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Tian Han and the Southern Society Phenomenon: Networking the Personal, Communal, and Cultural

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In his seminal study of the Southern Society (*Nanguo she*, 1924–1930), Dong Jian, the foremost specialist in modern Chinese spoken drama studies, draws the following distinction between the Southern Society and the Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*): whereas it took Mao Dun, Zheng Zhenduo, and twelve other literati to found the Literary Association, the only literary figure associated with the Southern Society was Tian Han, who proved to be the “soul of *Nanguo*.” As Dong Jian (1989: 939) puts it: Tian Han’s “career path is that of *Nanguo*. His style is that of *Nanguo*. His representative works are those of *Nanguo*.”

Dong Jian’s observation about the uniqueness of Tian Han’s personal relationship with the Southern Society is borne out if one looks at two other drama societies, the Spring Willow Society (*Chunliu she*, 1906–1915) and the People’s Drama Society (*Minzhong xiju she*, March–October, 1921). The establishment of the Spring Willow Society in 1906 by a group of overseas students in Japan has conventionally been seen by literary historians as the “birth” of modern Chinese drama. That same year, the group successfully performed the third act of Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux Camélias* (*Chahua nü*) and, in 1907, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (*Heinu yu tian lu*). When Li Xishuang, one of Spring Willow’s major organizers, lost interest in drama and left to pursue a career in painting and music, Lu Jingruo replaced him, and he was able, in 1909, to direct a praiseworthy production of *Hot Blood* (*Rexue*), with Ouyang Yuqian playing the female lead. In 1912, Ouyang Yuqian accepted Lu Jingruo’s invitation to join an extension of the Spring Willow Society in Shanghai, the New Drama Society (*Xinju tongzhi hui*), which attracted a group of talented performers. After 1914, Lu Jingruo rented a theater in Shanghai where, with Ouyang Yuqian’s sustained support

and his contributions as leading actor, he put on eighty-one productions for the Spring Willow Theater (*Chunliu jushe*). The death of Lu Jingruo in 1915, at age thirty, abruptly ended the almost ten-year history of the Spring Willow Society (Su Guanxin 1989: 896, 900–913). Its achievements would not have been possible without the three men who lent it their significant talents at different stages of its growth: Li Xishuang, the passionate originator of the society, who introduced his contemporaries to a new, powerful form of drama; Lu Jingruo, who, overcoming poverty and prejudice, built the first professional theater; and Ouyang Yuqian, whose acting experience in the Spring Willow Society was the springboard for his becoming one of the three founding fathers of modern Chinese drama, along with Tian Han and Hong Shen. These trailblazers were in fact responsible for what Chen Anhu (1997: 165) refers to as the emergence in modern China of “popular communication effects in art” (*yishu de dazhong chuanbo gongxiao*), based on their belief that modern drama was the easiest form in which to communicate with the common people, compared with such genres as newspapers, magazines, public speeches, and cartoons.

Whereas the Spring Willow Society undertook theatrical experiments influenced by Western forms, the People’s Drama Society (1921) began by bringing out its own journal, *Xiju* (Drama), the first drama journal ever published, in which it advocated a new drama (*xinju*) consisting especially of social problem plays that both realistically portrayed people’s lives and fulfilled popular demands for entertainment. The first issue of *Drama*, for instance, discussed Romain Rolland’s idea of a “people’s theater,” designed to provide joy, energy, intelligence, and entertainment for the benefit of workers. Thus, long before Communist cultural bureaucrats were demanding of literature and art that they serve the interests of the people, the People’s Drama Society pioneered this concept as it related to theater (Gu 1989: 922–23). Even though the journal and the society survived less than a year, the People’s Drama Society sparked another wave of drama reform during a period when audiences had repudiated modern drama following the failed reform of operatic theater and the commercialization of “civilized drama” (*wenming xi*). The People’s Drama Society had four principal participants: Wang Zhongxian, the originator of the journal and the society; Chen Dabei and Xiong Foxi, the creators of “amateur drama,” with which they intended to counter commercial culture; and Ouyang Yuqian, the indispensable actor with an outstanding reputation in both operatic and modern theater.¹

In contrast to these two collectively organized drama societies, Tian Han was the sole impetus behind that Southern Society. He edited by himself several journals on drama (e.g., *Nanguo banyue kan* [Southern Biweekly], *Nanguo te kan* [Southern Special Issues], and *Nanguo* [Southern Country]); formed the Southern Drama and Film Society (*Nanguo dianying jushe*) in

1926; was president and educator at Southern Art College (*Nanguo yishu xueyuan*) from 1927 to 1928; and wrote the scripts for twenty-seven spoken dramas, five movies, and three revised Peking operas that were produced during the six-year history of the Southern Society. Thus, Dong Jian's view of Tian Han as having played a unique role in the history of dramatic societies is not an exaggeration. However, Dong, in this essay, hewed to an almost exclusively ideological and political framework in interpreting the trajectory of Southern Society and the texts on drama that Tian Han wrote for it. For example, his concern for the personal aspects of Tian Han's life used primarily to support his own perception of the historical necessity that transformed Tian Han from a sentimental, romantic playwright influenced by Western authors in the 1920s to a progressive writer of the left influenced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology in the 1930s, and, finally, from a master of the modern stage in the Republican era to a leader of socialist dram one in the era of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

While I acknowledge the importance of Dong Jian's historical and ideological approach in studying the Southern Society, I think that Tian Han's career and the society he knew and wrote about must also be looked at from the perspective of his personal life. Tian Han's family connections, his entanglements with various women, and his relationship to other artists (especially those of the younger generation whom he trained to function in his ideal artistic world) inspired many of the plays that form the core repertory of the Southern Society. Furthermore, to write a history of mother, wife, friend, student, and fellow artists would assure that the trajectory of modern Chinese drama would not read merely as stories of "founding fathers,"² but also as stories of mothers, women, and some artists thus far unmentioned in literary history. Focusing on the "personal" aspects of Tian Han's life does not return to the traditional approach of biographical studies; on the contrary, it challenges the previous biographies that focus on Tian Han as the sole creative persona, and his "women" as "supporting roles" in his personal drama and political performance. I argue that women in Tian's life played a crucial role in his artistic networking and in his creation of diverse female characters on stage, which defined numerous female characters in subsequent plays in later historical periods.

MOTHERHOOD AND EROS: RECREATING THE PERSONAL ON STAGE

On February 9, 1920, Tian Han wrote a letter to Guo Moruo, a new friend with whom he had begun a correspondence through the good offices of Zong Baihua, an aesthetician, literary critic, and, in years to come, an illustrious academician. In his first letter to Guo, Tian expressed his great

happiness at having “met” Guo, “the future poet of the Orient.” Already regarding him as a close friend, Tian could not help but share with Guo what he called his good “family fortune”: he was blessed with a “bosom friend” in his uncle, a “bosom lover” in a Ms. Yi Shuyu, and a wise and determined mother who had supported him throughout his years of hardship. Surrounded by such “a beautiful garden with hundreds of flowers,” Tian felt a great sense of vigor and vitality in spite of his own “weakness” and “inexperience” (Tian et al. 1920: 29–30). The correspondence among these three burgeoning artists, then in their twenties, touched on the topics of foreign literature, artists’ creativity, family, love, and marriage. It was to be collected in *San ye ji* (Kleeblatt), which, Tian hoped, would become as momentous an influence on young Chinese readers as Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* had been on their German counterparts.³ (See also the chapter by Xiaobing Tang with Michel Hockx in this collection.) However, within the elegant literary essays in *Kleeblatt* (or clover leaf) can also be discerned the other “leaves” that helped shape Tian Han’s career: the roles of his mother, his uncle, and the women of diverse backgrounds with whom Tian became romantically involved despite the usual understanding of the “three leaves” as referring to the three male authors of the texts.

As the most important “leaf,” Yi Keqin, Tian Han’s mother, had a formative role in molding Tian’s childhood experiences, temperament, and personality, and in encouraging his interest in drama, as well as scholarly pursuits. A young woman without any financial means of her own, she raised three sons and managed to send Tian Han to school.⁴ Having come from an opera-loving family, she encouraged Tian Han’s early love their native Hunan regional theater and the shadow plays popular in rural areas of the province (2000: 13: 402–3). Tian Han’s first playwriting effort, when he was a teenager, reflected the preeminent place his mother occupied in his mental and emotional world. Entitled *Xin jiaozi* (A New Story of Educating her Son, 1913), it retold the old popular tale contained in *Sanniang jiaozi* (Sanniang Educating her Son), which had been a favorite among illiterate rural women.⁵ In the original version a widow, Sanniang (Wang Chun’e), vows to her late husband that she will help her son attain a prestigious social position. On learning that her son is ignoring his studies, she narrates her family history so poignantly that she succeeds in changing his behavior and, ultimately, in turning him into a talented scholar. Tian Han shifts the setting to the contemporary time of the Northern Expedition, when Sanniang becomes a widow and has to inform her son about his father’s heroic deeds so as to urge him to fulfill the latter’s wish of unifying China in its war against warlords.⁶ Understanding Tian Han’s appreciation of her influence, his mother interpreted the play as “an apparent endorsement” of her role (2000: 13: 441).

While Tian Han engaged in the drama movements of his time, his mother took care of his children, his household, and his extended family of artistic

friends and penniless students. At one point, she pawned her winter coat to provide a good meal for the members of Tian Han's drama troupe (Tian Han 1929a: 12), who called her "mother of theater" (*xiju muqin*). In a letter from Yang Hansheng to Tian Han dated December 15, 1940, Yang expresses regret that he could not be there in person to celebrate Yi Keqin's birthday. Whenever Yang writes that he misses Tian as if he were his own brother, he also invariably says that he misses Tian's mother in the same personal way. The love coming from Tian's mother, Yang said, never fell short of the love he received from his own mother, whose tomb he had not been able to visit in the past memorial season, to his sorrow.⁷ Of course, an examination of the impact of the mother-son and mother-daughter relationship on the lives and writings of the master writers of twentieth-century Chinese literature belongs to a separate study,⁸ suffice to say that Tian's mother affected not only the life and writings of her son but also of such notable figures as Yang Hansheng, a leader in the League of Left-wing Writers and, in the PRC period, the CCP Secretary of the Chinese National Association of Literary and Art Workers (*Zhongguo wenlian*). Some scholars (Tian Benxiang et al. 1998: 1) characterize Tian Han's activities and writings as forming "half the history of modern Chinese drama"; if this is true, then his mother is necessarily part of that "half," which helped Tian construct his artistic network in and outside of his drama society.

Dong Jian's (1996) biography of Tian Han depicts his mother waiting for Tian to return from prison during the Cultural Revolution. On December 10, 1968, at the height of the Red Guard movement, ninety-six-year-old Yi Keqin sat alone in her courtyard in Beijing, believing that she would see her son again, unaware that Tian Han had died on that day in a prison-like hospital after having been repeatedly interrogated and tortured by the guards. His last plea had been: "Please, please let me see my mother one more time. Just one last time" (Dong 1996: 1-3). Yi Keqin died four years later, still not knowing that her son had died in 1968 as "a traitor, a spy, and a counter-revolutionary." Dong's biography concludes by highlighting this close mother-son connection, which has Tian's love and longing for his mother eclipsing all other emotions. An incident is also related in the book about the time when Tian, receiving from his mother a package with money, food coupons, and clothes, had written a note to her: "Long live my mother!" This communication could have exacerbated his condition in jail had not the guard excused him for simply exhibiting "filial loyalty" (Dong 1996: 867). Thus Yi Keqin could be said to have been the first member of the Southern Drama Society in that she sparked Tian's early interest in drama and inspired the depiction of his first important character in a play; at the end she also was the last remaining member of the Southern Drama Society and of Tian's social and artistic network.

Another early member of Tian's network was Yi Meichen who, after Tian had lost his own father and uncles, became Tian Han's "surrogate father."

