The Market, Ideology, and Convention

Jingju Performers’ Creativity in the 21st Century

Li Ruru

Driven by the imperatives of a changing society and the pressures of new technology, China’s theatre is undergoing continual transformation, both in its performance and understanding by practitioners and in its reception by audiences. Jingju (known in the West as Beijing Opera)—a highly stylized theatrical genre founded on specific role types and spectacular stage conventions—is no exception to this process. As new media devices and possibilities appear at an unprecedented pace, these developments afford artists tremendous choices and fundamentally alter not only what constitutes theatre but also the mentality of practitioners and spectators.

Since the nadir of the Cultural Revolution, a more than tenfold increase in gross domestic product has made China a powerful voice in the global capitalist community and a generous benefactor of its theatre. The budget for starting a stage show can now easily reach around five million RMB (about US$800,000). “Forging exquisite productions” (dazao jingpin) to obtain

Figure 1. Ailiya (Shi Yihong) dances for her beggar friends. Shanghai, 2008. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Jingju Theatre)
national prizes seems to be the ultimate objective of all theatre companies and local authorities, so the funding enables theatre, including jingju, to do things that it could not have dreamed of 30 years ago.

Behind this façade, however, the reality is perilous. Jingju is failing to attract sufficient audiences despite campaigns, starting as early as the 1990s, to promote it among young people. Since 1996 the Shanghai Jingju Theatre (Shanghai Jingjuyuan, SJT), for instance, has been running two projects aimed at bringing the Shanghai jingju to a larger audience including young people who are new to the genre: “Jingju Marching Ten Thousand Miles” and “Towards Young People.” Much debated from the 1990s onwards, and the topic of the “Strategy for the Development of Jingju in Shanghai” symposium in 1997, the question “What can jingju do?” remains unanswered.

Two productions staged by the SJT help to address this question: Lianli Yu Chenglong (The upright official Yu Chenglong; 2002), and Shengmuyuan (Notre-Dame; 2008) (fig. 1). The former is a newly written historical play; the latter is an adaptation of Victor Hugo’s 19th-century novel Notre-Dame de Paris (The Hunchback of Notre-Dame). The push and pull between the market, ideology, jingju’s conventionalization, and the performers’ creativity often yields preposterous outcomes as, one after another, new plays are staged in sparsely attended auditoria. Seats might be filled only at free performances organized either by the theatre (for example, performing for university students on campus) or by the local authorities. Thus when the SJT was invited to perform Yu Chenglong to the Zhejiang Changxing county-level leadership—for “education in clean government” (liangzheng jiaoyu)—one performance drew an audience of over 1,000.

Jingju practitioners believe that “conventionalization is the soul of jingju” (Li Yuru 2006:24). However, a tendency to concentrate on the richness of its conventions and patterns has often led practitioners, critics, and audiences to forget jingju’s rebellious beginnings. Originating in the 19th century as a new theatrical amalgamation created by re-forming pre-existent music, dance, and theatre genres (Ma Shaobo et al. 1999:71–110; Mackerras 1972:161–69), jingju’s fundamental characteristic remains the mixing of different styles (Li Ruru 2010b).

Jingju’s capacity since its inception to assimilate different styles encouraged performers to recreate existing stage conventions either to revitalize the old repertory or to present new plays. This concept of “re-form” resonated with the early 20th century’s penchant for high-spirited change.

1. The symposium was held from 25–29 March 1997, organized by the Guiding Committee of Jingju Promotion (Zhenxing Jingju Zhidao Weiyuanhui, established in 1992) under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture, the Chinese Foundation of Jingju Art (Zhongguo Jingju Yishu Jiushui, established in 1992), the Shanghai Cultural Bureau, Wenhu Daily, and the Shanghai Jingju Theatre. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise noted.

2. All Chinese names are written with family name first and given name second.

3. Around the turn of the 20th century, a series of reformed jingju productions (such as works by Wang Xiaonong, the Xia Brothers, and others; see Li Ruru 2010b:41–47) had a great impact on the emergence of modern drama.

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Following the “forward-looking” vogue for modernizing (Li Ruru 2010b:276), Mei Lanfang commenced his bold formal experiments in the early 20th century leading to the development of more acting styles (pai) in jingju (Goldstein 2007:119–29). About 50 years later, the power and resources of the state brought into existence the most bizarre cultural product ever to appear on the Chinese stage: the revolutionary model theatre (yangbanxi) with its “tall, big, and perfect” (gao, da, quan) central characters. Ironically, ultra-leftists used jingju’s ability to assimilate diversity — an essential characteristic of the genre’s tradition — in their efforts to eliminate traditional culture.4

The haipai or Shanghai style of jingju (as contrasted with the jingpai or Beijing style) has been particularly forward-looking. The SJT, which produced both Yu Chenglong and Notre-Dame, used haipai to distinguish itself from the over 80 other jingju companies in the country.

**Shanghai Jingju Theatre and Shanghai-Style Jingju**

The geographical area where the SJT is based determines its artistic strategy, which reflects the freedom that an artistic organization can sometimes be allowed while still following the cultural policy of both the Party and the government. Shanghai became the most important focus for jingju outside of Beijing from the late 19th century onwards because all the stars, including Mei Lanfang, were widely promoted by the burgeoning market-driven entertainment industry in this cosmopolitan city. Shanghai, where reformed jingju developed and where jingju actresses first appeared onstage, was also the home of haipai jingju.

At first, haipai was a derogatory term referring to performers who ingratiated themselves with the audience by showing off, ignoring the tradition, or using new stage devices excessively.5 Yet eventually, even the conservatives admitted that the Shanghai style represents a daring, innovative approach to jingju.

In addition to newly created plays, the Shanghai-style jingju staged the same traditional repertory as jingpai. The differences between the Beijing and Shanghai style lay in the portrayal of characters, the arrangement of scenes, and the ways of singing, speaking, acting, and displaying martial arts. Haipai altered the repertory to “suit the local customs” (Ma Shaobo et al. 1999:27); it was market-driven and audience-centered — a product of Shanghai culture.

While Shanghai was neither the political nor the cultural center of the nation, it was pre-eminent in finance, media, publishing, modern drama, film, literature, and fine arts. Shanghai’s non-central but non-marginal position was reflected in haipai productions that submitted to the Beijing style while consciously or subconsciously persisting in challenging the orthodox jingju. Interestingly, the Shanghai style was closer to jingju’s beginnings when it had been keen to assimilate different styles. SJT further developed this practice of assimilation in the 21st century.

