

Spring 2014

## Meaning in Movement: Adaptation and the Xiqu Body in Intercultural Chinese Theatre

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### Recommended Citation

Wilcox, Emily E., Meaning in Movement: Adaptation and the Xiqu Body in Intercultural Chinese Theatre (2014). *TDR: The Drama Review*, 58(1), 42-63.  
[https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_a\\_00327](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00327)

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# Meaning in Movement

## Adaptation and the Xiqu Body in Intercultural Chinese Theatre

Emily E. Wilcox



### Strindberg Rewritten

“You don’t know what to do? Let me tell you. Let me show you!”<sup>1</sup>

Jean yells this at Julie as he gives a villainous laugh and tosses his ankle-length silk sleeves into the air. Jean rushes toward Julie, grabs what we now know is an imaginary bird from Julie’s hand and, facing the audience, violently wrings the bird’s neck, killing it.

The bird still in his hand, Jean bends both legs into a deep squat, spins his arms like a jet propeller in a *fanshen*<sup>2</sup> turn, and then bashes the bird’s body into the stage floor.

Julie screams. Jean lets out a violent shout, whips his sleeves toward the floor and struts away offstage in a wide-legged swagger.<sup>3</sup>

1. In performance, the lines are spoken or sung in Mandarin with English subtitles. The quotations here are taken from the English subtitles, which audiences see projected on a screen while listening to the performance in Chinese.

2. *Fanshen* 翻身 is a technical trick in which the actor spins with both arms straight up and perpendicular to the floor, giving the effect of a windmill or propeller. It is used in *xiqu* and some forms of Chinese classical dance.

3. This stylized walking is part of the *xiqu* movement repertoire for male characters.

Kneeling over the bird corpse, Julie sends both her sleeves out horizontally to the sides in despair. Tenderly, she bends forward to caress her pet bird. Her posture and sleeve movements indicate that she is weeping,<sup>4</sup> and, heartbroken, she sings: “The cruel man is evil incarnate.” Her arms cross back and forth over her chest.

“My dear Skylark is decapitated!” Her sleeves fly up in the air, and float down. She continues to bend over the bird, kneeling down on the stage in a prostrating position.

“As if his claws had wrung my neck. I must have lost my mind and sight.”

Julie sits up briefly, then sinks, deflated, back to the ground. All the while, she stares absently, her head bowed forward.

Jean calls from backstage: “My eyes were a sightless belly button. They couldn’t tell pearls from mutton. Soft living weakens your mind. Go cry a river to your dead bird!”

Thus begins the climactic final aria of *Zhuli xiaojie* (朱丽小姐, *Miss Julie*), an experimental *jingju* adaptation of August Strindberg’s 1888 play. Known more commonly as Beijing opera, *jingju* is a regional style of *xiqu*, or Chinese indigenous theatre, of which there are more than 300 regional forms in China today. The earliest *xiqu* performances emerged around the 12th century, and *jingju* is among the youngest of these forms, developed in northern China during the mid-19th century. Like all *xiqu* styles, *jingju* incorporates the four elements of performance technique—singing, speaking, moving, and acrobatics—and it is a comprehensive theatrical genre unique to China.<sup>5</sup>

Created by a team of artists at the Shanghai Theatre Academy, including playwrights William Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei, director Zhao Qun, and producer Guo Yu, and performed by three professional *jingju* actors, *Zhuli xiaojie* is one in a new series of experimental *xiqu* performances by playwrights Sun and Fei.<sup>6</sup> The first in the series was *Xin bi tian gao* (心比天高, *Hedda or Aspiration Sky High*), an all-female *yueju* (a Southern style of *xiqu*) adaptation of Ibsen’s 1880 *Hedda Gabler*, which premiered at the Hangzhou Yue Opera Company in 2006. Other works in the series include *Haishang furen* (海上夫人, *The Lady from the Sea*), also

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4. See “The Weeping Sleeve” (Zung [1937] 1964:87). Stylized weeping is part of the antirealistic aesthetic of Chinese indigenous theatre, which uses a *xieyi* (writing meaning) approach to representation, as explained below.

5. For a general history of *xiqu* see Dolby (1976) and Mackerras (1983). For a history of *jingju* see Goldstein (2007).

6. *Zhuli xiaojie* premiered in the Shanghai Theatre Academy blackbox theatre on 7 March 2010. As of August 2012, it had been performed in Iran, England, Ireland, Sweden, and Italy. In January 2012, the work was staged at the Shanghai Theatre Academy as part of the “Performing Shanghai” Winter Institute, which is where I first saw the piece performed live. I interpreted for the post-performance discussion that included Sun, Zhao, the actors in *Zhuli xiaojie*, and audience members from China and the United States. For a web blog with details on *Zhuli xiaojie*, including photos and videos, see *Zhuli xiaojie* (1996). For a website with details on the 2012 Winter Institute, see STA Winter Institute (2011). See also Tarryn Chun’s essay in this issue.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Zhao Qun as Julie (Zhuli) in Zhuli xiaojie (Miss Julie), by William Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei, directed by Guo Yu. Piccolo Theatre, Milan, Italy, 20 October 2012. (Courtesy of Zhao Qun)*

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a yueju adaptation of an Ibsen play, and *Wangzhe bedi* (王者俄狄, King Oedipus) and *Mingyue zihan* (明月子翰, Mingyue and Zihan), both jingju adaptations of Greek myths.<sup>7</sup>

Like many previous xiqu adaptations of Western drama,<sup>8</sup> this new series has an explicitly intercultural goal founded in the playwrights' conviction that performance techniques give bodily form to Chinese culture. "Because the stories are familiar," writes Fei in a 2010 article in *Shanghai Theatre* and Sun in a 2011 article in *The People's Daily*,<sup>9</sup>

audiences can focus on the Chinese-style performance techniques, which are full of expressivity. The stylized movements found in xiqu are capable of transmitting the essence of Chinese aesthetics accumulated within them,<sup>10</sup> thereby attracting more foreigners to develop an understanding of Chinese culture.

The value of xiqu, argues Sun in a *TDR* article on "Performing Arts and Cultural Identity in the Era of Interculturalism," lies in its "socially constructed body" (2009:10). The xiqu body, he argues, makes xiqu an ideal medium for teaching and promoting intercultural understanding.

Adapting Western dramas for xiqu nearly always requires major changes to the original script, as evidenced by Chinese opera adaptations of Shakespeare. "To accommodate operatic arias, dance, combat, and acrobatics," writes Alex Huang in *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange*, "Chinese opera, for practical and aesthetic reasons, has to condense the plot and be highly selective of dialogues and soliloquies to translate or represent" (Huang 2009:170). "In using Shakespeare to help rejuvenate traditional Chinese theatre, adapters had to make extensive cuts to leave room for the extravagantly stylized acting," write Fei and Sun (2006:127). Often, this means that, "the characters' inner monologues [are] presented through singing and/or choreographed gestures and movement" (126).

Even in adaptations that seek to remain as true to the original script as possible—Ma Yong'an's landmark 1983 *Aosailuo*, a jingju adaptation of *Othello*, is one example—the script is "trimmed and condensed" and sections conducive to xiqu are extended or reshaped (Huang 2009:182–83). In xiqu, performance training is differentiated by character type or *hangdang*, so that court ladies and maids, for example, have different costuming, singing, and movement styles, as do old and young men, warriors and scholars, moral and immoral figures, etc. Often, to make characters in Western dramas better suit the character types in xiqu, stories are altered and characters adjusted. In other cases, the xiqu character types are combined or adapted to suit new characters. Ma's 1983 *Aosailuo*, like many works, uses both methods, depending on the character and the scene (186–88).

The climactic aria scenes in two works in Sun and Fei's series—*Zhuli xiaojie* (*Miss Julie*) and *Xin bi tian gao* (*Hedda or Aspiration Sky High*) raise three questions: What changes are made in the processes of adapting Western drama for xiqu; How do these changes allow embodied culture to be transmitted through the performance; and finally, What can be gained from using stylized xiqu performance techniques in the staging of stories and characters of Western dramatic works?

If xiqu adaptations of Western drama necessarily change scripts to facilitate full expression of xiqu performance techniques, what exactly do these shifts entail, and what do the new works

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7. See the forthcoming book *西戏中演* (Western Drama, Chinese Performance) by William Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei. *Hedda* and *The Lady from the Sea* will be presented in New York at the NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in February 2014.

