

## 2010 COMMEMORATIONS OF THE THEATRICAL CAREERS OF CAO YU AND LI YURU

LI RURU<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Leeds*

Baoyu 寶玉, “Precious Jade,” is the name of the protagonist in the novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢). Coincidentally, these two characters can also stand as an abbreviation of the names of a theatrical couple: playwright Wan Jiabao 萬家寶 (better known under his penname Cao Yu 曹禺) and *Jingju* 京劇 (also known as Beijing opera or Peking opera) actress Li Yuru 李玉茹. During the autumn and winter of 2010, China’s theatrical realm commemorated their respective contributions to Chinese theatre.

Cao Yu (1910-1996), a penname whose two characters represent the radical and phonetic, respectively, of his family name, is recognised as “the most significant figure in the development of modern drama in China” (Rimmington 1997). Often compared to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, and O’Neill, Cao Yu is credited with helping the non-indigenous “spoken drama” (*huaju* 話劇) reach a degree of maturity in both form and audience reception in the mid 1930s, and declares that his early plays gained canonical status due to their artistry and skilful fusion of contemporary political themes (Noble 2007, 78-80). The Cao Yu Centenary was marked by a series of events sponsored by the nation’s Ministry of Culture (Wenhua bu 文化部), the Federation of Chinese Literature and Arts (Zhongguo wenlian 中國文聯), and the municipal government of Beijing. Activities included symposia, lectures, two international conferences (one held in Tianjin 天津 and Beijing 北京,

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<sup>1</sup> I should disclose that Li Yuru is my mother and Cao Yu is my stepfather.

and one held in Cao Yu's hometown of Qianjiang 潛江 in Hubei Province), and exhibitions in mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, and Japan. A TV documentary series *Drama Master Cao Yu (Xiju dashi Cao Yu 戲劇大師曹禺)*, the publication of both a pictorial biography and a chronology of Cao Yu's life, and a set of commemorative stamps highlighted the month around his birthday on 24 September. In addition to spoken drama productions of his works, performances of adaptations for ballet, opera, and regional theatre traditions continued until the beginning of 2011.

Li Yuru (1923-2008) is remembered not only for her excellent performances on the stage but also her practice-led research on *Jingju* acting. She devoted her later years to her writing, including plays, novels, prose pieces, and research essays. Two of her books on *Jingju* performance (both completed after her second operation for lung cancer) have established her legacy in the *Jingju* realm. Her commemoration began on 23 October with a *Jingju* seminar open to the public at the Yifu Stage (Yifu wutai 逸夫舞臺) in Shanghai, where the featured presenter was Chen Chaohong 陳朝紅, one of her students. Focusing on Li's stage experience and research, Chen also illustrated certain points with live demonstrations. An international symposium and two special performances—a full-length play and an evening of highlights—were held in November, also in Shanghai. An exhibition on her life and career was mounted at the Shanghai Theatre Museum (Shanghai xiju bowu guan 上海戲劇博物館) from 6 to 30 November. Below I present some summary information on both Cao Yu and Li Yuru, as well as more detail on these events.

### **Cao Yu: A Brief Survey of his Life and Work**

Cao Yu grew up in an upper-class household with an extensive library of Chinese and Western literature. His father Wan Dezun 萬德尊, who had been among the first generation of students sent by the Qing government to Japan to study military affairs, once served as secretary to Li Yuanhong 黎元洪 (1864-1928), president of the Republic of China from 1916-17. Cao Yu's natural mother died three days after his birth, and although he loved his stepmother, he felt a lasting sorrow that his own birth had caused his natural mother's death. Cao Yu's elder sister, with

whom he was very close, died young after marrying an opium addict. His elder brother, who also died young, was once kicked so hard by their father to punish him for his opium addiction that it broke the brother's leg.

Cao Yu held contradictory feelings towards his father, and in the view of Tian Benxiang 田本相, a prominent Cao Yu scholar, this was one of the conflicts in his life that gave him a complicated outlook on the world and helped him create multi-faceted characters (1993, 8). Cao Yu described himself as a lonely little boy in a huge tall-ceilinged house, enveloped in an atmosphere smelling of opium (his parents and his elder brother were addicted to opium) tinged with sweetness and silent mystery. He lived in the stories told him by his nanny (a poor woman from the countryside), and in his own imagination. He became interested in the behaviour of adults, especially how people assumed different stances towards his parents as their financial fortunes changed. His loneliness and cold home environment left him prone to depression, and as he grew up he increasingly perceived the alienation of the individual in confrontation with the world. An acute observer, Cao Yu created all his characters on the basis of his own experience.

At Nankai High School in Tianjin and Tsinghua University in Beijing Cao Yu participated in amateur *huaju* activities. He graduated from Tsinghua in 1934, having written his graduation thesis in English on Ibsen. In the same year he published his first play, *Thunderstorm* (*Leiyu* 雷雨), which histories of modern Chinese theatre regard as a major milestone. The success of *Thunderstorm* established the popularity of spoken drama among ordinary urban audiences. Since its premiere on the Chinese professional stage in 1935 it has been constantly revived except during the Cultural Revolution, as well as adapted for various *xiqu* 戲曲 (indigenous music-drama) traditions, Western opera, and ballet. This play, and his later works such as *Sunrise* (*Richu* 日出; 1936), *The Wilderness* (*Yuanye* 原野; 1937), and *Peking Man* (*Beijing ren* 北京人; 1941), made Cao Yu the most famous spoken drama playwright in China.

