(Re)constructing National Identity: The Case of Xiqu Culture in Taiwan

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To most Westerners, a more familiar term for xiqu 戏曲 is perhaps Chinese opera, or Peking (Beijing) opera. However, Peking opera is only one of the numerous forms of “opera” in the performing traditions of Chinese-speaking societies. Xiqu, frequently translated as “opera,” is, in fact, very different from the opera of Western classical music in many ways. Xiqu is a traditional Chinese performing art that combines music, theater arts, literature, and martial arts. Historically, each area in China has developed their own unique xiqu forms that are performed in the local dialect and embody the local music and dance traditions. The art evolves closely to people’s ordinary lives – the librettis derived from folklore that emphasize of traditional moral values; the performances are often combined with religious ceremonies and folk rituals. Hence, a xiqu form is seen as a representation of the aesthetics of the certain area and the temperament and demeanor of the local people. Taiwan, however, is unique in that a multitude of xiqu traditions assembles on the island. The assortment of xiqu forms is only a miniature of the cultural composition of Taiwan, which includes that of the aboriginals, the large groups of Hans 漢人 that emigrated from across the strait from mainland China during various stages in history, and their descendants. Consequently, the identities of the inhabitants of this island are constantly being reshaped by fusions of different traditions, confrontation, conflict, and reconciliation. This process of identity construction is evident in the various xiqu forms in Taiwan.

From these numerous xiqu forms, I have selected three main active xiqu forms in Taiwan to focus on in this study: Peking opera 京劇, gezixi 歌仔戲, and kunqu 崑曲. Peking opera and kunqu have both been selected as the national opera by the imperial court during different periods of Chinese Empire and have developed into highly sophisticated styles; presently they are both acknowledged by the UNESCO as one of the world’s Intangible Heritage of Humanity.1 Gezixi, on the other hand, is a relatively young form that is likely to have emerged on the island of Taiwan in the last century. It is extremely versatile due to its young age; it can take the shape of a highly sophisticated form, as well as one that is accessible, unaffected, that belongs to the common folk. Each xiqu form in Taiwan naturally generated their own audience groups based on language and taste differences. Yet this audience profile is continuously changing, and the changes coincide with new directions for the xiqu forms, including more refined taste, larger performance scale, and fusions of traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern theatrical techniques. It also coincides with the changing meaning of being ‘Taiwanese’ from exclusively the people who inhabited this island before a certain period in history, people with certain political ideologies, people who speak a certain dialect, to broader meanings that include all people who identify Taiwan as home.

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The changes are not always results of natural occurrences. Political interference played a significant role in the history of *xiqu*. Through the second half of the twentieth century, the two opposing Taiwanese parties, KMT (Kuomintang or Nationalist) and DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) promoted different forms of traditional *xiqu* according to their different political ideologies. From the Nationalist government’s retreat to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War in 1949, through the lifting of the four-decade long martial law in 1987, to the DPP’s assumption of power ending the fifty-five years of KMT domination in 2000, and finally through the decline of DPP eight years later, an intricate relationship between *xiqu* and national identity was thus formulated in the past fifty years. Throughout this process, Peking opera was usually favored because of its signature role as a precious cultural heritage, and *gezixi* its status as the *xiqu* that presumably originated on the island of Taiwan and that belongs to the common Taiwanese people.

Examining the diversity in the traditional *xiqu* forms and how these traditions have evolved in the current society helps us understand the process through which Taiwan, as an immigrant society, has struggled searching for a way to construct a unified image. In a society such as this, culture identity becomes especially consequential. The ultimate goal I wish to achieve with this study is to complete one piece of the puzzle of what I call ‘music of the diaspora,’ or as this case turned out, music is not the only subject of interest. The people fabricate an idea of self with the frame of artistic work. It is in this context that the question of *xiqu* forms and national identity intrigues me.

Plate 1 The unique *wenhuachang* in Taiwan – free outdoor performance with refined theater quality, also mixed with some political component.

While politics play a significant role in formulating the national identity, the
political interference is much more mild in today’s Taiwan. Or one could say it is better concealed in this new era, during which ‘culture’ is what the people best like to describe themselves with. A special performance venue illustrates an aspect of cultural life in Taiwan and, in a way, demonstrates how this ‘concealment’ is achieved. This type of performance is a phenomenon unique to Taiwan, as HELIAN, a professor of Theater Arts, told me. This is a performance form called wenhuachang 文化場 (literally, ‘culture field’) (plate 1). This is an outdoor venue with a temporary stage and hundreds of plastic stools, yet the troupe presents the quality of a theater performance. Which means, for example, complete lighting equipment, two screens for subtitles, larger stage compared to traditional temple theaters, elaborate costumes, and finally, very carefully selected music. It is taking the refined indoor production to outdoor venues like community parking lots, parks, plazas, and so forth, performing free of charge at the level of theater quality. It has always been fairly successful in appealing to the ordinary inhabitants of the city who may not think to purchase a ticket to go to a formal theater. This performance form combines the traditional temple square gezixi that were often linked to religious ceremonies with the innovated refined theater performance that borrows Western theatrical techniques, among many others. This type of performance exemplifies the welcoming and accessible nature that the people in Taiwan pride themselves with, at the same time it voiced a demand for the Taiwanese audience to improve from a coarse folk art to a more cultured adaptation of Taiwanese opera. Interestingly, these performances are also opportunities for politicians to earn some popularity points and, ideally, some votes. County councilors and candidates were present at a wenhuachang I attended in Shilin District 士林 in a warm summer evening. As I entered the parking lot, there were tables of two candidates of two opposing parties set up on both sides. Volunteers wearing vests with the candidates’ names printed on them were handing out water bottles, fans, and flyers. At the end of the performance, the candidates stood on both sides of the road to greet and shake hands with audience members as they exited the parking lot.

This wenhuachang could be seen as a projection of the continuously evolving xiqu culture in Taiwan. The new trend, as demonstrated in the wenhuachang instance, is three-dimensional. First, it reveals a ‘renegotiation’ between culture and politics. The two should ideally subtlety merge into one (and possibly appear to be completely different matters). At the performance I described above, there were no political debates, no campaigning, but simply politicians showing up at culture-related events. This shows the current attitude that politicians do not want to be seen as interferers of cultural activities, but as supporters. Wenhuachang is a perfect type of cultural activity for this amalgamation. The reason for this brings me to the second point. The generally preferred cultural elements as of this day include a ‘nativist’ quality in the arts that make them accessible to the Taiwanese common folk. This does not mean primitive and coarse arts, but those that can at the same time demonstrate the high cultural level and rich heritage whereby the people in Taiwan stand proudly. Wenhuachang preserves the gezixi tradition and brings a theater-quality performance to the common populace. The new trend, like the refinement of the former temple theater, aims for higher level of cultural sensitivity; this refinement is being nurtured in an environment that pays increased

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2 July 22, 2011, age fifty.
respect it traditions. The third point is, therefore, the meaning of the apparent decline of interest in traditional xiqu and its resurrection. Whether traditional xiqu is declining does not depend only on the period of time, but also on individual opinion. As I am interested in the identity construction, this question may suggest what is recognized as successful preservation of tradition, whose tradition it is, and how important they are in the ordinary lives of people in Taiwan today.