The founding president of the SJT was Zhou Xinfang (1895–1975; his stage name, Qilin Tong, was a pun for a seven-year-old child starting to act on the stage), and he held the position until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). He was the most famous laosheng (singing male role) actor of the Shanghai style.6 His connection with left-wing intellectuals and

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4. For further discussion of the model theatre, see Denton (1987:119–36); Chen Xiaomei (2002:73–122); Li Ruru (2010b:155–88). [See also the Yawen Ludden’s article on yangbanxi in this issue.—Ed.]

5. Typical haipai approaches include “machine-operated stage scenery” (jiguan bujing) and “plays in episodic instalments” (liantai benxi) in which each performance is an entire story in itself, with a cliff-hanger ending drawing audiences to the next episode.

6. Scholars continue to debate how to judge the Shanghai-style jingju and whether or not jingju masters like Zhou Xinfang can be referred to as representative of Shanghai style. See Huang Zaimin (1997), He Man (1997) and Fu Jin (2005).
artists in spoken drama and the film industry had a great impact on his style of acting. Zhou Xinfang’s influence went beyond the male role. Li Yuru, a dan (female role) actor with solid training in the Beijing Theatre School who has been regarded as a typical jingpai-style performer, was grateful to Zhou, with whom she worked from 1946, for helping her understand how stylized conventions could be linked with real-life feelings. Referring to the scene Bieyao (Saying goodbye in front of the cave) in which she played Wang Baohuan alongside Zhou as Xue Pinggriu, Li noted that one of the features of Zhou’s haipai style was to consider the character’s real feelings under the specific circumstances, and then to modify the pattern of the percussion, movements, and speaking on the basis of the character and situation. Li wrote:

The secret of Mr. Zhou’s acting is that he can enter the characters and can exit as well. “Entering” means that he empathizes with the character’s feelings in the particular time and situation and uses this understanding as the basis of the acting. “Exiting” means that he can freely employ the stage conventions of singing, speaking, acting, expressing, dancing, to convey the character’s inner world that he (as an actor) felt. (2008:333)

After describing a few scenes in detail, Li Yuru goes on:

These lines, matched with beautifully choreographed movements, gripped audiences immediately. The emotions of the audience followed the alterations of the character’s feeling. Due to his ability for “entering theatre,” Mr. Zhou understood the character Xue Pinggriu’s thoughts thoroughly, while his acting skills enabled him to act the character fully and with liveliness. Audiences never got bored even after seeing this scene many times, and “Saying Goodbye in Front of the Cave” became one of the signature works of the Shanghai-style Qi (Zhou Xinfang) school. Acting with Mr. Zhou, I gradually understood the complementary relationship between life and stylized acting. Zhou’s performing art is based on life, but is expressed by stage conventions. All the aspects of his singing, steps, gestures, and movements demand highly skillful techniques. [...] Without meaning and without life, even unique techniques are dead and can never move the audience. (2008:342)

Li points to a significant aspect that most debates on the Shanghai style of jingju ignore. To be “audience-centered” is not merely to cater to the audience. Influenced by spoken drama and cinema, this approach means to ground the stylized acting in the soil of real life.

It was this audience-centered consciousness that made Li Yuru in 1979, at age 57, the newly appointed artistic director of Company Number Three in the SJT, feel anxious. Under her guidance, Company Number Three published a simple newsletter in January 1980 titled Jingju wutai (Jingju Stage) to “offer audiences information about our rehearsals and performances.” It featured a “Mailbox from/to audiences, which will act as the bridge between audiences and us” (SJT 1980). In Jingju Stage, Li told her audiences:

I always want to create a few more different characters on the stage, meeting my audiences with a new look. I would feel I let audiences down if I merely performed the traditional repertory, such as Shi yuzhuo (Picking up the bracelet) and Xiao fangniu (The herd boy and the country girl). Audiences would no longer be content. This was why I chose

7. In jingju circles, the Zhou Xinfang style is referred to as the Qi style, drawing from the first written character of his stage name: Qilin Tong.

8. Li Yuru studied the dan role (1933–1940) from male masters at the Beijing Theatre School (Beipingshi Zhongguo Gaoji Xiqu Zhiye Xuexiao). Cheng Yanqiu, one of the Four Great [Male] Dan (sida mingdan), was one of the founders of this school. After graduation, Li was a disciple of three famous male dan: Mei Lanfang, Xun Huisheng and Zhao Tongshan. Recommended by Zhou Xinfang, Li joined the SJT in 1953 when the theatre was one of the companies under the aegis of the Eastern China Research Institute of Indigenous Theatre (Huadong Xiqu Yanjiuyuan) (see Li Ruru 2010a).
to stage the [kabuki play] Jing shizi [Mirror lion; fig. 2]. Putting a Japanese play on the jingju stage will no doubt be difficult. But I feel our generation has the responsibility to be the connecting link, carrying the jingju art forward. [...] I think if we absorb the artistic nutrition from outside we may help jingju develop fully. (Li Yuru 1980:1)

Li’s experiments derived from several sources: from her education at the Beijing Theatre School; from the haipai she was exposed to working with Zhou Xinfang; and from her own anxiety about jingju’s future after the Cultural Revolution.

China’s open door policy that began in the 1980s brought immense and rapid changes not only to the economy and society structure but also to artistic sectors. Jingju, like all other theatres in the country, suddenly had to learn to deal with financial pressures and ever-increasing globalization. Although it had been the most popular genre in the market before 1949, jingju could not cope with the fast-changing social and economic realities after more than three decades of being strictly controlled by the ideology and supported by the state-subsidized system. Furthermore, the disappearance of the traditional repertory over the 15 years from 1964 to 1978 left an audience who lacked knowledge of indigenous theatrical traditions.9 In addition, the influx of an unprecedented variety of entertainments available via film, television, and the internet further challenged jingju. Faced with such a predicament, the SJT drew inspiration from haipai, which it promoted as its signature brand, emphasizing the openness of its repertory and embracing its diverse elements and styles (Wichmann-Walczak 2000:96–119; Li Zhongcheng 1997:22–24).

