

Theater & Society



An Anthology of
Contemporary
Chinese
Drama

Haiping Yan, Editor

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Acknowledgments

Theater and Society: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama is finally completed for English-speaking readers. Conceived almost eight years ago, this anthology, I hope, contributes to the building of artistic bridges between the different cultures on both sides of the Pacific.

I must thank Mark Selden for his constant support throughout a long working process full of interesting and, at times, unexpected difficulties. Along with his initial invitation to participate in his book series on Asia, I have received generous encouragement, challenges, and help. Harold Shadick, the late Professor Emeritus of Chinese Literature, Edward Gunn, Dominick LaCapra, and Michael Hays at Cornell University have been unfailing sources of support over the years. Martin Coben, Professor Emeritus of Theatre at the University of Colorado at Boulder carefully read part of the translations even though he was battling cancer. Howard Goldblatt, another colleague whom I am fortunate to have in Boulder, provided invaluable help. Wang Zhen the former President of Chinese Drama Publishing House, and Xu Xiaozhong, the current President of Chinese Central Drama Academy, have made specific and continuous efforts to ensure that this project reach its completion.

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Y.H.

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Theater and Society

An Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Drama

Yan Haiping

The five texts presented in this anthology are selected from the hundreds of plays and film scripts written and produced each year in China since 1979. Registering the nation's social, economic, political, and cultural transformations, these works have been published in leading journals and staged in major theaters, provoked powerful responses from Chinese audiences, and caused heated discussions, controversies, and confrontations on a national scale. Representing the most important achievements of contemporary Chinese theater, they also cover its two leading genres, namely, traditional regional music drama and modern spoken drama.¹ The one film script included here, *Old Well*, is nationally and internationally acclaimed. This anthology, the first to present this dramatic and performing literature, offers both vital information about what has come to be called "the dramatic renaissance of the new period" and significant insights into a society that has been undergoing complex structural changes.

"Drama of the new period," like other forms of art and literature of the era, began as a critical response to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Upon emerging from these ten years of civil strife and political fragmentation, many people were frustrated, angry, and deeply shaken. The shared need to express long-stifled emotions found one effective medium in drama, especially modern spoken drama. The first wave of this theatrical movement lasted approximately two years. From 1976 to 1978, two major kinds of plays were produced on stage nationwide. The first comprised new productions of some of the best-known plays created before 1966, such as *Nihongdeng xiade shaobing* (Sentries under the neon light) and *Jiang jie* (Elder sister Jiang). The former is about a group of young soldiers of the People's Liberation Army who come from rural backgrounds but have learned to deal successfully with their new and challenging experiences in Shanghai, the largest and most westernized city in China; the latter is based on the life of a woman revolutionary who maintained her integrity while being imprisoned, tortured, and finally executed by the Guomindang

government in the 1940s.² As dramatizations embodying the social, cultural, and political values of a “socialist new China,” these plays were extremely popular when staged in the 1950s and the early 1960s. During the Cultural Revolution, along with most other literary and artistic works produced since 1949, they were denounced as “poisonous weeds” and consequently banned.³ The creators of those works were accused of various political crimes and many of them died of persecution.⁴ While violent social forces were released in the course of the Cultural Revolution to attack “traditional culture,” eight “model plays” in the forms of the Beijing Opera and sinicized Western ballet monopolized the stage of Chinese performing art. Professional theater in general was suppressed; many theater companies were disbanded; modern spoken drama in particular was proclaimed “dead” by Jiang Qing and her followers.⁵ The restaging at the national level in the late 1970s of the dramas popular before 1966, therefore, indicated the ending of an era in the nation’s cultural and political life and the beginning of what has been called “a dramatic renaissance.”

Condemnation of the massive political persecution enforced during the Cultural Revolution was more directly expressed in the second group of plays staged in the late 1970s—plays newly written by both professional and nonprofessional playwrights, including Zong Fuxian’s *Yu wusheng chu* (From the depth of silence), Sha Yexin’s *Chenyi shizhang* (Mayor Chenyi), Cui Dezhi’s *Baochun hua* (Spring flowers), Xing Yixun’s *Quan yu fa* (Power versus law), and Su Shuyang’s *Danxin pu* (Noble hearts).⁶ These plays were constructed with two prominent features: a bitter condemnation of the Gang of Four and an ardent affirmation of senior revolutionary figures who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.⁷ A nostalgia for the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) lent these plays an unspoken sense of tragedy. The tears in the eyes of theatergoers when these dramas premiered marked one of the most intense moments in the nation’s contemporary emotional and cultural life.

This nationally shared moment, characterized by its emotional reaction to the repression of the Cultural Revolution and nostalgia for the hopeful and more open early years of the People’s Republic, was soon replaced by another wave of more complex theatrical representations. Rather than evoking memories of the past, beginning in the spring of 1979 an increasing number of plays generated debates over the present and its relation to the past and the future. *You zheyang yige xiaoyuan* (There is such a small compound) in Beijing, *Paobing siling de er’zi* (The artillery commander’s son) in Shanghai, *Yige wuangu de shengchan duizhang* (A stubborn production team leader) in Anhui, and *Kaolü kaolü* (We shall consider) in Hubei, to name a few, explored sensitive issues such as social inequality and gov-

ernment bureaucracy, touching off debates where they were staged.⁸ Finally, a national controversy quickly developed over the one-act play *Jiaru woshi zhende* (If I were real) by Sha Yexin, produced in Shanghai, based on the true story of a young man who manipulated various government officials and gained privileges by impersonating the son of a high-ranking official before being exposed and sentenced to jail.⁹ These plays were short and many were crudely crafted, but their appearance indicated that a substantial reexamination of the nation's past, present, and future was under way. After having been forced like most literary and theater journals to cease publication during the Cultural Revolution, the monthly *Jūben* (Drama)—the authoritative forum of the theater world since 1952—resumed its publication and its leadership role in 1979. In the following years the theater world was full of significant controversies. Leading dramatists, critics, theoreticians, and cultural administrators, once allied in their bitter rejection of the repressive policies of the Cultural Revolution, quickly split into different, shifting, and opposing camps over these controversies and the emergence in the early 1980s of a group of assertive playwrights who called their work “the school of critical realism.”

One of the most representative controversies generated by these “critical realists” centered on *Xiaojing hutong* (Small Well alley), a five-act drama published in 1981.¹⁰ Its author, Li Longyun, an “educated youth” from Beijing who had worked for many years on an army land reclamation farm, depicted a group of urban residents living in a courtyard named “Small Well” from 1949 to the early 1980s. After surviving various hardships under the Guomindang regime, these hardworking common folk embrace the 1949 revolution with great enthusiasm. Experiencing the remarkable first decade of the People's Republic, they develop a strong sense of national identity and shared social purpose, as well as unconditional belief in the new government and its policies. They throw themselves into the Great Leap Forward of 1958, sacrificing all they have for an imagined national paradise, only to suffer irretrievable individual and collective losses.¹¹ During the Cultural Revolution, they are in turn confused, frightened, split against one another, and devastated, but they finally reunite in resistance to the political opportunists who seek power while destroying many people's lives in the name of leftist radicalism. The Gang of Four is shown to be sustained by such powerseekers operating at every level of the society including that of the residential neighborhood committee, and their downfall means for the common folk of Small Well a “second liberation.” Unlike after their first liberation of 1949, however, in 1979 these common folk take initiatives in asserting their rights to elect their neighborhood committee and democratically organize their community and its leadership. With a cast of nearly

thirty characters of different social and individual constitutions and identities, the play presents a nuanced portrayal of the lives of urban working people in Beijing over four decades with a profound sense of history and emotional poignancy.

The Beijing People's Art Theater Company produced the play in 1983. Certain leading figures in dramatic circles and cultural administration in Beijing, however, questioned the decision to bring the play before the public. Although the first act shows that the people of Small Well welcomed the 1949 liberation, they argued, the following acts show only how things went from bad to worse, focusing only on people's "suffering": "It seems as if the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were the only two things that we [the Communist Party] have done since liberation—such a representation of PRC history appears rather lopsided."¹² Contending that he was a dramatist, not a historian, the playwright and his supporters argued that a play was not a historical textbook and should not be judged as such. But the play was permitted to run for just three performances with invited guests only. The subsequent bitter controversy involved playwrights, novelists, journalists, critics, theoreticians, and members of the cultural administration at the national level.

