

Yuan Li and Tim Beaumont

Dramatizing Chinese Intellectuals of the Republican Era in *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek*: Encoding Nostalgia in a Comedy of Ideas

Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek, one of the most influential Chinese plays to have garnered attention in recent years, serves as a reminder of the importance of campus theatre in the formation and development of modern Chinese spoken drama from the early twentieth century onwards. As an old-fashioned high comedy that features witty dialogues and conveys philosophical and political ideas, it stands in opposition to such other forms of theatre in China today as the extravagant, propagandistic 'main melody' plays, as well as the experimental theatre of images. This article argues that the play's focus on Chinese intellectuals of the Republican era and their ideas encodes nostalgia both in its dramatic content and theatrical form: the former encodes nostalgia for the Republican era through a nuanced representation of Chinese intellectuals of that period, while the latter encodes nostalgia for orthodox spoken drama (*huaaju*) in the form of a comedy of ideas. Yuan Li (first author) is Professor of English in the Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. She has published extensively on contemporary Chinese and Anglo-Irish drama, theatre, and cinema. Tim Beaumont (corresponding author) is Assistant Professor at the School of Foreign Languages at Shenzhen University. His research is primarily philosophical, and it is currently focused on the relationship between nineteenth-century liberal nationalism and contemporary multiculturalism.

Key terms: Chinese drama, campus theatre, Republican Fever, spoken drama, comic stage philosopher.

FROM ITS PREMIERE at the Nanjing University campus in May 2012 until January 2020, there were over 400 performances of the Chinese comedy *Jianggong de mianzi* (蒋公的面子, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek*) in major cities in mainland China and the USA.¹ One of the most influential Chinese plays to have garnered attention in recent years, this play was written by Wen Fangyi (温方伊) while she was a senior undergraduate student at Nanjing University's Department of Drama, Film, and Television in the School of Liberal Arts. Wen was assigned the task of writing a play as a term project by her supervisor Lü Xiaoping. According to Lü, the play had to be based on a frequently told anecdote about some professors and Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), the Kuomintang (KMT) leader who appointed himself as president of the National Central

University (later Nanjing University) between 1943 and 1944.²

Chiang was said to have invited three leading professors of the Chinese Department to a banquet on the eve of the Chinese New Year of 1943. It is difficult for historians to distinguish the truth about what happened from mere hearsay. No one knows for sure, for example, whether these professors accepted the invitation or not. However, as the title of the play suggests, it is believed that the decision would have been a difficult one to make, since each of them would have had unique but conflicting personal, political, and philosophical motivations for accepting or declining the offer. In consequence, regardless of the historical truth, the episode lends itself to a dramatic depiction of tension and suspense as the professors face a fundamental choice: to go or not to go? After

intensive research in various archives, historical records, memoirs, correspondence, and essay collections by famous Republican-era scholars such as Zhu Ziqing (朱自清, 1898–1948) and Wu Mi (吴宓, 1894–1978), Wen Fangyi's fine script won the support of her supervisor.

In May 2012, for the celebration of the 110th anniversary of the founding of Nanjing University, the Troupe of Master of Fine Arts at Nanjing University staged the play, directed by Lü Xiaoping himself. It was an immediate success and was followed by commercial productions by the end of the same year. Since then, the play has run to full houses for more than eight years, evoking strong responses from its audiences. While Wen Fangyi is the author of the play, its success is widely attributed to Lü Xiaoping, who not only directed but also helped to commercialize it by encouraging stagings in professional theatres throughout China.

Thinking beyond the confines of the ivory tower, Lü envisaged how the play could be crafted to appeal to a non-academic audience. For him, important box-office success was not only a matter of attaining revenue to finance the production, but also involved cultivating professionalism in the campus theatre, The Troupe of Master of Fine Arts. He was an optimist who believed that, despite the various loud and even crudely made cultural products available on the stage, there would always be a market for good plays performed at a high-quality level.³ Lü's point has undoubtedly proved to be right. *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* started out as a campus play with a production cost of only 50,000 RMB, attaining great commercial and artistic success over the past eight years.⁴ This demonstrates the importance of Nanjing University's investment of time and resources in the development of its drama curriculum and theatre programmes, led by a succession of such great theatre scholars and practitioners as Wu Mei (吴梅, 1884–1939), Chen Shouzhu (陈瘦竹, 1909–1990), Chen Baichen (陈白尘, 1908–1994), and Dong Jian (董健, 1936–2019).

Besides its commercial success, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* (henceforth *Face*) also

became a cultural event that generated heated debate. Some of the debates, touching upon the role of campus theatre and questions concerning theatrical form and images of Chinese intellectuals, have been published in major newspapers and media in China.⁵ This article addresses these issues by examining two types of nostalgia encoded in the play. One encodes nostalgia for the Republican era through a nuanced representation of Chinese intellectuals of that period, while the other encodes nostalgia for orthodox spoken drama (*huaju*) in the form of a comedy of ideas.

First, by exploring key Republican figures as well as the socio-political conditions of their era, *Face* captures the ethos and manners of Republican China (1912–1949). In doing so, it fits into a nostalgic cultural phenomenon known as *minguore* (民国热, Republican Fever), a popular interest in Chinese culture and society of the time, and prevalent, still, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁶

Second, the play offers a vivid and nuanced portrait of the uncertainties and dilemmas of Republican-era Chinese intellectuals. Instead of representing them as mere symbols of their cause, the play juxtaposes their public and private faces in order to reveal as well as contextualize the conflicts shaping their respective choices. The comic portrayal of these intellectuals reflects Martin Puchner's concept of a comedy of ideas, which features stage comic philosophers, the dialectic between action and inaction, and conflicts between their ideas and reality.⁷ In this respect, the play encodes nostalgia both in its dramatic content and its theatrical form.

