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Features

Panorama

Mosaic

December 26, 2020: A villager prepares red lanterns for the upcoming Spring Festival in Xubeizhang Village, Jiaozuo City, central China's Henan Province.

Spring Festival, also known as Chinese New Year, is the most jubilant time of the year for Chinese people. According to the Chinese lunar calendar, it marks the arrival of a new year with a farewell to cold and monotonous winter and a welcome to vigorous spring. Traditional celebration activities last about a month. Among them, hanging lanterns is an indispensable custom. For Chinese people, red lanterns symbolize family reunion and prosperity as well as happiness, completeness, and wealth. VCG

January 31, 2021: A folk calligrapher writes Spring Festival couplets at the local market in Nanning, capital of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Hanging Spring Festival couplets and the Chinese character "Fu" (meaning "good fortune") is an important custom for Spring Festival celebrations. They symbolize wishes for the new year with neat, concise words and serve as a prayer to ward off evils and promote good luck in the new year. People paste the paper scripts on the doors of their homes at the beginning of the Spring Festival holiday. VCG

January 14, 2021: A traditional craftsperson adjusts a puppet in Yangzhou City, Jiangsu Province.

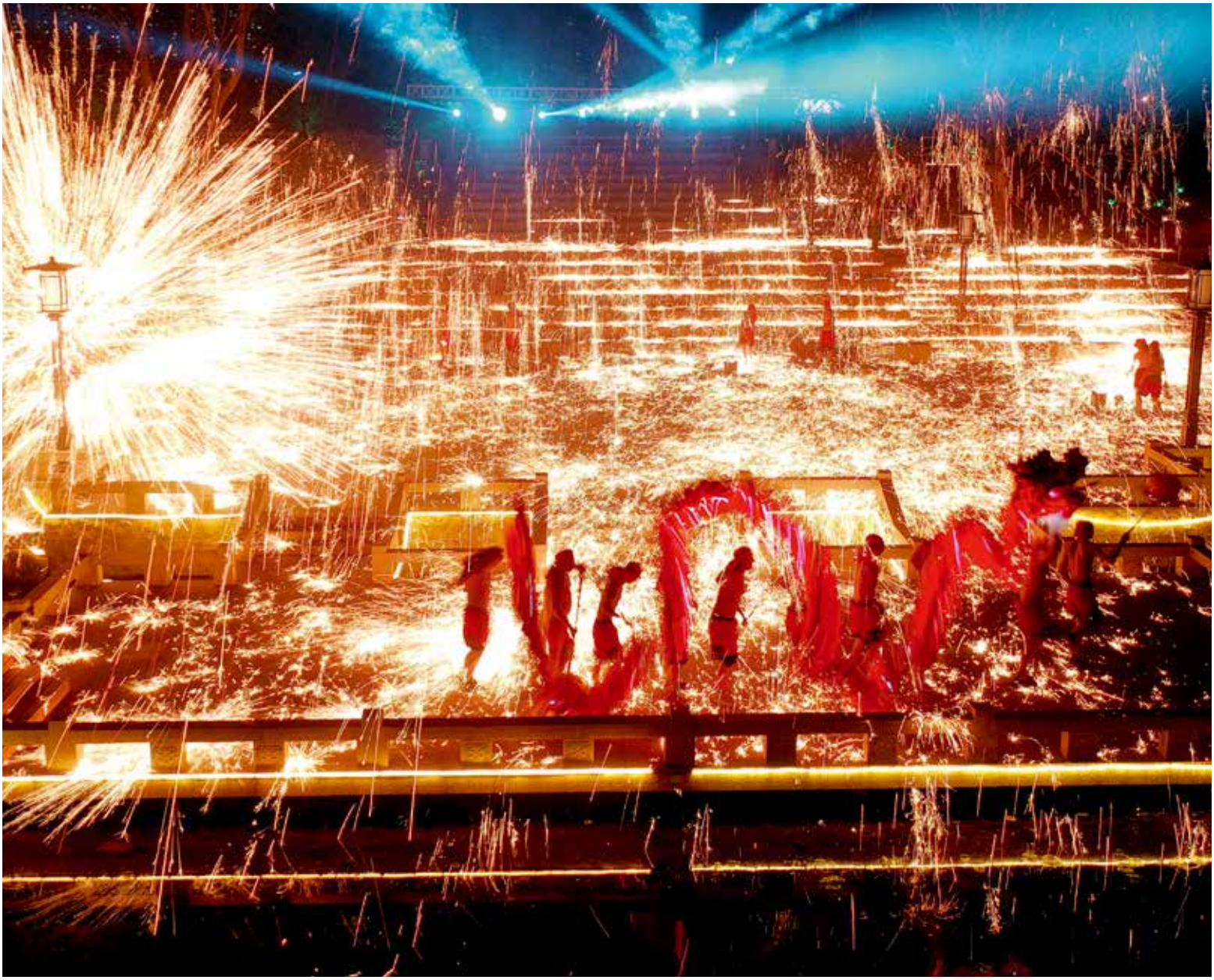
Puppet shows are a traditional Spring Festival folk custom in Jiangsu Province that dates back more than 2,000 years. Performers use seven to 14 silk threads to control different parts of the puppet's body while singing along. Most performances take place during Spring Festival and other traditional festivals as a way to ask the gods and their ancestors for blessings. In 2006, puppet shows became part of the first group of additions to China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List. VCG

January 31, 2021: The "Bubu cake" made by local villagers in Yangxin County, Binzhou City, Shandong Province. The multi-layer cake is gradually superimposed into a "tower" shape, implying "rising step by step."

Food is one of the most important festival totems for Chinese people. Their devotion to food can still be clearly seen in popular Spring Festival customs. Support from the global market and internet has helped food ingredients and dishes travel the world, enabling different regional tastes to fuse and integrate with each other and stir up new Chinese flavors on Spring Festival tables. VCG

January 31, 2021: Customers shop for orchids at the Huangtougang flower market in Fengtai District, Beijing.

A Spring Festival custom involves decorating rooms with various kinds of flowers to create a festive atmosphere. Such flowers are called *nianxiao* (meaning "New Year's Eve") flowers. Orchids, hollies, and white willows are all popular as *nianxiao* flowers. China's Guangdong Province has a tradition of celebrating the Lunar New Year by roaming flower markets. Visiting the annual Spring Festival flower market is the most popular traditional folk activity on the eve of Spring Festival. VCG



January 2, 2021: A "Huolong Ganghua" (dragon dance with steel flowers) performance is staged at the Jiuzhou Pool Scenic Area in Luoyang City, Henan Province.

Molten iron as hot as 1,500 degrees Celsius was thrown into the sky and splashed in all directions like fiery flowers. Shirtless dragon dancers shuttled under the "flowers" of molten iron. Chinese people emphasize good luck during celebrations of Spring Festival with hopes for a prosperous year. Huolong Ganghua has long been a traditional Spring Festival folk activity in Tongliang District, Chongqing. It is reputed "the best dragon dance in China" as one of China's first National Intangible Cultural Heritage items. IC

An Odyssey between Past and Present

The Observation of Chinese Calligraphy and Sculpture in Real Life

Text by He Yong **Photographs courtesy of** He Yong

He Yong, a sculptor with the Shanghai Oil Painting & Sculpture Institute, works as the curator and project sponsor of the third exhibition of "An Odyssey between Past and Present."

In January 2021, the third exhibition of "An Odyssey between Past and Present" kicked off at the art museum of the Shanghai Oil Painting & Sculpture Institute. I am honored to be the curator. With the theme of "sculptural intension and calligraphic extension," the exhibition invited established experts in sculpture, calligraphy and seal cutting as well as some young artists as participants.

This exhibition was a novel attempt. The definition of "calligraphy" I refer to here covers Chinese ideographs, handwriting, and seal cutting. This was the first time we exhibited works of sculpture and calligraphy, two forms of art greatly contrasting with each other in their background and form, side by side for interaction and comparative studies.

Why to put together these two strikingly different forms of art in the same exhibition? To answer the question, we need to go back to the name of the exhibition, "An Odyssey between Past and Present." "Odyssey" means a long wandering or voyage usually marked by notable experiences and hardships. Thus, I believe the exhibition could go beyond just an art exhibition or an academic activity, but rather an exploration trying to face and solve problems of the two forms of art. The exhibition traversed time and space, showcased the trend of contemporary Chinese art, and served as a journey to search and experience the traditional Chinese spiritual world.

The discussions on the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and its core spirit, as well as the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and its evolution in modern times, are nothing new. However, when we place the discussions in today's circumstances against a new backdrop, they have new premises and are supposed to address different issues. Compared with brilliant ancient Chinese sculpture, modern and contemporary Chinese sculpture art started in the

Rules of Chinese Calligraphy (part), a sculpture by He Yong. This piece of work is made of bamboo, carbon and salt.

turbulent years of the early 20th century, when Western culture and learning were introduced into China. Now, after more than a century of development, modern and contemporary Chinese sculpture has not separated itself from the core of Chinese culture. In the realm of sculpture, there is no end of the discussion of traditional culture and the current zeitgeist as it relates to sculpture. However, in a time when modern Western civilization remains dominant in the world as a result of historical development, the studies of traditional Chinese culture and art as well as their modern evolution have yet to achieve systematic results and built-in mechanisms, despite unremitting efforts over several generations.

The discussion on "an odyssey between past and present" is based on the need for Chinese sculpture's own development, and the demands of Chinese ideographs in modern times. Chinese calligraphic art boasts a time-honored history and profound culture, exhibits a complete set of world views and values, and carries the powerful cultural genes of the Chinese nation. At the same time, contemporary Chinese sculpture has always been based on Western sculpture. How to connect the ideas, cultures, and histories behind the two in order to reshape contemporary Chinese sculpture is a question open for academic discussion.

Although sculpture and calligraphy are two different fields, the integration of arts has offered expanded artistic possibilities. Sculptors and calligraphers who only focus on their respective

Sands from Dunhuang by Chen Guobin. This piece of work is made of stone and remains of bricks from the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

fields may run out of inspiration. At this time, stimulation from other art forms can help artists with their creative endeavors.

At present, whether from the perspective of Western theory or the angle of traditional Chinese thinking, both Chinese calligraphy and sculpture need to address the problems we are facing today and undertake the task of rebuilding themselves. The ultimate goal of doing this must be achieved through a deeper understanding of and in-depth studies on Chinese culture, history, thought, and life philosophy, as well as a thorough knowledge of ancient and modern China and the Western world. What we talk about here is not only about the building of art and culture in the new era, but also about our society and our everyday lives.

The author is a sculptor with the Shanghai Oil Painting & Sculpture Institute.

Who is Misunderstanding Kung Fu?

Chinese people have produced endless legends about Kung Fu that have been captured in literary works, films and and TV dramas. Kung Fu represents Chinese people's love of their nation and culture, pursuit of power and aesthetics, curiosity for mysterious metaphysics, and attempts to explore the potential of human body. Yet such connotations also blur the cognitive logic surrounding Kung Fu.

Today, the question of whether Kung Fu is "practical" persists to the point that clarification is necessary. Kung Fu is not dying away. Instead, it has become more professional and diversified. The only constant is that it has always been a "delicate art of mind and skill."

New Weekly
January 2021

Chinese Zodiac Animals

Chinese zodiac culture is engraved in the hearts of Chinese people, but surprisingly little is known about its history.

When did Chinese people begin to use the Twelve Zodiac Animals to record years? Why does the rat, which carries heavily negative connotations in nearly every culture in today's world, top the Twelve Zodiac Animals? How did such a humble little creature produce mixed feelings of disgust and worship at the same time?

As we explore the universe, the zodiac serves as the time code referencing astronomical phenomena; as we ponder the human world, the zodiac represents a cosmological method to integrate the stars' movement with social life. It is a simple but complicated existence.

