Staging China
As China is becoming an important player on the world stage, Chinese literature is poised to change and reshape the overlapping, shared cultural landscapes in the world. This series publishes books that reconsider Chinese literature, culture, criticism, and aesthetics in national and international contexts and render China’s classical heritage and modern accomplishments as a significant part of world culture. By promoting works that cut across the divide between modernity and tradition, this series will aim to challenge the inequality and unevenness of the current world system and aspire to a prospect of the global cultural community. Imbued with a desire for mutual relevance and sympathy, the series strives to influence the dialogue regarding world culture.

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Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century
Edited by Li Ruru
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Acknowledgments

This book discusses stage productions rather than play texts. The whole team unreservedly thanks ten theatre companies and a large number of theatre practitioners involved in our project. The volume would not have taken shape without these theatre professionals’ generosity in offering us all types of information, including images, granting us interviews, and answering our numerous questions.

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Without help from various organizations, colleagues, and friends, we would not have been able to complete such a wide-ranging study that analyzes new theatres in the twenty-first century in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

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This edited book indeed illustrates the Chinese proverb:

Only when all contribute their firewood can they build up a strong fire.

众（眾）人拾柴火焰高。

Li Ruru
General Introduction

Li Ruru

Staging China is a book about Chinese drama in the twenty-first century. “Drama” in this context refers to the modern theatrical form, called huaju or spoken drama in Chinese. Artistically, the new genre drew inspiration from Western realistic/naturalistic theatre when it first emerged in 1907; ideologically, it was a response to the call for a new realm of Chinese literature and art, which leading intellectuals believed would help to reform the nation after the country had suffered several military defeats at the hands of Western powers. By emphasizing the importance of the word “spoken” in “spoken drama,” huaju radically distinguished itself from the traditional “song-dance” theatre xiqu (literally “theatre [of] sung-verse”).

Through exploring more than a dozen key productions in the context of the history of modern Chinese drama and the present-day societies of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, this book examines what occurs when historical and cultural practices in the region of Greater China are transformed into stage images. It also investigates the society and culture through the lens of theatre by considering how people respond to the social, political, economic, and cultural challenges in the global context.

Like modern theatre in most Asian countries, Chinese spoken drama did not emerge until the beginning of the twentieth century and it was an imported theatrical genre from the West via Japan. Yet unlike many of its counterparts, which were “often as a result or in the shadow of global colonialism” (Liu 2013, p. 2), the birth of huaju was more of an inborn force of self-renewal in response to foreign stimuli when young Chinese radical intellectuals espoused the adoption of Western knowledge to eradicate the decadence and backwardness of China’s society. It was an outcome of Chinese people’s own choices between tradition and modernity and between indigenous and foreign cultures. Responding to the demands of the time
and embodying the spirit of a changing society, modern drama has evolved alongside China’s major historical events. Interactions with political and sociocultural factors have shaped huaju’s particular cultural expressions, social functions, and its aesthetic value.

As demonstrated by the discussion in the following 11 chapters, the development of Chinese drama has not been a singular or a purely theatrical process in monological accounts. Theatre is “not an innocent or naïve activity separate from or above and beyond everyday reality, history, politics or economics” (Zarrilli 2005, p. 1). A good example is that within the discussion of huaju in the book, one chapter is based on a “musical theatre” rather than a “spoken drama” in the strictest sense: Sweet & Sour Hong Kong, produced by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (and the literal translation of the company’s name is indeed Hong Kong Spoken Drama Company). Sweet & Sour was originally a spoken-drama play but after the disastrous SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in 2003, which devastated businesses, property prices, and people’s confidence, the “Hong Kong government wanted to perk up its citizens and approached the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre” (chapter 5). Both authorities and theatre practitioners felt that under the particular circumstances a musical show solely for the purpose of entertainment would be more appropriate than a serious drama. Hong Kong Repertory Theatre’s decision to make Sweet & Sour into a musical production echoes the reasons why a number of spoken drama theatre companies on the mainland and in Taiwan, since the late 1980s, have started producing “musical theatre” work: the most obvious one is to meet audience demand. If the appearance of huaju as a new theatrical genre at the beginning of the twentieth century was the reaction toward the traditional song-dance xiqu—which was regarded by the radicals as a form so ornamental that it was unable to carry out any social function to inspire its audiences to be transformed into “new citizens” as advocated in 1902 by Liang Qichao (1973, p. 3)—the musical elements introduced to huaju since the 1980s were not only another reaction toward the artistic style of this spoken drama but also a challenge to its social function. We should not regard the more musical elements in huaju as a maneuver back to the traditional theatre; rather it represents the dynamics of huaju’s development. When being challenged, theatre practitioners respond; their responses deliver vitality and diversity on the stage. We should also note that as early as in the 1980s, colleagues in Taiwan realized during their experimental “Little Theatre Movement” (see chapter 9) that the term huaju or spoken drama no longer described their theatrical form, and they thus created a
new term: wutaiju or stage play. However, this term has begun to wane since the millennium because more and more performances in Taiwan take place in nonconventional theatrical venues. The concepts of space, venue, and audiences have thus been challenged again: consequently the nature of the theatre has evolved.

