



# The Exploration and Expression of the Heritage Richness in Arts Education in the Multi-Cultural Society of Singapore: The Preservation and Practice of the Tradition of Xiqu in Mandarin Drama Curriculum Design and Actor-Teaching<sup>1</sup>

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A Exploração e Expressão da Riqueza Patrimonial no Ensino das Artes na Sociedade Multicultural de Singapura: A Preservação e Prática da Tradição do Xiqu no Design Curricular do Drama Mandarim e no Ensino de Atuação.

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## ABSTRACT

A young nation, the Republic of Singapore was established in 1965 as a state of multi-cultures and multi-ethnicities as well as multi-languages with English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil-speaking communities. The arts educational program of the Chinese-speaking Drama was introduced at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1997 with the establishment of this inaugural Mandarin Drama course in the country, where a range of the English-speaking curricula of (A-Level) Theatre Studies and (O-Level) Drama courses, etc. had already been introduced in this post-colonial society.

Therefore, the positioning of the mandarin drama curriculum and actor-training has always been challenging: should it follow the global format of the drama programmes, most of which were developed out of the English drama courses, or should it be a curriculum of its own – a question of whether the mandarin drama performative expressions should just be a translated Chinese version of the English Drama at large, or should it be a unique theatrical establishment of its own? This is an issue of how and to which extend the cultural and aesthetic nature from *xiqu*, one of the oldest existing theatrical traditions of the world cultural heritage should be preserved with curricula design and actor-training in theatre education.

This paper examines, reflects, and reviews the curriculum design discourse as well as the arts educational practice with the mandarin drama program in Singapore, a case study in relation to the issue of the preservation of the world cultural heritage in drama curriculum design and actor-training practice at large.

Keywords: Arts Education; Theatre; Chinese Operatic Performance of *Xiqu*; Mandarin Drama; Curriculum Design & Actor-training

## RESUMO

Uma nação jovem, a República de Singapura foi estabelecida em 1965 como um estado multicultural e multiétnico, bem como multilíngue, com comunidades de língua inglesa, chinesa, malaia e tâmil. O programa educacional em artes do

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teatro em língua chinesa foi introduzido na Academia de Belas Artes Nanyang em 1997 com a criação deste primeiro curso de Teatro Mandarim no país, onde já havia sido introduzida uma variedade de currículos em língua inglesa para estudos teatrais (Nível A) e cursos de Teatro (Nível O), entre outros, nesta sociedade pós-colonial.

Portanto, a posição do currículo de teatro em mandarim e na formação de atores tem sido sempre desafiadora: deve seguir o formato global dos programas de drama, a maioria dos quais foi desenvolvida a partir dos cursos de drama em inglês, ou deve ser um currículo próprio - uma questão de se as expressões performativas de teatro em mandarim devem ser apenas uma versão chinesa traduzida do teatro em inglês em geral, ou se deve ser um estabelecimento teatral único por si só? Isso é uma questão de como e em que medida a natureza cultural e estética do xiqu, uma das tradições teatrais mais antigas do patrimônio cultural mundial, deve ser preservada no design de currículos e na formação de atores na educação teatral.

Este artigo examina, reflete e revisa o discurso de design de currículo, bem como a prática educacional em artes com o programa de teatro em mandarim em Singapura, um estudo de caso relacionado com a questão da preservação do patrimônio cultural mundial no design de currículos de drama e na prática de formação de atores em geral.

## 1. Introduction

As a young nation with a short history of only about half a century, Singapore, situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, became a city-state republic only in 1965 when it has been separated from Malaysia, two years after the end of its colonial history under the United Kingdom that ruled the island-city over the previous one-and-half centuries.

However, Singapore had long been an island of immigration by nature and origin: apart from the ethnic Malay and the other indigenous groups, the number of the Chinese immigrants rose swiftly from only a handful among a thousand people living in the island, mostly the indigenous Malay, prior to Raffles' arrival in the year of 1819, to that more than half of the total population of 80,000 in 1860, and now further to over 70% of its whole population of more than 5 million residents today ("Singapore", 2023).

The Chinese immigrants together with the other three ethnic groups of Malay, Indian and Eurasian have formed the general population demography since then in Singapore. With Malay

as the national language of the country and the English as the official administrative language for all, the Chinese, the English, the Malay, and the Tamil have thus since become the four official languages used by the four major ethnic peoples respectively.

In school education, the dual languages' system has been implemented since the 1980s', where both the official administrative language of English and one of the mother tongue languages are taught to the students of the respective ethnic communities. Likewise, on stage and on screen, the performances and the programmes have also been delivered in the respective languages for the different targeted audience groups, as well.

There are dozens of theatre groups in Singapore. Many of them are English drama companies in addition to a handful of the Chinese-speaking troupes as well as a few groups that give performances in Malay and Tamil languages respectively. Among the Chinese-speaking theatre companies, more than half are the Chinese spoken (mandarin drama) ensembles while the rest are xiqu (戏曲)

(Chinese operatic theatre) troupes.

