

LEARNING *YUZHOU FENG* (SWORD OF THE COSMOS):  
A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF THE ART OF  
MEI LANFANG

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When I was granted a half-year sabbatical leave for the winter and spring quarters of 2010, I immediately decided that I would use this time to go to China to study *Jingju* 京劇 (Beijing opera) performance with a professional teacher. The desire had been there for a long time, and the timing of this opportunity could not have been more optimal. I had dabbled at learning the singing and physical movement of *Jingju* since the early 1990s through a local amateur opera club, and had occasionally invited and supported Chinese opera professionals in one-time college productions and workshops, but I had not seriously pursued *Jingju* performance for myself until eight years ago, when I became acquainted with a group of recently emigrated Chinese opera artists and musicians scattered around the U.S. Meeting these displaced professional artists, whose nostalgic comments on any aspect of the opera would instantly plunge my mind into some abyss of cognitive mystery, opened my eyes to a new world of aesthetic vision and intellectual contemplation. I began to realize that, in tackling this classical performance genre, no amount of scholarly reading, objective investigation, or creative association can get me close to the heart and essence of its complex artistry. What I really needed, as a first step into that new world of cognition, was a period of intense study with a professional *Jingju* teacher.

What follows is the narrative documentation of such an intense study. In this narrative, I will make a conscious effort to stay true to my original intention, which was to reach the heart and essence of the art of *Jingju* through personal and direct experiences, and not through secondary reading or theorization. Since it is meant to be a first-hand account of a

field study, the narrative will not abide by any structural rubric conventionally adopted for a systematic explanation of *Jingju* performance, but will instead follow the sequence of my actual areas of study in roughly chronological order. For each area, I will describe the particular challenges and hardships I encountered pertaining to that area. Such descriptions should not be taken as an indulgence of personal feelings; they are simply meant to demonstrate the true nature and process of a grueling artistic work under strict demands and severe discipline. The goal of this article is to share a genuine artistic journey—with all its immediacy of actions and rawness of emotions—and not at all, as will be re-stated at the end, to generate a summative observation or objective conclusion about the particular art that was the focus of study.

Before this sabbatical, I had studied with a number of professional *Jingju* teachers in the past, even performed a couple of relatively sophisticated pieces that they had taught me, but that study had usually been fairly disorganized and unavoidably interrupted by my teaching responsibilities. As I planned to conduct a more intensive study during my sabbatical, I very seriously pondered the questions of the choice of teacher and learning institution. For years I have struggled with finding a teacher who can offer me the kind of education I need within a limited amount of time. Although my artistic training in Beijing opera is far from solid, I do have a lifelong fascination with its art, a sturdy academic background in theatre, and a huge appetite for learning. I have also always nursed a strong interest in the school of Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1961), one of the most famous male performers of female roles in *Jingju*.

Mei Lanfang's fame and achievements corresponded with the arrival of *Jingju*'s "golden age" in China during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> As one of the many male performers of female roles who contributed to the maturity of *Jingju* during this golden age,<sup>2</sup> Mei was

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<sup>1</sup> On the historical and cultural background of the "golden age" of *Jingju*, c. 1917–c. 1937, see Ma Shaobo 馬少波 et al., eds., *Zhongguo Jingju shi* 中國京劇史 (History of Beijing Opera in China), 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju, 1999), 2: 607–817.

<sup>2</sup> Mei is generally regarded as one of the four great male performers of female roles (*si da mingdan* 四大名旦) in *Jingju* history. For the differences in style between the four great male performers of female roles—Mei, Shang Xiaoyun 尚小雲 (1900–1976), Cheng Yanqiu 程硯秋 (1904–1958), and Xun Huisheng 荀慧生 (1900–1968)—see Ren Mingyao 任明耀, *Jingju qipa si da mingdan* 京劇奇葩四大名旦 (The Extraordinary Blooms of *Jingju*, the Four Great Male Performers of Female Roles; Nanjing: Dongnan daxue, 1994).

noted for his successful incorporation of modern sensitivities and traditional aesthetics into the established conventions of *Jingju*,<sup>3</sup> leading to his unique “school” of performance style and aesthetics. Through his signature operas, such as *Guifei zuijiu* 貴妃醉酒 (The Imperial Consort Becomes Intoxicated), *Bawang bieji* 霸王別姬 (The Hegemon King Says Farewell to his Consort), *Feng huan chao* 鳳還巢 (The Phoenix Returns to Its Nest), and *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒 (The Cosmic Sword),<sup>4</sup> Mei Lanfang introduced and engraved on the minds of Chinese theater-goers an array of “classic” Chinese women who came to exemplify native Chinese qualities of feminine charm and elegance. These operas of the Mei school also contain many famous arias unanimously regarded as examples of *Jingju*’s musical genius.

What struck me as the signature characteristic of Mei Lanfang’s art, as long witnessed in the performances of many Mei-school artists live or on video, is the sense of ease, grace, smoothness, and natural fluidity that appears to prevail over and penetrate into every aspect of the performance. Although all *Jingju* performance is built upon the same fundamental principles, the Mei style definitely entails exceptional levels of subtlety and exquisiteness on stage. Before this sabbatical, I had not been able to seriously pursue the uniqueness of the Mei art due to the unavailability of teachers. This time, driven by a genuine, idealistic aspiration to reach and understand the core values of the art of the Mei school, I decided to be very particular in terms of the teacher’s qualifications: I was earnestly looking for some master/artist—not just any professional—who not only had substantial knowledge and practical experience with the performance and teaching of Mei Lanfang’s art, but also possessed a sophisticated

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<sup>3</sup> The one, out of Mei’s many literati friends, most directly responsible for the elevation and theorization of Mei’s art was Qi Rushan 齊如山 (1875–1962). See Qi Rushan 齊如山, *Qi Rushan wencun* 齊如山文存 (Preserved Writings of Qi Rushan; Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu, 2009), pp. 10 – 21, for selections from his initial correspondence to Mei, in which he suggested that Mei make major changes to the traditional performance style he had been trained in. For a summary of their friendship and working relationship, see Chen Jiyong 陳紀滢, *Qi Rulao yu Mei Lanfang* 齊如老與梅蘭芳 (Qi Rushan and Mei Lanfang; Taipei: Zhuanji wenxue, 1980). On Qi Rushan’s importance to the elevation of *Jingju* as an art worthy to represent China on the world stage, see Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-Creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> This play is often referred to in English as “Beauty Defies Tyranny,” which attempts to summarize the content rather than translate the title. As we will see, the sword mentioned in the title has fairly little to do with the play as presently performed.

ability—and the extraordinary patience—to articulate and transmit the necessary knowledge and practice to a heady disciple with so little basic training.

It was also important that I find a teacher who was associated with a major opera school, because a significant part of my study would involve observation of, or even participation in, the curricular activities of a regular, mainstream *Jingju* school in China. I believed those activities would help broaden my understanding of the world of *Jingju* in general. There were several choices available at the time, and after sorting through all my notes, personal impressions, and recommendations by friends, I decided to go with Ms. Lu Yiping 陸義萍 of Shanghai, and base my learning at the Shanghai School of Chinese Opera (Shanghai xiqu xuexiao 上海戲曲學校), where Teacher Lu teaches in the style of Mei Lanfang.

### **The Teacher**

I had briefly interacted with Ms. Lu Yiping twice before and felt a strong connection with her both times. In 2007, I visited the Shanghai School of Chinese Opera for the first time. Having never met her before, I was invited to sit in her classrooms and observed her teaching for two days. The same year, in Los Angeles, I met her again by chance, watched her teach amateur performers, and received a couple of short, personal lessons on singing from her. Teacher Lu struck me as a strict and demanding teacher. With her young students at the professional school, she was relentlessly detailed and precise in her demands and instructions. All her students, despite looking a bit scared of her in class, seemed to genuinely and deeply adore her. However, what really impressed me during these initial encounters was the very personal, straightforward, and enthusiastic engagement she displayed with her non-professional students. During our first singing lesson, with her carefully correcting my pronunciation and guiding my voice, I could feel that she was really interested in me, and *wanted* to teach me. There was something very endearing about her teaching style and manner; this was obviously someone who enjoys teaching and cares about her students, whoever and whatever they are, the qualities great teachers possess no matter the age or culture they teach in.

That is not the only thing about her that impressed me. During the few meetings in 2007, I could tell that she was both eloquent and knowledgeable, and, better yet in my opinion, never employed superfluous verbiage or dabbled in abstract theorization. She knew exactly what she wanted from the students, and she had a lot of concrete stuff to offer.

