In Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The King and I*, the protagonist Anna comes across as both an Orientalist and a feminist. A nineteenth-century British widow, she will not stay home waiting for a chaperon or a second husband; instead she travels to Siam (as Thailand was known until 1939) to instruct in the English language and in Western culture the seven dozen children of King Mongkut. During her five years at the Siamese court, she has an ambiguous relationship with the Orient. King Mongkut’s unique qualities fascinate her, but she becomes indignant at the brutal oppression in his royal harem, where thousands of women and children are confined as wives, concubines, captives, and slaves. As in Anna Leonowens’ 1870s memoirs, on which *The King and I* is based, Anna exhibits the European imperialist’s feeling that the
natives of the Orient must be turned into a civilized and enlightened people. At the same time, she empathizes with the Siamese women, identifying with them as a woman and as a member of Victorian England’s lower classes. Thus an American dramatic representation of the Orient can be seen through the windows of race (white/colored), nation (Britain/Siam), gender (patriarchal king/Siamese woman), and class (poor British woman/establishment).

All these issues, as we shall find, can serve as points of comparison for a critical study of modern Chinese spoken drama. For example, in the third scene, the king’s singers and dancers perform a play adapted from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to demonstrate to the British royal visitors that the Siamese are already sufficiently civilized and require no British instruction. While playing Eliza, an escaped slave from Kentucky searching for the lover who has been sold to “Oheeo,” Tuptim, one of King Mongkut’s captive women, steps out of character to condemn “any King who pursues a slave who is unhappy” and tries to join her lover.

The basis for this Siamese play within an American play is nowhere to be found in Anna Leonowens’ memoirs, although Leonowens does write about the Siamese people’s love of traditional drama and the anguish that women endured as slaves. These two themes, however, possibly inspired the creation of the Siamese woman in Margaret Landon’s 1944 bestseller, *Anna and the King of Siam*, based on the author’s research into Leonowens’ life and writing. Landon’s novel portrays a Siamese woman so moved by the courageous spirit expressed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that she turned “the beloved story into Siamese.” As a token of respect for the American woman, she adopted the name Harriet Beecher Stowe as the first part of her Siamese name. After her experience in Siam, Leonowens befriended Stowe while in America and shared her antislavery stand, which led to the Siamese staging of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in *The King and I*. The combination of distinctive cultures rooted in history and drama is a hallmark of the long Orientalist tradition of Broadway (and Hollywood) flirting with exotic “others” (women in particular), as exemplified by such other theatrical creations as *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. The 1999 movie *Anna and the King* further testifies to the continuing fascination with cross-cultural romance.

The Siamese staging of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* might strike us as an ingenious dramatic device for linking British, Siamese, and American
experiences. The historical connection between *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the origin of modern Chinese drama, however, does not require any comparable stroke of imagination. Despite early contacts with Western drama through missionary schools and foreign residents, modern Chinese drama did not really begin until the 1907 premiere of *The Black Slave Cries Out to Heaven* (Heinu yutianlu).4 This full-fledged dramatic adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Spring Willow Society, formed by a group of overseas Chinese students in Tokyo, embodies a paradox in the development of modern Chinese drama. Using the American founding fathers’ vision of equality to oppose the Confucian tradition, the first generation of Chinese dramatists was nevertheless attracted to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for its denunciation of the slavery system, and its critique of the hypocrisy in the founding principles of the United States. Both Chinese and American writers saw in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a springboard from which to challenge their own cultures. Indeed, Lin Shu’s Chinese translation of Stowe’s novel, in 1901, on which the dramatic adaptation was based, was triggered by a fury over reports of the brutal treatment of Chinese coolies overseas by the American “white race,” who oppressed both the “black race” and the “yellow race.” At its inception, therefore, modern Chinese drama took seriously the issues of racial conflict, national identity, and resistance to domestic and foreign oppressors, and developed these issues in subsequent plays during the War of Resistance to Japan, when the Japanese—that same “yellow race,” and yet an ethnic “other”—became the arch enemy of the Chinese nation.

Indeed, even before the war against foreign aggressors broke out, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was also successfully staged as a class-conflict play in the Jiangxi Communist Soviet areas in 1931. Li Bozhao, a female playwright in the Red Army, adapted her *Peasant Slaves* (Nongnu) from a dramatic version of Stowe’s work she saw in the USSR. Unlike the performance by the Spring Willow Society in 1907, Li’s production contained four acts, ending with the oppressed black slaves defeating white slave owners. Although racial conflict did not figure in the Chinese dramatic scene of the 1930s, local peasant audiences responded enthusiastically to the theme of class oppression against local landowners. The performances often ended to audiences’ applause and slogans such as “down with slave owners” and “down with landowners.”5 A 1961 adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Heinu hen), however, strikes a different tone. Although class conflict remained a major part
of communist ideology, Sun Weishi, a female director who had received formal training in theater in the USSR for six years, attempted to break the “fourth wall” of illusionary theater and expanded dramatic actions to other space such as that of the orchestra. In modern China, where female playwrights and directors were few, significantly both Li and Sun were drawn to this Western drama for its political and artistic appeal.

In terms of formalist innovations, modern Chinese dramatists drew inspiration from Western drama for their own theater reform. Modern Chinese drama, like its Western counterpart, consists mostly of speaking and acting; it challenges the conventions of the operatic theater, known as xiqu, which combines singing, speaking, acting, and acrobatics. As a seminal form of a new culture, modern drama developed around the beginning of the Republican period (1911–1949), which saw the fall of the last imperial dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China, under the leadership of the Nationalist Party (hereafter referred to as KMT). At that time, “civilized drama” (wenmingxi), characterized by improvised dialogues and spontaneous speeches addressing current political events, responded to the social concerns surrounding the Republican revolution. In the May Fourth movement, modern drama was explored as an alternative to operatic theater, viewed then as too “dehumanized” (feiren) to express the concerns of an increasingly problematic world. During the War of Resistance to Japan (1937–1945), it played an important role in the cultural construction of the concepts of knowledge, power, identity, nation/state, gender politics, and twentieth-century Chinese national characteristics.

In the Maoist period (1949–1976), theater in the People’s Republic of China (hereafter referred to as PRC) mostly followed the Maoist ideology of literature and art, which viewed serving the interests of the proletariat cause—that is, the cause of workers, peasants, and soldiers—as its main function. As we shall see shortly, the politics of representing the proletariat raises intriguing questions about the relationship between dramatists and their objects of representation, many of whom were deprived of real power to express themselves at the same time as the state dubbed them masters of socialist China.

The post-Maoist era began in 1976 with the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution. Initiated in 1966, the Cultural Revolution had promoted “revolutionary-model plays” (geming yangbanxi) as the exemplary art of the proletariat in order to eliminate other forms
of literature and art. Perhaps at no other time did theater exert such a powerful impact on the nation. As a radical reaction to this period, post-Maoist theater launched a popular political agenda against Maoist ideology and initiated artistic experiments in the production of Western and Chinese plays.

This anthology introduces six plays drawn from Chinese indigenous theater, proletarian theater, women’s theater, history plays, and experimental theater in contemporary China. They are introduced with several different audiences in mind. For the general reader, I present and situate six contemporary plays, five of which had not previously been translated into English, in the political and cultural history of modern China in order to demonstrate the interrelationship between theater and history, society, and our everyday experiences. For students of literature and culture, I focus on one set of critical issues in each play to suggest its intercultural and theoretical implications for studies of other genres and other cultures, to introduce modern Chinese drama to Western classrooms as part of a curriculum on multiculturalism and non-Western literary and cultural studies. Such an enterprise requires an introduction that would portray the reception of each play while tracing its historical and critical connections between past and present, text and intertexts, and Chinese traditions and their counterparts in other cultures.

In terms of methodology, I attempt to analyze Chinese culture in different ways from those found in contemporary Western literature. Some critics in the United States consider challenging the canon their central task. They ask, for instance, whether authors who were not upper-class, white, or male were indeed excluded from the Western canon. These issues become complicated and problematic in the Chinese context. One might note that in the United States the issue of class in cultural studies receives far less attention than issues of race and gender politics. In the Chinese context, however, it would be difficult to talk about literature and culture without at least referring to class politics, which has significantly affected millions of people. Mao’s championing of the Chinese revolution as fundamentally a peasant’s revolution—and hence the principle that literature and art should serve the interests of the proletariat politics—largely determined literary production, canon formation, and literary reception. By the same token, the “nonwhite” issue in China became a question of perspective: to the predominantly white United States, China is yellow
and colored; to other ethnic minority groups within China, “non-white,” as a category, may indicate non-Han minority groups and/or non-Mandarin-speaking peoples within the Han majority. Furthermore, in contrast to the United States, where race became an issue of sustained scholarly concern only with the civil rights movement, attention to ethnicity was part of Maoist state ideology from the beginning. The PRC granted ethnic groups financial support and special rights, such as exemptions from the one-child policy to allow increases in the minority population. Similarly, as to the issue of gender, Chinese scholars in various disciplines have already pointed out that official feminism, despite its radical promotion of women’s rights and equality, illustrated by Mao’s adage that “women can hold up half of the sky,” merely validated the existing socialist ideology. Simply put, the representation of women as key players in socialist China was always part of the Maoist official culture. Thus what constitutes “opening the canon” for some Western critics would in China mean returning to the Maoist canon, or to the Maoist principle of creating and preserving literary texts. Ultimately, then, what is politically correct in the West may be politically incorrect in post-Maoist China, which rejected many aspects of Maoist ideology years ago. Bearing such distinctions in mind, the reader may learn from the following discussion of theatrical representations in contemporary Chinese drama, which shed light on the social and institutional histories of canon formation in cross-cultural contexts.

