called "The Woman in Green" [Lüyiren chuan] provided inspiration for Zhou Chaojun's late sixteenth century drama, *The Story of Red Plums* [Hongmei ji], which in turn inspired many versions of the play to be written and rewritten well into the twentieth century. It was one of these plays, a 1961 Kun opera [*kunqu*] called *Li Huiniang*, that was the first subject of serious criticism in the lead up to the Cultural Revolution. The ghost, branded a "great poisonous weed," and her most recent author, who was labeled an "ox ghost-snake spirit," or bad element *par excellence*, found themselves at the center of Mao's last great assault on his party.

"Stories of the strange," anomaly accounts, and all manner of ghosts, gods, and spirits have long been important parts of the Chinese literary canon. From folk stories to highly literary compendiums, from plays to novels to film, they appear in many forms and in many period. Studies such as Robert Ford Campany's *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* and Judith T. Zeitlin's *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* are in-depth examinations of literary

[1] Feng Qiyong 冯其庸, "Cong 'Lüyiren chuan' dao *Li Huiniang*" 从'绿衣人传'到《李慧娘》 [From "The Woman in Green" to *Li Huiniang*], *Beijing wenyi* (November 1962): 51-56; Qu You 瞿佑, *Qiandeng Xinhua* 剪灯新话 [New tales told by lamplight] (Shanghai: Shanghai guxiang chubanshe, 1981): 104-107.

compendiums of strange and miraculous events.[2] One of the most important forms of strange tales is the ghost opera [*guixi*], which constitutes a number of important works in many operatic forms. In 1961, the writer Liao Mosha remarked in his famous essay on ghost opera, "The Some Ghosts are Harmless Theory," that "people say, 'Without coincidences there would be no stories' [*wuqiao bucheng shu*], as it happens, these types of plays [illustrate] 'without ghosts there would be no plays' [*wugui bucheng xi*]."[3] Liao's rhetorical overstatement notwithstanding, his point that ghosts formed a very important part of the literary canon is key.

This dissertation project focuses on the efforts to maintain, reform, and preserve such traditional subjects in theatre between the years of 1949 and 1979. Traditional subjects – ane especially ghosts, gods, and spirits – are generally not what is thought of when speaking of cultural production in the People's Republic of China (PRC). What more often comes to mind is visions of the thoroughly socialist model operas of the Cultural Revolution, not actors resplendent in embroidered silk robes and glittering headdresses. Indeed, we often think of these traditional works as being the very things the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had marked for destruction. Mao Zedong's words at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art encapsulated the Party's official stance on the matter: "creative moods that are feudal, bourgeois … liberalistic, individualist, nihilist, art-for-art's sake, aristocratic, decadent or pessimistic, and every other creative mood that

---

[2] Robert Ford Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

[3] Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, "Yougui wuhai lun" 有鬼无害论 [Some ghosts are harmless], in *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen* 廖沫沙文集第二卷：杂文 [Collected writings of Liao Mosha, vol. 2: *zawen*]: 109-111.

is alien to the proletariat …. Should be utterly destroyed. And while they are being destroyed, something new can be constructed."[4] This dissertation, however, traces a tale of the uneasy and sometimes hostile relationship the CCP had with traditional, particularly supernatural, subject matter on stages, but it is also an exploration of how many intellectuals, performers, and high-level Party members attempted to protect what they saw as China's inheritance. In following this story of theatrical ghosts and supernatural subjects in the socialist period, I also show how established party intellectuals – many of whom had been cutting-edge radicals in the Republican period – struggled to carry out socialist dictates on what art and literature should be, and the nationalist impulse to maintain traditions of which they were justifiably proud. I argue that cultural workers who were entrenched in the Party apparatus were quite successful in protecting classical ghost plays and stories. I further contend that the destructive period of the Cultural Revolution was not necessarily a natural outcome of Party policy in the 1950s and early 1960s. I also argue that the resurgence of ghostly subject matter in the years after the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four serves as evidence that traditional subjects also remained central to cultural production debates throughout the early PRC. This phenomenon should not be seen simply as a "the premodern Chinese ghost narrative tradition" making "a comeback in the postmodern literary scene," as David Der-wei Wang has argued.[5]

---

[4] Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in Kirk Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 481.

[5] David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 265.

Broadly speaking, my purpose in undertaking this project is to illustrate the centrality of cultural production utilizing traditional subjects to the Chinese socialist project, but I also wish to illuminate the twentieth century history of supernatural subjects. Ghost plays and ghost literature were so important to the classical Chinese literary canon that even Marxist intellectuals and dramatists vigorously took up the subject of how to maintain them. This importance, however, has not yet been reflected in the secondary literature – especially not after works taking up the twentieth century. As Yang Qiuhong noted in the preface to her 2009 Chinese-language study of ghost plays in the imperial period, despite their importance, "at present, there is only one [Chinese-language] monograph dedicated to the study of ghost plays [Xu Xianglin's 1997 *Chinese Ghost Plays*, which dedicates only a few pages to ghost plays in the PRC], and only twenty or thirty essays."[6] In terms of English language sources, Judith T. Zeitlin's *The Phantom Heroine*, on the ghost literature produced by literati in the seventeenth century, and Catherine C. Swatek's *Peony Pavilion Onstage*, which examines the performance history of the great Ming story of miraculous things [*chuanqi*], stand alone as monograph-length works on the subject of ghost literature (including ghost opera).[7] This is especially true in the case of the twentieth century status of such plays, where there are generally no more than a handful of articles and a few pages in monographs devoted to the subject.[8]

---

[6] Yang Qiuhong 杨秋红, *Zhongguo gudai guixi yanjiu* 中国古代鬼戏研究 [Research on China's pre-modern ghost plays] (Beijing:Zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe, 2009); Xu Xianglin 许祥麟, *Zhongguo guixi* 中国鬼戏 [Chinese ghost plays] (Tianjin: Tianjin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997).

[7] Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Catherine C. Swatek, *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 2002).

[8] Judith T. Zeitlin, "Operatic Ghosts on Screen: The Case of *A Test of Love* (1958)," *The Opera Quarterly* 24.2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 220-255; Maggie Greene, "A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of

However, considering the general trends of Chinese cultural history – in which non-dramatic literary studies and film have far surpassed studies of drama – this should not come as a surprise. Simply put, there are comparatively few studies of drama in the twentieth century, and those that exist tend to focus on the late Qing and Republican period. There are Joshua Goldstein's study of the development of Peking opera (*jingju*) as a national art form from the late Qing to the Republican period and Andrea S. Goldman's recent monograph, which uses drama as a lens to study urban cultural production in late imperial Beijing.[9] Similarly, Jiang Jin's study of Shanghai Yue opera [*yueju*] in the Republican period is a city-centered cultural history of a particular style.[10] Despite numerous studies on the general history of Chinese theatre through the socialist period, there is no focused examination of the confluence of ideology, politics, and art exists for traditional Chinese opera in socialist period; there is, for example, no equivalent of Nancy Guy's study of Peking opera in post-1949 Taiwan.[11]

Vengeance: Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang*, and the Politics of Drama, 1959-1979," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24.1 (Spring 2012): 149-199. An example of this general blind spot can be found in the program of a recent conference, "Une esthétique de la fantasmagorie: fantômes dans la Chine et l'Etrême-Orient d'hier at d'aujour'hui" [Aesthetics of Phantasmagoria: Ghosts in China and the Far East in the Past and Present], where the majority of papers focused on ghosts prior to 1911, with the remaining papers being made up largely of Republican or contemporary topics.

[9] Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Andrea S. Goldman, *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[10] Jiang Jin, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

[11] Colin Mackerras, *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey* (Beijing: New World Press, 1990); Xu Muyun 徐慕云, *Zhongguo xiju shi* 中国戏剧史 [A history of Chinese theatre] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001); Wang Ankui 王安葵 and Yu Cong 余从, eds., *Zhongguo dangdai xiju shi* 中国当代戏剧史 [A history of contemporary Chinese theatre] (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2005); Nancy Guy, *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

Quibbling slightly with Chen Xiaomei's contention that studies of modern Chinese drama, particularly spoken language drama [*huaju*], have been stymied by a period of "enchantment with traditional Chinese operatic theatre … as an 'exotic' other" on the part of Western academics, I would clarify that such enchantment has generally *not* extended to a history of traditional theatre in the twentieth century, and certainly not to the period between 1949 and 1976.[12] Discussions of drama in this period in particular tend to be subsumed under larger discussions of politics; with the exception of Rudolf G. Wagner's 1990 study of historical plays written in the 1950s and 1960s, there are virtually no in-depth studies of the status of traditional drama in the PRC.[13]

It is, in fact, not a work of Chinese history that most closely matches what I hope to do in this study, but rather one on Soviet history. Christina Ezrahi's *Swans of the Kremlin* traces the history of ballet, that artistic treasure of aristocratic, imperial Russia, and its fate in Soviet Russia.[14] It is a story of competing political and cultural forces, particularly the attempt to "modernize" tradition within a socialist framework, and their impact on an art form already loaded with its own traditions; it is a story that also looks remarkably similar to the story of traditional opera in the PRC. Ezrahi wishes to "avoid the traditional emphasis on ideological control as a force that crushed artistic creativity … and to emphasize instead the complexity of the relationship between art in politics in

---

[12] Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 20.

[13] Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[14] Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

the Soviet Union."[15] She does this by tracing how intellectuals and performers navigated the complex ideological and bureaucratic waters and balanced competing demands on a traditional artform. Much like in the Chinese case, they were at once trying to make ballet appropriately revolutionary, while also ensuring that traditions would be handed down for future generations.

Perhaps the most distressing element of reading many cultural histories of twentieth century China is the lack of respect with which authors have treated the socialist period. Chen Xiaomei describes an impediment that scholars of socialist China face, namely "the pronouncement [by scholars] that the PRC period produced no works of 'literary excellence,' a dismissal generally accepted by students of modern Chinese literature and culture."[16] In the haste to make connections between Republican-era and post-1976 modes of thinking and ways of production, many scholars have further flattened the socialist period into a simple caricature. This type of approach is illustrated by the following statements from two separate works, though it is by no means confined exclusively to them. In her study of the idea of "love" in modern Chinese culture, Haiyan Lee is mostly devoted to tracing developments between 1900 and 1950.[17] Interested in connecting pre-1949 and post-1976 threads, she has this to say on the subject of a "socialist grammar of emotion":

---

[15] Ezrahi, 3.

[16] Chen, *Acting the Right Part*, 20.

[17] Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

> The kingpin of the socialist grammar of emotion is the collective definition of sentiment in which love is shorn of all particularistic or personalistic valence and is to be exclusively aligned with a new universal category: class. A socialist subject "loves" another socialist subject for his or her class belonging, not for his or her moral qualities, intellectual prowess, economic standing, social status, or sexual appeal …. Writers learn to wean themselves off the "revolution + romance" formula and turn to socialist realism whereby the only legitimate expression of love assumes the form of class passion. (286)

Writing of the miraculous resurrection of pre-1949 modes of cultural production and patterns of thinking, she goes on to say, in a manner that exemplifies this whitewashing of the socialist years,

> As soon as the political climate made it safe for [intellectuals] to write as "I" instead of "we," they resurrected love and sexuality and the enlightenment structure of feeling with a vengeance. (289)

These conclusions are short sighted and flatten the complex nature of literary debate in the socialist period. In this work, I trace the reception of two very different socialist revisions of the Ming drama *Story of Red Plums*, a story about desire, death, and politics centered around a Southern Song dynasty concubine Li Huiniang, a young scholar Pei Yu, and the evil and cruel prime minister, Jia Sidao. Critics of the 1950s and early 1960s enthusiastically discussed romance, love, and passion in modern re-workings of classical drama. These were discussions that bore no resemblance to Lee's "socialist grammar," and while the intellectuals involved would no doubt have recognized the concepts she lays out, this was not a mode they functioned in when writing of traditional literary works. These writers and critics – many of whom were well trained in classical Chinese literature and certainly had a grasp on the idea of love and emotion [*qing*], and all the weighty history behind it – were emphatically not discussing Li Huiniang's love for Pei Yu for his "class belonging." Likewise, they were not simply biding their time for

thirty years to continue discussions they had been having in the Republican period. This is not to say that their writings were not couched in Marxist ideology, or cloaked with a healthy dose of political discussion, and certainly there were writers that conformed to Lee's presentation. But there were many others who did not, and there is much more richness and nuance to the works and the debate than Lee's chronology gives them credit for.

More pertinent for the subject of this study, David Der-wei Wang meditated on the subject of ghost literature in *The Monster That is History*, his study of violence and writing in twentieth century China.[18] After stating that the tradition of ghost, god and spirit literature "came to a halt in the modern era," he goes on to say the following:

> The modern campaign to exorcise the ghosts haunting China was charged with even more power in the period of revolutionary literature …. But despite Communist crackdowns, ghosts kept creeping back into China, and worse, they seem to have multiplied in number after the founding of the new republic …. This context causes one to pay special attention to the vigorous return of ghosts to elite and popular Chinese culture in the 1980s. (265)

As I will illustrate, ghosts have *always* been present; the revival after 1976 of ghostly subjects was not particularly miraculous in light of the efforts and successes intellectuals had in the 1950s and early 1960s. Far from wanting to exterminate such subjects entirely, a group of intellectuals mounted a spirited defense of ghosts in literature and drama. They argued for their usefulness and utility, even in a socialist society; but they also argued for their usefulness as a national product and treasure, something that transcended socialism. Intellectuals savaged Ma Jianling's 1954 ghostless adaptation of a Ming dynasty ghost play, and many took serious exception to such a "red" rendering of

[18] Wang, *The Monster That Is History*.

classical ghost literature. For Wang to focus on a narrative of destruction and miraculous recovery to the exclusion of considering the many discussions and sophisticated literary works put forth in the years between 1949 and 1963 is not just limited – it ignores the fact that many of these elites were not simply dedicated Marxists, but nationalists who wanted to maintain traditions of which they were justifiably proud.

My contention is not that intellectuals in the PRC had free rein in writing about ghosts. Nor am I arguing that they had extraordinary freedom to exist outside a socialist framework. What I do suggest, however, is that a discussion of cultural production in the PRC needs to be significantly more sophisticated than a simple destruction-revival narrative, and the history of ghost plays in the 1950s and 1960s are an illuminating window into the politics of traditional culture and cultural production. The resonance of the revival narrative with ghost tales is appealing indeed, but it is just as unrealistic as those stories of beautiful dead women, brought back to life through the power of love.

From a Woman in Green to a Revolutionary Ghost

As the two plays I discuss at length – in chapter two, Ma Jianling's *Wandering West Lake* [You xihu] and Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, in chapter three – are both derived from the same source material, here I have set out a brief history of that literature here to avoid doing so in the main body of the text. I opened the introduction with a story in Qu You's early Ming *New Tales Told by Lamplight*. This story – "The Woman in Green" – was the story of a young man of the Yuan dynasty who falls in love with a young woman, only to find that she is, in fact, a ghost, and that they had been lovers in a previous life. While servants of the Southern Song dynasty prime minister, Jia Sidao, they had fallen in

love; when Jia discovers this transgression, he orders them to commit suicide at West Lake. After the nameless woman reveals this wondrous tale to the reincarnation of her lover, he two live together in married bliss for several years, after which she dies a second death, her spirit satisfied.[19]

The waning years of the Ming dynasty were a productive period for drama, a high point of dramas known as *chuanqi* (literally, "passing on something marvelous"). At some point late in the sixteenth century, Zhou Chaojun penned *The Story of Red Plums*. A thirty four-act play, it builds upon Qu You's tale of the woman in green, but makes significant changes. The first is a change in period – it now takes place entirely in the waning years of the Southern Song dynasty – and the second is a change to the characters. "The woman in green" becomes Li Huiniang, a concubine in the household of Jia Sidao; her love interest becomes Pei Yu, a young scholar who opposes Jia Sidao's callous rule. Instead of being put to death for an actual love affair, Li Huiniang is murdered by Jia for murmuring an admiring comment - "What a handsome youth!" - after seeing Pei Yu at West Lake. She returns as a ghost seeking to protect Pei Yu from Jia Sidao's wrath. Zhou's play also included a second love story involving Pei Yu and a young woman from a literati family, Lu Zhaorong.

The script proved popular in numerous derivative forms, many performed under the name *Red Plum Pavilion* [Hongmei ge]. These adaptations – like the two versions I will discuss in chapters two and three – generally focused on the story of Li Huiniang and Pei Yu. From Qu You's nameless woman in green, Li Huiniang developed into a ghost that captured the imaginations of audiences for centuries. She was quite a compelling

[19] Qu You, 104-107.

character, apparently, and she received not one, but two, important adaptations in the socialist period. She was also a ghost that had a hand in launching the Cultural Revolution. I have generally used the English translation-abbreviation *Red Plums* to refer to this story, except in cases where authors have referred specifically to the Li Huiniang-centered *Red Plum Pavilion*, in which cases I use that title.

The Project

In this dissertation, I concern myself primarily with intellectual debates, largely as seen through their publications in leading journals and newspapers of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as select publications in book form. As Merle Goldman points out in her study of the relationship between intellectuals and the state, as a group, these elite intellectuals – be they the older, liberal generation, or the younger, more radical factions - "were trained primarily in the humanities, history, literature, and philosophy. Their numbers were small, in the hundreds rather than in the thousands. They were a critical, politically aware segment of the intellectual class."[20] Although it is important to remember that these people wrote primarily for each other – that is, other cultural elites – the impact of their debates was not necessarily confined to the pages of *Theatre Report* [Xiju bao] or the *Guangming Daily* [Guangming ribao]. Their arguments and discussions rippled through policy decisions, which in turn had an influence on troupes and their repertoires, which then trickled down to audiences. The average person was probably not keeping abreast of the latest feuds and ideological discussions found in specialist drama

[20] Merle Goldman, *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.

journals, but it is entirely likely they would take in a night at the opera or two. Thus, in an attempt to gauge some of the broader implications of elite discussion and cultural production, I have at many points also made use of archival documents from the Shanghai Municipal Archives related to theatre and the staging of traditional plays. These documents include directives sent from the Ministry of Culture to culture bureaus across the country, as well as Shanghai-specific statistics and records of meetings, programs, and problems. This has allowed some insight into how troupes reacted to the larger political and cultural forces at work, particularly in the period leading up to the Cultural Revolution.

Although my interest lies primarily in elite literary productions, I believe ghostly subject matter is a topic with much wider appeal. The intellectuals I discuss often seem a world apart, but the subjects they discuss – particularly issues related to categorization of "superstitious" themes – are enmeshed in a wider social, cultural, and political context. For instance, S.A. Smith's splendid essay on "superstitious" rumor in the wake of the Great Leap Forward and discussions on the "scientification" of socialist society resonate strongly with these literary ghosts.[21] That is, these ghosts existed far outside the bounds of elite literary culture. While I focus primarily on the elite cultural apparatus, it is always with the knowledge that these characters were treading stages all over China, in front of many audiences, in a multitude of forms.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter follows the early efforts aimed at regulating traditional drama between 1949 and 1952. In particular, I

[21] S.A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of "Superstitious" Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961-1965," *The American Historical Review* 111.2 (April 2006): 405-427.

discuss the decision of the Ministry of Culture to ban twenty-six plays and the impact the bans had on traditional repertoire and performances. I also examine the early discussions of "mythology" versus "superstition," as well as the limits of drama reform, through an analysis of debates surrounding *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid* [Niulang zhinü], the traditional story of two celestial lovers. Chapter two considers the fallout that stemmed from the early bans, and the general impact of the Hundred Flowers Movement and Anti-Rightist Campaign. Its focus, however, is on Ma Jianling's "ghostless ghost play" *Wandering West Lake* [You xihu] – the first of two important adaptations of *Red Plums* - and the horrified reactions of intellectuals to his adaptation. The negative reaction of intellectuals forces us to reconsider preconceived notions of how Marxist intellectuals treated traditional culture. Chapter three places the production and reception of Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, the other *Red Plums* adaptation, at its center. The play has generally been understood in the context of the Great Leap Forward; here, I argue we need to see *Li Huiniang* in the broader context of debates over ghost opera throughout the socialist period. *Li Huiniang* was not simply a response to the tragedy of the Leap, but a play showing it was possible to be thoroughly red, but reverent of classical traditions at the same time. Chapter four looks at the last open debate on ghost opera in 1963, the year that also saw ghosts banned from Chinese stages entirely; I show how ghost opera is a barometer for the increasing radicalization of society, but also that cultural radicals had a difficult task ahead of them. Despite the leftward turn of politics, many troupes were resistant to the massive changes that were brewing, and were not necessarily willing participants in the wholescale changes that were to sweep the country. Chapter five considers the role of ghost opera and traditional drama in the Cultural Revolution. I trace

the history of two radical drama festivals and show that the cultural sphere was rather reticent to begin incorporating Jiang Qing's grand designs, until absolutely forced to in 1965. I also show that many assumptions about the grounds on which Meng Chao and others were attacked has been "read back" from later criticism, and has colored our assumptions of what the authors were attempting to do. Finally, in the conclusion I briefly discuss the post-1976 story of Meng Chao and *Li Huiniang* and trace connections to PRC cultural production as it exists today. I offer several examples of links between contemporary events and the 1950s and 1960s debates, showing that there are more threads between the socialist past and the present that need to be explored.

The Weaving Maid as Labor Hero: Reforming Drama in the Early PRC, 1949-1952

With the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 came the opportunity for momentous change in all realms of society. The early years of CCP rule were not necessarily, of course, a period of radical change, but neither could they be entirely characterized as a "honeymoon."[22] In the case of the drama world, the 1949 transition brought many issues into high relief: for the first time, the CCP was in a position to effect change on a massive scale. But even the state-sponsored cultural realm – including dramatists and performers of senior standing, with stellar revolutionary credentials – were hardly settled on one vision of socialist cultural production. Between 1949 and 1952, the Ministry of Culture attempted to rein in overzealous regional and local governments who took matters of repertory into their own hands. Senior intellectuals argued back and forth on the pages of *People's Daily* [Renmin ribao] and the newly established specialty arts journals on the utility of traditional drama, its uses, and its future. Within three years of the founding of the country, intellectuals, performers, and senior officials were already facing the unintended consequences of reform and change: a traditional repertoire in shambles, performers struggling to make a living, and a serious question of whether China's literary treasury would survive to see another decade.

This chapter begins a study that challenges assumptions about the role of supernatural subjects in socialist China, particularly in the theatre world, and how the CCP, Chinese intellectuals and performers approached the question of what to do with

[22] Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

some of the great literary works of centuries past. Although ghosts as a singular subject of discussion do not become prominent until 1953 and 1954, guidelines and the general shape of the discussion on drama in the earliest years of the PRC have a clear connection to those later debates. Far from attempting to regulate supernatural subjects out of existence, many senior intellectuals (as well as the state cultural apparatus, as embodied by the Ministry of Culture) were clear in regards to their support of traditional drama. Of course, this did not mean allowing anything and everything on stages. There were attempts at regulation, and even the most passionate defenders of traditional drama emphasized the need for reform. But at the same time, they insisted that this reform be undertaken with the utmost care, and they reacted quite badly to attempts to reform traditional drama. The great myths and tales of the imperial period were, in a great many cases, positioned as the people's "inheritance" that needed to be treasured and safeguarded.

That many intellectuals and influential figures of the Party were not bent on the destruction of traditional culture is clear when looking at theatre. There was a demonstrated interest and need in preserving traditional literary works, at least as far as many senior members were concerned. Mao's comments at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature notwithstanding, it is clear that many intellectuals abhorred the idea of jettisoning cultural products with rich history and significance. More importantly, many objected strenuously to attempts to tamper with those works in an attempt to make them resonate more strongly with contemporary concerns. This desire for a cautious approach to the treatment of traditional theatre largely set the tone for the period until 1963. Despite assertions that policies on active repertoire were relaxed only in the period of the

Hundred Flowers and again in the early 1960s, the discussions of the 1950s and 1960s – the terms of which were largely set in the period between 1949 and 1952 – should make us question the portrayal of a political and cultural apparatus regulating traditional forms and subjects into extinction.[23]

At the same time, early policy regarding traditional drama is a fine study of unintended consequences. The Ministry of Culture, encouraged by the famous playwright Tian Han, initially shied away from providing a set list of "good" and "bad" traditional plays. In the absence of clear, specific directives, perhaps frightened of staging the "wrong" plays, or fired up with revolutionary goals, regional and local officials took matters into their own hands and removed hundreds of traditional plays from stages. Worse yet, those plays that remained were often forced into resonating with the present. Not only were traditional plays disappearing, but the survivors were being perverted and further damaged by earnest attempts to make myths speak to the Korean War.

Following these alarming developments, in which even relatively liberal cultural spheres such as Shanghai saw their traditional repertoires shrink by as much as eighty percent in the span of a year, many intellectuals rallied to the defense of traditional theatre. As early as 1950, seeing the slippery slope of reform – what would be left of China's literary heritage if everything was either banned or tinkered with? What culture could Chinese people be proud of? – many intellectuals carefully and consistently argued for a more "hands off" policy towards drama. Not only should some questionable

[23] Siyuan Liu, "Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s," *Theatre Journal* 61.3 (Oct. 2009): 387-406.

subjects, such as ghosts, be allowed on stage, but writers bent on "updating" centuries-old myths should keep their meddlesome hands well away from theatrical classics.

As Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz explained in the introduction to *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, the early 1950s "has disappeared from the radar screens of successive waves of [Western] observers."[24] Despite many shifts in how China scholars have approached the period between 1949 and 1952, there is still a dearth of literature relating to how early developments in the cultural realm relate to later trends and patterns.[25] As later chapters will show, the discussion of reformed drama has largely been read in a post-1959, post-Great Leap Forward vacuum. Although some scholars have depicted the early 1960s discussion surrounding Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, for instance, as a brief upswing of interest in traditional subjects, the pages of *People's Daily*, reports from work conferences, and archival records indicate that there was a sustained and long-standing interest in traditional drama from the earliest days of the PRC.[26] Furthermore, the ripples of the early 1950s discussions can be felt long after. Ma Shaobo's arguments on the separation of superstition and mythology, for instance, set up continued discussions on the separation of good and bad subject matter until 1963.

---

[24] Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, "The Early Years of the People's Republic of China: An Introduction," in Brown and Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*: 1-18, 1.

[25] Julia F. Andrews' exemplary study of painting in the PRC is an exception; Andrews masterfully traces developments in politics and the cultural realm (and the connection between art and politics) throughout the socialist period. See Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[26] Roderick Macfarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, *The Coming of the Cataclysm: 1961-1966* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 384.

In *The Monster That is History*, David Der-wei Wang claims that "despite Communist crackdowns, ghosts kept creeping back into China."[27] The implication is that supernatural literature was in state of suppression throughout the socialist period, and that the CCP tried (and failed) to erase ghosts, demons, and gods. While the period between 1963 and 1979 saw a concerted effort to exorcise supernatural beings from culture and society, the years between 1949 and 1962 show a very different picture. In his attempt to show that "the premodern Chinese ghost narrative tradition has made a comeback in the postmodern literary scene," Wang - like many others - flattens the discussions, debates, and practice of the period between 1949 and 1963.[28] Maintaining that "ghosts appear to have been kept at bay by enlightened literati" ignores the fact that many "enlightened" (and indeed, devoted Marxist) intellectuals rallied to the defense of gods, spirits, and ghosts on the pages of books and on Chinese stages.[29]

In this chapter, I primarily consider the early discussions of "superstition" versus "mythology," bad subject matter versus good - a distinction that remained in play until 1963, and under which the later discussion of ghost opera took shape. Generally, scholars have paid little attention to the nuances of these labels, and yet they were extremely important to debates throughout the socialist period. A short, but illuminating, *People's Daily* debate on the subject of the tale of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid neatly encapsulates not only the debate intellectuals were engaged in, but more official stances on potentially problematic literature. Although this debate is addressed in Hong

---

[27] David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That is History*, 265.

[28] Ibid., 266.

[29] Ibid., 275.

Zicheng's *History of Contemporary Chinese Literature,* the author treats it essentially as a theoretical debate on historical drama; in contrast, I am interested in the debate as it relates to the discussion on mythological, supernatural, and superstitious literature.[30] Although it is impossible to entirely cordon off one subject from another - there is significant overlap between "historical dramas" [*lishi ju*] and "mythology plays" [*shenhua xi*], for instance, particularly in discussions of reforming or adapting drama more generally - mythological and supernatural subjects did remain a subject of sustained discussion until 1963.

Herding the Bureaucracy: Banning Operas, 1950-1952

There is no doubt that overzealous application of socialist dictates on art and literature did have many negative consequences for theatre troupes and the traditional repertoire. However, the general national-level bans promulgated by the Ministry of Culture seem to be a genuine attempt to rein in lower-level officials who were laying waste to the traditional repertoire. As the next chapter will explore in more depth, the Ministry of Culture objected to extreme bans that continued even in the wake of their promotion of a much more limited ban.

The early 1950s bans have been explored in depth in Li Desheng's 2008 monograph *Banned Plays*, as well as Siyuan Liu's 2009 *Theatre Journal* article. Li's work is particularly useful, and includes short historical overviews as well as more in-depth explanations of banned plays from the Qing dynasty onwards. More important for

[30] Hong Zicheng, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature,* trans. Michael M. Day (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 197-198.

this study are the post-1952 reevaluation of the national bans, as well as regional policy, which are discussed in the next chapter. Thus, a short overview of the nature, content and progression of the national bans here will suffice. As Liu and others have noted, regional policies tended to be far harsher than national directives. In some cases, opera repertoires were gutted thanks to vague directives ordering "elimination of poisonous elements in old plays."[31] Lists of banned plays numbered into the hundreds in some areas, with the most deleterious effects in Beijing and Ping opera repertoires, both popular in the north and northeast.[32] Upper level leadership quickly realized that this scattershot regional approach was clearly not going to work. Zhou Yang asked Tian Han to compile a list of plays to be banned; Tian argued strenuously against this approach, advocating for a "detailed analysis of the xiqu repertoire."[33]

However, Tian's project never went beyond the initial stages, and it was clear that in the stronger central control was needed. The national-level bans instituted by the Ministry of Culture were thus intended to combat regional authorities taking repertoire matters into their own hands. Between 1950 and 1952, a total of twenty-six plays were banned, the vast majority being Peking opera (15), with Ping opera (*pingju*, 7), Sichuan opera (*chuanju*, 2), and plays not to be staged in minority areas (2) making up the rest.[34] Some plays, such as the Peking opera *A Mother's Revenge* [Shazi bao], had been running afoul of authorities since the Qing dynasty, largely for the same issues (gore and

---

[31] Siyuan Liu, 390.

[32] Ibid., 390-391.

[33] Ibid., 391.

[34] Li Desheng 李德生, *Jinxi* 禁戏 [Banned plays] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2009), 12.

lasciviousness being the bane of officials through the ages).[35] After an initial wave of twelve plays banned in 1950, others were added piecemeal over the next two years.[36] The list did not have the desired effect, largely because of the haphazard nature of drama reform. Paola Iovene speculates the reason many works that were not banned remained off stages was due to policies that placed the onus for revisions on local governments. Fearing trouble from above for staging "inappropriate" works, they instead "preferred to 'suspend' the staging of a large number of works … often claiming that local artists had refused to perform them."[37]

My contention is not that the impact of bans in the early 1950s has been overstated, but that the motivations of senior leaders and intellectuals in charge of implementing reform (including the bans) have not been adequately assessed. There is no doubt that early efforts at drama reform had a serious – often seriously negative – impact on troupes and repertoire throughout China. Hand in hand with government efforts to reform drama were the intellectual debates over what shape and what meaning theatre was to have in a new China. It is clear from both the actions of the Ministry of Culture and the words of senior intellectuals that Chinese elite were aware of the pitfalls facing drama reform. They were particularly sensitive to what they saw as miscategorization or misapplication of socialist dictates on art. Many intellectuals were wary of the slippery slope of overly broad bans as early as 1950; this concern would only intensify throughout the period leading up the Hundred Flowers Movement. At the same time, the Ministry of

---

[35] Li Desheng, 65-66, 186-187.

[36] Siyuan Liu, 391.

[37] Paola Iovene, "Chinese Operas on Stage and Screen: An Introduction," *The Opera Quarterly* 26.2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 181-199, 185.

Culture was unable to check the impulses of regional and local governments, and would spend the next several years attempting to fix the problems that had started in the earliest days of the PRC.

Laying the Foundation: the Early Discussion on Superstition and Mythology

In the first few years of Communist rule, ghost plays were not the fodder for discussion they would be by the mid-1950s. But although they were not a specific focus for intellectuals and cultural workers, the debate surrounding them took place in more general terms. This was a running argument over superstition versus mythology, and the appropriate manner of dealing with revisions of the classical literary canon. More broadly, there were extended discussions on what to do with the traditional repertoire. Liu notes that the publication of an editorial in late 1948 reveals the contradictions inherent in the early policies regarding traditional theatre, and these contradictions were never entirely resolved – though attempts to do so filled pages of journals and newspapers, as we shall see. An enormous problem facing the Ministry of Culture was the local or provincial nature of initial bans. Liu points out that by the mid-1940s, various locales published their own lists of approved plays, banned plays, and plays needing revisions. Further, "as the People's Liberation Army advanced throughout China, the military's cultural authorities routinely published censorship lists of plays."[38] The number of plays banned were routinely double or more the numbers that would be formally banned by the Ministry of Culture between 1950 and 1952.[39]

[38] Siyuan Liu, 390.

[39] Ibid., 391.

The Ministry of Culture and senior intellectuals were clearly concerned by what was seen as misapplied and overzealous bans. These bans had a deleterious effect on the ability of troupes in some areas to make a living; of equal concern was the harm being done to China's literary heritage. From the earliest days, many intellectuals rallied to create safe space for classical literary works. While few, if any, of them ever explicitly put it in terms of nationalism, it is obvious from the way they discuss classical literature – China's "treasures," or the masses' "inheritance," for example – that national pride was at stake. To ban traditional subjects out of existence would mean jettisoning truly *Chinese* achievements. If all tradition went by the wayside, what would be left? Could dramas about the war with Japan, or those centered on the Korean War, stand the test of time?

Aware that the myriad of national and local policies were confusing at best, several early statements from the Ministry of Culture and associated senior intellectuals attempted to sort through the issues. In 1949, the ministry's Opera Improvement Committee had ordered that plays falling into three categories be excised from the repertoire, including those that propagated "feudal slave morality and superstition."[40] Superstition was a particularly problematic category, and remained so throughout the 1950s and 1960s: many of China's most popular and enduring plays could easily be construed as "superstitious." Gods, ghosts, spirits, and all manner of miraculous events litter the repertoires of opera forms; to get rid of them entirely would decimate the traditional repertoire. Thus began a pattern of intellectuals and senior politicians carefully arguing for the inclusion of a variety of potentially "unsuitable" subjects. While not everyone agreed on the difference between "superstition" and "mythology," or what

[40] Li Desheng, 12.

made a "good" play good, and a "bad" play bad, the patterns – and successes – of the earliest days of the PRC set the tone for over a decade of discussion and policy to come. While these early debates largely concerned "superstition" versus "mythology," the same logic would be used to defend ghosts in later years.

One of the earliest explications of official attitudes towards "superstition" and "mythology." In 1950, the dramatist and critic Ma Shaobo delivered an important speech to the opera division of the Beijing Spare Time Art School. The topic was the separation between "mythology" on the on hand, and "superstition" on the other. Ma was not the first to pay attention to the problems posed by conflating the two; the Ministry of Culture Opera Improvement Committee, established in October 1949, noted the critical nature of appropriately defining superstition and myths.[41] Ma follows in the footsteps of the committee, which declared that the difference primarily came down to whether or not something was frightening for the audience. "A large number of myths are the naïve fantasies of ancient people regarding natural phenomena, or one type of resistance against society, or wishes for an ideal world. This type of myth is not only *not* harmful, but beneficial; as for writing [scenes of] hell, cycles of judgment, and so forth, they can intimidate the people - these sorts of things are fearsome."[42]

---

[41] This committee was made up of a who's who of the theatre world. Headed by Zhou Yang, members included Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, Hong Shen, A Ying, Lao She, Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Ma Jianling, and a number of other important intellectuals. See Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Mixin yu shenhua de benzhi qubie" 迷信与神话的本质区别 [The essential difference between superstition and mythology] in Ma Shaobo, *Xiqu yishu lunji* 戏曲艺术论集 [Collected essays on theatre and art] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1982), 27.

[42] Ma, "Mixin," 24.

This confusion among cadres and those in charge of repertory was of particular concern because of plays being mislabeled. While Ma gave equal weight to those "fearsome" plays that had been shuffled into the category of benign dramas, over the next few years, the Ministry of Culture became increasingly alarmed by the trend to ban anything with a whiff of unsuitability. "Superstitious dramas," such as *Visiting Yin Mountain* [Tan yinshan] (which was eventually one of 26 plays banned by the Ministry of Culture), were sometimes called benign "myths," and "mythology plays" such as the *Legend of White Snake* [Baishe zhuan] or *Journey to the West* [Xiyou ji] derivatives were labeled as dangerous superstitions. Ma believed that superstitious plays - or superstitious sections of otherwise suitable plays - needed to be banned, as they "promote fatalism, encourage people to oppose science, and are fearsome poisons."[43] But as his speech makes clear, even plays with superstitious scenes could be performed with minor deletions and alterations. It was this point of view that was the dominant paradigm for dealing with traditional theatre until 1963. The point was not to suppress traditional subjects entirely, particularly since many such plays were the core of active opera repertory. Instead, Ma and other influential intellectuals advocated for a careful examination, categorization, and - if necessary - reform before ordering plays off stages. Whether provincial and local level cadres in charge of implementing directives followed their advice was another matter altogether.

The logic of Ma and others was that "superstitious" subjects were those that had historically been used to oppress the masses by frightening them into obedience. Thus, representations of hell and suffering were generally viewed as "superstitious," while gods

[43] Ma, "Mixin," 24.

and spirits were *not* necessarily superstition. The intellectuals also pondered the relationship between supernatural subjects on the stage and popular belief. Ma relates an anecdote about an acquaintance concerned for his wife's interest in the Double Seven Festival [*Qixi*]. The lore surrounding the festival involves the story of the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl, a popular subject for dramas. This pair of lovers - represented celestially by the star Vega and part of the Aquila constellation - was kept separate by a deity angry that the two "lost themselves in the lovemaking and neglected the work assigned to them."[44] Only on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month were they allowed to come together for their single night together. The festival was an important one, particularly for women, throughout the late imperial period.

Ma's acquaintance was concerned that his wife, having seen a play focused on the story of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid, wanted to go stargazing on the Double Seven Festival and "pray for divine guidance" [*qiqiao*]. Ma responded with two arguments. The first followed the idea that myths could impart positive teachings, and also added that not everyone engaged in so-called "superstitious behavior" actually believed in it. Ma argued that stargazing "should not necessarily be seen as superstitious behavior. Chinese people are a brave, hard working, mighty race, and also ought to be a race rich in humor. Women comrades going to look at stars, admiring [the idea that] men plow and women weave, the idea of eternal love, this especially is '*qiqiao*' - it's hoping for exemplary labor, achievements in work - how is this not good?"[45] Thus, he suggests

---

[44] Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 170.

[45] Ma, "Mixin," 26.

that this woman's *qiqiao* was quite possibly a bit tongue in cheek, and the principals underlying it - particularly the celebration of productive labor - were positive.

The second was equally as important, but usually remained unsaid or was deemphasized. While plays on supernatural themes could be useful teaching tools, Ma stated that they should not be seen as causing superstitious beliefs. This would be underscored with the pro-science, anti-superstition campaigns of the 1950s: "superstitions" on theatrical parade were not, as the next chapter will illustrate, a target when the CCP attempted to stamp out popular superstition among the people. The arguments of Ma and others, including the Ministry of Culture committee, gave enormous latitude for cultural workers to defend traditional drama. The only themes, at least insofar as potentially "superstitious" plots were concerned, that were explicitly off limits were those that could be construed as "frightening." In this case, it meant plot points that could be interpreted as ways for the elite to control commoners. Many other subjects that at first glance appeared to fall into the "fearsome" category (vengeful ghosts, for instance) were read as being expressions of resistance against feudal forms of oppression.

Despite this stamp of approval, traditional subjects were in decline throughout the first few years of the PRC. Ma Shaobo's plea to be careful in applying dictates on art and literature would be repeated over and over again. But even for people who found traditional myths appropriate subject matter, many felt that they needed to be reworked to be more applicable to the present. Ma Shaobo and others would be forced to wade into the fray once more, this time to try and protect the traditional dramas that were still left from overzealous "reform."

A Right and A Duty: The Preservation of Traditional Subjects

In November 1950, the All-China Theatre Work Conference, hosted by the Ministry of Culture, was convened in Beijing. This was a widely covered event, and spelled out the official attitude towards the Chinese theatre world in relatively clear terms. Of prime importance was discussing the reform of the opera world, which included creating new works as well as preserving China's theatrical "inheritance." As drama activities at Yan'an proved, theatre was very much a tool that the CCP was interested in deploying to greatest effect. This interest did not diminish with the 1949 ascension to power. As a *People's Daily* roundup succinctly noted, "opera is the most important tool with which to connect to the masses."[46]

As both contemporaneous newspaper reports and archival documents make clear, the Ministry of Culture and associated bureaus did not simply rush in blindly to remake drama in a new socialist image. Statistics trotted out at the conference illustrated both the enormous potential and pitfalls facing the party. Surveys put the number of opera forms in active performance somewhere around one hundred; story telling techniques (such as Shanghainese *pingtan*) numbered more than 200. Even when only considering six major cities - Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Wuhan, Xuzhou, and Shenyang - the numbers still illustrate the vastness of the theatre landscape in terms of people involved. The survey estimated there were nearly 80,000 performers, most of whom worked in the nearly 1,400

[46] "Quanguo xiqu gongzuozhe dahuishi xianyou xiqu gongzuozhe sanshiwuwan ren guanzhong sanbaiwan huiyi jiang taolun yu jiejue xigai fangzhen zhengce deng wenti" 全国戏曲工作者大会师 现有戏曲工作者三十五万人观众三百万 会议将讨论与解决戏改方针政策等问题 [All-China theatre workers assembly; currently, theatre workers number 350,000 people, audiences number t2hree million; conference will discuss and settle general and specific policies and other problems related to drama reform], *Renmin ribao*, 1 December 1950.

theatres or 400-odd teahouses that hosted performances. While public troupes were not included in the survey, privately owned troupes stood at nearly 1,700. In Shanghai alone, which had the largest, most diverse number of troupes and performers, there were more than 8,000 actors.[47] While the survey did not estimate the size of audiences attending operas, the numbers of performers indicate the level of popularity opera enjoyed.

Of the repertory, the *People's Daily* piece pointed to the strong efforts aimed at theatre reform since 1944. As we have seen, the Ministry of Culture established a committee dedicated to the subject shortly after the founding of the PRC, and offices dedicated to carrying out the work of reform and adaptation were established in most areas. The article claims that more than 190 new scripts had been created in the year since liberation. Based on statistics kept by the Shanghai Culture Bureau, these seem to be reasonable numbers, although the popularity of contemporary-themed plays certainly lagged behind traditional drama by a wide margin.

The Shanghai statistics, which tally plays performed and troupes performing in Shanghai between 1949 and 1958, show a relatively stable number of troupes and ratio of traditional to contemporary plays performed. Total numbers of contemporary-themed plays generally hovered around fifteen percent of the active repertory, with most popular types of drama (including Peking opera and Yue opera) never performing more than a handful of these new scripts until 1958.[48] The lion's share of contemporary themes were

---

[47] "Quanguo xiqu."

[48] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu Shanghai shi 1949 nian - 1958 nian yanchu jumu de fennian tongji biao, mulu biao" 上海市文化局关于上海市 1949 年－1958 年演出剧目的分年统计表，目录表[Shanghai cultural bureau, regarding repertoire performed in Shanghai from 1949 to 1958 – tables of statistics and catalogue, divided by year], SMA B172-1-326.

performed in the comedic or spoken word types of theatre, a pattern that would continue throughout the 1950s and 1960s.[49]

Regardless of the actual popularity of contemporary themes, the promotion of new scripts was one of the two important cornerstones of theatre work in the PRC. That stages needed more modern dramas gracing them was underscored by the constant references to the campaign to "resist American and aid Korea," and the centrality of drama to supporting patriotic endeavors. At the same time, there was an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of maintaining and developing traditional theatre. Zhou Weizhi, who had been influential in left-wing music groups of the 1930s and continued to be a force for revolutionary song composition after 1949, expounded on the central role of traditional plays.[50] Despite emphasizing the importance of work on contemporary themes, he spent some time discussing the role of traditional drama in China. "Every type of old drama derives from the people, was created by the people" Zhou said, and traditional drama " has turned into the art form that the people love. They have a deep basis among the masses, they are the riches of the people, riches of the country, and are a rich legacy among old art and literature." He continued that even in a socialist society, "we have the right and *the duty* to develop the outstanding traditional [dramas], this theatrical inheritance."[51]

---

[49] The consistent exception was Hu opera [*huju*], a local Shanghai form, which usually had a repertory composed of nearly eighty percent contemporary-themed dramas.

[50] Liu Ching-chih, *A Critical History of New Music in China*, trans. Caroline Mason (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010), 173, 311

[51] Zhou Weizhi 周巍峙, "Fazhan aiguozhuyi de renmin xin xiqu - zhu quanguo xiqu gongzuo huiyi" 发展爱国主义的人民新戏曲—祝全国戏曲工作会议[Developing the patriotism of the people's new opera - celebrating the All-China opera work conference], *Renmin ribao*, 10 December 1950.

As many before and after him, Zhou urged caution when dealing with traditional theatre. The fact that traditional opera was so deeply rooted in Chinese culture meant that it could not help but to represent the lives and thoughts of the masses. At its base, Zhou argued, traditional opera was an art form of the common person. It had been "usurped" by the ruling classes, which meant that plenty of distasteful elements had found their way in. But that these toxic elements existed in *some* plays did not mean that traditional operas should be forced off stages all together. Instead, what was needed was careful consideration of the good and bad points of plays, which could then be refashioned to be more wholesome. But as a debate the next year would show, the call for "preservation" was not heeded by everyone. A disturbing trend of repurposing traditional plays to speak to current events launched a heated discussion on the appropriate limits of drama reform, and theme that would continue throughout the 1950s.

The Model Worker Weaving Maid: Nationalism and Traditional Opera

Although Ma Shaobo and the Ministry of Culture committee had made their opinions on the mythology/superstition debate clear in 1950, some parts of the theatre world were still advocating for drastic changes to the existing repertoire. And, as evidenced by a small *People's Daily* debate in the latter half of 1951, not everyone was convinced that the relatively hands off approach elucidated by Ma Shaobo and others was the correct course. While the debate centered around adaptations of a mythological tale - not one that involved ghosts - the approach advocated by many prominent intellectuals mirrored how many would later argue for the continued maintenance of ghost opera. It also illustrates the support that traditional subjects - largely untampered with - enjoyed,

even from the earliest days of the PRC; this support would not diminish until the increasing radicalization of the cultural realm in 1963.

Central to the late 1951 discussion was the famous story *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*, which remained an exceptionally popular story for stage adaptations - both those hewing to new socialist ideals in arts, and those that stuck closely to tradition. In August, the poet Ai Qing wrote an essay on the many stagings of the story that had appeared after 1949, and was critical of what he viewed as unrestrained adaptations. He divided the plays into three types: the first was changed in minor ways, or perhaps not changed at all, and "panders to the urban petty bourgeoisie's backwards tastes."[52] These were versions that verged on the obscene and the farcical. On the opposite end of the spectrum were plays that "had large changes, or are entirely rewritten, adding many plots … borrowing [the appearance] of the myth, they integrate contemporary domestic and international events - land reform, the struggle against local despots, suppression of counterrevolutionaries, resisting America and supporting Korea, safeguarding world peace …. These types of scripts brush off the original myth, relying entirely on one person's competency in working out a literary script to create something new."[2]

Ai's irritation is palpable as he lists several new scripts, which range from a script where the celestial lovers have a happy ending to plays ending in peasant uprisings. "These works," he complained, "very stiffly mix many contemporary points of view and contemporary language, [and are] developing an astonishing discussion." He points to a version by Yang Shaoxuan where, among other shocking things, the "old willing ox"

---

[52] Ai Qing 艾青, "Tan *Niulang Zhinü*" 谈《牛郎织女》[Discussing *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*], *Renmin ribao*, 31 August, 1951.

sings a line of Lu Xun's poetry: "With a scowl, I ignore a thousand pointing fingers; with head bowed, I serve the children like a willing ox."[53] Ai called this trend a "most devastating" one, culminating in a Shanghainese version where a variety of supernatural beings were forced into one-to-one correlations with contemporary things. Spirits under the command of the Demon King lose their original associations, and the Demon King himself becomes an embodiment of Harry S. Truman. *Tange*, a bug, becomes *Tanke* (tank); *Feizhi*, an owl, becomes *Feiji* (airplane), and so on.

