

BEIJING-THEATRE-TEA  
THE HABIT OF TEA DRINKING  
IN THEATRES OF BEIJING  
from the 17th Century to the 1950s

The traditional name for a commercial theatre building that is still in use among old Beijingers is *chayuan* – namely “a teahouse”. This indicates the close and long-lasting relationship between the most common entertainment in imperial China – theatre – and the most common beverage: tea. Initially, theatrical performances held in teahouses were only additional to their main activity; their aim was simply to attract customers, but very soon they became the main reason for customers to visit *chuyuan*. Along with changes in the architecture of Beijing’s commercial theatres from the 17th century onwards, theatregoer’s customs also transformed significantly. However, the habit of tea drinking has constantly been an integral part of every theatrical performance up until the 1950s.

Related to a traditional commercial theatre building, in modern-day Beijing the old-fashioned name “teahouse” is still in use – *chayuan* (茶园, cháyuán, or in Beijing dialect with a characteristic “r” applied – cháyuánr), that literally means “tea garden”, or *chalou* (茶楼, chálóu/chálóur), which describes a multi-storey teahouse building. For a better understanding of this phenomenon it may be pertinent here to trace back the history of commercial theatres in Beijing from the 17th century onwards.

In urban areas most of the commercial performances were traditionally being held in venues significant to the local society, such as public squares and marketplaces in commercial and entertainment districts, where provisional

sheds or elevated platforms were temporarily set up for for travelling theatre troupes. Fixed stages for theatrical performances first emerged in temples, imperial palaces and residences of the aristocracy and later in mansions of wealthy merchants and guildhalls. With the exception of the stages in temples, rest of the theatre buildings were built to hold private performances for specified viewers. Commercial theatrical performances, in turn, were first held on fixed stages in restaurants, wine-shops and in the later period in teahouses. Despite the fact that those enterprises were run by private investors, performances held there were open to the public and with admission free of charge.

Until early the early 21st century, the oldest theatre in Beijing was Guanghe juchang (广和剧场, Guǎnghé jùchǎng), the latest incarnation of renowned Zhalou (查楼, Zhālóu) – one of the four<sup>1)</sup> earliest commercial theatres to be open in the city at the beginning of the 17th century. During the last four hundred years, it has gone through all the major stages of the architectural development of commercial theatre buildings in Beijing, accompanied with changes in theatregoers' habits.

Zhalou was located in Beijing's Outer City (外城, Wàichéng), near the Qianmen (前门, Qiánmén), namely the Front Gate, in the area called Roushi (肉市, Ròushì) – the Meat Market. It was set up in the late period of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in the garden of a private residence belonging to the Zha (查, Zhā) family. Many members of this renowned family were high-ranking officials and scholars (at least seven were successful candidates in the highest imperial examination), wealthy merchants, men of letters and even playwrights.<sup>2)</sup> Zha family was also known for owning a private theatrical troupe that gave performances not only in their estate in Beijing, but also entertained family members during their voyages. In the garden of their residence there was also an open-air theatre, a typical example of freestanding theatrical stage that were built in the private gardens at that time. At the beginning of the 17th century Zhou family has decided to run in this part of the garden a *jiuguanxiyuan* (酒馆戏园, jiǔguǎnxiyuán) – a restaurant open to the public, that is serving food, tea and liquor, while giving theatrical performances.

The architectural design of the Zhalou (Ill. 1) resembled *siheyuan* (四合院, sìhéyuàn), a type of traditional residential building most commonly built in Beijing during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its main building was the theatrical

<sup>1)</sup> The other three were Taipingyuan (太平园, Tàipíngyuán), Siyiyuan (四宜园, Sìyíyuán) and Yuemingyuan (月明楼, Yuè míng lóu), *Zhongguo xiqu zhi – Beijing juan* (1999: 885).

<sup>2)</sup> Hou (2003: 92-97), see also Hou (1999: 17-28).

stage – a freestanding structure with an acting area situated on an elevated platform. A rectangular stage was open on three sides, enclosed only by a wall at the back. There were two doors in the wall that led directly backstage. The door on the left (looking from the audience) is called “(performers’) stage entrance” (上场门, shàngchǎngmén) and the door on the right is “(performers’) stage exit” (下场门, xiàchǎngmén).<sup>3)</sup> The stage building was roofed with the support of two pillars installed on the stage. In front of the stage building there was an open yard, rectangular in shape, which was surrounded by several small pavilions. The pavilions were open towards the yard, which indicates that their main function was to provide a seating area for the audience. To the yard led from a street a large gateway, allowing customers to enter Zhalou freely.

At that time Zhalou’s main activity was serving food and beverages, mostly tea and liquor. Theatrical performances were held to attract more customers. The admission fee for the performances was included in the price of food and tea, while for customers watching plays standing in the yard it was free of charge. If a customer was willing to watch a particular play, he could order it directly from the troupe, but he had to pay an extra fee.

Zhalou functioned in the form of a *jiuguanxiyuan* for about the next two centuries, becoming the most renowned stage in the city at that time. Probably at the end of the 18th century Zhalou started functioning as a teahouse and since then its main activity evolved into serving mainly tea, while holding theatrical performances were still regarded as additional. In 1792, apart from the Zhalou, there were only seven commercial theatres known by name in Beijing,<sup>4)</sup> and in 1827 there were already twenty of them.<sup>5)</sup> However, later in the 19th century the total number doubled, reaching reaching forty theatrical stages.<sup>6)</sup> At that time theatre became the most common entertainment among the Chinese society of Beijing. To the most renowned teahouses in Beijing belonged at that time Tianleyuan (天乐园, Tiānlèyuán), Guangdelou (广德楼, Guǎngdélóu), Zhonghelou (中和楼, Zhōnghélóu), Qingleyuan (庆乐园, Qìnglèyuán) and Guanghelou (广和楼, Guǎnghélóu) – formerly known as Zhaolou. Since it was established, Zhalou changed its name for several times, and was known, among the others, as Zhajialou (查家楼, Zhājiālóu), for a short time as Jinlinglou (金陵

<sup>3)</sup> Traditionally also called *chujiang* (出将, chūjiāng) and *ruxiang* (入相, rùxiāng), respectively. See also Hou (2003: 7-8).

