Music and performing arts: tradition, reform and political and social relevance

This chapter takes up some of the main genres of modern Chinese culture that come under the general heading of music and performing arts. The traditional forms include traditional theatre (xiqu); traditional dance; folk songs (min’ge); narrative singing (shuochang or quyi); and traditional instrumental music (qiyue). Modern forms include the modern spoken play called the huaju; several other forms that were influenced greatly by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such as opera (geju, literally ‘song drama’) and ‘dance drama’ (wuju); and music introduced from outside China, especially the West. Some attention will be given to how the main forms have developed since the early years of the twentieth century, and to how these forms interacted with the society and the politics of the day. The chapter will adopt a basically, though not entirely, chronological structure. However, it will make no attempt at a consolidated discussion of all these genres. Rather, it will use examples from them to illustrate important themes.

Since the early years of the twentieth century, three in some ways related themes have dominated China’s music and performing arts. These are: how to reform or preserve them to maintain their popularity and relevance; the ability of the performing arts to change society; and the dichotomy between Chinese traditional and Western or Soviet forms. Some new genres have emerged under Western influence, but they have not simply followed the original models exactly. Although many traditions persist into the twenty-first century, no previous century has witnessed more thorough-going change in China’s music and performing arts than the twentieth century.

Another theme of considerable interest is the dichotomy between urban and rural performing arts. Referring specifically to folk music,
one specialist refers to ‘the gulf between rural and urban music-making, between the music of the yiren [artists] in the villages and that of the urban professional troupes’. He continues that ‘despite the contacts between town and country, as long as the urban professional scene dominates our image of Chinese music, we need to adjust our perspective’. He is referring specifically to the late years of the twentieth century, but his comments might also apply to other periods. In fact, most of the developments discussed in this chapter originated in the cities, and it was there that they had their greatest impact. However, we would do well to remember the living traditions that still exist in the countryside and away from the main centres.

The social and political context is covered elsewhere in this volume, but I note here that the reforms of the last decade of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and the Japanese Occupation and the various revolutions of the twentieth century have all exerted profound influence on music and the performing arts, although they have also generally left the traditions with a substantial following. The need to bring a degree of modernization to China has affected the arts since the late nineteenth century and accelerated since then, although not consistently. The impact of the modernization push since the 1970s may turn out to be even greater than that of the revolutions that preceded it, and in the early years of the twenty-first century has still far from run its course.

Late Qing reform

In traditional China, elite society despised drama (xiān) and its practitioners. As the main branch of popular literature, along with the novel, popular drama was so coarse that almost all traditional scholars regarded it as demeaning to be seen at a performance. But reformist thinkers such as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) took a different view. In a piece published in 1902 Liang claimed that reform of drama and the novel was essential to undertaking the reform of the country, as well as of its ethical standards, religion, customs, learning and ‘people’s hearts and characters’. His reason was simple: ‘popular literature wields incredible influence over the way of the world’. Meanwhile, scholars such as Wang Guowei (1877–1927) began to take traditional theatre very seriously as an area of scholarship. His 1912 work on the history of Chinese drama in the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1280–1368) periods, Song Yuan xiqu kao [Enquiry
into Song and Yuan Drama], proved both seminal and highly influential. According to one contemporary scholar, ‘it is fair to say that it represented the first systematic Chinese-authored insertion of Chinese literature into the discourse of “world literature”’. The idea that the popular arts influenced the minds of the people gathered momentum during the twentieth century. Research was interrupted several times, for instance during the war against Japan and more particularly the Cultural Revolution, but drama and other performing arts remained a respectable area of study, and the twentieth century produced an enormous amount of path-breaking work.

In the Chinese theatre itself reform was well under way by the time the Qing Dynasty fell in 1911. Reform was prominent in several of the traditional xiqu forms, including the most famous, the jingju, often translated as either Beijing Opera or Peking Opera. In August 1904, the reformist jingju actor Wang Xiaonong (1858–1918), who had taken to the stage after being dismissed from a position as county magistrate for his love of song, put on a new-style piece that reflected the dire situation in China at the time. The item, called Guanzhong lanxun (literally ‘melon seeds, cause of the orchid’), was about an ostensible war between Poland and Turkey, which ended in Poland’s humiliation and partition.