8. Xiqu productions of Shakespeare are among the most common xiqu adaptations of Western drama. See Huang (2009).

9. The same sentence appears in both articles, indicating that it is an official position shared by the playwrights.

10. The original phrase used here is "其中积淀着的中国美学的精髓." All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

generate that is new or different from the original scripts? Furthermore, how is “embodied culture” a central factor in this adaptation process? What comprises the embodied culture of xiqu, and how is it most fully engaged in intercultural performance?

Put simply: What is the xiqu body, and how does it move?

Movement, here, is understood as both kinetic and sentimental: the xiqu body moves in space, and it moves audiences.

In xiqu adaptations of Western drama, stylized movement such as singing and the manipulation of props (sleeves, swords, chairs, etc.) generates theatricality and affect in ways that are different from naturalistic spoken drama. Movement is central to xiqu because, as Huang explains, “[xiqu technique] demands kinetic representation of the psyche of the characters” (2009:186). One of the most important differences between xiqu and naturalistic theatre is xiqu’s focus on *qing*,<sup>11</sup> or sentiment. In both *Zhuli xiaojie* and *Xin bi tian gao*, as in many other of Sun and Fei’s xiqu adaptations, the original scripts are adjusted to create new spaces for the exploration and expression of *qing*, a defining feature of Chinese indigenous performance. In both works, adaptation facilitates the incorporation of xiqu performance techniques of movement, singing, and props that are aimed at the externalization of emotion and feeling. At the same time, the introduction of adapted texts into Chinese performance repertoires helps expand these forms’ expressive possibilities and thematic content.

By shifting the focus to *qing*, the adapted scripts and their performance allow for fuller engagement of xiqu performance techniques, including the presentational principle of *xieyi* (写意, writing meaning). Distinct from representational verisimilitude, *xieyi* seeks to convey the essence of things rather than to imitate their exact form. Elizabeth Wichmann, in *Listening to Theatre: The Aural Dimension of Beijing Opera*, writes, “It is through the display of skills, externalizing the thoughts and feelings of major characters and elaborating upon their actions and interactions, that Beijing opera performance transcends a resemblance to life and builds an overall effect that conveys its essence” (1991:2). Thus, xiqu adaptations replace naturalistic aesthetics with the aesthetics of *xieyi*, often introducing imagery and sentimental exploration not evident in the original.

Often, some of the original scripts’ nuances are lost in this process of shifting from naturalist-inspired spoken drama to *xieyi*-inspired xiqu. For *Zhuli xiaojie*, what is lost includes some complexity in the portrayal of class and gender relations, and in the verbal articulation of psychological conflict. In *Xin bi tian gao*, Hedda’s coldness and preoccupation with reputation are replaced by personal ambition and a more conventional longing for past romance. New depth, however, is gained in both adaptations through a plumbing of the affective expressiveness of the xiqu body, including the use of props, music, and movement to enact character and plot development.

Xiqu has been described as sumptuously visual, a genre that delights audiences, particularly non-Chinese, with its exoticism, color, and stunts. This focus on the spectacular often produces “positive stereotyping” and generates interest in xiqu (Huang 2009:175). However, it also leads to the misunderstanding that xiqu, as a more embodied and visual form, is less capable of conveying complex plots and characters than theatre that relies more on verbal expression, such as spoken drama. “It is unfortunate that the ideological investments in Chinese opera’s visuality have turned xiqu into a system of signification antithetical to *huaju* [spoken drama]<sup>12</sup> and verbalization” (176). Thus, a focus on the visual and bodily elements of xiqu has sometimes perpetuated the devaluation of Asian theatre forms and embodied performance. “The idea of a

11. 情 Sometimes also translated as “love” (see Birch 1995:142).

12. *Huaju* refers to Western realistic theatre introduced to China in the early 20th century. Chinese playwrights and theatre artists have extensively developed *huaju*, and most Chinese adaptations of Western drama in China appear in this form. For a history of spoken drama in China, see Chen (2010).

necessarily Asian visuality is implicated in a hierarchical view informed by an ideology of the print that puts spectacles to the service of textual elucidation” (231).

To move beyond a notion of “Asian visuality” as spectacle requires recognizing the signifying capacity of the xiqu body. Thus, by focusing on the physical, I do not seek to reinscribe the hierarchy ranking the verbal over the visual, nor do I seek to reverse this hierarchy. Rather, by exploring the signification and artistry of the xiqu body in intercultural performance, I want to show how in these adaptations of Western dramas the xiqu body signifies, means, and moves in ways that textual and verbal modes of performance often do not; that something is gained—not lost—through the adaptation process, specifically the added meanings made possible through engagement of the xiqu body.

In the adaptations discussed here, new meanings and affects are generated through the focus on qing and through the interconnected engagement of the multiple channels of xiqu performance technique. The trained body of the xiqu actor employs costumes, props, music, and movement in a virtuosic display that is not only spectacular but also moving and meaningful. In the transformation from drama to xiqu, textual meanings are not “translated” into spectacle, as Alex Huang warns, but rather are reformed to produce new theatrical effects (Huang 2009:181).

In xiqu adaptations of Western dramas, new meanings are created and affective impacts are generated through stylized xiqu bodily performance techniques that engage the senses on multiple levels. Adaptations make possible an understanding and appreciation of Chinese aesthetics and culture not only through “ocular proof” (Huang 2009:168) of Asian visuality, but through a demonstration of the immense theatrical and expressive power of the multidimensional xiqu body.

## Qing in Chinese Performance

Qing has been a dominant feature of indigenous Chinese performance since at least the 16th century, and possibly before. One of the earliest known writings on *yuewu* (乐舞), the mixed music, poetry, and dance form that dominated early Chinese court-sponsored performance,<sup>13</sup> states that in its most basic definition *yuewu* expresses “movements of the human heart” which result from “stirrings of emotion and sentiment.”<sup>14</sup> By the late Qing and Republican eras (late 18th to mid-20th centuries), a “cult of *qing*” dominated Chinese elite literary and artistic culture. Qing was the focus of aesthetic connoisseurship (Lee 2007).

At its most basic, qing means sentiment, feeling, or love. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), sentimental love stories staged in the southern xiqu form of *kunju*, or Kun opera, was the most popular style among Chinese elites (Dolby 1976; Mackerras 1983; and Birch 1995). In *Peony Pavilion* (c. 1598)—the most representative work of Kun opera—qing can be felt in the passionate scenes of lovers meeting in gardens and in dreams, in the slow death and loneliness of their anguished pining, and in their happy reunion when love overcomes death.<sup>15</sup> Although translated as “sentiment,” “feeling,” “passion,” or “love,” qing in these performances is a broad category that “includes empathy, devotion, [and] the virtues of that broader love that exists also outside the sexual relationship” (Birch 1995:142). Apart from love and sentiment, qing also means “interpersonal relations,” even in some cases national sentiment (Goldstein 2007:138). In his account of the reinvention of *jingju* in the early 20th century, Joshua Goldstein argues that qing, as it was used by Chinese intellectuals and critics at the time, came to mean the sentimental human relations that bind a community. When they wrote about and performed qing in

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13. For a general history of Chinese dance, see Wang (1985).

14. The line, which begins “凡音之起，由人心生也...” in the *Record of Music* (*Yueji*), is quoted and explained in Long, Xu, and Ou (1999:60).

15. For an analysis of qing in *Peony Pavilion* see Birch (1995).



Republican-era jingju therefore, Chinese xiqu critics and actors also conveyed a sentimental or emotional feeling that could “inspire the coalescence of a nation” (2007:139). The connection between qing and human relations can be traced to Confucian codes of interpersonal ethics in which human emotion cannot be separated from social connectedness (Lee 2007).

Qing remains an important feature of indigenous performance in China. In her account of women’s yueju or Yue opera in 20th-century Shanghai, Jin Jiang argues that the focus on qing, defined as “[h]uman feelings’ (*renqing*), and ‘affection,’ ‘passion,’ or ‘sentiment’ (*ganqing*),” was the main reason for the extreme popularity of Yue opera, its impact on the film industry, and the development of a powerful star system composed of well-known female Yue opera performers (2009:217). While romantic love was officially taboo in the revolutionary “model opera” jingju of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), qing nevertheless remained central in its expression as political passion and national kinship (Judd 1991; Chen 2002; Roberts 2010). During my fieldwork in Chinese dance and theatre conservatories between 2007 and 2012, I found that teachers and critics alike cited qing as the most important goal of indigenous Chinese performance arts.