The Dead Visiting the Living: The Dynamics of Form and Content

Although the post-Maoist play The Dead Visiting the Living (Yige sizhe dui shengzhe de fangwen) premiered as late as 1985, it belongs to a well-established repertory in modern drama that sometimes skillfully combines such seemingly opposing elements as East and West, modern and traditional, and Brechtian and illusionist theater. Indeed, it crystallizes the century-old effort by the Chinese dramatists to seek an equilibrium between artistic form and political content.

The first such attempt can be detected in Hu Shi’s 1919 play The Main Event of One’s Life (Zhongshen dashi), which used Ibsen (for the first time) as the quintessential Western model for writing about individualism and free love, against the expected Confucian content
and traditional form of old theater. Although primitive in terms of
dramaturgy, Hu’s play depicts a brave young woman rejecting her par-
ents’ wishes that she submit to an arranged marriage and instead elop-
ing with her Japan-educated lover. With this play, Hu Shi pioneered
a subsequently long tradition of exploring Western dramatic forms as
a way of giving expression to the antitraditional agenda of the May
Fourth intellectuals to further political and social reforms. The father
in Hu’s play, an apparently modern, educated man who lives in a
house decorated in Chinese and Western styles and yet adheres to clan-
centered old values, seems to symbolize the desire of Chinese intel-
lectuals to borrow from the West while simultaneously preserving Chi-
nese traditions. This ambiguous attachment to Western theater found
its most telling example in Wang Zhongxian’s expensive yet unsuc-
cessful Shanghai performance, in October 1920, of Bernard Shaw’s
Mrs. Warren's Profession (Hualun Furen zhi zhiye), which had been
endorsed in the radical periodical New Youth as a laudable realistic
drama from the West. The indifferent reception convinced Wang that
he had no choice but to adapt to the popular taste of Chinese audi-
ences, many of whom were still accustomed to the familiar features of
operatic theater.

The ensuing development of “amateur theater” (ai meiju) in Bei-
ing illustrates the dual-fold emphasis of theater as both an educational
and an artistic experience. Whereas “amateur,” the English term, refers
to noncommercial performances by unpaid actors, the Chinese trans-
lation, “ai mei,” which literally means “love of beauty,” emphasizes art
for art’s sake. The best achievement of amateur theater was the 1924
production by Hong Shen of Oscar Wilde’s Lady Windermere’s Fan
(Shaonainai de shanzi), an event that drama historians now view as
the beginning of a tradition of realistic performing art on the Chinese
stage. It highlighted stage design, the role of the director, and the use
of local flavor drawn from Shanghai life, while still adhering to the
spirit of the foreign original.

Only with the creation of Cao Yu’s watershed play Thunderstorm
(Leiyu), in 1933, did Chinese theater encounter a more vibrant combi-
nation of Western Aristotelian form with May Fourth content. Indeed,
Thunderstorm perfected an Aristotelian theater (characterized by a
closed form, or the so-called three unities of time, plot, and place) as
opposed to Shakespearean theater (characterized by an open form,
with several places, multiple plots, and various time frames). Echoing
Western traditions such as Greek theater and the plays of Shakespeare, Ibsen, O’Neill, and Chekhov, as well as Chinese classics, Thunderstorm is a well-structured play of four acts and two scenes that center around the dramatic conflicts of two families with a secret, sordid thirty-year history, which unfolds and finds resolution within a twenty-four-hour period. Deviating, however, from the purely Aristotelian “three unities,” the play’s setting shifts between the two families of Lu and Zhou. When Lu Ma arrives at the Zhou household, where her daughter works as a maid, it is revealed (to Lu Ma’s horror) that her daughter is in love with the first young master, who is her own son whom she had left behind with the Zhou family thirty years before. Thus Lu Ma sees her daughter reenacting the tragic history when Lu Ma herself was a maid and fell in love with the old master, who rejected her and drove her from his house after she had given birth to his two children. Complicating this tale of incest is another misalliance. The first young master earlier had an affair with Zhou Fanyi, his stepmother, who married the old master after Lu Ma’s departure but was nevertheless alienated by her husband’s indifference and cruelty. By the play’s end, Lu Ma’s daughter and the two young masters are dead, Zhou Fanyi is mentally ill, and a grief-stricken Lu Ma feels she has nothing left to live for. Like Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, the play concludes with the lonely patriarch on an empty stage, signifying the emptiness of a broken home, which was in fact never a “home.” However, the two plays differ in a vital respect: where Ibsen’s play celebrates Nora’s leaving home as a courageous act, Cao Yu’s play illustrates that for Chinese women, the lure of leaving home is only a trap. Lu Ma’s departure from home thirty years before and her determination “never to see the Zhous again” merely ends with the dreadful realization that, despite her best efforts, her daughter has succumbed to the same pitfalls and has become trapped in the same home. As for Zhou Fanyi, leaving her parents’ home thirty years earlier in quest of true love only delivered her back into a prisonlike house, with no opportunities for further escape.

Cao Yu’s Thunderstorm was among the most frequently performed plays in the Chinese theater, especially in the Maoist period, when it was canonized as one of the works that best depicts the evils of a “big family” in the “old society” before 1949. On various occasions, Cao Yu echoed this official interpretation, despite his earlier statement about being motivated by a Greek-like emotional force, a longing for an
explanation of the many mysterious forces in the universe that had captivated him. In the PRC revision of the play, moreover, Cao Yu changed Lu Ma and her second son, Lu Dahai, to oppressed characters with class consciousness, thereby highlighting the theme of class struggle.9 Thus a work that had begun life as a well-made play was later rewritten and its political content changed to accord with prevailing ideologies.10 Cao Yu, who as president of the Beijing People’s Art Theater represented the party’s policies on literature, typifies the predicament of Chinese dramatists. Theater could never be an art-for-art’s-sake enterprise for them, despite their original artistic orientations.

Developed simultaneously in China with the Aristotelian form of theater, Shakespearean theater found its example in Hong Shen’s Yama Zhao (Zhao Yanwang). In imitation of Eugene O’Neill’s Emperor Jones, the play revolves around a military deserter lost in a forest, where he addresses imagined ghosts of enemies and friends and vents his grievances over past tragedies.11 Although some criticized Hong Shen’s adaptation of the open form as a superficial imitation of Western masterpieces, the play deserves mention for its expression of early dramatists’ concern with such social problems as corruption, poverty, and a weak national government confronted by foreign aggression. This direction reached its apex with Xia Yan’s Under Shanghai Eaves (Shanghai wuyan xia), a play whose innovative structure has only one setting: a cross section of a typical house in Shanghai, occupied by five poor families struggling to survive, with one family in each of the five distinct spaces on stage enacting different story lines concurrently.12 The open structure proves ideal for a narrative about the discontent of these ordinary people—an unwilling prostitute, an impoverished primary school teacher, an eccentric old newspaper vendor with dreams about the homecoming of his son, who has already been killed in the war. All these subplots seem to hinge on the return of Kuang Fu, a revolutionary who, after a brief reunion, leaves his family again upon realizing that his wife and daughter lived with his best friend during the eight years of his imprisonment.

Both the Aristotelian close form and the Shakespearean open form found their fullest expression in the subsequent texts of “defense drama” during the War of Resistance to Japan, the Civil War period, and the PRC period, in plays reflecting on contemporary realities and on historical myth and figures. This tension between artistic innovation and political orientation peaked during the Cultural Revolution.
when all “undesirable” forms of literature and art were denounced as harmful to the socialist state, and the model revolutionary theater, touted as the only proper proletariat genre, explored artistic forms from traditions that deliberately excluded all feudal and bourgeois influences. Of the eight model works promoted at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, five are Peking operas and three draw from Western forms of ballet and symphonic music. Modern Chinese drama, as well as many other forms of literature and art, did not really exist during the Cultural Revolution, although some of the model operatic pieces such as The Red Lantern (Hongdeng ji) and Azalea Mountain (Dujuanshan) were earlier performed as modern Chinese drama. In reaction to such neglect, post-Maoist theater revived artistic traditions from East and West alike, and modern as well as traditional plays. Both artistically and politically oriented plays (or a combination of the two) flourished in the dramatic renaissance of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

One example is Liu Shugang’s The Dead Visiting the Living, which blends Brechtian theater with the socialist-realist tradition. Based on the real lives of two national heroes extolled by the post-Maoist regime, the play recounts the aftermath of Ye Xiaoxiao’s murder by two thieves on a bus as other passengers look on passively. Throughout the rest of the play, the dead Ye comes back to visit the living, to confront the indifferent passengers, and to reconnect with his two best childhood friends: Tang Tiantian, the woman he loved, and Liu Feng, his rival in work and love.

