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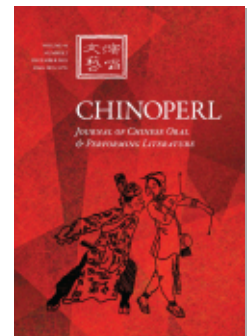
## The Stage Moves on Air: The Mediatization of Quyi in Early Twentieth-Century North China

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# THE STAGE MOVES ON AIR: THE MEDIATIZATION OF QUYI IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY NORTH CHINA

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*This article explores the flourishing of quyi 曲藝 performances—various forms of storytelling, ballad singing, and comic routines—through their interactions with modern media forms, particularly the gramophone and radio, and examines the transformation of native genres as they navigated the complexities of these media technologies and their associated industries. Drawing on both textual and media sources, it highlights the underexplored dynamics behind the mediatization of quyi performances in North China during the early twentieth century. Strategically coordinating with gramophone technologies, piaoyou (票友 avocational performers) transformed quyi performances into modern cultural products—sonic fragments that preserved local aesthetics and connoisseurship, valued for repeated listening, preservation, and academic research. These efforts, however, were soon eclipsed by the rise of radio broadcasting. With its advertising-driven profit model, broadcasting not only boosted the popularity of quyi genres but also reshaped both the cultural and commercial dynamics of the field through modifications introduced by producers and performers to suit the broadcast format. Yet, the process of modernization did not benefit all groups equally. The 1936 protest by blind singers in Tianjin against local broadcasting stations reveals the increasing imposition of professional barriers by the emerging new media platforms, leading to the exclusion of disadvantaged performers. By tracing these trajectories, this article illuminates the forces that fueled the golden age of quyi performances in 1930s North China, while also revealing the nuanced—and often overlooked—experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds who engaged in the historical process of mediatization.*

KEYWORDS: quyi; performance; gramophone; radio; media; modernization

“So you won’t keep looking down on me, mocking me for performing *xiang-sheng* with a garrulous and sharp tongue! See what I’ve done—I, Fang Liu, have made an appearance on the radio! When I start talking there, everyone in all of Beijing, and even those in the ‘borderlands’ of Tianjin, can hear me!”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “San bu guan” 三不管, or literally the “Three-No-Cares,” refers to an area in Tianjin located at the borders of the Chinese-administered region, where Japanese, Chinese, and Western authorities showed little intention to govern. Over time, it developed into an entertainment district where brothels, theaters, teahouses, and street performances gathered.

“省得你老看不起我，貧嘴惡舌的說相聲！瞧吧，我方六也到廣播電台去露了臉！我在那兒一出聲，九城八條大街，連天津三不管，都聽得見！”

Lao She, *Four Generations under One Roof* 四世同堂<sup>2</sup>

This boast from a *xiangsheng* 相聲 (comedy routines) performer in Lao She's 老舍 (1899–1966) novel *Four Generations under One Roof* vividly captures the impact of broadcasting on *quyi* 曲藝 performances—various forms of storytelling, ballad singing, and comic routines—in early twentieth-century China. What was once a humble form of entertainment ascended to new heights through the medium of radio, extending its influence to cities across the North China Plain. Public presence and fame in the industry were redefined sensorially—not only dependent on recognition earned through live bodily performances in prestigious teahouse theaters, but also shaped by the widespread exposure of the performer's invisible voice over the radio. Broadcasting was not the only modern medium that profoundly interacted with native *quyi* performance. Since the early 1900s, gramophone companies from Europe and the United States had produced various records featuring native *quyi* performances and engaged with local entertainment until the mid-1930s, when radio rapidly emerged as the dominant medium of popular entertainment. Amid this technological shift, *quyi* performances gained prominence while simultaneously undergoing reproduction. While the transformation of transnational media technology and industry during the colonial era has been well documented, the nuanced intricacies of the mediatization process, especially its interactions with local vernacular performances, have often been overlooked. How and why did *quyi* performances thrive in their engagement with various modern media forms? In what ways did native genres both transform and remain resilient as they navigated the complexities of mediatization? Were there casualties of the technological development of media, and what were the resulting challenges that performers faced?

To answer these questions, this article explores the process of mediatization and its impact through the experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds in vernacular *quyi* performances. Previous scholarship tends to examine the media history in early twentieth-century China through the lenses of nationalism and capitalism, the two key forces of modernity. They typically focus on the business structures and consumption patterns of gramophone records and radio programs, which were largely shaped by the upper and middle classes, as well as their roles in state-building, while paying less attention to the details of the mediatization process itself.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, this article shifts the focus beyond middle- and upper-class intellectuals and businessmen to include performers and musicians, proposing that media should be conceptualized as a fluid social institution of modernization and contextualized in a

<sup>2</sup> Lao She, *Sishi tongtang*, p. 384.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Andrew Jones explores the presence of locally owned pocketbook record companies during this period. See Jones, *Yellow Music*, pp. 61–64; Andreas Steen notices gramophone companies' strategies of inviting renowned performers and the copycat issues they encountered. He also discusses the involvement of *piaoyou* in producing gramophone catalogues. Steen, *Zai yule yu geming zhijian*, pp. 237–42. A more structural examination of Shanghai's gramophone industry can be found in Ge Tao, *Changpian yu jindai Shanghai shehui shenghuo*, and Steen, "The Shellac Period in China." For broadcasting in Republican Shanghai, see Benson, "From Teahouse to Radio."

network of relationships between human actors, technologies, and local practices.<sup>4</sup> This approach emphasizes the negotiated nature of mediatization, highlighting that the transforming media landscape was shaped by diverse groups of people holding varying ideas, rather than being driven solely by the dominant force of technology.<sup>5</sup> This article thus also foregrounds the experiences of participants from varied backgrounds—middle-class *piaoyou* 票友 (avocational performers), producers, previously marginalized performers, and disabled singers—and their engagement with the reproduction of native *quyi* performances during the mediatization process. It argues that the responses of these sometimes-overlooked individuals to the chaotic and competitive media soundscape of early twentieth-century China—whether by exploiting, adapting, negotiating, or being rejected—were significant to the transformation of *quyi* performances into popular modern entertainment. By doing so, this study provides a micro perspective on the global process of popular culture modernization grounded in the empirical experiences of North China in the early twentieth century, underscoring how local practitioners navigated the tensions between premodern genres and mediatization, both actively and passively.

The integration of new media into local societies has often been portrayed as a gradual and seamless progression, leading to the invention of new cultural products and promising futures for participants. This article challenges this view by emphasizing the persistence of existing practices and power structures within the local cultural industry, which interacted unpredictably with the mediatization process, yielding mixed impacts. Specifically, via their gramophone production for transnational companies, *piaoyou* producers objectified *quyi* performances into collectible sonic fragments, elevating local *quyi* genres into an academically esteemed art form grounded in the connoisseurship of *piaoyou* communities. From the 1930s onward, however, the prestige of refined content and vocal artistry gave way to the appeal of novelty. The rise of broadcasting facilitated the revival of *quyi* subgenres with long pieces, as well as the rise of previously marginalized forms such as *xiangsheng*, valued for their informative and fast-changing content, interactive qualities, and spoken delivery well suited to commercial radio advertisements. Yet the dominance of broadcasting did not only produce positive results. It revealed and reinforced existing professional barriers within the *quyi* business, exacerbating the exclusion of disadvantaged blind singers.<sup>6</sup> This article, then, suggests that both the transformation and the resilience of local performances within the turbulent global media industry were spontaneous and contingent, shaped by the intricate interplay of various power dynamics—old and new, local and global—bringing fortune to some while compromising others.

To closely examine this transforming and chaotic soundscape, this article draws upon both textual and media archives as primary sources. It utilizes reports and

<sup>4</sup> Scholars in media studies have paid attention to the interplay between media and society by exploring the concept of mediatization. See, for instance, Couldry and Hepp, “Conceptualizing Mediatization.”

<sup>5</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

<sup>6</sup> Studies on blind singers often concentrate geographically on Cantonese regions. See Yung, “A Humble Blind Singer’s Autobiographical Song”; Chin, *Bound to Emancipate*. Some scholars focus on blind singers’ engagement in PRC propaganda. For instance, see Hung, “Reeducating a Blind Storyteller.”

broadcasting programs from newspapers to track *quyi* performances in broadcasting on a day-to-day basis, enabling a micro-level analysis of the everyday soundscape of contemporary audiences. In addition to textual evidence, this article also analyzes audio recordings that unveil various production strategies employed in gramophone records—details captured in sound but often absent from conventional written sources. Although *piaoyou* agents were enthusiastic about documenting their engagement with modern media, their writings rarely emphasized their own roles and practices, as they tended to prioritize their observations on the stars they admired, overlooking the historical significance of their own involvement. However, through media evidence, this article reveals the practices of *piaoyou* agents in coordinating performers and machines, infusing their connoisseurship into the previously undervalued *quyi* performance.

This article is structured into three parts, tracing the distinct ways three groups of participants from different backgrounds engaged across media platforms. The first part examines the strategies and challenges of *piaoyou* agents, exploring their coordination with the gramophone technology to transform *quyi* performances into cultural products valued for repeat listening and even as artifacts for academic research, a process that impacted performers' aesthetics. The second part unpacks the transition of *quyi* performances from the margins of popular entertainment to its forefront with the development of broadcasting, analyzing the contribution of the advertising-driven profit model of new media to the popularity of *quyi* on radio and its reshaping of the performance genre. It also explores several innovations by producers and performers in leveraging or negotiating wireless technology to create more engaging performances. The third part centers on a 1936 protest by blind singers in Tianjin against broadcasting stations, delving into the tensions between disadvantaged singers and the new media technology; it further explores the establishment of professional barriers within *quyi* performances, which was exacerbated by the new media.