Chinese Intellectuals on the Stage

There has been no shortage of images of intellectuals on the Chinese stage from the beginning of the twentieth century, although how they have been represented has changed over time. In the twenty-first century, two plays other than *Face* that feature intellectuals stand out: *Lüdeshui* (驴得水, *Mr. Donkey*, 2012) by Zhou Shen (周申) and Liu Lu (刘露), and *Jiake* (家客, *House Guest*, 2017) by Yu Rongjun.

While *Lüdeshui* gives a very dark and bleak portrayal of the weakness and hypocrisy of intellectuals when they are faced with the temptation of money and the threat of power, *Jiake* explores different possible destinies and choices that intellectuals could have made as they came of age during the Cultural Revolution. *Face* also has intellectuals as its main characters, and it offers rare insight into the intellectual debates of the Republican era, which still resonate with Chinese audiences today.

Face alternates between two spatio-temporal settings: Chongqing in 1943, during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), and Nanjing in 1967, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).⁸ Action in the first takes place in a teahouse, as well as at one of the professors' houses. Three professors have heated arguments over the invitation from Chiang, showing the personalities, values, and political standpoints of the characters. In the second, 1967 period, Red Guards persecute the professors seen as *niuguisheshen* (cow demons and snake spirits, 牛鬼蛇神), and coerce them into confessing the 'crime' of attending Chiang's banquet in 1943. Each remembers or purports to remember the event differently, thereby producing the Rashomon effect, so named after Akira Kurosawa's famous film *Rashomon*: the film shows how different parties at an event may perceive it in contradictory ways that reflect their self-interest rather than the objective truth.⁹

Inspired by Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998), this narrative avoids committing itself to one historical interpretation of an event over another.¹⁰ In *Copenhagen*, the dramatic depiction of the uncertainties pertaining to Werner Heisenberg's 1941 visit to Niels Bohr allows Frayn to highlight deeper questions raised by their meeting. The dramatic depiction of the mysteries surrounding Chiang's invitation allows the Chinese playwright to explore broader issues in an analogous way. Reed Way Dasenbrock, in his article 'Copenhagen: The Drama of History', discusses how Frayn views his roles both of playwright and historian in the process of seeking the truth:

The difference between them is one of method and methodological limits: the historian has to stay with the external effects, to the level of the observables, whereas the playwright can speculate about what cannot be observed. But this attempt to speculate about the thoughts and intentions of the characters does not move us into a relativist terrain: nothing here suggests that the truth is viewpoint-relative or that all the different versions are equal in truth-value. It is true that Frayn does not sort the different versions out for us . . . it is our job as the audience to do the adjudication. He has built the cloud chamber, he has delineated the effects, and it is up to us to judge what if anything produced these effects.¹¹

Similarly, in *Face*, the playwright is not seeking a plausible answer to historical questions because the invitation and hence the meeting may not have happened at all. This does not create a problem for the contemporary Chinese audience for whom the historical reality of the event tends to be less important than the way in which it has been remembered and imagined. Lü Xiaoping praised his student's writing technique, claiming that her work should not be categorized as a historical play, despite its rich historical dimension. As he puts it: 'The interest in this legend is actually a reflection of the disappointment of professors today in their current situations and a reflection of their own spirit.'¹²

The contrast drawn between the spirit of intellectuals in the two historical periods demarcated seems an implicit critique of the soul-crushing Cultural Revolution, while harking back to the nostalgically perceived Republican era. Although scenes in the play alternate between the Republican era and the Cultural Revolution, most of the plot and dramatic conflicts take place in the former period, while the latter provides a background for characters who deteriorate over time with their changing circumstances.

Nostalgia for the Republican Era and its Intellectuals

Wen Fangyi succeeded in capturing the typical language and ethos of each historical period,



Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek. Scene set in 1967. Photo: courtesy of the Troupe of Master of Fine Arts, Nanjing University.

one being archaic and elegant, and the other revolutionary and vulgar. The most interesting dialogues come from the Republican period and they mix absurdity, sarcasm, and social critique, using such traditional Chinese cultural elements as the *jifeng* (机锋, sharp-witted words) employed by Chan Buddhist masters and the satirical inflections of *Rulin Waishi* (*The Unofficial History of the Scholars*, 儒林外史).

This retro style belongs to the broader cultural phenomenon cited above – *minguore* (民国热, Republican Fever). To put it more precisely, *minguore* was a marked socio-cultural trait during the decades of the War of Resistance against Japan and the Civil War between the Nationalist government and the Communist forces, incorporating everything from fashion, furniture, and food to celebrities, and it permeated numerous new films and TV shows about the Republican period. The logic behind this was a deeply nostalgic belief that the Republic was much more vibrant and

more open and successful than had been previously shown by the overwhelmingly negative narratives about it. One widespread claim was that ‘the Republic enjoyed a surprisingly high level of academic and media freedom and that notable progress was made in spreading democratic thinking and building democratic institutions’.¹³

On perceiving the great market potential generated by interest in this period, publishers and producers started releasing Republican-themed books, films, and television dramas, all of which turned out to have massive popular appeal. These new portrayals of Republican society tended to be more diverse and colourful than preceding ones, and they combined negative and positive features. *Face*, with its presentation of Republican figures and their socio-political context, apparently taps into the rich resources of the era, which partly explains why it has been so popular.

