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Xiaomei Chen/Acting the Right Part

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Prologue

Written fourteen years after I became part of the Chinese diaspora in America, this book is intimately related to my memories of growing up in a family of celebrated theatrical artists in Beijing. In my early childhood, theater was a form of “child’s play,” a taste of paradise granted me each Saturday night, when I was placed on a small stool next to the stage lights, at the corner of what seemed the immeasurably vast stage of the China Youth Art Theater (Zhongguo qingnian yishu juyuan). From behind the curtains, I watched with curiosity and wonder as my mother played the role of Almaviva, the countess in The Marriage of Figaro (Feijialou de hunyin), performed for the first time in 1962. Well known in the Western theater repertoire, this play was originally written by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, and on the occasion of its premiere in 1784, it met with ecstatic applause from all sections of the house not occupied by the aristocracy. My parents later told me that, although pronounced foreign and bourgeois by Marxist doctrinaires, The Marriage of Figaro was nevertheless
a remarkable and thoroughly revolutionary piece of theater for its time. In the historical context of the coming French Revolution, it can be imagined what alarm and fright the spectacle of the servant Figaro daring to mock his master gave the aristocratic members of the audience. I was also told that the performance of this French play on the Chinese stage was intended to illustrate a revolutionary truth taught by Chairman Mao Zedong—to wit, that those of the most exalted class strata were the most foolish among us, whereas society’s humblest were the most intelligent.

I also watched my mother in the Chinese play Young Folk in a Remote Region (Yuanfang qingnian; premiered in 1963) playing the role of Amina, a beautiful Moslem girl who devotes herself to constructing the socialist motherland in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. It was beyond my powers at the time to discern that these two culturally different plays both re-created two extraordinary revolutionary dramas taking place on the larger stage of the outside world. Unexpectedly, the antiroyalist French play could be viewed as pertaining somehow to the Chinese ethnic-minority play about thousands of ex-slaves in feudal pre-1949 Xinjiang enjoying for the first time the fruits of a socialist revolution. The slaves were depicted as masters of a new Chinese nation—as happy citizens in a predominantly Han state that generously and lovingly “parented” its fifty-five-plus ethnic minority groups, as seen in the harmonious Uighur community (Fig. 1). I later learned that Wu Yuxiao, a Han Chinese, wrote the play after living in Xinjiang, where he gained firsthand experience in the life-style of minority groups. The play premiered in Beijing in December 1963 and enjoyed a successful run of seventy-six performances in the first season, an impressive record in comparison to the other ten plays that opened the same year. Ten premieres in the single year of 1963 also marked a record high in the history of the China Youth Art Theater. The theater thrived at that time, with approximately two hundred professional employees. Such state sponsorship, which provided an unparalleled opportunity for developing the dramatic arts in the 1950s and 1960s, disappeared in post-Maoist China.

At age ten I was awaiting my mother’s return from her year-long tour in Xinjiang, where, in addition to playing her acclaimed role in Young Folk in a Remote Region, she coached the Moslem amateur actors and actresses in stage acting. I remember how, in the breezy September evenings, I felt reluctant to go to bed, sitting instead on a stool in the courtyard, counting the stars in the sky and guessing which ones were twinkling over the far-away land where my mother was. I was not then aware that this play,
written and performed by Han people, the majority ethnic group, was already being introduced in the vast areas inhabited by diverse ethnic and religious groups as an exemplar of popular theater.\(^3\) In contrast to the traditional theater of indigenous cultures, this new and modern dramatic genre was being explored as a means both of teaching Mandarin, the major Han dialect, and the way of life of the Han people. Ultimately, it became a convenient medium through which still other ethnic and religious groups might express their experience under socialist China in Han terms. Nor was I then in a position to foretell the powerful role played by theater in contemporary political culture in creating a Chinese national identity centered around Han culture and paving the way for various ethnic identities to assume their place in a socialist “melting pot.”