The discussion above points to the research choice made by the whole team of contributors to this book: our focus is on stage performances rather than play texts. It also illustrates the argument that this study puts forward: stage work, as a mode of cultural action, provides a vital arena for practitioners to interact with audiences, the market, the government, and cultural establishments. It not only illustrates the mutual exchange and negotiation between practitioners and their diverse experiences, ideologies, creative approaches, artistic/technical skills, and stage-crafts, but also functions as a dialogue between present and past. If Marvin Carlson uses “theatre memory” that every performance “conjures the ghosts of previous productions” (2003, p. 75) to explore the way the memory of the spectator informs the process of theatrical reception, the “ghosts” involved in the productions analyzed in this volume have another facet. The discussions in the following chapters illustrate how the present reflects and visits the past, particularly some key issues or concepts involved in the aesthetic and ideological development of huaju.

Inspired by Bourdieu’s theory of practice—the two inseparable concepts: habitus and field that embody the philosophical duality between the subjective element of action and objective structures (1993)—the team worked out an analytical framework for the book. All of these critical examinations of key theatrical productions focus on the “process,” scrutinizing how the making of theatre functions within the nexus constituted by the economy, politics, and culture. We believe that theatrical practice is transposable not immutable. It addresses issues in the cultural and social transformations that mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been undergoing. It also explores the way theatre shapes perceptions of the region of Greater China.

In order to achieve the above goals, the team worked together since 2013 and agreed on a common set of research questions:

- What is the value of classical plays in contemporary society, especially for young audiences and theatre practitioners? What are today's approaches to these works?
- What is the form and function of propaganda theatre (“main melody” in its present form) in contemporary China, a country
guided by the principle of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Deng 1984/1991, pp. 1–5)?

- How are socioeconomic, political, and cultural transformations in the twenty-first century challenging the *huaju* genre and how are practitioners reacting?
- How has *huaju*—originally an imported theatrical genre—been adapted to become a Chinese art form and utilized to bring together people from different communities, including those from deprived backgrounds? What exactly does *huaju* Sinicization mean, and is it purely on the ideological level? Why are people still interested in staging foreign plays and in what way do these works present the “Chineseness” on the stage?

The process of refining the research questions worked well in tandem with the process of finding the key theatrical productions resulting in the presentation of this book to readers. We observed three criteria in selecting productions. First, they are excellent performances making great contribution(s) in any of the following aspects of theatre: playwriting, directing, acting, scenography, or marketing. Second, the work represents different generations of theatre practitioners and different theatre companies, offering a wide spectrum of performances from veterans to rising stars of young practitioners, from theatre at the top level like National Theatre of China, Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, and Taiwan’s Ping-Fong Acting Troupe to regional theatre like Tianjin People’s Art Theatre and to independent company or venue like Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio, Grass Stage, and Penghao Theatre. Last but not least, on the one hand, our selected productions embody the spirit of the rapid changes taking place in society at present, whereas on the other hand, from different angles, they map out the trajectories of spoken drama’s evolution in which significant issues and key concepts recur. Had we had more space available in this book, we would have very much liked to discuss the work of three more theatres, one each from Taiwan and Hong Kong, particularly productions by community theatres in these areas, and one more regional theatre’s work from mainland China, because they have added many colors to today’s drama landscape.

