

## “Peking Opera Houses” and “Jiqing Opera Exchange” in the Modern Stage Market in China

### Abstract

In the sixth year of the Tongzhi (1867), “Peking Opera Houses” and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” emerged in Shanghai and Guangdong separately, changing the course of Chinese opera history and marking the emergence of a modern stage market in China. As transaction intermediaries of the market, they had an irreplaceable role and meaning in the development of the Peking Opera and the Cantonese Opera. This study argues that they profoundly reflect the influence of the capitalist market economy on Chinese traditional culture in the early age of globalisation and have an important historical position in the history of the modern stage market in China.

**Keywords:** Jiqing Opera Exchange, modern stage market, Peking Opera Houses.

### Introduction

The modern Chinese stage market, which emerged in the Late Qing dynasty, is a major component in the history of the modern stage market in China as the harbinger of a modern Chinese cultural market. It reflects the transformation of Chinese traditional culture, especially theatrical systems and the relationship between audience and performers in a period of social change. In addition, it witnessed the formation of Chinese modern industrial culture and laid a solid foundation for its development. Thus, it is of great academic value to study the emergence of the modern stage market in China for exploring the modern history of the Chinese stage market and modern Chinese opera.

In my opinion, the emergence of the modern stage market in China is part of the modernization, marketization and industrialization of Chinese opera as an important arena for market trade intermediaries, which were represented by “Peking Opera Houses” in Shanghai and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” in Guangdong. As such, they are important research objects in this study as important milestones in the history of the modern stage market in China and even the history of the modern market.

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But it is worth mentioning that the study on this issue is very little covered in academic circles. According to my statistics, there are no articles at present concerning a comparative study between “Peking Opera Houses” and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” from the perspective of the history of the stage market. Ching Maybo,<sup>2</sup> Lu Ling<sup>3</sup> and Liao Ben (2014) undertook some research on the “Jiqing Opera Exchange”, and Andrea S. Goldman (2013) studied the theatre market of Beijing in the Late Qing dynasty, but not the trading ports such as Shanghai and Guangzhou. As such, there are research gaps for comparative study on both.

A comparative study will be conducted in this study on the significance and historical roles of these two intermediary organs in the history of the modern stage market in China, starting with analysis of its historical development, specific functions and the historical influence of “Peking Opera Houses” and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange”, based on the specific conditions of the Chinese social-economy and culture in Tongzhi and Guangxu, thus exploring and thinking about the emergence of the modern stage market in China.

### **The Appearance and Rise of the “Peking Opera Houses”**

In 1867, British Cantonese Luo Yiqing came to settle in Shanghai with the introduction of an advanced British theatre broker system to China and founded “Mantingfang” in Baoshan Street and Jingyuan South Street, the first modern opera theatre in China set up by Chinese people. The theatre mainly organised performances of Chinese traditional drama represented by the Peking Opera as the first Peking Opera performance place in Shanghai.

When the theatre was established, Luo Yiqing invited performers who performed Peking Opera from Tianjin, and “people in Shanghai flocked to appreciate the performance at the beginning”,<sup>4</sup> an unprecedentedly grand occasion. This marked the beginning of the Peking Opera coming to Shanghai and the origin of the Shanghai Peking Opera.

“Mantingfang” represented a modern model of performance of traditional opera in a western-style theatre, that is Peking Opera Houses (also known as Tea Houses). In these Houses, theatre brokers set up a stage, provided a place for performance, sold tickets, advertised and packaged performers with all the income distributed in accordance with the contract provision between the theatre and the performers.

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2 Ching 1996: 473–475.

3 Lu 2014: 115–119.

4 Yao 1918: 5.

It was different from the previous opera performance system in China, with Private performances (Tanghui) or temple fairs (Miaohui). Performing in these two traditional performance styles, performers earned little and lived an unsettled life with a low social status. They would reach audiences by shouting, almost no better than beggars, so performers (actors or actresses, in Chinese named Youling) were professionals, but humble.

