

**PECULIAR FEATURES OF THE SMALL THEATRES ACTIVITY  
IN BEIJING AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE FRINGE PENGHAO THEATRE**

**The purpose of the article** is to outline the creative and organizational principles of the activity of Penghao Theatre, the first private theatre in Beijing. The **methodology** of the study comprises historical, comparative and biographical methods. The **scientific novelty** of the research is the fact that it is the first time in Ukraine, when the history of the emergence of small form theatres on Chinese stage has been highlighted, the activity of small drama theatres (peculiar features, fields of work, repertoire policy, economic basis) in China have been studied, as exemplified by Penghao Theatre. **Conclusions.** Historical reasons for the theatre emergence, economic and socio-political conditions of its foundation are highlighted. The primary fields of the theatre's activity, its creative orientation, repertoire policy and the main difficulties faced by the private theatre in Beijing are described.

**Key words:** Penghao Theatre, Beijing private theatre, Wang Xiang.

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**Особливості діяльності малих театрів Пекіну на прикладі експериментального театру "Пенхао"**

**Мета дослідження** – окреслити творчо-організаційні принципи діяльності театру "Пенхао" – першого приватного театру Пекіну. **Методологія** дослідження включає в себе історичний, компаративний та біографічні методи. **Наукова новизна** дослідження полягає в тому, що вперше в Україні висвітлено історію виникнення театрів малих форм на китайській сцені, досліджено діяльність малих драматичних театрів (особливості, напрямки роботи, репертуарна політика, економічна база) Китаю на прикладі театру "Пенхао". **Висновки:** Висвітлено історичні причини виникнення театру, економічні та соціально-політичні умови його заснування. Охарактеризовано основні напрями діяльності театру, його творчу спрямованість, репертуарну політику та основні труднощі, з якими стикається приватний театр в Пекіні.

**Ключові слова:** театр "Пенхао", пекінський приватний театр, Ван Сян.

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**Особенности деятельности малых театров Пекина на примере экспериментального театра "Пенхао"**

**Цель исследования** – определить творческие принципы деятельности театра "Пенхао" – первого частного театра Пекина. **Методология** исследования включает в себя исторический, компаративный и биографические методы. **Научная новизна** исследования заключается в том, что впервые в Украине отражена история возникновения театров малых форм на китайской сцене, исследована деятельность малых драматических театров Китая (особенности, направления работы, репертуарная политика, экономическая база) на примере театра "Пенхао". **Выводы:** Освещены исторические причины возникновения театра, экономические и социально-политические условия его основания. Охарактеризованы основные направления деятельности театра, его творческая направленность, репертуарная политика и основные трудности, с которыми сталкивается частный театр в Пекине.

**Ключевые слова:** театр "Пенхао", пекинский частный театр, Ван Сян.

The urgency of the research. The activity of small form theatres that occurred in China in the early 2000s was aimed at reforming Chinese theatre system, which had been developing for centuries in the course of the drama theatre existence. The drama theatre of China is increasingly becoming the subject of European historians' and theatre theorists' studies, but the activity of small theatres hasn't been appropriately studied yet. However, specifying the main directions and principles of the existence of small theatres in China (political, socio-economic, and artistic ones) is necessary for understanding the contemporary Chinese theatrical process. The mentioned above determines the urgency of the chosen topic.

Analysis of recent studies and publications. The activities of the first private theatre in Beijing, Penghao Theatre, as well as the activities of other small form theatres, were not considered by Ukrainian theatre studies.

The activity of Penghao Theatre as regards the socio-cultural life in China was considered by N. Demido [1], Chinese researchers prefer the analysis of a particular performance [11], without highlighting the big picture of the theatre activity.

The goal of the research is to highlight the creative and organizational principles of the activities of the first private theatre in Beijing, that is, Penghao Theatre.

Statement of basic materials. Private theatres, which are usually small form theatres, are considered to be a relatively new phenomenon in China. This is due to the fact that this form of theatre hasn't worked at all for sixty years. The small form theatre reinforced its existence in China in the early 1920s, becoming a "left" movement of the dramatic theatre (the so-called "spoken drama"), which actively developed at that time. Thus, in the 1920s, new theatre companies that propagated the ways of reforming the performing art in China appeared: first of all, they suggested focusing on small dramatic forms and the work of amateur companies. For example, Chen Dabei, who is considered to be the founder of the "small theatre" in China, thought that it was necessary to differentiate professional and amateur theatres, emphasizing that the amateurism taught performers to be self-sufficing.