## THE CONNOISSEURS BEHIND GRAMOPHONE DISCS

In 1925, two collections of drum song gramophone records by Liu Baoquan 劉寶全 (1869–1942) were released: one by the French Pathé Company and the other by the newly established Odeon China Co., Ltd., with German involvement. Both companies captured one of Liu's most renowned pieces, "The Ningwu Pass" (*Ningwu guan* 寧武關), yet they employed different recording strategies. The first divergence lies in the sections of the song each company chose to record. "The Ningwu Pass" tells the lengthy story of Ming general Zhou Yuji 周遇吉, who, when besieged by the peasant rebellion leader Li Zicheng 李自成 at the Ningwu Pass, must witness the tragic suicide of his whole family, who choose this action to ease his concerns about their safety. Pathé opted to record the inception (*tou ben* 頭本) of the story, which depicts Zhou's return home before the battle and his worries about his family's uncertain fate.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Odeon selected a later and more climactic section, portraying Zhou's mother's decision to set their home ablaze after the suicides of her

<sup>7</sup> For the content of the recording, see *Zhongguo beifang quyi laochangpian yousheng dakao*, p. 16.

daughter-in-law and grandson.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Odeon's piece features more engaging dialogue between Zhou's mother and her elderly servant about martyrdom for righteousness and loyalty. The choice of this more dialogue-driven section demanded a more sophisticated vocal performance from Liu Baoquan, highlighting another key difference between the two recordings. The robust dialogue required Liu to nuance the gender and status disparities between the characters through his vocal techniques. He employed a slower pace and a lower-pitched, throaty voice to convey the femininity and elevated social status of Zhou's mother, while adopting a faster, sharper head voice for the servant. Emotionally, Zhou's mother exhibits steadier and more determined singing, contrasting with the servant, who carries a tone of eagerness and sorrow.<sup>9</sup> To accommodate the richer vocal performance and the more intricate narrative, Odeon's recording extended the duration by a minute compared to Pathé's version. This additional time allowed for a more cohesive performance, presenting a fuller rendition akin to live performances—a strategy recognized for its effectiveness in differentiating Odeon from its competitors.<sup>10</sup>

The distinctiveness of the 1925 Odeon project, characterized by its careful selection of captivating passages with the best display of the performer's talent and meaningful content aimed at moral education, owes much to the substantial contribution of *piaoyou* of native performing arts. These *piaoyou* enthusiasts played a crucial role in reshaping the landscape of gramophone record production, influencing both the tastes and strategies employed in the industry. A prominent figure among these *piaoyou* producers at Odeon in the early 1920s was Zheng Zibao 鄭子褒 (1898–1955).<sup>11</sup> Zheng's entry into the gramophone industry was informal and facilitated by his deep involvement in the *piaoyou* circle and his strong native-place tie to Yuyao 餘姚.<sup>12</sup> Zheng described this accidental entry into the gramophone industry

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 21–22. While the gramophone record released by Odeon was labeled as “Installment Two of the Ning Wu Pass” (*Erben Ningwu guan* 二本寧武關), it actually corresponds to the fourth installment in the five-installment *zidishu* manuscript, which captures the climax of the tragedy.

<sup>9</sup> Liu Baoquan, *The second part of the Ning Wu Pass*, 1925, Odeon Records.

<sup>10</sup> Meihua guanzhu, “Wo yu changpian de guanxi.”

<sup>11</sup> Liu Ziqiu, “Minguo ‘jutan daren’ Zheng Zibao de juping, ban kan shiye.” Details of Zheng's professional activities between 1918 and 1924 remain somewhat obscure, but it is evident that he gained recognition during this period by publishing numerous articles, primarily opera performance reviews, in Shanghai newspapers under the pseudonym “Master of the Hall of Plum Blossom” (Meihua guan zhu 梅花館主). Zheng also served as a literary staff member at the KMT Shanghai branch in the 1920s and 1930s. See Shanghai Municipal Archive (SMA), Q6-12-51-3. By around 1924, Zheng had established himself as a respected author and editor for various newspapers and magazines, earning nationwide recognition as a prominent performance critic, closely associated with intellectual *piaoyou* circles in Shanghai. See Yueban, “Tan ju zhu mingjia lüejì.” This trend of intellectuals migrating from Zhejiang to Shanghai and initiating their careers by engaging in public media circles has been exemplified by the case of Chen Diexian 陳蝶仙 (1879–1940), which occurred a decade prior to Zheng's move. Both figures epitomized the archetype of the middlebrow intellectual in early twentieth-century Shanghai, whose career and reputation burgeoned alongside the rise of the city. Lean, *Vernacular Industrialism in China*, Chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> Zheng's reputation as a critic within the *piaoyou* circle led to an invitation from Xu Qianlin 徐乾麟 (1863–1952), a fellow native of Yuyao who served as the chief comprador for the Victor Talking Machine Co. (Shengli liushengji gongsi 勝利留聲機公司). At Xu's invitation, Zheng became involved in a recording project in 1921 as a temporary guest participant, gradually acquainting himself with the industry. Xu then introduced Zheng to his son, Xu Xiaolin 徐小麟 (1902–?), who later took charge of Odeon. Luo Liangsheng, “Xiqu changpian shihua.”

as “a leap from the newspaper industry to the commercial world” 從報界跳到商界, downplaying both his pioneering role in the emerging industry and the social status of gramophone producers.<sup>13</sup> During the developmental stages of the gramophone industry in the early 1920s, gramophone records were more a product of *piaoyou* entertainment than of carefully planned business strategies. The experiences of Ding Song 丁悚 (1891–1969), a painter who also informally engaged with gramophone production as a *piaoyou*, showcase the recreational nature of gramophone production for *piaoyou* at that time. As a close friend of Zhang Changfu 張長福 (dates unknown), the first-generation comprador for the Pathé company, Ding enthusiastically contributed to the production of gramophone records without seeking compensation.<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on his involvement, Ding stated that his primary motivation was personal enjoyment and providing voluntary assistance to enhance the appreciation of those within and beyond the *piaoyou* circle.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, *piaoyou* producers in the early 1920s, such as Ding, functioned more as voluntary representatives of gramophone consumers. They offered perspectives that reflected the interests and tastes of the primary listeners, aligning with companies’ aspirations to increase sales.<sup>16</sup>

In the mid-1920s, the gramophone market witnessed increasing competition, with a surge in the circulation of new records. Leading companies such as Pathé were capable of producing ten to twelve records every three months.<sup>17</sup> To navigate this competitive landscape, *piaoyou* producers began to engage in gramophone production with a more professional approach, guided by the criteria and tastes prevalent within the *piaoyou* circles. They became more discerning in song selection, as discussed at the beginning of this section, and leveraged their *piaoyou* networks to invite popular performers.<sup>18</sup> In addition, they paid attention to recruiting skilled musicians who played crucial roles in improving the quality of recordings. Zheng Zibao’s memoir, which documents Odeon and Victor’s journey to Beijing, demonstrates his profound understanding of opera and *quyi* performances, along with his strategic approach to producing the 1925 project. He carefully selected master *sanxian* 三絃 (a three-stringed plucked instrument) and *sihu* 四胡 (a four-stringed bowed instrument) musicians, and ensured their effective collaboration with the singers. A newspaper advertisement for Odeon’s latest production in 1925 stressed that Liu Baoquan’s recordings were accompanied by two esteemed musicians, Bai Fengyan 白鳳岩 (1899–1975) and Ma Yanfang 馬硯芳 (1898–197?).<sup>19</sup> Both of them

<sup>13</sup> Meihua guanzhu, “Wo yu changpian de guanxi.”

<sup>14</sup> Ding Song, “Changpian hua.”

<sup>15</sup> Ding Muqin, “Changpian fusong changci suyuan.”

<sup>16</sup> Ding Song, “Shanghai liushengji shiye jinkuang.” This casual engagement, featuring the *piaoyou* mindset, persisted even into the 1930s. When the first China-funded Great Wall Gramophone Company (Changcheng changpian gongsi 長城唱片公司) was established in 1933, its contact address was set at the Neilshu Opera *Piaoyou* Club (Neilshu piaofang 內里社票房). The company’s founders joined primarily for entertainment purposes (為遊藝性質而參加), and many years passed without their attendance at shareholder meetings. They showed little interest in the company’s operations, having established it primarily out of friendship rather than serious business ambition. See SMA, Q275-1-2045.

<sup>17</sup> Ding Song, “Shanghai liushengji shiye jinkuang.”

<sup>18</sup> Similar strategies for producing competitive records can also be found in early twentieth-century U.S. country music discs. Peterson, *Creating Country Music*.

<sup>19</sup> Meihua guanzhu, “Gaoting gongsi shouyin ji.”

were instrumental in shaping the genre of capital-rhythm drum songs (*Jingyun dagu* 京韻大鼓) in the early twentieth century through their innovative melodies. This trend of emphasizing the quality of the musical accompaniment soon influenced Odeon's competitors, such as Pathé. A notable difference in the quality of musical accompaniment can be observed when comparing two recordings of "Da Xixiang" 大西廂 (*The great Western wing*) produced by Pathé ten years apart—one in 1926, during intense competition, and another in 1936, when *piaoyou* began establishing their own studios, breaking away from the foreign companies that had previously monopolized the business. In the 1926 Pathé version, Bai Fengyan skillfully accompanied the performance with his mastery of rolling techniques (*gun* 滾) on his *sanxian*. The recording dedicates a generous 25 seconds to the accompanist to showcase his skills, which stand out as a bravura performance in its own right.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the 1935 version only includes ten seconds of the accompaniment.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Bai's rolling technique in the 1926 version effectively complements the singing of the "Da Xixiang" excerpt. In this segment, Hongniang 紅娘, a lively young maid, employs a playful and witty tone to encourage her lovesick mistress, Yingying, to eat. She enthusiastically lists a variety of delicious dishes, urging Yingying to choose her favorite. Despite being a man in his late fifties, Liu Baoquan embodies the character of Hongniang with a spirited and playful tone. The energetic melody with jumpy rolling notes harmonizes perfectly with the young woman's lyrics and the master's singing.