The play relies on the illusionist-theater techniques of presenting realistic slices of life and highlighting social problems via the actions of the uninvolved passengers. As a visitor come back from the dead, Ye gradually understands and forgives onlookers whose preoccupation with their own problems inhibited them from aiding him. For example, a father was eager to get to the hospital to see his wife and their new baby; a party official was trying to think of ways to earn a promotion to provide better care for his blind daughter. After all, life was difficult for everyone after the Cultural Revolution. Ye’s acceptance of people indirectly responsible for his death lends him the aura of a socialist hero, who gives without expecting anything in return. In this respect, The Dead could please both the authorities and the public: the crime scene in a crowded bus full of worrying people could be seen as a timely critique against the old regime of Cultural Revolutionary
China. The unrewarded hero, Ye, who rises above everyone in moral stature, points up the emptiness of adhering to the socialist spirit and the need to overcome past difficulties, a spirit promoted by the post-Maoist ideology of the 1980s.

Celebrated by many critics as an apt combination of socialist-realist, Western absurdist, stream-of-consciousness, and symbolist techniques, *The Dead* experimented with the Brechtian “alienation effect,” along with the echoes of Greek tragedy obtained by the use of masks and a chorus. Drawing on Brecht’s concept of an episodic plot with epic overtones that can effectively address social concerns, *The Dead* consistently “alienates” its audiences from the immediate events by connecting the past with the present, the dead with the living, and the actors with the audience who, as observers, are supposed to offer rational alternatives to the dramatic action. Most of these dramatic effects are achieved through the ingenious use of the chorus, whose members greet the audience at the beginning of the play, to help them realize that they are watching the play along with them. Besides commenting on the action and becoming part of the setting, with their symbolic costumes and props, the chorus members also use masks to step in and out of other dramatic roles, such as those of the passengers and the criminals on the bus, the detective, the corrupt party official, Ye’s employer, and the doorman at the funeral home.

These dramatic techniques are meant to prompt audiences to reflect upon the dramatic action while Ye reflects on his journey through life. For example, Tang Tiantian, in her belated effort to demonstrate her love for Ye, kisses and embraces the ghost of Ye in front of a bewildered, jealous Liu Feng. The sight tortures Liu, because he is uncertain whether Tang and Ye were intimate before his death, as Tang now claims, despite the adamant denial of the ghost Ye. In the middle of this confusion of sense, vision, and experience, the audience is encouraged to continue to mull over the question Tang has posed for Liu: “As the living, can’t you tolerate my feelings for and intimate acts with the dead Ye?” This question forces the audiences to consider the lingering influence in socialist China of the Confucian moral code of chastity and virginity, which demands that women remain faithful to their husbands or betrothed, whatever the circumstances. The kissing onstage and the dramatic conflict surrounding it also reflected the new vogue of early post-Maoist theater, which highlighted love stories after years of their absence during the Cultural Revolutionary period. At the
end of the play, when Ye is about to be cremated, Liu surprises everyone by confessing that he is the person Ye has been seeking—the passenger with a sense of justice to insist that the bus be immediately driven to the police station, so the criminals might be apprehended, but who remains too intimidated to incriminate them. Liu’s additional admission that he wrote the play to allay his guilt turns the audiences’ attention to the meaning of theater and of this play.

By presenting himself as one of the indifferent onlookers partially to blame for Ye’s death, Liu actually situates himself above this otherwise undifferentiated crowd. His dramatic skills allow him, in a way denied to the others, to argue his own case in a privileged theatrical space. In this sense, the play is a meta-commentary on the problematic relationship between drama and life, between Chinese intellectuals and the people they claim to represent, and between what one aspires to be and what one is capable of being. This surprising ending dissolves the idealistic image of the dramatist as embodied in the stage character of Liu, a successful director who sought to communicate the spiritual, inner beauty of “one’s heart” in his play. However, his alter ego, Ye, laments his failure as an actor early in his career and his subsequent struggle to succeed as a costume designer, when he was entirely devoted to creating “the outward appearance” of human beings.15 Members of the audience are prompted to ask: Who is the truthful man? The one who claims to be “spiritual,” and whom society views as successful, but was too intimidated by the criminals to act? Or the one who admits to failing to be “spiritual” and yet was committed by a sense of justice to act when it mattered? In a similar juxtaposition, the dead (or the unsuccessful one when he was alive) is the one to be honored rather than the living (the successful one whose spirit is nearly dead). This image of the self-conscious dramatist, however, can also be read as symbolizing the ambiguities surrounding the position of Chinese playwrights. They are accustomed to learning from and serving the interests of the ordinary people, as Mao demanded, while being aware that it is they who hold the power to write and represent reality onstage.

*The World’s Top Restaurant:*
The Paradox of the Local and the Global

While acknowledging its Western inspiration, PRC literary historians have also argued that modern Chinese drama sinicized Western dram-
They maintain that Xia Yan and Cao Yu employed appropriate formalist features from the Chinese and Western traditions to best convey a sense of the daily lives of Chinese people in specific locales. Any given local culture of China was influenced by people’s changing perceptions of the global context, but “local” in one particular play may embrace another dynamic, which casts the urban as the central and the rural as the marginal. Xia Yan’s *Under Shanghai Eaves* represents the rural folk, such as the Huang family, who were victimized by the urban decadence after migrating to Shanghai. Xia Yan’s Shanghai-flavored drama contrasts with Beijing-flavored plays in the PRC. These two schools helped shape the unique, indigenous genre known as local-flavored plays. In Lao She’s plays, for instance, Beijing people act out their identities as either urban residents with rural roots or as longtime city dwellers from different classes confronting the challenges of life in a modern city. On the PRC stage, moreover, Beijing was depicted, in local terms, as the site of distressed people who were casualties of the old society. At the same time, the city was proclaimed, in global terms, as the center for world revolution, to be waged by suffering people who were invited to look to China for inspiration in their own national and regional movements for freedom and independence.

Usually cited as one of the earliest successful productions of Beijing-flavored plays, Lao She’s 1951 *Dragon Beard Ditch (Longxugou)* capitalized on local dialects and expressions of the old Beijing culture to portray poor Beijing citizens who lived around Dragon Beard Ditch, such as the storyteller, the rickshaw driver, and the bricklayer. The play also depicted their living conditions, such as the stinking slum that for generations had trapped poor people, and the government efforts to rebuild the neighborhood after liberation. The play earned Lao She the title of “people’s artist,” awarded by the Beijing People’s Government. It was the only time any artist received such an honor in China throughout the entire Maoist period.

In 1958 Lao She’s second Beijing-flavored play, *Teahouse (Cha-guan)*, premiered to equal acclaim. This time the drama presents more than sixty vivid characters, old Beijing citizens, including an imperial wrestler, a eunuch, a prostitute, a pimp, a bird lover, a fortune-teller, two KMT secret agents, two deserters, an industrialist, and a property owner. Characters meet at a teahouse during the time span following the failure of a political reform under the Qing dynasty in 1898 through 1945, after the defeat of the Japanese under the rule of
the KMT. Despite its allusions to many historical events, the play focuses on the rise and fall of the teahouse and the struggles of the shopkeeper’s family and friends. Lao She intended to commend the “new society” by satirizing the three declining political regimes and their failure to bring about a decent life for Beijing citizens. *Teahouse*, written and published at the height of the anti-rightist movement (1957), was still deemed controversial because it was interpreted as conveying sympathy for the property owner of the old society, rather than focusing on the “heroic deeds” of the common people as they worked to build the socialist state. Deeply rooted in the old culture of Beijing, however, one could also detect a resistance to change, no matter how frequently political regimes changed hands and claimed victory.

Consequently, the Cultural Revolution condemned Lao She and his well-received Beijing-flavored plays. However, his legacy was dramatized on Beijing’s stage during the post-Maoist period, in Su Shuyang’s *Taiping Lake* (*Taipinghu*), published in 1986 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Lao She’s death and premiered in 1988 after numerous revisions. The play depicts the day, August 24, 1966, when Lao She drowned himself to protest the brutal beating and humiliation he suffered at the hands of the Red Guards. Before the suicide, Lao She wanders around Taiping Lake for a day and night, meditating on the paradox of his past devotion to the party and the charges of antiparty activities it has now pressed against him. Heartbroken and confused, he engages in conversations with the living (Beijing citizens who still fondly remember his plays) and also with the dead (dramatic characters of his who committed suicide to decry the miserable pre-1949 society). Beijing-flavored plays, which had followed Lao She’s lead and criticized the old society for marginalizing local people, now offered up a much harsher judgment of Maoist China’s unfair treatment of dramatists.