Both Yu Chenglong and Notre-Dame exemplify how the SJT developed its own style based on haipai jingju and its desire to link jingju “with the [rail] track of the world (yu shijie jiegui)” (Ma Ke 1997:349).

**Shang Changrong and Upright Official Yu Chenglong**

In The Upright Official Yu Chenglong,10 Shang Changrong, a specialist in jing (painted-face) roles, played the eponymous hero. Shang, the third son of Shang Xiaoyun, one of the Four Great Dan (sida mingdan), started studying jing roles when he was 10 years old. He is a three-time winner

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9. In 1964, two years before the Cultural Revolution, jingju and other indigenous theatres began to be regulated by policies requiring the “staging [of] contemporary theme” (dayan xiandaixi). A policy of “model opera only” soon followed, and it was not until 1978, two years after the official end of the Cultural Revolution, that the Party allowed the classics to appear again onstage.

10. There are two existing translations of the play’s title: “disinterested official” and “honest official,” yet they only incompletely capture the original meaning. Even my choice of “upright” does not really convey the Chinese word “lian” which has the connotation of being “clean,” i.e., not corrupted.
of the Plum Blossom Prize for Chinese Drama (Zhongguo Xiju Meihuajiang 1985, 1995, and 2002), was recognized as a person of “State-level Intangible Cultural Heritage,” and was re-elected as chairman of the National Association of Chinese Dramatists (Zhongguo Xijujia Xiehui) in 2010.

Shang worked with his father in the Shaanxi Provincial Jingju Company until 1987, when he discovered a script about the historical figure Cao Cao (155–220) written by Chen Yaxian. He saw the potential of the play but felt that the Shaanxi Company would not be able to produce it successfully at a national level. Turned down by Beijing’s jingju companies, Shang offered the play to the SJT. It accepted it immediately. *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu*, the first play in what would become the Shang Trilogy, premiered in 1988 and marked the most important achievement of the SJT’s reform, proving the effectiveness of three tactical innovations, which are still implemented by the SJT:

1. To secure excellent performers, utilizing all kinds of connections to overcome potential obstacles such as a refusal by the theatre or local authorities where the performer is based, or any problem posed by the household registration system [which prevents people from moving residence], particularly moving from a lower- to a higher-level administrative division, for example from a province to Shanghai;

2. To seek suitable scripts;

3. To organize a “creative group” consisting of musicians, performers, directors, playwrights, designers, composers, theatre critics, and arts administrators.

The *Cao Yang* play received a sensational response when it premiered in Tianjin at the Festival of New Jingju Plays in 1988. Lü Ailian, the then Deputy Director of the SJT’s Company Number Two, which staged the play, recalled that those older intellectuals who had experienced the political campaigns of the second half of the 20th century stayed up all night after watching the production because they saw their own lives in this new historical play (Lü Ailian 2011).

The storyline was based on the characters and incidents in the formation period (c. 208–220), known as the period of the Three Kingdoms, but both Cao Cao and Yang Xiu were portrayed as real people in today’s sense with complex hidden thoughts and convincing character development. The central relationship—between Cao, a powerful ruler seeking worthy men to consolidate his kingdom, and Yang, a wise and virtuous minister whose increasing popularity among the generals presented a serious threat to the ruler—paralleled the contemporary political conflicts between the powerful leaders and the intellectuals, especially when it was performed after the crackdown on the 1989 Beijing Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement. Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak hailed this production as “one of the finest pieces of theatre created in the 20th century anywhere in the world, and [...] certainly one of the finest jingju in existence today” (2007:111).

11. In 1988, it was named an Outstanding New Jingju Play at the Festival of New Jingju Plays (Jingju Xinjumu Huiyian) organized by the Ministry of Culture; in 1989 it received the Award of the National Association of Chinese Indigenous Theatres (Zhongguo Xiqu Xuehui, established in 1987); and in 1995, *Cao Cao and Yang Xiu* was awarded the grand prize at the National Festival of Jingju Art (Zhongguo jingju Yishujie).

12. Two types are involved. The first consists of primary musicians, mainly the *huqin* (the main musical instrument accompanying songs) players, who, following certain jingju musical modes and patterns, work out the sung music for the production. The second type is the atmospheric composer who works with the primary musicians and makes orchestral arrangement.

13. They are mainly older and experienced actors who sometimes serve as the technique directors for a particular production.

This success did not occur by chance. Shang, 47 years old, was not happy confined in a provincial company, and saw the great potential of this new script. His political sensibility had been sharpened by experiences during the Cultural Revolution when he witnessed the public denunciation and torture of his celebrated father. A promising 26-year-old jing-role actor had suddenly become the lowest-of-the-low in the theatre due to his “black” (figurative term for counterrevolutionary) family background. The historical *Cao Yang* play mirrored that ruthless reality.

Meanwhile, when state subsidies were cut, the SJT was in its “most hungry” period (Ma Bomin 1997:7). In a performer-centered genre, Shanghai’s jingju had lacked strong actors of jing roles since 1949. The arrival of Shang Changrong with the *Cao Yang* script gave the SJT a perfect opportunity to create a new Shanghai jingju, one that was no longer haipai, although it had inherited some haipai qualities.

The final two productions of the Shang Trilogy were created differently. Zhenguan shengshi (The heyday of the Zhenguan period: 627–650; 1999), commemorating the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, was a production with extravagant dances and huge crowd scenes meant to display the “magnificent style of the great Tang dynasty” (SJT 1999:n.p.). Amply supported by China’s Exquisite Productions of the Stage Art program,15 the play promoted the theme: “A wise ruler and virtuous ministers can together build a flourishing age if the ministers advised frankly while the ruler took criticisms willingly; and everyone was vigilant in peacetime, refrained from high living, and aspired to make the country prosperous” (SJT 1999:n.p.). *Yu Chenglong*, the last play in the Trilogy, premiered in 2002, and in 2009 a film version was released. The hero, Yu Chenglong (1616–1684), was a historical figure to whom the Kangxi Emperor granted the title “clean and honest.”

