

Hong Shen and the Modern Mediasphere in Republican-Era China: An Introduction

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Often considered a pioneer in modern Chinese theater and film, Hong Shen (1894–1955) was an important agent in the growth of both fields as a playwright/screenwriter, translator/adaptor, director, educator, and theorist. Compared to Tian Han and Ouyang Yuqian, the other so-called *huaju* (spoken drama) “founding fathers,” however, Hong has received far less attention both in scholarly studies and in narratives of modern Chinese theater and film histories. Film scholars have generally limited their discussion of Hong to his 1930 protest of the anti-Chinese Hollywood film *Welcome Danger*, whereas *huaju* studies have tended to reiterate his appropriation of expressionist techniques from Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* in his play *Zhao Yanwang* (Yama Zhao, 1922), his introduction of gender-appropriate casting at the Shanghai Xiju xieshe (Shanghai Stage Society) in 1924, and his sinicized adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in the same year.

To the extent that his playwriting and dramatic theories are discussed, “the legacy of Hong,” as Xiaomei Chen (2014: 229) observes, “will likely continue in the PRC as a founding father of a realist theater most useful for political propaganda.” For Chen, though, the discussion of his so-called

“utilitarian concept of theater . . . failed to note that Hong’s rich and multi-faceted thoughts on theater practice defy easy classification either in terms of ‘isms’ or ‘schools,’ and cannot be simply interpreted as either politically or artistically oriented.” In fact, Hong “allowed his dramatic characters to behave in socially acceptable ways while exploring their multi-voiceness to destabilize the prevailing ideology” (229).

Chen’s call for a new assessment of Hong Shen’s ideological complexity corresponds with other recent developments in Hong Shen scholarship, including an annotated chronicle of Hong’s life and work by his daughter Hong Qian (Hong 2011) and the 2013 Hong Shen Project at The Ohio State University (OSU), which was composed of a revival of his English play *The Wedded Husband* (first staged at OSU in 1919), a screening of his film *Xinjiu Shanghai* (Shanghai old and new), and the symposium “Hong Shen and the Modern Mediasphere in Republican Era China.” The production and the symposium were the impetus for this special issue, which presents six essays charting new approaches to Hong Shen’s pioneering participation in and contributions to the modern Chinese mediasphere. Making use of new sources, methodologies, and perspectives, the essays challenge existing narratives and expand our assessment of Hong’s place in modern Chinese cultural production.

Several of the essays examine Hong’s ideological complexity through new archival evidence from recently digitized Republican-era newspapers and magazines. Xuelel Huang, for instance, uses digitized tabloid newspapers and magazines to demonstrate that although Hong is well known for his three arrests in the 1930s resulting from his *Welcome Danger* protest and his alliance with the left-wing literature and art movement, he “wavered between old and new, left and right, elite and popular” (p. 13) and could be included among such disparate groups as “the new intellectuals, those working in the field of popular culture (especially the film industry), and the pro-right intellectuals and cultural officials” (p. 24). Considering such equivocality common among intellectuals of the

era, Huang suggests that the depiction of Hong as a pro-left intellectual who rejected the Nationalist right is a product of the 1980s when his old friends Xia Yan, Ma Yanxiang, and others revisited Hong's political credentials as a way of restoring their own reputations in the wake of the chaotic Cultural Revolution. This construction is undermined, however, by contemporary records, which show that Hong maintained subtle and complicated relationships with both Communists and Nationalists, and never "broke away" from the latter.

Huang's debunking of Hong's supposed left turn in the early 1930s corresponds to Liang Luo's recent complication of the "left-turn" narrative surrounding another *huaju* pioneer, Tian Han, whose "case illustrates how the scholarly fixation on the rhetoric of conversion (i.e., from art to politics) misses the point, namely, the continual interweaving of performance and politics and the avant-garde and the popular in the intellectual climate of this period" (Luo 2014: 76). Huang's and Luo's contentions force us to rethink the long-held story that the impending Japanese invasion and the sharpening ideological split between the Nationalists and the Communists resulted in a left turn in the early 1930s cultural sphere.

