

trained systematically began to flood to society, resulting in the enhancement of overall performance levels and the intensification of market competition. All these factors pointed to a more attractive and ornamental style of performance. *Xiwen* was an exact product. However, what is surprising was that once it was born, it already possessed all the elements required for a mature theater, like an artistic peak towering out of a flat land.

The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie was not merely a form of combined speech and song but a full-fledged theater. It was a typical prosopopeia in genre and narrative method, providing an essential condition to mature theater. It also possessed a complete music structure with southern tune as its main body, blazing a brilliant road to Chinese theater.

It was true that *xiwen* including *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie* was closely related to the art of singing with speaking in the Tang and Song dynasties. Dozens of theater scripts, whose themes and story framework, as well as their main characters were repeated countless times by artists on the stage and were well known to the audience. After transformation and refinement, they quickly evolved into theaters. Their development track was clearly visible.

Xiwen, *bianwen* and *zhu gongdiao* bore a clear relationship of inheritance. However, they had differences that lay in their genre. While *bianwen* and *zhu gongdiao* were narratives, *xiwen* was prosopopeia. The genre disparity differentiated theater from the art of singing and speaking. In the latter form, there were one or two narrators conveying the message of others by using the third person, instead of being the characters in the story. On the contrary, actors in theater pretended to play roles of characters in the story and used the first person to sing and speak. With the same story framework and the same characters, but differentiated in means of expression, the art of singing and speaking and theater were clearly distinct.

However, what was more interesting was that in the script of *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie*, we can find some tracks left by the



evolution from *zhu gongdiao* into *xiwen*. The opening scenes were similar to *zhu gongdiao*. An actor performed in the style of *zhu gongdiao* and urged the audience to be quiet for a moment and stop laughing. He then interpreted how the script came into being, adapted from the original *zhu gongdiao* work *The Biography of Zhang Xie* (*Zhang Xie Zhuang Yuan Zhuan*). The purpose of the adaptation was to win a competition and change the genre of the performance. It was then followed by performances by many actors playing different roles. As a result, the transformation from narrative to prosopopeia or from the art of singing and speaking to theater was complete. In an era when the audience was accustomed to narrative, theater was still quite ready to emerge. Therefore, it was a matter of course that much necessary groundwork had to be done before a grand show.

In *xiwen*, actors played dramatic characters. From the Southern Song, Chinese theater began to adopt a typical role-playing system.

In *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie*, *sheng* (a male lead), *dan* (a female lead), *jing* (a supporting male lead), *chou* (the jester) and *mo* (a male role) were all in place, and sometimes, would be supplemented by *wai* (a spare role), when the main roles had to be played by more than one person at the same time. In *The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie*, a *sheng* played the role of Zhang, while the poor maiden was played by the *dan*. However, an actor was not confined to one dramatic character; on the contrary, he was free to take the role of two or three characters, as long as there was no need for these characters to be on stage at one time. In the above theater, *mo*, *jing* and *chou* all appear frequently, taking part in multiple scenes.

The typical system of role-play in Chinese theater could find its full expression in the theater script. In most occasions, *jing* and *chou* were responsible for fun parts, considered as descendents of *canjun* and *canghu* in the era of *canjun* opera. *Mo* played an even more crucial role as a guide, who, from time to time, jumped out of the theater to introduce the event, make some comments and glamorize the atmosphere. He was also able to play the role of



Role-play system

The role-play system was an important and special system in Chinese traditional opera, related to the formation of theatrical troupes and the division of actors. It originated from *canjun* opera, in which only two actors had performances. As the number of characters in Song Jin *zaju* increased, artists began to duly assume their respective duties. The system in which different artists impersonate different types of dramatic characters was referred to as "role-play." From the original theatrical troupes, actors, without exception performed fixed roles such as *sheng*, *dan*, *jing*, *chou*, or *mo*. Plots became more complex, however, and it often occurred that when two or even more dramatic characters of the same type had to be on stage at the same time, the theatrical troupe had to be enlarged. However, actors of the same type of roles were in an unequal status. For example, when two *dan* were needed in one theater, such as a mistress and a maiden servant, the much more important role, namely a mistress was played by *dan*, and the lesser one by *tie dan*.

narrator.