Honestly, I cannot say that for every *Jingju* teacher I have met. For the first time in many years, the unique characteristics of the Mei style of singing made sense to me via her incisive instruction and explanation. After checking out her background, I was not surprised at her easy exhibition of insight and acumen. She had graduated from The National School of Chinese Theatre Arts (Zhongguo xiqu xuexiao 中國戲曲學校)<sup>5</sup> in the late 1960s, and was assigned to the Shanghai *Jingju* Company (Shanghai *Jingju* yuan 上海京劇院) in 1970. After coming to that company, she received instruction on performing the lead roles of plays of the Mei school repertoire from Wei Lianfang 魏蓮芳 (1910–1998), who was generally regarded as the first personal disciple (*da dizi* 大弟子) of Mei Lanfang, and became the personal disciple of Li Yuru 李玉茹 (1924–2008), another personal disciple of Mei's. After nearly thirty-years of professional experience on the stage, during which time she played mostly lead roles, she retired from the stage in 1999 and started a new career as a teacher at the Shanghai School of Chinese Opera, where she taught the Mei school of performance. For the last decade, she has also taught and worked with professionals of other theatre genres as well as amateurs of *Jingju* in China and from different parts of the world.

So here was an ideal teacher who was not only an expert in the Mei Lanfang school of *Jingju* but also an outstanding teacher—exactly what I needed. And best of all, hearing my request on the phone, she was available and happy to teach me. The plan was simple: I would learn a Mei school piece from Teacher Lu—singing and movement included—and perform the piece after I returned to the U.S. The study time was short, only three weeks, but the undivided concentration would be an unusual blessing. There would be few distractions from teaching, family, or other official and social responsibilities; it would be, ideally, total immersion. The opera I chose, ambitiously, was the scene “Xiuben” 修本 (Drafting the Memorial) from one of Mei's favorite plays, *Yuzhou feng*. I had already found out that Teacher Lu's version of this play had been transmitted to her directly by Wei Lianfang. I felt extremely excited about the prospect of learning an item of the Mei Lanfang repertoire from a teacher who was solidly part of the Mei lineage, despite the formidable implications that that prospect carried with it. I told myself: nothing beats a real challenge; besides, I was very familiar with the arias in the play over

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<sup>5</sup> Later elevated to “academy” (*xueyuan* 學院) status.

years of singing practice. I figured that my previous knowledge of the play would surely make studying it a lot easier.

When I was anxiously and confidently getting prepared for the trip, having already made the necessary contacts and arrangements, I had little idea what kind of life-changing, soul-shaking tribulation I had gotten myself into. Certainly, all the previous singing and performing experiences I took with me to China did not make the learning “easier”—not at all; how foolish I was to have assumed it would. On the other hand, whether these preconceived notions and acquired habits made my learning of *Yuzhou feng* “harder” is equally beside the point, because, in essence, the whole learning experience was one hard lesson that could not have been either any harder or any less hard. It was just *hard*—distressfully, embarrassingly, but wonderfully, exhilaratingly, and rewardingly hard. The Shanghai trip turned out to be only the beginning of my work with Teacher Lu; I would have the chance to continue it after coming back to the U.S. But I will get to that later.

### The Play

Before I move on to detail my lessons with Teacher Lu at the opera school, I should first introduce the opera a little. The entire story of *Yuzhou feng* is long and complicated (see below). Long versions were once popular in local opera traditions but, according to Mei Lanfang, originally only two scenes, “Zhao Gao xiuben” 趙高修本 (Zhao Gao Drafts a Memorial) and “Jindian zhuangfeng” 金殿裝瘋 (Feigning Madness in the Palace),<sup>6</sup> were performed as *Jingju*.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the case with other longer plays in Chinese theatre that were eventually represented on stage only through selected extracted scenes (*zhezi xi* 折子戲) and where those scenes tended to be performed separately and under their own titles, in the case of the scenes from *Yuzhou feng* in the *Jingju* repertoire, they tended to be performed together under the name of the entire play, *Yuzhou feng*,<sup>8</sup> despite the fact that in the two scenes the sword of the title is

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<sup>6</sup> These scenes are also referred to by the shorter titles of “Xiuben” and “Jindian.”

<sup>7</sup> See Xu Jichuan 許姬傳, Xu Yuanlai 許源來, and Zhu Jiajin 朱家潛, eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian: Mei Lanfang huiyi lu* 舞台生活四十年: 梅蘭芳回憶錄 (Forty Years of Stage Life: A Memoir by Mei Lanfang), 2 vols. (Beijing: Tuanjie chuban she, 2005), 1: 143.

<sup>8</sup> In his memoir, speaking of 1950 and earlier, Mei Lanfang notes that while in Beijing it was expected that the two scenes would always be performed together if *Yuzhou feng* was listed on the program, in Shanghai this was not always the case, and

generally only mentioned once and never appears on stage.<sup>9</sup> *Yuzhou feng* was one of the earliest plays that Mei Lanfang learned how to perform and he spent a lifetime refining his performance of it.<sup>10</sup> Not only was *Yuzhou feng* his favorite play to perform, but also the one that he put the most heart and effort into.<sup>11</sup> There is no question that, among all the masterpieces of the Mei school, *Yuzhou feng* occupies a special place of honor and prominence.

The play is set in the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.), when the lascivious successor of the First Emperor, the Second Emperor (Qin Ershi 秦二世), presides over a divided court. His prime minister, Zhao Gao 趙高, is a scheming politician.<sup>12</sup> In an attempt to neutralize one of the people in the way of his consolidation of power, Kuang Hong 匡洪, Zhao marries his daughter, Zhao Yanrong 趙艷容, to Kuang's son. The young couple turns out to be a good match, but the union does not achieve Zhao Gao's purpose and he employs a more vicious plot to neutralize Kuang Hong. As a mark of imperial favor, the Kuangs had been given the precious sword after which the play is named. Zhao Gao frames the Kuangs for treason by having the sword stolen and used in a purposely unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the emperor. The sword is taken as evidence of the Kuangs' complicity and the entire clan is ordered to be executed. There is only one survivor, Zhao Yanrong's husband, who manages to escape by disguising himself as one of the servants. The real servant dies in his stead.

It is at this point of the story that the scene "Xiuben" occurs. At the beginning of the scene, in his quarters, Zhao Gao announces the success of his plot, but also mentions a rumor he has heard that states that Zhao

when the second scene was also performed that would be noted on the program. See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 142.

<sup>9</sup> This perhaps explains the fact that the *feng* 鋒 (sword) of the title is sometimes miswritten as *feng* 峰 (peak) or *feng* 瘋 (madness).

<sup>10</sup> His experiments included performing a complete version of the play, as an attempt to reach new audiences who did not know the entire story. He abandoned that approach because audience interest in the play dissipated after "Jindian." See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 143.

<sup>11</sup> See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 144.

<sup>12</sup> Zhao Gao is generally understood to have been the chief eunuch in the Qin court (and the only example of a eunuch appointed prime minister), and that would seem to complicate the idea that he could have a daughter of his own. On this question, see Michael Lowe, "On the Terms *Bao zi*, *Yin gong*, *Yin guan*, *Huan*, and *Shou*: Was Zhao Gao a Eunuch?" *T'oung Pao* 91.4–5 (2005): 301–14.

Yanrong called a servant her husband. He summons his daughter, who has moved back home, to ask her about the rumor, and she appears with her faithful mute maid (known in the play only as Yanu 啞奴 [“mute slave”]). Although initially frightened by the accusation, Yanrong manages to dissolve Zhao Gao’s suspicion by claiming that it would be absolutely absurd for her to call a mere servant “husband.” She then persuades Zhao Gao to exercise magnanimity and compose a memorial to the emperor requesting a pardon for the Kuang clan. While Zhao Gao is drafting this memorial, much to Yanrong’s joy and relief, they are both alarmed by a surprise visit by the Second Emperor, who is returning from an excursion. Yanrong quickly hides herself, but not before the Second Emperor catches a glimpse of her beauty and instantly takes a fancy to her. After reading Zhao Gao’s memorial, the Second Emperor immediately approves it. Then he orders Zhao Gao to present his beautiful daughter at the court the following day—he wants to make her one of his concubines.

