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Errata  In the previous issue of *East Asian History* (No.27) an incorrect character was given on p.57 for Wen-hsin Yeh. The characters should read: 叶文心
THE PRESS AND THE RISE OF PEKING OPERA SINGERS TO NATIONAL STARDOM: THE CASE OF THEATER ILLUSTRATED (1912–17)

Catherine V. Yeh

The Press and the Actor

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a new kind of public personality and even national icon emerged: the Peking Opera singer, formerly regarded as the lowliest member of society. The most famous example is Mei Lanfang 梅兰芳.1 Crucial to this development, in terms of both the conception and the reception of the actor as a star, was the press. The most important role was played by the entertainment newspapers known as xiaobao 小報, which had sprung up in the Shanghai International Settlement just before the turn of the century and soon spread through the larger urban centers. Represented by Entertainment (Youxi bao 遊戲報) (1897–1910?) and World Vanity Fair (Shijie fanhua bao 世界繁華報) (1902–1910?), these early xiaobao marked out their specialty and territory within the market of commercial newspapers by making the world of entertainment in general, and the leading courtesans and actors in particular, their focus. By introducing the notion of entertainment as a newsworthy field of play and by making a link between the star and the press, the xiaobao set into motion the mechanism that was to generate a particular Chinese star culture and was to propel entertainers to national stardom.2

The illustrated image was at the heart of this development. Illustrations had been a traditional means of text enhancement, but in the development of the new star the new image reproduction technologies of the time, especially lithography and photography, helped the papers as well as the entertainers themselves to implant this figure into the imagery of commercial and popular culture. Entertainment was among the first to explore this option. It used the new and miraculous medium of photography to enhance the notion of

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marvel and excitement already associated with the top courtesans (Figure 1). Later, photographs of opera stars would be found in the entertainment papers (Figure 2) and adorn the windows of photography studios. Lithography was also very much in vogue. As the example of *Theater Illustrated* (*Tuhua jubao* 圖畫劇報) will show, it captured for the reader the new style of Peking Opera acting with its emphasis on action and movement (Figure 3).

Figure 1

The Shanghai courtesan Hua Lijuan 花麗娟, who took second place in Youxi bao’s “flower competition” of 1898. To publicize the event, photographs of the top three contestants were offered as glue-ins in the newspaper. Youxi bao, 3 October 1898, p.1

Figure 2

Mei Lanfang in costume for the title role in the ‘new’ play Deng Xiagu 鄧霞姑, Jingbao 京報, 12 April 1920, p.2
The star actor became the point of convergence between the media and the newly forming urban mass culture. Perhaps inadvertently, but effectively, the opera singers with their stage art challenged the supremacy of the traditional ‘famous literati’ (ningshi 名士) with their achievements in the orthodox literary arts of poetry, essay writing, painting, and calligraphy. The xiaobaos both instigated and reflected the dramatic social transformation that came with the rise of the actor to stardom, which in itself is an intriguing sign of a society undergoing a cultural identity crisis.

The close connection between this rise of the actor and the construction of China as a modern nation has been pointed out in an important study by Joshua Goldstein. His article on “Mei Lanfang and the nationalization of Peking Opera” brings out the role of Qi Rushan 齊如山 in making Peking Opera into a national drama form. He refers to the importance of the mass media in this process but does not offer a detailed analysis. The present study explores the question of why—of all the possible candidates the new Republic could have chosen as its representative—it was the actor who came to the fore. The crucial factor, as I will try to show, was China’s early press.

The press was first to invoke the notion of the actor as a national personality, and it offered the only early forum for patronage culture to go public, for aesthetic appreciation to be debated, and for the notion of stardom to be explored. Before the first entertainment papers came out, the big dailies had already pointed the way. A close relationship between the commercial newspaper and the theater had been forged during the early days of the Shenbao 申報 in Shanghai. Owned by a foreign consortium and managed by the Englishman Ernest Major, it was the most important early Chinese-language newspaper. From its start in 1872, it had carried daily advertisements containing different theater programs, which sometimes

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Figure 3
Theater Illustrated 圖畫報, front page, 20 August 1913

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5 Ibid., p.379.
A new commercial relationship between leading actor and theater was established after the 1860s, with Shanghai playing a pivotal role. In Beijing, opera troupes were independent from the theaters in which they performed; actors only signed contracts with a troupe, and performed as part of that troupe with no possibility of operating on their own. By contrast, each Shanghai theater had its own core troupe. After the 1860s, when Shanghai theaters began to specialize in Peking Opera, they developed a strategy of inviting famous actors from Beijing on contract to be the lead singers in performances given by their own fixed Shanghai troupes. This freed both the individual opera singer and the theater to come to a market-based agreement, and allowed the actors to move across regional boundaries into an evolving national entertainment market. Other treaty ports such as Tianjin and Wuhan followed Shanghai’s lead. As these singers were paid handsomely, they were more than willing to accept such invitations. During the same years, the most famous Shanghai courtesan performers also began to work the same circuit. This mobility and reports about it by nationally circulating newspapers created a new type of national entertainment space in which the opera star was the recognized icon. For a detailed study of this issue, see Catherine Yeh, “Where is the Center of Cultural Production: the rise of the actor to national stardom and the Beijing/Shanghai challenge (1860s–1910s),” *Late Imperial China* 25.2 (December 2004): 74–118.

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front page, would also become a regular feature in the major daily papers (Figure 6, see overleaf).7

The turning point for the social status of the actor had come with the 1898 political reform movement. With the public calls by reformers such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 in many press articles to “renovate the people” through novels and operas, an utterly new agenda was laid out for the opera and its performers. The cultural capital of writers (literati/journalists/reformers) participating in the public debates on the possible uses of theater was crucial in the formation of star culture and brought a respectability to the scene which the entertainment papers could not themselves have secured. At the same time, the reform press had to face the realities of the commercial entertainment world of Peking Opera, where even the most high-flying reformist ideas would have to survive the test of the box-office.

The press became the platform for debate on the role of theater. The inherited form of Peking Opera, it was argued, was not fit for the new agenda. Calls went out for a reform of the theater and opera along Western lines. In 1905, Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 went so far as to claim that “the theater is in fact the university of the world, and the actor the grand teacher of all the people.”8 Reform-minded literati promptly wrote new operas with a reform agenda.9 In this way, the reform movement gave an appreciably “progressive” facelift to what had hitherto been classed

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7 In Beijing, however, it was a different story. Even as late as 1913, Mei Lanfang was still surprised by the attention given by the Shanghai papers to a profession which he himself obviously still considered to be beneath the purview of an educated readership. This emphasis on the individual rather than the theater troupe already differed greatly from the practice in Beijing. According to Mei Lanfang, it was not until well into the Republican era that Beijing had newspaper advertisements and public posters (known as haibao 海報) for the theater. 


9 See A Ying, Wan Qing xiqu xiaoshuo mu [Bibliography of late Qing drama and fiction] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Lianhe Chubanshe, 1954), pp.3-55.
As lowbrow entertainment. Young dramatists and actors, some with a Japanese or US education, came out in favor of a new Western-style spoken theater, which they called 'civilized new drama' (wenming xinxi 文明新戲) or 'new theater' (xinju 新劇) and later 'spoken drama' (huaju 話劇). As a consequence, the status of theater rose from mere entertainment to a potential instrument of political action.