The personal connections between *piaoyou* producers and performers often ensured the superior quality of such productions. Zheng Zibao, for instance, established close ties with *quyi* performers and musicians primarily through frequent visits to entertainment emporiums in Shanghai, facilitated by Chen Yanheng 陳彥衡 (1868–1933), a former Qing official who later devoted himself to Peking Opera music innovation and cooperated with numerous opera stars.<sup>22</sup> With such experienced connoisseurs and even semiprofessional performers present in the recording studio, singers and musicians often refined their performances with greater sophistication than they might have for outsider gramophone managers and foreign technicians. This influence is evident when comparing two versions of "Wulongyuan" 烏龍院 (*The black dragon courtyard*) by Liu Baoquan. The 1925 Odeon version, produced under the guidance of *piaoyou*, features fewer showy high pitches than the later 1928 Victor version.<sup>23</sup> In the Odeon version, the dialogue between the characters Liu Tang 劉唐 and Song Jiang 宋江 is performed with a more interactive approach with lower pitches, highlighting the confidential nature of their private conversation about inviting Song to join the bandits. In other words, the Odeon *piaoyou*-influenced version prioritizes plot and emotion over mere displays of vocal skills and talents. Performers likely put effort into adjusting their performing styles to cater to the tastes of *piaoyou* present in the recording setting, aiming for emotional nuance rather than showmanship. In another form of engagement, sometimes the musicians showcased their skills more prominently when *piaoyou* were involved. While Bai Fengyan's considerations during his recording remain unclear, a similar instance involving Peking Opera musicians suggests that the presence of *piaoyou*

<sup>20</sup> Liu Baoquan, *Da Xixiang*, 1926, Pathé Records.

<sup>21</sup> Liu Baoquan, *Da Xixiang*, 1935, Pathé Records.

<sup>22</sup> Meihua guanzhu, "Dao Liu Baoquan."

<sup>23</sup> Liu Baoquan, *Wulongyuan*, 1925, Odeon Record; *Wulongyuan*, 1928, Victor Record.

could prompt a more ostentatious performance. During a recording project in which Chen Yanheng served as an expert and recording coordinator, when he presented and expressed his high expectations, *huqin* 胡琴 (two-stringed fiddle) master Sun Zuochen 孫佐臣 (also known as 孫老元, 1862–1935) exhausted his full range of skills, delivering each set of eight opening bars (*guomen* 過門) in different styles without repetition, showcasing his reputation as a “musician worthy” (*yue sheng* 樂聖).<sup>24</sup> As Howard S. Becker argues, the production of artistic products is a collective activity shaped by the conventions of their social contexts—as large as a society and as small as a studio—in which they are produced.<sup>25</sup> In scenarios like this, where the *huqin* musician displayed his skills as a gesture of respect for insider *piaoyou* who appreciated his art, it is plausible that Bai Fengyan was similarly encouraged or motivated to deliberately showcase his virtuosity during his performance.

*Piaoyou* efforts to transform native performances into media artifacts with distinct artistic qualities for repeated listening and collection also influenced performers’ attitudes toward the value they placed on recording projects. Gramophone recordings were viewed by *piaoyou* as models for emulation, similar to how Chinese calligraphers use copybooks for practice, leading them to make efforts to preserve classic performances.<sup>26</sup> During the 1920s, many performers held negative views of recording projects, perceiving them as threats to their reputation, mere games, or simply profitable opportunities.<sup>27</sup> As the gramophone industry developed, some performers, such as Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), began to realize the significance of records for their reputations and careers.<sup>28</sup> With this trend, although Liu Baoquan initially disliked gramophone records for compromising the fluidity of his performances, by 1936, at the age of 67, he acknowledged the value of the gramophone in preserving his art. Aware that he might be too old to continue performing on stage, Liu negotiated with several gramophone companies to record his singing as a final commemorative act before retiring from public performance 輟唱前臨別紀念.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to designing recording projects, since the mid-1920s, *piaoyou* producers such as Zheng began integrating their interest in textualizing performance scripts into the gramophone industry to facilitate the circulation of discs. This process further fixed the previously flexible and interactive *quyi* performances, enabling their preservation and study as objects of academic research. Within the *piaoyou*

<sup>24</sup> Meihua guanzhu, “Changpian yiyu,” September 20, 1946. The record mentioned here is *Cailou pei* 彩樓配 (Betrothal at the decorated stage), performed by Chen Delin 陳德霖 and produced by Odeon Record in 1925.

<sup>25</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, Chapter 1.

<sup>26</sup> Su Shaoqing, “Tan *huqin* changpian.”

<sup>27</sup> *Piaoyou* such as Chen Yanheng, for instance, criticized Tan Xinpei 譚鑫培 (1847–1917) for carelessly selecting second-rate musicians to cut troupe costs, arguing that the recordings should be meticulously crafted as classics for passionate *piaoyou*. As demonstrated by Tan’s unsuccessful recordings, inexperienced musicians could disrupt the rhythm of the performance and ruin the most revered lines that *piaoyou* sought to appreciate and learn. Xu Jichuan, “Wo suo zhida de Chen Yanheng laoshi.” For Liu Baoquan’s struggle when he first encountered gramophone recording, see Shi, “Tensions on the B-Side.”

<sup>28</sup> Mei was celebrated by *piaoyou* producers during the gramophone era for his professionalism. He approached recording sessions with the utmost seriousness, rehearsing diligently to ensure every detail was flawless, reflecting his belief in the enduring legacy of gramophone recordings. Meihua guanzhu, “Changpian yiyu,” September 5, 1946.

<sup>29</sup> “Liu Baoquan zhi siren shenghuo.”

circles, a semiprofessional academic research community emerged, leading to the collection and cataloging of released discs and the publishing of the renowned *The Great Research into Plays* (*Da xikao* 大戲考).<sup>30</sup> Initiated in 1929 under the title *Compilation of Gramophone Recording Lyrics* (*Changpian juci huibian* 唱片劇詞彙編), *Da xikao* was at first headed up by Su Shaoqing 苏少卿 (1890–1971), a semi-professional opera performer with a background in primary school teaching, mass education, and opera criticism.<sup>31</sup> Zheng took over from Su, renaming it *Da xikao* to appeal to a broader audience in the early 1930s.<sup>32</sup> Different from earlier *Xikao* published in the 1910s, *Da xikao* encompassed a wider range of urban entertainments captured by gramophone records, especially *quyi* performances.<sup>33</sup> As the character “kao” (考 research) in its title suggests, *Da xikao* framed *quyi* scripts with an academic research orientation.<sup>34</sup> It fostered a community of connoisseurs and *piaoyou* who approached the appreciation of native traditional performances with a scholarly dedication.<sup>35</sup> The *quyi* section in *Da Xikao* was carefully curated, featuring a select group of performers favored by intellectuals, whose works were considered worthy of repeated appreciation and even scholarly attention. For Northern genres, only the “Drum King” (*gu wang* 鼓王) Liu Baoquan and two *zhuizi* 墜子 (ballad singing originating in Henan Province) singers, Dong Guizhi 董桂芝 (1915–2007) and Qiao Qingxiu 喬清秀 (1910–1944), were included; all were widely recognized within intellectual circles in Beiping (now Beijing), Tianjin, and Shanghai for their distinctive elegance (*wenya* 文雅) and artistry.<sup>36</sup> Although the number of performers was limited, their works were collected comprehensively, reflecting the editors’ scholarly meticulousness and thoroughness. For instance, the drum song section extensively compiles twenty-one of Liu Baoquan’s pieces recorded by various companies. The repertoires of Liu and the two *zhuizi* performers primarily consist of popular stories from intellectually esteemed classics, such as selections from

<sup>30</sup> Here, I follow David Rolston’s translation of “xikao.” See Rolston, *Inscribing Jingju/Peking Opera*, p. 293.

<sup>31</sup> Zhi, “Ming pingju jia Su Shaoqing.”

<sup>32</sup> *Da xikao suoyin*.

<sup>33</sup> The format of *Da xikao* was not a novelty tailored for the emerging gramophone media. The genre probably came from established practices in textualizing live performance since the early Republican period. For the history of *Xikao*, see Rolston, *Inscribing Jingju/Peking Opera*, pp. 296–405.

<sup>34</sup> This suggests a persisting tradition among opera enthusiasts of proving one’s profound knowledge of theatrical connoisseurship to the community. See Goldman, *Opera and the City*, Chapter 1. For more details on the intent of *Xikao* in preserving musical traditions, see Steen, *Zai yule yu geming zhijian*, pp. 392–400.

<sup>35</sup> The transcription of scripts helped sustain the community by enabling scholarly discussion. Despite producers such as Zheng being enthusiasts or amateur performers, accurately deciphering lyrics often proved difficult. Performers often promised to provide the lyrics of the versions they sang but broke their promises after recording. Consequently, the producers and editors of *Da xikao* had to painstakingly listen to the lyrics repeatedly, transcribe them, and sometimes consult with friends or even contact the performers for further clarification on uncertain passages. Many performers were illiterate or had been taught lyrics word-by-word by their instructors without understanding their exact meanings or, worse, taught incorrectly. Transcribers were left to make guesses on unclear sentences, and in some cases, better alternatives were discovered years later when discussing with their *piaoyou* friends. Shan Yu, “Changpian guanyin de nanti”; Chanweng, “Guanyin yiyu (xu).”

<sup>36</sup> Tang Xinfo, “Dagu yuanliu de tantao”; Pai, “Henan *zhuizi* dawang Dong Guizhi”; Maochang, “Guanghan xianyue Qiao Qingxiu.”