In fact, Wang Xiaonong’s real purpose was closer at hand: he aimed to use the theatre to educate the people in patriotism. In February 1904, Japan had declared war on Russia and the war had been fought on Chinese soil. China’s humiliation could hardly have been greater. Wang believed the theatre should ‘force people to think and feel for their country’ and ‘be a model for awakening our four hundred millions’. His experiment, which he put on in Shanghai because it was considered a comparatively free and open city, proved very popular, both with audiences and reviewers. It showed that people could respond to dramas that concerned contemporary politics, and were willing to accept theatre that departed from the traditional patterns with their endless repetition of stories based on Chinese novels, history, stories and legends.

The last years of the Qing saw the development of the modern form called huaju (literally ‘words drama’), but more often known in English as ‘spoken drama’. This was a new and very important form of drama that followed Western patterns of theatre, mostly transmitted through Japan. Its most prominent feature was that the dialogue was spoken, not sung or intoned, as in the traditional drama. In June 1907 the Spring Willow (Chunliu) Society put on a Chinese-language play called Heiniu
yuitian lu [The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven], which was an adaptation of the American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96).

While this first Chinese spoken drama was performed not in China but in Japan, the spoken drama quickly gained a following in China itself, although mainly among the educated. The new form produced a long line of excellent representative examples, a few of which will be mentioned later. Moreover, the first Chinese spoken drama very specifically advocated social reform for the downtrodden masses, because the novel on which it was based, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, dealt with the oppression of black slaves in the United States. The idea that drama should reflect and help to change society was from the beginning one of the main hallmarks of this new form. One specialist has written that, given “its inherently public nature and the social views of the writers, spoken drama has been the most assertive form of innovative literature in modern Chinese society.”

We might also note that the first modern-style proscenium stage where both modern and traditional plays were performed and open to Chinese audiences was located in Shanghai’s New Stage (Xin wutai) theatre, which dates from 1908. This stage could accommodate complex scenery and properties, in contrast to the old-style stages, which had no decor and only very simple props. Instead of sitting around tables, as so often happened in the old-style theatres, the audience faced the proscenium. Although traditional stages are still occasionally used in China, the proscenium stage has become dominant for the theatre. Modern concert halls have also become the norm for musical performances.

**The Republican period**

The New Culture Movement, which began with the appearance of the journal *New Youth* in 1915, and the May Fourth Movement of 1919 had a tremendous effect on Chinese drama. Western theatre patterns exerted a powerful influence, with many plays translated into Chinese, smoothing the way “for the new theatre of ideas, in which scripts became the basis of the production; stagecraft became secondary to faithful adherence to a preconceived and unalterable written form; authors dictated to actors; and exhortation replaced entertainment.” An implication of this last point was that the reform movement gathered momentum, with dramatists increasingly convinced that they must use their art to change society for the better and to help roll back the Western and Japanese imperialism they saw as humiliating China.
In the field of music and the performing arts, the New Culture activists faced a dilemma: reform appeared to require them to take new forms and styles from the West, but patriotism implied that their own tradition might have good things to offer. Few people shared the radical view of Qian Xuantong (1887–1939) that traditional Chinese drama should be eliminated altogether, since it was a relic of an evil Confucian past. However, the main beneficiary of May Fourth radicalism was undoubtedly the spoken drama, the Western form that had been introduced to China through Japan. And the literary doctrine guiding the new drama was realism, which required costuming, gestures and actions that resembled everyday life and required ‘facing truth and reality, especially the unpleasant truth of unhappy endings’, all of which was the direct antithesis of traditional drama.

The May Fourth period led to a very distinguished period in the history of the spoken drama, with a host of distinguished playwrights that included Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962), Hu Shi (1891–1962), Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Tian Han (1898–1968) and Hong Shen (1894–1955). A good example of this genre is the work of Cao Yu (1910–96), the pen-name of Wan Jiaobao. One specialist expresses a typical view when he claims Cao Yu as ‘the greatest of all the playwrights China has produced in modern theatre’. Despite his long life, prolific output and in general highly successful career, Cao’s best plays were produced in the 1930s. These were Thunderstorm [Leiyu, 1934], which has been called ‘the most famous dramatic work of the pre-war period and possibly the most performed play in the modern Chinese theatre’, Sunrise [Riclu, 1936] and The Wilderness [Yuan ye, 1937]. According to one specialist, Thunderstorm and Sunrise ‘attracted unprecedented audiences to the spoken drama and helped establish the first full-time professional company devoted exclusively to spoken drama’. Although Cao Yu’s plays are set in China and are an attempt as serious as any in modern Chinese theatre to wrestle with the problems of Chinese society, they certainly show the foreign impact familiar to his times. One writer states that he was ‘heavily influenced by and deeply indebted to his great predecessors in the Western theater, particularly Ibsen, O’Neill and Chekhov’.