The question at the core of the controversy was how to reevaluate and represent some of the most critical and complex experiences of the nation since 1949. Through its portrayal of several moments of socioeconomic and political crisis in the People's Republic, the play captures and explores the problems of the historically conditioned and changing relationship between the socialist state and its citizens, the national body of policymakers and ordinary members of the society. It is imperative, the Small Well story argues, for the Chinese leaders and all citizens to recognize the vital importance of socialist democracy and to develop effective forms of such democracy through which the common folk can employ critical thinking and genuinely participate in the decision-making process of the nation. It was due to unconditional belief in the policies made by the ever narrowing circles of the central leadership and the lack of a community-based participatory socialist democracy that China had suffered such economic fiascoes as the Great Leap Forward and such political disasters as the Cultural Revolution. Underlying such an argument is a conviction that the well-being of the common folk is the ultimate standard for evaluating success and failure in Chinese history. Such a conviction is based upon the author's understanding of his role as a playwright whose vocation is to "speak for the ordinary citizens."

This conviction underlying Li Longyun's emotionally charged play shapes one of the primary principles and organizing features of the school

of critical realism. Playwrights such as Zong Fuxian (Shanghai), Zhong Jieying (Beijing), Yao Yuan (Jiangsu Province), and Li Jie (Jilin Province) who loosely gathered under the banners of this school, despite their many differences shared the basic view that working people's daily experiences and ethical sentiments were the sources of their creative activity, and that enacting social and cultural critiques in dramatically effective ways was the essential function of theater. Their pointed critiques of contemporary Chinese society were therefore woven together with their pronounced emotional attachment to the well-being of the ordinary majority, a commitment that had been one of the essential components in the legitimacy of the PRC government and its proclaimed programs. Li Longyun once summarized his thoughts on playwriting in the following lines.

I grew up in the southern part of the old city of Beijing, the little alley where we lived had a rather civilized name, "the small well." The small well alley looked old and tumbledown, but in my heart and in my memories it is lively and filled with tenderness. Like a gracious mother, it offered me a gentle breast to rest upon, provided me a space to begin my toddling. I believe that every writer has a piece of land that his heart calls home, and every homeland has its own smell, color, ethos, and culture. It is upon this homeland a writer's life is dependent and by which a writer's death is defined. My homeland has formed the most essential feelings in the depth of my heart, it has shaped a particular sense of self-respect in me, it tells me about kindness and beauty, about integrity and firmness, and what is the dignity of common folk living at the bottom of a society.¹³

The sentiments expressed by Li Longyun in these lines were shared by many playwrights of critical realism active in the first half of the 1980s. It is the working people's lives and their profound sense of human dignity and equality that render *Small Well Alley* and its likes critical of aspects of the PRC's history and affirmative of the values of a socialist morality deeply resonating with Chinese folk egalitarian ethics.

Responding to these ethical sentiments from another angle but sharing similar views on socialist democracy and socially engaged theater, another group of playwrights in the early 1980s sought to employ premodern historical materials to create dramas that were allegorically relevant to the contemporary social situation. They employed the form of modern historical drama that was invented by Guo Moruo in the 1920s and has been developed by spoken dramatists ever since, and they drew upon Chinese history for dramatic motives. Among the modern historical plays produced in the early 1980s, *Li Shimin, Prince of Qin* was one of the most influential.¹⁴ Written by Yan Haiping (the author of this introduction), then a student at Fudan University in Shanghai, *Li Shimin, Prince of Qin* dramatizes the

early years in the political life of Li Shimin, later the grand emperor of the Tang dynasty—a dynasty that represents the pinnacle of China’s imperial history (A.D. 627–650). Exploring the turbulent events that led to the founding of the Tang dynasty, the play’s thematic vision is based on the classical concept of *minben* (民本), a prominent concept in Chinese political philosophy and history which asserts that the foundation of any dynasty lies in the common people and their minds and hearts, reminding its audience that “the commoners are the currents of the river, and the kings and the nobles are the boats riding it; the river carries the boats but also buries the boats.”¹⁵ With its epic-style dramatization of the conflict between Li Shimin, who was pressured to recognize the demands of the peasants and their essentiality to the lasting stability of the Tang dynasty, and his father, Li Yuan, and elder brother, Li Jiancheng, who adhered to the desires of the nobility and the supremacy of imperial authority, the play reenacts a historical story with critical significations relevant to post-Cultural Revolution society.

The production of the play by the Shanghai Youth Theater Company in 1981 created a stir nationwide. While the enthusiastic audience crowded in for ninety performances in the heat of Shanghai’s summer and some critics embraced it with even greater enthusiasm, other critics, newspaper editors, and cultural administrators denounced it for deviating from Marxist historical materialism. Li Shimin and his father, Li Yuan, and brother, Li Jiancheng, they argued, were all members of the imperial ruling class; their conflict was a pure power struggle among the members of the ruling elite and did not concern any significant policy difference. That the author chose an emperor as her protagonist showed how far she had wandered from Marxist class theory and how “dangerously she had gone astray.”¹⁶ The author responded that the core of Marxism was its historical dialectic, and that vulgar materialism would only lead to nihilistic attitudes toward the nation’s rich and complex history.¹⁷ Focusing on the tensions between the commoners’ needs and the ways in which the members of the governing body come to terms with such needs, the author summarized her reading of Li Shimin’s story:

Witnessing how the peasants rebelled against the Sui dynasty, Li Shimin was awestruck; searching into the rise and the fall of past dynasties, Li Shimin further recognized the formidable forces of the commoners and their importance to the long-term stability and prosperity of his dynasty. “The Son of Heaven,” he wrote, “if he follows *Dao* [Heaven], people will support him, and if he violates *Dao*, people will discard him,” because “*Dao* sees as the people see, *Dao* hears as the people hear.” This is the lesson that Li Shimin learned from his experiences as one of the founding generals of the Tang dynasty as well as from his understanding of history, this is the core of his thoughts on policymaking and governing. Those who respond to the needs of the

people will govern, and those who ignore the needs of the people will perish. In the past, in the present, as in the future, even the greatest leaders of our nation have to be tested and judged by this basic law of historical process.¹⁸

Such a rereading of history has an interesting doubleness. Clearly criticizing the PRC leadership—especially Mao Zedong—for the destructive consequences of such social turmoils as the Cultural Revolution, it at the same time registers deep influences of Mao's teaching on human history and the relationship between “the commoners” and “the kings and the ministers.” By remembering the past in such a way, it reevaluates the present and leaves no room for any leaderships—past or present—to be exempt from the “historical judgment” of the commoners. Although a symposium on the play organized by the Shanghai branch of the Association of Chinese Dramatists was riven with high political tension and deep divisions among participants of considerable sociocultural status and influence, subsequent discussions became increasingly enthusiastic, involving all the major theater journals and critics in the country.¹⁹ The play was soon made into a television series shown nationwide and was adapted into regional music forms and performed in small cities and towns.²⁰ While other modern historical plays of the same period have different thematic concentrations and theatrical effects, their dramatic constitutions are woven with similar convictions of the historical inescapability and ethical legitimation of the judgment on any governing body from “the commoners.” Chen Baichen's *Dafengge* (Song of the wind), Lu Jianzhi and Fang Jiayi's *kunqū*-style *Tang-taizong* (The Grand emperor of Tang), and Zhen Huaixi's *puxian*-style music drama *Xintinglei* (Tears shed at the Xin Pavilion) are among the most significant examples.²¹

Rereading the nation's past on the one hand and examining the current conditions of working people and their needs on the other, many of the critical realists of the early 1980s sought to rediscover history and to confront the severe problems and crises in Chinese society in order to revitalize what they saw as the spirit of socialist modernization. Such efforts were questioned by other dramatic activities with more individualist impulses. There emerged another group of playwrights who attempted to break away from what they saw as the alienating, antiartistic, and ultimately illusory role of social and moral leadership with which Chinese intellectuals—including the critical realists—seemed obsessed. Looking to the West for inspiration, these playwrights discovered Western modernism in their eager, albeit tentative, pursuit of “the modern.”²² As early as 1980, some influence of the theater of the absurd appeared in works by such playwrights as Jia Hongyuan and Ma Zhongjun in Shanghai, and very quickly such influences appeared with

more thematic substance in theater circles in Beijing.²³ A formally experimental play titled *Absolute Signals*, by Gao Xingjian, a scholar in modern French literature, was produced in 1982 in Beijing; its dramatization of the sensitive social issues of youth unemployment and juvenile delinquency attracted positive responses, though its highly innovative visual image of socially detached individuals went largely un-commented.²⁴ The following year, *Bus Stop*, by the same author, was staged by the People's Art Theater Company, and with it Western-style experimental modernism came of age in China. Still interacting with the social concerns of realist playwrights, the play shows certain structural and ideological departures—much more significantly than most works of critical realism at the time—from traditions of the theater in particular and Chinese culture in general since the 1950s. It is the first text in this anthology.

