



# The Birth and Growth of Chinese Drama

The History of Chinese  
Drama, Volume 1

Ronghua Wang

palgrave  
macmillan

# The Birth and Growth of Chinese Drama

Ronghua Wang

# The Birth and Growth of Chinese Drama

The History of Chinese Drama, Volume 1

palgrave  
macmillan

Ronghua Wang  
University of Jinan  
Jinan, Shandong, China

ISBN 978-981-96-3124-7      ISBN 978-981-96-3125-4 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-3125-4>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer  
Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2025

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

## PREFACE

This book is about contemporary Chinese drama. I didn't touch this subject in my book "Chinese Literature in 2019", which was completed at the end of May 2020, because I knew I would write a separate book about it.

I have always had a keen interest in drama. I wanted to be an actor when I was young, my life would be entirely different if my mother didn't strongly oppose my idea. When I was in junior middle school, I organized an art group, which rehearsed a play I wrote myself; I even rehearsed one act of Guo Moruo's (郭沫若) play "Qu Yuan (屈原)" with a schoolmate of mine and we staged it once on the stage of a factory near our school with a considerably large audience. I joined the drama group of the local district, which rehearsed a play about the building of the Ming Tomb reservoir and I played a small role in it; but it was never staged.

In my middle school years, I attended some lectures on drama given by famous actors of the Tianjin People's Art Theatre, I was most impressed by Shi Jin (时今)'s talk, and after his talk, I went to a book store to buy "An Actor Prepares" and "Directing Plan of 'The Lower Depths'" by Konstantin Stanislavsky. I watched and enjoyed every minute of the play "The Phoenix Hairpin", which depicted the love between the Song poet Lu You and Tang Wan, performed by the Tianjin People's Art Theatre. It had a long-lasting impact on me as I used to recite the theme poem whenever and wherever it was proper.

After I started my working career, I tried to grab some books on Western drama. I have been using “*The World of the Theatre*” by Robert W. Corrigan as my tutorial book. I was an avid reader of “Four Major Plays” by H. Ibsen, because I read the Chinese version of “A Doll’s House” when I was young. During my first trip to the USA, I bought “Famous American Plays of the 1970s and 1980s”. I have been following, not regularly, what has happened to Chinese drama and I wish to share what I know about Chinese drama with people outside China. So, that’s how I have been motivated to write this book.

This book will be presented in two volumes. The first volume—The Birth and Growth of Contemporary Chinese Drama covers topics such as the birth of drama in China and its life before 1949, its life in the first 17 years of the People’s Republic, its miserable life during the cultural revolution, and its life in the “New Period”. The second volume—The Builders of Contemporary Chinese Drama covers topics such as an exclusive tiny archive of the most influential actors and actresses, brief introduction to the most important playwrights, and to most influential directors, a brief account of Chinese stage design, some description of important Chinese theaters, some words on how Chinese drama audience and a review of drama criticism and media coverage in China.

I wish to express my special appreciation here to Mrs. Song Baozhen, Director of the Drama Institute, Chinese National Academy of Arts (CNA), who has been most supportive of my writing of this book and offered some perceptive comments. I am most grateful to the Drama Institute of China National Academy of Arts (CNA) for allowing me to use their photos in this book, without which the book would not be as rich and colorful. So, except for a few photos I purchased and provided by Beijing Propel Performing Arts & Media Co., Ltd., all other photos are used with the courtesy of the Drama Institute of CNA.

I am not a professional. What I shall provide will not be perfect. I am sure there are more English-speaking professionals now in China and I hope they can give some criticism of this book, and so much the better if they can improve the book or give an updated version a few years later.

Jinan, China

Ronghua Wang

# CONTENTS

## Part I The Birth of Chinese Drama and Its Life before 1949

|          |  |           |
|----------|--|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>The Birth of Chinese Drama</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
|          | <i>References</i>  | 6         |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Chinese Drama in the 1920s</b>  | <b>7</b>  |
|          | <i>Debate over the Future of Drama and the Introduction of Foreign Plays</i>   | 7         |
|          | <i>Modern Drama Institutionalized</i>  | 10        |
|          | <i>Chinese Playwrights of the 1920s</i>  | 12        |
|          | <i>References</i>  | 16        |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Theatrical Activities of the League of the Leftist Dramatists and the Rise of Drama for the War of Resistance</b> | <b>17</b> |
|          | <i>References</i>  | 28        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Theatrical Activities in the 1940s</b>  | <b>29</b> |
|          | <i>References</i>  | 38        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Drama in the Liberated Areas</b>  | <b>39</b> |
|          | <i>References</i>  | 49        |

## Part II Drama in the First 17 Years of the People's Republic

|           |   |            |
|-----------|---|------------|
| <b>6</b>  | <b>The Establishment of the National Drama System</b>     | <b>53</b>  |
|           | <i>The First Climax of Drama Creation</i>                 | 56         |
|           | <i>"Scripts of the Fourth Category"</i>                   | 59         |
|           | <i>References</i>   | 63         |
| <b>7</b>  | <b>Tea House—A Monument</b>                               | <b>65</b>  |
|           | <i>A Master of Language</i>                               | 72         |
|           | <i>The Life of Lao She and His Other Works</i>            | 75         |
|           | <i>References</i>   | 86         |
| <b>8</b>  | <b>A Bumper Harvest of One-Act Plays</b>                  | <b>87</b>  |
|           | <i>Reference</i>  | 92         |
| <b>9</b>  | <b>Tian Han and His Plays</b>                             | <b>93</b>  |
|           | <i>The Chronology of Tian Han</i>                         | 93         |
|           | <i>"Guan Hanqing", the Historical Play</i>                | 100        |
|           | <i>Other Important Works of Tian Han</i>                  | 105        |
|           | <i>References</i>   | 108        |
| <b>10</b> | <b>Historical Plays of Guo Moruo</b>                      | <b>109</b> |
|           | <i>A Brief Introduction to the Six-Act Play "Qu Yuan"</i> | 111        |
|           | <i>An Introduction to the Four-Act Play "Wu Zetian"</i>   | 114        |
|           | <i>An Introduction to the Five-Act Play "Cai Wenji"</i>   | 116        |
|           | <i>References</i>   | 119        |
| <b>11</b> | <b>The PLA Drama</b>                                      | <b>121</b> |
|           | <i>Reference</i>  | 125        |

