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BIOGRAPHY OF YING RUOCHENG

He is one of China's most accomplished and admired actors. There is more to him, however, than the image on stage or screen. He lived a life and charted a career that, even in the most difficult of times, attested to a steadfast dedication to excellence in his craft as well as an abiding faith in the deeply universal values of art.

Ying Ruocheng was born in Beijing to a family of intellectuals on June 21, 1929. His grandfather was a Manchu scholar named Ying Lianzhi (Ying Lien-chih) who died not too long after Ying was born. He was "the most interesting person in the Ying clan, much more interesting than I am, actually," Ying fondly says. Lianzhi was involved in the Reform Movement of the 1890s and associated with such men as Yan Fu (Yen Fu). An important figure in modern Chinese intellectual history, Yan Fu was a great translator of Western social classics (such as the works of Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith). Together with Liang Qichao, he was a major spokesperson of the reform movement that was led by young gentry scholars who made up the first generation of the modern Chinese intelligentsia. Anxious about the threat of foreign imperialism and convinced of the need to modernize China, they had turned away from Confucian values and traditional institutions to embrace Western ideas.

When imperial authorities cracked down on the reformers, Lianzhi had to flee China to escape persecution, traveling to Hong Kong, then Vietnam, and back to China to hide out in remote Yunnan. Granted amnesty in 1901, he traveled to Shanghai and then moved to Tianjin where, again in association with Yan Fu, he edited the newspaper *Dagongbao* beginning in 1902. *Dagongbao*, Ying says, was "the paper with the most integrity in the last century."

Like Yan Fu, Lianzhi believed in the need for China to assimilate the "new learning" *(xin xue)* of the West. Early in his career, he converted to Catholicism after, it is said, he studiously examined the relative merits of various religions. He had a pivotal role in the founding of the Catholic University of Beijing (Furen), a pioneering university in China established in 1925 by the American Cassinese Congregation of the Benedictine Order and then transferred to the German-based Society of the Divine Word (SVD) in 1933. Though Lianzhi and his family became pillars of the Catholic Church in China, Lianzhi remained a strong-minded liberal. He was once threatened with excommunication by the French archbishop of Beijing for his criticism of the wealth of the Church. Like legendary sixteenth-century Jesuit Mateo Ricci, Lianzhi believed in the emancipating power of education rather than of wealth. In his last will and testament, he enjoined his descendants to go into industry and business instead of living off other people's rents by accumulating land.

There were other interesting characters in the Ying family. Ying Ruocheng fondly remembers a brother of his grandfather, a famous wrestler who was part of the emperor's stable of wrestlers and had a wide following performing in various parts of China. From his family background, the young Ying surely imbibed something of his cosmopolitanism, interest in cross-culturalism, and love for theater.

Ying's father, Ying Qianli (Ying Ch'ien-li), Lianzhi's only son, was himself a remarkable man. In 1912, when he was twelve, he was sent to Europe to study, living first in Belgium, then Ireland, and finally England. Stranded in Europe by the Great War, he was cared for by a Belgian Catholic priest, a follower of Mateo Ricci, who had become so Sinicized he dressed as a Chinese, spoke Chinese, and took a Chinese name (Nei Mingyuan). Years later, this extraordinary priest died in China fighting the Japanese, a sacrifice that was honored by Mao Zedong himself.

Qianli was nineteen when he returned to China to be wed in a traditionally arranged marriage. His wife, Cai Baozhen, the daughter of the president of the university in Tianjin, was educated in a Catholic school and, like her husband, spoke English. Qianli and Baozhen raised a family of four sons (including Ying Ruocheng) and two daughters.

An admirer of John Donne and the metaphysical poets, Qianli worked as a professor of English literature and head of the English Department in the Catholic university his father helped found. When the German priests of the Society of Divine Word assumed control of the university, Qianli acted as the university's secretary-general and virtually ran the institution since the Germans knew little about China when they came in. Also known by his Christian name, Ignatius Ying Ch'ien-li, Qianli was so active in the Church that he was conferred a papal award as Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Sylvester in 1941.

When Qianli returned to China in 1919, the country was astir with the political activism of intellectuals and the common people. Anti-foreign sentiment reached a high on May 4, 1919, when more than three thousand university students in Beijing
demonstrated against the decision of the Western democracies at the Versailles peace conference to transfer the former German imperialist concessions in Shandong Province to Japan as war booty. In what was called the May Fourth Movement, unrest spread as strikes and demonstrations took place in various parts of the country. These protests, directed as much against China's feudal order as against foreign imperialism, helped set the ground for the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party in 1920–1921.

It appears that Qianli was not directly involved in the May Fourth Movement. He had just returned to the country. Trained in Europe and raised a Catholic, an academic in a German-run university, he was too removed from the greater mass of the population. (It must be noted that Catholics constituted a tiny minority in China; even the student population of Beijing's Catholic university was predominantly non-Catholic.) For all this, Qianli was no less a patriot. During the war between China and Japan (1937–1945), he was active in anti-Japanese activities and was imprisoned for three years.