Given the strong Republican lineage of prestigious Nanjing University, nostalgic

stories and anecdotes about the idiosyncratic behaviour of its Republican professors and their defiance of authority have circulated for a long time on the campus. Wen Fangyi managed to synthesize tales about those professors, creating three characters whose images cater to the popular view of the high level of intellectual scholarship achieved during the Republican period. Sun Yu (孙郁), a famous Chinese writer and author of the book *Zai Minguo (In the Republic, 2008)*, claims that present-day intellectuals can hardly compete with the academic brilliance of the intellectuals of the Republican era.¹⁴ Although Ge Jianxiong (葛剑雄), a historian at Fudan University, has refuted this opinion as biased and overstated, asserting that the masses are more interested in the anecdotes of intellectual celebrities than in an objective evaluation of their academic standards, the nostalgia for *da shi* (the great masters) is well acknowledged today.¹⁵

Moreover, these characters are also part of the transition of the centuries-old Chinese *shi* (literati) to modern intellectuals. In *Shi yu zhongguo wenhua (士与中国文化, Scholars and Chinese Culture)*, Yu Yingshi (余英时) analyzes the special social status of *shi* over the course of two thousand years, and argues that, while *shi* share many features with western intellectuals, increasingly from the 1900s, they identified themselves as 'intellectuals', thereby aligning themselves with westernization and modernization.¹⁶ However, Yu also notes that the spectre of *shi* lingers in so far as Republican intellectuals have, as well, preserved the literati's scholarly heritage.¹⁷ *Face* captures the conflicts and tensions between traditional *shi* and modern intellectuals.

Of the play's three professors, Shi Rendao can probably be regarded as the most westernized for his advocacy of science and democracy. Bian Congzhou is a different case. His name sounds like '*bian congzhou*' (便从周), which alludes to Confucius' decision to 'follow Zhou' and so cooperate with the current regime when the Zhou dynasty (c. 1050–256 BCE) conquered and succeeded the Shang one.¹⁸ Bian certainly embodies the ideals of a Confucian *shi* who aimed to form a relationship with the ruler as a teacher, friend, and

minister.¹⁹ By contrast with Bian and Shi, Xia Xiaoshan represents another type of Chinese *shi*, one who chose to remain detached from politics and enjoyed Taoist seclusion. Xia's personality resembles *weijin fenggu* (魏晋风骨, the demeanour of the Wei and Jin dynasties), which manifests strong self-awareness and self-esteem.²⁰

Nostalgia for the Enlightenment and its Leaders

However, besides catering to popular interest, *Face* engages in a deeper exploration of images of intellectuals and the enlightenment ideas that they embody. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the image – or 'face' – of Chinese intellectuals has changed many times in the turmoil of China's modern history. Perhaps the most positive image of Chinese modern intellectuals has been that of the leaders of the Chinese enlightenment movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. While Immanuel Kant's motto for the Western Enlightenment, '*Sapere aude!*' ('Dare to know!'), refers principally to emancipation from religious dogma, the distinct socio-political context of Chinese intellectuals led them to convey what has been described as 'an urgent, almost inchoate desire for emancipation from the ethic of self-submission'.²¹ Thus, the liberal spirit of individual freedom and human rights embodied in the European Enlightenment was transplanted into the Chinese context to deconstruct traditional cultural and moral systems.

The feudal tradition, especially the ethic of subordination to family or state patriarchal authority, was attacked so as to reorient China's historical and cultural consciousness towards self-emancipation and autonomy in the hope of building a modern nation. Some scholars have likened the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the European Enlightenment, despite the differences between European and Chinese ideas.²² Indeed, May Fourth Chinese intellectuals of the Republican era strived to utilize the trope of the Enlightenment in order to achieve what the historian John Fitzgerald called 'national awakening'.²³

It is also worth noting that the birth and formation of Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*) in the early twentieth century overlapped with this undertaking of 'national awakening' – 'in part in response to calls by reform-minded intellectuals unsatisfied with traditional theatre's inability to depict social reality, and thus serve political and educational functions'.²⁴ Ruru Li regards the birth of spoken drama as 'an inborn force of self-renewal' in which Chinese intellectuals 'espoused the adoption of Western knowledge to eradicate the decadence and backwardness of China's society'.²⁵

When Fitzgerald speaks of '*xian juezhe*' (those first awakened, 先觉者), he refers to the Republican intellectuals who took upon themselves the responsibility of inspiring the nation, and the masses looked up to them. However, given the political turbulence and anti-imperialist pressure of the 1920s and the 1930s, the relationship between the already-enlightened thinkers and the still-to-be-awakened populace was short-lived. The image of intellectuals as 'leaders of [a] new culture, ahead of and above the common people', was tarnished when the masses were mobilized to serve anti-imperialist and revolutionary ideals; the intellectuals' commitment to western individualism and liberalism left them looking insufficiently nationalistic.²⁶ Often perceived as being 'un-Chinese', and 'isolated from the masses' (*tuoliqunzhong*, 脱离群众), intellectuals were repeatedly subjected to accusation and even persecution, the most severe case being the Cultural Revolution itself.

Hence, the alternating scenes of the Republican era and the Cultural Revolution in *Face* display a sharp contrast in the spirit of intellectuals. The intellectuals of the Republican era are younger; they are outspoken and, despite living in a time of unrest, their spirits are high and vigorous. Although they are under pressure, they can make choices and can deliberate and argue over them. Some of them openly condemn the national leader.

Intellectuals living under the persecution of the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution are dispirited. They seem to believe that they have no option other than to turn against each other and forsake all their principles, beliefs, and

courage in order to survive. Their broken memories symbolize their broken spirit. *Face*'s representation of the shifting fortunes of Chinese intellectuals reflects a collective anxiety that members of the Chinese audience are likely to feel towards Chinese intellectuals, not sure whether the latter are to be idolized or mocked. Are they obnoxious or pathetic? The stark contrast invokes nostalgic memories of the Republican era when intellectuals were deemed to be excellent scholars and leaders of the enlightenment.