While there had been much debate in the reform camp on the assessment of the traditional opera repertoire, where so much was considered superstitious and lewd, there was no disagreement as to the question of the importance of theater as a means of educating the common people. Some of the steps taken by actors themselves certainly prompted reformers to reconsider their role and status. Some actors from Shanghai, namely Pan Yuejiao, Xia Yue'an, and Xia Yuejun, began in 1903 to experiment with what was called at the time 'reformed opera' (gailiang jingju 改良京劇) or 'new opera in contemporary costume' (shizhuang xinxi 時裝新戲). John Fitzgerald and Henrietta Harrison have shown to what degree other political and cultural institutions of the Republican period carried national implications; the same is true for opera reform in this earlier period.

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12 For discussions of traditional opera and reform during the late-Qing period, see for example A Ying, Wan Qing wenxue congcbao: xiasbuxi xiqu yanjiu juan, pp.50-59; Hsiao-t'i li, "Opera, Society and Politics: Chinese intellectuals and popular culture, 1901-1937" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1996).
The press became the forum where literati (wenren 文人) journalists entered the field of entertainment to push their particular ideals of social change. As their chances to push reforms from above had been frustrated in 1898, they aspired to enhance their own public impact through the medium of the press and were, in a way, pressing for star status for themselves at the same time. As most newspapers came out of the Shanghai Concessions, the city naturally became the place where journalists congregated to enter into these new careers. Presenting themselves as the new force to set the agenda and establish standards of taste in the field of cultural production, they took their own performance rather seriously. As their aim was to promote reform through theater, the elevation of the actor to star status was, for most of the reform-oriented papers, a somewhat unintended byproduct. While these stars soon became financial and cultural forces in their own right and moved on to become role models, the papers nonetheless used this development for their own advantage, attempting in the process to gain a certain degree of control over it.

One of the ways of asserting their authority was through theater criticism and stage reviews. Already, before the turn of the century, the Shenbao had started to combine theater news with reviews of certain performances. From the founding of the Shibao 時報 in 1904, theater criticism—in this case by Xu Banmei 徐半梅 (Zhuodai 卓呆, 1878–1958)—became part of daily newspaper fare. Xu Banmei later became a critic for the Theater Illustrated. Starting in the last year of the Qing in 1911, the Shenbao also began to publish theater criticisms almost daily, in this case by Wuxia Jian'er 好下健兒. At the same time, the first journals appeared that were neither gossipy entertainment nor broad-band commercial papers, but specialized serials on the theater written in an increasingly professional manner. First came Twentieth-Century Stage (Ershì shíji jià wùtài 二十世紀大舞台), founded in Shanghai in 1904; this was followed by journals such as New Moon Theater (Gechang xinyue 歌場新月, 1913), Journal of New Theater (Xinju zazhi 新劇雜誌, 1914), The Actor's Journal (Paiyou zazhi 俳優雜誌, 1914), and Theater Miscellany (Xiju congzhao 新劇叢報, 1915). Some of the papers fully dedicated to political reform also published substantial amounts of theater criticism, such as Establishing the Citizen (Minli bao 民立報, 1910), Citizens' Rights (Minquan bao 民權, 1911), and Citizens' Rights Plain and Simple (Minquan su 民權素, 1914). This type of serious, professional public treatment of theater profited from the ongoing fascination of the public with the stars on stage and in their private lives, but also dramatically enhanced the cultural standing of theater and provided much-needed critical input for its artistic development. Theater criticism also further heightened the prominence of lead actors.

The forces shaping the star culture, however, overlapped in many ways. The editors, journalists, and critics in both the commercial and advocacy news media might themselves be actors, playwrights or stage directors. While many of them favored the new theater, they did so because of its perceived...
Goldstein notes that during this period the demarcation between traditional and new plays had not yet become rigid; see his “Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912–1930,” p.391.


The Role of Theater Illustrated in Shaping the Image of the New ‘Civilized/Cultured’ Star

The appearance of papers specializing in one particular type of entertainment signals the rise in status and the broader marketability of entertainment art and artists. Entirely devoted to the stage, and to singers and actors alike, Theater Illustrated was unique in combining pictorial representations of stage scenes with theater criticism. As the paper announced in its first issue, it chose to link pictorial representation (tuhua) with the theater so as to make use of the two most accessible media for conveying reformist ideas to the broadest possible segment of society.

The use of lithography rather than photography in the journal reflects a nineteenth-century legacy from the West and Japan, where lithography had been the dominant medium in entertainment newspapers (Figure 7). More important, however, was the background of the paper’s two founders, Zheng Zhengqiu 鄭正秋 (1888–1935) and Qian Binghe 眾病鶴 (1879–1944), both of whom had been working for reform newspapers with a strong emphasis on illustration. Newspapers that advocated revolution, such as the Minli bao and the Minquan bao, had already begun to use illustrations as part of their political commentary. In 1911, both papers also produced illustrated dailies, the Minli huabao 民立畫報 and the Minquan huabao 民權畫報. These published theater criticism written by none other than Zheng Zhengqiu, combined with theater illustrations by Qian Binghe and Shen Bocheng.}

Figure 7

Miyako shim bun 都新聞, Kyōto, 1 February 1889
very much indebted to these two predecessors. 23

Another important factor in choosing lithograph illustration over other types of representations (such as the newly available technology for printing photographs) was the particular relationship between commercial advertising...
and the entertainment papers. Many artists for these papers had received their training in the graphic arts by drawing commercial advertisements for foreign products such as cigarettes in Shanghai. Line drawing was thus a relatively developed skill in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{24} Lithograph reproduction was also cheaper than reproducing photography. There was, furthermore, no way of reproducing indoor on-location photography without great expense. In this period, hand-drawn illustration was also a statement; it was new, especially in the way it was used in \textit{Theater Illustrated}. As Geremie Barmé has pointed out, cartoon (\textit{manhua}) was an artistic genre that the educated elite found rewarding.\textsuperscript{25} For the reform-minded artist, it was one way of exerting influence and establishing a position of his own in the new market of commercial/political print entertainment.

With their strong and explicit agenda of promoting a 'revolution' on and through the stage, the paper and its journalists dissociated themselves from the increasingly negative stigma of traditional theater and its performers, and redefined and upgraded the 'reform' stage and its actors into a potential force in the development of a new theater and an equally new theater culture.

With this revolutionary agenda, the \textit{Theater Illustrated} was from the outset rather ambivalent about the role played by the budding opera stars, for whom it used the neologism 'famous actors' (\textit{mingjue}). It came out against the heavy emphasis placed on the top stars (most of whom were, as noted, invited from Beijing by the Shanghai theaters for short-term appearances). Good performances and high-quality operas, the paper argued, did not and should not depend on an individual star, but resulted from collective effort. They could only be achieved through the utter dedication of each individual actor in the troupe, good theater organization, and sound financial management.

