

Beyond Convention: Xun Huisheng's Innovations in Qingyi and Huadan Performance Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the distinctive performance style of Xun Huisheng (1900–1968), one of the “Four Great Dan” of Peking Opera, with a specific focus on his revolutionary approach to the Huadan (vivacious female) role type. Utilising textual analysis of primary sources from the Republican era, including newspaper reviews, performance records, and critical essays from periodicals such as Shen Bao and The Theatre Monthly, this study deconstructs Xun’s innovations in vocal delivery, physical movement, and character portrayal. It argues that Xun systematically integrated expressive elements from regional theatre forms, particularly Bangzi opera, to forge a performance aesthetic characterised by naturalism, psychological depth, and nuanced emotional expression. The findings reveal that Xun’s artistic reforms not only expanded the expressive capacity of the huadan repertoire but also embodied a significant paradigm shift within Peking Opera during its early 20th-century modernisation. This research offers a new perspective on the evolution of performance aesthetics in Chinese traditional theatre and underscores Xun Huisheng’s profound influence on gender representation and stage practice.

Keywords: *Xun Huisheng, Peking Opera Theatre, Huadan, Chinese Performance Arts, Gender and Performance*



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1 INTRODUCTION

The first half of the twentieth century was a particularly glorious era in the development of Peking Opera, during which it reached its artistic peak, especially in the Republican period (1912–1949) (Ye, 1994; Zhong, 2023). This was a time when the art of performance was refined to its highest level through the contributions of outstanding artists known collectively as the Four Great Dan. These four—Mei Lanfang (1894–1961), Cheng Yanqiu (1904–1958), Xun Huisheng (1899–1968), and Shang Xiaoyun (1900–1976)—were male performers celebrated for their portrayals of female roles (*dan*) (Ma et al., 2019). Each represented a distinctive artistic school, and together they elevated the *dan* performance system to an unprecedented level of sophistication and expressiveness (Luo, 2012).

The early twentieth century in China was also a time of profound social change and cultural renewal. Peking Opera, as the nation’s dominant theatrical form, stood at a critical intersection between preserving traditional aesthetics and embracing modernisation (Hu, 1995). Within this historical context, the Four Great Dan not only defined the artistic standards of the era but also embodied the cultural negotiations of a society in transition. Their performances reflected the tension between the old and the new, the classical and the modern. Among them, Xun Huisheng distinguished himself through his innovative interpretation of the *huadan* role type, bringing fresh vitality, realism, and emotional depth to the portrayal of female characters (Liu, 2013). His artistic innovation became a vital force in the broader reform and modernisation of Peking Opera.

Compared to Mei Lanfang's elegance and grandeur, Cheng Yanqiu's profound subtlety, and Shang Xiayun's vigorous clarity, Xun Huisheng's artistic path was both distinctive and groundbreaking. Among the Four Great Dan, the other three mainly specialised in *qingyi* roles—refined and dignified female characters—while Xun Huisheng (1900–1968) stood out for his focus on the *huadan* role type. Xun was an outstanding master of Peking Opera who founded the Xun School Art System and played a significant role in the reform of Peking Opera (Zhu, 2005). Rather than confining himself to the dignified and elegant (*duānzhuāng diǎnyǎ*) archetype traditionally esteemed by the *qingyi* role type, he shifted his artistic focus to the *huadan*—a role type typically portraying lively young women or clever maidservants (Wang, 2021). Through his refined interpretations of *huadan* characters, Xun vividly depicted women's distinctive temperament and inner emotions, earning him the title of “the King of *Huadan*” (Li, 2010). His contributions went far beyond technical mastery: he boldly integrated the lively rhythm, realistic expression, and regional flavor of theatres such as Hebei *Bangzi* opera into the highly codified system of Peking Opera, forming a new artistic language that was both graceful and authentic. Many of the plays he created or adapted have continued to be performed to this day (He, 2016), attesting to his enduring influence. Instead of relying on the sometimes exaggerated or stylised conventions of the traditional *huadan*, Xun infused his performances with captivating vitality, expressive naturalness, and emotional sincerity that resonated deeply with the image of the “New Woman” emerging in Republican-era urban culture. His artistic practice was therefore not merely an innovation in performance technique but also a subtle cultural intervention that reflected and responded to the social transformations of his time. This orientation also resonates with Confucian thought, which values order and harmony, yet does not imply blind submission to authority or acceptance of the status quo (Wang et al., 2025).