<sup>4)</sup> Liao, Liu (2009: 348).

<sup>5)</sup> Liao, Liu (2009: 348).

<sup>6)</sup> *Zhongguo jingju shi* (1999: 189).

楼, Jinlínglóu), then as Guanghe Zhalou (广和查楼, Guǎnghé Zhālóu), Guanghe chalou (广和茶楼, Guǎnghé chálóu), and in the later period as Guanghelou (in common use some of those names functioned simultaneously). Since 1955 it was called Guanghe juchang.

In the 19th century a new type of theatre building became popular in Beijing. Initially an open-air structure of *jiuguanxiyuan* was roofed to provide protection from adverse weather conditions and to increase the number of seats for the audience. The new type of enclosed wooden teahouses that emerged (Ill. 2), resembled former open-air theatres in shape, with a roofed stage building, rectangular yard and pavilions covered with one roof (Ill. 3). At the same time, the seating arrangement became more complex when the auditorium became equipped with various kinds of seats (Ills. 4, 5). What was formerly an open yard in front of the stage became the stalls, the cheapest seats occupied mostly by townspeople were called *chizuo* (池座, chízuò) – namely “the pond”. It was equipped with long tables and benches arranged perpendicularly to the stage, where customers sitting there faced each other and had to turn their heads towards the stage to watch the play (Ills. 6, 7).<sup>7)</sup> The pavilions which encircling the yard in open-air theatres, then became the most expensive seats called *guan-zuo* (官座, guānzuo) – “officials seats”, or boxes – *baoxiang* (包厢, bāoxiāng). Installed on the first floor on the left and one on the right side of the stage, four, six, eight or even up to ten and twelve customers could be seated. There were first-grade boxes, second-grade boxes and third-grade boxes occupied by wealthy customers. Seats on the first floor opposite the stage were called *zhenglou* (正楼, zhènglóu), “straight seats”. On the ground floor beneath the boxes there were also some cheap seats called *sanzuo* (散座, sǎnzuo), “scattered seats”. In some theatres behind the “scattered seats” on the ground floor and behind the “officials seats” on the first floor, there was also another variety of cheap seating called *turyetan* (兔儿爷摊, tùryétān), namely “rabbit stalls”.<sup>8)</sup> During the most popular shows, theatre employees could resort to *jiadeng* (加凳, jiādèng) – they installed additional benches, to increase the number of *chizuo* or *sanzuo* seats (Ill. 8)

In the 19th century, the enclosed structure of teahouses became the most widespread in Beijing. Average teahouses could host several hundred customers at a time, they operated all year round regardless of the weather conditions and

<sup>7)</sup> In the early 20th century long tables and benches were replaced with benches with backrests that faced towards the stage or, in some theatres with square or round tables for four or six (Ill. 9).

<sup>8)</sup> Crowded seats at the rear part of audience reminded of stalls at fairs packed tightly with clay rabbit figurines – *turye* (兔儿爷, tùryé), that were sold mostly during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

thus could generate a higher income. Almost entirely made of wood were very susceptible to fire, which was an imminent problem in Beijing. Also the conditions of hygiene of such teahouses were considered to be rather substandard.

There are no historical records that include information when the Zhalou was transformed into an enclosed teahouse. The *Zhongguo xiqu zhi - Beijing juan* (*Records of Chinese Theatre - Beijing volume*),<sup>9)</sup> a major source on Beijing theatre history, states that it was during the Republican period (1912–1937).<sup>10)</sup> If so, it would have been one of the last theatres in Beijing to change into an enclosed structure. The only known photograph of Guanghelou interiors (Ill. 10), taken probably in the 1920s, depicts a rectangular stage and long tables and benches arranged perpendicularly to the stage. At that time it was considered as “old-fashioned” by many theatregoers, especially when a few years earlier a new type of theatre building had emerged and revolutionised theatre architecture in Beijing.

In June 1914 a new theatre called *Diyi wutai* (第一舞台, *Dìyī wǔtái*), namely The First Stage (Ill. 11) was opened and a new era for theatre buildings in Beijing had begun. It was not only the biggest theatre in Beijing (with an auditorium for about 2600 viewers), but as its name might suggest, also the first modern one. Its construction was made of bricks and timber and differed much from the traditional wooden theatres that had been built in the city previously. Hou Xisan, an expert on history of Beijing theatres, in his book *Beijing lao xiyuanzi* (*Old Theatres of Beijing*)<sup>11)</sup> describes the architecture of *Diyi wutai* in such a way:

Behind the [fence] gate there was a front courtyard, long for 50 meters and wide for 20 meters. There was an awning installed over the [part of the] courtyard to protect from the sunlight. On both sides of the courtyard there were two-storey buildings where manager's office, offices, cashier's office, snack bar, money exchange office, etc. were located. The main building was a brick-and-timber structure [...]. When entering the building there was the auditorium, sometimes called *datang* [大堂, *dàtáng*]. Audience seats were located at first, second and third story, which makes [Diyi wutai] the first theatre in Beijing with three-storey auditorium.<sup>12)</sup>

<sup>9)</sup> *Zhongguo xiqu zhi - Beijing juan* (1999).

<sup>10)</sup> *Zhongguo xiqu zhi - Beijing juan* (1999: 885–886)

<sup>11)</sup> Hou (1999).

<sup>12)</sup> Hou (1999: 159), translation by the author.

The biggest auditorium in Beijing was also the first one to be equipped with a new kind of stall seating. The long tables and benches arranged perpendicularly to the stage in traditional teahouses had been exchanged with benches with backrests that were now facing towards the stage. There were also some long desks attached to the back side of the backrest, for customers sitting in the row behind to rest their teacups. Seats on the ground floor were still called *chizuo*, on the first floor traditional boxes were installed and on the second floor seven rows of *sanzuo*. Instead of the elevated stage typical for traditional teahouses – a rectangular platform open on three sides with two pillars on it to support the roof – the First Stage was equipped with a Western-style semi-circular, picture frame stage, with front curtain and tormentors, and an acting area nearly twice the size of traditional stages. In Diyi wutai was also the first theatre in Beijing to have a revolving stage installed.

