



Shanghai Grand Theatre



An entrance of the North Theater



Grand National Theater
(Under construction)

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An Overview 解説

A new face of China At the forefront of the performing arts in China

———— KIKUCHI, Ryoko (Producer, R Production)

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———— 菊池 領子 (R PRODUCTION 代表/文化事業プロデューサー)

A rush of theater construction and the shift to private-sector management and financing

China is now in the midst of an unprecedented rush of construction of new theater facilities. A prime example is the new “Grand National Theater” built on the west side of Tiananmen Square in Beijing (2,416-seat opera house, 2,017-seat concert hall, 1,010-seat theater). There are more than 50 national projects of this type nationwide that are presently scheduled for completion before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. And, in the midst of this boom, foreign and domestic construction companies, architectural firms and furnishing suppliers are competing aggressively for contracts. When all the similar projects under way at the metropolitan and regional level and the facilities being built within educational institutions are added, the total number of new theater facilities is beyond our grasp. Of course, once they are completed, a large number of people will be needed to staff and run all these facilities, and we are seeing an increasing number of Chinese theater representatives visiting theaters in Japan on study tours, either in preparation for the construction of new theaters or as part of the training for new theater staff. At the same time, Japanese companies in the fields of acoustics and lighting are beginning to do business in China.

As far as I am able to observe, the new theaters being constructed in China fall mainly into three categories. The first is theaters belonging to the national theater companies like The People’s Arts Theater Beijing and The People’s Arts Theater Tianjin. Both of these companies are presently in the process of planning the construction of new theaters in the near future. The second category is government-run theaters that will specialize in renting out their facilities for both foreign and domestic productions. Representative facilities of this type are the previously mentioned “Grand National Theater” in Beijing and the “Shanghai Grand Theater.” The third type is theaters financed by the private sector. In the booming Chinese real estate development industry of recent years, where is a rush of construction of hotels and recreation/amusement projects, and in many cases their plans include theater facilities.

In addition to these projects that have been triggered by the booming Chinese economy, another spur behind the growth in theater facilities is the government’s reform policies. In China until now, only a certain number of theater companies were given official “performance rights,” and no group without these rights could hold performances that

involved selling tickets to the public. In order to stage performances under this system, the production had to pay a fee to a performance rights holder in exchange for being able to use the rights holder's name as the production organizer.

For example, if directors belonging to government affiliated theater arts companies wished to stage productions of their own, the directors would have to raise the necessary finances themselves. And, in spite of this, they could not be corangeited as the organizers of the resulting productions. They would still have to pay to have a company holding performance rights corangeited as the organizer. Therefore, foreigners not familiar with this system would never know who the actual organizer of a production was.

When director Li Liuyi of The People's Arts Theater Beijing brought his production of "Fei Chang Ma Jiang" to Japan in 2001 and again in 2003, the National Experimental Theater was corangeited as the organizer for the 2001 production, while The National Theater of China (the name of the company resulting from a merger with The Youth Theater of China) was corangeited as the organizer in 2003. In fact, this production was financed by Li himself originally in 2000 under a cooperative agreement with the actors by which the actors' salaries were paid in accordance with the amount of profit made from ticket sales. This kind of private sector type production management was revolutionary in China at the time.

While organizing such productions under the borrowed name of a performance rights holder, Li was waiting for the chance to organize productions under his own name. The opportunity finally came with a production in the autumn of 2003 after a revision of China's "Detailed Provisions for Operation of Commercial Performance Management." This revision stated that "enterprises meeting the given requirements with regard to personnel and funding may engage in performances for profit within the area of jurisdiction of the regional governing body if they are recognized as having sufficient funding, experience and record of achievement." Li established a company that met these requirements and was then able to mount his own production under his own company name.

In the same way, private sector corporations that have made tremendous profits in the real estate business are taking advantage of this revision in the provisions governing performance rights to begin investing in the construction of theaters as a means to enter the cultural entertainment field. And, lately there has been a resulting increase in commissions to artists for the planning and management of productions from these corporations now entering the field of performing arts with no expertise in creating works or production know-how. Certainly these new private sector theaters will become the focus of attention in the future as places for independent artists to perform their own works. As seen in this recent revision in the rules governing performance rights, there has been a basic change in policy by the Chinese government regarding cultural enterprise. Whereas until now the government has been the primary provider of performance art productions, the new policy seeks to make cultural enterprises financially independent and thus foster a new industry. The result is a movement toward privatization, which will not only encourage the entry of private sector companies but also force public sector companies to revise their management practices.