Chinese Heritage
January 2021

Image Networking Era

The power of images is stronger today than ever before.

Ten years after its release, Instagram remains the most important imaging social network in the world. In China, the app's influence is apparent even in the image function of WeChat moments and Weibo. The world today is visualized. Emojis used in the virtual world, just like gestures used in daily conversations, polish our conversations to make it smoother and funnier. But in an era in which social networking is connected by images, will text become more accurate or more ambiguous? Will we understand each other or the world more clearly or more vaguely?

Sanlian Life Week
January 2021

Transoceanic Chinese Beauty

From the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) to the Republic of China era (1912-1949), several large-scale losses of cultural relics occurred in China alongside the nation's struggles. Against this backdrop, construction of museums became a trend in the United States, and their numbers increased sharply. Chinese cultural relics became a major draw for American museums.

It is a shame that the charm of many Chinese national treasures can only be seen on the other side of the ocean. However, whether by taking a field trip across the distance or examining by leveraging the free high-definition collection image resources of museums around the world, Chinese hearts continue to throb upon exposure to "Chinese beauty."

National Humanity History
January 2021

Chinese Opera: Revival of Traditional Art in the New Era

Text by Fu Jin

Thanks to its historical profundity and attractive cultural flair, Chinese opera is likely to relive its past glory in the near future.

June 26, 2016: A performance is staged at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, presenting the beauty of visual art on the opera stage. by Wu Xianquan

The famous Peking Opera artist Shang Xiaoyun (1899-1976) performing in a play. His performance style derived power from his infusion of masculine strength into his female roles. The picture shows Shang Xiaoyun playing Qing'er in the Peking Opera play *The Legend of the White Snake*. CFB

Xun Huisheng (left), a famous Peking Opera artist in the 20th century, was noted for his sweet and seductive voice. This picture is a still from the Peking Opera play *Returning the Pearl*, which was adapted from a Tang Dynasty (618-907) poem. The elegant lyrics made it one of the Peking Opera classics with the highest literary achievements. CFB

In the 1920s, Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), Xun Huisheng (1900-1968), Cheng Yanqiu (1904-1958), and Shang Xiaoyun were four great Peking Opera artists who played female roles in their plays. Before them, only elderly male roles could be the protagonist in a play, but they opened new ground for female roles to serve as the protagonist. The picture shows a still of *The Rainbow Pass*, starring Mei Lanfang, Shang Xiaoyun and Cheng Yanqiu, with Mei Lanfang (right) playing the young male role. CFB

Like other civilizations in the world, China's long cultural history included a lengthy history of theatrical performance, but not until the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) did China's most representative opera, *Xiwen*, a classical local opera from Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, emerge. When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, *Xiqu* became an umbrella term for traditional Chinese operas, with *Xi* referring to stage performances and *Qu* scripts mainly composed of rhymed lyrics penned by literati.

Chinese opera literature reached its first peak during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Few intellectuals from the upper class desired to work as an opera scriptwriter during the Southern Song Dynasty, but the profession became more accepted in the Yuan period. Then, many outstanding literary figures tried their hands at this form of art, producing masterpieces like *The Injustice to Dou E* by Guan Hanqing, *The Romance of West Chamber* by Wang Shifu, and *Autumn in the Han Palace* by Ma Zhiyuan, among many others. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), opera scripts became longer and more dramatic, and legendary subjects became en vogue in the scriptwriter circles. Classical plays such as *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Peach Blossom Fan*, and *The Palace of Eternal Life*, now considered the highest achievements of Chinese literature during the Ming and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, were also very popular when originally staged. At the same time, local operas featuring folk music spread across the country and formed a diverse range of theatrical performances, and Kunqu Opera was the courtliest form favored by high-level intellectuals after the mid-Ming Dynasty.

By the mid-19th century, folk opera troupes from relatively developed areas of southern China had created a new style of

In 1960, Peking Opera actor Mei Lanfang (3rd left) talking with others at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

In 1960, a teacher at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts showing students how to play a musical instrument. by Zhang Xiushen and Wang De/*China Pictorial*

opera based on local tunes which became known as Peking Opera. After winning favor from the imperial court and commercial theaters alike, Peking Opera spread across the country and came to dominate theater stages within just 20 to 30 years. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the government adopted the policy of "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend" to promote progress in arts, so various types of opera from across China were encouraged to flourish and formed the diverse hues of today's theatrical performance landscape. At least 348 types of opera are performed in China according to the 2017 statistics released by the Chinese government, and national policies have been formulated to maintain and develop their cultural value and artistic characteristics.

After centuries of development, Chinese opera has developed as a genre of theatrical performance with unique

The Legend of the White Snake is a famous Chinese play performed by almost all of the more than 300 types of Chinese opera, including Peking Opera. The picture shows a still from the Peking Opera play *The Legend of the White Snake* performed by Liu Xiurong (middle) and Zhang Chunxiao (right) in 1958. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

national characteristics and accumulated tens of thousands of traditional plays. The repertoire covers a wide range of subjects including historical romance and ordinary daily joys and sorrows. The moral principles of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and honesty" promoted in the plays represent the core values generally recognized by all social classes in China for thousands of years, shaping the way Chinese people behave and live.

However, the ecosystem of Chinese opera has been affected in modern times by the introduction of Western theatrical theory during the New Culture Movement period (1915-1923), the large-scale reform of the traditional opera repertoire in the 1950s, and the impact of modern pop art since the end of the 1970s. Especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese opera faced a severe crisis, evidenced by dwindling available plays, dropping performance caliber, and a shrinking market.

In the 21st century, the trajectory of Chinese opera rebounded. Chinese opera experienced a renaissance of sorts as the opera community began better recognizing the significance of inheriting traditional operas and maintaining national characteristics. At the same time, more young people keen on embracing traditional Chinese culture have been drawn to traditional opera. In recent years, old and new plays from different types of opera, including Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, Shaanxi Opera, Shanxi Opera, and Yunnan Opera, have been well received.

The public's growing awareness of the benefits of protecting cultural diversity and Peking and Kunqu operas' addition to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List have inspired greater efforts to explore, adapt, and stage the traditional repertoire. Many local opera forms now under protection are recovering their vibrancy. Distinctive local dialects, music, and traditional performance styles are helping many once-obscure plays attract niche urban audiences.

Moreover, Chinese opera has gone global, showing the world excellent contemporary Chinese works and performances while boosting public confidence in the contemporary development of Chinese opera. Even French scholar Voltaire translated *The Orphan of Zhao*, a play from the Yuan era, during the 18th century, and Cantonese Opera was introduced to the Americas in the 19th century. When Peking Opera artist Mei Lanfang led his troupe on a visit to the United States in 1930 and the Soviet Union in 1935, the beauty of Chinese opera finally became widely recognized by mainstream

The picture shows a still from the Peking Opera play *The Unicorn Purse*, starring the famous actor Zhang Huoding, in 2009. The high-standard presentation of this classic opera on stage makes it one of the most popular plays in the theater market today. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

Western society.

After the 1950s, Chinese opera got more chances to be performed on the international stage, which helped reaffirm its aesthetic status and artistic value through a positive process of cross-cultural communication. The rapid development of the internet and new media has also created new opportunities for Chinese opera to flourish. In 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak pushed theatrical performance to online platforms. Opera troupes started livestreaming performances and attracting fans on short video platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou. The latest social trends have effectively cut the distance between traditional opera and young viewers.

Despite long-term efforts, the ecosystem of Chinese opera hasn't been completely restored yet. China still has a long way to go in translating supportive policies for traditional art into measurable theatrical progress, staging more excellent traditional plays, producing new plays reflecting modern times and the contemporary unique features of local places, improving performance, attracting bigger audiences, and protecting hundreds of endangered opera forms. Luckily, the Chinese opera community is working hard on all of these fronts. Thanks to its historical profundity and attractive cultural flair, Chinese opera is likely to relive its past glory in the near future.

The author is vice chairman of the China Literature and Art Critics Association.

Mao Weitao: Artistic Bravery

Text by Gong Haiying **Photographs courtesy of** Baiyue Culture Creative Company

"I will never stop trying and will always stay confident, brave, and persistent, which is my art secret."

On the evening of January 1, 2021, a new production of the traditional Yue Opera play *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, also known as *The Butterfly Lovers*, adapted from a well-known Chinese folk story, debuted at Butterfly Theater on the bank of West Lake in Hangzhou, eastern China's Zhejiang Province.

Mao Weitao, a renowned Yue Opera artist and vice president of the China Theatre Association, organized the performance and played the lead role of Liang Shanbo after more than a year away from the stage.

Mao headed Zhejiang Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe for many years and now ranks among Yue Opera's most influential practitioners. She is also chairperson of Baiyue Culture Creative Company, owner of Butterfly Theater.

"Considering the emergence of increasingly diversified art forms, we are searching for a living space for Yue Opera through such performances," said Mao.

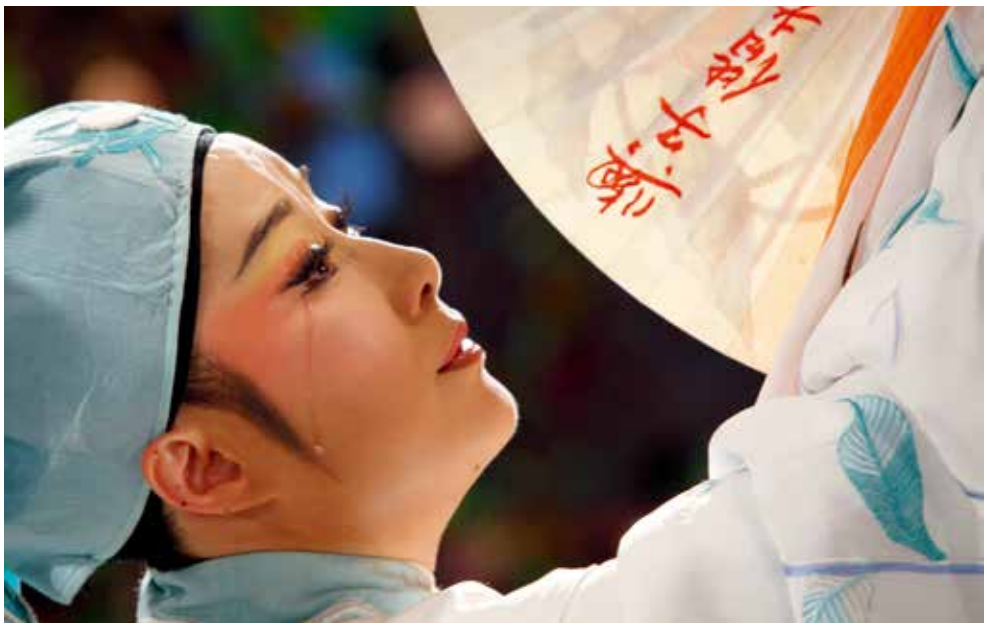
After performing Yue Opera for more than 40 years, Mao is brainstorming ways to help the art better develop through reforms.

Since the 1990s, she has organized a series of Yue Opera performance experiments to break the traditional routine and clichés of Chinese romance plays featuring "love between a gifted young man and a beautiful girl" while reviving many historical and cultural characters in Yue Opera plays, such as Jing Ke, an assassin who attempted to kill Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.).

In 2016, she took on dual roles of Coriolanus and Liu Mengmei in a brand new Yue Opera production called *Coriolanus & Du Liniang* that went on a performance tour of Britain, France, Germany, and Austria.