The formal form of theatre education in Singapore did not start until 1965 when the late Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002) established the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS) where the mandarin drama was taught and practised together with the other performing arts forms, e.g., dance, storytelling, etc.

Following the primary launch of the School of Drama at LaSalle College of the Arts in 1985 at the tertiary institutional level, the programme of Theatre Studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was commenced in 1992. These two programmes are delivered in English with the study of the Singapore English-speaking theatre at the core of their respective curriculum.

In 1997, the programme of Mandarin Drama was launched at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts being then the first and only higher theatre educational programme delivered in the Chinese language in Singapore. The study and practice of the mandarin drama of the world theatre repertoire with the focus of actor-training has been the core of its unique curriculum content.

## 2. Mandarin Drama on Singapore Stage

As the outcome of the concerted efforts in theatre education mentioned above, there came out subsequently a vibrant theatre performance scene especially since towards the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on Singapore stage, where the mandarin drama performance has also become uniquely a landscape of its own. This has not only appeared with the language of the Chinese being used as its distinctive presentational medium, but

it has also reflected the differentiated artistic features in the areas of acting style, the deliberation with voice and speech, and the movement, as well as its aesthetics, especially with the productions performed by the few local mandarin drama companies, as well as that by the students of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

Such theatrical as well as cultural characteristics embodied in the performance of mandarin drama on Singapore stage have always been identified and recognized as the fruition of the conspicuous influence from *xiqu*, the traditional Chinese operatic theatre, in nature and style.

In fact, the Chinese-language spoken-drama, i.e., the mandarin drama, was originally an outcome of a deliberate experimentation following the model of the western spoken-drama in contrast to the performance style of *xiqu* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It has thus consequently led to the formation of the modern Chinese theatre in the modern Chinese language speech instead of the classical (rigidly rhymed) textual structure in Chinese, together with the realistic movement form instead of the stylized gestural conventions, etc. as an innovated and updated new performing arts genre of its own for the Chinese-speaking public. Hence, came out the modern Chinese spoken drama in 1906 first in Tokyo by a group of the Chinese students studying in Japan, followed by its further introduction back to Shanghai, China, (Yu, 2019b, p. 106) which was subsequently brought over to Singapore in 1913 (Quah, 2013, p. 3).

Interestingly, since after the matured development of the Chinese spoken drama during the 1940s as an independent genre being different from that of the traditional Chinese operatic theatre of *xiqu*, there has, nevertheless, frequently

appeared the efforts to further experiment then with such an established mandarin drama by consciously and constantly looking back again to the artistic features and aesthetic nature of its own as an original tradition that had been embodied in the performance style of *xiqu*. With a temporary halt during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), this trend has then been revived and re-vitalized more conspicuously and purposefully since after the 1980s (Yu, 2020, p. 60).

The trend in question has always been deliberately combined with the contemporary drive to further experiment with and continual upgrade of the performance style and the dramatic structure of the Chinese spoken drama in search for its culturally national as well as traditionally indigenous characteristics. This has led to a fruitful outcome with the series of the popularly accepted productions appeared on the Chinese stage towards the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Likewise, such artistic features embodied in the fruitful stage productions, which had been explored from the theatrical traditions of *xiqu*, have also appeared in the performance style among a range of the mandarin drama plays on the Singapore stage, particularly with the works produced by the two longest-standing mandarin drama companies, e.g., the Arts Theatre of Singapore, the I-Lien Drama Society, etc. (Yu, 2020, p. 64) and some of the other companies, as well as the campus productions among the schools and tertiary institutions in Singapore.

In a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society of Singapore where both the English-speaking theatre and the Chinese spoken (mandarin) drama are presented to and received mostly by the same (English and Chinese speaking) communities of the bilingual audience, the embodied differentiated

artistic styles and aesthetics respectively from the English drama and mandarin drama have thus always been obviously reflected and felt through their respective performances on stage. Thus, the achieved artistic style with the mandarin drama influenced by the performance tradition of the Chinese operatic theatre of *xiqu* could thus always be easily identified, well understood, effectively received, appreciated, and enjoyed by the audience who are familiar with the Chinese theatrical culture.

However, at the same time, such distinctive artistic feature with the theatrical richness from the traditional Chinese operatic performance of *xiqu* might also bring about a sense of unfamiliarity to the others who are not familiar with the Chinese culture and its aesthetics at large, causing the receptive confusions and losses in their understanding and appreciation process usually with the following questions:

- 1) How and what is the artistic value through such a differentiated presentational, instead of representational, style with voice and speech as well as movement conventions in mandarin drama, which seems to be exaggerated, artificially faked, and unrealistically represented, compared to that of the western theatre, e.g., the English-speaking drama in performances?
- 2) Could the mandarin drama be performed in the exact same style as that of the English drama to achieve a similar authentic aesthetics with a common artistic format through a realistic, or naturalistic representational acting style on stage?
- 3) Should the mandarin drama artists, e.g., actors, directors, etc. be trained under the exact same artistic and aesthetic standard as that of the English drama artists, etc. in theatre education?