Many of the architectural and technical solutions applied in Diyi wutai served as a model to copy for the newly built theatres in the forthcoming decades in Beijing. Since then most of the teahouses had been gradually rebuilt or modernized. In “the pond”, long tables and benches arranged perpendicularly to the stage had since been exchanged for long benches with backrests facing towards the stage or for square tables and chairs.<sup>13)</sup> Some of the teahouses had modern, semi-circular stages installed, with no stage roofing or stage pillars. The audience then had a clear view of the stage that in traditional teahouses was obstructed by stage pillars and the seating arrangement (Ill. 12).

For customers the habit of drinking tea was still an important part of a theatrical performance, but for the theatre owners it had since become an additional element with the performances themselves as the main attraction. Also refreshments, formerly sold together with tea during the performance, now were being sold in a snack bar that is located, as Hou Xisan mentioned, outside of the auditorium.

At that time many theatres in Beijing to indicate their modernity changed their names from *chayuan* (teahouse) into *xiyuan* (戏院, xìyuàn) – “playhouse”, like Qingleyuan, that after its modernization in 1935, changed its name to Qingle xiyuan (庆乐戏院, Qìnglè xìyuàn), like Zhongheyuan (中和园, Zhōnghéyuán), that became Zhonghe xiyuan (中和戏院, Zhōnghé xìyuàn) or Tianleyuan, that became Huale xiyuan (华乐戏院, Huálè xìyuàn).

<sup>13)</sup> Which is now the most common way to arrange *chizuo* seats in traditional theatres, like Hu-Guang huiguan theatre (Ill. 22).

In the first half of the 20th century there were also three theatre buildings in Beijing, that were the forerunners of a new era of Western-style theatres, which in fact has began in the 1950s. Xinming daxiyuan (新明大戏院, Xīnmíng dàxiyuàn), opened in 1919, Zhenguang xiyuan (真光戏院, Zhēnguāng xìyuàn) opened two years later (Ill. 13), and in 1922 Kaiming xiyuan (开明戏院, Kāimíng xìyuàn) in 1922 were constructions that followed the latest trends in theatre architecture in the Western world. They were steel and reinforced concrete structures, with decorations in a Western eclectic style, equipped with box offices, snack bars, foyers and lobbies, semi-circular stages with modern facilities (like electric stage lighting), front curtains, backdrops and tormentors, extensive backstage areas, and auditoria in the form of an amphitheatre (Xinming daxiyuan for 1200 guests, Zhenguang xiyuan and Kaiming xiyuan both for 800 guests). In Xinming daxiyuan and Zhenguang xiyuan there were also an adjacent restaurants, the first of its kind in the city, to serve meals to theatregoers outside of the auditorium. They were the first theatres in Beijing to be called *xiyuan* (戏院, xìyuàn) and until the early 1950s they were also the only “fully” Western-style theatres buildings in Beijing.<sup>14)</sup>

Those different types of commercial theatre buildings coexisted in Beijing until the 1950s, with traditional teahouses comprising the majority. All held theatrical performances, but some of them, like the Western-style Zhenguang xiyuan, were also holding film projections among other artistic events.<sup>15)</sup>

In the everyday language of modern-day Beijingers there are some significant words and phrases in use regarding traditional teahouses and theatre customs. They differ a great deal from the vocabulary used in the context of modern-day theatres. In traditional teahouses, for example, theatregoers were called “guests” – *keren* (客人, kèrén) or *chake* (茶客, chákè), literally meaning “tea-guests”, but never the “audience” – *guanzhong* (观众, guānzhòng). For many theatregoers the term *guanzhong*, widely used after 1949, is inappropriate, especially when referring to traditional teahouses’ guests. At the same time, theatregoers visited teahouses not “to watch a play” (看戏, kànxi), as it is today, but to “to listen to a play” (听戏, tīngxi), as it was until 1930s.<sup>16)</sup>

A true theatregoer had to know also *when* to go to listen to a play. Someone visiting a teahouse before the performance had begun or even shortly after it

<sup>14)</sup> Li (1998: 167–171), Hou (2003: 159–174).

<sup>15)</sup> In the early 1930s Zhenguang xiyuan (真光戏院, Zhēnguāng xìyuàn) transformed into Zhenguang Cinema (真光电影院, Zhēnguāng diànyǐngyuàn); since the 1950s it has been a functioning theatre once more, home to the National China Children’s Theatre (中国儿童剧院, Zhōngguó értóng jùyuàn) (Ill. 14).

<sup>16)</sup> Li (1998: 99).

had began, might have been considered as a *waihang* (外行, wàiháng), “a non-professional viewer”. This was concerned with the way of a theatre repertoire was arranged, where during one performance numerous plays were staged. At the beginning of the show it was the time for young or less known actors to perform, while renown actors came on stage towards the end. From the Qing dynasty until the 1920s and 30s, performances in teahouses lasted for about five to six hours, starting at noon and finishing about 5 or 6 p.m. Since the 1920s, when the electricity began to be more commonplace, there were evening shows held starting at 6 p.m. and lasting until about midnight. Viewers who intended to watch the better actors usually came to the teahouse at about 9 p.m.

According to a tradition dating back to the 17th century’s *jiuguanxilou*, admission to traditional commercial theatres was free of charge. Guests were received at the door by a theatre worker called a *lingzuorde* (领座儿的, língzuòrde) – “one who is in charge of the seats” or *kānzuoerde* (看座儿的, kānzuoèrde), “one who watches the seats”, who ushered them to the table. Available seats were marked with teacups turned upside down (Ill. 14). To approve the choice of the seat, guests had to turn over the teacups and tip the *lingzuorde*. Thereupon a waiter served them with tea. In traditional teahouse called *chafang* (茶房, cháfang) or *chaguan* (茶馆, chágǎn). At the time, guests were charged a one-off payment for tea; the so called “tea money” – *chaqian* (茶钱, cháqian) or *chazi* (茶资, cházi), was in fact a payment for watching the performance.