As a supervisor of overseas students in Japan who had originally come from Hunan, Yi Meichen took Tian Han with him to Japan where he spent six memorable years, schooling himself in Western literature and establishing networks of friendships with important writers like Guo Moruo. During their brief stay in Shanghai before traveling to Japan, Yi Meichen acquainted Tian with Peking opera in Shanghai⁹ and introduced him to revolutionary leaders like Huang Xing, who kindled Tian's patriotic aspirations.¹⁰ Yi Meichen also arranged for his daughter, Yi Shuyu, to join Tian in Japan in 1919 (against his wife's strong objections, for she was opposed to their daughter's marriage to Tian, a poor student without any apparent prospects).

In time Yi Meichen's life experiences found their way into Tian Han's creative works, as seen in *Fan'elin yu qiangwei* (Violin and Rose: A New Romantic Trilog in Four Acts, 1920). The play concerns an actress who, as a sacrifice for her lover, decides to marry Li Jianzhai for his money, thus enabling her to finance her musician lover's studies in Paris. However, she misjudged Li Jianzhai. A former revolutionary who devoted his life to establishing the Republic, he is interested only in teaching the young lovers a lesson about the hazards of settling for a loveless marriage; at the end of the play, he sends the young couple off to Europe with his blessings and financial aid. Like Yi Meichen, Li had once been a strong opponent of the concubinage system. Yet because of their experience with arranged marriages, both the actual person Li and the character Yi sought some sort of happiness with a mistress. Disappointed by setbacks in the revolutionary movements, both had come to believe in serving society through personal altruism and helping young people, the future hope of a better society.¹¹

Yi Meichen's revolutionary activities led him to being murdered by a warlord in Hunan in 1920, and this loss affected Tian Han profoundly, tingeing his early plays with sorrow and longing for his "father" figure (Tian Han 1921a: 60-75). Brokenhearted, Tian Han drew solace from the grief and fury he found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which he translated in 1921; this first translation of *Hamlet* into Chinese initiated his literary career as a scholar of Western literature.¹² The loss of his uncle also led Tian to write *Kafeidian zhi yi ye* (A Night at a Café, 1921), a play he peopled with lonely drifters and inconsolable lovers who would touch a generation of spectators (Tian et al. 1998: 58).

Another important "leaf" to affect Tian's life and plays was his first wife, Yi Shuyu, who occupied a central place in his work. Tian Han's one-act play *Xiangchou* (Longing for Home, 1922),¹³ for example, looks at the experiences of a foreign student couple in Japan and is clearly based on his relationship with Yi Shuyu. In the play, the couple admit to feelings of loneliness, but they also realize that their differences have caused them to drift apart. She blames him for his indigence and for neglecting her needs, while he laments his inability to fulfill her desires. They are then joined by

a friend who had been wandering the world alone for sixteen years vainly pursuing his artistic dreams. "Those without a family envy those who have one; those with a family envy those have none. Which one is happier?" the friend wonders at the end of the play (Tian Han 1922: 178).¹⁴

In *Longing for Home*, Tian Han also has the young couple deploring the predicament of Chinese students, both those studying overseas and those trapped in China. Discussing a friend who had gone back to China and who missed "his happier days in Tokyo," the female protagonist observes: "It really is interesting: those who have gone back home always want to come back, whereas those who are here always want to go home" (1922: 168). Liu Ping is thus correct in pointing out that *Longing for Home* was Tian Han's "summary of their studying-abroad experience; meanwhile it also served as a memento of those overseas days together."¹⁵ Indeed, at almost every dramatic turn in *Longing for Home*, the play parallels Tian Han and Yi Shuyu's experience: their financial strains, Yi's poor health and her struggle to keep up with her studies, Tian's artistic pursuits and the toll on their relationship, and their unfulfilled wish that they could be a couple that perfectly combined artistic achievements and personal happiness. They did experience brief happiness in 1922 after moving back to Shanghai, where they worked side by side producing their own literary journal, *Southern Society Biweekly*. But when he lost his wife to illness in 1925, another tragic period commenced in Tian Han's life, and he moved from place to place mourning his wife, who now became perfect in his memory. However, his later plays, which drew on Lin Weizhong, his third wife, for their subject, continued to record his ambiguous feelings¹⁶; like his first wife, Lin proved to be the most loving of women, but as the idealized companion of his artistic journey Tian found her wanting.

Another disturbing factor in Tian Han's relationships was his attraction to other women artists, which paradoxically played a crucial role in his networking with other artists, who followed his lead in their own dramatic writings. In fact, during their stay in Japan, Yi Shuyu had threatened at one point to go back to China, because, in her words, "there were so many women compatible with Tian, such as Kang Jingzhao and Bai Wei (Huang Suru), both in Tokyo and in China" (Dong 1996: 152). This quarrel occurred after Yi had read *Violin and Rose*; Tian's play stimulated doubts in her about Tian's devotion when she compared their relationship with the ideal love he had prescribed for his protagonists. Biographers have documented the mutual attraction between Tian and Bai Wei, which provoked a crisis between Tian and Yi in late autumn 1920. Once a roommate of Yi in Japan, Bai Wei admired Tian, calling him her "only teacher." He had introduced her to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and his enthusiasm caused her to shift her studies from science to dramatic arts (Dong 1996: 140-42; Wang Wenying 1988: 389). Bai Wei had already demonstrated a talent for playwriting in

her early days in Tokyo, when her first play, *Su Fei*, in which she played the title role, was produced for the overseas student community.

No one has pointed out, however, that there might be a direct correspondence between the real Bai Wei and the dramatic character named Bai Wei in Tian's one-act play, *Hu shang de beiju* (*A Tragedy on the Lake*), written in 1928. Although Tian had refuted Bai Wei's suspicion that the story of Bai Wei in *A Tragedy on the Lake* was modeled on her own life,¹⁷ the parallels between the two women seem obvious. Bai Wei fled her prisonlike home for Hengyang, Hunan, and then Japan, to escape an arranged marriage. The character Bai Wei throws herself into a lake rather than acquiesce to her parents' demand that she marry a wealthy man. As a consequence, her lover marries someone he does not love, but indulges himself in writing a novel to commemorate his doomed love affair with Bai. However, Bai Wei the dramatic character, having been rescued from the lake in time, years later discovers her lover's literary endeavor and attempts suicide a second time—this time successfully—to validate the tragic ending and allow the novel to become “the greatest eternal art.” Artistic pursuit thus trumps romantic love, from which sprang the artistic creation. In *A Tragedy on the Lake*, Tian Han gives expression to his lifelong wish for a sublime union of artistic and romantic life and demonstrates that a separation of two lovers in the physical world merely enhances their reunion in the artistic sphere. The “spirit and flesh” dyad, however thorny to achieve in reality, persistently drives Tian's dramatic writings.

Bai Wei's desperate love for Yang Sao, the poet who deserted her in Tokyo in spring 1925, and her subsequent heartbreaking account of it,¹⁸ indicates that she also had in common with the Bai of *A Tragedy on the Lake* a passion for love. Bai followed Yang Sao to West Lake in Hangzhou, where she was told that he might come back to her in three years, after he had experienced other types of women. Instead of throwing herself in the lake, however, Bai triumphed over poverty, illness, and depression to become a celebrity on the literary scene with the publication of her second play, *Linli*, which she had completed at West Lake (Bai/He 1983: 70). Whereas the Bai Wei in Tian's play commits suicide to ensure the literary success of her lover, the real Bai converted a tragic love into artistic expression and ultimately received more acclaim as a writer than Yang Sao himself.¹⁹ The dual pursuit of romance and art characterized both Tian Han's and Bai Wei's personal and creative experiences, as well as their early dramatic works. Whether or not Tian Han drew on Bai Wei's story in *A Tragedy on the Lake* is not entirely clear, but the play does seem to hint at Tian's regret that Yi Shuyu, though a loving wife, could never be the true artist with extraordinary talent that he longed for.

Another important female figure in Tian's life was Lin Weizhong, who has been an eager reader of Tian Han's passionate writings. Having read Tian Han's poetry memorializing Yi Shuyu, Lin Weizhong wrote from Southeast

Asia to extend her sympathy and to express her admiration for Tian. They finally met in 1928 in Shanghai, after exchanging many love letters, and Lin Weizhong offered Tian five hundred dollars (her entire savings after several years of teaching) to finance his "little theater" for the newly established Southern Art College (Liu Ping 1998: 383). The timely financial aid made it possible for Tian to establish a public space in which about thirty young students (poor but gifted) could emulate him in his pursuit of "Southern art" (*Nanguo yishu*), free from the interference of official institutions, party politics, and commercial patronage (Zou 1999: 74–75).

Tian Han portrayed his relationship with Lin Weizhong most aptly in his three-act drama *Hui chun zhi qu* (The Song of a New Spring). Although written in 1934, after they had experienced some difficult years in their marriage, the play gave a sense of the exotic Southeast Asian landscape and customs that Lin Weizhong had evoked for Tian in her letters. However, unlike his earlier plays during the *Nanguo* period, *The Song of a New Spring* employs as a backdrop the national crisis of the Japanese invasion after September 18, 1931. It recounts the story of a patriotic soldier with amnesia who regains his memory when his lover, Meiniang, who has returned from Southeast Asia, expresses her readiness to marry him even though he is unable to remember her. Inspired by his "total and true love" for Lin Weizhong (Zou 1999: 160), Tian Han calls Meiniang a "wild rose from Southeast Asia"; "once in love, she surrenders her life to you," but "if you cheat on her, she would surely fight you to death" (1934: 114). These lines, which could have been "said by Tian himself to Lin Weizhong," seemed, in retrospect, to anticipate their subsequent breakup (Zou 1999: 160).

A patriotic Meiniang, however, would have to be considered a perfected version of Lin Weizhong. Meiniang's sacrifice for her lover and, ultimately, her country, elevated her to the exalted status of a model for the nation. Although agreeing with Zou Ping that Lin Weizhong was the person on whom Meiniang was based, Dong Jian also sees in Meiniang an expression of Tian Han's longing for An E, a leftist poet, journalist, and musician who had studied and worked in the Soviet Union. By the time the play was written, An E had already left Tian, after a passionate affair in the course of which she gave birth to their baby boy out of wedlock. During his unhappy marriage with Lin Weizhong, Tian Han missed An E, whose revolutionary passion he also projected onto Meiniang, casting her as a fearless fighter for her nation. The anguish that the painful triangle caused Tian was transmitted to the play and was probably partially responsible for it being praised as one of his best in this period. The profound emotions expressed in poetic language were lauded, as well the three theme songs written by Nie Er, whose music talents was first discovered by Tian Han; together, they also wrote the music and lyrics for "Yiyongjun jinxing qu" (The March Song of the Volunteers) that would later be adopted as the Chinese national anthem.

Of course, the idealized portrayal of Meiniang could not resolve Tian Han's real-life love triangle. The situation was in fact headed for another crisis, in 1940, when Tian Han met An E again after her return from the battlefield, where she had accompanied Agnes Smedley to report on the combat against the Japanese invaders (Dong 1996: 568–72). Once again drawn to An E's independent spirit and full of admiration for her revolutionary career, Tian Han imagined another happy ending in his drama *Qiu sheng fu* (The Sounds of Autumn, 1941) to compensate for what was lacking in his real life. The play depicts a playwright torn between his grudging wife (who had supported him in his early career but had turned into a petty, jealous woman after years of a trying marriage) and a poet, with whom he has a child out of wedlock and shares ongoing artistic interests. Frequent quarrels marked Tian's life with Lin Weizhong, but the bitter enemies on stage achieve mutual respect and understanding, even joining forces to kill Japanese soldiers when they break into their dwelling and saving the playwright's mother from the impending danger. Taking a leaf from An E's life, but certainly not Lin Weizhong's, they also devote themselves to caring for and educating war orphans. Perhaps to protect his wife's image and persuade himself to accept his problematic marriage, Tian portrays the wife in the play as a progressive woman while diminishing the lover as a self-centered poet, both far cries from their real-life counterparts. He did draw on his own life in Guilin at the time by having the male protagonist occupy himself with work (journal editing and playwrighting) that contributed to the national liberation movement against Japanese aggressors. Tian also replicated from his own life the appearance of an art associate to urge the playwright to finish his next act for the waiting troupe. According to his preface to the 1944 edition of *The Sounds of Autumn*, Tian had originally—by request of a group of young artists eager to launch their New China Drama Society (*Xin Zhongguo jushu*)—intended to write a play about the birth and death of Guilin's wartime artistic scene, hoping thereby to revive the city's cultural life (Tian Han 1944: 366, 368). In the process of writing, however, Tian transformed the play into one about his own domestic drama, although it still reflects the lives and careers of artists of his generation in that historical period.