The play fuses Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, the tragedy of a Roman general banished by his own people, with a similar situation in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) playwright Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, a love story involving a young lady named Du Liniang who falls asleep in her garden and dreams of an encounter with a handsome scholar named

In more than 40 years of her theatrical career, Mao Weitao has striven to win the Plum Performance Prize, the highest theatrical award in China, three times. She has always had a strong self-confidence, which is not only reflected by her excellent performance and glorious achievements but mostly comes from her courage and capability to keep moving forward and never stop learning and thinking. Therefore, After Mao's artistic transformation, her Yue Opera fans will have a lot to look forward to.



Mao Weitao as Liang Shanbo in the play *The Butterfly Lovers.* To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Yue Opera in 2006, Mao led the Xiaobaihua Yue Opera Troupe in launching an adapted version of *The Butterfly Lovers*, which integrated the traditional Yue Opera performance methods with modern singing and dancing. Since then, the play has been staged many times in major cities at home and abroad, and finally turned the goal of integrating Yue Opera with contemporary life into a reality.

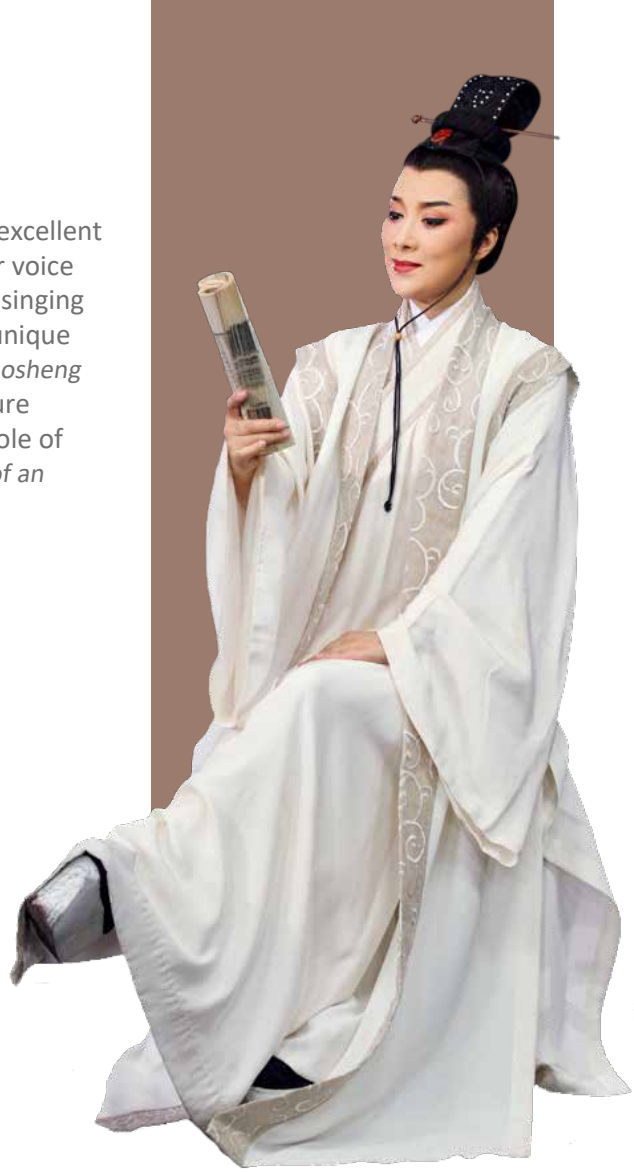
January 1, 2021: When the performance of the new version of *The Butterfly Lovers* nearly reaches its end, 87-year-old Chinese composer He Zhanhao appears on the stage with an orchestra and conducts the violin concerto *The Butterfly Lovers*. This gave the theater audience and those watching online an unforgettable experience and made them truly embrace the glamor of the New Year Concert.

Liu Mengmei. The production marked the peak of her career in performing arts and breathed fresh life into traditional Yue Opera at a global level.

Founding Baiyue Culture Creative Company was her recent attempt to navigate the survival and development of Yue Opera, based on the inspiration she drew from the mature theatrical operation modes of Broadway in New York and the West End in London.

China Pictorial: Why did you choose the new version of *The Butterfly Lovers* as the first play staged at Butterfly Theater this year?

Mao Weitao: The COVID-19 pandemic raging around the world in 2020 made



Mao Weitao has a good appearance and excellent stage performance. Giving full play to her voice advantage, she innovated the traditional singing skills of Yue Opera and formed her own unique style. She is known as the best female *xiaosheng* (young male role) in Yue Opera. The picture shows a still of Mao Weitao playing the role of Fan Rong in the Yue Opera play *The Tale of an Ancient Book Collector.*

people increasingly appreciative of the classics. Late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai once said that the Yue Opera classic *The Butterfly Lovers* reflected the hopes and dreams of the Chinese people. Today, it can be interpreted as a call for unity in the fight against COVID-19.

China Pictorial: Does the production mark the Xiaobaihua troupe returning to traditional Yue Opera themes?
Mao Weitao: The times make artists. Whenever a work of art is remembered or survives into another era, it must fit the times. When we look at tradition, we should pinpoint and pass on the "love" and "wisdom" embedded within.

Whether you seek to preserve or innovate the arts, it is necessary to appreciate the past and develop the sensitivity to discover new things. Every art theme is always waiting to be discovered by artists who are patient enough to keep searching. I am just en route.

China Pictorial: Did you add anything special to help foreign spectators understand this new version of *The Butterfly Lovers*? How do you balance the integration of modernity and internationality with folk culture?
Mao Weitao: The new version of *The Butterfly Lovers* is a reinterpretation of Chinese classics from the perspective of internationalization and modernization.

I have been working on finding ways to introduce Chinese theater arts to different countries. By making performances and conducting exchange abroad, we absorb elements from different arts of various countries. This helps us better recognize and utilize our own artistic characteristics.

Audiences in different countries share the same feelings for love and romance. They can easily understand the sorrow of lovers who can't be together because such situations are universal.

Integration of folk culture with modern and international cultural elements is an inevitable trend considering the development of the times and social progress.

Instead of saying that the arts of a nation belong to the world, it's better to look at the world as something composed of different

Located on the bank of West Lake in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, the Butterfly Theater is designed by famous Chinese architect C. Y. Lee from Taiwan, and got its name because it looks like a giant butterfly. It is a comprehensive new cultural space integrating many urban living and leisure functions, including a theater, a museum, an exhibition hall, a tea house and a book bar.

On New Year's Day 2020, the new version of *The Charming Smiles*, a classic of Yue Opera, debuted as the first resident performance of the Butterfly Theater. This adaptation created a new style and artistic expression of opera music and infused the classic with a youthful vitality.

September 1, 2020: Mao Weitao attends the opening ceremony of Mustard Seed Class, a public service program aiming to promote traditional arts. Mao has put a lot of effort into such public service programs, and she hopes to turn the Butterfly Theater into a Yue Opera school.

nations. The pandemic has fostered a much clearer understanding of what is meant by building "a community with a shared future for humanity." "World" itself is an inclusive term. Going global includes acknowledging voices from different countries, races, and ethnic groups.

China Pictorial: We learned that Baiyue Culture Creative Company is planning to cooperate with the UK's National Theatre to stage an English version of the drama *Wolf Totem*. What struck you most during your own collaborations with British theatrical artists?

Mao Weitao: Much can be learned from British drama, and I was especially touched by the scientific spirit they apply to art and the country's attractive artistic atmosphere. Relatively speaking, China has room to improve in this area. Maybe being an ancient civilization with cultural heritage of five thousand years makes our workload heavier.

But as long as we make up our minds to do it, we can and will do it well. Since ancient times, the Chinese nation has upheld a spirit of perseverance capable of moving mountains.

China Pictorial: Considering the decline of traditional Chinese theater arts in contemporary times, where is your company seeking breakthroughs in promoting the development of Yue Opera and other Chinese theater arts?

Mao Weitao: "You can't visit West Lake without drinking a cup of Longjing tea and enjoying Xiaobaihua plays" has become the slogan of Baiyue Culture Creative Company as we work in the direction of integrating traditional culture more tightly with contemporary life.

The old saying comparing Suzhou and Hangzhou to something out of heaven still resonates widely in China. We hope that Butterfly Theater in its romantic Chinese style will become a cultural landmark of Hangzhou.

Baiyue has recently been working to launch a series of cultural activities including a grand Yue Opera show to open in March.

We hope to leverage Yue Opera as a launchpad to gradually find new channels for traditional Chinese opera and even traditional Chinese culture to deeply integrate into contemporary life.

May 24, 2016: Zhang Huoding addresses the media after performing the Peking Opera play *Legend of the White Snake* at the closing ceremony of the 16th "Meet in Beijing" International Arts Festival. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

Zhang Huoding: Chasing the Dream of Peking Opera

Text by by Zhou Xin

Only persistence grants the right to dream.

On September 2, 2015, Peking Opera artist Zhang Huoding visited the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York for the first stop of her first world tour. She performed *Legend of the White Snake* and *The Jewelry Purse*, two classical Peking Opera plays, for American spectators.

"She's got this special evocative quality onstage—an aura and charm that seems to enchant the audience," said David Wang, a Harvard literature scholar who has followed Zhang's career. "But she also has this tremendous vocal capacity that renders in a kind of low-key, melancholy way."

Legend of the White Snake tells the story of love between a man named Xu Xian and a white snake maiden called Bai Suzhen. Their love is thwarted by Buddhist monk Fahai. *The Jewelry Purse* tells the story of a kind-hearted wealthy woman who escapes a desperate situation thanks to help from a woman she had previously helped. During the performance, Zhang Huoding donned different costumes and made multiple stunning appearances to deliver pure, remote, tactful, and low-pitched singing that immersed the audience into the play to laugh and shed tears for characters.

After the curtain dropped, Zhang was pushed back to the stage by several curtain calls, but her bowing did little to satiate the audience's thirst for more performance.

Before visiting the United States, Zhang Huoding had already been a well-known Peking Opera star in China for a long time. However, in 1986, at the age of 15, she was nearly rejected by a school specializing in Chinese theater art. A saying goes that "every minute on stage requires 10 years of offstage practice." Behind her eventual success was the unimaginable dedication by Zhang Huoding.

Across the Threhold

Zhang Huoding was born in 1971 in Baicheng City, northeastern China's Jilin Province. Her brother was admitted to a local Chinese theater art school at the age of 11. Influenced by her brother, she also developed strong interest in Chinese theater art. Her passion was firmly supported by her parents. At the age of nine, Zhang signed up for the admission examination of the local opera school.

However, Zhang failed to pass the exam several times over the following years. She once joked that her experience with the test was like Fan Jin (a fictional character who first took the imperial examination at age 20 and didn't pass until 54 years old). Even past primary school

Poster of Zhang Huoding's performance at David H Koch Theater, New York, which was staged on September 2 and 3, 2015. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts

age, she continued to apply to Chinese theater art schools across the country every year.

Zhang's perseverance was driven by her passion for Peking Opera. "It is amazing," she beamed. "I felt my life would be meaningless if I couldn't perform it."

Seeking to end his daughter's worries about her future, Zhang's father wrote a letter to the principal of Tianjin Art Vocational School. "The letter was very long, and he requested the principal see me and either accept me or explicitly declare me unfit to study traditional opera," she recounted.

Zhang Huoding was eventually admitted to Tianjin Art Vocational School as the only student not admitted under unified enrollment. In 1986, her annual tuition was 560 yuan (about US$90) a year. At the time, the amount was about a half-year income of an ordinary family. To cover the tuition, Zhang's parents made extraordinary sacrifices to save. "I swore to practice hard." Zhang understood the difficulties she caused her parents.