Hence is the need to explore and to understand the differentiated heritage richness uniquely

embodied in the Chinese-speaking theatrical culture as possessed and reflected in the genre of *xiqu*, the traditional Chinese operatic theatre.

### 3. Ceremonial & Spectacle: The Origin of the Chinese Operatic Theatre (*Xiqu*)

Different from the development of the western drama in terms of its narrative origin dating back to that of the Greek Tragedy, the start of the Chinese theatrical performance could be traced back into its own unique beginning as early as in the primitive shaman performance with its ritual ceremonial activities called *la* (腊), *zha* (蜡), *nuo* (雩) before Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 BC) (Yu, 1995, pp. 11-17).

Over its long historical development, such theatrical happenings have then been developed into, on one hand, both court as well as state worshipping processions leading to the Confucius ceremonial dance accompanied by ritual music shortly before Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), and on the other hand, as the court-jesters' show called *you* (优) during Warring-States Period (475-221 BC) by the well-looking (*you*) performers with music, dance, and acrobatics (Yu, 1995, pp. 17-19).

The appearance of theatrical wrestling show (*juedi-xi*) (角抵戏) in Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), was then flourished being part of *baixi* (百戏) (the hundred theatrical spectacle and acrobatic shows) during the period of Three Kingdoms (220-280 AD). While the former was further developed into a more dramatic performance of *chanjun-xi* (参军戏), a kind of topical farce named after one of its dual characters performed in the court through Jin Dynasty (265-420 AD) until Tang Dynasty (Yu, 1995, p. 20).

The form of talking-singing (*jiang-chang*) (讲唱) process in Buddhist temples during the period of Northern & Southern Dynasties (420-581 AD) and Sui Dynasty (581-618 AD), which was primarily devoted to the Buddhist Scriptures (*fo-jing*) (佛经), then also reached to the Buddhist legends as well as the popular stories during mass religious gatherings supported by the court authority. The Daoist revivals did not only follow such a practice but also succeeded in adding to the shows the mysterious Daoist witchcraft skills and martial arts, as well.

While at the same time, the theatrical performance of *nuo* (雩) was parallelly developed with the enhanced role-playing elements. As the result of such a tendency with the combination of ritual process and theatrical performance together, the flourishment of the Tang Dynasty dramatic dance and the topical farce in the court jointly contributed to the successive formation of the early *zaju* (杂剧) towards Northern Song Dynasty (960-1126 AD), being called (Northern) *song-zaju*, (宋杂剧) meaning the miscellaneous drama of the (Northern) Song Dynasty. It has been largely based on the dramatic form from Tang Dynasty topical farce (*chanjun-xi*) mixed with the theatrical traditions from the early *baixi* show and singing-talking performance, as well.

With the further inclusion of the local folkloric music from around south China, parallel to the (Northern) *song-zaju*, there appeared another operatic variation called *nan-xi*, (南戏) (the southern drama), as the kind of singing-dancing theatrical performance accompanied by the local folkloric music traditions during the period of Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 AD).

Compared with the (Northern Song Dynasty) *song-zaju*, the (Southern Song Dynasty) *nan-xi*

has established a more matured and distinctive artistic format with the absorption of the various Tang Dynasty theatrical styles including music and dance, popular ballad singing, as well as the Song Dynasty literature form of the lyrical poetry works (*song-ci*) (宋词).

Being popularly accepted, *nan-xi* achieved and enjoyed within and beyond the region of south China. It soon became flourished in the whole China throughout the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279 AD) reaching to its next historical development in Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 AD). It has thus directly led to the matured formation of *yuan-zaju*, (元杂剧), the Yuan Dynasty *zaju*. The latter has become the leading artistic form with the established dramatic structure and the enriched theatrical lyrical conventions as the Chinese classical theatre so far during Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 AD) (Yu, 1995, pp. 20-25, 25-35).

#### 4. Musicality & Theatricality: Beijing Opera (Jingju) as the Representation of the Chinese Operatic Theatre of *Xiqu*

During the next historical development in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), especially towards the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there appeared many regional “musical melodic-passage systems” (*shengqiang-xitong*) (声腔系统) with the practice of both *zaju* and *nanxi* performances, the term of which means the special musical structures based on the respective regional melodic sources. It has functioned together with the other musicological elements like that of melodic phrases, metrical types, and tune modes as well as the linguistic features from the local dialects to have formed the musical variations as the dis-

tinctive core elements of the Chinese operatic theatrical varieties of *xiqu*.

It has been with such long and complexed theatrical as well as musical evolutionary processes in the history through different dynasties, that the traditional Chinese operatic theatre of *xiqu* has thus been finally formed, though, different from region to region. Among them was *kun-ju* (昆剧) (*kun* drama), also called *kun-qu* (昆曲) (*kun* music melodies). It has been evolved from a musical style of *kunshan-qiang* (昆山腔), the vocal melodic-passage system local to the region of Kunshan in south China.