A Note on Romanization

The report uses the romanization convention generally used for work on Taiwan, the hanyu pinyin system 漢語拼音. When the romanization of names and places are already established, or when individuals romanize their own names in specific ways, then these are observed.

The interviews, lectures, and informal conversations all took place in Taipei, Taiwan, where Mandarin Chinese is the primary language. Taiwanese dialect (Minnanyu 閩南語) was also occasionally used. I translated all the Chinese texts. In addition, I have given pseudonyms to all my informants for their confidentiality.

Cultural Translation

Here I would like to explain a few particular terms that I choose to use in this study. While the word ‘opera’ is used to refer to the type of performing arts discussed in this study, I would like to replace it with the word xiqu, the real name of this art that has no English equivalent. As CHANG Bi-Yu describes in her article, “xi literally means ‘play and drama’ and qu means ‘music and songs.’” Xiqu resembles nothing of the opera in Western classical music, in aesthetic, in performance practice, and in all technical aspects from script writing, music composition, to performer training. As stated above, there are multitudes of xiqu forms that prospered in local areas in China and Taiwan.

One of the forms examined more closely in this study is Peking opera. A number of other translations have been used for Peking opera in scholarly work, including Beijing opera and Chinese opera. In Taiwan people may refer to this opera style as pingju 平劇, guoju 國劇, jingju 京劇, pihuang 皮黃, and so on. Pingju is a name I typically encountered when talking to elderly people during my fieldwork. Like jingju, Beijing opera, and Peking opera, it also means theatrical style of the city Beijing. The city was named Beiping until it became the capital of People’s Republic of China in 1949; the city name was then changed to Peking/Beijing. Guoju means national opera, a title bestowed upon the xiqu style when the Nationalist government tried to promote it. From my observation during my stay in Taiwan, Jingju today appears to be the conventional Chinese name among Peking opera professionals, journalists, and scholars in Taiwan. While I speak about jingju in Chinese, I choose to use the name Peking opera in this writing because I believe it is already an established name among English speakers.

Waishengren 外省人 and benshengren 本省人 are two frequent terms used to distinguish the people who came to the Taiwan island after its retrocession in 1945, and those who had built a home in Taiwan a few generations earlier. How these names should be explained, or whether the line between the two groups is simply drawn by an

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3 Chang, Bi-Yu, Disclaiming and renegotiating national memory, 51.
imagined difference, is a very complex issue. While English-language literature on the subject of Taiwan frequently accentuates these terms, ordinary people and xiqu professionals in Taiwan are hesitant to mention them. There are other terms and translations used to address the same issue, but I shall use weishengren and benshengren when referring to it.

There are other keywords that are encouraged and assume a more positive connotation than the distinction between waishengren and benshengren. As I was conducting my interviews, I usually sensed resistance against such distinctions, leading me to search for new phrasings in order to more successfully approach the subject. I found that making remarks on my informants’, their audience, or students’ dialects is more comfortable to most. Making note of whether I am confronting a group of Taiwanese dialect speakers, a Mandarin Chinese speakers, Hakka speakers, or others helps me gain an insight on their family background. However, this does not directly represent a certain political ideology or preference in a type of xiqu.

When discussing Taiwanese identity, it is almost impossible to leave out the terms waishengren and benshengren. Despite the altering political power, the present day Taiwanese people is composed of the aboriginals, the large groups of Hans that emigrated from across the strait during various stages in history, and their descendants. While this is a historical fact, it provides a close connection with mainland China that some Taiwanese people are reluctant to recognize. To these people, waishengren and benshengren could be two different ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds and heritages, and thus different political ideology, not just both diasporas who resettled in Taiwan during different periods. The meaning and importance of waishengren and benshengren, then, is evidently divergent from individual to individual. It also evolves with changing political and social dynamics in Taiwan overtime. There are some who have now ventured to make the distinction as great as mainlanders/Chinese versus Taiwanese. At the same time, SHIYING, who was born in 1961, who would in the above sense be considered a benshengren, informed me that she barely noticed the distinction and it was no at all important as she was growing up. She just thought they all share the Chinese heritage. It was not until the 1990s that an image of a nativist Taiwanese culture (bentu, xiangtu) began to emerge.

In fact, this is an example of how the narrative of the modern history of Taiwan can be highly subjective. The ‘version of the story’ that was taught to most of my subjects was: Taiwan was liberated from Japanese rule after the Second World War and retroceded to the Republic of China in 1945; the Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan after the defeat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949. I choose to stay with this narrative in order to more faithfully reveal the language of the people, who are not constantly watching their words to say what is the most currently political correct, but most often reflecting how they were educated. There are scholars who disagree with the term retrocession, because they see Japan as simply one of the many outside forces, along with the Portuguese, the Dutch, even the Ming and the Qing Court, who once reigned over the island, and because the Republic of China was established during the time when the Taiwan island was under Japanese rule. There are also scholars who emphasize that the waishengren are refugees from mainland China and identifying them

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4 This is one of the many ethnic groups and the largest group that the Chinese population is comprise of.
5 July 17, 2011.
not just as newcomers, but diaspora, outsider who are inherently different from the Taiwanese people.

It is important to note that, though, it is very easy to mistakenly look at Taiwanese identity issue by categorizing people’s view into the groups of waishengren and benshengren, in turn assuming their political orientation, in turn viewing the identity study as a pursuit of the question whether Taiwan should be a dependant nation or not. From my observation, the connection between people’s political orientation, their background, and their attitude on cross-strait relations is subtle. I confess, as a researcher, I had to resist my temptation to push my cultural findings into the web of cross-strait relations more than one time. Although the political dynamic in Taiwan may seem very polarized in Taiwan to an outsider, the people whom I have spoken to about xiqu normally do not bring up political discourse; they normally do not even speak about topics such as whether their audience is mostly waishengren et cetera. The difficulty in reviewing these exchanges is finding the balance between being attentive to unspoken implications and reading too much into the conversations and forcing distinctions between the people and meanings that I assumed prior to entering ‘the field.’ The largest shock that found me soon after I began my investigation was that the presupposed link between gezixi, Peking opera and different political orientations, different waishen or bensheng groups seemed to have appeased, almost vanished. After spending more time in the community, I became convinced that today’s Taiwan requires a new understanding that looks beyond cross-strait issues. In this inquiry of national identity construction, I would like to focus on cultural identity and distinguish this from national ideology.

What is national identity? BENEDICT ANDERSON’s Imagined Communities is perhaps one of the most comprehensive and the most consulted book on nationhood. It offers a scientific explanation like HARRISON’s positivist causal model. In HARRISON’s words:

> By arguing for the contingent nature of nationalism, ANDERSON distinguishes between nationalist ideology and the nation as a social phenomenon amenable to scholarly analysis… Instead of describing national identity on the basis of how nationals may identify themselves as a unique people, as Chinese, Japanese, or Taiwanese, ANDERSON is theorizing an individual’s sense of his or her own ‘nation-ness’ as a general category.⁶

This somewhat contradicts with MARK HARRISON’s positivist causal model of explaining national consciousness, which supports that “imaginations are sustained by languages,”⁷ but in the end it is the same effort to avoid the danger of possibly neglecting the subtle consciousness that do not immediately fit into the frame of national identity. Taiwanese identity is dissolved in the spoken language and dialect, the daily conduct, the culture of the people. The consciousness of being Taiwanese can be expressed in their artistic creation. I believe that gives being Taiwanese a more substantial meaning than the political speeches and the official attitude in policymaking and distribution of funds. The consciousness of being Taiwanese should not simply be devised ways of distinguishing themselves from other people. The artistic expression offers a vehicle that requires no

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⁶ Harrison 26-27.
⁷ Ibid 27. For more explanation on national identity and comparisons of different models, see Chapter Two “Explaining National Identity.”
verbalization of the consciousness.