In Beijing, the first attempts to sell tickets for the theatrical performance instead of charging for a tea were made in 1907 and 1908. Wenming chayuan (文明茶园, Wénmíng cháyuán) (Ill. 9), namely Civilised Teahouse – a renowned theatre known for its modern approach to theatregoers, and one year later, Tianleyuan – at that time an almost 100-year-old theatre, tried to convert Beijing theatregoers to the modern way of payment for the performance, i.e. *xipiao* (戏票, xìpiào), “play ticket”. However, soon afterwards, theatre managers under pressure from public opinion decided to reinstate the *chaqian*.<sup>17)</sup> The first theatre to sell *xipiao* consistently was the Western-style Xinming daxiyuan, opened in January 1919, one of the three earliest Western-style theatres in Beijing. Also at that time *xipiao* was widely commented upon in the Beijing press.<sup>18)</sup> *Chaqian*, as a traditional form of payment was finally abandoned in the 1950s, when the traditional teahouses had been shut down and Chinese classical theatrical performances were being held almost exclusively in Western-style

<sup>17)</sup> Hou (2003: 220).

<sup>18)</sup> Hou (2003: 159–162).



theatres or modernized stages. Since then, theatre tickets have been commonly called *xipiao* – “play tickets”, or *menpiao* (门票, ménpiào), “entrance tickets”.

According to *Lao Beijing fengsu cidian* (*Dictionary of Old Beijing Customs*),<sup>19)</sup> the most popular tea in old Beijing was jasmine (tea scented with jasmine blossoms). In Northern China before 1940s it was called *xiangpian* (香片, xiāngpiàn); nowadays it is known mostly as *huacha* (花茶, huāchá), namely “scented tea”. The second most popular tea was the *longjing* (龙井茶, lóngjǐngchá).<sup>20)</sup> Renowned teahouses in Beijing were known for their teas, specially imported from the south of China, while local tea merchants supplied common teahouses. It was also acceptable for guests to bring along their own tea leaves, which were later served to them by the *chafang*.

Along with the tea there were also some refreshments served in teahouses, such as peanuts, melon seeds, dried sugar snap peas, hazelnuts, sweets and candied fruits.<sup>21)</sup> In the summertime fresh fruits were also served, most commonly watermelons. According to Zhongguo xigua bowuguan (the China Watermelon Museum) among the most popular watermelon cultivars in Beijing during the Qing dynasty were *xiaohualing* (小花苓, xiǎohuālíng), *dahualing* (大花苓, dàhuālíng) and *xiyangzhen* (西洋枕, xīyángzhěn). However, during the Republic of China the most popular were *heibengjin* (黑崩筋, hēibēngjīn) and *xiaofenggua* (小风瓜, xiǎofēngguā),<sup>22)</sup> both rarely seen today, but still existing in the collective memory of old Beijingers.

Tea prices in teahouses varied according to the type of seats at the audience. The cheapest seats were *chizuo* (and in modern-style theatres – front rows in stalls), while the most expensive were always boxes – *baoxiang*. On the theatrical poster of Huabei xiyuan (华北戏院, Huáběi xiyuàn)<sup>23)</sup> dated 30th April 1936 the *chazi* (payment for a tea) for the evening show were as follows: first-class boxes on the first floor – eight *fen* per person, second-grade boxes on the first floor – five *fen* per person, straight seats (*zhenglou*) – five *fen* per person, ground floor scattered seats (*sanzuo*) – all five *fen* per person.<sup>24)</sup> In modern theatre

<sup>19)</sup> Wang (2009: 48–49).

<sup>20)</sup> Wang (2009: 48).

<sup>21)</sup> Hou (1999: 94).

<sup>22)</sup> Source: exhibition at the Zhongguo xigua bowuguan (中国西瓜博物馆, Zhōngguó xīguā bówùguǎn) (China Watermelon Museum), July 2011.

<sup>23)</sup> Until the early 1930s Huabei xiyuan (华北戏院, Huáběi xiyuàn) was operating as Wenming chayuan (文明茶园, Wénmíng cháyuán).

<sup>24)</sup> Huabei xiyuan theatrical poster, 30th April 1936, source: private collection.

buildings, theatre tickets and tea were sold separately, and the latter was not obligatory. In Kaiming xiyuan at the end of 1936 tea cost eight *fen* per person.<sup>25)</sup>

The habit of tea drinking in traditional theatres in Beijing concerned not only the spectators, but also the actors. Until the late 1930s it was very common to observe actors drinking tea to moisten their throat while performing on stage. This custom was called *yinchang* (饮场, yìncǎng).<sup>26)</sup> Actor playing a leading role in a play (and only the leading role) had the right to drink a sip of tea before and even while singing the arias. *Yinchang* was not part of a play script, but it was a kind of treatment for an actor to relieve his throat during his work on stage. For instance, in a classical play very popular since the 1920s *Yutangchun* (玉堂春, Yùtángchūn) (*Yutangchun*) a wrongfully accused young courtesan named Yutangchun is kneeling before the court and singing her story to prove her innocence. Depending on the version of this play, to perform the arias it could take the leading actor even up to 45 minutes in a row. According to the custom of *yinchang*, the leading actor can ask for some tea to moisten his throat before or during the arias. Tea in a small teapot would be served to him on the stage by his personal attendant, called *genbao* (跟包, gēnbāo),<sup>27)</sup> or by the theatre stage manager, called *jianchangren* (检场人, jiǎnchǎngrén).<sup>28)</sup>

The custom of *yinchang* can be seen in the 1937s movie *Qiantai yu houtai* (前台与后台, Qiántái yǔ hòutái) (*On Stage and Backstage*).<sup>29)</sup> This is the only pre-1949 era feature film thematically concerned with traditional Chinese theatre that has survived until the present day.<sup>30)</sup> It was created by Zhou Yihua

<sup>25)</sup> Kaiming xiyuan (开明戏院, Kāimíng xìyuàn) theatrical poster, 3rd November 1936, source: private collection.