Like everyone in China, the 1949 Communist victory had a great impact on Cao Yu's life and career. On the one hand, he was appointed to numerous high official positions; on the other, his creativity was steadily eroded by one political campaign after another. He wrote only three plays after 1949. During the Cultural Revolution he was targeted for public

denunciation and was demoted to a cleaner, mopping the floors and toilets in the Beijing People's Art Theatre (Beijing renmin yishu juyuan 北京人民藝術劇院; hereafter BPAT) where he was made the founding president in 1952. A sympathetic Red Guard arranged a sit down job for him, but unfortunately he was recognized by a group of Japanese visitors and the authorities sent him back to sweeping floors. In his later years he was deeply troubled by the fact he had written only nine full-length plays and all his masterpieces appeared before 1949. His life and work offer a microcosm of Chinese intellectuals' experience in the twentieth century.

### **Main Features of the Cao Yu Centenary**

The most noteworthy of the various commemorative activities were performances of Cao Yu's plays and the conference that opened in Tianjin and then moved to Beijing (22-26 September).

#### **Performances**

Amongst the productions all over China for the Cao Yu centenary, *The Wilderness* produced by the BPAT (fig. 1) and the *pingtan* 評彈 adaptation of *Thunderstorm* (fig. 2) stand out. The *Wilderness* was Cao Yu's third play and his only work set in the countryside. This expressionist play about a peasant's revenge interweaves darkness, nightmare, fear, and mystery. Cao Yu once commented that a production of it by even a professional troupe could easily fail because of the complexity of the inner world of its characters and demanding requirements of the lighting and set (1937/1996, I: 577-78). BPAT itself shied away from staging it formally<sup>2</sup> for more than five decades, despite the fact that Cao Yu was its first president. In order to prove its determination to do the play justice, the theatre for the first time invited an outside director: Chen Xinyi 陳薪伊, a seventy-two-year-old veteran female director who had seen 13 of her productions (both spoken drama and indigenous music-drama) win top theatre prizes. An all-star cast was put together. Jinzi 金子, one of Cao Yu's most controversial female characters, was acted by Xu Fan 徐帆, a graduate of the Central Academy of Drama (Zhongyang xiju xuyuan 中央戲劇學院) who had previously

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<sup>2</sup> There was an informal, experimental staging in 2000 by BPAT.

been trained as a *Jingju* actress in an opera school. During the past decade she has appeared far more frequently in films and TV miniseries than on the stage. The protagonist, Qiu Hu 仇虎 (the “revenging tiger”), was played by Hu Jun 胡軍, whose unsuccessful attempt at the same role ten years previously had pushed him off the stage and into film and TV, where he became a star. Pu Cunxin 濮存昕, currently the vice-president of BPAT, and well known for this stage and TV work, played Jiao Daxing 焦大星, Jinzi’s husband.

Chen Xinyi, who had previously directed two other Cao Yu plays, offered a new interpretation of the play. In the process of researching and working on the production she decided to overturn the theme of revenge and to not “highlight the fighting and ugliness,” but instead to focus on “the beauty that slowly falls apart and that should be the meaning of tragedy” (Jiang Wanjuan 2010). She added two characters—a younger Jinzi and Qiu Hu’s sister—as part of her interpretation of the play.

According to media reports and informal feedback from theatre circles, the *pingtan* adaptation of *Thunderstorm* was very well received by critics, scholars, and ordinary members of the audience. Suzhou and Shanghai are the main homes of *pingtan*, a term that includes two kinds of narrative storytelling, *pinghua* 評話, which does not feature singing or musical accompaniment, and *tanci* 彈詞, which does. It is performed by a limited number of performers who both narrate the story and speak or sing in the voice of the characters in the story. The adaptation of *Thunderstorm* was produced by the Suzhou Pingtan Company (Suzhou pingtan tuan 蘇州評彈團), and starred Sheng Xiaoyun 盛小雲, Shi Bin 施斌, Chen Yan 陳琰, and Xu Huixin 徐惠新. The provision of side-titles for both the dialogue and sung portions allowed those not competent in Suzhou dialect to follow the performance.

It was a daunting task to adapt *Thunderstorm* for performance in the *pingtan* genre. The adaptation restructured the four-act play into three chapters that focused on the relationship between the heroine Fanyi 繁漪 and her stepson Zhou Ping 周萍. Having abandoned the conventional interpretation of Fanyi as a “new woman,” the adaptation was more concerned to show how she is troubled and spiritually tortured by her imprisoned life. Zhu Donglin 朱棟霖, the literary advisor for the adaptation, pointed out in his conference paper that the key to the

understanding of Fanyi's character came from the dialogue given her in act four of the first complete publication of the play but taken out of later editions. These are the lines in question (with stage directions in parentheses):

(*To Zhou Chong, half crazedly*) . . . I am no longer your mother. She is now a woman resurrected after meeting Zhou Ping. (*Regardless of the consequences*) She is a woman who needs real love from a man and wants to live as a real human being.

(向沖，半瘋狂地)……現在我不是你的母親。她是見著周萍又活了的女人，(不顧一切地)她也是要一個男人真愛她，要真真活著的女人! (Cao Yu 1936/1996, I: 178)

Zhu Donglin says that inspired by these lines, Fanyi in the *pingtan* adaptation is no longer a “Chinese Nora,” and although she is perhaps no longer a “fighter against feudalism” (*fan fengjian de doushi* 反封建的鬥士), she gains by undergoing a more interesting and detailed psychological analysis as a real woman in the storytelling. More complicated facets and layers of her inner world are presented in the narrative. In order to make the heroine more convincing and to help today's young people empathize with this character created seventy-five years ago, the adaptation contains an additional plotline concerning how the stepmother and stepson fall in love with each other. Interestingly, the added episode makes use of the popularity of the “Young Lovers' Edition” (*Qingchun ban* 青春版) of *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭) among university students.<sup>3</sup> In the *pingtan* adaptation, Fanyi and Zhou Ping have a conversation about their impressions of a performance of *The Peony Pavilion*. According to Zhu, the female lead in *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang 杜麗娘, not only gives Fanyi a starting point to reveal her suffering to her stepson, but also offers today's audiences a way to relate to Fanyi's feelings and her eagerness to seek love.

