

“ It is difficult for me to say how I wrote *Peking Man*. I only knew I wanted to write about people. Drama is about people. I am fascinated by the soul of people, their inner secrets and their most subtle feelings. This is the basis for my writing.



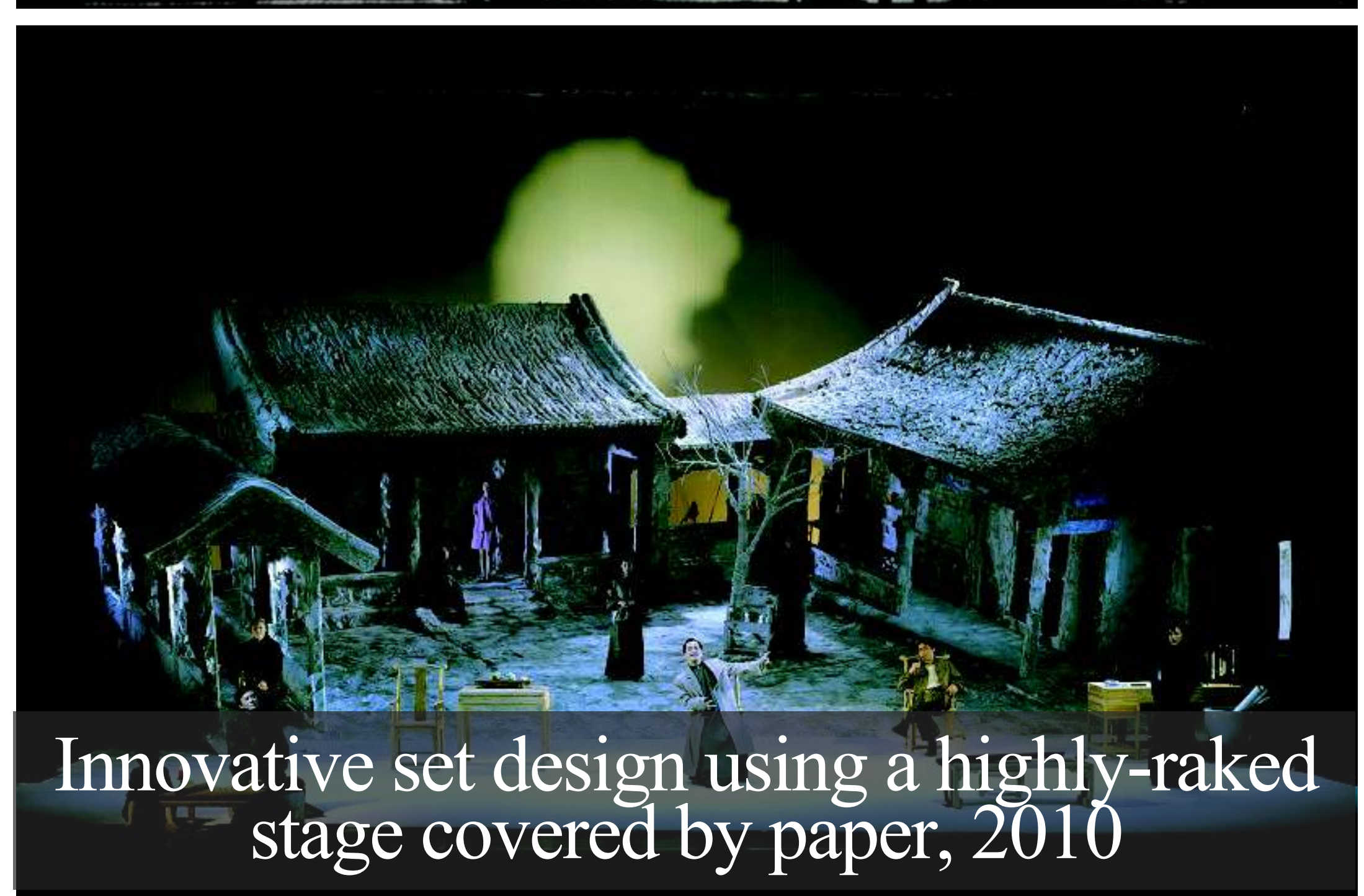
- Cao Yu,
interviewed by Tian Benxiang, 1982

Peking Man (1941)