## Part III Chinese Drama in the Cultural Revolution

|           |                                   |            |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| <b>12</b> | <b>Chinese Drama in Disasters</b> | <b>129</b> |
|           | <i>Drama on the Decline</i>       | 137        |
|           | <i>Reference</i>                  | 147        |

## Part IV Drama in the “New Period”

|           |  |     |
|-----------|--|-----|
| <b>13</b> | <b>The Insurgence of the Art of Drama (1977–1981)</b>                                  | 151 |
|           | <i>Prelude to Drama in the New Period</i>  | 151 |
|           | <i>Drama of Critique in Close Coordination with Politics</i>                           | 156 |
|           | <i>Drama on Social Problems</i>  | 171 |
|           | <i>Plays in Memory of Veteran Revolutionaries</i>                                      | 178 |
|           | <i>The Re-Staging of Some Excellent Drama</i>  | 186 |
|           | <i>Greeting the Spring of Opening for Drama</i>  | 188 |
| <b>14</b> | <b>The Exploration Period amid Crises (1982–1989)</b>                                  | 197 |
|           | <i>Important Exploration Plays</i>   | 198 |
|           | <i>The Features and Significance of Exploratory Plays</i>                              | 216 |
|           | <i>References</i>  | 221 |
| <b>15</b> | <b>The Adaptation Period amid the Tide of Market Economy (1990–2010)</b>               | 223 |
|           | <i>“The Theme” and Government Regulation of Drama</i>                                  | 224 |
|           | <i>The Rise of Folk Drama from Silence</i>   | 224 |
|           | <i>The Rise of Campus Drama</i>  | 225 |
|           | <i>A General Picture of Drama in the Adaptation Period</i>                             | 226 |
|           | <i>Theme Plays</i>   | 226 |
|           | <i>The Rise of “Avant-Garde” Drama</i>   | 228 |
|           | <i>Water Testing for Commercial (Drama) Theatre</i>                                    | 229 |
|           | <i>Drama Festival in Chinese Language</i>  | 233 |
|           | <i>References</i>  | 235 |
| <b>16</b> | <b>The Small Theatre Movement</b>  | 237 |
|           | <i>Inception</i>   | 237 |
|           | <i>The 1993 Exhibition of Small Theatre Drama and International Academic Symposium</i> | 240 |
|           | <i>Representative Plays of Small Theater Drama</i>                                     | 244 |
|           | <i>Features of the Small Theatre Movement in the 1990s</i>                             | 250 |
|           | <i>Disputes on the Avant-Garde Drama</i>   | 253 |
|           | <i>Attitudes Toward Classical Plays</i>  | 257 |
|           | <i>Reference</i>   | 263 |
| <b>17</b> | <b>Annual Reports (2011–2020)</b>  | 265 |
|           | <i>Drama in 2011</i>   | 265 |
|           | <i>Drama in 2012</i>   | 272 |
|           | <i>Repertoires and Classics Still Maintained Their Charm</i>                           | 272 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Freshness in Drama Exchanges and Exhibitions</i>               | 275 |
| <i>Diversity in between Tradition and Modernity</i>               | 276 |
| <i>Drama in 2013</i>  | 279 |
| <i>Mixed Feelings Toward Revision and Resumed Rehearsals</i>      | 279 |
| <i>Small Theatres Can Open Up Large Space</i>                     | 281 |
| <i>The Edification by Foreign Drama</i>                           | 282 |
| <i>Who Is Going to Open Up the New Age of Drama?</i>              | 284 |
| <i>Drama in 2014</i>  | 286 |
| <i>Touching Plays Are Originated in Life</i>                      | 287 |
| <i>Life that Has Been Brewed into Wine Is Delicious</i>           | 290 |
| <i>Experiments that Contained New Thoughts Are Worth Trying</i>   | 293 |
| <i>Classics Are Still a Mirror</i>                                | 294 |
| <i>Works Created with Heart and Soul Possess Aesthetic Appeal</i> | 296 |
| <i>Drama in 2015</i>  | 298 |
| <i>A Year of Harvest of Original Plays</i>                        | 298 |
| <i>History and Reality in Dramas</i>                              | 300 |
| <i>Awakening Nerves Sunk in Deep Sleep</i>                        | 301 |
| <i>Staying with Pure Children Naiveness</i>                       | 302 |
| <i>Drama in 2016</i>  | 303 |
| <i>Plays on Hot Social Issues</i>                                 | 304 |
| <i>Plays Highlighting Strong Sense of Duty</i>                    | 307 |
| <i>How to Present Real Persons and Events on the Stage</i>        | 309 |
| <i>Momentum Was Kept for the Small Theatre Movement</i>           | 311 |
| <i>Achievement by Privately Owned Theaters</i>                    | 312 |
| <i>The Development of Children's Drama</i>                        | 314 |
| <i>School Campus Drama Has Come of Age</i>                        | 316 |
| <i>The Exemplary Production of Classics</i>                       | 317 |
| <i>Drama in 2017</i>  | 317 |
| <i>Poetic Pursuit by Original Plays</i>                           | 317 |
| <i>Efforts to Make Drama More Chinese</i>                         | 319 |
| <i>Realist Expression in Historical Plays</i>                     | 321 |
| <i>A Few High-Quality Plays with Realistic Themes</i>             | 323 |
| <i>Drama Performed by Privately Owned Theaters Still Exist</i>    | 324 |
| <i>Updating of Children's Plays</i>                               | 329 |
| <i>Plays in the Theme of Growth</i>                               | 330 |
| <i>Artistic "Adroitness" Can Bring Out Beauty of Wisdom</i>       | 332 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Drama in 2018</i>  | 333 |
| <i>Songs of Praise of the 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up</i>     | 334 |
| <i>Remarkable Achievements in Realism Creation</i>                  | 335 |
| <i>New Achievements in the Creation of Historical Dramas</i>        | 338 |
| <i>A New Chapter in Campus Drama</i>                                | 342 |
| <i>Achievements in the Creation of Dramas by Private Troupes</i>    | 345 |
| <i>New Highlights in the Creation of Children's Dramas</i>          | 347 |
| <i>Drama in 2019</i>  | 350 |
| <i>Discover New Ideas in Real Life</i>                              | 350 |
| <i>Excavate Contemporary Meanings from Historical Themes</i>        | 356 |
| <i>Write About the Artistic Beauty of Ordinary Life</i>             | 359 |
| <i>The Development of Drama Produced by Privately Owned Troupes</i> | 365 |
| <i>A New Atmosphere in the Creation of Children's Drama</i>         | 367 |
| <i>Drama in 2020</i>  | 375 |
| <i>A Special Case</i>   | 395 |
| <i>References</i>   | 400 |
| <b>Index</b>  | 403 |