From the Song Dynasty onwards, when actors performed on stage, roles rather than characters in the theater were specified, for instance, *sheng* or *dan* was marked instead of Zhang Xie or the poor maiden; and it was no exception when one actor played the role of more than one character, since he could introduce himself or be introduced so as to be known. That's why the script of Chinese theater served as a clue for actors to play on the stage, rather than a text for reading.

Take an example of the role-play system. The script was not supposed to be read by the audience since it did not really provide information about the event or the destiny of the characters. Instead, it offered tips for actors about who was the next to go on stage, what should he sing or speak on stage and how he could act.

The No.1 Scholar Zhang Xie was endowed with the typical stage art form in Chinese theater, that is, the scene where the dramatic event occurred was revealed by a virtual performance. Here is a typical example. When Zhang was seriously injured by the bandits in Wuji Mountain and escaped to the nearby temple, the dramatic setting was changed into *jing*, *mo* and *chou*, playing respectively the role of Mountain God, the judge and the clown. When Zhang entered the temple, *jing* ordered *mo* and *chou* to change into two temple doors. As he pushed the door, what he pushed was actually *mo* and *chou*. Since Zhang was badly wounded, he had to lean against the door when it was closed, and leaned on *chou*. Later, when the poor maiden returned to the temple, she had to knock at the door which was cushioned by Zhang, and *chou*,





A male *chou* and a female *chou*.

impersonating the door, made the sound as a knock on the door. When the poor maiden made the movement of knocking, *chou* even said, “you could also knock on the other door.” On the wedding day, *mo* takes the role of Uncle Li, while *jing* is Aunt Li, and *chou* the waiter. However, at the wedding reception, *chou*, the former waiter, bows to one knee and braces himself to the ground with two hands, serving as a table for dinner. When Zhang Xie, the poor maiden, Uncle Zhang, and Aunt Li drink the wine, the table begins to sing: “I bow from the waist to serve you, so may you be kind to offer with me some wine drink?”

Such performances, to be sure, teased the audience but also demonstrated a typical stage pattern of Chinese theater. The virtual performance on the stage, or a typical mean where complicated stage props were replaced by performances, was born during the Song Dynasty and lasts to the present day.

From the 20th century, Chinese theatrical scholars reached a consensus on referring to the typical theatrical form which contained full stories, facing the audience to act by using multiple vehicles including singing, dancing and speaking as *xiqu*.

With the emergence of *xiwen*, Chinese theater successfully evolved into a pattern. If *xiqu* is considered as representative of Chinese theater, then, all those simple and primitive plays of the past thousand years serve as its foreshadow. During the Ming



(1368–1644) and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties, artists were used to calling the small-sized *xinong* and musical dance “small opera,” differentiating them from large-scale “big opera.”

The Prosperity of Yuan *Zaju*

In the 13th century, the Mongols destroyed the Southern Song Dynasty, and established a unified Yuan Dynasty. After that, Mongols ruled the Han people, especially those in the south with an iron hand. But even so, Yuan witnessed the most important development in Chinese theater history.

During the Yuan Dynasty, *zaju* was prevalent, especially during the most prosperous cities such as Kaifeng, Luoyang and Lin’an.

A systematic official prostitute system was born during the Song and Tang dynasties, when the singing girls were responsible for amusing officials at the command of the court or local government, and were permitted to put on some commercial performances. During the Yuan Dynasty, *zaju* became the mainstream dramatic form and was played by the prestigious singing girls. Affected by the singing girls, artist groups engaged in traveling entertainment show appeared.

Zaju then spread throughout the country, and even into rural areas. The Yuan Dynasty left a good number of classic *zaju* works and was a peak in the history of Chinese literature, whose literary value was no less than that of any time in history. Many talented scholars didn’t involve in politics because of the social unrest. Instead, they hung out with the artists in the lower social class all year around and wrote script for them, which unintentionally contributed to the prosperity of Chinese theater.

Yuan *zaju* was also referred to as northern tune *zaju*, in contrast with southern tune *xiwen*. In Song and Yuan dynasties, there existed a sharp difference in music and theater between South and North. Certainly, southern tune *xiwen* was born earlier than northern tune *zaju*, however, the latter was distinct in its musical system without