To summarize, the theme of art versus love remained a constant in Tian's plays, indirectly reflecting his experiences with the three major women in his life. All three women loved him passionately, but it was Yi Shuyu who shared Tian's vision during the years of the early *Nanguo* journals; that she did not have a successful artistic career of her own, Tian compensated for in his idealized portrayal of the couple in *Violin and Rose*. Similarly, Tian enjoyed mutual love in the early part of his third marriage, but as the relationship deteriorated, he dealt with his perception of Lin Weizhong as a nagging wife in *The Sounds of Autumn*, providing the two struggling individuals in a problematic marriage with a fantasized happy ending.²⁰ In An

E, Tian finally discovered a “perfect” woman whose revolutionary career influenced his later plays of the *Nanguo* period, such as *Carmen*. By Tian’s own admission, the inspiration for “red Carmen” was An E, whose versatile talents included all the artistic genres that Tian had explored in his dramas as well as in his training of students in the Shanghai Art College and Southern Art College. An E offered Tian the coveted triad of love, art, and revolutionary idealism that had already taken root in his plays before and during his Southern Society period. Our story of Tian’s early career, therefore, starts with major family influences in Tian’s creative life (his mother, uncle, and first and third wives) women) and concludes with a his union with An E, his fourth wife, who would become his life companion until death sundered them in a time of turmoil and triumph. Ultimately, while friends, students, and colleagues shunned Tian Han during the Cultural Revolution, An E and her mother-in-law waited for years for Tian’s homecoming—they were the only remaining members of Tian’s complex Republican-era artistic network. From Yi Shuyu, Tian’s first wife and the first member of the Southern Drama Society to other women, personal and family connections outlived professional and artistic affiliations.

FRIENDSHIP AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: NETWORKING THE ARTISTS ON STAGE

As crucial to his work as these women were, performance artists also influenced Tian’s playwriting and his activities in the Southern Drama Society. The sorrows and struggles of the artist form a typical focus of Tian’s work from the time of his early writings, as in *Violin and Rose*, to the period of the major plays frequently performed at the peak of the Southern Drama Society movement. Tian thought *Violin and Rose* immature and unworthy of being his “first play”²¹; nevertheless, the work paved the way for his best plays on theater artists, such as *Ming you zhi si* (The Death of a Famous Actor, 1927) and *Guan Hanqing* (Guan Hanqing, 1958).

In 1919 Tian had gone with Zong Baihua to the New World entertainment center in Shanghai (Tian Han 1920*b*: 273), where he was impressed by the performance of a “pear-flower drum singer” (*Lihua dagu*).²² The experience inspired him to depict the dark world of struggling artists in *Violin and Rose*. In the play, Liu Cui, a talented folksong singer, decides to forgo her own needs in order to send her lover, Qin Xinfang, to Paris, the world center of Western music. “I must not love you, for I am motivated by a greater responsibility,” she says. “You are so talented that you will have to become a great musician so you can perform at the grand ceremony celebrating the founding of a young China,” “poor workers and depressed youth are reaching out for the comfort of your music,” and “New Cultural

soldiers and anti-old society warriors are longing for your encouragement" in their struggle for a better life. China is an oppressive country that lacks an appreciation for artists, Liu implied, and it is "not a place for you to linger" (1920a: 30).

In this play, Tian Han portrays an artist whose love for another artist entails the obligation to comfort suffering workers, with the goal of building a "young China" in which "poor workers," "depressed youth," and aspiring artists could form alliances as brothers and sisters of the same class. This presumed obligation reveals an interesting paradox in Tian Han's early work: while still under the influence of Western writers and believing in art for art's sake, Tian was at the same time searching for an ideal artistic form that would comfort the subalterns, or "serve their interests," to use a familiar phrase from Mao Zedong's 1942 "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art." Having grown up in an impoverished family in rural China, Tian Han had witnessed first hand the hardscrabble existence of poor peasants. His juxtaposition of an "old society" with a "new society"—a bright China for both subalterns and artists—predated the more prevalent usage of the same terms in the People's Republic of China two decades later. Rather than considering Tian as having been influenced by the CCP ideology when he "turned left" in 1930, as asserted in some PRC literary histories, it would be equally valid to argue that Tian Han, through his dramatic writings on the lives of fellow artists, helped construct a leftist discourse—an important trend in the literature and art of the 1920s and 1930s. Before Mao had articulated his better known doctrine, Tian was already one of the first advocating and practicing the principle of using art to serve the masses.

Nevertheless, Tian Han's nationalist sentiments and his demarcating of the old and new society, as represented by the characters of *Violin and Rose*, mark him less as a leftist writer than as a typical May-Fourth writer, who looked toward an imagined West as an ideal "other" from which to draw intellectual inspiration and cultural rejuvenation. Note, for instance, Liu Cui's remark that Qin's failures as an overseas student in "Dongyang" (Eastern Oceans, referring to Japan) did not mean he could not go to "Xiyang" (Western Oceans, referring to Europe and America), where so many other artists had fulfilled their dreams (1920a: 28). In "an artistic country" like France, though Qin could not enroll in a music school right away, he might find work in a factory. Liu Cui persuades Qin that there he might listen to "the laboring sounds of the workers" and the resonant, oppressive machines, and be moved to compose "new music" (1920a: 29–30). Again, Tian's dramatic material mirrors his own experience and that of his artistic friends, who gave up other subjects to pursue their artistic interests. In *Violin and Rose*, Mother Wu informs Liu Cui that Qin, after rejecting his father's idea of studying politics and law, filled his time with music, the theater, and friends "who did not seem to have a real future." When his father threat-

ened to withdraw his financial support, Qin retorted that he would rather go back to his home village in Henan and “carry manure in the fields” like an ordinary peasant than earn a meaningless foreign degree (1920a: 21). After his sojourn in Japan, Tian had to give up his original plan of touring the artistic centers of the world—in Europe and especially in France—since he needed to provide for his young family with the meager income he could earn as a writer. We can thus see that Liu Cui’s longing for a European experience reflects the playwright’s own anxieties and unfulfilled dreams.

Tian Han also recalled his life experiences and those of his fellow artists through dramatic interactions between audience and performers in the form of plays within plays. Act One, for instance, is set in front of a stage in the New World entertainment center in the early summer of 1920. Before the performance starts, a worker steps out from the audience to present Liu Cui with a bouquet of wildflowers. He tells her that she has brought happiness to his mother, who sees in her the beauty of her own daughter, whom she has lost to illness. “If only she were alive, I would have given up anything to let her perform so that others could also appreciate her talents,” the mother lamented (1920a: 13). This scene perhaps marks one of the earliest occasions when performing was celebrated onstage as a reputable profession in a traditional society. Previously, dramatists were thought to belong to one of the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy.

Art patronage can come from another unexpected source: ex-revolutionaries who turn to art after becoming disillusioned with the revolutionary movement. As mentioned before, the character of Li Jianzhai in *Violin and Rose* is based on Tian Han’s uncle. In the same play, Li also plays an audience member who goes backstage to congratulate Liu Cui on her performance and overhears her telling Qin that she has decided to marry a rich man so that she will be able to send Qin to Paris. To teach the young couple a lesson about the importance of pursuing love, Li first takes Liu as his fourth concubine and then, after Liu realizes she has made a mistake, Li, his wife, and other concubines put their resources together to send both Liu and Qin to Paris. This undertaking gives Li his purpose in life: to seek out and support talented young people who hold out the promise of forging a better future for his suffering country.

From the perspective of gender politics, the generosity of Li’s wife and concubines toward Li and, ultimately, Qin, might seem problematic. The women in this play, including Liu Cui, seem to subjugate themselves and deny their own voices in a patriarchal home within a male-dominated society. However, Tian Han’s insight into the class conflicts might explain his seemingly uneven treatment of the genders. In addition to his concern for subalterns, Tian also sympathized with financially strained artists, whom he regarded as another oppressed social group contending against the ruling ideology. Li’s wife and concubines identify with artists, who in turn identify

with the poor and the deprived. This view of women as symbols of oppression predated Maoist official feminism, in which images of heroic and suffering women were used to legitimize the Chinese Communist Party's political power. In this regard, Tian had not only anticipated but helped to create the PRC discourse on oppressed subalterns and progressive women, which, as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua have pointed out, derived from the standard May Fourth literary and cultural discourse (Meng/Dai, 1989).

Violin and Rose foregrounds a couple of struggling performers. Tian's more acclaimed play, *A Night at a Café*, puts theatrical events in the background while foregrounding a group of lonely individuals looking for comfort and companionship. In 1932, upon the occasion of the publication of the first volume of his selected plays, Tian Han retrospectively credited *A Night at a Café*, written in 1921, with starting his lifelong career in the theater (1932: 452–53). Considered a masterpiece of May Fourth literature, the play gathered, in the words of Tian Benxiang, a group of drifters in a café, whose stories bolstered the spirits of many in the audience (Tian et al. 1998: 73); they drew strength from the female protagonist Bai Qiuying's words: "We must struggle to live on with a more profound understanding of society."

Although not all the characters of *A Night at a Café* are artists, the play further demonstrates Tian's familiarity with artists' lives. On the plot level, there are at least three conflicts relating to art. The first involves a waitress by the name of Bai Qiuying who has run away from the country to escape an arranged marriage and to try to find a Mr. Li Qianqing, her lover of many years. To her sorrow, she sees Li walk into the café on the arm of a Miss Chen, a city girl with a rich family background, to whom he is now engaged. Instead of begging him to take her back, Bai throws his money and love letters into the fire basin. Bai is comforted by Lin Zeqi, the protagonist of the second conflict. Lin has been arduously trying to make his own way in life, but he has "failed with much frustration" because he is tormented by the possibility that his father will try to relieve himself of some of his debts by forcing him into an arranged marriage. As a college student of art and literature with a romantic temperament, Lin cannot decide if he should "live in a world of eternity or of temporality," a "world of spirit or of flesh" (1921*b*: 109). Bai, in turn, offers solace to Lin because, though an "ordinary woman without any knowledge of literature and painting," as she describes herself, she understands his quest for true love and a spiritual life. The third conflict involves someone Bai and her other customers talk about: a blind Russian poet occasionally invited into the café by the college students. Forced into exile by numerous reactionary governments, this poet and world traveler (to such remote lands as Burma, India, and Japan) recites poignant poetry and plays music that evokes sympathy and love in his young audience. "The life of a blind poet in exile with a guitar, drifting in foreign land," is itself a "mournful song" and a "beautiful poem," "at

once sad and admirable," Bai and her customer remark (1921*b*: 106). Lin and Bai, hearing the Russian poet playing his melancholy music next door and deeply touched by his longing for his homeland, deplore the "sorrows of artists" and "the hardships of their life journey."²³

The café serves as a microcosm of the "larger sphere of society," where drifters suffer from loneliness and alienation but may discover "travel companions."²⁴ In a broader context, this play depicts the romantic spirit of solitary artists, and students of literature and art like Lin, and the harsh environments with which they must contend. For Bai and Lin, the café became "a home away from home" in an indifferent society. Integral to the theme in May Fourth literature of celebrating home-leaving characters (the prime inspiration for this theme being Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*), the café functions as a metropolitan "boardinghouse" where likeminded artists gathered as brothers and sisters after having roamed from city to city and country to country looking for ways to bring their dreams to fruition.

The dramatic space of the café, where old lovers part and new friends meet, contrasts sharply with the performance space of the theater, where people, even lovers, act to protect their own interests. Right before Li Qianqing and Miss Chen enter the café, Bai remarks that it is now close to eleven o'clock, when she would expect more costumers to be streaming in from the theater behind the café (Tian 1921*b*: 115). On entering the café, Miss Chen comments that she enjoyed the show so much that she left early, wanting to avoid feeling disappointed at seeing "the end of a good show." In the 1959 revised version of the play, Tian Han goes further in pushing the theatricality of the character's life: the "show" goes on in the café. When Bai Qiuying waits on Li Qianqing, the latter tells Miss Chen that he only knew Bai as a little girl from his hometown. With good humor, Miss Chen calls their unexpected reunion "a dramatic scene," indicating that she is aware Li is putting on an act to hide the truth.²⁵ Clearly, Tian Han was drawn to the theater: his play flows from the social space of the café to the performance space of theater and a night at a café becomes part sketch of theatergoers and part commentary on the theatricality of life. Whereas the café attracts lonely youths coming together like brothers and sisters, the theater serves for dramatists, performers, and audiences as a link between theatrical events on and off stage.