PART I

---

The Birth of Chinese Drama and Its Life  
before 1949



## The Birth of Chinese Drama

Modern drama is only a child among all genres of Chinese plays and operas. It has at least 20 elder siblings of national popularity,<sup>1</sup> such as Peking Opera, Ping Opera, Shanxi Opera, Henan Opera and Kunqu Opera, as well as 20 more of local popularity<sup>2</sup> such as Puxian Opera and Flowery Drum Opera.

Modern drama made its first appearance in China when the Amateur Dramatic Club of Shanghai (ADC for short, formed by the Ranger and Footpad societies from the UK) performed in the Lyceum Theatre in the middle of the nineteenth century. The theater built by the ADC still stands in the center of Shanghai today. Only a small number of local Chinese could go in to watch performances, for it was not open to Chinese audience unless specially invited.

February 1907 has however been accepted widely as the birth month of Chinese modern drama proper. This was the month when Li Shutong (李叔同) and others staged in Tokyo “*La Dame aux Camélias*” by Alexandre Dumas fils. The performance was staged by the Spring Willow Society, an organization of Chinese students in Japan. This was the first production of a modern drama by a Chinese troupe. Li Shutong later became a famous master monk under the name Hong Yi (弘一法师).



The Spring Willow Society's Advertisement for *The Black Serf Appeals to the Sky*.

In the ensuing months, Li and Zeng Xiaogu (曾孝谷) adapted *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe into a five-act play, "*The Black Serf Appeals to the Sky*", which was staged between June 1 and 3 of 1907 in Tokyo. It caused a sensation. The female roles were played by male actors. There was singing and dancing in the second act, and the singing was in the style of Peking Opera. In September of the same year, "*The Black Serf Appeals to the Sky*" was produced by another company at the Lyceum Theatre in Shanghai, again with gongs and drums and music from Peking Opera. In this case, however, the leading role was not a black slave, because the actor refused to make up as a black man. Such a change somehow impaired the audience's understanding of the play, but this was their first exposure to this form of theater and they were impressed with the stage setting, lighting and sound effects.

The first professional drama company in China, the Evolution Troupe, came into being in November 1910 in Shanghai. Its founder was Ren Tianzhi (任天知), who called himself a member of the Spring Willow Society. Its first performance took place in Nanjing in January 1911, and it staged three plays for three consecutive months. It then moved to Wuhu in Anhui for four months. After the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution, the troupe came back to Shanghai and staged two plays relating to those events. The troupe then toured more than ten cities in six provinces to

perform revolutionary plays. Dr. Sun Yat-sen, leader of the 1911 Revolution personally inscribed on a plaque for the troupe: “This is also a school”.

But political zeal alone could not keep the effort long and alive. As the revolution tide ebbed there was a sharp decline in enthusiasm from the audience. At the same time, reactionary forces started to threaten and even arrest theater workers. Members of the troupe became depressed and left. At the same time, Ren also disappeared from the public scene.

But the Evolution Troupe did have its influence. Similar troupes appeared in many cities. Among them, a troupe at the Nankai School was quite conspicuous. Zhou Enlai was an active actor in it and took charge of stage properties. Zhang Pengchun (张彭春), a student who recently returned from the USA, wrote and directed “*The New Village Head*”, which many considered that it marked the highest achievement of Chinese drama in its infant period. Zhang was also known as Pengchun Chang, who was China’s representative at UN Economic and Social Council and UN Security Council in 1946–47, he was also a member of the drafter of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; before his diplomatic career he rehearsed such foreign plays in Tianjin: *Imperial Envoy* by Gogoli, *A Doll’s House* and *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, *Strife* by John Galsworthy and *The Miser* by Moliere. Through rehearsal of these plays Zhang helped the introduction of regular directing and performing practices popular in America and Europe, and promoted healthy development of Chinese drama. The troupe that performed these plays was the Drama Troupe of Nankai School, which was founded by his brother Zhang Boling (张伯苓, 1876–1951). The troupe existed for almost forty years. It was recorded that between 1909 and 1922, the troupe performed 50 plays, most of them were created by the teachers and students themselves. Quite a few talents were brought up in the troupe, aside from Zhou Enlai, there were also Cao Yu and Huang Zongjiang (黄宗江, 1921–2010). Long Fei, an author wrote in his article “The Nankai Play and Its First Director Zhang Pengchun”: “When Cao Yu completed his maiden work, the drama ‘*Thunderstorm*’, he presented one copy to Zhang with such words: I wish to devote this play to my master Zhang Pengchun, he was the one who inspired me to approach drama”.