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<sup>3</sup> This production was created and premiered in Taiwan (in 2004) but made use of actors and personnel from Suzhou.

### **The Tianjin/Beijing International Conference**

More than fifty essays presented by scholars from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, America, and Canada brought Cao Yu studies to a new phase. In contrast to the previous focus on the subject matter, structure, characters/characterization, and the language in his plays, many papers for the first time paid attention to Cao Yu's creative process, focusing on the writer's prefaces, postscripts, and his talks on various occasions about his own plays and his life.

Another theme of the papers was the influence of Cao Yu's plays in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, in the Chinese community in Southeast Asia, and in the wartime era of Communist-controlled Yan'an. Based on a number of historical documents, Japanese scholar Seto Hiroshi 瀬戸宏 convincingly argued that the production of Cao Yu's *Sunrise* started a "trend for large scale performances" (*daxi re* 大戲熱) in the Yan'an area, and that Mao Zedong then reversed his initially positive opinion of these works and decided to organize the famous Yan'an Forum to attack, among other things, the tendency in these works to present urban life in a way that was divorced from his conception of the Communist revolution. Mao's decision was to transform Cao Yu's career and, indeed, the whole Chinese literary and artistic realms in the following decades.

It is also worth mentioning that Japanese scholar Suzuki Naoko 鈴木直子 made a significant contribution to Cao Yu's chronology by identifying the correct date of Cao Yu's first visit to Japan as 1934 instead of 1933. She meticulously used the theatrical advertisements and programs kept at the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum (Tsubouchi hakusei kinen engeki hakubutsukan 坪内博士記念演劇博物館 at Waseda University in Tokyo) to show that the performances Cao Yu is known to have attended in Japan occurred in 1934. The new date will help those scholars interested in tracing the influence of Japanese theatre on Cao Yu's early playwriting. Among the other papers, Chen Xiaomei's 陳小眉 discussion on teaching Chinese drama to American students opened a new field in Cao Yu studies.

Cao Yu's centenary was also celebrated outside of China. On 13 November, a symposium in New York was organized by the Renwen Society at China Institute and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University. Speakers included Wan Fang 萬方, Cao Yu's

daughter, who herself is an accomplished novelist, screen writer, and playwright; Fei Chunfang 費春放, Professor of English and Drama and Director of the Center for American Studies at East China Normal University in Shanghai; Kent Paul, who directed Cao Yu's *Peking Man* at Columbia University in 1980; and Ben Wang, Senior Lecturer at the United Nations and China Institute and Co-Chair of the Renwen Society. A series of events about Cao Yu and modern Chinese drama will be held in Britain in 2011, including photographic exhibitions, lectures and seminars, and a theatrical piece using female characters selected from five of Cao Yu's plays.

### **Li Yuru: A Brief Survey of her Life and Work**

Li Yuru was a descendent of Manchu nobility, but the family was in dire poverty when she was born. In 1933 when she was ten, she was sent to a theatre school so that she could learn a profession and her room and board would be taken care of. She changed her surname from Jiao 焦 to Li, her mother's maiden name, in order not to affect her family's reputation. She studied the *qingyi* 青衣 (young to middle-aged good and virtuous women), *huadan* 花旦 (vivacious, flirtatious or shrewish younger women, sometimes of questionable character) and *daoma dan* 刀馬旦 (martial women, mostly female generals and bandits) roles from male tutors covering a wide range of different schools (*liupai* 流派). Li attributed her success to the unusual training programme that the school specially arranged for its students.

The school, which was run from 1930-1941, is generally referred to by its short name, Zhonghua xixiao 中華戲校 (National Drama School). It trained actors and musicians in *Jingju* and aimed to reform the traditional theatre through providing a more rounded education than was the case in the traditional training school (*keban* 科班). It was the first co-educational opera school to appear in China,<sup>4</sup> and its motto was "Respect our profession and entertain our people" (*jingye lequn* 敬業樂群) (Cui Wei 1939).

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Zhizhang (2003, 811), for the year 1912, does mention the names of three actresses associated with the most famous and long lasting of the traditional training schools, Fuliancheng 富連成.

Closely associated with the school were both the prominent cultural politician Li Shizeng 李石曾 (1881-1973) and Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904-58), one of the “Four Great [Male] Performers of Female Roles” (*si da mingdan* 四大名旦). The first principal (1930-1935) was Jiao Juyin 焦菊隱 (1905-1975), who later became one of the leading directors of spoken drama. During its ten-year existence the school trained over three hundred students, many of whom became stars on the *Jingju* stage. As with traditional training schools, the stage names of students in the same class shared the same middle character (Li Yuru was a member of the fourth class, which had *yu* 玉 as their middle character).

The school emphasized that male roles should be performed by male actors, and female roles by female actors—the sole exception was for the *wudan* 武旦 (more acrobatic martial female) role because the school authorities felt the training for this role was far too harsh for girls to undergo. Students studied six days per week and were not normally allowed to go home, although parents could visit their children on Sundays. In terms of discipline, as in the traditional training schools, students could be beaten for misbehaviour or failure to learn quickly enough and a whole class could be penalized for one student’s mistake. However, teachers were strictly forbidden to hit students’ heads.