After the Second Emperor leaves, Zhao Gao announces to his daughter the good news about the memorial and her upcoming presentation at court. Upon hearing of the latter, she directly accuses him of lacking shame and only craving honors and riches. She claims that while she was bound to follow her father’s wishes in the case of her first marriage, that is no longer true with any subsequent marriages, but an angry Zhao Gao accuses her of rejecting the authority of both father and emperor. Trapped inside this patriarchal web of tyranny, Yanrong’s only and last hope comes from her faithful mute maid, who is as full of wisdom as she is short of voice. The maid pulls Zhao Yanrong aside and gestures to her to put on a show of insanity. Inspired by the suggestion, Yanrong exits the stage and returns with robe and hairdo in disorder, and scratches blood marks on her forehead in front of the audience.<sup>13</sup> To complement this visual portrait of madness, she treats her father as if he were her lover, spewing lewd and crazy phrases and making seductive gestures, all the while following the hints from the mute maid. Her feigned madness is taken for real by her father, who despondently sends her back to her room. Yet a more severe battle awaits her the following morning at court, in front of the Emperor and his heavily armed entourage. Yanrong’s unflinching confrontation with the Emperor, in which she uses the disguise of insanity to curse him to his face, is the content of the ensuing scene, “Jindian.”

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<sup>13</sup> In different versions of the scene, including the one Mei Lanfang recorded on film in 1955 mentioned below, Yanrong returns to the stage with scratch marks already on her face. In Teacher Lu’s version, Yanrong performs this act of self-defacement on stage.

A film was made of Mei Lanfang performing these two scenes in 1955, when he was 61, six years before his death. This film is an invaluable document and model for all opera fans and students interested in his art. Mei's memoir also includes his own rather detailed analysis of how he performed these two scenes.<sup>14</sup> Performing "Xiuben" without "Jindian" is uncommon but acceptable.<sup>15</sup> The crux and the challenge of the scene is to present Zhao Yanrong's madness as feigned and yet real enough to persuade Zhao Gao at the same time.

### The Lessons

By the time I arrived in Beijing on April 8, 2010, the three-week class with Teacher Lu had shrunk to a bit more than two weeks. I decided to spend a whole week in Beijing first, visiting the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan 中國戲曲學院) and making some contacts there. I also requested a singing lesson on *Yuzhou feng* with a Mei school teacher there, partly to spread out my network of connections and mainly to get some initial pointers on the play. After a productive week in Beijing, freshly encouraged by the new Beijing teacher and feeling quite good about myself, I arrived at Shanghai late in the evening of April 15 and settled into a comfortable hotel room about ten-minutes walking distance from the opera school. My class was to start the following morning, at 9 am. Teacher Lu had set up a tight schedule for me: three to four hours each day, five days a week, with possible all-day classes when rehearsal room was available, as well as weekend classes if she had to skip any weekday classes due to teaching conflicts. She was more serious than I had expected! I was soon to find out that she basically gave up all her break time from her regular teaching to fit me in. It also became clear to me later that she was actually very busy at the time with the additional duty and stress of coaching her students in preparation for a major national competition. I got to witness the intensity of the preparatory work in the school as a whole while I followed Teacher Lu around for the following two weeks. About a year later, I found out that one of Teacher Lu's students, named Fu Jia 付佳, received the highest score of anyone in this competition, which took place in Beijing in November 2010, for her performances of two famous Mei Lanfang plays:

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<sup>14</sup> See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 144–54.

<sup>15</sup> As noted above, "Xiuben" was once performed fairly often in Shanghai on its own without "Jindian."

*Luoshen* 洛神 (Goddess of the River Luo) and *Taizhen waizhuan* 太真外傳 (The Unofficial History of Imperial Consort Yang).

The amount of class time for my lessons somehow took me by surprise. Do I really need class every day and possibly even weekends? Do I have to give up all fun and sight-seeing activities while in Shanghai? I thought to myself, how hard can a forty-minute piece be?

### Voice

Teacher Lu started the lessons with vocal training. After a brief greeting, she took me to one of the standard classrooms on the third floor of the impressive-looking “Instructional Building” (Jiaoxue dalou 教學大樓). Each of these spacious class/rehearsal rooms is equipped sparingly with a large carpet covering almost the entire floor, a table, two chairs, and a standing mirror. Five minutes after we sat down, Teacher Lu asked me to speak Zhao Yanrong’s opening lines in “Xiuben.” There was no vocal warm-up or anything like that. I should have done that before the class. I quickly calmed my nerves and recited the introductory couplet (*yingzi* 引子) Zhao Yanrong recites at her first entrance: *Dujuan zhitou qi, / Xuelei an beiti* 杜鵑枝头泣, 血泪暗悲啼 (The cuckoo on the tree branch crying, / Bloody tears, in secret, sad calls).<sup>16</sup> The first line of the couplet is just intoned with the normal tonal patterns and inflection expected of a proper maiden on the *Jingju* stage, but starting with the third character in the second line, the characters are sung rather than recited.<sup>17</sup> I had worked on these two lines on my own prior to coming to China, by imitating the tempo and tonal contours of a few famous performers recorded on video.

After I courageously made the first attempt, Teacher Lu started to explain to me how to perform this couplet properly. As she was talking, I began to realize that all my previous efforts with these words were, if not completely wasted, pretty nearly so. No matter how I thought I understood the emotional content of this poem, I had little idea of how to adequately translate that emotion using the tools of *Jingju*. While my imitation may have been close in pitch, it did not carry over at all the nuances of each

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<sup>16</sup> It was a common notion, based on the story of a king of Shu who transformed into a cuckoo, that cuckoos cried so hard that they cried out tears of blood.

<sup>17</sup> For the melodic contours for the last three characters given in cipher notation (*jianpu* 簡譜), see Zhou Xiyuan 周翕園 and Shu Changyu 舒昌玉, eds., Zhou Zhenfang 周振芳, transcription, *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒, in *Jingju qupu jicheng* 京劇曲譜集成 (Compendium of *Jingju* Plays with Musical Notation), 10 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi, 1992), 1: 7.

word or their relationships to each other. It all boiled down to one basic problem: I had no fundamental training in using and incorporating breath into my vocalization, whereas an organic system of breathing techniques is the root and foundation of every artistic vocalization made on stage. Ten minutes into my voice class, I had already been brought to a mind-boggling revelation and felt completely overwhelmed.

Within a split second before an actor utters the first word onstage, Teacher Lu said, she/he has to inhale sufficient air to completely support the vocalization of that word. Only with the support of breath can any word carry weight, volume, and depth. Therefore, before beginning to speak that couplet, right before the first word, I should inhale—quickly and fully. Deep inhalation and prolonged conservation of air inside the performer's body is the first key to vocal articulation in *Jingju*. Vocal expression—both spoken and sung—is not created by the working of the voice, but by controlled and purposeful breathing that propels and shapes the voice. Vocal projection in *Jingju* is not a simple pushing outward of sound, but rather a much more internal activity that starts with pushing the voice *inward*, guiding it to pass through a series of resonant spaces inside the head before it is finally projected outward. The result is a voice that is much more pleasant and colorful, a voice carrying with it hues and layers of expressive possibilities.

It may appear a simple enough concept, not entirely different from Western ideas of vocal projection in theatre, but the actual application of this concept in word-by-word delivery of lines in *Jingju* is an extremely complicated process, something a professional performer would learn and practice day by day, scene by scene, play by play, throughout his/her schooling and continuing throughout his/her professional life. For me, who had seldom paid such conscious and meticulous attention to my breath, it soon seemed a mission impossible to fluently recite this ten-character couplet. But Teacher Lu did not seem to notice my floundering or embarrassment. She persisted in correcting my pronunciation of each word, pointing out how I was misusing my breath, and repeatedly demonstrated the right articulation and cadence without ever losing patience.

Every Chinese mono-syllabic word is an independent unit, Teacher Lu told me, that is also closely and tightly bound with all the other units in the vocal sequence of which it is part. Traditionally, *Jingju* divides the physical factors affecting vocal articulation into four external mouth formations (*sihu* 四呼), five internal formations (*wuyin* 五音), and thirteen rhyme categories (*shisan zhe* 十三辙). The five internal formations are

formed by manipulating the lips (*chun* 唇), the middle section of the teeth (*chi* 齒), the far-back sections of the teeth (*ya* 牙), the tongue (*she* 舌), and the throat (*hou* 喉). They determine the pronunciation of the “head of the word” (*zitou* 字頭; i.e., the initial of the syllable). The four external mouth formations—*open* (*kai* 開), as in the sound “ah”; *parallel* (*qi* 齊) as in the sound “ee”; *compressed* (*cuo* 撮), as in sound “ü”; and *close together* (*he* 合), as in the sound “oo”—guarantee the consistency and strength of the “stomach of the word” (*zifu* 字腹; i.e., the medial of the syllable). Although the thirteen rhyme-categories of *Jingju* are broader than systems that divide all the finals of syllables into far more than thirteen groups, a full execution and accurate completion of the rhyme category requires that the *Jingju* performer pays particular attention to the “tails of the words” (*ziwei* 字尾; i.e. the final of the syllable). With the support and proper manipulation of breath, combined with a close attention to the internal and external formations, the production and articulation of every word or syllable is carefully divided into head, stomach, and tail.