The selected productions and research questions finally form the discourse of the book. It is underpinned by a conceptual framework of “process” as pointed out earlier: we set out to analyze the stage productions, their interactions between habitus and field (in
Bourdieu’s sense) through mechanisms such as the way in which a written text is transformed into a performative text, how various media are transformed in the hands of practitioners, and how a work from the rehearsal room is transformed into the theatre venue and the market. Such a process involves interactions between multitudes of different agents, including practitioners (everyone working in the production), audiences, and social, economic, political, and cultural establishments. As Bourdieu points out, these agents and cultural fields all have their “own laws of functioning” (1993, p. 162), and thus the interactions between them can never be smooth but must involve “struggles.” On the one hand, the “process” is the theoretical frame adopted by this book; on the other, the dynamics of the process well reflects the nature of the social and cultural transformations that the region of Greater China has been undergoing.

In order to research these key productions thoroughly, chapter contributors employed a variety of methods including data collection, examination, and analysis of secondary sources, interviews, and surveys. More importantly, the method of close-reading of video recordings of the productions (some of the contributors also have the experience of seeing the productions in theatre with other audiences) has enabled the whole team to present this performance analysis of twenty-first century’s Chinese drama to the readers. There are four parts and a total of eleven chapters.

Part I Revitalizing the Theatre: New Approaches to Classical Plays consists of two chapters. One analyzes Wang Yansong’s 2006 version of Cao Yu’s The Savage Land (also translated as The Wilderness) produced by Tianjin People’s Art Theatre. The other discusses Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio production of Ibsen’s The Master Builder (2006) directed by Lin Zhaohua. Originating from an imported theatrical form, huaju has a tradition of presenting foreign works, and thus “classical plays” for huaju include both Chinese and foreign masterpieces. Yet this is the only foreign play included in the present volume. The rationale of using The Master Builder to discuss Director Lin Zhaohua’s innovations to huaju acting lies in the article’s subject itself, because the author Lin Wei-yu believes that a foreign play can best exemplify how Director Lin embeds the aesthetic principles of xiqu in the Western style of acting. It would have been easier to implement this new approach to acting a Chinese play, and thus the discussion of staging a foreign work best illustrates the process of how huaju has evolved from an imported theatrical form into naturalized Chinese drama.
Part II “Main Melody”: A New Image of Propaganda Theatre contains three chapters. Chen Xinyi’s 2002–2003 version of Shang Yang, by the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, focuses on a historical figure (395–338 BC). In Meng Bing’s work Archives of Life (2009) and other plays produced by the Drama Company Attached to the Political Department of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the heroes are either soldiers or revolutionary leaders. The last work in Part II is the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre’s Sweet & Sour Hong Kong (2003), which describes two fast-food restaurants and their relationship changing from one of fierce rivalry to one of collaborative partnership. It eulogizes the core values of hard work, resilience, optimism of the people of Hong Kong, and the theme that Hong Kong is home for both local and new Hongkongers (i.e., recent mainland immigrants).

Part III Contemporary Consumerism: A New Relationship between Theatre, Market, and Society focuses on works produced by two prominent state-run theatres. The National Theatre of China produced both Meng Jinghui’s intermedial performance Flowers in the Mirror, Moon on the Water (2006) and Tian Qinxin’s The Yellow Storm (2010); the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre produced The Story of the Deer and the Cauldron (2008) directed by He Nian. While each of these productions has its own specific features, together they demonstrate, from different angles, how practitioners respond to the challenges of the new consumer society in contemporary China.

Part IV Independent Theatre: Alternative Space examines three independent theatre productions. From one of Taiwan’s most famous theatres comes Peking Opera: The Revelation (premiered in 1996, and was revived in 2000, 2007, and 2011) by Li Guoxiu and the Ping-Fong Acting Troupe; from Shanghai The Little Society (2009–2011) by Zhao Chuan and Grass Stage; and from Beijing The Story of Gong and Drum Lane (2009) by Wang Xiang et al. and Penghao Theatre. Although clearly illustrating the different socioeconomic, political, and cultural environments on each side of the Strait, the three examples demonstrate a strong spirit of independence and the practitioners’ commitment to common people. The two productions from the mainland independent theatres mark a sharp contrast to the extravagant work produced by state-run theatres that caters to the newly emerging middle class and its commodity fetishism (see chapters in Part III).

