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Yueju – The Formation of a Legitimate Culture in Contemporary Shanghai

By Haili Ma

Abstract

This article presents a case study of the development of a local cultural form – Shanghai Yueju – caught up in the rapid urban redevelopment of post-socialist China. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘distinction’, it analyses the processes of the reformation of taste and class in a Chinese city. It explores the following question: can high levels of financial investment revive *Yueju* and allow it to gain market success and cultural distinction? The question is examined in the context of Shanghai’s swift urbanisation process, throughout which the government has reinforced its control over not only economic but also social and cultural capital. It suggests that ignoring *Yueju*’s rootedness in a local habitus of long history and focusing only on its economic organisation has had a damaging effect on the vibrancy and viability of this cultural form. This case study of *Yueju* in Shanghai suggests that economically driven cultural development could lead to the erosion of local culture and restricting its social and cultural innovation.

Keywords: Shanghai opera, economic development, urban regeneration, culture capital, social class, taste, distinction, habitus

Introduction

For Bourdieu ‘distinction’ is not just a mark of difference but of legitimacy based on power and influence: ‘(when the) differences are recognized, legitimate and approved’, it becomes ‘a sign of distinction’ (Bourdieu 1991: 238). In this paper, I will show how Shanghai *Yueju* Opera becomes implicated in new strategies of distinction attempted by the Shanghai municipal government in its vision to become a ‘global city’. In the first part I trace the emergence and development of *Yueju* up to the reforms of 1992. In the second part I outline the Shanghai government’s use of culture in its urban development strategies. In part three I look more closely at transformations of class and consumption in post-reform Shanghai and how government attempts to reform and promote ‘high quality’ *Yueju* productions have been tied up in these changes. In part four I explore how this attempt to promote ‘high class’ productions has faced real problems in finding an audience. In the last part I look at evidence of innovative, ‘grass toots’ opera production and what prospects this might hold for the future.

I *Yueju* in Pre-Reform China

Prior to 1949, Shanghai’s ‘recognised, legitimate, and approved’ forms of culture were highly diverse. Pan described the original Shanghai ethos as ‘haipai’, a term denoting a new configuration of Western and Chinese cultural forms which grew up in the city’s relative autonomy from the rest of China (Pan 2008: 6). As the only Chinese city where migrants, refugees, entrepreneurs and scholars of different nationalities coexisted, breaking from tradition was the norm in the city. Soon Shanghai was to be the centre of the May Fourth Cultural Movement (1915–1923). Internationally, Shanghai was recognized as a unique Chinese model of modernity, reflecting the unruly spirit and hybridity of its commerce and culture (Bergere 2009).

It was against this background that Shanghai *Yueju* was born and developed. *Yueju* is a folk song derived from Shenxian town in Zhejiang province. *Yue* is the ancient name of Shenxian town in Shaoxin region and *Ju* means staged drama or opera. First performed commercially, by male peasants turned street beggars during the famine and flood period at the end of the nineteenth century, it became a popular rural concert and tea-house entertainment in Zhejiang. Shanghai was the first city in China to accommodate female workers and from the early twentieth century, a large flow of Zhejiang peasant girls came to work in Shanghai, as textile workers – and soon as *Yueju* performers (Honig 1986; Gao 1991). The first all-female troupe appeared in Shanghai in 1923 and by the mid 1930s, it had developed into the most popular cultural form among the working class migrants from Zhejiang province.

During the Japanese occupation (1937–1945), large numbers of entrepreneurs and politicians took refuge in Shanghai from nearby provinces. They turned to their local culture for nostalgia and consolation. This era was often referred to as the famous ‘Shanghai Isolated Island Culture’ (*Shanghai Gudao Wenhua*) (Gao 1991; Ying 2002). It was during this time that *Yueju* peaked. Large numbers of Zhejiang middle class refugees entered Shanghai and their female family members became loyal patrons of this cultural form. With their economic and political support, dozens of all-female troupes formed in Shanghai. By the mid 1940s, all-female *Yueju* grew to become the second most popular local opera in Shanghai, resting its reputation on artistic innovation (Gao 1991: 49).