<sup>26)</sup> Wang (2009: 210).

<sup>27)</sup> Famous actors often employed private attendants, in theatrical circles called *genbao* (跟包, gēnbāo). They took care, among others, of the actor's costumes and props; backstage they helped to apply makeup and put on costumes, while on stage they served him tea.

<sup>28)</sup> The stage managers or *jianchangren* (检场人, jiǎnchǎngrén), were theatre employees in charge of managing the stage before and during the performance. They were to prepare props for the actors, set the stage before the performance and change the settings during the performance. Their presence on the stage during the performance was not due to the play script, but because the theatrical curtain had never been used in Chinese theatre until the late 19th century, and thus the settings used to be changed before the viewers' eyes. Among other activities, *jianchangren* were also to assist actors while performing on stage, including serving them tea. Wang (2009: 210), see also Dai (2009: 267– 270) and footnote 31.

<sup>29)</sup> *Qiantai yu houtai* 1937.

<sup>30)</sup> We distinguish feature films concerned with Chinese traditional theatre (like *Qiantai yu houtai*), recordings of theatrical performances (only some of the pre-1949 short recordings exists), television theatre (especially popular after 1949), documentaries and newsreels. *Qiantai*

(周翼华, Zhōu Yìhuá) (1909–1978) and Fei Mu (费穆, Fèi Mù) (1906–1951) filmmakers known for their Beijing opera movies starring the most prominent theatre actors. The action of *Qiantai yu houtai* takes place in a commercial opera theatre, while the main characters are the actors and staff members of this theatre. Despite being a feature film, it has undeniable cognitive values – it shows the functioning of a commercial opera theatre in the late 1930s, including many interesting theatre customs that were abandoned only a few years later.

The *yinchang* custom is captured between 4' 27" and 4' 32", where the leading actress is performing on the theatrical stage the role of *Yutangchun*. After finishing a part of a long aria, while still kneeling on the stage – as the scene called for her to kneel – she is served tea by the stage manager. The actress drinks tea in front of the audience directly from the teapot held by the stage manager (Ill. 15).

For the filmmakers the main purpose of this scene in the theatre was to show the troupe's leading actress during her performance on the stage. It is doubtful that the *yinchang* custom was initially in the movie script, but it is more likely that it was filmed as an integral part of a theatrical performance in those days. Its value simply cannot be overestimated, because at present this is the only known *yinchang* scene filmed during the days when it was often seen on theatrical stages.<sup>31)</sup>

In the movie scene, the actress is drinking tea directly from a small teapot called *shoubahu* (手把壶, shǒubǎhú) – “a teapot to be held in a hand” (Ill. 16).<sup>32)</sup>

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*yu houtai* is the only feature film and one of the few Chinese movies from the pre-1949 era thematically concerned with traditional theatre at all that have survived until now. In 2011 I had the opportunity to watch this movie in Zhongguo dianying ziliao guan (中国电影资料馆, Zhōngguó diànyǐng zīliào guǎn) (China Film Archive) in Beijing, where the film reel with this 37-minute long movie is now kept.

<sup>31)</sup> In the play *Yutangchun* the stage manager was also responsible for another unique activity – he was to hand over a small decorative cushion to the actor playing the role of *Yutangchun* to kneel on it while singing long arias. The way it was handed over was also unique: the stage manager used to throw the cushion across the entire stage just when the actor was already beginning to kneel. Theatre audience always followed the trace of the cushion landing in the exact moment just in front of actor's feet. This activity was never a part of a play script, though it was an important part of the theatrical performance until the early 1950s. Regrettably, this custom, unlike the *yinchang*, was not captured in the *Qiantai yu houtai* film.

<sup>32)</sup> *Shoubahu* (手把壶, shǒubǎhú) teapots are important part of the collection of over 1,300 museum objects in Zhongguo biyanhu zishahu bowuguan (中国鼻烟壶紫砂壶博物馆, Zhōngguó bíyānhú zīshāhú bówùguǎn) (Chinese Snuff Bottles and Red-Clay Teapots Museum); this private museum was opened in Beijing in 2011 and is located in newly built three-storey building, where the collection is on permanent display, occupying over 3,000 square meters.

This kind of teapots holds enough liquid to moisten the throat only with five or six gulps of tea. It was very important for every *genbao* or stage manager to prepare the tea according to the actor's liking and to keep it at an appropriate temperature during the entire performance.

Drinking tea directly from a teapot was also very practical. It prevented applied makeup from being smudged and costumes from being stained, and that is why many actors drank tea using a *shoubahu* also when backstage (Ill. 17). What is more interesting about this custom, is that it has remained on the backstage until today, where actors drink every kind of beverage – even bottled ones, through a straw.

After the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, all commercial theatres in Beijing were nationalized. Traditional teahouses were successively closed down and were either demolished, or changed into workshops, storehouses or dwellings. Since 1950s only modern, Western-style theatres – now called *juchang* (剧场, jùchǎng) – were to be built in Beijing. Reinforced concrete structures with modern architectural design and the latest facilities did not differ much from theatres built at that time in the Western world. The first newly-built *juchang* – Tianqiao Theatre (天桥剧场, Tiānqiáo jùchǎng), was opened in January 1954, three months later, in April 1954, People's Theatre (人民剧场, Rénmín jùchǎng) held its inaugural performance – both those theatres are still operating. At the same time some of the renowned old theatres of Beijing were being demolished and replaced by new constructions. Guanghelou, formerly known as Zhalou, was demolished and rebuilt in 1955 as a modern Western-style theatre, and its name was changed into Guanghe *juchang* (Ill. 18).<sup>33)</sup>