“Peking Opera Houses” guaranteed stable incomes for the performers, and they would not have to do self-publicity. But in return, they were only required to perform well. The theatre managers were responsible for maintaining the show order, receiving troupes, publishing performance schedules, pasting posters and carrying out other publicity and planning activities, which saved performers much time so that they could concentrate on the performance. The “Peking Opera Houses” mode created by “Mantingfang” was unprecedented in the history of Chinese opera.

It is worth mentioning that there were already “opera houses” in Peking when the Peking Opera came into being, but the performers in Peking tied themselves to the troupes and had nothing to do with these opera houses, which, in turn, were not responsible for publicity and management. They were almost totally unrelated to each other. This was opera houses as inns, and troupes like passing travellers. “Peking Opera Houses” introduced their own employment system, where the revenues from ticket sales to the performance were all owned by the theatre with a percentage to performers according to box office receipts, which was known as “Packet money” (in Chinese Baoyin). At that time, there was a saying: “there are no Tea Houses without opera troupes and no opera troupes without Tea Houses”. “Opera troupes are focused (in other places) but Opera Houses are most valued in Shanghai” (the Institute of Art Studies in Peking, 2005).

Both in China and other countries, the entertainment industry and violent groups often go hand-in-hand. Luo Yiqing brought gangs and violence when introducing the brand modern stage market to Shanghai as he hired roughnecks to “guard his interests” and prevent disputes with performers or any trouble caused by thugs. Luo went by the nickname “Tiger Luo”.<sup>5</sup> So, Luo was later regarded as the father of the stage market in Shanghai and seen as one of the founders of the Shanghai Gangs.

Shanghai in the Late Qing dynasty was a paradise for investors. As Luo Yiqing’s “Mantingfang” business was booming, many people in Shanghai imitated him. In the same year, another Ningbo native businessman Liu

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5 Su & Chen 1991: 40-41.

Weizhong invested in establishing the “Osmanthus Tea House”, intending to compete with “Mantingfang”. As expected, although Luo Yiqing had deep pockets, his product was inferior to Liu Weizhong, who was familiar with the Shanghai consumer mentality. The “Osmanthus Tea House” invited various opera to put on different performances in Shanghai and put “Mantingfang” out of business within a few months. In the following year, “Mantingfang” was announced bankrupt.

Despite the bankruptcy of “Mantingfang”, the mode of “Peking Opera Houses” was inherited by “Osmanthus Tea House”. As a person who was full of forgiveness and generous, Liu Weizhong was good at management and promotion, so many top Peking Opera performers at that time in China were willing to appear on the stage of “Osmanthus Tea House”. For example, Meng Qi (Meng Xiaodong’s grandfather), Shen Yunqiu, Yang Guixiao, Jin Huanjiu and other opera stars came and performed. For a time, the “Osmanthus Tea House” was Chinese Opera’s South centre.

“Mantingfang” was not the only Peking opera house, and the “Osmanthus Tea House” was not either. The mode of “Peking Opera Houses” created by the “Mantingfang” and inherited by “Osmanthus Tea House” such as Jinguixuan (1871), Shengpingxuan (1874), Tianxian Tea House (1875) and so on emerged, and performers of various operas (dominated by Peking Opera) tried all ways possible to compete in Shanghai.

Moreover, these theatres were all “Peking Opera Houses” and there was a total of more than 100 Peking Opera Houses founded in Shanghai up to 1917 when the last Peking Opera House “Guixian Tea House” was closed. These Peking Opera Houses played host to more than 100,000 audience members. Regardless of the fact that Peking Opera originated in Peking, development of the market in Peking was obviously slower than that in Shanghai. Shanghai, with many concessions, became the promised land for the development of the Peking Opera due to its unique geographical location and historic opportunities. These Peking Opera Houses were fashion representatives of Shanghai in the Late-Qing dynasty. At the time, they were described as follows in *The Bamboo Branch Gamut from Theatres*:

*There are concessions anywhere,  
For wandering about at leisure,  
Opera theaters are founded long roads,  
Every night likes New Year’s Eve,  
And all theaters are open till late,  
There are singings everywhere from street to street,*

*Fresh colors, new light and new roles.  
Posters can be seen everywhere,  
Because of these,  
Audiences spend money like water,*

*Performance will start,  
Honored guests took their seats in due order,  
Even invited the socialite ladies to accompany them.  
All dress circles are all full,  
Social butterflies gather here,  
For a romantic and romantic performance,  
Audiences spend money like water.<sup>6</sup>*

What should not be overlooked is that “Peking Opera Houses” such as the “Mantingfang” and the “Osmanthus Tea House” were opened in the concession area. It is obvious that concession civilisation played an irreplaceable role in promoting the emergence of “Peking Opera Houses”. This mode of theatre “combining Chinese and western content styles” was originally for the “Peking Opera Houses”, which in nature reflected the influence of western civilisation on Chinese modern culture, especially early modern capitalism in China.