Yueju as a symbol of Chinese modernity was largely due to its representation of the cultural identity of new urban women. During this period, *Yueju* had various names referring to its root in working class culture, such as ‘beggar’s song’ ‘didu song’, ‘Shaoxin civil opera’, ‘Shaoxin opera’, and others. The word *YueJu* first appeared in Shanghai newspapers in 1927, and in 1938 ‘Shanghai Theatre World’ (*Xiju Shijie*) first used ‘all-female *YueJu*’ to describe this art form (Gao 1991: 68 - 71).

Post 1949 Shanghai’s *haipai* identity was always viewed with suspicion by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP hereafter), who saw it as built on western power, capitalism and ‘decadence’. However, Shanghai all female *Yueju* received the direct patronage of the CCP and flourished for reasons I explain below.

To the CCP, culture was for mobilising mass power for the winning of the revolution (Schwartz 1968: 173; Mackerra 1983: 479). By the end of 1940s, over 85 percent of the population was illiterate; in this context folk art, such as *Yueju*, was regarded highly by the CCP as form of education (Mackerras 1983: 158). The later premier Zhou Enlai, defined opera as: ‘A vital educational weapon of national spirit and patriotism because it has an intimate connection with the masses’ (quoted in Ying 2002: 178). As the majority of those illiterate were women (Cohen 1986), *Yueju*’s popularity amongst working class females was viewed as an important educational tool by the CCP. Throughout the 1950s, and before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, under direct CCP political and economic support we see the establishment of the *Shanghai Yue Ju Company* (SYC hereafter) symbolizing the institutionalisation of *Yueju*. By the mid 1960s, *Yueju* had grown to become the second most widespread opera form in China, with the SYC being the largest state *Yueju* opera house.

Despite its being heavily promoted by the national government, *Yueju*’s popularity declined as a result of ‘over politicized’ production from the early 1960s (Fu 2002; Ying 2002). During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution only eight model operas (*yang ban xi*) were performed nationally, with all other opera and cultural forms denounced. By the end of the 1970s, with at least two generations having grown up with little cultural exposure or education, *Yueju*’s popularity in Shanghai declined to its lowest historical point. Between the 1980s and 1990s,

Yueju was widely regarded as the opera for the elderly and middle aged female audience, most of whom were first generation Zhejiang immigrants and who were the poorest with the lowest education in the post-Mao economic reform era. Like many other opera forms in China at the time, *Yueju* was widely regarded as a folk culture format associated with the lower social classes.

In 1992, after Deng announced China's further economic development and giving Shanghai more autonomy in economic and cultural reforms, Shanghai was on its way to become the 'Paris of the East'. It is during this time that traditional culture formats found their way back into mainstream society.

II The Decentralised State: Building Economic and Cultural Capital in the new Shanghai

Since the economic reforms began in 1979, increasing power has been devolved from central to local government (Zhang 2004). Regional governments act as 'managers' for regional economic development with the central government retaining the right to change the 'manager' of each regional government at will. In this way, the central government retains control over the regions, whilst the regional government is highly motivated in economic development. So long as the regional government follows the central government's general line, it gains immense power in regional development. As might be expected, this creates the conditions for frequent clashes between the central and local government. However, whilst local governments have inherited much of the economic development responsibilities from the central government, culture remains under the direct supervision of the central government for political reasons. I will argue that the separation between economic development and cultural development at the local level has affected the redevelopment of *Yueju* in significant ways in Shanghai.

Shanghai, as the 'head of the dragon', holds a leading role in the economic development of the Yangtze river delta. Not only economic: in the decentralised China of today, the Shanghai government represents what Bourdieu describes as 'the concentration of the different species of capital,' which 'leads to the emergence of a specific, properly statist capital which enables the state to exercise power over the different fields and over the different particular species of capital, and especially over the rates of conversion between them' (1998: 42). That is, the Shanghai government plays a significant role not just in the accumulation and distribution of economic capital but also that of cultural capital – what is and what is not to be seen as 'legitimate culture'.