Attempts to bring modern theatre architecture to Beijing and high culture to old – fashion teahouses succeeded in 1950s since when the vast majority of the traditional Chinese theatrical performances have been held in *juchang*'s or modernized stages. Western-style theatre architecture has also necessitated some radical changes in traditional Chinese theatre performance. The orchestra, for example, during performances in teahouses was located directly on the stage, while in Western-style theatres it is located in the left wing of the stage, only barely visible to the audience. Since the stage curtain came into common

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<sup>33)</sup> Guanghe *juchang* (广和剧场, Guǎnghé jùchǎng) functioned as a theatre until 1996. Fifteen years later, at the end of April 2011, the derelict building was demolished. The prior decision to rebuilt Zhalou in a different form and in a new location was strongly opposed by Beijing historians, but recently the decision was made to rebuilt Zhalou in its original location.

use, the settings are changed when the curtain goes down. At this moment, the presence of a *jinacharen* (stage manager) on the stage during the performance became unnecessary. Customs like *yinchang* or throwing the cushion, in fact were systematically eliminated from the modernized stages since 1920s and 30s, and finally completely abolished since 1950s.

Beijing theatregoers also had to face a situation when instead of being *chake*, “tea-customers”, they became impersonal *guanzhong*, “the audience”. Instead of paying *chaqian* (“payment for tea”) to a waiter during the show, they had to buy a *xipiao* (“theatre ticket”) in a cashier in advance. But one of the main differences was that they were no longer served with tea and pastries while watching the performance. Beverages and snacks were sold in snack bars, while meals were served in restaurants adjacent to some of the modern theatre buildings. However, some theatres provided boiling water for viewers to pour into teacups that they had brought along.

It seemed like this long lasting and, up to then, unbreakable relationship between theatre and tea had been definitively broken. However, since the late 1980s we have observed a revival of some of the teahouse traditions in Beijing: in December 1988 a new traditional-style teahouse called Laoshe chaguan (老舍茶馆, Lǎo Shě cháguǎn) was opened. In the small-sized auditorium of this highly renowned theatre, there are only wooden square tables with chairs installed. During traditional Chinese theatre performances the customers are served there with the finest tea and traditional pastries.

Two years later, in October 1990, Liyuan Theatre (梨园剧场, Líyuán jùchǎng) was opened. On the ground floor of its auditorium, nearly half of its space is equipped with traditional square tables where guests are served with tea and pastries (Ills. 19, 20). The rare part of the stalls and the balcony is equipped with a casual row of seats for the total number of 800 viewers.

In May 1996 after a long renovation process, a traditional wooden theatre was reopened in the Hu-Guang Guildhall (湖广会馆, Hú-Guǎng Huìguǎn). In the late 1980s the decision was made to restore the theatre that after 1949 had been converted into workshops and dwellings. Enclosed structure building from 1830 underwent complete restoration and not only its architectural design was restored – like square tables in *chizuo* and *baoxiang* at the first floor, but also the atmosphere of old-fashioned teahouses was revived. Guests (*chake*), are being led there to their tables by a *lingzuorde*, and served with tea by a *chafang*. Since then, Beijing opera fans have met there every Saturday forenoon to listen to traditional opera recitals (Ills. 21, 23.), while evening performances are aimed mostly at foreigners.

In 2011 one of the most modern theatres in Beijing opened – Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre (梅兰芳大劇院, Méi Lánfāng dàjùyuàn), the first row of seats on the ground floor having been replaced with comfortable leather armchairs (Ill. 24.). Viewers who buy their tickets for a price several times higher than a normal ticket, are served with the finest tea and pastries by waiters.

## EPILOGUE

I realized how strong and important for Beijingers is the relationship between theatre and tea, when I visited an elderly professor in China in autumn 2011. We talked while sitting in a living room of his apartment in Beijing, while his wife served us tea. Soon afterwards, she left the room politely, but every time I drank a sip of the tea, she looked at me curiously through the kitchen doors. After a short while, she interrupted our conversation impatiently and asked me whether I liked the tea that she had served. I answered her, truthfully, that it tasted delicious. “Indeed!”, she said with undisguised satisfaction, “because this is exactly the same tea that is served nowadays in Lao She chaguan theatre!”

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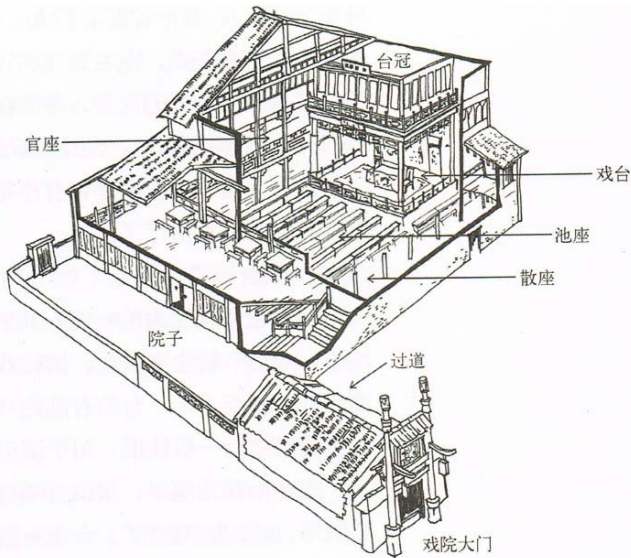


Ill. 1. View of Zhalou in 17th and 18th century (reconstruction). An open-air structure of early commercial theatres in Beijing with a free-standing roofed stage building and rectangular open yard surrounded by pavilions. Source: *Zhongguo xiqu* 1999