In more than one sense, Chinese theater exemplifies Ronald Harwood’s description of theater as “by its nature giv[ing] rise to the most vehement enthusiasms and hostilities.”\(^4\) I received an early impression of this function when I made my own theater debut, at age four, playing the part of little Yingzi (Xiao Yingzi), a Korean girl in *Iron Transportation Troops (Gangtie yunshubing)*. This 1958 production\(^5\) portrayed the Chinese volunteer soldiers who were fighting on the side of the North Korean Communist army against South Korean troops and their US military advisors.
in the Korean War of 1951. During my few minutes on stage I was carried in the arms of a Korean woman, who gave Chinese soldiers an account of how I had become blind after picking up a “toy” (which turned out to be an explosive device) dropped by a US bomber. “Why did American devils deliberately target and hurt children?” the Korean woman indignantly asked (Fig. 2). The Chinese soldiers compared the miserable lot of Korean children with the felicity of Chinese children in Beijing, from whom they had just received letters and gifts in celebration of National Day (October 1). On the eve of this day the children had been asking what their “dear uncles” would be doing in war-stricken Korea the next morning, during the hours they themselves would be taking part in the annual Tiananmen Square parade. Intent on answering this question in deeds rather than mere words, the Chinese soldiers vowed to avenge, more fearlessly than ever, the injuries inflicted on innocent Korean people by US imperialism. Despite my awareness that I was only participating in a type of child’s play, as well as a theatrical play, this early exposure to nation-
alist sentiments in the China Youth Art Theater made a lasting impression on me, as did the internationalist and anticolonialist initiatives being played out on the global stage outside the theater during my formative years in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1950s and 1960s.

My childhood world of play was also influenced by the renown of my father, who was equally well known in the theater for organizing, directing, and training his illustrious team of stage designers. Theatrical histories cite his achievements in designing the stage settings and costumes for lustrous productions of Gogol’s The Inspector General (Qinchai dachen) premiered in 1952, Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya (Wanniya jiujiu) in 1954, Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (Nuola) in 1956, and Schiller’s Love and Intrigue (Yinmou yu aiqing) in 1959. In effect, I grew up absorbing the stories of my parents’ shared glory: my mother’s acclaimed roles as Nora in A Doll’s House (Fig. 3) and as Yelena (standing in the middle) in Uncle Vanya (Fig. 4) were more than complemented by my father’s prize-winning stage designs for these two plays. In the long history of Chinese theater, which saw the proliferation of numerous Nora-like characters thanks to the far-reaching influence of Ibsen after 1919, my mother’s Nora was cited as
the first to grace the PRC stage after 1949. I was amazed to see exhibited in Norway six 18 × 24-inch photos of this 1956 production of *A Doll’s House*, featuring my mother in the foreground and my father’s stage design in the background. Years after this performance, my mother was invited to Oslo by the National Theater of Norway and the Norwegian Drama Festival in Commemoration of the Centennial Birth of Ibsen in 1996, in recognition of the “brilliant Nora” she had created on the Chinese stage. As their distinguished guest, on September 13, she visited Ibsen’s residence in his native village of Skien. My seventy-two-year-old mother was surprised that her performance of forty years before should have had such wide-ranging impact, although Chinese theater historians apparently remained unaware of it. These photos of the Chinese production of *A Doll’s House*, selected for permanent display from many similar photos of productions representing other diverse cultures and languages, were meant to illustrate the extension of Ibsen’s influence to a socialist country with a very different ideological and cultural heritage.