From the mid-1990s, as Shanghai received the green light for economic development, the city also launched a wholesale reconstruction of the cultural landscape. In its attempts to 'Manhattanise' Shanghai the municipal government mobilised its long association with 'modernity' as part of its re-invention as the new Asian metropolis for the 21st century.

As a statement of intent two new cultural symbols were built in Shanghai. The Shanghai Grand Theatre, built in 1998 at a cost of 1.2 billion RMB, the first purpose built theatre in China aiming to cater for large-scale international performing arts, was placed in the People's Square at the heart of the city centre. In 2005, the Shanghai Municipal Government invested another 1 billion RMB into building the Shanghai Oriental Art Centre in Pudong, the new financial and commercial centre. Both edifices aim to be symbolic of Shanghai's aspirations to enhanced cultural status in the eyes of the international art world, hosting a wide range of Western productions, from *Swan Lake* to *Cats* and from the Berlin Philharmonic to the British Royal Ballet. These developments marked the commercialisation of 'high' culture in Shanghai, attempting to move these off state subsidy by appealing to more high spending and foreign audiences. It thus also marked the acceleration of a disconnect between a globally facing cultural profile and the everyday reality of locally produced culture. Fu Jin, a leading Chinese opera social critic explained:

The Grand Theatre hosts 90 percent of Shanghai performing programmes and marks its legitimacy through high prices. Instead of old, small to medium theatre rental fees of between ten and twenty thousand RMB per performance, for a troupe to enter the Grand Theatre, the rental cost is between 100 and 130 thousand RMB per performance. A popular saying in Shanghai opera houses today is: 'In the pre-1978 reform era, you worried about not having productions good enough to enter a theatre. Today, you worry that you don't have enough money to enter a theatre. (Interview 9/7/2008)

High prices, together with the western buildings, inject a sense of 'legitimacy' into the cultural forms hosted by these grand cultural edifices. The construction of a new cultural infrastructure also coincided with the wide scale urban development of Shanghai from the early 90s. As a result, there has been a demolition of 'illegitimate' cultural infrastructure: many of the small and medium theatres in old residential districts in the city, which have existed since the end of the nineteenth century and are directly associated with traditional operas, are on the list to be knocked down.

These buildings are important to local opera development not only because they have existed for nearly one hundred years but also they were symbols of a local opera culture. Under Mao, performances were continually generated in these small to medium theatres to bring culture closer to the people. But in the recent urban regeneration, these community based theatre spaces are seen as old fashioned and too small for Shanghai. But above all, the lands they occupy are now too expensive for 'cultural' uses. They are disappearing to make place for the new Shanghai. The demolition of the old theatre districts has had a devastating effect on the development of local opera by separating it from its audiences. The famous saying amongst opera companies in Shanghai is 'each time we hear the word "re-generation" we get nervous; urban regeneration removes theatres as well as our

audience.’ By the end of the 2000s, *Yifu* Theatre is the only one remaining in the People’s Square, where dozens of theatres used to be found.

III Taste and Class in the new Yueju

In order to allow local cultural forms to enter these newly built cultural spaces, the municipal government had to legitimize them first. This involved a hefty state subsidy to reform the business model and target a completely different kind of audience.

In 1999 under leadership of former Shanghai Mayor Gong Xueping, a joint partnership was formed between the Shanghai Grand Theatre and the SYC, namely the Dream of the Red Mansion Ltd. Xu Peilin, a local cultural entrepreneur, explained that the Shanghai municipal government invested 2 million RMB in producing the *Luxury-Style Dream of the Red Mansion* (*Haohuaban Hongloumeng*), to be staged in the Grand Theatre for free (interview 8/6/2008). The *Luxury-Style Dream of the Red Mansion* is the most expensive Yueju production ever produced by the SYC. Borrowing words from Gong XuePing, the aim of the production, according to SYC director You Boxin to make Yueju ‘bigger and more extravagant’ in order to ‘boost the *yueju* market’ (Interview 8/7/2008). In an era when scale and expense becomes a way of measuring legitimacy and distinction (Wang 2009), Shanghai *Yueju* has to abide by the rules in order to become legitimate.