A Night at a Café is also largely a product of Tian Han's artistic and intellectual networks. Tian wrote the play—in the winter of 1921 in Tokyo for the inaugural issue of *Chuangzao jikan* (Creation Quarterly, which appeared in May 1922)—in response to Guo Moruo's request for help in celebrating the founding of the Creation Society (*Chuangzao she*). (See chapter by Tang with Hockx in this volume.) As he was composing the play, he received a letter from Li Chuli, an old friend from his days in Japan, asking for help in caring for Ereshenko, a blind Russian poet who had traveled all over the

world in the cause of the arts and humanities. Apparently Tian wrote the episode with this character into the play. The initial concept of *A Night at a Café* also came from Li Chuli. Li had confided details of his unhappy love life to Tian, and Tian then projected many of these details onto the characters in the play (Tian Han 1932: 453; Tian Han 1920: 44). A year earlier, Tian had invited Li to a café with the intention of confiding in him his own love life. However, as an impoverished student in Japan, Tian regarded cafés as a luxury that he could only infrequently afford. In fact, he had once invited Guo Muoruo to sample the café culture in Toyko, only to realize that he did not have the cash to take care of the bill (Dong 1996: 169–72). But for Tian, a cherished, unfulfilled wish of enjoying the café culture with artistic friends found its way into the theater, where art and life could become one, if only temporarily.

Although they make for fascinating reading, the earlier plays, *Violin and Rose* and *A Night at a Café*, do not belong to the much-performed repertoire of the Southern Drama Society theater movement of 1927 to 1930.²⁶ Nevertheless, Tian Han's three most frequently performed plays during this period—*Suzhou yehua* (*A Night Story in Suzhou*, 1927–1928), *The Death of a Famous Actor*, and *Nangui* (*Returning to the South*, 1929)—repeat the earlier themes: artists' lives and their efforts to attain a unified world of spirit and flesh. For example, *A Night Story in Suzhou* describes the family reunion of a painter in a Suzhou hotel after years in which his family members were scattered from northern to southern China by the devastating wars between warlords. Before this family reunion, the protagonist Liu Shukang, having lost his wife and daughter, recognizes that brushes and paints alone cannot save China. He enrolls in a military school to become an officer and fights in the revolutionary war, but is disillusioned by the "revolution" after it has been won. Adjourning to Europe to gain more training, he is at length driven home again by his loneliness and a revived hope of using art to save China. As time goes by, however, he longs to reunite with his own family (Tian Han 1927–1928: 291). Once again, it is easy to find in Liu's story the parallel with Tian Han's personal experience. Tian had also lost a beloved first wife and had seen the foundering of his hope of promoting art with government support, so that he had come to believe in training the next generation of artists to build powerful, independent art movements (*minjian*) divorced from the mainstream. This is Liu's message to his art students: "I am merely a lonely man drifting to the four corners of the world; after family happiness was denied me, I only wish to serve my country by training you in your future careers; in doing so, I also wish to find my own happiness and consolation" (Tian 1927–1928: 288–89).

A Night Story in Suzhou articulates Tian Han's vision of a generation of artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, but at the same time it is also a product of the 1920s Southern Drama Society theater movement,

with Tian Han as its charismatic leader. During a trip to Suzhou with his student followers in art and theater, Tian was touched by the sad tale of a student named Tang Shuming; before he even had a script for *A Night Story in Suzhou*, Tian took the main plots from the student's account and jotted down what would become key dialogues in the play. He cast Tang Shuming to play her "own" role: the daughter who sells flowers to a stranger, in whom she suddenly recognizes the father she and her ailing mother lost years ago when warlord troops burned down their house in Beijing. The cast of *A Night Story in Suzhou* included students enrolled in the fine arts program of Shanghai Art College who had remained loyal to Tian after its financial difficulties. They concurred with Tian's vision of building a first-rate school of art consisting not just of drama and theater programs, but also of programs in painting and music. The art students in *A Night Story in Suzhou* are portrayed as Liu's admirers, sharers of his dreams, and as close to him as family. By the end of the play, when an art student greets Liu's newly found daughter as if she were her own sister, the artistic network Tian Han has created both on and off stage is demonstrably a happy, united family, with Tian Han as its inspirational father figure and beloved teacher.

Tian Han's most accomplished rendering of an artist's life and career is to be found in *The Death of a Famous Actor*, another by-product of Tian's teaching and directing activities as president of Shanghai Art College. Performed during the Dragon and Fish Art Festival (*wenyi yulong hui*)²⁷ in the winter of 1927, the play draws on "The Heroic Death," a prose poem by Baudelaire that had fascinated Tian Han since his student days in Japan.²⁸ According to Tian Han, the poem depicts a master actor, who is captured by the king for taking part in a conspiracy against him. The night before his execution, the king asks him out of curiosity to perform one final time. Astounded and a little frightened by the actor's perfect performance, the vicious king provokes an audience member to insult him. This remark humiliates the actor, and he drops dead, much to the relief of the king, who thereby deems his own power to have remained intact.

The play was also partially based on a non-Western source: the true story of a Chinese Peking opera actor's tragic death in a society hostile to performers. It was said that on tour in Shanghai, the once famous Liu Hongsheng failed to sell out performances even after adding, despite his poor health, some well-known crowd-pleasing skits. After the first skit, he supposedly peeked out from the side of the stage and, seeing the half-empty audience, breathed his last while seated on his costume trunk. Profoundly touched by the demise of a brilliant opera star, Tian Han named his protagonist Master Liu, or Liu Laoban.²⁹ So familiar was Tian Han with the life stories, dramatic careers, and struggles of artists that, as he had with *A Night Story in Suzhou*, he directed *The Death of a Famous Actor* without a written script (Tian Han 1930: 119).

Still, the most immediate influence on the production of the play was Gu Menghe, whose brilliant acting brought the performance to life in its premiere. A successful Peking opera actor as well as an actor in modern drama, Gu Menghe inspired Tian Han to stage a play in order to showcase Gu's talents in both opera and spoken drama.³⁰ Tian indeed constructed a play within a play—that is, an inner play, in which the Peking opera star fills his traditional dramatic role onstage, and an outer play, in which his real-life struggle to survive is revealed in the form of modern drama. In the subsequent performances of *The Death of a Famous Actor*, this demanding role was most frequently assumed by Hong Shen. Hong's background in traditional Chinese opera, his formal American education in modern drama, his "perfect personality," and his discontent at the obstacles standing in the way of promoting drama made him the ideal choice to play Master Liu (Tian Han 1931: 328; 1957: 374).

Thus at least in two instances, *The Death of a Famous Actor* provided to living artists a stage for demonstrating their talents and a forum for venting their dissatisfaction, both of these purposes crystallizing in the protagonist Master Liu. At the play's outset, Master Liu is upset with his apprentice Liu Fengxian, because, since becoming a star, she no longer bothers practicing her art. She has lapsed into a materialistic life style, going out with Master Yang, a rich man who passes his time seeking out beautiful women backstage. Crestfallen at seeing the shattering of his dream of training a couple of "talented and loyal apprentices," Master Liu collapses onstage in reaction to some people in the audience who have been provoked by Master Yang into heckling him. He leaves behind a grief-stricken Liu Fengxian, now painfully aware that she would give anything to bring back the dear master and surrogate father by whom she was raised and transformed from orphan to opera star. Despite the play's somber ending, however, Tian Han projects onto one of the other characters—He Jingming, a progressive friend of Master Liu—his own optimistic view that a future society would better appreciate artists. Sooner or later, He Jingming assures Master Liu, this world will have to change for the better, and opera singers will have a new life, one in which they can sing to their hearts' content onstage and do what they liked offstage (Tian Han 1927: 352). He Jingming also expresses Tian Han's own bitterness at the unjust treatment of performers: "Why does the life of the most famous actor of a generation have to end with such a tragic death!" (356–57).

This plea for a better life for artists would be echoed in the PRC in theater performances and films on artists' lives. The 1965 film *Wutai jiemei* (Stage Sisters),³¹ which closely follows Tian Han's *The Death of a Famous Actor*, portrays two Shaoxing opera (*yueju*) actresses: a progressive Zhu Chunhua, who helps Xing Yuehong, her "stage sister," combat the evil forces of the old society that had corrupted her. Xing Yuehong is reminiscent of Liu Fengxian in *The Death of a Famous Actor*: Yuehong marries her boss and abandons her

acting career, which she can resume only after 1949, when a new China provides performers from all backgrounds a better opportunity to go onstage. Tian Han-like leftist cultural leaders seem to be the models for the characters Jiang Bo and Brother Lin, who guide Zhu Chunhua and her other stage sisters in their adaptation, before 1949, of Lu Xun's short story "Zhufu" (New Year's Sacrifice) to a Shaoxing opera. After liberation, they go on to produce operatic theater (e.g., a version of *White-Haired Girl*) that reflects contemporary life. Tian Han's *The Death of a Famous Actor* thus provided a model for character types, plots, and themes for a series of later theater works dealing with artists' onstage and offstage lives. Tian's own circle of associates in theater became leaders in leftist theater and played significant roles in theater production and reform in subsequent years. Ironically, in 1956, Tian Han made a public appeal to help opera performers, who suffered from hunger, poor health, low wages, and extremely crowded housing conditions in the new socialist China (Tian Han 1956: 234–40). For echoing He Jingming, who in *The Death of a Famous Actor* protests against the ill treatment of theater artists, Tian Han would pay a heavy price during the Cultural Revolution, when he died tragically as a famous "actor."

The Death of a Famous Actor was one of the earliest plays in modern Chinese drama to represent a theater space onstage. Both Act 1 (which sets up the dramatic conflict) and Act 3 (which presents onstage the confrontation between Master Yang and Master Liu and ends with Master Liu's death and Liu Fengxian's awakening) are set in the backstage area of the theater. This is the space where actors and actresses who share a vision of dramatic art interact with each; outsiders like the lustful Master Yang and a noisy reporter are intruders who try to lure them away from their art. Backstage is the perfect "meta-drama" setting: it reveals the preparations involved in going onstage (e.g., makeup, costume dressing), and allows actors to comment on the performance that is taking place onstage. Act 2 is set in the house of Master Liu, an extension of the "backstage." Here Master Liu leads the daily training of his apprentices, with newly famous Liu Fengxian refusing to cooperate and Liu Yunxian, the "younger sister," urging Liu not to disappoint their master/father. In contrast to Liu Fengxian, Liu Yunxian represents for Master Liu the hope that he and his dramatic art will have a successor. She also may be construed as a version of Liu Fengxian before she became famous. Another comparison can be made between Zhu Chunhua of *Stage Sisters* and Liu Yunxian, with the latter viewed as a pure and innocent Zhu Chunhua, before she "turned left" under CCP influence. It would appear, therefore, that *Stage Sisters* is even more "leftist" than *The Death of a Famous Actor*, thanks to the earlier work's groundbreaking impact. Both works make prominent use of theater space, a hallmark that in Tian's case drama historians took as evidence of his familiarity with theater artists and what he learned from his own remarkable playwrighting career.

In August 1957, during the Anti-Rightist campaign, Tian Han offered his own trendy, “ultra-leftist” interpretation of the function of the backstage setting in *The Death of a Famous Actor*. Responding to the casting crew’s questions about the historical background of *The Death of a Famous Actor*, he said that the fall of Master Liu represented an artist’s anger at himself for failing to resist the evil forces bent on destroying everything beautiful. Tian suggested that this theme partly accounted for the popularity of the play at the time. Tian went on to say that in recent years some dramatists were picturing the backstage of the new socialist society as “full of a murderous atmosphere,” while characterizing the backstage of the old society as “warm and vibrant.” He hoped that through the performance of his play those harboring such thoughts would be able to see which backstage was murderous and which one was vibrant. He hoped that the restaging of *The Death of a Famous Actor*, therefore, would not merely help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of modern Chinese spoken drama; it could also deal “a telling blow to those people who felt nostalgic about the old society while slandering the new society” (1957: 374).