The trouble the paper had with the stars went even deeper than this. Writing in revolutionary mode, Zheng Zhengqiu would claim in 1913 in his article "A Call for Revolution," that the problem was the moral character of the 'famous actors.' They represented a kind of theater culture that encouraged arrogance, tyranny and corruptibility, with the part of the lead singer, and subservient fawning and flattering by the middle and lower-ranking singers as they tried to ingratiate themselves with him. All this was incompatible with the spirit of the new theater culture, and the 'revolution' called for in this article was in fact a summons to overthrow the 'famous actor' system and the entire way in which theater had hitherto been organized. To end the moral decay inherent in this system and bring about a 'clean' new theater culture, a war had to be waged.\textsuperscript{26}

Zheng Zhengqiu contrasted the \textit{mingjue} system with the true agenda of the time, the 'progress of civilization' (\textit{wenming jinhua}), a notion very much at the forefront of China's reform and revolutionary movement.\textsuperscript{27} Already the opening statement of \textit{Theater Illustrated} had declared that its aim was to
achieve this ideal. In specific terms this meant “to reform the theater world [gaitiang jujie 改良劇界] with the aim of reforming society”; and to achieve this, the paper was to put its emphasis on “promoting the theater while at the same time correcting its [mistakes]” and on “supervising the actors and giving praise [when they made progress toward this end].” Conflict was probably inevitable. Even while the ‘famous actor’ system might seem too commercial, individualistic, and morally suspect to fit into this overall program, these stars also enhanced the attractiveness of the theater and gave the newspaper its high profile and commercial viability. The paper could not help but focus on them, even more so as theater criticism as well as illustration necessarily privileged leading actors.

Unable to do away with the prominent position of opera stars on its pages, Theater Illustrated took a pro-active approach: it would play an active role in defining the star. As its editors believed that the top actors would gain prominent positions on the national public stage and would be able to exert considerable influence on society, they set out, as part of the journal’s program of theater reform, to involve themselves in shaping the image of the new icons. Writing in a more realistic mode, Zheng would therefore claim in other statements that the purpose of the paper was to shape the moral character of the stars rather than to wage war for the abolition of stardom altogether. To dispel the traditional stigma associated with the acting profession and to make the lead actors suitably ‘civilized’ models for emulation, certain moral standards had to be established for them. The old-style social relations within the troupes had to be changed and the collective interaction of the members of the troupe in the pursuit of excellence had to be promoted.

Together with more general pieces promoting a ‘blend’ of traditional and new operas and calling for respect for both, the journal thus came out with critical evaluations and comparative appraisals of individual lead actors. Its efforts to raise the consciousness of actors and nurture their moral fiber were geared towards elevating the standing of theater altogether, and not just that of ‘new’ plays. The journal was to be the public guardian; its duty was to ‘extol’ actors of good behavior who had self-respect and kept the public interest in mind, and to ‘penalize’ those who were “resigned to their backwardness” and only took care of their own interests.

In the following four case studies, I shall try to demonstrate how the paper moulded the opera star—who was both its life-line and its ideological opponent—within this new conceptual framework, and how it set out to develop the star’s potential as a new national icon who combined wenming (‘civilized’ moral integrity) with high artistic achievement.
The Star as Artist: The Famous Tan Xinpei 諧鑫培 Comes to Shanghai in 1912

In the early twentieth century Tan Xinpei (1847–1917), an actor of ‘senior male’ (laosheng 老生) roles, enjoyed very high status among theater aficionados, especially in Beijing. As one of the favorites of the Empress Dowager, Tan clearly reigned supreme in Peking Opera, but he was also widely respected for the innovative artistic elements in his singing. He had developed his own school by combining different traditions of singing into a style that gave his characters new psychological depth.30 Huang Chujiu 黃楚九, the owner of Shanghai’s “newest of the new” theater (Xinxin wutai 新新舞台)—as well as the famous amusement park Great World (Da shijie 大世界)—had invited Tan to perform in his theater in 1912. To advertise the event, he had conferred on him the title “King of the theater world” (lingjie dawang 伶界大王), akin perhaps to the modern synonym ‘superstar’ in film and music entertainment.31

Between 1880 and 1915, Tan altogether made six visits to Shanghai, which since the 1870s had become the main rival to Beijing as the center for Peking Opera.32 As Mei Lanfang would say much later, Shanghai was the place to either make or break a singer’s career. We are interested in Tan’s fifth visit here. A few days before his arrival the Theater Illustrated had been founded.

With such a gigantic figure coming to the Shanghai stage, the Theater Illustrated used the opportunity to focus on the art of Tan Xinpei rather than his person, and on challenging the Shanghai theater audience to have the sophistication to appreciate the actor; that Tan was an avid opium smoker, for example, was never mentioned. A report about his impending visit appeared in the first issue of the paper. In the news section covering theater (liyuan xiaoxi 梨園消息), writing under the pen name Maimai 良媒 the critic Zhan Yumen 詹雨門 declared, that it was truly auspicious that the founding of the paper coincided with the arrival of the “leading figure” (taidou 泰斗) of Peking Opera. Yet, the critic asked, “will he be successful with the Shanghai audience?” and would the Xinxin Theater, which had invited him, be able to make the visit a commercial success? The Xinxin had engaged Tan Xinpei for the proud sum of 16,000 yuan plus 5,000 yuan for expenses, a fortune and a risky venture when compared to the few thousand yuan offered to other invited lead singers, or the few hundred yuan paid to actors belonging to the theater itself.33 The paper lived up to its part of the challenge by keeping the focus on Tan during his entire stay, with Shen Bocheng creating illustrations of most of his performances as well as providing terse critical comments. (Figures
Shen tried to capture the psychological depth of Tan’s art of characterization. The illustrations would present the opera star as an artist by catching, in Shen’s own words, his “spirit” (shenqi 神气), his “brilliant performance” (jingcai 精采), his “demeanor” (zishi 姿势), and his “true features” (zhênxiàng 真相). These terms signal the first attempts to depict the art of the opera singer in a language close to that used for the arts of literature or painting. Describing the character of the actor through his acting and performance effectively elevated him to the rank of a master of high art.

Figure 10 shows Tan Xinpei playing the role of Kong Ming (i.e., Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮), the brilliant military strategist of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo
Shen Bocheng, statement on illustration of Capturing and Releasing Cao Cao in TH/B, 10 January 1913.

There is a famous story about the first encounter between Qi Rushan (an eminent theater historian, critic and playwright) and Mei Lanfang. After seeing Mei’s performance, Qi wrote him a letter in which he suggested that Mei, when playing the qingyi (a serious female, whose performance traditionally relies primarily on singing and not upon acting) role of a wife whose husband returns after a long absence and tries to convince her that he is indeed her husband, should show the wife’s reaction to his words by using his body and facial expressions; it was not credible, he suggested, for a wife not to be moved and show interest. 


There is a special advertisement appearing at the bottom of the illustration, presumably paid for by the Xinxin Theater. The following illustration (Figure 11) depicts a scene from Capturing and Releasing Cao Cao (Zhuo fang Cao) where Tan played the role of Chen Gong. The illustration evokes the moment when Chen Gong hesitates as he plans to cut off Cao Cao’s head. It captures the inner feeling of a man struggling with himself between moral considerations (should he kill Cao Cao?) and the fear that this might be misunderstood by Cao’s enemies as a sign that he supported them. In the end he departs without killing him, leaving behind a poem written on a wall.

While this emphasis on the art of acting rather than simply on the singing certainly helped to elevate the cultural respectability of the actor, it was also designed to promote an aesthetic of the theater as an all-encompassing art form. It asked theater visitors to pay attention not just to the singing but also to the acting. It has been pointed out by scholars that up to that time the Beijing-dominated theater aesthetics privileged the voice, and a true connoisseur would focus on listening to the arias (tingxi) rather than on looking at the action on stage; some would go so far as to close their eyes so as to really enjoy the performance. Movement and acting were something for less refined tastes. The notion of an opera star showing a deep artistic understanding through singing, movement and acting (including facial expression) thus became part of the new theater aesthetics promoted by the paper. The emphasis on visual representation through illustrations marks the beginning of an image-conscious and image-driven star culture.