This account reflects a distinctive moment in the Chinese theater’s golden age of the 1950s. The history of The China Youth Art Theater reveals that the socialist stage in the PRC before the Cultural Revolution
produced many bright theater stars and luminous performances in plays from the Western repertoire. From 1952 to 1962 the China Youth Art Theater performed eleven other plays from foreign countries, such as the USSR, Czechoslovakia, India, Japan, and Argentina, solidifying its reputation for producing world-class foreign plays. Many theatergoers remember the 1950 premiere of a Russian play How Steel Is Made (Gangtie shi zhenyang liancheng de), which promoted the image of Pavel Korchagin (Bao’er Kechajin), a Soviet national hero, as a role model for many young people in Beijing. Based on an autobiographical novel of the same title (Kak zakalyalas’ stal’) by Nikolay Alekseyevich Ostrovsky, the play represented the life story of Pavel, who, in spite of paralysis and blindness, still pursued his revolutionary career with an optimistic spirit. As a crucial step in his earlier career, Pavel had to break up with his first love from the bourgeoisie (Fig. 5). The play was such a success in Beijing that Jin Shan, the actor who played Pavel, was frequently invited by young people to give lectures on Pavel’s life stories and on his performing experience as Pavel. During one performance, the audience waited for three hours, without complaint, for his eventual appearance after his car broke down during his return from a lecture tour in Tianjin. The performance did not end until one o’clock in the morning, when many audience members had to walk home after the buses had stopped running.14

Unfortunately, this cosmopolitan tradition was aborted in 1963 with Mao Zedong’s call “to never forget class struggle,” which resulted that year in the openings of ten plays, six of which had in common the theme of
“class struggle” as it supposedly was manifested in socialist China. Chinese audiences would have to wait almost twenty years to see the China Youth Art Theater put on another foreign play, Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo* (*jialilue zhuan*) in 1979. This was followed, in 1980, by *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (*Caiyicai, shuilai chi wancan*), adapted from an American movie and the first American play ever produced in the PRC after Nixon’s visit to China in 1972. Chinese theater had traveled a long way since 1958, when I had appeared in *Iron Transportation Troops* as the young victim of American imperialist soldiers.

For me as a child, theater was the window through which I came to view Beijing, the city, and China, the motherland. Through this window I also gradually grasped how Beijing functioned as a central stage for the performance of historical events and for imagining successive revolutions. Situated on East Chang’an Street, which leads westward toward Tiananmen Square, the building housing the China Youth Art Theater was itself a geopolitical landmark not far from other national monuments clustered in and around the square. Previously a movie theater whose screenings gave Chinese audiences a glimpse into Hollywood culture and its influence on the West, the site was remodeled in 1951 to serve as a platform for socialist drama, in itself a milestone in the young republic’s political and cultural life. As the designated “national theater (*guojia juyuan,*”) the only one under the direct jurisdiction of the PRC’s Ministry of Culture, the administrators of the China Youth Art Theater, in the years to come, tried especially hard to see to it that its repertoire would reflect China’s past and present national history.

First established in 1941 as Yan’an Youth Art Theater in the liberated area of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during World War II, the company was renamed China Youth Art Theater on April 16, 1949, in Beijing, as part of the events celebrating the republic’s founding. Liao Chengzhi, the first president of the theater, declared his “two-fists policy” in 1950, with which he hoped to combine the strength of two groups of dramatists—those from the KMT (Nationalist Party) areas such as Nanjing, Shanghai, and Chongqing, and those from the liberated areas—in their efforts to establish a first-rate national theater true to its name. Figure 6 demonstrates the atmosphere of a staff meeting when Liao delivered his speech. A survey of the company’s repertoire over fifty years (1949–1999) testifies to a tenacious preservation of the plays from the time span extending from the May Fourth movement (1915–1925) to the PRC period. Its nearly two hundred multi-act plays and seventy one-act
plays²¹ show a team of dedicated artists fully realizing its mission as China’s national theater, whose history was intricately interwoven with the history of a new nation/state. The theater’s intimate identification with the nation/state and its mass audiences reached its zenith during the socialist era of the 1950s and early 1960s. Figure 7 records the crowd waiting for the 1950 premiere of Lao She’s Fang Zhenzhu, a play depicting the title heroine’s struggles as a folk performer in Beijing before liberation. Considering the accomplishments of such a national institution, one must deplore the destruction of its building in 1994 to make room for an “Oriental Plaza,” a shopping mall cosponsored by a Hong Kong entrepreneur. In a post-socialist era when economic growth and materialist pursuit turned audiences away from theater, a previously prestigious national theater, deprived of its venue, was forced to turn to popular-media ventures like television drama. Thus do we arrive at the current, sad chapter of the China Youth Art Theater’s story, to which I will return at the end of my Introduction.