In addition to annual subsidies, the government provided an additional 200,000 RMB to promote the show including having it advertised for six months in ‘rotation form’ (*gundong*) on the TV, radio and internet – all for free. It was also advertised on the city centre highway bridges to catch wider audiences. This was in a city where advertising fees had reached 38 million RMB a year for five-seconds of prime-time advertising (Zhao 1998: 58). Such practices aimed to raise the status of *Yueju* from its folk cultural roots into ‘high art’ (*gaoya yishu*), to attract the Shanghai elite culture.

From 1999 to 2002, this *Luxury-Style Dream of the Red Mansion* was performed a total of thirteen times in the Grand Theatre. Tickets were sold at 1000 RMB per person for the first show and for the following 12 shows at 500 RMB per person, which were the most expensive Chinese opera tickets ever sold in the market. People queued to get into the theatre and it was difficult to obtain a ticket without reservation. The scene was described as a ‘once in a hundred years event (*bainian buyu*)’. The programme seemed to have awakened the audiences’ love of Shanghai *yueju*. It became the most talked about subject in town at the time. The SYC vice president, the star performer of the Jia Baoyu character in this show, Qian Huili, stated in proud tones: ‘No other opera had ever entered the Grand Theatre before, we are the first!’ (Interview 8/6/2008).

It was through the local government's support that Shanghai *Yueju* was rediscovered and repackaged. In its process of being 'recognized, legitimized and approved', *Yueju* becomes 'a sign of distinction' (Bourdieu 1991: 238). With the backing of the officials, Shanghai *Yueju* was established as a legitimate and approved form of culture to be consumed by the elite class in the city.

Bourdieu points out that cultural consumption is never an isolated social act but is meant to separate classes: 'All cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.) function as markers of class' (Bourdieu 1984: 1). With the glamourizing of *Yueju*, the consumption of this cultural form involved new distinctions of class and taste. However, Bourdieu emphasises that although we may appear to have a choice in classification through taste, those excluded from legitimate taste because of financial and education reasons, tend to internalise this exclusion. Bourdieu calls this internalisation of the exclusion about which we can do little the 'taste of necessity' (Bourdieu 1984: 234). We can see this occurring as *Yueju* was increasingly marketed to audiences with high economic and social capital. In their attempt to legitimize *Yueju*, the Shanghai government envisaged the emerging middle class as the main consumer group and thus felt it necessary to scale up the performances for the new elites in the city. This group has very different economic and educational status from the traditional *Yueju* audience.

Bourdieu stated in *Distinction that* 'preferences in literature, painting or music are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondary to social origin' (Bourdieu 1984: 190). How has *Yueju* been adapted to the young middle class after having been long associated with the old and the poor in the city?

Most young middle class Shanghainese lack knowledge of traditional Chinese culture due to the period in which they grew up. Born in the 1960s and 1970s when culture, especially traditional Chinese culture, was being systematically erased by the Cultural Revolution, this generation has grown up with minimal exposure to traditional Chinese opera. The historical scenes of children watching opera in an open market space, hanging from rooftops and trees with their peers or sitting with parents could now only be read in novels. For many of the new middle class, cultural consumption through such forms of everyday social practice no longer occurs. They do not possess the knowledge to appreciate Chinese operas as did their parents' generation.

Scholars have observed high levels of foreign educational and cultural knowledge in the habitus of many Chinese youth during Mao's era. Hamm, in *Music and Radio in the People's Republic of China* (1991), highlighted how the young generation of the 1950s was raised on Russian literature. In order to restore the image of internationalization, the government was always keen to introduce western culture to 'educate the good youth' since China's open door policy. Mackerra (1983) stated that in the post-Mao era, the majority of urban youth took up western culture instead of Chinese traditional culture in order to show a level of

openness, international knowledge and cosmopolitan attitude. Gaining economic and social advance was the priority during this period, and in Shanghai this was exhibited through a distancing from traditional Chinese culture and aspirations to deal with foreign businesses and foreign culture.