The watershed 1979 revival of *Teahouse* by the Beijing People’s Art Theater epitomized the entire history of modern Chinese drama for how it pitted “real-life” theater against the status quo in a national arena, in which scene after scene of political drama was being rehearsed and reinvented on the smaller stage of the theater. *Teahouse’s* successful tours in Germany, France, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, and Hong Kong in the 1980s proved to be the culminating act of this theater in the broader sense and marked the first time that modern Chi-
nese spoken drama was exported to the global stage, thereby gaining an entry to the world repertory. This voyage by Teahouse simultaneously completes the “journey back home,” which was undertaken at the very beginning of the twentieth century when the first generation of Chinese dramatists traveled to Japan and to the West. Thus the most indigenous and most local of plays, as some critics have happily pointed out, became the most universal and global, by virtue of its artistic appeal and its faithful reflection of the spectrum of the Chinese people’s experience. The further development of Beijing-flavored plays in post-Maoist China, as represented by Guo Shixing’s Birdman (Niaoren),18 dramatized events and characters in the quiet lanes and neglected corners of 1990s Beijing, where the citizens struggled to cope with the commercialized economy and transnational capital.

To provide another glimpse of the Beijing-flavored play, this anthology includes The World’s Top Restaurant (Tianxia diyilou), written by the woman playwright He Jipeing and performed for the first time by Beijing People’s Art Theater, in May 1988. Set in Beijing between 1917 and 1928, the play deals with the rise and fall of a legendary Beijing roast-duck restaurant, brought to greatness by hardworking managers, waiters, and chefs, only to be ruined later by the two young owners, who for years lived off the restaurant without learning how to run it. The play depicted a Lu Mengshi, a manager hired by the previous owner of the restaurant at his deathbed to continue the latter’s wish to revive the restaurant. Three years later, in a period of great financial hardship, Lu Mengshi fends off interference by creditors and trouble-makers as he expands his business by constructing a new building. Lu then tricks the two young owners into giving up their remaining interest in the business’s management so that he might, by dint of his efficient management and creative abilities, restore the restaurant to its former greatness. Between Act II and Act III, eight years elapse, in the course of which the restaurant, while enjoying its golden age, becomes known as “the best one under heaven.” To audiences’ great dismay, however, the two heartless young masters suddenly return to reclaim the fruits of Lu’s hard work. In the epilogue, after his departure, Lu has a couplet sent to the restaurant. Asking “who is the owner and who is the guest?” the couplet concludes the play in a suspenseful climax that has both characters and audience pondering the meaning of this message, which proves central to the thematic concerns of the play.19 It is
the guests, the outsiders of the family, who have shown themselves to be the genuine owners of the restaurant; those who were the owners in name were actually the outsiders.

The reception of *The World's Top Restaurant* centered around the performing aspects of the play as perfected by Beijing People’s Art Theater, known as the only institution capable of producing real Beijing-flavored plays. Much credit was given to the directors and actors for their “second creation,” which turned the script into a theatrical event, bursting with vivid and diverse Beijing characters of more than seventy years before. Without the older generation of directors and actors, who had spent years learning the dialect, mannerisms, customs, body movements, and lifestyles of the old Beijing people, one critic pointed out, we would never have been able to enjoy a first-rate Beijing-flavored play.\(^{20}\) Reportedly, the directors attended every performance, to test the “authenticity” of the play in front of the Beijing audience and, depending on its effect, to modify the next performance.\(^{21}\) All these factors contributed to making *The World’s Top Restaurant* an unusually popular play, as demonstrated by the continuing strong ticket sales after more than fifty-eight performances in only two months,\(^ {22}\) a record high during the lean years of Chinese theater when critics were discussing how to solve “the drama crisis.”

Other critics, however, criticized *The World’s Top Restaurant* as being inferior to *Teahouse*, because the former’s time span of 1917 to 1928 was not regarded as being as instructive as that for *Teahouse*. With the first act set in 1898 (the end of the reform movement), and the second act around 1918 (the transitional period between Qing dynasty and Republican mores), and the third act in 1945 (following the defeat of the Japanese), *Teahouse* was perceived as indicating the historical necessity of the decline of the previous political regimes. In *The World’s Top Restaurant*, however, the rise and fall of a particular business seems irrelevant to the direction of historical events;\(^ {23}\) it could even be associated with an unhealthy nostalgic longing for the past at a time of economic and political reform, in 1980s China.\(^ {24}\) Such views were rebutted by other critics, who insisted that precisely because of its historical neutrality, *The World’s Top Restaurant* surpassed the earlier play. Its appeal, they claimed, was attributable to its own internal conflicts and logic, thus avoiding the danger of contamination by political and ideological contingencies and interpretations.\(^ {25}\) In effect, the play was accorded the typical treatment meted out to contemporary Chi-
nese drama: no matter how salient the aesthetic values of a particular play in the eyes of one group of critics, it was bound to be looked at as a forum for political texts by other critics, whose educational and personal experiences dictated a different approach.

He Jiping, the playwright, however, provided her own explanation for what she called the “universal appeal” of the play. While spending two and a half years “delving into life” in a Beijing roast-duck restaurant, she had been deeply touched by the intelligence and dedication of the managers, chefs, and waiters, who had been looked down on as belonging to the lowest rung in the social strata. Part of her intention had been to demonstrate that the rich, the leisured, and the so-called “cultivated” elite class excelled only at eating, drinking, and playing around, whereas the hardworking laboring people were the creators of Chinese culinary art, which should be deemed a form of high art on a par with classical music, poetry, and painting. By asking at the end of the play “who is the owner and who is the guest?” she felt she was restoring the status of the “guests” as equivalent to that of the “owners,” or “the makers of history.”

One also needs to be aware of the complex, paradoxical problems entailed in ethnic representation: while Beijing-flavored plays can be seen as a means for local natives to challenge the mainstream tradition inherited from the Western dramatic canon, they also, for the most part, represent the theater of the Han people. In this capacity they stress the history, culture, customs, and lifestyle of the Mandarin-speaking Chinese majority and of the officials in the state and party apparatus, based in the national capital of Beijing. As for the fifty-some minority nationalities and traditions that are not visible in Beijing-flavored plays, they are indeed the real locals in their geographical areas, whose regional and cultural traditions need to be taken seriously in terms of their relationship with the mainstream culture. Indeed, the dramatic world of Teahouse itself provided a glimpse of the complexity of multi-ethnic China. As a Manchu who grew up in Beijing, Lao She expressed his ambivalence toward his own identities by dramatizing a eunuch and an imperial wrestler as diehards from the Manchu court that had conquered and ruled the Han people. On the other hand, Lao She also created another upright Manchu man who would rather sell vegetables to make his own living than depend on the stipends awarded only to the Manchus. Although class struggle and the inevitable victory of communist ideology as implicit themes remained the focus of
its reception, *Teahouse* nevertheless offered us a valuable text imbedded with complex issues of personal, ethnic, and national identities.

**Jiang Qing and Her Husbands:**
History, Revolution, and Political Theater

In *Acting the Right Part* I discuss the relationship between street theater in Tiananmen Square, such as state parades and student demonstrations, and the “theater of the street” that represented street theater in real life onstage. Indeed, theater of the street in early post-Maoist China comprised one of the three golden periods in modern spoken drama. It first rose as one of the most popular genres during the War of Resistance to Japan, when spoken drama raised the morale of the Chinese people. The second boom stretched from the late 1950s to mid-1960s in the PRC, when a strong socialist state promoted realist theater that educated mass audiences with collective values and common goals. The third boom arrived soon after the arrest of the Gang of Four, in 1976, when dramatists were among the first to respond to the post-Maoist regime’s call to narrate “bitter stories” of the Cultural Revolution. The so-called anti–Gang of Four plays attracted many people to the theater, where audiences watched the downfall of traitors of the nation onstage while celebrating the nation’s “second liberation.” Some of them even reenacted onstage the Tiananmen protest of April 5, 1976, against Chinese authorities during the Cultural Revolution. Rarely before had “one play shocked the entire city,” as seen in the simultaneous staging of forty performances of *In a Land of Silence* (*Yu wusheng chu*) in Beijing alone in 1978.27

**Jiang Qing and Her Husbands (Jiang Qing he tade zhangfumen)** was written in 1990, when drama had lost considerable ground to film and television. It is nevertheless one of the best political plays. As I have pointed out elsewhere, *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* can be read as a “trial drama,” in which a former “First Lady,” after having been imprisoned in Mao’s “doll’s house” for forty years, presents her side of the story.28 That story showcases a frustrated Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, which Jiang Qing performed in 1935; she spent the rest of her years imitating Nora’s spirit of an independent woman. The trial drama reenacts the 1980 public trial of the Gang of Four, in which Jiang Qing was sentenced to death but received a two-year stay of execution. In the process it points up the differences in the judicial approaches of
China and of the United States. In the latter case, the trial is governed by the element of suspense, as the defense lawyer and prosecution vie for the jury’s favorable verdict. The trial of the Gang of Four, however, was mostly a show, with the prosecution enumerating forty-eight counts of indictment for Jiang Qing, and the accused either refusing to cooperate or totally admitting guilt without submitting an effective defense. The Chinese people’s denunciation of Jiang Qing for her destructive role during the Cultural Revolution can also be seen as one of the few options available, because Mao could not be directly challenged. On another level, it illustrates the formation of a political discourse on Jiang Qing, which draws from traditional culture’s misogynist view of the seductive woman. For centuries this view scapegoated Yang Guifei, the beautiful concubine in the Tang dynasty, for having presumably brought down an emperor. The resentment against Jiang Qing also obscures the issue of Chinese official feminism, which was manipulated and abused by Jiang Qing when promoting her image as a public woman with an acting career while claiming to be the “banner woman” for all oppressed classes.

*Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* offers diverse interpretations that cut across the problematic relationship of gender (embodied in Jiang Qing as a strongwilled, independent woman) and nation/state (embodied in an even stronger male counterpart who was patriarch of both family and state). The play was written in 1990 at the request of a Hong Kong actress interested in playing Jiang Qing, and the playwright, Sha Yexin, seized the unusual opportunity of writing a play that would not be subjected to official Chinese censorship. He did his utmost, however, to follow closely the official and unofficial documents at his disposal. At the same time, he exercised his playwright’s prerogative of selecting the episodes that would best suit his construction of Jiang Qing. In terms of formalistic features, Sha Yexin smoothly combined a Brechtian structure (which distances audiences from the dramatic action, thereby reminding them that what they are watching is only a play) with illusionist theater (which draws audiences in, convincing them that they are watching real-life events). Originally intended as a movie script, the play also adapted a fluidity of time and space in which Jiang Qing travels between the past and the present, and between her inner world and the outer reality.

The illusionist dimension was adapted by the socialist-realist tradition to evoke the “revolutionary-history play,” that is, the theatrical
dramatization of historical events according to official history. On the other hand, the Brechtian structure highlighted Jiang Qing’s self-reflections, which had been buried in post-Maoist official history, providing a subversive version of the “revolutionary-history play,” if not the revolutionary history itself. Thus Jiang Qing and Her Husbands could be appreciated both as imitating and reacting to its precursor texts. Although the revolutionary-history play decisively shaped other subgenres during the early post-Maoist period, this subgenre has received scant scholarly attention, and no translations in English of the plays or critical studies are available. As a consequence, I discuss some of the popular revolutionary-history plays and their reception in order to provide readers with a clear sense of their roles in constructing a new nation/state in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Jiang Qing and Her Husbands provides the best example of this subgenre, albeit a belated and seditious one.

Revolutionary-history plays can be traced back at least to history plays in the May Fourth period. Guo Moruo’s A Trilogy of Rebellious Women (Sange panni de nüxing), written in the 1920s, reinterpreted the legend of three ancient women rebelling against the three-fold Confucian obligations that bound women to their fathers, husbands, and sons. During the War of Resistance to Japan, the history play became the most popular theater form. At that time many plays, such as Yang Hansheng’s 1937 The Death of Li Xiucheng (Li Xiucheng zhi si) and Guo Moruo’s 1942 Qu Yuan, depicted patriotic historical figures who perished in the battle against corruption and treason—clear allusions, according to PRC literary history, to the KMT government, which was described as resisting the Japanese invaders only reluctantly. After the anti-rightist movement of 1957, the history play saw a resurgence in popularity. For some playwrights, the history play served as an escape from the demanding task of depicting the contemporary life; it could thus be easily criticized as commenting on the status quo. Even the presumably politically safe “masterpieces” among the history plays, such as Guo Moruo’s work Cai Wenji and Tian Han’s drama Guan Hanqing, were criticized during the Cultural Revolution for using ancient, dramatic characters to voice a discontent with socialist China. They were reprimanded for having been obsessed by stories from the “old culture,” about feudal “emperors, princes, generals, and ministers” (di wang jiang xiang) or about “talented scholars and beautiful women” (caizi jiaren).
The significance of the history play on the Chinese stage resided in its dual temporal position, between the past and the present. While characters from the past could be lauded on their own terms according to their place in history, they were also inevitably judged by an audience that could see them as resembling familiar figures in contemporary times. The defense of history against excessive fictionality or innovative contemporary interpretations became a discursive strategy in the critical debate on the history play. Dramatists and critics could sometimes explain away questionable events by claiming that they were merely reenacted history, without reference to the politics of the present day. Their opponents, in turn, could argue against what they saw as excessive fictionality—or a disregard for historical fact—which pointed to evidence of deliberate allusions to and, hence, subversive activities against the ruling ideology. All these elements could prove to create serious political problems for dramatists. The best known case is Wu Han’s “historically accurate” Peking opera Hai Rui Dismissed from Office (Hai Rui baguan). Responding to Mao’s call to write about Hai Rui, a legendary official of the Ming Dynasty (in order to encourage Chinese people to speak out), Wu Han, the deputy mayor of Beijing and a reputable historian, portrayed an incorruptible Hai Rui dismissed from his official post for having challenged the authority. Wu’s Peking opera was absurdly interpreted as having used the drama to challenge Mao’s dismissal of General Peng Dehuai, who questioned Mao’s radical economic policies of the late 1950s. Wu’s history play, which was based on thorough research and designed to address a contemporary issue in socialist China was first publicly criticized on November 10, 1965, in Wenhui bao (Wenhui newspaper), in Shanghai. It became the first shot in the Cultural Revolution.

Well versed in the complex navigation of past and present in relation to the history play, Chinese dramatists by the late seventies seemed to know exactly how to play the game. They answered the official call against the Gang of Four, and many playwrights explored to the hilt a thriving new genre known as the “revolutionary-historical drama” or “revolutionary-leader play,” which reenacted episodes in the lives of communist leaders. Both Newspaper Boys (Baotong) and Turning Point (Zhuanzhe), for example, depict Zhou Enlai’s revolutionary career during the war period, while A Generation of Heroes (Yidai yinghao) recounts Zhou’s heroic leadership during three Shanghai workers’ uprisings and the August 1 Nanchang uprisings in 1927,
which were celebrated events in early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history. Similarly, *Eastward March* (*Dongjin! Dongjin!*;37 and *Chen Yi Leaves the Mountains* (*Chen Yi chushan*);38 describe the war legends surrounding the generals and vice premiers such as He Long and Chen Yi, both of whom were persecuted to death during the Cultural Revolution.

At first sight, the central theme of these “leader plays” might seem comparable to that of the Elizabethan history play, which Northrop Frye links to “the unifying of the nation and the binding of the audiences into the myth as the inheritors of that unity, set over against the disasters of civil war and weak leadership.”39 The great difference of the leader play, however, is that by depicting past glories, it highlights the leader’s tragic death during the Cultural Revolution, thus ensuring “the simultaneous presence of irony” through questioning of the very myth of Chinese revolution.40 Leader plays were particularly popular from 1978 to 1981 because they functioned as effective weapons for exposing the Gang of Four’s crimes and for voicing Chinese dramatists’ challenge to communist historiography, which had victimized not only its people, but its own leaders, the “pillars of Chinese revolution.”

A typical example is *Morning Light* (*Shuguang*), one of the first leader plays to be performed after the death of Mao.41 Premiered in 1977 this six-act play relates Marshal He Long’s early military career in developing the Honghu rural Soviet area, from 1931 to 1934, at the low ebb of Chinese revolution when the Central Committee of the CCP was said “to be dominated by Wang Ming’s leftist opportunism.”42 Foregrounding the “two-lines struggle” within the central leadership of the CCP, the play gives an account of how the followers of Wang Ming’s leftist line persecuted, arrested, and even executed faithful defenders of Mao’s “correct revolutionary line.” For example, Feng Dajian, the director of the Soviet Security Bureau, awed and terrified his enemies by frequently venturing into their headquarters in disguise to collect intelligence, and defeating them in numerous battles with his invincible troops. Yet, however heroic, he still could not survive the purge within his own party, which executed him as an enemy spy.

Thus *Morning Light* actually comes off as a conspiracy play, another subgenre of the history play, which, according to Herbert Linderberger, provides “the central fable shaping the vast majority of historical dramas.”43 As a conspiracy play concerned with “the transfer of power from one force to another,” *Morning Light* suggests at least four
different conspiracies within and outside the party’s hierarchy. The first conspiracy against Feng Dajian is followed by the second conspiracy, against Yue Minghua, a division commander in the Red Army who had been wrongfully accused of having protected Feng. Yue is condemned to death by Lin Han, the party representative of the CCP Central Committee whose main task is to put into effect Wang Ming's leftist line. In the nick of time, however, Yue is rescued by He Long, then Army Commander of the Second Army Corps of the Red Army, which had already lost 90 percent of its territory and its troops owing to Wang Ming’s “incorrect policies.” Because of He Long’s challenge to Lin Han, He Long’s party loyalty was naturally questioned. His ensuing persecution and death during the Cultural Revolution undoubtedly touched a chord among some audience members, who might have been victims of conspiracies in their own lives, lending the play a sense of urgency and realism. When Yue Minghua onstage warned the Chinese audiences in 1977 to be on the lookout against conspirators within the party especially when victory would have been won for the Chinese revolution, many audience members (myself included) would have understood its allusions to the Gang of Four. This message led to a fourth conspiracy: the Gang of Four itself had fallen prey to a coup d’état, without which the post-Maoist regime would never have taken power.