The elevation of a top opera singer to stardom was further enhanced by advertisements. The star features are unmistakable here. The first and second issues of the Theater Illustrated carried an over-sized illustrated advertisement (Figure 12). Prominently displayed, it offered an image of Tan based on a photograph together with an introduction of this ‘King of the theater world.’ The illustration referred to the practice of the Beijing theaters of placing an object symbolizing a particular act outside the door of the theater. The broken stele in the advertisement illustration refers to the opera Li’s Mortuary Stele (Li lingbei...
李陵碑), for which Tan was so famous.  

The paper also carried illustrations focusing on movement in a further attempt to define Peking Opera as a high art engaging both body and mind (Figures 13 and 14).

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**Figure 13**

*Tian Mo, “Tiao Huache”* (Overturning the Rolling Chariots). Theater Illustrated, 8 January 1913

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**Figure 14**

*Xue Ni, “Dao hun ling”* (Stealing the Soul Bell). Theater Illustrated, 22 January 1913

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Unfortunately, the only extant copy of the *Theater Illustrated* is missing the section that contains the article giving a critical appraisal of Tan's performance, which makes it impossible to compare the opinions of the critic with that of the illustrator. Nevertheless, it would appear from the illustrations that the illustrator consciously projected the lead actor as an artist on the same high level as traditional ‘famous literati,’ attributing to him an artistic stature worthy of the name of star.

Although these illustrations of Tan have much in common with traditional figure paintings (renwu hua 人物画) with their emphasis on positive representation, an alternative scenario did exist. Standing in stark contrast to these figure drawings are the political illustrations by Qian Binghe. Published in the *Theater Illustrated* of the same period (Figures 15 and 16), these cartoons, in...
which a strong influence in spirit and form from Western-style drawing can be seen, treat another kind of new star—the politician—with sarcasm.

Although we do not have the *Theater Illustrated*’s critical comments on Tan, we know that Tan himself was very much aware of the power of the newspaper and its editor. Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲, the prominent theater critic and later co-founder of the Ming-xing Film Studio (Mingxing yingpian gongsì 明星影片公司), recalls that at the time when Tan visited the city, an entertainment newspaper with the name of Tides on the Huangpu River (*Huangpu chao 黃埔潮*) came out with a devastating review of Tan’s performance. Tan knew this, and was also aware of being watched by Zheng Zhengqiu, who was already by then a well-known theater critic and advocate of new drama. Tan felt the pressure and was extremely diligent in his performances.37

The question remained, however, as to whether or not Tan was able to live up to the moral stature that theater reformers such as Zheng Zhengqiu thought was an essential qualification if the star was to become a model worthy of emulation. Perhaps because Tan was such a big star in Beijing and a darling of the Empress Dowager, or because Tan was an extremely arrogant person and the conditions he had attached to his contract were so outrageous and imperious, we know from the memoirs of theater critics of the time that Zheng Zhengqiu’s attitude towards him remained hostile.38 After someone in the audience had been slapped in the face by runners working for the Xinxin Theater because he had dared to boo Tan’s performance, Zheng Zhengqiu unleashed a torrent of criticism against the theater (and indirectly Tan), and was joined in this by other xiaobao journalists, with the result that Tan’s visit nearly ended prematurely. The theater owner and Tan had to apologize to the public through newspaper advertisements, and to officially withdraw the title ‘King of the theater world’ used for Tan.39 The ambiguity of the *Theater Illustrated*—with its double agenda of promoting a new aesthetic and political cast for the stage alongside a new persona for the actor—comes to the fore in the treatment of Tan, whose art is praised but whose character is impugned.

The way in which the paper presented the opera star differed greatly from the way in which the new drama actors and directors saw their roles. The experienced reader would notice the difference between the presentation in illustrations of traditional opera actors and of those playing the new opera (Figure 17). In the illustrated advertisement (*tubua guanggao 圖畫廣告*) for the new play *Garden at Night* (*Ye huayuan 夜花園*) not just the lead singer but all the principal actors are shown and their names are listed in a modest fashion. As we shall see later, the promotion of the new opera in the *Theater Illustrated* focused on the collective, and not on the individual star.

In its reports on a star like Tan Xinpei, the *Theater Illustrated* demonstrated that it was determined to make the actor feel its power. Through criticism and illustrations, the paper spelled out what it saw as the key

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39 Ibid.; Lanwairen (Wu Xingzi), “Lingjie dawang Tan Xinpei” [Tan Xinpei, the King of the theater world], *Jingju jianwen lu* [Record of things seen and heard about Peking Opera] (Beijing: Baowentan Shudian, 1987), pp.8–9.
features of a ‘civilized’ aesthetics. It continued to highlight Tan’s artistic achievements even while being critical of his social behavior. The paper’s flexibility is demonstrated in its treatment of a then relatively unknown actor with great potential: Mei Lanfang.

The Star as Modern Personality: The Little-Known Mei Lanfang Comes to Shanghai

Mei Lanfang himself described his 1913 trip to Shanghai as the turning point in his career. He was then twenty, had specialized in young dan 旦 (female roles) mostly playing the qingyi 青衣, the serious and morally upright young female, and had never left Beijing. He was invited as a young
and promising actor to accompany the much more famous Li Fengqing 李凤卿 to Shanghai. The difference in their status is evident from their market value. Li was paid 3,200 yuan and Mei 1,400 yuan until Li intervened to have the latter’s wage raised to 1,800 yuan. The original one-month contract was later extended to 45 days. For a relatively unknown young singer like Mei, an unsuccessful trip to Shanghai might have meant the end of his career, as much as a success could land him on center stage.

The trip turned out to be a great success. The audience adored Mei Lanfang, whom they were seeing for the first time. What emerges from his own story of the trip is the importance of the press, the significant role it played in making him a star, and the degree to which this had become conscious knowledge. There are many indications to support this claim. Upon their arrival, the owner of the theater took Li and Mei to pay their respects to the chief editors of the three most important Shanghai dailies, Di Pingzi 狄平子 of Shibao, Shi Liangcai 史量才 of Shenbao, and Wang Hanxi 汪漢溪 of Xinwen bao 新聞報, in an evident effort to elicit friendly press coverage. Shanghai theater criticism and advertising made a profound impression on Mei. In Shanghai, the power of the newspapers to generate interest in the theater and influence public judgment of the performance was unique. Very few newspapers outside Shanghai carried any theater criticism at all at this time.

While Mei Lanfang was performing in the city, there were almost daily reviews of his performances. Unfortunately the format of Theater Illustrated had changed by this time, and it no longer carried artistic illustrations; the only illustrations now were in theater advertisements. Advertisements featuring Mei frequently appeared on the front page (Figures 18 and 19). Mei was overwhelmed by the way advertising was displayed on the Shanghai streets as well as in the newspapers, since Beijing at the time had neither newspaper advertisements nor the public theater advertisements known as baibao.