The third type of a script was a more cautious, moderate approach that "by and large preserved the spirit of the original myth." Unfortunately, this was the least numerous type of script. And yet the one version Ai had seen in Beijing - although it had "many weaknesses" - was a type he felt was most "earnest" and realistic. *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid* was "one of the best literary works of the Chinese people, it is a precious [piece] of our people's inheritance"; it was an inspiration for poets, a story with two thousand years of history. Ai passionately argued that when revising the play, authors should "take folk tales seriously, preserving the original beauty of the plot as far as possible." Writers and artists should "cherish our folklore, cherish myths that have spread widely over a long period among the people - they are an expression of our patriotic spirit …."[54]

Ai's point of view is similar to the viewpoint expressed by Ma Shaobo and many others; it emphasizes the healthy and national characteristics of China's literary heritage. These were not old, dusty stories to be thrown by the wayside in light of new socialist

---

[53] Ai, "Tan."

[54] Ibid.

and scientific ways of thinking, but valuable expressions of the "Chinese character" and achievements of centuries past. In the estimation of Ai Qing, oxen quoting Lu Xun and demons such as Atomic Bomb, Tank, and Gunpowder were a perversion of the very tradition that the Chinese people should take extreme pride in.

Ai Qing's criticisms provoked a surprisingly harsh response from Yang Shaoxuan, who wrote *People's Daily* and criticized the editors for publishing Ai's essay.[55] And while the paper published his response in November, the damning editor's note made it clear that the paper came down firmly on the side of the poet's call for restraint. "Although [Ai Qing's] essay could be said to have incomplete parts, nevertheless, its general point of view is correct." The note continued that they "believe Comrade Yang Shaoxuan's basic point of view and attitude both have errors."

In his response, Yang positioned himself in opposition to men like Ai Qing, and attempted to rely on political rhetoric to portray his actions in a positive light. His work was not "art for art's sake," or "mythology for mythology's sake," unlike the art Ai argued for; it was work designed to serve the masses. The new movements in art and literature were, no doubt, "very childish and simple." Yang - no doubt referring to Ai Qing - claimed that so far as "feudal literati and bourgeois writers" were concerned, such works might look "very coarse, quite ridiculous." But he hotly contended that this was because they couldn't stand this bourgeoning movement, which he characterized as "adopting an attitude of cherishing and respecting" - the very things Ai had accused him

[55] Yang Shaoxuan 杨绍萱, "Lun 'wei wenxue er wenxue, wei yishu er yishu' de weixianxing - ping Ai Qing de 'Tan niulang zhinü'" 论"为文学而文学、为艺术而艺术"的危害性 —评艾青的"谈《牛郎织女》"[Discussing the harmfulness of 'literature for the sake of literature, art for the sake of art' – criticizing Ai Qing's "Discussing *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*], *Renmin ribao*, 3 November, 1951.

and other playwrights of not doing. If there were no simple works in the beginning, there would be no foundation to build upon for better, more sophisticated pieces.[56]

More to the point, he attacked what he saw as Ai's misunderstandings of his revisions. In his script, an owl was caught; "according to Ai Qing's logic, this was part of [my] 'savage behavior' - why? Because he believed that 'owl' was 'referring to' the 'Truman' in his article; in truth, Mr. Ai Qing is neurotic, I wrote that 'owl' to embody a general idea of a saboteur, [something] destroying … a happy marriage … a helpmate of feudalism." While Truman could *perhaps* be read into his description of a means of production-destroying, feudalism-supporting owl-saboteur, what was so wrong with that?[57]

In other circumstances, Yang's charges could be quite serious: in the body of the main essay, he essentially accuses Ai of supporting changes except those that were "anti-imperialist" in character, and in a supporting letter, he makes the connection explicitly. His insinuations are quite clear, particularly when he refers to Mao - at best, Ai was attempting to impede the work of getting out from the twin yokes of imperialism and feudalism. "Chairman Mao says: We must move two great mountains: one is the mountain of feudalism, one is the mountain of imperialism," and, in Yang's view, he had written a play to help move those "mountains."[7] Yet Ai had criticized such work!

Yang's angry essay descends into a critique of Ai's explanation of the original myths and further accusations that the poet simply wants to see "mythology for mythology's sake." He claims Ai is essentially "supporting the enemy" by advocating for

---

[56] Yang, "Lun."

[57] Ibid.

a much more tempered approach to the classics. Yang staunchly defended his right to "make" mythology refer to anything, a tit-for-tat argument that probably could have continued indefinitely. And yet, despite the aspersions he cast on Ai's ideological state as well as his literary knowledge, the editor's note makes clear that it is *his* point of view that was out of favor.

It is difficult not to feel a pang of sympathy for Yang Shaoxuan; he surely did not anticipate the negative spin *People's Daily* would put on his letters. Yang was hardly a nobody: active in Yan'an during the 1940s, he had been a director of the Peking opera troupe there.[58] The year before, the inaugural issue of *People's Theatre* reproduced a 1944 letter written by Mao praising a play the Yang and Qi Yanming had revised.[59] The three additional missives appended to the main essay, which were sent on September 1st, 7th, and 21st, comprise a spectacular overreaction to what was a relatively general (and comparatively gentle) critique. On September 1st, he wrote: "Does [Ai's essay] not expose a resentfulness towards the resist America, aid Korea [movement]?" He pondered further on September 7th: "I think [Ai's] essay is a typical example of 'mythology for mythology's sake,' it doesn't have any thinking, and it cannot solve any problems …. It is the muzzle of a gun pointed [at the country], it is helping the enemy; it is attacking the playwrights [who are] resisting America and supporting Korea, it is helping the American

---

[58] Hong Zicheng, 197 (*n* 18).

[59] Ibid., 453. The letter reads in part: "[I] have seen your play, you have done very good work - I extend my thanks to you …. Guo Morou has done excellent work on historical plays, you have done this sort of work in regards to old plays …. I am extremely pleased, [and] hope that you adapt more and perform more [dramas] …." Mao Zedong, "Mao Zedong gei Yang Shaoxuan, Qi Yanming de xin" [The letter sent from Mao Zedong to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming], in Zhonggong zhongyan wenxian yanjiu shi 中共中演文献研究室, Zhongyang dang'an guan 中央档案馆 ed., *Jiandang yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian: yijiueryi - yijiusijiu* 建党以来重要文献选编：一九二一－一九四九[Selection of important documents since the founding of the Party - 1921-1949], vol. 21 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chuban she, 2011), 5.

imperialist Truman." Finally, on September 21st: "Speaking of the problems of this essay, the words 'feeble minded and ignorant' will suffice; at its base, it violates the rules set down for literary workers."[60] Unfortunately for Yang, his side was not the one taken up by editors, and a more senior person than Ai Qing was about to weigh in. One wonders if the playwright might not later have regretted his public outburst; while *People's Daily* may have published his complaints, they certainly do not cast him in a positive light.

The day after the publication of Yang Shaoxuan's rebuttal to Ai Qing, Ma Shaobo - who had written of the mythology/superstition problem the year prior - waded into the fray. In his November *People's Daily* piece, he covered much the same ground he had the year before: making distinctions between "mythology" and "superstition" was critical. He complained that people were confused "to the point that some people incorrectly believe that 'if it has a speaking spirit' [*you shen shuohua*] then it is 'mythology' [*shenhua*]."[61] He responded not just to the Ai/Yang fracas, but took aim more generally at two problems.

The first was the issue of forcing mythological subject to speak to obviously contemporary problems and political situations. He uses several examples drawn from contemporaneous revisions of the traditional Cowherd and Weaving Girl tale. Of particular concern was one Shanghainese version that enhanced the Cowherd and Weaving Girl's devotion to work so that it was "similar to the nature of the patriotic pledge; [that] husband and wife meet only once each year proceeds wholly from their

---

[60] Yang, "Lun."

[61] Ma Shaobo 马少波, "Yansu duidai zhengli shenhuaju de gongzuo - cong *Tianhe pei* de gaibian tanqi" 严肃对待整理神话剧的工作 一从《天河配》的改变谈起 [A serious treatment of the work of putting mythology plays in order - speaking from the adaptation of *Tianhe pei*], *Renmin ribao,* 4 November 1951.

own volition. It is said that this encourages the creation of a patriotic spirit in today's people, intensifying the [feeling of] Resisting America and Supporting Korea." Echoing Ai, he complains that such things are "a kind of violation towards the achievements of the [Chinese] tradition of mythology, and at the same time distort the reality of struggles."[62]

After 1952, the generalized discourse surrounding supernatural themes in opera spoke of their didactic utility in relatively broad, non-specific terms. Ghosts, gods and spirits - at least the good ones - could "encourage" struggle against oppression, educate the masses on the evils of old society, and so on. They were not expected, at least by much of the elite intellectual sphere discussing them, to correlate directly to contemporary events. Ma Shaobo's dissatisfaction with attempts to make the myth of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid resonate with major international events of the day was largely due to ignoring the realities of both the past and the present.

On the other end of the spectrum from these earnest, overly political adaptations were those scripts that included everything, good and bad. Ma points to a revised version called *Lovers on the Milky Way* [Tianhe pei], written by Wu Zuguang; Wu's play left in "the vulgar bits," and also managed to weaken the plot - having the overall effect of forgetting the "resisting spirit" of the original. Just as overly politicized versions could be damaging, so too could these types of uncritical revisions be "damaging" for the "beautiful and sound popular myths."[63]

---

[62] Ma, "Yansu."

[63] Ma, "Yansu." Wu Zuguang (who was not a member of the party) was a playwright who continued to run afoul of the establishment for more serious violations than apparently distasteful revisions of classic myths. During the Hundred Flowers Movement, he was a vocal critic of party policy concerning cultural production. Tian Han "led the attack" against Wu during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama,* 4) - though Tian Han had in fact similarly argued against non-professional (i.e., party) control of the drama world. After 1976, Wu and his acid tongue - sharpened after

Ma is much more interested in defining plays that should be treated as positives than ferreting out "bad" plays that need to be banned. His exemplar of a play that was "one of the very worst," *Huayou Mountain* [Huayou shan] (part of the story "Mulian Rescues His Mother" [*Mulian jiumu*]), had in fact been banned in the spring of 1949 before the CCP had even attained total control of China.[64] His general recommendations remained the same as those he and others had given the year before: delete the superstitious bits that "encouraged fatalism," and let the sections that encouraged resistance to oppression remain intact. He gives the example of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* [Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai], where the two young lovers - their passion and devotion for each other thwarted by an arranged marriage - turn into butterflies upon their untimely deaths.[65] "This is mythology, not superstition," Ma declares. Liang and Zhu "symbolize a protest against feudal oppression;" such plays were a "radiant achievement of national art, and should not be looked upon as superstition."[66]

Regarding Yang's essay, Ma flatly stated that he believed the position that one "could use mythology to … reflect [the Korean War], safeguard world peace" was improper.[67] Furthermore, Ma felt Yang's tack of casting aspersions on Ai Qing's

---

decades of marginalization and oppression - harshly criticized party policy in the years after Mao's death. See Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[64] Li Desheng, 188-189.

[65] Like *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid,* this has been an exceedingly popular story in a variety of times, places, and mediums. For instance, *The Love Eterne*, a 1963 Hong Kong *huangmeidiao* film by the Shaw Brothers, was an unprecedented box office success in Taiwan (Chen Xiangyang, "Woman, Generic Aesthetics, and the Vernacular: Huangmei Opera Films from China to Hong Kong," in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 177-190, 177.

[66] Ma, "Yansu."

[67] Ma, "Yansu."

character - the inability to gracefully take criticism - "actually has the effect of pushing one's comrades to the enemy's side; Yang Shaoxuan's unreasonable attitude is very incorrect!" Ma also criticized his emphasis on Mao's deployment of a classical set phrase ("Yugong moves a mountain" [*Yugong yishan*]) to illustrate the correctness of inserting the Korean War into mythology. In Mao's case, it was simply an example of using old language, or examples from art and literature, to brighten up one's language.

In a literary barrage, Ma stated that Lu Xun, Guo Morou, and other Republican writers who used historical themes to speak of the present *had* to do so. "In those days, they were under the rule of a dark force - there was no freedom of speech, it was very difficult to publicly spread revolutionary thought, so obviously they wrote historical stories and history plays" as a way to freely discuss the present. But there was, in Ma's reckoning, no need for such subterfuge in 1951; "revolutionary artists have ample freedom of speech," so were such veiled measures necessary? While we may quibble with Ma's characterization of "the freedom of press," his more general point - that using mythology to "reflect" current events could lead only to distortion of history *and* the present - is well taken.[68]

For poor Yang Shaoxuan, the dressing down on the pages of *People's Daily* did not end with Ma's critique. Ai Qing offered a cutting reply on November 12th, nine days after Yang's letters had been published.[69] Compared to Ai's original essay, his response was sarcastic and vicious to the extreme. Critiquing not only Yang's changes, but his

---

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ai Qing 艾青, "Da Yang Shaoxuan tongzhi" 答杨绍萱同志 [An answer to comrade Yang Shaoxuan], *Renmin ribao*, 12 November, 1951.

literary talent and ability to string a plot together, Ai - with Ma Shaobo and *People's Daily* on his side - thoroughly trounced Yang in this particular game of wits. Accusing Yang of throwing in two red herrings - respect and protection for mass movements, and not using feudal literati or bourgeois points of view in criticism - Ai insists the issue has nothing to do with literary works of the masses. The problem was the attitude of one man - Yang Shaoxuan - towards his responsibilities of safeguarding China's national dramatic heritage, his methods of creation, and his attitudes regarding literary criticism.

Ai minced no words about his target: "We are *by no means* expressing an opinion on the agenda of a certain primary school's parent-teacher association meeting, nor on a workers' part time theatre troupe production - we are putting forth a point of view on the type of specialists' work like [that of] Comrade Yang Shaoxuan."[70] He declared that Yang's overly defensive response was only hurting the playwright. Ai airily dismissed Yang's hysterical accusations, stating that he (and others like him) were simply advocating for a sensible approach to sorting through China's literary treasures. Contrary to the angry playwright's assertions, Ai was all for change; however, it was the *type* of change that mattered.

Dispensing with the general commentary of his first essay, Ai trashes the revisions that Yang had claimed were so useful, educational, and deep. "Is not this [easily resolved] struggle tantamount to a children's play? Is it *really* possible that imperialism is like this?" He points to the internal inconsistencies of the script, particularly those related to "superstitions," roundly deriding Yang for preposterous leaps in logic and confusing plot developments. The reasons for this, at least in Ai's view, were clear: "Because this

[70] Ibid.

work was knocked together, it of course is full of contradictions." Trying to do too much, or avoid too many things, the work ultimately failed for Ai because it wound up doing nothing at all.[71] And just as bad - if not worse - than his literary failings was his inability to take criticism with grace. Criticisms and self-criticisms were necessary parts of revolution, Ai opined. Thus, what had started as a discussion on the appropriateness of plot revisions ended with a warning about proper behavior for revolutionaries:

"If one resembles Comrade Yang Shaoxuan, when on account of some people pointing out the flaws and deficiencies of his work, immediately stamps his feet in a rage - to the point of developing an uncontrollable appearance - and stands out due to unparalleled confusion, agitation, indignation; in point of fact, [one has] already started to lose the most basic quality of a revolutionary. I do hope Comrade Yang Shaoxuan will promptly be on guard against this."[72]

Wisely, Yang did not engage in any more repartee on the subject, despite the fact that a number of senior intellectuals weighed in on the case. Hong Zicheng characterizes this largely as a discussion on historical materialism, Marxism, and ideological squabbles.[21] While I do not wish to downplay the importance of the broader debate on the uses of history, the fundamental issue - revisions of classic stories - should also be taken on its own terms. Intellectuals may have used these types of discussions to bring up a myriad of theoretical issues, but the state of traditional drama was not merely a smokescreen for lobbing ideological grenades.

---

[71] Ai, "Da Yang Shaoxuan."

[72] Ibid.

Freezing the Repertoire: the Impact of Bans and Intellectual Debates

Despite the defense mounted by intellectuals and the Ministry of Culture's scramble for control over repertory decisions, there is no doubt that the confusion and vague statements of the early 1950s had a severe impact on troupes and the traditional repertoire. As evidenced by the rush to ban plays *en masse*, simply announcing three types of plots that were inappropriate, such as those that promulgated superstition, left the door open for wildly different interpretations. The attempt at giving regional and local governments a fair amount of latitude resulted in repertoires stripped of their plays and troupes unable to make a living. At the same time, documents from Shanghai call into question assertions that the early emphasis on revision meant that a large swath of the repertoire was entirely shelved until after 1976.

The Shanghai Culture Burea kept careful notes on the active repertory between the years of 1949 and 1965. Although these documents vary in emphasis and precision – there are general overviews, as well as year-by-year accounts of the plays performed by every troupe in every style and genre – they do provide a detailed picture of trends in the Shanghainese drama world. The varying categories highlighted in different documents likewise underscore the changing nature of drama policy and interests of the Culture Bureau. For instance, an emphasis on revised traditional drama is actually not seen until after 1963. Statistics kept prior to that year detail only broad categories of plays, if any: one set, which charted the number of troupes performing and the number of plays performed between 1949 and 1958, divided plays by "contemporary plays," "traditional

and newly composed history plays," and "foreign scripts."[73] Table 1.1 lists the total plays performed in Shanghai between 1950 and 1958. As evidenced by the numbers, traditional subjects or new plays on historical themes, made up the lion's share of performed plays throughout the period. Although the statistics do make clear that there was a sharp drop in the number of plays performed in 1953 and 1954, most likely due to the same confusion and anxiety about "proper" repertoire that swept the rest of the country, the general percentage of repertory that was made up by traditional plays remained consistent. Contemporary plays did not depend on a strictly contemporary setting, but could also include recently written plays centered on the "old society" and its evils.

Table 1.1: Shanghai Performance Statistics, 1950-1958

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958
Troupes	125	109	97	70	87	117	109	99	125
Plays (Total)	1706	1525	1281	998	1019	1767	1562	1501	1975
Contemporary themes	230	232	164	158	169	260	188	223	390
Traditional plays	1474	1292	1110	839	848	1503	1371	1243	1578
Foreign plays	2	1	7	1	2	4	3	35	7
% Traditional plays	86.4	84.7	86.7	84.1	83.2	85.1	87.8	82.8	79.9

Source: SMA B172-1-326

Although the figures from the 1950s do not differentiate between revised scripts and unaltered originals, later figures from the 1960s give some indication that the

[73] SMA B172-1-326.

influence of revised scripts, or new plays written on historical themes, must have been quite low. Between 1958 and 1963, "historical plays," meaning new works, never equaled even two percent of the repertory.[74] Considering that by 1963 – after 13 years of effort put towards revising drama – revised scripts made up only 1.7 percent of the repertory, it should be unsurprising that the numbers were even lower in the 1950s.[75] According to statistics compiled in 1962 and 1963, the percentage of "historical plays" (e.g., new scripts) performed between 1949 and 1958 ranged between 0.3 and 1.28 percent.[76]

The confusing climate of the early 1950s obviously had a chilling effect on the number of plays performed even in Shanghai, which seems not to have been subject to the extensive bans or capricious cultural policy of other areas. At the same time, the maxim quoted by Liu, that "There's no need to read [the ads] when you open a newspaper, for there is nothing but *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, *The West Chamber* [Xixiang ji], or *The Legend of White Snake*," is clearly vast overstatement, particularly outside the nadir of plays performed in 1952, 1953, and 1954.[77] Even accounting for the

---

[74] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu yijiu e liusan nian quannian shanyan jumu tongji, jingjuyuan jumu paidui, guojia juyuantuan baoliu jumu gelin biao" 上海市文化局关于依旧额流散年全年上演剧目统计、京剧院剧目排队、国家剧院团保留剧目各类表 [Shanghai culture bureau statics on annual performed repertoire for previous years, Peking opera theatre repertoire list, list of every type of national theatre repertoire], SMA B172-5-682, 5.

[75] Ibid.

[76] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju yijiusijiu nian dao yijiuliuernian linian shangyan jumu (haoxi, huaixi) bijiaobao" 上海市文化局一九四九年至一九六二年历年上演剧目（好戏，坏戏）比较表 [Shanghai culture bureau comparison table of the performed repertoire (good plays, bad plays) over the years from 1949-1962], SMA B172-5-530, 2.

[77] Siyuan Liu, 402.

multiple versions of plays, there was still a relatively diverse body of plays being performed through the 1950s and 1960s.[78]

With that said, the drop in plays performed after 1951 is quite striking. Table 1.2 tallies at the number of plays performed by two of the major Peking opera troupes in Shanghai, a pattern replicated with other troupes and other styles, as well. Although some of the shifts could be explained by the instability of the artistic world after 1949 – the Shanghai Culture Bureau statistics show new troupes being created, troupes merging or being renamed, and troupes disappearing from the record – the extreme drop in plays performed in 1952 is likely due to the same reasons seen in other areas. However, as the next chapter will explore, the Ministry of Culture reacted strongly to the unintended consequences of placing the onus of banning or revise plays. At least in one major cultural center, after the low point of 1952-1954, the variety of plays performed strongly rebounded in 1955 and the following years.

Table 1.2: Number of Plays Performed by Two Major Shanghai Peking Opera Troupes

	1949	**1950**	**1951**	**1952**	**1953**	**1954**	**1955**
Zhongguo daxiyuan	103	115	110	17	30	20	135
Tianchan	96	139	109	64	30	28	70

Source: SMA B172-4-917

For the intellectuals watching the impact of both national and regional policies on drama, the sharp and sudden drop in plays was clearly alarming. Indeed, even before the

[78] Although the documents do not detail methods of collecting statistics, it is clear based on the numbers that they must have counted the same play multiple times. That is, one script performed by two troupes would be counted twice.

freeze had fully taken effect, the Ministry of Culture and senior intellectuals hurried to try and mitigate the damage, to limited effect. What followed the early years of drama reform in the PRC – the debates, discussions and policies that emerged in the period after 1949-1952 – was in large part a reaction to this early blunder, and will be discussed in the following chapters. The Ministry of Culture and a number of senior intellectuals, many of them dedicated party members, found the trend of lower-level officials laying waste to the theatre landscape disturbing. Had the CCP truly been bent on destruction of traditional themes, they had the perfect opportunity in the first few years of the PRC – as the statistics show, even large, important troupes in relatively liberal Shanghai found their repertory reduced to a handful of dramas in the span of a year. Although drama on contemporary themes lagged behind traditional drama until the mid-1960s, as events leading to the Cultural Revolution show, contemporary themed dramas *could* be written and staged in large quantities with very little preparation.

In many respects, the tone for the next decade and a half was set by 1950. The separation between what the Ministry of Culture and senior intellectuals wished to see, and what was actually imposed on troupes by regional or local authorities, continued. That there continued to be a separation between high flown, literary essays on the pages of elite journals and papers and what was actually happening when new structures and rules were imposed on troupes should not be a surprise. At the same time, we should pay more attention to those intellectual discussions: they do challenge our perceptions of what people at the time hoped to see out of culture and art in a new, socialist China. Likewise, it is important to remember that policies were often vague and open to interpretation, which allowed room both for those who wished to see radical changes to the repertoire

and those who wanted to see traditional drama preserved. The early discussion on mythology versus superstition trickled down to debates over the suitability of ghosts and other potentially unsuitable subject matter. Here again, the sheer vagueness of policies left room for intellectuals to maneuver. The initial mishandling of repertoire questions gave officials, performers and intellectuals a glimpse of what was to come if these issues were not handled promptly, and was likely one cause for the lively defense of traditional subjects over the next ten years. The next chapter will explore the continuing efforts to fix the problems created by the early attempts at trimming the repertoire, as well as the beginning of the debate over ghosts – a continuation of the superstition/mythology discussion started in the first heady months of the PRC. It was a debate that, by its zenith, would have serious consequences not only for the theatre world, but China as a whole.

The Ghostless Ghost Play: Ma Jianling and the Reform Opera, 1953-1958

Even from the distance of half a century, there is a certain wildness about the photographs of Ma Jianling. His beard, shot through with white, is prematurely grey, his hair is wiry and a bit unkempt - usually covered with a worker's cap. He looks less like his fellow famous playwrights - men like Tian Han, who seem like they would be at home in the finest Republican Shanghai salons - and more like the people he strove to represent in theatre. Fitting, then, for the man who first rose to literary prominence in Yan'an, bringing *qinqiang* on modern themes to the masses. Ma is still remembered as one of the finest playwrights on contemporary themes, at least in those early years. But there is a play that is not often discussed when examining his canon and his successes: Ma, for all his achievements, had the dubious honor of creating one of the 1950s most startling scripts, a ghostless ghost play.

The story of Ma Jianling's 1953 foray into ghost opera is one that has garnered little attention, and yet it was this adaptation of the Ming drama *Story of Red Plums* that attracted notice from intellectuals throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. For some, it was a stunning example of reworking a dusty, old, and inappropriate script so that it could be staged without hesitation, even in a new, communist China. For others, it was a shocking example of what could happen when Mao's Yan'an talks on literature and art were applied to beloved old dramas.

Ma's *qinqiang* adaptation, called *Wandering West Lake*, is perhaps the most important adapted ghost play of the 1950s; it certainly garnered the most attention. It, and its author, provide an interesting counterpoint to the most important adapted ghost play of the 1960s (and probably the Mao years most broadly), Meng Chao and his *Li Huiniang*.

The trajectory of Ma's career and his interests are reflected in his earnest script, and the same can be said of Meng Chao. And just as *Li Huiniang* and the discussion surrounding its premiere reflect a specific cultural, social, and political moment of the 1960s, so to does the debate around Ma and his take on the 500 year-old play.

Had Ma's play premiered a few years earlier, it might have found more favor in a heady climate that saw the first attempts at strongly regulating drama. But by 1954 - the point at which Ma's play attracted attention from drama critics and intellectuals writing in influential journals like *Literature and Art News* [Wenyi bao] and *Play Monthly* [Juben] - the climate had become ever more receptive to traditional drama just as it was. By 1956, even the Ministry of Culture would be putting an explicit stamp of approval on ghost plays and many of the plays banned between 1950 and 1952. Furthermore, in the face of a push to eradicate "superstition" and encourage "scientific thinking" among the masses in the mid-1950s, intellectuals concerned with China's literary heritage had a vested interest in quickly creating a safe space for ghosts, gods, and other fantastical imaginings to exist. Ma's ghostless ghost play, then, provided the perfect opportunity for comparison and extended discussion. Just as Ma was bent on getting rid of things that "propagated superstition" - in this case, the ghost Li Huinaing - many intellectuals were bent on proving that ghosts were not only *not* superstitious, but useful teaching tools for reaching the masses. Intellectuals argued that the "resisting spirit" of literary ghosts and the lessons about feudal society contained in old plays were valuable, and valid, lessons. Building on the debates of the first years of the PRC, which saw Ma Shaobo and other intellectuals defending the difference between "superstition" and "mythology," many intellectuals argued for the continued inclusion of Chinese ghosts as they were.

Writing a Revolution: Ma Jianling and the Reform of Qinqiang

Ma Jianling was born in 1907, into what seems to have been an intellectual, if unremarkable, family, from Mizhi county, north Shaanxi.[79] His father was a teacher, a career that Ma and his elder brother would also take up after graduating from middle school. From a young age, he displayed an interest in theatre and music, picking up proficiency in several instruments. It is this love of music and theatre, not any sort of elite intellectual pursuits, that pervades his biographies. Despite following his older brother to BeiDa in 1930, his own writing activities do not appear to have ever been part of the elite literary milieu.[80]

However, he was certainly steeped in revolutionary culture from a relatively young age. His older brother, Ma Yuncheng, joined the CCP in 1925 (Ma would follow in 1928), becoming the party secretary of Yulin, Shaanxi, and later taking up teaching posts in various spots around Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. In 1935, while working within the party's military commission for Beijing, he was reported to Guomindang (GMD) authorities and executed.[81] One imagines this must have had something of an impact on the 26 year old, who by that time had gone to Hebei to teach and run a theatre troupe; he would move to Yan'an in 1936.

---

[79]Chen Yan 陈彦, "Ma Jianling zhe ge ren" 马健翎这个人 [This person Ma Jianling], *Meiwen* 2007 (April): 75-79, 76.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Zhang Chengping 张承平, ed, *Babaoshan geming gogmu beiwen lu* 八宝山革命公墓碑文录 [Collection of epitaphs from Babaoshan revolutionary cemetery] (Beijing: Gaige chubanshe, 1990), 55.

This was the start of his theatrical prominence: he threw himself into the life of teaching, directing and writing for the "Native Place troupe" [*Xiangtu jutuan*] at the Yan'an Normal School. From here, he joined forces with the poet Ke Zhongping in 1938, and "at Mao Zedong's prompting," established the influential Shaan-Gan-Ning Masses Troupe [*Minzhong jutuan*] in Yan'an.[82] The troupe became famous for its new productions of dramas on contemporary themes. Ke, unlike Ma, had a more prominent literary career prior to his move to Yan'an in 1938. But Ke spent three years in prison and four years in Japan after his 1920s involvement in the Creation Society, an absence which "may have influenced his readiness to abandon the professional autonomy fostered by the literary associations which flourished in the relatively free atmosphere of the International Settlement."[83]

This combination of veteran cultural worker and playwright passionate about local forms proved fruitful and long-lived. The Ke-Ma collaboration was, in the words of Ellen Judd, "virtually alone in its deep involvement in the local rural culture."[84] Although Ke hailed from Yunnan, Ma's upbringing and early interest in Shaanxi culture shined through. But he did not simply attempt to bring new revolutionary themes to native Shaanxi forms, in Shaanxi dialects. Instead, in one of his earliest plays - *Inspecting Road Passes* [Cha lutiao] - he wrote in a "generalized North Chinese vernacular."[85] Their plays,

---

[82] Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, eds., *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 268-9.

[83] Ibid., 268.

[84] Ellen Judd, "Prelude to the 'Yan'an Talks': Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia," *Modern China* 11.3 (July, 1985): 377-408, 388.

[85] D.L. Holm, "Local Color and Popularization in the Literature of the Wartime Border Regions," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 2.1 (Spring 1986): 7-20, 11.

then, were designed to be performed in a number of local contexts - for instance, Ma glossed words that were subject to many local forms in the text.

In applying revolutionary themes to popular drama, Ma's lack of literary credentials - at least where leftist societies were concerned - probably stood him in good stead. The disconnect between the literary elite who flocked to Yan'an and the masses they tried to serve was illustrated by the late 1930s emphasis on poetry as a vehicle. "The people," Judd points out, "were being provided with 'new poetry' … by youths whose most valued possession might be a volume of Pushkin …. Despite the enthusiasm … for taking poetry to the masses, they had not moved beyond the superficial spreading of their own nonpopular literary form."[86] Ma's attraction to and talent for reworking local forms immediately gave him better tools to work with - he could apply revolutionary themes to popular, familiar forms, and even bring to them a sensitivity regarding linguistic nuances. Consider 1938's *National Spirit* [Guohun], a spoken language drama that Ma wrote. Like most of his plays of this period, it took up a very real subject: the war with Japan. Mao saw a performance at the Military and Political University of Resistance Against the Japanese, and said to Ma after the performance, "You have quite an achievement in the writing of this play, and if you change it to *qinqiang*, its utility will be even greater."[87] Ma duly followed Mao's urgings, and the reset play was called *The Spirit of China* [Zhongguo hun].

---

[86] Judd, 386.

[87] Yang Bujun 杨步均, "Minyishujia Ma Jianling" 民艺术家马健翎 [People's artist Ma Jianling], *Jinqiu* 2012.1: 41-42, 42.

Ma and Ke's work constituted one of the most important pre-1949 efforts at harnessing popular drama for party goals. However, following the CCP's ascension to power in 1949, his focus shifted from the revolutionary- and contemporary-themed dramas that had been a hallmark of his pre-1949 works, to adapted traditional dramas. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Although later historians have generally viewed his activities in reforming drama positively, Ma's attempt at reforming the Ming *chuanqi Story of Red Plums* did not, as we shall see, have such a response from literary critics of his own time.[88]

The Ghostless Ghost Play: Wandering West Lake

As illustrated in the previous chapter, the reform of drama was a concern of the CCP from the days of Yan'an and beyond, particularly in the creation of new, revolutionary-themed works using older forms. Indeed, Ma's own history illustrates the importance attached to reforming and creating new drama for the masses. But unlike many critics and writers who seemed unable - or unwilling - to shed their elite literary pasts, Ma displayed a devotion to making art that truly served the masses. His thoughts on the reform of drama are notable for being particularly unpretentious and non-dismissive of the people, whom he did not view as unsophisticated idiots. He agreed that old dramatic forms were not ideal. But he also argued that old forms "contained many things that can express the life, character, temperament and thoughts of the people. …

[88] E.g., Dong Dingcheng 董丁诚, "Ma Jianling juzuo de pingjie wenti" 马健翎剧作的评价文题 [The problems with evaluations of Ma Jianling's dramas], *Dangdai xiju* 1988.4: 10-12.

Are our Chinese masses all simpletons that they would all foolishly love this old theater? To reject the bad, adapt the good, then refine and give it substance, in order to express a new progressive content, is both completely possible and absolutely necessary."[89]

Of course, much lip service was paid to "serving the masses," and ostensibly *all* reformed drama of the PRC was aimed at transforming musty forms into healthy, progressive works. But in many respects, the debates that played out on the pages of elite literary journals and the scripts that appeared in the same places were written by literary elites for literary elites. Meng Chao's 1961 *Li Huiniang* - adapted from the same work as Ma's *Wandering West Lake* - was as high-flown as Ma's play was homespun. In language, literary references, and historical descriptions, the elite playwrights (or academics-turned-playwrights) were often writing plays aimed at one another. Ma Jianling, on the other hand, maintained his commitment to creating accessible, politically appropriate drama for the masses.

Ma's *Wandering West Lake* marked the first attempt at reforming a ghost opera in the PRC, and also the first ongoing debate on the particulars of reforming ghost opera for socialist stages. The play, first published in 1953, proved a lasting example of the limits of reforming drama, for while troupes and crowds apparently seized upon it with some enthusiasm, drama critics and other elite intellectuals reacted with horror to Ma's revisions, accusing Ma of holding incorrect points of view and having insufficient understanding of historical reality. The old divides first seen in Yan'an, between literary elite who were not entirely convinced they wanted to give up their own preferences and

---

[89] Yi-Tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling's Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 121.

traditions and cultural workers like Ma who embraced both forms and content designed to promulgate socialism to the masses, came to the fore yet again.

In the introduction to the script in book form, Ma Jianling discussed his thoughts on both the original *Red Plums* and his revision, *Wandering West Lake*. Ma criticized the original plot for including fatalism and superstition - Li Huiniang's visit to the underworld and Yama, King of Hell, for instance, as well as the most obvious problem, the fact that Li Huiniang was a ghost. He further complained that many of the characters (including the hero Pei Yu) are frivolous loafers, and the masses were not represented. Ma's neat removal of Li Huiniang's death and ghost self removed most of the superstitious elements in one move, and his additions rounded out the myriad problems he saw with the original.

But Ma was not only concerned with taking the superstition out of a classical play; he wanted to make it resonate even more strongly with the present. The original was, of course, not entirely bad - otherwise he would not have had an interest in renovating it. He placed particular emphasis on the play's virtues of revealing "the evils of the feudal ruling class" and opposing the "feudal" marriage system.[90] He couched his explanation of some rather dramatic plot changes - particularly the backstory of Li Huiniang and Pei Yu - as a way to strengthen the positive virtues of the play. In the original, Li Huiniang and Pei Yu have no prior connection; her admiring comments about the handsome young scholar rest entirely on a brief impression of him from a distance. In Ma's revisions, he

[90] Ma Jianling 马健翎, "Xiugai *You xihu* de shuoming" 修改《游西湖》的说明 [Explaining the alterations to *Wandering West Lake*], in *You xihu* (*qinqiang juben*) 游西湖（秦腔剧本） [Wandering West lake (qinqiang script)] (Xi'an: Xibei renmin chubanshe, 1954).

invented a prior history between the two: Li Huiniang and Pei Yu were neighbors, and contracted to be married (this is symbolized by the gifts they give each other, and carry throughout the play: a jade belt ornament for him, and a silk fan for her). The tragedy of Li Huiniang's situation is thus compounded. Not only was she forced into concubinage, but she was forced to give up her true love - a man she has known since childhood.

On the one hand, this twist on the original is an intriguing throwback to Qu You's original tale, "The Woman in Green," found in his early Ming collection *New Tales Told by Lamplight*.[91] In that story, the character that provided the model for Li Huiniang meets her soulmate for the second time, decades after they parted - having been forced to commit suicide in the late Song. But it seems unlikely that Ma intended such synergy with the antique original; instead, there were CCP concerns that his *West Lake* resonated with. One of the most important laws put into place in the first few years of the PRC was the New Marriage Law, promulgated in 1950. Work on the law began in 1948, and it underwent numerous revisions before it was released.[92] Between 1950 and 1953, a series of campaigns promoted the law; some estimates state that seventy percent of the Mainland was reached by some form of propaganda regarding it.[93] Neil J. Diamant, in his study of the wide-ranging effects of the Marriage Law, has described it as "one of the

[91] See Qu You, 104-107.

[92] Chen Jianfu, *Chinese Law: Context and Transformation* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008), 399.

[93] Ibid., 401.

most dramatic and far-reaching attempts by a state to reshape 'traditional' marriage and family structures," and it had enormous, though often unintended, consequences.[94]

The 1950 Marriage Law was a showpiece of the early years of the PRC, demonstrating the CCP's commitment to shedding China's "feudal" past. It was the legal manifestation of decades of discussion surrounding the question of women, marriage, and the evils of "feudal society" in China. While farmers had, in Gail Hershatter's words, "resisted and blunted the effect" of the law, it did - at least on paper - ban some of the more troubling marriage customs, such as child betrothals, the selling of brides and concubinage, and set legal minimum ages for marriage.[95] It further laid out new processes for divorce, including the division of property and child support. As with many things in those early years, including the regulation of drama, implementation of the law was not particularly smooth. The wide-ranging effects the central leadership CCP imagined for all of Chinese society were not always welcomed warmly. In the case of the marriage law - the potential ramifications of which had serious implications for familial relations and social standing - many male rural cadres reacted with "ambivalence or outright hostility."[96] Hershatter's study of women in Shaanxi includes several hair-raising accounts of just how badly the new law was received, and reveals the extent to which provincial-level cadre were concerned with winning over the masses.

---

[94] Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: Unviersity of California Press, 2000), ix.

[95] Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 4-5; 105.

[96] Ibid., 109.

Against this background, Ma's determination to "enhance the foundation of the love between Pei Yu and Li Huiniang," so as to better educate audiences on the wisdom of opposing the feudal marriage system, makes perfect sense.[97] Furthermore, as he himself explained, his project was not a solitary one: the Northwest department of culture had convened a group of drama workers to select plays to revise, and *Wandering West Lake* was one, owing to its popularity. After he had revised the script, performers from the Xibei theatre research unit helped prepare it for the stage. This was no amateur production, and the fact that the revised plot dovetailed so neatly (at least, as far as its author was concerned) with propaganda needs was likewise no accident. Ma was one of the most prominent authors working with native Shaanxi forms, truly skilled in using *qinqiang* to express contemporary political lessons. His dramas may have been entertaining, but they were also highly didactic. The medium could not have been better - Hershatter describes the pleasure some Shaanxi women took in singing and dancing in public, and theatre was one way of popularizing campaigns and mores of the new society. Though she does not mention *qinqiang* specifically as a vehicle for these performances, it is not difficult to imagine Ma's Li Huiniang alongside *The Legend of White Snake* and other favored classics, all of which were "open to reinterpretation in support of free-choice marriage."[98]

In addition to changing the backstory of Li Huiniang and Pei Yu, Ma made a variety of other changes to the plot. First, he excised the subplot that involved Lu

---

[97] Ma, "Xiugai."

[98] Hershatter, 103.

Zhaorong, a (living) love interest of Pei Yu's in the original - this was not particularly radical, as the story of Li Huiniang has generally proved more compelling for authors and audiences. Likewise, excising the scenes involving Yama, King of Hell, and the underworld were simple changes that would be made again and again throughout the 1950s and 1960s, an easy way to remove more obviously "superstitious" material from an otherwise suitable play. But the original, and most of its derivations, hinge on Li Huiniang's death: it is a central plot point. It could not simply be removed without impacting the rest of the play, and this is where Ma ran afoul of critics and intellectuals.

Ma had concocted a new story that diverged significantly from the original. Instead of Jia Sidao killing Li Huiniang in a rage, he orders his other concubines to beat her. One of Jia's concubines, conveniently name *Rui*niang, sympathizes with Li Huiniang, but puts on a good show of being vicious. She suggests to Jia that she should invite the lovelorn concubine to her rooms, and then poison her. Instead, Ruiniang smuggles her out of the house, whereupon Huiniang dresses up as a ghost, lest anyone catch on to the fact that she has not, in fact, been murdered. Much as in the original, Li Huiniang still needs to save Pei Yu from the clutches of Jia Sidao; she does this - with the help of a friendly gardener - by fooling Jia's underlings with her ghostly disguise.

Compared to the Ming original, another significant difference was that Ma's revisions were lacking in poetry. Artistic concerns, despite his assertion that he "wanted to preserve [the original] *Wandering West Lake*, not write another [one]," do not figure into his discussion, and the play is a straight forward, simply written script.[99] One can imagine that it might have been pleasant to see performed, but it is distinctly unsatisfying

[99] Ma, "Xiugai."

as a literary text to be enjoyed as reading material. There is a preponderance of spoken lines, and the arias that remain are not striving to match classical achievements of years past. Two brief examples from scenes late in the play should suffice to illustrate the rather insipid dialogue that marks much of the script.[100] Here, Li Huiniang and Pei Yu meet again in person, after the Ruiniang-facilitated escape has taken place:

> Huiniang: Master Pei! Master Pei! [She pats him on the shoulder] Young Pei!
> Pei Yu: [Greatly startled] Who is it?
> H: Master Pei, it's … it's me.
> P: You …?
> H: I'm Huiniang.
> P: Oh! You … you're Huiniang?
> H: Master Pei!
> P: Huiniang!
> H: Master Pei! (53)

And here, the scene between Jia Sidao and his underling, who is trying to explain that he has just seen "the ghost" of Li Huiniang:

> Jia: What came?
> 3rd Servant: A ghost came!
> Jia: What? A ghost came?
> 3rd: A ghost! A ghost!
> Jia: What spirit dares to come make mischief?
> 3rd: Hui … niang came!
> Jia: Ah!
> 3rd: Huh! (65)

Peony Pavilion it was not. But what his language lacked in literary sparkle and classical flash, it tried to make up for in simplicity and earnest political aims - a not insignificant feature in the early days of the PRC. Unlike many intellectuals, who professed a desire to promulgate literature for the masses, while at the same time writing

---

[100] Ma Jianling 马健翎, *You xihu* (*qinqiang juben*) 游西湖（秦腔剧本） [Wandering West lake (qinqiang script)]. Xi'an: Xibei renmin chubanshe, 1954.

exceedingly erudite and complicated essays, poems, and plays, Ma's script is an attempted execution of Mao's dictates on literature and art: art that serves the masses. It was quite clearly *not* aimed at currying favor with the literary elite, who still prized many aspects of classical culture and objected strenuously to what they saw as poor imitations of the originals.

"The Results are Not Good": Intellectuals' Response to Wandering West Lake

Wandering West Lake straddles a strange period in Chinese drama, sandwiched between the first few years that saw the national bans of 26 plays and the 1956 Ministry of Culture pronouncements that they would "relax the limitations" on traditional drama, including ghost plays.[101] But even prior to the official government pronouncements that put a stamp of approval (or at least, not outright disapproval) on ghost opera, intellectuals made their displeasure with revised versions like Ma's *qinqiang* revision known. The argument over ghost plays was built upon the foundation laid by Ma Shaobo and others, which argued for a clear separation between "superstition" and "mythology" in the earliest days of the PRC. Just as Ma had been alarmed by the rampant, uncritical bans, the fact that a ghostless ghost play was apparently making inroads among many troupes over a reasonably wide area did not sit well with those who wanted to see traditional drama maintained.

Probably owing to Ma Jianling's relatively high profile, intellectuals took notice of the revisions. As we have seen, Ma's version was no simple rework, but involved a drastic change to the script. The line from *White Haired Girl* that "old society turned

[101] Li Desheng, 13.

people into ghosts, and the new society turns ghosts into people" took on alarming connotations when it came to the classical canon. In the hands of someone like Ma Jianling, who had impeccable revolutionary and dramatic credentials (at least where contemporary themes were concerned), it meant making serious changes that many intellectuals found completely unacceptable.

Measure of exactly how disturbed they were came by the continued discussion about the play. Journals like *Theatre Report*, *Play Monthly*, and *Literature and Art News* continued to run articles discussing the play's failings years after its premier. While it is difficult to ascertain exactly how popular or widely performed the play was, we can guess by the discussion that it was more than a simple flash in the pan. According to one 1955 essay, Ma's revised version was performed widely not only by Shaanxi *qinqiang* troupes, but also by Shanxi opera, Puzhou opera (a southern Shanxi form), Peking opera, and Hebei opera troupes, among others.[102] Drama critics and others who felt Ma's version was, at best, a misguided, overzealous attempt to "fix" a play were not going to sit by as it spread throughout a variety of repertoires. The criticism of *Wandering West Lake* reveals a divide between elite intellectuals, such as those associated with high-level publications, and those operating primarily in a local or provincial context. This is a divide that is mirrored by the political situation, with the divide between the Ministry of Culture and lower-level culture bureauss becoming ever clearer throughout 1954 and 1955.

---

[102] Liu Naichong 刘乃崇, "Duzhe dui Ma Jianling gaibian *You xihu* juben de yijian" 读者对马健翎改编《游西湖》剧本的意见 [Readers' opinons on Ma Jianling's revised *Wandering West Lake* script], *Juben* 1955.6: 162-166, 162.

Early in 1954, the editors of *Literature and Art News* wrote a general overview of responses to *Wandering West Lake*. Characterizing the split opinions of Xi'an audiences as those who thought the revision was "getting rid of the dregs of feudalism," and people who "opposed [Ma's] method of adaptation" on the other, it falls generally on the side of the latter.[103] The fundamental problem – one that the article does not address in depth – is differentiating between mythology and superstition. While noting several positive reviews in Shaanxi papers – which praised Ma for "conforming with the wishes of today's people" – there is little doubt that the *Literature and Art News* writers sympathize with the viewers and performers who believed ghost plays did *not* necessarily constitute superstition. There were "incorrect" parts, which Ma rightly revised, but the ghost in the ghost play was an integral plot point, and the reason for the power of the story.[104]

The editors selected as representative of the anti-*Wandering West Lake* viewpoints two cadres, one from the Northwest administrative committee, the other from the Shaanxi broadcasting channel. While they both concurred with Ma that there were problematic aspects of the original play, they felt his revisions were egregious examples of "characterizations full of loopholes," a script guilty of "preserving ahistorical, unrealistic mistakes, and seriously damaging a theatrical legacy."[105] They further castigated Ma for conflating superstition and ghost opera, and questioned his assertion that *Wandering West Lake* was banned under the GMD owing to its "superstitious"

---

[103] "Gaibian *You xihu* de taolun" 改编《游西湖》的讨论 [Discussion of the adaptation *Wandering West Lake*], *Wenyi bao* 1954.5: 40-41, 40.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid., 41.

nature. Although the piece ends on a generally positive note – exhorting those involved in the excavation, adaptation, and preservation of China's literary gems to take care with their work – other contributors to *Literature and Art News* would not be quite so tempered in their remarks.

Zhang Zhen, who was and would remain a fast defender of ghost operas, both adapted and not, wrote another highly critical piece in late 1954. This essay also appeared in *Literature and Art News*, and Zhang took Ma to task for what he saw as revisions that weakened the realism of the play. The old classics, he argued, were exemplars of combining "romanticism and realism," which contributed to the very power of those works to transmit ideas of struggle.[106] This, he says, has been lost in the revisions, primarily through a weakening of the characters. However, Zhang's purpose was not simply to criticize what he viewed as an unsophisticated reworking; it was to criticize the very ideas underlying Ma's work. In particular, he took umbrage with the idea that there was a connection between seeing theatrical ghosts and popular belief that ghosts existed in the world. The critic bluntly stated that this is a misunderstanding of the role of fantasy and symbolism in art. Furthermore, "Some people say that, at the very least, putting ghosts on stages enables the masses to believe that there are ghosts. Actually, if a person truly believes in supernatural beings, even if he doesn't see plays that have [them], he's *still* going to believe in them."[107]

---

[106] Zhang Zhen 张真, "Tan *You xihu* de gaibian" 谈《游西湖》的改变 [Discussing *Wandering West Lake*'s revisions], *Wenyi bao* 1954.21: 41-43, 42.

[107] Ibid., 42.

That problems of "superstition" in the masses ran much deeper than Chinese theatrical traditions, and that even removing *all* the ghosts from Chinese stages would not fix the problem, is the one explicit point made by Zhang that does not appear in mostother criticisms. A critical roundup that appeared in a 1955 issue of the influential journal *Play Monthly*, which published new plays, adaptations, and criticisms, instead made more subtle criticisms of the project of ridding ghosts from Chinese stages. But both essays, like many others, are in effect cordoning off a celebrated section of Chinese culture, literature with potentially superstitious elements, and declaring that reformers like Ma should keep their hands off.