His perspective limited by the oppressive politics of the Anti-Rightist movement, Tian Han was apparently enthusiastic about the new society of the 1950s. Since the 1920s, he had written dramas that predicted and expressed a longing for this new society. However, despite his resentment of the unfair treatment accorded artists in the old society, it is important to note that in the period of the Southern Drama Society, the backstage—and the front stage, for that matter—was indeed vibrant and lively, partly because of his own leadership in the independent art movement. His friendship, understanding, collaborations, and tolerance of other artists on and offstage, in theater business and in other interdisciplinary areas, won him an irreplaceable niche in the history of modern Chinese culture and art.

THE NANGUO MOVEMENT AS CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: THE NETWORKS OF A CENTURY

Tian Han’s depiction on stage of a generation of artists would not have been as convincing had it not been for his lifelong endeavor to collaborate with numerous artists in interdisciplinary activities. His admiration for artists, and his disappointment when a hostile society prevented them from pursuing their art, motivated Tian to become a pioneer in art education and to commit himself to initiating an independent art movement. Exploring this aspect of Tian’s achievement is crucial to understanding the complex historical context of contemporary artistic networks, which, in the case of the PRC period, functioned as officially sponsored institutions, like the Chinese National Association of Writers, the Chinese National Association

of Dramatists (*Zhongguo xijujia xiehui*), and the Chinese National Association of Painters, to name a few. As the rest of this essay will demonstrate, the emphasis on “literary and art groups” (*wenyi tuanti*) was rooted in the early part of the twentieth century when artists like Tian Han and Guo Moruo, seeking like minded colleagues, played a key role in founding literary societies. Tian Han’s influence helped to shape the Communist practice of artist groups.

One might even argue that art institutions as they now stand in China issued from at least one paradox evident in Tian Han’s early efforts of the 1920s. On the one hand, Tian promoted an independent art movement that in avoiding the KMT government sponsorship could fend off censorship. On the other hand, he developed his own form of the “velvet prison,” which, according to Miklós Haraszti, resembles the “self-censorship” artists imposed on themselves even in postsocialist societies when official censorship had already faded away. However, looking at Tian’s situation in terms of the concept of “velvet prison” helps explain Chinese cultural and artistic contexts only if we can dispose of the binary model of Communist rule being “military” or “hard” and postsocialist society being “civilian” or “soft.” Long before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, for example, Tian had already self-censored his own works and labeled them “bourgeois” because they failed to answer the needs of the common people as he had described them in his essay “Our Self-Criticism,” his declaration that he intended to “turn left.” Even in his early career in the 1920s, before his official “turn left,” Tian had already censored his own plays. His self-censorship was driven by his eagerness to respond to audiences’ wish for drama to become a vehicle for social reform. Although a victim of its legacy, Tian helped formulate a leftist tradition that would pave the way for the rigid Maoist policy on art and literature. Tian’s situation demonstrates that all societies—(semi)capitalist and (pre)communist, (post)socialist, and (pro)democratic—have their own forms of censorships; the intelligentsia as a whole frequently collaborate with the government, especially in the sense that they apply a censorship to their own works. Moreover, Tian’s leftist theater emerged in part as a response to and protest against KMT censorship policies in the 1920s and 1930s.

This process of self-censorship can best be assessed by looking at “Our Self-Criticism,” which Tian Han scholars have frequently cited as containing the essential historical data for understanding the *Nanguo* movement, its achievements and its limitations. In this essay, Tian Han adopted a unique narrative strategy: he “set the record straight,” delineating the literary influences, authorial intention, and cultural and historical background of his dramatic activities and artistic network, while simultaneously critiquing his erroneous past, a past that had not measured up to the requirements of proletarian art, to which he had become committed by 1930. “Our Self-

Criticism" fulfilled the "dual" task of writing a hitherto unavailable literary history and critiquing this history from the leftist point of view. More than anyone else, Tian Han set the tone for subsequent PRC literary criticism, which ingeniously combined official censorship with self-censorship in the form of self-criticism, albeit in many instances, extracted through psychological and political pressure. Most important, with his "Our Self-Criticism," he left behind a legacy of literary societies, artistic networks, early drama history, and independent art education at a dynamic point in history when foreign influences, ideological shifts, and critical paradigms were stirring both in art and in society.

Discussing the formation of literary societies in his "Our Self-Criticism," Tian Han traced his fascination with the idea of *tuanti*. Before launching his first literary journal, *Nanguo banyuekan* (Nanguo Biweekly), with his first wife, Yu Shuyu, Tian belonged to two literary societies, the Young China Society and the Creation Society. The former disbanded after the young artists in it realized that their earlier beliefs in "no isms" was not enough to bond them, despite their common goal of exploring science to serve society; by 1923, the latter had lost its appeal. At this point, Tian still held to his "dual attitude" of faith in the social function of art, or art "for the fourth class" (the proletariats), and in art for art's sake (1930: 82–85). In this way, Tian Han echoed Guo Moruo's paradoxical view of the relationship between *tuanti* and authority: "We most detest the organization of *tuanti* because a *tuanti* is a violence, which can do strange things by virtue of its massive number. . . . Our little society does not have a fixed organization, nor do we have a constitution, an office, or agreed-upon isms. Gathered freely as friends, we have different ideas and isms without having to concur with each other, so long as we share our hearty desire to pursue artistic activities" (Tian Han 1930: 84). An artistic network without isms and pursuing pure art while keeping art's social function in mind corresponded closely with Tian Han's views. Inspired by William Blake's example of printing his own journal without relying on commercial publishers, Tian Han and his wife composed, edited, page-proofed, and produced *Nanguo Biweekly*, the earliest product of their efforts at independent literary journal publishing.

Tian Han's concept of *tuanti* can also be traced to his attraction to the nineteenth-century Russian Narodniks, a group of populist agrarian socialists who viewed the peasants and the intelligentsia as the only valid revolutionary forces. Inspired by the spirit of this "courageous revolutionary *tuanti*," with ringleaders like Tchaikevsky, Krivenkon, Michailovsky, and Kololenko, Tian Han, in "Our Self-Criticism," explained the intentions behind his first, and as yet unfinished, film, *Dao minjian qu* (Go Among the People) (1930: 91). Seven years before, in Tokyo, he had been deeply touched upon reading a poem by Ishikawa Takuboku, a Japanese novelist and critic who had also been inspired by the Russian Narodniks. In this

poem, Ishikawa Takuboku laments the lack of desire to “go among the people” on the part of Japanese youth. In his film script, Tian Han depicts a group of Chinese college students welcoming a Russian revolutionary poet, played by Boris Pilniak, who listens to the Chinese students’ views on future social changes; some prefer socialism, but others believe in “going among the people.” The Russian poet only encourages them to pursue their own dreams; “whoever realizes your dream of reforming China first,” the Russian poet declares, “will win the love of this beautiful waitress” (1930: 92).³² After narrating the story of the film, Tian then refers to a reception for Boris Pilniak in Japan and to Leon Trotsky’s critique of him. Trotsky called Pilniak a “fellow traveler” (*tonglu ren*) in relation to revolutionary literature and a “realist” who though he did not dislike revolutionary Russia, failed to eulogize it publicly as an ideal society. Tian claims that two groups, “fellow travelers” and “proletarian writers,” split the contemporary Russian literary scene in two. “Fellow travelers” could be further divided into “leftists fellow travelers,” who realistically depict both the negative and the positive sides of the revolution, and the “rightist fellow travelers,” who adopted a passive and pessimistic view of the revolution (1930: 99). Although I do not mean to suggest that Tian was among the first to use the words “fellow traveler,” or “leftists” and “rightists,” in the context of revolutionary literary criticism in modern China, I am struck by his constant use of these designations in 1930; “fellow travelers” was to become a much used term in Maoist discourse to describe unreformed Chinese intelligentsia not worthy of being called proletarian writers. After a long treatment of the literary career of Boris Pilniak and a critical history of the Russian literature of his times, Tian compares Boris Pilniak’s career with the artistic trajectory of the *Nanguo* movement, which turned out to be as bourgeois and unsatisfying as Pilniak’s work. Here again, Tian is both promoting the *Nanguo* movement and criticizing its performance; he discusses the formative impact of foreign literary figures on Chinese culture while at the same time enumerating their ideological limitations when applied to the Chinese scene.

In the course of his analysis, Tian Han emphasizes the importance of artistic networks both at home and abroad. He organized a “wine reception” (*wen jiu xiao han hui*) to welcome Tanizaki Junichiro, “the great Japanese writer” who had visited Tian Han’s film studio even before Boris Pilniak’s visit. Through Boris Pilniak, Tian Han met and befriended the Shanghai counselor from the Soviet Union, who arranged for a private showing of Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*. This film, according to Tian Han, was a watershed that indicated “the real beginning of the introduction of artistic films from the Soviet Union.” Eisenstein’s skillful handling of rebellious crowds without any protagonists gave to his film “a new force of beauty and power” (1930: 103). His admiration for Eisenstein, provided Tian a convenient opening for a critique of *Go Among the People*, which he says lacked

Eisenstein's insightful depiction of "volcano-like, rebellious comrades from oppressed classes." His own film, by contrast, concerned itself with minor issues of the petite bourgeoisie and advanced the cause of "self-contradictory reformism" without any "revolutionary commitment" (103).

Despite his self-criticism of the *Nanguo* movement, Tian Han gives ample space in "Our Self-Criticism" to recording his lifelong interest in networking with artists, which led in part to his promotion of independent art education with which to train a new generation of artists. To fully articulate his dedication, he advances a theoretical argument for establishing private schools (*sixue*) as a means of educating proletariat youth who could neither afford, nor "qualify" for, public education. He recounts at length the development of public and private universities in Japan. Whereas public education in Japan was driven by the logic of capitalism, private education quickly became "Americanized," resulting in the subsequent loss of academic freedom from dominant ideologies from the West (1930: 136). Tian stressed the urgent need in China to start private art education for disadvantaged youth, who, although they lacked money, did not "lack talent." His Southern Art College aimed at "fostering talents . . . who would share the weal and woe of the historical times and possess the vision and knowledge to become pioneers of a new era" (137).

This theoretical and cross-cultural perspective justifies Tian Han's place, as he tells it earlier in the essay, in the brief history of Shanghai Art College. He served, from autumn to the end of the year 1927 (at age twenty-nine), first as the director of the literature and arts program, and then as president. The students elected him president after the previous president disappeared with embezzled funds. Despite the difficulties, Tian Han persevered in his vision of running a private institution as "an artistic movement without government control" (*zaiye de yishu yundong*). He relied on a "hardworking spirit (*kugan*) to recruit and retain students, gave daily lectures on European literature, and was deemed the only reliable teacher in the college, who was always there for students (Liu Ping 1998: 166). It was at Shanghai Art College that he first educated "students he felt close to"—such as Chen Baichen, Zuo Ming, Tang Shuming, and Chen Ningqiu—about "the treasure of *Nanguo*" (Tian Han 1930: 117); these same would later become theater specialists and famous actors and play an important part in the subsequent development of the *Nanguo* movement and modern spoken drama.

Tian Han also records the lengths he went, exhausting his limited means, to attract brilliant artists to teach the next generation of students. The students already regarded the college as a family, and to sustain this sort of family, Tian Han invited Xu Beihong, later to become one of modern China's most famous painters. Xu was pleasantly surprised to encounter in Tian Han's arts program talented students like Wu Zuoren and Liu Ruli (who would themselves become distinguished painters). To retain Xu Bei-

hong for his newly established Southern Art College, Tian Han spent most of his own savings, turning an upstairs room in a campus building into a well-lit modern studio for Xu.³³ So impressed was Xu Beihong by what he called “the only studio in Shanghai that looks nearly like an atelier” that he said he believed with it he could produce the best artists of his time.³⁴ Similarly, Tian went out of his way to hold on to Ouyang Yuqian, whom he had hired to direct the college’s drama program. He borrowed money to build a small theater that would place at his friend’s disposal the best teaching and performing space possible (1930: 142–43). When he learned, at the start of the program, that Ouyang Yuqian had accepted a position to head a government-sponsored project at a drama research institute in Guangdong Province, Tian felt no rancor toward Ouyang for departing, nor for his lack of interest in the independent art movement. Tian’s tolerance and his appreciation for his fellow artists was a big factor in their supporting his endeavors; in return for his friendship, for example, opera performers like Zhou Xinfang gave free lectures at the arts college. Without Tian’s artistic network, the Southern Art College could not have survived.

