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# Introduction

Chinese theatre has always been viewed by Western theatre artists and scholars as the experience of *difference* which might offer a source of inspiration to their own theatre. Each practitioner approaching the Chinese theatre has identified elements within its aesthetic which have confirmed his own projected (unattainable?) theatre model. Bertolt Brecht found his theory of gesture and *Verfremdungseffekt* confirmed in a series of performances that he witnessed in the Soviet Union, in 1935, and recorded his impressions in several articles.[1] On the same occasion, Vsevolod Meyerhold praised the sense of theatre memory or tradition in Chinese theatre[2] and Sergei Eisenstein discovered his technique of montage echoed in the way the Chinese actor moved like a 'dancing skeleton . . . whose arms and legs fall apart and come together again'.[3] In the 1960s, Jerzy Grotowski explored the concept of breath (*qi*) and voice control in Chinese theatre[4] and, along with directors such as Peter Brook and Richard Schechner, turned to Chinese and Oriental theatres in search of a universal language of theatre.[5] In the 1980s, Eugenio Barba founded his ideas on training for the theatre on Chinese and Oriental models[6] and Ariane Mnouchkine's epic-folk theatre adopted some elements of Chinese theatre, amongst others, in order to defamiliarise Shakespeare.[7] Thus the broad, contemporary, Western view of the Chinese theatre is composed of a mixture of these

[1] For example, Brecht 1964: 91–9. [2] Banu 1986: 156.
[3] Eisenstein 1988: 777. [4] Grotowski 1969: 117–24.
[5] Grotowski 1969; Williams (ed.) 1991 and Schechner 1985.
[6] Barba and Savarese 1985.
[7] Fischer-Lichte, Riley and Gissenwehrer 1990: 281–2.



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individual perspectives, gained, in most cases, from single performances observed in the West either live or on video, or in some cases during workshop situations with Chinese actors that lasted no more than a month.[8] Moreover, such perspectives are not aimed at mediating the Chinese theatre *per se*, they rather seek to identify elements in the other theatre which might inspire and reform the own theatre.

While the pre-occupation of such important artists with the Oriental and Chinese theatres has brought some awareness of them to the Western theatre world at large, the nature of each artist's own specific interest means that the focus is turned inwards, back towards their own theatre. Some theatre practitioners looked for techniques of *distancing* in the Chinese theatre, while others searched for *universals* of theatrical language. Each opened up one small window on the Chinese theatre, one or two aspects which the artist *felt* (since none were literate in Oriental languages) confirmed his own pre-conceived idea of what theatre should try to be.[9]

The situation has been enlightened greatly since the 1970s. Sinologists such as William Dolby[10] and Colin Mackerras[11] have systematically mapped the historical and social context of Chinese theatre. Elizabeth Wichmann[12] and Gerd Schönfelder[13] have elucidated the music of Chinese theatre. Such works have greatly supplemented the earlier, descriptive works by Cecilia Zung,[14] Tao-Ching Hsu,[15] and others who have listed the costumes, make-up, movements and plots of some plays. The sinologists are, however, largely reliant on Chinese sources reflected through a cultural-evolutionary concept of the development of theatre,[16] not to mention certain theatre professional taboos and political restrictions.

As a challenge to the Western theatre practitioner who looks to China for the experience of difference and finds only his own theories and visions confirmed, and in an attempt to escape the evolutionary-historical presentation of the Chinese theatre, this work shall try to

[8] At the International School of Theatre Anthropology 1980–5, for example, or at the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre in 1986, 1987 and 1988.
[9] See for example Pronko 1967.
[10] Dolby 1976.
[11] Mackerras 1972, 1975 and 1983.
[12] Wichmann 1991.
[13] Schönfelder 1971, 1974.
[14] Zung 1937.
[15] Hsu 1985
[16] Zhou Yibai 1980.



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show, for the first time, a Chinese perspective. My account is drawn from inside the theatre world in China, as an initiated participant. It is based on many years of study in China at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing and in the field, in rural China. It shall draw upon personal experience of training for, performing[17] and spectating various kinds of performance art in China, as well as from personal encounters with teachers and actors across China.

