BOOK REVIEW
Siyuan Liu, *Transforming Tradition: The Reform of Chinese Theater in the 1950s and Early 1960s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021)

Emily Wilcox, William & Mary

In *Transforming Tradition*, Siyuan Liu tells a heartbreaking story of how, in their effort to reform *xiqu* (Chinese traditional theater) to suit the needs of post-1949 society, cultural reformers in the early PRC all but destroyed a vibrant and beloved performance practice that was both a longstanding pillar of Chinese traditional culture and a successful commercial enterprise for performing artists around the country. In this work, Liu builds on a growing body of recent scholarship examining *xiqu* history and the development of Chinese theater in the early PRC.[1]

This hefty book of over four hundred pages is bursting at the seams with vibrant examples and incisive analysis grounded in original primary source research. As a leading historian of modern Chinese theater, well-versed in both the Chinese and English-language scholarship, fluency in performance analysis and the *xiqu* repertoire, and deeply immersed in archival materials, Liu demonstrates an impressive mastery of a wide range of historical texts in this study. Liu draws extensively on government documents from the municipal archives of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin. He reads these together with published directives and reports on theater reform found in national, regional, and local newspapers and theater journals, as well as published theater criticism, scripts, and reviews dating back to the turn of twentieth century and earlier, in addition to artist biographies and memoirs and studies by other scholars. What lends the book its particular weight is Liu's expert positioning of this textual source material alongside analysis of audio-visual documentation of theater performance. Through his deep knowledge of Chinese performance traditions, Liu is able to read theater films, photographs, and sound recordings for changes in characterization, music, language, and choreography. By comparing recordings of performances from different periods of time by different artists and in different pre- and post- reform versions, Liu not only documents the policies and logics of the theater reform process but also assesses, in concrete terms, the impacts of these policies and logics on performance practice itself.

This book builds on many of the themes established in Liu's first monograph, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China*, which examines the history of *wenmingxi* ("civilized drama"), a hybrid urban performance tradition that peaked in China in the 1910s and blended elements of *xiqu* with Western-style *huaju* (spoken drama) and Japanese *shinpa*.[2] A major argument of that book is that *wenmingxi*, despite being commercially successful and well-loved by Chinese audiences, was eventually stamped out and even overlooked in Chinese theater historiography as a result of a *huaju* bias that was grounded in elitist notions of genre purity and Eurocentric colonial views of theatrical modernity that took Western theater history as universal. In *Transforming Tradition*, Liu extends this argument to understand the fate of *xiqu* in the post-1949 era, showing how theater reformers in the early PRC "adopted the basic tenets of literary and theatrical historicism from the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s" such that "[t]he reform efforts of both eras can be seen as attempts to historicize *xiqu* according to 'universal' (i.e., European) theories of the ideal state of theater" (p. 14). In Liu's analysis, the new ideological demands and historical materialist arguments that emerged in the 1950s *xiqu* reform served ultimately to further this historicist approach that positioned what reformers understood to be modern Western and Soviet theater as models for Chinese theatrical evolution.

In *Transforming Tradition*, Liu furthers this analysis by adding the important new concept of gentrification to understand the transformation of *xiqu* that occurred through PRC theater reform in the 1950s and early 1960s. The concept of gentrification highlights what Liu sees as the core function of the reform project, which was to shift artistic agency, creative authority, and organizational ownership away from *xiqu* artists and into the hands of "new literature and art workers," mainly political leaders with experience in either *huaju* or the reformed *xiqu* developed in Yan'an and the CCP base areas (p. 3). Under the presiding historicist vision, PRC cultural leaders labeled *xiqu* practitioners and their art as "old," thus providing a rhetorical justification for a gentrification process that was framed as a necessary intervention to "save" *xiqu* by educating, modernizing, and cleansing the art and its practitioners of ostensibly outmoded practices. As Liu details throughout the book, these interventions were so extensive and broad-ranging that they fundamentally transformed *xiqu* as an art form and as a result significantly reduced, rather than increased, its vitality. Among the myriad interventions Liu documents are the censorship of play content and performance practices, on often misguided ideological grounds that flattened characters and reduced performance variety (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2); orchestration of theatrical creation to serve external goals, such as perceived needs of international diplomacy and a forced "modern vs. traditional" genre categorization system (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4); and a fundamental restructuring of theater troupes and the way plays are created, produced, and toured to increase bureaucratic oversight, among other goals (discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). In each of these components of *xiqu* reform, Liu convincingly demonstrates how those who were the historical agents of *xiqu* artistry and innovation—the star performers—found themselves, through theater reform, to be increasingly dispossessed, constrained, and deprived of creative opportunities. Moreover, this dispossession took place all while these artists were for the most part still fully employed and even highly celebrated members of the *xiqu* profession who were at the prime of their careers and receiving state support.