Believing that students should obtain hands-on training beyond the classroom, while presiding over academic affairs for Shanghai Art College in 1927, Tian Han organized a series of informal art seminars (*wenyi zuotanhui*), to which he invited well-known writers, poets, dramatists, and opera performers, such as Xu Beihong, Xu Zhimo, Yu Dafu, Ouyang Yuqian, Hong Shen, Yu Shangyuan, and Zhou Xinfang, to interact with students and discuss artistic issues. As documented in detail in “Our Self-Criticism,” Tian displayed considerable savvy in bringing competing artists together. For example, his longtime friendships with Ouyang Yuqian and Zhou Xinfang, two famous Peking opera actors, allowed him to incorporate Peking opera traditions into traditions of modern drama, at a time when some modernists perceived traditional theater as an obstacle. Tian helped reconcile the two sides in the heated debates of the day over the incompatibility of the traditional and modern theaters. Rather than seeing traditional and modern drama as binary and oppositional, Tian distinguished the “new opera” (*xin geju*) from the “old opera” (*jiu geju*), and he differentiated “new drama” (*xinju*) from “civilized drama” (*wenming xi*). He felt that the creation of new opera could not be successful without borrowing from the legacy of old opera. Moreover, he implied that the failure of civilized drama to meet the needs of the audience and of society should warn against any blind advocacy of new drama or any claim that it was the only way to create effective theater (1930: 118).

In December of 1927, Tian Han also organized a series of dramatic performances during a weeklong Dragon and Fish Art Festival that marked the first public performances under the name of Southern Drama Society. “Dragon” refers to famous performers who could attract audiences, and

“fish” stood for the fortunate students given the opportunity of studying dramatic art while performing with “dragons.” Besides Tian’s five scripts (including his *A Night Story in Suzhou*) and other dramatic achievements, the festival put on two of the most famous modern plays of the Republican period: *The Death of a Famous Actor* and *Pan Jinlian*. Ouyang Yuqian’s *Pan Jinlian* reversed the patriarchal verdict that the eponymous heroine was an adulterous murderer, transforming her into a courageous rebel devoted to the pursuit of happiness. In his stage directions, Tian followed Ouyang’s blueprint, adding his own creative energy and supplying an outstanding cast, with Ouyang Yuqian as Pan Jinlian, Zhou Xinfang as Wu Song, and Gao Baisui as Ximen Qing—all well-established Peking opera actors. As a result, the superb production combined the quick pace of modern spoken drama’s plot development in the Aristotelian tradition with traditional theater’s lyric beauty and body language, stemming from the singing passages of Peking opera. As a master scriptwriter for both traditions, Tian acted on his belief that the positive elements of both theaters should be nurtured, in order to revive and recreate a lively theater.

Tian Han’s success at reconciling both theaters buttresses Xia Yan’s (1983: 11) point that since the May Fourth movement, the field of drama enjoyed unity (*tuanjie*) among practitioners of operatic and modern theater, whereas other fields, such as music and painting, saw its artists divided into the opposing camps of the new/Western school and the old/Chinese school. Xia Yan attributed this phenomenon to the unique contributions of Ouyang Yuqian, Tian Han, and Hong Shen, the “three founding fathers of modern drama,” all of them well versed in operatic traditions but also active in promoting modern spoken drama. In his memorial essay on Tian Han, Xia Yan contrasts his own lack of knowledge of operatic traditions with Tian’s advice, given in 1949 when both of them were redefining themselves from influential left-wing cultural leaders to mainstream CCP art officials, that he pay more attention to networking with opera performers. To be sure, Tian told Xia, modern drama seemed to have a greater appeal in mobilizing the masses in the new China; Peking opera and other regional theaters, however, enjoyed an even greater popularity at the grassroots level. Xia recalls that Tian’s suggestion coincided with Premier Zhou Enlai’s proposal to Xia that he pay respectful visits to the homes of opera performers like Mei Lanfang, Zhou Jinfang, and Yuan Xuefen because they were much more influential among the masses than the modern drama performers. Although he held important official positions after 1949, such as the chief of the Art Bureau and president of the Chinese National Association of Dramatists, Xia Yan recalls, “Tian Han never forgot his *Nanguo* days when he had lived through the good and bad times with his fellow performers, and he continued to treat all artists, whatever their backgrounds, like his brothers and sisters. He even put his own political future at risk when he pleaded that actors and

actresses be protected from having their careers wasted in endless political maneuvering, and when he made a case for improving the living standard of the old artists who sank into poverty after 1949.³⁵ Interestingly, Xia Yan's celebration of Tian Han's achievements, written half a century later, parallel Tian Han's own account of his "regrettable career" as expressed in his "Our Self-Criticism." As I mentioned earlier, Tian's "Our Self-Criticism" served both as a faithful historical record of his Southern Drama Society's theater activities and its artistic networking and as reflections on what he would have done better had he adopted a proletarian view of literature and arts.

Although not always followed by dramatic performances like the Dragon and Fish Art Festival, *zuotanhui* among artists became common practice in the People's Republic of China. The seminars were mostly organized by official associations whose duty it was to carry out the Communist Party's policies on literature and art, even if the occasions were often related to the celebration of artists' birthdays or their career anniversaries, a tradition built upon similar events in the Republican period. A well-known precedent, for instance, was the gathering of celebrities in Shanghai to honor Tian Han's fiftieth birthday and his thirty-year career in the drama. Occurring in March 1947, the event coincided with the popular performance that month of his *Liren xing* (The Beauties' Journey).³⁶ Although the occasion was given the name *jinian dahui* (commemoration meeting), it was essentially similar to other *zuotanhui*, except for the unusually large number of people attending, testifying to Tian's great popularity and renown as leader of modern Chinese drama. In his speech at the meeting, Guo Moruo described Tian Han as "not only a pioneer of drama, but also of the entire cultural circle." In the past twenty-five years, Guo stated, "drama and film among all fields of new arts had achieved the most rapid and astonishing progress" thanks to Tian's leadership (Zou 1999: 227).

Zuotanhui also took place in connection with the practices of *huiyan*, or performance gatherings. These performance gatherings were most prominently developed during the War of Resistance, when drama troupes from various cities traveled to Chongqing and Guilin for drama festivals and seminars promoting wartime drama. In 1944, for instance, Tian Han, with Ouyang Yuqian, was instrumental in organizing in the Nationalist-occupied city of Guilin the Southwest Drama Exhibition (*Xinan xiju zhanlanhui*), which staged performances by more than twenty drama troupes from several provinces and cities.³⁷ The organizers also mounted a drama history exhibition, which displayed playwrights' manuscripts, historical archives of development of the drama in different regions, and stage design models for numerous plays. A drama conference was also held where thirty-one speeches were delivered and thirty-seven proposals passed by delegates.³⁸ This practice of *huiyan* became a central feature of the PRC period, with municipal, provincial, and regional *huiyan* routinely bringing drama troupes

together to showcase artistic achievements and holding seminars for the purpose of exchanging ideas; some *huiyan* were also planned around national holidays, anniversaries, and ideological campaigns.

After 1949, Tian Han continued to preside over many *zuotanhui* as the president of the Chinese National Association of Dramatists and also as the vice president of the Chinese National Association of Literary and Art Workers.³⁹ Some of these *zuotanhui* led to critical moments in the development of Chinese theater. For example, in the National Seminar on Artistic Works (*Quanguo wenyi gongzuo zuotanhui*) held in June 1961 in Beijing, Premier Zhou Enlai and Zhou Yang, Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Propaganda, disparaged the ultraleftist initiatives that suppressed artists' freedom during the Anti-Rightist campaign. In the same spirit, Tian Han defended historical drama (*lishi ju*), citing its rich potential for social relevance in contemporary China, as opposed to the ultraleftist view that traditional stories (*chuantong xi*) would be replaced with modern, contemporary plays (*xiandai xi*).

Another important *zuotanhui* was the National Seminar on the Script-writing of Modern Spoken Drama, Opera, and Children's Plays (*Quanquo huaju, geju, ertong ju chuangzuo zuotanhui*), held in March 1962 in Guangzhou. During this *zuotanhui*, Zhou Enlai once again supported the creative work of intellectuals, whom he urged people to trust as they would any labor group; Vice Premier Chen Yi further argued that Chinese intellectuals should not be regarded as bourgeois intellectuals, the label that was used to repudiate them during the Anti-Rightist movement. Overseeing the *zuotanhui* as head of the Chinese National Association of Dramatists, Tian Han went further in rejecting the leftist tendencies of drama criticism, encouraging playwrights to write not only modern but also historical plays, which, when done correctly, could also represent the spirit of contemporary times. Tian also endorsed the demand of socialist art for vivid, heroic characters as protagonists of plays, but not to the exclusion of ordinary people, or even negative characters like Zeng Guofan. No one could write a good play without dramatic conflict, and Tian believed that this conflict could also be detected in the "internal contradictions of the people"—such as those between cadres and masses—not just between positive and negative characters of opposing ideological camps, as leftists had argued (1962: 256–57).

Tian's arguments sowed the seeds of opposition in those who would snub him right before and during the Cultural Revolution for his attempts to protect traditional theater and its artists in 1956, his campaign to release certain "ghost plays" from the banned list, his argument for a "two-legged policy" to promote both pre-modern and modern stories in traditional theater, and his own success in rewriting traditional stories for stage performance, such as *Xie Yaohua* and *Guan Hanqing*. As such, Tian was a prime target of the radical leftist who saw opposed what they saw as the decadent drama serving the interests of feudalist, capitalist, and revisionist art (*feng zi xiu*). Mao

shared their judgment that the dramatic field was a stronghold of counter-revolutionary art, and this eventually led to his determination to initiate the Cultural Revolution, a move that as good as invalidated Tian Han's career as promoter of drama. Ironically validated, however, was Tian Han's longtime belief in the intricate relationship between drama and real-life experience, and in drama's capacity to be an integral to social change. As leader of his drama circle and defender of traditional theater, Tian Han became a natural target during the Cultural Revolution. Like many of his peers and friends, he was subjected to public humiliations during numerous *bidouhui* (public struggle meetings)—proceedings quite opposite to *zuotanhui* over which he had so often presided. The artistic networking Tian had so ingeniously mastered now became one of his most "heinous" crimes during the Cultural Revolution; he was criticized for his "complicated social relations" before 1949 and paid a stiff political and personal price for his "crimes." Ironically, some of his life-long friends from his artistic networks participated in his persecution (including his two sons), whereas others, such as Zhang Guangnian, wrote memoirs to document how he "straightened his back while walking in rapid steps" toward the stage" on which he would be public ally humiliated as in front of furious crowds (Dong 1996: 861–63).

In 1979, eleven years after his death during the Cultural Revolution, the post-Mao regime duly recognized Tian's epoch-making career in Chinese drama. The forum for this event was a *zuotanhui* and also a grand national memorial meeting chaired by Mao Dun and attended by more than a thousand national and international artists and writers, some of whom Tian had befriended and supported during the *Nanguo* movement. In his memorial speech, Mao Dun praised Tian's landmark contributions to the development of modern spoken drama when he was the president and a teacher at Shanghai Art College, his famous Dragon and Fish Art Festival, and the performances of *A Night Story in Suzhou* and *The Death of a Famous Actor*. Both of these plays, according to Mao Dun, "pioneered a new path for our nation's drama movement."⁴⁰ Ironically, almost forty years before, Tian Han had self-censored his *zuotanhui* and Dragon and Fish Art Festival for expressing the "insincere attitude toward life" of "romantic" artists whose "class nature" could be seen when analyzed in the context of "that particular environment" (2000: 15: 123). Although he used less radical rhetoric than the Red Guards, in his remarks Tian had already started "capping" himself as bourgeois long before the ultra-leftists denounced him as "counter-revolutionary" during the Cultural Revolution. Mao Dun's rehabilitation speech therefore did not merely reverse the Cultural Revolution's verdict on Tian, but also Tian's judgment of himself in 1930.