Despite his achievements, Xun Huisheng has not received commensurate attention in overseas academia, where research still largely focuses on Mei Lanfang. In view of this, this study aims to fill this gap. It is grounded in first-hand historical sources from the Republican period (1920s-1940s), primarily theatre reviews and critical essays from newspapers and periodicals, and seeks to answer the following core questions:

- (i) What are the specific characteristics of Xun Huisheng's *huadan* performance art across the four dimensions of singing, speech, acting, and combat?
- (ii) In what key aspects did his artistic innovations break through the stylised norms of traditional Peking Opera?
- (iii) How was his performance style received by contemporary critics, and what influence has it had on later Peking Opera?

By exploring these questions, this paper strives to restore Xun Huisheng's historical profile as a theatrical reformer and, through this specific case, reveal the complexity and diverse paths of Peking Opera's modern transformation. It argues that Xun Huisheng's synthesis of regional folk traditions with metropolitan Peking Opera created a new, hybrid aesthetic that was both authentically Chinese and strikingly modern, ultimately expanding the emotional and social vocabulary of the stage.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the “Four Great Dan” has accumulated considerable results in both Chinese and foreign academia, but the focus is unevenly distributed. In English-language scholarship, Joshua Goldstein's *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870–1937* (2007) provides an excellent socio-historical analysis of Peking Opera's modernisation but uses Mei Lanfang as its primary case study, inevitably casting the others in a supporting role. However, in comparing the “Four Great Dan”, it notes that Xun Huisheng retained and mastered the so-called “*qiao*” (high-platform wooden shoes) technique and discusses his very extensive repertoire—over 300 plays, including several “signature plays” covering tragedy, comedy, martial plays, and adaptations from regional operas—thus demonstrating Xun's performative energy in themes of “ordinary people's lives”. Yet, it does not present a complete and systematic picture of Xun Huisheng's performance art.

Research in the Chinese-speaking world shows deeper attention to Xun Huisheng. For instance, Qin Huasheng (2001) and Wang Shengmin (2021) have clearly identified the characteristics of Xun's absorption of *Bangzi* opera elements. Wu Yifan (2022) analysed Xun Huisheng's singing style. However, some studies still have two shortcomings: firstly, an over-reliance on secondary accounts or general observations rather than being rigorously grounded in the immediate, first-hand critical responses of his era; secondly, often remaining at the level of generalised descriptions of artistic features, failing to fully situate them within the specific socio-cultural context of the Republican period, thus weakening the cultural critical significance of his innovations.

The contribution of this study lies in its methodological focus. It strives to return to the historical scene, using immediate theatre reviews from *Shen Bao* and *Ta Kung Pao* and professional debates from *The Theatre Monthly* as the main analytical texts. This approach is methodologically justified by the unique nature of the Republican-era media landscape. The Republican period in China witnessed the rapid development of print media, wherein newspapers and magazines played a crucial role in disseminating and popularising Peking Opera (Yeh, 2008). The performances of artists like Xun Huisheng became frequent subjects of critical reviews by scholars and audiences. These discussions not only reflected public engagement but also actively contributed to the artistic development of the genre (Wang, 2014; Shan, 2021). As mass communication materials, these periodical reviews are especially valuable for examining cultural change and artistic trends within a specific historical context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consequently, the Republican era was selected as the focus of this study, as its surviving documentary materials preserve authentic, contemporaneous records of artistic practice, providing an objective and historically grounded foundation for analysis (Xu & Xu, 2007; Fu, 2019).

These historical materials not only record the specific details of Xun's art but also vividly preserve the audience reactions and critical dialogues of the time, providing an irreplaceable perspective for understanding how "Xun School" art was perceived, accepted, and debated by his contemporaries, thereby allowing for a more three-dimensional and historical assessment of the substance and impact of his artistic innovation.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine Xun Huisheng's performance innovations within their historical and cultural contexts. Textual analysis enables a close reading of primary theatrical reviews, critical essays, and performance records from the Republican era, focusing not only on explicit descriptions of artistic technique but also on the underlying aesthetic values and ideological positions embedded in these texts. This approach is particularly appropriate for traditional theatre studies, where performance practices are often documented indirectly through contemporaneous writings rather than audiovisual recordings.