The extreme irony of such intense energy and resources being devoted to *xiqu* reform while at the same time generating such terrible results from a theatrical perspective is precisely what makes Liu's narrative so heartbreaking. Through his meticulous analysis of individual actors' careers and the loss of their key performance skills over time, Liu documents how *xiqu* reform, through its intense pruning of repertoires and limiting of characters, plots, and stage techniques—especially for *chou* (clown), *huadan* (coquettish female), *wusheng* (martial male), and other role types that frequently fell into the crosshairs of reform efforts—forced the extinction of many complex and moving elements of *xiqu* performance that, as bodily knowledge passed down directly from teacher to student, can no longer be revived. Liu also reveals, often in disturbing detail, how many *xiqu* performances regarded today as "classics"—*Sanchakou* (Crossroads Inn) and *Baihua gongzhu* (Princess Baihua), discussed in Chapter 3, just two of many clear examples documented in the book—are in fact pale shadows of their former selves, leading Liu to conclude on several occasions in the book that "*xiqu* today is, to a significant extent, the legacy of a seventeen-year tradition" (p. 331). One also becomes extremely frustrated when reading about the seemingly arbitrary assignments of regional dramatic forms to "modern" or "traditional" repertoire and the consequent dire losses to artists' livelihoods and artistic viability. The elimination of improvisation and scenario plays—both important sources of innovation and collective creation in pre-1949 theatrical practice—seems obviously counterproductive to the purported goal of creating artistic work that reflects contemporary life and is "loved by the people," a commonly stated goal of cultural production in this period. The absurdity of imposing an 8-hour office schedule on theater actors who must perform late into the evenings and of organizing troupes in such a way that major repertoire cannot be performed for basic logistical reasons also further discredits the legitimacy and competency of the theater reform enterprise.

Some of Liu's discussions do partially redeem the theater reformers. For example, he shows how the Cultural Ministry and others at the national level were often at pains to reign in overly zealous regional and local leaders who interpreted central directives in a way that was often more extreme than intended (a phenomenon that will be familiar to PRC

historians and that continues to exist to the present day). This dynamic becomes particularly clear in the Prologue, where Liu explains the convoluted process of play censorship (in which confusion at the local level necessitated lists of banned plays) and the rocky unfolding of reform policy in general in the early years. Liu's account also reveals how reformers occasionally rolled back or moderated their damaging policies, as with the management of Cantonese opera repertoire in Chapter 4 and the troupe reorganization process detailed in Chapter 6. The picture Liu paints of the period overall throughout each chapter is one in which periods of restriction and control were followed by relative loosening and recalibration in a cyclical manner. In this way, despite presenting a very critical portrayal of state intervention into theatrical practice, Liu nevertheless avoids falling into the trap of portraying the state as a monolith or official doctrine as uniform and unyielding. Rather, in his explanation of both policy development and implementation, Liu is careful to differentiate between individual reformers, institutional units, and time periods, presenting a nuanced picture that emphasizes internal tensions and dynamic changes across time and place. Even the reformers themselves have names, stories, motivations, and trajectories. They are not one-dimensional bogeymen. In a way, because the leading reform figures in Liu's story are so well-known and often revered in accounts of modern Chinese theater history—people such as Tian Han, Ouyang Yuqian, Ajia, etc.—it feels important to have this unconventional view that also reveals the negative side of their leadership.

