

Xin Fengxia and the Transformation of China's Ping Opera 1

Introduction

In 1949, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had taken control of Beijing in January that year, a star actress emerged from the low-class entertainment quarter of Tianqiao. Her name was Xin Fengxia (1927–98), an actress of the northern folk *xiqu* (traditional Chinese theatre) form of *pingju* (ping opera) who had just moved to Beijing from her hometown Tianjin. Initially denied access to Beijing's established theatres, which were mostly reserved for *jingju* (Beijing opera), Xin now found a ready ally in the class-conscious communist government because of her outstanding artistry and due to *pingju*'s facility as less stylized folk theatre to allow for the performance of contemporary plays, making it well suited to propagating new government policies. At her peak, Xin anchored grand finales during performances for national leaders, even topping *jingju* stars. She also joined the ranks of the cultural elite after marrying Wu Zuguang (1917–2003), a prominent playwright and film director, although the risk of such an alliance became apparent in 1957 when Wu became a leading target of the Anti-Rightist campaign and was punished with a three-year exile to the northeast.¹ Paradoxically, those years of separation from Wu proved to be the most artistically productive for Xin; labeled an “internal rightist” for refusing to divorce Wu and deprived of lead roles in revolutionary dramas, she created her own traditional-themed plays using new arias and metrical types that significantly expanded *pingju*'s musical repertoire. After several relatively peaceful years under liberal policies in the early 1960s, Xin was again targeted before and throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), during which she was banished from the stage and suffered a stroke in 1975 that paralyzed her left side. Kept away from the stage after the Cultural Revolution, Xin, despite being illiterate until the early 1950s, wrote over a dozen volumes containing recollections of her life and artistry, which became widely acclaimed as quality sketches of life on- and offstage before and after 1949, as well as a rich source of research material, including for the writing of this volume.

Xin has become a cultural icon on account of her artistic achievements and larger-than-life personality. She is also a key figure with regard to our understanding of various aspects of Chinese theatre in the twentieth century, such as the relationship between theatrical genres and their performers' social status, and the role of social and political systems in determining such relations; the relationship between a theatre artist's stance in political upheavals and her creativity and legacy, both theatrical and cultural; the evolution of folk-based theatre in content and form through regime shifts and political upheavals; the

¹ The Anti-Rightist Movement started in June 1957 after a period of liberal policies in 1956 and early 1957 that encouraged criticism of governmental bureaucracy.

fate of low-class popular entertainers, especially female performers, before and after 1949; the authorship of an actress's autobiography; and the reliability of memory under official narratives.

As a critical biography of Xin, this book is divided into four sections, reflecting four periods of her life: growing up in Tianjin before 1949; national stardom in Beijing (1949–57); creativity during political upheavals (1957–76); and authoring her memoirs (1976–98). The issue of Xin's authorship of her memoirs, and whether to focus on the role of her male "helpers" or to treat such work as a kind of "solo performance, 'By Herself'" (Gardner 2007: 187), will be discussed in detail in Section 4. Suffice to say that I broadly agree with Viv Gardner's contention of trusting the work of an "actress-autobiographer" in its "assertion of agency" (Gardner 2007: 175), while also seeking confirmation from contemporaneous publications and other sources. On the issue of memory, China historian Gail Hershatter has documented the constructedness of post-1949 oral histories that conform to what she calls the "official subaltern-speak" of suffering and resistance before 1949 that is "at best . . . homogenizing, unilinear, flattening in its inattentiveness to any categories other than those of the official class structure" (Hershatter 1997: 23; see also Hershatter 2011; Feng 2017). Indeed, some of Xin's writings could have been similarly influenced by the rhetoric of the post-1949 denunciation of the "old society." For example, as will be discussed in Section 2, her judgment of certain traditional *pingju* plays during their revision process in the mid-1950s seems to reflect *xiqu* reform rhetoric. However, as I detail in Section 4, Xin's writings of her pre-1949 life on- and offstage are marked by vivid details that sharply contrast with the "homogenizing, unilinear, flattening" language of "subaltern speech." By the same token, in Section 1, I generally trust Xin's highly descriptive and personal writings about the discriminations and abuse she and other *pingju* actresses suffered before 1949, while also balancing them with available publications from the era and secondary sources.