Comments from Nanjing University professors after watching the play accentuated this nostalgia. In the preface to the published playscript of *Face* titled 'Why Search for the Old Shadow of the Independence of Intellectuals?', Ding Fan (丁帆) points out that the play's success was not due to an appeal to popular taste, or to visually impressive stage design, or lighting, but to a nostalgic looking back because 'amid this suppressive age full of material desire, the audience gets to catch a glimpse of the morning light through the dark tunnels of history'.²⁷

The Changing Theatre Landscape in Twenty-First-Century China

When *Face* was first staged, it was met with criticism from the official establishment at the local level. The production was accused of failing to provide a positive message and thus inspire hope; and it was accused of not aligning its position with the positive themes of the 'main-melody' genre, which is a form of propaganda theatre, 'with interesting and touching stories ranging from ancient China to revolutionary history and socialist development since 1949 to the achievement of economic reforms'.²⁸ It was also accused of being insufficiently critical of the Kuomintang (KMT) and Chiang Kai-shek, and of not being sufficiently supportive of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It was even denied access to one of the campus theatre festivals in Shanghai.²⁹ Lü Xiaoping was very eager to defend the play against these criticisms. He claimed that the play belonged to the Enlightenment rather than the 'main melody' genre, and he made it clear that his creative intention

was to initiate dialogue between campus and main-melody plays.³⁰

Claire Conceison gives a detailed account of China's 'main melody' campaign (1990–91), along with an analysis of the major main-melody plays of the 1990s, concluding that, 'though "main melody" is a term that has fallen out of usage, the idea behind it has not necessarily disappeared'.³¹ In fact, far from falling into obsolescence, the term is still used today. The 'main melody' theme has also become more prominent since President Xi Jinping took power in 2012, since he has emphasized the importance of arts that increase society's 'positive energy' (*zhengnengliang*).³²

Lü Xiaoping expresses concerns over how the state's cultural policy of promoting main melody plays as an overbearing political agenda can make it difficult to generate a product with genuine artistic value. Lü's concern about the negative effect that this cultural policy has had on Chinese theatre over the past twenty years is well grounded, but he seems to exaggerate the extent to which the government controls Chinese theatre. As Rossella Ferrari observes, since the 1990s a new age of cultural commodification and artistic commercialism has 'added new angles to old parameters and new tensions to old conflicts, as the market came into play as a third major determinant in the classic struggle between art and politics'.³³ This has increased in the twenty-first century because Chinese theatre has been shaped more and more by factors such as consumerism and globalization.

It is here worth situating Chinese theatre in a global context. Most western theatre for the past half-century or so has been moving away from orthodox spoken drama, which features 'a socially conscious, script-centric and speech-only theatre based on western realism'.³⁴ As Gary Jay Williams notes, challenges to the primacy of the text in the west and in western-influenced theatres elsewhere began to be felt in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁵ Under the influence of Antonin Artaud's sensuous theatre and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist views on language, many theatre performance artists turned away from the once primarily important verbal play-text,

and relied on visual vocabularies to expand the expressive range of the stage. Multimedia theatres of visual and aural landscapes and choreographed movement were created by many artists internationally, including Ping Chong, Robert Lepage, Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Ah Min Soo, leading to what has been called the 'theatre of images'.³⁶ In addition, more and more globalized theatres engaging in cross-cultural productions have preferred primarily visual communications because it facilitates crossing language barriers and cultural borders.³⁷

In this context, Chinese theatre followed the same trajectory, albeit with a time lag of two decades or so. As several theatre scholars have noted, drama in China since the 1990s has de-emphasized the spoken word, thereby becoming 'more focused on providing a total performance event'.³⁸ For example, the most prominent contemporary theatre-maker, Meng Jinghui, is well known for deconstructing texts and exploring intersections between theatre, architecture, music, installations, and multi-media. Theatre companies such as Niao Collective (*zuhe niao*) have also challenged the dominance of spoken theatre by creating *zhiti xiju* (肢体戏剧, body theatre) which aims to question accepted views of the body, performance, and language.³⁹ In addition, the experimental theatre since the 1990s has blended western modernist theatre and indigenous Chinese *xiqu* (song-dance theatre) dramaturgy as a reaction to orthodox *huaaju*.⁴⁰

While these innovations and experiments contributed to a much more vibrant and diversified theatre landscape, a negative spin-off was a scarcity of excellent playscripts.⁴¹ *Face*, then, can be viewed as a reaction against this trend since its success is largely due to Wen Fangyi's dramatic text. In fact, the stage design of the original campus production was criticized for being too simplistic, and even rustic.⁴² The essence of the play lies in its intricate character delineation through witty and poignant dialogue full of allusions, all of which returns to the old-fashioned *huaaju* (literally, 'spoken drama').

This return may seem less surprising when the history and nature of China's campus theatre is taken into account. China's campus

plays date back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the development of modern drama. The first Chinese spoken drama, *The Black Slave's Cry to Heaven* (*Heinu yutian lu*, 1907), was produced by a student group called the Spring Willow Society.⁴³ One of the main features of campus theatre was its valorization of the playscript and dialogue, which was partly due to its comparative lack of funding. *Face's* speech-focused dramaturgy is also born out of Nanjing University's traditional emphasis on dramatic literature instead of theatre. Indeed, on several occasions, Lü maintained that *Face* 'returns to the nature of spoken drama' by returning to the text.⁴⁴ Similarly, after watching *Face*, Cao Lusheng, a professor from Shanghai Theatre Academy, exclaimed in joy, 'Spoken drama is back!'⁴⁵ According to him, the past twenty years had witnessed the overbearing role of the theatre director and the growth of experimental companies that emphasized non-verbal methods, which often gave in to improvisation. Consequently, the playwright had been driven out of the picture. By contrast, an intellectual play such as *Face* had re-established the central role of the playwright, thus re-emphasizing the importance of *spoken* drama.⁴⁶

