



国家出版基金项目

身临其境
艺术中的当代中国



CHINESE DRAMA: 100 YEARS ON

Zhao Hongfan

新星出版社 NEW STAR PRESS



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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国话剧百年: 英文 / 赵红帆著. — 北京: 新星出版社, 2017.4

(身临其境: 艺术中的当代中国)

ISBN 978-7-5133-2516-5

I. ①中… II. ①赵… III. ①话剧—戏剧史—中国—英文

IV. ①J809.2

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2017)第249034号

中国话剧百年

赵红帆 著

责任编辑: 张维 高传杰

责任印制: 韦舰

版式设计: 海天雷鹰

封面设计: 冷暖儿

出版发行: 新星出版社

出版人: 谢刚

社址: 北京市西城区车公庄大街丙3号楼 100044

网址: www.newstarpress.com

电话: 010-88310888

传真: 010-65270449

法律顾问: 北京市大成律师事务所

国际经销: 中国国际图书贸易总公司(中国北京车公庄西路35号)

公司地址: 北京邮政信箱第399号 100044

印刷: 北京尚唐印刷包装有限公司

开本: 700×1000 1/16

版次: 2017年4月第一版 2017年4月第一次印刷(英)

书号: ISBN 978-7-5133-2516-5

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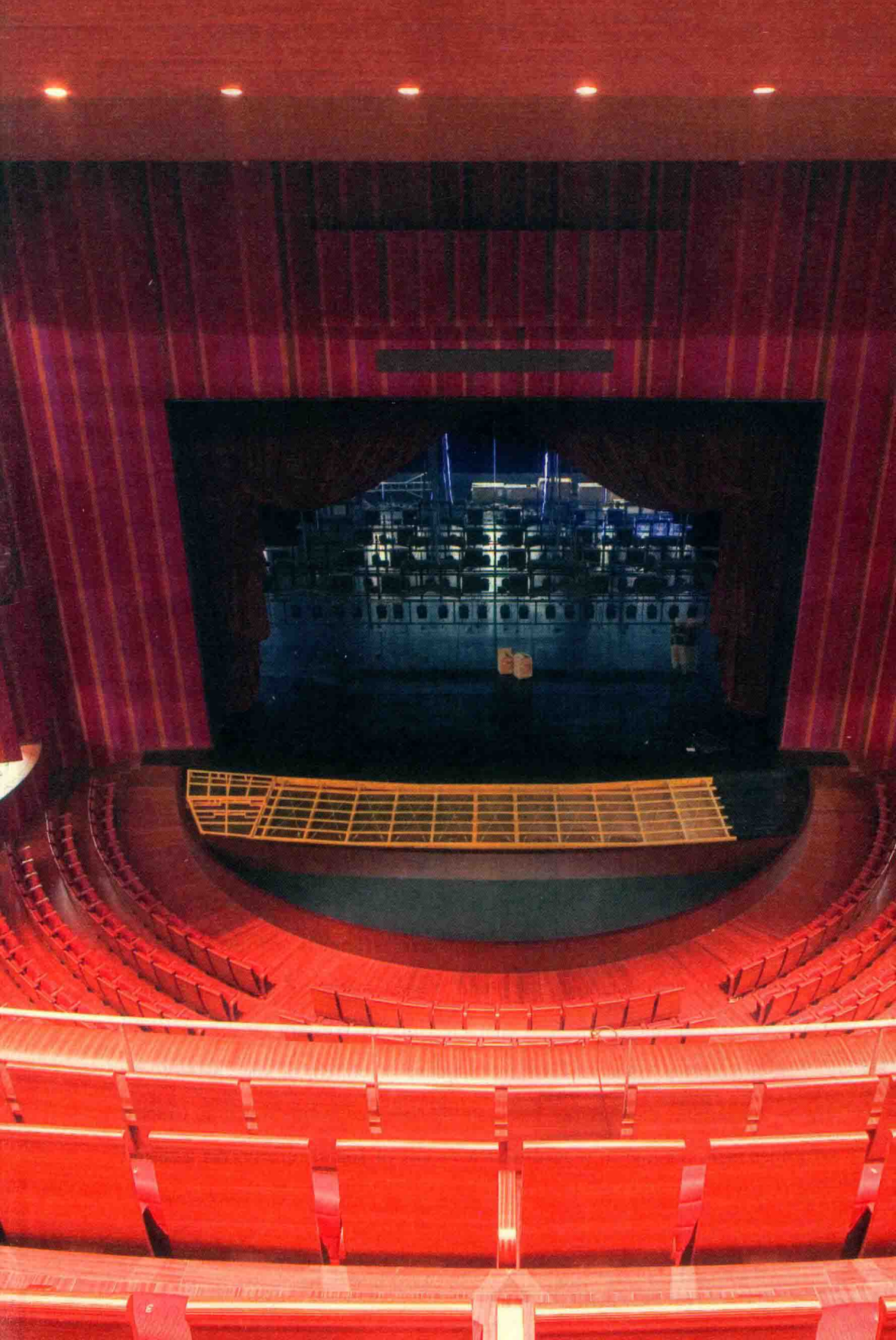
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Foreword