In decoration and design, Peking Opera Houses were very different from the traditional opera stages. In these Houses, kerosene lamps instead of candle lanterns were used for lighting, which greatly increased the brightness of the entire theatre, and stage structure was not in the traditional opera stage style but a higher stage like the western-style theatre, with stalls in the audience and boxes upstairs. And there were waiters serving the audience with hot towels, tea, refreshments and snacks, similar to today’s night clubs.

In terms of the level of industrialisation of the stage culture, the “Peking Opera Houses” in Shanghai were well ahead of their time, while Peking lagged, although it was the birthplace of the Peking Opera. Some audiences wrote an “evaluation conclusion” as follows, comparing the Opera Houses in Peking and Shanghai:

*Opera Houses in Peking serve no tea for guests, let alone hot towels, although they hang a signboard of ‘Tea House’. Guests bring their own tea and hand over to servers for making hot tea, but they must pay some money for the service. However, teapots and teacups are so dirty that one can’t stand the taste of it. Benches and obsolete tables are arranged for seats, which are the lowest seats in Shanghai. But the costs are quite*

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6 Anonymus 1872.

*cheap, charging only 130 cents for each seat. But opera performances in Peking are much better qualified than in Shanghai.*<sup>7</sup>

The opera performance in Peking was at a higher level and lower cost than in Shanghai, but the supporting service was worse, for example, there were no hot tea, refreshments or hot towels, instead, guests needed to take tea leaves and pay for tea making. What is worse, Tea Houses could not even wash teapots and teacups clean. The difference in service level between these two places is clear.

Now we may rethink the differences between theatres in Peking and Shanghai. If only in terms of the theatrical quality, Peking was “better qualified than Shanghai” and the price there was lower, but audiences still preferred the Peking Opera Houses in Shanghai. Why? One important reason is that the Peking Opera Houses in Shanghai increased the added value to the opera performance, an industrialisation of opera, hot tea, towels, snacks and attentive service in the theatre, making the performance become a distinctive features of the market.

If we see the emergence of the Peking Opera Houses as a milestone in the history of Chinese capitalism, strictly speaking, it was only one of 3 milestones, as we can see that, via horizontal comparison, the year of 1867 was important in the history of the Chinese stage culture industry. In that year, in addition to the Peking Opera Houses, the Lyceum Theatre was built by the Amateur Dramatic Club of Shanghai of aliens in China and an opera trade intermediary, the Jiqing Opera Exchange, came into being in Guangzhou. These three milestones are independent of one another and have important significance in the history of the Chinese stage market.

As mentioned previously, before the birth of the Peking Opera Houses, opera performers in China were low in status and made a living by performing in private performances held by rich people for celebrations or temple fairs held for weddings and funerals in villages, quite like today’s traveling performers. These performers had to keep their eyes and ears open to find business opportunities and recommend themselves in addition to putting the mind to the performance.

As such, opera performers would go to two different extremes, one is that they would be well-known performers and troupes would be in short supply, the other is that unknown or novice performers or newly established troupes would not receive any offers to perform and barely survive. Obviously, it might lead to a problem whereby senior performers (troupes) would oppress and

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7 Anonymous 1927.

exploit the young as they would subcontract the offers to the young performers (troupes) to derive high profits. Evidently, the Peking Opera Houses were the key to solve this problem, as both well-known and new performers were equal in the Opera Houses. With a high popularity, performers should gain more as more tickets were sold, but on the contrary, they would gain less.