Through this method, the paper systematically identifies key artistic innovations in Xun's practice—across singing, speech, movement, and role-type versatility—and interprets them in light of broader cultural discourses and aesthetic transformations of the early twentieth century.

3.2 Data Collection

The analysis is based on primary historical materials drawn from major Republican-era newspapers and specialised theatre periodicals, housed in the National Library of China (Beijing) and the Shanghai Library.

Newspapers: Reviews and cultural supplements from publications such as *Shen Bao* and *Ta Kung Pao* provide insights into the perspectives of mainstream intellectuals and urban audiences.

Theatre Periodicals: Journals such as *The Theatre Monthly* and *Banyue Xiju* offer in-depth professional commentary and debates within the theatrical community.

These sources serve three key functions:

- (i) Documenting technical innovations in performance (e.g., vocal style, speech patterns, staging).
- (ii) Recording audience and critical reception, thereby revealing contemporary aesthetic expectations.
- (iii) Providing evidence of artistic debates, which illuminate the ideological stakes of Xun's reforms.

These archives offer a wealth of material, including performance announcements, detailed reviews that describe specific vocal and physical techniques, audience testimonials, and transcripts of critical debates between traditionalists and modernists.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is informed by two complementary frameworks:

3.3.1 The Internal Aesthetic System of Peking Opera

The Four Skills (Sì Gōng): Peking Opera, as a major branch of traditional Chinese theatre, inherits and refines the internal aesthetic principles that have long shaped Chinese performing arts. Traditional theatre in China is a comprehensive art form that combines literature, music, dance, visual arts, martial arts, acrobatics, and character portrayal (Huang, 2002; Xing et al., 2024). Its mode of expression is rooted in the synthesis of *chang*, *nian*, *zuo*, *da* (singing, acting, speaking, and combat), which are performed within a stylised stage setting to depict historical or contemporary life and evoke a refined sense of beauty (Ding, 2009).

Drawing on the traditional taxonomy of *chang*, *nian*, *zuo*, *da* and the role-type conventions of *huadan* and *qingyi*, this framework provides a precise technical reference system. It allows the paper to situate Xun's artistic practices in relation to inherited conventions—clarifying whether specific gestures, vocal choices, or speech patterns represent continuities or deliberate transgressions.

3.3.2 Cultural Sociological Perspective

Situated within the socio-cultural milieu of Republican urban China, this framework examines Xun's artistic choices as cultural strategies that both responded to and shaped broader trends—such as the rise of the “New Woman,” vernacular modernity, and shifting audience tastes. His vernacularised speech, live painting performances, and reimagined female characters are interpreted as interventions in the negotiation between tradition and modernity.

By combining these frameworks, the study moves beyond descriptive performance analysis to a critical interpretation of Xun Huisheng as both an innovator within the operatic system and an active agent in cultural modernisation. These theoretical lenses guide the analysis presented in Section 4, where each artistic innovation is examined for both its formal characteristics and its broader aesthetic-cultural implications.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through the methodological approach outlined above, this study systematically identifies key artistic innovations in Xun's practice—across singing, speech, movement, and role-type versatility. The following sections present these findings and interpret them in light of the broader cultural discourses and aesthetic transformations of the early twentieth century.

4.1 Vocal Innovation: Fusion of *Bangzi* and *Pihuang*

Xun Huisheng's vocal artistry represents the foundation of the "Xun School" style. He creatively fused the passionate, melodically florid, and rhythmically flexible vocal characteristics of Hebei *Bangzi* (a regional opera known for its high-pitched and expressive style) with the more structured and refined *pihuang* musical system of Peking Opera. This synthesis forged a distinctive aesthetic of "softness concealing strength, grace and brightness" (*róu zhōng dài gāng, wǎnyuē tōuliàng*).

Timbre and Technique. Departing from the shrill, piercing falsetto conventionally used by *huadan* performers, Xun developed a sweet, charming, and mellifluous tone by skilfully blending falsetto and true voice. Technically, he was a master of subtle tremolos, portamento (sliding between notes), and intricate ornamentation. His signature technique of concluding phrases with a delicate nasal resonance (*bíyīn shōu qiāng*) added a unique, lingering charm that felt both spontaneous and deeply emotive.