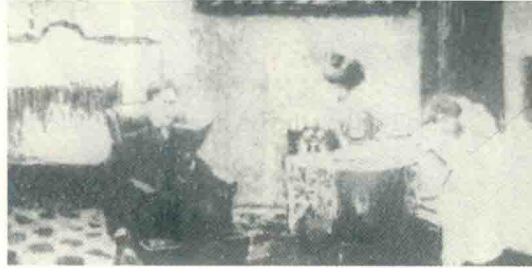
The Mirror of Life

Chinese theatre originated with ancient totem worship ceremonies. The Chinese theatre of today consists mainly of two broad categories: Chinese opera¹ and *huaju*² (literally “spoken drama,” i.e., Western-style theatre or modern Chinese drama). Throughout its history spanning more than 800 years, Chinese opera has continuously been an important cultural and leisure activity of the Chinese people. It also occupies a unique position on the world stage and is recognized as one of the three major ancient forms of drama (the other two are Indian Sanskrit dramas and the comedies and tragedies of ancient Greece). In comparison to the Chinese operatic arts, which date back to ancient times, *huaju* can be considered a rising star in the development of Chinese theatre.

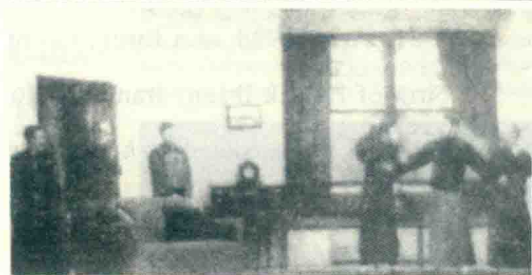
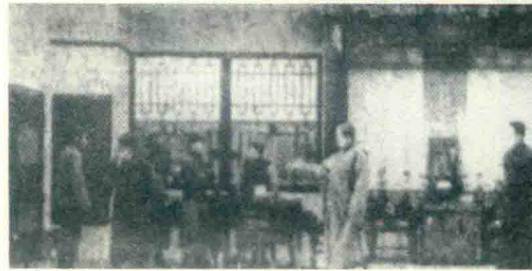
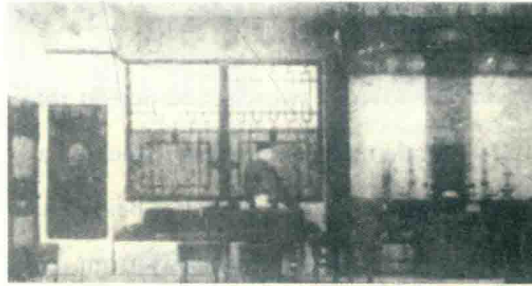
By the end of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese society was in a state of turmoil. Against this background, bourgeois enlighteners, reformists and revolutionaries saw the need to build a culture that could “rouse a nation of people from their sleep.” After noticing that various characteristics of Western theatre—such as its colloquial style of expression and frequent enactment of state affairs as a way to indoctrinate the masses—had a strong social education function, China’s reformist faction came to regard it as a means of social reform. As a result,