Figure 2. Liu Lu as Julie (Zhuli) and Qin Hao as Jean (Xiang Qiang) in *Zhuli xiaojie* (Miss Julie), at Shanghai Theatre Academy, 10 January 2012. (Courtesy of Zhao Qun)

## Adapting for the Xiqu Body in *Miss Julie*

In Sun and Fei’s jingju version of *Miss Julie*, the changes made in the final scene of *Zhuli xiaojie* demonstrate how a shift to qing allows for a full engagement of the xiqu body. This is the scene in which Jean kills Julie’s pet bird and she weeps over its death. The scene unfolds on the morning after a local holiday, and Julie, whose father is a member of the gentry, is distraught over having drunk too much the night before and having had sex with Jean, her father’s valet. Julie’s father is due to return home anytime, and Julie, Jean, and Christine (Jean’s fiancée, the cook) are determining what to do. Jean suggests he and Julie run away and open an inn together. Julie, preparing to leave, has packed her bird to take along.

In Strindberg’s version, Jean asks Julie to leave the bird behind, and Julie protests. “I’d rather you killed it,” she says. Jean chops the bird’s head off. Enraged, Julie curses Jean. A long conversation ensues between Julie and Christine, later joined by Jean who had snuck away after decapitating the bird. Finally, Julie asks Jean to play the role of master and tell her, as though she were a servant, what to do. Jean hands Julie a razor, saying, “It’s awful, but there’s no other way out.” Julie leaves and the play ends (Strindberg 1888).<sup>16</sup>

In *Zhuli xiaojie*, Sun and Fei have significantly altered the scene, cutting out almost all of the dialogue and centering the dramatic action on the bird’s death and Julie’s response to it. To contrast with Julie’s outsized grief over her pet bird, Jean is depicted as someone rougher and

16. All quotes from Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* are from the Modern Library Online version (Strindberg 1888).

more violent than in Strindberg's play. However, the complexity of Jean's servant psychology is not lost. Indeed, it is in some ways more moving and tragic in the jingju production. In Jean's frantic bodily responses to the imminence of Julie's father's appearance, as well as to Jean's change of costume (from valet uniform to travel clothes), one sees the stark contrast between Jean's fear driving him to "do something" and Julie's ambivalence. As Julie indulges in her own emotions Jean loses control over his own actions. Following the last line, ("Go cry a river to your dead bird!"), the scene unfolds as follows: Julie is downstage weeping when Jean reappears from the wings and joins Julie beside the bird. From offstage, Christine suddenly calls out, "Master is coming!" Jean and Julie both perceptibly jump with shock, looking right at the audience, their faces freeze in exaggerated, even comical, looks of surprise. Jean holds both hands out with fingers spread and shakes them in the air, a jingju gesture indicating anxiety or concern. "Master is coming? It's before dawn," Julie says. "Is Master really coming?" asks Jean. "Master is coming!" Christine repeats, then, "Maids, guards, everyone, come, serve Master!"

Jean, who has been wearing an elegant coat over his clothes, suddenly removes the coat and casts the robe onto the floor. His previous swaggering posture of condescension deflates as he scurries haphazardly about the stage. Jean says nothing, but his movements convey a shift from his domineering relationship to Julie to his cringing, subservient relationship to her father. At the same time, he shows his inner resentment of those who control him.

Seemingly unable to make up his mind, Jean picks up the coat he has just thrown on the floor and tries frantically to put it back on. The coat is inside out, and his hands shake wildly. He is trembling so strongly that the robe shakes in the air. He cannot control his movements sufficiently to get his arm through the sleeve. Finally, he ties the robe around his waist, kneels on the floor, and then quickly stands up again to rush offstage, abjectly calling, "Welcome home, Master! You must be tired, Master!"

Meanwhile, Julie forgetting about her father, turns her bejeweled head and painted face to the place on the floor where Skylark's corpse lies.<sup>17</sup> A gong sounds. She is alone onstage. She kneels over her bird, lifts her head slowly toward the audience, and sings, "Outside the day is dawning, inside my heart is drowning." As she enunciates each word, her lips and teeth remain almost motionless, a *xiqu* convention.<sup>18</sup> Her eyes are open wide, and her hand, placed delicately in the orchid position, the standard hand position for female characters in indigenous Chinese theatre,<sup>19</sup> rests just in front of the bodice of her delicately embroidered gown. Julie's sorrow appears to deepen, as she slowly draws out each syllable of the song, until her song becomes a wail. She unbuckles the neck clasp on her cape, removes it, and places it carefully over the bird's body.

"Skylark, oh, Skylark: your singsong days are cut short, I'm left behind utterly bereft." Julie tries to stand, but her legs tremble. Her right hand is raised, and with her left she pulls the right sleeve across in front of her chest in the weeping gesture. As she stretches the syllables even longer than before, her song rises in pitch, reaching an emotional climax. Scooping up the bird's tiny body in her cape, Julie neatly folds the cape as if wrapping it around the bird, creating a small package. She cups this casket-package in her hand, pulling it close to her chest.

Turning to the audience, Julie walks in a slow, lilting step<sup>20</sup> toward a chair upstage.<sup>21</sup> She bends and places the wrapped bird onstage behind the chair, then tips the chair back to form a

17. As a refined female character, Julie wears a head ornament covered in flowers and glittering beads, and hair is piled high on her head with two small pigtails hanging down under her ears. Her face is painted white with pink around the eyes, and her eyes and eyebrows are lined dramatically in black.

18. In *xiqu*, singers keep their mouths partially open while they sing but do not open them fully as in Western opera.

19. In this position, the thumb and middle fingers are pressed in, and the index and pinky fingers are delicately raised and hyperextended.

20. This walking style is characteristic of refined female figures in *xiqu* productions.

21. Traditionally, *xiqu* is performed on an empty stage with only a table and two chairs.



grave.<sup>22</sup> Standing in front of the small grave, Julie begins to dance. She turns, swirling her long sleeves over her head, and after repeating the previous line, sings, “Julie, oh, Julie: How can you bear such cowardice? How can you bear such despair?” The tempo of her singing slows. The gong sounds again, and she throws her sleeves horizontally to both sides in a familiar water-sleeve gesture, then drops to the floor. Staring blankly toward the audience, Julie suddenly gasps and her body deflates. Stretching her right hand, trembling and covered with the sleeve, she reaches forward toward the front of the stage. Through the applause that usually erupts from the audience at this point, she sings her final lines:

How can you bear such melancholy?  
How can you bear such absurdity?  
Night’s over but there is no light,  
I’m following Skylark in her flight.

Her right hand shaking, Julie fixes her eyes out toward the audience. A bell sounds. A spotlight shines stage center, in front of the chair-grave. Julie walks to the light, stands under it, and turns her face to look upward into the light. She raises her right hand slowly upward. All is silent except for the bell repeating its chime. After circling once in place, Julie stops with her back to the audience and bends backward until her face appears upside down to the spectators. Her right arm is splayed out to the side and her left is bent over her chest, as her inverted eyes peer at the spectators. Her body rotates in a slow-motion fanshen turn, continues twisting and lowers, spiraling, into a coiled seated position.<sup>23</sup> Her sleeves, drooped on the floor, form a circle around her. Her whole body is white in the glaring light, and she lowers her head to the floor, body twisted, looking upward.

Silence.

The lights gradually dim. The high-pitched sound of a *suona*, a Chinese horn used in village celebrations, accompanied by gongs and drums, is heard in the distance. Jean and Christine emerge solemnly from opposite sides of the stage, each wearing a red silk sash. They walk slowly side by side to Julie’s body, turn to face each other, and walk backward in opposite directions. Each holding one end of a long red ribbon with a red flower knot tied at the center, they stretch the ribbon between them, forming a horizontal red line over Julie’s body. Without speaking, they release the ribbon and it flutters to the floor, landing like a pool of blood across Julie’s body. Jean and Christine bow toward one another and the lights go out. The words “The End” flash on the screen.

## The Expressivity of Codes

When describing the embodied culture of xiqu and the ways in which its distinctive performance techniques contribute to the intercultural stage, Sun and Fei use the terms “extra-expressivity” or “super-expressivity.” Unlike method acting, which uses mimetic devices and naturalistic techniques to imitate real interactions, xiqu uses a codified and highly stylized performance repertoire that although not imitative of life, they argue, is highly capable of expressing the essence of real experiences and of producing dramatic effects. “Few words [are] necessary, but the characters [are] rendered very expressively, thanks to stylized patterns of the character types” (Fei and Sun 2006:129). In contrast to naturalistic techniques such as method acting, xiqu techniques allow actors to “define characters more sharply and render feelings more

22. In xiqu objects frequently signify other things, and the actor’s movements can transform them instantly from one thing to another.