Two other essays in this issue trace Hong's ideological divergence from the May Fourth ethos of the late 1910s and the socially conscious *aimeiju* (amateur theater) of the 1920s. In "When S/He Is Not Nora: Hong Shen, Cosmopolitan Intellectuals, and Chinese Theaters in 1910s China and America," Man He examines the creative and ideological genealogy of Hong's 1919 *The Wedded Husband*—from its origins in the sentiment (*qing*)-infused short story "Yilü ma" (A strand of hemp, 1909), by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writer Bao Tianxiao; to the *jingju* (Beijing opera) version, by Mei Lanfang, and its antifeudal ending; and to the *wenmingxi* (civilized drama) version that was faithful to Bao's original emphasis on *qing*. Using material from the OSU archives about the original production and its use of a gender-appropriate and mixed-race cast, Man He argues that Hong, in an attempt to showcase Chinese virtues to his American audience,

chose to focus on such traditional values as *zhong* (loyalty) and *xiao* (filial piety). *The Wedded Husband* considerably complicates the progressive/modern vs. conservative/traditional dichotomy with the third element of a “hostile” West. Faced with the task of presenting to his American audience a “new” China only several years into the Republican era, Hong chose to stage a world in which modernity and tradition coexisted, a stark contrast to the core antifeudal message of Hu Shi’s *Zhongshen dashi* (A main event in life), which was published in the same year *The Wedded Husband* was staged. That Hong chose to include *A Main Event in Life* as the first play in the drama volume of *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of modern Chinese literature, 1935), thus contributing to the narrative of *huaju*’s antitraditionalism, and not *The Wedded Husband* attests to the latter’s ideological complexity and serves as a reminder of the heterogeneous beginnings of modern Chinese theater.

In “Hong Shen and Adaptation of Western Plays in Modern Chinese Theater,” I complicate Hong’s ideological stance while in Shanghai—which he returned to in 1922 after studying playwriting at Harvard and living in New York—by highlighting his preference for Broadway hits over *aimeiju*’s single-issue one-acts. I trace the genealogies of Hong’s productions at the Shanghai Stage Society and the Fudan student drama club (A1 Workshop) to their predominantly Broadway roots and provide detailed analyses of Hong’s theorization and practice of “sinicized adaptations,” particularly that of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. I argue that Hong’s adaptations, together with his theoretical defense of the practice and his mentoring of young adapters, made “adaptation” the de facto method in China for producing Western plays, thus providing invaluable breathing room for *huaju*’s largely inexperienced practitioners to stage contemporary Western hits without worrying about negotiating the significant cultural distance and technical demands of staging these plays in their original *mise en scène*.

In addition to drawing attention to Hong’s complex ideological positioning and his contribution to *huaju*’s development through sinicized

adaptations, essays in this issue challenge conventional narratives of Hong's role in *huaju* gender performance, particularly in ending female impersonation with gender-appropriate casting at the Stage Society in 1923. In my essay, I counter such claims by pointing out that all-male or all-female casts remained a common practice after 1923 in school productions, which were fertile ground of future *huaju* practitioners. In "Hong Shen and the 'Natural Death' of Female Impersonation," Megan Ammirati examines the Freudian roots of Hong's aversion to female impersonation and contends that his gender-appropriate casting in 1923 "straightened" the fluidity of gender performance in early twentieth-century *huaju* and led to more essentialized and eroticized performance than in traditional theater. Hong's choice, therefore, serves as a reminder that the rejection of female impersonation in modern theater was always a negotiated process that involved "cultural capital, historical visibility, and theoretical positioning" (p. 195). But Ammirati also complicates Hong's stance on gender performance by arguing that *Yama Zhao*—the all-male soldier play Hong wrote as a way of avoiding, or such is the conventional view, the use of female impersonation at a time before actresses were able or willing to perform onstage—"still embraces the notion that a man may assume feminine identities onstage" through two "ghost" scenes. In one scene, the main male character, Zhao Da, assumes the voice of an old woman he had murdered; in the other, also a reflection of Zhao Da's delusional mind, a young woman (played by a man in the original 1922 production) is interrogated in a Qing dynasty court. Such borrowing from the performance vocabulary of traditional theater introduces a view of gender performance less essentialist than that expressed in Hong's later writings and challenges his supposed linear march toward gender-appropriate casting and speech-only performance.