Emotional Expression and Audience Impact. This vocal style was not merely ornamental but served as a powerful instrument for psychological characterisation and emotional storytelling. Its profound impact on audiences is vividly documented in contemporary reviews. For instance, an article titled "On Xun Huisheng" in *Tianjin Yishi Bao* (1936) explicitly praised his singing in *The Phoenix Hairpin* (*Chaitou Feng*) as "touching and moving". The author provided a compelling anecdote: "last winter at the Guotai Theatre during the performance of *The Phoenix Hairpin*, at the scene of 'death separation', those who shed tears of sympathy were not few, some could not bear the sorrow and left before the end, this shows how his acting was." This firsthand account demonstrates the ability of his vocal style to create an immersive tragic atmosphere and elicit strong empathetic responses. Beyond tragedy, Xun demonstrated remarkable versatility. Whether conveying the cheerful playfulness of Hongniang or the profound grief and indignation of Du Shiniang, he could aptly articulate the required emotions through subtle yet masterful changes in vocal colour and delivery.

This nuanced and emotionally resonant approach, underpinned by the innovative fusion of *Bangzi* and *pihuang*, significantly enhanced the expressive capacity of the *huadan* role. It moved the character type beyond mere vivacity or coquetry toward a more serious and psychologically complex dramatic expression, thereby redefining its artistic potential.

4.2 Cultural Cultivation: Intersections of Visual and Performing Arts

Beyond performance technique, Xun's achievements were grounded in a deliberate cultivation of cultural literacy, particularly in painting and calligraphy. Contemporary sources (*Shanghai Pictorial*, 1927; *Li Yuan Gong Bao*, 1930; *Beijing Pictorial*, 1931; *Yi Shi Bao*, 1933) document his formal study under established masters and the high demand for his artworks.

This proficiency found striking theatrical expression in his 1926 production *Danqing Yin*, in which Xun pioneered "live painting" on stage. Rather than serving as mere decoration, the act of painting was integrated dramaturgically, recalibrating the relationship between performer, medium, and theatrical space. By painting plum blossoms, bamboo, or calligraphy before the audience, he simultaneously heightened authenticity and expanded theatrical expressivity. As *Xi Bao* (1939) observed, this practice became widely emulated, inaugurating a new performative convention.

Contemporary media framed this innovation as a hallmark of Xun's artistry, effectively positioning him as a multidisciplinary cultural producer and blurring the boundaries between fine and performing arts.

4.3 Vernacular Speech and Expressive Naturalness

Xun's most radical departure from tradition occurred in the domain of spoken delivery (*nian*). While retaining the structure of *jingbai* and *yunbai*, he developed a hybrid *xiebai* style characterised by colloquial exclamatory particles (“a,” “ya,” “yo”) and childlike intonations. This created an unprecedented psychological immediacy, rendering his portrayals of young female characters strikingly lifelike and emotionally transparent.

Influenced by the emerging spoken drama (*huaju*), this vernacularisation responded to modern urban audiences' shifting aesthetic expectations. By embedding natural speech patterns within the operatic framework, Xun challenged the stylised distance of traditional performance and repositioned *huadan* speech as a vehicle for character interiority, rather than as formulaic ornamentation.

4.4 Physical Embodiment: The Expressive Body

Xun Huisheng's physical artistry (*zuo*) was widely celebrated for its refinement and emotional precision. Contemporary critics often described his stage presence as “mesmerising,” praising his rare ability to “*sing and act with equal brilliance.*” His movements were marked by suppleness and restraint—“*lithic and graceful*” (*ē'nuó*)—and his eyes were consistently noted as his most expressive instrument. Through subtle shifts in gaze and delicate facial expressions, he could convey an entire emotional spectrum, from gentle shyness to sharp intelligence and deep sorrow.

This sensitivity to detail reflected Xun's deep psychological insight into his characters. Every gesture, glance, and motion appeared carefully designed yet never mechanical, combining technical mastery with genuine emotional experience. His performances revealed an extraordinary balance between external stylisation and internal truth—a fusion that elevated his *huadan* portrayals beyond conventional formula.

