

THE CHINESE LITTLE THEATRE MOVEMENT:  
FROM 1980s TO PRESENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

Chinese Little Theatre first emerged more than twenty years ago in the 1980s, following liberalisation under the Open Door Policy. It developed rapidly and is now a thriving industry, however, its development was influenced by several factors which helped it evolve its own unique styles. Little theatres have advantages and disadvantages over conventional theatres, and these will be explored in this work. Further, there have been a number of influential individuals in its development. Meng Jinghui especially played an important role in the process of connecting the theatre with the market. In this dissertation I will concentrate on closely analysing the Chinese Little Theatre and its development in a variety aspects.

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# INTRODUCTION

Little theatres emerged in the USA during the early 1900s in the spirit of anti-commercialism, and their growth and influence gradually led to the Little Theatre Movement. The concept spread to many different countries and finally reached China during the early 1980s following liberalisation under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy. However, it was not until the 1990s that Chinese Little Theatre emerged from its underground niche to gain popularity amongst the young and educated. The changing trend from the '80s to the '90s was driven by substantial developments in the economy and society, altering people's perception of theatre. The Little Theatre that evolved during this period brought together original Western scripts with the changing social landscape in China, to form new styles based on national, social, and cultural characteristics.

This evolution of Chinese Little Theatre has been summarised very well by the dramatist Wu Baohe who points out that discussions regarding the nature and characteristics of Little Theatre have been ongoing for more than 10 years, giving rise to Chinese Little Theatre with its own uniqueness which is different to that of Western theatre, whilst forming theories relevant to that of Chinese contemporary theatre (2003, p. 3). His point is that apart from the influence of Western drama, Chinese Little Theatre mixed aspects of the Chinese society and national conditions, creating a form of Little Theatre that had its own features. Its evolution has been shaped by a number of transformations in China in the economy, politics, theatre, and the audience, as well as changes in media and technology and Western dramatic influence.

Despite substantial transformations in Chinese Little Theatre many problems still exist – especially the lack of original plays. However, the significance of the Chinese Little Theatre cannot be denied. It has introduced a new and exciting form of drama, and has played a significant role in rejuvenating and even saving the art of Chinese drama and theatre. Further, it has played a role in opening people’s minds to different experimental artistic forms and has brought people back to the theatre.

Many factors have influenced the development of Chinese Little Theatre and the influence of Meng Jinghui should not be forgotten. Being one of the most famous and influential theatre directors in China, he has played a leading role in Chinese drama, with many taking him as the leader of Chinese Little Theatre. He has adapted and directed many Western absurdist dramas including plays like Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, and Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, all of which have been very successful. More recently, he has been focusing on creating original plays; *Life Advice from Two Dogs (Liang Zhi Gou de Sheng Huo Yi Jian)* and *Ma Hua (Ma Hua)* are two of his most popular. [Note: Unless otherwise stated all the translations from Chinese to English are my own, but some of the names will be kept in Chinese when they cannot readily be translated]. Among the media his influential position has earned him the title ‘*Experimental Drama Leader*’ (先锋话剧领军人物).

Though Little Theatre is well-known among Chinese people, academic research and the study of this field is lagging and lacks true organisation. Therefore, in this study I will attempt to analyse Chinese Little Theatre systematically based on a variety of materials, and show the history of its development in regards to different factors, as

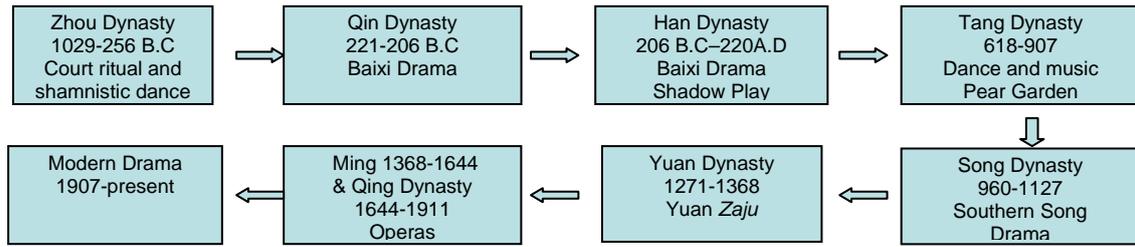
well as the problems and the significance associated with it. I wish to give the readers a general view and deeper understanding of Chinese Little Theatre.

# CHAPTER 1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE LITTLE THEATRE

## 1.1 Chinese Theatre Development

The history of Chinese drama and theatre can be traced back thousands of years to ancient China, though in academia arguments over the origin have been disputed. As Zhou Huabin states: “There are always different views about the origin and formation of Chinese drama, most scholars take the ‘use of song and dance to tell stories’ as the start of Chinese opera, as well as Chinese traditional drama.” (有关中国戏剧起源与形成的问题始终存在着不同的看法，学者们渐渐将“以歌舞扮演故事作为中国戏曲——亦即中国传统戏剧的界定；1997, vol. 1). The Zhou dynasty, the third Chinese dynasty after the Xia and Shang dynasty, saw the development of the singing and dancing performance style. As McGraw and Stanley state, “Chinese theatre is usually traced back to the court ritual and shamanistic dances and the court jester acts of the Zhou dynasty (1027-256 B.C.) and the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.)” (1984, p. 505). Following the Zhou and Qin dynasty, Chinese drama and theatre continued a long development through the Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Within its development more than 300 regional operas sprouted, of which Peking Opera is the most famous.

### Time Line of Chinese Theatre Development



The form or concept of Chinese modern drama (or spoken drama – *huaju*) started from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, heavily influenced by Western dramas. Zhan Pingping points out: “in a lot of Chinese modern literature works, the concept of ‘modern drama’ excludes traditional opera, and represents drama mixed with Western drama performance skills of the 19<sup>th</sup> century — *huaju*.” (在中国现代文学的诸多论著中，“现代戏剧”这一概念显然已经将中国传统的戏剧形式戏曲排除在外，而单只 19 世纪末在中国新兴并迅速发展的西方戏剧形式—话剧; 2008, vol. 2).

The milestone which many perceive as the advent of modern drama in China was the translated script of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This play was first translated by Lin Shu, and was then adapted and played in Japan by a group of Chinese students in 1907. The dramatist Zhan Jian remarks: “this was the first play that had a complete literary script, plot, and performance based primarily on dialogue and movements, which was very different from traditional opera, marking the beginning of Chinese modern drama.” (此举不仅有完整的文学剧本，分幕，而且以对话和动作作为主要表现形式，从而标志着中国话剧的正式诞生; 2004, p. 1). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries following the proliferation of modern drama, a debate about Chinese traditional opera and new drama occurred. The most famous period of debate was in

1914, the year titled Jia Yin Zhong Xing (甲寅中兴), meaning “Jia Yin Boom” (according to the Chinese Lunar calendar 1914 was called Jia Yin year). This name represented the successful performance of modern drama plays in Shanghai. “Jia Yin Zhong Xing had two main features: professionalisation and commercialisation. Within one year there were several professional drama troupes, thousands of professional actors, and hundreds of plays in Shanghai.” (以职业化与商业化为主要特色骤然中兴一年之内，伤害一地出现的职业剧团数十个，职业演员在千人以上，演出数目数百个； Cheng Fangjin, 2004, vol. 20). Dramatists and critics discussed and compared the performance styles and other elements of these two drama forms (traditional and modern), with different views about which one was more suitable for the Chinese society. As Cheng Fangjin states, the plays during Jia Yin Zhong Xing represent the successful attempt of Little Theatre drama to weaken the traditional plays from the Qing Dynasty (2004, vol. 20). Chinese modern drama began to occupy an important place on stage.

Soon after the Jia Yin Zhong Xing year, in 1919, the very important historic event of the May Fourth Movement (a.k.a. New Culture Movement) occurred. This was a significant milestone in Chinese history as it marked the first time people openly discussed the development of democracy and science, traditional Chinese values, culture and moral systems, and the need for freedom of speech and thought. Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Qian Xuantong, and Liu Bannong, the famous socialists, “launched a fierce criticism of Chinese traditional Opera in order to support Western drama” (终

于在五四时期，胡适，陈独秀，钱玄同，刘半农等为张扬西方话剧，而对中国戏曲展开了激烈的批评; Hu Xingliang, 2001, vol. 1, p. 173).

During the New Culture Movement new dramatists and theorists implicitly criticised traditional Chinese theatre, comparing it with Western drama. The dramatist Wang Zhongxian proposed a new approach in 1921 – “copying Western ‘Amateur’ plays to build up Eastern ‘amateur’ and a non-commercial independent troupe” (仿西洋的 Amateur，东洋的“素人演剧”的法子组织一个非营性的独立剧团) (Ge Yihong, 1997, p. 48). Later, Cheng Dabei named this type of play ‘Ai Mei Ju’ (Ai Mei Ju – phonetic pronunciation of Amateur) which soon evolved into a movement, the centre of which was in Beijing, involving mostly the young, especially students from the universities inside Beijing. During this period of time, a number of Ai Mei Ju plays appeared on stage: *Heroes Got Upset (Ying Xiong Yu Mei Ren)*, *Cannot Say It Out (Shuo Bu Chu)*, *Good Heart (Liang Xin)*, *Past Love (Ai Guo Zai)*, etc. The Ai Mei Ju Movement declined during the late 1920s, however, it is still historically the most important event in Chinese Little Theatre development as it was tightly linked with Western Little Theatre.

As with every subject, with greater discussion one can discover a new path easier. So, the New Culture Movement was a turning point not only for the Chinese society as a whole, but also in other cultural fields, such as literature, music, drama, and other areas.

From 1937, the beginning of the Anti-Japanese War to 1949, the founding of the People's Republic of China, many dramatists rehearsed and organised their productions, most of which featured an Anti-Japanese War theme. The Chinese Theatre field was full of passionate dramatists, and among the most famous and influential were Lao She, Cao Yu, and Xia Yan. From 1949 to 1966 with new found peace, Chinese Theatre developed steadily and dramatists showed their enthusiasm for creating new drama plays and reconstructing the theatre industry in a badly damaged country. Chinese theatre reflected several changes: under new government planning state-owned established theatres were founded; the Stanislavski system was adopted; 'art serves politics' became the primary guideline. Drama plays like *Clear Sky* (*Ming Lang de Tian*, by Cao Yu), *Test* (*Kao Yan*, by Xia Yan), *Long Xu Ditch* (*Long Xu Gou*, by Lao She) were produced in this environment, the themes of which focused on the changes in people's lives after winning the war. They were staged in established theatres and achieved success.

Between 1966 and 1976 profound changes in Chinese drama and theatre occurred with the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution is seen as one of the most significant periods in Chinese history as it brought many considerable changes in society and politics. Every aspect of society and the country was controlled by the government; it was a step backwards for the philosophy surrounding the New Culture Movement, destroying everything that movement fought for. This had direct implications for drama, with Jiang Qing, Chairman Mao's wife, and the other three members of the 'Gang of Four' picking five traditional Peking Opera plays, adapting them, and using them as tools to push forward various political agendas for the Communist Party.

*Taking Tiger Mountain by Storm (Zhi Qu Wei Hu Shan)*, *The Red Lantern (Hong Deng Ji)*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment (Qi Xi Bai Hu Tuan)*, *Shajiabang (Shajiabang)*, and *On the Docks (Hai Gang)* [Note: these English titles are the standard translation] – these were the five original Model Drama plays. By 1976 several more models were announced, for example *Du Juan Mountain (Du Juan Shan)* and *Fighting on the Plains (Ping Yuan Zuo Zhan)*. However, as these came about towards the end of the Cultural Revolution none had time to infiltrate into the popularisation movement. The Cultural Revolution saw a ban on all dramas that were deemed ideologically counter-revolutionary, and this was followed by the ruthless persecution of writers, playwrights, and theatre professionals. These reforms by Jiang Qing and the Communist Party eventually developed into the complete banning of all but the five Peking operas, known as the ‘Model Operas’ or ‘Revolutionary Model Operas’. The direction of Model Drama was one that was most useful for political objectives, and the most effective for communicating Jiang’s and Mao’s Communist ideology. Although Model Drama was used as a political tool to push forward agendas, to an extent it did have a positive influence on Chinese drama by combining traditional Peking Opera and modern drama to create a new performance style.

After the Cultural Revolution society was eager to change, drama and theatre were in need of fresh blood after this extremely dark period. Thus, the Open Door Policy (1978) was a good opportunity to make changes for the better. Dramatists desperate to free Chinese drama from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution introduced Western experimental plays using small sized theatres. Subsequently, various Western

modernist and post-modernist literary ideas have had a growing influence in China. However, it was not until the '90s that the growth of little theatres began to pick up.

## 1.2 Chinese Little Theatre and Its Development

### 1.2.1 The American Little Theatre Movement

In 1919 Song Chunfang, who was studying Western drama and theatre, wrote an important article called *The Significance, Development, and Current Situation of Little Theatre*, introducing the world of Little Theatre and its history to readers in China. Song wrote that the “‘Little Theatre Movement’ started in France, and then spread to Europe and America.” (cited by Ge Yihong, 1997, p. 44). To understand the Little Theatre Movement we have to clarify the definition of Little Theatre first. According to Dickinson (1917, p. 75), Little Theatre “is four things”. “It is a building; it is a principle of economical management; it is a cooperative guild of artists of the theatre; and it is a system of alliance with the federated audience. Properly it is a combination of all of these things.”. Dickinson wrote these observations during the American Little Theatre Movement, 1911 to 1919, but in fact the Movement had started earlier when it emerged in France during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, from where it spread to other countries, including America. The American Little Theatre Movement developed rapidly, starting with the appearance of a number of theatres, and an increase in the numbers of directors, actors, playwrights and stage artists.