Teacher Lu used the pronunciation of the second to the last character in the couplet, *bei* 悲 (sad), to illustrate the importance of accurately distinguishing the head, stomach, and tail of each word-syllable. As noted above, in Yanrong’s introductory couplet, *bei* is sung, not spoken. It belongs to the category of syllables whose initial sound is formed by the lips, which naturally connotes that the performer must take particular care with them. After the initial sound formed by the bursting apart of the lips by the column of air, since *bei* has a zero final (i.e., no final consonant/s), the rest of the syllable is all vowel (an “ei” sound that corresponds to the *huidui* 灰堆 rhyme category) throughout its long, drawn out melody. The open mouth formation for the medial or stomach of *bei* requires that the mouth remains half open vertically but wide open horizontally, with the corners of the mouth drawn back as much as possible. This leaves the tips of the teeth slightly exposed and creates a nice gap between the molars on each side. The performer needs to relax all facial muscles at the same time gently lifting up the cheek muscles. Because the lifting of the cheek muscles can create the impression of a smile, Teacher Lu also called the muscles around the cheeks “smiling muscles” (*xiaoji* 笑肌). It is essential to always raise the smiling muscles and consequently make the face shorter. A shorter and rounder face, with all the facial muscles going wide and upward, gives a much more aesthetically pleasing countenance on stage. The sound created by such a mouth formation can also become much fuller and wider. At the same time, *bei* is a word in the first tone

(*yinping* 陰平), a level, high-pitched tone. The energy in the pronunciation of such a high-pitched level tone is robust and outward at the start, showing the intensity of the sorrowful emotion. As the singing of the word winds through a sinuous melody into a softer note, the emotional energy of the word becomes darker and gloomier, ready for the near-sobbing sound of the final word, *ti* 啼 (to call or cry), to emerge and take over.

With the quick and deep inhalation of air right before the start of a sound, the performer creates a passageway for the air to flow through his/her body. This passageway (*tongdao* 通道)—the “pipe” (*guanzi* 管子) or “sound pillar” (*yinzhu* 音柱) as Teacher Lu also called it—connects several anchoring points of the breath: the abdomen, chest, mouth, larynx, pharynx, nasal cavity, and head cavity, and channels the air to push the vocal production to the apex of resonance at the back of the head. Teacher Lu told me that the best way to find this passageway is to track the flow of air in a full-body yawn. She described vocalization in *Jingju* as similar to “yawning with your mouth closed.” In yawning, our whole body is relaxed. The inside of the mouth is expanded to its full capacity, accomplished by the opening of the jaws, the separation between upper and lower teeth, and the lifting of the soft palate. A passageway is thus created by opening the back of the mouth all the way to the pharyngeal wall. Teacher Lu wanted me to imagine *two mouths* existing simultaneously. The literal mouth in the front is for accurate enunciation of initial consonants, but the one that really speaks and sings—that gives body and shape to the voice—is the mouth at the back, an imaginary one, at the pharyngeal area. This area needs to be completely open and relaxed, so that the voice, pushed through by the air, can go upward into the nasal cavity.

*Jingju* requires the voice to be positioned and maintained high up in the nasal area. According to the requirements of *Jingju*, a voice projected directly from the front of the mouth, produced only by the sounding board of the larynx, would be described as “flat” (*bie* 癩) or “fallen” (*ta* 塌), while a good voice would be described as “standing upright” (*li* 立), showing strength, depth and height. Certainly, the voice cannot be stuck inside the nasal box either but needs to be continuously pushed upward to the head, so the passageway between the nose and the head has to be completely open and free as well. How to establish and strengthen this vertical pipeline inside a performer’s body is the primary concern of a serious *Jingju* performer, especially one in the Mei Lanfang school.

Teacher Lu waited until the end of my study in Shanghai to teach me some basic exercises to cultivate the breath and train the voice for the long run. These exercises are meant to help a performer to develop mental

awareness and muscular agility to efficiently preserve breath in the abdomen area and push it upward, through the controlled passageway, in the timely support of vocal production and projection. They are designed to be practiced daily and to support any vocal performance. I was grateful that Teacher Lu chose to introduce me to this series of vocal exercises after she had explained to me the basic principles of breath use and control. To show me how to execute these exercises correctly, she had one of her senior students, Zheng Shuang 鄭爽, work beside me and model for me the specific steps of execution.

We stood together, side by side, in front of Teacher Lu, as she directed us first to stand straight, relax our bodies, and keep our eyes straight forward. From simple but demanding breathing exercises, Teacher Lu guided us through increasingly complicated workouts of breath-sound coordination, each with specific design and purpose at the same time fitting inside an altogether organic voice training regimen. I could clearly tell the difference between the sounds I created and those Zheng Shuang produced. While my sounds were thin, flat, weak, and unstable, hers were clearly thicker, fuller, stronger, and much more consistent. There was depth and power in her voice, coming from resonance, whereas mine felt simply shrill and squeaky as if forced from the voice box. Zheng Shuang told me that they had to do these exercises all the time, in and outside of class. Thanks to Zheng Shuang's live demonstration, I was given a clear sense of what could be possible for me if I continued to work on these exercises for, perhaps, ten more years.

Along with all this general but intricate information on how to use breath and cultivate voice, Teacher Lu also gave very scrupulous directions on how to convey minute emotional movements through subtle vocal changes within the context of the play. To facilitate my study and understanding, not only in voice but in all aspects of the performance, Teacher Lu divided the entire course of Zhao Yanrong's actions in "Xiuben" into three distinct sections. The first of these stretches from Yanrong's first entrance to the stage to her hasty retreat at the sudden appearance of the emperor. The second section extends from her re-entrance after the emperor's departure to her exit to adjust her costume and make-up so that she appears mad. The final section begins with her re-emergence in the mad form and lasts till her final exit from the stage, which takes place just before her father's final comments on her condition and the end of the scene. Yanrong's emotional state is motivated and defined by the immediate circumstances in each section: in the first one she has to deal with her father's suspicions and is successful in getting him

to draft the memorial; in the second section she is shocked by the emperor's plans and her father's acquiescence to them and is searching for a way out; in the third section she has to feign madness and flirt with her father. In correspondence with the different dramatic situations and emotional states, her vocal qualities and characteristics are remarkably different across the three sections.

Even within each section, Zhao Yanrong's vocal expressions cover many different levels and modes. Teacher Lu taught me how to reveal the progression of the character's emotions with deliberate vocal variations and contrasts. For example, through her crafted and contrasting ways of calling Zhao Gao "father" (*diedie* 爹爹), Yanrong leads the audience through a swing of clandestine thoughts and emotions she holds secretly within. When Yanrong first enters the room, she bears a bitter grudge against Zhao Gao for what he has done to her in-laws, but she cannot divulge such sentiment. She greets Zhao Gao with the kind of formal and unremarkable salutation expected of her, *diedie wanfu* 爹爹萬福 (myriad blessings to Father), but delivers it in a cold and strained tone. Shortly afterwards, in trying to dispel Zhao Gao's suspicions about what happened to her husband, when she calls him *diedie* there is a hint of tension and of the piquant in it. However, as soon as she realizes that Zhao Gao has accepted what she says as true, she switches tactics and tone, and takes the opportunity to persuade Zhao Gao to write the memorial requesting a pardon for her husband's family. Her mood gets covertly brighter and more hopeful; her voice becomes less guarded. When coaxing Zhao Gao, the way she calls him *diedie* conveys both urgency and sweet pleading. The tempo is faster than before, and an *ah* 啊 pops out before the words themselves, showing her quick thinking on feet. Much to her surprise, her father agrees immediately to write such a memorial to the Emperor. She is beaming with joy when she says, at a very fast pace and rising pitch, *ci nai diedie ende* 此乃爹爹恩德 (This shows your mercy and magnanimity, father.) Here the pronunciation of 爹爹 is crisp and lively, a sharp contrast to her subdued manner of address earlier.

Without any pause Yanrong then turns to her maid and calls out, *yanu, nongmo cihou* 啞奴, 濃墨伺候!" (Mute Maid, get the ink ready!). Teacher Lu explained to me that the non-stop continuation of her speech here shows not only her eagerness, but also her fear of Zhao Gao's changing his mind, if the thing is not done immediately. But to display eagerness and excitement in the Mei style of performance is an extraordinary challenge. Teacher Lu cautioned against any trace of over-acting and vociferation in the voice. Although Yanrong is eager and excited, she still

maintains a dignified control over her tone, locution, and underlying emotion. It is important to strive for subtle degrees and various layers of emotion in the voice; yet at no time should the vocal expression go beyond what is proper for a character performed by Mei Lanfang.