In terms of the traditional drama, an interesting development in the Republican period was the ‘newly written historical drama’ (xin bian lishi ju). These were new arrangements of old or historical stories in traditional style. The theatre scholar Qi Rushan (1877–1962) wrote some of these for his friend Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), the most famous actor
China has produced. However, it was the CCP writers who paid most attention to this form.

In May 1942, CCP Chairman Mao Zedong put forward from his base in Yan’an in northern Shaanxi the idea that literature and the arts were an essential component in developing revolutionary ideology among the masses. It was important to use them directly for propaganda purposes and to follow a class line, with the arts clearly supporting the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers against the class enemies, especially the landlords, big bourgeoisie and collaborators with the Japanese. Mao’s ideas applied to all arts, not just the performing arts, but he was particularly interested in traditional theatre, which became one of the sites he used to push his ideas.

The CCP sponsored a movement to ‘weed through the old and push forward the new’ (tuichen chuxin). For jingju an important stage came on 9 January 1944, when Mao saw a newly written historical drama called Bishang Liangshan [Forced up Mount Liang]. It tells of the rebels of the classical novel Shuihuzhuan [Water Margin], which is about rebels and feudal ruling-class oppression, because its focal point is that the protagonist Lin Chong is given no choice but to go up Mount Liang and join the rebels there. Mao was very enthusiastic about the drama, praising the actors for ‘restoring history’s true face’ by making positive characters not out of ‘lords and ladies’ (laoye taitai shaoye xiaojie) but of rebels and the masses.14

Already, a form similar to Western opera, known as geju (song drama), was emerging. The first large-scale example among the Han majority of China was The White-Haired Girl, which premiered in April 1945 in conjunction with the Seventh CCP Congress. The opera combines Western and Chinese instrumentation, singing style and music, and is largely based on local melodies, but departs from the conventions of the traditional drama. The White-Haired Girl is about a village girl who, raped by a landlord, escapes into the mountains where she has a child and undergoes privations so severe that her hair turns white and the local people regard her as a spirit. In the end, the revolution triumphs and she accuses the landlord of his crimes.

The People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1976

When the CCP came to power in 1949, it set about reforming music and the performing arts to suit the needs of the new socialist China, as well as preparing to use these arts for political purposes. In music, the
main focus was on the popular arts, including xiqu, folk music and quyi, because one of the main points of the CCP's doctrine was that the arts should both reach the masses and influence them in the direction of socialism. Several major organizations were set up to cater for the needs of musicians and dramatists, and festivals were held to promote their work. One Chinese account of early PRC activity in the field of quyi could apply to other popular music:

Many literature and art workers took part in quyi reform work. On the one hand, they helped folk artists collect and arrange good traditional works, and raised them to new heights from ideological and artistic points of view. On the other hand, they actively created and arranged new works that reflected realistic life.⁹

The 'realistic life' reflected in these new works was geared very definitely to perpetuate the values of the new regime and the policies it was putting forward.

Like all art forms, the xiqu was expected to advocate revolt against the feudal system, equality for oppressed groups such as peasants, women and minorities, and patriotism. Some works that appeared to go against such themes were banned, and many 'newly written historical dramas' on traditional themes were developed that followed the CCP line. These used complex décor and stage properties, with the characters of the libretto projected on screens beside the stage. The changes initially left most of the conventions of the xiqu intact. However, from 1954 a few conventions that were considered 'unhealthy', such as the old method of imitating the gait of a woman's bound feet, were banned.