Again, the criticisms of the play rested not on its language or literary merits, but on the sweeping changes to the characters and plot. Just as Zhang Zhen had argued the year before, in the view of the critics and performers the author of the *Play Monthly* piece surveyed, these changes damaged the utility of the original. On issues of characterization, the primary faults of Ma's rendering were in Jia Sidao and Li Huiniang. One reader quoted from the description Jia Sidao found in the *History of the Song Dynasty* [Song shi], noting "You can see he is so ferocious and fearsome!" But in the adaptation, "his description is very ordinary" - that is, the dramatic power of having a great villain is lost. This was important primarily because his evil character is one reason the play "has class struggle within it," an unquestionable virtue of the original. A Shanxi opera troupe member complained that Ma's neat plot twist simply acquiesced to the wishes of the masses, and lessened the dramatic *and* didactic impact of the original.[108] More

[108] Liu Naichong, "Duzhe," 162.

concerning than Jia Sidao's mellower personality in the 1953 version was the tempering of Li Huiniang's character. "Not only does [the revision] make Huiniang live, but she lives very well." It is much more difficult to grasp the essence of "oppression" that was important to justifying the original's continued maintenance. In short, Ma is being accused of having an ideologically less useful script than one written in the Ming dynasty.

In a pattern that would become quite familiar throughout the next decade, the critics stated that Ma was not being careful enough in making a distinction between "superstition" and "mythology." That is, he assumed that the "products of human imagination [found in drama] - gods, celestial spirits, buddhas, demons, fox spirits, and ghosts are all 'propagating superstition,'" which these critics strongly objected to.[109] The Tianjin drama critic Wu Tongbin flatly stated that Ma revised his drama "according to this incorrect point of view."[110] Wu, like many others before and after, held the opinion that *if* such "products of human imagination" were promoting struggle and illustrating the ills of feudal society, then they were emphatically *not* superstitious. Wu echoed Zhang's comments, stating that in the depiction of oppression and class struggle, the original could be considered a type of realism.

Realism, or lack thereof, is a concern of much of the essay. On the two new characters - Huiniang's savior Ruiniang, and the kindly peasant-gardener - Liu dryly notes that "objectively, the results are not good."[111] The lack of success is due largely to

---

[109]Liu Naichong, "Duzhe," 163.

[110] Ibid.,

[111] Ibid., 165.

the unbelievable aspects of both characters, especially in combination with Jia Sidao. Ruiniang behaves as though Jia is a mere toy in her grasp, and skillfully strategizes Li Huiniang's escape. The peasant, designed by Ma to give "the masses" at least one dignified role in the story, was so kind - why would Jia Sidao entrust the imprisoned Pei Yu to his watch?[112]

In attempting to rid the original play of "superstition," these critics claimed Ma had made the play even more unbelievable. As one artist pointed out, while Ma tried to remove the ghost from the ghost play, his Li Huiniang still finds herself dressed up as a ghost. Why is an actress dressed up as a ghost more terrifying, or damaging, for audiences than an actress dressed up as a character dressed up as a ghost? If the claim is that it is less fearsome or frightening for audiences, why then do Jia Sidao and his henchmen become frightened?[113] This is a criticism that is in the same vein as Zhang's outright statement that theatrical ghosts had no bearing on popular belief. The implication is that if one believed that theatrical ghosts propagated superstition, surely theatrical people dressed up as ghosts had the same effect.

Finally, the writers criticized the love story of Li Huiniang and Pei Yu. Ma's contention that the Li-Pei love affair was lacking a foundation, thus the need to invent a backstory, was roundly derided. He must not have known, the critics opined, that in "feudal society," the idea of love at first sight *was* a form of resistance. Beyond the particulars of the love story, however, was the more unforgivable sin of weakening each character (Li Huiniang is missing her daring, Pei Yu his righteous indignation) and

---

[112] Liu Naichong, "Duzhe," 166.

[113] Ibid., 164.

making them dull. One critic noted that the new "West Lake" chapter - a key scene in the original that sets the stage for the tragedy to follow - consists entirely of "Pei Yu fingering his jade belt ornament [given to him by Li] and complaining tearfully, Li Huiniang holding her … fan [given to her by Pei] and complaining tearfully."[114] It is unrealistic and serves no purpose to push the plot along.

Despite the minor concession of acknowledging what Ma "got right" - namely, getting rid of the scenes involving Yama, the underworld, and the slightly more lascivious points of the ghostly Li-Pei love affair, as well as trimming the plot of superfluous characters - there is no question that the critics were completely unimpressed with Ma's adaptation. The article ends on a damning note: "While the work of adapting *Wandering West Lake* has its good points, in speaking of the whole, it is … not good."[115]

This criticism of Ma is striking on a number of levels, not least of which is the fact that the modern revision - by a noted author of contemporary drama on revolutionary themes - was compared unfavorably to the Ming original on an ideological level. In the view of these intellectuals, this modern adaptation that was far more concerned with romance and moping lovers; the original play had far more merits on a didactic level. But the critiques also exposed some of the anxiety these intellectuals, appreciative of the great literary treasures of imperial China, must have felt in the face of attempts at remaking those works in a new, socialist image. Zhang Zhen, Liu Naichong, and Wu Tongbin drew

---

[114] Liu, "Duzhe," 165.

[115] Ibid., 166.

a very clear line between well-loved remnants of classical culture and "true" superstitions among the people.

When a Ghost is Not a Ghost: Popular Science and Drama

The criticisms of *Wandering West Lake* make more sense when one considers some of the broader political and social context: the 1950s attempts at popularizing science and stamping out "superstitions" among the masses. Of course, this was not a movement exclusive to the PRC; intellectuals had been fretting about the backwardness of Chinese culture and the Chinese people since the nineteenth century. However, the CCP was the first political apparatus that was (at least in theory, due to its strong central control over more than just urban areas) truly in a position to snuff out culture they deemed to be backwards, harmful, feudal, and superstitious if they so wished. Intellectuals were carving out space for celebrated works to exist, even if they did harbor "superstitious" elements. Ghosts were not always symbols of China's backwardness, they argued; they could be useful tools to encourage and educate audiences, no matter how unsophisticated those audiences may have been.

The assertion that the CCP was bent on large scale cultural destruction from the very first hinges on the assumption that the party, its cadres, and its intellectuals had a relatively simple set of categories that could be applied to cultural products, popular culture, social rituals, religion, and so on. In fact, as the ghost play debate reveals, it was hardly so clear cut as Mao's Yan'an talks made it appear, and there was in fact quite a lot of room to maneuver inside the bounds of what was considered appropriate for socialist society. But this is not to say that the matter was settled; if anything, the pages and pages

of intellectual ponderings on mythology and superstition, ghosts and gods, appropriate and inappropriate cultural forms, prove just how fuzzy the line was. As the first chapter illustrated, establishing the difference between mythology in literary culture and superstition in popular culture was a concern from the earliest days of the PRC.

The criticisms of Ma's revision hint at the emotions that were aroused when culture, tradition, science, and socialism met. Sigrid Schmalzer has described the popularization of scientific thought in the socialist period, particularly highlighting the tensions between encouraging "mass science" ("the production of scientific knowledge wholly or in part by nonscientists") and the view of the masses that painted them as essentially backwards and "superstitious" as a rule.[116] As Schmalzer argues, "science dissemination in China was premised on the notion that the people were hampered by superstition," which "legitimated, or even required, an attack on popular culture."[117] Popular culture here refers to "ideas, beliefs, and practices" that were created and maintained outside of "the state and state-supported cultural apparatus."[118] This obvious tension is not so neatly replicated, at least in the 1950s, in the theatre world, and yet it seems clear that the authors were preemptively fending off any potential criticisms of these ghosts as "superstitious" things. Performing Li Huiniang or Du Liniang, the heroine of the *Peony Pavilion*, for the masses was not at all like burning paper offerings.

But it was not simply the literati who denied linkages. Even writing aimed at rendering superstitious customs understandable in modern, scientific ways paid no

---

[116] Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xviii.

[117] Ibid., 75-77.

[118] Ibid., xviii.

attention to the literary world. Take the 1956 pamphlet *Are There Ghosts or Not?*, which is fairly representative of the type of tract aimed at educating the masses about the true (scientific) nature of many "mysterious" occurrences, and discouraging belief in old, superstitious customs.[119] The story is a dialogue between two people - educated teacher Zheng who is lodging with the Dong family, a pleasant, but backwards, peasant household - on the subject of ghosts. The peasant has heretofore kept two rooms of the house closed off due to the presence of a ghost of a former occupant who had committed suicide (she also happened to be the second wife of a wealthy man, the current peasant having been given the house during land reform; thus we have not only a discussion of the problems of superstition, but a further illustration of the ills of old society and the glories of socialism). Upon hearing this, Zheng and Dong have a lengthy chat about the origins of ghosts, the futility of burning paper offerings to ancestors, and the oppressive nature of superstitious customs.

Dong is a miraculously quick study, and in the course of a ten-minute conversation, is a new convert to scientific modes of thinking and is ready to go preach the wonders of this scientific gospel. Zheng exhorts him to pay particular attention to mothers who use stories of ghosts and monsters to frighten their children into behaving, "because many superstitious thoughts are thus disseminated to children."[120] The overwhelming emphasis of the tract is the practices that Schmalzer defines as "popular culture," particularly those with a religious dimension, such as burning paper offerings.

---

[119] Chen Cisheng 陈慈生, *You meiyou gui?* 有没有鬼？ (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1956).

[120] Ibid., 14.

Many books of this type were published in the mid-1950s, and they all focus on "popular culture" as Schmalzer defines it. Literary culture is simply not a bone of contention; the "superstition" that scientists concerned themselves with was found in homes and among the masses, not in literary works or on stages.

And yet the mere existence of so many essays bent on marking ghost opera as safe indicates that intellectuals did worry about the status of these works. Zhang Zhen, as we have seen, denied the connection between popular culture and literature. Maintenance of ghost opera was always justified on the basis of its *positive* didactic qualities, and any links to peasant superstitions were denied. These plays existed both inside and outside the "popular culture" Schmalzer discusses, and this perhaps explains the sometimes contradictory and confused way in which writers discussed them. Belief in ghosts could be symbols of the superstitious, unscientific backwardness of the Chinese masses; but literary ghosts could also be important contributors to the "realism" of a literary product, as critics argued in the case of *Wandering West Lake*. And even amongst those entrenched in the "state-supported cultural apparatus," there was not one simple unified front: Ma Jianling could hardly be more different in approach from those who argued against his revisions.

Old Trees Blooming: The Hundred Flowers Movement

As it turned out, political events were on the side of the intellectuals who decried Ma's *Wandering West Lake* as an inappropriate adaptation that fundamentally misunderstood proscriptions for art and literature. By early 1956, overtures were being made to woo disenchanted intellectuals through motions to liberalize the cultural and

intellectual spheres. Zhou Enlai outlined new policies towards intellectuals at a conference in January, noting that the CCP needed to correct "certain unreasonable features in our present employment and treatment of intellectuals, and, in particular, certain sectarian attitudes … towards intellectuals outside of the party …."[121] In 1956, the Hundred Flowers movement was launched. On May 2nd, Mao made his famous speech from whence the movement took its name. A few days later, Liu Shaoqi reinforced the message as it applied to the cultural realm. "Our policy is to let [a hundred] flowers bloom, to develop something new from the old. We cannot afford to erase certain things because they are old."[122]

The Hundred Flowers had some positive, long reaching effects in the theatre world, and despite the eventual blowback of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, many of the changes to repertoire and policies stuck. The actions taken to liberalize the theatre world were not coming from disaffected, lower level intellectuals: on the contrary, the Ministry of Culture and the words of top leaders show that the top was checking the radical impulses of lower-level cadres who banned large swaths of repertoire or made horrifying revisions like ghostless ghost plays. "There should not be any drastic revision of plays," Liu Shaoqi wrote in the May directive. "Any harmless play may be staged. Harmful ones may also be staged after minor alterations …. [Those] charged with duties to revise plays in … troupes should be warned against impetuosity."[123] There were limits to how much

---

[121] Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 1, *Contradictions Among the People 1956-1957* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 34.

[122] Ibid., 52.

[123] Ibid.

one could radicalize culture, at least in 1956; Liu's words, and the later directives by the Ministry of Culture, warn off those like Ma Jianling who would take liberties with the great old dramas, the same plays Zhang Zhen and others argued had didactic purpose. It was this point of view, not the reformist impulse of Ma, that was vindicated by Liu Shaoqi: "Some old plays have rich educational significance," he wrote in the directive, "and should not be touched."[124]

The exhortation to "let a hundred flowers bloom, push out the old to bring in the new" had been a phrase familiar to dramatists since the founding of the PRC, and the connection to "let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend" is clear. But "pushing out the old to bring in the new" was reaffirmed to mean an equal measure of preservation. As Zhou Yang stated in March, "If we want to let a hundred flowers bloom, the first (essential) is to preserve and uncover the national heritage." This point was made clear at the 1956 All-China Theatre Repertoire Work Conference, held in June. A particular point of emphasis was the necessity of "excavating and putting in order" traditional plays.[125] There was an explicit acknowledgment at the conference that old forms, even ones that some labeled "superstitious," particularly ghost opera and mythology plays, had value and could and should not be excised from the repertoire. This was not simply the point of view of intellectuals feverishly debating Ma Jianling's revisions in *Play Monthly*, but actively promulgated by cadres and cultural workers at a nationally prominent event. The Ministry of Culture was, in effect, backtracking from its

[124] MacFarquhar, *Contradictions Among the People*, 52.

[125] "Ji quanguo xiqu jumu gongzuo huiyi" 记全国戏曲剧目工作会议 [Remembering the all-China theatre repertoire work conference], *Xiju bao* 1956 (July): 25.

early 1950s limited spate of bans, and checking the "impetuosity" of cadres in charge of repertory who were seen as doing serious damage to China's national heritage, their literary inheritance.

The 1956 conference set off a flurry of discussion and reportage in journals and papers. Articles from *Theatre Report* reported both on the conference itself, as well as broader themes brought up at the event. An essay by the editors of the journal was a broad declaration that China's theatrical inheritance needed to be preserved and "put in order" so as to enhance the theatre of the PRC. "The theatre arts of our country are not only elegant, refined," able to satisfy the tastes and wishes of the people, no matter how lofty, but they "also possess an amazing vitality."[126] This was not the statement of a cultural apparatus bent on destruction, nor were the writers simply speaking of the earthy, homespun local forms of Ma Jianling and others (whatever their merits, they are usually not described as "elegant" or "refined").

They go on to specifically address criticisms of "mythology" and "ghost plays," pointing to Ma Jianling's revisions in spirit, if not in name. Criticizing the point of view that "immortals [i.e., mythology plays] are acceptable, but all ghosts are put on the list of unacceptable [things]," the authors took issue with nonsensical revisions. "That strong avenging spirit in *Red Plum Pavilion* must be turned into a human, *Black Basin Stratagem* [Wupen ji, banned as a Peking opera entitled *A Strange Wrong Avenged* [Qiyuan bao]] has a ghost, it must not be staged …. In such a way, who knows how many

---

[126] "Fajue zhengli yichan, fengfu shangyan jumu" 发掘整理遗产，丰富上演剧目 [Excavate and put in order our heritage, enrich performed repertoire], *Xiju bao* 1956 (July): 4-5, 4.

scripts with healthy ideology they have killed?"[127] For such destruction, they blame individuals and cadres in positions of power, who bypass regulations in order to exercise their own tastes. That is, to declare a play unfit to be staged was supposed to be left to the Ministry of Culture; for a troupe or lower-level official to declare a play "banned" because of their personal dislike for a script was simply unacceptable. But for many people, it wasn't that they harbored "evil intentions of laying waste to our inheritance," but that they simply didn't understand what methods could be used to make art serve politics. "Art," the authors declared, "is not the same as a newspaper editorial, or a government report."[128]

As previous sections have made clear, drama critics and intellectuals were more than happy to vent their unhappiness regarding the state of traditional drama in papers and journals. The Hundred Flowers did not change anything in this respect, but there was a new stamp of credibility added to their complaints. Zhang Zhen, who had taken a dim view of Ma Jianling's revisions, wrote yet another piece in support of traditional drama in the summer of 1956. He complains not simply of mismanaged revisions, but of the general attitude towards drama, ostensibly on the part of well intentioned but misguided cadres.[129]

Zhang is interested here in the necessity of having a diverse, active repertoire to draw from. Audiences, he said, want all sorts of things, and to have a repertoire made up of a handful of didactic dramas was not enough. For instance, he complains that comedic

[127] "Fajue zhengli," 5.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Zhang Zhen 张真, "Guanyu kuoda xiqu shangyan jumu" 关于扩大戏曲上演剧目 [Regarding the broadening of performed opera repertoire], *Xiju bao* 1956 (August): 16-17.

dramas featuring clowns have been in precious short supply since 1949 (this was ostensibly due to a "misapplication" of Ministry of Culture dictates that ordered plays making buffoons of the common people off stages). And even in more serious dramas, "the clowns have all washed their faces clean …. This is most odd. Can it be that there are people who believe that the construction of socialism and laughing are incompatible? Some people think these little comedies have no didactic purpose, but I think in regards to [them], we should just want them to give the audience a healthy laugh, and this is enough."[130] Zhang's comments, arguing not just for the utility of many types of drama, but for emphasizing entertainment alongside didactic functions, presage those of Chen Yi and others in the early 1960s.

The emphasis on inappropriate actions on a local or provincial level as the root of the problem is echoed in government documents sent from the Ministry of Culture in the autumn of 1956. One in particular takes a close look at the situation in Shenyang, Liaoning, which they wanted to use as an example of how to enhance the repertoires of opera troupes. It explains that the overzealous banning of traditional plays happened "owing to an insufficient understanding of the special points and utility of theatrical arts on our behalf, as well as certain regional cultural departments."[131]

In Shenyang, with the exception of a handful of plays based on *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* [Sanguo yanyi], *The Water Margin* [Shuihu zhuan], and *Romance of the*

---

[130] Zhang Zhen, "Guanyu kuoda," 17.

[131] "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhua bu duiyu Shenyang shi wenhuaju fengfu quyi shangyan jiemu de pifu yijian" 中华人民共和国文化部对于沈阳市文化局丰富上演节目的批复意见 [Reply from the Ministry of Culture regarding the Shenyang culture bureau's enrichment of performed operatic arts programs] (18 October, 1956), SMA B172-1-196-23.

Sui-Tang [Suitang yanyi], a great number were entirely banned. Although the document does not include precise statistics, it does note that among *xiangsheng* (comic dialogue) plays alone, more than forty were banned, and most of those were banned on suspect justifications. Anything involving ghosts, good officials, or descriptions of love were "all indiscriminately, without exception, halted on account of damaging the unity of the people, propagating feudalism and superstition, extolling the ruling class, and publicizing sex."[132] Even by 1956, the Ministry of Culture was still battling with lower-level cadres who were creating an untenable situation for theatre troupes. As a result, troupes were starting to take outlandish measures to be able to keep audiences coming in. In some cases, troupes would perform new works only while cadres were in the audience, but after the cadres had left, they would "return to the main story" of old plays.

Of even more concern were literary Frankensteins that were appearing. Performers, apparently quite desperate to broaden what they were allowed to perform, were surreptitiously putting scenes from banned plays back on the books by inserting them into "acceptable" plays. Thus, characters from *Romance of the Eastern Han* [Donghan yanyi], like Ma Wu and Yao Qi, were stuffed into martial plays set during the reigns of Kangxi or Yongzheng. "The result of this sort of fraud and stealthy substitution is to cause many good traditional scripts to suffer harm. And so, at present, performed scripts are extremely lacking, dull, and at the same time maintain … a confused appearance, and have already caused a big [negative] impact on the lives of performers."[133]

---

[132] SMA B172-1-196-23, 24.

[133] Ibid.

The Shenyang Culture Bureau's response to this was what the Ministry of Culture wanted to see for *all* of China: they "broadened and enriched" what counted as appropriate plays. Clearly, the problem of overzealous cadres at the lower levels had not been solved by providing a list of twenty-six plays that were banned. The solution was to throw the doors open, relatively speaking: precious few plays seemed to be explicitly off-limits, and they backed up the position of intellectuals who had argued that ghosts (among other things) were *not* inherently unsuitable to be staged. This was clearly not simply a decision that rested on high-flown theoretical debates; the constant undercurrent of the document detailing the problems facing Shenyang troupes was the problem troupes faced in making a living. But the back peddling of the Ministry of Culture throughout 1956 and 1957, which included lifting the ban on plays such as *Black Basin Stratagem* (having undergone "proper revisions," of course), signaled that for the performers and intellectuals, it was those who passionately argued for the inclusion of traditional subject matter who found themselves on the winning side, at least for the moment.[134]

In regards to the status of ghost drama and banned plays, the climate surrounding the Hundred Flowers had an ameliorating effect, but as I have illustrated, it by no means launched the critical discussion on traditional opera in socialist society. Roderick MacFarquhar has discussed the tepid early response of intellectuals to the movement, while conceding that "literary … and intellectual activity generally increased."[135] The

---

[134] "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhuabu wei tongzhi jingju *Wepen ji* jing shidang xiugaihou ke huifu shangyanqu" 中华人民共和国文化部为通知京剧《乌盆计》经适当修改后可恢复上演曲 [Notification from the Ministry of Culture that *Black Basin Stratagem* has undergone appropriate revision and may resume being staged]. (5 October, 1956), SMA B172-1-196-10.

[135] MacFarquhar, *Contradictions Among the People*, 83-84.

elite theatre world engaged in even more discussion; work on reforming and maintaining traditional drama also benefited from this more relaxed atmosphere, just as it would in the early 1960s. But Ma Jianling, Zhang Zhen, Liu Naichong, and the others were not the non-Party intellectuals the CCP wished to woo. Thus, the development of the ghost play debate may be seen as benefiting from the Hundred Flowers atmosphere, but should not be seen as deriving from it. The conversations that took place during the Hundred Flowers were already occurring prior to the relaxing of the cultural sphere.

This is not to say that the Hundred Flowers had no impact on the drama world. Many people did speak up and criticize party policies – Tian Han, for instance, criticized the need for young artists to attend numerous political classes, as well as the "deplorable lives of celebrated old actors."[136] There were certainly many who felt aggrieved by party policies, and felt increasingly comfortable speaking up. In May 1957, the great *huadan* (young female role) Xiao Cuihui (Yu Lianquan) gave an impassioned plea to *People's Daily*, saying, "I want to sing opera!"[137] The star told an editor of the paper, "The Party has called for 'a hundred schools of thought to contend,' it wants us artists to speak our innermost thoughts and feelings, to help the party restore the mood to good order." Xiao claimed that the early restrictions on opera, including the art of *qiaogong* (using shoes that replicated the look and gait of a woman with bound feet), severely curtailed the plays he could perform; but it was the early opera bans that forced him off stages altogether.

---

[136] Wagner, 3-4.

[137] "Xiao Cuihua shuo: 'Wo yao changxi!' Beijing wenhuaju jing zhizhibuli" 筱翠花说："我要唱戏！"北京市文化局竟置之不理 [Xiao Cuihua says: 'I want to sing opera!' the Beijing cultural bureau brushes [him] aside], *Renmin ribao* 14 May 1957.

Still, it was hard to not perform, so he had decided in late 1956 that he wanted to sing again. However, three abortive attempts to see the director or deputies at the Beijing Culture Bureau came to nothing. Xiao optimistically said he "hasn't given up hope. I have faith, Chairman Mao called for 'a hundred schools of thought to contend,' and this will certainly get something done …. It will soon be half a year, and the Culture Bureau just brushes my requests off."[138] Xiao was unsuccessful, and the *huadan* never returned to performance - although he was allowed to teach and "even to record the details of performance techniques," which Siyuan Liu points to as evidence that "live performance was more dangerous than the printed archive."[139]

In addition to artists who spoke up regarding ill treatment, Tian Han and others criticized "*waihang* (nonprofessional) Party control over the professional dramatists as 'dangerous.'"[140] Despite this "blooming and contending" throughout late 1956 and the first half of 1957, not everyone was advocating for an open atmosphere. Although a speech Mao gave in March 1957 illustrated a step back from his Yan'an talks that seemed to advocate scrapping most every type of culture that was not thoroughly new and red, his new position was hardly the stamp of approval on traditional drama that Liu Shaoqi and others had spoken of in 1956. In a speech delivered to provincial-level organizations, Mao looked towards the eventual extinction of "feudal" dramatic traditions. In a general

---

[138] "Xiao Cuihua shuo."

[139] Siyuan Liu, 401. Liu here is interested in the deleterious effects the early 1950s had on performance techniques in the opera repertoire. Since opera relies on person-to-person transmission and teaching, forcing masters like Xiao off the stage essentially killed certain parts of his repertoire. Despite efforts to recover elements of Xiao Cuihua's style, "there is," Liu says, "an unfortunate lack of actors capable of performing Xiao's plays, some of which have not been revived" (401).

[140] Wagner, 4.

critique of "poisonous weeds," Mao was not advocating for their alteration, but rather suggested that they should be allowed to remain as negative examples. They would thus serve as a foil for the development of new revolutionary dramas. Paradoxically, he wished for a full saturation of the market with such plays, for the more of these plays that were performed, "people will start talking, and when more and more people start talking, then fewer and fewer people will come to watch, and these things will not be performed."[141]

Despite – or perhaps because of – these words, the Ministry of Culture continued the trend it had started in 1956 with *Black Basin Stratagem* and formally lifted the ban on all 26 plays.[142] This seems to simply have been an explicit declaration of what the directives of 1956 were talking around. Certainly, the previous year's discussion of *Black Basin* hinged on its "appropriate reform," and no one was suggesting flooding stages with unadulterated "feudal" works. But as the criticism of Ma Jianling's adaptation showed, the changes that many wanted to see were minor deletions, not wholesale rewritings.

Even as intellectuals debated and criticized, performers like Xiao Cuihua turned a hopeful gaze to the possibilities of this period of blooming and contending, and the Ministry of Culture was lifting bans entirely, Party leadership was beginning to plan their counterattack. As with many of Mao's decisions, loosing the reins had unintended consequences – in this case, the criticisms of the CCP were likely more numerous and

---

[141] Mao Zedong, "Speech at Conference of Members and Cadres of Provinicial-Level Organization of CPC in Shandong (March 18, 1957)," in Michael Y.M. Kau and John K. Leung, eds., *The Writings of Mao Zedong, 1949-1976,* vol. 2, *January 1956-December 1957* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986), 415.

[142] See Li Desheng, 13.

more sustained than anticipated – and thus the country was in need of a sharp check. In early June, a series of editorials published in the *People's Daily* contended that the criticisms needed counter-criticisms; "rightist elements" were accused of "misusing the rectification campaign to turn back the clock and overthrow the Communist party, the proletariat, and the socialist cause."[143] As it turned out, those intellectuals who had been wary of the 1956 calls to bloom and contend were proved right; the Anti-Rightist Campaign would punish many of those who had done just as they had been asked.

The drama world did not emerge unscathed. A particular point of contention was the criticism voiced by Tian Han and others – namely, the control of dramatists by nonprofessional cadre. While Tian Han was never criticized as a rightist for his remarks, others were not so lucky. Mei Lanfang, the most public face of theatre in the Party, wrote an August 1957 editorial in *Gansu Daily* (reprinted shortly thereafter in the *People's Daily*) criticizing those who spoke out against nonprofessional (*waihang*) "interference," a position he explicitly identified as "rightist."[144] Mei's primary topic of concern – arguments about staging "bad plays" – seems to be a red herring. As evidenced by the discussions surrounding Ma Jianling's *qinqiang* revisions, critics were not advocating for "unhealthy" plays to be staged in their entirety; they did, however, object to what they saw as ham-fisted revisions of plays with didactic functions. Still, the association of "rightists" with potentially "bad plays," such as those that had formerly been banned,

---

[143] MacFarquhar, *Contradictions Among the People*, 262-264.

[144] Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳, "Tantan buyan huaixi he fanyoupai douzheng wenti" 谈谈不演坏戏和反右派斗争问题 [Discussing the problems of not staging bad plays and the struggle against rightists], *Renmin ribao* 25 September, 1957.

seemed to put a chill on the performance of *Black Basin Strategem* and similar plays: Li Desheng claims *Black Basin* in particular, although newly unbanned, was not staged in the wake of the Anti-Rightist Campaign.[145]

Despite the political crackdown on those labeled "rightists," the lively discussion in the drama world did not entirely stop. If anything, the continuation of the ghost play debate illustrates that the discussion existed very much outside of the call for blooming and contending. In the summer of 1957 – just as the reins were being hauled in on the Hundred Flowers movement – the critic Qu Liuyi published an important essay on ghost plays in *Theatre Report*. The distinction between mythology plays and ghost plays had not been particularly important in the first few years of the PRC; if anything, many writers conflated mythological characters and ghosts together when discussing why they should *not* be considered "superstition." But this was a distinction that would become increasingly important in the early 1960s, when some critics attempted to argue that mythology plays were inherently suitable for socialist stages, while ghost plays were emphatically not. Qu's essay is an early defense of ghost characters on stages; if anything, it argues that ghosts are more useful than mythological characters.[146]

In Qu's opinion, ghost plays and mythology plays were inherently similar, being products of human imagination; but the worlds of Sun Wukong, the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, and other subjects were inherently out of reach. Ghosts, on the other hand, represented people who had once been alive, just like the audience. According to Qu, these "two strange flowers" were equally as deserving of being on stages. Despite a

---

[145] Li Desheng, 191.

[146] Qu Liuyi 曲六乙, "Mantan guixi" 漫谈鬼戏 [Discussing ghost plays], *Xiju bao* 1957 (July): 4-7.

distance of four years from Ma Jianling's ghostless ghost play, even this 1957 essay cannot resist a dig at the idea of "turning ghosts into people": he sets out to show why such techniques were undesirable. Like others before him, he objected to "restricting artistic education to the principals of science education, as this really fetters artistic development."[147] Charitably, he says that those who *do* try and do so – by deleting ghosts, or turning ghosts into people – should not be entirely opposed, but it was necessary to get beyond this initial reaction to "superstition" to see the true artistic value of some theatrical ghosts.

Qu provides a taxonomy of good and bad ghost plays; with the removal of banned plays as a category, the division between "good plays" [*haoxi*] and "bad plays" [*huaixi*] became the important factor for determining whether or not a play ought to be staged. However, as the existence of Qu's article may indicate, the definitions were also – unlike a ban that explicitly listed what should go – difficult to pin down. The critic does not advocate for a blanket approach to ghost plays one way or another, but careful study and revision if necessary; he also illustrates several types of plays that may be "bad," but staged in a positive manner, or vice versa. On the whole, however, he argues successfully for the continued maintenance and inclusion of ghost plays in the repertoire, both for didactic and entertainment purposes. This type of relatively permissive approach to plays with potentially suspect subject matter is, in fact, the dominant approach advocated by intellectuals from 1949 to 1963. The liberal atmosphere of the Hundred Flowers may have encouraged even more discussion of the topic, but the blowback from the Anti-

[147] Qu Liuyi, 4.

Rightist Campaign certainly did not shut it down. As the next chapter illustrates, even more attention was paid to reforming drama in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Putting the Ghost Back into the Ghost Play: Ma's 1958 Wandering West Lake

As Qu Liuyi's summer 1957 article indicates, the ghostless *Wandering West Lake* was still on the minds of drama critics, and time had not improved its standing. Perhaps owing to this continued criticism, in 1958, Ma Jianling, along with several other collaborators, made yet another adaption of *Wandering West Lake*. While he maintained some of the plot changes he made in his 1953 revision, he reversed entirely the ghostless aspect of the play. Just as in his original adaptation, Ma provided Li Huiniang and Pei Yu with an existing love story; in 1958, however, Li Huiniang was murdered, and returned as a ghost. Ma had apparently come to grips with whatever ideological qualms had pushed him to create a ghostless ghost play. Or perhaps he was tired of veiled and not-so-veiled criticisms of his unique plot twist. But even with these major changes, the new *Wandering West Lake* was still not a critical success, though it seems to have been a generally popular play among audiences and troupes. Still, on many levels the play was compared unfavorably with the original - including on an ideological level, which surely must have stung for a playwright used to being on the cutting edge of socialist art and literature.

Owing to the nature of documentary sources, it can be difficult to ascertain what exactly counted as "popular." Until the advent of theatre yearbooks in the 1980s, it is uncommon to see precise makeups of a troupe's repertoire. In Shanghai, for instance, while yearly statistics of the general number of performances by opera type and lists of

plays in the repertory were kept beginning in 1949, they do not reveal how many performances of each play there were, nor how many people attended. It is entirely possible that for intellectuals concerned about the future of theatre, "popular" meant simply being in the active repertory, and a play could have ten performances or two hundred. The distaste by the critics writing in the premiere publications related to literature and culture seems to often have been more on a theoretical basis – that is, the *idea* that such plays could be popular – than rooted in documented statistics. Critics were troubled by the proliferation of revisions that did not conform to their own points of view, such as ghostless ghost plays, or the addition of new plot points, for offending their own senses of how China's literary heritage should be treated. One wonders if audiences were not rather more concerned with simply having an enjoyable evening at the theatre. It seems reasonable to infer that whether a play was pleasant to watch, or the story moving in some manner, were most important to them. In any case, audiences had precious little control over larger decisions related to the repertoire, and after the overzealous bans of the early 1950s, a diversity of traditional themes (no matter what revisions the plays held) might have been a very welcome development. The theatre world always existed on multiple planes that were often quite separate each other – from the high theory and academic debates found in *Theatre Report* to stages in smaller cities – and they each had their own concerns.

Regardless of the concrete popularity of Ma's revisions to *Wandering West Lake*, critics were still unhappy with his tinkering. Liu Naichong - who was partially responsible for the highly critical 1955 roundup on the first revision of *Wandering West*

Lake - returned in 1958 to offer his opinions on the reworking.[148] While he found the characterization of Li Huiniang as a ghost a very positive point, and now liked the idea of a prior Li Huiniang-Pei Yu relationship, he was largely unimpressed with the revised play, and again found the original superior in many ways.

Liu's approach to the play was largely through analyzing the characters at specific moments, comparing the original and the 1958 version. He approved of the removal of the Lu Zhaorong subplot, which made for a shorter, tighter script, and offers opportunities to elicit audience sympathy that are otherwise unavailable. Yet the new revisions squander this potential: the living Li Huiniang was a relatively static character, and a very passive one at that.. Pointing to several classical examples of female protagonists who aroused the sympathy of audiences by being "unwilling to submit to humiliation" (e.g., Liu Lanzhi from "The Peacock Southeast Flew" [Kongque dongnan fei] a long narrative poem from the fifth century AD), Liu maintains Ma's more passive Li Huiniang shows herself to be powerless, and thus is a much weaker character.[149]

Although Liu states in the beginning that he finds the backstory of Pei-Li betrothal an interesting and useful addition, it has a number of negative consequences: namely, that the political and ideological content of the play is extremely watered down. In the original, he maintains, there is a better representation of the oppressive nature of Jia Sidao's household, and more importantly, there is much more political content. In Liu's opinion, Li Huiniang's return as a ghost had, in the Ming version, more of a

---

[148] Liu Naichong 刘乃崇, "Ping *qinqiang You xihu* gaibianben" 评秦腔《游西湖》改编本 [A review of the revised edition of the *qinqiang Wandering West Lake*], *Xiju yanjiu* 1959.1: 43-45.

[149] Liu, "Ping *qinqiang*," 43. In the course of the poem, Liu Lanzhi and her lover-husband commit suicide as to circumvent the familial pressures and arranged marriages.

political dimension, whereas the new revision removed this entirely. Li Huiniang exists in life and death for the love of Pei Yu.[150]

Liu found problems not only with Li Huiniang, but the male characters as well. In the original play, the altercation on West Lake between Pei Yu and Jia Sidao is primarily a political and ideological struggle: the students are angry about Jia Sidao's actions (and inaction). But the previous relationship between Li and Pei in the 1950s versions changes the dynamics of this scene: Pei Yu is primarily angry because he sees his former betrothed on Jia Sidao's boat, now a concubine. The scene is transformed from a political statement about the corrupt prime minister to a scene with a frustrated lover. Even Li Huiniang's utterance in the original - "Oh, what a handsome youth!" - is tinged with political overtones; Liu maintains she is referring not just to his attractive face, but his moral stance and bravery in standing up to Jia Sidao.[151] With the emphasis on the previous relationship between Pei and Li, this entire political emphasis is lost.

Finally, on the character of Jia Sidao, Liu argues that even the evil prime minister has been weakened in the new revisions. In the original, he kills Li Huiniang for uttering a single sentence (and truly treating her as chattel, as evidenced by his comment that "although you love that youth, I have paid your bride-price"). The revised version offers more details of the Pei-Li love story, including the fan Pei Yu gifted Li Huiniang, which offers more explanation for Jia Sidao's rage. Although it is still terrible that she is killed,

---

[150] Liu, "Ping *qinqiang,*" 44.

[151] Ibid., 45.

the tiny "offense" – murmuring a word of appreciation for a handsome young man - she commits in the original makes it a more compelling story.[152]

Liu's point, however, is not simply to critique the revised version; he again seems genuinely interested in underscoring the utility of the original play in socialist society. As he has set up the comparison, it is the *new* version of the play - written at least in part by a well-known proponent of revolutionary drama - that is more interested in romance than politics. He notes that "some comrades have said things like: 'In the past, *Wandering West Lake* was, in the hands of the dark ruling class, a play full of lascivious and fearsome [things]. Today, in the hands of the masses, it has finally brought out its descriptions of … oppressed people resisting the ruling class.' This," he continues, "is an extremely unfair remark." He goes on to admit that while the original certainly has its failings, it is excessive to say that the play is replete with negative elements. The original play is "truly full of a resisting spirit."[153]

Liu bristles at the suggestion that the original is inappropriate, and says that simple changes would make it more suitable for staging in the PRC; these elements, such as scenes of hell, are items always identified as "superstitious" by intellectuals discussing ghost plays. The suggestions he makes are not, it should be noted, drastic revisions such as Ma's 1953 version. While he admits there are a few examples of lascivious, fearsome, or superstitious elements - he points to the objectionable scenes where Li Huiniang is in hell, or the secret trysts between Pei Yu and a ghostly Li Huiniang - these were easily removed without fundamentally altering the sweep and power of the script. Consider a

---

[152] Liu, "Ping *qinqiang,*" 45.

[153] Ibid.

1956 adaptation of *Red Plums* produced under the auspices of the Yunnan Culture Bureau, which maintains the original plot structure (including the Pei Yu-Lu Zhaorong love affair) while eliminating the same "superstitious" elements of Yama and the underworld.[154] Liu does not mention other revisions, but he was surely aware that it was quite possible to make positive changes without making *enormous* ones.

In some respects, Ma Jianling was between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, his first attempt at revising *Wandering West Lake*, in order to make it more politically suitable, had attracted criticism from intellectuals who focused on excising the ghost character. On the other, when Ma and others revised the play again, it still was not up to the standards demanded by intellectuals like Liu: the play was *still* lacking in the political power of the original and had weakened the characterization of the main characters.

Ma's version could not fall back on elegant language and learned references (Liu does not even bring its literary merits into the conversation), and instead needed to stand on its own as theatre. Apparently, the man who had been so successful in creating contemporary dramas could not squeeze the same success from this classical work. In 1961, however, another revised edition of *Red Plum* would appear, and this one would meet Liu's demands in most every way: from the ideological level of the characters to an appropriate political setting, to exquisitely literary language. Of all the plays that Ma wrote in his lengthy career, *Wandering West Lake* receives little dedicated attention -

---

[154] Lu Ning 鲁凝, *Hongmei ji* 红梅记 [Story of red plums] (Kunming: Yunnan sheng wenhuaju xiju gongzuozhi, 1956).

probably because it was, at least as far as the intellectual and cultural elites were concerned, a failure. The "ghostless ghost play" would be trotted out again and again as the ultimate example of how *not* to reform traditional drama.

The Ma Jianling affair illuminates the first real debate over ghost plays, which in turn were built upon the earlier defense of mythological subjects. Intellectuals, confronted with what was an eminently logical solution to the problem of "superstition," immediately set about proving that literary ghosts were *not* superstitious. The debate, which eventually resulted in Ma Jianling reinserting the ghost into *Wandering West Lake*, set the tone for years to come. Not until 1963 would the suitability of ghosts on stages be seriously challenged. This is not to say that early efforts at drama reform were entirely successful. As the anecdote of Xiao Cuihua shows, policies did force many plays (and their interpreters) off stages, some never to return. At the same time, the understanding of how policy towards drama (particularly potentially unsuitable subject matter) developed throughout the early 1950s has been insufficient.

David Der-Wei Wang has stated that "The modern campaign to exorcise the ghosts haunting China was charged with even more power in the period of revolutionary literature …. But despite Communist crackdowns, ghosts kept creeping back into China …."[155] He further wonders why, if ghosts and ghost stories appeal to people in times of trouble, they "failed to appear more frequently in the first eight decades of the twentieth century"?[156] But ghosts were a constant presence in the Mao years, and one does not even need to look very hard for them. "Communist crackdowns" may have tried to stamp

[155] David Der-Wei Wang, 265.

[156] Ibid., 266.

out the ghosts that inhabited people's daily lives, but there was a clear separation of *those* ghosts on the one hand ("superstition") and *literary* ghosts on the other. Certainly not everyone agreed that such literature belonged in a socialist world; but by and large, intellectuals argued successfully for both a separation between popular ghosts and their literary ghosts, as well as the continued maintenance of classical ghost tales and ghost opera. It is quite simply a mistake to conflate the campaigns to eradicate superstition in the masses with a desire to eradicate the great ghosts of China's glittering literary past, at least until 1963. Far from trying to stamp out traditional subjects, many senior party intellectuals reacted with revulsion to modernizing revisions that stripped those traditional dramas of their unique literary attributes.

A year after the premier of Ma Jianling's 1958 re-revised *Wandering West Lake*, work began on yet another version of Li Huiniang. Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* was as different from Ma Jianling's interpretation as a play could be, in both form and construction. As the next chapter will show, it was a play that represented the zenith and the nadir of the ghost play debate: from exquisite, celebrated literary works to thoroughly trashed "poisonous weeds."

Perfecting Perfection and Leaping the Leap: Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang*, and the Continuing Reform of Drama, 1958-1962

Shortly after the start of the Anti-Rightist campaign, Mao Zedong met with other communist leaders in Moscow to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. There, he made a bold and fateful pronouncement: China would economically overtake the United Kingdom in a mere fifteen years.[157] The late summer and fall of 1958 were the high point of a plan that would turn China into an industrial powerhouse and begin the transition to communism. Communes were set up in the countryside, and the national economic priority turned to the production of iron and steel – which would be financed on the backs of the peasants. But the Leap was not intended to simply advance the economic foundation of the PRC; the exuberance and hopefulness that characterized the language and policies of the summer and fall of 1958 spilled over into all areas of life, including culture. For the first time since the founding of the PRC, dramatists and actors took up drama on contemporary themes with vigor, and it seemed that the dramatic tide was finally changing. Perhaps those traditional dramas that had been subjects of heated debate and discussion were losing their popularity once and for all. However, the promises of the early Leap turned out to be nothing more than fantasy, and as a disaster of monumental proportions unfolded, the effort to reform traditional drama merged with the grief and anger of senior writers and intellectuals. Like many literati in times past, in the early 1960s, good Marxists like Meng Chao, Wu Han, and Tian Han penned subtle literary criticisms of their Party that had failed the country in unimaginable ways.

[157] Roderick MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 2, *The Great Leap Forward 1958-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 17.

This chapter considers the continuing efforts to reform drama in the late 1950s, as well as the surge of interest in "new historical dramas" (modern plays written on pre-1911 themes and subjects) and revised traditional dramas. In particular, it examines the creation, premiere, and initial reception of Meng Chao's *Red Plum Pavilion*-derived Kun opera, *Li Huiniang*. However, in contrast to much of the current work on the subject of these revised dramas, I connect the work of Meng Chao, and the continuing discussion on ghost opera, to the pre-Great Leap Forward, pre-1959 discussions and debates. As previously chapters have shown, the question of traditional drama and intellectual interest in preserving China's literary inheritance of ghosts, gods, and spirits was a subject enthusiastically taken up from the earliest days of the PRC. Yet, when discussing Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, the tendency is to see this play simply in context of the political developments of the Leap, if it is discussed at all.[158] I argue that while Meng Chao and

---

[158] E.g., Goldman, *China's Intellectuals,* 43-44. However, most references are simply that – references to the fact that in 1961, a ghost play called *Li Huiniang* premiered. Although Wagner's *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama* gives the most attention of English language scholarship to *Li Huiniang*, he does not treat the play in the context of these larger debates on ghost opera, as might be indicated by the monograph's focus on the new historical play.

In general, the play and its author have been ignored in favor of their more famous companions. Meng Chao's first version of the libretto was published in the same August 1961 issue of *Juben* as Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan*. Seven months earlier, the first publicly circulated version of Wu Han's Peking opera adaptation *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* appeared in *Beijing Literature and Art.* These three plays and their authors are permanently linked, owing to their role in the early Cultural Revolution - it was heavy criticism of *Li Huiniang* in early 1965 that presaged the attack on Wu Han and *Hai Rui*, which itself has often been called the "prelude" to the Cultural Revolution. Yet of the three writers, it is only Meng Chao who remains largely forgotten, and his play has received very little attention.

As Wagner has succinctly noted, "Among Western scholars, considerable attention has been given to Wu Han's play, much less to Tian Han's, and very little to Meng Chao's." (80). The political history of the early 1960s is well represented in the secondary literature, but Meng Chao and his ghost are generally barely a footnote. Meng Chao and *Li Huiniang* generally appear as a sentence or two in histories of the period, and the play has received so little attention that even literary scholars consistently misidentify Meng Chao's Kun opera *Li Huiniang* as Peking opera (See Chen Xiaomei, "Reflections on the Legacy of Tian Han: 'Proletarian Modernism' and Its Traditional Roots," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18.1 (Spring 2006): 155-215, 197; David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That is History,* 265; Judith T. Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*, 6.) Even in the Chinese-language literature, Meng Chao and his play have received

others were no doubt putting their literary training to good use in offering a form of "indirect remonstrance" to the CCP, they were also adding to the debate on traditional subject matter that had been going on long before the Leap. To see these works simply in a post-1959 vacuum denies the lengthy and often heated discussion that existed for the first 10 years of the PRC, as well as the efforts of many intellectuals to maintain a safe space for traditional theatre repertoire. Furthermore, I contend that *Li Huiniang* needs to be viewed in light of its status as a *ghost* play; while the ghost play discussion existed side by side with, but separately from, the general discussion on new historical plays.

While not denying the importance of so traumatic event as the Great Leap Forward and its impact on society, culture, and politics, I argue we need to "leap the Leap" in regards to the cultural climate of the early 1960s. Mao's retreat from the political realm and the more liberal cultural climate of the early 1960s may have coalesced to create an environment that was particularly hospitable to revised historical plays and ghost opera, but they would have not been in such a position were it not for the twelve years of discussion that preceded them. *Li Huiniang* did not simply "[lead] to a spurt of interest in ghost plays," as Roderick MacFarquhar contended.[159] Instead, *Li Huiniang* was the supreme example of what intellectuals had argued was possible since the early 1950s: an exquisitely written work that was at once appropriately Marxist and reverent of Chinese literary traditions. It was in many ways the work that many of the intellectuals who had pondered ghost plays, decried Ma Jianling's adaptations, and fought for a safe space for

---

little serious attention, although he is personally referenced with slightly more frequency due to his activities in the Republican period.

[159] MacFarquhar, *The Coming of the Cataclysm*, 384.

the existence of traditional drama (even those with potentially unsuitable subjects) had been waiting for. And yet *Li Huiniang* did appear at a unique moment, one that was particularly open to revised dramas.

In this chapter, I utilize a variety of published sources - with a heavy focus on those sources directly relating to the writing, publication, and staging of Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* - to contextualize the *Li Huiniang* ghost play discussion between 1961 and 1962, beyond the standard reading that Meng Chao and his supporters were criticizing party leadership through the words and actions of his characters. While I do not deny the usefulness and potential truth of this analysis, I do suggest that reading Meng Chao's play in a broader context allows for readings that shed light beyond the period after 1959. The play does contain barbed criticism of a figure in power, and post-Cultural Revolution reflections have tended to support a reading of the play and Meng Chao's motivations as one highly critical of party policy during the Great Leap Forward. Such criticism is a distinct possibility, but the Great Leap Forward-dependent reading is very limited because it confines the significance of *Li Huiniang* to a particular political moment. The discussion of *Li Huiniang* in the wake of its premier illustrates how intellectuals had successfully struck a balance between the necessity of adapting drama and the attempt to maintain cherished, yet potentially unsuitable, literary traditions. *Li Huiniang* was the encapsulation of more than a decade of debates in literary circles: Meng Chao had proved that a ghost play could be at once an extraordinary homage to China's glittering literary history, as well as imbued with modern, socialist sensibilities.