23. This seated *woniu* or “snail” position, the backbend, and the fanshen spin are all choreographic elements common to xiqu. They demonstrate the actress’s professional skills of balance, flexibility, and precision and convey her refined character, while adding to the kinesthetic intensity of her performance.

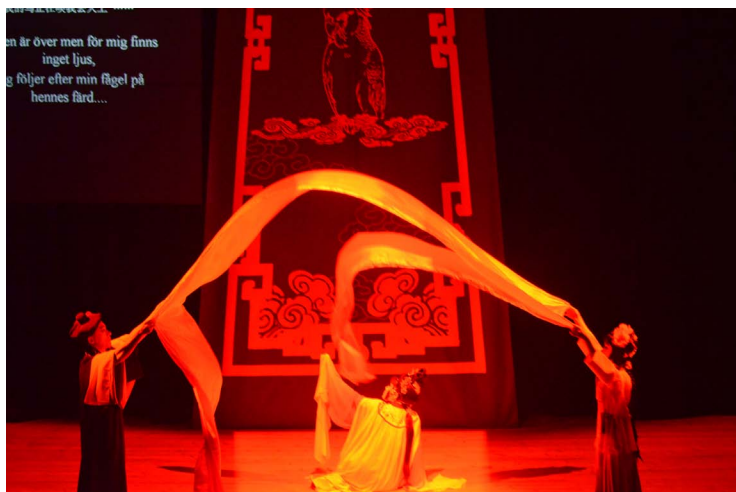


Figure 3. Qin Hao as Jean (Xiang Qiang), Liu Lu as Julie (Zhuli), and Yu Bowen as Christine (Gui Sidi) in *Zhuli xiaojie* (Miss Julie), directed by Zhao Qun. Shanghai Theatre Academy, 10 January 2012. (Courtesy of Zhao Qun)

strongly,” producing scenes that are “longer, more elaborate, and more heart-wrenching” (130).<sup>24</sup>

The distinction that Sun and Fei make between mimetic and stylistic techniques echoes long-standing aesthetic debates about what makes xiqu distinctive. Qi Rushan, a leading Chinese drama expert of the 1920s, argued that the defining feature of xiqu is its use of aestheticized, rather than realistic means of representation. If a performance calls for a character to drink a cup of tea, for example, xiqu would never require the actor to actually imbibe liquid onstage. Instead, he or she would carry out a prescribed set of symbolic actions, such as holding a cup near one’s

mouth with a hand covering the rim.<sup>25</sup> In xiqu performances, characters open doors by miming in the air, indicate beheaded villains using balls wrapped in red cloth, and ride horses by waving a rope-fringe wand (Zung 1937). Crying never produces real tears but instead conveys sadness through stylized uses of voice, gaze, posture, costume, and gesture (Wichmann 1991:3).

In *Zhuli xiaojie*, xiqu performance techniques are used throughout. Because the performers who play Julie, Jean, and Christine are all professionally trained jingju actors, their technical mastery of the xiqu body allows for a robust use of codified techniques in their conversions of Strindberg’s characters into xiqu role types. Julie is performed as a *qingyi* or high-status young female, Jean as a *xiaosheng* or young man, and Christine as *huadan* or low-status young female. While Julie is played by a female actor, Christine is played by a male actor in the cross-dressing style that dominated jingju performance during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas in Strindberg’s version of the play, the class distinctions between Jean and Julie are complicated—Julie’s mother is not an aristocrat and Jean possibly was born an aristocrat but had then fallen into servitude—in *Zhuli xiaojie* the differences in social status between the three characters are extremely clear. The switching of roles in the final scene of Strindberg’s play—Julie asks Jean to act as her master and order her to commit suicide—is not in *Zhuli xiaojie*. In fact, the long conversation in the final scene between Julie, Jean, and to some extent Christine in Strindberg’s play is almost completely cut, replaced by Julie’s aria and dance.

24. The idea of super-expressivity emerged in dialogue with Eugenio Barba’s notion of “pre-expressivity,” which they found useful but problematic for conceptualizing Chinese performance.

25. For an overview of Qi Rushan’s theory of aestheticism in Chinese drama, see Goldstein (2007:150–59).

26. Jingju, which developed in Beijing in the mid-19th century, was an all-male form through the early 20th century, when famous male actors like Mei Lanfang became well known as men who played female roles. Although jingju has, since the mid-20th century, been performed by male and female actors, a revival of male actors playing female roles has taken place since the 1980s. The casting of a cross-dressing performer for Christine but not for Julie makes innovative use of gender performance contrast and experimentation with role-types to express class difference. For a cultural history of Beijing opera, see Goldstein (2007).

Some of the details of Strindberg's dialogue are lost in the adaptation to xiqu. The most obvious is how the feminist views of Julie's mother impacted Julie's upbringing. This is never mentioned in *Zhuli xiaojie*. Nevertheless, Strindberg's critique of class division is in some ways made even more moving by the contrast between the two characters as conveyed through xiqu role types, as well as their emotional responses in the climactic final scene.

The contrast between Jean's and Julie's responses to their predicaments, and the relationship between these responses and the very different social backgrounds of the two characters, is a major theme of Strindberg's play. In 1914, Emma Goldman wrote:

When Jean kills the bird which Julie wants to rescue from the ruins of her life, it is not so much out of real cruelty, as it is because the character of Jean was molded in the relentless school of necessity, in which only those survive who have the determination to act in time of danger. For as Jean says, "Miss Julie, I see that you are unhappy, I know that you are suffering, but I cannot understand you. Among my kind there is no nonsense of this sort. We love as we play—when work gives us time. We haven't the whole day and night for it as you." Here we have the key to the psychology of the Julie type, of the utter helplessness and weakness; and to the brutality of Jean's character type. The one is the result of an empty life of parasitic leisure, of a useless, purposeless existence; the other shows the effects of too little time for development, for maturity and depth, of too much toil to permit the growth of the finer traits in the human soul. ([1914] 2005:30–31)

In *Zhuli xiaojie* this contrast between two "kinds" of people is seen, heard, and felt through the different body language inherent to the different role types of Julie and Jean. Julie's small, lilting steps, delicate orchid hands, curving backbone, melodious singing, and flowing silk sleeves are all part of the qingyi repertory of body techniques that are accentuated by her sparkling head ornaments, finely embroidered gown, and graceful facial makeup. Jean and Christine, by contrast, have fewer singing lines, and what they do sing is relatively rough, without the elongated syllables and extended tone and range. Their clothing is less ornamented, with shorter sleeves and fewer layers. As in Strindberg's play, Jean belongs to a role type that is somewhere in between Julie's and Christine's. This ambivalence of Jean's character can be seen in his physical behavior in *Zhuli xiaojie*, which at times makes him similar to Julie and at others similar to Christine. When Jean puts on his work robe, he has the elongated sleeves that indicate wealth and refinement, yet his and Christine's everyday clothes lack sleeve extensions. Whereas Christine's movements, speech, and use of props are frequently comical and clown-like in their exaggeration, even for the stylized xiqu aesthetic, Jean's are more serious and sober, more like Julie's. However, both Jean and Christine display acrobatic elements such as tumbling and high kicks, while Julie's movements are graceful and demure, even when technically difficult.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the visual and kinetic expressions of class distinction made possible with the use of codified role types, Julie and Jean's different classed sensibilities are also explored in *Zhuli xiaojie* through the elaboration of qing. One of the most important techniques for this aspect of the adaptation is the use of props.

## The Power of Props

The contrast between Julie and Jean's social backgrounds, as seen through their different emotional responses to adversity, is especially clear in the ways they combine movement, song, costumes, and props in the final scene. Here there are two immediate sources of adversity: Jean killing Julie's bird and Julie's father returning home. In Strindberg's play, Julie's response to

27. For an outline and description of the major role types, including their use of singing, props, and movement, see Wichmann (1991:7–12).

the bird's death is similar at first to that in *Zhuli xiaojie*, but soon the two versions diverge. In Strindberg:

Julie. [Shrieking.] Kill me too, kill me! If you can kill an innocent animal without your hand shaking! Oh, I hate and loathe you! There is blood between us! I curse the hour in which I saw you! I curse the hour in which I was born!