The first report on Mei came three days before the actual premiere. As he was virtually unknown in Shanghai, this article came at a critical juncture. Written by the leading theater critic Feng Shulan 馮叔鸞 (whose pen name was Mr Ma Er 二先生), it alerted the Shanghai audience to its responsibility by mentioning that the Beijing newspaper Asia Daily News (Yaxiya ribao 亞細亞日報) had run a

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Figure 18

Advertisement for the DiyiTai Theater showing Mei Lanfang on stage. Theater Illustrated, 25 November 1913
Figure 19

Advertisement for front the Dijitai Theater showing Mei Lanfang, on center of the page. Theater Illustrated, 6 November 1913

full-page reprint of the reactions in the Shanghai news media to the arrival of Li Fengqing and Mei Lanfang. Obviously, the art of these two actors was highly regarded in their own city. Their appearance would be a treat for Shanghai, and he, the critic, was himself eagerly awaiting the opening night.45 Through this reference to other newspaper reports, the critic assumed a professional and objective stance towards the two actors. The tone of this report prepared the stage for Mei Lanfang.

Singing a qingyi role, Mei Lanfang faced an audience with quite traditional reactions. According to Theater Illustrated some opera fans reacted with wild enthusiasm at Mei Lanfang's stunning grace and beauty. This was a type of role which in the past had inevitably associated the actor with possible moral compromises. The audience's enthusiasm was a possible pitfall for a ‘civilized’ (wenming) star. The Theater Illustrated, as might be expected, did everything in its power to counteract this unwholesome tendency. With the agenda of reshaping the traditional opera singer into an artist in the highest cultural register, and of re-educating the public in the process, the paper explored an utterly new dimension of the actor’s off-stage performance.

After the initial positive but matter-of-fact reviews of Mei’s performance, mixed at times with ironical asides about the Shanghai audience being so captivated by Mei’s good looks,46 an article entitled: “Lanfang actually looks like a southerner,” by the theater critic Wang Shouyue openly praised Mei for his modern appearance and dress. These were similar to those of young men in China’s southern coastal cities, and that meant modern in the Western sense:

When actors come south, most of them bring their big long queue with them, but an exception occurred this time with Mei Lanfang’s visit to Shanghai. Not only does he have short hair, his entire way of dressing and appearance all uncannily resemble that of a southerner, together with his delicate and graceful appearance, he seems even more to be without a whiff of turbid air [associated with persons from the North].47
The article then went out of its way to describe Mei’s upright and modest demeanor. This attention given to the personal and moral character of an actor was unusual. The stated aim of these observations was to correct the impression that opera singers from Beijing—at the end of the year 1913—all still wore queues, the emblem of traditional stuffiness. Yet the delight expressed by the writer in reporting his observations had a clear agenda: in recognizing Mei’s good looks and talent as an artist, the critic was attempting to build up the image of a top singer who could also be admired for his new civilized public character.

In the third phase of criticism, it was the innovative spirit of Mei’s acting and singing which increasingly won the respect of the *Theater Illustrated* critics. Articles began to appear analyzing his “extremely refreshing” new style of singing. They also paid great attention to Mei’s stage movement and the way in which his serious and upright character shone forth in his voice and acting. The paper even began to print poems dedicated to Mei by enthusiasts. All of this attention contributed to the creation of the atmosphere of heightened enthusiasm that was crucial for the rise of a new star.

All of Mei Lanfang’s modernity notwithstanding, the *Theater Illustrated* was still uneasy with the star culture its own articles fostered. As the critic Zuiweng wrote:

[The theater] Diyitai 第一台 hires so-called *mingjue* [leading star singers] but in fact they have no real talent. The theater is only using their hollow names to cheat others. When a *mingjue* has been shown enough in the limelight, he is then whisked away and replaced by others. All this hype and flattery is for the Shanghainese, who are quick to tire of the old and love anything new. If one of these actors were to stay on, it would be difficult for him to please them continuously. Thus [the Diyitai] uses the strategy of continuous renewal to satisfy the psychology of the Shanghai audience. The audience does not notice this, and each time it goes crazy [again with excitement]. Should we not be a little more cautious?

Apart from this point of principle, Zuiweng offered little by way of particular criticism of Mei’s performance. In two other articles written by Feng Shulan (Mr Ma Er), however, the criticism moved beyond such points of principle into an extremely detailed and balanced discussion of Mei’s performances. Feng Shulan pointed out where Mei was not as good as he could have been, and where Mei’s interpretation of a character was not sound. These were convincing criticisms mixed with praise. Feng Shulan was most impressed, however, by Mei Lanfang’s willingness to experiment with new acting techniques.

Such willingness and ability on the part of actors to learn and experiment with new ways was made into a praiseworthy quality by the *Theater Illustrated*: it implied a criticism of the traditionalism of imitating the teacher’s performance to the last gesture, and opened the mental door for the great
innovations in Peking Opera that were to come in the 1920s and 1930s. As Feng Shulan observed, Mei had already begun to change while he was still in Shanghai. After his return to Beijing, with the help of his supporters and critics, he threw himself into creating new operas and acting in new operas which he had seen in Shanghai. Mei himself later recalled how the response of Shanghai’s audiences and critics had stimulated him to experiment with new acting techniques:

The experience of the first two days had shown that among the pieces which I have being singing alone _Springtime in the Jade Hall_ (Yutang chun 玉堂春) was more successful than _The Match at Rainbow Towers_ (Cai lou pei 彩楼配). As to the program of the last four days ... the audience was most enthusiastic about _Rainbow Pass_ (Hongni guan 虹霓關). From this it is easy to see that the soprano scenes ... with their emphasis on singing [and not much acting], and furthermore on old-style singing as well as old tunes, did not satisfy audience tastes. What audiences like is a combination of singing and acting; but there has to be something new in the singing as well. As there are many new tunes in _Springtime in the Jade Hall_ and _Rainbow Pass_, and much lively stage acting, the audience was quite satisfied. My main repertoire is in the high-register singing pieces; these are mostly old pieces sung [with the hands just] holding the belly [and little acting]. If I had relied on any of these for the ‘piece that brings the house down,’ I am afraid I would not have been successful. 53

Mei Lanfang now made an extraordinarily bold decision. For his first lead performance in Shanghai, he studied a role-type he had never played, that of the female warrior, the ‘sword and horse dan’ (daoma dan 刀馬旦), because he felt it combined singing and acting in a manner most attractive for the Shanghai audience.

As the performances went on, the paper built up the persona of Mei as a man of great talent, with an innovative style of singing and a keen understanding of the psychological depth of his characters, and who was, moreover, morally upright.

The reporting on Mei Lanfang shows the means by which the image of the star, and the star himself, was shaped by this particular specialized press. Taking this young actor, who was known to few, the paper attempted to create the image of an opera star as a modern figure who, in addition to being a sublime artist, is capable of new thinking and behavior. The mechanism of creating such an image can be summed up as: (1) large amounts of continued and focused exposure, including illustrated images, praise, comment, and criticism based on a balanced and detailed assessment by well-known and knowledgeable critics; (2) an advertising campaign boldly designed and centrally displayed to focus public attention and establish the actor as a public personality with a high level of recognition; and (3) the purposeful highlighting of those features which serve the cultural agenda of the new theater, in Mei’s case through clear and detailed comments on his
admirable personal character and behavior. Thus, the continued coverage by the press, the central position given to individuals, and the orientation of its reporting in effect established the entertainment-plus-reform papers of the *Theater Illustrated* kind as the brokers of stardom.

The interest which these newspapers and the large papers that were soon to dispute their territory had in the stars lay in their capacity to generate news; at the same time it was this very press coverage that made entertainers and actors into stars or, for that matter, undid them. The attention paid by the press to the theater and its stars could also backfire, as the case of Zhang Yucun 張漁村 will show.