**A Note on Methods**

Through an ethnographic study of *xi*gu traditions in Taiwan, I hoped to understand the music and art forms in immigrant society and their contribution to nation-building, search for identity, and national culture construction. My research investigates how the art of *xi*qu constitutes a mechanism of culture construction that reflects the metamorphosis of “Taiwanese identity”. I draw on my qualitative field research of *xi*qu in Taiwan this summer to provide three different frames for “Taiwanese identity”: against the non-Chinese speaking culture, against mainland China, and within Taiwan against different cultural backgrounds. My interviews and informal conversations with performers, *xi*qu scholars, and audience members from the capital city Taipei and its surrounding area, as well as my attendance at performances and other *xi*qu activities, demonstrated how the contrast between different *xi*qu forms and their former social connotations seem to be dwindling; what surfaces now is a collective “Taiwanese identity”. In today’s Taiwan, where a definite national status remain lacking, the people continue to orient themselves, and *xi*qu serves as an excellent vehicle in the construction of a new national narrative.

Before I chose to tackle the intricate relationship between Taiwan *xi*qu and identity, I was utterly ignorant about this art form. Even though I attempted to prepare myself as much as possible by doing library research on the art before entering my ‘field,’ I could not avoid being seen as an outsider when it comes to this art. During my ten-week study of Taiwan *xi*qu, I chose a more audience-oriented approach. In other words, I investigate the question of how art helps people in an immigrant society formulate identity, or identities through the perspective of the ordinary members of the community. I also discussed with *xi*qu scholars and professionals about their views on the audience reaction. This approach allowed me to directly observe the component of the community – the people, but despite the budding attention to traditional *xi*qu, I have nonetheless found that a typical Taipei resident can still live completely uninformed about such activities. I am also limited by the short period and the lack of performance training in *xi*qu, thus preventing me from presenting myself as a colleague.

In some ways I was not completely an outsider. I was an outsider to the *xi*qu performing community. Yet having lived in Taipei, in addition to my similar outward appearance and Chinese language ability, I could be an insider to the ordinary Taipei residents. Sometimes the fact that I have returned from abroad, from the United States, pleases some of my informants even more. They see me as someone from outside Taiwan who is interested in Taiwan’s traditional culture, or someone who has come back to look for her ‘roots.’ And indeed, this study is all about the search for one’s roots – not in the sense that it is someone’s authentic heritage, but that it is part of an individual with which she is willing to identify with. Therefore, it is a very personal object that can vary from one individual to another, even if they are from the same country, the same community, or even the same family.

On a broader scale, I would like to consider this study part of a ‘music and other creative endeavors of the diasporas.’ More specifically it is a study of the various *xi*qu forms impact on Taiwan cultural identity. Finally, this study could be a very personal one, for me to orient myself in this study, as a researcher, insider, and outsider. In this
way, I become a useful subject of the study myself. I may ask myself the same questions: do I belong to this community in some way too? Do I embrace the xiqu forms, which forms? Frankly, orienting myself is one of the most serious challenges in this research process.

**Tradition and Innovation in the Art of Xiqu**

As is evident in the instance of wenhuachang, the unique outdoor performance venue, the refined approach of xiqu is becoming an integral path to contemporary xiqu artists. Perhaps the largest obstacle for xiqu promoters is situating the Taiwanese people in the mighty wave of this artistic tradition. First comes the problem that this tradition has long lost its grandeur and is becoming obsolete. Then follows the question, how should the Taiwanese people regard this tradition that has been brought to this island by their ancestors from across the strait? How does xiqu help the Taiwanese people orate their position in the Chinese-speaking society? I shall elaborate on the second question in the next section. But first, a task that all the xiqu artists face is revitalizing this tradition, so as to prevent it from being lost to old age.

In spite of the possible divergence between people who belong to different xiqu forms, I have noticed some overwhelming consistencies across performing troupes, student clubs and amateur singing groups of Peking opera, gezixi, and kunqu. Both gezixi and Peking opera companies, as well as kunqu groups, have encountered the same question: Is xiqu getting too old? Is it fading away? Alarmingly, xiqu culture seems to be near its twilight. To solve this problem, troupes have attempted to increase the level of entertainment, but were not very successful. In worse cases, the gezixi in the 70s have been called crude, vulgar, and even primitive. Neon lights, coarse jokes, and bright colors never suited xiqu. The most successful xiqu professionals in Taiwan now aim toward the young crowd, mainly college students. The objective is to assume the art’s refined characteristic, and find new inspirations. Is this path successful at reclaiming its reputation? This section discusses the shifting approach and audience groups in today’s Taiwan. In this ethnographic study, I would like to present the current discourse by first looking at how the question about xiqu is typically received at the initial stage.

**Audience**

Xiqu tradition often appears to be very distance to the general populace. Those from the non-Chinese-speaking societies, who have seen xiqu often find it difficult to comprehend with its bare stage, symbolic and abstract gestures, slow pace, and above all, its exceptionally uncanny sound to foreign ears. Frankly, the general population in Taiwan at the present commonly has little or nothing to do with xiqu tradition anymore. Without any knowledge of the art, they also often find it utterly difficult to comprehend. When they see actors holding rods decorated with tassels, and hear the gongs and drums accompanying the actors’ appearance, they do not see historical heroes on horseback; when they see a female role performing elaborate hand gestures, making elegant body movements, lowering and turning, they do not recognize that the lady has opened and walked though a door. The symbolic qualities are thought to be the essence of traditional theater arts, yet they are being overridden by the realist world presented by other art forms, such as cinema. This, however, should not be viewed as a decline of the xiqu’s importance in the culture of Taiwan, for the decline is not a single phenomenon occurring
within the tradition’s realm, but one that is part of the lack of interest in and patience for theater arts, or performing arts in general, in the fast-paced society that Taiwan is today. When I said to some friends that I am going to a Peking opera performance, I noticed that they have not seen any. One responded by wishing me luck and telling me not to fall asleep; another, even though she has not seen any xiqu performance either, said she would go see a gezixi instead of Peking opera, for the sound is too high-pitched (referring to the iconic voice of the female role in Peking opera) and the face painting is scary. I admit I have always liked the face painting, although the sound was rather foreign too me before I began to learn more about the convention. I found it restrained and at times, artificial and comical. After seeing a few quality performances, I began to admire it and to believe that there are no other sounds that can replace its impressive expressiveness. Yet it is evident that the virtuosity in Peking opera singing could repel untrained listeners.