In *Zhuli xiaojie*, Julie's response turns almost immediately to grief, with her attention focused on the bird, at times even addressing it by name. In Strindberg, Julie stares briefly at the bird, never shedding a tear over it. While the bird's death clearly produces an emotional response, as evidenced by Julie's shrieking, staring at the chopping block, and increasingly accusatory language, her tone never takes on the sad solemnity that is portrayed in *Zhuli xiaojie*. In Strindberg's version, what Goldman calls Julie's "utter helplessness and weakness" is expressed through Julie's verbal attack on Jean:

Do you think I can't look at any blood? Do you think I'm so weak? Oh! I'd just like to see your blood and your brains on the chopping block. I'd like to see your whole stock swimming in a lake, like the one there. I believe I could drink out of your skull! I could wash my feet in your chest! I could eat your heart roasted! You think I am weak! You think I love you!

Here, Julie's character takes on a savage and threatening tone that she does not have in the final scene of *Zhuli xiaojie*, where she is more pathetic than enraged.

To accommodate the aesthetic style of the qingyi, which is refined, sentimental, and delicate, Sun and Fei choose to convert anger into sadness. Rather than producing a climactic conflict through the escalation of Julie's rage, fear, and self-doubt, as in Strindberg's play, they instead create the conflict first through Jean's violent killing of the bird and then through Julie's long, drawn-out weeping as she buries the bird. While in *Zhuli xiaojie* there is little direct interaction between Jean and Julie after the bird's death, there is a jarring contrast between Julie's focus on her pet while Jean is running back and forth preparing to greet the returned master. Apart from highlighting Julie's social condition of having "an empty life of parasitic leisure," this staging allows the audience to sympathize with Julie's plight in a way that is difficult to feel in Strindberg's play.

Having the drama of the final scene unfold in song and dance rather than in dialogue allows for an expressive and more focal use of costume, in particular sleeves, to convey qing. Manipulation of sleeves is a rigorous technique central to all xiqu performers' professional training, and some argue that it is the most important of all dramatic actions in xiqu performance.<sup>28</sup> Sleeve actions form what Joshua Goldstein calls "a subtle language of emotional expression," conveying the character's sentimental inner world and relation to others:

[Sleeves] can swirl with abandon to express joy; they can serve as handkerchiefs to mop up tears or droop to the floor like a physical manifestation of an inner despair; hanging like a curtain besides a woman's cheek, they can convey her flirtatious modesty or allow her to furtively declare her inner thoughts in an aside unbeknownst to other characters on stage [...] (2007:183)

Because Julie is portrayed as a qingyi and the scene is changed to provide a long solo aria full of sad sentiment, the actor playing Julie is able to fully use the emotional language of the sleeves, both in conveying the immediate subject of Julie's song (the bird's death) and the more abstract themes of her social demise, her hopelessness, and the lack of fulfillment in her

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28. "From the saying, 'the longer the sleeves, the better the dance,' we can easily see why sleeve movements are the most important of all dramatic actions [in indigenous Chinese theatre]" (Zung [1937] 1964:77).

life. At the same time, Julie's distracted sentimentalism serves as an effective contrast to Jean's nervous practicality.

The style in which Julie conveys qing is consistent with the xieyi style of xiqu expression. She does not shed tears, snuffle, moan, or pound her fists on the floor as someone in the throes of similar emotions might in life.<sup>29</sup> Instead, in typical xiqu fashion, she conveys the essence of the emotions using codified sleeve actions and singing techniques. The "weeping sleeve"—a hand held close to the face with the sleeve dangling down—conveys crying, while elongated syllables and warbled pronunciation imbue her songs with melancholy tones.

Through a series of super-expressive movements, Julie also conveys her emotional ruminations kinesthetically: she physically deflates, bows, bends forward onto the ground, falls on her knees, stares blankly, and trembles. While some of these movements resemble reactions a person might have in the process of mourning, overall they convey Julie's emotions in an aestheticized way—like the deep backbend, during which she gazes upside down at the audience and conveys the total spiritual brokenness that consumes her and leads her to suicide. Although no weapon is used, Julie's death is suggested when she coils to the ground under white light and the stillness that follows. The red silk scarf that Jean and Christine drop over Julie's body could be interpreted as an aestheticized expression of her spilled blood.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most ingenious adaptations in the final scene of *Zhuli xiaojie* is that of Jean's livery, or work coat. In Strindberg's play, the livery serves as a significant metaphor for Jean's contradictory predicament: aspiring to social mobility while being caught in a situation that makes such mobility impossible. In Strindberg's text, Julie refers to the livery as a symbol of Jean's servitude to her father. "You, who wear my livery, you menial, who wear my arms on your buttons," she yells during her diatribe after Jean murders her bird. Jean, too, refers to the livery as a material reminder of servitude. "It's the livery which I've got on my back," he says, "I believe if the Count were to come in now and order me to cut my throat I'd do it on the spot."

In *Zhuli xiaojie*, Jean's work livery is replaced by a different but equally significant garment. In the climactic final scene, Jean appears wearing a sleeved gown that is obviously too sophisticated for his servant status. He has borrowed the gown from his master and is wearing it as a kind of make-believe; the gown represents his futile desire for upward mobility. Though never referred to in the character's lines, the gown serves as a signifying prop in *Zhuli xiaojie*, one that visually and kinetically conveys Jean's conflicted identity through techniques of super-expressive acting.

At the beginning of the scene, Jean appears wearing the high-status garment, and he displays dominance over Julie by killing her bird, laughing at her, and insulting her. Throughout this segment, Jean's movements draw from the movement repertory of commanding xiqu roles such as old men and military figures—his legs and arms are widely splayed, and he stands squarely to the audience. At one point, he even stands on a chair to increase his appearance of power. Wearing the gown and embodying the movements and postures of higher status roles allows the audience to see Jean as he wishes to see himself. Just before killing the bird, Jean executes a series of powerful and impressive movements such as high leg lifts, and he sings about his ambition to become wealthy, respected, and independent. As soon as Christine announces the return of the Father, however, Jean's comportment changes. He suddenly evokes the posture of servitude, and this is the moment when he casts the coat off.

Jean's physical shift from dominance to servitude as he disrobes is viscerally jarring, as is his struggle to re-robe before going out to greet his master. His frantic attempts to put on the

29. See the discussion of the aesthetics of jingju tears in Wichmann (1991:3).

30. The significance of colors in the last scene, according to director Zhao Qun, has multiple possible interpretations. However, white is a traditional color of death in China. The red scarf may also be interpreted as an indication of Jean and Christine's marriage, or as a reference to class struggle (Zhao 2012).

coat as his hands shake and his body trembles conveys super-expressively Jean's inner turmoil and ultimate recognition that he cannot escape the tyranny of social roles. In Strindberg's version, Jean never achieves a clearly dominating position in relation to Julie, as he does in Sun and Fei's version when he kills her bird. In Strindberg's version, Julie asks Jean to kill the bird for her. Thus, while Sun and Fei's choice in their adaptation reduces some of the complexity in Jean and Julie's relationship, it also makes possible a more vivid portrayal of their differences through its bodily depiction of Jean's servant class status. In both cases, Jean ultimately becomes a pitiful figure, as does Julie, despite the fact that the two stories develop the characters in different ways.

*Miss Julie* is often read as a realist tragedy on the theme of class antagonism, in which the psychological complexity of class enculturation is seen especially clearly in Jean. In the jingju adaptation of *Miss Julie*, the characters of Christine and Julie take on more prominent roles. Two of the most compelling scenes are those in which Christine is tormented at hearing Jean and Julie in the bedroom and, the one discussed here, the final scene in which Julie expresses her despair over Skylark's death. Neither of these scenes is in Strindberg's script. These interpolations are possible because the work has been adapted successfully for the xiqu body, allowing for what xiqu does best—the externalization of qing, through the careful coordination of movement, words, song, costume, and props.

## The Body in Performance

Limited dialogue in xiqu makes extended verbal development of themes uncommon. In Julie's final aria, the narrative weight of what in Strindberg's drama is a long and complex dialogue hangs on brief, abstract lines, such as "Outside the day is dawning / Inside my heart is drowning." *Miss Julie* deals with the theme of the immutability of social class—what Emma Goldman calls "the vicious brutality, the boundless injustice of rank" ([1914] 2005:27). Strindberg's script makes extensive use of language games in which the characters reflect on their own class positions and the theme of changing roles. "Then just do as though you were he, and I were you," Julie says to Jean during the final scene in Strindberg's script. "Have you ever been to the theatre and seen the hypnotist? He says to the one hypnotized, 'Take the broom'; he takes it; he says 'Sweep,' and he sweeps."