### **The Evolution and Function of “Jiqing Opera Exchange”**

Peking Opera Houses were a product of the concession civilisation to a certain extent, largely existing in Shanghai. So, in another port city, Guangzhou, opera performances also faced the problem of modern transformation. In this context, the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” came into being. It appeared simultaneously with the Peking Opera Houses, marking the emergence of the modern stage market in China. Therefore, they not only played an important part in the history of Chinese opera, but also had an important historical value in the history of modern China.

Different from the Peking Opera Houses and the Lyceum Theater, the Jiqing Opera Exchange was not a product transplanted from the west to China by foreigners but a new product completely coming into being and developed at home. The Jiqing Opera Exchange, which began as a guild organisation “Qionghua Club” (located in Foshan) set up for Cantonese Opera performers. During the reign of Emperor Guangxu, the Jiqing Opera Exchange gradually developed into the “Barwo Club”. So, the Jiqing Opera Exchange was only a transitional historical term, hence in the Cantonese opera business there is a saying: “The Jiqing Opera Exchange came into being first ahead of the Barwo Club; and the Qionghua Club appeared first ahead of the Jiqing.”

Liao Ben believed that the Qionghua Club, Jiqing Opera Exchange and Barwo Club were all “Operatic Guilds” in nature, internally in charge of daily affairs of performers, resolving contradictions, reconciling relationships and maintaining orders, while internally in charge of business, attending social affairs as representatives of the performers and safeguarding the common interests of the performers.<sup>8</sup> I largely agree with this statement. Chinese Opera has a long history, but these guilds were founded after the reign of Qianlong and Jiaqing, and especially began to flourish after the First Opium War, when the stage market developed to a certain extent, and it is of course a reflection of capitalism’s growth. From a geographical perspective, it is inseparable from the fact that the Pearl River Delta is in a coastal area, and Guangzhou, one of five port cities that led the fashion at that time. The “Qionghua Club” was doomed at the beginning of its establishment before its functions were

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8 Liao 2014: 12.

defined. The reason is that it suffered an unexpected calamity in its history of Cantonese Opera. In the fourth year of Xianfeng (1854), when the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement broke out, Cantonese Opera actor Li Wenmao ordered his disciples to establish Wenhui, Menghu and Feihu armed forces and started an uprising in Guangdong to support the Movement, which of course offended the Qing dynasty Government, so “Qionghua Club” was burned down and the Emperor Xianfeng, in a huff, ordered elimination of any Cantonese Opera performance.

With the end of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, the Qing government began to loosen Cantonese Opera performances. Cantonese Opera performers decided to revive Cantonese Opera, hence they collectively demanded a restoration of the “Qionghua Club”. The “Neijiang Troupe” (performing Luntan melodies and Shaanxi Opera besides Cantonese Opera) were willing to lead the work and the senior actor Li Congshan served as the leader for restoration of the “Qionghua Club”. With his efforts, the “Qionghua Club” was restored and renamed the “Jiqing Opera Exchange”, located on Tongji Street of Huangsha (Datong Road, Liwan District, Guangzhou Today). This is the historical reason for the establishment of the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” in one particular circumstance.

The emergent causes and development of the Jiqing Opera Exchange are described above, so I will discuss its specific functions and transactions next. The Jiqing Opera Exchange was set up in line with the demand for a unique local Cantonese Opera. Its troupe had a broker named “Duye”, often served by a retired actor who was only responsible for selling opera, namely soliciting business and finding buyers. It can be said that the livelihood of the theatrical troupe completely depended on Duye.

Where there is a seller, there is a buyer. In the business of traditional Chinese opera (including Cantonese Opera), the buyer is called “Zhukuai”. The so-called Zhukuai refers to the cultural officer in villages or towns who is responsible for buying opera. His duty is to select and contact theatrical troupes to do business with different “Duyes”, namely to buy opera, if a private performance or a temple fair needed it in a village or a town.

Therefore, in the Cantonese Opera industry after the Jiqing Opera Exchange emerged, negotiations and business between Duyes and Zhukuais were carried out at the Qionghua Club and the like. But most of the time supply outweighed demand. Usually when a Zhukuai came several or even dozens of Duyes would start self-marketing. Because of undercutting it often led to brawls between rival Duyes.