Ying Ruocheng grew up in an environment of relative privilege as well as exceptional stress. Of Manchu origin (thus belonging to the country's dominant political and ethnic class), his family lived in the shadow of imperial power. His grandfather's family resided close to the emperor's Summer Palace and his grandmother, Aisin Giero, was an aristocrat related, if remotely, to the imperial family. As a child in the 1930s, Ying lived with his family in a palatial residence next door to the Catholic university, located near the old imperial section of Beijing called the Forbidden City. This huge mansion belonged to a prince who had fled the city together with Pu Yi, China's last emperor, after Nationalist general Feng Yuxiang (FengYu-hsiang) occupied Beijing. The mansion housed professors of the university and here Ying's family lived with their servants until 1940, when the building was taken over by the Japanese.

Ying was raised a Catholic. He even learned to recite prayers in Latin. He grew up in a nonconventional environment in which, unlike in the typical Chinese household, children were free to speak their minds even in front of their parents.

He started school in the Xiang Shan orphanage where an aunt of his was a teacher. After a year, he was transferred to a primary school of the Normal University of Beijing, and then to an experimental boys' middle school attached to the Catholic university. His father was headmaster of this school, in addition to having other duties in the university. As a boy, Ying loved sports and was so frisky he got into trouble for hitting one of his teachers with a slingshot. Thus, his parents transferred him—he was then twelve—to Tianjin, to board at a stricter school, Saint Louis, a British-style educational institution run by the Catholic Marist Brothers. He was briefly expelled from this school for disciplinary reasons but was later allowed back. This was the time of the Japanese occupation and Ying's father was in prison for anti-Japanese activities.

Saint Louis was an exceptional school that had a mix of foreigners as teachers, followed the Cambridge system, used English as the medium of instruction, and had students of many nationalities, including Jews who had poured in from Europe to seek refuge in China. It was, for Ying, like studying "abroad" in China. He enjoyed the experience of interacting with many foreign students and never took himself to be either different or inferior.

In 1946, Ying entered Qinghua (Tsinghua) University, majoring in English literature. It was an exciting time for him, during which he developed his interest in drama. Qinghua gathered teachers and students who were, or later became, leading lights of Chinese theater, such as Cao Yu (Ts'ao Yu), Zhang Junxiang, and Zhong Jino. The most notable of these figures—one with whom Ying would have a long association—was Cao Yu, widely regarded as China's foremost modern playwright. A graduate of Qinghua, he helped pave the way for the emergence of modern Chinese theater with plays such as *Thunderstorm* (1934), *Sunrise* (1936), and *The Wilderness* (1937).

While a student, Ying developed his appetite for movies and the theater. This was a golden age of modern Chinese cinema, and the years after the war with Japan saw an influx of American movies. Ying frequented the cinemas and avidly watched Chinese, American, and European movies. He loved Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, James Cagney, and Bette Davis. He even dreamed of directing films someday.

The stage, however, was his passion. The first play he appeared in was *The Corn Is Green*, in which he and Wu Shiliang, a fellow student he would marry upon graduating from the university, played the lead roles. A 1930s melodrama by British playwright Emlyn Williams about a remote mining village in nineteenth-century Wales, the play was not a wholly exotic production since it dealt with a theme popular in China at the time: social and economic oppression in a class-divided society.

China's struggle with Japan and its great civil war framed Ying's entire youth. When World War II ended, the truce between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party collapsed into the bloody civil war of 1946–1949. At the time, there was an almost universal antipathy toward the ruling Guomindang, particularly among university students, because of the economic miseries, corruption, and military abuses. Qinghua was a liberal bastion, and anti-Guomindang sentiments among students were strong. Ying shared these sentiments. He, too, placed his hope in the building of a society that was fair, free, and more or less based on Western democratic concepts. He kept a certain distance from the events, however, particularly the rapid advance of the Communist forces, aware of his peculiar position in Chinese society. He was a Catholic, Westernized, and the son of an "establishment intellectual."

After the People's Liberation Army (PLA) liberated Beijing in February 1949, however, Ying joined theater friends who were organized into a propaganda group that moved with the PLA. "It was a heady time," Ying said. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong was in Beijing to proclaim the birth of the People's Republic of China. Chiang Kai-shek and the remaining members of his defeated army and bureaucracy had fled to the island of Taiwan.