Nostalgia for Orthodox *Huaju* and the Drama of Ideas

In this respect, *Face* can be viewed as encoding nostalgia for an orthodoxy theatre form. In fact, its speech-focused dramaturgy appeals to Chinese audiences weary of avant-garde experiments in which form is emphasized over content. As a high comedy featuring witty dialogues and conveying philosophical and political ideas, *Face* is different from the extravagant, propagandistic main-melody plays and, as well, from the experimental theatre of images. By dramatizing intellectuals who try to represent, embody, and articulate a message, a view, a philosophy, and an opinion, the play is dominated by dialogues, not by action. Thus *Face* exemplifies Martin Puchner's concept of a theatre of ideas.⁴⁷

In *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy*, Puchner refutes the prevailing misunderstanding of Plato as an

enemy of theatre, arguing that Plato's Socratic dialogues constituted 'an alternative form of drama'; and he analyzes the reverberations of this dramatic Platonism in modern drama.⁴⁸ According to Puchner, modern dramatists, from August Strindberg, Oscar Wilde, and Bernard Shaw, to Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello, and Tom Stoppard, share, despite their differences, a Platonic insistence that 'theatre be an intellectually serious undertaking, a theatre of ideas. The theatre had something crucial to contribute to the formation of ideas.'⁴⁹

Puchner acknowledges that he was inspired by Alain Badiou's provocative thesis in his *Rhapsody for the Theatre* that 'all theatre is [a] theatre of ideas'.⁵⁰ He also thinks Badiou's insistence on the dramatic text as a reference point 'goes against the widespread suspicion in theatre and performance studies of the dramatic text as somehow traditionalist'.⁵¹

Face began as a play-text term paper and this dramatic characteristic is integral to its success. Lü Xiaoping acknowledges that his directorial efforts were minimal since dialogue continued intensely throughout the whole two hours of the play. There was, therefore, no need or any room for inserting other theatrical forms.⁵²

Another way in which the play conforms to Puchner's idea of Platonic theatre is that its three characters are used as devices through which to present different philosophical and political concepts. A central component of the theatre of ideas is the use and manipulation of characters, especially its philosophical protagonist. The three professors in *Face*, besides embodying different types of Chinese intellectuals of the Republican era, represent the political stances that Chinese audiences were most familiar with, usually labelled 'left', 'centre', and 'right'. Their arguments concerning Chiang's invitation, as well as the attendant political disputes, are the staple of the whole play. In the context of Republican China, Shi Rendao is an indignant leftist (a pro-communist) who regards Chiang Kai-shek as a dictator. Bian Congzhou is a moderate rightist, who supports Chiang's leadership because he believes that a strong centralized government is essential at a time of national



Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek. Scene set in 1943. Photo: courtesy of the Troupe of Master of Fine Arts, Nanjing University.

crisis caused by the Japanese invasion. Xia Xiaoshan, the third professor, takes the middle ground by refusing to engage in politics. The personalities and political views of the three characters are reflected in a conversation about Hu Shi, the famous advocate for the enlightenment during the May Fourth movement:

BIAN CONGZHOU: Hu Shi sure knows when to push forward and when to step back.

XIA XIAOSHAN: After several years as Chinese Ambassador in America, Hu Shi quit this job once he got the opportunity. Politics is not for intellectuals. We are better off with academic pursuits.

BIAN CONGZHOU: Politics needs intellectuals.

SHI RENDAO: If the intellectuals are like water, and politics is likened to the ink stone, water must remain clear in order to wash the ink stone; if the water is contaminated, the ink stone will never be clean.

BIAN CONGZHOU: Water and ink must be compatible so that ink can melt in the water.

After all, we need ink water to write. What is your comment on this, Mr. Xia?

XIA XIAOSHAN: Me? I would rather be water in a fishpond, stay away from pen, ink, paper, and ink stone.⁵³

The arguments that dominate the whole play present a variety of ideas, as well as conflicts generated by attempts to apply ideals to the real world. Here, as Puchner puts it, 'theatre can be an epistemological tool, a laboratory of truth, a thought experiment'.⁵⁴

Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek as a Comedy of Ideas

Yet depictions of the intellectuals in this play are far more profound and subtle than the crude distinctions of left, centre, and right. In

fact, the play's biggest appeal is the comic presentation of their awkward situation. When Wen Fangyi explained her writing, she said what she wanted to present was 'the perpetual predicament of the intellectuals'.⁵⁵ Lü Xiaoping affirmed the artistic value of her characterization, which was to present the three professors as 'fallible human beings' with all the attendant inconsistencies and incongruities that entails.⁵⁶ That is how this play differs from plays in the 'main melody' tradition, which are generally too didactic to be artistic. As to what a well-made high comedy is supposed to be: 'the purpose is not consciously didactic or ethical, though serious purpose is often implicit in the satire that is frequent.'⁵⁷ The comic presentation of the intellectuals is both entertaining and thought-provoking, which makes it easier for audiences to identify with their impasse, and to perceive the tragedy beneath the comedy.

This nuanced dramatic depiction also exemplifies Puchner's notion of comedy of ideas. He traces the philosophers and scholars emergent from Plato's rendition of Socrates, and continuing in the characters created by Shaw, Wilde, and Stoppard, defining them as comic stage philosophers or 'professors'. Puchner asserts:

The importance of comedy for the Socratic dialogue is most clearly visible in the depiction of Socrates as what I call a comic stage philosopher. When philosophers such as Socrates are allowed onstage at all, invariably they turn out to be comic: concerned only with ideas, they keep stumbling over concrete reality. One fragment about the first known philosopher, Thales, has him looking at the stars and stumbling into a ditch with a Thracian maid looking on and laughing.⁵⁸

Puchner goes on to elaborate how the peculiarities of philosophers – their unworldliness and absurdity, which puts them into awkward situations – are often sources of good humour and laughter:

For comedies of almost any type or variety, philosophers proved a compelling target because their focus on metaphysics and abstract ideas could be contrasted, to comic effect, with the everyday reality of their lives. Many practitioners and theorists of

comedy, from Aristophanes to Bergson, have used the collision of idea and matter as a quintessential comic technique. Nothing is more comic than a character who pursues ideas and thereby disregards everyday life.⁵⁹

The three professors of *Face* have traits of the comic stage philosopher. Xia Xiaoshan avoids politics and indulges in academic pursuits, delicious food, mah-jong, *kunqu*, and Song poems. The comedy lies in his conflict between hesitant acceptance of Chiang Kai-shek's invitation and his ardent love for banquet delicacies. Audiences understand and laugh at his obsession with braised tofu with Jinhua ham. Although it is easy to view Bian Congzhou as a supporter of Chiang Kai-shek, he acts on a Confucian ideal of engagement with politics and, therefore, on the impetus to find opportunities to advise the ruler. However, as an intellectual who is supposed to remain distant from the authorities, he knows what the stakes are in accepting the invitation. To save his face, he tries to persuade his colleagues to go with him.

Perhaps the most comic or awkward character is Shi Rendao. As a more modern and progressive intellectual, he is strongly against Chiang Kai-shek's regime and openly condemns it when one of his students is killed during a demonstration in support of resistance against Japan. However, he secretly longs for Chiang's favour so as to bring back the books that he left behind in another province during the wartime migration to Chongqing, the south-west hinterland. In order to protect his own face, Shi urges Bian Congzhou to accept this invitation so that Bian can ask for this favour on his behalf. The play exposes his hypocrisy and vulnerability. He tries to project an image of himself as an independent, courageous scholar: 'There is no way that I can sit together with Old Chiang! . . . Shi Rendao would rather starve to death than borrow money.'⁶⁰ Nevertheless, he loses face when his wife later reveals that she had been borrowing money from Bian Congzhou for their livelihood. Shi Rendao is comical because he is awkward and bitter. As Puchner notes, comedy deflates ideas or forms by confronting them with the material reality of the world.⁶¹



Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek. Scene set in 1943. Photo: courtesy of the Troupe of Master of Fine Arts, Nanjing University.

The play is also satirical on social matters but avoids head-on criticism. In a teahouse scene, for example, a poster on a wall reads: 'It is hard to predict air raids, so please pay your tea bill first; by official mandate – no discussion about state affairs.' The stage design pays tribute to Lao She's most famous play, *Teahouse*, in which the poster 'No discussion about state affairs' (莫谈国事) hangs on the wall, warning customers from all walks of life. This poster is comic and disheartening at the same time, since it highlights the play's allegorical intention: to dramatize the predicament of intellectuals in public life. The term used in the quotation above probably refers to a phantom that haunts the entire history of Chinese spoken drama, thus stirring collective anxiety regarding intellectuals who fear offending rulers. They are likely to stay aloof and silent, or become cynical.

Face also hints at the time-honoured tradition of Chinese literature of *jiegufengjin* (using

the past to criticize the present) – a technique by which political allegories and historical references point to actuality.⁶² Here there are parallels between old corruption and a formerly politically divided intelligentsia in the present:

BIAN CONGZHOU: Nowadays, people criticize the government daily. As if it will be made progressive by shouting out 'corruption'!

SHI RENDAO: Doesn't the government deserve condemnation? The corruption of the nationalist government is world famous. The American Red Cross donated a great amount of quinine to us, only to find it was stored in the Bank of China. Instead of distributing it to the wounded soldiers, they sold the medicine for profit. . . . Shame on our nation! Shame! It is better to shout out 'corruption' than to shout out 'Long Live' [something]. . . .

BIAN CONGZHOU: If you are not content with the government, just go to Yan'an.⁶³ But what can you do there? It does not even have light bulbs!

SHI RENDAO: If there is no democracy and freedom in politics, what is the point?⁶⁴

This conversation usually incites the loudest audience laughter, which may be less of a response to humorous content than a release of potentially unconscious anxiety and anger. As Sigmund Freud claims in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, a joke indicates what is being repressed in serious discussion.⁶⁵ Audiences immediately identify the elephant in the room and so take pleasure in a semi-illicit outlet. The joke here is a tendentious one 'in the services of the purpose of exposure, and of hostile, cynical and sceptical purposes'.⁶⁶

Bian Congzhou's criticism of another professor, Lou Zhichu, is relevant: 'He appears to be liberal but supports authoritarianism. He considers himself above the crowd, acting like an unconventional old-style scholar, but maintains good connections with many politicians . . . He is a really smart guy.'⁶⁷ No doubt, this kind of cynicism and hypocrisy can still be found amongst intellectuals today. Despite such cases of *jiegufengjin* in the play, tensions in its political debates are offset by comic dialogue about mah-jong, delicacies, and anecdotes.

As previously indicated, *Face* encodes deep nostalgia for the high-spirited intellectuals of the Republican era. Thus, although the three professors are rather ridiculous in their vanity and human-all-too-human calculations, this need not undermine an audience's sense of their spiritual independence. After all, Chiang Kai-shek's invitation puts them in an awkward position; none considers it a great honour or privilege. Ultimately, the play is about the faces of these intellectuals when they are put in a moral quandary. It is a test of their attitude when they are confronted by power.