This middle class also includes the new migrants with high educational capital. The Shanghai Government was one of the first to relax the *hukou* system installed to prevent internal (especially rural-urban) migration. In 1992 alone, net immigration rose from 14,600 to 21,600. Immigrants were mainly university graduates. In 1994 the net figure jumped to 74,200, the highest since 1980. The majority of the migrants allowed into Shanghai were university graduates from all over China – only those with a masters’ degree or above were permitted in, resulting in the new ‘golden collar’ class (Wei 2008: 13). This newly admitted well-educated class, along with the local middle class shanghaiense, is the driving forces of cultural consumption in Shanghai.

The traditional *Yueju* audience came from a very different historical formation. The majority of the *Yueju* audience in post-Mao’s era is middle aged and elderly women. They don’t like to go to the grand cultural sites, such as the Grand Theatre, the surroundings of which are highly unfamiliar to them. Even if they do, their usual opera watching habits, such as chatting and snacking whilst watching performances are highly undesirable to the new middle class consumers.

Therefore, the intention behind the production of the *Luxury-Style Dream of the Red Mansion*, was to package *Yueju* for middle class consumption, with its beautiful stage sets, pretty women, facile adventures, frivolous conversation and reassuring philosophy suited for the city’s ‘bourgeois’ audience who are also able to afford high prices (Bourdieu 1984: 234). High production costs have to be matched by high-ticket prices. Especially as from the early 1990s, the Shanghai Municipal Cultural Bureau and the Shanghai Municipal Consumer Price Bureau stopped subsidies for all opera companies. Opera tickets rose from one or two RMB in the early 1990s, to between 120 RMB and 1000 RMB at the current time.

It is not new for the government or institutions to separate out classes through price based cultural consumption. DiMaggio (1977) points out that, in the 1860s, producers in America sometimes purposely raised production costs to create ‘high art’ as opposed to ‘low art’ in order to separate the classes. In the case of Shanghai, there may not have been an explicit purpose to separate classes as in 19th century Boston, nevertheless the imposition of high production costs through the withdrawal of subsidies and an insistence on the ‘luxury style’ has *de facto* resulted in such a separation. The majority of the population in Shanghai has no access to such culture. It is through high ticket pricing that *Yueju* became associated with elite cultural and economic status.

IV Desperately Seeking the Audience

In China, due to Mao's egalitarian policies, social distinctions around economic capital only started to emerge in earnest after the 1980s. The middle aged bourgeois audience, with high economic capital, central to Bourdieu's account of the cultural field, was absent in China. *Yueju's* traditional audience is pre-1949 emigrants from nearby Zhejiang province who are reluctant to spend excessive amount on cultural activities. As noted above, the majority of these were illiterate or semi-illiterate. Although this group were a quite well-established urban working class in the 1980s (Chan 1985), as the market economy took off in the early 1990s they were about to become amongst the losers. In the mid 1990s, ten million workers were laid off, of which seventy percent were women, aged thirty and above (Tian and Chu 2000: 155). Due to their low educational level, many could not find work afterwards. Warde (1993) pointed out that middle aged and elderly females make up the lowest economic, social and educational group in cities such as Shanghai. This group is referred to as the 'disadvantaged group' (*ruoshi qunti*) (Goodman 2008: 39). The high ticket price often leads to them being excluded from entering the Grand Theatre to taste *Yueju*.