In the spoken drama, Cao Yu continued to write new work, and in 1956 the People's Literature Press published his three-act Bright Skies [Ming-lang de tian], which concerns American germ warfare during the Korean War. Probably the best representative spoken drama in the early years of the People's Republic is Teahouse [Chaguai] by the Manchu writer Lao She, pen-name of Shu Qingchun (1899–1966), which was written in 1957 and premiered the following year. The play is unique in the way it sets its three acts in the same place, the Yutai Teahouse in Beijing, but in entirely different periods—the first in 1898, the second soon after the death of China's first president Yuan Shikai in 1916, and the third shortly before the CCP came to power. Lao She regarded Beijing's teahouses as 'a microcosm of society as a whole',⁶ which meant that a teahouse could portray a reasonably accurate view of the development of history over half a century.
In 1957, the new form of wuju (dance drama), which combined elements of Western ballet with traditional Chinese dance movements and Western and Chinese music, was developed. New theatres were built, official figures claiming that the number rose from 891 in 1949 to over 2,800 in 1959, an early example being the People’s Theatre (Renmin juchang) in Beijing. Meanwhile, the CCP attempted to raise the social status of actors and musicians, by inviting representatives to join the CCP and even the National People’s Congress.

At the same time the CCP did not initially ignore either traditional Chinese or foreign music. It reformed the ancient musical instrument the seven-stringed zither (guqin) and sponsored publication of transcriptions of old pieces as well as the training of good guqin performers. In 1956 the China National Symphony Orchestra (Zhongguo guqin jiaoxiang yuetuan) was established in Beijing. It performed some Western music but also Chinese works written especially for it, some of which used both Chinese and Western instruments. In December 1956 a Chinese opera company put on Giuseppe Verdi’s La Traviata, which was the first European classical opera to be performed in the PRC.

The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) clamped down on Western music and traditional Chinese music that did not pass the test of being fully revolutionary. For a start, Lao She died under tragic circumstances as a direct result of the Cultural Revolution. The leader of the revolution in the performing arts was Mao Zedong’s radical wife Jiang Qing (1913–91). The xiagu was restricted to a very small number of ‘model dramas’ (yangban xi), mostly jingju but also a few others such as ballets, all set in the revolutionary period from the late 1920s on. Traditional xiagu and guyi were not allowed to be performed, while records of them disappeared from the shops. All the models were specifically designed to emphasize the class struggle, the leading positive characters being revolutionary heroes and the negative ones class enemies such as landlords or Japanese invaders. One of the few items allowed to be performed by the China National Symphony Orchestra was the Yellow River Piano Concerto, composed for it by committee and designed to emphasize the heroism of the Chinese people.

Possibly the best known of the ‘model dramas’ was the jingju The Red Lantern (Hongdeng ji), which features three generations of revolutionary heroes set against the background of the Japanese occupation. The story gives full play to the revolutionary heroism of the three protagonists, especially the main hero, the middle-generation Li Yuhe. In addition, the stage properties, gestures and acting allow the characters and heroic
class nature of the heroes to be set effectively against the reactionary qualities of the Japanese general and the soldiers and Chinese collaborators who support him. A few Western instruments have been added to the orchestra of this jingju to emphasize the heroism, while the music has a staccato style that is part of the mechanism of portraying the class struggle inherent in the story.

Another of the revolutionary 'model dramas' was the war ballet The Red Detachment of Women [Hongse niangzi jun], which takes up the theme of the oppression of women, but shows them resisting fiercely by forming a women's detachment. Chen Xiaomei comments:

At first sight, gender differences seem to disappear as women warriors take to the battlefield as ably and courageously as their male counterparts. But it then becomes evident – when we see that women are encouraged to be androgynous but that men's so-called male characteristics remain inviolate – that the unequal power relationship between genders will persist.19

The tension to which Chen refers is a very interesting one. However, both in the period of civil war before 1949, when the drama is set, and during the Cultural Revolution, when it reached its greatest popularity, the focus in Hongse niangzi jun was inevitably more on the political than on gender struggle. What mattered most was that women should take part in revolutionary struggle along with men and fight as well as men, not that they should in all respects be equal to men.

It would be a mistake to write off the theatre of the Cultural Revolution period completely. Even in the early twenty-first century, the 'models' attract some attention and occasional performance. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution period saw a blooming of theatrical performance in the countryside. Village amateurs were very active, even though they had to follow the tight prescriptions laid down by Mao and his followers. Mao was one of the few leaders in modern Chinese history to place emphasis on rural culture.