After a few months training, lower level students would start acting walk-on parts in public performances which starred upper level students. The plays the students staged included items from the traditional *Jingju* repertoire as well as adaptations from other operatic genres and newly-written scripts. Many *Jingju* stars, including Cheng Yanqiu himself, *huaju* actors, and famous theatrical and literary scholars taught at the school. The school gave Li Yuru a rounded education as a performer on the stage and as a human being in society.

At the age of fourteen, summoned to replace an upper level student, Li Yuru triumphantly performed a leading role and thereafter always held a prominent position in the theatre. After her graduation in 1940 when she was seventeen, Li organized her own troupe (Ruyi she 如意社) with friends from the National Drama School and achieved a sensational success with a forty-eight-day run in Shanghai (Anonymous 1941). The troupe offered the Shanghai audience a program of altogether sixty-two plays that included both traditional and newly-composed pieces. Li acted

the leading roles for twenty-eight of the plays, demonstrating her ability to perform at a high level all three of the female role-types that she had studied. However, because of the unbearable external pressure she had to put up with as a young, prominent actress, she soon disbanded her troupe and started working with a number of masters, putting herself under the protection of famous male stars such as the *laosheng* 老生 (dignified mature male) role actors Ma Lianliang 馬連良 (1901-1966), Zhou Xinfang 周信芳 (stage name Qilin tong 麒麟童; 1895-1975), Tang Yunsheng 唐韻笙 (1902-1971), Tan Fuying 譚富英 (1906-1977), Yang Baosen 楊寶森 (1909-1958), Xi Xiaobo 奚嘯伯 (1910-1977), and Li Shaochun 李少春 (1919-1975; also known for his *wusheng* 武生 [martial male] roles), the *hualian* 花臉 (painted face) role actor Jin Shaoshan 金少山 (1889-1948), the *wenchou* 文丑 (civil “clown”) role actor Ma Fulu 馬富祿 (1900-1969), and the *wuchou* 武丑 (martial “clown”) role actor Ye Shengzhang 葉盛章 (1912-1966). The wide range of training that she had received at the school made it possible for her to perform repertoires of different acting styles, and to become a private disciple of two of the “Four Great [Male] Performers of Female Roles,” Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894-1961) and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900-1968), and of the foremost performer of *huadan* roles, Zhao Tongshan 趙桐珊 (stage name Furong cao 芙蓉草; 1901-1966). She also studied from Yu Lianquan 于連泉 (stage name Xiao cuihua 小翠花; 1900-1967). As a young actress with neither a family connection to the *Jingju* acting community nor any rich and/or powerful patron, Li’s achievement in Republican era China was extraordinary.

In 1953 Li Yuru joined the state-run Shanghai *Jingju* troupe that would be combined with other troupes to form Shanghai *Jingju* Theatre<sup>5</sup> (Shanghai *Jingju* yuan 上海京劇院, hereafter SJT) in 1955. She had both fame and youth, and a relatively “clean” personal history, something that was not the case for many *Jingju* stars at the time. Her deprived family background, and her personal experience of being bullied by the Japanese occupiers and Nationalist officials made her wholeheartedly embrace the new China. However, there were numerous things about the new China that the young actress could not understand.

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<sup>5</sup> The English name presently used on their website is Shanghai Peking Opera Troupe.

For instance, when she was performing Cheng Yanqiu's play *Spring Boudoir Dream* (*Chungui meng* 春閨夢) in Wuhan in early 1952, her performances were well received. However, one evening some People's Liberation Army men appeared in her dressing-room to demand that she cease performing this play. They claimed that to perform this play when China was fighting the US in Korea was most inappropriate and made her an accomplice of US imperialism. Frightened and confused, Li was not able to figure out why a play derived from a Tang poem by Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) should now be associated with capitalist imperialism. She never acted this play again until the 1980s, in preparation for a tour of Hong Kong, when she was sixty-four.<sup>6</sup>

Soon Li came under the direct influence of the state's extensive campaign to reform traditional theatre (*xigai* 戲改): She was asked to prepare productions and to perform them at the frontline in North Korea. Together with her colleagues, Li revised a few traditional plays, including *The Village Girl and the Herdboy* (*Xiao fangniu* 小放牛), *Picking up the Jade Bracelet* (*Shi yuzhuo* 拾玉鐲), *The Autumn River* (*Qiujiang* 秋江), *Imperial Consort Yang Gets Drunk* (*Guife zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒), and *Beauty Defies Tyranny* (*Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒). Even as a student and later as a young actress, Li Yuru agreed that certain aspects of the traditional repertoire should be amended: for instance, "pink scenes" (*fenxi* 粉戲; scenes with sexual content) ought to be removed. Nevertheless, one of the clear consequences of theatre reform in the PRC was the drastic shrinking of the repertoire, despite the fact that a relatively small number of plays were banned outright. Li Yuru was worried that if too much of the traditional repertoire disappeared this would result in a damaging loss of acting techniques. Writing later about the *huadan* repertoire in particular, she concluded as follows:

As for those that I studied at school, and those after graduation that I learned from the personal instruction of Mr. Furong cao (Zhao Tongshan) and from watching the performances of Mr. Xiao cuihua (Yu Lianquan) and Mr. Xun Huisheng, they number maybe 30-40

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<sup>6</sup> This play, and another of Cheng's that premiered in the early 1930s, were controversial for their pacifism (see Goldstein 2007, 280-81).