Party history was one conspiracy after another. The subversive theme of the play was so blatant that it alienated some conservatives. After *Morning Light* was published, in 1977, several readers wrote to the editor to express their concern: it was depressing to see so many negative characters, who necessarily overshadowed the positive communist heroes. If the incorrect party line prevailed so easily, they argued, how could one sufficiently account for the inevitable victory of the Chinese revolution? Others, however, seemed eager to connect conspiracies onstage with real stories, in order to validate the historical “truth,” which, in their view, was reflected in the play. Tao Hanzhang, a Red Army veteran, testified that the character of Yue Minghua was based on the true story of Duan Dechang, a division commander in the Red Army who was executed by the leftist opportunists within the party. Xue Baokun went further, suggesting that the play be revised so that Yue will have just been executed at the point when He Long arrives on horseback. Although Xue admitted that some audiences would find this bleak outcome too hard to swallow, he maintained that...
the deaths of both Yue and Feng would arouse a more profound sense of pathos suitable to tragic theater. Furthermore, the audiences would be provided with a more vivid lesson of the price of revolution when it pursues incorrect party lines; they were, in fact, familiar with the most costly example, as had been seen in the recent struggle between Mao’s revolutionary line and that of the counterrevolutionary Gang of Four. These reactions indicated that 1977 was a historic moment, when a subversive discourse against the party apparatus, including that of the new post-Maoist regime, overlapped with the official call to discredit the regime’s predecessors. A leader play could help vent one’s resentment against the Gang of Four. Alternatively, it could disturb, by presenting the past heroic narrative as an illusion.

The leader plays that dealt with Mao understandably aroused the most debate. The first such play, Autumn Thunder (Qiushou pili), was questioned for its hagiographic treatment of Mao, which ran counter to the Marxist view that the people, and not individual leaders, were the driving force of history. One critic pointed out that the character of Mao appeared only twice in the play’s 1977 premiere: first, to declare the start of the autumn harvest uprisings; second, to announce the beginning of the peasant army’s march toward the Jinggang Mountains, where the first rural soviet was to be established, in 1927. This insufficient dramatization of Mao, which was said to have turned him into an isolated idol, was addressed in the 1979 script, which portrayed Mao as “one of us”—that is, participating in and organizing peasant uprisings and even coming to the assistance of a poor peasant grandmother, carrying her hay for her on a shoulder pole. Although at the cost of the fictionalization of some plot details, the creation of the “typical and beautiful” characters brought the revolutionary-leader play closer to the “essence of historical truth”; now, one critic stressed, Mao was accurately sketched as a real flesh-and-blood human being, not a godlike figure with a halo.

Other critics believed that the leader play must simply function as another form of party history. They argued that it should be presented as factually as possible to provide proper education in cultural and revolutionary history through a theater experience. This view was most tellingly illustrated in the controversy over the production of Yang Kaihui, which dramatized Mao’s loving relationship with his first wife. While received warmly by critics and audience, Yang Kaihui was never-
theless criticized for having “lost its power of conviction” by presenting Yang Kaihui as a guerrilla warrior. According to historical fact, Lu Bai argued, Yang was a gentle wife and true comrade who had always been supportive of Mao’s career and had never participated in any warfare. Over-fictionalization and exaggeration, Lu concluded, revealed an unhealthy trend in the leader play toward creating the kind of “tall, grand, and perfect” characters that had been favored in the Cultural Revolutionary–model theater. Because of this controversy, post-Maoist dramatists were thrown into a situation of irresoluble tension: they were called on to memorialize an epoch-making history and its leaders in order to justify CCP events. At the same time they were asked to take down from his pedestal the individual leader so that he could become “one of us.” “His” history was to be appreciated as “our history,” but, in another twist, the masses had to overlook their history to honor “his” history.

Owing to this dilemma, some commended Yang Kaihui in 1978 as a breakthrough for its focus on Mao’s private life—his love, emotions, and sorrows as a husband and father. Presented as a gentle and supportive wife and mother, Yang Kaihui was extremely popular among many early post-Maoist audiences, who saw in her Mao’s ideal wife, never to be replaced by Jiang Qing, his third wife. Such sentiments brought about a flourishing subgenre known as “Yang Kaihui plays,” which included the folk opera Proud Yang (Jiaoyang) and the Peking opera Ode to My Beloved (Dielianhua). The spoken drama Yang Kaihui was especially lauded for its romantic ending, when Mao and Yang, dressed as students, stride hand in hand toward the audiences from backstage among plum blossoms, white clouds, fresh evergreen, and red flags. By this finish, the directors intended to convey that Yang and Mao would “always live in the hearts of the millions of people”—that in real life, Mao, in his heart of hearts, had reserved his love for his first wife. Audiences might then let this more personal message infuse Mao’s poetic lines, as Yang imagines them in the last scene before her execution: “Kaihui, your life is pure because you have given it up selflessly for your people. Your life is heroic because you have fearlessly confronted your enemy. Your life is magnificent because it is combined with the ideals of Communism.” Speaking passionately from backstage, Mao declared that Yang did not just belong to him; above all, she was identified with the glorious course of the Chinese revolu-
tion. With one final, dramatic stroke, Yang’s sexual love was thus transformed into a greater love put at the disposal of a great leader for the creation of his new nation/state.

To audience members aware of the historical facts, however, these episodes could deconstruct the very spirit of Yang’s myth. When Yang was being tortured in prison (from October to November 1930) and refusing to yield to the authorities’ demand that she renounce her legal status as Mao’s wife, Mao had already married He Zizhen, “the most beautiful woman” in the Soviet area of the Jinggang Mountains, to quote from Jiang Qing and Her Husbands and various biographies. Thus the portrayal of Mao’s imperishable love for Yang, as she imagined it in her prison cell before her execution, was far-fetched, and one wonders, would Yang still have refused the authorities’ offer of freedom in exchange for denunciation had she been aware of Mao’s infidelity? It is in this regard that the reception of Yang Kaihui seems particularly ironic. Yang’s ennobling selflessness in prison—originally viewed as a means of softening the overly heroic image of Mao—can now be seen as a thoroughly meaningless sacrifice for a man she imagined to be faithful. A so-called true representation of a past love story in a leader play could, on the other hand, become an archaeological search for knowledge, in the Foucauldian sense of that term, with the object of recovering an episode buried in official history.

The issue of motherhood in the first family was tackled head-on in a 1985 leader play entitled The Son of the World (Shijie zhi zi), which depicts the life of Mao Anying, the Chairman’s firstborn son by Yang Kaihui. The play focuses on the war years in the Soviet Union when Mao Anying fought valiantly as a Red Army soldier, and on his heroic death as a volunteer soldier in the Korean War in 1950. An important subplot details the hardships endured by He Zizhen after she left China in 1938. During her brief appearance onstage, she is characterized as a caring and loving stepmother who tends to the needs of Mao Anying and his ailing brothers. In the years of famine, He Zizhen struggled to obtain medical treatment for Jiaojiao, the only daughter to survive of the six children she bore Mao during the war; for her pains she was “rewarded” with confinement in a Soviet asylum for almost five years. In the first act when news of her unfair treatment is conveyed to Moscow, Stalin refuses to help, since she is not Mao’s current spouse. By refusing to rescue He Zizhen, Stalin believed he was helping Mao
consolidate his absolute power at home as “a helmsman” for the army, the party, and the country. Unlike the earlier *Yang Kaihui*, this play questions Mao’s unfair treatment of his former spouse and contrasts it with the privileges given his firstborn son. He Zizhen half jokingly tells Mao Anying that as the “crown prince,” he must never neglect to meet his father’s great expectations. The son, however, is less concerned with power than with his search for a mother and father. Having lost his biological mother, he vainly urges his father to come to the aid of his stepmother. After exhibiting great valor in the war, Anying is warmly congratulated by Stalin, whom he worships both as a world leader and as a surrogate father. This father of the revolutionary world, we nevertheless learn, dispatches his own son to the battlefield and orders the arrest of his daughter-in-law as soon as he hears of his son’s capture by the German army. Stalin asserts that his rule of punishing prisoners of war (and thus possible traitors) as well as their relations should be enforced even if it means imprisoning a family member.

Mao Anying probably ended his search for a father by seeing in his surrogate father something of his own father, whose indifference might be justified on the basis of the noble course he was steering for the country. Upon Mao Anying’s return to China, Mao Zedong flatly rejects his son’s request for a command position in the army and orders him to go down to the countryside to be reeducated by the local peasants. Mao Anying pleads with Mao as a son eager to live his own life, not as an imperial heir waiting for his royal orders; he tells his father of the heartbreaking farewell in prison with his mother, whose last wish was that he grow up to equal his father on the battlefield. “I am your father,” Mao still insists in *The Son of the World*. “Although there is much that you learned in the Soviet Union, you have no idea how drastically different are the social realities of our two countries!” Dispirited, Mao Anying continues to plead that Mao make it possible for his stepmother to return home: “Aunt He has been shut up in an asylum for almost five years. Isn’t it about time we get her back home?” Regarded from this vantage point, the play might be characterized as falling between what Herbert Linderberger defined as a “tyrant play” and a “martyr play,” because it depicts Mao Anying and his stepmother as two martyrs who sacrificed their lives for Mao, the father figure, and were victimized by him in the process. The characterization of He Zizhen as an angry Nora who slammed the door in the face of a helpless Mao
in *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* perhaps presented as well the perspective of Jiang Qing, who had cast herself as yet another Nora, most recently imprisoned in Mao’s dollhouse.