The events had a tragic consequence for the Ying family. When Ying went home to Beijing, after traveling with his theater troupe doing propaganda work for the PLA, he learned that his father was among those who had fled to Taiwan together with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government. (It is estimated that more than two million people—troops, civil servants, refugees—fled to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek.) Qianli's departure was so sudden that he had no time to pack anything but his briefcase. He left thinking that an agreement would be reached between the Communists and the Guomindang and that he would be back in Beijing in three or four months. (Twenty years later, as "two Chinas" emerged, Ying's father was still in Taiwan, working as a professor of English at Taipei's Furen University and the National Taiwan University.)

With Qianli's flight to Taiwan, his wife was left to support the family. Baozhen was working at this time as chief librarian of a children's library in Beijing. Though the family was not persecuted, this was clearly a sad and difficult time for its members.

For all this, the triumph of the Communists marked a new phase in Ying's life. Despite the disruption of schools due to the war, Ying graduated from the university in 1950 with a bachelor's degree in Western literature. On July 17 of the same year, he married his theater partner, Wu Shiliang. The country was at the cusp of momentous changes. "China," Ying wrote years later, "was full of dreams."

Modern Chinese drama began in 1907, when a small group of Chinese students organized the Spring Willow Society in Japan and performed such translated plays as *La Dame aux Camelias* by Alexandre Dumas fils and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* The practitioners of this new genre called it "new theater," and later "civilized drama," to distinguish it from traditional theater. It was also called "spoken drama" to demarcate its important departure from the traditional Beijing opera style, which is essentially "singing drama." The May Fourth Movement in the 1920s used the new form as a vehicle for modernity and social reform. Dramatic clubs or societies were organized, foreign plays (most prominently, the works of Henrik Ibsen) were translated into Chinese, and original Chinese plays in the new style were staged. The productions at this time were crude and amateurish. Not until the 1930s and 1940s—particularly because of the efforts of Cao Yu—did modern Chinese drama finally come of age in both writing and performance.

It was at this time that Ying Ruocheng entered a life in theater. Fresh from the university, Ying and his wife joined Beijing People's Art Theater. The People's Art Theater had its start in a huge company that encompassed the various performing arts and had subsidiary companies or groups in fields such as ballet and opera. It was headed by a Moscow-trained artist named Li Bozhao, wife of Yang Shangkun (Yang Shang-k'un), a high party official who later served as president of the People's Republic. Tough and powerful, she could order generals to help out in rehearsals and even had Mao himself appear in a play in a cameo role. It was no surprise that her imperious manner earned her enemies. In 1952, she was replaced by Zhou Yang, the "czar" of literary and cultural matters of the Chinese Communist Party. Under Zhou, the cultural conglomerate was broken up into seven groups, with Beijing People's Art Theater designated as the drama company.

Theater was spirited and relatively open in the early years of Communist rule. Artists sought to appropriate the best of Western theater. Beijing People's Art Theater staged, in addition to Chinese plays, the works of Shakespeare, Molière, and Chekhov. Russian influence was particularly strong. Russians who worked with Chinese artists included experts from the Moscow Art Theater (founded by renowned acting theorist and teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky) and the Vakhtangov School of Acting (established by Eugene Vakhtangov, Stanislavsky's friend and a proponent of his methods). The artistic director of Beijing People's Art Theater, Zhao Juyin, combined European training with his knowledge

of traditional Chinese theater to give shape and style to the company's repertoire. A great artist who was called "the Stanislavsky of China," Zhao Juyin was one of the intellectuals who was persecuted and died during the Cultural Revolution.

Ying was one of the founding figures of the company. He was a lead actor and translator and was responsible for evaluating new plays for staging as well as counseling new playwrights on stagecraft. In heady years of experimentation, Ying mastered his craft in productions of Chinese and Western plays. He and his wife completely supported themselves through their work in theater. A tradition of state support for the arts made full-time work by artists viable. Ying and his wife not only received regular salaries, they also lived in the theater when this was convenient or necessary. They had the benefit of an institutional base with adequate facilities. Beijing People's Art Theater had the best theater facilities in the whole of China: an auditorium with a seating capacity of 1,400, a stage with modern equipment (including a revolving stage), three rehearsal halls, lighting apparatuses, and an acoustic system provided by the East Germans.

At this time, Ying also acted in movies and wrote plays for the company. An instance of the latter was a play about the Democratic Republic of Congo, dealing with the murder in 1960 of its leader, Patrice Lumumba—a play commissioned by the Propaganda Department of the Beijing local government. Ying also translated English plays, such as Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, into Chinese.

In 1952, when he was only twenty-three, Ying Ruocheng translated Stanislavsky to Chinese by publishing a work based on the English text called *Stanislavsky Produces Othello*, a production guide written by Stanislavsky for the Moscow Art Theater. It was, however, as an actor that Ying was most popular, playing leading roles in plays such as Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* and Maksim Gorky's *Igor Burichov and Others.* As an actor, he created a body of work inspired by the passion for excellence in the craft and the "truth" of performance that Stanislavsky (who was obviously an influence on Ying) stressed as fundamental principles in acting.