*Yu Chenglong*’s plot is drawn from a novel by Wang Yongtai (1998) and a TV series (2000) adapted from the book. Yu Chenglong, an honest Qing official assigned to Fujian province, discovers that his predecessor conducted a so-called “anti-crime campaign” with callous disregard for human life. The corrupt former official, who had a close relationship with the court, imprisoned nearly 10,000 local people, 3,000 of whom face imminent execution, having been falsely convicted of “collusion with the enemy on the sea” (Li Zhongcheng 2005:168).16 As a consequence, fields and houses have been abandoned and the whole province is in turmoil. Yu realizes that the old cases must be retried and the innocent must be released. In addition, the heavy taxes imposed on the population need to be reduced and the economy developed.

Disregarding his personal safety, Yu Chenglong suggests that the previous decision endorsed by the emperor should be overruled, and advises the emperor’s brother, Prince Kang, a man with supreme power in Fujian, to release the prisoners and to ask the emperor for a tax reduction. Yu also makes every effort to save the poor from danger, particularly the elderly, women, and children. Finally, the arrogant Prince and cunning officials are profoundly touched by the revelation that Yu’s only possessions are parcels of soil collected from every place where he has worked (fig. 3). The play ends happily: the Prince bows in respect to Yu honoring him as his tutor and vows they will “serve the country together” (Li Zhongcheng 2005:204); while the evil officials learn their lesson and kneel down to apologize to Yu. As local people begin to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, Yu Chenglong is promoted to inspector in charge of the capital. Amid lingering farewells from the people—who call him “Grandpa Yu” and “Honorable Yu”—Yu commences his challenging new task still wearing his old jacket and smoking an old pipe.

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15. Guojia Wutai Yishu Jingpin Gongcheng was launched in 2002, sponsored by the Ministries of Culture and Finance. With an annual budget of 40 million RMB, they aimed to produce 50 exquisite productions within five years including drama, music, dance (in both traditional and modern forms), and acrobatics.

16. The script was written by four people: Liang Bo, Dai Yinglu, Wang Yongshi, and Li Zhongcheng. I used the text from *Selected Plays by Li Zhongcheng* (2005).
The storyline illustrates that the play was not only created with “the sense of historical continuity” (Lindenberger 1975:10) but also with a particular audience in mind, aware of the Party’s ideology and the plight of ordinary people. Everyone in China knows that corruption threatens the country’s future and fuels social inequality and unrest. At the lavish celebration on 1 July 2011 of the 90th anniversary of the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu Jintao warned all Party members:

If corruption does not get solved effectively, the Party will lose the people’s trust and support. The entire Party should stay alert and fully appreciate the long-term complexity and arduousness of the fight against corruption, and make more efforts in fighting corruption and building a clean government. (in Watts 2011)

Both the Party and the government say they are trying to solve the problem of corruption—even though officials are often the cause of the problem. Yu Chenglong and other productions about “upright and honest dynastic officials” (qingguan xi) serve as a useful tool to propagandize the Communist principles.

Li Yufu, Deputy Secretary of the Central Commission of the CCP for Discipline Inspection (Zhonggong Zhongyang Jilü Jiancha Weihuanhui), attended the release of the film version and praised the work for being “against corruption and promoting morality.” He said:

Artistic works should dig out and comb through the elements against corruption in historical materials and use them fully. Through the modern artistic approach, [such works] sow the seeds and grow the forest of anticorruption and offer audiences a cultural feast and spiritual foodstuff. Contributing to the promotion of a cultural construction of anticorruption, [such works] educate and inspire a wide-ranging audience, especially Party members and their cadre. (Zhang Yu 2009)

Yu Chenglong emphasizes that both the supreme ruler and the overall system are good, and that the unseen corrupt predecessor is the main antagonist. In his outward actions, Prince Kang seems arrogant, but inside he wants to build a strong country. He has been deceived by his subordinates Le Chun, Ka Lin, and others—yet even these bad officials learn from Yu’s noble behavior. The whole story up to this point has no dramatic tension at all. However, the seemingly nondramatic conflict is dramatized by two wine-drinking contests between Yu and Kang; these “two chapters” constitute the core of the production. In the first contest, the conceited Prince, busy entertaining his guests, refuses to see Yu, who comes seeking permission to retry the unjustified cases. After waiting for a long time, Yu enters the hall and finally the two decide on a drinking contest with the following terms: If the Prince loses, he will let Yu release

Figure 3. Yu sings how the soil reminds him of the places and people he has worked for. Shanghai, 2006. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Jingju Theatre)

17. Instead of organizing the play through conventional “scenes,” the playwrights divided the work into “chapters” to emphasize its narrative quality.
all the prisoners, including those due to be executed, and he will ask the emperor to reduce the region’s tax. If the Prince wins, Yu will retract his requests and will have to crawl back to his home from the Prince’s residence with the wine jug on top of his head.

Treating a serious topic light-heartedly or even absurdly has been very much the trend on the Chinese stage since the end of the Democracy Movement. Audiences like to be amused. Directly attacking the government is not permitted and is thus avoided by artists. The singing duet, the expressive music and percussion accompaniment, and the beautifully choreographed movements make the wine contest scene extremely entertaining (fig. 4). Yu Chenglong’s comic scenes distinguish it from most other “upright and honest official” plays. Yet despite the farcical elements, a few lines in the scene always receive loud applause and supportive shouts from the audience, because stopping corruption is one of very few concerns that ordinary people share with the authorities. One exchange that is often applauded occurs during the first wine contest:

YU: If good people say you’re good, and bad people say you’re bad, you are not bad at all. If bad people say you’re good while good people say you’re bad then you cannot really be good. Actually, for either good people or bad people, only four characters [of Chinese writing] matter.

KANG: Which four characters?

YU: Heaven, earth, good, heart. (Li Zhongcheng 2005:174)

The last two characters (liang and xin) are a pun on “conscience,” and indeed corrupt officials have no conscience. Another line that often elicits support from the audience occurs near the end of the play:

If people control other people, the state might be controlled but will fall into chaos. If people control themselves, the state might be chaotic but it will be stable. (205)

These lines in the printed script are delivered by Yu in the second wine contest scene. However, in the production, they appear in a letter written by Yu to Le Chun, one of the ill-behaved officials. By making the corrupted official read out these words, the performance emphasizes that all bad officials—in the world of the play, at least—are turning over a new leaf.