To this day I continue to think back to the many times when, after school, I would get off the bus on East Chang’an Street and make a little
detour so I could glimpse the “picture” windows of the China Youth Art Theater, that is, the displayed photographs of dramatic performances. Amid the brilliant golden colors of October, I would marvel at the building’s handsome decor and lose myself in contemplation of posters heralding new plays to be staged on National Day, when my long anticipation would be rewarded with the opportunity to venture once more into the theater and sample the new, thrilling offerings. The plays put on by the China Youth Art Theater and by other theaters in Beijing provided me with a formal and informal ideological tutelage from which I learned who I was and what was expected of me as a young citizen. Although most of the people in the audience were adults (an unfortunate circumstance from a child’s perspective), enthusiastically applauding along with them the heroic actions on stage cemented my identity as a member of the young republic, fortunate to have been born and raised in the brilliant sunshine of the socialist motherland.

I grew up with dramatic characters who depicted the handsome heroes...
and beautiful heroines in worker, peasant, and soldier plays (gong-nong-bing xiju), a core repertoire of the China Youth Art Theater. The worker play Red Storm (Hongse fengbao) left me with a particularly deep impression of its spectacular staging of the Beijing-Hankou railway workers strike on February 7, 1923. Premiered in 1958 to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the event, Jin Shan wrote the script in two weeks, then directed and played the lawyer Shi Yang, an underground CCP leader of the worker’s union later murdered by the authorities. Figure 8 records one famous scene where a charismatic Shi Yang, in a soliloquy of more than one hundred sentences, defends the accused workers with passion, grace, and elegance. I was told that this speech established a “Jin Shan style of acting” and was repeatedly imitated by drama instructors in their teaching and by applicants to drama school in their auditions. Some people watched the performance night after night; they quietly came in and sat down in the last row in the middle of the performance, just in time to savor this speech. A charming Shi Yang helped me relate to a group of passionate railway workers depicted on stage, whose simplicity, honesty, and devotion to their cause inspired me to try to grow up just like them.

I also treasure a memory of watching peasant plays such as Li Shuang-shuang, in which the title heroine represented the best and brightest women in rural China. I enjoyed the same story from other genres: a 1960 fiction
entitled A Brief Biography of Li Shuangshuang (Li Shuangshuang xiao-zhuan) written by Li Zhun; a 1962 “picture book” (Lianhuanhua) for children; and the popular 1962 film by Beijing Film Studio that had won a “one-hundred-flower” award. Situated in the general background of the Great Leap Forward of 1958, these works depict Li Shuangshuang as a witty, selfless, and courageous woman who dares to criticize selfish fellow villagers despite her husband’s efforts to stop her from alienating too many people. In my younger years, Li Shuangshuang seemed to be a perfect role model who could reconcile the demand to serve the public and her commitment to her husband. Such a complex relationship inspired some of the best dramatic scenes, marked by quarrels, compromises, separations, and homecomings. Figure 9 shows one such moment, when the couple breaks into laughter after a tearful fight. The story has a happy ending, as Li wins her husband’s love and respect both as a model member of the People’s Commune and as a devoted wife. Yu Daiqin, who played the role of Li Shuangshuang after having lived with peasants for months, won national acclaim for her performance as a lively, beautiful, and, most important, believable peasant woman, who was accepted by her peers when the play toured the countryside after its Beijing premiere. My teenage
attachment to Li Shuangshuang helped me later in the countryside, when I expected to live a peasant’s life as she had.