*huadan* plays. From other local operatic traditions such as *bangzi* I learned around six or seven *huadan* plays. I cannot be considered an actor with a very big repertoire, and I have not seen that many plays, but when I carefully think about it, I break into a cold sweat. Of this limited number of plays that I can act or have seen, since I was thirty [and joined the state-run theatre], I have only performed about 10-20% of them. There are many plays that, because I have not performed them for sixty years, I have already completely forgotten. In other words, there are many plays that were lost during my generation. As I said previously, the art of *Jingju* is closely associated with the repertoire, and when repertoire is lost that means that many of the unique arts and techniques of *Jingju* have disappeared with the older generation.

我在學校裡學的和畢業後由芙蓉草先生（趙桐柵）為我指點過的，以及通過觀摩小翠花（于連泉）和荀慧生先生的演出而學習的大約共有三四十齣花旦戲，又向其他地方戲劇種如梆子等大約學了六七齣花旦戲。我並不能算是一個肚子寬的演員，看的也不算多，然而細想一下，我不由得嚇出一身冷汗，因為就在我學過的以及我看過的有限的這些劇目中，我自己在 30 歲以後上演的大約就只有十分之一二，很多戲由於 60 年不演，已經完全忘記了，也就是說很多戲是在我們這一代人手裡失傳的！正如上文所言，京劇藝術與劇目緊密相連，劇目的失傳意味着很多京劇獨特的藝術以及技巧已經都被老先生們帶走了。（2007, 56-57）

The increasing pressure to mount *Jingju* plays about modern affairs (*xiandai xi* 現代戲) was another policy which brought Li Yuru into conflict with the authorities. The problem, as Li saw it, had less to do with ideology than art. What concerned her was that performers should feel “comfortable” on the stage and should offer audiences good performances that made use of the unique skills that had been created by generations of performers. Li performed in four contemporary plays and had to confront the problem that the acting conventions for traditional *Jingju* were of no use for these plays. Li recalled, “I had nowhere to place my hands, I did not even know how to walk, or what to do on the stage.” 我的手沒處放，

簡直也不會走路了，在舞臺上整個就是無所適從。<sup>7</sup> Li was severely criticized because she employed too many traditional *dan* acting conventions, which were thought to “defame the image of members of the working class” (*waiqu laodong renmin de xingxiang* 歪曲勞動人民的形象). Because of the problems she was encountering, at various meetings she suggested:

Those theatrical forms that have shorter histories and that lack strict conventions can be made to put on more works about modern affairs, while old genres like *Kunju* or *Jingju* [which are strong and rich in conventions] can do more traditional plays or newly-composed historical plays. We can also use those kinds of plays to serve Socialism.

可以讓比較年輕的、不具有嚴格程式規律的劇種多排演現代戲，而像京、昆這樣的古老劇種則可以多演傳統劇目或者新編歷史劇。我們用這些戲同樣可以為社會主義服務。<sup>8</sup>

There is no doubt that such comments gained her the label of a diehard representing conservative forces in theatre and contributed to her denunciation during the Cultural Revolution.

Li's experience during the Cultural Revolution was worse than Cao Yu's. She was publicly denounced, insulted, and tortured. Her Manchu noble family background was exposed, a group of teenaged Red Guards took over her mother's courtyard house in Beijing for a week, and their constant beatings brought the old woman's life to a tragic end.<sup>9</sup>

Trying, like everyone else in China, to re-establish her life after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Li Yuru devoted herself fully to *Jingju*. She reappeared on the stage in 1977, and in September 1978 she was allowed to perform some selected plays from the traditional repertoire. She also

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<sup>7</sup> This and later quotes in this paragraph are from interviews I did with Li Yuru for an article about one of these productions (Li 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Li had to make self-criticism for these words, as recorded in the minutes for 23 January 1964 kept in the SJT's archive.

<sup>9</sup> I have written a greater length about the dilemmas that Li Yuru faced during the theatre reform campaign (Li Ruru 2010a, 94-147 and 2010b, 121-54).

started putting on new plays, including one based on a *kabuki* play, and one she herself wrote, *Love and Hatred* (*Qingsi hen* 青絲恨; 1984), a new adaptation of the story of Wang Kui's 王魁 betrayal of Jiao Guiying 敫桂英. In the case of the latter, instead of playing the heroine Jiao Guiying, she used that role to train younger actresses, while she herself occasionally played Wang Kui, a *xiaosheng* 小生 (young man of letters) role. She also organized master classes for young actresses in the SJT and from other cities.

After marrying Cao Yu in 1979, Li Yuru had to abandon her beloved stage from time to time to spend more time with her husband, who was fourteen years her senior and often needed her care. Besides turning to writing plays, she also began to write fiction. Her first novel, *Pinzi* 品子, named after the heroine, was serialized in an evening paper in 1992 and appeared as a book the following year, under the title of *Little Woman* (*Xiao nüren* 小女人). It was adapted into a twenty-episode TV miniseries in 1999.