The editor’s introduction to each of these parts includes a few further readings (publications not used by chapter contributors but
INTRODUCTION

helpful for readers on the subject) and sets the context for the following chapters by pointing to the important issues or concepts involved in huaju history or contemporary socioeconomic, political, and cultural perspectives. The team members believe that all the twenty-first-century productions discussed in this book are in one way or another a reaction toward previous theatrical phenomena: without knowing the past we will not be able to grasp the present. In addition, all performances are a reaction toward the society in which the plays/productions were created, even a story centered on historical figures or events. Each chapter is an independent entity because it explores particular productions from different angles embodying the theoretical structure of “process” applied in this book. Yet, collectively these chapters tell readers a fascinating and multifaceted story about today’s theatre and, more importantly, about the region of Greater China.

Finally, a brief conclusion considers further questions generated from the discussions in the chapters.

Throughout the book, the term huaju is often used but the genre is also referred to as modern drama or spoken drama according to the context. Similarly, we use xiqu, traditional song-dance theatre or traditional opera, to refer to the traditional/indigenous Chinese theatre, which covers nearly 300 regional theatres in stylized song-dance form. We transliterate Chinese words in accordance with the standard pinyin system, and therefore write gongfu for Kung Fu and taiji for T’ai Chi; the sole exceptions to this rule are a few names that are better known in English in another form, such as the statesmen Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen, and institutions Peking University and Ping-Fong Acting Troupe. All Chinese names are written with the family name first and the given name second without a comma. Meanwhile we also follow the format of authors’ names in print. For example, it is Chen, Xiaomei, or Chung, Mingder in the bibliography while in the text they are Xiaomei Chen and Mingder Chung. In order to produce a more readable style in a book full of unfamiliar terms, we have attempted to add pinyin only to those key productions and important concepts. Chinese titles and the names of organizations (excluding those in the notes) are confined to the bibliography and glossary. There are two appendices: one is the chronology of major plays discussed in the book; one is a glossary. The Harvard referencing style is adopted and thus in the author-date system, only the surname or family name appears. However, if the author uses a penname we cite the full name, such as Cao Yu or Lao She.
Notes

1. When modern Chinese drama first appeared on the stage in 1907, it was referred to as wenmingxi (civilized drama, “civilized” read as “modern”) or xinju (new drama). The use of “huaju” denoting the nature of spoken drama did not appear until the 1920s and has become a formal term for the genre.

2. This statement is based on a few interviews with researchers and theatre practitioners, examples are: Li Ting, artistic director of the Sichuan People’s Art Theatre (September 28, 2012); Liao Xianghong, deputy president of the Central Academy of Drama (April 3, 2012); Liu Xinglin, stage designer (April 3, 2012), and Nick Rongjun Yu, playwright and the then Director of Marketing and Programming of Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre (May 6, 2011).
PART I

Revitalizing the Theatre:
New Approaches to Classical Plays
The two chapters of Part I examine, respectively, Wang Yansong’s 2006 version of Cao Yu’s *The Savage Land* (also translated as *The Wilderness*) produced by Tianjin People’s Art Theatre, and the Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio production of Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* (2006) directed by Lin Zhaohua with a cast headed by Pu Cunxin, one of the leading actors in huaju. Both chapters focus on the key points of the theatrical form: directing and acting.

These productions not only successfully presented classical works to today’s audiences but also, in differing ways, integrated traditional Chinese performing elements into the modern spoken-drama practice. Lin Zhaohua used the “narrative” style that he had discerned in the traditional Chinese storytelling/balladry to break up huaju’s normal adherence to the Stanislavski System that trains actors to believe “I am being” the character in the “here and now” given circumstances of the play. Wang Yansong’s method was to prune excessive realistic details of the original text in staging *The Savage Land* and this was similar to the xiqu aesthetic concept of “minimalism.” Yet Wang pointed out that the production’s highly symbolic set design, costumes, and blocking choices were no longer a simple reproduction of the “one table and two chairs” style of the traditional stage (Wang 2013b, p. 54). Indeed, his presentation demonstrated the specific “stage vocabulary” (p. 56) created on the basis of the enriched resources that he quarried from both the traditional Chinese and contemporary Western theatres. Hence, by analyzing the directing/acting “process” about how words in play scripts are transformed into stage images, both chapters tackle intriguing issues between xiqu and huaju, and the thorny topic of Sinicization, which has arisen repeatedly over the past 100 years of spoken drama’s history.