It is difficult to disagree with Liu's assessment of the theater reform's devastating effects on *xiqu*, which were only exacerbated by the Cultural Revolution that followed the period Liu examines and, in his analysis, dealt the final death blow to many of the practices that had already been significantly diminished during the 1950s and early 1960s. Part of what makes Liu's account so convincing is that it is extremely holistic. As he states, "this book looks into the comprehensive transformation of *xiqu*'s ecosystem" (p. 21). While acknowledging the effectiveness of Liu's intervention, which I am utterly convinced by, I would like to raise some questions for further consideration and exploration:

First, were there any aspects of pre-1949 *xiqu* that Liu felt were legitimately in need of reform and, if so, how did the theater reform impact those aspects of *xiqu*? In his discussion of the *jinglike* ("manager") in Chapter 6, Liu suggests that real abuse of power may have existed in the pre-1949 system, with accusations "of reaping profits without being onstage; of ruthlessly controlling theaters, touring schedules, and troupe organization; and, in the worst case, of using such power to sexually harass actresses or *nan-dan* (male *dan*) actors" (pp. 288-289). Additionally, in the discussion of censored content and banned performance practices in Chapters 2 and 3, it is clear that one concern of *xiqu* reformers was to remove elements of *xiqu* performance that expressed discriminatory values, including ablism (through techniques making fun of the disabled), classism (through plots and performance that were deemed "demeaning to the laboring class" p. 100), and sexism (through using the *qiao* to perform women's bound feet), etc. The apparent popularity of plays about women being forced to suicide or otherwise punished for perceived infidelity (including after their husband's death), as in the plot summaries of *Cleaving the Coffin* and *Spinning Cotton* in Chapter 2 (p. 117), also give the impression that there was room for improvement in content to reduce sexist and misogynist themes. So, my question for Liu is, was the reform project completely unreasonable and unjustified from the beginning, or was it more the flawed execution, the misunderstanding of *xiqu* repertoire and practices, and the reliance on historicist views of theater that were the main problems? Furthermore, is it valid to justify keeping problematic practices and content by arguing that they are essential to preserving the artistic tradition?

Finally, one of the great strengths of Liu's analysis is that he evaluates changes to *xiqu* practice from the point of view of the *xiqu* community itself, that is, the *xiqu* performers and fans. I am wondering if we can get a different picture of *xiqu* reform if we consider how it may have impacted people outside this community. For example, were new audiences exposed to *xiqu* as a result of bringing in directors, designers, and playwrights from other fields or of sending *xiqu* abroad on international diplomacy missions? Did the promotion of *xiqu* nationally and internationally through film and other media extend

its reach beyond what would have been available without state intervention? During Liu's moving discussion lamenting the lack of stage time and creative opportunities for leading actor Li Shaochun after Li joined the state-owned Chinese Jingju Theater (pp. 313-319), I could not help but think of how, around this same time, in 1957, Li co-directed the first Chinese classical dance drama, *Magic Lotus Lantern* (*Bao liandeng*). I also recalled the dancer Zhao Qing, who starred in this production, telling me in an interview that it was a conversation with Li Shaochun during an international diplomacy tour together in the mid-1950s that she realized the importance of pursuing classical Chinese aesthetics in dance. While this does not reduce the tragedy of the reform's impact on *xiqu* performers and their art, can we find any redeeming aspects of the reform's impact if we consider ways in which it may have encouraged interdisciplinary work or brought *xiqu* knowledge and culture into new realms? In other words, while the reform destroyed many aspects of *xiqu* as it was practiced before 1949, did it perhaps also transform the relationship between *xiqu* and other genres in ways that may have been productive, possibly in ways not immediately clear if we assess it through the lens of *xiqu* alone?

As with his previous work, with *Transforming Tradition* Liu has brought us once again a tour de force of thoroughly committed, deeply multilayered, impeccably researched scholarship. His research continues to set the standard for historical studies of theater and the arts in modern China.