What about the new middle class? Economically, the middle class's consumption power has been 'greatly exaggerated' (Jiang 2007: 3). In Shanghai, this is directly associated with the high costs of the housing market as well as other living costs (health and education, for example). Since the beginning of the property boom in 1992, Shanghai has seen the fastest rise in house prices in China. Those government employees who were assigned ownership of flats by their work units and 'those dodgy businessmen who bought state assets from government friends during the fire-sale days of the late 1980s and early 1990s' (Bell 2008: 26) were amongst the winners in this property game. This process also contributed to the rapid emergence of an urban poor. In an article on *International Advertising*, a Chinese market analyst describes what happened in Shanghai:

Why have people felt that their money is not worth a penny? Home ownership expenses keep shooting up [...] last year, the salary rise for individual residents was an average 10.4 percent, yet the private housing market went up as high as 21.7 percent. In 2004, housing took up 22.6 percent of a household's total expenditure. The increase over spending on food, clothing, medical services, cultural consumption and entertainment was reduced to a slim 9.5 percent. (Yuan 2005: 56)

With the rise of the property market, large numbers of Shanghai residents lost their spending power to high mortgage repayments, often becoming what is popularly known in China as 'the house slave' (*fangnu*). Cultural consumption and entertainment were squeezed.

Finally, rural workers make up around 70 percent of the national population. However, their rural registration and low educational level means they are often viewed as 'illegal migrants' in the cities. Their consumption capacity falls behind urbanites by at least ten to fifteen years (Jiang 2007: 3, 8). They are the least likely to spare their cash for entertainment.

Thus we have the established migrant working class who have the cultural connection with *Yueju* but were excluded because of the high ticket price; the young middle classes who should be able to afford these but lack the cultural connection and anyway are tied up in the property game; and the new working class made up of temporary peasant workers, with extremely low educational, economic and social status in the city, and denied effective access to any form of cultural consumption in the city.

So much for the taste of necessity; what of luxury? Who are the new *Yueju* consumers in Shanghai? Shanghai Performing Art Company Director Ding Zhiyuan gave a good picture of the demography of *Yueju* audiences:

According to our database, there is a regular ballet audience of around 3000 in Shanghai; a regular concert audience of around 4000, most of them are white collar workers. Some of them maybe described as 'a pretending audience', sitting there to give themselves a new identity. However, after a period of time, they will fall in love with Western art. Out of all operas, *Yueju* is the most popular opera and has the best market. We have a loyal regular *Yueju* audience of around 400, and the number is slightly lower for *Jingju* and *Huju*. [...] The *Yueju* audience is a mixed group; in terms of age, twenty percent are between their teens and thirty, sixty percent are thirty to forty five year olds, and twenty percent are forty five years and above. Especially in the last few years, with the promotion of young performers, their own fans began to emerge, and of course they are all young people, of the same age as the performers. (Interview 8/7/2008)

This is a rather astonishing record, that in a city with a population of twenty million, there are around 7,000 to 8,000 regular western cultural consumers but only 400 for the *yueju*, which is regarded as the most popular local art form, with other opera forms attracting even less. This confirms that the middle class consumers have a better taste for western culture than for local Chinese culture. The newly built cultural infrastructure in the city reinforces such western oriented cultural consumption patterns. When interviewed Chinese opera social critic Fu Jin explained that the Shanghai Grand Theatre attracted the highest audience attendances, but that ninety percent of its performing art programme was western, leaving the small balance to local opera (9/7/2008).

Yueju will have to compete with these western cultural performances for revenue. According to Wu and Yusef (2002), Shanghai is acquiring the social shape of an 'onion dome' with fifteen percent forming an elite layer, and eighty five percent the 'have-less' class' (p. 6). This small elite consists of people with educational, economic, as well as political capital. As Andreas (2009) in *Rise of the Red Engineers* argued, a new elite 'technocratic' class emerged after Mao's era, based on the combination of older educational capital with the new political capital gained through the 1949 revolution. This elite class not only has educational capital also political ties with the central and local government enabling them to obtain crucial access to economic capital in the early economic reform era of 1980s and 1990s. It is this top 15 percent elite population that could develop the taste of 'luxury' – consuming the legitimate art at the legitimate sites.