## NOTES

1. Plays with singing of national popularity: Peking Opera, Ping Opera, Shanxi (Jin) Opera, Henan (Yu) Opera, Beijing (Qu) Opera, Yue Opera, Sichuan (Chuan) Opera, Shandong (Lǔ) Opera, Shanghai (Hu) Opera, Guangdong (Yuè) Opera, Hubei (Han) Opera, Kun Qu Opera, Qin Aria Opera, Qingdao (Liu) Opera, Chaoshan Opera, Ping Tan (ballad singing in Suzhou dialect), Huang Mei (Yellow Plum) Opera, Northeast Style of Antiphonal Singing, Singing for Shadow Puppet and Shanxi Style Antiphonal Singing. (Their names in Chinese are respectively: 京剧、评剧、晋剧、豫剧、曲剧、越剧、川剧、吕剧、沪剧、粤剧、汉剧、昆曲、秦腔、柳剧、潮剧、评弹、黄梅、二人转、皮影、二人台。).
2. Plays with singing of local popularity: Puxian Opera, Flower Drum Opera, Xi Opera, Wu Opera, Long Opera, Huai Opera, West Qin Opera, Henan Opera with two-string bowed instrument, Yang Opera, Qiong Opera, Bai Opera, Guilin Opera, Flat String Opera, Qinghai (Pingxian) Opera, Tibetan Opera, Flower Lamp Opera, Inner Mongolia (Manhan) Opera, Heilongjiang Opera, Wenzhou (Ou) Opera, Jiangxi (Lu) Opera and Zhangzhou (Gezai) Opera. (Their names in Chinese are respectively: 莆仙戏、花鼓戏、锡剧、婺剧、陇剧、淮剧、西秦戏、河南坠子、扬剧、琼剧、白戏、桂剧、平弦戏、藏戏、花灯剧、漫瀚剧、龙江剧、瓯剧、庐剧、歌仔戏。).

## REFERENCES

- Wang Weiguo, Song Baozhen, Zhang Yaojie. The History of Chinese Drama. The Publishing House of Culture and Arts, 1998 (王卫国、宋宝珍、张耀杰。《中国话剧史》, 文化艺术出版社, 1998年).
- Huang Huilin. Manuscripts of a Century of Chinese Drama (The Contemporary Part). Beijing Normal University Press, June, 2009 (黄会林主编。《中国话剧百年史稿》现代卷, 北京师范大学出版社, 2009年6月).



## Chinese Drama in the 1920s

Chinese drama in the 1920s was a direct product of the May Fourth Movement and the New Cultural Movement, which, on the one hand severely castigated old culture including old-style plays and operas, and on the other hand introduced and sought to learn from Western culture and Western drama. Out of these movements, many activists of modern drama emerged, including playwrights, theorists, educators, directors and actors, who laid a foundation for modern Chinese drama. This group of activists promoted the concept of realist drama with great enthusiasm, and reached a common understanding that modern Chinese drama must be created after the model of Western drama. As a result, both Western plays and much Western theory on drama were brought to China.

### DEBATE OVER THE FUTURE OF DRAMA AND THE INTRODUCTION OF FOREIGN PLAYS

Before continuing the story of this development of modern performance theater in China, however, it is worth going into more detail on the intellectual debate that preceded and surrounded it. Leading scholars of the New Cultural Movement and the May Fourth Movement such as Hu Shi (胡适), Li Dazhao (李大钊), Lu Xun (鲁迅), Zhou Zuoren (周作人), Qian Xuantong (钱玄同) and Liu Bannong (刘半农) spared no effort in attacking traditional Chinese culture. This total denial of traditional

culture was resisted by a large group of scholars represented by Gu Hongming (辜鸿铭), Zhang Taiyan (章太炎), Wang Guowei (王国维), Liang Qichao (梁启超), Chen Yinke (陈寅恪) and others. In Ronghua Wang's book *The Story of China Studies*, he illustrated how they defended and developed traditional Chinese approaches to culture. He gave a talk in 2014, "The Negation of China's Traditions by the New Cultural Movement and Its Effects", in which he said "The historical merits of the New Cultural Movement have been widely and indubitably acclaimed for its onslaught on China's traditional ideology and for its stormy take-down of feudal ideas. The movement also imported fresh air into Chinese circles of thought under the banners of science and democracy, evoked a democratic consciousness in the masses and provided the 'weaponry' for social transformation and progress. However, today, a hundred years later, the literati of China have become increasingly aware of the shadows that the monument of the New Cultural Movement casts over the vast Chinese land. The movement thoroughly negated China's traditional culture with regards to language, the writing of Chinese characters, the family structure, ethnic groups, filial duty and propriety. Such negation has taken root deeply in Chinese circles of thought".

The dispute among scholars over Chinese theater was also fierce. Qian Xuantong wrote in his "My Impressions 18", "one of my friends often said 'to possess true play, we must close down all the existing theatres in China.' I think what he said is right".<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Zhang Houzai (张厚载) attacked "The New Youth" magazine, which carried many of the most virulent articles on old Chinese operas. Zhang was born in 1895 in Shanghai. He was a firm supporter and a fan of the most famous Peking Opera actor Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳). He was famed for his counterattacks to modernist criticisms, pointing out that his opponents lacked common knowledge of traditional Chinese operas. When Hu Shi said that old operas should eliminate singing. Zhang said that it was absurd and impossible. When Liu Bannong sneered that Chinese operas were nothing more than solos and antiphonal duets combined with disorderly martial arts, Zhang refuted him by citing "The Second Entrance into the Palace", which had singing by three persons and analyzed martial art operas as having well-choreographed and complex actions. When Qian Xuantong said that the facial make-up in Chinese operas was not in accord with the meaning the operas were trying to illustrate. Zhang replied that the make-up and masks followed long-standing conventions with positive or negative connotations well known to the audience.<sup>2</sup>

On the positive side, leaders of the New Cultural Movement regarded introduction of foreign drama as an imperative task. Hu Shi issued a call for translation and he said “Please hurry up and translate more famous western works so that we can have models to follow”.<sup>3</sup> A special issue of “The New Youth” on Ibsen was printed in June of 1918, which included three plays of Ibsen: “*A Doll’s House*”, “*An Enemy of the People*” and “*Little Eyolf*”, as well as a biography of the playwright and an article on Ibsenism. This was the first Chinese periodical devoted exclusively to a single foreign writer. The October issue of the same magazine carried an article, “One Hundred Famous Modern Plays” written by Song Chunfang (宋春舫, 1892–1938, also known as Soong Tsungfaung and Sung Ch’unfang), who accepted a suggestion of Hu Shi and introduced works of 58 playwrights from 13 countries.