This is another reason for the establishment of the “Jiqing Opera Exchange”, as it was necessary to create a place for equality and civilised transactions between Duyes and Zhukuais. The Jiqing Opera Exchange had specific stipulations that Duyes should present the information about their troupes in brief on theatrical unit menu boards (Shui Pai) with gold letters written on black backgrounds and put them up on the wall of the Exchange, so that all Duyes could rest and have tea in special areas. After Zhukuais came into the Exchange, they would choose the appropriate boards according to their primary needs and then make negotiations after recommendation by the Exchange managers. Satisfied parties would then sign a contract. The Jiqing Opera Exchange would take 20% profits (Duye and Zhukuai would take 10%, respectively).

The Jiqing Opera Exchange specifically provided that all business should be carried out on a fair basis, forbidding shouting, buying or selling by force, or fighting to compete for business in the Exchange. Areas for Duyes to rest and the place for Zhukuais to choose boards were not in the same place. If the Zhukuais took no fancy to any troupe and was not introduced by the Exchange managers, Zhukuai and Duye would not be allowed to trade privately.

It was rather like New York Cotton Exchange established in New York in 1870: led by an intermediary and run in brand management for free marketing. However, the difference is that the Jiqing Opera Exchange was engaged in transactions of virtual cultural products instead of goods. The first similar exchange of cultural products emerged in the United States as late as in the 1920s, but another exchange of pure virtual cultural products (non-physical art work) has not yet existed besides the Jiqing Opera Exchange. The emergence of the Jiqing Opera Exchange is evidence that the capitalist market came into being in Guangdong with “western customs spreading into eastern ones”. Fueled by the Jiqing Opera Exchange (renamed as the “Barwo Club” during the reign of Guangxu with scale expansion), there were as many as over 1,000 Cantonese Opera troupes during the reign of Tongzhi and Guangxu.

### **The historical meaning of “Peking Opera Houses” and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange”**

The part above has briefly touched on the emergence, development and functions of Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange. As the two different trade intermediaries for the stage market emerged in the same year, their presence also marked the emergence of the modern stage market in China. The following part will start with specific features and historic factors influencing these two institutions mentioned above and then try to explore the

significance of the emergence of the modern stage market in China and its historical position in the history of modern China.

First, “Peking Opera Houses” and the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” were private intermediaries for the stage market, and their emergence was the inevitable result of stage market development to a certain degree, heralding the rise of a modern cultural market in China.

As one of the oldest products, Chinese Opera had enjoyed a history of two or three thousand years up the Late Qing dynasty. Jiaofang operatic guilds and the public place of entertainment set up in the Tang and Song dynasties marked the commercialisation of Chinese Opera, but that is not synonymous with industrialisation, as the latter was at a more advanced stage than the former. Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange mentioned above marked the industrialisation of the opera as they were trade intermediaries.

The formation of intermediaries is a very important feature of industrialisation, for intermediaries are based on a sizable market. Anne C. Perry argues that transactions in the preliminary stage include transaction subjects and objects, but advanced transactions includes trade intermediaries besides the two above for two basic reasons: complication of the trade procedure and large-scale profit, besides a fundamental reason, the gradual emergence of the capitalist market economy.<sup>9</sup>

It is easy to see that the three reasons above are important in the formation of Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange. Commercial performances of Chinese Opera in the past were based on a simple buyer-seller relationship where the Zhukuai in each town directly found a troupe boss (or Duye) and invited his troupe with pay. It was extremely simple. But with the Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange, an intermediary element was added to this trade pattern, so that the whole trade was no longer of the “troupe boss (Duye)-Zhukuai style”, but a mode where the performance should be carried out via Peking Opera Houses or the Jiqing Opera Exchange. Superficially, it was more complicated in terms of procedure, but surprisingly, business transactions did not fall, and intermediaries were not denied or disobeyed by both sides of the deal, like cotton and financial transactions in Venice, Portsmouth and other port cities in early capitalism, thus intermediaries obtained both legality and necessity.