*The Journalist on the Line: The Case of Zhang Yucun—Making and Breaking a Would-be Star*

On 2 July 1913, an article appeared in the *Theater Illustrated* titled “The record of the actor Zhang Yucun emerging from seclusion.” Mr Zhang, who was a member and Peking Opera instructor of the Ming she 鳴社 society of amateur opera singers, had been invited to Shanghai by the Xinxin Theater for a special guest appearance of five nights. With enthusiasm and apparent insider knowledge, the critic Tianxiao 天曉 detailed Zhang’s absorbing passion for the opera, to the point that when all his considerable inherited wealth had been spent, he had thrown in his lot with the profession and become the pupil of the famous actor Wang Xiaonong 汪笑儉. As Shanghai theaters were eager to invite stars from Beijing, friends had convinced Zhang to come out and perform in public.54

The hype and praise for Mr Zhang continued for two more days, with Tianxiao writing articles introducing his singing style, pronouncing the performance a unique occasion, and divulging how hard it had been to convince Mr Zhang to agree to giving public performances.55 The paper also carried illustrated advertisements for his performances on the 4th and 5th of July (Figure 20).

The effect was instantaneous. On the night of the performance, the paper reported that the Xinxin Theater was so packed that there was barely standing room. The comments on Zhang’s performance were, however, surprisingly muted.56

On the very same day, the paper carried a full-page article by Zheng Zhengqiu, titled “An announcement to colleagues in our company,” in which Zheng blasted the performance of Zhang Yucun which he happened to have seen the previous night. But this was not what motivated him to write the article. He had come to the theater after his doctor had given him an evening’s leave from the hospital where he had been treated over the past month. As he had not been able to read the newspaper during this time,
ZhengZhengqiu, “Zhengqiu gao she zhong zhu tongzhi” [An announcement to colleagues in our company], THJ, 6 July 1913.

Although the failure of Zhang Yucun is his own doing, [what is much more at stake is that] the name and honor of our company have fallen to the ground, and the trustworthiness of our paper has been damaged. The newspaper seeks truth in its praise and censure. If it is based on reciprocating sentiments [of friendship], we would have failed in our duties and obligations to our readers. I urge Tianxiao to be careful with his pen in future.  

Two days later, the Theater Illustrated published an explanation by Tianxiao of the incident and an apology to readers. To dispel any suspicion of premeditated distortion on his part, Tianxiao pointed out that his two previous articles had been based on Zhang’s trial performance, which he had attended. There, Zhang had sung with power and refinement. He ended by saying: “It is clear [as this incident proves] that to perform on the
stage is not a simple matter, and neither is writing theater criticism.” From Tianxiao’s article we learn that the second performance was canceled, since Zhang had been so intimidated by Zheng Zhengqiu’s criticism that he could not make himself appear on stage; instead, he terminated his contract with the theater.58

The case highlights the journal’s heightened sense of responsibility to a new type of public figure also possessing potential star qualities that had appeared among its own ranks—that is, the man of letters and journalist. While it shows the potential influence the press had on the fates of actors and would-be stars, it more importantly makes visible the new understanding the theater journalist had gained of his duties as a maker of public opinion. There had been a rhetoric of slanderous comment about the low moral stature and lack of commitment to truth on the part of Chinese journalists among some high-ranking Qing officials (who at the same time were avid readers of the papers).59 To make his mark as a public personality worthy of respect, the journalist had to counteract this image; related efforts in this direction go back to the early years of the Shenbao. The strong and pointed sense of professional responsibility of the journalist in Zheng Zhengqiu’s article is characteristic of the paper as a whole. It is the behavioral code for the journalist as a ‘famous man of letters’ that gives this episode its sense of urgency. In the newly developing public sphere the journalist takes his own performance, role-playing, and respectability as seriously as that of the opera star. As much as opera stars were dependent on public opinion to maintain their stardom, journalists had to safeguard their public credibility as well as their claim to analytical sophistication in a field—artistic judgment—notoriously beset with suspicions of subjectivism and nepotism. Being himself an actor on the public stage, the journalist had to defend an idealized image of his own importance in the realm of cultural production.

This self-assigned public role and its importance were reflected in the journalists’ perception of the close relationship between theater criticism and the well-being of the theater. In an article titled “Theater Criticism and Shanghai,” the critic Wang Shouyue states that the quality of the Shanghai theater was directly related to the attention it received from men of letters (wenren). A comparison with cities such as Hankou, he argued, showed how much journalists had contributed to the Shanghai stage. In the Hankou paper Central Western Daily (Zhong xi bao 中西報) “from the first page to the last not one column is devoted to theater criticism. [Even in the section on entertainment programs] only two opera houses are listed. What they do publish, however, and in large amounts, is news on courtesan entertainment.” He linked the Hankou paper’s poor record with the dismally low theater attendance in Hankou even though the city could boast some very fine singers.60

58 Tianxiao, “Cuixi yuebao zhujun” [Apology to readers], THJR, 8 July 1913.
60 Wang Shouyue, “Pingju yu Shanghai” [Theater criticism and Shanghai], THJR, 8 November 1913.
In this assessment of the role of the journalist as the arbiter of cultural taste, a larger issue raised in the Zhang Yucun episode remains unresolved: that what are considered facts can be used and presented to enhance a particular ideological position. This is not disputed by the editors, since they are strongly committed to the development of the new drama, and to the glory of the collective rather than that of the star.

**The Collective as Star: The Case of New Stage Theatre and Xinmin She 新民社**

As a paper that made no secret of its ideological orientation, *Theater Illustrated* placed its focus firmly on the New Stage Theater (Xin wutai 新舞台) and the Association for the Renewal of the People and the Renewal of the Stage (Xinmin xinju she 新民新劇社). Both were commercial theater companies committed to reforming Peking Opera (jingjugailiang 京剧改良) and creating ‘civilized new drama’ (wenming xinju 文明新劇). Through its portrayal of the two organizations, the *Theater Illustrated* presents its ultimate ideal of stardom: the collective. This commitment was, however, very much at odds with the star system prevailing in the Shanghai entertainment world. Thus it was against this trend that the paper tried to promote a new theater culture.

A short history of the two organizations will put these issues into perspective. The New Stage was founded by the brothers Xia Yueshan and Xia Yuejun, along with Pan Yuejiao and with the help of local Chinese merchants. The building itself was the first modern theater in China. It was built in 1908 following the Japanese model of a Western-style theater, without supporting beams in the room and with audience seating fanning out facing the stage. It made use of background scenery, modern lighting equipment, a revolving stage, and a catwalk. The three founders were all excellent Peking Opera singers living in Shanghai. Additionally, they were, furthermore, politically extremely active during the 1911 revolution in Shanghai. As a political gesture, the new theater was built in the Southern Town (nanshi 南市), the Chinese part of the city under local self-government. It was first established on the Bund of Shiliu pu 十六鋪; then, after the lease ended in 1912, a new theater was built inside the former walled city at Jiumu di 九畝地. The choice of locations was prompted by the wish to revive theater life in the Chinese area. Together with the theater, residential housing was built around it to stimulate business. The theater was among the first to create new operas with new and contemporary themes. They included *The New Dame aux Camélias* (Xin chahua 新茶花) and *The Opium Addict* (Heiji yuanbun 黑籍冤魂) (also known as “The Civilized New Opera The Opium Addict, performed in installments on successive evenings” (liantai wenming xinxi Heiji yuanbun 連台文明新戲黑籍冤魂)). These were new operas based...
on contemporary themes and performed in contemporary costume (Chinese and Western), and were first sung by the politically active opera singers of the New Stage. One is a Chinese version of Alexandre Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux Camélias* with the 1911 revolution added to the plot, and the other is a play about the criminalizing effects of opium on an entire family. Both plays were extremely popular and ran for a long time.66 Operas based on contemporary (sometimes Shanghai) events, such as the new opera *Yan Ruiseng* 閻瑞生, were even more successful;67 one report claimed that this opera drew a full house, rain or shine, for six months.68 The success of this theater with its new plays provided the model for the construction of a new type of opera house.