The years that followed the establishment of the People's Republic were volatile and dangerous. In the state's drive to build a socialist society, millions of Chinese were executed, imprisoned, or sent to forced labor camps. Intellectuals were particularly vulnerable in the state's cyclical campaigns of repression. In 1951, a "thought reform" campaign was carried out after Mao Zedong called for the reformation of "bourgeois intellectuals" to hasten the transition to socialism. While there was little physical coercion at this time (although some intellectuals were sent to the countryside for "reeducation through labor"), social and psychological pressures were intense, exercised through such means as mass meetings and group sessions of criticism and self-criticism. The campaign of repression receded in 1952 but came alive again in 1955–1956 in the Si Fan Movement, or the Campaign to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, which came down hard on intellectuals (as instanced in the vilification and imprisonment of the Marxist literary critic Hu Feng, a follower of the celebrated writer Lu Xun).

In 1956, the government's need to regain the support of a disaffected intelligentsia and revitalize a conservative bureaucracy led to the Hundred Flowers campaign ("Let a hundred flowers blossom, let a hundred schools of thought contend."). Writers, artists, and scholars were wary of the state's intention since the realm of freedom allowed was ambiguously defined, but a significant number of intellectuals began to freely express their views. By the beginning of 1957, the campaign was suppressed as authorities warned of "poisonous weeds" that had sprung among the blooming flowers. There was again a new wave of repression. Then, in 1958, the Great Leap Forward campaign (1958–1960), aimed at rapidly industrializing the countryside, proved socially disastrous, resulting in restrictions

on cultural activities. And then again this was followed by a relaxation of controls in 1961–1962, when writers and artists were allowed greater latitude in style, subject matter, and themes, so long as they did not directly criticize state policies.

Ying pursued the arts at a time and place perilous for artists. He recalls the frequent shifts in the state's policies and practice in the cultural field. The year 1958 was relatively open, the period of 1959–1960 was restrictive, and then 1961 was again more relaxed. Intellectuals had to keep their ears close to the ground, keep a low profile, and use "cunning" to avoid persecution. In the anti-rightist campaign of the 1950s, Ying came out relatively unscathed.

He did not, however, escape the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Aimed at purging society of traditional and revisionist tendencies, this traumatic phase in modern Chinese history caused great suffering. Close to half a million Chinese perished. As a social group, intellectuals became the political scapegoats of both radical and conservative factions in the Cultural Revolution. They were among the first victims of the revolution, subjected to physically as well as psychologically agonizing "study and criticism" sessions, arrested and jailed, or sent off to labor camps in remote parts of the country. A tragic episode in Chinese literary history was the persecution of Lao She, China's most revered playwright and author of *Rickshaw Boy.* Humiliated, his house pillaged and his books burned, the sixty-seven-year-old author committed suicide. His drowned body was found in Taiping Lake near Beijing in late August 1966.

The historian Maurice Meisner describes the intellectual life of this period thus:

> *Cultural as well as educational life seemed to descend to a dark and obscurantist age. Writers could not write or could not publish what they did write, for little was being published save for the writings of Mao and the political polemics involved in the ideological campaigns of the time. Artists did not paint and actors and musicians did not perform, save for those few involved in [Mao's wife] Jiang Qing's "revolutionary" ballets and operas, the main "cultural" product of the Cultural Revolution. Few new films were produced, and those made prior to 1966 were not shown. Most museums holding traditional or modern works of art were closed to the public.*
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> *Bookstore shelves were largely empty, having been purged of most Chinese as well as foreign literature. Virtually all academic, scientific, and cultural journals had been suspended in 1966, and few were permitted to resume publication during the remainder of the Maoist era. . . . Even the use of libraries was restricted. For intellectuals, the period of 1966–76 was truly the "ten lost years."*

Ying's family background, association with foreigners, and passion for Western theater exposed him to persecution. Accused of unhealthy leanings toward the West, he was, together with his wife, placed in a detention center. His eight-year-old son, Ying Da, was sent off to the care of his brother. With other young people, his daughter, eighteen-year-old Ying Xiaole, had to travel all the way to Inner Mongolia as a "volunteer" in the state's program of "social education." (Ying Da is now a television actor and director in China, while Ying Xiaole is a painter living in Chicago.)

Ying was in jail from 1968 to 1971. He was first held in the detention center in Beijing and then moved to Jixian, an obscure little place in the center of Hebei Province. His wife was kept in Beijing, detained in an old, damp building, which exacted a toll on her health. When she was freed, her back was bent and her hair had all turned white. "I still feel that

she died prematurely because of all that," Ying says. (Wu Shiliang died in 1988.) After Ying was released from detention, he was sent for "reeducation" in a "cadre school" in a farm near Beijing. This did not last long, however, as he was cleared of any crime and sent home. He was reunited with his wife (who was released four days before he was) and their son and daughter. For the next five years, Ying lived a quiet life, tending to household duties, making furniture, and whiling away time playing bridge with his friends. "Life was quite tolerable," he said.