Persist, Persist

Learning Chinese theater requires practice from childhood, and many performers start at a very early age. Zhang Huoding was already 15 years old when she was finally enrolled in a school, an age usually considered too late. But Zhang persisted with hard work. Without teachers willing to waste time helping her, she listened to tapes extensively. When she lacked a proper curriculum, she looked in on lessons from other classes. No pain, no gain. Zhang's efforts were noticed by famous Peking Opera artist Meng Xianrong. Meng was so moved by Zhang's enthusiasm that he offered to be her mentor.

During Zhang's three years at Tianjin Art Vocational School, she learned 30 plays, equal to the volume a normal student can memorize in seven years.

January 17, 2020: The Peking Opera play *Farewell My Concubine* is staged at Beijing Chang'an Grand Theater. Zhang Huoding played Yu Ji, concubine of Lord Xiangyu of the Chu Kingdom, in the play. by Zhu Zhaohui

August 30, 2010: Zhang Huoding teaches in a class. In 2008, Zhang Huoding joined in the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts as a Peking Opera teacher. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

After graduation, Zhang was recruited by a Peking Opera troupe in Beijing. Her unique voice attracted Zhao Rongchen, a famous master in the Cheng School of Peking Opera.

Zhao was an outstanding protégé of Cheng Yanqiu, founder of the Cheng School. Nearly 80 years old at that time, he was not seeking protégés of his own anymore, but offered to mentor 23-year-old Zhang Huoding as his last disciple. Learning from a Peking Opera master empowered Zhang to make rapid progress in understanding the depths of the art. "I learned a lot of fundamental skills from Mr. Zhao," she said. "I often spent a whole morning just trying to sing one word right. Sometimes practicing some minute detail took three days. Mr. Zhao changed my life."

"Zhang Huoding's performances started capturing the essence of the Cheng School," commented Peking Opera artist Ye Shaolan. "She performs in both the Cheng School and her own style. The audience hears and sees both the Cheng School and Zhang's own characteristics. She manages to make stylized art more rational. Zhang injects her own quality of gentility and elegance to the art of the Cheng School. She never makes deliberate moves to win applause and instead inspires warm applause naturally. This is the highest state of the art."

In 2019, Zhang Huoding's *Farewell My Concubine* became a massive hit in Beijing and Shanghai. She had made painstaking preparations for the play for 10 years. Tickets sold out soon. Fans and professionals from all over the country rushed to catch a glimpse of the different version of Yu Ji that she played in the play.

The epic battle between Chu and Han armies after the Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.) was overthrown is well-known in

November 13, 2016: The Peking Opera play *Sister Jiang* is staged at the National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing. Zhang Huoding played Sister Jiang in the play. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

China. Legends about the war abound. When Lord Xiang Yu of Chu was defeated, he bid farewell to his beloved concubine Yu Ji. Yu Ji chanted poems while performing a sword dance as a farewell, which was reported as beautiful and tragic.

Performing *Farewell My Concubine* had been Zhang Huoding's dream for many years. After 10 years of hard work, she finally brought the play to the stage. The road to achieve the dream was not smooth. It took her 10 years of hard work to turn the dream into reality. Across the decade, the music changed several times. Wan Ruixing, who has worked with Zhang for a long time, cooperated with her on this play. Wan fell ill and was admitted to the hospital several times, so work was suspended. During the 10 years, Zhang Huoding became a teacher and a mother. She took on new roles in life while continuing to pursue her dream.

Only persistence can make dreams come true. Perseverance helped her realize the dream of becoming a Chinese theater art performer. Now she is realizing another dream of giving the character of Yu Ji her singular tenacity.

A still from *Wang Peiyu Peking Opera Show* planned by Wang herself.

Wang Peiyu: A Theater Life

Text by Li Zhuoxi **Photographs courtesy of** Yuyin Society

She compared herself to Fahai in *Chunshuidu*, walking down from the "high court" of Peking Opera to experience "mortal life," blazing new trails for the audience and herself.

On December 10, 2016, an adaptation of *Legend of the White Snake* was staged. The source material is one of the best-known Chinese folk tales, a story of love between Madam White Snake and human Xu Xian against the will of heaven and Buddha, and their tragic separation by Monk Fahai. In contrast with the original work, Xu Xian did not become a monk at the end of the 2016 production, and Madam White Snake was not imprisoned under the Leifeng Pagoda. Instead, Fahai, a powerful monk seeking to subdue demons, is so inspired by the couple that he takes off his robe to experience the secular world. Instead of saving mortals, he is so inspired by them that he chooses to join them.

The new play fusing Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera is called *Chunshuidu* (literally, *Crossing the Spring River*).

In the traditional Chinese folk story, Monk Fahai is an antagonist with boundless power but is headstrong and believes that every monster must convert to Buddhism. Wang Peiyu, a seasoned performer of traditional Peking Opera, spearheaded the new adaptation by playing a "rebellious and deviant" Fahai.

Looking back at the play today, Wang realized the story was very similar to her life experience. She compared herself to Fahai in *Chunshuidu*, walking down from the "high court" of Peking Opera to experience "mortal life," blazing new trails for the audience and herself.

Gaining Fame

Wang Peiyu was a late bloomer compared to many of her peers, but still rose to fame relatively young. When she debuted, she was already considered a top talent.

Born and raised in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, Wang first studied *pingtan*, a traditional form of storytelling and ballad singing. She began to learn Peking Opera at 11 and two months later won first prize in a competition for amateur performers in Jiangsu Province. She first specialized in playing the *laodan* (elderly woman) role. Fan Shiren, her first mentor, stressed that *laodan* was mostly a supporting role in a play, whereas *laosheng* (an elderly male role) was usually the lead. He gave her some tapes of legendary *laosheng* performers including Yu Shuyan, founder of the Yu School of Peking Opera, and Meng Xiaodong, a legendary female *laosheng* performer in the early 20th century. Wang was so intoxicated by the

A still from *Chunshuidu*, a play fusing Peking Opera and Kunqu Opera, with Wang Peiyu playing Monk Fahai.

Wang Peiyu (left) and her mentor Wang Siji.

tapes that she fell asleep listening to them every night. She was so infatuated with the cheers and applause on the tapes that she decided to train for *laosheng* roles.

When Wang reached the age of 14, the Shanghai Academy of Drama happened to re-launch its first Peking Opera class in 10 years. Wang passed both the written exam and the professional knowledge test, but her name still didn't show up on the admission list. When she asked the school why, she was told that since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese drama schools had never recruited females to train for *laosheng* roles. "I have made up my mind to devote my life to my love of Peking Opera, regardless of my own success or failure," she wrote in a

Wang Peiyu was born on March 4, 1978 in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. She is a revered Peking Opera artist and a national first-grade performer with the Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe.

letter to the school's administrators, which was delivered by her mother.

In 1992, after several twists and turns, Wang was eventually admitted to the Peking Opera class at the Shanghai Academy of Drama. However, the school insisted that her admission included the condition of a one-year probationary period to monitor her progress. Learning traditional Chinese opera became a gamble for her.

Wang became a star before her 16th birthday. In 1993, she temporarily stood in for Mei Baoyue, the only daughter of Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang, in the play *Wenzhao Pass*. She played the role of Wu Zixu, a military strategist in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) who escapes from Fancheng and seeks revenge on King Ping of Chu for killing his father and brother in the play. Her performance received a rave review from Peking Opera master Mei Baojiu.

By the time she was 20, Wang had won every Peking Opera competition she could enter. Barring catastrophe, her path to becoming a major traditional Peking Opera artist seemed solidly paved.

In 2008, her mentor Wang Siji passed away. After enduring overwhelming sorrow from the loss of her beloved teacher, she began to reflect on aging and death. "When I was 25, I felt uneasy to be seen through by others. It felt like any show of modesty was just a gesture. But after the age of 30, when my elders started passing away, the feeling of loneliness became hard to contain." Then she began to worry about the fate of Peking Opera. The road to success in Peking Opera was already hard enough when the art was thriving. She didn't want to see her peers endure all the hardships to become a "star" only to see the audience disappear.

Turning Point

Wang Peiyu's 2017 appearance on the variety show *Who Can Who Up* is now regarded as the starting point of her drive to popularize the art throughout China.

Wang Peiyu Peking Opera Show combines stand-up comedy elements with traditional opera performance. The show features anecdotes about traditional Peking Opera, highlights rules on and off stage, uncovers the fickleness of human nature in and out of the script, and explores everything about Peking Opera.

This online show aligns with the younger generation's aesthetics. When Wang appeared with short slicked-back hair, a pair of golden glasses, and a bright black gown, she was like a gust of fresh air for the audience. The juxtaposition of different art forms made her performance particularly popular. Her debut in the show was a great success, and she maintained her composure with the calm she wielded when performing *laosheng* roles on the Peking Opera stage.

Since then, she has never hesitated to embrace new media and modern forms of communication such as livestreaming, variety shows, and short videos. Although she grew up in a traditional art environment, she follows fashion trends. From 2017 and 2018, Wang appeared on many TV and online shows. "When I reached my 40s, I felt pushed by an invisible force," she said. "I always felt that I needed to do more for the revival of Peking Opera." Now, she is largely focused on exposing Peking Opera to more of the public and promoting it through engagement with popular media culture. It is an era of "cross-sector cooperation." Wang understands the scarcity of market demand for her craft, so she fuses the skills of Peking Opera with the trending culture.

And such rare skills are certainly not innate.

Back in 2004, then 26-year-old Wang became Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe's youngest vice-president. While still young, energetic, and unwilling to be confined by an unchanging system, Wang resigned to seek changes. "I underestimated the difficulties awaiting ahead and overestimated myself." Reality dealt a heavy blow to her. Within two years, she had burned through her savings and fell into self-doubt. The harsh market environment of traditional Chinese opera at that time left her flailing for help. Finally, she chose to return to the troupe.

"I was naive," she admitted. Many years later, Wang laughed at her former self.

"The more you learn, the more complexity you discover." She quelled her rebelliousness and described herself as a "moderate reformer who is both active and conservative." In those years, Wang started the noticing outreach of the entertainment industry and began consciously building her personal brand image. She established the Yuyin Society, organized Qingyin mini-concerts, and launched Yule Peking Opera classes, commencing her effort to revive Peking Opera by absorbing elements from diverse forms of art. Fifteen years ago, the market didn't offer an environment fit for the release of her full potential. But eventually, such days finally arrived.

Overcoming Difficulties

Inevitable controversy accompanied her rising fame.

Many of Wang's young fans attended the theater with signs and lighting devices, which displeased traditional theatergoers. Wang was blamed for endorsing unhealthy fan culture practices in the Peking Opera industry.

Wang Peiyu considers such criticisms totally unnecessary. "When people aren't hostile to a traditional opera performer becoming a public figure, the development of Peking Opera will embrace a good ecosystem," she said. Wang sees acceptance of pop culture practices as part of improving the market ecology for Peking Opera.

Balancing the development of traditional Chinese opera with the modern entertainment industry is difficult. Wang believes that Peking Opera and other traditional arts should "stick to the original form while pursuing innovation" and leverage new communication platforms to find more possibilities for growth. "But the foundation of traditional opera should not be changed rashly." Although she has participated in many variety shows, she still adheres to her own principle. No matter how popular a show was, she always rejects if it strays too far from Peking Opera.

Since 2019, Wang has appeared on variety shows less frequently while continuing to gain supporters. She has new plans for the future. "In 2021, I want to return to my original craft and produce more solid work."

Today, the Yuyin Society manages its own performance venue, Yuyin Pavilion, in an ancient theater. "I'll experience the mundane world again by traveling through the streets and experiencing the diverse human feelings of the world," sang Wang at the end of *Chunshuidu*. "When that day comes, Fahai will don his robe and return to Jinshan Temple to devotedly recite Buddhist scripture." On stage, the silver glow of the moon shone on the eaves of Yuyin Pavilion. Perhaps a hundred years ago, a previous generation of Peking Opera performers basked in the same moonlight.