The vocal technique is a main difference between older traditions like Peking opera or kunqu, and gezixi. The sound is, for young and inexperienced audience, one of the most difficult aspects to understand. This is one of the reasons why some people prefer newer conventions such as gezixi – the singing voice sounds a lot more natural to inexperienced ears. Gezixi uses more chest voice, narrower vocal range, shorter and catchier phrases, and speaking dialogue. Peking opera and kunqu are much older theater forms that matured in the imperial court. The singing voice of Peking opera and kunqu is characterized by high control and technical level. The female roles sing and speak with what they call xiaosang 小嗓 (close equivalent of the head voice, though the sound produced sound quite different from the soprano voice in opera), and the young male role sing and speak by switching between dasang 大嗓 and xiaosang 小嗓, they call that yinyangsong 阴阳嗓. This characteristic becomes an icon of Peking opera and signifies its prestigious status. As Peking opera professional Yu told me, the vocal characteristic is perhaps the deepest part of Peking opera to master: a listener needs to be taught how to appreciate it and a singer requires sophisticated technique to have perfect command in Peking opera singing. She then added (and it is perhaps important to remember), since it is such a difficult technique to master, there are probably a lot of rather mediocre performances.

This is only another element of traditional xiqu that makes it hard more modern audience to appreciate. However, there is still a crowd of college students and youngsters who are passionate about xiqu, many of whom were exposed to the art in high school or college, through friends and student clubs, et cetera.

The reception of the students on innovations departs notably from that of the older audience generation. I was discussing Taiwan xiqu over tea and sweets with MING and RONG, both aged over sixty. RONG grew up in Taipei and speaks Taiwanese well. She studied Chinese literature in college, but she does not think that makes her any more educated about xiqu than anyone else at the table. “I don’t really watch any of that now,” and I thought the gezixi discussion was soon to come to a close. But after a few minutes, she began fondly reminiscing about her childhood memory, telling the story of how she went to see gezixi every evening at the when she was a little girl in primary school. They brought their own stools and attended the performance every evening. The kids would go

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8 July 2011, age twenty-one.
9 July 26, 2011.
backstage and see the actors take off their elaborate hats and eat noodle soup like ordinary people; she thought it was very amusing. She warmly discussed the fashionable lightening scene during a battle, which always woke her up from the little girl’s doze, and the abundant supply of food, drinks, and snacks from all the food carts around the plaza. Subsequently, she turned to how gezixi is today: she stumbled upon a television gezixi\(^\text{10}\) and saw them wearing strange costumes and mixing the movements with some “dance from India.” She stopped there, politely suggesting how she was a little baffled by the combination. Immediately after that, though, MING described an instance when he heard someone sang a popular aboriginal dance song. But he said the singer made a mistake and mixed in a chorus from a different song of a different aboriginal tribe. “How can a beautiful lady from the Ali Mountains now just relocate to Taitung in the same song?” Though he said it did not sound odd musically and therefore most people cannot tell upon hearing the song, but he knows Taitung very well for it is his hometown. He commented disapprovingly, “I think it was really bizarre” (bulun bulei 不倫不類). This clarified to me what RONG meant with her implicit comment. The fact that RONG thought the hybrid gezixi form looked bizarre, and that MING followed the anecdote with another instance of aboriginal music, which is another aspect of Taiwanese culture, provides a good sense of how people regard xiqu and its innovations, and its relation to their identity.

To RONG, gezixi belongs to her past; it was a delightful piece of memory, but also a childhood memory. She does not seek out new performances to go to, nor can she necessarily accept the innovations, or the mix-and-match of today’s gezixi. They might have been some remarkably loyal audience members once upon a time, but xiqu going has long exited their lives. When I informed them of the active troupes, new theaters, and various performances, they showed some pleasant surprise, and even considered attending one. But upon further consideration, many of them confessed that they do not think they will want to go – because it is too hot or too crowded to sit outside and watch a xi, or because they would be too long to sit through, such were their reasons. I found this to be typical attitude of the generation of sixty years and up.

Whether that was a mistake or a new composer’s choice to combine two songs to demonstrate the rich cultural diversity on this island is irrelevant to MING. Such transformation is hard to accept. However, any art form exists in a constant process of innovation, but all originalities need tradition as foundation. Tradition itself, then, is not something that merely increases in value by age. It is not something to be left in an old beautiful chest in the attic for it to majestically but quietly remains for ages and ages. It adapts to everyday life with new infusions.

**Artists**

According to my ethnographic study, xiqu may be forgotten by many outside the artistic realm, yet it remains a highly regarded tradition that no artist in Taiwan could afford to neglect. Like PAI HSJEN-YUNG 白先勇 said at a lecture on a successful kunqu

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\(^{10}\) This is television gezixi that emerged with the arrival of television from the 1960s onward. They are not visual recordings of theater performances but gezixi made specifically for TV audience and are produced like a TV series, with connected plots everyday. For more detailed account on the history of television gezixi, see Lin Ho-Yi, (2008), 華戲劇史 (History of Theater Arts in Taiwan), Taipei: National Open University.

\(^{11}\) July 17, 2011.
production *Peony Pavilion – Young Lovers’ Edition* (*Qingchunban Mudanting* 青春版牡丹亭), obviously preserving tradition does not mean that one still performs *kunqu* on a candle-lit stage. Now we all use computerized lighting equipments just like contemporary theater.\(^{12}\) His *Peony Pavilion – Young Lovers’ Edition* is an example of successful modern adaptation of traditional art. This lecture was given in 2008, when this production just recently returned from a tour in London and Athens. Since the 2006 debut, the production has reached its 152th performance at the time. Many new production teams such as the one of *Peony Pavilion – Young Lovers’ Edition* target university students. Pai’s *Peony Pavilion* has performed on various college campuses in Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong, and abroad, including at University of California at Los Angeles and Santa Barbara.

As the artists resolve to appeal to the younger generation and engage in refining the art, they seek ways to make the old tradition relevant to the present world. Many scholars and artists share this view that traditional *xiqu* cannot remain unchanged, even though there used to be many highly respected restrictions to the entire system, from story selection to the entitled costume and makeup of a certain character, and to change what the way of one’s master’s way is nearly a form of betrayal. It is not that traditional *xiqu* cannot be changed; it is just that the alterations have to be good. I have heard this opinion multiple times from Peking opera, *kunqu*, and *gezixi* people. Originality influence old traditions, and new creations must look back at traditions. In this way, traditions assume an active role in artistic development. When I was discussing the development patterns of this art with HELIAN, who is a professor at one of Taiwan’s most acclaimed universities and also an expert on the history of *xiqu* in both China and Taiwan, she told me:

To people inside the artistic realm… traditional things, it doesn’t matter whether [these people are] in Taiwan or in mainland, they would take traditional things like *xiqu* and see it as cultural heritage, something special that was left to us from the past. From their point of view, of course there are taboos… but up to this day, whether one is creating or researching, they all hope to consult and make reference to traditional ideas and traditional aesthetics – because in our traditional aesthetics, traditional *xiqu*, there are a lot of very special things, for example it’s very sophisticated, very metaphysical (*xieyi* 寫意), with a rich imageries and symbolisms. These things are really different from the idea of Western realist theater… Now even people with training Western theater arts feel that traditional things are a kind of ‘nourishment’ (*yangliao* 養料), something for them to absorb. That is why now a lot of new creations absorb from each other. People who make traditional theater also like to borrow some of Western’s techniques, or theater equipments; those who make modern theater also wish to borrow from the rich nourishment and concepts of traditional theater.\(^{13}\)

She later went a step further, and pointed out to me that, “To today’s people, the most ancient things feel like what it the most revolutionary.” Indeed, the symbolic quality