The argument for Sinicizing huaju, a theatrical form originating as a foreign import, was first raised by Yu Shangyuan (1897–1970) and his colleagues in 1926 during the “national drama movement”
To this group of young people, the Western realistic theatre focusing on producing everyday illusion lacked theatricality and paid no attention to audiences. They believed that Chinese spoken drama could be enriched by using the more colorful traditional song-dance theatre’s stage conventions (Yu 1927/1992).

In the 1920s, such ideas conflicted with most people’s concept of drama and play. Aiming to reform the old society and culture, modern spoken drama had appeared as a reaction toward Chinese indigenous musical theatre, which was regarded by young reformers as purely ornamental and entertaining with no social function. The May Fourth Movement, particularly the forums organized in 1918 by the radical journal *New Youth*, further widened the dichotomy between the naturalistic modern spoken “new drama” (*xinju*) and the nonmimetic traditional song-dance “old drama” (*jinju*). The debate was no longer limited to the theatre, but gained a broader cultural context, representing new and old, progressive and backward, naturalness and falseness. For both didactic and aesthetic reasons, radicals considered Western realist spoken drama superior to the Chinese stylized *xiqu*, and some extremists even denied the latter to be a “legitimized dramatic form” (Fu 1918, p. 324). Within this context, we can see the boldness and significance of the “national drama movement” led by Yu, a 29-year-old young man who had just completed his study of dramatic literature and theatre technology at Carnegie Mellon and Columbia Universities in the United States. Yet, Yu and his comrades were too busy with the ideological side to pay much attention to the practice. They seemed to have forgotten that the two theatres were aesthetically different though neither was superior to the other. In what way could these two theatres be blended? To take a simple example: How could a stylized *xiqu* movement like “cloud-hands” (*yunshou*)—with specific rules on how a male or a female role type should stand; on how they should stretch and turn their arms and with which hand; on when the hand should become a fist and when it should remain in the palm shape; on how far in height and width the hands ought to reach—be used in a mimetic presentation that spoken drama aimed at? Although the short-lived national drama movement met with skepticism among practitioners, it planted a seed of “re-examining and retuning to our own culture” in people’s minds and made a great contribution to modern Chinese drama: constructing an imported genre into China’s own *huaju*.

The theme of Sinicization recur a few times in the 1930s and 1940s, mainly in debates on the aesthetic side covering a wide range of topics from content and scenography to style of presentation. Scholars and practitioners expressed different views in a healthy discussion initiated by theatre makers themselves. This time practical work took place,
and the following two exemplified the practice: Gorky’s *The Lower Depths* was adapted into *Night Inn* (both stage and film versions); and *Wang Deming*, a spoken drama re-working of *Macbeth* used a Chinese historical figure from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–979 AD).² Both adaptations were well received by audiences.

After 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took over the mainland, the above artistic and aesthetically oriented discussions, like every aspect of the literature and art, were taken away by the authorities. From the late 1950s onward, the “huaju Sinicization” campaign started with a stamp of political correctness. Some practitioners simply followed the correct ideological line and produced uninspired work while others used the opportunity to make adventurous experiments, particularly on the stylistic side that Yu Shangyuan and his group did not do in the 1920s. The greatest achievement in this area was made by Jiao Juyin (1905–1975), the general director of Beijing People’s Art Theatre (BPAT). His Sinicized style of stage productions became BPAT’s house brand, and he trained a group of outstanding directors and actors including Lin Zhaohua (as discussed in chapter 2).

How *huaju* should learn from *xiqu* was raised again in the early 1980s, and this was a crucial topic in the heated debate about “the conception of theatre” (*xijuguan*), a term first raised in 1962 by Huang Zuolin (1906–1994),³ a British-trained director much influenced by Michel Saint-Denis’s work. Huang discussed the differences and overlapping ideas between Stanislavski, Brecht, and Mei Lanfang⁴ (an icon of *jingju*, representing the nonmimetic *xiqu* style). The early 1980s was a special period in contemporary China when the country had just emerged from the ten chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution and started to “open its door” to the outside world. For the first time since 1949, numerous foreign ideas (non-Marx-Leninism) were exposed to Chinese eyes, such as symbolism, cubism, structuralism, Existentialism, modernism, postmodernism, Freud’s idea of ego and Id and his psychoanalysis, Theatre of the Absurd, Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, et cetera. People were thirsty for knowledge; long queues formed outside bookstores in order to buy reprinted classics and works concerning the above-listed topics. Young *huaju* practitioners who often felt superior to those from *xiqu* were surprised to realize that a lot of their worshipped Western modernist idols had claimed that they had received nourishing resources from indigenous Asian cultures. No longer just a matter of political correctness, or of nationalism, in the 1980s modern spoken drama learning from the traditional song-dance theatre became, paradoxically, much motivated by the Western influence of the time. A group of practitioners started absorbing *xiqu* concepts and methods and
made good use of them. During this period, modern drama was full of experimental spirit; excellent productions emerged exploring new ideas and innovative styles.