Meanwhile, amateur theatre companies started to occur one after another. They were founded by faculty members and students at universities of Beijing, Quinghua, Yanjing, Jiaotong, and at women's educational institutions, which usually could play a couple of performances without rehearsals.

In May 1921, Wang Youyou, Shen Yanbing, Ouyang Yueqin, Chen Dabei, Xiong Foxi and other theatre personalities founded the Minzhong Theatre Company in Shanghai, emphasizing in every possible way the need for creating "their theatre; the theater that would suit them", and opposed "copying and imitating others" [3, 180]. Members of the company suggested creating a new system of working on the performance, performance technique, directing school; denied the manner of performance that followed the example of previous performances or borrowed ideas from them.

In 1927, the Institute of the Study of Art of Nango was established in Shanghai. The program of the institute was based on the principles of teaching in a private school, including absence of state support and financial help of entrepreneurs; collaboration with faculty and students; independent training of the personnel so that in the future they could meet the requirements of the age and become genuinely educated masters. Based on this program, "Decisive action, starting with the private" became the motto of the theatre. In order to implement its program, the institute purposefully founded a 50-seat "small art theatre" [3].

The movement of small theatres lasted until the end of the 1920s (Beijing Small Theatre" under the direction of Yu Shangyuan and Xiong Foxi was one of the last small theatres that were founded in autumn of 1929). However, in the early 1930s, the activities of these theatres stopped completely.

Since PRC was founded, the art and culture in China have been fully governed by the state. This explains the total prevalence of state-owned theatre companies over private ones that had existed for many years.

The next stage of small private theatres began in the 1990s. During this period, first of all, due to the governmental policy of reform and openness, the first theatre studios began to appear (for example, Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio, Tian Qinxin Theatre Studio, Meng Jinghui Theatre Studio)<sup>1</sup>.

Economic reforms required industrial civilization, democratization and market relations, as well as changes at the cultural level. In general, Chinese traditional culture was considered incompatible with political, economic and cultural aspects of modernization. Thus, Chinese intellectuals' first reaction to reforms resulted in searching for an answer to the following question: how should traditional values be changed, in order to meet the requirements of cultural modernization better. "Modernization of culture means the formation of a new culture that absorbs the gains of other cultures and is compatible with modern society. Modernization of economic and social life, modernization of "people" and modernization of culture are integral components of modernization. They are interrelated, interactive and irreplaceable" [10].

Cultural modernization highlighted new discussion trails in Chinese culture (globalization and localization, cosmopolitanism and national identity, etc.). Based on this discussion, at the beginning of the 21st century, a new kind of culture has been formed in China, which is neither a renaissance of traditional culture nor a copy of Western values. This new Chinese culture tries to combine traditions and modernity, emphasizing both national identity and universal values [12].

The painful processes of modernization also take place in Chinese theatre. Thus, in the 1990s, the period of the "dramatic crisis" led to the parallel development of three main genres, including: the "main melody", which was supported by the state, the fringe theatre (mostly trying to imitate Western theatre), and the commercial theatre (created and supported by private producers) [13, 179].

In the 2000s, when the preparation for the Olympic Games in Beijing, the International City of Culture, was started, the number of tours of foreign theatres increased significantly, the demand for foreign directors increased on the one hand, and, on the other hand, private theatres started to appear in the capital, including Theatre No. 9 (2004), Myriads of Stars Theatre (2009), Xin Chuan Experimental Company (2008) and others. At this time Penghao was founded. It reinforced the reputation of the theatre specializing in experimental productions.

Penghao Theatre was founded in 2009, although it was officially registered a year earlier. The name of the theater is translated as "a small straw hat"; sao is "straw" in Chinese. This symbol is written and pronounced in the same way as the "grass" that sounds like the name of the theatre since penghao is a kind of

grass as well. The name of the theatre is also a metaphor borrowed from the verse of Thai poet Li Bo (701-763): in the literature, "peng hao" is used to refer to the "insignificant, poor, simple person."

The occurrence of the theatre was encouraged by the relative weakening of state control over the cultural sphere and the subjective personal factor, that is, the efforts of its founder and art director Wang Xiang, who claimed: "The theatre is a spiritual food, today there is a lot of material food, and there is little spiritual food. We have to change the situation by ourselves" [2].