*Dream of the Red Chamber*, with substantial overlap with the stories performed in popular opera pieces.<sup>37</sup> With the circulation of *Da xikao* and the textualization of drum songs together with opera lyrics, the previously belittled drum song was transformed from a trivial “thing” (*wanyi'er* 玩藝兒) into a genre deserving of serious academic attention, resonating with the Folklore Movement underway since the New Culture era.<sup>38</sup> As early as 1937, scholars such as Zhao Jingshen 趙景深 (1902–1985) began utilizing *Da xikao* as a primary source for researching drum songs as a significant genre of folk literature.<sup>39</sup>

Over the years following the advent of *quyi* records produced by *piaoyou*, their distinct taste gradually influenced the dissemination, performance, and production of this genre. The productions designed by *piaoyou* played a pivotal role in elevating the status of *quyi* performances during the broadcasting era. As noted by one radio listener, when technical failures disrupted live performances, broadcast stations would play discs of both Mei Lanfang and Liu Baoquan to fill the gap and appease listeners.<sup>40</sup> *Quyi* performers also recognized and embraced the advantages of the *piaoyou* connoisseurship exemplified in gramophone records. They adopted the term “disc pieces” (*changpian huo* 唱片活) for short, well-crafted pieces with fixed lyrics. According to an interview with Bai Yunpeng 白雲鵬 (1874–1952), “disc pieces” were considered the most captivating and popular segments of drum songs due to their carefully designed structures, engaging openings, and satisfying conclusions, which provided quick gratification for the audience. Each component in this category of pieces—paragraph, sentence, and character—was meticulously refined through extensive experience and research.<sup>41</sup> The connoisseurship of *piaoyou* was also recognized and adopted in subsequent media productions. In the 1939 film version of “The Ningwu Pass,” Liu Baoquan began his performance with the more engaging part selected by Odeon’s *piaoyou* producer in 1925, summarizing preceding storylines, including the part previously chosen by Pathé, despite the film’s capacity to accommodate a longer duration.<sup>42</sup>

## THE RISE OF RADIO

During the 1920s, as Zheng and his peers strove to produce high-quality recordings, broadcasting began to permeate the everyday lives of Chinese people. The world’s first commercial radio station was established in the United States in 1920. Shortly

<sup>37</sup> For the repertoires of the three performers, see *Da Xikao*, pp. 219–25 (Liu Baoquan); pp. 235–39 (Dong Guizhi); pp. 240–44 (Qiao Qingxiu).

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed study on the making of Peking Opera as an academic discipline and the contribution of *piaoyou*, see Wu, “Collecting Theater in Republican Beijing.”

<sup>39</sup> Zhao Jingshen, *Dagu yanjiu*.

<sup>40</sup> Zheng Yuan, “Bailiwei diantai jinkuang.”

<sup>41</sup> Wang Zhuyu, “Dagu mingjia Bai Yunpeng fangwen ji.” So far, my research has not uncovered documented evidence of either professional performers or *piaoyou* using *quyi* recordings for learning purposes, unlike the case of Peking Opera records. Most professional *quyi* performers acquired their skills through apprenticeship, while some learners improved their abilities by “stealing the art” from live performances by renowned artists—a method recalled by Wei Xikui 魏喜奎 and Luo Yusheng 駱玉笙—which was more affordable and accessible than learning from gramophone records. For *piaoyou*, early twentieth-century *quyi* lacked the cultivated connoisseurship and the stable, discerning elite audience base that supported *piaoyou* communities or imitation practices in Peking Opera. As a result, examples of using media materials for skill acquisition in *quyi* are likely rare.

<sup>42</sup> Liu Baoquan, *Ningwu guan*, 1941, Xinhua yingye.

after, in 1923, Shanghai inaugurated its first commercial radio station, Osborn Radio Station, which primarily served the foreign community. This development was soon followed by the launch of Kellogg Radio (*Kailuo diantai* 開洛電台) in 1924, an American-funded station that catered more to local tastes.<sup>43</sup> The advent of radio quickly expanded beyond Shanghai, with Tianjin's first government-sponsored radio station beginning operations in 1927 and Beijing's inaugural broadcast station opening just two months later in the same year.<sup>44</sup> By 1930, almost every major Chinese city had its own radio station.<sup>45</sup>

The rise of broadcasting in the early 1930s posed significant challenges to gramophone companies directed by *piaoyou*. Despite technological advancements and localization efforts, many of these enterprises struggled to remain viable. The decline of the Great Wall Gramophone Company, sponsored by *piaoyou* in 1930 and managed by Zheng Zibao, exemplifies the difficulties faced by the industry.<sup>46</sup> Initially, the company gained popularity by carefully selecting and producing recordings of masterpieces performed by renowned artists. However, the rapid expansion of radio broadcasting soon eroded its market position, and by 1935, sustaining operating costs became increasingly difficult.<sup>47</sup> While gramophone records remained integral to contemporary broadcasting—nearly all radio stations featured programs that included gramophone records—the widespread reach of radio waves significantly diminished their retail sales.<sup>48</sup> Foreign gramophone companies encountered similar challenges but responded with different strategies. Recognizing the high costs and uncertain returns of hiring local opera stars, Pathé instead cooperated with film stars and turned to producing film songs by the early 1930s, which were more cost-effective and profitable.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, producers like Zheng continued to invest substantially in high-quality records to satisfy the tastes of *piaoyou*, focusing on producing gramophone records featuring famous opera stars, including collaborative performances between leading performers.<sup>50</sup> Ongoing business difficulties eventually led to the sale of the Great Wall Company to the Japan Victor Company in 1942.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Cao Zhongyuan, "San nian lai Shanghai wuxian dianhua zhi qingxing," p. 51. For the program of the Kellogg station, see *The China Press*, since 1924.12.28.

<sup>44</sup> "Tianjin guangbo wuxiandian"; "Beijing guangbo wuxian diantai zuori shiyan fangsong."

<sup>45</sup> These cities included Nanjing, Beiping, Tianjin, Hangzhou, Fengtian, Harbin, Dalian, and Shanghai. "Quanguo guangbo diantai zhi diaocha."

<sup>46</sup> SMA, Q275-1-2045. Initially conceptualized in 1930 by Zhang Xiaolin 張嘯林 (1877–1940), a leader of the Green Gang, the company faced difficulties from the outset. Its establishment was delayed due to the January 28 Incident in 1932, and it finally came to fruition in 1933. However, due to the war and the diversion of other committee members' attention to more profitable ventures, Zheng was left to shoulder most of the managerial responsibilities.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The company's situation was further worsened by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War and then influenced by World War II.

<sup>48</sup> As the market for records shrank, conflicts arose in 1935 between gramophone companies and radio stations over copyright fees for broadcasting gramophone records.

<sup>49</sup> Pathé also gained an advantage by investing in film and wireless equipment. Similarly, Victor Records thrived by recording popular film songs. Some Chinese capitalists with business acumen, such as Xu Xiaolin, had already turned to broadcast equipment when the new technology arrived in China. SMA, Q275-1-2045.

<sup>50</sup> An example is the company's most renowned opera recording, "Si Wuhua dong" 四五花洞 (The true and impersonated Wu Dalang and Pan Jinlian with four Pan Jinlians), which featured collaborations by Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲, Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋, and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生.

<sup>51</sup> SMA, Q275-1-2045.

With the advent of radio, *quyi* performances, which had previously been minimally represented on gramophone records, began to flourish. Initially, radio broadcasts in Tianjin and Beijing primarily focused on playing excerpts of Peking opera, the most popular and respectable form of live entertainment at the time.<sup>52</sup> However, starting in October 1927, the Tianjin broadcast station began dedicating two hours each day to live *quyi* performances.<sup>53</sup> At first, these *quyi* performances were vaguely described with a list of subgenres such as “Southern and Northern *tanhuang* operas, popular songs, drum songs, and miscellaneous songs” 南北灘簧時調大鼓雜曲 in newspapers, without providing specific details.<sup>54</sup> By November of the same year, however, major newspapers like *Dagongbao* 大公報 began offering more detailed program information. It highlighted drum songs and included seven other subgenres with the names of the performers.<sup>55</sup> In the 1930s, *quyi* performances became a significant component of radio entertainment, particularly on programs from private stations. The schedule of the Zhonghua Broadcast Station (*Zhonghua diantai* 中華電台), one of Tianjin’s most popular private stations, exemplified this trend, with *quyi* subgenres occupying nearly ten of the sixteen-and-a-half hours of daily broadcasting.<sup>56</sup>

This rise in the popularity of *quyi* performances was largely due to their flexibility in accommodating various types of advertisements. By the mid-1920s, American radio had revolutionized its profit model by introducing commercial advertisements—a practice that Chinese radio stations quickly adopted.<sup>57</sup> This shift toward commercialization highlighted the importance of entertainment in radio. Broadcast stations designed their schedules with eight to ten slots for diverse entertainment content to capture and retain listeners’ attention, while placing sponsored advertisements between these slots to generate revenue. The slots, ranging from forty minutes to an hour, required performances that could be adjusted to fit these time constraints. *Quyi* performances proved particularly advantageous for this need. The early experiences of *danxian* 單絃 (simple strings) performer Cao Baolu 曹寶祿 (1910–1988) with broadcast performances illustrate the flexibility of *quyi* performances in adapting to such requirements. Cao was assigned to fill an hour-long slot between eleven and twelve o’clock. Initially, he was concerned about covering the entire hour, as the genre he performed typically featured short pieces lasting ten to twenty minutes in teahouse performances. To address this challenge, Cao first managed to find a longer piece that was rarely performed in his live performances. On the day of the broadcast, Cao expertly crafted his time by skillfully assembling various components of his subgenre. He began with a short *chaqu* 岔曲 (*cha* songs) to engage the audience, as in live performances. Following that, he transitioned into the main piece and filled the remaining time with some casual conversation. By employing this strategy and by coordinating closely with his accompanist, Cao successfully

<sup>52</sup> “Zhongyang gongyuan guangbo wuxiandian”; “Guangbo wuxian diantai xiaoxi.”

<sup>53</sup> “Guangbo wuxiandian jinri fangsong jiemu.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Guangbo wuxiandian jinwan fangsong jiemu.”

<sup>56</sup> *Zhongguo de yi ri*, pp. 850–51. Other private broadcast stations in Tianjin had similarly designed programs. See also Benson, “From Teahouse to Radio,” pp. 119–20.