He returned to theater in 1973 when the Beijing People's Art Theater tasked him to write a play. With a colleague, he traveled all the way to Wuhan for research and wrote a play in the socialist realist mode of the time, *Workers and Peasants Should Be One Family*, which was staged in 1974. Though the play conformed to what was the "official" theater in Mao's China, it was criticized for being politically incorrect. The play had the ill fortune of appearing at the time when the Party had launched its Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign, aimed at discrediting the reputation of Lin Biao. Lin Biao was China's minister of defense and one of the great heroes of the Chinese revolution. Once Mao's official heir apparent, he fell from grace shortly before he died in a mysterious plane crash in 1971.

The play Ying wrote was criticized as a diabolical example of "Lin Biao-Confucius tendencies." Ying himself could not understand what in the play made it a target of attack. He would, years later, wonder, asking with wry wit: "Why? I still don't understand. I don't think the two (Lin Biao and Confucius) were even acquainted." In truth, he was not really surprised. In China, art was a familiar counter in an unceasing drama of political intrigue that used interpretations of history and literary works as coded signs of the kinds of politics to be repudiated or promoted. The strange campaign to link Lin Biao and Confucius, for instance, invoked an episode that took place around 200 B.C. when, it was argued, Confucian scholars resisted the attempts of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty to unify China. Hence, in the logic of the Communist Party, Lin Biao represented a reactionary 2,500-year-old ideological tradition of opposition to national unity and political centralization. In essence, however, the Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius campaign had less to do with Lin Biao or Confucius than with the struggle within the Party on how the Cultural Revolution was to be evaluated and who was to lead China into the post–Cultural Revolution era and in what direction.

Ying was not persecuted, though the play was suppressed. In the post–Cultural Revolution era, party leaders had become wary of the dangers of descending into the kind of hysteria that caused such serious dislocations during the Cultural Revolution. Disillusioned, Ying left theater and joined Beijing's Foreign Languages Press as a journalist for the magazine *China Reconstructs.* His command of English made him a natural for the job and he enjoyed the work of interviewing important public figures. Journalism, however, was not really what he wanted to do with his life.

Significant changes were taking place in China, though these were not always apparent, predictable, or painless. In 1976, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai died, marking a momentous transition in the history of the People's Republic. At this time, moves were already underway to reverse the errors and excesses of the Cultural Revolution. These moves included the "smashing of the Gang of Four" in 1976, which was followed by their famous televised trial in 1980 for their responsibility for crimes committed during the Cultural Revolution. (The "gang" was composed of Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, Wang Hongwen, and Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, China's would-be cultural czar during the Cultural Revolution.)

After Mao's death in 1976, intellectuals regained some of their past status as the Communist Party gradually withdrew its control of most areas of life, except those that related directly to politics and such sensitive matters as birth control and religion. Hitherto

banned plays, operas, and films once again appeared in theaters. Literary and scholarly journals, dormant since 1966, resumed publication. A growing variety of new periodicals also appeared. Intellectuals who had been jailed or sent to labor in remote areas were rehabilitated. They slowly returned to the cities to resume their work in 1977 and 1978.

In late 1979, Ying returned to Beijing People's Art Theater to resume full-time work with the company. It was at this time that he joined the Communist Party. It appears that he did so not for strong ideological reasons. He later said: "I would say that I have decided to live with my world. There was little else I could do with my life."

The post-Mao era saw an end to China's isolation and a growing openness to contact with the outside world. This was foreshadowed by China's entry into the United Nations in October 1971 and US President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972. Invoking the principle of "making foreign things serve China," the government promoted international exchanges and encouraged the publication of new translations of Western literary classics. Deng Xiaoping came to power at the end of 1978 and for the next decade and a half presided over one of the most extraordinary episodes of economic growth in world history.

The change in the cultural terrain created new opportunities for Ying Ruocheng as an artist. He entered what may be the busiest and most productive period in his career.

When the famous American comedian Bob Hope came to China in 1979 to make one of his "road" shows, *The Road to China*, Ying acted as the comedian's translator. Taking place barely a decade after the Cultural Revolution, Bob Hope's visit to China was an amazing event. Of course, the television variety special had to steer clear of the censors and local sensitivities. One of the jokes Bob Hope had to excise from his material before the show was: "I had so much Chinese wine last night that when I woke up this morning my head felt like the Gang of Four." But the problem of cultural translation also provided Ying with his own opportunity for playing with the American comedian for the benefit of the Chinese audience. In his usual spiel, Bob Hope was saying that he's convinced he's now really in China because he has seen the Great Wall, which—he went on to say—reminded him of another great American edifice, Raquel Welch. Translating to Chinese on stage, Ying translated fluently and then, feigning ignorance, suddenly stopped, "By the way, *what* is a Raquel Welch?" That brought the Chinese house down.