Also included in the issue are two essays that examine Hong's broader contribution to the modern Chinese mediasphere. In "Reading Hong Shen Intermedially," Liang Luo discusses six Hong Shen books on drama and

film published between 1933 and 1943: two anthologies, *Hong Shen xiqu ji* (Collected plays of Hong Shen) and *Hong Shen xiju lunwen ji* (Essays on theater by Hong Shen), and four pedagogical manuals and handbooks, *Dianying shuyu cidian* (Dictionary of film terminology), *Dianying xiju biao'anshu* (Techniques of film and theater performance), *1100 ge jiben hanzi shiyong jiaoxuefa* [or *Jiben hanzi*] (Pedagogy for the application of 1100 basic Chinese characters), and *Xi de nianci he shi de langsong* (Theatrical elocution and poetic recitation). For Luo, these latter works reflect a distinct pedagogical impulse in Hong for the emerging fields of theater and film performance, play and script writing, and technology, in addition to popular education through vernacular, even Latinized, Chinese. Highlighting “both the constructive power of the ‘mediasphere’ and its connection to the Althusserian conception of ‘ideology,’” Luo views all six works as an “interconnected story about Hong Shen’s effort to consolidate emerging fields of cultural practices from the 1930s to the 1940s” (p. 211). Luo’s emphasis on mediasphere reminds us of the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the intricately connected cultural productions promoted by intellectuals such as Hong Shen and Tian Han. Well versed in modernist aesthetics and eager to contribute to the emergent modern theater and film, they were also vanguards of using media for mass education and mobilization. In this sense, the notion of “mediasphere,” which is part of the title of this special issue, provides a useful framework for considering the broad spectrum of Hong’s works and those of his peers.

In the final essay of the issue, “Hong Shen, Behavioral Psychology, and the Technics of Social Effects,” Weihong Bao examines some of the same works, and others, from another illuminating perspective—that of media studies—by tracing the influence of behavioral psychology, engineering design, and modernist aesthetics Hong encountered during his US years on his acting and directing manuals. Bao uses the term “technics,” following Lewis Mumford’s usage of the term as “both technique (craft, art, skill) and technology.” The focus on technics allows Bao to link Hong Shen’s work

in wartime propaganda with his artistic creation: “This thread in Hong Shen’s theory of theater and film . . . connects his interest in the technics of the two media with his desire for social effects, evolving around the aesthetic design and engineering of affect, hence binding the creative process of the production, transmission, and management of affect with the creation and channeling of social effect” (250). Furthermore, Bao links Hong’s discussion of technics with Jamesian behaviorism to explain his “model of creative control to achieve social effects and serve the wartime mobilization in terms of its proximity to models of information control and social control” (p. 285). By focusing on the motivation and technics of social control, Bao’s reading, therefore, points to a plausible way to move beyond Hong’s supposed “utilitarian concept of theater,” mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, and to see it as an organic development of the interconnections among his studies in the US, his artistic creation, and his work in wartime mobilization.

Together, the six essays in this special issue cover Hong Shen’s creative life from 1919 to the 1940s. They provide new evidence for and evaluations of his significant contribution to the modern Chinese mediasphere and seek to destabilize conventional narratives of his role as a *huaju* “founding father.” By availing themselves of works not included in the four-volume *Hong Shen wenji* (Collected works of Hong Shen, 1957–1959), which had long been the main source for Hong Shen scholarship, these essays give us a much better understanding of important facets of Hong’s cultural work: the links between his US studies and his ideological complexity; his gender politics; his adaptation and production choices; his pedagogical impulses; and his investment in mass education and mobilization. The authors have dramatically broadened the scope of research on this neglected cultural figure by treating pedagogical and theoretical texts that have rarely been discussed or analyzed in any detail. They have also reframed Hong’s contribution to and place in modern Chinese cultural production by emphasizing the gender-normative effect of his casting practices at the

Shanghai Stage Society on *huaju* dramaturgy and performance, the critical significance of sinicized adaptations to *huaju*'s development, the wide spectrum and heterogeneity of his ideological choices and personal and political associations, and his engagement with the Chinese mediasphere in terms of modernist aesthetics, behaviorism, and engineering design.

These are some of the core issues that define the modern Chinese mediasphere, and Hong Shen's experience is far more typical than we might first imagine. Focusing on a single cultural figure, as we have done here, reveals much about the heterogeneity of cultural production in Republican China, the inadequacy of ideologically and politically driven labels and narratives to capture that heterogeneity, and the fundamentally cross-cultural and transnational nature of Chinese cultural modernity. Hopefully, the reframing and revisionism that have shaped these essays will lead to yet more new thinking in our research on and teaching of modern Chinese theater, film, and cultural production as a whole.

Bibliography

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