Never staged, *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* did not have to brave scrutiny for its possible effect on a culture’s reception of its revolutionary leaders. This was probably fortunate, for Mao in this play is more “human” than in any other leader play before and after it. Mao is shown in his private life as a rustic peasant leader who craves unhealthy fatty pork, dances awkwardly, does not enjoy kissing women on the lips, and cannot even say the words “I love you.” In fact, the stark contrast between a peasantlike Mao and a “sophisticated” Westernized Jiang Qing can be construed as the symbolic, unceasing power struggle between Chinese intellectuals and the laboring people they tried to please, only to be rejected by the latter for not really being one of them. The dichotomies between countryside and city, man and woman, society and individual, tradition and modernity, and East and West constantly shift positions and ultimately propel the development of the dramatic conflicts in the play. The characterization of Mao as a patriarch who was cut from the same cloth as his Chinese and Western forefathers, and the display of his helplessness and frustration in dealing with Jiang Qing, also present a dynamic interplay between revolutionary history, disruptive drama, and rebellious women, which might be resorted to as strategies for cultural suppression and cultural liberation. Thus the playwright’s world can be studied as a crucial arena for political theater, in which history was written and rewritten according to the latest transmission of knowledge and power. It is in this sense that we can truly redeem early post-Maoist revolutionary-leader plays, which were later deemed as too political to be worth studying. Indeed, one could read them as precursor texts to *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands*. The Yang Kaishui plays, for instance, can be seen as earlier acts in a sequence of the revolutionary-history plays of the first family in the PRC. When one woman replaces another in Mao’s dollhouse, she brings upon herself merely the invitation to stand trial for her man’s past.

*Black Stones: The Politics of Representing the Proletariat*

As seen in the preceding discussion, Chinese spoken drama, especially in the PRC period, has often been characterized as too politically laden
to warrant serious study. The politics of representation on the Chinese stage, however, evokes ideological critiques in other cultures, such as Plato’s politically centered criticism of theater. According to Plato, the proper battle for theater is the ancient debate between the philosophical king, devoted to serving the interests and values of the ideal state, and the immoral poet, whose appeal to and expression of unhealthy emotions supposedly invalidate it. As did ancient Athens, the Chinese socialist state has punished questionable dramatists who were considered dangerous for conducting an anti-official discourse against the moral values of the ideal state.

Derived from Marx’s sociopolitical theories, “ideal drama” is understood to depict the inevitable historical process in which the proletarian heroes, as George Lukács later saw it, express typical class struggle contradictions that are apparent in the typical circumstances of their time. Drama’s most important verisimilitude draws from the social reality as seen from the perspective of the proletariat, while exposing the evils of contemporary society and expressing the oppressed classes’ lofty ideals. If the proletariat’s cause is to be advanced, the language and artistic style of drama must not cater to the pleasures and tastes of the elite but be fashioned so as to be comprehensible and accessible to the multitude. Ideally, the representational triangular relationship should be such that it always favors the representation of the proletariat, by artists who understand them, and for the additional benefit of readers who uphold and appreciate their values.

In becoming one of the most important categories of Chinese drama, proletariat theater was further subdivided into the “worker play,” the “peasant play,” and the “soldier play,” or together known as “worker-peasant-soldier play” (gong-nong-bing xiju). Because it both illustrated the Maoist theory of socialist realism and a continuous theatrical tradition, PRC literary historians interpreted Tian Han’s one-act play The Raining Season (Meiyu), 1931, as one of the earliest plays in Republican China. In depicting the woes of a poor worker’s family, Tian was said to have represented the darkness of the old society and the workers’ inevitable insurrection against those in power. Such stories became popular in the early years of the PRC, as demonstrated in Number Six Gate (Liuhaomen), written in 1950. The play painted the miserable life of the porters in the Tianjin train station before 1949 and then showed their new life after liberation, when they became masters of their own lives and country under CCP leadership. The play
appealed to audiences and was later adapted into a film and a Peking opera. *A Wish of Forty Years (Sishinian de yuanwang)*, produced in 1952, departed the simple conflict between poor workers and their oppressors before liberation and presented the more complex confrontation between an engineer and workers in the PRC. Supported by the party and army representatives, workers criticized the engineer for being too conservative in his blueprints for building the Chengdu-Chongqing railroad. With the help of the experts from the Soviet Union, the workers succeeded in completing the railroad in two years, in time to present it as a gift to celebrate an anniversary of the CCP funding and to fulfill the long-held wishes of people in Sichuan.

This play reflects the new theme of reeducating intellectuals whose pre-liberation trainings became a liability in the new society. This theme found its best expression in another worker play, *Braving the Torrent (Jiliu yongjin)*, in which a former worker became a steel factory vice president after having been trained as a new intellectual, at once politically trustworthy and technologically up-to-date. Despite its dogmatism, the play, directed by Huang Zuolin and premiered by Shanghai People’s Art Theater in 1963, occupied a special place in the theater history as one of the very few Brechtian productions in the 1949–1966 period.

In addition to using a narrator to introduce the background of different characters, Huang employed multiple scenes onstage to dramatize various events occurring at the same time. The most memorable scenes include the one where the protagonist rushes home in a roaring train in the background while his fellow workers wait for his homecoming in the center stage. In another scene, the protagonist tested the probability of a new plan while positioned in front of a steel furnace as others discussed it in a meeting. Such a fluid use of theatrical space attempted to create a new image of a worker leader, at once practical and knowledgeable.

While *Braving the Torrent* experimented with dramatic techniques to represent new workers in socialist China, other worker plays reminded their audiences of the heroic pre-liberation history before 1949. *Red Storm (Hongse fengbao)*, for instance, dramatized the famous 1923 Beijing-Hankou railroad strikes, organized by the workers’ union with CCP underground party members and brutally suppressed by warlords and their foreign supporters. The class conflict between haves and have-nots pointed to the anti-imperialist theme still found on the PRC stage. Premiered in 1958, *Red Storm* ran for 273 shows, as
an unparalleled hit with record-breaking ticket sales. Nevertheless, the play was later attacked during the Cultural Revolution for failing to represent workers exclusively. Its characters included a lawyer who provided legal advice to workers, but he was still considered a member of the petite bourgeoisie. It also hindered a dramatization of the typical contradictions of the time through the class struggle between workers and their oppressors, with a typical hero of the proletariat to lead the masses in circumstances typifying the Republican China.

In the 1960s, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the focus in worker plays shifted to alert the younger generation of workers to “never forget” their revolutionary history. Specifically, this means “never to forget class struggle” in socialist China as expressed in the title of Cong Shen’s play Never Forget Class Struggle (Qianwan buyao wangji).\(^65\) Performed by Harbin City Theater, in 1963, and frequently produced throughout the country, Never Forget concerns the dilemma of a young worker whose marriage to a beautiful woman introduced him to a “bourgeois lifestyle” under the influence of his mother-in-law. Such a “corrupt” lifestyle saw him purchase a new wool suit, which cost over 100 yuan, raised by hunting and selling wild ducks in his spare time. The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie persisted even in a worker’s family. The link between the revolutionary heritage and one’s own family played an even larger role in Three Generations (Sandai ren), performed by the China Youth Art Theater in 1963. During the Cultural Revolution in 1970, it became better known in its model Peking-opera version as The Red Lantern (Hongdeng ji).\(^66\) Set during the War of Resistance to Japan, The Red Lantern narrates the story of Li Yuhe, a poor railway worker who adopts a mother and an orphan girl whose family members had been murdered during the Beijing-Hankou railway workers’ strikes. In contrast to Red Storm, with its masses of striking workers, The Red Lantern focuses on the fortunes of a single family. Li Yuhe and his adopted mother are captured, tortured, and finally executed by a Japanese police chief. Carrying out the last wishes of her father and grandmother, Li Tiemei, Li Yuhe’s adopted daughter, succeeds in sending secret codes to the CCP guerrillas. With this simple story line, The Red Lantern ingeniously denied blood relationships—the basis of families in all cultures—while extending their hierarchical and cohesive structure to the creation of “one big revolutionary family,” whose members share class interests as they struggle against their common enemies.
Using a similar strategy, other model plays constructed a global discourse of “world revolution.” Peking opera On the Docks (Haigang) portrayed the working class in 1960s Shanghai, where the daily loading and unloading of rice seeds on ships to the outside world was said to have greatly aided the liberation of Third World peoples oppressed by Western imperialism and colonialism. The opera claimed that Western imperialists had attempted to stop African peoples from experimenting with growing rice, thus making them dependent on Western foreign aid. The heroes and heroines in these model plays were held up as role models for the “revolutionary masses” during the height of the Cultural Revolution, which was said to have world revolution as its ultimate goal.

While Maoist theater presented a teleological view of history perpetrated by inevitable class struggle, post-Maoist theater challenged this paradigm. An important example is Winter Jasmine (Baochunhua), an early and popular anti–Gang of Four play. It recounts the class discrimination endured by Bai Jie, a young female textile-factory worker, because of her politically incorrect family origins. Her father had been declared a counterrevolutionary for working for the KMT government before 1949, and her mother was condemned as a rightist for having challenged in 1957 the CCP’s radical policies. The introduction of a Bai Jie to the Chinese stage signaled a historic turn, for even before the Cultural Revolution, when the party’s policies were less rigid and dogmatic, postrevolutionary plays seldom had protagonists from questionable class backgrounds. The ban had extended to all works of literature and art, in order, it was said, to best serve the interests of the party, the working people, and the proletarian revolutionary cause.