huaju stage plays led the wave of modern drama in China during the cultural enlightenment and democratic revolution of the early 20th century. In 1905, Chen Duxiu³ tersely summarized the influence of modern spoken theatre on the Chinese people of that era, stating that: “a performance is the largest school; (and) performers, the greatest teachers.”

In 1907, Spring Willow Society, a theatrical company made up of Chinese students in Japan, gave performances of the modern drama *Black Slaves' Appeal to Heaven* (adapted from American author Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and Act III of the famous play *The Lady of the Camellias* (by the celebrated French writer Alexandre Dumas, fils) in Tokyo, Japan. These “new plays,” as they were called at the time, relied on dialogue as their primary means of expression, thus setting them apart from traditional Chinese opera. Today, they are widely



February 1907, Spring Willow Society (Chunliushe) performs *The Lady of the Camellias* in Tokyo, Japan.



Xin Cun Zheng is performed by Nankai New Drama Troupe in Tianjin in 1918.

regarded as the beginning of modern Chinese drama.

During the Xinhai Revolution, or the Revolution of 1911, the propagandist function of modern drama was fully unleashed. Plays such as *Xin Cun Zheng* accurately reflected China's social problems and the living conditions of the Chinese people during the period, creating a wide impact across the nation at all levels of society.

Over a two-decade period that overlapped the May Fourth Movement⁴, modern Chinese drama witnessed a gradual transformation from ancient Chinese opera to *huaju*, the latter being characterized by realism and re-creation. These works also drew heavily from real political issues and social problems. *The Greatest Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*) tells the story of a young couple whose love is suppressed by the traditions of feudal society. In the face of oppression, they remain strong and adamant, holding to the belief that “The lifelong commitment of marriage should be decided by us young people ourselves.” The young man and woman leave their families to be together.

In April 1928, at a forum to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Henrik Ibsen, dramatist Hong Shen proposed that the English word “drama” be translated as *huaju* (“spoken drama”) in order to differentiate it from traditional Chinese opera, which combines singing, dialogue, dancing



Sanjianghao.



Following the May Fourth Movement of 1919, advocates of “new dramas” held the plays of Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen in high esteem. Under the influence of *A Doll's House* (*Wan'ou zhi jia*), the philosopher and essayist Hu Shi wrote *The Greatest Event in Life* (*Zhongshen dashi*).



The Last Strategem (Zuihou yi ji) is performed by Raging Tide Drama Society in 1936.

and martial arts. Since then, the term *huaju* has been carried forward up to the present day. In 1929, the Shanghai Theatre Arts Society was established, and advanced the concept of the “proletarian drama”; thenceforth, the overall development of modern Chinese drama turned towards the left-wing drama movement.

Following the outbreak of the Mukden (Shenyang) Incident on September 1931, Japanese troops launched a full-scale invasion of China’s territory, threatening the very survival of the Chinese people. From the 1930s to the late 1940s, Chinese modern drama, through a series of actions, undertook the responsibility of “awakening the people” and “saving the nation.” *Huaju* thus entered a period of prosperity that lasted for more than a decade. Theatre workers created many short and simple forms

Guan Hanqing. Premiere: June 1958. Playwright: Tian Han. Directors: Jiao Juyin, Ouyang Shanzun.



Cai Wenji. Premiere: 1959. Playwright: Guo Moruo. Performed by Tianjin People’s Art Theatre.