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The People's Art Theater Tianjin's production, written by Tsao Yu

New Efforts by the Guangdong Provincial Arts Research Institute – Establishing Independent Artist Studios

One example of this shift by public sector theater companies toward commercial-base management can be seen in the new practice of not relying completely on one company's own artists to create and produce performances but to draw on a nationwide pool of creators when putting together each new production. In other words the public company takes on the role of producer in a commercially based system.

New efforts of this type are being seen at The People's Art Theater Beijing and The People's Art Theater Tianjin, but perhaps the most prominent effort undertaken recently has been an experimental program by the Guangdong Provincial Arts Research Institute in Guangzhou, the major Chinese city near Hong Kong and Macao. The term "Research Institute" seems to imply a group involved in academic research rather than creation of new works, but the people at the Guangdong Provincial Arts Research Institute see "research, experimentation and production" as three aspects of a single mission, and they are presently involved in creative activities in a number of artistic fields. Their fields of endeavor range from modern theater and traditional Guangdong theater to music ensembles performing with traditional Chinese instruments.

Attention has focused recently on a new system that the Guangdong Provincial Arts Research Institute is experimenting with, in which artists are given studio space to use for their own self-financed production activities. For example, one of the Institute's first class directors, Wang Jiana, was allowed to open her own "Jiana Drama Studio" within the Institute's facilities in April of 2004. At the same time, stage art directors, musicians and film/video directors were also allowed to establish their own studios, and it is said that they now collaborate frequently with each other on productions.

In this way, the Institute is supporting the free creative activities of artists in a number of fields while also embracing these artists, who are active at the leading edge of their respective fields with a contemporary management style, for use in the production of the Institute's own productions as well. Furthermore, besides the artists in their own Institute, the trend toward enlisting the talents of artists from all over the country is seen here as well. Considering these conditions, it is probably appropriate to say that the actual functioning of the Guangdong Provincial Arts Research Institute today is closer to that of a production company than a research institute.

Since the establishment of the first independent studio for Wang Jiana, the number of independent studios within the Institute has continued to grow. These include a young director in her thirties named Wang Xiangdong, who was invited to open a studio at the Institute based on her achievements in directing local civic dance and traditional dance productions at the Guangdong Province Song and Dance Theater. In the modern dance field, a studio was also provided for the director of

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the Guangdong Experimental Modern Dance Company, Gao Chengming. The Guangdong Experimental Modern Dance Company was established in 1992 as China's first modern dance company, and it has recently engaged in a financial tie-up with the Hong Kong dancer and stage art director Willy Tsao. Even though Hong Kong has returned to Chinese possession in 1997, it is still under separate governance as an independent economic zone and there is a strong desire for financial tie-ups. And, we are now seeing the start of such tie-ups in the field of arts and culture. Although the Guangdong region tends to draw less attention from Japan than the northern centers of Beijing and Shanghai, it is often said that the winds of change blow from the south and certainly Guangdong seems to be leading reform in this area.

Government-affiliated agents venture into production

Another movement being seen in the general privatization of the performing arts is government-affiliated agents becoming involved in the creation of new works and production. Until now, many agents have been involved in the performing arts as short-term managers for a set number of performances of a given production. Recently, however, some agents have begun to broaden the scope of their activities in light of the current trend toward independent (commercial-based) financing. China's largest agency is the China Performing Arts Agency of the Ministry of Culture (CPAA) established in 1957, and its primary business has been serving as intermediary in performing arts exchanges with other governments. However, since they have no experience or know-how with regard to holding commercial productions overseas and have little consciousness of copyrights and intellectual property rights, they have often suffered experiences when their prices were kept unnecessarily low. As a result, a new organization named the CPAA International Performing Arts Production Co., Ltd. was formed to undertake their own production of works and management of overseas performances.

The company's first production was a performance based on Shaolin Kungfu martial arts that toured North America, Australia and other markets with a total of over 200 performances over a five-year period beginning in 2000. During this time, the production played before a total audience of over 400,000. Also, the affiliated CPAA Metropolitan Theater Management Co., Ltd. was entrusted with the management of the Tianqiao Theater (1,200 seats) in Beijing as a rental theater. This is the theater where a production of Madame Butterfly was staged in 2002 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between China and Japan.