In 1980, Ying made his first trip out of China. Upon the invitation of the British Council, Ying and his wife, together with two others, traveled to London. It was an exhilarating experience for Ying. They were taken to sites such as Hyde Park and Stratford-upon-Avon, but the highlight for Ying and his wife was West End in London. Ying saw his first Western musicals (*Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*). He was bowled over by the creativity and brashness of British stagecraft but, as drama, it was Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* that particularly impressed him. *Amadeus* (1979), a play about the rivalry between the youthful genius Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and the Viennese court composer Antonio Salieri, was a widely heralded play. (It was adapted as a film in 1984, directed by Milos Forman, and won eight Oscars or Academy Awards.) Ying was so impressed by the play and the British actor Paul Scofield's performance in it that he started working on staging the play himself when he returned to China. He subsequently had the chance to visit Peter Shaffer in New York and got his permission for the use of the play. *Amadeus* was staged in Chinese in 1985.

Other opportunities opened up for Ying. He had his first big international role as an actor when he played Kublai Khan in *Marco Polo*, an international film serialized on television and released in 1982. The movie, directed by the Italian Giuliano Montaldo, featured an all-star cast that included Anne Bancroft, John Gielgud, John Houseman, and Burt Lancaster. That Ying stood equal to some of the best acting talents in the world

affirmed his status as a world-class actor. It was also in connection with this project that, around 1981, Ying made his first trip to the United States when he flew to Los Angeles to do postproduction work for *Marco Polo.*

In 1982, Ying returned to the United States when he was appointed Visiting Professor of Theater and Asian Scholar-in-Residence at the University of Missouri under the sponsorship of the Edgar Snow Memorial Fund. In Missouri, he conducted classes and directed his own English translation of *The Family*, a play based on the classic novel by Ba Jin. During another stint with the university in 1984, he also directed for the Missouri Repertory Theater, *Fifteen Strings of Cash*, a play based on a classical tale going back to the Sung dynasty (960–1279).

As cultural contact between China and the West increased in the 1980s, Ying Ruocheng acquired an international reputation as an artist. In 1987, he played the role of the governor in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, a movie that won nine Academy Awards in the United States in 1988 and had a strong cast that included Peter O'Toole and John Lone. Released in Italy as *L'Ultimo imperatore* (1987), the magnificent film was inspired by the true story of Pu Yi, China's last emperor, and ranged from the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Ying also played a major role in Bertolucci's $35-million film, *Little Buddha* (1993), which retells the tale of Prince Siddharta, the young Buddha, through the modern story of a Tibetan Lama (played by Ying Ruocheng) who searches the world for his master whom he believes has been reincarnated as a nine-year-old boy in Seattle.

Ying's most challenging artistic experience was staging Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing in 1983. Ying himself translated this modern American classic into Chinese and played the central role of Willy Loman in its landmark staging in Beijing, which saw Arthur Miller come to China to direct the play.

Ying relates that when Beijing People's Art Theater decided to put on a play by Arthur Miller, their first choice was *All My Sons* because they felt it would be easier for the Chinese audience to understand and appreciate. With some of his colleagues, including Cao Yu, who was then president of the company, Ying argued that *Death of a Salesman* would be the better choice since it was more representative of Miller's work and a more profound piece of drama. Ying later explained that he also chose *Death of a Salesman* because its drama techniques were a radical departure from the naturalistic techniques dominant in China's modern theater. Moreover, he believed that its theme was important and he liked the way its treatment of the ambiguous values of capitalism provoked readers and viewers to think. He recalls there were doubts in the beginning about the choice of play. Some Americans suspected the production was meant to disparage American capitalism, while conservative Chinese thought it was designed to praise American capitalism.

Ying met Miller for the first time sometime in 1982 when the American playwright was in China on a private visit. Miller saw several of the Beijing People's Art Theater productions and came to know Ying as an actor and friend. Ying acted as Miller's guide during his China visit. When Ying was in the United States for his Missouri stint in 1982, he visited Miller in New York to pursue plans they had first discussed in China for a Chinese production of a Miller play. Miller's first choice was *The Crucible*, saying that this play about the Salem witches would have some relevance to the Chinese experience of "witch-hunts" during the Cultural Revolution. He eventually agreed, however, on the choice of *Death of a Salesman.*

The attempt to produce an American play in its "original" environment—Brooklyn, New York, in 1949—through Chinese actors, in Chinese, in Communist China in 1983 was a daring feat. Moreover, Miller had only three weeks of rehearsal (not to mention problems of language) before the play opened in Beijing. If anything, the production proved art's

power to communicate a common, shared humanity that bridges time, language, culture, and politics. The performance was a success. Of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, Ying said that though it was a foreign play "it stunned the audience all the same because it forced the truth on them, confronted them with the truth in life, which usually one doesn't come across either in real life or in art."