My point of departure is not the viewpoint of a Western spectator, the *outsider*, who sits inside a Chinese theatre, or of a scholar pouring over ancient documents in a Western library; instead it asks the question: What does the Chinese spectator, an initiate, or *insider*, expect to see even as he stands outside the theatre before the performance has even begun? Is there a body of shared knowledge about each actor – his heritage, his training – and what about the play itself? Is it known? Does it have a performance history, and how does the Chinese spectator apply this knowledge to the performance he observes?

Once he is inside the theatre, what does the Chinese spectator *see*? How does he interpret the actor and the role being played? What tools of knowledge must the Chinese spectator have to crack the surface codes of a Chinese performance, and how do they operate? Some elements may be read in terms of their historical or aesthetic contexts, but others depend on philosophical, even genetic contexts. The Westerner perceives the process of life (of time and space) as a sequence which moves from position A to position B. Does the Chinese view differ? Is there a different (vertical, in depth?) way of reading the theatre, as Pound and Fenellosa suggested of Chinese poetry?[18] What happens when the spectator investigates the actor below the costume, music, make-up, movement, layer by layer, meaning by meaning? The Chinese teachers say that before an individual may speak out (articulate meaning), he must first absorb the form of speech. What is the *form* of the Chinese per-formative body? How is it composed? How does it prepare?

In the Year of the Dog (1983) I travelled up from the south of China towards Beijing, by train, by boat, by bike, by foot, crossing great river

[17] As the wine seller in *Zuida shanmen* (*Escaping from the Monastery*) with Ma Mingqun and the Beijing *jingju* 2nd Company, for example.
[18] Fenollosa 1969.



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beds empty of their waters, green-brushed mountains dry and strangely peaking out of rice fields, brown and yellow dust bowls of interminable plains, searching for 'Chinese theatre'. The hot days were filled following the image of film cameras dotted across the map of each city showing cinemas and theatres, buying tickets, unknowing. The cool evenings and nights were spent sitting on hard wooden benches in the square, in the park, the tea-house, circus tent or on upright chairs in theatres, numbered odds to the right, evens to the left, watching. I saw everything. From spoken Western-style theatre, traditional theatre, socialist cinema, music concerts and variety shows, to comic dialogue, sing-story-telling and disco. My ticket allowed me hours of programme, once inside. I could get up, walk about, eat, come back, find my seat occupied by a grandmother selling a brood of chicks from a basket on her lap, or an old gentleman dreaming with his pipe and spittle. They would move, or I would, and a busy woman in little white cap would come by with an enormous steaming kettle of hot water to fill our tea jars, before filling those on stage for the musicians and performers. My ears filled with noise and chaos. Of people talking, shouting, eating, laughing. Of the rough percussion on stage and the performer's song. Of piglets snorting and hens clucking, of babies suckling, grandpas spitting. My eyes filled with the colour, movement and shape of bodies on stage, of bodies off stage, of bodies back and forth behind and ahead, carrying kettles, baskets, an instrument, a prop, a pipe. For hours and hours, a gentle chaos, a sleepy bustle, and then a pause, a stop, a breath, a concentration, an involving passion for the moment on stage, as the female role tosses a sleeve over her shoulder, cries, exits, dragging the white silk on the floor behind her, trailing it for the dead hero to catch it and call her back, before being released again by the crack of sunflower seeds in the mouth of my neighbour before the shell flies to the ground, my feet, the earth.

The goal of my journey was Beijing, the capital city, the pure, the north, the citadel, the 'original' model, as I thought, of all this, the 'true' theatre, *jingju*, known to Westerners as 'Peking opera'. But when I arrived there, it was September, the middle of the Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution, and after checking in, my bags were deposited outside the hostel in the street and I was told 'there are no foreigner travellers in Beijing now'. I left China via Shanghai, city of lust and



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splendour, of lemon meringue pie and European quarters, without my theatre.