An internet search for “jingju Yu Chenglong” readily finds blogs from spectators praising this production:

Let’s thank them! It is these performers who make Yu Chenglong—noble, uncorrupted, upright, and wholeheartedly working for the people—resurrected on the stage. Our time calls for Yu Chenglong; our time needs Yu Chenglong urgently. (Wangyi Blog n.d.)

Yu Chenglong exemplifies the SJT’s desire to ingratiate itself with both audiences and the authorities. A huge grant elevating Yu Chenglong to the level of Exquisite Productions of the
Stage Art, as well numerous prizes and soaring ticket sales, indicate SJT’s success thus far in realizing that desire. The production was furthermore performed for different government agencies as part of the “education in clean government” and Yu Chenglong’s letter to Le Chun quoted above was one of the composition topics in the 2006 examination for Zhejiang provincial civic servants (Zhonghua wang 2006). After the film version was released, more and more local divisions of the Commissions of the Chinese Communist Party for Discipline Inspection organized their members to see the film.

Shang Changrong used the character of Yu Chenglong to demonstrate his acting range. Boldly departing from jingju’s conventions, Shang did not use rhymed heightened speech (yunbai), nor did he wear a long full beard or a painted face. These three refusals challenged the three essentials for a traditional jing role (figs. 5 and 6).

Having played two officials in Cao Yang and Heyday—in which he wore conventional costumes such as heavily embroidered gowns, long sleeves, and high-platform boots—Shang Changrong was looking for a role in which he could go beyond what he had done before. Chen Ying, an experienced photographer working for the Xinmin Evening Post, suggested he play Yu Chenglong (Sun Chongliang 2008). As a Qing official, Yu would not wear jingju’s conventional robes with long sleeves as he had before. Rather, the character’s thrifty and plain lifestyle offered Shang the chance to differentiate the character from the conventional jing role. Without the painted face and beard, Shang had to pay far more attention to his facial expres-
sions. In the wine contest scene, he invented a technique of “shaking cheeks” to show Yu’s way of drinking. The movement of the cheeks was exaggeratedly funny. The singing was also tinged with non-jingju elements. Because the historical Yu was from Shanxi, melodies of Shanxi folk songs were integrated into jingju’s musical system. From time to time, Shang even spoke with a Shanxi accent. These elements were strange yet suitable: interwoven with more traditional jingju conventions, they created a sense of naturalness that contributed to the production’s comic incongruity.

It is important to note how Shang’s Yu Chenglong differed from the characters in model operas, such as Li Yongqi in *Zhiqu wehushan* (Taking tiger mountain by strategy), or Sasayama in *Hong deng ji* (Story of the red lantern), who were also acted by painted-face actors, depicted using colloquial speech and without the traditional facial-patterns or beards. The main difference lies in the relation between the “hero” and the rest of performers. All the model opera characters were acted in the same way. In contrast, Yu is a man of the Qing dynasty and jingju has particular Qing acting conventions, especially when characters are in formal or official costumes. Shang adjusted his acting according to the other characters in the scene, performing differently in scenes where Yu is with officials and in the scene where Yu imagines he is with his wife.

When Yu was in the presence of other officials who wore Qing official attire and shoes, Shang acted according to the jingju Qing style, maintaining a balance between stylization and naturalness. His acting approached everyday life while never completely abandoning the jing role’s codified conventions of arm and hand movements. His walk was modified because he wore modified jing boots with lower platforms. Yet, in the scenes where Yu talks to his wife in his imagination, he and his wife wore plain costumes; both were “natural” with fewer codified movements and gestures. For example, the first encounter of the couple after a long separation was expressed by a conventional jingju movement *tuimo* (literally, “push the grinder”),18 but the husband and wife stood closer together than the conventional *tuimo* specified, and the wife not only gripped Yu’s shoulders tightly, but also touched his face, showing a moving and happy reunion as in life. Of course, the scene was still tinged with some exaggerated gestures matching the exaggerated makeup. Shang Changrong’s creativity shines through in his use of different acting styles to react to different characters in the play. His acting is often referred to as a “painted face with the Zhou Xinfang [haipai] style,” which makes him quite at home in the SJT.

This more natural acting and colloquial speech mirrored the innovative playwriting. The script, arranged in four chapters, structurally emphasized the narrative. The play opens with a prologue:

More than 300 years ago, an old man of about 60 years in a plain outfit walks on the road in Fujian. His eyes are deep, full of willingness to help the common people. His firm steps show that he is not afraid of any danger. This is the hero of our play — Yu Chenglong. (Li Zhongcheng 2005:160)

Yu’s story is then told at an unusually fast pace, exaggerating jingju’s quality of letting time and space flow freely. The use of modern lighting techniques also helps guide the audience through the complexity of different scenes and entwined plots. Such an atypical opening prepares audiences for an unconventional performance.

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18. Two characters stand facing each other as if on opposite sides of a big grindstone. Then, one actor walks in a clockwise direction, the other counter-clockwise, together making a half circle to meet face-to-face.
Shi Yihong and *Notre-Dame*

Shi Yihong, one of the SJT’s leading actresses, was the driving force behind the production of *Notre-Dame* (2008).¹⁹ Like Shang Changrong, Shi wants to go beyond the boundaries of a role type. “I’m bold enough to take the risk of losing my fame. I must always surpass myself” (in Pan Shu 2011).

Unlike Shang, Shi is not from a jingju family. She is probably the only jingju actress in Mainland China who has trained and worked in other performing genres. Shi Yihong’s training began when she was seven years old with the martial arts course at the Shanghai Workers’ Physical Education Centre (Shanghai Gongren Tiyugong). After learning martial arts, she went on to gymnastics. She turned to jingju when she was ten, after being admitted to the Shanghai Indigenous Theatre School (Shanghai Shi Xiqu Xuexiao, SITS) where she studied the female warrior role (*wudan*). Shi felt that her martial arts and gymnastics training “tempered” the impact of the rigorous exercises so that she did not fear the “torture” of arduous jingju training, as she told me in our interview (Shi Yihong 2010a). “Perhaps my muscles were used to the stretching, so I never felt pain,” she laughed. She had two great tutors in jingju. One was Zhang Meijuan, originally an actress at the SJT who started her teaching career when the May 7th Jingju Training Class²⁰ was organized during the Cultural Revolution. Shi’s other tutor was Lu Wenqin, a player of the *buqin* (a two-string fiddle, the main musical accompaniment to jingju songs), who took a scientific approach to training singers. Like most performers specializing in martial arts, Shi Yihong did not receive much voice training. Yet, in jingju, singing ability comes first among the four basic skills. Except for the comic role (*chou*), singing is necessary for all major actors. Lu helped Shi develop her singing, and she is now recognized by critics and audiences as an actress who can perform most female roles including singing parts (*qingyi*), woman warrior characters (*daoma dan* and *wudan*), and the *huadan* role (vivacious young woman).