<sup>57</sup> Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor*. A 1930 municipal regulation from Guangzhou has addressed the tax collection on broadcasting advertisements. See *Guangzhou shi shizheng guizhang jikan*.

extended the performance to approximately two hours for the two-day broadcasting, demonstrating the adaptability of *quyi* performance in meeting the specific time requirements of radio programming.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to their adaptability to time slots, *quyi* performances were better suited to accommodating the fragmented nature of radio advertisements than other established genres. As satirized in a contemporaneous *xiangsheng* piece, “Xue diantai” 學電臺 (Imitating broadcast stations), audiences of the time were often annoyed by the frequent and intrusive advertisements of commercial broadcast stations that interrupted the entertainment content.<sup>59</sup> Live *quyi* performances, however, allowed a smoother integration of advertisements. As Cao Baolu noted, his performances typically lasted around twenty minutes, followed by an active break during which advertisements were broadcasted either by him or by another agent. *Quyi* performers and agents could manage transitions to advertisements more naturally and smoothly, often interacting with the audience to prepare them for the change and sustain their interest. This seamless blending of advertisements with the performance enhanced the effectiveness of *quyi* performances as a medium for commercial messaging.

Subgenres that could more effectively integrate advertisements—particularly those emphasizing spoken word and interactive engagement with the audiences—gained a competitive edge in the industry. *Xiangsheng*, in particular, stood out due to these features. As literature from the time suggests, the sound of string instruments (*xian sheng* 絃聲) and singing often served merely as background music for radio listeners, filling the silence without truly engaging them.<sup>60</sup> Unlike opera or other subgenres featuring singing and music, *quyi*, through spoken word combined with audience interaction, allowed for a more engaging experience. This approach transformed the audience from passive listeners into active participants, effectively capturing their interest and attention while facilitating smoother transitions to advertisements. *Xiangsheng* performers could even weave advertisements naturally into their performances, skillfully incorporating sponsors into their jokes.<sup>61</sup> This seamless integration provided memorable promotion for the products, ensuring a more effective presentation of fragmented advertisements. In this context, *xiangsheng* experienced significant growth during the broadcasting era. Initially, it served as a minor act to enliven *bajiaogu* 八角鼓 (octagonal drum) performances, and its comedic nature placed *xiangsheng* performers at the bottom of the industry’s hierarchy. Before the 1930s, many such performers rarely had opportunities to perform in teahouse theaters, and even the top performers earned less than drum singers. However, due to its amusing narrative, ability to incorporate advertisements, and interactive nature, *xiangsheng* rose to prominence and became one of the most popular subgenres among listeners by the mid-1930s.

Moreover, *quyi* performances proved to be a more economically sensible option for most sponsors. While some businesses opted to sponsor direct advertisements

<sup>58</sup> Cao Baolu, *Qutan cangsang*, p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> “Xue diantai” was composed by *xiangsheng* performer Sun Shaolin 孫少林 (1923–1980) in the 1940s. Although the versions differ, they consistently reflect a core characteristic of broadcasting: its exaggerated approach to advertising. *Zhongguo chuantong xiangsheng daquan*, pp. 451–53.

<sup>60</sup> Pan Xinyi, “Shutan yu diantai.”

<sup>61</sup> Lingjiang, “Tianjin wuxian diantai.”

between programs, others chose to fund independent programs or even establish their own private broadcast stations. Typically, these sponsors were small enterprises, such as shops selling everyday items or medicines, and sometimes they shared the costs of sponsoring a program. *Quyí* performers provided a cost-effective alternative for these smaller sponsors and private broadcast stations operating on limited budgets. Compared to the high expense of hiring opera stars, *quyí* performers were much more affordable. For example, Cao Baolu was content with earning 100 *yuan* monthly for a daily one-hour performance at a broadcast station—a sum still considerably lower than the cost of hiring opera troupes or individual opera stars.<sup>62</sup>

During the development of broadcasting, subgenres featuring long pieces and serial stories also experienced a revival in popularity. The programming of Zhonghua Broadcast Station exemplifies this shift, with seven out of the ten subgenres dedicated to long-form narratives, such as *Hujia jiang* 呼家將 (The generals of the Hu family) and *Liaozhai* 聊齋 (Strange tales from the Liao Studio).<sup>63</sup> This trend is further reflected in the rising popularity of *pingshu* 評書 (storytelling). In the early twentieth century, *pingshu* performers faced significant difficulties due to their incompatibility with entertainment venues that emphasized modern spectacle. However, the advent of broadcasting dramatically improved their employment opportunities and income.<sup>64</sup> Unlike the shorter content required for gramophone recordings, these extended performances kept listeners adhering to a particular channel, cultivating loyal audiences. The suspense techniques (*kou'er* 扣兒) used in *pingshu* storytelling, which originally served to encourage tipping (*da qian* 打錢) during live performances in teahouses, became well suited for inserting commercial advertisements.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, longer *quyí* performances like *pingshu* became more favored by sponsors than shorter subgenres. When Cao Baolu was introduced to an advertising agent for the first time, the manager inquired whether he could perform lengthy stories. Upon learning that he could not, the manager dismissed him.<sup>66</sup>

The advent of radio broadcasting marked a shift from the visual emphasis prevalent in entertainment emporiums to a focus on aural appreciation. This change in medium contributed to the popularity of *quyí* performances, which, unlike opera, relied less on visual elements and thereby suffered less loss in adaption from live performances. The emphasis on sound in broadcasting made audiences more discerning of oral delivery. For instance, Luo Yusheng 駱玉笙 (1914–2002), a renowned drum singer, was impressed by the audience's criticism of her incorrect pronunciations and nonsensical lyrics—issues that were seldom highlighted in live performances.<sup>67</sup> This vocal emphasis in broadcasting also led to the development of new *quyí* genres. A notable example is Beijing *qinshu* 北京琴書 (ballad-singing with dulcimer accompaniment). In the 1940s, the limitations of broadcasting technology

<sup>62</sup> In the same year, Mei Lanfang's daily income was about 3,000 *yuan*—1,000 times more than that of Cao. "Mei Lanfang yanju shouru."

<sup>63</sup> *Zhongguo de yiri*, pp. 850–51.

<sup>64</sup> Mao'an, "Diantai zhuan wei shuoshu er she ma"; Lingjiang, "Tianjin wuxian diantai"; Wan, "Quan Hu diantai yule jiemu shuoshu zhan shouxi."

<sup>65</sup> Lian Kuoru, "Lian Kuoru xiansheng tan yi jilu," pp. 175–77.

<sup>66</sup> This development in China roughly coincides with the global rise of radio drama. Crook, *Radio Drama*; Yoshimi Toshiya, "*Koe*" no *shihon shugi*.

<sup>67</sup> Yonghua, "Shouyinjì li Xiaocaiwu miu yi."

often resulted in noisy transmissions where musical accompaniment could overshadow the vocals. To address this issue, performers experimented with using the Chinese dulcimer (*yangqin* 揚琴) exclusively for accompaniment. This approach not only mitigated the problem but also created a distinctive subgenre with unique musical effects.<sup>68</sup> The invisibility of broadcast station performances also allowed performers to avoid judgments based on appearance and sexual attraction. Chang Lian'an 常連安 (1899–1966) and his son, who were initially refused by theaters due to their facial disfigurements, later found success through radio broadcasts, which allowed them to reach an even wider audience within the city of Tianjin.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, while female drum singers dominated the stage of teahouse theaters in the 1930s, radio offered male singers a significant platform. For instance, the 1936 and 1937 programs of the Zhonghua Broadcast Station usually featured two female singers among eight performers.<sup>70</sup> With less emphasis on visual appeal compared to live performances, radio broadcasting enabled male *quyi* performers, who often sought to build more enduring careers than women, to establish their reputations based on their skills.

Due to the commercial drive to engage and captivate audiences, radio granted listeners greater autonomy in reshaping performers' programs, thereby presenting challenges for *quyi* performers to improve their repertoires. As Benson has noted, radio audiences in the 1930s were highly interactive rather than passive. Sponsors and agents would also pressure singers to meet audience demands.<sup>71</sup> The daily broadcasts and the live nature of radio created a sense of intimacy between performers and listeners, but this daily interaction also posed a risk of boredom if performers repeatedly delivered the same content.<sup>72</sup> Different from live performances with a limited selection of songs for the audience, radio allowed audiences to request any of their favorite pieces. Performers were expected to respond swiftly to the diverse interests of a broader audience by performing the requested piece in their future performances. Both the younger singer Wei Xikui 魏喜奎 (1926–1996) and the more sophisticated Cao Baolu experienced anxiety when receiving such requests, particularly when the requested pieces were unfamiliar. As a result, performers often had to seek out teachers or learn new material on their own to prepare for their broadcasts. In this sense, *quyi* performers were compelled to expand their repertoires for a broader market created by broadcasting. The demand for novelty was a key appeal of radio, which shifted prestige from combined visual and sound representation to solely sound-based performance. Surprisingly, there is currently no evidence suggesting that performers pursued refining vocal artistry for broadcasting; instead, greater attention was given to producing fresh content. Compared to gramophone records, the transient nature of radio—and perhaps the limited technology for delivering vocal detail in the early twentieth century—did not create an immediate need for more sophisticated vocal skills from performers.

<sup>68</sup> Du Lai, "Beijing *qinshu* qiantan."

<sup>69</sup> Chang Baofeng, *Wo de fuqin Chang Lian'an*, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> See the broadcast programs listed in *Yishibao* (益世報) from February 1935 to January 1937.

<sup>71</sup> Cao Baolu, *Qutan cangsang*, p. 53.

<sup>72</sup> Lina, "Xiaojie rijì."