Wang Xiang, being the founder of his theatre, had never worked in the theatre. While studying in the late 1970s at the Military Medical University, he tried himself as an amateur theatre actor. But he chose a dentist career, getting a position at the Naval General Hospital. In the 1990s, when private entrepreneurship started to overgrow, Wang Xiang established one of the first private dental clinics. This experience (first of all, the bureaucratic and economic ones) was useful when Wang created Penghao.

Wang Xiang explains the reasons for creating the theatre as follows: "The main challenges faced by China today are the democratization and modernization of society (two processes that are still unresolved), the premature impact of a free market economy and the cult of money. All these types of problems that destroy the art, imagination, and intellect of Chinese people. By creating Penghao Theatre, I aimed at interrupting this intellectual regress". Another reason for creating the theatre, as Wang Xiang claims, is the lack of a sufficient number of venues for artists and spectators since a Chinese director often has to wait for a year or more to be able to create a performance [5].

Wang Xiang invested about 1,200,000 yuan (\$ 175,000) in the project [8, p. 123]. This money was spent on rent and reconstruction of the traditional yard on Dongmanhua Hutong, which became Penghao Theatre. Average annual theatre budget is 200 thousand dollars, and the cost of production is 4-8 thousand dollars [6].

After receiving all the necessary permits and checks by the District Culture Committee, Beijing City Bureau of Culture and Ministry of Culture, the theatre operates in dual mode: it creates its performances and provides its venues for rent. Penghao is registered as a commercial enterprise (therefore, high commercial taxes are paid), also, the commitment to sell cheap tickets (\$ 8-24) was undertaken by Wang Xiang, so, he is forced to cover a part of the expenses from his funds. However, according to the creative director of the theatre, Liang Dangdang, the financial capabilities of the founder of the theatre are also limited (for example, he was already forced to sell one of his own houses and give another one as a pledge), so, this way of financing the theatre "can't be considered as the right way of management. However, – Liang Dangdang continues, – it is impossible to imagine commercially viable productions in such a small theatre as ours, since what we do here can, in fact, be stable only with the support of the state sector" [6].

The theatre and its art director don't have any problems with cooperation with individual state agencies, but insist on their status as a "popular" and non-governmental institution, stating that their theatre is an artistically non-profit mission. Governmental support is also evident in the form of grants for the theatre for arranging educational seminars and theatre festivals since engaging in such state theatre programs requires much more funding. Another reason for the involvement of private theatres, Penghao, in particular, in various theatrical forums, is the existence of their programs, while such projects must be approved at the governmental level at state theatres.

Despite the state support (not all theatre organizations in China can boast of them, by the way), Wang Xiang criticizes the authorities for refusing to support non-governmental cultural and artistic initiatives. In 2013, he developed the project of eight recommendations, Wang's Eight Elements, in which he required the status of a nonprofit organization for private theatres, encouraging of social contributions to society and legislation that guarantees the direct state financial support of art, clear cultural program, accelerating the pace of political reform.

At the same time, the artistic director emphasizes the artistic mission of the theatre: "Penghao is not just a venue for the performance. Of course, we create a productive space, but in fact, it's not the production I focus on. The dramatic art has already been recognized as an influential form of art in Beijing; providing functional space ensures that this recognition will continue. But now we need to use the power of the theatre to draw attention to the problems. The plays that we put on stage emphasize humanism and aesthetic component" [7].

The theatre is located in the area of Nanguouxiang, which is considered to be the cluster of various cafes and shops aimed at the younger generation.

Penghao can host 80 spectators, has a terrace and two additional rooms for performances. The small hall and stage are arranged in such a way that seats for spectators can be moved and rearranged depending on the production. Simple technical equipment and the minimal set of scenery are used for performances. A separate ticket hall is not provided, tickets are sold at the stand in the lobby.

The theatre describes itself as "the first popular, nonprofit small theatre in Beijing."

Following its program, the theatre chose to work with an average spectator. This policy is implemented in the whole practice of management, programming, and even theatre arrangement. The theatre holds

a variety of festivals, workshops, and literary events. There is a large cafe that, according to the founder of the theatre, should become an integral part of the theatre space as a place where viewers and creators of the performance have an opportunity to express their thoughts on what they saw on stage. Free tickets (usually sponsored by the state) are one of the forms of attracting spectators [11, 222].