\(^{12}\) For the recording of the lecture, see Pai, Kenneth Hsien-yung, (白先勇), (2008), 種台北人到青春版牡丹亭, Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

\(^{13}\) July 22, 2011.
appears much more approximate to Minimalism in the twentieth-century! In short, the
two impact one another tremendously and cannot be separated. This attitude has become
a common sentiment for many of my informants. I wish to add that HELIAN specializes
in gezi xi, particularly outdoor improvisatory gezi xi. She also told me that she is
‘Taiwanese,’ or benshengren, but she married a waisheng husband. I was under the
impression that she spoke to me as an expert; her observations were professional and fair.
She acknowledge that one’s background can cause significant distinctions, but it is no
question that ‘our tradition’ is the age-old one that emerged and matured in mainland
China, and that is the tradition that is valued by artistic people in Taiwan. In addition,
she repeated to me several times that she believes it is only in today’s Taiwan that
tradition can receive thus much attention and the obsolete opinion that tradition belongs
to the past is abandoned. The situation would not be the same in mainland China and
Hong Kong, said HELIAN. The people in Taiwan, particularly the educators, have in them
a stronger ‘consciousness’ (zijuexing 自覺性) that makes them special, according to her.
This consciousness is perhaps a product of a culturally advanced community, which is
how many scholars and artists in Taiwan like to describe this place. To the xiqu artists,
the farewell to obsolete approach to traditions happens along with the elevation of
sensibility in the general audience, especially in cities like Taipei. Therefore refinement
and capturing simply the elegance of the ancient beauty become the answer. In this
sense, consulting traditions, even though it could be categorized as Chinese traditions, is
not a gesture of identifying with China. Instead, the refined and innovated xiqu
productions and this consciousness of tradition in modern adaptation are what make the
cultural identity of Taiwan distinct from mainland China, Hong Kong, and other Chinese-
speaking communities.

For today’s xiqu professionals, there are some materials that work as better
‘nourishments’ for modern productions. From my study, I have found focuses in
literature and in the general ambiance. For example, professor, librettist, and Peking
opera scholar QING told me that Peking opera becomes an avenue to recreate the beauty
of Chinese classical literature and that her focus is on cultivating a intellectually
sophisticated audience. One reason that she does not feel there is enough development
room in the musical aspect is that, even though the singing use to be the highlight of a
Peking opera performance, and though the audience to use to say they go ‘hear’ the opera
(qutingxi 去聽戲), the audience profile has changed. There are no longer enough
audience members with such expertise in the vocal technique, who would follow an
‘opera star’ and critically comment on the sound of a certain note like in the old days.14
She recognized that the era of Peking opera has passed and reviving the art itself is not
the main objective anymore.15 This is different from mainland China, where there are
still plenty of Peking opera listeners; in Taiwan there are more who would attend a
Peking opera performance as one of the many performing arts options.

Pai’s new production of the kunqu classic Peony Pavilion is dedicated to imitate

14 There are still amateur Peking opera performances at the Armed Forces Cultural Center (國軍文藝中心),
although the significantly fewer than a few decades ago. I went to one of these performances on July 24,
2011 and immediately sank into the nostalgic atmosphere. This performance departs clearly from
GuoGuan. The audience is composed of elder people, speaking with waisheng accent. One senior lady
commented after the performance, ‘[after hearing this] I can finally sleep well at night!’
15 July 18, 2011, age fifty-six.
the ‘sensibility’ of Chinese aesthetics by consulting traditional use of color and visual effects, and even employing other aspects of classical art such as calligraphy, finally applying new designs to produce an overall elegant and refreshing effect. This is something that distinguishes Taiwanese practice from that in mainland China. China has a multitude of well-trained acrobats and xiqu singers. Such skills require rigorous training starting at a young age. The social and educational environment in Taiwan does not particularly stimulate such endeavors. Instead, Taiwan’s freedom to speak and create breeds originality, visions, and intellectual thought. The innovations of traditional xiqu and the fusion of different cultural elements is not likely to be embraced in mainland China. This is another example of how Peking opera in Taiwan has developed its own practice different from mainland China over the years. In this sense, the Taiwanese xiqu indicates not the origin of a form, but the new category of adapted xiqu.

**Whose Tradition?**

Many experts believe that xiqu is highly sophisticated because of the rich imagery and symbolic movements, music, and costume. This is what HELIAN described above. In addition, xiqu encompasses the largest number of areas compared to other typical ‘operas.’ Music and drama are two main parts, but the quality of a xi is often based on the literary achievement of the libretto, since there is usually not a large space for creativity in the music composition; two certain sets of melodies (xipi 西皮 and erhuang 二黄) are typically assigned at different tempi according to plot development and mood, and the melody sets can be used for different libretti. In addition to the two parts, acrobatics and kongfu are integral to xiqu. As traditional xiqu encompasses such a wide range of performing arts from ritual performances, temple gezixi, to imperial opera, sometimes the boundaries of xiqu is difficult to define. These theatrical and musical characteristics and performance practices were brought to Taiwan from mainland China. Gezixi also frequently borrows techniques from older forms like Peking opera, which include conventional melodies, role categories (juese hangdang 角色行當), and symbolic movements. The fusion between old and new, foreign and local, fabricates a diverse xiqu culture. This culture is constantly being challenged as the Taiwan people look for cultural traits to identify with. Recognizing a modern, Taiwanese adaptation of an old xi as representation of Taiwanese culture is something that constantly requires renegotiation.

**Competition in Xiqu**

While Peking opera is typically regarded as being more sophisticated, for the average Taiwanese people, sometimes it is elitist and out-of-reach. Gezixi on the other hand assume a friendlier character in many Taiwan people’s hearts. It is closely

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16 This is a widely recognized fact. For a historical account, see Lin, 150-157. I also saw a Minghuayuan adaptation of a libretto from mainland China. Furthermore, celebrated gezixi actress GUO CHUNMEI 郭春美 also said in an interview at a Taiwan Public Television Service (PTV 公共電視) program, *Riguang Dadao 日光大道* on the June 20, 2011 show on *gezixi – Bainian Feng Gezi 百年風歌仔*, “even though I am a gezixi actress, we should still compliment on the accomplishment of others [referring to other xiqu forms]… I always praise Peking opera and yueju… their movements, steps, and hand gestures are truly incredible!” She then said that she would like to learn from them and include the essence into gezixi performance.
connected with culture and rituals, performed in Taiwanese dialect, and utilize materials from pop songs. However, an important message YU, a GuoGuang administration staff member was trying to convey to me was that this two-hundred-year old, former imperial art is in fact very close to our everyday life; it has such an intimate quality (shenghuohua 生活化). With some introduction and guidance, she believes a beginner may very comfortably find Peking opera a familiar friend and easily make sense of it. YU is a thirty-something professional with a Master’s degree in Musical Theater from the United States, and is now a dedicated researcher and teacher of Peking opera. Unusual for her generation, she has also received Peking opera acrobatic training starting at the age of ten.17

In the last few decades, many scholars and artists who have traveled and studied abroad brought back new visions of their own culture, which, I may say, is seriously overwhelmed by Western culture and appears lacking in the daily lives in Taiwan. It has been a continuous struggle for the Taiwan people to determine what should represent their own culture, as the people stand at the intersection between Western culture and Chinese culture, between the old tradition and modern creativity, perhaps at one point between different ethnic groups of Taiwan, and more recently, between mainland China and Taiwan. The government officials yearn for a perfect characterization of the Taiwanese culture that would match their ideology; the artists seek vehicles to portray a culture that belongs to themselves and their audience. Unfortunately, these efforts are frequently reduced to political and commercial products.