In 1912, the Xia brothers also set up the first modern theater organization in China, the Shanghai Theater Association (*Shanghai lingjie lianbehu* 上海伶界聯合會). To highlight their reform agenda, and to eradicate the image of the actor as a male prostitute, members of the New Stage were required to use their real names and not stage names, and to refer to themselves not as actors (lingren 伶人), which was the tradition, but as ‘artists’ (yiyuan 藝員). Members were not allowed to participate in private performances; these were regarded as demeaning, being furthermore associated with male prostitution.69 The Theater Association also showed social responsibility by sponsoring many welfare projects including famine relief, a public cemetery, and a primary school.70 Being very much aware of the influence of newspapers on the theater business, Xia Yueshan founded the entertainment newspaper *The Forest of Laughter* (*Xiaolin bao* 笑林報) to further promote the New Stage.71

The *Xinmin she* was one of the more influential organizations promoting the new drama.72 Zheng Zhengqiu had founded it in 1913, and he was not only the director and an actor in the troupe, but also its playwright. The troupe’s members had been actors in the ‘People’s Renewal Motion-picture Company’ (*Xinmin yingxigongsi* 新民影戲公司), which Zheng Zhengqiu had founded together with others earlier in the same year. For that venture, Zheng had written and directed one of China’s first feature films, *Nanfu nanqi* 難夫難妻 (Husband and wife in times of hardship). A few months later the film company folded, and in the fall of that year Zheng reorganized its members into the drama troupe.73 Zheng’s relationship with motion pictures did not end there, however. In 1922, he became one of the founding members of the famous Chinese film company, Star Studio (*Mingxing yingpian gongsi* 明星影片公司). I mention this here because the same people who were

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66 There are different works under the title of *Xin Chabua* the novel *Xin Chabua*, by Xin Qing (Shanghai: Shijiqiao Xiaoshuo She, 1907); the new opera *Xin Chabua*, performed by Xin Wutai (1909); and the spoken drama *Xin Chabua*, performed by the *Jinhua tuan* [Evolution Troupe] in 1910. Each has a different plot; see Chen and Dong, eds, *Zhongguo xiandai xiju shigao*, pp.43–60, 342. There are four different works going by the title of *Heiji yuanhun*, which are similar in their plot line: a novel published in 1909 (Shanghai: Gailiang Xiaoshuo She); the new opera performed by the New Stage in 1911; the spoken drama performed by the *Xinmin she* in 1913; and the film version produced in 1916 (Shanghai: Huanxian studio). See *Beijing shi yishu yanjiusuo*, *Shanghai yishu yanjiusuo*, eds, *Zhongguo jingju shi*, vol.1, pp.36, 39, 329–31.

67 The new opera *Yan Ruiseng* was based on the story of the murder of a courtesan by her client Yan Ruiseng. For details, see Wang Laioweng, “Hujun shishu Yan Ruiseng moubi Lianying an panci” [The final verdict by the military court on the case of Yan Ruiseng’s murder of Lianying], in Wang Laioweng, *Shanghai liushi nian huajie shi* [Sixty years of the Shanghai flower world] (Shanghai: Shixin Shuju, 1922), pp.161–73; see also Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: prostitution and modernity in twentieth-century Shanghai* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1997), pp.157–64.

68 “Bai nian lai Shanghai liyuan de yange,” p.55.

69 See Ouyang Yuqian, *Ziyou yanxi yilai* [From the time when I began to perform on stage] (Taipei: Longwen Chubanshe, 1990), p.84; on the New Stage, see *Beijing shi yishu yanjiusuo*, *Shanghai yishu yanjiusuo*, eds, *Zhongguo jingju shi*, vol.1, pp.347–51; for a short introduction to the Xin wutai and the Xia brothers, see ibid., vol.1, pp.451–5.


involved in the new opera and new drama movements were also involved in China's new film industry with its studio and star system.\textsuperscript{74}

Using the \textit{Theater Illustrated}, Zheng Zhengqiu promoted various new dramas which he himself had written and staged and in which he had also acted. The texts of these plays were published in his paper. They included \textit{The Evil Family} (\textit{E jiating 惡家庭}) and \textit{The Suffering Maid} (\textit{Ku yatou 苦丫頭}), both of which had as their theme the oppressiveness of the 'feudal' family.

Through focused and numerous reports, the \textit{Theater Illustrated} promoted both the New Stage Theater and the \textit{Xinmin she}. Reports included everything from detailed notes on theater repairs to big events such as the premieres of new plays, and from detailed financial records to daily stage criticism—and
this over a long period of time. In this way, the paper helped to make the two theater reform organizations into landmarks on the Shanghai theater scene. The one overall concern of the paper was to provide a model for Peking Opera troupes and new drama against the background of the inexorable rise of the Peking Opera star. This was reflected in the way in which their performances were critically evaluated and their advertisements written.

The reviews of the performances of these two troupes touched upon each and every member of the troupe and gave no privileged positions to stars. As the paper pointed out, the New Stage was made up entirely of strong singers, each contributing to the success of the troupe as a whole; moreover, it was their spirit of change and their new operas that made them successful, and not one or two individual actors. In a report on a New Stage Theater performance in a different location after its premises had been occupied by refugees from the Civil War (a location which they rebuilt and named Zhaoming Teahouse, [Zhaoming chayuan 聲明茶園]), the critic Maimai praised the troupe for maintaining unity under such difficult circumstances. It continued to be successful without resorting to the strategy of inviting new stars from Beijing.75

The emphasis on the troupe rather than the star is clearly brought out by the illustrations. In a review of the new opera The Conspiracy (Yinmou 隱謀) based on the story of Napoleon and performed by the New Stage Theater (Figure 21), the entire focus is on the content; not one of the actors is mentioned by name. In the Xinmin she advertisements, the names of the actors are often not listed; they are only identified as a collective (Figure 22). But when their names are given, all members are listed without hierarchy (Figure 23). Compared

75 Maimai, "Jishi [Notes on events], THJB, 11 August 1913.
The New Stage was organized as a shareholding company with a governing board (extremely advanced for its time); for details, see Zhongguo jingju shi, vol.1, p.337.