A seemingly Beckettian play, *Bus Stop* dramatizes a group of people who have been waiting for ten years at a bus station somewhere between country and city for a bus that is to take them to the city. One bus after another passes but none stops at their station. While waiting and agonizing over their individual dreams and desires, they hardly notice that one silent, middle-aged man leaves the bus station after several buses have passed: "He strides away without turning his head even once. Music rises, the melody evoking a painful and persistent search."²⁵ By the end of the play, people begin to realize that perhaps this bus stop has been suspended and the bus route changed; they finally decide to stop waiting and get ready to walk on their own feet to the city. Realistic in characterization and symbolistic in overall structure, the play provoked immediate controversy in Beijing cultural circles, followed by heated discussion in major cultural centers throughout the nation. Some critics stressed the play's creativity and hailed its message that people should actively take charge of their lives rather than waste their lives in passive waiting. Other critics contended that the play contained a basic questioning if not a fundamental negation of the organization of contemporary Chinese society, a condescending attitude toward the deluded "pitiable multitude," and an elitist and individualistic impulse embodied in the "silent man" walking alone to the city.²⁶

The controversy occurred in 1983, a time when a serious debate at the highest levels of the state and cultural spheres was intensifying, and a socioideological metamorphosis in the world of literature and art was quickly unfolding. At the center of the debate were efforts to read the economic and political disasters and implied theoretical problematics of PRC history as symptoms of a systematic "alienation" inherent in socialist theory and practice. Led by senior theorists such as Wang Ruoshui, then the deputy editor of *People's Daily*, and supported by such figures as Zhou

Yang, then the minister of culture, the theory of “socialist alienation” was proposed while a rediscovery of humanist discourse in the early writings of Karl Marx was conducted.²⁷ Wang, Zhou, and their supporters were arguing that the Chinese socialist project had over the decades turned into the opposite of the ideal of socialism—had become alienated from itself—and that the Marxist theory of class struggle in the hands of the “ultraleftists” had been used to fabricate class struggles in a socialist society; such fabrications served not only to legitimize their violation of many people’s personal freedom and their denial of the human dignity of the citizens but to “justify sheer cruelty in their pursuit of power.”²⁸

Responding to this theory of socialist alienation and the proposed humanistic remedy, former Politburo member Hu Qiaomu and other theorists insisted upon two major points. First, the problems that occurred in Chinese socialist practice could be rectified while the socialist system as a whole still had its great vitality and could further mature. That such disasters as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were stopped, criticized, and indeed denounced provided the evidence that the socialist system had in itself an effective rectifying mechanism. The problems that Wang, Zhou, and their supporters pointed to, therefore, could not be defined as predetermined results of the systematic alienation of socialism itself, and to define them as such could lead to the dangerous conclusion that socialism was intrinsically alienating if not fundamentally flawed. Second, humanism and its variants, including the version in the young Marx, was historically inseparable from and in fact a vital part of the ideology of the bourgeoisie. This was why Marx himself in his mature writings turned away from this creed and developed his dialectic and historical materialism. Adopting this Western and bourgeois ideology to solve the problems in Chinese socialist practice was therefore historically utopian and theoretically misleading.²⁹ The appearance of *Bus Stop* added to this debate a particular dimension by providing Hu Qiaomu and his supporters, including He Jingzhi and Feng Mu, a dramatic illustration of bourgeois humanist individualism with an overall negation of the socialist practice and history of contemporary China.

The significant critical attention the play received can be seen in the discussion organized by the editorial committee of *Xijūbao* (On theater), the equivalent of *People’s Daily* in the theater world, and participated in by Tang Yin, Du Gao, and Zhen Bonong, three important cultural critics. In their response to the play, these critics also articulated their views on the forces operative in the formation of the school of “Western modernism,” on the debate about socialist alienation theory and humanism, and on the general climate in the cultural world at the time. They saw in all these “theories of socialist alienation” and “schools of Western modernism” a funda-

mental rejection of socialism and Marxism and, by implication, a crisis of the socialist consciousness that could undermine the “foundation of our country”:

Some of our theorists tend to view and judge our historical experiences of socialist practice and its problems with pessimism and formulate the misleading theory claiming that the socialist system constantly generates its own “alienation.” . . . This theory can easily be accepted by some of our young writers who have become fundamentally doubtful about socialism. When we are criticizing ultraleftism and its effects on art and literature, creative experiments in the theater are the refreshing fruits with which we have every reason to be pleased. Yet our critiques of ultraleftism seem to have caused serious confusion in the minds of some young authors as well. They take the critique of ultraleftism as a fundamental abandonment of Marxist views on art and culture and total denunciation of the achievements of socialist literature and art and its revolutionary tradition. And their “innovations” turn out to be mere echoes of Western modernists. Taking the capitalist art of the West as the ultimate “world art” and canceling the fundamental distinctions between socialist art and capitalist art, their dramatic “innovations,” as a result, become imitations of “the theater of the absurd,” products of the declining Western culture.³⁰

The response from these critics was consequential. *Bus Stop* was stopped after ten performances in July 1983, and the play was judged “seriously flawed.” At about the same time, the debates on “alienation theory” and “the young Marx’s humanism” vs. “the old Marx’s class struggle” concluded with Zhou Yang’s self-criticism for having misunderstood Marx and Wang Ruoshui’s removal from office. Such administrative conclusions, however, did not resolve the complex questions raised in these debates and certainly did not prevent enthusiasm for Western culture and ideology from further growing in the Chinese cultural world.

More books on Western modernist theater were quickly and often inadequately translated into Chinese and disseminated in literary, dramatic, and theoretical circles. Plays by emerging Chinese playwrights of various schools ranging from “absurdism” to “surrealism” continued to be staged in rapidly increasing quantity from 1983, and the first peak of experimental modernism was reached in the mid-1980s. *Jieshang liuxing hongqunzi* (Red skirts are the fashion) by Jia Hongyuan and Ma Zhongjun and *Yige shengzhe dui sizhe de fangwen* (A visit from a dead man) by Liu Shugang were among the most acclaimed and controversial plays.³¹ In *Red Skirts*, a “model socialist worker” alienates her co-workers because of her ideological pretension—however reluctant—of being a virtuous role model and her socially induced dishonesty. In *A Visit*, a fashion designer fights the “social

prejudices" against private ownership and courageously sets up and runs her own business, while her lover, who is marginalized by his temporary working status in a state-run theater company, emerges as the true moral hero by saving a passenger assaulted by a murderous criminal on a public bus at the expense of his own life. Despite the measures taken by some cultural administrators to criticize or ban some of those plays, their rising popularity testified that theater circles in particular and the cultural world in general were living in a profoundly different climate—one in which not only Marxist notions of class and class struggle were questioned in their relation to Chinese society but a whole range of social ethics and moral values established since 1949 were, implicitly or explicitly, deconstructed as forms of "hypocrisy of ultraleftism." As an "era of pluralism" in the cultural arena was heralded by some quickly rising new writers,³² it appeared clear that the value system of humanistic individualism was reshaping the orientation and organizing features of Chinese art and literature. It was represented in literary, artistic, critical, and theoretical works in rapidly increasing quantity, although such individualism was harshly and constantly criticized and indeed denounced from on high.