1 Growing Up in Tianjin before 1949

When Xin Fengxia started writing her memoirs after the Cultural Revolution, she mostly focused on her life before 1949. These autobiographical reflections majorly shape her initial volumes, published in the early 1980s, which established her fame as a fresh literary voice because of her keen observations and vivid delineations of life on- and offstage (Xin 1980, 1982, 1983, 1985b). Her early memoirs can be divided roughly into three categories: her wide-ranging acquisition of performance skills that prepared her for post-1949 stardom in Beijing; her experiences with popular entertainment performers on- and

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offstage, especially with other *pingju* actresses; and various sketches of people and events in her family and in her mostly working-class neighborhood. In Section 4, I will discuss this last group of essays, which received high praise for their vivid depiction of unique social customs in pre-1949 Tianjin. Here, I focus on the first two categories: learning her craft and the life of actors in popular entertainment before 1949 under the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) government or the Japanese occupation (1937–45). As a popular theatrical form for the lower class, *pingju* was generally performed in small theatres, either standalone or within entertainment complexes such as department stores or amusement arcades that offered theatrical performances.

1.1 Acquisition of Expansive Performance Skills

Xin Fengxia was most likely born in 1927, the first of seven children in a poor family in Tianjin, although her real parentage remains unclear. When she was ten, her cousin Yang Jinxiang,² a *jingju* (Beijing opera) actress, told her that she had been purchased at three years old from the southern city of Suzhou and brought to Tianjin, an allegation her parents steadfastly denied, even introducing her to the midwife present at her birth (Wu 1998: 15). Nonetheless, Xin apparently believed the allegation, to which she alluded in her early memoirs and to which she explicitly referred in the 1998 *My Name is Xin Fengxia* (*Wo jiao Xin Fengxia*), a volume completed a month before her sudden death in April of that year (Xin 1985b: 236; 1998: 61; Wu 1998: 15). While she wrote effusively of her mother's unrelenting devotion to her early career and of her support in and after 1957 when Wu Zuguang was targeted as a "Rightist," as well as of her father's struggles to support the family, she must have shared her doubts with her husband. In 1954, after refuting a peasant woman's false claim as Xin's birth mother, Wu wrote in his diary about Xin's mother, "This mother is also not the real one" (Wu 2005: 44).

The mystery surrounding Xin's birth is relevant to our understanding of *pingju* actresses of Xin's and older generations, since many of them were indeed bought/fostered and groomed as moneymakers, including some of the genre's luminaries, such as Bai Yushuang (1907–42) and her adopted daughter Xiao Bai Yushuang (Bai Yushuang, Jr., 1922–66). Both were bought by Bai's adopted mother Li Bianshi (Mrs. Li, née Bian), from whose tight control both also at various times tried to escape. Also bought and fostered was Ai Lianjun (1918–39), one of *pingju*'s Four Major *Dan* (female-role-type) superstars, who died aged twenty-one of tuberculosis; to continue performing as long as possible to the financial benefit of her foster parents, they forced her to smoke opium and take

² Due to their low social status, the birth and death dates of many actors in this book are unknown.

heroin shots (Wang 1991: 63–64). Closer to home, the wife of Xin's second uncle on her father's side – her cousin Yang Jinxiang's mother – was a madam who bought girls to be either trained for the stage or sold to a brothel. According to John D. Chinnery, a *pingju* scholar and friend of Xin and Wu's who discussed the issue in his foreword to Xin's translated memoir, it was this aunt-in-law of Xin's who first bought her and then gave her to her adopted parents (Xin 2001: ix).