It took us two days to go over Yanrong's lines. The vocal lessons basically consisted of my speaking the lines and singing the arias in the order they appear in the scene, with Teacher Lu stopping me as she saw fit to give correction and instruction. We would repeat one segment again and again until she felt satisfied, or at least satisfied enough. There was no physical movement involved at this point. We spent a significant amount of time on Yanrong's lines, especially on those increasingly fiery salvos Yanrong fires toward Zhao Gao in the middle of the scene. The arias were also painstakingly analyzed and practiced, at a lower pitch than required on stage, without any musical accompaniment. (Teacher Lu's real help with my singing—especially with the famous and difficult *fan erhuang* 反二黄 aria that is the highlight of the scene—took place more substantially and productively three months later, in the U.S., during the week before my performance.) Bombarded with all this new knowledge, I simply could not comprehend it all on the spot, let alone act on it satisfactorily. Teacher Lu encouraged me to record all her instruction on my digital audio recorder. Later, she also recruited Zheng Shuang to help me record the physical movements of the whole scene on video. Without these recordings, I don't think I could ever have finished learning the scene by the time I left China. Without question, this documentation will also be extremely beneficial for my long-term study of *Jingju* beyond the temporary needs of learning and performing *Yuzhou feng*.

Basically, my first lesson with Teacher Lu completely removed all the unrealistic expectations I had carried with me to China. Pushing away any desire for leisure activities, I set my daily routine as follows: I would spend a whole morning or afternoon with her in the classroom, and then I would go back to the hotel and use the rest of the day practicing the work I had just learned in preparation for the next lesson on the following day. There was always more material than I could digest before the next lesson and more often than not I woke up in the middle of night dreading the arrival of morning, yelling at myself: why did I arrange only two weeks, and not two months? Would *two years* even be enough for this?? Nevertheless, every time I walked into that rehearsal room, I could literally feel the instant pumping of adrenaline and the ferocious beating of my heart. I had never felt this alive!

### Walk and Posture

We moved to the physical movements of the scene on the third day, but Teacher Lu continued to give me vocal education as we moved through the scene. If producing the right kind of voice for *Jingju* was hard, the physical demands of learning the proper stage movements were even more rigorous and grueling. But it was also incredibly fun and stimulating. Before everything else, Teacher Lu taught me how to walk the female walk. I had practiced the stage walk of a demure female character, the so-called black-robe (*qingyi* 青衣) role, for some years and felt relatively confident about this aspect of the role. Teacher Lu walked with me a few times in front of the mirror, and observed that I had indeed got some previous training. She was, however, a lot more exact in her dissections of the movement of the legs and feet than any of my previous teachers. She watched every little move of mine like a hawk.

Done in slow motion, in this way of walking, each advancing step is like massaging the floor with the bottom of the foot. While the moving foot massages the floor from the toes through the ball of the foot, to the arch, and finally to the heel, the front part of the foot, especially the toes, becomes purposefully elevated during the process. Each step stays close to the ground in this way, and lands gently on the heel. As the foot touches the ground at the end of a step, the toes are completely off the ground at first and then gently placed down. The alternately moving feet also deliberately cross each other at a calculated distance, forming a trail of zigzag motion on the floor. As the feet move forward, the two legs remain close to each other for as long as possible. With such exaggerated crossing between the feet and such close contact between the foot and the ground, the hips would naturally sway a little with the completion of each step. The black-robe female role in the Mei tradition walks in comparatively big and confident strides with just the right amount of hip swaying. When it is done right, as Teacher Lu demonstrated so perfectly herself, the walk produces an air of serenity, balance, harmony, and elegance. As odd as it might sound, it can also be described as producing a kind of placid liveliness or making one think of a moving statue.

All of this depends on the performer's total control of body and feet making each step definite, stable, and consistent. Despite my previous training, my feet would periodically go out of control and simply could not sustain an even level of energy and pace beyond four or five steps. Instead of grace and harmony, all I could perceive from my reflection in the mirror was a shaky mess of awkwardness. Later, when I tried to learn the actual stage movements for the play, my lack of control over my feet

became an even more distracting and devastating problem. Yet I pushed on, assiduously, swallowing tears and hiding mental bruises along the way. Under the watchful and unforgiving eyes of a wonderfully strict teacher who would not budge or compromise, I was made to directly experience—not just to understand or to conceptualize—the difficulty and agony in the execution of walking in *Jingju* on stage, **in every step**.

The next thing Teacher Lu taught me was the standing posture. When standing, the female character has one foot placed slightly behind the other. The whole body remains straight and aligned but purposefully inclines forward, the weight almost completely resting on the front leg. The knees are slightly touching; the back foot can, but does not have to, go on tiptoe in the general framework of the Mei style. The female sitting posture follows a similar principle and also includes a kind of leaning forward. A woman character sits with only the back part of the buttocks on the front of the chair and places most of the weight onto the thighs and the feet. With such standing and sitting positions the female character strikes the audience as engaged and alert, although she also appears visually constrained and reserved, as would be proper for a traditionally-cultivated woman.

Standing and sitting in this manner for long periods of time takes a lot of conscious effort on the part of the performer, something I had a great deal of difficulty maintaining throughout my movement training. Conditioned by a false (or, Western) sense of physical erectness, I tended to tense up my torso and locate my center of gravity over my heels when I stood on stage. Teacher Lu would not let it slide whenever she caught me standing upright, perpendicular, or, worse yet, slanting backward, even though examples of these bad postures kept recurring approximately thirty times each day. She would also, without the slightest hesitation, call me to straighten up my neck, or to keep my head in perfect alignment with my neck and the rest of my body. It was quickly brought to my attention that I liked to bob my head and lift up my chin when I spoke and sang in a standing position. She was equally staunch in her criticism of my sitting posture. The moment she saw me *shufu de tang zai yizi shang* 舒服地躺在椅子上 (lounging on my backside on the chair), as she called it, she would stop everything and demand instant correction. I was highly embarrassed in the beginning at being criticized so constantly. And despite the steady stream of criticism and correction, these bad habits were very resistant to change. Fortunately, my fragile sensitivity grew calluses and I exchanged embarrassment for willing admission of my faults, and my shame became humility. With Teacher Lu's unrelenting reminders in my ears, I timidly

proceeded in her classroom with a growing awareness of how I stood and sat, how I controlled different parts of my body, and where I distributed my weight. The awareness slipped in little by little, and by the time I got on stage, I believe I was a lot better than before—although still far from adequate. The only occasional compliment I received from Teacher Lu was *ni bu nan kan le* 你不難看了 (You don't look as ugly now). Hearing that, I always felt like screaming for joy!

The alternation and smooth transitions among walking, standing, and sitting make up a large percentage of stage movement. Walking and body posture make up two of the five primary categories of Chinese stage movement: hand movement, eye movement, body movement, stylization, and walking movement (*shou yan shen fa bu* 手眼身法步).<sup>18</sup> The aesthetic totality of Chinese opera performance depends on the mastery of such basic techniques as walking and stationary posture. Professional performers would have spent years on rigorous physical training to have these techniques ingrained into their bodies. When they start learning a play, they already know how to pose and move according to convention, with grace and harmony built into their movements. Since I did not have time to go back to the beginning and re-build myself from the ground up, I had to live with the cruel reality of my untrained clumsy body, and so did Teacher Lu. What amazed me about Teacher Lu was that she did not seem to regard my lack of basic techniques an insurmountable obstacle, nor my clumsiness an unbearable sight. As long as I was still standing there in her classroom, she seemed totally fine and ready to teach me the way she would always teach—with the best faith and effort possible.

So, without the traditional daily drills of leg stretching (*yatui* 壓腿) or running in circles with upper torso still (*pao yuanchang* 跑圓場), I got to pick up, slowly but surely, the basic elements of physicality in *Jingju* through working out the physical world of *Yuzhou feng*. When Teacher Lu began to teach me the entrance movements of Zhao Yanrong, she explained and demonstrated every step slowly and carefully. She broke apart all the physical elements—eyes, head, body, hands and feet—and showed each of them, first in isolation and then in correlation with each other. Zhao Yanrong's first few steps after entering the stage are probably the most difficult part of her entire physical action in the scene—at least for me. Within a few minutes, the performer has to construct the stylized persona of a refined lady weighed down by sorrow but still keeping up her

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<sup>18</sup> This is a traditional list. No one has come up with a convincing explanation for why *fa* appears in it or what *fa* really means.

dignity. Her gait has to be steady and stately, the physical gestures fluent and elegant, with alternating waves of the water sleeves steered by hidden arm motions within them. The combination and perfect coordination of all these physical constituents, manifested simultaneously and in unbroken continuity, are designed to infallibly imprint on the mind of the audience an impression of a dignified woman of high social standing. Once I got these few steps right, I would have a general framework within which to physically represent Zhao Yanrong; the rest of the scene would have a foundation to build on. I spent at least two days working just on Zhao Yanrong's initial entrance, which only involves moving out from the stage right wing to the spot down stage right where Zhao Yanrong intones her introductory couplet.