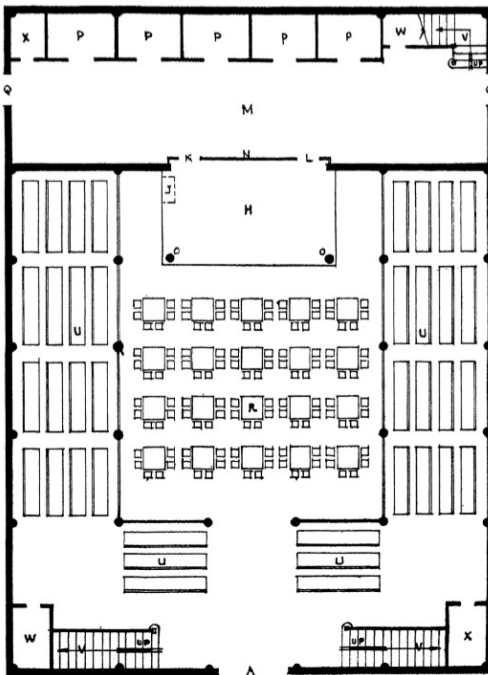


Ill. 2. Beijing teahouse during the reign of Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908). An enclosed wooden structure with a rectangular elevated stage and two-storey auditorium was a new kind of commercial theatre building that emerged in Beijing during the Qing dynasty. Source: *Zhongguo xiqu zhi - Beijing juan* 1999

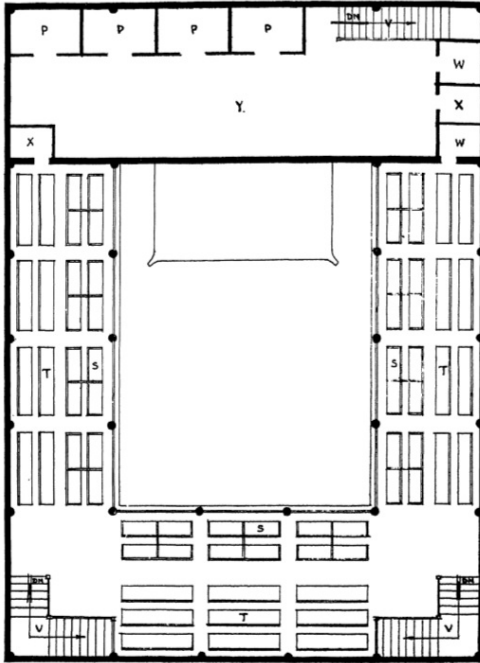




Ill. 3. Traditional enclosed structure teahouse in Beijing: Main entrance – 戏院大门 (xìyuàn dàmén), Corridor – 过道 (guòdào), Courtyard – 院子 (yuànzi), Boxes – 官座 (guānzuo), Stage – 戏台 (xítái), Stall seats or *chizuo* – 池座 (chízuo), Scattered seats or *sanzuo* – 散座 (sǎnzuo). Source: Li 1998



Ill. 4. Simplified floor plan of a typical traditional teahouse (ground floor): A – Main entrance, H – Stage, J – Orchestra, K – Stage entrance, L – Stage exit, M – Backstage, N – Backdrop, O – Pillar, P – Dressing room, Q – Backstage entrance, R – *Chizuo* (the Pond), U – *Sanzuo* (Scattered seats), V – Stairs, W – Gentlemen's lavatory, X – Ladies' lavatory. Source: Zung 1937



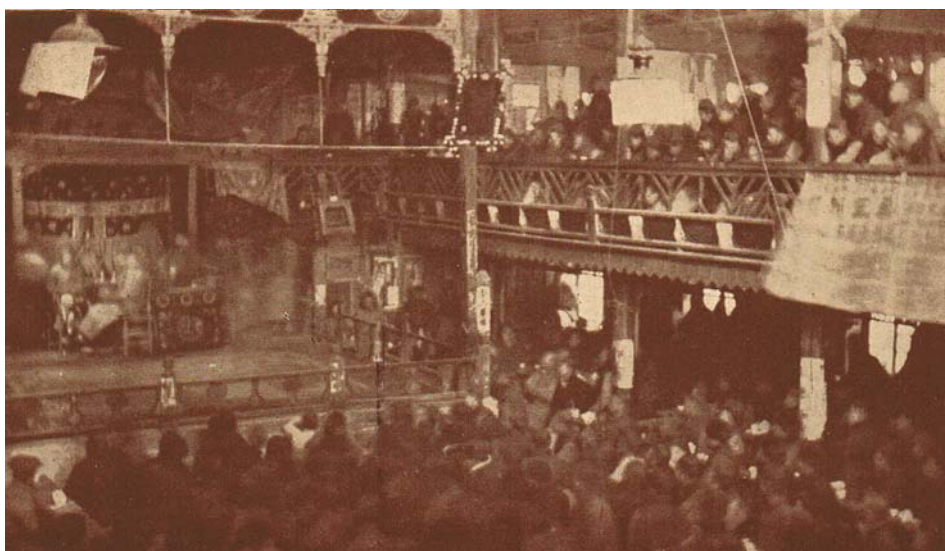
Ill. 5. Simplified floor plan of a typical traditional teahouse (first floor): P - Dressing room, S - *Baoxiang* (Boxes), T - *Turyetan* (Dress circle seats), V - Stairs, W - Gentlemen's lavatory, X - Ladies' lavatory, Y - Scenic properties. Source: Zung 1937



Ill. 6. Watching plays in Guandelou teahouse, early 20th century. The long tables with benches were more suitable for drinking tea and chatting, rather than for watching plays. Source: Soulié de Morant 1926



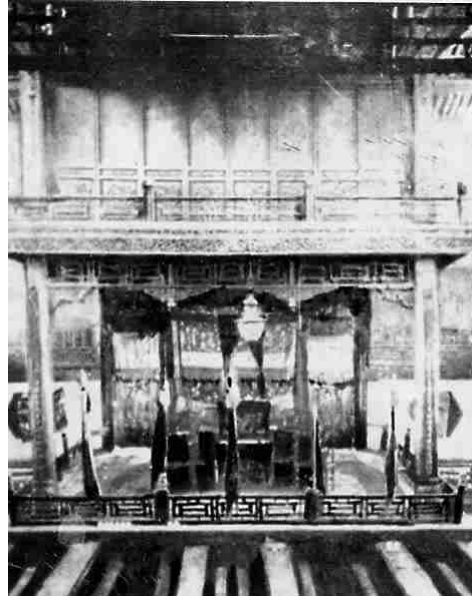
Ill. 7. Guangdelou teahouse, early 20th century. The cheapest seats in traditional teahouses were *chizuo*; it seems almost impossible to manage sitting on such benches during a nearly six-hour performance. Source: Soulié de Morant 1926