Conclusion

Instead of merely representing the intellectuals as symbols of their cause, *Face* juxtaposes their public and private faces in order to reveal and contextualize the conflicts that shape their respective choices. Julien Benda's and Edward Said's conceptions of intellectuals are illuminating here: Benda sees intellectuals idealistically as 'a tiny band of super

gifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind', while Said emphasizes the importance of addressing the idiosyncrasies and personal stories of individual intellectuals.⁶⁸ Using Jean-Paul Sartre as an example, Said claims:

That is why when we remember an intellectual like Sartre we recall the personal mannerisms, the sense of an important personal stake, the sheer effort, risk, will to say things about colonialism, or about commitment, or about social conflict that infuriated his opponents and galvanized his friends and perhaps even embarrassed him retrospectively. When we read about Sartre's involvement with Simone de Beauvoir, his dispute with Camus, his remarkable association with Jean Genet, we situate him (the word is Sartre's) in his circumstances. . . . Far from disabling or disqualifying him as an intellectual, these complications give texture and tension to what he said, expose him as a fallible human being, not a dreary and moralistic preacher.⁶⁹

In consequence, Said maintains, intellectuals should not be viewed as mere symbols of their beliefs or causes because their 'personal inflection' and 'private sensibility' adds another layer of significance to their words and writings.⁷⁰ Accordingly, it is important to be aware of intellectuals' public and private faces – the beliefs that they defend in public life and the motives that animate their private life. Respect in *Face* for such Enlightenment ideas as autonomy and freedom, together with its presentation of comic stage philosophers, is enriched by its depiction of intellectuals torn between their ideals and their personal stakes.

With both great artistic and commercial success, *Face* marks the rise of campus theatre in China in the twenty-first century.⁷¹ It continues to play a significant role in the development of Chinese modern drama.

Notes and References

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1. Our English translation of the title of this play follows that of Siyuan Liu, 'Modern Chinese Theatre', in Siyuan Liu, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 311–27.

2. Lü Xiaoping, 'Yige wenhua shijian: guanyu xiju Jianggongde mianzi' ('A Cultural Event: About the

Comedy Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), *Yangzijiang Pinglun* (*Yangzijiang Review*), VII, No. 1 (2013), p. 5–9.

3. Zhu Xuniao and Jiang Fang, 'Jianggongde mianzi weihe chengwei quanguoxing wenhua shijian' ('Why Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek Became a National Cultural Event'), *Xinhua Meiridianxun* (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph*), 1 November 2013.

4. The Troupe of Masters of Fine Arts at Nanjing University, which produced *Face*, and consists of theatre-makers from Nanjing University, and the actors (teaching staff and students) from the Communication University of China, has been attempting to connect their campus plays to the theatre market since its founding in 2007. Prior to *Face*, previous attempts included such productions as *Renmin gongdi shijian* (人民公敌事件, *An Event of the Enemy of the People*) in 2005, and *Luomiu, haishi Aosailuo* (罗密欧, 还是奥赛罗, *Romeo, or Othello*) in 2009. With the success of *Face*, the Troupe has evolved into a private theatre company (Nanjing Blackbox Culture Limited) after its official registration in February 2013.

5. See interviews, commentaries, and discussions on *Face* by the main stream press and social media collected and edited in Geng Jun, ed., *Huali huawai hua jiangong* (*Talks on 'Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'*, 话里话外话<蒋公>) (Shenzhen: Shenzhen Press Group Publishing House, 2013).

6. Robert Weatherley and Qiang Zhang, *History and Nationalist Legitimacy in Contemporary China: A Double-Edged Sword* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 154.

7. Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 118–19.

8. During the War of Resistance against Japan, the Chinese central government, along with important universities and factories, was relocated to Chongqing in the Chinese interior.

9. Robert Anderson, 'The Rashomon Effect and Communication', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, XLI, No. 2 (2016), p. 249–69.

10. Wen Fangyi admitted that she was inspired by *Copenhagen* when conceiving her play; see Wen Fangyi, 'Xiezuo Jianggongde mianzi' ('Writing Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), *Yangzijiang Pinglun* (*Yangzijiang Review*), VII, No. 1 (2013), pp. 10–12.

11. Reed Way Dasenbrock, 'Copenhagen: The Drama of History', *Contemporary Literature*, XLV, No. 2 (2004), p. 218–38.

12. Lü Xiaoping, 'Yige wenhua shijian: guanyu xiju Jianggongde mianzi' ('A Cultural Event: About the Comedy Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), p. 5–9.

13. Weatherley and Zhang, *History and Nationalist Legitimacy*, p. 147. The authors explain that the economic and nationalist rationales for the official toleration of a more relaxed political climate, especially the Chinese Communist Party's 'consensual nationalist approach' to highlighting 'Chinese national unity and historical commonality with the KMT' (p. 156–7), which has allowed *minguore* to emerge.

14. Ding Guoqiang, 'Nayidai wenren de fenggu yu qidu' ('The Manner and Demeanour of the Intellectuals in That Generation'), *Bolanqunshu* (*Chinese Book Review Monthly*), XIV, No. 8 (2008), p. 88–91.

15. Ge Jianxiong, 'Minguo shi dashi zhongduo de xueshu huangjin shidai ma?' ('Were There Many Great Masters in the Republican Era?'), *Guanchazhe* (*The Observer*), 18 October 2014.

16. Yu Yingshi, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* (*Chinese Scholars and Chinese Culture*) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1987), p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*

18. In Confucius' *Analects*, the Master said 'Zhou had the advantage of viewing the two past dynasties. How complete and elegant are its regulations! I follow Zhou.' See *Lunyu*: Bayipian (八佾篇).

19. Yu Yingshi, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* (*Chinese Scholars and Chinese Culture*), p. 101.

20. Yu Yingshi characterizes this Wei-Jin demeanour in terms of five features: reclusive thoughts (避世思想), Taoist health nurturing (养生与老庄), financial sufficiency (经济基础), feeling from mountain and water (山水怡情), and literature and arts (文学艺术). See *ibid.*, p. 331–51.

21. Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 2.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

23. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 6.

24. Siyuan Liu and Kevin J. Wetmore Jr, 'Modern Chinese Drama in English: A Selective Bibliography', *Asian Theatre Journal*, XXVI, No. 2 (2009), p. 320–51.