As stated above, the boundaries of xiqu can be rather ambiguous as it encompasses so many performing arts. Throughout the process of government officials identifying true Taiwanese arts, certain art could be recognized with plenty of controversies. SHIYING is a fifty-year-old accounting professor. She grew up in Taipei in a bensheng family. Even though she would be categorized as ‘pure Taiwanese,’ she admitted that she does not have a very good command of Taiwanese dialect.18 She does not like it when some people try to represent Taiwan’s culture with some very vulgar arts. Like Dianying Santaizi 電音三太子, which she explained to me as a folk culture that is attached to temple activities, with electronic music combined with dancing costumed characters representing various religious figures in parades:

I think some of these things related to folk religion are getting progressively crude, and vulgar, or overly commercialized. And they are strongly promoting these things to represent Taiwanese culture… There are some much more sophisticated aspects in Taiwanese culture, even gezixi, I like how some of them are getting more refined. Can we please go toward that direction? If they are identifying these, from my point of view almost primitive activities, as Taiwanese culture, than that is a little humiliating. I think even the ‘less-educated’ Taiwanese people would likely to have more sophisticated taste than what the politicians are going after.19

17 July 26, 2011.
18 This is typical of many benshengren who grew up in Taipei. Most people learned to speak the dialect at home, but many parents in the city, though they themselves spoke Taiwanese, did not intentionally pass the dialect on to their children. In contrast, Taiwanese dialect was more commonly spoken in the south and in the country.
19 July 17, 2011.
Gezixi itself have been through that stage in the past, as was discussed above. Emerged from the folk culture, it was once accused of being vulgar and even ‘poisonous’ to moral minds.\(^{20}\) Today’s gezixi, on the other hand, symbolizes a xiqu form native to Taiwan, which embodies the friendly mentality of the Taiwanese people. An accomplished gezixi actress told me as I interviewed her backstage before an outdoor evening performance, “gezixi is the true legitimate xiqu art!” \(^{21}\) Although it appeared rather vague to me what is exactly the opposite side of legitimate art in Taiwan that she was referring to, the competition between different forms is evident.

Many Taiwan people prize the Taiwanese character as being friendly, down-to-earth, and accessible. Dianyin Santanazi may be a suitable choice to present the unique folk culture and ritual that is unique to Taiwan. When I express my wish to study traditional xiqu in Taiwan, I get various kinds of reactions. To many, there are various other performing arts forms that are more native to Taiwan and are able to represent Taiwan better. Some of these are also age-old traditions that originated from mainland China and found a new home in Taiwan, others stemmed from peasant life and folk art, and a lot of times fused with popular and contemporary culture elements to become more entertaining. Hui, a secondary school music teacher who grew up in a bensheng family, did not seem too keen on the idea of representing Taiwanese culture with Peking opera and gezixi. She suggested a different xiqu form called nanguan 南管\(^{22}\) and a renown performing group Hantang Yuefu Ensemble 漢唐樂府. She said she has DVDs of the ensemble’s performance at home. However, she did not seem very knowledgeable on the endeavors of Peking opera or gezixi troupes. She then moved on to describe what she called huogui wenhua 貨櫃文化, literally ‘container culture.’ It is a way of performance that is, I was informed, common in the south; it is a wonderful way of bringing a variety of performing arts to the people. The container is basically used as a mobile stage. Once the container reaches its desired destination, it can be transformed into a stage. There are many theatrical and xiqu performances that are thus designed to suit such occasion and the taste of the wandering audience. Hui valued this culture and was eager to introduce it to me because it portrays a versatile and accessible performing style situated in a simple and friendly agricultural society. Contrary to the level of sophistication that defines GuoGuang’s Peking opera, many people in Taiwan share this nativist taste that cherish accessibility.\(^{23}\)

**The New Generation in Taiwan**

There is an ongoing debate of which xiqu form, namely Peking opera and gezixi, can more truly represent the Taiwan people. In the past, the different forms used to be closely associated with the family background of an individual. Artistically, the forms continue to influence on another, and to evolve according to the present audience taste, for practical reasons. As the answer for cultural identity slowly becomes detached from

\(^{20}\) Chang 54-55 and Lin 148 and 228.

\(^{21}\) July 30, 2011.

\(^{22}\) Nanguan, the oldest xiqu for to become popular in Taiwan. This is why it is often regarded as a xiqu form of Taiwan. It is one of the many forms active in around the coastal area of Quanzhou 番州 in mainland China beginning perhaps around the end of the seventeenth-century. See Lin 57.

\(^{23}\) July 8, 2011, age late forties.
national ideology and turns toward the arts, one might ask, is it necessary to define one’s own culture and heritage? “When young people search and find this *Peony Pavilion – Young Lovers’ Edition*, it is a déjà vu! Yes, yes indeed, yes indeed, they would say this is truly Chinese, but so strange and foreign like something never seen before! There is of course this freshness to it. But I believe that in our subconscious, there is this sprouting ‘culture DNA.’”

PAI believes that the young people are searching for what is their own, and that is why the new adaptation of *Peony Pavilion* can successfully speak to the young audience. QING expressed an opposing opinion. She does not believe young people would come to a *xiqu* performance in want of something that they can identify as their heritage. They only come as they come to any artistic display – they want to be moved. It is just that our productions take the form of *xiqu*, she said. Despite the contrasting opinions, their aims are the same – to appeal to young audience. And thus, the challenge is the same – the rest of the artistic realm, more importantly the powerful ones like movies, popular culture, such cultural aspects that are closely connected to the West.

I have viewed excerpts of the new nine-hour-long *Peony Pavilion* and several new works of GuoGuang Opera Company. The *Peony Pavilion* captures the spirit of *kunqu*. The redesigned lighting always pay homage to the traditional color-coding, and the set design accentuates the elegance of this *xiqu* classic. The visual effects, to me, fulfill my imagination of the classical beauty and delicacy. It is a romanticized imagination of the past that stands distinctively apart from Western performing arts. This is perhaps in the end more faithful to the artistic tradition, as it presents the core spirit of it without the bright colors that were probably only suitable for candle-lit stages. GuoGuan has, in recent years, produced a number of brand new works – new libretti, sometimes adaptations of a contemporary novel, new music that sometimes collaborate with symphonic musicians and opera singers. These productions are new in all senses. The makeup and costume often resemble modern theater or even cinema more than traditional *xiqu*, and the stories introduce three-dimensional female characters that are no longer simply either elegant and virtuous or evil and idiotic but with full range of emotions, desires, and fears. Yet this only makes the Peking opera closer to the lives of people today; it does not make it look foreign. For the people who consider Peking opera as their cultural heritage, I believe this transformation can only compliment that belief. It is not westernizing the art or distorting its traditional quality; if anything, it retains it and makes it more relevant to the younger generation. At this point it might be appropriate to draw a comparison between the *xiqu* culture and Taiwanese cinema. Taiwanese filmmaking has been silent for some time, but recently, a few Taiwanese films emerged and made their way to some recognition. The young population in Taiwan shows enthusiasm for these new movies. They are not as high quality and large budget as that of Hollywood and other internationally acclaimed film industries, yet the people in Taiwan seem to have been waiting for something that they could better connect with – scenes in their hometown, food they eat, popular songs they listen to, and language they speak. Therefore, in my opinion, this is the role that *xiqu* in Taiwan plays today. In the mind of young people, they are not searching for a recollection of the traditional past, but something intrinsic and familiar. That is what *xiqu* can offer.