Towards the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, *kunshan-qiang* had an important musical innovation that assumed itself with a totally new artistic touch as “an aurally beautified musical melodic-passage system.” It was effective and expressive in exploring the inner emotions of the characters with its vivid presentation of dramatic content. With such, *kun-ju*, became an established royal opera genre of the time, contemporary to that of the Shakespeare theatre of the west.

On the other hand, parallel to and then following the development of *kunshan-qiang*, the rise and flourishment of the other four major regional musical melodic-passage systems of *yiyang-qiang* (弋阳腔), *bangzi-qiang* (梆子腔), *xiansuo-qiang* (弦索腔), and *pihuang-qiang* (皮黄腔) from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century did not only lead to the prosperity of the performance of different musical and theatrical styles of the regional operatic varieties in China, but has also jointly contributed to the final formation of *Beijing* opera musically and theatrically towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Yu, 1995, pp. 58-61).

In 1790, with the imperial celebration of Emperor *Qianlong* (1711-1799)’s eighty-years’ birthday,

the four celebrated ensembles of *huixi*, (徽戏) one of the local operatic theatrical varieties from the region of Anhui in south China, were invited for royal performances in Beijing. They were Three Celebrations Ensemble, Four Happiness Ensemble, Harmonious Spring Ensemble, and Spring Stage Ensemble.

With the individual artistic strengths from each of them, the arrival of these four major *huixi* ensembles at the capital city with their received imperial performances there jointly promoted the final formation of Beijing opera, *jing-ju* (京剧) (Yu, 1995, pp. 61-62). The latter has thus become the matured Chinese operatic drama ultimately in the history of the Chinese theatre.

*Jing-ju*, (Beijing Opera) has thus not only been just one of but has also become the leading one among the total over three hundred Chinese operatic theatrical varieties, which have been generally termed as *xiqu* (literally in Chinese: dramatic musical melodies), the theatrical opera or operatic varieties. They share the common artistic features with an organic inclusiveness of singing, (rhythmed and rhymed) recitation, (lyrically and poetically) acting and dancing in one unity with the character-work within the role-type conventions. Such artistic features are thus described and expressed by the modern Chinese scholar Wang Guowei (王国维) (1877-1927), as “the story-telling performance through singing and dancing” in nature (Wang, 2009, p. 7).

However, with the influence from the western theatre brought over to Asia, through Japan to China, towards the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there have been concerted efforts to create and develop a totally new kind of modern Chinese spoken drama out of, or against with, both in content and form, the traditions of the classical Chinese

operatic theatre of *xiqu*. Such has thus become the departure towards the modernity process with the Chinese theatre of the time (Yu, 1990, p. 161).

## 5. The Artistic Influence of Xiqu on Contemporary Mandarin Drama Performance: All Vocal Expressions Tend to Be Singing (无声不吟) All Physical Movements Tend to Be Dancing (无动不舞)

It is interesting to note that the developed and modernized Chinese theatre in the form of spoken drama, the mandarin drama, as mentioned earlier, then, since towards the middle of the last century, nevertheless, started to review and reflect on its own developmental outcome to re-explore and renew its identity by re-positioning itself with a re-discovered aesthetic spirit and presentational format through its search for a unique indigenous tradition from within its own theatrical heritages.

Therefore, it has tried to resume and remain, as well as instinctively further experiment and strive for, its fundamental artistic characteristics as a lyrically positioned poetry drama with the inclusiveness of the multiple performance devices and theatrical conventions instead of mono and only approach of spoken text on stage.

Such a searching and striving process has consequently been directed back to the rich performance traditions with its theatrical heritages, i.e., the artistic characteristics found in *xiqu*.

As mentioned at the beginning of the previous

chapters, the start of the Chinese theatrical arts could be traced back to as early as primarily the shaman performance with ritual ceremonial singing and dancing at large in difference from that of the start of the western theatre represented by the Greek tragedy with its narrative origin and logos process.

This has also been true to the differentiated departures generally with the start of the other artistic origins at large, e.g., the literature art with the genre of poetry between that of the west and China. The former, represented by *Odyssey*, one of the two major ancient Greek epic poetry works by Homer written during ca. the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. It is a narrative epic with the historical account of the Greek hero Odysseus' journey home after the Trojan War.

While in the east, in the case of Chinese literature art, on the contrary, *Shi-Jing* (【诗经】), the *Book of Songs*, also named as *The Classic of Poetry*, or *Book of Odes*, the oldest existing collection of the Chinese poetry work comprising over three hundred poems dating back from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC with unknown authors ("Classic of Poetry", 2023), has set a totally different directive beginning.

*Cooing and Wooing*, also translated as *Guan-Ju* (【关雎】), as the very first piece of *Shi-Jing*, is in fact also the very first poetry work of all the Chinese literature art. It is purely a love song about that. "By riverside a pair / Of turtledoves are cooing; / There is a maiden fair / Whom a young man is wooing." ("关关雎鸠，在河之洲，窈窕淑女，君子好逑。") ("Guan Ju", 2023).