When I returned, the following year, it was to the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. The pure source, the theatre in Beijing, was not what I had dreamed. The stalls were half-filled with old grey men, their eyes closed, nodding, tapping their long yellow fingers to the beat, muttering; five white-shirted youths leaned lugubriously over the gallery resting their heads on their arms, languidly watching the flickering digits on their silver quartz watches. On stage, thirty minutes of this play, an hour of that, an interval and another thirty minutes of something. The actors played their play like automata, the only real movement was the shifting strip of characters displayed on either side of the stage giving the text. Without it, the figures on stage are dumb to the spectator, even with it, the text is unforgivingly classical, few can follow its intricacies (and I wondered which spectators could read anyway) but a summary is provided in red ink on tissue paper programme notes. Night after night it was the same scenario, the same twenty or so plays moved from theatre to theatre, unchanging, for two whole years: acrobatic spectaculars such as the Monkey King favourite *Sun Wukong danao tiangong* (*Sun Wukong Stirs up Trouble in Heaven*) and episodes from the saga *Baishe zhuan* (*The White Snake*); martial spectaculars such as *Sanchakou* (*Where Three Roads Meet*) *Yangjia jiang* (*The Yang Family Generals*), *Mu Kezhai* (*The Mu Family Axehandle Stockade*) and plays taken from stories of battles in the Three Kingdoms such as *Changbanpo* (*The Battle of Changban Hill*); historic romances such as *Yu Tangchun* (the tale of the wronged prostitute, Yu Tangchun), *Shi yuzhuo* (*Picking up the Jade Bracelet*), *Changshengdian* (*Palace of Eternal Youth*) and *Bawang bieji* (*The King Takes Leave of his Concubine*). Though the same plays are regularly offered to Western theatrical entrepreneurs, who believe the repertoire has been adapted for them to simple plots with eye-catching acrobatics, in fact they are produced to capture the failing Beijing audience. Specifically designed for the foreign market are the numerous Shakespeare adaptations,[19] and productions using children from the *jingju* school performing in English – anything to excite someone, anyone. Actors graduating with poor skills

[19] Li Ruru 1988.



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turn to the blossoming black markets at night to deal in leather jackets and lamb kebabs. Actors graduating with excellent skills do the same, practising English at street corners and dreaming of *kung-fu* films. Older actors, frail and sad, in worn, buttoned up Mao suits and caps as unchanging as their weary expressions, moan into their jars of tea, fished out of black plastic handbags, the cadres' key accessory.

The form *jingju* had its heyday at the turn and beginning of this century. It was a product of certain theatrical styles which met in the capital city and influenced each other. It was performed in the city at court as well as in tea and guild-houses, and later, in specially built theatres. One of the best known *jingju* actors of the early 1900s was Mei Lanfang. Mei performed the female *dan* role. He experimented with, and developed, *jingju* in all its aspects – costume, set, text, movement repertoire and song. Mei was a great *jingju* star in the 1920s and '30s; he 'declined' to perform during the Japanese Resistance, but returned to the stage in the 1950s in the changed arena of the Communist regime. He was given support by the government, which he reflected in visits to soldiers guarding the Chinese frontiers to Vietnam and Korea, as well as in performances for miners, workers and farmers across the land. But (this changed) Mei Lanfang died in 1961; and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 destroyed all that was left of the gasping theatre tradition, both *jingju* in Beijing, and the other theatres in the regions beyond. All cultural monuments and ideas were overturned. All that had been China, her writing, religion and theatre was eradicated at one blow. During those years, nearly every trace of the theatre tradition was erased. Most actors were sent to labour in the countryside and the few that remained performed eight politically correct plays over ten years to a bound audience. In the early 1980s, after the creation of the new culture along with its New Speak (*xinhua*), some attempts were being made to revivify the theatre by reintroducing certain traditional plays – rewritten according to recommended, thoroughly discussed and ratified lines. Mei Lanfang was used as the ghostly model, the prime spiritual recoverer of the lost golden age of theatre. *Jingju* began to travel to the West again; we were told of its 'ancient traditions', its 'deeply significant, codified movements'. But what came was not the *jingju* of before; the new *jingju* has been created under different political and social circumstances; it has a different history.