Consequently, *xiqu* representing national identity is no longer a question on

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24 PAI’s lecture.
25 July 18, 2011.
national ideology to most people today, especially to the new generation of Taiwanese. HELIAN explained the new concept of waishen and benshen:

My daughter is your age; she was born in 1990. She would belong to the third generation of ‘waishengren’ but the problem doesn’t exist anymore. The arts and entertainment of different groups will soon develop into a style, an aesthetic. Gezixi has a friendly folk quality, more flexible and more entertainment; Peking opera is a more serious form. A person’s taste would be determined or influenced by his or her background, for example if he grew up in the south, he is likely to have a better command in Taiwanese dialect, then gezixi might fit his interest better; if she grew up in the north, she might have been exposed to kunqu, et cetera. But these all impact one another, and there are a lot of cross-over in the arts… The distinction between the Peking opera and gezixi audience groups will no longer be separated by ethnic backgrounds or language, but aesthetic taste.

I found that college students who enjoy gezixi often did not know how to speak the Taiwanese dialect before they became involved in this activity. The art can in fact appeal to audience across all boundaries. I cannot speak the dialect well, but after I sit in the audience for half an hour or so, I could begin to understand more and find the performance appealing without understanding the dialect perfectly. During my research, I became acquainted with a girl who is now conducting field study in improvised outdoor gezixi for her master’s degree. She did not know how to speak the dialect very well, she told me. She was simply drawn to her high school gezixi club because she had friends there. Now she still cannot converse very well, but she can read libretti in the dialect. Some college students became so passionate about gezixi in their student club years that they decided to continue with it, such is the case for the founders of a new gezixi troupe established in 2006 named Formosa-Zephyr Opera Troupe 臺灣春風歌劇團. The troupe members were members of National Taiwan University and Normal University gezixi clubs. They have all graduated from college and have full-time jobs and families, yet they contribute the rest of their free time to evening rehearsals and other gezixi endeavors, including writing new libretti. They have performed traditional xi as well as new works such as mystery drama and presented their own perspective on the traditional art, and have won Taishin Arts Award 台新藝術獎, among many other recognitions. This is a successful example of how the new generation in Taiwan may contribute to the xiqu culture and ultimately, the discourse on national identity.

The traditional local role that xiqu once used to play, as we can see, is diminishing. The art is still a strong vehicle for cultural and even national identity, but the value in different xiqu groups is no longer the articulated by the different characteristics among different language groups within Taiwan. Instead, the different forms collectively weaved together a fabric of this small island, which is identified by its diverse culture, ethnic and language backgrounds, and imposed a new meaning of Taiwan for the people to face the mainland, other Chinese speaking regions and nations, and the rest of the world.

Taiwanese Identity

Opera was a genre in Western classical music that played a remarkable role in the
nation building of Italy and Germany in the nineteenth century. However, a time like that may never come for *xiqu* in Taiwan. This is a reasonable supposition in many respects. For one, as prosperous as the *xiqu* culture in Taiwan may seem in gaining official recognition and popularity among ordinary citizens, *xiqu* is walking toward the ‘refined’ (*jingzhihuà* 精緻化)\(^{26}\) direction and it will be very difficult for the culture to ever cause a sensation all over the island. The process of refinement signifies *xiqu*’s departure from its former political role. Secondly, nationalism is not how the Taiwan people seek to express their identity. In other words, the role that culture, or specifically *xiqu*, plays in Taiwan is not an avenue to nation building in the political sense. When the Peking opera company members explained to me how Peking opera is different than the Peking opera in China – and yes, they do want to find what is uniquely Taiwan in this *xiqu* style – they are not projecting a vision of how a national identity shall be built, but cultivating a vibrant performing arts scene in Taiwan. I believe that the question of nation is no longer necessarily the most effective representation of identity to the people in Taiwan. Instead, they seek other approaches to define who they are.

Culture is conveniently the safe and neutral discourse that politicians and *xiqu* professionals cling to. It has a positive light of bringing Taiwan toward a more globalized, intellectually and artistically aware community. Politicians have to highlight their connection with culture-related activities, private companies also engage in culture-related business in the hope of elevating their status and even receive government funding.\(^{27}\) Even scholars can further justify their credibility by saying that they have made their decisions based on reasons related to culture. For example, when LIN HO-YI explained in the preface of her book *Taiwan Xiju Shi* 臺灣戲劇史 (History of Theater Arts in Taiwan): since this is a history book of the theater arts that describes culture, the fundamental recognition attitude (*rentong taidu* 認同態度) is unavoidable. For the fifty years of Japanese rule in Taiwan, this book seizes the potion of culture (*zhanzai* ‘站在文化的位置上’), taking the phrase Japanese occupation (*riju* 日據), and refer to the period after that as post war (*zhongzhanhou* 終站後).\(^{28}\)

There is nothing unreasonable about this explanation, but it reveals how the keyword of culture can be a way to mark her credibility. What I have noticed very soon in my fieldwork process is that for *xiqu* professionals, they prefer discussing their work simply in the light of art. That is, their decisions on the productions are motivated by pure artistic reasons; they are devoted to the promotion of art; they do what they can to pay their respect to the art they are responsible of, just as they ought to as artists. What effect their art has on the political dynamic seems to be beyond their reach. This may be an orthodox position that evolved to this day. But the truth is, there is probably a very little part these professionals of the artistic sector can play in political concerns.

To understand the subtle renegotiation between politics and culture, I would like to return to the beginning of this report, to the *wenhuachang* performance. What is very interesting was seeing the county councilor, legislators, and candidates appearing at this *gezixi wenhuachang* performance. I might add here that they were politicians.

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\(^{26}\) Both GuoGuang Opera Company and Minghuayuan mentioned this term without me referring to it first; they said that this shall be the new direction of Taiwan’s *xiqu*.

\(^{27}\) *Wenhua chuangyi shanye* 文化創意產業

\(^{28}\) Lin 2.
representing two opposing parties in Taiwan. They went up on stage making speeches before the performance started. The speakers spoke very enthusiastically, almost yelling with their already hoarse voices – I was told that it is a positive indicator of how hard they have been working for the people. They spoke of getting culture into the neighborhood, into the alleys (wenhua zoujin xiangzi li 文化走進巷子裡); they spoke of promoting culture in new policies. Their presence showed their support and concern and two positive elements in Taiwanese politics today: culture and the welfare of the common folk; their presence also earn them credit for the outcome of this cultural event, this gezi xi performance. The keyword culture always came up in every one of the short speeches. The speakers were extremely enthusiastic, but the audience was not. There were applauses here and there, but it seemed that they were just waiting for the gezi xi performance to begin. The warmest reaction was that to their neighborhood councilor. In this instance it was a woman, who was wearing the same t-shirt as her volunteers, clearly the person who pushed for bringing such performance into their neighborhood. The instance illustrates two points. First, it confirms the status of the keyword culture is the orthodox thinking in Taiwan today. Second, it shows that the audience was attracted by the performance itself, and that they were not always as interested in the politics as they were to the performance; in fact they do not identify the immediate link between politics and xiqu art as so many outsiders might assume.