Something that cannot be ignored is that Guangzhou and Shanghai were quickly involved in the globalised market as ports connecting China and

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9 Perry 1992: 60.

the world after port opening in the Late Qing dynasty. During the reign of Tongzhi and Guangxu, concessions flourished and foreign merchants gathered in these two places, which to some extent helped develop a capitalist economy. As previously mentioned, the “Mantingfang”, “Osmanthus Tea House” and other Peking Opera Houses were mostly located in the concession area in Shanghai and there was just a river separating the “Jiqing Opera Exchange” and “Shamian Concession” established in 1861 in Guangzhou.

This is an external causal factor, but we also need to discuss the internal reason for the formation of the two intermediary bodies. There were many port cities opened in the Late Qing dynasty, such as Hankou, Fuzhou, Ningbo, Tianjin and Xiamen. These cities had their own local opera, but why did intermediaries for the stage market emerge only in Guangzhou and Shanghai?

I think the internal reason is that Chinese capitalism germinated earlier in these two places. Different from most parts of the country, these two places were not based on agriculture but on business as origins of China’s maritime trade. Early in the Tang Dynasty, there was a post of “port office” in Guangzhou served by a eunuch responsible for maritime trade. In the Early Qing Dynasty, there were many Hong Merchants in Guangzhou who connected Chinese and western merchants with proficiency in multiple languages as the earliest trade intermediaries in the history of China. In the 24th year of the Emperor Kangxi (1685), maritime trade was allowed and Guangdong Customs was set up, so that in Guangdong the population of European and American customers increased sharply and the number of Hong Merchants grew dramatically, and thus Thirteen-Hong specialising in sales of foreign goods emerged. In the 38th year of Kangxi (1699), the British East India Company set up an agency in Guangzhou and a large amount of tea was shipped to the United Kingdom. In the 68<sup>th</sup> year of Kangxi (1719), France set up an agency in Guangzhou. All that happened before the First Opium War.

So, what happened in Guangzhou, and Shanghai was no exception. In affluent areas of Shanghai, represented by Soochow, Taicang and Songjiang, “Bureaus for Foreign Shipping” were established early in the Yuan dynasty; in the late Ming dynasty when the local capitalist economy was budding, Shanghai was the region where the private banking industry was the most developed in China with hundreds of domestic banks existing before the First Opium War. These banks “exchanged savings for silver money and made loans to neighbouring shops and Northern merchants fleets to make profits” (Guo Jixian, 1933). In 1866, shortly after the port opening, stock trading emerged in Shanghai.

The reason why I go into the economic history of Guangzhou and Shanghai is to explain that both Shanghai and Guangzhou have a very profound basis of trade and a mercantilist tradition (especially for overseas trade), which is the intrinsic motivation driving the formation of intermediaries for the stage market. It is an indisputable historical fact that the modern Chinese market started in Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Therefore, under the joint action of these inner and outer factors, the traditional Chinese opera market expanded rapidly in Guangzhou and Shanghai, and the stage market developed to a high level, that one could call industrialisation. As an important component of Chinese culture, opera in China has a long history of performing tradition and a solid mass foundation. Integration of traditional opera and the modern industrial system spawned spontaneous and private intermediaries for the stage culture industry, witnessing the emergence of modern Chinese stage culture and promoting rapid development of the modern stage market in China.

Secondly, managing the ways of Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange reflected the capitalistic contract spirit, marketing ideas, operating logic and business rules, which were the basic premises for the modern stage market in China to continue to blossom later.

Let us first talk about managing the Peking Opera Houses. They were managed based on a western-style theatre mode, where audiences had to buy tickets to enter in accordance with strict rules and regulations, not randomly, as in a rural private performance at home. For example, refreshments would be served at the break and the audiences were not allowed to stir up trouble, and so on. Thus, a ticket contributed to the contract between the audiences and the theatre, which had never been seen before. On this basis, theatre etiquette constructed in the theatre was gradually established in the Chinese world, including later movie theatre etiquette. Even today, Singapore Chinese still refer to “watching movies” as “going to theatre”.