---

[1] See, for example, Xiaomei Chen, Tarryn Li-Min Chun, and Siyuan Liu, eds., *Rethinking Chinese Socialist Theaters of Reform: Performance, Practice, and Debate in the Mao Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021); Maggie Greene, *Resisting Spirits: Drama Reform and Cultural Transformation in the People's Republic of China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Xing Fan, *Staging Revolution: Artistry and Aesthetics in Model Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution* (Hong Kong University Press, 2018); Brian James DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ruru Li, *The Soul of Beijing Opera: Theatrical Creativity and Continuity in the Changing World* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

[2] Siyuan Liu, *Performing Hybridity in Colonial-Modern China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Response

Siyuan Liu, University of British Columbia

I am grateful to *PRC History Review* for soliciting a review of *Transforming Tradition* and to Emily Wilcox for her careful reading and generous assessment of the book. I also want to thank Wilcox for the questions she raised. I agree with both of her major points, about the need for nuance in our overall assessment of the *xiqu* reform and for viewing the reform from the viewpoints other than the practitioners. In general, I concur with her that some *xiqu* reform measures were reasonable and much of the problem could be the result of flawed execution, misunderstanding, and historicist views. The key issue that I took with the reform was its top-down nature.

As I discussed in the book, *xiqu* reform had been a priority for modern intellectuals since the turn of the twentieth century and some of the reform leaders, such as Tian Han and Ouyang Yuqian, were given their positions in the PRC partly due to their pre-1949 efforts, including Ouyang's anti-sexist retake of the classic "fallen woman" Pan Jinlian's story. I invoked Chinese scholar Li Wei's model of the three paradigms in pre-1949 *xiqu* reform: the "Mei Lanfang paradigm" of technical conservation, the "Tian Han paradigm" channeling modern intellectual and artistic visions, and the "Yan'an paradigm" that utilized folk art for political utilitarianism. Li views the post-1949 reform as replacing and co-opting the first two reform paths with political utilitarianism. It seems to me a less invasive reform path would have given more room for the first two paradigms to flourish.

The top-down model in the decision-making process is exemplified in the 1951 Shanghai forum on performance reform where the conclusion was presented as a consensus despite concerns raised during the discussion (Chapter 2). One such concern that was ignored was related to the *qiao* that Wilcox discussed in her review; the speaker suggested finding ways to preserve the *qiao*'s performance technique even as the practice was eliminated. Also ignored was an earlier plea from Mei Lanfang for *qiao*'s use by comparing the practice to ballet pointed toes, even as he was speaking as the director of the national Jingju Research Institute (Chapter 2). An alternative to the government mandate could have been to follow the market force and performance evolution. In the case of the *qiao*, such force had, by the 1940s, significantly narrowed the role types that used the *qiao*, in part because of the invention of the soft *qiao* that was akin to high-heel shoes, thus eliminating one major objection to the *qiao*'s usage, the physical cruelty to beginning actors' feet. The questions then become: Who has the final say on the legitimacy of specific performance techniques, the state or the artists, audiences, and the market? Which approach would be less invasive?

I am also grateful for a chance to discuss Wilcox's second major question, which is the interdisciplinary benefit of the *xiqu* reform in expanding *xiqu* into other media, reaching more domestic and international audiences, and cross-pollinating with other art forms. Without doubt, these benefits need to be acknowledged; it is also important to recognize the price of such expansions and probe whether such price could have been mitigated or avoided had it not been for such a top-down, utilitarian model. We can, for example, celebrate the wide reach of *pingju* (ping opera) and *yueju* (Yue opera) films while remembering the significant loss of their pre-1949 repertoire as a result of focusing on new plays (Chapter 4), or celebrate Li Shaochun's influence on Zhao Qing's dance drama during their international cultural missions while recognizing how these frequent tours distanced Li from the stage and consequently left him far short of his creative potentials (Chapter 6). I believe such a multi-focal vision will bring more nuance to our understanding of the *xiqu* reform.

Again, I thank Wilcox for her generative review.