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But now, from Beijing, with an official Work Unit Card that showed I belonged to the Guild of Theatre Schools, I could travel again – this time extensively, and empowered with the language – south to Fujian and Guizhou, north-east to Shanxi. The theatre of the surrounding countryside and cities away from the capital was far more alive, more a part of the people's lives as they participated on and off stage, and I found the myth that the Beijing theatre (*jingju*) *is* Chinese theatre was being elbowed out by a vibrant tradition of making and watching performance of all (other) kinds in all (other) places. The capital has lost its central significance for theatre.

This was the search for the 'missing' theatre. The theatre people of my generation East and West had never seen, a theatre not coloured by the designs of those new theatre makers. It was an attempt to find a Chinese theatre by travelling back temporally and spatially to the outlying areas of China; to uncover the writings, religions and passions that made the theatre.

In the yellow plains of poorest Shanxi, I found ancient theatre stages from the twelfth century in temples transformed into schoolhouses, homes, granaries. In the coastal region of Fujian, a vibrant puppet tradition thrives as clans compete to outdo each other in skill and variety of repertoire. The representation of man, through the figures, and the manipulation of such human figures by men, raised all kinds of questions about performance and being, about life and death, or the real and other, fictive, theatrical worlds. In the southern province of Guizhou, among a population of eight ethnic nations: Han, Miao, Buyi, Dong, Shui, Yi, Gelao, Yao, a form of theatre called *nuo* (to cleanse, exorcise) performed at the lunar New Year, autumn harvest festival and – in the event of drought, sickness, infertility – at the desire of any villager. The performers are male clan members, villagers, mostly farmers. Their theatre cleanses, celebrates and reconfirms the clan community.

The *nuo* performance arena is marked by a passageway of red banners, leading to an open space at the heart of the village. Guizhou is cold at New Year, not the minus temperatures in white sun that make Beijing winters bearable, but a creeping, cold dampness that never clears from the layers of clothes that swaddle each body. The spectators stand close to keep warm. The very first day of New Year, I walked to



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the village of Wujiaguan, just outside Anshun. The village has no *dixi* troupe of its own (the local form of *nuo* theatre), but invites a troupe from distant Zhanjiadun to perform on its behalf, who arrive at midday, in costume with drums, having marched several hours, singing. The troupe follows the red-bannered path, the waiting spectators gather to greet them. But before they are permitted to enter the performance area of Wujiaguan, the actors face a test. On a table, barring the entrance to the village, stand tiny porcelain cups of spirits and rice. The village elders congregate behind the table and offer the cups to the troupe leader and his deputies, singly, to drink and offer propitiation, respect and libation to the earth round which they are about to enter. One by one an actor approaches and is given a riddle. He must puzzle it out in verse, singing, or withdraw, singing. The first riddle was the character *quan* (spring, source) with a picture of a leaf above it. It was quickly solved as 'fresh, green spring', a good omen for the coming spring crops. The second riddle was an unfinished literary quotation from the *Saga of The Three Kingdoms*; the third also tested the literary scholarship of the invited actors. These riddles were easily solved, and celebrated with yet more libations of wine and song. The fourth riddle was 'two colts galloping side by side'. One actor came forward, then another. The actors became agitated. The village elders waited. An hour passed. The troupe sang and sang – the feathers in their head-dresses tossing and quivering. The village elders conversed, edgily watching me. Finally they agreed that my presence allowed them to move the barrier and welcome in the troupe, despite the final riddle remaining unsolved. Under normal circumstances, the troupe must guess the riddle before they may perform, no matter how long it may take. Later, a hoary voice whispered to me, across the din of duelling generals 'this is the year of the horse, midday is the hour of the horse – the first moment of the New Year, the time of performance, should have been like the two horses galloping in'.

What other spectators demand so much of their performers and so challenge the actors' literary scholarship? It was a contract between partners which continued throughout the performance. A wrong movement, a mispronounced text, a badly executed sequence was criticised by a circle of old women sitting at the edge, nodding, gossiping, tut-tutting.