After graduating from the SITS, Shi Yihong entered the SJT just as the theatre initiated its reform. Many new plays were created and young talents were recruited; Shi had opportunities to perform new characters in new plays. She was also among the first group of students to be selected to attend the post-graduate course (1996–2000) at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (Zhongguo Xiqu Xueyuan).²¹ As a performer in the new era of globalization, which offers at least some degree of political relaxation, Shi has had opportunities to do things beyond the dreams of traditional jingju actors. In 2000, Shi performed in Tan Dun’s *The Gate*, one of the plays in the composer’s *Orchestra Theatre Series*, which portrays three females who all devote themselves to love: Yuji from the jingju *Bawang bieji* (Farewell my concubine); Shakespeare’s Juliet; and Koharu-San from the Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre. In 2006, Shi acted Wen Xiuzhu in the 34-episode TV series *Wutai jiemei* (Stage sisters). While rehearsing *Notre-Dame* in 2008 she took part in the Shanghai Semi-Final Dance Competition, presenting tango, rumba, and paso doble. She played the eponymous heroine in the Shanghai Music

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¹⁹. Shi Yihong personally raised money for this unconventional project although, ultimately, the SJT did not use her funds because it received a grant from the Shanghai Cultural Development Foundation, established in 1986 under the aegis of the Municipal Department of Publicity, which aims to raise funds to support arts and literature projects. Theatre companies often apply for funds from the Foundation to start working on productions (Feng Gang 2011).

²⁰. Wuqi Jingxunban was named after Mao Zedong’s “May 7th Directive” on education, which was released on 7 May 1966 (Mao Zedong 1998:53–56).

²¹. Students from all over China were chosen through a strict selection process. They studied together for two months each year, undertaking a wide range of activities, including practical master classes, literary criticism, English or Japanese, and weekly seminars on various subjects. For the remaining ten months of each year, they went back to work with their own theatre companies. Yan Qinggu, an actor of comic role type (*chou*) from the SJT, was in the same course (see Li Ruru 2010b:189–214).
Conservatory’s 2009 production of Bai Niangzi (Lady White; fig. 7), which employed a large onstage orchestra together with multimedia effects, and was well received at the Shanghai Expo. In 2010, she made a jingju DVD accompanied by a Western orchestra, and during the 2011 Spring Festival she performed Suo ling nang (The embroidered reticule), a signature piece from Cheng Yanqiu’s repertory, which demands skillful vocal techniques.

Inspired by the success with Western audiences of the SJT’s adaptation of Hamlet (for the 2005 Hamlet Sommor in Kronborg Castle in Denmark and then at the National Opera House in Amsterdam) and an anecdote that Mei Lanfang had once advised his student Yan Huizhu (1910–1966) to act Esmeralda (in Notre-Dame), Shi persuaded the SJT to work on a jingju adaptation. Notre-Dame, scripted by Feng Gang (who also adapted Hamlet) and directed by Shi Yukun (a director with a jingju background whose most famous directing work was Luotuo Xiangzi [Camel Xiangzi]), premiered in October 2008 at the Shanghai International Arts Festival.

Ailiya, the Chinese Esmeralda, is an orphan brought up by the King of Beggars. In the adaptation, both time and place are left unspecified in order to avoid identifying any particular religion. Although Notre-Dame is the title, the play just refers indeterminately to a “divine temple,” because translating the French directly sounds too alien to Chinese audiences.

At a gathering of the beggars, Ailiya dances and sings so well that she attracts a large crowd, including Abbot Luo (Claude Frollo) who falls in love with the pretty but wild young woman (fig. 8). Abbot Luo instructs his adopted son Ugly (Quasimodo) to kidnap her. When Ailiya is rescued by Tianhong (Phoebus de Chateaupers), the general of the local battalion, she believes that she has at last found her true sweetheart and future husband. Learning of their tryst at an inn, Abbot Luo severely wounds Tianhong and, thinking he is dead, falsely accuses Ailiya of murder. Ugly, however, in gratitude to Ailiya because of the sympathy she had previously shown him, rescues Ailiya from the execution site and hides her in the temple. Like Phoebus in the original, Tianhong does not die, nor does he want to see Ailiya again. While Ailiya is relieved to discover that her sweetheart is still alive, she is heartbroken when she realizes he has no interest in her. On the Abbot’s instructions, Tianhong and his soldiers attack the temple and kill Ailiya, who they think is a witch. Having recognized the evil nature of his adoptive father, Ugly finally kills Abbot Luo and then commits suicide.

Notre-Dame de Paris serves as a model of globalization: traveling from Victor Hugo’s novel published in 1831, through several film and stage presentations, including a musical and a

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22. This production toured Germany and Spain in 2007, France and Germany in February 2008 and was then performed at the 2011 Edinburgh Festival.

23. Those who are interested in this contemporary-themed production can see Evans (2011) and Li Ruru (2012).
The SJT adaptation focuses on the relations between the beautiful woman and the three men. Jingju plays up the Chinese female virtue of faithfulness and it gives the actress a good opportunity to sing a long aria when she discovers that she has been abandoned by her beloved.

There is certainly no existing jingju female role type appropriate for acting Ailiya, who sings, acts, dances, and fights (fig. 9). More importantly, she needs to express the “gypsy” characteristics the adapters wrote into the role (perpetuating a clichéd image in people’s minds): a woman wild like the wind and fire. As Shi Yihong described the character, “Ailiya is a crimson rose with many thorns, but inside of her she has the very traditional idea of being faithful to only one man” (Shi Yihong 2010a). In order to portray an unprecedented female character on the jingju stage, the SJT’s whole “creative group” worked together. For the task of presenting the “foreignness” on the jingju stage, Shi invited choreographer Gao Xiaoya (from the Shanghai Opera and Dance Theatre) to create dances, and atmospheric composer Yang Nailin (originally a jingju huqin player but now working at the Central Music Conservatory) to create a theme song for Ailiya: “I Am Called a Vagrant.”