During the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, commercial theatres still had the majority share of the market, making it the leading force in the

industry. For example, the Theatrical Syndicate in the US, established in 1896 as a 'Trust' organisation controlled hundreds of theatres itself. The Theatrical Syndicate offered funding to established theatres to support the theatre's maintenance and other expenses. The established theatre industry became a cash cow for big companies. As Wang Yiqun states: "the famous American theatre critic Barnard Hewitt mentions in his book *Theatre U.S.A. 1668-1957* that theatre had become a big business at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with most theatres only focused on profit, not theatre itself." (美国评论家巴纳德海威特在《1668 至 1957 年美国戏剧史》一书中指出当二十世纪开始时，戏剧已经成为一种十分兴隆的大生意；1982，p. 115). In order to maximize opportunities to attract a larger audience, theatres focused on producing plays with luxurious scenery, for example, *The Girl of the Golden West* (David Belasco) or romantic dramas like *Heart of Oak* (J.A. Herne) and *Way Down East* (L. B. Parker). In this profit orientated environment some serious dramatists began rebelling against commercial plays by supporting and training young drama talent. Thus George Pierce Baker's '47 workshop' class in 1905 started to cultivate new and fresh talent. Through the efforts of these dramatists, gradually an increasing number of little theatres were founded: in 1906, the first little theatre launched in Chicago; in 1909, the New Theatre opened in New York; and in the following years different theatres like the Wisconsin Players and the Carnegie Institute of Technology were founded one after another.

Although the 'rebellion' against the commercial theatre had gained momentum, the audience was still not attracted in large numbers by Little Theatre, and non-commercial plays were still not so popular at this time. For example, on October 31<sup>st</sup>,

1905, George Bernard Shaw's famous play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* suffered a failure in New York and was closed after only a day. In essence this failure was related to the audience's aesthetic behaviour during this period, as they had got used to the established theatres' commercial plays and performance style.

From the 1910s to the 1930s the American Little Theatre Movement was in its heyday. Many little theatres and groups were established, and plenty of plays were performed on stage; as Chansky states:

Between 1912 and 1916, sixty-three organisations calling themselves Little Theatres sprang up in the United States. By 1926, a writer for *Variety* claimed there were 5,000. Little Theatre work became accepted by universities, high schools, and civic groups (2005, p. 5).

The expansion of little theatres was rapid and they absorbed the essence of different theatres from around Europe:

Little Theatre reformers looked to European models, inspired by the plays and organisational structures of England's Independent Theatre, Dublin's Irish Players, the Moscow Art Theatre, the Freie Bühne, and the Théâtre Libre and the design and directing work of Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig, Konstantin Stanislavski, and Max Reinhardt. (Chansky, 2005, p. 4).

The Little Theatre Movement was dedicated to seeking "a better system of values; a more dependable and enlightened audience; and an impulse coming from the artists rather than from the investors" (Sarlós, 1982, p. 4). There were a variety of genres on stage: realism, expressionism, symbolism, and naturalism. Meanwhile, themes of the play were expanded and the characters varied from farmers, sailors, artists, workers

and even prostitutes. Since these characters are generally familiar to the ordinary people, this reduces the distance between the audience and the drama. As Willard describes:

Young Americans in the 1920s and 1930s got an education in the theatre, for almost every subject of importance was discussed in the best plays of these years, from social and political philosophy to sexual morality. The censors, official and unofficial, had not yet moved in. (1960, p. 69).

Further, this movement had some other significant features. It paid attention to the works of particular innovative playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Lillian Hellman, Elmer Rice, Arthur Miller, and other great dramatists. Besides the support from playwrights the American Little Theatre Movement also got support from literary theorists and critics, like Edith J. R. Isaacs and Stark Young.

From the 1950s and 1960s technology developed rapidly with new media forms coming to the stage, which had a substantial impact on theatre. Meanwhile, other new arts and forms of entertainment including the musical, rock music, and movies became increasingly successful. With the change, established theatres around the world experienced a harsh moment. To survive and develop in this new environment with fierce competition the theatres had to adapt rapidly. Some new theatres again seized this opportunity, with the rise of Off Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, Alternative Theatre and others at this time. Off Broadway and Off-Off Broadway adhered to the spirit of the Little Theatre Movement, featuring various experimental plays on their stages. However, Alternative Theatre is a new theatre; as Theodore Shank points out, “the new theatre was expressive of those who aligned themselves with the various

social movements of the time - civil rights, free speech, hippie, anti-nuclear, anti-Vietnam War, ecology, feminist, and gay.” (1982, p. 1). The new Alternative Theatre was in opposition to the commercial theatre, wishing to entertain audiences without binding itself to profits. The rise of Alternative Theatre occurred in Europe, and in Britain the Fringe Theatre had an impact on the traditional theatre as well. These theatres were influenced by modern and post-modern thought in the arts, trying to create a new theatrical style and put it onto the stage.

The American Little Theatre Movement has thus had a great impact on the history of theatre, and has influenced and contributed to theatre development in other countries, including China.

### 1.2.2 Little Theatre in China

Chinese Little Theatre developed relatively late in China compared to the West, partly due to social unrest caused by the War. During this time Chinese Little Theatre had little chance to grow. In 1964 some Western Theatre of the Absurd plays had been mentioned by the magazine *Foreign Drama Information* <外国戏剧资料> which introduced *Waiting for Godot* to its readers. The magazine gave a typical ‘Culture Revolutionary style’ judgment of the time, saying that those plays were ‘the sign of declining Western drama art’ (由此可见没落中的西方戏剧艺术一般; 1964, vol. 11).

From 1966 to 1976, Little Theatre development flat lined due to the policies employed during the Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, in the late 1970s, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the Open Door Policy, China was no longer as closed as before. And

with the American Little Theatre Movement, Western Little Theatre had matured sufficiently with enough great dramatists and plays from which Chinese theatre could learn and reap the fruits. It presented great opportunities for dramatists of the time whose attitudes and thoughts were no longer shackled by the chains of the Cultural Revolution and were able to immerse themselves into this new form of drama. In 1979, the Central Academy of Drama began to prepare and rehearse new plays. Zhang Yujing makes a trenchant point about the development of the drama in this period: “the realistic writing style was the mainstream since Chinese modern drama was founded, which now (1970s) started to mix with a lot of Western drama expressions” (从中国现代话剧创建之时一直占据主流地位的现实主义创作方法,(1970 年代)开始融合西方现代戏剧中的诸多表现手法; 2002, p. 43). Plays during this period of time like *Xiao Jing Hutong* (*Xiao Jing Hutong*), *The Story of Sang Shu Ping* (*Sang Shu Ping Ji Shi*), and *Uncle Doggie’s Nirvana* (*Gou Er Ye Nie Pan*) focused on ordinary Chinese people and analysed the Chinese people’s emotional and mental state within the current social environment. This can be distinguished from model dramas which concentrated on portraying heroes in unrealistic plots.

In this unique environment the playwright Gao Xingjian released the script of *Alarm Signal* (1982) in the magazine *October*. After the script was published, the director Lin Zhaohua put the play on Beijing People’s Art stage for the first time, earning it a strong reputation and wide support. [Note: See below for further discussion of the play]. Today, *Alarm Signal* is seen as a milestone in the history of Chinese drama and is one of the most influential original scripts. Although the appearance and

development of Chinese Little Theatre occurred much later than the American Little Theatre Movement, there are still some similarities between the two.

First, they are generally smaller than those of established theatres, meaning that there are far fewer seats “It usually contains fewer than three hundred seats.” (Dickinson, 1917, p. 76). This relates to financial constraints, as many of the ‘theatres’ are rented or temporary in order to cut costs. The space creates a unique environment bringing the actors and audience together, allowing the audience to receive a most intimate and unique performance style.

Secondly, the ticket price is generally cheaper. The theatres are simple and economical, and as the performers are mostly amateur, little theatres can run with low costs. These prices attract an audience which often could not afford the standard price for the established theatre. Despite their size, little theatres still have a complete system of performers, plays, and audience. Unlike little theatres, many established theatres have lost their independence running into monetary problems and needing help to pay for the artist’s salary, maintenance, marketing, and other expenses.

Soon after *Alarm Signal*, in 1985, a group – the Nanjing Drama Troupe – started to produce original Little Theatre plays like *Weakness* (*Ruo Dian*, 1985), *Field Facing House* (*Mian Chao Tian Ye De Fang Zi*, 1985), *Big Flour Pot* (*Da Mian Gang*, 1985), and *Flying Duck* (*Fei Xiang De Ya Zi*, 1988). Over time an increasing number of Little Theatre plays began playing in other cities within China. This was marked by the first Little Theatre Festival, held in Nanjing in April 1989, attracting the participation of ten theatre groups from all over the nation. During the festival forum,

scholars pointed out that some of the plays did not meet the criteria to be classified as Little Theatre. According to *Little Theatre Study* (1991) (小剧场戏剧研究, 南京大学出版社, 1991), it admits the similarity between the Western Little Theatre and Chinese Little Theatre but it also suggested some doubts among Chinese dramatists: the size of the theatre was not as important as the spirit; some regarded Little Theatre as Experimental Theatre; others insisted that the name Little Theatre is mainly connected with the small space, low cost, and smaller audiences. Among all these different ideas, two were accepted by dramatists and critics. The first was that Little Theatre does not equal experimental theatre; as Hu Miaosheng comments:

“Little Theatre and Experimental Theatre – these are two concepts which are not totally alike. Most of the time experimental theatre plays can be taken as Little Theatre plays, but not all Little Theatre plays are Experimental Theatre” (小剧场戏剧与实验戏剧这两个概念并不是完全重合的。实验戏剧一般都是小剧场戏剧, 而小剧场戏剧并不都是实验戏剧; 1996, p. 18).

The second is that Chinese Little Theatre should have its own unique characteristics. But Director Lin Zhaohua points out that:

“Our Little Theatre is a different form from the Western one, we have to consider our own national conditions. Many of the Western Little Theatre dramas are anti-drama plays...but not for Chinese Little Theatre. The first time Gao Xingjian and I started Little Theatre drama, we did not start with anti-drama plays.” (我们的小剧场与国外不一样, 这里有一个国情的问題。国外的小剧场很多是反戏剧潮

流的。.....中国的小剧场运动这种色彩不浓。我与高行健开始搞时，就不是从反戏剧传统出发；cited by Tan Peisheng, 1996, p. 29).

Although Little Theatre originally appealed to the anti-traditional and anti-commercial aspects when it first became popular in the West, the situation is somewhat different in China. As Lin Kehuan (1996, p. 48) notes, Chinese Little Theatre is distinct from most Western Little Theatre's anti-institutional and anti-commercial spirit. Chinese Little Theatre has its own characteristics which are closer to that of the Chinese audience. This idea has also been pursued by Dong Jian: "Chinese playwrights have gone beyond just copying Western Little Theatre, and started to find a Chinese Little Theatre style which meets the Chinese audience's requirements." (1996, p. 23). This debate shows there is no strict definition of Little Theatre. Some tend towards the view that not all little theatres are experimental; while others say that Chinese Little Theatre is no longer the same as the original Western Little Theatre and has developed its own uniqueness. However, there is a widely accepted concept of Little Theatre, as Hu Yuan states: "There is a general acceptable concept in our country about Chinese Little Theatre: it is experimental theatre in nature, it is staged in small sized space." (小剧场戏剧一直是人们关注的话题。目前我国学界普遍接受的说法，即小剧场戏剧在性质上是实验戏剧，在空间上是较小的剧场里演出的戏；2009, vol. 1).

The 1990s was another important period for Chinese Little Theatre development, and a number of successful drama works appeared on stage, including *Lovers (Qing Ren)*, *Ms. Left (Liu Shou Nü Shi)*, *Rhinoceros in Love (Lian Ai De Xi Niu)*, and *On the Same*

*Boat (Tong Chuan Guo Du)*. These plays attracted increasing numbers of people to the theatre, due to the emphasis of directors and playwrights to pay attention to the market. The theme of these plays focused on the daily life of ordinary people, with the characters in the plays having doubts and concerns about their lives, emotions, and relationships in the new era of China, which resonates well with the audience. From 1999, the up and coming director Meng began adapting Western plays and material including *Waiting for Godot*, *Don Quixote*, *The Decameron*, and *Faust*, etc, bringing them to the stage in China. He connected theatre with market demands initiating a new era for Chinese Little Theatre. Because of his success other directors copied Meng's model, proliferating the number of Little Theatre plays, and pushing Little Theatre forward.

### 1.3 Milestone— *Alarm Signal (Jue Dui Xin Hao)*

In 1982, four years after the introduction of the Open Door Policy, the play *Alarm Signal* directed by Lin Zhaohua, and written by Gao Xingjian and Liu Huiyuan, was put on stage. This marked the recognised beginning of Chinese Little Theatre, and as the famous drama critic Tong Daoming states:

In November 1982, '*Alarm Signal*' was top on Beijing People's Art Theatre list, which is a milestone for Chinese drama history. It was the first real Little Theatre play in China. (1982年11月在北京人艺首演<绝对信号>的日子，是可以载入中国戏剧史册的，它是中国真正意义上的第一个小剧场戏剧；2008, interviewed by *the Beijing news*).