### **Eyes and Face**

While the physical action unfolds and establishes the character's external image and social standing, it is in the face and the eyes of the performer that Zhao Yanrong's internal emotions are revealed to the audience. Eyes represent the soul of the character and galvanize all features of facial expression. Teacher Lu's instruction on the theatrical use of eyes could not be more detailed or decisive. She wanted me to always envision the depth of the stage and my spatial relationship with the audience when I practiced in the rehearsal room. For example, according to Teacher Lu, within the short, three-minute initial stage entrance sequence, the focus of Zhao Yanrong's eyes is first a single spot on the edge of stage left, then moves slowly to a broader field in the mid-center section of the auditorium, and finally ends with a more condensed area along the front row of the audience stage right, straight ahead of her when she makes her final pose before reciting her couplet. As the levels and depths of the character's vision change moment by moment, the theatrical and emotional implications expand in the audience's imagination. Here and throughout the play, Teacher Lu gave the exact time, direction, and speed of all major eye movements, which were too many to count and each had to fuse seamlessly with the emotional and physical development of the character.

In *Jingju*, the eyes should be alert and agile, at the same time as they are serene and stable. They tell instantly the story of a character's heart and cover a spectrum of his/her emotions through variations in level, distance, depth, energy, and speed of movement. Teacher Lu taught me how to focus my eyes on stage. Focused eyes are purposeful and dynamic, never rigid or stagnant. Working with the muscles around my eyes, I also

learned how to project different feelings and create different types of gaze. Under the influence of Teacher Lu's daily instruction, I began to perceive eyes as either cold or warm, hazy or clear, shallow or deep, empty or full, soft or hard, internal or external. These are by no means abstract categorizations, but telling indications of the range and subtlety of the forms of expression required within the specific theatrical and emotional contexts of Zhao Yanrong. Most important of all, eyes are there for the audience to *see*. They are the guiding light for the spectator's perception. They serve the primary and paramount function of directing the audience's attention down the path of the unfolding of the dramatic discourse. Many times in the scene, Teacher Lu instructed me to use my eyes to lead the audience. Setting about a stage action, even something as simple as sitting down, I should first let my eyes go out toward the audience, making sure that their attention is mobilized to watch my upcoming move. Teacher Lu's saying was, *ni bu kan tamen, tamen ye jiu bu kan ni* 你不看他們, 他們也就不看你 (If you don't watch them, they will not watch you). Through such mindful and creative use of the eyes comes the true magic of reciprocal communication between the performer and the audience.

Teacher Lu cautioned me against a bad habit I had when I was unconsciously "trying too hard," which was to raise my eyebrows and strain to make my eyes big. Raising the eyebrows in this way contorts the facial muscles and destroys any potential for aesthetic purity and beauty of the theatrical face. I particularly showed this bad habit at the start of an aria, at the moment I opened my mouth to sing. The intention to project my voice and infuse emotion into it was misdirected into a compulsive facial tension, which, according to Teacher Lu, had no place on the *Jingju* stage. Teacher Lu emphasized that a theatrical face in the Mei Lanfang tradition has to maintain beauty and serenity of the purest kind under any condition, even when it is used to suggest wild or extreme sentiments such as anger, hatred, despair, horror, or even—in the case of *Yuzhou feng*—madness. Like everything else on stage, facial expression is prohibited from going beyond the stylistic conventions and notions of artistic propriety prescribed by the tradition.

One of the crucial functions of the face and eyes is to help define and differentiate the Zhao Yanrongs of the three sections of the scene. The general emotional tone of the first section is *joy* at the drafting of the memorial pardoning the Kuangs, in the second section it is *anger* at the emperor and her father, and in the third section it is the *madness* she is forced to feign. At the start of the first section, Zhao Yanrong wears a morose facial expression and her eyes are cold and withdrawn, hiding

deep grief and indignation. When she is questioned by Zhao Gao and tries to erase away his suspicions, her eyes are cautious and intense, but never overtly nervous or shifting; they alternately engage with and avoid direct contact with her father at calculated intervals. As her mood turns optimistic, her face lights up with a gentle grin and her eyes emit warmth. The first section shows a prudent Zhao Yanrong who is gradually edging out of misery toward personal victory and emotional gratification.

The second section soon changes that dramatic direction, through some ironic twists. It starts with a continuation of her visibly joyful mood and contented gaze from the end of the previous section. Her delight is at first enhanced by the news of the emperor's granting of the pardon for her husband's family, but then just as quickly smashed by the news of the emperor's carnal intentions toward herself. Her reactions to the two opposite pieces of news tease and tantalize the audience's interest with a quick succession of striking and contrasting facial images. Her expression of hearty joy and gratitude toward the emperor turns quickly into one of alarm. Her quick inquiry of Zhao Gao as to his reply to the emperor's command suggests that she is still level-headed and has not completely given up hope. But Zhao Gao's insistence on giving her to the emperor throws her into shock and incredulity, and a chasm of despair. Teacher Lu gave a lucid explication of Zhao Yanrong's tumultuous psychology at this critical moment and taught me, through repeated direction and demonstration, how to use eye and facial movements of various speeds, angles, and directions to create the fast-paced but step-by-step trajectory of her psychological development.

The heart of the second and middle section is the sharp argument between father and daughter, carried out both vocally and through complicated choreography on Zhao Yanrong's part. This quick argument, in which Yanrong does not shrink from directly contradicting her father, underscores this young woman's moral liberation and psychological emancipation from an authority figure that the audience knows is seriously tainted but who has nevertheless long wielded emotional and social control over her body and soul. An elaborate sequence of eye movements is integral to the vocal exchange and the choreography of Yanrong's movement. Zhao Yanrong's eyes, along with her body movements and vocal delivery, highlight the growing fury and determination she feels. Although she immediately criticizes her father for lacking shame despite holding high office, her initial protest contains a slight tone of imploration, as indicated by her sobbing voice at the end of the line. In her heart, it is still possible at this point to expect Zhao Gao's recantation. Yet her protest

only evokes Zhao Gao's obstinacy. After each round of protestation, she strikes a pose, which is instantly disturbed by Zhao Gao's haughty reaction to her protest. With increasing ardor and conviction, teary protest grows into fiery rebellion against paternal and patriarchal tyranny. Teacher Lu instructed me that whenever Zhao Yanrong breaks out of her theatrical pose upon hearing Zhao Gao's words, it is the quick movement of her eyes and facial expression that offer the first signals of the depth of her emotion—be it sorrow, dismay, anger, fierce repulsion or the combination of any number of them—before any reaction is seen in the rest of her body. This is an example of *Jingju* privileging the eyes as the most spontaneous, honest, and direct reflection of a character's mind and emotions.

Teacher Lu told me that, as Zhao Yanrong, at no time throughout the father-daughter debate should I forget that the object of my fury and hatred was my father, Zhao Gao. Therefore, the focus of my gaze should stay on him. It was also crucially important that I don't allow my eyes to "drop" at any moment. Since I felt incorrigibly insecure about my body and constantly worried about my stage walk, I tended to look down toward my feet, especially during a complex choreographed sequence. For example, in this section, a recurrent movement pattern has me move in a circle away from my father, all the while my eyes are supposed to be fixed on him. I simply could not stabilize my gaze while I made the circle. For Teacher Lu, "dropping" or shifting the focus of the eyes at random would immediately take away all the truth and power of the emotion and deflate the energy that the performer had worked so hard to achieve. She had me practice these few steps again and again until I stopped lowering my eyes. I benefited tremendously from such repetitious drilling. Without it, I don't think I would have cared enough or practiced the coordination of my eyes and feet so diligently in my hotel room at night. And I would have never got to understand—truly understand—what "coordination" really means.