The practice carried out by both Wang Yansong and Lin Zhaohua of integrating xiqu into huaju discussed in Part I demonstrates the impact of the fervent debates in the 1980s on the conception of theatre. It also illustrates the new features of “Sinicization,” because neither Wang nor Lin followed any of stylized “patterns” or conventions of xiqu. Instead, they boldly created hybrid theatricalities between xiqu and modern Western theatre for their huaju productions. Indeed, the development of huaju involved extensive struggle, negotiation, and compromise between formalized indigenous Chinese theatre and naturalistic Western drama. This feature can also be discerned in later chapters: for example, in chapter 3 about the historical drama Shang Yang, and in chapter 6 on the intermedial performance Flowers in the Mirror: Moon on the Water.

Notes

1. In 1918, one year before the May Fourth Movement took place, the New Youth journal published a special “Drama Issue,” which initiated fervent debates in the coming months on “old drama,” the indigenous song-dance theatre represented by jingju.
2. Detailed discussion of Wang Deming can be seen in Li Ruru (2004).
3. Further discussion on Huang Zuolin can be seen in Li Ruru (2003, pp. 121–127).
4. A male actor playing female roles, Mei toured Japan, the United States, and the USSR before 1949 and caused great sensation among non-Chinese theatre practitioners, scholars, and the general public, including Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Chaplin, and others. See Goldstein (2007).

Further Reading

After 70 Years, a Production That Redefines a *Huaju* Classic: Wang Yansong’s New Interpretation of *The Savage Land*

Siyuan Liu

At the upper center of a bare stage, we see the back of two figures dressed like terracotta warriors from the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) tombs (although in civilian clothes) with big papier-mâché heads. A man in a dirty gray shirt and pants (Chou Hu) pushes open their extended arms to enter a room. He calls in a hushed voice, “Daxing.” From stage right enters a man (Daxing) in an earthy yellow gown as if sleepwalking, murmuring, “How dark! How dark!” He is followed by three terracotta figures like the two already onstage. Another four terracotta figures enter from stage left, with the last one much shorter than the others, a child with a gigantic head. Daxing stops at center stage, calls out, “Jinzi” and turns to stage right murmuring, “My dagger, my dagger.” As he raises his dagger, Chou Hu grabs it, holds Daxing from behind, and stabs him. Immediately, the terracotta figures turn away from these two men, too horrified to look. Chou Hu stares at the pulled-out dagger, mumbles, “He’s done,” lays down Daxing’s body under stark white light, and collapses to the floor to Daxing’s right and front. A cellist sitting on upper stage left begins to play Mozart’s *Requiem* as the chorus (formed by the terracotta figures) stands in two vertical lines on either side of Daxing’s body and starts to sing the tune, “Ah, ah, ah . . . .” A young woman (Jinzi) in blazing red blouse and pants enters from upstage left, followed by
a blind old woman (Mother Jiao) in purple with an iron walking stick. Jinzi walks to Chou Hu on the right: “The blind, she’s following me.” Chou Hu tells her that the old woman is going to his room to kill him, but right now little Heizi—Mother Jiao’s grandson (Daxing’s son and Jinzi’s stepson)—is sleeping in his bed. As the two gasp with the horrible realization, Mother Jiao, who has already walked to center stage left behind the terracotta figure of the child (Heizi), hits it from behind. The child whimpers, turns around to reveal the other side of his face covered with needles and blood. Mother Jiao falls to the ground with a gut-wrenching cry: “Huzi [Chou Hu], Huzi, I know you are here. You are too vicious! Heaven won’t tolerate you!” With Chou Hu and Jinzi petrified on the ground, the eight terracotta figures resume singing *Requiem*, lift up Daxing’s body, and walk slowly off center stage, followed by Heizi’s figure with his huge and blood-streaked face.