The formation of such a small class having the taste of 'luxury' is supported by the Shanghai Municipal Government. An anonymous official in the Shanghai Media stated: 'High ticket prices are marked up purposefully to be purchased as presents, often for government officials, enterprises, and other networking purposes. It is not really for the consumption of the people' (Interview 9/6/2008).

Foreign expats are also among the elite group who has been given the privilege to consume Chinese culture. The manager of the Shanghai Performing Art Company, Ding Zhiyuan insisted that shows in the Grand Theatre should not have 'any yellow faces' (Interview 8/7/2008). Professor Fu Jin, despite his criticism of the grand cultural buildings, approved the high-rise ticket prices for the 'Red Mansion': 'It is a grand version of the performance; a lot of effort and money has gone into making this opera. I don't think that it should be consumed by everyone, it should just belong to a certain group of people' (interview 8/6/2008). In this view, the perception of *Yueju* as a cultural form for the 'poor' needs to be changed to that of 'high art' for the Shanghai elites.

During this period, when the municipal government was promoting the 'taste of luxury' they knew very well that there was a large number of 'flawed consumers' who, as Bauman's wrote: "...do not have the means to truly enter the shopping mall at all, do not have the means to truly enter into the consumer game'. They were also aware that 'these consumers are leading to social degradation and "internal exile"' (Bauman 1998: 38). But it is a priority to the municipal government to upgrade cultural infrastructure to match Shanghai's new global cosmopolitan image. Granting right of access to a small group of high income professionals in the city and excluding low income people is their means of creating a sense of cosmopolitan glamour for the city.

We also need to be aware of the heavy cost of such glitzy promotions and the dire consequences of short term commitment – as such high profile public subsidies to culture are likely to be. After the 'luxury' version of the *Dream of the Red Mansion*, the government has never invested in another similar scale opera production, and opera did not enter the Grand Theatre throughout the 2000s. In 2008, the SYC entered the Oriental Art Centre, performing the complete version of *Dream of the Red Mansion*. This time it was staged only twice. *Yueju*'s inability to prove itself worthy of economic investment to the local government through attracting self-sustaining funds was the main problem. *Yueju* faded from the position of 'most talked about cultural form in town' soon after the local government ceased its support.

Meanwhile, large numbers of *Yueju* fans are greatly deterred by the high price and grand, yet alien, theatre locations. *Yueju*'s new legitimate status failed to attract either its traditional or its intended middle class audience.

V *Yueju* – Surviving through the ‘Black Box’

Having lost direct government’s support, *Yueju* has been increasingly marginalised by the Shanghai Grand Theatre, to the degree that many people struggle to see *Yueju*. In reality, it is still regularly performed and popular amongst local audiences. In opposition to the emphasis on large productions and costly marketing, these performances are much smaller in scale, produced by individual SYC artists outside SYC working hours and they have managed to attract younger audiences. However, due to expensive advertisement fees and the illegality of performing in ‘informal’ venues, it is only the ‘inner circle’ of artists who know where productions may be staged. These performances mainly take place in universities, in small enclosed theatre spaces known as a ‘black box’ (*hei xiazi*).

In 2009, I was on an international opera exchange visit to Shanghai. The host team of Chinese theatre academics, government high officials and entrepreneurs struggled to provide us with information on contemporary Chinese opera performances by saying: ‘It is very difficult to find such performances in Shanghai. They are either traditional operas, or modern dramas’. The international group in the end agreed to watch a modern drama at the Shanghai Theatre Academy. As we entered the theatre, I happened to see a small poster in the corridor, advertising a new *yueju* production in the next building. It turned out to be a very refreshing experience – no grand production and no star performer but young performers, trying to experiment with new ideas. The theatre of around fifty seats where it performed was full. There was an after-show discussion between the audience and artists around *Yueju* production in general and the theme of this show. The high spirit shared by the artists and audience in this theatre is rarely seen in today’s legitimate theatre spaces.