A Leap Forward for Revised Drama

Although the Ministry of Culture had entirely reversed the bans of the early 1950s in 1957, this did not mean unfettered artistic freedom for troupes. Throughout the 1950s, the bureaucracy attempted to mediate between the need of troupes and audiences (especially the desire or need for traditional plays), and the sense that troupes and audiences should be regulating themselves and keeping unhealthy, unsuitable plays off stages. In late July 1957, Mei Lanfang, Zhou Xinfang, Cheng Yanqiu, and three other operatic luminaries made an appeal to the theatre world at the National People's Congress. They admitted that the removal of the Ministry of Culture bans had "enhanced the zeal and creativity" of many troupes, but that many troupes had gone too far and had been staging "poisonous weeds."[160] The example used was *A Mother's Revenge*, the story of a lascivious widow who kills her son, one of the twenty-six banned plays. This had given rise, they claimed, "to the criticism of many audiences and … to the dissatisfaction of many popular artists."[161] In reading this critique, one more clearly understands the conundrum those responsible for repertory decisions found themselves in after 1949. On the one hand, overzealous banning (perhaps out of fear of being labeled as misguided in their thinking) had led to criticism from top intellectuals, performers, and the party apparatus. On the other, policies deemed too permissive did open those responsible to criticism. Troupe leaders were expected to be "bold in unearthing repertoire," and yet "earnestly responsible" for what they put on stages.[162]

---

[160] "You ducao jiudei jinxing douzheng" 有毒草就得进行斗争 [Have poisonous weeds, must carry out struggle], *Renmin ribao* (25 July, 1957).

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid.

Following the July comments of Mei Lanfang and others, the Ministry of Culture sent out a stern memo on the subject of "bad plays." The communiqué in large part simply repeats and formalizes the People's Congress commentary. Although the lifting of the bans had led to a "flourishing and dynamic" environment, "certain theatre troupes have been staging some bad plays without alterations."[163] To rectify the situation, they first requested that local bureaus convene performers to study and discuss the editorial. In regards to bad plays, bureaus were to publish essays and convene meetings, soliciting opinions, criticism, and discussion from audiences and performers. The difficulty here was the nebulous meaning of "bad plays." The memorandum offered no guidance, other than that while they were developing a review system, they were not to publish lists of banned plays.[164]

An October memo from the Shanghai Culture Bureau to the Ministry of Culture typifies the problem of the bans (or lack thereof) throughout the 1950s. In this memo, the Culture Bureau chastised its own troupes for performing formerly banned plays, as well as a spate of "zombie" or reanimated corpse (*jiangshi*) and hoodlum (*afei*) plays. These plays, they said, "propagated feudal superstition, terror, and lasciviousness."[165]

---

[163] "Wenhua bu guanyu qing liji zuzhi wenhuabumen he xiqu jutuan dui *Renmin bao* ""You ducao jiudei jinxing douzheng" de shelun he Mei Lanfang tongzhi xiang xiqujie tichu buyan huaixi de jianyi jinxing xuexi he taolun de tongzhi" 文化部关于请立即组织文化部门及戏曲剧团对人民报"有毒草就得进行斗争"的社论和梅兰芳等同志向戏曲界提出不演坏戏的建议进行学习和讨论的通知 [Notice by the Ministry of Culture regarding the request to immediately organize study and discussion by Minsitry of Culture branches and opera troupes regarding the *People's Daily* editorial, "Have poisonous weeds, must carry out struggle" and Mei Lanfang's proposal to the theatre world that bad plays not be staged] (10 August 1957), SMA B172-1-257-48, 49.

[164] Ibid., 49.

[165] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju wei chengbao Shanghai xiqu yanchu qingkuangshi" 上海市文化局为呈报上海戏曲演出情况事 [Shanghai cultural bureau reporting the situation of plays staged in Shanghai], (21 October, 1957), SMA B172-1-257-23.

According to the Culture Bureau, a healthy period of criticism had curbed most of the problems, though some still remained. These they intended to rectify by enhancing the socialist education of performers, instituting repertory standards, and holding another conference for repertoire work.[166] A related document, disseminated sometime after the July pronouncement of Mei Lanfang and other opera luminaries, went into more depth discussing bad plays. These hoodlum and corpse plays were all bad plays on account of "disseminating treachery, lewdness, and murder; advocating for feudal morality, savage terror .... [and] wanton killing behaviors."[167]

There are echoes of the old superstition versus mythology debate, as the document specifically outlined why mythology plays and ghost plays [*guihunxi*] were *not* to be categorized as bad plays. A mythology play "uses the form of fantasy to describe ideals and kind hopes of the people," while ghost plays "resisted feudal society, and posses a distinctive righteous struggle."[168] In contrast to these positive qualities, plays about reanimated corpses propagated superstition, frightened audiences with loathsome and horrid images, and "disseminated backwards, ignorant thinking."[169] The Shanghai document is considerably more precise than many of the documents and essays emanating from the upper echelons of the CCP, pointing out particular plays and being quite specific about the types of plays deemed inappropriate. Considering the reluctance

---

[166] SMA B172-1-257-23.

[167] "Benshi zhaokai huaixi shangyan de qingkuang ji youguan zhe fangmian gaijin de yijian" 本市召开坏戏上演的情况及有关这方面改进的意见 [The situation of Shanghai performances of bad plays and opinions on improving this facet], SMA B172-1-257-71, 71.

[168] Ibid., 73.

[169] Ibid.

of the Ministry of Culture to promulgate strict, highly specific guidelines – instead relying on the lower levels of the bureaucracy to implement vague directives in a specific way – the precision of the Shanghai document makes sense.

That lower level bureaucratic apparatuses needed to be more specific than the national Ministry should not, perhaps, be much of a surprise. The lifting of the bans, while ostensibly making things more open, had the effect of returning the strain of repertoire control on regional and local governments and the troupes themselves. This in turn placed the potential for negative repercussions (e.g., highly critical essays, speeches, and internal announcements aimed at those who were seen as not conforming to the standards set forth by the Ministry of Culture) on those lower level cadres and performers.

The Shanghai Culture Bureau documents do give some insight into how lower level organizations dealt with the back peddling of the Ministry of Culture. But the general wax and wane of theatre repertory, as well as performers' later comments on policy between 1963 and 1964, indicate that a number of performers were adept at handling the uncertain nature of artistic policy in the 1950s, and were not simply cowering in fear of directives from above. With the exception of the sharp drop in plays between 1952 and 1954 discussed in chapter one, theatre repertoire from 1955 to 1963 was relatively stable. Statistics from the Shanghai Culture Bureau elucidate the general trends from 1949 to 1965 (table 3.1), and there are several lessons to be drawn. The first is that 1957 did see another drop across the board in the number of plays performed. While not as extreme as the drop experienced in 1953, it is reasonable to assume that this was due in no small part to the back and forth of plays being unbanned, then promptly declared "bad." The theatre world, at least in Shanghai, showed much sensitivity to

political events. The rise in contemporary scripts during the Great Leap Forward makes sense when thinking of the political framework; the similar rise in 1963 will be discussed in the next chapter, but was probably due to anxiety over high-level developments in the Ministry of Culture, as well as a renewed push for drama on contemporary themes.

Table 3.1: Plays Performed in Shanghai, 1953-1962

	Contemporary themes (%)	Historical plays (%)	Traditional plays (%)	Total plays
1953	197 (19.8)	7 (0.7)	790 (79.5)	994
1954	181 (17.9)	13 (1.3)	819 (80.8)	1013
1955	282 (16)	12 (0.7)	1473 (83.4)	1767
1956	279 (17.3)	11 (0.7)	1321 (82)	1611
1957	272 (19)	7 (0.5)	1158 (80.6)	1437
1958	543 (31)	18 (1)	1189 (67.9)	1750
1959	482 (28.5)	24 (1.4)	1185 (70.1)	1691
1960	318 (21)	21 (1.4)	1174 (77.6)	1513
1961	229 (13.9)	28 (1.7)	1390 (84.4)	1647
1962	118 (8.5)	22 (1.6)	1249 (90)	1389
1963	399 (26.9)	25 (1.7)	1059 (71.4)	1483

Source: SMA B172-5-530 and SMA B172-5-682[170]

[170] Here, I have totaled the numbers of plays in the "contemporary," "history," and "traditional" categories, leaving aside the categories of foreign plays and "other" (*qita*) scripts. Foreign plays, with the exception of 1962 (in which they were 1.7% of the total plays performed), never made up even one percent of the repertoire. The "other" category only appears in records from 1961 forwards. Although these plays, whatever they were, made up 8% of the repertoire in 1961, 4% in 1962, and .99% in 1963, I think the overall trends of the Shanghai theatre world can be discerned without including them.

During the early days of the Leap, unlike the period of the early bans and uncertainty regarding theatre repertoire, the number of plays performed rebounded strongly in 1958. The reason for this is clear: the exuberant mood of the first months of the Great Leap Forward did not just have an impact on workers in the industrial and agricultural spheres, but on cultural workers, as well. These are the second and third lessons of the meticulous record keeping from the Shanghai Culture Bureau: the new obsession with collection of data and record keeping, as well as the concrete impact of the Leap on theatre repertory, particularly in regards to the production of drama on contemporary themes.

While lists of plays performed and troupes performing had been kept since 1949, the period after 1958 saw a new emphasis on categorization, particularly the division between contemporary and traditional dramas. Although some categories of analysis (such as "good" or "bad" plays) were rather fluidly defined – that is, when a chart was compiled in 1963, a play defined as "bad" may well have appeared quite innocuous when it was staged in 1955 or 1961 – the most important categories (contemporary themes and traditional themes) remained static throughout the socialist period. One of the most obvious areas impacted by the Leap was the production and performance of drama on contemporary themes, which saw a large jump between 1958 and 1960 (table 3.1). New historical dramas likewise increased in number, although as the statistics make clear, they were hardly significant additions to the repertoire; at their height in 1961, they amounted to less than two percent of the repertory. In many respects, the emphasis placed on these newly written plays on historical themes, both in the 1960s and in the later literature, far outpaces the impact they had on the active repertoire. That these newly written dramas,

typified by Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan*, and Wu Han's *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* [Hai Rui baguan], had an enormous impact on high politics of the 1960s, is not at issue, as the next two chapters will illustrate. However, while admitting their importance to the increasing radicalization of the 1960s and eventual launch of their Cultural Revolution, we should also remember that they were not making waves outside of elite intellectual and political circles.

In early 1959, the Shanghai Culture Bureau assembled lists of traditional plays for the major opera styles, including Peking opera, native Shanghai forms like Yue opera, Hu opera, and so on. The lists simply compiled plays, sorted by historical period or theme, with occasional notations on whether it was an especially popular script and whether or not it had been reworked. They give little information on how popular the various plays were, or how often they were performed; neither are any value judgments on the worthiness of plays. Plays that had been banned by the Ministry of Culture, and still lingered in a theatrical no man's land, were listed with no fanfare. The Peking opera list is a weighty document listing 1,852 plays, of which 449 had received modifications or revisions of some type.[171] Based on these particular statistics, 1957 emerges as the clear high point of this sort of drama reform: a full 51 percent of revised scripts were completed that year, with 1956 and 1958 seeing 12 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Still, even those hundreds of revisions amounted to not quite one quarter of the repertoire. These revisions most likely consisted of minor deletions and alterations to plays, made in order to eliminate feudal, superstitious, or otherwise unsuitable subjects. But although

[171] "Shanghai shi jingju chuantong jumu mulu" 上海市京剧传统剧目目录 [List of traditional Peking opera repertoire in Shanghai], January 1959, SMA B172-1-293.

they not listed separately from unaltered traditional plays, these simple revisions certainly made more of an impact on repertoire than the totally rewritten plays like *Li Huiniang* that rose to prominence in the shadow of the Leap.

In the Shadow of the Famine: Historical Drama, Ghost Opera, and the Leap

The Great Leap Forward was not simply to be a jump forward for China's economic development, but for socialism in all areas of life. Intellectuals and performers threw themselves into creating topical poems, exhortatory essays, and even plays on the subject of the Leap. In March 1958, for example, Meng Chao – who in the fall of the following year would find sudden inspiration in classical tales relating miscarriages of governmental justice – penned a poem on the subject of the Leap for *People's Daily*. The short poem valorizes what seems to be terrifically difficult physical work, but ends on a fantastical note:

> This era is already different than those before,
> It seems like riding an elevator up a mountain;
> You who always have many kinds of misgivings,
> Watch us fly to the summits of the Himalayas![172]

Such language is familiar territory when discussing the high point of the Leap in the fall of 1958. As MacFarquhar describes, it was "a period of superhuman endeavor in the field of production and exuberant experimentation with elements of a new society based on the communes."[173] Cultural workers may not have been working for the improvement of

---

[172] Meng Chao 孟超, "Dayuejin duanqu" 大跃进短曲 [A short melody of the Great Leap Forward], *Renmind ribao* 29 March, 1958.

[173] MacFarquhar, The Great Leap Forward, 91.

agriculture, but they, too, took a renewed interest in driving forward socialist goals in the cultural realm. Meng Chao's poem, like many similar pieces, is the literary equivalent of psychedelic propaganda posters depicting workers borne aloft on the backs of dragons and other such subjects (figure 1).

Figure 3.1: "The commune is like a gigantic dragon." Source: Wu, Zhang, and Lu, "Gongshe ru julong, shengchan xian weifeng," IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections

The period of the Leap marked a somewhat unique time in the Chinese theatre world, one in which the usual balance of traditional versus contemporary themed drama was temporarily upset. The years 1958 and 1959 showed a significant increase in the number of plays on contemporary themes performed; and within those increases, the percentage of repertory made up by plays on contemporary themes also rose. A similar jump was seen in 1963, and for politically similar reasons (albeit in a very different political climate): there was a fresh encouragement by the upper leadership of the writing

and performance on plays on contemporary themes. This was in contrast to the shifts of the early 1950s, which saw a drop in total number of plays performed, but the ratio of contemporary plays to traditional remained stable. The initial enthusiasm for the Leap clearly had a positive impact on the performance of drama on contemporary themes – but as the campaign went from high tide to high tragedy, the gains would not be maintained.

However, it is not contemporary-themed drama that dominates discussion and historiography of the period, but historical plays. The general designation of "historical play" is used to describe newly written scripts on historical themes, not simply revisions (i.e., removing descriptions of hell) of traditional plays. As Rudolf Wagner has described them, they were "the group of texts dominating the intellectual field and political attention between 1958 and 1966," but this domination certainly did not extend to the repertoires of many locales.[174]

The exuberant language and lofty promises of the Leap's launch degenerated into a man-made disaster of a nearly unimaginable scale. Mao's promise that the PRC would overtake the United Kingdom in steel production meant that experienced rural labor was temporary funneled into backyard factories. Although the fall of 1958 saw a bumper harvest, its collection was often left under the purview of more inexperienced hands. While the harvest in some areas rotted for want of labor, the national leadership was receiving reports of massive yields, and it was on these reports that the state requisitions were determined.[175] It was a story that old playwrights could not have dreamt up: by the

---

[174] Wagner, x.

[175] Edward Friedman, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Mark Selden, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 226-228.

time the state had taken its share of grain based on hugely inflated reports, there was little left for the peasants to eat, and certainly no reserves left to face any future difficulties.

Although false information passed to the upper echelons of the bureaucracy was certainly a problem, it was soon apparent that serious problems were unfolding. At the Lushan conference in June and July of 1959, a year after the Leap had been set in motion, reports indicated that the situation was dire and action needed to be taken to prevent the disaster from deepening. The Minister of Defense, Peng Dehuai, suggested privately to Mao that the peasants were suffering and a change in policy was needed; for this, he was dismissed from his post and publically humiliated. Despite the warnings, the situation worsened before it got better.[176]

The famine of the Great Leap Forward, "a disaster which Mao and his colleagues had wrought in their hubris," killed in excess of thirty million people due to policy decisions that could have been stopped; even after measures were taken to correct a disastrous course, and the Leap effectively came to an end in 1960, 1961 was considered a "third 'bitter year.'"[177] The shock of the Leap – the shock of failure with such a terrible human cost – engendered a number of critical, yet coded, literary works. The climate of the early 1960s, which was focused on economic recovery, as well as Mao's temporary retreat in the face of the disaster, meant a relatively liberal climate for cultural production. While the lion's share of high-level CCP leadership discussions were focused on stabilizing the economy, "the whole cultural sphere had to be involved" in aiding the recovery. "Writers and artists … were the 'engineers of the human soul' whose

[176] MacFarquhar, *The Great Leap Forward*, 200-206.

[177] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm,* 5.

inspirational talents were critical to reviving battered morale and flagging energies ….”[178] Still, the party leadership sent mixed messages. Chen Yi gave a speech in March 1961 in which he criticized overly political adaptations of traditional drama, noting that “plays should give us pleasure and artistic satisfaction, not a political lesson.”[179] But the Eight Articles on Literature and Art, started in May 1961 (with a final revision appearing in April 1962), was “far less permissive than Mao himself in 1956-7. There was nothing … that was likely to encourage anyone who had lived through the Anti-Rightest Movement and the GLF to allow their creative juices to flow freely.”[180] On the other hand, senior intellectuals like Meng Chao, Tian Han, and Wu Han had emerged from the Anti-Rightist Campaign unscathed, and turned their considerable literary chops to reworking classical dramas. Creative juices may not have flowed “freely,” but they were certainly flowing, and the high point of the new historical drama was at hand.

Li Huiniang was conceived in the fall of 1959, as the scale of the disaster was becoming achingly clear. Could it have been an accident that this memory of childhood suddenly appeared to him one evening in that cool autumn? And indeed, it is in this context that Meng Chao’s version of a Song dynasty concubine has been read: a sophisticated literary critique of the Party’s monumental failures during the famine. But the discussion that *Li Huiniang* inspired at its premier, and the play itself, should also be seen as joining the long-running debate on ghost opera and traditional theatre. Unlike Ma Jianling’s ill-fated 1953 revision, Meng Chao penned a highly literary Kun opera revision

[178] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 90.

[179] Ibid., 113.

[180] Ibid., 119.

that did not tamper with the essence of a ghost play. It was a perfect encapsulation of what Zhang Zhen, Ai Qing, Qu Liuyi and other intellectuals had claimed was possible throughout the 1950s: a play with didactic qualities that still hewed closely to the themes and lyricism of the Ming original. Meng Chao may have turned his pen to criticizing the party he had been working for over the past four decades, but he was also entering into a debate that stretched far beyond the current political climate.

From Radical Intellectual to Traditionalist: Meng Chao

Much like Ma Jianling, who had cut his literary teeth on thoroughly revolutionary and proletarian literary production, Meng Chao had gained some measure of fame for his activities in the 1930s, as a member of radical literary societies. However, there were significant differences in background that perhaps help explain their disparate approaches to the literary reworking of a Ming script. Ma Jianling, as explained in chapter 2, came from a relatively modest social and educational background. In contrast, Meng Chao was from a more prominent family and received a more thorough education. At the same time, they both displayed a dedication to "proletarian literature" throughout the Republican period and engaged in teaching work. However, Ma Jianling would rise to prominance in Yan'an, while Meng Chao labored in GMD-controlled areas and skirted the edges of literary fame.

Born Meng Xianqi in 1902, Meng Chao grew up in Zucheng, Shandong (also the hometown of Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng). Hailing from a literary family, he was educated at the primary school his father had founded before advancing to a middle school in Jinan. Although he was expelled in 1917 for participating in a strike, he

returned to Zhucheng, where he participated in a poetry society with Tao Dun and others. In 1924, he moved to Shanghai with his old friend Kang Sheng and began studying in the Chinese language department of Shanghai University in 1924.[181] The university was, as Yeh Wen-Hsin has described it, "an important rallying point for Marxist intellectuals who provided leadership and inspiration to a whole generation of aroused youth."[182] Meng Chao was immersed in an academically demanding environment, surrounded by some of the premier radical intellectuals, and this set the tone for his political activities for the rest of his life. The outline of his political life reads as a workhorse of the party - while not necessarily glorious (he was not, for instance, part of the Long March or present at Yan'an), his revolutionary credentials seem beyond reproach. He joined the Communist Party in 1926, and by1929 he was a member of the Culture Bureau in Shanghai. After 1930, he was a committee member of the Zhabei branch of the party, a member of the Shanghai labor union, as well as the All-China Work Union doing propaganda and recruitment work. He was arrested in March of 1932 for his recruiting activities in a western Shanghai cotton factory; after his release in 1933, he went north to Beijing and engaged in unspecified "cultural work." Between 1935 and 1937, he worked at the normal school in Tancheng County, Shandong. Between 1937 and 1945, he

[181] Wang Xinrong 王欣荣 and Lu Zhengyan 卢正言, "Huodong zai zhengzhi yu wenxue zhijian de Meng Chao" 活动在政治与文学之间的孟超 [Meng Chao's activities between politics and literature], *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* 4 (1988): 63-69, 63.

[182] Yeh Wen-Hsin, *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China*, 1919-1937 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 138.

produced anti-Japanese propaganda, published the journal *Weeds* [Ye cao] and taught in the southwestern Chinese cities of Guilin, Guiyang, Kunming, and Chongqing.[183]

In the fall of 1947, he served as a special editor of the *Wenhui bao* and *Dagong bao*. Later during the civil war, the party sent him to the northeastern liberated area. Finally, after 1949 - and nearly three decades of active service to the CCP - he settled down in Beijing. He served as a section chief of the Liren publishing house, an adjutant director of the library, and the deputy director of the Renmin Yishu publishing house. In the spring of 1957, he was appointed the deputy editor of the Zhongguo xiqu publishing house. Finally, in 1961, he was made a deputy editor of the Renmin wenxue publishing house and appointed head of the drama division. If an account of his activities proves anything, it is that he was (like many) a good old revolutionary, and - more importantly - a person of higher standing than the existing literature would indicate. Of course, he was not the glittering literary star that Tian Han was, nor did he occupy a position of political prominence like Wu Han. But he was not an unknown writer, and he certainly circulated in important intellectual circles. [184]

Naturally, he did not just happen into such a circumstance: his literary activities propelled his career. Owing to the large number of pen names (the earliest use of Meng Chao seems to have been in 1924, when he published a poem and short story in a Shanghai literary magazine), tracing the small details of his career trajectory can be

---

[183] "Meng Chao tongzhi zhuidaohui daoci" 孟超同志追悼会到此 [The eulogy at the memorial meeting for comrade Meng Chao], *Xin wenxue shiliao* 1 (1980): 282.

[184] "Meng Chao tongzhi," 282.

somewhat difficult.[185] But the larger sweep of his career is reasonably easy to flesh out. Beginning with his move to Shanghai, he began publishing poetry and short stories. At the time, Shanghai University was full of important, left-leanings intellectuals - including Qu Qiubai, Yu Pingbo, Tian Han, and Guo Morou, among others - and this clearly influenced his thinking and writing.[186] He was one of the founders of the radical literary society "The Sun Society" [Taiyang she] in the late 1920s, which advocated for proletarian literature, and would go on to join the League of Leftist Writers in the 1930s. Along with other radical intellectuals, Sun Society members engaged in attacks on the literary giants of the May Fourth period - particularly luminaries like Lu Xun - and argued about the course literature was to take.

As described in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, "May Fourth literature, [Sun Society members] argued, was in its own Westernized and cosmopolitan way as elitist and divorced from the masses as the classical literary tradition."[187] Jiang Guangci, fellow member of the society, explained what the literary future was to look like: "Revolutionary literature must be an anti-individualist literature, its heroes must be the masses, not individuals; it must be directed not toward individualism, but toward collectivism …. The duty of revolutionary literature is to show in this life struggle the power of the masses, to instill into people collective tendencies."[188]

---

[185] Lu Zhengyan 卢正言, "Meng Chao minghao biming huilu" 孟超名号笔名汇录 [A record of the titles and pen names of Meng Chao], *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* 2 (1986): 151-152, 151.

[186] Wang and Lu, 63.

[187] Kirk Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 259.

[188] Ibid., 260.

While his later literary activities, *Li Huiniang* in particular, bring into question his long-term commitment to the cause of proletarian literature, his early literary activities were significantly less classical in bent. An early play on the subject of the workers' movement entitled *Under the Iron Heel* [Tieti xia] was published in the Sun Society magazine, and his *The Story of Tanzi Island* [Tanzi wan de gushi] was the earliest depiction of the May 30th events in fictional form.[189]

Meng Chao's turn towards Kun opera in the period after 1959 indicates just how far he had come from his position of the late 1920s and 1930s. Of all the types of Chinese opera, Kun opera is the most strongly associated with the social and cultural elite. The "softness, smoothness and delicacy" of the form meant that it was suited to the intimate settings of literati homes, and its mass appeal was questionable, to say the least.[190] While even the supposedly "national" style of Peking opera could have surprisingly little reach (a Shanghainese survey from 1963 indicates audiences were small and composed of older, well educated people), Kun opera was truly the domain of elites - whether in 1561 and 1961.[191]

---

[189] Wang and Lu, 64.

[190] Mackerras, *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey*, 27-34.

[191] See "Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu jumu gongzuoshi de gongzuo zhidu, fengong yijian ji Shanghai jingju guanzhong qingkuang chubu diaocha" 上海市文化局关于剧目工作室的工作制度，分工意见及上海京剧观众情况初步调查 [Shanghai municipal culture bureau, regarding the repertoire office work system and separation of work and suggesting a preliminary investigation of the situation concerning Shanghai's Peking opera audiences] (November 1963), SMA B172-5-680.

A Ghost Bodhisattva: The Genesis of Li Huiniang

Unlike the carefully managed production of Wu Han's *Hai Rui*, it seems that *Li Huiniang* nearly missed becoming an important play. The Northern Kun Opera Troupe [Beifang kunqu juyuan], which had been founded in 1957, invited Meng Chao to make a revision of the Ming play *Red Plum Pavilion*. Cong Zhaohuan, a prominent *xiaosheng* (young male role) of the troupe during the 1950s and 1960s, notes that *Li Huiniang* was given to the troupe in 1960, and the initial impulse was to give the script to the student division.[192] Fortuitously for Meng Chao and lovers of traditional drama, it eventually made its way to the professional division. Cong describes how the performers wanted to energize the performance of classical dramas, undertaking rehearsals with gusto. Li Shujun, who played Li Huiniang, sought special tutoring in the execution of the ghost step, and Cong practiced *shuaifa*, a technique of "swaying the hair" typically used by male characters who are in distress or humiliated.[193] The two months of practice paid off as soon as the play made its debut: Cong states that "very quickly, the Beijing Cultural Bureau saw that this was a good play - the south had *Fifteen Strings of Cash* [Shiwu guan, often cited as *the* example of a highly successful Kun adaptation], the north had *Li Huiniang*, and it was a paradigm for 'pushing out the old to bring in the new.'"[194] The old phrase from the Hundred Flowers was reenergized in 1961, and the problem of how best to "push out the old to bring in the new" was a consistent feature of discussions on opera

[192] Cong Zhaohuan 丛兆桓 and Chen Jun 陈均, "Wo suo qinli de *Li Huiniang* shijian" 我所亲历的《李慧娘》事件 [My personal experience of the *Li Huiniang* incident], *Xinwenxue shiliao* 2 (2007): 54-62, 55.

[193] Alexandra B. Bonds, *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 223-4.

[194] Cong and Chen, 55.

until 1965. The play was a hit not just with bureaucrats, but also with intellectuals, who enthused about the adaptation in a number of publications, and used it as a starting point to discuss broader issues.

In his own postscript to the publication of the play in book form, Meng Chao does not dwell on the little twist of fate that launched *Li Huiniang* into prominence, nor does he discuss what seems to have been a commission. Instead, he sets the stage for his reimagining of this ghost heroine in an exquisitely literary manner: "In the fall of 1959, I happened to be wracked by illness - as I lay on my sickbed in the cool night, fallen leaves rustled, insects wailed, the cold moon peeked through the window, and the image of Li Huiniang suddenly crowded into my vision."[195] Inspired, he turned to Ming-era commentaries, including lines supposedly penned by Tang Xianzu, author of the *Peony Pavilion*.[196] Finally, encouragement by the critic and playwright Zhang Zhen (who, as previous chapters have shown, was a firm defender of traditional opera, particularly of the ghostly variety) and enthusiasm of Northern Kun Opera's Jin Ziguang roused Meng Chao into action.

Meng Chao's depiction of his inspiration, loaded with words that lend a tragic impression to the scene (cold moonlight, rustling leaves, insects that are "wailing"), does invite a reading that is tied to the Great Leap Forward. Merle Goldman has written that for Meng Chao, "the Leap had produced the chill and … he, like his traditional forebears,

---

[195] Meng Chao 孟超, "Shi fa danqing tu guixiong – kunqu *Li Huiniang* chuban daiba" 试泼丹青涂鬼雄－昆曲李慧娘出版代跋 [An attempt to portray a ghost hero – the postscript to the publication of the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*], in Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang* 李慧娘 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980): 108-119, 109.

[196] It is clear that the specter of Tang Xianzu looms large – he figures prominently in the essay.

sought to alleviate the distress of the peasants was revealed later [in the play] ….”[197] This Li Huiniang of Meng Chao’s imagining is not simply a ghost angry over her own fate, but instead worries about the common people, as described in one of the arias of the play:

> My worry is for the bitterness of refugees of disasters,
> My worry is for the resentment of those forced to wander.
> The lakeside scene glitters,
> But the howling of the people of Lin’an is more desperate than the howling of ghosts.
> Under the hand of Jia Sidao,
> Even after death, it’s difficult to find peace! (35)

Meng Chao writes of the fall of 1959, the point at which the situation for peasants had worsened drastically. The “high tide” of the Leap in late summer and fall of 1958 was long past, and the countryside was in the grip of a worsening famine. Yet that famine was itself being driven along by insistence on sticking to a policy that party leadership knew was having disastrous consequences.[198] The heroic reading of this story as a tale of brave intellectuals standing up against party leadership on behalf of starving peasants is satisfying on a number of levels. Turning to the script itself, characters give voice to what many must have felt during the Leap. The young scholar Pei sharply criticizes the prime minister, crying out:

> Foreign dust darkens the sun and war drums ring out,
> But those who sleep soundly by scenic lakes and hills will not go out to battle.
> While they are ignorant of strategic spots and vantage points,
> Farmland lays fallow, for the common people are injured. (18)

---

[197] Goldman, 43.

[198] See Friedman, Pickowicz and Selden, 226-228; MacFarquhar, *The Great Leap Forward,* 17, 116, 200-206.

Yet although he may have strengthened the "ideological" grounding of the heroes, the skeleton of the plot remained the same. Lest we forget, the powerful, cruel, or corrupt leader against the righteous and indignant underling had been a popular theme for adapted drama prior to 1959 – and for centuries before that.

Just as Tom Fisher and others have forced us to question Wu Han's motivation in writing *Hai Rui*, we should be cautious in reading entirely altruistic motives into Meng Chao's creation of Li Huiniang. While Li Huiniang may speak of the bitterness of the people, Meng Chao also speaks in reverent tones of Tang Xianzu and ponders the role of classical concepts like *qing* (love or emotion) in modern drama. Even accounting for many layers of coded meaning, it is obvious that there is more to the creation of *Li Huiniang* than criticism of the Party's economic policies. Addressing the contemporary climate of drama, Meng Chao complained mightily of *overly* didactic scripts, the type that were crammed full of "dry, turgid, and insipid language" and sent audiences fleeing.[199] He may well have been chastising the CCP for the disaster of the Leap, but he was also taking aim at those who thought theatre could or should be entirely remade in a socialist image.

That there is more than criticism in the drama is evident from poetic preface to the play.[200] While Meng Chao writes of mistreated peasants and bad foreign policy, he also links himself to classical culture and the debates on ghosts:

---

[199] Meng Chao, "Shifa," 113.

[200] Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang, Juben* (July/August 1961): 78-91, 78. Rudolf Wagner mentions that he is unclear on what the rainbow signifies, though he assumes "it refers to the link between the present and the 'discourses on ghosts' that the poet read" (Wagner, 307). 'Discourses on ghosts' (*guibian*) can be read in several ways, I think: as a reference to classical discussions (what it appears Wagner is suggesting), or the 'discourses on ghosts' of the 1950s and earlier, which Meng Chao himself did not participate in, but could hardly be ignorant of. It could also be read as a type of synecdoche, with "Guibian" (the last act in part one

> Crossing the river to the south, the mountains are rugged,
> The dissolute still hold sway in Lin'an.
> In a bamboo hut, I am fond of reading 'discourses on ghosts,'
> My intentions and energy link to a long rainbow,
> My vigorous brush punishes treacherous officials.
> Drawing from the wisdom of my predecessors,
> I express my own humble views,
> And give the old play *Red Plum* a new turn.
>
> I have carefully studied the tender emotions of youths, the feelings of personal enmity.
> I write of a flourishing dream being cut off,
> I write of northern horses neighing at the banks of the Qiantang.
> Jia Sidao endangers the state and harms the people, but there is music and song at evening banquets;
> His smile hides a dagger, and a chance for murder appears;
> Pei Shunqing, indignant, speaks bluntly - the source of his misfortune,
> Pleasing the hearts of people, extending righteous justice,
> Li Huiniang is a heroic spirit after death, avenging injustice! (78)

While the preface is replete with references to debauched high officials ignoring pressing state matters at best, and at worst actively harming "the people" (this is, after all, a key part of the classical plot), it is also full of classical references. The poetic preface is echoed in the postscript (published in 1962), and the references to the classical culture and the use of classical imagery seems just as critical as the scattered references to bitter peasants and debased rulers. Meng Chao's presentation of himself is consciously styled in the manner of the solitary classical scholar, and explicitly links his work with what was often described as "China's literary inheritance" [Zhongguo wenxue yichan]. His play retains many of the linguistic and stylistic elements of the original, down to the highly poetic preface - the same elements that he and others had been so critical of in the

---

of *Story of Red Plums*, which forms the last act of Meng Chao's revision) standing in for *Red Plums* or classical works as a whole. In any case, it seems obvious that Meng Chao is connecting himself and his adaptation to a myriad of antecedents.

Republican period. These were also the elements lacking in Ma Jianling's earnest adaptation, which had been criticized for being too earnest and not respectful enough of Chinese dramatic tradition.

This linking to the past continues in the postscript as Meng Chao describes how he turned to plays and commentaries in the wake of his sickbed vision. Again, he begins with this classically accented account of the genesis of *Li Huiniang*: not mentioned is the grand work of "adapting" or "reforming" drama. It was not the words of Chairman Mao, but one of the Ming commentaries on *Red Plums*, supposed to have been written by "Jade Tea Leaf Studio" (Tang Xianzu), that seems to have proved most inspiring. And while critics were enthusiastic about Li Huiniang's ideological position in Meng Chao's new version, they were just as enamored - if not more so - with his exquisite language that seemed to be a modern descendant of the great dramatists of times past.

Making Perfection Even More Perfect: The Reception of Li Huiniang

The reaction to *Li Huiniang* is, in many respects, an encapsulation of the cultural climate of the early 1960s. Writers like Meng Chao attempted to balance the reverence for classical language and classical culture with the desire to make classical culture more relevant or useful for contemporary use. It seems that the comments of Chen Yi that were critical of stuffing political points into traditional plays were ignored by Meng Chao and others. Between the publication of *Li Huiniang* in *Play Monthly*, and the publication of the play in 1962, the writer made a seemingly minor change that became a point of debate. In Meng Chao's script, as in other versions, Pei Yu unleashes a verbal tirade on Jia Sidao:

> I ask you:
> Why do you plunder the people's salt, practicing usury with large profits?
> Why do you occupy the people's fields, oppressing, exploiting,
> plundering?
> Why do you increase taxes, and seize them with brutal force?
> Why do you abuse the law codes, pressuring good people, killing people
> like flies …. (25)

Li Huiniang, who has been present for the heated exchange, comments:

> This powerful speech –
> It is exactly the poem the youth of the Pei family inscribed …
> It seems this marvelous upright youth
> Defies power,
> And has the courage to display the righteousness of the world. (27)

And then, in the original 1961 publication, she sighs: "Oh, handsome youth!" [mei zai shaonian].[201] The next year, it was appended to "Oh, righteous youth! Oh, handsome youth!" [zhuang zai shaonian, mei zai shaonian]- which Meng Chao said was because he felt that the addition of "righteous" better expressed the admiration Li Huiniang had for Pei Yu.[202] It also had the effect of intensifying the ideological underpinnings of the Li-Pei love affair, which was widely commented on.

It is important to consider the reviews and critical discussion of *Li Huiniang* carefully - not only to gauge the relative success of Meng Chao's adaptation among cultural elites, but to consider what contemporary reviewers focused on. The discussions in 1961 and 1962 are notable primarily because the *lack* of debate as compared to other years. Issues that were critical in the 1950s and in 1963 - particularly the question of whether or not ghosts ought to be performed - are totally absent. While there are certainly points of contention, they tend to be over seemingly minor stylistic or

---

[201] Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang* (1961), 89.

[202] Meng Chao, "Shifa," 114.

procedural issues. The relative lack of political rhetoric, paired with the absence of debate over the suitability of ghosts, marks this period of the early 1960s as unique: there is no hint of the turbulent period to come. That is, unlike the earlier debates of the 1950s, when intellectuals made impassioned arguments about the suitability of ghosts, there is practically no debate over whether ghosts are suitable for Chinese stages. The relative success of those earlier defenses laid the groundwork for this discussion of the early 1960s, in which the idea that righteous ghosts belonged on socialist stages was a foregone conclusion.

What I suggest is not that cultural elites did not or could not have read a tacit critique of party policies into *Li Huiniang*. We would not expect to see open acknowledgement of such a point in reviews, nor could we expect Meng Chao to openly discuss such a use of his opera. Despite Mao's retreat in the wake of the failure of the Leap, intellectuals were not exactly *openly* disparaging his policies. The most "open" critics, such as Deng Tuo, were utilizing *zawen* (short, satirical, subtle essays, a form popularized by Lu Xun in the Republican period), not opera, and their attacks were still cloaked in allegorical language, designed to be understood only by a limited circle of people.[203] Meng Chao himself was a talented writer of *zawen*, and participated in the 1962 essay series, published in *People's Daily*, "The Long and the Short."[204] This seems

[203] See Goldman, *China's Intellectuals*, 27-28.

[204] Like *Evening Chats at Yanshan* (Deng Tuo), *Notes from a Three Family Village* (Deng Tuo, Wu Han, and Liao Mosha), *Long and Short* was a series of *zawen* (written under pennames) that appeared over several months in major publications Xia Yan, Wu Han, Liao Mosha, Meng Chao, and Tang Tao contributed, though Liao became "the major personality," according to Timothy Cheek. See Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 235-236; Xia Yan 夏衍, Wu Han 吴晗, Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, Meng Chao 孟超, and Tang Tao 唐弢, *Changduan lu* 长短录 [The long and the short] (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1980).

a more natural avenue for expressing his frustration with the Party than Kun opera, which he readily admits to having no experience writing. Rather, I offer that regardless of what Meng Chao's own intentions were, and whether or not audiences saw in his adaptation a criticism of the Great Leap Forward and Party leadership, the discussion about his play indicate that there were other issues at stake that intellectuals and performers enthusiastically took up. The discussion surrounding *Li Huiniang* in 1961 and 1962 underscores these issues - particularly the balance between the necessity of adapting drama and maintaining literary traditions. The more relaxed period is reflected in the discussion, and there is no indication that the sharp reversals of 1963 were evident at that point.

Critics received *Li Huiniang* in an overwhelmingly positive manner. Zhang Zhen, the critic Meng Chao mentions in his postscript and who had been critical of less skillful adaptations of ghost plays, was no less enthusiastic in his *Theatre Report* review than he had apparently been with Meng Chao. Zhang praises the author for the effort he put into the portrayal of the unlucky concubine, as well as the extensive edits he made to the original storyline.[205] Meng Chao's lyricism was praised, as well as the "*zawen* techniques" he brought to the revisions.[206] He also makes much of the artistic qualities of the actors. In particular, he mentions Li Shujun's ghost step [guibu], an absolute necessity when performing ghost roles, was learned from Xiao Cuihua, one of the great *huadan* of Peking opera, and the same star who, during the Hundred Flowers, had protested his

---

[205] Zhang Zhen 张真, "Kan kunqu xinfan *Li Huiniang*" 看昆曲新翻李慧娘 [Watching the new *kun* opera translation of *Li Huiniang*], *Xiju bao* (August 1961): 47-49, 47.

[206] Ibid., 49.

removal from stages. He also points to Cong Zhaohuan's *shuaifa*, noting that such traditional skills really helped bring characters to life.[207]

Yang Xianyi, a well-known translator and no stranger to China's illustrious classical traditions, noted in *Play Monthly* that Meng Chao's adaptation was truly the best of the numerous versions of the story, and the best Kun opera representative of the order to "let a hundred flowers bloom, push out the old and bring in the new" in the period after *Fifteen Strings of Cash.*[208] Like many other reviewers, Yang pointed to the extreme streamlining of the play as a highlight of the new version - perhaps, in some respects, the most basic part of adapting drama. "While writing plays, these feudal period literati often forgot that plays were meant to be staged so people could watch; they didn't give much thought to the structure of the libretto, and on the contrary, often made the plots excessively complicated … the result being there was no way to stage the whole play, only excerpt a few scenes." Yang suggests that "*most* Ming-Qing *chuanqi* could be handled in the manner of *Fifteen Strings of Cash* and *Li Huiniang*. After discarding the useless and preserving the good, we would invariably discover many good plays to stage."[209]

---

[207] Cong's account also makes it clear that the actors had to go to some effort to improve their performance of these "traditional" skills - in the case of the ghost step, integral to performing the role "well." Zhang's review is very positive, but the comments that specifically pick out the *preparation* of these stage skills are curious. The implication is, I think, that younger performers are not receiving training critical to carrying on theatrical tradition.

[208] Yang Xianyi 杨宪益, "Hongmei jiuqu xi xifan – kunqu *Li Huiniang* guanhou gan" 红梅旧曲喜新翻－昆曲《李慧娘》观后感 [A welcome new turn for an old red plum drama – feelings after seeing the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*], *Juben* (October 1961): 90-92, 90.

[209] Ibid., 90.

Yang, like many other intellectuals, did not see the "ghost" in "ghost plays" as something to be discarded. On the subject of Ma Jianling's 1954 ghostless adaptation, the esteemed translator praised certain aspects, most interestingly the fact that Ma "discarded the superstitious portions involving the King of the Underworld et al." But Yang criticizes the decision to change Li Huiniang from an unjustly slain concubine-turned-ghost to a concubine faking death and dressing up as a ghost as "spoiling the fun" and "really detracting from the atmosphere of the original script."[210] Beyond Ma's version, Yang considers other revised scripts, which all had their good and bad points - the bad points overwhelmingly being an impulse to strip away superfluous elements while adding other confusing elements and plot twists. In outlining why Meng Chao's adaptation was superior, Yang emphasizes the short length and concentrated plot above all other things. He briefly nods towards the "patriotic mentality" of the characters and the fact that the play is not just a simple love story or a story of personal revenge. If anything is lacking, Yang opines, it is that Meng Chao's version fails to capture the *romanticism* of the original, and the narrative foundation of the Pei Yu-Li Huiniang love story is unstable![211] This was a criticism that was repeated over and over again, even by reviewers who otherwise found *Li Huiniang* an overwhelming achievement. It was not a question of political suitability - it seems that Meng Chao had, in his efforts to improve the political suitability of the play, downplayed a beloved aspect of the play. It is indicative of the permissive atmosphere that intellectuals were comfortable enough to criticize a lack of romance.

---

[210] Yang, 91.

[211] Ibid., 91-92.

Huang Qiuyun, writing under his pen name of Zhao Yan, also picked up the theme of other adaptations. Writing in an issue of *Literature and Art News*, he drolly noted that poor adaptations were cases of "the remedy being worse than the illness, touching gold and turning it to iron." Meng Chao's reworking of *Red Plums* was, happily, an example of "discarding the useless and preserving the good, pushing out the old to bring in the new."[212] Although praising Meng Chao for streamlining the play and adding a new politicized foundation for a love story, Huang is equally appreciative of his talent for preserving Kun opera's traditions. He calls the "Hatred" [*youhen*] chapter a particular achievement, written as if it was of the same generation as the great Yuan playwright Bai Renfu or Tang Xianzu - a feat he attributes to Meng Chao's serious command of classical literature. Just as Meng Chao displays deep reverence for Tang Xianzu's achievements, so too did many critics display a serious appreciation for the revisions that maintained "elegant" and "traditional" (and exceedingly complex) language.

Writing in a December issue of *People's Daily*, Tao Junqi and Li Dake also took up the subject of the inadequacies of the many adaptations of Zhou Chaojun's original play.[213] Unlike many of the others, however, Tao and Li consistantly praised the original for its artistry *and* its ideological content. In their opening, they chastise others for not paying enough attention to the original or criticizing it as being "not very bright." The problem was not with the original *per se*, but it lay with many adaptations. Tao and Li

---

[212] Zhao Yan 昭彦 [Huang Qiuyun 黄秋耘], "*Li Huiniang*," *Wenyi bao* 11 (1961): 3-4, 3.

[213] Tao Junqi 陶君起 and Li Dake 李大珂, "Yi duo xianyan de 'hongmei' – cong *Hongmei ji* de gaibian, tandao kunqu *Li Huiniang*" 一朵鲜艳的"红梅"－从《红梅记》的改变，谈到昆曲《李慧娘》 [A brightly colored 'red plum' – using the adaptations of the *Story of Red Plums* to discuss the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*], *Renmin ribao* (December 28, 1961).

opined that adaptations generally expunged the story of political struggle between Pei Yu and Jia Sidao, choosing instead to focus on the twin love stories of Pei Yu and Lu Zhaorong and Pei Yu and Li Huiniang. According to them, Meng Chao had preserved the essence of the original, while deleting the weak segments; they provided historical justification for the strengthening of the characters' political resolve.

Discussion of *Li Huiniang* was not confined to the pages of journals and newspapers. In August of 1961, the Beijing Federation of Literary and Art Circles brought together the director and theorist A Jia (here in his position of deputy director of the art work group of the Beijing Municipal Federation of Literary and Art Circles), a number of unnamed dramatists and researchers, Meng Chao, the Northern Kun Opera director Bai Yunsheng, actress Li Shujun and others for a meeting to discuss the success of *Li Huiniang* as an adaptation.[214] The writeup of the meeting, which appeared in *Beijing Literature and Art*, proves illuminating on the subject of the work of adaptations more broadly. The title of the piece - "Making perfection even more perfect" - proved a good descriptor for the contents of the discussion. Despite the effusive praise for *Li Huiniang*, there is a clear tension between the mandate to improve ideological and political content (which Meng Chao seems to have been generally successful at) and preserving favorite aspects of the play, the love story in particular. But while discussants criticized the love story as being built on an unstable base, no one could offer an example of a play that managed the balance better. In some respects, dramatists were in an impossible position, and the account of the Beijing meeting makes this clear. Critics

[214] "Jingshantianhua – *Li Huiniang*, *Zhong Li jian* zuotanhui jiyao" 锦上添花－《李慧娘》《钟离剑》座谈会记要 [Making perfection even more perfect – a summary of the symposiums on *Li Huiniang* and *Zhong Li's sword*], *Beijing wenyi* 10 (1961): 54-55.

wanted plot lines that "improved the ideological thinking" of characters, and love stories that melded with the theme of political struggle. At the same time, they yearned for those love stories to seem "believable," while remaining true to historical circumstance.

What is striking from the reviews and discussion of *Li Huiniang* in 1961 is what is not present: there is absolutely no question of the suitability of ghosts. True, some of the dissenting voices quibbled with the political grounding of the characters - but they also expressed disappointment with the romantic elements of the play. The overwhelming desire was to harmoniously marry two disparate traditions - the socialist artistic tradition, with an emphasis on political aspects, and the tradition of great classical love stories.

This emphasis on the love story is reflected in Meng Chao's postscript to the play, which was published in book form by the Shanghai Literature and Art Press in 1962. As already discussed, it gives an indication of how deeply steeped some intellectual circles were in classical traditions, and how important the preservation of China's literary heritage was. Even in a socialist framework, Ming-Qing debates return - Meng Chao addresses the question of *xing/qing* rather extensively, no great surprise given the emphasis that critics put on the emotional love story or lack thereof. It is even less surprising given that he declares Tang Xianzu his most revered writer, and quotes from Tang's famous preface to the *Peony Pavilion* ("Through [love] the living may die, and the dead may live again; if through it the living may *not* die, nor the dead live again, then

it is not love at its most complete").[215] Abandoning such classical concepts was likely to lead to dull or frigid literary works.

Addressing the specific criticisms of the lack of romantic love between Pei Yu and Li Huiniang, he writes that he was certainly intending the romance to be "relatively veiled," to better fit with his development of Li Huiniang. And yet he had no intention to avoid the love story, asking - "Can you say [lines such as] 'I sleep in a withered tomb, lovelorn, [hearing] a lone jade flute!' isn't 'love'?" Admitting there were areas where he could have played up the romantic elements, he adds that he was unable to bear the idea of handling his own characters in a rash manner.[216] His Li Huiniang met with death on account of being moved by Pei Yu's righteousness; her motivation after death was to save Pei Yu, and love emerged by degrees from a place of respect and justice.[217]

However, despite this good-natured debate over romance or lack thereof, the piece that *Li Huiniang* and Meng Chao have been most strongly identified with is a short but highly critical essay written by Liao Mosha. His "some ghosts are harmless theory" [yougui wuhai lun] was not a critique of Meng Chao, but a powerful, short defense of ghost plays. In the context of the generally positive back and forth of 1961 and 1962, Liao's essay is an outlier: it is highly critical of those who would ban ghosts from stages.

---

[215] Meng Chao, "Shifa," 112-113.

[216] Ibid., 115.