How are abstract ideas, such as the immutability of social class, and complex images, such as the one Julie paints of the hypnotist above, conveyed through the highly physical performance of xiqu? More than a question about xiqu, this is a question about the expressive capacity of the body as a medium of performance.

It is clear that the body, through the technical repertory of xiqu, is capable of conveying abstract ideas. Examining just a single scene of one work, it is possible to see bodily performance techniques being harnessed on multiple levels to convey complex themes, including psychological character development, nuanced reflections on class and gender relations, and metaphorical relationships between objects, meanings, and people. The system of character types provides a coherent aesthetic system of coded movements and stylized physicalities for reflecting on class, gender, and social position. By rendering Julie as a qingyi, audiences are able to recognize her gender and social position and to comprehend the meaning of her bodily movements when she varies from this style, uses it to convey particular classed or gendered meanings, or uses it reflexively. Much like an accent or rhetorical style, the movement style used by xiqu performers conveys information about the character's social position and serves as a tool for reflecting on this position and its changeability.

In an early scene in *Zhuli xiaojie*, Julie and Jean use the props of a lion's head and a red silk ribbon to create a memorable choreographic image of role reversal, pursuit, and desire. As in the verbal analogy of the hypnotist, Jean and Julie change roles and experiment with inversions of their class status. The result, like that created with Jean's robing and disrobing in the final scene, is a reflection on one of the basic themes of the play—the immutability of rank and class. In both cases the meanings are created physically rather than verbally.



Of course, not all the details of Strindberg's text are preserved in the xiqu adaptation. The setting of *Zhuli xiaojie*, for example, is a remote village in rural China before the existence of the People's Republic. In *Zhuli xiaojie*, it is Julie who entices Jean into the bedroom, whereas in Strindberg's play it is the other way around. The festival crowd that enters the servants' quarters and creates a commotion in Strindberg's script is replaced in the Sun and Fei version with a solo dance by Christine. Without musical accompaniment or singing, Christine uses sexually inflected movements to convey the excitement and inappropriateness of Julie and Jean's lovemaking. This scene is a turning point conveyed completely through bodily performance. Here, the physicality of xiqu not only creates a spectacle but advances the narrative and generates meaning.

Appreciating xiqu performance and its expressive potential requires spectators to shift from focusing on language to focusing on the body as the medium of expression and meaning-making. As dance scholar Susan Foster has pointed out, the problem with the body in performance is not that it does not produce meaning or generate impact, but, rather, that these meanings and impacts are ignored. She defines choreography as "structured movement practices" to orient performance scholars to the significance and impact of the body in performance (1998:10). Choreography includes the ways in which the structured movement practices of bodies in performance exist within larger social contexts. Paying attention to choreography means attending to the way bodies cite one another, the ways they are molded and shaped in social interactions, and the affective impact they have on spectators.

Attendance to choreography in intercultural performance is particularly difficult because it requires knowledge of choreographies in several cultural systems. To attend choreographically to the xiqu body in *Zhuli xiaojie*, one needs to understand the coded gestures of xiqu movement as well as the subtleties of role type, prop significance, and the qualities of xiqu music. To describe effectively the body in xiqu performance demands a culturally embedded terminology, often using words that have no equivalent in the language of the foreigner. Most important, it requires visual, aural, and kinesthetic senses that have been trained and tuned so that one can see, hear, feel, and comprehend the impact of the performance as it unfolds. Finally, understanding and feeling the impact of embodied expression in xiqu requires attending to physicality and auality not merely as spectacle but as modes of signification and psychological exploration.

## Rewriting Ibsen

### Adapting for the Xiqu Body in *Hedda Gabler*

The super-expressive use of props, costume, movement, and music, as well as the focus on qing are also significant in Sun and Fei's adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, called in Mandarin *Xin bi tian gao* (Hedda or Aspiration Sky High). Premiered in 2006, *Xin bi tian gao* was the first of Sun and Fei's series of xiqu adaptations of Western dramas. Created in collaboration with the Hangzhou Yue Opera Company of Hangzhou, *Xin bi tian gao* has an entirely female cast.<sup>31</sup>

Toward the end of the play, Haida (Hedda) burns Wenbo's (Lovborg's) unpublished manuscript.<sup>32</sup> The book-burning scene is the emotional climax of Haida's inner conflict. It is also the scene in which the audience realizes, through an intensely dramatic solo dance-aria, the depth of Haida's desperation and jealousy.

31. Hangzhou is located about two hours from Shanghai, and it is part of the regional and cultural sphere of Shanghai/Zhejiang-style Yue opera, a traditionally all-female form. For a historical study of Shanghai Yue opera, see Jiang (2009).

32. I first saw *Xin bi tian gao* live in Hangzhou in a blackbox theatre as part of the January 2012 Shanghai Theatre Academy Winter Institute (Hangzhou Yue Opera Company 2012). My descriptions here are based on a video of the fully staged version. As with *Zhuli xiaojie*, a post-performance discussion took place with Sun and the artists after the show, for which I served as the interpreter. For a website with details on *Xin bi tian gao*, including photos, see the Ibsen in China website (He 2008).



Figure 4. Haida (Zhou Yujun) and Wenbo (Xu Ming) in *Xin bi tian gao* (*Hedda or Aspiration Sky High*) by William Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei, directed by Zhi Tao and Zhan Min. Hangzhou Grand Theatre, 15 January 2012. (Courtesy of Hou Jun, Hangzhou Yue Opera Company)

The scene begins after Wenbo has just come to Haida looking for his lost manuscript, and Haida sends him away with a sword in hand, but no manuscript. During their conversation about the “lost” manuscript—which in fact is tucked in the sleeve of Haida’s red gown—Wenbo admits his commitment to Xiya (Thea), saying that the manuscript is his and Xiya’s “heart and soul” and “child” (Fei and Sun 2012a).<sup>33</sup> Haida, upset by Wenbo’s admission, gives Wenbo one of the pair of “lover’s swords” (*yuanyang jian*)—of which they had one each—and sends him off with the cryptic message, “Swords have no eyes. Take care.” While Wenbo is leaving, Haida turns away from him and looks defiantly at the audience. But the moment after Wenbo’s departure, Haida’s expression breaks down. Her lips quiver, her eyebrows furrow, and she lifts her hand to cover her face with the sleeve of her gown. She turns and runs in the direction of Wenbo’s departure, then stops at the doorway and reaches her hand out in his direction. After pausing for a few seconds, Haida

turns slowly and faces the audience again, a blank stare frozen on her face. She steps slowly backward, saying, to herself: “It’s Xiya and his future, not mine. It’s Xiya and his fame, not mine.” As she speaks, her voice wavers, and she pulls the manuscript out from her sleeve. Staring at the manuscript in her left hand, she drops her right sleeve over her arm and pulls it caressingly across her left wrist. Tears fill her eyes.

“Not mine, not mine, not mine!” Haida repeats as she stares at the manuscript, each time with increasing intensity and rising pitch. Suddenly, as the onstage orchestra sounds a frantic strumming of the pipa (Chinese guitar) and zither (Chinese harp), Haida tosses her long red silk sleeve into the air. She runs in a circle around the stage, the music seeming to chase her. At last, she pauses, stands still and faces the audience as the orchestra goes silent. She stares forward, not speaking. Then, the whine of a lone erhu (two-stringed Chinese fiddle) sounds. Holding her hand at her heart, Haida sings:

33. All quotes from *Xin bi tian gao* are from Sun and Fei (2012a). As in *Zhuli xiaojie*, the performance is sung in Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles (Sun and Fei 2012b).

Such remorse! Such hatred!  
Wenbo used to be mine.  
Our hearts did entwine.  
Anxious, as he would not reform,  
never would I wish him any harm.  
I am completely heart-broken [...]

Her sadness turns to jealousy: “Why am I not the one that you love? Why can’t I share your moment in the sun?” Suddenly Wenbo’s voice is audible from offstage, as if in Haida’s head, echoing, “It is Xiya’s and my heart and soul. It’s our child. Witness to our commitment, fruit of our affection.” As she hears this, Haida shakes her head back and forth, her eyes moving from side to side. Raising her sleeve to her cheek, she begins to weep, and the orchestra plays again, strumming loudly. Haida spins in place and her sleeve flies through the air.