This is not to deny that in theater criticism the lead actor was the center of attention. In the case of New Stage and Xinmin she, however, the lead actors themselves were treated as part of a collective. Both were, after all, actors’ companies, owned and run by actors. In the case of New Stage the three founding members (Xia Yueshan, Xia Yuerun and Pan Yuejiao) were also the company’s lead actors; and for Xinmin she, Zheng Zhengqiu was founder, director, playwright and actor. The heads of these companies were interested in the well-being of the entire enterprise and not just their own.
glory. They also employed many other famous actors such as Sun Juxian, Mao Yunke, Wang Hongshou, and Zhou Fengwen during the period studied here. One of the reasons we know about these people as lead actors and stars of the company is the way the Theater Illustrated treated them. The theater reviews published in the paper normally comment on all lead actors, starting with the critic’s first encounter as he enters the theater and on down the list according to the program. This same principle was adopted by the company in its advertising strategy. Each day the company would feature a different lead actor. All of them would be associated with the group and were regarded as representing the collective excellence of the whole.77

Few of the reviews of the new dramas performed by the Xinmin group were written by Theater Illustrated staff members; indeed, some of the paper’s journalists were usually in the play. As a manifesto published after the first performance of The Suffering Maid states, the paper would publish different critical opinions according to “the Western notion of letting public opinion be heard through the newspaper.”78 These reviews were generally positive. The focal points of most reviews were the content of the play and the acting. As these were new plays, some critics commented on the characters and the acting for the whole play.79 Others gave advice on improving the text. At the center of these reviews was the play itself, rather than the actors.80

These new dramas were not performed in the traditional Peking Opera theaters, but in the city’s foreign-owned drama theater, the Lyceum. Founded by a group of English residents in 1866, this was Shanghai’s oldest theater.81 The connection with the Lyceum no doubt had its ideological roots, as the new drama tried to make clear that its artistic origin was Western theater, and that this was a new brand of actor not to be socially categorized in the same manner as traditional opera singers. But the setting brought its own problems as most Chinese theater visitors were not familiar with the manners of this new environment. As much as the Lyceum was effective in providing a new cultural milieu for the reception of the new plays, it also brought a lot of trouble for the foreign management of the theater as well as for Zheng himself. One article strongly protested that Chinese audiences simply did not know how to behave in a Western-style theater; some people started to smoke and were removed by the Western management, while others were noisy and spat as they pleased. This, exclaimed the writer, was not entirely the fault of the audience but rather of those who were familiar with Western ways and were in charge of the event (namely Zheng Zhengqiu). Some kind of notice should have been distributed alongside the advertisement for the show to instruct people on how to conduct themselves.82 Civilized drama could not solve the problem of ‘civilizing’ theater behavior; it could do no more than present anti-‘feudal’ dramas and works denouncing social ills. This left the whole question of ‘civilized culture’ in a somewhat fuzzy state.
The New Stage and the Xinmin she, as seen in the Theater Illustrated, made a valiant effort to confront the ever-growing prominence of the leading stars in the theater. In their effort to gain a degree of control over the course of the development of opera and to shape public opinion regarding the social status of actors and the rise of star culture, they fostered a new awareness of the profession of the actor. Later this translated into the founding of the Theater News (Liyuan gongbao 梨園公報) in 1927, a paper that specifically addressed the issues and problems facing the theater and actors. While the paper tried to focus on the collective, and on issues of collective welfare, the tide represented by star actors such as Mei Lanfang was by then too strong to resist. As actors were very much aware of the power of the press in making them known to the wider public, they used the papers to promote their own cause.

Even the fame of Zheng Zhengqiu and his Xinmin she drama troupe did not secure economic viability, and a few months after its founding the company was in serious trouble due to a hostile takeover attempt by former colleagues with whom Zheng had started his film company. As a consequence, he was forced to hire a few relatively famous actors who had happened to return to Shanghai at that moment, and to offer them huge salaries compared to those of the troupe members. Capitulating before the power of stardom, Zheng furthermore placed ‘flamboyantly phrased’ advertisements in all the big and small papers, ‘imitating,’ as the The Actor’s Journal (Paiyou zazhi 偕優雜誌) said, “the method used by traditional theater advertisements, presenting the names of these actors in enlarged characters, and praising them in an exaggerated manner with phrases like ‘there is no equal to them on this earth.’”

When Zheng Zhengqiu and other members of his drama troupe moved into film, where the whole business setup revolved around the lead actresses and actors, the ideal of promoting the theater troupe as a collective became history.

**Conclusion**

The entertainment press was very much at the forefront of promoting the notions of entertainment as newsworthy and the actor as a star. Neither the genre of the entertainment press nor the idea of the actor as a star was invented in or unique to China; Li Boyuan 李伯元, the founder of the early Youxi bao and Shijie fanhua bao, himself stated that he was inspired by Western examples. The cult of the actor or actress as a star of national and even international dimensions had developed in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century; and, as in China, the key link was the entertainment press. This new urban medium came with a whole new
way of presenting and looking at social relationships. The simultaneous popularization of the stage stars and their elevation to sublime artists, exemplars of modern enlightenment, and national emblems came at a moment in China when all social relations and social standings were very much in flux and under challenge and reconsideration—and it was made possible by these developments.

As there are clear Western models visible in all aspects of this process (ranging from the entertainment paper and its symbiosis with the star to the elevation of stage art into a high-culture genre with the concomitant development of a civilizing and modernizing mission for the star actor), and as the process described here evolved mainly in the International Settlement in Shanghai with its comparatively open public sphere, it is certainly plausible to see this cultural movement in the framework of a ‘response to the West,’ where a new Chinese cultural identity was constructed in response to the Western notion of ‘civilization’ under conditions of ‘imperialist’ domination. While any construction of the ‘national’ must take the international context into account, I have tried to offer an alternative to this line of argument. The rise of the actor to national stardom is an international phenomenon, but the actual process hinges less on the power relations between nations than on the development of China’s public sphere since the 1870s, with its core in Shanghai. With the rise of the Chinese-language press, a new and public cultural sphere was in the making and with it, a new cultural identity formed that actively engaged with international trends. As a power broker in China’s public arena, the press delineated its own agenda and formulated its own brand of ‘public personalities’ largely determined by the nature of the press as a public forum. The entertainment press went for the iconoclastic and the popular, and trained its spotlights on marginal but popular personalities such as the courtesan and the actor. These papers did not have a unified voice, but they were unified on the issue of promoting the theater and actors. Most of the papers were commercial enterprises and, while their editors might have had an ideological commitment, they had to ensure their financial survival and success—which meant finding a broad popular audience and, to a degree, catering to their preferences. This was even true for the higher entertainment papers, such as the *Theater Illustrated* with its strong reformist agenda. That an actor such as Mei Lanfang became a national and even international star who was seen as representing the flower of Chinese culture certainly did not result from a collective urge of China’s reforming elite as part of their modernizing agenda; and neither was it the result of China’s bending to the pressures of imperialist demands. With the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the entrance of traditional literati into the new cultural field of the press, a dynamic relationship emerged between political agendas, the market, and new urban cultural forces. The Chinese press was national through the requirements of its market,
This is not to say, however, that the reform and modernist agenda altogether passed Peking Opera by. As seen in the work of the drama reformer Qi Rushan, Peking Opera had its own modernization drive. For a study on Qi Rushan and his effort to turn Peking Opera into national opera, see Goldstein, “Mei Lanfang and the Nationalization of Peking Opera, 1912–1930,” pp. 380–7.

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and international through its engagement with urban modernity. The messy processes of interaction between these different forces in a largely open public sphere proved in the long run to be more internationally connected and locally subversive than any of the institutions of the nation state. The actor star is a result of these processes rather than of a program of any of the persons or forces involved.

From the late-Qing reform efforts up to the New Culture movement of 1919, the commercial aspects of stars and of theater culture in fact overwhelmed the ideological drive. The May Fourth cultural project rejected Peking Opera as representing the old society and lacking any redeeming feature, but the Western-style spoken drama it favored was not able to undermine the popularity of Peking Opera as a form of mass entertainment.