Immediately thereafter, other periodicals of national influence, such as “The New Tide”, “Juvenile’s China”, “Novel Monthly” and supplements in journals and newspapers published a great amount of translated works, among which drama took up a considerable portion. Famous writers of the time, such as Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Shen Yanbing (沈雁冰), Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎), Guo Moruo, Tian Han, Chen Dabei, Pan Jiayun (潘家洵) and Shen Xingren (沈性仁) either translated or introduced foreign plays. According to the statistics compiled by Tian Benxiang (田本相), a contemporary drama specialist, 81 translated plays written by 46 playwrights were carried in 28 journals and newspapers nation-wide between 1919 and 1924. According to the “Data of the Sylloge of Chinese New Literature” edited by Ah Ying (阿英), the Commercial Press, China Book Bureau and Tai Dong Book Bureau printed 115 foreign plays during the May Fourth Movement period.

Another person who deserves more attention, if only to prove the debate was not all black and white, was Song Chunfang. Born in 1892 at Huzhou in Zhejiang, in 1912 he went to Switzerland to study political economy and drama. He also made field trips to France, Germany, Italy and the USA to survey drama there. He was the first scholar to teach drama in China at the college level, conducting courses on European drama at Peking and Qinghua universities. He was the only prominent scholar during the May Fourth period to demonstrate both a profound knowledge of foreign drama and a sober mind toward the legacy of Chinese theatrical culture. He held that old operas should be maintained and at the same time new drama should be developed. He regarded

Chinese opera as a crystalized art form with irreplaceable features—an art of symbols with its own unique reasons to exist.

It is also worth pointing out that even the most tightly held views can change. Some anti-traditionalists such as Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren and Ouyang Yuqian (欧阳予倩, 1889–1962) softened their attitude toward old Chinese operas with the lapse of time. As Lu Xun once said, “Those youngsters who appreciated ‘The Matter of Lifetime Importance’, which was an attempt to learn from Ibsen, are now kneeling down before the stage of ‘The Heavenly Maids Spreading Blossoms’ and ‘Daiyu Buries Flowers’”.<sup>4</sup> “The Matter of Lifetime Importance” is a play written by Hu Shi; the last two titles are old Chinese operas.

### MODERN DRAMA INSTITUTIONALIZED

Moving back from theory to performance, there was in Chinese dramatic circles a decade of an increasingly open attitude toward realist drama, Western romantic drama and other foreign models. In October 1920, Bernard Shaw’s “*Mrs. Warren’s Profession*” was staged for the first time in Shanghai. It was not especially successful in dramatic terms, but had a strong aftermath in terms of encouraging Chinese activists to create a version of the Western small theater movement. These activists called themselves “amateurs”; the transliteration of “amateur” was “爱美” (a term meaning “love of beauty”, which was first suggested by Chen Dabe [陈大悲, 1887–1944]). The movement triggered a healthy development in Chinese drama and the emergency of some outstanding troupes. Two of the latter were especially conspicuous. One was the Shanghai Theatre Society headed by Hong Shen (洪深), the other the Southern Society headed by Tian Han (田汉). Both gave up the practice of using male actors to play female roles; they introduced the system of “production on the basis of the script” that is, stressing a close adherence to the written text rather than improvisation; and they put directors at the center of production. A modern dramatic art marked by the language and actions of daily life came into being.

Let’s look at these two schools in more detail.

The Shanghai Theatre Society was formed in December 1921 but only really came to life when Hong Shen joined it in 1923. Hong Shen was born on the last day of 1894 in Wujin County of Jiangsu. Starting in 1919, he learned drama from Professor G.P. Baker at Harvard, simultaneously he studied performance and dance with S.S. Curry in Boston.

Coming back to China in 1922, he wrote a play named “*Zhao, the King of Hell*” (《赵阎王》), which was staged in Shanghai with his own money and played the leading role, but it was not successful. A year later, he directed “*The Fan of the Young Mistress*”, which was an adaption of Oscar Wilde’s “*Lady Windemere’s Fan*”. To cater to the taste of the local audience, the ambience, disposition of characters, language and habits had been dyed with strong Chinese color, he asked the actors to be natural and realistic (as opposed to the high emotionalism of most traditional performances), on a stage equipped with three-dimensional sets, plus lighting and sound effects that changed as the play progressed (in the Western manner). Newspaper reviews proclaimed it a sensation that opened up a new horizon for drama.

The Southern Art College, also known as the Southern State Society (南国社), began a tour in 1928 to Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuxi and Guangzhou. The plays they staged were mostly written by Tian Han, “*The Will to Live*” (生之意志), “*A Small Village Scene near the River*” (江村小景), “*The Artist and His Sister*” (画家与其妹妹), “*Night Talk at Suzhou*” (苏州夜话), “*Death of the Famous Actor*” (名优之死), “*Father Returns*” (父归), “*A Tragedy on the Lake*” (湖上的悲剧) and “*Returning to the South*” (南归). These plays were well received by large audiences for their romantic tone and refreshing style. During this tour, Hong Shen coined a Chinese equivalent to “drama”, which is “话剧”—“play with dialogues”. By then drama had found its foothold on the Chinese soil; propelled by the tide of the time, Chinese drama had taken its first step toward realistic depiction of social life.