During the Qingming Festival of 1937, the Beijing Federation of Students organized over 7,000 students to watch a performance of *Put Down Your Whip (Fang xia ni de bianzi)* at Beijing’s Fragrant Hills (Xiangshan).



The Brave Mother and Her Children (Danda mama he tade haizimen).



Premiere of *Questions for the Living* (*Yige wenzhe dui sizhe de fangwen*), June 27, 1985. Performed by the Central Experimental Drama Theatre.

Premiere of the small theatre drama *Bus Stop* (*Chezhan*), June 7, 1983. Performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre.

Premiere of the small theatre drama *Signal Alarm* (*Juedui xinbao*), November 5, 1982. Performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre.



Premiere of *Rhinoceros in Love*, June 1999. Performed by the Central Experimental Drama Theatre.

of performance, such as street plays, teahouse plays, marching plays, “living newspaper” dramas, light plays and puppet plays. *Sanjianghao*, *Put Down Your Whip* (*Fang xia ni de bianzi*), *The Last Stratagem* (*Zuihou yi ji*) and other plays were performed in every corner of the country.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all privately-owned and existing state-owned performing groups were converted into government-coordinated drama troupes and divided into national, provincial and municipal levels. The *huaju* of the 1950s and 60s focused primarily on celebrating the victory of the democratic revolution and creating revolutionary heroes. Among these, *Cai Wenji* and *Teahouse* (*Chaguan*), directed by Jiao Juyin, reflected the nationalistic pursuits of Chinese drama; while *The Brave Mother and Her Children* (*Danda mama he tade haizimen*), directed by Huang



After Divorce (Lihun le, jiu bie zai lai zhao wo).

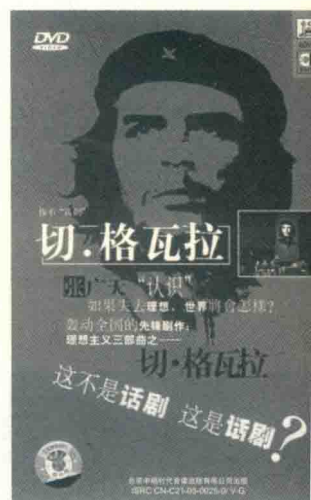
Premiere of *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana (Gou'erye niepan)*, October 1986. Performed by the Beijing People's Art Theatre.

Uncle Doggie's Nirvana. Playwright: Liu Jinyun. Directors: Diao Guangtan, Lin Zhaohua.

Zuolin, created the theatrical concept of “free-minded drama.”

In the early 1980s, China's opening up to the outside world and the recovery of the Chinese economy precipitated a movement towards the liberation of previously suppressed cultural and artistic thinking. Chinese theatre gained an opportunity to reflect on the historical triumphs and failures of realism.

Faced with a new influx of Western theatrical thought, many Chinese playwrights and directors with a strong sense of innovation and “avant-garde” took a liking to modernism, although there were some who still adhered tenaciously to realism. A number of theatrical “explorers” possessed a modernist style, most notably Gao Xingjian and Lin Zhaohua. *Signal Alarm (Juedui xin hao)*, for example, “signaled” the beginning of China's small-theatre movement by “rebellious” against realist theatre. During this experimental process, explorative dramas such as *Bus Stop (Chezhan)*, *Wild Men (Yeren)* and *Questions for the Living (Yige shengzhe dui sizhe de fangwen)* emerged in large numbers. This trend towards modernist theatre was best captured by the plays *Uncle Doggie's Nirvana (Gou'erye niepan)*



Che Guevara.

and *Stories of Mulberry Village (Sangshuping jishi)*.

Since the 1990s, as a result of economic and technological growth, the cultural ideology of Chinese society has become more open and pluralistic. The essential characteristics of modernism were incorporated into the creative methods employed by traditional realism, and experimental theatre grew steadily in both size and scope. 1993's "Chinese Small Theatre Plays" adapted to the shifting cultural ecology during China's social transition. Three of the plays that had the greatest impact were *After Divorce*, *Rhinoceros in Love* and *Che Guevara*.