[217] This debate over literary romance is one that certainly deserves more attention than it has gotten. Haiyan Lee (*Revolution of the Heart*) claims that conceptions of "romance" or "love" experience a total shift after 1949: "a socialist subject 'loves' another socialist subject for his or her class belonging, not for his or her moral qualities, intellectual prowess, economic standing, social status, or sexual appeal. Love ceases to be an affair of unique persons and singular hearts." (286). She also states "as soon as the political climate made it safe from them to write as 'I' instead of 'we,' they resurrected love and sexuality and the enlightenment structure of feeling with a vengeance." She's referring to the post-Mao period, but -what better actors to enact such change than the ultimate literary examples of the power of love and emotion: ghosts moved by the bonds of love?

Like Meng Chao, Liao Mosha had been active in the Republican Shanghai literary scene and was known as a talented writer of *zawen*. Unlike Meng Chao, however, Liao had achieved a good measure of literary and political prominence beginning in the 1930s. By the 1960s, he was "director of the United Front Work Department of the Beijing Party Committee and was also a member of the central Propaganda Department."[218] Even for the uninitiated, a cursory glance at his collected works makes it clear that he was a prolific writer who weighed in on a number of critical issues of the day, including the discussion on new historical plays. However, his entrance into the ghost play debate would have a lasting impact on Liao, Meng Chao, and the debate on ghosts.

Yet, according to his own accounts, his essays on new historical drama and ghost opera were not born out of interest in the subject of a Ming official or a Song concubine, adapted or otherwise. Instead, their roots lay in theoretical ponderings over Engels' writings and in the request of an old acquaintance and his supporters. In his 1978 essay on the genesis of "Ghosts," after discussing his theoretical interest in Engels' theories on historical development and its relation to Wu Han and *Hai Rui*, he explains that Meng Chao's supporters "wanted me to take a look at the performance, then, according to the example of "'History' and 'Drama'" [the essay Liao wrote on the subject of Wu Han's *Hai Rui*], write a review of *Li Huiniang*."[219]

---

[218] Goldman, *China's Intellectuals*, 27.

[219] Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, "Wo xie 'yougui wuhai lun' de qianhou" 我写《有鬼无害论》的前后 [Surrounding my writing of the 'some ghosts are harmless theory'] , in *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen* 寥沫沙文集，第二卷：杂文 [The collected works of Liao Mosha, volume 2: *zawen*] (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1986): 492-495, 493.

He was provided tickets by the *Beijing Evening News* and saw the play, but after watching the production, he was apparently at a loss for what to write about. He spoke with *Beijing Evening News* editor Hou Qi (one of the people who encouraged Liao to attend a performance of *Li Huiniang*), who "mentioned that ghost plays were unable to be accepted by some of the audience, which immediately reminded me of the 'releasing or restricting' section of Chairman Mao's March 1957 'Speech at the CCP National Propaganda Work Conference.'"[220] Liao quotes Mao's words on theatrical monsters, "ox ghost-snake spirits" [*niugui-sheshen*] - "Recently, some *niugui-sheshen* have been staged. Some comrades look at this situation, and they are very anxious. I say, a little bit is fine. … Of course I am not *recommending* monsters [be staged], I simply say 'a little bit is fine.'" He quotes from the speech further, but leaves out a few critical lines: "… within a few decades such ghosts and monsters will disappear from the stage altogether, and you won't be able to see them even if you want to."[221] While Liao's account emphasizes the role of Engels' writings in composing "'History' and 'Drama'", and the role of Mao's writings in the composition of "Some Ghosts are Harmless," Mao is almost totally absent from the latter - and Engels is an obvious presence. At the same time, Engels is almost totally absent from the piece on *Hai Rui*.[222]

As it stands, Liao's essays on the subject of his famous pieces of theatre criticism were written years after the fact, and in somewhat suspect conditions. An essay penned

---

[220] Liao, "Wo xie," 493-494.

[221] Mao Zedong, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Volume V* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 434.

[222] Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, "Wu Han xie *Hai Rui baguan* shiqi wo de sixiang qingkuang" 吴晗写《海瑞罢官》时期我的思想情况 [My ideological situation during the period that Wu Han wrote *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*], in *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen*: 449-451; Liao Mosha, "Yougui wuhai lun."

in 1969 on the creation of "'History'" reads very similarly to his essay on writing "Ghosts," which was written in 1978. The necessity of downplaying his early 1960s motivations during the Cultural Revolution is obvious; any reasons for obfuscating the story in 1978 are somewhat less apparent. Ultimately, like Meng Chao's motivations in writing *Li Huiniang*, when considering the role of "Some Ghosts are Harmless" in the context of debates over ghost opera, we should concentrate less on Liao Mosha's motivations in writing the piece, and pay more attention to the essay itself and reactions to the essay.

Liao sketches connections between the *Hai Rui* essay and "Ghosts" and there is a fair amount of similarity between the two pieces. Both were published under the pseudonym Fan Xing in *Beijing Evening News* ("'History'" in February 1961, and "Ghosts" in August that same year), and both pieces come down positively on the side of the authors. The piece on *Hai Rui* is written as a relatively lighthearted, congratulatory note to an old friend, Wu Han. Of course, the subject itself is weighty: the relationship between history and theatre had been one of Wu Han's "major preoccupations during the period 1959-1962."[223] Liao writes positively of Wu Han's efforts, noting "With your *Hai Rui*, at long last the doors of the two families of 'history' and 'theatre' are beginning to be broken down … This is a very difficult thing, a very creative type of work."[224] At the end of the essay, he poses three questions to Wu Han concerning the differences of writing history and writing historical dramas. Thus, the piece very obviously extends

[223] Fisher, 7.

[224] Liao Mosha, "'Shi' he 'xi' – he Wu Han de *Hai Rui baguan* yanchu" "史"和"戏"－贺吴晗的《海瑞罢官》演出 ['History' and 'theatre' – congratulating Wu Han's production of *Hai Rui dismissed from office*], in *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen*: 80-82.

beyond the bounds of a single adaptation. The one thing never up for discussion is whether or not historical dramas *should* be on stages - it is simply assumed they *will* be performed.

Like his letter to Wu Han, the piece on ghost plays comes down firmly in the camp of the adaptation; as such, the piece is (like its predecessor) more than a defense of a single author. It is a defense of a large part of the classical canon. Liao puts forth a question he attributes (somewhat tellingly) to "youth": "Since these are adapted scripts of contemporary authors, why are we preserving the superstitious component of old plays, allowing ghosts to appear on stages - how can this not be propagating superstitious thought?"[225] He does not address this right away. Instead, he estimates that the number of classical works (novels, plays, and short stories) that involve ghosts and spirits in some capacity includes a significant portion of the corpus. Liao writes that if one removes the ghost from plays that involve or reference ghosts, "it fundamentally cannot be considered as a play. People say, 'Without coincidences there would be no stories' [*wuqiao bucheng shu*], as it happens, these types of plays [illustrate] 'without ghosts there would be no plays' [*wugui bucheng xi*]. Thinking of *Li Huinaing* or *Story of Red Plums*, if after strolling around West Lake, Jia Sidao returns home and cuts Li Huiniang down in one blow, and her ghost did not then appear - now, what interesting play is left to watch?"[226]

It is here - not in the essay on *Hai Rui* - that Liao leans heavily on Engels. He points out that belief in ghosts simply was a fact of human development: "The earliest origins of the [belief] in ghosts and spirits in human minds owes to human ignorance of

---

[225] Liao, "Yougui," 109.

[226] Ibid.

forces of nature. Following the development of class separation, in the same way that people were unable to understand natural forces, so too the pressures and feelings of social struggle. Thus, this represents 'nature' spirits, and also represents one kind of social power, just as Engels said: 'Spirits of nature and spirits of social forces become one,' becoming 'one omnipotent spirit, God.'" Liao Mosha argues that in the great ghost dramas, the supernatural beings represent little of the "natural" spirits that represented misunderstood natural phenomena, "in point of fact, they are participating in class struggle in the human world."[227]

Liao Mosha may have been a semi-disinterested participant in the debates on history on stages and theatrical ghosts, but he defended both - and by extension, defended the value of classical culture in modern society. The catchphrase that "some ghosts are harmless" pointed to Mao's words in the Hundred Flowers period that "a little is okay," while ignoring Mao's prediction that such things would soon cease being. In arguing that *Li Huiniang* (and other adapted plays) was "not only *not* disseminating superstition, but precisely the opposite - it was really one type of encouragement of struggle against oppression," he added his voice to many others that argued against blanket condemnation. "It's not whether Li Huiniang is a human or a ghost," he wrote, "it's about who she represents and who she resists. To use a phrase children often want to ask while watching plays: is she a good ghost, or is she a bad ghost?"[228] Of course, the good ghost/bad ghost divide was far from a childish question, and had taken up pages of space since the early 1950s. In large part, Liao Mosha's "theory" is nothing novel: ghosts had

[227] Liao, "Yougui," 109-110.

[228] Ibid., 111.

been justified on similar merits for more than a decade. Even Mao had demonstrated remarkable tolerance for ghosts on stages - at least, selective quoting of his speeches made it appear so. It is unusual in the context of the ghost play discussion it appeared alongside: others simply took for granted that Li Huiniang was a *good play*, never mind a good ghost.

Liao's essay was a defense of Meng Chao and *Li Huiniang*, but also a defense of classical culture in a new China. At the time that "some ghosts are harmless" was published, the play and the author were facing no serious criticism - as I have illustrated, *Li Huiniang* had been well-received, and there was no indication that the debate on ghosts would take a serious turn for the worse. There *was* no actual debate over ghosts on stages, at least not publicly. Liao Mosha seems to be primarily chastising those who would get rid of China's "literary inheritance" - particularly the "youth" who question the appropriateness of such productions. Meng Chao, Liao Mosha, and many of the other "senior" participants in these cultural discussions had long careers with the party. But, just as Goldman has discussed, they had grown up in a very different environment than younger intellectuals.[229] The exposure to and respect for aspects of "traditional" culture comes through clearly in their writing; Liao's preemptive defense of ghost opera is also a defense of classical culture at large. The recognition that banning ghosts on stages could lead to a whole host of ramifications in the literary field was one that would only become more widespread in following years.

"Ghosts" was not the last word in the debate. One of the strongest critiques of Meng Chao's interpretation of Li Huiniang appeared in the May 1962 edition of *Theatre*

[229] Goldman, *China's Intellectuals*, 13-14.

Report - though to be clear, this was not an attack on the suitability of ghosts on socialist stages. Much as some critics in the early 1950s took a dim view of ghostless ghost plays, Li Qingyun criticized the overly political nature of Meng Chao's plot. Li focused on the four-character addition, *zhuang zai shaonian*, "what a courageous youth," to Li Huiniang's original comment about Pei Yu, *mei zai shaonian*, "what a handsome youth." Li queries that while the concubine's "ideological level has improved, has the power of her image been enhanced or not? Is the new work more moving to people or not?" In essence, Li questions whether or not the changes have improved the play in any respect other than the political grounding of the characters.[230]

Li argues that the political improvement comes at the cost of the original focus on love and human emotions, which are the very things that made Li Huiniang a compelling character. In the Ming original and its many adaptations, Jia Sidao's wrath is aroused simply by her impulsive comment on a handsome young man. In Meng Chao's revision (though not the original publication in *Play Monthly*), she comments on his courage as well. Thus, as Li argues it, she is actually commenting on politics. "To put it plainly, isn't this [sort of statement] looking for death?"[231] The critic sees this political consciousness as false and not in keeping with the historical setting. More importantly, the revisions damaged the power of the play. In most versions of the play, Li Huiniang is murdered for a minor offense - her almost involuntary comment on the attractiveness of a young man. This truly underscores the brutal and unfair nature of the feudal past,

---

[230] Li Qingyun 郦青云, "Tantan *Li Huiniang* de 'tigao'" 谈谈《李慧娘》的"提高"[Discussing *Li Huiniang*'s 'improvement'], *Xiju bao* (May 1962): 47-50, 47.

[231] Ibid., 49.

whereas in the 1961 revisions, she is actually killed for making a political statement. That someone could be killed in the "old society" for opposing a powerful official would not be a revelation for audiences. [232] Li Qingyun finally states that while reforming drama is an admirable goal, not all works can have political thought grafted in without damaging the artistic integrity and usefulness of the pieces. Li concludes that - at least in the case of *Li Huiniang* - "new people are not equal to the old."[233]

The final word of this 1962 debate came from Feng Qiyong, who grounded a critique of Li Qingyun's position on a historical survey of the story.[234] He took particular issue with Li's assertion that Li Huiniang's death was an obvious consequence of making a politically defiant statement in the old society, and that this lessened the impact of the play on the audience. Feng's impassioned argument - built on the numerous adaptations of the original story - defends Meng Chao's revisions. Isn't it possible, he asks, for numerous works to pull from the same foundation, but all have different emphases and methods of expressing their point? Feng ends his essay with a critique of Li's statement that "new people are not equal to the old." Such a statement not only negated Meng Chao's revisions, but anything that deviated from the Ming original - which included an whole host of regional adaptations. Feng ended that he thought Li's "conclusion is still up for debate." There would be more debate, but not precisely in the way Feng suggested.[235]

---

[232] Li Qingyun, 49.

[233] Ibid., 50.

[234] Feng Qiyong, "Cong 'Lüyiren chuan' dao *Li Huiniang*."

[235] Feng Qiyong, 54

The initial discussion of *Li Huiniang* underscores the unique moment of the early 1960s. With party leadership focused on recovering from the Leap, and leaders like Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi courting intellectuals and trying "to revive the Hundred Flowers policy," the atmosphere was relatively open and liberal.[236] In many respects, the "debate" on *Li Huiniang* was far less of a debate than the discussions of the 1950s – more liberal, even, than the discussions during the Hundred Flowers. No one questioned whether or not ghosts belonged on Chinese stages, and with the exception of Liao Mosha, a defense was not mounted. It did not seem needed: if anything, the adaptation was too political for some.

As it turned out, this relatively pleasant literary repartee was not to last long, although the participants in the discussion about *Li Huiniang* seem not to have realized it. Kang Sheng, Meng Chao's old friend and traditional drama enthusiast, relayed a message to one of Meng Chao's daughters in July or August 1962. "Tell your father to not only write *Li Huiniang*. He should write other things [too]." More ominous was a note Kang Sheng sent directly to Meng Chao on August 11. "Comrade Meng Chao, please pass on to other dramatists that from today, ghost plays are no longer to be performed."[237] While a formal ban was enacted only in March 1963, Kang Sheng's notes suggest that trouble was brewing in the middle of 1962; the intellectual elite who enthusiastically discussed revised plays were blissfully unaware of the problems they would soon be confronted with.

---

[236] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 240-244.

[237] Mu Xin 穆欣, "Guixi *Li Huiniang*" 鬼戏《李慧娘》[The ghost play *Li Huiniang*], *Yanhuang chunqiu* (October 1994): 34-43, 38.

In “refining” a Ming dynasty ghost, Meng Chao may have raised his brush in an attempt to “punish treacherous officials,” but he would pay a terrible price for such an act. But though he may have had an inkling of trouble to come, thanks to the ominous notes of an old friend, the discussions of 1961 and 1962 do not reveal that intellectuals believed trouble to be imminent. However, 1963 would mark a transition to a new, much more radical phase of cultural production and criticism, and ghosts would yet again have a starring role.

The Troublesome Ghosts of 1963

If one looks only at the articles published in 1961 and 1962, it would seem that *Li Huiniang* and her creator were destined to be a success story of cultural production in the Mao years. The reworking of the ghost play was the high point of more than ten years of heated discussions on the place of such works in socialist China, and it seemed that liberal intellectuals like Meng Chao, Tian Han, Liao Mosha and the rest had emerged from a turbulent decade to bask in a more relaxed cultural environment. While some in the leadership poked fun at pedantic plays and encouraged writers to create true entertainment – not just ideology lessons dressed up as traditional plays - writers reveled in highly literary Chinese and intellectuals debated the finer points of balancing political ideology and romance.

But the balance that had been maintained from 1950 to 1962 was upset in 1963, when the Ministry of Culture banned all ghost plays from stages. This did not, however, mean that the "ghost play issue" had been totally resolved. To the contrary, despite the first blanket ban, a robust debate played out on the pages of elite publications and in troupe meetings. Intellectuals like Li Xifan, who had written copiously on the subject of historical drama, now wrote pages and pages on "the ghost play issue." Between the two poles of "some ghosts are harmless" and "no ghost is harmless," writers and artists struggled to "decide" the future of drama in China. The terms of the debate had changed, and much larger forces were at work as Mao returned to the political fray and Jiang Qing took on new importance behind the scenes. Yet many carried on as if this were simply an extension of the same debates that had taken place in the 1950s, which many authors in 1963 traced in their own essays. As it turned out, this discussion - which *was* strongly

connected to the earlier debates of the 1960s, 1950s, and beyond - was the last of its kind. The fate of ghost plays and their writers and performers was out of the hands of intellectuals who argued their case in 1963. When Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, and their allies truly threw down the gauntlet in 1964, opportunities for true debate (not simply one-sided criticisms) were increasingly difficult to come by. By 1965, with the vicious political attacks of the early Cultural Revolution period already in planning or underway, there was no lively debate, only strident calls to take down people seen as promulgating anti-party, anti-socialist tendencies.

1963 was a critical year in the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, yet has largely been ignored by scholars. The overwhelming focus has been on the 1965 criticism of Wu Han's *Hai Rui*; the vicious attack on the author and play is often read as the "prelude" to the Cultural Revolution. However, as I have argued, the real "prelude" was the attack on ghost plays in 1963; the criticism of Wu Han and *Hai Rui* came only when lesser artists and more suspect plays had been thoroughly trashed. In many respects, the 1963 debate served as a testing ground for Jiang Qing and her clique - she successfully insisted on a total ban of ghost plays, put into practice by the Ministry of Culture, and engineered criticism of ghost plays and Liao Mosha's "some ghosts are harmless theory." At the same time, 1963 was the last year of relatively open debate, and many intellectuals seemed uncomfortable with this attack on traditional drama - and were not afraid of sharing their opinions. Jiang Qing may have been prepared to take on the whole of the cultural realm, but many people resisted, both in public and in more private spaces, from Shanghai to Beijing.

The 1963 ban may have engendered a public debate, but its origins were in a relatively quiet period for public discussion on the subject. At the same time, it is apparent that by the spring of 1963, Jiang Qing and members of her clique were beginning to exert a stronger influence behind the scenes. However, until 1965 and 1966, Jiang apparently saw her activity in the cultural realm as an attempt to "bring political purity to the arts rather than as a challenge to the existing [political] hierarchy."[238] Thus, Jiang's actions towards adapted editions of traditional plays (including ghost plays) in 1963 are better read as critiques of cultural policy that allowed - and even encouraged - them, not retribution for criticism of the Great Leap Forward. The connection between criticism of Mao or the Party broadly and *Li Huiniang* was not a leap that contemporaries made - even in the frenzied atmosphere of the early Cultural Revolution. Timothy Cheek notes that Mao's speech "at the Tenth Plenum of the CCP in September 1962 is generally regarded as the end of the 'thaw'" of the early 1960s. But he also argues that "nobody saw the Cultural Revolution coming; this was just another phase in the cycle of openness and repression."[239]

Tracing the history of the early Cultural Revolution beyond the high political situation - especially the machinations of Jiang Qing and her compatriots, particularly Kang Sheng - is difficult, so documenting an exact timeline for the attack on traditional drama is essentially impossible. There is a significant amount of material that is either unattributed (yet taken as fact), or based on post-Cultural Revolution reminiscences,

---

[238] Frederick C. Teiwes, Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965 (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1979), 505.

[239] Timothy Cheek, Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 265.

which are themselves not entirely reliable. According to Bonnie McDougall and Kam Louie, Mao was displeased with "the covert attacks on him personally," a fact that was relayed to the screenwriter Xia Yan by Jiang Qing in 1962. They further allege that in the summer of that year, Jiang Qing suggested a ban on Wu Han's *Hai Rui*, which was ignored.[240] This failure prompted her to turn elsewhere. As I have previously argued, it is possible that Jiang Qing saw in ghost plays an opportunity that was hard to pass up: ghost opera had been a subject of serious debate even before 1949, and was reasonably easy to criticize as bourgeois, individualistic, and feudal. Mao had never urged anyone to act like a ghost, but he had encouraged people to be more like Hai Rui. Perhaps most importantly, the author of the celebrated ghost play revision lacked the political connections of Wu Han. There was no Peng Zhen or Zhou Yang on his side. Meng Chao had only Kang Sheng – a dangerous friend to have. The man who had played matchmaker for Meng Chao and his future wife and who had encouraged his old friend in rewriting a Ming ghost play would bring him to ruin.[241]

Kang Sheng, perhaps the most inscrutable of all the players in the great drama of 1960s Chinese politics, also began agitating behind the scenes that summer. In July or early August - around the period that Jiang Qing tried to have *Hai Rui* banned - Kang

---

[240] McDougall and Louie, 296.

[241] As Ross Terrill describes in his biography of Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng moved to make even greater matches – including that between Jiang Qing and Mao. Kang Sheng, who "looked like a crook even before he became one," began encouraging the pairing in the middle of 1938, and by the fall of that year "he led the move to overcome Party resistance to a divorce between Mao and He Zizhen, and to a form … marriage of Mao and Lan" (Terrill, *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984), 152). While this may have been his greatest coup politically, at least in terms of matchmaking, setting up Meng Chao and Ling Junqi probably had a good dose of self-serving interests at its core: it was Ling Junqi's father who supported Kang Sheng during his tenure in Shanghai and later in Jinan (Mu Xin 穆欣, "Meng Chao *Li Huiniang* yuan'an shimo" 孟超《李慧娘》冤案始末 [The whole unjust case of Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*], *Xin wenxue shiliao* 2 (1995): 156-203, 158-159.

Sheng requested that one of Meng Chao's daughters relay a message to him. Mu Xin, friend of Meng Chao and editor of *Guangming Daily*, states the note instructed her to "Tell your father to not only write *Li Huiniang* [i.e., ghost plays]. He should write other things [too]." A more ominous note is also relayed by Mu; this one was apparently sent directly to Meng Chao on 11 August, 1962. "Comrade Meng Chao, please pass on to other dramatists that from today, ghost plays are no longer to be performed."[242] This was quite the reversal for Kang Sheng, who himself had played a key role in bringing *Li Huiniang* into existence, and was an unrepentant fan of traditional drama. He is quoted as once saying "I'll revoke the party membership of anyone who wants Ma Lianliang [a famous Peking opera actor and director] to put on contemporary dramas."[243]

In the months prior to sending his ominous warnings to Meng Chao, he and Jiang Qing had spent time in Hangzhou, where they demanded many performances of banned plays, or plays the local troupes had on their own decided not to stage.[244] According to Byron and Pack, the purpose of the trip was for "rest and recreation" – and, taking advantage of their political positions, the opportunity to see many "bawdy and erotic" plays not staged for many years - not any nefarious purposes. However, several years later when the Propaganda Bureau, spurred on by reports that "two 'central leaders' had watched 'old plays' in Hangzhou," Jiang Qing claimed they had "merely watched the

---

[242] Mu Xin 穆欣, "Guixi *Li Huiniang*" 鬼戏李慧娘 [The ghost play *Li Huiniang*], *Yanhuang chunqiu* (October 1994):34-43, 38.

[243] Mu Xin 穆欣, *Ban* Guangming ribao *shinian zishu* 办《光明日报》十年自述 [My thoughts on ten years of publishing the *Guangming Daily*] (Beijing: Zhonggongdang shi chubanshe, 1994), 197. Ma Lianliang was the actor who brought Wu Han's Hai Rui to life on stage – and suffered greatly in the Cultural Revolution on account of it. He died in 1966.

[244] Ibid., 197-198.

'intolerable' plays advertised in the local paper." Considering they apparently ordered Hangzhou troupes to make trips to Shanghai to gather necessary materials to stage the plays, this seems a somewhat suspect explanation. However, as with many things relating to Kang Sheng and Jiang Qing, we will simply never know.[245]

It was political expediency, not any great love for contemporary theatre, that propelled the activities in 1962 and 1963. Roderick MacFarquhar's explanation for the pair's activity against traditional drama is that they "grasped that there were political opportunities presented by Mao's revival of class struggle [at the Tenth Plenum], but that to seize them meant abandoning their bourgeois, even 'feudal', tastes in drama."[246] But according to Li Zhisui, Mao's personal physician, Jiang and Kang's new position on traditional drama was not immediately apparent to even people in the inner circles. While Kang Sheng had engineered a performance for Zhou Enlai in 1961 (he apparently enjoyed the opera greatly), Mao did not see it until early 1963.[247] In Li's telling of the story, he suggested the play to Mao since he himself had wanted to see Meng Chao's new version. "The performance became a special event within Zhongnanhai," he notes. "Because Mao himself had requested the opera, all the other top leaders attended, too."[248]

---

[245] John Byron and Robert Pack, The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng, the Evil Genius Behind Mao – and His Legacy of Terror in People's China (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 265-267.

[246] MacFarquahar, *The Coming of the Cataclysm*, 384.

[247] Mu Xin, "Guixi," 37; Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, trans. Tai Hung-chao (New York: Random House, 1994), 402.

[248] Li, 402.

However, Mao did not like *Li Huiniang*. Li posits that the critical scene where Li Huiniang cries out in admiration of "righteous" and "handsome" Pei Yu "struck too close to home, to Mao's own philandering and to his young women. It recalled Mao's refusal to allow one of them to marry the young man she loved and her accusations that he was a bourgeois womanizer." While Mao may have sulked, the true villain of the story seems to be his wife. Li - no great fan of Jiang Qing - paints a picture of a woman on a cultural rampage. He quotes Wang Dongxing, Mao's primary bodyguard, as saying "We're in big trouble. Jiang Qing thinks *Li Huiniang* is a very bad opera, a big poisonous weed."[249] She took the opportunity of the Zhongnanhai staging to go after senior intellectuals like Tian Han. Still, the eventual outcome of all this scheming and strategizing seems not to have been telegraphed to the intellectual community at large. People may have been aware that larger forces were at work, but throughout 1963, many continued to hold their ground. As for Kang Sheng's 1962 warning to Meng Chao, whether it was ever publicized is unclear; Mu Xin, Meng Chao's only real chronicler, is silent on the matter. If it did make waves, it is probable that performers and writers simply felt this was yet another shift in drama policy – one of many experienced over the years. They certainly would have had little reason to believe that something like the Cultural Revolution would be bearing down on them in three years. After all, bans had come and gone since the earliest days of the PRC.

It seems reasonable to assume that the campaign to ban ghost plays began in the summer of 1962, although the specific catalyst is unclear - and one wonders why Mao

[249] Li, 403-404.

would have approved a staging of *Li Huiniang* if his wife was preparing an assault on the play. However, the intellectual and artistic discussion that followed the 1963 ban makes clear that many participants were not merely "debating" the issue within the narrow confines of what would become Cultural Revolution rhetoric. That is, it was not an attack on intellectuals and performers for being "anti-party" or critical of Mao and his policies. Although the "thaw" may have come to an end, many intellectuals carried on as they had for the past several years. Many acted as if the ban was still up for discussion - or, in most cases, with no acknowledgement that a ban had even happened. As Fisher argues about Wu Han and *Hai Rui*, to simply read back from Cultural Revolution criticisms is to miss the larger (and perhaps for much of the period, more important) context that the work and its author existed in. Much as the discussion surrounding *Li Huiniang* in 1961 and 1962, the 1963 debates on ghost plays highlight the larger cultural issues that were intimately tied to the plays and their intellectual context - issues that were important long before Jiang Qing gained political prominence. The question of what was appropriate art for the masses, and what purpose art served, was seemingly still up for discussion, and ghost plays provided the perfect vehicle for this debate. While 1963 was a tipping point towards the radicalization of society, it only seems so from a distance: if intellectuals had an inkling of what was coming, they would likely not have carried on defending Liao Mosha, Meng Chao, ghosts, and other "poisonous" things. By their actions, it is clear that the discussions of 1963 were treated as just yet another shift in policy; it was hardly a remarkable development.

In March of 1963, the Ministry of Culture published a directive entitled "Regarding the report and requests for instruction on halting the performance of 'ghost

plays'."[250] The March 16 announcement, which formally banned ghost plays, once again made it clear that artistic matters were to be firmly subsumed to political ones. The "thaw" was over, though the document itself did not indicate the severity of the blowback to come for the numerous voices that had supported ghost plays throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. It asserted that a ban would help the drama world put into practice the policies of art and culture serving socialism and the masses and "letting a hundred flowers bloom, pushing out the old to bring in the new" - the same slogan, of course, that had been applied to the reworking of *Li Huiniang*.

While noting that the most "poisonous" of ghost plays had already been banned in the early years of the PRC, the directive expresses some alarm at the popularity of ghost plays - especially in light of the "profusion of praise" *Li Huiniang* received from critics, and Liao Mosha's idea that "some ghosts are harmless."[251] While this seems a sharp rebuke to intellectuals who enthusiastically took up the defense of traditional drama, of equal (or even greater) concern was the fact that ghost plays were "spreading feudal and superstitious thought among the masses."[252] The intellectual debates of the past decade apparently had little impact on what people wanted to see. In short, despite all the campaigns and education of the past 14 years, audiences - particularly those in the countryside - still loved ghosts on stages. Mao had claimed during the Hundred Flowers that "poisonous weeds" did not need strict regulation, as they would eventually fall

[250] "Guanyu tingyan 'guixi' de qingshi baogao" 关于停演"鬼戏"的请示报告 [Instructions regarding ceasing performance of 'ghost plays'], in *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian, di shiliu ce* 建国以来重要文献选编 [Selected important party documents from after the founding of the country, volume 16], Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed. (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997): 248-251.

[251] Ibid., 248.

[252] Ibid.

victims to their own success. As these plays were performed, "people will start talking, and when more and more people start talking, then fewer and fewer people will come to watch, and these things will not be performed."[253] Mao had badly underestimated the importance of traditional opera on Chinese stages; his wife stepped in to set the cultural world straight, and expunge undesirable elements from stages once and for all.

Compared to later statements, the announcement is remarkably even-tempered. It even goes so far as to affirm the fact that there were some "comparatively good" ghost plays, particularly in regards to artistic achievements.[254] Even the criticism of *Li Huiniang*, highlighted as an example of the most serious problem (that of contemporary adaptations and theoretical defenses of ghost plays), is muted compared to later statements - the play is accused only of "greatly playing up" the ghost character. The author is never mentioned, and neither Meng Chao nor his play are presented with the vituperative type of rhetoric that would plague them during and after 1965. Certainly, there is no hint of an accusation that the work was fundamentally "anti-party, anti-socialist thought."

As presented by the Ministry of Culture, the problem simply boils down to one of negatives outweighing positives. Ghost plays may indeed provide examples of oppressed people resisting and struggling against their oppressors - but it is "impossible to ignore the fact that they all affirm the superstition that after death, people turn into ghosts."[255] In

---

[253] Mao Zedong, "Speech at Conference of Members and Cadres of Provincial-Level Organization of CPC in Shandong (March 17, 1957)," in Michael Y.M. Kau and John K. Leung, eds. *The Writings of Mao Zedong*, *1949-1976*, vol. 2, *January 1956-December 1957* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986), 411-432, 415.

[254] "Guanyu tingyan," 248.

[255] "Guanyu tingyan," 249.

contrast to people who claimed the ideological level and general knowledge of the common people had been drastically raised in the years following liberation, the directive espouses the belief that the masses were still far too uneducated, too unsophisticated, and too impressionable to be allowed access to such dangerous material. For purposes of rooting out superstition among the people, ghost plays had to go.

Reinforcing the assertion that this is a problem stemming from the masses is the notation that theatre and education work units were able to stage otherwise banned plays internally (with permission) - that is, what was unfit for public consumption was perfectly acceptable for performers and intellectuals in the confines of their work units, or, presumably, leaders still interested in seeing the traditional repertoire.[256] Also underscored was the problematic distinction between superstitious ghost plays and other types of traditional tales - here, mythology plays and legends [*chuanshuo*] not involving ghosts are specifically excluded from the ban. While the announcement notes that troupes should take care not to play up "superstitious aspects" or put on "fearsome" scenes, there is no explanation on why *The Legend of White Snake* (featuring an interspecies snake-woman and man love affair) would be any less likely to "promulgate superstition" than ghost opera. The distinction between ghost plays and mythology plays is one that dates back to the 1950s, and is one that many people did not find entirely convincing.

Rudolf Wagner's analysis of the importance of *Journey to the West* in Communist narratives may explain why Monkey and his compatriots escaped being banned. As he notes,

---

[256] Ibid., 250.

> The basic model of history as salvation history was absorbed into the Marxist world view from European Christian sources: in Marxism it was secularized into a theory of revolution leading to the eventual establishment, after a period of transition, of eternal communist bliss. After the victory of the Chinese Communist revolution, the *Xiyou ji* offered one of the few [native] and familiar plot structures able to meaningfully resonate … with the revolutionary transformation.[257]

Connecting Wagner's argument to theatrical ghosts, we can say that *Journey to the West* was useful in a way that ghosts simply were not. The logical hoops and torturous mental gymnastics seen in the 1963 ghost play debate, particularly in attempts to set mythological subjects apart from ghosts and other superstitious elements, make more sense in light of this continued usefulness of plays like *Journey to the West*. That it shows, in Wagner's words, "an arduous quest for an ultimate goal" meant it could be recycled for many purposes (and indeed, it was).[258] Even cultural radicals were not ready to throw out so useful a plot structure, Buddhist influence or no, and so the line between "superstition" and "mythology" once again needed to be hammered out. This time, though, ghosts would be shunted into the "superstition" category, there to remain until 1979.

One of the first pieces to appear after the ban was published in *Literature and Art News* in April, and it showed clearly that the general terms of the debate had - not surprisingly - shifted. No longer were reworked ghost plays a case of perfection needing a touch of polishing - 1963 marked a return to an earlier type of discourse, one that took up whether or not theatrical ghosts had any redeeming value. The author took issue with Liao Mosha's "some ghosts are harmless theory," stating that regardless of whether a

---

[257] Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*,140.

[258] Ibid., 139.

ghost was "good" or "bad," when it came to acknowledging or promoting the existence of ghosts, "they were all the same."[259] The author, dramatist Zhao Xun, writes that he objects mightily to Liao Mosha's defense of *Li Huiniang*, but more importantly to the mere idea that ghosts could be harmless, as "this hampers [the use of] plays in the ideological education of the people."[260] Continuing with the return to past debates, he closes with a rather uninspiring defense of mythology plays and legends - not unlike the tepid explanations offered by the Ministry of Culture.

If the ban was a fairly temperate method of chastising intellectuals and writers who were overstepping their bounds, the discussion that followed was a bit more critical - particularly where Liao Mosha's theory was concerned. In May, two months after the announcement of the ban, an article highly critical of the "some ghosts are harmless" theory and *Li Huiniang* appeared in the Shanghai-based *Wenhui bao.*[261] Like the later attacks in 1965, this essay was organized by Jiang Qing (in this case, through Ke Qingshi, mayor of Shanghai).[262] However, while the five-part essay clearly targets the two pieces, the author Liang Bihui criticizes a broader trend. "It's a pity that in recent years, a small number of comrades have advocated 'history for the sake of history,' 'tradition for the sake of tradition,' believing that this [work] cannot be corrected, that [work] cannot be changed - this is pushing out the old and not bringing in the new [*tuichen buchuxin*], to

---

[259] Zhao Xun 赵寻, "Yan 'guixi' meiyou haichu ma?" 演"鬼戏"没有害处吗？ [Does staging 'ghost plays' do no harm?], *Wenyi bao* 1963.4: 16-18, 18.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Liang Bihui 梁壁辉, "'Yougui wuhai' lun" "有鬼无害"论 [On 'some ghosts are harmless'], *Wenhui bao* May 6-7, 1963.

[262] Wagner, 312.

the point of pushing out the old to bring in the old [*tuichen chujiu*]."[263] While Jiang Qing's intervention may have been responsible for this particular essay, the criticism of artistic policy and points of view is not unique. If there is one unusual feature of this essay, it is the lack of response from the two intellectuals under attack - Meng Chao and Liao Mosha are conspicuously absent from the 1963 debate. In Meng Chao's case, this was probably due to the warning from an editor of *Wenhui bao* that "the article came from 'an authoritative side' and that [Meng Chao] should not reply."[264] The publication of this essay - and its attendant warning - is likely why, in August of that year, Zhou Yang informed Kang Sheng that Meng Chao had written another self-criticism - one that Zhou Yang apparently felt was unwarranted.[265]

Also published in May was a three-part essay entitled "The Harmfulness of Ghost Plays" in *Guangming Daily*.[266] Authored by dramatist and critic Jing Guxie, who himself was involved in the work to adapt traditional drama, it is representative of the type of article opposing ghost plays that appeared throughout 1963. Serving as a primer to the ghost play "problem," Jing introduced to readers major pieces of Chinese criticism of the 1950s, as well as more classically Marxist-Leninist approaches to "superstitious" literature and drama. While the tone is highly critical of the plays, the author does not move to attack the credibility of the authors or supporters. The plays are never described

[263] Liang, "'Yougui.'"

[264] Wagner, 312.

[265] Mu Xin, "Guixi," 38.

[266] Jing Guxie 景孤血, "Guixi zhi hai" 鬼戏之害 [The harmfulness of ghost plays], *Guangming ribao*, May 21, 23, 25 1963.

as being a threat to the party or the political elite; rather, they are castigated as being poor teaching tools and inappropriate for the masses.

On the subject of *Li Huiniang*, Jing's criticisms have little hint of the venom that would plague the play and its author in following years. Instead, he asks whether or not the "improvement to the ideological content" of the Li Huiniang character had any effect on the course of the play. Despite being able to wreak havoc for Jia Sidao, he answers that her "political struggle - just as before - is a failure!" Was she able to force Jia Sidao to lend aid to troops in the north? Or to stop him from killing patriotic women? Or improve the lives of common people, suffering under taxation and land requisitions? "There is inevitably just one response [to all these questions]" - that the "ideological improvement" does not affect the outcome. On the question of the purpose and value of art, Jing Guxie comes down firmly on the side of art deriving value from its utility for the masses: "To say that Li Huiniang is using [ghosts] to 'advance political struggle' is simply 'absolutely empty [talk]'."[267] So, one absolutely cannot say that on account of having a 'political struggle' label, *Li Huiniang* is able to enhance its value."[7] Simply paying lip service to political issues (as *Li Huiniang* did, in his opinion) was not enough; to have value, works needed to show a positive outcome for struggle. This is not an argument that derives its power from a post-1959 political context - it is a continuation of a debate that had been going on for decades. One need look no further than Mao's talks at Yan'an to see a powerful piece of rhetoric supporting this viewpoint.

These few articles did not snowball into something larger, however, though some would receive rebuttals later that year. Perhaps indicative of the relatively weak political

[267] Jing, "Guixi zhi hai (zhong)," May 23.

position of Jiang Qing and her coterie, the publication and dissemination of Liang Bihui's article did not lead to wider outcry. While some intellectuals advocated for the same position espoused by Liang, Jiang, and others, there was also a notable amount of opposition in public and more private venues. At stake was not simply whether or not ghosts should be reinstated on Chinese stages, but the future direction of China's artistic policy.

Although isolated articles on the problem of ghost plays appeared in newspapers and journals throughout 1963, September proved a high point for the discussion. In August 1963, the Ministry of Culture, the Playwright Union, and the Beijing Culture Bureau convened to hold a meeting to talk about a number of problems: the policy of "letting a hundred flowers bloom, pushing out the old to bring in the new," the feudalism and affinity to the people [*renminxing*] of traditional plays, historical plays, and ghost plays, among other things.[268] This was not a discussion confined to a high level meeting or two - it was to be the basis of discussion for several months and more. The *Guangming Daily* was the primary platform for discussion of the issue. On September 9, a lengthy piece kicked off several months of discussion about drama under the heading of "let a hundred flowers bloom, push out the old to bring in the new." While the piece was published as an "editorial note," ostensibly by the paper's editors, it was, according to deputy editor Mu Xin, "drafted according to the views of Zhou Yang and other related comrades in the Central Propaganda Bureau, underwent repeated revisions and also

[268] Mu Xin , *Ban*, 189.

corrections by Lu Dingyi [leading propagandist], and was sent to Mao Zedong to approve and finalize."[269]

Mu Xin's autobiographical writings are a treasure trove for examination of the ghost play problem, albeit a somewhat problematic one. A deputy editor for *Guangming Daily* from the mid-1950s onwards, he circulated in top intellectuals circles and was active during several critical periods. At the same time, he was without a doubt a "radical" intellectual - eventually a member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group, put together in 1966, though he was purged in 1967.[270] However, his post-Cultural Revolution writings, particularly those published outside of the PRC, show a rather stunning reversal, and he clearly has an axe to grind regarding Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng. And while he may be passionate about the injustice done to Meng Chao, there seems to be little reason to throw out his rather dispassionate telling of the events that took place in the fall of 1963.

In his 1994 memoir, published in Beijing, he reprints the full text of the 1963 "editorial note" with little comment. It is largely unremarkable, and its primary critique does not seem particularly stinging: "Not only were some bad plays *not* subject to the justified critique of the critics, but instead received praise; some good plays were neither taken seriously nor encouraged."[271] However, the criticism was sharp indeed: *Li Huiniang*, *Hai Rui* and the rest had been summarily shuffled from the category of "good play" to "bad." Also being criticized were those who had participated in discussions on

---

[269] Mu Xin , *Ban*, 189.

[270] Goldman, *China's Intellectuals,*140, 150.

[271] Mu Xin, *Ban*, 190.

the subject. Still, such reversals were hardly novel for intellectuals who had survived the 1950s. Much of the rest of the piece simply repeats the same things that had been published since the founding of the PRC: drama needed to incorporate socialism and patriotism and improve the political awareness. It ought only to "suit the wishes of the people, keep pace with the forward progress of the age …."[272] Of course, the engineers of the essay did not mention that by and large, it seemed that "the masses" were more than happy with the traditional repertory of various local opera forms!

This was a call to arms that explicitly connected itself the slogan of the Hundred Flowers movement, "let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." Despite the official intervention, intellectuals did not simply reverse their opinions and begin publishing self-criticisms. Instead, a rich debate took place in print - Mu Xin recounts that between September and December, the paper received 532 submissions related to the subject, totaling nearly two million characters. Illustrating the popularity of the "ghost play problem," nearly a third - 166 responses - were on the subject of theatrical ghosts.

One of the most frequently referenced articles was published by noted critic Li Xifan in the *Guangming Daily*.[273] Appearing six months after the ban on ghost plays, Li's essay was published alongside a much longer primer on the problem (authored by the editors of the *Guangming Daily*). Much like the "editors'" piece (and Jing Guxie's article before them), Li's essay sums up the many defenses of ghost plays: the question of

---

[272] Ibid., 191.

[273] Li Xifan 李希凡, "Feichang youhai de 'yougui wuhai' lun" 非常有害的"有鬼无害"论 [Extremely harmful 'some ghosts are harmless' theory], *Guangming ribao*, 10 September 1963.

artistic license, "good ghosts" (ghosts who encourage struggle), artistic considerations (here, meaning special effects and/or movements such as the ghost step - employed only in ghost plays). Some of the critiques of ghost plays as deployed by Li Xifan recall late Ming and Qing criticisms of the *Peony Pavilion*: "bad" ghost plays risked stirring up suicide in misguided women who believed they would meet their beloved in the afterlife.

More important than his encapsulation of a decade of literary criticism is Li's attempt at drawing distinctions between mythological, ghost, and god-and-spirit (*shenguai*) plays. Here, Li tried - as authors had done before - to make distinctions between these various kinds of plays; however, for anyone familiar with the discussions Li references, his argument can seem contradictory and confusing. For instance, he insists that stories such as *Journey to the West*, the *Legend of White Snake*, and *Cowherd and the Weaving Girl* encourage a fighting, resisting spirit - they encourage individuals to use their own power to resist and do not rely on ideas of predestination and fate. *Li Huiniang* itself was celebrated for the very same reasons the previous year, and it was a well-trod defense for ghost plays in general. This was an argument that had never been satisfactorily settled - the strenuous defense of *Journey to the West* makes sense, as Wagner argues, in light of its utility as a revolutionary narrative. But people who favored a more nuanced approach to regulation of plays found the broad distinctions between "ghost" and "mythology" plays suspect at best.

Even more suspect than the ghost/mythology distinction was the mental gymnastics some writers went through to separate "ghost plays" from plays that merely had ghosts in them. The argument that *The Injustice Done to Dou E* [Dou E yuan] could be easily fixed by deleting the scene where Dou E's ghost appears is reasonable enough.

However, arguing that *The Peony Pavilion* was merely a case of "borrowing the form of a ghost to express the author's ideals" (thus, a "special," acceptable kind of ghost play) is more of a stretch.[274]

In the same edition of the *Guangming Daily*, a piece appeared by the pseudonymous "Ruo He," apparently a student at East China Normal University in Shanghai.[275] Billed as a response to Zhao Xun's April essay on ghost plays (and noted as being written in May), it can also be read as a response to aspects of Li Xifan's critique, especially the arbitrary distinction between "mythology plays" and "ghost plays." The publication date a full five months after the initial publication of Zhao Xun's piece seems suspect if we trust that it was "merely" a response to that essay. The author took particular issue with Zhao's comment that people who wrote about ghosts were people who believed in ghosts. Leaving aside romantics like Li Bai, Pu Songling, or Wu Cheng'en, the author points out that even realists like Du Fu, Guan Hanqing, and Lu Xun wrote of ghosts - "almost-but-not-quite" ghosts also appeared in such vaunted socialist works as *The White-Haired Girl* [Baimao nü].[276] The idea that literary ghosts were the manifestations of their authors' belief in ghosts was nonsense. The author further contends that the idea that getting rid of ghosts on stages would somehow stamp out

---

[274] Shen Yao 沈嶢, "Shenhuaxi yu guixi bixu yange qubie kailai – jianping Ruo He, Tan Peng tongzhi de yixie lundian" 神话戏与鬼戏必须严格区别开来－兼评若何，谭鹏同志的一些论点 [Mythology plays and ghost plays must have a strict separation – a simultaneous critique of a few of Comrades Rou He and Tan Peng's points], *Guangming ribao* November 17, 1963.

[275] Ruo He 若何 [Chen Gongdeng 陈恭灯], "Yan 'guixi' youhai ma? – 'Yan 'guixi' meiyou haichu ma?' duhou" 演"鬼戏"有害吗？－"演'鬼戏'没有害处马？"读后 [Staging 'ghost plays' is harmful? – on reading 'Staging 'ghost plays' doesn't have any harmful points?'], *Guangming ribao*, 10 September 1963; Mu Xin, *Ban*, 202.

[276] Ruo He.

superstition among the masses was a silly notion. He points to Mao's own words (admittedly from his 1927 report on Hunan peasants) that "Idols were erected by peasants, and at the right time, peasants will use their own hands to tear the idols down, there is no need for anyone else to do it prematurely."[277]

Many authors pointed out this suspect logic, the tenuous connection between ghost plays and "actual" superstition among "the masses" – or at least, the problem of pinning the blame on ghost plays. One essayist called the ban a case of "giving up at the slightest obstacle" – arguing that a lighter hand was called for, so as not to toss out perfectly good plays with the bad. As an example of the good, the author stated that Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* was "perfect and without fault" both in terms of its ideology and its art.[278] Another flatly stated that as ghost plays were included in the "mythological play" designation, and arguments that applied to ghost plays likewise applied to mythology plays. If one was going to claim that ghost plays spread superstitious thought, one really had to say the same thing about mythological plays. Why, there was a certain place in Shanxi where the locals kowtowed and burned incense to a snake - yet *Legend of White Snake* was not banned.[279]

In general, the negative voices were more numerous than the positive, although the discussion was - as Ruo He's article indicates - hardly one sided. The discussion may have been stacked in favor of the naysayers, but those who found the arguments

---

[277] Ibid.

[278] Chen Ying 陈莹, "Tingyan guixi shi yinye feishi" 停演鬼戏是因噎废食 [Stopping performances of ghost plays is giving up at the slightest obstacle], *Guangming ribao* 23 September 1963.

[279] Kong Xiang 孔相, "Guixi he shenxi ying yilü kandai" 鬼戏和神戏应一律看待 [Ghost plays and mythology plays out to be treated the same with one law], *Guangming ribao*, October 4 1963.

unconvincing or downright ridiculous at times still published critiques. One author argued that the heavy handed approach to ghost plays seemed downright un-Marxist: "The Marxist approach to criticism is *not* to wholly negate [something], to toss it out entirely, but to carry out concrete analysis, to separate the wheat from the chaff."[280] According to Mu Xin, even more expressed dissatisfaction with such "indiscriminate attacks" privately. One anonymous person who "could not abide by the current outrageous criticism of the Kun opera *Li Huiniang*" went so far as to send a poem to the paper, asking that it be sent to Meng Chao.[281]

It was not only intellectuals who took up discussions. In light of the August discussion in Beijing and the ensuing *Guangming Daily* debate, drama troupes in Shanghai were brought together to discuss a number of artistic and political problems. While the emphasized topics vary somewhat depending on what troupes were involved in the meetings, the general thrust was the same as the conversation in Beijing.[282] Particular emphasis was put on the issue of "pushing out the old to bring in the new," reform of drama and ghost plays. The documents produced after these meetings, designed for government use, shed light on the non-public behavior and thoughts of performers and cadres. They also illustrate that even in light of the March 1963 ban on ghost opera, performers were divided on this action for a wide variety of reasons.