As audience expectations became more sophisticated, radio producers sought innovative ways to keep their programs fresh and engaging. Wireless technology was creatively employed to offer unique listening experiences. In 1944, a Tianjin radio station pioneered a groundbreaking broadcast format by connecting *xiangsheng* performers from Beiping and Tianjin through telephone lines to collaborate on a performance.<sup>73</sup> This experiment sought to eliminate geographical barriers, creating a virtual stage for stars who had no chance to perform together in person at a teahouse stage. Although prominent participants like Hou Baolin 侯寶林 (1917–1993) expressed dissatisfaction with the sound quality, especially low volume issues caused by poor telephone connections, the endeavor was notable for its novelty.

The growing impact of radio provided new opportunities for performers who had previously been overlooked in teahouse theaters, altering the traditional path to fame, although live venues remained the primary source of both economic benefit and public recognition. Invitations to radio stations were influenced not only by reputation but also by luck and economic considerations. For instance, Cao Baolu by chance was introduced to the manager of an advertising agency by an audience member at one of his live performances. Cao noted that the compensation for frequent radio broadcasts was not particularly enticing for famous performers, which discouraged their participation. Nonetheless, he realized that radio still offered valuable opportunities for performers without exceptional talent or prior fame to enhance their reputations. When drum singer Wei Xikui was hesitant to begin a career as a singing girl in teahouses (*Kun shu guan* 坤書館), Cao advised her to refrain from doing so to maintain her dignity. He instead encouraged Wei to join him and his accompanist at three radio stations, assuring her father that once her performances were broadcast and her name was announced on these stations, she would quickly gain fame in Beijing and across the country.<sup>74</sup> Within two months of her first broadcast, Wei advanced in the hierarchy of performers and secured a spot at the prestigious roof garden of the Kaiming Theater (Kaiming xiyuan 開明戲院), a venue previously reserved for star performers. In this sense, while radio could offer a shortcut to fame, it did not fundamentally change performers' career paths in the 1930s and 1940s. Wei still had to return to theaters to gain lasting recognition from live audiences. Radio coexisted with existing hierarchies and had limited power to disrupt them—at least until a nationwide radio network was established in the 1960s, enabling the medium to become accessible to the majority of the population.<sup>75</sup>

As the landscape of the radio business evolved, storytellers with entrepreneurial acumen also began to establish their own advertisement agencies to maximize earnings. Realizing that middlemen were taking a substantial cut of their income, they sought to take control of the business themselves. A notable example of such

<sup>73</sup> “Jing Jin xiangge erbai sishi li shuo duikou xiangsheng.”

<sup>74</sup> Wei Xikui, *Qubai yangbo*, p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, radio offered *quyi* performers a shortcut to fame and a modest source of extra income, but it could not match the steadier and often greater earnings from live performances. As Cao Baolu recalled, his monthly pay from a broadcasting station was 100 *yuan*, while a single day of live performances in teahouse theaters could bring him as much as 50 *yuan*. Live performances also allowed for the full display of a performer's craft—the richness of bodily expression, the immediacy of audience interaction, and the immersive atmosphere—all of which were essential for securing lasting recognition from audiences.

performers is Lian Kuoru 連闊如 (1903–1971), who founded his own advertising agency in 1939. Lian's agency, which employed up to five staff members, operated until 1950, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power. His business model was simple yet pioneering. Leveraging his storytelling talent, fame, and networking, Lian collaborated with the Beiping Broadcast Station, where he performed *pingshu* for seventy-five minutes while also delivering advertisements from his sponsors. Lian's approach was not unique. Other performers who engaged with broadcasting in the 1930s, such as Cao Baolu and Chang Lian'an, also ventured into the advertising business during this period.<sup>76</sup>

Although broadcasting opened up new opportunities, it also demanded performers commit significantly more time and labor, compelling them to adopt rigorous schedules to manage cross-media engagements. The live nature of broadcasting required strict adherence to schedules. Performers often had to shuttle between multiple broadcast stations and theaters in a single day. Female singers, in particular, it was claimed, faced severe health challenges. The demanding performance schedules frequently resulted in illness and fatigue, as reported by contemporary tabloids, underscoring the physical and emotional toll that broadcasting imposed on them.<sup>77</sup> In this context, not only were recordings of their performances commodified, as in the gramophone era, but the performers themselves also became mobile products, constantly on the move.

### PROFESSIONAL BARRIERS ON THE AIR

Although the expansion of radio broadcasting significantly broadened the reach of *quyi* performances, not all performers welcomed this change. In May 1936, two years after private commercial radio stations began operating in Tianjin, a group of blind singers gathered at the municipal government office to submit a petition. They voiced their concerns that broadcasting posed a significant threat to their livelihoods.

The dissatisfaction among blind singers arose from the growing influence of commercial radio, which increasingly permeated the daily entertainment life of common people in Tianjin. *Quyi* performances became a leading form of radio entertainment in the city following the emergence of private broadcast stations in the mid-1930s. In 1934, three private radio stations—the Renchang Silk Store Broadcast Station (*Renchang chouduan zhuang guangbo diantai* 仁昌綢緞莊廣播電台), the Zhonghua Broadcast Station, and the Dongfang Company Broadcast Station (*Dongfang guangbo diantai* 東方廣播電台)—gained popularity for featuring *quyi* performances.<sup>78</sup> Initially, these broadcast stations focused on music and gramophone records rather than *quyi* performances.<sup>79</sup> However, in February 1935, the Zhonghua Broadcast Station took a pioneering step by inviting drum singers and *xiangsheng* performers into their studios.<sup>80</sup> On April 5, the Renchang Silk Store Broadcast Station began airing its self-sponsored Xihe Drum Song (*Xihe dagu* 西河大鼓, Drum songs from the Western-Rivers Area of Tianjin) broadcasts twice

<sup>76</sup> Beijing Municipal Archive, J070-002-00398.

<sup>77</sup> "Dianxun."

<sup>78</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri jiemu," December 31, 1934.

<sup>79</sup> "Wuxiandian jinri jiemu."

<sup>80</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri jiemu," February 27, 1935.

daily, along with promotions of the day's featured items.<sup>81</sup> By July 1, the station had further expanded its programming to include additional subgenres, such as relaying performances from the Zhongyuan Entertainment Emporium (Zhongyuan youyi chang 中原遊藝場) and featuring *pingshu*.<sup>82</sup> The Dongfang Company Broadcast Station, initially specializing in Western classical music, also began featuring Xihe Drum Songs on August 14, 1935.<sup>83</sup>

The rise of *quyi* performances on radio thus increasingly encroached on the low-end market previously occupied by blind singers. During imperial times, many blind people relied on singing, begging, and fortunetelling as their primary sources of livelihood. Although blind singers had introduced Hebei rural drum songs to Tianjin in the late nineteenth century, sighted performers, who could incorporate visual elements such as facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact into their performances, gradually surpassed blind singers in popularity.<sup>84</sup> Blind singers faced significant challenges in updating their repertoires to meet the transforming values and preferences of contemporary audiences, as many remained secluded from the world beyond the blind community.<sup>85</sup> In addition, the growing presence of women in public spaces further marginalized blind performers, who had traditionally entertained audiences confined to the inner chambers by offering content that reinforced moral teachings without violating the late imperial gender order.<sup>86</sup> As women began attending performances in public by sighted performers during the Republican era, blind singers were largely excluded from the high-end market. Despite this, before the advent of broadcasting, blind singers remained a more accessible form of entertainment for the poor of Beijing and Tianjin due to their lower cost and mobility.<sup>87</sup> Urban poor communities would sometimes gather to enjoy performances by blind singers, sharing the fee among themselves.<sup>88</sup> However, from the mid-1930s onward, this niche was increasingly encroached upon by the growing popularity of radio. Radio enabled even the poorest audiences to access performances by prestigious singers for free by tuning into broadcasts in their communities or at storefronts on the streets. Almost every store placed a radio at its entrance to attract customers.<sup>89</sup> At noon, when broadcasts began, people on the streets, particularly those of limited means, would gather around these storefronts to listen to *quyi* performances, such as *xiangsheng* and drum songs. The entire street would momentarily fall silent as peddlers ceased their hawking and customers paused their bargaining, all captivated by the performance broadcasts.<sup>90</sup> As a result, blind singers, whose performances were seen as less trendy and refined, became less desirable. For many, singing was their only means of livelihood, especially as their supplementary income

<sup>81</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri jiemu," April 5, 1935.

<sup>82</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri jiemu," July 1, 1935.

<sup>83</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri yaomu," August 14, 1935.

<sup>84</sup> *Zhongguo quyi zhi*, *Tianjin juan*, pp. 909–10.

<sup>85</sup> Jin Shoushen, "Zai tan gumu yiren." Typically, blind singers had to learn moralistic stories from their blind masters that were intended for elite women in the Qing inner chambers. These stories lacked the violence or romance later preferred by Republican audiences.

<sup>86</sup> Their repertoire consisted of virtuous teachings, including works such as "Qianjin quande" 千金全德 (A noble daughter of perfect virtue). Hanyu, "Gumu yiren jilüe."

<sup>87</sup> Maoba, "Pingshi mangmu maichang zhe."

<sup>88</sup> Shou, "Gumu yiyuan huajiu."

<sup>89</sup> Cao Baolu, *Qutan cangsang*, p. 44.