From the mid 1990s, Li Yuru also began to write about *Jingju* acting (learning to utilize computer word processing at the age of seventy-five in 1998!). One of her two books collects her writings on acting: *Li Yuru on the Art of Jingju* (*Li Yuru tan xi shuo yi* 李玉茹談戲說藝; 2008), and the other is a collection of her plays: *Selected Plays from Li Yuru's Repertoire* (*Li Yuru yan chu juben xuanji* 李玉茹演出劇本選集; 2010). Her own experience of being the disciple of great *dan* masters and collaborating with great masters of other role types, and her seventy-five years in *Jingju* made her writing on *Jingju* both convincing and practical. One writer said about her collection of essays, she “truly teaches young people the tradition, but also leaves enough space for them to make their own creations” 真正的做到教老的東西給後人，并留給後人創造的空間 (Sun Changjiang 2010). Another said of her analysis of a particular character in a play, “it was like having her teach the play [in person], all you had to do was read it and you would know all the mysteries involved” 這如同說戲一般，一眼瞧去，就能知其中奧妙 (Zhang Yue 2010)

### **Main Features of the Commemoration of Li Yuru in Shanghai**

Performances and an international symposium including scholars from the USA, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and Britain formed the principal

content of the commemorative events. An exhibit on Li Yuru's life and career mounted in the Shanghai Theatre Museum also attracted a wide public because of the general interest in old photographs and the romance between Cao Yu and Li Yuru. As mentioned above, Chen Chaohong's public lecture on 21 October commenced the activities.

### Performances

Of the two performances, the one on 6 November consisted of a full-length play, *Princess Baihua* (*Baihua gongzhu* 百花公主) (fig. 3) and the one on 7 November of four highlight plays (*zhezi xi* 折子戲): *Love and Hatred*, *Imperial Consort Mei* 梅妃, *Picking up the Jade Bracelet* (fig. 4) and *Imperial Consort Yang Gets Drunk*. With regard to the second day of performances, most worthy of note is the participation of Sun Zhengyang 孫正陽, a celebrated *chou* actor who had worked with Li Yuru since the 1950s (fig. 5) and became famous for the role of Luan Ping 樂平 in the model opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhiqu Weihushan* 智取威虎山). He acted Matchmaker Liu (Liu meipo 劉媒婆) for the young actress Yang Yang 楊揚 in *Picking up the Jade Bracelet*.

The choice of *Princess Baihua* by the SJT was significant because this play was the last SJT play Li Yuru participated in (two years after her second lung cancer operation in 2007), and the lead actress Shi Yihong 史依弘 was one of the few students Li taught in her seventies (fig. 6). The work also exemplifies the complicated interaction between the repertoires of different regional operas in the Chinese indigenous theatre, while serving both as a reminder of the political interference of the 1960s and of how the younger generation continues the *Jingju* tradition into the twenty-first century. *Princess Baihua* is not only a good example of the *Jingju* concept of "pass-down and carry-on" (*chuancheng* 傳承) but also a rich example of Chinese theatre's unsmooth journey through the past century.

The earliest version of the story of Princess Baihua seems to have been a *chuanqi* 傳奇 play written anonymously in the Ming and known under the names of *The Story of Baihua* (*Baihu ji* 百花記) and *The Phoenix Mountain* (*Fenghuang shan* 鳳凰山). Although the play as a whole had been lost, four scenes remained in the *Yiyang qiang* 弋陽腔 repertoire. The repertoire of *Shanxi bangzi* 山西梆子 had its own version called

*Baihua Pavilion* (*Baihua ting* 百花亭). On the basis of that version, Weng Ouhong 翁偶虹 (1908-1994) wrote a *Jingju* play entitled *The Girl's Heart* (*Nü'er xin* 女兒心) which Cheng Yanqiu performed in Shanghai in the 1940s (Weng Ouhong 1986, 188-94). Li Yuru first learned two scenes of *Baihua* from the *Yiyang qiang* actor Zhang Peiqiu 章佩秋 in about 1954, and then adapted one of them, *Baihua Presents a Sword as a Gift* (*Baihua zeng jian* 百花贈劍) for *Jingju* in 1958. The forty-minute short play was well received and then extended into a full-length *Princess Baihua* in the early 1960s.

However, the story was not a simple conventional romance, and the question of how to interpret the young man Hai Jun 海俊,<sup>10</sup> with whom the martial princess Baihua falls in love after he has come to spy on her father, was a tricky issue in 1960s China. Hai Jun's character was changed several times, and he was once even played by the *chou* actor Sun Zhengyang in order to emphasize that he was an evil traitor. Marshal Chen Yi 陳毅 (1901-1972) even gave instructions on making the play into a model to show the whole world that a small country could defeat a superpower.<sup>11</sup> Finally, after sufficient revision to both Baihua and Hai Jun, the politically correct 1960s version came into being. Yet Li Yuru was unhappy because she could not convince herself about the heroine's motivation and therefore could not present a convincing realization of the character for her audiences. Nevertheless, the reviews praised her beautiful singing skills of the Cheng Yanqiu school and the new acrobatic movements that she borrowed from the *wusheng* and *hualian* repertoire (fig. 7).

In 2007, Shen Ying 沈穎, a young woman playwright of the SJT, re-worked the play, turning Hai Jun into a less stereotyped character, and

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<sup>10</sup> His original name is Jiang Liuyun 江六雲. Earlier versions of the story took his identity as a spy very seriously, while this was downplayed or eliminated in later versions.

<sup>11</sup> Chen Yi's comments were verbal and were mentioned by Li Yuru and others involved in the production interviewed by myself. Zhang Bingkun 張丙昆, one of the playwrights of the 1960s versions, pointed to the significance of Chen's comments in his paper, "Li Yuru yu Baihua Gongzhu" 李玉茹與百花公主 (Li Yuru and *Princess Baihua*), for the 2010 Li Yuru symposium.