Haida gathers her sleeve into her hand, the music stops, and Haida again stands facing the audience. “What about me?” she says. Then, almost screaming, “Where is mine?” A look of desperation fills her eyes. “Witness? Fruit? Child?” she says, her breathing becoming more audible. Haida clutches the manuscript in both hands and lets out a biting laugh. Tears well in her eyes, but she cuts them off with a shake of her head. “All finished!” she says. She skitters across the stage and sweeps her sleeve through the air in a circle. Haida pauses as the pipa lets out a high-pitched fast strumming. She repeatedly coils the right sleeve of her gown around her wrist and then throws it out again. She opens the manuscript, grabs one side with each hand and holds it up over her head. Suddenly, she falls onto the stage on both knees, tearing the manuscript in two. Haida stares down into a light, creating the impression of flames before her. Page by page, Haida drops Wenbo’s manuscript into the imaginary fire, all the while staring into it. Haida lets out another laugh, then is silent. The only sounds audible are the tearing of paper and the slow but building beat of a drum.

The entire manuscript now in flames, Haida lifts both hands, palms up, toward the ceiling. She slowly rises to her feet, lets out both sleeves, and prepares to dance. The drumbeat quickens, and Haida spins in place. Her sleeves fly out around her forming a circle as she turns, and she laughs again loudly. The full orchestra is now playing, and the tune is fast and light, almost celebratory. An offstage chorus of high-pitched female voices sings, “Flames jump, papers fly / jealous butterflies fill the sky.” Haida tosses her sleeves back and forth in the air, as black paper words, like charred ashes, rain down from above. “Burn the heart, burn the soul,” the chorus sings, “Up to Heaven they all go.”

As the chorus sings and the orchestra plays, Haida executes a series of fast and difficult sleeve movements, ending with the two-handed *pianhua*, one of the most technically difficult movements in xiqu sleeve action. In this move, both sleeves are caught at the midpoint, so that half of the sleeve hangs down from the hand. Using one’s wrists, the performer spins the half sleeves until they form flat squares in the air on either side of the performer’s body. Haida continues spinning her sleeves for a full 30 seconds, all the while increasing speed and keeping pace with the beating drum. When the spinning cannot get any faster, she throws her sleeves out and begins a pattern of breathtaking full sleeve tosses, accompanied by loud sounds of gongs, cymbals, drums, and wooden clappers. She finishes with alternating sleeve catches. Then, she sings:

Why is it not my child?  
Why does it hurt me?  
Why should it block my husband’s way?  
Why should it break my heart?  
Oh-h-h-h, He-e-e-e-e eaveeens!

The syllables are elongated to convey emotion. Haida continues singing and dancing until her husband Simeng (Tessman) and the conniving Master Bai (Judge Brack) enter. They tell Haida that Wenbo has killed himself “accidentally” with the sword she just gave him. Xiya tells Simeng



Figure 5. Haida (Zhou Yujun) and the Judge (Shi Huilan) in *Xin bi tian gao* (*Hedda or Aspiration Sky High*) by William Huizhu Sun and Faye Chunfang Fei, directed by Zhi Tao and Zhan Min. Hangzhou Grand Theatre, 15 January 2012. (Courtesy of Hou Jun, Hangzhou Yue Opera Company)

that she still has the notes from Wenbo's manuscript and they go off together to reconstruct it. Master Bai attempts to seduce and blackmail Haida, but she rejects him. The final scene—a dramatic sequence of singing, music, and sword and sleeve dancing—ends with Haida's suicide using the other lover's sword.

Anyone familiar with Ibsen's play will note that in Sun and Fei's version, the characterization of Hedda and her relationship to Lovborg have been significantly altered. Harold Bloom describes Ibsen's Hedda as a "trollish" figure with an aimless existence and no direction in

life. She kills herself not out of a broken heart but rather because she fears scandal, a characteristic Bloom calls "quintessential bourgeois" (Bloom 1999:15). Sun and Fei's Haida, by contrast, is an educated and ambitious woman frustrated by the loss of Wenbo's love and by her inability to fulfill her own desires. Unlike Ibsen's Hedda, Haida shows interest in the scholarly activities of her husband and lover. Also unlike Hedda, Haida displays a strong desire to maintain her romantic connection with Wenbo.

The interactions between Hedda and Lovborg in Ibsen's script show Lovborg as the more sentimental of the two. For example, when he finds out that Hedda is married, Lovborg asks pleadingly, "Oh, Hedda, Hedda—how could you throw yourself away!" He insists on using her familiar rather than married name, showing that he wishes to maintain an intimate connection with her. Throughout their conversations, it is Lovborg who repeatedly seeks confirmation of their past romance and Hedda who responds with a cold, detached resignation to the way things are. The closest Hedda comes to expressing affection toward Lovborg is when they are recounting the night they parted long ago, and Hedda threatened to shoot him; Hedda admits she may have been motivated by love.

In *Xin bi tian gao*, however, Haida is the nostalgic, sentimental one who tries to maintain the intimacy that once existed between her and Wenbo. An opening dream sequence in the opera, not present in Ibsen's play, shows Haida and Wenbo in love and dancing together, each holding one of a matched pair of swords. The scene is shown to be Haida's fantasy. When Haida and Wenbo are reunited, Wenbo tries to return his sword to Haida, a symbolic breaking of their romantic bonds. Haida at first refuses to take the sword, stating, "I cannot take the sword [...] You said if you returned it you would die." "The feelings are hard to forget, / But the past has to be buried," Wenbo replies. It is only when Haida realizes that Wenbo is rejecting her for Xiya that she becomes vindictive and cold: "I swear by this sword, I'll see you fail in love and fail in your career." Finally, she accepts the sword, but only because circumstances force her to do so.

By introducing the "lovers' swords" and reversing the roles of Lovborg and Hedda, Sun and Fei change Ibsen to conform to xiqu expression by allowing a greater emotional range for Haida, who uses many xiqu performance techniques, including singing, dancing, music, costume, and props. In both the introductory dream sequence and when Haida and Wenbo reunite, *duichang* (对唱, duet singing) is used—a qing technique where two characters interweave their voices in song to express their emotional connection. The expressive quality of the xiqu orches-



tra is also engaged: the erhu sound is used when Haida is mournful, the pipa indicates introspection, and the drums and cymbals convey confusion, anger, and excitement.

Swords and sleeves serve not only as spectacle but also as expressive and symbolically significant elements of character. When Simeng catches Haida dancing with her lover's sword, he tells her that sword dancing is not appropriate for women, to which Haida responds assertively, "Why can't a lady wield a sword?" When Wenbo tries to give Haida back his sword and express his commitment to Xiya, Haida mimes an action of suicide with the sword, expressing her inner pain. During the dream sequence at the start of the performance, Wenbo and Haida create symmetrical shapes and lines with their swords, conveying that they are in harmony with one another. During the book-burning scene, the sleeve pulled over Haida's wrist expresses nostalgia and tenderness, while the sleeve flung and swirled through the air visualizes the conflict and rage in her heart. When the sleeve is wrapped around Haida's wrist and repeatedly thrown out and then pulled back, it expresses Haida's attempts—ultimately unsuccessful—to contain her sentiments. Finally, the high-speed twirling of Haida's pianhua sleeve actions conveys intensifying anxiety, ultimately to a level of self-destruction.

Since the tremendous impact of *A Doll's House* in China during the second decade of the 20th century, Ibsen has been a tool for Chinese intellectuals to reflect on social problems, especially that of gender inequality (see Chen 2010). For this reason, it is in keeping with a long history of Chinese Ibsen adaptations that Sun and Fei interpret *Hedda Gabler* as a play about the tragic demise of a strong female character, rather than a critique of bourgeois malaise.<sup>34</sup> Whereas *Zhuli xiaojie* takes up the question of class, suppressing the themes of gender that are in the original, *Xin bi tian gao* downplays the theme of class to emphasize gender.

Turning *Hedda Gabler* into a love story with a charismatic female protagonist helps create more opportunities for xiqu expression of qing. Moreover, it stretches the capacities of xiqu by introducing a heroine with education, independent ambition, and rage. "Characters like Haida don't appear commonly in traditional xiqu repertoire; we chose *Hedda Gabler* because it allows for a different type of female character to explore with the xiqu form," explained Sun in the question and answer session following a 2012 performance of *Xin bi tian gao* in Hangzhou. "This is what we love about adaptations; they allow us to take on new themes and stories while also exposing more audiences to Chinese performance" (Sun 2012).