---

[280] Tan Peng 谭鹏, "Youxie 'guixi' yinggai jiayi kending" 有些"鬼戏"应该加以肯定 [Some 'ghost plays' ought to be treated positively], *Guangming ribao* 20 September 1963.

[281] Mu Xin 穆欣, *Jiehou changyi – shinian dongluan jishi* 劫后长忆－十年动乱纪事 [Long reminiscences after the disaster - chronicle of the decade of disturbances] (Hong Kong: Xintian chubanshe, 1997), 447.

[282] "Guanyu baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin wenti de xuexi" 关于百花齐放，推陈出新问题的学习 [Regarding the study of the 'let a hundred flowers bloom, pushing out the old to bring in the new' issue], Shanghai Municipal Archives B172-5-664.

In thinking of the drive towards the Cultural Revolution, much has been made of the increasingly radical Shanghai leftists, such as Yao Wenyuan, who Jiang Qing found to be eager and willing participants in her struggle for cultural dominance. The troupe discussions in Shanghai underscore that while there may have been a "debate between Shanghai and Beijing," at least where elite intellectual and political maneuvering were concerned, the reality for those tasked with carrying out cultural directives was much murkier.[283] While there are many voices that appear to be cultural radicals, there are also large numbers of dissenting or apathetic views.

While the debate seen in the Shanghai troupe debates does not, for the most part, differ significantly from the discussion taking place in print, there are certain aspects that are enlightening. The first is to see the reach published discussions had – the *Guangming Daily* in particular is mentioned numerous times. The second is that while many points of view echo published articles, there are a number of very practical concerns brought up by performers and cadres who were directly impacted by government directives. While intellectuals debated on largely abstract terms, troupe members did not have that luxury: a ban meant serious changes in repertory for many styles. Many participants also seemed upset by the seemingly arbitrary nature of decisions on art and culture, perhaps because they were the ones who actually had to implement changes.

Perhaps owing to the less public setting, statements were also made that do not appear in print. Outright criticism of the often-contradictory nature of party policy is not seen in *Guangming Daily* essays. However, one troupe questioned the uneven application of supposedly "anti-superstitious" rules such as the banning of ghost plays:

[283] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 382.

"Now that ghost plays are not good to perform, why is *Stories of Not Being Afraid of Ghosts* [Bupa gui de gushi] still being printed?"[284] Another troupe wondered why "old struggles" of 1956 were being revived in 1963. "Why," they asked, "did nobody say anything about *Li Huiniang* in the 1960s?"[285] That is, why was the play being criticized in the present - why had no one criticized it in 1961 or 1962, when it received acclaim from the intellectual and political elite? It is worth noting that highly politicized points of view (e.g., discussion of "anti-party" or "anti-socialist thought" subject matter) are not evidenced in these sessions. For the most part, performers and cadres seem concerned with questions of what subjects are suitable for the masses and how to determine that suitability.

Of course, not every artist was on the opposing side - many of the voices speak approvingly of the ban and a less permissive approach to drama. In general, such agreements took the same form - ghost plays were fundamentally flawed at best, and at worst were dangerous and harmful. Theatrical ghosts supposedly encouraged superstitious behavior among the masses, gave the impression that there was an afterlife, and were not in keeping with the goals of socialist art. However, some performers pointed out that the ban was due more to audiences than the plays themselves. "If we performed a ghost play for the senior cadres of Central Party," on artist stated, "there wouldn't be a problem."[286] This is in fact echoed in the Ministry of Culture directive, which provided an explicit loophole for the performance of ghost plays in theatre and

[284] SMA B172-5-664, 72.

[285] Ibid., 73.

[286] SMA B172-5-664, 147.

research groups. It is unclear how often (if at all) requests to perform ghost plays were granted, but the fact it was mentioned at all reinforces the idea that this was a problem of audience.

The performers sometimes seem more tuned in to the potential ramifications of banning ghost plays. Some noted that several great dramas, including the *Peony Pavilion* and the *Injustice Done to Dou E*, were useful tools for teaching. Furthermore, even a play branded "dangerous" by the Ministry of Culture had its fine points: *Li Huiniang* was singled out for having a lot of artistic value due to its arias and dance techniques. One artist underscored that the banning of ghost plays could be a slippery slope – was Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* [Liaozhai zhiyi], or the poetry of Qu Yuan and Li Bai next?[287]

In another meeting, a troupe brought up an intriguing question, one not usually addressed in discussions on ghost plays - what, exactly, was the meaning of "ghost"? What did it encompass? More saliently for the discussion on the ban - when was a ghost not a 'real' ghost? Drawing on the example of the revolutionary opera *The White-Haired Girl*, they queried how to interpret the famous line that "the old society turns people into ghosts, the new society turns ghosts into people [*jiu shehui shiren bian gui, xin shehui shigui bian ren*]."[288] A similar train of thought showed up in another meeting. Here, there was a question regarding a Yue opera featuring "a person dressed up as a ghost," which the troupe insisted was very different than a ghost character, and thus the play was *not* a ghost play (and not subject to the ban). But some of the audience disagreed, stating

[287] Ibid., 148.

[288] SMA B172-5-664, 72.

it was a small step from people dressed up as a ghost to a ghost character.[289] Here is an echo of the 1954 arguments about Ma Jianling's ghostless adaptation of *Wandering West Lake*, when intellectuals wondered how a person dressed up as character dressed up as a ghost was any less frightening to "the people" than a person dressed up as a ghost character.

Even though a diverse set of opinions is evidenced in these discussions, there is one rather constant undercurrent - simple exhaustion with trying to keep up with changes in the cultural realm. This is one aspect that is difficult to uncover in the published essays on the subject. One artist expressed his frustration with nearly a decade of policy changes and the impact on art by bringing up the numerous hotly debated changes to the character of Li Huiniang: "At first it was ghosts being changed into people [referring to the 1955 Ma Jianling version, *Wandering West Lake*], afterwards the people were turned into ghosts - why do we want to change like this and change like that, the [political] thought [behind all of it] is unclear."[290] One troupe succinctly stated their position on ghost play problem: it had "already been decided by the Central Party - what's left to discuss?!"[17]

The Shanghai performers often seemed to grasp the reality of the situation in ways that their intellectual counterparts did not. Just as a troupe had said, there was, in fact, not much left to discuss. Though many of the intellectuals and performers would not have known it, not only had the Ministry of Culture spoken, but Mao was once again critiquing faults he saw in the cultural realm. He declared in September that "pushing out

---

[289] Ibid., 148.

[290] Ibid.

the old to bring in the new" required new forms, and old forms needed an internal transformation if they were to be of use. In November 1963, he strongly criticized *Theatre Report* and the Ministry of Culture: the journal was disseminating ox ghost-snake spirits, while the Ministry of Culture had been paying no heed to culture. A great many feudal things had taken root, and the Ministry ignored it all – if the Ministry was unable to change, Mao suggested changing its name to "the ministry of emperors, generals, and ministers" or "the ministry of scholars and beauties," or even "the ministry of foreigners and dead people."[291] This was a far cry from the relatively sanguine attitude he displayed during the Hundred Flowers: traditional drama was not driving itself to extinction, and something had to be done.

For all the sharp criticisms of the 1963 ghost debates, they paled in comparison to the attacks that would be coming in 1965 and 1966. The debate of 1963 was a true debate, and intellectuals and performers talked seriously of what to do with drama. Even the more radical participants often expressed a desire to maintain traditional drama in some fashion. Although the torturous logic employed to differentiate plays with ghostly characters from ghost plays can seem less than convincing from several decades after the fact, the 1963 discussion was very much in keeping with the general tone and structure of discussions of the 1950s. Yet the Shanghai troupe discussions illustrate that not everyone was interested in debate: some intellectuals must have felt the same fatigue as many of the Shanghai troupes.

---

[291] Bo Yibo 薄一波, *Ruogan zhongda jueci yu shijian de huigu, xia* 若干重大决策与事件的回顾 [A review of certain major decisions and incidents, volume 2] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1993).

The increasing power of the cultural radicals around Jiang Qing was largely invisible, even in Shanghai. The East China Drama Festival in late 1963 and early 1964 was a sign of growing power, but the Festival of Peking Operas on Contemporary Themes in the summer of 1964 marked the overt beginning of serious attacks and criticism of traditional drama and its proponents. But the end of 1963 saw a subtle shift in the theatre journals like *Theatre Report* or *Play Monthly*, with political musings on socialist thought and contemporary themes crowding out the lively discussions on traditional or classical subjects that had largely dominated until 1963. However, even with increasing power and visibility, proponents of radicalizing the cultural sphere would not find an entirely receptive environment in which to peddle their new wares. 1963 marked the last year ghosts appeared on Chinese stages until 1979, but it by no means marked an end to the high political drama.

Not a Trace of Art: The Cultural Revolution, 1963-1976

The climax of the story of ghost plays, historical drama, and traditional theatre in the Mao years was the Cultural Revolution. Yao Wenyuan's November 1965 criticism of Wu Han and Wu Han and *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* has conventionally been regarded as the "prelude" to the Cultural Revolution.[292] However, as I have argued previously, it ought to be seen as the climax of the early Cultural Revolution: the attack on *Hai Rui* and Wu Han was the last step in the increasingly radical critique of liberal intellectuals.[293] Criticism of Meng Chao and his *Li Huiniang* - and the ghost debate more broadly – paved the way for the later criticism of better protected, more politically connected intellectuals. In this respect, the ghost play debate of 1963 and the targeted criticism of Meng Chao in the first months of 1965 was an earlier indicator of the increasing radicalization of the cultural and political spheres.

This chapter considers the activities of the theatre world leading up to and during the early Cultural Revolution. Cultural discussions quickly shifted from the type seen in 1963, which were relatively robust debates on the suitability of traditional plays, to a much more one-sided valorization of theatre on contemporary themes, and demonization of traditional operas of all kinds. The discussions of 1963 did not alter the course of radicalization, and the discussion quickly moved beyond ghost plays to a more general

---

[292] See "Shi 'wenhua dageming de xumu' haishi cuandang de xumu? – benkan bianjibu juxing zuotanhui pipan Yao Wenyuan de 'ping xinbian lishiju *Hai Rui baguan*'是文化大革命的序幕还是篡党的序幕本 刊编辑部举行座谈会批判姚文元的《评新编历史剧海瑞罢官 [Was it 'the prologue to the Great Cultural Revolution,' or the prologue to seizing the party by force? – the editorial board holds a meeting to criticize Yao Wenyuan's 'Criticizing the new historical play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*'], *Renmin xiju* (January 1979): 4-9.

[293] See Maggie Greene, "A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of Vengeance."

questioning of traditional theatrical forms. The critique of the status quo in the theatre world moved to far more general, and far more negative terms.

However, understanding the post-1963 discussion is critical to our to our understanding of of how ghost plays and drama have been perceived in post-1976 scholarship. With this in mind, this chapter examines both the high-level actions aimed at priming the cultural sphere for a new, much more revolutionary era, as well as the impact on theatre repertoire. I consider the discussions surrounding drama in 1963, with published accounts of the East China Spoken Drama Festival (Shanghai, December 1963-January 1964), and summer 1964, when the Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary themes was held in Beijing. This period was key for Jiang Qing and her allies to establish themselves as leaders in the cultural realm (never far from politics), and it has received some attention from scholars. The Peking opera festival in particular marks a coming out of sorts for Jiang Qing, with her first major public speech, and the first example of high-level political and cultural leaders getting on board publically with her program of drama reform.

However, the high level political maneuvering and battles that played out in the pages of *Theatre Report* and leading newspapers areare only one part of the story. As documents from the Shanghai Culture Bureau show, the cultural radicals faced not only private opposition from political and intellectual elites. They also found themselves attempting to reform the repertoires and performance habits of troupes, as well as the tastes of audiences, in a very short period of time. The preference of audiences and performers for traditional subjects bore little resemblance the grand narratives spelt out in the speeches given at the large drama festivals that lauded the eagerness of the cultural

sphere for new dramas on contemporary themes..

In addition to considering the 1963 and 1964 drama festivals, this chapterchapter will consider the specific criticisms aimed at Meng Chao and his supporters, as well as Tian Han and Wu Han, in order to illustrate the influence the 1965 and 1966 attacks have had on readings of pre-1965 events. While Yao Wenyuan's attack on Wu Han is well-traversed ground for historians of the socialist period, there has been far less attention paid to the attacks on Meng Chao, which occurred a full eleven months before those against Wu Han. I analyze these criticisms in large part to illustrate that Cultural Revolution-era discourse on cultural production was a sharp break from its predecessors in the 1950s and early 1960s, and has had the effect of coloring post-1976 interpretations of the pre-1963 cultural sphere. It is, in fact, from the 1965 and 1966 criticisms that an overwhelming emphasis on the Great Leap Forward as impetus for the creation *Li Huiniang*, *Hai Rui*, and other reformed drama derives. As previous chapters have illustrated, the debate on ghost opera and traditional drama extended far beyond the period following the Leap – a fact that can be difficult to discern in the criticisms of 1965 and 1966.

Cultural Politics: Sharp Left Turn Ahead

As evidenced by the reversals of 1963, the cultural world needed, in the opinion of Mao, to be whipped into shape. As MacFarquhar has noted, "ever since he had observed the seminal role of the Petöfi Circle in the Hungarian revolt of 1956, Mao had been obsessed with the key role which intellectuals could play in mobilizing the masses

in critical political situations."[294] He wanted to ensure that intellectuals were "drummed into service on his side," which would first require getting them back in line after a relatively open period in the wake of the Leap.[295] As seen in the previous chapter, he made sharp rebukes of *Theatre Report* and the Ministry of Culture for ignoring their duty to promote socialist art. Mao set his sights on the cultural elite at large, stating in December 1963 (remarking positively on an article written by Ke Qingshi), "In many departments … very little has been achieved so far in socialist transformation. The 'dead' still dominate …. Isn't it absurd that many Communists are enthusiastic about promoting feudal and capitalistic art, but not socialist art?"[296]

Mao's irritation turned into outright hostility, and in early 1964, he criticized the role of intellectuals throughout history, and further ordered that "'actors, poets, dramatists, and writers' be 'driven out of the cities,'" going so far as to say that "only when they go down will they be fed."[297] From his relatively sanguine attitude in the 1950s, Mao had returned to a much more hardline stance reminiscent of his attitude in the 1940s: intellectuals needed to be among the people and learn from them in order to strengthen their art. Just as he had said at the famous Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, "Our writers and artists have their literary and art work to do, but their primary task is to understand people and know them well."[298] That arguing amongst themselves on the

---

[294] MacFarquhar, *The Coming of the Cataclysm,* 381.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Goldman, *China's Intellectuals*, 90.

[297] Ibid., 92.

[298] Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," 461.

pages of *Theatre Report* and the *Guangming Daily,* to say nothing of penning highly literary adaptations of Ming dynasty plays to be performed in arcane styles like Kun opera, did not qualify as "knowing the people well" hardly needed to be stated. Despite the warning signals that had been coming from 1963 at the latest, and despite the fact that many senior members of the party leapt into action with Mao's increasingly irate commentary on the state of the cultural realm, many performers and intellectuals were under the impression that any attempt at shaking up cultural production would be yet another "brief gust of wind," a term that performers used to describe the occasional periods of intense socialist artistic production in the 1950s.[299] However, Jiang Qing, Ke Qingshi, Yao Wenyuan, Kang Sheng, and the growing group of cultural radicals would ensure this would be no mere gust.

Holding Their Tongues: Festivals and the Theatre World, 1963-1964

Between December 1963 and the summer of 1964, Jiang Qing, Ke Qingshi, and others close to her organized two important dramatic festivals. The first, held in Shanghai, was the East Chinese Spoken Language Drama Festival, designed to celebrate spoken drama; five months later, the Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary Themes was held in Beijing. While the press was full of laudatory articles about the new, appropriately socialist turn the theatre world was taking, Shanghai archival documents lay bare the problems facing Jiang Qing and other cultural radicals who were trying to

[299] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu canjia wenhubu juban de jingju xiandaixi guanmo yanchu de mingdan, zongjie baogao" 上海市文化局关于参加文化部举办的京剧现代戏观摩演出的名单，总结报告 [Name list and final report of the Shanghai cultural bureau regarding attending the Ministry of Culture-sponsored festival on contemporary themes in Peking opera] (29 August 1964), SMA B172-1-527.

make their vision of a socialist Chinese theatre world come to fruition. Their opposition was not simply from the old generation of liberal intellectuals, who in fact were much more likely in public to go along with the spectacles, but from the very "masses" they claimed to be working for. Indeed, some of the political establishment, such as Peng Zhen, also felt that the artistic world was mired in backwardness and needed an infusion of new subjects on revolutionary themes.[300] But at least in Shanghai, audiences and troupes were highly resistant to a whole-scale, lasting change that Jiang Qing and Mao wished to see. At the same time, the Peking opera festival in particular marked a real shift in discourse, both in public and in private. Publically, there were open, named attacks on dramatists like Meng Chao. In less public settings, unlike the autumn 1963 ghost play meanings (dedicated to discussing issues as opposed to individuals), there was an obvious shift to criticisms of specific individuals at meetings designed to discuss issues in theatre. While these were not the struggle sessions of the Cultural Revolution, they must have been extremely uncomfortable for many parties involved.

The 1963 spoken drama festival, held from December 1963 to January 1964 under the auspices of the Shanghai Propaganda Department, was a celebration of the new.[301] Spoken drama lagged seriously behind traditional theatre in popularity, and the goal of the festival was to introduce new plays, new performers, and new writers to supposedly eager audiences. Ke Qingshi's opening remarks attacked – without naming names – the established drama world. Problems in the theatre world were the fault of intellectuals and performers who produced plays that harmed the people by promulgating

[300] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 386.

[301] Goldman, China's Intellectuals, 77.

feudalism, capitalism and bourgeois values, old class structures, old habits, and old thoughts.[302] He further critiqued the decadent cultural world of Shanghai in the Republican period, something which later chroniclers have argued was an attack on senior dramatist (and one of Jiang Qing's *bêtes noires*) Tian Han.[303] Wei Wenbo's remarks, which closed the festival, largely echoed Ke's emphasis on newness. He noted that the festival brought out "many new people, new dramatists, new actors …. For some it was their first time writing a play, for some it was their first time setting foot on stage." However, to describe this impact, he relied - somewhat ironically, considering the circumstances - on a line from the Tang poet Li Shangyin, opining that "the cry of a young phoenix is more pure than that of the old" [*chufeng qing yu laofeng sheng*], proving that expunging the dead from culture was harder than it might first appear.[304]

Despite the high-minded words that would be lauded at the 1963 and 1964 festivals surveys on audiences and plays performed, conducted by the Shanghai Culture Bureau in 1963 and 1964, laid bare the resistance of audiences and troupes to not only spoken drama and drama on contemporary themes, but also cast significant doubt on the

---

[302] "Guanche Mao zhuxi wenyi fangxiang dali tichang xiandaiju - Ke Qingshi tongzhi zai Huadongqu huaju guanmo yanchu kamushi shang jianghua" 贯彻毛主席文艺方向大力提倡现代剧－柯庆施同志在华东区话剧观摩演出开幕式上讲话 [Implement Chairman Mao's artistic trends, energetically advocate for drama on contemporary themes - Comrade Ke Qingshi's speech at the opening ceremonies of the East China Spoken Language Drama Festival], *Shanghai xiju* 1964. 1 (January): 2-5, 2-3.

[303] Dai Zhixian 戴知贤, *Shanyu yulai feng manlou - 60 niandai qianqi de 'dapipan'* 山雨欲来风满楼－60年代前期的'大批判'[Mountain rains about to come, wind fills the building - the early days of mass criticism in the 1960s] (Henan: Henan renmin cubanshe, 1990), 88.

[304] Wei Wenbo 魏文伯, "Zai yijiuliusan nian Huadongqu huaju guanmo yanchu bimu shishang Wei Wenbo tongzhi de bimuci" 在一九六三年欢东区话剧观摩演出闭幕式上魏文伯同志的闭幕词 [Comrade Wei Wenbo's closing remarks at the closing ceremonies of the 1963 East China Spoken Language Drama Festival], *Shanghai xiju* 1963.2 (February): 2-3, 2.

success of fifteen years of drama reform. Shanghai, owing to the great support for Jiang Qing provided by Ke Qingshi, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and others, was the political base of the early phases of Jiang Qing's program to overhaul drama and culture. However, Jiang Qing could not simply convince audiences and performers to conform her wishes.

Although the speeches asserted that it was the fault of the established performers and intellectuals that the theatre world was infected with "old" things, and that spoken drama was the easiest, most relatable vehicle for reaching the masses, the Culture Bureau survey of plays performed in Shanghai in 1964 makes it clear that despite the breath of fresh air Ke Qingshi, Jiang Qing et al. intended the spoken drama festival to provide, the existing demand for spoken-word drama and contemporary themes was apparently very low. Of the over two thousand plays included in the survey – divided both by type of drama, as well as subject matter of the plays - less than fifty were spoken drama.[305] If there was a large demand for spoken drama, it certainly was not reflected by audiences and troupes, even in the wake of the festival. Even by 1965, when traditional subjects were entirely removed from Shanghainese stages, the number of attendees of spoken drama performances (not quite 550,000 people) was not even forty percent of Yue opera goers (just shy of 1.55 million). The Shanghai Yue Opera Troupe alone drew in an average of nearly 1,300 audience members per performance; in contrast, the People's Art spoken drama troupe, the most successful spoken drama troupe, had an average of 886

[305] SMA B172-5-682, 2. Based on similar documents, it is probable that the survey counted every single script from each troupe. That is, if three Yue opera troupes each performed *Red Plum Pavilion*, this would be counted as three separate plays.

audience members at their performances.[306] Although a Shanghai survey would illustrate that younger audiences preferred spoken drama over traditional operatic forms, it is clear that fired up youth were not enough to make up for audiences that continued to prefer local operatic forms to spoken drama.

The emphasis on new productions designed to serve the masses and socialism, as well as the critique of the cultural establishment, continued with the 1964 Peking opera festival. The Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary Themes, held in Beijing from 5 June to 31 July, 1964, was on a cultural and political level far above the spoken drama festival. It was significantly more politically pointed than its predecessor and in many respects, laid the foundation for Jiang Qing's model operas, as well as the all-out political attack on the old guard of performers and cadres. It was not simply a time to study revolutionary art, but also a time for less public discussions that made explicit attacks on luminaries of the Shanghai cultural world.

The festival was an impressive affair, and China's political and cultural elite turned out for it, along with troupes from all over China. As Roderick MacFarquhar has described, "[It was held] under the auspices of Zhou Enlai and Peng Zhen," and at the opening ceremony, "Lu Dingyi, Kang Sheng, Guo Moruo, and all the luminaries of the [Beijing] Opera world were arrayed on the dais; in front of them sat 5,000 artistes and officials from all over the country."[307] The main emphasis of the festival was on the failings of the cultural world. In Peng Zhen's speech, which hewed closely to the line that

---

[306] "Shanghai shi yijiuliuwu nian shangyan jumu tongjibiao" 上海市一九六五年上演剧目统计表 [List of repertoire performed in Shanghai, 1965] (February 1966), SMA B172-5-434.

[307] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 387.

had become popular in late 1963, he criticized the theatre world for sticking too closely to stories of "emperors, generals and ministers, scholars and beauties, old men and their wives, princes and ladies," and instead needed to serve the people.[6] "The masses, particularly the majority of youths," he claimed, "don't like this performing of emperors, generals and ministers and not putting on revolutionary contemporary plays, and long ago expressed this. The method of expression was quite simple, they simply didn't buy your tickets. Old Peking opera audiences [are smaller than] those for local forms, and this is because [local forms] put on revolutionary contemporary dramas."[308]

This was simply untrue, at least in one major market. While Peng was correct that local forms were preferred in many locales over Peking opera, the idea that this was due to a plethora of revolutionary dramas found in local forms is suspect. A year before the Peking opera festival, the Shanghai Culture Bureau undertook a small survey to assess the popularity of Peking opera in the city and its outskirts. In one respect, it proves Peng Zhen correct: young audiences were largely disinterested in classical opera of any stripe, including operas on revolutionary themes, preferring contemporary spoken drama.[309] Among the few people who counted themselves as Peking opera fans (primarily educated cadres from the north), they largely wanted to see famous actors in traditional costume, not prancing about stage in modern clothes. But, as the Culture Bureau discovered, most

---

[308] Peng Zhen 彭真, "Zai jingju xiandaixi guanmo yanchu dahuishang de jianghua" 在京剧现代戏观摩演出大会上的讲话 [Speech at the festival on contemporary themes in *jingju*], *Xiju bao* 1964 (July): 4-9, 5.

[309] "Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu jumu gongzuoshi de gongzuo zhidu, fen'gong yijian ji Shanghai jingju guanmo qingkuang chubu diaocha"上海市文化局关于剧目工作室的工作制度，分工意见及上海京剧观众情况初步调查 [Shanghai culture bureau regarding program of work of the repertoire office, opinions on the division of labor as well as a preliminary survey regarding the situation of Shanghai's Peking opera audiences] (11 Nov 1963), SMA B172-5-680, 1-2.

Shanghai audiences simply preferred local forms by a huge margin, some expressing that they found the language and dramatic conventions difficult to understand. As one older woman from Zhangjiazhai (in the Jing'an district) said, "The more you listen to *yue* opera, the more comfortable it becomes; a sentence of seven words is a sentence of seven words … in Peking opera, one word can become ever so long …."[310] In fact, many people from the outskirts are described as thinking Peking opera so unintelligible that it must have been some sort of "foreign play" [*yangxi*].[311]

Jiang Qing's speech at the 1964 Peking opera festival was her "first major public speech of her life." It was not - unlike the remarks of Peng Zhen and others- published at the time, only being published as a pamphlet in 1967 (a Foreign Languages Press translation followed in 1968).[312] Her comments were rather tempered, particularly considering the remarks of others like Kang Sheng: while stressing the creation of opera on revolutionary themes, those on historical themes "before our Party came into being area also needed."[313] It seems likely that Jiang Qing's idea of "appropriate historical themes" and the opinions of a great many performers and intellectuals on what constituted suitable themes diverged rather greatly (namely, "historical" came to mean "history of the Party") - and it was, of course, Jiang Qing's interpretation that won out in the end. However, it was going to take a serious struggle to install "revolutionary"

---

[310] SMA B172-5-680, 3.

[311] Ibid.

[312] Ross Terrill, *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984), 248; MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 388-89; Jiang Qing, *On the Revolution of Peking Opera* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), 3.

Peking opera as a model form, at least outside of Beijing. It is clear that members of the cultural radicals were steeling for a fight, especially when they openly denounced senior writers at the festival. Kang Sheng, Meng Chao's old friend and ardent fan of traditional drama, did not hold back in his criticisms of the very same play he had encouraged his friend to write. "In the past fifteen years," he declared, "we have not put out any good plays. On the contrary, we've only produced bad scripts like *Li Huiniang* and *Xie Yaohuan*."[314] Kang Sheng was nothing if not a political opportunist, and a friendship of fifty years meant very little in the face of opportunities presented with Mao's leftist turn.

The Peking opera festival was not entirely made up of speeches, performing, and watching. As the summary from the Shanghai Culture Bureau documents, there was much discussion going on behind the scenes, often with a less positive gloss than encouraging speeches. The Shanghai contingent was a significant one, particularly as Jiang Qing had spent much time in Shanghai prior to the festival working on the operas *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* [Zhi qu weihu shan] and *The Legend of the Red Lantern* [Hongdeng ji], which were duly trotted out at the festival.[315] Zhang Chunqiao, a close collaborator of Jiang Qing, headed the delegation, with operatic luminaries Zhou Xinfang and Yu Zhenfei, as well as Li Taicheng, as deputy heads.[316] Zhang, in addition to heading the delegation, gave a report on the "spirit of the age," though the document does not detail the precise details of his - or anyone else's - speech. Likewise, the contents of discussions between Shanghai representatives and a variety of political and

---

[314] Zhong Kan 仲侃, *Kang Sheng pingzhuan* 康生评传 [A critical biography of Kang Sheng] (Beijing: Hongqi chubanshe, 1982), 93.

[315] Terrill, 248-249.

[316] SMA B172-1-527, 1. This document exists in two forms: the preliminary draft and a final report.

cultural luminaries, Zhou Yang and Xia Yan among them, are not recorded in detail.[317] However, it is clear that the Shanghai radicals were enjoying a certain level of prestige at the festival.

Pleasantries aside, the document details significant problems inin the cultural world, particularly the idea that performance of contemporary themed plays was simply a "brief gust of wind," as some performers described it. The impression that the focus on contemporary themes was yet another brief cultural fad, encouraged by the party, was "not just present among the old generation of Peking opera practitioners," the report complains, "but also among some of the younger members." The young actress Li Bingshu - "*even* after arriving in Beijing" for the festival - "still had a thought of finding several teachers, so as to study more traditional plays, to improve her performance of 'The Broken Bridge' [*Duanqiao* from *Legend of White Snake*] and those types of traditional plays."[318]

The festival was also an opportunity for criticism; several instances of semi-public (the participants all seeming to be from the Shanghai contingent) discussions to debate failures of years past. While discussing the problem of promoting traditional drama, several stars of the theatre world were the focus of criticism: "Zhou Xinfang, Yu Zhenfei, Yan Huizhu [Yu Zhenfei's wife], Li Ruilai - all remained totally silent." The editor of the journal *Shanghai Opera* likewise simply held his tongue when accused of

[317] Mention of Zhang's speech, along with most mentions of Zhang, were deleted for the final version of the report.

[318] SMA B172-1-527, 6.

propagating "ghost plays."[319] These cultural luminaries came under further criticism when another discussion turned to the topic of capitalist thoughts and "high salaries."[320] And even when the topic of discussion moved away from individuals, there were wide criticisms for most anyone that was part of the current system of theatrical productions. The Peking opera community (and surely, this could be extended to the opera world more broadly) was described as "preserving the feudal student-teacher relationship, the feudal trade association relationship, relationships of feudal factions - all of these are placed above the party and proletariat."[321] For all the relatively accommodating words of the public speeches, behind the scenes, it certainly appeared that factions of of the political apparatus were preparing for quite a fight – to not simply promote drama on contemporary themes, but to tear down the theatre world as it existed. It was obvious by the summer of 1964 that matters had become ever more political, and ever more personal, in the world of cultural production.

Meanwhile, despite the efforts of 1963 and 1964, the Shanghai survey of 1964 theatre makes it abundantly clear that there was little interest among audiences and performers for these new drama trends. Throughout 1964, plays on contemporary themes never comprised more than forty percent of plays performed, and were not even a quarter of the active repertoire of Shanghainese and other local opera forms.[322] However, the

---

[319] SMA B172-1-527, 13.

[320] Ibid., 22.

[321] Ibid., 24.

[322] SMA B172-5-682, 2. The statistics include Yue opera (by far the most popular type of opera, at least as far as sheer numbers of plays performed), Peking opera, Kun opera, Hu opera, Yang opera, Huai opera, Tong opera, and Xi opera. The troupes counted are Shanghai-based troupes; while non-Shanghai troupes

same survey tallied historical data from 1958 through 1963, illustrating why many performers and intellectuals may have considered the 1963 and 1964 efforts were just one more shift in a period that had experienced many "gusts." In 1958 and 1959, for instance, drama on contemporary themes made up nearly thirty percent of plays performed. In 1960, they declined to less than twenty five percent - and by 1961, they comprised barely ten percent. The nadir of contemporary-themed drama was 1962, where they made up a mere eight percent, with traditional plays making up eighty four percent of plays performed. Yet, in the next year, the numbers "equalized," and returned to numbers seen in 1959.[323] Much like the intellectual discourse of 1963 - which many intellectuals seemed to think was simply another change of direction, like a pendulum that would eventually swing back to the other side - one could imagine that performers and cadres of the cultural sphere would find fluctuations a normal part of business. And, in some respects, Shanghai may have been far ahead of Beijing in terms of performances on revolutionary themes. Colin Mackerras has stated that in Beijing, traditional pieces made up 97 percent of performances in 1960, 83 percent in 1961, and all plays in 1962.[324]

The Shanghai documents do underscore the fact that Mao was in fact quite right in declaring little progress had been made since 1949. Despite the effort poured into reforming traditional drama and promoting new forms of entertainment, there was an

---

had general statistics listed for themes, they did not tally the types of non-local troupes coming through. Non-local performances made up a not insignificant thirty percent of plays performed.

[323] SMA B172-5-682, 5.

[324] Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 168. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* article Mackerras cites here must not have been including spoken drama. However, the Shanghai statistics still illustrate that all types of plays, with the exception of Kun opera (which itself was not often performed), were performing at least a few plays on contemporary themes.

overwhelming preference for traditional opera on traditional subjects, performed in local styles. Reformed traditional scripts like *Li Huiniang* comprised a mere two percent of operas performed in 1964.[325] In some ways, this shows how small the reach of the soon-to-be "poisonous weeds" were: audiences were, by and large, not watching adaptations; Shanghai audiences watched *Story of Red Plums*, not Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*. But it also highlights the potential challenges of fixing the system, and explains some of the drastic measures taken in 1965 and the years following. The gradual method had not produced significant results, except perhaps in filling the pages of elite journals and newspapers.

And so, if audiences and troupes would not choose to give up their preference for traditional drama, the choice would be taken from them. However, the shift (at least in regards to Shanghai) somewhat challenges perceptions about how this took place, and what it looked like – possibly due to the influence of Jiang Qing's Shanghai comrades in cultural arms. Liu Zhingzhi has argued that following the 1964 Peking opera festival, "There was no time for [troupes of other regional forms] to write, rehearse, and perform many contemporary operas …. Contemporary drama was still unable to take the place of traditional drama." [10] Only in 1966, he argues, were wholesale changes able to take place, with traditional operas finally being replaced wholesale. This may have been true outside of a major cultural center, but the assertion that traditional drama could not be replaced is demonstrably false in the case of Shanghai. Massive changes, including the creation of new scripts, happened very quickly and without much time to prepare.

---

[325] SMA B172-5-682, 1.

In 1965, traditional plays simply disappeared from official reckoning of what had appeared on Shanghainese stages. Even accounting for the possibility that Culture Bureau cadres were hiding whatever traditional plays had been performed, there is no doubt that troupes and audiences experienced a massive shift. The drop in plays performed is impressive: from 1,051 plays performed by local, Shanghai-based troupes in 1964 to 276 in 1965. In fact, when the same play being performed by multiple troupes of different types is taken into account, the number drops to 148.[326] Even when we keep in mind that a great number of traditional opera plays were in fact the same story, or overlapped heavily in source material, there is still an incredible constriction in the number of plays being performed in 1965. The themes were consistent, even if the titles were not: *American Invaders, Get out of Vietnam!*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *Ode to the Dragon River*, *The Red Doctor*, and so on. They were apparently red and revolutionary to the core, and most were created in the span of a year. And yet, despite this sudden narrowing of the theatrical sphere, Jiang Qing's projects - spoken drama, Peking opera, and the plays that would become the model operas - continued to find comparatively little favor vis-à-vis local forms and other takes on revolutionary themes. Shanghai audiences may have been forced to watch contemporary themed drama if they wanted to watch an opera, but they were generally going to see Yue opera, Hu opera, or Huai opera – local forms that were deeply rooted in Shanghainese culture – and not Peking opera or spoken drama.

[326] Liu Ching-chi, *A Critical History of New Music in China*, trans. Caroline Mason (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010), 388.

Poisonous Weeds: the Opening Salvos of the Cultural Revolution

As discussed in previous chapters, late 1962 and 1963 can be seen as the cultural "prelude" to the Cultural Revolution; the late 1965 attack on Wu Han was the climax of those early efforts of Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng. Mao, who had briefly retreated in the wake of the disastrous Leap, once again began to exert control over domestic and foreign affairs in the latter part of 1962, assisted by "an *ad hoc* coalition of trusted supporters like Kang Sheng which would become a truly 'anti-party-group'" in 1965 and 1966.[327] That this little coalition was destined for great things is perhaps evidenced by Kang Sheng's summer 1962 notes for Meng Chao, cautioning his old friend from writing ghost plays well before the 1963 ban. At the same time, many important intellectuals and politicians seem not to have sensed the shift to the left taking place, or at least not the extreme turn events were to take.

The intellectual and cultural climate of 1962 and 1963 - even after the March 1963 ban on ghost plays - was apparently comfortable enough that debates carried on as they had since the early 1950s. And although Mao was increasingly (and publicly) displeased with the drama world, senior intellectuals were hardly rushing to satisfy Jiang Qing's wishes in regards to overhauling Chinese theatre.[328] Many important members of the party are attributed with a variety of disbelieving and exceedingly negative comments about Jiang Qing's forays into creating her model operas. Peng Zhen, despite his comments at the 1964 festival, is supposed to have said that the plays were "still at the stage of wearing trousers with a slit in the seat," and wondered "What the hell are these

[327] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 324.

[328] Ibid., 385.

models? I'm head of arts in this place, and I know nothing of models." The cutting comment that "you just see a bunch of people running to and fro on the stage. Not a trace of art" is attributed to Deng Xiaoping.[329]

Mao's words in late 1963 - that *Theatre Report* was "full of ox ghost-snake spirits," that that the theatre world in general was was guilty of adoring "feudal and bourgeois art," that the Ministry of Culture ought to be renamed the "Ministry of Emperors, Princes, Generals and Ministers," among other options - were certainly indications that the cultural and political realms were undergoing a massive shift.[330] Other signs of the gathering storm were much more subtle: Kang Sheng's terse notes to Meng Chao and the cold shouldering of Tian Han at the East China Spoken drama Festival in late 1963, where the senior dramatist was denied the the seating his position ought to have accorded him.[331] The slight notwithstanding, the early published attacks focused largely on Meng Chao and *Li Huiniang* - beginning with the 1963 Liang Bihui piece discussed previously, continuing into 1964 with an essay by Deng Shaoji, and into 1965 with the opening salvos of the Cultural Revolution in essay form.

---

[329] Terrill, 249. One of the problems of establishing what was going on in elite literary and cultural circles, particularly where the leaders are concerned, has to do with the sources available to us; Terrill's citations for Peng and Deng's disapproving comments apparently derive from 1967 sources, hardly an unbiased period. The Chinese and English-language biographies of Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng almost read like scandal sheets, and Terrill is no exception. He also seems to have a fundamental misunderstanding of the production and performance of drama in the PRC. The The effort to regulate drama, for instance, is met with incredulity: "She did not blush to say the Central Committee of the Communist Party should become the 'processing plant' for reform of the theater (as if the White House were to select the shows for Broadway based on the needs of the next election!)" (243). While the Central Committee itself may not have busied itself with "selecting the shows" in previous years, the idea that drama reform was too trivial for the central apparatus to bother is, as we have seen, incorrect. Jiang Qing's model operas took reform a step further than efforts of the 1950s or early 1960s, but they were not at all novel.

[330] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*,385; Dai, 87.

[331] Dai, 88.

While the criticism of *Li Huiniang* and ghost plays in 1963 did include criticisms of the authors themselves, the debate was far milder than the personal attacks of the Cultural Revolution. *Li Huiniang*, as the most recent and influential example of a reworked ghost play, was mentioned frequently, but the 1963 discussion was a more general argument on the utility of ghost plays. The socialist credentials of authors like Meng Chao were not under direct attack; even the Ke Qingshi-directed essay by Liang Bihui on the problems of the "some ghosts are harmless" theory and *Li Huiniang* is relatively mild. The criticisms that appeared in early 1964 and 1965 were hardly so genteel. No longer was this a general discussion on the suitability of ghost plays on Chinese stages. Instead, it was Meng Chao's views that took center stage. It is important to note that in many of these criticisms, it is post-script to the 1962 book version of *Li Huiniang* that is attacked. The play is not a "poisonous weed" simply because of its form and theme, it is poisoned thanks to the incorrect, *anti-socialist* viewpoints of its author. This is indicative of a large shift in the approach to "fixing" the cultural world: no longer was it sufficient to concentrate on the plays without considering the people writing these weeds. A wholesale change of personnel was necessary.

In the summer of 1964, coinciding with the opening of the Peking opera festival, a lengthy screed was published in *Literary Criticism* that is representative of the highly personal attacks levied at writers and intellectuals in the Cultural Revolution. Entitled "*Li Huiniang* – a Poisonous Weed," the article largely draws from Meng Chao's postscript to the book publication, as well as the substance of the play itself, to launch a

personal attack on the author and his supporters.[332] This is a striking difference from the criticisms of years before – now at issue is not whether or not the play is suitable (it is clearly not), but the political thinking and attitude of the author.

It is also an attack not simply on the play, but on its supporters – the introductory paragraph quotes from numerous positive reviews, as well as Liao Mosha's "Some Ghosts are Harmless." The target is not a singular ghost or one author, but the whole liberal project that had supported revisions like the ones Meng Chao made. To "refute the absurd idea that ghost plays are not only *not* harmless, but have good points" is one goal; these points had historically been acknowledged even in the announcement of the ban. The author spends some time detailing the changes made to the plot in Meng Chao's version, namely the lack of emphasis on the love story and the deletion of the Pei Yu-Lu Zhaorong plot (the author of the criticism pays little attention to the fact that historically, the Pei Yu-Li Huiniang tale had been the more compelling for audiences and writers).

In many respects, the essay written by Deng Shaoji – a 31 year old Fudan University graduate and specialist in ancient literature (including drama) at what is now the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences - presages the more famous criticisms of 1965 and 1966.[333] Meng Chao's "individualism" and his supposed technique of putting his thoughts into action through the character of Li Huiniang, are particular sticking points,

---

[332] Deng Shaoji 邓绍基, "*Li Huiniang* – yizhu ducao" 《李慧娘》－一株毒草 [Li Huiniang – a poisonous weed], *Wenxue pinglun* 1964.6: 10-20.

[333] Cheng Yun 程芸, "Deng Shaoji" 邓绍基, in *Mingshi huicui: Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan yanjiushengyuan boshisheng daoshi jianjie (yi)* 名师荟萃—中国社会科学院研究生院博士生导师简介（一）[A distinguished assembly of famous teachers: a brief introduction to doctoral supervisors of the graduate school of the Chinese academy of social sciences] (Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 1998), 478-479.

and would continue to be primary avenue used in attacking senior liberal intellectuals. Deng describes him (through use of the postscript) as "gloomy" during the Great Leap Forward, a totally inappropriate state for a CCP member at such a wonderful time for the country.[334] These points would be repeated time and again. However, unlike later pieces, Deng turned to one of Meng Chao's earlier pieces to divine more evidence for his anti-party thoughts. In 1949, Meng Chao published *A Guide to the Heroes of Liangshan Marsh*, a collection of 29 character sketches from *The Water Margin*. Originally published under the pen name "Caomang shijia" [historian of *caomang*], it seems an innocent project of a well-trained literary scholar and writer. As the essayist Nie Gannu, an old friend of Meng Chao's, would write in a forward to the 1985 republication, "Of his *Li Huiniang*, some said it was a case of 'using the past to allude to the present.' I think this little book really is using the past to comment on the present. This book is an ode to Liangshan Marsh, in reality it's an ode to Yan'an - Liangshan alludes to Yan'an, those writing *zawen* in GMD-controlled areas during the war of resistance often employed this tactic."[335]

Of course, the book did not receive such a positive reading in the 1964 attack. But the tack employed by Deng was not to criticize the topic, or the way the essays were framed, but Meng Chao's pen name, "Caomang shijia." "Whether or not we can call him a historian is not under discussion," Deng declared. "But he cannot be considered some

---

[334] Deng, 14.

[335] Nie Gannu 聂绀弩, "Huai Meng Chao - zuowei *Shuibo liangshan yingxiong pu* de xu" 怀孟超－作为水波梁山英雄谱 [Thinking of Meng Chao - written as a preface to *A Guide to the Heroes of the Marsh*], in Meng Chao 孟超, *Shuibo liangshan yingxiong pu* 水波梁山英雄谱 (Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1985): 1-4, 4.

caomang person, he is quite clearly a cadre of the country. That is to say, having a position of leadership in the CCP and in the People's Republic, as a member of the CCP, how can he pose as a '*caomang*'? Isn't this a lie? We know Meng Chao enjoys engaging in word mongering, but he cannot possibly *not* know the meaning of these two characters, *caomang."* Deng explains how *he* reads Meng Chao's use of *caomang*: "it often refers to a person 'out of power,' such as a 'minister out of power' … or a person of low social status, such as a '*caomang* hero [i.e., Robin Hood].'"[336] In the authors view, a pen name selected in 1949 or the years before clearly indicated Meng Chao's expression of individualistic leanings and his dissatisfaction with his current position, as if he were part of a faction that was out of power. His pen name was just one more example of the anti-party, anti-people feelings found in *Li Huiniang*. Considering the numerous materials available to Meng Chao's critics (particularly his *zawen* of the early 1960s), the *caomang* criticism is a somewhat baffling diversion from the *Li Huiniang* problem. It perhaps explains why later authors would stay away from attempting to divine anything from his pre-1949 works.

In January 1965, an article appeared in *Theatre Report* under the pen name Qi Xiangqun. Like the later criticisms of Tian Han and Wu Han, it is likely this was a pen name for a group of people and that the essay was carefully crafted with input from Jiang Qing and others. Entitled "A Serious Criticism of Meng Chao's adapted [drama] *Li Huiniang*," it provided a model for all the criticisms to follow in later months.[337] It is a

---

[336] Deng, 15.

[337] Qi Xiangqun 齐向群, "Chongping Meng Chao xinbian *Li Huiniang*" 重评孟超新编《李慧娘》[A serious criticism of Meng Chao's adaptation *Li Huiniang*] *Xiju bao* 1965.1 (Jan): 2-8. The piece, like most

vicious political attack on Meng Chao. The subject of the piece, as in Deng's essay, is is no longerthe question of the suitability of ghost plays, but of the political motivations of the author. Before delving into specific criticisms, the authors gave a concise history of *Li Huiniang* and its reception among the literati and in the press.

The first mention of Meng Chao's wrongs comes from an essay he wrote in 1959, celebrating Tian Han (the selection of this particular essay surely could not have been an accident: while the attack on Tian Han followed Meng Chao's by a full year, the two were inextricably linked - along with Wu Han - as the first targets of Jiang Qing's clique). In the 1959 piece, Meng Chao described his thoughts on artistic production, specifically adapting drama: "One part of artistic works, the 'new,' is to traverse the author's new points of view, to bring a fresh approach and description to historical characters or traditional themes, to obtain things from within them that can be used to teach today's people, can make the past serve the present, but will not violate historical realities."[338] While this is hardly a radical point of view - "using the past to serve the present" was a common defense of traditional or historical subject matter throughout the 1950s and early 1960s - the authors of the criticism use this to underscore the idea that Meng Chao was up to something in reworking a traditional opera. Establishing exactly what that was is the true purpose of the article.

The bulk of the criticism is divided into three sections: "Propagating the ridiculous 'ferocious after death' line of reasoning and the avenging essence of capitalist

---

criticisms of this period, was republished widely in regional publications, as well as the March 1, 1965 edition of *People's Daily*.

[338] Ibid., 2-3.

individualism," "the shell of Li Huiniang, the spirit of Meng Chao," "using ghosts to encourage which 'living people,' and encouraging them to do what?". While some time is spent on discussing the "propagating of superstition," it is something of a red herring. On one hand, the authors state that according to Meng Chao's portrayal of Li Huiniang's "strength after death" could give the impression that "not only do people turn into ghosts after death, but further, ghosts are stronger than living people, living has no meaning, and only after death is there any power." By this logic, Meng Chao is neglecting his duties as a socialist author to stamp out superstition and encourage struggle amongst the living. On the other, there is an echo of the 1963 criticisms of the play - namely, that Li Huiniang is *ineffective* in her "struggle," and thus has the effect of "consolidating" the power of feudalism, and so loses power as a teaching vehicle.[339] While one doubts that having an especially strong ghost would have saved Meng Chao from Cultural Revolution criticism, it does appear that - at least for purposes of the critical essays - the first crime of Meng Chao was in not being didactic enough. Returning to the 1962 post script, the authors underscore this lack of teaching on Meng Chao's part by discussing his apparent lack of concern for discussing the proletariat or opposing feudalism: "If he considers himself a proletarian author, why doesn't he clearly point out the evils of feudalism and the righteousness of opposing feudalism?"[340] The answer was a simple one, and one that Meng Chao addressed in his post-script - which is gleefully pounced on later in Qi's piece. He, like many of the senior intellectuals and politicians like Chen Yi, had expressed distaste for the overly didactic, dull dramas that occasionally came into vogue.

---

[339] Qi, 4.

[340] Ibid.

In addition to not injecting his play with enough educational purpose, the essay attacks Meng Chao for what amounts to a "lack of positive thinking." Drawing from the "Hatred" scene, which marks Li Huiniang's first appearance as a ghost, as well as the fifth scene, "Saving Pei," and the post-script, the authors emphasized the language underscoring a dreary feeling or atmosphere. Meng's descriptors of his sickbed vision of Li Huiniang echo his depiction of Li Huiniang in "Hatred": dreary, cool, lonely, crying insects. The writer came to the idea of Li Huiniang in the fall of 1959. How, the authors query, could Meng Chao have been so miserable at the "high point" of the Leap, a period when (at least according to this set of radicals) the rest of China was engaged in momentous, positive work? Why did he get the idea of writing *Li Huiniang* at that point, and why was he unable to forget the idea of revenge?