The quest for "modern subjectivity," proclaimed by leading modernists and indicated by the bulk of modernist plays produced since the mid-1980s, is at the heart of Western-inspired and Western-oriented experimental modernism. Among the features of "modern subjectivity," the claim of individuality and individual creativity is most prominent. The theory of "socialist and revolutionary realism," which stressed the sociopolitical nature and function of art and literature and had been the dominant theory in China since the 1950s, was rejected by the modernists, who asserted that such theory over the decades had become a political cliché that had frozen the natural blossoming of modern Chinese culture. To liberate Chinese literature and art from stifling orthodoxy, many experimental modernists declared that art in its essence was independent of politics, not representing any socioeconomic group or class. Rather, artistic works were expressions of individual creativity and universal humanity. In searching for such expressions of transcendental individual-universal humanity, they embraced and absorbed Western modernism with great enthusiasm while undergoing a process of multilayered psychocultural transference. The thematic motives of modernism, such as epistemological uncertainty, existential agony and despair, and ontological nothingness, articulated in the West by the post-World War II generation, in short, were captured, appropriated, transplanted, and reproduced in a radically different sociohistorical context, namely, post-Mao China. Such a practice was of course not, as modernists themselves claimed, apolitical or cleansed of sociopolitical implications.

They were both socially and politically charged expressions rooted in the desire to break away from particular sociopolitical constraints. But contrary to the assertions of Du Gao and others, they were not mere imitations of European modernist theater either. The historically specific dynamics in this complex process of discovery, appropriation, and reproduction can be seen in all the works of experimental modernism mentioned above and others. In his essay on modernism and contemporary Chinese literature, written in 1987, Gao Xingjian articulates the features of such Chinese modernist organizing principles quite clearly:

The movement of contemporary Chinese literature toward modernity shares some features with Western modernism, but it cannot possibly repeat the process of development of modern Western literature. The school of modernism that has emerged in China, in general terms, is rather different from that of Western modernism . . . Unlike Western modernism, which is underlined by a negation of the self, Chinese modernism is founded on an affirmation of the self; it exposes the absurdities in the realities of Chinese society but does not—as Western modernism does—take absurdity as constitutive of the existential conditions of humanity. . . . A critical skepticism about the old humanism is the point of departure for Western modernism; but for Chinese modernists, the rediscovery of humanism that was lost under the social conditions of modern and contemporary Chinese society is their core. Such rediscovered humanism is imbued, in effect, with the spirit of romanticism.³³

Such a “rediscovered humanism” filled with the spirit of “romanticism,” while not overtly rejecting collectivism, focuses on the individuality of the citizens that had been radically deemphasized if not erased in contemporary Chinese public discourses. Gao’s *Bus Stop*, the earliest modernist play, is certainly one of the representative works of this dramatic school. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* provided a situational structure and dramatic impulse for Gao’s play, but *Bus Stop* has an unmistakably Chinese quality in its individual characterizations and structural implications, which are both underlined by the social and historical conditions of Chinese society in the post-Mao era. Beckett’s play, more specifically, explores the loss of the meaning of humanity in the postwar West, and Gao’s play centers on what he sees as the blindness of the multitude who have been trapped by illusory group-bound conventions and promises throughout their lives. As an embodiment of epistemological negation of Western modernity, *Godot* offers nothing, indeed cancels almost any possibility, for change. As an embodiment of disillusionment about Chinese socialist practices, *Bus Stop* offers the “silent man,” who is clearly a trope for humanistic enlightenment and an individual search for direction in a moment of social transformation and political uncertainty.

Situated in and responding to this moment of transformation and uncer-

tainty, dramatists writing in the vein of critical realism and experimental modernism in the first half of the 1980s adopted distinctively different organizing principles in their playwriting and theatrical production. Their differences, however, were largely submerged by their shared support of Wang Ruoshui and Zhou Yang, first for their advocacy of “humanism in early Marx,” and later through a variety of confrontations with what both called “ultraleftism,” namely, the complex and by no means homogeneous cultural and political forces persisting in the society that were critical of their dramatic and theatrical practices. The battle waged over the banning of the play *WM* (We) in 1985 shows how the major members of both schools functioned as allies in a national controversy. The play *WM* is hence chosen as the second text in this anthology.

Written by Wang Peigong and produced by the Theater Troupe of the Air Force in Beijing, *WM* offers a tender and nearly melancholic portrayal of “educated youth” in their struggle to cope with their drastically changing living conditions and to find meaning in their lives. The play begins with a scene of a “collective household” in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution and ends with a reunion at a fancy city restaurant in the mid-1980s. The seven characters in the play are from different social and family backgrounds: the status and identities of their parents range from those of a senior army officer, a cadre who gained power during the Cultural Revolution, and a hardworking industrial worker to those of intellectuals, a “rightist,” and a “capitalist roader.”³⁴ Their lives, registering important aspects of Chinese society over a decade and capturing significant historical moments of these years, are characterized by emotional ruptures and political disillusionments. Despite all they have suffered, however, they remain deeply bound by their shared youth spent in the “collective” and their memories of a sunny childhood in the 1950s, crystallized in the team song of the “Young Socialist Pioneers.” The play ends with them humming the melody of the song and poignantly echoing—with explicit mockery and implicit nostalgia—a group of children, another generation of Young Pioneers, singing in the distance.

Structurally, the play is divided into four parts, with a series of intertwined individual stories using two drummers to set the rhythm of the unfolding events and accentuate each character’s often unspoken feelings or subconscious. Drawing on such modernist elements as streams of consciousness in the forms of overlapping or parallel monologues, *WM* is substantiated by a realistic characterization. The significance of such structural innovation certainly goes beyond the realm of pure theatrical techniques. Registering such sentiments of experimental modernism as an ever growing sense of alienation among once genuinely connected characters, the play is

at the same time suffused with a longing for social justice, equality, and the ideals that informed most plays of critical realism in the early 1980s. The reform era in *WM* is no longer an imagined future invested with hope for socialist democracy (as in *Small Well*), belief in the “laws of history” in accordance with which the will of the commoners prevails (as in *Li Shimin*), or desires of romantic individualism (as in *Bus Stop*). The reform era in the play has turned into a trying reality in which some old problems persist and new problems emerge while drastic social changes dislocate everyone and redefine everything. Compared with the three texts discussed above, *WM* offers a much more fluid narrative that aims to capture these complex social conditions and the individuals feeling caught in them without any conclusive evaluations. As the author said in an interview, “We don’t want to define those characters in ready-made categories of good or bad, . . . we just want to accurately represent their experiences, their emotional crises, to show the barely discernible changes in human relations under changing social realities.”³⁵ In fact, *WM* is one of the few plays of the mid-1980s that touches upon the subtle disintegration of the moral fabric of human relations under the gradually developing commodification of society.

Some leading members of the Air Force Cultural Bureau were displeased with the play. The young people, they argued, all appeared self-serving and petty, they lacked a belief in socialism and a sense of purpose for their lives. The only person among the seven characters who had kept his ideals and integrity appeared most abstract, and he was literally losing his eyesight. One sees in the play how these young people had lost their socialist dreams but no indication of how they could regain their ideals. The production, judged too “gloomy, low-spirited, and decadent,” was permitted two dress rehearsals with a small group of invited guests to solicit comments and suggestions for its revision.³⁶ Wang Gui, the director of *WM* and also the head of the troupe, rejected these criticisms as ultraleft orthodoxy. Arguing that the play realistically reflected the life experiences of the generation of “educated youth,” he refused to make any revisions and turned the first “dress rehearsal with invited guests only” into a full-fledged evening performance witnessed by a large group of critics, reporters, writers, and theorists. Although praise quickly appeared in major newspapers and journals, the Air Force Cultural Bureau canceled all rehearsals and further possibilities for public performance.

The controversy immediately reached the national level, and the decision to ban the play provoked anger and protest. Numerous dramatists from the schools of critical realism and experimental modernism protested the decision, calling it “brutal and confused administrative interference.”³⁷ The Society of Dramatic Literature, a newly established subgroup of the

Association of Chinese Dramatists, soon decided to sponsor a production of the play by collecting donations from such sympathetic groups as the Chinese Society of the Disabled, led by Deng Xiaoping's elder son, Deng Pufang.³⁸ They then invited artists from different theater companies to perform it. The Shanghai People's Theater Company, meanwhile, also decided to stage the play. While the rehearsals were proceeding in both cities, numerous newspapers and journals reported on the play and its surrounding controversy, and when the two productions were brought to the public in October the reviews were full of unanimous praise.