*Mao Commentary* (Mao-Shi-Zhuan) (【毛诗传】) as one of the four early classics of the commentary on the *Book of Songs* attributed by either Mao Chang (毛萇), or Mao Heng (毛亨)

(?) (both were born prior to 221 BC -?) ("Mao Commentary", 2022), includes the commentary with prefaces to each of the 305 poems selected. However, there is a longer text immediately after the first poem of Cooing and Wooing, which is quoted below:

Poetry is the expression of the will. The will from within the heart expresses itself as a piece of poem. The feeling emoted inwardly appears outwardly as a speech. With the insufficiency of a speech, thus comes out a sigh; with the insufficiency of a sigh, thus comes out singing; with the insufficiency of singing, thus comes out dancing with hands and feet instinctively." ("诗者，志之所在也，在心为志，发言为诗，情动于中而形于言，言之不足，故嗟叹之，嗟叹之不足，故咏歌之，咏歌之不足，不知手之舞之足之蹈之也。") (Yu, 2021).

The most significant theoretical work on the Chinese literature and arts, this piece of the commentary text on the nature and feature after the very first poetry work of the Chinese literature has not only described the origin of the literature art in the form of poetry but has also indicated the nature and feature of the emoting process with the consequent emotional and behavioural occurrences applicable to the other artworks, including theatre arts, as well.

From this theoretical description about the nature and feature of the Chinese literature and artworks at large, as well as from the formation and outcome with the historical development of the Chinese operatic theatre discussed so far, it is thus not difficult to discover and understand the unique feature with the inclusiveness of various theatrical devices and musical conventions as the original artistic characteristics that have contributed to the formation of the combined multiple stage expressions with the composition and performance of *xiqu*.

Such a process with its characteristics has



thus been distinctively in difference from that of the western theatre, where spoken drama has been generally and phenomenally, if not deliberately, isolated from the rich musical expressions of the music theatre genre (opera, operetta, dance and musical, etc.), as well as that of the other forms of theatrical arts, e.g., *commedia dell'arte*, etc.

With the spiritual essence of the artistic characteristics embodied in the cultural heritage of *xiqu* at large, it is thus not difficult to understand why the matured mandarin drama, be it in China or elsewhere in the world including in Singapore, could still not escape its destined features of the combined theatricality and musicality in the format of a lyrical poetry drama with the deliberated inclusiveness of the enriched devices of singing, dancing, acrobatics and recitational arts, as well.

Though already been forged and formed after the model of the western spoken drama under the influence from the westernized modernity process in general, mandarin drama, nevertheless, thus still constantly and inevitably has been looking back to and striving for such unique artistic traits and aesthetic essence from within its own origin of the traditional operatic theatre of *xiqu*.

Increasingly during the past few decades, this has become a more consciously informed trend and process with its deliberate awareness to have explored and discovered the nature of its own theatrical heritages. Qi Rushan (齐如山) (1875-1962), Mei Lanfang's dramaturg, described the artistic features of *xiqu* performance represented by Beijing Opera (京剧) as "all physical movements tend to be dancing, all vocal expressions tend to be singing" (无动不舞，无声不吟) (Qi, 1989, pp. 98-99). The aesthetic nature of such artistic features has been further summarised by

Huang Zuolin (1906-1994), the maestro director of the mandarin drama, with his coined English words of "ideographics" as opposed to "photographics" (Huang, 1990a, p. 185), comparing the latter to that of the western theatre with the example of the English spoken drama fundamentally.

## 6. Ideographic Presentational Style with Conventionalities Instead of Photographic Representations: The Aesthetic Nature of *Xiqu*

However, the story-telling performance through singing and dancing as the essence and format of *xiqu*, as was explored and summarized by Wang Guowei mentioned earlier, does not mean any random collections of / or connections between singing and dancing items within the performance process of any traditional operatic theatrical show. Nor is it the kind of presentational style of the integrated music and dance units combined with the differentiated, or somewhat contradictory, (representational) acting style generally found in the stage performance of musicals of the west.

It is also neither the agenda and format of the performance practice of "through-composed" (*durch-komponiert*) music drama (*musikdrama*), as visioned and practiced by Richard Wagner (1813-1883), with his corresponding attempt to achieve the innovated singing style in line with the naturalistic (representational) acting for the sections of analogous to the accompanied recitative (Dahlhaus, 1971, pp. 7-11, 155-161).

Rather, distinctively, the performance conven-

tion of *xiqu* is a synthesized system of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (totally combined artwork) with highly hybridised and stylized singing, dancing, acrobatics, acting, and recitation (diction and articulation) through a coordinated vocal and physical score with hands, eyes, body, mind and footing in one unity throughout the whole performance process.