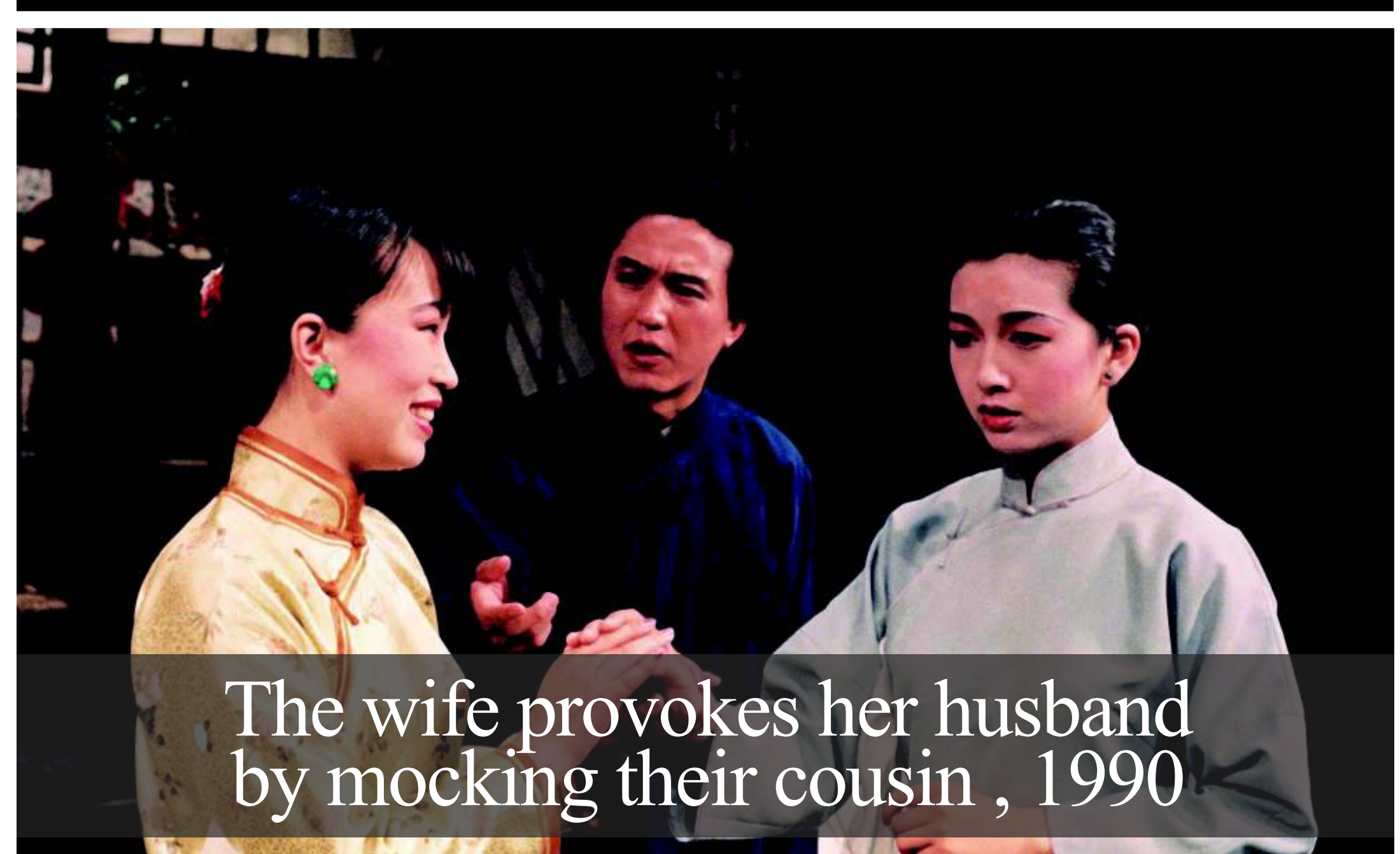
In *Peking Man*, considered by many to be his masterpiece, Cao Yu returned to his original style of drama concerned with human beings and their poignant relationships. Written with a sense of poetry, this three-act play objectively presents the decline of a once-prominent scholar-official family and fiercely attacks the tensions and hypocrisy of the Chinese gentry: the “good-for-nothing” members of the polite society of the time.