The play's flawed hero and moral ambiguities stood in sharp contrast to the morality tales typical of China's official theater in the Maoist era. A character like Willy Loman was unthinkable during the Cultural Revolution, when one major theme in the literary polemics of the period was the rejection of what was called the "middle character," a person ambiguous and internally divided, on the grounds that what needed to be privileged were ideological heroes without doubts or weaknesses.

The play resonated with local meanings. In Ying's view, Miller's story of lost American dreams spoke to the dreams of Ying's own generation in China. China was full of dreams in 1949, of reclaiming lost glory and asserting itself in the world. These dreams had disintegrated during the Cultural Revolution. The play must have resonated with other meanings as well since, at the time it was staged in Beijing, China had begun to confront the challenge of creating its own brand of capitalism.

In 1992, nine years later, the play enjoyed a sold-out, twelve-performance run at the National Theater in Taipei where it was hailed as a "first attempt at producing a modern Western classic in its original environment." Other observers called it an event that opened "a window of communication for the two sides of the Taiwan Strait." In Taiwan, the production took on its own distinct mental and emotional coloring. Ying believes that in Taiwan, Miller's somber drama of disillusion may have evoked as well something of the erosion of the exile's tenacious dream of "recovering the mainland." "To admit," Ying wrote, "that one cannot attain the goal one has struggled all one's lifetime for, that this goal is unattainable, is hard to accept."

Ying's staging of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing was a remarkable cross-cultural event. It was, both as text and event, an outstanding example of cultural translation. Some years later, Ying was given the honor of introducing Miller when the latter was conferred US presidential honors for his achievement in the arts. With President Ronald Reagan in attendance, Ying spoke at the formal awarding ceremonies held at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. As guest of the US State Department for the event, Ying also joined Miller in a dinner hosted by Secretary of State Alexander Haig. It was a high moment for a Chinese actor who, less than two decades earlier, was a prisoner of the Cultural Revolution, planting carrots in remote Hebei Province.

Ying Ruocheng served as China's vice-minister of culture from 1986 to 1990. He was put in charge of the performing arts in the country, both the performing groups and training academies.

In this capacity, he instituted sweeping reforms among the country's three thousand government-supported performing arts troupes by making them responsible for generating their own revenues. He believed that it was by making these groups self-sustaining that their independence could be strengthened and artistic freedom promoted. While these moves conformed to Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented strategy of development at the time, they were radical nevertheless in a country where state ownership and subsidies were an entrenched practice. Ying made enemies in this post, but the effects of his reforms were bracing. He encouraged individuality and creativity and battled against bureaucracy and mediocrity. He also worked to strengthen China's cultural relations with the outside world, particularly in fields such as dance and theater.

In 1990, after leaving the Ministry of Culture, he was named chair and president of the China Arts Festival Foundation. He later became its honorary chair and continued the work of nurturing China's theater arts and exposing Chinese audiences to plays and performances from abroad.

Sometimes dubbed as China's "cultural ambassador," he shuttled between China and other countries as actor, lecturer, and interpreter, introducing Chinese culture to the world and bringing other people's cultures to China. For this and his accomplishments as an artist, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Bowdoin College in Maine, in northeastern United States, in 1993. In 1997, the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region named him one of the ten most outstanding Chinese artists in the world.

Ying was well positioned to be an effective and skilled mediator between East and West. Schooled in Western literature, impeccable in his command of English, and cosmopolitan in his tastes, he was conscious of himself, even as a young man, as being different from most of his Chinese contemporaries. It was a difference he had to come to terms with. It took him years, he said, to shed his "Westernness." He spent a great deal of his time reflecting on his "halfway" position. He cultivated an interest in Chinese intellectual history, particularly in the East-West dialogue and the experience of early Chinese scholars in dealing with the twin challenge of confronting Western influence and being responsible as well to the realities and needs of their own society. Versed in Western culture, Ying studiously devoted himself to the study of his own. Yet, confident of who he was, through the years he continued to favor wearing a Western suit (without the tie, of course). He did not feel the need to demonstrate his "Chineseness."

In 1998, reflecting on the subject of cultural exchanges, Ying said, "It is a subject I am deeply interested in and committed to all my life—from my high school days to the present. On a broader scope, it has been one of the vital issues confronting China ever since the doors of the Middle Kingdom were forced open in 1840 by the gunboats of the Western powers in the infamous incident of the Opium War." It was always his ambition, he said, to push the limits of culture by absorbing the good things from the West and combining them with the best in Chinese traditions.