This system has been formed, developed, and regulated by the performance aesthetics of the Chinese theatre culture in the spirit of ideographic theatre instead of the photographic. The description and nature of the latter could be seen in the model of the western spoken drama especially with and influenced from, to some extends, its genre of naturalism theatre towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳) (1894-1961), the contemporary Chinese Beijing opera master summarized the performance system of *xiqu* based on his own vision and practice:

the Chinese operatic theatre of *xiqu* is not a theatrical form that generally synthesizes the elements of music, dance, fine art, and literature. Instead, it is a special theatrical form that immediately and ingeniously synthesizes singing, dancing, poetry, recitation, martial arts, musical accompaniment, and character imagery (e.g., mask and make-up, costuming, etc.), props and décor... (Ye, 1999, p. 20).

Here, the key words of “immediately and ingeniously synthesized” has emphasized a highly organically interwoven and processed performance system. This unique set of the stage languages of physical and vocal behaviour could be interpreted and understood as “extra-daily technique in search for a new posture” in the view of Eugenio Barba (1936-)'s approach with his theatre anthropological departure (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 36).

In both the theoretical as well as practical fra-

meworks of *xiqu* performance, such a performative system appears and functions as the kind of the embellished unique style being called as conventionality (*chengshi*) (程式), one of the four salient features of the traditional Chinese theatre of *xiqu* summarized by Huang Zuolin in the following:

Conventionality: adherence to an elaborate system of commonly recognized conventions is the basic characteristic of traditional Chinese theatre. It is considered impossible, if not distasteful, to represent real life on the stage without any embellishment. A play is a play, it is honestly theatrical. We have created a set of conventions to break through the limitations of time and space, so that life may appear freer and more sublime on stage (Huang, 1990a, p. 185).

According to him, the artistic feature of this conventionality as the guiding principle in acting has been considered as one of the four external salient characteristics of the performance system of the traditional Chinese theatre. The other three are defined by him as “fluidity, flexibility and sculpturality” (Huang, 1990a, p. 185). The characteristics of the latter three are in fact governed by the nature and practice of the conventionality that has not only made the dramatic and dramaturgical scenic work cross time and space fluidly and flexibly possible but has also created the sublimed sculpture-like characters in the scene on stage.

Xiong Foxi (1900-1965) is the one among the pioneering generation of the modern mandarin drama, and who was also the founding president of Shanghai Theatre Academy. He put forth his ideal training benchmark for actors' character-work on the stage of mandarin drama as “a sculpture in stillness and a dancer in movement (静如雕塑动如舞者)” if when physicality is concerned (“Xiong Foxi (【熊佛西】)”, 2022). This

fundamental benchmark with its fruitful practice has since then exerted its lasting influence on the development of actor-training practice for mandarin drama performance significantly in China and beyond.

Seemingly, such a specific desired benchmark for mandarin drama actor-training has been obviously influenced by the practices of both the performance style as well as the actor-training system of *xiqu*. It has been developed for generations, be it in the form of master-pupil apprenticeship among the private troupes, or in the system of the modern theatre schools. The benchmark in question has also been vividly and outstandingly demonstrated by Gai Jiaotian (盖叫天) (1888-1971), the *Beijing* opera master actor (“Gai Jiaotian (【盖叫天】)”, 2023).

Taking a closer study and analysis of Gai Jiaotian’s stage performance through his represented masterpieces appeared in the film entitled “Gai Jiaotian’s Stage Art” (【盖叫天的舞台艺术】) (“Gai Jiaotian’s Stage Art (【盖叫天的舞台艺术】)”, 2021), one can witness and understand his outstanding demonstration of the unique life behavioural posture as expressed in the proverb of the Chinese theatre performance culture: “To sit as a clock-tower, to stand as a pine-tree, to lie down as a stand-by bow, to move as a gust of wind” (【坐如钟，站如松，躺如弓，行如风】) (“Zuo-ru-zhong, zhan-ru-song, xing-ru-feng, wo-ru-gong (【坐如钟，站如松，行如风，卧如弓】)”, 2023 [must confirm date, see references list at the end!]).

With an observation of his rolling on stage, it could be further described as “to roll on stage like burning fire” (【滚如火】). All such desired life behavioural postures have already been in fact integrated and practised as part of actors’ phy-

sical training system of both *xiqu* and mandarin drama for generations (Wang, 2010, pp. 15-23). This has also been successfully introduced to and implemented in mandarin drama actor-training in Singapore since 2001 (Yu, 2019a).

Parallel to the above benchmarked actors’ physicality, the practice and technique of mandarin drama actor’s vocal training has also been likewise developed fruitfully both at Shanghai Theatre Academy and Central Academy of Drama (Beijing) towards the 1990s (Yu, 2008, pp.152-156), which has also been introduced to Singapore since the beginning of this century (Yu, 2020, p. 64).

Such a unique benchmarked vocal training system could be summarized as the practice of a synthesizing process between breathing (气), voice (声), wording (字), together with that of (dramatic) accentuation (腔), (poetic) rhyming (韵), (musical) melody (音) within one unity based on the linguistic typicality of the Chinese language’s syllabic word (character), that are mostly vowel-ending one-syllabled wording with five different tones each. These harmoniously synergized vocal training technicalities have been theatrically governed and lyrically regulated to serve the character’s (人) dialectical expressions of emotions (情) within the given circumstance of dramatic logics (理), aiming for an effective exploration and presentation of the lyrical sounding with the poetic text that have been literally structured and dramaturgically embodied in the contemporary mandarin drama play through its effective performance on stage.