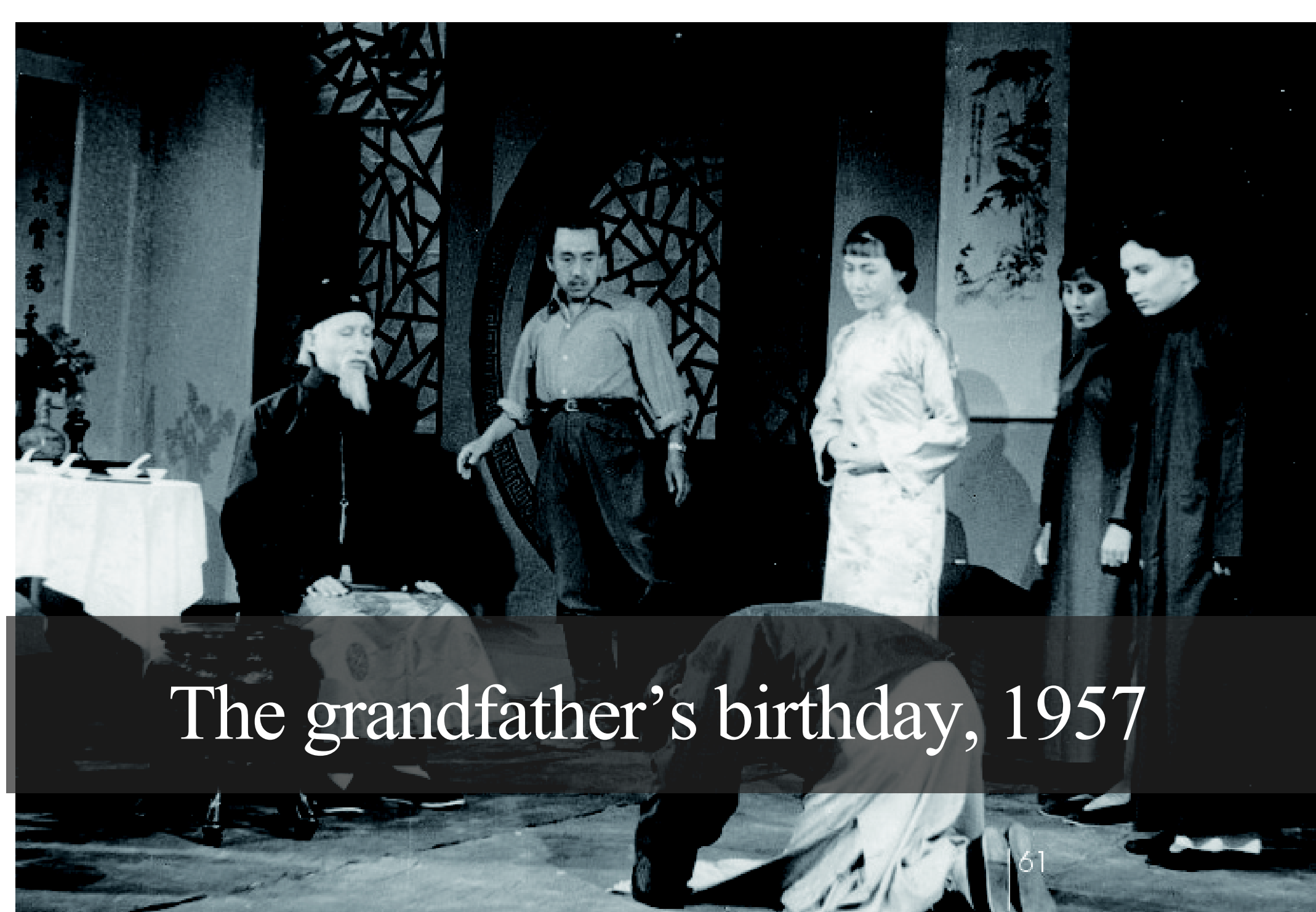
The play's premiere, 1941



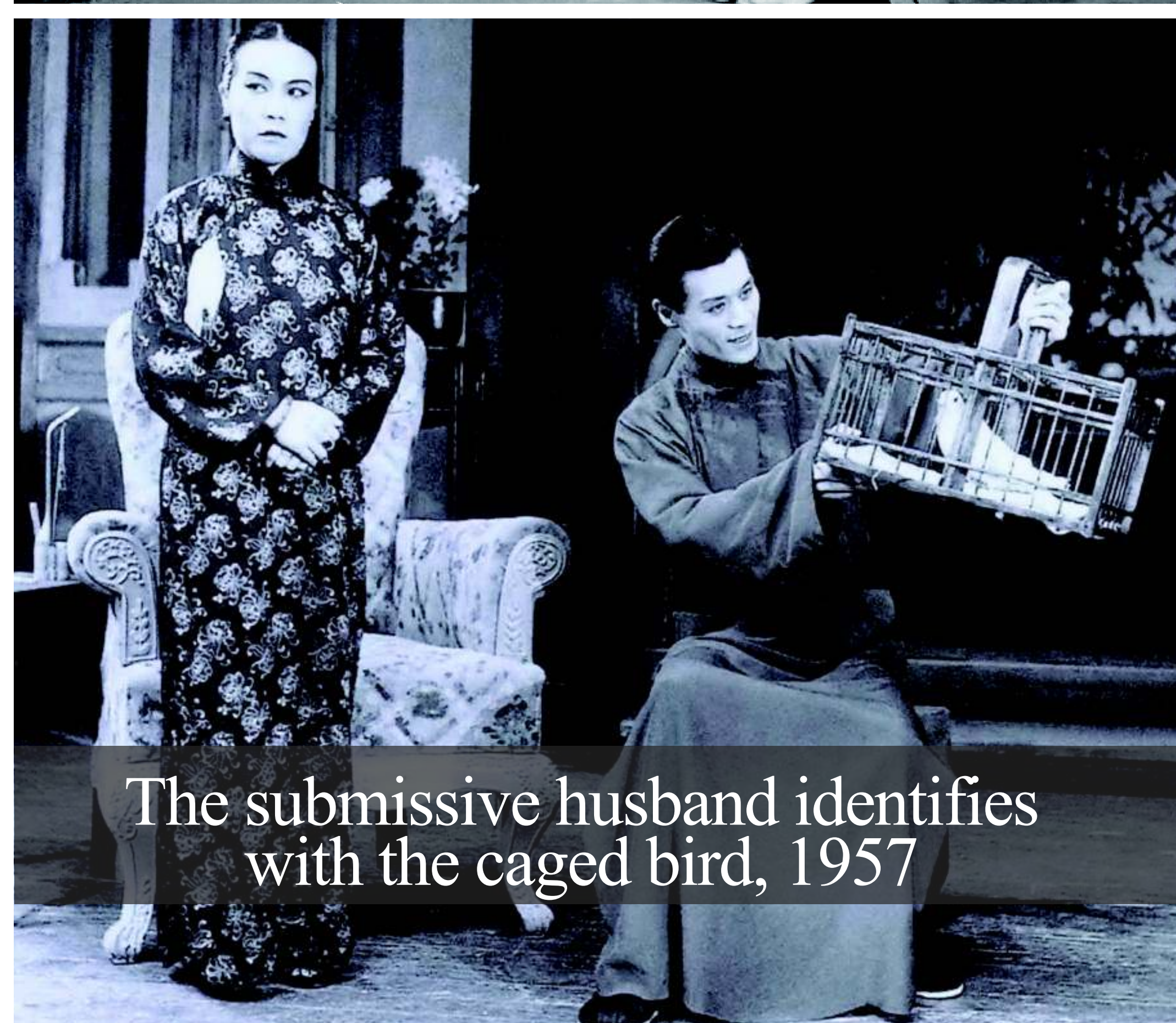
Innovative set design using a highly-raked stage covered by paper, 2010



The wife provokes her husband by mocking their cousin, 1990



The grandfather's birthday, 1957



The submissive husband identifies with the caged bird, 1957



Cao Yu with director Kent Paul and the cast of the US production at New York's Horace Mann Theatre, 1980

The title “Peking Man” is doubly symbolic. As residents of Peking (or Beijing), the family is representative of the citizens of China's centre of culture, seemingly the most refined and polished of people. Yet, cocooned within society, these culturally-intoxicated people are oblivious to the rapidly-changing realities of the world. At another level, “Peking Man” is the label attached to the skull discovered in northern China by a team of palaeontologists in December 1928. This scientific dimension intensifies the playwright's view of human evolution and social progress. Further metaphors, like the “Peking Man” silhouette seen on stage, the coffin, doves and rats, deepen the significance of the play.