A number of short-lived drama schools were also established in the 1920s. However, brief as their existence, they did train a large number of playwrights, directors, actors, stage designers and dramatic educators who became prominent in the next decade. The most important of these schools included the People’s Art School of Drama set up in Beijing by Pu Boying (蒲伯英, 1875–1934) and Chen Dabei in 1922; the Department of Drama of Beijing State Special Art School in 1925; the Southern Art College in Shanghai set up by Tian Han; and the Drama School under the Drama Research Institute of Guangdong set up by Ouyang Yuqian.

## CHINESE PLAYWRIGHTS OF THE 1920S

Over the 1920s, several playwrights laid a solid literary foundation for modern Chinese drama with their widely different themes, rich content, varied approaches and styles. Ding Xilin (丁西林, 1893–1974) is famed as a creator and pioneer of China's modern comedy, although his background is in physics as a graduate of Birmingham University. From 1923 to 1927, he created the following one-act comedies: “*A Hornet*” (一只马蜂), “*Dear Husband*” (亲爱的丈夫), “*After Drinking*” (酒后), “*Oppression*” (压迫) and “*One Eye Lost Sight*” (瞎了一只眼). Among them, “*Oppression*” is probably his most representative work. It tells the story of how an engineer, who, as an unmarried man, manages to rent a room from a landlady who never lets out rooms to bachelors. Hong Shen regarded it as the best comedy of the period; others applauded the play as rich in Chinese humor and full of indigenous Peking flavor even though Ding was from Jiangsu.



A scene in *Death of the Famous Actor*.

In addition to the plays written by Tian Han for the Southern Art College, two other plays of his are worth noting. “*The Singing Girl and Her Accompanist*” (歌女与琴师) was completed in September of 1920. “*The Night when a Tiger Was Caught*” (获虎之夜) was the first play published after he returned to China in 1922 from his studies in Japan and was rated by Hong Shen as the best Chinese drama script of the decade. The play is about free love between a boy and a girl, which is opposed by the father of the girl. When the boy attempts to visit the girl by stealth at her home, he is trapped and killed as an “invading tiger”. Chen Dabei was the playwright of “*Conscious*” (良心), “*The Hero and the Beauty*” (英雄与美人), “*Miss Youlan*” (幽兰女士), “*The Patriotic Thief*” (爱国贼), “*The Son of a Father*” (父亲的儿子) and others. “*The Hero and the Beauty*” was his most representative work. It centers on Zhang Hannian, an activist during the 1911 Revolution, and his Mistress Lin Yaqin, how they were forced to recant their revolutionary purpose and then repented. Chen said the purpose of this play was to smash people’s illusions concerning the stereotypical “hero” and “beauty”.

Wang Youyou (汪优游, 1888–1937) was an influential drama activist who created China’s first drama magazine, “Plays with Singing” (戏剧). Only one of his plays is still available, “*The Good Son*”. The protagonist is the only worker in the family; his mother gambles, his wife constantly buys jewelry and his brother always needs money to pay his tuition. Finally, the worker has to pass fake money and commit a crime. The play successfully depicts the life and consciousness of those at the lowest level of society in Shanghai and was strongly praised by Hong Shen.

Pu Boying was one of the leaders of the 1911 Revolution. He established China’s first professional drama school, the People’s Art School of Drama. He wrote “*Relations on Basis of Justice*” (道义之交), a six-act play that depicts how a gentleman who is sojourning in Shanghai and is forced by a bank to repay some money and “*Rich Men’s Filial Duty*” (阔人的孝道) is a four-act play exposes an official who plans a birthday party for his mother to collect money, but his mother suddenly dies and he covers up the news and holds the party as usual, and this is how his filial duty is.

Ouyang Yuqian was more of an actor or director than a playwright. Yet he is also well known for his one-act plays written in 1922, “*The Shrew*” (泼妇) and “*After Getting back Home*” (回家以后). “*The Shrew*” features how the heroine forces her husband to reverse his decision to purchase a prostitute as his concubine, divorce her and leave home with their son and the concubine. “*After Getting Back Home*” depicts how a wife agrees

to a divorce when her husband marries a girl while studying in the USA. Ouyang was also well known for a modern Peking Opera script, “*Pan Jinlian*”. Pan has an affair with Ximen Qing after her husband’s younger brother refuses her approaches. When her husband finds out about the illicit affair, she asks Ximen to have him killed. The younger brother exacts revenge by killing both Ximen and Pan; Pan, who was dying, tells the revenger: “Even as you kill me, I still love you”. The cutting edge of the opera was clearly applied to the unreasonable marriage system.

Xiong Foxi (also known as Fauci Hsiung, 熊佛西, 1900–1964) has been regarded as a major pioneer of Chinese modern drama. He is the author of 27 multi-act plays and 16 one-act plays. “*The Grief of Youth*” (青春的悲哀) and “*Getting Drunk*” (醉了) are prominent among his earlier works. The well-known three-act play “*The Patriotic Mind*” (一片爱国心) tells the story of Akiko, wife of a revolutionary, who asks her son to sell a mine to a Japanese firm, but her daughter, a revolutionary managed to stop the deal. Yu Shangyuan (余上沅, 1897–1970) wrote “*Mutiny*” in the winter of 1922. It was intended to be a comic love story, but has been regarded as a delicately conceived drama. He was also the playwright of the one-act play “*Going Home*” (回家) and the four-act play “*Statue*” (塑像).

Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892–1978) wrote three plays before 1925 on the emancipation of women, namely “*Zhuo Wenjun*” (卓文君), “*Wang Zhaojun*” (王昭君) and “*Nie An*” (聂荃). These were successful as literature, but were judged as not applicable to stage performance.

Although in a minority, three women playwrights were also successful. They were Bai Wei (白薇, 1893–1987), who was born in Hunan, her original name was Huang Zhang (黄彰), and she was one of the earliest members of the League of the Leftist Writers. The plays she wrote include “*Lin Li*” (琳丽), “*The Aunt*” (姨娘), “*Strike out of the Tower of Soul*” (打出幽灵塔). She was the author of the novel “Bomb and the Bird that Flies Far (炸弹与征鸟)” and her autobiographical novel is “A Tragic Life” (悲剧生涯). Her hometown, the city of Ziyuan has set up a Bai Wei House of Books, for which they collected through various channels 120 poems of hers, 10 plays and traditional opera scripts, 30 novels and prose writings, more than 40 copies of her diary, more than 60 photographs in different periods and a few dozens of her letters.