Hence, the embodiment of the embellished musicality within the vocal expressions has thus not only favourably formed the lyrically poetic presentations aurally but has also been regulating harmoniously the overall performance style of

mandarin drama, a presentational style in nature that has been influenced by the appealing conventionality of voice and speech from the performance style of *xiqu* at large (Yu, 2020, pp. 61-63, 65-66).

Therefore, as part of the Chinese-speaking theatre in general, the mandarin drama has thus also shared all the possible artistic features of *xiqu*, including that of diction and articulation, physical movement, dance, acting, as well as martial arts and acrobatics deliberately and effectively on stage.

In this way, the previously mentioned four external characteristics have been in fact related to, governed, and regulated by another four internal characteristics of *xiqu* performance: “the ideographics of life, the ideographics of movement, the ideographics of language, and the ideographics of décor”, which has also been summarized by Huang Zuolin in the 1990s (Huang, 1990a, pp. 185-186).

Determined by the essential nature of the performance style of *xiqu*, such aesthetics of ideographic theatre, in fact, could be fundamentally detected and discovered in, as well as profoundly supported by the philosophy of the Chinese culture at large.

## 7. Image and/or Imagery: The Philosophical Dialectics of the Chinese Culture

It has been no doubt that both the western (spoken drama) theatre and the Chinese operatic theatre of *xiqu* generally follow the theory and practice of Aristotle’s definition of theatre as the imitation of action in life.

However, the practice of *xiqu* performance, like

many of the indigenous theatrical performing arts varieties in Asia, e.g., Kabuki in Japanese theatre, Kathakali dance in Indian theatre, as well as Balinese dance of the Indonesian theatre, etc. appears as the kind of ideographic presentation of the imagery (visual images collectively and subjectively) instead of photographic representational image (picture) during the action-life imitation process.

The corresponding Chinese expression with the word of ideographic is *xie-yi* (写意), literally meaning, writing (*xie*) (写) of idea/will (*yi*) (意). Ideographic theatre has been literally visioned, expressed, and personally practiced by Huang Zuolin as his aesthetic departure for the performance of mandarin drama, which is in line with the artistic spirit and characteristics embodied in *xiqu* (Huang, 1990b, pp. 1-6, 269-283).

However, the concept of *xie-yi* (写意) itself, has long existed in the practice and expressions about the Chinese painting, where, interestingly, it has always thus been deliberately termed as (subjective) “writing” of “*yi*” (idea/will) instead of (objective) “painting” (picture). The expression is immediately related to another important Chinese aesthetic terminology of “*yi-xiang*” (意象).

The Chinese expression of “*yi-xiang*”, literally meaning “idea-image, or willed-image” is close to the definition of the English word “imagery” as a visual symbolism, or figurative language of artwork that evokes a mental image or the other kinds of sense impressions, especially in a literary work, etc.

The Chinese phrase of this wording consisting of the two different characters of *yi* (意) (idea/will) and *xiang* (象) (image/imagery) could be both combined and separated respectively with their dialectic implications defined differently in the Chi-

nese philosophy.

The philosophical dialectics embodied in the related Chinese phrases about these two characters of *yi* (idea/will) (意) and *xiang* (image/imagery) (象) could be traced back to as early as in the book of *Yi Zhuan* (【易传】), a collection of the commentaries to the classical Chinese *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*) (【易经】) of Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-771 BC).

In this very first philosophy book on ethics in China written during Warring-States Period (475-221 BC), the aesthetic concepts of both “getting imagery from observing objects” (*guan-wu-qu-xiang*) (观物取象) (“Guan-wu-qu-xiang” (【观物取象】), 2023) and “setting imagery to express will/idea” (*li-xiang-jin-yi*) (立象尽意) (Li-xiang-yi-jin-g-yi (【立象以尽意】), 2023) were thus for the first time raised. They could be interpreted as the (ideographic) subjective presentation of the imagery based on the objective observation of the image to express will/idea.

Regardless of the various conflictual schools on the definitions of the nature of “beauty” between the views of objectivity and subjectivity in the western aesthetics study, the dialectical relationship between the subjective will/idea and objective observation as such regarding the expressions with *yi* and *xiang* in relation to the Chinese painting has thus created the (ideographic) *xie-yi* (writing of will/idea) aesthetics in the Chinese philosophy.

Such dialectic aesthetical view was then further developed by Wang Bi (王弼) (226 AD-249 AD) with his expression of “the acquisition of will/idea by ignoring the photographic image (*de-yi-wang-xiang*) (得意忘象)” (“De-yi-wang-xiang (【得意忘象】)”, 2020), where the same character of *xiang* (象) could be interpreted as photographic

“image” (picture).