The audience was mainly opera artists, young professionals and students. The relatively inexpensive tickets are affordable for most young people. The success of these black box performances makes a powerful contrast to the Grand Theatre in their promotion of local culture. In fact, the Grand Theatre, despite its high culture intake, has been unsuccessful in promoting this culture as a business proposition. Whilst high production costs might momentarily change the public perception of *Yueju*, it is difficult to change what it is as a historically evolved cultural format and the associations that go with that. *Yueju* derived from local folk culture and its roots within it cannot be completely erased in search of new kinds of audiences and profit.

Zhao Zhigang, former Vice President of the SYC, is now one of the main contributors to ‘black box’ productions and shared his delightful creative experience with the young audience while performing in a black box venue:

I performed *Yueju Hamlet* in a “black box” small university theatre. There were no props on stage. I came out all in white, one spot light on me. I walked down, amongst the audience, looking for my deceased bride. Suddenly, a phone went off, so I said: “Whose phone was it, switch it off please!” You could imagine the audience were furious. Then I took the phone out of my own pocket and answered it,

carried out a dialogue which was supposed to be between myself and my deceased bride [...] then in the next scene I walked amongst tomb stones, but I used the audience as tomb stones and walked amongst them. When I cried in front of my deceased bride, I held a female audience member as if she was the tomb stone, she was really scared! Everyone enjoyed this *Yueju* production. (Interview 9/7/2008)

Although the black box has ignited some hope for the revival of *Yueju*, its future is still uncertain without this cultural form being exposed to a wider local audience. The hidden space of the black box can only offer a temporary alternative to the expensive grand theatre and the fast diminishing old theatres; it cannot guarantee the availability of *Yueju* in the long term. Without local government support – as part of everyday rather than elite culture – the development of *Yueju* will remain hidden and illegitimate.

Conclusion

In China's vast economic development era, cultural production and consumption are becoming increasingly commercialised. Many forms of local culture are re-packaged to serve an elite class with high economic, social and political capital. Although *Yueju* has gained some high cultural ground by being promoted by the government, it is losing its connection both with its actual and potential audience, and with those who are essential to the evolution of *Yueju* in terms of content production. Local government is influential in preserving and transforming local culture in many ways, but with its eyes on a global audience it has promoted the connection between legitimate culture and up-market consumption. Such a strategy may well be short-lived. I have argued that it might be possible to change the perception of certain cultural forms for a short time – through heavy promotion and restricting access – but it is difficult to change the culture – its social and aesthetic roots – so rapidly and so instrumentally. *Yueju* was briefly turned from popular culture to high art through government support and allowed to occupy a highly visible space, only to then find itself struggling to attract the right audience. Once the government's support ceased it was impossible for *Yueju* to continue this 'up market' route. This situation was made worse by the scarcity of formal performance spaces and the inaccessibility of grand cultural facilities to small local performances. Although *Yueju* has managed to sustain itself through performing in cheaper and smaller scale venues, access by the wider public remains restricted without the support and acknowledgement of local government.

There are however other examples in China which might point to possibilities of changing cultural policy in Shanghai, in order to sustain the long term development of *Yueju*. For example, the Zhejiang government views *Yueju* as essential in building its local cultural identity and subsidises performances through providing free venues to opera companies whose actors have won the Plum Flower award (the highest award for opera performers in China). The Hong Kong government too provides local cultural performances with generous subsidies. When

SYC performed in Hong Kong, in a similar scale theatre to the Shanghai Grand Theatre, they were charged only 13,000 RMB for four days' rent – much cheaper than the 100-130,000 RMB per performance to rent the Shanghai Grand Theatre (Xu Peilin, Interview, 8/6/2008).

In 1945, Yuan Xuefen and other star Yueju performers wanted to build their own theatre so that artists would not be exploited by backstage managers and could develop *Yueju* (Gao 1991; Yuan 2002). Sixty years later, in 2008, Li Li, the current Director of the SYC stated: 'If only we had a theatre of our own, we could perform regularly, we could experiment, we could develop. At the moment we can do nothing but survive' (Interview 9/7/2008).

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