Wang Peiyu applying the *leitou* (head-binding) technique for a show. A Peking Opera make-up technique, *leitou* seeks to tighten the head with a cloth belt and lift the eyes to suit the personality of the character.

Zhang Jianfeng: Finding the Future of Peking Opera

Text by Wang Yuncong **Photographs courtesy of** Zhang Jianfeng

Zhang Jianfeng is exploring the future of Peking Opera through integrating the classical and the modern and drawing inspiration from both home and abroad.

As a winner of the Plum Performance Award, China's top honor for practitioners of theatrical arts, Zhang Jianfeng practices Peking Opera every day. "The ecstasy of producing vocal vibrations cannot be matched," he said. "The charm of traditional Chinese culture is singular."

Back to School

Zhang Jianfeng started studying Peking Opera relatively late. At the age of 14, he enrolled in Shijiazhuang Art School in Hebei Province to learn the art. His voice changed at 18. Adolescent voice change is usually a nightmare for Chinese theater art performers, but it turned out to be a gift for him. Through the process, Zhang's voice became more clear and resonant. Demonstrating extraordinary talent, Zhang worked hard and became a famous Peking Opera actor at school and even renowned near and far.

After graduation, Zhang joined the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing. In 2000, he became a student of Ouyang Zhongshi. A famous Peking Opera expert, Ouyang Zhongshi was the first disciple of Xi Xiaobo, founder of the Xi School of Peking Opera. The Xi School is characterized by elegant, veiled, and delicate singing. With his singing talent and bright voice, Zhang Jianfeng quickly absorbed the essence of the Xi School.

Shifting from a top student in school to a member of the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing was smooth for Zhang. But a sense of frustration haunted him during the first three years of his career. During that period, he was only getting cast in small roles. "The most painful thing for actors is inability to get on the stage," he recalled. "No one appreciated my work, and I was always getting heavy criticism. I even considered giving up and doing something else."

To improve his skill and win favor in the Peking Opera circle, Zhang decided

Zhang Jianfeng played Guo Jianguang in the modern Peking Opera play *Shajiabang*, which tells the story of battles between Japanese troops and the New Fourth Army during the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression.

to go back to school. He was admitted to the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in 2002.

The academy boasts numerous famed experts among its faculty and students dedicated to learning as well as a rich collection in the library. "I spent almost every lunch break in the library," Zhang recounted. For those years, Zhang spent most of his life in three places: training room, library, and dormitory. Compared with his younger classmates, Zhang's work experience made him more cognizant of his shortcomings. "I read everything from newspapers and magazines to books, old and new, published in China and the West, because I was so eager to make up for my shortcomings through learning." Extensive learning of literature and art on campus laid a more solid foundation for his future career.

Finding a Future

In 2005, Zhang Jianfeng was cast as Jean Valjean in the experimental Peking

Zhang Jianfeng played Li Dazhao in the Peking Opera play *Li Dazhao*. Li Dazhao (1889-1927) was one of the founders of the Communist Party of China (CPC). He was not only an outstanding leader of the CPC in its early days, but also a well-known scholar.

Opera play, *Les Miserables*, the first joint production by five departments of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. It was his first chance to play the lead in a brand new Peking Opera play in Beijing. "To be honest, I don't think works like *Les Miserables* are the future of Peking Opera, nor will they ever be," he said. "But we were trying things." As a Peking Opera performer, Zhang continued pondering ways to develop and popularize Peking Opera.

Zhang's resume now includes classical plays, modern plays, revised historical plays, and small theater productions. "When he was alive, Mr. Ouyang warned us not to shun any form of art. Peking Opera took shape by absorbing various theater arts. This is especially important now because we are entering an era of greater diversity."

Zhang suggested new plays may have the ability to attract people who have never watched Peking Opera and bring more people to the theater to enjoy new forms of the art.

At the same time, Zhang endeavors to improve the audience's aesthetic taste and encourage them to bring along their friends. In 2017, he had considerable success taking a show on a tour of six colleges and universities in Beijing. He

Zhang Jianfeng has performed a great number of characters from Chinese theater arts in his career.

tries to expose Peking Opera to greater numbers of youth so that more young people will fall in love with it. "Perhaps you won't see obvious results in the short term, considering that such influence is subtle. Many years later, however, they may take their children to the theater to appreciate Peking Opera."

Tan Zhengyan: Carrying the Torch

Text by Wang Yuncong **Photographs courtesy of** Tan Zhengyan

"It is my mission to sustain the Tan School of Peking Opera."

Across Peking Opera's two-century history, the Tan family name has always carried weight. Many have mused that the family's stories represent nearly half of Peking Opera's history. Each generation of the Tan family produced representative figures in the art, which solidified the family's reputation. Tan Zhengyan, representative of the seventh generation of his family, is now carrying the torch for both Peking Opera and the family's legendary status. "Born into this family, I've become inseparable from Peking Opera," he said.

A Timeless Show

The Battle of Dingjunshan, a classical show in the Tan School of Peking Opera, tells the story of Huang Zhong, a Shu general, fighting Xiahou Yuan, a Wei general, during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265). China's first domestic film is a documentation of this play performed by Tan Xinpei, founder of the Tan School of Peking Opera. On December 28, 1905, the film was screened at Daguanlou Movie Theater in Beijing. The silent film created a huge buzz at that time.

"That show has been enjoyed for more than a century because every detail in the plot was exquisitely designed, and each generation of performers worked attentively to get every single move right." After graduating from college, Tan Zhengyan was first cast to headline this play by his grandfather. "It was that day that the responsibility of carrying the torch of the Tan School was passed to me."

Tan started studying Peking Opera at the age of eight and was enrolled in a traditional opera school at 11. He studied at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts and became a member of the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing in 2001. Every step he took to embrace the art seemed right for him, and he steadily acquired the necessary skills to represent the seventh generation of the Tan family. Growing up under the weight of such family pride, however, also left him feeling powerless, suppressed, and caged in, which few people realize.

Driven by both his passion for the art and his desire to honor his family name, Tan has devoted relentless effort to Peking

Tan Zhengyan, representative of the seventh generation of the Tan School of Peking Opera, was born on August 26, 1979, in Beijing. He is a national first-class actor and a leading artist with the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing.

Opera. The family name "Tan" means a lot to him, and the high bar set by past generations can cause him a lot of anxiety.

"Sometimes I hated my family name because it stressed me out. It's too difficult to carry the torch for my family," he once said in tears at a press conference. But on many occasions Tan reaffirmed, "It is my mission to sustain the Tan School of Peking Opera."

Classical works of the Tan School such as *The Qing Ding Pearl* and *General Yang's Escape* are still popular plays frequently performed by major Chinese Peking Opera troupes. *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, however, is only performed by Tan School artists nowadays.

A Never-ending Marathon

"Each generation of my family developed Peking Opera according to the trend of their respective time," said Tan when talking about the inheritance and innovation of Peking Opera. "It's like running a marathon forever. You must keep running and withstand loneliness, and there is never an end in sight."

Tan Zhengyan (right) as Shen Fu, a writer and art dealer, in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. It is a Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) love story about Shen and his wife, Chen Yun.

Tan worships the traditional essence of Peking Opera. At the same time, he often ponders the future of the art form. He acknowledges that Peking Opera is waning in its traditional form, but envisions a different future which drives Tan to innovate.

Alongside Tan School plays and other traditional shows, he also performed in *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* and *Grinding the Jade Bodhisattva* in small theaters. The latter originated from a vernacular novel from the Song Dynasty (960-1279) about Cui Ning and Xiuxiu fighting a lord and making sacrifices for love. As Cui Ning, Tan employed a fusion of the performing skills for *laosheng* (an elderly male role), *xiaosheng* (a young male role), and *wusheng* (a military male role), which created a unique experience for the audience. "Tan made huge breakthroughs in this show," commented director Guo Baochang. "He

Tan Zhengyan as Shu general Huang Zhong of the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265) in the classical show *The Battle of Dingjunshan.*

is finding new paths between *laosheng* and *xiaosheng*."

Tan believes that innovating Peking Opera requires far more than creating a few new shows. New thinking and fresh perspectives are needed to pinpoint the factors impeding the development of Peking Opera and reinvigorate the art. "I've been searching for more creative methods to promote Peking Opera. Both Peking Opera and other traditional arts should develop with the times and seek breakthroughs rather than staying static. We must understand Peking Opera in the modern context and make it mirror the society we live in."

Tan Zhengyan is making bold steps. He is reaching out to younger viewers by integrating Peking Opera with other theatrical arts. "I hope my generation's efforts will pay off and attract more young people to the theaters to enjoy Peking Opera," he said.

Yan Rui: Birth of a New Genre

Text by Gong Haiying

"I hope for the opportunity to experience a broader range of content including famous dramas, both ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, for inspiration to interpret more stories representing the unique style of the Chinese nation."

As the lights come up, the backdrop, tables, chairs, screens, plaques and other props of the Peking Opera show set a relatively specific scene. The stage begins to rotate slowly, and the troupe hidden behind the set is moved to center stage. The whole stage is an opera within a play. The lead character, Peking Opera artist Liu Zhensheng, marches to the only seat on the stage to perform his climactic finish.

It is the last scene in *The Death of a Star*, a new three-act classical drama produced by Beijing People's Art Theatre. The drama enjoyed a second run from January 12 to 21, 2021, at Capital Theater. "The set design captures a fusion of the impressionistic style of traditional Eastern opera and the realism of Western drama," commented Yan Rui, co-director of the drama and a young artist from Beijing People's Art Theatre.

The Death of a Star tells the story of Liu Zhensheng, a fictional Peking Opera master during the early years of the Republic of China period (1912-1949). When Liu Fengxian, Liu Zhensheng's disciple in whom he has invested great expectations, is seduced by the promise of fame and fortune from Shanghai Bund bully Uncle Yang, two different ideals collide fiercely in Liu Zhensheng's heart: "to live to act" or "to act to live." Endeavoring to further the art until his final breath, Liu Zhensheng collapses on the stage he had graced most of his life.

The drama seeks to capture the joy and sorrow in traditional operatic circles. The show's ingenious fusion of Peking Opera and Western drama attracted huge attention after its premiere in 2018. The show deployed dramatic narrative methodology to present the core story of Peking Opera. The formal beauty of traditional art and the themes of the drama support and sublimate each other, creating an entirely new stage style. "The whole drama revolves around stories related to the Peking Opera industry, so integrating Peking Opera and modern drama becomes natural," said Yan.

Throughout the play, usage of operatic

A still of Yan Rui playing Peking Opera artist Liu Zhensheng in the second act of the drama *The Death of a Star*. As a drama actor with a background in traditional opera, Yan Rui admitted that the role of Liu Zhensheng in the drama seemed particularly written for him. In the drama, he leveraged his impressive strengths both in directing and acting.

techniques such as mise en scene, rhythm of spoken parts, and typical character posturing and blocking not only radiated the beauty of traditional Chinese opera, but also cleverly rendered the psychology of the characters and promoted development of the plot. Liu Zhensheng, played by Yan Rui, is the most central character in the drama. This role requires great operatic skills. Yan Rui was formerly a Peking Opera artist. He learned traditional opera as a child and showed remarkable talent in the art. When he was six years old, he appeared on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala to perform a scene from the famous Peking Opera play *Judge Bao and the Case of Qin Xianglian* and rose to fame. He was later admitted to the Beijing Academy of Traditional Chinese Opera and joined the China Peking Opera Theatre. However, he was not satisfied with that career path. Later, he was admitted to the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, where he majored in directing and acting. After graduation, he joined Beijing People's Art Theatre as an actor and director.