This is the end of act 2, the climax of *The Savage Land* (Yuanye) by Cao Yu (1910–1996) in a 2006 production by Tianjin People’s Art Theatre under the direction of Wang Yansong. Written in 1937 on the heels of Cao Yu’s two striking successes in realistic mode—*Thunderstorm* (Leiyu, 1934) and *Sunrise* (Richu, 1936)—that marked Chinese modern spoken drama’s coming of age, *The Savage Land* has since the 1990s been considered by some critics as “the crown jewel of [his] ‘life trilogy’” (Qian 2007, p. 88). However, in contrast to the other two plays’ critical and stage triumph from the start, *The Savage Land* only solidified its canonical status in modern Chinese theatre seven decades after its premiere, first as dramatic literature by the 1990s, and then with Wang Yansong’s 2006 production that, according to one prominent scholar, will likely lead to “a new assessment of *The Savage Land*’s place in Cao Yu’s works and the general history of Chinese theatre” (Wang et al. 2006). In other words, Wang’s production finally canonized the play.

### A Mixed 70-Year History of Critical Reception and Production

The play starts with the prologue, when the protagonist Chou Hu breaks out from prison and returns to his home village to seek revenge against the Jiao family. Ten years earlier, Jiao Yanwang (“Yama”) had taken possession of Chou’s family land, buried his father alive, and sold his younger sister into prostitution, where she soon died. Chou learns from a simpleton, Bai Shazi (“fool”), that Jiao Yanwang is now dead, his wife Mother Jiao is blind, and Chou’s sweetheart Jinzi is
married to Jiao’s son Daxing, Chou’s childhood friend. We next see Daxing (a traveling merchant) takes leave from Jinzi and his blind mother, who fiercely hate each other. Chou Hu reunites with Jinzi for ten days of wild love while her husband is away from home. Act 1 starts on the tenth day. Blind Mother Jiao, suspicious of Jinzi’s affair and having sent a neighbor to bring Daxing back, interrogates Jinzi and, once left alone, thrusts a needle repeatedly into a voodoo doll, a wooden figurine resembling Jinzi. When Daxing returns, his mother tells him of the affair, making him beat Jinzi; but Chou Hu stops him and formally announces his return. Taking place at nine that evening, act 2 involves a series of verbal confrontations between the four major characters, leading to the offstage murders of Daxing and Heizi (yet, Wang’s version brings these murders onstage as seen at the beginning of the chapter). In act 3, Chou Hu and Jinzi escape at night through a dark forest, hoping to catch the train beyond it to the place “covered with gold.” However, the forest makes Chou Hu see ghostly figures: his own father and sister; his prison gang; Daxing; Jiao Yanwang; and demons of the netherworld. The couple is also hounded by Mother Jiao’s haunting calls for Heizi’s soul as well as gunshots and drumbeats from the pursuing sheriffs. In the end, Chou Hu pushes Jinzi away and kills himself with the dagger in the forest.

Multiple factors contributed to the play’s tortuous road to canonization. Despite its tremendous tragic power through characterization, dialogue, and stage directions, the play on the surface is a combination of theatrical realism in the first two-thirds and expressionism in the final act following Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*. While some early reviewers, such as the famous writer Yu Dafu, praised it as an intensely powerful symbolic play that surpassed its realistic predecessors (Yu 1939/1991, p. 890), many criticized it as muddled realism that mystified peasant revenge and, after 1949, as misrepresenting class struggle, the era’s paramount paradigm for rural-themed literature. This negative assessment has changed since the 1980s when the taboo against literary modernism was lifted, allowing literary scholars to view it as the true poem of Cao Yu’s heart in depicting uncontrollable desire and hatred through expressionist and symbolic techniques, especially the repressed power of the savage land, the “seventh character” beyond the play’s six roles (Qian 2007, p. 92). This interpretation of *The Savage Land* is inspired by Cao Yu’s criticism of productions of *Thunderstorm* that ignored the invisible “ninth character”: “a strong man called Thunderstorm,” whose spirit should infuse the performance to prevent “lifeless figures jumping in and out” (Cao Yu 1966, epilogue p. 5).
Indeed, it was largely due to Wang Yansong’s addition of the nine terracotta figures as the “seventh character” that *The Savage Land* finally became a masterpiece on stage, 70 years after the play’s premiere. Together with other staging tactics, Wang was able to accentuate the play’s archetypal and tragic core that had eluded all previous directors, including Cao Yu himself, who had directed it in 1939. In fact, the chasm between the author’s vision and available staging techniques for his and subsequent generations of Chinese directors was so irreconcilable that even before its premiere in 1937, he cautioned that while *Thunderstorm* and *Sunrise* were certain hits, professional productions of *The Savage Land* would be doomed by its character complexity and technical challenges (Tian 1988, p. 215). In 1983, Cao Yu wrote in a letter on an upcoming production in Sichuan that he “agonized for the artists,” that they should not “make the audience itching to leave, as if in a nightmare” (p. 464). Ten years after Cao Yu passed away, Wan Fang, his daughter and adapter of the play’s opera version (1988), finally witnessed in Wang’s production “all that atmosphere, that mysteriousness, those heavy, dark and savage elements” and felt they had all existed in her father’s mind (Wang et al. 2006).