Ill. 8. Overcrowded Guangdelou teahouse during a theatrical performance, early 20th century. When there were no more seats available in the auditorium, theatre workers often installed additional benches (*jia deng*) to increase the number of seats, multiplying the theatre's income at the same time. Source: Soulié de Morant 1926



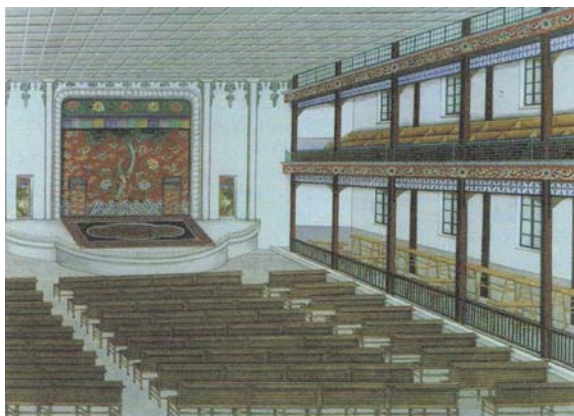
Ill. 9. Wenming chayuan in early 20th century was the first theatre in Beijing to have *chizuo* equipped with square tables. It was also the forerunner of selling theatre tickets instead of charging for tea. Source: Chen 2014



Ill. 10. Guanghelou teahouse, formerly known as Zhalou, about 1920s. The oldest theatre in Beijing, at the same time it is supposed to be the last teahouse rebuilt in a traditional enclosed structure, with a rectangular stage and *chizuo* equipped with long tables and benches. Source: Li 1998



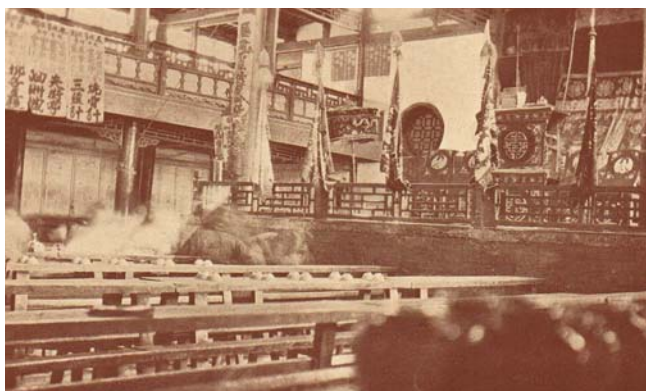
Ill. 11. Diyi wutai (The First Stage), opened 1914, was the first modern-style theatre in Beijing. With its construction made of bricks and timber it differed much from the traditional wooden teahouses. Source: [Diyi wutai], entry 15 July 2015



Ill. 12. Interior of a modern-style theatre in 1920s and 30s. *Chizuo* is equipped with a new kind of bench with backrests that are facing towards the stage. This kind of seats arrangement indicated the moment in history of Beijing theatre when “to watch a play” (*kanxi*) became far more important than “to listen to a play” (*tingxi*) as it was in traditional teahouses. Source: *Zhongguo xiqu* 1999



Ill. 13. Zhengguang xiyuan, opened in 1921, one of the earliest Westsern-style theatres in Beijing, now is home to Zhongguo ertong juchang – China National Children's Theatre (foto by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 14. Yanxitang (燕喜堂, Yānxǐtáng) teahouse, early 20th century. On the tables tea bowls are arranged upside down for the upcoming performance. Viewer who came to the teahouse before or at the beginning of the performance could be regarded as ignorant. Source: Soulié de Morant 1926



Ill. 15. Action shot from a 1937's movie *Qiantai yu houtai* (*On Stage and Backstage*); the actress is served with tea during the performance by the stage manager (*Qiantai yu houtai* 1937)



Ill. 16. *Shoubahu* – “a teapot to be held in the hand”, was used for drinking tea straight from the teapot (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 17. Teapot *shoubahu* – the way tea used to be drunk backstage (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



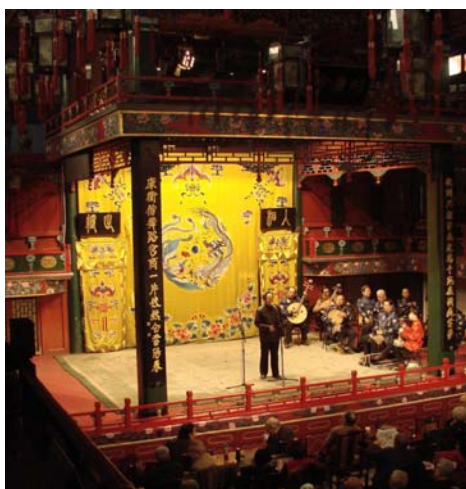
Ill. 18. Western-style Guanghe juchang – the latest incarnation of Zhalou, a teahouse with a nearly four hundred year history just three days before it was demolished in April 2011 (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 19. Liyuan Theatre (opened in 1990). The auditorium close to the stage is equipped with traditional square tables where audience members are served with tea and refreshments. The rear part of the auditorium and the balcony are equipped with a casual row of seats. Source: [Liyuan Theatre], entry 15 July 2015



Ill. 20. Tea and refreshments served during the performance (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2007)



Ill. 21. Hu-Guang Guildhall Theatre in Beijing, built in 1830, where a meeting of Beijing opera fans is held every Saturday before noon (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 22. Hu-Guang Guildhall Theatre, where tea drinking is still an important custom for every theatregoer (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 23. Hu-Guang Guildhall Theatre; for some Beijing opera fans it is still more important to “listen to a play” (*tingxi*), rather than to “watch a play” (*kanxi*) (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)



Ill. 24. Mei Lanfang Grand Theatre, opened in 2007; viewers sitting in the front row are served with tea and refreshments during a theatrical performance (photo by Maurycy Gawarski, 2011)