The relatively relaxed political environment of the early 21st century, the launch of the ideological liberation movement and, in particular, the cultural

Hamlet

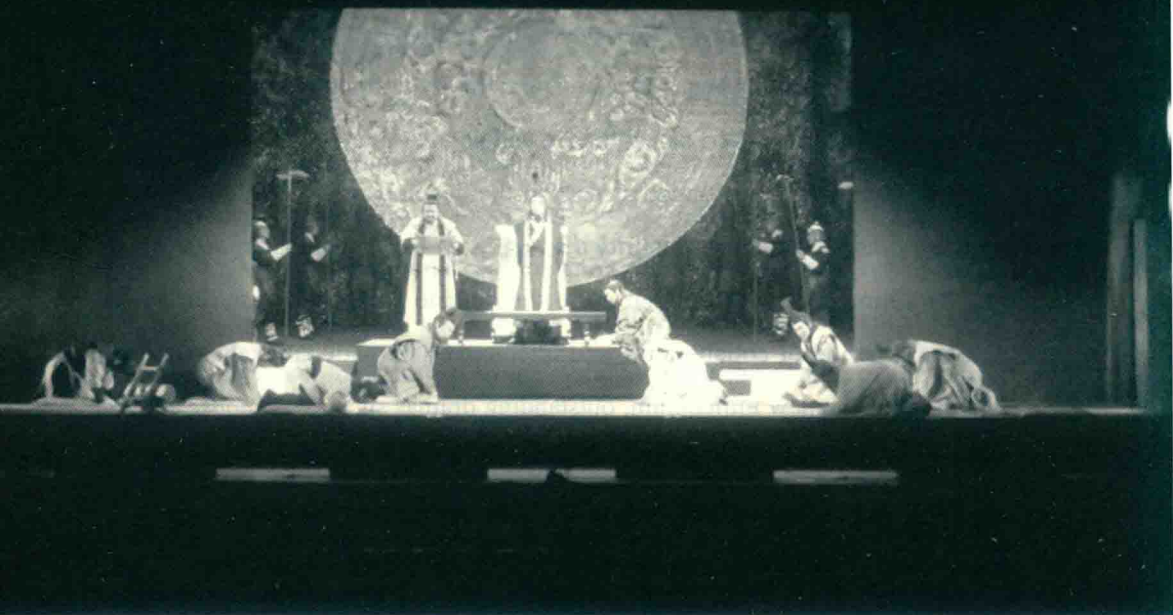


restructuring of 2004, gave vigor and vitality to the creation of dramatic works. Modern Chinese drama began to exhibit a multi-style structure that encompassed mainstream theatre, experimental theatre and popular drama. In addition, modern Chinese drama achieved great success in the development of children's plays, military dramas and ethnic minority dramas, as well as historical dramas.

As China continues to open up to the outside world, Chinese theatre has entered a period of collaborative and interactive international exchange. Since the dawn of the new millennium, outstanding dramas such as *Teahouse* and *The Family* have been performed abroad. All kinds of drama festivals, performances and academic symposiums commemorating the great theatre masters of the world have been held with increasing frequency, further strengthening China's

The Family (Jia).





cooperation and exchange with other countries in the area of theatre culture.

Having completed the process of nationalization and modernization, the Chinese *huaju* has evolved from an imported art form to the modern Chinese drama of today. This transformation has witnessed not only the accumulation of many excellent works, but also the cultivation of many outstanding actors and directors. Looking forward, modern Chinese drama faces several arduous tasks—to continue to showcase aesthetic charm and the meaning of human culture; to artistically reflect the changes and fluctuations of society during the transformation of modern Chinese drama; to improve the system and organization of Chinese theatre; and to create a better environment for its survival. With the continued efforts of China's theatre community in the new century, modern Chinese drama is destined to enjoy an even more rich and colorful future.