<sup>90</sup> Luo Yusheng, *Tanban xian'ge qishi qiu*, p. 59.

from fortunetelling was also restricted by the modernizing efforts of the Kuomintang (KMT) government.<sup>91</sup>

On May 13, 1936, approximately one year after private broadcast stations began airing *quyi* performances, the Society of the Blind (Mangren hui 盲人會) elected eleven representatives from over nine hundred blind singers across Tianjin to petition against the radio broadcasting of drum songs. Historically, blind performers in Tianjin had a tradition of organizing guilds, producing records as early as 1913 on the basis of gatherings known as “gu hui” 瞽會 (blind gatherings).<sup>92</sup> In the 1920s, with the rise of democratic trends, Lin Moqing 林墨青 (1862–1933), a local gentry devoted to charity and mass education, established the Three Sovereigns Society (San huang hui 三皇會) along with four other loosely connected associations for the blind. By 1926, the Three Sovereigns Society had begun cultivating representatives to advocate for charity due to the dire economic conditions faced by its members.<sup>93</sup> In 1929, when the municipal government began registering fortunetellers, one of the associations, the Blind People’s Welfare Association (Gumu Minsheng hui 瞽目民生會), organized a protest against the Bureau of Social Affairs (Shehui ju 社會局, hereafter the BSA) of Tianjin.<sup>94</sup> This protest led to the unification of the four associations into a larger and more cohesive organization.<sup>95</sup> The more organized structure and advocacy tradition of the Tianjin blind made their protests against radio stations “a rare occurrence in the broadcasting industry nationwide” 全國播音界所稀有的事.<sup>96</sup> The Tianjin municipal office received their statement and agreed to forward their request to the mayor. Acknowledging the limited career options available to blind singers, the mayor instructed the BSA to intervene. A week later, the BSA decided to support the blind singers’ request. The bureau then negotiated with the radio stations, requesting modifications to the broadcasting schedules and the cessation of *quyi* programs.<sup>97</sup>

The initial resolution appeared promising, but neither the blind performers nor the government fully assessed the economic significance of *quyi* performances for commercial broadcasting stations. The six-hour broadcasts featuring eight sub-genres, which attracted sponsors, could not be easily canceled. Despite the mayor’s directive, the broadcasts were never fully halted. A month later, the blind singers made a second appeal, with over nine hundred singers gathering at the government gate. The singers resubmitted their request, staying for over two hours until municipal office staff received their petition and promised to forward it to the mayor.<sup>98</sup> However, this second appeal yielded no response. Four days later, the blind singers returned to the municipal office for a third time, with more than two hundred singers gathering to submit their request.<sup>99</sup> The previous mayor, having vacated his position, left the blind community with unfulfilled promises. Broadcast stations continued to neglect their concerns into August, leading the blind singers to issue a fourth

<sup>91</sup> “Bushu xingxiang.” Blind singers usually learned fortunetelling and ballad-singing together from their masters. Hanyu, “Gumu yiren jilie.”

<sup>92</sup> “Guzhe shesong.”

<sup>93</sup> “Mangren ju daibiao qiu zhen.”

<sup>94</sup> “Xiashuo.”

<sup>95</sup> “Xia nao yizhen.”

<sup>96</sup> Zheng Mengtang, “Huigu.”

<sup>97</sup> “Jiuji mangren shenghuo.”

<sup>98</sup> “Mangren bai yu ming zuori erci qingyuan.”

<sup>99</sup> “Mangren sanci qingyuan.”

appeal. On the first day of August, despite the rain, over one hundred blind performers gathered at the municipal office.

Having received no response, the blind singers further articulated their demand to the new mayor in the fourth appeal. This demand reveals the professional barrier between themselves and sighted singers, which was exacerbated by the advent of radio. This time, they requested the immediate removal of four specific categories from the broadcast station programs: *tiepian dagu* 鐵片大鼓 (iron castanets drum songs), *muban dagu* 木板大鼓 (wood castanets drum songs), *shidiao* 時調 (popular songs), and *yapai qu* 牙牌曲 (domino songs). They insisted on the immediate implementation of these changes, warning that all blind singers in Tianjin would escalate their protests if their demands were not met.<sup>100</sup> These four genres represented traditional forms preserved within the blind community. The inclusion of the term “*muban dagu*” in their requests already underscored the gap between blind singers and professional sighted performers. *Muban* drum songs, originally brought to Tianjin by blind singers from Hebei in the 1860s, had been reformed by notable sighted performers such as Liu Baoquan.<sup>101</sup> By the mid-1930s, this genre had undergone differentiation in the *zashua* 雜耍 (variety skits) teahouses, giving rise to various subgenres, such as *Jingyun* drum songs, *Xihe* drum songs, and *Jingdong* drum songs 京東大鼓 (East-of-the-Capital drum songs), all of which were featured on radio broadcasts. The term “*muban dagu*” that blind singers used in their announcement had already vanished from contemporary *zashua* theater and broadcasting programs. What the blind singers were actually referring to were all long-piece drum songs on the radio. As noted by a contemporary blind singer in an interview, they heavily relied on long, serialized drum songs as a more efficient way to earn a substantial income without the need to move from place to place.<sup>102</sup> However, they failed to precisely name and target their competitors when these rivals emerged as a direct threat to their livelihood through the radio waves. In addition to the diversification of subgenres derived from *muban* drum songs, the professionalization of rural genres and brothel songs in teahouse theaters also set a professional barrier for blind singers, which became evident with the popularity of broadcasting. Due to the increasing competition within the *quyi* performance profession since the 1920s, previously less common subgenres mastered by blind performers began to be featured on teahouse-theater stages and were further developed with better music. The *tiepian* drum song, originally a rural subgenre from Hebei, became popular in teahouse theaters for its unique rustic style that set it apart from other performances, ultimately leading to invitations from broadcast stations.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the *shidiao* genre, characterized by its licentious lyrics, which were traditionally performed in brothels by blind singers, began to move into teahouse theaters by the mid-1920s.<sup>104</sup> Some performers with brothel backgrounds, such as Gao Wugu 高五姑 (1882–1943), gained popularity with their exceptional skills and were later invited to broadcast stations. *Yapai qu*, also associated with brothel entertainment, was seldom shown in teahouse performances and never broadcast as a stand-alone subgenre. Their

<sup>100</sup> “Mangren maoyu qingyuan.”

<sup>101</sup> *Tiepian* drum songs were also popular among blind singers in Beijing. Hanyu, “Gumuyiren jilüe.”

<sup>102</sup> Maoba, “Pingshi mangmu maichang zhe.”

<sup>103</sup> Wei Ye, “Wang Peichen fangwen ji.”

<sup>104</sup> “Guangbo wuxiandian.” *Zhongguo quyi zhi, Tianjin juan*, pp. 93–94.

inclusion in the blind singers' requests, again, suggests the petitioners' lack of familiarity with the emerging subgenres and their desire to keep all kinds of brothel songs in which they specialized off the air. In general, while *quyi* performances were becoming more professionalized in teahouse theaters, it was the new media that exposed the widening gap between the sighted and blind communities, transforming this shift into a direct and explicit threat to blind singers.

Examples of blind singers who successfully adapted to radio broadcasting demonstrate that for the blind, overcoming professional barriers and technological unemployment often necessitated integrating into the sighted community and embracing its cultural trends. Many blind singers in broadcasting primarily worked as accompanists for sighted singers. For instance, Lu Chengke 盧成科 (1903–1953) frequently visited broadcast stations in the 1930s, mainly serving as a *sanxian* accompanist for famous sighted performers. His opportunities to collaborate with sighted performers were largely a result of his early training with renowned sighted musicians, which provided him with valuable networks and skills suited to sighted performances.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, although some blind musicians gained fame for their exceptional auditory abilities, their success often depended on their engagement with sighted cultural practices. Wang Dianyū 王殿玉 (1899–1964), for example, was celebrated for his “artistic innovation” (*yishu fanxin* 藝術翻新) in mimicking various sounds with his string instruments. However, his popularity and broadcast invitations were largely attributed to his skill in imitating the singing of Liu Baoquan and opera performers.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, blind singers such as Zhai Shaoping 翟少平 (1890–1954) and Wang Xiuqing 王秀卿 (1898–1978) earned recognition from official broadcast stations by expanding beyond traditional blind repertoires to include patriotic content that aligned with the political trends of the sighted community, positioning themselves as exemplars of the blind community. In this sense, radio was not the sole factor contributing to the unemployment of blind singers; rather, it was rooted in the enduring cultural divide between the sighted and the blind.

Although the unemployment of blind singers should not be solely attributed to broadcasting, broadcast stations did not shift the blame but rather arrogantly justified the situation to defend their benefits. Reluctant to relinquish their popular and commercially valuable long-piece genres, the broadcast stations responded to the blind singers' specific requests by submitting their own petition, interpreting the unemployment of blind singers as an inevitable consequence of modernization. In their communication with the Tianjin government, the four private broadcast stations invoked the theory of evolution to justify their stance, arguing that “world science progresses according to the universal law of natural selection, which naturally results in the new superseding the old” 世界科學進步，天演公理，新陳代謝。<sup>107</sup> From their perspective, the demands of the blind singers were unreasonable (*wuli* 無理).<sup>108</sup> To establish clear boundaries and avoid further conflicts, the stations announced that they would stop hiring blind performers for broadcasts altogether.

<sup>105</sup> *Zhongguo quyizhi, Tianjin juan*, p. 954. An interview with a blind singer trained by both blind and sighted instructors indicates that learning from sighted musicians often resulted in more structured (*zhenggui* 正規) training and a richer repertoire. Interview with the blind singer, Li Jiageng, in 2000, from Yue Yongyi, *Lao Beijing za ba di*, pp. 224–25.

<sup>106</sup> “Gumu yiren Wang Dianyū.”

<sup>107</sup> Document No. 657, *Tianjin shi zhengfu gongbao*.

<sup>108</sup> “Diantai guangbo guqu guanfang buzai jinzhi.”

In response to the government's directive to halt *quyi* performances, the stations employed a deceptive strategy to appease both the authorities and the blind singers. Instead of canceling the four specific genres demanded by the blind singers, the stations opted to remove less prominent performances, such as *xishou ci* 喜壽詞 (celebration songs) and *danxian*. *Danxian* was only occasionally performed in Tianjin, primarily by *piaoyou*, or temporary visiting singers from Beijing. *Xishou ci* was even less common, seldom recorded or broadcasted, and usually performed live only on special occasions by blind singers.<sup>109</sup> In essence, the broadcast stations, driven by their belief in technological progress, had no intention of discontinuing the four highly popular genres demanded by the blind singers that drew significant audiences and revenue. They sought to appease the blind singers and the municipal government by removing rarely aired genres, thereby securing their own interests without making significant concessions.