A key feature of his performance technique was his mastery of *caiqiao*—performing while wearing high-platform wooden shoes—a physically demanding practice that endowed his movement with both historical authenticity and aesthetic delicacy (Cheng, 1959). Yet, Xun went further by cleansing the *huadan* repertoire of exaggerated or overtly suggestive gestures that had once characterised the role type. Instead, he favoured gestures rooted in everyday observation: a fleeting glance, a subtle turn of the wrist, or a graceful inclination of the body that vividly conveyed individuality and emotion. His artistic aim, as many critics observed, was to “portray the disposition and character of the figures in the plays in a positive and uplifting light,” transforming *huadan* from coquettish caricatures into believable, multidimensional women.

This artistic transformation was perhaps most evident in his celebrated portrayal of Hongniang (*The Little Maid Named Hongniang*). Reviews, such as that in *Ta Kung Pao* (1935), emphasised how Xun's finely tuned gestures—quick glances, nimble hand movements, and spirited posture—brought to life a witty, lively, and emotionally complex young maid. His performance conveyed not only Hongniang's humour and intelligence but also her warmth and moral courage, allowing audiences to perceive her as a psychologically complete and socially resonant figure rather than a mere supporting comic role.

In this sense, Xun's artistry represented a conscious reorientation of female representation on the Peking Opera stage—from conventionally stylised types to emotionally authentic and intellectually nuanced characters. His *embodied technique* thus redefined the expressive potential of *huadan* performance, integrating aesthetic grace with human depth and setting a new benchmark for female characterisation in Peking Opera.

4.5 Transcending Role-Type Boundaries

A defining hallmark of Xun Huisheng's artistry was his remarkable versatility across role types, often performing dual or even contrasting roles within a single production. This ability to transcend the rigid *hangdang* (role-type) system not only showcased his extraordinary technical mastery but also challenged the traditional boundaries of gender and characterisation in Peking Opera.

In *Fan Jiang Guan*, for example, Xun first appeared as Fan Lihua, a *daomadan* (martial female) in armor, displaying heroic grandeur through highly stylised combat movements. He then reemerged as Xue Jinlian, a *huadan* (vivacious young woman), capturing youthful playfulness and charm with delicate gestures and expressive glances. In *Da Ying Jie Lie*, he initially portrayed Chen Xiuying, a witty teahouse girl (*huadan*), before cross-dressing as the *wuxiaosheng* (young martial male) Wang Fugang—a vivid embodiment of heroic masculinity rarely attempted by *dan* actors. Likewise, in *Xun Guan Niang*, he fused the elegance of a *guimendan* (dignified young lady) with the athletic vigor of a *wudan* (martial female), presenting a character both intelligent and courageous as she broke through enemy lines.

Moreover, Xun was celebrated for his “dual-role performance in one play” (*yì xì shuāng jué*), in which he successively portrayed two entirely different female characters. Notable examples include *Hong Lou Er You*, where he alternated between the resolute and fierce Third Sister You and the fragile, tragic Second Sister You, and *Kan Yu Chuan*, in which he contrasted the dignified Yu Suqiu with the lively Han Yujie.

Contemporary reviews—including *Shuntian Shibao* (1926), *Xinwen Bao Benbu Fukan* (1926), and *The Theatre Monthly* (1931)—praised his exceptional command of both literary and martial techniques. Critics emphasised that his solid foundation in martial arts endowed his performances with remarkable agility and rhythm, while his refined acting captured subtle shifts of personality and emotion. Through these transformations, Xun not only displayed unparalleled artistic breadth but also questioned the restrictive hierarchies of the *hangdang* system, expanding the dramaturgical and expressive possibilities of Peking Opera.

4.6 Character Reinterpretation and Modern Female Agency

Xun's innovations in voice, speech, movement, and role versatility culminated in the reconfiguration of female stage characters. His portrayals ranged from lively and interesting young girls (*Hongniang*), gentle and sentimental daughters (*Huo Xiaoyu*), and quick-witted and courageous heroic women (*Xun Guanniang*) to tragic but resilient figures (*Du Shiniang*, *Honglou Er You*). Across these roles, he foregrounded agency, intelligence, and emotional depth—qualities aligned with the Republican-era “New Woman” discourse.

This transformation was not merely aesthetic. It intersected with contemporary social movements that advocated for marital freedom and gender equality, enabling his performances to serve as subtle cultural interventions. Urban female audiences found in his characters both emotional resonance and models of modern subjectivity.