## The Content of Spectacle

Xiqu adaptations of Western dramas have often been criticized for what they purportedly lose in the process of transforming the original to fit the xiqu stage. Alan Ying-Nan Lin, writing on the Taiwan Bangzi Company's work *Yue/shu* (約/束, Bond; 2009), adapted from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, argues that *Bond* weakens the characterization and depth of the original script:

As a result of the large amount of cutting and simplification, the original script's mutually resonating plotlines and complex multifaceted characters underwent an editorial process guided mainly by erasure; not only was the plot of the original reduced to its broad outline, but the development of every character also was impacted. (2011:88)

Like many critics, Lin applies his knowledge and appreciation of the original to evaluate the adaptation, and as a result finds the adaptation lacking. With a Shylock that is no longer Jewish and a plot that no longer repeats itself with multiple father-daughter relationships, Lin is

34. Bourgeois malaise would be a valid topic of critique in Chinese performance during the 2010s when this adaptation was created. Despite persistent attacks on bourgeois culture in China in early decades of the PRC, it has experienced an explosive growth since the late 1990s, becoming a common theme in contemporary Chinese literature and performing arts. See Hui (2013).

hard-pressed to find what he likes about *The Merchant of Venice* in *Bond*. Ultimately, he argues that *Bond* is not an adaptation but an “appropriation,” and he seeks to distance the work from what he sees as a much superior original.

Catherine Diamond, in her analysis of *Yuwang Chengguo* (欲望城国, Kingdom of Desire; 1990), a jingju adaptation of *Macbeth* by Taiwan’s Contemporary Legend Theatre, offers a far greater attempt to engage xiqu aesthetics and principles. Like Lin, Diamond points out cuts and changes to the original script, but she explains these changes in terms of the different needs of Asian theatre forms. She contextualizes *Kingdom of Desire* in a distinctly Asian textual realm, citing the influences of Japanese film and noh theatre. Furthermore, she points out the limitations of critics who try to evaluate the work without a deep understanding of xiqu aesthetics: “English critics,” Diamond writes, “did not understand how the music and gestures worked together to create the emotional subtext to the arias [...] Unable to get emotionally involved, they sat back and analyzed what they were watching” (1994:129).

Even Diamond, however, fails to fully articulate the signifying capability of the xiqu body in her analysis. Describing two sequences that clearly use combinations of movement, props, and music to convey complex emotions and characterization, Diamond writes:

In *Kingdom of Desire*, the orphaned son sings a long aria bemoaning the death of his father and outlining a plan for his revenge, while the assassin and his father reenact the fight in mime behind a black scrim curtain. The son unravels his long swatch of hair and swings it in circles across the stage to show his grief and resolution [...] Wei Haimin as Lady Aoshu Zheng sings a long aria in her handwashing scene, expressing her fear and despair. Dressed in a white gown, she flits about the stage bedeviled by the ghosts of those she and her husband have killed. (1994:121–22)

Though acknowledging the xiqu body in her descriptions, Diamond does not offer any analysis of its contributions to the overall work, nor does she offer insights into what this mode of performance might possibly add to the experience of a Shakespearian play. Instead, invoking director and lead actor Wu Xingguo, Diamond indirectly questions the expressive capacity of xiqu technique: “[Wu] found it difficult working with classically trained actors and helping them find ways to express true emotion when all their instincts had been curbed to produce a highly stylized representation” (124).

Ultimately, though offering much more in the way of contextualization in the aesthetics of Asian performance, Diamond, like Lin, focuses more on what is lost in the adaptation process to create *Kingdom of Desire* than what is gained. “With the simplification of Aoshu Zheng’s [Macbeth’s] personality and the diminished interplay between guilt, ambition, fear, illusion, and truth, he becomes a plaything of fate” (124). This dependence on fate, Diamond argues, robs *Kingdom of Desire* of what is most compelling about Macbeth’s character (125).

Acknowledgement of the possible benefits of the xiqu form appear as an afterthought in Diamond’s analysis, and they lack full elaboration. She writes, “One positive result of the text’s editing, however, was revealed in the pacing of the performance. A momentum was established in the beginning scene and it never lagged” (125). When discussing the work’s acrobatic scenes, she states only that they are “imaginatively choreographed and superbly executed [...] performed with precision and aplomb” (126). A dance scene performed by a female with a mask offers “an appropriate metaphor for the play’s underlying theme,” yet “had no Beijing opera style movement” (127). Diamond helps the reader to identify elements of xiqu technique in the work, and at times she even evaluates its quality in terms of jingju aesthetics, such as when she laments the lack of the traditional silk water sleeves in Wei Haimin’s hand-washing scene (126). Nevertheless, Diamond stops short of offering a close analysis of the contributions xiqu performance technique makes to the production as a whole.

The ways in which movement, song, costume, and props come together through the expressive and signifying capacities of the xiqu body to form moving scenes of emotional and psy-



chological depth, demonstrate ways in which xiqu performance technique adds to, rather than necessarily diminishes, the complexity of character development in xiqu adaptations. Just as naturalistic drama is suited to particular types of stories and characters, so too is xiqu. Adapting for the xiqu body entails changes when the original is a spoken drama script; these changes, while sometimes interpreted as losses from the perspective of naturalist drama, can also be gains for the xiqu audience.

The series of xiqu adaptations of Western classics created by Sun and Fei represent, for them, a conscious decision to explore xiqu movement aesthetics as a new mode of artistic expression and cultural outreach. In 1987, Sun and Fei produced their first piece of intercultural theatre—the spoken drama *Zhongguo meng* (China Dream), directed by Huang Zuolin (see Conceison 2004).<sup>35</sup> Huang was known for his distinctive approach to intercultural Chinese performance, which blends the techniques of Stanislavsky, Brecht, and Mei Lanfang to create a new theatrical style. The stage setting for *China Dream* was inspired by nonrealist xiqu aesthetics, but despite introducing some xiqu-derived elements, the actors' techniques were primarily those of realistic spoken drama.

Since the early 2000s, Sun and Fei have made a concerted effort to create intercultural theatre using a full range of xiqu performance technique. Apart from the series of xiqu adaptations of Western dramas, two of which I have discussed here, Sun has also been one of the leading figures in the intercultural theatre project Confucius's Disciples, which began in 2010. Using xiqu as its primary performance style, the project's goal is to promote understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture through the study and performance of xiqu.

Sun and Fei's promotion of the xiqu body through intercultural theatre is part of a national intervention into state-sponsored efforts to promote Chinese culture through xiqu performance. China's Ministry of Education passed a law in 2008 to begin introducing xiqu into schools as a way of teaching Chinese children their own cultural heritage (Sun 2009). Whereas the initial project focused on songs, Sun argues that training in xiqu movements and postures would be a better choice. Sun is so convinced of the cultural value of learning the movement techniques of xiqu that he suggests replacing *guangbo ticao*, the morning "broadcast exercises" that Chinese school children have practiced since the 1950s, with a more artistic exercise based on xiqu and martial arts:

If [broadcast exercises] were re-choreographed as a performing art, not merely a physical exercise, it would not only be more appealing to the dancers, but also carry cultural meaning that would enrich their spiritual and community lives. This artistic work would no longer be a unisexual, unicultural, mechanical body exercise, but instead could be made to relate to the composite style of Chinese opera—including the movement patterns of Beijing opera and many other local operas, as well as some martial arts. (2009:10)

Since they value the xiqu body so highly, Sun and Fei select and adapt foreign texts with that body in mind, and they revise them in ways that facilitate the full expression of xiqu technique. Interpreting these adapted works thus requires appreciation for the importance of xiqu technique as an end in itself, as well as a tool for expressing theatrical content.

Works like *Zbuli xiaojie* and *Xin bi tian gao* are in many ways reminiscent of experiments that have taken place more or less continually in China since the early 20th century. When late drama reformers during the 1910s promoted *gailiang xinju* "reformed new dramas," they argued that new content could be effectively performed using the performance styles of xiqu. Throughout the Maoist period (1949–1976), xiqu productions using hybrid performance styles were created and widely performed—including the model operas and ballets of the Cultural Revolution. After the 1980s, productions of Western works in traditional xiqu styles became increasingly common.

35. See here also a discussion of their later work *Qiuqian qingren* (Swing; 2002).

The major difference between productions like *Zbuli xiaojie* and *Xin bi tian gao* and those practiced throughout the 20th century is their increasing capacity for international exposure. With China's place in the new global geopolitical and economic environment, opportunities for and investment in the domestic and international promotion of Chinese cultural products has increased, with xiqu one of many art forms receiving increased attention as a site of value for cross-cultural appreciation and exchange. To realize this value, both for practitioners and audiences, requires a greater attention to the distinctive aesthetics of xiqu performance. This includes asking what xiqu adaptations can add to Western classics.

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