Another important playwright is Yuan Changying (袁昌英, 1894–1973), who wrote a successful three-act play “*The Peacock Flies Southeast*” (孔雀东南飞). She had a pair of bounded foot. She studied abroad twice, the first time she went to the University of Edinburgh in 1916; the second time she went to the University of Paris in 1926. She was the first Chinese female student who acquired a master’s degree in British Literature. She was the first lady scholar who studied Shakespeare. She was one of the three lady professors of Wuhan University in the 1930s. Her husband died during the cultural revolution, her daughter was working in Beijing and her son severed all relations with her because of high political pressure. The lonely professor was sent to her hometown in Liling of Hunan, and she died quietly there in April 1973. Her former residence was opened in 2017 at Liling, where a memorial garden was built and a full-length statute was erected to remember this outstanding woman writer.

The third playwright is Pu Shunqing (濮舜卿, 1902-), who was born in Zhejiang. The plays she wrote include “*Dawn*” (黎明), “*Her New Life*” (她的新生命), “*Human Paradise*” (人间的乐园) and “*The Doll of Cupid*” (爱神的玩偶). She wrote the movie script “*The Divorce of the Moon*” in 1927, thus becoming China’s first woman film script writer.

It has been calculated that from 1919 to 1929, over 400 modern Chinese plays were created,<sup>5</sup> some of them are still staged today. It was also in this period that playwrights like Tian Han, Hong Shen, Ding Xilin, Ouyang Yuqian and Xiong Foxi established the foundations of their renowned careers.

## NOTES

1. Qian Xuantong. “Selected Essays of Qian Xuantong”, compiled by Lin Wenguang, published by Sichuan Publishing Group. April, 2010, p. 56 (钱玄同。《钱玄同文选》，林文光选编，四川出版集团出版，2010年4月。第56页。)
2. Shen Daren(沈达人) (2012), “Zhang Houzai and His Comments on Peking Opera” published in the journal of “Peking Opera of China” (沈达人。“张厚载及其京剧评论”，刊载于《中国京剧》2012年号。)
3. Hu Shi (1920s) volume I of “Existing Writings of Hu Shi”, p. 94 (胡适。《胡适文存》第一卷，第94页。)

4. Lu Xun. "The Complete Works of Lu Xun", Volume 7, People's Literature Publishing House, 1981, p. 172 (鲁迅。《鲁迅全集》第7卷，人民文学出版社，1981年第172页)。
5. P. 40 "History of Chinese Drama" by Wang Weiguo, Song Baozhen and Zhang Yaojie (1998), "History of Chinese Drama", published by the Publishing House of Culture and Arts (文化艺术出版社), p. 40 (王卫国、宋宝珍、张耀杰。《中国话剧史》，中国文化艺术出版社，1998年，第40页)。

## REFERENCES

- Tian Benxiang. Volume One, The General History of the Art of Chinese Drama. Shanxi Publishing Group, June, 2008 (田本相。《中国话剧艺术通史》第一卷。山西出版集团，2008年6月)。
- Wang Weiguo, Song Baozhen, Zhang Yaojie. The History of Chinese Drama. The Publishing House of Culture and Arts, 1998 (王卫国、宋宝珍、张耀杰。《中国话剧史》，中国文化艺术出版社，1998年)。



## Theatrical Activities of the League of the Leftist Dramatists and the Rise of Drama for the War of Resistance

In the 1930s, Chinese drama gained remarkable growth and maturity while being gradually accepted by the general public. It thus planted its roots in the people and the reality of China. Mao Zedong described this period in his “On New Democracy”: “This period was one of counter-revolutionary campaigns of ‘encirclement and suppression’, on the one hand, and of the deepening of the revolution, on the other. There were two kinds of counter-revolutionary campaigns of ‘encirclement and suppression’, the military and the cultural. The deepening of the revolution was of two kinds; both the agrarian and the cultural revolutions were deepened”.<sup>1</sup> In this period, Chinese drama maintained its anti-imperialist and anti-feudalist features; the slogan of “a proletarian drama” appeared and was accepted and gained momentum.

One important event of this period was the founding of the League of Leftist Dramatists (LLD), on August 1, 1930. Most of its members were members of the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Youth League, with the idea of developing a proletarian drama. The founding members of the LLD were Zheng Boqi (郑伯奇, 1895–1979), Feng Naichao (冯乃超, 1901–1983), Ah Ying (阿英, 1900–1977), Yang Cunren (杨邨人), Shi Linghe (石凌鹤) and Ye Chen (叶沉). Zheng joined the Chinese Revolutionary League (同盟会) when he was 15 and took part in the 1911 Revolution; he was a teacher of politics at the Huangpu Military School and the head of the Shanghai Company of Artistic Plays

formed in 1929. Feng Naichao joined the Party in January 1928; he drafted the platform of the Leftist League of Writers (LLW) and was its head of publicity. Ah Ying was a prolific playwright of historical plays during the War of Resistance against Japan. Xia Yan, Tian Han, Hong Shen and Liu Baoluo (刘保罗) also joined the LLD later. LLD organized many performances among workers in Shanghai and Suzhou, it also formed drama troupes, both professional and amateur in schools and staged many plays. LLD also established a branch in Beijing, which organized a few drama troupes to perform in the auditorium at Qinghua University for the purpose of fund-raising for the Northeast Army of Volunteers.