The third and final section is definitely the climax of the whole scene, hence the most demanding in terms of Zhao Yanrong's eye control and facial expression. This is after Zhao Yanrong has given up on trying to directly confront her father and decided that the only way to escape the impending doom is to transform herself into a mad woman. But she is not mad; she only *pretends* to be mad. While she puts on a pretty convincing show externally, she is deeply conscious and conflicted inside. Without the instruction and guidance of a lowly maid who cannot even speak, she will never be able to sustain this outrageous masquerade, especially as it involves disordering her dress and engaging in lewd bawdry and obscenity with her own father. She presents a dual image: she is both mad and not

mad. When she is mad, she seems happy; when she is not mad, she is utterly sad. Teacher Lu told me that a big challenge of this section is to make the images of “madness” and “sanity” visibly clear and convincing. But a bigger and more daunting task is to make the transitions between these different states and images on stage completely logical and believable to the audience. The secret, Teacher Lu said, lies with the face.

The complexity of Zhao Yanrong’s facial expression in this section is well described by Mei Lanfang himself in his memoir. In Mei’s own words, there are three different “expressions” (*biaoqing* 表情) Zhao Yanrong displays. The first is the “real face” (*zhen mianmu* 真面目) she displays when receiving Mute Maid’s hints about what to do next; the second expression is the “false mask” (*jia mianju* 假面具) of lunacy she puts on when facing Zhao Gao; and the third is her “spirit” (*shenqi* 神氣) of inner torment and indecisiveness over actually performing the crazed actions Mute Maid suggests.<sup>19</sup> If these three expressions symbolize Zhao Yanrong’s three states of mind, the quick switching back-and-forth between them is what marks out their separation and heightens their contrast, and ultimately intensifies the theatrical thrill and suspense of the play within the play. All the facial changes, according to Teacher Lu, have to be done accurately with regard to amplitude and timing, and are always cued by the eyes.

For Zhao Yanrong to embark on this masquerade of madness, she has to first accept Mute Maid’s proposition that only enduring the complete disgrace of being perceived as mad will save her from worse indignity. Resigning herself to such disgrace brings with it terrific mental struggle and tremendous pain, as the power of her will to do what is necessary is challenged again and again by her deep-rooted sense of dignity. After she has changed her outer appearance, she continues to receive instruction from Mute Maid on how to behave like a mad woman and how to flirt with her father. When Zhao Yanrong is communicating with her mute maid, her facial expression is that of a normal person with a sane mind. When the maid’s gestures become clear to her, her face quickly assumes an expression of revulsion and shame. With Mute Maid’s persistent encouragement, Yanrong slowly and reluctantly moves to her father, yet her eyes continuously cling to the maid in a clear facial language of resistance and pleading. However, the moment she turns around and catches her father’s eyes, she instantly puts on an exaggeratedly frenetic

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<sup>19</sup> See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 148.

and flirty look. The quick masking and unmasking of her face is thus triggered by the direct eye contacts Zhao Yanrong alternately makes with the other two characters onstage.

During the long singing and dance number of the *fan erhuang* aria, Zhao Yanrong basically circles around Zhao Gao with a frenzied glare and an alluring smile. But many times during the aria she is seized by spasms of inner weakness and her external front crumbles. At those crucial and short intervals when Zhao Gao looks away, Yanrong immediately turns toward her maid. Her face drops all pretense and becomes pensive and entreating. The maid responds to her expression of weakness with pushing and encouraging gestures. These gestures remind Yanrong of the necessity of finishing her performance and bring sadness and desperation back to her face. However, within the split second it takes for her to turn back to her father, all that sadness has already been replaced by a glowing grin of abandon and derangement. Quick facial changes between pleading, pain, and frenzy repeat several times during the whole aria and have to be timed in perfect synchrony with the musical phrasing and percussive beats. Supported by rhythmic, melodic, or percussive punctuation, all these changes appear sharp but subtle: sharp, to arouse appropriate responses from the audience; subtle, because they are altogether stylistically fluid and humanly believable.

Learning facial expressions for the play brought me to a keen awareness of my total lack of consciousness of my own facial contours and structure, not only as a performer but also, more sadly, as a person. Because of the subtlety and intricacy involved, facial expression was one of the areas I struggled the most with—and probably also learned the most about—the requirements of Mei Lanfang’s art, which is probably also why I have devoted so much discussion of it in this article. It is difficult to perform craziness in the highly stylized way the play calls for, because such delicate stylization requires not only strong discipline but also profound vision. Above everything else, the craziness needs to be in total compliance with the idea of *beauty*. Mei Lanfang himself stresses the omnipresence of aesthetic beauty in *Jingju* performance, and insists that all aspects of a theatrical presentation adhere to the concept of ‘beauty’ (*mei* 美).<sup>20</sup> This applies even to the presentation of madness, and

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<sup>20</sup> Mei talks about *mei* a lot. With regard to *Yuzhou feng*, he specifically mentions the importance of maintaining *mei* in all physical expressions, whether to portray real madness or feigned madness on stage. See Xu Jichuan et al., eds., *Wutai shenghuo sishi nian*, 1: 149. A clear contradiction to *mei* can be represented by the phrase and idea of

especially to madness performed by such a proper character as Zhao Yanrong.

“Beauty” is the law, the core, and the spirit of the Mei Lanfang school of *Jingju* in its bold and in-depth explorations of human nature and experience, including those smacking of depravity and ugliness. “Beauty” in *Jingju*, and most insistently in the style of Mei Lanfang, refers to the kind of disciplinary control that brings forth the highest possible sense of poise, balance, and equilibrium in the smallest, simplest detail of the body. Teacher Lu severely warned me against any form of distortion in the countenance for the purpose of depicting harsh or negative emotions. Realistic verisimilitude at the cost of aesthetic balance is dispensed with and frowned upon in Mei Lanfang’s art. She instructed me to always maintain a relaxed, calm, lively, and “short” face, with the smiling muscles pulled toward the temples and the mouth slightly curved up at the corners. At no time should I tense up my facial lines, pluck my mouth, strain my eyebrows, or harden my jowls, all of which I had done subconsciously in the past. The theatrical face stays perpetually centered and placid, devoid of obtrusive shapes and reckless movement. Multifarious emotions are projected through the eyes whose efficient versatility can be acquired through and only through long and intense training. As already mentioned earlier, Zhao Yanrong’s wide emotional spectrum—from sorrow, bitterness, and anger to far-out mania—is firmly contained and regulated within the aesthetic system of the *Jingju* tradition. In this tradition, all human experiences become products of artistic craftsmanship and connoisseurship; the face is the artistic medium for a multitude of human emotions to stand out against a constant canvas of tranquility and harmony.

### **Movement**

Teacher Lu’s instruction with regard to my face and eyes was by no means isolated and removed from her teaching of the physical movements as a whole. I learned the facial expressions and the maneuvers of eyes at the same time I was learning the choreography. Comparatively speaking, I spent more than half of my class time in Shanghai on learning and practicing the established sequence of physical movements for Zhao

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*guo* 過, which simply means “over” or “overly done.” Mei gives an example of *guo* in his memoir, remembering a performance of *Yuzhou feng* in which he over-acted the part to compensate for his weakness of voice on that day. He got instant criticism from one of his critic/friends, who cautioned him against violating his own aesthetic principle of balance. See *ibid.*, 1: 154.

Yanrong, which are extensive and extremely challenging. Teacher Lu was simultaneously patient and incisive in her instruction of these movements. She would explain every motion and gesture by breaking it into basic parts and primary ingredients, and point out those special elements most indicative of the character's psychological motivation and emotional nature. She would give tireless and countless demonstrations to show me how to execute each move technically and aesthetically. Thanks to her pointed and insightful illuminations, and the advantage of watching and imitating her at a close distance, I was able to stumble along and make steady progress learning these complicated movements. By the time I left Shanghai, Teacher Lu had taught me the entire choreography of Zhao Yanrong's movements in the scene and had also helped me preserve her teaching in a few digital video recordings. It was expected that I would continue to refer to these video recordings in my preparation for the performance after returning to the U.S.

There are simply too many aspects in my movement study to be adequately discussed in this article. Suffice to say that I had stepped into a completely different field of kinetic exercise and mental work from any of my previous ventures at learning *Jingju*. I got to witness and recognize what a delicate and exquisite performance *Jingju* is and all the care, concentration, diligence, thought, and understanding that go into the constitution of a character performed according to the requirements of the Mei school, as well as the absolute ease, grace, and effortlessness that are part of the creative process at its best. All this was clearly in evidence in Teacher Lu as she moved in her simple rehearsal robe and without any theatrical makeup, day in and day out. With none of her aesthetic instincts and technical mastery, I was always conscious that I could never look anything like her, and I would only be able to reach a certain level of proficiency with my current abilities. But I grew to feel quite content with that recognition and, with little other choice, just tried my best.