The People's Republic of China: reform period since the late 1970s

The Cultural Revolution was probably the most restrictive period for the arts in Chinese history. However, with Mao's death in 1976 and the negation of the Cultural Revolution in 1978, things changed very quickly for music and the performing arts.
The late 1970s ushered in a period of spectacular revival and creativity in the Chinese theatre. The best traditional xiqu and guyi came back, as did the best ‘newly written historical dramas’ of the past, even including Bishang Liangshan. The geju and wuju, few of which had been allowed to be performed during the Cultural Revolution, were revived, their tunes regaining popularity throughout much of the country.

In terms of newly created items, the most prominent and controversial items were the spoken dramas and the ‘newly written historical dramas’. We can see several major themes in the dramas produced in the 1980s. One was a revival of traditional patterns and a rethinking of Chinese history, of all periods – imperial, modern and contemporary – the last primarily consisting of attacks on the Cultural Revolution and all it stood for. Another theme was Western influence in the theatre. Yan Haiping, one of the best dramatists of the time, as well as a leading commentator, has written that, besides dramatists who reread China’s past and examined current conditions in China,

[there emerged another group of playwrights who attempted to break away from what they saw as the alienating, antiartistic, and ultimately illusory role of social and moral leadership with which Chinese intellectuals ... seemed obsessed. Looking to the West for inspiration, these playwrights discovered Western modernism in their eager, albeit tentative, pursuit of “the modern”.]

Perhaps the most innovative dramatist in the field of the spoken drama in the 1980s was Gao Xingjian (born 1940), who was in 2000 to distinguish himself by becoming the first person writing mainly in the Chinese language to win the Nobel Prize for literature. In 1981 he joined the Beijing People’s Art Theatre, the leading spoken drama company in China. Between 1982 and 1985 he wrote three notable plays, Juedui xinhao [Absolute Signal, 1982], Chezhan [Bus Stop, 1983] and Yeren [Wild Man, 1985]. The first director for all three plays was Lin Zhaohua (b. 1936), vice-president of the Beijing People’s Art Theatre from 1984 to 1998 and one of China’s most significant directors. The partnership confirmed the Beijing People’s Art Theatre as China’s main centre of experimental theatre.

Both Absolute Signal and Bus Stop show the heavy influence of modern Western theatre. The French newspaper Le monde declared that Absolute Signal marked ‘the birth of avant-garde theatre in China’. Bus Stop is regarded as China’s first example of theatre of the absurd. About a group
of people who wait ten years for a bus that never comes, it is to some extent inspired by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, although we should not underestimate 'the dynamic synthesis of Western and Chinese theatrical traditions present in the play'. In *Wild Man*, Gao turned much more to traditional themes, including Confucianism, Daoism, and folk cultures, as well as to the theatrical style of the traditional drama (xiagu).33

Although the theatre of the 1980s was incomparably broader in range and creativity than that of the Cultural Revolution had been, the authorities continued to keep an eye on what was happening in the theatre and did not hesitate to ban plays they found offensive to the socialist system. Gao Xingjian was a controversial figure who came under suspicion for the highly experimental nature of his work, which appeared to CCP authorities to depart from or ignore any socialist ideal, as well as for the somewhat negative view of contemporary Chinese society that comes over in his plays. One specialist claims that Gao compromised his endings, making them less bleak than he would have liked. In any case, he left China in 1987, making his home in Paris. In 1991 he declared he would never return to a 'totalitarian China', and in 1998 he became a French citizen.

The 1980s were also an excellent period for the 'newly written historical dramas', indeed probably the best decade since the form emerged. Very good dramas were produced in many of the regional styles. The most represented style was, not surprisingly, jingju. However, the most innovative playwright of the period was probably Wei Minglun (born 1940), who wrote for Sichuan Province's main traditional regional theatre genre, called Sichuan drama (chuanju).

Unlike Gao Xingjian, Wei Minglun has continued to live in China — in fact, in Zigong in his native Sichuan Province. His best-known work is *Pan Jinlian*, which will be discussed briefly below, but he has written other innovative dramas. Probably the most notable of these is an adaptation into a jingju (1993) and then a chuanju of Giacomo Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, itself set in China. Wei's *Turandot* won him numerous awards at the National Drama Festival held in 1994 in Chengdu, Sichuan's capital.