Stills from the premiere of *The Death of a Star*. It is a great test of operatic skills to present the beauty of traditional opera art through the sublimation of the theme of a drama. by Guo Shasha and Zhang Yuming/*China Pictorial*

Yan Rui has directed many narrative dramas and appeared in many opera-related roles as characters, opera fans, or art experts. The picture shows Yan preparing for a cross-dressing role in the drama *The Stage*.

In *The Death of a Star*, Yan Rui leveraged his impressive strengths both in directing and acting after honing his operatic skills through painstaking preparations for the role. As a dramatic actor with a background in traditional opera, Yan admitted that the role of this famous Peking Opera star seemed written for him. "I'm like a piece of raw material that perfectly fits this play," he said. "A lot of my moments in this play really strike a chord with my life experience. Many lines and monologues seem as if they're about me."

Such immersion in the role gives the character's reflections on reality and eventual death a strong artistic appeal. In the face of temptations from money and the market, what is the best path for art? In the play, the contradiction is whether to follow audience influence or the art itself. When Yan speaks "I live to act" and other classic lines, he seems one with the character, after experiencing similar disillusionment from a collision of ideal and reality. In the drama, Liu's final fall is caused not only by his personal resistance to reality, but also a somewhat realistic reflection of the current phenomenon of "amusing till the end."

Integration of operatic aesthetics with narrative drama has been Beijing People's Art Theatre's creative tradition for many years since Jiao Juyin (1905-1975), an outstanding Chinese dramatist and founder of Beijing People's Art Theatre, proposed "nationalizing drama." For Yan, who joined the troupe in 2008, serving as both a director and lead actor was a preliminary exploration and a chance to showcase his wealth of experience. He has directed and adapted other Peking Opera plays such as *The Phoenix Returns to Its Nest* by famous Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang and also directed narrative dramas. He has also appeared in many opera-related roles as characters, opera fans, or art experts. He has a wealth of practical experience "demonstrating the essence of traditional Chinese opera in the form of drama" as advocated by Jiao Juyin.

"We are continuing to explore and move forward along the path of our predecessors," Yan said. "Now, I am trying to adapt the historical event of Anhui Opera troupes arriving in Beijing into a drama. The event was crucial for the formation and development of Peking Opera. I hope for the opportunity to experience a broader range of content including famous dramas, both ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, for inspiration to interpret more stories representing the unique style of the Chinese nation."

Qiu Jirong: Pioneer of Tradition

Text by Zhou Xin **Photographs courtesy of** Qiu Jirong

Qiu Jirong is blazing trails for reviving Peking Opera, and doing it his way.

Qiu Jirong's performance of *Jing Hong* (or *The Elegance of Traditional Opera*) for the New Year's Eve Gala on Bilibili.com, a streaming platform popular among young Chinese people, provided a novel viewing experience for people used to seeing Chinese theater art performed in complete costume with makeup, choreography, and singing. The performance included dance alongside Peking Opera (*Jingju* in Chinese). As the main character, Qiu wore almost no theatrical costume except for a typical long moustache and incorporated extensive dancing into the choreography, while his supporting cast performed in a style closer to traditional Chinese theater art.

The actors juxtaposed but harmonized both styles in the performance, one of Qiu's many endeavors over the years to explore the future of Peking Opera. The show seemed like a dialogue between Qiu, a modern dancer, and those who paved the way to his existence.

To Be or Not to Be

Born in Beijing in 1985, Qiu Jirong shares not only a surname with his father and grandfather but also the vocation of performing the Qiu School of Peking Opera.

The Qiu School was developed by his grandfather Qiu Shengrong (1915-1971). Unique facial makeup is one feature of this style. His father Qiu Shaorong (1957-1996) followed suit, but passed away at age 39. The skill was still inherited across generations, and Qiu Jirong is now the only male member of his family. His name suggests his fate: He was destined to inherit the techniques of Peking Opera, but under pressure from both his identity and family.

Qiu once had doubts about his prescribed destiny.

"My grandfather was an opera performer, as was my father. Does this mean I have to be a Peking Opera performer?" It seemed as if his life was arranged without his consent, even before he was born.

He was sent to Peking Opera Art School at the age of only 10 by his mother. "I had no choice."

When he first applied facial makeup and costume of Peking Opera, his family and

Qiu Jirong pioneers a combination of Peking Opera and dance.

friends gasped that he looked exactly like his grandfather on stage due to the similar shapes of their faces and curves of their eyes. This gave Qiu mixed feelings. He understood that the likeness was intended as a compliment, but he didn't find the prospect of repeating his grandfather's career attractive.

He is actually a fan of Michael Jackson.

At age 13, he saw a music video of Michael Jackson when passing a CD store. He was startled by the rock star's fascinating dancing, which moved his heart. It seeded a passion for modern dance in Qiu's heart. He learned Jackson's dance moves by watching the video over and over in slow motion.

Due to family pressure, he still agreed to study Peking Opera at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts, China's top institution dedicated to higher education in Chinese theater art, and set aside his love for dance.

He was admitted to Beijing's Jingju Theatre Company after graduation thanks to his excellent performances. He even won the top prize in a national TV competition for Peking Opera held by China Central Television (CCTV) in 2012.

Modern "Monkey King"

Chinese theater art, which had been popular for hundreds of years, has declined in recent years.

"Should I seek to be a duplicate of my grandfather my whole life?" With this question in mind, Qiu eventually decided that art starts with imitation and flourishes with innovation.

Peking Opera, an important genre of Chinese theater art, peaked during the lifetime of his grandfather Qiu Shengrong, according to the younger Qiu. It gradually lost most of its audience over the past few decades due to "competition" with various forms of newer entertainment such as TV, movies, and mobile devices. Once a popular form of entertainment, Peking Opera is now mostly appreciated by seniors and professionals in the sector.

Qiu began studying traditional Chinese opera at the age of nine, but didn't fall in love with it until he was 22 years old. After years of practice, he finally began

December 31, 2020: Qiu Jirong's performance, *Jing Hong*, for the New Year's Eve Gala on the online streaming platform Bilibili. In the last part of the performance, figures from Chinese theater arts come into the dream of Qiu Jirong, suggesting a dialogue between Qiu and his predecessors.

to appreciate the magnificence of Peking Opera and realized that Chinese theater art was a deep pool of the amazing traditional Chinese culture. He started learning and practicing Peking Opera with the same passion he had developed for dance, and became determined to find ways to connect brilliant traditional culture with the modern world.

Alongside Michael Jackson-inspired dance, he also likes popping and Tai Chi, so he is keen to combine elements of both traditional Chinese culture and Western dance. He created several dance programs and songs that wed Peking Opera with modern dance.

The performance *Jing Hong*, as Qiu puts it, was an exploration. He hoped the production would trigger reflection on inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture, especially Chinese theater art. Qiu believes that although many people haven't even watched or listened to Peking Opera, it is still in every Chinese person's blood.

"I do mixed performances combining the skills of Peking Opera like singing, dialogue, and acting with pop music and modern dance," said Qiu. "It is both dance and Peking Opera. I'm still exploring and can't be confined by a single definition. But the early results are clear: For mixed art, the essence of the performance must be built on Peking Opera, otherwise it will collapse."

He became famous due to the dance *Wukong*, which was originally an impromptu dance with elements of Peking Opera. "Wukong" is the name of the Monkey King, one of the heroic characters in the classical novel *Journey to the West*. The Monkey King, as described in the novel, is a rebel, an inheritor, and a pioneer.

So is Qiu Jirong.

Dou Xiaoxuan: Feeling the Charm

Text by Wang Yuncong **Photographs courtesy of** Dou Xiaoxuan

"Peking Opera performers of my generation need to bring more people to the theaters."

"She is definitely born for Peking Opera."

At her kindergarten graduation ceremony, Dou Xiaoxuan performed an episode from the Peking Opera play *Su San under Police Escort*, and her performance was highly praised by her teachers. The then six-year-old girl had memorized all the moves and libretto and presented them neatly and gracefully on stage.

This kindergarten star later became a disciple of the renowned Peking Opera artist Du Jinfang. As a young performer, Dou has played quite a few distinct characters and deeply impressed her audiences.

Love Leads to Perseverance

Dou was born in Tianjin. When she was a child, the popularity of extracurricular classes was on the rise. Dou's mom enrolled the then four-year-old millennial in a traditional Chinese opera class and a dancing class, hoping her girl would be fully exposed to art. At the age of 10, the talented girl was admitted to Tianjin Art School and started her journey into Peking Opera.

Although she came into contact with traditional Chinese opera at the age of four, Dou said that she only became interested in Peking Opera when she was about to graduate from secondary school. It was in university that she developed a real love for the art. During her college years, Dou's understanding of traditional Chinese opera gradually grew, thanks to the lessons from many artists. "They just told me every detail about what it's like on stage and about their lifetime performing experience," said Dou. She gradually became more fascinated with the art.

After graduation in 2006, Dou began to work for the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing. In 2007, she became a disciple of Peking Opera master Du Jinfang. "Under the influence of my teacher, my understanding and views of the art have changed greatly," said Dou. "I used to put most of my energy into the singing part and seldom

Born in 1985, Dou Xiaoxuan is now a Peking Opera actress at the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing. She graduated from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts.

went deep into stories. Master Du told me at the very beginning of my studies under her that I needed to understand and explore stories thoroughly instead of staying on the surface."

Dou's love for Peking Opera is the reason for her perseverance. Peking Opera performers live monotonously repetitive lives. For Dou, she shuttles between home, her workplace, and theaters almost every day. Peking Opera requires its performers to spend hours upon hours in tedious practice. Furthermore, whenever there is going to be a performance, actors and actresses need to learn it from a master and make detailed preparations. For those who have a number of upcoming performances, they hardly have any free time. "But when your singing on the stage brings down the house, you will be very proud of yourself and feel that it was all worthwhile," said Dou.

Experimental Plays in Small Theaters

In 2015, the classic Peking Opera play *Red Cliff* was staged at China's National Center for the Performing Arts after a period of revision, which depicts a historical battle from over 1,800 years ago. Dou took part in the performance and invited friends to watch the show. "They told me that they never expected such a wonderful experience—watching a show in a real

December 26, 2019: Dou Xiaoxuan (left) plays Xie Yaohuan in the Peking Opera play *Xie Yaohuan*. During the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (690-705) in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), powerful landlords in Suzhou City annexed land, which caused riots from peasants. This play tells the story of the female official Xie Yaohuan fighting with corrupted high-ranking officials and helping peasants in Suzhou during that period.

theater," Dou laughed.

As a millennial, Dou can relate to young people nowadays and understand their feelings towards Peking Opera or other genres of traditional Chinese opera. "It is frustrating, sometimes. Many young people just turn a cold shoulder to traditional Chinese opera for no reason. Some of them never watch a real performance, refusing the art simply because they feel the acting rhythms of such shows are too slow," said Dou. In her opinion, rejection by young people is the major challenge that traditional Chinese opera is facing today.

As a performing art and live art, people need to walk into the theaters to see what really Peking Opera is. "Only theatergoers can feel the true atmosphere. It is a totally different experience from watching it on TV," said Dou. "Peking Opera performers of my generation need to bring more people to the theaters. Then these audiences might change their mindset about Peking Opera or at least have a direct and first-hand experience of the art."

Whether it is drama, cross-talk, storytelling, or traditional opera, small theaters seem to be more attractive to young people nowadays. As an experimental means to attract more young audiences, the Peking Opera small theater in the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing has matured in recent years. "Many young people enjoy Peking Opera staged in small theaters. One show usually lasts about an hour and a half. The time span is acceptable for young people and the audience can interact with the actors and actresses." In Dou's view, performing Peking Opera in small theaters is quite challenging. "The time limit requires a simpler plot. Thus, in most circumstances, stories are told in a straightforward manner. But we are carefully doing that because we want our stories to be easy to understand and carry deep meanings at the same time."