Xin's father was a skilled maker and peddler of a popular snack called *tanghulu*, a skewer of several northern Chinese hawthorn berries covered in crystal-clear, hardened sugar. Her mother was a housewife who sometimes did sewing work for extra cash for the family. When Xin was young, the family lived together with relatives on her father's side, including her grandmother, a widowed aunt, and two older uncles, the second of whom was Jinxiang's father and a well-known *jingju* musician of the genre's principal instrument, the two-stringed *erhu*. Later, the big family divided their living arrangements, but with Jinxiang's family living next door, at the age of six Xin was able to start *jingju* training with her cousin (Xin 1985b: 28), beginning with strenuous physical exercise and growing to learn and play bit roles in Jinxiang's troupe. Several years later, after Jinxiang died from an opium addiction and Xin's second uncle's family moved to the northeast (Xin 1983: 55), Xin started learning *pingju* from several masters. At this point, she was around the age of twelve. It was only then that she acquired the stage name of Xin Fengxia ("New Phoenix Sunset") after several failed attempts at acquiring one, having been called only the informal Xiaofeng ("Little Phoenix") since childhood (Xin 1985b: 21–31).

Pingju's origins can be found in the chanted storytelling form of *lianhualao* (lit. "song of the lotus flowers") that can be traced to the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and was popular throughout China, including vast rural areas in Hebei province east of Beijing and Tianjin. Around 1890, *lianhualao* artists started performing in Tianjin. When the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 pushed the troupes out of the city,³ some artists found an opportunity to start the transformation of *lianhualao*'s performance format from narration to character impersonation, thus creating a new form known as *chaichu* (lit. "separating out [of characters]"), although the scripts created at this time largely maintained *lianhualao*'s narrative convention of having characters announce their own actions. Another breakthrough for the form occurred in 1908, during a prolonged sanction on entertainment during the dual national mourning of the Empress Dowager Cixi

³ The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) was an uprising against foreigners in China, suppressed by a united Western and Japanese army that invaded Beijing through Tianjin.

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(1835–1908) and the Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908). For several months, Cheng Zhaocai (1874–1929), *pingju*'s foundational and most prolific playwright, and his fellow artists worked in their home village in Luan County, about sixty miles east of Tianjin, to fundamentally transform *chaichu* into what we now know as the basic form of *pingju* by expanding the orchestra with additional instruments and, critically, by transferring the beat-keeping clappers from the performers to the orchestra, thus freeing the actors' hands for performance. They also created the foundational role-category system of the "three littles" – little *dan* (female role), *sheng* (male role), and *chou* (clown role), with *dan* as the principal role type. In 1915, Cheng and his fellow actors returned to Tianjin, where their revamped form acquired the name *pingju*. This new form experienced tremendous success and growth.

Pingju's popular practice of using folk content, combined with the emergence of actresses in the form who took over female roles from male performers who previously had played all roles, resulted in widespread censorship against its performance. This censorship drove many actresses to the northeast, where *pingju* flourished in the 1920s around the city of Shenyang, then called Fengtian. By the end of the decade, *pingju* troupes began entering Beijing, where *pingju* thrived until the expulsion of Bai Yushuang in 1934,⁴ which, ironically, led to its two-year boom in Shanghai (1935–37), showcasing Bai and other major stars. By the time Xin started learning *pingju* at the end of the decade, the genre's expansion years were coming to an end. She managed to learn bits and pieces, at times with great difficulty, from the Four Major *Dan* stars – Bai Yushuang, Liu Cuixia (1911–41), Ai Lianjun, and Furong Hua (1911–52). However, the first three would soon pass away, making the 1940s a kind of "hiatus era" for the genre, reinvigorated by Xin's innovations, together with the reemergence of male stars,⁵ in the following decade.

By the age of fourteen, Xin had already earned lead status in her troupe in Tianjin. Her break came from a fortuitous opportunity when the former lead actress eloped with her lover, and Xin, having gained a reputation backstage for her capabilities at observation and imitation, was asked to take over the starring role in the play *Tang Bohu Chooses Qiuxiang* (*Tang Bohu dian Qiuxiang*), which was well received by the audience (Xin 1980: 72–74). Her lead status was further reinforced that year when she performed the middle-aged Auntie Wang

⁴ Bai was punished for wearing supposedly lewd costumes in a play titled *Catching Flies* (*Na cangying*).