If Winter Jasmine redeems a model worker from a politically incorrect family to denounce the extreme class politics that peaked during the Cultural Revolution, Fashionable Red Skirts in the Street (Jieshang liuxing hongqunzi), premiered in 1984, questions the very value of the model-worker system in the Mao era. Tao Xing’er, a model worker just like Bai Jie, is confused by her title. Although expected to love her factory as her own home, she spends her precious time preparing for a university entry examination. She also purchases a “fashionable” red skirt, which leads her boss to chastise her for displaying “bourgeois taste.” When her father, after years of separation, finds her through a newspaper story on her model-worker’s deeds, her image embarrasses her
and she rejects his love. The play dramatizes a divided self who struggles to free herself from the “glorious” tradition of the working class to become a woman true to her own desires. The play exposes the hypocrisy of the class issues in Maoist and post-Maoist China. In a Maoist country where there was no significant gap between the wealthy and the poor, class issues seldom revolved around economic circumstances but centered on the discourse of power to promote the political agenda of the ruling class.

The problematic nature of the representation of the workers is best illustrated in Yang Limin’s *Black Stones (Heise de shitou)*, one of the best-received dramas of the late 1980s. Labeled as a neorealistic play, *Black Stones* reworks the Maoist claim of protecting the welfare of the workers. Premiered by Daqing City Theatre (Daqingshi huanjutuan), the play depicts the hardships and suffering of petroleum workers, no longer portrayed as proud masters of socialist China. In spite of the dark view of the workers’ lives, however, *Black Stones* was unanimously applauded by cultural officials, drama critics, and the audiences of various backgrounds.

*Black Stones* is best appreciated when set against PRC literary tradition, which stressed the heroic spirit of the working class. Many Chinese people in the early 1960s were familiar with the stories of legendary petroleum workers who forged China’s first proletarian industry in the wilderness known as Daqing. *Black Stones* astonished post-Maoist audiences with its bleak description of workers and their daily fatigue in the “most barbarous” wilderness. Indeed, the very image of black color in the title of the play contrasts sharply with that of red color in *Red Storm* and *The Red Lantern*, allusions to revolutionary zeal and heroic heritage for a lofty course. Rarely could one find the familiar characters who had combated nature and class enemies. In a messy camp cabin, one hears the sad story of Veteran, an oil-rig builder who nine years before left behind his wife in his remote hometown because he had no idea how to manage the red tape that would have approved her transfer. It should be noted that although the play is set in contemporary times, Veteran is depicted as a typical model worker of the 1960s—disciplined, diligent, and uncomplaining.

Veteran’s basic honesty is ironically pointed out when he spends the greater part of a day wandering fruitlessly around the administrative building, not knowing which door to enter to deliver his gifts. At a subsequent meeting called to criticize his unlawful act, he apolo-
izes wholeheartedly for his “terribly shameful” behavior, whereby he failed to live up to the expectations the party had of him as a veteran. Although a victim of the system, he still is loyal to it, blaming himself for letting it down, and not even contemplating that it might have let him down. This story, of course, typifies that of many a nameless veteran who fought in the war for the CCP and was sent, after 1949, to reclaim the virgin land in the remote Northeast, far away from his hometown. Like Veteran in the play, many of these men volunteered to relocate to the wilderness without knowing what was in store for them and what they stood to lose.

To drive home what Maoist history meant for the workers, Black Stones has another character, a Captain Qin, who personifies the revolutionary heritage that Daqing workers helped to create in the 1960s. For him, opposing this heritage would discredit his lifelong sacrifices and his stories of a glorious past. Holding on to his heritage allows Captain Qin to make sense of his past. He is prepared to die, forever faithful, at his post—the drilling ground where he belongs—rather than ever violate his tradition. Belatedly identifying with him, they commemorate him most meaningfully, perhaps, by erecting a national monument to the veteran workers, who were victims of socialist history. For this play to be accepted on a still-socialist stage in the 1980s and to bypass censorship required the help of a character, Lin Jian, the new secretary of the Party Committee of the Exploration Corporation. He represents the party’s new policy in post-Maoist China of seeing to workers’ welfare, which the previous regime had neglected, and his ploy of living and working among the workers without revealing his identity until the end suggests what they might hope for from the next generation of leadership. This device of creating a new party secretary to protect a play from being branded harmful to the regime in power was employed in several post-Maoist plays.

It is fitting to recall here that in the 1960s, Chinese theatrical discourse denied any need for scripting tragedy, which was only required for plays depicting the deadly class struggle between workers and their oppressors in the pre-PRC period, when revolutionary setbacks could give temporary victory to the reactionaries and result in the tragic death of the proletarian heroes. During the post-Maoist theater debate, however, some critics rescued tragedy by pointing out that it was a legitimate form for current plays, which were now allowed to focus on the tragic flaws of individuals without referring to society as the cause of
their fall. To validate post-Maoist ideology, tragedy was also permitted to depict the Chinese people’s struggles against the Gang of Four or other Maoist radicals, who, for a limited period of time, caused tragedy to overtake socialist China.

*Black Stones* seems to bestride this duality with great effectiveness. On the one hand, Captain Qin’s death occasions tragic sublimity; on the other, it is blamed on the residual Gang of Four radical ideology, which ignored the workers’ interests, a situation that Lin, as the new party leader, promises to redress. As we have seen, Lin does not reveal himself until very late in the play—when his official status is needed to authorize the order for a helicopter to save Captain Qin’s life. This type of official character holds out the promise of a new, more responsive regime and revalidates the idea of the “savior of the people” embodied in the old socialist system. In this case, however, the “savior” might have materialized too late. Not only had the audience already been exposed to Veteran’s and Captain Qin’s disillusioning stories, but they were also likely to sympathize with Jubilee, another “little man,” whose life exhibits even more marginalization than that of his peers. An orphan of a veteran roughneck killed in an accident in the 1960s, Jubilee thinks of the team as his home. Returning from a dangerous journey and in search of cigarettes and wine for his fellow workers, Jubilee cannot believe that Blackie, his master and trusted friend, has killed his pet—an injured wild goose Jubilee rescued. Blackie had gone after the animal in a fit of rage after being criticized by the authorities for loving Phoenix, a married woman from the nearby town. Knowing this does not console Jubilee, who cries out in desperation and anguish: “Why on earth can’t you let live a little thing like this!” It is at this point that the meaning of “Jubilee” comes into full play: literally defined as “little celebration,” the word pays tribute to numerous little men like Jubilee whose sacrifices and sorrow must be remembered. It also questions the image of “Daqing” (literally, “grand celebration”), which, after years of “painstaking and arduous effort,” still is a godforsaken wilderness, as so depicted in the play.

The play does not end with Lin’s revelation, nor with Captain’s Qin’s death. Rather, it concludes with a denouement that leaves one uncertain as to what will happen to Blackie and his lover, Phoenix, who has just joined him after having murdered the husband who brutally abused her. The team having departed on time for a new construction site with the new party secretary in the lead, Blackie and
Phoenix are left alone onstage. Their embracing bodies appear deserted and vulnerable, as an insignificant couple barely surviving at the margin of a culture. Although the invention of the Lin character prevented the play from being attacked as an unhealthy tragedy, many audience members might feel free to ask themselves: who is to blame for these tragic events that occur not just onstage, not just before the smashing of the Gang of Four, but now, right in front of us? Thus protected by ambiguities and a double discourse, this desolate play was received as one of the most successful works of the post-Maoist theater.

After *Black Stones*, the worker play in post-Maoist China almost disappeared. Indeed, the play could be seen as the worker theater’s swan song, since this kind of drama no longer attracted much of an audience, as box office sales clearly showed. In a society that no longer cast class differences as the driving force for historical change, the stories of the working class had lost their power. The representation of workers in Maoist and post-Maoist theaters was problematic, despite its attempt to honor workers. Nevertheless, a price is paid when theater no longer addresses contemporary issues in the lives of ordinary people. One wonders what Chinese contemporary theater would look like if it turned its attention to the stories of the urban poor who recently lost their jobs in government factories. One wonders, also, what contributions post-socialist societies could make to cultural production, especially to the dramatic genres, which cannot survive in local communities without making strong conscious efforts to link with the mass audience.

*Wild Grass: The Space between the Country and the City*

If *Black Stones* is noteworthy for rewriting workers’ history, *Wild Grass (Yecao)* should be credited for taking up the fate of the peasants. Chinese theater’s fascination with rural life has a different dimension from that in the West, where some writers glorify it as the images of romantic exile. Mao saw the countryside as the most important site of revolution, which would eventually surround and overwhelm the cities. In postrevolutionary days, Lin Biao, Mao’s chosen successor during the Cultural Revolution, promoted the idea that the exploited and colonized nations of the Third World were the “countryside of the world.” When they united, they could eventually surround and conquer the