The overwhelming praise for *WM*, like the resolute ban it provoked, indicate as much about the complexity of the moment in which it appeared as about the meaning of the production itself. With the decollectivization being enforced in the rural areas, by 1985 the urban economy had entered preliminary stages of denationalization. The cultural climate, the most sensitive barometer of Chinese socioeconomic and political life, was likewise transforming. In late 1984 the Fourth Congress of Literature took place in Beijing, and Hu Qili, then a standing member of the Politburo, gave a keynote speech promoting efforts to create "a vast sky of artistic freedom" and denouncing "inappropriate administrative interference" in literature and art.³⁹ In the early spring of 1985, the Fourth Congress of Theater also took place in Beijing, at which Xi Zhongxun, then secretary of the Central Disciplinary Committee of the Communist Party, made a speech similarly denouncing "ultraleft interference." The institutional implications of these speeches were demonstrated in the striking reconfigurations of the standing committees of the Writers Association and the Dramatists Association that were accomplished at both congresses: a significant number of those who had supported the controversial "new works of the new period" since the early 1980s were elected to replace some of the increasingly unpopular previous members of both committees;⁴⁰ and the once controversial writer Wang Meng was soon to assume the office of minister of culture. The production of *WM* was hailed as "a new chapter of modern Chinese spoken drama," and *Small Well Alley* was finally restaged for the public in the spring of 1985 after its five painful years of being kept at bay.⁴¹

The *WM* production, therefore, occurred at a significant transitional moment in the world of art and literature. The transition, however, was far more complex than what the performance of the play and its emotionally charged controversy had contained. The appearance of *Small Well Alley* looked tragically belated on the changing Chinese sociocultural scene. "Chinese reform" as a synonym for "Chinese modernization" was by now identified not only with decollectivization of the rural economy but with the partial denationalization, commodification, and internationalization of the

urban economy, and voices echoing such socialist ethics as the collective well-being of the working people were likely to be judged old, outdated, and somewhat “ultraleft.” Welcomed by its Beijing audience, *Small Well* was received as a gesture about a dispute in the past rather than as an artistic work auguring the future, and the moral values of the honest, hardworking common folk with their preference for the collective well-being affirmed in the play appeared out of step with the culture of the day. That none of the plays Li Longyun wrote after *Small Well* was nearly as influential indicates the changed sociopolitical conditions following in the wake of the reform process. Leading critical realists, after their hard-won battles over the “ultraleftists” who often attempted to ban their works in the first half of the 1980s, were confronted with growing new problems after the mid-1980s.

The cultural world of these years embraced Western-style modernism that was accompanied by escalating importation of European and American cultural products; books on Western literature, philosophy, political science, art, and theories were hastily translated and published. The theater world from 1985 onward was increasingly dominated by “modernist” dramas. These dramas, like some of the earlier modernist experiments, absorbed certain Western modernist sentiments on alienation from the state and a rebellious spirit toward sociocultural orthodoxy. More important, and unlike some of the earlier modernist dramas, they further inherited great amounts of sociocultural nihilism built within the organizing principles of Western modernist theater, in the light of which the ideology of Marxist socialism and its moral traditions were rejected. The spirit of individual rebellion against society embodied in Western modernism was transplanted into the Chinese context to deconstruct established cultural and moral systems, even as the conventional values of Western modernity were penetrating China to fill the ideological void created by such modernist deconstruction and the furthering of economic denationalization and internationalization. As such literary terms as “absurdism,” “surrealism,” “expressionism,” or simply “modernism” were dancing through theater or literary journals and cultural circles, waves of Western consumer goods were sweeping across Chinese society. There appeared in cultural circles an equation of the modern West with the modern world, modernization with westernization, and Western-style modernity with universal humanity. While this Western-oriented modernism was reaching its second apex in the latter half of the 1980s, “the West is best” sentiments began to dominate the theater world as well as the society at large.⁴²

Responding to the challenges that modernist theater with a nihilistic turn posed, but insisting on the “Chineseness” of their theatrical practices, some

of the critical realists consciously appropriated the modernist techniques. Among the innovations in playwriting evident since the mid-1980s were structural changes: well-made plots often gave way to series of episodes; the orderly unfolding of stories began to split into multiple lines of development in which time and space or past and present were manipulated with greater flexibility; complex, ambiguous, and at times allegorical images increasingly replaced well-defined and linearly developed characters. When realists employed these putatively Western modernist techniques they began to appear more familiar to Chinese eyes and even turned out to be something very close to many aesthetic formulations of Chinese traditional music drama. The rich trove of traditional music drama then was emphatically rediscovered by critical realists. Such features of Western modernist theater as the fluidity of time and space, symbolism of imagery, and performative theatricality, some critical realists asserted, were in fact originally borrowed by Western dramatists from dramatic cultures of the East. Bertolt Brecht's interest in Beijing Opera, which inspired him to crystallize his theories of alienation effect and the epic theater, was the most cited and discussed example. Creative combinations of European modernist semiotics and the aesthetic codes of traditional Chinese drama, some of the leading dramatists of critical realism argued, marked the most promising direction for modern Chinese theater. The effort to carry out such combinations resulted in one of the most influential and provocative dramas of the 1980s: the *chuanjü*-style play *Pan Jinlian: The History of a Fallen Woman* of 1986, a realist redramatization of an ancient Chinese story in the form of regional music drama that rather consciously and effectively incorporated Western modernist elements.⁴³ *Pan Jinlian* is the third text and the only regional music drama in this anthology.

Written by well-known playwright Wei Minglun in the form of traditional *chuanjü* with one prelude and four parts, *Pan Jinlian* reappropriates the traditional story of "lascivious" Pan Jinlian by recontextualizing her life in juxtaposition with various fictional and historical characters from different times and places. Jia Baoyü, the hero of the Qing-period novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Wu Zetian, the female emperor of the Tang dynasty, Anna Karenina, the heroine of Leo Tolstoy's classic novel, *Feifei*, a divorcée of modern China, and her friend, a contemporary woman judge, are but a few of those presented in this representation of Pan Jinlian's tragic story. The play, the author announced, is a protest against the "oppression of the female gender" rooted in Chinese traditional culture and persisting in different forms in modern Chinese society.⁴⁴ Moreover, the place where the story takes place is "across countries and continents, unconstrained by specific locations," implying that this protest is relevant to cultures and socie-

ties everywhere.⁴⁵ The “fallen” woman, Pan Jinlian, viewed as one among all the women in the world who have suffered male oppression, is reevaluated from cross-national, transhistorical, and multicultural perspectives as the victim of patriarchal power structures. Compared with such plays as *WM* that also incorporate traditional Chinese and Western modernist techniques, *Pan Jinlian*, with a regional music form and folk-style language familiar to Chinese audiences in both urban and rural areas, appears more coherent and complete in its aesthetic stylization and more dynamic and effective in its dramatization. The play creates virtually an entirely new form of Chinese regional music drama that cannot be fully defined by reference to categories of realism or modernism, traditional or modern. The author himself styled it “*chuanjü of the absurd*.”

Stimulating many theatergoers of both traditional music drama and modern spoken drama with its refreshing thematic treatment and formal innovations, and disturbing some others with its radically different reinterpretation of the traditional story, *Pan Jinlian* touched off another heated nationwide debate. Some acclaimed the play as a milestone in contemporary cultural history and a powerful protest against Chinese “feudal morality” and its contemporary variation, “ultraleft orthodox morality,” which imposed feudalistic restrictions on relations between male and female citizens. Wei Minglun’s redramatization of Pan Jinlian, they argued, revealed the necessity of “sexual liberation” not only for Chinese women but for the nation’s search for sociocultural modernity.⁴⁶ The concept of “sexual liberation,” directly translated from English, was thus formally introduced and quickly disseminated in contemporary Chinese literary criticism. Others, however, denounced the play as a grave sociocultural misrepresentation in which a hedonistic, self-indulgent, and thoroughly traditional woman is glorified as an icon for women’s liberation. “This play is written and produced with explicit pragmatic social purpose,” a senior critic wrote; “it is certainly not just about a traditional story and a woman who was victimized by China’s feudal tradition. The play’s immediate implications for Chinese society in the 1980s are more than visible, as the author himself also declared. In our society today, while rapidly increasing numbers of middle-aged and younger men are carrying on extramarital and premarital affairs, and the percentage of teenagers’ love affairs has also been quickly rising, Wei’s Pan Jinlian, who is driven by her impulsive individual sexual desires to ‘justifiably’ murder her husband, can indeed help those men to achieve and justify their ‘sexual liberation.’ The sex is liberated, but this has nothing to do with women’s liberation.”⁴⁷ As in some of the previous controversies, the oppositions had little interest in the complexity of the play as a many-layered artistic work and less patience to explore the issues broached by it:

problems of gender in the gender-blind discourse of state socialism, the issue of sex in a society in which only four decades earlier Confucian patriarchy was still the official ideology and concubinage was legal, and the changing configurations of gender, sex, and class in a women-friendly and at the same time paternalistic state that is presently dismantling some of its established social mechanisms while generating a market economy, with all its usual women-hostile consequences, such as the return of the oldest form of sexual exploitation—prostitution. All these issues and more that are contained in this play and its receptions, unfortunately, have not been explicated in this debate.