The firm progressive stance of broadcast stations challenged the Tianjin government's Confucian paternalism in its approach to supporting the blind. Unlike the British government, which took a hard position against the Luddites, the Tianjin government displayed neither strong support for industrial machinery nor a full endorsement of the blind singers' request.<sup>110</sup> During the blind singers' protest, the government initially approached the issue with a paternalistic mindset, attempting to preserve the livelihood of blind performers. However, it struggled to impose effective restrictions on private broadcast stations. Four days after the first protest, the head of the BSA convened a meeting with the managers of Tianjin's four major private broadcast stations to discuss possible solutions. The outcome was a vague order: "The stations should make an effort to reduce such entertainment in the future" 嗣後各電台放送此項娛樂節目，應力求減少云。<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, the radio stations did not comply with this order, which the blind singers perceived as a deliberate attempt to undermine their livelihoods and defy government orders. Moreover, in response to the broadcast stations' complaint asserting that the challenges faced by the blind singers were a result of a general market downturn and a natural consequence of technological progress, the municipal office issued an announcement calling for fair treatment of both parties in resolving the dispute.<sup>112</sup> On November 5, the municipal office settled the case by adopting a precedent set by the two official broadcast stations in Beijing, the Central Broadcast Station (*Zhongyang diantai* 中央電台) and the Beijing Broadcast Station (*Beiping diantai* 北平電台). They established a rule limiting the broadcast of drum songs to twice per day to better achieve mass education. The Tianjin municipal office stipulated that once this measure was implemented, the blind singers were to refrain from making any further demands.

This so-called fair resolution to the blind singers' unemployment exposed the limitations of the government's existing administrative framework for managing radio. In fact, the KMT government had been struggling to control various aspects of this

<sup>109</sup> The blind singers argued that they had heard celebratory content from the broadcast station, which was one of their signature singing styles. *Tianjin shi zhengfu gongbao*, p. 219.

<sup>110</sup> For an account of the Luddites—early nineteenth-century workers who protested against industrial machinery that threatened their jobs—and the government's response, see Archer, *Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England*.

<sup>111</sup> "Diantai bosong guqu jiemu ying liqiu jianshao."

<sup>112</sup> "Diantai guangbo guqu guanfang buzai jinzhi."

burgeoning commercial media. Although broadcast regulations were issued as early as 1928, their primary concern was on preventing content that might undermine the party's authority, which proved challenging to effectively enforce.<sup>113</sup> The rise of commercial radio, driven by strategies to attract audiences at any cost, faced criticism for being overly vernacular, repetitive, and lacking in educational value.<sup>114</sup> Though attempting to address this issue for the sake of the public ethos, the government grappled with managing the impact of commercial broadcasting and its associated entertainment, particularly in cities like Tianjin and Shanghai, where private broadcast stations prevailed. In Shanghai, the government attempted to cooperate with the broadcast guild to improve the quality of radio programs. However, the guild found it difficult to control live *quyi* performances due to the absence of pre-broadcast scripts for censorship, despite some success with regulating gramophone recordings.<sup>115</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Tianjin government's efforts to restrict drum song broadcasts were ultimately ineffective.<sup>116</sup> Unlike the two official stations in Beijing, the Tianjin government lacked the authority to regulate private stations effectively. As a result, the four stations in Tianjin continued their programming unchanged despite the new restrictions on drum songs.<sup>117</sup> In this context, the government's inability to effectively regulate commercial broadcasting contributed to the ongoing unemployment and marginalization of blind singers, as well as the establishment of barriers inside the *quyi* performance business.

## CONCLUSION

This article examines the rise and transformation of *quyi* performances within the chaotic soundscape shaped by the burgeoning media industry in early twentieth-century China. It explores the diverse experiences of three groups of participants from different backgrounds—*piaoyou* agents, sighted performers, and blind singers—who were involved in the cross-media production of *quyi* performances. Through an analysis of *quyi* recordings from various periods, this study reveals the pivotal role of *piaoyou* producers, who, though informally engaged with the gramophone industry, shaped native *quyi* performance with their *piaoyou* connoisseurship. Their influence on project design resonated throughout the gramophone commercial network and extended into the radio waves. As the novelty of gramophone production declined with the development of radio, *quyi* performance rose in the transforming media landscape. Its compatibility with commercial advertisements facilitated its dominance in radio, with subgenres emphasizing spoken words and audience interaction gaining the greatest prominence. The auditory focus of radio also reshaped the genre, encouraging performers to refine the content of their performances. However, the growing popularity of *quyi* performances on the radio further marginalized the already declining tradition of blind singing. The new media exacerbated the exclusion of disabled participants, reflecting and reinforcing existing cultural divides between sighted performers and blind singers. The radio industry's

<sup>113</sup> SMA, U38-1-2172; U38020954; Q5-3-2986.

<sup>114</sup> Fangfu, "Guangbo wuxian dianhua zhi feiyong."

<sup>115</sup> SMA, Q6-24-4.

<sup>116</sup> "Guangbo wuxiandian jinri yaomu," November 6, 1936.

<sup>117</sup> Consult the broadcast program listings in the November 1936 editions of *Dagongbao* and *Yishibao*.

embrace of technological progressivism, coupled with the government's limited regulatory oversight of broadcasting, solidified these professional barriers within the industry.

The mediatization of *quyi* reveals both parallels to and differences from the processes experienced by other contemporary genres, particularly various forms of traditional opera. Similar to other genres, *quyi*'s engagement with gramophone and radio technologies reshaped sensory hierarchies within performance, shifting emphasis toward auditory experience. Gramophone reproduction in both opera and *quyi* objectified live, interactive performances into decontextualized sonic fragments of selected classical excerpts, displacing immediate audience interaction in favor of technical perfection. The later emergence of radio, however, played a far more significant role in reshaping *quyi* performances—a transformation rarely seen in opera. *Quyi*'s greater accommodation of interruptions and advertisements facilitated its deeper integration with radio, positioning its performers as unique stars of the new media landscape. This engagement, in turn, reshaped the genre by demanding fresh and rapidly updated content to attract audiences, fostering new standards of connoisseurship and professional criteria centered on programmatic diversity. Institutionally, the mediatization process offered new career opportunities to *quyi* performers but also stratified the industry, promoting those with access to sponsorship while marginalizing others. Performers attained a new form of “disembodied” fame through their voices in radio broadcasts, challenging traditional notions of celebrity rooted in physical charms. Their identities shifted from service-based entertainers to media-dependent celebrities, with success increasingly measured by mass appeal rather than direct audience feedback. This shift excluded those without access to richer repertoires or personal connections with advertising agents, such as blind singers. Nonetheless, despite these transformations, mediatization did not fully overturn existing hierarchies or sources of income; given the limited media reach in China before the 1960s, live venues remained indispensable for performers' livelihoods. The mediatization of *quyi* thus exemplifies the dynamic interplay between technological innovation and traditional performance practices, illustrating the complex negotiation between continuity and change in the modernization of vernacular performances.

With its bottom-up perspective, this study sheds light on the plight of blind singers, a group largely overlooked in previous scholarship on *quyi* performers. These singers present a unique example of the technological underemployment of the disabled within the culture industry. Unlike the nineteenth-century Luddite campaigns in the British textile industry, where skilled laborers were replaced by lower-paid, unskilled workers, the rise of radio technology and entertainment capitalism further polarized the *quyi* business in 1930s China.<sup>118</sup> This shift eliminated the last means of livelihood for marginalized and disadvantaged blind singers in the modernizing era. Different from sound-modernization victims in other sectors who might transition to other careers, blind singers were left with no alternative but to seek refuge in public welfare, underscoring the critical need for social support and government intervention. The “fair treatment” policies adopted by the Tianjin municipal government, though more informed by benevolent paternalism than those of the British

<sup>118</sup> For other examples of resistance against machines and technologies in the early twentieth century, see Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing*, Chapter 11; Eyman, *The Speed of Sound*.

government during the Luddite uprisings, proved insufficient to salvage the livelihoods of blind singers. This issue remained challenging even for the socialist regime after 1949. The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) brought only slight improvements to the plight of blind singers. While the creation of the "Blind Training Classes" (*mangren jiangxi ban* 盲人講習班) provided some support and opportunities for those with certain abilities, enabling them to join the "Cultural Work Troupes" (*wengongtuan* 文工團) and other cultural units, their career prospects remained grim.<sup>119</sup> Much like in the Republican era, except for those who engaged with the sighted community and were promoted as models by the CCP, blind singers continued to be excluded from the radio broadcasts, perpetuating their marginalization.

The beneficiaries of radio also experienced vicissitudes with the ongoing transformation of media—in which change was the only constant. Although the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) disrupted the popularity of radio *quyi* performances, it also slowed the development and widespread adoption of television technology in China, thereby limiting television's impact on *quyi*. However, the challenge was only postponed. In 2004, *pingshu* was removed from the programming of China Central Television due to its decreased appeal to advertisement sponsors.<sup>120</sup> Regarding this, Shan Tianfang 單田芳 (1934–2018), a leading *pingshu* performer who gained nationwide fame in the 1980s through radio, remarked, "To allow performers to develop and fully exercise their talents, the best place for *pingshu* remains the teahouse" 要講究演員得發展有發揮，還是茶社裡比較好。<sup>121</sup> To cope with the frustration of being left behind by television, the storytelling master embraced a nostalgia for the simplest and most authentic performing settings—free from any technological devices—while ironically overlooking the fact that the genre had risen to unprecedented prominence through broadcast technology in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>119</sup> Wang Songsheng, "Lao She zai Beijing wenlian."

<sup>120</sup> Wang Xiaofeng, "Shan Tianfang."

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Also around 2004, one of the most famous *quyi* television programs produced by the Central Television, *Qu yuan za tan* 曲苑雜壇 (Miscellaneous shows of *quyi* performances), faced declining ratings. In response to this trend, senior *xiangsheng* performers also urged younger performers and audiences to return to the traditional theater setting, emphasizing the unique value of live performances over televised productions. Ma Rongrong, "Women dao na'er ting xiangsheng."

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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