Thus Tian Han can be seen as a both a producer and a victim of his historical times. As I argued at the beginning of this essay, however, it would be mistake to conceive of his work and career merely in the context of political

change and historical movement. His personal life and professional network dictated much of his life's trajectory. Although Chinese drama critics have always contended that it was the triumph of Communist ideology that won Tian Han over in 1930, when he finally "turned left" after several years' hesitation, there were other important factors. By that time, some of his best students and actors had left the Southern Drama Society to join other leftist theater groups. A political shift toward the left seemed to be his only option if he wanted to maintain his artistic networks and give his Southern Society a chance to survive fierce competition from other theater groups. At the core of his career, dramatic production and theater survival had always been the chief considerations in his political decision-making.

There was also a personal factor. Tian Han was then alienated from his third wife, Lin Weizhong. In spite of her crucial financial assistance in helping him build his first theater in the early period of the Southern Society, in later years she had failed to involve herself in his artistic projects. He was now drawn to An E, a passionate revolutionary writer who, as we have seen, had studied and worked in the Soviet Union and in whom he found at last the combination of loving woman and idealistic artist he had hoped for. Falling in love with An E necessarily meant for Tian Han embracing socialist ideology. One again, his artistic networks and his complex relationships with different kinds of women played pivotal roles in his new political orientation. A political interpretation alone cannot therefore explain the complicated course of Tian Han's career and the history of the Southern Society.

Fortunately, Tian Han's turning left did not prevent him from writing *Guan Hanqing*, which by all critical accounts his best play. He projected onto the Yuan Dynasty playwright his own predilection for writing plays that protested social injustice. Like Tian Han, Guan Hanqing drew inspiration for his characters from his contemporaries—that is, fellow artists, actors and actresses, students, and audiences. However, unlike Guan Hanqing, who in the play is forced into exile but has the company of his loved one, his actress friend Zhu Lianxiu, Tian Han died alone in prison in 1968 under appalling circumstances. Besides being charged with having "complicated" social networks, which included KMT agents and right-wing writers, Tian was accused of having written *Guan Hanqing* as an attack on the Chinese Communist Party for persecuting various groups of artists he had done his best to protect. Thirty years later, in 1998, the same group of artists—his former students and fellow writers—assembled to celebrate his one hundredth birthday with a series of national symposiums on his dramatic art and a restaging of such representative plays as *Guan Hanqing*.

In 2000, Beijing hosted the premiere of *Kuangliu* (Torrent), a biographical play about Tian Han written by Tian Qinxin and performed by former students of Tian Han's and actors, some of whom had distinguished themselves in the earlier performance of Tian's *Guan Hanqing*. Not surpris-

ingly, the play on Tian Han reconstructs stories of his social and artistic networks—which included his mother, his wives, and other women—and his recreation on stage of Guan Hanqing and other dramatists. A tribute to his wide-ranging, full life, *Torrent* backgrounds its political aspects and foregrounds the personal ones, especially Tian's devotion to and love for his mother and the women he cared about. One scene, for instance, involves Tian, his first wife, Yu, and third wife, Lin.⁴¹ Each is seen sitting in a chair, watching the unfolding of Tian's early play *Longing for Home*, in which the characters named Tian Han and Yu act out an episode from the play. In this episode, Yu accuses Tian of selfishly pursuing his artistic career at the expense of her health and happiness. Walking out of the area where he has been observing the play, the "real" Tian apologizes to Yu for not having seen to her needs in the past few years. At her death he bids her a heartbroken farewell and goes on to fulfill her last wish that he marry her best friend, Lin, who, in Yu's view, will be the best person to care for him. But then, after living together unsuccessfully as husband and wife and with great regret, Tian takes his leave of Lin, and we see Lin showing Yu (as if she were still alive) an envelope given her by Tian with the fare for traveling to Japan so that Yu might visit those beautiful sites to which she had once felt deeply attached (Tian Qinxin 2000: 19–23).

As if there was an intention to illustrate the dramatic achievements of women disadvantaged by the strictures of a patriarchal society, the foregoing sorrowful scene is transformed into an uplifting view of the photographs of eight women playwrights, lit up one by one to celebrate their innovative plays. On view are Bai Wei, the author of *Linli*, a three-act poetic play written in 1925, and eleven other plays; Yuan Changying, who studied in England and France before writing, in 1929, her three-act play *Kongque dongnan fei* (Southeast Flies the Peacock)⁴²; Pu Shunqing, who wrote *Aishen de wan'ou* (The Plaything of the Goddess of Love) and in 1928 published a collection of plays, *Renjian de luyuan* (Paradise on Earth); Lu Xiaoman, who in 1928, together with her husband Xu Zhimo, wrote a five-act tragedy, *Biankun gang* (Biankun Ridge); Xiao Hong, author of the play *Jinian Lu Xun xiansheng* (In Memory of Mr. Lu Xun); Yang Jiang, who wrote a comedy, *Chengxin ruyi* (As You Like it) and a tragedy, *Fengxu* (Windswept Blossoms); Ding Ling, who wrote the experimental plays *Yaogong* (Kiln Workers) and *Chongfeng* (Reunion); and An E, whose most characteristic play is *Jinlin ji* (The Story of Golden Scales of a Fish).

After this scene, as eight former male students of Tian's turn toward backstage the eight light boxes containing the women playwrights' photographs, Tian Han murmurs something to himself about the fragility of women's bodies and how easily their quick wit and brilliance are reduced to nothingness with the passage of time. Tian then speaks to his mother about his boyhood and his quest as an adult for a fresh and magnificent life; and to Wei-

zhong, his third wife, about their love at first sight and the failure of their marriage after so much suffering and strife (Tian Qinxin 2000: 24–30). A significant portion of the play is then devoted to highlighting Tian's conversations with his Southern Art College students regarding his determination as a dramatist to be in touch with reality and the masses; his aspirations in developing an independent art movement; his major plays and films, with their dates and titles flashed onto movable screens; and Tian's direction of one of his most influential dramas, *Yizhi* (Solidarity), performed in 1929 in Nanjing (it would soon be banned by the KMT government for provoking people's sentiments against the status quo).

At this moment, An E appears as the "red Salomé" Tian Han had depicted in his translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (an episode of which had also been incorporated in the earlier part of *Torrent*), a personification of the type of woman Tian had failed to find throughout the years. An E best united the "redness" of the Chinese Communist Party's ideology with the unrestrained passion of Wilde's character. She encourages Tian to finally accept and devote himself to socialist idealism in an episode directly following another scene in which several of his best drama students threaten to break away from the Southern Drama Society unless Tian makes up his mind to turn left and do direct battle with KMT reactionary power (Tian Qinxin 2000: 46–48). A subsequent scene of Tian being taken to the KMT prison in 1934 for producing leftist dramas and Tian's mother welcoming him home afterward is contrasted with the next scene's representation of a different sort of prison, taken from Tian Han's drama *Guan Hanqing*. Tian plays Guan Hanqing and An E plays Zhu Lianxiu as they reenact the magnificent prison reunion scene, in which they read and sing the song written by Guan to give voice to their shared destiny and love:

"I studied thousands of volumes of the classics;
 I wrote more than fifty plays.
 And all these years the nation has been crushed,
 people have suffered untold misery everywhere.
 We saw, and we fought,
 till 'Tou Ngo' sped us to our deaths.
 The moon wanes by itself,
 the single wick flickers out alone,
 but we shall die together.
 Resting, we share
 the same glimpse of the clouds
 through our barred windows.
 Walking, our chains clank in unison.
 But like the rainbow
 our hearts are bright with faith and strength.
 Who would waste tears?"

If there is no place for martyrs
 in the nether world,
 are there not green vales reserved
 in which the pure and great may rest?
 Years divide us, but our hearts are one.
 Unwedded, we shall lie in the same grave.
 Behold! When the fields again
 are red with azalea blossoms,
 how two butterflies, you and I,
 will flutter in the breeze, loving each other,
 never to part!" (Tian Qinxin 2000: 52–53).⁴³

This well-known poetic passage, along with the play *Torrent*, celebrates not only the everlasting love and the extraordinary career of Tian Han, but also the regard in which he was held and the dedication of his four wives and mother, his students, his actors and actresses, and other friends in his artistic network. At the play's conclusion, the national anthem is played with Tian's lyrics, to illustrate the central position Tian occupied in the history of modern China. This biographical play thus took up a sub-genre that might be called "drama of the theater," in which stories of artists and their communities are staged. As previously noted, it was a sub-genre begun by Tian Han in 1927 with his play *The Death of a Famous Actor*, and perfected in subsequent plays portraying the life stories of theater artists. The final staging of the play on Tian Han, therefore, seems to be a fitting tribute to his prolific career and to the social and artistic networks he so valued.

NOTES

1. For an informative study on the People's Drama Society, see Chen Anhu 1997: 178–92.

2. Historians of modern Chinese drama claim Hong Shen, Ouyang Yuqian, and Tian Han as the three "founding fathers" of modern Chinese drama. See Xia Yan 1983: 11.

3. According to Zong (1980: 4), *Kleeblatt* attracted a large number of young readers upon its first appearance and had to be reprinted several times. Zong's memoir, recorded by Zou Shifang and Zhao Zundang, first appeared in *Beijing ribao* (Beijing Daily), was later collected in a reprint of *Kleeblatt*.

4. For a biography of Yi Keqin, Tian Han's mother, see Tian Han, "Muqin de hua" (In my mother's own words) (Tian 2000: 13: 377–464).

5. The original source from Tian Han is vague on dates, as seen in Tian Han's essay entitled "Zai xiju shang wo de guoqu, xianzai, ji weilai" (Past, present, and future in my drama career) (Tian 2000: 16: 298). The latest scholarship indicates that the play was published on March 14–16, 1913 in *Changsha ribao* (Changsha Daily).

6. For the play, see Tian Han 2000: 7: 1–9. See also Tian et al. 1998: 29–30.

7. See Tian Han 1940–46, 104; 1929a: 12; and Dong 1996: 313.

8. A well-known example of this relationship can be found with Bing Xin, who wrote elegant prose on her mother and the latter's influence on her literary career. See Lieberman 1998 for the image of motherhood in modern Chinese literature.

9. Tian Han 1933: 459–50; Dong 1996: 79; Zou 1999: 2–3. -

10. Tian Han 1936: 508; Dong 1996: 76.

11. Dong Jian (1996: 180) points out that: "Li Jianzhai resembles Yi Meichen."

12. Tian Han's translation of *Hamlet* was published in *Shaonian Zhongguo* 2, no. 12 (1921).

13. Tian Han's *Longing for Home* was written in 1922 and published in 1924 in the first issue of *Nanguo banyue kan* (Southern country society by-weekly), and collected in Tian Han's *Kafei dian zhi yi ye* (A night at a café) (Shanghai: Shanghai Zhonghua shuju, 1924). Citations of this play are from Tian Han 1920b: 163–78.

14. This dilemma would be articulated by Qian Zhongshu two decades later in his novel *Weicheng* (Fortress Besieged), a twentieth-century masterpiece about the confused lives of Chinese intellectuals after returning from foreign countries. See Qian Zhongshu, *Weicheng* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue, 1991). For an English translation, see *Fortress Besieged*. Trs. Jeanne Kelly and Nathan K. Mao (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

15. Liu Ping 1998: 121–22. Tian Han (1929b: 299) explained his authorial intention in this way: "*Longing for Home* actually depicted the dark clouds between Shuyu and myself while eclipsing the other side of the picture."

16. Before her death, Yi Shuyu asked her friend Huang Dalin to marry Tian Han and take care of their infant son. Although Tian realized they had different temperaments, he followed the wish of Yi and married Huang, with much reservation, in 1927. They divorced in 1929 (Zhang 1992: 88, 140).