One may ask why *Alarm Signal* is seen as such an influential and significant play in Chinese drama and theatre history. In order to answer this question it is necessary to look closer at the content of the play. The main story concerns a man called Hei Zi who gets instigated by a group of robbers to rob a freight train. There are two conductors on the train; an old conductor and Xiao Hao, the vice-conductor. Hei Zi's girlfriend Bee is also on the train and is a friend of Xiao Hao. During the journey the old conductor finds out about the robbery plot, and reminds Xiao Hao to be careful and informs Bee of the situation. The old conductor, Bee, and Xiao Hao manage to touch Hei Zi's heart using actions and words. Take old conductor and Bee's lines as an example:

Old conductor: Everything has a beginning. Once there is a small break, it will get bigger.

老车长: 什么事情都有个开头的。小口子一破, 大口子难补。

Bee: Everyone is sleepy now. Listen, I was thinking, one day the country will get better as old conductor said, all of us will have jobs. You will be not as worried then like you are now. Hei Zi, you should not do something bad. All the current difficulties are temporary, I can bear it. Everything will be fine, are you listening?

蜜蜂: 都在打瞌睡呢。你听我说, 我刚才在想, ( 想往地 ) 总有一天, 象老车

长讲的那样，国家都整顿好了，我们也都会有工作的。等那天，你就不象现在这样心神不安。黑子，你可不要去做亏心事，往邪路上走。这困难只是暂时的，我能忍受。一切会好起来，你听着吗？

Here the old conductor tries to pass an important message to Hei Zi: it's better late than never, as soon as you start doing something bad it will be harder for you to correct in future. Meanwhile Bee uses a direct method to persuade Hei Zi to give up thoughts of crime. During the journey the robbers talk about how there will be no train stop for them to have a rest after they pass Cao Jia Pu train station.

The old conductor: So far it is not too late.

老车长: 小伙子，还来得及。

Hei Zi: Are you talking to me?

黑子: 师傅，你说我呢？

Again, the old conductor uses indirect messages to pass his warning to Hei Zi. There are lots of similar moments in the play, and these wise and kind words to Hei Zi make him gradually change his mind. After a series of self-reflections and ideological struggles, at the last minute, Hei Zi decides to turn himself in and attempts to stop the robbers.

In answering the original question, why was the play so influential, one can look at it from various aspects. First, although the story line of this play at first glance appears simple, it puts a lot of effort into describing the complex inner activities of all the roles, especially Hei Zi. Hei Zi faces different problems and conundrums; he is down on life, has no job and not enough money to marry his true love, Bee. This creates a complex role, one which requires the actors to be skilled enough to express the characters' inner feelings. As Davis says,

As a playwright Gao first attracted attention with *Alarm Signal* (*Juedui xinghao*, 1982), which articulates the psychological conflict of the protagonist, who must choose between the moral prescription against thieving and the threats made by outlaws pressuring him to steal. Despite these didactic elements, the play was considered a bold theatrical experiment. Staged in a small theatre, it broke down the fourth wall-the illusion of the stage-and the lack of a set forced the performers to use symbolic gestures. (2004, p. 301).

During the performance, when the main character is confronted by the thieves, the director uses light and sound effects to create a new dimension never seen before in Chinese drama. The use of lights, audio, and music allows the director to create three different performance levels: reality, imagination, and memories. Despite these seemingly insignificant changes, during this time the directors and playwrights had to be brave to break the shackles of the conservative established theatre in a country that was still relatively closed.

The theatre and stage layout can be easily distinguished from that of traditional ones, with the audience sitting around the stage, close to the actors. In Chinese traditional opera and modern drama there has always been a stage separating the audience and

actors. Never had the performance space been as intimate as in *Alarm Signal*. In *Chinese Drama* magazine, Gao Wo reviewed this play, stating that *Alarm Signal* was a meaningful exploration of a special performance form (这种演出形式的探索是有意义的; 1983, vol. 1). Many people were attracted by this new and interesting dramatic and theatrical form, which was reflected by the tremendous popularity of Lin Zhaohua's next play, *Station*, performed in 1983. As the playwright Gao Xingjian states: "The little theatre is quite small without air conditioning. The room was packed with people, some even sitting in the aisle. None of them left the theatre during the two hours performance, the room was full of laughter" (小剧场里密不透风, 又没有空调。四周围坐着观众, 外圈的走道上还站满了人。将近两个小时, 中间不休息, 没有一个中途退场的, 观众中始终笑声不绝; 1988, p. 67).

The success of *Alarm Signal* inspired other creative playwrights and directors to create and test their own Little Theatre plays, including *Mother's Song* (by Hu Weimin and Lao Bi, 1982), *Hanging on The Wall* (by Wang Xiaoying and Gong Xiaodong, 1984), and *Everyone Goes to the Night Club* (by Wang Xiaoying and Gong Xiaodong, 1985). These attempted to emulate the intimate relationship between actors and audience seen in *Alarm Signal* through the seating arrangement, creating a warm and passionate atmosphere, drawing the audience into the performance (致力于缩短演员和观众的距离, 营造炽热的戏剧氛围 增加观众的临场感与参与感; Lin Kehuan, 1996, p. 34). *Alarm Signal* plays an important role in Chinese Little Theatre history, as it is the recognised start of Little Theatre in China. In the past twenty years

Chinese Little Theatre has grown significantly, with directors, playwrights, critics, scholars, and the audience all throwing themselves into the art without hesitation. They are the motive power to help develop Chinese Little Theatre in future.

## CHAPTER 2. THE FACTORS INFLUENCING LITTLE THEATRE

During the development of Chinese Little Theatre a number of significant factors played an influential role in its progression. In this chapter I will look back as far as the ‘Art Serves Politics’ policy and analyse these factors individually, exploring the ways in which they have influenced the development of Little Theatre in China.

### 2.1 Politics

Politics has impacted and shaped theatre no matter in the East or West. As Barker and Gale point out in their book, the relationship between theatre, politics and social change was far more complex than a superficial survey of ‘key’ writers or ‘key’ production companies (2001, p. 1). For example Alternative Theatre initially expressed the voice of people who sought for civil rights, anti-nuclear proliferation, an end to the Vietnam War, and other social movements in the political background of the time. In China, the relationship between politics and theatre is even tighter, and this point has been mentioned in Kevin Latham’s book, as he states, “Theatre in China has also long been associated with politics.” (2007, p. 326). For Chinese Little Theatre, several political policies played an important role during its development.

#### **Art Serves Politics**

As a policy, ‘art serves politics’, an explicit policy proposed by Mao Zedong during the conference in the Yan’an Rectification Movement (a.k.a. Yan’an Zheng Feng,

from 1941 to 1945) had a big influence on shaping Chinese Theatre including the Little Theatre. The Yan'an Rectification Movement, initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was initially presented as a positive reform. However, it soon turned into an attack against intellectuals, replacing the spirit of the May Fourth Movement with the Communist culture. The main aspects included: respecting the hierarchy; putting the Party at the forefront; taking Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zengdong thoughts as the guiding ideologies; anti-individualism and anti-liberalism; and strengthening the Party's grip on the arts (Liu Tie Ming, 2005, vol. 6). As Schoppa states: "At the Yan'an forum, Mao laid down his dictum that literature and art must serve the state and the 'people' as defined by the Party." (2000, p. 290). In the drama field 'art serves politics' had two implications: one, all the plays have to follow a political purpose; two, it was forbidden to criticise politics. Though this policy was purely verbal and not written in law, it tightly controlled the work of artists from the '40s to the late '70s. As Eberstein states:

Modern Chinese theatre is a political art. It has always been closely related to political and social development. In this respect it neither played a passive role, nor did it restrict itself to adapting to developments that had already taken place, but rather took part in them as a consciously active force (1990, p. 6).

The 'art serves politics' policy reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution with the appearance of Model Drama.

However, breakthrough changes came about in 1978, the year of the Open Door Policy. During the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Party meeting held in Beijing, it was agreed that the unofficial policy of 'art serves politics' was to

be finally repealed and scrapped forever. This was a huge burden off the shoulders of drama practitioners and the open-minded and creative playwrights were freed from the shackles of ideology. This was especially true for artists who were eager to use dramatic forms to express human emotions and the inner feelings, representing the complexity of human consciousness, which were restricted during Cultural Revolution. Learning from and adapting Western pieces became a turning point for the change from the dominant realist methods that existed during this Stanislavski dominated period to various methods. As Yu points out: “in the 1950s and 1960s Stanislavski’s system dominated the Chinese stage” (1996, p. 5). During this time the collision of styles and thoughts was unavoidable. As mentioned in *Chinese Theatre*, Chinese theatre is no longer taking the realistic style as the mainstream, but learning from Western modern drama (*Chinese Theatre*, 2009). Eventually many Little Theatre plays began adapting new elements, creating ‘new’ plays which had reference to individualism, equality, globalisation and internationalisation.

Although dramatists have tried to build new drama concepts not controlled by politics, the association has been hard to overcome. There remain tight connections with politics and plays still cannot criticise politics or the government. Few plays refer to political topics; instead they focus on discussing society, emotions, and human nature. This is an important reason why the Chinese Little Theatre still lacks independence, showing through in adapted Western dramas such as *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, which has had its political elements removed.

### **Open Door Policy**

The Open Door Policy was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 as part of his economic and political policy and is considered a fundamental principle of socialist construction. The policy consisted of two main parts, the so called ‘reform’ and ‘opening-up’ policies, designed to reform the economy within China, and open it up to the outside world. The reforming policy involved changing the highly centralised planned economy to a socialist market economy, whereas the opening-up policy was designed to encourage foreign trade and capital investment.

The Open Door Policy is considered a milestone in Chinese history and has led to changes in society, living standards, the economy, and Chinese drama and theatre. As Yu states: “the decade began auspiciously with the modernisation drive and open-door policy inaugurated by China’s new leadership. The opening to the West made it possible to introduce modern Western drama into China.” (1996, p. 4). The beginning of the Open Door Policy offered a precious opportunity for Chinese dramatists to relate to Western drama as never before, enriching Chinese drama. Playwrights and directors were encouraged by this new policy and were full of passion and energy to create new and exciting plays like *Help Her (Jiu Ta)*, *Flower Bao Chun (Bao Chun Hua)*, *Worries (Dan Xin)*, allowing them to finally explore and express their emotions through drama. Further, many traditional Chinese drama plays were re-staged and mixed with new performance elements and skills, and previously banned performances, including Lao She’s famous play *Tea House (Cha Guan)* were allowed back on stage.

The established influence of Western drama upon Chinese theatre was reflected by the beginning of Chinese Little Theatre in the early 1980s. The impact that Little Theatre

had was pointed out by Davis in his work which comments that the emergence of an Avant-garde/Experimental Theatre in the '80s "challenged the dominance of socialist realism and the Stanislavski system in China." (2004, p. 53). Since liberalisation increasing numbers of Western plays were introduced to China, including *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter. Naturally Chinese directors evolved and began adapting their own Little Theatre plays such as *Alarm Signal* (*Jue Dui Xin Hao*, 1982), *The Research and Analysis of Fifteen Divorce Cases* (*Shi Wu Zhuang Li Hun An De Diao Cha Pou Xi*, 1983), *Mill House* (*Mo Fang*, 1985), *Black Room* (*Hei Fang Jian*, 1985), and *Ma Zhong Jun* (*Ma Zhong Jun*, 1985). These plays challenged the established methods of performance and presentation in China, as Yu states: "All these plays employed non-traditional methods of presentation such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue, juxtaposition of characters and events from different time periods, episodic plot structure, use of symbols and images" (1996, p. 6). Soon after the Open Door Policy Chinese Little Theatre entered its peak development. The Open Door Policy influenced Chinese Theatre and gave a good opportunity for Chinese Little Theatre to develop.

### **Unbalanced Government Policy**

Within China there exist state-owned theatres, controlled by the Chinese government. These possess several advantages over little theatres including a larger performance space, professional actors, financial aid, and modern technology. Take the famous National Centre for the Performing Arts as an example which is located in Beijing, on the west of Tian An Men Square. It was completed in 2007 at a cost to the government of £268 million, is a massive 18,930 m<sup>2</sup>, and is divided into countless

areas. Moreover, many top Chinese actors have signed exclusive contracts to perform there.

Little theatres are normally private and self-financed, making them more profit-oriented focusing on making money and choosing their plays wisely. This balance has made the little theatre market more competitive. However, over time the situation has changed significantly, owing to the state-owned theatres' reform, forcing many of the once state owned theatres to stand on their own two feet, ending their financial support. As Barker and Trussler state: "Behind this trend towards 'little theatre' lies a less positive factor – the financial pressure caused by government cuts in subsidy to state theatres." (1998, p. 285). The success of little theatres and the slow demise of established theatres has forced some state-owned theatres to cooperate with little theatres offering both financial and technological support. For Chinese Little Theatre this poses both positive and negative influences; on one hand it can help alleviate the financial problems associated with little theatres giving them opportunities to update facilities, etc. Meanwhile, state-owned theatres have built their reputation and brand, giving them the ability to promote themselves more successfully. These are attributes that little theatres need, especially new ones. When little theatres rely on the state-owned theatre funding, they are normally restricted to some degree. For example, sensitive plays with political themes, critical of government, will not necessarily be possible. For example, the Dong Fang Xian Feng theatre is supported by the National Theatre Company of China (NTCC). As its manager stressed during an interview Dong Fang Xian Feng has a really strict standard for choosing scripts because it is

cooperating with the NTCC (因为我们是国家话剧院的剧场 (NTCC) , 所以在品质上的要求还是比较严格的; Chao Shanshan, 2009).