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In the early 1900s, *jingju* spectators talked of going to 'hear theatre' (*tingxi*). They were as critical, as initiated, as the old women in the countryside. Mei Lanfang's reputation was based on modifications he proposed which such knowledged, sharing audiences ratified. But where was he now? No disciples continued his tradition (the representation of female *dan* roles by males was abandoned in the 1950s), the plays he performed were stripped of 'unsuitable' content (whether superstitious, feudal, bawdy, spiritual or religious), and the theatres are barely filled with men who barely remember their part of the contract, while those who would have been initiated, who would have joined their elders, sat in bars drinking beer from white plastic jugs and playing pool.

Mei Lanfang, and all that he once represented, the mythical *jingju* that I never experienced in the 1980s, has become the empty centre of this study. He is the one figure that unites all kinds of theatrical performance occurring in China; elements of his art are reflected in all theatrical events, from puppet theatre, mortuary ritual and *nuo* masked theatres, and I found that the examination of all these other performance events illuminates, reflects and fulfils the image of the great master.

In the *nuo* theatre, the actors orientate their performance around a mathematical, magical matrix known as the Luo diagram. It consists of three rows of three cells, numbered in such a way from 1–9 that any route along a straight line of three renders the same digit, 15. The *nuo* performers place certain values onto the matrix related to the macrocosm, and their dance across the performance space becomes a recreation of perfect (mathematical and cosmological) harmony. In the matrix, the central cell, bearing the digit 5, with its magical relations to centrality, medial control and harmony, is the key element combining all other outlying digits with each other. Each route across the Luo diagram exploits and transgresses the magic, unifying centre, the axis of recreation. In this study, the model of the Luo diagram has been applied to the whole of Chinese performance in general. The figure Mei Lanfang stands at the centre of the study as the model around which presence in performance, the articulation of the performing figure, can be analysed. Through one play, *Guifei zuijiu* (*The Favourite Concubine Becomes Intoxicated*) aspects of Mei Lanfang's performance art are analysed. Each moment, from the discussion of the role outside the theatre among the



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queuing spectators in chapter one, to the first entrance pose, three minutes later in chapter five, opens a path towards other forms of performance and back. The focus of the study could have been any play from the *jingju* repertoire. The method of analysis can be applied to all plays. This particular play was chosen simply because it is better known, because more materials are widely available – in film and text and because it became identified more than any other play, with the actor Mei Lanfang.

The eight chapters of this work take Mei Lanfang as a starting point, as central, unifying figure to illuminate a different aspect of performance. Chapter one, 'Family', begins with the moment outside the theatre and the known history of the performer and the play shared by the initiated audience. It deals with the tradition of performance within the clan or adopted family and the breakdown of such traditions in modern China. The second chapter, 'Appearance', analyses the first pose of the actor on stage, and explores systems of meaning in the cut and colour of costume and dress and, finally, the system of meaning in the body underneath the costume: how the body is transformed, manipulated or recreated as an actor. In chapter three, 'To sever', methods of transforming, cutting, articulating the body for performance are analysed. Training methods, actual physical dismemberment and masking are parts of this process in Chinese theatre. Chapter four, 'Identity', explores the spoken and sung text of performance and the shifting sense of identity portrayed by the acting figure. Key issues of Chinese performance such as self-narration, self-manipulation of the articulated body and distance from the role being played are discussed. In chapter five, 'Life', the model of the mortuary figure, placed in the tomb to provide life in the underworld, is related to the performing figure in theatre. The processes in China by which inanimate figures of wood, metal, porcelain and paper are animated for the other world of death are closely related to similar processes of animation of the role by the actor in the other world of theatre. Chapter six, 'Presence', continues this discussion and explores the movement of such animated figures in detail. What kinds of movement show presence? How is movement represented by such figures to give the idea of presence? The mathematical-magical matrix of creation, the Luo diagram, is the centre of chapter seven, 'To unify'. In this chapter, specific examples of movement sequences from



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