The idea of having a theme song originated from the 2003 production Datang guifei (The imperial concubine in the great Tang dynasty). Based on Mei Lanfang’s plays and arias, this symphonic jingju production employed 300 performers and singers, and was coproduced by companies from both Beijing and Shanghai. The production’s theme song, “Lihua Song” (Ode of the pear blossom), also composed by Yang Nailin, was so well received at the premiere in 2003 that it has since been sung by many performers in different venues, from concerts to variety shows.

Although both theme songs were composed by Yang, the approaches differed. The character that sang “Pear Blossom” in The Imperial Concubine was the well-known Yang Guifei, an archetypal character of the Mei school. In addition, Mei Lanfang’s son Mei Baojiu, one of the few male performers playing female roles, acted Yang Guifei in the premiere. The song’s musical score was based on the siping tune of the erhuang mode — both elements of jingju’s musical system — and concentrated on the singing characteristics of the Mei style. In Notre-Dame, by contrast, the fact that the heroine was a foreign young woman offered the composer the freedom to absorb different musical sources including Central Asian, Chinese folk, and jingju elements. The special flexibility in the rhythm of Romani (“gypsy”) music and its balance between slowing-down and speeding-up gave a distinctively sweet sound to Notre-Dame’s theme song. Shi Yihong recalled that within three days, everyone at the rehearsals was humming it (Shi Yihong 2010a).

24. There was another jingju adaption of this novel, entitled The Great Belfry (Da zhonglou), initiated by Tang Yuen-ha, a jingju performer based in Hong Kong, and her husband, composer-producer Yeung Lau-ching (1999). Both Shi Yihong and Feng Gang said that they were aware of the piece, but had not seen it before they started their own work (Shi Yihong 2010b; Feng Gang 2011).
The practitioners knew how to subtly introduce this unusual song to audiences. First, the lyrics were the same as the jingju aria that Ailiya sang at her first entrance; only the melody was modified. Second, the placement of the theme song corresponded to the plot. It took place when Ugly realized that Abbot Luo, his adoptive father and a respected religious man, was actually the evil person who had put Ailiya in mortal danger. Ailiya, trying to cheer up Ugly, offered to sing and dance for him. The non-jingju music and the dance (solos and a duet) conveyed the complex feelings between the two characters. Finally the theme song appeared again towards the end of the play when Ugly danced with the corpse of the dead Ailiya. In this scene, audiences appreciated Shi’s dance techniques, which she learned from non-jingju genres as evidenced by the way she portrayed the seemingly uncontrolled motions of a lifeless body through the minutely controlled gestures of her performance, carefully coordinated with Ugly’s movements (fig. 10).

On the stage, Ailiya’s first entrance was given a great deal of attention. It took place in front of the temple (Notre-Dame). Abbot Luo, disturbed by the noise of the beggars’ songs and games, had just ordered everyone to be quiet. In the middle of the crowd’s silent embarrassment, the first line of the theme song could be heard. When the King of Beggars announced: “This is Ailiya’s

Figure 9. Using the conventional female warrior techniques of throwing and kicking spears, Ailiya (Shi Yihong) fights the soldiers. Notre Dame, Shanghai, 2008. (Courtesy of the Shanghai Jingju Theatre)

Figure 10. Ugly, in despair and love for the dead Ailiya, dances with her corpse. Shanghai, 2008. (Photo by Shi Huizhi)
voice,” everyone in the crowd shouted: “Here comes Ailiya!” and turned to where she was to enter. Although the scene thus exhibited certain parallels to the model theatre’s approach of strongly featuring the heroic character, the music, percussion, and Aliya’s nontraditional appearance soon overrode that impression. Running out in a red dress with a long red scarf tied around her head into a flower-like knot, Ailiya entered like a spreading fire (see fig. 1). Not only did the pace of her entrance violate the jingju convention, it also occurred in an unconventional stage location. The director arranged for her to come out from the space between the first and the second stage-right leg drops, not from between the last leg and the backcloth, a conventional place where actors enter. As the director expected, the unusual entrance of the heroine surprised the audience. Ailiya’s dance fused gestures, steps, and movements from the jingju female warrior role with the tango and paso doble that Shi had recently performed during the dance competition mentioned above. Soon she led the crowd running around her, while she sometimes flowed and sometimes paused. The fluid movements—with bursts of speed interrupted by a surge of inner power—evoked a mystical quality. After creating a vibrant sense of gaiety, Ailiya stepped onto a lotus-shaped platform. Jingju’s melody wafted from the non-jingju music and Ailiya started her first aria:

I am called a vagrant and  
I don’t know where I am going tomorrow.  
My hometown afar is within me,  
My road that I walk on is full of sorrows.  
Let me dance—I sing passionately,  
Hoping a sweetheart will come to me.  
God, bestow on me your blessing—the wings of the spirit that blesses my man and me  
Carry us to heaven with happiness.

The aria was in the style of the jingju tune nanbangzi but was modified with non-jingju elements that were an extension of the music that had accompanied the dance presented immediately before. The lyrics of the aria were used again later for the theme song. In this way, the SJT artists skillfully led audiences to accept innovation on the traditional stage: a typical jingju aria with some non-jingju melodies leading to an inventively composed new song tinged with jingju elements.

The foreign story with its unfamiliar character and unusual costumes necessitated well thought out responses from the performers. On 26 April 2010, before the production was taken to the Shanghai Normal University, a teaching college, I attended the rehearsals. During the break, another observer who works at a US university asked Shi why she did not stand in a tabu position, a traditional female role’s way of standing (fig. 11).25 Shi explained that the bottom of Ailiya’s non-Chinese skirt was huge and therefore the jingju standing convention would make no sense. Instead, she stood with her legs about a foot apart, one slightly in front of the other, displaying the large skirt to the audience (fig. 12). The seemingly simple reply illuminates the essential point that conventions are not static. In this case, the new costume required by the story demanded a modification of acting conventions. The unusual expanse of the skirt also helped Shi present unconventional jingju acting. However, some of the non-Chinese elements evolved through rehearsals following the jingju principles of “roundness” and “opposition” of gestures and movements,26 and as a result the “foreignness” on the stage tended to become less alien-looking for both actors and audiences.