⁵ *Pingju*'s male actors largely only played supporting roles during the expansion period due to their practice of singing in the same key as the actresses. Their emergence as equal partners came in the 1950s after the invention of the *yuediao* (transcendent tune), which is pitched a fourth lower than that of their female partners.

in *Persuading Aibao* (*Quan Aibao*), one of *pingju*'s foundational plays, with a plot about Wang admonishing a young couple who mistreat the husband's parents. Flanked by two tall and heavysset male actors, Yang Xingxing and Dong Ruihai, in male and female clown roles as the young couple, Xin, at her entrance, quickly subdued the audience's laughter at the adult actors' clowning with her calm posture and steady delivery (Xin 1998: 167). In another play, *Loving Mother's Blood* (*Cimu xie*), her singing of a key aria as the mother character impressed her veteran supporting cast to such a degree that, after the show, the actor Gai Sansheng (1882–1954), considered by Xin as her mentor and who would later teach her several plays, took her to the backstage worship table to pay homage to the patron saint (*zushiye*) for “the supernatural power our ancestor has bestowed on you of such a big stage presence at a young age!” (Xin 1998: 170).⁶ From then on, she earned the appreciation of her supporting cast, some of whom would later accompany her to Beijing and then join the Chinese Pingju Theatre.

Apart from the rigorous, strict training Xin received from her cousin and *pingju* masters, another contributing factor to her precocious maturity onstage was the broadly hybrid environment of popular entertainment forms that surrounded her throughout her formative years, which she eagerly absorbed and would benefit from throughout her career. These forms included *jingju*, other regional *xiqu* genres such as *Hebei bangzi* (Hebei clapper opera), China's first modern spoken theatre *wenmingxi* (civilized drama, a hybrid form that mostly used scenarios and improvisation), and various storytelling forms (*quyi*), especially different types of drum songs (*dagu*) and a stand-up comedic form known as *xiangsheng* that is usually performed with two comedians. As a child living in the low-class entertainment area of Nanshi (South Market) with multiple theatres nearby, one of her most enjoyable activities was *chuotui* (“poking the legs [to the ground]”), meaning standing in a theatre to watch plays for free, which was allowed by the venues as a way of attesting to and promoting their popularity (Xin 1985b: 13–15). After she started acting, because two of her masters, Deng Yanchen and Xiao Wuzhu, were well-known *pingju caidan* (female-clown-role) actors and well connected, she upgraded her theatre roaming privilege by directly entering another theatre's backstage, walking up to the patron saint's tablet, saluting, and then bowing to any actor sitting at the table, announcing, “Uncle Master, I'm here to watch the play” (Xin 1983: 153). Because she performed mostly in the entertainment centers of either Nanshi or the French Concession around the city's biggest department store/

⁶ Before 1949, Chinese theatres usually had a backstage worship table for the patron saint of theatre.

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entertainment complex, the Emporium of Industrial Promotion (Quanye Chang) (Xin 1997: 5–6), she was able to pop into nearby venues before, after, or even between her stage appearances.

This last practice once landed Xin in trouble when she snuck out – still in full makeup – of her *pingju* theatre on the sixth floor of the Emporium of Industrial Promotion to watch *jingju* plays on the fourth floor. When she returned before her next appearance, she was harassed in the elevator by a group of low-life gangsters who went as far as to follow her inside the theatre; the incident ended with her boss apologizing to the gangsters and her forfeiting a day's pay (Xin 1985b: 132–40). She was even hit by a car during another theatre-hopping, play-watching venture in the French Concession, when she tried to catch the famous *jingyun dagu* (Beijing drum song) actor Bai Yunpeng's performance of a well-known piece for the third time so as to master one especially catchy line (Xin 1997: 6). The only exception to this free-entrance custom for fellow actors was the city's most distinguished theatrical venue, the Grand China Theatre (Zhongguo Da Xiyuan), which was reserved exclusively for *jingju* and where the guards looked down on *pingju* performers. Consequently, when the *jingju* star Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) came to Tianjin and performed in the theatre, Xin and her friends were only able to see him perform through a skylight from the balcony. Ultimately, she was forced to leave by an usher after she argued with an actress friend about whether the lowly *pingju* would ever enter the Grand China Theatre (Xin 1983: 154–56).