Despite post-Cultural Revolution pieces that encourage reading this critique as the radicals drawing direct parallels between Meng Chao's script and the Great Leap Forward (that is, Jia Sidao as Mao or the party at large and Li Huiniang as the long-suffering, indignant intellectuals), the approach in the essay is not nearly so pat. First, the authors attacked what they described as "capitalist individualism" for Meng Chao's emphasis on "I" and "freedom" in his postscript. "Is it really that in our society, we should fully allow these anti-party, anti-people, anti-socialism 'freedoms'?"[341] Although the piece does make references specifically to the Leap, the real charge is not a lack of positive feeling for the campaign, but for harboring "individualist" thoughts – he was not engaged in the great collective work of the masses in 1958 and 1959. Linked to this critique of individualism is the post-script's critique of certain corners of the drama world,

[341] Qi, 6.

wherein Meng Chao describes the "dry, turgid, and dull language" of some contemporary plays. This is framed not simply as an attack on certain dramatists, but as an attack on the "socialist life" and evidence that he "is dissatisfied or hates it."[342]

In the final section of analysis, questioning whom Meng Chao intended to encourage, the authors argue that *Li Huiniang* is hardly a reflection of contemporary society. Analyzing Li Huiniang's "ghost bodhisattva" aria of "Hatred," they declare that people of today face no hardships and there are no "bitter refugees of disasters" (the people Li Huiniang declares she wishes to offer comfort and aid to). More damning, Meng Chao is declared as harboring reactionary class thought, and accused of using Li Huiniang to express that. They point to lines from the play where the concubine describes her miserable existence, describing this as evidence of her feelings "living in the lap of luxury" [*jinyi yushi*] rather than any desire to overturn the exploiting class.[343] Indeed, Meng Chao, they say, is *not* encouraging others like him to "wait until death to resist," as they "all know that resistance after death is fantasy …. It is actually describing the strong resistance to socialism by capitalist-individualist people, the state of mind of an exploiting class that is unwilling to withdraw from the historical stage, and describing their death struggle."[344]

The Qi Xiangqun essay is not, unlike the 1963 anti-ghost play essays, a particularly sophisticated piece of work. Whereas many of the 1963 essays (to say nothing of their forerunners between 1950 and 1963) were erudite, if radical, literary

---

[342] Qi, 6.

[343] Ibid., 7. The line Qi refers to is in fact a modified version of a poem by the great poet of the Southern Song, Wen Tianxiang.

[344] Ibid.

critiques, the Qi piece often reads as a confused diatribe that is not at all concerned with making logical sense. Certainly, there was little effort to build a truly cogent argument: while many of the individual pieces of the argument make some measure of sense, on the whole, the essay is teleological in the extreme. Since it is a foregone conclusion that Meng Chao harbored anti-party, anti-socialist feelings, there was no other reading of his play or postscript that was possible. Of course, unlike the 1963 debates, there was little pretense of a reasoned debate.

Shortly after the Qi essay was published, Liao Mosha appeared again as Fan Xing, this time repudiating his "some ghosts are harmless" theory. Liao had come under stiff criticism in 1963, and Li Xifan's criticism was a piece that played an important role in the discussions of ghost opera in that year. Writing in the *Beijing Evening News*, the paper that had originally published his 1961 essay, he penned a self-criticism that was part examination of his own "incorrect" points of view, and part criticism of Meng Chao's motives.[345] Liao claimed he had "forgotten that our socialist society still harbored … class contradictions and class struggle, and still had the two road struggle of socialism and capitalism," which led to the folly of defending ghost plays. He criticized himself for going against Mao's proscriptions for art and literature – namely, that art was to serve the masses and socialism, and needed to "struggle with capitalist and feudal art that opposes socialist artistic improvement." Contritely quoting Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* ("The traditions of all dead generations weigh on the minds of the living like a nightmare"), he claimed that "truly, these feudal and capitalist traditions weigh on

[345] Fan Xing 繁星 [Liao Mosha 寥沫沙], "Wo de 'yougui wuhai lun' shi cuowu de' de" 我的'有鬼无害论'是错误的 [My 'some ghosts are harmless theory' was a mistake], *Beijing Wenyi* 1965 (March): 59-64, 62.

me like a nightmare."[346] Of course, self-flagellation was only a part of his public self-criticism; much of the essay is made up of an attack on Meng Chao.

Despite Merle Goldman's assertion that "Liao continued to defend Meng's play for airing dissatisfaction with present-day reality,"[347] his approach was largely the same as the one seen in the Qi essay. Using Meng Chao's 1962 post-script, he questions what "spirit of the age" Meng Chao was attempting to draw out. The spirit of the Southern Song? No, because while Jia Sidao was a real historical personage, Pei Yu and Li Huiniang were not. The spirit of the Ming? How could Meng Chao hope to grasp that period that was 450 years before his time? The answer, then, was that "it was Meng Chao's own 'era,' his own 'feelings."[348] Much like the Qi criticisms, which castigated the author's "gloomy" feelings in the autumn of 1959, Liao questions why Meng Chao was moping around in a period marked by "surmounting natural disasters, combating imperialism" and the like.[349] Of course, we should likely not read too much into Liao's remarks: it seems very unlikely that he had an enormous amount of latitude to express himself, and a stiff critique of Meng Chao and his play would be an expected part of renouncing his earlier views.

Another important article of the 1965 criticisms - the year not being marked by a plethora of diverse viewpoints on the pages of leading journals and papers - is Bu Linfei's February essay, first published in the *Guangming Daily*, and reprinted in *Theatre*

---

[346] Fan Xing, 61.

[347] Goldman, China's Intellectuals, 106.

[348] Fan Xing, 62.

[349] Ibid., 63.

Report.[350] At issue is Meng Chao's "defense" of his "incorrect thought and theory." His first point of attack is Meng Chao's veneration of and references to the master of Ming *chuanqi*, Tang Xianzu, which Bu takes as evidence of the author ignoring the Marxist ideals on art and literature. By relying on Tang, Meng Chao is making use of outmoded, worn out modes of artistic production. As Bu works through more of the post-script, he concludes that there is no true struggle in Meng Chao's works, and worse yet, the writer clearly opposes the idea of class struggle. Bu attacks further statements made by Meng Chao and his post-script: his disdain of overly political, dry and dull plays show clearly he is opposing socialist thought. His work is encouraging "escapism," a truly bourgeois idea, and abandons any commitment to a proletarian ideology; how could the result be anything but a work of art that opposes socialism?

Despite post-Cultural Revolution interpretations that state Meng Chao, Wu Han, and Tian Han were attacking the party's action – or inaction – during the Great Leap Forward, it is clear that the 1965 essayists (including Yao Wenyuan's famous essay) do not draw parallels between the plays themselves and the disaster of the Great Leap as such. This would come later. Bu does indeed criticize Meng Chao's actions during the Leap, but not for the reasons that have generally been read back into the play (that is, a criticism of the disaster). Bu, like Qi, returns to the post-script and one of the most lyrical passages in Meng Chao's essay: the image of the author laying on his sickbed in the fall of 1959, listening to the lonely sound of chirping insects in the chilly air of an autumn

---

[350] Bu Linfei 卜林扉, "Fan shehuizhuyi de sixiang he yishu – pipan Meng Chao tongzhi de kunju *Li Huiniang* daiba" 反社会主义的思想和艺术批 判孟超同志的昆剧《李慧娘》代跋 [Anti-socialist thought and art – criticizing comrade Meng Chao's postscript to the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*], *Xiju bao* (February 1965): 44-45.

evening. It was here, as discussed earlier, that the well-loved ghost of Meng Chao's childhood appeared before him, providing the inspiration to rewrite *Story of Red Plums*. 1959 was, Bu claims, a highly "dynamic" period, and what was this writer doing? Moping in bed! Here was a lack of "positive thinking" if ever there was one. Bu ends his attack by stating that there is no grand socialist purpose to Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, as revealed by the author's own writing. "The thing [the play] is 'spreading' is a 'ghost hero' who is opposing socialism. This kind of ideology, this type of product, is a written declaration of war to encourage an attack by capitalist thought on socialism."[351]

The criticism of Meng Chao in the early part of 1965 was followed by relative calm before the storm that would be unleashed by the publication and promotion of Yao Wenyuan's attack on Wu Han in November of that year. However, *Li Huiniang* and its author were unquestionably linked to the criticisms of Wu Han and Tian Han and their respective historical plays, the "three great poisonous weeds" of the early period. Beyond the fact that they were senior writers or intellectuals of some standing, Tian Han and Meng Chao were even more closely linked, as *Li Huiniang* and *Xie Yaohuan* were published in the same 1961 issue of *Play Monthly*.

In November 1965, Yao Wenyuan's criticism of Wu Han's *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* was published; it is a piece that, while declaring Wu Han (like Meng Chao before him) a promulgator of anti-Party, anti-socialist thought, does not draw a parallel between the Hai Rui story and the Mao-Peng Dehuai affair of 1959. Indeed, it was apparently Mao himself who, in late December of that year, followed a suggestion of Kang Sheng and declared that "dismissed" was the dangerous term. "The Jiaqing

[351] Bu, 45.

emperor dismissed Hai Rui, in 1959 we dismissed Peng Dehuai. Peng Dehuai is 'Hai Rui.'"[352] This type of direct reading (whether Hai Rui-as-Peng Dehuai or Li Huiniang's waning Song dynasty-as-Great Leap Forward) was not, then, found in the initial criticisms, such as those by Qi Xiangqun or Bu Linfei, yet has remained an enduring part of Cultural Revolution analyses. If it had seemed to be a valid avenue of attack in 1965 or earlier, one would expect the writers to pounce on it in much the same way they seized upon seemingly innocuous statements in essays and postscripts.

Wu Han, unlike Meng Chao, was not simply hung out to dry in the face of the radicals' criticism. Deng Tuo and other intellectuals wrote comments supporting the historian that appeared in the same publications Yao's article had been published in.[353] He published a self-criticism in late December, but "it was already out of date," and Mao was ready for a fight. Intellectuals and senior party members may have thought the leftist turn of the past few years was simply another "gust of wind," but they were quickly realizing that they were sorely mistaken. Peng Zhen – who not even a year earlier had delivered remarks at the Peking opera festival intellectuals that resonated with the position of Jiang Qing – made herculean efforts in early 1966 to check the direction the leftists were heading in. In the "February Outline," subordinates of Peng Zhen laid out the terms the debate was to take. It "emphasized that it was a struggle within the field of scholarship rather than a political one …. The self-reform of scholars whose viewpoints were reactionary or who had committed errors was to be welcomed."[354] Mao, however,

---

[352] Dai, 229; MacFarquhar, vol. 3, 453.

[353] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 453.

[354] MacFarquhar, *Cataclysm*, 454-455.

was having none of it, and by late March, he had condemned Peng Zhen, who was left exposed thanks to the travels of his patron Liu Shaoqi.[355] The final assault on the Beijing establishment – not simply on a handful of intellectuals and traditional culture – was on.

While high-level political shakeups were taking place, discussion on the failures of CCP intellectuals and performers continued. In the wake of the Yao article attacking Hai Rui, an article by Yun Song appeared attacking Tian Han, who was the last of the three to be attacked publically, "because of his link with Zhou Enlai."[356] In February 1966, Yun Song's "Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan* is a Great Poisonous Weed" appeared in *Renmin ribao*, filling an entire page, and it was republished in several more top papers and journals.[357]

Although the focus of the new round of criticism was most definitely Wu Han and Tian Han, who were far more valuable political targets than Meng Chao, he and his ghost had not faded from public memory. In February, for example, the Chinese language and literature department at Jilin Normal University put together a handy guide of "a selection of materials related to the *Li Huiniang* problem."[358] It included the essays by Qi Xiangqun, Deng Shaoji, and Bu Linfei, a 1963 *Theatre Report* article on the ghost play problem, the full text of *Li Huiniang*, Meng Chao's postscript, Liao Mosha's "some ghosts are harmless," a positive review of the Northern Kun Opera performance by Tao

---

[355] Ibid., 456-457.

[356] Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, 137.

[357] Yun Song 云松, "Tian Han de *Xie Yaohuan* shi yike daducao" 田汉的《谢瑶环》是一棵大毒草 [Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan* is a big poisonous weed], *Renmin ribao*, 1 February 1966.

[358] Zhongguo yuyan wenxuexi ziliaoshi 中国语言文学系资料室, eds, *Guanyu* Li Huiniang *wenti ziliao xuanbian* 关于《李慧娘》问题资料选编 [A selection of materials relating to the *Li Huiniang* problem] (Changchun: Jilin Normal University, 1966).

Junqi and Li Dake, a 1956 piece on the ghost plays, and a concise bibliography on the ghost play problem from 1956 on. Similar compliations appeared elsewhere, some drawing together criticism of all three of the poisonous weeds.

In the published attacks, Meng was explicitly pulled back into the fray by a senior drama critic and producer, Liu Housheng. Liu's attack on the three authors, "The anti-party, anti-socialist thought community - a discussion of *Li Huiniang*, *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, and *Xie Yaohuan* together," appeared in the March 1966 issue of *Theatre Report*, the last issue before the publication ceased printing for over a decade.[359] It is a truly sophisticated piece of writing, especially compared to the early criticism lobbed at Meng Chao by "Qi Xiangqun" and others in 1965, and is one of the best examples of critical essays that have been "read back from" in the decades since the Cultural Revolution. In the introduction, Liu notes that most criticism has focused on the individual plays, but he seeks to elucidate the numerous points of mutual interest and common foundations of all three pieces. It is first and foremost an attack on the three authors, but more broadly, attacks the group of cultural liberals and political moderates that enjoyed a period of relative freedom in the early 1960s.

Many of the points that Liu enumerates echo those of the 1965 essays, particularly the vilification of what he sees as the reverence for "individualism" and "romanticism" (as opposed to *revolutionary* romanticism) found in the plays. "Romanticism" of the revolutionary stripe was described by Zhou Yang as "the manifestation of revolutionary

---

[359] Liu Housheng 刘厚生, "Fandang fanshehuizhuyi gongtongti - *Li Huiniang, Hai Rui baguan, Xie Yaohuan* zonglun" 反党反社会主义共同体－《李慧娘》《海瑞罢官》《谢瑶环》纵论 [The anti-party, anti-socialist thought community – a discussion of *Li Huiniang, Hai Rui Dismissed from Office, Xie Yaohuan*], *Xiju bao* 1966.3 (March): 7-13.

idealism in artistic methods," and a key component of the new drama on contemporary themes.[360] "Revolutionary romanticism is a literary and fictional idealization" of an ideal presented by "revolutionary realism," and while it is replete with "mythical, heroic, and larger-than-life- characters," it is to draw on "real life" as it should *be*, not as it is.[361] The romanticism of Meng Chao, Wu Han, and Tian Han depicted a "reality" in which rulers were tyrants, peasants starved after having their land seized, and only a handful of people were willing to defy authority in order to "plead for the people," pleadings that were generally unsuccessful. It was a "reality" that simply would not do. Liu criticizes this "romantic" and "individualist" approach, and says Meng, Wu, and Tian were each the type of person who, when "writing and speaking the pronoun 'I' … surely wants to use capital letters."[362] The settings of the plays - noble households and high-level officials - as well as subjects such as ghosts and dreams are clear evidence of the romantic sensibilities of the authors, things that were set in opposition to socialist ideals for art.

However, underneath much of the trite phrasing is a surprisingly perceptive reading of many of the factors that led to these three authors facing the brunt of Jiang Qing and her clique's early wrath. Speaking of the plays, Liu notes the authors "use beautiful poetry and lofty language to glorify themselves and flatter each other," a clear example of conceited, bourgeois (and Romantic) thought.[363] On the one hand, this is

---

[360] Yang Lan, *Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998), 19.

[361] Joshua Mostow, ed. *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 471-472.

[362] Liu Housheng, 11. Here, he quotes the Russian writer Maxim Gorky.

[363] Liu Housheng, 9.

hardly more convincing than the selective reading of Meng Chao's postscript found in Qi's essay; on the other, Liu's thrust is entirely correct. There seems to be little doubt that the exquisite literary language employed by Meng Chao, or the obscure historical references found in Wu Han's work, were designed to be read, understood, and enjoyed by a small subset of society – the intellectuals and literary elite (the limited reach of adapted dramas confirms that the audience was in fact rather exclusive). Meng Chao's reverent references to Tang Xianzu and his careful deployment from the classical poetry canon were hardly aimed at a proletariat of more humble educational background. The defense of ghost plays was launched not for the benefit of the "workers, peasants, and soldiers," but by intellectuals who were keen on preserving certain measures of artistic freedom and Chinese literary heritage.

Liu's essay also addresses the disaster of the Great Leap Forward in much starker terms than his 1965 predecessors. While Qi's essay questioned why Meng Chao was "gloomy" and unhappy during what the radicals attempted to present as a very positive period of socialist history, Liu does not attempt to put such a pleasant gloss on the Leap and resulting famine. He specifically refers to the "three years of hardship" (*san nian kunnan*), and draws connections between the "hardship" and the emphasis of all three plays on the "miscarriage of justice" [*yuanyu*], particularly "the forcible seizure of the people's land bringing about one type of 'tragedy.'" [364] Returning to the question of just what these three adapted plays were designed to encourage, Liu declares that they are encouraging people like themselves to resist the government. To the authors' claim that it was possible to have "history for history's sake," Liu declared this a cop out; the authors

[364] Ibid., 9-10.

were in fact using history to advance their own opinions on the present. Considering the deft use of historical and literary allusions in the early 1960s *zawen* written by Wu Han, Meng Chao, and others, Liu would seem to be on target with his criticism. The use of history to comment on the present was a long-standing tradition, as we have seen, and the skilled senior writers were in a better position than most to put the technique of historical allusion to good use.

In many ways, Liu successfully casts a more sinister shadow on the activities of the literary elite in the late 1950s and early 1960s than Qi Xiangqun and others. He notes that the Anti-Rightist Campaign proved that "using [contemporary-themed] plays … was a comparatively hard road to walk" in criticizing the party, which thus led the authors to select historical plays as their subjects. He criticizes the pre-1949 activities of the literary elite, who had accessed "feudal and bourgeois education to become intellectuals." They had made a show of understanding the proletariat, but were never able to fully enter into the struggles of the people. "They were able to write good works," Liu wrote, "but they were not able to truly hear the words of Mao Zedong … they held on to their own capitalist world views."[365]

From a distance of several decades, knowing what was to come, Liu's criticisms seem unfair: many writers from "bourgeois" backgrounds had suffered mightily for the party prior to 1949, and to accuse them of being "anti-party" seems outrageous. But if the artistic debates of the 1950s and early 1960s proved anything, it was that many artists held fast to ideals that had been shaped in the environment of May Fourth artistic production. They were not willing to totally relinquish their intellectual and artistic

[365] Liu Housheng, 12.

freedom, nor were they willing to sacrifice their artistic "inheritance" for what they considered artistic works of dubious quality. As it turned out, many of them paid a greater price than they ever could have imagined for their views.

The Suffering of the Human World: 1966-1976

In the early months of upheaval, people in the political and cultural realm reacted much as they had to more minor changes in policies in former years: with confusion and bewilderment. The earliest phases took place largely behind closed doors - a critical May 16th Notification was circulated at a Politburo meeting, and not publically disseminated until 1967. A document plagued with typos and inconsistencies, it was at least consistent on the need for upheaval; it was "to be by far the most ambitious attempt at dealing with revisionism ever attempted by the CCP."[366] But with the appearance of the first "big character poster" at Beijing University in June, the movement was taking a much more public turn. As the conflict played out in an increasingly public and frenzied manner, with rallies and struggle sessions and the appearance of the Red Guards, ever more high-level members of the CCP apparatus fell from power.[367] By the end of 1966, influential "revisionists" like Peng Zhen, Wu Han, and Liao Mosha were dragged out again and again in front of crowds of tens of thousands be struggled against and humiliated.[368] The criticisms had already spread far beyond highly visible targets. Ma Jianling, who had

[366] Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 40.

[367] Ibid., 54-61.

[368] MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 123-124. Liao Mosha was attacked – along with Wu Han and Deng Tuo, who committed suicide in May 1966 – not for his "some ghosts are harmless" theory, but for his participation in the *Three Family Village* series of essays.

tried so hard for decades to write thoroughly socialist scripts for the people, not for the intellectuals, seemingly anticipated the turn events were taking in 1965. That year, Ma was branded a member of an anti-party, anti-socialist thought group that included the already-deceased Ke Zhongping, his old People's Troupe collaborator from the heady Yan'an days. Apparently intimating the even darker days to come, the man that Mao had praised for his earnest revisions in the 1940s, and who had earned the ire of 1950s intellectuals for trying to "fix" a ghost play to make it more appropriate for socialist China, committed suicide.[369] Lou Shiyi, an essayist and old friend of Meng Chao, recalled after the Cultural Revolution that in the early days of 1966, he was "a shallow person, and I rejoiced at my good luck," thinking that because he had not written anything of particular prominence, he had "escaped by sheer luck." As it turned out, he did not escape the fate of his old friend, and soon found himself branded an ox ghost-snake spirit and put into a "cowshed" [*niupeng*] at a cadre reeducation school alongside Meng Chao.[370] The photographic record of the period is a familiar one: Buddhist relics in flames, cadres wearing placards humiliated in front of ominous-looking crowds, students marching in the streets.

Even in the midst of the frenzy, however, time was taken to collect and review statistics from years earlier. Criticisms attacked the artistic world broadly. In Shanghai, this manifested in at least one article that took the "ghost play problem" to an entirely

---

[369] Yang Bujun, 42. Ke was actually attacked, as he worked on a long poem about the Communist hero Liu Zhidan, in 1962 at the behest of Kang Sheng; the poem was branded an "anti-Party epic." Although urged to give the project up, Ke refused and in 1964, collapsed and died under the strain. See David Holm, "The Strange Case of Liu Zhidan," in Jonathan Unger, ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

[370] Lou Shiyi 楼适夷, "Wo huai Meng Chao" 我怀孟超 [I think of Meng Chao], *Renmin ribao* (10 October, 1979).

new level. Throughout the socialist period, the general idea of what a *guixi* was remained relatively static, as previous chapters have shown. While not all plays involving ghosts were labeled as "ghost plays," all ghost plays shared some common features. Most notably, they were always discussed in the context of "traditional Chinese opera" (*chuantong xiju*) and nearly always associated closely with historical settings. And even in the realm of that fantastical or superstitious, there were, as we have seen, a number of sacred cows, such as the *Journey to the West* tales: traditional dramas that had enough cultural standing to not only be defended vehemently by intellectuals, but actively supported by the state, even throughout the Cultural Revolution.

A July 1967 edition of the Shanghai *Wenyi zhanbao* included several bits of information on ghost plays, including a nearly full page list of "ghost plays" performed in Shanghai between 1949 and 1963.[371] The long list of plays includes brief plot synopses of over 50 plays and notes on which troupes staged them. A shorter list details plays staged between 1959 and 1963, and a small chart illustrates the wax and wane of the popularity of ghosts on Shanghainese stages. While not all the information is surprising (*Red Plum Pavilion* and its many derivatives are listed, including *Li Huiniang*, which is described as "the big poisonous weed concocted by Meng Chao"), some of the list does prove revelatory. Most interesting are two types of plays: first, plays that would never have fit into a pre-Cultural Revolution potentially negative "ghost play" category. The *Peony Pavilion,* for example, had long occupied a special place - even critics in 1963 and after were willing to give credit to Tang Xianzu's masterpiece, while perhaps wishing it off

[371] "1949-1963 Shanghai yanchu de guixi " 1949－1963 上海演出的鬼戏 [Ghost plays performed in Shanghai between 1949 and 1963], *Wenyi zhanbao* 文艺战报, 5 July 1967.

socialist stages. Also included were several versions of the "Uproar in Heaven" episode from *Journey to the West* - a somewhat odd inclusion, since the icon of Sun Wukong was still very much in use, and as Wagner has argued, "the language and fantasy of the Cultural Revolution were strongly influence by *Xiyou ji.*"[372] It might be remembered that intellectuals and literary critics went to extreme lengths to safely isolate "mythology" plays like *Journey to the West* derivatives from "ghost plays" like *Story of Red Plums*. Much like the early years of the PRC, when the central government had a difficult time reining in cadres who enthusiastically banned anything with the merest whiff of superstition, some things were still open to interpretation, and it was difficult to check the ideological excesses of radicals.

The second type of play that appears somewhat curious are plays that, either due to form or content, would not have been discussed as "ghost plays" prior to this period. The very first play listed, for example, is a 1962 spoken language drama called *Mount Everest* [Zhumulangma], which is rather obviously neither traditional Chinese opera nor concerned with "historical" subject matter. Its setting was entirely contemporary, being based off the 1960 Chinese ascent of Everest. However, the play included "five mountain spirits" as well as the ghost of a "foreign explorer." The debates on ghost plays of the 1950s and early 1960s confined themselves to discussion of classical drama, primarily adaptations of Ming *chuanqi*; spoken drama, with or without ghosts, drew no notice. Likewise included were a number of plays with what appear to be questionable ties to "ghosts" as had traditionally been defined - a number of plays listed are stories relating to *jiangshi*, the "reanimated corpses" which bear resemblance to vampires and zombies

[372] Wagner, 201.

familiar to Western literature. Even with this relative broadening, a number of classic plays were not represented, including seemingly obvious stories like *Legend of White Snake*.

Still, the evidence of "inappropriate" artistic production found in statistics and charts would have been cause for a self-criticism at most in previous years. They were now ammunition for more serious charges and punishments. The tales of suffering are familiar territory for anyone who has looked at histories of the Cultural Revolution, and there is no doubt that people with far less power or influence than the senior intellectuals also suffered mightily. Tian Han, last to face severe public criticism, died first on 10 December 1968, having been confined to a prisonconfined to a prison "set up under Kang Sheng's personal control."[373] His final plea was reportedly "Please, please let me see my mother one more time. Just one last time," and his mother waited for him in Beijing, dying four years later, still not knowing the fate of her famous son.[374] Wu Han, having been dragged about, humiliated and mistreated in 1966 and 1967, was held – along with his wife – at a cadre school, although they were allowed to return home occasionally. In March 1968, he, too, was imprisoned, and died a year and a half later.[375]

The miserable deaths of men like Wu Han and Tian Han also had the effect of later burnishing their legacies. Their participation in the Anti-Rightist Campaign and their attacks on fellow intellectuals, for instance, are often left out of recollections of their

---

[373] Wagner, 137.

[374] Chen Xiaomei, "Tian Han and the Southern Society Phenomenon: Networking the Personal, Communal, and Cultural," in Kirk A. Denton and Michael Hockx, eds. *Literary Societies of Republican China* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008): 241-278, 245.

[375] Mary G. Mazur, *Wu Han, Historian: Son of China's Times* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 429.

life.[376] But what of the third writer and his ghost? Meng Chao, never achieving the prominence of Tian Han and Wu Han in life, has slipped further into obscurity in death (one wonders if this might not be, at least in part, because his story does lack the emotional punch of the outlandish abuse endured by Tian Han and Wu Han). The last ten years of Meng Chao's life come down to us largely through a grief-stricken essay by his daughter, affectionate reminiscences by often-jaded fellow intellectuals, and the former editor of the *Guangming Daily*, Mu Xin.[377]

Meng Chao suffered a multitude of private tragedies, not well-publicized public humiliation. Even so, he found his situation was intolerable, and in the 1960s, he – like many others – attempted suicide. He was rushed to the hospital after swallowing poison,

---

[376] Wagner, 4-5.

[377] Mu Xin illustrates one of the challenges of writing the histories of individuals during the Cultural Revolution. In the decades since Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four, there have been countless memoirs, articles, and books written about the period. Many of these take on an air of victimhood, often obscuring or flat-out lying about the author's activities, especially in the heady days of 1966 and 1967. To write a narrative of someone's personal journey during the Cultural Revolution – particularly someone who did not survive to write their own reminiscences – is a matter of patching together sometimes contradictory, sometimes untrustworthy sources. He was Meng Chao's most faithful standard-bearer, writing articles and book chapters on "the tragedy of *Li Huiniang*." But even – or perhaps especially – Mu Xin has an agenda.

As a key member of the *Guangming* Daily staff, he presided over some of the great intellectual debates of the period, including the ghost play debates of 1963. He was in fact one of the most radical members of the Cultural Revolution Group before his purge in 1967; in the summer of 1966, Mao entrusted him and another member of the Cultural Revolution Group to attend meetings set up by Liu Shaoqi, in order to report back with his impressions (Kwow-sing Li, *A Glossary of Political Terms of The People's Republic of China*, trans. Mary Lok (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1995), 584; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 80). He is hardly an unbiased source, and leaves aside many of his own activities in the early Cultural Revolution, with the exception of noting he was criticized for the "shady relationship" between the two men (Mu Xin 穆欣, *Jiehou changyi – shinian dongluan jishi* 劫后长忆－十年动乱记事 [Long reminiscences after the disaster – an account of the decade of upheaval] (Hong Kong: Xintian chubanshe, 1997), 448). And when he declares, thirty years after his purge, that Jiang Qing and Kang Sheng will surely "be swept into the trash heap of history," it is clear this denunciation comes from a deeply personal place (452). However, the fact remains that he was one of Meng Chao's most faithful chroniclers – beyond the memories of friends and family, his accounts are essentially the only narratives we have of what transpired between 1963 and Meng Chao's death in 1976. Perhaps writing chronicles of what had happened to an old friend were a way to assuage his own guilt, and a way to vent his anger about his own purge and imprisonment.

his case handlers hot behind him. The doctors inquired whether or not this was someone "you want or not?" The handlers responded, "This person is a very big traitor, and you mustn't allow him to die!"[378] The doctors dutifully did their work so that Meng Chao might be subjected to more criticism and punishment. At the cadre reeducation school, he was, according to Lou Shiyi, a special target of the "young path breaking revolutionaries" who frequently burst into their cowshed, crying "Which one of you is Meng Chao?" Having no choice but to show himself, he submitted to beatings and abuse. He "never made a sound, and took the beatings with his head bowed low," scenes that made Lou's blood run cold with fear.[379]

As it turned out, his old friend Kang Sheng was in charge of his case – a fact of which Meng Chao was unaware when he submitted two letters from Kang Sheng praising *Li Huiniang*, hoping to stem some of the criticism. The letters disappeared, and of course had no impact on the disposition of his case.[380] He must have figured it out at some point, though. Lou Shiyi recalled one evening at the "cowshed," when they had acquired a little bit of alcohol. Emboldened perhaps by the liquor, Lou asked Meng Chao: "Didn't you have that 'master of theory' [Kang Sheng] you grew up with? He was really good to you that day we went to see the premieree of [Li Huiniang]. He specially congratulated you and invited you out to eat Peking duck! Why don't you write him a letter and appeal, maybe you can be released a little early." Meng Chao was silent, and simply shook his

---

[378] Mu Xin, *Jiehou changyi*, 449.

[379] Lou Shiyi.

[380] Mu Xin, *Jiehou changyi*, 448-449.

head. Lou did not bring it up again.[381] He was denied the opportunity to see his wife of 42 years as she lay dying, although his daughter Meng Jian managed to sneak him in for a last visit.[382]

By the time the cadre schools were eventually dissolved in the mid-1970s, Meng Chao, Lou Shiyi, and the others were allowed to return home. Meng Chao's wife was dead, his daughters scattered, and he was left to a small Beijing *hutong* flat with one of his daughters. "I went to see him when I had time," Lou Shiyi recalled a few years later. "He was alone, reading the *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*. All of his books had been confiscated, only this one book was left." Jiang Qing and "the Gang of Four" were still clinging to power, and there was no change in his case or status, and there would be no change until the rehabilitations of 1979.[383] In his final months, he cried to one of his daughters that he had been wronged, that someone had hurt him. His last words to her were "*Yuan a!*" – "the injustice!" – a fitting echo of Li Huiniang's cries, and mirroring the feelings of many.[384] He died in May 1976, outlasting his old friend and persecutor Kang Sheng by five months, which must have been little consolation.

The injustice! It was a powerful cry, and in time, many people would attempt to extract some measure of revenge, however minor, for themselves and those who had died earlier, still wearing their "bad element caps."

---

[381] Lou Shiyi.

[382] Mu Xin, *Jiehou changyi,* 451.

[383] Lou Shiyi.

[384] Meng Jian 孟健, "Xie zai *Li Huiniang* zaiban de shihou" 写在《李慧娘》再版的时候 [Writings at the time of the republication of *Li Huiniang*], in Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980): 125-128, 125.

Despite the increasing radicalization of the cultural realm from 1962 to 1965, few artists, intellectuals, or politicians seemed entirely prepared or entirely willing to accept the wholesale changes Jiang Qing and other proposed. Throughout late 1963 and 1964, many artists considered the changes sweeping the drama world as just another shift, one of many they had experienced since the founding of the PRC. The changes in the Shanghai drama world – in which traditional drama was replaced with mostly new scripts in less than a year - show how wrong those perceptions were, and how swiftly radical change happened. Further, the activities at the Peking opera festival of 1964 are evidence that the shift was taking a very sharp personal turn. No longer was it simply a matter of fixing forms or content; the artists and intellectuals producing the content needed to be fixed. This increasingly began to mean that they needed to be swept aside entirely, with public denunciations, struggle sessions, and imprisonment – or worse.

The criticisms that appeared between 1965 and 1967 have in large part been read back into pre-1965 events, coloring perceptions of how works and debates were perceived in earlier periods. As previous chapters have illustrated, the debate on traditional drama - ghost plays in particular - go far beyond the narrow, post-Great Leap Forward readings that Cultural Revolution-era screeds may imply. And in fact, the earliest published criticisms of Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang*, as well as Wu Han and Tian Han's work, do not hew as closely to the narrative that has been promulgated in the decades after Mao's death as one might expect. Liu Housheng's 1966 attack on the three authors exemplifies the position that we have assumed was the driving force behind those early criticisms: that the plays were written in response to the CCP's mishandling of the

Great Leap Forward and the resulting famine. But this was the final phase of the formal criticism, and many of the earlier essays are not such elegant critiques. Nor do they draw direct connections between the contents of the plays and the tragedy of the Leap. Meng Chao was accused of having a lack of positive attitude during what was described as a dynamic and exciting period of socialist history. It is Liu Housheng's 1966 criticism – which made a direct connection between the "three years of disaster" and the theme of governmental "miscarriage of justice" found in the three plays – has stuck.

Conclusion: Other Echoes in the Garden

Following the 1976 fall of Jiang Qing and the so-called Gang of Four in the wake of Mao's death, an explosion of discontent swept the cultural world. The pages of drama journals, resuming publication after a ten-year hiatus, were filled with attacks on the Gang of Four, lamentations for those who suffered during the Cultural Revolution, and the deification of Zhou Enlai, who was exalted as a Party knight in shining armor. Gradually, such unrest died down and intellectuals turned once again to topics of more artistic and literary interest. By 1979, the literary elite was enmeshed in debates over what lessons to draw from the Cultural Revolution, and more and more people came forward to publish bitter criticisms of a party that had betrayed them, their family, or their friends.

Photographs of Jiang Qing's model operas were gradually replaced with those of traditional dramas, most of which had not been staged for a decade or more. A new discourse surrounding the "great poisonous weeds" of the Cultural Revolution gradually emerged, as those who had been intimately involved with the persecution of fellow intellectuals, or who had themselves been persecuted, attempted to find some meaning for the years of chaos and upheavals. As they parsed the responsibility of Mao and the rest of the Party that had been so tainted by the radical excesses of the Gang of Four, they absolved themselves of all responsibility, or at the very least, abstained from publically admitting to their role in the events of the preceding decade. One of the first mentions of the trio of poisonous weeds came in January 1979, though the plays and their authors were still not officially rehabilitated. A collection of articles entitled "Is it 'the prologue to the Cultural Revolution,' or the prologue to seizing the Party by force?" appeared in

Theatre Report, describing a meeting in 1978 to discuss the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. The result of the meeting, made up of famous literary theorists and critics, was clear: the blame for the Cultural Revolution should rest entirely on the Gang of Four.[385]

These intellectuals, many of whom had been active during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, as well as the early Cultural Revolution, absolved themselves of any blame; as many had run afoul of Jiang Qing and her clique in later years, perhaps they felt their earlier actions had little bearing on the course of events. Still, they wrestled with a number of daunting questions – most importantly, how to understand the attacks on plays such as Wu Han's *Hai Rui*. If a piece of literature or art adhered to the "six political standards" set forth by Mao in 1957, they wondered, was it then permissible to criticize the work further or declare it a "poisonous weed"? Who had the right to brand a work a "fragrant flower" or a "poisonous weed"? The participants noted that many of the authors had simply been criticizing the reality they witnessed; was it right to expect them not to express their feelings?

The "final verdict," whatever it was worth, was that there should be "democracy for scholars and artists," and their right to expression, within limits, should be protected by law. In delineating the line between "criticizing present reality" and being "anti-party, anti-socialist thought," the assembled literary critics essentially admitted that the attacks on Wu Han, Meng Chao, Tian Han, and many others had been unfounded. The disgraced authors had not been trying to subvert the party or to criticize the foundations of socialist thought; they wished only to critique the dark days of 1959, all in hopes of bringing about

[385] "Shi 'wenhua dageming de xumu'," 4-9.

a better future.[386] Naturally, the participants did not admit their own complicity in joining in the early fray, and placed the blame squarely on Jiang Qing, Yao Wenyuan, and others for allowing cultural critique to spin out of control.

Of course, those who could have most benefitted from these pronouncements – the men who had borne the brunt of early, vicious criticism – were by this point all dead. Even Meng Chao, who had managed to survive until 1976, outlasting Wu Han and Tian Han by nearly a decade, had "gone to see Marx." So it was left to those who remained behind to vent their anger. In October 1979 – seven months after many artists had been posthumously rehabilitated - Lou Shiyi recorded his memories of his time with Meng Chao. The essay, which included descriptions of their life in a Cultural Revolution-era "cowshed," was sarcastic and literary to the extreme, and took aim at those who had begun the persecution of literary subjects. Why, he wondered, had a play that was "anti-Jia Sidao" come to be considered "anti-Party" in 1965? "Don't tell me," he wrote, "that our great, righteous, glorious, and honorable Party harbored a Jia Sidao."[387]

Time and posthumous rehabilitation did not necessarily dull anger and the feelings of being wronged. Meng Jian, one of Meng Chao's daughters, wrote a heartbreaking essay for the republication of her father's most famous literary product in 1981. She recounted her father's anguished cries two months before his death – "I've been wronged! Someone has hurt me!" – and his steadfast refusal to name his persecutor.[388] Although Meng Chao, like many others, had been rehabilitated in March

---

[386] "Shi 'wenhua,'" 5.

[387] Lou Shiyi.

[388] Meng Jian, 125.

1979, his daughter bitterly wondered why she was supposed to be happy. Posthumous rehabilitation could not change what had happened to her father and their family. Meng Jian tells of standing in front of her father's urn and silently cursing Li Huiniang: "It's all because of wanting to write *you*, having written you that it's come to such an end! You are an ancient, immortal ghost – you can become a celestial immortal, but my father is a new ghost, and that fact is extremely hard to swallow, it is an extraordinary injustice!"[389] And although it is her father's fictional ghost she curses, Li Huiniang seems a mere stand in for the real villains of the story, who she declines to name outright.

The outrageous suffering of intellectuals like Tian Han and Wu Han has had the effect of burnishing their legacies; little is said of their role in persecuting fellow intellectuals in the Anti-Rightist Campaign, for instance. That Meng Chao has slipped into obscurity, despite the very visible role criticism of him and his play in the early Cultural Revolution, probably has something to do with the less gripping nature of his story. He was persecuted, yes, but saved the grandiose public humiliations many of his colleagues suffered through. Crying to his daughter of generalized injustice lacks the same emotional punch of the pleas of the imprisoned Tian Han, only days from death, to see his mother one last time. Certainly, many other people suffered more for having done far less than Meng Chao. And yet his daughter's grief sums up the feelings so many must have had. All the elegant intellectual debates on who was to blame, all the rehabilitations and lashing out at Jiang Qing, Kang Sheng, and others, could never replace what was lost. She ends her essay on her father and his ghost on a melancholy note, at once deeply personal, and yet able to speak for many:

[389] Meng Jian, 127.

> For a long, long time I did not dream; the strange thing is that recently, I've dreamt often. In dreams I see my father, wearing a half-length Chinese padded jacket, a long, camel-colored scarf wrapped around his neck three times; he rests on a walking stick, his body short and thin and weak. As before, his back has a bit of a hunch to it, he drags his leg that was hurt during his persecution, and in his mouth he keeps the end of a long, long cigarette - one, then following that, another. He hobbles towards me, but is always, always unable to reach me …..
>
> Waking up, I know that it's simply a pipe dream. But – I miss him, I really miss him. (128)

Meng Jian speaks not to the abstract ideological fallout, but the high personal costs borne by so many people.

Engineering Escape

The desire to connect pre-1949 events with the post-1976 present has, as I have argued, led to a "flattening" of the socialist period. Certainly, Western academics are not the only ones who sometimes seem overeager to shed (or ignore) the messy, complicated high socialist Chinese past. It is all too easy to shunt the discussions, debates, policies, and artistic creations of the period between 1949 and 1976 aside, to brush them off as mere propaganda, discussions or creations that were more or less held and created under duress, old dinosaurs of outmoded thinking. But to do so ignores the very real people that were at the heart of those works and debates. Having spent a long time among the works of these writers, and the words of people who cared about them, it is difficult for me to see them simply as zealous Marxists bent on destruction.

This is not to deny the disenchantment many felt (and continue to feel) with the CCP, nor the negative impact of the Mao years on many facets of life, nor the damage culture sustained during radical periods. But to ignore the complex realities of the period

in favor of spinning a tale of simple suppression and miraculous revival is to strip these intellectuals and artists of their agency. That theatrical ghosts outlasted their critics should not be a surprise; they were there all along, and between 1949 and 1963, they were nurtured and protected by a group of people who thought they were important, valuable parts of Chinese culture. Mao may have called for sweeping away of anything old, but plenty of senior intellectuals disagreed with such a point of view. Ghosts and other miraculous subjects were cherished as culture of which the Chinese people could be proud. The great achievements of Tang Xianzu and other playwrights, and the links liberal intellectuals felt with their literary heritage, were celebrated, although such celebrations may have been couched in socialist language and theory.

Perry Link, in his recent monograph *An Anatomy of Chinese*, ponders the meanings of rhythms, metaphors and the structure of the Chinese language. In his introduction, he points out the strangeness of Red Guards chanting "We want to see Chairman Mao" – a "1-2, 1-2, 1-2-3" pattern common to classical Chinese. "Were they aware," he asks, "that they were using an example of the 'four olds' in order to praise the leading opponent of the 'four olds'? … It seemed that no one noticed the irony, even as everyone was intuitively enjoying the lilt and rightness of the phrases."[390] This is a subtler version of the linguistic turns that were never expunged, even in the most radical periods: Wei Wenbo's late 1963 deployment of a Tang Dynasty lyric to praise drama on contemporary themes, for instance, or the continued use of the old phrase *ox ghost-snake spirit* to describe enemies of the CCP. To exterminate a tradition that was not only deeply

[390] Perry Link, *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3, 5.

embedded in Chinese culture, but actively promoted throughout much of the socialist period, was all but impossible. Still, as the early 1950s rash of impulsive, wide-ranging bans on local and regional levels show, if the state and its intellectuals had truly been bent on destruction, the possibility was certainly there. But narratives that simply emphasize the destructive nature of the Mao years ignore the opinions and desires of the very human actors in that great political drama.

Historical plays – including Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* – have often been thought of in terms of remonstrance, an opportunity for intellectual elites to obliquely criticize Party policies in the wake of the Great Leap Forward. As I have argued in this work, *Li Huiniang* needs to be situated in a broader context: we need to "leap the Leap," and move beyond this relatively simplistic understanding of the attraction of historical dramas for those well enmeshed in the Party apparatus. We need to have a much broader understanding of the role of and approach to classical culture in the Mao years, for it was an incredibly important subject for many from the earliest days of the PRC. *Li Huiniang* needs to be read as a ghost play, and part of the bigger "discourses on ghosts," in addition to its status as a revised drama on historical themes that appeared in the crucial period between 1960 and 1962. What else drove these intellectuals to write – and write of – the role of traditional culture? Meng Chao was a well-known writer of *zawen*, and just like Wu Han, Tian Han, Liao Mosha, and many others, turned to that familiar form in the early 1960s. Thus, Meng Chao did not *need* to write a Kun opera to express his dissatisfaction (nor did Wu Han or Tian Han *need* their historical figures to build a drama around): why the ghost, then? Why such an antique mode? Here, it is (somewhat surprisingly) a Cultural Revolution-era criticism that offers the most tantalizing

suggestion: Bu Linfei's accusation that it was *escapism* that was, at least in part, at the heart of works like *Li Huiniang*, *Xie Yaohuan*, and *Hai Rui*.

As Zeitlin and many others have noted, the classical ghost tale, particularly the eroticism of stories of reviving ghosts, still "exerts a strong grip on the contemporary imagination."[391] As evidenced by the passionate defense of ghost plays, the fervor of socialism did not particularly loosen that grip, at least not until 1963 when ghosts were banned from Chinese stages. But we might ask what other attractions ghosts and historical subjects held for socialist writers. Link writes of the "power engineering of political language in Communist, and especially Maoist, China," and relates the ponderings of theorist Li Tuo wondering whether "Chinese writers, once acculturated to a 'Mao literary form' can extricate themselves from its worldview – or even become aware that they in fact remain inside it."[392] The play that Meng Chao chose to write was so obviously different from his other literary production, in form and content, he could not have helped but to have recognized those differences. I must wonder if it is this aspect – not the potential to criticize the actions of the CCP during a time of political crisis, or even the desire to maintain a truly "national" literary product – was not the most appealing. Is it possible that Bu Linfei, hardly the most sophisticated of the Cultural Revolution critics, had indeed cut to the heart of the matter? Ghosts and gods and ancient generals offered an escape, a way to get out of a constrained literary system. They offered ways to link back with a Chinese literary past – one that was not at all tied to official language or Marxist theory.

---

[391] Zeitlin, *The Phantom Heroine*, 1.

[392] Link, 13.

Meng Chao was at his literary best when writing of his ghost. His lyricism and mastery of classical culture shine through in full force, in a way they do not even in his *zawen* (which themselves are extremely sophisticated little pieces, just like those of his intellectual compatriots). If ghosts, particularly female ghosts, have historically been vehicles for male fantasies of many kinds, could this not be another kind of fantasy, one of escapism or resistance? To read his poetic preface to *Li Huiniang* is to see a Marxist writer consciously styling himself as a scholar in a much more ancient mode. Likewise, his postscript is a lengthy, elegant discussion of highly literary topics; even his criticism of the state of drama, circa 1962, is lyrical. He does not take much interest in defending his play on socialist merits; instead, he seems most eager to show himself one of the heirs of a great, classical literary tradition.

I imagine it must have been a pleasure for him to write, just as the play must have been: not simply the topic and what might have been a satisfying, subtle critique of his party. But the core of the work, its language, is itself a world away from his essays expounding on the problems of revising drama and poems celebrating Chinese achievements of the Leap, or climbing Mount Everest. It was a reminder to himself and others that they could exist outside a socialist worldview; he deliberately links himself to a literary tradition that was outside the boundaries of what was "appropriate" for socialist art. So too for his audience: I simply cannot believe that the play was so well received merely on the basis of being a literary criticism of the Leap. This was literary escapism on multiple levels. The setting, the theme, the form, the language: it was not, despite arguments to the contrary, very socialist at all, and therein was its appeal. There were plenty of other vehicles for criticism. But there were not many other public methods of

submersing oneself in elite literary production, particularly not one with a classical bent. And to write a play – to exercise one's literary talents in a creative manner – is a very different exercise than writing an academic essay. As Chen Yi said in 1961, plays were to give pleasure and satisfaction to the audience, not political lessons. Surely that pleasure and satisfaction must have been just as important for the producers and consumers of elite literary works, the intellectuals themselves.

That classical subjects and classical language could be an escape mechanism probably goes a long way in explaining the horrified reaction of intellectuals to Ma Jianling's earnest adaptation of *Red Plums*. If one turns to ghosts as a means of escape or fantasizing, being confronted with the results of a socialist experiment in ghost opera would be frustrating indeed. Snotty posturing on the part of the intellectual elite possibly enhanced this reaction to *Wandering West Lake*; it is not difficult to imagine them looking down their noses at this homespun adaptation by someone outside their own circles. Ma had certainly made a name for himself in Yan'an, working with local Shaanxi forms, but he was not someone who had been a star in the urban, left wing literary scenes of the 1930s. Meng Chao's *Li Huiniang* invites the reader to step into a world very different from their every day life, both in setting and in language; Ma Jianling's, with its less poetic *baihua* and more "realistic" plot, turns the fantastic into the mundane.

There is an amusing scene in Han Shaogong's 1996 novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* in which the narrator, an educated youth sent down to a Hunan village, recalls the problems of staging a model work.[393] A peasant who, in former years, used to act in

[393] Han Shaogong, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, trans. Julia Lovell (New York: Dial Press, 2003).

plays and who was proud of his singing voice, reacts in an unfathomable way when pressed into service for an opera celebrating plowing and field work:

> Having studied [the script] a while, he suddenly seized me by the arm. 'Sing this? Hoes and rakes and carrying poles filling manure pits watering rice seedlings?'
>
> I wasn't sure what he meant.
>
> 'Comrade, I have to put up with all this stuff every day in the fields, and now you want me to get on stage and sing about it?' (60)

Although a fictional account, the story rings true. Intellectuals like Meng Chao had, at least until 1963, other avenues for escaping writing about mundane subjects. But perhaps we can read a parallel of the fictional peasant's outrage in *Maqiao* in the savaging of Ma Jianling's play. One can imagine the things those intellectuals left unsaid, buried under acceptable critiques of ideology and form: "Comrade, we have to write appropriately Marxist works all day, every day – and now you want our historical tales, our ghosts, too?"