However, despite some continuing exceptions such as the works of Wei Minglun, the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have not been as rich as the preceding period for the Chinese performing arts. Xiaomei Chen is quite right when she writes:
It is important to point out that after the mid-1980s, theatre productions declined drastically, losing out to television, film, and other mass media. Gone were the days of early post-Maoist China when a play could draw large audiences with its pointed critique of contemporary society... Gone also were the 'golden' times of the Cultural Revolution, when dramas of model theater like *The Red Detachment of Women* were familiar to the majority of the people.25

Since the early to mid-1990s the modernization push has had an especially severe impact on *xiqiu*. The government has attempted to maintain it in several ways, such as sponsoring large-scale festivals and making traditional music, especially *jingju*, into a tourist attraction. Chen’s reference in the above quotation to television is particularly interesting, since China Central Television has set aside an entire channel for the traditional theatre. The medium of television may yet save traditional music.

Although the decline of interest in traditional Chinese music and performing arts has occurred everywhere in China, it has been most pronounced in the cities. In the countryside traditions of all kinds have retained considerable strength. Rural customs, such as popular festivals, still survive and draw some interest, and folk peasant musical and drama troupes remain quite active in many parts of rural China.

One factor of relevance here is religion, the importance of which to Chinese society is recognized in its allocation of a chapter in this book. The following comment may be specifically about instrumental music, but could apply equally to other performing arts, especially those of the countryside.

Religion is a major theme: secularization is far from complete, and to seek instrumental music almost inevitably leads us to the study of ritual. Folk ritual specialists and musicians, serving calendrical or life-cycle rituals, are still the major life-force of instrumental music in China today. Some village musicians are professional, others perform as a social or religious duty. Musicians also meet for their own pleasure— notably the string ensembles of coastal southern China.27

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the reform period has been both highly secular and highly urban: the emergence of an active rock music (*yaojun yinyue*) scene in China. The first rock band, called Wan-Li-Ma-Wang from the surnames of its four members, was set up in Beijing in 1980. It performed mainly Western music such as songs by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Since that time, the number of rock bands has
grown exponentially. Beijing remains by far the most active centre of Chinese rock music, with over 200 bands in 1994, but there are bands in other cities such as Shanghai, Chengdu and Guangzhou. The ‘father’ of Chinese rock is Cui Jian (born in 1961), who has produced many songs that have become popular among China’s youth, most notably ‘I Have Nothing’ (Yiyou), which premiered in May 1986. Although the performance of rock is mainly a male phenomenon, there are some female rock artists, and the first all-female rock band was Cobra (Yanjingshe), founded in the spring of 1989.

It is the greater openness to the West that has characterized the reform period which has enabled the growth of a Chinese rock scene. Rock was one of the main cultural products of the sudden and spectacular enthusiasm for everything Western when contacts with the West became permissible after the end of the Cultural Revolution and foreign students, cassettes and television programmes flooded into China. On the other hand, there are significant Chinese elements in the instrumentation and style of Chinese rock. It has even been suggested that Mao Zedong’s ideology of rebellion and revolution has made it possible to sinicize rock music effectively.

There are political implications in the introduction of such an art form. Just as in the West, rock is associated with cries for freedom and opposition to the establishment. Cui Jian’s ‘I Have Nothing’, though initially performed at a state-organized concert in the People’s Workers’ Stadium in Beijing, became a ‘student hymn’ during the protests of 1989. Most rock artists since then have maintained some anti-establishment flavour. Cui Jian has continued to emphasize individualism and criticize society in his art, and though his earliest success with ‘I Have Nothing’ has never been completely replicated he remains recognized both in China and abroad.

The authorities have occasionally stopped rock concerts, on the grounds that they are hostile to the government, at least in flavour and at times directly in content. Yet the rock music industry is thriving, and has produced numerous tapes and CDs. Moreover, rock music remains diverse, including works that range from rap, reggae, jazz, World Beat, and heavy metal to punk and even to dance music.