17. Tian Han stated that each character in *A Tragedy on the Lake* had its own model, but overall it was a lyric poem that expressed his spiritual world at that time, covered with "the rich color of himself." At the same time, he claimed that "Bai Wei had once suspected that the dramatic character Bai Wei was modeled on her life story, but I did not know that Bai Wei was her pen name at the time when I wrote the play." See Tian Han, "Tian Han xiqu ji di si ji zixu" (Author's preface to the first volume of *Selected Plays by Tian Han*) (Tian Han 1983: 1: 442). The preface was originally published in *Tian Han xiqu ji* (Selected plays by Tian Han) (Shanghai Xiandai shuju, 1931), vol. 4. Tian Han's claim seems suspicious, since Bai Wei changed her name from Huang Zhang to Bai Wei after she went to Japan, where she met Tian Han. Although she used the pen name Su Ru when she published *Su Fei* in 1926, she used Bai Wei for her second play entitled *Linli* published in 1926, after which, according to Chen Xiyang (1929), Bai Wei became "a new star in the new literary scene," together with Bing Xin. Tian Han's *A Tragedy on the Lake* was published in 1928, it is thus unlikely that he had never heard of Bai Wei's name. For biographical accounts of Bai Wei, including her different uses of names, see Bai/He 1983: 3, 26, 41–42; Wang Wenying 1988: 484–500.

18. Bai Wei's *Beiju shengya* (A tragic life) is an autobiographical account of her difficult love life and career (Shanghai: Wenzue chubanshe, 1936). For a critical study in English of Bai Wei's writings, see Jianmei Liu 2002.

19. For an account of Yang Sao's life and literary achievement, see Qin Hong 1988: 401–13.

20. Lin Weizhong complained about her sacrifices for Tian's career and objected to his writing their own love experience into the play as a violation of their love. In Tian Han's letter to Lin Weizhong dated September, 22, 1942, Tian responded to Lin's "anger and protest" as "unnecessary, unwise, and [showing] a lack of humor" since a play is a poem and not a photograph or a biography. If the male protagonist can be seen as a persona of the playwright himself, Tian believed that he did not "forgive himself either"; let alone the fact that the wife is depicted in a more flattering light. "When have you ever fought against the Japanese?" (Tian Han 2000: 20:181-183). Although there isn't the space in this essay to treat this issue, this episode could generate an interesting discussion about the gender politics of playwriting, when a male writer dominates the representation of a woman on stage, even if she is his wife. Their correspondence can be seen as an intriguing example of how a wife-turned-audience challenges the power of a playwright, thus making possible a "readerly text."

21. As mentioned earlier, one can consider his teenage play, *A New Story of Educating Her Son* as his first play. Drama historians, however, usually regard *Violin and Rose* as Tian Han's real first play as an adult. Tian Han himself would not necessarily have agreed. In his "Preface," written in 1932, to the first volume of *Selected Operas by Tian Han*, he claimed that although his first work was *Violin and Rose*, it is "indeed so immature" and "problematic in its dramatic structure and choice of characters and events," that he could not even begin to revise it to be collected in this volume. After having had the chance to understand better the women singers "under feudalism oppression and exploitation" in the past ten years, he would rather begin his volume with *A Night in the Café*, his second play, to begin his dramatic writing career. The latter play is "indeed the first emerging piece that can best introduce myself to the world." See Tian Han, "Tian Han xiqu ji di yi ji zixu" (Author's preface to the first volume of *Selected Plays by Tian Han*) in Tian Han 1983: 1: 452-53. Dong Jian (1996: 182) agrees with Tian's self-critique when he points out that *Violin and Rose* was never performed on stage because of its overly literary and lengthy dialogues and monologues and its lack of dramatic action. Although it may not work well as performance, it can be considered an alternative, literary style of playwriting that Tian Han became one hallmark in his later plays. Tian Benxiang (Tian et al. 1998: 61, 63) also believes that although Tian Han himself had rejected *Violin and Rose*, the play nevertheless expressed his earliest experiments with "poetic realism" (*shihua xianshizhuyi*), which combined romanticism, expressionism, and realism, a style that helped establish his unique position in the history of modern Chinese drama. It can indeed be seen as an embryo with his genetic heritage."

22. "Dagu" in general refers to versified story sung to the accompaniment of a small drum and other instruments. Some scholars believe that "dagu" was developed from the older term of "guci," which Tian Han used in his early opera entitled *Xin taohua shan* (The New Story of Peach Flower Fan, 1915), in which a old friend of Hou Fangyu, the protagonist in the original version of The Story of Peach Flower Fan came back to life around 1915 to perform a "guci" piece on stage to comment on the weak state of China in support of the Reclamation revolution. For Tian Han's script, see Tian Han 2000: 7: 11-19.

23. See Tian Han 1921b: 127. Tian Han borrowed this stage line, and the image of a drifting and lonely Russian poet with a guitar, from a letter written to him by Li

Chuli, who lamented on the “sorrows of artists” (*yishujia de bei'ai*) and the “difficulties of one’s life journey” (*rensheng zhi xinglu nan*). Tian Han used the experience of Ereshenko, the blind Russian poet mentioned in Li’s letter, in his *A Night at a Café*, another example of the importance of artistic networking in his drama writing. See Tian Han’s dairy on October 25, 1921, his “Qiangwei zhi lu” (The road of the roses) (2000: 20: 262).

24. See Tian Han 1921*b*: 126. In one of first few articles in English on Tian Han, Constantine Tung (1968) believes that *A Night at a Café* created a group of disillusioned and lonely artists and their typical spirits in the 1920s. Bai Qiuying, for example, joined this sad group after her heart-broken encounter with her former boy friend.

25. Tian Han 1983: 1: 133. This citation is from *Tian Han wen ji* 1983, which printed a revised version from the early text in Tian Han’s collection of plays entitled *Kafeidian zhi yiye* (A night at a Café), published by Shanghai shuju in 1924. The 1924 version was seen as the original one and was collected in *Tian Han quan qi* 2000; it does not have Miss Chen’s comment on “a dramatic scene” (Tian 2000: 1: 116). The later version’s depiction of Miss Chen seems to be more humorous and light-hearted than the earlier version.

26. With the publication of these two plays, Tian initiated a tradition of reading scripts as poetic and literary texts, Whereas *Violin and Rose* was never performed, *A Night at a Café* was not performed during the peak period of Nanguo performance in such events as Fish-and Dragon festival in 1927, and the first season of the public performance of Southern Society (*Nanguo she di yi qi gongyan*), which includes the first Shanghai performance in December 1928, the first Nanjing performance in January 1929, the Guangzhou performance in March 1929. The second season of the public performance of Southern Society includes the second Nanjing performance in July 1929, Wuxi performance in July 1929, and the second Shanghai performance in July 1929. The third season started with a Shanghai premier of *Carmen* on June 11, 1930, which was banned three days later by the government. See Zhang Xianghua 1992: 114, 118, 120, 128, 131-34, 150. *A Night at a Café*, however, was chosen as one of the best May Fourth plays to be performed in the PRC.

27. “Dragon” refers to famous performers who could attract audiences, and “fish” stood for the fortunate students given the opportunity of studying dramatic art while performing with “dragons.”

28. For many years, Tian Han had wanted to write a drama about a Chinese *mingyou* (famous actor). See Tian Han, “*Tian Han xiju ji disi ji zixu*” (Preface to the fourth volume of *Selected Plays by Tian Han*) (2000: 16: 326–28). Charles Baudelaire’s prose poem is entitled in the original French “Une mort heroique.” *The Parisian prowler: Le spleen de Paris, petits poèmes en prose*, trs. Edward K. Kaplan. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

29. Tian Han, “*Tian Han xiju ji disi ji zixu*” (Preface to the fourth volume of *Selected Plays by Tian Han*) (Tian 2000: 16: 326–28). In the same preface, Tian Han names Hong Shen, one of the founding fathers of modern Chinese drama, as the most successful player for the role of Master Liu.

30. Tian Han 1931: 326. For the premier of *The Death of a Famous Actor* at the first Dragon-and-Fish Festival, see Zhang Xianghua 1992: 98.

31. *Stage Sisters* was written by Lin Gu, Xu Jin, and Xie Jin and produced by Shanghai Film Studio in 1965. The film script can be found in *Zhongguo xin wenyi daxi 1949–1966, dianying ji, xia* (Compendium of new art: 1949–1966, film volume, 2) (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chuban gongsi, 1989): 571–612.

32. Here is another example of what I term the image of “Tian Han’s café revolutionaries,” which found its best expression in his *A Night at a Café*. The West-ern/Japanese oriented romantic space of the café became for Tian Han a symbolic stage where student artists imagined themselves as social reformers without serious commitments to “isms.” At the very moment when he dismissed it as bourgeois sentiment, Tian Han also lost his unique view of art and theater as an independent form of social change.

33. In January 1928, after Zhou Qin hao, the former president, removed most of the properties of Shanghai Art College, Tian Han had no choice but to resign as president and pursue his dream of independent art movement and private school education (*sixue*) by becoming the president of a new school, Southern Art College (attached to the Southern Society). The new school began with three programs: literature, headed by Tian Han, painting, headed by Xu Beihong, and drama, headed by Ouyang Yuqian. See Tian Han 1930: 137–43.

34. See Zou 1999: 68; Tian Han 1935: 138, 140. Although Xu Beihong later had to quit his teaching duties at Southern Art College after his wife had moved all his belongings from the studio, thereby bringing an end to the art program, Tian Han remained a life-long friend of Xu.

35. Xia Yan 1983: 11–13. For Tian Han’s appeal to improve the career and living standard of operatic artists, see his “Wei yanyuan de qingchun qingming” (A plea on behalf of actors and actresses for their artistic career) (2000: 16: 71–73) and “Bixu qieshi guanxin bing gaishan yiren de shenghuo” (We must be concerned with and improve the living standards of artists) (2000: 16: 185–92). Both articles were published in 1956 and became evidence for the criticism of Tian Han during the Anti-Rightist campaign.

36. Tian Han was born on March 12, 1898, and would have been 49 in 1947. The fiftieth birthday follows the Chinese calculation of a person being one year old at birth (*xusui*). Dong Jian (1996: 684–95) points out that the thirty years is a round number because it would be more than thirty if one counted his *A New Story of Educating his Son* or *New Story of Peach Blossom Fan* (Xin taohua shan, 1915), or less than thirty if one counts his *Raining Season* (Meiyu, 1919), or *Violin and Rose* (1920). Dong also points out that different news reports suggested varying attendance figures for this event, one at more than five hundred and another at more than a thousand.

37. Mao Dun, “Jiechu de wuchan jieji wenhua zhanshi—Tian Han” (Tian Han: an outstanding proletarian cultural soldier) (in Tian Han 1983: 1: 4).

38. For a collection of essays on the history and achievements of Southwest Drama Exhibition of 1944 and a comprehensive selection of drama reviews of its performances, news coverage of its key figures, and memoirs of its participants, see *Xinan juzhan* 1984. A detailed study of this event would provide an important window to the dramatic culture of the war period. Suffice it to say that Tian Han, by all accounts, was credited as a chief architect of this event thanks to his wide-ranging social connections and reputation as a national drama leader.

39. Before 1949, Tian Han was involved in leading the League of Left-wing Writers and the League of Left-wing Dramatists (*Zuoyi xijujia lianmeng*), which further qualified him to become a leader in the Communist art movement. Paradoxically, the more elaborate his artistic networks became, the more quickly he abandoned his earlier pursuit of an independent art movement, a fundamental principle of the Southern Drama Society.

40. Mao Dun, "Mao Dun tongzhi zhi daoci" (A memorial speech by Comrade Mao Dun) (in Tian Han 1980: 1: 6-7).

41. Lin refers to Huang Dalin, a close friend of Yu, who, before her death, asked Tian Han to marry Huang because Yu believed that Huang would take good care of her son and Tian Han.

42. For an English translation, see Dooling/Torgeson 1998: 209-52.

43. The original quote can be found in the play *Guan Hanqing* (2000: 6: 170-71). English translation: *Kuan Han-Ch'ing* in Gunn 1983: 361.