Wang was the first director to interpret the play’s theme as the inescapable trap of hatred: “the temptation of eternal desire,” ‘the bondage of souls that do not die,’… the frustration and bitterness of humanity” (Wang 2013a, p. 50). As evidenced in the murder scene cited at the beginning of this chapter, the terracotta figures functioned as a chorus in the Greek sense by introducing a ritualistic and tragic dimension. The murder scene also points to Wang’s other effective stage tactics, starting with the onstage cello performance that, in this scene, transcended the staging from 1930s rural China toward a universal condemnation of savagery with Mozart’s *Requiem*. Furthermore, Wang’s insightful reading of the play’s tragic core allowed him to reduce the 85,000-word script to 33,000 words, removing much of its naturalistic detail. The murder scene in Wang’s version involves about 40 lines and runs five minutes in performance, a dramatic reduction from the original 100 lines. Finally, Wang employed minimalist and symbolic blocking and design to highlight the inevitability of hatred, as evidenced in this scene by staging the double murders in front of the audience. These tactics shocked the audience with their direct, visual potency and helped the actors externalize their inner world as primal animals of the savage land.

In the following passages, I will further discuss these three key factors to Wang’s success: his judicious excision of the script; the terracotta figures as the chorus; and his minimalist and symbolic design
and blocking, particularly his use of only two benches through most of act 2 to effectively block five verbal battles between the four major characters.

"Cao Yu’s Dialogue Is Enough for Me"—Cutting the Script

On the first day of rehearsal, Wang asked the stage manager to read Cao Yu’s 1983 letter concerning Sichuan People’s Art Theatre’s planned production. In it he advised them to

"cut and change at will and not stage it as my original script. [...] The Prologue and act 3 especially need deep cuts. The script reads as dramatic but often appears static and exasperating on stage. There are five scenes in act 3, very hard to stage. Without some dynamic, playful, fluid, and romantic approach, it’s better to only keep the final bits between Chou Hu and Jinzi, a few lines, several moving gestures, and remove the rest completely—never stage all five scenes; that is dangerous. [...] The third act should only leave an impression. Once realistic, it will be excruciatingly dragging and tiring for both the actors and the audience. (Tian 1988, p. 464; Wang 2013a, p. 50)

A comparison between Wang’s act 3 and Cao Yu’s letter reveals how closely Wang followed the latter’s advice. Wang’s act 3 kept only 3,000 words of the original 23,000, just 13 minutes of performance on stage. Yet, it was truly dynamic and fluid, without any scene changes and with the terracotta figures performing the menacing dark forest, Heizi’s ghost haunting Chou Hu, and demons from hell finally breaking down Chou Hu’s spirit and forcing him to see the demon in his heart that prevented him from escaping the forest. It preserved Mother Jiao’s horrifying calls for Heizi’s soul as the giggling fool Bai Shazi led her through the forest. The play ended with a highly symbolic image of Jinzi, having crawled through the gigantic and moving train wheels held by the figures, sitting up behind Chou Hu’s corpse, despondent yet defiant, with her upper body straight and head high, looking forward as the lights dim. This highly creative staging left an indelible impression on the audience, clearly capturing the essence of Chou Hu’s psychological breakdown and the engulfing power of the savage land while avoiding all the pitfalls of a realistic rendition (see figure 1.1).

While cutting over 20,000 words in act 3 was the most drastic of Wang’s judicious excisions of the script, his elision of another 30,000