Baihua's love for him became more believable. Li Yuru was pleased with the much healthier creative environment at that time, which brought together practitioners from three generations making contributions in different areas. Working with young people, Li felt that she was buoyed by their youthful vigour and enthusiasm. Having discussed the various traditions combined in the final version, Li wrote:

At the same time, this work [*Princess Baihua*] well exemplifies the relation between passing-down and carrying-on in the art of *Jingju*. ... The most valuable experience we had was that in the case of this twenty-first-century production, both I and my students participated in the work on it. In the process of our collaboration, we [the older generation] passed on our experiences of success and failure to the younger generation, while they gave us in return their unlimited youth and energy. Through this play, we saw the "veins" through which [the art] is passed-down and carried-on, and understood the true nature of *Jingju*. At the same time we also saw what the actual concrete process of passing-down and carrying-on really is: numerous practitioners working conscientiously on the content that has been passed down, engaging in innovation and creation, and then passing on [what they have accomplished].

同時，這部作品非常說明京劇藝術中傳和承的關係。……難能可貴的是，在二十一世紀的作品中，我和我的學生輩也參與工作了。在合作過程中，我們把成功與失敗的經驗傳給了年輕的一代，而他們則還給了我們以無窮的新鮮活力。這部作品讓我們看到了傳承的血脈，明白了京劇的實質，同時，也看到了傳承的具體過程：無數個實踐者兢兢業業地對於承過來的內容，進行新的創造，并且還將再繼續傳下去。(2008, 227)

### Symposium

The title of the one-day symposium was *Continuity, Creativity and Regeneration: Li Yuru and Jingju's Creativeness in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century* (Chuan Cheng, Chuangzao, Shengming: Li Yuru yu ershi shiji xiaban ye Jingju chuanguo yanchu yantao hui 傳承·創造·生命：李玉茹與二十世紀下半葉京劇創作演出研討會). It was rather unusual that a number of scholars who research and write about *Jingju* in

languages other than Chinese presented papers at the symposium, and participants from China and abroad felt that this marked a significant development for *Jingju's* entry into the international arena and the academic world. Although some of Li Yuru's fans were present, the symposium was not simply an occasion for remembering an individual actor, rather Li's life and career served as a site upon which to work out an anatomy of *Jingju* performance in contemporary China. Scholars were most interested in the two propositions on *Jingju* acting advanced by Li Yuru: "Repertoire and acting conventions complement each other" 劇目—表演, 相輔相成 (2007, 54) and "On the basis of tradition, engage in extremely strong individual creation" 在傳統基礎上進行富有極強個性的創造 (2008, 96). The analysis of Li Yuru's life and achievement also pointed to the relevance of *Jingju* education.

The symposium was divided into three sessions. Papers in the morning session explored the traditional repertoire and female character types. *Love and Hatred*, the full-length play Li wrote in the early 1980s, was the subject of the second session and attracted considerable attention. This session naturally led the discussion to the newly-written plays that Li and her colleagues staged in the twentieth century, which was the focus of the third session. Li's arguments on *Jingju* acting and the training that Li had received in the National Drama School and privately from individual masters were referred to throughout the symposium. For reasons of space, I will focus on the second session only.

The story of Wang Kui and Jiao Guiying that *Love and Hatred* treats has been part of the Chinese theatrical repertoire from the very beginning. Many versions have appeared over the years. The significance of *Love and Hatred* can be seen not only in the new perspective it offers on an archetypal story and its characters, but also in its creative blending of modern techniques with the stylized conventions of the *Jingju* stage. The playwright's acting background made her bold theatrical experiment both more convincing and accessible for performers and audiences alike. Contemporary reviews declared it a successful re-working of a classical play (Yang Yumin and Hu Jinzhao 1984, 3) and praised its psychological analysis in which Wang Kui's nightmare revealed his deeper subconscious (Gong Yijiang 1984, 1).

The session at the symposium consisted of three papers, and a short projection of a video recording of a 1984 performance of the temple scene in which Jiao Guiying lays her complaint before the temple god, gets no satisfaction, and kills herself. Speakers included Lü Ailian 呂愛蓮, the director of the 1984 production; Rong Guangrun 榮廣潤, a celebrated critic and educator (former President of the Shanghai Theatre Academy [Shanghai xiju xueyuan 上海戲劇學院] 1996-2006); and Wang Anqi 王安祈, who researches *Jingju* and writes plays and is currently both a professor at Taiwan National University (Taiwan guoli daxue 臺灣國立大學) and the Artistic Director of the GuoGuang Opera Company<sup>12</sup> (Guoguang jutuan 國光劇團) of Taiwan. Their papers focused on the origin and variations of the play, the structure of the 1984 version, the new interpretation of Wang Kui and how acting conventions were used to create the psychological analysis of characters on the *Jingju* stage. Instead of a typical *Jingju* structure presenting a story from the beginning to the end, this play opens right in the middle of the story, when Guiying encourages Wang Kui to go to take the imperial examinations after the madam of the brothel where they are living has decided to make Wang Kui leave and force Jiaoying to take customers again. As the play develops from that point, previous events are gradually filled in through the surprisingly effective innovation on the *Jingju* stage of the flashback, a dramatic device used in the West since Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. This unusual structure reveals the complicated relationships among characters more interestingly and leaves more space and time to explore the inner worlds of both the protagonist and antagonist through song and dance. In addition, the stage conventions that had been “borrowed” from the old play as performed in other theatrical genres were enriched through the new interpretation of the characters. The 1984 version is fertile ground for the exploration of tradition and innovation within *Jingju*.