Of course, this is only one factor. More important contracts are embodied in the relationships between Peking Opera Houses and opera troupes and performers. During the reign of Guangxu, Peking Opera Houses in Shanghai came into an age of cooperation based on stock between opera performers and businessmen, such as the Guixian Tea House organised jointly by Li Chunlai and Ying Guixin (1890), the Yongxian Tea House organised jointly by Wu Yuexian and Tang Zhuguang (1895) and so on, so that the industrialisation of the property of Peking Opera Houses was further strengthened. Opera performers investing in the theatre became general managers of the theatres as

chief specialists, while the businessman was like the Chairman of the Board. Troupes signed performance contracts with Peking Opera Houses, emphasising their respective rights and obligations and declaring their liabilities for breach of contracts.

The way the theatre paid performers also showed the spirit of the contract. According to the theatre rules, there were four ways to pay the performers: the first was based on a “share in percentage”, that is, the theatre and the performers got income by proportion according to box office returns, which was in general applied to the performance with uncertain returns (especially given by new troupes or new performers); the second was a package reward, that is, the theatre paid a lot of money to troupes or performers and invited them to perform for a month, which was mainly applied to famous actors or actresses based on a common knowledge that the returns were assured; the third was by rent rate, that is, the troupe rented the whole theatre by paying a sum of money and they performed operas within the prescribed period with responsibility for their own profits and losses; the fourth was fixed pay, that is the theatre trained and cultivated new performers and paid them for performances.

Application of the latter two payment methods was spread after the 1890s. The theatre and the troupes (performers) signed contracts based on one of these four payment methods according to concrete conditions and rights and responsibilities included in them. The troupe leader-centered system that had existed for hundreds of years was almost eliminated and it was replaced by an actor-centered system, which became mainstream. In the 1860s, famous performers represented by Sun Chunheng and Xia Kuizhang became the target of competing theatres. In the 1870s and 1880s, theatres in Shanghai even engaged in a lawsuit to compete for Wang Guifen, Yang Yuelou and other famous performers. The “actor-centered system” of Chinese opera performance gradually came into being with the rise of modern stage market in China.

The market, like other kinds of market, was subject to market testing conducted by consumers. Before industrialisation, Chinese opera was mainly performed at private performance or temple fairs, where the Zhukuai decided who to choose and what to perform, and the audiences had no right to make a choice. But theatre gave the audience the greatest power to decide for themselves and the audience became the people that the opera performers relied on for a living within this democracy, so the income and status of these performers greatly improved. But they also began to face the problem of market selection and they had to compromise to the audience.

This mass selection by voting with tickets is a prominent feature of the modern market, for it clearly possesses the rules and spirit of the early capitalist market economy in ideas, logic and rules. The Jiqing Opera Exchange is no exception.

Like Peking Opera Houses, the Jiqing Opera Exchange highlighted the supply and demand relationship in the Cantonese opera performance market at that time: at first, it was a buy-side market with more troupes and fewer performance events, so sometimes Duyes fought over Zhukuais. But it is precisely because it was standardised and orderly, the sell-side market developed, thus reaching a balance between supply and demand. It is easy to see that if there had been no idea or system conforming to the modern capitalist market economy, the Cantonese opera performance market would have been in utter disorder.

The Jiqing Opera Exchange arising spontaneously was not the result of a government executive order. From the perspective of its formation, the execution of contract spirit, namely an external power urgently required by opera troupes represented by Duyes and rural communities represented by “Zhukuais”, made the increasingly large deals orderly, so it could continue to exist. Facts prove that the establishment of the Jiqing Opera Exchange greatly promoted the development of Cantonese Opera in Guangdong, with the total number of troupes from 10 in 1867 to 1,630 in 1909.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, Peking Opera Houses and the Jiqing Opera Exchange established under the push of the citizen stratum in China in the late Qing dynasty together reflected the maturing of the modern stage market in Shanghai and Guangdong, namely modern performance and trade system of traditional Chinese operas, featured with capitalist commodity trading characters. They effectively proved the emergence of the modern stage market in China. and have an important historical value in the history of the modern Chinese cultural market.

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10 Wing 2015: 90.

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The left-hand picture I took shows the site of “Jiqing Opera Exchange” (“Barwo Club”), located on En’ning Road in Guangzhou; the right-hand picture is a postcard I collected, printed in the French concession, which witnessed performance spectacle of “Osmanthus Tea House”.



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