Unlike the debates over *Small Well* or *WM*, however, the controversy about *Pan Jinlian* was quickly concluded with a general affirmation of the play as a great artistic work offering a powerful critique of both “feudalist moral codes” and “ultraleft orthodoxy” about human sexuality. It is significant that although leading cultural luminaries of the reform era such as Wang Meng and Liu Zaifu celebrated the flourishing of an “era of cultural pluralism,”⁴⁸ in the theater world *Pan Jinlian* hardly engendered genuine critical exchanges and substantial controversy at all. Instead, Chinese dramas written and produced in the late 1980s were regularly acclaimed by critics as protests against “feudal ultraleftism” or as arguments for “reform and open-door policy,” “modernity,” and “individuality.” Until, that is, the social and political explosion of 1989 and the imposed silence that followed June 4.

The national success of *Pan Jinlian*, and the brief but highly visible controversy it aroused, temporarily masked the disturbing fact that from the mid-1980s the theater world as a whole was drastically declining. Film, television, and various popular entertainments flourishing in urban areas since the mid-1980s surpassed theater as the medium attracting national attention. As early as 1983, more than one hundred new films were released annually, and 87 percent of the households in Beijing and Shanghai already had television sets.⁴⁹ “Every evening,” a noted dramatist wrote in 1983, “several TV channels offer interesting programs, more than ten cinemas show various Chinese and foreign films, each theater stages musical dramas, dancing dramas, and other popular performances—people now have many choices for a leisured evening. If we want to attract the audience to come and see our spoken dramas, we have to offer something special.”⁵⁰ Theater, in short, had been increasingly challenged by the rapidly changing social conditions and larger patterns of the nation’s cultural life.

Emblematic of those changes, the Chinese film and television industries had been visibly rising since the mid-1980s. As the percentage of urban households that had television sets increased with unprecedented speed and

programs and channels with commercial advertisements multiplied, so did the time that people spent in front of the television. Although the sociocultural impact of the television industry on the general public was increasing in the mid-1980s, the film industry, which reached its most productive period in its quantity and technical quality, captured most of the public attention.⁵¹ The rise of the once humble Xian Film Studio best exemplified such changes. Led by Wu Tianming, appointed manager of Xian Film in 1983, the studio produced a series of national hits and, in 1985, sold more copies of its films than any other studio in the country. In 1987, its films won seven of the eleven national Golden Rooster Awards and several prestigious international prizes.⁵² Provoking strong responses at a variety of international film festivals while stirring excitement and controversy within China, these films registered the dynamics of modern Chinese history as much as the changes in the history of Chinese film.

Wu Tianming was recognized as one of the most forceful figures in film by the mid-1980s and an outstanding director in national and international film circles. Among eleven awards he received as a film director, five were international; among the five films he had directed, *Old Well*, released in 1986, was awarded two national and three international prizes.⁵³ With a narrative style strikingly distinguished from those of realist films made by such leading senior directors as Xie Jin and Wu Yigong, *Old Well* fascinated audiences with its innovative use of heavy color and strong light, creative appropriation of folk and rural imageries, highly assertive and theatrical cinematic representation, and enormous emotional energy. The film focuses on villagers who live and labor under the harshest physical conditions. Generation after generation of these villagers searched for water, the most precious source of life and hope, in a severely barren mountainous area. Their heroic-tragic persistence and the allegorical significance of their struggles are powerfully revealed through the cinematic narration, which is at once brutally realistic and intensely symbolic. Rewriting the realist tradition of Chinese film with its allegorical narrativity, *Old Well* paved the way for and heralded most creative features of the “fifth generation” of Chinese film directors. Embraced by Chinese viewers and acclaimed by Western critics, it significantly altered the landscape of Chinese cinematic culture. It is the only film script in this anthology.

The national and international recognition of Wu Tianming’s *Old Well* caused complex but positive reactions as well as nationwide controversy in China. Some cultural critics and administrators asserted that the film gained attention in the West by representing Chinese society and people’s lives in a most degrading way, exaggerating and even fabricating China’s dehumanizing rural poverty and backwardness to please Western critics and audiences

who held culturally and racially prejudiced stereotypes about the inferior “yellow race.” Others contended that the film embodied the most precious spirit of the Chinese people and its culture, namely, the indomitable tenacity and determination to live and to develop under the most severe natural and social conditions. The international recognition the film won, they further argued, should be celebrated as a victory of Chinese culture asserting itself in the world and not taken as negative evidence against the film itself. As the Chinese economy, according to the general orientation set up by the reform policies of the nation, must find ways to enter the international economy, Chinese cultural production must make every effort to enter the global cultural market. *Old Well* was exemplary in taking the lead in “going into the world.”⁵⁴

The debate over *Old Well* concluded with unequivocal praise of the work by most members of the Chinese cultural world, but the complex questions regarding export-oriented cultural products in the international economic and cultural market were far from being resolved. Although 1985 to 1987 became known as the “golden years of Chinese film” for the unprecedented influence that film exerted throughout the nation compared with other performing arts, particularly spoken drama, financial support from the government for the film industry soon declined. This reduction of government financial support generated an urgent need for alternative resources. From 1987 onward, driven by the need to find more adequate financial support, attracted by the glamour and wealth that international recognition implied, and further pushed by the policies designed by the Chinese reform leadership to promote production for export, the Chinese film industry resorted to foreign investment and to making films for international markets. Competition for overseas financing among film directors intensified, and some turned completely to the Western film market starting in the late 1980s. Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Shanghai Triad* (1995) and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and *Temptress Moon* (1997) were among the latest sensations so created. That the majority of the Chinese audience showed less and less interest in these films, even deeply disliking Zhang’s *Red Lantern* in particular, contrasted sharply with the nationwide enthusiasm that Wu Tianming’s *Old Well* once evoked.⁵⁵

The problematic implications of the increasing fame of certain Chinese films since the late 1980s in the world film market can be partly seen in the marketing and distribution of Zhang Yimou’s *Red Lantern*. Financed from Hong Kong and Japan and catering to the Eurocentric mindset that has dominated the international cultural market in general and film market in particular, *Red Lantern* offered a brilliant cinematic fabrication and a conscious exoticization of the Chinese concubine system in the 1920s and its

erotic politics. The high-profile coverage and sensational praise the film received in the Western media contrasted with the ambiguous comments in Chinese newspapers, revealing an emerging process of “orientalizing” Chinese culture and people, a process consciously joined by some Chinese artists who won international fame bestowed by Western patronage with monetary rewards.⁵⁶ This process has begun to induce serious critical examinations.

Meanwhile, the television industry had been undergoing intensifying commercialization since the late 1980s. Media products from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the West were imported in increasing quantities, and by 1988 nearly 60 percent of television programs in Shanghai and Beijing were imported from the West or Japan or patterned after Hong Kong and Taiwan commercial styles.⁵⁷ As many Western scholars of contemporary China have emphasized, the rise of the television industry in the 1980s was one of the most significant developments in modern Chinese cultural history. Unlike its counterpart in the West, however, its rapid development since the mid-1980s was generated not only by the growing forces of the domestic economy and technology but also by the aggressive expansion of Western consumer culture and its variations in the “Kong/Tai” (Hong Kong and Taiwan) style into China.⁵⁸

These changes in film production and the rise of the television industry, emblematic of the formation of a performing arts market in China and the changes in the nation’s cultural life, were inseparable from, and to a certain degree illustrative of, an overall economic and social transformation. The increasing commodification of society and the further opening of the nation to Western multinational capital and ideology, particularly since the late 1980s, have been structurally redefining the modes of production and the fundamental ways of life of the Chinese. When pursuit of material wealth began to dominate society’s imagination and dictate the lives of individual citizens, cultural activity that was not yet commercialized appeared increasingly superfluous and anachronistic. While the government was cutting funds on one hand and the declining audience was cutting the box office on the other, the theater world as a whole was rapidly sinking into total crisis. By 1988, in the words of Yin Ruocheng, then vice minister of culture, “a large percentage of spoken drama companies nationwide are nearly dead.” His solution: “We must disband more theater companies at all levels, adopt a contract system, and promote tourist performances.”⁵⁹