Something else kept me going. I was greatly gratified and encouraged by the discovery that Teacher Lu, faced with all my inadequacies, did not teach me a reduced or simplified version. I had proof. I got to see a DVD of *Yuzhou feng* performed by one of her former students, Tian Hui 田慧, in an official performance. Tian Hui followed exactly the same choreography as Teacher Lu was teaching me. Later, during one of our class times, Teacher Lu had Zheng Shuang help me review a learned sequence while she was busy. In the process, it became clear that I had been taught everything that Zheng Shuang had been taught with regard to that sequence. I could not do it as well, certainly, but it was such a comfort

to know that the version I had been taught was the same as taught to a student of professional caliber. Technically and artistically, I was behind; emotionally and intellectually, I had been treated to the full feast. That was important.

Every day I came to Teacher Lu's classroom with high spirits and the intention to learn how to perform the scene, but, on a deeper level, I also came to listen to her explanation of the character and telling of the story. As we proceeded from one day to the next, from one section to the next, the story of *Yuzhou feng* became more and more lucid and coherent, and the character of Zhao Yanrong became fuller, more rounded, and more humanly plausible as time went on. All the things Teacher Lu taught and insisted on, whether with regard to voice, facial expression, or physical movement, also became more and more sensible and enlightening in the way that they connected all the dramatic elements together. I finally came to the conclusion that the plotline of *Yuzhou feng* and the character of Zhao Yanrong are constructed with such minute blocks and exquisite brushstrokes that there is hardly any room left for additional interpretation or expansion. There is no need. What the play already contains is too involved and complex for any actor to tackle thoroughly. Generations of great performers, Mei Lanfang included, have done all the homework and fit all the puzzles together for us, so much so that the finished product appears perfect. All the later efforts to re-produce this play are simply individual attempts to piece together the parts of the puzzle afresh and get a bit closer to that image of perfection. Teacher Lu's professional students are making the attempt, and, in a similar and no less heroic way (considering what I was working with), so was I. I finally understood why Teacher Lu's teaching attitude toward me was so completely and unreservedly serious.

As stated earlier, when I left Shanghai in mid-May, Teacher Lu had taught me the entire choreography. But that does not mean that I had learned it all. I had been taught everything possible within the limits of the time we had and my skill level. In all honesty, I brought back with me but a general impression of the outline of the performance and a mass of information that I had yet to sort out and digest. To prepare for the scheduled performance on July 10, 2010, I watched the video clips of Teacher Lu's classroom instruction frequently, trying in earnest to remember the crucial points of each vocalization and movement she had taught me. It was not easy; nothing seemed to make much sense now that those moments of communication and inspiration were in the past and Teacher Lu was not there to explain everything in person. I felt that my

memories and acquired abilities were fading away, day by day. My confidence deteriorated, as the July performance date was fast approaching.

Sometime in June, I received an email from Teacher Lu, telling me that she had been invited by a performing arts institute in California to teach a short summer class. Without any hesitation, I wrote back to ask her to come to my place after the class, to help me—no, to rescue me—and my performance. She came just in time to spend a whole week with me before the performance date. During that week, she became my live-in tutor and gave me intense crash courses on almost everything about Zhao Yanrong that filled up almost every waking minute of my life. She helped me go through the whole choreography several times, she taught me to feel the pulse from the percussion and synchronize myself with it, and she had me practice breath control and sing all the arias at least once every morning. She worked with the performers playing Zhao Gao and Mute Maid to help them understand their roles so that they could adequately support my performance. She personally helped videotape all my rehearsals so we could play them back afterwards to find problems and seek improvement.

Most importantly, among the numerous things she did for me, she helped me come a bit closer to being a real performer of the Mei Lanfang school by making me more intently and conscientiously sculpt my body during the course of performance. Although we could not possibly scrutinize every gesture and movement, she picked out many of them to help me re-examine what I was doing with my body. The problem might be the height of my arms, or the direction of my face, or the angle of my torso, or the position of my wrist or palm, or several elements that should have been in sync but weren't and therefore tilted the balance of my entire bodily composition. Her objections seemed to be based on nothing but instinct, without the support of mathematic equations or scientific evidence, but they were always accurate. By reviewing the video clips of my rehearsals with Teacher Lu's side comments, I was able to visually identify all the little but grotesque problems I had in my body that had significantly jeopardized the flow or harmony of my performance. After spending time and assiduous efforts fixing these problems, again under Teacher Lu's personal tutorship, I could also tell that my gestures or movements improved a great deal, as shown in the video of the next rehearsal. Through this condensed and incremental learning process, my eyes grew more acute and sensitive, and my taste became more and more attuned to the aesthetics of the Mei Lanfang school.

By seeing and recognizing my many mistakes and problems, I grew even more appreciative of the natural grace and fluidity of the Mei Lanfang style of *Jingju* in general. None of that natural smoothness, which is so typical of the Mei Lanfang performance style, is really natural. Only the highest, most refined and polished artifact could glow with such natural beauty and perfect ease. Teacher Lu has shown me what it takes to reach such a goal. Many aesthetic principles of Mei's art are immensely challenging in practice. For example, that stage movements and hand gestures should be "round" may appear accessible and comprehensible as a general principle, but it becomes incredibly complicated and mindboggling in actual application. Like everything else, the constant observation of roundness in all physical expressions requires intense mental engagement and sophisticated muscular sensitivity at all times. To fulfill that requirement, I had to envision and strive for an ideal physical constitution in every second of my performance by carefully positioning the individual parts—my limbs, shoulders, torso, hips—in a perfectly proportioned relationship within that constitution. While the concentration required is constant and intense, the appearance should exude ease and fluidity, devoid of any visible hints of strenuous endeavor or extraneous desire. All of this control derives from the same core value of aesthetic balance and harmony discussed earlier in reference to facial expression. Although these artistic principles are abstruse and hard to verbalize with precision and accuracy, they are also concrete and practical, perfectly palpable in the physical presence of a performer solidly trained in the Mei Lanfang tradition. In learning *Yuzhou feng*, I learned to move beyond the abstractness of the general principles and apply them to practical, non-nonsense physical enactments that challenged and thoroughly remolded my relationship to my body and mind.

#### **Afterword**

My performance of "Xiuben" went well. After the whole grueling and inspiring experience in learning the art and the craft, the performance was only the icing on the cake and appeared ironically of little consequence. Teacher Lu went back to Shanghai, and I went back to my regular teaching after the summer. My life returned to its usual hecticness as if nothing had changed. It was not until a year later and through a totally different project, when I directed the Greek tragedy, *The Trojan Women*, by Euripides, during the spring of 2011, that I came to truly appreciate how much I learned from Teacher Lu and how incredibly valuable and universal that knowledge is. In trying to figure out how to portray several

deeply traumatized women including one afflicted with madness, I applied what Teacher Lu taught me to many of the concrete situations and characterizations in that Greek drama. It worked beautifully and effectively. I hope that one day I can relate that experience in another article.

At this very moment, I am still processing the huge amount of knowledge I learned a year ago, first in Shanghai and then in the U.S. I am also still struggling, as probably proven by this article, with articulating the results and fruits of my learning. Looking back at the whole journey, I know that I have become a much better performer of *Jingju* because of it. Being a better performer does not mean that I can act, move, speak, and sing better on stage, which is probably true but relatively insignificant, considering that I will never become a professional actor. The more important fact is that for the first time in my life I have stepped *inside*, into the heart of the art of Mei Lanfang, an art that has fascinated and mesmerized me on stage for so long. I have come out with a stronger appreciation and an even deeper love—although not necessarily a clearer understanding. An art of such profound history and intangible nature is not to be grasped so easily. Having physically and emotionally experienced it as a performer rather than a spectator, I can now feel the power of Mei Lanfang's art in my voice and body, but I still lack the logical mind and proper vocabulary to adequately express or analyze it. This elusiveness is not unexpected and will only keep me digging and yearning for more. All I can do now, as I have tried to do here, is to pick out and focus on a few small pieces of mental insight and critical discovery to reflect on. I can only hope that my scattered account will have the power to invoke, both for myself and for the reader, the grandeur and depth of the process.

A fuller understanding and better articulation of all that is involved is the work of a lifetime. But for now, I have only one immediate concern. I need to decide on my next project—another play, or scene, in the Mei Lanfang tradition—to study with Teacher Lu. I cannot wait to start the next stage of the journey.



Fig. 1: In the classroom of the Shanghai School of Chinese Opera, Lu Yiping (Teacher Lu) is teaching the author how to perform a section of the *fan erhu* aria in *Yu zhoufeng*, which involves singing, physical movements, sleeve maneuvers, and facial expressions.



Fig. 2: Backstage on the day of the performance, Teacher Lu is watching and giving last-minute corrections to the author and Olivia Chen (playing the part of Mute Maid) as they rehearse the section of Zhao Yanrong's feigned madness.