25. Ruru Li, 'Introduction', in Ruru Li, ed., *Staging China: New Theatres in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 55–60.

26. Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theatre and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p. 125.

27. Ding Fan, 'Why Search for the Old Shadow of the Independence of the Intellectuals', in Wen Fangyi, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2013), p. 3–16.

28. Ruru Li, 'Introduction', p. 55–60.

29. Despite initial critical voices and setbacks such as the occasional denial of staging and access to some campus theatre festivals, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* still received quite a few government endorsements. In October 2013, Lü Xiaoping and Wen Fangyi were elected among China's Cultural Persons of the Year; and in December, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* won the Lu Xun *wenhuajiang* (鲁迅文化奖, Lu Xun Culture Prize) for the best play of the year, an award in honour of China's canonical modern literary master, Lu Xun (1881–1936). The sponsor of this award is the Lu Xun Cultural Foundation, supervised by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. There were also laudatory reviews of the play in some of China's official newspapers and journals, including *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*, and *Beijing Youth*.

30. Lü Xiaoping, 'Huaju Jianggongde mianzi yu Shanghai' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek and Shanghai'), p. 68–73.

31. Claire Conceison, 'The Main Melody Campaign in Chinese Spoken Drama', *Asian Theatre Journal*, XI, No. 2 (1994), p. 190–212.

32. Ruru Li, 'Introduction', p. 55–60.

33. Rossella Ferrari, *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in Contemporary China* (London: Seagull Books, 2012), p. 52.

34. Siyuan Liu, 'Spoken Drama (*Huaju*) with a Strong Chinese Flavour: The Resurrection and Demise of Popular Spoken Drama (*Tongsu Huaju*) in Shanghai in the 1950s

and Early 1960s', *Theatre Research International*, XLII, No. 3 (2018), p. 265–85.

35. Gary Jay Williams, 'Director, Text, Actor, and Performance in the Postmodern World', in Phillip B. Zarrilli *et al.*, eds., *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 512.

36. The phrase 'theatre of images' was coined by Bonnie Marranca in her analysis of the American avant-garde theatre represented by Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and Lee Breuer in the 1970s. See her 'Introduction' in Bonnie Marranca, ed., *The Theatre of Images: Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Lee Breuer* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. ix–xv.

37. Néstor García Canclini, 'Theatre and Performance in the Age of Global Communications, 1950–2009', in Zarrilli *et al.*, eds., *Theatre Histories*, p. 463.

38. Jonathan Noble, 'China: Modern Theatre', in Samuel L. Leiter ed., *Encyclopedia of Asian Theatre*, Vol. 1 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 117. The scholars who notice this trend include Cao Lusheng, Lü Xiaoping, and Jonathan Noble; see Geng Jun, ed., *Huali huawai hua jianggong* (*Talks on 'Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'*), p. 165.

39. Néstor García Canclini, 'Theatre and Performance in the Age of Global Communications, 1950–2009', p. 478.

40. Siyuan Liu, 'Spoken Drama (*Huaju*) with a Strong Chinese Flavour', p. 265–85.

41. Geng Jun ed., *Huali huawai hua jianggong* (*Talks on 'Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'*), p. 56.

42. Lü Xiaoping, 'Women jiuqing zuolexie shenme' ('What On Earth Did We Do?'), in Wen Fangyi, *Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2013), p. 23–38.

43. Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, 'Case Study: Imagining Contemporary China: Gao Xingjian's Wild Man in post-Cultural Revolution China', in Zarrilli *et al.*, eds., *Theatre Histories*, p. 575.

44. Geng Jun ed., *Huali huawai hua jianggong* (*Talks on 'Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'*), p. 56.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas*, p. 88–9.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

50. Alain Badiou, 'Rhapsody for the Theatre: A Short Philosophical Treatise', trans. Bruno Bosteels, *Theatre Survey*, XLIX, No. 2 (2008), p. 187–238.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

52. Geng Jun, ed., *Huali huawai hua jianggong* (*Talks on 'Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'*), p. 168.

53. Wen Fangyi, 'Jianggongde mianzi' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), in Lü Xiaoping, ed., *Qingchun xiju dangan* (*Staging Like A Teen Spirit*) (Beijing: Qunyan Press, 2013), p. 354.

54. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas*, p. 119.

55. Wen Fangyi, 'Xiezuo Jianggongde mianzi' ('Writing Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), p. 10–12.

56. Lü Xiaoping, 'Huaju Jianggongde mianzi yu Shanghai' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek and Shanghai'), p. 68–73.

57. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, seventh edition (Prentice Hall Books, 1997), ebook, <<http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/comedydi.htm#High%20Comedy>> (accessed 20 February 2020).

58. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas*, p. 16.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

60. Wen Fangyi, 'Jianggongde mianzi' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), p. 374.

61. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas*, p. 19.

62. Shiao-ling Yu, 'Politics and Theatre in the PRC: Fifty Years of *Teahouse* on the Chinese Stage', *Asian Theatre Journal*, XXX, No. 1 (2013), p. 90–121.

63. Yan'an, a city in Shanxi province in the Northeast of China, was the headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party from 1935 to 1947.

64. Wen Fangyi, 'Jianggongde mianzi' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), p. 374–5.

65. Michael Billig, 'The Dialogic Unconscious: Psychoanalysis, Discursive Psychology, and the Nature of Repression', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, XXXVI, No. 2 (1997), p. 139–59.

66. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, <<https://b-ok.cc/book/2516981/a9599f>> (accessed 25 February 2020).

67. Wen Fangyi, 'Jianggongde mianzi' ('Face for Mr. Chiang Kai-shek'), p. 355.

68. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 4–5.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

71. Siyuan Liu, 'Modern Chinese Theatre', in Siyuan Liu, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre*, p. 311–27.