June 27, 2017: Dou Xiaoxuan puts on her makeup backstage before a performance of the Peking Opera play *The Grand Mansion Gate*.

The situation of lacking young theatergoers has been improved in recent years. Activities such as public campaigns aimed at promoting traditional Chinese opera in schools, airing TV series, films, and variety shows including Peking Opera performers to perform some of the acts, and innovations in the form of traditional Chinese opera are backing the progress. "Nowadays, we see a lot of young fans backstage, some of whom were high school students," said Dou. "Many children become interested in Peking Opera after they have one or two lessons about the art, so do their parents who take them to theaters."

Western Flavors in Chinese Theater Art

Text by Wang Shaojun **Photographs courtesy of** Wang Shaojun

A blend of Eastern and Western cultures in Chinese theater art is the trend.

In 1930, famous Chinese Peking Opera artist Mei Lanfang landed in the United States to give a performance. People from theater and film circles joined other interested spectators to embrace this rare chance to taste Chinese theater art. A wide variety of American spectators, including British-born film star Charlie Chaplin, were amazed by the Eastern art.

In 1935, Mei Lanfang and his team visited the Soviet Union for a performance tour, stirring up a wave of adoring and studying Chinese theater art in Moscow and other cities. Celebrities from across the country gathered to watch Peking Opera. Mei Lanfang wowed audiences with minimal costume and set, which surprised many famous Soviet theater legends. Famous artists from the Soviet art circle such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and Sergei Eisenstein expressed deep admiration for the profound Chinese theater art presented by Mei Lanfang. German theater director Bertolt Brecht credited inspiration from Mei Lanfang's performance for his "distancing effect" theory.

Mei Lanfang's overseas tours not only showed the world the charm of Chinese theater art, but also offered a window for many to better understand China and traditional Chinese culture.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese theater art became an important conduit for cultural exchange between China and other countries. Famous troupes and artists practicing various major types of Chinese theater art went abroad to perform representative plays and build bridges for friendship between China and foreign countries.

Chinese opera troupes visiting foreign countries primarily sought cultural exchange, so the plays they performed were mainly classical Chinese theater art. They conveyed historical stories, humanistic spirit, and moral values of China. Alongside local officials and cultural consumers, overseas Chinese people accounted for the majority of the audience. Watching operas brought from the motherland helped ease their homesickness.

Since the beginning of China's reform and opening up in the late 1970s, overseas performances of Chinese theater art started embracing business opportunities in addition to fostering cultural exchange. Performances were no longer confined to traditional Chinese theater art.

Mei Lanfang (right) with Charlie Chaplin during his visit to the United States in 1930.

A still from the Henna Opera play *Much Ado About Nothing* adapted from Shakespeare's play of the same name by the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts.

Interpretation of Western classics through Chinese theater art forms also emerged.

During this period, many operas with both Chinese and Western elements were staged. The Peking Opera version of *Othello* created and performed by the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing in the late 1970s was a highly successful Shakespearean adaptation. *The Crimson Palm*, performed by the Shanghai Kunqu Opera Troupe, was adapted from *Macbeth*. Peking Opera shows *Dragon King* and *Sakamoto Ryōma* were jointly developed by China and Japan in the 1980s. The Kunqu Opera play *Twilight Crane* is based on a Japanese story. These works either used Chinese theater art forms to perform foreign masterpieces or injected Chinese theater art with elements of Western art. They all combined Eastern and Western cultures and arts.

Two major styles are used to adapt Western operas to Chinese theater style. One is to costume characters in Western-style clothing and hair while singing in Peking Opera rhyme. During the performance, performers play the roles of a Western opera with only a subtle Chinese

theater style. Because of incompatible elements of Chinese theater art and Western operas such as names, certain behavior, and story structure, performances can be strange.

The other method is to adapt Western operas to comparable Chinese stories and characters while saving the story structure of the original work, so actors can play Chinese roles with natural dialogue and action against a Chinese cultural backdrop. This method avoids conflict in terms of cultural background, language, action, and style, and makes the production more natural. Many consider this style of opera a purer form of art because it provides reasonable space for the unique characteristics of Chinese theater art. Western audiences have also been amazed and attracted by the emotions expressed by this unique Eastern style and often left with an even stronger impression than Western plays.

For example, a Henan Opera adaptation of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* was produced by the acting department of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. A Henan Opera troupe presented an adapted version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The original work was adapted into a Chinese story, and Chinese characters were used. The opera's singing and dancing was still on full display, creating space for reasonable exploration of singing and dancing. Finding works more easily adapted to a traditional Chinese theater art structure has produced stronger results.

By utilizing plotlines of plays familiar to Western people, foreign spectators can more easily understand productions without subtitles and better focus on appreciation of the dramatic art of Eastern culture presented by Chinese artists. When audiences are already familiar with the content of the play, they are more able to understand the Chinese culture fueling the production. In the internet era, Chinese theater art is playing an even more active role in international cultural exchange. Blending cultures in Chinese theater art is the modern trend.

A still from the Peking Opera play *Othello* presented by the Jingju Theatre Company of Beijing.

The author is director of the acting department of the National Academy of Chinese Theater Arts.

Huafu: Wearable History

Text by Guo Xiangmei

Wearing *huafu* is like wearing Chinese history. It revives ancestral pursuit of beauty across historical periods through appreciation of the enduring artistic aura and historical profundity of traditional Chinese culture.

A woman wearing a wedding gown with the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) style designed by Tingyuexiaozhu. The gorgeous wedding dress features a shoulder pattern of a phoenix flying amidst peony flowers, symbolizing good luck, elegance and wealth, and the front pattern features ocean waves and cliffs, symbolizing longevity and happiness. courtesy of Zhuo Tongzhou

The book *Zuo Zhuan*, or *Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, by Zuo Qiuming, a historian in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), claims that China got its ancient name "*Huaxia*" because the country was known for grand ceremonies (*xia*) and beautiful clothes (*hua*). *Huafu*, or traditional Chinese clothing, refers to costumes worn by the Han people and other ethnic groups from the time of the mythical Yellow Emperor some 5,000 years ago until the fall of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

In recent years, *huafu*, reflecting the aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture, has been popular among young Chinese people. About three-quarters of *huafu* buyers are between 16 and 24 years old, a group that regards wearing traditional costumes as a way of rediscovering and experiencing traditional Chinese culture. China has at least 4 million *huafu* lovers and more than 1,500 *huafu* shops. The emerging *huafu* market has embraced an annual sales volume of hundreds of millions of dollars and created an important cultural phenomenon of converging fashion trends with traditional culture.

Across thousands of years of development, traditional Chinese

Clothing with the Song Dynasty (960-1279) style designed by Tingyuexiaozhu. The Song costumes feature a plain, unadorned style. Popular among children in ancient China, the tiger head hat is a common ornamental part of *huafu*. courtesy of Zhuo Tongzhou

Clothing with the Tang Dynasty (618-907) style designed by Tingyuexiaozhu. The decorative patterns on the costume are phoenix and peony, symbolizing wealth and brightness. Influenced by northwestern nomadic communities, Tang clothing features tight garment and narrow sleeves. courtesy of Zhuo Tongzhou

A hairpin decorated with a handmade velvet flower. by Guo Shasha/*China Pictorial*

clothes from different dynasties adopted distinctive styles and reflected the environment, textile skills, and aesthetic tastes of different eras. Wearing *huafu* is like wearing Chinese history. It revives ancestral pursuit of beauty across historical periods through appreciation of the enduring artistic aura and historical profundity of traditional Chinese culture.

The respective plain, gorgeous, unadorned and elegant costumes of the Han (202 B.C.-220 A.D.), Tang (618-907), Song (960-1279), and Ming dynasties are the most popular among the *huafu* community. Today, the clothing forms are generally divided into two categories: One seeks to replicate every exquisite detail of unearthed cultural relics of clothing while the other adds traditional Chinese

October 2020: Fan Yi in *huafu* at the Museum of Chinese Gardens and Landscape Architecture in Beijing. courtesy of Fan Yi

A replica of the phoenix crown worn by Chinese women during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.). by Guo Shasha/*China Pictorial*

elements to Western-style clothing and explores combining Chinese culture with global fashion by altering or improving traditional clothing forms.

Today, an increasing number of Chinese young people wear *huafu* when attending cultural events such as a *guqin* (Chinese zither) concert or poetry recital or performing rituals for traditional festivals such as Mid-Autumn Festival, Double Ninth Festival, or Lantern Festival. Modern *huafu* has evolved from fancy dress to daily clothing after more than a decade of development. Although the attire has endured a mixed reception from the general public,

November 2020: Fan Yi in *huafu* at the Grand View Garden in Beijing in the law-related video *Chang'an Diary 4*. The video series was popular on Bilibili, a Chinese video sharing website. courtesy of Fan Yi

the traditional clothing inarguably adds a new dimension of vitality and diversity to modern cities.

Huafu is also being seen more frequently in public places. An estimated 2,000 *huafu* clubs operated globally by the end of 2019, and the total volume of *huafu* lovers has maintained a high annual growth rate of more than 70 percent for four consecutive years. *Huafu* culture has been tightly embraced on social media where many young minds gather. *Huafu*-related videos have received more than 43.4 billion views on the short video platform TikTok. Videos depicting *huafu* or traditional Chinese dance on the video sharing website Bilibili have been followed by 83.47 million fans, 83 percent of whom are under the age of 24.

For thousands of years of dynastic history, the development of *huafu* not only reflected the evolution of traditional clothing, but also propelled the inheritance of traditional culture. An obscure niche hobby in the past, *huafu* now serves as a creative channel to represent traditional Chinese culture. The efforts and creativity of *huafu* enthusiasts are likely to lift it to the status of a cultural icon of the Chinese nation.

As a young *huafu* fan posted, "the revival of huafu is by no means the destination, but a new starting line."

Chinese Ink Painting: Fusing Soul and Nature

Text by Liu Wanming **Photographs courtesy of** the National Museum of China

Liu Wanming

The author is deputy director of the National Museum of China.

Chinese painting derived from Fuxi Bagua (Eight Trigrams) and Chinese characters and has developed for thousands of years. Traditional Chinese painting is a complete and independent art system deeply rooted in the cultural soil of the Chinese nation and the country's unique culture, aesthetics, and philosophy.

Chinese painting stresses the aesthetic principle of "abstracting concepts from objects." The idea influences the dialectical unity of the depiction and creation of Chinese painting. It includes two aspects: observation and absorption. The so-called "object observation" refers to the omni-directional and multi-level observation and understanding of celestial phenomena, geography, animals, and vegetation, as part of an effort to explore the laws of nature and human affairs. "Abstracting concepts" refers to summarizing and displaying the results of observation in the form of symbols. After adoption and discarding, it reflects the unity of depiction and creation. Whether observing surrounding objects or other elements from the vast natural world, "absorption" requires the flexibility to combine understanding of external things with the consciousness of life and integrate life into the universe, which is also essential for the aesthetic creation of Chinese painting.

Chinese painting emphasizes the aesthetics of nature, which originated from Chinese appreciation for the unity of man and nature since ancient times. This unity calls for merging the soul and nature and fusing emotion with its surroundings. The rise of Chinese landscape poetry and painting is the artistic embodiment of the combination of human consciousness and natural

Nine Peaks in Snow by Huang Gongwang of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), housed in the Palace Museum.

aesthetic consciousness.

Another important aesthetic appeal of Chinese painting lies in "viewing art with truth," which discusses the relationship between "truth" and "skill." When top-tier art techniques are obtained, art creation will move toward freedom, evolving from art to "truth." The core goal of "observing art with truth" is to use the concept of "truth" to master skills, control form with spirit, and build soul-to-soul connection instead of observation through the eyes. This is also the ultimate goal of Chinese painting creation.