## 2.2 Economic Factors

The development of Little Theatre and the Chinese economy are inseparable. The primary drive of economic development came after the Open Door Policy, transferring the Chinese economy from a planned to market economy, pushing China to commercialization, with the 1990s seeing the commercialization of little theatres.

Different promotions were used, such as discounted prices, heavy advertising, market surveys, and other techniques. For example, to attract customers many employed offers like student discounts, group discounts, plays with easily understood content or humorous themes, and plays dealing with ‘hot topics’ of society. These theatres focused on understanding the audience’s taste and adjusting their plays accordingly, especially to that of the young audience. One successful method to attract young people was to hire stars. In *Ma Jin Lives Upstairs (Lou Shang de Ma Jin)*, movie stars Wang Zhiwen and Liu Wei were invited as the main actors, which was very profitable. Likewise, Chen Peisi’s *The Balcony (Yang Tai)*, *Cheater (Tuo)*, *Relatives and Friends (Qing Qi Peng You Hao Suan Zhang)*, took in almost six million pounds in three years.

To expand their business, little theatres created sales channels not restricted by the traditional methods. They sold at supermarkets, bookstores, and on the internet. By the end of the 1990s the theatres’ market value and return on investment increased

substantially. During this period the most successful director to connect the needs of the market with Little Theatre was Meng Jinghui with plays like *Rhinoceros in Love* (*Lian Ai De Xi Niu*), *Si Fan* (*Si Fan*), and *Ma Hua* (*Ma Hua*) which were all very successful. “*Rhinoceros in Love* hit a new high in the box office. It was staged continuously more than 40 times within the first two months after its debut in 1999.” (Jia Xiaowei, 2007, p. 124).

Besides Meng Jinghui, other directors also moved to little theatres with the intent of cutting costs. From an economic perspective Little Theatre has a tremendous cost advantage as it carries less investment and risk. The Director Meng Jinghui agreed that it is meaningless to produce plays without considering audience’s needs. In China these days, the primary measure of a play’s quality is its performance at the box office: “Commercial design has gradually become the focus of dramas..... Meng has participated in some commercialised activities in drama, but all his attempts only won him business success, instead of promoting the art” (Jia Xiaowei, 2007, p. 125).

## 2.3 Theatre

Theatre factors include location, reputation, ticket price, equipment, as well as other elements that affect the development of little theatres. Throughout cities in China, little theatres are spread far and wide, but there are concentrations in the big cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Zhejiang, with Beijing often considered being the unofficial capital of Little Theatre. As Huo Yan says: “if you want to know Chinese Little Theatre better, you have to know Beijing’s little theatres better” (2010, interviewed by

email). In this case, it is necessary to select several representative little theatres for a deeper analysis.

Beijing as the capital of culture, politics, and economy has attracted the most little theatres, and among these theatres there are several famous ones. The analysis will be made on five of them inside Beijing. Through analysing these theatres, we can find the reasons as to how these factors push the little theatres forward.

NAME	HISTORY	SIZE	TICKET PRICE ( ¥ )
Feng Chao	06/2008 – Present	343 seats	50 – 380
Dong Fang Xian Feng	05/2005 – Present	320 seats	100 – 280 10%–15% discount for students
Nine Theatre	09/2003 – Present	80-514 seats Six little theatres	50(students) – 580
Fan Xing Village	10/2009 – Present	80 – 260 seats Five little theatres	180 – 380
Xi Xiao Tang	2006 – Present	206 seats	50 – 280

(Appendix 2)

Apart from their common features these theatres also have their own characteristics.

**Feng Chao's** main attraction is the art director Meng Jinghui. His reputation as the most famous of Little Theatre directors can singly attract a diverse and big audience.

This reputation extends to the facilities which consist of good lighting, stage, professional and famous actors, modern equipment, and importantly most plays are Meng's work. During an interview in 2010 the famous director Huang Ying states: "Feng Chao has the biggest stage size within little theatres in Beijing and all facilities are good enough for the dramatists to create good plays." (蜂巢不仅有北京最大的舞台，其他方面也很适合戏剧创作者的发挥; *Lifestyle*, 2010).

**Dong Fang Xian Feng** as a branch of the NTCC is eligible for financial support from the government, meaning it is in a good location, has high quality plays, and a professional crew. The theatre is located in Dong Dan, the centre of Beijing, near a busy road system. Because of its state funding it regards the quality of plays as more important than any monetary benefit, and in general has a good reputation. Because of its obligations it also hosts concerts, ballets, and other performances, and offers 10% to 15% discount for students all the year round, making it popular among the young. With government support, Dong Fang Xian Feng Theatre launched a drama festival in 2007 – the University Students' Drama Festival, one of the biggest in China. The festival supports and encourages students to create original scripts. All these measures have helped build up a strong audience base.

**Nine Theatre** locates in Chao Yang district within the CBD area, it founded in 2003. Nine Theatre includes six little theatres and four other rehearsal places. The six theatres are Qie CHE Action Theatre (Qie CHE Xing Dong Theatre), Post SARS Theatre (Hou SARS Theatre), Ao Theatre, TNT Theatre, Little Pear Garden Theatre (Xiao Li Yuan Theatre), and Fei Fei Theatre. All these little theatres have their own characteristics. As the manager Fan Xinyin said in a interview that each theatre has its own style, for example, SARS Little Theatre mainly put the comedy drama; TNT is capable of taking 200 audience so mainly focus on some classic plays; the biggest theatre Qie CHE Action Theatre is for commercial plays; Fei Fei theatre is for non-professional drama groups. (Lifestyle, 2010).

It also concentrates its attention on encouraging the production of original scripts and offers great opportunities for college students to create their own plays. The original plays like *Confession* (Kou Gong, 2005), *Angle* (Tian Shi, 2006), and *Seeking for Spring* (Xun Zhao Chun Tian, 2007) are all staged inside Nine Theatre. Due to the sustained efforts the Nine Theatre gradually plays an important role among little theatres in Beijing. According to statistics, in 2008 there were thirteen little theatres (within 500 seats) open to public in Beijing, and 148 plays were staged. Among these plays, there were 62 plays staged in Nine Theatre (Appendix 2). Meanwhile, it opens door to college students who want to perform their plays on stage to choose the most potentially talented students to work for them. Many passionate young students and college drama societies come to show their plays, encouraging more people to put effort into their Little Theatre career.

**Fan Xing** is a fabricated village, which is located in the business centre, Xicheng District, of Beijing. It offers a full consumer experience including theatres, fine dining, coffee shops, book stores, and other shopping facilities which is unique model among the theatres. Fan Xing is planning to produce its own plays instead of only supplying other theatres with producers. According to its blueprint from its official website, in future 2/3 plays will be produced by Fan Xing itself. Its influence and success has led it to become the centre of a new Little Theatre area in which other theatres have installed themselves around it. As the manager Fan Xing said, Beijing has a good audience base, but a lack of good theatres (北京有很好的创作和观众资源, 缺的就是剧场; Niu Min, 2009).

**Xi Xiao Tang** is located inside Feng Lan International Shopping Centre, and presents more than 200 drama shows each year. Xi Xiao Tang dramas are of low-cost, hiring college students as its creative team. Although some dramas in Xi Xiao Tang may be of questionable quality, the theatre has a new business model – chain theatres. It has incorporated aspects from Broadway including cooperation with other little theatres. The manager Guan Haoyue points out that they are copying Broadway drama play tours, trying to cooperate with local theatres (cited by Niu Min, 2009). Besides Beijing, Xi Xiao Tang has built its brand in Shanghai, Shenzhen, Shenyang, Jinan, Yinchuan and Haerbing.

Beijing little theatres have some things in common. First of all the target audience is mainly young people since they are more passionate and eager to accept new and creative ideas. As Fu Weibo the manager of Dong Fang Xian Feng points out, young

people aged from 20 to 35 are the target audience of little theatres, especially students and office workers. (观众构成现在还是以年轻观众为主，大概在 20—35 岁之间的大学生、白领比较多; Chao Shanshan, 2009). Secondly, the location and facilities are good enough to satisfy the audience, and are in keeping with the tradition of Little Theatre with its intimate relationship between the actors and audience. Thirdly, most of them have their own business model, finding the balance between drama and commerce with their target market. Lastly, all theatres pay attention and make efforts to create their own original plays.

## 2.4 Independent Producers and Audiences

### **Independent Producers**

With the development of Little Theatre, independent producers came to the stage as a new concept. An independent producer is an organiser who takes charge of raising funds, seeking scripts, looking for directors and working staff, and has other general responsibilities. Independent producers play an increasingly important role in the Little Theatre industry. As Herbert and Leclercq state: “In the 1990s, the emergence of an independent producers’ network brought vitality to Chinese modern drama. Its experimental character drew great attention.” (2003, p. 67).

For an independent producer to obtain the relevant qualifications they must find a ‘mother theatre’ to help them produce their plays. Usually, independent producers are attracted to Little Theatre due to their dynamic style, low cost, and often good

margins. As Xue Xiaojin remarks: “The biggest feature of independent producers is that they focus on the market.....independent producers always focus on minimum investment, enjoyable plays, and educated young people based on the consideration of the needs of the market.” (实行独立制作人制的话剧，最鲜明的特点就是重视市场化运作.....独立制作人出于市场的考虑往往将制作项目锁定在投资较小，观赏性将强，面向有一定文化程度的青年人的剧目；2007, Xue Xiaojin, vol. 6, p. 12).

Many independent producers are in the form of studios, producing plays, and among the most famous are the Lin Zhaohua Studio and the Li Bonan Studio, founded by directors Lin Zhaohua and Li Bonan. The Li Bonan studio has only three workers, including the director Li Bonan, producer Tian Xu, and the playwright Ha Zhichao. Despite its small size and limited staff, the studio has produced many famous plays, for example, *A Date with Drama* (*Yu Xiju Xiang Yu*, 2004), *I Want to Be Famous* (*Wo Yao Cheng Ming*, 2007), and *How Many Relationships Can Be Messed With* (*You Duo Shao Ai Ke Yi Hu Lai*, 2006), with *How Many Relationships Can Be Messed With* being played more than 300 times since it first came to the stage. As well as independent producers, there are also many non-professional drama lovers who have produced their own plays. The attraction to this field is the flexible working hours and potential for big financial rewards for successful plays (Lu Haibo, 1999, p. 6). The independent producer has had substantial influence on the development of Chinese Little Theatre.

## **Audiences**

As with most performances the audience is considered the best judge for deciding the quality and can offer an instant response to the performers and the play. They can leave the theatre if the play and performance are not satisfactory; on the contrary they can also help it gain both a good reputation and ratings at the box office if the plays are enjoyable. For example, *Marriage to Jing Ji Shi Yong Nan (Jia Gei Jing Ji Shi Yong Nan)*, *Ms. Left (Sheng Nü Lang)*, and *Hidden Marriage (Yin Hun Nan Nü)* have been played more than 1000 times since they first came on stage in 2010. The themes of plays always tightly connect to the audiences' emotions and the current societal hot topics to reflect what the audiences really care about. For example, *I Want to Be Famous* was based on the reality television show *Super Girls*, which in 2004 quickly became an extremely popular show in China, with millions of people voting for their favourite girls. In 2005, Li Yuchun won the final championship with 3.25 million votes. Many girls have become famous from this show, and lots of young girls are still obsessed with the notion of over-night fame. Based on this, *I Want to Be Famous* came to the stage and focused on discussing this phenomenon which was also very successful.

Since the audience plays such an important part within theatre development, to satisfy the audience dramatists must put more effort into producing scripts, improving performances, and offering a congenial theatre environment. Thus, the pressure from the audience can stimulate little theatres and push them to produce better works. Take the Nine Theatre, it barely made a profit for their first 2 years, as the manager said during an interview, in those two years they focused on renewing the theatre facilities, inviting famous directors to put their plays on the stage by offering some benefits, and so it was not until 2007 that they finally broke even. Now there are at least two plays

shown every day, and they also rent out theatres to other independent producers and theatres (Niu Min, 2009).

In order to investigate the target audience age range, the dramatist Zou Hong prepared 400 questionnaires for Ren Yin and the Central Experimental theatre, with 363 and 350 completed respectively.

Age	Ren Yi Theatre		Central Experimental Theatre	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Below 18	6	1.6%	5	1.5%
18 to 30	232	63.9%	201	62.8%
30 to 50	78	22.4%	73	22.8%
Above 50	39	11.2%	23	7.2%

(Zou Hong, 2003, vol. 6)

Aside from indicating to us that the majority of the audience is aged from 18 to 30, it is also noticeable that the 30 to 50 age range is the second most common, indicating a possible future potential market. In order to improve Little Theatre dramatists should try to attract people from different age groups, not limiting themselves to young people.

One important target group is college students, many of whom are passionate and creative and attracted by new ideas. They care about society and may want to express their own thoughts, making them suitable candidates for enjoying the spirit of Little Theatre. Students are also an important force for the future of Little Theatre, as

potential future recruits and portals for ideas. Many little theatres prefer to hire enthusiastic students to work for them. Take Beijing little theatres as an example. Most are located in the west of the city which is surrounded by universities and colleges, making it more convenient for students to watch plays or work for them. Furthermore, universities have their own drama societies and together hold an annual Students' Drama Festival. Office workers constitute another important segment of their audience, with many taking Little Theatre as a fashion and a good way to relax. Further, it is a way to socialise with friends or colleagues, and to meet this need many little theatres perform comedy to create a friendly and relaxed environment. *Ma Hua* is a typical example of this. It was first performed in 2003 and is a play that is updated annually. This means every year they add elements of what has happened throughout the last year into the play, making fun of certain popular aspects of society 'hotspots'. In 2008, *Ma Hua* was called *Ma Hua, Nobody is Allowed to Laugh (Ma Hua, Shui Dou Bu Xu Xiao)* which talks about the relationship between a girl and other men. In 2009, it was called *Mahua, Sweet and Salty (Ma Hua, Tian Xian Pei)*, incorporating elements of time travel, as the theme of time travel happened to be popular that year.