It was theater to which he devoted a large part of his creative life. He staged numerous plays, acted in movies and television productions, and translated plays and theatrical theory that breached cultural, ideological, racial, and linguistic barriers, and fostered cultural cross-pollination, cultural diversity, and international understanding.

For half a century he worked as an actor, portraying a wide range of characters in Chinese and English-language productions: Pockmark Liu in Lao She's *Teahouse*, Liu Ze in *Rickshaw Boy*, and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman.* In China, his film credits include appearances in *Rickshaw Boy, Intimate Friends*, and *Dr. Bethune*, and the television series *Yes Minister.*

As for his translations, Ying modestly described his work as "restroom literature" because many of his translations were done in the theater's restroom or lounge during breaks in performances. Yet, his translations are an important contribution to Chinese literature. Using the penname *Shao Ruo*, he translated Chinese plays into English, and into Chinese such Western works as Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Henry Fielding's *The Coffee House Politician*, Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara*, as well as *Death of a Salesman*, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, and *Amadeus.*

He also made signal contributions to internationalizing theater in the People's Republic of China. As artist and bureaucrat, he ranged himself against cultural bias and bureaucratic censorship and promoted synergy between Chinese artists and their foreign counterparts.

As Italian film director Bernardo Bertolucci put it: "Ying epitomizes a kind of East-West culture."

Many of his artistic endeavors helped dispel cultural biases and stereotypes. He recalled, for example, how he saw the tears shed by Americans who flew into Beijing from the United States to see the Chinese version of *Death of a Salesman*. "Why were they moved?" he asked rhetorically. "They were glad to see a production from their own culture being done, not haphazardly but seriously, by Chinese who were inscrutable and now were suddenly scrutable." Summing up, in the simplest terms, what intercultural understanding requires, Ying explained: "When you see another people of a totally different background treating something of yours with respect, with understanding, with commitment, I think that is important. If you compare that with the traditional image of the Chinaman on the screen here or the traditional image of the Yankee in China, then you realize the importance of it."

Of his many accomplishments, Ying will perhaps be best remembered as an actor. He has approached his craft with methodical devotion—from (quoting Stanislavsky) "an actor prepares," all the way to the final stage of "building up a character." "Most actors, I think, at least the good ones," Ying says, "have their own individual ways of reaching that goal [of truly 'inhabiting' a character]." And when that goal is reached, the satisfaction and joy are incommensurable. Recalling his experience playing Liu Ze in *Rickshaw Boy*, he said:

> [It] called up all my instincts since I was a child about these people, their values, the way they walked, the way they talked to each other, the language, and so on. It was the first time, I think, I really experienced what Stanislavsky said, "to live under the skin of your part." When you stop worrying whether you are being true or not, you just believe. It's a great pleasure, I must say, to be able to achieve that. Maybe an actor, even the good one, is lucky to have that experience, that sort of experience, five times in his life, his whole life.

He recalled having this same experience playing Willy Loman in Beijing, the rare pleasure of standing before a rapt audience, of being in the moment, convinced that he had entered someone else's "inner reality" and created on stage something real and true. "That's not something you can ask of every part," he says. "That's the moment when the actor feels, 'I did the right thing when I was sixteen years old and decided to take up acting.'"

While many think of acting in terms of dissimulation and pretense, acting in fact fails when it is a sham. When acting is an art, it is about the discipline of making truth come alive. Ying Ruocheng devoted himself to being an actor in this sense.

Few countries are as challenging a terrain for artists as China. It is not just a matter of China's size and complexity but the weight and consequence of artistic practice in the country.

This is illustrated in how literary and artistic works are implicated so intimately in major political events in Chinese history. In 1965, official criticism of a play, *The Dismissal of Hai Rui* by Wu Han, was one of the first public warnings of the coming of the Cultural Revolution. In 1975, the controversy over the fourteenth-century novel *Water Margin* was "code" for political maneuvers in the Communist Party against Lin Biao and Deng Xiaoping. In 1988, a debate over a widely viewed film entitled *Heshang* (River Elegy) resurrected the debate over the relationship between China and the West. It exposed ideological conflicts within the Party and the larger society and was blamed by some Communist officials for having provoked the tragic events of June 1989, the "pro-

Democracy" movement, and what came to be known as the Tiananmen Massacre.

These remarkable examples from modern Chinese history show the vulnerability of art to political abuse; yet, positively, they indicate as well the power accorded to art in China's public life. In China today, increasing intellectual pluralism and involvement with the outside world present problems and opportunities both old and new. The task of the artist remains a challenging one.

In the end, however, all that can be asked of the artist is that he remains true to the best that art intends. Tall and urbane, Ying Ruocheng remained steadfast in his commitment to the arts. Until his death on December 27, 2003, at the age of seventy-four, he lived in Beijing and remained an example of how to remain a gentleman, idealistic, and humane in the midst of the political turbulence of our time.

Resil B. Mojares

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