For the same reason, Chinese painting attaches great importance to the cultivation of the painter's personality. Calligraphic works are written with the mind, and paintings are crafted with the heart. A conscious mind will produce great writing, while a candid soul will guide fine art. Su Shi (1037-1101), a renowned writer and painter of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), was broad-minded and detached, so his paintings and calligraphy demonstrate a strong sense of freedom and uprightness. Qian Xuan (1235-?), a Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) painter, was well versed in painting figures, landscapes, flowers

Protecting Calves by Liu Wanming, 2016.

and birds. His paintings are mild and meaningful due to his broad-minded temperament and magnanimous style. Mi Fu (1051-1107), a prestigious calligrapher and painter of the Northern Song Dynasty, left many calligraphic works characterized by elegance and aloofness. Xu Wei (1521-1593), a famous calligrapher and painter of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), had a unique temperament. Upholding the rule of conforming to nature, his paintings were flush with vitality and free of vulgarity.

Meanwhile, Chinese painting also requires the painter's artistic concept to serve as a corner stone. It advocates reading before painting. A speck of dust in the mind might rust the brush pen. Only through years of practice can a painting master be born. Guo Ruoxu from the Northern Song Dynasty believed that moral standing was a crucial component of quality art. Dong Qichang (1555-1636), a calligrapher and painter from the Ming Dynasty, said that only after reading ten thousand books and traveling ten thousand miles should one attempt to paint. Such practitioners aimed to present characters through painting and calligraphy and enhance education and emotional ties with art.

Chinese painting emphasizes beauty and benevolence while appreciating personality, with themes focusing on peace and harmony. Most works are meditative and calming. They explore the effects of emotions on the soul to implement the beauty of "balance and harmony."

Two Ways to Serve the Present with the Past

Text by Zhao Yong

Zhao Yong

The author is a professor at Beijing Normal University.

Zhao Shuli (1906-1970), a famous modern Chinese writer, was a pioneer and practitioner of using the past to serve the present. He identified three types of traditional Chinese literature: ancient Chinese literati literature, new culture literature popularized since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, and folk culture literature.

On the issue of critically inheriting old traditions of literature, Zhao developed starkly different views from mainstream voices of his time. He believed that folk literary traditions should be central and supplemented by the other two traditions.

Instead of following the mainstream narrative mode of most novels since the May Fourth Movement, Zhao Shuli turned to seeking nourishment from *huaben* (ancient novels written in the style of storytelling scripts), and created a new kind of modern novel that was not only interesting but also easy to understand. He became a real "storyteller" as famous German scholar Walter Benjamin asserted in his essay "The Storyteller" in 1936.

Actually, Zhao Shuli's creation of modern storytelling novels is a revolution and innovation of traditional literature and art. He created new characters, stories, and novels in a reformed old form, which could be described as "new wine in old bottles." It became his channel for serving the present with the past.

However, can the innovation of traditional culture be

made conversely, by pouring "old wine into new bottles"? The answer is yes. For example, Tang Dynasty (618-907) poet Zhang Ji's renowned poem *A Night Mooring by Maple Bridge*.

For more than a thousand years, the beauty of this masterpiece was limited to the form of seven-character quatrain poetry (regulated verse with four lines of seven characters each). However, things changed drastically in the 1990s. In 1993, Chen Xiaoqi, known as the "King of Guangdong Pop Music," had already become a fan of the poem. Attracted by its inspiring and emotional glamor, he set out to write a song based on the poem.

As a result, the pop song "The Sound of Waves as Usual" was produced and became popular across China and in Chinese communities around the world.

Alongside the borrowing

In 1958, Chinese writer Zhao Shuli (right, front) played drums with local farmers at a construction site of a small water conservancy project in Taihang Mountain area in Shanxi Province. by Zhang Ruihua/Xinhua

A still from the TV series *A Dream of Red Mansions* (1987), adapted from a classical novel of the same name. The key to innovating traditional culture remains new combinations of form and content. The modern media form has helped this classical literary work not only go through big innovations but also gain mainstream popularity. CFB

of artistic concepts and words from the poem *A Night Mooring by Maple Bridge*, the brilliance of the pop song lies in how it melts ancient homesickness into a modern narrative structure of "parting and reunion."

When the song played, people were immediately connected to the artistic concepts of Tang poetry, and ancient homesickness took on a new method of expression.

This is just one example of "old wine in new bottles," the other way of serving the present with the past.

Whichever way it goes, the key to innovating traditional culture remains new combinations of form and content.

In fact, many of the greatest activators of traditional culture are mainstays of mass culture and media.

Zhao Shuli's storytelling novels took the path of mass literature. Today, many literary and artistic works such as the TV series *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the new production of *The Peony Pavilion*, and popular music like "The Sound of the Waves as Usual" all reach the audience through mass media channels.

Of course, traditional culture can also be innovated into a brand new work serving niche markets, but only when it enters mass culture can it embrace big innovation and mainstream popularity.

A History of Chinese Theater in the 20th Century, by Fu Jin, jointly published by China Social Science Press and Routledge & CRC Press in 2016.

Chinese Theater in an Extraordinary Century

Edited by Zhou Xin

A key component of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese theater underwent drastic changes in the 20th century.

For thousands of years, the Chinese people lived in a society largely supported by an agricultural economy. The decades before the turn of the 20th century and the subsequent 100 years brought dramatic changes to lifestyles in China due to the huge influence of the outside world and modernization. The fate of Chinese theater over the past century mirrors the transformation of much of the art that prospered in ancient China.

A History of Chinese Theater in the 20th Century comprehensively traces the developmental trajectories of Chinese theater in the 20th century.

Social turmoil and chaos exerted intricate influence on Chinese theater in the early 20th century during the waning years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). After emerging during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) and the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Chinese theater had matured by the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties. The more popular forms such as Kunqu Opera were performed all over the country alongside various local theater arts. In this context, the classical narratives and wealth of performing skills developed over hundreds of years laid a solid foundation for Chinese theater to survive in the 20th century. As modernization continued, new cities exerted a powerful impact on Chinese theater with new venues and forms.

China's 20th century fell into two roughly equal halves with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 as a demarcation line. In the second half of the century, Chinese society and its theater endured tremendous changes, during which theatrical development continued with new variations springing up in scripts, acting techniques, music, and stage art. Such factors were

Photo of a theatrical performance taken by a foreign photographer in the early 20th century.

reliant on interactions between traditional and modern operatic systems as well as competition between the two, which led to the rise and fall of Chinese theater in that century. Alongside these factors was a stronger force: the innate human desire for entertainment and its influence on the content of theater. Theater should be a form of recreation. It is this impulse that ensures a steady flow of successors of the art, creating a cornerstone for survival of traditional theater arts in different social environments.

Variations of Chinese theater in the 20th century were subject to both internal restraints and impact from the outer world. As Chinese theater began to transform in the early 20th century, many realized the enduring power of tradition would become an obstacle for stage innovation. New theatrical products, whether political, artistic, or recreational, started differing greatly from their predecessors due to such forces. Modernization and localization are two basic dimensions to accurately interpret the development of Chinese theater in the 20th century. Furthermore, elaboration on Chinese theater from political, artistic and recreational perspectives has shone light on the intricate process. By outlining this process, the book is able to project a distinct picture of Chinese theater in the 20th century.

Author Fu Jin, born in 1956, is a professor at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. An expert on Chinese theatrical theory, he spent 20 years writing this book of 1.2 million Chinese characters, based on rich historical materials, deliberate discourse, and coherent analysis.

To facilitate better understanding of Chinese theater by global readers, the book is now being translated into English. The first and second volumes of the English version have already been published.

Setting the Stage

Text by Yi Mei

Glittering costumes, precious vinyl records, colorful stage stills and many other vintage objects used decades ago can now be seen at the Achievement Exhibition Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) and the Theatre Arts Education of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which recently opened at the National Museum of China.

Founded by the Chinese government in January 1950, NACTA was the first national educational institution dedicated to Chinese theatre arts after the founding of the PRC in 1949. The first president of the academy was Tian Han, the lyricist of the national anthem of the PRC.

Today, NACTA is an exemplary national provider of theatre arts education thanks to a wide-ranging curriculum and a mature training system supported by a robust teaching staff. It produces the largest volume of high-caliber professionals, solidifying its status as the most influential school of its kind in the country.

This exhibition thoroughly traces the huge changes in Chinese theatre arts education since the founding of the PRC by cataloguing the development of NACTA over the past seven decades.

Organizers went to great lengths to showcase the long path that NACTA has walked since its establishment and demonstrate how it has reformed and explored the classics and embraced inclusive innovation, paving an increasingly broad path of development for Chinese theatre arts.

The exhibition takes visitors back to the heydays of big names from the academy such as Tian Han, Wang Yaoqing, Xiao Changhua and Shi Ruoxu, and captures the teaching stories of the "Four Peking Opera Masters"—Mei Lanfang, Cheng Yanqiu, Gou Huisheng, and Shang Xiaoyun—as well as lessons from other famous masters.

It offers a closer look at the beauty of Chinese opera from both sides of the stage through display of exquisite costumes, traditional musical instruments, and precious black-and-white stills.

The mysterious origins of many terms repeated in professional classrooms are revealed one by one at the exhibition. By gaining understanding of the "unique skills" of Chinese opera, the audience can

The Achievement Exhibition Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) and Theater Arts Education of the People's Republic of China opened to the public at the National Museum of China in Beijing on December 26, 2020. The picture shows the profile photo of the White Snake Maiden, Bai Suzhen, in the Henan Opera play *The Legend of the White Snake*. by Chi Miao/*China Pictorial*

December 26, 2020: Costumes and props used by the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts are displayed at the exhibition. courtesy of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts

December 26, 2020: Photos displayed at the exhibition capture the stories of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. by Chi Miao/*China Pictorial*

better appreciate its profundity.

At the opening ceremony, Yin Xiaodong, president of NACTA, noted that some of the pieces on display came from the academy's historical collection, but most were contributed by common people.

Many famous opera masters who studied or taught at NACTA contributed pieces from their own precious collections. This resulted in the unique opportunity to see so many exhibits of historical significance, which silently document the persistence and inheritance of artists over time. For example, famous artist Wang Yaoqing's costume designed to be different on each side, master and educator Shi Ruoxu's 71 diary manuscripts documenting the development and changes of NACTA since its establishment, Gao Shenglin's *lankao* (blue armor), Lei Xifu's *lanmang* (a garment with python patterns worn by senior officials), Yan Baoquan's drums, Bai Dengyun's clippers, and other items.

This exhibition also uses various technologies such as multimedia interaction systems to enhance the viewing experience. The exhibition hall features many exquisite costumes, props, and design works used on the opera stage. A series of musical instruments, records, opera scripts, and 3D light shows have also been displayed, attracting a number of visitors.

"In this exhibition, we tried employing new and creative ways to better display static exhibits," said Yin. "By promoting the integration of modern technology and traditional art, we hope to get people from all walks of life interested in traditional culture, especially theatre arts and education. We have also been working hard to explore how to make theatre arts from thousands of years ago glow with modern vitality and powerful appeal in the new era so that they can develop with the times."

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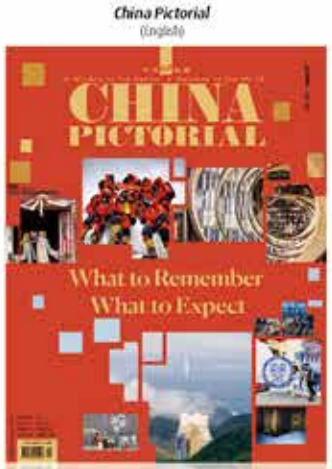

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