In a nutshell, during the progress of Chinese Little Theatre, the audience plays the very important role of allowing the Chinese Little Theatre to progress.

## 2.5 Media

Aside from the factors mentioned above one of the most distinct factors is the advent of new media technology including television, films, mp3, computer, and the internet. These technologies have been perceived by many to reduce the number of people

interested in theatre. For example, television began to be popular in China during the 1980s, and many preferred to watch TV at home with family rather than going to the theatre. From the 1990s till now, with the development of other media forms, people have far more choice for entertainment, especially with the internet where many alternatives to theatre are available. It seems the new technology has many considerable advantages over traditional drama, and some people have started to doubt if drama will still survive. Gao Xingjian points out:

“Facing the challenge of movies and TV, shall we just let drama become a piece of art hidden inside a museum or try to gain the audience to keep its special place in modern human culture?” (在现代科学技术武装着的电影和电视的挑战下，戏剧是任它衰亡为人类艺术博物馆里的一种活的文物呢？还是去获取新的生命力，夺回丧失了了的观众，继续保持它在人类现代文化中的特殊地位？). (1983, vol. 1).

However, to a certain extent new media techniques can help established theatres, in that theatres can use new media equipment or methods to develop further. For example, some connect movies with performance, using screens to play sections of movies as a background. Also, they can promote their plays through websites, produce DVDs, promote themselves on the internet through channels like Youtube, and advertise on TV. We should focus on the positive side of the challenge: the developed media techniques actually help Chinese dramatists get the information from Western theatre more easily and conveniently, and the Chinese audience can readily access more information about Western drama through TV, radio, the internet, etc.

In a word, all the factors what have been discussed in this chapter have influenced the development of Chinese Little Theatre. Even though there have been a number of factors hindering the development of Chinese theatre in general, liberalisation has allowed creative and innovative minds to express themselves. Despite there still being factors limiting Little Theatre, the future appears positive as society opens up.

### CHAPTER 3. MENG JINGHUI

With the development of Chinese Little Theatre many dramatists were full of passion in devoting themselves to the art. Amongst these were Lin Zhaohua, Mou Sen, Hu Wenmin, Gu Yian, and Meng Jinghui. However, it is the scripts of Meng which played a leading role, and throughout his career he has been highly regarded among critics both in China and abroad. For many he is considered the pioneer of Chinese Little Theatre. As Cody and Sprinchorn state: “Meng Jinghui significantly contributed to the reformulation of the avant-garde in terms of popularisation and stage-audience communication and is now regarded as the foremost representative of contemporary Chinese experimental theatre.” (2007, p. 91). Many of Meng’s most popular and successful plays were adapted from popular Western classic absurdist plays, with the most popular being Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Besides these plays,

Meng also created original Little Theatre plays, such as *Life Advice from Two Dogs*. In this chapter I will use these two plays as case studies and analyse them.

## 3.1 Meng Jinghui

### 3.1.1 Meng Jinghui and His Plays



Meng Jinghui was born in 1964 and is the most influential Little Theatre director in China. The plays of Meng have a strong personal style, which has made him a cultural phenomenon with

(image 1: Meng Jinghui) a large cult following:

“He is perhaps the youngest proponent of Western plays in China. Not only has he staged many (from *The Bald Soprano* to *The Balcony* to *The Kiss of the Spider Woman*), but his own creations are offshoots of this ‘modernist’ tendency.....‘Experimentation’ in his plays means polyphonic voices, criss-crossed temporal lines, post-modern references to classical works, a medley of citations, and a very animated stage not averse to technological special effects.” (Huot, 2000, pp. 76-77).

Many directors active during the ‘80s were deeply affected by the policies of the Cultural Revolution, and had embedded impressions and experiences in their minds. Many of these directors, including Lin Zhaohua, who were middle aged during this period, were forced to make up lost time. However, for the emergence of the ‘new’ generation of directors in the ‘90s, the Cultural Revolution was just a childhood

memory. It is this group of youthful avant-garde stage directors to which Meng Jinghui belongs.

During this critical period after the Cultural Revolution, Meng was studying for a postgraduate degree at Beijing Central Drama College. With the increasing number of Western works being introduced into China, drama students had a good opportunity to become familiar with Western drama and theatre and ways to incorporate them into Chinese works. Meng was attracted to various Western plays such as Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano/The Bald Prima Donna*, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and he soon began adapting and putting them on stage. Meng cooperated with several other students and rehearsed more than 10 experimental plays, most of which were from the Western Theatre of the Absurd, including traditional classics like *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna*. Their production of *Waiting for Godot* was performed in the theatre at Beijing Central Drama College using simple equipment and staging. Despite their lack of experience the play attracted much attention from fellow students and staff, who hailed it a success.

After graduating and with momentum on his side, Meng began directing other plays like *Si Fan (Si Fan)*, *I Love xxx (Wo Ai xxx)*, *Lover Ants (Ai Qing Ma Yi)*, and *Fake Faust (Dao Bao Fu Shi De)*. Among these plays it was *Si Fan* which marked the turning point in Meng's career. His version combined the traditional Chinese drama, *Si Fan*, with Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and created a whole new construct to form a new style of play. The original *Si Fan* is a traditional opera from the Ming dynasty which tells the story of a young nun who is sent to a temple by her parents,

but when she grows up she wants to get married and have a normal life so she escapes from the temple without permission. Later on she meets a monk who escaped from his temple as well. The relationship between them is fragile, both of them wish to have a new life but they have consciously controlled themselves because of their traditional Buddhist upbringing. Meng picked up two stories from *Decameron* and added them to the original: the first one is of a young man (played by the same actor as the monk) that checks into a hotel and falls in love with the daughter of the boss; the second one, a groom who sleeps with a queen accidentally. In the end of Meng's *Si Fan* the nun and monk get married. The way Meng Jinghui tells the stories are not restricted by the traditional conduct of attractive, as these three stories are independent from each other, but share the same theme of 'abstinence, love and freedom'.

The play was unique as it was not performed from a written script, instead the actors had to improvise in a way which was not familiar to them. This innovative performance style continued in his next play, *I Love xxx (Wo Ai xxx)* in 1994, Meng's first original play. The entire play lacked any logic or a plot, and each line started with 'I Love (Wo Ai)'. However, due to government policy the play was forbidden to be performed in public as it was regarded as 'too avant-garde'. During this period in Meng's career, his plays were regarded as 'experimental theatre' – both anti-tradition and anti-commercial. Based on the success of *Si Fan* and *I Love xxx (Wo Ai xxx)*, Meng became a highly regarded director and gained positive reviews throughout China.

In 1997 at the age of 31, Meng went to Japan to further his study in drama in what was one of the most influential periods in his life, profoundly shaping his directing

style. The same year the Chinese government liberalised the economy further and China increased its industrial production with many people giving up their jobs to start businesses, this marked the start of Chinese Little Theatre commercialisation. When Meng returned to China he began an overhaul of his old style, now basing his plays on meeting the demands of the audience. He strayed away from his original philosophy of expressing his own thoughts, and in 1998 adapted Dario Fo's work *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, cooperating with another famous playwright, Huang Jisi. "Meng took only 1/10 from Dario Fo's original play and 8/10 from Huang's version" (孟京辉取了达里奥福原剧的十分之一和黄纪苏剧本的十分之八; Yin Qingyi, 2001, p. 14). Meng mixed these two parts with 1/10 of his own creation to direct a brand new Chinese version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

The pair made significant changes to the original play and converted the Italian theme into one more suited for a Chinese audience (see pp. 43). The new play structure was a success and on the back of it Meng directed a further two plays in 1999, namely *Rhinoceros in Love* (*Lian Ai De Xi Niu*) and *Fake Faust* (*Dao Ban Fu Shi De*), both of which were as successful as the first. As Chen Jide states:

Meng Jinhui directed two plays in 1999: *Rhinoceros in Love* and *Fake Faust*. The first was played 40 times in Qing Yi little theatre and the audience attendance was as high as 120%, generating around £40,000. The second played 33 times in Ren Yi theatre, and was fully packed each time." (1999年,孟京辉导演了两部戏剧: <恋爱的犀牛>和<盗版浮士德>前者在青艺小剧场连演 40 场,,上座率高达 120% , 票房纪录 40 万元。后者在人艺小剧场连演 33 场 , 也是场场爆满; 2002, vol. 1, p. 56).

Meng's plays were becoming increasingly commercialised, rather than exhibiting the 'pure' experimental style which he had used at the beginning of his career. In 2000, with his increasing success Meng put greater effort into creating original plays, including *Ma Hua (Ma Hua)* and *Life Advice from Two Dogs (Liang Zhi Gou De Sheng Huo Yi Jian)*. Like his other plays, these were very popular and successful at the box office.

Despite Meng's efforts at creating original drama, his early works which focused on adapting Western plays had a deep influence upon his style. This is seen in many of his plays, embedded in the narrative structure and expressive methods. Therefore, some similarities can be found between his original plays and Western plays. For example, the setting of his play *Life Advice from Two Dogs* is quite similar to that of *Waiting for Godot*. Today, Meng is still the leader of Chinese Little Theatre and his name has become a 'brand' and cult following, and whenever his plays are on stage people from all over China travel to watch.

### 3.1.2 Features of Meng Jinghui's Theatre

The success of Meng Jinghui's plays can be attributed to his ability to create a style that suits the taste and needs of the audience. His style has been called *Mengshi* (Meng 'style'). In quite a few of his works he tries to isolate the elements from the classic productions, and uses them to create satirical effects. Usually, his work is full of amusing plots, either with jokes or the exaggerated performance of actors to create *Mengshi* humour. It is Meng's style to connect all genres together which include the

arts of music, multimedia, and paintings. All these elements together make such innovative works.

For Meng, the audience is the most important element of theatre and is irreplaceable. As Yu Qiuyu points out: “no matter what kind of drama play, the nature of them is for the audience to watch, this is also the reason for it to exist...there would no drama plays without an audience” (不管是什么样的戏剧作品,写出来总是为了给聚集成观众的一些人看的,这就是它的本质,只是它存在的一个必要条件.....没有观众,就没有戏剧; 1983, p. 565). Meng’s philosophy of putting the audience first means he has bridged the distance between audience and actors, improving the relationship between actor and audience. In contrast, traditional Chinese Theatre keeps the actor/audience interaction to a minimum, in fact in old Peking Opera the stage area is higher than the audience, meaning the audience must look up to the actors. Even some of the more modern drama/spoken drama theatres have a similar setup to that of the old opera theatres. This audience/actor interaction was one of the many Western drama theories that came to China after the Open Door Policy, and it was those of the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski that Meng adapted in his works. Grotowski challenged the traditional performance style, encouraging actors and audience to build up closer relationships. As Slowiak and Cuesta state:

Grotowski was obsessed with the relationship between actor, spectator, and space. Of course, other directors and theorists before him have proposed innovations in the theatre space or manipulated the actor-audience relationship, but Grotowski did not stop with the idea of a flexible performance space. Grotowski explored how space itself can become a part of the dramatic action.” (2007, p. 12).

In several plays the actors and audience have chances to interact directly. For example, in *The Life Advice from Two Dogs*, the actors walk into the audience's seating area to talk to them and shake hands. This kind of exchange brings a new style to the Chinese audience, and breaking the ice between actors and viewers enhances enthusiasm and participation. At the same time, the reduced physical distance also acts to bridge the psychological barrier of performance.

Meng also created two working methods to please audiences: one being 'group creation', a system where the director, actors, and playwright work together to create the plays, allowing them to discuss and suggest freely with the end result adding elements that the audience is interested in; the other being plays without a finished script, where the actors get a basic script then have to improvise using tips from the director. During the rehearsals of *Si Fan*, director Meng pointed out to the actors that the performance is uncertain, and that what is rehearsed may be different to the live product, giving the actors freedom to adapt their performance according to feedback from the audience (2000, p. 58). Despite the actors and crew creating the play together during rehearsals, when the actors are on the stage they must perform extempore. Because of this, each time the result is always different and unexpected, and the audiences are rewarded by a unique performance each time they watch the same play.

Meng always concentrates on portraying and criticising society through theatre. As Lin Haibo states: "Meng Jinghui's drama dream is to focus on society rather than expressing personal emotional feelings" ( 将戏剧的触角伸向比自我感受与生命体

验更加广泛的社会是孟京辉的追求; 2002, p. 236). This was especially important during Meng's maturation as a director as that period was important for social transformation within China. During this period different social problems arose and people's values and ideology were shaken. Meng's plays focus on these changes, and criticise the dark and unfair aspects of society while trying to discuss the values and beliefs missing from today's society. As Huang Aihua remarks: "The contents of his plays are closer to real life, reflecting life. He uses a sober attitude to expose and criticise the dark and unfair phenomena of the society, to express what the audiences want to say." (他的戏剧的内容, 多切近现实生活, 甚至是原生态地表现生活, 以一种清醒、冷峻的态度, 表现生活的丰富多彩, 揭露和抨击现实社会中的一些腐败的、不合理的现象, 说出观众心里想说的话; 2009, p. 102). An example of this is Meng's play *Fake Faust*, based on Goethe's *Faust*, which criticises some Chinese intellectuals who accept the philosophy of Confucianism, especially the philosophy of pragmatism. Another is *Life Advice from Two Dogs*, a comedy where two dogs go to a big city and suffer the difficulties of reality and city living. These plays resonate well with the audience, attracting big turnouts.