Among the soldier plays performed by the China Youth Art Theater, I remember especially well the dramatic success of The Leopard Bay Battle (Baoziwan zhandou), premiered in 1964.\textsuperscript{24} The play depicts Ding Yong, a brave CCP commander who leads his soldiers in another “battle” for self-reliance to defeat the KMT blockade. Figure 10 illustrates the moment when Ding shows his soldiers a new spinning wheel to make cloth for their army uniforms. I well remember the outstanding performance of cast members such as Lei Ping, who actually participated in these events in Yan’an during the war. Her practiced spinning and weaving on stage and her flamboyant personality as a woman soldier impressed me with the idea of art imitating life, which helped me to appreciate socialist theater in its salad days. Knowing her personally as a family friend and a caring “aunt,” I loved her stage characters and admired her pursuit of a revolutionary acting career during the war.

Deeply engraved in my memory also were those confusing times during the early days of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when I saw my father, for the first time after he had been taken into custody by the Red Guards, waiting in line in the theater’s cafeteria for lunch along with...
several dozens of counterrevolutionaries rounded up for having promoted “poisonous” plays advocating Western and bourgeois ideologies. I remember my mother periodically putting together a bundle of daily necessities to be sent to my father, who, on a piece of paper passed on to my mother, seldom forgot to ask for more of Chairman Mao’s works, so that he could study them even harder in order to reform himself into an artist once again acceptable by the people. I remember, in particular, how my mother took me and my brother to the Great Wall, finally fulfilling one promise for which she had never had time before the Cultural Revolution, when she was devoting all her time and energies to dramatic performances for the masses. After we returned from my first exciting train trip to the outskirts of Beijing, however, she instructed me how to cook and how to open the drawer where money and food-ration coupons were kept, so that I could take care of myself and my brother should she not come home from work the next day. As one of the most famous actresses instrumental in promoting Western drama, she expected to be taken into custody by the Red Guards any day. I remember even more vividly how, after the Cultural Revolution ended, my mother and father once again enthusiastically threw themselves into reviving dramatic productions without wasting any time to settle personal scores. Regardless of whether she was playing the protagonist in an anti-Gang of Four play, or a minor role in a French play celebrating the uprising of the People’s Communes, my mother took her roles seriously and left behind on the Chinese stage, with her tears, laughter, and sweat, vivid and lively characters to be remembered by many audiences, some of whom had been her fans long before the Cultural Revolution. Together with their colleagues, my parents participated in the rebuilding of the theater, which regained its vitality in its subsequent productions of Western drama, experimental theater, and socialist-realist plays, some of which I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5. The China Youth Art Theater even initiated the first women’s theater, as seen in Bai Fengxi’s women trilogy, which I will examine in Chapter 6.

Such remembrance of things past sparked my academic interest when I pursued a Ph.D. degree in comparative literature at Indiana University, where I buried myself in reading plays and dramatic histories from different cultures across diverse historical periods. It was then, inspired by brilliant teachers, that I confirmed my mission to introduce the “Chinese cousin” to the global family of modern drama. This mission drew from my personal commitment to an entire generation of Chinese dramatists and artists.
who dedicated their lives to the development of modern drama. Yet, for reasons to be discussed in the following Introduction, no monument has ever been erected in Chinese cultural history and the collective memory that traces their sleepless nights and long journeys across the country in the painful process of dramatic creation and production. No comprehensive study has ever portrayed those unfortunate and unknown players who paid, some with their lives, for extraordinary dramatic careers they had pursued over many decades. Most recently, my mother related to me that in the late 1990s many funerals were held, one after another, to bid farewell to many ex-stars who once shone on the Chinese stage and yet are hardly remembered today by many, especially the younger generation whose entertainment has little to do with drama. When my mother described to me, with tears in her eyes, how few people even bothered to attend those sad valedictory occasions for these almost forgotten artists, I felt a strong urge—if not a call to duty—to preserve their stories, hitherto untold. With deep respect for and emotional attachment to those “aunts and uncles” who watched me grow up, and to well-known and unknown people whom I do not know personally but know of their contributions to modern drama, I dedicate this study. To the memories of their tremendous courage, endurance, and persistence—and above all else, their artistic talents—I dedicate this book.