Furthermore, Xun Huisheng enjoyed particularly strong popularity among female audiences—including urban students, housewives, and professional women. This popularity stemmed from his ability to embody vibrant, authentic, and occasionally defiant young women whose independence and wit challenged conventional femininity. His attention to realistic stage details—such as naturalistic makeup, hairstyles, and costume design—further enhanced this connection, reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities and evolving self-awareness of modern women in the Republican era. Through these performances, Xun became more than a theatrical innovator; he emerged as a cultural icon whose artistic image symbolised a new form of female consciousness and social participation.

4.7 Critical Reception: Aesthetic Tensions and Modernity

Xun's artistic reforms provoked sharply divergent critical responses, reflecting the aesthetic and ideological tensions that characterised the Republican period. Progressive intellectuals praised his “new performance of old plays” (*jiù xì xīn yǎn*), as well as the vivid sense of everyday life and human insight expressed in his private repertoire, celebrating these as creative renewals of Peking Opera traditions. Traditionalists, however, decried his style as “too lively,” “unrestrained,” or even “lacking refinement,” arguing that his approach blurred the boundaries of established stage convention.

In reality, Xun consciously purified the *huadan* repertoire by removing the coarse and erotic gestures of earlier performance traditions. He transformed them into movements of grace, humour, and vivid realism, thereby elevating the artistic value of *huadan* roles. His plays often depicted the joys and sorrows of ordinary women—stories of love, betrayal, and resilience drawn from everyday life. This realism, however, also became the reason some conservative critics labelled his art as “popular” rather than “refined”. Their criticism did not imply moral vulgarity but revealed a deeper cultural divide: Xun's art appealed to the urban public, in contrast to the elite elegance associated with contemporaries like Mei Lanfang, who specialised in divine or aristocratic heroines.

Thus, the debates surrounding Xun's artistry illuminate how the modernisation of Peking Opera involved not merely technical reform but also a redefinition of aesthetic values—between the refined and the popular, the traditional and the modern. Positioned at the heart of these tensions, Xun Huisheng played a pivotal role in reshaping the aesthetic sensibility of modern Chinese theatre.

5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Xun Huisheng's legacy is that of a transformative artist who redefined the boundaries of his tradition. By masterfully synthesising the raw emotional power of *Bangzi* opera with the sophisticated codification of Peking Opera, he created a performance style that was both deeply rooted and strikingly innovative. His work demonstrated that modernisation was not merely a matter of adopting some Western forms (like spoken drama) but could be achieved through the intelligent and creative recombination of indigenous Chinese traditions.

His innovations in vocal delivery, vernacular speech, and psychologically motivated movement moved the *huadan* role from the margins of comic relief to the centre of serious artistic expression. More importantly, his characterisations offered a new vision of femininity on the Chinese stage—one that was active, intelligent, complex, and profoundly relatable to the changing society of the Republican era. He didn't just perform roles; he embodied the spirit of a new age.

For subsequent research, two avenues are particularly promising. First, a comparative study of Xun Huisheng and Mei Lanfang's interpretations of similar roles (e.g., tragic heroines) would illuminate the diverse paths modernisation could take. Second, tracing the lineage of the “Xun School” (Xunpai) and its influence on contemporary female performers of *huadan* roles would reveal the enduring impact of his techniques in a performance context where the gender of the performer now often aligns with the gender of the role.

Finally, tracing the lineage of the “Xun School” (*Xunpai*) and its influence on contemporary female performers of *huadan* roles would reveal how his legacy continues to shape the expressive vocabulary of Peking Opera, especially in an era when gender alignment between performer and role has become the norm. However, the accelerating process of modernisation presents growing challenges to the preservation and transmission of traditional performing arts (Deng & Hassan, 2024). In this context, fostering cultural awareness and adaptability has become essential to sustaining artistic heritage in a changing society (Yi et al., 2024).

This study, through its reliance on primary historical sources, underscores the value of contemporary criticism as a lens for understanding artistic innovation. It provides a methodological framework for analysing how performance styles are constructed, contested, and ultimately canonised, offering a model that can be applied to the study of other revolutionary artists across global theatrical traditions.

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The first author conducted the study and collected all research materials, while the second author, as the supervisor, conceptualised the research idea and provided continuous guidance and critical revisions throughout the writing process.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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