Another important feature of Meng's plays is commercialisation. Meng is now not only seen as a successful director but also a successful 'businessman'. However, at the beginning of Meng's career he paid little attention to revenue. This is evident from what he told Xie Ding, a journalist for *The Founder* magazine in 2010. The cost of *Si Fan* was only £700 which was paid for by the theatre and did not put any pressure on him from the box office. In fact this has to do with the theatre system, in that during in the late 1980s and the early 1990s most Little Theatre plays were funded by larger

theatres and did not need to worry about turnover. During this period most of the people who went to theatre did so for free. So even for *Si Fan*, despite the large turnout, income was relatively low. Things changed after Meng returned from Japan and began thinking about profit. Since then he has begun to promote ways in which to increase revenues, founded his own theatre, built sales channels, added fashionable elements into the plays, etc. From then on, his plays became extremely profitable.

This is in opposition to another famous director, Sen Mou, who focuses on ‘pure’ experimental plays, taking profit and financial incentives as extras. Yin Qingyi talked about Mo Sen’s situation in 1996, noting that one of his plays, *Talk (Qing Su)*, was staged 7 times but ended with having no more than 200 people in total (2001, p. 19). Unlike some Little Theatre directors, Meng does not have a bias against commercialisation. During an interview with the newspaper *Chinese Youth (Zhong Guo Qing Nian)* he said: “A person will be highly regarded if he makes money, and he will have the influential voice to judge traditional drama and aesthetics” (谁赚钱了，谁就成了权威，因为你经营的东西，结果你在美学上也有发言权了，你对传统的戏剧也有发言；1999, 1<sup>st</sup> March). Because the majority of the audience is young, the use of celebrities in the leading role has become an important part of his method. For example, the play *Hu Po* used the movie stars Liu Ye and Yuan Quan as the main actors, with Jin Xing as the dance choreographer, Yao Qian as the composer, etc. This play cost £600,000 which is very high for a Little Theatre production.

Unlike many other directors, Meng has not only founded his own little theatre in Beijing but has also set up a whole market operation system including website, fan

club, promotions, and a ticket channel. All these are pushing him closer to the audience and the market. For Meng, commercialisation is a way to survive the competition.

## 3.2 Meng Jinghui's Plays

### 3.2.1 *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*

*Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is one of Dario Fo's classic plays, performed in theatres across the world. Behan claims that "*Accidental Death of an Anarchist* has been the most performed play in the world over the last 40 years...it has been estimated that in four years of touring across the country (Italy) *The Commune* performed the show to about a million people" (2000, p. 63). The play is based on a real story in which the anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, was accused by police of putting a bomb in the Banca Nazionale, a crime in fact he never committed. The police later reported that he had died accidentally, falling through a fourth floor window at the police station. In 1998 as a collaboration, Lü Tongliu translated, Huang Jisu adapted, and Meng Jinghui directed their version of the play. Fo's version was adapted considerably. Huang Jisu adapted the original version into a new story and added a lot of *Mengshi* elements into this play. So in this version Meng style is totally used – for example, he broke the original play's frame and combined it with another story, while Meng's satirical jokes can be seen and heard as well.

Fo's original play has a traditional beginning and end. The truth has to be found through the interrogation of the Fool and conversations between Fool and other characters. However, Meng's version starts with three policemen killing the convict and in order to cover up their crime they cooperate with Fool to fake a story of the death of the convict, however, it turns out Fool has fooled all of them. In the version I have watched there were seven actors in total including two hosts whose jobs are to smooth out the play between two plots by playing a guitar and singing. Meanwhile they introduce some background of the play and give the information on Fo and his life. One of them is Meng Jinghui himself. At the beginning of the play Meng introduced the characters from the plays by drawing them on a blackboard, and after that the play started. The stage set was quite simple with one central stage which is surrounded by black cloth with three chairs in the middle. An extension stage reaches into the audience, and there is a small stage for the two hosts.

The original *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* was written and staged the year following the event. The play gave a quick farcical response to the tragic circumstances that surrounded the events at the police headquarters. In contrast to Fo's timely response, Huang Jisu adapted it into a piece relating directly to China but looking back at the profound changes of the last decades and some dark sides of the society but with nothing about current events. For example, 'revolution', 'anti-revolution', and 'reform' were words regularly mentioned in Huang's script, topics that were widely discussed amongst intellectuals of that time but not much nowadays.

Additionally, the theme of Fo's play is quite clear; it criticises the government and politics. However, Meng's remake is more obscure in content, removing the political

elements due to its sensitive nature, whilst still focusing on the grey areas of society. Meng put many Chinese elements into the play and centred on the hot topics of society, criticising its dark aspects and making the text easy to understand. For example,

Chief: (Staring at Captain) He is dead.

局长: ( 盯着警长 ) 他已经死了

Captain: Dead? Great! It wasn't worth me buying this pair of white gloves.

警长 : 死了 ? 好哇 ! 可惜了可我这副手套白买了

Chief: (keep staring at Captain, slowly) Not really, did you keep the receipt?

局长 : ( 继续盯着警长 , 幽幽地 ) 没白买 , 开发票了吗 ?

Captain: (Takes invoice out from pocket) Will they reimburse my money?

警长 : ( 掏出发票递给局长 ) 给报 ?

During the dialogue between the Chief and Captain, both appear not to care about the death of the anarchist but are more interested in the reimbursement of their gloves. As expected, with many changes occurring in China there are always some corruption and malfeasance scandals on the news which are detested by the people. When these kinds of stories are staged in the theatre, the audience can easily relate to the meaning

of the playwrights, bridging the distance between actors and audience emotionally. There are numerous examples of this throughout the play, one being the monologue of the Chief talking about the difference between having a poor dad and a rich dad:

Chief: ....I killed a person on the street and got caught by the police, when the police heard the name of my dad he kept saying sorry to me and sent me home. When I wanted to become an officer my dad gave quite a lot money to my boss. When I decided to do business, my dad invested big money in me.....

局长: .....我在街上杀人了，警察给我拷进来，局长一听说我 爸，连忙松绑,赔礼道歉，送我回家. 当官，我爸是三级长征火箭蹭蹭地给我往上送；经商，我爸举起我朝那最大的一堆钱哐铛一扔一准儿.....

Such a monologue is a typical feature of Meng's plays and demonstrates how he incorporates different topical issues of society. Further, he uncovers another phenomenon in China that in many people's mind money can buy all and as long as you have money you can do anything you want, even commit crime. Meng's version is full of irony and mockery of the whole Chinese society and its realities.

Lastly Fo's version adds humour, as Travers states: "Dario Fo (b. 1926) sought to communicate his radical message through farce, slapstick and other forms of carnivalistic humour" (2001, p. 326). In adapting this for China Meng uses *Mengshi* humour making it easier for the audience to relate to. There are several scenes that make the audience laugh aloud. The first one is when the policemen ask Fool to pretend to jump from the window, Fool suddenly starts to sing instead of saying the

line “give me my belt back” with exaggerated movements. The tone of this song is quite funny and is very familiar to the Chinese audience, so all the audience started to laugh. The second is that, when the Chief is not satisfied with the rehearsal and says “Let’s do it again” instead of getting back to their original position the officers start moving back in slow motion, which is also very funny for the audience. Also, there are some other familiar scenes in this play. As Meng did before, he refers to some traditional plays and add parts of them into his plays. In this play, he uses a scene from the classic Chinese play, *Tea House*, which proved a success as people found it very funny and were comforted by familiar scenes and characters. As in the original *Tea House* Meng kept a big poster on the wall with the famous words “do not talk about politics”, which he used in the play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* as a metaphor and sarcasm. Meng’s special ironic sense of humour not only makes the audience to laugh but also makes them think, which is one part of ‘*Mengshi*’.

Meng also applied other methods such as playing an Italian movie clip on screen, using voice-overs, singing songs, and sometimes using dialects to create funny effects. The play became popular in 1998 and was performed more than 30 times in that year. By 2000, the play attended the Turin Art Festival where Dario Fo and his wife were also present, both praising Meng’s version as a success.

Meng and his creative team (Huang Jisu and Zhang Guangtian) essentially rewrote the play, changing the structure and language style, making it more suitable for the local audience. However, some changes were not accepted by the whole team. As playwright Huang points out:

Some of Meng Jinhui's changes I do not agree with. For example, he got rid of the last scene which changed the meaning of the whole play.....compared with Dario Fo's original play, Meng added a lot of Chinese comedy elements, but removed the political criticism" (孟京辉作为导演有些地方的改动,我本人并不赞同。比如说最后一幕拿掉了,这样一来整个戏的意思就变了。.....与达里奥·福相比,即兴喜剧的成分有了,但锋芒的东西削弱后,达里奥·福式的政治批评的东西就少了; cited by Yin Qingyi, 2001, p. 15).

Meng's version of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* is considerably different to that of the original, adapting it for the Chinese audience. There is no doubt that the essential part of Fo's work has been kept in, namely the critical spirit of the play. However, Meng falls short of Fo's critical stance on politics and instead focuses his efforts on being critical of society as a whole. *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* helped Meng gain success at both the box office and in his artistic reputation. This play has even had a big influence on Meng's other plays, as he told *Chinese Drama Online* that lots of elements in his other plays are from *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (后来我戏里的很多东西都来自这个戏; Wang Run, 2010).

### 3.2.2 *Life Advice from Two Dogs*

Based on the success of his previous plays, especially those adapted from Western dramas, Meng began focusing on creating original plays. *Life Advice from Two Dogs* was the one of them, and was first shown in 2007. In the following years the play was performed more than 500 times.

The plot involves two dogs, Wang Cai and Lai Fu, who leave the countryside to seek happiness and fortune in the city. However, life in the city is not as good as they expect. Along the way they meet many difficulties and begin to complain about a way of life they cannot understand. To survive in the city they initially become buskers, but later find several different jobs, including security guard, singer, and street seller. During their time as street sellers they get caught and beaten by ‘city management’ workers whose job is to take charge of removing the ‘illegal’ street sellers to keep the city clean and neat. The two dogs have their own philosophy, which is that no matter what happens in their life they always handle it in a positive way. They are satisfied with their life and have hopes about the future. In the end, they decide to face up to life no matter how hard it might be.

*Life Advice from Two Dogs* is a comedy but continues Meng’s style of highlighting and criticising the dark and obscene aspects of the society and portraying them through humour. As Wang Xinyan states: “*Life Advice from Two Dogs* makes the audience laugh compulsively, they might not understand the hidden meaning of the play but they do understand the jokes” ( <两只狗的生活意见>, 全场爆笑, 就算观众无法全明白其中的内涵也能明白演员在说什么, 听懂了他们的笑话; 2010, p. 131).

Here, the two dogs are representative of the common people, and their complaints reflect most people’s feelings. The two of them experience lots of difficulties, most of which occur in real life. “The sharp satire is hidden behind the jokes” ( 在笑话的背后有着尖锐的讽刺; Wang Xinyan, 2010, p. 131).

Take the scene of them being beaten by city management as an example. In lots of Chinese cities the relationship between street sellers and urban management officers has never been worse, with many of the officers resorting to violence to expel street vendors, creating a vicious spiral. In daily life, when people discuss urban management officers they often refer to violence and use rude language. This social phenomenon is satirised in this play. Throughout the whole play Meng uses similar topical social cases to emphasise his message, and this grips the attention of the audience.

“*Life Advice from Two Dogs* was considered a play that reflects society and judges current events, to show sympathy to common people. However, it has two totally different reviews from audiences: people who like it take it as a work of genius; the ones who dislike it take it as like some other comedy play, nothing special” ( <两只狗的生活意见>曾被认为是介入社会之作。对时事的讽刺，对社会部分人群的同情。但它引来两种截然不同的评论。喜欢的，把它吹上天；不喜欢的，讽刺这部戏和大多数搞笑话剧没什么区别; Xie Ding, 2010)

Another feature of *Life Advice from Two Dogs* is that it mixes different styles of performance; the play has only two actors (Liu Xiaoye and Chen Haoming) with a simple stage set, meaning that for one hour and forty minutes two actors have to perform from the beginning to the end. Meng also uses musical elements like dancing, singing, and playing instruments. The two actors also imitate some famous celebrities such as Yu Quan and Song Zude in a humorous way whilst making a parody of some classic Chinese plays like *Thunderstorm (Lei Yu)*. These require mature and sophisticated performance skills from the actors and all elements are familiar to audiences which brings laughter. It draws similarities to ‘*Xiangsheng*’ which is a

Chinese comedic performance usually between two or more performers, and sometimes even done as a solo monologue. But *Xiangsheng* normally is just talking without much performance and complete story plots.

The relationship between the actors and audience is different from the traditional plays. At the beginning, the actors do not perform but instead mimic a talk show; every time a new member of the audience comes in, they start the play from the beginning again until everyone is seated. So the opening always repeats itself several times, making it like a daily chat show with the audience. Although seeming a little boring at first, this setup makes the audience expect more from the play later on:

(ACT 1)

Lai Fu: Still some of the audience are not here yet, let's not be in a rush.

来福：还有观众没有到，我们不要着急。

Wang Cai: Take it easy.

旺财：别着急。

Wang Cai: Now it's photo taking time.