Scholars also commented that the time that this play was written, rehearsed, and staged was highly significant historically. The early 1980s were the period when the whole theatre realm was shaken by the unprecedented economic reforms; many practitioners felt confused and frustrated because of forced early retirement or change of career. A play

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<sup>12</sup> This is how the English name of the Company is rendered on their website.

written by a sixty-one-year-old actress, and rehearsed by a group of practitioners during the heat of summer in a room with a single electric fan, showed the rest of the theatre world what actors could or should do. (Fig. 8)

The Li Yuru commemoration will continue among the *Jingju* teachers and students at the Shanghai College and School of Chinese Indigenous Theatres (Shanghai xiqu xueyuan, xiqu xuexiao 上海戲曲學院, 戲曲學校) because many could not attend the 6 and 7 November events as they were in Beijing for a national competition for *Jingju* students. Xu Xingjie 徐幸捷, the head of both institutions, said that taking the students to the Li Yuru exhibition and organizing seminars on Li's work for them would help the younger generation see

. . . what it is to be called a good *Jingju* performer. Apart from working hard on the [traditional] *Jingju* skills of “singing, recitation, dance-acting, and martial-acting” they have to realize the importance of working on their general cultural knowledge, and that they also must study how to be a [good] person.

. . . 什么才叫做好演員。除了用功學習京劇的唱念做打以外，他們必須明白學習文化知識的重要性，也得學習怎么做人。<sup>13</sup>

### **The Events in Perspective**

China is now playing an increasingly important role in international politics and the global economy. The events celebrating the “Precious Jade” (Cao Yu and Li Yuru) once again demonstrate that the Party, in a time of phenomenal economic growth, is also keen to improve the country's cultural image, not only in the eyes of the outside world, but, more importantly, among its own people. At the Fifth Plenum of the 17<sup>th</sup> CCP Central Committee held in Beijing, 15-18 October 2010, the necessity of “cultural construction” (*wenhua jianshe* 文化建設) and the “improvement of the Chinese people's civil education” (*tigao quan minzu wenming suzhi* 提高全民族文明素質) were highlighted. The arts and literature were described as no longer merely a propaganda tool but as a “sustaining industry for the economy of our citizens” (*guomin jingji zhizhu*

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<sup>13</sup> Telephone conversation between Xu Xingjie and the author on 13 November 2010.

*xing chanye* 國民經濟支柱性產業).

At the twenty-second session of the group study for the members of Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee in August of 2010, Hu Jintao expressed his concerns about the general condition in the cultural realm, particularly programs on television and entertainment entering China via the internet. He emphasized that it was time to “make China’s own cultural brand” because the renaissance of a nation needs the support of its own culture (*China Daily* 2010). The commemoration of Cao Yu and Li Yuru and their work fits in well with these concerns.

However, the reactions of the participants of the events also demonstrate that they in particular reminded people of the value of art. We have already noted Xu Xingjie’s comments on why he wanted to continue Li’s activities among *Jingju* teachers and students at the institutions he heads. Mou Sen 牟森, who has been regarded as one of the most avant-garde stage and film directors,<sup>14</sup> felt that the greatest contribution that the Cao Yu centenary made was to lead people to the playwright’s own works. Mou pointed out that Cao Yu’s early plays were an accurate and profound response to the pain that people experienced when China was transforming from “an agricultural society to an industrial and commercial society, and from blood ties to contractual ties” 從農業社會向工業和商業社會，從血緣關係向契約關係. Such transformations continue in the twenty-first century. Mou believes that Cao Yu’s works are still relevant. He says,

The greatness of Cao Yu resides in how he took techniques from classical theatre, from the tragedies of ancient Greece to the modern plays of Ibsen and Chekhov, and combined these classical techniques at a very high level with Chinese reality. As for this kind of perfection, in Chinese spoken drama no one else has been able to reach this.

曹禺的偉大在於，借用經典戲劇的技藝，從希臘古典悲劇，到易卜生和契訶夫為代表的近代戲劇，將經典技藝與中國現實高超

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<sup>14</sup> His most famous stage production is *File Zero* (*Ling dang’an* 零檔案), a blend of first-person narrative, poetry, and documentary film footage, produced by the Garage Theatre (Xiju chejian 戲劇車間) in 1994.

結合。此種完美，中國話劇史上并無第二人做到。(Mou Sen 2010).

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Figure 1: *The Wilderness* (2010), Hu Jun as Qiu Hu (left) and Pu Cunxin (right) as Jiao Daxing. Courtesy of Beijing renmin yishu juyuan Xiju bowuguan.



Figure 2: *Thunderstorm* (*pingtan* adaptation, 2010), Sheng Xiaoyun, Chen Yan, and Xu Huixin (from right to the left). Courtesy of Suzhou Pingtan tuan.



Figure 3: *Princess Baihua* (2010), Shi Yihong as Baihua and Jin Xiquan as Hai Jun. Courtesy of Shanghai Jingju yuan.



Figure 4: *Picking up the Jade Bracelet* (2010), Yang Yang as Sun Yujiao (left) and Sun Zhengyang (right) as Matchmaker Liu. Courtesy of Shanghai Jingju yuan.



Figure 5: *Picking up the Jade Bracelet* on tour of the USSR (1956), Li Yuru as Sun Yujiao (left) and Sun Zhengyang (right) as Matchmaker Liu. Courtesy of Zhongguo yishu yanjiu yuan.



Figure 6: Li Yuru teaching Shi Yihong a scene from *Jade Bracelet* in 1998, photographed by Yan Qinggu. Courtesy of Shi Yihong.



Figure 7: *Princess Baihua* (1960), Li Yuru as Baihua. Courtesy of Shanghai Jingju yuan.



Figure 8: Li Yuru (left) teaching Li Zhanhua how to act Jiao Guiying in the temple scene. Sun Zhengyang as the Sea God sitting on a young man's shoulder. Courtesy of Li Zhanhua.