25. On the jingju stage, the female role stands with feet in the position that a Western woman would adopt when curtsying, with the body’s weight on the forward leg while the other leg naturally bends slightly behind.
26. “Roundness” means that all the gestures and movements follow the principle of making a circle. For example, a stretched arm must be in a curved shape. “Opposition” means that if the actor needs to raise the left arm, the arm first goes downwards towards the right direction. (Details can be seen in the training chapter in Li Ruru 2010b:55–82).
Different Responses to the Experimental Work
From Intercultural to Intracultural

Chinese theatre reviews are still very rare. Yet thanks to the internet, many ordinary theatre-goers as well as critics and scholars publish their opinions on their blogs. *Notre-Dame*, “a new Shanghai-style jingju production” (as referred to by blog-writers), drew great interest especially after it appeared online in April 2010 via PPLive, a video interactive entertainment media platform. Viewers’ judgments vary, but they are valuable as real audience voices. Among the positive feedback there are noteworthy indications that new audiences for jingju might be emerging:

The production gave me a good surprise. [...] Ailiya is not Yutangchun [an archetypal female character in a traditional repertory]. What is important for me is that I saw a play that I liked very much. (*Sina Blog* 2010)

The writer does not have much knowledge of the genre. But does that matter? New audiences may not understand the musical modes, nor be unable to distinguish the music of *xipi* from *erhuang*, nor know the subtypes of the role categories, but they express clearly whether or not
they like the performance—whether or not they are touched by it. Practitioners in market-conscious China will listen to what customers say.

Other critical views are harsher. Some suggest that Shi Yihong and the SJT “ruined Chinese culture” by adapting a Western masterpiece for the jingju stage in order to draw foreign attention. A critic with the pen-name Yudianxin asked: “When jingju goes out to the wider world, do we want people around the world to appreciate jingju, or do we want to tailor jingju to the tastes of the wider world? What will these foreigners think when they see this ‘essence of Chinese culture’ being presented as a half-baked gypsy dance?” (Wangyi Blog 2008). Some negative reviews echo the fear that Notre-Dame portends a larger trend of valuable Chinese cultural tradition being absorbed into fashion and entertainment; others critique the artistic approaches in the production as conflicting.

Indeed, there are many potential stylistic conflicts that ought to be addressed in the jingju Notre-Dame. For example, Ailiya wears foreign attire while the rest of the cast is in jingju costumes. Tianhong even wears the armor and the pair of feather plumes of the traditional male warrior role. Additionally, although the adaptation avoids naming a specific religion, the stage platform in the first scene is shaped like a lotus, which is an overt reference to Buddhism (and there are no similarly direct references to Roman Catholicism).

Nevertheless, this experimental work offers the SJT practitioners ample opportunity to explore their creativity and testifies to jingju’s elasticity—a feature crucial to the genre’s early development, but gradually lost as jingju matured and became set in its ways and frozen in place. In Notre-Dame, it was not only Shi Yihong who tried new skills: everyone in the production needed to alter their acting habits or the conventions of role types for which they had been trained since childhood. Dong Hongsong, the jing actor (who usually played the same role type as Shang Changron in Yu Chenglong) could not use the jing’s skills without modifying them to suit his character, Ugly. He based his performance as Ugly on the jing, but absorbed different techniques from other role types. Dong admitted that it was not easy for him to act this hunched back man with a golden heart. His facial pattern borrowed elements from certain comic role patterns that employed asymmetrical shapes. Together with the technique director and choreographer,27 Dong devised a series of movements, gestures, and steps to show Ugly’s hunched back and limp. Yet the performers never totally abandoned jingju’s aesthetic principles. As Elizabeth Wichmann argues: “everything within the world of the play must above all be beautiful (mei)” (1991:2–3). Indeed, from Dong’s songs and movements, audiences witnessed simultaneously the kindness of Ugly (the inner beauty) and the charm of his acting style (external beauty).

While SJT had seen itself as a cultural missionary with its 2005 jingju adaptation of Hamlet, which took Chinese theatre West to demonstrate to Western audiences that jingju could interpret a Shakespearean masterpiece, the Notre-Dame project attempted to gain insight into jingju’s own nature. By using elements from other cultures, Notre-Dame sought to explore the frontiers of jingju’s own potential. This intercultural work enabled an intracultural experiment in the sense expounded by Patrice Pavis:

The intracultural is the correlative of the intercultural: it refers to the search for national traditions, often forgotten, corrupted or repressed, in order to reassess the sources of a style of performance, to situate it better in relation to external influences and to understand more deeply the origins and the transformation of its own culture. (1996:5–6)

27. Today, indigenous Chinese theatre involves two types of directors. One is the director who is in charge of the whole production, similar to the director of a spoken drama. The other is called a “technical director,” who helps design gestures, movements, and dance-like blocking that are part of the native genre the production employs. The technical director’s function further differs from that of the choreographer, who usually focuses exclusively on the dance section.
Both The Upright Official Yu Chenglong and Notre-Dame, as new developments in Shanghai-style jingju, represent particular outcomes of today’s dynamic interactions between market forces, ideology, jingju conventions, and individual artists’ creativity. These productions invite us to consider what some Chinese traditional artists are up to in the 21st century. Once upon a time, theatre served the majority of the Chinese population as the prime source of education about history and the outside world; it occupied a unique and central position in Chinese life. Today, its uniqueness long gone, theatre has been pushed to the margins. Should theatre claim that it only exists for small, targeted audiences? Or is it that every epoch has its own dominant cultural form, and that jingju and many other regional theatres must accept their inevitable transition into the past tense? Practitioners like Shang Changrong, Shi Yihong, and many others do not believe so. They keep fighting, as the new version of Notre-Dame demonstrates. At the Sixth National Festival of Jingju Art held in Wuhan in November 2011, SJT presented a completely Sinicized production, entitled Qingshang zhonglou (Passions in the belfrey). I have not seen the new performance, but heard that theatrical professionals, critics, scholars, and audiences had contrasting views on the new work. Shi Yihong (2011) and Feng Gang (2011) believe that such debate will provoke new ideas and groundbreaking practice not only in their work, but also in jingju as a whole. Through their vast potential and endless creativity, innovative performers such as these ensure that jingju continues, modifying its shape to respond to the demands of the coming decades.

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