旺财：下面可以拍照。

Lai Fu: Well, this will give you guys enough time, otherwise there will no time to take it later on, and you can use your mobile to take it. Woo, high resolution mobiles! It's cool.

来福：啊，给足时间啊。一会儿就没有时间了，手机也可以嘛，对不对，像素都挺高的呢！来，行，行。

Wang Cai: There is someone taking photos, "cheese". All right, time is up.

旺财：哎，还真有人拍，“茄子”。好！时间到。

Lai Fu: Our play is about to start, so don't take photos later.

来福：一会儿就不要拍照了，我们的演出马上就要开始了。

Wang Cai: We will start soon.

旺财：马上就开始。

Lai fu: I don't think the audience gets us.

来福：观众不明白我的意思。

Wang Cai: You are right, they did not get it.

旺财：对，没看明白。

Lai Fu: We never ask for applause.

来福：我们演出从来不要掌声。

Wang Cai: Never, it is not our style to ask for applause.

旺财：哎，不要。要掌声是很不道德的。

This theme continues throughout the play and if anyone leaves or comes in to the theatre, the actors will stop for a moment and then continue. This does not cause any uncomfortable feelings for the audience; on the contrary, the audiences feel closer to the performance and actors. Meng successfully breaks the traditional distance between actors and the audience, allowing the actors to improvise lines during the performance according to the current situation. A good example of this is when Lai Fu and Wang Cai become buskers. The actors walk into the audience asking them for money, involving them in the play, and making them feel a part of the performance.



(Image 2 and image 3: Interaction between actors and audience)

Chen Haoming told the *Xin Jing* newspaper that once during the play there was a young person in the audience who kept laughing from beginning to end, even through the scene where he commits suicide:

I said “I heard the voice of my reincarnation”, the audience started to laugh. Later on there was another suicide scene of me, he did the same thing again, I said “that voice is calling me again” the audience totally could not help but laugh (2007).

As Wang Xinyan points out: “in *Life Advice from Two Dogs* the relationship between actors and viewers is quite relaxed, it is easy to be accepted by the Chinese audience, although it teases them a bit, it does so in a warm way” (<两只狗的生活意见>中的观演关系很生活化，特别容易被当代观众接受。虽然有些戏弄的意味,却是温暖的; 2001, vol. 2).

Meng focuses a lot on the dark aspects of society. He tries to express his unsatisfied emotions about these unfair and dark aspects of society under the label of ‘Little Theatre’. There many unfair phenomena happening everyday in real life, and Meng attempts to put as many of them as possible into this play. This creates a problem as the play does not have a main theme. His desire to highlight many aspects of society dilutes the depth of the meaning, resulting in many people being attracted by its funny and satiric story rather than the serious plot of the traditional plays (Shi Linlin, 2009, p. 539).

With more than 20 years development of Chinese Little Theatre, many directors and dramatists have devoted their life to Little Theatre. Some have gained success, Meng Jinghui being one of them. In this chapter I have analysed Meng Jinghui and his work systematically from different aspects and provided some analysis of two of his works, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and *Life Advice from Two Dogs*. It can be seen that Meng became a mature director gradually forming his own style. It is undeniable that some of his works are still controversial; some critics even propose that his works are moving away from the spirit of Little Theatre, focusing on pleasing the needs of the

audience and the market. Xue Zhichuan points out that in the early stages of Meng's work he focused less on the market and the audience's needs, but gradually he learned how to cater to the audience and the market (孟京辉从做的狠点儿和观众对立的东西比较多到学会和观众更恰当的交流这一转变中向观众靠拢; 2005, vol. 6).

However, there is no doubt that Meng and his works have had a profound impact on Chinese Little Theatre, and not only has it speeded up the process of commercialisation of little theatres but also enriched Little Theatre. As Huang Mei states: "Meng got the acceptance from the mainstream drama field, he also gained a huge commercial success." (他既得到了官方主流戏剧界的承认, 也获得了商业上的成功; 2010, vol. 7).

## CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS OF CHINESE LITTLE THEATRE

The past 20 years have seen the rapid rise in Chinese Little Theatre. It has become more popular than ever and has shown it possesses certain unbeatable advantages such as cheap ticket prices, humorous plots, rapid responses to hot societal topics, and so forth. However, during this period there have been a number of unavoidable problems which might affect the growth of Little Theatre in future, such as the lack of original plays and the fact that little theatres have developed unevenly. However, no matter how many problems it has, the significance of the Little Theatre is undeniable. The first part of this chapter will focus on analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese Little Theatre, with the second part drawing a conclusion on the whole of Chinese Little Theatre.

### 4.1. Strengths and Weaknesses

#### 4.1.1 Strengths of Little Theatre

Little Theatre possesses certain advantages over established theatres, explaining why it has become so popular in China. First and foremost, the low cost and risk is beyond

doubt its most valuable asset. Meng makes a statement about why he chose little theatres to show his plays:

I was thinking what kind of theatre would be more suitable to perform my play, a traditional or little theatre. After calculating I estimated 300 people would come to my play a day, if in a big theatre, what should I do about the other 500 empty seats? If you do sell the other 500 tickets, then what about the next day? You will create a vicious circle (2000, p. 352).

Little theatres also possess a perfect performance space for low cost plays; if you rent established theatres, you increase the cost of the play and cannot guarantee that the tickets will be sold. However, choosing little theatres reduces the risk, partly because of the rent savings that reduce the cost of each production. Meanwhile, low cost means low barriers to entry which helps to attract more investors into the industry, for example the independent producers. “In 1997, more than half of the new Little Theatre plays in Beijing were produced by independent producers.” (仅在 1997 年，在北京上演的仅 20 台新剧目中,就有一半以上是由独立制作人推出的小剧场戏剧; cited by Wu Baohe, 2001). Many of the most popular theatres like Fan Xing, Xi Xiao Tang, Nine Theatre, and Peng Hao are all private. As Jia Mina states: “Little Theatre plays can be put on stage without high cost; for the Little Theatre pioneers, low cost is the choice when they have to meet the risk.” (小剧场话剧只需要不多的投资便可以进行演出对于实验话剧的先锋们来说，小投资也是他们进行风险颇大的话剧实验时的现实选择; 2008, vol. 8).

Low cost means plays can be performed frequently. For example, Nine Theatre offered 62 plays showing a total of 675 times in 2008. Because of the basic nature of little theatres, these theatres can hire relatively inexperienced drama enthusiasts and offer internships for students, giving them a chance to enter and experience the world of theatre. In a way little theatres act as a portal for attracting and encouraging new blood into the industry:

College students not only could identify themselves with the Old B (Old B is a character from the play *Old B Is On the Wall*), who has an urgent desire for participation in an environment where he can hardly fulfil it, but also considered participation in this theatre experiment a part of their own life.” (edited by Lu Runtang, 1990, p. 161).

The low producing cost has another advantage, low ticket prices. Normal ticket prices ranges from £5 to £30, and most theatres offer discount for students. This kind of price range attracts young audiences, helping to build up the theatres’ reputation.

Secondly, the themes of Little Theatre are less restrictive compared with established theatres. The themes have evolved to cover topical social matters like relationships, family, money, and injustice in society. For example, plays like *Don’t Come To Bother Me After Divorce* (*Lihun Le Jiu Bie Lai Zhao Wo*), *Don’t Worry About Your Appearance* (*Bie Wei Ni De Xiang Mao Fa Chou*), *Beautiful Women* (*Nü Ren Piao Liang*), *Black Honeymoon* (*Hei Se Mi Yue*), and *Wife From America* (*Mei Guo Lai De Qi Zi*) are easy for the audience to connect with. Established theatres focus on classic Chinese works like Laoshe’s *Teahouse* (*Cha Guan*), Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm* (*Lei Yu*), and *Family* (*Jia*), however, these are distant from today’s reality. In this respect, Little Theatre’s current themes satisfy the audience’s desires making it more attractive

and relevant to today's environment. Going further, little theatres have developed to be innovative and flexible, with the playwrights and directors able to produce their own products quickly, changing the set or layout of the stage easily. Further, the ease with which new directors can enter this field to begin their career helps to keep the theatre system ever changing, creating a 'treadmill' effect whereby it will keep the art rolling forward.

Thirdly, Chinese Little Theatre is linked with modern business management skills, developed ticket sales channels, and other promotions. Established theatres, most of which are still controlled by government, do not have so much pressure from the market. If they cannot sell any tickets the government will often cover their losses so their methods and techniques of running and managing theatres have not improved much over time. However, little theatres have the ability to respond quickly to market conditions and pay more attention to its needs. For the audience, little theatres are more convenient, there are many ways to obtain tickets, and they can get relevant information readily from any media or street posters. The famous dramatist Wu Baohe remarks that "the management of Chinese commercialised little theatres learned much from overseas commercial theatres using different promotion methods to promote sales" (商业化的小剧场在演出的运作和经营上，借鉴了国外商业戏剧的做法，比如宣传和包装; 2001, vol. 6).

#### 4.1.2 Weakness of Little Theatre

##### **Plays**

As Chinese Little Theatre emerged it shared many features with experimental theatre, epitomised by the late 1980s plays *Alarm Signal* and *Bus Stop*, which inherited the experimental theatre spirit. However, from the late 1990s Chinese Little Theatre entered a phase of commercialisation, provoked by social and economic changes. Rapid commercialisation compelled the theatres to transfer their attention to the needs of their consumers. However, commercialisation is a double edged sword; although it has and will continue to help theatres grow, over-commercialisation can be detrimental to the philosophy which made and makes Little Theatre so great. Many believe that Little Theatre has become over commercialised. As Sun Yuling says: “Compared to before, these days the trend of Little Theatre plays is focused on entertaining the audience, to some extent it has given up pursuing the art.” (与以前相比，如今的小剧场话剧趋向于幽默和娱乐性，看重的是噱头，以“娱乐大众”为最主要的目标，在一定程度上放弃了对更高艺术境; 2009, vol. 5).

In order to have success at the box office, directors have to find and attract more people to watch their plays, putting the audience at the centre of their decision making. As a result many directors have given up pursuing their original convictions in exchange for making plays whose sole purpose is to lure in a large audience. For example, as of late there has been a large rise in the number of comedy-orientated plays. This caters for the target audience of young office workers in the city, a place for them to relieve the pressure from a hard day's work. There has been a shift towards producing humorous Little Theatre plays, including Xiang Dinghua's *Married! Fainted! (Hun Le! Hun Le!)*, Meng Jinghui's *Life Advice from Two Dogs*, independent producer Li Liuyi studio's *Shi Jing San Guo (Shi Jing San Guo)*, Shen

Yong's *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow* (*Mingtian Ni Shifou Yiran Ai Wo*), and others. This has had the effect of diluting the true art for something that is often superficial.

Over-commercialisation can ruin the connection between real life and artistic creation. When Chinese Little Theatre emerged, plays were largely based on very topical and sensitive issues, whereas many directors now make use of vulgar jokes or unrealistic plots to satisfy the audience's requirements. For example, in recent years lots have focused on adapting famous and controversial TV shows and movies. Sun Ruilin makes a point about this: "when director Zhang Yimou's movie was on, within two months the drama *Curse of the Pyramid* was in the theatre as well..... The aim of little theatre has become to entertain people and gain success at the box office" ( 当张艺谋的<满城尽带黄金甲>热 , 不出两个月就有了话剧<满城都是金字塔>.....小剧场话剧趋向娱乐性和票房 ; 2009, vol. 5). The movie *Curse of the Golden Flower* has a similar story line to the Chinese classic play *Thunderstorm* (*Lei Yu*) which is about love and revenge. However, the plot of the play *Curse of the Pyramid* has nothing to do with the movie apart from its name, a technique used by many to attract attention. This play labelled itself as a love comedy. As the critic Xie Xizhang points out, most of the plays produced in recent years are of low quality which might give the young audience a wrong message about what the Little Theatre plays are (edited by Su Xiangdong, 2011).

There are a number of plays similar to this: the TV show *How Can I Save You, My Love* (*Na Shen Me Zheng Jiu Ni, Wo De Ai Ren*) was followed by the play *How Can I*

*Kill You, My Love (Na Shen Me Zheng Si Ni, Wo De Ai Ren)*. For little theatres these plays normally do well at the box office; it seems that the function of theatre is to make the audience laugh. Picking up on this, to compete, many little theatres have resorted to the 'star effect', hiring movie or TV stars as actors. The most famous production of this kind was *Tuo* in 2003, in which Chen Peisi, a famous actor, took the leading role, boosting the theatre's revenue.

A shortage of good directors and strong original plays is another problem. Jia Mina makes this point: "The important factor that restricts the development of Little Theatre is that there is a lack of good original plays" (好剧本匮乏肯定是首要因素; 2008, p. 247). Huo Yan makes a similar comment:

Little Theatre has developed a lot in China, many drama troupes have their own little theatres, but the problem of Chinese Little Theatre is that it lacks classic original plays. Many of them have been forgotten soon after being staged. Original plays like *Life Advice from Two Dogs* are rare." (小剧场在中国还是蓬勃发展的，而且很多剧团建立了自己的剧场，但存在着的问题是持续力不足，经典剧目少，很多话剧上演了一轮就被遗忘了。像<两只狗的生活意见>经久不衰的剧目缺乏; 2010, email interview).

Currently Little Theatre is a booming industry in China, and many drama societies have their own theatres, however, most lack sustainability and good original material. With so many generic and superficial plays being released, many classics have already been forgotten and original and meaningful plays are sparse. Playwrights and directors appear set on adapting classic scripts, no matter Western classic or

traditional Chinese. Take the play *Three Sisters are Waiting for Godot* as an example. The play was staged in 1998, and cut sections from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, splicing them together with some of the playwrights' own thoughts. However, it underperformed at the box office as for many the story was hard to understand.