60% of the theatre repertoire are drama performances, 40% are choreographic, musical and literary productions. Penghao often produces outputs by foreign authors performed by Chinese and foreign actors. Plays are performed in Chinese and foreign languages; the translation problem is solved using subtitles. The theatre annually shows over 240 performances. If we analyze the repertoire of Penghao in recent years (2013-2017), the policy and direction of the activity of the theatre are revealed.

Over the specified period, the theatre has had almost the same number of performances by Chinese (23) and foreign (25) playwrights (mostly modern ones), produced by Chinese (33) and foreign (15) directors. It's noteworthy that foreign directors have never worked on Chinese drama. For comparison, the Chinese Folk Arts Theatre (the top-ranked state drama theatre of China) produced 68 plays based on Chinese drama and only 28 plays based on foreign drama over the same period.

While working on foreign drama (most often it's French (5), American (4), South American (3) and Norwegian (3) drama), the theatre rarely turns to acknowledged works. Exceptions are the puppet show "Romeo and Juliet" by W. Shakespeare, "My Poor Marat" by A. Arbuzov and "Love's Comedy" by H. Ibsen.

The genre repertoire range of the theatre in 2013-2017 is presented by dramatic (40), plastic (6), puppet (1) and opera performances (1).

As of 2017, 600 theatre performances were watched by about 300 thousand spectators.

The Beijing Foreign Community interacts closely with the theatre. Penghao creates many international projects, including: the conceptual performance "The Phenomenon: Hedda Gabler" (as part of the project "Ibsen in China", together with the Department of Culture of the Embassy of Norway), the play "The Pelican" by A. Strindberg and the non-mainstream play "Two Fredericks" by Swedish director Matthias Lafoli, the one-man production "Revel's World of Shakespeare" by American playwright, director, actor Joseph Graves, "You and I", "Invisible Bridge", "40 Years of Silence" by French mime Philip Bizo. A creative group "Beijing IMPOV" (working in the genre of the stand-up comedy) created by the foreign actors performs in Penghao every month [1, 112].

Arranging festivals is one of the most critical activities of the theatre, which gives an opportunity to expand the influence on the cultural and social life of the capital. Penghao is known as the organizer of theatrical events of the city (Youth Review of Performances of Dongcheng District, 2010), national (Theater Exchange of Beijing and Shanghai) and international scale (Beijing International Festival Monodrama).

The theatre holds about 100 cultural events annually, participates in charity projects, serves as a launching pad for novice authors, stage managers and actors, and implements plans for theatre education. Among other things, these are the lectures and master classes of recognized directors and playwrights of the present, providing a stage for daring theatrical experiments, student projects of the theatre academy, located near the theatre. In this way, Penghao tries to break the persistent stereotypes of artistic thinking and perception in China.

Among the problems faced by Penghao Theatre, one can distinguish the insufficient interest of Chinese audience in the genre of spoken drama in general, the control over the theatrical process by censorship bodies, the lack of financial support by the state and public funds on a permanent basis, a small venue, experimental orientation of creative projects, offering a complex artistic form of perception, limiting the influence of Penghao on the gross audience and, accordingly, its role in the socio-cultural life of the capital. For example, in 2016, the owner of the theatre building delivered an ultimatum: they had to either buy the premises for \$ 6 million or leave it. As the art director of the theatre mentioned, over the past year, he spent more time looking for additional funding than for creative aspects of work. Wang Xiang considers the financial problem to be the social one: "Penghao is among the minorities of minorities in the highly commercial and materialistic society of China. Fundraising for art and culture is a very new concept" [9].

Conclusion. Usually one of the critical features of an independent theatre is distancing from the state system and market. In the case of Penghao Theatre, this feature requires some reservations, since both the theatre and its art director don't see problems in cooperation with certain governmental agencies, but they strongly insist on the status of a "popular" and non-state institution. The theatre is located near the vital tourist center of Beijing. It describes itself as an artistically nonprofit mission.

The peculiar feature of the first private theatre Penghao in Beijing is their productions, while other private companies only rent venues out for the performances that conform with their vision of Chinese performing art.

The main areas of activity of Penghao Theatre are performances, educational and charitable projects, festival movement.

The most significant part of the repertoire of the theatre is based on contemporary foreign drama. The premises and theatre financing limit the stage practice of the theatre. One of the main problems of the theatre is the lack of a correct (taking into account the economic aspect) interaction of the state and the private theatre.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the first theatre studios were created by the directors, who were considered to be representatives of the avant-garde movement of Chinese spoken drama.

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