The reform period has seen the emergence not only of far more Western influence on Chinese theatre but also of performance of Western theatrical and musical pieces. Western music was suppressed more or less entirely during the Cultural Revolution. But the opening up in the
reform period has been incomparably broader than during the 1950s or early 1960s. Exchanges with Western countries have meant the regular performance of Western works by foreign groups, sometimes in conjunction with Chinese. Probably the largest in scale of these foreign performances as of 2006 was the Nuremberg State Theatre's production of Richard Wagner's mighty Der Ring des Nibelungen. The four operas were performed in Beijing late in 2005, the first time the entire cycle had been performed in China. In Beijing in 1986, this writer saw a Chinese performance, in Chinese and by Chinese performers, of Georges Bizet's Carmen. In May 2000 the China Philharmonic Orchestra was established in Beijing, with the German-trained Yu Long as its founding artistic director and principal conductor. It plays the Western orchestral canon, such as the works of Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler, as well as Chinese symphonic items from the 1930s and music newly written by Chinese composers in an idiom heavily influenced by Western styles. One of the channels of China Central Television is dedicated to telecasting concerts of the Western classics, as well as Chinese traditional music and occasionally groups from other foreign countries.

Training in Western music has come to occupy a fairly high place in the Chinese education system, with Chinese-trained musicians doing well on the international stage. Perhaps the most famous is the composer and conductor Tan Dun (born in 1957 in Hunan), who was trained at the Central Conservatorium in Beijing but has lived in New York since 1986. Tan has conducted several of the world's most famous orchestras and is fully conversant with Western musical idiom, but his works combine Western and Chinese styles in what one writer has called 'his search for the core of global musical and artistic experience'.

Some notes on gender in the Chinese theatre

One of the most prominent themes in spoken drama as well as in the reformed xiagu has been gender. Progressives have been very keen to use drama as a means of improving the lot of women. Many plays, including those set in the distant past, have pushed the cause of women's emancipation, and we have seen above how Jiang Qing and her followers adapted gender issues during the Cultural Revolution. Illustrative of gender matters are two items about Pan Jinlian, a character in one chapter of the novel Shuihu zhuan [The Water Margin], as well as in the erotic and pornographic novel Jin Ping Mei [The Golden Lotus]. Pan was traditionally
regarded as an evil woman because she was a nymphomaniac who killed one of her husbands to marry Ximen Qing, the anti-hero of *Jin Ping Mei* and a man even more noted for his insatiable sexual appetite than she.

An early example of a play about Pan, entitled simply *Pan Jinhian*, was written by actor, dramatist and drama historian Ouyang Yuqian, and premiered in 1927 and was published in 1928. Originally a spoken drama, it was also performed as a *jingshu* with Ouyang himself playing the title role. Despite Pan Jinhian's bad reputation in traditional times, Ouyang Yuqian takes her side and has her voice a plausible defence of her actions as a fighter for women's rights. In Ouyang's hands, she becomes almost a heroic figure, the antithesis of the image traditionalists attributed to her.

Written over half a century later, *chuanyu* dramatist Wei Minglun's most important and novel drama is also called *Pan Jinhian*, and according to its creator 'a Sichuan drama of the absurd' (*huanggan chuanyu*). The drama crosses cultural and time barriers by appealing to judgments about Pan by a range of people, including the only female emperor in Chinese history Wu Zetian (who reigned from 684–705), Anna Karenina, Ximen Qing himself, and a female judge of the People's Republic. At the end of the drama, the judge sums up as follows:

This is the story of a woman's fall –
Ages of feudalism caused it all.
I wished to save her, but she'll soon be dead.
My heart cannot overrule my head.
We should not follow ways we know are evil.
The moral of this story's deep and doleful.

Wei Minglun does not justify Pan Jinhian's actions. She is no hero, and in that sense he departs from some feminist accounts of Pan, especially Ouyang Yuqian's version. On the other hand, he does transfer the blame away from the woman herself and to the society in whichh she lived. This is very clear in the judge's summary, especially in her comment that the root cause of her actions was 'ages of feudalism'. Wei wrote of an absurdist dream he had had about the play, in one part telling the French absurdist playwright Eugène Ionesco that in his play Pan 'undergoes enormous transformations, from simple naivety to complicated worldliness, from trying to fight against the odds to sinking into total depravity, from an innocent victim to a criminal'. Wei's *Pan Jinhian* is actually more about the position of women in contemporary China than it is about the past. But to take the historical characters and use the form of traditional
chuanju was a brilliant development in the history of xiqu. At the end of his absurdist dream Wei heard hostile voices telling him that Pan Jinlian would not help revitalize the traditional theatre, but would only hasten its decline. This 'horrible' thought shocked him thoroughly, and he woke to greet 'some light in the eastern sky'.68 However, if traditional theatre does decline, it will hardly be the fault of Wei Minglu.