Confronted with this crisis, dramatists of critical realist and experimental modernist persuasions responded in very different ways. Many of the realists were disturbed by commercialization and what they called “Hongkongization” and “Taiwanization” of Chinese culture. As early as 1985, after Hu

Qili's speech on artistic freedom, leading dramatists of critical realism gathered in Beijing to discuss "freedom of artistic creation and artists' historical missions." Wang Peigong, the author of *WM*, evoked the threat of cultural commodification to spoken drama in the following comments:

All the programs produced by the central television network for the Spring Festival this year, including that Hong Kong-style "New Year's Eve Show" and that traditional music drama preluded by a comic actor embracing a big shoe-shaped piece of gold, were utterly disappointing to the mass audience. "So *this* is called 'freedom of art?!' " many asked. Some answered: "Why make such a fuss? This is merely the beginning!" If such a "beginning" continues, more of the audience will be driven out of theater and cinema. How then can we talk about literary and artistic prosperity? Such a "beginning," I don't need to repeat, will make some men of letters "freely" run into fatal pitfalls!⁶⁰

Echoing Wang's comments, Zhong Jieying, another noted playwright of the Beijing People's Art Theater Company, warned: "Please cherish what we have finally won, namely, the right to write what we truly feel and think about our lives. If we let our art be dominated by those fashionable performances that imitate Hong Kong and Taiwan tastes and let money-dictated publications including pornography dominate our society, freedom will lose its true value and become just another form of falsehood."⁶¹ Most dramatists of the critical realism school shared these views, as many essays printed in journals and speeches made at meetings indicate; yet how to further understand or deal with those "pitfalls" and "falsehoods," few of them seemed to know.

Similarly uncertain about the fate of modern Chinese drama, and indeed the future direction of the country as a whole, dramatists of experimental modernism responded to the changing situation with diverse views. Some followed the impulses offered by European modernist "negative theology" and went further and further into an isolated agony and despair over the "ultimate meaninglessness of being"; others turned into unconditional admirers and proponents of Western modernity and its ideology, identifying the idealized images created by eighteenth-century European rhetoric of "liberty," "equality," and "fraternity" with historical realities. They shared, however, the rhetorical assertion that the socially engaged and committed tradition of modern and contemporary Chinese literature and art was the culprit responsible for the multiple crises of Chinese culture in general and Chinese drama in particular.⁶² Literature and art, some of them insisted, were expressions of individual subjectivity endowed with universal humanity, and anything that involved social issues was doomed as pseudoart re-

pugnant to “our modern audience.” Such pseudo art and literature, it was further argued, were deeply rooted in the tradition of classical Chinese aesthetics, which emphasized the social and ethical function of literary activity and was simply a feudal legacy that should be eradicated from “modern” ways of artistic thinking.⁶³ Critical realism, with its announced engagement with the social, political, cultural, and emotional conditions of the nation, was thereby viewed as another variant of “ideological orthodoxy,” a descendant of “feudalism” and its modern reincarnation, “ultraleftism,” outdated, petrified, and bound to be discarded by “new waves of world history.”⁶⁴ Increasing numbers of playwrights of critical realism, including Zong Fuxian, Xin Yixun, Li Jie, and Li Longyun were implicitly criticized and at times explicitly ridiculed.⁶⁵

It is here that the problematic tensions between the school of critical realism and that of experimental modernism became explicit. As early as 1985, in an interview with an American journalist, Li Longyun made the following comments:

What’s most attractive about a writer is his or her own character, and what is most appealing about a nation is its own cultural spirit and form of living . . . A play is significant internationally if it is characterized by its own unique artistic style and resonates with its own profound cultural traditions. I believe that our productions of plays like *Rhinoceros* and *Bald Soprano* cannot surpass the productions by Western theater companies, but I dare say that there is no theater in the entire world that can produce a better production of *Teahouse* than the Beijing’s People’s Art Theater Company.⁶⁶

More polemical phrases like “superficial imitators,” “self-styled westernizers,” and “trick players and claptrappers” were coined by some critics to characterize some of the modernists, indicating the degree to which this conflict was emotionalized.⁶⁷ While modernist plays staged in cities like Shanghai accounted 74 percent of all the productions mounted in the years from 1985 to 1989, a large proportion of these dramas, with intentionally obscure language and westernized images, were less and less appealing to the general public.⁶⁸ Despite the effusive praise they received from some theater critics, the theater of experimental modernism in the late 1980s was losing the genuine cultural energies and critical thrusts operating in the pioneering modernist works of the earlier years and, more important, was losing the remaining part of the general audience for spoken drama.

The deep tension between the two drama schools voiced by some critics and dramatists, such as Wang Peigong and Li Longyun, interestingly enough, has never been adequately explored in the theater world. As China’s structural economic changes encouraged further commodification

of society and were closing the social spaces once occupied by such non-commercial forms of culture as spoken drama, a sizable proportion of the nation's leading playwrights and drama theoreticians either remained silent on topics of urgent social relevance or stretched themselves to comply with whatever currents that were carrying the day. Those who insisted upon the organizing principles of socially engaged critical realism and "Chinese cultural styles" in their literary practice and theories often appeared defensive and reactive rather than creative or initiative; Zong Fuxian and Xi Yixun, among others, managed to criticize their own playwriting with explicit anxiety and hidden ambivalence.⁶⁹ While further socioeconomic changes forced even the most ontological or transcendental modernists to confront the empty theater houses in the late 1980s, most of them seemed desperately frustrated and deeply lost rather than capable of asserting alternatives as they once appeared so confident in doing. The ambivalent responses of some—and the significantly absent responses of others—to the crises of Chinese spoken drama since the mid-1980s indicate the historical profundity and complexity of the crisis in relation to a changing society.

As the decade of the 1980s was ending, financial support for theater from the government was further reduced to subsistence or a lower than subsistence level. The Ministry of Culture in 1987–1988 began to enforce an "employee contract system" in theater companies for their new hiring, and such basic principles as job security, free medical care, and other benefits were done away with. For those dramatists who joined the companies before this contract system was enforced and hence still retained some benefits, particularly free medical care, the State Council adopted a new policy that "strongly encouraged" them to stop being dependent on the company for their income and to take the initiative to organize individual performances to make a living for themselves. Meanwhile, more theater companies were disbanded. In 1987 alone, for instance, five spoken drama troupes in Liaoning Province were closed.⁷⁰ The degree of change in government policy in the late 1980s was demonstrated emphatically when *Jūben* (Drama), the national drama journal that was founded in 1952 and contained essentially the entire history of contemporary Chinese drama ever since—except during the Cultural Revolution years—lost its annual funding from the cultural administration in 1988.⁷¹ The editors and staff members of the journal refused to let it be closed. They made a historically unprecedented and emotionally charged national appeal for donations, and managed to continue its publication. The national theater journal *Xijūbao* (On theater), on the other hand, did not lose its funding entirely. But with its funding drastically reduced it was compelled to change its title to *Zhongguo xijū* (Chinese theater), and it started issuing "popular editions" containing

photos of sexualized women and violent, sensational stories to increase revenues.⁷² Moneymaking had become the real priority for theater companies and drama publishing houses at all levels, and more theater companies were turned into nightclubs.⁷³ A large number of playwrights gave up playwriting and started working for the television industry or joined other lucrative commercial activities; a larger number of actors left the stage of spoken drama and contracted for various commercial performances to make a living; driven by the profit-making pressures at home and lured by the spells of Hollywood films and American-style mass culture industries abroad, many artists left the country altogether and joined the largest “brain drain” from China in the twentieth century.⁷⁴

Still, some of the finest playwrights, directors, and dramatic artists of the nation remained with their chosen vocation and continued their creative efforts. The dramatic works of fine artistic quality written and produced in the last two years of the 1980s, therefore, cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the turbulent social, economic, and cultural situation in which Chinese dramatists struggled. Faced with a wide array of night entertainment, neon-light advertisements for Western consumer goods such as MTV, legal or illegal imported videotapes, magazines, and pornography, Hong Kong, Taiwan and American television programs and Rambo films, discos and Japanese-style karaoke singing, theater productions appearing in the last years of the 1980s were not only outstanding artistic works but heroic triumphs for the much undermined, confused, and distressed world of Chinese spoken drama. *Sangshuping jishi* (Sangshuping chronicles) was such a play, and it is therefore chosen as the last dramatic text in this anthology.⁷⁵