The organization says that it intends to use its growing experience and know-how to create its own productions in the future in pursuit of greater profits. Presently, agencies like CPAA are headed in the direction of working together with other large-scale agents in tie-ups aimed at expanding the performing arts market and are making use of facilities like the Tianqiao Theater with a long-term perspective as venues for development of their production management business.

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Beijing Modern Dance Company



"Fei Chang Ma Jiang"

Private Sector Theaters and the Emergence of a Democratizing Generation

Up to this point we have discussed the movements among government-affiliated theater companies, theaters and agents, but what about the private-sector theaters? It is believed that theater facilities now being built by real estate development companies and the like will be used primarily for an entertainment-oriented lineup of performances or ones aimed at the tourists staying in the hotel complexes they are built in. However, at the same time we are seeing movements suggesting that a new wave of cooperative efforts between the private sector and government-affiliated performing arts companies will bring a fresh impetus to the Chinese theater arts scene.

Spearheading this movement is the North Theater in Beijing where Yuan Hong, a 30-something artist born in the early 70s, serves as both producer and art director. This small theater of about 400 seats stands on a quiet Huton, a small street in one of Beijing's older residential areas. This is one of the theaters that belonged to the former China Youth Theater Arts Company and was vacated when the company merged into the China National Drama Theater Company as mentioned earlier.

At the time in 2001, there was a plan for Yuan Hong and his friend, the well-known Taiwanese director Stan Lai to invest in the purchase of the theater and make it the Beijing base for Lai's company, the "Biao Yan Workshop." However, official approval for investment from Taiwan was not given and Yuan ended up running the theater by himself. The staff are all people with independent sources of income who have gathered in support of Yuan's activities. With their individual expertise in different fields from finance, media, research and the like, they combine their abilities in the creation and production of works.

The theme of Yuan's activities is the "popularization of theater" and "returning theater to the people." Although the government-affiliated theater companies are gatherings of professionals who command an unshakable position in their respective roles, there has long been a problem that the theatrical fare they provide is lacking in variety of expression and that the contents of their plays lack relevance to people's lives today. And, as seen in the fact that Tsao Yu's first play was written when he was a college student, theater is a field where anyone, pro or amateur, should have access to the stage as a place of expression. In reality, however, the present theater scene in China has become one where only the pros have the opportunity to mount productions and perform.

Yuan's desire was to break down the status quo and bring new stimulus to the Chinese theater world by opening up the stage to imaginative young college students. In 2001, he planned and organized a student theater festival named the "Beijing High School and College Student Theater Festival." Using the small theater of the People's Art Theater Beijing, six student plays were presented in the festival's first

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holding. By its fourth holding in 2004, however, the festival's schedule had grown to include 31 plays performed at the North Theater, the small theater of the People's Theater Arts Beijing and the theater of the National Drama Theater Company Experimental Theater. Also, the venues had spread outside Beijing to include performances in Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Presently, the People's Art Theater Tianjin is apparently planning a student theater festival also, and it is expected that this movement will spread throughout China. It is exciting to think about the potential new talents that will emerge from this movement in the future. Despite its limited budget, the North Theater is organizing small-theater festivals in Beijing, Hong Kong and Taiwan and is nurturing new talents and conducting tours around the country with its productions.

Another movement in private-sector theater worthy of mention is that of modern dance companies. In China, the very concept of modern dance is still a new one, with the country's first modern dance company having been founded in Guangdong in 1992. Due to this short history of barely ten years, most of the companies are made up of young dancers and most are privately run. What's more, the Beijing Modern Dance Company established under the auspices of the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture in 1995, was privatized in April of 2004. Its director, Zhang Changcheng, is still in his early thirties, like Yuan, and he is working actively to create a network to enable overseas performances and invitational performances, while at the same time directing efforts toward the establishment of a foundation to support young artists.

When we think about it, these people now in their mid-30s are from the generation that were college students at the time of the Tiananmen incident in 1989. That generation that called for democracy back then are now at the forefront of the privatization movement and are beginning to move the Chinese performing arts world as well.