A very different way of looking at gender issues in Chinese theatre derives from the ancient practice of cross-dressing, which meant that boys or men played female roles while women played men’s roles. The male dan or female impersonator existed in almost all local traditional drama styles, and saw its greatest artistic development in the four great dan of the jingju, most prominent of whom was Mei Lanfang.

The decline of cross-dressing began in the Republican period. Ironically, this was partly because Mei himself took on some female disciples, a highly radical move at the time. This meant that women would begin to play women’s roles. The Beijing Private Advanced Traditional Drama School (Beijing shi sili Zhongguo gaoji xiqu zhiye xuexiao), established in 1930, was extremely unusual in taking on both male and female students. Meanwhile, in the 1920s women began to play men’s roles (sheng) in the local style of Zhejiang Province called the yueju, often translated as Shaoxing Opera, which became an all-female theatre by the early 1940s.

FRC governments have generally found it unnatural to have men playing female roles or vice versa. They have also condemned as feudal the past practices involved in training the male dan, which included the purchase of little boys from desperately poor parents by managers. In 1964, Zhou Enlai stated that cross-dressing of all kinds would gradually be phased out, even though it would continue to be part of actors’ training. In practice, what has happened since the Cultural Revolution has been the gradual demise of the male dan across all forms of regional opera, and the continual flourishing of the female sheng, particularly in yueju.69 There is a certain irony in this fact, considering the former importance of male dan in performing women’s roles.

Conclusion

The balance between Western influence on the arts and the Chinese tradition, whether reinvented or unreformed, has changed greatly over the last few decades, and mostly in the direction of Western influence. It
is remarkable to see the tradition in decline at the same time that rock
music seizes the imagination of urban young people. Market forces have
become much stronger than ever before in the period of reform, and
seem to be accelerating since China joined the World Trade Organiza-
tion at the end of 2001. This will probably affect the situation of music
and the performing arts in China, because the government will no longer
provide the funds to bail out failed companies.

At the same time, China is becoming demographically more urban
than ever before. The 1982 census indicated that 20.91 per cent of the
population was urban, but this figure grew to 26.44 per cent in the 1990
census and 36.22 per cent in the census of 2000. Small towns may well
remain centres of traditional arts, and it would be a mistake to write
off rural or semi-rural traditions. But the balance between urban mod-
ern arts and rural traditional arts will continue to shift in favour of the
former.

The forces of globalization in music and the performing arts in China
are expanding at the expense of those of indigenization, but it is unlikely
that the traditions will die out completely. In some contexts, globaliza-
tion has the effect of reviving traditions, because people do not want
to see their own culture swept away in a tide of globalization. But one
thing appears fairly certain: a revived tradition will be a changed tradi-
tion. It may be possible to keep a more or less pure tradition for tour-
is, a bit like a museum piece, or a memory. And while there is nothing
wrong with museums, or indeed with memories, they are unlikely to be
deeply seated in society.

Notes

1. These five categories follow the framework of analysis developed by Chinese music-
cologists in the 1950s; see Stephen Jones, Folk Music of China, Living Instrumental Tra-
3. See Liang Qiuhao, "Popular Literature in Relation to the Masses", in Faye Chunfang
Fei (ed. and trans.), Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Pre-
Song-Drama, 1300–2000, New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmil-
lan, 2003, p. 22.
5. Quoted in Rebecca E. Karl, Staging the World. Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the
14. See the passage quoted in Huang Yuchuan (ed.), *Mao Zedong shengyingshi jianbian, yibajuanshi - yijinjiangyun* [Brief material from Mao Zedong's life, 1893-1969], Hong Kong, Union Research Institute, 1970, p. 221.
21. Quah, Gao Xingjian, p. 64.
25. Quah, Gao Xingjian, p. 89.
36. Wei Minglun, trans. David Williams, with the assistance of Xiaoxia Williams, 'Pan Jinlian, The History of a Fallen Woman', in Yan (ed.), Theater and Society, p. 188. The whole chuanda is translated on pp. 123–88.
37. Wei Minglun, 'I am Dreaming a Very Absurd Dream: Thoughts on Pan Jinlian', in Fei (ed. and trans.), Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance, p. 197.
38. Wei, 'I am Dreaming a Very Absurd Dream', p. 201.

Guide to further reading