## **Theatres**

Little theatres have developed unevenly which has restricted the development of Chinese Little Theatre in general, and many directors are worried about the quantity of the theatres. Taking Beijing as an example, manager Yuan Zihang from Xi Xiao Tang theatre says that theatres like Dong Fang Xian Feng and Ren Yi are all fully booked until next year, so it is impossible for other directors to show their plays too (2009, *Culture Weekend*). Director Rao Xiaozhi complained that the directors do not have much choice regarding theatres; the number of theatres are limited but each year there are more and more new plays coming to the stage (2009, *Culture Weekend*). Actually, with their increasing popularity there are many new little theatres sprouting in Beijing, and more private investors are building their own theatres. However, there is still a problem as most plays are concentrated in several famous theatres including those that have been analysed before, which give priority to the directors based on their reputation.

The most famous theatres build their reputation and audience foundation by choosing good locations, advanced facilities, competitive pricing, and good plays. For example, Bei Qing Ying theatre, founded in 2007, has 150 seats and is located in the Wang Fujing district in the northeast corner of Beijing, quite far from both the city centre

and universities. Last year it only showed two plays staged 23 times in total, with most performances empty. Compared with Dong Fang Xian Feng which had 342 performances, and one can see the disparity. As the manager of Bei Qing Ying theatre, Niu Min said, no one wants to do their plays in a theatre in a remote location (2009, *Culture Weekend*). It is not only the location that restricts the development of theatres, but also the facilities. There are many theatres in this kind of situation no matter in Beijing or other cities, and the waste of resources leads to a situation where better theatres are always booked, and less famous ones are always empty.

### **Audiences**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the audience is an important factor which influences Chinese Little Theatre. The audience for Chinese Little Theatre is predominantly young, including students and office workers. As Huo Yan states, “they are mainly youth, who were born in 1970s and 1980s.” (2010, interviewed by email). Meanwhile, Xue Xiaojin states, “Currently there are around twenty to thirty thousands little theatre fans in Beijing, mainly consisting of white-collar workers and university students” (目前北京小剧场的观众大致在两三万人，主要由白领和大学在校生构成；2002, p. 49). However, despite their large base Chinese Little Theatre has a narrow target audience limiting its development. This shifting trend began after its commercialisation and now the majority come from either universities or offices in big cities. This young audience has been an invaluable force in the progression of Chinese Little Theatre since the ‘90s, but at the same time has narrowed the audience structure and has had a negative impact on Chinese Little Theatre in general. In order

to satisfy the youth, directors focus on producing plays that the young are interested in and use the elements they prefer. For example, progressively more Little Theatre plays have become like ‘fast food’ which can be produced and staged within a short time with a simple theme that is directly targeted at them. Like Su Xiangdong says, in order to attract the young audience some plays even use low taste adult humour or plots (为追求票房，还有一些人不惜突破底线，炮制低俗廉价的荤段子来“吸引”观众; 2011).

Another possible approach could be to attract people from different areas. At the moment the majority of the audience mainly comes from big cities, with most in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou. Since little theatres concentrate in these cities, with more and more little theatres entering the market, the competition has become severe. The focus on big cities leaves a largely untapped population from small cities which have yet to be exploited. Take Qingdao, the capital city of the Shandong province as an example. *Life Advice from Two Dogs* has been staged there twice in 2010, and the result was unexpectedly good. As the manager of Qingdao Shunyi theatre, Jin Shunchao said in an interview: “after the first performance of *Life Advice from Two Dogs* in Qingdao, there were many people buying tickets to invite their friends or relatives to watch, some even came to watch it a second time.....this is a really exciting sign.” (在<两只狗>演出之后，青岛已出现自己看完之后再买票邀请亲戚、朋友来看的现象，也有人看完第一场还要再买票看第二场.....但它所传递出的信号令人感到振奋;cited by Wang Pin, 2010). Therefore, developing some new audience group is a way to avoid the limitations and help the Little Theatre enlarge its market and influence.

## Others

There are other factors which have restricted or slowed down the speed of growth of Chinese Little Theatre. One of them is the free tickets phenomenon in Beijing which arose during the era of the planned economy. However, even with the change to a market based economy, the old tradition has continued. Free ticketing has created a vicious spiral in Beijing, and has become a typical Beijing Little Theatre phenomenon:

In Beijing a large number of people can get the free tickets from their friends or friends' friends who work or are connected with little theatres. This is a bad habit for lots of people whose expectation is never to go to the theatre without getting free tickets (北京看戏多为“蹭戏”,多数是戏剧圈的边缘人由于人情的原因经常可以拿到免费戏票,从而养成了非免费戏不看的恶性循环; Bo Jing, 2010, interview).

Another is that the Little Theatre is not widely accepted. Compared to Chinese Television and movie festivals, Little Theatre itself does not have many professional festivals, restricting its popularity to a certain degree. Chinese Little Theatre needs wider support from both professionals and non-professionals to promote its development. Although Meng Jinghui's plays have been widely accepted and very successful, not many Little Theatre dramatists can be that successful. Some consider Meng and his plays to be more like a phenomenon.

## 4.2. Significance

Chinese Little Theatre plays an important role in the development of Chinese theatre. Employing a different style to Established Theatre (*huaju*), it has influenced established theatre in several aspects.

Little Theatre has played a role in breaking the realist dramatic style of the established theatres. For many years Chinese drama was preoccupied predominantly with realism, but Little Theatre has altered this. At the beginning some critics complained that there were some Little Theatre plays that only changed the nature of the performance space and the size of the theatre, but the drama still adhered to the essence of realism. And experimental drama is a good example of this. At very beginning some dramatists thought experimental drama only concentrated on form and not content, but now experimental drama is considered an independent dramatic form which brings a new style in both form and content. This proves that changes in dramatic form can lead to new content. When Little Theatre came to China, the first change was the performance space. During the first performance of *Alarm Signal*, people were crowded inside a small space and the audience and actors were very close, requiring the actors to be skilled, making the play more alluring to the audience.

From the 1980s Chinese theatre gradually went through a low period which continued through to early the next decade. In 1993, *Get Closer to Chairman Mao* had only 7 people in the audience, outnumbering actors: “Facing the empty theatre, some of the actors began to cry” (Wu Baohe, 2003, p. 92). It was a big challenge for drama,

demoralising many dramatists to the extent that some found employment elsewhere. At this moment, it was not just about audience, but more importantly it was the drama workers themselves who were losing confidence. For drama, it was about survival. When Little Theatre rose to popularity and pulled the audience back to theatres, the dramatists' confidence was regained. At that time, not all Little Theatre plays were 'real' Little Theatre plays; many directors were lured by its success, using it as a way out from a bad situation. For them, picking up smaller sized theatres could reduce many of the overheads of big theatres. As Ye Tingfang states: "Because of the dilemma of big theatres, many playwrights could not handle the situation in established theatres and they transferred to little theatres...little theatres are more like sanctuaries." (是由于大剧场的困境造成的。大剧场吃不饱，只得往小剧场跑。

于是小剧场就成了大剧场的避难所; 1998, vol. 6). However, it did prevent many dramatists from leaving drama altogether, and has become an integral part of Chinese theatre. Some dramatists have continued their careers in little theatres, thus maintaining the potential for future positive trends in Chinese drama. Dong Jian calls Little Theatre a 'quiet revolution', and adds that the "Little Theatre Movement in China did not have any support from government...it depends on lots of artists who love drama, this 'revolution' is not from the outside world but from an internal force." (这场小剧场戏剧运动，没有政府的大力号召和推动.....它全凭着一批痴迷于戏剧艺术的人士的热情苦干而偷偷兴起的。这场“革命”不是来自外部的发动，而是来自戏剧内部的要求; 1996, vol. 12).

For quite a long time, modern Chinese drama was not professional, and most of the troupes were non-professional. After the People's Republic of China was founded, all the drama troupes became state-owned, and though this kind of system aided Chinese drama forward, it fully depends on the support from government but is not connected with the market and audience. From the 1980s to the 1990s, state-owned theatres suffered from changes from the Open Door Policy carried by Deng Xiaoping, during which China went into the market economy period, in which the market was open but the competition was fierce. For established theatre, the pressure was not only from little theatres but other media. The theatres did not try to connect with the market and productions did not consider the audience's needs, therefore drama stagnated. On the other hand, new drama enthusiasts had the passion to get into the field but as they did not belong to any state-owned theatres or troupes, they were blocked. In this case, Chinese drama needed a breakthrough, and the young people who loved drama turned to the little theatres which are independent from the state. In little theatres, the young people whether professionals or non-professionals, can throw themselves into the drama world and create new plays. And these are the people who first started to align the market with theatres, helping to bring hope to the Chinese theatre as a whole.

Chinese Little Theatre has had some problems during its development but they have not stopped its progress. There is no doubt that Chinese Little Theatre has played an important role in Chinese theatre history and has made a big contribution to breaking the old theatre system, thus making the Chinese theatre more diverse.

With the efforts all the dramatists and the people who love drama, Chinese little theatres are becoming more and more popular. These days the communication

between Western and Chinese little theatres is improving and becoming more frequent. Every year, there are some famous Western plays invited to play in Chinese little theatres during the Beijing Fringe Festival. At the same time, Chinese dramatists bring their productions to the theatres all over the world, as well as the international theatre festivals, such as the Avignon Theatre Festival and Belgrade International Theatre Festival. This kind of communications offers good opportunities for Western and Chinese dramatists to exchange information, especially for Chinese dramatists who can learn from other great dramatists and plays from other countries. I do believe with more and more communications between West and East, the Chinese Little Theatre will grow healthily.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Email correspondence between Huo Yan and Lisi Dai

DATE: 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2010

TIME: 17:03:05

发件人： **霍艳** (huoyan629@163.com)

发送时间： 2010 年 4 月 11 日 17:03:05

收件人： **戴丽斯** (lisi-dai@hotmail.com)

LISI DAI: 您认为小剧场近年来

这国内火起来的原因有哪些？

HUO YAN: 想要知道中国戏剧发展,就要看北京的小剧场发展.剧场等配套设施越来越完善.观众素质不断提高,培养出来固定的话剧观众群。投身小剧场的导演跟演员越来越多。媒体关注。票价战,比如加 50 多一张同等价位票,比如学生优惠票。

LISI DAI: What do you think the reasons are for little theatres being so popular in China these days?

HUO YAN: If you want to know Chinese Little Theatre better, you have to know Beijing's little theatres better. The theatres' equipment is getting better and better. The requirements from the audience is improving as well. There are certain fixed audience group. More and more directors and actors are getting into this field. Media pays more attention to Little Theatre. Price wars, for example, you can get extra ticket if you add 50 Yuan, and student discount.

LISI DAI: 您认为小剧场的主要观众群体构成是什么？年轻观众在其中发挥着怎样的作用。

HUO YAN: 年轻人为主。七八十年代人。年轻人是主要消费群体，而且话剧安排的时间正好是年轻人下班的时间，票价也符合年轻人收费标准，看话剧成了年轻人中时髦的休闲活动以及谈资。

LISI DAI: Who do you think is the main part of Little Theatre audience? What kind of role do they play?

Huo YAN: Mainly youth, who were born in 1970s and 1980s. They are the majority because normally the time the plays start is always the time they are off work. The ticket price is reasonable for young people. Going to little theatres has become the fashionable activity and topic among young people.

LISI DAI: 中国特色的小剧场与西方的实验话剧或其他剧种有着怎样的联系，其相关影响又是怎样的

HUO YAN: 中国的小剧场最开始上演的是西方实验话剧，如孟京辉的话剧，演员少，布景简单，靠剧本的功力。但是现在中国小剧场有自己的特色了，比如剧本趋向原创，趋向娱乐化。

LISI DAI: What is the relationship between Chinese Little Theatre and Western Experimental Theatre?

HUO YAN: At the beginning of Chinese Little Theatre, the Western Experimental Theatre plays were always staged. For example, Meng Jinghui's plays, had few actors and a modest stage. The script itself is really important.

However, now Chinese Little Theatre has its own characteristics, for example, the plays are more original and entertainment.

LISI DAI: 您对孟京辉话剧及其对小剧场的贡献有着怎样的看法

HUO YAN: 毕竟他把小剧场带到了国内。而且几部代表作至今经久不衰，持续上演。他也成立了自己的剧场。

LISI DAI: What is your opinion of Meng Jinghui and his plays?

HUO YAN: After all he is the person who brought Little Theatre to China. And some of his plays are staged again and again. He has his own theatre as well.

LISI DAI: 小剧场在国内的发展前景您怎么看，为什么？它所存在的问题或者说挑战又是什么

HUO YAN: 小剧场在中国还是蓬勃发展的，而且很多剧团建立了自己的剧场，但存在着的问题是持续力不足，经典剧目少，很多话剧上演了一轮就被遗忘了。像《两只狗的生活意见》经久不衰的剧目缺乏。

LISI DAI: What do you think the future of Chinese Little Theatre, why? What kind of problems it has and what the biggest challenge is.

HUO YAN: Little Theatre has developed a lot in China, many drama troupes have their own little theatres, but the problem of Chinese Little Theatre is that it lacks classic original plays. Many of them have been forgotten soon after been staged. Original plays like *Life Advice from Two Dogs* are rare.

## APPENDIX 2

All the materials in Appendix 2 are downloaded from the official website.