Staged by the Central Drama Academy in Beijing in 1988, *Sangshuping* is set in a northern Chinese village during the late years of the Cultural Revolution. It dramatizes how the “high rhetoric” of militant radicalism during the Cultural Revolution had no real connection at all with the villagers’ lives and was used only by traditional patriarchal forces in the socioeconomically backward countryside. The patriarchal tradition perpetuated by rural poverty and the victimization of women by such cultural traditions and economic conditions are both emphatically dramatized. The love stories of the young and their tragic endings are movingly represented. As a condemnation of the die-hard patriarchal and traditional forces operating through “ultraleftism” during the Cultural Revolution, the play did not go beyond the accomplishment of plays of critical realism like *Small Well Alley*. The crucial difference between the plays produced in previous years and *Sangshuping Chronicles*, however, lies in the fact that the former’s critiques of social, political, and cultural illnesses were intertwined with their authors’

call for a genuine practice of socialist ethics and democracy in accordance with the common folk's needs and desires, while the latter holds the patriarchal mentality of "the common folk" in rural China perpetuated by their extreme economic poverty as one more major source of the social illnesses persisting in society. The causes of the tragedies of *Sangshuping*, the play suggests, are not only the abuse of power by officials and their institutional mechanisms, but the extreme rural poverty and the cruel ignorance of the peasantry rooted in their poverty and associated traditional values.

Such a difference is particularly striking when one compares this play with the film *Old Well*, which deals with a similar type of rural lives. While *Old Well*'s villagers share many of *Sangshuping*'s problems, their human spirit to not only persist but struggle to change their lives is recognized and represented with intimate understanding and deep emotional resonance. In *Sangshuping*, no such spirit survives. Whereas the two leading women characters in *Old Well* assert their strong individualities and their ability to define their own forms and values of living, in *Sangshuping* the two leading women characters become simply victims—one goes insane and the other commits suicide. *Old Well* unfolds with the life of Wangquan, a young man with a modern education who returns to his home village to live, suffer, work, and fight; *Sangshuping* is seen through the observant eye of Zhu Xiaoping, in whom the authorial voice speaks. Unlike Wangquan, Zhu is the only character in the play who is not from the village but from another world—China's large urban centers. Although his sociopolitically privileged family background is presented with critical reflection in the play when Zhu is shown using it to help the villagers, his constant gaze is clearly enacted as a perspective of "the modern" that organizes this dramatic narrative of "the traditional." Indeed, one may well argue that *Old Well* is a story told as the villagers live through it, while the *Sangshuping* story is told as a self-conscious modernist sees it. Many of the critical insights into the Chinese peasantry in the play are certainly invaluable in heightening the sense of urgency to "enforce fundamental social reform" and "eliminate feudalistic ignorance," as the director of the play puts it.⁷⁶ But the structuring of the play is also underlined by a narrative distance that allows a fair amount of objectification of the villagers. By turning them into carriers and victims of "feudalistic" ignorance and cruelty without any intrinsic resources for effective change, the play implies a prescription for saving the Chinese peasantry from itself—a "modernization" that seems a negation of the "backward lives" of the *Sangshuping* village rather than a consolidation of the desires and strengths for change coming from its inhabitants.

The much emphasized focus of the production is on aesthetic experimen-

tation. Incorporating elements of traditional Chinese music drama and techniques of Western modernist theater in an innovative, unique, and coherent performing style, the play is full of images of poetic richness and allegorical suggestiveness, fluid spatial constructions and temporal transmutations, and expressive representations of individual characters' feelings and their shared living situation. As the performance was going on in the Academy's little theater, all noted theater critics and cultural administrators in Beijing, including Yin Ruocheng, then the minister of culture, hailed it as "the crystallization of the finest achievements of contemporary Chinese dramatic art."⁷⁷ While such celebration is grounded in the remarkable aesthetic experimentation of this production, it cannot substitute for substantial explication of the complex signification of the play and its prescriptive "call for fundamental social reform." As if being somewhat displaced by the promotion of its aesthetic innovation in itself, discussions of any substance about the play—its form in relation to its content, for instance—were visibly absent in the entire celebration of this "theatrical triumph." The show "closed after fewer than twenty performances at the Academy's little theater."⁷⁸

Such triumphs on stage, moreover, were fewer and fewer, as the prescriptions for the nation's modernization with a "global vision" were intensifying in the public discourse, indicating the degree to which tensions between the public program for "national progress" and the lives of China's ordinary citizens were growing. After the tragic events of 1989, no one can say that the theater world remained unchanged, but the essential tensions and crises discussed above persisted and developed. While market-led reform was in temporary retrenchment from late 1989 to late 1991, there appeared a momentary resurgence of spoken dramas reasserting "socialist spirit and morality."⁷⁹ After Deng Xiaoping's trip to southern China in the spring of 1992 and the Fourteenth Party Congress in the fall calling for speeding up the implementation of reform policies gearing the society toward a "socialist market economy," however, this momentary resurgence was eclipsed and commodification further dictated sociocultural trends.⁸⁰ Although a "middle-class theater" was advocated by some critics and dramatists in the late 1980s and then again in the early 1990s, most Chinese artists who remained in their profession seemed to have realized that they were living in a painful period during which the most they could do might be to keep their dramatic activity alive on a small scale and continue to prepare for a resurgence in the future—whatever that might be.⁸¹ In his essay "Our Hope for Spoken Drama Lies in the New Century," Zhao Yaoming, a noted playwright in Nanjing, predicted that it would take thirty or so years for China to succeed with its market reforms and to turn itself into "a prosperous, democratic, socially integrated, and culturally developed country" with a fully estab-

lished middle class. Until then, it seemed to Zhao, modern spoken drama, conditioned by the necessities of Chinese social history, had no alternative but to continue its struggle to survive in its diminished and diminishing social spaces.⁸²

While hope for the revitalization of modern Chinese drama seemed to be placed by some critics and dramatists in the twenty-first century, with an ideal audience of an imagined Chinese middle class, some American- and Western-run commercial theaters began to gain social and institutional ground in cities like Shanghai.⁸³ Meanwhile, the last group of playwrights and dramatists were leaving the realm of spoken drama; 95 percent of the students in the 1992 class at the Shanghai Drama Academy chose to write television scripts to fulfill the requirements for their degrees.⁸⁴ A news item in *South Evenings* on July 21, 1993, reported that playwrights in Beijing had all stopped writing plays; some retired, some started working for commercial television, and some “jumped into” the “sea of business.” The situation in such provincial centers of spoken drama as Hubei and Liaoning was even worse than in Beijing. In the south, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou are faring slightly better; there have been occasional productions of spoken dramas, but they are by and large not well attended.⁸⁵ Among the few plays to win some national media coverage in the beginning of the 1990s, one was an adaptation of Harold Pinter’s *The Lover* in Shanghai in August 1992, containing a lovemaking scene; another was a new play called *Taiyang wan* (Harbor of the sun) by Chu Yue in Beijing in May 1993, which had a female nude scene.⁸⁶ While female nudity was certainly not the sole attraction of these two plays, they did not seem to offer much for sustained artistic or social discussion. As a Chinese scholar noted in 1994: “Since a certain kind of capitalism is developing in China now, theater companies can no longer operate as they have since the inception of the People’s Republic in 1949.”⁸⁷

Modern Chinese drama continues to exist, however, no matter how small its scale of production and how limited its social influence may be for the moment. Contemporary dramatists are still searching for ways to keep their art alive, no matter how much they have to turn to commercial activities for their living.⁸⁸ In the early 1990s in Nanjing a series of innovative performances in small and at times temporary theaters were produced by artists who put their limited individual financial resources together, and “the Nanjing little theater movement” became nationally known.⁸⁹ In Beijing, there also appeared various sponsoring programs, and all the shows produced in the 1990s have had substantial public or private donations. *Niao ren* (Bird men), a three-act spoken drama, was mounted by the People’s Art Theater in April–May 1993 with such subsidies and was extremely well received by