Qing Dynasty literature critic Liu Xuzai (刘煦载) (1813-1881) then further put forth his theory of “to construct imagery from the vagueness (*ping-xu-gou-xiang*) (凭虚构象) instead of constructing imagery from the solidness (*shi*) (实)” (“Ping-xu-gou-xiang (【凭虚构象】)”, 2023), indicating that the latter has too many limitations regarding the infinite imaginary world. Here, the character of *xiang* (象) is defined as “imagery” dialectically.

Following this review of the philosophical development of the literary critical theories regarding the aesthetic dialectics between subjective presentation of the imagery in relation to objective representational image/picture developed from the respective terms of will/idea (*yi*) (意) and image/imagery (*xiang*) (象), of the Chinese philosophy, it is therefore not difficult to understand why the spirit and expression as well as the practice of ideographic theatre instead of the photographic has thus become nevertheless a consequent choice systematically accepted and adopted with *xiqu* for centuries (Dong, 2013, pp. 239-260).

This has also, therefore, been obviously identical to and identified with the performance and actor-training practices of mandarin drama, nevertheless, over the past few decades on stage as well as in mandarin drama actor-training globally including Singapore. It has been deliberately preserved and observed by the practitioners and consequently accepted increasingly by more audience worldwide.

## 8. Conclusion

Through the above historical overview of the theatrical traditions of *xiqu*, as well as the examination of the aesthetic heritages of the Chinese

philosophy, it has been now easier to understand that:

The mandarin drama, as part of the genre of the Chinese theatre in general, since after its matured establishment towards the middle of the last century until today, still appears and functions inevitably and deliberately to practise the spirit and format of the ideographic subjective presentational style rather than the photographic representational format of the western theatre at large. Even though it has been the product inspired by and modelled after the western spoken drama upon its formation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Compared with the western theatre in the case of the English-speaking drama for example, the mandarin drama, be it in China or elsewhere worldwide, could thus always have possessed and exerted its own characteristics with a range of the set of identical artistic expressions beyond the usual textual speech as the mono theatrical device on stage. Mandarin drama, nevertheless, has already conspicuously appeared beyond the model and limit of being the Chinese-speaking version of the English Drama only.

Therefore, the motto practised by the Beijing opera master actor Gai Jiaotian and the crystalized physical benchmarked standards established for mandarin drama actors, as well as the whole set of the voicework training method explored and developed at Shanghai Theatre Academy and Central Academy of Drama (Beijing), have thus jointly contributed to the outcome of a distinctive mandarin drama actor-training aesthetics and system, as well. It has thus embodied a theatre educational benchmark uniquely identical to the artistic feature of mandarin drama inherited from the cultural richness of the theatrical traditions of

*xiqu* at large.

Since the beginning of this century, such a theatre educational treasure has been gradually introduced and implemented as the curriculum content and departure in the mandarin drama actor-training process in the multi-cultural educational landscape of Singapore successively and fruitfully. Its effective artistic impact on and the unique contributions to the growth of the local theatre industry as well as the arts educational landscape of Singapore could thus never be underestimated in that:

Firstly, such a comprehensive inclusiveness of various theatrical conventions of singing, dancing, recitation as well as spectacular visual elements (masks, costume, scenic décor, multi-media, etc.) on stage within the organic performance process has thus already demonstrated itself as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (totally combined artwork) of cross/inter-disciplinarity. This has, in fact, been desired and attempted by the concept and practice of contemporary theatre worldwide nowadays, though, which has been originally ideated by Richard Wagner over one and half centuries ago.

Secondly, such a cross/inter-disciplinary practice governed by the organic conventionalities inherited from *xiqu* performance has been in fact a highly nurtured and matured process of effective stage presentational process. It should be, and has been, fundamentally in difference from any random collections of / or connections between various disciplinary elements, be them visual or/ and aural, or etc.

Finally, such a unique aesthetics and practice of performance and actor-training with mandarin drama that has been explored and inherited from *xiqu* could also go beyond the genre of mandarin drama itself to enrich the overall theatrical per-

formance and actor-training at large as one of the effective approaches of intercultural theatre practice, or interwoven performative experimentation, as detected and described by the contemporary theatre scholar Fischer-Lichte significantly at the beginning of this century.

Inspiringly indeed, such a practice, in fact, has been striving for itself as a contemporary theatre educational benchmark universally that has been desired in the world of theatre with the training outcome in terms of “holy actor.” It has been longed for and practised by Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) for decades during his lifetime (Grotowski, 1968, pp. 34-39), which has also been inherited and followed up successively by Eugenio Barba ever since till today.

From this aspect, the continual exploration and further implementation of the aesthetic essence as well as the artistic characteristics from the traditions of the actor-training systems inherited from the various other presentational performance genres beyond *xiqu* (e.g. the Japanese Kabuki, the Indian Kathakali, the Indonesian Balinese dance, etc.) in the training curricula among the global arts educational landscape proves to have an infinite promising future ahead, both challengingly and rewardingly.

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