For her own genre of *pingju*, to learn the singing secrets of the often-volatile star actresses, Xin would find whatever way possible to be on the same stage with them by taking advantage of the fluid troupe-composition system. To observe the two foremost stars of the time, Bai Yushuang and Liu Cuixia, she even played a dog in the play *Beating the Dog to Admonish the Husband* (*Da gou quan fu*), hiding inside a dog costume to learn their singing secrets (Xin 1983: 157–58, 169–73). Of course, she also studiously learned from them as much as she could, regardless of whether she could perform with them onstage. Her memoirs described multiple examples of her aptitude for imitating the stars with absolute accuracy, often making the performers themselves smile, as she recalled in an essay dedicated to the topic, simply titled "Imitations" ("Xue ren") (Xin 1985b: 141–54). She had aspirations to become a *xiangsheng* comedian, only to be scolded by her cousin Yang Jinxiang because of the form's impropriety for a girl; on one occasion she even beat Xin on the head – not an uncommon practice at the time between a master and student – for showing off her *xiangsheng* skills to fellow actors backstage (Xin 1985b: 81). Another favorite storytelling form of Xin's was *Henan zhuzi* (ballads of Henan), which she learned while backstage. She was so engrossed in learning the

singing that, on one occasion, she entered the stage to perform the *pingju* play *Flower as Matchmaker* (*Hua wei mei*) but ended up delivering the opening lines in the manner of *Henan zhuizi*, which “immediately provoked ‘boos’ from the audience” (Xin 1980: 136).

Despite these mishaps, such broad inspiration from other performance forms was highly significant to Xin’s innovative creativity in the coming years; her mimetic talent also earned her precious learning opportunities that would have been otherwise unavailable. One such example is the tutoring she received from the superstar Furong Hua. As a budding actress, Xin was eager to solidly imitate an especially lovely aria in the final “Wedding Chamber” (*Dongfang*) scene of *Flower as Matchmaker*, in which an enraged woman, Zhang Wuke, encounters her rival Li Yue’e, who succeeded in arriving at Zhang’s wedding earlier and imitating the bride – under a customary solid red veil – ultimately performing the wedding ceremony with Zhang’s betrothed Wang Zunqing. But when Zhang sees Li’s beauty in the wedding chamber, she cannot help but praise the latter’s face, clothing, and bound feet in a highly appealing aria with catchy rhythms and tunes and, as Furong performed it, movement of the hips on her own bound feet, which were unusual among *pingju* actresses by the 1940s. Xin was especially eager to learn the piece but was somewhat thrown by a challenging section known as building-over-building (*lou shang lou*), comprising a quick, $\frac{1}{4}$ tempo and closely stitched lyrics with words one right on top of another. She felt unable to do it properly even after winning general approval of her imitation of the aria from two of Furong’s supporting actors. To catch Furong’s attention, Xin would sing the aria near Furong’s dressing room in the same way the star sang it. Unlike most of the other divas, who dismissed Xin out of hand when she attempted to join their companies, Furong, upon seeing Xin, smoothed her disheveled hair, as she had just finished warm-up exercises, and asked Xin to perform the aria. Furong “very carefully taught me this aria word by word” and advised Xin not to blindly imitate her “liberated bound feet” which would “make people feel uncomfortable” (Xin 1985b: 93). She even offered Xin a chance to perform a scene from the play before her own piece, visibly standing by the curtain to show support for the young actress. Subsequently, Xin would always start with this play whenever she toured to new venues and audiences. Indeed, as can be seen in Xin’s 1964 film version of the play, the aria, with some revision, was especially appealing in both her singing of the building-over-building section and the stepping movements she made without imitating bound feet (Xin 2009: 0:19–2:55). All these learning experiences would prove useful not only for her performance of existing pieces, but also later when she created new tunes for original plays, especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which significantly transformed the *pingju* musical repertoire.