

C H A P T E R 11

For the People, by the People:
Penghao Theatre and *The Story of Gong
and Drum Lane*

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In the final moments of *The Story of Gong and Drum Lane* (Luoguxiang de gushi, 2009), directed by Wang Shaojun and Mu De at Penghao Theatre in Beijing, music swells over the actors' closing lines, the stage lights dim, and a slideshow of scenes from the South Gong and Drum Lane (Nanluoguxiang) neighborhood surrounding the theatre washes over the stage. First, a series of black-and-white images: cricket cages hanging from the eaves of old houses; bicycles in narrow alleys; clay tiled roofs decorated with small figurines. Then, a still shot turns into a pan as the camera tracks from rooftops to the contemporary alley (*hutong*) where cars line the street. Black-and-white fades to color and then a close-up on a new sign that reads "Nanluoguxiang." Tourists walk past the camera, the footage accelerates, and a number of popular restaurants and bars speed past: Xiao Xia's café; Bye Bye Disco; and, of course, Penghao Theatre itself. The final shot, a slow zoom on the brightly painted traditional gate bearing the street's name, brightens the entire stage and literally frames the play's set within the cultural geography of Nanluoguxiang.

During this montage, and indeed throughout the performance of *The Story of Gong and Drum Lane* (*Gong and Drum* hereafter), a strange sense of doubling confronts the audience. The title of the play clearly locates it in close proximity to the Nanluoguxiang Culture and Leisure Street, in reality only a stone's throw away from the performance venue; the characters that meet in this world are but

thinly veiled avatars of the local residents, actors, and directors who truly coexist along the length of Dongmianhua Hutong, the alley in which Penghao is situated; and the events that unfold onstage echo the foundational narrative retold in Penghao's publicity material and statements by its founder and artistic director, Wang Xiang. Even the simple unit set contributes to the collapse of real and imaginary geography, characters, and events, with both the living room of the alley residents and the theatre company's rehearsal room occupying the same stage space.

Premiered in December 2009 and revived several times since, *Gong and Drum* offers a snapshot of daily life in a small Beijing neighborhood in a realist mode.¹ The story revolves around the interruption and change brought by a theatre company that sets up shop in the middle of a residential area. There, three down-to-earth locals—Qiangzi, a lazy and jobless 20-something, his mother (called only Qiangzi's Mother in the script), and a neighbor, Auntie Jiang—are paralleled by a theatre director, Han, two young actors, Xiaoguang and Nanfang, and the theatre's manager, Ms. Lin. The main conflict of the play begins with an ironic twist: Ms. Lin has ordered new signage in order to improve local publicity efforts for the theatre's next show, a play about everyday life in the neighborhood, but the residents call the police when the yet-unhung signs are left blocking their doorway. It takes the intervention of Director Qi, the well-respected head of the local neighborhood association, to calm them and devise a plan to get the theatre company and residents to work together on the upcoming play. Skeptical of this venture, Auntie Jiang and Qiangzi's Mother remain aloof, but Qiangzi enthusiastically dives in and regales the director and actors with stories of local life. It is the story of his mother's tragic first love, whose proposal she refused in favor of the more stable life offered by Qiangzi's father, that finally catches the director's attention and forms the basis for a rewritten script. Qiangzi's Mother is enraged when she learns that she has been made the focal point of the theatrical production but, after watching a rehearsal, she finds herself moved to tears by the performance. With the unlikely neighbors thereby one step closer to mutual understanding, the play ends with Director Qi pronouncing the name of the play-within-a-play—*The Story of Gong and Drum Lane*—and the director breaking the fourth wall to address the audience, erasing any remaining pretense that the world within the play is anything other than that of Penghao itself.

This play, co-written by Wang Xiang and National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts professor Wang Shaojun, is based on a true

story: during the renovation of the space that would become Penghao Theatre in 2008, Wang Xiang had particular difficulty with one of the theatre-to-be's next-door neighbors, who called the police on him three times during construction to complain about the disruption. In *Gong and Drum*, Wang sympathetically but unabashedly transposes this incident from his theatre's own struggles to build a "playhouse for the people, by the people" in the local community of Beijing's Jiadaokou neighborhood into a staged production (Penghao Theatre 2013a, p. 173). A humble narrative and short play in performance, *Gong and Drum's* combination of emphasis on place as a theme and clearly self-referential dramaturgy nonetheless provide fruitful ground for exploring the relationship between theatre spaces and local cultural geography, performance as an act of institutional self-fashioning, and the potential of theatre to create a space for building civic engagement and civil society. While on one level the play serves local government interests by promoting the tourist district of Nanluoguxiang and portraying a harmonious coexistence between residents and newly arrived culture industries, *Gong and Drum* also skillfully manipulates a politics of place that gains Penghao Theatre institutional legitimacy and theatrically lays groundwork for grassroots Chinese civil society.

PENGHAO *IN SITU*: PROJECTIONS OF POSITION IN BEIJING'S CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Set in and suffused with scenic references to Nanluoguxiang, *Gong and Drum* cannot be understood outside of the context of the recent redevelopment of its namesake neighborhood. Situated inside the Dongcheng District of Beijing Old City, the eastern portion of the area currently encompassed by the Second Ring Road, Nanluoguxiang is located north of the Forbidden City and has a history dating back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). In 2002, it was named as one of Beijing Old City's 25 historic preservation areas, and the classic courtyard homes in the surrounding alleys became part of urban conservation plans administered by the Jiadaokou Street Administrative Office, under the larger Dongcheng District government.² In fact, Nanluoguxiang began attracting independent cultural and tourist entrepreneurship as early as 1999, when the first bar along its main stretch opened, but it was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century and, ironically, its designation as a preservation area, that a full battery of boutique shops, cafes, restaurants, and