The young democracy in Taiwan has undergone one round of party rotations. That is, the Democratic Progressive Party came into power in the year 2000 after Kuomintang (KMT) have governed Taiwan in the past five decades; the DPP is no longer an absolute non-incumbent. In 2008, the voters elected MA YING-JEOU, a KMT candidate to become the new president of Taiwan. The time before 2008, the DPP was bringing Taiwan toward a completely new direction than where it had gone before the new century; it devotedly promoted different cultural aspects than what used to positively symbolize the traditional ‘Chinese.’ This encouraged the cultural diversity that Taiwan has today, but left arts that relied heavily on national support in devastation.29

Peking opera troupe GuoGuang Opera Company was one of such groups that saw their decline under DPP rule. Between 2000 and 2001, NANCY GUY encountered pessimistic and dispirited emotions when she visited the troupe. “They [meaning the Ministry of Education officials] take you and look at you as though you were an ant,” GUY quoted performer KAO HUI-LAN, who was fifty-six years old at the time. In response to GUY’s question about Peking opera’s future in Taiwan, the then seventy-three performer ZHOU ZHENGTRONG replied, “This depends on the government.”30 As GUY writes in the introduction to her book Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan, published in 2005:

Over the last several years, I have been struck by the irony that my study for [Peking opera]… is coming to a close just as the tradition on Taiwan is fading away. Peking opera is clearly in its twilight on Taiwan. Its audience is small, its future source of funding uncertain. The Peking opera world… is gone.31

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29 The more radical members of DPP engaged in de-sinification that ultimately rejected cultural elements that evoke Chinese memory.

30 GUY, Nancy, Peking Opera and Politics in Taiwan, 2-3.

31 Ibid 10.
What I found in my ethnographic experience in the 2011 Taiwan seems to contradict with this dejected attitude. The troupe no longer uses the old spelling ‘Kuo-kuang,’ which is also how GUY refers to it in her book, and changed to the pinyin spelling. It is actively giving lectures and performances, many on college campus, and is particularly attentive to the taste of young people. Perhaps this nonetheless reveals the very close relationship Peking opera has with politics. One audience member observed that the company definitely prospered in the last three years. But the time before 2008 when the art was almost suppressed, the company and Peking opera performers had very little enthusiasm for their future. Evidently the GuoGuang in 2011, like many other traditional performing arts groups, have found their new ways to the heart of audience. Hence, perhaps the company shall walk away from the changing politics in the future.

After this party rotation, Taiwan has experienced culture construction first as an authentic and traditional China, then as a nativist Taiwan whose culture does not stem from the mainland China. The general attitude in Taiwan today is defining Taiwan as a culturally diverse community and embracing a wide variety of traditional and innovated arts. This shall be the new narrative of Taiwanese cultural identity as this community continues to evolve into one that is comprised of the offspring of Han (including the so-called waishengren, benshengren, and new couples of intermarriage between mainland China and Taiwan), Hakka, aboriginal Taiwanese, Southeast Asian, and more.

Although culture may be a concealment of the political competition and even the dispute over independence, it is a valuable bridge of reconciliation between the two political ideologies, if there are really two distinct sides at the present, and to help the people orient themselves when confronting cultures from non-Chinese speaking communities. As CHANG concludes in her article, ‘Disclaiming and Renegotiating National Memory: Taiwanese Xiqu and Identity’

On the surface, it seems both the governments have struggled to preserve heritage and cultural legacy. In reality, their attempts were part of an aggressive political scheme to win international recognition. There are two dimensions to this battle for recognition. One is an internal need to formulate a more unified and unique cultural identity. The other is an external reflection, exerting a desired image of ‘self’…

Today, which xiqu from is Taiwan’s guojuc (national opera) is no longer an issue of debate. Taiwan’s xiqu heritage offers a multicultural tradition for contemporary Taiwan and represents it’s brand new image in international society.34

There seems to be two contrary arguments for what Taiwan’s cultural identity ought to be, however, they ultimately pursue the same goal in this progressively globalized world. In the end, the cultural milieu may hope to flourish as a consequence of such ‘culture and international’ ideology shared by both governments.

Indeed, to the second and third generation Taiwanese, those who were born on this island after 1949 to parents waisheng and bensheng, the divergence between the

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32 July 2011, age fifty-four.
33 There is an increasing number of Southeast Asian wives marrying Taiwanese husbands and settling down in Taiwanese.
34 Chang 67.
different backgrounds should not be a critical point in cultural identity. It is a Taiwan that these people collectively constructed, contributing traditions of their own, supplying with originality, that the people in Taiwan want and are eager to identify with. A newly written Peking opera, Sunlight After Snowfall voices this diaspora sensibility. At the end, an anonymous character (who looks like one of the many veterans that came to Taiwan with the Nationalist government in 1949) examines the calligraphy work at the National Palace Museum Taipei. This piece of treasure has wandered through time and places ever since it was created around 300 CE; it too ended up on this island. Reflecting on his life full of turmoil and wars in front of this work, he finally said, “the place that cherishes me, is the place I call my home!”

At a time when the people in Taiwan are shouting on the top of their lungs (and quite literary, in the instance of the community councilors who spoke at the gezixi wenhuachang) for culture, why should we not turn our attention to cultural identity construction and leave behind the subject of national legitimacy? Identity, is how an individual or a community desires to describe themselves. More importantly, it is how they wish to present themselves to the others. Therefore, the “newly invented xiqu tradition,” as CHANG puts it, should be regarded as a cultural identity shared mutually by the people who called this multicultural Taiwan, home.

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35 The chorus here sings, “We start our live here with new designs; we devote ourselves fully to take root in this land…” The Peking opera was a collaborative work between GuoGuang Opera Company and National Symphony Orchestra; it was premiered at National Theater in November 2007.

36 CHANG, 67.
Important Events that Influenced the Development of Today's Peking Opera and Gezixi in Taiwan

1945  End of Japanese rule and Taiwan retroceded to the Republic of China
1949  The Nationalist government and Republic of China officially transferred to Taiwan
1976  End of Cultural Revolution in People’s Republic of China; End of Cultural Renaissance Movement in Taiwan
1979  Taiwan broke off diplomatic relations with the United States of America and officially lost its place as the true China
1981  Council for Cultural Affairs 文建會 established
1986  Martial law abolished; National Chiang Kai-Shek Cultural Center established (National Theater and Concert Hall)
1988  End of Guoju Juben Shencha 國劇劇本審查; henceforth Peking opera enjoys full legal liberty in the artistic work
1995  GuoGuang Opera Company 國光劇團 established
1999  National Taiwan College of Performing Arts 國立臺灣戲曲專科學校 established (the only school that offers formal education for gezixi training)
2000  The Democratic Progressive Party took over the presidential office
2008  Kuomintang (KMT) candidate MA YING-JEOU won presidential election, completing a full round of ‘party rotation’ in Taiwan
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