The Empty Coffin: the Many Lives of Phantoms

Although the authors may have had only one life, their literary works could live again and again. Beginning in 1979, many actresses stepped into the diaphanous, silver-fringed gowns of ghost characters and brought them back to life. Although it was Wu Han's *Hai Rui* that was initially revived, *Li Huiniang* once again premiered with the Northern Kun Opera Theatre – the troupe that had commissioned *Li Huiniang* twenty years before – on April 27, 1979. A blurb in *People's Theatre* made note of the

performance and offered one of the great understatements on its value: "As everyone knows, this is a good play" [*zhe shi yige haoxi*].[394] Of course, as everyone also knew, *Li Huiniang* had been declared the very antithesis of a "good play" for many years. The enthusiasm for the revived ghost was probably due in no small part to the fact that it symbolized other, more recent specters of the past were dead and gone, or at least locked in prison. While it can be difficult to determine the exact origin of plays with similar stories and similar names, Meng Chao's Kun opera ghost seems to have enjoyed a relatively popular revival in the years immediately after the rehabilitation of its author. In 1981, for instance, the Jiangsu Kun Opera troupe put on a total of 223 performances. Roughly fifty percent were productions of *Xi Shi*, a classical tale of a beautiful woman – but forty percent were of *Li Huiniang*.[395] Whether or not the play was an exact version of Meng Chao's play is not particularly important. Although the *Red Plums* had always been a popular play in several styles of opera, it took on even more meanings in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.

In 1981, a new version of Li Huiniang fluttered her way across Chinese movie screens. The cinematic version presented by Hu Zhifeng of the Suzhou Peking Opera Troupe was not precisely an adaptation of Meng Chao's ghost, but it doesn't seem to be a stretch to suggest that the two were deeply intertwined. That this adaptation was a world away from its Mao-era predecessor was, however, obvious from the start: the film begins

---

[394] Hui Min 慧敏, "Beifang kunqu juyuan huifu *Li Huiniang* chongxin shangyan" 北方昆曲剧院恢复《李慧娘》重新上演 [The Northern Kun Opera Theatre's important new staging of the revived *Li Huiniang*], *Renmin xiju* (May 1979): 47.

[395] *Zhongguo xiju nianjian* 1982 中国戏剧年鉴 1982 [1982 Chinese theatre yearbook] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1982), 532.

with Li Huiniang's descent into Hell and meeting with Yama. This was the very type of scene that even steadfast defenders of ghost plays in the 1950s had declared "inappropriate" for socialist stages. The film – and the stage version before it – was extremely well received by critics and audiences alike.[396] Here was real proof that Chinese ghosts had well and truly outlasted their detractors.

And yet, in watching current developments in the PRC, it often seems that old ghosts have not been entirely put to rest, nor have they been allowed free rein. Consider the 1998 production of the *Peony Pavilion*, staged by American-based director Chen Shizheng at New York City's Lincoln Center. Billed as possibly the first time the entire play had been performed in its entirety, it was to star the Shanghai Kun Opera troupe. But Shanghai bureaucrats impounded the sets, declared the play "feudal, superstitious and pornographic," and refused to let the troupe leave the country. Chen and Lincoln Center were forced to put together a new troupe; they staged the play to excellent reviews.[397] While this seems to have been more of a power play and attempt to maintain control over the production, there is no denying that it was an echo of 1960s criticisms. Now that the traditional arts have been declared national or international treasures (Kun opera, for instance, was the first Chinese entrant on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural

---

[396] See Shi Xin 石欣, "Ruiyi chuangxin, hongmei canran – cong Hu Zhifeng biaoyan de *Li Huiniang* tan tuichen chuxin" 锐意创新，红梅灿然－从胡芝风表演的《李慧娘》谈推陈出新 [Brilliantly blazing new trails, a dazzling red plum – observing Hu Zhifeng's production of *Li Huiniang* to discuss pushing out the old to uncover the new], *Xiqu yishu* 4 (1980): 54-55; Zhou Heping 周和平 and Xu Ming 徐铭, "Hu Zhifeng tan *Li Huiniang*" 胡芝风谈《李慧娘》[Hu Zhifeng talks about *Li Huiniang*], *Dianying pingjie* (Nov. 1980): 36-37; Gong Yijiang 龚义江, "Hu Zhifeng he ta de *Li Huiniang*" 胡芝风和她的《李慧娘》[Hu Zhifeng and her *Li Huiniang*], *Renmin xiju* (June 1980): 33-34.

[397] Sheila Melvin, "China's Homegrown *Peony Pavilion*,' *The Wall Street Journal* (24 November, 1999); Judith T. Zeitlin, "My Year of Peonies," *Asian Theatre Journal* 19.1 (Spring 2002): 124-133.

Heritage, and Yue and Peking opera have since joined it), there are new battles to be waged over who controls their presentation and legacy.

Beyond the theatre world, there are often unexpected echoes of the Mao years in the twenty-first century. These are often issues that Meng Chao, Ma Jianling, and other intellectuals probably could not have dreamed of if the 1950s or 1960s: videogames, television miniseries, internet cafés. It would seem that the subjects and concerns that fueled pages of intellectual discussion on theatrical ghosts and monsters have still not been satisfactorily resolved. For instance, in March 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued guidelines that discouraged plots including "fantasy, time-travel, random compilations of mythical stories, bizarre plots, absurd techniques," for these things were "propagating feudal superstitions, fatalism and reincarnation, ambiguous moral lessons, and a lack of positive thinking."[398] The ban was widely lampooned in the Western media, just one more example of crazy Chinese censorship run amok. But to me, it speaks to a deep discomfort with elements of popular entertainment that have long been the bane of certain sets of bureaucrats and intellectuals. How can we not hear the echoes of those socialist debates on "myths" and "superstition" in the 2011 directive of SARFT?

Or, take another, even more recent example. In May 2013, the results of a Wuhan Academy of Social Sciences study made the rounds on Chinese news websites. The subject of the study was the views of children and teenagers on "returning to life after death" [*si er fu sheng*] and the permanence of death. Just as in 1963, when the Ministry of

---

[398] "China Bans Time Travel for Television," *China Digital Times* (13 April, 2011). http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/04/china-bans-time-travel-for-television/ [Accessed 1 July 2013]

Culture declared that ghost plays encouraged superstitious, fatalistic beliefs, the study, based on surveys of primary and middle school students, postulates that popular culture had an alarming impact on people's thinking. The WASS study claims that owing to the popularity of television series that glorify tragedy and promulgate the "point of view that death is beautiful," or videogames that allow players to come back to life again and again, are impacting popular conceptions of death and encouraging belief in revival.[399] Is this type of study – and the anxiety that underpins it - not the spiritual descendent of those old ghost debates?

On a structural level, it is tempting to speculate on the impact that multiple (and sometimes conflicting) layers of bureaucratic control exert on creative industries. In the socialist period, conflicting approaches to the regulation of potentially unsuitable theatrical subjects had a constricting effect on the repertoires of drama troupes. At the worst of times, confusion had a stifling and harmful effect on traditional theatre, as troupes tried to navigate the confusing and often contradictory regulations promulgated by the Ministry of Culture and local bureaucracies. At best, dealing with years of various "gusts of wind" and changes in policies left many troupes fatigued and perplexed – hardly an environment conducive to creativity and artistic daring. This problem, if anything, has only gotten worse in the internet age: while there is certainly plenty of direct central control over activities (one need look no further than the Great Firewall), there are just as many – if not more – competing governmental interests.

---

[399] Song Lanlan 宋兰兰, "Wuhan tuan shiwei diaocha cheng banshu zhongxuesheng xin 'ren si neng fusheng'" 武汉团市委调查称半数中学生信"人死能复生" [Wuhan municipal group study says half of middle school students believe that 'people are able to return to life after death'], *Changjiang Daily* (30 May 2013), reprinted on http://news.qq.com/a/20130530/001500.htm [Accessed 10 June 2013].

The most startling example is an older one, but the problems it illustrates have only intensified in the intervening years. In 2009, the exceedingly popular Western massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* ran into approval trouble. But this was not a row between a central ministry and overzealous lower level cadres, like the early 1950s theatre bans. Instead, the Chinese operators of the game and Chinese players were stuck in a firefight between the Ministry of Culture and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP).[400] The particulars of the case are not terribly relevant here; what is important is the confusion over who controls one increasingly important area of popular culture and the potentially chilling effects on the Chinese game industry such battles continue to have. If established theatre troupes, with established, long-standing repertoires, reacted so negatively to being bounced between competing interests on a national and local scale – between Ministry of Culture regulations on the one hand and the wishes of local bureaucrats on the other – what impact does the risk of running afoul of not only the local bureaucracy, but one of two competing central ministries, have on creative production in a very young industry?

As of yet, no one knows. I suspect many of the complaints about the lack of creativity in the Chinese game development scene, for example, stem at least in part from the difficulties of navigating very tricky bureaucratic waters. But I believe it is critical to make connections between socialist-era and present-day cultural production and government policies. Historical debates on ghosts – those ever popular, often problematic subjects – are not so different from videogame monsters as they might first appear. As I

[400] Michael Wines, "Chinese Agencies Struggle Over Video Game," *The New York Times* (6 November, 2009); http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/07/world/asia/07china.html [Accessed 20 June 2013].

hope I have illustrated in this study, an historical approach to issues of censorship, control, and the response of cultural workers will prove far more illuminating than simply viewing recent developments in light of post-1976 events, or seeing contemporary cultural patterns only as a resurgence of pre-1949 modes. The sound of ghostly debates still echo, and one suspects they always will: we should follow them, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, down the passages we have not taken and the doors we have left unopened. It will undoubtedly prove a fruitful excursion.

Glossary

afei 阿飞

A Jia 阿甲

A Ying 阿英

Baimao nü 白毛女

Bai Renfu 白仁甫

Baishe zhuan 白蛇传

Beifang kunqu juyuan 北方昆曲剧院

Bupa gui de gushi 不怕鬼的故事

caomang shijia 草莽史家

Cha lutiao 查路条

Cheng Yanqiu 程砚秋

chuanju 川剧

chuanqi 传奇

chuanshuo 传说

chufeng qing yu laofeng sheng 雏凤清于老凤声

Deng Tuo 邓拓

Donghan yanyi 东汉演义

Dou E yuan 窦娥冤

Duan qiao 断桥

Du Liniang 杜丽娘

Feiji 飞机

Feizhi 费志

Guohun 国魂

Guo Morou 郭沫若

guibu 鬼步

guixi 鬼戏

haoxi 好戏

Hongdeng ji 红灯记

Hongmei ge 红梅阁

Hongmei ji 红梅记

Hong Shen 洪深

huadan 花旦

huaixi 坏戏

huaju 话剧

Huayou shan 滑油山

huju 沪剧

Jia Sidao 贾似道

Jiang Guangci 蒋光慈

jiangshi 僵尸

jingju 京剧

jinyi yushi 锦衣玉食

jiushehui shiren bian gui, xinshehui shigui bian ren 旧社会使人变鬼,新社会使鬼变人

Kang Sheng 康生

Kangxi 康熙

Ke Zhongping 柯仲平

Kongque dongnan fei 孔雀东南飞

Lao She 老舍

Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台

Liaozhi zhiyi 聊斋志异

Li Bai 李白

Li Ruilai 李瑞来

lishi ju 历史剧

Li Shujun 李淑君

Li Taicheng 李太成

Liu Lanzhi 刘兰芝

Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇

Lu Dingyi 陆定一

Lu Xun 鲁迅

Lu Zhaorong 卢昭容

Ma Lianliang 马连良

Ma Wu 马武

Ma Yuncheng 马云程

Meng Xianqi 孟宪启

Minzhong jutuan 民众剧团

Mudan ting 牡丹亭

Mulian jiumu 目连救母

niugui-sheshen 牛鬼蛇神

Niulang zhinü 牛郎织女

niupeng 牛棚

Ouyang Yuqian 欧阳予倩

Pei Yu 裴禹

pingju 评剧

pingtan 评弹

Pu Songling 蒲松龄

qiaogong 跷功

qing 情

qinqiang 秦腔

qiqiao 乞巧

qita 其他

Qixi 七夕

Qiyuan bao 奇冤报

Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白

Qu Yuan 屈原

renminxing 人民性

Ruiniang 蕊娘

Sanguo yanyi 三国演义

san nian kunnan 三年困难

Shazi bao 杀子报

shenguai 神怪

shenhua 神话

shenhua xi 神话戏

Shiwu guan 十五贯

shuaifa 甩发

Shuihu zhuan 水浒传

si er fu sheng 死而复生

Song shi 宋史

Suitang yanyi 隋唐演义

Sun Wukong 孙悟空

Taiyang she 太阳社

Tange 谭格

Tanke 坦克

Tang Xianzu 汤显祖

Tan yinshan 探阴山

Tanzi wan de gushi 潭子弯的故事

Tao Dun 陶钝

Tian Han 田汉

Tianhe pei 天河配

Tieti xia 铁蹄下

tuichen buchuxin 推陈不出新

tuichen chujiu 推陈出旧

waihang 外行

wugui bucheng xi 无鬼不成戏

Wupen ji 乌盆记

wuqiao bucheng shu 无巧不成书

Wu Zuguang 吴祖光

xiangsheng 相声

Xiangtu jutuan 乡土剧团

Xiao Cuihui (Yu Lianquan) 筱翠花(于连泉)

xiaosheng 小生

Xixiang ji 西厢记

Xiyou ji 西游记

yangxi 洋戏

Yan Huizhu 言慧珠

Yao Qi 铙期

Ye cao 野草

Yongzheng 雍正

you shen shuohua 有神说话

You xihu 游西湖

yuanyu 冤狱

yueju 越剧

Yugong yishan 愚公移山

Yu Pingbo 俞平伯

Yu Zhenfei 俞振飞

zawen 杂文

zhe shi yi ge hao xi 这是一个好戏

Zhi qu weihu shan 智取威虎山

Zhongguo hun 中国魂

Zhongguo wenxue yichan 中国文学遗产

Zhou Chaojun 周朝俊

Zhou Xinfang 周信芳

Zhou Yang 周扬

zhuang zai shaonian, mei zai shaonian 壮哉少年，美哉少年

Zhumulangma 珠穆朗玛

References

"1949-1963 Shanghai yanchu de guixi," 1949－1963上海演出的鬼戏 [Ghost plays performed in Shanghai between 1949 and 1963]. *Wenyi zhanbao,* 5 July 1967.

Ai Qing 艾青. "Da Yang Shaoxuan tongzhi" 答杨绍萱同志 [An answer to comrade Yang Shaoxuan]. *Renmin ribao*, 12 November, 1951.

_____. "Tan *Niulang Zhinü*" 谈《牛郎织女》[Discussing *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*]. *Renmin ribao*, 31 August, 1951.

Andrews, Julia F. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

"Benshi zhaokai huaixi shangyan de qingkuang ji youguan zhe fangmian gaijin de yijian" 本市召开坏戏上演的情况及有关这方面改进的意见 [The situation of Shanghai performances of bad plays and opinions on improving this facet]. SMA B172-1-257-71.

Bo Yibo 薄一波. *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shijian de huigu, xia* 若干重大决策与事件的回顾 [A review of certain major decisions and incidents, volume 2]. Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1993.

Bonds, Alexandra B. *Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

Brown, Jeremey and Paul Pickowicz. *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

_____. "The Early Years of the People's Republic of China: An Introduction." In Jeremy Brown and Pickowicz, eds. *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007: 1-18.

Bu Linfei 卜林扉. "Fan shehuizhuyi de sixiang he yishu – pipan Meng Chao tongzhi de kunju *Li Huiniang* daiba" 反社会主义的思想和艺术批 判孟超同志的昆剧《李慧娘》代跋 [Anti-socialist thought and art – criticizing comrade Meng Chao's postscript to the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*]. *Xiju bao* (February 1965): 44-45.

Byron, John and Robert Pack. *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng, the Evil Genius Behind Mao – and His Legacy of Terror in People's China*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Campany, Robert Ford. *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Cheek, Timothy. *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Chen Cisheng 陈慈生. *You meiyou gui?* 有没有鬼？ [Are there ghosts or not?]. Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1956.

Chen Jianfu. *Chinese Law: Context and Transformation*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2008.

Chen Xiangyang. "Woman, Generic Aesthetics, and the Vernacular: Huangmei Opera Films from China to Hong Kong." In Christine Gledhill, ed. *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012: 177-190.

Chen Xiaomei. *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

_____. "Reflections on the Legacy of Tian Han: 'Proletarian Modernism' and Its Traditional Roots." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18.1 (Spring 2006): 155-215.

_____. "Tian Han and the Southern Society Phenomenon: Networking the Personal, Communal, and Cultural." In Kirk A. Denton and Michael Hockx, eds. *Literary Societies of Republican China.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.

Chen Yan 陈彦. "Ma Jianling zhe ge ren" 马健翎这个人 [This person Ma Jianling]. *Meiwen* 2007 (April): 75-79.

Chen Ying 陈莹. "Tingyan guixi shi yinye feishi" 停演鬼戏是因噎废食 [Stopping performances of ghost plays is giving up at the slightest obstacle]. *Guangming ribao* September 23, 1963.

Cheng Yun 程芸. "Deng Shaoji" 邓绍基. In *Mingshi huicui: Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan yanjiushengyuan boshisheng daoshi jianjie (yi)* 名师荟萃—中国社会科学院研究生院博士生导师简介（一）[A distinguished assembly of famous teachers: a brief introduction to doctoral supervisors of the graduate school of the Chinese academy of social sciences]. Beijing: Zhongguo jingji chubanshe, 1998.

"China Bans Time Travel for Television," *China Digital Times* (13 April, 2011). http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/04/china-bans-time-travel-for-television/ [Accessed 1 July 2013]

Cong Zhaohuan 丛兆桓 and Chen Jun 陈均. "Wo suo qinli de *Li Huiniang* shijian" 我所亲历的《李慧娘》事件 [My personal experience of the *Li Huiniang* incident]. *Xinwenxue shiliao* 2 (2007): 54-62.

Dai Zhixian 戴知贤. *Shanyu yulai feng manlou - 60 niandai qianqi de 'dapipan'* 山雨欲来风满楼－60 年代前期的‘大批判’[Mountain rains about to come, wind fills the building - the early days of mass criticism in the 1960s]. Henan: Henan renmin cubanshe, 1990.

Deng Shaoji 邓绍基. "*Li Huiniang* – yizhu ducao" 《李慧娘》－一株毒草 [Li Huiniang – a poisonous weed]. *Wenxue pinglun* 1964.6: 10-20.

Denton, Kirk, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Diamant, Neil J. *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968*. Berkeley: Unviersity of California Press, 2000.

Dong Dingcheng 董丁诚. "Ma Jianling juzuo de pingjie wenti" 马健翎剧作的评价文题 [The problems with evaluations of Ma Jianling's dramas]. *Dangdai xiju* 1988.4: 10-12.

Ezrahi, Christina. *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

"Fajue zhengli yichan, fengfu shangyan jumu" 发掘整理遗产，丰富上演剧目[Excavate and put in order our heritage, enrich performed repertoire]. *Xiju bao* 1956 (July): 4-5.

Fan Xing 繁星 [Liao Mosha 寥沫沙]. "Wo de 'yougui wuhai lun' shi cuowu de' 我的‘有鬼无害论’是错误的 [My 'some ghosts are harmless theory' was a mistake]. *Beijing Wenyi* 1965 (March): 59-64.

Feng Qiyong 冯其庸. "Cong 'Lüyiren chuan' dao *Li Huiniang*" 从‘绿衣人传’到《李慧娘》 [From "The Woman in Green" to *Li Huiniang*]. *Beijing wenyi* (November 1962): 51-56.

Feuerwerker, Yi-Tsi Mei. *Ding Ling's Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Fisher, Tom. "'The Play's the Thing': Wu Han and Hai Rui Revisited." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 7 (January 1982): 1-35.

Friedman, Edward, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden. *Chinese Village, Socialist State.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

"Gaibian *You xihu* de taolun" 改编《游西湖》的讨论 [Discussion of the adaptation *Wandering West Lake*]. *Wenyi bao* 1954.5: 40-41.

Goldman, Andrea S. *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770-1900*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

Goldman, Merle. *China's Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

_____. *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Goldstein, Joshua. *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Gong Yijiang 龚义江. "Hu Zhifeng he ta de *Li Huiniang*" 胡芝风和她的《李慧娘》 [Hu Zhifeng and her *Li Huiniang*]. *Renmin xiju* (June 1980): 33-34.

Greene, Maggie. "A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of Vengeance: Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang*, and the Politics of Drama, 1959-1979." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 24.1 (Spring 2012): 149-199.

"Guanche Mao zhuxi wenyi fangxiang dali tichang xiandaiju - Ke Qingshi tongzhi zai Huadongqu huaju guanmo yanchu kaimushi shang jianghua" 贯彻毛主席文艺方向大力提倡现代剧－柯庆施同志在华东区话剧观摩演出开幕式上讲话 [Implement Chairman Mao's artistic trends, energetically advocate for drama on contemporary themes - Comrade Ke Qingshi's speech at the opening ceremonies of the East China Spoken Language Drama Festival]. *Shanghai xiju* 1964. 1 (January): 2-5.

"Guanyu baihua qifang, tuichen chuxin wenti de xuexi" 关于百花齐放，推陈出新问题的学习 [Regarding the study of the 'let a hundred flowers bloom, push out the old to bring in the new' issue]. SMA B172-5-664.

"Guanyu tingyan 'guixi' de qingshi baogao" 关于停演"鬼戏"的请示报告 [Instructions regarding ceasing performances of 'ghost plays']. In *Jianguo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian, di shiliu ce* 建国以来重要文献选编，第十六册 [Selected important party documents from after the founding of the country, volume 16]. Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, ed. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997.

Guy, Nancy. *Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022.

Han Shaogong. *A Dictionary of Maqiao*. Translated Julia Lovell. New York: Dial Press, 2003.

Hershatter, Gail. *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Holm, David L. "Local Color and Popularization in the Literature of the Wartime Border Regions." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 2.1 (Spring 1986): 7-20.

_____. "The Strange Case of Liu Zhidan." In Jonathan Unger, ed. *Using the Past to Serve the Present: Historiography and Politics in Contemporary China*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

Hong Zicheng. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature.* Trans. Michael M. Day. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

Hui Min 慧敏. "Beifang kunqu juyuan huifu *Li Huiniang* chongxin shangyan" 北方昆曲剧院恢复《李慧娘》重新上演 [The Northern Kun Opera Theatre's important new staging of the revived *Li Huiniang*]. *Renmin xiju* (May 1979): 47.

Iovene, Paola. "Chinese Operas on Stage and Screen: An Introduction." *The Opera Quarterly* 26.2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 181-199.

"Ji quanguo xiqu jumu gongzuo huiyi" 记全国戏曲剧目工作会议 [Remembering the all-China theatre repertoire work conference]. *Xiju bao* 1956 (July): 25.

Jiang Jin. *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.

Jiang Qing. *On the Revolution of Peking Opera*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968.

Jing Guxie 景孤血. "Guixi zhi hai" 鬼戏之害 [The harmfulness of ghost plays]. *Guangming ribao*, May 21, 23, 25, 1963.

"Jingshantianhua – *Li Huiniang*, *Zhong Li jian* zuotanhui jiyao" 锦上添花－《李慧娘》《钟离剑》座谈会记要 [Making perfection even more perfect – a summary of the symposiums on *Li Huiniang* and *Zhong Li's sword*]. *Beijing wenyi* 10 (1961): 54-55.

Judd, Ellen. "Prelude to the 'Yan'an Talks': Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia." *Modern China* 11.3 (July 1985): 377-408.

Kong Xiang 孔相. "Guixi he shenxi ying yilü kandai" 鬼戏和神戏应一律看待 [Ghost plays and mythology plays ought to be treated the same with one law]. *Guangming ribao*, October 4, 1963.

Lee, Haiyan. *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

Li Desheng 李德生. *Jinxi* 禁戏 [Banned plays]. Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2009.

Li Kwow-sing. *A Glossary of Political Terms of The People's Republic of China*. Trans. Mary Lok. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1995.

Li Qingyun 郦青云. "Tantan *Li Huiniang* de 'tigao'" 谈谈《李慧娘》的"提高" [Discussing *Li Huiniang*'s 'improvement']. *Xiju bao* (May 1962): 47-50.

Li Xifan 李希凡. "Feichang youhai de 'yougui wuhai' lun" 非常有害的"有鬼无害"论 [Extremely harmful 'some ghosts are harmless' theory]. *Guangming ribao*, September 10, 1963.

Li Zhisui. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*. Translated Tai Hung-chao. New York: Random House, 1994.

Liang Bihui 梁壁辉. "'Yougui wuhai' lun" "有鬼无害"论 [On 'some ghosts are harmless']. *Wenhui bao* May 6-7, 1963.

Liao Mosha 廖沫沙. "'Shi' he 'xi' – he Wu Han de *Hai Rui baguan* yanchu" "史"和"戏"－贺吴晗的《海瑞罢官》演出 ['History' and 'theatre' – congratulating Wu Han's production of *Hai Rui dismissed from office*]. In *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen* 寥沫沙文集，第二卷：杂文 [The collected works of Liao Mosha, volume 2: *zawen*]. Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1986.

_____. "Wu Han xie *Hai Rui baguan* shiqi wo de sixiang qingkuang" 吴晗写《海瑞罢官》时期我的思想情况 [My ideological situation during the period that Wu Han wrote *Hai Rui baguan*]. In *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen*.

_____. "Yougui wuhai lun" 有鬼无害论 [Some ghosts are harmless]. In *Liao Mosha wenji, di er juan: zawen* 廖沫沙文集第二卷：杂文 [Collected writings of Liao Mosha, vol. 2: *zawen*]: 109-111.

Link, Perry. *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Liu Ching-chi. *A Critical History of New Music in China*. Trans. Caroline Mason. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010.

Liu Housheng 刘厚生. "Fandang fanshehuizhuyi gongtongti - *Li Huiniang, Hai Rui baguan, Xie Yaohuan* zonglun" 反党反社会主义共同体－《李慧娘》《海瑞罢官》《谢瑶环》纵论 [The anti-party, anti-socialist thought community – a discussion of *Li Huiniang, Hai Rui dismissed from office, Xie Yaohuan*]. *Xiju bao* 1966 (March): 7-13.

Liu Naichong 刘乃崇. “Duzhe dui Ma Jianling gaibian *You xihu* juben de yijian” 读者对马健翎改编《游西湖》剧本的意见 [Readers’ opinons on Ma Jianling’s revised *Wandering West Lake* script]. *Juben* 1955 (June): 162-166.

_____. “Ping *qinqiang You xihu* gaibianben” 评秦腔《游西湖》改编本 [A review of the revised edition of the *qinqiang Wandering West Lake*]. *Xiju yanjiu* 1959.1: 43-45.

Liu Siyuan. “Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s.” *Theatre Journal* 61.3 (Oct. 2009): 387-406.

Lou Shiyi 楼适夷. “Wo huai Meng Chao” 我怀孟超 [I think of Meng Chao]. *Renmin ribao* (10 October, 1979).

Lu Ning 鲁凝. *Hongmei ji* 红梅记 [Story of red plums]. Kunming: Yunnan sheng wenhuaju xiju gongzuozhi, 1956.

Lu Zhengyan 卢正言. “Meng Chao minghao biming huilu” 孟超名号笔名汇录 [A record of the titles and pen names of Meng Chao]. *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* 2 (1986): 151-152.

Ma Jianling 马健翎. “Xiugai *You xihu* de shuoming” 修改《游西湖》的说明 [Explaining the alterations to *Wandering West Lake*]. In *You xihu* (*qinqiang juben*) 游西湖（秦腔剧本） [Wandering West lake (qinqiang script)]. Xi’an: Xibei renmin chubanshe, 1954.

_____. *You xihu* (*qinqiang juben*) 游西湖（秦腔剧本） [Wandering West lake (qinqiang script)]. Xi’an: Xibei renmin chubanshe, 1954.

Ma Shaobo 马少波. “Mixin yu shenhua de benzhi qubie” 迷信与神话的本质区别 [The essential difference between superstition and mythology]. In Ma Shaobo. *Xiqu yishu lunji* 戏曲艺术论集 [Collected essays on theatre and art]. Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1982.

_____. “Yansu duidai zhengli shenhuaju de gongzuo - cong *Tianhe pei* de gaibian tanqi” 严肃对待整理神话剧的工作 —从《天河配》的改变谈起 [A serious treatment of the work of putting mythology plays in order - speaking from the adaptation of *Tianhe pei*]. *Renmin ribao,* 4 November 1951.

MacFarquhar, Roderick. *Contradictions Among the People 1956-1957*. Volume 1 of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

_____. *The Coming of the Cataclysm: 1961-1966*. Volume 3 of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

_____. *The Great Leap Forward 1958-1960*. Volume 2 of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

MacFarquhar, Roderick and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Mackerras, Colin. *Chinese Drama: A Historical Survey*. Beijing: New World Press, 1990.

_____. *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975.

Mann, Susan. *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Mao Zedong. "Mao Zedong gei Yang Shaoxuan, Qi Yanming de xin" [The letter sent from Mao Zedong to Yang Shaoxuan and Qi Yanming]. In Zhonggong zhongyan wenxian yanjiu shi 中共中演文献研究室, Zhongyang dang'an guan 中央档案馆 eds. *Jiandang yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian: yijiueryi - yijiusijiu* 建党以来重要文献选编：一九二一－一九四九 [Selection of important documents since the founding of the Party - 1921-1949], vol. 21. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chuban she, 2011.

_____. *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Volume V*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977.

_____."Speech at Conference of Members and Cadres of Provinicial-Level Organization of CPC in Shandong (March 18, 1957)." In Michael Y.M. Kau and John K. Leung, eds. *The Writings of Mao Zedong, 1949-1976,* vol. 2, *January 1956-December 1957*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986.

_____. "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art." In Kirk Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Mazur, Mary G. *Wu Han, Historian: Son of China's Times*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.

McDougall, Bonnie S. and Kam Louie. *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳."Tantan buyan huaixi he fanyoupai douzheng wenti"谈谈不演坏戏和反右派斗争问题 [Discussing the problems of not staging bad plays and the struggle against rightists]. *Renmin ribao* 25 September, 1957.

Melvin, Sheila. "China's Homegrown *Peony Pavilion*." *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 November, 1999.

Meng Chao 孟超. “Dayuejin duanqu” 大跃进短曲 [A short melody of the Great Leap Forward]. *Renmind ribao* 29 March, 1958.

_____. *Li Huiniang* 李慧娘. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980.

_____. *Li Huiniang* 李慧娘. *Juben* (July/August 1961): 78-91.

_____. “Shi fa danqing tu guixiong – kunqu *Li Huiniang* chuban daiba” 试泼丹青涂鬼雄－昆曲李慧娘出版代跋 [An attempt to portray a ghost hero – the postscript to the publication of the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*]. In Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang*. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980: 108-119.

“Meng Chao tongzhi zhuidaohui daoci” 孟超同志追悼会到此 [The eulogy at the memorial meeting for comrade Meng Chao]. *Xin wenxue shiliao* 1 (1980): 282.

Meng Jian 孟健. “Xie zai *Li Huiniang* zaiban de shihou” 写在《李慧娘》再版的时候 [Writings at the time of the republication of *Li Huiniang*]. In Meng Chao, *Li Huiniang* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1980): 125-128.

Mostow, Joshua, ed. *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Mu Xin 穆欣. *Ban* Guangming ribao *shinian zishu* 办光明日报十年自述 [My thoughts on ten years of publishing the *Guangming Daily*]. Beijing: Zhonggongdang shi chubanshe, 1994.

_____. “Guixi *Li Huiniang*” 鬼戏《李慧娘》[The ghost play *Li Huiniang*]. *Yanhuang chunqiu* (October 1994): 34-43.

_____. *Jiehou changyi – shinian dongluan jishi* 劫后长忆－十年动乱纪事 [Long reminiscences after the disaster – chronicle of the decade of disturbances]. Hong Kong: Xintian chubanshe, 1997.

_____. “Meng Chao *Li Huiniang* yuan’an shimo” 孟超《李慧娘》冤案始末 [The whole unjust case of Meng Chao’s *Li Huiniang*]. *Xin wenxue shiliao* 2 (1995): 156-203.

Nie Gannu 聂绀弩. “Huai Meng Chao - zuowei *Shuibo liangshan yingxiong pu* de xu” 怀孟超－作为水波梁山英雄谱 [Thinking of Meng Chao - written as a preface to *A Guide to the Heroes of the Marsh*]. In Meng Chao. *Shuibo liangshan yingxiong pu* 水波梁山英雄谱. Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1985: 1-4.

Peng Zhen 彭真. “Zai jingju xiandaixi guanmo yanchu dahuishang de jianghua” 在京剧现代戏观摩演出大会上的讲话 [Speech at the festival on contemporary themes in *jingju*]. *Xiju bao* 1964 (July): 4-9.

Qi Xiangqun 齐向群. “Chongping Meng Chao xinbian *Li Huiniang*” 重评孟超新编《李慧娘》[A serious criticism of Meng Chao’s adapted *Li Huiniang*]. *Xiju bao* 1965.1 (Jan): 2-8.

Qu Liuyi 曲六乙.“Mantan guixi”漫谈鬼戏 [Discussing ghost plays]. *Xiju bao* 1957 (July): 4-5.

Qu You 瞿佑. *Qiandeng Xinhua* 剪灯新话 [New tales told by lamplight]. Shanghai: Shanghai guxiang chubanshe, 1981.

“Quanguo xiqu gongzuozhe dahuishi xianyou xiqu gongzuozhe sanshiwuwan ren guanzhong sanbaiwan huiyi jiang taolun yu jiejue xigai fangzhen zhengce deng wenti” 全国戏曲工作者大会师 现有戏曲工作者三十五万人观众三百万 会议将讨论与解决戏改方针政策等问题 [All-China theatre workers assembly; currently, theatre workers number 350,000 people, audiences number t2hree million; conference will discuss and settle general and specific policies and other problems related to drama reform]. *Renmin ribao*, 1 December 1950.

Ruo He 若何 [Chen Gongdeng 陈恭灯]. “Yan ‘guixi’ youhai ma? – ‘Yan ‘guixi’ meiyou haichu ma?’ duhou” 演“鬼戏”有害吗？－“演‘鬼戏‘没有害处吗？”读后 [Staging ‘ghost plays’ is harmful? – on reading ‘Staging ‘ghost plays’ doesn’t have any harmful points?’]. *Guangming ribao* (September 10, 1963).

Schmalzer, Sigrid. *The People’s Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

“Shanghai shi jingju chuantong jumu mulu” 上海市京剧传统剧目目录 [List of traditional Peking opera repertoire in Shanghai]. SMA B172-1-293 (January 1959).

“Shanghai shi wenhuaju 1949 – 1958 nian shangyan jumu tongjibiao” 上海市文化局1949－1958 年上演剧目统计表 [Shanghai cultural bureau statistics of repertoire performed, 1949-1958]. SMA B172-4-917.

“Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu canjia wenhubu juban de jingju xiandaixi guanmo yanchu de mingdan, zongjie baogao” 上海市文化局关于参加文化部举办的京剧现代戏观摩演出的名单，总结报告 [Name list and final report of the Shanghai cultural bureau regarding attending the Ministry of Culture-sponsored festival on contemporary themes in Peking opera]. 29 August 1964. SMA B172-1-527.

"Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu jumu gongzuoshi de gongzuo zhidu, fen'gong yijian ji Shanghai jingju guanzhong qingkuang chubu diaocha" 上海市文化局关于剧目工作室的工作制度，分工意见及上海京剧观众情况初步调查 [Shanghai municipal culture bureau, regarding the repertory office work system and separation of work and suggesting a preliminary investigation of the situation concerning Shanghai's Peking opera audiences]. SMA B172-5-680 (November 1963).

"Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu Shanghai shi 1949 nian - 1958 nian yanchu jumu de fennian tongji biao, mulu biao" 上海市文化局关于上海市 1949 年－1958 年演出剧目的分年统计表，目录表 [Shanghai cultural bureau, regarding repertoire performed in Shanghai from 1949 to 1958 – tables of statistics and catalogue, divided by year], SMA B172-1-326.

"Shanghai shi wenhuaju wei chengbao Shanghai xiqu yanchu qingkuangshi" 上海市文化局为呈报上海戏曲演出情况事 [Shanghai cultural bureau reporting the situation of plays staged in Shanghai], SMA B172-1-257-23.

"Shanghai shi wenhuaju guanyu yijiu e liusan nian quannian shanyan jumu tongji, jingjuyuan jumu paidui, guojia juyuantuan baoliu jumu gelin biao" 上海市文化局关于依旧额流散年全年上演剧目统计、京剧院剧目排队、国家剧院团保留剧目各类表 [Shanghai culture bureau statics on annual performed repertoire for previous years, Peking opera theatre repertoire list, list of every type of national theatre repertoire]. SMA B172-5-682.

"Shanghai shi wenhuaju yijiusijiu nian dao yijiuliuernian linian shangyan jumu (haoxi, huaixi) bijiaobao" 上海市文化局一九四九年至一九六二年历年上演剧目（好戏，坏戏）比较表 [Shanghai culture bureau comparison table of the performed repertoire (good plays, bad plays) over the years from 1949-1962], SMA B172-5-530.

Shen Yao 沈嶢. "Shenhuaxi yu guixi bixu yange qubie kailai – jianping Ruo He, Tan Peng tongzhi de yixie lundian" 神话戏与鬼戏必须严格区别开来－兼评若何，谭鹏同志的一些论点 [Mythology plays and ghost plays must have a strict separation – a simultaneous critique of a few of comrades Rou He and Tan Peng's points]. *Guangming ribao,* November 17, 1963.

"Shi 'wenhua dageming de xumu' haishi cuandang de xumu? – benkan bianjibu juxing zuotanhui pipan Yao Wenyuan de 'ping xinbian lishiju *Hai Rui baguan*'" 是文化大革命的序幕还是篡党的序幕本 刊编辑部举行座谈会批判姚文元的《评新编历史剧海瑞罢官 [Was it 'the prologue to the Great Cultural Revolution,' or the prologue to seizing the party by force? – the editorial board holds a meeting to

criticize Yao Wenyuan's 'Criticizing the new historical play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*]. *Renmin xiju* (January 1979): 4-9.

Shi Xin 石欣. "Ruiyi chuangxin, hongmei canran – cong Hu Zhifeng biaoyan de *Li Huiniang* tan tuichen chuxin" 锐意创新，红梅灿然－从胡芝风表演的《李慧娘》谈推陈出新 [Brilliantly blazing new trails, a dazzling red plum – observing Hu Zhifeng's production of *Li Huiniang* to discuss pushing out the old to uncover the new]. *Xiqu yishu* 4 (1980): 54-55.

Smith, S.A. "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of "Superstitious" Rumors in the People's Republic of China, 1961-1965." *The American Historical Review* 111.2 (April 2006): 405-427.

Song Lanlan 宋兰兰. "Wuhan tuan shiwei diaocha cheng banshu zhongxuesheng xin 'ren si neng fusheng'" 武汉团市委调查称半数中学生信"人死能复生" [Wuhan municipal group study says half of middle school students believe that 'people are able to return to life after death']. *Changjiang Daily* (30 May 2013), reprinted on http://news.qq.com/a/20130530/001500.htm [Accessed 10 June 2013].

Swatek, Catherine C. *Peony Pavilion Onstage: Four Centuries in the Career of a Chinese Drama.* Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 2002.

Tao Junqi 陶君起 and Li Dake 李大珂. "Yi duo xianyan de 'hongmei' – cong *Hongmei ji* de gaibian, tandao kunqu *Li Huiniang*" 一朵鲜艳的"红梅"－从《红梅记》的改变，谈到昆曲《李慧娘》 [A brightly colored 'red plum' – using the adaptations of the *Story of Red Plums* to discuss the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*]. *Renmin ribao* (December 28, 1961).

Tan Peng 谭鹏. "Youxie 'guixi' yinggai jiayi kending" 有些"鬼戏"应该加以肯定 [Some 'ghost plays' ought to be treated positively]. *Guangming ribao* (September 20, 1963).

Terrill, Ross. *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984.

Teiwes, Frederick C. *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965*. White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1979.

Wagner, Rudolf G. *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Wang Ankui 王安葵 and Yu Cong 余从, eds. *Zhongguo dangdai xiju shi* 中国当代戏剧史 [A history of contemporary Chinese theatre]. Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2005.

Wang, David Der-wei. *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Wang Xinrong 王欣荣 and Lu Zhengyan 卢正言. "Huodong zai zhengzhi yu wenxue zhijian de Meng Chao" 活动在政治与文学之间的孟超 [Meng Chao's activities between politics and literature]. *Shanghai shifan daxue xuebao* 4 (1988): 63-69.

Wei Wenbo 魏文伯. "Zai yijiuliusan nian Huadongqu huaju guanmo yanchu bimu shishang Wei Wenbo tongzhi de bimuci" 在一九六三年欢东区话剧观摩演出闭幕式上魏文伯同志的闭幕词 [Comrade Wei Wenbo's closing remarks at the closing ceremonies of the 1963 East China Spoken Language Drama Festival]。 *Shanghai xiju* 1963.2 (February): 2-3.

"Wenhua bu guanyu qing liji zuzhi wenhuabumen he xiqu jutuan dui *Renmin bao* ""You ducao jiu de jinxing douzheng" de shelun he Mei Lanfang tongzhi xiang xiqujie tichu buyan huaixi de jianyi jinxing xuexi he taolun de tongzhi" 文化部关于请立即组织文化部门及戏曲剧团对人民报"有毒草就得进行斗争"的社论和梅兰芳等同志向戏曲界提出不演坏戏的建议进行学习和讨论的通知 [Notice by the Ministry of Culture regarding the request to immediately organize study and discussion by Minsitry of Culture branches and opera troupes regarding the *People's Daily* editorial, "Have poisonous weeds, must carry out struggle" and Mei Lanfang's proposal to the theatre world that bad plays not be staged]. SMA B172-1-257-48 (10 August 1957).

Wines, Michael. "Chinese Agencies Struggle Over Video Game." *The New York Times* (6 November, 2009); http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/07/world/asia/07china.html [Accessed 20 June 2013].

Wu Shaoyun 吴少云, Zhang Yuqing 章育青, and Lu Zezhi 陆泽之. "Gongshe ru julong, shengchan xian weifeng" 公社如巨龙, 生产显威风 [The commune is like a gigantic dragon, production is awe-inspiring]. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1959. From the IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections. Call number BG E13/593. http://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-593.php [Accessed 10 June 2013].

Xia Yan 夏衍, Wu Han 吴晗, Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, Meng Chao 孟超, and Tang Tao 唐弢. *Changduan lu* 长短录 [The long and the short]. Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1980.

"Xiao Cuihua shuo: 'Wo yao changxi!' Beijing wenhuaju jing zhizhibuli" 筱翠花说："我要唱戏！"北京市文化局竟置之不理 [Xiao Cuihua says: 'I want to sing opera!' the Beijing culture bureau brushes [him] aside]. *Renmin ribao* 14 May 1957.

Xu Muyun 徐慕云. *Zhongguo xiju shi* 中国戏剧史 [A history of Chinese theatre]. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2001.

Xu Xianglin 许祥麟. *Zhongguo guixi* 中国鬼戏 [Chinese ghost plays]. Tianjin: Tianjin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997.

Yang Bujun 杨步均. "Minyishujia Ma Jianling" 民艺术家马健翎 [People's artist Ma Jianling]. *Jinqiu* 2012.1: 41-42.

Yang Lan. *Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1998.

Yang Qiuhong 杨秋红. *Zhongguo gudai guixi yanjiu* 中国古代鬼戏研究 [Research on China's pre-modern ghost plays]. Beijing:Zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe, 2009.

Yang Shaoxuan 杨绍萱. "Lun 'wei wenxue er wenxue, wei yishu er yishu' de weixianxing - ping Ai Qing de 'Tan niulang zhinü'" 论"为文学而文学、为艺术而艺术"的危害性 一评艾青的"谈《牛郎织女》" [Discussing the harmfulness of 'literature for the sake of literature, art for the sake of art' – criticizing Ai Qing's "Discussing *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*]. *Renmin ribao*, 3 November, 1951.

Yang Xianyi 杨宪益. "Hongmei jiuqu xi xifan – kunqu *Li Huiniang* guanhou gan" 红梅旧曲喜新翻一昆曲《李慧娘》观后感 [A welcome new turn for an old red plum drama – feelings after seeing the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*]. *Juben* (October 1961): 90-92.

Yeh Wen-Hsin. *The Alienated Academy: Culture and Politics in Republican China, 1919-1937*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

"You ducao jiudei jinxing douzheng" 有毒草就得进行斗争 [Have poisonous weeds, must carry out struggle]. *Renmin ribao* (25 July, 1957).

Yun Song 云松. "Tian Han de *Xie Yaohuan* shi yike daducao" 田汉的《谢瑶环》是一棵大毒草 [Tian Han's *Xie Yaohuan* is a big poisonous weed]. *Renmin ribao*, 1 February 1966.

Zeitlin, Judith T. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.

_____. "My Year of Peonies." *Asian Theatre Journal* 19.1 (Spring 2002): 124-133.

_____. "Operatic Ghosts on Screen: The Case of *A Test of Love* (1958)." *The Opera Quarterly* 24.2-3 (Spring-Summer 2010): 220-255.

_____. *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.

Zhang Chengping 张承平, ed. *Babaoshan geming gongmu beiwen lu* 八宝山革命公墓碑文录 [Collection of epitaphs from Babaoshan revolutionary cemetery]. Beijing: Gaige chubanshe, 1990.

Zhang Zhen 张真. "Guanyu kuoda xiqu shangyan jumu" 关于扩大戏曲上演剧目 [Regarding the broadening of performed opera repertoire]. *Xiju bao* 1956 (August): 16-17.

_____. "Kan kunqu xinfan *Li Huiniang*" 看昆曲新翻李慧娘 [Watching the new *kun* opera translation of *Li Huiniang*]. *Xiju bao* (August 1961): 47-49.

_____. "Tan *You xihu* de gaibian" 谈《游西湖》的改编 [Discussing *Wandering West Lake*'s revisions]. *Wenyi bao* 1954.21: 41-43.

Zhao Xun 赵寻. "Yan 'guixi' meiyou haichu ma?" 演"鬼戏"没有害处吗？ [Does staging 'ghost plays' do no harm?]. *Wenyi bao* (April 1963): 16-18.

Zhao Yan 昭彦 [Huang Qiuyun 黄秋耘]. "*Li Huiniang*." *Wenyi bao* 11 (1961): 3-4.

Zhonggong zhongyan wenxian yanjiu shi 中共中演文献研究室, Zhongyang dang'an guan 中央档案馆 ed. *Jiandang yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian: yijiueryi - yijiusijiu* 建党以来重要文献选编：一九二一－一九四九[Selection of important documents since the founding of the Party - 1921-1949], vol. 21. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chuban she, 2011.

Zhongguo xiju nianjian 1982 中国戏剧年鉴 1982 [1982 Chinese theatre yearbook]. Beijing: Zhongguo xiqu chubanshe, 1982.

Zhongguo yuyan wenxuexi ziliaoshi 中国语言文学系资料室, eds. *Guanyu* Li Huiniang *wenti ziliao xuanbian* 关于《李慧娘》问题资料选编 [A selection of materials relating to the *Li Huiniang* problem] (Changchun: Jilin Normal University, 1966).

"Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhua bu duiyu Shenyang shi wenhuaju fengfu quyi shangyan jiemu de pifu yijian" 中华人民共和国文化部对于沈阳市文化局丰富曲艺上演节目的批复意见 [Reply from the Ministry of Culture regarding the Shenyang cultural bureau's enrichment of performed operatic arts programs]. 18 October, 1956. SMA B172-1-196-23.

"Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wenhuabu wei tongzhi jingju *Wepeng ji* jing shidang xiugaihou ke huixia shangyan you" 中华人民共和国文化部为通知《乌盆计》

经适当修改后可恢复上演曲 [Notification from the Ministry of Culture that *Black Basin Stratagem* has undergone appropriate revision and may resume being staged]. 5 October, 1956, SMA B172-1-196-10.

Zhong Kan 仲侃. *Kang Sheng pingzhuan* 康生评传 [A critical biography of Kang Sheng]. Beijing: Hongqi chubanshe, 1982.

Zhou Heping 周和平 and Xu Ming 徐铭. "Hu Zhifeng tan *Li Huiniang*" 胡芝风谈《李慧娘》[Hu Zhifeng talks about *Li Huiniang*]. *Dianying pingjie* (Nov. 1980): 36-37.

Zhou Weizhi 周巍峙, "Fazhan aiguozhuyi de renmin xin xiqu - zhu quanguo xiqu gongzuo huiyi" 发展爱国主义的人民新戏曲—祝全国戏曲工作会议 [Developing the patriotism of the people's new opera - celebrating the All-China opera work conference], *Renmin ribao*, 10 December 1950.