Along with Zheng Boqi, several other members of the LLD worked at the Shanghai Company of Artistic Plays, which staged Upton Sinclair's "*The Second-Story Man*", Romain Rolland's "*Le Jeu de l'Amour et de la Mort*" and L. Maerten's "*Bergarbeiter*", all in January of 1930. In March of the same year, it staged "*All Quiet on the Western Front*" by Erich Maria Remarque and the one-act play "*Ah Zhen*" (阿珍) by Feng Naichao. But in April the company was ordered by the police authority of Shanghai to close down. Similarly, in June 1930, after the Southern State Society staged "*Carmen*", adapted by Tian Han from Prosper Mérimée, it was also ordered to close down. The authorities clearly considered that the societies intended to use foreign drama to spread revolutionary sentiment. But the strongest effect of these close-downs was to push a considerable number of activists further to the left, many of them becoming core members of the leftist drama movement.

The first affiliated company of the LLD was the Great Road Performing Troupe, formed in January 1931. The company sent teams to factories and schools to perform for workers and students, performing such plays as "*The Second-Story Man*", "*L'Arlesienne*", "*The Forty-First*" and "*The Flood*".

Meanwhile, the nation was at war. In order to celebrate the great victories gained by the Chinese Red Army in the areas, where the Communist Party of China and the Red Army established political power, the League in March 1931 not only solicited donations for the Red Army, it also planned a benefit performance to mark the victory. The League took a novel entitled "*The Forty-First*", which told a story of the Soviet Red Army, and adapted it into a play named after the heroine "Maria Filatovna". It was staged in the auditorium of the Daxia University (now East China Normal University). On the stage such slogans were shouted:

“Long Live the Red Army”, “Long Live the Soviet”. The performance was covered by the Soviet magazine “World Revolutionary Literature”, thus attracting international attention. Because the theater was in the foreign concessions, the police station there sent detectives over to check things out. The troupe managed to give three performances.

Two days after the “September 18” incident broke out and the three provinces in the Northeast were lost, Tian Han went to the Great Road troupe to discuss how to stage plays that would call on the public to rise against the aggression. He began writing a new play on the 20th of September and finished it on the afternoon of the 22nd. It was named: “*The Untuned Bell*”. The troupe rehearsed it immediately and performed it on the night of the 24th. It was staged for three consecutive nights and aroused the political zeal of not only the audience, but the general public who read reports of the performance.

In January 1932, the Great Road Troupe put on the following plays: “*The Crown of Life*” by Yamamoto Yuzo, “*The First and the Last*”, “*The Last Five Minutes*”, “*The Home of a Rickshaw Man*” by Ouyang Yuqian, “*Yellow*” and “*L’Arlesienne*” by Alphonse Daudet. They also staged “*The Untuned Bell*” again. During the January 28 performance of that play, just as the bombing of Shenyang sounded on the stage, it coincided with the sounds of gunfire as the 19th Route Army resisted the invasion of Shanghai by the Japanese. The 3000-student audience called a pledge meeting to fight against invasion. The Nationalist government signed a ceasefire agreement with the Japanese, however, all publicity opposing the invasion was strictly scrutinized. The Great Road Troupe was soon dissolved in the face of this censorship.

Another drama troupe directly under the League was the Morning Star, formed right after the September 18th incident, led by Lou Shiya (楼适夷, 1905–2001) and Yuan Wenshu (袁文殊, 1910–1993). The troupe made many trips to factories and schools, performing the plays “SOS” and “*A Way to Live*” by Lou Shiya and “*The Night Scene of the Factory*” by Yuan Wenshu. “SOS” depicted a group of Shenyang telegraphers, who send out a cable telling the world about the crimes of the Japanese invaders, and are all shot dead when Japanese troops get to the telegraph room. “*A Way to Live*” describes a village woman, who goes to Shanghai to find her husband. She finds him on strike against his Japanese boss and in resistance against Japanese aggression. “*The Night Scene of the Factory*” illustrates how workers rose to fight against the suppression by

the Japanese rulers. These plays became signature elements of the Leftist Drama movement and were staged all over the country.

There were other similar drama groups at the time, for instance, the Spring and Autumn Play Society, Guangguang, Sansan and Camel Drama teams, which staged a large number of modern plays. The League of the Leftist Dramatists also set up branches in Nantong, Peking, Wuhan, Guangzhou and Shandong. The League dissolved itself in 1935 because it was difficult to carry out organized activities.

Aside from the above-mentioned plays, the following were often staged by various leftist drama groups: “*The Plum Rain*” (梅雨) by Tian Han depicts a worker’s family. The father is fired because of his old age; the son is dismissed by the factory after he hurts one of his arms, and resorts to intimating rich people for money; the daughter, who doesn’t believe in fate, rises up and becomes a revolutionary. “*The Moonlight Sonata*”, also written by Tian Han, portrays the struggles of bus drivers against suppression by foreign capitalists. “*The Song of Returning to Spring*” brought great fame to Tian Han. It tells the story of a returned overseas Chinese who lost his memory during a battle. His lover, Meiniang, forsakes her comfortable life abroad and comes to China to look after him. He recovers his memory as she sings and the New Year firecrackers explode, and the first question he asks is “Have the invaders been driven away? Has the Northeast been recovered?”.

The famous “countryside trilogy” by Hong Shen was staged quite often. It includes “*The Bridge*” (五奎桥), “*Nice Rice*” (香稻米) and “*The Pond of the Blue Dragon*” (青龙潭). “*The Bridge*” is a one-act play that portrays the oppression of farmers by the feudal establishment and their resistance. The bridge in the title has been built by senior leaders of the local landlord family to commemorate five of their ancestors, but now it blocks the flow of water to the fields during a drought. The landlord refuses the farmers’ demand to tear it down, rallies his servants and invites a judge to the spot in an attempt to defend the bridge and to intimate the farmers, who are so indignant that they tear down the bridge themselves. In the face of the resolute action of the farmers, the judge flees and the landlord and his servants are struck mute as stone. In the play the bridge is not merely a bridge, but a symbol of the authority of landlord over peasants. The premiere of the play took place in the gymnasium of Fudan University in May of 1933. Yuan Muzhi (袁牧之, 1909–1978) played the role of the landlord and won wide acclaim for his acting. A reviewer wrote: “With his make-up, the small props he used, with the way